

MUSIC: Franz Ferdinand back with 'Human Fear' **Page 28**

MOVIES: 'Better Man' a beastly biopic **Page 15**

TELEVISION: 'The Pitt,' 'Doc' offer more meds **Page 30**

EUROPE
& PACIFIC
WEEKEND
EDITION

NFL PLAYOFFS
Bills brace for
rematch with
Ravens' Henry
Page 48

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JANAE CHAMBERS/U.S. Navy

Aviation Ordnancemen wait to inspect ordnance attached to an F/A-18E Super Hornet aboard the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower in the Red Sea, on April 12. U.S. Navy vessels deployed to the Red Sea, including the USS Eisenhower, have launched over 200 missiles to defend against Houthi rebels' campaign that began November 2023.

Intense battle in Red Sea

Navy fires over 200 missiles to stave off militant attacks on shipping

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — The U.S. Navy has defended against nearly 400 attack drones and missiles in the Red Sea since Iranian-backed Houthi militants began their assault on commercial and military ships more than a year ago, a pace that has seen the service firing back at levels comparable to World War II battles.

Navy forces have fired more than 200 missiles against those attacks since the Houthis began their campaign in the strategic water-

way in November 2023. Destroyers and cruisers also have fired more than 150 artillery rounds, said Vice Adm. Brendan McLane, commander of Naval Surface Forces.

Many of the munitions were fired in larger-scale battles, said McLane, speaking Tuesday during a panel discussion at the Surface Navy Association conference in Arlington, Va.

"We've done the analysis with what we used to shoot in World War II, and we're at about two rounds per incoming missile to shoot (Houthi strikes) down," he said.

That matches the current rates of fire to those of the historic battles fought more than 80 years ago, he added.

In a recent attack, the destroyer USS Spruance was "in a fight where they shot down three anti-ship ballistic missiles, three anti-ship cruise missiles and seven one-way (aerial drones) that were coming towards" them, said McLane, who didn't specify when Spruance was attacked.

SEE BATTLE ON PAGE 4

Marine head: Moving troops over to Guam is 'wrong way'

BY BRIAN MCELHINEY
Stars and Stripes

The commandant of the Marine Corps warned this week that a plan to move thousands of troops from Okinawa to Guam would position forces too far away to deter Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific, according to media reports.

Gen. Eric Smith, at a Defense Writers Group meeting Wednesday in Washington, D.C., said the plan "puts us going the wrong way," according to reports from news websites military.com and Task & Purpose.



Smith

"Guam puts us on the other side of the International Date Line, but it puts us a long way from the crisis theater, from the priority theater," Smith said, according to the reports.

"Every time you give China a foot, they take a mile. They only understand one thing, which is a credible deterrent force. And that credible deterrent force has to be present to win, which — to me — means being [in] the first island chain," he said, according to military.com.

The chain includes the Kuril Islands north of Hokkaido; Japan itself; the Ryukyu Islands, which include Okinawa; Taiwan; and the Philippines.

A full transcript of Smith's remarks was not available Thursday. However, U.S. Marine Corps Headquarters spokeswoman Capt. Brenda McCarthy confirmed the accuracy of Smith's comments in an email Thursday.

More than 4,000 Marines are expected to move from Okinawa

SEE MOVING ON PAGE 6

BUSINESS/WEATHER

EUROPE GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel	Azores	..	..	\$4.203	..
Germany	\$3.452	\$3.994	\$4.348	\$4.011	Change in price	..	..	+0.4 cents	..
Netherlands	..	\$4.440	\$4.955	\$4.795	Turkey	..	..	\$4.019	\$4.307*
U.K.	..	\$3.994	\$4.348	\$4.011	Change in price	..	..	+0.4 cents	No change

Fuel prices are updated daily. These prices are effective Jan. 17. The change in price is from Jan. 10.

PACIFIC GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel	South Korea	\$3.129	..	\$4.019	\$3.689
Japan	..	\$3.989	..	\$3.649	Change in price	No change	..	No change	+5.0 cents
Okinawa	\$3.379	..	..	\$3.649	Guam	\$3.159**	\$3.669	\$4.049	..

*DieselEFD **Midgrade
For the week of Jan. 17-23

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates		Commercial rates	
Euro costs (Jan. 17)	0.95	Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3769
British pound (Jan. 17)	\$1.19	Britain (Pound)	1.2197
Japanese yen (Jan. 17)	154.00	Canada (Dollar)	1.4387
South Korean won (Jan. 17)	1414.00	China (Yuan)	7.3328
		Denmark (Krone)	7.2580
		Egypt (Pound)	50.3994
		Euro	0.9728
		Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7881
		Hungary (Forint)	402.01
		Israel (Shekel)	3.6225
		Japan (Yen)	156.15
		Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3084
		Norway (Krone)	11.3748
		Philippines (Peso)	58.62
		Poland (Zloty)	4.15
		Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7520
		Singapore (Dollar)	1.3679
		South Korea (Won)	1459.85

Switzerland (Franc)	0.9129
Thailand (Baht)	34.59
Turkey (NewLira)	35.4421

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

INTEREST RATES

Prime rate	7.50
Interest Rates Discount rate	4.50
Federal funds market rate	4.33
3-month bill	4.31
30-year bond	4.88

WEATHER OUTLOOK

FRIDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



FRIDAY IN EUROPE



SATURDAY IN THE PACIFIC



TODAY IN STRIPES

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

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MILITARY

Austin found at fault for diagnosis failures

BY MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin is responsible for the Pentagon neglecting to tell Congress and the White House that the former Army general was incapacitated last year due to treatment for prostate cancer as his office is required to do, the agency's watchdog concluded in a report released Wednesday.

Austin came under scrutiny last year for failing to disclose his cancer and complications that led to an extended hospital stay. A report issued by the Defense Department's inspector general faults Austin for communication failures in which his hospitalization was kept secret for days, including from President Joe Biden.

"I wish [Secretary Austin] were a normal person, but he's the [defense secretary]. We have a big institutional responsibility. He can't just go totally dark on his staff. ... Please pass to him that we can't keep his hospitalization a secret forever. It's kind of big deal for him to be in the [surgical intensive care unit]. And I'm worried sick," then-chief of staff Kelly Magsamen wrote in texts to Austin's junior military assistant.

Austin was first diagnosed with cancer in December 2023, with his hospital stay stretching into January. By February, the defense secretary took responsibility for secrecy about his illness.

"I want to be crystal clear; we did not handle this right. I did not handle this right," Austin told reporters at the Pentagon in February. "I should have told the president about my cancer diagnosis. I should have told my team and the American people, and I take full responsibility."

The inspector general's yearlong investigation found Austin's strong desire for privacy likely influenced his staff in deciding not to prod further into his condition. To date, no one on Austin's staff has been singled out as responsible for the failure.

The IG report points to Austin for not informing Congress or the White House of his initial treatment in December 2023 for prostate cancer and not telling his staff or the White House of his worsening complications on Jan. 1, 2024, which led him to be



ALEXANDER KUBITZA / Office of the Secretary of Defense Public Affairs

Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin hosts a holiday morale call from the Pentagon last month. An inspector general report released Wednesday faulted Austin for not alerting Congress and the White House to his prostate cancer treatments.

taken by ambulance to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md.

The report states when Austin went for the initial medical procedure December 2023, he kept information private from Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks; Air Force Gen. Charles "CQ" Brown, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and nearly all his staff. He told one junior staff member, "if anyone had any questions, they're more than welcome to ask [me] directly," according to the report.

When Austin had to be transported by ambulance to Walter Reed on New Year's Day, the report states the evidence based on contemporaneous statements and actions of those involved indicates Austin requested the ambulance not use lights and sirens and told his personal security officer, "We're not notifying anybody."

On Jan. 2, Austin transferred some of his more pressing responsibilities to Hicks.

The report states neither Austin nor

Hicks "met the requirement to immediately notify the comptroller general and Congress of the vacancy" of the secretary's office from Jan. 2 to Jan. 5.

At the time, Austin said he was experiencing fever, chills and shallow breathing on that day, and doctors decided to move him to the intensive care unit for several days of close monitoring.

Yet Biden did not learn of Austin's prostate cancer until Jan. 9. That same day, the White House ordered all Cabinet members and secretaries must immediately notify the administration if at any time they cannot perform their duties.

"We believe that the combined impact of his condition and the complications from the Dec. 22 procedure, and the effects of his illness and treatment, particularly including his procedures on Jan. 6 and Jan. 8, should at least have prompted consideration by Secretary Austin and others as to whether his authorities should have been transferred to Deputy Secretary Hicks

during periods of his hospitalization," the report reads.

A separate internal review of the situation was conducted shortly after the situation. The Pentagon concluded in February that privacy restrictions and staff hesitancy as the reasons for the failure to notify the president and other U.S. officials about Austin's prostate cancer and subsequent complications.

The internal review made eight recommendations that included ensuring key defense officials in the order of succession are familiar with relevant processes and procedures, as well as the department reviewing and updating internal reporting practices associated with the transfer of duties, Air Force Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder, the Pentagon's top spokesman, said at the time.

"There was no finding of ill-intent or an attempt to obfuscate," Ryder said.

The inspector general's investigation into Austin's handling of his illness and hospitalization took a year to complete and was released just days before Austin is set to leave office on Jan. 20.

Two senior defense officials, who spoke to reporters Wednesday on the condition of anonymity, made a point to emphasize there was no cover-up by anyone in the department, and the IG report states there was no break in command at any time and the secretary was not incapacitated and unable to carry out his duties.

"The actual report says that there were no risks to see to, the report did not identify any adverse impacts on [Defense Department] functions and there was no evidence that the secretary experienced severe cognitive impairments during his time at Walter Reed ... or otherwise unable to carry out his duties," one official said.

The IG report made 20 recommendations to improve notifications within the department and other critical stakeholders, as well as the effective assumption of functions and duties by the deputy defense secretary or other senior department leaders in the chain of succession, according to the report.

Austin responded on Jan. 3 concurring with all 20 recommendations.

Overseas military pharmacies moving to interactive phone-in refills

BY JONATHAN SNYDER
Stars and Stripes

U.S. military pharmacies overseas are instituting an interactive, voice-response system for prescription refills, the Defense Health Agency announced recently.

The transition to the new system started at military hospitals and clinics in September and is about 78% complete, DHA spokesman Peter Graves told Stars and Stripes by email Wednesday.

"We are currently working with the vendor to provide local numbers for our [outside the continental U.S.] sites, which will broaden communication capabilities for our beneficiaries," he said. "Our goal is to transition

completely by June 2025."

The change means military pharmacies may create a new phone number for their prescription refill lines.

"Most [military treatment facilities] have already updated their pharmacy labels and websites with their new number, and they are call forwarding the old refill number to aid patients who still have prescriptions with the old number on it," Graves said.

The change should be seamless for beneficiaries whose usual treatment facility uses a local phone tree or 1-800 number.

Patients can still refill prescriptions using the MHS Genesis Patient Portal online, according to a DHA news release.

Some patients who prefer the

phone system over the online refill method are hopeful this upgrade will be an improvement.

"Hopefully this actually makes it easier," one commenter wrote Dec. 18 on Tricare's official Facebook page. "MHS Genesis has made it more difficult to refill online than the previous online system."

DHA says the transition will not affect existing prescriptions or refills and that all remaining refills will automatically move over to the new system.

"The digital refill call system is already active, and we are working towards new capabilities that are being piloted by Edwards [Air Force Base], to include refill pickup notifications," Graves said.



ANNA NOLTE/U.S. Air Force

A pharmacy technician with the 18th Medical Support Squadron hands a prescription to a patient at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa.

MILITARY

Report: Military pay in line with private sector

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

U.S. service members earn more in money and benefits than most civilians in similar demographics, the Defense Department said this week following the release of a military pay review done every four years.

No major changes to the military's compensation system were called for in Wednesday's report, officially titled the Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation.

"Our retention is really high, so I'm thinking that the longer members serve, the more fully they understand the value of the total compensation package," a defense official told reporters Wednesday.

The assessment considered salaries and benefits such as housing and subsistence allowances.

Junior enlisted troops fared especially well when compared with Americans of similar career experience and education levels, ranking in the 93rd percentile. Most officers, meanwhile, were in the 75th percentile for financial compensation, the study found.

The study didn't account for a salary bump passed by Congress in December that will give junior enlisted troops a 14.5% pay raise and all other service members a 4.5% increase in 2025.

Although DOD compensation is competitive with the civilian labor market, there are some areas for improvement, another senior defense official told reporters

Wednesday.

"This may ultimately require us to consider policy and programmatic changes to compensation as well as nonmonetary programs to ensure successful recruitment, retention and readiness of the force moving forward," the official said.

The report looked at the effect of dual-income households on military retention and how issues such as permanent change of station moves and child care access factored into the life decisions of armed forces personnel.

For military spouses with careers, frequent moves pose challenges to finding employment and advancing their own careers. The circumstances can be a cause for service members to end their military careers.

Offering greater access to child care was one of the improvements the report suggested that the Pentagon make.

The report also recommended that DOD reconsider its current target of paying service members at the 70th percentile of comparable civilian jobs and boost the figure to the 75th percentile.

The military needs to do a better job communicating with service members and recruits about compensation packages and benefits that often get overlooked, such as free dental and health care, the report said.

Defense officials said they would begin implementing the report's various recommendations.



PHOTOS BY AARON LAU/U.S. Navy

Sailors aboard the destroyer USS Carney stand watch in the ship's Combat Information Center during an operation to defeat a combination of Houthi missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles, in October 2023.

Battle: Navy has defeated 380 Houthi attack drones in 15 months

FROM PAGE 1

On Nov. 11, Spruance and the destroyer USS Stockdale came under Houthi fire, fending off at least eight drones and eight missiles while transiting the Bab el Mandeb, a strait that connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden.

Over the past 15 months, the Navy has fired 120 SM-2, 80 SM-6, and 20 Evolved Sea Sparrow and SM-3 missiles, as well as 160 rounds from its 5-inch guns. Those weapons defeated 380 Houthi attack drones and ballistic and cruise missiles, McLane said.

Those missile expenditures have cost the Navy hundreds of millions of dollars. SM-2 missiles are priced at about \$2.1 million apiece while the SM-6 missiles cost about \$3.9 million each. SM-3 missiles range from \$9.6 million to \$27.9 million, according to Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance data.

McLane acknowledged the expense, saying that modest threats increasingly were being addressed with lower-cost alternatives such as guns, electronic countermeasures and aircraft.

But commanders shouldn't be considering the cost of a weapon when responding to a threat, McLane said speaking separately during a "status of the forces" address at the convention.

The Navy has sent 26 vessels into the Red Sea and nearby waters since November 2023, including the aircraft carriers USS Dwight D. Eisenhower and USS Harry S. Truman, to protect ships.

The Houthis have vowed to disrupt shipping until there is a cease-fire in Gaza.

It wasn't clear Thursday whether they would end their attacks should a ceasefire negotiated between Israel and Hamas, the war-



The destroyer USS Carney engages Houthi missiles and drones in the Red Sea in October 2023. The Navy has defended against nearly 400 Houthi attack drones and missiles since the group began its assault on ships more than a year ago, Vice Adm. Brendan McLane said.

ring parties in Gaza, begin Sunday.

Since Nov. 19, 2023, there have been at least 111 reported attacks, attempted attacks, hijackings and suspicious behavior incidents involving ships in the Red Sea.

Two vessels have been sunk, four mariners have been killed and two others were severely injured in attacks, according to Joint Maritime Information Center data. There have been no injuries or damage to Navy sailors or ships from Houthi actions.

But in an apparent "friendly fire" incident, the cruiser USS Gettysburg shot down an F/A-18 Super Hornet on Dec. 22 as the fighter jet was responding to a Houthi drone and missile attack on U.S. forces in the Red Sea.

Both aviators aboard were rescued, with one suffering minor injuries.

Houthi tactics have evolved from the use of inexpensive drones and cruise missiles shot in irregular intervals to a "marked escalation in the scale and complexity of enemy techniques and capabilities," McLane said.

Those advanced techniques include the use of anti-ship ballistic missiles and roving, one-way aerial attack drones in preassigned three-dimensional target areas, also known as kill boxes, he said.

That weapons engagement zone has taught sailors valuable lessons in the use of drones and directed energy weapons, such as high-energy lasers, McLane said.

"We've sped up our own learning and teaching so that our deploying ships are always prepared with the latest (tactics, techniques and procedures) before they go over the horizon," he said.



JOAQUIN CARLOS DELA TORRE/U.S. Marine Corps

Service members at Fort Myer-Henderson Hall, Va., rehearse Jan. 10 for the upcoming presidential inauguration. The Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation found that troops are paid better than most of their civilian counterparts.

MILITARY

Army doctor gets 13-year sentence

Stockin gets maximum amount of prison time allowed under a plea deal

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

Maj. Michael Stockin, an Army doctor, was sentenced Wednesday to 164 months in prison for sexually abusing 41 patients under the guise of providing medical care at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington.

Col. Larry Babin, the military judge of the trial, said he had deliberated more than 12 hours before reaching his decision to sentence Stockin, 39, to the maximum amount of prison time allowed under a plea deal made with Army prosecutors.

Babin also ordered Stockin forfeit all future pay and benefits and be dismissed from the Army — the equivalent of a dishonorable discharge for officers.

As a result of the conviction, Stockin will lose his medical license and be required to register as a sex offender. As a felon, he'll be barred in many states from voting or owning firearms.

Stockin showed no emotion Wednesday in court as Babin issued his ruling. Stockin, dressed in a dark blue service uniform with a fresh high-and-tight hair-

cut, was accompanied by his attorneys to the back of the courthouse where military police were waiting to take him into custody.

The 15-minute court session was a short, sharp end to a three-year investigation and prosecution of what Army legal officials have said is the largest known case of sexual abuse in U.S. military history. Twenty-two of Stockin's 41 known victims testified or gave statements in the court-martial.

"The resilience of the victims in this case should be celebrated," said Maj. Ryan Keeter, the Army's lead prosecutor in the trial. "They have been living with the trauma that has come from Maj. Stockin's actions for years."

Robert Capovilla, the lead defense attorney, issued a statement after the trial noting Stockin faced a maximum sentence of more than 250 years in prison had he not agreed to the negotiated plea deal.

"Major Stockin took full responsibility for his actions, and he made no excuses," Capovilla said. "The defense hopes and prays that the victims and Maj. Stockin will finally be able to heal and to move

forward with their lives."

Stockin was taken into custody by military police and was being held at the Northwestern Joint Regional Correctional Facility at Lewis-McChord, according to base officials.

Stockin's conviction is automatically sent for review to the Army Court of Criminal Appeals at Fort Belvoir, Va., said Michelle McCaskill, a spokeswoman for the Army Office of the Special Trial Counsel.

If the conviction is upheld, Stockin would then be dismissed from the Army.

Stockin joined the Army in 2013 and previously was assigned to Tripler Army Medical Center in Hawaii and Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md. He also served a six-month deployment in Iraq.

Stockin was assigned to Lewis-McChord in 2019. After complaints about sexually abusive behavior, he was removed from seeing patients in February 2022.

An 18-month Army investigation led to 23 charges against Stockin in August 2023. The charges expanded to 54 by Janu-

ary 2024. A two-month trial on the charges was scheduled for January 2025.

But a plea deal was reached in September in which Stockin agreed to plead guilty to 36 counts of sexually abusive contact for fondling patients' genitals during medical appointments. He also pleaded guilty to five counts of indecent viewing — telling patients to disrobe and expose their genitals.

Ryan Guilds, a lawyer representing seven victims in the court-martial case, said his clients felt the judge's decision to give Stockin the maximum sentence "sends the right message."

"Maj. Stockin showed disdain in the way he treated the Army and the uniform that he should have been honored to wear," he said.

But Guilds said the Pentagon still needs to pursue a thorough investigation into how Stockin was able to molest patients for so long before action was taken to remove him from duty.

Several former patients have filed federal claims seeking \$5 million from the Army for its failure to properly manage Stockin



KOMO News

Army Maj. Michael Stockin had faced a possible 250 years in prison if he had not agreed to the plea deal, his lawyer said.

and allowing his crimes to continue after initial complaints.

As of Wednesday, at least 26 patients had filed claims, totaling \$130 million. The claims are the first step in gaining the legal right to sue the federal government in civil court. Additional patients could file claims.

"Stockin has been sentenced for his role — now the Army must also be held accountable," said Christine Dunn, an attorney who represents some of the victims pursuing civil claims against the government.

Japan sets new mission to NATO

Associated Press

TOKYO — Japan on Thursday formally inaugurated an independent mission to the NATO military alliance as Tokyo and NATO seek to bolster cooperation amid escalating tension from Russia, China and North Korea.

Previously, the Japanese embassy in Belgium also covered NATO. The new mission is led by Osamu Izawa, who takes over the role currently filled by the ambassador to Belgium, Masahiro Mikami.

In Tokyo on Thursday, Japan and NATO held high-level consultations to discuss regional security issues in East Asia and Europe, according to the Foreign Ministry.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and closer ties between Moscow and Beijing, NATO has deepened its links with Japan and three other Indo-Pacific partners, Australia, New Zealand and South Korea, though not as part of the military alliance.

Japan's Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba has advocated a NATO-like security framework in Asia, though he has not given details.

Countries with shared security concerns are strengthening ties as competition escalates between the United States and China.



STEPHANIE SERRANO/U.S. Air Force

Two U.S. B-1B Lancers were escorted Wednesday by South Korean 15K Slam Eagles and Japan Air Self-Defense Force Mitsubishi F-2s in airspace between South Korea and Japan.

US B-1Bs fly with jets from Japan, South Korea

By JOSEPH DITZLER
Stars and Stripes

Japanese and South Korean fighters escorted U.S. bombers on a display of air power Wednesday in the skies over the Sea of Japan, or East Sea, according to Air Force Global Strike Command.

Two Mitsubishi F-2s of the Japan Air Self-Defense Force and two F-15K Slam Eagles of the South Korean air force escorted a pair of Air Force B-1B Lancer bombers in a show of deterrence and interoperability, the command said in a news release that day.

The military uses the term interoperability to refer to the ability of one nation's armed forces to use the equipment and training meth-

ods of another country's military.

The escort flight was the first air power demonstration of the year by the three countries, according to the release. The flight "builds upon a history of strong trilateral cooperation, enabling an immediate coordinated response to regional security challenges.

"This increasingly steady and sophisticated trilateral interoperability of our aerial and maritime forces strengthens our collective deterrence and defense posture," the release states.

Escort flights of this nature sometimes follow missile tests or other demonstrations of military strength by North Korea.

In this case, the North on Tuesday tested several short-range

ballistic missiles, according to the Japanese and South Korean militaries, which said they tracked the launches.

North Korea's communist regime also fired an intermediate-range ballistic missile on Jan. 6, its first test of the new year.

The state-run Korean Central News Agency described the missile as a hypersonic weapon, but the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff expressed skepticism of that claim in a statement that said the description was likely exaggerated.

The Air Force did not identify the Lancers' home station, but it routinely sends bombers on long flights from the United States called bomber task force missions

to demonstrate its ability to respond globally on behalf of its allies.

Two Lancers last flew in South Korea on air support drills at Pilsung Range, 100 miles southeast of Seoul, in October.

One Lancer dropped bombs there in June during a live-fire exercise.

The flight occurred a day before President Joe Biden made his televised farewell address from the Oval Office.

His administration strengthened military cooperation between Japan and South Korea as a response to security challenges from China, and diluting decades of hard feelings between the two lingering since World War II.

PACIFIC

Oil spill reported at USMC site on Okinawa

By BRIAN McELHINEY
AND KEISHI KOJA
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — A construction vessel leaked oil at the site of a future Marine Corps airfield in northern Okinawa this week but caused no environmental damage, according to Japan's coast guard.

Hydraulic oil spilled at 11:40 a.m. Wednesday from a drill on a vessel that was boring into the seabed in Oura Bay, according to a coast guard news release on the same day. The vessel was working on construction for the airfield in waters about 4,400 feet north-northeast of Cape Henoko in Nago city.

The airfield is under construction at the Marines' Camp Schwab on reclaimed land to replace Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in densely populated Ginowan city. The U.S. and Japanese governments agreed to move the base in 1996, but the Okinawa prefectural government has repeatedly delayed construction.

Oil seepage was confirmed on the ocean surface around noon, and contractors installed an oil fence and an oil absorption mat to recover the spill, according to the release. Recovery work was successfully completed at 1:10 p.m.

An investigation is underway to determine the cause and how much oil was spilled, a coast guard spokesman said by phone Thursday.

Some Japanese officials speak to the press only on condition of anonymity.

Contractors hired by the Okinawa Defense Bureau, an arm of Japan's Ministry of Defense, began ground improvement work in Oura Bay on Dec. 28, the bureau announced in a news release the previous day.

The work involves solidifying the soft seabed to ensure stability for the airfield by "laying sand at the required locations on the seabed and driving sand piles," the bureau said.

In July, contractors drove test piles into the seabed to prepare the site for steel pipes that will support the seawall.

The construction zone is divided into two main sections: 279 acres on Schwab's north side and 91 acres in the south, according to Okinawa Prefecture's website.

Work on the Oura Bay side, or north side, had been on hold since April 21, 2020, when Okinawa Gov. Denny Tamaki, citing safety and environmental concerns, refused to approve design changes meant to solidify the seabed.



BRIAN McELHINEY/Stars and Stripes

A crane used to drive test piles floats in Oura Bay at the site of a future U.S. Marine Corps runway at Camp Schwab, Okinawa, in July. A construction vessel leaked oil at the site this week, Japan's coast guard said.

Tamaki filed, and lost, three lawsuits, culminating in a September 2023 defeat at the Supreme Court.

Japanese Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism Tetsuo Saito approved the con-

struction permits Dec. 28, 2023, after Tamaki ignored a deadline from Fukuoka High Court.

Moving: Force Design plan calls for USMC to better defend islands east of Taiwan

FROM PAGE 1

under the Defense Policy Review Initiative, a 2012 agreement between the U.S. and Japan to reduce the military presence on Okinawa, which hosts nearly 30,000 of the 55,000 U.S. troops stationed in Japan.

About 100 logistics support troops from III Marine Expeditionary Force began moving from

Okinawa to Guam last year, according to a Dec. 14 joint statement by the Marine Corps and Japan's Ministry of Defense.

Camp Blaz on Guam is expected to house 1,300 members of III MEF and another 3,700 Marines as a rotational force.

The base is still under construction.

Smith told reporters Wednesday

that he is not sure the plan "is in the best strategic interest of America."

"We're committed to coming down to about 10,000 on Okinawa and getting ourselves to Guam," he said, according to military.com. "But Guam is a challenge. I mean, Apra Harbor [at Naval Base Guam] still has to be refurbished; [it] has to be redone

to allow for big decks to get in there."

The service "supports the tents outlined in the DPRI agreement and the plan for the movement of units from Japan to Guam or Hawaii starting in 2024," McCarthy wrote in a separate email Wednesday.

"The Marine Corps will continue to explore options for the best

location for the future force in the region."

The Pentagon identified China as an aggressive presence in the East and South China seas and a global "pacing challenge" in its 2022 National Defense Strategy.

The Marines' Force Design plan calls for the service to better defend the small islands east of Taiwan and to counter China.

Japan, Philippines officials want Trump's commitment to region

By SETH ROBSON
AND HANA KUSUMOTO
Stars and Stripes

Japan and the Philippines plan to remind the new U.S. administration about the need for continued American commitment to Indo-Pacific security, according to the U.S. allies' foreign ministers.

The two nations have boosted security cooperation with the United States under outgoing President Joe Biden amid aggressive actions by China in disputed areas of the South China and East China seas.

Japanese Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya, during a Wednesday press conference in Manila with his Philippine counterpart, Enrique Manalo, said the pair are committed to communicating with Donald Trump's administration

after he becomes president again Monday.

"We will approach the next U.S. administration to convey that constructive commitment of the United States in this region is important also for the United States itself," Iwaya said, according to a video of the press conference posted on YouTube.

A Philippine journalist asked whether Trump might scale back or put a price on commitment to the region.

Maintaining and strengthening the multilayered cooperation among the U.S., Japan and the Philippines is important amid the increasingly severe strategic environment, Iwaya said.

The three nations are cooperating on maritime security, resis-

tance to economic coercion, resilient critical infrastructure and cyber security, he said.

Iwaya noted the strategic importance of sea lanes in Southeast Asia and economic growth in the region.

Manalo told reporters that the Philippines and Japan would work with like-minded states, including the U.S., to uphold a rules-based international order and work for a free and open Indo-Pacific.

The diplomats' comments follow reports that China's "monster" coast guard cutter, the 541-foot-long CCG 5901, has been operating in Philippine waters since Jan. 4.

In recent days, the vessel came within 70 nautical miles of Zamboales province, home of the former

U.S. naval base at Subic Bay on the Philippines' main island of Luzon, the state-run Philippine News Agency reported Monday.

Philippine assets are challenging Chinese vessels in its territorial waters daily, Philippine National Security Council assistant director general Jonathan Malaya told reporters the next day.

"Right now, we have two Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) vessels shadowing them, closely monitoring them," he said, according to the Philippine News Agency. "We have sent assets also from our forces and from the PCG aerial assets to continue monitoring them."

Beijing's territorial claims in the South China Sea are legitimate concerns for the international community because they link di-

rectly to regional peace and stability, Iwaya said at Wednesday's press conference.

"Japan strongly opposes any attempt to unilaterally change the status quo by force or build up tension in the region. We strongly ask for easing of tensions," said Iwaya, who is scheduled to attend Trump's inauguration in Washington.

Japan and the Philippines plan to move forward on agreements to facilitate their troops training in each other's territory, he said.

This spring, Japan for the first time will join the annual, large-scale Balikatan military exercise in the Philippines. Details about the training are being finalized, a spokesman for Japan's Joint Staff said by phone Thursday.

NATION

'Oligarchy' threatens US democracy, Biden warns

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden used his farewell address to the nation Wednesday to deliver stark warnings about an “oligarchy” of the ultra-wealthy taking root in the country and a “tech-industrial complex” that is infringing on Americans’ rights and the future of democracy.

Speaking from the Oval Office as he prepares to hand over power Monday to President-elect Donald Trump, Biden seized what is likely to be his final opportunity to address the country before he departs the White House to spotlight the accumulation of power and wealth in the U.S. among just a small few.

“Today, an oligarchy is taking shape in America of extreme wealth, power and influence that literally threatens our entire democracy, our basic rights and freedoms, and a fair shot for everyone to get ahead,” Biden said, drawing attention to “a dangerous concentration of power in the hands of a few ultra-wealthy people and the dangerous consequences if their abuse of power is left unchecked.”

Invoking President Dwight Eisenhower’s warnings about the rise of a military-industrial complex when he left office in 1961, Biden added, “I’m equally concerned about the potential rise of a tech-industrial complex that could pose real dangers to our



MANDEL NGAN/AP

In his farewell address from the Oval Office on Wednesday, President Joe Biden spotlighted the accumulation of power and wealth in the U.S. among just a small few.

country as well.”

Biden used his 15-minute address to offer a model for a peaceful transfer of power and — without mentioning Trump by name — raise concerns about his successor.

It marked a striking admonition by Biden, who is departing the national stage after more than 50 years in public life, as he has

struggled to define his legacy and to steel the country against the return of Trump to the Oval Office. This time, the president, who has repeatedly called Trump a threat to the nation’s system of governance, went even further, warning Americans to be on guard for their freedoms and their institutions during a turbulent era of rapid technological

and economic change.

Biden sounded the alarm about oligarchy as some of the world’s richest individuals and titans of its technology industry have flocked to Trump’s side in recent months, particularly after his November victory. Billionaire Elon Musk spent more than \$100 million helping Trump get elected, and executives like Meta’s Mark Zuckerberg and Amazon’s Jeff Bezos have donated to Trump’s inaugural committee and made pilgrimages to Trump’s private club in Florida for audiences with the president-elect as they seek to ingratiate themselves with his administration and shape its policies.

Biden’s speech in the Oval Office is the latest in a series of remarks on domestic policy and foreign relations he has delivered that are intended to cement his legacy and reshape Americans’ grim views on his term. Earlier in the day, he heralded a long-awaited ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas, which could end more than a year of bloodshed in the Middle East.

“It’ll take time to feel the full impact of what we’ve done together but the seeds are planted and they’ll grow and they’ll bloom for decades to come,” Biden said. It was a tacit acknowledgment that many Americans say they have yet to feel the impact of his trillions of dollars spent on domestic initiatives.

Trump’s outsider Cabinet picks gaining support on Hill

BY LISA MASCARO

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — One by one, all the president-elect’s men, and women, are falling into place in his Cabinet.

While defense secretary pick Pete Hegseth’s nomination was teetering toward collapse just weeks ago, he now appears on track for confirmation after a fiery Senate hearing that focused on his drinking, views of women in combat and lack of high-profile management experience for the top U.S. military job.

President-elect Donald Trump’s other nominees pushed Wednesday through a gauntlet of confirmation hearings with the help of allied Senate Republicans carrying them toward the finish line, despite Democratic objections. One of them, potential FBI director Kash Patel, popped into a private Senate GOP lunch Wednesday to say hello.

“These nominees are bold choices,” said Sen. John Barrasso of Wyoming, the GOP whip, in earlier remarks.

He predicted the Senate will begin start voting on Inauguration Day, Monday, to confirm Trump’s picks.

■ A long haul for some of Trump’s picks.

To be sure, Trump’s more controversial choices of Patel, Tulsi Gabbard and Robert F. Kennedy Jr., have yet to come before senators for public questioning. Once they do, they face a long haul ahead in winning over skeptics from both sides of the political aisle.

In a letter to Republican senators Wednesday, an organization headed by Trump’s former vice president, Mike Pence, said it was “deeply concerned” over Kennedy over his views on abortion, and urged senators to reject him for secretary of health and human services.

But Hegseth’s ability to mount a political comeback, take the fight to his critics and

turn his nomination into a litmus test of Trump’s Make America Great Again movement stands as a powerful example of the incoming White House’s ability to get what it wants. The Trump team’s allies, including billionaire Elon Musk and others, amplified support for Hegseth, pushing him forward.

“If anyone in the Senate GOP votes against confirming Pete Hegseth after his stellar performance today, there will be a primary challenge waiting for you,” wrote Trump ally Charlie Kirk on X. “You can take that to the bank.”

■ Momentum for Hegseth, some others.

The Senate Armed Services Committee is expected to vote on Hegseth’s nomination on Monday, sending it to the full Senate for consideration, with confirmation possible later that week.

With a nod of support from GOP Sen. Joni Ernst of Iowa, a combat veteran and sexual assault survivor who initially had questions for Hegseth, the former Army National Guard veteran powered past his biggest potential roadblock. Ernst faced an onslaught of personal and political attacks as she wavered on supporting Hegseth, an early signal to others.

Sen. Kevin Cramer, R-N.D., said the criticism of Hegseth was not as powerful as the image of “a warrior with dust on his boots who’s actually done the things.”

On Wednesday, a half dozen more Trump nominees appeared before Senate committees as his team floods the zone, senators dashing between hearing rooms to participate in as many sessions as possible.

Pam Bondi, the nominee for attorney general, was grilled by Democrats probing



ROD LAMKEY JR./AP

Chris Wright, President-elect Donald Trump’s nominee to be secretary of energy, left, is greeted by Sen. John Hickenlooper, D-Colo., ahead of a Senate committee hearing Wednesday.

whether she believed Trump lost the 2020 election, she said Joe Biden won, or would stand up to presidential pardons for those convicted of crimes in relation to Jan. 6, 2021.

“You say the right things, that you’re going to be the ‘people’s lawyer,’” said Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn.

“But I believe being the ‘people’s lawyer’ means you have to be able to say no to the president of the United States,” he said. “You have to be able to say Donald Trump lost the 2020 election, you dodged that question. ... You have to be able to say Jan. 6 insurrectionists who committed violence shouldn’t be pardoned.”

Bondi responded: “I don’t have to say anything. I will answer the questions to the best of my ability, and honestly.”

Another Trump nominee, Russ Vought, a Project 2025 architect tapped to lead the White House Office of Management and Budget, was asked if he would commit to re-

leasing congressional approved funding for Ukraine. He vowed to “always commit to upholding the law.”

And California Democratic Sen. Alex Padilla asked Trump’s Energy nominee Chris Wright if he still believes “wildfires are just hype,” in the aftermath of the devastating Southern California fires that have killed at least 25 people and destroyed thousands of homes.

Wright said he stood by his past comments. He then said climate change is real before Padilla cut him off.

■ Republicans eye quick votes after Trump’s inauguration.

On Monday, Trump is expected to go inside the Capitol after he is inaugurated to sign paperwork to formally nominate his picks for top Cabinet and administrative positions, launching the confirmation process.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune has said the Senate will vote on nominees as soon as they are ready.

First up could be Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., a former Trump rival for the 2016 GOP presidential nomination, who is now the president-elect’s choice for secretary of state.

Rubio promised an “America First” foreign policy agenda during his own confirmation hearing Wednesday. As a well-known senator, he is expected to have broad support from Republicans, as well as Democrats. His confirmation vote could be as soon as Monday evening.

Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer all but acknowledged Democrats, as the minority, are essentially powerless to prevent Trump from getting his desired team.

“It’s important to have a record of these nominees,” Schumer said Wednesday as the hearings pushed ahead. “Even if they get confirmed in the end.”

NATION

Florida AG Moody will take Rubio's US Senate seat

Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Florida Attorney General Ashley Moody will take Marco Rubio's seat in the U.S. Senate, Gov. Ron DeSantis announced Thursday, making Moody only the second woman to represent Florida in the chamber.

Elected as the state's top law enforcement officer in 2018, Moody campaigned on a pledge to voters that she'd be a prosecutor, not a politician. But along with DeSantis, she boosted her political profile during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, calling on the federal government to "hold China responsible" for the outbreak.

In elevating her to the post, DeSantis praised Moody as a key player in his political battles, a law and order prosecutor who's prepared to help President-elect Donald Trump "secure and shut the border," rein in inflation, and overhaul what he described as a federal bureaucracy "run amok."

"I'm ready to show up and fight for this nation and fight for President Trump to deliver the America First agenda on Day 1," Moody said during Thursday's announcement at a hotel in Orlando.

"The only way to return this country to the people, the people who govern it, is to make sure we have a strong Congress doing its job, passing laws and actually approving the regulations that these unelected bureaucrats are trying to cram down on the American people," she added.

Before running for statewide office, Moody worked as a federal prosecutor. In 2006, she was elected to the post of circuit judge in Hillsborough County, home to Tampa. A fifth generation native of Plant City, Fla., Moody was once named queen of the city's famed strawberry festival. She's a three-time graduate of the University of Florida and she and her



MARTA LAVANDIER/AP

Florida Attorney General Ashley Moody speaks at a news conference in Miami in 2023.

husband, a law enforcement officer, have two sons.

As the state's attorney general, Moody has been instrumental in defending DeSantis' conservative agenda in court and has joined other Republican-led states in challenging the Biden administration's policies, suing over changes to immigration enforcement, student loan forgiveness and vaccine mandates for federal contractors.

"I'm happy to say we've had an Attorney General that is somebody that has acted time and time again to support the values that we all share," DeSantis said. "We in Florida established our state as a beachhead of liberty, as the free state of Florida. And she was with us every step of the way."

Moody isn't the state's only AG to use the office as a stepping stone to a national post. Her predecessor, Pam Bondi, is Trump's pick to lead the Justice Department and is testifying Thursday in the Senate.

Under Florida law, it was up to the Republican governor to choose Rubio's replacement after Trump picked the three-term senator to be his next secretary of state. Moody will serve in the Senate until the next general election in 2026, when the seat will be back on the ballot.



BEN CURTIS/AP

Scott Bessent, President-elect Donald Trump's choice to be Secretary of the Treasury, appears before the Senate Finance Committee for his confirmation hearing at the Capitol in Washington on Thursday.

Treasury nominee: Trump can unleash an 'economic golden age'

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. Treasury nominee Scott Bessent told his confirmation hearing Thursday that President-elect Donald Trump has an opportunity to unleash "a new economic golden age."

In testimony, Bessent said the U.S. must secure vulnerable supply chains, levy sanctions to address national security concerns "and critically, we must ensure that the U.S. dollar remains the world's reserve currency."

Lawmakers on Capitol Hill are questioning Bessent's stance on taxes, tariffs, trade and other issues during his confirmation hearing before the Senate Finance Committee.

Trump's choice for treasury secretary is a South Carolina billionaire who, before becoming a Trump donor and adviser, donated to various Democratic causes in the early 2000s, notably Al Gore's presidential run.

He also worked for George Soros, a major supporter of Democrats.

Bessent was one of several people Trump considered for the posi-

tion. Trump took his time before settling on Bessent as his nominee. He also mulled over billionaire investor John Paulson and Howard Lutnick, whom Trump tapped as his nominee for commerce secretary.

The treasury secretary is responsible for serving as the president's fiscal policy adviser and managing the public debt. He would also be a member of the president's National Economic Council.

If confirmed, Bessent will oversee massive agencies within the Treasury Department, including the Internal Revenue Service. The IRS received a massive boost in funding from Democrats' Inflation Reduction Act, though that money has been in constant threat of being cut.

Trump expects him to help reset the global trade order, enable trillions of dollars in tax cuts, ensure inflation stays in check, manage a ballooning national debt and still keep the financial markets confident.

"Productive investment that grows the economy must be prioritized over wasteful spending that

drives inflation," Bessent testified.

Senators were expected to question the money manager for hours on his views on cryptocurrency, the Trump-era tax cuts and potential conflicts of interest.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., a member of the finance committee, sent Bessent more than 100 written questions in advance, interrogating him on such topics as agency independence, housing, treasury workforce issues and financial stability oversight.

In addition, Democrats on the Senate Finance Committee are circulating a document that alleges Bessent has avoided paying roughly \$1 million in taxes related to his hedge fund. He will be asked about this during his hearing.

Bessent has backed extending provisions of the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, which Trump signed into law in his first year in office. Estimates from various economic analyses of the costs of the various tax cuts range from nearly \$6 trillion to \$10 trillion over 10 years.

He calls for spending cuts and shifts in existing taxes to offset the costs that extending the tax cuts would add to the federal deficit.

Adviser says president-elect is exploring options to 'preserve' TikTok

Associated Press

Donald Trump's pick for national security adviser, Florida Rep. Mike Waltz, said in an interview on Wednesday that the president-elect is exploring options to "preserve" TikTok.

Waltz made the comment when Fox News anchor Bret Baier asked him about a report from The Washington Post that said Trump was considering an executive or-

der to suspend enforcement of a federal law that could ban the popular platform nationwide by Sunday.

Last week, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in a legal challenge to the statute brought by TikTok, its China-based parent company ByteDance, and users of the app. The Justices seemed likely to uphold the law, which requires ByteDance to divest Tik-

Tok on national security grounds or face a ban in one of its biggest markets.

"If the Supreme Court comes out with a ruling in favor of the law, President Trump has been very clear: Number one, TikTok is a great platform that many Americans use and has been great for his campaign and getting his message out. But number two, he's going to protect their data," Waltz said.

"He's a deal maker. I don't want to get ahead of our executive orders, but we're going to create this space to put that deal in place," he added.

Separately on Wednesday, Pam Bondi, Trump's pick for attorney general, dodged a question during a Senate hearing on whether she'd uphold a TikTok ban.

Trump has reversed his position on the popular app, having tried to

ban it during his first term in office over national security concerns. He joined TikTok during his 2024 presidential campaign and his team used it to connect with younger voters, especially male voters, by pushing content that was often macho and aimed at going viral. He pledged to "save TikTok" during the campaign and has credited the platform with helping him win more youth votes.

NATION



MARCO POSTIGO STOREL/AP

Students with the Gaza Solidarity Encampment block the entrance of Hamilton Hall at Columbia University after taking over it, April 30, in New York.

Colleges settle antisemitism cases as Trump threatens to revoke funds

By COLLIN BINKLEY
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Many colleges accused of tolerating antisemitism on their campuses have been settling with federal civil rights investigators in the weeks before the inauguration of President-elect Donald Trump, who urged a tougher response to campus protests against the war in Gaza.

By settling with the Education Department, the schools close the cases against them as long as they meet the terms of the agreements, which mostly have required training, policy updates and reviews of past complaints.

But many colleges at the center of the highest-profile cases — including Columbia and Cornell — face investigations that remain unresolved and could run the risk of harsher penalties after Trump takes office. Trump has not said what he would like to see come of the investigations, but he has threatened to revoke federal money for schools that fall short of his demands.

“Colleges will and must end the antisemitic propaganda or they

will lose their accreditation and federal support,” Trump said in a virtual address to Jewish donors in September. “No money will go to them if they don’t.”

Settlements with the Education Department’s civil rights branch have piled up in recent weeks with the University of Washington, the University of California, Johns Hopkins, Rutgers and the University of Cincinnati. Those follow other voluntary agreements signed by Brown and Temple universities, along with the University of Michigan.

The flurry of recent deals has drawn outrage from Republicans in Congress who say the Biden administration is letting colleges off the hook.

Rep. Tim Walberg, R-Mich., chair of the House Education and Workforce Committee, said the settlements are “toothless” and fail to hold colleges accountable for permitting antisemitism. In a statement, he said the Trump administration should “examine these agreements and explore options to impose real consequences on schools.”

One of the committee’s priori-

ties will be “calling out woke higher education institutions — especially those that allow antisemitism to run rampant,” Walberg said at a Wednesday meeting.

More than 100 U.S. colleges and school districts remain under investigation over alleged antisemitism or Islamophobia following the Oct. 7, 2023, attack by Hamas on Israel. That includes Columbia, Cornell, Yale, Princeton and other prestigious schools targeted by a Republican campaign against antisemitism.

The Department of Education investigations stem from complaints that schools violated Title VI, which bars discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color and national origin at colleges and universities that receive federal funding.

Several colleges facing investigations declined to comment on their status.

Whether Trump pushes the Education Department to use the so-called “nuclear option” is still in question. But without a deal before Jan. 20, colleges raise the risk that they could become test cases for Trump.

Bill to age check porn sites still under scrutiny

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court on Wednesday seemed open to a Texas law aimed at blocking kids from seeing online pornography, though the justices could still send it back to a lower court for more consideration of how the age verification measure affects adults’ free-speech rights.

Texas is among more than a dozen states with such laws aimed at blocking young children and teenagers from viewing pornography. The states argue the laws are necessary as online porn, including hardcore obscene material, has become almost instantaneous to access on smartphones online.

Chief Justice John Roberts, a member of the court’s conservative majority, raised similar concerns. “Technological access to pornography has exploded, right?” he said.

The Free Speech Coalition, an adult-entertainment industry trade group, says the Texas law wrongly affects adults by requiring them to submit personal identifying information online, making it vulnerable to hacking or tracking. The adult-content website Pornhub has stopped operating in several states, citing the technical and privacy hurdles in complying with the laws.

The Free Speech Coalition agrees that children shouldn’t be seeing pornography, but it argues the new law is so broadly written it could also apply to sexual education content or simulated sex scenes in movies.

The law also leaves a loophole by focusing on porn sites rather than the search engines often used to find porn, the group says in court documents. Content filtering is a better alternative to online age checks, it says.

Justice Amy Coney Barrett appeared skeptical, pointing to the growing number of ways kids can get online.

“Content filtering for all those different devices, I can say from personal experience, is difficult to keep up with,” said Barrett, who has seven children.

This isn’t the first time the Supreme Court has confronted the issue. In 1996, the court struck down parts of a law banning explicit material viewable by kids online. In 2004, a divided Supreme Court ruled against a different federal law aimed at stopping kids from being exposed to pornography but said less restrictive measures like content filtering are constitutional.

Texas argues that technology has improved significantly in the last 20 years, allowing online platforms to quickly and easily check users’ ages with a quick picture, making it more like ID checks at traditional stores that were upheld by the Supreme Court in the 1960s.

The states won in the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals, where a divided panel overturned a lower court and allowed the age verification requirement to go into effect. The Supreme Court previously refused an emergency appeal asking to put the age verification on hold while the legal fight continues.

Still, some of the nine justices worried that the lower court hadn’t applied a strict enough legal standard in determining whether the Texas law and others like that could run afoul of the First Amendment.

“How far can a state go in terms of burdening adults showing how old they are?” Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson asked.

The court is expected to decide the case by June.

US recovers \$31M in Social Security payments to dead people

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. government clawed back more than \$31 million in Social Security payments that improperly went to dead people, a recovery that one official said Wednesday was “just the tip of the iceberg.”

The money was reclaimed as part of a five-month pilot program after Congress gave the Department of Treasury temporary ac-

cess to the Social Security Administration’s “Full Death Master File” for three years as part of the omnibus appropriations bill in 2021. The SSA maintains the most complete federal database of individuals who have died, and the file contains more than 142 million records, which go back to 1899, according to the Treasury.

The Treasury projects that it will recover more than \$215 mil-

lion during its three-year access period, which runs from December 2023 through 2026.

“These results are just the tip of the iceberg,” the Treasury’s Fiscal Assistant Secretary David Lebryk said. He urged Congress to give the Treasury full access to the master file, saying it would “significantly reduce fraud, improve program integrity, and better safeguard taxpayer dollars.”

The effort has shown areas where the government is preventing fraud, waste and abuse — which is also one of Donald Trump’s campaign promises.

The president-elect has tapped two business titans — Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy — to lead the Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, a new non-governmental task force assigned to find ways to fire federal work-

ers, cut programs and slash federal regulations, all part of what Trump calls his “Save America” agenda for his second term.

A representative from the Trump transition team did not immediately respond to a request for comment on whether the incoming administration would continue the efforts or seek to make the Treasury’s temporary access to the file permanent.

NATION

Cellphone bans in schools gaining traction

By Andrew DeMillo
Associated Press

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. — Arkansas' Republican Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders and California's Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom have little in common ideologically, but the two have both been vocal supporters of an idea that's been rapidly gaining bipartisan ground in the states: Students' cellphones need to be banned during the school day.

At least eight states have enacted such bans over the past two years, and proposals are being considered in several more states this year.

Here is a look at the push by states for such bans.

■ Why are states banning cellphones at schools?

The push for cellphone bans has been driven by concerns about the impact screen time has on children's mental health and complaints from teachers that cellphones have become a constant distraction in the classroom.

Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy, who has called on Congress to require warning labels on social media platforms about their effects on young people's lives, has said schools need to provide phone-free times.

Nationally, 77% of U.S. schools say they prohibit cellphones at school for non-academic use, according to the National Center



LEA SUZUKI, SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE/AP

A student uses a cellphone after unlocking the pouch that secures it from use during the school day at Bayside Academy in August in San Mateo, Calif.

for Education Statistics. But that number is misleading. It does not mean students are following those bans or all those schools are enforcing them.

Kim Whitman, co-founder of the Phone Free Schools Movement, said the issue is catching on because parents and teachers in both red and blue states are struggling with the consequences of kids on mobile devices.

"It doesn't matter if you live in a big city or a rural town, urban or suburban, all children are struggling and need that seven-hour break from the pressures of phones and social media during the school day," she said.

■ What states are enacting bans?

At least eight states — California, Florida,

Indiana, Louisiana, Minnesota, Ohio, South Carolina and Virginia — have enacted measures banning or restricting students' use of cellphones in schools.

The policies range widely. Florida was the first state to crack down on phones in school, passing a 2023 law that requires all public schools to ban cellphone use during class time and block access to social media on district Wi-Fi.

A 2024 California law requires the state's nearly 1,000 school districts to create their own cellphone policies by July 2026.

Several other states haven't banned phones, but have encouraged school districts to enact such restrictions or have provided funding to store phones during the day.

Sanders announced a pilot program last year providing grants to schools that adopt phone-free policies, and more than 100 schools signed on. In her state of the state address this week, Sanders proposed an outright ban.

"We will ban cellphones in our schools, bell to bell, so that our kids are not distracted, in class or out of it," Sanders said.

Other governors recently calling for bans include Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire, who was sworn in this month, Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds and Nebraska Gov. Jim Pillen. New York Gov. Kathy Hochul has suggested she'll seek a statewide policy, but has not offered specifics.

■ What is the opposition to the bans?

The cellphone bans have faced opposition from some parents who say they need to be able to contact their children directly in case of emergency.

Some parents have pointed to recent school shootings where having access to cellphones was the only way some students were able to communicate with loved ones for what they thought might be the last time.

But supporters of the bans have noted that students' phones could pose additional dangers during an emergency by distracting students or by revealing their location during an active shooter situation.

Parents opposed to the ban have also said they want their children to have access to their phones for other needs, such as coordinating transportation.

Keri Rodrigues, president of the National Parents Union, said she agrees about the dangers of social media on children but that the bans sought by states are taking too broad of an approach. Banning the devices during the school day is not going to solve underlying issues like bullying or the dangers of social media, she said.

"We have not done our job as grown-ups to try to teach our kids the skills they need to actually navigate this technology," she said. "We've just kicked the can down the road and thrown them into the deep end of the pool when they're by themselves after school."

Bezos' New Glenn rocket reaches orbit on 1st test flight

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — Blue Origin launched its massive new rocket on its first test flight Thursday, sending up a prototype satellite to orbit thousands of miles above Earth.

Named after the first American to orbit Earth, the New Glenn rocket blasted off from Florida, soaring from the same pad used to launch NASA's Mariner and Pioneer spacecraft a half-century ago.

Years in the making with heavy funding by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, the 320-foot rocket carried an experimental platform designed to host satellites or release them into their proper orbits.

All seven main engines fired at liftoff as the rocket blazed through the predawn sky to the delight of spectators lining nearby beaches. Bezos took part in the action from Mission Control and Blue Origin employees erupted in cheers once the craft successfully reached orbit 13 minutes later, a feat that

drew praise from SpaceX's Elon Musk.

The first-stage booster missed its landing on a barge in the Atlantic, but the company stressed that the more important goal was achieved. Bezos said before the flight it was "a little crazy" to even try to land the booster on the first try.

"We did it!" Blue Origin's CEO Dave Limp said via X about reaching orbit. "On to spring and trying again on the landing."

For this test, the satellite was meant to remain inside the second stage while circling Earth. Plans called for the second stage to be placed in a safe condition to stay in a high, out-of-the-way orbit in accordance with NASA's practices for minimizing space junk.

New Glenn was supposed to fly before dawn Monday, but ice buildup in critical plumbing caused a delay. The rocket is built to haul spacecraft and eventually astronauts to orbit and also the moon.



JOHN RAOUX/AP

Blue Origin's New Glenn rocket lifts off from Launch Complex 36 at the Cape Canaveral Space Force Station on Thursday in Cape Canaveral, Fla.

NASA's stuck astronaut steps out on spacewalk after 7 months in orbit

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — One of NASA's two stuck astronauts got a much welcomed change of scenery Thursday, stepping out on her first spacewalk since arriving at the International Space Station more than seven

months ago.

Suni Williams, the station's commander, had to tackle some overdue outdoor repair work alongside NASA's Nick Hague. They emerged as the orbiting lab sailed 260 miles above Turkmenistan.

"I'm coming out," Williams ra-

dioed.

Plans called for Williams to float back out next week with Butch Wilmore. Williams and Wilmore launched aboard Boeing's new Starliner capsule last June on what should have been a weeklong test flight.

But Starliner trouble dragged out their return, and NASA ordered the capsule to come back empty. Then SpaceX delayed the launch of their replacements, meaning the two won't be home until late March or early April — 10 months after launching.

It was the first spacewalk by NASA astronauts since an aborted one last summer. U.S. spacewalks were put on hold after water leaked into the airlock from the cooling loop for an astronaut's suit. NASA said the problem has been fixed.

WORLD

S. Korean court rejects petition to release Yoon

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — Lawyers for impeached South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol failed in their court effort to secure his release on Thursday, a day after he was detained at his residence for questioning over rebellion allegations linked to his martial law declaration last month.

Yoon was sent to a detention center near the country's capital, Seoul, after undergoing more than 10 hours of questioning on Wednesday at the headquarters of the Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials, during which he exercised his right to remain silent. Yoon refused further questioning by the anti-corruption officials on Thursday as his lawyers maintained that the investigation was illegal.

Lawyers had asked the Seoul Central District Court to consider his release, questioning the validity of the detention warrant for Yoon issued by the Seoul Western District Court.

But the Central District Court denied their petition late Thursday.

Yoon had avoided several requests to appear for questioning before the anti-corruption agency and police carried out a major law enforcement operation involving hundreds of personnel to detain him at his residential compound in Seoul.

Investigators are expected to move to place him under arrest in the coming days.

The anti-corruption agency, which is leading a joint investigation with the police and the military over whether Yoon's martial law declaration amounted to attempted rebellion, has 48 hours either to request a court order for his formal arrest or to release him.

On Thursday, his lawyers for-

mally declared that Wednesday's raid at the presidential residence, which led to the detention of a head of state, was illegal, in complaints filed with prosecutors.

Yoon didn't attend a hearing at the Central District Court on Thursday, which was part of the review over his detention warrant, because of security concerns, according to Seok Dong-hyeon, one of the president's lawyers.

Hundreds of Yoon's supporters rallied for hours in streets near the court and the detention center where Yoon was being held, waving banners and chanting slogans calling for his release.

Yoon set off the country's most serious political crisis since its democratization in the late 1980s when he attempted to break through gridlock in legislation by declaring martial law and deploying troops around the National Assembly on Dec. 3. The standoff lasted only hours before lawmakers managed to get through the blockade and voted to lift the measure.

His presidential powers were suspended when the opposition-dominated assembly voted to impeach him on Dec. 14, accusing him of rebellion. His fate now rests with the Constitutional Court, which has begun deliberating on whether to formally remove Yoon from office or reject the charges and reinstate him.

Yoon and his allies have defied efforts to investigate his role in the chaos of Dec. 3. He ignored requests to appear for questioning for weeks, remaining in his official residence to avoid detention as his lawyers turned away police, citing a law that protects locations potentially linked to military secrets from search without the consent of the person in charge — Yoon himself.

UK leader Starmer, on a visit to Kyiv, signs '100-year partnership' agreement

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer signed a 100-year partnership agreement with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Thursday, part of a European show of support and promises to keep helping Ukraine endure in its nearly three-year war with Russia.

The announcement came days before Donald Trump is sworn in as U.S. president with what he says is a plan to end Europe's biggest conflict since World War II.

"We are with you not just today or tomorrow, for this year or the next, but for 100 years long after this terrible war is over and Ukraine is free and thriving once again," Starmer told Zelenskyy,

promising that the U.K. would "play our part" in guaranteeing Ukraine's post-war security.

Starmer said that the landmark century-long agreement commits the two sides to cooperate on defense — especially maritime security against Russian activity in the Baltic Sea, Black Sea and Sea of Azov — and on technology projects including drones, which have become vital weapons for both sides in the war. The treaty also includes a system to help track stolen Ukrainian grain exported by Russia from occupied parts of the country.

Ukraine's alignment with the West, and potential future membership in NATO, have angered Russian President Vladimir Putin, who still wants to exert influence

over the independent nation.

While Starmer was meeting with Zelenskyy at the presidential palace, debris from Russian drones shot down by Ukraine's air defenses fell in at least four districts of Kyiv, according to city administration chief Tymur Tkachenko.

Starmer said that the drones were "a reminder" of what the Ukrainian people are up against and their resolve.

Starmer's unannounced visit is his first trip to Ukraine since he took office in July, though he said that it was his seventh meeting with Zelenskyy.

The Italian defense chief was also in Kyiv on Thursday, two days after Germany's defense minister visited.

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WORLD

US aid package funds contract to bolster Israeli air defenses

By LARA KORTE
Stars and Stripes

Israel will upgrade the layered system shielding it from aerial attacks under a new contract made possible by American funding, according to a statement Thursday by the Israeli Defense Ministry.

The \$5.2 billion deal with defense technology firm Rafael Advanced Defense Systems is the first of its kind under a U.S. aid package approved by Congress last year.

Israel will strengthen the Iron Dome and David's Sling systems as a result of the contract, which the ministry announced Thursday on X. The deal also covers work on Iron Beam, a laser system Israel is developing to shoot down missiles.

The news comes amid talks of a ceasefire with Hamas to halt the fighting in Gaza. Negotiations were delayed by a "last-minute crisis," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Thursday.

Iron Dome was designed to defend against short- and medium-range rockets and missiles as well as drones. It demonstrated "exceptional performance" during the war with Hamas, the Defense

Ministry statement said.

The U.S. has been a key partner in the production of Iron Dome, in addition to helping develop and produce the Arrow Weapon System and David's Sling, which target medium- to long-range missiles, the ministry said Thursday.

Maj. Gen. Eyal Zamir, director general of the Israeli Defense Ministry, thanked the United States, which he credited with making the contract possible through the aid package it provided.

The defense system upgrades are part of a larger \$8.7 billion U.S. aid package Israel secured last fall to support its ongoing military efforts.

Israeli forces continue to use the defense systems against attacks from Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen.

In October, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin deployed a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD, missile battery and a crew of military personnel to assist Israel against incoming fire.

A defense official confirmed to Stars and Stripes in late December that THAAD had been used in the region recently but did not provide further details.

Netanyahu: 'Last-minute crisis' with Hamas holding up truce

Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Thursday that a last-minute dispute with Hamas was holding up Israeli approval of a long-awaited ceasefire that would pause the fighting in the Gaza Strip and release dozens of hostages. Israeli airstrikes, meanwhile, killed at least 72 people in the war-ravaged territory.

The statement from Netanyahu's office signaled complications with the deal shortly after U.S. President Joe Biden and key mediator Qatar announced it was complete. That created a dual reality: War-weary Palestinians in Gaza, the relatives of hostages held there and world leaders all welcomed an agreement, expected to begin Sunday, even as Netanyahu said it was not yet finalized.

"Hamas is backing out of the understandings and creating a last-minute crisis that prevents a settlement," Netanyahu's office said.

It was not yet clear if Netanyahu's statements merely reflected

jockeying to keep his fractious coalition together or whether the deal was at risk.

The Israeli Cabinet was expected to vote on the deal Thursday, but Netanyahu's office said that officials won't meet until Hamas backs down, accusing the militant group of reneging on parts of the agreement in an attempt to gain further concessions, without saying which parts.

A U.S. official with knowledge of the negotiations said Hamas made a last-minute revision that relates to the distance Israeli forces would withdraw from at least one largely populated area in Gaza that the official would not identify. The issue is expected to be resolved quickly and enable the ceasefire to begin as planned this weekend, according to the official, who was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

In a briefing Thursday, David Mencer, an Israeli government spokesman, said the Israeli delegation of negotiators remained in

Qatar, "continuing its efforts to reach a solution."

Izzat al-Rishq, a senior Hamas official, said the militant group "is committed to the ceasefire agreement, which was announced by the mediators."

The deal announced Wednesday would see scores of hostages held in Gaza released and a pause in fighting with a view to eventually wind down a 15-month war that has destabilized the Middle East and sparked worldwide protests.

Hamas triggered the war with its Oct. 7, 2023, cross-border attack into Israel that killed some 1,200 people and took 250 others hostage.

Israel responded with a fierce offensive that has killed over 46,000 Palestinians, according to local health officials. Israel says it has killed over 17,000 fighters, without providing evidence.

The military campaign has also leveled vast swaths of Gaza, and pushed around 90% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million people from their homes.

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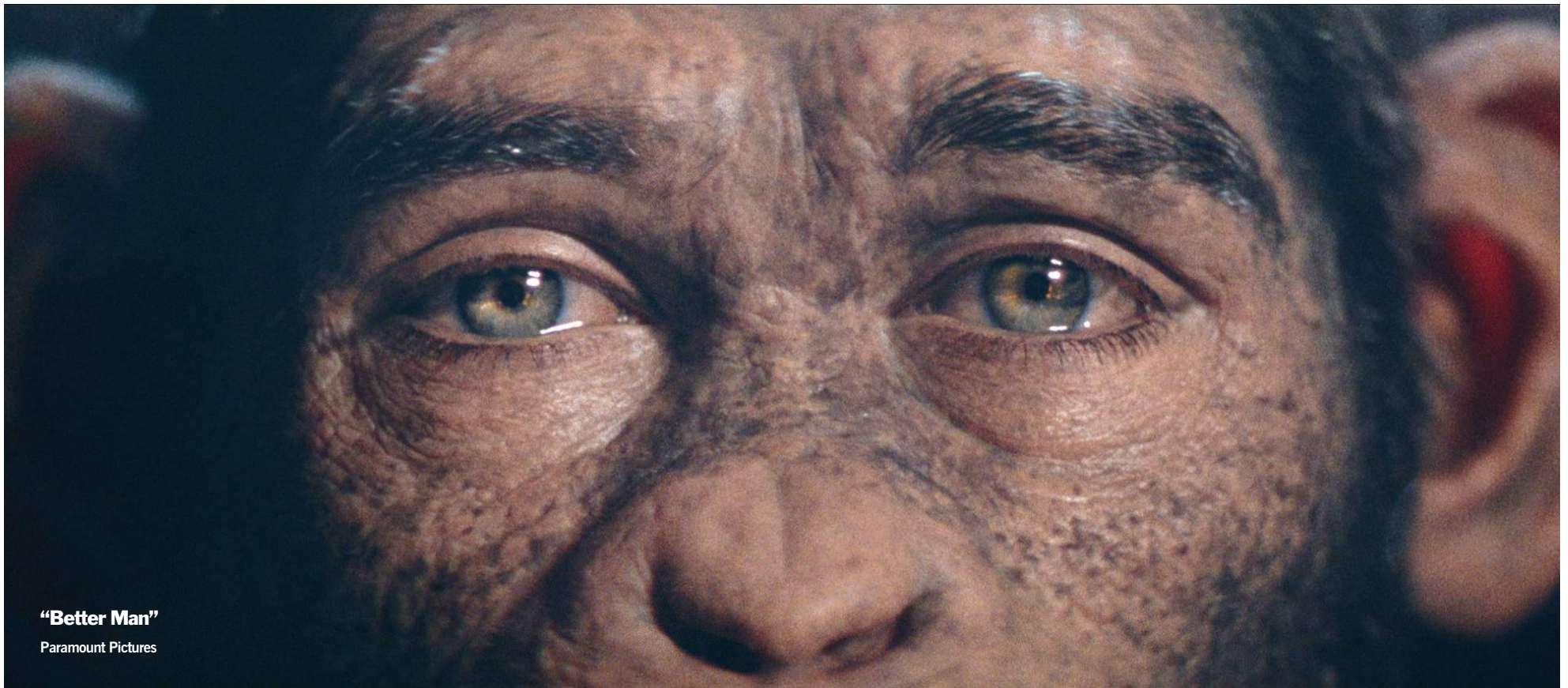


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WEEKEND



Franz Ferdinand album faces fear
Music, Pages 28-29



"Better Man"
Paramount Pictures

The beast inside

New Robbie Williams biopic 'Better Man' takes creative approach to tale of British musician's ups and downs while navigating megastardom

Movies, Pages 15-16



Robbie Williams
MATT LICARI, INVISION/AP

WEEKEND: GADGETS & TECHNOLOGY



New year, new inbox

Save storage space, increase productivity, boost digital security by decluttering your email

By **KELVIN CHAN**
Associated Press

The new year is always a good time to make a fresh start — including with your email inbox. To kick off 2025 with a clean slate, why not clear out all those unnecessary and unwanted messages?

If you're anything like me, you'll have piles of messages that have been accumulating in your inbox: receipts, bank and credit card statements, mobile phone bills, plane tickets, restaurant bookings, reminders, security warnings, spam and more.

Mixed in with all that administrative detritus might be some personal missives from friends and family that are worth keeping.

There are several reasons to purge all that digital clutter. For one, it cuts the risk in case of a data breach. If hackers somehow gain access to your email, they won't have any personal or financial info like credit card details to pilfer.

A decluttered inbox also helps boost productivity and focus because it's easier to find important messages if you don't have to sift through reams of irrelevant ones.

Some productivity proponents advocate inbox zero, a practice that requires dealing with each email that comes in so that by the end of the day your inbox is empty.

But who has the time and energy for that? If you're busy, it's easier to just deal with the messages that need immediate attention and ignore the rest. That is, until the backlog becomes too big.

Here are some tricks to tame your inbox by culling unwanted emails from important ones:

Ditch the attachments

Email accounts used to have limited storage space, say a gigabyte or two at most, which meant that messages with big attachments took up lots of space. Nowadays, email comes with plenty of free storage, but it's still good practice to clear out oversized messages because they tend to build up over time. Do you really need to keep all those high-resolution photos of a forgotten friend's grandchildren?

In Microsoft Outlook, click on the "Size" column or button to float the biggest messages to the top, where you can go through and delete them. Outlook also lets users sort by attachment so that messages with added files show at the top. If you want to save the message itself, right click on the attachment to remove it.

In Gmail, go to the search settings to filter out messages that are "greater than" a certain size. Start at, say, 20 megabytes, and then gradually reduce the number.

Sort it

Emails from frequent automated senders, such as newsletters and mailing lists, can take up a lot of space in your inbox. Or perhaps you get a lot of security notifications from your bank that might be important in the moment but quickly become outdated.

It's often too tedious to delete them individually, so filter your inbox by sender to delete them as a group. In Outlook, click the "From" column or button. In Gmail or Yahoo mail, use the search bar to look for the sender's email address.

Combine this with another search trick

that narrows down the date range to filter out all those old emails that you never got around to deleting. In Outlook or Gmail, you can set a date range to capture emails from, for example, 2010 to 2017, so that you can get rid of, say, all those utility bills you don't need anymore.

Keywords

Emails from mailing lists tend to include certain words or language that makes it a bit easier to filter them out. One such obvious term is "unsubscribe." Searching for a word like that, which wouldn't normally be used in emails written by humans, will identify all the newsletters for easy deletion.

Carbon copy trick

Copying everyone onto an email chain could be viewed as polite and courteous — or annoying, depending on whether the message topic is relevant to you. Sure, it's a good idea to CC everyone in the office about an important policy that applies to all staff, but maybe not about a meeting about Bring Your Child to Work Day if you don't have kids.

In Outlook, there's a hack to filter out all those emails where you're not the main recipient. Go to the Home tab, click "Rules," and then "Create" a rule. Go to Advanced Options, and tick "where my name is in the cc box." For the next step, you can tick the box to move it to a folder, or even permanently delete it if you're feeling confident.

Gmail users can do something similar with the search function. Type cc: and your email address.

The Nuclear Option

Perhaps you've tried out all these various hacks and whittled down your backlog, but still have many more that you haven't gone through. Then it could be time to consider the nuclear option: delete everything.

The benefit of this approach is that it really does provide you with a blank slate. You'll have no more mental anxiety if you don't have any more messages to worry about. The drawback, of course, is that you might lose any messages that might be important or precious.

6-in-1 Victrola looks retro but plays both old and new media

By **GREGG ELLMAN**
Tribune News Service

The multiple media format Century 6-in-1 Music Center from Victrola can play music from many generations. It's an attractive and functional addition to any family room.

Front and center is a three-speed turntable. Then add a cassette player, a CD player, a pair of built-in Bluetooth speakers and a 3.5mm aux input. With VINYL-STREAM Bluetooth output, you can send the music to your wireless headphones or an external Bluetooth speaker. You can also stream from Bluetooth devices to the music center's built-in speaker.

For more than 115 years, Victrola has made turntables and music-related home-use products. So it's no surprise that the first thing you notice about the Century 6-in-1 Music Center (\$149.99) is its attractive yet retro, timeless appearance.

Setup is simple, taking only a few minutes to unpack and power up with the included AC adapter. One-inch legs can screw into the bottom of the music center but aren't required. It depends on where you keep it.

The sound out of the speakers is clear and bass-filled and captures what you would want out of vinyl. It broadcasts from the speakers behind a soft fabric grill on the front. Sure, it doesn't sound like a \$1,000 sound system, but it sounds fine for what you expect to play classic music. As mentioned, it also works with external speakers to get more room-filling sound. It also has RCA and headphone outputs for direct wired connections.

The three-speed (33 1/3, 45 and 78 rpm) belt-driven turntable has a 7-inch platter and a fixed counterweight. An ITNP-LC1 cartridge is included. Overall, operating it is user-friendly with its control knob, playback buttons and LED indicator.

CDs are loaded on the left side and cassettes on the right. The Century 6-in-1 Music Center is available in black, natural and walnut finishes.

Being one of those people who still has original records and cassette tapes from my youth, along with way too many CDs, this is a dream come true. If the next model included an 8-track player, it would complete my music world.

Online: victrola.com

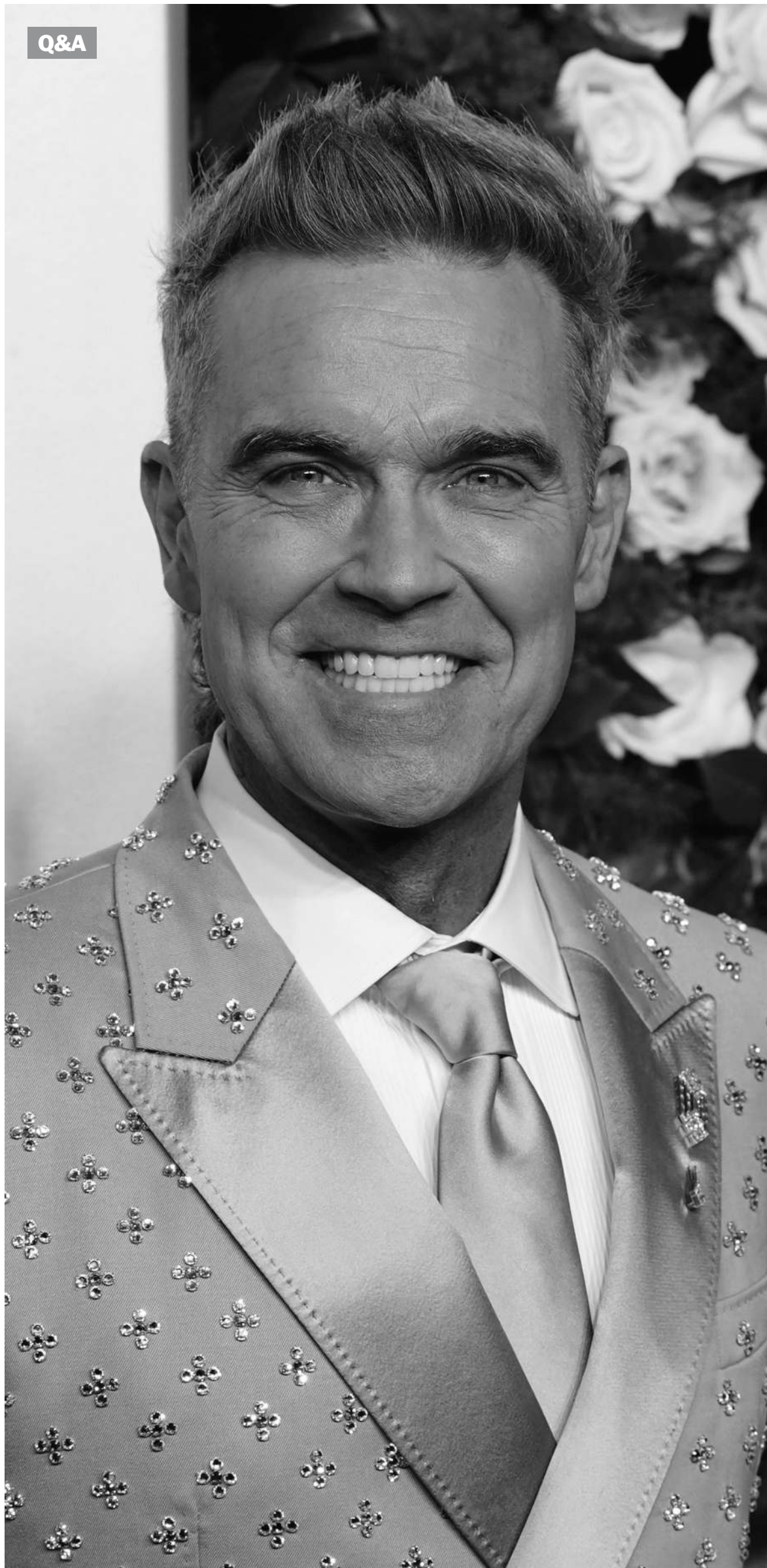


VICTROLA/TNS

Victrola's Century 6-in-1 Music Center can play records, CDs (left side), cassettes (right side) and Bluetooth music.

WEEKEND: MOVIES

Q&A



JORDAN STRAUSS, INVISION/AP

British pop star and former Take That singer Robbie Williams arrives at the 82nd Golden Globes on Jan. 5 in Beverly Hills, Calif. A biopic of his life, "Better Man," is now in theaters.

Monkey business

British pop star Williams talks about his new biopic, fame and reforming his bad-boy image

By JAKE COYLE
Associated Press

It was after one particularly emotional premiere of the new biopic about his life that Robbie Williams resolved he couldn't be "the crying guy" at every screening. "Better Man," which chronicles the life of Williams, the British pop star and former Take That singer, can hit him differently at different times. Jet lag is a factor. So is who's in the building. One screening with his band, he says, was "healing." But he's self-conscious enough about all the emotion that he can be defensive about it.

"In real life I don't cry that much," Williams says and then smiles. "You have a (expletive) biography about you and have the world go, 'I've seen you and heard you,' and come tell me how you deal with it."

One twist? The Williams heard in "Better Man" is Williams, himself. But the Williams seen in the movie is a computer-generated chimpanzee.

Michael Gracey, who directed the 2017 musical hit "The Greatest Showman," had the novel idea that Williams should get the big-screen biopic treatment, but with a monkey. Relying on Weta's motion-capture technology, the actor Jonno Davies stands in for Williams.

In "Better Man," now in theaters, that makes for a compelling spin on the music biopic, partly because it's still a quite R-rated journey through the ups and downs of megastardom.

Williams, who met a reporter recently on a stopover in New York, also hopes it will expand his footprint in America, where he's famously less famous than he is in Europe.

"If I want to phone Macron, I phone Macron. If I want to phone Keir Starmer, I phone Keir Starmer. If I want to phone Trump, he's not taking my call," Williams says with a laugh. "Maybe he would, I don't know."

"Maybe this film moves the needle for me," Williams, 50, adds. "Or if it doesn't, I'll do something else."

What both a conversation with Williams and "Better Man" have in common is a frankness about the experience of fame. More than a litany of chart-topping successes, "Better Man" is a chronicle of fame-induced trauma, complete with drug addiction and mental breakdown.

Williams, now, though, is a reformed bad boy — a family man with four kids with all kinds of plans, like building hotels and buying sports teams.

"At the moment," he says, "I have the wide optimism of a new artist."

Associated Press: Did your identification with monkeys predate "Better Man"?

Williams: Well, let me know, in the biography of your life, what animal would play you?

I don't know. A chipmunk?

I asked my friend this morning, Joey McIntyre, from New Kids on the Block, and he said, "an owl." And I agreed with him. An owl would be good for him. Did this predate? I guess so, subconsciously. My MO has been cheeky. What's more cheeky than a cheeky monkey? I've been a cheeky monkey all my life. There's no more cheekier monkey than the coke-snorting, sex-

addict monkey that we find in the movie.

I've never seen a monkey do so much coke.

Yeah, we've seen a bear do a lot of coke, but never a monkey.

Do you think it's easier for audiences to empathize with a monkey than with you?

We care for animals more than we care for humans, most of us. I guess there is a removal, as well. It's very much a human story but if you're watching it and someone's playing Robbie Williams, you're thinking: Does he look like him? Does he act like him? Does

SEE FAME ON PAGE 16

WEEKEND: MOVIES

Ape-solutely entertaining

Williams' 'Better Man' uses CGI chimp to tell brassy, audacious, sometimes bananas biopic

BY JOCELYN NOVECK
Associated Press

Pop star Robbie Williams recounts in "Better Man," his new biopic, "I came out of the womb with jazz hands. Which was very painful for my mum."

Badum Dum.

But also: Wow. What an image, to illustrate a man who, we learn, agonized from early childhood as to whether he had "it" — the star quality that could make him famous.

Turns out, he did. Williams became the hugest of stars in his native Britain, making 14 No. 1 singles and performing to screaming crowds (though he never gained traction in the United States). And whatever else we learn from director Michael Gracey's brassy, audacious and sometimes utterly bonkers biopic, the key is that Williams' need to entertain was primal — so primal that it triumphed over self-doubt, depression and addiction. It should surprise nobody, then, that this film, produced and narrated by Williams (now 50), is above all entertaining.

But wait, you may be saying: Five paragraphs in, and you haven't mentioned the monkey?

Good point. The central conceit

of Gracey's film, you see, is that Williams is represented throughout by a chimpanzee — a CGI monkey, that is (actor Jonno Davies provides the captured moves and speaking voice). This decision is never explained or even referred to.

There's a clue, though, in one of Williams' opening lines: "I want to show you how I really see myself." Gracey based his film on many hours of taped interviews he did with Williams. He says the pop star told him at one point that he felt like a monkey sent out to entertain the masses — particularly in his teens as a member of the boy band Take That. It was Gracey's idea to take this idea and run with it.

We begin in 1982, in Stoke-on-Trent, England. Young Robert Williams is bad at football and mercilessly taunted. But there's no football in his DNA, he explains. There is cabaret.

He gets the performing itch from his father. When Sinatra appears on telly singing "My Way," little Robert jumps up to join Dad (Steve Pemberton, excellent) in singing along. But Dad cares more about performing than parenting, and one day just leaves home for good. Robert is raised by his mum and his ador-



PARAMOUNT PICTURES/AP

Actor Jonno Davies provides the captured moves and speaking voice of the CGI chimpanzee representing Robbie Williams in "Better Man," director Michael Gracey's biopic about the pop star's life.

ing grandmother, who assures him he's a somebody, not a nobody.

At 15, flailing in school, Robert auditions for Take That, the boy band, and somehow makes the cut. The band first covers the gay club circuit — until it emerges that girls go wild over these young men.

Director Gracey, who helmed "The Greatest Showman," is quite the showman himself, never more obviously than in a terrific musical sequence that chronicles the band's journey to success. Filmed to Williams' hit "Rock DJ" on London's Regent Street and featuring some 500 extras, the number starts with the boys hardly noticed by passersby, representing the start of their career. Gracey illustrates their rise to fame with explosive choreography, pogo sticks, scooters, London buses — all ending in a flash mob with hundreds dancing on the famed street.

And now, Robert is forever Robbie — his name changed by the band's shrewd manager, Nigel.

"Where's my Robert gone?" asks his grandmother (a touching Alison Steadman), bewildered by the hype. "I'm a pop star now," he replies.

But fame brings all sorts of trouble for Robbie. Later, he will note that when you become famous, your age freezes — so he never graduates from 15. He sinks into depression and develops alcohol and cocaine habits.

But when the band kicks him out, his competitive fire is stoked: He's going to have a "massive" solo career. A woman overhears him saying this to himself at a New Year's party; she turns out to be Nicole Appleton, of the girl band All Saints. Another of Gracey's grand song and dance numbers ("She's the One") covers their troubled relationship, including an abortion.

Nicole ends up leaving Williams (for Liam Gallagher of Oasis), part of a miserable time for the singer, who manages to destroy most of his relationships. But he reaches a career pinnacle, performing at the storied Knebworth Festival to some 375,000 adoring fans.

Gracey punctuates shots of Williams performing with a violent, medieval-style battle between the singer and his demons — other (monkey) versions of him, essentially. It's another over-the-top sequence that makes this biopic radically different than most — if also a tad indulgent (and a bit too long).

But, hey, it's all in service of one thing. "Let me entertain you," Williams seems to be screaming through every scene. Mostly, he succeeds.

"Better Man" is rated R for drug use, pervasive language, sexual content, nudity and some violent content. Running time: 135 minutes. Now playing in select on-base theaters.

Fame: Singer candid about 'not unusual' experience in entertainment industry

FROM PAGE 15
he talk like him?

As someone who's been open about difficulties in life, you're not new to the idea that people don't have a lot of sympathy for wealthy pop stars. You were probably suffering very human things at a time when people didn't see you as human.

I think they have sympathy once you come through the other side and you're talking about something in the past. Everybody loves a story of redemption. The redemption is: I was this guy who experienced this thing but I've endured and overcome it. You throw in a word like "endure," and I can already hear British people going "(Expletive) you! What did you endure? Knickers being thrown at you." Dude, I was mentally ill. I still am, but I'm in a good place. I couldn't derive joy from anything because I was mentally ill. I won a sprinting race with two broken legs.

It was that bad?

Yeah. My story's not unusual. There's a boy band documentary that's going to be on telly in Britain that I've taken part in, and everyone's story is the same. They've got the bends. They experienced this thing that warped them and gave them mental breakdowns.

I can't apologize for the truth, and the truth is there's something about this matrix-bending, washing-machine fame that's deeply unhealthy. No matter what job you have or what path you choose in life, you spend the sec-

ond 20 years of your life sorting out the first 20 years. It just so happens I did it in public and told people exactly what was going as it was going on. And still do.

When One Direction singer Liam Payne died, you seemed to understand what he might have been going through.

Here's the thing: I'm always astonished — may he rest in peace, bless him, beautiful boy — that the entertainment industry isn't littered with those types of cases, that we can't point to 30 of them.

Fame, as you describe it, would seem clearly unhealthy. But does some part of you need it?

It's different now. I (expletive) love it. I wouldn't trade it for the world. I'm 50 and I'm incredibly grateful for fame. It facilitates everything that I need and want to do with my life. I was just too young to receive it, and I wasn't surrounded by good people. And I wasn't good people. But now I can't speak highly enough of it. (Laughs)

Part of your appeal has always been your candor. In your experience, though, does show business work against remaining authentic?

It depends who you are. Most people I meet in the industry, they're nice folk. But a lot of the people that I meet also are narcissists and they understand on some level that it's best to cover up their true nature. So they do. Now there's cancellation, so you've got a lot of people

terrified of saying the wrong thing.

The interesting that I've carved out for me, by mistake, is that the only villain in my story when I talk is me. None of my opinions are political. None of my opinions are cancellable. The only person that can cancel me is me.

So how did you turn your life around? You've often credited your wife.

Ayda was credited with saving my life before she saved my life. I was like, "You (expletive)." I was like: I've done a lot of work on myself here. Don't give her all the credit. But now I can give her way more credit than I was giving her because I've realized how much she's done.

Without that grounding, my life would be a lot different. I probably wouldn't be here. Because I have somebody in my life that's worth me being the best version of myself 24 hours out of the day, I'm better. And because there's four young souls that need looking after, my purpose is a lot different. I suppose my purpose at one time, due to finding hedonism incredibly intoxicating, was to be the most (expletive) person in the room. But now I want to be the most well person in the room. I intend to be the well person in the mother-(expletive) room. (Laughs)

When you go on a worldwide tour next year, do you do things differently to help you stay sane?

Yeah and no. The no bit is: It's OK. I've come to realize, I didn't die. There's a bit more wisdom now. The lunatic that was in the car is still in the car, but he doesn't drive anymore.

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS

'Wolf Man' might make viewers howl

Reboot has underwhelming monster, laughably obvious reveals and poor continuity

BY MARK KENNEDY
Associated Press

Blake Lovell thinks taking his wife and young daughter to rural Oregon to pack up his dead father's belongings is a good idea. It's a break from their urban life, might help repair his fraying marriage and reconnect them all with nature. "It would be good for us," he argues.

It will not, of course, because this is a Blumhouse movie called "Wolf Man." It will not be good for Blake and it will not be good for the audience. That's because this film is a terrible misfire using a classic movie monster poorly rebooted by the modern home of horror.

Slack when it should be terrifying, "Wolf Man" suffers from cheap sentimentality, laughably obvious script reveals, poor continuity and a creature that is less predatory than painful. Pity comes to mind.

Christopher Abbott stars as Blake, a father and husband whose own estranged dad was a tad unstable, constantly drilling in his son a survivalist ethic. "It's not hard to die. It's the easiest thing in the world," his dad says. His being officially declared dead 30 years after he disappeared into



UNIVERSAL PICTURES/AP

From left, Charlotte (Julia Garner), Blake (Christopher Abbott) and Ginger (Matilda Firth) barricade themselves in their cabin from a monster outside while inside Blake, who's been infected, starts becoming a wolf in "Wolf Man."

the forest starts this sludgy movie off.

"The Invisible Man" writer-director Leigh Whannell — who co-wrote the story with Corbett Tuck — seems to be attempting a horror movie with his new message: Being overprotective can lead to your family being assaulted by a deranged manbeast. Wait, that can't be right. Maybe

it's about inheritance? It's all a little muddled.

A weird human-animal hybrid lurking in the Oregon wilderness — actually New Zealand pretending to be Oregon — signals what is supposed to be the scary part of this movie, but so much time is spent on the domestic drama setup that the au-

dience will be bored by the time the supposed thrill ride shows up. When it does, the filmmakers lean on creepy sounds way too much.

There's a Wolf Man out there and he's, well, underwhelming. He is largely unseen for most of the movie because seeing the monster is always a bad idea. At one point, he attacks through the cabin's doggie door, one of the most disappointing assaults on film.

Now infected inside their barricaded cabin, Blake goes through a body-horror transformation, which includes the sweats, enhanced hearing, uncontrolled peeing, teeth readjustment, mottled skin, being made mute and hair loss. That's right, hair loss. This is the first Wolf Man movie that seems to endorse Rogaine.

His wife, played by Julia Garner, is left here to sniffle and shriek, going from life partner to potential dinner. That means a lot of running and panting with a flashlight in hand. Their daughter, played by Matilda Firth, earlier so precocious, now asks really stupid questions like "What's happening?" and "What's wrong with Daddy?"

So, outside the cabin lurks a Wolf Man. And inside is potentially another, but one still kind of trying to hold onto his humanity. "Mom, he wants this to be over," the girl says of her dad-wolf. We know the feeling.

"Wolf Man" is rated R for bloody violent content, grisly images and some language. Running time: 103 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.

Buddy comedy 'One of Them Days' with Palmer, SZA, has low stakes, big payoff

BY JAKE COYLE
Associated Press

Horror, not comedy, has been the go-to movie genre in recent years, but a movie like "One of Them Days," starring Keke Palmer and, in her big-screen debut, SZA, is a good reminder of what we've been missing.

Creepy stuff and jump scares, we've been told, have proved better suited for channeling our abiding contemporary dread. But the communal joys of big-screen comedy have, and always will, suit dark days as much as light ones, if not more so. "One of Them Days," for instance, happens to arrive while Los Angeles, where the movie is set, has been decimated by wildfires. The Southern California skies, though, are crystal clear in "One of Them Days." In the opening moments, someone says, "It's always cooler on the West Side."

"One of Them Days," which had its premiere canceled by the fires, is a welcome warm breeze for a movie landscape that has largely frozen out the comedy. There's one overwhelming reason for this positivity: Keke Palmer.

This is a buddy comedy, so it might seem unfair to single out one half of a duo. SZA, in her first feature, acquits herself well. But this is Palmer's show.

Palmer plays Dreux, a Los Angeles waitress who, when her artist roommate Alyssa (SZA) gives their rent money to an untrustworthy boyfriend, Keshawn (Joshua David Neal), goes on a madcap, daylong odyssey to raise the money before they're evicted. This seemingly low-stakes premise is itself a kind of throwback to a more 1990s-flavored movie. The antic spirit of F. Gary Gray's "Friday" can be felt throughout "One of Them Days."

The tone here, courtesy of director Lawrence Lamont, producer Issa Rae and screenwriter Syreeta Singleton, is amiably realistic. Aside from a few cartoonish flourishes, "One of Them Days" is grounded in a working-class real-

ity where every step toward upward mobility for Dreux and Alyssa is swiftly knocked backward.

They live in a dilapidated apartment complex in the neighborhood of Baldwin Village, nicknamed the Jungles. When they're forced to raise \$1,500 — a race complete with a ticking-clock countdown to eviction, and, as things develop, until "certain death" — Dreux is also scheduled for the biggest job interview of her life, to become a franchise manager for the restaurant chain she's employed by.

The satire of "One of Them Days" is mostly directed at the feeble opportunities afforded to those striving to break out of a paycheck-to-paycheck cycle. When the roommates seek a loan, their payday center advertises a comical APR of 1,900.5%. (The agent, who takes great pleasure in their credit scores, is memorably played by Keyla Monterroso Mejia.)

That's just one of the characters the two encounter in their pleasantly meandering journey to raise money via everything from blood donation to Air Jordans hung on power lines. Some of the characters along the way include Katt Williams, as a conscientious homeless man who warns against predatory lending; Vanessa Bell Calloway's stripper-turned-blood-bank-worker; a new white neighbor named Bethany (Maude Apatow); and Keshawn's new hookup (Janelle James), who proves the movie's most regular villain, despite the looming presence of a fearsome gangster (Amin Joseph).

Anyone familiar with Rae's "Insecure" will recognize some of the hallmarks of that HBO series, namely the struggles of Black women trying to get a leg up in Los Angeles while also juggling romantic interests that might come from a wide range of backgrounds. Here, that's Dreux's crush, Maniac (Patrick Cage), who drives a Mercedes and who she suspects is a criminal.



SONY PICTURES/AP

Keke Palmer, left, and SZA in a scene from "One of Them Days," a comedy about two roommates who need to raise \$1,500 before they get evicted from their apartment.

If all of this sounds somewhat low stakes (I failed to mention Lil Rel Howery as their prospective sneaker buyer), that's more of a pleasing feature than a bug in "One of Them Days." Besides, filling this movie with anything more — star cameos or broad comedy set pieces — would be a mistake. That would leave less room for the interplay between Palmer and SZA.

"One of Them Days" hinges on central buddy comedy, which Lamont seems to recognize even in his feature directorial debut. SZA's uber-cool unsurprisingly transfers easily to the big screen; her performance is winning because it's so unforced.

But it's a testament to Palmer's dynamism as a performer that "One of Them Days" would work no matter where their day takes them. There's a freewheeling wit and ever-shifting subtlety to Palmer, who so enlivened Jordan Peele's "Nope." Only a theatrical comedy can really showcase charisma like hers. For an actress who's hustled to get to this point, "One of Them" days is the perfect platform for Palmer, scrappy and unstoppable.

"One of Them Days" is rated R for language throughout, sexual material and brief drug use. Running time: 97 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.

WEEKEND: MOVIES

Participate or keep it quiet?

Recent singalongs spark debate over appropriate movie theater behavior

BY CURTIS YEE
Associated Press

As movie theaters worked to entice Americans back into seats after COVID-19 lockdowns and labor strikes, the industry marketed blockbuster films like “Wicked” and the dueling releases of “Barbie” and “Oppenheimer” as no less than cultural events.

But when certain movies become “events” unto themselves, sometimes different behavior accompanies them.

During the theatrical run of “Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour” last fall, fans danced and belted lyrics in the theaters, sharing their glee on social media. Last year, fans at early screenings of “Wicked” did the same, to the chagrin of other moviegoers. One video of a woman dressed as Glinda the Good Witch racked up over a million views on TikTok and beyond for announcing to her theater, “I’m here to hear Cynthia and Ariana sing, not you.”

After a period of growing accustomed to watching movies only from the comforts of home, Americans have been slowly returning to theaters following COVID-19 lockdowns. Along the way, as attendance spikes, the question of how to behave as part of a moviegoing audience has become a topic of passionate online debate.

When asked whether it’s appropriate for fans to sing in the theater, “Wicked” star Cynthia Erivo, who plays Elphaba, the Wicked Witch of the West, told NBC that she thinks the practice is “wonderful” and that “it’s time for everyone else to join in.” Dwayne Johnson, who stars as Maui in “Moana 2,” told the BBC that theatergoers who have spent their “hard-earned money for a ticket” should be able to sing.

Online backlash was swift, with one user retorting, “I paid my hard-earned money for a ticket too and I don’t wanna hear y’all attempting to sing so what now.”

It all circles around two questions that, like anything else in the culture, are constantly evolving: When you’re seeing a movie in a theater, how should you behave? And when can a viewer become a participant?

Movie singalongs are a theater tradition

Actual in-person disruptions at movie theaters appear minimal. Representatives from Alamo Drafthouse Cinema, a prominent chain known for diverse film screenings and food service, and ACX Cinemas, a family-owned chain based in the Midwest, both say they’ve experienced nothing major. Same story at AMC, which has had “virtually no complaints about disruptive singing” in relation to “Wicked,” spokesman Ryan Noonan said.

The instinct to join in is hardly new.

“Singalong screenings have been a principal part of moviegoing going back over 100 years,” says Ross Melnick, a professor of film and media studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. But singing, he says, typically occurs in “designated singalong environments where it is clear that there’s a collective performance of the audience.”

According to Esther Morgan-Ellis, author of “Everybody Sing!: Community Singing in the American Picture Palace,” American film screenings in the late 1920s and



iStock

Singing at the movie theater can be fun, but not necessarily for those nearby.

early 1930s were often preceded by singalongs. An organist would perform three or four popular songs and audiences were encouraged to join in, often guided by lyrics projected onto the screen. In other cases, the singalong would be coupled with a short film that included lyrics and a bouncing, on-screen ball that would hop across the words to help audiences keep tempo.

While singing has long been common, other behaviors were once hotly debated. When movies were a new medium, Americans quarreled over not just the content of the films themselves but the venue at which people viewed them. Was the dark room a hotbed for vice and immoral behavior? Should films be screened with the lights turned up? Should talking be allowed? And, of course, there was segregation; movie theaters were not fully integrated until the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

“We have never been a monolithic society. Not ever, and increasingly so now,” Melnick says. “You can tell so much about America by looking at what’s going on in its movie theaters.”

In 1944, MGM, the film studio that had produced “The Wizard of Oz” just five years prior, released a short film titled “Movie Pests” that warned moviegoers against engaging in disruptive behavior. Some of the film’s concerns — sticking gum under chairs, removing shoes — are still considered no-gos today. But the short also showcased etiquette of another era, such as removing jackets in the lobby and using the hat rack under your chair.

Today, acts of participation can be more ad hoc. One Ariana Grande fan account started an online firestorm after posting on X that users should share photos they’d taken of their favorite scenes from “Wicked.” While some commented and posted their own photos, others responded with snarky remarks. One clapback came from the Alamo Drafthouse account, which retorted, “Or, don’t do that.” The theater chain has a no-talking or texting policy, and violators are ejected after one warning.

Chaya Rosenthal, Alamo Drafthouse’s chief marketing officer, said the policy “is all about respect — respecting the films, the filmmakers and fellow moviegoers who paid for a ticket who deserve an immersive experience.”

Giving viewers what they want

To allow visitors to choose their preferred viewing experience, theaters have offered special singalong screenings of “Wicked.” The Main Cinema in Minneapolis de-

clared screenings on Mondays (and “Mondays only”) as singing-friendly. Universal Pictures, which produced “Wicked,” began holding special singalong screenings of the film starting on Christmas Day.

When fans of Taylor Swift caused a ruckus in 2023 by dancing and singing along during screenings of “Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour,” Michael Barstow, the executive vice president of ACX Cinemas, saw the hoopla not as a nuisance but part of the draw.

“The reason why they paid money and went and saw that inside movie theaters was to have a dance party with other people,” Barstow says. “That’s something we should lean into and embrace and try not to be too much of the fun police in those auditoriums.”

To draw people back to the theater, movie distributors and theater owners have expanded the types of experiences they offer. ACX Cinemas hired actors to dress as characters from “Wicked” and “Moana” to take photos with visitors and hosted a themed brunch at its affiliate restaurant. Theaters have begun offering slates of themed popcorn buckets to accompany tentpole films — sandworm-shaped buckets for “Dune 2” and gothic coffins for “Nosferatu.”

Even before pandemic lockdowns, theaters were upgrading sturdy plastic chairs to comfy leather recliners, and waiters at bespoke theaters began offering seat-side dining service (often at the cost of interrupting viewers to hand them the bill).

Alamo Drafthouse hosts “movie party” events where interaction is encouraged and its strict no-phone policy is void. Attendees at a special “Magic Mike XXL” screening were given fake money to throw at the screen, and visitors were encouraged to dress in regency garb for tea party screenings of movies like “Pride and Prejudice” and “Emma.”

And though unique theater experiences may be rising in notoriety, decades of late-night screenings of “The Room” and “The Rocky Horror Picture Show” have enticed devotees to adopt unorthodox viewing practices. Longtime viewers gather at regular screenings to shout synchronized snark, toss items at the screen and even act out the movie.

“It’s really hard, what we all do, especially coming out of the last four years,” Barstow says. “The fun part is, all gloves are off as far as being creative and trying things. And that’s exciting.”

“The reason why they paid money and went and saw that inside movie theaters was to have a dance party with other people. That’s something we should lean into and embrace and try not to be too much of the fun police in those auditoriums.”

Michael Barstow

executive vice president of ACX Cinemas, speaking about “Taylor Swift: The Eras Tour” screenings

WEEKEND: MOVIES

Tubi wants you to 'find your rabbit hole'

Free streaming service vastly popular for massive library of weird and obscure content

By TRAVIS M. ANDREWS

The Washington Post

King Arthur pursued the Holy Grail. Indiana Jones scoured for precious artifacts. Harold and Kumar sought White Castle burgers.

Adam Schmersal hunts for a different type of jewel: the most ridiculous movies on the most ridiculous streaming service. And he's struck pay dirt again and again.

There's "Dracula's Angel," a gothic horror romance that's animated in the style of the Sims video game series. There's the films of Dustin Ferguson, a director who puts out B-movies at an astonishing rate. Their titles speak for themselves: "Spider Baby or, the Maddest Story Ever Told," "Demonoids From Hell," "Amityville in the Hood," "Arachnado 2: Flaming Spiders."

And don't forget "Big Bad CGI Monsters."

"It's unreal what he does," says Schmersal, a 36-year-old service technician in Ohio. "It's not good."

But it's not boring.

Then there's "Baby Cat," about a woman who falls in love with a cat, which is played by a human wearing cat ears. Yes, romantically.

"I couldn't predict the next five seconds the entire time I was watching," Schmersal says.

He dubs these flicks Tubi Treasures, and he has been posting his discoveries to Reddit for the past year.

These are the kind of movies you might have once found mindlessly flipping through the channels, back before streaming came along and algorithms began crafting our entertainment diets.

But Tubi is a streaming service that doesn't feel like one. Owned by Fox, it's free, so long as you can stomach a few ads (you know, like old TV). It's a type of streaming service referred to in the industry as a FAST service — free, ad-supported TV.

You probably already have it installed somewhere — your phone, your smart TV, your gaming system, your Roku, who knows, maybe your microwave — without even knowing it.

Tubi isn't only filled with so-bad-they're-good movies. It's got a bit of everything. A Criterion movie here. A strange Rob Lowe-hosted game show there. "Bad Boys," "Dances with Wolves" and every episode of "Columbo" and "The Magic School Bus" are neighbors on the streaming service. It's like a T.J. Maxx or a Mar-



The free streaming service Tubi has some recognizable classic movies, but more than its share of outlandish options as well.

shalls: an awful lot of bargain-bin fare, not particularly organized — currently, you'll find "Despicable Me 3" but not its predecessors — but also packed with diamonds in the rough if you're willing to spend time sorting through the riffraff.

Tubi chief marketing officer Nicole Parlapiano said the service has the largest content library in streaming. It has more than 275,000 movies and TV episodes, according to a press release.

Since the service debuted in 2014, it has been sitting quietly on our devices. But all the while it has been growing like a weed, joyously embraced by millions. Tubi streamed 10 billion hours of content in 2024 and recently surpassed 97 million users, a jump of nearly 20 million from May, while paid services such as Netflix and Hulu grow ever more expensive while adding ad-supported tiers that still require a monthly subscription fee.

(Tubi is not to be confused with Mubi, the art house-movie-focused service and distribution company. Tubi is a fast-food drive-thru to Mubi's Michelin-starred tasting menu.)

Other FAST services, including Samsung TV Plus and Roku TV, are nipping at its heels, but Tubi appears to stand alone in fan loyalty. Search "Tubi" on any social media platform and you'll unearth such enthusiastic posts about it that you'll wonder whether Fox planted the endorse-

ments itself.

"Tubi is the s—" reads a Reddit post. "Uninstall Netflix and Prime, folks — learn to love Tubi and physical media," director Andrew Rakich proclaimed on Bluesky.

One X post, like most posts about Tubi, is deliciously over the top: "1. Nationalize Tubi 2. Outlaw all other streaming services 3. Put all content on Tubi 4. Also make it a social network."

"We just try to really respect the viewer and what they're into and lean into it, no matter how ridiculous and out of pocket it can be," Parlapiano says. She wants the service to "feel too good to be free. That's what we aim for — delight and surprise. We just want you to find your rabbit hole on Tubi."

Hmm, that sounds an awful lot like ...

"It is a lot like cable," says Christy Turner, a 53-year-old photographer and IT consultant in Calgary, Canada. "It's like picking up the remote in the old-school days, just scrolling through and finding something."

Tubi also offers a growing — and equally eclectic — bunch of original programming, including "The Thicket," a western starring Peter Dinklage and Juliette Lewis, and the daytime talk show-esque "We Got Time Today," hosted by Deion Sanders and Rocsi Diaz.

"The joke is that Tubi will take any-

thing, and sometimes it does feel that way when I see a movie like 'Sharks of the Corn,' which is about sharks attacking a cornfield in Kentucky," says 24-year-old Austin Elliott, a film enthusiast and Tubi superfan who lives in Connecticut. On the other hand, Elliott says, "I appreciate that they're so open door that they'll take any independent filmmakers' work, whether they spent \$50 or \$50 million making their projects."

Gregory Frye, a 41-year-old American expat living in Europe and working as a consultant, says he installed a virtual private network or VPN to watch Tubi from afar because no other service offers the same thrill of discovery.

"I feel like I'm walking into my dream rental shop, where I can find all this crazy stuff I didn't know existed — and old-school cult classics," he says.

Having her own movies in that shop made 41-year-old filmmaker Delinda Kay feel like a celebrity in her small town of South Boston, Va. For Black filmmakers such as herself, she says, Tubi is a god-send.

"Tubi doesn't need to market for you," Kay says. "Tubi is the market. ... Where I live, that's all that everyone talks about. For Black cinema, it's golden."

That's one reason 50-year-old Dallas author Candice Johnson loves the service. Sure, not all the movies are perfect. It's not uncommon to see a boom mic in a shot. But, she says, "we may not get to see these movies ... otherwise. And that's what keeps people watching. For some of us, we get to see people who look like us."

For better or worse, it seems like Tubi has no gatekeepers. Or, really, any keepers at all.

Tubi's video-store quality can be a double-edged sword for filmmakers. Indie filmmaker Michael Sarrow's second feature film, "Smile as You Kill," follows a man who kidnaps an advertising guru and forces him to create an ad campaign to pay for his health care. It was made on a shoestring and will probably have the best chance of reaching audiences when it hits Tubi and other FAST services.

"It's so much easier to get someone to give a small film like ours a shot when it's free to watch and they only have to sit through a few ads," Sarrow says.

But such films can be difficult to find on a service celebrated for being supersaturated with content.

"There are millions of other movies on Tubi," Sarrow says, "so how do you stand out?"

But for viewers, the fact that nothing immediately stands out is part of the fun. It's the quest for the next gem.

"That's what I love about Tubi," says Schmersal, the Tubi Treasures hunter. "They kind of take in the strays."

"The joke is that Tubi will take anything, and sometimes it does feel that way when I see a movie like 'Sharks of the Corn,' which is about sharks attacking a cornfield in Kentucky. I appreciate that they're so open door that they'll take any independent filmmakers' work, whether they spent \$50 or \$50 million making their projects."

Austin Elliott

a film enthusiast and Tubi superfan

WEEKEND: MOVIES

Sparking a rethink

Filmmaker hopes LA wildfires incline more people to watch '21 documentary

By JOCELYN NOVECK
Associated Press

When Lucy Walker debuted her harrowing documentary about California wildfires, “Bring Your Own Brigade,” at Sundance in 2021, it was during peak COVID-19. Not the best time for a film on a wholly different scourge.

“It was really hard,” the Oscar-nominated filmmaker says now. “I didn’t blame people for not wanting to watch a film about the fires in the middle of the pandemic, because it was just too much horror.”

And so the film, though acclaimed — it was named one of the 10 best films of the year by the New York Times — didn’t reach an audience as large as Walker had hoped, with its urgent display of the human cost of wildfires and its tough, crucial questions for the future.

That could change. Walker thinks people may now be more receptive to her message, given the devastating wildfires that have wrought havoc on Los Angeles itself during the past week.

“This is probably the moment where it becomes undeniable,” she said in an interview.

She added: “It does feel like people are now asking the question that I was asking a few years ago, like, ‘Is it safe to live in Los Angeles? And why is this happening, and what can we do about it?’ And the good news is that there are some things we can do about it. What’s tricky is that they’re really hard to accomplish.”

Documenting human cost, complacency

In “Bring Your Own Brigade” (available on Paramount+), Walker portrays in sometimes terrifying detail the devastation caused by two wildfires on the same day in 2018, products of the same wind event — the Camp Fire that engulfed the northern California city of Paradise and the Woolsey fire in Malibu, two towns on opposite ends of the political and economic spectrum.

She embeds herself with firefighters, and explores the lives of locals affected by the fire. She shares harrowing cellphone footage of people driving through exploding columns of fire as they try to escape, crying out “I don’t want to die!” She plays 911 calls in which people plead in vain for rescue as fire laps at their backyards or invades their homes.

And she conveys a layered message: Devastating fires in California are increasingly inevitable. Climate change is a clear accelerating factor, yes, but it’s not the only one, and therein lies an element of hope: There are things people can do, if they start to make different (and difficult) choices — in both where and how they choose to live. But first, complacency must be vanquished.

“Complacency sets in when there hasn’t been a fire for a few years and you start to think it might not happen again,” Walker says.

It even affected Walker herself a few months ago. A British transplant to Los Angeles, she had chosen to live on the Venice-Santa Monica border — too scared, she says, to live in the city’s lovely hilly areas with small winding roads, surrounded by nature and vegetation, near the canyons that wildfires love.

But a few months ago, she started wondering if over-anxiety about wildfires had incorrectly influenced her choice. And then, of course, came the Palisades catastrophe — “this God-awful reminder that it only takes one event,” she says.

Challenges of enacting fire safety measures

Walker became interested in making a film about wildfires after she got to LA and wondered if she was safe.



AP photos

A home burns as the Camp Fire rages through Paradise, Calif., on Nov. 8, 2018. Filmmaker Lucy Walker hopes her documentary about the Camp Fire, “Bring Your Own Brigade,” will receive more attention now, in light of the Palisades wildfire in Los Angeles, than it did when it premiered at Sundance in 2021.

“It does feel like people are now asking the question that I was asking a few years ago, like, ‘Is it safe to live in Los Angeles? And why is this happening, and what can we do about it?’”

Lucy Walker
Oscar-nominated filmmaker

“Why is the hillside on fire?” she says she wondered. “Why do people just keep on driving?” She had considered such fires “a medieval problem.”

One thing she learned while filming: Firefighters were even more impressive and courageous than she’d thought.

“If you want to watch a firefighter have their heart broken, it’s when they want to do more,” she says. “I was just absolutely wowed by how incredibly selfless and brilliant they were.”

Not that the public wasn’t angry at them — her film depicts angry residents of Malibu, for example, chastising firefighters for not doing enough.

One of the most stunning parts of “Bring Your Own Brigade” — the title is a reference to the economic inequity of wealthy homeowners or celebrities like Kim Kardashian hiring private firefighters — is watching the reaction of firefighters at a town meeting in Paradise, where 85 people had been killed in the fire. They’ve convened to discuss adopting safety measures as they rebuild. One by one, measures are rejected — even the simplest, requiring a 5-foot buffer around every house where nothing is flammable. Safety takes a back burner to individual choice.

“It was very shocking to be at that meeting in particular, given that people had died in the most horrible way in that community. And you have firefighters with tears in their eyes saying, ‘This is what we need to have happen to keep us safe,’ and then (they) get voted down.”

Walker is not the only filmmaker to have made a film about Paradise. In 2020, Ron Howard directed “Rebuilding Paradise,” focused on the effort to rebuild and the resilience of residents. Walker says she looked at the same set of facts and arrived at different takeaways.



The remains of homes leveled by the Camp wildfire, in Paradise, Calif., on Nov. 15, 2018. Walker’s documentary doesn’t just show the impacts of the fire but also asks questions about the future.

Townpeople were indeed amazing and resilient, Walker says. “But are we right to be building back without a real rethink? Because the tragedy is that these fires are predictably going to be repeating and against the backdrop of climate change, they’re getting worse, not better.”

Rethinking where we live — and how

That rethink involves making hard calls about where people should live.

“The population is overwhelmingly moving into these wildland urban interface areas,” Walker says, referring to areas where housing meets undeveloped wildland vegetation — exactly the areas most likely to burn.

In California, some of these places are very expensive — like Palisades and Malibu — but others are in more affordable areas. With the great pressure on housing, more people are moving into such areas, she says. But the “braking mechanism” could be that insurance companies “are doing the math, and it’s not sustainable.”

It’s not only a question of where people live. “What does a fire-hardened home look like?” Walker asks. “Design-wise, that does dictate certain things.” For example: “This lovely wood is going to require tremendous firefighting.”

It’s too early to know, but Walker thinks she may be hearing something different now from those who have lost homes, of whom she knows many.

“What I’m hearing from people is not just ‘I can’t wait to rebuild. Let me rebuild,’” she says. “It’s: ‘How could we go through that again?’”

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Sicilian surprises, 'Bella chaos' in Palermo

One thing I enjoy about returning to a destination is the chance to update the outdated impressions I've held in my mind from previous visits. Europe is always changing — and on my last visit to Sicily's capital of Palermo I discovered that it's become a whole new city in recent years. It's cleaner, safer and more efficient, but it still retains its colorful edge — and that's why I love it.

Palermo has revitalized itself with new museums, gentrified neighborhoods, pedestrianized streets and upscale shops and hotels. The Mafia's influence has also significantly diminished. Sure, the traffic is a free-for-all, and even the city's prettiest public spaces are rough around the edges. It's like Naples in that regard — but most visitors come to appreciate Palermo's grittiness and what locals call its "bella chaos."

The heart of the city is Quattro Canti ("Four Corners"). It's where two main streets — Via Maqueda and Via Vittorio Emanuele — intersect, dividing the city into four major historical neighborhoods. Between the streets are four Baroque facades, each adorned with three tiers of statues. The bottom statues represent

the four seasons, from a young maiden for spring to an elderly woman for winter.

A few steps from Quattro Canti is a trio of glorious churches, facing each other across Piazza Bellini: La Martorana, with gorgeous gilded mosaics; San Cataldo, filling a former mosque; and the highlight —



Rick Steves

Santa Caterina, where a simple exterior hides an explosive Sicilian Baroque interior.

Nearby, in Piazza Pretoria, the famous "Fountain of Shame" is one of the few Renaissance works here. Its gathering of marble statues includes gods, goddesses and grotesques on several tiers, with the virgin goddess of the hunt, Diana, presiding above the commotion. The nickname comes from the nude figures — considered quite racy in conservative Sicily.

While Palermo can seem a bit ramshackle, behind its decaying walls hide exquisite noble mansions reminding visitors of the island's rich heritage. One of my favorite places to sneak a glimpse of aristocratic life is Palazzo Conte Federico, an elegant and extremely lived-in man-



DOMINIC ARIZONA BONUCELLI/Rick Steves' Europe

Palermo entertains travelers with striking architecture, vivid street life and a cosmopolitan vibe.

sion built upon the city wall. Count Federico's family has lived here for centuries, and the current count is a race car enthusiast. Tours of the mansion are led by their sons.

Perhaps the most fascinating sight is about 1.5 miles from the center, in a crypt below a Capuchin monastery. The Capuchins, a branch of the Franciscan order, have a passion for reminding people of their mortality.

Historically, when one of their monastic brothers died, their bones were saved and displayed. The Capuchins of Palermo took this tradition a step further, preserving bodies in their entirety.

Inside the Catacombs of the Capuchins, a maze of corridors contains about 2,000 clothed skeletons and mummies: monks in brown robes, women wearing favorite dresses, priests in their vestments, soldiers still in uni-

form, and children looking almost as if they were just taking a long nap. The oldest body — Brother Silvestro — has been hanging here since 1599. These "bodies without souls" are meant to remind the living that their time on earth is transitory, and something much greater awaits.

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.

Consumer fairs in France, Germany cater to specific interests

Travel? Coffee? Wine? Crafts? Whatever your passion, you can almost be certain of finding a consumer fair devoted to your specific interests. Here are some upcoming events centered around the products and lifestyles that make our everyday lives brighter and happier.

Travel in Stuttgart, Germany: Inspiration for new travel destinations is in abundance at CMT The Holiday Exhibition, billed as the world's largest consumer fair for travel and leisure time activities. From Jan. 18-26, the Messe Stuttgart hosts thousands of exhibitors touting every form of vacation imaginable, from five-star pampering on a cruise to hardcore fitness boot camps. Hikers, golfers, cyclists, divers and other active types can find holidays in which indulging in their favorite activities stands front and center. Those with mobility issues can find tour operators and destinations catering to their special needs. The question of how to travel and where to stay once arrived is answered in the form of seven halls full of trailers, mobile homes, vans, tents, off-road vehicles and various gear. Each edition of the fair features a special guest land, and this year, it's India in the spotlight. Presentations by travelers, adventurers, sportsmen and bloggers make up the on-stage offerings.

The fair is open from 10 a.m.-6 p.m. daily. Online tickets for adults go for 15 euros on weekends and 17 euros on weekdays; youth ages 6 to 15 pay 5 euros. Online: www.messe-stuttgart.de/cmt

Crafts, chocolate and gourmet treats in Metz, France: Two separate fairs taking place simultaneously on the grounds of the Metz Expo Feb. 6-9 can be explored for the price of one ticket. The Salon Gourmet & Chocolat is a showcase of chocolate, pastry, beverages and artisanal products reflecting their regional roots, whereas Salon Creativa is meant to inspire and supply crafty types.



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Gourmet chocolate stars in at least one upcoming festival, The Salon Gourmet & Chocolat in Metz, France, Feb. 6-9.

Experts on hand will give demos and tips on how to use the tools of their trade. The fairs run 10 a.m.-6 p.m. daily, and tickets cost 8.50 euros. Children up to 12 are free. Online: metz-expo.com/evenement-12-creativa

Wine in Strasbourg, France: The "Salon des Vins des Vignerons Indépendants" gives visitors the chance to taste and virtually explore the regions producing one of France's most acclaimed exports. From Feb. 14-17, exhibitors from regions including Alsace, Bordeaux, Burgundy-Beaujolais, Languedoc-Roussillon, Provence-Corsica, South-West Armagnac, Loire Valley-Vendée and the Rhône Valley will offer samples of their wares. As the fair's name implies, the exhibitors present are independent wine-makers. A number of stalls will offer accompaniments such as charcuterie, foie gras, cheese, oysters and other delectable bites. The fair takes place from 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Feb. 14, 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Feb. 15 and 16, and 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Feb. 17 at the Parc des Expositions, located at

3, Avenue Herrenschmidt. Entry costs 6 euros per person. Online: vigneron-independant.com

Travel, leisure and motorbikes in Munich: While the scope of the consumer fair named "f.re.e" is too vast to defy easy description, fans of adventure travel and the great outdoors are sure to find something new and exciting offered by the some thousand exhibitors on hand at this fair slated for Feb. 19-23 at the Exhibition Center in Munich-Riem. The latest gear for camping, RVs, water sports, cycling and fitness is displayed across eight halls. A cycling track, climbing wall and pool allow for demos and hands-on experiences. Running parallel to this fair, and accessible with the same ticket, is IMOT, a motorcycle exhibition featuring exhibitors from around the globe (IMOT takes place Feb. 21-23 only). Adult tickets to the expo go for 17 euros, youth 6-14 pay 8 euros and children under 5 are free. Online: free-muenchen.de/en

Tattoos in Frankfurt, Germany: Those considering their first or umpteenth tattoo can get inspired by the Gods of Ink Tattoo Convention, set to take place March 28-30 on the grounds of the Frankfurt Trade Fair. Some 400 of the world's best tattoo artists will showcase their skills. Tattoo competitions are judged by a high-profile jury. Stands selling fashion and lifestyle products help complete the look. Concerts and high-energy stage shows add to the fun factor. The event takes place in Hall 1.2; single-day adult entry tickets go for 35 euros. Online: godsofinktattooconvention.com/events

Coffee in Amsterdam: The Amsterdam Coffee Festival, which opens April 5, unites coffee lovers with the many facets of their drink of choice. The festival's 10th anniversary edition promises a lineup of immersive experiences, from live roasting demos and barista battles to workshops, art displays and live music. The fair takes place at the NDSM, and tickets are sold per three-hour time slot. Tickets cost 20 euros for adults and 5.50 euros for those under 18. Online: amsterdamcoffeefestival.com



Karen Bradbury

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS

A Bahraini refuge for creativity, community

Passion Art Cafe and Studio in Budaiya inspires with its decor and no-frills classes

By SHANNON RENFROE
Stars and Stripes

I was searching for something creative to fill my free time, with Bahrain's early sunsets and dropping nighttime temperatures setting the mood for indoor pursuits.

What I found is a hybrid refuge — a café, an art studio, even a form of therapy. The moment I stepped through the doors of Passion Art Cafe and Studio, I felt the serenity that this unique spot in Bahrain seeks to provide.

The café sits tucked beneath the art studio, with an outdoor seating area that, unsurprisingly, remained empty on a cool day.

Stepping inside felt like entering a cozy living room and a charming backyard garden. The ceiling was adorned with cascading vines — plastic, but still enchanting — woven with delicate fairy lights that added a warm glow.

The seating ranged from a plush couch to traditional tables, inviting guests to sip coffee while painting or indulging in a slice of their lemon poppy seed cake, which sat temptingly under a glass cloche.

That cake was extraordinary; it had the perfect balance of lemon and sugar, with a subtle hint of almond adding depth. Curds of candied lemon peel and a light dusting of poppy seeds adorned the top.

I paired it with saffron coffee, drawn by the spice's deep connection to Middle Eastern culture and its unmistakable flavor. Saffron is delicate and can easily overwhelm if not handled carefully. In this case, it enhanced the coffee with grassy undertones and floral depth.

The result was beautifully balanced and I encourage anyone to try something saffron-flavored, whether a sweet or savory dish. You will either love it or hate it.

Upstairs from the café is a space designed for creativity, where visitors can take up activities like freestyle painting, ceramic painting or clay modeling, complete with 10 bright orange potter's wheels.

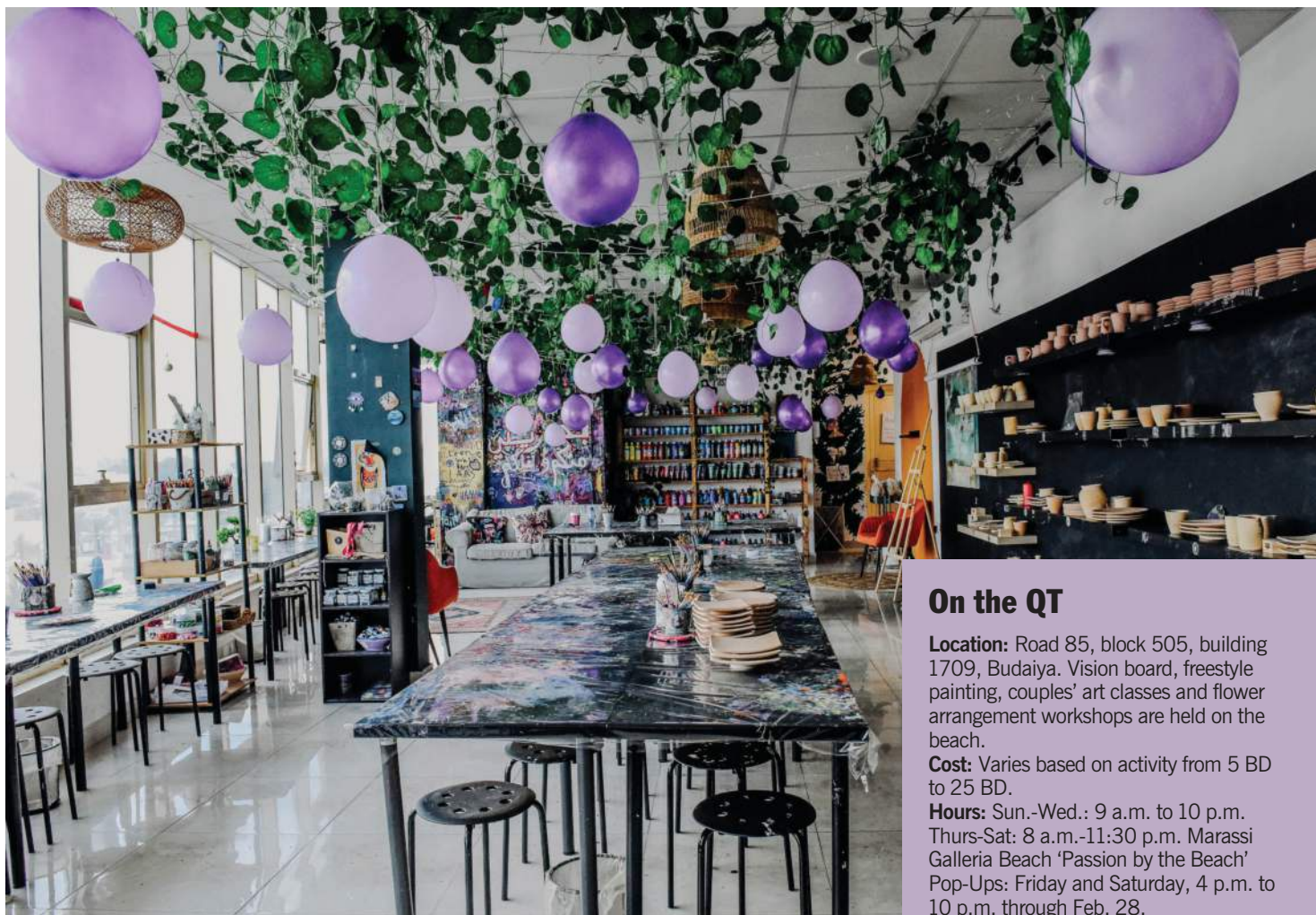
At a glance, they could be mistaken for 1970s pedicure stations. Each wheel is paired with a small wooden stool topped with a pillow for comfort.

This is where clay-throwing classes take place four times each week. Students are encouraged to channel their stress and negative emotions into the ball of French clay, symbolically throwing it away as they hurl it into the center of the potter's wheel. The clay can be molded into bowls, vases and other creations.

Another studio section opens into a well-lit room with large tables draped in thick, paint-splattered plastic lining, bearing the smudges of years of creativity.

My eyes were immediately drawn to a graffiti-covered wall at the back of the studio, a mesmerizing chaos, beautiful in its rawness. The clientele here paints on stretched canvases, sculpts clay models or embellishes premade pieces available for purchase.

The entry door is littered with sticky



PHOTOS BY SHANNON RENFROE/Stars and Stripes

A whimsical creativity space at Passion Art Cafe in Budaiya, Bahrain, welcomes customers with cascading vines, fairy lights and purple balloons on Jan. 7. Below the space is a café with both indoor and outdoor seating.



Rustic charm meets creativity in the pottery corner at Passion Art Cafe in Budaiya. This is where clay-throwing classes take place four times each week.

notes from customers that affirm the joy and inspiration they found here. Some messages, especially those from children, stand out with their unfiltered sincerity, hinting at moments of newfound confidence. A full-length mirror affixed to a pillar proclaims in glittering letters, "You look good."

Above, acrylic hummingbirds dangle from the ceiling. They reminded me of my mother and her reflections on hummingbirds from her years of bird-watching with the Audubon Society.

In some cultures, these tiny creatures

symbolize healing, joy and lightness. Whether or not the birds were intentionally symbolic, they felt perfectly suited to the space.

The café and studio, which opened in April 2022, is owned by sisters Bayan and Mariam AlQassab. Mariam, an experienced painter, leads the art classes, while Bayan left her day job two years ago to team up.

The sisters say their hope is that others are inspired to discover and embrace their own passions. Whether it's for a birthday party, a date night, a team-building event

On the QT

Location: Road 85, block 505, building 1709, Budaiya. Vision board, freestyle painting, couples' art classes and flower arrangement workshops are held on the beach.

Cost: Varies based on activity from 5 BD to 25 BD.

Hours: Sun.-Wed.: 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. Thurs-Sat: 8 a.m.-11:30 p.m. Marassi Galleria Beach 'Passion by the Beach' Pop-Ups: Friday and Saturday, 4 p.m. to 10 p.m. through Feb. 28.

Information: +973 3366 8199; @Passionart.bh on Instagram

Shannon Renfroe



At the heart of Passion Art Cafe lies a wall of sticky notes and memories, where visitors can pen affirmations, gratitude and artistic inspirations.



Passion Art Cafe has a graffiti wall that customers can decorate. From bold Arabic calligraphy to vibrant splashes of color, the artwork stands as a testament to the creativity the café aims to inspire.

or a casual outing, I highly recommend a visit to Passion Art Cafe.

The experience is refreshingly authentic — no frills, just the purity of art.

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WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING



PHOTOS BY BRADLEY LATHAM/Stars and Stripes

Namaste Nepal restaurant in Wiesbaden, Germany, uses ingredients sourced from the Himalayan country. Its cozy dining room seats about 40 guests. Parking may be problematic, depending on the time of day.



Curried comfort, novelty

Namaste Nepal in Wiesbaden offers both familiar Indian cuisine as well as distinctive Nepalese fare, using locally sourced spices

BY BRADLEY LATHAM
Stars and Stripes

On a recent, cold Sunday around New Year's, my wife and I craved a restaurant that would be a new but not too exotic experience.

We found just what we had in mind at Namaste Nepal, around the corner from the Schlosspark in the Biebrich district of Wiesbaden.

The restaurant says it sources its Ayurvedic spices from Nepal, which intrigued us. But having eaten at our fair share of Indian places, we weren't sure how distinctive Nepalese fare would be in comparison.

Although we saw familiar menu items like naan, butter chicken and masala curries, we started with an appetizer from the country's Himalayan roots.

The spicy vegetarian momos are a variation on the traditional dumpling of the region. Nepal's identity came across in the blending of chilis, ginger, cilantro and cardamom in the slightly fried round dumplings.

The momos were balanced with enough heat to warrant their spicy label, without being overpowered by chili.

My wife chose the Ayurvedic curry with paneer, a non-aged farmer's cheese. She said the curry's cardamom- and clove-forward taste paired well with



Namaste Nepal

Address: Rathausstrasse 4, Wiesbaden, Germany
Hours: Tuesday-Friday, 5:30-10 p.m.; Saturday, Sunday and holidays, 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m.; 5:30-10 p.m.; closed Mondays (except on holidays)
Prices: Appetizers, 6-8 euros; entrees, 15-25 euros; desserts, 5 euros; kids menu, 6-10 euros; appetizer, entree, drink and dessert, 30-40 euros
Information: +49 611-36056093, www.namastenepal.de

Bradley Latham

her Ayurvedic tea, which she likened to a softer, more rounded chai.

I couldn't choose a single main dish, so I ordered the thali, a sampler platter that had three smaller-portioned entrees with rice, a small salad and a dessert.

There was a chicken turmeric curry, which had a surprisingly creamy texture considering it didn't contain any dairy, as well as a pleasantly fragrant potato-and-cauliflower dish.

But my favorite of the three was the kalo daal. The curry of black lentils, kidney beans and chickpeas was thick and hearty but didn't feel heavy.

I tasted a cilantro note and other herbaceous flavors I couldn't nail down, but which balanced it out nicely.

My wife and I agreed that while the curry portions were adequate, more rice would have helped. However, this is a minor complaint about an otherwise fantastic meal.

The dessert my platter came with was laal mohan, a tasty deep-fried dough ball soaked in a sweet syrup with hints of cardamom and cinnamon.

We added the gajar ka halwa, a warm carrot-based pudding with raisins, nuts, cloves and other spices, which had a very slight sweetness. I can't say I would have recognized it as a dessert without knowing, but I liked the taste and creamy texture.

The fried apple rings were our favorite dessert by far. The treat combined the sweetness of the fruit with a syrup like the one on the dough ball.

Parking at Namaste can be problematic depending on the time of day, though we found a spot on the street. A bus stop is within a couple of hundred feet of the eatery.

While I'm still a big fan of a fiery, tangy Indian vindaloo, there's something very comforting about Namaste Nepal that I'm sure will call me back.

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Top, Namaste Nepal's spicy vegetarian momos. Above, a three-entree sampler known as thali including chicken turmeric curry and kalo daal, alongside rice, salad and a dessert. Left, the Ayurvedic curry.

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WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING

Comfort food with international flair

JJ's American Diner near Camp Humphreys like a small-town eatery with a global menu

BY LUIS GARCIA
Stars and Stripes

JJ's American Diner serves up classic American comfort food with an international flair in Pyeongtaek, South Korea.

Much like diners in the United States, JJ's captures the essence of a small-town eatery while embracing the global influences that have shaped American cuisine over the years.

Its proximity to the base — just a five-minute stroll from the Camp Humphreys' walk-in gate — ensures it's a welcoming spot for soldiers and locals alike.

Inside, the atmosphere is everything you'd expect from a diner: warm, inviting and full of nostalgic charm. Booth seating and friendly staff make it the perfect place to settle in for a meal that feels like home.

JJ's menu features an array of dishes that highlight the fusion of American classics and international inspirations. From burgers and pancakes to chicken and waffles, the options are diverse and satisfying.

For the main course, I tried the loaded steak fries, which surprises with its portion size and layered flavors.

Crinkle-cut fries form the base, topped with tender steak, onions, tomatoes, sour cream and a combination of shredded and melted cheese.

While the presentation wasn't particularly striking, mixing everything together brought out



AFTER HOURS
S. KOREA

JJ's American Diner

Location: 93-4 Anjeong-ro 222beongil, Paengseong-eup, Pyeongtaek-si, Gyeonggi-do, South Korea

Directions: A short walk from Camp Humphreys' walk-in gate.

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

Prices: Entrees cost between 14,900 and 28,900 won.

Dress: Casual

Information: 031-8094-1337

Luis Garcia

a surprising flavor profile. The price on this one was 15,900 won, or about \$12.

I also sampled the creamy Alfredo pasta with steak, which delivered a rich and hearty meal. The pasta was coated in Alfredo sauce, complemented by tender cubes of steak.

However, the accompanying bread leaned a bit too sweet for my taste and detracted slightly from the overall meal.

At 18,900 won, it's a solid choice if you're in the mood for something indulgent and comforting.

JJ's drink selection sticks to the diner classics, with coffee, sodas and a small selection of beers like Budweiser and Heine-



PHOTOS BY LUIS GARCIA/Stars and Stripes

Loaded steak fries from JJ's American Diner near Camp Humphreys, South Korea, are topped with tender steak, onions, tomatoes, sour cream and a combination of shredded and melted cheese.

ken. The straightforward options pair well with the rich, flavorful entrees and round out the experience.

JJ's American Diner blends the best of American comfort food with a touch of global influence, making it a solid choice for anyone in the area.

Whether you're stationed nearby or just passing through, JJ's is a reliable spot for a satisfying meal.

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Creamy Alfredo pasta with tender cubes of steak, a rich and hearty meal that comes with bread, is both indulgent and comforting.

Honey, miso and soy complement rich, meaty salmon dish

BY CHRISTOPHER KIMBALL
Milk Street/Associated Press

Traybakes are the ultimate in weeknight ease, but they often suffer from unexciting flavors and a lack of textural contrast.

For a dinner that's anything but lackluster, we lean on a trio of high-impact ingredients and add the vegetable and fish in stages, so everything comes out of the oven perfectly cooked.

In this recipe from our cookbook "Milk Street 365: The All-Purpose Cookbook for Every Day of the Year," we combine miso, soy sauce and honey to make a savory-sweet, umami-rich marinade for meaty, fat-rich salmon. Some of the mixture is set aside and combined with orange juice and zest, creating a bright sauce for drizzling over the finished dish.

While the fish marinates, the broccolini gets a head start roasting in the oven. Once the quick-cooking salmon is added, the traybake is nearly done. Roast, skin side down, until the fish flakes and the broccolini is lightly charred and tender-crisp.

Drizzle with the miso-orange sauce and garnish with fresh scallions, red pepper flakes or both.

Serve with steamed rice, and perhaps a leafy green salad.



JOE MURPHY, MILK STREET/AP

Honey-miso salmon and broccolini traybake combines a trio of high-impact ingredients.

Honey-Miso Salmon and Broccolini Traybake

Start to finish: 30 minutes

Servings: 4

Ingredients

2 tablespoons white OR red miso

2 tablespoons soy sauce

2 tablespoons honey

3 tablespoons neutral oil, divided

Four 6-ounce center-cut salmon fillets (1 to 1¼ inches thick), patted dry

1 tablespoon grated orange zest, plus 2 tablespoons orange juice

1 pound broccolini, trimmed OR broccoli crowns, cut into 1-inch florets

Kosher salt and ground black pepper

Directions

Heat the oven to 425°F with a rack in the middle position. In a small bowl, whisk together the miso, soy sauce, honey and 1 tablespoon of the oil. Transfer half of the mixture to a wide, shallow dish; add the salmon skin side up and set aside. Stir the orange zest and juice into the mixture remaining in the bowl; set aside.

On a rimmed baking sheet, toss the broccolini with the remaining 2 tablespoons oil and ½ teaspoon each salt and pepper. Distribute in an even layer, then roast until beginning to brown at the edges, about 15 minutes.

Remove the baking sheet from the oven. Using a wide metal spatula, scrape up and flip the broccolini, pushing it to the edges. Add the salmon, skin side down, to the center of the baking sheet. Roast until the fish flakes easily and the broccolini is lightly charred and tender-crisp, 7 to 10 minutes. Transfer to a platter and drizzle with the reserved miso-orange sauce.

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS

Power of punk

Iggy Pop, Sex Pistols, Bad Religion headlining punk rock fest in Japan

BY AARON KIDD
Stars and Stripes

Time to tease up your mohawk. Iggy Pop, Bad Religion and three founding members of the Sex Pistols are slated to headline PUNKSPRING when the highly anticipated Japanese music festival returns in March.

With a lineup packed with legendary acts and fan favorites, the event promises two unforgettable days of high-energy, raucous performances in Osaka and Tokyo.

The raw power begins March 29, at INTEX Osaka, with the Sex Pistols (featuring Frank Carter on vocals), Bad Religion, Yellowcard, Pennywise and other surprises. Doors open at 11 a.m., and the first band hits the stage at 12:30 p.m.

On March 30, the festival moves to Makuhari Messe Convention Center just east of Tokyo, where the godfather of punk, Iggy Pop, takes top billing alongside the aforementioned bands. Doors open at 10 a.m., with music starting at 11:30 a.m.

Note that Iggy Pop, who will turn 78 a few weeks after this performance, will not appear at the Osaka show. The cultural icon gained fame as frontman of The Stooges, a highly influential four-piece known for its aggressive sound and rebellious spirit.

The Sex Pistols — drummer Paul Cook, guitarist Steve Jones and bassist Glen Matlock — last performed in Tokyo on Dec. 8, 2008, with original vocalist John Lydon (also known as Johnny Rotten) at the helm.

Carter — former frontman for Gallows and current leader of Frank Carter & The Rattlesnakes — first took on the Rotten role for fundraisers in August and a mini-tour of England in September. Music critics have praised his ability to channel Lydon's raw energy, noting his dynamic stage presence and vocal prowess.

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BJORN TAGEMOSE

Iggy Pop gained fame as frontman of The Stooges, a highly influential four-piece known for its aggressive sound and rebellious spirit.

On the QT

Information: Presale PUNKSPRING tickets are available until Jan. 30 online at ib.eplus.jp/punkspring25. Regular ticket sales begin Feb. 1 and last until a week before showtime — or until they sell out.
Cost: For the Tokyo show, Gold Standing tickets are 20,000 yen, or about \$130, and include access to an exclusive admission lane, front-viewing areas and a fast lane for merchandise sales. Regular standing-room admission is 15,000 yen. The Osaka show costs 15,000 for Gold Standing and 10,000 for regular admission. See punkspring.com/english for further details.

Aaron Kidd



Sex Pistols

The Sex Pistols are set to perform in Japan for the first time since 2008. Frank Carter will be on vocals when the iconic group plays the upcoming PUNKSPRING festival in Tokyo and Osaka.

Exploring
the Beauty of the Pacific



Pick up the magazine or get it online



STARS AND STRIPES

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Addressing the elephant in tourism

Researchers divided over whether interacting with the animals is ethical and safe

By FRANCES VINALL
AND WILAWAN WATCHARASAKWEJ
The Washington Post

An elephant handler in Thailand is under investigation after a Spanish tourist was killed during a bathing activity at a venue advertised as an ethical sanctuary, an officer at the Tourism and Sports Office in Phang Nga province said last week. The grim incident has again spotlighted the question of how tourists can ethically — and safely — interact with elephants while traveling.

Humans have been interacting with elephants for centuries, said Hannah S. Mumby, an assistant professor at the University of Hong Kong's Area of Ecology and Biodiversity who has studied human-wildlife interactions and Asian elephants. But regardless of how innocuous a tourism experience appears, she said, "an elephant is always still a wild animal."

Is elephant tourism ethical?

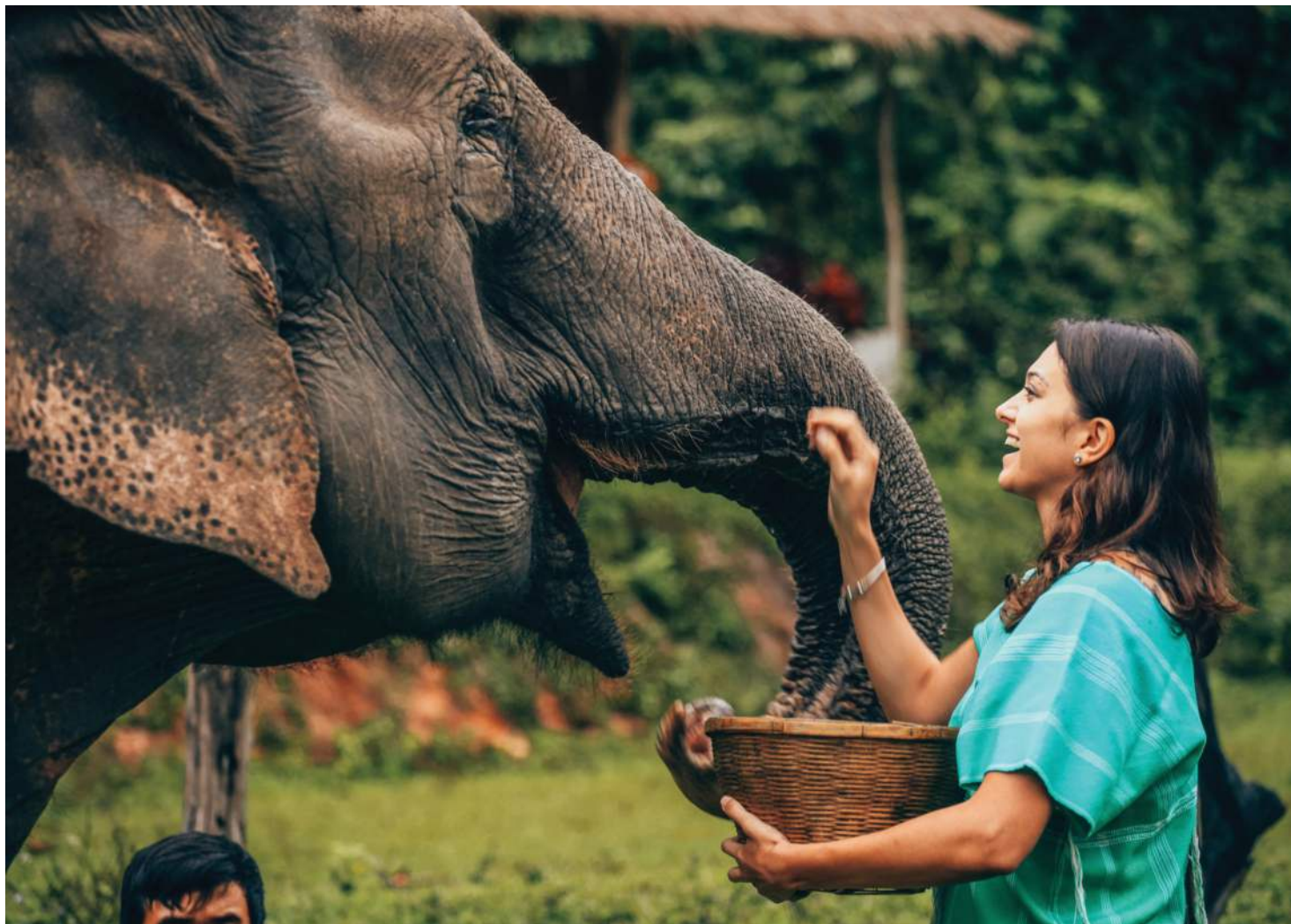
Trick-performing elephant acts are mostly frowned upon these days, and experiences advertising ethical treatment and conservation efforts have sprung up in their place. But animal welfare organizations often urge against any tourism that involves interacting with wild animals, including bathing and taking photos close to elephants.

The U.N. Tourism agency, however, does not recommend against tourism that involves interacting with captive wild animals in its Global Code of Ethics for Tourism, despite calls from animal rights groups for it to do so. It advocates, generally, for tourism activities that are "conducted in harmony with the attributes and traditions of the host regions and countries and [with] respect for their laws, practices and customs."

The appropriateness of engaging with wild animals is a social and cultural conversation that is constantly in flux, Mumby said. The mental and emotional state of an animal is a complex phenomenon that is difficult for scientists to conclusively measure, she added.

Research on the question is mixed. A 2020 review of animal welfare in elephant tourism in Thailand by researchers with Chiang Mai University and the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute found that "conclusions that the vast majority of captive elephants are abused often are based on anecdotal evidence and not solid science."

The authors recommended a variety of best practices for the management of captive elephants, such as limiting high-calorie treats like bananas and sugar cane and providing for sufficient exercise; ensuring the elephants have ample opportunity to be social, including overnight; providing naturalistic housing with limited concrete flooring and walkways; and prioritizing adequate pay, training and retention of mahouts — workers responsible for elephants — throughout the industry.



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Even just bathing and feeding elephants can be dangerous for tourists and is also not recommended for the animals' health.

Lead author Pakkanut Bansiddhi, an associate professor of veterinary medicine at Chiang Mai University, said in a video interview that how a particular elephant tourist activity is managed is often more important than the type of activity, even among riding or bathing experiences. But she acknowledged there was a huge variety of welfare standards in the industry and that it is often difficult for tourists to discern which options are better than others.

An official program to accredit Thai elephant tourism operators based on animal well-being is in its infancy, she said.

"Especially in Thailand, we have a very deep tradition and culture between Thai people and the elephant," she said.

"I think the better way is to promote welfare, educate people and do the science to find out which is the best management and the best activity for the elephant in tourism," she said, adding that she had seen significant improvements over the past decade in how elephants are treated within tourism.

Other researchers do take a categorically unfavorable view of the industry. A 2023 analysis of elephant tourism led by researchers at the Emergent Disease Foundation, a U.K. charity, found that "elephant welfare within some sectors of the close contact interactive tourism industry continues to involve significant mistreatment and abuse." It called for bans of close-contact experiences.

Lead author Clifford Warwick, a biologist, said in an email that while some forms of tourism that involved observing elephants, from vehicles for example, could be acceptable, "bans are required"

when it comes to interacting with the animals.

"In my view, any directly interactive tourism is unresolvably problematic," he said. "The highly concerning animal welfare and public health and safety issues associated with directly interactive (riding, bathing, touching, feeding, close-up photographs) in elephant tourism are unresolvable."

How to navigate tourism options

Plenty of elephant experiences advertise themselves as ethical but would be unlikely to get the animal-rights-group stamp of approval. Sanctuaries that are considered humane provide homes for rescued animals that cannot be released into the wild, in which carefully managed tourism can play a role.

World Animal Protection calls for tourists to "only visit venues where you can look, not touch": That means no riding, bathing or patting elephants, or visiting any venue where the elephants are behaving in a way they would not behave in the wild. It recommends a list of elephant sanctuaries, including 10 in Thailand.

The Global Federation of Animal Sanctuaries, a nonprofit dedicated to sanctuaries, rescue centers and rehabilitation facilities that administers accreditation, is another place to check out when deciding whether or where you want to see animals while traveling, though it does not list any sanctuaries in Thailand.

The travel site Tripadvisor does not allow most experiences in which tourists come into contact with captive wild animals to be booked through its platform,

though they can still be listed and reviewed. Airbnb does not allow bookings of experiences in which guests ride, bathe or feed elephants, and Booking.com has disallowed tours that involve directly interacting with elephants, among other banned animal activities on those sites.

Are elephant experiences safe?

The chances are low that you will be hurt by an elephant as a tourist. But it does happen.

In the Jan. 3 incident in Phang Nga province, a woman accidentally slipped and grabbed onto an elephant's trunk, startling it, a local tourism official said. The elephant shook out its trunk, which pushed the woman against the edge of the pool, the official said. She died in a hospital. The woman and her boyfriend had been participating in an elephant bathing activity and had been instructed by a tour guide to stand in front of the elephant for a photo, the official said, citing police and tour company reports.

Reports of tourists injured or killed by captive elephants in Asia have made headlines nearly annually in recent years. Viewing elephants in the wild can also be risky: At least two tourists were killed by the animals while on safari in Zambia last year.

There is also a risk of disease transmission between elephants and humans when in close contact, experts warn. The Emergent Disease Foundation-led analysis concluded that "infection and injury risks between humans and captive elephants cannot be safely controlled where close contact experiences are involved."

WEEKEND: LIFESTYLE

Giving homes arboreal love

Architects, designers are using trees in their residential biophilic designs for sustainability, wellness and harmony

By **KIM COOK**
Associated Press

By now, you may be familiar with biophilic design — it's the idea of integrating nature into design to enhance our connection to the environment. Sustainability, wellness and harmony are usually part of the deal.

Some architects and home designers are using one particular biophilic element to striking effect: trees.

We've already seen public spaces around the globe incorporate trees in remarkable and beautiful ways.

The Ford Foundation in New York boasts a 12-story-high atrium filled with magnolias, eucalyptus, jacaranda, cryptomeria, iron bark and pear trees. The Winter Garden atrium in lower Manhattan's Brookfield Place is home to 16 40-foot-tall Washingtonia palm trees. Singapore's Jewel Changi airport features 2,500 trees — natives to Madagascar, Australia, Malaysia and Indonesia — in a 6-acre indoor forest with walking trails. If your flight's delayed, lucky you.

Apartment complexes also have seen some striking examples of trees and other greenery incorporated into their design — the buildings are sometimes called "greenscrapers."

For instance, architect Stefano Boeri's Bosco Verticale in Milan is a 44-story tower with 800 trees and myriad shrubbery enveloping each unit. In the Netherlands, he built the Trudo Vertical Forest, a low-income apartment tower with trees growing on all four facades.

"Architects and designers are increasingly shrouding and softening the hard-edged stone and concrete planes of urban buildings with lush vegetation," says London-based architecture and design writer Dominic Lutyens.

Private houses are also getting the arboreal love. In some, the tree's brought right indoors. In others, trees on the property are included as important partners in the home plan.

Whether it's building the home around an existing tree, planting one (or more) trees within the interior space, or simply giving the illusion of a woodland indoors, the aesthetic is green and gorgeous.

A Zen-like heart of the home

New York-based firm ODA Architecture created a penthouse home for a client in New Delhi that has a closed courtyard at its center with a reflecting pool and a ficus microcarpa tree. Raindrops land on the glass ceiling and are reflected in the infinity-edged pool the tree resides in, truly giving an indoor/outdoor vibe.

Ryoko Okada, one of ODA's principals and its interior project director, says the firm brings the outdoors in — on a big scale like this, and on less ambitious projects — as often as they can.

"There's nothing more calming than being surrounded by nature. A living tree is a statement piece, and an art installation in itself," she says. "It'll bring you joy and peace, and as with a smaller houseplant, seeing it grow and evolve is regenerative."

The tree lives in multiple feet of soil and is supported to prevent damage to the home. The level below had high ceilings, which allowed the architects to drop the floor and establish space for the tree roots to grow.

Framing the views

KAA Design Group in Los Angeles created a modern home in Southern California that embraces the property's existing cork oaks, rare Torrey pines and magnolias. An impressive mature cork oak sits center stage. Leaving it



ODA ARCHITECTURE/AP

This rendering created by DNS shows a living tree situated in an infinity pool inside a private residence, as designed by New York-based firm ODA Architecture for a client in New Delhi, India. Raindrops land on the glass ceiling and are reflected in the pool, truly giving an indoor/outdoor vibe.

in place took a bit of a sell, says one of the firm's founding partners, Grant Kirkpatrick.

"The client's perception was that this tree was too messy, and right in the middle of the property. We had to convince him that the tree is a 300-year-old antique that should be featured rather than removed," he said. "Once we developed the plan that literally embraces the tree, they understood."

"There's nothing more calming than being surrounded by nature. A living tree is a statement piece, and an art installation in itself. It'll bring you joy and peace, and as with a smaller houseplant, seeing it grow and evolve is regenerative."

Ryoko Okada

an ODA Architecture principal and its interior project director

The driveway, too, offers a Zen moment, with a black pine pruned in the Japanese niwaki style with more open branching, and a miniature rock garden emerging out of the paving like an organic sculpture.

On an upper floor, you can look out onto a grassy platform built around the gnarled branches of one of the oaks. Views out the sliding glass doors of the open-plan kitchen and dining area are framed by tree limbs, and the ocean is on the horizon.

There are ways to honor trees, even if you don't have a live one

On a ranch property near Paso Robles, there'd been a fire in 2016.

"It burnt several acres of the property and took some of the beautiful manzanita trees," Kirkpatrick says.

The team had recently visited the studios in Belgium of interior designer Axel Vervoordt, who's known for his "wabi," or Japanese minimalist style.

"We loved how they incorporated tree branches and other organic materials into their home space interiors," Kirkpatrick said. "Back at the ranch, we were inspired to take one of the (burnt) manzanitas, paint it flat black and incorporate it (into the space)." It's now an eye-catching natural piece of art.

What to consider

"We don't recommend planting full-size trees in your home without consulting a landscape architect or other qualified specialist. A living tree will only thrive in the right environment, determined by region, access to light and air and soil type. And it needs to be supported by proper infrastructure to stay alive and avoid home damage," Okada says.

"We also recommend doing thorough research on the tree's natural environment so that you're not attracting pests," she says.

Adds Kirkpatrick: "It can be tricky. At least 4 feet of soil depth is recommended. Plentiful natural light as well. The right tree for the right climate is important. And it needs to be acclimated in the area prior to planting."

The landscape teams of John Mini Distinctive Landscapes and Pahokee Palms, who installed the Brookfield Place palms, did just that: After the young trees were dug up in Florida, they spent some time under the protective cover of a 48-foot-high shade house, so they could adjust to light conditions in New York.

The palms in the Brookfield space need to be replaced every 10 years or so, because living indoors, they aren't exposed to elements, becoming weaker as they get taller.

"Trees need to 'work out,'" says Anna Zarra Aldrich of the University of Connecticut's College of Agriculture, Health and Natural Resources. "For instance, gradually exposing a tree to more wind develops its resistance and makes it more resilient in a storm."

Once removed, the old trees are turned into mulch. Sixteen new Washingtonia Robusta palms are sourced in Florida, shipped up in groups of four by truck and planted at Brookfield Place. The mulch is settled around native trees planted in their honor in places like serenity gardens at local hospitals.

WEEKEND: MUSIC

Fascinated by 'Human Fear'



Q&A: Franz Ferdinand discuss new album, resurgence of 2000s indie and Charli XCX

By SIAN WATSON
Associated Press

Two decades ago, the Scottish rock band Franz Ferdinand sent a jolt across the music world. They waltzed in striped shirts and quickly became global icons for their deliriously hooky songs, hitting a critical mass in the chant-along singles “Take Me Out” and “Do You Want To.” A lot has changed in that time, but the band never wavered in their dedication to 2000s indie ebullience. Over the last few years there’s been a bit of an indie music resurgence, but for Franz Ferdinand, it never went away.

On Jan. 10, they released “The Human Fear,” their sixth studio album and the first in seven years, mark-

ing the end of the longest break between full-lengths in their career.

Frontman Alex Kapranos says the album tackles relationships forming and breaking down. “The title is a clue to the scene,” he teases. “But it wasn’t written to the theme, at least not consciously.”

In an interview with The Associated Press in London, Kapranos and Franz Ferdinand bassist Bob Hardy discussed “The Human Fear,” the resurgence of indie music and the band’s love for Chappell Roan and Charli XCX. Responses have been edited for length and clarity.

AP: What is the story behind “The Human Fear”?

Kapranos: The last song that was written, the last lyrics that were written was (for) the song “Hooked.”

It starts off with the line, “I’ve got the fear / I’ve got the human fear.” And I realize that so many of the songs had an underlying theme of fear to them. But not necessarily succumbing to fear, but more like overcoming fear.

“The Doctor” is about the fear of leaving an institution, and “Bar Lonely” is the fear of leaving a relationship. “Night or Day” is the fear of committing to a relationship. But fear is fascinating because fear is universal. We all experience fear. We all experience the same fears. But how we respond to it is individual. And that’s how we find who we are, our personalities. And overcoming fear feels good. That’s

SEE FEAR ON PAGE 29

Alex Kapranos, left, and Bob Hardy, of Franz Ferdinand, pose on Nov. 28 in London. The Scottish indie band is back with a new album, “The Human Fear.”

SCOTT A GARFITT, INVISION/AP

WEEKEND: MUSIC



Alex Kapranos, frontman of Franz Ferdinand, performs with the band during the Bonnaroo Music and Arts Festival on June 18, 2023, in Manchester, Tenn. AP

Fear: Franz Ferdinand makes the music it loves, regardless of trends

FROM PAGE 28

why we watch horror films or ride rollercoasters — because you overcome fear and then feel very alive for having done so.

AP: The latest single, “Audacious,” deals with fear as well.

Kapranos: The song starts off addressing that feeling that we all have sometimes, which is, you know, you feel that your life is collapsing around about you for one reason or another. It could be a relationship that is disintegrating. Often, it’ll go that things tend to happen to you (all) at once. The relationship starts going south as well as your professional life. And then you realize that the washing machine leaked and your basement’s flooded and just all that kind of annoying stuff. Your phone gets nicked or whatever. And it can be overwhelming. And you just, you have this sense of fear that, “Gosh, everything’s collapsing.”

I guess I was feeling a little bit like that when I was writing the song for one reason or another. And I thought, “What am I going to do?” ... I’m just going to do something astonishingly audacious. I’m going to go into it with an audacious attitude and get through it that sort of way. And don’t blame anybody else for it as well. Like, own the responsibility of overcoming the fear myself.

AP: Has your writing process changed?

Kapranos: We’re not one of these kinds of bands that will sit down and say, “Right, we’ve got two months to write an album.” For me, you’re always writing, you’re always coming up with ideas. And so, on this album, there’s ideas that were written in the studio literally the day before it was sent off to be mastered. And there’s also ideas ... I think the oldest idea is the bassline (of) one of the songs,

which is from 1995.

I think the way my brain works is like if you imagine going into the office of a university’s eccentric professor that’s scattered with bits of paper. It’s all kind of like catastrophic, organizational hell, but they know exactly where everything is. That’s what my brain is like with bits of ideas and bits of songs and stuff like that. I know where they are, and when I need to use them, they’ll come out.

Hardy: And the show has become the reward for making records, to me. It all kind of focuses playing it live in front of an audience and seeing people react to it in the moment. When you release a record, you don’t see people listen to it at home. You know, the way you kind of get the reaction is these live shows.

AP: What do you think about the current resurgence of indie?

Hardy: It’s never gone away.

Kapranos: There was a period in the late-2000s where there was point of saturation where, like, you turned on any mainstream radio show and you heard nothing but indie bands. And when it becomes that saturated, maybe the quality control goes down slightly. And then when that happens, there’s always a reaction to it. And I think over the last decade, there’s been a bit of, “Right, OK, so we’re going to listen to, like, pure pop instead.” And of course, there’s some brilliant stuff like Charli XCX. Amazing. Chappell Roan (is) incredible. But there’s a lot of stuff that’s maybe not quite premier tier as well. And I think there’s been maybe a little bit of a reaction to that.

I think from our perspective, just, yeah, make the thing that you love and then you’re not really going to go wrong.

REVIEWS

Bad Bunny

Debí Tirar Más Fotos (Rimas)

Bad Bunny’s sixth studio album is an opus on his beloved Puerto Rico.

On “Debí Tirar Más Fotos,” which translates to “I should have taken more photos,” Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio pulls from the island’s rich musical history and hybridizes it.

The journey to “Debí Tirar Más Fotos” began with the release of “El Club” in early December, a song that effortlessly combines house rhythms, electronic production — courtesy MAG, La Paciencia and Saox — and nylon-stringed plena guitars. It was an interesting tease: Here, Benito marries pop modernity with a classical, Puerto Rican folk style. Not unlike Mexican corridos, with narrative lyrics that spread messages to its people, plena has been known as “El Periodico Cantado” or “the singing newspaper” in English.

Then came “Pitorro de Coco,” named after the Puerto Rican coconut-flavored spirit, a downtrodden holiday song built on a jíbara rhythm that interpolates a song from Chuíto el de Bayamón’s “Música Jíbara Para Las Navidades.”

Both, it would turn out, were ideal introductions to a new era for the artist. “Debí Tirar Más Fotos” is rooted in música jíbara and other Puerto Rican folkloric musical styles but works to evolve them. That’s found in the salsas “Baile Inolvidable” and “La Mudanza,” or the opening track “Nueva Yol,” a love letter to New York that weaves dembow into a sample of El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico’s “Un Verano en Nueva York.” It shouts out both Willie Colón and Toñita, the matriarch of one of the city’s last-standing Puerto Rican social clubs.

The shared language of Puerto Rico’s traditions transformed into Bad Bunny’s present exists in his collaborations, too. He features talent from his homeland like the band Chuwi, Dei V, Omar Courtz, Pleneros de la Cresta, and the next-generation superstar RaiNao, one woman at the forefront of the changing face of urbano.

Those listeners eager to hear more politically motivated songs a la “El Apagón” won’t be disappointed, either. There’s “Turista” and the affecting “Lo Que Pasó a Hawaii,” where Bad Bunny sings “No quiero que pase contigo lo que pasó a Hawaii,” (“I don’t want what happened in Hawaii to happen to you,”) a rallying cry for Puerto Rico’s cultural autonomy.

“Debí Tirar Más Fotos” is an album for his loyalists and new listeners alike, but most importantly, it is one of Bad Bunny’s best because it does what he has always done best: “Debí Tirar Más Fotos” celebrates the music at the heart of Puerto Rico and brings it to the world.

— Maria Sherman
Associated Press



Ethel Cain

Perverts (Daughters of Cain)

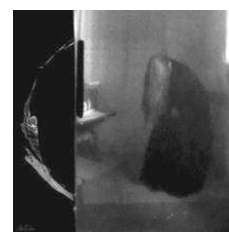
“Perverts,” the second studio release by the gloomy Americana artist Hayden Anhedonia, who performs as Ethel Cain, deploys a vast array of elements. Post-industrial noise, glacial tempos, layered reverb and ritualistic incantations through darkly angelic vocals combine in a jarring exploration of self-gratification and self-loathing.

The artist’s first full-length release, 2022’s “Preacher’s Daughter,” blended folk, goth and ambient elements. Cain’s ethereal vocals spun a story of violence, trauma and Southern-Baptist confession. “Perverts” enters as the second installment of a planned trilogy and tells a postmodern horror story through its formidable sound. Where “Preacher’s Daughter” tiptoed into brutalist musical margins, “Perverts” is aggressively experimental, featuring poetry-slam style exposition, long periods of droning and empty air.

Finding influence in ambient music and the sub-genre slowcore, much of “Perverts” can sound unstructured the first time through. A deeper listen through its 90-minute run time reveals meticulous composition, with the musical elements purposefully slowed and distorted. In sound as in lyrics, the listener is left to find pattern and meaning in its sparseness.

Cain has made an interesting choice in presenting such a difficult and unexpected sophomore release. “Preacher’s Daughter” drew wide critical acclaim — at least partially due to its single anti-pop hit, “American Teenager” — and Cain expanded her fanbase by touring with beloved acts like the indie artist Mitski and the Grammy Award-winning boygenius. “Perverts” is bound to alienate some of her audience, but as an artistic statement of uncompromising experimentation, its legacy may be to expand ideas of musical boundaries.

— Jim Pollock
Associated Press



WEEKEND: TELEVISION



Max

Noah Wyle stars in “The Pitt,” set in a Pittsburgh emergency room.



FOX

Molly Parker is a doctor with an eight-year gap in her memory in “Doc.”

Branching medical specialties

Newcomer ‘The Pitt’ specializes in frantic hyperrealism, whereas ‘Doc’ uses memory loss to generate melodrama

BY ROBERT LLOYD
Los Angeles Times

Judging by the content of television shows over the seven decades since the medium began, an alien race — you know they’re watching — would be justified in thinking the primary occupations of the human race to be solving crime and treating disease — which amount, substantially, to the same thing.

In life, no one wants to go to the hospital, yet people like to go there on television, I suppose in the same way that people like to watch shows about murder without being murdered. There is something crucial that happens in those places, which television grabs hold of and amplifies into high drama, both medical and existential.

Two new series join the long parade of hospital shows this month. Fox’s “Doc,” which streams on Hulu, stars Molly Parker as Dr. Amy Larsen, a Minneapolis internist who loses eight years of memory in a car crash but keeps on keeping on. “The Pitt,” now streaming on Max, is set in a Pittsburgh emergency room; that it involves “ER” vets John Wells (executive producer, director), R. Scott Gemmill (creator) and Noah Wyle (star) makes it impossible not to mention that show, so I have.

“Doc” is a soap opera with medical elements; “The Pitt” is a hyper-realistic medical drama with soap opera elements. Both offer a critique of bedside manner; patients that, seemingly fine, suddenly lose consciousness; red herrings, dead ends and wrong trees to bark up.

Adapted by Barbie Kligman from an Italian series, “Doc” begins in the after-

math of the crash; we get to see something going on inside an open skull, and then we meet Amy, whose misadventure has left her with no more than a bandage on her head, a possibly permanent case of partial retrograde amnesia and the cognitive dissonance that, as a virtual time traveler, assails her at every turn.

She will encounter the husband to whom she finds she’s no longer married, now running the hospital (Omar Metwally as Dr. Michael Hamda) where she worked, and her suddenly teenage daugh-

“Doc” is a soap opera with medical elements; “The Pitt” is a hyper-realistic medical drama with soap opera elements. Both offer a critique of bedside manner; patients that, seemingly fine, suddenly lose consciousness; red herrings, dead ends and wrong trees to bark up.

ter, Katie (Charlotte Fountain-Jardim); neither know quite what to make of her. And she’ll learn that her son is dead, a trauma that turned her cold and made her unpopular at work and with patients, though no less super powerful a diagnostician — which she remains. Confused? So is everyone.

Neither does she recall the secret affair she’d been carrying on with the hunky chief resident, Dr. Jake Heller (Jon-Michael Ecker), who isn’t about to remind her; or know why Dr. Sonya Maitra (Any-

Banerjee), who has completely escaped her memory, doesn’t seem to like her; or why the nurses mock her behind her back; or that Dr. Richard Miller (Scott Wolf), now in her old post as chief of medicine, is worried about something she used to know and hopes she won’t remember. Offering support are best friend Dr. Gina Walker (Amirah Vann), the hospital psychiatrist, and young Dr. TJ Coleman (Patrick Walker), inspired by Amy to practice medicine.

In no time at all, Amy is wandering the halls, peeking in on patients, getting un-

derfoot. Bumped down to a sort of a shadow doctor, trailing her colleagues like an intern — she has to retake her medical boards — she will nevertheless discover most of what needs to be discovered. But she stays humble about it. “Never saw you deferring to anyone before,” observes Dr. Miller. “Fresh start, new rules,” says Amy. “That sounds like the tag line for a really bad sitcom.”

It’s not a comedy, but in a way it is — second chances and all. And Parker, who shines a light all over the show, is partic-

ularly delightful and moving in her reborn persona. “Doc” can be a little corny, a little too obviously like television, when it comes to the cases, but is all in all quite entertaining.

There are more jokes in the 15-episode “The Pitt,” which plays out in real time across a single day’s shift. Wyle stars as Dr. Robinavitch, who goes by Dr. Robby. Alongside Tracey Ifeachor’s Dr. Collins, he runs things in the ER at the Pittsburgh Trauma Medical Center. Robby is loose (but focused) where Collins is tight (and focused — and also pregnant, but not telling anyone).

Where “Doc” takes place on the quieter floors of a big city hospital, “The Pitt” — shot with peripatetic handheld cameras — is set in its noisiest part, the emergency room. There is no music, but machines beep constantly. There is much running and shouting. (One of the first sights we’re treated to is a naked man on the lam, crying: “No more needles.”) There are arguments as families are torn apart under pressure and violence against hospital staff and emergencies within emergencies. The waiting room, which we see briefly, is appropriately crammed with patients.

And the ER itself is crammed with doctors. There are a lot of characters to keep track of, not even counting the myriad patients and patients’ families, and it takes a while to sort them out.

Patrick Ball is the good-looking Dr. Langhorn, who has questions about dogs. Fiona Dourif plays Dr. McKay (what’s up with the ankle monitor, you will wonder), who can smell trouble. Dr. Mohan (Supri-

SEE MEDICAL ON PAGE 31

WEEKEND: TELEVISION

Medical: 'The Pitt' is convincing

FROM PAGE 30

ya Ganesh) spends more time talking with patients than your own doctor might so is called "Slo Mo." Dr. King (Taylor Darden), on rotation from the VA, is a cheerful, excitable sort who likes to high-five when something's gone well. And charge nurse Dana (Katherine LaNasa) keeps everything running; she loves her job but would like a raise.

New to the room is a trio of student doctors — it's a teaching hospital — on their first day: Javadi (Shabana Azeez) a prodigy at 20 but defensive about her age; competitive intern Dr. Santos (Isa Briones), who will need to learn there is no "I" in "team"; and gentle farm boy Whitaker (Gerran Howell). Santos calls him "Huckleberry." ("It sounds like sarcasm," he says. "You think?" she replies, sarcastically.) The question for them all is whether they can stand the pace, ride the roller coaster.

"This is the job that keeps on giving," says Robby, "nightmares, ulcers, suicidal tendencies." (The anniversary of the pandemic-era loss of a mentor haunts him through the day.)

Whether or not "The Pitt" reflects the life of an actual emergency room — do doctors chat about their lives while working over a patient or give them wheelchair rides? — it has a convincing energy. The actors have an easy way with the medical dialogue, the various needles and knives and tubes and paddles their characters need to use, the Purell they casually pump onto their hands on entering a room.

The doctors will take on cases of electrocution, drowning, overdose, trauma, scurvy, sickle cell anemia, a nail in the chest, a fastball in the eye, gallstones, third-degree burns, chlamydia, a faulty pacemaker, rats in the clothes of an unhusband man, and on and on, each with a story and a backstory.

The setting allows for a cross section of humanity, united in distress, and occasional passages of sociopolitical commentary. In its mix of cool authenticity and hot theatricality, of cases to solve and personal business to arrange, "The Pitt" reminded me of "Homicide: Life on the Street." I never watched enough "ER" for it to remind me of "ER."

"The Pitt" streams Thursdays on Max. "Doc" airs Tuesdays stateside on Fox, and streams on Hulu and Disney+.



Disney+

In "Shifting Gears," the widowed owner of a classic car restoration shop (Tim Allen, far left) is confronted with his most unexpected and challenging project yet when his estranged daughter (Kat Dennings, far right) and her adolescent children come crashing back into his life.

Tim Allen back on familiar track

Actor's 3rd sitcom, 'Shifting Gears,' a typical setup with extended family, political differences

BY ROBERT LLOYD
Los Angeles Times

W elcome Tim Allen back to the land of multicamera sitcom, for a third run in a form that has treated him well. "Home Improvement" ran for eight seasons on ABC and is arguably what allowed him to become a film star; "Last Man Standing," which returned him to television after a decade in the movies, finished a nine-season run (six on ABC, three on Fox) in 2021. And here he is again, once more on ABC, with "Shifting Gears," which, if past is prelude, should just about see Allen — a fit 71, his tight T-shirt would like you to know — into his 80s.

Allen plays Matt, who — importing Allen's own automotive interests — runs a garage specializing in vintage and custom cars. (Working here we find Daryl Mitchell as Stitch, a wise wisecracker, and Seann William Scott as Gabriel, handsome, amiable, a little dim.) Literally driving back into Matt's life, in a filthy Pontiac GTO she stole from him 15 years before, when taking off pregnant with a musician boyfriend, is his daughter Riley (Kat Dennings). She's getting divorced, musicians being what they are, and needs a place to land with her two kids, moony teenager Carter (Maxwell Simkins) and cheerful little Georgia (Barrett Margolis), who has a thing for inventor and "Shark Tank" panelist Lori Greiner and dreams of becoming a billionaire. (The kids are excellent.)

"Well, good luck finding a man who's OK with his wife making more money than him," says Matt, an old-fashioned sort of fellow.

"I don't need a man to feel complete," replies Georgia.

"You want to kill a spider, a man's going to look pretty darn good."

"I have a shoe."

Father and daughter have been estranged, more or less — the kids do know their grandfather — since the death of Riley's mother

some indefinite years before; she was the bridge that allowed them to have a relationship. Riley, a former wild child, voted "Mean for No Reason" by her high school class, is trying to raise her kids with a sensitivity that Matt, who is all "in my day we were," regards as coddling. And so they must learn to get along under the same roof.

When "Last Man Standing," in which Allen played a not dissimilar character, went on the air in 2011, we were in the third year of the first Obama administration, and a show with a volubly conservative lead character played a little differently in the TV ecosystem; now, on the verge of heaven knows what, such a character reads as something like an adorable, almost moderate curmudgeon. Matt reads the Wall Street Journal and rails against television pundits "telling you what you're supposed to think about the news, like I'm too stupid to form my own angry opinion." When Stitch, anticipating one of Matt's rants, says, "Let me guess, we're all going to hell in a handbasket," Matt replies, "We don't even make handbaskets in the U.S. anymore. We do make excuses, quitters and diabetes, and celebrities that use diabetes medicine to lose weight." He describes Gabriel's dirty hat as looking like "a normal hat that was left in Portland too long."

The tenor of such softball japes can make "Shifting Gears" feel behind the times. There's something sort of dutiful about the show's sociopolitical humor, such as it is, which exists more to give the characters something to bat around than to say anything substantial about How We Ought to Live Now. And no one is batting very hard; this is, after all, a show about loving your difficult relations and putting differences aside. (Riley: "Can we try to talk to one another like rational adults? Matt: "Have you watched the news lately? That's not a thing anymore.") Classic stuff.

Allen and Dennings do quickly strike a satisfying mix of antagonism and affection.

Both know their way around a filmed-before-a-live-audience sitcom. (Dennings spent six seasons on "2 Broke Girls.") They're very good talking over one another, and very good not knowing exactly what to say. In one tender moment, side by side on a couch, unsure how to reach out, he touches her ... foot. To the extent that there's a new Tim Allen here, it's the one who, thinking of his late wife, and the flour sifter he has taken care not to clean, he cries, almost, sort of. But there has always been a soft center to his self-important characters. (And who really needs a new Tim Allen?)

"It's been really different here, alone," he tells Riley. "I think that's why I watch the news in the morning, so I can hear a woman's voice — even though it's sometimes Nancy Pelosi."

"Yeah, it's annoying the way she's trying to save democracy."

The series was created by Mike Scully and Julie Thacker-Scully, "Simpsons" writers and co-creators with Amy Poehler of the animated series "Duncanville." They reportedly left after the pilot (directed by John Pasquin, who directed about a fifth of "Home Improvement" and more than a third of "Last Man Standing" episodes), which is perhaps why the second episode — only two were available to watch — feels less focused.

That there is nothing new to see here is not in the series' disfavor. Political differences among close-quartered sitcom families go back at least as far as "All in the Family," which had been off the air nearly a decade when Dennings was born; adult children moving in with parents or parents moving in with children (see "Lopez vs Lopez," currently in its third season on NBC) is an old theme on television, which loves to pack as many generations into a three-walled set as possible. Formulas are formulas because they give consistent, reliable, unsurprising results.

"Shifting Gears" airs Wednesdays stateside on ABC, and streams the next day on Hulu.

WEEKEND: HEALTH & FITNESS

Falls aren't inevitable

Geriatricians offer their advice for older adults seeking better balance

By ALBERT STUMM
Associated Press



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To preserve or improve their balance, older adults should stay physically active and engage in at least 150 minutes of general physical activity per week. Yoga and tai chi, which involve controlled movements while shifting one's body weight, are particularly helpful exercises for working on balance.

Taking a shower. Grocery shopping. Moving around the kitchen. Getting dressed. The underappreciated link between these mundane activities is good balance, which geriatricians say is key to maintaining an independent lifestyle as we age.

Lacking balance can be dangerous. In the U.S., 3 million older people seek medical care for fall-related injuries each year, according to the Centers for Disease Control. But falls are not inevitable, said Roopa Anmolsingh, a geriatrician who created the Cleveland Clinic's balance classes.

"Some people have a misconception that part of getting old is, you're going to fall. That's not true," Anmolsingh said. "You can control how you fall, or if you fall."

To prevent falls, geriatricians say people should start asking themselves questions about their balance as early as 50 years old.

Do I ever feel unsteady?

Besides muscles and bones, other systems in the body can affect balance, so it's important to have a doctor check you if you ever feel unsteady, even if only occasionally. The cause could be related to blood pressure, a medication, inner-ear function, a nervous system issue or countless other potential problems.

Even if unsteadiness is not an issue, you can determine whether you still might need an intervention with an easy at-home assessment.

Standing next to a wall or something that can lend support if needed, raise one leg. If you can balance on each leg for 10 seconds, you should be fine, said Greg W. Hartley, a University of Miami professor of physical therapy specializing in geriatrics.



"Some people have a misconception that part of getting old is, you're going to fall. That's not true," said Roopa Anmolsingh, a geriatrician who created the Cleveland Clinic's balance classes. "You can control how you fall, or if you fall."

"If you can't do that, then you should probably go see a physical therapist," he said.

Another assessment, which Hartley recommended doing supervised, is called TUG, for "timed up and go." Sit in a chair and start a timer when you stand. Walk 10 feet, come back and stop the timer upon sitting back down. If it takes longer than 15 seconds, the risk for a fall is very high. Twelve seconds or less, the likelihood of a fall is almost zero.

The National Council on Aging offers an online resource to assess the risk of a fall with questions about medications, whether you worry about falling and if you have trouble stepping over a curb, among others.

What can I do to improve balance?

Because muscle mass begins to decline in most people during their 30s, geriatricians say the best way to preserve good balance is to stay physically active throughout life. But it's never too late to start prioritizing it, Anmolsingh said.

Tai chi and yoga are particularly good for older adults because they involve controlled movements while shifting body weight. There also are individual exercises people can work into their everyday lives.

Anmolsingh recommended standing on one foot while waiting in line at the grocery store. At home, try sitting up and down from a chair several times without using arm rests. While holding onto a chair or the wall, do three-way leg lifts on each side, lifting a leg to the front, side and then back. At the kitchen counter, take a few steps to the side in each direction.

How often should I do the exercises?

For general physical activity, which will improve balance as well as mood and overall health, the National Institute of Aging recommends at least 150 minutes per week. That should include a mixture of stretching to improve flexibility, an aerobic activity increasing the heart rate and strength training with weights or resistance bands.

For balance-specific exercises, it's particularly important to do them regularly because it takes at least 50 hours of training to have a measurable impact, Hartley said. Besides strengthening the associated muscles, doing exercises repetitively for extended periods trains the brain to react properly when you slip or trip.

"Just like an athlete needs to do repetition to train for a sport, you're doing repetition to train for everyday balance activities," he said.

WEEKEND: FAMILY



iStock

Safety gates and properly secured furniture are solid safety measures when a toddler is first learning to walk.

Tips for top-heavy tots

What to do if your accident-prone infant or toddler hits their head

BY RONI ROBINSON AND ELIZABETH B. PORTIN
American Academy of Pediatrics

Just like older kids, babies and toddlers can get concussions. In fact, little ones face some extra risks. It can sometimes be harder to recognize the signs of concussion, a type of mild traumatic brain injury, in infants and toddlers. They may not have the language skills yet to tell you how they feel.

The impact from a bump, blow or jolt to the head or a hit to the body causes the head to move quickly back and forth. This sudden, back-and-forth impact causes the brain to twist inside the skull and stretch the brain cells. Chemical changes happen that temporarily disrupt normal brain function.

An infant or toddler's head is large compared to their body. This makes them top-heavy so they are more likely than older children to fall headfirst when they lose their balance. This is common as babies and young children often fall when they're learning to walk, run and explore.

Plus, their neck muscles are still developing and offer less control of head movement. On top of that, a baby's skull is softer and thinner than an older child's. While headfirst falls put infants at higher risk of concussion, any activity where they can hit their head or body hard enough can cause one.

Here are some ways to help protect your child from concussion:

- Put baby gates at the top and bottom of stairs. Use other home safety products to "childproof" your home like window guards and non-slip bathtub mats.
- Always keep a hand on your child while they're on furniture, including diaper changing tables.
- Secure heavy furniture such as dressers to the wall to prevent tip-overs.
- Ensure your child is always properly buckled up in a car safety seat while riding in a vehicle.
- Choose playgrounds with age-appropriate equipment.

Younger children often show changes in their behavior when they have a concussion. They may become upset, cranky or extra fussy. They may also become more clingy, and their sleeping and eating patterns can change.

You may notice these symptoms right after the injury, or in the days that follow. Concussion symptoms may improve with rest at first, but can also worsen with increased activity afterward.

Take your child to the emergency department right away if they have been hit in the head or body and have any of these symptoms:

- Will not stop crying and cannot be consoled (infants)
- Will not nurse or eat (infants)
- Repeated vomiting or nausea
- Slurred speech
- Looks very drowsy or cannot be awakened
- One pupil (the black part in the middle of the eye) is larger than the other
- Convulsions or seizures
- Unusual behavior or not acting like their usual self
- Loss of consciousness (even a brief loss of consciousness should be taken seriously; the child should be carefully monitored)

Your child's doctor will get a detailed description of what happened, as well as your child's medical history. They will also want to know how your child has been acting since the injury.

The main treatment for concussion is to take a step back from your child's usual daily activities for a few days. This is because they may only have enough stamina or feel well enough for shorter activities.

They may need to stay home for a few days from daycare or preschool, for example. Your child may also need breaks from busy or loud environments until they are starting to act more like their usual self.

This does not mean that they can't do anything. In fact, research has found that it's best not to cut out activity completely. Let them play but recognize that they may not be able to play as long as they usually do and may also benefit from more breaks. You'll also need to be on the lookout for new or worsening symptoms. In addition, it is important to avoid activities that would put them at risk for another head injury.

Although younger children need to be monitored, there is no need to periodically wake them up when they're asleep if they have a concussion unless their doctor advises you to do this. Sleep can help the brain heal.

While older children often recover in about 3 to 4 weeks, younger children may take several weeks to get to full recovery.

Be sure to discuss any ongoing or worsening symptoms with your child's doctor. This helps determine whether further tests may be needed.

THE MEAT AND POTATOES OF LIFE

Lisa Smith Molinari



The tale of a middle-aged Boot Camp breakthrough

"Hey, Lisa," said my friend Marcia, approaching me after a recent Boot Camp exercise class. "That dinner you told us about was at Castle Hill, right? I told my husband about it, and he just couldn't believe it."

I was taken aback. Marcia was referring to a story I'd told a few boot campers recently, and I was touched that she found my tale interesting enough to tell her husband.

Call me pathetic, but this little crumb of social success felt like a breakthrough.

Even though my Navy husband retired after 28 active duty years, I still have a military spouse's mindset, prone to insecurity after so many military moves.

After every PCS move our family experienced, I'd turned into my middle-school-aged self. "Will anyone like me?" I'd wonder, awkward and uncertain. I'd eventually find my people, but it was never easy. Even after my husband's military retirement and move to our current home in Rhode Island, I've struggled to find close pals in my community.

Since leaving base life, I've longed for one or two "kitchen door" friends. The kind that show up unannounced without makeup on. The kind that tell you the commissary is out of strawberries. The kind that let you vent about how long it took for your number to be called at the base pharmacy. The kind that let you be yourself and appreciate you for it.

About a year ago, I discovered that the local recreation center offered Boot Camp exercise classes, so I signed up and became a twice-a-week regular. I wanted to get in better shape, but the women in the class were equally interested in the social opportunity Boot Camp classes offered.

On Fridays after class, we'd all meet up at a local coffee shop for sweaty chat sessions. Over time, these little doses of camaraderie were like Prozac.

Boot Camp classes were not in session over the recent holidays, so five of us met up on the morning of New Year's Eve to make a feeble attempt at self-directed exercise before we gave up and headed to a coffee shop. After exercising, we opened a bottle of Prosecco one of the ladies had brought on a bench outside the rec center, hoping we wouldn't get "busted" by any local cops. Giggling with my plastic cup, I felt like a goofy middle-schooler, but in a good way.

At the coffee shop, I experienced a sense of comfort I hadn't felt before, so I decided, for the first time with this group, to tell a meaty story.

I've always been a storyteller, sometimes to the chagrin of my audience, because I enhance every detail with elaborate descriptions, exaggerated hand gestures and facial expressions. I pride myself in telling a good story, but I don't fully reveal this essential element of my personality until I can trust that a listener will appreciate it. My best friends know that whether they laugh, cry, or are fascinated or outraged, they will be entertained.

With the Prosecco's liquid courage in my bloodstream, I relayed my story of the dinner at Castle Hill to my Boot Camp friends. To tell it right, it was necessary to transport my consciousness back to the evening in question. I was deep into my storytelling trance when I approached the plot's climax, so I paused for dramatic effect.

In that brief moment of silence, I glanced around at the four ladies, and realized that none of them was rolling her eyes, having a side conversation or falling asleep. They were looking right at me, frozen in suspense.

Then, I delivered the crucial pinnacle, and my friends gasped in disbelief. "What? Are you kidding? No way! That's outrageous!" I walked home feeling great. I'd finally let go and was unguarded. I wanted to trust that my new friends' appreciation of my authentic self was genuine.

"My husband couldn't believe it when I told him your story!" Marcia said at Boot Camp this week, and then I knew for certain. I'd found my people.

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

ALL THINGS CHANGE

BY KAREEM AYAS / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

Kareem Ayas is a high school teacher of English literature and film studies in Harlem. He grew up in Syria and Lebanon, moved to the United States in 2014 and started solving the Times crossword with co-workers during lunch breaks. Soon his puzzle habit led to constructing. Kareem says he gets his best theme ideas "as I walk my dog at midnight while listening to Duran Duran." Keep your thinking cap on, because he adds, "More often than not I start with the question 'What crossword rules can I break?'"

- ACROSS**
- 1 Turmoil
 - 7 Protagonist of Arabian folk tales
 - 14 /
 - 19 They might be sewn in at a beauty parlor
 - 21 Mustangs sometimes race with them
 - 22 Many a Quentin Tarantino film role
 - 23 Classic Chevys
 - 24 Vanity fare?
 - 25 Super-excited
 - 26 Donkey Kong, e.g.
 - 27 Some chords
 - 29 Trash
 - 30 Unhappy spectators
 - 31 Live interview shout-out
 - 32 Common sales promotion
 - 34 End of fall?
 - 38 Increases
 - 39 Made less effective, in gamer slang
 - 40 Like some picture frames
 - 41 Part of a fishing line to which a hook is attached
 - 43 Characters from Homer and Herodotus?
 - 44 Goes higher, at an auction
 - 47 Part of a modern assembly line
 - 50 Some works of Pablo Neruda
 - 54 Landmark featured in "Roman Holiday"
 - 57 Reveals everything
 - 59 Biblical inspiration for Caleb, in Steinbeck's "East of Eden"
 - 60 Landscaper's roll-out
 - 61 Jason of "Aquaman"
 - 62 Sign on a tray at a cash register . . . or a hint to entering 32-Across
 - 71 Like Sherlock Holmes's "game"
 - 72 Away from work, for short
 - 73 Bit of plankton
 - 74 Place for some light rest?
 - 78 Band with the 2001 No. 1 hit "How You Remind Me" . . . or a hint to entering 54-Across
 - 84 Long-running tour title for Taylor Swift
 - 85 Cultural meeting place
 - 87 Washington airport, informally
 - 88 Smartphone precursors, for short
 - 89 Typical features of locker rooms
 - 92 European capital said to be the site of the first decorated Christmas tree
 - 93 Gin or djinn, e.g.
 - 96 Part of overalls
 - 98 Mercilessly harsh treatment, in an expression . . . or a hint to entering 117-Across
 - 101 Pivot without warning . . . or a hint to entering 19-Across
 - 103 Not straight, in a way
 - 104 Pilot
 - 105 Questionable gift, for short?
 - 106 Musician once nicknamed "The Beale Street Blues Boy"
 - 108 One of 10 on each end of a beer pong table
 - 111 Tough-guy title role
 - 112 "Nice going!"
 - 114 Harsh "reading"
 - 116 Part of a bridal gown 117 1/4
 - 118 Registers
 - 119 Some bank deposits
 - 120 Mentee
 - 121 Start to boil
 - 16 Current measure
 - 17 Start to boil
 - 18 Mess (around)
 - 20 Emotional strains
 - 28 Last word of the New Testament
 - 30 Second strings
 - 31 Prefix with -centric
 - 32 Onion or garlic
 - 33 2024 Shakira single "(___ Paréntesis)"
 - 34 Compartmentalize
 - 35 Swear
 - 36 Quintet of experts on "Queer Eye," familiarly
 - 37 Late actress Garr
 - 42 Chaney of "The Hunchback of Notre Dame"
 - 43 Pointy part on a husky
 - 45 Italian motorcycle brand
 - 46 Insta alternative
 - 48 Prominent instrument in Seal's "Kiss From a Rose" and Sonny and Cher's "I Got You Babe"
 - 49 Revealing word
 - 50 Plains tribe
 - 51 "Hot ___!"
 - 52 North Carolina campus town
 - 53 Leave rolling in the aisles
 - 55 Love all, essentially
 - 56 One of the Wilsons of Heart
 - 58 Skewer
 - 60 Thruway advisory
 - 62 ___ Modern (London attraction)
 - 63 Way off
 - 64 Coffee named for the district it's grown in
 - 65 Many, many moons
 - 66 Rejections
 - 67 Weird Al Yankovic's parody of the song "Lola"
 - 68 Little suck-up?
 - 69 Antlered animal
 - 70 Many moons
 - 75 Gordimer who wrote "The Conservationist"
 - 76 Non ___ (unwelcome)
 - 77 Major K-pop septet
 - 78 Nonverbal OK
 - 79 Privy to
 - 80 The Flash's civilian identity ___ Allen
 - 81 Bickering
 - 82 Structure for a shark dive
 - 83 1980s Chrysler debut
 - 86 Brain piece
 - 88 Oxygen atoms have eight of them
 - 90 Queen's realm
 - 91 One working the knight shift?
 - 93 Mena of the "American Pie" films
 - 94 Elemental
 - 95 Pretty soon
 - 96 Parisian eatery
 - 97 Effect
 - 99 Storing, as some ashes
 - 100 Vice president with a Nobel Peace Prize
 - 101 Fruit pastries
 - 102 Put off
 - 106 Head shop purchase
 - 107 Memory unit
 - 108 Pacify
 - 109 Sch. with the Daily Bruin newspaper
 - 110 Vet's concern
 - 112 TikTok, for one
 - 113 "Busy" one
 - 115 Littl'un



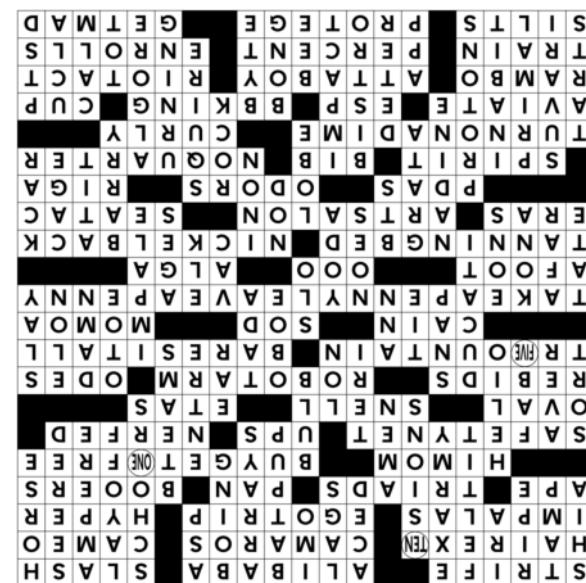
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- 113 "Busy" one
- 115 Littl'un

GUNSTON STREET



"Gunston Street" is drawn by Basil Zaviski. Email him at gunstonstreet@yahoo.com, and online at gunstonstreet.com.

RESULTS FOR ABOVE PUZZLE



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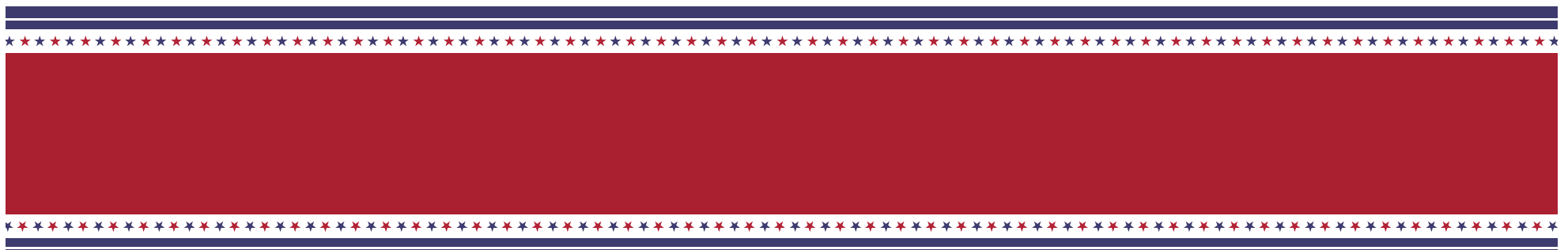
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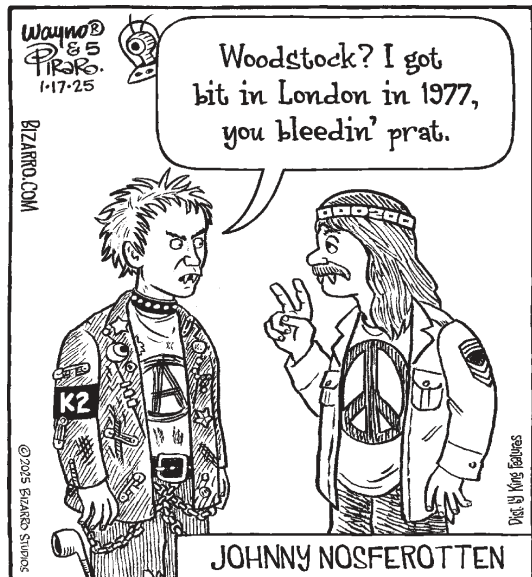


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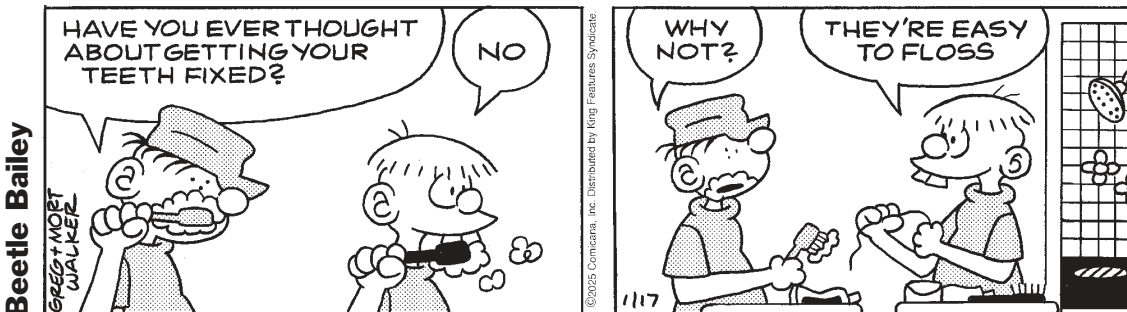
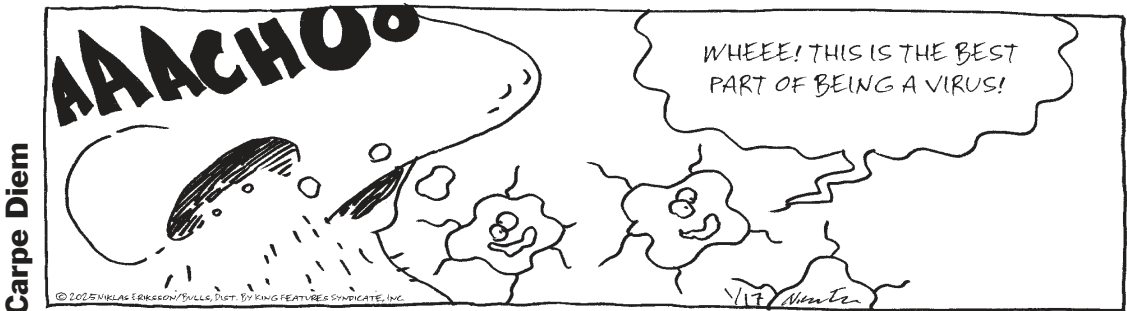
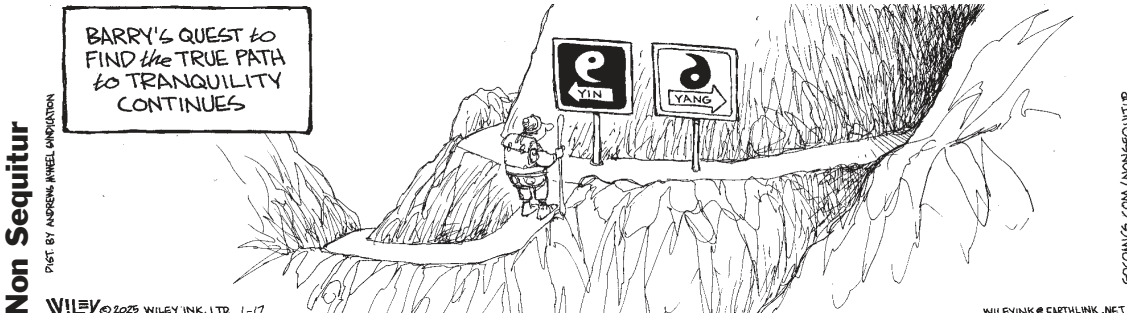
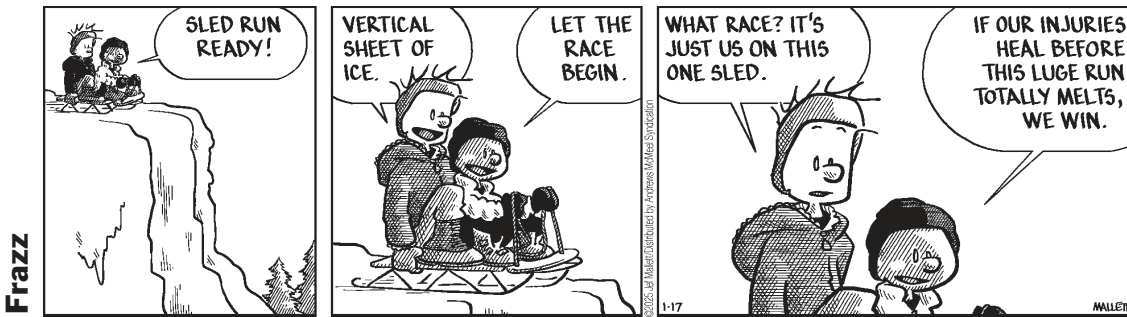


Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

1	2	3		4	5	6	7		8	9	10	11
12				13					14			
15			16						17			
18							19	20				
			21				22			23	24	25
26	27	28				29				30		
31					32				33			
34				35				36				
37			38				39					
			40				41			42	43	44
45	46	47				48	49					
50						51				52		
53						54				55		



ACROSS

- 1 Cry
- 4 Vault
- 8 Daly and Allen
- 12 Common title start
- 13 Killer whale
- 14 Web addresses
- 15 Pithy joke
- 17 Legume
- 18 Suggests
- 19 TV guide abbr.
- 21 Wager
- 22 Expulsion
- 26 Errand runner
- 29 Whatever number
- 30 Hwy.
- 31 Caspian Sea feeder
- 32 Keats creation
- 33 Go caroling
- 34 Capitol VIP
- 35 Year in Madrid
- 36 Epic narratives
- 37 On/off switch
- 39 "You've got mail" co.
- 40 Documentarian Burns
- 41 Obligations
- 45 Beige
- 48 The whole crowd
- 50 Ache
- 51 Aswan's river
- 52 Victory

- 53 Abbr. on a schedule
- 54 Ticked (off)
- 55 Annex

- 24 Sicilian peak
- 25 Bylaws, briefly
- 26 Sudden wind
- 27 Disc-shaped cookie
- 28 Sharp tooth
- 29 Commotion
- 32 Penny
- 33 Like seawater
- 35 Boxing legend
- 36 Turned bad
- 38 Hog's "hello"
- 39 "Hello" singer
- 42 Illinois neighbor
- 43 Wife of Geraint
- 44 Fax
- 45 Clean air org.
- 46 Baseball fan's headwear
- 47 Tear
- 49 Compete

DOWN

- 1 Halt
- 2 "It can't be!"
- 3 Hive population
- 4 Hang around
- 5 Painter Max
- 6 Expert
- 7 Series opener
- 8 Big brass
- 9 Rage
- 10 Org. with a style manual
- 11 Nine-digit ID
- 16 Slander in print
- 20 Purchase
- 23 Advanced math

Answer to Previous Puzzle

K	A	R	A		D	I	S	C		L	E	O		
I	T	O	N		U	S	S	R		E	L	D		
L	E	M	O	N	T	R	E	E		M	A	I		
N	E	A	R	B	Y					D	R	O	N	E
					A	C		S	H	O	R	N		
M	I	L	K		S	C	I		S	A	V	E		
A	L	E			O	A	F			D	E	V		
A	L	M	A		M	L	I			F	E	T	E	
					O	P	T	E	D		B	A		
H	E	N	R	Y				S	E	T	T	E	E	
A	L	T			L	E	M	O	N	C	U	R	D	
U	S	E			E	G	A	D		A	N	N	E	
L	E	A			R	O	S	A		T	E	E	N	

1-17

CRYPTOQUIP

JNX' IH TOAEMZ VH LN RNMOXVH
LPEO RXIKJ RTWWTZH DTIEHLJ
HDHIJ GTJ TL GEMMHILEVH?
NP, ATKH MN!
Yesterday's Cryptoquip: I HAVE CONCLUDED THAT I SHOULD NEVER ARGUE WITH NINETY-DEGREE ANGLES. THEY'RE ALWAYS RIGHT.
Today's Cryptoquip Clue: R equals C

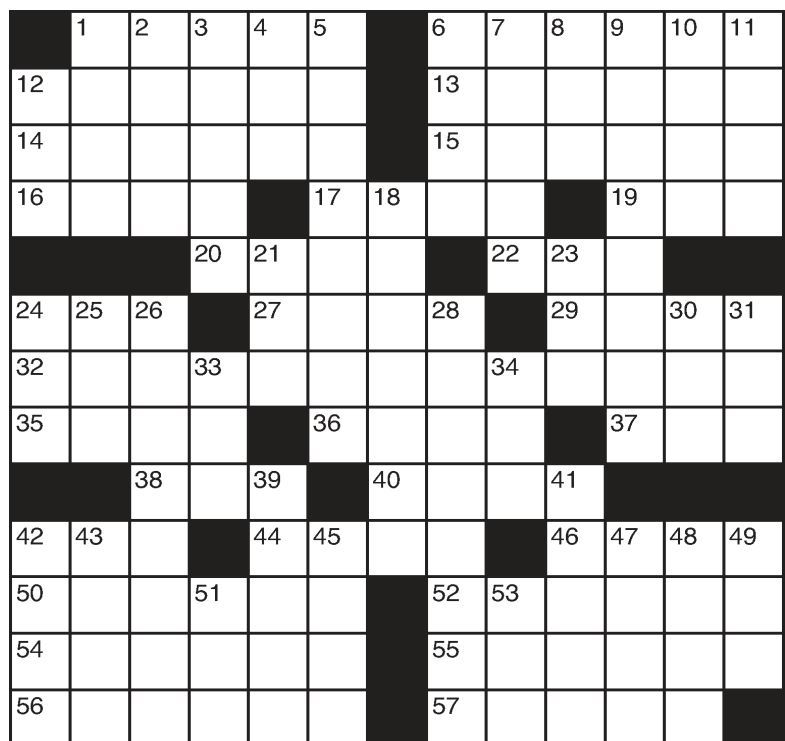
Bizarro



Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword



ACROSS

- 1 Detox center
- 6 Gives up
- 12 Swiss metropolis
- 13 Unexpected
- 14 Ingratiate
- 15 Stahl of "60 Minutes"
- 16 Disposition
- 17 "La — Bonita"
- 19 Casual shirt
- 20 Third son
- 22 Capote nickname
- 24 Canine greeting
- 27 Furnace fuel
- 29 Branches
- 32 President of South Africa, 1994-1999
- 35 Pronto
- 36 Monumental
- 37 Half dozen
- 38 Fannie — Lamar
- 42 Sashimi fish
- 44 Neatnik's nightmare
- 46 Jazzy James
- 50 Legislative group
- 52 Camelot king
- 54 Aerie newborn
- 55 Organize an art show
- 56 Pueblo structures
- 57 Recognizes

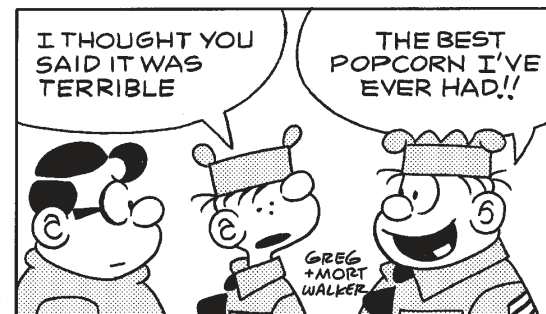
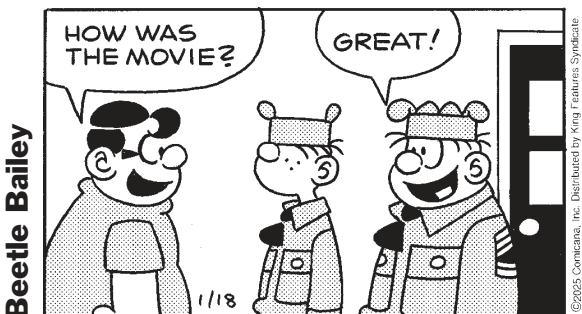
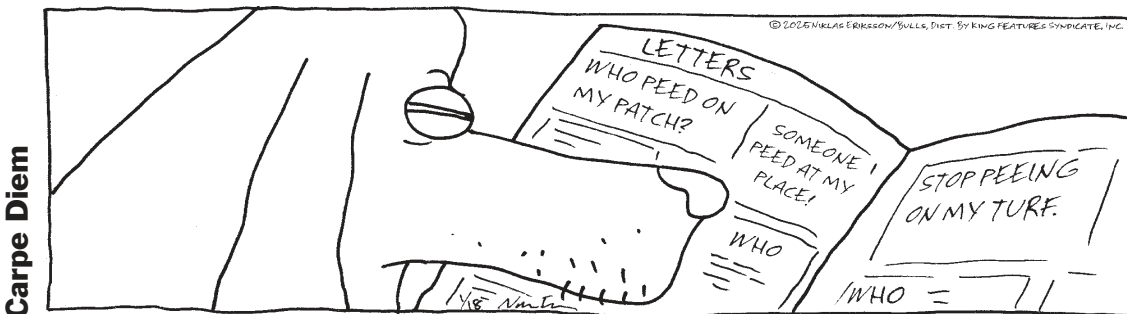
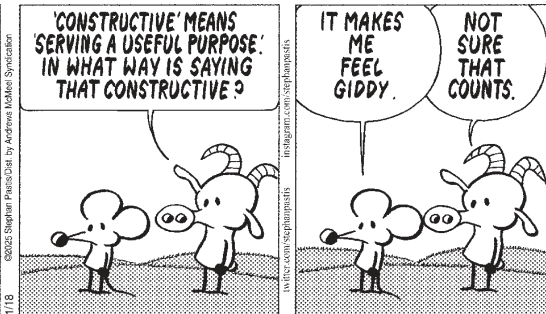
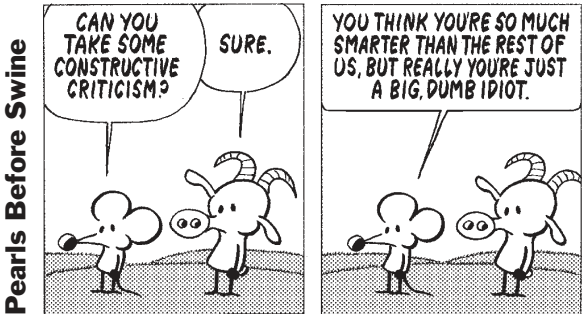
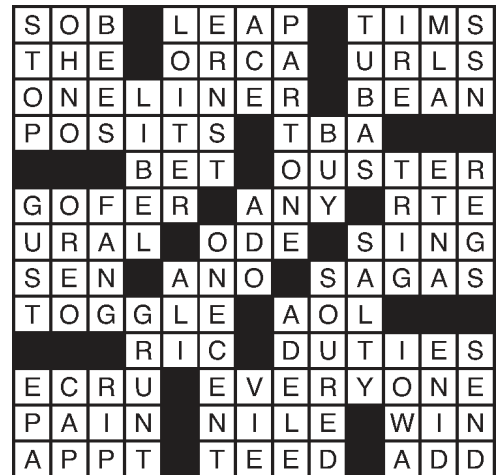
DOWN

- 1 Nevada city
- 2 Within (Pref.)
- 3 Obeys
- 4 "Selma" director DuVernay
- 5 Male singing voice
- 6 Humpty's perch
- 7 Skip — (flutter)
- 8 Tax-collecting org.
- 9 Birds of prey
- 10 Duel tool
- 11 Ocular woe
- 12 Tiara jewel
- 18 Rug cleaner
- 21 — -friendly
- 23 "Awesome, dude!"
- 24 Navarro of "The View"

25 Scale

- members
- 26 Pink wading bird
- 28 Relaxed
- 30 Roman 1051
- 31 Coltrane's instrument
- 33 Aromatherapy spot
- 34 Sgt., e.g.
- 39 Lauder of cosmetics
- 41 Paris subway
- 42 Cruising
- 43 Lettuce unit
- 45 Reply to "Shall we?"
- 47 Spring meltdown
- 48 Mild rebukes
- 49 "How — you?"
- 51 Cleric's tunic
- 53 Scamper

Answer to Previous Puzzle



1-18

CRYPTOQUIP

UYKF ELPYF K XWESKIJ NW
 KHFRQ LF YKD EKIGHKXFGQRN
 FLKQKD HWQ K SKPRKIF? DRIN
 LI FYR XQWUID.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: YOU'RE ASKING ME TO CONSUME THIS CURLY CABBAGE VARIETY EVERY DAY AT DINNERTIME? OH, KALE NO!
 Today's Cryptoquip Clue: F equals T

STARS AND STRIPES

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After the Gaza ceasefire, getting serious about peace

BY DAVID IGNATIUS

The Washington Post

The Gaza ceasefire and hostage release agreement announced Wednesday is joyous news that hopefully marks an end to this terrible conflict. But a speech this week by Secretary of State Antony Blinken shows just how hard it will be to make a new beginning toward Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Leaving a job allows you to say exactly what you think about intractable problems. And that's what Blinken did Tuesday in unusually blunt remarks about the Middle East. He talked about obstacles rather than breakthroughs. If speeches could bleed, this one would be dripping red.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the yoke worn by every secretary of state I have covered, back to George Shultz in the 1980s. They all labored to create a "two-state solution," a goal that seems screamingly obvious to everyone except the parties directly involved. Martin Indyk, a two-time U.S. ambassador to Israel and blessed among peacemakers, said a decade ago that the conflict had broken his heart. Maybe it broke Blinken's, too.

"I wish I could tell you that leaders in the region always put their people's interests ahead of their own interests. They did not," Blinken said. Make no mistake: That was a message to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Blinken began his speech by reciting the standard talking points about U.S. policy in the region: deepening partnerships, deterring aggression, de-escalating conflicts. This is the elevator music of diplomacy. And he faithfully recorded Israel's triumphs in the long arc of revenge for Oct. 7, 2023. Hezbollah had been "ravaged," Iran was "on its back foot," the balance of power in the region was "shifting dramatically."

But then he leaned into a discussion of a Gaza war that has haunted him and the State Department since Hamas began the nightmare.

And he used language that he has usually suppressed in public. Gaza has brought "immeasurable suffering on Palestinian civilians," he said. "Nearly the entire population has lost a loved one. Nearly the entire population is enduring hunger. Nearly the entire population ... has been displaced."

Blinken, whose stepfather was a Holocaust survivor, has been a deeply faithful friend to Israel, as has his boss, President Joe Biden. But you could sense his anger with Netanyahu, who for more than a year has obstructed American efforts to plan for a "day after" in Gaza that might alleviate the misery there.

"Israel's government has systematically undermined the capacity and legitimacy of the only viable alternative to Hamas: the Palestinian Authority," Blinken said. As for humanitarian aid to Palestinian civilians, "Israel's efforts have fallen far short of meeting the colossal scale of need in Gaza."

Frustration turned to raw anger in Blinken's description of Israeli actions in the West Bank, actions that have deepened tension there. Under Netanyahu, Blinken said, "Israel is expanding official settlements and nationalizing land at a faster clip than any time in the last decade, while turning a blind eye to an unprecedented growth in illegal outposts." Meanwhile, attacks by extremist settlers on Palestinians "have reached record levels."

I've watched this ever-escalating Israeli encroachment in the West Bank for 40 years now. From north to south, the land that peacemakers imagined would someday become a Palestinian state is now sliced and diced so many ways by Israeli roads, settlements and outposts that there's little fabric left, only threadbare patches of ground.

Blinken put the matter bluntly: "Israel must decide what relationship they want with the Palestinians. That cannot be the illusion that Palestinians will accept being a non-people without national rights." I pray that members of the incoming Trump administration heed

Blinken's warning: "Israelis must abandon the myth they can carry out de facto annexation, without cost and consequence to Israel's democracy, to its standing, to its security."

For the first time, Blinken publicly detailed the "day after" plan for Gaza that he began to float several months ago. It's centered on the Palestinian Authority that Netanyahu has tried so hard to undermine. The PA would invite international partners to help manage governance and reconstruction in Gaza. The United States would help train and equip a PA-led force that could gradually take over security there. The transition would be anchored in a United Nations resolution and overseen by a senior U.N. official.

It's not only a sound plan. It's the only plausible pathway out of the death and destruction in Gaza. Netanyahu surely understands that. But he has blocked Blinken's efforts for months. That's terrible for Palestinians, obviously. But it also leaves Gaza a festering mess on Israel's border.

Middle East diplomats always urge Israelis and Palestinians both to make "tough choices." But after so many months, it must feel to Blinken like pounding his head against a brick wall. "The unimpeachable reality is that, up to this point, they have either failed to make these difficult decisions, or acted in ways that put a deal and long-term peace further from reach," Blinken said.

You can argue that Blinken should have made this speech months ago. Or that Biden should have used the United States' enormous leverage to force Israel toward a stable outcome in Gaza. Blinken himself conceded that he didn't get every decision about Gaza right.

The Gaza ceasefire and hostage release could truly mark a new start toward negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, rather than just another lull in fighting. Blinken's clear-eyed comments are a gift for anyone who, after the horror of Gaza, wants to get serious about peace.

Acquiring Greenland has merit. Trump's tactics don't

BY JONAH GOLDBERG

Tribune Content Agency

Whether it was Will Rogers or Tony Soprano, the old advice of "buy land, God's not making any more of it" is good real estate advice, but it's hardly an iron law. First of all, God does make more land from time to time. And so do humans. This raises a second famous piece of advice, also of unclear authority. When it comes to real estate only three things matter: location, location, and location.

And that brings us to Greenland.

Donald Trump wants to acquire it. Nay, he says we need to acquire it. The last time he was president, he floated the idea and was roundly mocked for it. But not by me, and I am hardly adverse to mocking Trump when the moment calls for it. For myriad reasons, it would be in our interest for the United States to annex, lease, absorb, or otherwise acquire the giant island. The most important of these reasons is, of course, location.

That's why I've long thought acquiring Greenland — peacefully! — was a good idea (Indeed, last year, I despaired of the "Greenland effect" — the phenomenon whereby Trump's embrace of a good idea makes it less popular.).

But my opinion doesn't count for much. James Stavridis, the former Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, and hardly a MAGA

toady, agrees. He writes that the Mexico-sized island "is a vital element of the Greenland-Iceland-UK 'gap' that guards the northern approaches to the Atlantic Ocean from Russian naval forces."

It's also believed Greenland has huge deposits of crucial rare-earth minerals, essential to all manner of high-tech industries, industries China is trying to control or dominate, in part by establishing a near monopoly on such resources.

Long before anyone appreciated the importance of this stuff, the Truman administration recognized the value of Greenland and tried to persuade the Danes — who administer the quasi-independent nation — to part with it. The Danes politely said no. But the issue was mostly resolved a few years later when Denmark became a founding member of the NATO alliance. They agreed to work with us on using it to bolster western defenses.

Trump claims that's not good enough. In a recent press conference, Trump refused to rule out the use of force to take Greenland (and the Panama Canal).

"For purposes of National Security and Freedom throughout the World, the United States of America feels that the ownership and control of Greenland is an absolute necessity," Trump insists.

The best defense — really the only defense — of Trump's rhetoric is that it's a negotiating

tactic: Start with an outlandish ask, and then find a compromise that would have been impossible without it.

Again, the problem with this classic example of turd-polishing Trump's rhetoric is that Denmark and Greenland are already generously cooperating with the U.S. on national security issues. We literally have a vital military installation in Greenland already. So, what could that compromise be? Some special leasing deal for mining? OK, maybe. But, surely, there's a better way to pursue that with a long-time ally than threatening military force?

Acquiring Greenland is a serious idea, but pursuing it in an unserious way is worse than not pursuing it at all.

Say what you will about the calumnies and blood libel against "neocons," none of them floated the idea of provoking a foreign war with democratic allies.

But when Trump threatens exactly that, well, that's just so cool apparently.

The people who insist that Trumpian nationalism is a Very Serious Idea invariably find themselves having to bend their Very Serious Arguments to the fact that Trump doesn't care about arguments and ideas. He's just a real estate guy who likes putting his name on stuff.

Jonah Goldberg is editor-in-chief of The Dispatch and the host of The Remnant podcast.

SCOREBOARD/MLB

DEALS

Wednesday's transactions

BASEBALL Major League Baseball American League

ATHLETICS — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with SS/RHP Shotar Morii, RHPs Ricardo Osorio, Edwin Mendoza and Jesus Delgado, OFs Carlos Salmeron and Breyson Guedez, and C Aiverson Barzarte.

BALTIMORE ORIOLES — Traded C Blake Hunt to Seattle in exchange for cash considerations. Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with C Yeison Acosta, SSS Meykel Baro, Jorge Drullard, Jose Luis Pena and Ronald Terrero, Cs Ricardo Chirinos, Jose Flores, Victor Saez and Manuel Vasquez, OFs Fabian Cordero, Johanse Gomez, Rayner Herrera and Lisandro Sanchez, RHPs Alexander Diaz, Emmanuel Pena, Laurens Sosa, Samuel Teran and Benjamin Vasquez, LHPs Darlin Valencia, Yunior Villavicencio and Kelvin Zapata and 3B Frandy Guillen.

BOSTON RED SOX — Acquired C Blake Sabol from San Francisco in exchange for international bonus pool space. Designated RHP Chase Shugart for assignment.

CHICAGO WHITE SOX — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with RHPs Nathanael Valerio, Yobal Rodriguez, Jhonny Morao, Cesar Familia, Albert Munoz and Felix Doroteo, OFs Jeremias Aponte, Orlando Patino, Frank Mieses and Alan Escobar, 3B Alejandro Cruz, Cs Jose Mendoza and Diego Natera, INFs Yordani Soto, Igor Escobar and Jelfrank Silva.

CLEVELAND GUARDIANS — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with SSS Heins Brito, Luis Garcia and Luis Galan.

DETROIT TIGERS — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with SSS Angel De Los Santos, Sterling Bazli, LHP Anderson Diaz, C Carlos Benavides and OF Cris Rodriguez.

HOUSTON ASTROS — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with RHPs Adrian Ruiz, Dayson Cova, Emilio Payro, Ismael Obregon, Jesus Sosa, Juan Fraide, Omar Damian and Ronald De Los Santos, INFs Pablo Martenez, Juan Rojas, Jose De La Cruz, Anderson Areinamo, Santiago Martinez and Eric Mota, OFs Anthony Millan Puerto, Freddy Ramos and Kevin Alvarez, Cs Emilio Gonzalez, Esteban Castro and Ire Garcia.

MINNESOTA TWINS — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with RHPs Santiago Castellanos, Rainier Marin, Eliezer Lucena, Eli Urena and Rainer Marin, 3B Jammesson Val, OFs Telion Serrano, Cristian Bonifacio, Cs Daniel De La Valle, Aaron Salazar, Pablo Castillo and SSS Haritzon Castillo, Jose Barrios, Santiago Leon and Darwin Almanzar.

NEW YORK YANKEES — Acquired minor league RHP Michael Arias from Chicago in exchange for cash considerations.

SEATTLE MARINERS — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with SS Kendry Martinez, C Manuel Almeida, OFs Elias Perez, Yorgor Bautista and Maikol Rodriguez, RHPs Ismanuel Pina, Christopher Quiroz, Darwin Ramos, Cesar Farias, Wisler Infante, Randal Munoz and Henry Alcantara. Designated 2B Samad Taylor for assignment.

TAMPA BAY RAYS — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with OFs Emile Torres and Maykel Coret, LHP Jensey Duran, SSS Raymer Medina and Warel Solano and 2B Emmanuel Cedenro.

TORONTO BLUE JAYS — Traded RHP Brett de Geus to Pittsburgh for cash considerations.

National League

ARIZONA DIAMONDBACKS — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with Cs Ismael Mejia, Jeshua Mendez, Santiago Gil, OFs Jose Pitrre, Mayki De La Rosa, Elian De La Cruz, Ronny Suarez and Albert Medina, 3B Victor Santana, Feliz Genao, SSS Daonil Montero, Angel Sanchez, Rodrigo Gonzalez, Juan Brima, Alam Bruno and Eybert Sanchez, LHPs Keivan Vasquez, Miguel Valdez and RHP Malvin Baez, Yauri Jimenez and Johan Calcano.

ATLANTA BRAVES — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with RHPs Yangel Martinez and Lionel Prevosti and SSS Juan Elejandro and Yassel Garcia.

CINCINNATI REDS — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with RHPs Starlin Alberto, Cesar Maiz, Ramces Camargo, Ramces Camargo and Oscar Ramirez, INFs Liberts Aponte, Juan Caricipe, Sandor Feliciano, Jealmy Frias, Omar Guadamuz, Angel Salio and Deinis Chourio, INF/OF Wanderly De La Cruz, OFs Isaac Garcia, Jose Martinez, Diego Munoz and Rey Reyes, C/1B Abel Pena and C Enry Torres.

MIAMI MARLINS — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with SSS Anthony Abreu, Steven Herrera, Johan Machado, Andrew Salas and Luis Arana, OFs Jesus Perez and Sandy Presbot, RHPs Edelson Canelon, Kevin DeFrank, Santiago Linares, Pedro Montero, Adrian Pena and Isaac Prince, LHPs Keyner Cedenro and Diego Godoy, Cs Diego Martinez and Moises Morales.

NEW YORK METS — Claimed RHP Austin Warren off waivers from San Francisco. Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with INFs Elian Pena, Giomar Ubiera, Jose Padilla, Yorber Semprun and Roni Garcia, RHPs Yobanny Sanchez, Kleber Gamez, Jose Vielma, Darling Perez and Olmedo Barria, LHP Pablo Medina, Cs Adrian Silva and Jose Serracin and OFs Aiberson Blanco and Jhonael Cuello.

PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with SS Romeli Expinosa, OF Daber Cruceta, INF Rafael Oropeza, C Nelson Prieto, RHPs Deiry Gonzalez, Filippo Sabatini, Jeremy Vilorio and LHP Reyner Zambrano.

PITTSBURGH PIRATES — Acquired RHP Brett de Geus from Toronto in exchange for cash considerations. Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with INF Luis

Cruz, 2B Frederick Ovalle, C Victor Familia, LHPs Yoslaniel Hernandez, Yhosneiber Torres, OFs Edgar Walker, Gabriel Rodriguez and Limanol Payero, RHPs Hamlet Santos, Jose Sequera, Alejandro Rondon, Claudio Estelle, Eydan Fermin, Fernando Figuera, Jose Sequera, Justino Francisco, Leudy Reyes and Robinson Smith and SSS Armstrong Muhozi, Darell Morel, Hyun Seung Lee, Johan De Los Santos and Yoander Santana.

ST. LOUIS CARDINALS — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with 3B Michael Cordero, SSS Sebastian Dos Santos, Miguel Hernandez, and Yeferson Portolatin, RHPs Juan Carlos Garcia, and Daniel Gomez, CFs Kenly Hunter, Royelny Strop, and Yordy Valdez, OF Yostin Pena, INF Jesus Perez and C Juan Rujano.

SAN DIEGO PADRES — Agreed to terms with SS Santiago Vargas to a minor league contract.

SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS — Traded RHP William Kempner to Miami in exchange for future considerations. International Bonus Pool Money. Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with CF Djean Macares, RHPs Jose Gonzalez, Yesid Mendoza, Ebduar Loina, Jeremiah Jones and Abraham Utrera, LHP Winkel Del Rosario, SSS Josuar Gonzalez, Yulian Barreto, Alexander Camacaro and Yeison Oviedo, Cs Diego Alambarrío, Carlos Martinez and Miguel Caraballo and LF Rainer Espinoza.

WASHINGTON NATIONALS — Assigned RHP Joan Adon outright to Rochester (IL). Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with Ronny Bello 2B, Cs Junior Castillo, Edgardo Figueroa and Daniel Hernandez, SSS Rony Bello, Marconi German, Adrian Tussen and Brayan Cortesia, RHPs Juan Lopez, Jesus Carrasco, Manuel Ruiz, Jhondel Salas and Hernan Mejia, OFs Esneider Vargas and Jonierbis Garces.

BASKETBALL National Basketball Association

CHARLOTTE HORNETS — Acquired G Josh Okogie and three second-round draft picks from Phoenix in exchange for C Nick Richards and a second-round draft pick.

LOS ANGELES LAKERS — Waived G Quincy Olivari.

NEW YORK KNICKS — Recalled C Ariel Hukporti and G Tyler Kolek from the Westchester Knicks of the G League.

TORONTO RAPTORS — Assigned Fs Jonathan Mogbo, Eugene Omoruyi and J'Kobe Walter to the Raptors 905 of the G League.

WASHINGTON WIZARDS — Assigned G Patrick Baldwin, Jr. to the Capital City Go-go of the G League.

FOOTBALL National Football League

BALTIMORE RAVENS — Claimed WR Diontae Johnson off waivers from Houston.

BUFFALO BILLS — Signed QB Anthony Brown to the practice squad. Released DT Eli Ankou from the practice squad.

CLEVELAND BROWNS — Named Tommy Rees offensive coordinator.

DENVER BRONCOS — Signed WR Michael Bandy to a reserve/futures contract.

GREEN BAY PACKERS — Signed DL Leonard Payne to a reserve/futures contract.

HOUSTON TEXANS — Elevated WR Jared Wayne from the practice squad to the active roster. Signed WR Alex Erickson to the taxi squad.

INDIANAPOLIS COLTS — Signed OT Luke Tenuta to a reserve/futures contract.

KANSAS CITY CHIEFS — Signed WR Jason Brownlee to the practice squad. Released TE Robert Tonyan from the practice squad.

MINNESOTA VIKINGS — Signed QB Brett Rypien, RB Zavier Scott, LB Max Tooley, OLB Gabriel Murphy, G Henry Byrd, OTs Marcellus Johnson and Leroy Watson, WRs Lucky Jackson and Thayer Thomas, DL Jonathan Harris and Travis Bell, CBS Kahlef Hailassie and Reddy Stewart to reserve/futures contracts.

NEW YORK GIANTS — Fired defensive back coach Jerome Henderson and safeties coach Michael Treier.

TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS — Signed LB Deion Jennings to a reserve/futures contract.

HOCKEY National Hockey League

DALLAS STARS — Sent Arttu Hyyry to Texas (AHL).

LOS ANGELES KINGS — Recalled Samuel Helenius from Ontario (AHL).

PITTSBURGH PENGUINS — Placed G Tristan Jarry on waivers.

TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING — Sent F Jack Finley to Syracuse (AHL).

VANCOUVER CANUCKS — Sent Jonathan Lekkerimaki to Abbotsford (AHL).

WINNIPEG JETS — Acquired D Isaac Phillips from Chicago in exchange for D Dmitri Kuzmin.

SOCCER Major League Soccer

D.C. UNITED — Signed D Kyle Rowles to a two-year contract.

FC CINCINNATI — Re-signed D Nick Haglund to a two-year contract.

LA GALAXY — Signed D Mathias Jorgensen to a two-year contract.

LAS VEGAS FC — Transferred F Khori Bennett to Kuwait club Al-Nasr SC.

NASHVILLE SC — Signed D Chris Applewhite to a two-year contract.

ORLANDO CITY SC — Acquired \$50,000 in 2025 general allocation money (GAM) from Real Salt Lake in exchange for G Mason Stajduhar.

PORTLAND TIMBERS — Acquired \$100,000 in 2025 general allocation money (GAM) from Charlotte FC in exchange for M Eryk Williamson. Signed M Joao Ortiz to a two-year contract.

NWSL

CHICAGO STARS FC — Signed M Manaka Hayashi to a three-year contract.

KANSAS CITY CURRENT — Released F Opeyemu Ajakaye per mutual agreement.

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Wednesday's men's scores

EAST

Army 70, Lafayette 68
Boston U. 63, Lehigh 58
Bowie St. 76, Howard 73
Bucknell 86, Holy Cross 82
Colgate 73, Navy 66
Duquesne 73, George Washington 65
La Salle 79, Davidson 76
St. Bonaventure 63, Richmond 49
UMass 120, Fordham 118, 30T

SOUTH

Chattanooga 63, Wofford 81, OT
Florida St. 82, Pittsburgh 70
Furman 73, ETSU 70
North Carolina 79, California 53
Radford 79, Gardner-Webb 75
SMU 54, Virginia 52
Samford 75, Mercer 74
South Alabama 75, Southern Miss. 62
Tennessee 74, Georgia 56
Troy 77, Louisiana-Monroe 58
Tulane 80, FAU 65
UAB 92, South Florida 83
UNC-Asheville 93, SC-Upstate 92
UNC-Greensboro 70, The Citadel 57
VMI 66, W. Carolina 50
Vanderbilt 66, South Carolina 63
Virginia Tech 79, NC State 76
Wake Forest 80, Stanford 67
Winthrop 102, Charleston Southern 97, 30T

MIDWEST

Bradley 118, Indiana St. 65
Butler 82, Seton Hall 77
Cleveland St. 76, N. Kentucky 58
Drake 66, Illinois St. 62
Fort Wayne 120, Wright St. 113, 20T
George Mason 67, Dayton 59
Ill.-Chicago 97, Murray St. 93, 20T
Iowa St. 74, Kansas 57
Loyola Chicago 81, Rhode Island 77
Michigan St. 90, Penn St. 85
Oakland 72, IU Indianapolis 59
S. Illinois 73, Missouri St. 51

SOUTHWEST

Houston 70, West Virginia 54
Texas 77, Oklahoma 73
Texas St. 94, Georgia St. 80
Utah 73, TCU 65

FAR WEST

Cincinnati 68, Colorado 62
Omaha 80, Denver 62
Purdue 69, Washington 58
UNLV 65, Utah St. 62

Men's Top 25 schedule

Saturday's games

No. 1 Auburn (15-1) at No. 23 Georgia (14-2)
No. 2 Iowa St. (14-1) at West Virginia (12-3)
No. 3 Duke (14-2) at Boston College (9-7)
No. 4 Alabama (14-2) at No. 8 Kentucky (13-3)
No. 5 Florida (15-1) vs. Texas (11-5)
No. 6 Tennessee (15-1) at Vanderbilt (13-3)
No. 7 Marquette (14-2) vs. Xavier (10-7)
No. 9 Kansas (12-3) vs. Kansas St. (7-8)
No. 10 Houston (12-3) at UCF (11-4)
No. 11 Texas A&M (13-3) vs. LSU (11-5)
No. 13 Oregon (15-2) vs. No. 17 Purdue (13-4)
No. 14 UConn (13-4) vs. Creighton (10-6)
No. 15 Mississippi St. (14-2) vs. No. 21 Mississippi (14-2)
No. 16 Gonzaga (14-4) vs. Santa Clara (12-6)
No. 24 Wisconsin (13-3) at USC (10-6)

Wednesday's women's scores

EAST

Army 74, Lafayette 65
Cleveland St. 74, Robert Morris 53
Colgate 62, Navy 54
Dayton 80, Duquesne 71
Holy Cross 63, Bucknell 37
James Madison 93, Marshall 65
Lehigh 80, Boston U. 54
Michigan St. 70, Rutgers 60
Providence 51, Xavier 45
Saint Joseph's 72, Fordham 65
UConn 71, St. John's 45
UMass 82, La Salle 66
Villanova 66, DePaul 55
West Virginia 73, Colorado 46

SOUTH

Charleston Southern 78, Winthrop 50
East Carolina 72, Charlotte 65
George Mason 69, Loyola Chicago 39
Georgia Southern 69, Texas St. 62
Longwood 72, High Point 68
Old Dominion 78, Appalachian St. 71
Radford 71, Gardner-Webb 70
Rhode Island 64, VCU 50
Richmond 98, St. Bonaventure 60
SC-Upstate 60, UNC-Asheville 57
UTSA 70, Memphis 68

MIDWEST

Ball St. 66, Kent St. 57
Bowling Green 74, Ohio 53
Buffalo 77, E. Michigan 55
Cent. Michigan 75, Akron 55
IUPUI 75, Wright St. 63
Miami (Ohio) 73, N. Illinois 52
Michigan 82, Washington 69
North Dakota 80, South Dakota 54
Saint Louis 64, George Washington 63
Seton Hall 58, Marquette 52
Tulane 66, Wichita St. 62
UMKC 73, Denver 66, OT
W. Michigan 41, Toledo 38
Youngstown St. 75, N. Kentucky 66

SOUTHWEST

Arkansas St. 67, La.-Lafayette 65, OT
North Texas 61, Rice 53
Tulsa 79, FAU 64

FAR WEST

Boise St. 93, San Jose St. 64
Colorado St. 62, San Diego St. 58
Fresno St. 74, Utah St. 54
Oregon 69, Purdue 53
UCLA 83, Penn St. 67
UNLV 84, Air Force 51
Wyoming 66, Nevada 61



AARON GASH/AP

Bob Uecker, the longtime Milwaukee Brewers broadcaster who was known as "Mr. Baseball", died Thursday at the age of 90.

'Mr. Baseball' icon Uecker dies at 90

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Bob Uecker, the voice of his hometown Milwaukee Brewers who after a short playing career earned the moniker "Mr. Baseball" and honors from the Hall of Fame, has died. He was 90.

The team announced Uecker died Thursday morning, calling it "one of the most difficult days in Milwaukee Brewers history." In a statement released by the club, Uecker's family said he had battled small cell lung cancer since early 2023.

"Even in the face of this challenge, his enthusiasm for life was always present, never allowing his spirit to falter," the family said.

Uecker was best known as a colorful comedian and broadcaster who earned his nickname during one of his numerous appearances on Johnny Carson's late night show.

Born and raised in Milwaukee, Uecker signed his first professional contract with the Milwaukee Braves in 1956 and reached the majors in 1962. He lasted six seasons in the big leagues as a backup catcher, finishing with a .200 average and 14 homers.

"Career highlights? I had two," he often joked. "I got an intentional walk from Sandy Koufax and I got out of a rundown against the Mets."

Uecker also befriended former Brewers owner and MLB commissioner Bud Selig, who initially hired him as a scout. Selig liked to joke about how Uecker's initial scouting report was stained with mashed potatoes and gravy.

Selig eventually brought Uecker to the broadcast booth. Uecker became the voice of the Brewers in 1971, in the second year after the team moved from Seattle.

Uecker remained with the club from that point on and became one of its most indelible figures.

"There's no single person in this franchise's history who has been as iconic and as important as Bob

Uecker," said Jeff Levering, a member of the Brewers' broadcast team since 2015.

Even as his celebrity status grew nationwide, Uecker savored the opportunity to continue calling games to fans in his hometown.

"To be able to do a game each and every day throughout the summer and talk to people every day at 6:30 for a night game, you become part of people's families," Uecker once said. "I know that because I get mail from people that tell me that. That's part of the reward for being here, just to be recognized by the way you talk, the way you describe a game, whatever."

Uecker was honored by the Hall of Fame with the Ford C. Frick award in 2003 and spent nearly 20 minutes keeping the Cooperstown, New York, crowd of about 18,000 in stitches.

"Ueck" got his big break off the field after opening for Don Rickles at Al Hirt's nightclub in Atlanta in 1969. That performance caught Hirt's attention, and the musician set him up to appear on "The Tonight Show" with Johnny Carson. He became one of Carson's favorite guests, making more than 100 appearances.

Carson was the one who dubbed Uecker "Mr. Baseball." And the name stuck.

But Uecker's comedy was just a part of his abilities. His warm storytelling and delivery made Uecker a natural to become one of the first color commentators on network TV broadcasts in the 1970s with ABC.

From there, Uecker reached most households as one of the Miller Lite All-Stars in popular commercials for the beer brand based out of Milwaukee.

"You talk about all the things Bob has done, he never wanted to leave Milwaukee," Selig said. "Above all, he made himself into a great play-by-play announcer. That's what he did. He's everything to this franchise and loves every minute of it."

NBA

Pistons starting to click

Winning record at midway point makes Detroit one of season's biggest surprises

By **TIM REYNOLDS**
Associated Press

They lead the NBA in wins so far in January. They'll have a winning record at the midpoint of the season. They've won five of their last six games at home, and they've also won five of their last six games on the road.

And chances are, you wouldn't guess which team fits that billing.

It's the Detroit Pistons. Yes, the Pistons.

Doormats and punchlines no more, the Pistons are adding themselves to the list of great surprises in the NBA this season. They're now 21-19 after winning Monday night against the New York Knicks at Madison Square Garden, meaning they'll hit the halfway mark of the season with a winning record for the first time since 2017-18.

"We believe we can beat anybody," center Isaiah Stewart said.

"That's our belief. We're good enough to beat any team in this league. That's the belief we've got and we believe in each other. We're always pouring confidence into each other to go out there and be the best versions of ourselves. When we have that collectively as a group, that's a lot of energy — a lot of positive energy that we're putting out there."

The notion of the Pistons beating anybody — literally, anybody — a year ago would have been comical. That was the team that lost a record 28 consecutive games, the worst single-season stretch in NBA history. They were 4-37 through 41 games, tying the sixth-worst start to a season ever. They were so bad that Pistons owner Tom Gores had to do the unthinkable and fire a coach in Monty Williams with five years and \$65 million or so left on his contract.

This year's Pistons started 0-4 under new coach JB Bickerstaff. The preseason expectations of being bad once again looked pretty secure. But they've now won 10 of their last 12 games and lead the NBA with seven wins so far in January. They could be a play-in team. They could be a playoff team. They might have an All-Star in Cade Cunningham. The way he's playing right now, Cunningham — bidding to be Detroit's first All-Star since Blake Griffin in 2019 — might want to go ahead and make plans for a trip to San Francisco next month for that very reason.

"I'm just thankful for my team, thankful for this coaching staff," Cunningham said. "We've

"That's our belief. We're good enough to beat any team in this league."

Isaiah Stewart
Pistons center



FRANK FRANKLIN II/AP

Cade Cunningham is playing like the star he was projected to be when the Pistons took him No. 1 overall in 2021. He's averaging 24.5 points, 9.4 assists and 6.6 rebounds a game.

got to keep going. We've got a lot more work to do."

The Pistons have already smashed last season's win total of 14. They're maybe a couple weeks away from rewarding bettors that went on the high side of their season-long win total that was set at 25.5 by BetMGM Sportsbook. It's happening with Cunningham — the No. 1 overall pick in the 2021 draft — now looking like a bona fide breakout star, with season averages of 24.5 points, 9.4 assists and 6.6 rebounds per game.

"Our job is to put him in position to be successful. And then he's got to go out there and do it," Bickerstaff said. "Over these 40 games now, he and I and his teammates have learned a lot about each other and how we can best help each other. And that's what it's about — each of us playing our role and doing what we're supposed to do together and collectively to just help one another, make this team as good as we possibly can. Cade knows his role and what this team needs, and he's executed perfectly."

It does seem fitting that Bickerstaff is getting to be part of something good, since he was fired by a good team in Cleveland after last season. The Cavaliers had an over-under of 48.5 wins entering the season; they're an NBA-best 33-5 right now.

Oklahoma City, Houston, Chicago, Portland, Brooklyn and Atlanta are also among the teams on pace to top their expected win totals for the season. But they won't get there in January, like



DUANE BURLESON/AP

Pistons center Isaiah Stewart celebrates after scoring against the Toronto Raptors on Jan. 11. The victory was one of Detroit's seven wins so far in January.

the Pistons might. If that's the metric for measuring surprises, then the Pistons might be the biggest stunner so far this season.

"The best part about this team is finding different ways to win the game," Bickerstaff said.

It's been a long time coming. It's not time to start selling playoff tickets quite yet, Detroit. But before now, the last time the Pistons were even two games over .500 — barely above mediocre — was March 2019, nearly six years ago.

These are good signs. Signs of progress. Signs of belief. For a franchise that hasn't won a playoff game in 17 years — that's 173 players, 10 coaches and two arenas ago — there might be real hope this time.

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	28	12	.700	—
New York	27	15	.643	2
Philadelphia	15	24	.385	12½
Brooklyn	14	27	.341	14½
Toronto	10	31	.244	18½

Southeast Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	23	19	.548	—
Atlanta	21	19	.525	1
Miami	20	19	.513	1½
Charlotte	9	28	.243	11½
Washington	6	32	.158	15

Central Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Cleveland	34	5	.872	—
Milwaukee	22	17	.564	12
Indiana	22	19	.537	13
Detroit	21	19	.525	13½
Chicago	18	23	.439	17

Western Conference

Southwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Houston	27	12	.692	—
Memphis	26	15	.634	2
Dallas	22	19	.537	6
San Antonio	19	20	.487	8
New Orleans	10	32	.238	18½

Northwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Oklahoma City	33	6	.846	—
Denver	24	16	.600	9½
Minnesota	21	19	.525	12½
Portland	13	26	.333	20
Utah	10	29	.256	23

Pacific Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Clippers	22	17	.564	—
L.A. Lakers	21	17	.553	½
Sacramento	20	20	.500	2½
Golden State	20	20	.500	2½
Phoenix	19	20	.487	3

Tuesday's games

Oklahoma City 118, Philadelphia 102
Cleveland 127, Indiana 117
Atlanta 122, Phoenix 117
Milwaukee 130, Sacramento 115
New Orleans 119, Chicago 113
Denver 118, Dallas 99
Brooklyn 132, Portland 114

Wednesday's games

New York 125, Philadelphia 119, OT
Toronto 110, Boston 97
Atlanta 110, Chicago 94
Memphis 129, San Antonio 115
Milwaukee 122, Orlando 93
New Orleans 119, Dallas 116
Houston 128, Denver 108
Charlotte 117, Utah 112
L.A. Lakers 117, Miami 108
Golden State 116, Minnesota 115
L.A. Clippers 126, Brooklyn 67

Thursday's games

Indiana at Detroit
Phoenix at Washington
Cleveland at Oklahoma City
Houston at Sacramento
L.A. Clippers at Portland

Friday's games

Orlando at Boston
Minnesota at New York
Charlotte at Chicago
Denver at Miami
Toronto at Milwaukee
Utah at New Orleans
Oklahoma City at Dallas
Memphis at San Antonio
Brooklyn at L.A. Lakers

Saturday's games

Phoenix at Detroit
Atlanta at Boston
Philadelphia at Indiana
Washington at Golden State
Cleveland at Minnesota
Houston at Portland

Sunday's games

San Antonio at Miami
Denver at Orlando
Philadelphia at Milwaukee
Brooklyn at Oklahoma City
L.A. Lakers at L.A. Clippers
Chicago at Portland
Washington at Sacramento

Monday's games

Dallas at Charlotte
Detroit at Houston
Minnesota at Memphis
Atlanta at New York Knicks
Phoenix at Cleveland
Boston at Golden State
Utah at New Orleans
Chicago at L.A. Clippers

NHL

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Table with columns: Atlantic Division, GP, W, L, OT, Pts, GF, GA. Rows include Toronto, Florida, Tampa Bay, Boston, Ottawa, Montreal, Detroit, Buffalo.

Metropolitan Division

Table with columns: GP, W, L, OT, Pts, GF, GA. Rows include Washington, New Jersey, Carolina, Columbus, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, N.Y. Rangers, N.Y. Islanders.

Western Conference

Central Division

Table with columns: GP, W, L, OT, Pts, GF, GA. Rows include Winnipeg, Minnesota, Dallas, Colorado, St. Louis, Utah, Nashville, Chicago.

Pacific Division

Table with columns: GP, W, L, OT, Pts, GF, GA. Rows include Vegas, Edmonton, Los Angeles, Calgary, Vancouver, Anaheim, Seattle, San Jose.

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

Buffalo 4, Carolina 2
Edmonton 5, Minnesota 3

Thursday's games

Anaheim at Tampa Bay
Detroit at Florida
New Jersey at Toronto
San Jose at Columbus
Washington at Ottawa
Philadelphia at N.Y. Islanders
Calgary at St. Louis
Chicago at Nashville
Montreal at Dallas
Seattle at Winnipeg
N.Y. Rangers at Utah
Edmonton at Colorado
Los Angeles at Vancouver

Friday's games

Pittsburgh at Buffalo
Vegas at Carolina

Saturday's games

Philadelphia at New Jersey
Boston at Ottawa
Dallas at Colorado
Anaheim at Florida
Calgary at Winnipeg
Columbus at N.Y. Rangers
Detroit at Tampa Bay
Pittsburgh at Washington
Toronto at Montreal
San Jose at N.Y. Islanders
Minnesota at Nashville
Vegas at Chicago
St. Louis at Utah
Edmonton at Vancouver
Los Angeles at Seattle

Sunday's games

Ottawa at New Jersey
N.Y. Rangers at Montreal
Detroit at Dallas

Scoring leaders

Through Wednesday

Table with columns: Player, Team, GP, G, A, PTS. Rows include Nathan MacKinnon, Leon Draisaitl, Nikita Kucherov, Connor McDavid, Mikko Rantanen, Mitch Marner, Kyle Connor, Jack Eichel, Jack Hughes, Mark Scheifele.

Utah struggles for success at home

By JOHN COON
Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY — Finding success at home has turned into a persistent struggle for the Utah Hockey Club.

Utah beat San Jose for its lone win in the first four games of a January homestand and has lost to Florida, Montreal and the New York Islanders. The team has won just three times in its last 14 games in Salt Lake City, and its six home victories are the fewest in the NHL.

"I don't know why we've been struggling at home in front of our fans that have showed a lot of support for us," forward Nick Bjrgstad said. "I feel for them. I just think we'll find a way, but it's going to take some digging and looking in the mirror."

For a team hovering on the fringe of the Western Conference playoff picture, the margin for error is growing perilously thin.

Ironically, road success is keeping the club within striking distance of a spot. Utah has a dozen wins away from home after rattling off five straight road victories in mid-December.

Inconsistent offense has undercut Utah's efforts to build momentum at home. Over its last four games at Delta Center, the club has allowed 3.0 goals per game but is scoring an average of 1.8.

"Guys are trying," forward Nick Schmaltz said. "Sometimes (the shots) go in. Sometimes they don't. You've got to work through it, keep putting the work in on practice days and working on your finishing. It'll come eventually. Once we see one go in, guys get a little more confident. Hopefully we can get on a roll."

Tight finishes decided late are a recurring staple at home this season. At one point, seven consecutive Utah home games were



RICK EGAN/AP

Utah Hockey Club left wing Lawson Crouse reaches for the puck during the first period against the Montreal Canadiens on Tuesday in Salt Lake City. Utah is just 6-10 at home this season going into Thursday.

decided by one goal.

A couple of games against San Jose show how razor-thin the margin is. Utah lost to the Sharks in overtime Oct. 28 after allowing two goals in a 25-second span late in regulation, and then beat them Saturday when Barrett Hayton got the game-winner with 1:23 left.

That eased some of the frustration briefly. Subsequent losses to New York and Montreal brought the frustration back.

"It's part of the growth, it's part of who we want to become, it's part of the journey," Utah coach Andre Tourigny said. "We want to create that relationship with our fans. We want to win, we want to get in the

race, climb in the standings and all those things. That comes with a ton of pressure internally and externally."

Fan support hasn't dipped amid struggles on the home ice.

Utah has reported a sellout crowd of 11,131 for every home game during the team's inaugural season. Because of partially obstructed views for some seats, full-view seat capacity for hockey games is lower than seating capacity for Utah Jazz games (18,206) and live concerts (13,898).

Single-goal-view seats are not counted or tracked in attendance figures reported to the league. Demand for tickets has led Utah to

open a portion of these seats to fans anyway.

Utah launched a pair of community ticket programs in January to offer single-goal-view seats for up to 2,000 fans each home game for \$10 a seat. One program is geared specifically toward local university students, and Utah will host a college game night March 20th when it takes on Buffalo.

These programs add on to an earlier program Utah announced in September that provides 100 partial-view upper-bowl tickets every home game at no-cost to local nonprofits, schools, community groups and charitable organizations.

Struggling Penguins place Jarry on waivers

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — The Pittsburgh Penguins ran out of patience waiting for two-time All-Star goaltender Tristan Jarry to emerge from a slump, placing him on waivers Wednesday ahead of a pivotal seven-game road trip that could determine the course of the rest of their season.



Jarry

The 29-year-old Jarry is 8-7-4 with a 3.32 goals against average and a .886 save percentage this season for Pittsburgh, which is on the fringe of the playoff race in the Eastern Conference due in large part to subpar play in net.

The Penguins have allowed an NHL-high 173 goals, with neither Jarry nor Alex Nedeljkovic establishing themselves behind a defense prone to lapses.

Pittsburgh will call up promising rookie Joel Blomqvist to join Nedeljkovic on the road trip, which starts Friday in Buffalo. Blomqvist went 3-5 with a 3.60 goals against average and a .904 save percentage during a stint with the Penguins earlier in the season.

It seems unlikely a team would be willing to claim Jarry and pick up his salary, meaning he will be re-assigned to Pittsburgh's American Hockey League affiliate once he clears waivers.

"At this point, (I) just feel it's best in the long run for the team and for Tristan to allow Joel to come up here," Penguins general manager Kyle Dubas said Wednesday. "We think over the past year-and-a-half, with his play in Wilkes-Barre and when he's been up here with us, he's earned the right to have a go at it."

The decision comes 18 months after Dubas signed Jarry to a five-year deal with an average annual value of \$5.375 million. Jarry was an All-Star in 2020 and 2022 but has struggled most of the last two seasons.

"He's continued to come in here, put the work in and that's not been a question at all," Dubas said. "That just hasn't materialized the

way we would like it to on the ice. At this level, you get to the point where you have to do what's right ... for him and for us."

Jarry ceded the starting job to Nedeljkovic last spring. While he reclaimed his spot atop the depth chart coming out of training camp, he stumbled out of the gate and was sent to Wilkes-Barre/Scranton for a lengthy conditioning stint.

While there was a brief uptick in his play after he returned, Jarry has lost five straight starts and continues to struggle early in games. He's allowed a goal on an opponent's first shot six times this season and allowed a shorthanded goal on Seattle's second shot in a 4-2 defeat to the Kraken on Tuesday.

"When you lose, this is the kind of stuff that can happen," Pittsburgh captain Sidney Crosby said Wednesday. "A goaltender already has a ton of pressure, and it's difficult for us because we feel like as a team we're responsible if we don't give our goalies enough help sometimes. I think that's the tough part."

COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF/AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Ohio State has purposely paced itself on offense

By STEPHEN HAWKINS
Associated Press

Ohio State has been purposely pacing itself on offense all season, huddling more and trying to limit the number of snaps in each game of what the Buckeyes hoped and anticipated would be a long run.

"I know it sounds crazy, the huddle, it's almost like going back in time," coach Ryan Day said. "But it's sort of a new thing, really, because of the no-huddle offenses that have been around, and certainly we have been a part of that. ... We don't always do that, but it has allowed us an opportunity to be more cohesive on offense."

While Ohio State (13-2) has certainly slowed down, it's getting ready for its school-record 16th game. That will be for the national championship against Notre Dame (14-1) on Monday night in Atlanta.

None of the other teams in the expanded 12-team playoff average fewer plays than the Buckeyes' 61.8 per game that rank 120th out of 134 Division I teams. That includes 57 in each of their



National Championship
No. 6 Ohio State (13-2)
vs. No. 5 Notre Dame (14-1)
AFN-Sports
1:45 a.m. Tuesday CET
9:45 a.m. Tuesday JKT

last two playoff games, wins over undefeated Big Ten champion Oregon in the Rose Bowl and SEC runner-up Texas in the Cotton Bowl.

Ohio State's lowest average in at least 25 seasons is only slightly down from its 63.9 plays a game in 2023. But it's still more than 10 plays a game below the 72.1 average over a 10-season span that began with its last national championship in 2014, when the College Football Playoff debuted as a four-team playoff.

"That's kind of by design," said first-year Buckeyes offensive coordinator Chip Kelly, who be-



KYUSUNG GONG/AP

First-year Ohio State offensive coordinator Chip Kelly, center, has had the Buckeyes pacing themselves all season in anticipation of a long playoff run, an approach that has gotten them into the CFP title game.

tween coaching Oregon and UCLA spent four seasons as an NFL head coach when those were 16-game regular seasons. "We didn't have games we were running 100 snaps a game. ... We had a long-term plan."

Oregon averaged more than 81 plays a game in 2012, Kelly's final season there. Even Ohio State averaged more than 80 plays a game in 2018, which was Urban Meyer's final season before Day took over as head coach.

Indiana, a first-round loser with two fewer games, is the only one of the 12 playoff teams with fewer total snaps than the Buckeyes' 927 this season.

TreVeyon Henderson has 967 yards rushing with 10 touchdowns for Ohio State, and Quinshon Judkins has 960 yards and 12 TDs — neither has run more than 17 times in a game, with Henderson's season high being 11. Graduate transfer quarterback Will Howard has thrown for 3,779 yards and 33

touchdowns, and he has three receivers with at least 50 catches.

"In terms of the way that we designed this year, part of it was the fact that we felt like by cutting down the number of snaps it would certainly help with the length of our season and the health of our team," Day said. "But also getting in a huddle and having Will Howard look 10 guys in the eye and break a huddle together, kind of grew as a team as the season went on."

Swiatek moves into third-round match against Raducanu

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Iga Swiatek rushed through the first set in 26 minutes and completed her 6-0, 6-2 second-round win over Rebecca Sramkova in an hour at the Australian Open.

The five-time Grand Slam champion makes a habit of advancing quickly through the early rounds at the majors. She's won almost 12% of her sets in Grand Slams by 6-0, which puts her in exclusive company.

So when No. 49-ranked Sramkova ended a seven-game losing run by holding serve Thursday, she raised her arm to acknowledge the applause from the Rod Laver Arena crowd. It was one of the few chances she had to celebrate.

"It was good to play in such an efficient way and just finish it quick," Swiatek said. "Also, you know, just feel the court and how it is in RLA."

Second-seeded Swiatek next faces 2021 U.S. Open champion Emma Raducanu, who recovered from an early break in the second set to hold off Amanda Anisimova 6-3, 7-5.



ASANKA BRENDON RATNAYAKE/AP

Iga Swiatek plays a forehand return to Rebecca Sramkova during a second-round match at the Australian Open in Melbourne on Thursday.

Taylor Fritz hasn't wasted any time advancing to the third round, dropping just eight games across two rounds and spending just over

three hours on court.

The 2024 U.S. Open runner-up and No. 4 seed beat Cristian Garin 6-2, 6-1, 6-0 to move into a third-

round match against 38-year-old Gael Monfils, who last week became the oldest player to win an ATP Tour title.

Also advancing on the men's side were local hope Alex de Minaur, seeded 8th, No. 16 Lorenzo Musetti, No. 19 Karen Khachanov and No. 21 Ben Shelton, who beat Pablo Carreno Busta 6-3, 6-3, 6-7 (4), 6-4.

Raducanu has struggled with injuries since her breakthrough major in 2021, when she became the first qualifier to win a Grand Slam singles title.

She didn't play a warmup tournament ahead of this year's Australian Open because of a muscle strain and needed time during her match against Anisimova to get treatment on her back from a trainer.

After advancing beyond the second round for the first time at Melbourne Park, the No. 61-ranked Raducanu was confident she'd recover in time for her next challenge against Swiatek.

"It'll be a very good match for me, another opportunity to test my game," she said. "Going into it, I

have nothing to lose. I'm just going to swing."

Swiatek is moving on from the doping infringement which led to her one-month ban last year. And she's not showing any signs of it being a distraction.

She did everything at pace in the second round, including quick claps of her racket to acknowledge the crowd after her win. Swiatek didn't face a break point against Sramkova and converted five of the six she had. She finished off points with winners off both sides, and also hit some clean volleys on her ventures to the net.

She's feeling slightly less pressure this year, too, after losing the No. 1 ranking to two-time defending Australian Open champion Aryna Sabalenka.

"Yeah, there was a lot of pressure starting the year as No. 1, but I think overall last year I didn't think about it this much anyway," she said. "Also, I realized last year that I don't have 100% influence on what happens with my ranking sometimes. So now I just focus on tennis."

NFL PLAYOFFS

Lions' investment in run game paying off

BY LARRY LAGE
Associated Press

ALLEN PARK, Mich. — The Detroit Lions were built to run.

The Lions' longest-tenured players, offensive tackle Taylor Decker and center Frank Ragnow, were first-round picks in 2016 and 2018.

In general manager Brad Holmes' first draft with Detroit in 2021, he selected two-time All-Pro tackle Penei Sewell with the No. 7 overall pick.

The Lions bolstered the backfield in 2023, signing free agent David Montgomery and drafting Jahmyr Gibbs in the first round. Detroit also addressed a desperate need in free agency by adding guard Kevin Zeitler last offseason.

The investments have paid off. The Lions, a top-seeded team in the NFL playoffs for the first time, have one of the league's best ground games.

While the running backs get much of the praise, Montgomery said the big guys up front deserve more love.

"We've got the best O-line in the world," Montgomery said. "I don't think they get enough credit. There's no 1,000-yard scrimmage for me, there's no almost 2,000 yards scrimmage for Jah."

The sixth-seeded Washington Commanders, who will play at Detroit on Saturday night in the divisional round, are well aware of the upcoming challenge that will test one of their weaknesses.

"Hats off, they've got two backs, very physical, perimeter and whatnot," Commanders linebacker Frankie Luvu said. "But it's not about them. It's about us. And when it's time to make hits, we're going to make them pay."

Washington ranked 30th in the 32-team league against the run during the regular season, giving

up 137.5 yards rushing per game. In a 23-20 win over Tampa Bay in the wild-card round last Sunday night, the Buccaneers ran for 101 yards.

Gibbs and Montgomery averaged a combined 138.5 yards rushing during the regular season and had fun off the field embracing their Sonic and Knuckles nicknames.

In his second NFL season, Gibbs led the league with a franchise-record 20 touchdowns and ranked fifth with 1,412 yards on the ground. He also had 517 yards receiving and four touchdown receptions.

"Jah is special," Montgomery said. "He's a generational talent."

In his sixth season, Montgomery had 775 yards rushing and 12 touchdowns before a knee injury in the 14th game threatened to end his season.

Montgomery avoided surgery and rested for the final three games of the regular season and took advantage of the team's bye.

"I wouldn't be out there if I wasn't ready," he said. "I think it feels better than it did before I got hurt."

Lions offensive coordinator Ben Johnson, a candidate to be an NFL head coach next season, said Montgomery has looked good in practice.

"I expect David to come in and pick up where he left off," Johnson said.

Gibbs made the most of increased opportunities without sharing carries with Montgomery.

The two-time Pro Bowl player ran for more than 100 yards in three straight games for the first time in his career, and averaged 162.3 yards from scrimmage and scored six touchdowns.

"It's kind of his show," Montgomery said.



MATT SLOCUM/AP

Eagles quarterback Jalen Hurts looks to pass during the first half against the Green Bay Packers on Jan. 12 in Philadelphia. Despite a 22-10 win, the passing game continued to be a weak point for the Eagles.

Hurts admits passing game has room for improvement

Eagles QB emphasizes his priority is final score, not stats

BY EJ SMITH

The Philadelphia Inquirer

PHILADELPHIA — In the aftermath of the Eagles' wild-card round win against the Green Bay Packers, Jalen Hurts is focused on the result.

It's fair to acknowledge the uneven production and mid-game stagnation from Philadelphia passing game during the 22-10 win last Sunday — even Hurts did during his Wednesday news conference — but the Eagles quarterback also reiterated the priority he places on the final scoreline over the passing statistics.

"I think you guys need to understand that I don't play the game for anything other than to win," Hurts said. "My role in each game will be different and the approach in each game is different, you just want to go out there and do your job and take advantage of opportunities obviously. I think some things are magnified a little bit more because there's less opportunity in certain areas, but ultimately it's about winning the game. We're talking about playoff football."

Hurts finished last Sunday's game 13 for 21 with 131 passing yards and two touchdowns as the offense once again leaned heavily on running back Saquon Barkley to serve as the group's steady force. After starting the game with six straight completions, Hurts' next nine dropbacks featured seven incompletions and two sacks.

His struggles were amplified by

pressure as Green Bay began putting extra defenders up to the line of scrimmage to stress Philadelphia's protection plans. According to Pro Football Focus, Hurts was 2-for-8 for 19 yards when pressured and had a passer rating of just 39.6.

When asked what his assessment was of his performance after reviewing the film, Hurts conceded there were some missed chances the offense would like to have executed better.

"I think there are some opportunities, there's always going to be something that you want back," Hurts said. "You wish you could have done or taken advantage of, but ultimately I think we all made plays when we needed to the most and that's what matters."

Hurts & Co. will face another stiff test this Sunday against the Los Angeles Rams at Lincoln Financial Field, matched up against a defense that had nine sacks in a wild-card upset over the Minnesota Vikings.

Although he faced the Rams' defense already this season in a 37-20 win at SoFi Stadium in November, Hurts said he isn't sure what to expect in the rematch due to the nature of the postseason and the evidence of the Packers playing the offense differently last weekend.

"I don't really know what they're going to do," Hurts said. "They're a great team, I think even Green Bay kind of did some different things that we were not

expecting as an offensive unit. It's the playoffs, you have to be ready for everything."

This isn't the first time the Eagles' passing game has come under scrutiny despite a winning result. Hurts finished the team's Week 14 victory over the Carolina Panthers 14-for-21 for 108 yards and two scores in a game that ended with star receiver A.J. Brown voicing his frustration with the passing game.

Brown, who had four catches for 43 yards in the 22-16 win over Carolina, had an even smaller role against the Packers. He finished with one catch for 10 yards and just three targets, the lowest number of targets he's had in a game he finished healthy since joining the Eagles before the 2022 season.

When asked if it would be important to get Brown more involved this coming Sunday against Los Angeles, Hurts said he'd like to get each of his primary targets, including DeVonta Smith, Dallas Goedert and Barkley, more touches. It's worth noting Barkley had a career- and franchise-high 255 rushing yards in the team's first meeting against the Rams in Week 12.

"They've got a great defense, they've been very disruptive up front," Hurts said. "We've just got to come and execute, I think it starts in the trenches in a game like this. We've been able to run the ball effectively, so hopefully we can continue to impose our will up front."



RICK OSENTOSKI/AP

Detroit Lions running back Jahmyr Gibbs led the league this season with a franchise-record 20 touchdowns and ranked fifth with 1,412 yards on the ground. He also had 517 yards receiving and four TD receptions

NFL PLAYOFFS

Crafting connection

Daniels-to-McLaurin has blossomed throughout year in helping Commanders advance to divisional round

By **STEPHEN WHYNO**
Associated Press

ASHBURN, Va. — When the Washington Commanders had to have it — fourth down, trailing in the fourth quarter of a playoff game — Jayden Daniels found Terry McLaurin in the end zone for a touchdown.

That moment marked the pinnacle of the rapport between the dynamic rookie quarterback and dependable sixth-year wide receiver that has been developing since off-season workouts.

Daniels has connected with McLaurin 77 times for 1,033 yards and 13 TDs, and that relationship blossoming on and off the field is a big reason the Commanders are in the postseason and advanced to the divisional round to face NFC-leading Detroit on Saturday night.

“They have built through the year, there’s no doubt,” offensive coordinator Kliff Kingsbury said Wednesday. “The first couple of games, the ball wasn’t coming to him as much as we would have

liked, and we’ve had our ups and downs. ... Those two guys are just going to get better and better as they go. They’re two very conscientious players that are team-first guys and work really hard at it.”

Daniels and McLaurin are the first Washington QB-WR duo to be selected to the Pro Bowl since Mark Rypien and Gary Clark in 1991. That was also the franchise’s most recent Super Bowl season.

This one started with very different, much lower expectations. The Commanders were

expected to win six or seven games and start the climb toward being a contender.

Instead, they went 12-5 with the NFL’s fifth-highest scoring offense and beat Tampa Bay to set up another road challenge against the Lions, when McLaurin said he needs to “be ready to make plays for Jayden.” He has since September.

“Come game day, you don’t really think about it,” Daniels said. “You just put the ball in the vicinity for Terry to go make a play, and nine times out of 10 he makes them.”

What Daniels called “continuous growth” for him and McLaurin has not been progress in a straight line, even beyond the early season bumps in the road Kingsbury pointed out. Daniels has thrown the ball McLaurin’s direction as many as 10 times in a game down to as few as twice.

Even through those times, there was never tension between teammates at those positions that can often fester in football. Nothing beyond two athletes at the top of their

sport wanting to maximize their performances.

“We’re extremely competitive people,” McLaurin said. “We really put a lot of time and effort into our craft. Good is not good enough, and you’re not just happy being here. I think that is what we have in common. Even the great plays we’ve had, we’ve still focused on the plays that we missed and the ways that we could continue to get better.”

On the field, coach Dan Quinn has con-

“Those two guys are just going to get better and better as they go.”

Kliff Kingsbury
Offensive coordinator



SETH WENG/AP

Commanders wide receiver Terry McLaurin, right, celebrates with quarterback Jayden Daniels after scoring a touchdown in November. McLaurin had 13 TD catches this year.

tently lauded Daniels’ poise beyond his 24 years of age and limited professional experience — something evidenced by the Commanders winning their past five games in a row all on the final play from scrimmage. He also credited McLaurin for the offense’s immense success down the field for the receiver’s ability to read deep throws and get under the ball at the perfect time.

“Obviously you have to have speed, but tracking a deep ball is one of the most difficult things,” Quinn said. “He’s got a knack on a deep ball of tracking it that not everybody has because to get some of the plays that he has to get behind people.”

That has not gone unnoticed among Lions coaches, and defensive coordinator Aaron Glenn compared McLaurin to Detroit All-Pro wideout Amon-Ra St. Brown for his all-around willingness to compete on every catch.

“He does a really good job on 50-50 balls, which you wouldn’t think that he would because of his stature, but he does a really good job of that,” said Glenn, who was a standout cornerback as a player. “He will block, he’ll go across the middle, he’ll take hits, he’ll get back up, get back to the huddle, so he’s a gamer. He’s a gamer, so it doesn’t surprise me the success he’s having.”

McLaurin, after Washington cycled through 10 different quarterbacks in his first five seasons, said he’s “fortunate to play with a young player who’s coming into the league and been so ready right off the bat where a lot of our communication and conversations are more next level.” The play has shown the results of that.

“He makes my job a lot easier when I just know I have to put myself in position to be open,” McLaurin said. “He’s going to put the ball right where it needs to be.”

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NFL PLAYOFFS

Divisional round features intriguing rematches

BY SAM FARMER
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Kobie Turner calls them “get-back” games.

The Rams’ defensive end is talking about redemption, not regression. He doesn’t want to get back to where the team was when it lost by 17 to the Philadelphia Eagles in Week 12. He wants to get back at the Eagles for one that got away.

“We were able to get our get-back on Arizona when they came to SoFi,” Turner said of the Rams beating the Cardinals in Week 17 after getting blown out in Week 2. “Now we have Philadelphia lined up, and who knows what could be next? But the only thing on our minds is getting our get-back versus Philadelphia, and we know what that requires.”

In fact, we’re pretty much in for a get-back weekend with three of the four divisional games being rematches from earlier in the season.

Baltimore plays at Buffalo, and the Bills are looking to avenge a 35-10 loss to the Ravens in Week 4.

It’s Houston at Kansas City, and those teams just played a few weeks ago, with the top-seeded Chiefs winning 27-19.

The only divisional matchup that’s new is Washington at Detroit, and those teams haven’t faced each other since the second week in 2022 when Lions quarterback Jared Goff threw four touchdown passes in a 36-27 thriller won by the Lions. The Commanders quarterback that day? Carson Wentz, who is a decidedly different challenge than Washington super rookie Jayden Daniels.



**Houston Texans (11-7)
at Kansas City Chiefs (15-2)**
AFN-Sports
10:30 p.m. Saturday CET
6:30 a.m. Sunday JKT



**Washington Commanders (13-5)
at Detroit Lions (15-2)**
AFN-Sports
2 a.m. Sunday CET
10 a.m. Sunday JKT



**Los Angeles Rams (11-7)
at Philadelphia Eagles (15-3)**
AFN-Sports
9 p.m. Sunday CET
5 a.m. Monday JKT



**Baltimore Ravens (13-5)
at Buffalo Bills (14-4)**
AFN-Sports
12:30 a.m. Monday CET
8:30 a.m. Monday JKT

It’s first things first for the Rams, who are singularly focused on upsetting the Eagles on Sunday, with Philadelphia favored by six points at home.

The Rams will be pulling for the Commanders on Saturday night, too, as a Washington victory would keep alive hopes of playing another NFC title game at SoFi Stadium, assuming it would be possible to play a game in Los Angeles at that point.

The Lions, who have never played in a Super Bowl, are favorites to make it to New Orleans and the NFL’s biggest stage. Oddsmakers have Detroit favored by a robust 9½ points this weekend. They are loaded on offense with so

many different ways to score, and Goff already has Super Bowl experience, having gotten there as quarterback of the Rams.

Daniels has been spectacular for the Commanders, who have become more one-dimensional of late with their inability to establish a consistent ground game.

Washington has won five in a row, including beating Philadelphia, while the Lions have only lost two games — by four to Tampa Bay in Week 2, and by six to Buffalo in Week 15 — though both of those defeats came at home.

Baltimore blew out Buffalo when they met in the regular season, but the Bills were missing three key defensive players at the



RYAN SUN/AP

Philadelphia Eagles running back Saquon Barkley gashed the Los Angeles Rams for 302 total yards Nov. 24 in Inglewood, Calif.

time. Unlike the first meeting, this game will take place in Buffalo, and likely in the snow.

The Bills started to make a bit of a comeback in the second half of that game, but in the third quarter they ran an ugly trick play that resulted in a big hit on quarterback Josh Allen and a turnover. That extinguished any hopes of rallying.

Lately, the Bills have been remarkably balanced on offense, and Allen — like Baltimore quarterback Lamar Jackson — is among the most dangerous weapons in the league. The early line has the visiting Ravens favored by 1½ points, the closest spread of the weekend.

Divisional weekend begins Sat-

urday with the Texans at the Chiefs. When these teams met in Week 16, Kansas City had gotten Marquise “Hollywood” Brown back — he’s a versatile piece of their offense — and Houston lost receiver Tank Dell to a gruesome knee injury. This time, the Chiefs are favored by 7½ points, while the Texans are riding high after knocking off the Chargers in a home wild-card game.

For the Rams, the biggest challenge will be containing running back Saquon Barkley, who rushed for an Eagles-record 255 yards against them and accumulated an incredible 302 total yards.

Said Rams defensive tackle Braden Fiske: “That definitely left a bad taste in our mouths.”

Henry: Buffalo had success against RB when he was with Tennessee

FROM PAGE 48

loose on an 87-yard touchdown run on the first offensive snap in the Ravens’ 35-10 win at Baltimore. Henry finished with a season-high 199 yards rushing while also scoring on a 5-yard catch in an outing during which Buffalo surrendered a season-worst 271 yards rushing and 427 total yards.

“Run game, pass game, third down, screen game, red zone. ... We got our butts kicked,” Bills defensive coordinator Bobby Babich said.

Difficult as it was rewatching the film this week, Babich noted it can serve as motivation.

“No one likes losing like we lost. I mean, we’re all competitors,” he said. “Sometimes those scars help you when you do have the chance to play a team again.”

Henry, 31, is enjoying a resurgence in his first season in Baltimore. He finished second in the NFL, behind Philadelphia’s Saquon Barkley, and set franchise season records with 1,921 yards rush-

ing and 16 touchdowns.

“He’s moving a lot faster than what he looks. That’s probably what really messes up the corners and linebackers when he hits the edge,” Ravens cornerback Marlon Humphrey said.

“He’s definitely one of one. But I think the visual and what’s actually happening doesn’t really match up. It’s like, ‘Oh, I have a perfect angle,’ and then he gets around you,” he added. “He’s just different. I know the Bills will have their hand, uh, it’ll be tough.”

The good news for the Bills is they’re healthier entering Sunday, with Bernard, linebacker Matt Milano and cornerback Taron Johnson set to play after the three starters were sidelined in the first game against the Ravens.

Another positive working for Buffalo is having previous success against Henry. In five meetings when he was with Tennessee, Henry topped 100 yards just once while combining for 359 yards rushing with seven touchdowns.

The Ravens, however, pose a multifaceted test for any defense. Stopping Henry is merely half the battle against Baltimore, which became the NFL’s first to top 4,000 yards passing and 3,000 rushing in a season, while finishing with 7,224 total yards — the third most in league history.

“They’re a one-two combination. I don’t know if the NFL has ever seen that type of combination of power, speed, explosiveness,” McDermott said. “That two-dimensional type of weaponry, if you will, is tough on people.”

An underlying subplot in Buffalo revolves around ongoing questions of the defense’s inconsistencies, especially against the run. Buffalo allowed 120-plus yards rushing nine times this year.

The questions date beyond this season involving a defense allowing a combined 500 yards rushing in Buffalo being eliminated in each of the past three divisional playoff rounds.

The criticism has reached a

point where defensive tackle DaQuan Jones is aware of it, but no longer cares what’s being said.

“At the end of the day, our end goal is to win a ring. I’m not going to sit here and harp because people are saying I don’t got the stats or Ed Oliver doesn’t have the stats. OK? What do you want me to do?” Jones said. “We’re chasing something better,” he added. “The next game right now is the Baltimore Ravens, and that’s all we’re focusing about.”

Jones spoke while wearing a Bills-colored sweatshirt with a three-word phrase that includes a profanity printed on it, summing up the defense’s dismissive approach. The shirt was designed by tackle Jordan Phillips, who said the phrase was taken directly from what someone said during a recent defensive meeting.

“Just not really acknowledging the outside noise,” Jones said, “and just having the mindset of just go out there and play our style of football and see what happens.”



JEFFREY T. BARNES/AP

“No one likes losing like we lost. I mean, we’re all competitors. Sometimes those scars help you when you do have the chance to play a team again.”

Bobby Babich
Bills defensive coordinator

SPORTS



Motown makeover

First-half success makes Pistons one of season's big surprises » **NBA, Page 42**

NFL PLAYOFFS

Massive challenge

Bills brace for test of stopping Henry after getting trampled by RB in Week 4

BY JOHN WAWROW
Associated Press

Bills coach Sean McDermott joked that Buffalo could use five 300-pound linebackers in assessing what it might take to stop Baltimore's Derrick Henry. Linebacker Terrel Bernard was a little more realistic Wednesday, saying it's going to require all 11 defenders swarming the running back. Even quarterback Josh Allen, at 6-foot-5 and 240 pounds, acknowledged feeling intimidated the few times he has stood next to the 6-2, 250-pound Henry.

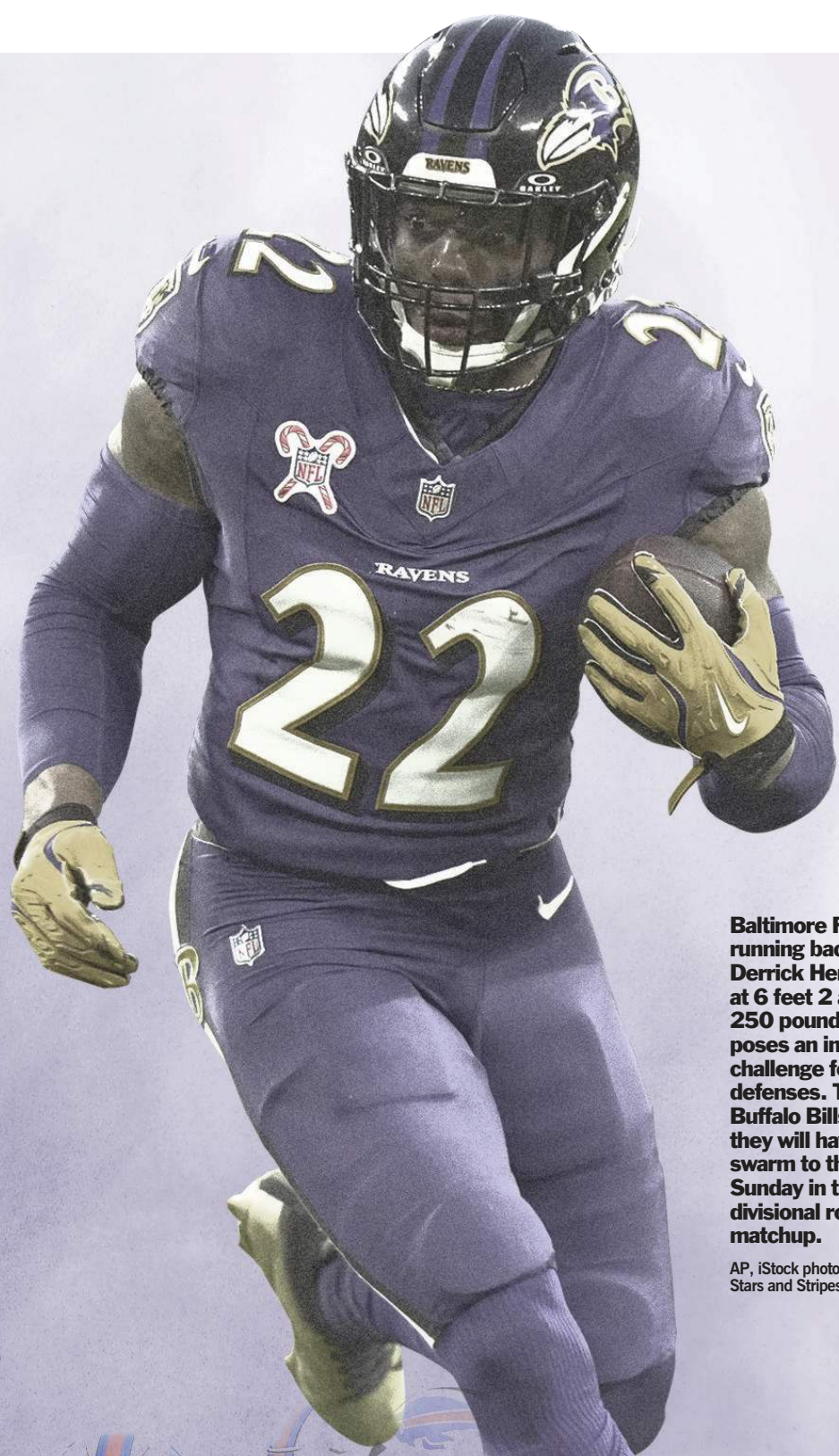
"He's absolutely massive," Allen said. "He's as fast as anybody on the field and once he gets going downhill, he's just tough to bring down because of his sheer size and speed."

One way or the other, stopping Henry is among the challenges Buffalo (14-4) faces Sunday night when hosting the third-seeded Ravens (13-5) and their league-leading offense in a divisional round playoff game.

Not lost on the Bills is what happened in Week 4, when Henry broke

199
Yards rushing for Derrick Henry against the Buffalo Bills on Sept. 29 in Baltimore. Henry had an 87-yard touchdown run and a receiving TD as the Ravens won 35-10.

Associated Press



Baltimore Ravens running back Derrick Henry, at 6 feet 2 and 250 pounds, poses an imposing challenge for defenses. The Buffalo Bills know they will have to swarm to the ball Sunday in their divisional round matchup.

AP, iStock photos; Stars and Stripes Illustration



SEE HENRY ON PAGE 47

Utah struggles to find success on home ice » **NHL, Page 43**

