NCAA: March Madness headed for an SEC overload **Page 48**

MOVIES: Soderbergh's sexy spy film **Page 17**

GAMES: Split Fiction takes lead in 2-player revival **Page 15**

EUROPE & PACIFIC WEEKEND EDITION

MUSIC
Lady Gaga rekindles spark
Page 28

STARS AND STRIPES®
stripes.com

Volume 83 Edition 233 ©SS 2025 FRIDAY, MARCH 14, 2025 平成12年4月5日 第三種郵便物認可 日刊（土日除く） 発行所 星条旗新聞社 〒106-0032 東京都港区六本木7丁目23番17号 定価￥100 $1.00

JESSICA MAZZAMUTO/U.S. Marine Corps

U.S. Marine Corps Sgt. Favour Long performs a deadlift on Camp Lejeune, N.C., on July 12. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth on Wednesday ordered a review of existing standards for fitness and grooming, according to a Pentagon news release. Hegseth has long said that the inclusion of women in combat has led to lowered standards.

Hegseth orders standards review

Defense secretary has criticized military's fitness and grooming rules

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth on Wednesday ordered a "rapid" services-wide review of existing standards for physical fitness, body composition and grooming, according to a Pentagon news release.

In a memo, Hegseth directed the undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness to gather the existing standards. Darin Selnick is performing those duties.

While described as "rapid," the memo does not provide a timeline for the review.

"We must remain vigilant in maintaining the standards that enable the men and women of our military to protect the American people and our homeland as the world's most lethal and effective fighting force," Hegseth wrote in the release.

"This review will illuminate how the Department has maintained the level of standards required over the recent past and the trajectory of any change in those standards," he said.

The review of grooming standards will also include the wearing of beards, according to the memo.

The Army, Air Force and Navy all offer shaving waivers to service members diagnosed with pseudofolliculitis barbae that allow them to forgo shaving. The condition, which

SEE REVIEW ON PAGE 7

JACCOB HEARN/U.S. Army National Guard

First Lt. Jean Paul Stassi Jr. shaves before training at Camp Shelby, Miss., in July.

Top service heads warn of stopgap challenges

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Senior service leaders said Wednesday that they will be significantly challenged by a stopgap spending bill that the Senate plans to vote on this week to fund the government through Sept. 30 and avoid a shutdown.

The bill includes a $6 billion increase for the military but largely keeps the same spending levels as last year because lawmakers could not agree on appropriations for fiscal 2025, which began Oct. 1.

The resulting temporary funding extension, known as a continuing resolution, will force the military services to operate with substantially less money than they expected, causing disruptions in programs and modernization efforts, according to service leaders.

"The Navy will need to make hard choices this year if we are operating under a full-year continuing resolution," Adm. James Kilby, vice chief of naval operations, said in testimony before a subpanel of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

He said he expects to see slowed progress in shipbuilding, getting new weapons and equipment to modernize the Navy's fleet and maintaining the service's momentum in recruiting. The maintenance schedules for 11 ships are also at risk, he said.

SEE STOPGAP ON PAGE 6

NATION
Senate Democrats dig in for fight on House spending bill
Page 10

BUSINESS/WEATHER

EUROPE GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel
Germany	$3.499	$4.070	$4.435	$4.012
Change in price	-0.9 cents	-1.4 cents	-1.7 cents	-5.3 cents
Netherlands	..	$4.551	$5.095	$4.856
Change in price	..	-3.3 cents	-2.8 cents	-3.4 cents
U.K.	..	$4.082	$4.447	$4.024
Change in price	..	-1.4 cents	-1.7 cents	-5.3 cents
Azores	..	..	$4.293	..
Change in price	..	..	-1.7 cents	..
Turkey	..	..	$4.085	$4.427*
Change in price	..	..	-1.7 cents	No change

Fuel prices are updated daily. These prices are effective March 14. The change in price is from March 8.

PACIFIC GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel
Japan	..	$4.069	..	$3.649
Change in price	..	-2.0 cents	..	-5.0 cents
Okinawa	$3.429	..	..	$3.649
Change in price	No change	..	..	-5.0 cents
South Korea	$3.169	..	$4.099	$3.679
Change in price	No change	..	-2.0 cents	-5.0 cents
Guam	$3.189**	$3.759	$4.129	..
Change in price	-1.0 cents	-2.0 cents	-2.0 cents	..

***DieselEFD **Midgrade**
Pacific for the week of March 14-20

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates	
Euro costs (March 14)	0.90
British pound (March 14)	$1.26
Japanese yen (March 14)	144.00
South Korean won (March 14)	1413.00

Commercial rates	
Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3769
Britain (Pound)	1.2938
Canada (Dollar)	1.4398
China (Yuan)	7.2379
Denmark (Krone)	6.8776
Egypt (Pound)	50.6534
Euro	0.9219
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7724
Hungary (Forint)	368.39
Israel (Shekel)	3.6613
Japan (Yen)	148.12
Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3081
Norway (Krone)	10.6843
Philippines (Peso)	57.42
Poland (Zloty)	3.86
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7503
Singapore (Dollar)	1.3366
South Korea (Won)	1457.73
Switzerland (Franc)	0.8839
Thailand (Baht)	33.82
Turkey (NewLira)	36.6146

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

INTEREST RATES

Prime rate	7.50
Interest Rates Discount rate	4.50
Federal funds market rate	4.38
3-month bill	4.31
30-year bond	4.63

WEATHER OUTLOOK

FRIDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

FRIDAY IN EUROPE

SATURDAY IN THE PACIFIC

The weather is compiled from weather.com

TODAY IN STRIPES

Classified 46
Comics 34,38-39
Crossword 34,38-39
Opinion 40
Sports 41-48
Weekend 13-34

STARS AND STRIPES
However you read us, wherever you need us.
Mobile • Online • Print

EUROPE | ADVERTISING | CustomerService@stripes.com | +49 (0) 0631.3615.9111 DSN: 314.583.9111

MIDDLE EAST | ADVERTISING | CustomerService@stripes.com | +49 (0) 0631.3615.9111 DSN: 314.583.9111

PACIFIC | ADVERTISING | PacificAdvertising@stripes.com | +81 (42) 552.2511 DSN: 315.227.7310

Round-the-world news for America's military.

Stripes.com supplies constant updates, on news of interest — including reports from our overseas military bases in Europe, Pacific, Southwest Asia and the Mideast, and coverage of the Pentagon and Capitol Hill.
Also available on mobile apps for Android and iOS.

STARS AND STRIPES®
Mobile • Online • Print

MILITARY

MICHELLE LESSARD/U.S. Army

U.S. service members and their families gather at Camp Humphreys' downtown plaza after a ruck march in South Korea on Dec. 6.

USFK: Longer family tours will improve quality of life, security

BY DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — A Pentagon policy extending two-year tours for troops who bring their families to South Korea will improve quality of life and enhance security on the Korean Peninsula, according to senior military officials.

Announced last month, the change extends accompanied tours by one year and is expected to be fully implemented by October 2027.

The current two-year tour is "out of step" with conditions on the peninsula, Air Force Col. William Parker, director of personnel for U.S. Forces Korea,said Feb. 28 at USFK's headquarters on Camp Humphreys.

Accompanied troops make up nearly one-fourth of the roughly 28,500 U.S. service members in South Korea, he said. USFK approves about two-thirds of requests for family accompaniment, depending on available space and resources.

The U.S. military's presence in South Korea changed significantly in 2018 when most troops began relocating from Yongsan Garrison in Seoul to Humphreys, a 3,600-acre base in Pyeongtaek, about 40 miles south of the capital.

"We were in Yongsan, and Camp Humphreys was just a major construction zone," Parker said. "Since then, we've moved much of our forces down here. The quality of life for our service members has improved significantly. The mission has evolved tremendously, and we have not changed our tour policies in conjunction with that."

> **"The mission has evolved tremendously, and we have not changed our tour policies in conjunction with that."**
>
> **Air Force Col. William Parker**
> director of personnel for U.S. Forces Korea

An additional year in South Korea helps address challenges military families face, such as spouses finding employment on base and frequent relocations, he added.

Army Col. Arron Lummer, of Eighth Army's personnel department, said the extension may seem minor but can provide stability for families.

"That one year really can make a big difference in adding that little bit of stability, to give that family the opportunity to put down a little bit more roots and grow to discover themselves here with the Korean culture," he said at USFK headquarters. "I think it could potentially have a profound impact on quality of life."

Extending tours also reduces turnover among experienced personnel and strengthens the military's deterrence mission against North Korea, Parker said.

"A lot of the folks are filling positions or in key leadership positions, and having that continuity of mission is critical," he said. "We see that at all levels here and across all components."

Parker also noted that family stability plays a role in deterrence efforts.

"By striking a balance and keeping some families here, to keep some of that continuity of mission, we improve our deterrent effect," he said.

During the Cold War, U.S. troops were stationed in Germany with their families, he added.

While the policy change may save "millions of dollars" in relocation costs, Parker said financial considerations were not the driving factor.

"This does not require any additional investment in terms of infrastructure," Lummer said. "It's about the families who are already here and those to come in the future, affording them the opportunity to stabilize in one location for up to three years to become increasingly vested in the mission."

The command is also reviewing potential changes to the tour length for unaccompanied troops, who typically serve one-year tours in South Korea, but no immediate changes are planned, Parker said.

DODEA reinstates travel for Pacific student-athletes

BY DAVE ORNAUER
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — Student-athletes at Department of Defense Education Activity schools in the Pacific resumed travel Thursday for spring season away games after a brief funding freeze.

Some DODEA-Europe events have been rescheduled, though it remained unclear whether others would proceed as planned. Officials there announced Wednesday that most competitions for the weekend had been canceled, only to announce hours later that they were reviewing the decision.

"We have received updated guidance from DODEA headquarters that we may now proceed with student and staff travel for athletics," DODEA-Pacific chief of staff Todd Schlitz wrote in an email to staff members obtained by Stars and Stripes.

Schlitz's email did not specify whether weekend competitions would take place as scheduled. It stated that DODEA leadership had granted an exception allowing students and coaches to travel for contests in their respective districts.

Hundreds of high school soccer, track, softball and baseball competitions across both regions were at stake. The spring sports seasons, many just beginning, are scheduled to conclude with championships May 19-23.

In Europe, DODEA officials did not release any new information on rescheduling as of late Thursday. However, a track meet originally set for 14 teams beginning Saturday is now scheduled for noon Friday at Kaiserslautern High School in Germany, according to a school Facebook post, which did not specify which teams would be there.

Kaiserslautern's soccer team will head to Stuttgart on Friday for a 2 p.m. kickoff, and its baseball and softball teams will host nearby Ramstein at 2 p.m. Friday. All of those games were originally scheduled for Saturday.

DODEA had initially canceled all extracurricular activities involving extensive travel following a Feb. 26 executive order by President Donald Trump. It restricted government-funded travel to essential military operations and permanent changes of station.

Schlitz's email did not explain what prompted the policy reversal that allowed DODEA travel to resume.

However, another challenge looms as Congress considers a continuing resolution to fund the government beyond Thursday. Without its passage and Trump's signature, all nonessential government spending — including "all afterschool athletics, activities, and extracurricular trips," according to Schlitz's email — will be suspended.

The funding uncertainty is particularly significant for DODEA-Pacific schools in Japan, where teams frequently travel long distances. E.J. King High School at Sasebo Naval Base, for example, must travel more than 700 miles to compete against DODEA teams in the Tokyo area.

Stars and Stripes reporter Jennifer H. Svan contributed to this report.

DOD leaker Teixeira pleads guilty to obstructing justice

Associated Press

BEDFORD, Mass. — Jack Teixeira, the former Massachusetts Air National Guard member who caused an international uproar when he leaked highly classified documents about the war in Ukraine, pleaded guilty to military charges of obstructing justice at his court-martial Thursday.

The plea agreement calls for dishonorable discharge and no confinement. Teixeira was already sentenced last year to 15 years in prison after pleading guilty in federal court to six counts of willful retention and transmission of national defense information under the Espionage Act.

Military prosecutors said before the court-martial at Hanscom Air Force Base, Mass., that charges of disobeying orders and obstructing justice were appropriate given that obeying orders is the "absolute core" of the military.

Teixeira's lawyer, Lt. Col. Bradley Poronsky, argued that the obstruction of justice charge should either be dismissed or go unpunished, saying it amounts to double jeopardy because it already factored into Teixeira's November sentencing.

MILITARY

Shipbuilding focus helps as US chases China

By Caitlyn Burchett
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The creation of the White House's shipbuilding office could help get Navy shipbuilding on track, but the U.S. won't catch up to China dominating the industry without a multidecade whole-of-government and commercial sector approach, according to a defense analyst.

"I do believe that presidential-level attention is what is needed to make it happen," said Cynthia Cook, defense analyst for the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a think tank based in Washington. "That said, there's a lot of other things in the industrial base we are going to need."

President Donald Trump announced last week during his national address to Congress that he would create a White House shipbuilding office. The office, he said, will aim to "resurrect the American shipbuilding industry." Trump said the U.S. once had a great domestic shipbuilding industry, which is greatly diminished now. That will change, he promised.

Trump

"We used to make so many ships. We don't make them anymore, very much," Trump said. "But we're going to make them very fast, very soon."

More than a week after Trump's announcement, the White House was unable to provide details on the function of the office.

Naval Sea Systems Command — the service's shipbuilding management arm — and the office of the assistant secretary of the Navy for research, development and acquisition referred all questions about shipbuilding to the White House.

Without yet knowing what the office will do, Cook said the office would be most effective if it focused its efforts on simplifying the requirement process for procuring and designing new Navy ships, as well as look at how U.S. policies might be hindering shipbuilding efforts.

"The idea of becoming competitive in shipbuilding — it can happen, but that would be really expensive," she said. "Notionally, the U.S. government could completely subsidize shipbuilding and let other nations buy ships for less than cost, but just the idea of building up that capacity capability — expanding the supply base and all the tactical challenges along the way — make it seem really hard."

Daniel Perez/U.S. Navy

Navy Capt. J. Patrick Thompson, right, commanding officer of the aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis, conducts a dry dock walk-through last April in Newport News, Va.

The Navy, which relies on contracted private shipbuilding companies, has come under fire in recent years for its shipbuilding struggles. The sea service planned to have a battle force of 313 ships by 2025. But in its fiscal 2025 shipbuilding plan, the Navy said it will have 287 ships by 2025 — 26 fewer ships than expected. Meanwhile, China, considered America's top military competitor, is rapidly growing its fleet and is on pace to reach a 425-ship fleet by 2030.

The Navy's shipbuilding has been plagued with construction delays exacerbated by a workforce shortage and supply chain issues. From 2019 to 2023, the Navy planned for the delivery of 11 new Virginia-class submarines and 15 new Arleigh Burke-class destroyers. Only four of those submarines and seven of the destroyers were delivered. Additionally, a federal watchdog report found 37 out of 45 — or 82% — of ships now under construction are facing delays ranging from five months to more than three years.

"When we think about shipbuilding, as in any defense manufacturing endeavor, it's not just the ships that will need to surge production. It's also every level of the supply chain," Cook said.

To achieve this, she said, there needs to be more cooperation between the government and commercial sector, as well as allied nations and their commercial shipbuilding industries.

"As the saying goes, 'Individually, we are weak. Together, we are strong'," Cook said.

Shelby Oakley, the Government Accountability Office's director of contracting and national security acquisitions teams, said Tuesday that a major shortcoming of the Navy is the service does not heed lessons from the commercial sector.

"The Navy's budget and acquisition processes don't use the successful approaches of commercial companies that our work has found can be thoughtfully applied to Navy shipbuilding programs," Oakley said during a shipbuilding hearing before a subpanel of the House Armed Services Committee.

The Constellation-class frigate program, Oakley said, is a prime example. The frigate program is at a standstill while the Navy and shipbuilder determine how to build the ship. The program is at least three years behind schedule because the Navy has changed the design of the ship throughout the construction process. Having a completed design before beginning construction is a leading practice of commercial shipbuilding, according to Oakley.

"It's that key that commercial shipbuilders follow in maturing that design so that they know when they start bending metal, they start construction, that they're going to get what they expect to get," Oakley said.

Rep. Joe Courtney, D-Conn., said in response that the Navy should "let go" of exquisite vessel designs to "follow what the commercial industry is doing so that we can speed things up."

The CSIS published a study Tuesday that found Chinese shipbuilding follows a "military-civil fusion" strategy, which blurs the lines between the country's defense and commercial sectors. According to the report, the state-owned China State Shipbuilding Corporation, which builds commercial and military ships, sells three-quarters of its commercial production to buyers outside China, including to the U.S.-allied Denmark, France, Greece, Japan and South Korea.

These foreign firms are thus funneling billions of dollars to Chinese shipyards that also make warships, advancing China's modernization of its navy and providing Chinese defense contractors with key dual-use technology, the report said.

China accounts for more than 53% of global commercial shipbuilding, while the U.S. produces 0.1%. Japan accounts for 13% and South Korea for 29%.

The CSIS researchers suggested as a long-term fix, the U.S. should work with allies to expand shipbuilding capacities outside China. For the near term, they recommended actions to level the playing field and "disrupt China's murky dual-use ecosystem," such as by charging docking fees on Chinese-made vessels and cutting U.S. financial and business ties with China State Shipbuilding Corporation and its subsidiaries.

The Shipbuilders Council of America released a statement immediately after Trump's announcement last week, applauding the creation of the office. Industry-government collaboration is key to kickstarting the industrial base to ensure the United States remains a global leader in maritime power for decades to come, said Matthew Paxton, president of the council.

"By fully utilizing the existing domestic shipyard capacity, the shipyard industrial base can meet the growing demands of national defense, restore American competitiveness and create thousands of skilled jobs in communities across the nation," he said.

China's naval growth may be aided by foreign firms

The Washington Post

A single Chinese state-owned shipbuilder produced more commercial vessels by tonnage in 2024 than the entire U.S. industry has since World War II, according to a report that underscores how China has come to dominate the sector.

Foreign companies may be inadvertently fueling the expansion of the Chinese navy, according to the report from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, posing a security threat to the United States and its allies.

President Donald Trump has Chinese ship manufacturing in his crosshairs — he has proposed charging Chinese-built vessels up to $1.5 million to dock at any U.S. port — as part of his pledge to resurrect shipbuilding.

China's emergence as a shipbuilding giant began in the 2000s with aggressive state support.

The industry has become even more important under Chinese leader Xi Jinping, who aims to turn his country into a maritime power to rival the U.S. The Chinese navy is now the world's largest, overtaking the U.S. Navy in number of warships.

The China State Shipbuilding Corporation is at the center of those ambitions.

The state-owned firm is a major defense contractor that supplies the Chinese military but also has commercial operations. But in China, the line between the CSSC's commercial and military operations is blurred as part of Xi's strategy to leverage the private sector to boost the military.

The report found that over 75% of ships produced at the CSSC shipyards with the closest ties to the military were destined for foreign firms, including those in countries with close relationships with the United States, such as Denmark, France, Greece, Japan, Singapore and South Korea.

MILITARY

Report says US should be wary of rising Chinese use of Africa ports

By John Vandiver
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — China's growing network of ports in Africa could serve as a precursor to the creation of more military bases, according to a new report by a Pentagon-affiliated think tank.

Chinese firms, many of which are state-owned, are now either active stakeholders or present at 231 ports there, making the continent Beijing's largest maritime hub in the world, the Africa Center for Strategic Studies said in a report Monday.

Years of Chinese economic investment in Africa could be paving the way for a more robust military presence by Beijing, the report said.

A "concern of China's expansive port development in Africa is the possibility of repurposing commercial ports for military activities," wrote Paul Nantulya, a researcher at the center.

U.S. military officials in recent years have warned about China's potential military expansion in Africa.

In 2021, former U.S. Africa Command leader Gen. Stephen Townsend said China had its eye on a number of locations in western Africa that could serve as an Atlantic port for its warships.

"They are working aggressively to get that, but we have not seen any of that come to fruition yet," Townsend said at the time. "And it is my No. 1 global power competition concern."

In 2017, Beijing opened its first overseas military base just miles away from AFRICOM's hub at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti.

In the run-up to the opening of that base, China marketed its involvement at the Port of Doraleh as commercial in nature.

But two months after the port went into operation, the site became the first Chinese military base overseas, the think tank's report said.

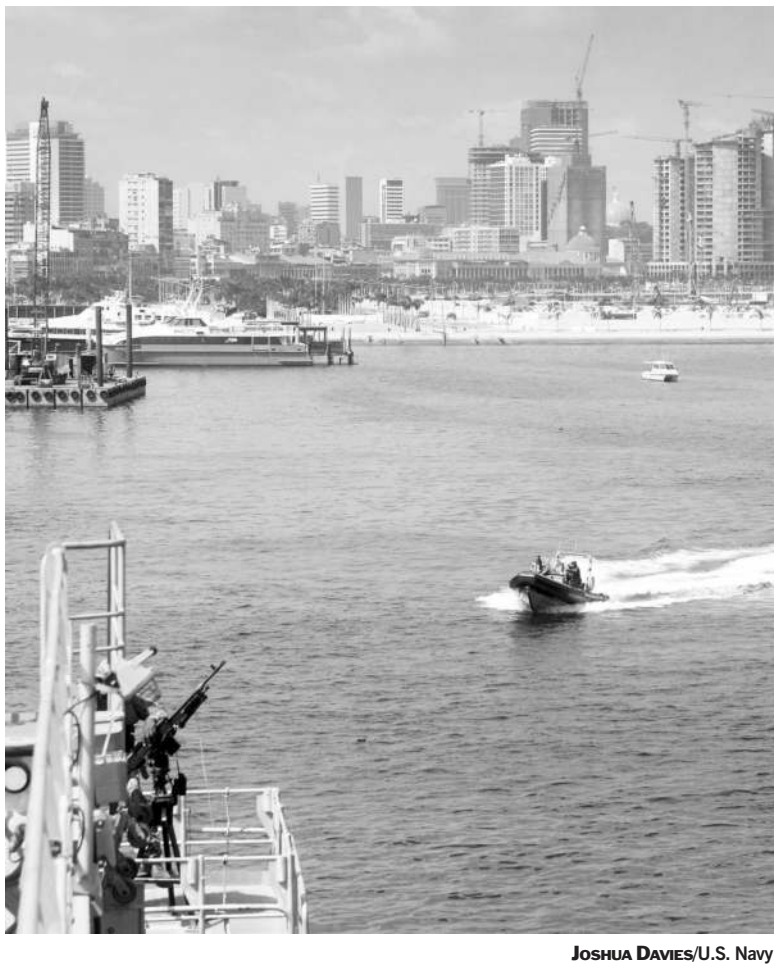
"There is widespread speculation that China could replicate this model for future basing arrangements elsewhere on the continent," the report said.

Among the ports where China is active, several stand out as locations for military use, given their respective design specifications, the report said, listing facilities in Angola, Nigeria, Kenya and Namibia as possible candidates.

Another country that has been mentioned as a potential site for a new Chinese naval base is Equatorial Guinea. However, the center's report downplayed the idea, saying a variety of technical factors make that country less suitable.

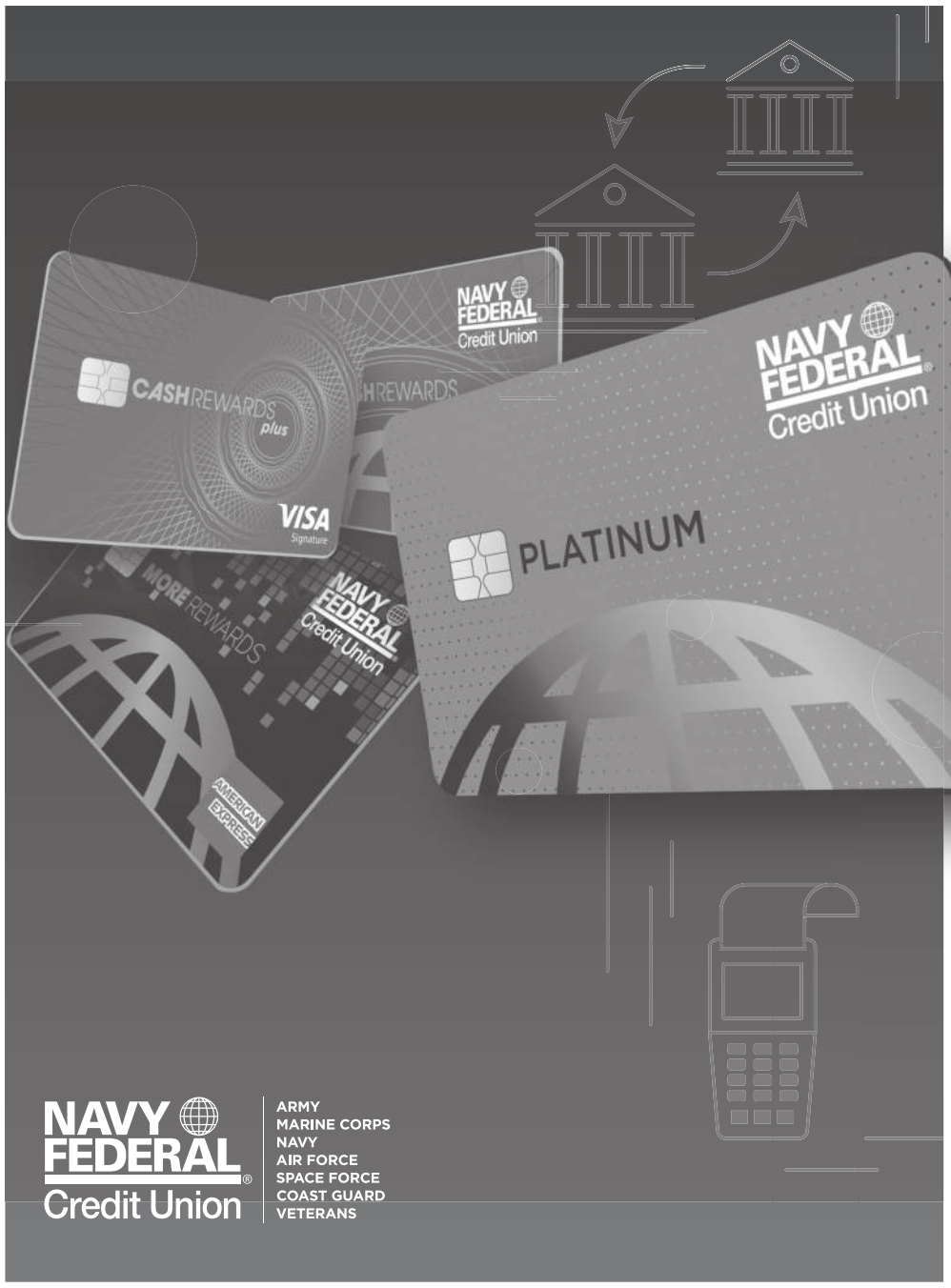
Numerous ports stretching from Tanzania on the Indian Ocean to Nigeria on the Atlantic Ocean have already served as staging grounds for Chinese military exercises and navy port calls, the report said.

"The growing militarization of China's Africa policy is stoking concerns about the implications of more foreign bases in Africa," the report said.



Joshua Davies/U.S. Navy

The port of Luanda, Angola, as seen in 2015. China's increasing development of seaports in Africa is creating concerns about the potential for transforming them into a foothold for the Chinese military, according to a report Monday, by a Defense Department-affiliated think tank.



GET A LOW INTRO APR AND DOMINATE DEBT

You could take down debt this year with a 0% intro APR on balance transfers. For 12 months, you'll save on transfers to select Navy Federal cards made in your first 60 days.[1] After that, a standard variable APR between 10.99% and 18% will apply.[2] Plus, no transfer fees.

Hurry—these balance transfer offers end March 31, 2025. Get started at navyfederal.org/CreditCards.

Navy Federal is federally insured by NCUA.

[1]As of 2/3/25, rates range from 10.99% APR to 18% APR, are based on product type and creditworthiness, and will vary with the market based on the U.S. Prime Rate. ATM cash advance fees: None if performed at a Navy Federal branch or ATM. Otherwise, $0.50 per domestic transaction or $1.00 per foreign transaction. [2]This offer is non-transferable and is valid for the intended recipient only. This means that only members who receive this offer directly from Navy Federal are eligible to accept the offer. To be eligible for the 0% promotional APR on balance transfers, you must transfer a balance from a non-Navy Federal credit card between 1/2/25 and 3/31/25. Qualifying balances will revert to your variable Standard APR 12 months after your balance transfer has posted to your Navy Federal credit card account. All balance transfers that do not meet the requirements for this offer will accrue interest at your variable Standard APR. Balance transfers are not eligible to earn rewards. Maximum total transfer amount is limited to your available credit line, but no single balance transfer can be greater than $30,000. Balance transfers using convenience checks are excluded from this offer. If you transfer a balance with this offer, interest will be charged on purchases made with your credit card unless your purchases have a 0% APR or you pay the entire balance, including any transferred balances, in full each month by the payment due date. Navy Federal reserves the right to change or end this offer at any time without notice. © 2025 Navy Federal NFCU 14300 (1-25)

NAVY FEDERAL Credit Union
ARMY
MARINE CORPS
NAVY
AIR FORCE
SPACE FORCE
COAST GUARD
VETERANS

MILITARY

House CR has $1.5B for unrequested warship

By John M. Donnelly
CQ-Roll Call

WASHINGTON — The continuing resolution the House passed Tuesday would add more than $1.5 billion to start building a warship that the Navy did not request and that experts suggest the shipbuilder may have trouble constructing on time and on budget.

The fiscal 2025 stopgap measure, which the Senate must clear by March 14 to avoid a government shutdown, would provide $892.5 billion for defense. That is $6 billion more for defense than was appropriated in fiscal 2024, a growth rate of less than 1% and not enough to outrun inflation.

Despite the funding constraints, members would add the sizable tranche of funds for the third, unrequested Arleigh Burke class destroyer, a warship that is built in states represented by senior defense lawmakers, in addition to proposing funding for the two Arleigh Burke ships that were requested.

Three destroyers are not listed in any one year in the service's future purchasing projections, and in some of those years the Navy plans to buy only one. Nor was the third vessel included in the Chief of Naval Operation's list of "unfunded priorities" for fiscal 2025 that the service wants but that did not make it into the formal budget proposal.

The Arleigh Burke destroyers bristle with missiles, long-range guns, torpedoes, anti-missile interceptors and highly capable radars.

The ships are built in Maine and Mississippi, the home states of Senate Appropriations Chair Susan Collins, R-Maine, and Senate Armed Services Chair Roger Wicker, R-Miss. The chair of the House Armed Services Seapower and Projection Forces Subcommittee, Republican Trent Kelly, also hails from Mississippi.

The shipyards in those states are among the largest employers in their regions.

Collins said Tuesday that the Navy had previously wanted to buy three Arleigh Burke destroyers per year. Moreover, she said, they should buy three a year once more because the destroyer fleet needs to grow to deter China's burgeoning armada.

"China is expected to have 435 ships by the year 2030, and we have under 300 right now," Collins said. "The value of destroyers has really been underscored by the activities of destroyers in the Red Sea in keeping open the shipping lanes and shooting down Houthi missiles."

The destroyers, along with Navy aircraft, other surface vessels and submarines, engaged more than 400 Houthi drones and missiles in a 15-month period since October 2023, Navy officials told an industry conference in January.

Congress set in motion the funding for the unrequested destroyer in last year's spending bill. Even though the Biden administration did not request a third Arleigh Burke destroyer in fiscal 2024, Congress added $1.3 billion in that year's bill, or about half the cost, for it. The Navy included an option to complete construction of the ship in a contract with the shipbuilders.

The CR money was required this year in order to complete the construction of that ship, a Senate aide said.

The CR's proposed boost to Navy shipbuilding accounts comes as the Trump administration is attempting to wring savings out of federal programs. Included in this push is a proposed 8% cut from purportedly less necessary Pentagon programs so as to reallocate some or all of the money to the administration's defense priorities.

The last time the Navy asked to build a third Arleigh Burke destroyer was two years ago, during the fiscal 2024 budget writing process, officials have said.

But the Biden administration turned down the Navy's request, arguing that the shipyards lacked the capacity and personnel to produce three of the ships per year.

After the fiscal 2024 budget was submitted, Pentagon Comptroller Mike McCord told an industry conference: "We don't see the yards being able to produce three [Arleigh Burke destroyers] a year. We don't see them being able to produce two a year. And that's just data. It's not what we wish to be true. But everybody's struggling with skilled labor. Everybody's struggling with supply chains."

In October, the Navy announced it is extending the service lives of a dozen Arleigh Burke class destroyers before retiring them. That will increase the size of the fleet and reduce the pressure to replace retiring vessels, said Eric Labs, the Congressional Budget Office's top naval analyst, at a House Armed Services Committee hearing Tuesday.

Ryan Brown/U.S. Navy

The Arleigh-Burke class guided-missile destroyer USS Arleigh Burke returns to her homeport at Naval Station Rota, Spain, in December.

Stopgap: Service leaders warn of fallout from a continuing resolution

FROM PAGE 1

Gen. James Mingus, vice chief of staff of the Army, said the service will be impacted but "the degree and the severity is unknown" because the Defense Department has never had to operate under a continuing resolution that spanned an entire fiscal year.

The House narrowly passed the yearlong continuing resolution Tuesday and then adjourned for the remainder of the week, leaving the Senate with the option of passing the same legislation or facing a government shutdown at midnight Friday.

Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., blasted the House on Wednesday for "skipping town on a Tuesday" and forcing senators to accept either a "half-assed" funding measure that will harm the military or a "catastrophic" shutdown.

Sen. Roger Wicker of Mississippi, the Republican chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said he could not vote for the stopgap funding bill as it is if Republicans were not also working on separate legislation to beef up defense spending.

Senate Republicans hope to infuse an additional $150 billion into the military through a major spending and cost-cutting package targeting President Donald Trump's domestic agenda this year.

Wicker last year advocated for increasing the 2025 defense budget by $25 billion. He expressed frustration Wednesday that the military would see just a $6 billion increase under the continuing resolution, saying it does not provide adequate support for the military to deter adversaries.

Still, he said he would vote for the funding extension because the alternative is "so unpalatable, so dangerous."

Service leaders said they could potentially fill some funding gaps by moving money in different accounts, but it could mean having to "rob from one account to pay for another," said Gen. Christopher Mahoney, assistant commandant of the Marine Corps.

"Examples might be inflation that outpaces the plus-up, pay raises that were not planned for or budgeted, but are must-pay bills — that money will come from somewhere," he said.

Gen. Michael Guetlein, vice chief of space operations, said the continuing resolution will be a "huge challenge" for the Space Force to manage.

"It's very, very inefficient, it does impact us, especially because we are the smallest force with the smallest budget," he said. "Any churn in our budget is a huge hit to us."

It was unclear Wednesday when or how the Senate would vote on the House-passed stopgap bill.

Nearly all 53 Senate Republicans are expected to back the bill, but the legislation requires 60 votes to pass, meaning some Democrats will need to vote for it to avert a government shutdown.

Eric Kayne/Stars and Stripes

From left, Vice Chief of Naval Operations Adm. James W. Kilby, Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps Gen. Christopher J. Mahoney, Vice Chief of Space Operations Gen. Michael A. Guetlein and USAF Deputy Chief of Staff for Operations Lt. Gen. Adrian L. Spain prepare to testify on Wednesday during a meeting of the Senate Armed Services Committee in Washington.

MILITARY

Allies at forefront of Hohenfels drill

Move coincides with Pentagon push for greater role for European forces

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

HOHENFELS, Germany — Lithuanian and British troops helped lead the fight at the U.S. Army's Bavarian training grounds this week, practicing how they would counter drone and helicopter attacks in battle.

During this year's annual Allied Spirit exercise, the decision to put allies in front coincides with a Pentagon push to have European countries play a larger security role on the Continent.

The Army's Joint Multinational Training Center in Hohenfels is hosting the exercise, which runs through March 24, bringing together nearly 3,000 service members from the U.S. and 12 NATO and partner nations.

The exercise has featured drones, attack helicopters, simulated artillery, medical and psychological operations and civil affairs units, all competing against the training area's resident opposition force, the black-uniformed 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment.

Lithuania, a Baltic country considered a front-line state in the defense of NATO's eastern flank, is leading this year's Allied Spirit, which is focused on preparing a multinational brigade to deter Russian aggression.

On Wednesday, Senior Pvt. Kestas Dziugas, a drone operator from the Lithuanian army's Motorized Infantry Griffin Brigade, launched a small, off-the-shelf model for reconnaissance from atop a hill near the unit's mobile headquarters.

PHOTOS BY LYDIA GORDON/Stars and Stripes

A soldier from the United Kingdom's 88th Gun Battery posts security outside his unit's command and control center during exercise Allied Spirit at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany, on Wednesday.

A Lithuanian soldier sits in the turret of an M577 armored personnel carrier during exercise Allied Spirit at Hohenfels.

A soldier from the United Kingdom's 88th Gun Battery sits with her squad during Allied Spirit.

Maj. Avoldis Juskevateus, who works in operations, watched from outside an infantry fighting vehicle.

Juskevateus has been working with American counterparts from the 28th Infantry Division, 173rd Airborne Brigade and 12th Combat Aviation Brigade.

"We feel safe with the U.S.A. guy standing next to us, so I believe everything is all right," Juskevateus said. We "tested our procedures, improved our understanding of each other. A lot of lessons that we learned in this."

U.S. forces "provide a lot of assets that we don't have," he said, citing the aviation brigade's capabilities as an example.

Nearby, the British 88th Gun Battery hid artillery pieces under trees and camouflage netting. Gunner (Pvt.) Keelan Horton said they had successfully dodged both helicopters and drones trying to find them.

"We're winning so far," added Gunner (Pvt.) Travis Gaskin, who said European-led training is important under the current circumstances.

"If it comes to a real-time situation, then we've got a better idea of what we're doing instead of just going in blind," he said.

Brig. Gen. Steven Carpenter, head of the 7th Army Training Command, surveyed the action alongside Lithuanian land forces commander Brig. Gen. Arturas Radvilas.

Carpenter took questions during a press conference that delved into uncertainties over NATO's future, as the White House and the Pentagon review the U.S. global force posture.

"What's not uncertain is the fact that the United States believes that a strong (American) presence, a strong NATO presence is not just a deterrent in Europe, it's a deterrent globally, because all of these conflicts are interconnected," he said.

Earlier this week, an alliance spokesman said that all 32 allies, including the U.S., are continuing to plan and execute exercises together, following a Swedish newspaper report saying that U.S. would no longer take part in them.

Radvilas said that Allied Spirit was proceeding as it normally would.

"We don't know maybe what we can expect in the future," he said. "Up to now, we don't see any changes at all."

Review: Hegseth critical of recent changes to fitness, grooming standards

FROM PAGE 1

manifests in painful razor bumps, disproportionately affects Black men.

Hegseth has long been a critic of physical fitness standards in the armed forces, in particular saying that the inclusion of women in combat has led to lowered standards.

The ban on women serving in combat roles was lifted in 2013 by Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, and women were fully integrated into those roles by 2016.

The review will look at how standards have changed since Jan. 1, 2015.

"The review will also provide insight on why those standards changed and the impact of those changes," the memo states.

Hegseth wrote in his most recent book, "The War on Warriors: Behind the Betrayal of the Men Who Keep Us Free," published last year, that women are not fit for combat because they "cannot physically meet the same standards as men."

During a Feb. 7 town hall meeting at the Pentagon, Hegseth described soldiers as "standard bearers."

"What are the standards?" he said. "I mean, and it starts with the basic stuff, right? It's grooming standards and uniform standards and training standards, fitness standards."

Hegseth compared lax standards to the broken windows theory of policing, in which unpunished small misdemeanors embolden greater lawbreaking.

"[I]f you violate the small stuff, and you allow it to happen, the big stuff, it creates a culture where big stuff you're not held accountable for," he said. "I think the same thing exists inside our services."

In recent years, some services have loosened regulations around hair styles and tattoos.

The changes have come as troops have pressed for grooming standards that match the current era.

Some service branches see the changes as essential to successful recruiting for America's all-volunteer armed forces.

Not all services see it that way.

In January, Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Eric Smith told a group of reporters that the service would not allow beards.

"We're Marines, and we're different," he said. "We don't have beards."

The Marine Corps is currently meeting its recruiting goals, and "what we don't want to do is tinker with the ethos" of the service, he said.

Services approach physical fitness in varying ways.

The Army in 2022 launched its Army Combat Fitness Test, which is designed to better prepare troops for what they would experience in combat as compared to the previous test.

The test focuses on measuring a wide range of physical capabilities — strength, agility, reaction time and endurance.

The Space Force is experimenting with doing away with fitness tests entirely.

Thousands of guardians have participated in a two-year study ending this year that tracks routine workouts in lieu of using fitness tests to gauge physical capability.

WAR IN UKRAINE

Putin agrees in principle with ceasefire proposal

Associated Press

Russian President Vladimir Putin said Thursday that he agrees in principle with a U.S. proposal for a 30-day ceasefire in Ukraine, but the terms need to be worked out, and he emphasized that it should pave the way to lasting peace.

"The idea itself is correct, and we certainly support it," Putin told a news conference in Moscow. "But there are issues that we need to discuss, and I think that we need to talk about it with our American colleagues and partners and, perhaps, have a call with President Trump and discuss it with him."

President Donald Trump said there have been "good signals" coming out of Russia and offered guarded optimism about Putin's statement.

Putin noted the need to develop a mechanism to control possible breaches of the truce. Another issue, he said, is whether Ukraine could use the 30-day ceasefire to rearm.

Putin made the remarks just hours after the arrival of Trump's envoy in Moscow for talks on the 30-day ceasefire that Ukraine has accepted.

The diplomatic effort coincided with a Russian claim that its troops have driven the Ukrainian army out of a key town in Russia's Kursk border region, where Moscow has been trying for seven months to dislodge Ukrainian troops from their foothold.

Putin said it appeared that the U.S. persuaded Ukraine to accept a ceasefire and that Ukraine is interested because of the battlefield situation, particularly in Kursk.

ALEX BABENKO/AP

A Ukrainian service member covers an M101 Howitzer in Kharkiv region, Ukraine, on Wednesday.

Putin thanked Trump "for paying so much attention to the settlement in Ukraine."

He also thanked the leaders of China, India, Brazil and South Africa for their "noble mission to end the fighting," a statement that signaled those countries' potential involvement in a ceasefire deal.

Russia has said it will not accept peacekeepers from any NATO members to monitor a prospective truce. A Kremlin adviser said Putin planned to meet with Trump's special envoy, Steve Witkoff, later Thursday.

The Russian Defense Ministry's claim that it recaptured the town of Sudzha, a Ukrainian operational hub in Kursk, came hours after Putin visited his commanders in Kursk. The claim could not be independently verified. Ukrainian officials made no immediate comment.

The renewed Russian military push and Putin's high-profile visit to his troops unfolded as Trump seeks a diplomatic end to the war, which began more than three years ago with Russia's full-scale invasion.

The U.S. on Tuesday lifted its March 3 suspension of military aid for Kyiv after senior U.S. and Ukrainian officials reported making progress on how to stop the fighting during talks in Saudi Arabia.

Trump said Wednesday that "it's up to Russia now" as his administration presses Moscow to agree to the ceasefire. The U.S. president has made veiled threats to hit Russia with new sanctions if it does not engage with peace efforts.

U.S. Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent told CNBC Thursday that Trump is "willing to apply maximum pressure on both sides," including sanctions that reach the highest scale on Russia.

Ukraine has expressed its own concerns that Russia would use a truce to regroup and rearm.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy chided Russia on the Telegram messaging app Thursday for what he said was its slow response to the ceasefire proposal, accusing Moscow of trying to delay any peace deal. He said that Ukraine is "determined to move quickly toward peace" and hoped U.S. pressure would compel Russia to stop fighting.

The U.S. still has about $3.85 billion in congressionally authorized funding for future arms shipments to Ukraine, but the Trump administration has shown no interest so far in using that authority to send additional weapons as it awaits the outcome of peace overtures.

By signaling its openness to a ceasefire at a time when the Russian military has the upper hand in the war, Ukraine has presented the Kremlin with a dilemma — whether to accept a truce and abandon hopes of making new gains, or reject the offer and risk derailing a cautious rapprochement with Washington.

The Ukrainian army's foothold inside Russia has been under intense pressure for months from the renewed effort by Russian forces, backed by North Korean troops. Ukraine's daring incursion last August led to the first occupation of Russian soil by foreign troops since World War II and embarrassed the Kremlin.

UK, France race to draft security plan for Ukraine Trump will buy

Bloomberg News

The U.K. and France are scrambling to bolster Ukraine's negotiating position as President Donald Trump seeks to force through a settlement in its war with Russia.

Europe's only two nuclear powers are trying to pull together a plan to help guarantee security for Kyiv with Moscow demanding that Ukraine's military be massively scaled back as part of any settlement.

Defense ministers of Europe's five main military powers held talks in Paris on Wednesday to coordinate on support for Ukraine amid American pullback.

"A broad consensus is emerging that the first security guarantee for Ukraine is the Ukrainian army itself, its capacities, its armament, its training," French Defense Minister Sebastien Lecornu said at a press conference in Paris on Wednesday, alongside defense chiefs from Poland, Germany, Italy and the U.K.

"Long-lasting security guarantees will depend on the capacities we'll be able to provide Ukraine," Lecornu said.

Lecornu warned that Europe needed to move fast on space technology and reduce its reliance on Starlink.

German Defense Minister Boris Pistorius welcomed the U.S. announcement that it will continue its military support for Ukraine but added that Europe is able to replace or substitute certain U.S. aid and services including Starlink.

"We can step in rapidly for example with ammunition but also with satellite communication if this should be needed," Pistorius told reporters.

The defense ministers will meet again next week to continue discussions on "military planning" if there's a settlement, U.K. Defense Secretary John Healey said Wednesday.

U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer and French President Emmanuel Macron are leading discussions between 37 countries to form a "coalition of the willing" in Ukraine if a peace settlement is agreed.

It would see nations across Europe, the Commonwealth and Asia contribute either funding, troops, aircraft or naval vessels to help protect Ukraine from the prospect of further Russian aggression in the future.

In a separate meeting Tuesday, non-NATO allies including Australia, Japan and New Zealand joined talks with military chiefs from dozens of European countries as well as Canada in Paris, according to people familiar with the matter.

Duda calls on US to place nuclear weapons in Poland

Associated Press

WARSAW, Poland — Poland's President Andrzej Duda again called on the United States to deploy nuclear weapons to Poland as a deterrent to Russia, the latest indication that the frontline NATO nation is increasingly considering nuclear protection as fears of Russia grow.

Duda made his appeal in an interview with the Financial Times published on Thursday, repeating an appeal he made to the Biden administration in 2022.

Duda's adviser for international affairs, Wojciech Kolarski, followed up on Duda's appeal with an interview on Poland's RMF FM radio Thursday morning in which he argued that nuclear protection would improve security for Poland.

Poland's location opens it up to potential conflict as a NATO member along the alliance's eastern flank that shares borders with Ukraine, Belarus and the Russian territory of Kaliningrad.

Prime Minister Donald Tusk, a political opponent of Duda's, said last week that Poland was in talks with France concerning President's Emmanuel Macron's proposal to use France's nuclear deterrent to protect the continent from Russian threats.

Moscow called the idea of that proposal "extremely confrontational."

Tusk made his comment to parliament after Macron said he has decided to open a "strategic debate" on using France's nuclear deterrent to protect European allies amid concerns over potential U.S. disengagement.

The French president described Moscow as a "threat to France and Europe" in a televised address to the nation.

France is the only nuclear power currently in the European Union.

NATION

Remaining Gitmo migrants flown back to US

By Silvia Foster-Frau and Alex Horton
The Washington Post

The Trump administration has removed all the migrants who were still being held at the Guantanamo Bay Naval Station in Cuba and flown them back to the United States, a Defense Department official said Wednesday.

The 40 men have been transported to Louisiana, where there is a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement facility in Alexandria. It comes just two weeks after the U.S. Department of Homeland Security sent another group of 48 migrants back to the same city from Guantanamo.

It is unclear why DHS routed the group of migrants back to the United States after the costly flights to the military base on Cuba. The agency did not immediately respond to a request about the latest transfer. The defense official spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss ongoing operations.

Lawrence Davis/U.S. Navy

Illegal alien holding tents at Naval Station Guantanamo Bay in Cuba are seen last month.

Both of the transfers back were on ICE Air, a less expensive option compared to the 17 military flights that have transported migrants to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, since the Trump administration's migrant operation began more than a month ago. A nonmilitary flight departed Guantanamo on Tuesday afternoon bound for Alexandria, according to flight trackers.

Nearly 300 migrants have been detained in Guantanamo since President Donald Trump took office and quickly ordered the U.S. government to begin holding detainees at the naval station as part of its plan to carry out the largest number of deportations in U.S. history.

On Feb. 20, the Trump administration deported a group of 177 Venezuelan men — the highest number of migrants detained in Guantanamo under the Trump administration at one time — back to their homeland. That was the first time it cleared out its migrant detainee population. During those first weeks of the Guantanamo operation, DHS sent one migrant back to El Paso.

Two Democratic members of Congress who toured Guantanamo last week said officials told them that they had asked that migrants with medical conditions and behavioral issues not be sent to Guantanamo.

As of Monday, 23 of the 40 migrants being held in Guantanamo were considered "high threat" and held in the Cuba-based naval station's military detention facility, while 17 others were detained in a separate space known as the Migrant Operations Center, according to a Pentagon official.

The American Civil Liberties Union, the Center for Constitutional Rights and other organizations have filed two separate lawsuits requesting that 13 migrants in U.S. detention be blocked from transfer to Guantanamo. A judge granted a temporary restraining order halting three of the migrants named in the first lawsuit from being sent to the naval station. The men were later deported to Venezuela.

On Friday, a D.C. federal court will hear arguments for two lawsuits by civil rights organizations against the Trump administration's Guantanamo migrant operation: A Feb. 12 lawsuit over the lack of legal access to migrants at the base and a March 1 suit that requests to block the transfer of 10 migrants detained in the United States to Guantanamo.

Federal student loan site goes down day after layoffs gut Education Department

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — An hours-long outage Wednesday on StudentAid.gov, the federal website for student loans and financial aid, underscored the risks in rapidly gutting the Department of Education, as President Donald Trump aims to dismantle the agency.

Hundreds of users reported FAFSA outages to Downdetector starting midday Wednesday, saying they were having trouble completing the form, which is required for financial aid at colleges nationwide. The National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, a group of people who handle colleges' financial aid awards, also received reports of users experiencing technical issues and having trouble completing the FAFSA.

"We've been trying to get more clarity on why it's down," said Allie Bidwell Arcese, a spokeswoman for NASFAA. The Education Department hadn't shared any information on the outage, she said. "The maintenance and troubleshooting may be impacted by yesterday's layoffs."

The developers and IT support staff who worked on the FAFSA form were hard hit in the Education Department's layoffs Tuesday, along with staff buyouts and the termination of probationary employees. In all, the Education Department has reduced its staff by half, to roughly 2,000, since Trump took office.

A list of laid-off staff obtained and verified by AP shows more than 300 people cut from Federal Student Aid — two dozen of them from Federal Student Aid's technology division. That included the entire team responsible for systems supporting the FAFSA form, a person with knowledge of the outage told The Associated Press, speaking anonymously for fear of retaliation. While laid-off staffers are still technically employed until March 21, they had limited access to their email, phones and computers, making a response to the outage difficult, the person said. At one point Wednesday, about 70 people had joined a Teams call to try to pinpoint the cause of the outage.

The call continued for hours. By Wednesday evening, the website carried a banner claiming "Planned Maintenance" was underway, and login access was cut off.

The Education Department did not respond to a request for comment on the outage.

Problems with the FAFSA had vexed the administration of former President Joe Biden, drawing rebuke from Republicans. The form was overhauled last year in an attempt to simplify it, but technical problems blocked students from submitting forms or bungled financial aid calculations.

Advocates had feared frustration would lead thousands of students to give up on going to college at all. But overall freshman enrollment at U.S. colleges increased over the previous year.

Bill would create congressional oversight of additional VA layoffs

By Linda F. Hersey
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Republican chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee said he plans to introduce legislation to require congressional oversight and input from veterans groups before the Department of Veterans Affairs fires more workers, which is expected to reach 80,000 by September.

Sen. Jerry Moran of Kansas said he plans to submit legislation that would place guardrails on VA job terminations that have been ordered by President Donald Trump's administration as part of a larger downsizing of federal government. The bill would represent the first effort by a GOP lawmaker to place limits on a directive by Trump to significantly decrease federal jobs and programs as part of a cost-cutting campaign.

Moran said he wants to be certain that efforts to "right size" the VA are done responsibly and with transparency.

Rep. Mike Bost, R-Ill., chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, does not plan to introduce similar legislation at this time, his office said Wednesday.

Moran plans to introduce his bill after the Senate returns from spring recess, according to his office. Many lawmakers return to their home districts for town hall meetings and to meet with constituents during the break, which is from March 17 through March 23.

Moran's office said Wednesday that the senator wants to meet with veterans organizations, individual veterans and other stakeholders before formalizing the legislation.

"The VA must work closely with Congress and veterans service organizations when it plans to undertake staffing cuts," Moran said Tuesday at a Senate VA committee hearing on bill introductions. "Congress must play a significant role in strategically shaping VA workforce decisions to achieve the right outcomes for veterans and their families."

Moran

Moran's legislation will compete with bills by Democratic lawmakers to reinstate veterans to their federal jobs.

Sen. Richard Blumenthal of Connecticut, the top Democrat on the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, planned to hold a news conference Thursday with Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., a committee member, to discuss the Putting Veterans First Act, which would restore jobs and protect veterans, their spouses and survivors from future jobs cuts.

A leaked internal VA memo sent by the chief of staff to other agency leaders stated the VA plans to fire 80,000 employees by August. The terminations would follow the layoffs last month of about 2,400 VA jobs.

But Moran said at the Senate hearing Tuesday that additional workforce reductions must be "thoughtful, transparent and carried out in close coordination" with lawmakers, veterans and other stakeholders.

Veterans make up about 30% of the federal workforce, which numbers more than 2 million. Veterans receive preference for federal employment over other job applicants.

A total of 6,000 veterans have lost jobs in the mass firings across federal agencies, according to lawmakers.

Republican lawmakers so far have not signed on to bills led by Democrats to protect veterans from job cuts, including legislation by Blumenthal and Sen. Tammy Duckworth of Illinois, an Iraq War veteran and member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee.

The two senators have held news conferences to condemn the firings and a hiring freeze at the VA. They have accused the Trump administration of hampering the agency, which is already struggling with not enough doctors and nurses due to a national shortage of medical personnel.

Blumenthal warned the terminations will roll back gains made under the PACT Act of 2022, which resulted in an additional 740,000 veterans receiving VA health coverage for illnesses connected to toxic exposure during military service.

"The PACT Act is a linchpin of modern-day protections for veterans. Veterans are asking whether benefits will still be available to them," Blumenthal said because of the job cuts.

NATION

Judge: Offer jobs to fired workers

By Salvador Rizzo
The Washington Post

SAN FRANCISCO — A federal judge on Thursday ordered the Trump administration to offer jobs back to all probationary employees who were fired last month from the departments of Agriculture, Defense, Energy, Interior, Treasury and Veterans Affairs under directions by the Office of Personnel Management, a ruling that could reinstate thousands of employees who were ousted as part of the president's push to slash the federal workforce.

Judge William Alsup said at a hearing in U.S. District Court in San Francisco that OPM — which serves as the federal government's human resources agency — had no legal authority to direct the mass firings in phone calls and written communications last month. He added that individual agencies could follow the steps laid out in a federal law called the Reduction in Force Act to pare back their staffs.

The ruling marked the most significant challenge so far to President Donald Trump's effort to shrink and reshape the sprawling, 2.3-million person federal workforce. Alsup also extended a temporary restraining order he had granted last month to a group of labor unions and advocacy groups who sued over the terminations.

Alsup castigated a Justice Department attorney arguing on behalf of the Trump administration for submitting "sham" documents and "stonewalling" efforts to gather facts and testimony, incensed that the acting director of OPM, Charles Ezell, refused to testify in court Thursday as the judge had previously ordered.

"I tend to doubt that you're telling me the truth," Alsup told Assistant U.S. Attorney Kelsey Helland, the lone Justice Department lawyer at the hearing.

"You will not bring the people here to be cross-examined," the judge said. "You're afraid to do so, because … it would reveal the truth. This is the U.S. District Court. … I've been practicing or serving in this court for over 50 years, and I know how we get to the truth."

The judge previously issued a temporary restraining order last month, finding that OPM's directives to terminate all probationary workers at the departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs, as well as the National Park Service, Bureau of Land Management, Small Business Administration and Fish and Wildlife Service were "unlawful, invalid, and must be stopped and rescinded."

Justice Department attorneys representing the Trump administration maintained that OPM never ordered federal agencies to fire employees and was only offering guidance, despite the fact that multiple human resources officials — from the IRS and National Science Foundation and the departments of Agriculture, Defense, Energy and Veterans Affairs — have said OPM ordered them to dismiss their probationary workers, according to court records.

Before the mass firings, the United States employed about 200,000 probationary workers, representing about 10% of its civilian federal workforce.

Al Drago/Bloomberg

Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., center, speaks to Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer during a news conference following the weekly Senate Democrat policy luncheon at the U.S. Capitol on Tuesday.

Dems fight GOP funding bill

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A day before a shutdown deadline, Senate Democrats were mounting a last-ditch protest over a Republican-led government funding bill that already passed the House but failed to slap any limits on President Donald Trump and billionaire Elon Musk's efforts to gut federal operations.

Senate Democrats are under intense pressure to do whatever they can to stop the Trump administration's Department of Government Efficiency, which is taking a wrecking ball to long-established government agencies by purging thousands of federal workers from jobs.

Democrats are pushing a 30-day funding bill as an alternative. But its prospects are dim in the Congress controlled by Republicans. And it's unlikely the Democrats would allow a government shutdown, worried about the further chaos they say Trump and Musk could cause.

As the Senate opened Thursday, with one day to go before Friday's midnight deadline, the Republican Senate Majority Leader John Thune said: "It's time to fish or cut bait."

Debates over funding the federal government routinely erupt in deadline moments but this year it's showing the political leverage of Republicans, newly in majority control of the White House and Congress, and the shortcomings of Democrats who are finding themselves unable to stop the Trump administration's march across federal operations.

In a rare turn of events, House Republicans stuck together to pass their bill, many conservatives cheering the DOGE cuts, leaving Democrats sidelined as they stood opposed. They House then left town, sending it to the Senate for final action.

Options for Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer are limited, especially as the party is wary of fully withholding their votes and being blamed for a full shutdown of services.

Schumer announced that Democrats were unified in pressing for a 30-day stopgap measure as an alternative to the House passed bill, which would instead fund operations through the end of the budget year in September.

With his party united, Schumer said the Republicans, who hold a 53-47 majority, lack the support needed to reach the 60-vote threshold, which is required to overcome a filibuster.

But Senate Republicans have shown little interest in Schumer's offer.

Trump threatens retaliatory 200% tariff on European wine

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump on Thursday threatened a 200% tariff on European wine, champagne and spirits if the European Union goes forward with a planned tariff on American whiskey.

The European tariff, which was unveiled in response to steel and aluminum tariffs by the U.S. administration, was expected to go into effect on April 1.

But Trump, in a morning social media post, vowed a new escalation in his trade war if the EU pushes ahead with the planned 50% tariff on American whiskey.

"If this Tariff is not removed immediately, the U.S. will shortly place a 200% Tariff on all WINES, CHAMPAGNES, & ALCOHOLIC PRODUCTS COMING OUT OF FRANCE AND OTHER E.U. REPRESENTED COUNTRIES," Trump wrote. "This will be great for the Wine and Champagne businesses in the U.S."

The Republican president on Wednesday had signaled that he intended to take the action.

"Of course I will respond," Trump told reporters during an Oval Office exchange.

Trump, in announcing new tariffs, openly challenged U.S. allies and vowed to take back wealth "stolen" by other countries, and he drew quick retaliation.

He has separate tariffs on Canada, Mexico and China, with plans to also tax imports from the European Union, Brazil and South Korea by charging "reciprocal" rates starting on April 2.

The EU announced its own countermeasures. European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said the United States was "applying tariffs worth 28 billion dollars, we are responding with countermeasures worth 26 billion euros," or about $28 billion.

Those measures cover not just steel and aluminum products but also textiles, home appliances and agricultural goods.

Trump withdraws CDC director nomination

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The White House has withdrawn the nomination of Dr. David Weldon, a former Florida congressman, to lead the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The Senate health committee announced Thursday morning that it was canceling a planned hearing on Weldon's nomination because of the withdrawal.

A person familiar with the matter, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations, said the White House pulled the nomination because it became clear Weldon did not have the votes for confirmation.

Weldon was considered to be closely aligned with Robert F. Kennedy Jr., the U.S. health secretary who for years has been one of the nation's leading anti-vaccine activists.

A former Florida congressman, Weldon also has been a prominent critic of vaccines and the CDC, which promotes vaccines and monitors their safety.

Weldon becomes the third Trump administration nominee who didn't make it to a confirmation hearing.

Previously, former U.S. Rep. Matt Gaetz withdrew from consideration for attorney general and Chad Chronister withdrew from consideration for the Drug Enforcement Administration.

NATION

Law firm gets reprieve from portions of executive order

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A federal judge blocked President Donald Trump's administration Wednesday from enforcing portions of an executive order designed to punish a prominent law firm linked to Democratic-funded opposition research during the 2016 presidential campaign into ties between the Republican candidate and Russia.

U.S. District Judge Beryl Howell in Washington granted a temporary restraining order sought by the firm, Perkins Coie, one day after it filed a federal lawsuit alleging it's being illegally targeted because of its legal work. The judge said the president's action sends a chilling message that lawyers can be punished for representing clients or advancing views unfavorable to the administration.

"Such a circumstance threatens the very foundation of our legal system," said Howell, who was nominated to the bench by Democratic President Barack Obama. "Our justice system is based on the fundamental belief that justice works best when all parties have zealous advocates."

Perkins Coie called the judge's ruling "an important first step in ensuring this unconstitutional Executive Order is never enforced."

"We will follow the court's direction regarding next steps and will continue to challenge the Executive Order, which threatens our firm, our clients, and core constitutional protections important to all Americans," a firm spokesperson said.

The order came during an extraordinary court hearing in which Attorney General Pam Bondi's chief of staff, Chad Mizelle, defended the latest in a series of retributive moves targeting the president's perceived adversaries. It's highly unusual for such a high-ranking Justice Department official to argue on behalf of the government in the trial court.

Mizelle, who's also serving as the acting associate attorney general, argued that the president has the clear authority to take action against entities he believes present a threat to national security.

"If that means excluding individuals that are no longer trustworthy with the nation's secrets, that's a bedrock principle of our republic," Mizelle said.

Perkins Coie says it's already suffering financial consequences of the order, which calls for limiting firm employees' access to federal buildings and terminating any government contacts of its clients.

SpaceX delays flight to replace NASA's two stuck astronauts

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — A launch pad problem prompted SpaceX to delay a flight to the International Space Station on Wednesday to replace NASA's two stuck astronauts.

The new crew needs to get to the International Space Station before Butch Wilmore and Suni Williams can head home after nine months in orbit.

Concerns over a critical hydraulic system arose less than four hours before the Falcon rocket's planned evening liftoff from NASA's Kennedy Space Center. As the countdown clocks ticked down, engineers evaluated the hydraulics used to release one of the two arms clamping the rocket to its support structure. This structure needs to tilt back right before liftoff.

Already strapped into their capsule, the four astronauts awaited a final decision, which came down with less than an hour remaining in the countdown. SpaceX canceled for the day. Officials later said the launch was off until at least Friday.

Once at the space station, the U.S., Japanese and Russian crew will replace Wilmore and Williams, who have been up there since June. The two test pilots had to move into the space station for an extended stay after Boeing's new Starliner capsule encountered major breakdowns in transit.

TERRY RENNA/AP

A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket scrubbed prior to liftoff at the Kennedy Space Center in Cape Canaveral, Fla., on Wednesday.

February US wholesale prices unchanged

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. wholesale inflation decelerated last month, suggesting that price pressures are easing for now. But the progress may not last as President Donald Trump intensifies his trade wars.

The Labor Department reported Thursday that its producer price index — which tracks inflation before it reaches consumers — was unchanged from January after rising 0.6% the month before. Compared to a year earlier, producer prices were up 3.2%, down from a year-over-year gain of 3.7% in January.

Excluding volatile food and energy prices, so-called core wholesale prices fell 0.1% last month from January, first drop since July. Core producer prices rose 3.4%, lower than the 3.8% year-over-year gain in January.

The readout comes as Trump ramps up his trade war with a wide range of U.S. trade partners, threatening to send inflation higher.

Major retailers have warned that they expect U.S. consumers to pull back spending this year in the face of higher costs, partially from from Trump's tariffs.

NOW HIRING

MS2USA is looking for Maintenance QARs (Kaiserslautern): €32-€34 per hour and car.

Visit our Careers Page at **www.ms2usa.com** or email **p.rinaldo@ms2usa.com**

NOW HIRING

MS2USA is looking for Air Force Munitions Personnel for job openings in the Abu Dhabi (UAE): Tax Free, Apartment, Car, Travel Stipend, & Bonus.

Visit our Careers Page at **www.ms2usa.com** or email **j.hillberry@ms2usa.com**

NOW HIRING

MS2USA is looking for Navy- Aviation Ordnance Personnel for job openings in the Abu Dhabi (UAE): Tax Free, Apartment, Car, Travel Stipend, & Bonus.

Visit our Careers Page at: **www.ms2usa.com** or email: **j.hillberry@ms2usa.com**

WORLD

JONATHAN FRANKS/AP

Jonathan Franks, second from right, and six American prisoners detained by Kuwait pose for a photo at Kuwait International Airport on Wednesday, before flying home to the United States. Franks is a private consultant who helped work for their release.

Kuwait frees a group of jailed Americans

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Kuwait has released a group of American prisoners, including veterans and military contractors jailed for years on drug-related charges, in a move seen as a gesture of goodwill between two allies, a representative for the detainees told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

The release follows a recent visit to the region by Adam Boehler, the Trump administration's top hostage envoy, and comes amid a continued U.S. government push to bring home American citizens jailed in foreign countries.

Six of the newly freed prisoners were accompanied on a flight from Kuwait to New York by Jonathan Franks, a private consultant who works on cases involving American hostages and detainees and who had been in the country to help secure their release.

"My clients and their families are grateful to the Kuwaiti government for this kind humanitarian gesture," Franks said in a statement.

He said that his clients maintain their innocence and that additional Americans he represents also are expected to be released by Kuwait later.

The State Department did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The names of the released prisoners were not immediately made public.

Kuwait did not acknowledge the release on its state-run KUNA news agency and did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The holy Muslim fasting month of Ramadan and its upcoming Eid al-Fitr holiday typically see prisoner releases across Muslim-majority nations.

The countries have had a close military partnership since America launched the 1991 Gulf War to expel Iraqi troops after Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein invaded the country, with some 13,500 American troops stationed in Kuwait at Camp Arifjan and Ali al-Salem Air Base.

But Kuwait has also detained many American military contractors on drug charges, in some cases, for years. Their families have alleged that their loved ones faced abuse while imprisoned in a country that bans alcohol and has strict laws regarding drugs.

UN report accuses Israel of sexual violence in Gaza war

Associated Press

GENEVA — United Nations-backed human rights experts on Thursday accused Israel of "the systematic use of sexual, reproductive and other gender-based violence" in its war with Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The allegations came in one of the most extensive reports of its kind on the issue since Hamas' Oct. 7, 2023, attack on southern Israel ignited the war.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu lashed out at the Human Rights Council, a U.N.-backed body that commissioned the team of independent experts, as an "anti-Israel circus" that "has long been exposed as an antisemitic, rotten, terrorist-supporting, and irrelevant body." His statement did not address the findings themselves.

The findings by the Commission of Inquiry on the Occupied Palestinian Territory, which seeks to document in minute detail the allegations and evidence of crimes to bolster accountability for perpetrators, could be used by prosecutors at the International Criminal Court or in other jurisdictions to try to bring justice to victims and their relatives.

In its report released Thursday, the commission examined the widespread destruction of Gaza, the use of heavy explosives in civilian areas and Israeli attacks on hospitals and health facilities. It said all three led to "disproportionate violence against women and children."

The commission documented a range of violations perpetrated against Palestinian women, men, girls and boys and accused Israeli security forces of rape and sexual violence against Palestinian detainees. Israel denies any systematic abuse of prisoners and says it takes action when there are violations.

"Our report finds that Israel has increasingly employed sexual, reproductive, and other forms of gender-based violence against Palestinians as part of a broader effort to undermine their right to self-determination," Chris Sidoti, a member of the commission, told reporters in Geneva.

Israel's mission in Geneva rejected the allegations and accused the commission of relying on "second-hand, single, uncorroborated sources." Since the commission was set up in 2021 — long before the Oct. 7 attacks in Israel — Israel has refused to cooperate with it, accusing the investigative team and the council of bias.

Commission member Sidoti said the report "also concludes that Israel has carried out genocidal acts through the systematic destruction of sexual and reproductive health care facilities."

The commission stopped short of accusing Israel of genocide, as some advocacy groups and other rights experts have. Israel, which was established in the wake of the Nazi Holocaust and is home to many survivors and their families, has vigorously denied such allegations.

Israel says it took extraordinary measures to avoid harming civilians in the 15-month war, which has been paused by a fragile ceasefire. It blames civilian deaths and destruction on Hamas because the militants operate in residential areas. Israeli forces carried out a number of raids on hospitals, accusing Hamas of using them for military purposes, allegations denied by Palestinian health officials.

Belgian prosecutors make arrests amid probe linked to the European Parliament

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — Belgian federal prosecutors announced Thursday the arrests of several people as part of a corruption probe linked to the European Parliament amid reports in local media that Chinese company Huawei bribed European Union lawmakers.

About 100 federal police officers carried out 21 searches in Brussels, the Flanders and Wallonia regions, and Portugal, the federal prosecutor's office said.

The suspects were arrested for questioning in "connection with their alleged involvement in active corruption within the European Parliament, as well as for forgery and use of forgeries," prosecutors said.

According to an investigation by Le Soir newspaper and other media, lobbyists working for Chinese telecoms giant Huawei are suspected of bribing current or former European Parliament members to promote the company's commercial policy in Europe.

Huawei representatives in London did not respond to an emailed request for comment.

The European Parliament said only that the assembly "takes note of the information" and when requested, "always cooperates fully with the judicial authorities."

Huawei, which makes cellphones and is the biggest maker of networking gear for phone and internet carriers, has been caught in tensions between the U.S. and China over technology and trade. Some European nations have followed Washington's lead and banned Huawei's equipment from next-generation mobile networks over allegations that it poses a security risk that could help facilitate Chinese spying. The company has repeatedly denied this.

Ecker
HONDA & ACURA
• Accident Repairs
• Body Work
• Maintenance
• Warranty - Work
• Damage Estimates
• Tax Free
www.honda-ecker.de
hauptstuhl@honda-ecker.de
Mon-Fri 0800 - 1700 • Sat 0900-1300
06372-4607 • Kaiserstr. 79, 66851 Hauptstuhl

H&R BLOCK
Germany H&R Block Tax Offices.
Get face-to-face tax help.
Ramstein
06371-8020410
Wiesbaden
0611-890-23100
Vilseck & Grafenwöhr
0713-573-6112
jorellano@hrblock.com

Express filing ITIN & Reports of
Foreign Bank Accounts (FBAR's)
Email: eclemons@hrblock.com

WEEKEND

Jack Quaid feels no pain in 'Novocaine'

Movies, Page 16

Unleashing 'Mayhem'

Lady Gaga's latest album a return to form for artist who claims she's regained her passion, identity

Music, Pages 28-29

Chuff Media

Video games — 15 Travel & Food — 19-25 Television — 30-31 Health — 32 Crossword — 34

Rein in robocalls

Here are some ways to silence unknown numbers

iStock

By Kelvin Chan
Associated Press

Unwanted phone calls are out of control. Whether it's a robocall trying to sell you something or spam calls from scammers trying to rip you off, it's enough to make you want to stop answering your phone. So what can you do to stop them?

The scourge of unwanted phone calls has been branded an epidemic by consumer groups, while the Federal Communications Commission says it's the top consumer complaint. The calls are a nuisance to many ordinary people, some of whom have complained to The Associated Press.

"I need help on getting spam calls to stop," one reader said in an email. She's getting up to 14 calls a day despite the countermeasures she's employed.

As the name implies, robocalls are automated calls to deliver recorded messages to a large number of phones. A robocall purely to deliver a message or collect a debt is allowed under U.S. regulations, but the Federal Trade Commission says robocalls with a recorded voice trying to sell you something are illegal unless you've given explicit written permission to receive them. Many robocalls are also probably scams, the FTC warns.

If you're flooded by unsolicited calls, here are some ways to fight back:

Phone settings

Smartphone users can turn on some built-in settings to combat unknown calls.

Apple advises iPhone users to turn on the Silence Unknown Callers feature. Go to your "Settings," then scroll down to "Apps" and then to "Phone," where you'll see it under the "Calls" section. When you turn this on, any calls from numbers that you've never been in touch with and aren't saved in your contacts list will not ring through. Instead, they'll be sent to voicemail and show up in your list of recent calls.

Android has a similar setting that allows you to block calls from private or unidentified numbers, although you will still receive calls from numbers that aren't stored in your contact list.

After this story was first published, a reader wrote in with a workaround for that problem: Leave your Android phone on Do Not Disturb but configure it so that anyone on your Contacts list is allowed to interrupt.

Just keep in mind that you could also end up not getting important calls, which sometimes come from unknown numbers.

If an unwanted call does get through, both Android and iPhone users can block the individual phone number by tapping on it in the recent callers or call history list. You can also enter numbers directly into your phone's block list.

Do not call

Sign up for the national Do Not Call registry, which is a list of numbers that have opted out of most telemarketing calls. The Federal Trade Commission, which runs the registry, says it only contains phone numbers and holds no other personally identifiable information, nor does the registry know whether the number is for a landline or a cellphone.

The FTC says there are some exemptions, including political calls, calls from nonprofit groups and charities and legitimate survey groups that aren't selling anything. Also allowed are calls from companies up to 18 months after you've done — or sought to do — business with them.

But it also warns that while having your number on the registry will cut down on unwanted sales calls, it won't stop scammers from making illegal calls.

Other countries, like Canada and the U.K., have similar registries.

Carrier filters

Check whether your wireless carrier has a call-blocking service. Verizon, T-Mobile and AT&T, three of the biggest U.S. networks, all have their own call filters for customers to block robocalls and report spam. There's typically a free basic version and an advanced version that requires a subscription fee.

Try an app

If your phone company's filters aren't good enough, try third-party apps to weed out unwanted callers.

There are a host of smartphone apps available that promise to block spam calls, like Nomorobo, YouMail, Hiya, RoboKiller, TrueCaller and others. Many charge a monthly or annual subscription fee, but some offer a free basic option. Some also can be installed on landline phones but only if they use VOIP technology, not copper cables.

The Associated Press hasn't tested any of these apps and isn't making specific recommendations. We recommend you read user reviews and try some out for yourself.

Apple says the apps work by comparing a caller's number with a list of known numbers and labeling them, for example, spam or telemarketing. Then it might automatically block the call. "Incoming calls are never sent to third-party developers," the company says.

Report calls

Did you know you can file a complaint with the FCC about specific spam calls? You can do so easily through an online form. It might not give you immediate satisfaction, but the National Consumer Law Center says data on complaints is the best tool federal agencies have for determining how big a problem robocalls are.

Just say no

While companies you've done business with can make robocalls to you, the National Consumer Law Center says it's probably because you gave consent — possibly hidden in fine print. But you can also revoke your consent at any time.

Just tell the company representative that you want to "revoke consent," and if that doesn't stop them, contact customer service and tell them that you don't consent to receive calls and want your number added to the company's "do not call" list, the center says.

Hang up

You might be tempted to try to engage with the call in an attempt to get your number off the call list or be put through to a real person. The FTC warns against doing this and recommends that you just hang up.

"Pressing numbers to speak to someone or remove you from the list will probably only lead to more robocalls," the agency says on its advice page. "And the number on your caller ID probably isn't real. Caller ID is easy to fake" and can't be trusted, it says.

Cybersecurity company Kaspersky advises not even saying anything when you receive what you think is a robocall. We've all received scammy calls that start with something like "Hello, can you hear me?" to which you've probably replied "yes" without thinking.

Scammers "can then store the recording of your confirmation and use it for fraudulent activities," Kaspersky says. "So, avoid saying yes where possible."

Blue Pure 511i Max an effective, compact air purifier

By Gregg Ellman
Tribune News Service

Blueair's Blue Pure 511i Max is a compact advanced air purification appliance ideal for keeping the air in your home or office clean and healthy.

According to the Blueair site, the AC-powered 14.5-by-9.3-by-9.3-inch, 4.2-pound device can clean the air at a rate of 193 square feet in 12.5 minutes, 460 square feet in 30 minutes and 920 square feet in 1 hour.

Its clean air delivery rate is 125 cubic feet per minute. To achieve maximum performance, the Blue Pure 511i Max is best used in a 193-square-foot room, allowing it to clean the air at the Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers recommendation of four times every 12.5 minutes.

The system has five filtration layers to remove 99.97% of airborne particles down to 0.1 microns, which can include pollen, cooking odors, smoke, dust, pet dander, mold, chemicals and allergen matter. It also says that tiny particles, including viruses and bacteria, can be captured. An indicator displays the air quality: very polluted, polluted, moderate, good or excellent.

BLUEAIR/TNS

The Blueair Blue Pure 511i Max is 14.5-by-9.3-by-9.3 inches and weighs only 4.2 pounds.

The Blue Pure 511i Max ($139.99) has Bluetooth and Wi-Fi (2.4 GHz)connections. It is built with a 360-degree air intake, allowing it to be placed almost anywhere in a room, even behind furniture. With the Blueair app you can set custom schedules, power the purifier on or off and set a child lock.

The Welcome Home feature automatically turns the Blue Pure 511i Max on when you leave the house and arrive back home.

RealTrack in-app monitoring tracks the replaceable filter and alerts you when it needs to be changed. The filter will last up to one year (it could vary based on your conditions and how much it is used), and a filter replacement LED will glow red as a reminder that it needs attention.

This air purifier uses an activated carbon filter, which can be cleaned or replaced in just a few steps. Filters can be purchased individually or delivered on a schedule with the filter subscription plan.

Specialty filter add-ons are available for additional protection against smoke or allergens. A prefilter add-on is also available in three color choices to help integrate the Blue Pure 511i Max into the space in which it will be used.

Online: blueair.com

WEEKEND: VIDEO GAMES

EA

Opposing principles on writing clash in Split Fiction. Here, the protagonists are led through the fantasy writer's digitized simulation.

Split Fiction leads 2-player gaming revival

Hazelight Studios founder and director Josef Fares discusses his most ambitious project yet, a sci-fi adrenaline rush

By Gene Park
The Washington Post

As a former filmmaker now directing video games, Josef Fares is taking the hard road to creativity.

"If I want to make another movie, it'll be like going on vacation," said Fares, the Swedish Lebanese founder of Hazelight Studios. "I've made five feature films. This is my fourth game as director. There's no denying at all that gaming is so much more challenging."

His most ambitious project to date is Split Fiction, published and released March 6 by EA on PlayStation 5, Xbox and PC. It's the studio's third game to require two players to play.

In hopes of getting work, the game's two budding young writers, Mio and Zoe, get contracted by a dubious publisher who throws them into a virtual simulation based on their stories. Mio is a cyberpunk gearhead obsessed with laser swords, while Zoe is a country girl who dreams about flying around as a fairy battling trolls. The game pits the two visions against each other as they learn to work together to survive a glitchy system that threatens their lives and, worse, to take credit for their work.

The game is a bewitching, action-packed roller coaster that plays with camera perspective, with Mio walking on walls while Zoe is upside down, all on the same screen with the two players using the same controls. It's a dizzying flourish of design that expands on the strangest ideas from Nintendo's Super Mario Galaxy, whose sequel is one of Fares' favorite games.

"We get inspired by a lot of different games. If I had to choose one thing, I would say Nintendo games in general," Fares said. "We like the simplicity of it, the variety, the speed of the form."

Fares is becoming a master of his chosen format. Split Fiction continues his experiments into creating games that require two players to work together to overcome obstacles. It Takes Two, a lovely tale about two soon-to-be-divorced parents forced to work together, has sold 23 million copies since its 2021 debut, Fares confirmed. The game won numerous awards, including coveted game of the year trophies from the Game Awards and the Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences. His 2018 prison escape tale, A Way Out, has now sold 11 million.

It's hard enough to create games. But Fares has been determined to hone his unique spin on multiplayer games. Split Fiction is about how creatives insert themselves into art, so the two protagonists are named after Fares' daughters. The story also involves a tech corporation "extracting" ideas from writers, an unsubtle critique of how generative artificial intelligence might steal from creatives.

"I don't believe AI is in a state where we can actually use it in development for real," Fares said. "On the other hand, gaming has been using AI for a long time ... so we can look at it like a tool. At the end of the day, you just want to make greater games, but it's not that right now. It's terrifying and exciting."

Fares said his story is about human connection and bridging understanding. It's a far cry from shooting dehumanized, anonymous targets in popular multiplayer games.

Jamie Madigan, a psychology Ph.D. and author of several books about gaming psychology, said Fares' games offer a deeper awareness and "social presence" of the other player.

"Psychologists study a lot of different kinds of presence, like do you understand where you are in a virtual space, and do you feel immersed in there," Madigan said. "Social presence is a similar concept, but it's whether or not you feel the degree of awareness of other people in an interaction."

Fortnite became the most popular shooting game in the world by pitting one person against 99 other players. The new and popular Marvel Rivals, a team-based shooter, is a middle ground, Madigan said, but still doesn't quite offer the same experience.

"It does seem like you're just playing in parallel to other people, and once the match is over, you rarely think back on that interaction," Madigan said, specifying that emotes and "ping" systems in those games help with a little social presence.

The existential longing for connection can motivate people to play all kinds of games, Madigan said, referring to the psychological term "relatedness."

"The idea is that we're motivated to engage in activities such as playing a game to the extent that it makes us feel important to other people, and that can be done in a lot of really abstract ways," he said. "There's some research done that even getting quests from computer-controlled characters in a game can give you that sense of relatedness, like being important to the blacksmith in the village. But what really scratches that psychological itch is when you're important to people you know." When each person has to do something different to help beat a level or defeat a boss, they feel relevant to other human beings and their shared goal.

Fares achieves this in Split Fiction. A showstopping early fight requires Mio to mount a massive robot to expose a weak point only Zoe can attack. Playing a Hazelight game is about dependence on the other person, forcing cooperation and communication.

Split Fiction is a game that reinvents itself in almost every scene. It is constantly creating and throwing away new ideas at a dizzying pace. One moment, Mio is doing the "Akira" slide on a cyberpunk motorcycle. In the next delightful scene, the pair are trapped in an early-childhood story Zoe wrote regarding her love of hot dogs, and her horror when she finally discovered how the sausage was made.

Fares seems to be a master of pacing, letting moments breathe after grabbing the audience by the collar through explosive action sequences. But it remains his biggest worry.

"Movies have had over 100 years to talk and figure out their stuff more in production," Fares said. "We're still figuring things out, and one of the key things in pacing."

Before becoming an award-winning director, Fares was most famous for a viral moment at the 2017 Game Awards, where he offered some unkind words (and a gesture) about the Oscars. He said the outburst came from excitement but also some frustration that the awards were constantly called "the Oscars of gaming." To him, video games don't need to be compared to other forms of art to have validation.

"I don't even take the argument that gaming isn't art, because it's so stupid," Fares said. "It's like reinventing the wheel every time you make a game."

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS

‘Novocaine’ a shot of violent comedy

Jack Quaid stars as everyman-hero who can’t feel pain

BY LINDSEY BAHR
Associated Press

Nathan Caine may not be able to feel pain, as the tagline for the new action-comedy “Novocaine” reads, but the same does not apply to viewers.

Although he doesn’t scream when his leg is impaled with an arrow or when he sticks his hand in a vat of frying oil, you might. I certainly did. Out loud. In a theater. With other people. There may have been some phrases uttered entirely involuntarily, too. Were other people reacting in the same way, I wonder? I couldn’t hear them over my own groans.

This is, in some ways, a film for people who thought John Wick wasn’t stabby enough. It delights in the relentless mutilation of its hero, a regular guy (played by Jack Quaid) with a rare condition that has rendered him immune from feeling any sort of discomfort to bodily harm. Unlike such high-concept premises as “Crank,” congenital insensitivity to pain analgesia (or CIPA) is actually real. But it’s not exactly a superpower, Nate explains. He can still die; it just might be because he hasn’t emptied his bladder in many hours. Or because he’s accidentally bitten his tongue off eating a sandwich. These are real concerns of his.

His entire existence is devoted to preventing these kinds of crises, mostly through tried-and-true baby proofing techniques like using tennis balls on sharp corners. He eats only “nonchewing food.”

Work is stable and dull as an assistant manager at a bank. And dating is out of the question; he spends most of his free time playing online video games.

Quaid is believable as this cautious introvert, though everything is played with a light touch and a wink. The movie, directed by Dan Berk and Robert Olsen, even begins with the mournful R.E.M. anthem “Everybody Hurts.”

Then Nate’s life is changed one day when a pretty teller at the bank, Sherry (Amber Midthunder), asks him out and even spends the night. The next morning, things get even crazier: Sherry is taken hostage after a violent robbery at the bank. These guys are capital-B bad (led by aactor Ray Nicholson, son of Jack), killing both the bank manager and the cops outside. So what does Nate do? He steals a cop car and attempts to save her himself.

“Don’t do it,” pleads an injured cop as Nate hesitates before apprehending the car. It’s hard to argue with the cop: Why not just let the professionals handle it, understaffed though they may be over the Christmas holiday? It would be a rather short and pointless movie if he did just leave it to the cops, but the impetus for this quest is a stretch, to say the least. The conceit is missing some extra justification of why he felt like he was the only one who could do it.

Paramount Pictures

Jack Quaid plays Nate Caine in “Novocaine,” an assistant bank manager with congenital insensitivity to pain analgesia, who tries to rescue a teller from her kidnappers.

Like many things in “Novocaine,” it simply exists to open more avenues for his torture. This involves a fight in a restaurant kitchen, a visit to a tattoo parlor to get more information on one of the robbers and a stop by a booby-trapped house. The script is self-aware enough to throw in a “Home Alone” reference, though not before you’ve made one in your head.

On the heels of some bad action comedies like “Love Hurts,” “Novocaine” is pretty enjoyable. It might have been born in the same elevator pitch incubator (what if nonstop violence!), but it’s executed with some style and understanding of comedic timing. In one clever sequence, Nate persuades his psychotic captor to torture him as slowly as possible, buying time until his friend gets there as he pretends to feel the pain. “Novocaine” also kind of overstays its welcome, stretching on too long with too many endings. Still, it’s an easy, if not entirely painless, watch.

“Novocaine” is rated R for strong, bloody violence, language throughout and grisly images. Running time: 110 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.

Russos’ adaptation of ‘The Electric State’ has no spark

BY MARK MESZOROS
The News-Herald (Willoughby, Ohio)

Perhaps someone could have made a compelling adaptation of “The Electric State,” Simon Stålenhag’s well-regarded 2018 graphic novel. Regardless, the Russo brothers haven’t.

Siblings Joe and Anthony — who directed box-office hits for Disney-owned Marvel Studios that include the two-part epic consisting of 2018’s “Avengers: Infinity War” and 2019’s “Avengers: Endgame” — whiff on an ambitious swing with “The Electric State.”

They have shot for an adventure akin to the beloved Amblin Entertainment movies from the 1980s — “E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial,” “Gremlins,” “Back to the Future,” etc. — which, as they note in the film’s production notes, respected children by offering them stories with real stakes. However, it’s hard to imagine kids — or, for that matter, adults — will be consumed by this dystopian, if colorful, science-fiction adventure.

And, hey, the Russo brothers are far from the lone reason to have high hopes for “The Electric State.” It stars a couple of relatively heavy hitters in Millie Bobby Brown, a star of Netflix hit series “Stranger Things,” and Chris Pratt, a veteran of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the aforementioned “Avengers” entries. Plus, Stanley Tucci, Ke Huy Quan and Giancarlo Esposito are key supporting players, with myriad other well-known talents — Anthony Mackie, Woody Harrelson, Brian Cox, Jenny Slate, Colman Domingo and Alan Tudyk among them — providing voice work for characters also co-portrayed by motion-capture actors. Shoulda been better.

“The Electric State” is set in an alternate version of the 1990s, years after The Walt Disney Co. created robots for its theme parks, with other corporations soon using them for work unappealing to humans. Of course, as artificial beings have a habit of doing in such stories, they decided they wanted more from life, banded together and — led by (wait for it) a Mr. Peanut robot (Harrelson) — went to war with humanity. The outlook was bleak for fleshy types until tech mogul Ethan Skate (Tucci) developed the neurocaster, a large headset that allowed a person to control a bipedal mechanized device that turned the tide and led to a treaty.

NETFLIX/AP

From left, Millie Bobby Brown, Chris Pratt and Ke Huy Quan star in “The Electric State.”

Now, Skate’s thriving company, Sentre, sells a consumer version of the neurocaster, allowing its user to escape into a virtual reality.

Brown portrays Michelle, who, after the death of her family in a car accident, lives with a rotten, neurocaster-addicted foster father (Jason Alexander). She’s lost emotionally and struggling at school, where she refuses to wear one of the headsets, as required, in class.

Michelle is visited at night by a friendly-looking robot based on a character from the “Kid Cosmos” cartoon, which she and her brilliant younger brother, Christopher (Woody Norman), used to watch. The robot, Cosmo (Tudyk), can only gesture and play audio of phrases from the show, but she quickly comes to believe it’s being controlled by her brother and sets off with it to find him.

Along the way, this unusual duo meets a soldier-turned-smuggler, Keats (Pratt), and his sarcastic robot partner, Herman (voiced by fellow MCU vet Mackie).

They’re being hunted by Esposito’s robot-detesting Colonel Marshall Bradbury, via a mech, on behalf of Skate, who’s heavily invested in stopping Michelle from attaining her goal.

Eventually, Michelle and company encounter a commune of robots, which, yes, is headed by Mr. Peanut. It’s also home to the rather charming Penny Pal (Slate) and unbelievably unfunny grizzled baseball player bot Pop Fly (Cox). There, Michelle also gets vital information from Dr. Amherst (Quan), the physician who’d told her that her brother had died in the crash.

It’s said you need to crawl before you can learn to walk. Sadly, “The Electric State” never matures beyond the crawling phase.

“The Electric State” is rated PG-13 for sci-fi violence/action, language and some thematic material. Running time: 130 minutes. Now streaming on Netflix.

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEW

‘Black Bag’ a delightful romantic spy film

Soderbergh’s latest about a married couple entangled in a web of deceit, devotion

FOCUS FEATURES/TNS

Cate Blanchett, left, and Michael Fassbender play married spies in Steven Soderbergh’s “Black Bag.” Fassbender’s character George thinks his wife Kathryn may be leaking sensitive information to foreign agents, so he investigates.

By Katie Walsh
Tribune News Service

Move over, Mr. and Mrs. Smith; there’s a new sexy spy couple steaming up the silver screen, courtesy of Steven Soderbergh. Say hello to George Woodhouse (Michael Fassbender) and Kathryn St. Jean (Cate Blanchett). In this thrillingly twisty romantic drama inspired by John le Carré, their chemistry might be cerebral, but it is no less carnal.

The screenplay is by David Koepp, which marks the second (and superior) feature collaboration between the writer/director duo in 2025, the first being the ghostly thriller “Presence.” If Koepp and Soderbergh decided to keep churning out 90-minute genre exercises for the foreseeable future, movie culture would be the richer for it, since “Black Bag” is one of the best — and most fun — films of the year so far.

“Black Bag” is the story of how married spies stay married, which involves a lot of trust, a lot of mutual surveillance and a “till death do us part” level of loyalty that extends beyond the job.

“That’s hot,” gasps underling Clarissa Dubose (Marisa Abela), who has found herself entrenched in George and Kathryn’s strange web of deceit and devotion, and indeed it is hot, Clarissa; indeed it is.

Fassbender, outfitted in turtlenecks and horn-rimmed glasses, brings a simmering intensity to his portrayal of the nerdy, fastidious George, who hates liars so much he has no problem surveilling his own family, which now includes his glamorous, elusive wife, Kathryn. She’s ended up on a list of possible leakers of sensitive information to foreign agents, and so now he will begrudgingly, but meticulously, investigate her potential involvement in the plot.

“Black Bag” opens and closes with a high-stakes dinner party game, in which we witness how George carefully extracts the truth from his targets, and how incestuously interwoven their little group of colleagues and collaborators has become, in both matters of the heart and matters of international terrorism plots.

That terrorism plot may be what initiates the conflict, but it is secondary to the primary question of the film, which is about relationships, fidelity, trust and truth. The spy craft on display is more emotional but no less technical in terms of reading people and eliciting reactions. The action, as they say, is the juice, and the action here is verbal, rather than physical — it is manipulation and mind games, which might even be foreplay for George and Kathryn.

Soderbergh surrounds his two powerhouse actors with an equally dreamy ensemble cast, including Abela, Tom Burke, Naomie Harris, Regé-Jean Page and a former 007 himself, Pierce Brosnan. The internal workings of the script deliver dizzying suspense, while Soderbergh offers up delectable surface pleasure as director, cinematographer (under his alias “Peter Andrews”) and editor. Rich, luxe interiors are lit by ostentatiously warm lights, which contrast with the icy environs of the National Cyber Security Centre; George’s proper buttoned-up style juxtaposes the tactile riot of Kathryn’s wardrobe, composed of varying textures in silk, leather and knits of rich browns, maroons and caramel (the stunning costume design is by Ellen Mirojnick).

“Black Bag” makes for an apt pairing with Soderbergh’s 2011 action film “Haywire,” also starring Fassbender. It’s easy to categorize one as brawn, the other brain, but “Black Bag” is embodied too: in George’s assessments of physical reactions during a polygraph test, or the way a jilted lover lashes out with violence, or how someone concealing a secret medicates themself to sleep.

It’s embodied in the way George and Kathryn embrace in bed, or turn away; it’s in the golden lamplight that makes faces glow with beauty and mystery across a table.

“Black Bag” may be rooted in the mind, but it is inextricably connected to the heart, especially in matters of love and trust, betrayal and murder. That’s what makes a Soderbergh genre exercise such a deliciously satisfying cinematic morsel: It is pure fun, but also deeply layered with larger existential themes, making for a delightful romantic spy drama that cannot be missed.

“Black Bag” is rated R for language including some sexual references, and some violence. Running time: 93 minutes. Now playing in select on-base theaters.

Where else to watch ‘Black Bag’ ensemble cast

One of the standout performers of “Black Bag” is **Marisa Abela**, who made a name for herself on the HBO series “Industry,” as one of the striving young hustlers working at a London-based finance firm. She showed her range playing the tragic English songstress Amy Winehouse in Sam Taylor-Johnson’s biopic “Back to Black” in 2024. While the film didn’t do Amy’s life justice, Abela’s performance did, including doing her own singing for the role, sounding remarkably like the distinctive Winehouse. Stream “Industry” on Max and “Back to Black” on Prime.

Tom Burke plays Freddie, one of the other slick and cunning spies at the National Cyber Security Centre. You may recognize Burke from his heavily eyelinered turn as the unlikely helper Praetorian Jack in George Miller’s epic “Furiosa: A Mad Max Saga.” That heroic turn stands in stark contrast to his gut-wrenching performance as a toxic boyfriend in Joanna Hogg’s cinematic memoir “The Souvenir,” starring Honor Swinton Byrne. Stream “Furiosa” on Netflix or Max and “The Souvenir” on Max.

Dashing **Regé-Jean Page** co-stars as department golden boy. You’ll remember him as the love interest from the steamy Season 1 of “Bridgerton” on Netflix. He’s also popped up in other projects, including the fantasy film “Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves,” streaming on Netflix or Paramount+.

The always excellent **Naomie Harris** plays their workplace psychologist who is wrapped up in matters beyond her professional purview. She has appeared in another popular British spy series featuring Bond, James Bond, playing Moneypenny in the Daniel Craig Bond films. But she is most memorable for her Oscar-nominated turn in Barry Jenkins’ 2016 film “Moonlight,” and in another South Florida epic crime saga, Michael Mann’s “Miami Vice.” Stream “Moonlight” on Kanopy and rent “Miami Vice” on all platforms.

And a 007 himself — **Pierce Brosnan** — makes an appearance in “Black Bag,” adding to the international espionage flavor. Rent his best Bond movie, “GoldenEye” (1995), on all platforms.

You also might be wondering who that tall man who initially sets the plot in motion might be. **Gustaf Skarsgård** should be recognizable as one of the Skarsgård acting family — his father Stellan, is a legendary actor, as seen in “Dune,” and his brothers Alexander and Bill are also big-name actors (“True Blood” and “It,” respectively). Gustaf also starred as Floki on the series “Vikings,” and all six seasons are on Netflix.

— Tribune News Service

Communal sweating in saunas hot in UK

Wellness trend considered beneficial for good health as well as 'connectedness'

BY SYLVIA HUI
Associated Press

PHOTOS BY KIN CHEUNG/AP

Above and below, Callum Heinrich, left, and Ella Price enjoy their Feb. 25 sauna session at the Hackney Wick Community Sauna Baths in London. Charlie Duckworth, co-founder of the Hackney Wick Community Sauna Baths, says saunas serve as "a place of communion," much like a pub or a church.

It may be winter and there may be a biting chill in the air, but the dozen men and women who have packed this small sauna room in east London are happily sweating away in their swimwear.

It's more than 90 degrees Celsius (194 Fahrenheit) in here — and it's about to get even hotter.

As ice blocks infused with lavender oil melt over sizzling hot stones, releasing fragrant steam, "sauna master" Oliver Beryl turns on some ambient music and starts to vigorously wave a towel in a circular motion above his head to spread overpowering waves of dry heat around the room.

"Now try finding someone and sit back to back with them," Beryl suggests. "Or, if you want, maintain eye contact with the person sitting next to you." A brief hesitation, but most gamely oblige for a few minutes.

Sauna-bathing has taken London and the rest of the U.K. by storm, particularly among trendy 20- and 30-somethings interested in trying a new pastime that's healthier than nights out in pubs and bars.

Sweating it out in communal spaces for relaxation, physical or mental therapy and socializing has long been a staple of many cultures around the world, from Scandinavia's saunas and Native American sweat lodges to Japan's onsens and Turkish baths.

But the most popular saunas now are those that emphasize community and "connectedness," or offer something novel alongside sitting in a heated box. Think sauna club nights featuring DJs, saunas combined with a poetry workshop, or "aufguss" (meaning "infusion" in German) rituals like the one hosted by Beryl — an intense session blending heat therapy, music and scent.

Many sites also offer open-air ice baths next to the saunas so people can cycle between hot and cold.

'It's exhilarating'

"I loved the feeling of losing yourself. It's a 15-minute detachment from normal life," said Jess Carmichael as she emerged from her first "aufguss" at Community Sauna Baths in Stratford, east London.

She likened the exhilaration she felt to the experience of running into the freezing sea with hundreds of others on New Year's Day.

"I think people need this right now — this warmth coming from the outside and feeling that you're sharing an experience with others," she added.

Charlie Duckworth, a co-founder of Community Sauna Baths, said it all started in 2022 when he and fellow "sauna nutters" installed two small saunas — including one in a horse box — in a disused parking lot in the trendy neighborhood of Hackney.

The not-for-profit social enterprise proved so popular that it has since expanded to four sites across the capital, with two more opening soon.

A large part of the appeal for many fans is that saunas serve as "a place of communion," much like a pub or a church, Duckworth said.

"Sauna lowers inhibitions and also gives you a feeling of mild euphoria," not unlike the effects of social drinking, he said. "I think it's an excellent place to socialize."

Around the U.K., the number of public sauna sites has jumped from 45 in 2023 to 147 so far this year, according to the British Sauna Society.

'Have a bit more fun with it'

Compared to countries where the practice is steeped in tradition, one benefit of the U.K.'s sauna culture being so new is that providers can "have a bit more fun with it and be more creative," Duckworth said.

At Peckham Sauna Social in south London, weekends feature relaxed ambient sauna nights with resident DJs and a nonalcoholic cocktail bar. One of its most popular monthly sessions is the "creative writing sauna": a short poetry reading followed by a chai tea and writing workshop afterward in the lounge.

"Reading in the sauna was something I'd never done before — just being hot and sweaty and dripping onto the page was challenging at first," said Caroline Druitt, a writer who leads the workshops.

Something about sharing a chat with other semiclothed strangers in the sauna seemed to encourage participants to be more open about sharing their ideas and writings, Druitt said. "Besides, I know that many of my best ideas have come out of the bath," she added.

Many sites also offer open-air ice baths so people can cycle between hot and cold.

Reported health benefits

Besides reducing stress and getting ideas flowing, some swear by saunas and cold plunges for soothing joint inflammation and improving heart health and sleep.

Some studies go further, with one suggesting a link between going to the sauna at least four times a week and a reduction in the risk of psychosis among middle-aged Finnish men.

"Authentic sauna done well should be as regular as the gym, and doing it regularly is what offers the reported health benefits," said Gabrielle Reason, secretary at the British Sauna Society.

While those health benefits aren't yet well established — and those with high blood pressure or heart conditions should check with their doctors before going to a sauna and ice bath — many converts return regularly for the mood boost.

"It just resets your brain in a really lovely way," said Callum Heinrich, submerged in a barrel of frigid water, his skin still steaming from the sauna. He says he attends twice a week when he can. "For your mental health, it is the best thing in the world."

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Rothenburg retains its medieval charm

As a young backpacker, I first fell in love with the picturesque village of Rothenburg, in Germany's Franconian heartland. At that time, the town still fed a few farm animals within its medieval walls. Today, its barns are hotels, its livestock are tourists and Rothenburg is well on its way to becoming a medieval theme park.

But Rothenburg is still Germany's best-preserved walled town. Countless travelers have searched for the elusive "untouristy Rothenburg." There are many contenders (such as Michelstadt, Miltenberg, Bamberg, Bad Windsheim and Dinkelsbühl), but none holds a candle to the king of medieval German cuteness. Even with crowds, overpriced souvenirs and a nearly inedible pastry specialty (a fried ball of pie crust called a Schneeball — "snowball"), Rothenburg is still the best. Save time and mileage and be satisfied with the winner.

By the way, there are several "Rothenburgs" in Germany. Make sure you plan for Rothenburg ob der Tauber (on the Tauber River); people really do sometimes drive or ride the train to other, nondescript Rothenburgs by accident.

In the Middle Ages, when Berlin and Munich were just wide spots in the road, Rothenburg was Germany's second-largest city, with a whopping population of 6,000. Today, it's the country's most exciting medieval town, enjoying tremendous popularity with tourists without losing its charm. There's a thousand years of history packed between its cobbles.

Rothenburg's Medieval Crime and Punishment Museum, all explained in English, is full of diabolical instruments of punishment and torture. Some visitors react with horror; others wish for a gift shop.

Rick Steves

St. Jakob's Church contains the one must-see art treasure in Rothenburg: a glorious 500-year-old altarpiece by Tilman Riemenschneider, the Michelangelo of German woodcarvers. For a closer view of this realistic commotion of Bible scenes, climb the stairs behind the organ. It's Germany's greatest piece of woodcarving.

Warning: Rothenburg is one of Germany's best shopping towns. Do it here, mail it home and be done with it. Lovely prints, carvings, wine glasses, Christmas tree ornaments and beer steins are popular. (OK, I admit it; my Christmas tree sports a few ornaments from Rothenburg.)

The biggest of the ornament shops has an excellent little German Christmas Museum upstairs. Its unique collection is much more than a ploy to get you to spend more money. You'll get a look at tree decorations through the ages, Christmas-tree stands, mini-trees sent in boxes to WWI soldiers at the front, early Advent calendars and old-time Christmas cards, all thoughtfully arranged and described.

Rick Steves

The town fountain is flanked by characteristic half-timbered buildings, once filled with grain and corn to enable the town's inhabitants to survive any siege.

To avoid the hordes of Rothenburg's day-trippers, I like to spend the night. Except for the rare Saturday night and during festivals, finding a room is easy. Rothenburg feels all mine after dark.

Well before the sun sets, climb the Town Hall tower to enjoy the best view of the town and surrounding countryside. For more views, walk the wall that surrounds the old town. This 1.5-mile stroll atop the wall is at its most medieval before breakfast or at sunset, when a rich, warm light bathes the half-timbered houses.

A walking tour helps bring the ramparts alive. For the serious side of Rothenburg's history, you can take the tour offered by the town's tourist office (or follow my free audio tour).

But for a thoroughly fun hour of medieval wonderment, take the Night Watchman's Tour. The watchman jokes like a medieval John Cleese as he stokes his lamp and takes tourists on his rounds, all the while telling gritty, slice-of-life tales.

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

Celebrate St. Patrick's Day in style at these festive events

Having an Irish bloodline is no prerequisite to celebrating St. Patrick's Day, and a handful of places across Europe will offer the chance to revel in the spirit of the Emerald Isle this weekend.

Milan, Italy: The culture, art and traditions of Ireland will be on full display across the city through Monday, as Milan celebrates Irish Week with a program made up of music, dance, food, film, a showcase of the country's travel destinations and more. An exhibition of landscape photography can be enjoyed along Via Dante, where buskers and street dancers will perform through the weekend. Local institutions getting into the act include the Hard Rock Café, Spirit of Ireland, Old Fox Pub, Mulligans Pub Milan and Pogue Mahone's. Online: tinyurl.com/yzvfheeb

Karen Bradbury

London: The Mayor of London's St Patrick's Festival is set to unfold from noon-6 p.m. Sunday in and around Trafalgar Square. Stalls offering food and drink will flank the main stage upon which Irish acts including Kila, Women in Harmony, Rag-CV and others will perform. The Irish Creative Collective Sessions area offers a lineup of comedy, music, spoken word, TV and film shorts, while basic dancing steps will be taught at the Irish Dance Zone. A parade gets underway from Hyde Park at noon. Online: tinyurl.com/yk5aeh57

Munich, Germany: What's billed as the biggest St. Patrick's Day celebration on the European mainland has been taking place in Munich since 1996.Bavarian and Irish cultural traditions will come together once again at an open-air festival at Odeonsplatz from 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Saturday and from noon-6 p.m. Sunday. A variety of acts take to the stage, from traditional Irish folk artists to dance ensembles, while numerous stands serve up Irish-inspired food and drink. The parade on Saturday is the highlight of the festivities. At noon, 70 or so groups, from rugby players to costumed leprechauns, will start off along the Münchner Freiheit, following a 1.5-mile route along Leopoldstrasse and Ludwigstrasse to Odeonsplatz, as festively attired spectators cheer them on. Online: tinyurl.com/yzy78ceb

iStock

Revelers will gather in the streets of Dublin to celebrate St. Patrick's Day, which falls on a Monday this year.

Dublin: With Monday a public holiday, three straight days of festivities are set to enliven the country's capital. On Saturday and Sunday, circus acts will serve up acrobatics and street acts entertain; as evening falls, they will make way for musicians and show bands. A fun fair will be set up along the Custom House Quay. From 2 p.m.-5 p.m. on Monday, an interactive Céilí Mór dance will take place on Merrion Square West, led by former Riverdancer and champion step-dancer Dearbhla Lennon.

Dublin's main event is a parade that gets underway from Parnell Square at noon on Monday. About a half million spectators typically turn out for the chance to see the floats, bands, folk groups and thousands of other costumed marchers. The theme of this year's parade, Eachtraí (Adventures), celebrates the adventurous spirit of the Irish people and their ability to transform fear into courage. Online: stpatricksfestival.ie

St. Patrick's Day celebrations are not confined to Dublin. Other locations include Cork (parade, live trad and folk music); Derry/Londonderry (spring carnival parade, street performers); Killarney (music festival, rubber duck race and parade); Waterford (parade, river cruises, whiskey tastings); Belfast (music festival, trad trail, parade); Limerick (international band championships, concerts, street performers); and Kilkenny, where the Kilkenny Tradfest music festival takes place simultaneously. Online: tinyurl.com/54e49x3w

No way to get to Ireland on such short notice? There's plenty of reason to visit in all seasons. Some of the top events for 2025 include:

Bloomsday: On June 16 each year, Dublin's streets return to 1904, the day that Irish author James Joyce set his novel "Ulysses." Fans retrace the steps of the book's fictional Leopold Bloom wearing costumes of the day.

Fleadh Cheoil: Traditional music rings out night and day in Wexford Town from Aug. 3-10.

Dublin Beer Festival: Craft beer brewers pour their concoctions and live music flows at the RDS Sept. 12-13.

Galway International Oyster and Seafood Festival: This culinary event serves up fresh seafood Sept. 26-28.

Guinness Jazz Festival Cork: A diverse range of jazz in all its styles, along with hip-hop, R&B, dance music and more performed by top Irish and international acts, unfolds Oct. 23-27.

Early birds get the best flights

Hopping on an airplane at the crack of dawn gives you the best chance of leaving on time

BY HANNAH SAMPSON
The Washington Post

At some point between the brutally early alarm, the rushed dog walk in the dark and the bleary-eyed luggage toss into an Uber, Chris Wilson inevitably starts rethinking his life choices.

"Why do I do this to myself?" Wilson, a franchise consultant based in Central Florida, wonders as he heads out, yet again, to catch the earliest flight of the day.

It's standard advice from travel experts: To give yourself the best chance of avoiding delays, hop on a plane at the crack of dawn. The early bird gets the most dependable flight — and often the cheapest. Frequent travelers interviewed by The Washington Post said the lost sleep and pre-sunrise rides to the airport are worth the pain. In hindsight, at least.

"As much as I hate it, it seems like the smart way to go," said Angie Orth, an author and host of the Traveling with AAA podcast who said she takes the first flight to her destination more often than not.

Why first flights rule

Scott Keyes, founder of the cheap-flight service Going, said travelers can't predict the weather when they book a flight months in advance. But they can put themselves in a good position to leave on time by booking the day's first flight.

Data from the Department of Transportation backs this up: In November, flights scheduled to leave in the 6 a.m. hour at the country's 30 largest airports departed on time more than 94% of the time. By the 6 p.m. hour, 79% of flights were leaving on time. The difference was more stark in August, when weather delays are often worse: While nearly 90% of flights in the 6 a.m. hour left on time, that number dropped to just above 60% by the 6 p.m. hour.

United Airlines even has a name for its first flights: STAR, or Start the Airline Right, flights. The name applies to departures before 9 a.m. when the plane has been on the ground for four or more hours; the airline said those that leave on time are 20% more likely to stay on schedule for the rest of the day.

"By getting our STAR flights out on time, it allows our operations to better plan for morning departures and helps set us and our customers up for success throughout the day," United said in a statement.

Keyes said the most important thing about early flights is the location of the plane.

"For the first flight of the day, it's already at the airport, it's ready to go, it's been sleeping there overnight," he said.

Travelers don't have to worry about an inbound plane delay, or the cascading effects of weather complications elsewhere. Weather also tends to be better in the morning; according to the National Weather Service, summer thunderstorms usually develop in the afternoon when the sun heats air close to the ground.

Traveling early can be better for your pocketbook as well: Keyes said early-morning flights tend to be cheaper than those operating later in the day. Both Orth and Wilson said they sometimes get upgraded on those flights.

Another perk: Having more time in your destination.

"I'd rather get to the place I'm going and just be there and have that whole day rather than spend what I feel is the whole day traveling," said Orth, 43, of Jacksonville, Fla.

But oh, the pain

You start paying the price for the morning flight long in advance, like the night before, when you're doing laundry and packing and counting down the hours until you must be awake again. Then there's the nervous sleep — "essentially sleeping with one eye open," Wilson said — as your subconscious tries to make sure you don't sleep through the alarm.

"I won't really have trouble waking up at 3 a.m. because I'll already have woken up at midnight, 12:30, 1 a.m.," Keyes said.

There may be a half-awake scramble to double-check your packing list and find anything that's missing. Christane Njatcha, 31, a travel content creator who publishes as Journeys with Kris, said she'll examine her notes app, confirm she has her passport and make sure all her chargers are ready to go.

Need to get to the airport in basically the middle of the night? That's your problem. Better wake yourself up enough to drive and park or outsource that task.

"I'd like to think that my wife loves me dearly, but I would not even ask her to take me to the airport at 4 a.m.," Wilson said — especially because they have two young kids.

Njatcha, of Gaithersburg, Md., spends the first part of her ride to the airport checking to make sure she has her keys, passport, credit card and other essentials. She always tries to arrive two hours before domestic flights and three hours before international trips in case of any unexpected hiccups.

Wilson, 44, takes the opposite approach: Equipped with TSA PreCheck and Clear, which grant him expedited screening, he tries to roll in as the plane is boarding for early-morning flights.

"I don't even want to drink coffee because my intent is to sleep on the plane," he said. He usually catches an hour or two at least. "I've fallen asleep on a plane before the plane has backed up at the gate."

How to make the flight (slightly) easier

Keyes said he tries to make sure he's all packed, with a written list of any last-minute tasks or additions.

"I'm trying to make it as easy as possible for my 3 a.m. self to not be worried and forget stuff," he said.

Orth, who is also a travel content creator, said she sets several alarms on early-flight days, including one to warn her when the five-minute countdown to leave the house is on.

Njatcha tries to take advantage of airline apps to do everything she can in advance, like checking in and scanning her passport. She's invested in expedited screening services to get through airport lines more quickly. And she schedules her ride pickups ahead of time so she isn't scrambling to locate a driver first thing in the morning.

Some take the sleepwalker approach.

"Usually I'm in such a fog and a haze that early in the morning that I kind of don't even remember it," Orth said. "That was a weird fever dream."

ILLUSTRATION BY NOGA AMI-RAV/Stars and Stripes

Booking a flight for 6 a.m. can indeed be painful — losing sleep, having to scramble while half-awake to get everything ready and to find a driver first thing in the morning. But it does have its advantages.

> **"As much as I hate it, it seems like the smart way to go."**
>
> **Angie Orth**
> author, podcast host

The reinvention of gourmand's paradise

More affordable venues give Spanish town San Sebastián new culinary middle ground

By Rafael Tonon
Special to The Washington Post

PHOTOS BY GUIA BESANA/For The Washington Post

Mackerel and pumpkin crudo from San Sebastián's Bar Arenales, which features a vegetable-heavy menu and natural wine (below). Bar Arenales is one of the pioneers of the movement seeing more casual restaurant concepts that pair natural wines with small dishes.

San Sebastián, Spain, perched on the North Atlantic, boasts one of the highest concentrations of Michelin-starred restaurants in the world. The Basque resort town's population of less than 200,000 enjoys access to 12 such elite institutions no more than a short drive away, including three with a rare three-star rating.

For decades, a reputation for eating well has drawn not only Spanish royals but a massive influx of tourists. Visitors crowd its dozens of Old Town bars serving pintxos, the elaborate bar snacks that cover counters across the city, and fill the fine-dining restaurants that have helped define the new Spanish cuisine with their tasting menus.

But the pandemic, followed by a historic spike in food prices in Europe, has underscored the need for a more affordable middle ground in this culinary hub. And a new wave of innovative chefs is filling it.

Neo-bistros have opened focusing on Basque flavors and traditions, alongside more casual venues that combine relaxed atmospheres, curated eclectic wine lists and ingredients produced by the same local suppliers that service the top-tier restaurants in the region. Most of these new ventures come from entrepreneurial cooks without investors, running tiny kitchens with no more than five people, who have traded their chef hats for backward caps and stylish bandannas.

"More informal yet excellent restaurants have emerged, adding outstanding and original concepts to the city," said Elena Arzak, a prominent local chef at the three-starred Arzak, which she runs jointly with her father, the Basque culinary legend Juan Mari Arzak.

The result is a further enriched food scene in San Sebastián — and a still-evolving one. Here are some of the trends and restaurants to know:

Fire-powered seafood, produce

The young chefs at the forefront in San Sebastián have honed their skills in some of its most acclaimed restaurants. Now, running their own, many are blending tradition with innovation.

At Muka, nestled within the Kursaal, a glass complex overlooking Zurriola Beach, Catalan chef Juan Vargas showcases local produce as he embraces the Basque tradition of fire cooking.

"We aim to serve recipes with a haute cuisine approach and care in a more casual format," said Vargas, who previously worked at the two-starred Mugaritz. His à la carte menu at Muka features fish and shellfish, mainly from the Urola Coast, and smoky flavors crafted in an open kitchen.

Other Mugaritz alumni transformed a former truck garage in the beachfront Gros neighborhood into Humo, the trendiest pizza shop in town, whose name translates to "smoke." Its industrial architecture and poster-plastered walls make it feel like Brooklyn's Williamsburg, and the focus is on creative and fun pizza toppings, from the local tomatoes used in the sauces to the Basastxerri jamón aged in the Basque Country. The flavor combinations are inventive: baked carrots with blue cheese and nuts, Iberian ham with egg yolk and raisins and octopus with potato, aioli and bell peppers.

Maun, a creative and unpretentious gastropub, is tucked nearby among the fish, vegetable and meat stalls of the San Martín Market. Almost everything on the menu goes on the charcoal grill, from scallops with habanero water, lime and ginger, to burgers, seasonal vegetables and paella with perfectly crispy edges. Chefs Mateus Mendes and Unai Paulis also serve one of the best Basque cheesecakes in the city.

Latin American infusions

Just as they inspire native Basques, San Sebastián's restaurants attract talent from all over the world, including from Latin America. Such chefs are bringing fresh flavors and influences and inspiring new projects, too, anchored in the city's Gros neighborhood.

Peruvian couple German Barrocal and Anali Paytán met in the kitchen of a San Sebastián restaurant before deciding to start their own venture, Artean. In an open bar with 12 seats that combines the ambiance of a French bistro with a Japanese omakase, it serves dishes that highlight Basque products while honoring their own roots, such as a tiradito of bonito with ajoblanco and caviar, and an octopus-and-scallop ceviche with piquillo pepper sauce.

Less than 100 feet away, Ana Lore Lasa and Obrayan García run R Restaurante Bar, where Garcia infuses dishes with Mexican traditions, such as grilled goatfish with a sauce made from its bones and a touch of chipotle. An informal bar setting in the front serves up beer and snacks, while a casual restaurant in the back serves à la carte and light tasting menus (from four to six dishes).

Casa 887, a casual basement spot with a brewpub atmosphere and a hip-hop soundtrack, brings dishes that rival those of many high-end local restaurants: perfectly cut nigiri, tempura crayfish bao, corn toast with tuna and avocado and arroz bomba with roasted garlic carabinero. Its Brazilian chef, Antonio Belotti (a former student of Francis Mallmann), draws from Latin, Asian and Basque influences.

"After the Michelin restaurant boom and pintxos bar movement, many underdog restaurants have emerged with a local philosophy of valuing the product, making high-quality dining more democratic," Belotti said. "Since we're not Basque, we can mix different references and create a cuisine that is less traditional and more open to the world."

A movement toward natural wine

San Sebastián's tourism growth, particularly among younger couples plotting weekend getaways, has spurred an additional movement: more casual restaurant concepts that pair natural wines with small dishes to share.

One of the pioneers was Bar Arenales, located along the heart of Boulevard Zumardia, one of the city's main streets. The short menu is predominantly plant-based, the natural wines come from small-batch makers and the old marble tables invite a laid-back meal.

But few restaurants showcase San Sebastián's new ideas quite like Sa Taula around the corner, where dinner begins with a few specially chosen bottles already on the table. There is no wine list at Sa Taula, not even a menu. In the cozy kitchen-living room — which resembles an improvised garage with just a small oven and a few other pieces of equipment — the two Catalan chefs, childhood friends, create a menu with the best ingredients available that day. The 10 guests arrive at the same time, then proceed to dine together on around a dozen courses.

"We wanted people to feel more like they were going to a friend's or family member's house than to a restaurant," said Carlos Guijarro, one of Sa Taula's founders. "We knew it was an innovative idea, a little risky for the city. But just a few months after opening, and with things going well, we can say that San Sebastián has never been so open."

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS

PHOTOS BY ALISON BATH/Stars and Stripes

A room-sized, 3D diorama at the National Archeological Museum of Naples in Italy depicts the ancient Roman town of Pompeii before it was destroyed by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79.

Thousands of artifacts, including household items, medical and dental equipment, and military gear, are on display at the National Archeological Museum of Naples in Italy.

Hundreds of ancient Greco-Roman sculptures and paintings, many discovered amid the ruins of the ancient towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum, are also on display at the museum.

Archaeological wonders of Pompeii

Naples museum's artifacts, art help visitors learn about the ancient Roman civilization

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

No trip to see the ruins of the ancient Roman city of Pompeii is complete without a visit to the renowned National Archeological Museum of Naples.

Hundreds of artifacts found amid the destruction after the cataclysmic eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79 are housed at the museum about 16 miles from the archaeological site of Pompeii.

Situated in the Rione Sanità neighborhood, the museum encompasses five levels of the Palazzo del Mann, a former royal cavalry barracks that later housed the University of Naples until 1777.

The building subsequently was enlarged and refurbished to accommodate an impressive collection of Greco-Roman antiquities amassed by Alexander Farnese, who became Pope Paul III in 1534, and artifacts discovered in Pompeii and other Vesuvian towns.

The everyday lives of aristocrats, merchants, domestic workers, slaves and others killed in the legendary blast can be experienced through the paintings, sculptures, bronze works, household items and other objects they left behind.

The museum's collection also includes Egyptian artifacts from antiquity and a compendium of ancient inscriptions. Unfortunately, on my recent visit, the basement floor housing the Egyptian statues, funeral objects and other treasures was closed.

There also wasn't a map of the museum readily available, although a printable version in English and Italian can be found online. In addition, a hardbound guide in both languages is for sale for 24 euros.

Entering the museum on the ground level, visitors first see an imposing marble statue of Marcus Nonius Balbus on horseback discovered at Herculaneum, present-day Ercolano. The statue, dated to 20 B.C., is one of many honors erected in the city to the prominent patron.

On the same floor, which is also known as the zero level, are Greco-Roman antiquities, including marble and bronze sculptures, from the area around Naples and the impressive Farnese collection, featuring a sculpture of the ancient goddess Artemis.

You also can see the Farnese Bull, a massive sculpture of yellowish-white marble depicting the murder of the Greek nymph Dirce by the twin sons of Zeus, Amphion and Zethus, in the presence of their mother, Antiope, dated to the early third century.

A marble statue of the Greek titan Atlas, dated to the 2nd century, on the second level of the National Archeological Museum of Naples.

Up one floor on the first level are the mosaics of the House of the Faun, a luxurious villa in Pompeii. The stunning collection, salvaged from the ruins of the city's largest home, includes an immense mosaic titled "Battle of Alexander Against Darius," which originally was installed on the floor of the residence.

Don't miss the "Female Portrait," with its tiny mosaic pieces, and "Memento Mori," an allegory of death dated to the midfirst century B.C.

On the second level, visitors will find the immense Hall of the Sun Dial. Among its artworks is a second-century marble sculpture of the Greek titan Atlas holding the globe. The level also includes a room-sized, three-dimensional diorama of Pompeii, artifacts from the Temple of Isis and displays of household items — such as glassware, dishes, pots and jugs — and military equipment.

Also nearby are a collection of frescoes that document Roman painting in the Vesuvius area between the first century B.C. and the first century A.D., according to the museum.

Among them are "Flora," which depicts the Roman goddess of spring, flowers and fertility and was discovered in the Villa di Arianna in the ancient town of Stabiae, and "Dancers" from the Villa di Cicero in Pompeii.

For visitors in need of a break from touring the museum's wonders, two garden areas and a café offering drinks and light snacks present an opportunity to reflect.

With much to see and ponder, the National Archeological Museum of Naples is a great way to spend a morning or afternoon learning more about ancient Roman civilization in southern Italy.

bath.alison@stripes.com
@alisonbath_

The National Archeological Museum of Naples is located in the historic Palazzo del Mann.

On the QT

Address: Piazza Museo Nazionale 19, Naples, Italy. There are stops for the museum on metro lines 1 (Museo stop) and 2 (Piazza Cavour stop).
Cost: 20 euros; free for children 17 and under. The museum is open for free to everyone on the first Sunday of each month.
Hours: 9 a.m.-7:30 p.m., Wednesday-Monday; closed on Tuesdays and Christmas Day; check museum website for reduced hours on Christmas Eve, New Year's Eve and New Year's Day.
Information: Online: museoarcheologiconapoli.it

Alison Bath

WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING

Sure bets for a sugar fix in Kaiserslautern

These 5 standout desserts found at restaurants throughout the German city should satisfy your sweet tooth

BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

Leaving room for dessert is often easier said than done in and around Kaiserslautern, Germany, where schnitzels are the size of dinner plates and single servings of käsespätzle can feed a small family.

However, some desserts at area restaurants are worth saving space for — or even skipping straight to. Here are five standout offerings I discovered that should satisfy your sweet tooth:

Cafe Gourmand at Restaurant 11A

Last month marked six years since Restaurant 11A opened in the upscale Saks Urban Design Hotel in Kaiserslautern's Stiftsplatz.

The restaurant's Cafe Gourmand is a selection of several small desserts served together with an espresso. The portions may be small, but they're flavorful.

The chocolate mousse is smooth and dense, thicker than any mousse I've tried before. It pairs well with the vanilla sauce that decorates the plate. The panna cotta is also thick, with a mild sweetness accentuated by an even sweeter strawberry topping.

The tiramisu, on the other hand, is light and airy, with a fluffy cream layer atop a moist, but not soggy, coffee-soaked base. Each spoonful nearly dissolves in the mouth, leaving just a hint of coffee flavor.

The egg white cream with passion fruit is fresh and light, while the simple combination of mandarin orange and mint serves as a palate cleanser.

The Cafe Gourmand is a good choice for those who can't decide on one dessert, or just like to indulge in a bit of everything.

Address: Stiftsplatz 11, Kaiserslautern, Germany

Cost: 15 euros

Hours: Monday through Saturday, 10 a.m.-11 p.m.

Information: +49 631 37098730, www.11a-kl.de

Warm crepe with vanilla ice cream and plum at Julien

Julien is Kaiserslautern's best-known French restaurant. During a recent visit, I had my heart set on the plum crepe, but the staff recommended the chocolate mousse, leaving me with a tough decision. In the end, I ordered both.

Each dessert arrived beautifully arranged, featuring a dash of chocolate and fruit garnishes.

I tasted the mousse first and immediately understood the recommendation. The chocolate was rich and intense, even more pronounced than the mousse at Restaurant 11A, though its consistency was much lighter.

The two boules of chocolate mousse sat in a sweet mango jus. The dish was excellent and I'd order it again. But if I had to choose between the mousse and the crepe, I'd go with the latter.

The slightly tangy plum filling gave the crepe a sophisticated touch. Each bite was warm and gooey, with a light crunch from a sprinkling of almond pieces.

PHOTOS BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN/Stars and Stripes

The Cafe Gourmand at Restaurant 11A in Kaiserslautern, Germany, has a selection of small desserts, including some with chocolate and passion fruit.

The star ingredient in the Lotus cake at Mommy's Café is Lotus Biscoff, a beloved cookie with flavors of cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves and ginger.

In the warm chili chocolate cake at Restaurant 21 in city hall, sweetness dominates the spice.

Thin slices of apple and a cloud-like whipped cream complemented the flavor and texture, and the scoop of vanilla ice cream completed it all.

Address: Altenwoogstrasse 3, Kaiserslautern

Cost: Crepe, 9.80 euros; mousse: 10.80 euros

Hours: Tuesday through Saturday, 6-11 p.m.; Sunday, 6-10 p.m.

Information: +49 631 64887, www.restaurant-julien.de

The warm crepe at Julien, a French restaurant, is made with plum filling. It pairs beautifully with vanilla ice cream.

The apple strudel at Spinnrädl with a flaky crust that gives way to a soft center.

Lotus cake at Mommy's Café

Sometimes, dessert isn't just an afterthought. It's the main event. That's certainly the case at Mommy's Café, which opened last summer across from the Fruchthalle and specializes in vegan cakes and coffee.

The restaurant's most popular dessert is the Lotus cake, and it's easy to see why it routinely sells out.

It's made with the Lotus Biscoff brand of speculoos, a shortbread cookie spiced with cinnamon, nutmeg, cloves and ginger that is popular in Germany, France and the Low Countries.

It consists of layers of fluffy, lightly sweet lentil-based frosting, airy sponge cake and a rich spread made of Lotus cookie bits, cookie butter and vegan butter.

The portions at Mommy's Café are generous, but because the Lotus cake isn't overpoweringly sweet, it won't leave you with a sugar crash.

New cakes are baked fresh daily and slices that are more than a day old are sold at discounted prices.

Address: Fruchthallstrasse 11, Kaiserslautern

Cost: 3.70 euros per slice

Hours: Thursday through Tuesday, 12-8 p.m.; closed Wednesday

Information: +49 1523 6802839, www.mommyscafe.de

Warm chili chocolate cake at Restaurant 21

Located on the 21st floor of Kaiserslautern City Hall, Restaurant 21 bills itself as a fusion restaurant. For dessert, it aims for sweet with heat.

The warm chili chocolate cake contains peppers, though it's far from spicy. In fact, I didn't detect any while eating, but a subtle aftertaste lingered afterward. It was the sweetness that predominated.

The cake is topped with a runny chocolate sauce and fresh strawberries, paired with vanilla ice cream drizzled with caramel. Crumbled cookies add crunch, while kiwi and blueberries provide an occasional tangy contrast.

There's a lot happening in this dish, but in the end, the combination of chocolate cake and vanilla ice cream is the best part.

Address: Willy Brandt Platz 1, Kaiserslautern

Cost: 8.50 euros

Hours: Saturday through Thursday, 5:30-11 p.m.

Information: +49 631 3204370, www.21-lounge.de

Warm apple strudel with vanilla sauce and cream at Spinnrädl

Spinnrädl, housed in Kaiserslautern's oldest surviving half-timbered building, is a great place to indulge in apple strudel, a beloved staple of German dessert culture despite its Austrian origins.

It arrives warm, the golden, flaky crust giving way to a soft center filled with tender, slightly tangy apples. A generous serving of rich vanilla sauce pools around the strudel.

Served with airy whipped cream, Spinnrädl's strudel is both comforting and indulgent.

This dish is so good, in fact, that I nearly ordered it twice.

Address: Schillerstrasse 1, Kaiserslautern

Cost: 7.50 euros

Hours: Monday through Friday, 5-11 p.m.; Saturday, 10 a.m.-11 p.m.; closed Sunday

Information: +49 631 60511, www.spinnraedl.de

wellman.phillip@stripes.com
@pwwellman

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Exploring Osaka's alternative scene

Black punk singer from Maryland finds sense of belonging in music community

BY MAXINE WALLACE
Special to The Washington Post

Alyse Sugahara gripped a beer as she walked past the break-dancers in her black leather jacket. Her hair was shaved tight at the sides and styled into twists on top. Her combat boots rose and fell underneath knee-high socks. The piercings in her cheeks and nose caught the streetlights on the way to Osaka's punk venues, fetish bars and karaoke clubs, where she was about to spend another night outside the lines of conventional Japanese society.

A translator by day and a bartender and punk singer by night, Sugahara is one of many expats who have chosen a different lifestyle than the traditional, family-oriented role of women in Japan. She spends evenings at Dotonbori district outposts where "regular Japanese people don't really go," she said.

"If you're at any of these places, you're usually meeting some kind of alternative Japanese person and alternative expats," said Sugahara, 37. "They don't abide by normal Japanese society rules. They are just living their own independent lives."

Everyone is looking for somewhere they belong. Not too many find the answer on the other side of the world. For Sugahara, a Black woman from Prince George's County, Md., that place is a neon-lit metropolis with a vibrant counterculture.

It took her time to find her place in Osaka's alternative scene, about 250 miles southwest of Tokyo. Now it's her community.

After Sugahara moved to Japan in 2010, she tried to fit in by limiting her self-expression, adhering to a more conservative style.

"I had taken out my lip ring. I was like, 'All right, now it's time to be an adult,'" she said, referring to the requirements for her past job as an English teacher. "Because you work with children, no coloring your hair. No piercings. Of course, in Japan, absolutely no tattoos. I only lasted a year and a half."

So she got a job at a bar, where she could improve her language skills, wear what she wants and reconnect with a more authentic version of herself.

To begin her night out last fall, Sugahara stops at a hookah bar called Lapichu, an unpretentious spot where the patrons and staffers welcome travelers who don't speak Japanese. The owner is a friend of Sugahara's, and the warmth and familiarity in their conversation extend to other patrons.

It's the type of bar or izakaya, a casual restaurant centered on drinking food, where Sugahara said you can meet Japanese people who will treat you like their best friend.

"They don't judge me," Sugahara said. "They're just interested in me, maybe because I'm not Japanese."

Sugahara says she feels safer as a Black woman in Osaka than she did in the United States, so she strolls around town whenever she wants.

"I like being outside at night," she says. "It's very safe. I have never felt threatened by a Japanese man."

She cited the country's virtual ban on guns, which are owned by less than 0.5 percent of the population, according to the Japanese Foreign Ministry.

Sugahara and her band, Second Lady, play a mix of pop punk and grunge-style rock that perfectly complements the vibe of late-night Dotonbori. During a November gig, she switched seamlessly between Japanese and English, her connection with the crowd soaring above any language barrier. When Second Lady performed at the venue Goith two nights in a row, the energy never dipped.

On another night, Sugahara stepped into Bar Farplane, a fetish bar painted pink and purple that hosts burlesque performances and caters to a crowd that is not afraid to embrace its wild side. There are sex toys and handcuffs attached to the walls, and a pair of legs wearing fishnets and high heels.

Ouka, a friend of Sugahara's and a bartender there, excitedly welcomed Sugahara and her friends from Punk Black, Second Lady's record label, after a show.

Ouka's sharp bob and long, decorated fingernails are perfectly at home here. An easy cultural exchange happened as Ouka asked Von Phoenix, a bass player and co-founder of Punk Black, about his locs while she showed everyone her nails.

As the night continued, Sugahara headed to a DJ set at the small music venue Subterra, where she'll meet up with Marisa Figueroa, an American expat she met through a Facebook group called Black Women in Japan.

Figueroa — who sometimes DJs at Subterra, but not tonight — said the variety of scenes is "the coolest thing about Osaka."

"Any interest or hobby you have, there is a place you can find people with similar interests, whether they're international or Japanese," she said.

Living in Japan has helped Figueroa embrace what makes her different. Even if you wear Japanese fashion, speak Japanese and change your citizenship, Figueroa said, you won't be recognized as Japanese.

"I think it allows you to explore and challenge yourself a bit more," she added.

Sugahara said being Black in Japan means you are "already alternative."

"It's less common to meet Black people that aren't alternative in Japan," she said. "People came to Japan for that level of safety. To just enjoy their fandom and their alternative lifestyle in peace."

Late nights and early mornings are customary in Osaka. The last stop before calling it a night might be a convenience store to grab a snack and hang out in Triangle Park or by the Dotonbori River with the rest of the last-call crowd.

As dawn approached, Sugahara bid her friends goodbye and made her way to catch the 5 a.m. train, feeling free in a way that seemed unique in Osaka.

PHOTOS BY MAXINE WALLACE/For The Washington Post

Alyse Sugahara, who moved to Japan from Maryland, freely admits that she has chosen a different lifestyle in Osaka than the traditional, family-oriented role of women there.

Sugahara, who favors nose and lip rings, got a job at a bar in Osaka's Dotonbori district so she could improve her language skills. Pictured: Sugahara singing with her band, Second Lady, at the venue Goith.

A bartender at the Red Dragon in Nagoya wears a shirt for the record label Punk Black.

WEEKEND: FOOD

Netflix

Meghan, Duchess of Sussex, stars in "With Love, Meghan," now streaming on Netflix. In the aspirational series, she crafts dishes made from organic products for her on-screen friends, in between segments portraying her at other domestic pursuits such as tending to her beehives and berry-picking.

Meghan's one-pot pasta technique is legit

Writer attempts to replicate duchess' unconventional dish and decides the haters are wrong: It's pretty delicious

By Emily Heil
The Washington Post

The aspiring lifestyle guru Meghan Markle — who now goes by her British royal name, Meghan Sussex — is a reliable headline generator. And last week, she gave media on both sides of the pond some grist for the gossip mill with her new aspirational Netflix show, "With Love, Meghan."

But it wasn't so much grist as artisanally crafted dishes made from organic produce the now-Californian former actress served to her on-screen friends, in between segments portraying her at other picturesque (and staff-assisted) domestic pursuits, such as tending to her beehives and berry-picking.

Meghan's ever-present critics homed in on one project in particular, which she prepared in the opening episode of the series: a pasta dish she dubbed "single skillet spaghetti." The crime of this recipe, said aghast online skeptics, was its unusual preparation, which broke from the norm of boiling pasta before saucing it. Instead, Meghan's was an all-in-one dish in which she laid raw pasta on top of tomatoes, garlic and olive oil and poured boiling water over the pan, cooking it to tenderness before eventually stirring in greens (lacinato kale and chard, to be precise).

The unconventional method seemed to shock. "Meghan Markle slammed for VERY bizarre way she cooks pasta," screamed one tabloid. Other outlets focused on the purported outrage that Italians, those protectors of pasta's honor, must feel at her abuse of their national treasure.

Although Meghan herself positioned her preparation as novel ("we don't have time for all those pot changes," she explains), her loose recipe isn't innovative anymore:

Emily Heil/The Washington Post

Writer Emily Heil's version of the "single skillet spaghetti" from "With Love, Meghan."

Cooking pasta in its sauce, with no need for draining, is a long-standing technique that Martha Stewart Living magazine popularized in 2013 after a recipe developer learned it from an Italian cook — in Italy, no less.

As for Meghan's version? Well, I tried it, and sorry to the legions of Meghan-haters, but it's pretty delicious.

To test whether it worked, I watched and rewatched the segment in which Meghan prepares the dish several times. Then I went to the store for ingredients, because unlike the duchess, my personal assistant was taking the day off. (Yes, he's a cat, and he frequently — okay, basically always — flakes on the job. Note to self: Fire the lout.)

Sliced cherry tomatoes ("if you have heirlooms, that's fine," she assured viewers) go into a pan, topped with a generous sprinkle of salt, a drizzle of olive oil and the garlic. A handful of spaghetti (she says it's an entire pack, but it looks like less than a full pound to me, so I use a little more than half a box) and the zest of a whole lemon are laid atop that, and 3½ cups of boiling water are poured over it. She brought it to a boil, covered it for about six minutes, then uncovered it, stirred in ribbons of kale, chard and arugula, then added Parmesan cheese and chili flakes as the sauce reduced around the pasta.

Not cooking and draining the pasta separately, she emphasized several times, meant that the starch remained in the pan, offering a "creamy" quality.

She plated the dish with the utmost care, and I followed along. First, she ladled a spoonful of sauce, then an artful twirl of pasta, which she showered with more cheese, fresh black pepper and basil.

"It's so [bleeping] good," Meghan's longtime makeup artist and adoring audience Daniel Martin enthused after he took a bite.

"It's your choice of adjectives that I really appreciate," she replied, which kind of seemed like a thinly veiled insult? Anyway, I'm with Martin. It's good, full stop. The cooking water softened the vegetables and melded them with the cheese into a pasta-slicking sauce, and what's not to like about the classic flavors of fresh tomatoes, garlic and tangy greens?

My only critique of the dish itself is that its on-screen execution suffers from excess, which isn't surprising, given that the host is literal royalty. She calls for three types of greens — kale, chard and arugula — but you don't need full bunches of each. And by the time they cook down into the sauce, they are fairly interchangeable, so I think you could pick just one or swap in any other green you might have on hand. And while some skeptical viewers thought the pasta might be a soupy mess, the trick is just to keep boiling and reducing the sauce until it's to your liking. Otherwise, I had no notes for Meghan — at least when it came to her noodles.

At least I felt like I learned a few things on my pasta journey with the duchess. I got this pearl of wisdom: "I think the brightness of citrus helps many things." And plenty of reminders that it's good to surround yourself with beauty and positivity — and, if possible, someone to do the shopping for you.

Q&A

For overwhelmed moms everywhere

Popular Instagrammer pokes fun at her parenting circumstances, herself in relatable comic memoir

BY NORA KRUG
The Washington Post

The cover image on Mary Catherine Starr's new book says it all: A mother sits on the toilet, head in her hands, as her two young children plead for her attention. "Mom, look at me," says one. Then her husband chimes in to ask where his keys are.

You can almost see mothers around the world nodding their heads in recognition. Starr is among them. Her illustrated memoir "Mama Needs a Minute!" explores how she, like so many moms, ended up in that open-door bathroom.

Starr, a graphic designer and yoga instructor, began working on the book several years ago, when her children, Charlie Mae and Teddy, were toddlers. She'd grab an hour or two here and there, when the kids were with a sitter or had gone to bed.

The project grew out of her popular Instagram account, @momlife_comics, where Starr critiques and pokes fun at the challenges and inequities of domestic life in her own home and outside it. In 2022, one of those comic strips — "An Illustrated Guide to the Double Standards of Parenting" — went viral.

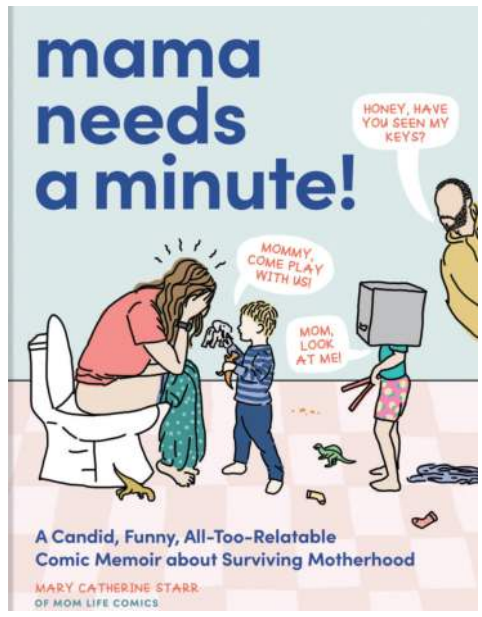
After that, Starr realized that she was onto something, and it surprised her. "Why is this situation so common despite women being more connected, empowered and informed than ever before?" she asks in her book.

Starr uses her experience to come up with some answers. She introduces us to her children and her husband, Ben, a lawyer whose heart is in the right place even if he can't find the onesies or figure out how to manage the family's mountains of laundry. Starr, 40, pokes fun at herself, too, and is frank about her anxiety, her feelings of inadequacy and the help she has gotten through therapy.

In a recent video interview from her home in Massachusetts, Starr discussed modern family life and how we can get through it with some of our sanity intact. This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

The Washington Post: What made you decide to put the bathroom scene on the cover?

Starr: The image of being in the bathroom and having zero privacy and everyone wanting you captures exactly what modern mothering feels like. Mothers of an older generation might say, "Just lock the door. Why are you letting your kids do that?" But modern parenting — modern mothering in particular — has set us up so that the boundaries are really fuzzy, the way we work and have to parent all at once.



Terri J. Calla

"Mama Needs a Minute!" author Mary Catherine Starr feels the pain of parents trying to "do it all." Her Instagram comic strips about parenthood led to her new book.

As you write, "countless books have been written about the mental load of motherhood, invisible labor and household inequality." How is your book different?

I've read a lot of those books and they were really helpful, but I would leave a lot of them feeling like I am already so overwhelmed, where would I find the time and energy to implement all these great ideas? I was in survival mode — I hardly had time to go to the bathroom alone!

With my book, I wanted readers to see that they're not alone, and that fixing household inequality can't be done in five easy steps. Maybe readers can learn from my mistakes and get some tidbits here and there. But it doesn't wrap up with a nice, pretty bow. We are trying to figure all this out on our own, but also there's some big stuff at play here — societal, cultural, structural — that's making that even harder for us. I hope the comics make it feel less academic, overwhelming or threatening.

What would you advise to a parent who might think of a given task, "I know how to do this better, so I will do it myself and then try not to get mad that I've done it."

I have had to let things just not be "my way." I learned that out of self-preservation. I truly got to the point where I was so overwhelmed that I couldn't function. I was doing too much. So I decided I was going to have to let my partner do some things, even if they are the "wrong" way. For example, I know the exact weird way my kids like their meals prepared, so I could tell my husband about these things before I leave the house, or I can go and he has to figure it out. Ultimately, he will.

What does your husband think of your comics?

He's a good sport. We navigate together what he is comfortable with my sharing. He has a great sense of humor and has often given me ideas for comics, and I am very grateful for that.

Have you heard from men and fathers about your work — and if so, what have they said?

I have had a ton of trolls. A lot of it was just men who seem to hate women speaking their mind or talking about equality. I have heard from a lot of people who don't have the full picture of what I'm saying, and they think it's just that I hate men or I hate husbands or that I sit around all day eating bonbons when my husband goes to work — the kind of typical thing people say to women who they think are not contributing to society even though we are contributing tons. It's incredible what being a woman and speaking about motherhood on the internet is like — I was not prepared for that, but I am in a better place with it now.

One of my favorite comics is "The Maternal Worry Cycle." Can you tell me how you came up with it and offer any advice for breaking this churn of anxiety?

For me, a lot of it has been vocalizing my needs and asking for help. In the past, I would have just taken care of the task and then gotten mad. Today, I will say, I don't want to do this alone, so here's what I need and let's do this together.

Among the issues you address is how the idea of women being able to 'do it all' has made things, paradoxically, more difficult for them. Can you explain your thoughts on this perennial subject?

I was raised by my mom, a stay-at-home mother, and my stepmom, who had a career outside the home. I had these two people in my ear, one telling me, "Motherhood is the greatest thing," and the other saying, "You can have your career." So I thought, OK, I'll do both; that's what everyone is doing now.

You can certainly do both things, but it's going to be hard and you're going to have to get a lot of help, to outsource things and have a partner who is willing to be there right with you. The message we didn't get is, you can do it all but you have to have a whole support system. I've heard people saying that women have been told that we can have it all, but men haven't been told what they would have to do to help us have it all.

Tell me about your drawing style. For instance, your characters don't have faces. Why?

I love the idea that the simple outline of someone's head can give a hint of what that person looks like without having detail. It makes the experience feel more universal — people can see themselves in the comics more — and you don't rely on facial expressions to understand the comic. It also takes less time to draw!

How is it that, in 2025, men and women are still battling over household chores and child care?

I think our government hasn't moved the needle on support for families and mothers. Other countries have universal child care or universal preschool or at least subsidized child care and other things that make parents' lives easier. The cost of living without structural support — we are paying for crazy-expensive child care — means parents have to work a lot more than maybe they can. I think the majority of parents in our country are just drowning, and until that changes we are going to continue having these conversations.

WEEKEND: BOOKS

In the Masters mood

Tripp Bowden, Augusta National's 1st full-time white caddy, pulls back the iconic club's green curtain through his books

By Aaron Kidd
Stars and Stripes

As another Masters Tournament approaches, golf's annual pilgrimage to Augusta National Golf Club brings with it a sense of nostalgia, reverence and an insatiable hunger for stories that illuminate the game's traditions.

Few writers capture Augusta's lore quite like Tripp Bowden, the first full-time white caddy in the club's storied history. Caddies at the esteemed Georgia institution were almost exclusively Black until the late 1980s; the club's first Black member wasn't admitted until 1990.

Through his books, Bowden weaves an affectionate, often humorous tapestry of golf's most hallowed grounds, offering an insider's look at a world that is as enigmatic as it is revered.

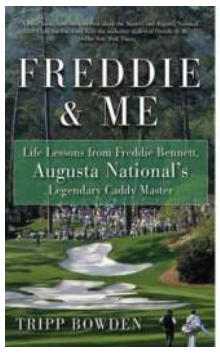
Akifumi Ishikawa/Stars and Stripes

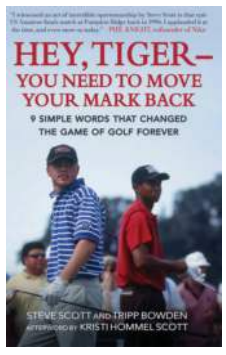
The grass will be Masters green at Augusta National Golf Club once again when the sport's most prestigious tournament tees off on April 10.

Portrait of a golf sage

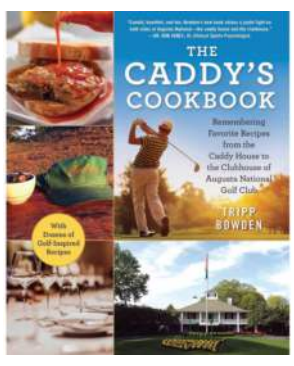
Bowden's memoir, "Freddie & Me: Life Lessons from Freddie Bennett, Augusta National's Legendary Caddy Master," is perhaps his most personal and poignant work. At its heart is his relationship with the club's legendary Black caddy master, whose wisdom, humor and larger-than-life presence shaped generations of players and loopers (caddies) alike.

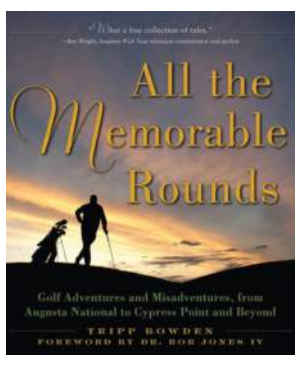
"Freddie was a once-in-a-lifetime person who worked at a once-in-a-lifetime place," Bowden told Stars and Stripes in a recent phone interview from his Augusta home.





The book is filled with Bennett's singular observations — some profound, others delightfully profane. "You don't read Augusta's greens, man. You remember them," he tells a young Bowden, imparting a lesson about knowledge that can only be absorbed through experience.





In one of the book's most compelling chapters, Bennett takes readers on a hole-by-hole tour of Augusta National, blending strategy with storytelling in a way that feels both instructive and immersive. From the ideal landing zone on the par-5 13th to the delicate touch required on the 16th green's treacherous slopes, his insights — honed over decades — offer a deeper appreciation for the subtleties that define the Masters.

Bennett's witticisms carry the force of lived-in truth. He instructs against timidity in life and golf — "Don't ever tell anyone to lay up on the chance of a lifetime."

What emerges is not just a portrait of a golf sage, but a reminder that the game's real treasures are often found outside the fairways and greens.

Authentic flavors

For those who believe golf and Southern hospitality go hand in hand, "The Caddy's Cookbook: Remembering Favorite Recipes from the Caddy House to the Clubhouse of Augusta National Golf Club" is a feast of memory and flavor.

With dishes like The Lost Art of Butterbeans and Pompano and Circumstance, Bowden serves not just food, but a cultural history of the club as experienced by those who know its back halls just as well as Amen Corner. It's an evocative mix of storytelling and Southern comfort, with each recipe offering a taste of life behind the ropes.

Many recipes, including the butterbeans, trace their origin to Augusta's old cinder-block caddy house, Bowden told Stars and Stripes.

"Freddie said this is the best thing for a hangover," he said. "He would get to the course at 4 in the morning, cook up butterbeans in the caddy house and serve them up in Styrofoam cups. He said it would cure what ails ya."

Then there's the Transfusion, a cocktail with roots in a snack cart stationed between holes 9 and 10, operated by a stern man in a tuxedo — a detail that feels almost too perfectly Augusta.

Tripp Bowden

Tripp Bowden's books offer insights into the inner workings of Augusta National.

"The Transfusion is grape juice and ginger ale," Bowden explained. "The club's members would call it a Confusion when he'd pour vodka in it."

Beyond Augusta's gates

Bowden broadens his scope in "All the Memorable Rounds: Golf Adventures and Misadventures, from Augusta National to Cypress Point and Beyond," chronicling play at some of the world's most storied courses.

The book captures golf's enduring allure, whether through tales of Alister MacKenzie's architectural genius at Palmetto Golf Club or Ben Hogan's legendary precision at Shady Oaks.

Bowden's storytelling extends beyond Augusta's gates in "Hey, Tiger — You Need to Move Your Mark Back: 9 Simple Words that Changed the Game of Golf Forever," co-authored with Steve Scott. It revisits the dramatic 1996 U.S. Amateur Championship final, where Scott, then an amateur standout, faced off against a young Tiger Woods.

Tripp Bowden

The subject of "Freddie & Me: Life Lessons from Freddie Bennett, Augusta National's Legendary Caddy Master," served in that role for more than four decades.

In a crucial moment, Scott reminded Woods to replace his ball marker properly — an act of sportsmanship that, had it gone unnoticed, might have altered the trajectory of Woods' historic career.

Bowden's books do more than tell golf stories; they are love letters to the game's history, its characters and the quiet lessons it imparts.

With the Masters on the horizon, there is no better time to revisit Augusta through Bowden's lens.

All of Bowden's books are available in Kindle and hardcover editions from Skyhorse Publishing. "Freddie & Me" is also offered in paperback, audiobook and Japanese.

All are available through major retailers and independent booksellers.

Personalized copies can be purchased at www.trippbowden.com.

kidd.aaron@stripes.com
@kiddaaron

WEEKEND: MUSIC

CHRIS PIZZELLO, INVISION/AP

Lady Gaga performs during the 67th annual Grammy Awards on Feb. 2 in Los Angeles. Her new album, "Mayhem," was released on March 7.

Lady Gaga strikes a chord

The superstar singer rekindles passion for music with new album, 'Mayhem'

BY JONATHAN LANDRUM JR.
Associated Press

When Lady Gaga walked into a New York City bar she frequented five years ago, the memories hit hard: Back then, she wrote songs there, feeling lost and disconnected from herself.

But this time was different. While sitting in the bar, Gaga felt a sense of peace and rejuvenation, reminiscent of her teenage years spent scribbling lyrics on napkins.

In recent years, Gaga rediscovered her passion for music by taking a step back from the limelight, cutting ties from fake friendships, swapping the spotlight for quiet nights at home and surrounding herself with people she truly trusts. That personal transformation became the soul of her new album, "Mayhem," released March 7.

EVAN AGOSTINI, INVISION/AP

Lady Gaga and fiancé Michael Polansky, shown at "SNL 50: The Anniversary Special" on Feb. 16 in New York, were co-executive producers on "Mayhem."

"I reclaimed myself as an artist," said Gaga, a 14-time Grammy and one-time Oscar winner who returned to her dark pop music roots on the album, which spans 14 tracks. Her new project follows last year's "Harlequin," a jazz-inspired companion album for the film "Joker: Folie à Deux," which stalled at No. 20 on the Billboard 200.

But Gaga's singles for the 14-track "Mayhem" have been received well on the charts, including "Disease," "Abracadabra" and "Die With a Smile," a collaboration with Bruno Mars, spending five weeks on the Billboard Hot 100 at No. 1 and winning a Grammy for best pop duo/group performance last month.

While recording "Mayhem," Gaga refused to rest on her past hits or accolades to define her new work. She credited her renewed creative drive to a journey of self-discovery, which ultimately empowered her to step back into the spotlight for several big moments last month. The superstar performed with Bruno Mars at

SEE GAGA ON PAGE 29

WEEKEND: MUSIC REVIEWS

WARNER BROS. PICTURES/AP

Joaquin Phoenix, left, and Lady Gaga are shown in the 2024 film "Joker: Folie à Deux."

Gaga: Artist makes music a main focus

FROM PAGE 28

the Grammys — including a tribute song "California Dreamin'" to Los Angeles wildfire victims, closed out the FireAid benefit concert with "All I Need is Time" and delivered a surprise performance singing "Hold My Hand" before the Super Bowl in New Orleans.

Gaga will headline Coachella in April and perform a free concert on Rio de Janeiro's Copacabana Beach in May.

"I built a routine in my daily life around music all the time, and not around self-promotion," said Gaga, 38, who was a producer and co-executive producer with her fiancé Michael Polansky, 41, on "Mayhem." "When my life was circulating self-promotion, I think I lost a lot of my passion. When my life was around my family, my partner and my music, it gave me back that realness."

In an AP interview, Gaga digs deeper into what it took to regain her passion, showing she's more than just a character.

The architect of her success

While Gaga was dropping early hits like "Just Dance" and "Poker Face," she noticed critics who downplayed her role in the success, giving more credit to producers and even stylists.

With "Mayhem," Gaga aimed to showcase that her talent was the driving force behind her rise. Fueled by the skeptics, the singer is determined to show she's the architect of her success, not just another industry creation.

"They tried to qualify and quantify me," she said. "Very often as a woman in music, they say it was other people. You're a product, like you were made. Something that was really important to me on this was really taking from myself my own inventions."

When Gaga began recording her new album, she focused on crafting the kind of dark pop melodies that defined her early career, pairing them with lyrics that spoke in code. She said it all came back naturally, giving her reassurance that she was on the right path to fully owning her identity as an artist instead of a made-up character.

"This was a way for me actually to feel like I wasn't. That it was the real me," she said. "I was the creator. This was my work. It was just not a character I was playing. It was something that I made."

Reclaiming her creative spark

Early in her career, fame came with a price that Gaga wasn't willing to pay. She felt isolated, trapped in transactional relationships and struck in an environment that prioritized competition over creativity.

The spotlight began to feel like an endless race, draining her passion for making music. She began to notice a shift as her sales climbed beyond the first 10 million records.

Gaga realized that staying in that energy would ultimately stifle her creativity, knowing it was time to break free.

"I lost the thing that I would teach my child, which is to sit alone with your thoughts and write a poem," Gaga said. "Sit alone and write a song. Just put good old-fashioned hard work and craftsmanship into what you believe in. I lost that for a long time."

Eventually, Gaga hit reset. She cut loose draining relationships and built a stable family with Polansky and their beloved dogs.

It helped Gaga channel her energy back into her artistry.

"This is the first day I've done interviews without makeup on, and it's nice," she said. "I just get to share with you about my experience with music, and I'm not feeling pressure to perform for you in any other way than as a female artist."

Lady Gaga

Mayhem (Interscope)

She hath returned: A new Lady Gaga, like the old Lady Gaga, but a different Lady Gaga.

"Mayhem," released March 7, is a satisfying full-length project of big pop material, both a return to her roots and a hard press on the gas pedal.

Her 2008 debut, "The Fame," introduced a new generation to the addictive properties of expertly crafted electropop. "The Fame Monster" a year later cemented her position as a modern great, a savior of theatrical pop that once recalled Madonna and now serves as a reminder that big belts are cinema. Then came the genre explorations of "Born This Way," "Artpop," "Joanne" (arriving years before pop would go country — she has long been prescient), and 2020's "Chromatica."

Half a decade later, is the world ready again for her club anthems? Or is "Mayhem" an attempt to revitalize a big pop sound left behind in the streaming era? Can an artist return home without playing some parody of themselves?

The answer, of course, is up to the listener. Some will hear "Abracadabra" as life-affirming dance music. Others will press play on "Killah" and balk at its Gesaffelstein-aided sound. They might read the earworm "Disease" as a song that too easily recalls the mid-2010s of her heyday, but to do so would strip it of stadium-sized pleasures. It is a great song, a familiar song, a return to a classic Gaga. (And for what it is worth, there's a lot more energy there than in the Grammy-winning power ballad "Die with a Smile," her collaboration with Bruno Mars.)

The truth is, Gaga has reclaimed her early dark-pop sensibilities and ushered them into her 2025 reality across "Mayhem." It manifests in a few ways, most prominently in her delivery. Lady Gaga sounds like she is having fun here, from the modular Moog of the ballad fake-out "Vanish Into You" and the "Bad Romance" easter egg of "Garden of Eden," to the springy synth of "Perfect Celebrity," which furthers Gaga's quest to use fame to question fame's legitimacy. Now that is timeless pop meta-commentary.

Autonomy was top of mind for Gaga on "Mayhem," and it's yielded great results. "Something that was really important to me on this was really taking from myself my own inventions," she told The Associated Press in a recent interview. "I was the creator. This was my work. It was just not a character I was playing. It was something that I made."

"Mayhem" will sound familiar to Gaga listeners, there's no doubt about that. But they will hear an evolved version — not an easy play at nostalgia, nor an artist appeasing contemporary trends. It is Gaga staying true to herself, as she has been known to do.

— Maria Sherman
Associated Press

Jason Isbell

Foxes in the Snow (Southeastern Records)

Jason Isbell unplugged can still electrify.

An excellent bandleader, guitarist and singer, Isbell is first and foremost a songwriter, and that skill takes center stage on his new album, "Foxes in the Snow." It's Isbell's first solo acoustic album, and his first album since 2013 without his band, the 400 Unit.

Accompanied by only his 1940 Martin acoustic guitar, Isbell sorts through romantic relationships. He sounds like someone trying to find his bearings. There's blood on the tracks.

That's not surprising given that the album is Isbell's first since his divorce from singer-songwriter Amanda Shires after more than a decade of marriage. Some of the material sounds powerfully autobiographical, and that's especially true on "Gravelweed."

"I was gravelweed and I needed you to raise me / You couldn't reach me once I felt like I was raised," he sings. "And now that I live to see my melodies betray me / I'm sorry the love songs all mean different things today."

Yes, the 2013 fan favorite "Cover Me Up," written for Shires, does sound different now.

Isbell sings about dangerous memories, dreams forgotten, the value of persistence, and the tug of his Alabama roots. "Ride to Robert's" pays tribute to one of downtown Nashville's best honky-tonks, while "Open and Close" skewers a bar band for mangling Steely Dan. (That's something he knows a little something about; Isbell spent a formidable stretch in a Steely Dan cover band.)

Rich, lean language and imaginative turns of phrase are Isbell's specialty. "I hope they're grading on a curve," he sings. "Forever is a dead man's joke." And later, "You thought the truth was just a rumor." All three come from just one song, "Eileen."

Isbell is a terrific acoustic guitarist, and his playing here is subtle and superb. A Doc Watson-style riff provides the foundation for the title cut, while nifty filigrees augment the waltz "Open and Close" and the opener "Bury Me," which sounds like a cowboy song from the '50s. That's the 1950s, or 1850s.

Isbell is touring solo, testing whether or not these sturdy but sober songs are enough to hold the attention of several thousand spectators. At the moment, he's not in the mood to stomp and holler.

— Steven Wine
Associated Press

Neil Young

Oceanside Countryside (Reprise)

The latest in a dizzying number of archival releases from Neil Young offers up a 1970s gem from his country-rock phase.

"Oceanside Countryside" opens and closes with a pair of Young classics: "Sail Away" and "Pocahontas." In between are eight tracks that will be familiar to Young diehards, but less recognizable to more casual fans.

But this release isn't targeted to Young newbies. It is the latest in Young's "Analog Original Series," which releases albums that were recorded in analog before digital processing. "Oceanside Countryside" is squarely focused on appealing to Young completists — especially those with a decent stereo.

"Oceanside Countryside" is a sister record to Young's "Comes a Time," released in 1978. Three songs appear on both — "Goin' Back," "Human Highway" and "Field of Opportunity." Musically, the two records have a similar country-rock sound.

Not content to make things simple, "Oceanside Countryside" carries the same title as a disc in Young's massive box set "Archives Volume III: 1976-1987" from last year. While the songs are similar on each, they are not identical.

"Oceanside Countryside" presents its 10 songs as they were originally prepared for release, broken up into five "Oceanside" tracks on the first side and five "Countryside" offerings on the second side.

The five "Oceanside" tracks were recorded in Florida and Malibu, Calif., with Young playing solo. The "Countryside" songs were laid down in Nashville, and live up to the name. Longtime Young collaborators and bandmates, such as Ben Keith on steel guitar, lend that side of the record a familiar country swing.

In the ever-widening pantheon of Young archival releases, "Oceanside Countryside" doesn't reveal much about Neil that wasn't already known.

Think of it more as a complement, a fun little nugget that fills in a microscopic gap in Young's recording history. It's for fans who just can't get enough of 1970s Neil, especially on high-quality vinyl.

— Scott Bauer
Associated Press

Q&A

‘A Different Animal’ of comedy

Shlesinger on ‘digestible feminism’ and ‘mom brain,’ topics from her new Prime special

BY NATE JACKSON
Los Angeles Times

Comedian Iliza Shlesinger takes the word “special” very seriously, and not just because she’s done a lot of them (seven, to be exact). It’s because when she hits the stage, the goal is to leave a mark. From the first roar of applause from the audience, to the punch lines that claw into the flesh of gender stereotypes, to the pop-star outfits that remind us she’s a comedy queen of the jungle, the veteran headliner holds nothing back.

In her latest comedy special, “A Different Animal,” which premiered Tuesday on Prime Video, Shlesinger dives into her evolution as a mother of two dealing with “mom brain” while proudly upholding her role as an elder millennial who can school Generation Z and Alpha newbies on what’s up with a mixture of wisdom, wit and wild animal noises.

This interview was edited for length and clarity.

Los Angeles Times: The title of your special, “A Different Animal,” is an aggressive title, but it also seems like it’s got a bunch of layers to it. How do you think the title relates to your comedy?

I wanted to do something that was very me, but also my comedy has a little bit of force and aggression built into it. But I did want to sort of announce that I’m on this new platform [Prime Video], and I think what I bring as a performer is different. Every comic should feel that they are bringing something unique; otherwise, why are you an artist? In a literal way, [my comedy] is a different animal because I do these animal sounds [during my show] and I’m very theatrical in what I do. This is different comedy than what you might get somewhere else. I think that I create a very special product.

You talk about “mom brain” a lot in your special. Is it true that parts of your brain shrink when you become a mom?

Thank you for asking that. Yeah, a part of your brain shrinks when you become a mom, and I know people watching this are like, “We better ask Joe Rogan. There’s no way she knows that” — but it’s true. Your brain actually chemically biologically shrinks to make way for a part of your brain that in fact enlarges when you become a mom, and that is the part that knows how to reflexively care for a child because it isn’t as easy as babysitting; like, that’s your mother’s intuition. Those are the eyes in the back of your head. All of those are senses that are in fact overdeveloped because you are inflamed when you become a mom. So it’s the reason why I can anticipate what my child might need or why a mom can do that. So while you are looking for your phone as you’re on it, you are still making sure your child doesn’t fall or grab a knife. So there’s a give and a take. I often forget to use a turn signal now, but at least I know my daughter’s favorite foods.

So as we millennials are reaching a certain age and having children, I think it’s great that comedians who are also experiencing parenthood are able to talk about it because it feels like a different era than what our parents went through. What is it like crafting jokes around that topic?

When you’re a woman, you’re always gonna get asked more about your children than men do, and for me there was a bit of a stutter step because to even begin to talk about something as life-changing, life-affirming and life-shattering as having kids, these are waters that you’ve never navigated before and I’ve gotten horrific comments like, “You’re not gonna talk about your kids, are you?” Which is disheartening because men get to do that and it’s like, “Oh, that’s so charming; give them a sitcom.” But when women do, it’s kind of seen as like, “Oh, well, she has kids; that’s not gonna be for me.”

I also have a lot of hot takes about other things. So for me, the commentary on being a mom is less about the specificity of an interaction with my child and more commentary on society’s commentary on a woman having kids, and even within that, I do keep it to a minimum in the special because I’m still so blown away by the experience that I’m having, I haven’t processed all of it yet. So in five years I’ll complain about the kids.

You have some good material when it comes to talking about Gen Z and Alpha. How do you find a way to make these jokes multilayered for everyone in the audience?

I’m always developing jokes for me, and I’m mindful of who might be in the audience, but I’m very lucky in that I don’t have a homogeneous audience. I think with some comics you know exactly the archetype of [their fans], and because I’m fortunate enough to be able to play audiences across the country, you really don’t know who you’re gonna get.

You can kind of guess, but we have everyone from conservative veterans, to a super queer contingent, to people who look like your parents, to Gen Z. So it’s always about the truth and it’s always about saying something honest, because comedy comes from vulnerability and from honesty, and I don’t hate Gen Z or Baby Boomers.

My comedy comes from a place of very much wanting to be seen and explain myself. I don’t ever write anything to hurt anyone deliberately. And so all my comedy comes from this unending need to understand what the f— is going on.

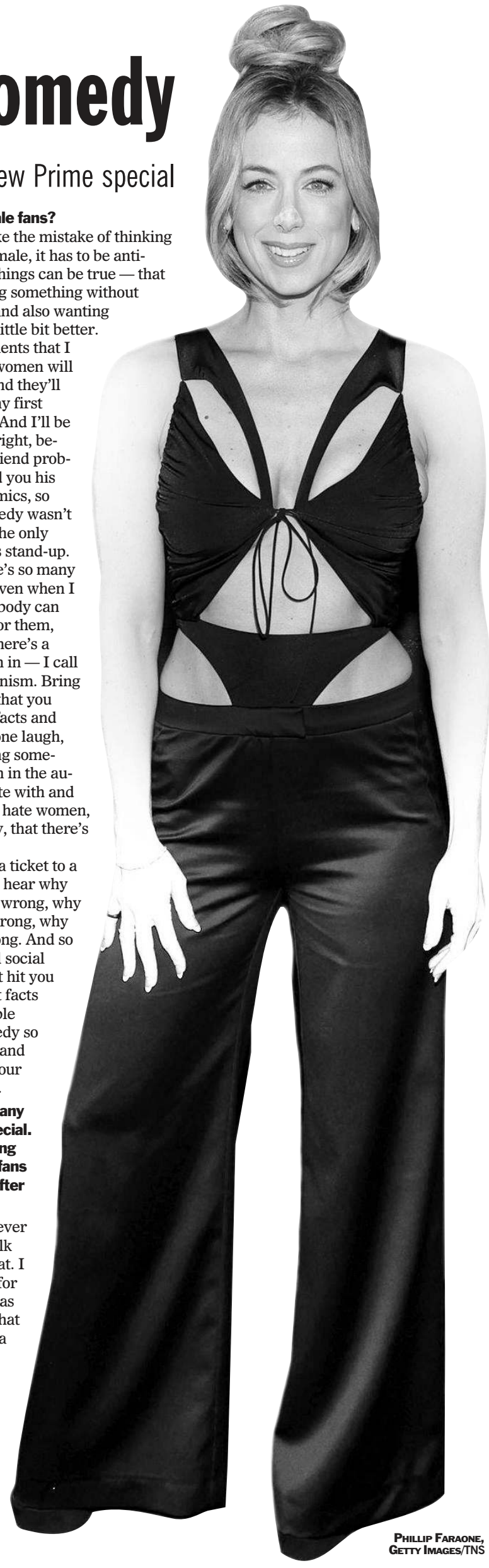
When you make jokes about gender double standards, you say that it’s never to bash men, it’s to empower women. Why is that an important message to drive home to your male fans?

I think we make the mistake of thinking that if it’s pro-female, it has to be anti-male. And both things can be true — that you are critiquing something without aiming to harm and also wanting women to feel a little bit better. One of the comments that I sadly still get is women will come up to me and they’ll say, “That was my first stand-up show.” And I’ll be like, well, that’s right, because your boyfriend probably only showed you his favorite male comics, so you thought comedy wasn’t for you. I’m not the only woman who does stand-up. Thankfully, there’s so many more now than even when I started, so everybody can find something for them, but I think that there’s a way to bring men in — I call it digestible feminism. Bring men in in a way that you just present the facts and you make everyone laugh, but you are saying something that women in the audience can vibrate with and men, if you don’t hate women, will be like, “Hey, that there’s a good thought.”

Nobody buys [a ticket to a comedy show] to hear why their politics are wrong, why their gender is wrong, why their color is wrong. And so I try to keep it all social and light and just hit you with scathing hot facts that are irrefutable wrapped in comedy so you can digest it and talk about it on your drive home later.

You have so many layers to this special. Is there something you would hope fans walk away with after watching it?

My only hope ever is that people walk away feeling great. I say these things for me just as much as the fans. I hope that men come away a little bit softer with women. I hope women come away feeling a little bit better. I hope everybody comes away with their faces in pain from laughing so hard.



PHILLIP FARAONE, GETTY IMAGES/TNS

WEEKEND: TELEVISION

‘Deli Boys’ comedy hams it up on Hulu

Cast, crew discuss the new show, which premiered March 6

BY LESLIE AMBRIZ
Associated Press

Abdullah Saeed wasn’t looking to write a groundbreaking comedy. He was just looking for a job.

The “Deli Boys” creator wrote a sample script in 2019, hoping to secure a staff position in a writers room after transitioning from journalism to screenwriting. (“Nobody was buying my documentaries,” Saeed jokes.) He had recently co-written a script for a feature film but needed something to showcase his own voice.

Saeed sat down to write without worry about representing his entire community, and decided to freely create a show that was as lighthearted as he is.

“The pressure was off because I didn’t think it was going to be a TV show. I was just like, ‘OK, whatever, I think that’s funny,’” said the Pakistani American writer.

“Deli Boys” soon landed in front of television writers and producers Jenni Konner (“Girls”) and Nora Silver (“Single Drunk Female”), who immediately wanted to do more than hire Saeed. They wanted to develop the half-hour pilot and bring it to life.

“It was so unique and so funny and fresh, and (there is) nothing like that in the world, ever,” said Konner, who later brought on showrunner Michelle Nader (“2 Broke Girls”).

The 10-episode Hulu original comedy stars Saagar Shaikh (“Ms. Marvel”), Asif Ali (“WandaVision”) and Poorna Jagannathan. “Deli Boys,” which premiered March 6, follows two Pakistani American brothers, Raj and Mir — played by Shaikh and Ali — who lose their comfortable lifestyles after their convenience store mogul father (Iqbal Theba) dies unexpectedly from a golfing accident. Raj and Mir must now work together to take over the family business, but soon learn they are in way over their heads when they discover the stores were a front for cocaine distribution.

DISNEY/AP

Saagar Shaikh, left, and Asif Ali play Pakistani American brothers who have to unexpectedly take over their father’s convenience store business after he dies in “Deli Boys.” Soon, however, they learn that the stores were a front for cocaine distribution.

Saeed, who used to cover stories centered on music, cannabis and recreational drugs, says he was inspired by the “unverified stories about stealth and smuggling” that he heard over the years.

“It’s just lore,” he said of the stories he was never able to report about. “But in this show, we can borrow all that stuff, right? And so, like, there’s all these elements about, you know, stealth, like how you actually package and move drugs that really made their way into the show.”

The brothers at the show’s heart are two complete opposites who have to find themselves while being comically thrust into the drug-smuggling underworld: Raj is the free spirit who relies on cannabis, his shaman and good looks to get him by, while Mir is the buttoned-up model child looking to make his father proud.

“It was great to finally, for the first time, be a flawed character, not a model minority,” Shaikh said. “The spectrum for white shows goes from, like, ‘Full House’ to “It’s Always Sunny.’ And, you know, we are, like them, not a monolith, right? We have different stories. We have different values from house to house. We have different cultures from house to house. And we rarely get to see any nuance.”

REBECCA CABAGE, INVISION/AP

From left, Ali, actor Poorna Jagannathan, showrunner and executive producer Michelle Nader, Shaikh, executive producer Jenni Konner and creator and executive producer Abdullah Saeed pose for a portrait to promote “Deli Boys” on Feb. 25 in Los Angeles.

For Ali, portraying Mir was something he never would have imagined.

“It really is above just being, you know, an exploration of what being South Asian is,” Ali said. “It’s something that I have never seen our community have before. Just, like, straight-up crazy comedy.”

Jagannathan plays their father’s right-hand woman Lucky, who quickly takes the boys under her wing in an effort to salvage the family’s dwindling drug operation. According to Jagannathan, Lucky was initially written as a man until Saeed was advised to go back to his script and change two characters from men to women. Soon, Lucky became a blend of Saeed’s mother, whom he describes as a “self-starting, headstrong badass,” executive producers Silver and Konner and Nader and Jagannathan’s past roles as mothers on “Never Have I Ever” and “The Night Of.”

“She’s sweet and loving and nurturing and then the next scene is her putting a bullet in someone’s head,” Jagannathan said. “And I think the juxtaposition of that is so funny, but the script has so much of that. It’s the expected with the unexpected right next door.”

The cast also includes Alfie Fuller (“The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel”) and Brian George, a familiar face to “Seinfeld” and “The Big Bang Theory” fans who is now front and center as Lucky’s second-in-command. Guest stars for this season also include “Queer Eye’s” Tan France, who makes his acting debut in the sixth episode.

“I saw the script, and it was a fully formed character. I was so nervous. But the first day I got on that set, I had the best experience,” said France, who initially thought he was only going to play a small role.

Saeed and Konner hope the show will have the opportunity to welcome more South Asian guest stars in later seasons. “There’s a lot of people we would die to have,” Konner said.

“And then for each of them, we’ve now set this thing up for ourselves where they have to play someone against type,” Saeed said. “So, that makes it more fun for us if we get somebody huge, right? And we’ve only seen them one way; we get to put them into something different.”

“It really is above just being, you know, an exploration of what being South Asian is. It’s something that I have never seen our community have before. Just, like, straight-up crazy comedy.”

“Deli Boys” star Asif Ali

Putting their foot down on standing all day

Some employees in states without 'right to sit' laws report related health issues

BY CATHY BUSSEWITZ
Associated Press

As a citizen of both France and America, Margaux Lantelme has noticed a difference in how store cashiers work in the two countries: in France, they do their jobs sitting down. In the U.S., where Lantelme works a register at REI, cashiers typically spend eight hours a day on their feet.

For Lantelme, a former kayaking instructor, prolonged standing can trigger flare-ups of chronic pain that limit her mobility. She requested a chair to use during her shift and got one. But after a change in management, she had to fill out paperwork to keep the chair, which required multiple doctor visits and insurance copayments over a period of months. She's still waiting for final approval.

"Not having access to a chair without approval from a doctor, which costs money and time and energy, is really ridiculous," Lantelme said. "I personally think that people should be able to have access to seating at work anytime they need it."

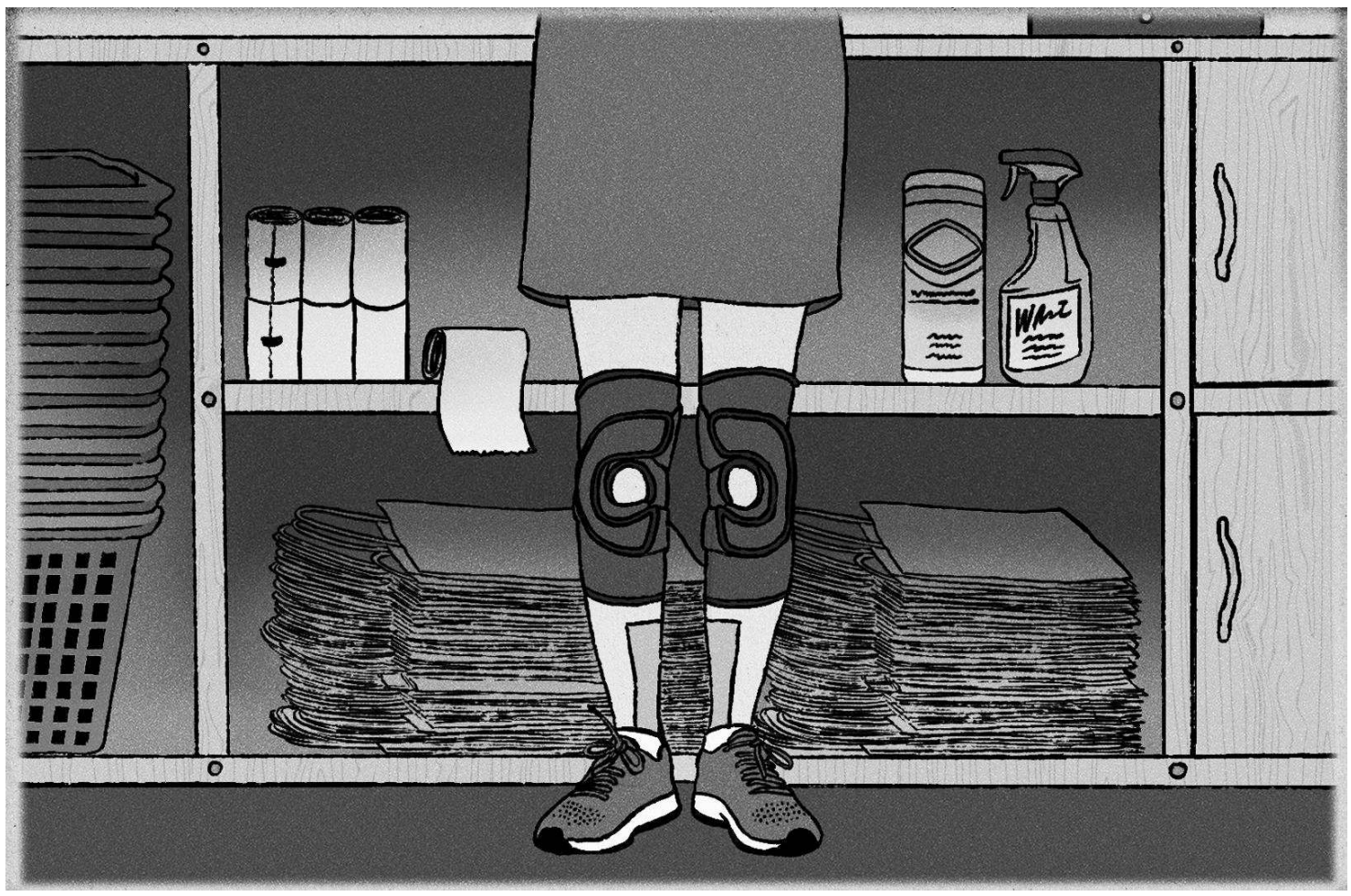


ILLUSTRATION BY ANNIE NG/AP

Some employees who stand on their feet all day resort to wearing knee braces and athletic tape to reduce pain, fatigue and swelling.

Aches, pains and complications

Standing for long periods can lead to low back pain, fatigue, muscle pain and leg swelling, and it can increase the risk of cardiovascular problems and pregnancy complications, according to a review conducted by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. Researchers there concluded that movement, whether walking or shifting from a standing to a seated or leaning position, appeared to be the best way of reducing those health hazards.

Being on one's feet for an extended time also can lead to chronic venous insufficiency, a disease in which damaged veins impact blood circulation, according to the Association of periOperative Registered Nurses, which represents operating room nurses.

The association recommends trying "fatigue-reducing techniques such as alternate propping one foot on a footstool, the use of antifatigue mats, using a sit-stand stool and wearing supportive footwear," said Lisa Spruce, senior director of evidence-based perioperative practices at AORN.

The right to sit down

Many jobs besides nursing require extended standing: Department store sales clerks, hairdressers, surgeons, restaurant cooks and airport workers are just some of the people who perform their roles on their feet.

Cecilia Ortiz, 43, used to work as an airport wheelchair attendant in Phoenix. "It takes a really hard toll on the knees," she said. The break room had three or four chairs, which wasn't enough for everyone, so workers often went to the hallway and sat on the floor, Ortiz said.

She said she once got written up by her boss for sitting down at an electronic device charging station for 15 minutes after she'd been on her feet for five hours without a break.

Ortiz now works for a warehouse that provides supplies to the airport, and when she needs to sit, she can.

"It's not so strict over there. If we needed to sit down for any reason there wouldn't be a problem," Ortiz said.

Her former employer, Prospect Airport Services, said it adheres to all local, state and federal labor regulations regarding breaks.

"Our employees are welcome to take their breaks and meals in our designated break room or in any common-use space throughout the airport," company spokesperson Jackie Reedy said. "This policy allows our employees to choose the location that best suits their needs."

Unionized workers at the Barnes & Nobles store in Manhattan's Union Square have made access to chairs and the right to sit down under certain conditions a part of their negotiations for their first contract.

"The longer I've been at the job, I've started noticing knee issues, especially because we do a lot of bending down and standing back up when we're shelving books and showing customers things and creating displays," bookseller Bear Spiegel, 28, said.

"Being able to have a stool available would be really useful just so I could rest my knees for a couple of minutes throughout the day while I'm doing things on the computer while I'm at the registers."

Spiegel's coworkers suggested wearing a knee brace and athletic tape, and those solutions have helped, but it's hard for him to predict what days he'll need the extra support because his symptoms vary each day, he said.

"There have been days that I've requested a stool and thankfully my managers have allowed me to take them out and use them when needed," Spiegel said.

Barnes & Noble uses chairs or stools routinely for those working off the sales floor when it's sensible to do so, but a lot of a bookseller's work is done on the move, including unpacking, sorting and shelving books, a company spokesperson said.

The Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union, which represents about 100,000 workers, has been pushing to include in the contracts it negotiates, including at Barnes & Noble, a guaranteed right to sit during work that can be done seated, said Stuart Appelbaum, the union's president.

During one bargaining session, an employer objected to the demand. Union negotiators used a break that emptied the conference room to underline their position.

"The employer came back and saw we had removed all chairs from the negotiating table," Appelbaum said. "I think the point was made."

In the end, the union got the chairs it wanted written into the contract, he said.

Sitting once a protected right

Around the turn of the 20th century, most states in the U.S. had laws requiring seating for female workers. Women were increasingly entering the workforce, and there was a fear that if their jobs were too physically taxing, they might not become pregnant, said Eileen Boris, a labor historian and professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Women were seen as the "mothers of the human race, and thus we have to protect motherhood," Boris added. "Almost every state had laws, but they weren't enforced."

Those laws were repealed over time because they applied only to women. One reason was that the women's movement was pushing for equal rights, rather than special treatment, Boris said.

Labor movements in other countries were more successful in establishing requirements about seating.

"The English shop movement was much stronger and had more men in it than the U.S.," Boris said.

In 1964, the International Labour Organization, a U.N. agency, adopted workplace standards requiring employers to furnish sufficient and suitable seats, as well as reasonable opportunities for workers to use them. More than 50 countries ratified the agreement, but the U.S. was not one of them.

Today, California, Florida, Massachusetts, Montana, New Jersey, Oregon and Wisconsin are among the states with "right to sit" laws that obligate employers to provide suitable seating for all workers, regardless of gender, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

The city of Ann Arbor, Mich., approved an ordinance in October that requires manufacturers, retail stores, laundromats, hotels, restaurants, hairdressers, barbers and skin care professionals to let workers sit down as long as sitting doesn't interfere with their duties. A statewide bill also was introduced in Michigan last fall.

WEEKEND: FAMILY

Spread too thin

‘Sandwich generation’ caregivers caught in middle, have to divide time between parents and children

BY LAURA WILLIAMSON
American Heart Association News

Becky Engram is redefining what it means to spend time with her family. The 48-year-old mother of two is learning to split her time between being a parent and taking care of her ailing father. Everyone needs her time and attention. Nobody’s getting enough.

Engram’s 78-year-old father, Bruce Dunning, has been in and out of the hospital since he started having heart problems late last year. Once fiercely independent, he now wants someone with him at all times. So Engram regularly makes the 3½-hour drive between her home in Marietta, Ga., and his in Huntsville, Ala., sometimes staying for weeks. Recently, her husband, Derek, drove their boys to Huntsville so they could spend the day skating with Mom while she took a break from her father’s hospital bedside.

Engram said her 10-year-old son, Carter, is taking it the hardest. After emergency trips to the hospital interrupted both Christmas and New Year’s Eve, keeping her away from home for most of their holiday break, he told her, “I just don’t feel like I have a mom anymore.”

“That broke my heart,” she said.

Engram is a member of the “sandwich generation,” adults who find themselves caring for two generations simultaneously: the young children they are raising as well as the parents who raised them. According to a 2022 study in the Journal of the American Geriatrics Society, about 1 in 4 adult caregivers in the U.S. also care for a minor child or children. Estimates place the number of adults in this position anywhere between 2.5 million and 11 million.

That number may continue to grow as couples increasingly delay parenthood, said Dr. Lianlian Lei, an assistant professor in the department of psychiatry at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, and lead author of the 2022 study.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the average age of first-time mothers has risen to 27 in the U.S., and a growing number of women don’t have a first child until their 30s or 40s, meaning they are still raising young children into their 40s and 50s as their parents reach their 70s and beyond and begin to experience deteriorating health.

Multigenerational caregiving comes with a host of challenges that can be physical, emotional and financial, experts say. Compared to their caregiving peers who aren’t raising children, more sandwich caregivers report substantial emotional and financial difficulties and higher caregiver role overload. A recent study in the British journal Public Health found sandwich caregivers who spent more than 20 hours a week caring for a family member experienced physical and mental health declines that could last for several years.

“The most challenging part is how many responsibilities they have,” Lei said. Her 2022 study found that nearly 70% of sandwich caregivers hold jobs on top of the more than 77 hours per month, on average, they spend on caring for older adults.

Sandwich caregivers juggle tasks such as setting up medical appointments, managing health information and accompanying their parents to the doctor, Lei said.

iStock

Adults of the so-called “sandwich generation” who care for both their own children as well as their aging parents deal with host of challenges that can be physical, emotional and financial, experts say.

They help with shopping, errands and personal care. This is on top of taking their children to and from activities, feeding their families, overseeing homework and bringing in income to cover the added medical expenses.

“Any one of these pieces can be very stressful,” she said. “If you combine all of these pieces, it just makes the situation so much worse.”

And caregivers aren’t the only ones who feel the impact.

“They’re not able to spend enough quality time with their own children,” Lei said. “This may affect the children’s school performance. Marital relationships can be affected as well. There could be all kinds of impacts on the family.”

The time spent juggling roles also takes time away from the caregiver’s ability to care for themselves, said Dr. Francesca Falzarano, an assistant professor at the Leonard Davis School of Gerontology at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles. And because that juggling leaves less time for socializing, it can shrink support networks at a time when caregivers need them most.

The “sandwich generation” moniker doesn’t fully capture the complexity of the situation, she said. “It’s more like a seven-layer dip than a sandwich.”

Seeking support from others is critical for people who find themselves juggling caregiving roles, Falzarano said. “It’s very easy to feel like you are an island, all by yourself. But there is support out there. Find a network and connect with other people in similar situations. When you share your experience with others, it can be a game changer.”

Not only does it make the caregiver feel more emotionally supported, others in a similar situation may also share tips and information that help lessen the burden, Falzarano said. “You can learn from others who have already navigated these situations.”

Engram said finding a support group was one of the first things she did, once she realized her situation wouldn’t be temporary.

She also looked to friends and neighbors, in addition to her husband, to help with child care and other logistical challenges.

Now they’re looking into moving her father and his cat, Squeaky, closer to their home in Georgia. But in the meantime, she said, “I’m managing the cat sitter, too.”

THE MEAT AND POTATOES OF LIFE

Lisa Smith Molinari

St. Patrick’s Day cuisine not so lucky for revelers

Sure, there will be parades, funny hats, silly buttons, green decorations and wild parties during the week of March 17. But what really makes or breaks holidays and special occasions?

Let’s face it — it’s all about the food.

Halloween and Valentine’s Day are lucky enough to have chocolate as their traditional treat. Easter gets savory ham and cheesy scalloped potatoes. Thanksgiving hit the jackpot with succulent roasted turkeys, mouth-watering dressings, cranberry sauce and pies loaded with whipped cream. And who doesn’t love Christmas and Hanukkah foods like cookies, doughnuts, prime rib, latkes, brisket and gingerbread?

With the luck of the Irish on its side, you’d think that St. Patty’s Day would be associated with delectable culinary delights. But corned beef and cabbage?

First of all, what is “corned” beef, anyway? Is corn even an ingredient? Does the corning process make an otherwise inedible piece of meat safe for human consumption?

Corned beef is undeniably delicious in a grilled reuben sandwich, sliced and piled high on buttered marbled rye with melted Swiss, tangy sauerkraut and creamy Thousand Island dressing. But when boiled with cabbage, it can be a smelly, stringy affair.

I’ve enjoyed well-prepared corned beef and cabbage on many occasions; however, those were the times that, by sheer happenstance, the cooking time was precisely correct for that particular size cabbage, acidity, elevation, boiling point and tilt of the Earth’s axis.

What average cooks don’t realize is that, within mere seconds, the otherwise crispy, sweet vegetable can become an overcooked ball of sulphur-gas-emitting mush that will stink up the house for at least a week. Corned beef and cabbage cannot just be tossed into a Crock-Pot. Properly cooking this finicky dish requires a doctorate in chemistry, a precision timing device and catlike senses. But who wants to stand around on St. Patrick’s Day watching cabbage steam? There’s green beer to drink, after all!

Speaking of which, green beer is festive, but let’s not kid ourselves. Order a green beer in any pub on St. Patrick’s Day and it’s likely to be the most tasteless brew on tap. Why?

The rich gold, amber and brown tones of the better beers turn an unappetizing hue of olive drab when mixed with green food coloring. It’s the watery, faintly yellow beers that make the prettiest kelly-green tones, but beware that the attractive color is masking a gut-rot swill that will stain your tongue and leave your head throbbing in the morning.

To make matters worse, my Irish mother-in-law, Alice Murphy, bakes a loaf of Irish Soda Bread every year around this time, and the whole family raves. I just don’t get Irish Soda Bread. I’ve never been a raisin fan, but also, the dry, bland loaf has always confused me. It’s not sweet enough to eat like coffee cake or dessert, but it’s too sweet to use as a pusher for the corned beef and cabbage. What good is it?

“It’s good with butter,” my mother-in-law would say. But doesn’t everything taste good with a thick slab of butter?

There’s one saving grace of St. Patrick’s Day cuisine. That sweet frozen delight with a creamy hint of something vaguely herbal like mint (or is it parsley?) that tingles the senses and cools the cabbage-scalded tongue.

Whether eaten past midnight with a Supersize Fry and a Filet-O-Fish after guzzling green beer, or sipped by itself from the drive-thru window on the way home from work, the McDonald’s Shamrock Shake mercifully delivers us from culinary evil.

The bottom line is, St. Patrick’s Day isn’t “all about the food” like other holidays and occasions. It’s really a day to experience the luck of the Irish. Obviously this luck doesn’t stem from the lousy food. Rather, it comes from being fortunate enough to share some fun with good friends and family.

Read more at themeatandpotatoesoflife.com and in Lisa’s book, “The Meat and Potatoes of Life: My True Lit Com.” Email: meatandpotatoesoflife@gmail.com

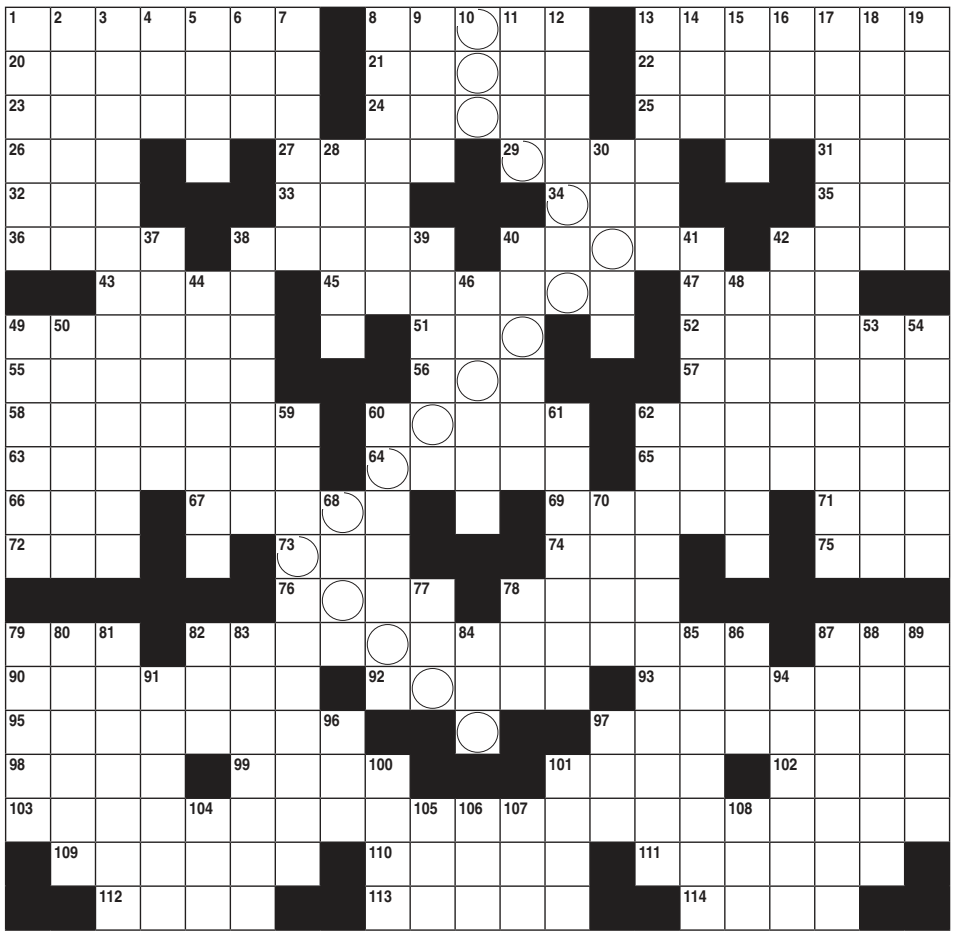
WEEKEND: CROSSWORD AND COMICS

NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

PARLOR TRICK

BY MATTHEW STOCK AND WILL NEDIGER / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

Matthew Stock works for a math-education nonprofit in East St. Louis, Ill. Will Nediger, of London, Ontario, is a professional crossword constructor. As fans of each other's work, they connected via the online "puzzleverse." They still have not met or even spoken together over video. The original idea for this puzzle was Matthew's. Together they developed the theme via Twitter direct messages, then exchanged grids back and forth until they got one they were both happy with. — W.S.



ACROSS

1 "Bon ____!"
8 "See ya later!"
13 It covers more than 30 percent of the earth's surface
20 Donna ____, member of Bill Clinton's cabinet
21 Klein who wrote the best seller "This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate"
22 Desert whose soil has been compared with that of Mars
23 Biting writings
24 Breakfast treat
25 Persuades a customer to pay more
26 "Or so"
27 Much of a delivery person's income
29 Makes a choice
31 Hoppin'
32 Prearranged
33 Suffix with official
34 Nickel found in a pocket, say
35 Actor Barinholtz of "The Mindy Project"
36 Classic Camaro
38 ____ K. Smith, poet who won a Pulitzer for "Life on Mars"
40 Cosmetic that can be applied with a brush
42 Neighbors of exclamation marks
43 "La Dolce ____"
45 Stuffed one's face
47 Bump on a frog
49 Question regarding a mic
51 Hubbub
52 One of the Blues Brothers
55 Above criticism
56 Question from the befuddled
57 Syrian city with a historic citadel
58 What "10" can mean
60 Extra
62 Rolled one's r's, say
63 Linguistic unit
64 Giraffe's closest living relative
65 Deb ____, secretary of the interior starting in 2021
66 Opposite of 'neath
67 Regarding
69 Exams for some future clerks: Abbr.
71 Cold open?
72 Hang out on a line
73 U.K. award bestowed by the queen
74 West Coast news inits.
75 Blunder
76 They cast lots
78 "Love covers a multitude of ____": I Peter 4:8
79 Lawn material
82 Something's essential aspect . . . or what's spelled out by letters in this puzzle's eight "cups"
87 Comedian Margaret
90 2011 film for which Octavia Spencer won a Best Supporting Actress Oscar
92 It takes blades to blades
93 Deal
95 Like the consonants "t" and "d"
97 Eject forcefully
98 Records request inits.
99 ____ history
101 Utah's state flower
102 Org. that sets permissible exposure limits
103 Karaoke instruction . . . or what to do starting at 10-Down
109 P.R. consultant on "Ted Lasso"
110 Start playing for pay
111 Into really small pieces
112 Scott who sued for his freedom
113 Afford, casually
114 Add salt to, say

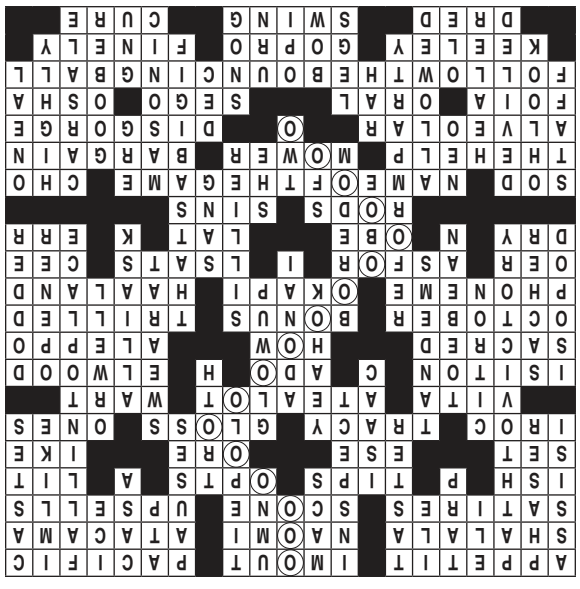
DOWN

1 Home of St. Clare
2 Starfleet weapon
3 Election night calculation . . . or what's traced by the circled letters
4 Name that's 6-Down backward
5 Save it for a rainy day!
6 La Corse, par exemple
7 Brewery employee
8 Comb through
9 Bubs
10 Worker's "on vacation" inits.
11 "Actually, I disagree"
12 Rococo painter of "Allegory of the Planets and Continents"
13 They might be pregnant
14 Organic energy compound, for short
15 "Mi ____ es su ____"
16 Part of a cold compress
17 Become clear . . . or make like the object represented by the circled letters
18 "So then my response was . . ."
19 Hereditary divisions
28 Physicist Newton
30 Loyalty that's pledged
37 Lemonlike fruit
38 Big rigs
39 "Well, fine then"
40 Age beautifully, informally
41 Cuss out
42 Big Brother's creator
44 Pink pad on a paw, in slang
46 The Lord, in the Hebrew Bible
48 Start of a simple request
49 Roly-poly, scientifically
50 ____ torte (Austrian cake)
53 Warm-up act
54 Move shakily
59 Ross Perot founded it in 1995
60 Lack of engagement
61 More wacky
62 "You're just assuming"
68 It's blown in the winds
70 Showed off one's pipes
77 Airport with a Harvey Milk terminal: Abbr.
78 Harry Styles tune about a woman who "lives in daydreams"
79 Lines of notes
80 Sight line?
81 Cooked with hot seasoning
82 Prefix with -lithic
83 Not against the rules
84 It's under @ on a keyboard
85 ____ lodge
86 Rowing machine, informally
87 Event for moving vehicles
88 Super
89 Actress Tatum
91 Folk medicine practitioner
94 Foolish sort
96 Sports fan's cheer
97 Universal Human Rights Mo.
100 Ability to sustain long-term interest
101 Kiss, in Kent
104 Sports fan's cheer
105 Gift wrapper's final touch
106 Nail-polish brand
107 Buffet table item
108 Zoo animal whose name rhymes with "zoo"

GUNSTON STREET

"Gunston Street" is drawn by Basil Zaviski. Email him at gunstonstreet@yahoo.com, and online at gunstonstreet.com.

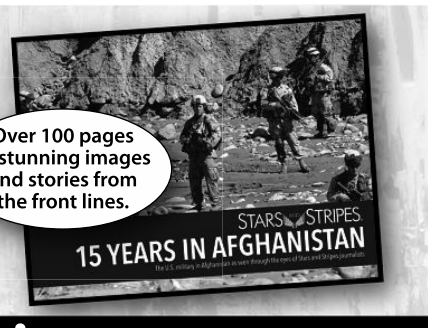
RESULTS FOR ABOVE PUZZLE



STARS AND STRIPES 15 YEARS IN AFGHANISTAN

The story of the U.S. military's role in Afghanistan, as seen through the eyes of Stars and Stripes journalists covering America's longest war.

Only $14.99 with Free Shipping



ORDER NOW at www.stripesstore.com

STARS AND STRIPES

MONTH OF THE
MILITARY
CHILD

ARE YOU A
DANDELION?

GIVE US A GLIMPSE
INTO YOUR LIFE

Military connected kids are often called **dandelions** because they are able to adapt and thrive in many different places! We want to showcase what gives them the ability to bloom where they are planted during April's Month of the Military Child.

Tell us what makes **you** extraordinary for a chance to be highlighted on the Stars and Stripes website and social media channels.

Learn more about submission at
europe.stripes.com/military-child

Sponsored by
CLUB BEYOND®
MILITARY COMMUNITY YOUTH MINISTRIES

SPRING BAZAAR

MARCH 14–16

AT THE WIESBADEN SPORTS & FITNESS CENTER

FRIDAY–SATURDAY: 10 A.M. TO 7 P.M.
SUNDAY: 10 A.M. TO 4 P.M.

Shop for a wide variety of tax-free European merchandise right here on Clay Kaserne! Handicrafts, carpets, furniture, paintings, wine, cheese, craft beers and lots more will be for sale at this year's event. Get ready for a true shopping extravaganza!

Open to US ID cardholders only. All sales in U.S. dollars only. Credit card only, no cash.

EDELWEISS LODGE and RESORT · STARS AND STRIPES · Andrews FEDERAL CREDIT UNION · OKAL · PMA Patriot Military Automobiles

Paid Sponsorship. No Federal Endorsement Implied.

U.S. ARMY · U.S. ARMY MWR

Family and MWR Special Events
Clay Kaserne, Bldg. 1214 | 0611-143-548-9816 | 548-9816
wiesbaden.armymwr.com & facebook.com/wiesbadenarmymwr

IT MATTERS WHERE YOU SHOP!

100% of Exchange earnings support Soldiers, Airmen, Guardians & their families

X

In the last 10 years, the Exchange has generated more than $15 billion in value for the military community

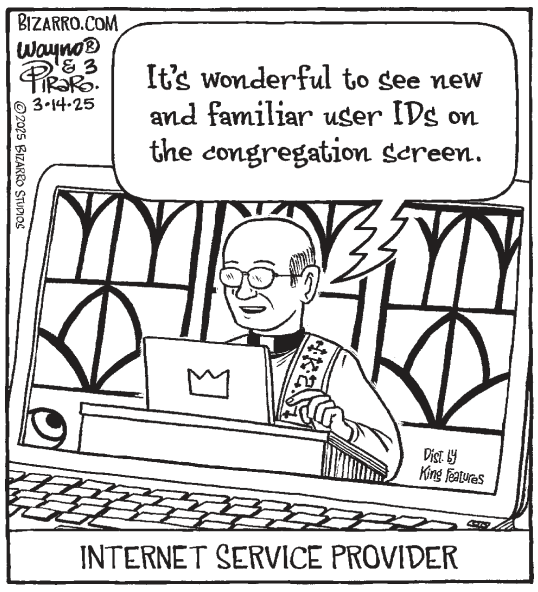
X

Shop tax-free with military-exclusive pricing

SCAN TO LEARN MORE

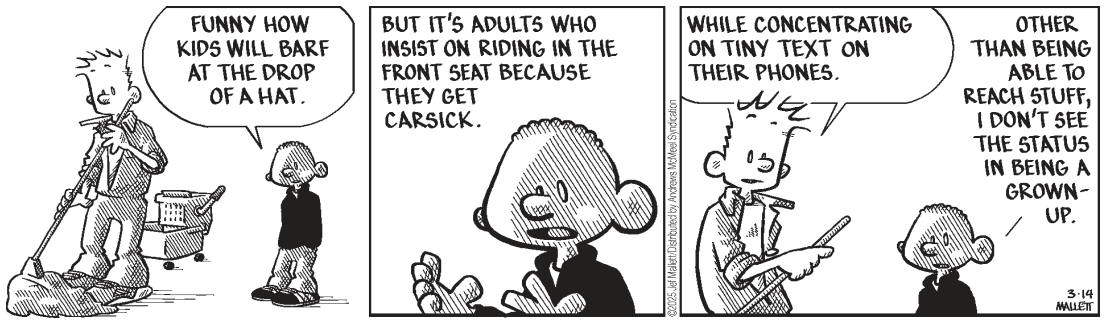
ShopMyExchange.com/vets

Bizarro

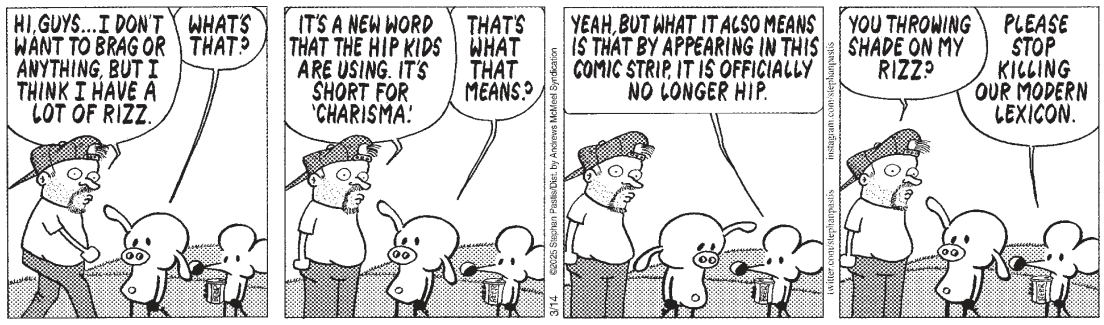


Loose Parts

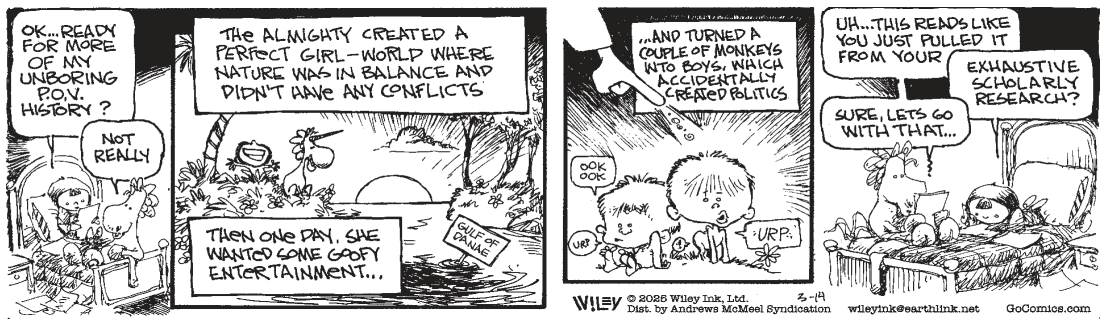
Frazz



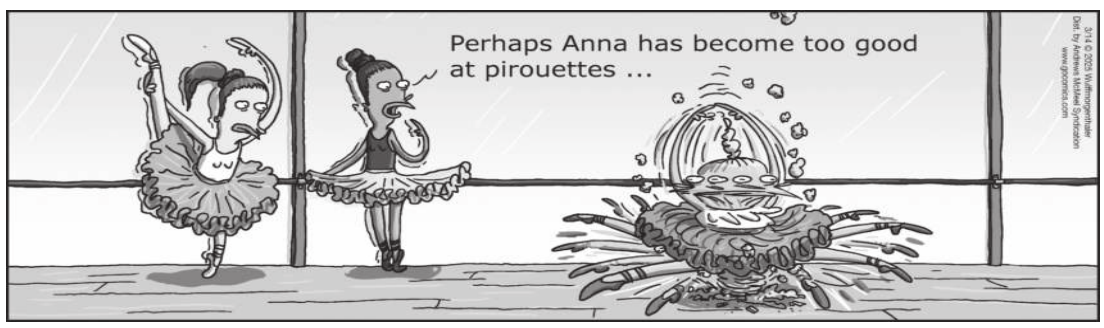
Pearls Before Swine



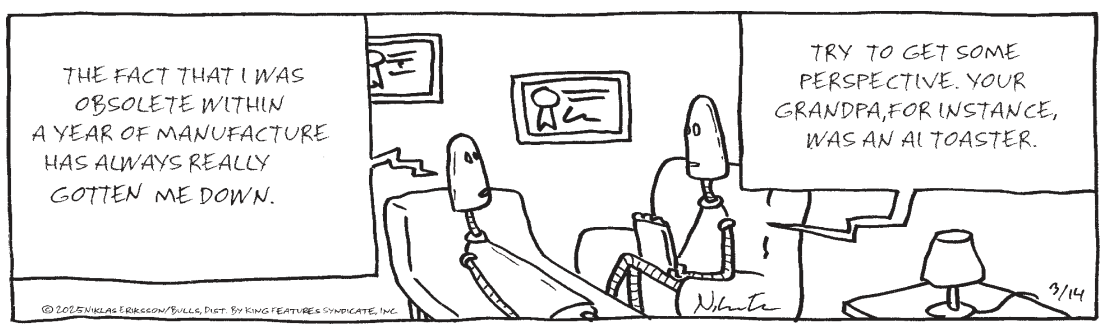
Non Sequitur



Wumo

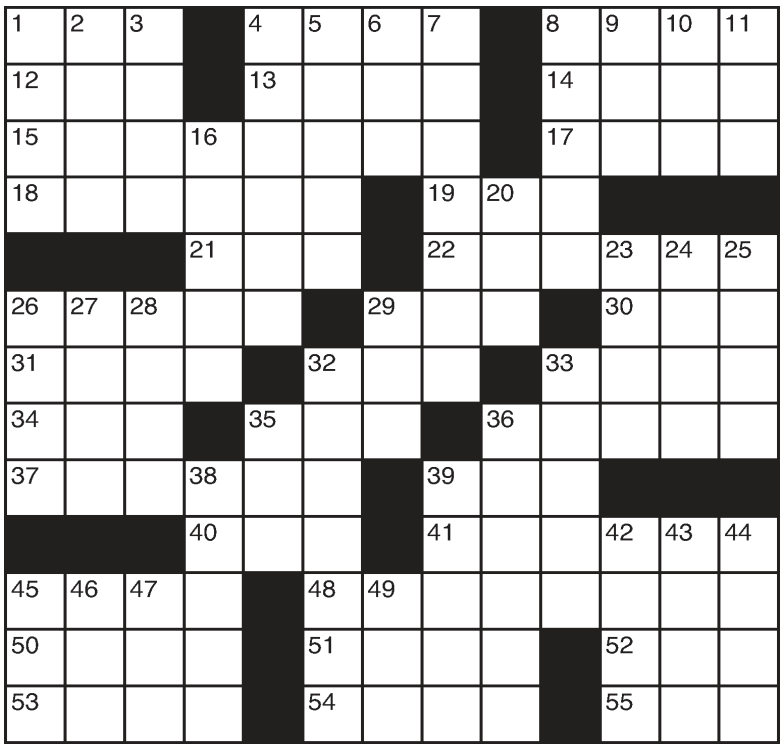


Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey

Eugene Sheffer Crossword



ACROSS

1 Newt
4 "Ray Donovan" star Schreiber
8 Court panel
12 Dead heat
13 Land measure
14 La Scala solo
15 Ice-removing tools
17 Nullify
18 Whine
19 Bit of wit
21 Gore and Green
22 Main dish
26 Takes five
29 Lanka lead-in
30 Scull need
31 Prefix meaning "all"
32 Prefix with gender
33 Activist Parks
34 Docs' org.
35 Harry Potter pal
36 Defeats
37 OutKast, for one
39 Rotating part
40 Rock concert booster
41 Showy shrub
45 Cicatrix
48 Ones making a getaway
50 Bank statement no.
51 Broadway star Moreno
52 Quibble
53 Genie's offering
54 Commotion
55 High school subj.

DOWN

1 Online craft shop
2 Abbr. on a pay stub
3 School session
4 Jacket flaps
5 Cake finishers
6 Goof up
7 Evening prayers
8 Quick trip
9 Coffee vessel
10 Free (of)
11 NBA great Ming
16 Ritzy violin
20 Numerical prefix
23 Aussie hoppers
24 Sunrise direction
25 Historic periods
26 Den noise
27 Thompson of "Love Actually"
28 Ginger cookie
29 Fall from grace
32 Barrel makers
33 Chart anew
35 Eggnog ingredient
36 Marketplace
38 Vader's title
39 Desert flora
42 Camera part
43 Guitarist Clapton
44 Wine region
45 Cutting tool
46 201, in old Rome
47 Rm. coolers
49 "Get comfy"

Answer to Previous Puzzle

L	E	I	S		C	L	A	M		A	H	S
E	T	T	U		L	E	G	O		N	O	T
A	N	T	I	P	A	S	T	O		T	O	Y
D	A	Y	T	O	N			S	P	I	T	E
			U	S		W	H	E	E	L		
S	L	A	P		S	H	Y		A	L	A	S
P	I	N			L	I	P			E	M	U
F	E	T	A		O	N	E		E	S	P	N
		I	M	A	G	E		O	N			
B	E	G	I	N			F	E	D	O	R	A
A	L	E		A	N	T	I	D	O	T	E	S
R	A	N		I	B	E	T		R	O	D	S
E	L	S		S	A	N	S		A	H	O	T

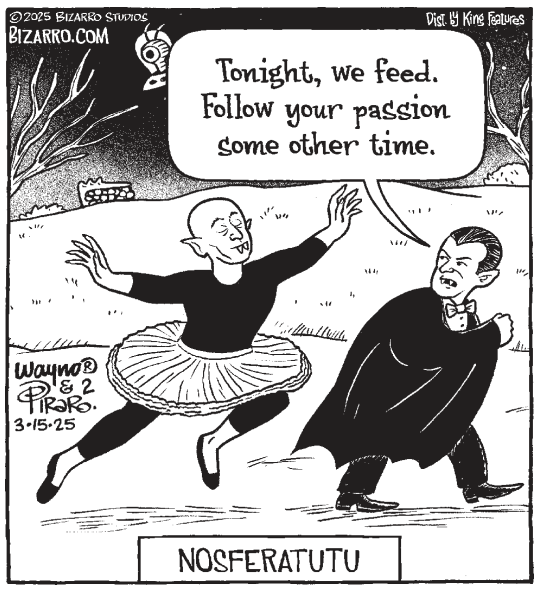
3-14 CRYPTOQUIP

S F Z A B L Q N I K E L T N P F R Q E J K S Z A X D G A X T L B A Q S S L C F Q K D Z P K C R Q E T K. L Q N F Z I K T L N A S L G A X X E Z S G S N J K.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: YOU HAVE ASKED ME TO FIND A VERY RELIABLE SOUTH AMERICAN PACK ANIMAL FOR YOU? NO PROB-LLAMA!

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: X equals G

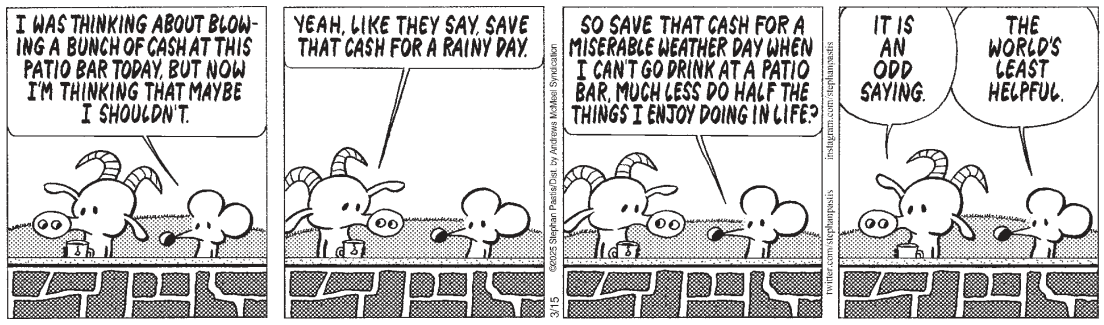
Bizarro



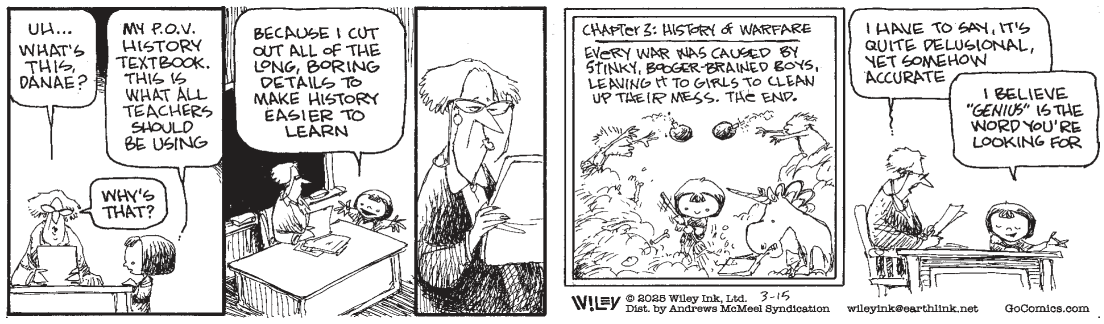
Loose Parts

Frazz

Pearls Before Swine

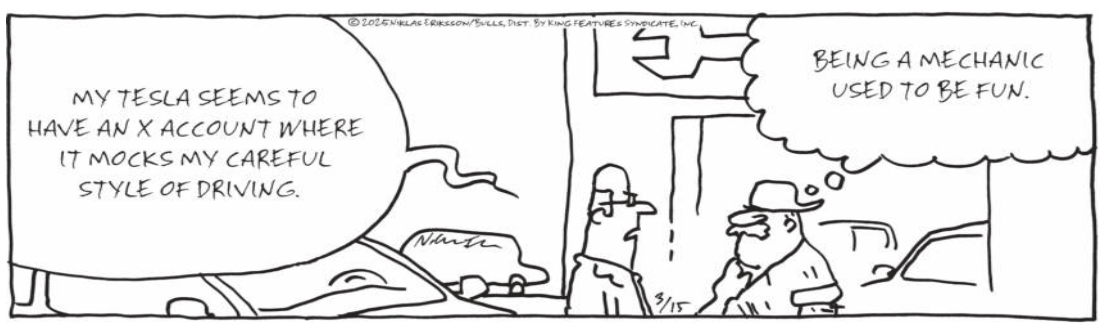


Non Sequitur



Wumo

Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey

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 Detox center
6 Clever
12 Department
13 Do electrical work
14 Lacking a musical key
15 Tristan's love
16 Org.
17 Future atty.'s exam
19 Greek consonants
20 Actor Alan
22 Pouch
24 Likely
27 Soda flavor
29 Dross
32 Crispy vegetable appetizer
35 Capital of Italia
36 List-ending shorthand
37 Cauldron
38 Branch
40 Genesis garden
42 Pitcher Maglie
44 Church area
46 "Sad to say ..."
50 Surfing the Web
52 Noble Florentine family
54 Lack of vitality
55 Peeved
56 Sunflower State
57 Book of maps

DOWN

1 Trenches
2 Cupid's alias
3 Reddish dye
4 Small battery
5 Bring down the house?
6 La Scala solo
7 Takes five
8 Pair
9 Movie excerpt
10 Language of Pakistan
11 Cask sediment
12 Cote cry
18 Military greetings
21 PC screen type
23 Bat wood
24 Ghana's cont.
25 Expert
26 "Shifting Gears" actor
28 College life
30 Year in Madrid
31 "Shoo!"
33 Corn serving
34 Cavs, on scoreboards
39 Craze
41 Tennis great Rafael
42 Drench
43 Author Quindlen
45 Stew veggies
47 "Break My Heart" singer Dua
48 Experts
49 Perch
51 Cyber-chats, briefly
53 Tolkien creature

Answer to Previous Puzzle

E	F	T	■	L	I	E	V	■	J	U	R	Y
T	I	E	■	A	C	R	E	■	A	R	I	A
S	C	R	A	P	E	R	S	■	U	N	D	O
Y	A	M	M	E	R	■	P	U	N	■	■	■
■	■	■	A	L	S	■	E	N	T	R	E	E
R	E	S	T	S	■	S	R	I	■	O	A	R
O	M	N	I	■	C	I	S	■	R	O	S	A
A	M	A	■	R	O	N	■	B	E	S	T	S
R	A	P	D	U	O	■	C	A	M	■	■	■
■	■	■	A	M	P	■	A	Z	A	L	E	A
S	C	A	R	■	E	S	C	A	P	E	R	S
A	C	C	T	■	R	I	T	A	■	N	I	T
W	I	S	H	■	S	T	I	R	■	S	C	I

3-15 CRYPTOQUIP

ZQVND EK JQWMEHV SGDMD JWQLU VQSVBU UDDY AW FD AEKLDMEKT SEAG AGEKTU UCUZENEWCUQB: AVYZDM FVB.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR DETANGLING MY KNOTTY SHOELACES FOR ME. YOU HAVE MY UNTYING GRATITUDE.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: U equals S

STARS AND STRIPES

Laura Law, Chief Operating Officer
Lt. Col. Katie R. Fidler, Europe commander
John Rodriguez, Europe chief of staff
Lt. Col. Marci Hoffman, Pacific commander

EDITORIAL

Robert H. Reid, Editor in Chief
reid.robert@stripes.com

Sean Moores, Managing Editor for Presentation
moores.sean@stripes.com

Ann Pinson, Digital Managing Editor
pinson.ann@stripes.com

BUREAU STAFF

Europe/Mideast

Erik Slavin, Europe & Mideast Bureau Chief
slavin.erik@stripes.com
+49(0)631.3615.9350; DSN (314)583.9350

Pacific

Aaron Kidd, Pacific Bureau Chief
kidd.aaron@stripes.com
+81.42.552.2511 ext. 88380; DSN (315)227.7380

Washington

Joseph Cacchioli, Washington Bureau Chief
cacchioli.joseph@stripes.com
(+1)(202)886-0033

Brian Bowers, Assistant Managing Editor, News
bowers.brian@stripes.com

CIRCULATION

Mideast

David Schultz, District Manager
schultz.david@stripes.com
xsscirculation@stripes.com
+49(0)152.5672.5036; DSN (314)583-9111

Europe

Carlo Aquino, Circulation Manager
aquino.carlo@stripes.com
memberservices@stripes.com
+49(0)631.3615.9136; DSN (314)583.9136

Pacific

Mari Mori, customerhelp@stripes.com
+81-3 6385.3171; DSN (315)227.7333

CONTACT US

Washington

tel: (+1)202.886.0003
633 3rd St. NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20001-3050

Reader letters

letters@stripes.com

Additional contacts

stripes.com/contactus

OMBUDSMAN

Jacqueline Smith

The Stars and Stripes ombudsman protects the free flow of news and information, reporting any attempts by the military or other authorities to undermine the newspaper's independence. The ombudsman also responds to concerns and questions from readers, and monitors coverage for fairness, accuracy, timeliness and balance. The ombudsman welcomes comments from readers, and can be contacted by email at ombudsman@stripes.com, or by phone at 202.886.0003.

Stars and Stripes (USPS 0417900) published daily (except Saturday, Sunday, 25 December and 1 January) for 50 cents (Monday through Thursday) and one dollar on Friday by Stars and Stripes Pacific, OPC 706 BOX 7, APO AP 96301-9001. Periodicals postage paid at San Francisco, CA Postmaster: Send address changes to Pacific Stars and Stripes, OPC 706 BOX 7, AP 96301-9001.

The Stars and Stripes newspaper is authorized by the Department of Defense (DoD) for the overseas U.S. military community. As an authorized newspaper, Stars and Stripes publications may be distributed through official channels and use appropriated funds for distribution to remote locations where overseas DoD personnel are located. The content printed in this newspaper is not classified as command information and is neither endorsed by nor represents the official views of the U.S. government.

The appearance of advertising in this publication does not constitute endorsement by the Department of Defense, Stars and Stripes, and or services advertised. Products or services advertised shall be made available for purchase, use or patronage without regard to race, color, religion, sex, national origin, age, marital status, physical handicap, political affiliation or any other nonmerit factor of the purchaser, user or patron.

© Stars and Stripes 2025
stripes.com

OPINION

Qualified immunity shouldn't be unqualified impunity

By George F. Will
The Washington Post

By a recent dereliction of duty, the Supreme Court has demonstrated that sometimes the proper regret about judicial activism is that there is too little of it. The court refused to hear a case that would have allowed it to clarify a doctrine that has become an impediment to remedies for even gross government violations of individuals' constitutionally guaranteed rights.

In 2016, Kodi Gaines, then 5, was seriously wounded by a Baltimore County police corporal who was, he later explained, "hot" and "frustrated" during a six-hour standoff on a sweltering August day in a Baltimore suburb. The corporal was, however, protected by court-granted "qualified immunity" from liability for his appalling misjudgment. Qualified immunity is frequently misapplied because the Supreme Court has declined to dispel confusion that has proliferated in the absence of clarity that the court could have provided by taking up Kodi's case.

According to court documents, when two police officers arrived to serve Kodi's mother with misdemeanor arrest warrants (arising from traffic violations), they encountered her with Kodi, a shotgun in her lap. The officers withdrew and summoned more than 30 backup officers. They surrounded the apartment building and cut its power, and hence its air conditioning. When Kodi's mother went to the kitchen to make him a sandwich, she took her shotgun but pointed it at no officer. Although she seemingly posed no threat of flight or imminent harm, the police corporal, who had been in an adjacent apartment, and who testified that he knew Kodi was somewhere behind the kitchen's drywall partition, fired his rifle at the mother. The bullet hit her in the back, ricocheted off the refrigerator and struck Kodi's face. The corporal then entered the apartment and killed the mother with three more shots, one of which shattered Kodi's elbow. His injuries required multiple surgeries.

In a suit filed on Kodi's behalf, a jury awarded him monetary compensation for violations of his constitutional rights. But an appellate court found that no "well-settled law" established that an innocent bystander has a right to be free from injury from a gunshot intended for someone else. So, the "hot" and "frustrated" corporal was protected by qualified immunity.

In 1871, Congress legislated that government officials who violate citizens' constitutional rights "shall be liable to the party injured." In 1982, however, the Supreme Court substantially weakened this guarantee. It held that for an official to receive qualified immunity for his conduct, the conduct must violate "clearly established law." This, in turn, has been construed to mean that trivial differences between the fact patterns in even egregious violations of rights mean that the abusive official did not have "fair warning" that his abuses, however glaring, were wrong.

The Supreme Court has, however, held that such immunity does not shield officers whose constitutional violations are "so obvious" and "clear" that a reasonable officer's sense of justice should suffice as "fair warning" of their acts' illegality, even absent a precisely similar precedent.

So, the Maryland court erred in considering only whether relevant prior cases exist. It wrongly ignored — as various federal circuit courts of appeal have done — the Supreme Court's obviousness principle: Some violations are so shocking that, when denying qualified immunity, it is unnecessary to find a prior case with closely similar fact patterns.

The obviousness principle rescues the law from this perverse outcome: The most luridly flagrant violations of rights are apt to be sui generis, so government agents who commitment them would be especially likely to be shielded by qualified immunity because there are no precisely similar precedents for denying it.

Qualified immunity was originally intended to protect endangered police making split-second decisions in, for example, high-speed chases or shootouts with armed suspects. But courts have granted qualified immunity to officers who stole more than $225,000 in cash and rare coins while executing a search warrant. To a deputy sheriff who, while trying to shoot an unthreatening pet dog, wounded a 10-year-old child. To state investigators who, without a warrant, entered a doctor's office and searched the medical records of patients. Even to some university bureaucrats because their flagrant denial of some students' First Amendment rights did not violate "clearly established law."

Qualified immunity properly shields from personal liability the overwhelming majority of competent police officers who might make honest misjudgments in high-pressure situations. But as a federal appellate judge has said, qualified immunity has begun to look like unqualified impunity for misbehaving public officials. The Supreme Court should have corrected this with some dutiful activism, using Kodi's case to end confusion among lesser courts.

Where's the economic sense behind the Trump tariffs?

By Ramesh Ponnuru
Special to The Washington Post

If you think tariffs are painful, try watching President Donald Trump's aides and supporters attempt to defend them. Whenever they come up with a rationale for his policies, however dubious, he immediately says or does something to contradict it. They say Trump's trade strategy is all about containing China — then he slaps tariffs on the allies we would need to do so. They explain that the law lets him impose tariffs on Canada to protect our national security, only for him to let slip that he's mad about Canadian dairy policies.

The truth is that Trump just likes tariffs and people who tell him they make sense. His trade adviser, Peter Navarro, thinks imports harm the economy because he doesn't understand how gross domestic product data is calculated. The administration has no grand trade strategy.

But the demand for sophistry in defense of Trump's tariffs is apparently inexhaustible. Scott Bessent, the treasury secretary, tried out another argument at the Economic Club of New York last week. The president, Bessent said with a straight face, "sees the world not as a zero-sum game, but as interlinkages that can be reordered" to help Americans. (If this were a college paper, the professor would scrawl "citation needed.")

Bessent argued that the tariffs are designed "to rebalance the international economic system" and "[level] the playing field." He's not just making the standard complaint that other countries place tariffs on U.S.-made products. Although true, that fact does not go very far toward justifying Trump's policies. In fact, many countries place lower tariffs on our exports than we do on theirs — yet Trump wants to hike tariffs on them anyway.

The treasury secretary has a broader view of the imbalances that need to be fixed. "The United States," he says, "provides reserve assets, serves as a consumer of first and last resort, and absorbs excess supply in the face of insufficient demand in other countries' domestic models." Most economists think the United States runs a trade deficit because investment outstrips savings. Bessent looks at it differently: Other countries force trade deficits on America by undervaluing their currencies and investing their excess savings with us.

Bessent sketched his case briefly in New York, but others have developed it in greater detail. Manufacturing employment has shriveled because of all this currency manipulation, these theorists say, but tariffs can undo these distortions by encouraging increased production at home.

Bessent alluded to this idea in the most-quoted remark from the speech: that "access to cheap goods is not the essence of the American Dream." He believes that the global economic order has pushed us to consume too much and produce too little. Perhaps a man with assets above $500 million should have found a better way to phrase this opinion.

But set aside the bad PR. The argument itself is a chain with several links — and not one is solid. Trade balances don't indicate which economies are succeeding and which are failing. The United States ran a trade deficit for most of the 19th century while rising as an industrial power. Nor is it true that trade surpluses can keep a country from losing manufacturing jobs. Every developed country — including Germany, which has a trade surplus — has seen the same downward trend.

Tariffs are not a reliable means of increasing domestic production, either. That's partly because they tend to cause the currency to appreciate. Bessent himself has told us so: During his confirmation hearings, he tried to allay fears that tariffs would raise prices by saying that a rising dollar would soften the blow. But a stronger dollar also reduces demand for U.S. exports — which is the very reason Bessent complains about currency manipulation.

Tariffs also tend to raise the price of goods that U.S. manufacturers use, which makes it harder for them to make and sell their own products.

What Bessent's case for tariffs has in common with all the other rationalizations is that the president has given no indication he believes it. If Trump believed it, he would want a weaker dollar and an end to its status as a global reserve currency. He doesn't; he has talked about punishing countries that try to displace the dollar.

The purpose of these theories is not to cohere. It's to sound just plausible enough to distract from the unsettling truth: The president has an obsession with tariffs, and it is impervious to facts and logic.

Ramesh Ponnuru, a contributing columnist for The Washington Post, is the editor of National Review and a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

SCOREBOARD

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Men's conference tournaments

America East Conference
Championship
Saturday, March 15

Bryant vs. Maine

American Athletic Conference
First Round
Wednesday, March 12

Charlotte 64, Rice 61

Second Round
Thursday, March 13

Wichita St. vs. South Florida
FAU vs. Charlotte
Temple vs. Tulsa
East Carolina vs. UTSA

Atlantic 10 Conference
First Round
Wednesday, March 12

Davidson 69, Richmond 65
Fordham 88, Rhode Island 71
La Salle 78, UMass 71

Second Round
Thursday, March 13

St. Bonaventure vs. Duquesne
Saint Louis vs. Davidson
George Washington vs. Fordham
Saint Joseph's vs. La Salle

Atlantic Coast Conference
Second Round
Wednesday, March 12

Georgia Tech 66, Virginia 60
North Carolina 76, Notre Dame 56
Stanford 78, California 73
SMU 73, Syracuse 53

Quarterfinals
Thursday, March 13

Duke vs. Georgia Tech
Wake Forest vs. North Carolina
Louisville vs. Stanford
Clemson vs. SMU

Big 12 Conference
Second Round
Wednesday, March 12

Iowa St. 76, Cincinnati 56
Colorado 67, West Virginia 60
Baylor 70, Kansas St. 56
Kansas 98, UCF 94

Quarterfinals
Thursday, March 13

BYU vs. Iowa St.
Houston vs. Colorado
Texas Tech vs. Baylor
Arizona vs. Kansas

Big East Conference
First Round
Wednesday, March 12

Butler 75, Providence 69
DePaul 71, Georgetown 67
Villanova 67, Seton Hall 55

Quarterfinals
Thursday, March 13

St. John's vs. Butler
Xavier vs. Marquette
Creighton vs. DePaul
UConn vs. Villanova

Big Sky Conference
Championship
Wednesday, March 12

Montana 91, N. Colorado 83

Big Ten Conference
First Round
Wednesday, March 12

Northwestern 72, Minnesota 64
Iowa 77, Ohio St. 70
Southern Cal 97, Rutgers 89

Second Round
Thursday, March 13

Oregon vs. Indiana
Wisconsin vs. Northwestern
Illinois vs. Iowa
Purdue vs. Southern Cal

Big West Conference
First Round
Wednesday, March 12

UC Santa Barbara 71, CS Bakersfield 66
Cal Poly 86, UC Davis 76

Quarterfinals
Thursday, March 13

CS Northridge vs. UCSB
UC Riverside vs. Cal Poly

Conference USA
Quarterfinals
Wednesday, March 12

Liberty 81, UTEP 60
Jacksonville St. 65, FIU 56

Thursday, March 13

Kennesaw St. vs. New Mexico St.
Middle Tennessee vs. Louisiana Tech

Ivy League
Semifinals
Saturday, March 15

Yale vs. Princeton
Cornell vs. Dartmouth

Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference
Quarterfinals
Wednesday, March 12

Quinnipiac 78, Rider 64
Merrimack 66, Sacred Heart 62

Thursday, March 13

Iona vs. Manhattan
Marist vs. Mount St. Mary's

Mid-American Conference
First Round
Thursday, March 13

Akron vs. Bowling Green
Toledo vs. Ohio
Miami (Ohio) vs. E. Michigan
Kent St. vs. W. Michigan

Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference
First Round
Wednesday, March 12

Norfolk St. 77, Md.-Eastern Shore 70
SC State 68, Coppin St. 63

Thursday, March 13

Howard vs. Morgan St.
Delaware St. vs. NC Central

Mountain West Conference
First Round
Wednesday, March 12

San Jose St. 66, Wyoming 61
Nevada 86, Fresno St. 71
UNLV 68, Air Force 59

Quarterfinals
Thursday, March 13

New Mexico vs. San Jose St.
San Diego St. vs. Boise St.
Colo. St. vs. Nevada
Utah St. vs. UNLV

Patriot League
Championship
Wednesday, March 12

American 74, Navy 52

Southeastern Conference
First Round
Wednesday, March 12

Arkansas 72, South Carolina 68
Texas 79, Vanderbilt 72
Mississippi St. 91, LSU 62
Oklahoma 81, Georgia 75

Second Round
Thursday, March 13

Mississippi vs. Arkansas
Texas A&M vs. Texas
Missouri vs. Mississippi St.
Kentucky vs. Oklahoma

Southland Conference
Championship
Wednesday, March 12

McNeese St. 63, Lamar 54

Southwestern Athletic Conference
Quarterfinals
Wednesday, March 12

Grambling St. 65, Southern U. 62
Jackson St. 91, Florida A&M 76

Thursday, March 13

Texas Southern vs. Alabama St.
Bethune-Cookman vs. Alcorn St.

Western Athletic Conference
Quarterfinals
Wednesday, March 12

Utah Valley St. 74, Utah Tech 57
Grand Canyon 98, Texas-Arlington 75

Thursday, March 13

Abilene Christian vs. Seattle
Cal Baptist vs. Tarleton State

Women's conference tournaments

America East Conference
Championship
Friday, March 14

Albany (NY) vs. Vermont

American Athletic Conference
Semifinals
Tuesday, March 11

Rice 67, Temple 49
South Florida 58, North Texas 48

Championship
Wednesday, March 12

South Florida 69, Rice 62

Atlantic Sun Conference
Championship
Saturday, March 15

Florida Gulf Coast vs. Cent. Arkansas

Big Sky Conference
Championship
Wednesday, March 12

Montana St. 58, Montana 57

Big West Conference
First Round
Wednesday, March 12

Cal Poly 56, UC Santa Barbara 54
UC Riverside 54, Long Beach St. 40

Quarterfinals
Thursday, March 13

UC San Diego vs. Cal Poly
UC Davis vs. UC Riverside

Coastal Athletic Conference
First Round
Wednesday, March 12

Hampton 76, Stony Brook 75
Towson 67, Northeastern 44

Second Round
Thursday, March 13

Hofstra vs. William & Mary
Monmouth (NJ) vs. Hampton
Delaware vs. UNC-Wilmington
Elon vs. Towson

Conference USA Conference
Quarterfinals
Wednesday, March 12

Liberty 78, Sam Houston St. 51
Middle Tennessee 73, Kennesaw St. 46

Thursday, March 13

New Mexico St. vs. Louisiana Tech
W. Kentucky vs. FIU

Semifinals
Friday, March 14

Liberty vs. New Mexico St.-Louisiana Tech winner
Middle Tennessee vs. W. Kentucky-FIU winner

Ivy League
Semifinals
Friday, March 14

Columbia vs. Penn
Princeton vs. Harvard

Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference
Quarterfinals
Wednesday, March 12

Fairfield 58, Manhattan 51
Quinnipiac 79, Iona 51

Thursday, March 13

Mount St. Mary's vs. Marist,
Siena vs. Merrimack

Mid-American Conference
First Round
Wednesday, March 12

Ball St. 82, W. Michigan 53
Kent St. 68, Miami (Ohio) 61
Toledo 76, Cent. Michigan 58
Buffalo 65, Bowling Green 63

Semifinals
Friday, March 14

Ball St. vs. Kent St.
Toledo vs. Buffalo

Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference
First Round
Wednesday, March 12

Norfolk St. 81, SC State 55
Howard 85, Delaware St. 49

Thursday, March 13

Coppin St. vs. NC Central
Md.-Eastern Shore vs. Morgan St.

Semifinals
Friday, March 14

Norfolk St. vs. Coppin St.-NC Central winner
Howard vs. UMES-Morgan St. winner

Missouri Valley Conference
First Round
Thursday, March 13

Valparaiso vs. Bradley
Illinois St. vs. S. Illinois
UIC vs. Evansville
N. Iowa vs. Indiana St.

Quarterfinals
Friday, March 14

Murray St. vs. Valparaiso-Bradley winner
Drake vs. Illinois St.-S. Illinois winner
Missouri St. vs. UIC-Evansville winner
Belmont vs. N. Iowa-Indiana St. winner

Mountain West Conference
Championship
Wednesday, March 12

San Diego St. 72, Wyoming 68

Northeast Conference
Semifinals
Thursday, March 13

Fairleigh Dickinson vs. Chicago St.
Stonehill vs. Le Moyne

Patriot League
Semifinals
Thursday, March 13

Army vs. Bucknell
Lehigh vs. Holy Cross

Southland Conference
Semifinals
Wednesday, March 12

SE Louisiana 57, Incarnate Word 37
Stephen F. Austin 61, Lamar 53

Championship
Thursday, March 13

SE Louisiana vs. Stephen F. Austin

Southwestern Athletic Conference
Quarterfinals
Wednesday, March 12

Texas Southern 69, Prairie View 49
Southern U. 63, MVSU 43

Thursday, March 13

Alabama A&M vs. Alcorn St.
Jackson St. vs. Grambling St.

Semifinals
Friday, March 14

Texas Southern vs. Alabama A&M-Alcorn St. winner
Southern U. vs. Jackson St.-Grambling St. winner

Western Athletic Conference
Quarterfinals
Wednesday, March 12

Grand Canyon 71, Utah Tech 47
Tarleton State Texans 59, S. Utah 40

Thursday, March 13

Abilene Christian vs. Utah Valley St.
Texas-Arlington vs. Cal Baptist

Semifinals
Friday, March 14

Grand Canyon vs. Abilene Christian-Utah Valley St. winner
Tarleton St. vs. UT-Arl.-Cal Bapt. winner

Women's NCAA Automatic Bids

Tennessee Tech, Ohio Valley
Duke, Atlantic Coast
UNC Greensboro, Southern
Duke, Atlantic Coast
George Mason, Atlantic 10
South Carolina, Southeastern
South Dakota State, Summit League
UCLA, Big Ten
TCU, Big 12
High Point, Big South
Arkansas St., Sun Belt
UConn, Big East
Green Bay, Horizon League
Oregon St., West Coast
South Florida, American Athletic
Montana St., Big Sky
San Diego St., Mountain West

DEALS

Wednesday's transactions

BASEBALL
Major League Baseball
American League

ATHLETICS — Optioned LHP Jacob Lopez to Las Vegas (PCL).
CHICAGO WHITE SOX — Agreed to terms with OF Travis Jankowski on a minor league contract.
CLEVELAND GUARDIANS — Optioned CF Petey Halpin to Columbus (IL).
LOS ANGELES ANGELS — Optioned RHP Hans Crouse to Salt Lake (PCL).
SEATTLE MARINERS — Reassigned RHPs Sauryn Lao and Casey Lawrence, LHP Austin Kitchen, INF Colt Emerson and OF Lazaro Montes to minor league camp.
TEXAS RANGERS — Agreed to terms with RHP Hunter Strickland on a minor league contract. Optioned RHPs Emiliano Teodo, Luis Curvelo and 1B Justin Foscue to Round Rock (PCL).
TORONTO BLUE JAYS — Agreed to terms with RHP Dillon Tate on a one-year contract. Placed RHP Angel Bastardo on the 60-day IL. Optioned RHP Nick Robertson to Buffalo (IL).

National League

CHICAGO CUBS — Optioned RF Kevin Alcantara to Iowa (IL). Released OF Travis Jankowski from a minor league contract.
CINCINNATI REDS — Returned Rule 5 Draft selection INF/OF Cooper Bowman to the Athletics.
COLORADO ROCKIES — Optioned 2B Adael Amador and C Drew Romo to Albuquerque (PCL). Reassigned INF Kyle Karros to minor league camp.
PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES — Optioned RHP Mick Abel to Lehigh Valley (IL).
PITTSBURGH PIRATES — Agreed to terms with OF Ji Hwan Bae, INF Billy Cook, OF Oneil Cruz, C Henry Davis, C Jason Delay, INF Nick Gonzales, INF Spencer Horwitz, RHP Jared Jones, RHP Carmen Mlodzinski, RHP Dauri Moreta, RHP Kyle Nicolas, OF Joshua Palacios, C Endy Rodríguez, RHP Paul Skenes, RHP Peter Strzelecki, OF Jack Suwinski, INF Jared Triolo, INF Enmanuel Valdez, LHP Joey Wentz, INF Alika Williams and RHP Nick Yorke on one-year contracts.
ST. LOUIS CARDINALS — Optioned RHP Tekoah Roby to Memphis (IL).
SAN DIEGO PADRES — Agreed to terms with INF Jose Iglesias on a minor league contract.

BASKETBALL
National Basketball Association

NBA — Fined the Utah Jazz $100,000 for violating the player participation policy.
CHARLOTTE HORNETS — Signed G Marcus Garrett to a 10-day contract.
WASHINGTON WIZARDS — Assigned G A.J. Johnson and F Colby Jones to the Capital City Go-Go of the G League.

HOCKEY
National Hockey League

CALGARY FLAMES — Recalled RW Adam Klapka from Calgary (AHL).
NEW YORK RANGERS — Signed G Jonathan Quick to a one-year contract extension.
OTTAWA SENATORS — Reassigned G Leevi Merilainen to Belleville (AHL).
PITTSBURGH PENGUINS — Recalled D Sebastian Aho and LW Matt Nieto from Wilkes-Barre/Scranton (AHL).
TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING — Recalled RW Cam Atkinson from Syracuse (AHL).

SOCCER
Major League Soccer

LA GALAXY — Signed MF Tommy Musto and F Sean Karani to short-term agreements from Ventura County (MLS Next Pro).

National Women's Soccer League

ANGEL CITY FC — Signed G Breanna Norris to a contract.
BAY FC — Activated G Melissa Lowder from season-ending injury list.
CHICAGO STARS FC — Signed D Justina Gaynor to a one-year contract that includes a 2026 mutual option.
NORTH CAROLINA COURAGE — Placed M Danielle Weatherholt and F Olivia Wingate on the 45-day injury list.
RACING LOUISVILLE FC — Signed G Maddy Anderson to a short-term contract through June 22, 2025. Placed G Olivia Sekany on the season-ending injury list.
PORTLAND THORNS FC — Signed F Caiya Hanks to a four-year contract that includes a 2029 club option.
SAN DIEGO WAVE FC — Signed D Nya Harrison and M Jordan Fusco to short-term contracts through June 2025.
SEATTLE REIGN — Signed M Sofia Cedeno to a one-year contract and loaned her to Brooklyn FS of the USL Super League through June. Signed F Lynn Biyendolo to a three-year contract.

TENNIS

BNP Paribas Open

Wednesday
At Indian Wells, Calif.
Round of 16
Men's Singles

Ben Shelton (11), United States, def. Brandon Nakashima (32), United States, 7-6 (6), 6-1.
Francisco Cerundolo (25), Argentina, def. Alex de Minaur (9), Australia, 7-5, 6-3.
Jack Draper (13), Britain, def. Taylor Fritz (3), United States, 7-5, 6-4.
Carlos Alcaraz (2), Spain, def. Grigor Dimitrov (14), Bulgaria, 6-1, 6-1.

Women's Singles

Belinda Bencic, Switzerland, def. Coco Gauff (3), United States, 3-6, 6-3, 6-4.
Madison Keys (5), United States, def. Donna Vekic (19), Croatia, 4-6, 7-6 (7), 6-3.
Aryna Sabalenka (1), Belarus, def. Sonay Kartal, Britain, 6-1, 6-2.
Liudmila Samsonova (24), Russia, def. Jasmine Paolini (6), Italy, 6-0, 6-4.

PRO SOCCER

NWSL

	W	L	T	Pts	GF	GA
Angel City	0	0	0	0	0	0
Bay FC	0	0	0	0	0	0
Chicago	0	0	0	0	0	0
Gotham FC	0	0	0	0	0	0
Houston	0	0	0	0	0	0
Kansas City	0	0	0	0	0	0
North Carolina	0	0	0	0	0	0
Orlando	0	0	0	0	0	0
Portland	0	0	0	0	0	0
Louisville	0	0	0	0	0	0
San Diego	0	0	0	0	0	0
Seattle	0	0	0	0	0	0
Utah Royals FC	0	0	0	0	0	0
Washington	0	0	0	0	0	0

Note: Three points for victory, one point for tie.

Friday's games

Chicago at Orlando
Washington at Houston

Saturday's games

Portland at Kansas City
North Carolina at Louisville
Bay FC at Utah Royals FC
Gotham FC at Seattle

Sunday's game

San Diego at Angel City

Friday, March 21

Angel City at Portland

Saturday, March 22

Seattle at North Carolina
Kansas City at Washington
Utah Royals FC at San Diego
Louisville at Bay FC

MLS

Eastern Conference

	W	L	T	Pts	GF	GA
Philadelphia	3	0	0	9	10	3
Inter Miami CF	2	0	1	7	7	3
Columbus	2	0	1	7	5	2
Cincinnati	2	1	0	6	4	4
D.C. United	1	0	2	5	6	5
Charlotte FC	1	1	1	4	4	3
New York	1	1	1	4	2	1
Chicago	1	1	1	4	7	7
NYC FC	1	1	1	4	4	4
Nashville	1	1	1	4	2	2
Atlanta	1	1	1	4	3	4
Orlando City	1	2	0	3	7	8
New England	0	2	1	1	0	3
Toronto FC	0	2	1	1	4	8
CF Montréal	0	3	0	0	2	6

Western Conference

	W	L	T	Pts	GF	GA
Vancouver	3	0	0	9	8	2
San Diego FC	2	0	1	7	5	1
San Jose	2	1	0	6	6	2
Minn. United	2	1	0	6	2	1
LA FC	2	1	0	6	4	5
St Louis City	1	0	2	5	3	0
Colorado	1	0	2	5	4	3
Seattle	1	1	1	4	7	6
FC Dallas	1	1	1	4	6	7
Austin FC	1	2	0	3	1	2
Real Salt Lake	1	2	0	3	3	7
Portland	1	2	0	3	2	6
Houston	0	2	1	1	2	6
Sporting KC	0	3	0	0	2	5
LA Galaxy	0	3	0	0	1	7

Saturday's games

Orlando City at New York
Chicago at Toronto FC
Austin FC at Los Angeles FC
Cincinnati at Charlotte FC
CF Montréal at D.C. United
New England at New York City FC
Minnesota at Sporting Kansas City
Vancouver at FC Dallas
Real Salt Lake at Houston
Seattle at St Louis City
Columbus at San Diego FC
Colorado at San Jose

Sunday's games

Nashville at Philadelphia
LA Galaxy at Portland
Miami at Atlanta

Saturday, March 22

Atlanta at Cincinnati
LA Galaxy at Minnesota
San Jose at Charlotte FC
New York City FC at Columbus
Toronto FC at New York
D.C. United at Orlando City
St Louis City at Philadelphia
Los Angeles FC at Sporting Kansas City
CF Montréal at Nashville
Portland at Colorado
FC Dallas at Real Salt Lake
Houston at Seattle
Chicago at Vancouver

Sunday, March 23

San Diego FC at Austin FC

AUTO RACING

Bell takes 3-race win streak to Vegas with Stevens in his corner

BY JOHN MARSHALL
Associated Press

AVONDALE, Ariz. — Nothing seemed to be going right at the start of Christopher Bell's relationship with crew chief Adam Stevens. They struggled to get the right setups and results.

That concerned Bell, who was still early in his NASCAR Cup Series career, but Stevens wasn't worried. He previously won a championship with Kyle Busch and could see that Bell had the goods to have a successful career after moving to Joe Gibbs Racing.

Stevens

"I will never forget 2021, my first year with Adam Stevens, and me and Adam got off to a rocky start," Bell said Sunday from Phoenix Raceway. "We were sitting in his office there at JGR and he looked at me and said: 'We can do this. I've won three straight sitting in these exact same two chairs,' talking about him and Kyle Busch. And he said, 'I know that we can do it.'"

Stevens was right.

Bell turned into one of the Cup Series' best drivers, earning his first win at the Daytona International Speedway road course in 2021. He has had at least two victories in each of the past four seasons and reached the Cup Series' Championship 4 in 2022 and 2023.

Bell and Stevens went through a bit of a dry spell after winning at New Hampshire last June, but they have been nearly unstoppable at the start of the 2025 season.

Bell ended a 19-race winless streak at Atlanta, followed with a victory on the road course at the Circuit of the Americas in Texas and ran his winning streak to three straight on the flat mile oval at Phoenix Raceway on Sunday.

That's three wins on three different tracks, making Bell the first driver to win three straight races in the NextGen car, which debuted in 2022. He is the first Cup Series driver to win three straight races since Kyle Larson in 2021 and the fourth to win three times in the first four races — the first since Kevin Harvick in 2018.

"The chase (last season), we had so many opportunities and did everything we needed to do, it just didn't go our way," Stevens said. "And what we've seen this year, (winning) three out of four times, things are going our way."

Stevens has been a big part of it.

A racer growing up in Ohio, Stevens got his first break in NASCAR as a designer at Petty Enterprises in 2002 and moved to Joe Gibbs Racing in 2005.

Stevens got his first shot at being a crew chief for JGR's No. 20 Xfinity car, driven primarily by Joey Logano in 2011. He teamed with Kyle Busch starting in 2015 and the pair had a successful run together, winning 19 Xfinity races and the 2015 Cup Series championship.

Stevens moved to the No. 20 car to become Bell's crew chief in 2021 and, after that rocky start, started racking up checkered flags.

"Adam and Christopher are a real pair," JGR owner Joe Gibbs said. "Adam, obviously you can tell he has a gift as a crew chief. He's done the Final Four about nine times, and so just appreciate them and how hard they work."

DARRYL WEBB/AP

Christopher Bell celebrates after winning a NASCAR Cup Series race at Phoenix Raceway on March 9 in Avondale, Ariz.

VINCENT THIAN/AP

From left, Max Verstappen, Lando Norris and Lewis Hamilton are among the favorites to win the F1 title in 2025. Verstappen is looking for his fifth straight championship, Norris for his first and Hamilton for his eighth.

F1 preps for close fight with several racers at forefront

BY JAMES ELLINGWORTH
Associated Press

Lando Norris will have to defy plenty of history to win the Formula 1 title this year.

There's his friend-turned-rival Max Verstappen's bid for a fifth title in a row. Just like the only driver to achieve that feat, Michael Schumacher, Verstappen is a hard racer who isn't afraid to bend the rules — as Norris knows from bitter experience.

Then there's Lewis Hamilton, the seven-time champion going for a record eighth title in 2025. It's his first season with Ferrari, which is itching to end a wait for a drivers' title going back to 2007.

Favorite Norris pressured

Norris is widely considered the favorite after he and McLaren had a strong second half of 2024 — though not strong enough to beat Verstappen — but it could be the closest season in years.

McLaren seemed competitive in preseason testing last month but Norris has to watch out not only for Verstappen and Hamilton, but also for his own teammate Oscar Piastri, Ferrari's Charles Leclerc and Mercedes' George Russell. Five drivers from four teams won the last six races of 2024.

"As much as we want to believe we're the best, I guess we still want to feel like we're underdogs. We have a lot to fight for," Norris said last month.

After slipping up from pole position in a few races last season, Norris has insisted he can thrive as the driver to beat.

"I know, coming into this season that for a lot of people I'm the favorite and as a team we're the favorites," Norris said. "I've always done much better under pressure. I'm able to think and to focus much more."

Verstappen still hungry

Ever since beating Hamilton to the 2021 title in a race that's still controversial, Verstappen has been F1's man to beat.

He's long been clear he doesn't want to stay in F1 into his 40s like Hamilton or Fernando Alonso, so could motivation be a factor in the Dutch driver's bid for a fifth title? Verstappen has said that last season — when he tested Norris to the limit and sometimes beyond — shows he's still hungry.

"My motivation is there because I think already last year it was not straightforward," Verstappen said. "We had of course good wins, but I guess not as many as we would have liked, but we still won the championship."

After a year when off-track events threatened to overwhelm his Red Bull team and his father sparred with the management, Verstappen seems more settled at the start of his 11th season in F1. The team feels "like a second family," he said last month.

Hamilton aims for No. 8

Another title for Hamilton would break a tie with Schumacher for the most in F1 history.

The British driver proclaimed himself "invigorated" at F1's glitzy season launch. Expectations from Ferrari's "Tifosi" fans are so high that he could finally bring success to the Italian team that some cut down a tree to better watch him test the new SF-25 car.

"I know what a winning team looks and feels like," he said last month. "The passion here is like nothing you've ever seen. They've got absolutely every ingredient they need to win a world championship. And it's just about putting all the pieces together."

Other crown contenders

Mercedes solved long-running car issues to win four of the last 14 races in 2024, including Hamilton's emotional home win at the British Grand Prix. Three-time winner Russell is joined by 18-year-old rookie Andrea Kimi Antonelli, who starts his career with some valuable advice from Hamilton.

If they can't challenge for the podium right away, other teams like Aston Martin might opt to switch focus early to their 2026 cars. Next year brings a big change in the regulations and getting a head start could pay off for years to come.

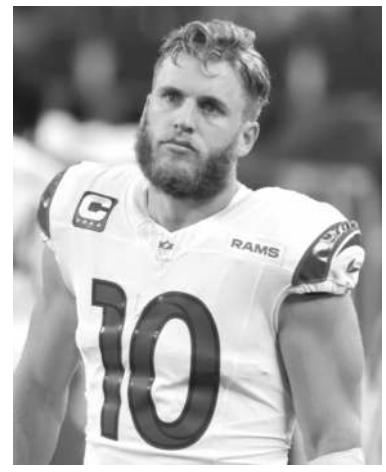
Off-track tensions

Watch out too for a simmering feud between the drivers and the governing body, the FIA, whose president Mohammed Ben Sulayem wants to crack down on drivers swearing.

New rules mean fines starting at $42,000 and even potential suspensions and point deductions for repeat offenders. Drivers have previously raised concerns about where the money from fines goes, a string of firings of senior FIA staff and Ben Sulayem's "own tone and language."

NFL

Ex-Super Bowl MVPs Kupp, Rodgers hit open market



MICHAEL AINSWORTH, LEFT, AND NOAH K. MURRAY/AP

Wide receiver Cooper Kupp, left, and quarterback Aaron Rodgers were released by the Los Angeles Rams and New York Jets, respectively, and are free agents for the first time in their careers.

BY JOSH DUBOW
Associated Press

The NFL league year kicked off Wednesday with two former Super Bowl MVPs hitting the open market.

The Los Angeles Rams cut receiver Cooper Kupp just days after signing Davante Adams to be his replacement and the New York Jets released quarterback Aaron Rodgers following a failed two-year stint.

The Rams cut Kupp after being unable to find a trade partner for the 2021 AP NFL Offensive Player of the Year. He announced last month that Los Angeles was trying to trade him despite his desire to remain with the team. But with him being owed $20 million this upcoming season, no other team was willing to make a trade.

Kupp won the receiving triple crown and Super Bowl MVP in the 2021 season when he caught 145 passes for 1,947 yards and 16 touchdowns. He added 33 catches for 478 yards and six TDs in the postseason, including the game-winning touchdown in a Super Bowl win over the Bengals on the Rams' home field.

But Kupp's production tailed off in the past three seasons. He hasn't played more than 12 games in any season during that stretch because of injuries and hasn't had 900 yards receiving in any season.

The Jets told Rodgers last month that they are going in a different direction at quarterback for 2025 and agreed to a deal with Justin Fields earlier in the week. They made his release official early Thursday.

A handful of teams could still be in search of a starting quarterback, including the New York Giants, Pittsburgh Steelers and possibly Minnesota if the Vikings aren't ready to turn the offense over to 2024 first-round pick J.J. McCarthy.

The Jets acquired Rodgers in a trade from Green Bay in April 2023 in hopes of winning a Super Bowl for the first time since after the 1968 season.

The four-time MVP's first season in New York ended just four snaps into his debut because of a torn left Achilles tendon that sank the Jets' Super Bowl hopes that were stirred by the QB's arrival.

Rodgers worked his way back to the field to start every game this past season, but he and the offense struggled with consistency and results as New York finished 5-12. He threw for 28 touchdowns and 3,897 yards but lacked some mobility in his return from the injury.

Other deals:

■ Safety Damar Hamlin is returning to Buffalo, and the Bills also continued restocking their defensive front by agreeing to sign tackle Larry Ogunjobi. Buffalo announced reaching an agreement to sign Hamlin to a one-year contract. A person with knowledge of the deal, meantime, confirmed Ogunjobi agreed to a one-year contract that includes $8 million guaranteed.

■ Six-time Pro Bowl cornerback Darius Slay is heading to the other side of Pennsylvania. The veteran cornerback, who won a Super Bowl with the Philadelphia Eagles last month, is signing a one-year deal with Pittsburgh, a person with knowledge of the agreement said.

■ Seattle filled two big holes by agreeing to a one-deal worth up to $5.5 million with speedy receiver Marquez Valdes-Scantling and a three-year, $42 million contract with former Dallas Cowboys pass rusher DeMarcus Lawrence. The Seahawks were in dire need of adding receivers after releasing Tyler Lockett in a cost-cutting move last week and agreeing to a trade to send D.K. Metcalf to Pittsburgh.

■ Minnesota made another major move on interior redesign, agreeing to terms with two-time Pro Bowl defensive lineman Javon Hargrave on a two-year, $30 million contract with $19 million guaranteed, according to agent Drew Rosenhaus. The agreement followed Hargrave's release by the San Francisco 49ers. He played in only three games for them in 2024 before suffering a torn triceps muscle that required surgery.

■ The Cleveland Browns and defensive tackle Maliek Collins agreed on a two-year, $20 million contract that includes $13 million fully guaranteed, Rosenhaus told the AP. Collins started 17 games for the 49ers after spending his first eight seasons with Dallas, Houston and Las Vegas. Collins, who turns 30 next month, has 30½ sacks, including five last season.

■ Tight end Evan Engram and the Denver Broncos agreed on a two-year, $23 million contract, a person with knowledge of the deal told the AP. Engram's deal includes $16.5 million guaranteed.

■ Quarterback Mac Jones will finally join San Francisco four years after the team nearly drafted him third overall. Jones agreed to a two-year deal worth $7 million with $5 million guaranteed to join the Niners, a person familiar with the deal said.

■ Washington retained veteran quarterback Marcus Mariota to back up Jayden Daniels. The Commanders agreed to re-sign Mariota on Wednesday, according to a person familiar with the deal.

Scoreboard

Wednesday's transactions

NFL — Suspended WR Drake Stoops two games for violation of the performance-enhancing substance policy.

ARIZONA CARDINALS — Signed OLB Josh Sweat to a four-year contract. Signed LB Akeem Davis-Gaither to a two-year contract. Signed QB Jacoby Brissett to a two-year contract. Re-signed WR Zay Jones to a one-year contract. Signed LB Mykal Walker to a contract. Placed the RFA Tender on WR Greg Dortch. Signed DL L.J. Collier to a one-year contract. Signed DL Dalvin Tomlinson to a two-year contract.

ATLANTA FALCONS — Signed CB Mike Ford to a two-year contract. Signed LB Divine Deablo to a two-year contract. Signed DE Leonard Floyd to a one-year contract. Re-signed CB Mike Hughes to a three-year contract. Re-signed DL Ta'Quon Graham to a one-year contract. Re-signed WR Khadarel Hodge to a two-year contract. Re-signed OL Elijah Wilkinson, OL Kyle Hinton and LB Josh Woods to contracts.

BALTIMORE RAVENS — Signed WR DeAndre Hopkins to a one-year contract. Placed the ROFR Tender on S Ar'Darius Washington. Signed LB Jake Hummel to a one-year contract. Signed WR Tylan Wallace to a one-year contract.

BUFFALO BILLS — Re-signed S Damar Hamlin to a one-year contract. Traded CB Kaiir Elam and 2025 sixth-round pick to the Dallas Cowboys in exchange for a 2025 fifth-round pick and a 2026 seventh-round pick. Signed DE Michael Hoecht to a three-year contract. Signed WR josh Palmer to a three-year contract. Signed DE Joey Bosa to a one-year contract. Signed DT Larry Ogunjobi to a one-year contract. Signed S Darrick Forrest to a contract.

CAROLINA PANTHERS — Signed DT Tershaw Wharton to a three-year contract. Tendered C Cade Mays. Signed S Tre'Von Moerhig to a three-year contract. Signed OL Patrick Jones to a two-year contract. Signed DT Bobby Brown III to a three-year contract. Signed P Sam Martin to a one-year contract. Released CB Miles Sanders. Re-signed WR Dan Chisena to a one-year contract. Signed LB Christian Rozeboom to a one-year contract. Signed RB Rico Dowdle to a one-year contract.

CHICAGO BEARS — Signed TE Durham Smyth to a contract. Signed C Drew Dalman to a three-year contract. Signed DL Dayo Odeyingbo to a three-year contract. Signed DT Grady Jarrett to a three-year contract.

CINCINNATI BENGALS — Signed CB Marco Wilson to a one-year contract extension. Signed RB Samaje Perine to a two-year contract. Signed DL T.J. Slaton to a two-year contract. Signed LB Oren Burks to a two-year contract. Re-signed DT B.J. Hill to a three-year contract. Signed DL Cam Sample to a one-year contract.

CLEVELAND BROWNS — Traded QB Dorian Thompson-Robinson and a 2025 fifth-round pick to the Philadelphia Eagles in exchange for QB Kenny Pickett. Signed OT Cornelius Lucas to a two-year contract. Signed DE Joe Tyron-Shoyinka to a one-year contract. Signed DT Maliek Collins to a two-year contract.

DALLAS COWBOYS — Re-signed P Bryan Anger to a two-year contract. Signed RB Javonte Williams to a one-year contract. Signed OL Robert Jones to a one-year contract. Signed DL Solomon Thomas to a two-year contract. Signed DE Payton Turner to a one-year contract. Re-signed WR KaVontae Turpin to a three-year contract. Signed LB Jack Sanborn to a one-year contract.

DENVER BRONCOS — Signed OL Matt Peart to a two-year contract. Signed S Talanoa Hufanga to a three-year contact. Signed LB Dre Greenlaw to a three-year contract. Signed WR Trent Sherfield to a two-year contract. Signed TE Evan Engram to a two-year contract.

DETROIT LIONS — Signed DT Roy Lopez to a one-year contract. Signed CB D.J. Reed to a three-year contract. Signed LB Grant Stuard to a one-year contract. Re-signed DT Levi Onwuzurike to a one-year contract.

GREEN BAY PACKERS — Signed G Aaron Banks to a four-year contract. Signed CB Nate Hobbs to a four-year contract.

HOUSTON TEXANS — Signed DT Sheldon Rankins to a one-year contract. Signed WR Braxton Berrios to a contract. Signed CB Tremon Smith to a two-year contract. Traded LT Laremy Tunsil and a 2025 fourth-round pick to the Washington Commanders in exchange for 2025 third and seventh-round picks and 2026 second and fourth-round picks. Signed DE Darrell Taylor to a one-year contract. Traded G Kenyon Green and a 2025 fifth-round pick to the Philadelphia Eagles in exchange for S C.J. Gardner-Johnson and a 2025 sixth round pick. Signed G Laken Tomlinson to a one-year contract. Signed LB Nick Niemann to a two-year contract. Signed DE Casey Toohill to a one-year contract.

INDIANAPOLIS COLTS — Signed S Camryn Bynum to a four-year contract. Signed CB Charvarius Ward to a three-year contract. Signed QB Daniel Jones to a one-year contract. Signed RB Khalil Herbert to a one-year contract. Signed DT Neville Gallimore to a one-year contract.

JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS — Traded WR Christian Kirk to the Houston Texans in exchange for a 2026 seventh-round pick. Signed CB Jourdan Lewis to a three-year contract. Signed QB Nick Mullens to a contract. Signed TE Johnny Mundt to a two-year contract. Signed S Eric Murray to a three-year contract. Signed WR Dyami Brown to a one-year contract. Signed OL Patrick Mekari to a three-year contract. Signed OT Chuma Edoga to a contract. Signed C Robert Hainsey to a three-year contract.

KANSAS CITY CHIEFS — Traded OL Joe Thuney to the Chicago Bears in exchange for a 2026 fourth-round pick. Signed LT Jaylon Moore to a two-year contract. Signed RB Elijah Mitchell to a contract. Signed CB Kristian Fulton to a two-year contract. Placed the ROFR Tender on LB Jack Cochrane and CB Nazeeh Johnson. Re-signed DE Malik Herring to a one-year contract.

LAS VEGAS RAIDERS — Signed OL Alex Cappa to a two-year contract. Traded a 2025 third-round pick to the Seattle Seahawks in exchange for QB Geno Smith. Signed S Jeremy Chinn to a two-year contract. Signed LB Elandon Roberts to a one-year contract. Signed CB Eric Stokes to a one-year contract.

LOS ANGELES CHARGERS — Signed LB Troy Dye and WR Jalen Reagor to contract extensions. Signed RB Najee Harris to a one-year contract. Signed CB Donte Jackson to a two-year contract. Re-signed LB Denzel Perryman to a one-year contract. Signed CB Benjamin St. Juste to a one-year contract. Re-signing WR Mike Williams to a one-year contract.

LOS ANGELES RAMS — Released WR Cooper Kupp. Signed WR Davante Adams to a two-year contract. Signed DT Poona Ford to a three-year contract. Signed C Coleman Shelton to a two-year contract.

MIAMI DOLPHINS — Signed QB Zach Wilson to a one-year contract. Signed G James Daniels to a three-year contract. Signed OL Larry Borom to a contract. Signed DB Ifeatu Melifonwu to a one-year contract. Signed WR Nick Westrook-Ikhine to a two-year contract. Signed S Ashtyn Davis to a contract. Signed LB Tyrel Dodson to a two-year contract. Re-signed LB Quinton Bell, DB Elijah Campbell, OT Jackson Carman and WR Dee Eskridge.

MINNESOTA VIKINGS — Signed C Ryan Kelly to a two-year contract. Signed OL Will Fries to a five-year contract. Signed Isaiah Rodgers to a two-year contract. Signed DT Jonathan Allen to a three-year contract. Signed DT Javon Hargrave to a two-year contract. Signed CB Tavierre Thomas to a contract. Signed S Harrison Smith to a one-year contract.

NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS — Traded DT Davon Godchaux to the New Orleans Saints in exchange for a 2026 seventh-round pick. Signed OLB Harold Landry to a three-year contract. Signed LB Robert Spillane to a three-year contract. Signed CB Carlton Davis to a three-year contract. Signed RT Morgan Moses to a three-year contract. Signed DT Milton Williams to a four-year contract. Signed DT Khyiris Tonga to a one-year contract. Signed QB Joshua Dobbs to a two-year contract. Signed WR Mack Hollins to a two-year contract. Re-signed S Jaylinn Hawkins to a one-year deal.

NEW ORLEANS SAINTS — Traded a 2026 seventh-round draft pick to New England in exchange for DT Davon Godchaux. Signed S Justin Reid to a three-year contract. Re-signed TE Juwan Johnson to a three-year contract. Re-signed WR Dante Pettis to a one-year contract extension.

NEW YORK GIANTS — Signed OT Stone Forsythe to a contract. Tendered LB Dyontae Johnson. Signed LB Chris Board to a two-year contract. Signed OT James Hudson to a two-year contract. Signed EDGE Chauncey Golston to a three-year contract. Signed S Jevon Holland to a three-year contract. Signed CB Paulson Adebo to a three-year contract. Signed WR Ihmir Smith-Marsette to a one-year contract. Signed OL Greg Van Roten to a one-year contract.

NEW YORK JETS — Signed QB Justin Fields to a two-year contract. Signed CB Brandon Stephens to a three-year contract. Signed S Andre Cisco to a one-year contract. Signed DE Rashad Weaver to a contract. Signed OL Chukwuma Okorafor to a contract. Re-signed CB Isaiah Oliver to a contract. Signed C Josh Myers to a one-year contract. Released LB C.J. Mosley.

PHILADELPHIA EAGLES — Received G Kenyon Green from Houston in exchange for S C.J. Gardner-Johnson. Traded QB Kenny Pickett to Cleveland in exchange for a 2025 fifth-round draft pick and QB Dorian. Re-signed LB Ben VanSumeren to a one-year contract. Signed RB AJ Dillon to a contract.

PITTSBURGH STEELERS — Traded a 2025 second, sixth and seventh-round pick swap to the Seattle Seahawks for WR D.K. Metcalf. Signed WR D.K. Metcalf to a four-year contract extension. Signed CB Darius Slay to a one-year contract. Signed LB Malik Harrison to a two-year contract. Signed RB Kenneth Gainwell to a contract. Signed CB Brandin Echols to a contract.

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS — Signed DB Jason Pinnock to a one-year contract. Signed WR Demarcus Robinson to a two-year contract. Signed CB Tre Brown to a contract. Signed S Richie Grant to a one-year contract. Signed TE Luke Farrell to three-year contract. Released OLB Leonard Floyd. Re-signed LB Curtis Robinson to a one-year contract. Signed LB Luke Gifford to a one-year contract. Signed QB Mac Jones to a two-year contract.

SEATTLE SEAHAWKS — Signed QB Sam Darnold to a three-year contract. Signed WR Marquez Valdes-Scantling to a one-year contract. Signed OL Josh Jones to a one-year contract. Traded QB Geno Smith to Las Vegas for a 2025 third-round draft pick. Traded WR D.K. Metcalf to Pittsburgh in exchange for a 2025 second-round pick. Signed DE DeMarcus Lawrence to a three-year contract.

TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS — Re-signed DT Greg Gaines to a one-year contract extension. Signed OLB Haason Reddick to a one-year contract. Signed P Riley Dixon to a two-year contract. Re-signed OLB Anthony Nelson to a two-year contract. Re-signed DL C.J. Brewer to a one-year contract. Signed QB Kyle Trask to a one-year contract.

TENNESSEE TITANS — Signed LT Dan Moore to a four-year contract. Signed LB Cody Barton to a three-yea contract. Signed P Johnny Hekker to a contract. Signed S Xavier Woods to a two-year contract. Signed WR Van Jefferson to a contract. Signed OL Blake Hance to a contract. Released G Saahdiq Charles. Signed G Kevin Zeitler to a one-year contract. Signed DL Dre'Mont Jones to a one-year contract.

WASHINGTON COMMANDERS — Re-signed QB Marcus Mariota to a one-year contract extension. Signed DT Javon Kinlaw to a three-year contract. Traded a 2025 third-round draft pick, a 2025 seventh-round pick, a 2026 second-round pick and a 2026 fourth-round pick to Houston in exchange for LT Laremy Tunsil and 2025 fourth-round pick. Signed S Will Harris to a two-year contract. Signed DT Eddie Goldman to a contract. Signed CB Jonathan Jones to a one-year contract. Re-signed TE Zach Ertz to a one-year contract. Signed DL Dietrich Wise to a one-year contract.

NHL

East wild-card race full of surprises

BY STEPHEN WHYNO
Associated Press

The Ottawa Senators last qualified for the playoffs in 2017, while the Columbus Blue Jackets have only won a round once in more than two decades of existence and none since before the pandemic.

The New York Rangers were the top team in the NHL last season before making a run to the Eastern Conference final and losing to the eventual Stanley Cup champion Florida Panthers. The Boston Bruins are just two years removed from setting league records for wins and points in a season.

Now those four teams are competing for the two wild-card spots in the East, coming from very different directions.

It's a surprise the Blue Jackets are in the race at all, the Senators have showed they belong and the Rangers and Bruins have clawed back in it after underachieving for several months.

"Nobody's giving up, that's for sure," Columbus general manager Don Waddell said. "It's going to be a tight race the rest of the way. We're just hoping that we can continue to win more games than we lose, and if we do that we'll be in good shape."

JUSTIN TANG, THE CANADIAN PRESS/AP

The Ottawa Senators' Dylan Cozens looks for a deflection chance between New York Rangers goaltender Igor Shesterkin and Braden Schneider during the third period in Ottawa, Ontario, on March 8.

Ottawa Senators

Pesky Ottawa has won five of its first six games in March to get in the driver's seat for the seventh seed behind likely playoff teams Washington, Florida, Carolina, Toronto, Tampa Bay and New Jersey. The Sens have 73 standings points with 18 games remaining.

"It's not about being in the playoff picture right now," alternate captain Claude Giroux said. "It's just how we're playing. How we want to play, we have a belief that it's going to make us be in the playoffs."

First-year coach Travis Green has set a competitive tone since training camp.

"He had us ready from the get-go," said veteran winger David Perron, who won the Cup with St. Louis in 2019. "There's going to be some stretches where you don't play as good, whatever it is, either individually or the team. I think he's done a good job to kind of reset us at the right times."

Captain Brady Tkachuk has a team-best 27 goals, center Tim Stützle has 21 points in his past 16 games to lead Ottawa with 66 and only reigning MVP Nathan MacKinnon has scored more than defenseman Jake Sanderson this month. Add some great goaltending from 2023 Vezina Trophy winner Linus Ullmark, and the fun times are rolling on the ice in Canada's capital.

"That's what it's all about," Perron said. "You play those kind of meaningful games and those important games that we are right now and that we have been for a little bit, it's the best feeling."

Columbus Blue Jackets

The death in late August of top forward Johnny Gaudreau, who was killed along with his brother, Matthew, while riding their bicycles near their New Jersey hometown on the eve of their sister Katie's wedding, was the latest shock to a tortured organization that was three years removed from goaltender Matiss Kivlenieks dying in a July Fourth fireworks accident.

With Waddell taking over and installing Dean Evason as coach, the expectations on the ice this season were very low — and that was before captain Boone Jenner had shoulder surgery before opening night. The Jackets were a 15-1 long shot to even make the playoffs and as high as 25-1 in November on BetMGM Sportsbook.

Then point-a-game defenseman Zach Werenski led the way and he and his teammates hold the second and final wild-card spot with 70 points and 18 games left.

"We're just leaving it all out there every night, and we're giving ourselves a chance to win," Werenski said. "It's been a lot of fun. It's been one of the more fun years I've had, and it's been a battle. We've been battling every night and it's not been smooth sailing all the time, but I've just really enjoyed battling with these guys."

Waddell conceded he "kept waiting for the bubble to burst," but then the likes of tough guy Mathieu Olivier, young Adam Fantilli and Kent Johnson and veteran Sean Monahan — a close friend of Gaudreau's — stepped up to keep things rolling against all odds.

"It feels like this year we were turning a corner," Olivier said. "We're making a really realistic push for playoffs here, which is our goal."

New York Rangers

Bringing back elite center J.T. Miller has paid big dividends for New York, which was in a funk until January. Miller has 16 points in 15 games since the trade from Vancouver, and it has also helped that top players such as Mika Zibanejad, Artemi Panarin and Vincent Trocheck have raised their level.

They've lost four in a row, but the Rangers with 68 points and 17 games remaining are right in the mix, two points back of Columbus.

"We're in a playoff fight right now," defenseman Will Borgen told reporters in Winnipeg after losing 2-1 to the Jets on Tuesday night. "We're battling for every point. ... We've got to string along some wins if we want to make the playoffs."

Boston Bruins

A little like New York, Boston bought and sold — but mostly sold — at the trade deadline, sending Brad Marchand to the Panthers, Brandon Carlo to the Maple Leafs, Justin Brazeau to the Wild, Trent Frederic to the Oilers and Charlie Coyle to the Avalanche. It looked as if they were pulling the plug on a lost season, but beating playoff-bound Tampa Bay and Florida back-to-back has the Bruins right in the thick of the hunt with 68 points and 16 games to play.

Boston coach Joe Sacco knows the spot his team is in and what just happened. Goaltender Jeremy Swayman, as a result, believes he and his teammates are "getting hungrier."

"We're not giving up on this group," Swayman said. "I just couldn't be more proud of the guys, the way that their effort is and the way that we're competing as a team and just being cohesive and we're obviously getting results."

Also in it

The Montreal Canadiens pulled just ahead of the Rangers and Bruins by with a victory on Tuesday night, and the Detroit Red Wings pulled even them by beating Buffalo on Wednesday.

The Canadiens are ahead of schedule in their organizational retooling effort, but a loss in OT to the Kraken on Wednesday didn't help.

The Red Wings came up just short a year ago and are in danger of extending the longest playoff drought in franchise history.

Detroit did end a six-game skid with a win over Buffalo on Wednesday to get to 68 points

Five points back and four other teams ahead of them are the New York Islanders (65 points with 18 games left), who have lost seven of 11 and traded pending free agent center Brock Nelson to Colorado on the eve of the trade deadline.

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Florida	65	40	22	3	83	215	175
Toronto	64	39	22	3	81	206	190
Tampa Bay	64	37	23	4	78	225	173
Ottawa	64	34	25	5	73	185	182
Montreal	65	31	27	7	69	194	215
Detroit	65	31	28	6	68	189	207
Boston	66	30	28	8	68	179	206
Buffalo	64	25	33	6	56	202	227

Metropolitan Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Washington	65	43	14	8	94	239	171
Carolina	65	39	22	4	82	208	176
New Jersey	66	35	25	6	76	198	168
Columbus	64	31	25	8	70	217	213
N.Y. Rangers	65	31	28	6	68	196	199
N.Y. Islanders	64	29	28	7	65	174	192
Philadelphia	66	27	31	8	62	188	224
Pittsburgh	67	26	31	10	62	190	244

Western Conference

Central Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Winnipeg	66	45	17	4	94	230	153
Dallas	64	42	20	2	86	221	166
Colorado	66	39	24	3	81	220	192
Minnesota	65	37	24	4	78	181	186
St. Louis	65	31	27	7	69	187	194
Utah	65	29	25	11	69	185	193
Nashville	64	25	32	7	57	170	211
Chicago	65	20	36	9	49	178	227

Pacific Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Vegas	64	38	19	7	83	215	177
Edmonton	64	37	23	4	78	207	189
Los Angeles	63	34	20	9	77	181	169
Calgary	64	30	23	11	71	167	186
Vancouver	65	30	24	11	71	178	198
Anaheim	65	28	30	7	63	175	203
Seattle	66	28	34	4	60	197	216
San Jose	66	17	40	9	43	173	248

Note: Two points for a win, one point for overtime loss. Top three teams in each division and two wild cards per conference advance to playoffs.

Tuesday's games

New Jersey 5, Columbus 3
Ottawa 5, Philadelphia 2
Pittsburgh 3, Vegas 2, OT
Boston 3, Florida 2
Carolina 4, Tampa Bay 1
Minnesota 2, Colorado 1, SO
Winnipeg 2, N.Y. Rangers 1
Washington 7, Anaheim 4
Montreal 4, Vancouver 2
Nashville 3, San Jose 2
Los Angeles 4, N.Y. Islanders 1

Wednesday's games

Detroit 7, Buffalo 3
Vancouver 4, Calgary 3, SO
Utah 3, Anaheim 2
Seattle 5, Montreal 4, OT

Thursday's games

Boston at Ottawa
Florida at Toronto
St. Louis at Pittsburgh
Tampa Bay at Philadelphia
Vegas at Columbus
Edmonton at New Jersey
N.Y. Rangers at Minnesota
Chicago at San Jose
Washington at Los Angeles

Friday's games

Detroit at Carolina
Edmonton at N.Y. Islanders
Dallas at Winnipeg
Colorado at Calgary
Nashville at Anaheim
Utah at Seattle

Saturday's games

Vegas at Buffalo
New Jersey at Pittsburgh
Washington at San Jose
Carolina at Philadelphia
Florida at Montreal
N.Y. Rangers at Columbus
Ottawa at Toronto
Tampa Bay at Boston
Nashville at Los Angeles
St. Louis at Minnesota
Chicago at Vancouver

Scoring leaders

Through Wednesday

	GP	G	A	PTS
Nathan MacKinnon, COL	66	27	75	102
Leon Draisaitl, EDM	64	46	51	97
Nikita Kucherov, TB	61	28	64	92
Connor McDavid, EDM	58	24	58	82
David Pastrnak, BOS	66	33	48	81
Kyle Connor, WPG	66	33	48	81
Mitch Marner, TOR	63	21	59	80
Jack Eichel, LV	63	20	58	78
Cale Makar, COL	66	24	51	75
Clayton Keller, UTA	64	23	51	74

NBA

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	47	19	.712	—
New York	42	23	.646	4½
Toronto	23	43	.348	24
Brooklyn	22	43	.338	24½
Philadelphia	22	43	.338	24½

Southeast Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Atlanta	32	34	.485	—
Orlando	30	36	.455	2
Miami	29	36	.446	2½
Charlotte	16	49	.246	15½
Washington	13	51	.203	18

Central Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
y-Cleveland	55	10	.846	—
Milwaukee	36	28	.563	18½
Indiana	36	28	.563	18½
Detroit	37	29	.561	18½
Chicago	27	38	.415	28

Western Conference

Southwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Memphis	42	24	.636	—
Houston	41	25	.621	1
Dallas	33	34	.493	9½
San Antonio	27	37	.422	14
New Orleans	18	48	.273	24

Northwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
x-Oklahoma City	54	12	.818	—
Denver	42	24	.636	12
Minnesota	38	29	.567	16½
Portland	28	39	.418	26½
Utah	15	51	.227	39

Pacific Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Lakers	40	23	.635	—
Golden State	37	28	.569	4
L.A. Clippers	36	30	.545	5½
Sacramento	33	31	.516	7½
Phoenix	30	36	.455	11½

x-clinched playoff spot
y-clinched division

Wednesday's games

Toronto 118, Philadelphia 105
Oklahoma City 118, Boston 112
Atlanta 123, Charlotte 110
San Antonio 126, Dallas 116
L.A. Clippers 119, Miami 104
Houston 111, Phoenix 104
Memphis 122, Utah 115
Minnesota 115, Denver 95
New York 114, Portland 113, OT

Thursday's games

Washington at Detroit
L.A. Lakers at Milwaukee
Brooklyn at Chicago
Orlando at New Orleans
Sacramento at Golden State

Friday's games

Boston at Miami
Indiana at Philadelphia
L.A. Clippers at Atlanta
Charlotte at San Antonio
Cleveland at Memphis
Dallas at Houston
Orlando at Minnesota
L.A. Lakers at Denver
Toronto at Utah
Sacramento at Phoenix

Thunder top Celtics for playoff spot

By Jimmy Golen
Associated Press

BOSTON — The Oklahoma City Thunder clinched a spot in the playoffs, and they did it against the team they could face when the NBA postseason reaches its peak.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 34 and Chet Holmgren added 23 points and 15 rebounds to lead the Thunder to a 118-112 victory over the Boston Celtics on Wednesday night in a much-anticipated potential NBA Finals matchup.

"We're in March, not June," Oklahoma City coach Mark Daigneault said after the Thunder swept the two-game season series against the defending champions. "So we're focused on March."

The Thunder also beat the Celtics in Oklahoma City on Jan. 5 in a game that Holmgren missed with an injury.

If they meet again this season, it would have to be in the NBA Finals.

"They've achieved what we're trying to accomplish, and there's no better test than that in the NBA," Gilgeous-Alexander said. "Playing against them is always fun, it's always a really good challenge, and something that we could test ourselves against. I guess we passed the test so far."

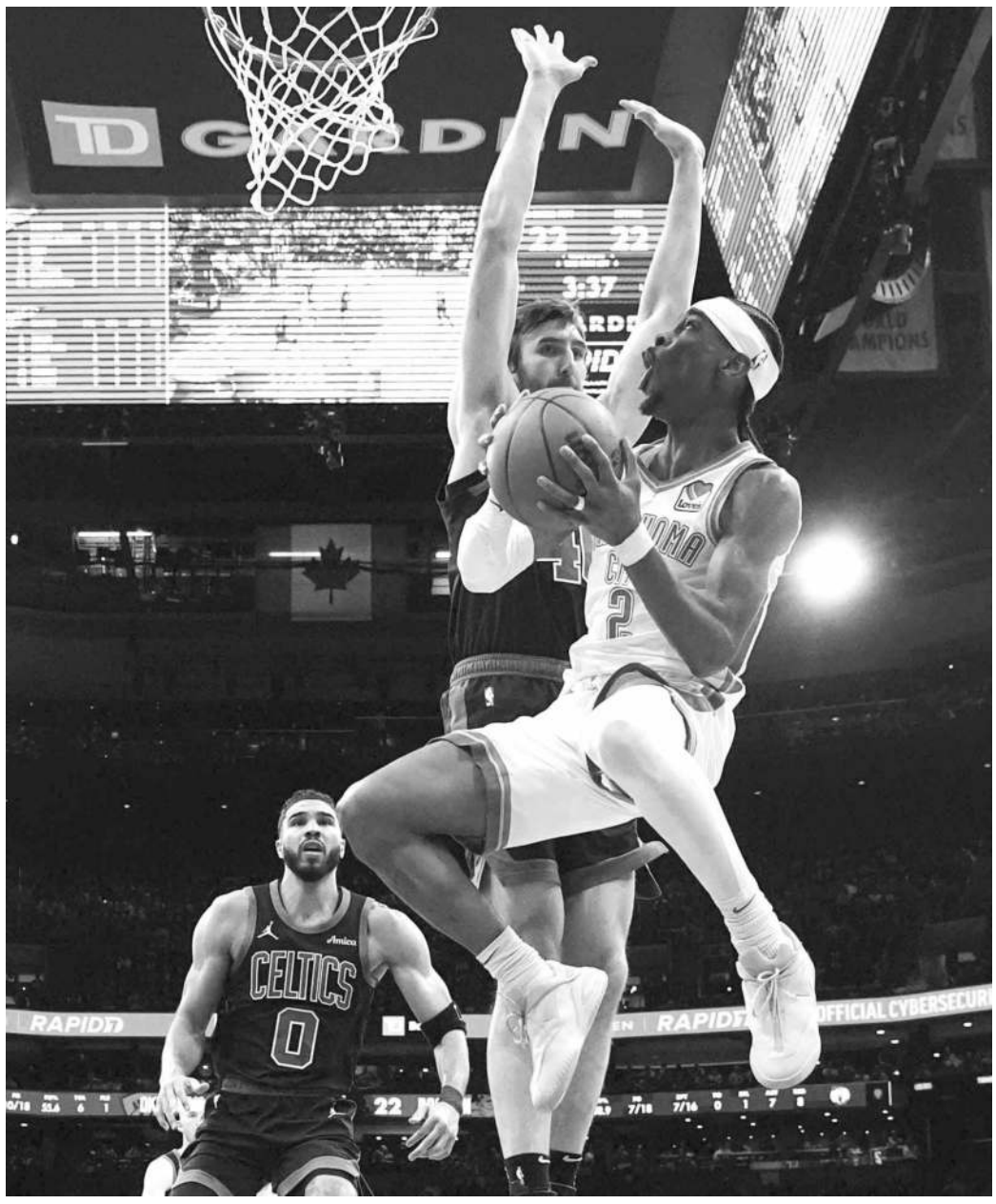
The Thunder were the second NBA team to clinch a playoff berth this season; Cleveland, which is one win better, earned its spot on Friday. Last year, OKC clinched a spot in the postseason on March 31.

"It means we got better than we were last year. Ultimately, that's all you can ask for," Gilgeous-Alexander said. "You put the work in, put the time in ... we took steps in the right direction. We got better and we, I guess checked a goal off the list a little bit earlier than last year, and we have a lot more to do."

Boston, which rode its 3-point shooting to an unprecedented 18th NBA championship last season, set a franchise record with 63 3-point attempts Wednesday. It tied the most ever for an NBA team in a regulation game.

"Every game's a test," said Daigneault, whose team was coming off a split in back-to-backs against 2023 NBA champion Denver. "We can't choose the opponent, but when you play against elevated teams like this — especially on the road — it's a real opportunity to improve. And so we take these games seriously.

"We want to see what we have. We want to see what we can learn. We won tonight; we can learn from that. We lost the other night; we can learn from that," he said. "But, yeah, we have to squeeze all the juice out of all these games that we can."



Charles Krupa/AP

Oklahoma City Thunder guard Shai Gilgeous-Alexander drives to the basket against Celtics center Luke Kornet and forward Jayson Tatum (0) during the first half Wednesday in Boston.

Jayson Tatum scored 33 points for the Celtics, including a 3-point play at the end of the third quarter that erased the remnants of a 12-point Thunder lead and tied the game 88-all. Boston went 3-for-14 from 3-point range from there, while Gilgeous-Alexander and Cason Wallace scored eight points apiece in the fourth quarter.

"Obviously, there's always added juice to the game playing the defending champions. I think anybody would say that," Holmgren said. "But at the end of the day, it's one of 82. Win or lose, we're going to try to learn from it, come back next game and try to be better."

AROUND THE NBA

Hawks, Magic, Heat have hope despite Southeast struggles

By Tim Reynolds
Associated Press

This fall will mark the 10th anniversary of the NBA changing its playoff rules and not guaranteeing a division champion a top-four seed regardless of record.

This season's Southeast Division is a good reason why that change was necessary.

In NBA history, there's never been a division with a worst won-loss record than the Southeast this season. Entering Thursday, the five teams in the Southeast — Atlanta, Orlando, Miami, Charlotte and Washington — had a combined record of 120-206, that winning percentage of .368 set to be the worst of any division ever.

The official low bar, for now, is a winning percentage .384 by the Central in 1970-71. That was a season where Baltimore won the division at 42-40 and Atlanta, Cincinnati and Cleveland combined to go 84-162.

And this is the crazy part about the Southeast: this season, the Hawks, Magic and Heat seem pretty much like locks for the play-in tournament at this point, meaning two of those teams are going to make the playoffs even though none are on pace to finish with a winning record.

"I don't know division-wise, but I just know it seems in both conferences it's a dogfight," Miami coach Erik Spoelstra said. "With the play-in and everything, it's been really good for the league. A lot more teams are competing."

The Southeast being the NBA's official battleground division is not a new thing. There won't be a 50-win team from the Southeast this year; that's no surprise, because there's been only one — the 2021-22 Heat, who went 53-29 — in the last 10 seasons.

Let's put that in some perspective. The Atlantic Division has had 15 teams reach the 50-win mark over the last decade, the Northwest and Pacific have each had 11, the Central and Southwest have each had nine.

Forget winning 50 games. Over the last decade there have been only 17 instances — out of 50 chances — of a Southeast team simply finishing a regular season with a winning record. And someone's going to have to go on a heck of a tear if a team from the Southeast is going to add to that total this season.

Miami went from the play-in to the NBA Finals two years ago, which is something Atlanta coach Quin Snyder pointed to as further proof that the play-in is a huge opportunity for teams. The Southeast might end the year with the worst divisional record in NBA history, but there's still a slew for the Heat, Hawks and Orlando to play for.

"We have to fight our way out of this funk," Magic coach Jamahl Mosley said. "It's exactly what it is, it's a funk and we've got to fight our way out of it. ... Because in this league, it can turn fast one way or the other."

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

CONFERENCE CHAMPIONSHIPS

Montana locks up 1st bid in 6 years

Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho — Kai Johnson scored six of his 23 points late to help No. 2 seed Montana pull away and beat top-seeded Northern Colorado 91-83 in the Big Sky Championship title game on Wednesday night.

Montana lead by as many as 14 points early in the second half, but Northern Colorado later used an 18-9 surge to pull within 74-73 with 3:35 remaining. Johnson answered with a three-point play and a 3-pointer to stretch the Grizzlies' lead to 80-73 with 2:24 left. The Bears got within five points twice but didn't get closer.

Montana (25-9), which has won 14 of its last 15 games, collected its first NCAA Tournament bid since 2019 and its 12th overall to extend its conference record. The Grizzlies also won their 51st Big Sky Tournament game, surpassing Weber State for the most in league history.

Brandon Whitney added 18 points for Montana, which shot 65% (30-for-46) overall and 24-for-28 (86%) from the free-throw line. Joe Pridgen chipped in with 17 points and Malik Moore had 15.

Jaron Rillie scored 24 points and had six assists to lead Northern Colorado (25-9). Langston Reynolds added 18 points, Brock Wisne had 15 and Isaiah Hawthorne had 14.

Men's NCAA automatic bids

SIU Edwardsville, Ohio Valley
Omaha, Summit League
Lipscomb, Atlantic Sun
High Point, Big South
Drake, Missouri Valley
Wofford, Southern
Troy, Sun Belt
Robert Morris, Horizon
UNC-Wilmington, Coastal Athletic
St. Francis (Pa.), Northeastern
Gonzaga, WCC
Montana, Big Sky
American U., Patriot League
McNeese St., Southland

Montana took the lead for good midway through the first half and led 48-39 at the break. Moore scored seven points during an 11-6 spurt to give the Grizzlies a 59-45 advantage with 16:22 to play.

STEVE CONNER/AP

Montana guard Joe Pridgen goes under the outstretched arms of Northern Colorado guard Langston Reynolds for a shot during the championship game of the Big Sky tournament Wednesday.

Patriot League

American 74, Navy 52: At Washington, Matt Rogers scored 25 points and second-seeded Eagles defeated the Midshipmen.

American (22-12) has made three previous trips to the NCAA Tournament, the last in 2014.

Geoff Sprouse, Rogers and Colin Smalls all made 3-pointers as the Eagles pushed their lead to 56-38 with 12 minutes left. The lead reach 20 on a tip-in by Rogers with about four minutes left and his 3-pointer with two minutes remaining made it 72-48.

Smalls finished with 11 points. Sprouse made 3 of 4 3-pointers and scored nine points off the bench. He had three assists.

Austin Benigni had 18 points and Donovan Draper had 11 points and 12 rebounds for Navy. It was the fourth double-double and ninth double-digit rebound game of the season for Draper.

American led all the way and shot 55% in the first half, including 6-for-13 from the 3-point line. American led 37-28 at halftime. It was 20-15 before Sprouse's 3-pointer kick-started an extended 13-6 run that gave the Eagles a 33-21 lead with three minutes left in the half.

Fifth-seeded Navy, which defeated No. 1-seed Bucknell 83-77 in the semifinals, finishes the season at 15-19 overall.

Southland

McNeese 63, Lamar 54: At Lake Charles, La., Quadir Copeland scored 18 points and Cowboys defeated the Cardinals in a cold-shooting, defensive battle, giving McNeese back-to-back championships.

Top-seeded McNeese (27-6) will be making its fourth appearance in the NCAA Tournament.

The Cowboys led wire-to-wire. The lead was 31-22 with two minutes remaining in the first half before 3-pointers by second-seeded Lamar's Andrew Holifield and Alexis Marmolejos sparked an 8-2 run. McNeese led 33-30 at halftime.

The defensive battle continued in the second half as McNeese went 5-for-15 and Lamar 5-for-23 in the first 12½ minutes after halftime. McNeese led 47-41 at the under-8 timeout.

Christian Shumate's dunk with three minutes remaining gave the Cowboys a 53-46 lead, and they finished off the win with a series of 10 made free throws.

STARS AND STRIPES
SERVICE DIRECTORY
The Daily Guide to Navigating The Military Business Market

Transportation 944

VEHICLE SHIPPING SERVICES

- International Shipping
- Import & Export
- Inland trucking *(U.S. & Europe)*
- Door to door pick-up/delivery service
- Customs clearance
- All Risk Marine Insurance
- Auto Insurance *(Germany only)*

For Further Information Please Contact

	GERMANY	UNITED KINGDOM	U.S.A
Phone:	+49-(0)6134-2592730	+44-(0)1638-515714	+1-972-602-1670 Ext. 1701
Toll-free:	0800-CARSHIP (Germany only)		+1-800-264-8167 (US only)
E-Mail:	info@transglobal-logistics.de	enquiries@carshipuk.co.uk	info@tgal.us
WEB:	www.transglobal-logistics.de	www.carshipuk.co.uk	www.tgal.us

For 2nd POV Shipments - Offices / Agencies near Military Installations

TransGlobal
LOGISTICS EUROPE GMBH

Are you in the picture?

Reading **Stars and Stripes** gives you a better handle on issues that affect you most.
No one covers the bases the way we do.

STARS AND STRIPES
However you read us, wherever you need us.

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Florida focused on securing a No. 1

Gators motivated to win SEC Tournament, stay on inside track to top seed in NCAAs

BY MARK LONG
Associated Press

GAINESVILLE, Fla. — There's only one way for No. 4 Florida to guarantee itself a top seed in the NCAA Tournament: win the Southeastern Conference Tournament.

And coach Todd Golden badly wants one of those No. 1 seeds in the NCAA field, which will be announced Sunday.

"We're going to go try to win this thing," Golden said emphatically Wednesday. "We're going to give it all we got."

The Gators (27-4, 14-4 SEC) will play either Missouri or Mississippi State in the quarterfinals Friday in Nashville, Tenn. Second-seeded Florida entered the tournament as one of the hottest teams in the league, winners of nine of its past 10.

It's not enough, though. The Gators appear to have a tenuous grip on the final No. 1 seed, behind Duke, Auburn and Houston. Losing in the SEC tourney would put that at risk, especially if Alabama or Tennessee ends up cutting down the nets inside Bridgestone Arena.

"To be honest, I think it's really important to us," Golden said. "But at the same time, I'm not sure how big of a difference our path would truly be whether we're the third or fourth 1 seed, or the first or second 2 seed.

"We definitely want the 1 seed, don't get me wrong. At this point, I think we're in a really good spot. Pride-wise, we're going to do everything we can to get this 1 seed. But I'm confident in our potential, whether we end up getting it or we're a high 2."

Why does it matter? Sixteen of the past 23 national champions were No. 1 seeds. Six of the past seven champions have been top seeds, as well as 13 of the last 17.

PHELAN M. EBENHACK/AP

"We're going to go try to win this thing. We're going to give it all we got."

Todd Golden
Florida coach

"We're approaching it with the same mentality we had all year, and that's just going out and doing our job, trusting each other, having confidence in each other and go out and win," senior guard Walter Clayton Jr. said.

Clayton added that a No. 1 seed would mean little to him and his teammates.

"Whatever path, I like my guys," he said. "Me and my guys against whoever."

Golden, though, believes in analytics and numbers — so much so that he ordered up research on whether winning the league or advancing to the title game had any effect on success in the NCAA Tournament.

Golden and his staff were intrigued after Florida made the SEC finale last year and then lost in the NCAA's opening round. Golden turned to turn to data to see if the two had any historical correlation.

The results were mixed.

"It doesn't matter enough," Golden said.

He pointed to Auburn as an example. The Tigers won the SEC Tournament last year and lost in the first round of NCAAs. They won the SEC tourney in 2019 and then advanced to the Final Four.

Digging deeper, only three of the past 10 national champions — UConn (2024), Kansas (2022) and Villanova (2018) — won their conference tournament.

The Gators would still rather have a No. 1, especially since it would mean playing closer to home for the first and second rounds.

"That would be a nice little cherry on top of our regular season if we're able to get the 1 seed for sure," Golden said.

ALAN YOUNGBLOOD/AP

Florida guard Walter Clayton Jr. (1) drives against Texas A&M guard Wade Taylor IV during a game on March 1 in Gainesville, Fla. Clayton said he likes his team's chances, regardless of tournament seeding.

Nightmares: Conference rivals could face each other in second round

FROM PAGE 48

In fact, Wednesday worked out nicely for the SEC from a bid maximization standpoint. Arkansas moved a step closer to making the tournament in John Calipari's first season at the helm, edging South Carolina 72-68. Later, Oklahoma picked up a big 81-75 victory over Georgia.

With the country's deepest league in line to place between 12 and 14 teams in the tournament, some long-held guidelines drawn to help set the matchups will have to give way, bringing the possibility that conference rivals could face each other as early as the second round or the Sweet 16.

"We will move it to try to ensure they don't play each other too frequently," the chair of the selection committee, North Carolina athletic director Bubba Cunningham, said Wednesday in a call to preview the selection.

"But it is a reality of where we are today."

The reality is shaped thanks in part to a flurry of realignment that has left college sports with four megaconferences. Three of those will gobble up nearly half of the 68 spots in the tournament. The record for a conference came in 2011 when the Big East placed 11 teams in the bracket.

Some projections have the SEC earning up to 14 spots, the Big Ten getting as many as 10 and the Big 12 earning up to eight. Of those 32 projected spots, seven could go to teams that were in different conferences as recently as 2023 — programs such as Oklahoma, Oregon and BYU.

There will be some big-picture repercussions from all this realignment. In a notable development earlier this week, Big 12 Commissioner Brett Yormark got on board with an idea to expand the tournament to 76 teams in a move that would favor Power Four conferences.

More urgently, though, having so many teams from so few conferences will force the 12 members of the selection committee, who are holed up in a conference room in Indiana this week, to make some nontraditional decisions.

The NCAA bracketing principles frown on teams that have played three times in a season from meeting before the Elite Eight. Likewise, they urge the committee to avoid potential pairings between teams that have played twice coming before the Sweet 16. But, in a tweak that was put in for this season, the principles note that those rules "can be relaxed if a league has nine or more teams in the tournament."

Cunningham said the committee's biggest priority will be getting the seedings right, an exercise that could make it more difficult to avoid these early matchups.

"We really try to keep everybody on the same seed line" they've earned, he said. "We don't want to move them to a different seed line because that really does impact the tournament. But it'll be a little bit trickier this year."

The SEC's dominance is showing up not only in the sheer volume of teams but also where they land. Auburn is a lock for a No. 1 seed, with Florida considered a slight favorite to edge out Tennessee and Alabama for another.

Among the biggest questions is whether the top overall seed in the tournament will go to Auburn or Duke, which this week supplanted the Tigers at No. 1 in the AP Top 25. The irony there is that Duke is one of only three teams from the ACC projected to make the field of 68, which would mark the hoops powerhouse's lowest total in 25 years.

SPORTS

East field full of surprises

Senators, Blue Jackets, Rangers, Bruins lead wild-card race » Page 44

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

The Southeastern Conference could place as many as 14 teams in the NCAA Tournament on Selection Sunday.

AP photos

Matchup nightmares

March Madness selection panel will have to juggle thanks to SEC overload in bracket

By Eddie Pells
Associated Press

The NCAA selection committee will have some juggling to do before the bracket comes out Sunday to keep March Madness from looking like an extension of the Southeastern Conference's regular season.

Of the 16 teams in the Southeastern Conference, only South Carolina and LSU are completely out of contention for an NCAA Tournament spot. Thirteen bids is a realistic expectation, and even 14 might be possible after Texas beat Vanderbilt 79-72 in the first round of the conference tournament Wednesday.

The Longhorns lost seven of their last nine in the regular season, but the SEC Tournament gave them a chance to post more significant wins, and they took advantage against the Commodores.

SEE NIGHTMARES ON PAGE 47

INSIDE

Florida motivated to win SEC tourney, earn an NCAA No. 1 Page 47

Rodgers, Kupp released, become free agents » NFL, Page 43

027664 520705