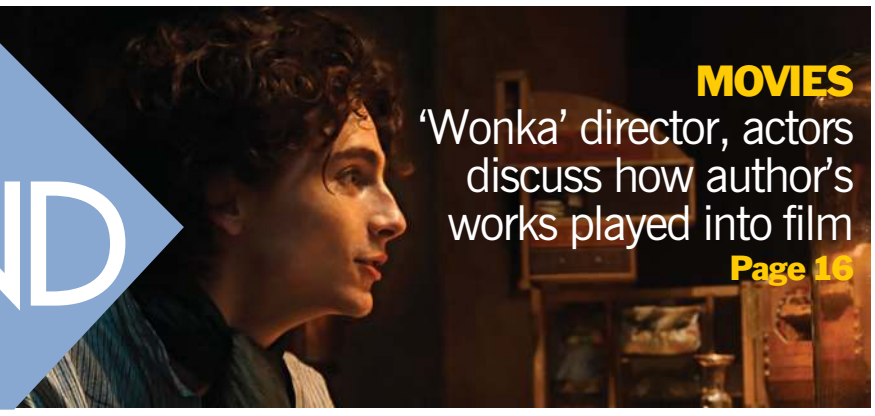
GAMES: Persona 5 Tactica is a turn-based chapter **Page 15**

MUSIC: How Mariah's hit has hung on **Page 30**

NFL: Stafford puts Rams in playoff race with play **Page 48**

EUROPE & PACIFIC WEEKEND EDITION



MOVIES
'Wonka' director, actors discuss how author's works played into film
Page 16

STARS AND STRIPES®
stripes.com

Volume 82 Edition 174 ©SS 2023 FRIDAY, DECEMBER 15, 2023
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

NDAA, with 5.2% pay boost, goes to Biden

By Svetlana Shkolnikova
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The House on Thursday passed a defense bill that authorizes a record $886 billion in military spending, raises military pay and avoids controversial culture war issues that threatened to derail the legislation.

Lawmakers in the Republican-led chamber voted 310-118 to approve the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act. A coalition of Republicans and Democrats came together to pass the legislation, unlike an earlier vote this year when Republicans overcame near unanimous Democratic opposition to push through a version of the bill catering to far-right conservatives.

The final legislation, negotiated with the Democrat-led Senate, dropped the most divisive provisions, including proposals to block the Pentagon's abortion travel policy, ban coverage of medical treatment for transgender troops and gut programs that promote diversity and inclusion.

It now goes to President Joe Biden to be signed into law.

"I'll be the first to admit, I'm disappointed we didn't get all the priorities we wanted but you know what, the Senate is pretty disappointed they didn't get the priorities they wanted either," said Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Ala., chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. "It takes compromise to move legislation in a divided government and this bill is a good compromise. It's laser-focused on deterring our adversaries, especially China."

SEE BILL ON PAGE 6

Denis Poroy/AP

Derek and Suzi Alkonis pose with a photo of their son Lt. Ridge Alkonis in 2022, in Dana Point, Calif.

Japan releases Alkonis to US

Family says Navy officer will come home after serving time for crash

By Eric Tucker
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A Navy officer jailed in Japan over a car crash that killed two Japanese citizens has been transferred into U.S. custody and is being returned to the United States, his family said Thursday.

Lt. Ridge Alkonis had been serving a three-year prison sentence after pleading guilty to the negligent driving deaths of a woman and her son-in-law in May 2021. His family has said the crash was an accident, caused when he lost consciousness while returning from a trip to Mount Fuji, but Japanese prosecutors maintained that he fell asleep while drowsy and shirked a duty to pull over.

"After 507 days, Lt. Ridge Alkonis is on his way home to the United States. We are encouraged by Ridge's transfer back to the United States but cannot celebrate until Ridge has been reunited with his family," the family, based in Dana Point, Calif., said in a statement to The Associated Press, adding that it appreciated the U.S. government's efforts to effect the transfer.

The Alkonis case had generated substantial publicity over the last year and a half, with his family rallying outside the White House to call for his release and his wife,

SEE HOME ON PAGE 9

BUSINESS/WEATHER

EUROPE GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel
Germany	$3.545	$4.091	$4.451	$4.396
Change in price	-9.5 cents	-10.9 cents	-9.6 cents	-10.5 cents
Netherlands	..	$4.353	$4.625	$4.865
Change in price	..	-5.4 cents	-5.2 cents	-1.6 cents
U.K.	..	$4.091	$4.451	$4.396
Change in price	..	-10.9 cents	-9.6 cents	-10.5 cents
Azores	..	..	$4.301	..
Change in price	..	..	-9.6 cents	..
Turkey	..	..	$4.117	$4.783*
Change in price	..	..	-9.6 cents	-10.5 cents

Fuel prices are updated daily. These prices are effective Dec. 15. The change in price is from Dec. 8.

PACIFIC GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel
Japan	..	$4.089	..	$4.039
Change in price	..	-10.0 cents	..	-10.0 cents
Okinawa	$3.189	..	..	$4.039
Change in price	-9.0 cents	..	..	-10.0 cents
South Korea	$3.219	..	$4.129	$4.069
Change in price	-9.0 cents	..	-10.0 cents	-11.0 cents
Guam	$3.249**	$3.789	$4.149	..
Change in price	-9.0 cents	-11.0 cents	-10.0 cents	..

***DieselEFD **Midgrade**
Pacific prices for the week of Dec. 15-21

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates	
Euro costs (Dec. 15)	$1.07
British pound (Dec. 15)	$1.23
Japanese yen (Dec. 15)	142.00
South Korean won (Dec. 15)	1264.00

Commercial rates	
Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3769
Britain (Pound)	1.2746
Canada (Dollar)	1.3425
China (Yuan)	7.1251
Denmark (Krone)	6.7835
Egypt (Pound)	30.8971
Euro	0.9099
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.8081
Hungary (Forint)	345.42
Israel (Shekel)	3.6725
Japan (Yen)	141.69
Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3076
Norway (Krone)	10.5046
Philippines (Peso)	55.66
Poland (Zloty)	3.93
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7514
Singapore (Dollar)	1.3278
South Korea (Won)	1290.32
Switzerland (Franc)	0.8673
Thailand (Baht)	34.82
Turkey (NewLira)	28.9750

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

INTEREST RATES

Prime rate	8.50
Interest Rates Discount rate	6.00
Federal funds market rate	5.33
3-month bill	5.40
30-year bond	4.18

WEATHER OUTLOOK

FRIDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

FRIDAY IN EUROPE

SATURDAY IN THE PACIFIC

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

TODAY IN STRIPES

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

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PACIFIC

Air Force posthumously promotes officer

‘Hardworking and hilarious’ Brayman was one of eight airmen who died in Osprey crash

BY JONATHAN SNYDER
Stars and Stripes

One of the eight airmen who perished when a CV-22B Osprey fell into the sea off southwestern Japan in late November has been posthumously promoted to major.

Capt. Terrell “Terry” K. Brayman, 32, of Pittsford, N.Y, will be promoted effective Friday, Air Force Special Operations Command said in a news release Wednesday.

Brayman was an Osprey pilot and flight commander assigned to the 21st Special Operations Squadron, 353rd Special Operations Wing, at Yokota Air Base in western Tokyo.

“Major Brayman’s legacy will forever endure in the hearts and minds of those who served alongside him, as his commitment to his country will continue to inspire current and future generations of Air Commandos,” Lt. Gen. Tony Bauernfeind, head of Air Force Special Operations Command, said in the release.

U.S. Air Force

Capt. Terrell Brayman, 32, of Pittsford, N.Y., was a CV-22 pilot and flight commander.

Seven of the eight airmen aboard the Osprey — call sign Gundam 22 — have been recovered since the tiltrotor crashed Nov. 29 off Yakushima, an island in Kagoshima prefecture.

People at Yokota silently lined the street leading to the main gate to pay their respects once Wednesday and twice Thursday as crew members’ remains were moved via hearse to a Tokyo airport for their final trip home.

Brayman’s remains were recovered Dec. 5. Maj. Eric Spendlove, 36, of St. George, Utah, remains missing.

The other airmen aboard the Osprey were Maj. Jeffrey Hoernemann, 32, of Andover, Minn.; Maj. Luke Unrath, 34, of Riverside, Calif.; Tech. Sgt. Zachary Lavoy, 33, of Oviedo, Fla.; Staff Sgt. Jake Turnage, 25, of Kennesaw, Ga.; Senior Airman Brian Johnson, 32, of Reynoldsburg, Ohio; and Staff Sgt. Jake Gallihher, 24, of Pittsfield, Mass.

Rep. Joe Morelle, D-N.Y., remembered Brayman’s service Wednesday in a speech on the House floor.

“It is with deep sorrow I rise to acknowledge the loss of U.S. Air Force Major-select Terrell K. Brayman of Pittsford, N.Y.,” he said.

Brayman, who grew up in Rochester, N.Y., died less than a month away from his 33rd birthday, Morelle added. Those closest to him described the airman as “hardworking and hilarious,” the congressman said.

Brayman earned his Air Force commission through the ROTC program at Ohio State University, Morelle said.

“He went on to serve with great distinction, demonstrating commitment to a cause greater than himself. For that, our community and nation will be forever grateful,” Morelle said. “My heartfelt condolences go out to his family and all who knew him. I hope they take comfort in knowing Major-select Brayman’s profound sense of duty, patriotism and dedication to our country will forever remain his legacy.”

A preliminary investigation indicated that an equipment failure, rather than human error, likely caused the crash, Air Force Special Operations Command said Dec. 6.

“The AFSOC community continues to stand with the families, friends, and teammates affected by this devastating loss,” Bauernfeind said in Wednesday’s release.

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Marines deploy food trucks on Okinawa in pilot program

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — Cpl. Jordan Kuzniak was among those lining up for lunch on a recent afternoon at the Chef Shack food truck outside the Foster Community Center.

The schedule for two food trucks in a pilot program to feed Marines outside their chow halls on Okinawa is confusing, said the air support operator with Marine Air Support Squadron 2. But she had visited the trucks at least five times over the past two months.

“I absolutely love it,” she said while ordering a spicy chicken bowl. “When it’s available, I take full advantage of it.”

The Mobile Feeding Pilot Program began Oct. 4 at Foster and has since spread to nearby Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, Gunnery Sgt. Raul Millan, subsistence chief for Marine Corps Installations Pacific, said at the community center on Nov. 29.

The program provides lunch at no additional cost to enlisted Marines at two Marine Corps Community Services food trucks.

The initiative will soon be available across Okinawa and could eventually be adopted wherever Marines are stationed in the Indo-Pacific, Millan said.

“The more we can enhance the quality of life for Marines, the more likely we can retain them,” he said.

The program was developed this year by MCIPAC’s food service office in response to then-Commandant Gen. David Berger’s Talent Management 2030 retention initiative, Millan said. The initiative seeks to retain Marines by offering improved facilities along with additional services and options.

PHOTOS BY MATTHEW M. BURKE/Stars and Stripes

Cpl. Jordan Kuzniak, an air support operator with Marine Air Support Squadron 2, orders lunch through the Mobile Feeding Pilot Program at Camp Foster, Okinawa, on Nov. 29.

Marines queue to receive lunch. The program began Oct. 4 at Foster and has since spread to nearby Marine Corps Air Station Futenma.

“We cannot lose a 12-year intelligence professional or artillery Marine because we could not provide access to pediatric care or a high quality chow hall,” Berger wrote in a March policy update.

Under the pilot, enlisted Marines entitled to meals at the government’s expense can use their Common Access Card to purchase food at the La Cocina and Chef Shack food trucks. La Cocina offers Mexican street staples like tacos and burritos; Chef Shack has an assortment of beef, chicken and plant-based protein bowls.

The entitlement is authorized for any lunch period, Monday through Friday, when the trucks are parked at Foster or MCAS Futenma, Warrant Officer Daniel Jensen, an installations command food service officer, said by email Dec. 7.

The trucks’ schedule varies and is updated on the Marine Corps Community Services’ website.

To date, the trucks have averaged about 30 customers per week, Millan said.

“The numbers aren’t there yet, just because it’s still pretty early, but maybe it’ll pick up in the next couple months,” he said.

Lance Cpl. Ray Joseph, a computer technician with the installations command, said he had only just learned of the program as he walked by Foster’s community center on Nov. 29.

“Having choices outside the chow hall is nice,” he said while ordering a steak burrito at La Cocina. “It’s appreciated.”

Lance Cpl. Bernardino Simbolon, an administrator at the Installation Personnel Administration Center, said the chicken protein bowls are well-balanced and fuel his rigorous gym sessions.

“I recommend it to every single Marine,” he said.

The Corps plans to expand the pilot program south to Camp Kinser by January and then to the northern camps, starting with Courtney, Jensen said. The service eventually hopes the program will be available elsewhere in Japan, as well as South Korea, Guam and Hawaii.

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MILITARY

DOD outlines recruiting shortfall challenges

By Corey Dickstein
Stars and Stripes

The top challenge facing U.S. military recruiting efforts is a lack of awareness about the armed forces among U.S. youth and not "woke" policies, top Pentagon personnel officials told House lawmakers Wednesday.

Personnel policymakers for the Defense Department and the Army, Navy and Air Force insisted their top hurdles to reaching annual recruiting goals amounted to a messaging problem. Generation Z — people born in the mid-1990s through the early 2010s — have little familiarity with the military and lack understanding of the opportunities uniformed service could provide them, defense officials told the House Armed Services Committee's military personnel subpanel.

"This combined with historically low unemployment, a strong private sector wage growth, concerns about the risks of military service, the [coronavirus pandemic's] impact on school access [to recruiters] has all turned into a perfect storm — creating the most challenging recruiting environment for our high-tech service since the height of the dot-com boom, nearly a quarter of a century ago," said Alex Wagner, the assistant secretary of the Air Force for manpower and reserve affairs.

Officials from the other services made similar assessments of recruiting now, which is generally considered the most difficult time to attract new troops since the introduction of the all-volunteer force 50 years ago. Last year the military services, excluding the Marine Corps and Space Force, missed their annual enlistment goals. The Army, which missed its goal by about 10,000 recruits, failed for a second straight year.

While Republicans on the subpanel agreed with the characterization offered by defense officials of the current recruiting environment, they also pointed their fingers at diversity, equality and inclusion initiatives brought by President Joe Biden's administration. The lawmakers claimed the DEI efforts drive otherwise interested people away from the military.

Rep. Jim Banks, R-Ind., the subpanel's chairman, described those DEI efforts as Biden's "pet project," and argued they were harmful to the military's primary goal of being lethal.

"Even now, when we can see that DEI has failed across the country, increasing division and hate, ignoring merit, and now fostering rampant antisemitism, this administration still elevates social justice over our national security," said Banks, a Navy veteran who served in Afghanistan. "And the result is a steep loss in institutional trust in the services and recruiting numbers at their lowest point in 50 years."

Some Democrats and several of the Pentagon officials pushed back against the argument from Banks — and other Republican lawmakers — that DEI policies were partially to blame for recent recruiting woes. Rep. Chrissy Houlahan, D-Pa., accused the Republicans of grandstanding on the culture wars issue, when the military personnel subpanel could be focused on improving quality-of-life problems that continue to plague the armed forces, such as inferior housing and high rates of suicide and sexual assault and harassment, which she argued also impact recruiting.

"I'm kind of sick by the fact that we're here now for the third time having this conversation about recruiting [in a hearing] and [not] actually listening to the genuine experts here who are saying it's complicated — because indeed, it is complicated," said Houlahan, an Air Force veteran. "I am enormously frustrated that this committee has not spent its time really thinking about the quality-of-life issues that our men and women and those who are thinking about being part of this service are facing."

Agnes Schaefer, the assistant secretary of the Army for manpower and reserve affairs, said she would at least consider looking at the DEI issues for any correlation with recruiting problems.

Army data, she said, concluded "wokeness" or culture war issues were not among the top reasons that young Americans were choosing not to enlist in the service.

"But if people have that perception, I think that we need to address it," Schaefer said. "The data we've seen doesn't indicate that's one of the top concerns … but if there are issues out there that people are concerned about [and] this gets at the sort of disconnection between the country and the military right now, which I am extremely concerned about."

The Army in October announced it would revamp its recruiting enterprise after failing to meet its fiscal 2023 recruiting goal. The service will restructure its recruiting command to include its trove of 8,000 recruiters and its now-separate marketing apparatus under one three-star general, officials said. It will also begin training permanent recruiters to replace most of its recruiters who serve in the role temporarily.

Schaefer on Wednesday identified that shift as the Army's top priority to meet its recruiting goals, calling it "one of the biggest transformations" in service history.

While the other services have not announced plans to fully revamp their recruiting efforts, they are also taking steps to try to improve, officials said.

Among them, the Navy has recently opened a Future Sailors Preparatory Course modeled after the Army's Future Soldiers Preparatory Course, which launched in 2022 and has produced nearly 10,000 recruits.

The Air Force has made changes to its tattoo policies and allowed some potential recruits who previously tested positive for marijuana to enlist, adding some 2,900 recruits who would have otherwise been turned away, Wagner said Wednesday.

All the services are working to better send the message to young Americans that serving in the military has value, the officials said.

"Lack of familiarity is the most important thing, but what's important to realize is that once people become familiar, they want to join," Wagner said. "They understand the benefits of service, they understand the opportunities, whether they be educational, financial, they understand the community, being part of a team … and why that matters. The data proves it."

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US, Japanese military commanders patrol Iwakuni city

By Jonathan Snyder
Stars and Stripes

IWAKUNI CITY, Japan — American and Japanese commanders at a Marine base near Hiroshima recently took to the streets to demonstrate, they said, a shared commitment to keeping the peace in their communities.

The commander of Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Col. Richard Rusnok, patrolled nightlife areas popular with service members on Dec. 8 with Rear Adm. Takuhiro Hiragi, commander of Fleet Air Wing 31 of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force.

They were joined by Iwakuni Mayor Yoshihiko Fukuda and officials from the Chugoku-Shikoku Defense Bureau and Yamaguchi prefecture.

Recent incidents involving U.S. citizens affiliated with the military — including drunken driving, car theft and assault — have raised concerns over further misconduct from the air station.

Japanese prosecutors on Nov. 24 indicted Lance Cpl. Manuel Gomez, 21, a motor vehicle operator, on charges he punched and injured an elderly Japanese woman earlier that month in Iwakuni. Another U.S. service member was reportedly involved in a fight with a 67-year-old man following a break-in at a store in the city on Nov. 18.

JONATHAN SNYDER/STARS AND STRIPES

Col. Richard Rusnok, commander of Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan, visits a local business during a joint patrol of Iwakuni city on Dec. 8.

"Any incidents that create any kind of friction between the American and Japanese community is anathema to our values," Rusnok said at a post-patrol press briefing. "And we cooperate fully in any investigation with the appropriate authorities that are involved."

This week, the commander of Marine forces in Japan ordered a liberty policy update following the rise in misconduct allegations.

The revamp, drafted Monday by Lt. Gen. James Bierman Jr., requires sergeants and below to carry tiered liberty cards while enjoying free time off base. Corporals and below must have a liberty buddy with them if they plan to consume alcohol anywhere other than a U.S. military base.

The American and Japanese communities share similar values, Rusnok said at the briefing.

"We have the same desire in the end-state, which is a safe, secure community where we can raise our children, where we can conduct business and where we can share our cultures together in the ways that we do very effectively every day," he said.

MCAS Iwakuni has put military members in uniform who are on weekend courtesy patrols in the Kawashimo and Marifu areas of the city, Rusnok said.

"The last several weeks, we have instituted an enhanced courtesy patrol in Iwakuni city and it will not be uncommon for citizens to see us in the very uniform I'm wearing tonight, out here demonstrating our commitment to this community to the safety and security and the appropriate behavior of our citizens in the community," he said.

Stars and Stripes reporter Hana Kusumoto contributed to this report.

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PACIFIC

CHOE DONG-JOON, NEWSIS/AP

Members of South Korean women's national handball team perform a team-building exercise with rubber boats during a training at a boot camp for the marine corps in Pohang, South Korea, in 2016.

S. Korean Olympic chief defends training athletes at military camp

BY KIM TONG-HYUNG
Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea's Olympic chief has defended a decision to send hundreds of athletes to a military camp next week as part of preparations for the 2024 Games in Paris, citing a need to instill mental toughness in competitors.

About 400 male and female athletes will arrive at a marine boot camp in the southeastern port city of Pohang on Monday for a three-day training aimed at building resilience and teamwork, the Korean Sport and Olympic Committee said.

The program, pushed by the committee's president, Lee Kee-Heung, has faced criticism from politicians and media who described the training camp as outdated and showing an unhealthy obsession with medals.

Officials at the committee have played down concerns about the potential for injuries, saying the athletes will not be forced into the harsher types of military training. Morning jogs, rubber-boat riding and events aimed at building camaraderie will be on the program. Sports officials are still finalizing details of the camp with the Korea Marine Corps., committee official Yun Kyoung-ho said Thursday.

During a meeting with domestic media, Lee said he hopes that next week's training could help inspire a "rebound" for the country's Olympic athletes who are stuck in a "real crisis situation." He was referring to what was widely seen as the country's underwhelming medal tallies in this year's Asian Games and at the Tokyo Olympics in 2021.

If their performances don't improve, South Korea may win just five or six gold medals at the Paris Games, Lee said, describing that tally as the "worst-case scenario" for the country.

The Associated Press was not present at the meeting, which was closed to foreign media, but confirmed Lee's comments later through the sports committee.

Lee first floated the idea about the military training camp following the Asian Games in October, when South Korea finished third in the gold medal count to host China and Japan. The six gold medals South Korean athletes won during the Tokyo Olympics were the fewest for the country since the 1984 Los Angeles Games.

South Korea has long linked sports with national pride, a legacy that goes back to the successive dictatorships that ruled the country from the 1960s to mid-80s, when military leaders associated Asian Games and Olympic Games achievements with regime loyalty and prestige.

Since the 1970s, male athletes who win gold medals at Asian Games or any medal at the Olympics have been exempted from 18-21 months of military service that most South Korean men must perform in the face of North Korean military threats.

South Korea scrambles fighter jets for approaching Chinese, Russian planes

BY DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — Six Chinese and Russian military aircraft entered South Korea's air identification zone Thursday, prompting Seoul to deploy fighter jets in response, according to the Ministry of National Defense.

The aircraft — two from China and four from Russia — were detected prior to entering South Korea's zone in the Sea of Japan, or East Sea, between 11:53 a.m. and 12:10 p.m., the ministry said in a text message to reporters.

The identification zone is a buffer designated by some countries between international and national airspace in which approaching aircraft are expected to identify themselves.

The six aircraft did not violate South Korea's airspace; however, the nation's air force deployed fighter jets "to take tactical measures," the ministry said.

No additional details on the aircraft were provided by the ministry.

The incident comes six months after four Chinese and four Russian aircraft crossed into South Korea's identification zone to the south and east of the Korean Peninsula on June 6. South Korean jets responded.

The same day, two Chinese H-6s and two Russian Tu-95 bombers conducted a joint air drill near Japan, prompting Tokyo to scramble fighter jets, according to Kyodo News.

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N. Korea slams new missile warning system

BY DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — North Korean state media warned Thursday that a missile-warning system shared by the United States, South Korea and Japan will undermine security in Northeast Asia.

The real-time, data-sharing, missile-warning system developed by the three countries is an attempt to "rationalize their adventurous military movements," according to the state-run Rodong Sinmun.

The U.S.-led system, which is due to come online this month, is a "threatening" military tool that will destabilize the region, according to the newspaper.

The system will "jointly respond to North Korean nuclear and missile threats," Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said during a November press conference in Seoul.

Missile-defense systems in South Korea have been a thorny topic not just for the North, but also its ally, China, Seoul's largest trading partner.

After the U.S. deployed a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD, battery in South Korea in 2016, China boycotted South Korean businesses, costing Seoul around $7.5 billion, according to a 2017 study by the Hyundai Research Institute.

The system's development was agreed upon by President Joe Biden, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida Fumio during the East Asia Summit in Cambodia on Nov. 13.

Washington, Seoul and Tokyo "intend to share [North Korean] missile warning data in real time to improve each country's ability to detect and assess the threat posed by incoming missiles, a major step for deterrence, peace and stability," the three leaders said in a joint statement at the summit.

The leaders also agreed to conduct trilateral defense training in the upcoming year to deter North Korea.

The allies have already carried out several military exercises in response to North Korea firing 22 ballistic missiles so far this year.

Japan, UK, Italy to develop new advanced jet together

Associated Press

TOKYO — The defense ministers of Japan, Britain and Italy signed an agreement on Thursday to establish a joint organization to develop a new advanced jet fighter, as the countries push to strengthen their cooperation in the face of growing threats from China, Russia and North Korea.

The three countries had agreed last year to merge earlier individual plans — for Japan's Mitsubishi F-X to succeed the retiring F-2s developed with the United States and Britain's Tempest — to produce the new combat aircraft for deployment in 2035.

Defense Minister Minoru Kihara said at a joint news conference with his British and Italian counterparts, Grant Shapps and Guido Crosett, that co-developing a high-performance fighter aircraft is "indispensable to securing air superiority and enabling effective deterrence" at a time that Japan faces an increasingly severe security environment.

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MILITARY

US Army stages Europe jailbreak

Soldiers sharpen escape prevention skills during largest drill of its kind

BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

SEMBACH KASERNE, Germany — The exercise Thursday at the U.S. military's jail in Europe began with three soldiers in prisoner roles leaving their cells to do supervised landscaping work on the base grounds.

After several minutes, one of the inmates darted into the nearby woods. When the guards couldn't catch him, emergency plans led to a dozen or so soldiers and a military working dog heading out in pursuit.

It took about three hours for the search teams to find the escapee, who was discovered hiding among tree branches. The prisoner attempted to attack the soldiers who found him, at which point the dog was released and brought the escapee down. Since it was an exercise, the prisoner was lucky enough to wear a dog bite protector.

The exercise was the largest known of its kind at this Army post in rural southwestern Germany.

"It represents one of the worst emergencies that could happen," Staff Sgt. David Diaz, the plans and policies noncommissioned officer at the facility, said of a potential jailbreak.

An American prisoner escaping off-post and on the loose in a foreign country would be both a public safety and a diplomatic concern.

It's critical for jail staff to know how to handle an escape, Diaz said.

Not all of the jail's personnel were onsite or even informed of the exercise. But part of the drill involved summoning everyone who worked there for an emergency meeting, where search teams were formed and a plan was made.

The jail, officially titled the U.S. Army Correction Facility-Europe, is the only one on the Continent that holds inmates stationed in Europe and Africa from all services.

Any U.S. service member awaiting trial on the two continents and those serving up to a year in confinement may be brought here.

Jail staff have conducted missing prisoner exercises by themselves before. This time, U.S. Army Garrison Rheinland-Pfalz's emergency services directorate and the 18th Military Police Brigade joined the two dozen jail personnel. Two German police officers observed the exercise.

In a real jailbreak, German police would help secure the base perimeter, Army officials said.

Military jailbreaks remain exceedingly rare. Not a single prisoner in military custody has gone missing in the past decade, Army spokesman Bryce Dubee said.

But the exercise shows the Army is serious about keeping the areas it works in safe, and that it's eager to improve, corrections facility commander Maj. Chad Pennington said.

"Overall, I'd say the exercise was very successful," he said. "Anytime we have this kind of exercise, there's going to be lessons learned."

The military's jail for Europe was first opened in 1945 in a stockade at Mannheimer Palace in Mannheim, Germany. In 1963, it moved to the Coleman Army Airfield to the north of the city, until that jail closed in 2014 as the current Sembach location opened.

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PHOTOS BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN/Stars and Stripes

An escaped prisoner is apprehended during an exercise at Sembach Kaserne, Germany, on Thursday.

Sgt. Fabio Santana, assigned to the 100th Military Working Dog Detachment, briefs troops during a missing prisoner exercise at Sembach Kaserne, Germany.

Bill: Lawmaker touts DOD budget as product of strong bipartisanship

FROM PAGE 1

Congress still needs to pass an appropriations bill that would allocate the funding necessary to implement the policies outlined in the NDAA.

Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., last week called the compromise bill "a total sell-out of conservative principles and a huge win for Democrats." Rep. Chip Roy, R-Texas, urged lawmakers who are "pro-life, against racial division, against taxpayer transgender surgeries, against drag shows" to oppose "this swamp bill."

Other lawmakers said they could not vote for the legislation because it included a four-month extension of a controversial foreign surveillance program. But the bill easily earned the two-thirds majority needed to pass.

Lawmakers from both parties lauded various quality-of-life improvements included in the legislation, including a 5.2% pay raise for troops — the largest in more than 20 years.

Other provisions expand eligibility for Basic Needs Allowance programs, fund improvements to military barracks and housing facilities, and allow military services to give financially struggling junior service members monthly bonuses.

"Nothing is more important to the national security of this country than the people who we ask to defend it," said Rep. Adam Smith, D-Wash., the top Democrat on the Armed Services committee. "This bill protects them."

The Senate approved the defense bill on Wednesday night in a bipartisan vote, 87-13. The legislation, which sets annual policy for the Pentagon, typically enjoys wide bipartisan support but its fate appeared uncertain this year due to the House's polarizing amendments.

Republicans on the House Armed Services Committee in recent days sought to champion the conservative measures that remained, saying the final legislation "pushes back against the radical woke ideology being forced on our servicemen and women and restores the focus of our military on lethality."

They touted provisions that prohibit funding for the teaching of critical race theory and establish a hiring freeze and salary caps for the Pentagon's diversity, equity and inclusion workforce. The bill also bans the display of unapproved flags, such as a rainbow LGBTQ pride flag, at military installations.

Additional items defund a Pentagon working group created to issue recommendations on rooting out extremism in the military and directs the defense secretary to inform service members who had been discharged solely for refusing to get the coronavirus vaccine on how they can be reinstated.

Recruiting commanders for the Army, Navy and Marine Corps told senators last week that few of the 8,000 service members booted from service sought to rejoin. About 57 soldiers are either back on active duty or awaiting their return to active duty in the Army, 14 Marines have come back to service and two Navy personnel have reenlisted, they said.

Rep. Matt Gaetz, R-Fla., argued the defense bill does not go far enough to address the fallout from the vaccine mandate, which was rescinded earlier this year.

"We were told over and over again that there would be back pay and reparations and restoration of rank for those people who were improperly told that they could not express their patriotism through military service because they didn't want to take an experimental vaccine," he said. "And yet that is totally absent in this legislation."

Rogers pushed back, pointing out the bill contains "hundreds of provisions that are good for our service members" and a pathway for discharged troops to get back into service.

Smith added the defense bill was a product of strong bipartisanship.

"You cannot oppose this bill and claim that you support the national security of this country," he said. "Because this bill represents that bipartisan compromise that we worked for to get a good bill to meet our national security needs."

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MILITARY

Marine earns 'Jeopardy' championship spot

Intelligence officer heads to final round with his $68,400 winnings

By Michael Slavin
Stars and Stripes

Marine intelligence officer Capt. Tyler Vandenberg put his intellect on full display Wednesday, cruising past his opponents during a semifinal match of "Jeopardy."

Vandenberg, who is based in Stuttgart, Germany, earned a spot in the popular game show's "Champions Wildcard" final stage by winning $68,400 in two commanding victories.

Heading into the final Jeopardy round, Vandenberg held a $7,800 lead when the "movie musical" category appeared.

Host Ken Jennings read the final answer: "Of the musicals to win an Oscar for best picture, one of the two with one-word titles based on and named for literary characters."

Vandenberg remained stoic while his answer, "What is Oliver!" was read from the screen. Only after his correct answer was shown did his smile appear, while revealing he wagered his entire sum of $18,400, earning him $36,800 on the day.

Vandenberg is no stranger to the game show, having previously appeared as a first lieutenant in July 2021, when he went on to win $41,400 as a two-day champion.

The winner of the group stage will receive a $100,000 prize and advance to the show's Tournament of Champions. The first final round of the group stage is slated for Friday and the second final round is Monday.

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JEOPARDY

Capt. Tyler Vandenberg plays for a spot in the final round of the Champions Wildcard "Jeopardy" tournament Wednesday.

Serbian war criminal living in Ohio found guilty of illegal entry

By Alexander Riedel
Stars and Stripes

A convicted Serbian war criminal this week admitted in federal court to escaping justice and living in Ohio for two decades after obtaining a green card by lying to U.S. immigration officials.

Jugoslav Vidic, 55, confessed to concealing a war crime he committed during the Yugoslavian Civil War, the Justice Department said in a statement Wednesday.

Vidic said he had never been charged with breaking "any law" in his immigration paperwork in 2000, despite fleeing a Croatian court conviction.

He received permanent resident status and a green card in 2005. He lived in suburban Cleveland, Ohio, where he worked in his former occupation as butcher and sausage maker.

Vidic was a Serb Army of Krajina soldier during the civil war in the former Yugoslavia.

On immigration documents, Vidic only claimed a one-year term of military service in the Yugoslav People's Army before the country's breakup, the Justice Department said Wednesday.

24 SATA NEWS

Jugoslav Vidic

In the summer of 1991, two months after Croatia declared independence from Yugoslavia, ethnic Serb forces besieged Petrinja, Croatia.

Vidic was part of a notorious paramilitary unit known as the "Red Berets," and he was implicated in the killing of his former factory coworker and noncombatant Stjepan Komes.

Vidic had seen his ex-colleague shaking hands on television with then-Croatian president Franjo Tudjman during a visit to Petrinja.

In apparent revenge for this perceived sign of solidarity with Tudjman, Vidic led his former coworker out of the building at gunpoint and cut off his right hand with a butcher's knife, according to court records.

Komes was never again seen alive and his body was later exhumed from a mass grave, according to a Justice Department indictment.

Vidic was convicted for a war crime against civilians in absence in 1998 but escaped across the Atlantic before his arrest.

In the more than 23 years after his arrival in the United States, Vidic ran a small business making Balkan-style sausages that once ran afoul of U.S. health regulations. He also faced accusations of a pattern of sexual harassment by fellow employees of a supermarket where he worked in the meat department, according to court documents. Vidic denied the accusations and his employer settled a lawsuit, according to Cleveland.com.

It was Komes' son, Tomislav Komes, who located his father's killer in North America 32 years later, after a tip from a fellow Croatian who met Vidic in America, Croatian media outlet Maxportal reported in January.

Vidic resurfacing in the U.S. unmasked a narrative of war crimes and subterfuge in Croatia, where online news site Sata 24 dubbed the escaped convict the "executioner from Petrinja."

"I can't imagine what kind of mentality it is, what kind of person it is," Tomislav Komes told Croatian television news Dnevnik Nova after Vidic's arrest earlier this year. "War operations are something that is legitimate and clear, there are victims, but this kind of brutal torture, cutting off a civilian's hand, is something that even today, after 30 years, I cannot understand."

Vidic entered a plea agreement that included his deportation and is scheduled to be sentenced on his immigration fraud charges in May.

"Vidic will serve prison time and then be removed from this country," acting assistant attorney general Nicole Argentieri said Wednesday in a statement. "His conviction demonstrates that no human rights violation is too distant for the Justice Department to seek accountability."

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Commercial tanker refuels airborne Air Force jets for 1st time

By Jonathan Snyder
Stars and Stripes

The Air Force has refueled airborne fighters from a commercial tanker for the first time, proving another means of extending its combat airpower, the service said in a recent news release.

Omega Aerial Refueling Services gassed up F-15C Eagles, F-16 Fighting Falcons and F-22 Raptors from a KDC-10 tanker during last month's Commando Sling exercise in Singapore.

The Virginia-based company began aerial refueling services for the Navy and the Marine Corps in the early 2000s, according to its website.

During the summer, a commercial tanker refueled an Air Force E-3 and an RC-135, Lt. Col. Curtis Holtman, Pacific Air Forces air mobility operations chief, said last month.

"We're expanding that aperture in PACAF, and identified a proof-of-concept employment to refuel fighter aircraft during exercise Commando Sling 23," he said.

Omega's KDC-10s can carry about 37,000 gallons of fuel depending on type, density and temperature, plus up to 100,000 pounds of freight or passenger payload, according to its website.

"The KDC-10 was also loaded with more than 40 passengers attending the exercise and four pallet positions worth of cargo to exercise the aircraft's dual role capability for airlift as well as refueling," Holtman said.

Omega did not respond to a Stars and Stripes phone call seeking further comment.

The Air Force cites the demonstration as a proof-of-concept to further project air power across the globe.

"If we can use commercial air refueling to cover the point A to point B movements for exercise participation across unit readiness training, then it frees up our warfighter tanker fleet to be ready to respond for emerging contingency requirements," Holtman said. "This is another mechanism that we can leverage to increase our warfighter readiness."

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MIDEAST

Israel vows to fight on in Gaza despite backlash

By Najib Jobain and Kareem Chehayeb
Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Israel vowed to keep fighting in Gaza until it crushes Hamas after one of the deadliest single battles of the war for its soldiers, even as it faces mounting international calls for a cease-fire and unease on the part of its closest ally, the United States.

The ambush in Gaza City, one of the hardest hit areas of the war, showed Hamas' resilience and called into question whether Israel can defeat it without wiping out the entire territory. Support for Hamas has surged among Palestinians — in part because of the militant group's stiff resistance to a far more powerful foe — while the U.S. has expressed growing discomfort over civilian deaths.

U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan was visiting Israel on Thursday, days after President Joe Biden said that Israel was losing international support because of its "indiscriminate bombing."

Israel has imposed a total siege on northern Gaza, including Gaza City, and has flattened much of it in what is already one of the 21st century's most devastating military campaigns.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to fight to the end, "even given the great pain and the international pressure," saying late Wednesday that "nothing will stop us."

The ambush took place Tuesday in the dense neighborhood of Shijaiyah, which was also the scene of a major battle during the 2014 war between Israel and Hamas. The dead included two high-ranking officers. A total of 116 soldiers have been killed in the ground offensive, which began Oct. 27.

Heavy fighting has raged for days in Shijaiyah and other areas in and around eastern Gaza City that were encircled earlier in the war. Tens of thousands of people remain in the north despite repeated evacuation orders, saying they don't feel safe anywhere in Gaza or fear they may never return to their homes if they leave them.

The military released footage on Thursday from northern Gaza showing dozens of men with their hands above their heads walking in a straight line out of a damaged building. Four of the men could be seen carrying assault rifles over their heads and setting them down in the street, along with what appeared to be several ammunition magazines.

The military said the men had exited the Kamal Adwan Hospital after troops battled militants in a nearby building. It described all of them as suspected militants, without providing evidence.

Mohammed Dahman/AP

Palestinians wounded in the Israeli bombardment of the Gaza Strip receive treatment at Nasser hospital in Khan Younis on Thursday.

The Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said 70 medical workers and patients were detained when Israeli forces raided the hospital earlier this week, including the hospital director. The U.N. humanitarian office said the hospital had 65 patients, including 12 children in intensive care, at the time of the raid.

It was not immediately clear if the military and the Health Ministry were describing the same event.

Israel says it is rounding up men in northern Gaza as it searches for Hamas fighters, and recent videos have shown dozens of detained men stripped to their underwear, bound and blindfolded in the streets. Some released detainees have said they were beaten and denied food and water.

In the video released by the military on Thursday, all the men appeared fully clothed except the four carrying weapons, who were shirtless.

Israel's air and ground assault, launched in response to Hamas' unprecedented attack into southern Israel on Oct. 7, has killed more than 18,600 Palestinians, according to the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza.

The ministry does not differentiate between civilian and combatant deaths. Its latest count did not specify how many were women and minors, but they have consistently made up around two-thirds of the dead in previous tallies. Thousands more are missing and feared dead beneath the rubble.

Nearly 1.9 million Palestinians have been driven from their homes, with most seeking refuge in the south, even as Israel has continued to strike what it says are militant targets in all parts of the territory.

Residents reported two Israeli airstrikes overnight in Rafah, the southernmost town along the Egyptian border. An Associated Press reporter saw 27 bodies brought into a local hospital early Thursday.

One woman burst into tears after recognizing the body of her child.

"They were young people, children, displaced, all sitting at home," Mervat Ashour said as she and others mourned their relatives. "There were no resistance fighters, rockets, or anything."

New evacuation orders issued as troops pushed into the southern city of Khan Younis earlier this month have pushed U.N.-run shelters to the breaking point and forced people to set up tent camps in even less hospitable areas. Heavy rain and cold in recent days has compounded their misery, swamping tents and forcing families to crowd around fires to keep warm.

Families of US hostages in Gaza hopeful after meeting with Biden

By Aamer Madhani and Zeke Miller
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden on Wednesday held his first in-person meeting with families of some of the eight Americans still unaccounted for and presumed taken captive by Hamas during its deadly Oct. 7 attack on Israel, reassuring the families that his administration was committed to reuniting them with their loved ones.

The family members said in a statement following the meeting that they urged Biden to do "everything in his power to negotiate a swift and total release of the remaining hostages," and they in turn offered to do "anything he needs" to win the hostages' release.

"We felt before and we're only reinforced in seeing and believing that we could have no better friend in Washington or in the White House than President Biden himself and his administration," said Jonathan Dekel-Chen, whose son Sagui is among the Americans believed to be held by Hamas.

The two-hour meeting came a day after Biden appeared to sharpen criticism of Israel's execution of its retaliatory strikes in Gaza, warning that the Israelis were losing international support because of "indiscriminate bombing."

White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said Biden's comments reflected "a concern that we have had for some time and will continue to have as this military operation proceeds about the need for reducing civilian harm and being as precise and careful and deliberate as possible."

Israeli officials on Wednesday sought to play down the signs of strain between Biden and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government.

"I have great respect for President Biden, for Defense Secretary [Lloyd] Austin and all the top American government officials. They are doing a lot," said Israeli Defense Minister Yov Gallant. He added, "Conversations are ongoing. I think we will find a way to help the Americans help us. That's the key and the base. They want our success, and we are aware we must do so while taking their needs into account, and without giving up on the goals of the war."

Secretary of State Antony Blinken and principal deputy national security adviser Jon Finer joined Biden for Wednesday's meeting. Thirteen of the family members attended in person, while three others joined the conversation with the president and his advisers by phone, according to the White House.

The Democratic president has previously met with some family members virtually and spoken to others on the phone.

Biden's meeting with the families came as his national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, was to head to Israel on Thursday to meet with Netanyahu, members of his war cabinet, and Israeli President Isaac Herzog.

The eight Americans remain unaccounted for after Hamas' surprise air, sea and land incursion into Israeli towns, where the group killed about 1,200 Israelis, mostly civilians, and took more than 240 people hostage. The White House has said that at least 31 Americans were killed by Hamas and other militant groups on Oct. 7.

Another missile from Yemen; this one misses targeted ship

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — A missile fired from territory controlled by Houthi rebels in Yemen missed a container ship traveling through the crucial Bab el-Mandeb Strait on Thursday, a U.S. defense official said, the latest attack threatening shipping in the crucial maritime chokepoint.

The attack saw the missile splash harmlessly in the water near the Maersk Gibraltar, a Hong Kong-flagged container ship that had been traveling from Salalah, Oman, to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, the official said.

The official spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence matters. The official's comments came after the British military's United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations, which monitors Mideast shipping lanes, put out an alert warning of an incident in the strait, which separates East Africa from the Arabian Peninsula.

The Maersk Gibraltar had also been hailed over the radio by "an entity claiming to be the 'Yemeni Navy' ahead of the missile being launched towards the vessel," the private intelligence firm Ambrey said. "The 'Yemeni Navy' demanded the vessel alter course to head for Yemen. Ambrey assessed the entity to be" the Houthis.

Maersk, one of the world's biggest shippers, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

Thursday's attack marks just the latest in the seaborne attacks attributed to the Houthis as part of their pressure campaign over the Israel-Hamas war raging in the Gaza Strip.

Two missiles fired from Houthi-held territory missed a commercial tanker loaded with Indian-manufactured jet fuel near the key Bab el-Mandeb Strait on Wednesday. Also near the strait, a missile fired by Houthi rebels on Monday night slammed into a Norwegian-flagged tanker in the Red Sea.

The Houthis have carried out a series of attacks on vessels in the Red Sea and launched drones and missiles targeting Israel. In recent days, they have threatened to attack any vessel they believe is either going to or coming from Israel, though several vessels targeted had no apparent link at all.

In November, Houthis seized a vehicle transport ship linked to Israel in the Red Sea off Yemen. The rebels still hold the vessel near the port city of Hodeida.

MILITARY

Home: Navy officer returning to US

FROM PAGE 1

Brittany, meeting and embracing President Joe Biden, who raised the case during a May meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida.

It was unclear how much additional time Alkonis might be required to spend behind bars in the U.S. under the terms of his transfer from Japan, which was done through a Justice Department program that permits the relocation of prisoners convicted in another country back to their home nation.

The program stipulates that the sentence cannot be longer than the one imposed by the foreign government. The U.S. Parole Commission determines the release date in the cases of returning Americans.

His family says no prison time is appropriate.

"When the Biden Administration is presented with the complete set of facts and circumstances surrounding the case, we're confident they will promptly recognize the absurdity of Ridge's conviction," the family said.

A department spokesperson referred a request for comment to the Bureau of Prisons, which said Alkonis was not in its custody.

Alkonis is a specialist in underseas warfare and acoustic engineering who at the time of the crash had spent nearly seven years in Japan as a civilian volunteer and naval officer.

In the spring of 2021, after a period of land-based assignments, Alkonis, a Southern California native, was preparing for a deployment as a department head on the USS Benfold, a missile destroyer.

With the assignment looming, he set out for an excursion of Mount Fuji for hiking and sightseeing with his wife and children.

They had climbed a portion of the mountain and were back in the car, heading to lunch and ice cream near the base of Mount Fuji, when, his family says, he suddenly lost consciousness after suffering acute mountain sickness.

He was so out of it, they say, that neither his daughter's screams to wake up nor the impact of the collision roused him.

His car veered into parked cars and pedestrians in a parking lot, striking the woman and her son-in-law, who both later died.

After the crash near Fujinomiya, Alkonis was arrested by Japanese authorities and was held for 26 days in solitary confinement at a police detention facility, was interrogated multiple times a day and was not given medical treatment or an evaluation, according to a statement of facts provided by a family spokesman.

That statement says that when American authorities arrived to take Alkonis into custody and return him to a U.S. base, he already was held by the Japanese.

He was indicted on a charge of a negligent driving, resulting in death, and was sentenced that October to three years in prison. After the sentencing, his family had sought to keep the case in the public spotlight, including by gathering outside the White House.

Andrew Eubanks

Brittany Alkonis, wife of Navy Lt. Ridge Alkonis, who at the time was imprisoned in Japan, hugs President Joe Biden following his State of the Union address at the Capitol in Washington on Feb. 7.

Ind. man gets prison for his attempt to sell 'ghost guns' to ISIS

By Kyle Alvarez
Stars and Stripes

An Indiana man who teamed up with his brother to try and sell arms to the Islamic State group has been sentenced to more than 16 years in prison for his crimes, the Justice Department said.

Moyad Dannon's sentence Wednesday was about four years less than his brother, Mahde Dannon, received in 2021, both for providing material support to a foreign terrorist organization.

"The defendants in this case fused together two grave threats to Americans' security by attempting to support a brutal terrorist organization through the illicit manufacture of 'ghost guns,' " Lisa Monaco, deputy attorney general, said in a statement.

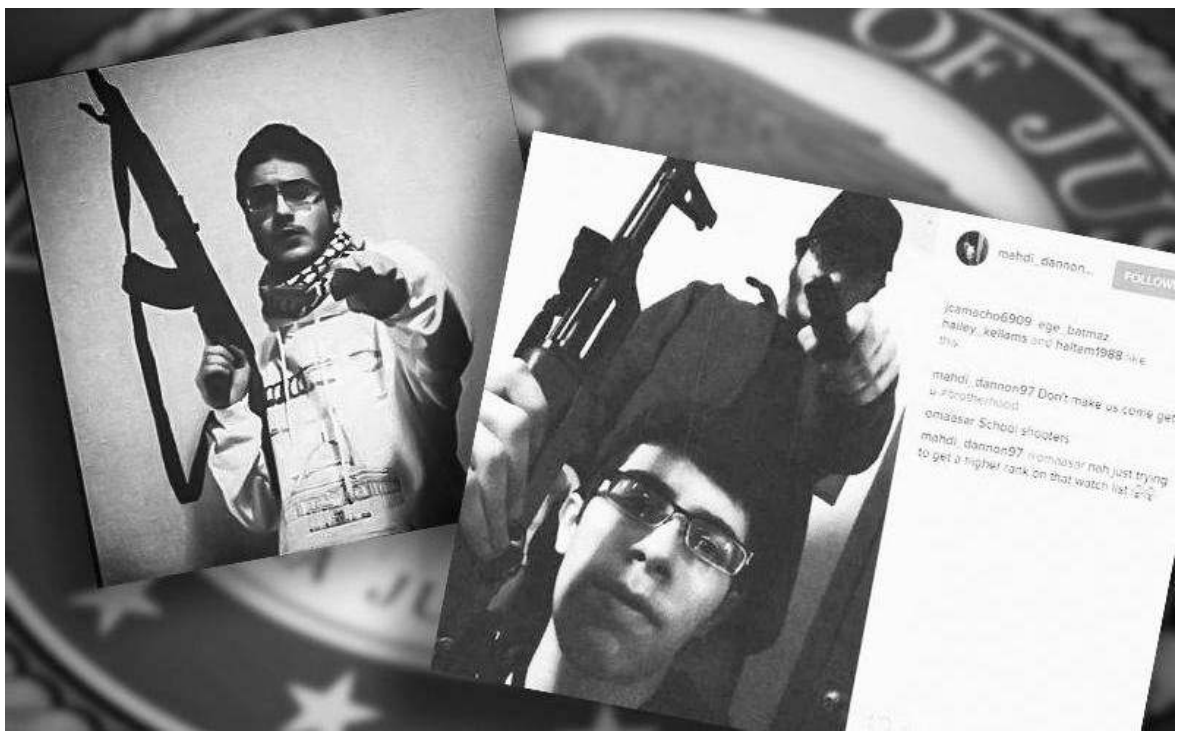
In June 2018, the brothers devised a plan to deliver stolen firearms to a convicted felon who was cooperating with the FBI, according to court documents.

The two brothers sold several illegally obtained firearms to the FBI informant, including .223-caliber semi-automatic rifles which were pieced together by ordering gun parts separately online. Such weapons are known as ghost guns because they are unregistered and difficult to trace.

They had agreed to build 55 ghost guns, and sell them to an uncover agent and the informant along the U.S. southwestern border, according to the Justice Department statement.

During conversations with the agent, Moyad Dannon talked of leaving his home in Fishers, a suburb of Indianapolis, to join ISIS fighters in Syria, the statement said.

They initially built five rifles in 2019 for immediate shipment to ISIS members fighting in Syria. They were immediately arrested following the arranged sale, according to court documents.



Justice Department

Undated photos from court filings show Moyad Dannon, left, and Mahde Dannon posing with firearms on social media, prior to their arrest for attempting to sell 'ghost guns' to the Islamic State.

After the arrest, the FBI found a flash drive on Moyad Dannon's keychain with roughly 16 gigabytes of ISIS materials, including videos of ISIS snipers killing U.S. military personnel. Other videos included ISIS militants conducting violent acts against hostages and civilians.

The brothers' sympathies were readily apparent on social media well before they began making rifles.

The Justice Department's initial complaint includes a 2015 post by Mahde Dannon with pictures of each of them holding rifles, and a comment: "Just trying to get higher on that watch list."

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Marine killed in Calif. training accident remembered as compassionate

By Rose L. Thayer
Stars and Stripes

Sgt. Matthew K. Bylski, a 23-year-old Marine who died Wednesday in a rollover accident during training at Camp Pendleton, Calif., had nearly five years of service and was known for his willingness to help others.

"He was so compassionate. He was always upbeat and would do anything he could to bring you out of a bad situation and put you in a better mindset," his brother Josh Bylski said in a statement released by Hazel Park Schools in Michigan where the Marine graduated high school.

Bylski, who grew up in nearby Royal Oak, Mich., died as he was serving as the vehicle commander of an amphibious combat vehicle at Camp Pendleton, according to the Marine Corps base. A rollover accident occurred as the vehicle with 14 other Marines inside was on land.

One Marine remains at the hospital in good condition, the others have been treated and released, the service said Thursday. The accident remains under investigation.

Bylski was an amphibious combat vehicle crewman assigned to the Battalion Landing Team 1/5 of the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit.

"Words fail to express our sorrow at the tragic loss of Sgt. Bylski, an outstanding Marine and a leader within his platoon," said Col. Sean Dynan, commanding officer of the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit. "The MEU — the Marines who lived, trained, and learned from Sgt. Bylski, mourn alongside his family and friends. The entire 15th MEU 'Vanguard' family is affected by his absence."

Bylski enlisted in January 2019, shortly after his 2018 graduation from Hazel Park High School where he played baseball and football, according to the district. He is survived by his wife, Lexi, and his parents, Ken Bylski and Sandra Rogoff.

"He was a real special kid," Ken Bylski said in a statement from the school.

NATION

House approves Biden impeachment inquiry

BY FARNOUSH AMIRI
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House on Wednesday authorized the impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden, with every Republican rallying behind the politically charged process despite lingering concerns among some in the party that the investigation has yet to produce evidence of misconduct by the president.

The 221-212 party-line vote put the entire House Republican conference on record in support of an impeachment process that can lead to the ultimate penalty for a president: punishment for what the Constitution describes as "high crimes and misdemeanors," which can lead to removal from office if convicted in a Senate trial.

Biden, in a rare statement about the impeachment effort, questioned the priorities of House Republicans in pursuing an inquiry against him and his family.

"Instead of doing anything to help make Americans' lives better, they are focused on attacking me with lies," the president said following the vote. "Instead of doing their job on the urgent work that needs to be done, they are choosing to waste time on this baseless political stunt that even Republicans in Congress admit is not supported by facts."

Authorizing the monthslong inquiry ensures that the impeachment investigation extends well into 2024, when Biden will be running for reelection and seems likely to be squaring off against former President Donald Trump — who was twice impeached during his time in the White House. Trump has pushed his GOP allies in Congress to move swiftly on impeaching Biden, part of his broader calls for vengeance and retribution against his political enemies.

The decision to hold a vote came as Speaker Mike Johnson and his team faced growing pressure to show progress in what has become a nearly yearlong probe centered around the business dealings of Biden's family members. While their investigation has raised ethical questions, no evidence has emerged that Biden acted corruptly or accepted bribes in his current role or previous office as vice president.

"We do not take this responsibility lightly and will not prejudge the investigation's outcome," Johnson and his leadership team said in a joint statement after the vote. "But the evidentiary record is impossible to ignore."

House Democrats stood in united opposition to the inquiry resolution Wednesday, calling it a farce perpetrated by those across the aisle to avenge the two impeachments against Trump.

"This whole thing is an extreme political stunt. It has no credibility, no legitimacy, and no integrity. It is a sideshow," Rep. Jim McGovern, D-Mass., said during a floor debate.

Some House Republicans, particularly those hailing from politically divided districts, had been hesitant in recent weeks to take any vote on Biden's impeachment, fearing a significant political cost. But GOP leaders have made the case in recent weeks that the resolution is only a step in the process, not a decision to impeach Biden. That message seems to have won over skeptics.

"As we have said numerous times before, voting in favor of an impeachment inquiry does not equal impeachment," Rep. Tom Emmer, a member of the GOP leadership team, said at a news conference Tuesday.

Emmer said Republicans "will continue to follow the facts wherever they lead, and if they uncover evidence of treason, bribery or other high crimes and misdemeanors, then and only then will the next steps towards impeachment proceedings be considered."

JOSE LUIS MAGANA/AP

Rep. Jamie Raskin, D-Md., ranking member of the House Oversight and Accountability Committee, speaks about the Republican impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden in Washington on Wednesday.

GOP hopefuls say 'compassion' needed in Texas abortion case

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Some of the Republicans seeking their party's 2024 presidential nomination have said the case of a Texas woman whose health deteriorated as she unsuccessfully sought an abortion should be handled with "compassion," but they did not criticize the state's law.

It's the latest indication that the candidates see the politics surrounding abortion as a delicate — and fraught — issue for the GOP after the Supreme Court's reversal of constitutional protections for the procedure helped power Democrats to unexpectedly strong performances in the 2022 midterms.

While campaigning Tuesday, both former United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley and Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis expressed sympathy for Kate Cox, a mother of two who sought an abortion after learning the baby she was carrying had a fatal genetic condition and suffering health complications of her own. Her request for an exemption from Texas' ban — one of the most restrictive in the U.S. — was ultimately denied by the state Supreme Court, and Cox left the state to seek an abortion elsewhere.

Asked about Cox's case at a CNN town hall, DeSantis, who signed a six-week ban in his state earlier this year, said that "these are very difficult issues" and pointed to Florida's exceptions allowing abortions when the mother's life is in danger or for a "fatal fetal abnormality."

"We have to approach these issues with compassion," said DeSantis, though there have been reports in Florida of women who have not been able to obtain abortions under the exception because their doctors, facing steep penalties if they are wrong, were unwilling to perform the procedure. The window of time for women to make the wrenching choice is also limited.

Haley also spoke of compassion and suggested Texas' medical board review the case. But she notably did not call for the law to be changed.

"You know I'm pro-life. I welcome the states that have become pro-life. But this is exactly why I've said you have to show compassion and humanize the situation," said Haley, who signed abortion restrictions after about 20 weeks into law as South Carolina governor in 2016. "We don't want any women to sit there and deal with a rare situation and have to deliver a baby in that sort of circumstance, any more than we want women getting an abortion at 37, 38, 39 weeks" — a rare occurrence generally due to grave medical complications.

President Joe Biden has called the Texas ruling "simply outrageous" and said what happened to Cox "should never happen in America, period."

Many Republican lawmakers, meanwhile, have been reluctant to stake out clear positions on what restrictions they support, including bans on abortion even when doctors determine a pregnancy is not viable and a baby will not survive outside the womb.

Much of that reluctance may be due to public sentiment, which favors abortion rights. An Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll this past summer found that about two-thirds of Americans said abortion should generally be legal.

US grants permission for new kind of nuclear reactor

Bloomberg

For the first time in more than 50 years the United States granted permission for a new type of nuclear reactor, a sign regulators are becoming more open to different approaches to producing power from splitting the atom.

California startup Kairos Power LLC received a construction permit from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission to build its Hermes demonstration reactor in Tennessee. While commercial reactors in use today are cooled by water, the Kairos technology uses molten fluoride salt as a coolant.

There's growing global interest in accelerating deployment of nuclear power as a key part of the fight to rein in climate change, but that effort has been hampered by a regulatory process that has been slow to approve new designs.

"It's possible to license things that are different with the NRC," Mike Laufer, Kairos's chief executive officer, said in an interview Wednesday. The regulatory process "doesn't have to be a roadblock."

Kairos is among many companies seeking to commercialize designs that can be built in factories and installed on site, an approach that's expected to be faster and cheaper than the large conventional reactors widely used today.

Kairos plans to begin construction next year on its $100 million project and expects the system to be complete by the end of 2026. The goal is to demonstrate the viability of its design and the molten salt technology. Molten salts remain liquid at high temperatures and low pressure, a potential safety advantage over water-cooled systems. Laufer said the last time the NRC approved a design that wasn't water-cooled was in 1968.

Hermes won't generate electricity but is expected to pave the way for the Hermes 2 project, which would use two of the same reactors to produce a combined total of about 28 megawatts of electricity.

The company's long-term goal is a commercial project that would use two larger reactors and would have more than 100 megawatts of capacity, though Laufer said it's too soon to say when Kairos may be able to pursue efforts beyond the initial Hermes plant.

WHERE HEROES WORK

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WORLD

EU to open membership negotiations with Ukraine

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — The European Union decided Thursday to open accession negotiations with Ukraine, a stunning reversal for a country at war that had struggled to find the necessary backing for its membership aspirations and long faced obstinate opposition from Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

European Council President Charles Michel, who was chairing a Brussels summit of the EU's 27 leaders where the decision was made, called it "a clear signal of hope for their people and our continent."

Although the process between opening negotiations and Ukraine finally becoming a member could take many years, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy welcomed the agreement as "a victory for Ukraine. A victory for all of Europe."

"History is made by those who don't get tired of fighting for freedom," Zelenskyy said.

Orban said his opposition remained steadfast, but, with a unanimous decision required, he decided to let his right to oppose lapse because the 26 others were arguing so strongly in favor. An abstention from him was not enough to stop the decision from being adopted.

An EU official, who asked not to be identified because the summit negotiations were private, said Orban was "momentarily absent from the room in a pre-agreed and constructive manner" when the decision was made.

"Hungary's perspective is clear: Ukraine is not ready for us to begin negotiations on its EU membership. It's a completely illogical, irrational and improper decision" Hungary's prime minister said.

Orban said he stepped aside since all of his counterparts were committed to putting Ukraine on the EU membership path.

"Hungary doesn't want to share in this bad decision, which is why Hungary abstained from today's decision," Orban said.

US Army leaders meet with Zelenskyy in Wiesbaden

By John Vandiver
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy made an unannounced stop at the U.S. Army's headquarters in Germany on Thursday, where he and top American commanders discussed continued support for Ukraine as it fights Russia.

The Zelenskyy meeting in Wiesbaden came after talks earlier in the week in Washington, where he urged Congress to continue providing military aid.

"We critically need it for the victory," Zelenskyy said in a statement after his meetings in Wiesbaden. "We expect that the U.S. Congress will soon adopt the crucial decision to continue such vital support for Ukraine."

The U.S.'s top military commanders in Europe were on hand for the talks, including U.S. European Command's Gen. Christopher Cavoli, who also serves as NATO supreme allied commander.

U.S. Army Europe and Africa boss Gen. Darryl Williams and Lt. Gen. Antonio Aguto Jr., who heads up the military's Ukraine assistance program, also attended.

EUCOM said Cavoli and Zelenskyy discussed continued U.S. support to meet Ukraine's "most urgent requirements," including provisions in the most recent allotment of aid announced by the White House on Tuesday.

They also discussed ongoing training provided to Ukrainian forces by U.S. service members and their international partners.

The Army's headquarters in Wiesbaden is the main hub for the military's effort to coordinate aid for Ukraine. Representatives from numerous countries work out of USAREUR-AF's headquarters.

The gathering in Wiesbaden comes at a turning point in Ukraine's war against Russia, which is now a virtual stalemate. After Ukraine's counteroffensive this year failed to produce substantial gains, concerns are growing about the country's strategy and its ability to push Russian forces out of entrenched positions. Ukraine also is facing a manpower problem after nearly two years of fighting.

Those concerns are compounded by uncertainty over future American support. With Congress locked in a funding dispute, the Pentagon is running out of resources to keep the weapons flowing into Ukraine.

President Joe Biden on Tuesday pledged that he would "not walk away from Ukraine."

But without a budget deal, Ukraine's war prospects are grim, Biden acknowledged.

"Congress needs to pass funding before [its] break for recess," Biden said. "Before they give Putin the greatest Christmas gift they can possibly give him."

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WEEKEND

What makes Mariah's holiday hit timeless

Music, Pages 30-31

Timothée Chalamet stars in "Wonka."

ERIC CHARBONNEAU, GETTY IMAGES/Warner Bros.

Tapping into pure imagination

Timothée Chalamet leads the way in 'Wonka,' chocolatier's colorful origin story

Movies, Pages 16-17

Video games — 15 Travel & Food — 20-24 Lifestyle — 27-29 Health — 32 Crossword — 34

WEEKEND: GADGETS & TECHNOLOGY

Control your viewing destiny

If Netflix won't stop suggesting certain content, you can fix it

BY SHIRA OVIDE
The Washington Post

Maybe you're trying to be cool, but Netflix keeps recommending that you watch "NCIS." What if you're a Grinch, but Prime Video steers you to cheesy Christmas movies? Or your one-week YouTube obsession with cliff diving now means you can't escape those daredevil videos every time you open the app.

Good news: Buried in those three popular video services are do-over buttons to reduce the likelihood of seeing entertainment recommendations you don't want. They're not foolproof, but these features are a chance at a fresh start. Instructions are listed below to reset the automated recommendations in Netflix, YouTube and Amazon Prime Video. That's not an option for Hulu, Disney+, Max (formerly HBO Max) or Peacock.

Many of the online spots where we hang out rely on automated suggestions, including our web searches, social media feeds, Amazon shopping and the videos you see on TikTok, YouTube, Netflix and more. Streaming video recommendations are another example of the glories and the frustrations of having our choices steered by computers. Those recommendations help you sort through zillions of options. They can also seem manipulative or maddeningly clueless about what you really want.

Netflix, YouTube and Prime Video deserve a thumbs-up for giving us a measure of control over their recommendation algorithms. To the other services: Get with it.

iStock

While your viewing history and your ratings are the biggest factors in what Netflix recommends to you, recommendations are also influenced by the programs you add to your My List, the trailers you watch and reminders you set for upcoming releases.

Netflix

The most direct step for a fresh start on recommendations is to delete all or part of Netflix's history of what you've watched. Log into your account from the web.

■ From the upper right corner of the screen, use the drop-down menu to click Account. Under the section for Profile & Parental Controls, select the profile you want to change and scroll to Viewing activity. Click "View."

■ You'll see a list of every single thing you've watched on Netflix. (I found this list slightly embarrassing.)

■ You can click the circle with the slash through it to hide a particular program from your viewing history. Or scroll to the bottom of the page and click "hide all," which wipes the record of everything you've watched.

Whatever you hid won't be used to suggest more videos to you.

If you want to further tinker with your recommendations, you can also rate shows that you've loved with a double Thumbs Up icon or a Thumbs Down for what you don't like.

Netflix said your viewing history and your ratings are the biggest factors in what Netflix recommends to you.

Recommendations are also influenced by the programs you add to your My List, the trailers you watch and reminders you set for upcoming releases.

If your kids' or spouse's viewing habits are ruining your Netflix home screen, don't forget to set up profiles for everyone who watches.

YouTube

From YouTube's smartphone app, tap "You" in the lower right corner. On the next screen, tap the settings icon that looks like a gear in the upper right corner. Tap on "Manage all history."

You'll see two options:

■ You can delete individual videos from your history, which is one factor in what YouTube automatically recommends you watch. You can also delete everything from your history or only what you watched on a particular day or another period of time.

■ You can also turn off YouTube history entirely. YouTube won't recommend videos based on what you've seen before. I found YouTube less useful when I turned off this setting.

YouTube has other options to tweak your video recommendations. The company also said that if you watch and click "like" on what you do like, YouTube's computers will take the hint.

Prime Video

From a web browser, hover your mouse over your profile in the upper right corner. Select Account & Settings.

From the horizontal list of options, pick Watch history. You can delete individual movies or shows from your history.

Also when Amazon shows you the array of videos that it recommends, you can choose to "hide" a video. That's another signal to Amazon's computers that you don't want to be recommended that video or something like it.

Hulu, Disney+, Max and Peacock

Sorry, these four do not seem to offer a straightforward option to reset their video recommendations.

They belong on the naughty list. Peacock, I am NEVER going to watch "Yellowstone," no matter how many times it's in my "For You" list.

Hulu does at least give you the option to "like" or "dislike" videos, which presumably influences what else is recommended to you.

GADGETS

Zagg's Pro Stylus 2 makes using iPads more efficient

BY GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service

As an iPad user for years, I've always let my finger do the swiping, even if using a stylus pencil was an option. Zagg has changed that for me with their new Pro Stylus 2, a cutting-edge device that makes using a large touch screen much more efficient.

Granted, if you have never used a stylus, it will take some getting used to, but not more than a few hours. Since I was reviewing this, I had to force myself to get used to the style, feel and functionality. I referred to Google for some tips on making the adjustment, which included getting used to the correct hand position for better sensitivity and comfort.

Once I did that, I was hooked. My iPad Pro (11-inch, 4th generation) even has a slot on the side where the Pro Stylus 2 fits perfectly. I used the new stylus for all my morning basics: reading sports, news, stocks and calendar appointments. The stylus also takes photo and drawing programs to a whole new level. The stylus also makes it even easier to manipulate click boxes, which I often have to pinch and pull with my finger to increase their size.

A battery inside the Pro Stylus 2 charges wirelessly with the included charger for about 6½ hours of use. It will also work with your Qi wireless charger. Other features include pen-click power on: Just push on the round end, and it turns on; after being idle for 15 minutes, it turns off to save battery power.

Tilt recognition lets you vary the width of your stroke, and palm recognition allows the stylus to keep working even if your palm touches the screen. Figuring this out was a vital part of my stylus learning curve. A spare tip is included.

According to Zagg, the Pro Stylus 2 is compatible with apps supported by the Apple Pencil and with all iPad models since 2018.

Online: Zagg.com; $79.99, in color choices of gray, yellow, white, blue and pink

ZAGG/TNS

The Pro Stylus 2 charges wirelessly with the included charger for about 6½ hours of use. It will also work with your Qi wireless charger.

WEEKEND: VIDEO GAMES

Persona 5 Tactica is a turn-based strategy game.
ATLUS/TNS

P-Studio gives Persona 5 another turn

Latest release, Tactica, successfully adapts beloved series gameplay to strategy genre, but struggles narratively

BY GIESON CACHO
The Mercury News

Japan releases plenty of role-playing games, but few have the staying power of Persona 5. Although this entry to the long-running series is 7 years old, fans can't get enough of Joker and the other Phantom Thieves. The title has spawned several spinoffs including several anime series, a rhythm game and an action RPG.

Now, some of the original developers from P-Studio are adapting the gameplay to a new genre. As the name implies, Persona 5 Tactica takes the characters and elements and meshes them into a turn-based strategy game. It's more like Fire Emblem or Mario + Rabbids than a conventional Japanese RPG.

In this entry, Joker and the Phantom Thieves find themselves unexpectedly transported to a mysterious kingdom that appears straight out of 18th-century France. It's ruled by a maniacal dictator named Marie, who charms Joker's friends and turns them into her loyal minions. Just as Joker is about to suffer the same fate, a freedom fighter named Erina rescues him and Morgana.

The first few missions teach players the basics. Tactica allows players to control teams of three. Squad members have to outmaneuver enemies, take cover and use their combat abilities to summon Persona, as well as fire ranged weapons and physically assault up close. As in similar titles, it's about attacking without leaving openings.

Teaching strategy

P-Studio does a good job of introducing the foundation and layering in more complex systems. About halfway through the more than 60 missions, players will have most of the mechanics down. The key to winning battles is to knock down enemies, leaving them vulnerable, which unlocks the Triple Threat all-out attack, allowing all squadmates to combine their attack powers to eliminate them. The rub is that it's only effective in a triangular area bounded by the party members and the downed foe.

That means positioning is even more important to success. It allows a squad to efficiently eliminate foes. Knocking down adversaries also grants a Phantom Thief an additional move during the turn, allowing the character to cause more havoc or set up another move. If players see no opportunity to attack, they can also wait their turn, which charges their abilities for the next turn.

The gameplay can overwhelm novices to this style of strategy game, but Tactica offers side quests that do a great job of hammering home critical lessons and showing them the potential for each move. They teach players how to set up turns so that one character can deal with several enemies in one go. Players will also learn the Follow-Up technique, which activates if a teammate from a higher elevation knocks a foe to the ground. That triggers another teammate to shoot the enemy as it falls, dealing more damage.

Character building and progression

The other half of Tactica is leveling up the heroes, and that requires the titular entities. Because this world works differently from the Metaverses they're used to, the Phantom Thieves find that they can only call upon one Persona, but they can equip Sub-Personas that boost stats and have unique abilities and properties. The strength of the Persona is limited by the collective level of the group. It essentially acts as a way to stop players from equipping powerful entities to breeze through the campaign.

Players will begin with weak Personas and they'll have to fuse them together to create more powerful entities. They earn more Personas as they complete missions. Part of the time-consuming fun is figuring out the best combinations to fuse. If done right, they accentuate a Phantom Thief's role in the squad while also providing valuable bonuses so they can finish a difficult mission or quest.

Not only can Personas be summoned and used as equipment, but they can also be added to weapons. They're key to obtaining some of the more powerful ranged weapons in the campaign.

A quick pace bogged down

Players will need all these advantages because Tactica can be challenging on higher difficulties. Seasoned strategy veterans won't have problems and they'll appreciate the quick pace of the missions.

Most won't drag on beyond 17 turns, and the map design offers enough complexities, especially in the later kingdoms, forcing players to try new strategies and characters. Players will encounter levels with multiple doors and switches, strict time limits or other scenarios that will cause them to rethink their approach. (Tactica is great because it lets players easily re-spec their characters, letting them experiment with different builds.)

The only thing that slows the campaign's brisk pace is the actual storytelling. The missions are a blast, but the narrative between them isn't as dynamic. It builds a compelling mystery as players delve into why the kingdoms are so different from the Metaverse palaces of the original. The spotlight focuses on Toshiro Kasukabe, a missing member of Japan's Legislature, who comes off as arrogant and weak. As players dig into his history, he becomes a more complex character.

However, P-Studio interjects too many other characters who bog down the plot points with excessive dialogue. Tactica continues the story of the Phantom Thieves, but because they're established and don't change much, they aren't the interesting parts of the campaign. This spinoff is more about Toshiro and the freedom fighter Erina. If the campaign had focused more on them, it would have been a better experience.

Platforms: Xbox Series X and Series S, Xbox One, PlayStation 5, PlayStation 4, PC, Nintendo Switch

Online: persona.atlus.com/p5t

WEEKEND: MOVIES

WARNER BROS. PICTURES/AP

Timothée Chalamet, left, and Hugh Grant star as Willy Wonka and an Oompa-Loompa, respectively, in "Wonka," the story of the chocolatier before Charlie or the chocolate factory.

Dahl 'the mothership' of family movies

'Wonka' director, actors discuss how author's works set the template they relied on to inject heart, humor into their film

By Lindsey Bahr
Associated Press

Hugh Grant learned some years ago that if a filmmaker doesn't make something from the heart, it shows. The films that work best and are most loved, he's found, are the ones that the directors really meant.

It applied to his romantic comedies with Richard Curtis as well as "Paddington 2." And he's pretty sure it's true of "Wonka." The lavish big screen musical about a young Willy Wonka — before Charlie, before the chocolate factory — dances into theaters this weekend with its heart on its velvet sleeve.

Like the "Paddington" movies, "Wonka" was dreamt up by Paul King, a lifetime Roald Dahl fan and a writer and director whom his collaborators somewhat universally agree may actually be Paddington in a human costume. With a beloved troupe of actors, including Grant, Timothée Chalamet, Olivia Colman, Sally Hawkins, Rowan Atkinson, Keegan-Michael Key, Natasha Rothwell and Paterson Joseph as well as newcomer Calah Lane, its vibrant costumes and sets and a contagious "let's put on a show" energy, "Wonka" feels like a modern homage to classic MGM productions of the 1940s.

King wasn't so sure about "Wonka" at first. No one was, except for hitmaker producer David Heyman, whose credits include "Harry Potter," "Paddington" and the biggest film of the year, "Barbie." King worried that like so many other "brands," a young Willy Wonka movie was something devised in a boardroom with visions of "12,000 movies and a TV show."

Then he went back to the book, which he'd read so many times as a child that the pages fell out of the spine. This time he found not just a great character in Wonka, an unapologetically flamboyant dreamer whom Dahl also seemed a bit obsessed with, but also a breakthrough about his work.

"I realized how informative Dahl had been to everything that I love about family movies. They've got these great heightened characters, but there's a real beating heart to them," King said. "It was like, oh this is the mothership."

> **"The message of Paddington and the message of this one, you know, family matters, the people you share your chocolate with. It's not a trite, tacked-on motto. It comes from his heart."**
>
> **actor Hugh Grant**
>
> an Oompa-Loompa in "Wonka"

And, with his "Paddington 2" co-writer Simon Farnaby (of "stop that stunning sister" fame), he would spend years toiling over what they're calling a companion piece to the Gene Wilder "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory."

Chalamet, the wildly popular Oscar-nominated actor of "Call Me By Your Name" and "Dune," wasn't technically a song and dance man (though his digital footprint from his teen years contains some evidence to the contrary), when he signed on to play Wonka. But King was convinced that he was the perfect person to balance "sincere" and "ridiculous" thanks in part to his memorable (and "hella-tight") performance in Greta Gerwig's "Lady Bird."

This was a little baffling to Chalamet, who only learned this at the premiere in London. But for him, "Wonka" was a chance to do something a bit different, on a grand scale. He also understands audiences being a little skeptical of any spinoff of a beloved character, but he takes comfort in something Gerwig said while they were making "Little Women."

He recalled her telling him "something like, 'For anybody that's saying that a lot of versions of this have been made, you know, when it's done well, no one complains,'" he said. "I think Paul really did that here."

Plus, in "Wonka," he'd get the bonus of the "classic thespian challenge" of singing and dancing.

"It's not necessarily what is in vogue as far as like behavioral acting and very natural storytelling, but when done right, it's very joyful to do," Chalamet said. "And as an audience member is very generous to receive."

In addition to "Pure Imagination" and the Oompa Loompa song from the 1971 film, Neil Hannon, front man of The Divine Comedy, wrote six original songs, while Christopher Gatelli ("Hail, Caesar!") oversaw the choreography.

Though Chalamet grew up surrounded by dancers (his sister, mother and grandmother included), and had done musicals at his performing arts high school, he didn't fully appreciate the exhaustive rigor of it. He'd also staged big battle sequences, in the sand in "Dune" and wearing chain mail armor in the mud in "The King," and trained for "Wonka" for months, but he was still not fully prepared for how taxing "take 13" of a large-scale dance number would be.

"He's very modest and I think that's one of the nice things about him," said King, who has compared Chalamet's singing voice to Bing Crosby's. "I think he's just fantastic in the film."

Chalamet's co-stars were in awe of how he was able to be both committed to his craft and fun to work with.

"It's hard to make fun of him," said Key, who plays the chief of police. "He was a good leader for being, as we like to say in the business, No. 1 on the call sheet ... there's a lot of responsibility."

Colman agreed, adding that if that person is "obnoxious or difficult to work with, everyone's unhappy."

On "Wonka," however, "everyone was deliriously happy ... because he appreciated what everyone did, knew everyone's

SEE WONKA ON PAGE 17

Wonka: Actors Grant, Chalamet helped bring filmmaker's vision to life

FROM PAGE 16

names, was always there on time, knew his words and was kind," said Colman, who plays the scheming Mrs. Scrubbit. "I felt sort of useless in his presence because I'm quite bumbly and quite badly behaved on set."

The sets, overseen by production designer Nathan Crowley ("Interstellar") were also something grand to behold. King wanted the city to look like "the best of Europe." In total, they built more than 50 sets across three soundstages, a back lot and an aircraft hangar around Warner Bros. Studios Leavesden, in addition to several on-site locations in the United Kingdom, to give the film its whimsical but grounded feel. Lindy Hemming ("Paddington") designed the vibrant costumes.

"It was like being given the best train set in the world to play with," King said.

Perhaps the most inspired twist of "Wonka" is Grant, an actor made world famous for his good looks and charm and romantic leads, who is playing an Oompa-Loompa.

King had already introduced Grant to a new generation of youngsters having him as the washed-up actor Phoenix Buchanan in "Paddington 2." When he was rereading "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," he found "Hugh's voice" coming into his head for the devious little workers.

"They're so biting and satirical and funny, but they've got a real kind of edge to them ... and they take an enormous delight in these children's demise," King said. "I had this vision of Hugh Grant, you know, this high with orange skin and green hair. And once you have that picture come into your mind, you have to try and get it out there."

In recent years, Grant has traded his romantic lead persona for more eccentric character roles. He's in what he calls the "freak show stage" of his career.

"That's all I can get," he said.

Grant is also a self-proclaimed miserable curmudgeon, which he'll say with a straight face right before saying something completely contradictory. In his interviews, which often go viral, he's witty and wry and reliably unreliable.

Whether he does in fact think "The Merry Wives of Windsor" is a terrible play, if he really likes to spread misery on every set he's on, or if his family actually wants him to give up acting because it makes him too grumpy are truths that only he knows. Some are obvious jokes; others you'd hesitate to dismiss wholly.

Yet when he talks about King, and "Wonka," and it all being from the heart, something melts away.

"One of the things that made those romantic comedies that I made with Richard Curtis work, apart from the fact that he's very good at writing comedy, was that he meant it. He really cared about love and he was always falling in love, falling out of love and being traumatized by it. But he meant it," Grant said. "Paul King means all this. The message of Paddington and the message of this one, you know, family matters, the people you share your chocolate with. It's not a trite, tacked-on motto. It comes from his heart."

And it's easy to believe that Grant, miserable though he may be, actually means it, too.

WARNER BROS. PICTURES/AP

"Wonka" director Paul King considered Timothée Chalamet, above in the titular role, the perfect person to balance "sincere" and "ridiculous," thanks in part to his performance in "Lady Bird."

WARNER BROS. PICTURES/AP

Calah Lane, left, plays Noodle, and Timothée Chalamet, right, plays a young Willy Wonka in "Wonka." Both are trapped in disastrous contracts at the local lodging house.

A sweet, cinematic treat

Chalamet puts mark on 'Wonka' in delightful origin story that also explores themes of class consciousness, the redistribution of wealth

BY KATIE WALSH
Tribune News Service

"Wonka," the new musical origin story of everyone's favorite mischievous chocolatier, is a lot like the creative confections our protagonist conjures — we don't need chocolate, but how can we resist such a tantalizing treat? It's the same quandary with this movie: We never needed a musical origin story of Willy Wonka, but how can we resist this whimsical and wonderful tale crafted by "Paddington" and "Paddington 2" auteur Paul King and starring Timothée Chalamet? Don't even try to resist; just enjoy the indulgence.

Working with "Paddington 2" writer Simon Farnaby, King puts his own stamp on the lore of Wonka, much in the same way that Tim Burton applied his sensibility to his own "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" in 2005, with Johnny Depp in the Wonka role.

That performance was a departure from the representation of Wonka with which we are most familiar — Gene Wilder in the 1971 movie "Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory," directed by Mel Stuart, adapted from the beloved Roald Dahl novel. And Chalamet delivers his own version of Wonka here as well.

Chalamet's Wonka is innocent and deeply earnest. He is mischievous, like Depp and Wilder's depictions, but while Depp's Wonka was quirky and fey, and Wilder's was sly and somewhat sarcastic, Chalamet's Wonka doesn't have an ounce of guile. His guard isn't up yet when he lands in an unnamed European city, which is seemingly equal parts London, Paris and Geneva, or maybe even Brussels.

Willy Wonka arrives singing, an announcement that this is, in fact, a straight-faced movie musical. The songs are by Neil Hannon, though none quite reach the heights of "Pure Imagination," the song sung by Wilder in the 1971 film, which we wait and wait for Chalamet to sing (don't worry, he does).

He dreams of making his fortune as a chocolatier in the Galeries Gourmet, delighting patrons with creative concoctions that have wild side effects.

But a cartel of candymen have throttled the competition in the Galeries Gourmet, where they bribe law enforcement with treats to keep Wonka from operating, and control the flow of chocolate in the city.

He's also trapped in a disastrous contract at the local lodging house, run by a Mrs. Scrubbit (Olivia Colman), whose predatory terms and conditions on her loans result in her guests becoming indentured servants in the laundry, including Wonka, and an adorable poppet named Noodle (Calah Lane).

For all the colorful, silly and witty characters, and though Willy doesn't seem to possess a mean bone in his body (yet), there is a streak of darkness that winds through this river of fun. We can giggle at the chocolate cartel, but fundamentally this is a story about the haves and the have-nots, the consequences of hoarding resources and structural social inequalities.

As Noodle likes to say, "the greedy beat the needy," and thus, "Wonka" becomes a film about class consciousness and the redistribution of wealth. The unspoken tragedy of it all is that we know that sometime in the future, Wonka will become a reclusive hoarder himself.

There's a distinctly British sensibility to the humor (King and Farnaby come from the U.K. comedy scene), and they include comics like Tom Davis as Scrubbit's oafish paramour Bleacher, and pay homage to the long lineage of U.K. comedy with a role for Rowan Atkinson, aka Mr. Bean.

It's wordy, funny and arch, set against a visually dense Technicolor world. The costumes and sets are so beautifully made, it's a bit of a shame when the film over relies on computer-generated effects and stunts, including Hugh Grant as the Oompa-Loompa Lofty, even if his performance is winning.

Though there may have been skepticism about "Wonka," there's no need to worry about this origin tale in the hands of King and Chalamet, who gives himself over fully to the wonder and magic of this role, putting his own mark on the iconic Wonka.

Go ahead and enjoy this delightful delicacy for what it is: a playful and heartstring-tugging take on a beloved character that's smarter than it lets on.

"Wonka" is rated PG for violence, mild language and thematic elements. Running time: 116 minutes. Now playing in select AAFES theaters.

WEEKEND: MOVIES

PEACOCK/AP

Tony Shalhoub as Adrian Monk in a scene from "Mr. Monk's Last Case: A Monk Movie." In his latest case, a billionaire is suspected of murder.

Mr. Monk is back!

Tony Shalhoub returns as everyone's favorite OCD sleuth to solve his 'Last Case' in new film now streaming on Peacock

BY MARK KENNEDY
Associated Press

Fourteen years ago, Tony Shalhoub said goodbye to one of his most beloved creations — the obsessive-compulsive private detective Adrian Monk. Monk's last TV appearance in 2009 was even called "Mr. Monk and the End."

There was talk over the years of a potential reboot and some possible scripts were floated. But Shalhoub said there wasn't enough of a compelling reason to return to his phobia-obsessed character.

Then the pandemic hit.

Monk suddenly wasn't the only germaphobe wiping down groceries, stocking up on antibacterial wipes and shuddering at the sight of crowded places.

"Monk, in a way, was the canary in the coal mine," Shalhoub tells The Associated Press. "He seemed so out of touch and so neurotic and so forth. The pandemic was the great equalizer. Everybody got to sort of see the world through Monk's eyes."

Viewers have caught up with Monk and so fans get another goodbye with the 90-minute "Mr. Monk's Last Case: A Monk Movie," now streaming on Peacock.

Shalhoub reunites on a new murder case with a millionaire as the prime suspect and original stars Ted Levine, Traylor Howard, Jason Gray-Stanford, Melora Hardin and Hector Elizondo.

Shalhoub laughs that when the rock band Eagles got back together in 1994, founding member Glenn Frey said they'd never broke up, they just took a 14-year vacation. "That's how I felt at the first table read when we all got back together again. We just kind of folded right back into it."

Monk helped the San Francisco Police Department solve crimes because his fixations enable him to observe things that others overlook. He walked away after solving his last case — the murder of his beloved wife.

When we reconnect with Monk, it is present day and he's emerged from the pandemic, having spent most of it in a full protective suit and using in-home rapid tests every 20 minutes. Outside, hand sanitizer use is booming. "Everyone is you," he is told. "They're gonna hate it," he replies.

Monk is in a moody place, no longer detecting and lonely. He wrote a memoir but burned through editors and ghost writers. His obsession with details — including nine pages about a suspect's vacuum cleaner — has prompted his publisher to scrap the book and ask for his advance back. So Monk is reevaluating his life and his career.

"When we're young, everything's in front of us. And then when we're in our middle ages, we feel more settled in the present. But then as we move beyond that, we mostly are looking backwards. We're looking behind us and we're reassessing and reevaluating," Shalhoub says. "You know, 'What have I done? What has been my footprint and my impact?' And I think that's exactly where Monk is: 'What has all this meant? What have we really accomplished?' That further perpetuates these very dark thoughts that he's having."

Shalhoub collected three Emmy Awards for his work as Monk over eight seasons. After the show ended in 2009, Shalhoub went on to earn three Tony Award nominations, winning in 2018 for "The Band's Visit," and starred in "The Marvelous Mrs. Maisel," winning another Emmy.

He suspects Monk — an unlikely hero in these Marvel days — has been embraced by legions of fans because he has flaws and insecurities, but manages to push through them.

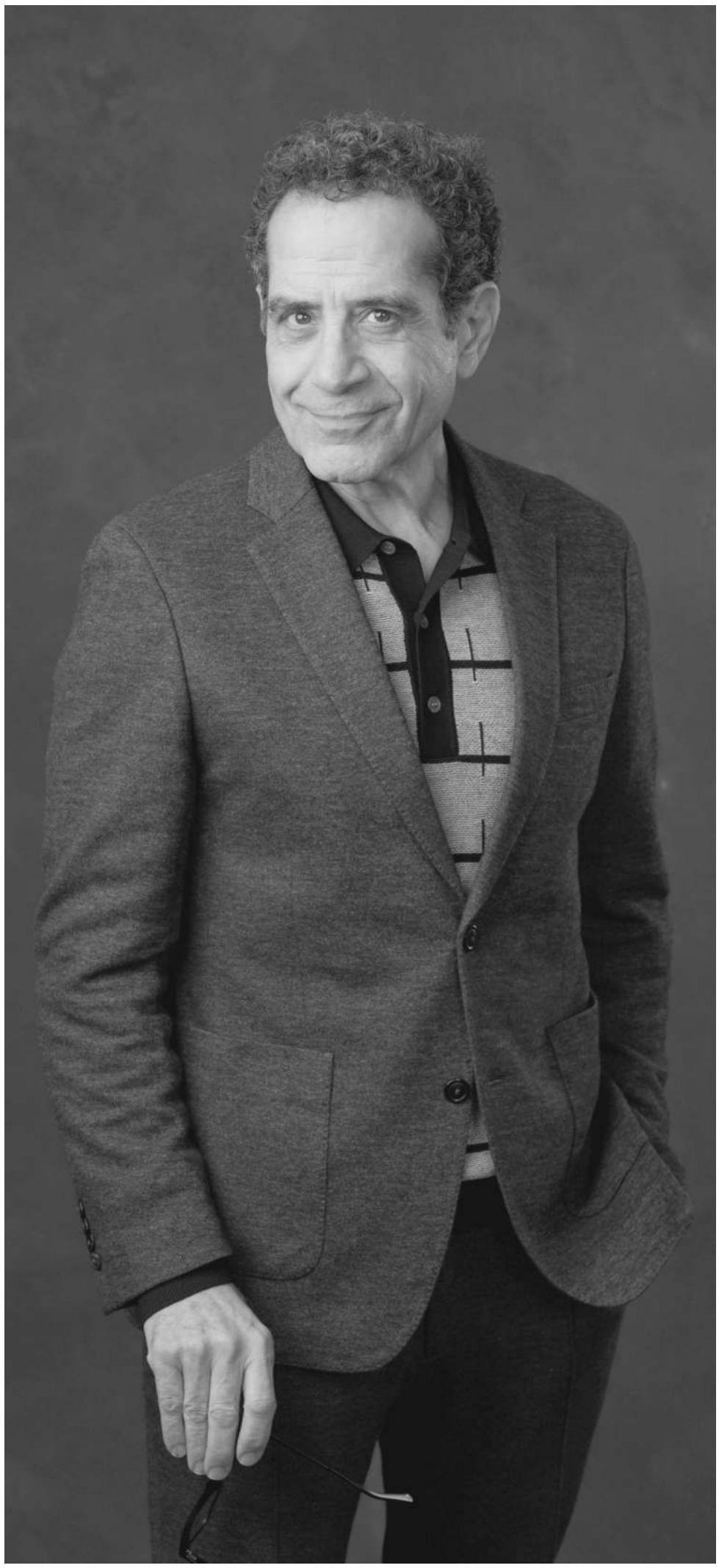
"He uses them and turns them into an asset. Actually, for Monk, they become this superpower in a way," Shalhoub says. "He doesn't know where he fits into the general society. So he's kind of always sort of like walking alongside of humanity and society. Maybe that also makes him a bit relatable."

He adds: "I always hear about adolescents and young teens relating to him, too, because that's such a time of life being feeling socially awkward and feeling you're not really a child, you're not really a grown-up."

Shalhoub also suspects there's a little OCD in all of us, whether it's being annoyed by the placement of something or an odd interaction on the street that sticks in your head. "Maybe it's a crooked picture frame on a wall. Not all of us may go over and straighten that frame, but good luck trying to keep your eyes off of it, you know?"

The debut of "Mr. Monk's Last Case: A Monk Movie" begs the question — is this really a final goodbye to Monk? Shalhoub isn't sure.

"I thought the door was closed. I really did for a lot of years. But now that we've cracked it open, I'm just going to leave that door open," he says. "I think the next one would have to be called 'Monk's Really, Really Final No Kidding Case — This Time We Mean It' or something like that."



CHRIS PIZZELLO, INVISION/AP

Tony Shalhoub says he thinks everyone has some obsessive-compulsive tendencies.

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS

More 'Monk' to love

'Last Case' on Peacock not as good as average TV episode but still a welcome return for fans of the neurotic detective

By Robert Lloyd
Los Angeles Times

Tony Shalhoub, whose credits are many and range wide, has taken his Adrian Monk (brown) suit out of mothballs after 14 years for "Mr. Monk's Last Case: A Monk Movie," now streaming on Peacock. For those new to the story, told across eight seasons of the comedy procedural "Monk," Monk was a San Francisco consulting police detective whose distinguishing characteristic was a full slate of obsessive-compulsive disorder symptoms and every sort of phobia the writers felt it convenient or funny to give him; these were exacerbated by a nervous breakdown after the murder of his wife, Trudy (Melora Hardin), which remained a mystery until the series' final episode. That alternation between the serious and the absurd was the series' stock in trade.

"Mr. Monk's Last Case" is basically just a double-length episode of the series, but with the challenge of standing alone after 14 years and providing a workable new (ish) environment for the players. (The cast has aged well.) With a screenplay from series creator Andy Breckman and direction by Randy Zisk, who helmed 35 episodes of the original series, its bona fides can hardly be questioned. Just as pure fan service, it's a welcome return. If you liked "Monk," you'll obviously want to watch it — and if you've never seen "Monk," you should watch "Monk." (The entire series is streaming on Peacock as well. It's a lot of fun.)

If I rate the movie not quite on the level of an average "Monk" episode, it's in part because the series was the product of a team working together, before and behind the camera, 16 weeks a year, with every quirk and detail studied and understood, and in part because the energy of a 45-minute basic cable episode is somewhat dissipated in this longer-than-necessary version.

On the other hand, it's funny when it wants to be. A scene in which Monk goes undercover as a bartender who can't finish making a drink makes no sense, but doesn't need to. The joke writing is on point, and physical bits in which Monk attempts to arrange the random world into a more comforting order are the soul of the show.

At the airport, arranging a stranger's bags by size: "You'll thank me later."

Stranger: "Why would I thank you? I don't even know you."

"You'll thank me for that, too."

When last we saw our obsessive detective, not counting a COVID-themed web short, "Mr. Monk Shelters in Place," in 2020, he was in a fairly good space, having solved Trudy's murder and discovered the adult daughter even she never knew she had; purpose and meaning seemed to have returned to his life. Now, supposedly as a result of the pandemic, he's relapsed into an even more depressive version of his old mopey self. I suppose a purely cheery Monk would be ... some other character.

PEACOCK/AP

Tony Shalhoub is back as detective Adrian Monk in "Mr. Monk's Last Case: A Monk Movie." The movie takes place three years after the 2020 COVID-themed short "Mr. Monk Shelters in Place" and 14 years after the TV series ended.

The wedding of Monk's late wife's daughter (Caitlin McGee) provides the pretext to get the band back together, which is, after all, why we've come. Lt. Randy Disher (Jason Gray-Stanford) has become a sheriff in southern New Jersey; Natalie Teeger (Traylor Howard), Monk's personal assistant, is selling houses in Atlanta; and Ted Levine's Capt. Leland Stottlemeyer (now retired) is working somewhere the movie holds back as a surprise, and I will too. The setting here reflects the jump from 2009 to 2023, with James Purefoy as a Bezos/Musk/Branson stand-in, who plans to be the first private citizen to orbit the Earth, but who will commit multiple murders; one of which will get Monk back on the job.

"How does it feel to be working again?" asks Monk's therapist, Dr. Neven Bell (Héctor Elizondo).

"Like riding a bicycle."

"Good, I'm glad to hear that."

"I mean it's terrifying."

"Mr. Monk's Last Case: A Monk Movie" is rated PG. Running time: 97 minutes. Now streaming on Peacock.

Jefferson's ambitious 'American Fiction' struggles with tone

By Mark Meszoros
The News-Herald, Willoughby, Ohio

"American Fiction" is two movies masquerading as one, each of which may have been strong on its own but feels underdeveloped and fails to contribute to a cohesive whole.

The debut feature from writer-director Cord Jefferson, "American Fiction" is adapted from the 2001 novel "Erasure" by Percival Everett.

At least on the screen — "American Fiction" landed in theaters last week — the story of frustrated Black novelist Thelonious "Monk" Ellison is part satirical social comedy and part sincere family drama. Although it benefits from strong work by the dependable Jeffrey Wright as Monk and gets its fair share of laughs as it skewers a media landscape that, perhaps, wants only a certain type of story from Black creators, the film frustrates more than it offers real food for thought or tugs at the heart.

In the film's trying-too-hard opening minutes, which prove to be a hint at tone issues to come, we are introduced to Monk as he's teaching a college course on Southern literature. He has written a phrase on the chalkboard that contains the N-word, which greatly disturbs a white student. He tells her that if he can get over it, so can she.

His handling of the situation doesn't impress the higher-ups at the California school, who see it as only the latest bit of concerning behavior from him. Now the once-successful Monk, who hasn't had a book published in years, is on mandatory leave.

He visits his hometown, Boston, for a literary festival, taking part in a panel that's poorly attended even by literary festival standards. Later, author Sintara Golden (Issa Rae) is being interviewed before a packed house about her new bestseller, "We's Lives in Da Ghetto." As Sintara then reads from the book, a disgusted Monk finds the work pandering to those wanting what he sees as stereotypical stories of Black misery.

His agent, Arthur (John Ortiz), tells him publishers want a "Black book," and he counters that his latest rejected book is just that — because he's Black. (In another exchange, Monk muses that he really doesn't even see race, with Arthur reminding him the problem is that everybody else does.)

MGM

Jeffrey Wright stars as author and writer Monk in Cord Jefferson's film debut, "American Fiction," based on Percival Everett's 2001 novel, "Erasure."

Fed up, he sits down and pens what he sees as a "Ghetto"-like novel, its dialogue, for which he has nothing but contempt, playing out in front of him via his imagination.

Much to Monk's surprise, "My Pafology" — shopped by Arthur as the work of an anonymous fugitive — generates great interest and a massive potential deal in the publishing world. This, too, angers him, but he certainly could use the money.

That's because once in Boston, he reconnects with his sister, Lisa (Tracee Ellis Ross, "black-ish"), who makes him aware their mother, Agnes (Leslie Uggams), is showing concerning signs of decline. Soon, it becomes clear she needs more help that can be provided to her at home by Lorraine (Myra Lucretia Taylor), the family's longtime live-in housekeeper, and, of course, moving her into a facility will come with great financial burden. Although Lisa and their brother, Cliff (Sterling K. Brown, "This Is Us"), are doctors, neither has much to contribute financially.

The thinly drawn Cliff and Monk clash consistently, the narrative using Cliff to hammer home the idea that Monk is very much like their late father, for better or worse.

More satisfying is the relationship that develops between Monk and Coraline (Erika Alexander, "Living Single"), a lawyer who lives near the family's beach house and has an appreciation for Monk's work. Their time together is "American Fiction" at its most authentic, if not its most relevant, but when Monk's behavior threatens to sink the promising romance, it, too, seems a bit too much to swallow.

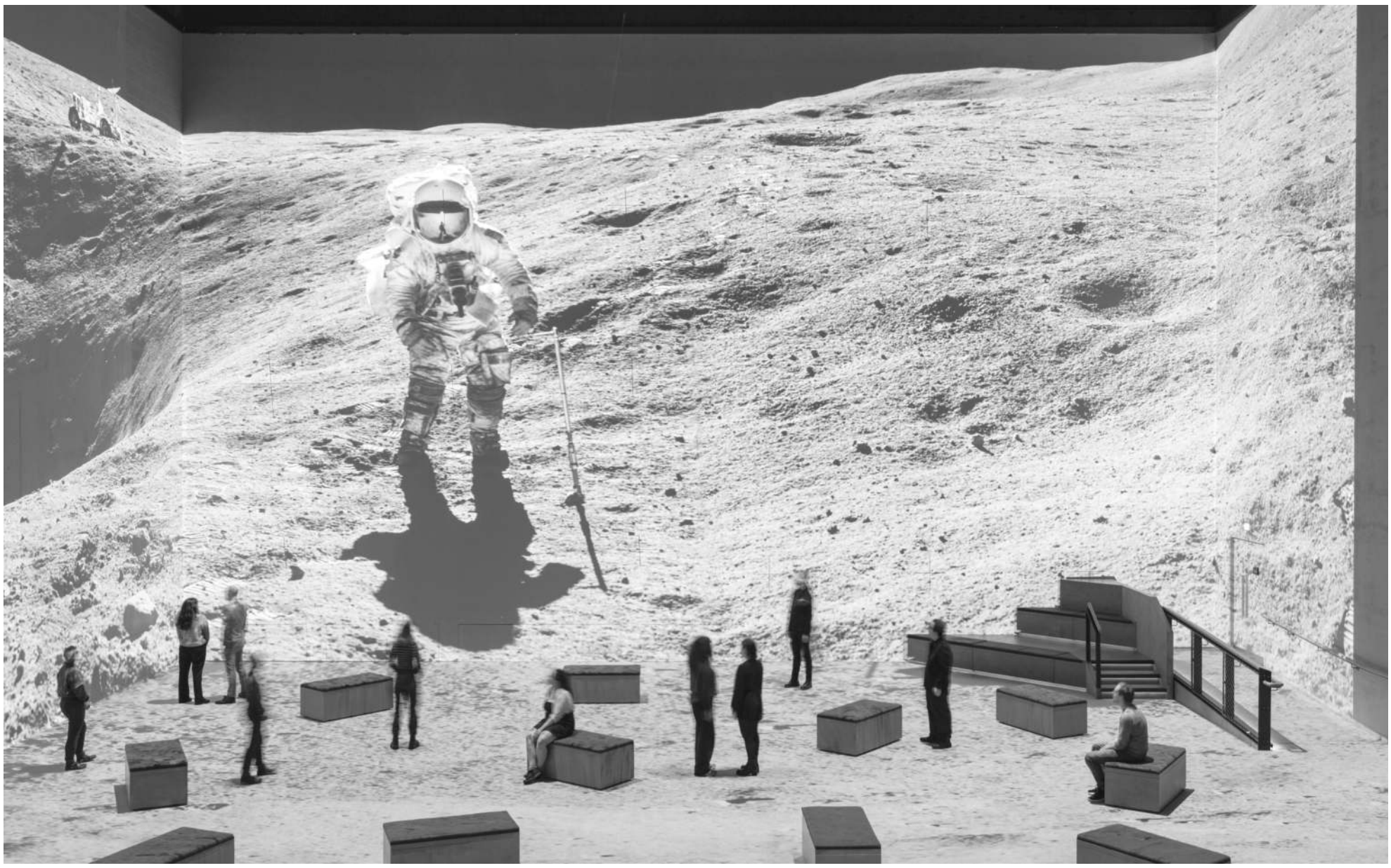
Ultimately, Monk's journey with "My Pafology" is the heart of the film, and it should have been fleshed out further. There are a few too many cheap laughs — in general, white people, such as the book publishers and some of Monk's contemporaries in the writing world, are just around to fall over themselves praising a book they don't know to be his — for "American Fiction" to have the desired impact. It is occasionally thought-provoking, however.

"American Fiction" is an ambitious first film from Jefferson, who has worked on the acclaimed TV series "Master of None," "Succession" and "Watchmen." Balancing its tones and making it all fit together seamlessly would have been tall tasks for even a much more experienced filmmaker.

And, hey, even if it didn't quite work for us, it should be noted the film this week received a nomination for the 2024 Golden Globes in the best motion picture — musical or comedy category.

"American Fiction" is rated R for language throughout, some drug use, sexual references and brief violence. Running time: 117 minutes. Now playing in theaters.

WEEKEND: MOVIES & TRAVEL



JUSTIN SUTCLIFFE/AP

Spectators attend the exhibition "The Moonwalkers: A journey with Tom Hanks" at the Lightroom in London. Hanks narrates the immersive film, which traces the missions that landed 12 people on the moon between 1969 and 1972 and details plans for future lunar exploration.

Space for Hanks to channel other passions

Actor, who narrates and co-wrote script of 'Moonwalkers' documentary, says he's been entranced since '68 Apollo 8 orbit

BY JILL LAWLESS
Associated Press

You won't see Tom Hanks on one of those space tourism flights that whisk celebrities and millionaires on a suborbital jaunt for a few hours. He says it wouldn't be enough time out of this world.

"I don't need to go up and down," Hanks said last week. "I think I'd need a little bit longer in paradise."

Going to the moon is another matter — and the subject of "The Moonwalkers," an immersive documentary co-written and narrated by Hanks.

"I'd do that in a second," Hanks said. "I don't have the math. I do not have those abilities, but I'm sure there's something I could do in order to help the program."

The two-time Academy Award-winning actor is a lifelong space buff, and he has channeled his passion into "The Moonwalkers," now playing at the Lightroom, a London venue specializing in interactive art and film experiences.

Visitors sit on benches surrounded by imagery as the 50-minute film brings NASA's Apollo space missions to life. The focus is on the 12 men who walked on the moon between 1969 and 1972, the thousands of people who helped them get there and a new generation of astronauts set to return to the moon as part of the Artemis program.

It's a high-tech blend of archive film footage, drawings, animation and digitally remastered photographs — but not, Hanks stresses, any computer-generated images.

"Every photograph, every image was a photograph taken by a human of the subject," Hanks told The Associated Press as he sat in the venue in front of a giant lunar landscape. "So there's nothing fake."

"The Moonwalkers," which runs until April 21, 2024, is subtitled "a journey with Tom Hanks." The actor narrates in his warm, avuncular style and co-wrote the script with British documentary filmmaker Christopher Riley.

The space race is presented as a deeply humanist endeavor that represents humanity's unquenchable curiosity and desire to do things — as President John F. Kennedy said of the moonshot — "not because they are easy but because they are hard."

Hanks, 67, has been enthralled by lunar exploration since he was a kid trying to simulate zero gravity by sitting at the bottom of a backyard swimming pool. His performance as Jim Lovell, commander of a space mission in jeopardy, in "Apollo 13" helped revive popular interest in the Apollo program in the 1990s.

Perhaps the signs were there early on that he'd become an actor, not an astronaut. What hooked Hanks on space was not so much the cutting-edge science as the human drama. His interest is in the people up there: "The science is cool, when you can grasp what the science is, but the science always goes hand in hand with, you know — Do they drink coffee up there? Do they have hot water? Do they need a shave?"

Hanks said the first time he was entranced by space was as a 12-year-old in 1968, seeing an image on his TV of the Earth beamed live from the Apollo 8 spacecraft orbiting the moon.

"It was a live broadcast, and you could see the cloud, you could see the gray of the ocean, you could see the darker gray of the land," he said, recalling his amazement that he was seeing "this great saga" on the same TV he used to watch "Batman" and John Wayne movies.

"I didn't view it as politics. I didn't view it as news. I viewed it as something that was like a great adventure out of Jason and the Argonauts ... a storytelling artistic achievement equal to all of the technological brilliance."

"The Moonwalkers" includes interviews with the four astronauts due to join the Artemis II mission, humanity's first foray moonward in half a century.

Reid Wiseman, Victor Glover, Christina Koch and Jeremy Hansen are due to fly NASA's Orion capsule on the first crewed Artemis mission, launching from Kennedy Space Center no earlier than late 2024. They will not land, but will fly around the moon and head back to Earth, a prelude to a lunar landing by two others a year later.

Countries including China and India also have plans to take astronauts to the moon.

Consummate team players, the Artemis crew members say they would be thrilled by the new lunar program even if they had not been selected for the mission.

"I would be just as excited to watch at home in my pajamas," said Glover, who will be NASA's first African American lunar astronaut. "It's just amazing that we're sending humans back to the moon."

Koch, the first woman to go on a moon mission, said Artemis is the start of a journey that will lead humans — some years from now — to Mars.

"I think we will go to Mars because we can answer one of the most fundamental questions that we all have there, which is, are we alone?" she said. "Everywhere I go, people ask me that question and what we think about that question. We're going to go there because our best chance of knowing the answer to that is there."

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Switzerland's urban charms

Swiss cities remind me of the guy in high school who's great at sports, has perfect hair and the best girlfriend, and whom all the teachers love. He's just too perfect. Sometimes you just want to see him trip or get a pimple. Switzerland's cities can seem too perfect, too. For many, the mountains provide more real travel thrills per mile, minute and dollar. But don't neglect the pristine urban offerings in Zürich, Luzern and Lausanne. With interesting art, colorful old towns and serene waterfront settings, these cities are worthy stops as you head for the hills.

Rick Steves

Zürich, located in the north, is the biggest city in Switzerland — and a major transportation hub.

Like most Swiss cities, Zürich embraces its resident body of water in a fun-loving way. The lakefront is a springboard for romantic walks, bike rides and cruises. A great way to glide across town is to catch the river boat, which functions like a city bus, and just enjoy the view. Its old town is lively night and day with cafés, galleries and a colorful cobbled ambiance. Touted as Europe's most "fountainous" city, Zürich has more than a thousand fun and fresh fountains, spouting water that's as good as the bottled stuff — a blessing in a country where restaurants charge for a glass of tap water.

The city's art treasure is a set of Chagall stained-glass windows, located in the Fraumünster church. Done in Chagall's inimitable painting style — deep colors, simple figures and shard-like Cubism — the five towering windows depict Bible scenes.

An hour south of Zürich, Luzern sprawls along the edge of a lake at and the foot of looming Mt. Pilatus. At its core is a charming old town paved with cobblestones, dotted with fountains and partially ringed by protective walls.

DOMINIC ARIZONA BONUCCELLI/Rick Steves' Europe

Luzern's Reuss River is spanned by the wooden Chapel Bridge, with its iconic stone water tower.

Luzern's Chapel Bridge — one of its two picture-perfect wooden bridges — was built at an angle to connect the town's medieval fortifications. Today it serves strollers rather than soldiers. More than 100 colorful paintings — many of them originals dating from the 17th century — hang under the bridge's rafters, showing scenes from Luzern and its history.

For fans of Picasso, Luzern's Rosengart Collection is a must, with several dozen black-and-white candid photographs of the artist. You'll see Picasso in the bathtub, getting a haircut, playing dress-up and horsing around with his kids. I've seen a pile of Picassos, but never have I gotten as personal with him as I did here.

If you're flying into (or out of) Geneva's airport, a good first (or last) stop is Lausanne, perched elegantly above Lake Geneva (known in French as Lac Léman).

Lausanne has two tourist zones: the idyllic waterfront area of Ouchy (pronounced "oo-shee") and the tangled and historic old town, directly uphill from the lake. Locals nicknamed their town "the San Francisco of Switzerland" for all its hills.

On the Ouchy lakefront is the top-notch Olympic Museum (Lausanne has been home to the International Olympic Committee since 1915). The museum celebrates the colorful history of the games, with a century's worth of ceremonial torches and a look at how medals have changed over the years.

One of Europe's most thought-provoking art galleries is Lausanne's Collection de l'Art Brut, presenting works produced by people "free from artistic culture and free from fashion tendencies" — many of whom were labeled (and even locked up) by society as criminally insane. Thumbnail biographies of these outsiders give insight into their unbridled creativity.

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.

Discover a superlative experience this holiday season

It's always fun to visit a place or thing that claims to be the biggest or the best in its class. With so many Christmas markets and events to choose from this month, it's only natural that event organizers should search for something superlative to say. Why not enjoy the bragging rights gained from visiting one of these places, each with its own specific claim to fame?

Nuremberg, Germany: World's largest punch bowl

Among those special words that fail to translate from their original tongue is the German term "Feuerzangenbowle." "Fire tongs punch" is the word for a red wine-based hot drink to which spice and citrus peel is added. Above the cauldron in which this concoction simmers, a rum-drenched hunk of sugar is held in place by tongs. When set alight, the alcohol-drenched sugar caramelizes and drips slowly into the cauldron, adding yet more punch to the punch. While it's possible to sample this drink at most larger markets throughout Germany, imbibing it from the world's largest vessel for such — an 11-foot-high pot holding 2,337 gallons of the brew — takes place on the edge of the Nuremberg Christmas Market. This temporary locale at "An der Fleischbrücke" is open daily through December 31. Online: nuernberger-feuerzangenbowle.de

Karen Bradbury

iStock

The famous Gubbio Christmas Tree, a display known as the biggest Christmas tree in the world, can be seen in the province of Perugia, Umbria, Italy.

London, UK: World's largest transportable rides

What began back in 2005 as a small fun fair on the edge of Hyde Park has since grown into a behemoth of a seasonal event, with markets, live shows, an ice bar, skating rink and much more. Rides also feature heavily into its offerings, including two -ests: The Munich Looping, the world's largest transportable roller coaster, and The Giant Wheel, the world's tallest transportable wheel. The coaster, which also makes an appearance at Oktoberfest, features five sky-high, breathtaking loops, while the Ferris wheel whisks its passengers 225 feet up in the air for stunning views above the city skyline. A single adult ride on the coaster costs 10 UK pounds ($12.60), whereas a turn on the wheel goes for 8-11 UK pounds, depending on the time and day of the week. Entry fees to Winter Wonderland itself range from free to 7.50 UK pounds, depending on the time of visit. Online: hydeparkwinterwonderland.com

Wiesbaden, Germany: The country's largest mobile ice rink

The green space in front of Wiesbaden's splendid Kurhaus, known as the Bowling Green, is the site of fairs, concerts, auto exhibitions and a slew of other events. Through Jan. 14, this swanky piece of real estate is home to Germany's largest mobile ice rink. Transparent glass barriers surrounding the skating surface allow spectators seated or gathered around one of the area's 10 restaurants to watch. A handful of special events, from an ice hockey training session to a visit from the Christkind, make a trip to the rink all the more special. Those who love watching figure skating will have their day on Dec. 22, when two shows, choreographed specifically to the space, will be offered.

Those without skates of their own can rent a pair on site. Tickets for a session on the ice start at 8 euros for adults and 5 euros for those under 12. Due to anticipated high demand, booking a time slot in advance wouldn't be a bad idea. Online: wiesbaden-on-ice.de/eisbahn

Gubbio, Italy: The world's biggest Christmas tree

The medieval town of Gubbio, in the region of Umbria in central Italy, is known, particularly to those of the Catholic faith, for its connection to Saint Francis of Assisi. It was here, legend holds, that he encountered and tamed a wolf. The town's position at the base of Mount Ignino lends itself well to using the mountain's slope as the canvas to what its founders refer to as the world's biggest Christmas tree.

Not really a tree at all, it's a light installation made up of more than 300 green lights in the outline of a Christmas tree. Its inner area is covered with hundreds of multi-colored lights and topped by a large star. The roots of the tree appear to rise up from the old city walls. The "tree" is illuminated nightly until Jan. 6. Online: alberodigubbio.com

Greccio, Italy: The first living nativity scene

Presepe Vivente, more commonly known as Living Nativity Scenes, refers to the staging of the scene and circumstances of Christ's humble birth in Bethlehem.

Saint Francis is thought to have staged the first living nativity scene in 1223 in the town of Greccio, using animals and local villagers dressed as shepherds and angels. Places where such reenactments can be witnessed include Matera, San Biagio, Dogliani, Villaga and Custonaci, along with Greccio.

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS

PHOTOS BY BRIAN ERICKSON/Stars and Stripes

A coat of arms adorns a fortification near the entrance to Venzone, Italy. The walled medieval town in the northeastern part of the country is a UNESCO World Heritage site.

Tested by time, temblor

The mix of historic and modern elements in Venzone, Italy, testifies to the walled medieval town's charm, strength and cultural significance

BY BRIAN ERICKSON
Stars and Stripes

The medieval walled village of Venzone lies in northeastern Italy where the southern tips of the Alps are met by the Tagliamento River, in an area known as the Canal Del Ferro.

Among other things, it's a pleasant place to walk around without the noise that accompanies more touristy areas, which are, of course, plentiful in Italy.

Strolling through the village, I noticed that some parts of the city walls were more worn than others, but the archway still stood strong. It got me thinking about how many tests these fortifications had been subjected to over the centuries.

Visitors to Venzone will likely enjoy its mix of historical pieces interspersed with modern restaurants and cafes in the town square, which surrounds a fountain built in the late 19th century.

It surprised me that there were no coins in the fountain, as we often see in America. Perhaps it's a sign of respect for the detailed carving and craftsmanship involved.

The 13th-century Cathedral of St. Andrew the Apostle features an organ that dates back to 1792. Next to the duomo sits the Chapel of San Michele, where five of the roughly 40 mummified bodies that have been found in the city over the course of centuries are displayed in the crypt.

The oldest mummy is the Hunchback, which was discovered in 1647 in a 14th century tomb located below the Chapel of the Rosary. The other mummies date back to the 18th and 19th centuries.

Just off the city center, visitors can see the remains of St. John the Baptist Church, a stark reminder of the devastating earthquake on May 6, 1976, that rocked the Friuli region and brought down most of the historic buildings in town.

Registering a magnitude of 6.5, the temblor was centered just a few miles from Venzone. It killed almost 1,000 people and created a swath of destruction in Italy and neighboring Slovenia, which at that time was part of Yugoslavia.

The quake is so important in Venzone's history that there is a museum, the Museo Tiere Motus, documenting the event and the reconstruction.

Thanks to its medieval charm and cultural significance, Venzone is a UNESCO World Heritage site. Places of interest nearby include Tolmezzo, Gemona del Friuli, Pontebba and Pofabro.

One of the major annual events in the city is the Pumpkin Festival, held on the fourth weekend of October. The event includes two days of medieval arts and crafts, street performances by musicians, jugglers and storytellers, and plenty of pumpkin dishes.

Venzone is approximately an hour drive northeast of Aviano Air Base.

erickson.brian@stripes.com
@BrianErickson_

On the QT

Address: Tourism office, Via Glizoio di Mels, 5/4, Venzone, Italy
Times: Tourism office, Tuesday through Sunday, 10 a.m.-1 p.m. and 3-6 p.m.; closed Monday. For the Earthquake Museum, 2-6 p.m. Friday; 10 a.m.-6 p.m., Saturday, Sunday and holidays. In June, July and August, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. daily.
Prices: Admission to the Earthquake Museum costs 8 euros. Viewing the Mummies of Venzone exhibit costs 2 euros.
Information: Phone: +39 0432 985034, Online: venzoneturismo.it

Brian Erickson

The 14th-century defense tower at the Porta San Genesio in Venzone, Italy, as seen Dec. 4. The gate is the only one in Venzone to survive a 1976 earthquake that leveled much of the town.

The Chapel of San Michele in Venzone, Italy. It was built in 1200 and now houses five mummies, which are available for public viewing for a fee. The chapel is next to the Cathedral of St. Andrew the Apostle.

WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING

PHOTOS BY DAVID EDWARDS/Stars and Stripes

The bottle room is one of three indoor areas at Joujou that can be specially reserved. The room is emblematic of the prominence of wine in the operations of the restaurant, which is in the famous German Wine Road city of Bad Duerkheim.

The black-and-green art deco room is the main indoor dining area at Joujou. The restaurant's name is a French word meaning toy, so it maintains a playful air as embodied in the different styles of its themed rooms.

With its vivid wallpaper menagerie, the jungle room at Joujou is a magnet for the young and the young at heart.

The decor in the sun room at Joujou is dominated by brass and gold-colored objects, and among the light sources are vegan rapeseed wax candles.

Toying with fine dining

Whimsical, gluten-free Joujou in Bad Duerkheim has fun with decor, food

BY DAVID EDWARDS
Stars and Stripes

Saying that a restaurant treats its operations as a plaything wouldn't normally inspire confidence.

But in the case of Joujou, a whimsical and all-gluten-free eatery in Bad Duerkheim, Germany, whose name means toy in French, conventional wisdom goes out the window.

The words "vollmundig, achtsam, verspielt" on the restaurant's window translate to "full-bodied, attentive, playful."

There are arts-and-crafts decorations inside such as evergreen trees made from wine corks. Themed, reserved dining areas like the sun room and the bottle room add to the amusement.

The general indoor seating area is adorned in black, green and yellow with an art deco motif. Its custom-made tiles and squiggly light fixtures pay homage to the height of 1920s style.

But with its wallpaper a riot of monkeys, birds, chameleons and flora, the jungle room was the most captivating for me.

A large, shaded terrace invites outdoor dining in warm weather. I enjoyed a satisfying lunch there in September, my only complaint being the wasp that refused to leave me and my food alone.

But for our party of four dining at Joujou in early December, insects weren't a concern. We settled in for a meal that ended up turning a foul-weather Monday into a pleasurable evening.

The pumpkin risotto with black garlic that I ordered was the talk of the table, and deservedly so. The thick rice was soused with a sauce that hinted of mustard, with sweet slices of pumpkin and optional bits of steak rounding out the dish, which I paired with a luscious blackberry limeade.

Listed on the menu as Die Verfaelschung der Renaissance, it was a masterful and innovative melding of flavors. Also, it was so filling that I had a portion to take home for later.

In retrospect, I wouldn't have added the small steak, which tasted fine but didn't warrant the extra 15 euros. Aside from that, the meal was a stellar example of gluten-free cuisine.

An American colleague who is the most Germanized of us chose Der Verspielte Herbst. It consists of king oyster mushrooms, chestnuts and red cabbage.

He too deemed his selection wunderbar and well-balanced in its flavors and ingredients. The mushrooms were meaty, and he also praised the chestnuts.

Another colleague ordered Die Ackerperle, which combines a potato-zucchini fritter with field greens and a balsamic dressing, and a berry crumble with chocolate sorbet. The name translates to "the sweet seduction."

The appetizer his girlfriend chose, Der Kreuzbluetler, had enough heft to qualify as a main course with the optional addition of breaded Rhine River catfish. Heaping helpings of cauliflower, greens, sprouts, fried onions and potato puree filled the plate, accompanied by a drizzle made of white wine and mustard.

They also partook of a bowl of the soup of the day, which turned out to be a pumpkin soup. Although the presentation looked nice, the soup needed salt.

My colleague's berry crumble dessert proved seductive enough to live up to its name. He shared a bite of the fritter and the salad with me, and I especially liked the delightfully tangy dressing.

Joujou is not just a restaurant, though. It has a bakery and a farm shop in a neighboring building, where items ranging from waffles and wine to organic fruits and vegetables are offered.

A standout at the farm shop is the fully stocked backpacks that hikers can rent for a ready-made picnic. They contain plates, cups, utensils and napkins, as well as whatever wine and food the customer adds. A map of outstanding local trails is included.

Given Joujou's location on the German Wine Road, the restaurant proudly showcases regional vintages on its lengthy wine list.

Its commitment to sustainability is evident in the use of such things as glass straws for drinks.

But even with its adherence to high quality and freshness standards, Joujou isn't tied down by any culinary concept in particular, giving the proprietors latitude to play around with the menu offerings.

In addition, it possesses a fancy-restaurant feel and aesthetics while shunning the snootiness associated with fine dining.

I was the only person at our table restricted to a gluten-free diet. Yet all of us reveled in our experience at Joujou even though the reason I chose to dine there didn't apply to the others.

And with all the reasons it's given me to keep coming back, I'm convinced that the 30-minute drive is worth it. An allergy-conscious restaurant with good food that actively encourages patrons to have a good time? Yeah, count me in for that.

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AFTER HOURS GERMANY

Joujou

Address: Hauptstrasse 34, Bad Duerkheim, Germany
Hours: Restaurant, 12-10 p.m. Monday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday; 12-6 p.m. Tuesday and Wednesday; 12-9 p.m. Sunday. Lunch served from 12 to 3 p.m. weekdays. Brunch offered the last Sunday of each month from 9:30 a.m. to noon. Bakery and farm shop, 12-6 p.m. daily.
Cost: Lunchtime menu items range from 5.90 euros to 14.90 euros, and from 5 to 8 euros for waffles and cake. On the dinnertime menu, the soup of the day costs 9.90 euros; appetizers have a base range of 11.90 euros to 13.90 euros; entrees run from 17.90 euros to 22.90 euros. Sunday brunch, 24 euros.
Information: Phone: +49 6322 7906693; Online: joujou-pfalz.de

David Edwards

Joujou's pumpkin risotto has sweet slices of pumpkin and a sauce that hints of mustard. The writer also added steak.

A summertime bowl served at Joujou consists of flank steak, glass noodles, peanuts and diverse vegetables.

Joujou's Der Verspielte Herbst, meaning the Playful Autumn, features king oyster mushrooms, chestnuts and red cabbage.

Rescued treasures on display in Taiwan

National Palace Museum holds paintings, weapons and relics spanning 8,000 years of Chinese history

BY SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

During China's Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and '70s, mobs of communist Red Guards destroyed much of their nation's cultural heritage.

However, Chinese Nationalists retreating to Taiwan in 1949 had taken with them hundreds of thousands of precious relics from Beijing's Forbidden City and other parts of China.

Jade objects, Ming vases, paintings, ancient weapons and curios spanning 8,000 years of Chinese history are on display at the National Palace Museum in Taipei.

You can browse the museum's galleries and learn about the precious objects and their place in China's rich history with the help of information panels, in English, and an audio guide.

Some quirky works of art are among the most popular items in the collection.

The Meat Shaped Stone, from the Qing dynasty, for example, was carved from jasper and dyed to resemble a succulent piece of pork marinated in soy sauce.

A jadeite cabbage, with a locust and a cicada perched on it, came from the Forbidden City's Yung-ho Palace, which was the residence of the Guangxu Emperor's (1875-1908) consort Jin, according to the museum's website.

"For this reason, some have surmised that this piece was a dowry gift for Consort Jin to symbolize her purity and offer blessings for bearing many children," the website states.

Paintings in the museum's collection show nature scenes as well as studious scholars, playful children and lively musicians.

You can check out a range of old swords and spears, including ceremonial weapons carved from jade.

The museum has a large collection of ancient Chinese kitchen accessories, including teapots, wine vessels, pans and some massive cauldrons.

One of the country's early rulers, King Wu of Qin, who reigned from 310 to 307 B.C., lost his life powerlifting a heavy bronze cauldron in a show of strength. King Wu was an avid wrestler but not renowned for his intellect.

Among the displays is a coral carving of the planetary deity Kui Xing clutching a representation of the Big Dipper.

The collection includes a planter box holding a coral carving of the planetary deity Kui Xing clutching a representation of the Big Dipper.

Legend has it that the Kui Xing was a highly educated scholar, but his ugly appearance prevented him from passing the civil service examinations, according to the museum's website. In a fit of anger and resentment, he tried to drown himself but was saved by a fish dragon, transformed into the celestial head of the Big Dipper and was put in charge of determining the outcome of examinations and career advancement.

Last year, amid efforts to safeguard Ukrainian museum treasures from Russian attacks, Taiwanese officials expressed concern that the valuable collection could be damaged if China tries to invade the island.

Taiwan's massive collection is too large to fully display, but it will take you hours to explore all the interesting things available in the museum on any given day.

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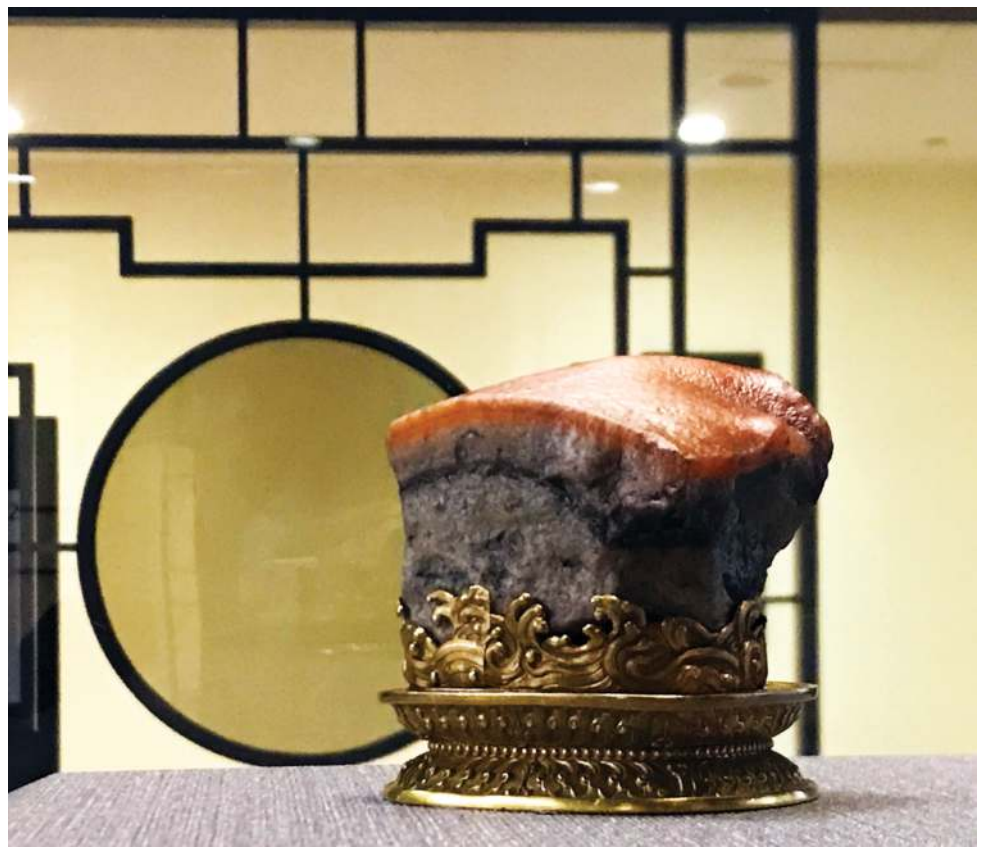

PHOTOS BY SETH ROBSON/Stars and Stripes

The Meat Shaped Stone at the National Palace Museum in Taiwan was carved from jasper and dyed to resemble a succulent piece of pork marinated in soy sauce.

A 1,000-year-old porcelain pillow is among the museum's eclectic treasures.

A bronze Northern Wei dynasty Buddha from the year 477 is displayed.

On the QT

Directions: Buses travel to the museum from the Taipei Metro's Shilin, Jiannan Road and Dazhi train stations. 222, Section 2, Zhishan Road, Shilin District, Taipei
Times: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Tuesday through Sunday; also open on national holidays.
Costs: $350 Taiwan dollars (about $11); $150 for those with an international student ID.
Information: Phone: 2-2881-2021; online: www.npm.gov.tw

Seth Robson

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WEEKEND: ENTERTAINMENT

Star-studded Tokyo Comic Con sets record

More than 85,000 came to cosplay, shop and meet celebrities

BY KELLY AGEE
Stars and Stripes

More than 85,000 people — a new attendance record for Tokyo Comic Con — flooded the three-day event this year at the Makuhari Messe Convention Center east of central Tokyo.

Organizers expected about 80,000 at the Dec. 8-10 gathering, Tokyo Comic Con president Mitsuaki Munegumi told Stars and Stripes by video call on Nov. 14. An estimated 67,000 people attended last year's event.

"It's been amazing," Lance Cpl. Emma Della Maggiora, a range control fire desk operator at Combined Arms Training Center, Camp Fuji, told Stars and Stripes at the event on Sunday. "This is the first time I've ever been to any sort of cosplaying event."

Della Maggiora, visiting from San Francisco, dressed up as Padme Amidala, a "Star Wars" character, and tracked down and talked to other "Stars Wars" cosplayers at the convention. She wore an official cosplayers badge required for attendees in costume. It cost 1,500 yen, or about $10.32, to cosplay each day of the convention.

"It feels really official, wearing this badge," she said with a smile. "I've been having the best day of my life since I was probably 6 years old."

All the celebrities opened the convention at noon Dec. 8 with greetings and a kagami-biraki ceremony, the act of opening sake barrels with a wooden mallet. Now a comic con tradition, the ceremony is meant to bring success to the event.

This year's convention featured appearances by Benedict Cumberbatch and Tom Hiddleston, who play Dr. Strange and Loki, respectively, in the "Avengers" franchise; Ewan McGregor, who portrayed a young Obi-wan Kenobi in the "Star Wars" prequels; Christopher Lloyd, Doc Brown in the "Back to the Future" trilogy; Natalia Tena, Tonks in the "Harry Potter" films; and Evangeline Lilly, Hope Pym in the "Ant-Man" movies.

"Hello, konnichiwa, thank you all for coming," McGregor said as he waved to the audience.

Attendees had opportunities for photos and autographs and to attend panel discussions with their favorite actors, who answered questions submitted by fans on official websites.

"Playing Loki changed my life," Hiddleston said during his panel Dec. 8. "The reason I have been able to play Loki for so long is because of everyone's support. Loki is a god, but also complex, playful, charming and multi-faceted; I think his appeal is that he is very human."

Another Comic Con first-timer, Petty Officer 2nd Class Vince Narvaez, said his shipmates dragged him along to the event. Narvaez, an instructor at Information Warfare Training Site Yokosuka, said he is new to Japan, and only three weeks in country.

"I'm really enjoying cosplaying," said Narvaez, from Chula Vista, Calif. "It's just the amount of effort that people put in costumes, I absolutely love. They should be costume designers or something with some of the specific costumes I've seen; it's pretty crazy."

At the convention, vendors sold anime-, TV- and movie-themed merchandise like jackets, T-shirts, keychains and towels from well-known productions like "Back to the Future," "Jaws," "E.T." and "Star Wars."

On the artist alley, guests could find autographs and custom drawings from comic book artists, including David Angelo Roman of "Rick and Morty," Arthur Suydam of "The Walking Dead" and Alex Sinclair of "The Flash."

Movie memorabilia was also a big item at the convention, including the DeLorean from "Back to the Future Part II," puppets used on "Gremlins," Marilyn Monroe's white dress from "The Seven Year Itch" and Robin's suit from the 1960s show "Batman."

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PHOTOS BY KELLY AGEE/Stars and Stripes

Marine Lance Cpl. Emma Della Maggiora copslays as Padme Amidala from "Star Wars" on Dec. 9.

Actors Tom Hiddleston and Ewan McGregor attend Tokyo Comic Con's opening ceremony Dec. 8 at the Makuhari Messe Convention Center in Chiba.

A cosplayer dresses as a Laputian Robot Trooper from Studio Ghibli's "Laputa: Castle in the Sky."

Screen-used props from the 1984 film "Gremlins" were among the movie memorabilia displayed at Tokyo Comic Con.

Writing what they know

Recent crime novels attempt to take readers behind the scenes

BY LISA LEVY
Special to The Washington Post

Aspiring writers are often told to write what they know, and what crime writers know is crime writing. Yes, others write crime: former cops, private investigators, prosecutors. But transforming real-world knowledge into fiction is not an easy or common deed. Unless it is executed very skillfully, a focus on writing in a narrative can be tremendously dull. For a rare example of how to do it well, see the eight seasons of "Castle," a TV show about a crime writer who hangs out with cops to gather material. The show works because we never reckon with Castle's writing life: Somehow, he's a bestseller who doesn't ever sit in front of his computer playing solitaire or checking his Amazon ranking.

Long before "Castle," there were 12 seasons of "Murder, She Wrote," which followed crime writer Jessica Fletcher, a sassy sleuth along the lines of Agatha Christie's Miss Marple. Fletcher lives in the charming Maine village of Cabot Cove and has a lovely study with bookshelves, a trusty typewriter and piles of paper. Yet she never writes. Instead, she maintains a demanding schedule of solving crimes in her hometown — Cabot Cove has a ridiculous crime rate for a quaint New England village — and traveling to other places, where crimes invariably occur.

The popularity of these shows proves that fans crave the inside scoop of the writing life, as do the many conventions at which authors give advice and try to charm their fan base and gain readers.

The business of crime fiction is analyzed, satirized and dramatized in recent books that take us behind the scenes of a typical gathering of crime writers.

In **"I Didn't Do It,"** by Jaime Lynn Hendricks (Scarlet, $26.95), a novice writer named Suzanne Shih is determined to break into the bestselling elite at a conference called Murderpalooza. Points to Hendricks for making Shih relatable, but not very likable. Shih pouts: "I want to be a full-blown celebrity. So many people nowadays get famous on TikTok, but I'm smart too. I wrote a sure-to-be bestseller! ... My social impressions should be going through the roof."

Murderpalooza becomes sinister when a writer named Kristin Bailey is found murdered in her hotel room. Bailey was connected to Shih, who hounded her for advice; to a washout named Mike Brooks, whose connection to Bailey is a secret that emerges after the murder; and to a Lee Child-ish hotshot, Davis Walton. These three writers are urged to join forces by an anonymous Twitter account run by someone who knows who murdered Bailey, as well as tawdry details of their lives.

"I Didn't" is burlesque compared to the moody **"I'm Not Done With You Yet,"** by Jesse Q. Sutanto (Berkley, $28). Sutanto, author of the popular Dial A for Auntie series, which is a lighthearted treatment of murder and family, has unexpectedly crafted a very dark and original thriller. The plot is another quest for writerly fame and another example of rivalry, fueled by the unrequited passion between two women who were best friends in a creative-writing program. Jane, who writes lousy novels with lousy sales, is still obsessed with Thalia Ashcroft, her rich and dazzling former friend who writes best-selling thrillers. Thalia stopped speaking to Jane after a troubling incident revealed late in the book. When Jane sees her former friend's name on the ad for a crime writers' convention, she thinks it's kismet. She must get Thalia back into her life somehow, and the convention is a convenient way to intentionally bump into her.

Val McDermid manages to stay at the top of her game in her latest, **"Past Lying"** (Atlantic Monthly, $27). Set against the dullness and dread of the early pandemic, she sends her Edinburgh detective, Karen Pirie, to investigate a deadly rivalry between two crime writers, Jake Stein and Ross McEwen. A contact at the National Archives is sorting Stein's papers when she stumbles on intriguing documents that point to a possible murder, and cold cases are Pirie's beat. McDermid moves effortlessly between scenes of a musty archive, old-fashioned shoe leather and cutting-edge technology. She captures the camaraderie of those who toil in the keyboard trenches and the never-ending competition for the spoils of literary success.

iStock

10 cheap gifts for home cooks

These small, trusty kitchen tools would make great stocking stuffers

BY BECKY KRYSTAL
The Washington Post

Holiday gifts don't have to be big or expensive to be appreciated. In fact, it's often the smaller, practical items intended for everyday use that end up having the most impact in the long run. That's certainly the case when it comes to the home cooks in your life.

If you're looking for one or two things to round out your gift bag — or a bunch of ideas to package together — we're here to help.

We gathered some of our favorite cheap kitchen tools in one place to make the decision easy. The gifts below range in price from $49.95 (for a 10-piece bowl set) down to $5 (for a peeler):

Serrated paring knife

The Victorinox serrated paring knife slices with ease through almost anything you can throw at it. It's ideal for fruit and vegetable prep, as well as dividing sandwiches in half. ($8 from Victorinox)

Glass prep bowls

Prep bowls (sometimes called pinch or finger bowls) come in a variety of sizes and are great for assembling ingredients, especially when making quick-cooking recipes such as stir-fries. Use to portion salt and pepper when dealing with raw meat, to avoid cross-contamination. ($49.95 for 10-piece set from Crate & Barrel)

Y peeler

Odds are, whatever Y peeler is in your gift recipient's drawer is old and dull. One of the main reasons for going with a Y peeler as opposed to the swivel style is the wider strips of food you can remove with the blade. We've had good luck with the Oxo Good Grips, shown here, and Kuhn Rikon Original Swiss Peeler. ($11.99 from Oxo; $5 from Kuhn Rikon)

Spoon rest

A nice wood or ceramic spoon rest adds flair and helps keep the kitchen neat. No more in-use spoons and spatulas on wadded-up paper towels, plates, the counter, the stovetop or, precariously, the edge of the pot. Some spoon rests are just big enough for the end of the spoon or spatula, but full-length versions are also an option. ($19.95 from Williams Sonoma; $32 from Pigeon Toe)

Funnel sets

Decanting can be a messy business, whether it's for dry or wet ingredients. A narrow-mouth funnel is ideal for filling spice or other small bottles; sets give you size options. Also consider metal canning funnels that can be used to fill regular- and wide-mouth jars when organizing the pantry with supplies of rice, beans and other dry goods. ($8.99 for set of three silicone funnels; $9.99 for stainless steel funnel from Fante's Kitchen Shop)

Dish towels

When you cook and clean a lot at home, it's easy to go through dish towels at a rapid clip. A large pack (24 is super) means never running out or having to do laundry all the time. Plus, they cut back on waste by standing in for paper towels. ($19.99 for 12-pack on Amazon)

Bench scrapers

Bench scrapers can do a lot — getting that last bit of dough out of the bowl or off the counter, cutting dough for square biscuits or slicing sturdy bar cookies. Use them to clean dough or flour from counters or level off dry ingredients in measuring cups. Consider a set with stainless steel and plastic scrapers that fit snugly together for compact storage. ($12.99 for 3-in-1 set from Chef'n)

Jar/mini spatulas

These slim tools are invaluable for scraping the last bits out of the jar. Depending on the size, they can also assist in mixing and sauteing, or maintaining a sourdough starter in a canning jar. ($5.99 for 4-pack on Amazon)

Reusable storage bags

Durable, sustainable food storage bags, such as Stasher's, are important to any kitchen. They keep the food visible but airtight thanks to a tight seal and can stand up to the fridge, freezer, dishwasher, microwave, oven and even sous vide cooking. And they reduce the need for disposable plastic bags. ($36.99 for 3-pack from Stasher's)

Pastry cutter/blender

A multi-bladed pastry cutter incorporates butter into flour for pie crusts, biscuits and more. Clever cooks also use it for mashing avocados for guacamole or bananas for banana bread, as well as slicing hard-cooked eggs. ($7.99 at Fante's Kitchen Shop)

PHOTOS BY SCOTT SUCHMAN/For the Washington Post

Some of the best tools in our kitchens are also some of the most affordable.

Bench scrapers can get that last bit of dough out of the bowl or off the counter, cut dough for square biscuits or slice sturdy bar cookies.

A Y peeler removes wider strips of food than a swivel peeler. Shown here, the $11.99 one from Oxo Good Grips. Kuhn Rikon sells another good one for $5.

The dark side of Christmas

Krampus, a European tradition and foil of Santa Claus, comes to some towns in US

BY MAURA JUDKIS
The Washington Post

It was time for Jennifer Stakes to decorate her home for the holidays, and she had everything she needed for her front porch in Kyle, Texas: the strands of tiny red lights, the wreath, the tree and the 6½-foot tall, animatronic, menacing horned demon. That's Krampus.

Most of her neighbors didn't know what Krampus was. Sometimes her Ring camera records the puzzled and delighted conversations of passersby who venture up to her porch for a closer look.

"I've had some people say that, 'I'm going to bring my kids by, and I'm going to tell them if they're not good, this is what's going to happen,'" says Stakes. "I'm like, okay, if that's what you want to do to your kids."

Oh, you've never heard of Krampus?

He hails from the Alpine towns of central Europe, and wears a red cloak trimmed with white fur, like Santa Claus. But underneath those robes is the body of a hairy, horned goat-like monster, with spindly, sharp fingernails and a long, creepy, Gene Simmons-esque tongue. For centuries, according to regional folklore, he's been the bad cop to Saint Nick's good cop: Jolly old Kriss Kringle doles out the presents for good boys and girls. Krampus finds the naughty ones and beats them with sticks.

In Germany, Austria, Italy and Slovakia, you'll find people dressed as Krampus parading through the streets and pretending to menace the villagers for a celebration on Dec. 5, which is known as Krampusnacht, or Krampus Night. But in recent years, you may have seen Krampus stateside, too. He's running down the streets of Los Angeles, or Chicago, or even Birmingham, Ala. Or he's on your friend's ugly Christmas sweater, or a craft beer label (a Vancouver brewery's Krampus abbey dubbel pairs well with red meat).

Or you may see Krampus in a Christmas haunted house. Maybe you didn't know those existed, either.

You'd better watch out. You'd better not cry. Because Krampus is already here.

As more Americans learn about this child-punishing folkloric figure — an antihero, of sorts — they can't get enough of him.

Krampus "helps balance the Mariah Carey and the Hallmark Channel," says Jason Swarr. "It gives us a little bit of that spooky, that fun, that mysterious, that dark side of things. And we're still celebrating the purity of Christmas."

Swarr is one of the organizers of "A Christmas to Dismember," a Mesa, Ariz., holiday horror convention for which the centerpiece is an opportunity to take Santa-style photos sitting on Krampus' lap. Hundreds of people lined up earlier this month — some in matching sweaters, hoping to use the image in their Christmas cards.

Swarr has taken some turns in the Krampus suit himself.

Occasionally, he'd get "a dad or mom who'd come up and say, 'Hey, my kid, whew, he has been horrible this year. Can you scare him?'" He would always comply. "That's when you get his name, you get what he's done bad, and the kid's like, 'Wait, how do you know this?'"

But he'd never take it too far.

"I get less tears than Santa does," Swarr says. "I promise you."

There has always been a dark undercurrent to The Most Wonderful Time of the Year. When Andy Williams sang of those "Scary ghost stories and tales of the glories of Christmases long, long ago," he wasn't just talking about the spirits that visit Ebenezer Scrooge. Krampus is just one of a whole array of Christmas bad guys in Europe with pagan origins. There's also Frau Perchta, a witch who slits the bellies of Bavarian bad kids and stuffs their corpses with straw. Or Mari Lwyd, an anthropomorphic horse skull who goes door to door terrorizing the children of Wales. Or Gryla, an Icelandic ogre who, with her fearsome Yule Cat, rounds up the naughty children and cooks them in a soup.

But unlike the rest of them, Krampus is the one who has caught on in the United States. Perhaps that's because in traditional lore, he doesn't usually kill

SEE KRAMPUS ON PAGE 29

PHOTOS BY CASSIDY ARAIZA/For The Washington Post

Krampus is the star Dec. 2 at Terror Trader's "A Christmas to Dismember" in Mesa, Ariz. The scary foil of Santa Claus is gaining popularity among Americans who want something less saccharine this time of year.

Aubrey Monserrate gets a photo taken with Krampus at "A Christmas to Dismember."

Krampus: Creature's visibility boosted by 2015 horror film

FROM PAGE 28

the kids — he just hits them. He's a disciplinarian.

Also: "He just looks cool," says Michael Garcia, who runs a Krampus-themed haunted house in Austin.

The first Krampus parades in America popped up in the early 2010s, says Cory Hutcheson, who teaches folklore studies at Middle Tennessee State University. The monster's popularity really began to ascend with the 2015 holiday horror film "Krampus," mostly panned by critics, but a cult favorite among scary movie aficionados.

Interest has grown as people celebrating Christmas look for a counterweight to all the holly jolly. In an era of climate doom and political nihilism and high-definition war beamed onto our phones, there's something about Krampus that feels more authentic.

"There have been a lot of dire things happening in the world," says Hutcheson. "So Krampus just seems like a good figure to sort of be our boogeyman during the holiday retail season."

That was partly the impetus for Grant Tatum to start a Krampus group around Birmingham, Ala., in 2021.

"The idea of sort of a sugar-coated Christmas, you know, felt like it needed something more in the wake of the pandemic," he says. "We really wanted to add some texture and depth to what that holiday experience could be."

Friends from a community theater group handmade their costumes and marched in a local holiday parade, to the befuddlement of spectators.

"The next day on one of the local neighborhood Facebook groups, there were a handful of moms that started ranting and venting a little bit about why their child was given a little bundle of switches," says Tatum. "And, 'Who were the people with horns growling at my kid?'"

Some community members who had heard of the tradition quickly came to his defense. The group marched in last year's parade, too, and this year will hold their own stand-alone event at a local brewery, with performances from folk musicians.

Not all communities have been welcoming. John Hurst works behind the scenes in Seattle-area haunted houses, and he and his friends were looking for a way to extend their Halloween fun. When he discovered Krampus, he reached out to a craftsman in Austria to purchase a traditional, hand-carved mask, and in both 2020 and 2021, he and some friends dressed up and walked around Leavenworth, a Washington town that prides itself on its Bavarian-style architecture.

But after 2021's event, a local business owner complained on social media about their presence, and in later comments, connected it to Satanism. The remarks were picked up by religious and conservative media.

Hurst's group was not invited back the following year. They moved their event to the town of Bremerton, about three hours west across the Cascade Mountains, where Krampus has been welcomed.

When Krampus crossed the pond from Europe to America, some aspects of his story were lost in translation.

A big difference with European Krampus is that he's often accompanied by St. Nicholas, who controls him with chains.

"Over here, we let them run free," says Hutcheson. (U-S-A! U-S-A!)

Americans have also expanded Krampus' powers and purpose. Instead of being "part of a complex of cultural practices that exist in really small communities in the Austrian Alps, we just kind of like him as: 'Oh, he can be the face of Scary Christmas,'" says Hutcheson.

Enter the Krampus haunted house.

When Garcia, the Austin haunted-house director, started learning about Krampus, he realized that haunted-house owners who aren't doing Christmas haunts are just leaving money on the table.

What emerged was "Krampus: The Fright Before Christmas," a three-part haunted attraction that has carried many storylines over the past few years, incorporating unrelated characters, such as Jack Frost, and inventing new ones, such as Belle, "the demon of the hall" (as in, the halls you deck).

Garcia's haunt offers a choose-your-own ending, with the option of naughty or nice. Naughty is an encounter with an especially fearsome Krampus, who has a hunchback, antlers and a mouth that resembles the Predator. Nice is a visit with Santa Claus — but he's a zombie.

"I was debating on having him holding up Krampus' chopped-off head," says Garcia.

Krampus merch has proliferated in recent years. There is Krampus liqueur, and all sorts of Krampus tchotchkes: stuffed animals, a "Krampus believes in you" mug, a Krampus nutcracker ($155!), "Merry Krampus" socks, and a wide assortment of ugly Christmas sweaters. One parody shirt advertises a "Krampus Day Care Service." You can buy an elegant Krampus ornament for $75 at Bergdorf Goodman, or a campy one for $17 at Walmart.

"I have seen a Krampus-themed sex toy," says Hutcheson. Something for everyone!

So are Americans, with their crass commercialism, appropriating Krampus? Hutcheson says that he's talked to a few people in Europe who find American Krampus distasteful.

"Maybe the whole thing is a bit exaggerated in America, but that doesn't bother us," emails Lillian Kutter, a member of the Bavarian Krampus group Oberpfälzer Schlossteufeln — which translates to "Upper Palatinate Castle Devils." The group, according to its website, has 29 active members who are available to spook your Christmas market: seven witches, six angels, 15 Krampuses and, of course, one "Upper Palatinate Santa Claus" to, you know, keep an eye on all those Krampuses.

PHOTOS BY CASSIDY ARAIZA/For The Washington Post

Paul Fisher takes a break from embodying the fearsome Krampus at "A Christmas to Dismember."

Photos with Krampus are a highlight of "A Christmas to Dismember" in Mesa, Ariz.

Kelly Cusion gets a photo with Krampus.

WEEKEND: MUSIC

AP

Mariah Carey performs at the New Year's Eve celebration in Times Square on Dec. 31, 2017, in New York. Billboard has posted a list of top seasonal hits since 2010, and Carey's "All I Want for Christmas Is You" has been No. 1 for 57 of the 62 weeks it has run, said chart director Gary Trust.

How to make a 'timeless' holiday anthem

Mariah Carey's 'All I Want for Christmas Is You' dominates season nearly 30 years on

By David Bauder
Associated Press

If anything about Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas Is You" annoys you, best to avoid shopping malls now. Or the radio. Maybe music altogether, for that matter.

Her 1994 carol dominates holiday music like nothing else.

The Christmas colossus has reached No. 1 on Billboard's Hot 100 chart the past four years in a row — measuring the most popular songs each week by airplay, sales and streaming, not just the holiday-themed — and it's reasonable to assume 2023 will be no different. One expert predicts it will soon exceed $100 million in earnings. Even its ringtone has sold millions.

"That song is just embedded in history now," says David Foster, the 16-time Grammy-winning composer and producer. "It's embedded in Christmas. When you think of Christmas right now, you think of that song."

Yet the story behind "All I Want for Christmas Is You" is not all holly and mistletoe.

The song's co-authors, Carey and Walter Afanasieff, are in a mystifying feud. The authors of a different song with the same title have sued seeking $20 million in damages. While Carey calls herself the Queen of Christmas, her bid to trademark that title failed.

Every year on Nov. 1, the song's hibernation ends when Carey posts on social media that "it's time" to play it again. This year's message depicted her being freed from a block of ice to make the declaration.

In both music and lyrics, the song was perfectly engineered for success, says Joe Bennett, musicologist and professor at the Berklee College of Music. And it came from an artist who was at the top of her game at the time.

"All I Want for Christmas Is You" works as a love and holiday song. Carey sets it up: She doesn't care about all the holiday trappings, she has one thing — one person — on her mind. She sprinkles in specific holiday references, from Santa Claus to mistletoe.

The instruments and brisk arrangement recall Phil Spector's 1965 album, "A Christmas Gift for You," itself a holiday classic. To top it off, part of the melody slyly references "White Christmas," Bennett says.

"That was my goal, to do something timeless," Carey explained in a recent "Good Morning America" interview.

Billboard has produced lists of top seasonal hits since 2010, and "All I Want for Christmas Is You" has been No. 1 for 57 of the 62 weeks it has run, said chart director Gary Trust. Will Page, Spotify's former chief economist and author of the book "Pivot," estimates the song will exceed $100 million in earnings this holiday season.

"By most objective measures," Bennett says, "it's the most successful Christmas song of all time."

As Afanasieff has told it, much of the work on "All I Want for Christmas Is You" was done by him and Carey working in a rented house in the summer of 1994. The team had a history, working on Carey's albums "Emotions" and "Music Box."

He started with a boogie-woogie piano, tossing out melodic ideas that Carey would respond to with lyrics, he said on last year's podcast, "Hot Takes & Deep Dives with Jess Rothschild" (Afanasieff did not return messages from The Associated Press). Later, Carey completed the lyrics herself and Afanasieff recorded all the instruments, he said.

Then things became complicated. Carey was married at the time to Tommy Mottola, head of Sony Music. They broke up in 1997 and her relationship with Afanasieff, who kept working for Mottola, became a casualty of that fractured marriage. Afanasieff said they've spoken once in more than 20 years, and his contributions have been written out of Carey's telling of the song's creation. On "Good Morning America" last month, she said, "I was working on it by myself so I was writing on this little Casio keyboard, writing down words and thinking about, 'What do I think about Christmas? What do I love? What do I want? What do I dream of?" she says. "And that's what started it."

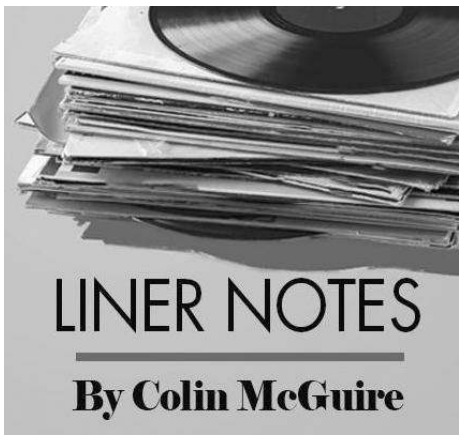
Afanasieff sounds almost bewildered by the turn of events. He told Variety in 1999 that every holiday season he has to defend himself against people who don't believe he co-wrote the song.

"Mariah has been very wonderful, positive and a force of nature," he told Variety. "She's the one that made the song a hit and she's awesome. But she defi-

SEE ANTHEM ON PAGE 31

WEEKEND: MUSIC

Women rule, AI steps up, a Sphere shines in 2023



It's the end of the year. For some, that means lists. Best album. Best song. Best ambient instrumental movement performed by spoons, three oboes and one harp. The rankings game is real this time of year and while it was once big business, it kind of/sort of feels like that bubble has deflated in its own apathetic way (along with, well, pretty much everything else once valued in popular culture).

That in mind, instead of offering up yet another best-of collection that will surely get lost within the echo chamber that dominates reading these days, I thought I'd take a quick look back at 10 things that shaped 2023 in the world of music. More than enough stories permeated their way through the noise that was the last 12 months, so let's get to some of the highlights as we prepare to ring in 2024.

Taylor's world

She's Time's person of the year. She won every award imaginable. And, for my money, she redefined the touring algorithm for those who want to work smarter and not harder as the live music landscape evolves. Saying it was anyone other than Taylor Swift's year when it comes to 2023 music is like saying The Beatles didn't define the British Invasion. The fun won't stop as the calendar turns, either — Swift isn't done bringing her Eras Tour to every corner of the world, and something tells me the "Taylor's Version" re-releases won't stop over the next 12 months. We're living in a time when one of the all-time transcendent pop stars is at her peak. Why fight it? Why be cynical? If anything, 2023 taught us to bask in the glory of Taylor Swift's dominance. Not even Walter White had this much success being an anti-hero.

A woman's world

And yet even if you resist the Swift Train, Taylor isn't the only female act dominating music charts far and wide. 2023 was led by acts like SZA, Boygenius and Beyoncé (who, in case you missed it, headlined a world tour of her own that didn't do all that bad). Shoot, even the biggest country music hit sung by a male this year was originally written by a female artist some 30 years ago. Joni Mitchell won the Gershwin Prize. Rihanna offered up a very pregnant and very boss-like Super Bowl halftime show. The list goes on and on. 2023 was the year of the woman in music. And God bless it for that.

Better than the real thing?

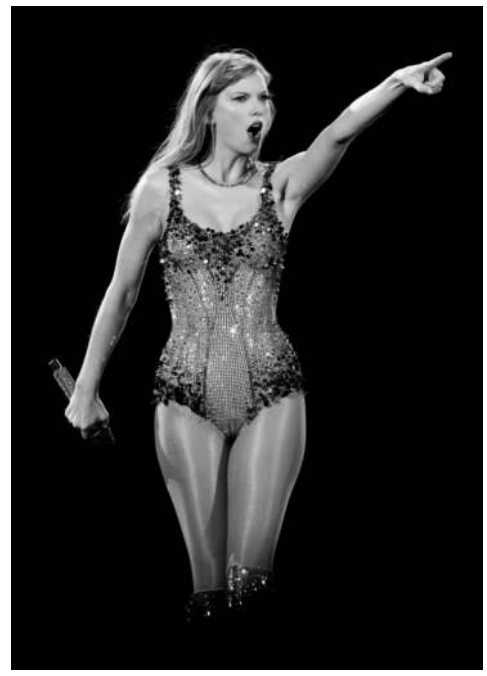
Las Vegas' shiny new toy, creatively titled the Sphere, finally got up and running this year and the results were ... well, kind of what we thought they'd be. U2 opened it (without Larry Mullen, which really makes it U1-and-a-half), and the cellphone videos that ensued were at times scary, always impressive and most often captivating. The thing feels like going to see a movie in IMAX, but instead of seeing Spider-Man, you see Bono sing an Elvis song. How long will it last? Rumor has it that the venue is still operating at a loss, but big plans seem to be on the horizon for 2024. Can Phish save the day? We'll see.

Goodbye, yellow brick road

As is the case in most years, a fair share of legendary/classic/noteworthy musicians called it a day with respective farewell tours in 2023. Elton John insisted he's done after a July concert in Sweden. Kiss wrapped things up at Madison Square Garden recently ... only to reveal that avatars will replace them from here on out, which is pretty on-brand. And Aerosmith launched what they said would be their final run, but then singer Steven Tyler bailed due to sexual assault allega ... er ... I mean, he said he had vocal cord problems. Will any of these goodbyes truly stick? It's rock 'n' roll, so never say never.

Enshrined

Another year, another debate about who should go in, who got in, who didn't get in and who might someday get in when it comes to the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. This year's class was no different. Willie Nelson got the nod (absolutely) while Sheryl Crow (she shouldn't have yet), Missy Elliott (if hip-hop is in, she's gotta be there) and Rage Against The Machine (thanks for not coming, guys!) took their places among popular music's elite as well. Love it or hate it, just wait until next year: John Mayer and Lil' Wayne lead the artists eligible for the first time. Let the debate begin.



NATACHA PISARENKO/AP

Taylor Swift performs at the Monumental stadium during her Eras Tour concert in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on Nov. 9.

Guts

When taken as a whole, we've already established how women dominated the main-mainstream when it comes to popular music. But beyond that ... man, for my money, the year's best music came almost primarily from women. Olivia Rodrigo proved a sophomore slump doesn't always have to exist (and that hell hath no fury like a scorned pop star who's not afraid to use swear words). Janelle Monae put out a wildly fun reggae(ish) album that should have received more love than it got. Jenny Lewis released what amounted to one of my two favorite records from front to back all year. And hey: We even got a couple very good new songs from the Chvrches lady. Music is never qualitatively defined by gender, but damn if the girls didn't outshine the boys in 2023.

Hangin' around

While their albums celebrate 20-year, 25-year or 30-year anniversaries on what seems like a weekly basis anymore, alt rock bands from the mid-to-late 1990s laid blueprints for how bands long removed from their heydays can still have a prominent space in the music landscape. You don't need to hear me fail at waxing poetic about Matchbox Twenty yet again (though they did put out a great album, got some "Barbie" love and embarked on a surprisingly successful summer tour), but even with them removed, consider their contemporaries. Counting Crows headlined amphitheaters with Dashboard Confessional. Bush is comfortably touring off little more than their greatest hits. And even bands like Creed and Hootie & The Blowfish announced major tours for 2024. Sure, it's unsettling to hear what you once thought was contemporary rock be classified as classic rock, but kudos to the bands for seeing it through. Now, speaking of classic rock ...

Now and then

... Two of the greatest rock bands ever wound up in the music conversation this year. The Rolling Stones released "Hackney Diamonds," which only succeeded on account that it didn't suck. OK, that's probably too mean, but really: Check it out. There's some good stuff in there. Conversely (and sadly), the same can't be said for The Beatles' final-ever song (maybe, probably), "Now and Then." A pedestrian Beatles song at best, the entire operation was ruined once that outrageously campy accompanying video hit the internet. As someone wisely pointed out after seeing it, "Why couldn't Paul just 'let it be'?"

All artificial

From magazine stories to poem-writing to song-crafting? Nothing is safe from AI technology these days, but it sure felt like the conversation surrounding artificial intelligence ramped up in a big way over the past 12 months. Consider the Grammys, which actually had to come out and state that only human creators can win one of the awards — but a work containing AI is eligible as long as human input is meaningful ... whatever that means. Ugh. Settle in, friends. The AI debate is only going to get more murky as the means become more available and the finances make more sense. And thus, it should be said again: Ugh.

Sundown

And finally, a lot of very noteworthy musical personalities passed away in 2023. That's not unusual, but this time around, the past year's deaths felt particularly heavy at times. Just check out this list: Jeff Beck, Gordon Lightfoot, Wayne Shorter, Burt Bacharach, David Crosby, Harry Belafonte, Tina Turner, Tony Bennett, Sinead O'Connor and Jimmy Buffett, among many, many, many others who left an impact. The mark they left with their music shouldn't soon be forgotten and so as we bid adieu to 2023, maybe pour a drink, spin a few of their records and reflect on what meant the most to you in the past 12 months of music.

Anthem: Singer's hit 'most successful Christmas song of all time'

FROM PAGE 30

nitely does not share credit where credit is due."

Last month, songwriters Andy Stone and Troy Powers sued Carey and Afanasieff in federal court in California, seeking $20 million in copyright infringement and citing their own 1989 country song, "All I Want for Christmas Is You."

Their song has a similar theme, with a narrator desiring a love interest before Christmas comforts. The writers cite an "overwhelming likelihood" that Carey and Afanasieff had heard their song. The two songs have no musical similarities, Berklee's Bennett says, and the theme is hardly unique. He pointed out Bing Crosby's "You're All I Want for Christmas," Carla Thomas' "All I Want for Christmas Is You" and Buck Owens' "All I Want for Christmas, Dear, Is You." Says the musicologist: "It's nonsense."

In his podcast appearance, Afanasieff noted how Foster once told him that "All I Want for Christmas Is You" was the last song to enter the Christmas canon and "that vault is sealed."

Foster told AP he exaggerated a little, but not a lot. Writing a new holiday song is brutally hard, since you're competing with not just current hits but hundreds of years of songs and memories. The old classics never go away.

"I just stay away from them, because they scare me," Foster says. "Lyrically, it's sort of all been done before — better than I can ever do."

While he appreciates Foster's compliment, Afanasieff told Rothschild that he hoped others don't take it to heart.

"I urge songwriters every year," he says. "It's time to write the next 'All I Want for Christmas Is You.'"

7 ways to live healthier this winter

Experts offer tips for your mind and body so you can stay happy, hydrated, safe and warm as the temperature drops

BY KATHERINE ELLISON
The Washington Post

The days are getting colder and shorter, and the deadline for New Year's resolutions is approaching. In other words, it's a more-than-appropriate time to focus on ways to stay healthy this winter. We polled experts to assemble the following winter health tips — some conventional, some not — which range from choosing the right lip balm to trying yoga — in the snow.

iStock

Snowga can be a novel way to get yourself outdoors and moving — just make sure to wear proper attire.

■ **Be kind to your kisser:** Lips dry out in winter. They're the thinnest skin on your body, with few oil glands to provide natural moisture. Lip balms can help, but you need to choose wisely. Some products contain ingredients, such as salicylic acid, that can make your lips drier, pushing you into a vicious cycle. Pick petroleum-based balms (even good old Vaseline) with the fewest ingredients.

"For those who prefer to avoid petroleum, I love the ones with beeswax and shea butter," says Sarvenaz Zand, a dermatologist in Mill Valley, Calif. While it's smart to use lip balms with sunscreen in summer, you may want to skip that in the winter, as it can irritate sensitive lips, she says.

"Remember to use your lip balm twice a day," Zand adds. For seriously chapped lips, she suggests trying an ointment with hydrocortisone, available over-the-counter.

■ **Plan more potlucks:** With the coronavirus lingering in the air and end-of-year tasks to attend to, you can find excuses to isolate, but your heart and brain will benefit if you resist. You can also strike a blow against the loneliness epidemic threatening American health.

If you're virus-shy, find a park with a fire pit and reserve time on a Sunday afternoon. If you're more ambitious, start a book club so you make gatherings routine. Offer friends gentle advice about what they might bring, and don't forget the friends who may be under the weather with holiday blues — especially if they're adolescents.

"The data is still showing increased depression and anxiety in that age group," says psychologist Tamar Mendelson, director of the Center for Adolescent Health at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

Altruism won't just help your targets; a growing body of research suggests it can make you happier and maybe even healthier as well.

"It can even be a really little thing, like sending an extra email or making a phone call to check in," Mendelson says. "It's all helpful."

■ **Sample snowga:** Yep, that's yoga in the snow, and while it's clearly not for everyone, it's a novel route to fight the tendency to vegetate in cold weather. Study after study has shown that people move more in warmer months and become more sedentary in the winter, but your body and mood will benefit from fresh air and exercise, whether it's a walk in the winter air or ... snowga. Its devotees include Gywneth Paltrow.

You don't want to do this barefoot. Skip the thin leggings for your full snow regalia, with gloves, scarves and boots. Yoga instructors warn this isn't a time to test your limits, since your body becomes more brittle in cold weather. Be sure to include some indoor stretching afterward.

■ **Groom the dog:** Furry pets are dust magnets. In the winter, they may also track in snow and mud. Veterinarians recommend you wash your dog at least once a month. You may also want to leave a thick towel at the doorway to remember to clean paws.

While you're at it, this is the time to do a dust inventory of your home to help avoid the risk of indoor allergies and asthma. Indoor dust gets worse in the winter, when we keep the windows closed. Is it time to change your HVAC filters? The American College of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology recommends that you also protect your bedding from dust mites by washing sheets, blankets and pillowcases in hot water once a week and if necessary using special mite-proof zippered cases for pillows.

■ **Enjoy a mindful mug:** If you want to go full-tilt hygge, cocoon your way into a pair of flannel pjs and slippers and settle in for a hot-chocolate meditation. So much is hard about winter, but for 20 minutes and minimal cash outlay, you can stop and smell the cacao, while reminding yourself to stay hydrated.

Breathe in deeply through your nose while you smell the hot chocolate; breathe out through your mouth to cool it, then focus on where on your taste buds the chocolate is landing. (Peppermint tea or a hearty bowl of soup also work.) If slurping doesn't appeal, mindfulness teachers say you can get some benefits simply by imagining drinking that hot beverage.

While we're on the subject of hydration, be sure to drink enough water: The American Heart Association recommends that women drink eight 8-ounce glasses daily and men 12 8-ounce glasses.

In addition, a humidifier can help your skin and respiratory system when the air is drier, according to the Mayo Clinic. Just don't forget that the gizmo needs maintenance, including cleaning every three days, to avoid mold and bacteria.

■ **Ward off germs:** Get your flu shot. Flu season peaks from December to February, so it's about time. While you're at it, remember to wash your hands to avoid contagion. For those who need a refresher, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention provides a handy online demonstration on best practices. Remember, of course, to apply moisturizer after you wash. Dry, cracked skin makes it easier for germs to get inside your body, the American Academy of Dermatology Association says.

Beyond that, remember to keep up on your vitamin D, which is made by our skin after exposure to sunlight and may diminish when days are shorter and you spend more time indoors. Vitamin D isn't just good for bones; it helps fight infections. Make sure you're eating high-vitamin-D foods, such as oily fish (like tuna and sardines), and talk to your doctor about taking supplements to ensure you're getting at least 600 international units (IU) a day.

And on the topic of worthwhile supplements, talk to your doctor about curcumin, the active ingredient in turmeric, as a winter pick-me-up for your immune system. The ancient Indian herb, which gives curry its zing and yellow tint, is an anti-inflammatory and antioxidant agent. Because it can interact with some medications, however, it's important to get a physician's advice before going all in.

■ **Upgrade your footwear:** Take the risk of falling seriously — just like doctors do. The CDC warns that millions of people over 65, in particular, fall every year, with risks that rise significantly in winter. One in 5 falls results in broken bones or head injuries.

Experts recommend rubber soles to help avoid winter slips. Choose shoes and boots that are waterproof and lined for warmth. For snowy days, consider slip-on cleats. Make sure your footwear fits — you should have room enough for thick socks. And if you can't live without those Jimmy Choos, why not bring them to change into once you get to your destination?

WEEKEND: FAMILY

Grandparents aren't banks

Take smart steps when helping your grandchildren financially so you don't overgive out of love

BY KIMBERLY PALMER
NerdWallet

In his early 20s, Chris Chen's nephew dreamed of becoming a professional photographer but to pursue that dream, he needed equipment that cost over $5,000. His nephew worked hard to save $1,500, then his maternal grandmother provided an additional $750. Chen, a certified financial planner in Newton, Mass., covered the rest.

"It helped him understand the value of money," Chen says of his nephew, who now earns his living as a photographer.

Grandparents — and other family members — often have the best intentions when it comes to helping their grandchildren financially, but experts say they don't always know how best to do so and can accidentally hurt their own finances along the way.

Financial advisers recommend following these steps whenever you're giving grandchildren a financial gift, whether big or small:

Protect your own finances

"The first question is, 'Can you afford to help your grandchildren, and how much?'" says Lorraine Ell, CEO and co-founder at Better Money Decisions, a national wealth management firm. Checking your own retirement funds and overall financial security can help ensure that you're in a position to give, she says.

Grandparents, Ell says, are often pulled to "overgive" out of love, but doing so in moderation instead can ensure your generosity is affordable.

Katie Lindquist, a CFP in Madison, Wis., and owner of Lindenwood Financial, cautions against co-signing loans for grandchildren, which can put your own credit on the line.

"There are other ways to help, such as giving part of a down payment, that can help them without actually co-signing on the loan," she says.

Talk to the parents before giving a gift

Before giving a financial gift to a grandchild, Lindquist recommends discussing the idea with his or her parents.

"Make sure everyone is clear on the plan. You can figure out what accounts they already have and what their needs are," she says. If you're giving cash, she adds, you might want to ask the parents to help the child keep it safe or direct the money to a specific savings account or purchase.

Still, Lindquist adds, it's worth recognizing that once you give the gift, "you can't control what they spend it on."

Trent Porter, a CFP and CEO at Priority Financial Partners in Durango, Colo., says in some cases, parents might not want their children receiving money.

"Grandparents can become a piggy bank," he says, where they end up enabling overspending. It's also essential to treat grandchildren fairly, he adds, even if unique needs require differing forms of financial help, such as contributing to a wedding for one and a travel abroad opportunity for another.

Discuss money openly with grandchildren

At the same time, it's worth setting clear expectations with your grandchildren, Porter says.

iStock

Grandparents need to be careful when giving their grandchildren financial assistance so they don't accidentally hurt their own finances.

"Be as specific as you can reasonably be: 'We will give you x number of dollars for tuition,' instead of, 'If you need help, here is a blank check,'" he says.

When you're giving money, it's also a good time to talk about financial topics such as budgeting and saving, Porter says.

"Communicating about those things gives them a huge advantage because most kids leave high school and have no idea," he says.

Susan Greenhalgh, a financial coach in the Providence, R.I., area and president of Mind Your Money, which provides financial coaching and workshops, says grandchildren are watching and observing your behavior closely, and modeling healthy financial behavior can be beneficial to them.

"Every conversation you have about money in their presence will become their money mindset, so you want to be careful about how you're showing up for them," she says.

Giving to charity can also be part of that conversation, she says.

"One grandparent I know wrote a note to his grandchildren every year at the holidays saying he would make a donation in their name to a favorite charity. It's a beautiful thing to pass on," Greenhalgh says.

Look at cash alternatives

In some cases, contributing money into a specific account allows grandparents to retain more control over how, and when, it's spent. Chen recommends funding a 529 college savings account, because then grandparents know the money is earmarked for education.

It's also worth noting that you can give up to $17,000 a year per person in cash or other gifts in 2023 without triggering the IRS gift tax, and $18,000 in 2024.

A Roth IRA, or individual retirement account, is another option for older grandchildren who earn money, Lindquist says. One of her clients, a pair of grandparents, told their grandson that they would match any contributions he made to his Roth IRA account up to $500. (Grandparents can contribute directly as long as the total amount saved doesn't exceed the child's taxable income.) This approach offered the added benefit of teaching him to save a portion of his wages, she says, which is especially useful to start now, with so many decades ahead of him before retirement.

That kind of life lesson is a financial gift, too.

THE MEAT AND POTATOES OF LIFE

Lisa Smith Molinari

Under pressure at the command holiday party

Four steps into the entrance of the downtown Hyatt, I noticed a small run in my pantyhose. I took a deep breath, which was difficult considering I'd bound my midsection with no less than four layers of figure-enhancing spandex, and tried to channel a festive attitude toward my husband's command holiday party.

Holding onto Francis' arm like an invalid, I limped to the elevators with great difficulty, as the "Comfort Series" pumps I'd bought for the occasion pinched with every step. In the mirrored elevator, I noticed that the concealer I'd applied under my eyes in the minivan was two shades too light, giving me the look of a startled barn owl.

The dress I'd purchased in haste on a T.J. Maxx clearance rack did not look as flattering as it had in the store's dressing room. Furthermore, the uncomfortable layers of underwear, control top pantyhose, Spanx, back-fat-reducing camisole and underwire bra were only making me feel like an overstuffed bratwurst ready to burst from its gut casing.

As I hobbled out of the elevator toward the ballroom, Francis' demeanor suddenly changed. Like Clark Kent, he transformed from a man who wears black socks in his recliner while scratching himself and watching "King of Queens" reruns, into "Captain Molinari," ready to leap tall buildings with a single bound. I staggered along as Captain Molinari's pudgy sidekick with bad feet and a cheap dress.

I made a beeline to the bar for a little liquid courage, but Francis delayed my mission, introducing me to various coworkers. "Great to meet you," I'd say, while my mind raced to think of something more interesting to contribute.

In the buffet line, I fought the urge to elbow colleagues out of the way to get my share of the Mediterranean chicken, only to find that it was rubbery and bland. Of course, I ate it anyway, along with a heaping plate of tiramisu, cream puffs, cheesecake and marshmallows dipped in chocolate fondue. I could almost hear the creak of my undergarments, stressed to their maximum capacity.

After the plates were cleared, I thought I was holding my own among the muckety-mucks at our table. But then, the admiral's wife signaled to me to wipe my face. I had a large splotch of fondue chocolate dripping down my double chin.

I excused myself to the ladies room, not only to relieve bladder pressure, but to take a breather from social pressure, too. The young female sailor who'd just won the best-dressed competition entered the stall right next to me.

There's nothing more equalizing than succumbing to one's bodily functions mere inches away from another human being. We flushed in tandem and met at the sinks to wash our hands. I broke the awkward silence by complimenting her lovely violet gown. She returned the compliment, an obvious obligatory gesture. I let her off the hook by joking, "I'm so packed into this dress, I almost knocked on your stall to ask if you'd help me get my Spanx back up."

By the time I returned to our table, the dance floor was dotted with a few brave souls gyrating to modern beats. Suddenly, the DJ called "Captain Molinari and his wife" to the dance floor to compete in the salsa competition. Francis and I had never learned how to do the electric slide, much less Latin salsa dancing. But Francis couldn't refuse the DJ's request, so we salsa-ed with about as much Latin authenticity as the fried ice cream at Chi-Chi's. Mercifully, we were eliminated before the song was half over.

Later at home, while undressing in our bedroom, I joked, "Beware of flying hardware!" just before releasing the hooks and latches on my figure-enhancing undergarments. Finally, in my flannel pj's and under the sheets, I was relieved that I'd not only survived the pressure those torturous trusses had put on my internal organs, I'd also made it through another command holiday party and lived to tell the tale.

Read more at themeatandpotatoesoflife.com and in Lisa's book, "The Meat and Potatoes of Life: My True Lit Com." Email: meatandpotatoesoflife@gmail.com

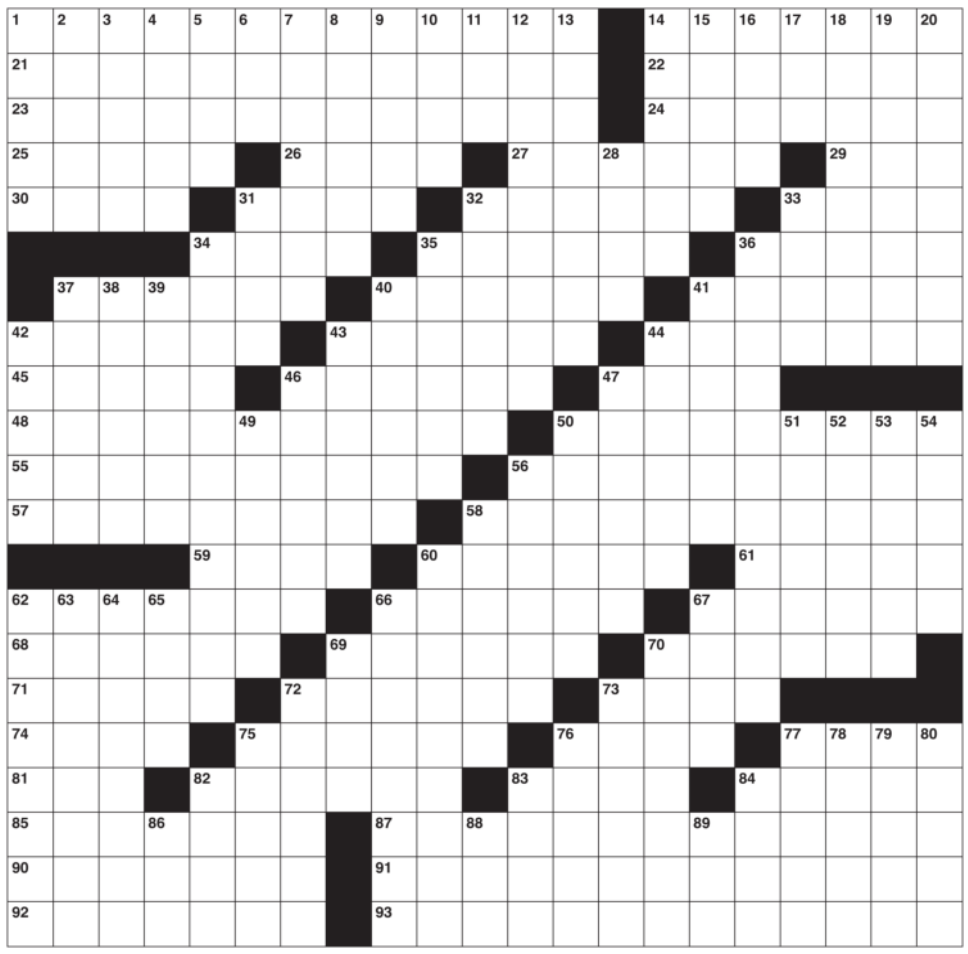
WEEKEND: CROSSWORD AND COMICS

NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

FREESTYLING

BY TRACY BENNETT / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

Tracy Bennett is a digital-puzzle editor for The Times. She manages Wordle and helps with the crossword. In this themeless puzzle, she took a bold grid pattern with lots of white squares and in each corner positioned a marquee answer — "something new or that had an appealing sound or cluing potential." Then she built out from there. F.Y.I., those starting points were 23-, 48-, 50- and 87-Across. — W. S.



ACROSS

1 Sarcastic response to an unsurprising development
14 That makes two of us!
21 Gold-rush camp that became a state capital
22 Carrier out of Kuala Lumpur
23 Hormone-therapy product
24 They're seen on the flags of Bhutan and Wales
25 Alexanders I-III
26 Legal claim
27 Retailer headquartered in Freeport, Maine
29 "____ Up Offa That Thing" (1976 hit)
30 "Will be," in Spanish
31 Map out
32 The Stepford wives in "The Stepford Wives," it seems
33 Host city of the 2022 FIFA World Cup
34 ____ Vogue
35 Acronymic devices in atomic clocks and radio telescopes
36 Part of a woodworking joint
37 ____ the Lucky Rabbit, character in early Disney shorts
40 Much sketch comedy
41 "Media impressions," "influencer marketing," etc., informally
42 Emulate
43 Diamond division
44 Sore spots for kids?
45 QB-protecting group
46 Difficult
47 San ____, capital founded in 1521
48 Super-sillyous?
50 Apocalyptic scene
55 What nocturnal polysomnography may detect
56 Mainstay of a sci-fi defense system
57 Canal inspector
58 Most serious, in law
59 It's a question of timing
60 Metric weight units
61 Actor Wilson of "The Office"
62 Month that goes by fast?
66 "Jeepers!"
67 Stops over in France?
68 Billionaires and such
69 Badly injured
70 Elegant and refined
71 See 81-Across
72 Given the name
73 Peacock show?
74 What a token may resemble
75 Pleased as punch
76 Abandon without warning
77 Figure in the Hindu trinity
81 With 71-Across, participant in some fertility treatments
82 Picks to win
83 "The Handmaid's Tale" airer
84 First Nations group of the Great Lakes region
85 "Let's Make a Deal" option
87 Prompt from the chronically forgetful
90 Accessibility concern
91 Walk in place?
92 Leafs
93 Set of books with maps, perhaps

DOWN

1 Stimulates
2 "Siddhartha" author
3 Where sacrifices may be made
4 Planet Earth
5 Actress Mireille ____ of TV's "Hanna" and "Lucky Hank"
6 Trail behind
7 Made scents?
8 Lasting for an immeasurable time span
9 How legal papers may be signed
10 Die-hard fan, in modern lingo
11 Turner of American history
12 Wrapped around
13 Mark who was the world's highest-paid actor in 2017
14 Military trainees
15 Turkish money
16 Port city in Algeria
17 Badger
18 Having equal angles
19 Like some golf courses
20 They may need fillings
28 Snooze
31 Who said, "Football is not about one or two or three star players"
32 Rough fabric with a loose weave
33 Investigators: Abbr.
34 Leave hurriedly, in quaint usage
35 Capital on the island of Luzon
36 Passage from one party to another
37 "Va-va-voom!"
38 It cuts the cheese (but not the mustard)
39 Got some shut-eye?
40 Pulitzer-winning poet Gary
41 Rang, as a bell
42 Use a divining rod
43 Like some decals
44 Compulsory payments of old
46 List of ranked favorites
47 Purchase at a sports stadium
49 Seasonal Russian cottages
50 Intruded, with "in"
51 Items usually sold in boxes of 25
52 Mountaintop homes
53 Enough to go around
54 Utopias
56 Played the rat
58 Outschemed, in a way
60 Period from 1945 to 1953
62 Evergreen tree with fragrant bark
63 Indian dish of potatoes and cauliflower
64 Putt-putt
65 Loads
66 "Carmina Burana" composer
67 Landed
69 Units of RAM, for short
70 Character defamation
72 Family emblems
73 They're found beside exclamation marks on keyboards
75 Inkling
76 Coup group
77 Sweet stuff in asparagus (if you read it backward)?
78 Many a Shiite
79 It may be raised in an argument
80 Auntie ____ (pretzel chain)
82 Pasta-recipe instruction
83 Inkling
84 Largest of the lagomorphs
86 Flag thrower, informally
88 Time to get back to work: Abbr.
89 Otherworldly sorts, for short

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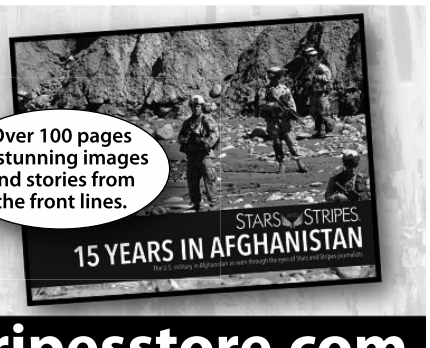

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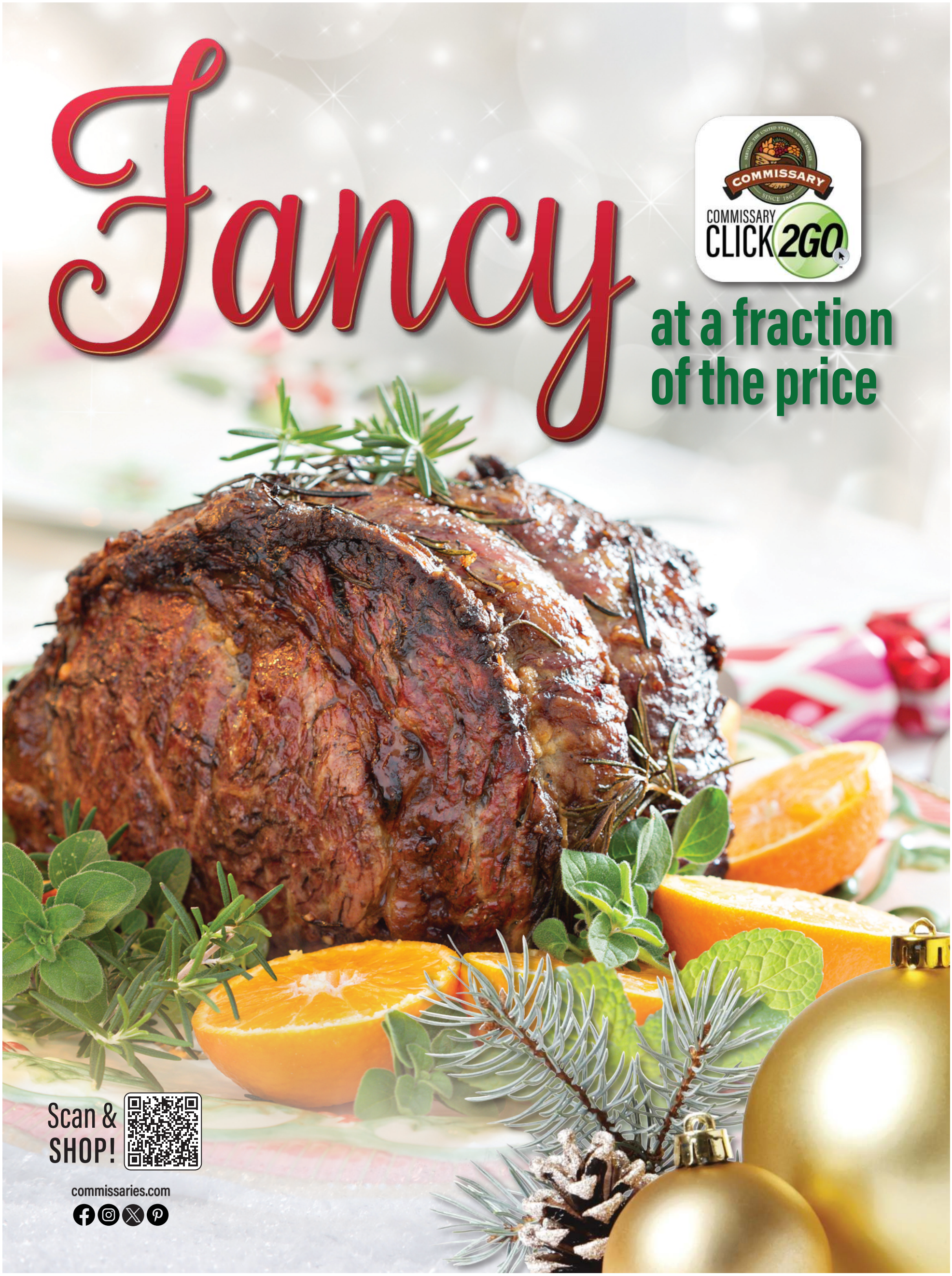
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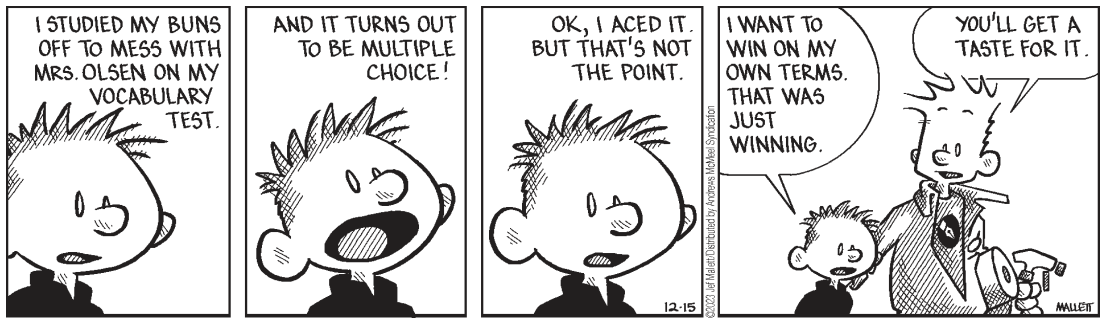

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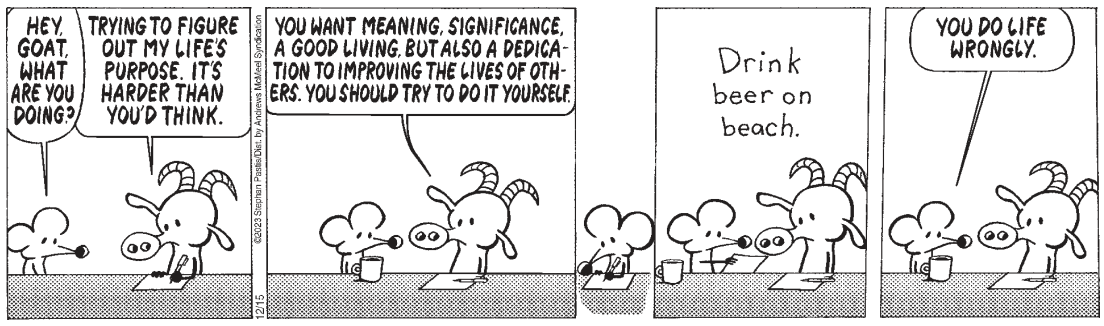

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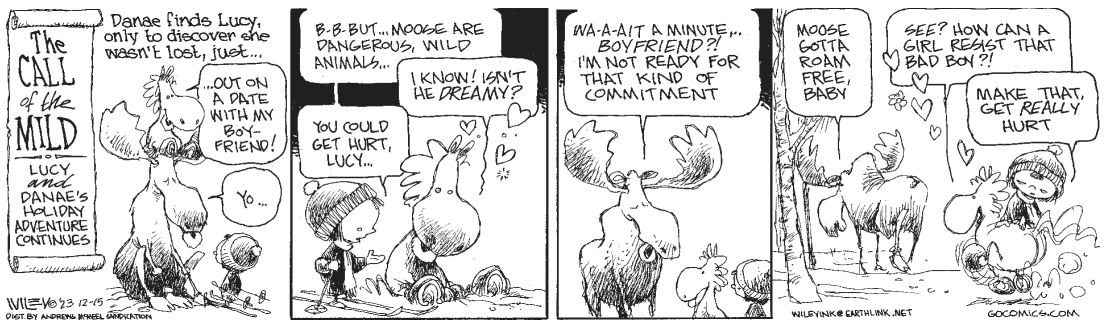

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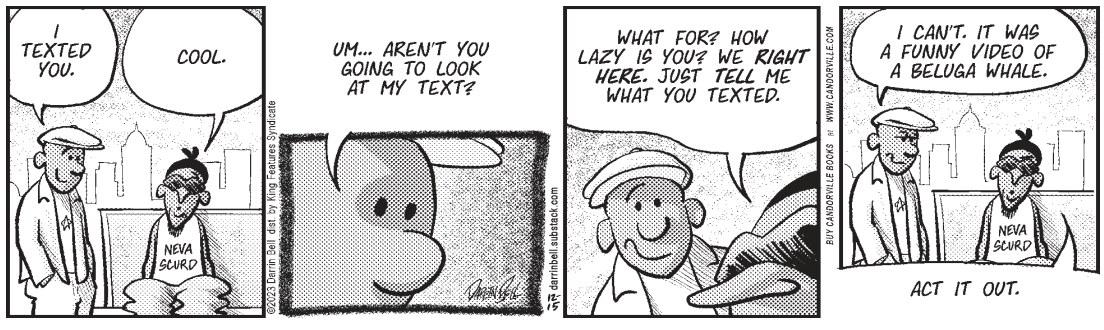

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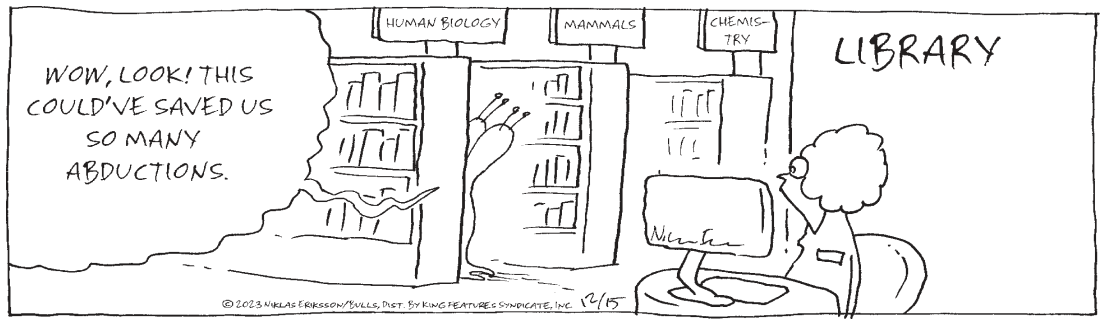

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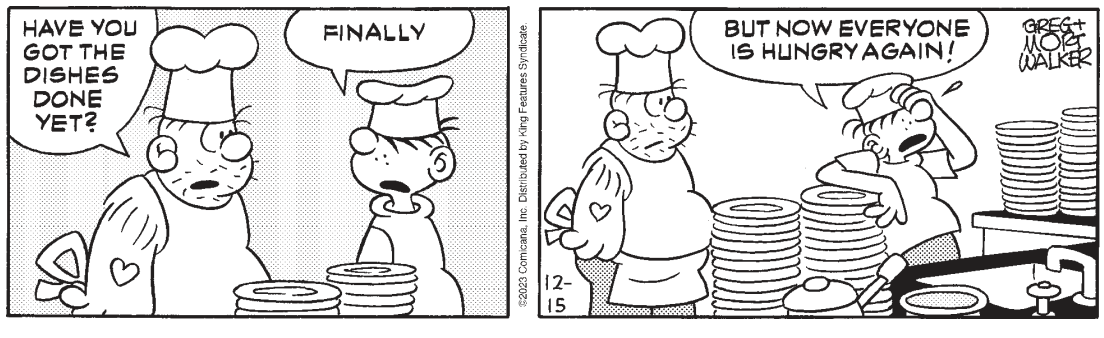


Eugene Sheffer Crossword

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 Early Mongolian
6 Hot tub
9 Dallas sch.
12 Emporium
13 Crucial
14 Atlas page
15 Check recipient
16 Reykjavik's country
18 Surgical beams
20 Approximately
21 Ecol. watchdog
23 Dig in
24 Partners
25 Peel
27 Winner's gesture
29 Night flight
31 Already sliced
35 Inventor Nikola
37 Apple variety
38 Asparagus unit
41 Mag. edition
43 Writer's block?
44 Jai —
45 Mexican liquor
47 Floral wreath
49 Emulate Frederick Douglass
52 Texas tea
53 Decay
54 Major exam
55 Rds.
56 Wall St. debut
57 Loses color

DOWN

1 Recipe abbr.
2 One-time link
3 "Babes in —"
4 Bailiwick
5 "Don't You Know" singer Della
6 Circumvents
7 Chest muscles, briefly
8 Sailor's "yes"
9 Brainy
10 Parson's home
11 High hairstyles
17 Temporary car
19 They hang around houses?
21 Mess up
22 Picnic dessert
24 Ball club VIP
26 Fine point
28 Bridge call
30 " — outta here!"
32 "Rodeo" composer Aaron
33 Ms. Thurman
34 TV's Danson
36 Deceived
38 Palm starches
39 Braid of hair
40 British nobles
42 Ridicule
45 L-Q bridge
46 "Carmen" solo
48 Shapiro of NPR
50 Inventor's monogram
51 Overhead trains

Answer to Previous Puzzle

A	D	A	M	■	V	I	P	■	A	V	O	N
S	I	L	O	■	E	M	U	■	N	E	R	O
E	V	E	L	■	R	A	M	■	A	R	C	O
C	A	S	A	B	A	■	P	A	C	M	A	N
■	■	■	R	E	C	■	■	B	I	O	■	■
M	A	V	S	■	R	E	V	E	N	U	E	S
D	R	E	■	■	U	K	E	■	■	T	R	I
S	P	R	I	T	Z	E	R	■	S	H	E	D
■	■	O	R	A	■	■	B	R	A	■	■	■
D	E	N	I	R	O	■	I	N	T	E	N	T
O	T	I	S	■	P	E	A	■	U	S	E	R
R	A	C	E	■	E	R	G	■	R	A	R	E
A	L	A	S	■	N	A	E	■	N	U	D	E

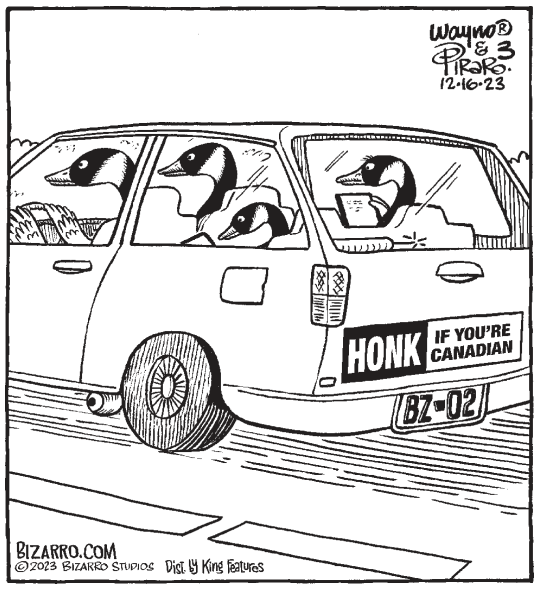
12-15 **CRYPTOQUIP**

D'W QTFAFDQLB EVT WLQQLB TA ISOI CORJ-MTIIDJP MSVFL QV ZOBCE. EVT QSVTCB WVR ZLIILF ISOJ ISOI!

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: HOW COULD YOU DESCRIBE SOMEBODY WHO HAS LEFT TO GO DESTROY SOMETHING? OFF AND RUINING.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: Q equals S

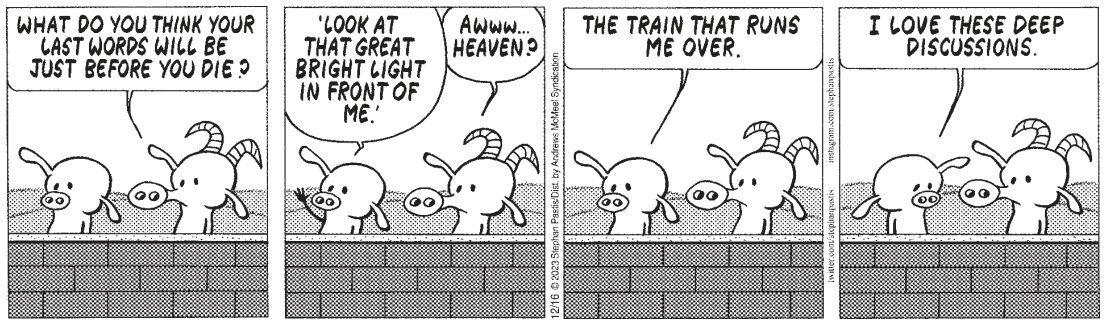
Bizarro



Loose Parts

Frazz

Pearls Before Swine



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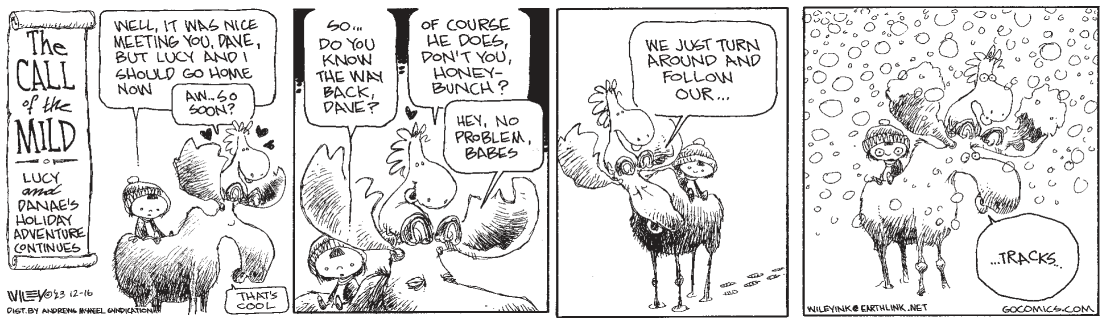

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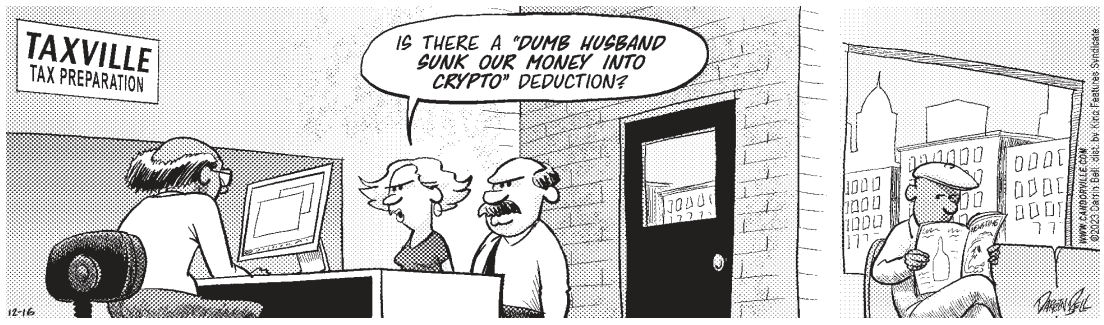

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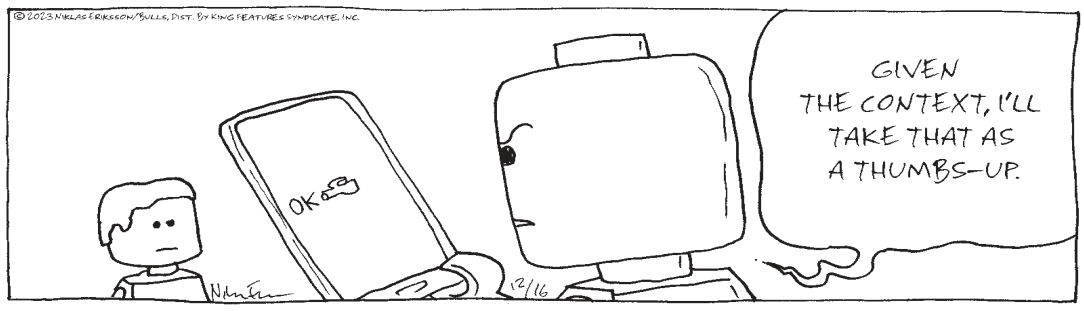

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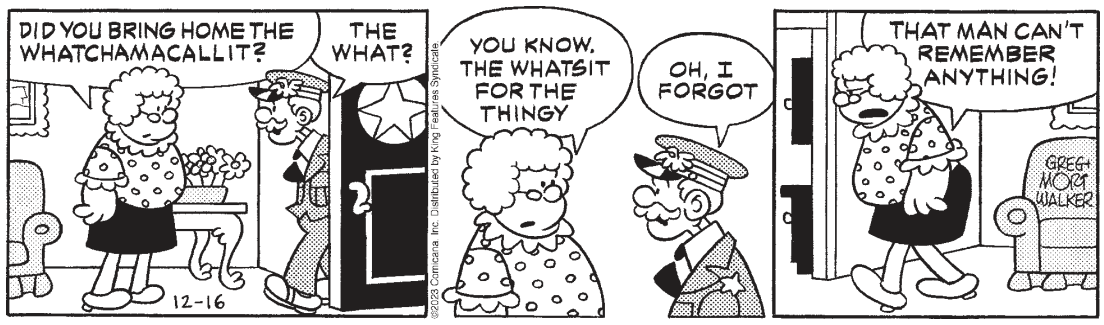

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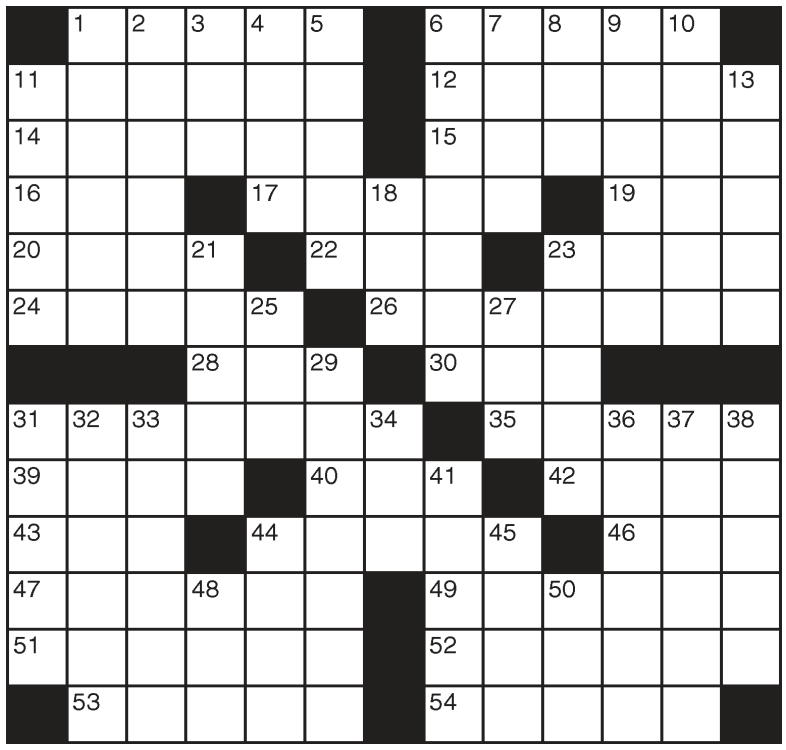

ACROSS

1 Winter warmer
6 Implore
11 Arctic jackets
12 Painter's tool
14 Elite groups
15 Change gradually
16 Fix illegally
17 Barrel strip
19 Fragrant tree
20 Roman 202
22 Reggae relative
23 Part of N.B.
24 Accord maker
26 Wing part
28 TV's Longoria
30 Restroom, for short
31 Spiced holiday drink
35 Shrill barks
39 Date with an MD
40 Long. crosser
42 Laugh-a-minute
43 Susan of "L.A. Law"
44 Shadow
46 Org. with a style manual
47 Stimulate
49 Arrid place?
51 Buy and sell
52 Egg on
53 Refine ore
54 Sycophant

DOWN

1 Colorful cat
2 Starting point
3 Many ATM deposits
4 Stable diet
5 Admin. aides
6 Triumph
7 Zero, in tennis
8 "Evil Woman" gp.
9 Totally supporting
10 Danny of "Taxi"
11 Shrivel with heat
13 Showed again on TV
18 Wanted poster abbr.
21 Namely, in Latin
23 "When pigs fly!"
25 Director DuVernay
27 Nonclerical
29 Clinic concern
31 Walked in water
32 Pinnacles
33 Surveillance aid
34 Science room
36 Transparent
37 System of government
38 Condition
41 Characteristic
44 Elec., for one
45 Florence's river
48 Land in la mer
50 Longtime record label

Answer to Previous Puzzle

T	A	T	A	R		S	P	A		S	M	U
S	T	O	R	E		K	E	Y		M	A	P
P	A	Y	E	E		I	C	E	L	A	N	D
		L	A	S	E	R	S		O	R	S	O
E	P	A		E	A	T		M	A	T	E	S
R	I	N	D		V	S	I	G	N			
R	E	D	E	Y	E		P	R	E	C	U	T
			T	E	S	L	A		R	O	M	E
S	P	E	A	R		I	S	S		P	A	D
A	L	A	I		M	E	S	C	A	L		
G	A	R	L	A	N	D		O	R	A	T	E
O	I	L		R	O	T		F	I	N	A	L
S	T	S		I	P	O		F	A	D	E	S

12-16 CRYPTOQUIP

RW O VATV NW KOHTRZ RX VCZNYRPK UCHS NUCHLCOECF, FN SNA ELRPM RE XLNATF EOMC NWW REX ZTNUCX?

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: I'M SURPRISED YOU MESSED UP THAT LAWN-CUTTING CHORE SO BADLY. YOU SHOULD MOW BETTER THAN THAT!

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: V equals B

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OPINION

US can let go of old Cold War bilateral treaties

By Anthony J. Constantini
Chicago Tribune

The Cold War struggle between the United States and the Soviet Union was frequently described as something resembling chess. For nearly 50 years, both vied for control of the global board until only one player remained. In order to manage that dangerous game, a system of bilateral treaties was established between both players. But now, as a multipolar world emerges, the game has changed — and the old order is falling apart.

In the past few months, Russia has pulled out of the Comprehensive Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty and the Treaty of Conventional Armed Forces in Europe, or CFE. And earlier this year, Russian President Vladimir Putin announced Russia's intention to suspend participation in New START, the only nuclear treaty remaining in force between Russia and America. While Russia has stated it will abide by the treaty's limits on nuclear warheads, missiles and launchers, there is little hope for a renewal when the treaty expires in 2026.

To be clear, these pullouts go both ways: President George W. Bush pulled out of the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty in 2002, arguing that it hindered America's ability to protect itself from terror. President Donald Trump took the United States out of the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty in 2019, claiming Russian noncompliance. And when Russia pulled out of the CFE, the West responded in kind — rendering that treaty defunct. And America has never ratified the Nuclear-Test-Ban Treaty.

The removal of these Jenga blocks of the international order has been portrayed by some analysts as calamitous. One analyst, writing for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, declared Bush's pullout from the ABM treaty a mistake that caused a new arms race.

But these arguments miss the forest for the trees. The old network of treaties was almost entirely established in post-World War II by victorious powers that were preparing for a long and drawn-out Cold War. Over time, new treaties were added — like the ABM treaty — in order to meet new challenges and keep the possibility of a hot war as low as possible.

But now, the entire structure of the international order is changing. American and Western hegemony is ending and being replaced with a multipolar order: China, India and others are becoming serious players. China is of particular concern to the United States. Satellite photographs recently captured what seems to be a massive new Chinese military base in Cambodia, and the U.S. government revealed that the communist state has massively increased its nuclear arsenal.

China has not broken any treaties in bolstering its forces, nor will India or other rising powers, should they endeavor to do so. This is because they are not restricted by any treaties limiting nuclear forces, nor are they required to provide information about their military to other powers.

A recognition of the lack of restrictions on China was one of Trump's other reasons for pulling out of the INF treaty: Intermediate-range nuclear forces will be key in any potential struggle with China, and America had been restrained from deploying too many by a treaty that was focused on Russia.

To be clear, this is not to say that all treaties should be done away with. Universal treaties that ban the use of certain particularly heinous weapons — like the Geneva Protocol, which bans chemical and biological weapons and is adhered to by all major powers — can be of great use in a multipolar world, as the risk of conflict will always remain. The Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, which also includes China, is likewise a helpful tool in ensuring that more multipolarity does not necessarily lead to a higher chance of nuclear war. As are the Geneva Conventions, which, among other things, ban mistreatment of prisoners of war.

However, the old bilateral treaties that bind the United States to a conflict now 30 years past are no longer necessary. The one-on-one game of chess is over, and a new multiplayer game — call it Chinese checkers — has begun. As the world moves on and starts playing by new rules and adopting new strategies, America should do the same.

Anthony J. Constantini is a contributing fellow at Defense Priorities, a foreign policy think tank.

In Ukraine, the risk isn't stalemate. It's defeat.

By Lee Hockstader
The Washington Post

PARIS

An unspoken, unspeakable potential endgame in the Russia-Ukraine war is suddenly being uttered out loud: Kyiv is at risk of losing — and suffering unimaginable carnage and consequences.

That Ukraine's fate is hanging in the balance arises not from its inability to recapture territory from entrenched Russian forces, nor from the related fact of the Biden administration's foot-dragging in providing the Ukrainian military with the weapons it needed, nor even from Russia's advantage in sheer mass and resources.

It springs from two more immediate causes. One is opposition from House Republicans to further U.S. assistance. The GOP lawmakers are holding future weapons packages hostage to the unrelated issue of blocking migrants from illegally crossing the United States' southern border. The other is aid from the European Union that is imperiled by Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban, who has become Vladimir Putin's stalking horse.

House Republicans stand in the way of the Biden administration's proposed $61 billion package of arms and other help that is critical to Kyiv's ability to hold the line against Russian forces on the battlefield. Orban, exercising Hungary's veto as an EU member, is blocking $54 billion in budget support that would help pay Ukraine's bills through 2027. He is also impeding talks that would lead to Ukraine's eventual membership in the 27-nation group. Without those infusions of cash, arms and munitions, even the disappointing status quo over the past year, in which Ukraine has not managed to recapture much territory, is unlikely to endure.

Andriy Yermak, a top aide to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, told a Washington forum last week that the "big risk" is that Kyiv's troops could "lose this war."

That message should jolt policymakers on both sides of the Atlantic. The danger, as Ukraine's top general warned publicly last month, isn't simply stalemate. It is that Ukrainian forces, running low on equipment, might be compelled to fall back, shorten their defensive lines and abandon territory.

"It would be a way back to the darkest times of the war," Nico Lange, a German security expert on Ukraine, told me.

It's essential to think about what Ukraine's defeat means, because it would be as much a strategic disaster for the United States and its NATO allies as a tableau of terror for Ukraine. Dual cataclysms, equally stark, played out on different timetables.

A complete Ukrainian military collapse is unlikely, at least in coming months. Kyiv's armed forces remain well-led and motivated, and they are husbanding equipment to prepare for shortfalls. But it is equally unlikely to expect a negotiated cease-fire with Russia that would maintain existing battle lines. To believe in that seemingly anodyne outcome is to misjudge Putin — again.

For the Kremlin dictator, a "compromise" would involve Ukraine's subjugation and dissolution as an independent state. That would include regime change, with Zelenskyy in exile (or dead), as well as an end to Kyiv's aspirations to join the EU or NATO. Putin and his factotums have held to that stance, even if they convey it using code words. In an interview last week with Agence France-Presse, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova reiterated that the Kremlin insists on the "withdrawal" of Ukrainian troops from territory Russia has illegally annexed, as well as "demilitarization" and "denazification." Translation: Stop fighting, retreat and accept a pro-Moscow government in Kyiv.

The Institute for the Study of War, a think tank, wrote in an assessment this week that "Russia does not intend to engage in serious negotiations with Ukraine in good faith and … negotiations on Russia's terms are tantamount to full Ukrainian and Western surrender." In fact, Putin's main advantage is strategic patience — the capacity to wait out what he is confident is finite Western political will and resources to sustain Ukraine, buttressed by his indifference to Russia's staggering casualties. In the end, he believes, Ukraine will be forced to capitulate.

If he is right, the timetable of that ending would be accelerated if Congress and the EU fail to approve fresh support. That would leave Ukraine's government unable to maintain basic services, and its military increasingly short of artillery ammunition, air defense capability and other equipment. Ukraine's already badly battered front-line forces would become more brittle. Russian territorial gains would be accompanied by murders, rapes, kidnapping of children and other Russian war crimes on a chilling scale. That grim scenario would be a staggering blow to Western prestige and credibility, revealing that pledges to back Ukraine for "as long as it takes" were empty.

A failure on that scale — let alone actual defeat in Ukraine — would have much more lasting repercussions than Kyiv's inability to break through Russian battle lines. It could raise the curtain on a new era of aggression by authoritarian states, unchecked by the world's diminished democracies.

Lee Hockstader has been The Washington Post's European Affairs columnist, based in Paris, since 2023. Previously he was a member of the Post editorial board, a national correspondent, a foreign correspondent and a local reporter.

SCOREBOARD/MLB

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Bowl schedule

Saturday, Dec. 16
Myrtle Beach Bowl
Conway, S.C.
Georgia Southern vs. Ohio
Celebration Bowl
Atlanta
Howard vs. Florida A&M
New Orleans Bowl
New Orleans
Jacksonville St. vs. Louisiana
Cure Bowl
Orlando, Fla.
Miami (Ohio) vs. Appalachian St.
New Mexico Bowl
Albuquerque, N.M.
New Mexico St. vs. Fresno St.
LA Bowl Hosted
Inglewood, Calif.
UCLA vs. Boise St.
Independence Bowl
Shreveport, La.
California vs. Texas Tech
Monday, Dec. 18
Famous Toastery Bowl
Charlotte, N.C.
W. Kentucky vs. Old Dominion
Tuesday, Dec 19
Frisco Bowl
Frisco, Texas
UTSA vs. Marshall
Thursday, Dec. 21
Boca Raton Bowl
Boca Raton, Fla.
USF vs. Syracuse
Friday, Dec. 22
Gasparilla Bowl
Tampa, Fla.
Geogia Tech vs. UCF
Saturday, Dec. 23
Camellia Bowl
Montgomery, Ala.
Arkansas St. vs. N. Illinois
Birmingham Bowl
Birmingham, Ala.
Troy vs. Duke
Armed Forces Bowl
Fort Worth, Texas
No. 24 James Madison vs. Air Force
Famous Idaho Potato Bowl
Boise, Idaho
Georgia St. vs. Utah St.
68 Ventures Bowl
Mobile, Ala.
South Alabama vs. Eastern Michigan
Las Vegas Bowl
Las Vegas
Utah vs. Northwestern
Hawaii Bowl
Honolulu, Hawaii
Coastal Carolina vs. San Jose St.
Tuesday, Dec. 26
Quick Lane Bowl
Detroit
Bowling Green vs. Minnesota
First Responder Bowl
Dallas
Texas St. vs. Rice
Guaranteed Rate Bowl
Phoenix
Kansas vs. UNLV
Wednesday, Dec. 27
Military Bowl Presented
Annapolis, Md.
No. 23 Tulane vs. Virginia Tech
Duke's Mayo Bowl
Charlotte, N.C.
North Carolina vs. West Virginia
Holiday Bowl
San Diego, Calif.
No. 16 Louisville vs. Southern Cal
Texas Bowl
Houston
No. 22 Oklahoma St. vs. Texas A&M
Thursday, Dec. 28
Fenway Bowl
Boston
No. 17 SMU vs. Boston College
Pinstripe Bowl
New York
Rutgers vs. Miami
Pop-Tarts Bowl
Orlando, Fla.
No. 19 NC State vs. Kansas St.
Alamo Bowl
San Antonio, Texas
No. 12 Oklahoma No. 14 Arizona
Friday, Dec. 29
Gator Bowl
Jacksonville, Fla.
Clemson vs. Kentucky
Sun Bowl
El Paso, Texas
No. 15 Notre Dame vs. No. 21 Oregon St.
Liberty Bowl
Memphis, Tenn.
Memphis vs. Iowa St.
Cotton Bowl
Arlington, Texas
No. 7 Ohio St. vs. No. 9 Missouri

FCS playoffs

Semifinals
Friday, Dec. 15
South Dakota St. vs. UAlbany
Saturday, Dec. 16
Montana vs. North Dakota St.
Championship
Saturday, Jan. 7
Semifinal winners

NCAA Division II playoffs

Championship
Harding vs. Colo. Sch. of Mines

NCAA Division III playoffs

Championship
North Central (Ill.) vs. Cortland

PRO FOOTBALL

NFL

AMERICAN CONFERENCE

East

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Miami	9	4	0	.692	411	294
Buffalo	7	6	0	.538	348	244
N.Y. Jets	5	8	0	.385	201	257
e-New England	3	10	0	.231	169	272

South

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Jacksonville	8	5	0	.615	312	290
Houston	7	6	0	.538	287	279
Indianapolis	7	6	0	.538	314	330
Tennessee	5	8	0	.385	241	282

North

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Baltimore	10	3	0	.769	361	218
Cleveland	8	5	0	.615	289	272
Cincinnati	7	6	0	.538	280	287
Pittsburgh	7	6	0	.538	210	250

West

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Kansas City	8	5	0	.615	292	228
Denver	7	6	0	.538	287	309
L.A. Chargers	5	8	0	.385	282	282
Las Vegas	5	8	0	.385	202	259

NATIONAL CONFERENCE

East

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Dallas	10	3	0	.769	421	233
Philadelphia	10	3	0	.769	342	321
N.Y. Giants	5	8	0	.385	183	314
Washington	4	9	0	.308	261	395

South

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Atlanta	6	7	0	.462	251	269
New Orleans	6	7	0	.462	285	261
Tampa Bay	6	7	0	.462	262	270
e-Carolina	1	12	0	.077	197	341

North

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Detroit	9	4	0	.692	340	314
Minnesota	7	6	0	.538	266	242
Green Bay	6	7	0	.462	280	267
Chicago	5	8	0	.385	270	309

West

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
x-San Francisco	10	3	0	.769	380	205
L.A. Rams	6	7	0	.462	299	290
Seattle	6	7	0	.462	280	318
Arizona	3	10	0	.231	230	331

e-Eliminated from playoffs
x-clinched playoff spot

Thursday, Dec. 7

New England 21, Pittsburgh 18

Sunday, Dec. 10

Baltimore 37, L.A. Rams 31, OT
Chicago 28, Detroit 13
Cincinnati 34, Indianapolis 14
Cleveland 31, Jacksonville 27
N.Y. Jets 30, Houston 6
New Orleans 28, Carolina 6
Tampa Bay 29, Atlanta 25
Minnesota 3, Las Vegas 0
San Francisco 28, Seattle 16
Buffalo 20, Kansas City 17
Denver 24, L.A. Chargers 7
Dallas 33, Philadelphia 13
Open: Arizona, Washington

Monday, Dec. 11

N.Y. Giants 24, Green Bay 22
Tennessee 28, Miami 27

Thursday's game

L.A. Chargers at Las Vegas

Saturday's games

Minnesota at Cincinnati
Pittsburgh at Indianapolis
Denver at Detroit

Sunday's games

Atlanta at Carolina
Chicago at Cleveland
Houston at Tennessee
Kansas City at New England
N.Y. Giants at New Orleans
N.Y. Jets at Miami
Tampa Bay at Green Bay
San Francisco at Arizona
Washington at L.A. Rams
Dallas at Buffalo
Baltimore at Jacksonville

Monday's game

Philadelphia at Seattle

NFL calendar

Jan. 13-15 — Wild Card playoff games.
Jan. 20-21 — Division playoff games.
Jan. 28 — AFC and NFC championship games.
Feb. 11 — Super Bowl 58 at Allegiant Stadium in Las Vegas.

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Wednesday's men's scores

EAST
Dartmouth 63, Boston U. 56
Howard 88, Regent 49
Princeton 92, Bryn Athyn 40
Stony Brook 84, Norfolk St. 78
SOUTH
Appalachian St. 93, Queens (NC) 81
Arkansas St. 75, Louisville 63
Auburn 87, UNC-Asheville 62
FAU 94, FIU 60
LSU 74, Alabama St. 56
Liberty 74, Tennessee St. 52
Louisiana-Lafayette 73, E. Kentucky 62
McNeese St. 67, Southern Miss. 48
Mississippi St. 85, Murray St. 81
North Alabama 76, Charleston Southern 64
Presbyterian 118, Mid-Atlantic Christian 51
UAB 93, Alabama A&M 82
MIDWEST
Chicago St. 75, Northwestern 73
Longwood 80, Milwaukee 67
Toledo 88, Marshall 87
SOUTHWEST
Rice 80, Incarnate Word 57
UALR 93, UTSA 84
FAR WEST
BYU 90, Denver 74
E. Washington 103, Portland Bible 34
Nevada 72, Weber St. 55
San Francisco 62, Seattle 59
UNLV 79, Creighton 64
Utah St. 84, Santa Clara 82

Wednesday's women's scores

EAST
Bryant 93, Fisher 20
Princeton 66, Rutgers 55
SOUTH
Auburn 94, Alabama St. 37
Lamar 63, Louisiana-Lafayette 60
Louisville 74, Morehead St. 48
North Florida 105, Piedmont 66
Radford 57, Liberty 45
Samford 76, LaGrange 50
UT Martin 69, Freed-Hardeman 41
MIDWEST
Cincinnati 87, Howard 62
DePaul 90, Northwestern 65
Green Bay 64, Ill. Chicago 56
Marquette 76, Creighton 70
Minnesota 96, Grambling St. 64
South Dakota 100, Mount Marty 35
Wisconsin 78, St. Thomas (MN) 55
SOUTHWEST
Texas Tech 76, Incarnate Word 35
FAR WEST
Texas 88, Arizona 75

TENNIS

Open BLS De Limoges

Wednesday
At Palais des Sports de Beaublanc
Limoges, France
Purse: Euro 100,000
Surface: Hardcourt indoor
Women's Singles
Round of 32

Nigina Abduraimova, Uzbekistan, def. Susan Bandecchi, Switzerland, 6-4, 3-1, ret.
Cristina Bucsa (5), Spain, def. Nahia Berecoechea, France, 6-3, 6-1.
Alize Cornet (6), France, def. Kathinka von Deichmann, Liechtenstein, 6-2, 6-2.
Alana Smith, United States, def. Alice Robbe, France, 4-6, 6-3, 7-6 (5).

Women's Singles
Round of 16

Anastasija Sevastova, Latvia, def. Rebecca Peterson (8), Sweden, 6-2, 6-3.
Elsa Jacquemot, France, def. Arantxa Rus (3), Netherlands, 6-4, 6-4.

Quarterfinals

Natela Dzalamidze, Russia, and Angelica Moratelli, Italy, def. Bibiane Schoofs, Netherlands, and Olivia Nicholls, Britain, 4-6, 7-5, 10-5.

GOLF

World rankings

Through Dec. 10

1.	Scottie Scheffler	10.70
2.	Rory McIlroy	9.16
3.	Jon Rahm	8.16
4.	Viktor Hovland	6.96
5.	Patrick Cantlay	5.79
6.	Xander Schauffele	5.75
7.	Max Homa	4.91
8.	Matt Fitzpatrick	4.81
9.	Brian Harman	4.44
10.	Wyndham Clark	4.20
11.	Tom Kim	4.10
12.	Tyrrell Hatton	4.03
13.	Collin Morikawa	3.92
14.	Tommy Fleetwood	3.86
15.	Jordan Spieth	3.65
16.	Keegan Bradley	3.60
17.	Brooks Koepka	3.39
18.	Sepp Straka	3.31
19.	Jason Day	3.31
20.	Tony Finau	3.29
21.	Cameron Young	3.29
22.	Sam Burns	3.28
23.	Cameron Smith	3.18
24.	Rickie Fowler	3.14
25.	Justin Thomas	3.06
26.	Russell Henley	3.06
27.	Sungjae Im	2.83
28.	Ryan Fox	2.81

DEALS

Wednesday's transactions

BASEBALL
Major League Baseball
American League

BOSTON RED SOX — Agreed to terms with RHP Cooper Criswell on a one-year contract.
CHICAGO WHITE SOX — Agreed to terms with RHP Erick Fedde on a two-year contract. Designated RHP Yohan Ramirez for assignment.
LOS ANGELES ANGELS — Agreed to terms with RHPs Luis Garcia and Adam Cimber on one-year contracts.

National League

ATLANTA BRAVES — Sent SS David Fletcher outright to Gwinnett (IL).
NEW YORK METS — Agreed to terms with RHP Jorge López on a one-year contract.

BASKETBALL
National Basketball Association

NEW YORK KNICKS — Waived G Dylan Windler.

FOOTBALL
National Football League

ARIZONA CARDINALS — Designated CB Bobby Price to return from injured reserve to practice. Signed WR Andre Baccellia to the practice squad.
BALTIMORE RAVENS — Signed QB Malik Cunningham. Placed WR Devin Duvernay on injured reserve.
CAROLINA PANTHERS — Signed Chris Pierce to the practice squad.
CHICAGO BEARS — Placed DE Yannick Ngakoue on injured reserve.
CLEVELAND BROWNS — Placed S Grant Delpit on injured reserve. Signed S Duron Harmon to the active roster from the practice squad and T Joey Fisher to the practice squad.
DALLAS COWBOYS — Designated OL Billy Price and DL Viliami Fehoko to return from injured reserve to practice.
DETROIT LIONS — Signed DT Chris Smith to the practice squad.
HOUSTON TEXANS — Designated K Ka'imi Fairbairn to return from injured reserve to practice.
JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS — Designated WR Jamal Agnew to return from injured reserve to practice.
LOS ANGLES RAMS — Signed TE Miller Forristall to the practice squad.
MIAMI DOLPHINS — Signed OL Jonotthan Harrison to the active roster. Placed OL Connor Williams on injured reserve. Signed OL Matt Skura to the practice squad.
MINNESOTA VIKINGS — Signed G Henry Byrd to the practice squad.
NEW ORLEANS SAINTS — Signed RB James Robinson to the practice squad.
NEW YORK JETS — Signed OT Obinna Eze to the practice squad.
TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS — Promoted WR David Moore from the practice squad to the active roster. Signed LS Evan Deckers and CB Keenan Isaac to the practice squad.
TENNESSEE TITANS — Signed DL Quinton Bohanna from the Detroit's practice squad and DL Keondre Coburn from Kansas City's practice squad to the active roster. Placed CB Kristian Fulton and DL Kyle Peko on injured reserve.
WASHINGTON COMMANDERS — Designated OL Saahdiq Charles to return from injured reserve to practice. Placed LB Jamin Davis on injured reserve. Waived CB Kyu Kelly and DB Danny Johnson on waivers.

HOCKEY
National Hockey League

BOSTON BRUINS — Placed D Jakub Zboril on waivers.
BUFFALO SABRES — Reassigned F Brett Murray to Rochester (AHL).
CAROLINA HURRICANES — Reassigned C Blake Murray to Allen (ECHL).
MONTREAL CANADIENS — Recalled F Emil Heineman from Laval (AHL).
NEW YORK ISLANDERS — Recalled D Grant Hutton from Bridgeport (AHL).
NEW YORK RANGERS — Assigned G Olof Lindblom to Cincinnati (ECHL) from Hartford (AHL).
OTTAWA SENATORS — Recalled D Jacob Larsson from Belleville (AHL). Returned LW Jiri Smejkal to Belleville. Reassigned G Leevi Merilainen and D Donovan Sebrango to Allen (ECHL) from Belleville (AHL).
TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING — Recalled F Bennett MacArthur from Orlando (ECHL).
WINNIPEG JETS — Recalled C Dominic Toninato from Manitoba (AHL) loan. Assigned D Dmitri Kuzmin to Norfolk (ECHL) from Manitoba (AHL).

SOCCER
Major League Soccer

NASHVILLE SC — Traded two 2024 international roster spots to NYFC for $325,000 for 2024 in general allocation money (GAM); two spots to Charlotte FC for $300,000 in 2024 (GAM) and $25,000 in 2025 (GAM) and one spot to St. Louis City SC in exchange for $175,000 in 2024 (GAM).
SAN DIEGO FC — Signed G Duran Ferree to a four-year contract through 2027 with a club option for 2028.

National Women's Soccer League

ORLANDO PRIDE — Signed M Angelina Alonso Costantino to a three-year contract.

Dodgers welcome Ohtani

By Beth Harris
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — The Los Angeles Dodgers welcomed Shohei Ohtani to Hollywood.

The biggest superstar in baseball was formally introduced by the team at a news conference Thursday.

A unique two-way star as both a hitter and pitcher, the 29-year-old Japanese sensation left the Los Angeles Angels as a free agent after six years. He's moving 30 miles up Interstate 5 after the Dodgers outbid the competition by offering a $700 million, 10-year contract in a deal announced Monday.

Ohtani

It was Ohtani's first time speaking with the media since Aug. 9, two weeks before a pitching injury that required surgery and will keep him off the mound until 2025. He had the operation on Sept. 19, but the nature of the surgery was not fully announced. Ohtani had Tommy John surgery on Oct. 1, 2018.

The two-time AL MVP has a .274 batting average with 171 homers, 437 RBIs and 86 stolen bases along with a 39-19 record with a 3.01 ERA and 608 strikeouts in 481 2/3 innings. Ohtani has 34.7 Wins Above Replacement (WAR), per Baseball Reference.

"He's got that edge where he's not afraid of any pitcher," Dodgers reliever Joe Kelly said. "Especially in the playoffs, you need a guy like that who obviously is not afraid and wants to be the star in a big moment."

Ohtani's unusual contract calls for annual salaries of $70 million and of each year's salary, $68 million is deferred with no interest, payable in equal installments each July 1 from 2034-43. He also can opt out of the deal if either controlling owner Mark Walter or president of baseball operations Andrew Friedman no longer is with the team, a person told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity Wednesday because the terms were not announced.

Kelly is switching uniform numbers, opening No. 17 for Ohtani.

"Our goal is the World Series every year," Kelly said, "so if you could put in players who aren't afraid of the moment, it goes a long way here."

NHL/OLYMPICS

Carousel of fired coaches takes toll

Berube was third let go this season

Associated Press

EDMONTON, Alberta — Craig Berube led the St. Louis Blues to a Stanley Cup in 2019. On Tuesday, he became the third NHL coach fired this season.

For players, that coaching carousel can complicate relationships on and off the ice.

Edmonton's Connor McDavid knows a bit about it. He has played for five coaches in his nine NHL seasons. Most recently, Jay Woodcroft was let go last month after a disastrous start.

"It's very hard," McDavid, the Edmonton Oilers captain, told The Canadian Press. "Professional sports — people sometimes forget the human side of it. There's a relationship there.

"These are people with families and it's hard."

New York Rangers coach Gerard Gallant was let go in May. Rangers captain Jacob Trouba said those types of connections don't just go away.

"You build friendships in a way," Trouba said. "We go through a lot ups and downs. Going to the conference final with (Gallant in 2022), we have a lot of great memories. He's not someone out of your life and gone forever."

Often, key moments are tied to the coach.

"He was the coach when I was named captain. I'll always remember these things and it will always be a part of my career," Trouba said. "That's not something you just push out the door and forget about."

The Toronto Maple Leafs fired Kyle Dubas as general manager in May. Dubas played a key role in bringing John Tavares to Toronto in free agency.

Dubas was there when Tavares suffered a gruesome injury in the 2021 playoffs, keeping Tavares' family up-to-date in those anxious moments after he was stretchered off the ice.

"There's always going to be a strong relationship between him and myself and other guys he had a big influence on," Tavares said. "As time goes on, there's more appreciation, more understanding."

Maple Leafs defenseman Morgan Rielly said he spoke with Dubas, who quickly joined the Pittsburgh Penguins as their president of hockey operations, following the change.

"I've probably felt that with him leaving more than I have in the past," Rielly said. "Just part of the business."

Seattle Kraken GM and Hall of Famer Ron Francis said players feel some guilt when a coach is fired.

"Didn't get the job done and that's what cost him his job," he said. "Everybody goes into this knowing you can be traded or fired at any point.

"Nature of the beast."

It doesn't make it any easier.

"Definitely takes a toll," McDavid said. "But just makes you cherish those moments that you have with your teammates and your coaches all the more."

TONY AVELAR/AP

St. Louis Blues coach Craig Berube watches from the beach during the first period against the Sharks on Nov. 16 in San Jose, Calif. Berube was fired Tuesday after a disappointing 13-14-1 start to the season.

Russian athletes faced minimal drug testing

BY EDDIE PELLS

Associated Press

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. — Two of Russia's top swimmers have been drug tested by their country's anti-doping agency only twice apiece in 2023, part of a larger trend in the country that adds an extra layer of uncertainty to the IOC's decision to allow some Russian athletes to compete next year at the Paris Olympics.

The Russian Anti-Doping Agency lists on its website the number of tests it gives to individual athletes, in following a best practice it had long been urged to adapt. It has administered some 10,500 tests in 2023 — a number the IOC highlighted in a memorandum signed by key members of the Olympic movement at a summit last week which "emphasized that doping controls in Russia continue."

Among those tests, only two each were given to defending 100 and 200-meter backstroke champion Evgeniy Rylov and 50-meter backstroke world-record holder Kliment Kolesnikov.

Another medal contender, Evgeniia Chikunova, has been tested three times by the agency. A pair of Russian silver medalists in fencing, Pavel Sukhov and Nikita Glazkov, have received only one test each in 2023. Five gymnasts who led the Russians to gold medals in the men's and women's team competitions have, combined, been tested nine times.

All these athletes still have to qualify for the Paris Games, and a big part of that will include determining whether their sports — and the IOC — will allow them to compete.

Rylov, for instance, has said he would not sign a declaration stating he does not support the war in Ukraine, which is a requirement set by the IOC for athletes to compete. Gymnasts are in limbo due to differing postures taken by international and European governing organizations in that sport.

America's anti-doping chief, U.S. Anti-Doping Agency CEO Travis Tygart, worries about a level playing field in Paris.

"Things are not as they are being portrayed — to say that Russian athletes have been held to the same standards as other athletes is a slap in the face to clean athletes," Tygart said.

Some of America's top athletes — such as Noah Lyles (7), Sha'Carri Richardson (6), Ryan Murphy (9) and Katie Ledecky (9) — have been tested double or triple the number of times as their potential Russian competitors. Simone Biles has been tested four times in 2023, which is more than any of Russia's top gymnasts.

Thorough testing of athletes by their national anti-doping agencies, especially at times when they are not competing, is considered a cornerstone of an effective anti-doping system. At least three to five tests is the minimum standard to ensure effectiveness of an "athlete biological passport" — an advanced data set that tracks athletes' blood samples over time to detect doping.

The rigor of Russia's testing during a period in which its anti-doping agency has been deemed noncompliant with World Anti-Doping Agency rules has been a troubling issue in the near decade since Russia's state-sponsored scheme to dope athletes for the Sochi Olympics in 2014 was revealed.

Those questions persisted in the months heading into the Tokyo Olympics, when testing numbers decreased sharply across the globe because of restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Among the statistics shared by the IOC last week was that the International Testing Agency, which tests athletes from various countries in several sports, conducted "well over" 400 out-of-competition tests on Russians in 2023 — a number that would augment the 10,500 conducted by the country's own agency.

But based on an analysis by USADA, the ITA tests have limited reach in any country. USADA recently concluded that tests done by international bodies only covered about 11% of U.S. athletes on its Olympic team, while the other 89% were subject only to testing done by the agency itself.

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Boston	27	18	5	4	40	88	67
Florida	28	17	9	2	36	85	73
Toronto	26	15	6	5	35	94	84
Detroit	28	15	9	4	34	106	92
Tampa Bay	30	13	12	5	31	96	106
Montreal	29	12	13	4	28	79	101
Buffalo	30	12	15	3	27	85	101
Ottawa	23	11	12	0	22	79	74

Metropolitan Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
N.Y. Rangers	27	19	7	1	39	89	78
N.Y. Islanders	28	14	7	7	35	87	90
Philadelphia	28	15	10	3	33	85	76
Washington	25	14	8	3	31	64	72
New Jersey	27	15	11	1	31	94	96
Carolina	28	15	12	1	31	92	91
Pittsburgh	28	13	12	3	29	83	74
Columbus	30	9	16	5	23	87	106

Western Conference

Central Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Colorado	29	18	9	2	38	105	88
Winnipeg	28	17	9	2	36	91	74
Dallas	27	16	8	3	35	95	84
Nashville	29	16	13	0	32	90	88
Arizona	28	13	13	2	28	90	86
St. Louis	28	13	14	1	27	80	94
Minnesota	26	10	12	4	24	81	88
Chicago	28	9	18	1	19	66	98

Pacific Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Vegas	30	20	5	5	45	105	73
Vancouver	29	19	9	1	39	111	74
Los Angeles	26	16	6	4	36	94	65
Edmonton	26	13	12	1	27	92	85
Calgary	29	11	14	4	26	87	104
Seattle	30	9	14	7	25	78	101
San Jose	29	9	17	3	21	64	117
Anaheim	28	10	18	0	20	74	96

Note: Two points for a win, one point for overtime loss. Top three teams in each division and two wild cards per conference advance to playoffs.

Wednesday's games

Pittsburgh 4, Montreal 3, SO
New Jersey 2, Boston 1, OT
N.Y. Islanders 4, Anaheim 3
Colorado 5, Buffalo 1
Winnipeg 5, Los Angeles 2

Thursday's games

Columbus at Toronto
Washington at Philadelphia
Carolina at Detroit
Calgary at Minnesota
Ottawa at St. Louis
Tampa Bay at Edmonton
Chicago at Seattle
Florida at Vancouver

Friday's games

Anaheim at N.Y. Rangers
Boston at N.Y. Islanders
Nashville at Carolina
Ottawa at Dallas
San Jose at Arizona
Buffalo at Vegas

Saturday's games

Vancouver at Minnesota
Colorado at Winnipeg
Detroit at Philadelphia
N.Y. Islanders at Montreal
N.Y. Rangers at Boston
New Jersey at Columbus
Pittsburgh at Toronto
Dallas at St. Louis
Washington at Nashville
Buffalo at Arizona
Florida at Edmonton
Los Angeles at Seattle
Tampa Bay at Calgary

Sunday's games

Vancouver at Chicago
Washington at Carolina
Anaheim at New Jersey
Ottawa at Vegas
San Jose at Colorado

Scoring leaders

Through Wednesday

	GP	G	A	PTS
Nikita Kucherov, TB	29	19	28	47
J.T. Miller, VAN	29	15	27	42
Nathan MacKinnon, COL	29	12	29	41
Quinn Hughes, VAN	29	9	30	39
David Pastrnak, BOS	27	16	23	39
Artemi Panarin, NYR	27	16	23	39
Connor McDavid, EDM	24	10	28	38
Cale Makar, COL	27	8	29	37
Elias Pettersson, VAN	29	11	26	37
Mikko Rantanen, COL	29	14	23	37
Sam Reinhart, FLA	28	17	20	37

NBA

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	17	5	.773	—
Philadelphia	16	7	.696	1½
New York	13	10	.565	4½
Brooklyn	13	10	.565	4½
Toronto	10	14	.417	8

Southeast Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	16	7	.696	—
Miami	14	10	.583	2½
Atlanta	9	14	.391	7
Charlotte	7	15	.318	8½
Washington	3	20	.130	13

Central Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Milwaukee	17	7	.708	—
Indiana	13	9	.591	3
Cleveland	13	11	.542	4
Chicago	9	16	.360	8½
Detroit	2	22	.083	15

Western Conference

Southwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Dallas	15	8	.652	—
Houston	12	9	.571	2
New Orleans	14	11	.560	2
Memphis	6	17	.261	9
San Antonio	3	20	.130	12

Northwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Minnesota	17	5	.773	—
Oklahoma City	15	7	.682	2
Denver	16	9	.640	2½
Utah	8	16	.333	10
Portland	6	16	.273	11

Pacific Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Lakers	15	10	.600	—
Sacramento	13	9	.591	½
L.A. Clippers	13	10	.565	1
Phoenix	13	11	.542	1½
Golden State	10	13	.435	4

Wednesday's games

New Orleans 142, Washington 122
Philadelphia 129, Detroit 111
Miami 115, Charlotte 104
Toronto 135, Atlanta 128
L.A. Lakers 122, San Antonio 119
Houston 117, Memphis 104
Milwaukee 140, Indiana 126
Brooklyn 116, Phoenix 112
Utah 117, New York 113

Thursday's games

Chicago at Miami
Cleveland at Boston
Minnesota at Dallas
Brooklyn at Denver
Oklahoma City at Sacramento
Utah at Portland
Golden State at L.A. Clippers

Friday's games

Detroit at Philadelphia
Indiana at Washington
New Orleans at Charlotte
Atlanta at Toronto
L.A. Lakers at San Antonio
Orlando at Boston
Houston at Memphis
New York at Phoenix

Saturday's games

Detroit at Milwaukee
Philadelphia at Charlotte
Atlanta at Cleveland
Chicago at Miami
Indiana at Minnesota
Brooklyn at Golden State
Dallas at Portland
Oklahoma City at Denver
Utah at Sacramento
New York at L.A. Clippers

Scoring leaders

Through Wednesday

	G	FG	FT	PTS	AVG
Embiid, PHI	20	224	205	675	33.8
Antetknmpo, MIL	23	276	176	737	32.0
Doncic, DAL	22	240	139	705	32.0
Durant, PHO	20	211	149	616	30.8
Gil.-Alex., OKC	21	236	144	639	30.4
Fox, SAC	17	176	96	501	29.5
Curry, GS	21	187	132	612	29.1
Mitchell, CLE	19	179	104	520	27.4
Tatum, BOS	22	209	118	602	27.4
Jokic, DEN	24	256	112	653	27.2
Young, ATL	21	175	157	571	27.2
Haliburton, IND	20	182	82	521	26.1
Maxey, PHI	22	197	111	575	26.1
James, LAL	23	218	93	582	25.3

Warriors' Green suspended indefinitely

By Janie McCauley
Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Golden State Warriors forward Draymond Green was suspended indefinitely by the NBA on Wednesday, less than 24 hours after he hit Phoenix Suns center Jusuf Nurkic in the face and received a Flagrant 2 foul and ejection.

The league said the penalty handed down by operations chief Joe Dumars begins immediately. This is already Green's second suspension this season.

"He will be required to meet certain league and team conditions before he returns to play," the league said.

The NBA noted that "this outcome takes into account Green's repeated history of unsportsmanlike acts."

The Warriors didn't have a statement Wednesday but said Green's suspension would be addressed at shootaround Thursday in Los Angeles ahead of a game against the Clippers.

The 33-year-old Green, part of four Warriors championships, was ejected for the 18th time in his career — most among active NBA players.

As the Warriors were inbounding the ball near their own bench early in the third quarter in a 119-116 loss at Phoenix, Green and Nurkic were fighting for position near the baseline corner and the two tangled. Green appeared to slip slightly then pivoted around right into Nurkic with his right arm connecting with the big man's face.

Rick Scuteri/AP

Golden State Warriors forward Draymond Green, left, was suspended indefinitely by the NBA after he was ejected Tuesday for hitting Phoenix Suns center Jusuf Nurkic in the face and receiving a Flagrant 2 foul.

Nurkic fell to the ground instantly and stayed down briefly before getting up to remain in the game.

"That had nothing to do with basketball," Nurkic said. "I'm just out there trying to play basketball."

Green was suspended five games by the NBA for putting Minnesota's Rudy Gobert into a headlock during an altercation in November.

There is little precedent for an indefinite suspension. In 2010, then-Commissioner David Stern suspended Washington guard Gilbert Arenas indefinitely for bringing firearms into the team locker room. That was a precursor to what became a 50-game suspension for Arenas, after Stern said "his ongoing conduct ... led me to conclude that he is not currently fit to take the court in an NBA game."

Last season during training camp, Green took a leave of absence from the 2022 NBA champions in what coach Steve Kerr called a "mutual decision" after the star forward violently punched then-teammate Jordan Poole in the face. Neither player was injured.

New Warriors general manager Mike Dunleavy said when he got the job after last season ended that he was committed to keeping Green, who then shortly after received a new $100 million, four-year contract in late June. Kerr has always said he loves Green's fiery, push-the-limits style of play — but it will be interesting to see how both sides come through this latest discipline.

Bucks, Pacers dispute Giannis' record ball

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Giannis Antetokounmpo exchanged heated words with members of the Indiana staff and raced toward the Pacers' locker room Wednesday night as the teams squared off in a hallway in a dispute over the game ball following the Milwaukee star's franchise-record 64-point performance.

After the Bucks' 140-126 victory, Antetokounmpo had an animated discussion with Indiana star Tyrese Haliburton and other Pacers before rushing from the court toward the Indiana locker room in search of the ball.

The Bucks wanted the game ball for Antetokounmpo. Indiana coach Rick Carlisle said the Pacers took the ball for Oscar Tshiebwe, who scored his first official NBA point.

That led to a confrontation between members of the teams in the arena hallway. Afterward, there still was confusion over who had which game ball.

"I have no idea. I'm not going to lie," Antetokounmpo said. "I have no idea. I don't know. I really don't know. I have a ball, but I don't know if it's the game ball. It doesn't feel like the game ball to me. It feels like a brand new ball. I can tell. I played, what, 35 minutes today. I know how the game ball felt. The ball that I have, which I'll take and I'll give it to my mom for sure, but I don't know if it's actually the game ball."

Morry Gash/AP

The Milwaukee Bucks' Giannis Antetokounmpo argues with an Indiana Pacers coach after a game Wednesday in Milwaukee.

One video appears to show the actual game ball being collected by a member of the Bucks' staff. Carlisle said the Pacers apparently have a reserve game ball they took after the game.

Bucks guard Cameron Payne said he was one of the players who went down the tunnel.

"Man wanted that ball," Payne said. "I'm following my team, helping my teammate out. It was just a lot of commotion, honestly. He just wanted his ball, man."

Carlisle said a number of the Bucks were in the hallway near the Indiana locker room and a confrontation occurred, with Indiana's general manager getting elbowed in the ribs.

"What happened after the game was unfortunate," Carlisle said. "There was a misunderstanding about the game ball. ... We were not thinking about Giannis' franchise record, so we grabbed the ball.

"A couple of minutes later, several of their players ended up in our hallway, and there was a big, I don't know what to call it — a fracas, melee, whatever. I don't think any punches were landed, but my general manager got elbowed in the ribs by one of their players. He certainly had a bruised rib and who knows if it's anything more than that. Unfortunate situation.

"We don't need the official game ball. There's two game balls there. We could have taken the other one, but it didn't need to escalate to that. Really unfortunate."

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

MIKE STEWART/AP

Coastal Carolina quarterback Grayson McCall is going to transfer to N.C. State. He was the Sun Belt offensive player of the year three times, but he hasn't played since getting injured on Oct. 16.

Sun Belt star QB McCall heading to Power 5 Wolfpack

Associated Press

Quarterback Grayson McCall announced Wednesday he'll transfer from Coastal Carolina to North Carolina State following an injury-plagued season in which he appeared in only seven games, and former Wolfpack quarterback MJ Morris is heading to Maryland.

Meanwhile, Texas backup quarterback Maalik Murphy told ESPN he intends to enter the portal and will not be with the third-ranked Longhorns for their College Football Playoff matchup with No. 2 Washington in the Sugar Bowl on Jan. 1.

Murphy started two games for Texas this season when Quinn Ewers was out with an injured shoulder. The second-year player and former four-star recruit has passed for 477 yards, three touchdowns and three interceptions.

Texas still has highly touted freshman Arch Manning to back up Ewers throughout the postseason.

McCall, a three-time Sun Belt Conference player of the year, will join a Power Five program that has won at least eight games in six of the last seven seasons. He will go into his final season in line to replace Brennan Armstrong as the Wolfpack's starter.

McCall started the Chanticleers' first seven games this season. He sustained a head injury in the fourth quarter against Arkansas State on Oct. 21 and hasn't played since.

In 42 career games, McCall has completed 70% of his passes for 10,005 yards with 88 touchdowns and 14 interceptions.

Morris, a second-year player, started four games for North Carolina State in the middle of the season, replacing Armstrong.

He then asked out of the lineup so he could redshirt the rest of the season and save a year of eligibility. Morris passed for 719 yards, seven touchdowns and five interceptions as the Wolfpack went 3-1.

The day after former Duke quarterback Riley Leonard committed to Notre Dame, Blue Devils teammate defensive end R.J. Oben decided to join him in South Bend, Ind.

Also, committing Wednesday was former Arkansas running back Raheim Sanders to South Carolina.

Stanford's Benjamin Yurosek, one of the top tight ends in the Pac-12 and a three-year starter, entered the transfer portal after an injury-shortened season in which he made 16 catches for 239 yards. He had a combined 92 catches for more than 1,000 yards in 2021 and '22.

Two-year starting defensive backs Decamerion Richardson of Mississippi State, Tamarion McDonald of Tennessee and Brandon Johnson of Duke also are in the portal, as is Wisconsin linebacker Jordan Turner.

Georgia freshman linebacker Marvin Jones Jr., a five-star recruit, also entered the portal.

Bowls on AFN

Celebration Bowl
Atlanta
Howard (6-5, MEAC)
vs. Florida A&M (11-1, SWAC)
AFN-Atlantic
6 p.m. Saturday CET
2 a.m. Sunday JKT

Top players

Howard: QB Quinton Williams, 2,158 yards passing, 16 touchdowns, four interceptions.

Florida A&M: LB Isaiah Major, 100 tackles, two sacks.

Notable

Howard: The Bison won the Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference title with a 14-7 win over Morgan State.

Florida A&M: The Rattlers enter the bowl with a 10-game winning streak after defeating Prairie View A&M 35-14 for its first-ever Southwestern Athletic Conference title.

Bowl history

It's the first time these teams have reached the Celebration Bowl, an annual matchup between the MEAC and SWAC.

COLIN E BRALEY/AP

Texas Tech running back Tahj Brooks rushed for 1,43 yards and nine touchdowns this season, resulting in a trip to the Independence Bowl.

Cure Bowl
Orlando, Fla.
Appalachian St. (8-5, Sun Belt) vs. Miami, Ohio (11-2, Mid-American)
AFN-Atlantic
9:30 p.m. Saturday CET
5:30 a.m. Sunday JKT

Top players

Appalachian State: QB Joey Aguilar, 3,546 passing yards, 33 touchdowns, nine interceptions.

Miami: LB Matt Salopek, was MAC defensive player of the year with 134 tackles, 8.5 stops behind the line.

Notable

Appalachian State: The Sun Belt East Division winners had their five-game winning streak stopped in the league title game, 49-23, at Troy,

Miami: The Redhawks defeated then-No. 23 Toledo, 23-14, to win the conference championship,

Bowl history

Appalachian State: First appearance in the Cure Bowl, eighth bowl game in program history.

Miami: First time in the Cure Bowl, 15th bowl appearance in team history.

LA Bowl
Inglewood, Calif.
Boise State (8-5, Mountain West) vs. UCLA (7-5, Pac-12)
AFN-Atlantic
1:30 a.m. Sunday CET
9:30 a.m. Sunday JKT

Top players

Boise State: RB Ashton Jeanty, 1,113 rushing yards, 13 touchdowns.

UCLA: DL Laiatu Latu, tied for fourth nationally with 13 sacks.

Notable

Boise State: Spencer Danielson guided the Broncos to three straight wins as interim coach after Andy Avalos was fired.

UCLA: The Bruins led the nation against the run, allowing 69.6 yards per game, and were 11th nationally in total defense, allowing 299 ypg.

Bowl history

Boise State: First appearance in the LA Bowl and 21st consecutive bowl appearance as an FBS program.

UCLA: First appearance in the LA Bowl and 38th bowl appearance overall.

Independence Bowl
Shreveport, La.
California (6-6, Pac-12) vs. Texas Tech (6-6, Big 12)
AFN-Sports
5:30 a.m. Sunday CET
1:30 p.m. Sunday JKT

Top players

Cal: RB Jaydn Ott, Pac-12-best 1,260 rushing yards, 11 touchdowns.

Texas Tech: RB Tahj Brooks, fourth nationally with 1,443 rushing yards, nine touchdowns. He's returning for his final season of eligibility.

Notable

Cal: The Bears lost four straight to ranked teams, then won their final three games to get bowl eligible.

Texas Tech: The Red Raiders won their first three November games to achieve bowl eligibility before losing 57-7 to College Football Playoff-bound Texas.

Bowl history

Cal: First appearance in the Independence Bowl, 25th bowl overall.

Texas Tech: Third Independence Bowl and 41st bowl appearance overall.

MARK J. TERRILL/AP

UCLA defensive lineman Laiatu Latu, center, had 13 sacks this season and led a Bruins defense that was 11th in the country, giving up just 299 yards a game, including just 69 rushing yards.

COLLEGE

Athletes who transfer twice can play after judge sets aside rule

By John Raby
Associated Press

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — College athletes who were denied the chance to play immediately after transferring a second time can return to competition — for now — after a federal judge issued a 14-day temporary restraining order Wednesday against the NCAA.

U.S. District Judge John Preston Bailey in northern West Virginia issued the order against the NCAA from enforcing the transfer rule. A lawsuit filed by West Virginia and six other states alleged the rule's waiver process violated federal antitrust law. The order clears the way for athletes to play during the two-week period and also ensures that schools won't be punished for allowing it.

The NCAA said in a statement it would comply with the order and notify schools.

The ruling comes while the transfer window is open for football and creates an opportunity for players who have already transferred using their so-called one-time exception for immediate eligibility to enter the portal again and be cleared to compete next season.

A hearing on the restraining order is scheduled for Dec. 27.

NCAA rules allow underclassmen to transfer once without having to sit out a year. But an additional transfer as an undergraduate generally requires the NCAA to grant a waiver allowing the athlete to compete immediately. Without it, the athlete would have to sit out for a year at the new school.

Last January, the NCAA implemented stricter guidelines for granting those waivers on a case-by-case basis.

Bailey wrote that the transfer rule "is the exact kind of unreasonable restraint of trade within labor markets that the relevant antitrust laws prohibit" and that the plaintiffs "have a strong likelihood of success."

The states involved in seeking the restraining order were Colorado, Illinois, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Tennessee and West Virginia.

It wasn't immediately clear whether any of the affected players would try to compete during the 14-day window.

West Virginia basketball player RaeQuan Battle transferred this season from Montana State after previously playing at Washington and has been sitting out.

"I'm in the gym every single day with the team, with the blood, sweat and tears with them," Battle told the court Wednesday. "When the ball is thrown up and that tipoff starts, I'm not suited up. That's what hurts me the most."

Battle, who grew up on the Tulalip Indian Reservation in the state of Washington, has said his mental health is a big reason why he came to West Virginia. Battle said he has lost "countless people" to drugs, alcohol and COVID-19.

After Battle visited West Virginia, he learned that now-coach Josh Eilert had lived on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota with his mother following his parents' divorce and felt a connection with the coach.

West Virginia's next game is Saturday in Springfield, Mass., against UMass. Battle has the opportunity to play in at least three games before the 14-day window ends.

"Welcome to the party," West Virginia forward Quinn Slazinski said on social media.

Chris Carlson/AP

After starring in the NCAA Tournament for Montana State, RaeQuan Battle now attends West Virginia but has yet to play this season.

Rick Scuteri/AP

Arizona guard Kylan Boswell looks to shoot against Wisconsin on Dec. 9 in Tucson, Ariz. The top-ranked Wildcats will have arguably their toughest game this season when they face No. 3 Purdue on Saturday.

TOP 25 THIS WEEK

No. 1 Arizona, No. 3 Purdue meet in marquee matchup

By Dave Skretta
Associated Press

Top-ranked Arizona is headed for a showdown with No. 3 Purdue on a neutral floor in Indianapolis on Saturday.

If neutral can be about 70 miles from the Boilermakers' campus in West Lafayette, Ind.

That should hardly bother the Wildcats, though, who solidified their hold on No. 1 in the AP men's college basketball poll Monday by receiving all but one of 63 votes cast by media members. They were downright dominant in a 98-73 blowout of No. 23 Wisconsin last weekend, which Arizona coach Tommy Lloyd called "the best team we've played to this point."

Bold statement, considering Arizona already played a true road game against No. 22 Duke.

The Blue Devils, ranked second at the time, gave the Wildcats all they could handle that night at Cameron Indoor Stadium in one of the first marquee games of the college basketball season. But Arizona not only prevailed, but served notice to the basketball world that it would be a contender for the national championship in Lloyd's third season on the sideline.

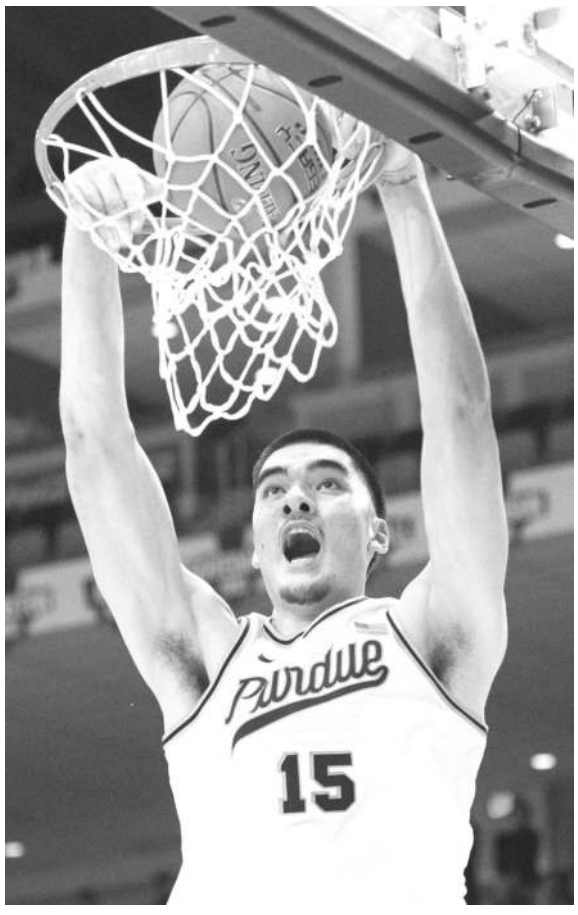
"We spend a lot of time talking about our Arizona basketball legacy," Lloyd said. "We take it really serious."

The Boilermakers, who were ranked No. 1 before ceding the top spot to the Wildcats with a loss to Northwestern, have similarly high hopes of contending for a title. And outside that lone blip in their Big Ten opener, reigning national player of the year Zach Edey and the Boilermakers have lived up to the expectations, including their run to the Maui Invitational title that included wins over 10th-ranked Gonzaga, No. 12 Tennessee and seventh-ranked Marquette in the title game.

In other words, they won't be intimidated by a matchup with the nation's top-ranked team in Indianapolis, either.

How evenly matched are the two teams meeting Saturday? Consider the fact that Arizona and Purdue (9-1) are the only teams in the nation that are ranked in the top nine for both adjusted offense and defense, according to the metrics at KenPom.

Both seem to be getting better by the week, too.



Christopher Katsarov, The Canadian Press/AP

Purdue center and reigning national player of the year Zach Edey has the Boilermakers again poised to make a deep run after being upset in the first round of last year's NCAA Tournament.

NFL

MARCIO JOSE SANCHEZ/AP

Broncos wide receiver Courtland Sutton makes a one-handed touchdown catch while fending off Los Angeles Chargers cornerback Michael Davis. Sutton has a career-high 10 TD receptions this season.

Broncos' Sutton making habit of difficult catches

BY ARNIE STAPLETON
Associated Press

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. — Courtland Sutton keeps topping himself, coming down with another inconceivable catch such as his toe-dragging touchdown grab against the Bills that Next Gen Stats called the most improbable catch it has ever tracked.

Or, how about his one-handed snare of Russell Wilson's 46-yard TD pass against the Chargers last weekend that he corralled despite being dragged down by a defender.

Sutton's most impressive snag, however, might just be the one he made on the sideline Sunday while catching his breath during the Broncos' 24-7 win.

Wilson was flushed from the pocket and threw the ball away toward his sideline. Nobody else so much as flinched, but Sutton, with his left hand on his hip for good measure, reached up with his right and nonchalantly snatched the football at its point.

"It was a cool little thing," Sutton said Wednesday. "I didn't think much of it. I just saw the ball coming and I said, 'I think I can catch this.' And I tried to make a play."

Amazingly, he hauled in Wilson's throw just as he has all season with the ones that did count.

Sutton's career-high 10 TD receptions are tied with Mike Evans of the Buccaneers for second in the NFL behind Miami's Tyreek Hill, who has a dozen.

Nobody has had the degree of difficulty that Sutton has in getting his 10 scores, which are the most by far he has ever had in his six NFL seasons.

Denver Broncos (7-6)
at Detroit Lions (9-4)
AFN-Sports
2:30 a.m. Sunday CET
10:30 a.m. Sunday JKT

Sutton's best season came in 2019, when he made the Pro Bowl on the heels of a solid rookie season with 72 receptions for 1,112 yards and six touchdowns.

He blew out his right knee in the 2020 opener, then caught two touchdown passes in each of the past two seasons.

Those middling numbers, along with a contract that called for base salaries of around $14 million annually through 2025, led to rampant speculation that Sutton would be traded this year.

The Broncos (7-6) certainly are glad the 2018 second-round pick from SMU stayed put. He's both effective — he leads the league with eight red zone touchdown receptions — and he's efficient: He has one TD catch for every 5.3 receptions.

Although Next Gen Stats has tried to quantify Sutton's season — calculating, for instance, that his TD against the Bills had a 97% chance of landing incomplete — coach Sean Payton needs only to believe his own eyes.

"Man, he's playing well," Payton said. "He's competitive. He's smart. He's got strong hands in traffic. And he's confident."

While Broncos fans debate which of his touchdown grabs this season was his best, Sutton said he doesn't have a favorite.

"My favorite one hasn't happened yet," he said. "I think it's coming at some point."

Still, he senses his vast collection of improbable catches is starting to exasperate opponents who defend the pass perfectly, but still end up watching him spike the ball.

"I like that. I love that. It's a fun part of the game," Sutton said. "You never know what's going to happen next."

Notes: TE Greg Dulcich practiced Wednesday for the first time in more than two months. The second-year pro has played in just two games this season and left both before halftime with pulled hamstrings, which also waylaid his rookie season. The Broncos are hoping he can return and stretch the field. "It was cool seeing him at practice today, getting out there and moving around again," Sutton said. "It's going to be even better once we get him active and get him back out on the field. I think he brings a whole different level of game plan for defenses. They have to account for him. If they try to leave him matched up with linebackers and safeties, it's not going to be a pretty day."

Turning: Praise isn't interesting to Stafford

FROM PAGE 48

He has passed for 802 yards in those three games against Arizona, Cleveland and Baltimore, completing 63% of his throws with a 111.0 quarterback rating.

But the pure numbers don't capture the exceptional nature of Stafford's play down the stretch this season, one year after serious injuries limited him to only nine games in the Rams' Super Bowl championship defense.

Even while facing the elite defenses fielded by the Browns and Ravens, Stafford has been smart, elusive, anticipatory and generally superb in the pocket while setting up targets Cooper Kupp, rookie Puka Nacua and Kyren Williams for prolific performances.

"He's played like Matthew," Rams coach Sean McVay said. "He's a great player, and you can see he's feeling healthy. He's doing a great job of distributing the football. Guys are competing hard around him and for him, and he has got great command of what he's seeing. (The last two opponents) have definitely been two of the upper-echelon defenses. I think he's played really well when you look at the fourth quarter in Seattle (in Week 11), and then the last 12 quarters when you combine Arizona, Cleveland and Baltimore."

A year ago, Stafford was already out for the season with a badly bruised spinal cord after taking 29 sacks in a half-season. Los Angeles' offensive line and pass protection have been exponentially better this year, and Stafford has been sacked only four times in the last five games. He has missed just one game this season, due to a thumb injury.

The 35-year-old Stafford's talents were on full display in the rain last weekend at Baltimore, where he showed off his incredible array of arm angles — looking as comfortable as Aaron Rodgers with his occasional sidearm throws — and signature misdirections while also demonstrating his love for an occasional risk-it-all throw into a defense.

Washington Commanders (4-9)
at Los Angeles Rams (6-7)
AFN-Atlantic
10 p.m. Sunday CET
6 a.m. Monday JKT

His best pass might have been a flawless fling through a tiny window to Nacua for a 23-yard gain in the fourth quarter, but he also hit both the star rookie and Super Bowl MVP Kupp with a series of clutch passes against Baltimore's dominant defense.

Although the Rams lost on a controversial overtime punt return by the Ravens, Stafford had one of the best performances in his three years with Los Angeles.

A week earlier against Cleveland, Stafford did many of the same things in an impressive win. On his most memorable play against the Browns, Stafford stepped up to the line and called an audible before firing a breathtaking long pass to Nacua, who caught it in stride for a 70-yard touchdown.

Stafford isn't interested in praise or criticism, so he metaphorically shrugs off the past few weeks with the confidence of a quarterback already wearing a Super Bowl ring, but still hungry to chase another.

"I'm always trying to improve, trying to get better week to week," Stafford said. "Each game is unique, what's asked of me. My job for that week is always to go out there and play at a high level, but sometimes it's different. Just proud of the guys."

NICK WASS/AP

Rams quarterback Matthew Stafford (9) celebrates a touchdown catch by tight end Davis Allen during an overtime loss to the Ravens.

NFL

CHRIS SZAGOLA/AP

Buffalo Bills defensive tackle Ed Oliver leads the team's defensive linemen in having played 67% of this season's snaps so far.

Oliver solidifies role as Bills' defensive anchor

BY JOHN WAWROW
Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — Ed Oliver still hasn't forgotten about the critics who questioned the Buffalo Bills for overspending when they offered the defensive tackle a four-year, $68 million contract extension in June, nor the vow he made shortly after signing the deal.

"I feel like I'm going to outplay the contract, to be honest," Oliver said at the time. "Just sit back and watch."

Three months into the season, the fifth-year player has solidified his role and validated his paycheck by nearly becoming an every-down player in anchoring Buffalo's defensive front. Oliver leads Bills defensive linemen in having played 67% of this season's snaps, and he's given the pass rush an added dimension with his ability to pressure the pocket from the middle.

Oliver's 6½ sacks are already a career high, and tied for third in the NFL among interior linemen. And he's been just as formidable against the run in leading Buffalo's linemen with 43 tackles.

So, how do you like him now?

"When you get paid and people are saying, 'Why you pay the guy?' it kind of does something to you," Oliver said Wednesday as Buffalo (7-6) prepared to host the Dallas Cowboys (10-3) on Sunday.

"I just internalized that and just used it to fuel the fire. I know I was a good player. I know I was one of the best players that came out of my draft class," he added. "And so that's mainly been on my mind, and just go prove myself that I deserve to be talked about."

Selected ninth overall in 2019 out of Houston, Oliver then proceeded to list the other first-round defensive tackles in his draft class, including the Jets' Quinnen Williams (chosen third), Miami's Christian Wilkins (13th), the Giants' Dexter Lawrence (17th) and Tennessee's Jeffery Simmons (19th).

Dallas Cowboys (10-3)
at Buffalo Bills (7-6)
AFN-Sports
10:25 p.m. Sunday CET
6:25 a.m. Monday JKT

"When you talk about them guys, you need to talk about me, too," Oliver said.

The past knocks against Oliver focused mostly on his size — at 6-foot-1 and 287 pounds, he's comparatively on the smaller end among NFL tackles — and inconsistencies.

Days before Oliver signed his extension, defensive line coach Eric Washington challenged Oliver to be better at anticipating plays by thinking rather than merely reacting.

On Monday, Washington praised the 26-year-old Oliver for his leadership qualities. A few weeks before that, the coach was crediting him for his consistency.

"From my vantage point, it's a person maturing, a person that's really knowing where to invest and how to invest, and investing with a certain level of attention to detail," Washington said. "He's taken a pretty significant jump in my mind."

Bills center Mitch Morse said Oliver has a knack for pushing the pocket by always moving toward the quarterback.

"He's not making a move that's going to be stagnant while moving forward," Morse said. "His ability to go from lateral quickness to vertical quickness and then having the power on impact — it's just so fast."

Samuel overcomes 'awful' season to star for 49ers

BY JOSH DUBOW
Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — Deebo Samuel can be his own harshest critic, as evidenced by his description of his 2022 season for the San Francisco 49ers as "awful."

No one would say that about the way Samuel has been playing of late this season as he has regained the form that made him one of the NFL's most dynamic playmakers in 2021 and has helped carry San Francisco to the top of the NFC standings.

"I think he's at the top of his game right now," coach Kyle Shanahan said.

That's saying a lot considering how effective he was during his All-Pro 2021 season, when he had 77 catches for 1,405 yards and six touchdowns to go along with 59 carries for 365 yards and eight scores. His 1,770 yards from scrimmage that season have only been topped by Hall of Famer Jerry Rice in Niners history.

But an offseason contract dispute led to Samuel coming into camp out of shape. He never fully recovered, leading to his negative portrayal of his 2022 performance when he had 864 yards from scrimmage and five TDs. Samuel said he was "sluggish" last season and vowed never to put that kind of performance on tape again.

San Francisco 49ers (10-3)
at Arizona Cardinals (3-10)
AFN-Sports2
10 p.m. Sunday CET
6 a.m. Monday JKT

"For him to say he was awful, c'mon now, that's probably a little much," linebacker Fred Warner said. "But the level that he's playing at now is unbelievable. We need it from him. He's such a big-time game changer, playmaker for us. ... He's been doing an incredible job. I'm not surprised the way that he works and everything that he's earned. I'm really happy for him."

Samuel had a big game early in Week 3 against the Giants before being slowed by injuries for a few weeks. His play picked up after San Francisco returned from a bye in Week 9 and he has been playing as well as ever the past few weeks.

"Since coming back from injury, I can see the level of play just getting better and better, week in and week out," he said. "Just taking it a day at a time, to be the best me I can be for the team."

Samuel had 138 yards from scrimmage and three TDs in a showdown win at Philadelphia two weeks ago and followed it up with 150 yards and two scores last week against Seattle.

He joined former Eagles running back Timmy Brown (1960) as the only players in NFL history with back-to-back games with at least 100 yards receiving and a TD run and catch. His 19 TD runs are the most for any wide receiver since at least 1960, with Samuel breaking Bobby Mitchell's record of 18 last week.

Samuel has 900 yards from scrimmage and nine TDs this season despite missing two full games and part of a third with injuries.

"I feel like he's just more intent with the little things," quarterback Brock Purdy said. "Last year was my first year with him, so I didn't really know a whole lot. I thought he balled last year. You get the ball in his hands and he still killed it. But he came back this year in great shape, looking good and then has given everything to this team. So, very proud of him. And obviously when you do get him the ball, he's the same old Deebo, makes plays."

GODOFREDO A. VÁSQUEZ/AP

San Francisco wide receiver Deebo Samuel celebrates after scoring a touchdown during the second half against Seahawks in Santa Clara, Calif., on Dec. 10. Samuel had 150 receiving yards and two scores.

SPORTS

Indefinite suspension

Warriors' Green sidelined for time being after Flagrant 2 foul ›› NBA, Page 43

NFL

Turning it up a notch

Stafford puts Rams into playoff race with some of his best play

BY GREG BEACHAM
Associated Press

Matthew Stafford has been a star quarterback for far too long to really care what a fan, a pundit or even an opponent thinks about how he's playing.

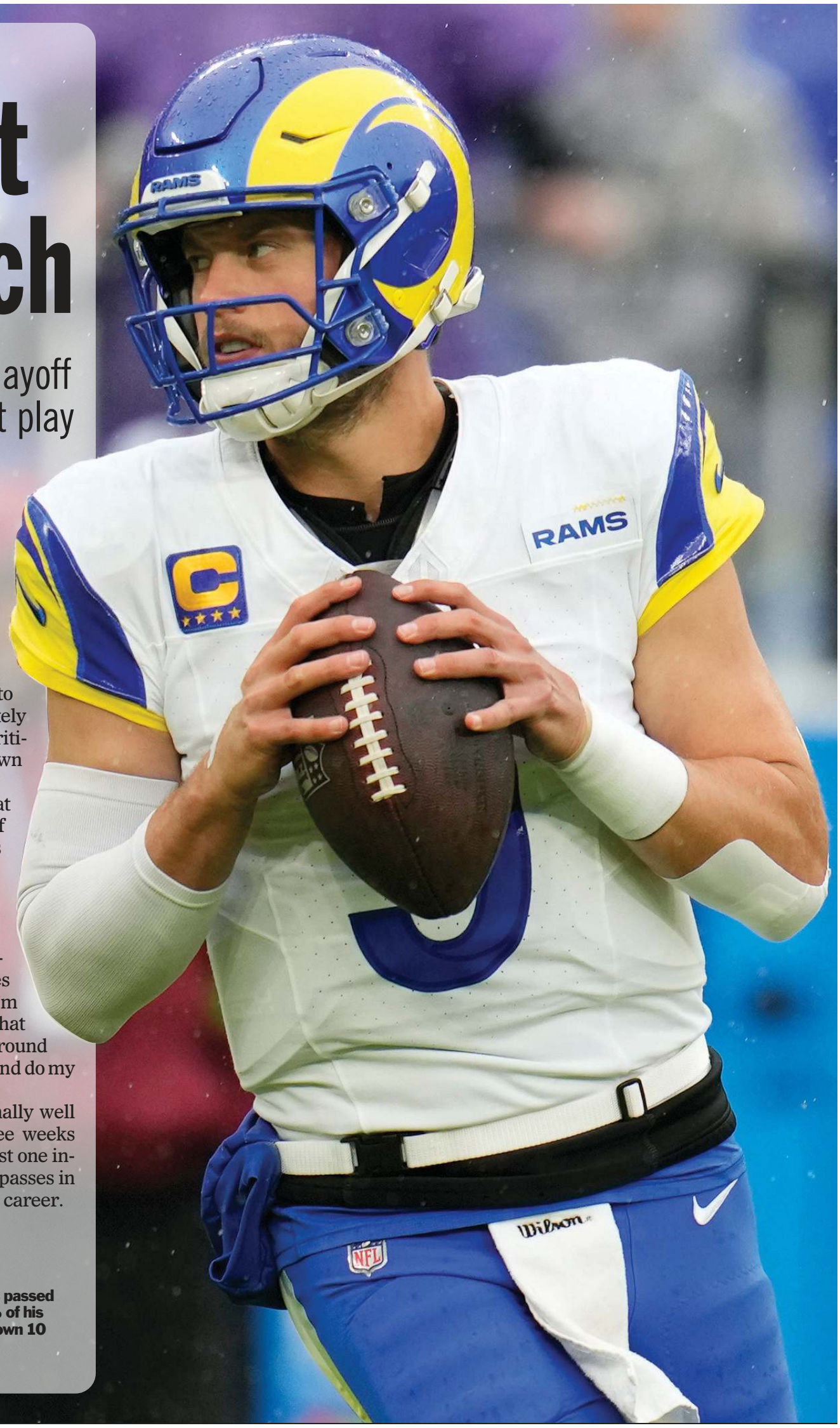
So even though he's in one of the most impressive stretches of his 15-year career with his Los Angeles Rams in the thick of the NFC playoff race, Stafford isn't about to change his stance of politely ignoring any praise or criticism from outside his own locker room.

> **"I'm always trying to improve, trying to get better week to week."**
>
> Matthew Stafford
> Rams quarterback

"If I'm playing good, that means the guys in front of me are blocking, the guys on the outside are getting open and catching it, and we're running the ball efficiently," Stafford said Wednesday. "It's an unbelievable team sport. It takes everybody to do all of it. I'm just trying to make sure that when everything is right around me and my number is called, to go out there and do my job as best as I possibly can."

Stafford has been doing his job exceptionally well this season, particularly over the past three weeks while throwing 10 touchdown passes with just one interception. He has thrown at least three TD passes in three straight games for the fifth time in his career.

SEE TURNING ON PAGE ??



Los Angeles Rams quarterback Matthew Stafford has passed for 802 yards the past three games, completing 63% of his throws with a 111.0 quarterback rating. He's also thrown 10 touchdown passes and only one interception.

ALEX BRANDON/AP

Russian athletes had minimal drug testing

›› Olympics, Page 42

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