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& PACIFIC

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Outpaced by China

ADAM FERRERO/U.S. Navy

Pre-Commissioning Unit John F. Kennedy in the dry dock area in Newport News, Va., on 2019. Experts see a lag in U.S. Navy shipbuilding capabilities compared to the Chinese navy.

US shipbuilding capabilities dwarfed by Beijing's navy numbers

By DIDI TANG
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. severely lags behind China in shipbuilding capacity, lawmakers and experts have warned, as the Biden administration tries to build up the country's ability to develop and produce weapons and other defense supplies to fend off war.

Speaking at a congressional hearing last week, Rep. John Moolenaar, the Republican chair of the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party, said

"Decades of underinvestments and consolidation had seriously eroded our defense industrial base."

Jake Sullivan
national security adviser

the country lacks the capacity to "deter and win a fight" with China and called for action.

"Bold policy changes and significant resources are now needed to

restore deterrence and prevent a fight" with China, Moolenaar said.

China's navy is already the world's largest, and its shipbuilding capacity, estimated to be 230

times larger, dwarfs that of the U.S.

Rep. Raja Krishnamoorthi, the ranking Democratic member of the committee, told Fox News that "for every one oceangoing vessel that we can produce, China can produce 359 in one single year."

The U.S. government has come to see China as its "pacing challenge," and officials have warned that Beijing is pursuing the largest peacetime military buildup in his-

SEE OUTPACED ON PAGE 5

House OKs defense bill with historic pay boost

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The House approved a \$895 billion defense policy bill Wednesday that will provide a historic pay raise for junior enlisted troops while also limiting treatment for transgender children of service members.

A provision barring Tricare — the military's health care program — from covering all gender-affirming care for minors had threatened to tank the annual National Defense Authorization Act, with Democrats voting en masse against it.

But the bill ultimately passed the Republican-controlled House in a 281-140 vote.

The legislation otherwise garnered widespread support for giving E-1 to E-4 troops a 14.5% pay raise and all other troops a 4.5% pay bump. The bill was also lauded for its investments in housing, child care, health care, spousal support and other quality-of-life improvements.

"No service member should have to live in squalid conditions. No military family should have to rely on food stamps to feed their children and no one serving in the military should have to wait to see a doctor. But that's exactly what many of our service members are experiencing, especially junior enlisted personnel," said Republican Rep. Mike Rogers of Alabama, the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. "This bill goes a long way to fixing that."

The bill now moves to the Senate, where it is also expected to pass, and is set to become law by the end of the year.

Lawmakers traditionally show bipartisan support for the must-pass authorization legislation,

SEE HOUSE ON PAGE 5

BUSINESS/WEATHER

EUROPE GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel	Azores	..	..	\$4.178	..
Germany	\$3.471	\$3.967	\$4.323	\$3.867	Change in price	..	..	-2.3 cents	..
Netherlands	..	\$4.463	\$4.988	\$4.793	Turkey	..	..	\$3.994	\$4.346*
U.K.	..	\$3.967	\$4.323	\$3.867	Change in price	..	..	-2.3 cents	No change

Fuel prices are updated daily. These prices are effective Dec. 13. The change in price is from Dec. 6.

PACIFIC GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel	South Korea	\$3.089	..	\$3.999	\$3.539
Japan	..	\$3.969	..	\$3.509	Change in price	-3.0 cents	..	-2.0 cents	-8.0 cents
Okinawa	\$3.339	..	..	\$3.509	Guam	\$3.119**	\$3.669	\$4.029	..
Change in price	No change	..	..	-8.0 cents	Change in price	-3.0 cents	-2.0 cents	-2.0 cents	..

*DieselEFD **Midgrade
Pacific prices for the week of Dec. 13-19

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates		Commercial rates	
Euro costs (Dec. 13)	0.93	Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3771
British pound (Dec. 13)	\$1.24	Britain (Pound)	1.2734
Japanese yen (Dec. 13)	147.00	Canada (Dollar)	1.4163
South Korean won (Dec. 13)	1396.00	China (Yuan)	7.2679
		Denmark (Krone)	7.0899
		Egypt (Pound)	50.8401
		Euro	0.9506
		Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7757
		Hungary (Forint)	388.80
		Israel (Shekel)	3.5680
		Japan (Yen)	152.25
		Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3075
		Norway (Krone)	11.0939
		Philippines (Peso)	58.24
		Poland (Zloty)	4.06
		Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7579
		Singapore (Dollar)	1.3439
		South Korea (Won)	1430.62

Switzerland (Franc) 0.8873
Thailand (Baht) 33.91
Turkey (NewLira) 34.8699

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

INTEREST RATES

Prime rate	7.75
Interest Rates Discount rate	4.75
Federal funds market rate	4.58
3-month bill	4.37
30-year bond	4.48

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

Hegseth visits Sen. Collins seeking vote

BY MARY CLARE JALONICK
AND MATT BROWN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Pete Hegseth, President-elect Donald Trump's nominee to lead the Defense Department, said he had a "wonderful conversation" with Maine Sen. Susan Collins on Wednesday as he pushed to win enough votes for confirmation. He said he will not back down after allegations of excessive drinking and sexual misconduct.

Collins said after the hourlong meeting that she questioned Hegseth about the allegations amid reports of drinking and the revela-

tion that he made a settlement payment after being accused of a sexual assault that he denies. She said she had a "good, substantive" discussion with Hegseth and "covered a wide range of topics," including sexual assault in the military, Ukraine and NATO. But she said she would wait until a hearing, and notably a background check, to make a decision.

"I asked virtually every question under the sun," Collins told reporters as she left her office after the meeting. "I pressed him both on his position on military issues as well as the allegations against him, so I don't think there was any-

thing that we did not cover."

The meeting with Collins was closely watched as she is seen as more likely than most of her Republican Senate colleagues to vote against some of Trump's Cabinet picks. She and Alaska Sen. Lisa Murkowski, a fellow moderate Republican, did not shy from opposing Trump in his first term when they wanted to do so and sometimes supported President Joe Biden's nominees for the judicial and executive branches.

And Hegseth, an infantry combat veteran and former "Fox & Friends" weekend host, is working to gain as many votes as he can

as some senators have expressed concerns about his personal history and lack of management experience.

"I'm certainly not going to assume anything about where the senator stands," Hegseth said as he left Collins' office. "This is a process that we respect and appreciate. And we hope, in time, overall, when we get through that committee and to the floor that we can earn her support."

Hegseth met with Murkowski on Tuesday. He has also been meeting repeatedly with Iowa Sen. Joni Ernst, a military veteran who has said she is a survivor of

sexual assault and has spent time in the Senate working on improving how attacks are reported and prosecuted within the ranks. On Monday, Ernst said after a meeting with him that he had committed to selecting a senior official to prioritize those goals.

Republicans will have a 53-49 majority next year, meaning Trump cannot lose more than three votes on any of his nominees.

On Thursday, Hegseth plans to meet with a Democrat — Pennsylvania Sen. John Fetterman. Fetterman did not say whether he was considering supporting Hegseth or what he planned to discuss.

Christmas comes early for Pacific islanders courtesy of Santa 41

BY ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

EAURIPIK, Federated States of Micronesia — Inhabitants of this remote atoll rushed onto a beach Wednesday as a U.S. Air Force plane prepared to drop crates filled with much-needed supplies and some Christmas cheer.

The C-130J Super Hercules from Yokota Air Base, Japan — call sign Santa 41 — looped above the island several times before dropping four crates, decorated with drawings and holiday greetings, from an altitude of about 300 feet.

Green parachutes drifted the payload gently into the water just off the coast of Eauripik, an atoll about 475 miles south of Guam.

Santa 41, part of Yokota's 36th Airlift Squadron, made a second drop to another island, Ifalik, shortly after. The five-hour sortie delivered eight bundles to the two atolls, both part of the Caroline chain in the Federated States of Micronesia.

After each drop, the loadmasters — Senior Airman Juan Lucero, of Wahiawa, Hawaii, and Staff Sgt. Dario Dominguez, of Ruidoso, N.M. — stood on the cargo ramp to wave at the islanders as the atolls disappeared on the horizon.

Wednesday's sortie was just one of dozens this week, part of the Defense Department's longest-running humanitarian-aid mission, Operation Christmas Drop.

The bundles, each decorated by donors and volunteers, carried critical supplies such as food, water, diving and fishing gear, clothing and — in the spirit of Christmas — toys.

An annual event since 1952, Operation Christmas Drop has become a means of supplying the outlying islands and a way for airmen from the United States and partner nations to get real-world supply drop experience.

"It feels different from our usual work and training," Lucero, a loadmaster with the 36th Airlift Squadron, told Stars and Stripes after Wednesday's mission. "I get to see a result; I see the people and how much they appreciate what we do. It feels great."

While each island favors certain landing zones for the airdrops, those spots can change from year to year, adding another level of complexity for the operation's pilots.

Communication between the aircraft, coordinators at Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, and individual islands is critical, said Santa 41's commander, Capt. Alex Dillenbeck.

"We have to identify where they want the bundles," Dillenbeck, of Memphis, Tenn., said from the cockpit. "They might use anything to signal it — rafts, tarps, life vests — and they communicate with us with marine handheld radios."

All eight of Santa 41's bundles landed securely, he added.

For the aircraft's co-pilot and instructor, Maj. Zeb "Spades" Kimball, the sight of the apprecia-



PHOTOS BY ALEX WILSON/Stars and Stripes

Senior Airman Juan Lucero, left, and Staff Sgt. Dario Dominguez prepare to drop supplies to a remote island in the Federated States of Micronesia, on Wednesday. Their C-130J Super Hercules was called Santa 41 during the Operation Christmas Drop mission.



The commander of Santa 41, Air Force Capt. Alex Dillenbeck, confirms a successful Operation Christmas Drop.

tive islanders is what makes Operation Christmas Drop so special.

"It's been the same pretty much every time," Kimball, of Colorado Springs, Colo., said of his other sorties this week. "And that definitely doesn't get old — it kind of fills you up every single time."

This year's operation, which be-



Senior Airman Juan Lucero, a loadmaster with the 36th Airlift Squadron at Yokota Air Base, Japan, watches Operation Christmas Drop bundles drift to islanders.

gan Dec. 2 and concludes Dec. 16, delivered 220 bundles to 60 islands in Micronesia and Palau. Also participating this year are Australia, Canada, Japan and South Korea.

The operation ultimately deliv-

ers around 82,000 pounds of supplies to over 42,000 islanders while covering approximately 1.8 million square miles of airspace, according to a Dec. 10 news release from Yokota's 374th Airlift Wing.

Correction

A story in Thursday's edition of Stars and Stripes about potential mold at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, should have said Seville Manor houses senior enlisted airmen and field-grade officers.

MILITARY

Air Force Academy sued over admissions policies

BY SUSAN SVRLUGA
The Washington Post

A group that opposes the use of racial preferences in college admissions has sued the U.S. Air Force Academy and the Defense Department, continuing its drive to end the practice at all institutions of higher education in the wake of a landmark Supreme Court ruling last year.

The group, Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA), argues that the academy has no legal justification for its admissions policies.

The Air Force Academy “is one of the American military’s premier institutions and the most prestigious source of commissioned officers in the Air Force,” the group argues in its complaint, filed Tuesday in the U.S. District Court for the District of Colorado. “It is also one of the last remaining universities to expressly consider race as a factor in admissions.”

The lawsuit comes just days af-

ter a judge’s ruling allowing the U.S. Naval Academy to continue to use race-conscious admissions policies.

In that case in U.S. District Court in Baltimore, also brought by SFFA, Senior District Judge Richard D. Bennett held that the Naval Academy’s limited consideration of race “further the government’s compelling national security interests.”

The group has said it will file an appeal to an appellate court and, if necessary, the Supreme Court.

Over the past few decades, SFFA President Edward Blum said, “the Air Force Academy and our other military academies have strayed from their former color-blind, merit-based admissions policies and now focus on race and ethnicity — factors that do not contribute to the qualifications of applicants.” Blum argued that because the Supreme Court ruling last year “expressly forbids all institutions of

higher education from using race in admissions decisions, it must follow that the Air Force Academy must end their race-based policies as well.”

Spokespeople for the Air Force Academy and the Defense Department said Wednesday their organizations do not comment on pending litigation.

The Supreme Court rejected race-conscious affirmative action in college admissions this past year, ruling in cases brought by SFFA against Harvard and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. That ruling — which overturned decades of legal precedent — not only changed the way highly sought-after colleges consider applicants for admission but accelerated legal challenges to diversity programs at government agencies and private companies.

The decision in *Students for Fair Admissions v. President & Fellows of Harvard College* held that Har-



ANDREW HARNIK/AP

Cadets stand during the 2023 United States Air Force Academy Graduation Ceremony at Falcon Stadium in June 2023 at the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo.

vard and UNC’s admissions programs violated the Constitution’s guarantee of equal protection.

But it included a notable exception for the country’s military academies, with a footnote that mentioned “the potentially distinct interests that military academies may present.”

For many years and over multiple administrations, Defense Department leaders have maintained that a racially diverse officer corps, one that reflects the fighting

force, is important to national security; a lack of diversity historically led to dangerous tensions, including race riots, that threatened military preparedness. And Solicitor General Elizabeth B. Prelogar had argued to justices in the Harvard case that it is not possible to achieve a diverse officer corps without affirmative action in the military academies.

SFFA quickly challenged that exception to the Supreme Court decision.

US, S. Korean airpower display will return over Osan

BY LUIS GARCIA
Stars and Stripes

OSAN AIR BASE, South Korea — After six long years, Air Power Days are returning to the home of the 7th Air Force and its U.S. fighter and attack squadrons.

The aerial performances last seen at Osan in September 2019 are scheduled again for May 10-11, along with static displays of U.S. and South Korean military hardware, the 51st Fighter Wing announced in a recent news release.

Among the expected highlights are performances by the Pacific Air Forces’ F-16 Viper Demonstration Team out of Misawa Air Base in northeastern Japan.

“We will give the audience an exhilarating display of the F-16’s capabilities,” Capt. Ethan Smith, the Viper Demo Team commander and pilot, said in a statement relayed by wing spokesman Maj. Kippun Sumner. “This is going to be a spectacular display of speed, power, and agility — just a glimpse into the full potential of this incredible multi-role fighter.”

Other featured aircraft include the F-16 Fighting Falcon, A-10 Thunderbolt II and U-2 Dragon Lady. The event will mark one of the final public displays of the A-10 in South Korea before its scheduled departure in October, according to the wing.

The event’s theme, “Respect the Past, Forge the Future,” pays

homage to the A-10, the 25th Fighter Squadron and the 25th Fighter Generation Squadron while celebrating the strength and longevity of the American and South Korean alliance, according to the release.

“Air shows at Osan Air Base are typically only held every 2-3 years. This is to balance the efforts that come with planning a large-scale public event like Osan Air Power Days with our mission and training requirements,” Sumner said in a follow-up email Wednesday. “There were COVID-19 restrictions in place during the past several years that also restricted the types of public events that we could hold.”

Planning such an event includes addressing logistics, transportation and security, Sumner said. The wing is working with local city officials and Korean National Police to ensure it is safe and accessible.

“We are hosting weekly meetings with all the responsible agencies to ensure a safe and enjoyable weekend for everyone that comes out to the air show,” he wrote.

Osan officials are focusing on accessibility and cultural inclusivity for the event, Sumner added. There will be bilingual announcements and translators available to assist visitors.

“The goal is for [Air Power Days] to be an event for both our on- and off-base audiences to en-



GREG NASH/U.S. Air Force

South Korea’s 53rd Demonstration Group, also known as the Black Eagles, perform on Air Power Day at Osan Air Base, South Korea, Sept. 21, 2019.

joy together,” he wrote.

The last Air Power Days featured performances by the South Korean air force Black Eagles and various U.S. aircraft, according to the release.

The two-day air show and open house will be free and open to the public, including the local South Korean community, Sumner wrote. All personnel will need a valid form of identification on them to enter the base.

There are no plans for pre-registration or identification checks for general off-base attendees, he added.



RAMON ADELAN/U.S. Air Force

An F-16 with Pacific Air Force’s Viper Demonstration Team performs during Air Power Day at Osan Air Base.

MILITARY

Outpaced: Ship gap could invite aggression, congressman alleges

FROM PAGE 1

tory, raising concerns about how the U.S. would respond and ensure victory in case of a conflict in the Indo-Pacific, where tensions are high in the Taiwan Strait and the South China Sea.

Krishnamoorthi warned that a weak military industrial base could invite aggression and argued that strengthening it is necessary to avoid war with China.

"History tells us we need a healthy defense industrial base now to deter aggression and make sure the world's dictators think again before dragging the U.S. and the world into yet another disastrous conflict," Krishnamoorthi said.

National security adviser Jake Sullivan called it a "generational project" to fix the problem after the "bottom fell out" of the American shipbuilding industry in the early 1980s.

"Part of it is we don't have the backbone of a healthy commercial shipbuilding base to rest our naval shipbuilding on top of," Sullivan said at the Aspen Security Forum in Washington. "And that's part of the fragility of what we're contending with and why this is going to be such a generational project to fix."

The challenge in shipbuilding has been "especially immense," stemming from the hollowing-out of the U.S. manufacturing base where its workforce shrank and suppliers left, Sullivan said.

And it is part of the broader problem of a weakened U.S. military industrial base, as manifested in the weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine, Sullivan said, when Kyiv in eight weeks "burned through a year's worth of U.S. 155-millimeter artillery production."

"Decades of underinvestments and consolidation had seriously eroded our defense industrial base, and there was no way around it," Sullivan said.

The head of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, Adm. Samuel Paparo, warned last month that the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East were eating away at critical U.S. weapons stockpiles and could hamper the military's ability to respond to China should a conflict arise.

He said providing or selling billions of dollars worth of air defenses to both Ukraine and Israel were hampering U.S. ability to respond to threats in the Indo-Pacific.

"It's now eating into stocks, and to say otherwise would be dishonest," he told an audience at the Brookings Institution in Washington on Nov. 19.

Several researchers at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies said China's rapid military buildup could allow the country to prevail over the U.S., especially in case of a prolonged conflict.

"China's massive shipbuilding industry would provide a strategic advantage in a war that stretches beyond a few weeks, allowing it to



ADAM FERRERO/U.S. Navy

The aircraft carrier John F. Kennedy is in dry dock while under construction at Huntington Ingalls Industries-Newport News Shipbuilding.

repair damaged vessels or construct replacements much faster than the United States," the researchers wrote in June.

Last week, the congressional panel heard suggestions from experts who said it would take time

to rebuild the defense industrial base, but for quicker fixes, the U.S. could innovate to make low-cost and autonomous systems and tap resources of its allies.

"We need to look at co-production of whether it's munitions in

Australia or shipbuilding in Korea," said William Greenwalt, a non-resident senior fellow at the Washington-based think tank American Enterprise Institute.

"We need to get numbers as fast as we can," he said.

House: Provision regarding transgender treatment sparks resistance

FROM PAGE 1

which sets policies for the Pentagon, but Democrats began withdrawing their endorsements earlier this week over the transgender provision.

The provision bars coverage of treatments "that could result in sterilization" for underage dependents who are suffering from gender dysphoria. An estimated 4,000 minor children of service members are receiving gender-affirming care.

Rep. Adam Smith of Washington, the top Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, said he would oppose passage of the defense bill due to the provision, arguing it could be used to target access to puberty blockers and hormone treatment therapy.

He blamed House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., for forcing the provision into the defense bill in a move that he said upended congressional norms and politic-

ized a typically bipartisan process.

"The inclusion of this harmful provision puts the lives of children at risk and may force thousands of service members to make the choice of continuing their military service or leaving to ensure their child can get the health care they need," Smith said.

Johnson has defended the provision as a "critical and necessary step" to protect children from "radical gender ideology and experimental drugs." Other Republicans have also come out in favor of the measure.

"Our veterans and active-duty military struggle to get their own necessary medical costs covered, and Tricare was expected to foot the bill for gender-affirming abuse?" Rep. Nancy Mace, R-S.C., wrote on X. "This should have never even been on the table."

Rep. Austin Scott, R-Ga., on Monday lashed out at lawmakers

who boycotted the defense bill and said they were exaggerating the intended reach of the transgender care provision.

"We are saying that we are not going to allow a surgical procedure on [children] that could result in sterilization," he said. "These are permanent and irreversible procedures and they should not be allowed."

But Democrats succeeded in blocking other culture war provisions in the bill. Measures previously approved by the House to end the Pentagon's abortion travel policy, gut diversity, equity and inclusion offices and bar Tricare coverage of gender-transition procedures were all dropped.

The legislation retains a hiring freeze for diversity-related positions at the Defense Department and bars military academies from teaching critical race theory, an academic concept that argues racism is systematic.

It also maintains the registration process for Selective Service without expanding it to women and does not expand access to in vitro fertilization for service members and their families.

Quality-of-life issues are the focus of much of the legislation after the House Armed Services Committee convened a special panel earlier this year to find solutions for high living costs, substandard military housing, limited access to child care, long wait times for medical care and spousal unemployment.

The panel made 32 recommendations and 29 of them were included in the final authorization bill.

They include the large pay raise specifically for junior enlisted service members, expanded access to the basic needs allowance, investments in new barracks and family housing, improved pay for child care staff and direct access

to specialty medical providers without referrals.

The bill also allows military spouses to transfer professional licenses between states, authorizes the construction of more Defense Department schools and child care centers, and makes it easier for government service employees of the military to stay in their overseas jobs past a five-year term limit.

Lawmakers on Wednesday said they will continue to seek further improvements to troop morale and quality of life but the approved defense bill marked a significant leap forward.

"This is the most consequential and important piece of legislation of the entire 118th Congress," said Rep. Chrissy Houlahan, D-Pa. "With this bill in law, our nation will be more secure, our servicemen and women more resolved to face the global challenges of tomorrow."

MILITARY

NATO chief urges boost in spending

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The top official in the U.S.-led NATO alliance issued a direct appeal Thursday to residents of countries in the bloc, asking them to demand big increases in defense spending in the face of Russia's aggression.

Secretary-General Mark Rutte's comments amount to the most forceful and direct call from a NATO leader in years to ramp up spending on the military. They come as allies prepare for President-elect Donald Trump's return to the White House.

Trump has blasted NATO repeatedly over the years for falling short on defense spending and has made increased expenditures the focal point of his approach to the bloc.

"Citizens living in NATO countries, especially in Europe and Canada, it's you I'm talking to. It's your support I need," Rutte said, adding that the security situation is "undoubtedly the worst" in his lifetime.



Rutte

While war with Russia is not imminent, the Kremlin's military buildup and transition to a wartime economy have Russia outpacing allies in Europe and putting NATO at risk, Rutte added.

"Danger is moving towards us at full speed," he said in his speech in Brussels. "We must not look the other way. We must face it."

Allies need to get back to a Cold War mentality of spending more than 3% of gross domestic product on defense, he said. A level of 2% of GDP has been the alliance's long-standing benchmark.

But many member states have regularly missed even the 2% threshold. In 2014, the number that hit the target was just three. Currently, about 20 of the bloc's 32 members spend at least that much.

Sweden and Finland joined NATO in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. There have been more than 1 million casualties collectively in a war that is a day's drive from alliance headquarters in Brussels, Rutte said.

"How many more wake-up calls do we need?" he said.

The public's views on increasing defense spending vary across the alliance, with members closer to Russian territory the most bullish on ramping up.

Poland has said it will spend 5% of GDP on defense in the coming year. And the Baltic states also are top spenders per capita, along with the United States. But many western members of the alliance fall short, including Italy, Spain and Portugal.

Germany finally hit the 2% mark this year after a long history of paltry defense spending. It's unclear whether Berlin is prepared to sustain that level or go higher. However, there are signs of domestic public support for pushing beyond the benchmark.

In November, a survey in Germany found that 65% of respon-

dents support an expenditure of at least 3% of GDP on defense.

Meanwhile, Russia will spend about 8% of GDP on its military this year, enabling it to produce larger numbers of tanks, armored vehicles and ammunition.

"What Russia lacks in quality, it makes up for in quantity," Rutte said. "With the help of China, Iran and North Korea, this all points in one clear direction: Russia is preparing for long-term confrontation with Ukraine and with us."

While Europe's defense industrial base has been hollowed out, Russian arms factories are churning out war equipment around the clock, he said.

Rutte urged allies in Europe to press banks and pension funds to invest in defense industries, something they don't do now.

Parsons takes over Navy on Okinawa

By BRIAN McELHINEY
Stars and Stripes

CAMP SHIELDS, Okinawa — A flight officer with several previous deployments to Okinawa took charge Thursday of Navy operations on the island, a unique command that encompasses naval aviators and ocean-going sailors.

Capt. Joseph Parsons relieved Capt. Patrick Dziekan, an E-2 Hawkeye pilot, as commander of Fleet Activities Okinawa, a collection of personnel and installations, including White Beach Naval Facility, during a ceremony at the Crow's Nest Club on Camp Shields.

About 230 sailors, family, friends and guests from across the U.S. and Japanese militaries on island attended the ceremony.

Rear Adm. Ian Johnson, commander of U.S. Naval Forces Japan and Navy Region Japan, praised Dziekan, who took charge in December 2021.

"Your team supported uninterrupted fleet operations across multiple domains, executed hundreds of vessel movements and sorties while ensuring seamless logistics and operational readiness," Johnson said at the ceremony.

He specifically cited the command's support of exercises Keen Sword in November and Citadel Pacific in July. It also received Navy Installations Command's excellence award in 2023, the first given to an overseas installation,



BRIAN McELHINEY/Stars and Stripes

Capt. Joseph Parsons is pinned with the command ashore insignia Thursday by his wife, Rosa Parsons, alongside their son, also named Joseph Parsons, at Camp Shields, Okinawa.

Johnson said.

Dziekan called Parsons "the right person for this job" during his brief remarks right before relinquishing command.

Okinawa's Navy command, headquartered at Kadena Air Base, traces its roots on the island to 1951, according to its website. It also has a presence on four other installations on Okinawa, including White Beach, the staging area for Marines headed out to sea.

Task Force 76 at White Beach is its primary tenant command, with multiple missions, including expeditionary and amphibious warfare and humanitarian relief efforts.

On the aviation side, it maintains two UC-12F Huron aircraft to support logistics flights throughout the Indo-Pacific, and its shore basing division supports deployed aviation units, according to the command's website.

Parsons is the rare nonpilot to take command of Navy operations on Okinawa. He told Stars and Stripes he will draw on his experience as a flight officer on P-8 Poseidon and P-3 Orion surveillance

aircraft in charge of large crews to lead an organization that encompasses 32 tenant commands and thousands of sailors and civilians.

"On a P-3 we had a crew of about 11; on a P-8 it's about nine for a standard mission," he said Tuesday at Navy headquarters on Kadena. "Every one of those positions is critical to the mission in its own way."

Parsons said he looks forward to working with the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and teased bilateral training in late February on a "simulated aircraft mishap."

He most recently served as Maritime Operations Center director and deputy chief of staff for Theater Anti-Submarine Warfare at Submarine Group 7, Task Force 74 and Task Force 54 at Yokosuka Naval Base, south of Tokyo.

A native of Dryden, N.Y., Parsons was designated a naval flight officer in 2004, according to his official Navy biography. He served his first deployment on Okinawa in 2005, he said.

Dziekan is headed to Joint Region Marianas on Guam to serve as chief of staff.

Army slashes payouts in credentialing program as it boosts tuition assistance

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The Army this week announced sharp cuts to a program that gives financial assistance to soldiers obtaining industry credentials while giving a boost to its tuition assistance initiative.

The new guidance, issued Tuesday, includes an increase of \$500 and two semester hours for tuition assistance but halves the annual cap for the credentialing assistance program.

Launched in 2020, the credentialing program allows troops to pursue education in hundreds of fields ranging from private pilot licenses for single-engine aircraft to security, personal training and technical trades.

The decrease in support for credentialing programs from a maximum cap of \$4,000 to \$2,000 annually was prompted by concerns that it was becoming financially unsustainable, the Army said in a statement Tuesday.

"When you have a program increase exponentially over a four-year period, you are eventually going to blow your budget to the point where it won't be available to anyone," Christine Traugott, a policy manager at the Army's office for manpower and reserve affairs, said in the statement.

The cost of the credentialing program has nearly doubled every year, Traugott said.

The average cost of a credential is \$1,700 and soldiers take an

average of 1.5 credentials a year, according to the Army.

Regarding tuition assistance, the annual cap goes from \$4,000 to \$4,500 and increases the annually allowed semester hours from 16 to 18.

Soldiers who took to social media to comment on the changes said the reduction could make it more difficult to get some sought-after credits, such as those needed by mechanics seeking Automotive Service Excellence certificates.

Other critics questioned whether scaling the popular program back would hurt recruitment and retention efforts inside the Army.

Next year, the Army will formalize the changes with a new regulation, which will exclude commissioned officers from using credentialing assistance and require command approval for both tuition and credentialing assistance requests.

In addition, soldiers will be limited to one credential a year and a maximum of three in 10 years. They will have to take the exam associated with the credential or recoup the cost of the course. Aviation credentials will max out at \$1,000 per year for all Army components.

The changes will bring the Army into closer alignment with the other services and preserve the benefits for soldiers who need them the most, Traugott said.

The average cost of a credential is \$1,700 and soldiers take an average of 1.5 credentials a year.

NATION



ALEX BRANDON / AP

President-elect Donald Trump speaks during a Time magazine Person of the Year event at the New York Stock Exchange, Thursday.

President-elect is named Time's Person of the Year

BY MICHELLE L. PRICE
AND DAVID BAUDER
Associated Press

NEW YORK — President-elect Donald Trump rang the opening bell Thursday at the New York Stock Exchange after being recognized for the second time by Time magazine as its person of the year.

The honors for the businessman-turned-politician are a measure of Trump's remarkable comeback from an ostracized former president who refused to accept his election loss four years ago to a president-elect who won the White House decisively in November.

Before he rang the opening bell

at 9:30 a.m., a first for him, Trump spoke at the exchange and called it "a tremendous honor."

"Time Magazine, getting this honor for the second time, I think it like it better this time actually," he said.

He talked up some of the people he has named to his incoming administration, including Treasury pick Secretary Scott Bessent, and some of his announced policies, including a promise this week that the federal government will issue expedited permits, including environmental approvals, for projects and construction worth more than \$1 billion.

Sam Jacobs, Time's editor in

chief, announced on NBC's "Today" show that Trump was Time's 2024 Person of the Year. Jacobs said Trump was someone who "for better or for worse, had the most influence on the news in 2024."

"This is someone who made an historic comeback, who reshaped the American presidency and who's reordering American politics," Jacobs said. "It's hard to argue with the fact that the person who's moving into the Oval Office is the most influential person in news."

Trump was also Time's Person of the Year in 2016, when he was first elected to the White House.

Trump invites Xi to inauguration

Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — President-elect Donald Trump has invited Chinese President Xi Jinping to attend his inauguration next month — extending a diplomatic olive branch even as Trump threatens to levy massive tariffs on Chinese goods.

Trump's incoming press secretary, Karoline Leavitt, confirmed on Thursday that Trump invited Xi, but said it was "to be determined" if the leader of the United States' most significant economic and military competitor would attend.

"This is an example of President Trump creating an open dialogue with leaders of countries that are not just our allies, but our adversaries and our competitors too," Leavitt said in an appearance on Fox News.

"We saw this in his first term. ... He is willing to talk to anyone and he will always put America's interest first."

CBS News first reported the invitation to Xi.

Leavitt said that other foreign leaders have also been invited, but did not provide any details.

Every country's chief of mission to the United States will also be invited, according to a Trump Inaugural Committee official who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

The invitation comes as Trump has vowed to enact massive tariffs on Canada, Mexico and China to get those countries to do more to reduce illegal immigration and the flow of illegal drugs such as fentanyl into the United States.

He has said that, on his first day

in office in January, he would impose 25% tariffs on all goods imported from Mexico and Canada and that China could be hit with even higher tariffs.

China produces precursor chemicals used in the production of fentanyl, but Beijing has stepped up efforts over the last year to crack down on the export of the chemicals.

Xi during a meeting with President Joe Biden last month in Beijing urged the United States not to start a trade war.

"Make the wise choice," Xi cautioned. "Keep exploring the right way for two major countries to get along well with each other."

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has also pushed back on Trump's threats, warning such a tariffs move would be perilous for the U.S. economy as well.

FBI director to resign before inauguration day

BY ERIC TUCKER
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — FBI Director Christopher Wray told bureau workers Wednesday that he plans to resign at the end of President Joe Biden's term in January, an announcement that came a week and a half after President-elect Donald Trump said he would nominate loyalist Kash Patel for the job.

Wray said at a town hall meeting that he would be stepping down "after weeks of careful thought," roughly three years short of the completion of a 10-year term during which he tried to keep the FBI out of politics even as the bureau found itself entangled in a string of explosive investigations, including two that led to separate indictments of Trump last year as well as inquiries into Biden and his son.

"My goal is to keep the focus on our mission — the indispensable work you're doing on behalf of the American people every day," Wray told agency employees. "In my view, this is the best way to avoid dragging the bureau deeper into the fray, while reinforcing the values and principles that are so important to how we do our work."

The intended resignation was not unexpected considering that Trump had settled on Patel to be director and had repeatedly aired his ire at Wray, whom he appointed during his first term. But his departure is nonetheless a reflection of how Trump's norm-breaking style has reshaped Washington, with the president-elect yet again flouting tradition by moving to replace an FBI director well before his term was up and Wray resigning to avert a collision with the incoming administration.

"It should go without saying, but I'll say it anyway — this is not easy for me," Wray said. "I love this place, I love our mission, and I love our people — but my focus is, and always has been, on us and doing what's right for the FBI."

Wray received a standing ovation following his remarks before a standing-room-only crowd at FBI headquarters and some in the audience cried, according to an FBI official who was not authorized to discuss the private gather-

"In my view, this is the best way to avoid dragging the bureau deeper into the fray."

FBI Director Christopher Wray

ing by name and spoke on condition of anonymity to The Associated Press.

Trump applauded the news on social media.

If confirmed by the Senate, Patel would herald a radical leadership transformation at the nation's premier federal law enforcement agency. He has advocated shutting down the FBI's Washington headquarters and called for ridding the federal government of "conspirators," raising alarms that he might seek to wield the FBI's significant investigative powers as an instrument of retribution against Trump's perceived enemies.

Patel said Wednesday that he was looking forward to "a smooth transition. I will be ready to serve the American people on day one."

It's extremely rare for FBI directors to be ousted from their jobs before the completion of their 10-year terms, a length meant to insulate the agency from the political influence of changing administrations. But Trump has done it twice, placing Wray in the job in 2017 after firing Director James Comey amid an investigation into ties between Russia and the Republican president's campaign.

Despite having appointed Wray, Trump had telegraphed his anger with the FBI director on multiple occasions throughout the years, including as recently as the past week.

In an interview with NBC's "Meet the Press" that aired Sunday, Trump said, "I can't say I'm thrilled with him. He invaded my home," a reference to the FBI's 2022 search of Trump's Florida property, Mar-a-Lago, for classified documents from Trump's first term as president.

That search, and the recovery of boxes of sensitive government records, paved the way for one of two federal indictments against Trump. The case, and another one charging him with plotting to overturn the 2020 election, have both been dismissed by the Justice Department special counsel that brought them in light of Trump's November victory.



Wray

NATION

Biden commutes 1,500 sentences and pardons 39

By COLLEEN LONG
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden is commuting the sentences of roughly 1,500 people who were released from prison and placed on home confinement during the coronavirus pandemic and is pardoning 39 Americans convicted of nonviolent crimes. It's the largest single-day act of clemency in modern history.

The commutations announced Thursday are for people who have served out home confinement sentences for at least one year after they were released. Prisons were uniquely bad for spreading the virus and some inmates were released in part to stop the spread. At one point, 1 in 5 prisoners had COVID-19, according to a tally kept by The Associated Press.

Biden said he would be taking more steps in the weeks ahead and would continue to review clemency petitions. The second largest single-day act of clemency was by Barack Obama, with 330, shortly before leaving office in 2017.

"America was built on the promise of possibility and second chances," Biden said in a state-

ment. "As president, I have the great privilege of extending mercy to people who have demonstrated remorse and rehabilitation, restoring opportunity for Americans to participate in daily life and contribute to their communities, and taking steps to remove sentencing disparities for non-violent offenders, especially those convicted of drug offenses."

The clemency follows a broad pardon for his son Hunter, who was prosecuted for gun and tax crimes. Biden is under pressure from advocacy groups to pardon those on federal death row, before the Trump administration takes over in January.

He's also weighing whether to issue preemptive pardons to those who investigated Trump's effort to overturn the results of the 2020 presidential election and are facing possible retribution when he takes office.

Clemency is the term for the power the president has to pardon, in which a person is relieved of guilt and punishment, or to commute a sentence, which reduces or eliminates the punishment but



SUSAN WALSH / AP

President Joe Biden on Thursday made the largest single-day act of clemency in the U.S. when he commuted sentences of about 1,500 people and pardoned 39 American convicted of nonviolent crimes.

doesn't exonerate the wrongdoing. It's customary for a president to grant mercy at the end of his term, using the power of the office to wipe away records or end prison terms.

Those pardoned Thursday had been convicted of nonviolent crimes such as drug offenses and turned their lives around, White House lawyers said.

They include a woman who led emergency response teams during natural disasters; a church deacon who has worked as an addiction counselor and youth counselor; a doctoral student in molecular biosciences; and a decorated military veteran.

The president had previously issued 122 commutations and 21 other pardons. He's also broadly pardoned those convicted of use and simple possession of marijuana

on federal lands and in the District of Columbia, and pardoned former U.S. service members convicted of violating a now-repealed military ban on consensual gay sex.

Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., and 34 other lawmakers are urging the president to pardon environmental and human rights lawyer Steven Donziger, who was imprisoned or under house arrest for three years because of a contempt of court charge related to his work representing Indigenous farmers in a lawsuit against Chevron.

Others are advocating for Biden to commute the sentences of federal death row prisoners. His attorney general, Merrick Garland, paused federal executions. Biden had said on the campaign trail in 2020 that he wanted to end the death penalty but he never did.

Wholesale inflation up in November

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Wholesale costs in the United States picked up sharply last month, signaling that price pressures are still evident in the economy even though inflation has tumbled from the peak levels it hit more than two years ago.

The Labor Department reported Thursday that its producer price index — which tracks inflation before it reaches consumers — rose 0.4% last month from October, up from 0.3% the month before. Measured from 12 months earlier, wholesale prices climbed 3% in November, the sharpest year-over-year rise since February 2023.

Excluding volatile food and energy prices, so-called core producer prices rose 0.2% from October and 3.4% from November 2023.

Higher food prices pushed up the November wholesale inflation reading, which came in hotter than economists had expected. Surging prices of fruits, vegetables and eggs drove wholesale food costs up 3.1% from October. They had been unchanged the month before.

The wholesale price report comes a day after the government reported that consumer prices rose 2.7% in November from a year earlier, up from an annual gain of 2.6% in October.



BRIAN GLENN, TMX/AP

Multiple drones are seen over Bernardsville, N.J., last week. The state has reported dozens of nighttime drone flights since last month.

Senator: Shoot down drones

Associated Press

A U.S. senator has called for mysterious drones spotted flying over sensitive areas in New Jersey and other parts of the Mid-Atlantic region to be "shot down, if necessary," as it remains unclear who owns them.

"We should be doing some very urgent intelligence analysis and take them out of the skies, especially if they're flying over airports or military bases," Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., said Thursday as concerns about the drones spread across Capitol Hill.

People in the New York region are also concerned that the drones may be sharing airspace with commercial airlines, he said.

"The Biden administration ought to be acting more aggressively against these drones that have been reported. If only to tell the American people who owns them, who's flying them, what they are. The lack of information is absolutely unacceptable," Blumenthal said.

Gov. Phil Murphy and law enforcement officials have stressed

that they don't appear to threaten public safety. The FBI has asked residents to share any videos, photos or other information they may have.

The number of sightings has increased in recent days, though officials say many of the objects seen may have been planes rather than drones. It's also possible that a single drone has been reported more than once.

The worry stems partly from the flying objects initially being spotted near the Picatinny Arsenal, a U.S. military research and manufacturing facility; and over President-elect Donald Trump's golf course in Bedminster.

In a post on the social media platform X, Assemblywoman Dawn Fantasia described the drones as up to 6 feet in diameter and sometimes traveling with their lights switched off.

Drones are legal in New Jersey for recreational and commercial use but are subject to local and Federal Aviation Administration regulations and flight restrictions. Operators must be FAA certified.

Most, but not all, of the drones spotted in New Jersey were larger than those typically used by hobbyists.

Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., said he was frustrated by the lack of transparency, saying it could help spread fear or misinformation.

"We should know what's going on over our skies," he said Thursday.

Fantasia, a Morris County Republican, was among lawmakers who met with state police and Homeland Security officials to discuss the spate of sightings that range from the New York City area through New Jersey and westward into parts of Pennsylvania.

Two Republican Jersey Shore-area congressmen, U.S. Reps. Chris Smith and Jeff Van Drew, have also called on the military to shoot down the drones. Smith said a Coast Guard commanding officer briefed him on an incident over the weekend in which a dozen drones followed a motorized Coast Guard lifeboat "in close pursuit" near Barnegat Light and Island Beach State Park.

NATION

Weather to help in California blaze battle

Associated Press

MALIBU, Calif. — Cooler temperatures, calmer winds and a chance of rainfall in Southern California this week are forecast to help firefighters as they battle a wind-driven blaze in steep, rugged terrain that's driven thousands, including celebrities, from their homes in Malibu.

The weather improved so much Wednesday that meteorologists said all red flag warnings, which indicate conditions for high fire danger and the notorious Santa Ana winds, were discontinued. The conditions allowed firefighters to have "a lot of success" despite the nearly inaccessible terrain, CalFire Assistant Chief Dusty Martin said.

Still, some 20,000 residents remained under evacuation orders and warnings Wednesday evening from the blaze, dubbed the Franklin Fire, which was only 7% contained over 6 square miles.

It's unclear how the blaze started. Officials said nine structures had been destroyed and at least six others had been damaged, though crews had only surveyed about 25% of the affected area, said Deputy Chief Albert Yanagisawa of the Los Angeles County Fire Department.

Much of the devastation occurred in Malibu, a community of about 10,000 people on the western edge of Los Angeles known for its stunning bluffs and Zuma Beach, which features in many Hollywood films.

Flames burned near horse farms, celebrities' seaside mansions, and Pepperdine University, where students were forced to



DAMIAN DOVARGANES/AP

A resident sifts through their property after the Franklin Fire swept through on Wednesday in Malibu, Calif.

shelter in place on campus for a second night Tuesday.

Faculty members are determining how best to complete the semester, which ends at Pepperdine this week. Final exams were postponed or canceled, depending on the class, university spokesperson Michael Friel said. An early analysis showed little to no damage to structures on campus, the university said.

Lonnie Vidaurri's four-bedroom home in the Malibu Knolls neighborhood is one of those destroyed. After evacuating to a hotel in Santa Monica with his wife and two young daughters, a neighbor

called to tell Vidaurri that firefighters would need to break into his house.

"It's pretty torched all around," Vidaurri said. He expects that the family's pet bunnies did not survive the fire, and that they lost most of their things. "My girls cried, obviously, but it could have been worse."

Mimi Teller, a Red Cross spokesperson who worked in the Pacific Palisades neighborhood, said many people arrived in their pajamas and were "definitely in shock."

"Nobody even had a backpack, it was, 'Get out now,'" Teller said.

"One lady didn't even have a leash for her dog, she just scooped them up."

Shawn Smith said he was asleep early Tuesday when someone knocked on his RV at 3 a.m. to wake him up to evacuate the Malibu RV Park.

"You could see the fires rolling in, in over the canyon," he said. "It was like 'Holy crap, this is real.'"

He returned Wednesday to find that the RV park had been saved — firefighters stopped the flames just before they entered the area.

"We got lucky," he said.

Dick Van Dyke, one of many celebrities with homes in Malibu,

said in a Facebook post that he and his wife, Arlene Silver, evacuated as the fire swept in. And Cher evacuated from her Malibu home when ordered and is staying at a hotel, her publicist, Liz Rosenberg, said Tuesday.

The fire erupted shortly before 11 p.m. Monday and swiftly moved south, jumping over the famous Pacific Coast Highway and extending all the way to the ocean. It was propelled by Santa Ana winds, with gusts that reached 40 mph. Santa Anas are notorious seasonal winds that blow dry air from the interior toward the coast, pushing back moist ocean breezes.

Alec Gellis stayed behind Monday night to save his home in Malibu's Serra Retreat neighborhood from the flames. He used pumps in the home's swimming pool to help spray water over the house and surrounding vegetation, turning the lush area "into a rainforest."

Gellis said there were flames within 5 feet of the home on all sides. "The whole canyon was completely lit up."

Utilities preemptively shut off power to tens of thousands of homes and businesses, starting Monday night, to mitigate the impacts of the Santa Ana winds, whose strong gusts can damage electrical equipment and spark wildfires.

As of Wednesday afternoon, electricity was still out for roughly 600 Southern California Edison customers, and the majority of those were in Los Angeles County, said utility spokesperson Gabriela Ornelas.

"We have been making significant progress," she said.

East Coast storm brings strong winds along with deluge of rain

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine — Colder weather began to return Thursday after a storm that swept up the East Coast delivered a blow to New England, packing powerful gusts that knocked out power along with a deluge of rain and warming temperatures that washed away snow and dampened ski resorts.

An atmospheric river transported moisture northward from the tropics and brought heavy rain Wednesday.

The city of Portland, Maine, got 2.33 inches of rain Wednesday, breaking a record of 2.01 inches for the date set in 1887, the National Weather Service said.

Utility workers were deployed to handle power outages after winds peaked Wednesday night into Thursday. Nearly 90,000 customers in Maine had lost power as of Thursday morning, according to

poweroutage.us.

A deepening low pressure system was responsible for winds that lashed the region, said Derek Schroeter, a forecaster with the National Weather Service. Some areas in Maine had wind gusts of over 50 mph.

Forecasters were concerned about bombogenesis, or a "bomb cyclone," marked by a rapid intensification over a 24-hour period.

"Is that what they're calling it?" said Jen Roberts, co-owner of Onion River Outdoors sporting goods store in Montpelier, Vt. She lamented that a five-day stretch of snowfall that lured ski customers into the store was being washed away, underscoring the region's fickle weather. "But you know, this is New England. We know this is what happens."

Ski resort operators called it bad luck as the holidays approach.

"We don't say the 'r-word' around here. It's a forbidden word," said Jamie Cobbett, marketing director at Waterville Valley Resort in New Hampshire, which was pelted by rain on Wednesday. "We're getting some moist wet weather today. We'll put the mountain back together."

Skier Marcus Caston was waterlogged but shrugged it off. "The conditions are actually pretty good. The rain is making the snow nice and soft. It's super fun," he said while skiing at Vermont's Sugarbush.

More seasonal low temperatures suitable for snowmaking were returning Thursday.

New England wasn't the only region experiencing wild weather. Heavy lake-effect snow was expected through Thursday in parts of Michigan, along the Lake Michigan shoreline, and dangerous cold



CHARLES REX ARBOGAST/AP

A man carries blankets as an Arctic blast brings single-digit temperatures with wind chills below zero on Thursday in Chicago.

enveloped parts of the Upper Midwest. In New York, Gov. Kathy Hochul on Wednesday declared a state of emergency in several counties in anticipation of heavy snowfall expected off of Lake Erie and Lake Ontario into Thursday.

But New England's weather

brought the biggest variety, with the storm bringing a little bit of everything. It started early Wednesday with freezing rain. Then came a deluge of regular rain and warming temperatures — topping 50 degrees Fahrenheit in Portland, for example.

NATION

Descendant a voice for village invaded in WWII

Chief's kin seeks more from Japan for residents of island in Alaska

By MARK THIESSEN
AND MARI YAMAGUCHI
Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — Helena Pagano's great-grandfather was the last Alaska Native chief of a remote island in the Bering Sea, closer to Russia than North America. He died starving as a prisoner of war after Japanese troops invaded during World War II, wresting the few dozen residents from their village, never to return.

Pagano has long believed Japan should pay more restitution for what its soldiers did to her great-grandfather and the other residents of Attu Island.

But her demand was sparked anew this summer by her first visit to the island. She went alongside Japanese officials who, as part of a redoubled effort to recover the remains of World War II soldiers killed abroad, unearthed the bones of two people from the tundra.

The Attuans "lost their homeland, they lost their family members," Pagano said. "This story was never told, and the Japanese have never really helped us in that regard."

Attu Island is the most westerly of Alaska's Aleutian chain. It was one of the few U.S. territories, including Guam, the Philippines and the nearby island of Kiska, to be captured during the war.

Japanese landed on Attu on June 7, 1942, killing the radio operator. The residents were kept in their homes for three months, then taken to Japan.

U.S. forces waged a bloody campaign amid hurricane-force winds, rain and dense fog in 1943 to retake Attu Island in what became known as the war's "forgotten battle." More than 2,500 Japanese soldiers died in combat or by suicide, and American forces lost about 550 soldiers.

Of the 41 residents interned on Japan's Hokkaido Island, 22 died from malnutrition, starvation, tuberculosis or other ailments over the next two-plus years, including Pagano's great-grandfather, Mike Hodikoff, the last chief. Hodikoff and his son both died in 1945, suffering from food poisoning after being reduced to scrounging through rotting garbage for sustenance.

After the war, surviving Attuans were not allowed to return to the island because the U.S. military said it would be too expensive to rebuild. Most were sent to Atka



MARK THIESSEN/AP

Helena Pagano, the great-granddaughter of the last chief of Alaska's Attu Island, in August was likely the first Attuan to spend a night on the island since the residents were forcibly removed 82 years ago.



U.S. ARMY/AP

A U.S. squad closes in on Japanese holdouts entrenched in dugouts during World War II on Attu Island in June 1943.



LISA HUPP, U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE/AP

An artillery monument sits above Massacre Bay on Attu Island.

Island, about 200 miles away. The last surviving Attu residents that were held in captivity died last year.

In 1951, six years after the end of the war, Japan did offer the Attuans who survived about \$4,000 a year — more than the average U.S. annual salary at the time — for three years, Pagano said. Nearly all accepted, but her grandmother refused, suggesting the treatment the POWs endured was too awful to be compensated with money.

The Japanese never compen-

sated the families for the deaths of prisoners or for the loss of land and damage to Attuan culture and language, said Pagano, who runs Atux Forever, a nonprofit devoted to Attuan culture. The historical trauma still weighs on the 300 or so Attuan descendants remaining in the U.S., she said.

Besides restitution, she'd like to see the Japanese government invest in a cultural center for Attuans somewhere in mainland Alaska and to work with the U.S. government on an environmental

cleanup of Attu Island, including the removal of old anti-aircraft guns and steel planking that was used for temporary airstrips, along with a peace memorial she said Japan erected there without the input of Attuans or U.S. veterans who served in the battle.

Officials at Japan's Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry and the Foreign Ministry said they have not received requests for additional restitution from Attuans.

There have been compensation demands for brutality against POWs, wartime Korean forced laborers and "comfort women" from across Asia who were forced into prostitution for Japanese soldiers. But the Japanese government has insisted that all compensation issues were settled under a 1951 treaty in San Francisco, whose signatory members had waived their rights, or other treaties, said Yoshitaka Sato, an official at the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry. Japan had set up funds for the women in 1995 and 2015 as exceptions.

Pagano says the 1951 treaty would not bar additional restitution.

The island is part of the Alaska Maritime National Wildlife Refuge. In August, Pagano made her first trip to Attu, on a ship operated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which manages the refuge.

She said she didn't know ahead of time that the Japanese officials would be exhuming any remains, and she considered it disrespectful, saying the bones could have been those of Attu residents or U.S. soldiers.

Jeff Williams, deputy manager of the refuge, said the exhumation plans weren't approved until just before the trip.

The former Attu village site, where the bones were unearthed, is owned by the Aleut Corp. — one

of several regional, for-profit corporations set up to benefit Alaska Natives.

In an email, spokesperson Kate Gilling said the Aleut Corp. "recognizes the significant historical trauma endured by the Attuan people during and after World War II" and that it was aware of Atux Forever's call for reparations.

"We believe greater partnership between all entities in the Aleutian and Pribilof Island region will help advance solutions that are comprehensive and inclusive," she said.

As war veterans and their relatives age, the Japanese government has faced growing calls to speed the recovery of remains and has done so, including more use of DNA testing. Of about 2.4 million Japanese troops who died in the war outside Japan, the remains of a little more than half have been recovered.

Japan conducted its first reclamation of remains on Attu in 1953 and recovered those of about 320 Japanese soldiers, which were taken to Japan and stored at the Chidorigafuchi National Cemetery. The remains of the others on Attu are unaccounted for.

Sato, the Japanese government official, said the U.S. government controls what areas Japan can survey for remains and requires Japan to take necessary environmental protection measures.

Japanese efforts to recover remains on Attu had long been on hold, largely due to U.S. environmental concerns, Sato said. In 2009, the U.S. government required environmental assessment that led to further delay of more than a decade.

Prior to the August visit to Attu, the U.S. proposed a survey without digging, but later allowed shoveling inside of a small piece of land, Sato said. Under the supervision of U.S. officials, the remains of two suspected Japanese soldiers were unearthed.

The remains were sent to Anchorage for temporary storage pending a preliminary evaluation by Japanese experts to be dispatched by the end of March. If their analysis determines the remains are very likely Japanese, samples will be sent to Japan for DNA testing, Sato said.

During the August visit, Pagano spent two days on the island, collecting water samples from a creek to check for lingering environmental contamination.

While others returned to the ship to sleep at night, she camped out — likely the first Attuan to spend a night on the island since the residents were forcibly removed 82 years ago.

"I did feel really calm and peaceful and complete as a human being," Pagano said.

WORLD

Yoon defends martial law amid continued impeachment calls

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol on Thursday defended his failed attempt 10 days ago to impose martial law, just as a poll shows most of his country's citizens favor his impeachment.

Yoon declared martial law on Dec. 3, he said in a televised speech Thursday, to "protect the nation" from the main opposition Democratic Party, a group he called "a monster that destroys the constitutional order of free democracy."

Yoon survived an impeachment vote Saturday when members of his People Power Party, the ruling conservatives, boycotted a parliamentary vote. Another vote is scheduled this coming Saturday, and the party chair voiced his support Thursday for removing Yoon

from office.

Nearly 80% of respondents surveyed Tuesday said they agreed with impeaching Yoon while 20% said they were against removing him from office, according to a poll by the Seoul-based Embrain Public polling agency for South Korean media outlet News1. The results were released Thursday.

The poll consisted of 1,005 South Korean adults and had a margin of error of 3.1%, according to the agency's filings with the National Election Survey Deliberation Commission.

Nearly 70% said Yoon should be immediately arrested and investigated, 13% said a potential arrest should come after an investigation and 10% said an investigation is unnecessary, the results said.

Only 13% of respondents said they believed Yoon should complete his five-year term that began

May 10, 2022. Fifty-seven percent said the National Assembly ought to pursue impeachment charges against the president and 20% said he should resign on his own accord.

Yoon declared martial law citing a growing number of political scandals and the Democratic Party's efforts to impeach his government appointees.

National Assembly lawmakers opposed to the declaration immediately went to parliament to overrule it as special forces soldiers stormed the building to block their progress.

Enough lawmakers successfully convened and voted in favor of ending Yoon's declaration after six hours.

The incident has spurred calls for his impeachment, waves of resignations from government officials and suspensions of high-



SOUTH KOREAN PRESIDENTIAL OFFICE

South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol gives a televised speech at the presidential office in Seoul, South Korea, on Thursday.

ranking military officers.

People Power Party leader Han Dong-hoon said he would back the impeachment effort after listening to the president's speech Thursday.

Yoon must be suspended "through impeachment" to "protect the democratic republic," Han told reporters at a press conference in Seoul.

Yoon loyalists jeered Han at a party meeting after he called Yoon's televised statement "a confession of rebellion," according to The Associated Press.

At least 200 votes are required from the 300-member parliament to suspend Yoon's duties until South Korea's Constitutional Court determines the validity of his presidency.

Russia edges closer to key eastern Ukraine city in 'intense' fighting

By ILLIA NOVIKOV
Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Fighting around the key eastern Ukraine city of Pokrovsk is "extremely intense" after a monthslong Russian push, Ukraine's top military commander said, with analysts estimating Russian forces are now within just a few miles of the city.

Ukrainian troops repelled nearly 40 Russian attempts to

storm defenses around Pokrovsk over the previous 24 hours, the General Staff said in a battlefield report Thursday.

"Russian occupiers are throwing all available forces forward, attempting to break through the defenses of our troops," Ukrainian army chief Gen. Oleksandr Syrskyi said in a Facebook post late Wednesday. His forces are outnumbered, he said.

Ukraine's stretched defenses in

Donetsk have been creaking since early this year under a fierce Russian drive to capture its neighbor's entire eastern Donbas region. Russian forces are trying to overwhelm Ukraine's battlefield defenses with sheer numbers of troops and powerful glide bombs that blast fortifications to smithereens.

Pokrovsk, which had a population of about 60,000 before Russia's full-scale invasion in Febru-

ary 2022, is one of Ukraine's main defensive strongholds and a key logistics hub in the Donetsk region.

Its capture would compromise Ukraine's defensive abilities and supply routes and would bring Russia closer to its stated goal of seizing the entire Donetsk region.

But Ukraine's dogged resistance and Western military aid have rendered the gains costly for the Kremlin in losses of troops

and armor.

A major worry for the Kyiv government is that tens of billions of dollars of key U.S. military support to hold Russia at bay may dry up under President-elect Donald Trump.

The Institute for the Study of War estimated late Wednesday that Russian forces have moved to within just under 4 miles of Pokrovsk, approaching from the south.

STARS AND STRIPES

SERVICE DIRECTORY

The Daily Guide to Navigating The Military Business Market




Transportation

944

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MIDEAST

In Syria, closest ally to US is losing ground

BY JOSEPH KRAUSS

Associated Press

The jihadi rebels who toppled Syrian President Bashar Assad say they want to build a unified, inclusive country. But after nearly 14 years of civil war, putting that ideal into practice will not be easy.

For Syria's Kurdish minority, America's closest ally in the country, the struggle for a new order is entering a potentially even more challenging phase.

Over the course of Syria's civil war, Kurdish fighters have fended off an array of armed factions, partnered with the U.S. to rout the Islamic State and carved out a largely autonomous region in the country's oil-rich east.

But the gains of the non-Arab Kurds are now at risk. The ascendance of the Sunni Arab rebels who overthrew Assad — with vital help from Turkey, a longtime foe of the Kurds — will make it hard for the Kurds to find a place in the new Syria and could prolong the conflict.

The jihadi rebels who rode into Damascus over the weekend have made peaceful overtures to the Kurds. But the rebels violently drove Kurdish fighters out of the eastern city of Deir al-Zour days after government forces abandoned it.

To the north, a separate opposition faction backed by Turkey that has been battling the Kurds for years seized the town of Manbij. And Turkey carried out airstrikes on a Kurdish convoy it said was carrying heavy weapons looted from government arsenals.

The Kurds have long counted on U.S. aid in the face of such challenges. Around 900 American troops are in eastern Syria, where they partner with Kurdish forces to prevent an Islamic State resurgence. But the future of that mission will be thrown into doubt under president-elect Donald Trump, who has long been skeptical about U.S. involvement in Syria.



BADERKHAN AHMAD/AP

Kurdish-led fighters backed by the U.S. stand guard in Raqqa, Syria, in February 2022.

Here's a closer look at the predicament the Kurds find themselves in.

■ Who are the U.S.-allied Kurdish fighters in Syria?

The Kurds are among the largest stateless ethnic groups in the world, with some 30 million concentrated in a territory straddling Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. They are a minority in each country and have often suffered persecution, which has fueled armed Kurdish uprisings.

In Syria, they carved out an autonomous enclave early in the civil war, never fully siding with the Assad government or the rebels seeking to topple him.

When Islamic State seized a third of the country in 2014, Kurdish fighters — who are secular and include women in their ranks — proved their mettle in early battles against the extremists, earning support from the U.S.-led coalition.

They formed a group known as the Syrian Democratic Forces,

which also includes Arab fighters, and drove Islamic State out of large areas of Syria with help from U.S.-led airstrikes and American special forces. In 2017, these Kurdish-led forces captured Raqqa, the capital of the extremists' self-styled caliphate.

■ Why is Turkey fighting the Kurds?

Turkey has long viewed the SDF as an extension of the decades-old Kurdish insurgency within its own borders. It considers the main Kurdish faction a terrorist group on par with the Islamic State and has said it should have no presence in the new Syria.

In recent years, Turkey has trained and funded fighters known as the Syrian National Army, helping them wrest control of territory from the Kurds in northern Syria along the border with Turkey. These Turkish-backed fighters have portrayed themselves as part of the opposition against Assad, but analysts say they are largely driven by opportunism and hatred

of the Kurds.

The Kurds have focused on battling the SNA in recent years. But the new leadership in Damascus, which also has longstanding ties to Turkey, could open another, much longer front.

■ How do the Syrian rebels view the Kurds?

The main rebel faction is led by Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Golani, a former al-Qaida militant who cut ties with the group eight years ago and says he wants to build a new Syria free of dictatorship that will serve all its religious and ethnic communities.

Nawaf Khalil, head of the Germany-based Center for Kurdish Studies, said the early signs were positive. He said the rebels steered clear of two SDF-controlled enclaves of Aleppo when they stormed the city two weeks ago at the start of their rapid advance across the country.

"It is also positive that they did not speak negatively about the Syr-

ian Democratic Forces," he said.

It remains to be seen if those sentiments will endure. After sweeping into Deir al-Zour this week, a fighter from al-Sharaa's group posted a video saying they would soon advance toward Raqqa and other areas of eastern Syria, raising the possibility of further clashes with the Kurds.

The rebels could still seek some kind of agreement with the Kurds to incorporate them into the post-Assad political order, but that would likely require accepting a degree of Kurdish autonomy in the east. It would also risk angering Turkey, which now appears to be the chief power broker in Syria.

■ Will the Trump administration support the Kurds?

The top U.S. military commander for the Middle East, Army Gen. Erik Kurilla, met with SDF forces in Syria on Tuesday, in a sign of the Biden administration's commitment to the alliance post-Assad.

But things could change on Jan. 20.

Trump has provided few details about his Middle East policy, aside from saying he wants to end the region's wars and keep the United States out of them.

In a social media post shortly before Assad was overthrown, Trump wrote that "Syria is a mess, but is not our friend, & THE UNITED STATES SHOULD HAVE NOTHING TO DO WITH IT. THIS IS NOT OUR FIGHT."

During his previous term, in 2019, Trump abandoned the Kurds ahead of a Turkish incursion, casting it as the fulfillment of a campaign promise to end U.S. involvement in the region's "endless wars."

The move prompted heavy criticism, including from prominent Republicans who accused him of betraying an ally. Trump backtracked weeks later, approving a wider mission to secure oil fields in the east. The troops remained where they were and the alliance endured.

EU countries double down on halt to Syrian asylum claims

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — Some European Union countries on Thursday doubled down on their decision to rapidly halt asylum procedures for Syrian migrants in Europe, but said that it was too early to consider sending any of the hundreds of thousands of people who have fled since 2011 back home.

Austria, Belgium, Germany, Greece, Finland, Ireland, Sweden and non-EU country Norway suspended asylum applications from Syrians in the wake of Bashar Assad's fall. France is weighing whether to take similar action, at least until Syria's new leadership

and security conditions become clearer.

The decisions do not mean that Syrian asylum-seekers will be deported. The EU's executive branch, the European Commission, has said that currently "the conditions are not met for safe, voluntary, dignified returns to Syria."

"We need to wait a few more days to see where Syria is heading now," German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser said. "What is the situation? What about the protection of minorities? What about the protection of the people? And then, of course, there could be repatriation."

Asked by reporters whether it would make sense to organize repatriations at an EU level, Faeser said "it would be very expedient to organize this together."

But she stressed that Syrians who work in Germany and abide by its laws are welcome to stay. Over 47,000 asylum claims by Syrians are pending in Germany, a main destination in Europe for those who have fled since 2011.

"This is not a long term pause as far as I'm concerned," Irish Justice Minister Helen McEntee told reporters. "It's really positive that the Assad regime has come to an end. At the same time, we can all

see that it's not clear what will happen next."

The arrival in Europe in 2015 of well over 1 million refugees — most fleeing the conflict in Syria — sparked one of the EU's biggest political crises as nations bickered over who should host them and whether other countries should be forced to help. Those tensions remain even today.

Almost 14,000 Syrians applied for international protection in Europe this year up to September, according to the EU's asylum agency. Around 183,000 Syrians applied for asylum in all of last year. On average, around one in three

applications are accepted.

Already on Monday, despite deep uncertainty about the country's future, hundreds of Syrian refugees gathered at two border crossings in southern Turkey, eagerly anticipating their return home following the fall of Bashar Assad's government.

In the days since Assad's abrupt fall, rebel leader Ahmad al-Sharaa, formerly known as Abu Mohammed al-Golani, has sought to reassure Syrians that the group he leads — Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, or HTS — does not seek to dominate the country and will continue government services.

WEEKEND



Lauren Mayberry finds her solo groove
Music, Pages 28-29

High note for Jolie

Actress steps into career-defining role as opera singer Maria Callas in 'Maria'

Movies, Pages 18-19



Critics have been giving Angelina Jolie her flowers for her role as Maria Callas in "Maria."

Netflix

WEEKEND: GADGETS & TECHNOLOGY

More movie, more money

ScreenX extends select film scenes to theater walls for an extra cost

By ADAM GRAHAM
The Detroit News

In ScreenX, everything is bigger. Or at least considerably wider.

For the movie business, it's not necessarily a game changer as much as it's a game enhancer. It's a little bit extra, like whipped cream capping a latte, or a cherry on top of a gooey ice cream sundae.

ScreenX is a premium theatrical format that extends movie screens to the theater's walls to create an immersive, 270-degree viewing experience. That means the movie is wrapping around you, filling your peripheral vision, rather than simply unfolding on the screen in front of you — you know, the way movies have been for the past 100-plus years.

ScreenX, which bills itself as “cinema without limits,” is not for every movie. It's not presenting a wider view of the papal voting sessions in “Conclave” or delivering even more of that static single room shot in “Here.”

But for the action blockbusters or animated films for which it's activated, ScreenX plops viewers further into the world of the movie, and deeper into the vision of the filmmaker.

At ScreenX presentations, the technology wasn't activated for the entire length of the film. At a recent ScreenX showing of the animated adventure “The Wild Robot” at MJR Waterford in Michigan, the three screens were on for about 62 of the film's 102 minutes, or about 60% of the film's runtime. This is typical.

Preshow trailers aren't in ScreenX, and the theater



DAVID GURALNICK, THE DETROIT NEWS/TNS

Viewers watch a demonstration on July 16 of the new ScreenX theater at MJR Waterford Cinema 16 in Waterford Township, Mich. The technology debuted there over the summer and costs about \$5 more than a regular ticket.

bumper isn't either. Select scenes in the film are fully rendered for the three screens, and in the case of “The Wild Robot,” the entire first 15 minutes of the movie were ScreenX-equipped.

But isn't the whole multiple screens thing distracting? It's not. A worst-case scenario would present two characters talking on screen from the left and right walls of the theater, with theatergoers' heads craning from side to side like they were watching a tennis match (or “Challengers”).

ScreenX is mostly built to extend the action of whatever is on the main screen, with the two walls adding to what's in the edges of the frame. The main action is still in the middle; the sides are just filling viewers' vision with, well, more.

More is the name of the game for “Wicked” and for “Gladiator II” — more green scenery in the case of “Wicked,” and more, er, sand in the case of “Gladiator II.”

The farther back you sit in the theater, the more you're

able to appreciate the experience. The closer you get to the screen, the more the action surrounds, and eventually encapsulates, your full range of vision.

ScreenX, which has been around for more than a decade, was developed by CJ 4DPLEX, a subsidiary of South Korean multiplex chain CJ CGV. It's used on nearly 400 screens in 43 countries.

It comes at a time when premium large format, or PLF, offerings have been a bright spot for the theatergoing industry. Other examples of PLF include IMAX and 4DX, the latter of which presents a full sensory experience, including misting viewers if the movie calls for it.

ScreenX comes at an upcharge: In Waterford, Mich., it's \$17 for an evening ticket, about \$5 more than for a regular showing.

It won't make a bad movie good, and being fully surrounded by something as aggressive as “Venom: The Last Dance” sounds like a cruel punishment. But for something enjoyable, it makes it a little bit sweeter, one step closer to living inside the world of the movie.

Vitesy's Shelfy extends the life of items in your fridge

By GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service

It's nice to write about a gadget that will save you money, but how much depends on the user. I'm referring to the Shelfy, a compact device (6.6 by 4.5 by 2.6 inches) you place in your refrigerator. It extends the life of fruits and veggies by eliminating bacteria and breaking down pollutants that accelerate ripening.

A company representative wrote in an email that she tested it and “can personally vouch for the fact that I have seen a notable difference in food shelf life, especially with fruits and vegetables.” The Shelfy is said to extend the life of fruits and vegetables up to 12 days. And remember, with bad food comes bad odors. The Shelfy will remove 80% of odors by preventing mold.

The email also stated: The world wastes about 2.5 billion tons of food every year, and the United States is the leader, discarding more food than any other country. This adds up to an approximate value of nearly \$218 billion — the equivalent of 130 billion meals wasted annually in America.

I'm, without a doubt, part of the problem. My wife and I buy fruit and vegetables weekly, and often, they are untouched and get trashed. So, for my testing, I purchased some fruit and vegetables and didn't eat them. I just waited for them to go bad. As is normal, the first to start to go



VITESY/TNS

Shelfy eliminates bacteria and breaks down pollutants that accelerate ripening. Place it on a refrigerator shelf or in the crisper drawer and use its app to customize fan speed.

bad in about six days was a tub of spring mix lettuce, followed closely by strawberries.

Then I went to the store and bought the exact same amount of fruit and vegetables and placed them in the same place in my refrigerator — except this time, I put the Shelfy on the same shelf.

On day six, everything looked fine. On day 10, I used the lettuce, and it was fine. On day 12, I finished the lettuce. I was convinced.

Shelfy's Italian parent company, Vitesy, produces sustainable and smart solutions to fight air pollution and food waste. I've been using the Shelfy for about a month

now, and there's no doubt Vitesy is true to its word.

The Shelfy will need a USB-C charge after about three weeks. It is controlled with its companion app, Vitesy Hub. The app is easy to use. Maintenance notifications will alert you when a recharge is needed and when to clean your fridge or filter.

The Shelfy's filter is part of Vitesy's zero-waste policy. It doesn't have to be replaced. Instead, it snaps out and is cleaned under running water. The app even displays how many days until filter washing is needed.

It has three operating modes. Eco is ideal (my choice) for daily use, Crisper is for the fruit and vegetables crisper drawer, and Performance is designed for a temporary and intensive action. Each runs the Shelfy's fan at different speeds, with Crisper at the lowest, Eco in the middle and Performance using the most fan power.

The app also shows you how to become a food storage expert. It tells you about the importance of food placement and preservation in your fridge and even advises which items shouldn't be stored there.

The Shelfy is currently \$125.99 (on sale from \$179.99) at Amazon. The Vitesy site has special pricing if you need multiple Shelfys.

Online: vitesy.com/shelfy

WEEKEND: VIDEO GAMES

Sony's precarious position

Now 30, the PlayStation, which once shattered the status quo, has become it

By GENE PARK
The Washington Post

Sony debuted the PlayStation on Dec. 3, 1994, with the expressed intent of re-creating the extravagance of big-ticket entertainment in a living room. For gaming at the time, that meant arcade machines priced around a car's down payment. But anyone who turned on their very first PlayStation game — in my case it was Ridge Racer — saw PlayStation vanish the arcade business into obsolescence.

Within just a few years, three of the platform's games defined the blockbuster video game experience: Resident Evil, Final Fantasy VII and Metal Gear Solid. Video games encompass various media (music, literature) and PlayStation helped the medium finally appropriate cinema to propel it into the future we know today. Halfway through the PlayStation 4's run as the dominant console in the 2010s, Sony's games would rival or exceed film in its lights and magic, and eventually boast the same bursting, out-of-control budgets.

That technical wizardry — for gamers, a sort of 2007 iPhone moment every few years — came to define Sony's remarkable 30-year run in video games.

Getting there wasn't simple. In the late '70s, Sony helped create the CD-ROM format, so naturally the firm leaned on its expansive storage space and cheaper production cost to widen the playing field for video game developers. Nintendo and Sony originally flirted with a plan to make a CD console, then called the Play Station. But Nintendo infamously scrapped the arrangement to work with Philips instead.

That chain of events embittered and emboldened Sony engineer Ken Kutaragi to turn the idea into Sony's entry into the games market. Nintendo, meanwhile, stuck with the more restrictive game cartridge format.

Sony's top executives at the time scoffed at the games business they didn't understand — Sony as a business was native to the arts and entertainment through film and music. It flexed its marketing muscles to create a culture around PlayStation that targeted the more discerning, mature gamer, whereas Nintendo was family-friendly and the struggling Sega was for misfits. In 1995, before the PlayStation's U.S. release, Sony executives even guided Michael Jackson through the show floor of the Electronic Entertainment Expo. The late pop king played Tekken, one of the many arcade experiences PlayStation re-created at home.

One problem: Sony didn't know how to make games. Nintendo and Sega had homegrown creative talent. Sony had to acquire its studios, the first of which was Liverpool-based Psygnosis. It was not only the first step in creating the multicompany collective now known as PlayStation Studios, it also propelled the globalization of the video game business outside of Japan and the United States.



Sony Interactive Entertainment photos

Sony is currently led by Naughty Dog and Santa Monica Studio, respective creators of *The Last of Us*, and *God of War*, above. These games are among the most critically acclaimed works of the medium and rival big-screen superhero films.



PaRappa the Rapper, which Sony produced in 1996, was one of the first rhythm action games. It married East Village art sensibilities with Japanese game design.

Sony aggressively asked outside studios to pitch in. This led to an explosion of creativity during the first three generations of consoles as new ideas and game genres sprang up every year. Sony produced many innovative titles such as PaRappa the Rapper in 1996, which married East Village art sensibilities with Japanese game design to create one of the first rhythm action games. PlayStation 2 saw this trend continue, having space for odd-ball experiences like Mister Mosquito, where you play as a household mosquito terrorizing a suburban family.

Eventually, the PlayStation drew the biggest names in video games. Capcom published the first adult-rated PlayStation game, Resident Evil, which used voice acting and cinematic camera angles to establish the horror game genre. Betrayed by Nintendo's decision to stay with cartridges, the creators of Final Fantasy pledged their next game to the PlayStation, which helped sell consoles. Final Fantasy VII arrived in 1997 and pushed the boundaries of games as a storytelling

medium through its mix of real-time 3D models and prerendered computer graphics footage. In 1998, Konami published Metal Gear Solid, which contained hours of film, voice acting, a Hollywood-tier score and a charismatic rock star personality in its director, Hideo Kojima.

These three games and series would continue to define the modern video game, each new entry topping the last in graphics and production. Final Fantasy X, released only four years after VII, looked like a game made in a different century. Kojima's work would inspire countless video game stories and how they're told. Sony's own studios would crystallize its design philosophies around the cinematic narrative adventure.

Today, Sony's stable is led by Naughty Dog and Santa Monica Studio, creators of *The Last of Us* and *God of War*, respectively. They use expensive motion capture and acting talent along with thousands of hours spent on special effects and graphics to create games that rival big-screen superhero flicks. These games are among

the most critically acclaimed works of the medium, but the higher costs have cut into profit margins, extending development cycles from years to almost a decade.

Former PlayStation boss Shawn Layden has publicly expressed concern about this exact issue, saying that ballooning budgets have created a frightening atmosphere for "risk-averse" publishers. Sony fell victim to its own hubris this year and created one of the largest entertainment flops in recent memory: With a reported budget of at least \$200 million and at least six years of development time, Concord was on sale for less than two weeks before Sony recalled the game for dismal sales.

The Concord failure illustrates the precarious situation Sony PlayStation finds itself in today. Concord was meant to be an expanding intellectual property that appeals to people of all ages and interests, something Sony lacks because of its 30-year persistence in catering toward the "adult" gamer. PlayStation is a victim of its own success, successfully maturing the games market only to plateau with an aging, narrowing audience.

Fortunately, the spirit of freewheeling creativity is now everywhere in the games industry. The PC space further lowered the barrier of entry and is now home to more experimental games. PlayStation used to feel like the platform where no matter who you are, there's a unique game experience catered just for you. Today, it's just like every other video game platform, especially since many of its once-exclusive games are now available on PC.

To its eternal credit, PlayStation's mission was to shatter the status quo, only to become it. It shaped the games business as we know it today and matured the medium along with the audience. If PlayStation wants to repeat its groundbreaking 30-year run, it would take a different bag of magic tricks for a tough crowd that's now seen it all.

WEEKEND: MOVIES

A merry movie mix-up

Reddit users recommend alternative Christmas and Christmas-adjacent films

BY AVERY NEWMARK
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

Tired of watching Buddy the Elf scarf down spaghetti with maple syrup? Reddit users have stepped up with plenty of suggestions for alternative Christmas movies, offering options for those craving something a little more complex.

These films show holiday spirit can shine in surprising ways — whether through magical wands, Gothic vibes or action-packed sequences.

Here's Reddit's guide to some of the best unconventional Christmas viewing:



20TH CENTURY STUDIOS/TNS

Bruce Willis plays John McClane in "Die Hard," which takes place during a Christmas party.

Die Hard

This 1988 action classic follows John McClane (Bruce Willis) as he battles terrorists (Alan Rickman and company) during a Christmas party, sparking endless debates about what constitutes a "Christmas movie" while delivering quotable one-liners and explosive action sequences.

Violent Night

David Harbour stars as a decidedly un-jolly Santa who takes on mercenaries with brutal efficiency. This recent addition to the alternative Christmas canon suggests that sometimes Santa needs to check his naughty list twice.

Batman Returns

Tim Burton transforms Gotham City into a Gothic winter wonderland where Michael Keaton's Batman confronts Catwoman and the Penguin. The film's dark holiday atmosphere creates an unforgettable Christmas noir.



UNIVERSAL STUDIOS/TNS

David Harbour stars as an un-jolly Santa who takes on mercenaries in "Violent Night."

Gremlins

This cautionary tale teaches us that Christmas presents require careful reading of their instruction manuals — unless you want your town overrun by mischievous monsters. A perfect blend of holiday cheer and creature chaos.

In Bruges

Colin Farrell and Brendan Gleeson star as hit men hiding out in a fairy-talelike Belgian city during the holidays. Dark comedy meets existential crisis in this cult classic set against a magical Christmas backdrop. Fun fact: Farrell snagged a Golden Globe for best actor in a motion picture — musical or comedy — for his performance.

Go

Take a chaotic trip to the checkout line in this 1999 film starring Katie Holmes and Sarah Polley. Following an ensemble of retail workers navigating a wild Christmas Eve, it shows us sometimes the best holiday stories unfold after hours.

"I always forget that's a Christmas movie! Great film," one Redditor commented.

The Long Kiss Goodnight

Geena Davis and Samuel L. Jackson team up in this festive action thriller about an amnesiac assassin who discovers her true identity during the holiday season.

The Ref

Denis Leary shines in this sharp-tongued tale of holiday dysfunction, where a burglar becomes an unlikely family therapist on the Christmas Eve.



Warner Bros. Pictures

From left: Rupert Grint, Emma Watson, Matthew Lewis, Daniel Radcliffe and Bonnie Wright star in "Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince." Several of the Harry Potter movies have holiday scenes.

Harry Potter

While not strictly Christmas movies, Hogwarts' magical holiday celebrations have become iconic, offering a cozy yet unconventional festive atmosphere filled with nostalgia.

"Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone.' Not a Christmas movie, but the tone, setting and soundtrack of the film always had a Christmas-y feel to me," according to one Redditor.

Kiss Kiss Bang Bang

Robert Downey Jr. and Val Kilmer deliver neo-noir Christmas chaos in Los Angeles, mixing murder mystery with holiday parties in this underrated festive thriller.

Eyes Wide Shut

A Manhattan doctor, played by Tom Cruise, ventures into the city's dark underbelly after his wife (Nicole Kidman) reveals her sexual fantasies about another man. Released in 1999, this moody exploration of desire and marriage was Stanley Kubrick's final film before his death, notable for both its controversial content and record-breaking 400-day shoot, Screen-Rant reported.

"I've watched it most every Christmas for over a decade. It's an adult film that explores this season without sentimentality," one Redditor stated.



WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS

Some winking, little thinking

'Kraven the Hunter' another campy, self-aware, mindless superhero flick

By KATIE WALSH
Tribune News Service

Every December, there comes a hero to save us all from prestige awards-season movies. Too much thinking? Need to turn off your brain? Never fear, "Kraven the Hunter" is here, a big ol' side of comic book beef with no contemplation required. For some, it may be just what the doctor ordered for a mid-December mind vacation.

"Kraven the Hunter" is a Marvel movie from Sony, the studio that has been churning out stand-alones for various obscure Spider-Man characters, like "Venom" and "Madame Web." So, think slightly goofy, pretty campy and somewhat self-aware about the silliness of the whole endeavor. But if the surprisingly successful "Venom" films are highest on the scale of knowing humor, "Kraven the Hunter" is the lowest — only a few participants have the winking down pat.

The character of Kraven is a foe of Spider-Man from the comic books who has an affinity for animal print and is so charming, he's more of an antihero than a supervillain. Aaron Taylor-Johnson and his abdominal muscles slither into Kraven's leathers for the film, an origin story for the character that is much like Spider-Man's: A boy has a near-death experience with a deadly animal, and through various magic and mysticism, receives specific qualities from that animal that compose his superpowers.

Privileged but sad teen Sergei Kravinoff (Levi Miller) is attacked by a lion on a hunting safari with his Russian gangster father Nikolai (Russell Crowe). He's revived by a mysterious potion-wielding ally, and then runs away from home, taking to the wilds of eastern Russia, where he lives in a yurt and hunts bad guys for sport, shedding Kravinoff and taking on the name of Kraven, aka "The Hunter."

Miller and Taylor-Johnson approach the material straight-faced, playing a character who loves animals and hunts only those he deems predators, like mob bosses imprisoned in deepest Siberia. Director J.C. Chandor, working from a script by Richard Wenk, Art Marcum and Matt Holloway, is also earnest about the film. But many of the character actors in supporting roles came to work ready to make big Choices, with a capital C.

There's Russell Crowe and his Russian accent, playing



SONY PICTURES/AP

Aaron Taylor-Johnson's character Sergei Kravinoff gets superpowers after being attacked by a lion as a teenager and changes his name to Kraven the Hunter. The film tells the Spider-Man comic book villain's origin story.

the big, bad bear of a father, against whom Kraven chafes. He claims his father is an evil drug-dealing gangster, even though we never see him do anything but take his kids on hunting trips and shame them about being weak. Not a great dad, but his criminal bona fides are not on screen. Fred Hechinger co-stars as Sergei's younger brother Dmitri, torn between big bro who abandoned him and dad who criticizes him.

Then there's Alessandro Nivola, delivering a creepy-camp performance as Aleksei Sytsevich, aka "The Rhino" (played previously in "The Amazing Spider-Man 2" by Paul Giamatti). Nivola seems the most in on the joke, or the most willing to get weird, and with his strange accent and bizarre mannerisms, he makes the whole thing worth watching (his transformation is especially silly). Then there's the shocking appearance of indie darling actor Christopher Abbott, playing "The Foreigner," a character who can control time by counting, "1, 2, 3." Hopefully he had a good time beating up Taylor-Johnson.

Then there's Ariana DeBose as Calypso. She's operating in a similar register as Michelle Williams in "Venom," but seems more out of her depth, with a wig that's wearing her, and a selection of costumes that seem to be from a 1990s Janet Jackson music video. Poor DeBose is saddled with some clunkers to deliver — her character is constantly loudly pronouncing what's happening on

screen — but her stilted line readings don't help matters much.

It would have been more fun to watch Kraven hunting, but the action of the film centers around the kidnapping of Dmitri, and Kraven's desperate attempts to rescue his little brother. But the structure and edit is so strange: There seems to be huge chunks of exposition missing and though it wasn't really necessary in the first place, it makes for a sense that something's missing, or scenes aren't put together the right way. Dodgy CGI, especially for the animals, and obvious green-screen inserts also show the seams on this project.

There's a certain pleasurable kind of entertainment to be had in watching Taylor-Johnson (or his stunt double) grapple with a speeding minivan or parkour around "London," and the star has enough charisma to just barely hold this thing together. You'll give a hearty chuckle when he finally dons his cropped, fur-collared vest at the end of the film, much in the same way Ms. Web finally revealed her signature specs at the end of her film. But aside from the obvious unintentional humor, the quality of "Kraven the Hunter" is severely lacking. Perhaps that's all the recommendation you need for some dumb fun at the movies.

"Kraven the Hunter" is rated R for strong bloody violence, and language. Running time: 127 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.



Vertical Entertainment

Nicholas Hoult plays the leader of a white supremacist group in "The Order," which is based on a true story.

Jude Law and Nicholas Hoult face off in taut 1980s white supremacist thriller 'The Order'

By MOIRA MACDONALD
The Seattle Times

"The Order" begins, and plays out, much like a classically elegant Western. In its opening scenes, a lone lawman — FBI agent Terry Husk (Jude Law) — arrives in town: early-1980s Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, so quiet you can almost see tumbleweeds blowing.

Husk, a man with his own demons, quickly begins to track a burgeoning white supremacist movement in the area, which he believes to be responsible for a series of robberies.

That group is led by the other man in this white hat/black hat showdown: Robert Mathews (Nicholas Hoult), a handsome, charismatic villain with a set jaw, who

robs banks to raise money for "the cause."

Those who have lived in the Pacific Northwest for a while may well recognize the story on which this film is based. Many of the crimes committed by Mathews and his organization — known as the White American Bastion, the Silent Brotherhood or simply the Order — took place in the region, with some in Seattle, and Mathews' final act played out on Whidbey Island. (The film was shot entirely in and around Calgary, Alberta.)

But there's a quietly timeless, location-less quality to the film: Evil, "The Order" reminds us, can exist anytime, anywhere.

Director Justin Kurzel keeps the action taut and lean, letting the story unfold on the faces of his leading men as they slowly

move toward their final confrontation.

Law, 25 years after his golden-boy breakthrough in "The Talented Mr. Ripley," has transformed himself into a brilliant character actor: Husk is driven but weary, and Law brings a world of pain into a simple silence when he's asked when his family is joining him.

Hoult, also excellent this fall in "Juror #2," gives a performance of real eeriness, his eyes hypnotic and unmoving.

"It's not our country any more," he says coolly to an associate, as if merely making conversation. "In every revolution, someone's got to fire the first shot."

"The Order" is rated R for some strong violence, and language throughout. Running time: 114 minutes. Now playing in stateside theaters.

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS



WARNER BROS. PICTURES/AP photos

Héra, voiced by Gaia Wise, left, and Wulf, voiced by Luke Pasqualino, in a scene from the anime film “The Lord of the Rings: The War of the Rohirrim.” In the film, Héra must save her people after Wulf’s father, Freca, is accidentally killed by her father, Helm, below, in a fight, and Wulf wants vengeance.

Middle-earth minutiae

Appendix-extracted anime ‘War of the Rohirrim’ earnest but long, dull

By JAKE COYLE

Associated Press

It’s a discombobulating experience, after a “Lord of the Rings” trilogy that was built, down to every frame and hobbit hair, for the big screen, to see something so comparatively minor, small-scaled and TV-sized as “The Lord of the Rings: The War of the Rohirrim.”

The film, set 183 years before the events of “The Hobbit,” is a return to Middle-earth that, despite some very earnest storytelling, never supplies much of an answer as to why, exactly, it exists.

“Rohirrim,” which sounds a little like the sound an orc might make sneezing, is perhaps best understood as a placeholder for further cinematic universe extrapolation from J.R.R. Tolkien’s books. (A live-action movie about Gollum is due out in 2026.) Here, the thin basis in Tolkien comes from the “Lord of the Rings” appendix, which lists a history of Rohan, the plains kingdom south of the elven forest of Lothlórien.

A small army of screenwriters — Jeffrey Addiss, Will Matthews, Phoebe Gittins and Arty Papageorgiou — have from those faint embers conjured a fiery war movie, made as an anime by director Kenji Kamiyama (“Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex,” “Blade Runner: Black Lotus”). The obviously talented Kamiyama fashions some dazzling vintage anime visuals that — and perhaps this isn’t all bad — feel a world apart from Peter Jackson’s Middle-earth features.

But “The War of the Rohirrim” also feels conspicuously closer to a 1990s direct-to-video release than an heir to some of the grandest big-screen fantasy storytelling of the past 25 years. Though there are many — too many — examples of Hollywood over-



The fight starts after Helm, voiced by Brian Cox, had refused to let his daughter marry Wulf and take the throne.

mining once-rich intellectual property, this dull, appendix-extracted anime adds to a not particularly Tolkienist tradition.

Tolkien die-hards, though, may be grateful for whatever “Lord of the Rings” morsels they can find. And there is some precedent. Before Jackson (an executive producer here) built Middle-earth in New Zealand, “The Lord of the Rings” prompted a pair of 1970s animated TV specials and a not-much-remembered animated 1978 movie.

“The War of the Rohirrim” concerns the adventures of Héra (voiced by Gaia Wise), daughter of Helm Hammerhand (Brian Cox), the Rohan king. Cox, coming off of “Succession,” again finds himself beset with trouble over the future of his throne.

Things get underway when Freca (Shaun Dooley), leader of the Dundelings, offers his son Wulf (Luke Pasqualino) to marry Héra and take the throne. After a swift refusal, a fight ensues, and with a mere punch, Helm accidentally kills Freca. Given how extreme Wulf’s vengeance is following this punch, it’s fair to wonder if “The War of the Rohirrim” could have been started just as easily with a slap or, perhaps,

an overly aggressive noogie.

But only self-seriousness reigns in this “Lord of the Rings” adventure. When the battle begins, Héra must save her people, which she strives to do by retreating to a fortress dug into a mountainside. Héra’s story is said to be one lost to history in the opening narration, but “The War of the Rohirrim” is just as much an origin story for the stronghold that will later be known as Helm’s Deep.

I don’t begrudge any Tolkien addict a little anime fun — and maybe these references and callbacks will be enough to conjure some of the majesty of the books or Jackson’s movies. You can tell “Rohirrim” was made with sincere belief in the world Tolkien created. But I found the connective tissue, like the few notes from Howard Shore’s original score that float in, only reinforced how such grander movie ambitions once came to Rohan. “The War of the Rohirrim” does manage to recapture one trait of the earlier films: at 134 minutes, it’s long.

“The Lord of the Rings: The War of the Rohirrim” is rated PG-13 for strong violence. Running time: 134 minutes. Now playing in select on-base theaters.

Biopic ‘Maria’ more about raw feeling than reality

By LINDSEY BAHR

Associated Press

Angelina Jolie glides through the final days of Maria Callas’ short life in Pablo Larraín’s “Maria,” a dramatic, evocative elegy to the famed soprano. It’s an affair that’s at turns melancholy, biting and grandly theatrical, an aria for a once-in-a-generation star.

Reality is of little consequence on the stage and in “Maria.” It’s all about the raw feeling, which serves the movie well, more dream than history lesson about La Callas. Early on, she pops some Mandrax and tells her devoted butler Ferruccio (a simply wonderful Pierfrancesco Favino) that a television crew is on the way. He wonders if it’s real.

“As of this morning, what is real and what is not real is my business,” she says calmly and definitively, making a feast out of Steven Knight’s sharp script. It’s one of many great lines and moments for Jolie, whose intensity and resolve belie her fragile appearance. And it’s a signal to the audience as well: Don’t fret about dull facts or that Jolie doesn’t really resemble Callas all that much. This is a biopic as opera — an emotional journey fitting of the great diva, full of flair, beauty, betrayal, revelations and sorrow.

In “Maria,” we are the companion to a protagonist with an ever-loosening grip on reality, walking with her through Paris, and her life, for one week in September 1977.

The images from cinematographer Edward Lachman, playfully shifting in form and style, take us on a scattershot journey through her triumphs on stage, her scandalous romance with Aristotle Onassis (Haluk Bilginer) and her traumatic youth. In the present, at age 53, she sleeps till midday, drinks the minimal calories she ingests, goes to restaurants where the waiters know her name looking for adulation

and has visions of performances staged just for her all around the city.

Callas is always immaculately dressed and assured, whether reflecting to the imagined news crew (led by Kodi Smit-McPhee) or attempting to find her voice again. Her instrument had famously diminished, leaving her wondering what’s left to live for. The only consistent praise she gets is from her obedient housemaid Bruna (Alba Rohrwacher). It’s no secret that the destination is death. And you suspect that she knows quite well that everything will be a big dimmer when her spotlight is turned off.

Larraín has made a lasting mark on cinema with his unofficial trilogy about famous women with tragic narratives. With “Jackie,” “Spencer” and now “Maria,” his films are also an unintentional antidote to Ryan Murphy’s stranglehold of the grand dames of recent history, which are all style and scandal and little substance. And yet Larraín’s films are not for everyone. If “Jackie” and “Spencer” did not speak to you, did not show those women as you hoped they would, “Maria” will not turn you into a believer. Three movies in, it seems that audiences are either very on board with his vision or not. There is little room for an in-between.

And yet it’s hard to deny that his films are incredible showcases for actors. Jolie as a movie star is somehow both omnipresent and elusive, and lately she chooses to step in front of the camera all too infrequently. Sometimes you wish she could just follow in Nicole Kidman’s footsteps, for whom quantity does not seem to ever jeopardize quality, and who seems to be having fun doing it all, all the time. Perhaps it’s because performances like Jolie’s in “Maria” look so all-consuming.

“Maria” is rated R for a sexual reference and some language. Running time: 122 minutes. Now streaming on Netflix.



NETFLIX/AP

Angelina Jolie plays Maria Callas with intensity and resolve. “Maria” walks through one September 1977 week in the opera singer’s life.

WEEKEND: MOVIES

A role Angelina Jolie was meant to play

Actor gives a defining performance as Maria Callas in Larraín's latest portrait of a 20th-century female icon

By JAKE COYLE
Associated Press

Angelina Jolie never expected to hit all the notes. But finding the breath of Maria Callas was enough to bring things out of Jolie that she didn't even know were in her.

"All of us, we really don't realize where things land in our body over a lifetime of different experiences and where we hold it to protect ourselves," Jolie said in a recent interview. "We hold it in our stomachs. We hold it in our chest. We breathe from a different place when we're nervous or we're sad."

"The first few weeks were the hardest because my body had to open and I had to breathe again," she adds. "And that was a discovery of how much I wasn't."

In Pablo Larraín's "Maria," which Netflix released in theaters before it began streaming on Wednesday, Jolie gives, if not the performance of her career, then certainly of her past decade. Beginning with 2010's "In the Land of Blood and Honey," Jolie has spent recent years directing films while prioritizing raising her six children.

"So my choices for quite a few years were whatever was smart financially and short. I worked very little the last eight years," Jolie says. "And I was kind of drained. I couldn't for a while."

But her youngest kids are now 16. And for the first time in years, Jolie is back in the spotlight, in full movie-star mode. Her commanding performance in "Maria" seems assured of bringing Jolie her third Oscar nomination. (She won supporting actress in 2000 for "Girl, Interrupted.") For an actress whose filmography might lack a signature movie, "Maria" may be Jolie's defining role.

Jolie's oldest children, Maddox and Pax, worked on the set of the film. There, they saw a version of their mother they hadn't seen before.

"They had certainly seen me sad in my life. But I don't cry in front of my children like that," Jolie says of the emotion Callas dredged up in her. "That was a moment in realizing they were going to be with me, side by side, in this process of really understanding the depth of some of the pain I carry."

Jolie, who met a reporter earlier this fall at the Carlyle Hotel, didn't speak in any detail of that pain. But it was hard not to sense some of it had to do with her lengthy and ongoing divorce from Brad Pitt, with whom she had six children.

The result of the U.S. presidential election was also just days old, though Jolie — special envoy for the United Nations Refugee Agency from 2012 to 2022 — wasn't inclined to talk politics. Asked about Donald Trump's win, she responded, "Global storytelling is essential," before adding: "That's what I'm focusing on. Listening. Listening to the voices of people in my country and around the world."

Balancing such things — reports concerning her private life, questions that accompany someone of her fame — is a big reason why Jolie is so suited to the part of Callas. The film takes place during the American-born soprano's final days. (She died of a heart attack at 53 in 1977.) Spending much of her time in her grand Paris apartment, Callas hasn't sung publicly in years; she's lost her voice. Imprisoned by the myth she's created, Callas is redefining herself and her voice. An instructor tells her he wants to hear "Callas, not Maria." The movie, of course, is more concerned with Maria.

It's Larraín's third portrait of a 20th-century female icon, following "Jackie" (with Natalie Portman as Jacqueline Kennedy) and "Spencer" (with Kristen Stewart as Princess Diana). As Callas, Jolie is wonderfully regal — a self-possessed diva who deliciously, in lines penned by screenwriter Steven Knight, spouts lines like: "I took liberties all my life, and the world took liberties with me."



PAX JOLIE-PITT, NETFLIX/AP

Angelina Jolie, left, with director Pablo Larraín on the set of "Maria." Larraín previously made films about Jacqueline Kennedy (Natalie Portman) and Princess Diana (Kristen Stewart).

Asked if she identified with that line, Jolie answered, "Yeah, yeah." Then she took a long pause.

"I'm sure people will read a lot into this and there's probably a lot I could say but don't want to feed into," Jolie eventually continues. "I know she was a public person because she loved her work. And I'm a public person because I love my work, not because I like being public. I think some people are more comfortable with a public life, and I've never been fully comfortable with it."

"I felt she could have that magnetism. The enigmatic diva that's come to a point in her life where she has to take control of her life again. But the weight of her experience, of her music, of her singing, everything, is on her back. And she carries that. It's someone who's already loaded with a life that's been intense."

'Maria' director Pablo Larraín

explaining why Angelina Jolie was suited to the role

When Larraín first approached Jolie about the role, he screened "Spencer" for her. That film, like "Jackie" and "Maria," eschews a biopic approach to instead intimately focus on a specific moment of crisis. Larraín was convinced Jolie was meant for the role.

"I felt she could have that magnetism," Larraín says. "The enigmatic diva that's come to a point in her life where she has to take control of her life again. But the weight of her experience, of her music, of her singing, everything, is on her back. And she carries that. It's someone who's already loaded with a life that's been intense."

"There's a loneliness that we both share," Jolie says.

"That's not necessarily a bad thing. I think people can be alone and lonely sometimes, and that can be part of who they are."

Larraín, a Chilean filmmaker, grew up in Santiago going to the opera, and he has long yearned to bring its full power and majesty to a movie. In Callas, he heard something that transfixed him.

"I hear something near perfection, but at the same time, it's something that's about to be destroyed," Larraín says. "So it's as fragile and as strong as possible. It lives in both extremes. That's why it's so moving. I hear a voice that's about to be broken, but it doesn't."

In Callas' less perfect moments singing in the film, Larraín fuses archival recordings of Callas with Jolie's own voice. Some mix of the two runs throughout "Maria."

"Early in the process," Jolie says, "I discovered that you can't fake-sing opera."

Jolie has said she never sang before, not even karaoke. But the experience has left her with a newfound appreciation of opera and its healing properties.

"I wonder if it's something you lean into as you get older," Jolie says. "Maybe your depth of pain is bigger, your depth of loss is bigger and that sound in opera meets that, the enormity of it."

If Larraín's approach to "Maria" is predicated on an unknowingness, he's inclined to say something similar about his star.

"Because of media and social media, some people might think that they know a lot about Angelina," he says. "Maria, I read nine biographies of her. I saw everything. I read every interview. I made this movie. But I don't think I would be capable of telling you who she was. So if there's an element in common, it's that. They carry an enormous amount of mystery. Even if you think that you know them, you don't."

Whether "Maria" means more acting in the future for Jolie, she's not sure. "There's not a clear map," she says. Besides, Jolie isn't quite ready to shake Callas.

"When you play a real person, you feel at some point that they become your friend," Jolie says. "Right now, it's still a little personal."

"It's funny, I'll be at a premiere or I'll walk into a room and someone will start blaring her music for fun, but I have this crazy internal sense memory of dropping to my knees and crying."

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Andorra: A high point for shops, recreation

Europe's smallest countries have an undeniable curiosity factor. In Europe's tiny derby, the Vatican is the big little winner. Then comes Monaco, San Marino, Liechtenstein, Malta, and finally — measuring about 13 miles by 13 miles, with 80,000 people — Andorra. All of these countries would fit easily into Europe's next smallest country ... the relatively vast Luxembourg.

While Andorra feels impressively remote, cradled high in the mountains where France and Spain meet — forget about getting there with the convenience of a plane or train — Andorra is just a couple hours' drive out of your way between the walled medieval time-capsule town of Carcassonne (in the south of France), and Barcelona (in Spain's far northeast).

For most of its long history, Andorra was an impoverished and isolated backwater. But in the last century, the nation has become wealthy — thanks to the same mountains that had hindered its development for so long. During the Spanish Civil War, Andorra sheltered huge numbers of refugees, from both sides of that conflict, and many of them stayed for good, significantly boosting the population. Around the same time, skiing and hiking became big business, stoking a building

boom. Huge Vail-esque ski condos, built of perfectly crafted rustic stone, both contrast and match the historic stone buildings they now dwarf and outnumber.

Andorra employs the special economic weapons so popular among Europe's little states: easy-going banking and low, low taxes. The principality has morphed from a rough-and-tumble smugglers' haven to a high-tech, high-altitude shoppers' haven — famous for its bargain-basement prices. More than 10 million visitors — mostly Spaniards and French — pour in yearly to buy the kind of luxury goods sold in airport duty-free shops while avoiding their high taxes back home. Signs are commonly multilingual with French, Spanish and Catalan.

Back in the 1970s, on my first visit to Andorra la Vella — the country's capital and dominant city — I remember thinking it felt like a big Spanish-speaking Radio Shack. And while spiffed up today, it retains the charm of a giant shopping mall. As I walk down the streets, it seems there's nothing but banks and places to buy electronics, furs and jewelry.

But times are changing. Since Andorra adopted the euro — and, later, a small sales tax — its prices are no longer drasti-



Rick Steves



Rick Steves

Andorra's capital, Andorra la Vella, sits high in the Pyrenees Mountains.

cally lower than the rest of Europe's. Add to that the ever-increasing popularity of online shopping, and the nation knows its days as a retail mecca are numbered. Instead, Andorra is investing even more into drawing visitors as a year-round outdoor-sports destination.

Andorrans have long grilled their trout, beef and snails on open fires, and these days Andorran barbecue is a tourist attraction in itself. The snails — fed a diet of thyme to become even tastier — are enjoyed by big-spending visitors.

A short drive from the capital into the higher valleys takes you to rugged little towns made entirely of stone.

Pockets of Old World charm hide out even in the capital, which has an old center well worth a stroll. That's where you'll

find the surprisingly small national parliament building, Casa de la Vall. Built on a rocky outcrop with its flag flying high, it was a private residence back in the 16th century. Its claustrophobic parliament chamber has just 28 seats. The centuries-old kitchen adjacent to the Assembly Room evokes a time when representatives would travel from (relatively) distant valleys of Andorra. They'd eat and sleep in this building as they performed their governmental duties. While a humble reminder of a simple past, Andorrans still look to this building for leadership as their country builds an ever-better life for its citizens.

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Keep the festivities alive with Christmas market-worthy treats

As seasoned Christmas market goers know, the incredible food and drink available at these festivities is a huge part of the overall experience. The good news is that many of these spectacular tastes can be found long after the Christmas markets close. Here's where to go to get your fix of Christmas treats throughout the year.

Hot chocolate: A steaming cup of hot cocoa warms us up, and more: a hankering for sweetness is satisfied and the drink's aroma is pure pleasure. While no single Christmas market has been tagged as serving the Continent's most luscious hot cocoa drink, one solid option is Brussels' Mary chocolate shop, where countless happy visitors swear they've indulged in the best hot chocolates of their lives. The shop, founded by a woman in 1919, holds the title of Belgian Royal Warrant Holder, meaning it's a supplier to the king's court. The brand good enough for royalty can be enjoyed at 73 Rue Royal in Brussels. There are five other Mary shops in the Belgian capital, shops in the Belgian cities of Antwerp and Bruges, and in a handful of locations in Japan. Online: mary.be/en/home

Gingerbread: Gingerbread, or Lebkuchen, has been a specialty of Nuremberg, Germany, since at least the 14th century. The city's prime location along a spice trading route and a profusion of honeybees in the nearby forests contributed to the concoction of this sweet treat that now bears a protective trademark of geographic origin under European law. Plain or glazed, with flavor additions such as orange peel, raisins or marzipan, or made of ground nuts in lieu of flour (the so-called Elisenlebkuchen), these thick, chewy cookies can be procured at the stand of Lebkuchen Schmidt at Nuremberg's Christkindlesmarkt. This particular baker has pop-up shops and stands at Christmas markets across Germany. Its flagship store at Zollhausstrasse 30 in Nuremberg sells its sweet and spicy



iStock

Delicious sweets such as hot chocolate are available at seasonal markets, but also available elsewhere.

creations all year. Online: lebkuchen-schmidt.com/en

Marzipan: The sweet almond paste known as marzipan plays both a starring and supporting role in countless Christmas market products. Sweet figurines of ladybugs or smiling piglets are pure marzipan pleasure, whereas cream liquors, chocolates or candied nuts are often flavored with the stuff. The city of Lübeck in northern Germany is the country's center of production, a tradition that goes back more than 200 years, when marzipan was considered helpful in fighting colds and raising libidos. No trip to Lübeck is complete without a visit to the Niederregger marzipan shop, which offers more than 300 variations of the treat, from pralines to fancy teacakes to chocolate-covered loaves. Niederregger's shop is located at Breite Strasse 89, next to the Town Hall; its café and museum are also nearby. Online: niederregger.de

Kaiserschmarrn: This dish of fluffy, shredded pancakes takes its name from the Austrian emperor Franz

Joseph I, who was said to be fond of this filling dessert that remains a firm favorite in Austria and Bavaria. Christmas markets are a prime place to indulge in this treat, typically served with raisins or other dried fruits and apple, berry or plum sauce on the side. Outside of the festive season, Munich is a good bet for finding a plate of this homey comfort food — try the Kaisergarten, located at Kaiserstrasse 34. Other Bavarian specialties such as suckling pig, schnitzel and roast chicken are served there too. Online: kaisergarten.com

Nougat: Nougat, the sweet treat traditionally made with sugar or honey along with whipped egg whites, is known as turrón in Spanish and torrone in Italian. While its exact origins are unknown, similar sweets were considered delicacies by ancient Romans and Arabians. In Italy, torrone is one of the staple treats of the holiday season and widely enjoyed from the Alpine regions to Sicily. A city with a particularly strong tie to this either chewy or brittle, nut-laden delight is Cremona, where there's even a festival held in its honor. Of the many shops selling torrone throughout the year, Negozio Sperlari 1836 is well worth a visit. The store located at Via Solferino 25 sells, in addition to the confection, jams, wine, spirits, mustard and more. Online: sperlari1836.com/storia.php

Churros: Coated with sugar and served piping hot, churros are a vaguely doughnut-like treat commonly enjoyed by dipping their tubular ridged forms into little pots of thick, dark chocolate. Nowadays a common sight at Germany's Christmas markets and beyond, churros trace their origins to Spain, where they're eaten not only for breakfast but from food trucks. To sample what many people hail as the best in the country, go to La Chocolería San Ginés in Madrid. It's worth braving the morning rush of eager customers at the café located at Pasadizo de San Ginés, 5. According to its website, the café is open for business 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Online: chocolateriasangines.com



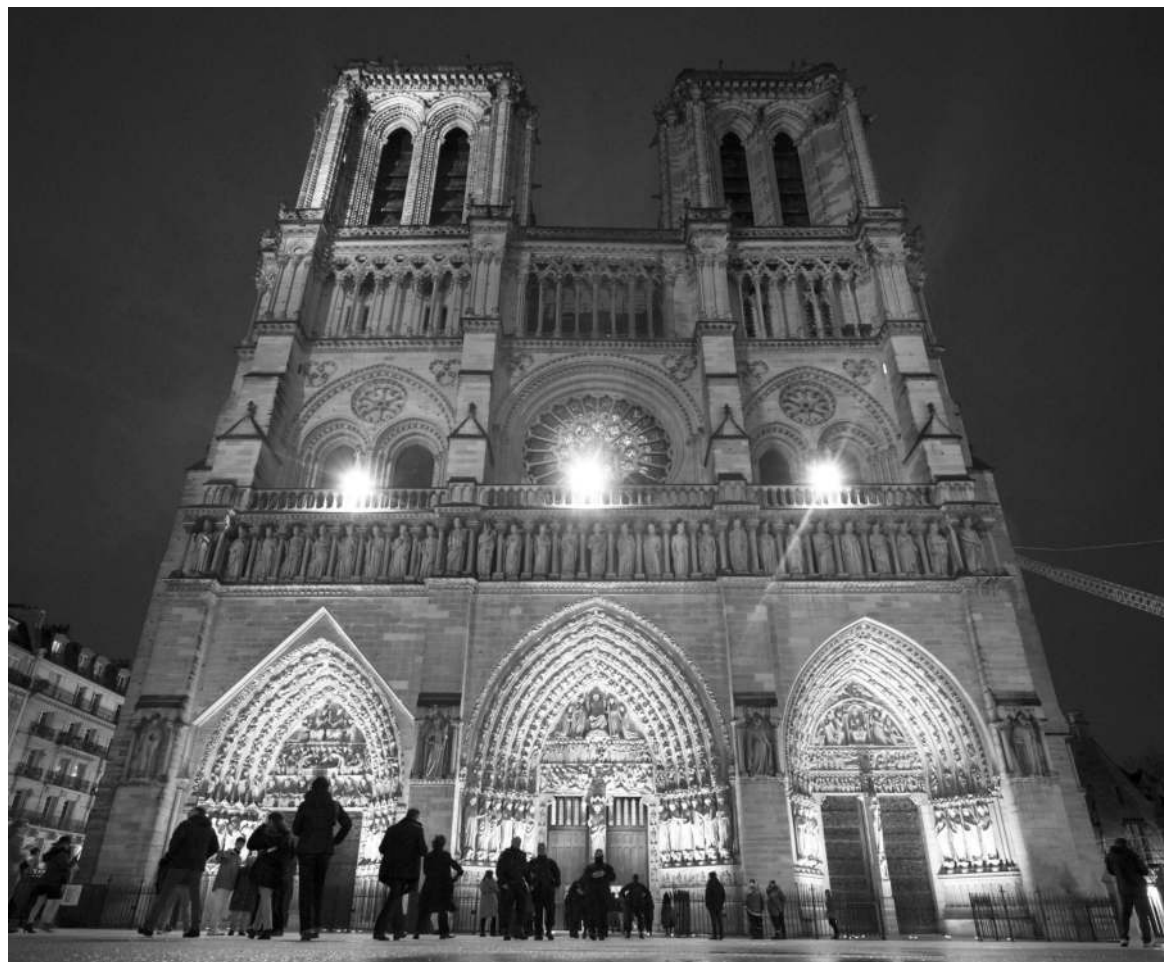
Karen Bradbury

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

What to know about the renovated Notre Dame

Visitors are now allowed back inside the famous Paris cathedral more than 5 years after the Catholic church was damaged in a fire

BY NATALIE B. COMPTON AND HANNAH SAMPSON
The Washington Post



ALESSANDRA TARANTINO/AP

People arrive Dec. 8 at Notre Dame Cathedral for the first public Mass since the catastrophic fire of 2019.

What's new at Notre Dame?

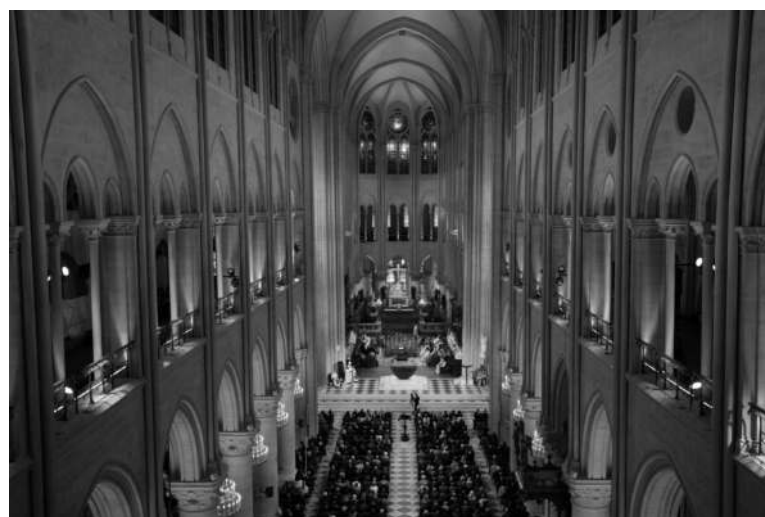
A new roof, new furniture, new logistics: Notre Dame underwent a historic restoration in just five years. The interior is said to be “more majestic than before the catastrophe.” The undertaking required the expertise of more than 2,000 architects, engineers and craftspeople using artisanal methods.

The 315-foot spire, which topped in the inferno, has been replaced, with a new rooster perched on top. Attic beams have been re-created, and vaulted arches include new and salvaged stone.

If you've visited before, you may first notice a small but significant change in traffic flow inside the cathedral. Visitors will now follow a path from north to south, “basically left to right,” Schwab said.

What else should I see in Paris?

Notre Dame is centrally located, so it's easy to fit into a day of



THIBAUT CAMUS/AP

As part of the renovations, the cathedral received a new roof and new furniture. The interior is said to be “more majestic than before the catastrophe.” There has also been a change to visitor traffic flow.

sightseeing in Paris.

Zimbeck recommends a stroll to the flower market on the Île de la Cité and visiting the Cluny Museum of medieval history. She says you could skip Shakespeare and Company, the always-crowded bookstore, and explore the fun shop Messy Nussy instead.

Schwab says to walk to the Latin Quarter for more shopping. You'll also find one of her favorite museums there: the Serge Gainsbourg House. The singer's daughter, actress Charlotte Gainsbourg, does the voice-over for the audio tour, which explains what it was like to live in the

More than five years after one of the most famous churches in the world was damaged by fire, a renovated Notre Dame cathedral is once again open to visitors.

In Paris, “people are so excited,” said Meg Zimbeck, who runs the food tour company and review site Paris by Mouth.

French tourism officials expect up to 40,000 visitors per day, almost double the number of people who flock to the Chateau de Versailles.

If you're thinking about visiting soon, here's what you need to know:

How do you get tickets for Notre Dame?

Tickets are free and available online through the cathedral's official website. You should definitely reserve them in advance, said Kate Schwab, a spokesperson for the French tourism authority, Atout France. According to the site, reservations are available the day of a visit or up to two days in advance.

“This option is entirely optional and aims solely to streamline entries and minimize unnecessary waiting,” the site says.

Space is first come, first serve for attending Mass. A 10 euro fee is required for those who'd like to visit the Notre Dame treasury, which is considered a museum. You can make the purchase on-site.

Alternatively, you can sign up for a free guided tour of the exterior with the volunteer organization CASA.

As of Dec. 16, the cathedral will resume its normal daily hours, from 7:45 a.m. to 7 p.m.

When is the best time to visit Notre Dame?

Of course, Paris is a major tourist destination year-round, and Notre Dame is among its most popular attractions. Don't expect to get the place to yourself no matter when you visit; the cathedral has a capacity of 2,500 people at a time.

Schwab recommends following basic sightseeing protocol to plan a visit.

“Go either early in the morning when it first opens or in the last hour,” she said. “Try to avoid the peak of the day.”

The same advice goes for time of year. You can expect the most crowds during the busy summer tourist season, and closer to the holidays, when Paris is also busy with “festive season.”

Small religious groups of up to 10 people will be allowed starting Feb. 1; cultural groups of as many as 25 people are allowed beginning June 9.

Can't get a ticket and don't want to face a long wait? Worst-case scenario, you can still admire the cathedral from the outside, as many have over the past five years.

house — which was preserved after his death and turned into a museum. It has a café open during the day, and by night, it turns into a piano bar.

“It is of course very popular with the French public, but when I was there, there were no other Americans,” Schwab said.

But you don't need to limit yourself to what's immediately next to Notre Dame because “you can hop across the river in either direction and get on the subway and go almost anywhere within 15 minutes,” Zimbeck said.

What's a less crowded alternative?

To escape the tourist rush, Schwab recommends a couple of lower-traffic museums, like the Musée Carnavalet, which offers a deep dive into the history of Paris, or the nearby Hôtel de la Marine on the Place de la Concorde. “It's like a mini Versailles, basically,” she said.

The historic property was built in the 18th century and served as the headquarters for the government office responsible for furnishing all royal properties. To restore the property to museum quality, “they had 1,000 craftsmen working on it,” Schwab said.

Better yet, it's “a museum that people don't really know that much about and it's definitely not going to be crowded,” Schwab said.

For a less-visited church, Zimbeck goes to La Sainte-Chapelle, one of her favorite places in the city.

“It's a wonderful, amazing cathedral with stained glass that's quite famous,” she said. “When I'm in a darker mood, I enjoy the Conciergerie, which is the dungeon ... where they locked up Marie Antoinette.”

Clément Decré, founder and CEO of the travel company Finding France, recommended Saint-Sulpice or Saint-Eustache churches, which he said in an email “offer remarkable architecture and history without the crowds typical at Notre Dame.”

For those who can travel outside Paris, he suggested the Chartres Cathedral for its “amazing” stained glass, Cathedral of Reims or the Amiens Cathedral.

Are renovations ongoing?

Work is continuing on the cathedral's flying buttresses, the stained glass rose windows and areas around Notre Dame, including a park.

The Paris tourist office says parts of the church, including the chevet and sacristy, are scheduled for restoration next year. Stained glass windows are expected to be installed in 2026.

French tourism officials say work around the cathedral — including a clearing, 150 trees and an underground parking garage that will become a reception area — is expected to continue for at least three years.

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS

Cooking just like a nonna

Naples class teaches basics of making Italian 'fettuccine Alfredo' and ravioli

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

Most of the people who take a class on handmade pasta in Naples probably will never make the Italian cuisine staple ever again, given how labor-intensive it is and the availability of great pasta in the city.

But that doesn't mean you should pass on getting your hands sticky making pasta with a group of similar-minded foodies.

The 2½-hour class I took with Naples Bay Tours offers participants the opportunity to learn the pasta-making basics used by Neapolitan nonnas, or grandmothers, while reveling in the city's food culture.

On a recent Tuesday evening, I joined four other aspiring pasta chefs at Mammina pizzeria just off the ancient street of Via Toledo in central Naples, although the restaurant is not affiliated with the class.

Offered twice a day, the class focuses on ravioli and fettuccine Alfredo, or rather the Italian version of the dish. Minutes into our class, our instructor, a lifelong Neapolitan who has been cooking since he was in his early teens, patiently explained that the long, wide noodles called fettuccine in the U.S. don't exist in Italy.

The closest comparison of American fettuccine Alfredo for Italians is tagliatelle with butter, Parmesan cheese and sage. "That's it," he said.

With that knowledge, we cracked two eggs into the middle of some finely ground double-zero flour and added a little salt. Just three ingredients are in the standard pasta recipe used by Italian grandmothers everywhere, our instructor said.

It was important to whisk the eggs until foamy first without incorporating the flour, which is high in protein and offers the smooth texture and elasticity needed for pasta. Before long, it was time to knead the dough.

This took time, muscle and patience as our instructor explained how to shape the dough and then push an indentation into the resulting ball to see if it was ready.

If the indentation bounces back, it's time to cover the dough and let it rest. In Italy, this is known as putting the pasta to bed or "buona notte," which means good night.

With 20 minutes on our hands, we were seated at a table and offered an appetizer of warm zeppole, deep-fried dough balls that are a typical Neapolitan snack and our instructor's favorite. The platter also included bruschetta, or grilled bread with chopped tomatoes and basil.

The break offered a chance to taste traditional cuisine and share in the joy of eating together, which is important in Italian culture.

After learning a little more about one another — three of my classmates were a family on vacation from Irvine, Calif., and the other an Australian finishing up a few months' tour of Italy and France — we were back at the hard work of making pasta.

The elasticity of the dough requires patient stretching in a large, thin circle using two different types of wooden rolling pins. Giving it our best try, each of us ultimately needed our instructor's assistance to roll out the dough nearly paper-thin.

This meant lifting up a portion of the flattened disc and putting your hand behind it. Dough that is thin enough has a sort of transparency that allows you to see your fingers, our instructor advised.

We then cut off the edges of the circle to make a square, saving the trimmings for later. "Nothing goes to waste," our instructor said.

Half of the square would become ravioli, filled with fresh ricotta and some Parmesan cheese seasoned with a little salt, pepper and olive oil.



PHOTOS BY ALISON BATH/Stars and Stripes

An instructor shows how to properly fold dough over filling for ravioli as part of a Naples Bay Tours pasta-making class in Naples, Italy, on Dec. 3. The 2½-hour class is held twice a day at a restaurant just off the famed Via Toledo.



The standard pasta recipe in Naples includes just three ingredients: eggs, double-zero flour and salt.



Ravioli and tagliatelle in progress during the pasta-making class. It takes muscle and patience to create pasta.

Fettuccine Alfredo and ravioli class

Address: Via Santa Brigida 65, Naples, Italy

Cost: 42 euros, including appetizer, drink and pasta lunch or dinner. Classes are kid-friendly; they are not wheelchair accessible. Instruction is in English.

Hours: 11 a.m. and 5:30 p.m. daily; reservations required

Information: Online: naplesbay.it/en/prodotto/lesson-of-the-egg-pasta

Alison Bath

The other half would become the tagliatelle, rolled horizontally, cigar-style, at a width about the size of a pinkie finger. We cut the roll vertically at index-finger widths, unwrapping the resulting pinwheels into long strips, and cut the leftover trimmings to match.

Our work was done. It was now time for our instructor to boil the pasta, not more than four or five minutes, and make the sauces to accompany it.

The ravioli came out first, blanketed in a sauce of sautéed San Marzano tomatoes accented with a touch of Parmesan. The buttery tagliatelle, or "fettuccine Alfredo," was next.

We savored each expertly prepared dish while sitting family-style around a dining table decorated with an iconic, red-checked tablecloth, swapping stories about what brought us to Naples.



At the end of the class, students get to eat their pasta creations during a family-style meal.

The class ended in a toast with limoncello, a lemon-flavored liqueur, and the presentation of pasta chef diplomas that included a QR code to an online site with recipes.

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WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING

Seize the chilly winter at Ennie's

Seasonal offerings add to warmth of deli in Homburg, Germany

BY PHILLIP
WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

When the late-year chill settles over Germany, it's a pleasure to find a cozy spot to enjoy a satisfying breakfast or lunch.

In Homburg, about a 25-minute drive west of Ramstein Air Base, Ennie's Deli and More offers that in an ambiance enhanced by a faux fireplace, wood-paneled walls and a comfortable hum of chatter.

Ennie's menu changes with the season; one of the current stand-out dishes is a pretzel bagel piled high with lettuce, shredded pumpkin and a poached egg, smothered in a velvety hollandaise sauce. It's called the Benadikts bagel. It's savory and creamy without overwhelming the palate. A tangy side of red cabbage added a welcome burst of acidity.

The "three types of pancakes" offered a twist on a breakfast classic, featuring two buttermilk, two banana and one marzipan pancake. Two marzipan stars lent a fun, Christmas-market touch. Topped with almond yogurt, cherries and a scattering of chocolate biscuit crunch, the pancakes were sweet but not overly so.

Patrons who are sensitive to gluten are in luck, as many meals are offered in a slightly more expensive, gluten-free version.

A colleague who recently joined me for breakfast was familiar with Ennie's thanks to the Find Me Gluten Free app, which has a pair of five-star ratings for the restaurant.

He went with one reviewer's recommendation of the sweet French toast, pairing it with a side of bacon, almond yogurt and a mango smoothie with cashew.

There was no need to add anything to the rice-and-buckwheat French toast because it came dusted in powdered sugar and with syrup embedded. The sweetness level was spot-on and the bread maintained its firmness.

While the yogurt wasn't as flavorful as expected, he enjoyed both the bacon and the smoothie.

A year-round Ennie's favorite is avocado bread. It starts with a slice of dense multigrain bread spread generously with cream cheese and topped with thin avocado slices and black-and-



Buttermilk, banana and marzipan pancakes topped with creamy almond yogurt and chocolate biscuit crunch at Ennie's in Homburg, Germany. A scattering of tart cherries spread provides a sharp, spiced contrast, evoking warm flavors of Christmas.



A small pot of chocolate muesli with organic yogurt and fruit is included with the Rose Breakfast at Ennie's in Homburg. The dish comes on a three-tiered serving platter and includes bread, cheese, avocado, a soft-boiled egg, fruit and hazelnut spread.



Ennie's restaurant in Homburg offers a few different French toast dishes. The sweet French toast made with rice and buckwheat bread is suitable for those sensitive to gluten.



Scraping aside some of the arugula on the avocado bread dish at Ennie's reveals a layer of cream cheese and thin slices of avocado. The dish is a year-round favorite at the restaurant.



Ennie's Deli and More

Address: Zweibrücker Strasse 4, Homburg, Germany
Hours: Monday-Wednesday closed; Thursday and Friday, 9 a.m.-2 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. The kitchen closes daily at 1 p.m.; on Saturday and Sunday there is a small snack menu from 1 p.m.-4 p.m.
Cost: Benadikts bagel, 13.90 euros; avocado bread, 8.20 euros; Rose breakfast and equivalent with meat, 15.50 euros; lattes between 4.20 euros and 5.70 euros.
Information: Phone: +49 6841 9733777; email: info@ennies.de; online: deli.ennies.de

Phillip Walter Wellman

white sesame seeds.

An almost comically large mound of arugula crowns the dish, its peppery bite complementing the creamy avocado. A small pot of pickled cucumbers and peppers comes on the side.



PHOTOS BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN/Stars and Stripes

The Benadikts Bagel at Ennie's — served with shredded pumpkin and a poached egg and covered in creamy hollandaise sauce — is the culinary equivalent of a cozy sweater on a chilly morning.

While tasty, the dish isn't particularly filling.

For something more substantial, Ennie's Rose breakfast is served on an eye-catching three-tiered platter. This vegetarian option includes a brown bread roll, thick slices of bread, cheese, avocado, a soft-boiled egg and a small pot of chocolate muesli

with organic yogurt and fresh fruit.

Condiments like butter, a fruity red spread and a house-made hazelnut spread, like Nutella but with crunchy nut pieces, complete the meal. Meat eaters can opt for a version with salami and ham, while vegans will appreciate the hummus.

While the ingredients are simple and can easily be assembled at home, their freshness stood out to me. The Instagram-worthy presentation was also a plus. The friendly and accommodating waitstaff is happy to help English speakers navigate the German menu or customize their orders.

On weekends, there is a snack menu featuring fresh waffles from 1 to 4 p.m. A selection of cakes and hot drinks, including roasted matcha chai and various lattes, is always available.

I took home two slices of carrot cake after one of my recent visits. The cake had a nice earthy taste, while its cream cheese frosting added richness. I saved one piece for the following day, and it was still soft and enjoyable.

Reservations are recommended on weekends, especially during this time of year. In the summer, the outdoor courtyard provides additional seating, which I look forward to checking out, as I'm sure the alfresco experience will be different.

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WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS

An educational adventure through time

The natural wonders at the Seodaemun Museum in Seoul include fossils and interactive displays

By **LUIS GARCIA**
Stars and Stripes

At the Seodaemun Museum of Natural History in the heart of Seoul, visitors can travel through the realms of dinosaurs, geology and biology interactively in a family-friendly environment.

Opened in 2003, this museum was the first of its kind in South Korea and still is one of the most popular places among locals and tourists alike. With three floors of exhibits, there is a lot to see for adults and children interested in the natural world.

Step inside and you'll find a towering dinosaur skeleton, a welcoming idea of what else is in store. An exhaustive collection of fossils ranging from the Triassic Period up to the Ice Age are on display and show how life evolved on Earth. Here, a translator app will come in handy when reading the descriptions of each exhibit, as they are available only in Korean.

A large collection of Korean dinosaur fossils is a highlight that affords visitors unusual peeks at the species found locally. The life-size displays of realistic models make it very easy to imagine these massive creatures in the wild.

Besides dinosaurs, Earth Science Hall is about the history and structure of Earth. The displays on volcanic activity, earthquakes and minerals illustrate the power and beauty of the Earth's geology. Visitors may touch some of the specimens, which makes this section more interesting.

If you're more a fan of marine life, you'll want to see the Life Science Hall, which has displays on the diversity of ocean ecosystems, along with preserved specimens and a large aquarium of fish native to Korean waters.

The big attraction is the Ecology Hall, which showcases a multitude of ecosystems in South Korea. This exhibit focuses on Korea's plants and animals and has models of local habitats, thus giving you a better understanding of the environment right outside the museum's walls.

The hands-on exhibits and realistic settings make this a learning experience that isn't as much about going to a museum as it is an adventure.

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PHOTOS BY LUIS GARCIA/Stars and Stripes

A towering dinosaur skeleton welcomes visitors to the Seodaemun Museum of Natural History in Seoul, South Korea.



The exhibits are all labeled in Korean, so a translator app will come in handy.

On the QT

Directions: 51, Yeonhui-ro, Seodaemun-gu, Seoul, South Korea. The museum is a short walk from Hongje Station, Exit 3. Look for signs pointing to the museum.

Times: Open daily, 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Closed Mondays and certain holidays.

Cost: Admission is 6,000 won for adults, or about \$4.50; 3,000 won for students and 2,000 won for children.

Food: The museum's small cafe serves drinks and light snacks.

Information: Phone: 02-330-8899; Online: namu.sdm.go.kr/web/main/main

Luis Garcia



The Seodaemun Museum of Natural History contains three floors of exhibits, including an exhaustive range of fossils and displays about Earth's structure and marine life.

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STARS AND STRIPES

WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING

Give Thai a try

Pad Thai Restaurant near Osan Air Base small but authentic

By ERIC MENDIOLA
Stars and Stripes

The area outside the walk-in gate at Osan Air Base known as the Songtan entertainment district is a visual feast of colors, advertisements and beckoning tourist opportunities.

But don't overlook a modestly sized hanging sign at the top of the street signaling, simply, Pad Thai Restaurant. A matching signboard on the sidewalk directs you up a flight of alley stairs to the restaurant.

Inside the small dining area there are four tables, with additional bar seating overlooking the street. Despite its size, the dining area does not feel cramped. Thai decorations adorning the walls add to an air of authenticity.

The staff are from Thailand — one server and two cooks, who provide excellent service. One of the cooks, who preferred to remain unnamed, was in Thailand in November for a conference on Thai cuisine.

Choose your seat, and while the server retrieves your beverage order, look over the 20 menu options.

I ordered a Thai tea, massaman curry with chicken and, of course, the restaurant namesake, pad Thai, also with chicken. Given a choice, I opted for a two out of five on the spice level.

The tea was served cold with the cream and tea layers separated in the glass. It is a very sweet but not overpowering beverage.



PHOTOS BY ERIC MENDIOLA/Stars and Stripes

The namesake chicken Pad Thai from the Pad Thai restaurant in Pyeongtaek, South Korea, comes in a shareable size.



Pad Thai Restaurant

Location: 302-94 Sinjang-dong, Pyeongtaek, Gyeonggi-do, South Korea

Directions: Across the street from the Osan Air Base walk-in gate into the Songtan entertainment district. On the left, look for the signs and the stairs that lead to the restaurant.

Hours: Open daily 10:45 a.m. to 8:30 p.m.

Prices: Pad Thai was 12,000 won, or about \$8.50. The massaman curry was 16,000 won and the Thai tea was 7,000 won.

Dress: Casual

Information: Phone 031-667-4459

Eric Mendiola



The Pad Thai restaurant is in the Songtan entertainment district of Pyeongtaek, South Korea.

Thai dish that's not noodle based.

Pad Thai is probably the most popular Thai dish globally. These stir-fried rice noodles can be found in any Thai restaurant, and I was very interested in seeing how it comes across in a restaurant that stakes its name on it.

It arrived a dark orange color that I didn't expect, but it was a tastier, tangier mix of noodles with peanuts, meat, vegetables and egg than I've had before, and I plan on another visit soon.

The meal and experience were great, and the location makes it an easy place to dine in or pick something up and get back to base quickly.

The Pad Thai restaurant may not be front and center among its neighbors, but this little piece of Thailand holds its own.

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The push to preserve Macao's fusion cuisine

By ALICE FUNG
AND ANTHONY KWAN
Associated Press

A crack of fire under a sprawling wok, a dab of soy sauce and a splash of Chinese rice wine. Bursts of aroma from spices sourced from around the world sizzle as a chef prepares Minchi, a dish of fried minced meat with diced potatoes topped with a sunny-side-up egg. This is one of the most iconic comfort foods for the Macanese.

Restaurateur Manuela Sales da Silva Ferreira hopes to ensure her grandmother's version of dishes like Minchi are not forgotten, using recipes passed down through generations at her eatery, Restaurante Litoral.

In the 25 years since Portugal returned its trading outpost to China, Macao has become known for its glittering, luxurious casinos and nightlife. But as the city evolves, old restaurant owners retire and outlets close and some people fear Macanese traditions and authentic cuisine could disappear.

Macanese food is a mix of Portuguese and Chinese cooking, combined with flavors and ingredients that Portugal imported from its other colonies, from Brazil to Mozambique, Goa to East Timor. UNESCO called Macao "home of the first 'fusion food,'" blending Western and Eastern cuisine.

Ferreira's paternal ancestors arrived from Portugal more than 400 years ago. She decided to pack her bags and leave in 1995, just four years before the Portuguese administration would end. But a sudden fear that Macanese cuisine could be lost pulled her back to her home city.

"At that time, I was already married with children, and even my children didn't ask what Macanese cooking is," she said. "If I don't do anything, Macanese cooking will be lost."

That was when she opened her own restaurant.

Ferreira said she believes her family recipes derive from home cooking after centuries of Portuguese wives tried to replicate familiar dishes using local Chinese ingredients, while Chinese wives tried to re-create Portu-



ANTHONY KWAN/AP

Manuela Sales da Silva Ferreira, owner of the family-run Restaurante Litoral, puts the finishing touches on a dish for her restaurant Nov. 11 in Macao.

guese cooking for their inter-ethnic families.

Her own favorite is baked crabmeat, which she learned from her mother. While the original version in Portugal could have been crabmeat mixed with cream and pickles, served cold, the recipe has evolved while being passed down the generations and crossing oceans. Ferreira now serves it hot, baked in crab shells.

The city of Macao on the southeast coast of China has a population of around 684,000. Ethnic Chinese make up 89.4% of the population while Portuguese, Portuguese-Chinese and other mixed Portuguese residents account for just 1.9%, according to the most recent census conducted in 2021.

Miguel de Senna Fernandes, who heads an association representing residents with mixed Portuguese and Chinese heritage, said Macanese people with mixed backgrounds have historically served as a bridge between Portuguese administrators and local Chinese. Fernandes traces his own Portuguese heritage to 1750 when his ancestors arrived in Macao.

As time passes, language, religion and identity are at risk of being lost along with food traditions. To keep Macanese heritage alive, the Macanese need to embrace their uniqueness, Fernandes said.

"We are from Macao," he said. "We are different from the Chinese, but we should embrace the differences."

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STARS AND STRIPES

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Gotsu hot springs area is heating up

Japan's Arifuku Onsen being revitalized by new system separating dining, lodging

BY YURI SATO
Japan News

A hot spring area in western Shima Prefecture has been undergoing a renaissance of sorts, thanks to a unique strategy of turning the entire town into what is effectively an all-inclusive resort.

Arifuku Onsen in Gotsu, once in decline due to a shrinking and aging population and a series of natural disasters, has been revitalized through the combined efforts of private businesses and local residents.

The strategy reorganized the entire Arifuku Onsen area, known for its secluded location in the mountains, into an "all-in-one hotel" that integrates the traditional functions of a Japanese inn across local businesses.

Located on the slopes of a bowl-like ravine, Arifuku Onsen is dotted with stone steps and buildings packed closely together, providing an unusual landscape that has drawn comparisons with the well-known Ikaho Onsen area in Gunma Prefecture.

"This surreal townscape is what makes it so appealing," said Shigechika Hirashita, 43, an interior designer and Gotsu native. "Recently, this area has been attracting people who have never come before, such as young hitchhikers."

Hirashita had left Gotsu to study at a furniture workshop in the United States and for other pursuits but returned in 2011. He is among the leaders of the revitalization effort, serving as vice president of the association promoting the area while running a local inn for long-term guests.

Farthest from Tokyo

Facing the Sea of Japan with a population of about 21,300, Gotsu is a center of production for the Sekishu style of roof tiles known for their reddish-brown color, which can be seen throughout the city.

A high school geography textbook once described Gotsu as "the farthest city from Tokyo," given how it takes the most time to reach it from the capital using public transportation. It's a designation that the city has embraced, even including it on its website and turning it into a selling point to attract travelers from the metropolitan area.

In the early years of the Showa era (1926-1989), Arifuku Onsen was a thriving area with about 20 inns. It gradually lost its vibrancy and, after a major fire in 2010 and devastating floods in 2013, the number of inns began to decrease, until just three remained.

The turning point came in fiscal 2020, when the city, Hirashita and other business operators came up with the "all-in-one" strategy.

The main pillar of the strategy is the separation of lodging and dining, which Japanese inns traditionally offer as a package. Instead, the two will be offered separately, with inns focusing on lodging,



THE JAPAN NEWS/The Yomiuri Shimbun

The Arifuku Onsen hot springs area features densely packed buildings built on a slope. It is located in Gotsu, which was described as "the farthest city from Tokyo" in a high school geography textbook. Its new all-in-one strategy, which separates lodging and dining and reduces the manpower needs and financial burden on inns, encourages guests to stroll the area at mealtimes.

and restaurants handling the serving of meals.

The system not only reduces the manpower needs and financial burden for the inns but also encourages visitors to stroll around the area, giving it a more vibrant feel.

The project was approved for a subsidy from the Japan Tourism Agency, allowing aging or abandoned inns and restaurants

Another pillar of revitalization that Hirashita is betting on is the holding of events that allow local residents to casually interact with overnight guests. In late October, he and others put on the first Saturday night market, where guests and local residents mingled together in a fair-like atmosphere.

This autumn marked the launch of the Fukufuku Asaichi morning market, held

to help preserve and pass on those things that they have long cherished," Nagatomo said.

He is involved in spreading information about the area, such as its traditional Iwami Kagura music and dance, with future plans of taking over and incorporating a local miso-manufacturing business.

Efforts to come up with ideas toward revitalization will continue in the future.

Reducing innkeepers' burden

The system of separating lodging and dining adopted by the Arifuku Onsen area has been particularly effective in reducing the burden on lodging facilities. This system is spreading to many places in Japan, partly to deal with the aging of innkeepers.

The Nukabira Genshenkyo Onsen area in Kamishihoro, Hokkaido, has implemented a system that allows guests staying for consecutive nights to eat either at their lodging facilities or at local restaurants. Since its adoption, there has been an increase in the number of repeat guests.

The Shimosuwa Onsen area in Nagano Prefecture also has a similar cooperation agreement between local guesthouses and nearby restaurants.

In the Shima Onsen area in Nakanajo, Gunma Prefecture, local restaurants, which used to be open only during the day, now stay open at night on weekends to serve dinner to overnight guests.

The Japan Tourism Agency recommends such cooperation in hot spring areas and provides information on sample cases around the country.

"This surreal townscape is what makes it so appealing. Recently, this area has been attracting people who have never come before, such as young hitchhikers."

Gotsu native Shigechika Hirashita, 43

to undergo renovations in fiscal 2021 and 2022. The number of inns has increased to 10, including those that only offer lodging or can be booked entirely by one party.

In 2021, a Hiroshima company opened an Italian restaurant providing meals for guests of local inns, and a wine shop in the area. There are plans for two more establishments in the near future.

The system has been well received by overnight guests. The area drew more than 10,000 visitors in 2023, 1.6 times the pre-pandemic number in 2019.

Keeping the boom going

Can the prosperity be sustained?

one Sunday per month. Stores from both inside and outside of the area sell pork miso soup, sandwiches and other items.

Young people who have newly moved into the area are also getting involved.

Taisei Nagatomo, 24, an employee of a local company, and Manami Fujita, 23, sell homemade miso and vegetables produced by local residents at a market once a month.

The two are from Kanagawa Prefecture and moved to the area after serving there as interns in the government's Local Vitalization Cooperator program during their college years.

"The local population is aging, so I want

WEEKEND: LIFESTYLE



Mandy Ewurs photos

John Reichart's holiday decorations light up the night in Indianola, Iowa. To make his wife Joan, who has Alzheimer's disease, happy, he not only decorated their own yard but also got permission to decorate their neighbors' as well.

Labor of love lights up homes, faces

Marine veteran, 74, spends thousands of dollars to decorate Iowa neighborhood for his wife, who has dementia

BY CATHY FREE
The Washington Post

About three months ago, John Reichart was relaxing in the living room when his wife Joan suddenly asked, "Where are all of the Christmas decorations?"

Joan Reichart, 72, was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease four years ago. In 2022, the couple moved back to their hometown of Indianola, Iowa, so some of their relatives could help with her care.

"We got engaged on Christmas Eve in 1970, and she's always loved Christmas," said John Reichart, 74, noting that he and his wife have been married for almost 54 years.

"I hadn't done much holiday decorating since we moved back because I'd been working so hard to look after her and keep her happy," he said. "But when she wondered about the decorations, I thought she deserved to see some Christmas lights this year."

Reichart thought about it for a few days, then came up with a plan: He would try to make a winter wonderland for his wife.

He knew from prior years that most people on his street didn't decorate their homes, so he decided to ask the neighbors in all 18 homes on his block if he could put lighted trees in their front yards.

"When I got permission for that, I also decided to ask for permission to put up LED lighting on the soffits of their houses," he said. "Then after that, I decided I'd buy large lawn ornaments like snowmen and tin soldiers for every house. I got a little carried away."

Only a few of the neighbors had put up decorations in recent years because the subdivision is new and many residents don't have children, often a motivator to hang lights and other fun decorations, said Frank Ewurs, who lives at the end of Reichart's street.

"I have two kids, and I like to put up inflatables in the yard, but for the most part, there aren't many Christmas decorations," Ewurs said. "A lot of the neighbors don't know each other very well, so everyone was really taken aback by John's offer."

Ewurs said he became emotional after he walked down to Reichart's house and heard his story.

Reichart, a Marine who served during the Vietnam War and is now disabled, told him how he'd met Joan on a blind date in 1970 after his service overseas. Married in 1971, the couple raised one daughter and lived for about four decades in Missouri, where John Reichart ran a fire

protection sprinkler business until his retirement.

Now that they were back in Indianola, Reichart had a little trouble getting around due to a foot injury, Ewurs said. But he was determined to take care of his wife at home for as long as possible.

"I sat there with him and he told me all of this, and I could sense that he got a little lonely at times," Ewurs said. "Here he was, putting together all of these decorations and setting them up. I felt he shouldn't have to take on everything on his own, so I offered to help."

Reichart's neighbor across the street, Donna Bahun, said she also wanted to lend a hand.

"I started seeing John in his garage a lot, so I went over to see what he was doing, and he said he was putting

together 9-foot, lighted trees for everyone in the neighborhood," said Bahun, 70.

The artificial trees, made of strands of light, secure into the ground to form a cone shape.

"One of his nieces would come over and



John, 74, and his wife Joan, 72

help him assemble them," she added. "I was stunned at the effort he was going to."

Bahun said she worried about Reichart injuring himself, so she carried the finished trees to nearby homes, including her own, and Reichart secured them to the ground.

For houses that were farther away, Reichart hooked up a small trailer to his mobility scooter to easily haul the trees and lawn ornaments. He then hired a lighting company to install the house lights he'd purchased for everyone, Bahun said.

"It probably took a month to get everything up," she said, noting that each house was fully decorated by mid-November. "It was nice to get to know John, and I was touched to watch him care for Joan. He's just a wonderful man."

Reichart said he spent thousands of dollars from his savings on the decorations, but he declined to give an exact amount. He said it was worth it to see his wife's face light up.

"Every dime was well spent," he said. "I'll do anything to make her happy. It breaks my heart to see the change in her, so it's nice to do something uplifting."

"Joan doesn't speak much now, but she tells me the lights are pretty," Reichart added. "Now that they're up, I turn up the heat in the garage and we sit out there most nights, waving at all the cars that drive by to see the decorations."

Reichart also hands out cups of hot chocolate to everyone who visits the street, which neighbors have nicknamed Christmas Wish Lane. KCCI News of Des Moines was among the local media outlets that covered his holiday decorating spree.

Reichart's spirit of giving has been contagious, Ewurs said.

"I went out and bought a Santa suit, and I'm now passing out candy canes when people come by my house," he said.

Reichart decided to have some fun with that, Ewurs said.

"I was in the Air Force, and when I told John what I was doing, he told me, 'Now, I'm going to have to get a Santa suit and hand out candy bars with my hot chocolate because I can't have the Air Force outdoing me,'" he said.

Ewurs started a card campaign after Reichart told him the only thing he wanted in return for his efforts was a Christmas card. He is asking people to mail cards to John Reichart, care of Frank Ewurs, at P.O. Box 133, Indianola, Iowa, 50125.

Ewurs and his wife, Mandy Ewurs, also started a GoFundMe, hoping to raise enough funds for Reichart to buy a shed to store the neighborhood's new decorations.

"It's a labor of love for him, but we don't want him to keep spending his money," said Mandy Ewurs. "He's been generous enough already, and he's brought a lot of our neighbors together."

"I'm so touched by it — it's like a movie you'd see on the Hallmark Channel," she added.

For Frank Ewurs, something else comes to mind.

"It's like Clark Griswold came to our neighborhood," he said, referring to the holiday classic movie "National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation."

"We now have one bright street," he added. "John even put light-up dogs in the yards of everyone on the street who has a dog."

Reichart said he plans to continue his new tradition for as long as he's able.

"Seeing my wife's reaction to all of this warms me up," he said. "Even when she's gone, I'd like to continue doing this in her memory. Every Christmas, I want to see the whole block light up."

WEEKEND: MUSIC

Lone wolf

Lauren Mayberry steps out of synth-pop band Chvrches for a solo album showing her influences

BY ELISE RYAN

Associated Press

The birth of Lauren Mayberry as a solo artist should be marked by something like a wolf cry. And that's exactly what it sounds like.

The vocalist and percussionist from the Scottish pop band Chvrches has punctuated her debut album with a playful howl while telling off an ex-lover on the song "Crocodile Tears."

"This moment in time is exactly the chapter where I get to howl like a wolf in a song if I want to. And I don't have to feel weird about it," she says.

Mayberry, 37, is enjoying the freedom to create whatever she likes, away from the synth-pop of the band she has been with since her early 20s.

"It's a mission statement of all things that you like, and you just go in and write the song that feels like it wants to be written on that day, which was quite refreshing," she says.

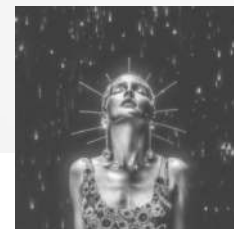
The 12 tracks of "Vicious Creature," released Dec. 6 on Island, veer from the coffee house folk of "Anywhere But Dancing" to the punky "Punch Drunk," the dance-pop of "Change Shapes" and stuttering glam of "Sorry, Etc."

If Chvrches — with members Iain Cook and Martin Doherty — usually works first with melodies and production

SEE LONE ON PAGE 29

Lauren Mayberry poses for a portrait on Sept. 30 in New York.

ANDY KROPA, INVISION/AP



Lauren Mayberry

Vicious Creature (Island)

Lauren Mayberry, frontwoman of the Scottish synth-pop band CHVRCHES, liberates herself from preconceptions on a punchy debut solo album, "Vicious Creature."

Mayberry's striking voice has been central to CHVRCHES' electro-pop since the trio started making music together in 2011. It is sharp and distinct, a key instrument used alongside Iain Cook and Martin Doherty's synths to create a sound that has endured throughout the subsequent decade. Now, her soprano voices feelings and experiences uniquely hers — adding a fire to a project all about ownership.

"Must be something in the air," she declares on the album's opening track. And later: "Too much noise might leave you on your own."

Throughout the album, she explores past relationships, family, the music industry and memory.

"I killed myself to be one of the boys," she sings on "Sorry, etc." bluntly listing the concessions she's had to make in order to succeed in the male-dominated music business. "I bit my tongue to be one of the boys / I sold my soul to be one of the boys," she continues, the chorus morphing into a confessional chant. Above drums and piercing electronic production, the song is all angst and theatrical flair — particularly on the final, whispered verse — and feels distinctly Mayberry.

On "Change Shapes," she details how and why that self-sacrificing happens. "I change shapes till I get what I want from you," she sings over a bouncy guitar and steady percussion. "Punch Drunk" is just that, a lively song atop analog crackles and loose riffs. "Mantra" uses a warbled beat to a hypnotic effect, as Mayberry takes on an enemy.

Those moments — the ones where Mayberry brawls, heard in her lyrics and the wolf howling back at the boy crying wolf in "Crocodile Tears" — are some of the album's best.

But there are dialed-back moments as well — quieter songs, the furthest from her work with CHVRCHES — and they come with their own revelations.

Those songs, like the acoustic guitar-led "Anywhere But Dancing," and piano ballads "Oh, Mother" and "Are You Awake," are anchors for the project. They serve as reminders that "Vicious Creature" was motivated by Mayberry's desire to center her storytelling as a soloist, the parts, it can be assumed, suppressed in her previous pursuits.

— Elise Ryan
Associated Press

WEEKEND: MUSIC REVIEWS

Linkin Park

From Zero (Warner Records)

Linkin Park, the inventive American rap-rock band who wove electronica into its heavy, melodic compositions, return with their first new album in seven years, "From Zero." It's a reference to their earliest days — when the band was known as Xero — a reclamation of their angry and ascendant sound, and something else entirely.

It started in September. Linkin Park debuted their first new music since the 2017 death of lead singer Chester Bennington: a new song titled "The Emptiness Machine," with new singer Emily Armstrong of the band Dead Sara and drummer Colin Brittain, joining returning members Mike Shinoda, Brad Delson, Phoenix and Joe Hahn. (Shinoda and Armstrong share vocal duties.)

It was a surprising return; as AP wrote at the time, Armstrong's performance style comfortably continues the band's legacy. Her full-throated vocals recalled Bennington without attempting parody. That spirit continues throughout "From Zero," Armstrong stretching out a scream into the kind of raspy, vibrato-fake out immediately recognizable as a Bennington-ism.

In his absence, however, Shinoda takes more of the vocal lead. And in some points, it is to the band's detriment, like on "Cut the Bridge." Elsewhere, it's a revisitation to "Metemora"-era LP, like on the fistful "Heavy Is the Crown." Ultimately, he makes a fine solo leader.

More melodic moments may sound like the work of another band entirely when performed by Armstrong, like on "Over Each Other," but that's quickly abandoned for the nu-metal ferocity of the next track, "Casualty."

It's an easy impulse to look for Bennington on this album. One of the most rewarding moments arrives on "Two Faced": "I can't hear myself think," Armstrong speak-sings, before launching into a guttural bellow, "Stop yelling at me." It has echoes of Linkin Park's career-defining hits, like "One Step Closer." The necessary reminder to the listener, then, should be that this is the same band just in the midst of a transformation. Much is intact: The album is produced by Shinoda and it sounds it; signatures of Hahn, the band's DJ, turntablist and creative director, exist throughout.

Bennington's mother, Susan Eubanks, told Rolling Stone she had no idea the band was going to continue on without her son — and that they previously said they'd give her a heads up; they did not.

For some Linkin Park fans, it is a nonstarter. For the others who will dive into "From Zero," there are echoes of the band they loved.

— Maria Sherman
Associated Press



Rosé

Rosie (Atlantic)

Rosé, the nightingale of the massively popular Korean girl group Blackpink, has flown the nest and launched her first solo album, "Rosie." She's the first of the awesome foursome to release a full-length solo record, and in English at that. Members Jisoo and Jennie have previously released singles, and Lisa is gearing up for her own studio album in 2025.

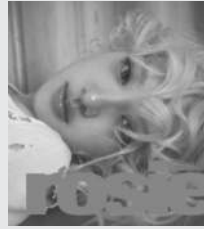
Across "Rosie," titled after Rosé's nickname to communicate a kind of personal intimacy, the singer goes to great lengths to detach herself sonically from her band. Unlike Blackpink's high-energy electro-pop output, Rosé's solo material is that of a coffee-house dweller with a sideline in romantic drama. But don't expect finger-plucked acoustic guitar balladry exclusively — "Rosie" is reserved in some moments, full of life in others.

The album starts off chipper, with the soaring piano ballad "Number One Girl," the cool synth-pop track "Two Years," the dynamic, catchy Bruno Mars collaboration "Apt.," and the contemporary, Taylor Swift-indebted pop of "Toxic Till the End." But it invariably slows down, preferring fairly stripped-back production throughout. She's got the voice and she's flaunting it; it's her prerogative to showcase her range at the expense of a more energetic beat.

Across 12 tracks, the album studies heartache over lost loves ("It's been two years and you're still not gone / It doesn't make sense that I can't move on," she sings on "Two Years"), missed chances ("Are we lovers or friends / 'Cause it's as good as it gets" in "Call it the End") and ambivalence over situationships that probably should've been nipped in the bud but staggered along, strung by the power of lust and not much else. (That one is everywhere — particularly in the dubious boyfriends of "Toxic Till the End" and "Gameboy.") Who can't relate?

The album is an emotional rollercoaster easy to empathize with, stuffed with songs that articulate the trials and tribulations of early adult years — the search for connection and getting dragged into romances that lead nowhere. But throughout, fans of both Blackpink and Rosé might miss the spirited songs of her group. After all, your 20s are for partying, too; not just heartbreak.

— Cristina Jaleru
Associated Press



Kim Deal

Nobody Loves You More (4AD)

When the Pixies set out to make their 1988 debut studio album, they enlisted Steve Albini to engineer "Surfer Rosa," the seminal alternative record that includes the enduring hit, "Where Is My Mind?" That experience was mutually beneficial to both parties — and was the beginning of a decadeslong friendship between the prickly Albini and Kim Deal, the band's bassist at the time.

Nearly 35 years later — just before the acclaimed audio engineer died in May at age 61 — Deal turned to Albini once again for what would be their final collaboration, this time for another debut. Eight of the 11 tracks on Deal's first solo studio album, "Nobody Loves You More," were produced by both Albini and Deal — the ideal partnership of his experimentation and her musical skill.

Deal's music has always been a reflection of the rugged exterior needed to be a woman at the forefront of the '90s alternative rock scene and a tenderness that subverts the indifference often characterizing that same scene.

Those features, ostensibly at odds with one another, culminate in "Nobody Loves You More," thanks to her poignant lyricism and the unique instrumentation woven throughout the record. At its heart, this is still a rock album — one that Deal is uniquely suited to make.

The album's final track, "A Good Time Pushed," musically and lyrically captures the fine line between doom and joy. "We're having a good time," she repeats, in what is perhaps an effort to convince herself that she is.

Although the continuity is there between this album and the music of the Pixies and Deal's band The Breeders, aspects of it are unequivocally distinct.

The resounding brass instruments on the title track and "Coast," along with the orchestra featured on "Summerland," are a departure from the traditional rock instrumentation that many listeners have come to associate with the 63-year-old.

As the album title suggests, much of the songs on "Nobody Loves You More" are also lyrically earnest and romantic. "Are you mine? / Are you my baby? / I have no mind / For nothin but love," Deal croons on the doo-wop-inspired "Are You Mine?"

As a whole, "Nobody Loves You More" is varied — and as distinctly American as the myriad locations which inspired it, from the Massachusetts island of Nantucket (the breezy sounds of "Coast") to the Florida Keys ("Summerland") to Deal's hometown of Dayton, Ohio.

Fans of the Pixies and the Breeders will find a lot to enjoy here — it is both familiar and different.

— Krysta Fauria
Associated Press



Lone: Mayberry wanted songs to be focused on storytelling first

FROM PAGE 28

before lyrics, Mayberry wanted to reverse the process.

"I knew that I wanted it to be more focused on the storytelling," she says. "It was nice to be able to go into a studio with a title idea or with a concept and then work back from that."

Mayberry cites Sinead O'Connor, Tori Amos, Fiona Apple and Annie Lennox as influences. She credits the yodel inflection in her voice to having listened to so much Alanis Morissette.

"It was those influences I wanted to dig into a bit more in my own material," she says. "When I thought back to what are the key influences on me as a writer, it isn't really a lot of synth-pop stuff. So then it's interesting that that's what I became so associated with."

Mayberry worked on her new album with producers Greg Kurstin, Matthew Korma, Tobias Jesso Jr., Ethan Gruska and Dan McDougall. She started writing in spring 2022 and had studio sessions in between touring with Chvrches.

McDougall, who has previously worked with Sigrid and Jason Mraz, co-wrote and played on four tracks and says he and Mayberry went into the studio hoping to push the boundaries.

"We didn't really have one specific lane in mind for the genre we were going down," he says. "We were just being experimental, and I guess the freedom within that just brought us something a bit different."

One track — "Sunday Best" — was in part inspired by "Once In a Lifetime" by Talking Heads and by her mother's illness. "Keep thinking one day maybe I will find the beauty in goodbye," she sings. The title comes from funeral clothes.

"I thought I was finally writing a hopeful, cheerful, uplifting song, and then I was like, 'Well, still about death, isn't it?'" Mayberry says, laughing. "Maybe it's a Scottish thing. I don't know. We're just a bit morose."

On the album, Mayberry explores mortality, nostalgia, societal pressures, arrogant exes and her band ("I killed myself to be one of the boys," she sings in one song.)

"The lyrics I like least that I've written are ones that I know didn't feel very authentic to me," she says. "I think you can hear in somebody's physical voice when they're singing, whether they mean something or not. So my only brief is like, 'Does it feel fake?'"

Regardless of how the album does with critics or charts, Mayberry is proud it's out there, proof of her musicianship and confirmation that she doesn't need anyone

to make good songs.

"No matter what happens with this record, I feel like it was more about proving to myself than to anybody else. Because if you never try it, then you're never going to know."

The album ends with the somber piano-led "Are You Awake?" as Mayberry takes a hard look at her life choices. Her friends have settled down — "Been counting their babies and their diamond wedding rings" — and her career expectations are heavy: "Hometown hero is a poisoned chalice choice," she sings.

"The end of that song opens up in a way to a question mark. And I think that's kind of how I feel about what will happen after the rest of this," she says.

Mayberry isn't sure what's next for Chvrches. The three members have been working on their own projects, and the door seems open for a reunion despite Mayberry spreading her wings.

"It's hard once you've felt the wind in your hair to not enjoy that as an experience," she says. "But my hope is that the two things can coexist. I do think that everybody getting experiences outside of the band will mean that we have different things to offer each other when we come to write again."

WEEKEND: BOOK REVIEWS

Celebrities who tell their stories well

BY KATHERINE A. POWERS
Special to *The Washington Post*

Celebrity memoirs are usually about as interesting as someone else's dreams. Here are three that defy the stereotype by being not only diverting, but actually intelligent.



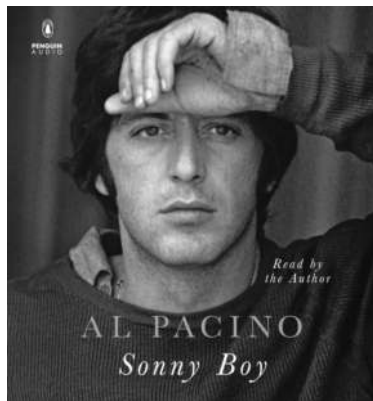
Simon & Schuster Audio

What I Ate in One Year Stanley Tucci

Tucci does in fact begin his memoir with a description of his dreams. Mercifully, he soon moves on to discuss his life in all its dailiness as actor, father, husband — and documentarian of his 2023 dietary intake. If you are not interested in food, this is not the book for you. Meal after meal, dish upon dish goes parading by, some merely mentioned, some spelled out with recipes and some described in terms approaching the lustful. For the most part, Tucci's humor and the glorious, celebratory mood of his film "Big Night" dominate this memoir, but not everything is sunshine and roses. Tucci's contempt for the purveyors of needlessly bad food — the "gunk and

gurry" served in airports, the fussy concoctions of overzealous chefs — is withering. He does indulge in a certain amount of profanity, though none of it is employed with the venom with which he pronounces "progress." That he can still bring such a festive air to eating is remarkable as he has survived oral cancer, an ordeal described in his previous book, "Taste." As a result, he cannot eat certain foods, including, sadly enough, steak. Still, it seems to not have affected his rich, wood-grained voice, which carries us briskly through a busy year. By the end, Tucci shows himself to be such an astute, likable guy that it's hard to believe he's famous.

(Simon & Schuster, unabridged, 7 ¾ hours)



Penguin Audio

Sonny Boy Al Pacino

Pacino reads his memoir in a voice whose raggedness suggests a lifetime of smoking, possibly aggravated by a temporarily paralyzed vocal cord. Though his gravelly caw takes getting used to, this recording offers much more than the print version. Here is the man fully and boisterously present: ad-libbing, laughing at his own folly, admitting his flops, wondering at his successes. The Oscar winner regales us with tales of his wild youth in the South Bronx and his early years in acting. After successful work in the theater, he became famous in 1972 with "The Godfather," after which talent, energy, good looks and a gimlet eye secured his renown. Pacino speaks pas-



Grand Central

sionately about acting but is strangely reticent about his personal life, touching only briefly on girlfriends and his four children. He knows — or knew — most of Hollywood's bigwigs and generously offers such spectacles as Marlon Brando, on location, sitting on a hospital bed eating chicken cacciatore — "gobble, gobble, gobble, gobble" — then wiping his tomato-sauced hands on the sheets.

(Penguin, unabridged, 12½ hours)

Connie

Connie Chung

Chung, the first Asian American news anchor on a major network, reads her memoir, a remarkable story of ambition, hard work, luck and an unlikely

talent for drinking and swearing. Born in Washington in 1946, she is the fifth child of parents who escaped from China during the Sino-Japanese War. After majoring in journalism in college, Chung went from gofer to secretary, reporter and correspondent and, despite one (male) news media veteran informing her that she'd "never make it in this business," worked her way up to the high-profile positions for which she is well known.

Chung attributes some of her success to the passing of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, but it's also clear that it depended as much on her drive, intelligence and ability to endure hostility and sexual harassment from her male colleagues. Chung's narration is — unsurprisingly — clear and nicely paced, relating even the most infuriating incidents calmly. She dishes up good stories about the people she dealt with, including Dan Rather, whom she calls condescending and biased against women.

Very occasionally she mimics the voices of well-known people, among them an uncannily realistic Richard Nixon. Her Walter Cronkite, however, sounds like a big woofy dog.

(Grand Central Publishing, unabridged, 11½ hours)

Spy novel-like 'Gabriel's Moon' will keep readers guessing

BY MALCOLM FORBES

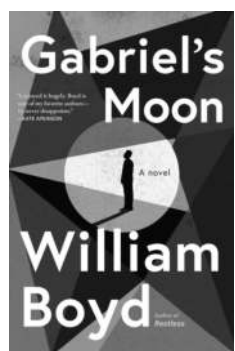
Special to *The Washington Post*

William Boyd's 18th novel gets underway with a formative event — or more precisely, a transformative tragedy. It is 1936 in Oxfordshire, and 6-year-old Gabriel Dax is getting ready to go to sleep with help from the comforting presence of his mother and his bedside night light. "Gabriel's moon," his mother says of his candlelit glass globe; "all's well with the world." But later that night, Gabriel's world implodes. A devastating fire breaks out, burning down the house, killing his mother and leaving him with traumatic memories.

From his shock opener, Boyd jumps ahead to 1960 and presents Gabriel as a successful travel writer on assignment in the newly independent Republic of the Congo (later the Democratic Republic of Congo). As he prepares to write a piece on Léopoldville and Brazzaville, two capitals separated by one river, we wonder what kind of book Boyd has set out to write. An African drama like his "Brazzaville Beach" (1990), or another '60s-set character-led caper like 2020's "Trio"?

It doesn't take long before "Gabriel's Moon" acquires the recognizable contours of the spy novel. Boyd builds layer upon layer of intrigue. Gabriel gets the opportunity to interview the recently elected Congolese prime minister, Patrice Lumumba.

During their exchange, Lumumba gives Gabriel the names of three people — one British, one American, one Belgian — who have been sent to the country to assassinate him. On his return to England, Gabriel takes stock of a series of oddities and



coincidences: He is upgraded at the airport; he spots a woman reading one of his travel books on the plane, and notices her again on the ground when he is out shopping; and he receives a silent phone call in his flat and discovers someone has paid him a "clandestine

visit" in his absence. Then one day his mystery woman reappears and this time approaches him. She introduces herself as Faith Green, and after stunning him with the news that Lumumba was overthrown in a coup and shot by a firing squad, she goes on to unnerve him by asking if he will do a "small service" and act as a courier for MI6. Reluctant to begin with, Gabriel eventually finds himself giving in: The money is good, the job seems straightforward and Faith Green is captivating.

Gabriel's mission plunges him into a

murky world of danger, betrayal and manipulation. At the end of his assignment, he realizes hostile outside forces are at work, but with his quick thinking he manages to extricate himself from a perilous situation in the nick of time. The stakes rise higher: an acquaintance turns up dead in a hotel; then a ruthless CIA operative tracks Gabriel down and demands the tapes of his interview with Lumumba, as the recording contains incriminating secret information. "I don't believe you have any idea how valuable it is," he tells Gabriel. "Which is why you're still alive." Rather than run away and lie low, Gabriel signs up for more missions from Faith, determined to see the full extent of the tangled web around him and the real identities, motives and allegiances of those who have woven it and those who are trapped in it.

Like Boyd's 2006 spy novel "Restless," "Gabriel's Moon" is a hugely enjoyable and satisfyingly intricate historical thriller. As ever, Boyd's evocations of time and place are deftly rendered, whether Franco-era Spain or communist Warsaw. He convinces with his depiction of the Cold War heating up, and of the spying game and the attendant panic and paranoia felt by its players. He deserves credit for making an effort to avoid the long shadow cast by past masters of the spy novel. John le Carré's spooks called double agents

"moles," but Faith tells Gabriel they prefer the word "termites." "Moles might spoil your lawn," she explains, "but termites can bring down a house."

Gabriel's adventures bring him into contact with a range of colorful and often morally dubious characters, from Spanish painter Blanco to Gabriel's Foreign Office bigwig brother, Sefton, to our man in Madrid, the delightfully louche Kit Caldwell. On the home front, Gabriel takes part in sessions with a psychoanalyst, the inscrutable Dr. Katerina Haas, to help cure his insomnia and nightmares, and also follows leads to investigate the cause of the house fire that cut short his childhood.

However, the novel is at its most compelling when Gabriel is either interacting with his mesmerizing and fiendishly shrewd handler or doing her bidding in foreign lands. Gabriel falls for Faith and comes to regard her as both "his tormentor and his solace." As he does what she asks of him, he starts to question his role: Is he an important asset or a useful idiot? He has been recruited because he is deniable — but is he also expendable?

Boyd excels with this portrait of someone who is in the dark, and in too deep emotionally. "He was like a man in an ever-widening, ever-vermiculated labyrinth," Boyd writes, "but one with no exit." Gabriel's resourceful attempts to get out and get ahead make for gripping reading.

WEEKEND: TELEVISION



Lucasfilm Ltd.

From left: Ryan Kiera Armstrong, Kyriana Kratter, Ravi Cabot-Conyers and Robert Timothy Smith star in “Star Wars: Skeleton Crew.”

‘Skeleton Crew’ keeps Lucas’ style alive

Showrunners approach ‘Star Wars’ TV spinoff with eye to capturing ‘vibe and aesthetic’ of original 1977 film

BY HERB SCRIBNER
The Washington Post

Jude Law was a little taken aback when he first donned his Jedi robe and stepped onto the set of “Skeleton Crew,” the latest “Star Wars” television spinoff.

The world-renowned actor, who has headlined a Marvel film, two Harry Potter movies and a slew of other blockbusters, was surprised to learn that “Star Wars” filmmaking had its own unique craft and style. There was a “language” to the process, he said — something that harked back to George Lucas’ original 1977 film.

In fact, Law recalled one director telling him specifically that they couldn’t film a shot a certain way because it wasn’t quite “Star Wars-y” enough.

“It required a whole different approach to the filmmaking process,” Law said. “It’s not that there’s a rule book, but a lot of it does relate back to what Lucas did all those years ago.”

Law stars in Disney+’s “Skeleton Crew,” an eight-part “Goonies”-meets-“Star Wars” series about a group of younglings who get lost in space. Law plays Jod Na Nawood, who claims to be a Jedi (though he’s a bit of a nerf herder) and says he wants to help the lost kids get home.

The show opens with scenes of the kids — including Ravi Cabot-Conyers’ Wim and Robert Timothy Smith’s elephantine alien Neel — being normal younglings in the “Star Wars” galaxy (their hometown is a cross between middle America and Disney’s ill-fated Galactic Starcruiser hotel). When they accidentally leave their home via a hidden spaceship, they find themselves tangling with pirates, an owl-like mentor and Law’s Nawood.

Showrunners Jon Watts and Chris Ford, who worked on Marvel’s “Spider-Man: Homecoming,” wanted to turn back the clock to the Lucas days for “Skeleton Crew.” It’s been well-documented that the director gained inspira-

tion for “Star Wars” from westerns as well as Akira Kurosawa’s samurai films. So Watts and Ford rewatched old spaghetti westerns, throwback pirate serials and some 1930s films to replicate that experience.

“You don’t want to try to just copy ‘Star Wars’ directly,” Ford said. “You want to try to re-create the processes that George Lucas employed to create ‘Star Wars.’”

Creating a show in the “Star Wars” universe also requires making sure it looks like “Star Wars.” Watts and Ford said they worked with Lucasfilm design artists consistently to create the proper aesthetic. They also said they used stop-motion animation, which they said felt more like “Star Wars” than CGI.

“It’s not like there’s a series of rule books and like, someone comes down from Lucasfilm and is like, ‘Oh, you broke it,’” Watts said. “It’s more like trying to capture the vibe and aesthetic of ‘Star Wars’ is a little bit of, like, an intangible thing. And it goes back to just what feels right and what doesn’t feel right.”

“It’s an emotional thing,” Watts added. “It’s, like, a feeling. How do you make something feel like ‘Star Wars’ is something that we talked about a lot.”

Ford agreed. “It’s not about rules. It’s more like upholding a tradition.”

To help make sure they were making the right choices, Watts and Ford heeded the advice of longtime “Star Wars” collaborators Dave Filoni and Jon Favreau, both of whom executive produced “The Mandalorian,” to get the feel of Lucas’ universe. Similarly, Bryce Dallas Howard, who worked on episodes of “The Mandalorian,” directed one of the episodes for “Skeleton Crew,” which gave them added support.

Watts and Ford said there are certain aspects of a “Star Wars” show that are unique to “Star Wars” — as opposed to a Marvel project, which can stretch in all sorts of directions.

Law, who played Yon-Rogg in 2019’s “Captain Marvel,” is familiar with how Marvel’s filmmaking process is different than “Star Wars.” In his time with the franchise, he witnessed wide shots where characters soared through the air and moments when the camera spun around the room.

“When it comes to space flight, you don’t see shots where they kind of pull out through the glass or whizzing around,” Law said of “Star Wars” films. “That’s more Marvel.” With “Star Wars,” he said, “you’re either inside or you’re outside. And again, I think that relates to the language that Lucas developed.”

Law said on-set “gatekeepers” instructed actors on how to keep their scenes consistent with Lucas’ original vision and with subsequent “Star Wars” projects. Similarly, various directors explained shots that were or were not permissible.

Though some may consider such strictures frustrating, Law doesn’t.

“I’m actually quite a fan of limitations on a film set,” he said. “You’ve got, you know, too much money, too much time and too many toys — I don’t know that you make good decisions. I quite like the idea of — these are the parameters; stick within them. I certainly never felt frustrated.”

Part of this is because Law, Ford and Watts all recognize that Lucas himself had constraints when he filmed “A New Hope” in 1977. That’s why they worked to mimic the cinematography and style of the original trilogy, which included moments where viewers see wide shots of the Tatooine desert and flat pan shots of the Death Star hanging in empty space. You don’t see too many close-ups and zoom-ins on “Star Wars” characters.

“You wouldn’t do, like, a snap zoom-in to, like, a close-up of Jude Law as he’s looking around the room,” Watts said. “That wouldn’t feel like ‘Star Wars.’”

WEEKEND: HEALTH & FITNESS

The science of superior facial processing

Researchers seek to better understand why some can recognize faces more easily

By RICHARD SIMA
The Washington Post

Do you remember the face of any strangers who passed by you today?

You probably can't, but super-recognizers can. These rare individuals can identify unfamiliar faces after a brief glimpse. And by studying them, researchers hope to understand how we recognize that a face belongs to someone we know — an important ability for a social species such as ours.

"The face is the most important visual stimulus for humans in their environment, probably throughout evolution," said David White, associate professor of psychology and lead investigator of the Face Research Lab at the University of New South Wales, Sydney. "We're a social species, and the information contained in the face is vital to behave rationally in a social environment."

We don't, for example, usually need to identify specific chairs, because knowing "it's just a chair" is enough, said Meike Ramon, an assistant professor and head of the Applied Face Cognition Lab at the University of Lausanne. "But for faces, it matters who each unique individual face belongs to."

Face processing on a spectrum

Our ability to recognize faces is part of a spectrum.

At one end are the 2 to 3% of people with face blindness — or developmental prosopagnosia — who have trouble recognizing faces that should be familiar to them, including those of loved ones or even their own.

At the other end are super-recognizers, first reported on in 2009, who excel at identifying or matching faces, even those that are unfamiliar to them — whether they are flipped upside-down, low resolution or presented at a different angle.

They have a "unique ability to derive a three-dimensional representation of a face, even when they see only one 2D image of the person," Ramon said. Super-recognizers are rare, though how rare is hard to estimate because there is no single agreed-upon method for categorizing them.

Most people's ability to process faces lies somewhere in between, where recognizing familiar faces is easy but deciphering unfamiliar ones is challenging.

What makes these super-recognizers super

Super-recognizers are drawn to faces. Even when they are presented with random pictures of everyday life, super-



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The super-recognizer ability to process faces may simply reflect how good they are at processing all visual information. Conversely, people with face blindness not only struggle with faces but may also have difficulties processing other types of visual information.

recognizers spend more time looking at faces, Ramon and her colleagues reported in one 2022 study.

Their eyes are also drawn immediately to the face, regardless of where that face is in the photo — and most closely near the optimal place for identification, below the eyes.

"It seems like faces are extremely salient for super-recognizers for reasons that we still don't know," Ramon said.

Their brains also respond differently to visual images less than a second after seeing them.

In a 2024 study, Ramon and her colleagues recorded brain activity from 16 super-recognizers and 17 control participants using EEG while they viewed a variety of pictures, such as of plants, animals, scenes and faces. Even just 65 milliseconds after an image pops up — faster than the blink of an eye — their brains already start responding differently than neurotypical brains.

Interestingly, super-recognizers exhibited this difference in neural activity regardless of what they were looking at, which suggests that their brains process visual information differently in general.

Other research suggests that super-recognizers have broader activation of the brain's face-processing networks, even when looking at unfamiliar faces.

The super-recognizer ability to process faces may simply reflect how good they are at processing all visual information. And conversely, people with face blindness not only struggle with faces but may also have difficulties processing other

types of visual information.

Curiously, however, super-recognizer abilities may extend beyond the visual domain. A 2021 study of 529 participants reported that super-recognizers were also much better at identifying unfamiliar and familiar voices, despite having merely average pitch discrimination, which may point to a "common basis for person identity processing abilities" across different senses, White said.

Still, super-recognizers have weaknesses. Just like typical recognizers, super-recognizers also find it more difficult to distinguish between the faces of people of ethnicities different from their own.

Getting better at recognizing faces

Identifying unfamiliar faces is tricky, even for experienced professionals such as forensic examiners and customs agents. Unfortunately, it is not possible to train people to become super-recognizers, which appears to be a natural ability.

When White and his colleagues pit super-recognizers against trained forensic examiners, the differences in their process for face identification were clear, though they achieved equivalent accuracy.

Super-recognizers were more intuitive and made their judgments quicker with great accuracy after just two seconds. They looked at faces more, but there was no clear pattern in where they were looking, the 2023 study reported.

Forensic examiners, by contrast, were much more methodical and systematic. They took longer to make their decisions,

requiring up to 30 seconds, but picked up on facial clues that most people would not pay attention to.

"What super-recognizers are doing is more of a black box," White said. "It's more of an automatic processing."

The growing recognition of super-recognizers has increased interest in using their powers to aid policing and security work, though there appears to be no formal, systematic approach for identifying and deploying them. Ramon has worked with Berlin Police and White has worked with the New South Wales Police Force to identify super-recognizers.

But super-recognizers aren't perfect, White said.

In White's research, when super-recognizers and professionals made errors, super-recognizers maintained a high confidence, while professionals were less confident.

So far, lessons on how to improve our facial processing come from trained experts.

In a 2021 study, White and his colleagues taught novice participants some of the tricks used by professional examiners, such as focusing on the ears, scars, freckles and blemishes. After just a six-minute training, the novices got somewhat better — an improvement of 6% in accuracy.

But more research on super-recognizers could help solve the mystery of how an unfamiliar face becomes a recognizable and familiar face. The fact that super-recognizers are able to do so well with unfamiliar faces may give us clues in how the brain makes that change, White said.

WEEKEND: FAMILY



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Celebrate with less stress

A few time, financial, health tips to help your family enjoy the holidays

By ALEXANDRA CVIJANOVICH
American Academy of Pediatrics

The holiday season is a time to make and share delicious food, exchange gifts and enjoy cherished traditions. But for many families, the “happiest time of the year” also means unmanageable stress.

Year-end schedules are often crammed with social events that place extreme demands on our time. We may feel pressured to splurge on gifts and travel even if our budgets are tight or take part in community activities that claim too much of our personal and family energy.

These challenges can be hard to handle, even if you and your kids are in good health. Here are a few suggestions for navigating holiday stress that can help your family feel more balanced and possibly a little more joyful, too:

Keep calendar, expectations manageable

The pressure to celebrate with everyone from your child’s soccer team to your work colleagues can make the holidays feel rushed and chaotic. Choose the ones you can reasonably handle and decline the rest without guilt. If you experience pushback, simply say, “That sounds like a great time, but we’ve got something else going on.” Keep in mind that long-distance visits and other travel can be rescheduled, giving the family something to look forward to in the new year.

Prioritize family health

Sticking to family routines can help you cultivate a sense of peace amid the holiday rush. Make time for exercise, healthy meals and plenty of sleep — including naps, especially for little ones.

Pay attention to how much time you and your kids are spending on screens. Replace digital entertainment with simple pleasures, like sipping hot cocoa together or taking a walk in the fresh air. It’s also a great time to try new ways to relax, like meditation. Above all, give your family room for self-care, time to slow down or simply “be.”

Watch for signs kids need extra support

The holiday hubbub can make a child’s mood swings more intense. Toddlers may experience melt-

downs as missed naps and sugary snacks push them toward overstimulation. Older children may feel anxious about fitting in and feeling accepted as social media channels explode with images of holiday parties and gift-giving.

Let your children know that you understand, and that you are there if and when they need to talk. Let your kids know you’re open to conversations about tough subjects, no matter how busy things get.

If your family recently lost a loved one, keep in mind that the holidays can trigger or deepen grief. Give yourselves permission to rewrite the holiday script. What pleasurable activities do you want to keep — and which ones would you prefer to skip this time around? Making these choices together can form a foundation of healthy mutual support. You can try having your kids write letters about holiday events like dance recitals or orchestra concerts to the deceased friend or family member. They can also write the person a holiday card to help them share their feelings or memories.

Emphasize the simple side of giving

The notion that we need to spend thousands of dollars celebrating the holidays can paint parents and families into an uncomfortable corner. Parents may feel pressure to borrow money or use credit cards for gifts, special outfits, decorations and more. This pattern can backfire as the new year and the overdue bills arrive.

Keep in mind that financial stress is never healthy for your family. Set a positive example for your children by setting a holiday budget and sticking to it. One special gift can be as meaningful as dozens of shiny packages, especially if you make this part of your family’s thinking about holiday happiness.

Consider talking with your kids about the deeper meaning of the season. Focus on ways to give that can bring a special kind of joy. You don’t need to make big donations to charities or volunteer hundreds of hours to make a difference.

It might mean something as simple as running errands for a neighbor who could use an extra hand or inviting a friend’s children over to play so they can finish up holiday chores. Ask your kids for ideas and find ways to pursue them together.

THE MEAT AND POTATOES OF LIFE

Lisa Smith Molinari



Fear of change can be a challenge to overcome

“I have bad news,” my 29-year-old son, Hayden, said during a recent conversation. “The owners are putting the house back on the market.” Ever since graduating from college in 2018, Hayden has lived in an apartment in a Victorian house. When the owners, a group of adult sisters who inherited the house, told Hayden they might try to sell it, he was terrified.

The first time the sisters put the house on the market, they allowed Hayden to continue to rent month-to-month. This uncertainty was a constant worry Hayden was unable to shake, and our assurances that everything would be fine fell on deaf ears. That first attempt to sell failed, much to Hayden’s relief. But only a few months later, the sisters decided to try again. When Hayden gave us the bad news, my husband and I could hear fear in his voice again.

“They said I could stay until spring, but then I’ll have to move out,” he said as if moving was a dire fate. “I’m not sure what to do,” he said. “If things go wrong, could I stay here temporarily and pay you rent?”

“Of course you can, and you don’t have to pay! But you’ll be able to find a new place. Maybe even better than your apartment now!” we assured him. From the look on his face, we could see that it would take a lot more to convince our son that moving was not the end of the world.

Why, we wondered, would our son, a software engineer with a great career and bright future, be so scared of moving? The answer was obvious: Hayden was a military brat. Our Navy family moved frequently during his vulnerable adolescent years, when he attended three high schools.

Despite our family’s constant emotional support, Hayden was impacted by those military moves during his teen years. While we’ve never had him psychoanalyzed for evidence of metothesiophobia (fear of change), it doesn’t take a Ph.D. to see that the mere thought of moving causes our son an irrational amount of stress.

Military children are resilient, but how much of their resilience is forced? They don’t have a choice. They aren’t in control. They must move when their service member parents receive orders to move. They must hide their fear. They must change schools. They must make new friends. They must be the new kids, again and again.

So, when the child becomes an independent adult, with the power to control his own life, will he react differently when facing fear? Will he remember the stress of those childhood moves and do everything in his power to avoid experiencing it again now that he can?

Can military child resilience turn into adult avoidance?

The National Military Family Association (NMFA) and Bloom Military Teens recently released the results of their annual Military Teen Experience Survey (MTES). The 2024 results showed “that only 8% of military teens report high mental well-being, while a staggering 35% are struggling with low well-being.”

Like Hayden did, many military teens internalize their stress. The MTES results “uncovered an alarming trend in self-harm behavior among military teens,” revealing that “half of respondents (45%) reported engaging in self-harm,” far exceeding the global rate of adolescent self-harm of 18%. The MTES researchers describe self-harm as a maladaptive coping mechanism that is “an attempt to externalize the emotional pain they feel from the instability in their lives.”

The MTES results, coupled with a study released in August concluding that childhood moving is associated with the likelihood of developing adult depression, indicate that military children may not always become resilient adults.

“I might buy a house,” Hayden called to announce last week. Our recent talks about moving and a few emails listing apartments for rent had paid off. It took a little extra time and thought, but Hayden eventually realized that by embracing change, he controls his own destiny.

Read more at themeatandpotatoesoflife.com and in Lisa’s book, “The Meat and Potatoes of Life: My True Lit Com.” Email: meatandpotatoesoflife@gmail.com



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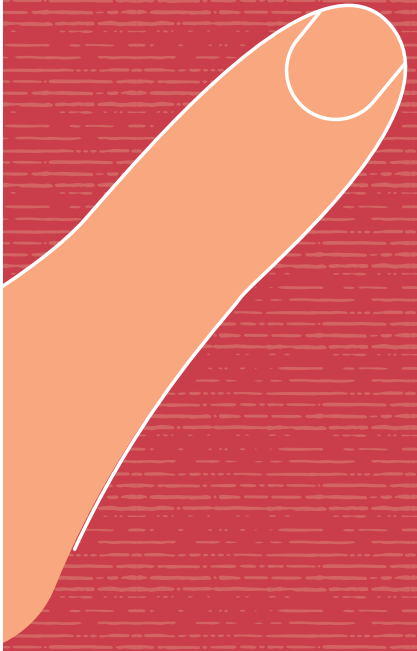
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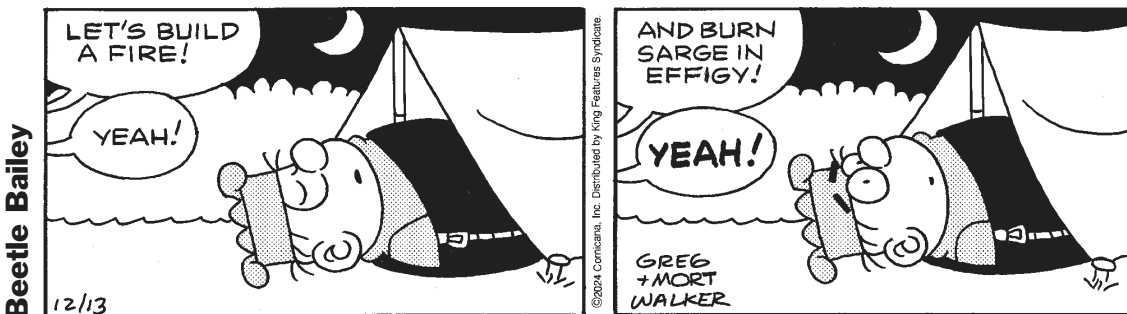
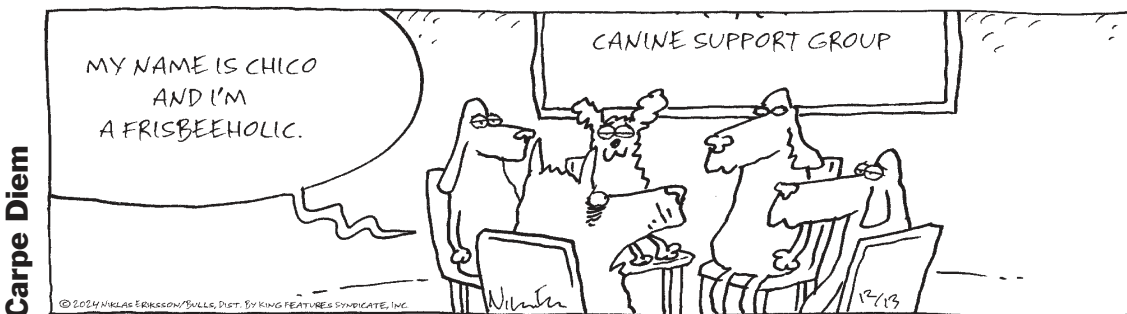
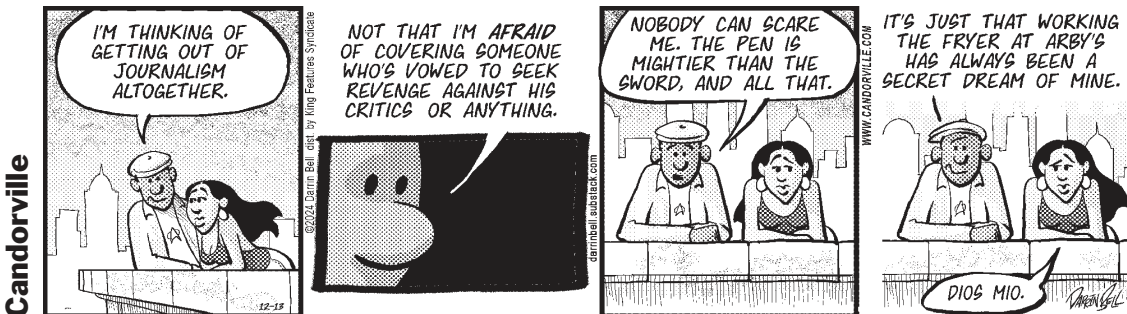
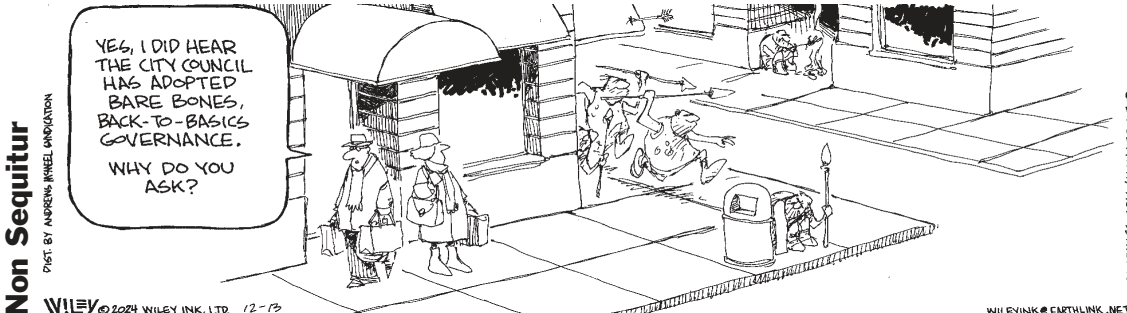
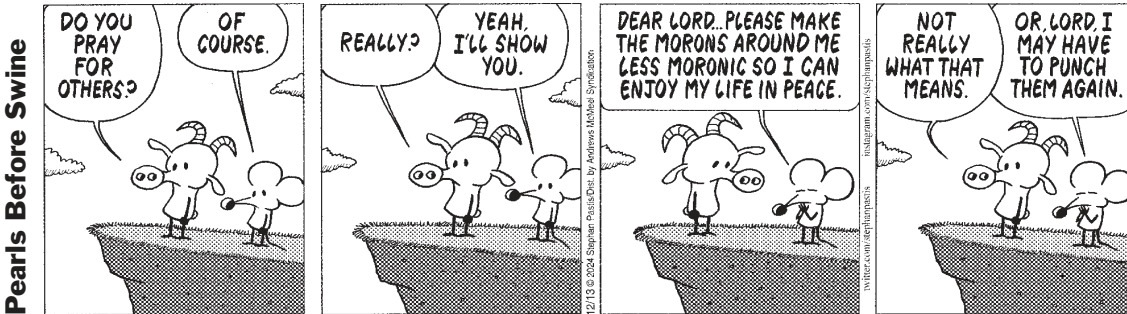
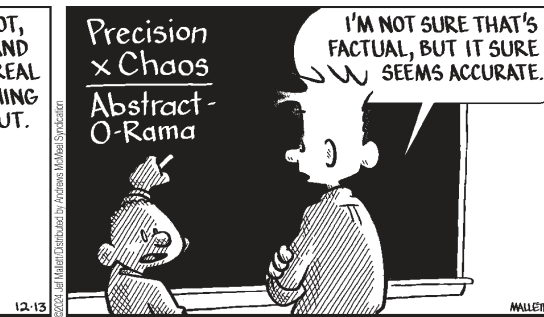
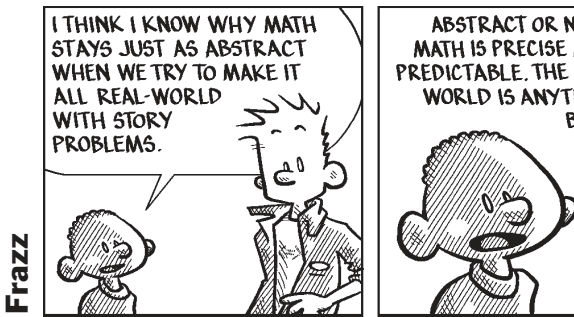
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Bizarro



Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

1	2	3	4	5		6	7	8		9	10	11
12						13				14		
15						16				17		
		18				19				20		
21	22			23				24				
25			26		27		28					
29				30			31			32	33	34
			35				36			37		
38	39	40				41		42		43		
44						45				46		
47				48				49			50	51
52				53				54				
55				56				57				

ACROSS

- 1 Belted area
- 6 Ship's sail
- 9 '60s chic
- 12 Host
- 13 Nest egg letters
- 14 URL ender
- 15 Bar mishap
- 16 Social groups
- 18 Opera legend Maria
- 20 Source
- 21 Wire measure
- 23 — card (cell phone insert)
- 24 Lincoln's coin
- 25 With (Fr.)
- 27 Saw
- 29 Home of St. Francis
- 31 Pizza topping
- 35 "Fast Car" singer Chapman
- 37 Jog
- 38 Skydiver's camera
- 41 Author Tolstoy
- 43 Whatever
- 44 "Superfood" berry
- 45 Signs from above?
- 47 Bodybuilder's pride
- 49 Pale purple

DOWN

- 19 TV chef Bastianich
- 21 Goat's plaint
- 22 ICU hookups
- 24 Corral
- 26 — acid
- 28 Trifled (with)
- 30 "No seats"
- 32 Prophets
- 33 Sine qua —
- 34 Hog haven
- 36 Concludes
- 38 Entire range
- 39 Eyelike openings
- 40 Peoples' histories
- 42 Edmonton player
- 45 Goose egg
- 46 Suffix for billion
- 48 "Bad" cholesterol
- 50 Do something
- 51 Dol. fractions

Answer to Previous Puzzle

T	A	L	C		P	R	Y		O	W	N	S		
E	L	O	I		A	T	E		S	E	E	P		
A	B	C	D		G	E	O		P	L	E	A		
M	A	K	E	D	O		W	O	R	L	D	S		
					R	A	P		N	E	W			
B	I	O	S		A	N	N	O	Y	E	R	S		
A	S	K			G	O	A			L	O	O		
T	E	A	R	D	O	W	N			S	L	I	D	
					Y	O	U		U	M	A			
C	L	O	U	D	S				N	Y	M	P	H	S
O	A	K	S			A	J	A		B	E	E	T	
A	M	A	T			R	A	N		A	C	R	E	
L	A	Y	S			A	B	U		S	K	E	W	

12-13

CRYPTOQUIP

UTVL CQC LTM KVP UTG
UGAJMC VZ V BGU KQXJMA ZVS
MVBT KGAPQPY? "VP RCCMA
CVS, VP RCCMA CGXXVA."

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: THAT LADY NO LONGER ENJOYED HER JOB WORKING AT THE BREAD BAKERY. THINGS WERE GETTING STALE.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: C equals D

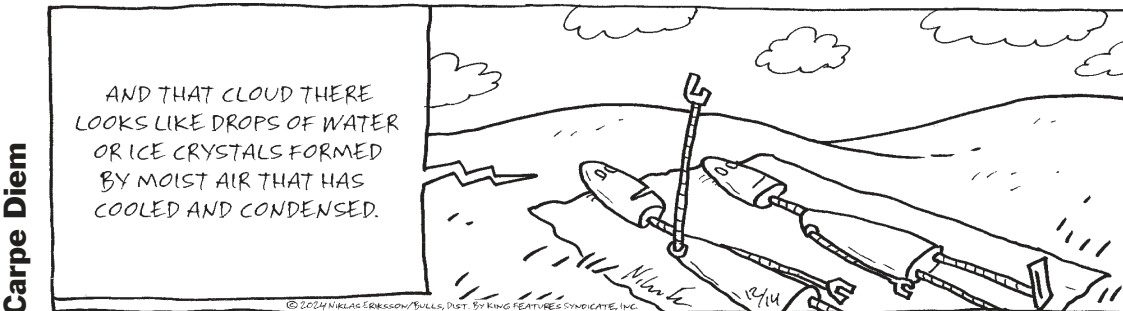
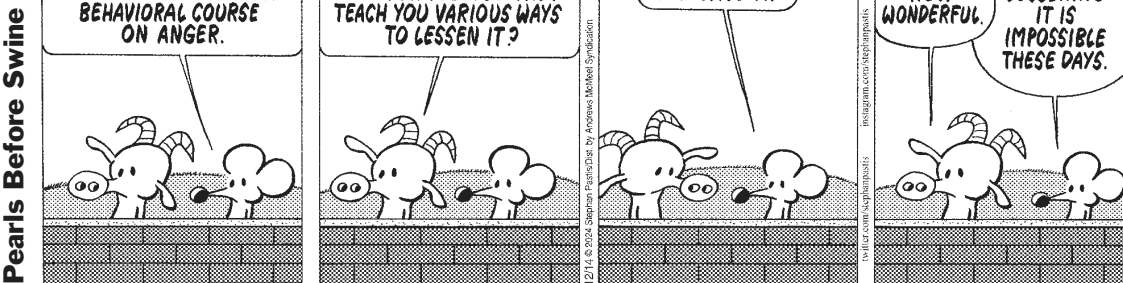
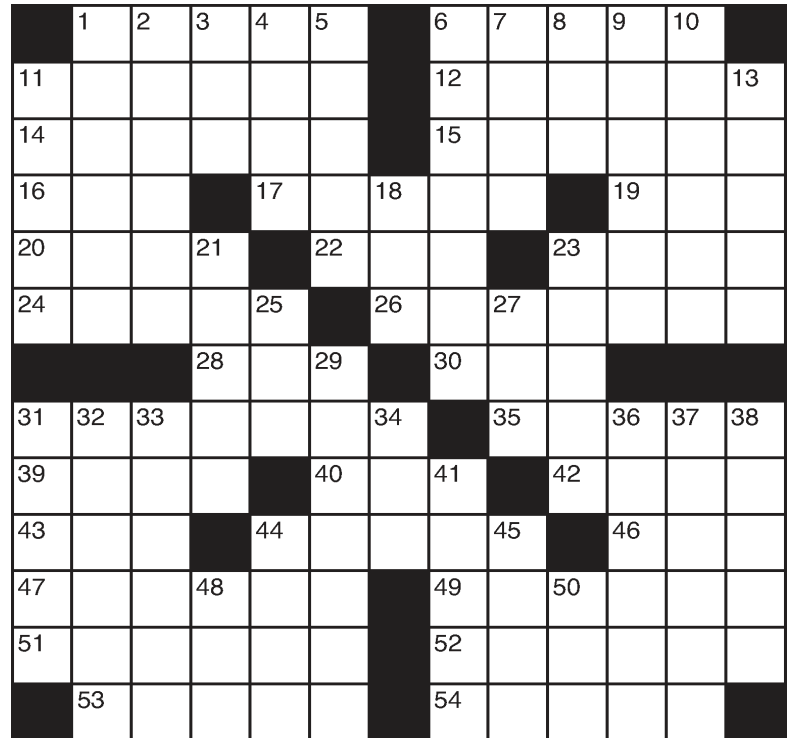
Bizarro



Loose Parts

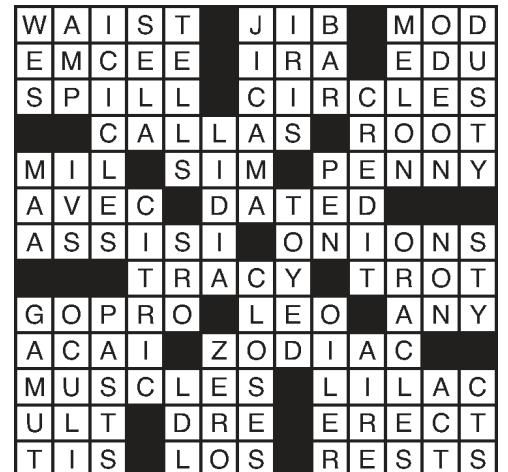


Eugene Sheffer Crossword



- ACROSS**
- 1 "What's the —?"
 - 6 Nibbles
 - 11 Sushi condiment
 - 12 Fesses up
 - 14 Biker's headgear
 - 15 Bathroom bowl
 - 16 Equi-
 - 17 Some IRAs
 - 19 Sale rack abbr.
 - 20 Siestas
 - 22 Court divider
 - 23 "Understood"
 - 24 Upright
 - 26 Busy store in December
 - 28 Granola morsel
 - 30 Actor Brynner
 - 31 Dog's plaything
 - 35 Track horse
 - 39 Lounge
 - 40 "Certainly!"
 - 42 Algeria's neighbor
 - 43 "Alley —"
 - 44 Wedding setting
 - 46 Lawn material
 - 47 Major shock
 - 49 Delaware Valley tribe
 - 51 Move fast
 - 52 Pueblo structures
 - 53 Cache
 - 54 South Indian crepes
- DOWN**
- 1 Roman ruler
 - 2 On an angle
 - 3 Highland hat
 - 4 Driver with a handle
 - 5 Discover, as an idea
 - 6 Small rubber duck, say
 - 7 Nuptial vows
 - 8 Texter's "Enough!"
 - 9 "Ocean Eyes" singer Billie
 - 10 Sound system
 - 11 Complain
 - 13 Throat affliction
 - 18 Hanoi holiday
 - 21 Grumpy look
 - 23 Imam's faith
 - 25 Bit of ink
 - 27 "Uh-huh"
 - 29 "Babes in —"
 - 31 Fabric
 - 32 "Yay!"
 - 33 Sun Bowl city
 - 34 Even so
 - 36 Melon type
 - 37 Runs off to wed
 - 38 Carnival attractions
 - 41 Leafy lunch
 - 44 Pt. of U.S.A.
 - 45 Make over
 - 48 Actress Hagen
 - 50 Refusals

Answer to Previous Puzzle



12-14

CRYPTOQUIP

RAVO B MEGXSZOK QGK RZSA
 B WBAGKBOF-XVQ HGBS KVSM
 HAZDDF, WZKAS ZS RVBX BO
 ZXZMA MRVBSVX?

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHAT DID THE MAN WHO WORKED AS A COW MILKER SAY EACH MORNING? "AN UDDER DAY, AN UDDER DOLLAR."

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: K equals G

STARS AND STRIPES

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Lt. Col. Katie R. Fidler, Europe commander

John Rodriguez, Europe chief of staff

Lt. Col. Marci Hoffman, Pacific commander

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Jacqueline Smith

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Ukraine helped Syrian rebels humiliate Russia

BY DAVID IGNATIUS

The Washington Post

The Syrian rebels who swept to power in Damascus last weekend received drones and other support from Ukrainian intelligence operatives who sought to undermine Russia and its Syrian allies, according to sources familiar with Ukrainian military activities abroad.

Ukrainian intelligence sent about 20 experienced drone operators and about 150 first-person-view drones to the rebel headquarters in Idlib, Syria, four to five weeks ago to help Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the leading rebel group based there, the knowledgeable sources said.

The aid from Kyiv played only a modest role in overthrowing Syrian President Bashar Assad, Western intelligence sources believe.

But it was notable as part of a broader Ukrainian effort to strike covertly at Russian operations in the Middle East, Africa and inside Russia itself.

Ukraine's covert assistance program in Syria has been an open secret, though senior Biden administration officials said repeatedly in answer to my questions that they weren't aware of it.

Ukraine's motivation is obvious: Facing a Russian onslaught inside their country, Ukrainian intelligence has looked for other fronts where it can bloody Russia's nose and undermine its clients.

The Ukrainians have advertised their intentions. The Kyiv Post in a June 3 article quoted a source in the Ukrainian military intelligence service, known as the GUR, who told the newspaper that "since the beginning of the year, the [Syrian] rebels, supported by Ukrainian operatives, have inflicted numerous strikes on Russian military facilities represented in the region."

That story, posted online, included a link to video footage that showed attacks on a stone-ribbed bunker, a white van and other targets that it said had been struck by Ukrainian-supported rebels inside Syria. The paper said that the Syria operation was conducted by a special unit known as "Khimik" within the GUR, "in collaboration with the Syrian opposition."

Russian officials have been complaining for months about the Ukrainian paramilitary effort in Syria. Alexander Lavrentyev, Russia's special representative for Syria, said in a November interview with TASS, "We do indeed have information that Ukrainian specialists from the Main Intelligence Directorate of Ukraine are on the territory of Idlib."

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov had made a similar claim in September about "Ukrainian intelligence emissaries" in Idlib. He claimed they were conducting "dirty operations," according to the Syrian newspaper Al-Watan, which asserted that Lt. Gen. Kyrylo Budanov, head of the GUR, had been in touch personally with HTS.

Before the HTS offensive toppled Assad, Russian officials had asserted that Ukraine's link with the rebel group was an attempt to recruit Syrian fighters for its war against the Kremlin.

A September report in an online site called the Cradle alleged that Ukraine had offered 75 unmanned aerial vehicles in a "drones-for-fighters" deal with HTS. But there isn't any independent evidence to back this Russian claim.

Russia clearly was surprised by HTS's



LORENZO TUGNOLI/For The Washington Post

A group of militants celebrate the fall of the Assad regime in central Damascus on Monday.

Like Ukraine's Africa forays and its assault on the Kursk region inside Russia, the covert operation in Syria reflects an attempt to widen the battlefield — and hurt the Russians in areas where they're unprepared.

rapid advance on Damascus — but interestingly, Russian sources have tried to minimize the Ukrainian role.

A Dec. 2 article in Middle East Eye quoted a Russian Telegram account, said to reflect the views of the Russian military, that discounted Kyiv's assistance: "Firstly, GUR members did visit Idlib, but they stayed there for only a short time" — not enough to train Syrians to operate unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) from scratch. "Secondly," the message continued, "HTS has long had its own UAV program."

The Syria operation isn't the only instance of Ukrainian military intelligence operating abroad to harass Russian operatives. The BBC reported in August that Ukraine had helped rebels in northern Mali ambush Russian mercenaries from the Wagner Group. The July 27 attack killed 84 Wagner operatives and 47 Malians, the BBC said.

Andriy Yusov, a GUR spokesman, touted

the Mali operation several days later, saying that the Malian rebels "received necessary information, and not just information, which enabled a successful military operation against Russian war criminals," according to the BBC. After the attack, Mali severed its diplomatic relations with Ukraine.

Budanov pledged in April 2023 that Ukraine would pursue Russians guilty of war crimes "in any part of the world," according to a news report. Budanov's aggressive intelligence operations have sometimes worried the Biden administration, U.S. officials have told me.

I asked Budanov in an interview at his headquarters in Kyiv last April about the GUR's reported operations against the Wagner militia in Africa.

"We conduct such operations aimed at reducing Russian military potential, anywhere where it's possible," he answered. "Why should Africa be an exception?"

Like Ukraine's Africa forays and its assault on the Kursk region inside Russia, the covert operation in Syria reflects an attempt to widen the battlefield — and hurt the Russians in areas where they're unprepared. Ukraine's aid wasn't "the drone that broke that camel's back," so to speak. But it helped, in at least a small way, to bring down Russia's most important client in the Middle East.

And like Israel in its failure to anticipate Hamas's surge across the Gaza fence on Oct. 7, 2023, Russia saw the Ukrainian-backed rebels coming, but couldn't mobilize to stop the attack and prevent the devastating consequences.

SCOREBOARD/NBA

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Wednesday's men's scores

EAST

Delaware St. 71, NJIT 59
Howard 124, Va.-Lynchburg 50
Maine 61, Duquesne 56
Mass.-Lowell 69, LIU 62
Pittsburgh 96, E. Kentucky 56
St. John's 99, Bryant 77
Stonehill 97, Lesley 53
Villanova 86, Fairleigh Dickinson 72

SOUTH

Alabama St. 103, UT Martin 93, OT
Coastal Carolina 82, S. Virginia 57
Kentucky 78, Colgate 67
Louisiana-Lafayette 68, SE Louisiana 61
Louisiana-Monroe 89, Ark.-Pine Bluff 73
Louisville 77, UTEP 74
N. Kentucky 98, Cumberlands 79
North Alabama 74, East Carolina 67
Presbyterian 97, Koalas 57
UNC-Asheville 92, Bluefield 46

MIDWEST

Fort Wayne 78, IU Indianapolis 76
Milwaukee 88, Green Bay 67
Notre Dame 77, Dartmouth 65
Wright St. 88, Marshall 79

SOUTHWEST

Baylor 94, Norfolk St. 69

FAR WEST

BYU 95, Fresno St. 67
Nevada 77, S. Dakota St. 63
San Diego St. 81, Cal Baptist 75
San Francisco 68, CS Stanislaus 52
Utah Valley St. 80, North Dakota 57

Men's Top 25 schedule

Saturday's games

No. 1 Tennessee (8-0) at Illinois (6-2)
No. 2 Auburn (8-1) vs. Ohio St. (6-3) at Atlanta
No. 5 Kentucky (8-1) vs. Louisville (5-4)
No. 6 Marquette (9-1) at Dayton (8-2), 7 p.m.
No. 7 Alabama (7-2) vs. Creighton (7-3)
No. 8 Gonzaga (7-2) vs. No. 18 UConn (7-3) at New York
No. 9 Florida (9-0) vs. Arizona St. (8-1) at Atlanta
No. 10 Kansas (7-2) vs. NC State (6-3)
No. 11 Purdue (8-2) vs. No. 17 Texas A&M (8-2) at Indianapolis
No. 13 Oklahoma (9-0) vs. Oklahoma St. (6-2) at Oklahoma City
No. 16 Clemson (9-1) vs. Memphis (7-2)
No. 19 Mississippi (8-1) vs. Southern Miss. (4-4) at Biloxi, Miss.
No. 20 Wisconsin (8-2) vs. Butler (7-2) at Indianapolis
No. 22 Cincinnati (7-1) vs. Xavier (7-2)
No. 24 UCLA (8-1) vs. Arizona (4-4) at Phoenix
No. 25 Mississippi St. (8-1) vs. McNeese St. (5-4) at Tupelo, Miss.

Sunday's games

No. 3 Iowa St. (7-1) vs. Omaha (4-7)
No. 12 Oregon (9-1) vs. Stephen F. Austin (5-5)

Wednesday's women's scores

EAST

Boston College 62, UMass 57
Penn St. 68, Providence 51
Princeton 66, Rhode Island 54
Rutgers 83, Fairleigh Dickinson 58
St. John's 62, Hofstra 38
St. Peter's 51, LIU Brooklyn 37
Villanova 75, Delaware 65

SOUTH

Coll. of Charleston 66, Jacksonville St. 47
Furman 68, UNC-Asheville 50
Georgia Tech 97, Louisiana-Monroe 37
Liberty 109, Randolph 26
NC State 59, Davidson 57
North Carolina 80, UNC-Greensboro 56
Presbyterian 67, NC Central 63
W. Kentucky 88, Kentucky Wesleyan 61
Winthrop 55, SC State 46

MIDWEST

Fort Wayne 79, IUPUI 71
Green Bay 86, Milwaukee 53
Iowa 75, Iowa St. 69
Kansas 79, UMKC 49
Minnesota 81, Jackson St. 43
Nebraska 63, Tarleton St. 50
S. Dakota St. 76, Dakota Wesleyan 48
Wisconsin 71, Butler 64, 2OT

SOUTHWEST

SMU 61, Texas Tech 57
Texas 97, Southern U. 39

FAR WEST

Cal Baptist 73, CS Northridge 71
E. Kentucky 78, Hawaii Hilo 49
San Diego St. 61, Cal St.-Fullerton 58

Women's Top 25 schedule

Sunday's games

No. 2 UConn (8-0) vs. Georgetown (6-3)
No. 3 South Carolina (9-1) vs. South Florida (5-5)
No. 4 LSU (11-0) vs. Louisiana-Lafayette (4-3)
No. 5 Southern Cal (8-1) vs. Elon (4-4)
No. 6 Texas (8-1) at Richmond (9-1)
No. 8 Notre Dame (7-2) vs. E. Michigan (1-5)
No. 10 Oklahoma (8-1) vs. Oral Roberts (6-2)
No. 12 TCU (9-1) vs. Louisiana Tech (5-3)
No. 14 North Carolina (9-1) vs. No. 25 Georgia Tech (9-0)
No. 15 West Virginia (9-1) at Temple (5-3)
No. 17 Michigan St. (9-0) vs. No. 21 Iowa (8-1)
No. 18 Iowa St. (8-2) vs. E. Illinois (3-5)
No. 22 NC State (6-3) at Louisville (5-4)
No. 22 Mississippi (6-3) vs. South Alabama (3-5)
No. 24 Nebraska (8-1) vs. Chattanooga (4-6)

DEALS

Wednesday's transactions

BASEBALL

Major League Baseball

MLB PLAYERS ASSOCIATION — Named Oriana Korin as chief communications officer.

American League

BOSTON RED SOX — Acquired LHP Garrett Crochet from the Chicago White Sox in exchange for RHP Wikelman Gonzalez, C Kyle Teel, OF Braden Montgomery and INF Chase Meidroth. Acquired C Carlos Narvaez from the New York Yankees in exchange for RHP Elmer Rodriguez-Cruz and international bonus pool space.

CHICAGO WHITE SOX — Agreed to terms with RF Mike Tauchman on a one-year contract.

TEXAS RANGERS — Acquired INF Jake Burger from Miami in exchange for SSS Echedry Vargas and Max Acosta and LHP Brayan Mendoza. Agreed to terms with RHP Jacob Webb on a one-year contract.

TAMPA BAY RAYS — Acquired RHP Mike Vasil from Philadelphia in exchange for cash considerations.

National League

MILWAUKEE BREWERS — Agreed to terms with LHP Grant Wolfram on a one-year contract.

NEW YORK METS — Agreed to terms with OF Juan Soto on a 15-year contract.

FOOTBALL

National Football League

ARIZONA CARDINALS — Signed P Michael Palardy to the practice squad.

ATLANTA FALCONS — Placed RB Jase McClellan on injured reserve. Elevated RB Carlos Washington to the active roster.

BUFFALO BILLS — Designated DE Dawuane Smoot and LB Baylon Spector to return from injured reserve.

CHICAGO BEARS — Placed WR DeAndre Carter on injured reserve. Signed DL Jonathan Ford to the active roster and RB Royce Freeman to the practice squad.

CLEVELAND BROWNS — Designated DT Mike Hall Jr. to return to practice. Signed TE Tre' McKitty to the practice squad.

DETROIT LIONS — Signed DB Erick Hallett to the practice squad.

GREEN BAY PACKERS — Designated TE Luke Musgrave to return from injured reserve. Signed DL Jeremiah Martin to the practice squad.

INDIANAPOLIS COLTS — Designated C Ryan Kelly and LB Jaylon Carlies to return from injured reserve.

JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS — Signed G Dieter Eiselein to the practice squad.

KANSAS CITY CHIEFS — Designated WR Marquise Brown and K Harrison Butker to return from injured reserve.

LOS ANGELES RAMS — Declined to reinstate OT KT Leveston from injured reserve.

MIAMI DOLPHINS — Designated WR Grant DuBose to return from injured reserve.

NEW YORK GIANTS — Placed S Tyler Nubin on injured reserve. Signed OT Jalen McKenzie to the practice squad. Designated C Austin Schlottmann to return from injured reserve. Signed CB Divaad Wilson to a contract.

NEW YORK JETS — Placed WR Irvin Charles on injured reserve. Signed DB Jaylin Simpson to the active roster.

SEATTLE SEAHAWKS — Designated DBs K'Von Wallace and Artie Burns to return from injured reserve. Signed RB Brittain Brown to the practice squad.

WASHINGTON COMMANDERS — Claimed WR K.J. Osborn off waivers from New England.

HOCKEY

National Hockey League

CAROLINA HURRICANES — Recalled C Tyson Jost from Chicago (AHL).

COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS — Agreed to terms with D Luca Marrelli on three-year contract. Placed C Yegor Chinakhov on injured reserve. Recalled G Jet Greaces from Cleveland (AHL).

DETROIT RED WINGS — Reassigned G Sebastian Cossa to Grand Rapids (AHL).

EDMONTON OILERS — Claimed D Alec Regula off waivers from Boston.

NEW JERSEY DEVILS — Sent D Nick DeSimone to Utica (AHL).

SAN JOSE SHARKS — Waived G Vyacheslav Buteyets.

SEATTLE KRACEN — Recalled F Ryan Winterton from Coachella Valley (AHL).

UTAH HOCKEY CLUB — Recalled D Kevin Connauton from Tucson (AHL).

VANCOUVER CANUCKS — Reassigned D Mark Friedman from Abbotsford (AHL).

SOCCER

Major League Soccer

D.C. UNITED — Acquired M Hosei Kijima from San Diego FC in exchange for \$400,000 in 2025 general allocation money.

SAN DIEGO FC — Acquired D Christopher McVey from D.C. United in exchange for \$50,000 in 2025 general allocation money and up to \$50,000 in conditional 2026 general allocation money if certain metrics are met. Acquired G CJ dos Santos from Inter Miami in exchange for \$100,000 in 2025 general allocation money.

SEATTLE SOUNDERS — Signed Ds Traivian Sousa and Leo Burney to one-year contracts.

National Women's Soccer League

ORLANDO PRIDE — Signed G Kat Asman to a two-year contract.

UTAH ROYALS FC — Signed F KK Ream to a contract.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

FCS playoffs

Quarterfinals

Friday, Dec. 13

Montana St. vs. Idaho

Saturday, Dec. 14

UC Davis vs. South Dakota
North Dakota St. vs. Mercer
UIW vs. South Dakota St.

NCAA Division II playoffs

Semifinals

Dec. 14

Slippery Rock vs. Valdosta St.
Ferris St. vs. Minnesota St.

NCAA Division III playoffs

Quarterfinals

Dec. 14

Susquehanna vs. Bethel (Minn.)
Springfield vs. North Central (Ill.)
Mary Hardin-Baylor vs. Johns Hopkins
Salisbury vs. Mount Union

Semifinals

Saturday, Dec. 21

Susquehanna-Bethel (Minn.) winner vs. Springfield-North Central (Ill.) winner
Mary Hardin-Baylor-Johns Hopkins winner vs. Salisbury-Mount Union winner

Bowl glance

Dec. 14

Celebration Bowl

Jackson State vs. South Carolina State

IS4S Salute to Veterans Bowl

South Alabama vs. Western Michigan

Dec. 17

Frisco Bowl

Memphis vs. West Virginia

Dec. 18

Boca Raton Bowl

Western Kentucky vs. James Madison

Dec. 19

New Orleans Bowl

Georgia Southern vs. Sam Houston

Dec. 20

Cure Bowl

Ohio vs. Jacksonville State

Gasparilla Bowl

Florida vs. Tulane

College Football Playoff

First Round

Dec. 20

No. 10 Indiana vs. No. 7 Notre Dame

Dec. 21

No. 11 SMU vs. No. 6 Penn State
No. 12 Clemson vs. No. 5 Texas
No. 9 Tennessee vs. No. 8 Ohio State

Dec. 23

Myrtle Beach Bowl

Coastal Carolina vs. UTSA

Potato Bowl

Fresno State vs. Northern Illinois

Dec. 24

Hawai'i Bowl

South Florida vs. San Jose State

Dec. 26

GameAbove Sports Bowl

Pitt vs. Toledo

Rate Bowl

Kansas State vs. Rutgers

68 Ventures Bowl

Arkansas State vs. Bowling Green

Dec. 27

Las Vegas Bowl

Southern California vs. Texas A&M

Liberty Bowl

Texas Tech vs. Arkansas

Holiday Bowl

Syracuse vs. Washington State

Armed Forces Bowl

Oklahoma vs. Navy

Birmingham Bowl

Georgia Tech vs. Vanderbilt

Dec. 28

Fenway Bowl

North Carolina vs. UConn

Pinstripe Bowl

Boston College vs. Nebraska

New Mexico Bowl

TCU vs. Louisiana

Pop-Tarts Bowl

Miami vs. Iowa State

Arizona Bowl

Colorado State vs. Miami (Ohio)

Military Bowl

NC State vs. ECU

Alamo Bowl

BYU vs. Colorado

Independence Bowl

Army vs. Marshall

COLLEGE SOCCER

NCAA D-I men's tournament

Semifinals

Friday, Dec. 13

Wake Forest vs. Marshall
Denver vs. Vermont

Championship

Monday, Dec. 16

Semifinals winners



MARTA LAVANDIER/AP

Heat forward Jimmy Butler said he doesn't mind his name being in the rumor mill, as his concern is about helping Miami win.

Butler won't focus on future despite trade speculation

BY TIM REYNOLDS

Associated Press

Jimmy Butler knows there are tons of questions about his future with the Miami Heat. He might get traded, he might leave as a free agent next summer, he might exercise a \$52.4 million option to return to the Heat or he might get a new contract.

"Who knows?" Butler asked. Evidently, even he doesn't have answers.

The Heat forward—who has led the team to a pair of NBA Finals trips in his Miami tenure—spoke out about trade speculation Wednesday, telling reporters after practice that he doesn't mind his name being in the rumor mill. ESPN reported earlier in the week that the Heat are open to receiving trade offers; that wouldn't be surprising, given Butler's contract status and the possibility that he might leave with the Heat getting nothing in return next summer.

"I actually like it," said Butler, who is averaging 19 points per game this season. "It's good to be talked about. I don't think there's such a thing as bad publicity—to a point."

Butler's future in Miami has been a talking point for some time now.

The Heat could have offered an extension last summer and chose not to, presumably for a variety of reasons including Butler's age—he's 35—and the fact that he missed 26% of Miami's games over his first five seasons with the team.

He still clearly impacts winning: Miami is 8-2 this season when he scores at least 18 points. And the Heat aren't new to trade specula-

tion; Tyler Herro has been the centerpiece of rumors in each of the last three summers. He is still in Miami, playing at an All-Star level and is the reigning Eastern Conference player of the week.

"Any other narrative, I don't care. Nobody should because most of this stuff has just been all a bunch of gibberish," Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said this week.

Butler said Wednesday that money doesn't really matter to him at this point. He stopped short of saying that he wants to absolutely remain in Miami—"I'm pretty sure y'all are going to get a report that's going to say otherwise anyways, so there's no sense in me answering that question," he said—and that he's not fixated on extensions or trades.

"My kids matter, my happiness matters, my well-being matters and my family matters," Butler said. "Right now, it's all about competing, staying healthy, playing some great basketball. I think I've done that so far, so we'll see what we got."

It has been social media fodder for a few days, with some even suggesting that Butler's hair dye in recent weeks—sometimes yellow, sometimes blue, sometimes red—has matched the teams some of the trade speculation links him to like Golden State, Dallas and Houston. That said, he has insisted since arriving in Miami that he wants to bring the team another championship. That stance has not changed. "We're going to continue to win and I'm proud of the guys," Butler said. "You see everybody out here working and we know what we're capable of."

NBA

AROUND THE NBA

Surprise starts not all that surprising

BY TIM REYNOLDS
Associated Press

There was a conversation Cleveland guard Donovan Mitchell had during training camp, the topic being all the teams that were generating the most preseason buzz in the Eastern Conference. Boston was coming off an NBA championship. New York got Karl-Anthony Towns. Philadelphia added Paul George.

The Cavs? Not a big topic in early October. And Mitchell fully understood why.

“What have we done?” Mitchell asked. “They don’t talk about us. That’s fine. We’ll just hold ourselves to our standard.”

That approach seems to be working.

For the first time in 36 seasons — yes, even before the LeBron James eras in Cleveland — the Cavaliers are atop the NBA at the 25-game mark. They’re 21-4, having come back to earth a bit following a 15-0 start but still better than anyone in the league at this point.

“We’ve kept our standards pretty high,” Cleveland coach Kenny Atkinson said. “And we keep it going.”

The Cavs are just one of the surprise stories that have emerged as the season nears the one-third-done mark. Orlando — the only team still unbeaten at home — is off to its best start in 16 years (17-9) and having done most of that without All-Star forward Paolo Banchero. Houston is 16-8, behind only Cleveland, Boston, Oklahoma City and Memphis in the race so far for the league’s best record.

The Cavaliers were a playoff team a year ago, as were the Magic. And the Rockets planted seeds



SUE OGRON/AP

The Orlando Magic’s Franz Wagner, left, and the Cavaliers’ Donovan Mitchell have been major contributors to their teams’ successful starts, with Cleveland maintaining the best record in the NBA thus far.

for improvement last year as well; an 11-game winning streak late in the season fueled a push where they finished 41-41 in a major step forward after a few years of rebuilding.

“We kind of set that foundation last year to compete with everybody,” Houston coach Ime Udoka said. “Obviously, we had some ups and downs with winning and losing streaks at times, but to finish the season the way we did, getting to .500, 11-game winning streak and some close losses against high-level playoff teams, I think we kind of proved that to ourselves last year that that’s who we’re going to be.”

A sign of the respect the Rockets

are getting: BetMGM Scorebook has made them a favorite in 17 of 24 games so far this season, after favoring them only 30 times in 82 games last season.

“Based on coaches, players, GMs, people that we all know what they’re saying, it seems like everybody else is taking notice as well,” Udoka said.

They’re taking notice of Orlando as well. The Magic lost their best player and haven’t skipped a beat.

Banchero’s injury after five games figured to doom Orlando for a while, and the Magic went 0-4 immediately after he tore his oblique. Entering Tuesday, they’re 14-3 since — and have to

regroup yet again. Franz Wagner stepped into the best-player-on-team role when Banchero got hurt, and now Wagner is going to miss several weeks with the same injury.

Ask Orlando coach Jamahl Mosley how the team has persevered, and he’ll quickly credit everyone but himself. Around the league, it’s Mosley getting a ton of the credit — and rightly so — for what the Magic are doing.

“I think that has to do a lot with Mose. ... I have known him a long time,” Phoenix guard Bradley Beal said. “A huge fan of his and what he is doing. It is a testament to him and the way they’ve built this team.”

Kerr: Foul call that led to Warriors’ loss ‘unconscionable’

BY KRISTIE RIEKEN
Associated Press

HOUSTON — Golden State Warriors coach Steve Kerr said a foul call against his team that led to their loss to the Houston Rockets on Wednesday night in the NBA Cup was “unconscionable” and that an elementary school referee wouldn’t have made it.

After Stephen Curry missed a 3-pointer with Golden State up a point with 11 seconds to go, Gary Payton II grabbed the offensive rebound, but turned it over with a pass Jalen Green intercepted. Jonathan Kuminga was then called for a foul against Green while they were on the floor, giving Green two free throws that lifted Houston to the 91-90 victory and a spot in the NBA Cup semifinals.

“That is unconscionable,” Kerr



ASHLEY LANDIS/AP

Golden State Warriors forward Jonathan Kuminga, right, fouls Rockets guard Jalen Green, left, during the second half of an Emirates NBA cup tournament quarterfinal game in Houston on Wednesday.

said. “I mean, I don’t even understand what just happened.”

Kerr thought it should have either been a jump ball or Houston

should have been given the time-out it was attempting to call.

“Our guys battled back, played their (expletives) off and deserved to win that game or at least have a chance for one stop at the end to finish the game,” he said.

“And that was taken from us by a call that I don’t think an elementary school referee would have made. Because that guy would have had feel and said: ‘You know what I’m not going to decide a game on a loose ball 80 feet from the basket.’”

Crew chief Billy Kennedy was asked by a pool reporter why the foul was called.

“The defender makes contact with the neck and shoulder area, warranting a personal foul to be called,” Kennedy said.

Kerr ranted for about two min-

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	19	5	.792	—
New York	15	10	.600	4½
Brooklyn	10	14	.417	9
Philadelphia	7	15	.318	11
Toronto	7	18	.280	12½

Southeast Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	17	10	.630	—
Miami	12	10	.545	2½
Atlanta	14	12	.538	2½
Charlotte	7	17	.292	8½
Washington	3	19	.136	11½

Central Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Cleveland	21	4	.840	—
Milwaukee	13	11	.542	7½
Indiana	10	15	.400	11
Chicago	10	15	.400	11
Detroit	10	15	.400	11

Western Conference

Southwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Houston	17	8	.680	—
Memphis	17	8	.680	—
Dallas	16	9	.640	1
San Antonio	12	12	.500	4½
New Orleans	5	20	.200	12

Northwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Oklahoma City	19	5	.792	—
Denver	12	10	.545	6
Minnesota	12	11	.522	6½
Portland	8	16	.333	11
Utah	5	18	.217	13½

Pacific Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Golden State	14	10	.583	—
L.A. Clippers	14	11	.560	½
L.A. Lakers	13	11	.542	1
Phoenix	12	11	.522	1½
Sacramento	12	13	.480	2½

Wednesday’s games

Atlanta 108, New York 100 (Quarterfinal Game 3)
Houston 91, Golden State 90 (Quarterfinal Game 4)

Thursday’s games

Detroit at Boston
Toronto at Miami
Sacramento at New Orleans

Friday’s games

Indiana at Philadelphia
Washington at Cleveland
Brooklyn at Memphis
Charlotte at Chicago
L.A. Lakers at Minnesota
L.A. Clippers at Denver
Phoenix at Utah
San Antonio at Portland

Saturday’s games

Milwaukee vs Atlanta
Oklahoma City vs Houston

utes about the officiating after the game and complained about what he believed was a clear foul on Curry that wasn’t called earlier.

“The game was a complete wrestling match,” Kerr said. “They didn’t call anything. Steph Curry got hit on the elbow plain as day on a jump shot, just clubbed right on there and no call. So you’ve established that you’re just not going to call anything throughout the game, it’s a physical game. Then you’re going to call a loose ball foul on a jump ball situation with guys diving on the floor with the game on the line?”

Houston snapped a 15-game skid against the Warriors, winning for the first time in the series since Feb. 20, 2020, when James Harden and Russell Westbrook led the Rockets.

NHL

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference							
Atlantic Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Florida	29	18	9	2	38	108	92
Toronto	28	17	9	2	36	82	72
Boston	30	15	12	3	33	76	95
Tampa Bay	26	14	10	2	30	99	78
Ottawa	28	13	13	2	28	87	87
Detroit	28	11	13	4	26	73	88
Buffalo	29	11	14	4	26	87	95
Montreal	28	11	14	3	25	78	100
Metropolitan Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Washington	27	19	6	2	40	109	74
New Jersey	31	18	10	3	39	103	84
Carolina	28	18	9	1	37	104	83
N.Y. Rangers	28	15	12	1	31	89	83
Philadelphia	29	13	12	4	30	88	101
N.Y. Islanders	30	11	12	7	29	78	90
Pittsburgh	30	12	14	4	28	86	116
Columbus	28	12	13	3	27	96	101
Western Conference							
Central Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Minnesota	28	19	5	4	42	91	69
Winnipeg	30	21	9	0	42	111	76
Dallas	27	17	10	0	34	92	69
Colorado	30	17	13	0	34	101	105
St. Louis	29	14	13	2	30	77	90
Utah	28	12	11	5	29	83	84
Chicago	28	9	17	2	20	68	87
Nashville	29	7	16	6	20	64	92
Pacific Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Vegas	28	18	7	3	39	99	82
Los Angeles	28	17	8	3	37	86	72
Edmonton	28	16	10	2	34	84	80
Vancouver	27	14	8	5	33	88	87
Calgary	29	14	10	5	33	78	87
Seattle	30	14	14	2	30	90	90
San Jose	31	10	16	5	25	84	111
Anaheim	27	10	13	4	24	65	84

Note: Two points for a win, one point for overtime loss. Top three teams in each division and two wild cards per conference advance to playoffs.

Tuesday's games

Philadelphia 5, Columbus 3
 Carolina 3, San Jose 2
 Toronto 2, New Jersey 1, OT
 Colorado 6, Pittsburgh 2
 Los Angeles 3, N.Y. Islanders 1
 Calgary 4, Nashville 3
 Winnipeg 8, Boston 1
 Edmonton 2, Tampa Bay 1
 Minnesota 5, Utah 4, SO
 St. Louis 4, Vancouver 3, OT
 Florida 2, Seattle 1, SO

Wednesday's games

N.Y. Rangers 3, Buffalo 2
 Ottawa 5, Anaheim 1

Thursday's games

Anaheim at Toronto
 Detroit at Philadelphia
 Los Angeles at New Jersey
 Pittsburgh at Montreal
 Washington at Columbus
 Chicago at N.Y. Islanders
 Nashville at Dallas
 San Jose at St. Louis
 Vegas at Winnipeg
 Edmonton at Minnesota
 Tampa Bay at Calgary
 Utah at Colorado
 Boston at Seattle
 Florida at Vancouver

Friday's game

Ottawa at Carolina

Saturday's games

Chicago at New Jersey
 Los Angeles at N.Y. Rangers
 Philadelphia at Minnesota
 Vegas at Edmonton
 Anaheim at Columbus
 Buffalo at Washington
 Montreal at Winnipeg
 Pittsburgh at Ottawa
 Toronto at Detroit
 St. Louis at Dallas
 Nashville at Colorado
 Boston at Vancouver
 Florida at Calgary
 Tampa Bay at Seattle
 Utah at San Jose

Sunday's games

N.Y. Islanders at Chicago
 Buffalo at Toronto
 Columbus at Carolina
 N.Y. Rangers at St. Louis
 Vegas at Minnesota

Monday's games

Washington at Dallas
 Carolina at Edmonton
 Colorado at Vancouver

Caps still rolling even without Ovi

Thanks to depth, Washington still atop Eastern Conference and leads league in scoring

By **STEPHEN WHYNO**
Associated Press

Alex Ovechkin has not missed many games during his two decades in the NHL with the Washington Capitals, and that remarkable durability is one reason why he is fast-approaching Wayne Gretzky's career goals record.

The Capitals had lost 33 of their 59 games without Ovechkin in the lineup during his first 19 seasons, including 23 of 36 over the past decade. In stark contrast to that, they've won six of nine since the 39-year-old captain was sidelined by a broken left fibula — a testament to a roster built not only to help him break the record but prepare the organization for the post-Ovechkin era.

“Ovi, he’s a legend, he’s special, he’s always going to probably lead the team in goals and we’re a better team with him, but we’re also a team where I think we’re not necessarily maybe relying on one or two players to win games,” said center Lars Eller, who rejoined the team in a trade from Pittsburgh a month ago. “We have four pretty strong lines, three D pairs and two good goalies. We don’t depend on one or two individuals, and I think that’s the strength of the team.”

Depth fortified by the additions of centers Dylan Strome, Pierre-Luc Dubois and Eller, wingers Andrew Mangiapane, Brandon Duhaime and Taylor Raddysh, defensemen Jakob Chychrun, Matt Roy and Rasmus Sandin and goaltenders Charlie Lindgren and Logan Thompson over the past few years has been the key to returning a playoff contender.

Longtime general manager Brian MacLellan, who after the most recent makeover this past summer handed day-to-day duties to Chris Patrick and moved upstairs as president of hockey operations, excelled in keeping Washington's winning window open with Ovechkin in the second-to-last year of his contract. Veteran defenseman John Carlson said the infusion of talent “really lit a fire under everybody.”

The Capitals led the Eastern Conference when Ovechkin got injured Nov. 18, and they remain atop the East more than three weeks into his absence. Fourteen players have scored a goal during this stretch, including six wins and an overtime defeat since losing the first two without him.

“We’re a deep group,” said right winger Tom Wilson, the team’s leading scorer during this stretch with nine points on five goals and four assists who expects to continue playing with a shield protecting his face after breaking a small bone in the sinus cavity area on the



PHOTOS BY NICK WASS/AP

Capitals right wing Tom Wilson, center, celebrates his goal with center Dylan Strome, left, and defenseman Rasmus Sandin against the Islanders. Wilson has nine points since Alex Ovechkin was sidelined.



Capitals left wing Pierre-Luc Dubois, left, and defenseman Matt Roy are two of the additions who have helped keep the team contending.

left side. “Everybody’s kind of stepping up on any given night. It’s a real group effort, and I think guys are really playing for each other.”

Carlson, who along with Ovechkin, Wilson and now Eller upon return are the only players left from Washington’s 2018 Stanley Cup championship team, also sees it as a case of younger teammates taking advantage of this chance.

“There’s the colossal emptiness of it, but there’s also a lot of opportunity for guys who would never otherwise be there when he’s on this team,” Carlson said. “When someone goes down, it’s obviously always kind of a rallying thing where guys need to step up, guys need to fill in and play bigger roles and play more minutes. But I think the way that our team’s built is depth, and that’s been our strength this year is kind of contributions from everybody.”

Ovechkin led all players with 15 goals when he went down, and the Capitals were the high-scoring team in the league at 4.33 goals a

game. They still are, down just a tick to an average of 4.04, and their 16 goals from defensemen are a big reason for that after ranking second-last in blue line production last season.

“We’re playing to our structure and doing what we want to do out there,” said Chychrun, who has eight points in nine games as part of an impressive start to his contract year. “We’ve got a D corps where everybody’s a really good player on that back end and can play in all situations and two-way guys and guys who have contributed offensively throughout their career.”

Another major defense is second-year coach Spencer Carbery, who acknowledged the structure and playing standard as a good place to start but pointed the credit to veteran leaders like Carlson, Strome, Wilson and Nic Dowd for shepherding the Capitals through Ovechkin-less hockey.

“They don’t go around the room and go, ‘Hey, we’ve got to do more,

“It’s a real group effort, and I think guys are really playing for each other.”

Tom Wilson

Capitals leading scorer since Ovechkin has been out

guys,” Carbery said. “They don’t announce it, but what they do is they think about it and go: ‘OK, we’re missing him. I’ve got to step my game up and I need to bring more.’ And that’s not just on the ice, on the power play, on 5 on 6 when we’re defending a lead. It’s not just the Xs and Os. It’s in the locker room. It’s energy in practice. It’s all the things that he brings every day when he’s in the lineup and when he’s practicing.”

Ovechkin skated before practice Wednesday and got an assist from longtime running mate Nicklas Backstrom, who stepped away 13 months ago because of a lingering hip injury. Carlson quipped, “I think Ovi wanted someone with a little more skill passing him the rock out there.”

The day is coming soon when Ovechkin returns to team drills and then game action. The Capitals are doing more than stay afloat without him, but they’ll welcome him back with open arms the moment he’s ready.

As Eller said, “Obviously I think we’re even better when he’s in the lineup.”

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Belichick agrees to coach Tar Heels

By ROB MAADDI
AND AARON BEARD
Associated Press

Bill Belichick had seemingly been waiting for the right opportunity to return to an NFL sideline. Instead, the six-time Super Bowl-winning head coach is headed to the college ranks to take over at North Carolina.

The school announced that it had reached a five-year deal with Belichick on Wednesday night, roughly a week after Belichick's name surfaced as an unlikely candidate to replace the program's winningest coach in Mack Brown. The deal requires approval by UNC trustees as well as the UNC public system's governors; an introductory news conference has yet to be scheduled.

Moving on from Brown, 73, to hire Belichick, 72, means UNC is turning to a coach who has never worked at the college level, yet had incredible success in the NFL alongside quarterback Tom Brady throughout most of his 24-year tenure with the Patriots, which ended last season.

There's also at least a small family tie to the UNC program for Belichick; his late father, Steve, was an assistant coach for the Tar Heels from 1953-55.

"I am excited for the opportunity at UNC-Chapel Hill," Belichick said in a statement. "I grew up around college football with my dad and treasured those times. I have always wanted to coach in college and now I look forward to building the football program in Chapel Hill."

He's arriving on campus at a time of rapid changes in college athletics, from free player movement through the transfer portal and athletes' ability to cash in on endorsements to the looming arrival of revenue sharing. The hiring represents a novel approach by the school to rethinking how it will approach those challenges, led by someone known for success at the highest level of the sport.

"We know that college athletics is changing, and those changes require new and innovative thinking," UNC athletics director Bubba Cunningham said in a statement. "Bill Belichick is a football legend, and hiring him to lead our program represents a new approach that will ensure Carolina football can evolve, compete and win — today and in the future."

Belichick is the second coach to win a Super Bowl and then later become a college head coach; Bill Walsh won three Super Bowls with the San Francisco 49ers and went 17-17-1 at Stanford from 1992-94.

Belichick takes over a UNC pro-



STEVEN SENNE/AP

Bill Belichick, who coached the New England Patriots to six Super Bowl titles, has agreed to a five-year deal to replace Mack Brown at North Carolina.

Bill Belichick at a glance

A look at Bill Belichick, who has reached an agreement to become North Carolina's next head coach:

Personal

Birthdate: April 16, 1952 (age 72).

Birthplace: Nashville, Tenn.

College: Wesleyan University (lettered in football, lacrosse and squash; member of the school's athletics hall of fame).

NFL highlights

Head coach of the New England Patriots (2000-23), winning six Super Bowls.

Head coach of the Cleveland Browns (1991-95), reaching the playoffs once.

Defensive coordinator of the New York Giants (1985-90), winning two Super Bowls.

Owns 333 career victories in regular-season and postseason play as a head coach, ranking second to Don Shula (347) for the NFL record. His 31 playoff wins are the most in NFL history.

Associated Press

gram that is facing a familiar challenge of how to build a sustained winner. The program had reached elite levels in moments rather than eras, notably with Brown building UNC into top-10 national stats (1996, 1997) to end his first tenure in Chapel Hill before taking over at Texas or the Tar Heels cracking the top 10 of the AP Top 25 poll briefly in 2015 and 2020.

The school announced Nov. 26 that Brown wouldn't return for a seventh season in his second stint in Chapel Hill; his firing became effective after the Tar Heels' loss to rival N.C. State on Nov. 30.

Interim coach Freddie Kitchens has been preparing the Tar Heels to face UConn in the Fenway Bowl on Dec. 28.



ADAM HUNGER/AP

Army quarterback Bryson Daily has scored 29 touchdowns this season, tied for the most in the Football Bowl Subdivision with Boise State Heisman Trophy finalist Ashton Jeanty.

Goal: Despite much success this year, Army-Navy the game that really matters

FROM PAGE 48

a half, two weeks — whatever it is — to prepare. Right now, it's Army-Navy."

Ramos said beating Army would define Navy's season even more than the previous eight victories. Fellow senior captain Daba Fofana notices that importance when he feels the intensity of each practice leading up to this game.

"It's definitely amped up," Fofana said. "We put a lot of emphasis on it naturally, but our mentality to deal with the big stage and just to play like we do, it's another game. We've played this since we were young kids."

Monken, in his 11th year at West Point, refuses to apologize for making the Army-Navy game a talking point 365 days a year. He ends some conversations with the phrase, "Beat Navy."

Army would love to beat Marshall, too, but standout quarterback Bryson Daily has been proud of how he and his teammates have avoided getting ahead of themselves in recent months. He expects nothing less in the most anticipated showdown of the year.

"You come here to play in this game: the biggest stage possible, millions of people watching and a sold-out NFL stadium," said Daily, whose 29 touchdowns are tied for the most in the NCAA's Football Bowl Subdivision with Boise State Heisman Trophy finalist Ashton Jeanty. "Records don't matter. Rankings don't matter. All that goes out the window for the Army-Navy game."



NICK WASS/AP

Brian Newberry says that winning the Commander In Chief's Trophy is the "most important goal in our program."

Army is a 6½-point favorite on BetMGM Sportsbook for the game at the Washington Commanders' stadium in Landover, Md., a few miles outside the nation's capital. All the success so far has not prevented Army athletic director Mike Buddie from feeling nervous about this weekend.

"Thrilled that we've had the season that we've had, but the beauty of this game is this is the one that matters," he said. "They know that this is big game, and our guys know this is a big game. We're hoping we can stay focused the way we've been able to do so far and make Saturday really special, but it won't be easy."

Navy coach Brian Newberry called this "the most complete,

well-rounded Army football team, the best Army football team" he has seen since arriving in Annapolis in 2019 as defensive coordinator. After a few games he'd like to have back, including a lopsided loss to Notre Dame, this is still a winner-take-all chance to capture the Commander In Chief's Trophy that has gone to Army and Air Force in recent years.

"Winning the Commander In Chief's Trophy, this game, is our most important goal in our program," Newberry said. Facing a talented SEC opponent like Oklahoma in a bowl game in the fertile recruiting ground of Texas is important, too, but he added without hesitation, "We'll worry about that on Monday."

MLB

Red Sox get Crochet in deal with White Sox

By **STEPHEN HAWKINS**
Associated Press

DALLAS — Garrett Crochet was acquired by the Boston Red Sox from the White Sox on Wednesday for four prospects, giving Chicago a better deal for the All-Star left-hander than available at the trade deadline in July.

For Boston, which is still seeking more pitching, it was a quick pivot after losing out on free agent lefty Max Fried to the rival New York Yankees.

“Feel like we got a legitimate No. 1 starter in Garrett, left-handed, ton of swing and miss, you know, massive strikeouts and feel like the best is still in front of him,” Red Sox chief baseball officer Craig Breslow said. “Adding him to the rotation, it adds depth, it adds quality.”

The White Sox got back catcher Kyle Teel, infielder Chase Meidroth, right-hander Wikelman Gonzalez and outfielder Braden Montgomery in the trade announced during the winter meetings.

Crochet was 6-12 with a 3.58 ERA in 32 starts for a Chicago team that went 41-121, the most losses for any club since 1900. The 25-year-old was picked for the AL All-Star team in his first season as a starter.

“What he did this past season was nothing short of excellent,” White Sox general manager Chris Getz said. “But you look at, you know, the long-term health of the organization and to inject the type of talent that we just did in this trade is really exciting for us.”

Getz said plenty of teams were interested in Crochet and there were about five he thought could get a deal done. Many, including Boston, had inquired about the hard-throwing lefty over the summer.

“Discussions really heated up last night with the Red Sox and we

took that into the morning, and, you know, it was very clear that they were motivated,” Getz said. “We wanted to get something done. And, you know, we made a match. ... Both clubs should feel really good about the return.”

The trade came a day after Fried agreed to join the Yankees for a \$218 million, eight-year contract, the largest ever for a left-hander.

“We came here a few days ago thinking we needed to improve our rotation,” Breslow said. “If we exclusively looked down one path, we would be closed off from other options. I think that’s still the case. There’s still really good players, really good starting pitchers, left on the free agent market, and there are still conversations we’re having with teams as trade targets.”

Before the trade, Boston’s projected rotation had five starters: Tanner Houck, Kutter Crawford, Brayan Bello, Garrett Whitlock and Lucas Giolito.

Crochet is eligible for arbitration this offseason and next after having an \$800,000 salary this year. He can become a free agent after the 2027 World Series.

Selected 11th overall by Chicago in the 2020 amateur draft, Crochet made his big league debut that September. He had a 2.82 ERA in 2021 while striking out 65 in 54⅓ innings, then had Tommy John surgery April 5, 2022. He didn’t return to the major leagues until May 18, 2023.

Crochet’s sinker averaged 97.9 mph this season and his four-seam fastball 97.2. He also throws a cutter, sweeper and changeup.

Teel was rated the Red Sox’s No. 4 prospect by MLB.com, Meidroth No. 11, Gonzalez 14th and Montgomery 54th.

“Talk about accelerating a rebuild,” Getz said. “This was a deal that we feel like can do that.”



GREGORY BULL/AP

Left-hander Garret Crochet posted a 3.58 ERA and 209 strikeouts in 32 starts last season when he was named the White Sox’s only All-Star.



JULIO CORTEZ/AP

Juan Soto’s 15-year, \$765 million contract with the New York Mets set a record for the richest in baseball history just a year after Shohei Ohtani set the record with his 10-year, \$700 million deal with the Dodgers.

ON BASEBALL

\$1B contract unlikely soon even after Soto’s megadeal

By **DAVID BRANDT**
Associated Press

For the second straight Major League Baseball offseason, a norm-shattering contract has been the talk of the winter, with Juan Soto agreeing with the New York Mets on a \$765 million, 15-year deal that’s the richest in baseball history.

It comes almost exactly one year after the Los Angeles Dodgers forked out a princely sum of \$700 million on a 10-year, heavily deferred deal for two-way Japanese superstar Shohei Ohtani. They are believed to be the two richest contracts in pro sports history.

The way it’s going, a contract approaching \$1 billion doesn’t seem out of the question.

But several factors are working against it — at least in the near future.

There’s reason to believe the megadeals for Ohtani and Soto are unicorns in the baseball world. Both players are uniquely talented, surely, but both also had unusual circumstances propelling their value into the stratosphere.

Ohtani is the greatest two-way player in baseball history, capable of improving any team on both sides of the ball. He’s also the rare baseball player who has true international appeal. His every move (like his unexpected marriage announcement) is followed closely in his native Japan, adding another 125 million potential fans who buy merchandise, watch him play and

help fill the Dodgers’ coffers.

Then there’s Soto — a four-time All-Star and on-base machine who won a World Series with the Washington Nationals in 2019. The X-factor for him is he became a free agent at the prime age of 26, which is extremely hard to do under current MLB rules.

Players have to be in the big leagues for six years before testing free agency. The precocious Soto debuted at 19 with the Nats, making him part of a rare group of players who reached the highest level of professional baseball as a teenager. That accelerated his free agency timeline.

Two major trends are colliding that will make it harder for guys like Soto to hit free agency in their mid 20s.

First, MLB teams have been more likely in recent years to take college players early in the draft, betting on more experienced talents. Just 10 high school players were drafted among the top 30 picks in the 2024 draft.

Second, teams are more eager to lock up young, premium talent on long-term deals very early in their careers, well before they hit free agency. Sometimes before they even reach the majors.

Since Soto, just two players have debuted in MLB before their 20th birthday — Elvis Luciano and Junior Caminero. Luciano hasn’t been back to the majors since his 2019 cup of coffee. Caminero is now 21 and has only played in 50 big league games.

Among those that debuted at 20:

Fernando Tatis Jr. signed a \$340 million, 14-year deal with San Diego in 2021, years before reaching the open market. Milwaukee’s Jackson Chourio got an \$82 million, eight-year deal before even reaching the big leagues.

The exception and wild card: Blue Jays slugger Vladimir Guerrero Jr. will be a 26-year-old free agent next offseason. Guerrero hasn’t been as consistent in his young career as Soto, but a standout 2025 season could position him to threaten Soto’s deal.

More likely is that the player to pass Soto isn’t in the majors yet — and might not even be in pro baseball. When 25-year-old Alex Rodriguez signed his record \$252 million, 10-year deal with Texas in 2001, it took over a decade for another player to match that total, when Albert Pujols got \$240 million over 10 years from the Angels in 2012.

For many players, passing up life-changing money in their early or mid 20s is too enticing, even if it means that they might not maximize their value on the free agent market later in their careers.

Soto was determined to test the market. He famously turned down a \$440 million, 15-year offer to stay with the Washington Nationals in 2022, betting that he could make even more as a free agent.

Not many players would turn down that kind of cash.

Then again, that’s what makes Soto unique. And it’s also why his \$765 million deal could be the industry standard for some time.

NFL

Bills have something to prove

High-scoring Lions give Buffalo defense chance to prove it's better than dud vs. Rams

By JOHN WAWROW
Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — Cornerback Taron Johnson is still agitated over the dud the Buffalo Bills defense produced in giving up season worsts in points and yards, while melting down on third down in a loss to the Los Angeles Rams last weekend.

There's no better time or opportunity to show how much better they are than this Sunday. That's when Buffalo (10-3) travels to play the NFC-leading Detroit Lions (12-1), who just happen to lead the NFL in scoring and feature the same dynamic style of offense as the Rams.

"I think our mindset is just going to be attack," Johnson said after practice Wednesday. "We can't wait to play Sunday just to prove people wrong and prove to ourselves that how we played wasn't who we are."

The Bills acknowledge having several excuses to lean on for why they unraveled in a 44-42 loss — riding a little too high after a division-clinching win, a cross-country trip and facing a more driven opponent in the thick of a playoff race. What's unacceptable is the hesitancy their usually reliable defensive backs showed in coverage and the lack of pressure applied by their defensive front.

The bright side is the standard performance potentially serving as a late-season reminder of this not being the time to let their foot off the gas.

"A lot of teams have scars on their way to having a darn good season. And we're having a darn good season," coach Sean McDermott said. "So what has to be in front of us this week is the opportunity that's in front of us, quite frankly, to challenge that team," he added, referring to Detroit. "You better bring your heart, you better bring your guts, you better put it on the line."

With a little bit of added fire, Buffalo is going back to the basics on defense following an outing in which very little went right. The defense was off-balance from the



GREGORY BULL/AP

Los Angeles Rams wide receiver Cooper Kupp is tackled by Buffalo Bills cornerback Taron Johnson on Dec. 8 in Inglewood, Calif. The Bills allowed the Rams to score on their first six drives and lost 44-42.



**Buffalo Bills (10-3)
at Detroit Lions (12-1)**
AFN-Sports
10:25 p.m. Sunday CET
6:25 a.m. Monday JKT

start in being unable to stop the run, before being picked apart in the passing game while allowing Los Angeles to score on each of their first six drives (not including

a kneel-down to close the first half) in building a 38-21 lead.

The most frustrating part was the Bills' inability to get off the field while allowing the Rams to convert 11 of 15 third-down chances. LA's 73.3% conversion rate was the third highest against Buffalo — and worst since Miami converted 75% of its chances in 1986 — since the stat was introduced to NFL gamebooks in 1973.

"The recipe to lose a football game is what we did (Sunday) and it starts with me, first and foremost," defensive coordinator Bobby Babich said Monday. "Move on and let it not happen again. Let it be a learning lesson. Failure is the

best teacher."

The challenge is preparing for an exceptionally balanced Lions offense that ranks fourth in the NFL in rushing and passing, and averaging 32.1 points per outing.

The objective, McDermott said, is to not overcorrect but stick to the fundamentals that led to Buffalo winning seven straight before losing to the Rams.

A little more urgency, would help, too.

"It is a mentality. It is an attitude, and if you want to play good defense, that's where it starts," McDermott said. "There's not a lot of shortcuts or ways around it. It's got to be a mentality."

Scoreboard

American Conference

East						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-Buffalo	10	3	0	.769	397	268
Miami	6	7	0	.462	264	292
e-N.Y. Jets	3	10	0	.231	251	300
e-New England	3	10	0	.231	221	307
South						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Houston	8	5	0	.615	308	288
Indianapolis	6	7	0	.462	267	298
e-Jacksonville	3	10	0	.231	238	345
e-Tennessee	3	10	0	.231	227	342
North						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Pittsburgh	10	3	0	.769	323	238
Baltimore	8	5	0	.615	383	318
Cincinnati	5	8	0	.385	362	360
e-Cleveland	3	10	0	.231	232	335
West						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-Kansas City	12	1	0	.923	308	252
Denver	8	5	0	.615	305	234
L.A. Chargers	8	5	0	.615	277	207
e-Las Vegas	2	11	0	.154	236	361

National Conference

East						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
x-Philadelphia	11	2	0	.846	342	234
Washington	8	5	0	.615	376	296
Dallas	5	8	0	.385	268	366
e-N.Y. Giants	2	11	0	.154	194	293
South						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Tampa Bay	7	6	0	.538	363	309
Atlanta	6	7	0	.462	278	333
New Orleans	5	8	0	.385	290	292
Carolina	3	10	0	.231	233	388
North						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
x-Detroit	12	1	0	.923	417	234
Minnesota	11	2	0	.846	339	240
Green Bay	9	4	0	.692	349	274
Chicago	4	9	0	.308	254	278
West						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Seattle	8	5	0	.615	302	283
L.A. Rams	7	6	0	.538	298	332
Arizona	6	7	0	.462	284	289
San Francisco	6	7	0	.462	308	308

e-Eliminated from playoffs
x-clinched playoff spot
y-clinched division

Monday, Dec. 9

Cincinnati 27, Dallas 20

Thursday, Dec. 12

L.A. Rams at San Francisco

Sunday, Dec. 15

Baltimore at N.Y. Giants
Cincinnati at Tennessee
Dallas at Carolina
Kansas City at Cleveland
Miami at Houston
N.Y. Jets at Jacksonville
Washington at New Orleans
Buffalo at Detroit
Indianapolis at Denver
New England at Arizona
Pittsburgh at Philadelphia
Tampa Bay at L.A. Chargers
Green Bay at Seattle

Monday, Dec. 16

Chicago at Minnesota
Atlanta at Las Vegas

Thursday, Dec. 19

Denver at L.A. Chargers

Saturday, Dec. 21

Houston at Kansas City
Pittsburgh at Baltimore

Sunday, Dec. 22

Arizona at Carolina
Detroit at Chicago
L.A. Rams at N.Y. Jets
N.Y. Giants at Atlanta
New England at Buffalo
Philadelphia at Washington
Tennessee at Indianapolis
Cleveland at Cincinnati
Minnesota at Seattle
Jacksonville at Las Vegas
San Francisco at Miami
Tampa Bay at Dallas

Monday, Dec. 23

New Orleans at Green Bay



**Washington Commanders (8-5)
at New Orleans Saints (5-8)**
AFN-Sports2
7 p.m. Sunday CET
3 a.m. Monday JKT



**Miami Dolphins (6-7)
at Houston Texans (8-5)**
AFN-Sports
7 p.m. Sunday CET
3 a.m. Monday JKT



**Tampa Bay Buccaneers (7-6)
at Los Angeles Chargers (8-5)**
AFN-Atlantic
10:25 Sunday CET
6:25 a.m. Monday JKT



**Green Bay Packers (9-4)
at Seattle Seahawks (8-5)**
AFN-Sports
2 a.m. Monday CET
10 a.m. Monday JKT

NFL

Barkley will be big test of Steelers' stops

By WILL GRAVES
Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Mike Tomlin started going down the checklist of the myriad ways Saquon Barkley can beat you. It took the Pittsburgh Steelers coach a while — by his usually measured standards anyway — to get to the end.

"He's got top-end speed," Tomlin said of the Philadelphia Eagles star and NFL's leading rusher. "He can hit the home run ... He's good in tight spaces. He can get downhill. He can lower his pads. He's got good lateral abilities. He can make people miss. He's just a really complete player."

So complete that Tomlin used the honorific "Mr. Barkley" when describing the challenge that awaits the first-place Steelers (10-3) when they visit the NFC East-leading Eagles (11-2) on Sunday.

"He's been dominant," Tomlin said. "Eye-opening at times."

Physics defying, too. It's one of the reasons Tomlin isn't worried about his team getting too caught up in the big picture as Pittsburgh begins a stretch of three games in 11 days that starts in Philadelphia, ends with Kansas City on Christmas and features a trip to AFC North rival Baltimore in between.

The way Tomlin figures, get caught looking down the road and you'll likely just end up as another hapless victim on Barkley's burgeoning highlight reel.

"If you don't minimize him in some way, you're not even going to position yourself to have a chance to be successful," Tomlin said.



MATT FREED/AP

Steelers cornerback Joey Porter Jr. tackles Browns running back Nick Chubb. Pittsburgh's defense has been strong against the run this season but faces Saquon Barkley, the NFL's leading rusher, this week.

Most teams haven't this season, though the Steelers and the NFL's fourth-ranked rush defense believe they has the tools to be the exception. Tools like inside linebacker Elandon Roberts, who has carved out a niche as an old-school run stopper over the last decade, or "tooth chipper," as Tomlin put it earlier this season.

Tomlin saw it nearly a decade

ago when he was scouting Roberts out of Houston. There was something about Roberts' willingness to stick his 6-foot-1 frame into uncomfortable places that stuck with Tomlin, so much so that when Roberts hit free agency in the spring of 2023, the Steelers practically sprinted to the bargaining table.

Roberts has been just as advertised, a veteran who welcomes the

dirty work his job entails. Against Dallas earlier this season, that meant vaulting over the line of scrimmage to stop Cowboys running back Rico Dowdle in his tracks, leading to a fumble that could have sealed the game had Dallas quarterback Dak Prescott not fallen on it.

When asked what's made him so effective through the years, Ro-

berts simply shrugged.

"I just think when you're good at something, you know, you hone in on it," he said.

He's hardly the only one on a defense that has slowed down Lamar Jackson, Derrick Henry, Nick Chubb and J.K. Dobbins among others this season.

Longtime defensive tackle Cam Heyward is playing some of the best football of his career at 35. Second-year defensive lineman Keanu Benton is starting to come into his own. Patrick Queen, signed in the offseason to play alongside Roberts, is Pittsburgh's best three-down linebacker since Ryan Shazier's career ended with a spinal injury in December 2017.

Queen is well aware the Steelers will need all 11 players on the field — whomever it might be on a given down — to work in tandem to keep Barkley from taking over.

"Everybody's got to do their job," Queen said. "That's really all it comes to. I think some teams are just unaware of how good Saquon is. You've got to keep your focus."

Mahomes: 'Not a good feeling' playing 3 times over 11 days

By DAVE SKRETTA
Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — You can count Kansas City Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes among those who are not exactly thrilled about the NFL forcing the two-time defending Super Bowl champions to play three times over an 11-day span in the coming weeks.

The Chiefs are among four teams — the Texans, Steelers and Ravens are the others — who were picked to play on Christmas Day this year. But with the holiday falling on Wednesday, when the NFL has rarely played, those four will also have to play the prior Saturday to give them at least some rest. And the result is two short weeks following their games Sunday.

"It's not a good feeling," Mahomes acknowledged Wednesday. "You never want to play this amount of games in this short of time. It's not great for your body. But at the end of the day it's your job, your profession, you have to come to work and do it."

Kansas City visits Cleveland on Sunday, while Baltimore visits the



**Kansas City Chiefs (12-1)
at Cleveland Browns (3-10)**
AFN-Atlantic
7 p.m. Sunday CET
3 a.m. Monday JKT

Giants, Pittsburgh visits Philadelphia and Houston hosts Miami.

On Dec. 21, the Texans head to the Chiefs and the Steelers visit the Ravens, before the Christmas Day doubleheader that begins with Kansas City heading to Pittsburgh and ends with Baltimore in Houston.

Mahomes was asked whether he has ever had three games in such a short span, he replied: "I haven't in football."

"All you can do is focus on the game. The practice you have that day," Mahomes said. "I try to prepare my body all year long for this stretch. That's tailoring my work-

outs, tailoring how you practice and prepare, and the coaches do a great job of taking care of us on the practice field. We practice as hard as anybody, but they know how to dial it back when needed."

The NFL has played on Wednesday in the past, most recently in 2020, when the Steelers and Ravens had their game pushed back because of a COVID-19 outbreak.

In 2012, the NFL's opener between the Giants and Cowboys took place on a Wednesday so the TV networks could broadcast Barack Obama's speech at the Democratic National Convention.

But prior to those games, the NFL had not had a Wednesday game since the Lions and Rams played Sept. 22, 1948.

"It's a unique situation. You just have to manage it," said Chiefs coach Andy Reid, whose team will have played on every day of the week but Tuesday this season. "It is what it is. You make the best of it."

It's not as if the games involved in the Christmas stretch are throwaways, either. Each has significant playoff ramifications.



PETER AIKEN/AP

Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes is not happy about the compressed schedule for the four teams playing on Christmas Day.

The Chiefs have already clinched the AFC West, but they are trying to fend off the Bills and Steelers for the No. 1 seed and a first-round playoff bye. Pittsburgh is two games ahead of the Ravens in the AFC North heading into this weekend, and could clinch a playoff berth if things fall their way, while the Texans are two games up on the Colts in the AFC South.

So how is Kansas City approaching such an important stretch of high-profile games?

"The main thing is you get guys ready for the game. Give them a chance to get ready for the game," Reid said. "They're going to do whatever you present to them. You try to help them out with that. Right now we have a normal week right here. We have to take care of business here."

SPORTS



Meeting 'Mr. Barkley'

Tomlin has healthy respect for league-leading RB » **NFL, Page 47**

COLLEGE FOOTBALL



The Navy Midshipmen and the Army Black Knights line up for a snap Dec. 9, 2023, at Gillette Stadium in Foxborough, Mass. The teams meet in the 125th Army-Navy game Saturday, and neither team is looking beyond their rivalry to their respective bowl games.

AP

Goal bigger than bowls

Army and Navy headed to postseason, but they're only focused on each other

BY STEPHEN WHYNO
Associated Press

LANDOVER, Md. — Army and Navy have combined to win 19 of 23 games this season and re-emerged as nationally relevant college football programs. For the first time since 2017, the two military academies are both going to a bowl game.

None of that matters much to players and coaches — not with the 125th rendition of the Army-Navy game on deck Saturday.

"It's a game and a season really all of its own," Army coach Jeff Monken said Tues-



Army (11-1) vs. Navy (8-3)
at Landover, Md.
AFN-Sports
9 p.m. Saturday CET
5 a.m. Sunday JKT



Monken

day. "We've had a good year. You make it a great year by winning this game coming up on Saturday. Frankly, that's just the way it goes around here." The Black Knights are ranked 19th in the country after routing Tulane to win the American Athletic Conference. They're 11-1, unbeaten in the AAC in their first season in it and their only loss came to College Football Playoff-bound Notre

Dame. Marshall awaits in the Independence Bowl.

Navy will face Oklahoma in the Armed Forces Bowl to cap its first winning season since 2019. Still, there's no way the Midshipmen are looking past this rivalry to the Sooners.

"Oklahoma's not on our mind right now because it's all Army-Navy," linebacker Colin Ramos said. "This is our No. 1 goal, and then after that, we'll have about a week and

SEE GOAL ON PAGE 44

Belichick agrees to become UNC coach » College football, Page 44

