

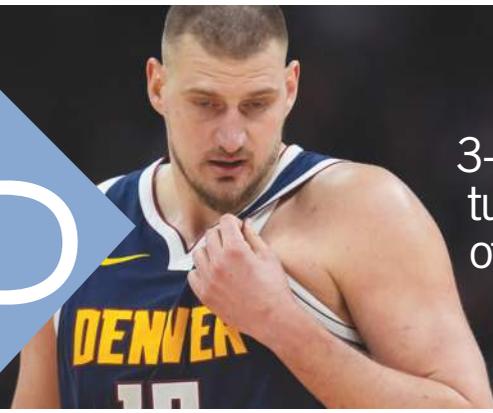
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DOD cuts on the horizon

Hegseth set to seek an 8% reduction in Pentagon spending

By **TONY CAPACCIO**
Bloomberg News

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's plan to reduce projected U.S. military spending by 8% over the next five years would spare southwest border enforcement, the Air Force's newest drone program, nuclear weapons modernization and preparations for a clean audit, according to a new memo he sent to the services.

The Feb. 18 memo instructs "senior Pentagon leadership," combat commands, Defense Department agencies, the service branches and civilian agencies to propose 8% cuts to their spending estimates for each of the five fiscal years starting with 2026. "I will conduct a relook" of what's been prepared to date, Hegseth wrote, setting a Monday deadline for responses.

Hegseth listed 17 areas that "may not be included by the services and components in their 8% decrease." In addition to border enforcement, the exempt list in-



DANIEL PROVIDAKES/U.S. Navy

The USS Vermont prepares to moor at Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan, on Dec. 9. Virginia-class submarines, such as the Vermont, are one of 17 areas that Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth declared "may not be included" in proposed Pentagon spending cuts.

SEE PENTAGON ON PAGE 7

PTSA asks Congress to help clarify DEI rules at DODEA schools

By **JENNIFER H. SVAN**
Stars and Stripes

RAMSTEIN AIR BASE, Germany — The Pentagon's schools in Europe have an extra two weeks to comply with recent executive orders that have shut down cultural events, disbanded clubs and sidelined lessons on immigration, among other changes.

But a private organization that advocates on behalf of military

RELATED
Parents in Stuttgart air frustration over diversity directives
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children in Europe is urging Congress to pause the implementation of those orders for much longer

and require Pentagon leaders to give Department of Defense Education Activity schools clearer direction.

"This lack of clarity is leading to widespread censorship, librarians being forced to remove books and clubs being canceled due to 'possibly' being out of compliance," the European Parent Teacher Student Association said in a message this week to lawmakers.

The letter, dated Tuesday, is addressed to the House Armed Forces Subcommittee on Personnel and has a subject line of "Protection from Censorship, Book Removal and Clarity Needed in DODEA Schools."

A review period of six months to a year would allow for staff training and correct implementation, the letter says.

"Our military children, who al-

ready face unique challenges, deserve better," the letter states. "They need access to diverse perspectives and resources that empower them to navigate life's difficulties with grace and compassion."

Kristen Smith, the Europe PTSA vice president of legislation and the person who signed the let-

SEE PTSA ON PAGE 5

BUSINESS/WEATHER

EUROPE GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel	Azores	..	..	\$4.376	..
Germany	\$3.578	\$4.153	\$4.518	\$4.107	Change in price	..	..	+6.2 cents	..
Change in price	+4.1 cents	+5.9 cents	+5.9 cents	+3.3 cents	Turkey	..	..	\$4.168	\$4.458*
Netherlands	..	\$4.526	\$5.047	\$4.787	Change in price	..	..	+3.8 cents	+0.9 cents
Change in price	..	-3.5 cents	-3.6 cents	-3.5 cents	Fuel prices are updated daily. These prices are effective Feb. 21. The change in price is from Feb. 14.				
U.K.	..	\$4.165	\$4.530	\$4.119					
Change in price	..	+7.1 cents	+7.3 cents	+4.5 cents					

PACIFIC GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel	South Korea	\$3.239	..	\$4.179	\$3.769
Japan	..	\$4.159	..	\$3.739	Change in price	+3.0 cents	..	+5.0 cents	+2.0 cents
Change in price	..	+6.0 cents	..	+2.0 cents	Guam	\$3.269	\$3.849	\$4.209	..
Okinawa	\$3.469	..	..	\$3.739	Change in price	+3.0 cents	+5.0 cents	+5.0 cents	..
Change in price	+3.0 cents	..	..	+2.0 cents					

*DieselEFD **Midgrade
For the week of Feb. 22-28

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates		Commercial rates	
Euro costs (Feb. 21)	0.93	Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3769
British pound (Feb. 21)	\$1.23	Britain (Pound)	1.2614
Japanese yen (Feb. 21)	148	Canada (Dollar)	1.4201
South Korean won (Feb. 21)	1404	China (Yuan)	7.2838
		Denmark (Krone)	7.1394
		Egypt (Pound)	50.5702
		Euro	0.9572
		Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7753
		Hungary (Forint)	385.13
		Israel (Shekel)	3.5478
		Japan (Yen)	149.84
		Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3086
		Norway (Krone)	11.1310
		Philippines (Peso)	57.95
		Poland (Zloty)	3.99
		Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7501
		Singapore (Dollar)	1.3370
		South Korea (Won)	1436.78

Switzerland (Franc) 0.9015
Thailand (Baht) 33.67
Turkey (NewLira) 36.3088

(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

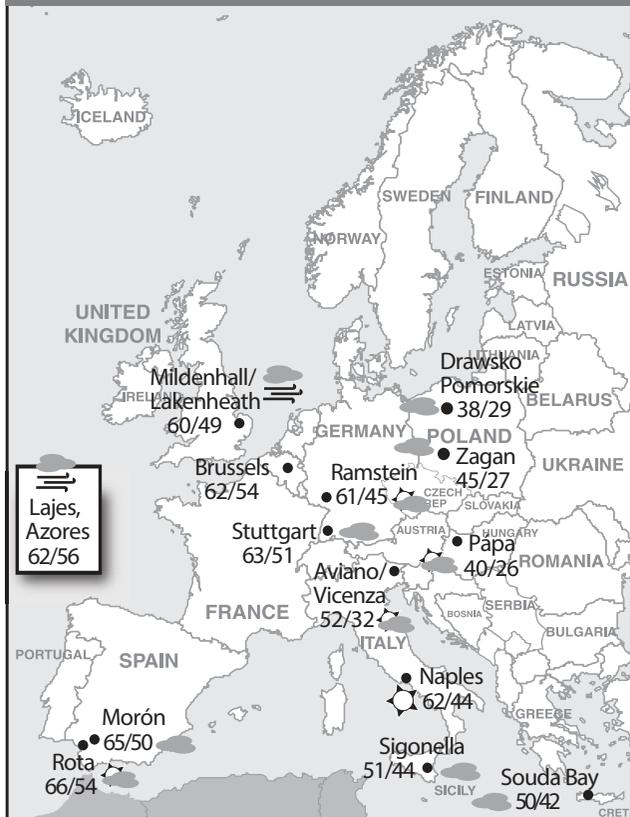
Prime rate	7.5
Interest Rates Discount rate	4.5
Federal funds market rate	4.33
3-month bill	4.32
30-year bond	4.77

WEATHER OUTLOOK

FRIDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



FRIDAY IN EUROPE



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EUROPE

CustomerService@stripes.com

+49 (0) 0631.3615.9111
DSN: 314.583.9111

MIDDLE EAST

CustomerService@stripes.com

+49 (0) 0631.3615.9111
DSN: 314.583.9111

PACIFIC

PacificAdvertising@stripes.com

+81 (42) 552.2511
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PACIFIC

Emails threaten explosions at Okinawa installations

By BRIAN McELHINEY
AND KEISHI KOJA

Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — Japanese police are investigating email threats that targeted 32 U.S. military installations on the island, warning of planned explosions unless a ransom is paid.

The threats were sent through the Okinawa prefectural and Naha city websites on Tuesday evening, according to spokesmen from both offices.

The identical emails, written in Japanese, warned that U.S. mili-

tary facilities would be bombed on Sunday and that “a large number of Americans” would be killed unless approximately \$120,860 is transferred to multiple bank accounts.

A prefectural government spokesman declined by phone Thursday to identify who signed the emails.

The prefectural government and Naha city officials alerted the Okinawa Prefectural Police Department and the Okinawa Defense Bureau, an arm of Japan’s Ministry of Defense, which then

informed U.S. military officials.

Kadena Air Base and Marine Corps Air Station Futenma were among the installations named in the threats, according to the prefectural government spokesman. However, officials declined to provide a full list of the targeted sites.

The U.S. military operates 31 bases on Okinawa and shares another with Japan’s Self-Defense Forces.

Marine Corps Installations Pacific is aware of the threat and is working with Japanese author-

ities, spokesman 1st Lt. Grant Hoel said in an email Thursday.

“At this time, we do not perceive a credible threat” to U.S. personnel covered under the status of forces agreement, Hoel wrote, referring to the pact that governs the rights and responsibilities of U.S. military personnel and their families in Japan.

Navy installations on Okinawa did not receive any direct threats, spokeswoman Candice Barber wrote in an email Thursday.

The Air Force’s 18th Wing at Kadena acknowledged questions

about the threat but did not immediately provide a response Thursday.

A spokesman for Okinawa Prefectural Police said authorities are considering whether to investigate the case as “forcible obstruction of business,” a criminal offense under Japan’s penal code.

“We will decide that after collecting and checking all of the evidence,” he said.

A spokesman for the Okinawa Defense Bureau declined to comment, citing police concerns over potential copycat incidents.

Bombers fly over S. Korea in show of force against North

By DAVID CHOI

Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — The U.S. and South Korean air forces demonstrated their combined air power with American bombers over South Korean airspace Thursday to “deter and respond to North Korea’s threats,” the South’s military said that day.

Two B-1B Lancers out of Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, flew alongside three U.S. F-16 Fighting Falcons from Osan Air Base, South Korea, four Marine Corps F-35Bs from Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan, and four South Korean F-35As and F-15K Slam Eagles, according to news releases Thursday from the U.S. 7th Air Force and South Korean Ministry of National Defense.

The bomber escort and air interdiction drill showcased the two countries’ ability to “deter and respond to North Korea’s nuclear and missile threats,” the ministry said.

Seventh Air Force commander Lt. Gen. David Iverson said the drill “ensures we’re able to maintain the high levels of readiness necessary for our combined de-



SOUTH KOREAN AIR FORCE

Two Air Force B-1B Lancers fly alongside F-16 Fighting Falcons and South Korean air force F-15K Slam Eagles over South Korean airspace Thursday.

fense posture,” according to the command’s release.

South Korea’s Ministry of National Defense and U.S. Forces Korea, the command responsible for 28,500 U.S. troops on the peninsula, does not disclose flight plans or ship movements in ad-

vance, citing potential security concerns.

Thursday’s drill marks the year’s first aerial demonstration by the two allied militaries.

Last month, a pair of Lancers were escorted by two Japanese Mitsubishi F-2s and two South Ko-

rean F-15K Slam Eagles over the Sea of Japan, also known as the East Sea.

The three countries kicked off trilateral air drills starting Oct. 22, 2023, after then-Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida and then-Presidents Joe Biden and Yoon

Suk Yeol of South Korea pledged to coordinate their defenses in light of North Korean threats.

That historic drill included a B-52H Stratofortress bomber; two F-16 Fighting Falcons; two South Korean F-15K Slam Eagles; and two Japanese F-2s in air defense zones overlapping Seoul and Tokyo.

North Korea has continued to levy threats against South Korea and the United States. The state-run Korean Central News Agency on Saturday reported the North will continue “bolstering” its nuclear capabilities to defend itself.

“As long as the U.S. and its vassal forces’ hostile threat exists, [North Korea’s] nukes are ... a means for legitimate self-defense entrusted by the constitution of the state,” the report said.

North Korea most recently fired several short-range ballistic missiles on Jan. 14 that flew approximately 155 miles before splashing down in the Sea of Japan, the South’s military said that day.

About a week later, the communist regime launched several cruise missiles that flew 930 miles, KCNA reported Jan. 26.

Study links migraines to Navy’s fuel-tainted tap water in Hawaii

By WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

Individuals exposed to jet-fuel tainted tap water near Pearl Harbor in late 2021 were more likely to experience new migraines and esophagus inflammation than others living nearby but not exposed to the water, according to a Defense Department study released last month.

The study examined conditions reported to Defense Health Agency Public Health following JP-5 jet fuel contamination in November 2021 of the Navy’s water distribution system that supplied military communities on and near Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam.

It was completed last summer but not made public for six

months.

The fuel was traced to the World War II-era Red Hill underground fuel storage facility, which was ordered emptied and permanently closed four months after the spill.

The study compared 44,373 individuals exposed to the tainted water with 59,499 “DoD-affiliated individuals living on Oahu at the time of the Red Hill fuel release” who were not exposed.

The Red Hill group was more likely to experience new cases of migraines and esophagus inflammation than the comparison group.

In addition, the study analyzed new cases of bloody urine, irritable bowel syndrome, nerve pain called peripheral neuropathy and

Raynaud’s syndrome, a condition in which the body’s extremities are deprived of blood.

No significant differences were found in those conditions, according to the study.

Immediately after the spill, residents complained of a host of conditions, from headaches and rashes to brain fog and fatigue.

“Notably, there is limited published literature on the health effects of JP-5 ingestion, and currently, no causal link has been established between this exposure and the specific health conditions reported by some Red Hill community members,” states the study, which was conducted by the Navy’s EpiData Center.

The center provides data analy-

sis for public health surveillance for the Navy and Marine Corps.

The study also compared the incidence trend of migraines solely within the Red Hill group by looking at the two-year period before the November 2021 contamination and a two-year period after.

The study found “a higher trend in the monthly number of individuals with health care encounters for migraine following the release event than in the period before the event” in the Red Hill group.

The study had several limitations, including the potential misclassification of conditions in medical records and potential physician bias arising from doctors more closely monitoring the health conditions of the Red Hill

group.

Hundreds of individuals who were exposed to the contamination have joined a lawsuit in federal court seeking compensation for physical, emotional and financial damages arising from the spill.

The trial for the first 17 “bellwether” plaintiffs in the civil suit, *Feindt vs. United States*, took place in May in Hawaii.

U.S. District Court Judge Leslie Kobayashi has not yet issued a decision.

During pretrial motions, Kobayashi disallowed expert testimony addressing the potential of long-term illnesses caused by jet fuel exposure, citing a dearth of medical studies involving human subjects.

MILITARY

Navy on track to meet 2025 recruiting goal

BY CAITLYN BURCHETT

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Navy is on track to meet its recruiting goal for the second consecutive year, the service announced Tuesday, just four months into fiscal 2025.

The sea service has contracted about 14,000 recruits since October, according to a post shared by the Navy to the social media site X. Of those, more than 12,700 have shipped out to Great Lakes, Ill., for the service's basic training program, according to an official.

The recruits mark significant progress in the service's effort to recruit 40,600 new sailors by Sept. 30, the end of the fiscal year. If the Navy achieves the goal, it would be the second consecutive year that the service has met its highest recruiting goal in 20 years.

"Bravo Zulu to [the Navy] for their continued improvement in recruiting numbers and welcoming the next generation of warfighters serving with honor, courage and commitment," Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said in a

message shared Wednesday to X.

Typically, the service begins sharing its recruiting data closer to the end of the fiscal year — in late summer or early fall. But the Navy took to social media this week to tout the near 35% milestone.

In August, Navy officials said they were seeing significant results in recruiting after years of loosening requirements to combat missed enlistment goals. The Navy ultimately contracted 40,978 recruits from October 2023 to September 2024, surpass-

ing its goal of 40,600.

The service set its recruiting goal of active-duty sailors for fiscal 2024 to attempt to make up for shortfalls from previous years. In 2022 and 2023, the Navy only contracted 22,000 and 30,000 sailors, respectively. Those same years, the Navy also emptied its delayed-entry pool, a program that allows people to sign up for the armed forces up to one year before they start basic training.

The Navy's announcement comes about one month after the Army touted its recruiting suc-

cess.

Army Secretary Christine Wormuth told The Associated Press in January that the Army is on pace to bring in 61,000 recruits by the end of the fiscal year in September and will have more than 20,000 additional young people signed up in the delayed entry program for 2026. It's the second consecutive year of meeting the goals.

In total, by Sept. 30, the services recruited about 225,000 new troops — about 25,000 more than the previous year.

Wave of dorm improvements reaches airmen in S. Korea

BY ERIC MENDIOLA

Stars and Stripes

KUNSAN AIR BASE, South Korea — A five-month renovation project at this U.S. fighter base has improved living conditions for about 1,500 airmen, adding new entertainment options and upgraded laundry facilities.

The upgrades come more than two years after an Air Force task force began investigating quality-of-life issues for Kunsan airmen after reports of mold and faulty air conditioning there surfaced on social media.

The \$460,000 overhaul includes new washers and dryers in 12 dormitory laundry rooms and refreshed dayrooms with TVs, air hockey tables, dart boards and other recreational amenities, Capt. Alvin Nelson, spokesman for the 8th Fighter Wing, said in an email Wednesday.

The updates affected 15 of the 34 dayrooms across 21 dormitories, with additional improvements planned throughout the year, he said.

The project stemmed from concerns over aging furnishings, some over a decade old, said Staff Sgt. Hwanhie Kim, of the 8th Civil Engineer Squadron, who led the effort.

"We noticed that a lot of the furniture in the dayrooms was pretty old, so we decided to upgrade them; our leadership supported us," Kim said Feb. 4 at the squadron office.

Kim, his brother, Tech. Sgt. Hwasung Kim, and airmen dorm leaders worked with South Korean civilian employees and contractors to complete the upgrades. The project was also supported by the 8th Comptroller Squadron, 8th Logistics Readiness Squadron, and the U.S. Army's 411th Contracting Support Brigade.

Renovations to the dayrooms, completed between September and November, cost \$150,000, Nelson said.

"I would say it affects other

airmen similar to me, like it gives them the space to come and relax, focus on their own mental health and de-stress and, overall, have a community here," Senior Airman Exzavier Hall of the civil engineers said Feb. 4 in one of the dayrooms.

The base installed 100 new washing machines and 117 dryers in 12 dormitory laundry rooms during January and February, an improvement that cost \$310,000, Nelson said.

The Air Force funds dormitory renovations through its annual facility sustainment budget.

"It definitely has improved our quality of life because it provides us with facilities to take care of our everyday needs as well as our extracurricular activities like being able to play games together and bond with other airmen in the dorm," Senior Airman Marvyl Ellis said in one of the newly refurbished rooms on Feb. 4.

Kunsan is home to the 8th Fighter Wing, which includes two squadrons of F-16 Fighting Falcons, as well as the South Korean 38th Fighter Group and supporting units.



PHOTOS BY LUIS GARCIA/Stars and Stripes

Dormitory dayrooms at Kunsan Air Base, South Korea, were refreshed with TVs, air hockey tables, dart boards and other recreational amenities.



Renovations to dormitory dayrooms at Kunsan were completed between September and November and cost \$150,000.



Kunsan installed 100 new washing machines and 117 dryers in 12 dormitory laundry rooms during January and February, at a cost of \$310,000.

MILITARY

Parents air frustration at new school rules

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

STUTT GART, Germany — More than 100 people packed into the base chapel this week at Patch Barracks, where some military families voiced opposition to recent Pentagon executive orders that have banned diversity programs and sparked curriculum reviews at Defense Department schools.

Educators are still sorting out how to implement rules based on orders issued less than a month ago, said Elizabeth Fales, superintendent for the Department of Defense Education Activity's Europe East district.

"We are trying our best to be in compliance with the understanding we have at this time," Fales said Wednesday during a town hall meeting. "So we ask everyone to have some patience with us."

Frustrations arose at times during the meeting over changes that have ended some long-standing school traditions.

For example, February is Black History Month, the first

large observance of the year among minority heritage month celebrations, which were banned by a Jan. 31 order issued by Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth.

"We have kids that feel like they are being erased," said one mother, who like other attendees remained anonymous in accordance with the rules of the meeting.

The parent, who is Black, added that books such as Toni Morrison's "Sula" have been removed in a review of library material.

"I am really worried about the mental health aspect of what's going on," the woman said. "This whole situation has been really, really hard on my kids."

Wednesday's gathering came a week after a student walkout at Patch Middle School during Hegseth's visit to Stuttgart.

Hegseth's decision to ban identity months centered on the argument that focusing on race and diversity is divisive and works against the military's overarching priority of being united in shared purpose.

One of the big challenges DO-

DEA schools are facing is threading the needle when it comes to broadly worded directives.

One parent at the town hall meeting asked whether Black History Month posters depicting historical figures could remain up if the identity month label were removed.

"Honestly, I need to get guidance on that," Fales said.

Fales added that such programming would continue in military schools, just not in the context of identity months.

"They are part of our curriculum. They are a part of our history," Fales said. "Our walls should not be bare in elementary classrooms."

Col. Kirk Alexander, the Stuttgart garrison commander, cautioned against attempts to "re-brand" pictures, which he said could be seen as an attempt to evade compliance with regulations.

For example, Alexander recently canceled a planned Irish American heritage run and rejected a suggestion to rename it

"the leprechaun run."

"We've got to be in compliance with the policies coming down, and it takes some time (to figure out how)," Alexander said.

Given the generalized wording of the recent executive orders are, educators are forced to navigate through gray zones.

If schools go too far, they could be accused of "malicious compliance," or undermining the intent of the directive.

That was the accusation leveled against the Air Force by a Republican U.S. senator from Alabama after the service removed a training video about the Tuskegee Airmen in connection with a review into diversity, equity and inclusion material.

Sen. Katie Britt brought the issue to Hegseth's attention on the social media platform X.

"We're all over it, Senator," Hegseth posted in response. "This will not stand."

The video has since been restored.

At the same time, schools that take an overly cautious approach to implementing Pentagon orders

could face accusations of slow-rolling mandates.

Parents said at the Stuttgart town hall meeting that some schools appear to be taking a harder line than others on implementing policies, adding to the confusion.

Meanwhile, some parents of transgender children said Wednesday that their kids do not feel welcome in school. DODEA is reviewing parts of its curriculum dealing with transgender matters in accordance with Pentagon and presidential directives.

One parent said teachers have become unsure about how to address his child, who goes by a different name than the one she was born with.

"There was an incident in school today where the teacher came up to her and said, 'I am not sure I can call you by the name you've been going by,'" he told the audience.

He said that while teachers have been supportive, "they are very unsure about the limits of what they're supposed to be doing in school."

PTSA: Many books set aside for review

FROM PAGE 1

ter, said Thursday that the speed with which DODEA has had to carry out the executive orders has caused confusion and mistakes.

For example, rainbows, which were removed from some kindergarten classes, are now allowed as long as they aren't used as a Pride symbol, she said.

"That's proof that a lot of people were acting out in fear, and that also, DODEA is paying attention and willing to recognize those things," Smith said.

The European PTSA is compiling a list of items shared with its members that the organization believes may have resulted from misinterpretation of the policies directed by the Pentagon.

Examples include the removal at one school of a Rosa Parks poster, and at another, a poster in a classroom of a child in a wheelchair. At still another school, a student book report on a child with autism was stopped, Smith said.

The PTSA at one school was told it could no longer hold its Fasching event, a traditional German celebration featuring costumes and carnival-like festivities, Smith said.

Some schools removed all artwork or posters of Martin Luther King Jr., while some just removed the Black History Month title from similar posters.

"The amount of detail they have to be concerned about, and the ins and outs of it all is incredible in following these policies and these

laws," Smith said.

DODEA schools have been ordered to comply with the recent executive orders titled "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government" and "Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schooling."

A third executive order, issued Jan. 31, prohibits Defense Department agencies, including DODEA, from using official resources to host celebrations or events related to cultural awareness months.

In Europe, schools had been given until Tuesday to comply, but the deadline was extended until March 3 "by senior leadership to conduct a thoughtful review of materials," DODEA-Europe spokeswoman Jessica Tackaberry said Wednesday. The other regions have a similar deadline, she said.

Schools are reviewing the curriculum and books to ensure they align with the White House directives and Pentagon guidance, DODEA officials have said.

A few lessons were identified earlier this month for removal during the review period, including elementary school reading assignments on immigration to America, Black History Month social studies material and chapters on sexuality and gender for high schoolers.

As part of the review, instructional resources "potentially related to gender ideology or discriminatory equity ideology topics" as

defined in the executive orders "will be identified for disposition," Tackaberry said in a statement Wednesday.

No books have been permanently removed from school libraries, pending completion of the review, Tackaberry said.

At Ramstein High School, more than 50 books were set aside for review.

Jasmine Vu, a sophomore who is part of the school's library management team, said the librarian explained the general guidelines used to pull books.

"Gender ideology means anything regarding trans people, we're taking it out," she said. "Discriminatory equity ideology is anything that goes 'This group of people is better than that group of people.'"

Books that have been removed so far include the popular teen series "Heartstopper," an LGBTQ+ young adult graphic novel and webcomic series by the British author Alice Oseman that is also on Netflix.

Others in the stack include "Rise Up and Sing," which explores how music has contributed to social justice, and the memoir "The World in Flames: A Black Boyhood in a White Supremacist Doodscap Cult."

"I'm in the library club. You see that big stack during meetings, it's kind of sad and depressing," Vu said.

The European PTSA has met with staffers of five congressional



Jasmine Vu

Books that have been temporarily removed recently for a compliance review are stacked up on a table in the library at Ramstein High School in Germany.

lawmakers so far, with more to follow.

The group is encouraging parents and students who are concerned about possible policy misinterpretations to talk with a school administrator, teacher or counselor.

The next step would be to write a letter to Congress, and the European PTSA has a template for that on its Facebook page.

Some parents who have raised issues say their schools haven't been helpful.

The parent of a middle school student at Ramstein, who asked not to be identified because of the nature of her job, said she received a canned response from the administration directing her to the DODEA civil rights office.

She had expressed concerns about the disbanding of cultural clubs and the ban on Black History Month observances.

The parent said her child's class was reading "Hidden Figures," a book about the barriers that Black female scientists faced while doing work for NASA and its precursor through the 1960s.

The teacher was forced to end the discussions and lessons planned for the unit, she said.

"They had to pivot to making the lessons about paper airplanes and how math can help with something," the parent said. "No conversations about women in science... none of that is allowed anymore."

Allison McKenzie contributed to this report.

MILITARY

Claims filed by family of aircraft crash victim

By **DAVE COLLINS**
Associated Press

The wife of a Connecticut man who died in last month's collision between a passenger jet and a military helicopter near Washington, D.C.'s Ronald Reagan National Airport has filed what are believed to be the first legal claims over the crash that killed 67 people.

The claims by Rachel Crafton were filed Tuesday against the Federal Aviation Administration and the U.S. Army, with each seeking \$250 million for alleged wrongdoing that led to the collision and death of Casey Crafton, 40, of Salem, Conn., according to her Chicago-based lawyer, Robert Clifford.

The filings were made under the Federal Tort Claims Act and are a required precursor to a lawsuit. If the FAA and Army either reject or do not act on the claims

within six months, a civil wrongful death lawsuit can be filed in federal court.

"The families are filing this to achieve their goal of taking the first step towards what the whole world knows will be eventual litigation against the FAA for its air traffic control and the U.S. Army relative to the operations of the helicopter," Clifford said in an interview Wednesday.

Clifford, who said he represents other crash victims' families, said the claims were based on public comments federal officials have made about the crash, including alleged understaffing at the air traffic control tower, the helicopter pilot flying above the 200-foot limit near the airport and communication lapses between air traffic control and the aircraft.

Clifford also sent letters to American Airlines, Sikorsky Aircraft and Collins Aerospace de-

manding that they preserve any evidence relating to the crash.

In a statement, the Army declined to comment on the filing Wednesday.

"Out of respect for the deceased, their families, and the ongoing investigation, it is inappropriate for the Army to comment on any speculation regarding claims or potential litigation," Army spokesperson Maj. Montrell Russell said. "Our primary focus is on supporting the families and ensuring the safety of our Soldiers and the public."

The FAA said Wednesday that it does not comment on potential litigation.

On Jan. 29, American Airlines Flight 5342 was coming in from Wichita, Kan., carrying 60 passengers and four crew members, as it approached Reagan National to land on a clear Wednesday night. At the same time, an Army Black

Hawk, made by Sikorsky, was on a training exercise with three soldiers aboard. The two aircraft collided and plunged into the Potomac River, killing everyone on board the jet and helicopter.

It was the deadliest plane crash in the U.S. since 2001, when a jet slammed into a New York City neighborhood just after takeoff, killing all 260 people on board and five more on the ground.

Investigators have said the helicopter may have had inaccurate altitude readings in the moments before the crash, and the crew may not have heard key instructions from air traffic controllers. The collision likely occurred at an altitude just under 300 feet, as the plane descended toward the helicopter, which was well above its 200-foot limit for that location.

Clifford also cited an FAA report that said the air traffic control staffing "was not normal" at the

time of the crash. One air traffic controller was responsible for both coordinating helicopter traffic and arriving and departing planes, when those duties are often divided between two controllers, the report said. But the airport typically combines those roles at night when traffic begins to slow.

Casey Crafton was a technical support manager for an aviation consulting firm who was returning from a business trip to Wichita when he died. He and Rachel Crafton had three young sons, ages 7, 10 and 12, and he coached their youth soccer and baseball teams.

"They will be grieving him for the rest of their lives that will never be the same," Clifford said. "This crash involves complex matters, and the family deserves answers as to what happened to their loved one."

Fort Belvoir honors 3 soldiers who died in DC aircraft crash

By **MATTHEW ADAMS**
Stars and Stripes

FORT BELVOIR, Va. — Soldiers, family members and friends gathered at the base chapel on Wednesday night for a candle vigil to honor three Army crew members who were killed when their helicopter collided in midair with a commercial jet over the Potomac River in Washington.

"There is an appointed, specific time for everything under the sun," said Army Col. Eddie Kinley, a chaplain. "If truth be told, there's no greater loss than that of a loved one. We are gathered here this evening because of three soldiers we lost tragically."

Capt. Rebecca Lobach, Staff Sgt. Ryan O'Hara and Chief Warrant Officer 2 Andrew Eaves were killed in the Jan. 29 collision between American Airlines Flight 5342 coming from Wichita, Kan., and the UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter from Bravo Company of the 12th Aviation Battalion at Davison Army Airfield at Fort Belvoir. The collision killed 67 people between the two aircraft, making it the country's deadliest aviation incident in almost 25 years.

Lobach, 28, began her career in the Army after graduating from the ROTC program at the University of North Carolina, and was in the top 20% of cadets nationwide, the family has said. She twice served as a platoon leader and as a company executive officer in the 12th Aviation Battalion. With



Army Col. Eddie Kinley, a chaplain, speaks during a candlelight vigil at Fort Belvoir.

more than 450 hours of flight time, she earned certification as a pilot-in-command after extensive testing by the most senior and experienced pilots in her battalion.

"Rebecca was a warrior and would not hesitate to defend her country in battle. But she was as graceful as she was fierce," her family said in a statement earlier this month.

O'Hara, 28, of Lilburn, Ga., served as a Black Hawk repairer in the Army from July 2014 until his death. He was the crew chief onboard the aircraft the night of the crash. He deployed to Afghanistan from March 2017 to August 2017.

His father, Gary O'Hara, told The Washington Post that his son texted him earlier the day of the crash about a new assignment that might bring him, his wife and 1-year-old son back to Georgia later this year.

The awards that O'Hara earned



PHOTOS BY ERIC KAYNE/Stars and Stripes

Participants mourn Wednesday during a candlelight vigil in Fort Belvoir, Va., to honor the 12th Aviation Battalion helicopter crew that perished in a midair collision over the Potomac River on Jan. 29.

include the Army Commendation Medal with C device for actions in combat, four Army Achievement Medals, a National Defense Service Medal, an Afghanistan Campaign Medal with campaign star and a Global War on Terrorism Service Medal.

Eaves, 39, of Great Mills, Md., served in the Navy from August 2007 to September 2017 before transitioning to a Black Hawk pilot for the Army from September 2017 until his death.

Some of the awards that Eaves received include three Army Commendation Medals, a Navy Commendation Medal, an Army Achievement Medal, a Global War on Terrorism Expeditionary Medal and a Global War on Terro-

rism Service Medal.

His wife Carrie, stepson Michael Lester, and family friends attended the vigil at the base. People who came took time afterward to express their condolences to the family.

Kinley told the crowd of more than 50 people that there is a time for everything — to laugh, cry, success and failure.

"That's God's desire in every person's life ... to demonstrate to each of us that there is growth, even in death. Even when God subtracts, we still multiply," the chaplain said. "It might not be immediate but in time you'll discover that even when God subtracts, he still multiplies."

As mourners held the vigil at

Fort Belvoir on Wednesday, investigators from the Federal Aviation Administration, National Transportation Safety Board and the Army continue to search for answers about what caused the crash.

NTSB Chairwoman Jennifer Homendy on Friday said a recording from the helicopter cockpit suggests the crew might have missed a key instruction just before the collision, according to a report from The Associated Press.

Homendy said the helicopter's pilot was being tested on the use of night vision goggles and flying by instruments. Investigators believe the crew was wearing night vision goggles throughout the flight.

MILITARY

Senate GOP budget bill said to be back on track

BY LISA MASCARO
AND KEVIN FREKING
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Back on track, Senate Republicans pushed ahead Wednesday with their \$340 billion budget bill focused on funding the White House's mass deportations and border security agenda after Vice President JD Vance gave a green light to proceed despite a morning dust-up caused by President Donald Trump.

The package was in jeopardy after Trump publicly bashed the approach from the Senate Budget Committee chairman, Sen. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina. Trump said he favored the "big beautiful bill" from House Republicans, a more politically fraught package that includes \$4.5 trillion in tax cuts but slashes government programs and services. Senators want to address those priorities later, in a second package.

"We are moving forward," said Sen. John Barrasso of Wyoming, the GOP whip, after a lunch meeting with Vance at the Capitol. "Foot on the gas, moving forward."

The start-stop process is complicating what's already a heavy legislative lift for Republicans, who have a rare sweep of power with majority

control of Congress, but face big hurdles enacting Trump's agenda as Democrats prepare to counter with steep objections at every step.

Ongoing GOP divisions over whether to do one package or two — the House thinks they can only muscle one package to passage, while the Senate believes two will be easier — has created a push-pull dynamic that Trump is leveraging as he goads the two chambers of Congress to compete with each other.

Trump, in his own private talks with the senators, including last weekend at Mar-a-Lago, has essentially told them just to "get the result."

It all comes as Democrats, without the votes to stop Trump's plans, are warning Americans what's at stake — particularly as the administration's Department of Government Efficiency effort is slashing across government departments, leaving a trail of fired federal workers and dismantling programs on which many Americans depend.

"These bills that they have have one purpose — and that is they're trying to give a tax break to their billionaire buddies and have you, the average American person, pay for it," Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer of New York told

The Associated Press.

Schumer convened a private call over the weekend with Democratic senators and agreed on a strategy to challenge Republicans for prioritizing tax cuts that primarily flow to the wealthy at the expense of program and service reductions in health care, scientific research, veterans services and elsewhere.

"This is going to be a long, drawn-out fight," Schumer said later.

With a party line vote, 50-47, the Senate launched the cumbersome budget process late Tuesday and by Wednesday was slogging through an initial 50 hours of debate. That all leads up to an expected all-night session Thursday with rapid-fire attempts to amend the package in what's typically called a "vote-a-rama."

The Republican package would allow \$175 billion to be spent on border security, including money for mass deportation operations and building the U.S.-Mexico border wall, in addition to a \$150 billion boost to the Pentagon and \$20 billion for the Coast Guard.

Trump border czar Tom Homan and top aide Stephen Miller told senators privately last week that they are running short of cash to accomplish the president's immigra-

tion and deportation priorities, spurring Republicans to move swiftly.

Eyeing ways to pay for it, Republican senators are considering a rollback of the Biden administration's methane emissions fee, which was approved by Democrats as part of climate change strategies in the Inflation Reduction Act, and hoping to draw new revenue from energy leases as they aim to spur domestic energy production.

But all that was in jeopardy when Trump said early Wednesday he wanted the House's version passed as a way to "kickstart" the process and "move all of our priorities to the concept of, 'ONE BIG BEAUTIFUL BILL.'"

Trump said, "Unlike the Lindsey Graham version of the very important Legislation currently being discussed, the House Resolution implements my FULL America First Agenda, EVERYTHING, not just parts of it!"

The Senate's Republican leadership was blindsided by the post.

"As they say, I did not see that one coming," said Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D.

Thune had engineered the two-bill approach as a way to deliver an early victory for the White House

and had pushed the Senate forward while the House is away on recess this week, saying it was time to act.

By lunchtime, after Vance met with the senators, his message was for them to simply carry on.

Sen. Kevin Cramer, R-N.D., said afterward that Vance told them: "The president wants whatever you guys want. Just do whatever you want. He's going to support it."

Cramer said Trump enjoys watching the House and Senate compete over his agenda.

The House GOP bill is multiple times larger, with \$4.5 trillion in tax cuts and \$1.5 trillion in spending reductions over the decade across Medicaid health care programs, food stamps and other services used by large swaths of the country. The cuts could ultimately grow to \$2 trillion to appease hard-right conservatives.

The budget plans are being considered under what's called the reconciliation process, which allows passage on a simple majority vote without many of the procedural hurdles that stall legislation. Once rare, reconciliation is increasingly being used in the House and Senate to pass big packages on party-line votes when one party controls the White House and Congress.

Pentagon: Hegseth's memo does not address future of some major programs

FROM PAGE 1

cludes the Virginia-class submarine, what it terms "executable surface ship programs," homeland missile defense, the Air Force's new Collaborative Combat Aircraft, one-way attack drones, "priority critical cybersecurity, munitions and Indo-Pacom construction projects" and private sector medical care.

In keeping with favorite themes of President Donald Trump and Hegseth, the memo calls for targeting excessive bureaucracy and spending on programs linked to climate change and diversity, eq-

uity and inclusion, which Hegseth characterized as "low impact" and "wasteful."

Like previous administrations, Hegseth's team is reviewing and revising the previous administration's notional spending blueprint, which projected expenditures of \$876.8 billion for fiscal year 2026, up from \$849 billion this year. The review is Hegseth's first foray into the nuts and bolts of running the largest U.S. department.

His memo doesn't address the future of some of the Defense Department's major programs, including the costliest — the F-35

built by Lockheed Martin. Although billionaire Elon Musk, a top Trump adviser, has said the fighter jet should be canceled in an era of drone warfare, Trump has talked of selling F-35s to India, which would require their continued production.

The Pentagon in a statement Wednesday night said that about \$50 billion will be reduced from the planned fiscal 2026 budget and those dollars wouldn't be lost to the military but instead "will then be spent on programs aligned with President Trump's priorities."

"The department will develop a



VIRGINIA MAYO/AP

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth is instructing "senior Pentagon leadership," combat commands, Defense Department agencies, the service branches and civilian agencies to propose 8% cuts to their spending estimates for five fiscal years starting with 2026.

list of potential offsets that could be used to fund these priorities, as well as to refocus the department

on its core mission of deterring and winning wars," the department added in the statement.

IRS plans to lay off 7,000 probationary workers, AP source says

BY FATIMA HUSSEIN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The IRS will lay off roughly 7,000 workers in Washington and around the country beginning Thursday, a person familiar with the plans told The Associated Press.

The layoffs affect probationary employees with roughly one year or less of service at the agency and largely include workers in compliance departments, according to the person, who was not au-

thorized to disclose the plans and spoke on condition of anonymity Wednesday. Compliance work includes ensuring that taxpayers are abiding by the tax code, filing their returns and paying their taxes, among other duties.

The layoffs are part of the Trump administration's intensified efforts to shrink the size of the federal workforce through the Department of Government Efficiency by ordering agencies to lay off nearly all probationary em-

ployees who have not yet gained civil service protection. They come despite IRS employees involved in the 2025 tax season being told earlier this month that they would not be allowed to accept a buyout offer from the Trump administration until mid-May, after the taxpayer filing deadline.

It's unclear how the layoffs may affect tax collection services this year. As the nation's revenue collector, the IRS was tasked during

the Biden administration with targeting high-wealth tax evaders for an additional stream of income to the U.S., which is \$36 trillion in debt. By the end of 2024, the IRS collected over \$1.3 billion in back taxes from rich tax dodgers.

The IRS has roughly 90,000 employees total across the United States, according to the latest IRS data. Racial minorities make up 56% of the IRS workforce, and women represent 65%.

In addition to the planned

layoffs, the Trump administration intends to lend IRS workers to the Department of Homeland Security to assist with immigration enforcement. In a letter sent earlier this month, DHS Secretary Kristi Noem asked Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent to borrow IRS workers to help with ongoing immigration crackdown efforts.

Representatives from the IRS and U.S. Treasury did not respond to requests for comment from the AP.

VETERANS

Lawmakers, vets vent amid workforce cuts

Many who served are losing jobs and are frustrated by the process

BY LINDA F. HERSEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Marine Corps veteran Andrew Lennox was wrapping up his last day of on-line orientation as a newly hired administrative officer at Ann Arbor VA Healthcare System in Michigan, when his cell phone pinged alerting him to incoming email.

As a supervisor in primary care services at the medical center run by the Department of Veterans Affairs, the 35-year-old former staff sergeant certified staff hours, handled equipment purchases and reviewed performance evaluations.

"I've loved my new job at the VA, and I have nothing but positive feedback," Lennox said.

But when he scanned his messages Feb. 13, he saw a work email from Tracey Therit, the VA's chief human capital officer. The message contained a formal letter stating his employment was no longer needed based on job performance. Lennox was fired, effectively immediately, after less than two months on the job.

He was among more than 1,000 workers across the VA new to their jobs who received similar notices of termination based on performance. The mass firings were part of a larger federal workforce reduction announced by President Donald Trump's administration to downsize the government.

But the layoffs are impacting many veterans, who represent approximately one-third of all federal workers, according to figures from the Office of Personnel Management. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., who is a member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, blasted the Trump administration for "attempting to balance the budget on the backs of veterans."

"Let's call this what it is — it is a middle finger to our heroes and their lives of service," Sen. Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill., a member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs and Armed Services committees, said Wednesday at a news conference that she and Blumenthal called to discuss the impact of federal job reductions on veterans.

Duckworth, a retired Army National Guard lieutenant colonel, said she has heard from veterans across the country who are reaching out to her office or the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee to share their stories and concerns, especially about the cuts at the VA. She described the workforce reduction as a "probationary purge."

At the end of fiscal 2023, 30% of federal employees were veterans compared to 5% of the total em-



Chelsea Milburn

Chelsea Milburn, a former Navy chief petty officer shown aboard the USS Rushmore during a deployment in 2015, was fired last week after three months on the job as part of a federal workforce reduction across several agencies.



Andrew Lennox

Marine Corps veteran Andrew Lennox, shown during a deployment to the Middle East, was terminated from his post at the Ann Arbor VA Healthcare System in Michigan when the VA fired more than 1,000 probationary workers.

ployed U.S. civilian labor force, according to the nonprofit Partnership for Public Service. About 25% of new federal hires in fiscal 2023 were veterans.

"I had been prepared for my job to be potentially impacted, but I was upset and angry when I got the termination notice. I had received so much positive feedback, but the letter stated it was from job performance and the burden was on me," said Chelsea Milburn, who was fired after three months as a public affairs specialist at the Education Department. Milburn served in the Navy from 2014-19 and has continued her service in the Navy Reserve. She is now un-



ERIC KAYNE/Stars and Stripes

Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., addresses a rally outside the Department of Veterans Affairs headquarters in Washington last week.

der review for a medical discharge from the Reserve based on a neurological condition.

In addition to job terminations at the VA and Education Department, hundreds of newly hired workers were fired last week from the Department of Health and Human Services, National Park Service and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, among other agencies. Many were veterans.

"I understand that because I am the new guy, I would be the first to go," said Lennox, who served for a decade in the Marines before ending active service in 2023. "But I object to the way my termination was carried out and the insincerity of it all. There was no feedback from anyone about negative job performance."

The White House has not provided a final tally on how many employees have lost their jobs so far in the federal workforce reduction. Most of the federal workers terminated last week were on probation, meaning they had less than a year or two in their roles.

"As someone who has served in the military for 11 years — and having sacrificed a lot with my family — I missed a lot. Having this job ripped out from me and my family is unacceptable," Milburn said.

At a Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee hearing Wednesday to consider the nomination of Paul Lawrence as VA deputy secretary, Blumenthal expressed frustration about a lack of transparency from VA leaders about job reductions at the agency.

This committee "learns of far-reaching decisions after the fact," Blumenthal said. "In the name of eliminating waste, Donald Trump and [tech billionaire] Elon Musk

are laying waste to [the Department of] Veterans Affairs."

He said about 30% of VA terminations are veterans.

"The younger probationary workers reflect the future of VA," Blumenthal said. "We are going to demand action and accountability."

Blumenthal and Duckworth said their offices are working with fired individuals to help them get their jobs back.

Probationary workers lack the full civil service protections personnel with more tenure have. They have limited rights for appeal. Probationary periods also apply to workers in new roles after promotions.

The formal notice of job termination received by Lennox stated the VA "finds based on your performance that you have not demonstrated that your further employment at the agency would be in the public interest. For this reason, the agency informs you that the agency is removing you from position with the agency and the federal civil service."

Lennox, whose wife also works for the federal government, said he worries about how they will afford their mortgage payments and cover their bills.

"We both left the private sector for public sector jobs," he said. "We're a household who tried to serve our country and are being punished for it."

Qualifying veterans who leave the military with honorable discharges are entitled to receive hiring preference for federal jobs.

But their active-duty military service generally does not count toward fulfilling the terms of a probationary period for federal employment, according to Just Security, an online legal forum fo-

cus on federal regulations and policy based at the New York University School of Law.

Probationary employees are entitled to written notice stating the reasons for separation and the effective date for removal from federal service.

"But a federal agency can terminate a probationary employee with comparatively little process," according to Just Security.

Michal Shinnar, an employment attorney in Maryland, has been fielding calls from probationary federal workers, including veterans recently terminated from their jobs.

Shinnar argued laws in place allow for what is called a reduction in force, a process that was not followed in the mass firings.

"Congress could, of course, pass laws to eliminate these positions, but Congress has not. Instead, these veterans, along with other federal employees, are being terminated in ways not allowed under the current laws, and terminating these employees will have severe effects on them, as well as on the services they provide to their agencies and the American people," Shinnar said.

Under an executive order signed by Trump, only one federal worker can be hired for every four who leave employment.

Milburn, a 34-year-old former chief petty officer, said she and her husband, who is disabled, spent most of their savings in moving costs and waiting for the completion of her hiring process for the job at the Education Department in late November.

"We moved in with relatives and were in the process of rebuilding our savings when I was terminated," Milburn said. "Federal onboarding for new personnel can take six months or longer. Mine took about three months."

"A lot of people like me have made service to their country a big part of their lives, whether it was through military service or working as civilians in federal government" she said. "We deserved some consideration in how that reduction took place."

Lennox said he feels proper channels were not followed in the probationary job terminations, but he also is not hopeful that challenging the firings will restore jobs.

"There are options to appeal, but there are hundreds, if not thousands, of appeals going on. We would have to take our place in line and do not have the resources for that," he said. "I would like to have faith in the system. But you cannot apply logic to a situation like this. If you do everything correctly, and there is nothing but positive evaluations, you assume your job is safe from performance issues. But that is not the case here."

NATION

Social Security head says dead not getting paid

By **FATIMA HUSSEIN**
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The new head of the Social Security Administration said Wednesday that deceased centenarians are “not necessarily receiving benefits,” contradicting claims that tens of millions of dead people over the age of 100 are getting payments from the agency.

Lee Dudek, the new acting SSA commissioner who was placed in the role by President Donald Trump, gave the clarification after Trump and billionaire adviser Elon Musk falsely claimed on social media and in press briefings that people who are 100, 200 and even 300 years old are improperly and routinely getting Social Security benefits.

While it is true that improper payments have been made, including some to dead people, the numbers thrown out by Trump and

Musk are overstated and misrepresent Social Security data.

On Tuesday, Trump said at a press briefing in Florida that “we have millions and millions of people over 100 years old” receiving Social Security benefits. “They’re obviously fraudulent or incompetent,” Trump said.

He repeated the false claims while speaking at a Miami conference of international investors and billionaires Wednesday, despite the SSA commissioner’s earlier statement.

Musk, whose Department of Government Efficiency is seeking to root out fraud, waste and abuse, issued a slew of posts on his social media platform X on Monday night, including: “Maybe Twilight is real and there are a lot of vampires collecting Social Security” and “Having tens of millions of people marked in Social Security as ‘ALIVE’ when they are definitely

dead is a HUGE problem. Obviously. Some of these people would have been alive before America existed as a country. Think about that for a second...”

So are tens of millions of people over 100 years old receiving benefits?

No.

Part of the confusion comes from Social Security’s software system based on the COBOL programming language, which has a lack of date type.

This means that some entries with missing or incomplete birthdates will default to a reference point of more than 150 years ago. The news organization WIRED first reported on the use of COBOL programming language at the Social Security Administration.

Additionally, a series of reports from the Social Security Administration’s inspector general in March 2023 and July 2024 state that

the agency has not established a new system to properly annotate death information in its database, which included roughly 18.9 million Social Security numbers of people born in 1920 or earlier but were not properly marked as deceased.

This does not mean, however, that these individuals were receiving benefits.

The agency decided not to update the database because of the cost to do so, which would run upward of \$9 million.

A July 2023 Social Security OIG report states that “almost none of the number holders discussed in the report currently receive SSA payments.”

And, as of September 2015, the agency automatically stops payments to people who are older than 115 years old.

Dudek, who was named acting chief of the Social Security Administration after the resignation of Mi-

chelle King, issued a news release Wednesday reiterating the agency’s commitment to transparency.

The last lines of the note acknowledged recent reporting about people older than 100 receiving benefits from the agency.

He seemed to confirm that confusion had arisen because of the default settings on the database.

“The reported data are people in our records with a Social Security number who do not have a date of death associated with their record. These individuals are not necessarily receiving benefits,” he said.

A July 2024 report from Social Security’s inspector general states that from fiscal years 2015 through 2022, the agency paid out almost \$8.6 trillion in benefits, including \$71.8 billion—or less than 1% of the total—in improper payments.

Most of the erroneous payments were overpayments to living people.

Unemployment applications increase, layoffs remain low

Associated Press

Slightly more Americans applied for jobless benefits last week, but layoffs remained in the same recent healthy range.

The number of Americans filing for jobless benefits rose by 5,000 to 219,000 for the week ending Feb. 15, the Labor Department said Thursday. Analysts projected that 215,000 new applications would be filed.

Weekly applications for jobless benefits are considered a proxy for layoffs.

The four-week average, which evens out some of the week-to-week volatility, fell by 1,000 to 215,250.

Some analysts say they expect layoffs ordered by the Department of Government Efficiency to show up in the report in the coming weeks.

Despite showing some signs of weakening during the past year, the labor market remains healthy with plentiful jobs and relatively few layoffs.

Earlier this month, the Labor Department reported that U.S. employers added 143,000 jobs in January, significantly fewer



NAM Y. HUH/AP

A hiring sign is displayed in November at a Home Depot store in Mount Prospect, Ill.

than December’s 256,000 job gains. However, the unemployment rate ticked down to an even 4%, signaling a still very healthy labor market.

Late in January, the Federal

Reserve left its benchmark lending rate alone after issuing three cuts late in 2024.

Fed officials are closely monitoring inflation and the labor market for signs of a potentially

weakening economy.

They expect only two rate cuts this year, down from previous projections of four.

Last week’s consumer prices report that showed that inflation

accelerated last month, creating some doubt about whether the Fed will be moved to cut rates at all this year.

The consumer price index increased 3% in January from a year ago, up from a 3 1/2 year low of 2.4% in September.

The new data shows that inflation has remained stubbornly above the Fed’s 2% target for roughly the past six months after it fell steadily for about a year and a half.

Overall, while layoffs remain low by historical standards, some high-profile companies have announced job cuts already this year.

Workday, Dow, CNN, Starbucks, Southwest Airlines and Facebook parent company Meta have all trimmed their workforces already in 2025.

Late in 2024, GM, Boeing, Cargill and Stellantis announced layoffs.

The total number of Americans receiving unemployment benefits for the week of Feb. 8 rose to 1.87 million, an increase of 24,000 from the previous week.

Trump backs idea to send some DOGE savings to Americans

Bloomberg News

President Donald Trump suggested that some savings from his federal cost-cutting effort, overseen by billionaire Elon Musk, could be sent back to U.S. taxpayers, with another portion being used to reduce the national deficit.

“There’s even under consideration a new concept where we give 20% of the DOGE savings to

American citizens, and 20% goes to paying down debt, because the numbers are incredible,” Trump said referring to his Department of Government Efficiency effort during an address Wednesday at an investment summit backed by Saudi Arabia’s sovereign wealth fund in Miami.

Trump’s idea has been floated previously by Musk, who was in

attendance for the address. Musk responded this week to a post on his social media platform X suggesting that Trump announce a “DOGE Dividend” with a \$5,000 tax refund check sent to taxpaying households, saying he would “check with the President.”

The remarks were the latest signal that Trump is working to justify his DOGE effort, which has sent

shockwaves through Washington as Musk’s moves to slash the federal government’s spending and workforce invite legal challenges and questions over the effort’s authority and powers.

Trump and Musk have repeatedly overstated the amount of realized taxpayer savings—casting doubt on whether ambitious goals to significantly slash spending

could be met.

While the White House has claimed some \$55 billion in savings so far, itemized documents posted by the group suggest the actual savings are only a fraction of that amount. Sending 20% of the roughly \$8.6 billion of DOGE savings the group has so far listed on its website would amount to about \$11 per taxpayer.

NATION

Another storm hits winter-weary East Coast

BY BEN FINLEY
AND JOHN RABY
Associated Press

NORFOLK, Va. — Officials urged people to stay off the roads Wednesday in portions of Virginia and North Carolina where a storm dropped heavy snow and caused hundreds of accidents in places unaccustomed to significant accumulations.

The storm that already dropped snow in the Midwest spread across the Tennessee and Ohio Valleys and into places that are just starting to clean up after a weekend of deadly floods.

Up to 10 inches of snow was possible through Thursday along the Atlantic Coast in Virginia and major ice accumulations were forecast in eastern North Carolina.

The National Weather Service said snowfall rates of up to 2 inches per hour were seen in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia and in northeastern North Carolina.

Meteorologist Alec Butner said additional accumulations were likely Thursday morning. While Butner said the snowfall in Norfolk won't approach the 1892 record of 18.6 inches, it's still "fairly infrequent" to reach snowfall totals of about 8 to 9 inches.

Virginia State Police reported 275 accidents by late Wednesday afternoon, including at least two dozen involving injuries. Accidents also closed portions of Interstate 95 and I-85 near Raleigh, N.C.

Nearly 5,600 flights were canceled or delayed across the U.S., in-



KENDALL WARNER, THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT/AP

Bridgett Greaves clears off her sidewalk Wednesday in the Colonial Place neighborhood of Norfolk, Va.

cluding more than 400 in and out of Charlotte Douglas International Airport in North Carolina, according to the flight-tracking site FlightAware.com.

Elsewhere, a polar vortex sent temperatures plunging from Montana to southern Texas.

As thick snowflakes pelted Norfolk, Va., a line of shoppers snaked deep into a Harris Teeter grocery store, past loaves of bread on shelves. In the parking lot of a Total

Wine store, college students in fraternity sweatshirts lugged a keg of beer to their car.

But on the sidewalks of the city's historic Ghent neighborhood, there was an eerie quiet. A white-haired shih tzu named Sasha tramped delicately in newly fallen snow Wednesday.

"This is a little weird for her. I love the snow, but it looks like this is a bit too much for us," said Sasha's owner, Lotfi Hamdi, who

stocked up on milk and bread. "If it's more than five inches, I think that's a bit risky for us. Luckily I'm off for the next couple of days."

Sasha isn't alone in feeling out of sorts. The winter months in this city of 230,000 people on the Chesapeake Bay sometimes pass with barely a dusting of snow. Schools and many businesses closed Wednesday throughout the Hampton Roads region and could remain shuttered into the week-

end. The Norfolk Naval Shipyard reduced operations.

Virginia remained under a state of emergency that Gov. Glenn Youngkin issued for another storm last week that allowed the National Guard and state agencies to assist local governments. North Carolina Gov. Josh Stein followed with an emergency declaration Tuesday. Both urged motorists to stay off the roads.

As snow, sleet and freezing rain arrived, Stein warned that "our greatest concerns remain power outages and road safety."

Potential ice accumulations of up to one-half inch in places like Greenville and Goldsboro would cause tree branches to snap, said North Carolina Emergency Management Director Will Ray.

Officials said more than 1,200 crew members were ready or already clearing roads.

Weekend storms that pummeled the eastern U.S. killed at least 19 people, including 14 in Kentucky.

"This is a snowstorm in the middle of a natural disaster," Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear said.

In southern West Virginia, weekend floods killed three people in McDowell County, destroying roads and disrupting public water systems. Shelters remained open at churches and schools.

The incoming snowstorm "is going to severely hinder, if not halt, a lot of the efforts that we have," said McDowell County Commissioner Michael Brooks.

National Guard troops rescued 296 people from flooding in 1 day

BY ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

National Guard troops in Kentucky rescued nearly 300 people from one county in one day as deadly floodwaters rose in the eastern portion of the state and trapped residents in their homes.

"This rescue mission added to the more than 1,000 Kentuckians who have been rescued by our Guard members and with the assistance of [Kentucky State Police] and other local, state and federal partners. We are so proud of all of you and so thankful these families are now safe," Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear said in a statement.

Additional troops from Indiana National Guard contributed to the 296 rescues in Martin County on Monday that airlifted people from two housing complexes that had become surrounded by floodwaters, the service said. Those rescued were taken just a few miles north to Big Sandy Regional Airport in Debord.

From there, a team from the Kentucky Air National Guard helped process evacuees and get them to a shelter in Inez.

Flooding across Kentucky began Friday and has claimed at least 14 lives, according to state officials. At least 220 state and federally managed roads remained closed Wednesday.

Now the state is facing snowfall and icy conditions that could persist through Friday.

"The areas hit hardest by flooding are going to get another 3 to 4 inches of snow tonight," Beshear said Wednesday. "And if the snow wasn't tough enough, it's cold right now, and it's going to get dangerously cold tonight into tomorrow. The wind chills across much of Kentucky are going to get down into the single digits or even lower."

More than 250 Kentucky Guard troops are working in the aftermath of the flooding and the winter weather, according to the governor's office. In response to

the floods, troops remain on call for search-and-rescue and high-axle transportation missions.

In areas with standing water in eastern Kentucky, engineers from the 149th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade are working closely with local officials to assess damage and help clear roads.

Other teams are removing debris, hauling supplies and conducting welfare checks.

Specifically in response to the snowfall and freezing temperatures, Guard troops are staging across Kentucky to assist road crews and emergency responders as needed.

Troops will remain on duty for as long as necessary, said Army Maj. Gen. Haldane Lamberton, Kentucky's adjutant general.

"It is very much a collaborative effort," he said. "It's not just any one entity or any one resource, but folks coming together to work together, whatever the need."

Trump administration orders halt to NYC congestion pricing

Associated Press

NEW YORK — President Donald Trump's administration on Wednesday ordered a halt to congestion pricing tolls in New York City, which thin traffic and fund mass transit by making people pay to drive into Manhattan's core.

Launched on Jan. 5, the city's system uses license plate readers to impose a \$9 toll on most vehicles entering Manhattan neighborhoods south of Central Park. In its early days, transit officials said the toll has brought modest but measurable traffic reductions.

The federal government has rescinded its approval of the program, U.S. Transportation Secretary Sean P. Duffy announced Wednesday, calling the toll's financial burden "a slap in the face to working class Americans and small business owners."

The Federal Highway Administration will work with the state on an "orderly termination of the tolls," according to the statement.

Within minutes of the announcement, the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, a state agency

that runs the New York City subway and other public transit, filed a federal lawsuit to keep congestion pricing alive.

Gov. Kathy Hochul, a Democrat, said the toll program would continue while the lawsuit plays out.

The president, whose namesake Trump Tower penthouse and other properties are within the congestion zone, vowed to kill the plan as soon as he took office. The Republican declared victory on his social networking site Truth Social after the Transportation Department announcement.

"CONGESTION PRICING IS DEAD. Manhattan, and all of New York, is SAVED." Trump wrote, adding, "LONG LIVE THE KING!" The White House later posted an image of Trump wearing a crown in front of the New York skyline.

Hochul was quick to fire back. "New York hasn't labored under a king in over 250 years," she said at a news conference at Grand Central Terminal, one of the city's train hubs. "We sure as hell are not going to start now."

WAR IN UKRAINE

Canceled press event grows US-Ukraine rift

By **JUSTIN SPIKE**
Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — A planned news conference after talks between Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and U.S. President Donald Trump's Ukraine envoy was canceled Thursday as political tensions deepened between the two countries over how to end the almost three-year war with Russia.

The format of the press event, which was to include comments to the media by Zelenskyy and retired U.S. Lt. Gen. Keith Kellogg, was changed at the last minute so that the two did not deliver statements or field questions from journalists. The change was requested by the U.S. side, Ukrainian presidential spokesman Serhii Nikiforov said.

Kellogg's trip to Kyiv coincided with recent feuding between Trump and Zelenskyy that has bruised their personal relations and cast further doubt on the future of U.S. support

for Ukraine's war effort. Nikiforov gave no other reason other than that the cancellation was in accordance with U.S. wishes.

The U.S. delegation made no immediate comment. The White House did not immediately respond to questions about why the news conference was called off.

When the meeting began, photographers and video journalists were allowed into a room where the two men shook hands before sitting across from each other at a table at the presidential office in Kyiv.

The two men were due to speak about Trump's efforts to end the war. Zelenskyy had previously said he looked forward to explaining what was happening in Ukraine and showing it to Kellogg.

Kellogg, one of the architects of a policy book laying out an "America First" national security agenda, has long been Trump's top adviser on defense issues.

Zelenskyy and Trump have traded rebukes in recent days.

The spat erupted after Russia and the U.S. agreed Tuesday to start working toward ending the war in Ukraine and improving their diplomatic and economic ties. With that, Trump abruptly reversed the three-year U.S. policy of isolating Russia.

Zelenskyy was unhappy that a U.S. team opened the talks without inviting him or European governments that have backed Kyiv.

When Trump claimed Zelenskyy was deeply unpopular in Ukraine, the president said Trump was living in a Russian-made "disinformation space," suggesting he had been duped by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

But Zelenskyy "retains a fairly high level of public trust" — about 57% — according to a report released Wednesday by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology.

Trump accused Zelenskyy of being "A Dictator without Elections!!" Due to the war, Ukraine did delay elections that were scheduled for April 2024.

Trump also suggested that Ukraine was to blame for the war.

Russia's army crossed the border on Feb. 24, 2022, in an all-out invasion that Putin sought to justify by falsely saying it was needed to protect Russian-speaking civilians in eastern Ukraine and prevent the country from joining NATO.

On Wednesday, Trump warned

Zelenskyy that he "better move fast" to negotiate an end to Russia's invasion of Ukraine or risk not having a nation to lead.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz whose country has been Kyiv's second-biggest weapons supplier after the U.S., said it was "wrong and dangerous" to deny Zelenskyy's democratic legitimacy.

Russian officials, meanwhile, are basking in Washington's attention and offering words of support for Trump's stance.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said "the rhetoric of Zelenskyy and many representatives of the Kyiv regime in general leaves much to be desired" — a veiled reference to Ukrainian criticism of Putin.

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WORLD

Hamas returns bodies of 4 kidnapped Israeli hostages

Associated Press

KHAN YOUNIS, Gaza Strip — Hamas on Thursday released the bodies of four Israeli hostages, said to include a mother and her two children who have long been feared dead and had come to embody the nation's agony following the Oct. 7, 2023, attack.

The remains were presumed to be of Shiri Bibas and her two children, Ariel and Kfir, as well as Od-ed Lifshitz, who was 83 when he was abducted. Kfir, who was 9 months old when he was taken, was the youngest captive.

Hamas has said all four were killed along with their guards in Israeli airstrikes.

The militants displayed four black coffins on a stage in the Gaza Strip surrounded by banners, including a large one depicting Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as a vampire.

Thousands of people, including large numbers of masked and armed militants, looked on as the coffins were loaded onto Red Cross vehicles before being driven to Israeli forces.



Palestinian fighters stand next to a coffin to hand it over to the Red Cross in Khan Younis, southern Gaza Strip, Thursday.

JEHAD ALSHRAFI/AP

The military held a small funeral ceremony, at the request of the families, before transferring the bodies to a laboratory in Israel for formal identification using DNA, a process that could take up to two days.

Lifshitz' family later said his remains had been officially identified.

Israelis have celebrated the return of 24 living hostages in recent

weeks under a tenuous ceasefire that paused over 15 months of war. But the handover on Thursday was a grim reminder of those who died in captivity as the talks leading up to the truce dragged on for over a year.

It could also provide impetus for negotiations on the second stage of the ceasefire that have hardly begun. The first phase is set to end at the beginning of March.

Yoon appears in 2 S. Korean courts

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — Traveling around Seoul in a prison transport vehicle, South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol appeared in two different courts on Thursday, contesting his arrest on rebellion charges in one and fighting an effort to remove him from office in the other.

Both cases — one on criminal charges, one an impeachment — are related to his brief imposition of martial law in December.

Security was heightened at the Seoul Central District Court as the motorcade transporting Yoon arrived for a preliminary hearing that involved discussions of witnesses, proposed evidence and other preparations for his criminal trial.

Yoon next traveled across the capital to the Constitutional Court, which is nearing a decision on whether to formally remove him from office after he was impeached by the National Assembly. During the hearing on Thursday, the court said it will hold final arguments on the case on Tuesday, which possibly sets up a decision sometime in March.

Yoon was indicted Jan. 26 on re-

bellion charges, which carry a potential punishment of death or life in prison. In South Korea, presidents have immunity from most criminal prosecutions, but not on charges of rebellion or treason.

The indictment alleges his imposition of martial law was an illegal attempt to shut down the National Assembly and arrest politicians and election authorities. The conservative Yoon has said his martial law declaration was intended as a temporary warning to the liberal opposition.

Yoon's presidential powers were suspended when he was impeached Dec. 14, leaving him to fight for his political life at the Constitutional Court.

Martial law was lifted about six hours after Yoon declared it but has caused political turmoil, disrupted high-level diplomacy and tested the resiliency of the country's democracy. Yoon's conservative supporters rioted at the Seoul Western District Court after it authorized his arrest last month, while his lawyers and ruling party have openly questioned the credibility of courts and law enforcement institutions handling the case.

Teenager detained after knife attack in Czech Republic

Associated Press

PRAGUE — Two women have died in a knife attack on Thursday at a shopping center in the Czech Republic, officials said.

Police say they detained a teen-

age suspect in connection with the stabbings in a store in the city of Hradec Kralove, some 100 east of Prague.

Reports initially said the victims had been injured, one of them

seriously, but police later said both had died. They were not identified.

A 16-year-old Czech national was detained by police about one kilometer from the scene, shortly

after the attack. A knife was found nearby.

Prime Minister Petr Fiala offered his condolences to the relatives of the dead.

The motive for the attack was

not immediately known.

Police say the situation was under control and there was no danger to the public.

No other details were immediately available.

STARS AND STRIPES

SERVICE DIRECTORY

The Daily Guide to Navigating The Military Business Market




Transportation

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WEEKEND



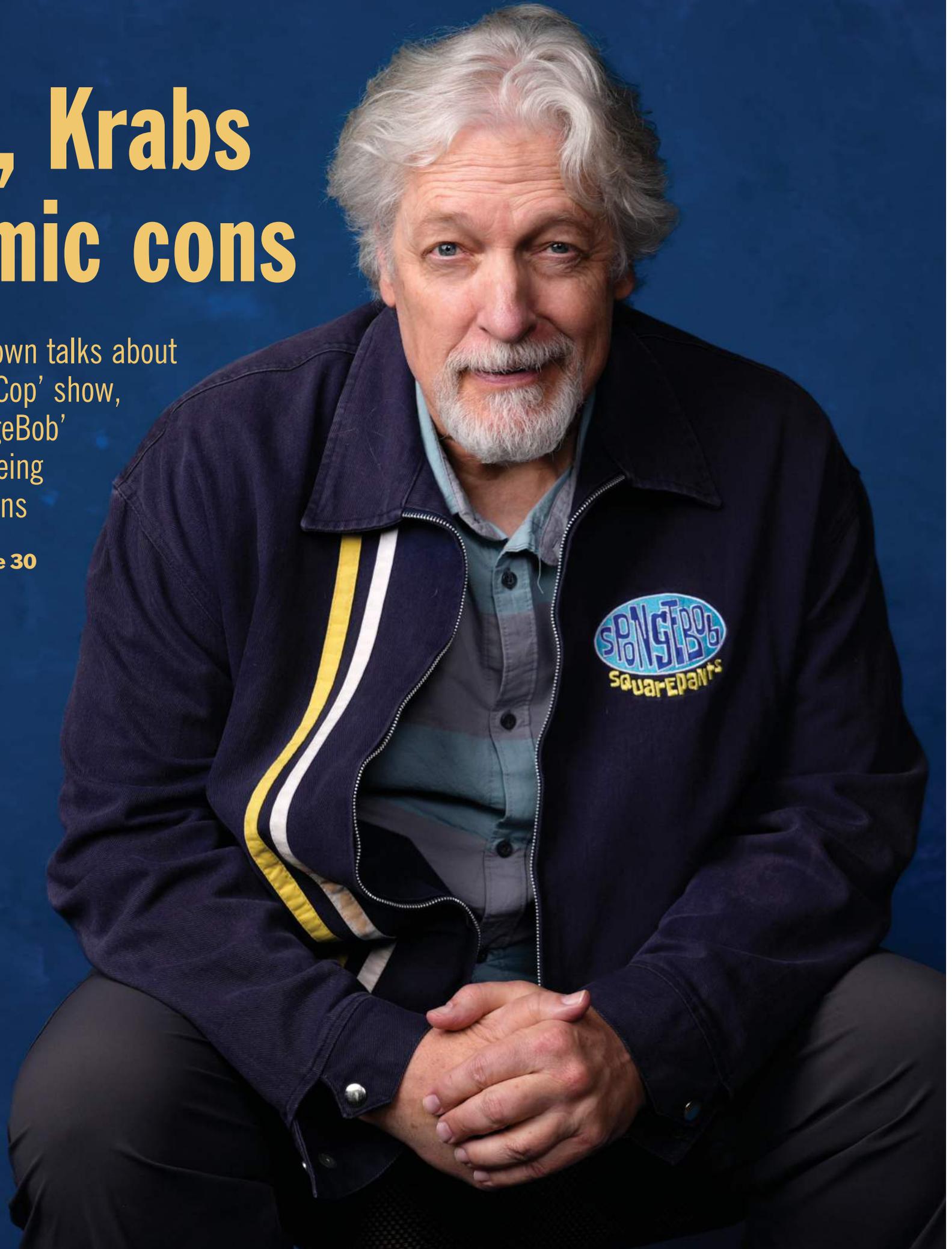
Combat a highlight of RPG *Avowed*

Video games, Page 15

Chief, Krabs & comic cons

Actor Clancy Brown talks about 'Good Cop/Bad Cop' show, voicing a 'SpongeBob' character and being recognized by fans

Television Q&A, Page 30



Clancy Brown appears at Comic-Con International on July 26 in San Diego.

AP

WEEKEND: GADGETS & TECHNOLOGY

High-end, high cost

Why are people grumbling about the price of a dozen eggs, but springing for the fanciest phones? Here are 5 theories

By SHIRA OVIDE
The Washington Post

In the United States especially, but also around the world, people are increasingly choosing higher-end smartphones over more modestly priced versions.

More than half of new smartphones sold in the United States have a sticker price of at least \$800, according to technology analysis firm Counterpoint Research. And devices that cost more than \$1,000 are hot sellers.

If you won't pay that much, you have fewer alternatives. Apple released its newest phone, the iPhone 16e, Wednesday with a starting price of \$599, much higher than the \$429 iPhone SE, formerly the cheapest model. Meanwhile, China's Huawei just unveiled a \$3,660 smartphone.

We mostly can't blame inflation or greedy companies for the rise of the fancy phones. We are gravitating to the highest-end phones.

I'll run through five theories for why smartphones are turning into an all-luxury market, and what it might mean for you. The bottom line: The more modestly priced smartphone is an endangered species, but it would be better for all of us if it thrived.

Theory 1: A \$1,000 phone doesn't really cost \$1,000

For several years, America's mobile carriers have been dangling promotions on new smartphones and offering no-interest loans to pay them off on your bill over a few years. That makes it easier to buy a fancy smartphone that you couldn't stomach if you had to pay the full price up front.

If you're trading up to a new \$1,300 Samsung Galaxy S25 Ultra, your carrier might give you a whopping discount for trading in your old phone and charge something like \$35 a month for the new model over three years or more. That cost doesn't feel so terrible.

These carrier smartphone offers aren't always the best deal, but the true cost of a high-end phone "is buried right now really efficiently," said Cliff Maldonado at mobile analytics firm BayStreet Research.

Theory 2: We're keeping phones longer

Americans are holding onto their

phones for about four years on average, roughly nine months longer than we were a few years ago, according to research firm IDC.

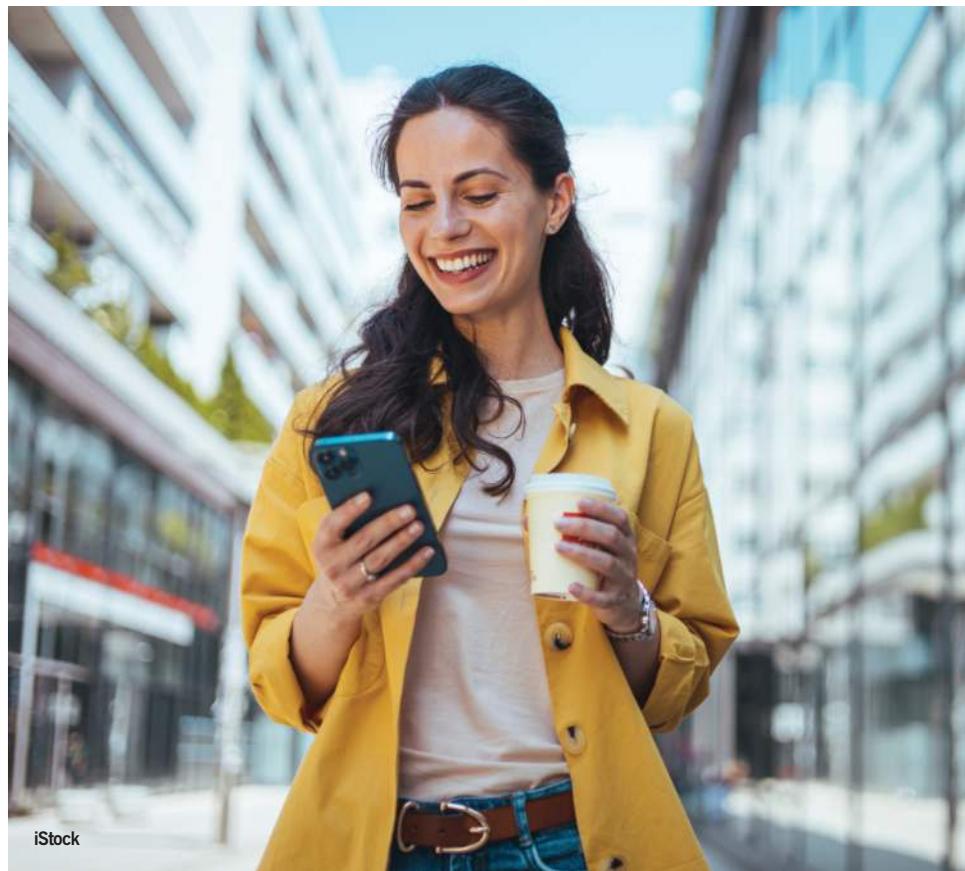
Since we're buying new phones less often, it can feel sensible to buy the best phone you can and hold onto it through the technology changes that will pop up over the next few years.

Gerrit Schneemann, senior analyst with Counterpoint Research, described the mindset as: "My phone is good enough for longer."

The irony is that a middle-of-the-road smartphone might be the long-lived phone you're looking for. The camera quality, battery life and computer processing power of midtier phones are pretty great these days, Schneemann said.

Theory 3: Apple did this

More Americans are buying iPhones over Android phones, and most of Apple's newest models cost at least \$800. Apple's growing popularity is part of the reason for the buying shift to higher-end phones, but it's not a sufficient explanation.



iStock

People are gravitating to fancier phones from other brands, too, Schneemann said. Even in less-affluent countries such as India, where iPhones sell poorly, people are inclined to get a more expensive phone than the one they had before.

Theory 4: There's a lack of competition

It's hard to know how much of the trend toward the priciest phones is what we want, and how much is what companies condition us to buy — and there's not much competition to shake up that trend.

Unlike in many other countries, Samsung and Apple have a near-lock on the market in the United States. They're happy if you buy their top-end smartphones, which generate the biggest profits for them.

Apple, Samsung and America's large mobile carriers focus their attention and marketing on those premium devices. Less-expensive phones are often relegated to dusty store shelves, and carriers have dumped some budget smartphones entirely.

Theory 5: It's a chicken-and-egg problem

Because we're buying fewer modestly priced phones, companies don't invest in making them or marketing them. That makes us even less likely to buy anything but the high-end phones.

There's no sign of change coming to this self-fulfilling cycle. If anything, companies keep pushing the envelope of the highest-end phones. Smartphone market analysts expect Apple to introduce higher-priced phones soon, including the first folding iPhone potentially next year.

The bottom line

Those five factors probably all play a role in the rise of the fancy phone. And while we want companies to keep inventing the hottest new things with all the bells and whistles, variety is the spice of life (and smartphones).

There's helpful innovation when more companies have incentives to create good and affordable phones that maybe skip the extras you don't really need.

Beatbot AquaSense 2 Ultra uses AI to clean pools

By GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service

You would think that buying a pool vacuum is simple, but as a pool owner, I can say that it's confusing to know what will work for your pool.

Beatbot, a technology company dedicated to the global robotization of the swimming pool environment, has launched several robotic swimming pool cleaners. The company claims its AquaSense 2 Ultra is the world's first artificial intelligence-powered 5-in-1 robotic pool cleaner (floor, surface, walls, waterline and water clarification), which uses AI-driven technologies to deliver a precise and intelligent cleaning experience.

The Beatbot AquaSense 2 Ultra has cutting-edge HybridSense AI Pool Mapping, which uses an AI camera, ultrasonic and infrared sensors.

With advanced AI vision, it effortlessly scans, maps and plans efficient cleaning paths. This technology is especially helpful for pools with unique shapes, curves and slopes — including round, rectangular, kidney and custom-shaped designs. It is listed to work on concrete, ceramic



BEATBOT/TNS

The Beatbot AquaSense 2 Ultra has 11 motors, two side brushes and four bottom brushes.

tiles, vinyl and fiberglass surfaces.

Inside are 11 motors. The cleaning hardware includes two side brushes and four bottom brushes. The vacuum has suction power of 5,500 gallons per hour and a 3.7-liter

(0.97-gallon) filter basket capacity to store what it picks up. A rechargeable 13,400 mAh lithium ion battery will run for up to 10 hours for surface cleaning or five hours for floor cleaning. The vacuum will fully charge in about 4½ hours in the dock charging station.

The vacuum's IP68 waterproof rating keeps it going, and the charging dock's IPX4 rating allows it to withstand water splashes from any direction.

Users have complete control over the vacuum with the Beatbot companion app and the robotic vacuum's dual wireless connectivity (5G/2.4G Wi-Fi and Bluetooth). The app displays the map the vacuum follows along with a remote control.

In addition, pool water circulates through the AquaSense 2 Ultra during cleaning and clarifies it. When the cleaning is finished, the AquaSense 2 Ultra parks itself on the water surface. The 1.49-foot-long by 1.44-foot-wide and 0.91-foot-high vacuum weighs 29.1 pounds. The Beatbot AquaSense 2 Ultra is available for preorder for \$3,450.

Online: beatbot.com/products/aquasense-2-ultra

WEEKEND: VIDEO GAMES

Avowed is great in fighting but not writing

Unusual for an Obsidian RPG, players' choices don't make much of an impact on the story or world

BY GENE PARK

The Washington Post

For the first several hours of *Avowed*, I was properly transported to its world of artificial gods and colonial strife. Obsidian Entertainment, one of gaming's most celebrated narrative houses, was meeting high expectations.

Then I noticed something I've never felt before during a game made by Obsidian, the studio that made *Fallout: New Vegas* and the *Pillars of Eternity* franchise, all writerly role-playing games focused on character-driven narratives that react to player choices. I stopped caring about the characters. My story choices didn't matter much, either to the narrative or, more fatally, to myself.

Instead of a reactive narrative, I was loving the reactive physics, seeing enemies thrash every time I cleaved through monster mobs in hefty-feeling first-person combat that reminded me of the 2011 cult zombie hit *Dead Island*. I couldn't wait to learn more spells with bigger, more devastating area-of-effect damage, and upgrade my guns.

Avowed casts you as the imperial envoy sent to the Living Lands, an isolated and ungoverned island nation in Eora, the world of the *Pillars of Eternity* series. Something called the Dreamscourge is causing people to lose their minds in dangerous, zombielike ways, and you've been sent to investigate.

You're also a "godlike," people with fungi growing on their heads to symbolize their connection with one of Eora's 11 gods. Confused yet? This is where this game's writing issues begin.

The game is eager to enchant us with its lore, which works if you're like me, unfamiliar with the *Pillars* games. I wanted to learn more about the unique take on the nature of gods and the afterlife. The first two of four maps in this game do well to introduce it all. But the more I learned — I admit I did some extra reading online — I found the narrative overexplaining things.

The plot's overarching hook isn't compelling. Fantasy tropes are fine, and great stories have been told from this game's premise of answering the call of a mysterious voice in your head. But the quest for knowledge doesn't have a strong pull besides learning more lore.

It should fall to the characters to provide proper motivation. But some of the cast don't feel fully vested in the adventure's stakes. The shark-toothed Kai is the best and most developed as the first person you meet, and his voice, by veteran RPG actor Brandon Keener, brings familiar warmth. Giatta has a compelling backstory that sadly fails to explore anything interesting about a character who mostly functions as exposition, while dwarf Marius' grumpy and constant contempt for so many things is wearying.

In fact, the party feels mostly like a tagalong group of commentators. *Avowed* tries to alleviate this by introducing the welcome "party camp" feature. Beyond providing rest and chances to upgrade equipment, party camps dim the game to a midnight vibe so the party can chat with you or among themselves independently. Freed from the constraints of RPG game design, Obsidian's writing can finally shine with engaging interpersonal dynamics and banter.

So much of the game is about words and conversation. Obsidian is also best known for creating conversation trees that feel realistic, natural and don't adhere to the binary "good or bad" morality scales that plagued games in the early aughts. *Avowed* at least continues this tradition, skipping the trap of utilitarian dialogue with many player responses that flesh out relationships or brighten conversation.

In one situation, I opted to say that my player and an antagonist used to date, and that story thread continued



Xbox photos

Avowed is the latest role-playing adventure from Obsidian Entertainment. In the game, the people are "godlike," with fungi growing on their heads to symbolize their connection with one of the world's 11 gods. The Dreamscourge is causing people to lose their minds in dangerous, zombielike ways, and players get sent to investigate.



Combat is a highlight, with dynamic physics and a system that allows the mixing of swords, guns and magic.

throughout the 30-hour adventure. Later, a character accurately noted my reckless choices meant I was lackadaisical, unbothered to "expect winter before spring." Obsidian doesn't offer play options found in bigger games like *Baldur's Gate 3*, but I relish its steady commitment to the written word and nice turns of phrase.

It's why the latter half of the game was disappointing. Obsidian RPGs are known for letting players make monumental choices that affect the world or story, and I was surprised to find many important choices weren't satisfying. Without going into detail, there are many nonbinary choices, but they all made me feel bad. I made them without confidence, and many mattered little to the world anyway.

Sometimes it gets messy. After making an endgame decision that dramatically changed my friend's living situation, they gave me a stern lecture. Just four lines deeper into the dialogue tree, my transgressive act seemed to be forgotten, with this character now praising me (and almost flirting).

Still, I enjoyed my adventure because the four maps are proper playing fields filled with rewarding exploration. Platforming puzzles can lead to great loot, and I was always on the hunt for the next big sword or gun. The combat system allows for robust customization, allowing you to mix and match any skills under classes for warriors, rangers or magicians. I was tickled to walk around as a menace armed with a gun and a book. *Avowed* is now among the best games out there for spell casters, allowing eight unique spells to be prepped to go for devastating, dazzling damage.

The combat mechanics are a small but welcome evolution of the clumsy, limp fantasy battles of the much larger *Elder Scrolls* series. Dashing around enemies makes battles feel more like those of *Doom* than *D&D*. With so



The world design is another strength, with many hidden treasures, puzzles and dense environmental storytelling.

many abilities, I can excuse the limited control of party members during fights, and they're equipped with more than enough abilities anyway. Parries and timed dodges slow frames down, making battles feel weighty and victories well earned, especially with its simple-to-understand crafting and loot system. Too bad the user inventory is clumsy to navigate.

Even when the writing didn't meet its old standard, *Avowed* is a much richer narrative than the studio's previous flat effort, the sci-fi capitalist critique of 2019's *The Outer Worlds*. If the characters' arcs don't impress, they're mostly a likable bunch and I even began to warm to their unintentional role as a traveling choir of expositing observers, thanks to how much I learn about each of them during the party camps, this game's best feature.

Famed game designer and founding Obsidian CEO Feargus Urquhart tells me in an interview that *Avowed* is part of the studio's journey to create the perfect RPG, an aspiration he acknowledges is impossible but worthy and fun to chase. It's about Obsidian doing its best to translate the genre's imaginative pen-and-paper roots into our computers and consoles.

"The pathway of RPG games has always been how to get that dungeon master out of people's heads and into the games," Urquhart said. "That is the thing that has kept RPGs moving forward. It's never perfect. 'I wish the companions could do this,' or 'we could do more with motive and conversations here.' We have these core tenets that's always driving us, and it's never good enough! We just have to make another game."

Avowed is certainly good enough, and I hope to see Obsidian forever evolve toward that perfect adventure of our dreams.

Platforms: PC, Xbox series X/S

Online: avowed.obsidian.net

WEEKEND: MOVIES

The Red Hulk

Marvel Studios



In need of a box-office smash

Why Marvel brought in Red Hulk for 'Captain America: Brave New World'

By **HERB SCRIBNER**
The Washington Post

The film "Captain America: Brave New World" has one main job: introduce us to the new Cap. That means plenty of time with Anthony Mackie's Sam Wilson, who picked up the shield from Steve Rogers more than five years ago in "Avengers: Endgame."

But "Brave New World," which premiered last weekend, isn't just a movie about Wilson's first go-around as Cap. It also brings back Thaddeus "Thunderbolt" Ross, the military general turned president who was the Marvel Cinematic Universe's original antagonist for Bruce Banner almost two decades ago. Only this time, he gets angry — really angry — and turns into the Red Hulk. Ross, who was portrayed by William Hurt until the actor's death in 2022, is now played by Harrison Ford.

Marvel Studios had a complicated relationship with the Hulk character and his wider universe of characters. The last time Hulk had a solo film was 2008's "The Incredible Hulk," which starred Edward Norton and underwhelmed critics. Since then, the character often appears as a side character in other projects, mostly notably in 2017's "Thor: Ragnarok" and all the "Avengers" films.

While Hulk (now played by Mark Ruffalo) often plays a secondary and comical role, his red counterpart makes a more intimidating debut in "Brave New

World." Director Julius Onah says the character was picked as a villain for a simple reason: Wilson, who has just taken up the shield and must lead the Avengers in a post-Steve Rogers world, needed a major villain to prove to himself and the country that he's an A-list superhero.

Making a Hulk movie is anything but easy. Onah says there needs to be an emotional center that makes the popular character worth bringing to the screen. He can't just smash things.

"Where you want to start with a character like Hulk is thinking about the emotional through-line of what gets you to the Hulk," Onah says. "And in this case, it starts with Thaddeus Ross and really thinking about where he is as a character and what does it mean to be a Hulk for him by the end of the story."

A Marvel Comics character dating back to the "silver age" of the 1960s, General Ross appeared in 2008's "Incredible Hulk" as an aggressive military commander who sought to kill Bruce Banner/Hulk. But Ross changed his tune as his daughter, Betty Ross (Liv Tyler), fell in love with Bruce. From there, Thaddeus Ross became an antagonist of the Avengers, pursuing them as superpowered vigilantes. In 2016's "Captain America: Civil War,"

In "Brave New World," Ross, now president of the United States, looks to rebuild his relationship with his daughter and the Avengers following Thanos' snap — that is, the dramatic

events of 2018's "Avengers: Infinity War" in which a cosmic villain erased half the universe. (Don't worry; the heroes fixed it.) In one of the new movie's early scenes, Ross walks up to the gravestone of his late wife and recites some Walt Whitman, with D.C.'s famous cherry blossoms behind him: "Always keep your face to the sunshine and the shadows will fall behind you."

That moment, according to Onah, was key to Red Hulk's emotional arc.

"What Hulk represents is backsliding to being 'Thunderbolt,' being this temperamental, angry man who he's trying to run away from," Onah says. "It was so important to make sure that the emotional line was clear from Thaddeus to Hulk."

From a technical standpoint, directing a Hulk film is complicated. Early on in production, the visual development team illustrated what Ford would look like as Hulk — including "the scar on his chin, the shape of his nose, the particulars of his face," according to Onah.

Filming scenes require some trickery, Onah says. Sometimes they'd film Ford and Mackie arguing with virtual cameras around them. Other times, Ford wore a motion-capture suit and acted, well, Hulkish.

"He is raging and jumping and hitting and going through all the motions of what a Hulk would do," Onah says.

Red Hulk has been all over the promotional materials for this movie. But Onah underscored



Disney

Anthony Mackie and Harrison Ford promote "Captain America: Brave New World" on Jan. 30 at Trafalgar Square in London.

that "Brave New World," like the three other "Captain America" movies, is grounded in the titular hero — while touching on the wider MCU lore.

"These movies sort of serve as a State of the Union of the universe to a certain degree and an opportunity to reset," he says. "And this is very much so what we're doing here, resetting and

setting the stage for what's to come."

"Brave New World," which has made more than \$101 million domestically, seems to be a first step as Marvel looks to regain faith from fans and critics after some recent stinkers and box-office letdowns. At the very least, Red Hulk is the villain you call when you need, well, a smash.

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS



LIONSGATE/TNS

Gavin Warren and Jacob Laval play brothers Logan and Austin in “The Unbreakable Boy.” Austin has both autism and genetic brittle bone disease, issues his father Scott (Zachary Levi) struggles to manage.

An unremarkable reversal

Based on a memoir, ‘The Unbreakable Boy’ an uplifting yet mundane faith-based drama about a father learning to love and accept his son

BY KATIE WALSH
Tribune News Service

First, the good news about “The Unbreakable Boy,” a family drama based on the memoir by Scott LeRette: star Zachary Levi is acting his age. After a few high-profile childlike roles in the past few years in the “Shazam” movies, and “Harold and the Purple Crayon,” it’s a relief to see him as an adult. The film is also a belated confirmation of co-star Meghann Fahy’s absolutely bulletproof star power. That had been confirmed with her turns in “The White Lotus,” “The Perfect Couple” and “The Bold Type” (if you were paying attention), but “The Unbreakable Boy” is a bit of a curious case, a relic from a period just before her breakout.

Shot in the winter of 2020, the film was originally slated for release in March 2022. Why it’s been aging on a shelf at Lionsgate for three years is a mystery, but the faith-based film finally hits theaters with the story of the LeRette family and their specific, if not unique, challenges about raising a child, Austin (Jacob Laval), born with both autism and a genetic brittle bone disease.

“The Unbreakable Boy” is adapted and directed by Jon Gunn, who has tackled other faith-based films based on true stories, having directed “Ordinary Angels” and “The Case for Christ,” and producing “Jesus Revolution” and “I Still Believe.”

His stock-in-trade is lightly inspirational and life-affirming tales about people overcoming distinct but relatable challenges, often through the help of their own faith or religious community. The stories are never all that extraordinary or shocking, but more quotidian, community-based and family-oriented, and “The Unbreakable Boy” is just that.

The film starts in medias res, with Scott (Levi) getting drunk at a New Year’s Eve bash at the country club and then driving home with his two boys, Logan (Gavin Warren) and Austin, in the car. The numerous narrative devices that the film employs — this rock-bottom framing (which cuts to a flashback “13 years, 9 months, 3 weeks earlier”), Austin’s voice-over narration and Scott’s imaginary friend, Joe (Drew Powell) — are entirely too cute by half. They’re used to try and make this rather straightforward and, sorry to say, unremarkable story seem like it’s more interesting than it actually is.

In “The Unbreakable Boy,” Scott is a distracted, easily overwhelmed dad, often resulting in Austin breaking a bone (there’s a running tally of injuries), and much of the film is concerned with him struggling to manage his son’s medical issues and free spirit, using alcohol to cope. Eventually, with the help of his church, Alcoholics Anonymous and his wife Teresa (Fahy), he

learns to shift his mindset in order to not just accept Austin but live his life more like his son: fully present and unencumbered by social expectations. It’s a nice sentiment, if not necessarily revelatory.

Gunn directs the film in the aesthetic of a nighttime family TV drama. It’s serviceable, if invisible, and he adds a few stylistic quirks, like the broken bone tally in a childish font, or a few animated sequences in order to represent how Austin “sees” the world. Levi and Fahy don’t have much chemistry, though the story of their rapid courtship doesn’t allow much time for their love story. Their big admission: They “might” love each other.

Levi plays Scott as somewhat smarmy and disingenuous — it’s hard to feel for this guy when he seems absolutely clueless about his own kids. Fahy carries the film in her supporting role, which seems weirdly apt for this story: the supportive, capable wife sidelined in favor of show-casing the inept husband getting himself together and presenting it as meaningful or poignant.

This might be significant to the LeRette family, but the real struggle here is trying to connect with this film beyond a wan appreciation that a father finally learned how to love his son for who he is. Good for them, I guess?

“The Unbreakable Boy” is rated PG for strong thematic material, alcohol abuse, language and some violence. Running time: 109 minutes. Now playing in select on-base movie theaters.

‘The Monkey’ a sick, twisted, gory good time

BY ADAM GRAHAM
The Detroit News

Everybody dies.

That’s the message a mother relays to her twin boys in “The Monkey,” director Osgood “Oz” Perkins’ delightfully wicked and darkly comic horror thriller, which takes great joy in mocking the ritual of death. Perkins turns it into sport, a “Final Destination”-style symphony of fate’s cruelty, and he’s crafted a sicko comedy that has more fun the further it pushes the proverbial envelopes on gory gags and of good taste.

That wise mother is Lois Shelburn (“Orphan Black’s” Tatiana Maslany), who is trying to protect her sons Hal (the sweet, shy one) and Bill (the bully) from tragedy. (Both brothers are played as children by Christian Convery.)

Their father disappeared, and a curse seems to hang over their family. That curse is possibly brought on by a mysterious toy monkey, which sports a frightening perma-grin on its mug and plays a windup drum that sits in its lap. When its stick comes down and taps that drum, you’re best to not be around.

The boys learn early on that this monkey is bad news, an unforgiving instrument of murder, which is why they go to great lengths to rid it from their lives.

Yet years later, as grown adults — Theo James of “The White Lotus” and the “Divergent” movies plays the grown version of Hal and Bill — they’re still under the monkey’s spell. But in differing ways: Hal has isolated himself and is afraid to get close to anyone, out of fear the monkey’s curse will in turn bring harm on them, while Bill has driven himself mad, and is attempting to harness the monkey’s power to exact revenge on his brother. (There’s no real rhyme or reason to the monkey’s ways, other than he who turns

the key seems to be safe from its wrath.)

But as Bill soon learns, the monkey doesn’t take requests. “The Monkey” is adapted from Stephen King’s 1980 short story that was included in his 1985 collection, “Skeleton Crew.” It’s about the randomness of life (and death) and the mechanics of revenge, and Osgood — so good at creating and maintaining a mood of sustained, suffocating dread in movies like “The Blackcoat’s Daughter” and last year’s surprise hit “Longlegs” — lets loose here with a tone of playful malevolence, where on-screen deaths arrive in increasingly ridiculous displays of comic absurdity.

So while gore-soaked death scenes aren’t in and of themselves funny, Osgood presents them as such, and the world he creates for his characters and the audience allows a real estate sign impaling a human head to become an expertly timed punch line to an elaborate joke. “The Monkey” is an outrageously funny vessel for shock humor, and if you’re surprised or even disgusted by what you’re laughing at, the laughter is the point (maybe the whole point, but the point nonetheless).

Osgood gets game performances from a dialed-in cast. James shows himself to be a more loose and adventurous actor than he was allowed to be in previous roles, Maslany is spiky and acid-dipped, and Adam Scott, who cameos, sets the right tone for what follows in a gleefully deranged opening sequence.

It all makes for a sidesplitting mixture of humor and horror, an outrageous comedy caked in blood. Everybody dies in “The Monkey,” but at least they die laughing.

“The Monkey” is rated R for strong bloody violent content, gore, language throughout and some sexual references. Running time: 98 minutes. Now playing in select on-base movie theaters.



NEON/TNS

The titular monkey in “The Monkey” is bad news, an unforgiving instrument of murder, possibly due to the influence of a curse.

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS

A restart for Bridget

Jones back, dating a younger man in 'Mad About the Boy'

By JOCELYN NOVECK
Associated Press

It is a truth universally acknowledged, as Bridget Jones herself might write in her diary, that at the end of any Bridget Jones movie, our heroine has triumphed over all doubts and obstacles and is finally happy.

With a man. Well, so far, with one particular man: Mark Darcy, the stuffy-yet-dashing man of her dreams.

This, dear viewer, is not a spoiler for the new fourth movie, "Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy." In fact, if you've seen the trailer, you'll know that Bridget (Renée Zellweger, still pretty delightful), who finally married Mark at the end of the third film, is now a widow.

What makes "Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy" especially enjoyable, then — and the best since the 2001 original — is not that Bridget finds a way yet again to triumph over doubts and obstacles. It's that she still makes us care so darned much.

How does she do it after all these years? All I know is, I was rooting harder for her at the end of this film than I was with the others, even the original where she's kissing Mark in the snowy street in underwear and sneakers.

There are various possible explanations. One is Zellweger herself, who has brought her character gracefully into her 50s, retaining Bridget's goofiness and deep-set optimism while reflecting hard-won life experience.

And there are subtle changes to the equation. The relationships in this latest film are more interesting.

Bridget's relationship with herself is

more interesting, too — and healthier. Sure, she can swig a full bottle of chardonnay on a bad night. But the smoking is gone, and so, thank heavens, is the ridiculous weight obsession — a phenomenon that hit its nadir in the icky final line of the second film, with Bridget saying yes, you can find happiness, even if you "have a bottom the size of two bowling balls."

Nothing like that in this latest installment, directed by Michael Morris based on Helen Fielding's novel (Fielding also co-wrote the script), which begins four years into Bridget's widowhood. She's living in a lovingly cluttered home in Hampstead with her kids, Billy and Mabel.

Bridget is getting dressed for a rare night at a dinner party, awaiting the sitter: Daniel Cleaver himself, back for the fourth film. Hugh Grant is less adorable than in the beginning, more grizzled, still slightly creepy but more vulnerable — and a devoted friend.

At the party, all the couples want to know how Bridget is moving on with her life. She escapes, and at a bar later with her stalwart friend group (from the previous films), says she's done with romance.

Of course, that will prove untrue. Bridget will meet her new love interest in the most Bridget Jones of ways: stuck awkwardly on a tree in the park, trying to rescue her children, also stuck.

To the rescue comes a dreamy park ranger (Leo Woodall), who also happens to see on Bridget's phone that her friends have set up a Tinder account: "Tragic Widow Seeks Sexual Awakening."

And thus, Bridget's new love interest is



Universal Pictures

Bridget Jones (Renée Zellweger), now a middle-aged widow, and Roxster McDuff, 29, (Leo Woodall) embark on a steamy courtship in "Mad About the Boy."

29-year-old Roxster McDuff — a ridiculous name, rivaling how ridiculously sexy he is. The two embark on a steamy courtship. At the same time, Bridget has returned to work as a TV producer.

"Now THAT'S a rebrand," Bridget's friend says approvingly of her new life. But can their relationship triumph over the considerable age gap? It's a subject — older woman, younger man — that's a hot topic in current movies.

Also raised here is the question of how one moves on from deep grief to live fully again — a goal that Bridget's late father had urged upon her. (Jim Broadbent reappears briefly, as does Gemma Jones as Bridget's mother. Colin Firth appears in a few dreamy moments.)

And there are plenty of other new issues for Bridget to navigate, too, such as how

hard it is to keep up with other parents at school. For example: When Bridget is asked, by her son's handsome and interesting yet seemingly guarded science teacher Mr. Wallaker (Chiwetel Ejiofor), to speak to the class about her career, he tells her the previous parent to come in was a Nobel winner in nuclear physics.

No worries. The lessons of this last — or so they say — Bridget Jones chapter speak to how one adjusts expectations and finds the right way to live in the world.

And on that note, as old photos from 25 years of Bridget's life fly by during closing credits, it's hard not to feel like she's family — and to be more than a little proud of how she found her way.

"Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy" is rated R for language and some sexual references. Running time: 124 minutes. Now streaming on Peacock.

Sci-fi thriller, wannabe rom-com 'The Gorge' is ridiculous

By JAKE COYLE
Associated Press

In the movies, we've had green valleys, haunted hills and grand canyons. But only now has the time arrived for a long-overshadowed land formation. "The Gorge," a preposterous new gamelike thriller, at least succeeds in, um, gorging on this often-overlooked geological feature.

The gorge in question, to be fair, is a beauty. In some northern forested wilderness sit two concrete towers, one for each side of a wide, foggy ravine encircled by sheer rock steeps. Two expert snipers — Levi (Miles Teller) from the U.S., and Drasa (Anya Taylor-Joy), placed by Russia — have been dropped off to man their respective stations.

Both are conscripts of a sort. Levi has been a private contractor for the military since being psychologically deemed unfit for service by the Marines. (Sigourney Weaver plays the cryptic woman who hires him.) Drasa is Lithuanian. Each operates in the murky quasi-official world of covert military operations. All they know is that they're to be at this ultraclassified post for a year, part of an annual rotation. Their main job is to shoot anything that comes out of the chasm below.

What's inside? The guy Levi is replacing thinks it could be a portal to hell. "The Gorge," directed by Scott Derrickson ("Doctor Strange," "The Black Phone") from a script by Zach Dean ("The Tomorrow War"), unpeels these mysteries in a film that, if it wanted to, could be a very atmospheric post-Cold War parable, a kind of kaiju-in-the-ground thriller, about deep-buried military secrets.

That may be the backdrop, but "The Gorge" wants to be something else, too. It wants to be a love story. Taking



APPLE TV+/AP

Miles Teller and Anya Taylor-Joy fall in love while trying to guard a ravine filled with evil creatures in "The Gorge."

after the hybrid DNA horrors that emerge from below, "The Gorge" mixes rom-com with sci-fi, with mostly ridiculous results. This is the rare movie to boast both horse-riding tree-zombies and so, so many T.S. Eliot references.

There is good preposterous and bad preposterous. "The Gorge" may find some believers on both sides of that gulf. The production quality is well above the grade of its script, with cinematography by Dan Laustsen (Guillermo del Toro's regular director of photography) and a score by Trent Reznor and Atticus Ross (coming off their incredible 2024 of "Challengers" and "Queer").

But the tonal swings, not to mention the gloss that covers the whole enterprise, make "The Gorge" an intriguing but empty genre mashup.

Like would-be lovers who spy each other across balco-

nies, Drasa and Levi find their gazes trained more on each other than the evil that lurks below. As the months go by, their interactions advance to dancing and even, with the help of some rappelling rope, a dinner date.

You could at this point be asking yourself a few questions. If some version of hell was pried open, would we, perhaps, want more than two guards? But if we're going with two, how likely is it, with ghoulish things sporadically climbing up from the abyss, that they would soon begin a "Love, Actually"-style courtship of holding up signs for each other?

These aren't quibbles that "The Gorge" has any time for, though. The movie's flow is choppy and occasionally distracted by overly showy camera moves, but it does zip along, and soon enough the two of them are shooting at what you could only call skull spiders. Questionable as the romantic turn is, Taylor-Joy and Teller have convincing chemistry. Plus, "The Queen's Gambit" fans can rejoice at the chance to again see Taylor-Joy play chess, albeit in a slightly different context.

Once we get a decent view of the creatures they're charged with keeping under control, they appear half tree root, half human, like demon Groots. "The Gorge" is better before our main characters are no longer poised at the mouth of hell but running through the gorge floor. One minute, they're swaying to the Yeah Yeah Yeahs, the next they're being swallowed by an adhesive root system.

"The Gorge" is pretty superficial stuff, but perhaps we can await its even shallower sequel, "The Gully."

"The Gorge" is rated PG-13 for intense sequences of violence and action, brief strong language, some suggestive material and thematic elements. Running time: 127 minutes. Now streaming on Apple TV+.

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Toledo a Spanish monument to art

Toledo is full of superlatives: Its street plan is the most confusing in Spain, its cathedral the most Gothic (and the most Spanish of all Gothic churches), and the cathedral's altar the most stunning. Toledo was once home to Europe's most powerful king, Charles V, and is papered with the vividly spiritual paintings of the city's most famous artist, El Greco.

Spain's former capital crowds 2,500 years of tangled history onto a high, rocky perch protected on three sides by a natural moat, the Tajo River. Toledo is so well preserved and packed with cultural wonder that the city has been declared a national monument — no modern exteriors are allowed. For centuries, Christians, Muslims and Jews enjoyed this city together. Toledo's past is a complex mix of these three great religions.

Today, Toledo is filled with tourists day-tripping from Madrid, a quick 30-minute train ride to the north. Its main sights were beautifully renovated when the town marked the 400th anniversary of El Greco's death in 2014. The two biggies are the magnificent cathedral, with a jaw-dropping interior and a sacristy swathed in El Greco's work, and the Santa Cruz Museum, with its own world-class collection of El Greco paintings.

The cathedral is shoehorned into the old center, where it rises brilliantly above the town's medieval clutter. The interior is laden with elaborate wrought-iron work, lavish wood carvings and window after

colorful window of 500-year-old stained glass. It's so lofty, rich and vast that visitors wander around like Pez dispensers stuck open, whispering "Wow." Drifting among the pillars, it's easy to imagine a time when the light bulbs were candles and the tourists were pilgrims — when every window provided spiritual as well as physical light.



Rick Steves

The cathedral's spectacular altar — real gold on wood, by Flemish, French and local artists — is one of the country's best pieces of Gothic art. The complex composition shows the story of Jesus' life, conveying the Christian message of salvation. The cathedral's sacristy is a mini-art museum, with masterpieces by the likes of Francisco de Goya, Titian, Diego Velázquez, Caravaggio and Giovanni Bellini, not to mention 19 El Grecos.

Born in Greece and trained in Venice, Doménikos Theotokópoulos (tongue-tied friends just called him "The Greek" ... El Greco) came to Spain to get work as a painter. He found employment in Toledo, where he developed his unique painting style, mixing icon-like faces from his Greek homeland, bold color and twisting poses from his time in Italy, and almost mystical spirituality from Catholic Spain.

Toledo's Santa Cruz Museum holds a superb collection of El Greco paintings, including the impressive altarpiece As-



CAMERON HEWITT/Rick Steves' Europe

Toledo's cathedral, with its vast, art-filled interior, is one of Europe's most impressive.

sumption of Mary. Finished one year before El Greco's death, it's the culmination of his inimitable style, combining all his signature elements to express an otherworldly event. No painter before or since has captured the supernatural world better than El Greco.

True El Grecophiles will also want to visit the small El Greco Museum, built near the site of El Greco's house.

A day full of El Greco and the romance of Toledo after dark puts me in the mood for game and other traditional cuisine. Typical Toledo dishes include partridge

(perdiz), venison (venado), wild boar (jabali), roast suckling pig (cochinillo asado) and young lamb (cordero). Plaza de Zocodover is busy with eateries serving basic food at affordable prices, and its people-watching scene is great. But it's worth a few extra minutes — and the navigating challenge — to explore Toledo's side streets and find places where you'll be eating with locals as well as tourists.

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.

Other European transportation beyond planes, trains and cars

There's a certain wonder to exploring a city or town for the first time, and there's no wrong way to go about it. Those who value a mode of transportation for its uniqueness as much as its actual convenience might wish to look into these options on their next urban adventure.

Elevator

The Ascensore Castello d'Alberis-Montegalletto, found in Genoa, Italy, is an underground lift capable of moving in two directions. After its carriage capable of holding up

to 23 passengers enters the hillside horizontally, it comes to a halt before making the transition to vertical movement. Following this ascent of 226 feet, many passengers will visit the D'Alberis Castle, which houses the Museum of World Cultures, a collection of curious artifacts amassed by the sea captain Enrico Alberto D'Alberis. The lower entrance to the lift, located off of Via Balbi, is a quick walk from the Genova Piazza Principe railway

station. Online: metrogenova.com/montegalletto.asp

The Santa Justa Lift in Lisbon, Portugal, connects the bustling central neighborhood of Baixa with the hilly Barrio Alto district. The beautiful wrought iron structure reminiscent of the Eiffel Tower dates back to 1902 and is a landmark in its own right. With a carriage that can carry only about 20 passengers at a time, long queues are inevitable. The lift makes up part of the public transportation network, in which it is called the 54E. A single ascent costs about 6 euros. Online: tinyurl.com/y8u6p7tj

Funicular

For many visitors to Heidelberg, Germany, a ride up the funicular known as the Molkenkurbahn represents the easiest way to reach the grounds of the city's famed castle. But the ride doesn't have to end there. From the



iStock

Rittner cable cars in Bolzano, Italy, convey up to 30 passengers for three miles up the hillside.

castle, it's possible to board a second funicular, this one bound for Königstuhl, which is, at 1,800 feet, the town's highest point. Things to do once there include exploring a fairy tale-themed park or watching a falconry show. Online: bergbahn-heidelberg.de/welcome

Tram

What's often billed as the world's longest tram line operates along Belgium's North Sea coast line, linking the towns of La Panne, near the border of France, with Knokke-Heist, close to the Netherlands. The so-called Kusttram, parts of which have been in operation since 1885, runs for more than 40 miles and stops at 68 stations. Riding the route in its entirety takes about two hours and 20 minutes. Online: zeebrugge.com/en/coastal-tram.php

Gondola

In Venice, Italy, the experience of crossing the Grand Canal on a gondola can be had by even the budget-con-

scious. Traghetto is the term used to describe this form of public transportation propelled by two rowers. The ride, which is always done standing up, costs only about 2 euros per crossing. Traghetti operate on six routes, including those between San Stefano and San Tomá and Ferrovia and S. Simeone. Online: tinyurl.com/4d8uxwd4

Cable car

The Funivia di San Marino, found in the postage stamp-sized republic of the same name, transports passengers between the city proper at the top of the hill and the lower city of Borgo Maggiore, seat of the castle. The two-minute ride rewards passengers with sweeping views of the glittering Adriatic Sea. Online: tinyurl.com/5fzjy3he

Beautiful Bolzano, the capital city of the Italian province of South Tyrol, sits in a valley surrounded by the Alps, making the Rittner cable car a sensible means of reaching a small community in the hills that doubles as an access point for scenic hikes. Ten cabins carrying up to 30 persons each travel along the three-mile route that makes up part of the local public transportation system. The point-to-point journey takes about 12 minutes. The valley terminal, located at Rittner Strasse 12, also offers parking facilities. Online: tinyurl.com/4678hx2h

Bike lift

The Trampe Bicycle Lift in Trondheim, Norway, allows cyclists to get a 400-foot uphill lift without ever dismounting. Essentially a rolling track embedded in a sidewalk, the lift has been in operation since 1993 and carries up to 30,000 riders annually. As operation can be tricky for first timers, the lift has a slower speed just for newbies. Bikers must keep their left foot on their own bike's pedal as they push a start button, which makes a footplate appear. The rider must then hop onboard and keep his right leg outstretched and bent forward throughout the journey — no easy feat for beginners. Online: tinyurl.com/mwh79ydf

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

A smaller, more intimate type of cruise

River voyages can be pricey but better for folks put off by size, crowds of ocean ships

BY HANNAH SAMPSON
The Washington Post

Cruise ships have become famous for their jaw-dropping size, massive capacity and dizzying array of things to do. If you're so inclined, you can jump into a sky-diving simulator, ride a roller coaster or scale a rock-climbing wall as you cruise the open ocean with 4,000 or more cruise-goers.

But that's not everyone's speed. Some people would prefer an intimate vessel with fewer than 200 passengers and an emphasis on the cultures and destinations they're visiting. That's where river cruises — a popular and growing segment of the industry — come in.

"You literally dock in the heart of cities," said Colleen McDaniel, editor in chief of Cruise Critic.

Word of a new player in the space drew attention late last month when Celebrity Cruises, part of Royal Caribbean Group, announced that it had ordered 10 river cruise ships and would launch in Europe in 2027. Celebrity has only sailed ocean cruises.

Here's what travelers should know if they're considering a river voyage:

Where can I go on a river cruise?

"If there's a major river, chances are you're going to find a river cruise ship on it," McDaniel said.

The bulk of the world's river ships are based in Europe; you'll have plenty of options to choose from on popular waterways, including the Rhine, Danube, Rhône, Seine, Douro and Dordogne. But you can sail rivers in other parts of the world — even the United States.

Two major cruise lines traverse the Mississippi: Viking and American Cruise Lines. American Cruise Lines also has ships on the Columbia and Snake rivers.

Travelers can also sail on the Nile, parts of the Amazon and the Mekong.

What time of year is best?

Travel adviser Tiffany Zinckgraf, owner of TravelBook Vacations and one of the moderators of the nearly 26,000-member River Cruise Lovers Facebook group, said summer is high season for travel in general, but she likes to steer clients to May or mid-October for European cruises because of milder weather and smaller crowds.

Water levels are a consideration for river cruises in Europe, as sailings can run into problems if the water is too low or



The bulk of the world's river ships are based in Europe. The Danube River, shown here with a view of the Hungarian Parliament Building in Budapest, is a popular destination.

too high. The hottest summer months can be problematic for low water, Zinckgraf said — another reason she likes October.

McDaniel said the traditional season has lasted from spring through Christmas markets in December, but some lines have extended their offerings to include the colder winter months.

"We've seen cruises in January and February, and often at a lower price," she said.

What is there to do on board?

Expect a focus on the destination: maybe cooking lessons particular to where you're going next, traditional dancers, conversations about the next day's stop. There won't be a major Broadway-style show, but there may be a DJ or pianist entertaining passengers at night, McDaniel said.

"I have seen some river lines have people dancing until pretty late," she said. "Really it's more about the experience off the ship than on."

Zinckgraf said there's no large stage or casino, but she doesn't call a river cruise a "sedate experience." On ships that have bikes on board, she likes to grab a bike and head out into the port city. A day

might start early with breakfast, a morning tour, lunch on the ship, an afternoon tour and dinner, followed by a bike ride.

"It's a very busy day, but it's not centered on the ship and the entertainment on the ship," she said. "It is centered on what is outside."

Laura Hodges Bethge, president of Celebrity Cruises, said some river ships may have a small plunge pool, a room for a massage or a small workout space. She said Celebrity is thinking about the open upper deck that typically has shared public areas as "ripe for innovation."

"It's a really nice playground to play in," she said. "There are obviously limitations as you go under bridges and things like that that you have to take into consideration, but we're very focused on that top deck."

Who offers river cruises?

Viking, which operates more than 80 river ships with another two dozen on order, is nearly synonymous with the form of travel. The company became a household name to travelers after its sponsorship of the PBS "Masterpiece" show "Downton Abbey" brought river ships into Americans' living rooms for years.

"Really it's more about the experience off the ship than on."

Colleen McDaniel

editor in chief of Cruise Critic, of river cruises

Other big names in the river cruise space include Avalon Waterways, AmaWaterways and Uniworld — though there are many other players. The Cruise Lines International Association has a marketing affiliation with 11 river cruise companies, according to its website.

Zinckgraf said some lines are premium and some costlier options are in the luxury category; those tend to include more in the price. Many of the differences between companies lie in the number of people on board, how the rooms are laid out or what kinds of amenities are offered.

Few companies have started with a focus on the ocean — like Celebrity Cruises — and added rivers to the mix.

"As we study our customers, they're taking river cruises," Hodges Bethge said. "Over half of our guests have either taken a river cruise or want to take a river cruise."

Who should consider them?

Passengers are often older, with plenty of time to fly to a destination and spend time exploring before and after a cruise, Zinckgraf said. Some cruise lines, such as Viking, cater to adults and don't have options for kids.

But others have looked to broaden their appeal: AmaWaterways partners with Disney's touring outfit, Adventures by Disney, for river cruises geared toward families with kids.

McDaniel said river cruises are good for people who are looking for a relaxed European vacation, and even people who might need to work during a trip, because there is generally Wi-Fi and frequent stops. It's also a good fit for people who might be put off by the size, crowds or motions of a larger cruise ship.

"River cruising offers a good way for people who might have fears about cruising to actually cruise," she said.

How much do they cost?

The cost will vary based on the type of ship, category of room and destination, but in general expect a river cruise to cost a good amount more than your typical big-ship Caribbean sailing.

You might be able to find a good deal on a four-night Carnival cruise to the Bahamas for a little more than \$80 a night per person, with taxes and fees included. For a seven-night Viking sailing on the Danube, the price might be closer to \$400 a night per person. But you'll be getting a lot more, including drinks with lunch and dinner, one excursion per port and Wi-Fi.

Zinckgraf said prices will be higher for a more luxurious experience, and those higher-priced trips will include more amenities and larger rooms. Some lines offer airfare. She said travelers can think about a range of \$350 to \$600 per person per night for a river cruise in general.

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Keep calm and fly on

How to relax on an airplane if you're a nervous flier



iStock

BY KARLA MARIE SANFORD
Los Angeles Times

I've always been a nervous flier. The second I take my assigned seat in a plane, I pull my headphones over my ears and glue my eyes shut in an attempt to drown out the sound of a plane taking off.

The tactic usually works, but with the recent fatal midflight collision at Reagan National Airport followed by an air ambulance crash in Philadelphia and a fiery plane engine evacuation in Houston, my anxiety has been off the charts.

Research shows that up to 40% of the population reports some degree of flight anxiety. Given the recent string of incidents, experts say it's understandable that those with flight anxiety would feel more on edge than usual.

"The odds of something happening don't matter as much to the anxious brain," said Andrea Bonior, a teaching professor in Georgetown University's department of psychology. "The anxious brain is drawn in by the horrific stakes of something."

So how should you approach your next flight? Here are five tips to ease your mind before takeoff:

Know the facts

Despite recent headlines, the old adage "you have a greater chance of dying in the car on the way to the airport than on a flight from the airport" remains true (even if it is crass). Commercial airliners are the safest planes for passengers, aviation experts told *The Times*. Unlike for smaller aircraft, pilots must achieve the highest certification, an airline transport pilot certification, to command commercial planes, said Thomas Anthony, the director of the University of Southern California Aviation Safety and Security Program. Plus, all commercial aircraft are routinely

inspected and maintained by the Federal Aviation Administration and fly within a regulated air traffic control system.

A pilot's biggest fear is a midair collision, said Martin O'Loughlin, the president and chief operating officer of Cornerstone Aviation, an FAA-authorized flight school in Utah. But he said it's important to remember that midair collisions make such big news, in part, because they're extremely rare.

"In almost every case, the design of the airspace and the rules that the FAA uses to design arrivals and departures is very, very good," said O'Loughlin, while acknowledging that more planes flying than ever before and fewer air traffic controllers has put a strain on the industry.

"It's really hard to build an impenetrable wall against our fears, but you don't have to latch onto those fears and dwell on them either," he added.

Visualize

Just as a star athlete visualizes their performance before game time, envisioning your flight — potential turbulence and all — can help ease your anxiety before the journey has even begun.

Be honest with yourself about whether you are a catastrophizer or someone who can roll with the punches, said Steven Siegel, the chair of the department of psychiatry and the behavioral sciences at the Keck School of Medicine of USC. If you're the former, going into the plane expecting how you might feel in a seat belt-sign-on situation can deflate your anxiety and help you be less hard on yourself when you do feel anxious, Bonior said. Plus, it can be harder to mitigate anxiety in the heat of the anxious moment.

In addition to visualizing, you can plan to bring soothing aides such as fidget spinners or essential oils. You can also download audio meditations or mantras to get you through the flight. Some free options include Healthy Minds Program and, for younger people, the Smiling Mind.

Slow your thoughts

Anxiety may be experienced as a partially physiological pathway, said Lauren Ng, an assistant professor of clinical psychology at the University of California, Los Angeles. For example, thoughts lead to physiological responses such as trembling hands. That can then lead to behaviors such as avoidance. Which is then how you arrive at feelings like fear.

To disrupt the first part of this pathway, try to halt the hamster wheel in your head. Then, if you're a logical person, you can remind yourself of the facts. Ask yourself: What is the actual thought driving this fear? Is this thought accurate?

If logic is less your thing, turn to mindfulness, which is the practice of being aware of your thoughts and then letting them pass on. Mindfulness can look like meditation or prayer. The idea is to accept that the fear is there but to not ruminate over it, or attach to it.

Label your emotions

A 2018 study of people with flight anxiety found that labeling their emotions lowered their anxiety. Instead of letting a wave of panic wash over you, put your feelings into words. If you're struggling to articulate your emotions, I've found a feelings wheel to be a helpful tool.

You can take labeling your emotions a step further by decentering yourself, said Emiliana Simon-Thomas, the science director of the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley. To put distance between yourself and what you're feeling, refer to the situation in the third person. For example, if your name is Jane Doe and your heartbeat is racing, you can say to yourself "Jane is feeling really worried right now."

In addition to labeling your emotions, experts say it can be helpful to disclose them. That's right, chat with your seatmate. If you're someone who tends to catastrophize, learning that someone is not

feeling the same way as you can help give you some perspective, Siegel said. But the simple act of interacting with another human rather than bottling up your fears can also bring a much-needed reprieve.

Unclench

Anxiety, and anxious thoughts, can manifest physically as sweaty palms or jittery thighs. If reminding yourself that airplanes are generally safe doesn't comfort you, you can ease your mind by targeting the physiological aspects of panic, Ng said. Work in reverse to relax your body. A good place to start might be by loosening your grip on your armrests.

Breath work is also a great way to calm the body, experts said. Simon-Thomas said there are tons of methods to choose from but to always prioritize breathing out longer than you breathe in, which is proven to send the body into a parasympathetic state. You can also practice self-compassion, she said, which is the practice of relating to your own difficult moments in a nurturing way. A firm, stable touch on your chest or shoulder can lend itself to physiological calm.

Finally, you can lean into a book, movie or game. Think of them less as distractions and more as activities that bring you joy.

An important step in the quest to lessen anxiety is to stop fighting it, said Alissa Jerud, a clinical assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania. Jerud likens this exposure practice to running: When you first start, your muscles will ache a lot and you might feel depleted. But if you stay consistent, you will be able to run longer distances, faster.

"Likewise, the stronger your muscles become for sitting with anxiety and the uncertainty that fuels it, the more confident you will likely feel in your ability to tolerate both anxiety and uncertainty," she said.

Over time, flying could feel as natural for you as taking a quick walk to the corner store.

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS



BRADLEY LATHAM/Stars and Stripes

BashParty Minispiele in Wiesbaden, Germany, offers visitors 11 rounds of play with a choice of more than 100 minigames. The new recreation facility opened in December.

Get your game on

BashParty Minispiele may bring out your competitive spirit

BY BRADLEY LATHAM

Stars and Stripes

When my wife and I clash in our mutual gaming hobby — be it board games, card games or the occasional video game — we treat it as a no-holds-barred rumble.

It was no different when a rare date night away from our toddlers recently brought us to BashParty Minispiele in Wiesbaden, where we engaged in cut-throat competition through 11 minigames in a venue of more than 5,000 square feet.

Minigames are smaller, shorter activities that complement a larger gaming experience. The little battles at BashParty unfold in about 10 different rooms or arenas housing equipment like ladder ball sets, dominoes and dart boards.

After check-in, a tablet guided us through a menu that included our 11 games that appeared to be randomly generated from a list of more than 100 possibilities.

The first event was at the front desk. From there, we were free to complete the additional challenges in the order of our choosing.

The variety of games tested skill, dexterity and mental prowess. I enjoyed Jakkolo, a shuffleboard-style game, that required precision and finesse to slide wooden discs through tight openings to score points. My wife bested me in one of the games that was a time-based challenge themed on the children's puzzle book "Where's Waldo?"

We had a great time and quite a few laughs while failing miserably at the falling sticks game, which required seemingly catlike reflexes. We didn't feel so bad when we saw other groups struggle as well.

Nothing was so physically demanding that my wife, who is well into a pregnancy, couldn't manage, but it did seem like I was advantaged from the start with a couple of the games.

To even the playing field, the tab-

On the QT

Address: Bahnhofstrasse 53, Wiesbaden, German

Hours: Monday through Thursday, 2-10 p.m.; Friday, 2 p.m.-midnight; Saturday, 10 a.m.-midnight; Sunday, 10 a.m.-10 p.m.

Prices: Adults, 25 euros; students, 23 euros; kids up to 5 years old, free. Discount rates available for families and scheduled party events. Drinks, 3-5 euros.

Information: Phone: +49 61188006210; Online: bashparty.de; Email: info@bashparty.de

Bradley Latham

let's scoring system has teams assign a point score from 1 to 11 for each game, adding an additional metagame to the experience and keeping the scoring exciting throughout.

BashParty opened at the beginning of December and updated its services in the past few weeks to include English translations. The website says the ideal group size is two to nine players divided into two or three teams.

After making my reservation, I received an email confirmation with a link to an online app that allows groups to divide players into teams ahead of time.

Going from room to room in the colorful play space dominated by blue, pink and yellow designs reminded us both of "Squid Game."

Coincidentally, BashParty is hosting an event from Feb. 24 to March 3 themed around the popular Korean Netflix drama that saw contestants compete in children's games with deadly consequences.

While a few popular games from the show will be included in the lineup, I'm sure the stakes won't be quite as high.

The price is on the upper end of what we would normally budget for entertainment, but we felt like we got our money's worth.

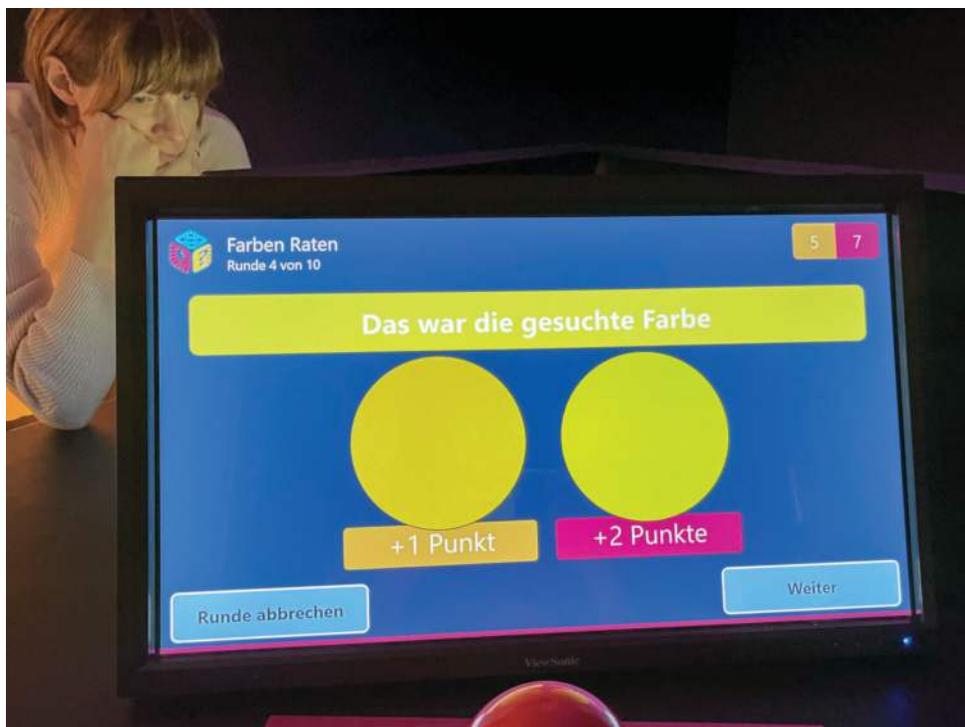
BashParty advertises the duration of the experience at around two hours, but we were quite efficient and completed our games in just under 90 minutes.

Although the head-to-head competition with my wife there was fun, we agreed



Judith Heimboeckel

Falling Sticks is one of the more challenging games at BashParty Minispiele. Players must react quickly to grab 10 foam batons that drop in a random pattern.



BRADLEY LATHAM/Stars and Stripes

In Guess the Colors, players have only a few seconds to memorize a color and then use a color wheel to find the closest match.

that the gaming is probably better with a few more people. While players of all ages are welcome, we'd pass on taking our kids, ages 2 and 4, until they are a bit older.

BashParty's convenient location close

to parking garages and Wiesbaden's main train station also makes for a great jumping-off point for an extended day or night out on the town.

latham.bradley@stripes.com
@BradLat24

WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING



Emily Szatko

The interior of Angelos at the Vogelbach fishing club in Bruchmühlbach-Miesau, Germany, is decorated with fish-related kitsch like mounted heads and adorned trophies.



HEATHER BENIT/Stars and Stripes

The fried trout with potato salad at Angelos. The fish — delicate and mild-tasting — is served whole, not just as a fillet.



Emily Szatko

Angelos has a takeout window, a small indoor dining area and outdoor seating. There are also swings and space for kids to play.

Kitsch of the day

Angelos fishing club restaurant in Vogelbach serves German and Asian food in a waterside setting with warm, welcoming service

BY HEATHER BENIT
Stars and Stripes

There are plenty of places outside of Kaiserslautern to get either a spicy Thai curry or a big piece of schnitzel, but there probably aren't many where you can get them both at a fishing club.

Angelos in Vogelbach is directly in front of a pond that is regularly stocked with fish, while the interior is decorated in kitsch, such as mounted fish heads and fish-adorned trophies.

I lured some friends to Angelos after a children's Fasching festival in early February. We had worked up an appetite from dancing and decided to move the party for what we presumed would be a traditional Pfalz fish dinner.

I'm not actually a fan of fish as a food but was drawn to Angelos because of its waterfront setting. The restaurant welcomes families and our party of four included two boys still buzzing from the energy of the Kinderfasching.

Angelos is housed inside the Fischerhütte, or fisherman's hut, a spot for local anglers to gather over a beer, cast a line in the Vogelbach fishing club's pond or grab a bite to eat.

But it's not just the catch of the day on the menu. Angelos specializes in German, Filipino, Thai and Chinese dishes.

We asked our friendly English-



Angelos Restaurant

Address: Am Güterbahnhof 5, Bruchmühlbach-Miesau, Germany

Hours: Tuesday-Saturday, 10 a.m.-8 p.m.; Sunday, 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Closed Monday.

Prices: Fish and schnitzel plates, 10.50-12 euros; Asian dishes, 10.50-13.50 euros

Information: Online: asv-vogelbach.de/Das-Vereinsheim

Heather Benit

speaking server if we could move outside to the terrace, where there are swings. The small indoor seating area was stuffy and smoke was wafting in from outside where patrons having a cigarette were chatting.

While we waited for our food in the veritable freezer that is a German February, the boys played on the swings and climbed on the rocks.

My friend ordered the fried trout and the rest of us tried the curry and vegetable noodles. The fish-free noodle and rice options were a welcome surprise for me. We shared a large bottle of water and skipped the warm drinks and alcoholic beverages.

When our dinners were brought out, my friend was jolted by the sight of a fully intact trout:

head, tail and bones. She prefers her fish filleted but said this fish had few bones and was delicate and mild-tasting. It was served with a classic German potato salad.

The Thai curry usually comes with chicken or duck, but I ordered it with just the vegetables and rice. The sauce was a rich coconut curry and very spicy — that's Thai spicy, not German spicy.

After a couple of bites, I regretted splitting a bottle of water with three other people. In terms of flavor, it was one of the best curries I've had in this area, but the dish was missing something without chicken or tofu to soak up the sauce and add substance to the veggies.

Both boys ordered the vegetable noodles with egg. This was basically a large portion of vegetable lo mein but less greasy than the Chinese version.

The generous hostess offered us a children's discount on their already reasonably priced noodles because our boys are "so small," she said. The boys might be small, but they almost cleaned their plates.

Overall, the food we ate at Angelos didn't stand out, but the warm and welcoming service did. The blend of Philippine friendliness in a local German anglers setting is worth another visit.

benit.heather@stripes.com

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS



PHOTOS BY JUAN KING/Stars and Stripes

At Hanegi Park in Tokyo, the annual plum blossom festival is underway, offering vibrant hues of pink, white and yellow amid a delightful fragrance. Park entrance is free.

Delicate plum blossoms signify spring

Hanegi Park in Tokyo bursting with colors, scents and tourists during its annual late-winter festival

BY JUAN KING
Stars and Stripes

As winter's chill lingers in the air, the delicate plum blossom, or ume, emerges in Tokyo, signaling the first hint of spring before the more famous cherry blossoms steal the spotlight.

At Hanegi Park in Setagaya Ward, the annual plum blossom festival is underway, offering vibrant hues of pink, white and yellow amid a delightful fragrance. The event, which concludes in early March, marks the 46th season of celebrating ume in the area.

Plum trees, also known as Japanese apricots, were first planted at Hanegi Park in the late 1960s, with more added during anniversary celebrations. Today, more than 650 trees flourish in the 20-acre park, according to the Setagaya city website.

The festival's opening day on Feb. 8 featured food stalls, ume-flavored treats and flower vendors. Traditional tea ceremonies, taiko drum performances and even blood donation drives

are scheduled throughout the event.

Visitors can enjoy plum-themed snacks, including plum Daifuku — mochi with white bean paste — plum kombucha and pickled plums, starting at 650 yen (about \$4.23). Nearby vendors offer drip coffee, cookies, fried chicken and other treats.

The park's scenic trails lead visitors through blooming ume trees, where pink, red and white flowers brighten the landscape. Signs on or near the trees identify the various ume species, some with QR codes linking to detailed botanical descriptions.

Hanegi Park's spacious grounds, spanning 20 acres and featuring the small Umegaoka Hill, provide ample walking paths and recreational space, drawing visitors of all ages. Entry to the park is free.

With the nearby trees in full bloom, crowds have begun to gather, eagerly embracing an early taste of spring amid the lingering winter cold.

king.juan@stripes.com
@juanking_17



Visitors can enjoy plum-themed snacks at Hanegi Park. Below: a plum blossom.

On the QT

Directions: 4-38-52 Daita, Setagaya City, Tokyo 155-0033; a short walk from Umegaoka Station on the Odakyu Odawara Line.

Times: The festival runs 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. every weekend through March 2.

Costs: Free to enter.

Food: A variety of snacks and beverages, especially plum flavors, are available.

Information: Online: setagaya-umematsuri.com

Juan King



WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING



PHOTOS BY ALEX WILSON/Stars and Stripes

The triple combo from the Jamaican Grill on Guam includes spicy jerk-style chicken, juicy ribs, fresh fish, rice and salad. Customers can also sample a variety of Chamorro-inspired dishes.

Real Caribbean flavors in an unexpected place

Guam's Jamaican Grill an authentic treat

BY ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

If you're in the mood for a unique fusion of flavors, Guam's Jamaican Grill offers a blend of traditional Chamorro cuisine and the sweet and spicy flavors of Montego Bay.

While it's nearly 9,000 miles from its namesake, Jamaican Grill offers up a surprisingly authentic variety of Jamaican dishes, including jerk-marinated ribs, oxtail stew and Jamaican empanadas.

Customers can also sample a variety of Chamorro-inspired dishes, including jerk chicken kelaguen — diced and marinated chicken — or beef ribs cooked in a kagu-style broth.

For a more traditional Jamaican experience, the restaurant offers a "triple combo" that comes with jerk chicken, ribs and 4 ounces of the day's local catch. If that isn't enough to conquer your appetite, the combo also includes rice and soup or salad.

Don't forget to ask for a side of



AFTER
HOURS
GUAM

Jamaican Grill

Location: 132 West Marine Drive, Macheche, Guam 96929

Hours: Open daily 10 a.m. to 9 p.m.

Prices: Appetizers start at \$6.50, entrees at \$12.

Directions: From Andersen Air Force Base, turn left and head southwest on Marine Drive for 6 miles. Turn left onto Macheche Avenue and then right onto East Liguana Avenue. Turn right into the parking lot.

Information: Online: jamaicangrill.com

Alex Wilson

finadene — Guam's notoriously delicious condiment based on soy sauce and chili peppers — or the even spicier denanche pepper paste.

Jamaican Grill also offers a sampling of traditional or Caribbean-style beverages, including imported ginger beer soda, fresh



Empanadas from the Jamaican Grill on Guam are served with a side of sweet fruit chutney.

fruit juice blends, daiquiris and Jamaica's famous Red Stripe beer.

Since it first opened in 1994, the restaurant has expanded to four locations in central Guam — Hagatna, Tumon, Dededo and Mangilao — and aims to provide "full service, themed and family oriented" services, according to its website.

"Our unique cuisine is an ongoing process which takes the island flavors from Jamaica, Guam and the Philippines creating exciting taste combinations only found here at the Jamaican Grill," the website states.

wilson.alex@stripes.com
@AlexMNVilson

Several peppers adds dimension to Hungarian chicken paprikash

BY CHRISTOPHER KIMBALL
Milk Street/Associated Press

Chicken paprikash is a saucy blend of chicken, onions, sour cream and lots of paprika. In this recipe, we blend techniques from restaurant chefs and home cooks in Budapest, Hungary.

In addition to a generous amount of onion, sautéed until sweet and softened to create a flavorful base, there are a couple other keys to achieving fullness and complexity in the iconic dish. Paprika, both sweet and hot, is a defining ingredient. The spice adds a touch of heat, a rusty hue and helps thicken the stew.

Multiple forms of peppers are essential for depth and range of flavor. Jarred roasted red peppers, blended to a smooth puree, bring a silky sweetness; fresh banana pepper, finely chopped, adds tangy, fruity notes.



CONNIE MILLER, MILK STREET/AP

Sweet and hot paprika is key for Hungarian Chicken Paprikash.

The paprika should be bright red, not dull brown, and full of fragrance. Seek out fresh, quality paprika, and in particular look for brands produced in Hungary.

Hungarian Chicken Paprikash

Start to finish: 1 hour, 40 minutes (25 minutes active)

Servings: 4 to 6

Ingredients

½ cup drained jarred roasted red peppers

2 tablespoons lemon juice, divided

4 teaspoons hot paprika, divided

1 teaspoon white sugar

Kosher salt and ground black pepper

1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil

1 large yellow onion, finely chopped

1 ripe medium tomato, cored and chopped

2 banana peppers or wax peppers, 1 stemmed, seeded and finely chopped, 1 stemmed, seeded and thinly sliced, reserved separately

¼ cup sweet paprika

2 cups low-sodium chicken broth

3 pounds boneless, skinless chicken thighs, trimmed

¾ cup sour cream

Directions

In a blender, combine the roasted peppers, 1 tablespoon of the lemon juice, 1 teaspoon of the hot paprika, the sugar and ½ teaspoon salt. Puree, scraping the

jar as needed, until smooth, about 30 seconds. Set aside.

In a large Dutch oven over medium-high, heat the oil until barely smoking. Stir in the onion, tomato and finely chopped banana pepper. Cover, reduce to medium and cook, stirring often, until the tomato has broken down and the onion is softened and light golden brown, about 10 minutes.

Stir in the sweet paprika, remaining 3 teaspoons hot paprika, broth and half of the pepper puree. Bring to a simmer, then cover, reduce to low and cook, stirring occasionally, for 30 minutes.

Add the chicken and stir until well coated. Bring to a boil over medium-high, then cover, reduce to medium-low and simmer, stirring occasionally, until a skewer inserted into the chicken meets no resistance, about 40 minutes.

Off heat, stir in the remaining 1 tablespoon lemon juice. Push the chicken to the side; add the remaining pepper puree and the sour cream to the liquid. Whisk to incorporate, then stir to combine the sauce and chicken. Taste and season with salt and black pepper. Serve garnished with the sliced banana pepper.

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WEEKEND: BOOKS

In defense of the juicy details

‘You Didn’t Hear This From Me’ a series of thoughtful essays on gossip by podcast host

BY CURTIS YEE
Associated Press

Kelsey McKinney bookends her new collection of essays on gossip with a word from Emily Dickinson: “Tell all the truth, but tell it slant.”

As the co-creator of the runaway hit podcast “Normal Gossip,” McKinney was well aware of gossip’s need for a PR makeover. But what started as a project to liberate the act from its designation as sin, villainized and demeaned as “women’s talk,” turned into something much more slippery.

In interrogating the longstanding contradictions of gossip, Dickinson’s line proves instructive: Which parts are true, which parts are slant, and who gets to do the telling?

“You Didn’t Hear This From Me: (Mostly) True Notes on Gossip” is a whirlwind inquiry into one of society’s oldest practices. McKinney writes about gossip with an intellectual rigor that borders on rever-

ence, explaining how a raunchy Doja Cat lyric exemplifies the theory of mind and how the notorious burn book from “Mean Girls” actually helped teenagers avoid a predatory teacher.

In each essay, McKinney unpacks new facets of gossip with a colorful cast of sources, ranging from the Apostle Paul, ChatGPT, philosopher John Stuart Mill, celebrity gossip account DeuxMoi and Town Tattle, an about-town magazine that was “essentially the Roaring Twenties’ Gossip Girl.”

McKinney, both a reporter and critic, is perhaps best known for her role as podcast host. On each episode of “Normal Gossip,” before she passed the baton to new host Rachele Hampton late last year, McKinney would relay “an anonymous morsel of gossip from the real world.”

After introducing each guest, she would ask them a simple question: What is your relationship with gossip?

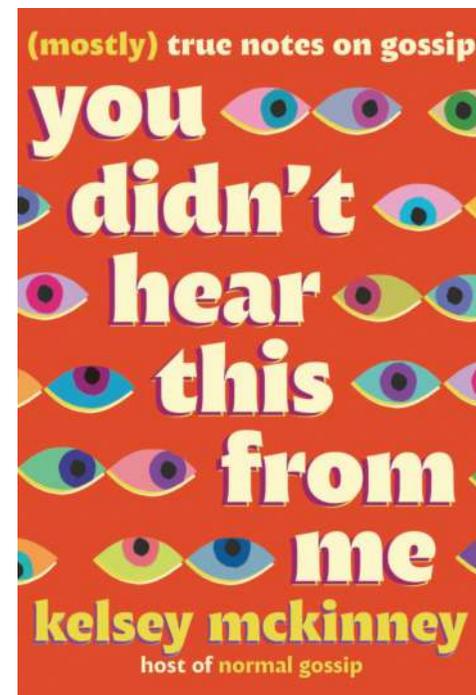
It’s a question that lies underneath each

of McKinney’s essays. From teenagers who use gossip as a way to beat down school rivals to women who warn coworkers to avoid office creeps, McKinney paints a complicated portrait of how gossip’s virtues and vices are directly intertwined with power and who wields it.

Perhaps some confusion about gossip comes from the fact that it is itself difficult to define. Often conflated as slander or libel or even hate speech, gossip’s definition is nebulous, existing according to McKinney “in a kind of transitory, imaginary space between events and their codifying.”

It’s this tentative quality that makes gossip a prime “tool for the less privileged” and an annoyance for those in authority.

In seeking to at least approach a definition, McKinney argues that gossip is distinguished not by its tone but rather by its point of view. The orators who relayed ancient tales like “The Epic of Gilgamesh”



and the group chat dishing about who’s dating who have something in common: Their tales are always second-hand, meaning every juicy detail is an interpolation of the truth. And yet it’s the slant itself that makes gossip so delectable, and dangerous.

Every Tom, Dick & Harry

Elinor Lipman

Lipman is as reliable as Chex Mix or your favorite afghan.

Her comic novels, often noted as the contemporary equivalent of Jane Austen classics, always hit the spot with warm characters, sharp dialogue, amusing situations and endings where everything works out for the people you hope it will work out for. The latest, “Every Tom, Dick and Harry,” is no different.

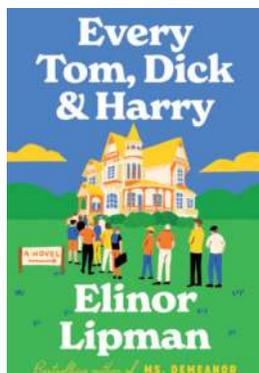
It’s about clever Emma, who hasn’t figured out how best to use her talents. When her father and stepmother retire and move, she drifts into their lives as if they’re hand-me-down slippers, moving into their home (with a friend of her father’s as a tenant) and taking over their business. She’s been helping with the estate sale firm since she was a kid, so it’s a comfortable fit but it’s not her passion, and she’s not sure what is. Possibly Luke, the new police chief of her small New England town — handsome, an old acquaintance and maybe/maybe-not single?

All five characters mentioned in that last paragraph are funny and distinctive, and Lipman has concocted a situation that offers plenty of comic possibilities: Emma’s latest project is a former B&B, except at least one of those B’s is “bordello.” What appears to be an average suburban home turns out to be a bawdy house inside, complete with a special staircase that leads to an area where the most intimate encounters occurred. The place has some decent silver and artwork, but also a bunch of stuff Emma has never had to sell and an owner who’s not easy to deal with.

There’s nothing unexpected in “Every Tom, Dick and Harry.” It’s as cozy and genial as a book with a madam and a fair number of freelance prostitutes could possibly be. There are more than the usual number of complications (everyone in town is scheming for Emma and Luke to hook up without knowing they already have, plus Emma’s boarder is romancing Luke’s mom). But the writer of “The Inn at Lake Devine” and “Ms. Demeanor” knows exactly how to shuffle things so all the good people find love and all the bad people go to jail, or at least have to move to Florida.

If you’re a fan of Lipman, you’re going to love it. And, if you’re new to her, you’re in luck: Her 14 other comic novels are all terrific.

— Chris Hewitt/The Minnesota Star Tribune



The Ghosts of Rome

Joseph O’Connor

A literary sequel worth its salt should satisfy two types of readers: those who read the first installment and those who didn’t. This novel does both.

The Dublin-born writer has fashioned it so that it functions as both a standalone work and a follow-up to its predecessor. “My Father’s House” was about a clandestine group that smuggled Allied soldiers and Jews out of Nazi-occupied Rome. “The Ghosts of Rome” picks up the story and tells how the ragtag band of heroes continues to risk all as the Nazi net closes in.

O’Connor brings newcomers up to speed by sketching the historical background and outlining his key players. It is February 1944 and German forces have tightened their grip on Rome. Despite the best efforts of SS Commander Paul Hauptmann, Monsignor Hugh O’Flaherty and his underground activists, cheekily known as the Choir, are still hiding and running an escape line for fugitives.

Pressure mounts when they take in two American POWs who prove reckless. Their troubles multiply when they find a half-dead airman with no identification.

A dangerous mission is devised to find a trustworthy doctor and evacuate the casualty. But Hauptmann has been given a final warning by Heinrich Himmler to dismantle the escape line and liquidate the Choir, so he implements extreme measures to hunt them down. One chorister soon comes forward, and after admitting to being tired of living “like a mongrel skulking tunnels and holes,” divulges valuable information.

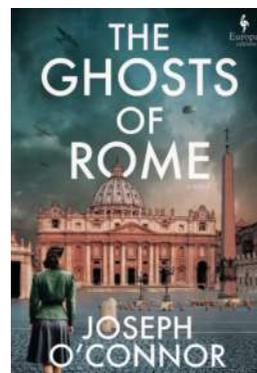
Structurally, thematically and tonally, O’Connor’s second volume in this series has much in common with his first. The narrative comprises a vivid patchwork of varied voices and diverse texts, from letters to memoir extracts to interview transcripts to Gestapo reports.

The expertly rendered backdrop depicts Rome not so much as the Eternal City but one on its last legs, full of hunger, desperation and relentless terror.

Once again there are many high-tension episodes involving money drops, people transfers, frantic chases and great escapes.

Richly atmospheric and pulsing with excitement, this novel breaks the second-in-a-trilogy “curse.” O’Connor’s final act can’t come soon enough.

— Malcolm Forbes/The Minnesota Star Tribune



After the North Pole

Erling Kagge

translated from Norwegian
by Kari Dickson

In 1994, Norwegian explorer Erling Kagge completed the “Three Poles Challenge,” becoming the first person to reach the North Pole, South Pole and summit of Mount Everest on foot — without using dogs, supply drops or motorized aids.

Since then, he’s remained refreshingly curious, both physically (by traversing New York City underground) and intellectually, earning a philosophy degree and founding a publishing house. Both sides of Kagge’s “eventyrlyst,” a Norwegian word meaning “lust for adventure,” are on display in his latest book, “After the North Pole.”

Kagge’s book itself is an exploration, not only of his 1990 journey to the North Pole, but of the history of humanity’s quest to stand on top of the world. Kagge’s trek north took an unimaginably enervating 58 days, during which he and compatriot Børge Ousland skied while each pulling a sled that initially weighed 265 pounds. Yet Kagge admits to no magical insight into polar explorers, writing, “I will never understand all the reasons why people want to go to the North Pole. I am not even sure of my own motives.”

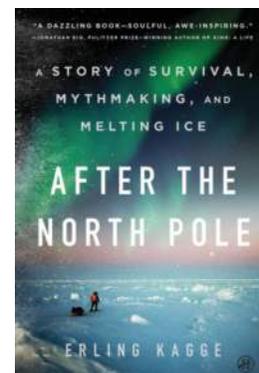
Kagge considers fellow adventurers as well as the literary, historical and philosophical figures who shaped the mythology of the Arctic and exploration in general.

“After the North Pole” catalogs a litany of those who walked, sailed, motored, floated and flew north before either dying (the overwhelming majority) or turning back. By the 1800s, slow progress was made toward the pole though, time and again, lack of preparation doomed men driven less by scientific curiosity than mythical martyrdom. This is encapsulated by Kagge’s wry observation that “perhaps there is nothing more gratifying than a dead hero who was left behind in the Arctic.”

In past books, Kagge has astutely lamented the many deleterious effects of modern life. These concerns arise occasionally here, but only in the final chapter does he focus on the biggest detriment to future polar exploration: climate change.

It’s a bleak prognosis. Soon, journeys like the one he made and those he so memorably recounts will only be feasible in the imagination.

— Cory Oldweiler/The Minnesota Star Tribune



WEEKEND: LIFESTYLE

‘Dopamine decor’ can boost your mood

Designers discuss new antitrend aesthetic of embracing whatever makes you feel good

By KATHRYN O'SHEA-EVANS
The Washington Post

If you've been seeking a little jolt of happiness anywhere you can find one lately, you're not alone.

“Trying to have a home that is incredibly comfortable and [surrounding] myself with the things that I love tempers my existential despair,” says designer Jonathan Adler, who has made a brand out of mood-boosting with his witty tabletop *objets* (cases in point: decorative brass boxes in the shape of Xanax; wicker bananas).

Consider Adler's work the precursor to “dopamine decor,” the viral buzzword du jour. The antitrend aesthetic is all about eschewing the latest thing and embracing what makes *you* feel good.

“Dopamine is the neurotransmitter designed to make us do more of the things that are good for us,” says Samuel D. Gosling, author of “Snoop: What Your Stuff Says About You” and a professor of psychology at the University of Texas, Austin. “The things that make us feel good tend to be things that have been either good for us now in some way or have been good for us in some kind of evolutionary context.”

Some of this is fairly universal — seeing a fire in the fireplace, for example, or being near water — while some of it is particular to you (like wanting to bathe your space in pink because your beloved grandma was a “blush and bashful” girl).

But if you're using TikTok as a guide, most of the rooms that turn up on a “dopamine decor” search would be considered punchy, even for the internet: snaking Pepto-pink sofas; stools shaped like Candyland bonbons — the types of overly cartoonish spaces that could give many of us a migraine in minutes (and are not exactly dope). Here are some suggestions from Adler and other pros about how to do the nontrend trend right.

Embrace earthy colors

“For me, color is an injector of happiness,” says Brittany Bromley, a designer with offices in Bedford, N.Y., and Palm Beach, Fla. “And so while we may start with a neutral base [in a room], we layer things onto that, because when everything in the room is one palette, it doesn't give your eye the ability to sort of jump around to things. And I think that's actually quite satisfying to be able to have your eye travel around a room and take it in.”

Bromley recommends considering hues with some soul and depth.

“We don't actually use primary colors very often. ... Very rarely do we use a true primary yellow,” she says. “Instead, we'll gravitate towards a burnt saffron or something that gives us that color value but is less of a true primary [for] a more satisfying outcome.”

It's that layered, almost earthy feeling in a color that can often lend a sense of comfort and restorative authenticity. Pairing a chocolate brown with a true red is very traditional, but “if you put a chocolate brown with a persimmon, it's cool, calm and collected,” Bromley says.

Kristin Harrison, of Bungalow

10 Interiors, sees people embracing unexpected colors more and more.

“The days of minimalism and white walls are not necessarily over, but I do see a massive shift [from] playing it safe,” she said in an email, adding that having a home that feels like “an escape from reality” can lift your mood.

Add a comedic wink

“In a world where we are all scrolling Instagram for a dopamine high (or is it just me?!), your home should feel like a respite from the ‘same old,’” Emily Janak, a designer in Jackson, Wyo., said in an email. “I think one of the best ways to evoke that warm feeling in your home is to inject it with humor and personality.”

One of Janak's favorite ways to do that is to select a not-so-serious wallpaper for a powder room. “A friend who runs her family's multigenerational Christmas business just papered her powder [room] in vintage Christmas wrapping paper,” Janak said. “How could you not get a kick out of that?”

Janak covered the walls of the powder room in her previous house with Queen Elizabeth II-themed paper. “It was arguably not tasteful, but it brought so much joy to our little log cabin,”



Lisa Flood Photography photos

Jackson, Wyo., designer Emily Janak suggests adding a “punch of yellow” vs. red. Researchers at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland have found that humans tend to equate the sunshine-y color with joy.

she said.

Liz Potarazu, CEO and principal designer of the Maryland-based LP & Co., calls her home wellness room her dopamine den. She has stocked it with green millwork, a sauna and cold plunge and — the pièce de résistance — a floral art piece that says: “Do Epic S—.”

Choose meaningful items

When Marie Kondo advised that we get rid of things that don't “spark joy,” she was also saying that the things we decide to keep can do exactly that. So find the life-changing magic of those.

“Framing personal items like notes and sketches that mean something to you is another way to make you instantly feel good,” Janak says, noting that she framed a souvenir scarf from Jackson Hole, complete with a humorous typo. “I love to include

conversation pieces that entertain, whether you have a house full of people or just your family.”

Get curvy

Pieces with round edges, such as the rotund sofas that have been popular in recent years, might actually assist in amplifying your mood. Gosling cites a study by Oshin Vartanian that showed most humans “have preferences for curvature rather than straight, angular spaces.” Round mirrors, orb-like ottomans and poufs, and circular dining tables may have the same comforting effect.

Brighten up with yellow

“Everyone talks about the Unexpected Red Theory, but have you tried adding a punch of yellow?” Janak says. She's right: Yellow can inspire a mood boost. Researchers at the University of



To add joy to a powder room in her previous home, Janak put Queen Elizabeth II on the walls.

Lausanne in Switzerland have found that humans tend to equate the sunshine-y color with joy. “Yellow is such a happy hue. I upholstered a one-of-a-kind mid-century chair in a bright yellow velvet that didn't coordinate with anything else in the room, but provided that tension you need to have a space feel not so perfect.” Just call it mellow yellow.

WEEKEND: MUSIC

Q&A



GARY GERARD HAMILTON/AP

From left: Brian Casey, Kyle Norman, Brandon Casey and Richard Wingo, of the R&B band Jagged Edge, pose for a portrait on Feb. 7 in New York. The group has been successful for nearly three decades in part because the members realized that collectively they were greater than their individual parts.

‘Love will keep you together’

Jagged Edge’s new album, ‘All Original Parts: Vol. 1,’ celebrates love, longevity and brotherhood

BY GARY GERARD HAMILTON
Associated Press

When Jagged Edge first formed in their teens, they realized the sum of their group would be greater than its individual parts — an understanding that’s been the main ingredient of their success for nearly three decades.

One of the most iconic groups of modern R&B, Jagged Edge — Richard Wingo, Kyle Norman, lead singers (and identical twins) Brian and Brandon Casey — returned Feb. 14 with their 11th studio album, “All Original Parts: Vol. 1.” The title of the 15-track project points to the group’s solidarity: They’ve never broken up or switched original members.

“The love is actually genuinely real. We really care about each other’s well-being,” Wingo said. “I guess a lot of groups, they really didn’t have that. Love will keep you together.”

The “Where the Party At” artists say “Vol. 1” is the first of three they plan to release this year. But the men behind classic songs like “Promise” and “He Can’t Love You” say while the sonics and even subject matter of R&B have changed since their first hit single in 1997, they’re still committed to telling stories about romance and relationships.

“It’s almost like love ain’t cool no more. Well, I don’t believe that. We don’t feel like that,” said Brian Casey. “Love is always going to be cool.”

Their 1999 song “Let’s Get Married,”

after all, is still nearly impossible to avoid at weddings — the original, a ceremony mainstay, and the remix packing dance floors during receptions.

Launching a tour in March celebrating the 25th anniversary of their double platinum “J.E. Heartbreak” album, the legendary group spoke with The Associated Press about sacrifice, creating timeless hits and their musical impact. The conversation has been edited for brevity and clarity.

AP: Most groups seem to break up at some point. What’s allowed you to stay together?

Brian Casey: That’s the benefit of us being actually four guys who really mess with each other. ... We’ll split a couple dollars here and there when we got to, to

keep this together. We’ll take the hits to keep giving the fans what they said they fell in love with. ... What we’re able to do in turn is worth that split. It’s worth that sacrifice.

R&B has drastically changed since you came on the scene with “I Gotta Be.” How have you navigated the changes?

Brandon Casey: Number one: staying true to Jagged Edge. That’s the first thing because that’s the vehicle, right? So, we never want to go too far from what our fans love us from. But we’re actually musicians, so it’s hard to just stay in one little place. ... Our sound is as eclectic as it’s ever been.

When you look over the longevity of

SEE JAGGED ON PAGE 29

WEEKEND: MUSIC

Jagged: Band validated by love from fans

FROM PAGE 28

your career, your love songs are timeless. What do you remember about first entering the industry?

Brian Casey: We came up in an era of “Bump n’ Grind,” “Freek’n You” and “Freak Me,” those are the biggest songs of all time at that time, it seemed like. So, we knew it would be a conscious decision for us to be the age that we were making songs talking about things like getting married. But we’ve never been afraid of that challenge, number one. So, I think of that. But I also think of how taking that route allowed us to be in the same room with some of our heroes who now looked at us as peers. And that was meeting Luther Vandross, meeting Prince, and them having positive things to say about our music.

Do you all feel you get the credit and recognition you deserve?

Brandon Casey: We get asked things like that a lot. So, I guess it starts to make us think, “Do we?” It’s been such a layered experience, right? It’s so many things to be proud of.

We don’t have nothing that we’ve built without our fans. And for us, that’s the most important, most heartwarming, gratifying thing, that it’s somebody who loves you for what you do. ... We’re one of the few groups who get onstage and them girls scream like we’re taking our clothes off, and we never take no clothes off. They scream like we got routines — we don’t do none of that, right? We always come in the arena like, “This is just us. This is who we are.” And they love us for that. And it’s no feeling that is even close.

Do you understand the impact your songs have had on fans and music?

Brian Casey: I don’t know that you can ever understand it while you’re still in the middle of it. ... But I will say, when you meet certain people, it’s heartwarming and it gives you a sense of what that impact is, you know what I mean? And it’s not until you get to talk to people who are looking at it from the outside-in that you realize, “Man, we did an all right job.”



GOLDEN STATE ENTERTAINMENT/AP

From left: Rappers P-Lo, E-40 and Too Short. P-Lo played a key role in assembling the Bay Area’s top artists, including E-40 and Too Short, for the first album on Golden State Entertainment, “For the Soil.” The album dropped in time for the NBA All-Star Game in San Francisco.

Changing the game

NBA’s Warriors blend sports, music with new album from groundbreaking record label

By JONATHAN LANDRUM JR.
Associated Press

The Golden State Warriors are known for their electrifying plays and superstar Stephen Curry, but now the team is pioneering a fresh gameplan: blending sports and entertainment in a way no NBA franchise has before.

As the first and only NBA team with its own record label, Golden State Entertainment, the Warriors are expanding their reach with “For the Soil,” a new album released last week. The project featuring the Bay Area’s top music artists — from E-40, Too Short, Saweetie, G-Eazy, Goapele, LaRussell and Larry June — arrived in time for the league’s All-Star Game weekend in San Francisco.

“A basketball team with a record label is unheard of until now, which is a testament to the Warriors and the Bay,” said P-Lo, a Filipino-American rapper who produced “For the Soil,” a collaborative release between Golden State Entertainment and EMPIRE, a distribution and publishing company. He performed live during an NBA All-Star tipoff party last week at Thrive City, a 11-acre community gathering space surrounding the Chase Center.

“This is about innovation, bringing a new idea to the table,” said P-Lo, a lifelong Warriors fan who has worked with artists such as Yo Gotti, Saweetie and Kehlani. He’s no stranger to the franchise, riding his convertible car as part of the Warriors championship parade, celebrating the team’s title in 2022.

“We’re here to break barriers while I’m trying to process it all,” he added. “I’m grateful for this opportunity.”

Warriors guard Gary Payton II said he plans on listening to the album.

“For me, to be the first team to have a music company, or production company, it’s kinda cool,” Payton said. “P-Lo is running it, and getting it done. I know there’s a lot of

“It’s just kind of authentic and natural to the culture.”

David Kelly

Warriors executive, chief business officer of Golden State Entertainment

talented Bay Area artists behind it, so it’s something to look forward to and be excited about.”

P-Lo played a key role in bringing together the Bay Area’s top artists, contributing to all nine tracks on the album. He began the process late last summer, collaborating with local talent to craft a well-rounded project.

“P-Lo can produce, rap and bring all these artists who are like family to him,” said David Kelly, an executive with the Warriors. He spearheaded the launch of Golden State Entertainment in 2022 before the team won the championship that year.

Several NBA teams have partnered with artists over the years: Drake as the Toronto Raptors’ global ambassador, Jay-Z as a former minority owner of the Brooklyn Nets, and the Miami Heat collaborating with DJ Khaled, who performed at games. The Atlanta Hawks have also embraced their city’s rap scene, working with T.I., 2 Chainz and Quavo.

But an NBA team with its own record label and entertainment division? That’s where Kelly saw an opportunity for the Warriors to break new ground. He said creating a label that serves as an intersection of hip-hop and basketball made sense.

“It’s just kind of authentic and natural to the culture,” said Kelly, who joined the organization in 2011 and currently is the chief business officer of Golden State Entertainment. “It seems like a lot of times people try to force them apart or mesh them together that don’t make sense. But if you grew up a part of both, they naturally intertwine.”

Kelly first pitched the idea of the Warriors having a record label to then-president Rick Welts before bringing it to the team’s owner, Joe Lacob, and co-executive chairman Peter Guber.

He said the Warriors’ leadership embraced his vision, and he hopes more pro teams will follow suit.

“It’s seeing the culture being presented in a way that’s true and reflective on a grand international scale,” said Kelly, a former Chicago-based rapper, whose stage name was Capital D. “Hopefully this is the first of many for Golden State and the culture.”

WEEKEND: TELEVISION

Q&A

‘Good Cop/Bad Cop’ just the latest stop

Actor Clancy Brown’s versatility apparent in everything from ‘The Shawshank Redemption’ to voicing Mr. Krabs

BY PETER LARSEN

The Orange County Register

Clancy Brown is modest when he’s asked to share the secret that’s kept him working steadily in hundreds of TV series and movies over the past four decades.

“I just think I’m far enough down the list,” Brown says on a recent phone call from his Los Angeles home. “After everybody says no, they finally get to me and I say yes. It’s kind of they’re stuck with me at that point.

“To be honest with you, I mean, maybe I’m cheap enough, and as I get older, a little well-known enough,” he says.

But there’s modesty and then there’s the truth, and the truth is that he’s long been a talented, versatile character actor, whose work shines in roles small and large. And, he picked some great projects.

Brown made his film debut in the 1983 Sean Penn prison movie “Bad Boys.” He followed that with a pair of cult favorites, “The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai” and “Highlander.” If you’ve seen “The Shawshank Redemption” — and at this point, who hasn’t? — you’ll remember him as the corrupt, sadistic Captain Hadley of the prison guard.

In recent years, Brown’s been in films including the Coen brothers’ “The Ballad of Buster Scruggs,” writer-director Emerald Fennell’s acclaimed “Promising Young Woman” and “John Wick: Chapter Four.”

As for TV, he’s guest starred on dozens of shows, while co-starring in series including the Colin Farrell hit “The Penguin,” “Dexter: New Blood” and “Bilions.”

Oh, and he’s been the voice of Mr. Krabs on “SpongeBob SquarePants” for 25 years, too.

Now, Brown is starring in the CW network’s new dramedy “Good Cop/Bad Cop,” which premiered Wednesday state-side.

He plays a good-natured police chief in a small Pacific Northwest town whose two adult children, played by Leighton Meester of “Gossip Girl” and Luke Cook of “Chilling Adventures of Sabrina,” end up as detectives in the department where old sibling rivalries and very different personalities create comedy and chaos.

In an interview edited for length and clarity, Brown, 66, talked about what drew him to the new show, what it was like shooting a Washington state-based series in Australia, life as Mr. Krabs and what it’s like for him at comic cons, where many of his shows and movies are beloved by fans.

The Orange County Register: What was it about the role of Police Chief Hank Hickman that drew you to “Good Cop/Bad Cop”?

Brown: Well, it was bopping around years ago. I remember thinking it was a pretty great and funny idea, but then it went away. Then when it came back, I think it just got sent to me. I thought, “Yeah, this is really worthwhile. This is really funny.”

Let’s see, what did I do? I think I just wrapped up on “Penguin,” and it was something completely different from that, which I always find attractive. I always like to turn 180 degrees after I do something if I can. [On “The Penguin,” he played violent gangster Salvatore Maroni.]

This is definitely different from Salvatore on “The Penguin.”

Yeah. I thought, eight episodes in Australia, I could do that. And John [Quaintance, the show’s creator] is a really good guy.

Then as the scripts came out, the scripts just got better and better. It kind of starts off as kind of a screwball, and it gets layered and deeper. It’s always still funny, but as the characters are revealed, we get to see more and more about them. It becomes way more interesting than just a joke-a-minute type thing.

And you get to be a good guy, when you often play the antagonist or the villain in some capacity.

Well, you’ll find out there’s a little — you know, families are always complicated, and as we get deeper into the family, we find out everybody’s little crimes against each other.

And the role is the role. It’s never a matter of being a villain. Did you think Salvatore was a villain? A lot of people tell me Salvatore is not a villain.

I mean, he’s kind of a villain, but you do feel a little bad for him when the Penguin goes after his family.

I know, I know. At least he loves his family. [He laughs.] He really, sincerely loves his murdered family. He doesn’t hate women. That “Penguin” is so crazy. It’s so great. Really, really dark.

So, [“Good Cop/Bad Cop”] was a nice little tonic to all that’s been going on for the last couple of years. There is darkness in it, as you’ll see as it goes on. It’s not super dark, but it’s complicated and human and fun. And it was a challenge. I gotta tell you, this isn’t my usual thing. But I had the best seat in the house for Leighton and Luke and really enjoyed everybody.

Then I’m just old, fat Clancy sitting there providing the bass line, I guess, for everything else that’s going on. I’m just the rhythm section.

I did not know until after I’d watched the first few episodes that the series was shot in Queensland, Australia. What was it

SEE BROWN ON PAGE 31



Clancy Brown plays police chief Big Hank Hickman in “Good Cop/Bad Cop” on the CW network. “SpongeBob SquarePants” fans might know him as the voice of Mr. Krabs.

CW

WEEKEND: TELEVISION

Brown: Actor recognized for variety of roles

FROM PAGE 30

like creating Washington state in Australia?

They did a pretty good job, I thought. They found a place up in the mountains that didn't have too many eucalyptus trees, and no koalas hanging off, as far as I could tell. I love all the people there and the actors are terrific, and writers and everything.

Would it be better if it was shot in the Northwest? Yeah, maybe. I mean, it certainly would look a little bit more authentic. ... But Australia is a great place to work, and the crews are terrific.

I'll tell you one thing they do that's a little bit too much. If you look at the set decoration, it's just a little overdone with all of the things they think are American. At one point I saw a jersey or a flag or something that was the symbol of the Ohio NHL team, the Columbus Blue Jackets, hanging on a wall. I said to John, 'I don't think it's that big of a deal, but if this is the Pacific Northwest they would have the Seattle Kraken or the Vancouver Canucks.

It was just red, white and blue with stars on it. ... what someone in Australia thinks is particularly American.

So I have to ask you about Mr. Krabs on "SpongeBob" and what it's been like to be him for 25 years now.

It's put my kids through college. I mean, it's one of those things. Did I have any idea it would take off? No, I didn't. Steve Hillenburg came up with this crazy idea that kind of everybody tilted their heads a little bit. Nobody really had the full concept in their head the way Steve did.

I don't know why he cast me. I have no idea. He just kind of went with his instincts. And the next thing you know, it's on for 25 years. I think they tried to cancel it once and it just kept getting bigger and bigger. It's an interesting story. When we're all done doing it, we'll all write books — "Inside Bikini Bottom," "Bikini Bottom Babylon." [He laughs.]

I saw you and the cast at Comic-Con last year. Do you get recognized as Mr. Krabs even though your face isn't on that show?

Yeah, yeah, I get it, especially now it's the 25th anniversary, we've been out and about for that a lot.

I would imagine at Comic-Con people would also know you as the Kurgan from "Highlander" and some other things, too, that fit into that universe.

Yeah, people come up and say different things. When we were at the New York Comic-Con doing the same kind of thing, I look over and see Denise (Richards) from "Starship Troopers" [in which Brown played Sergeant Zim]. I said, "What are you guys doing here?" She said, 'It's "Starship Troopers" anniversary and we're doing a panel.

I said, "Oh, would it be cool if I just kind of crashed that panel?" And then we got permission to do that. I think I was there for "The Penguin" and for "SpongeBob" and then I got to squeeze in a little "Starship Troopers."



RAMONA ROSALES, DISNEY/TNS

"Muslim Matchmaker" producers Smriti Mundhra, left, and Senain Keshgi say that viewers can gain insight into other cultures through watching their show on Hulu, and other titles such as "Indian Matchmaking" and "Jewish Matchmaking" on Netflix.

Matchmaking shows on the rise

Voyeuristic quality, relatability irresistible to many viewers, leading to proliferation of genre

BY KAITLYN HUAMANI
Los Angeles Times

The story of "Muslim Matchmaker" began as many modern tales of romance do: with an unsolicited DM.

Smriti Mundhra, the executive producer of the Netflix show "Indian Matchmaking," has spearheaded another series about the art of matchmaking, this time focusing on the Muslim American community.

After pitching the idea to the show's eventual stars, matchmakers Hoda Abraham and Yasmin Elhady, on Instagram several years ago, Mundhra began the long process of developing the series, eventually finding a home for it at ABC News Studios.

As the creator of "Indian Matchmaking" and a onetime client of the series' star, Sima Taparia, Mundhra is intimately acquainted with the world of matchmaking. She also served as an executive producer of 2023's "Jewish Matchmaking" on Netflix before leading the charge on "Muslim Matchmaker," which is now streaming on Hulu.

Mundhra said she thinks audiences are interested in shows that highlight religious or ethnic groups because there's "so much wisdom to gain from seeing how different cultures and different communities approach the idea of matchmaking and marriage." Although she is not Muslim, Mundhra said she learned many lessons from Islam while working on the show that have stuck with her.

"Seeing how much the matchmaking process and, more broadly speaking, the search for a life partner, reveals things about oneself, it was fascinating. It became such great fodder and such a great engine for a series," Mundhra said. "And it continues to fascinate."

Mundhra received two Emmy nomi-

"These [matchmaking] shows tend to be real. It feels like real people having real challenges that we all have."

Adam Cohen-Aslatei

Chief executive of matchmaking company
Three Day Rule

nations for her work on "Indian Matchmaking" (Season 3 aired in 2023) and has been nominated for two Oscars for directing documentary shorts — including this year for "I Am Ready, Warden."

Much like the practice of matchmaking, though, these shows are not new.

Two Pattis — Novak and Stanger — pioneered the matchmaker series through their respective unscripted reality series in the late aughts.

Novak starred in the short-lived "Confessions of a Matchmaker" in 2007 and Stanger was "The Millionaire Match-

maker" beginning in 2008 and running for eight seasons.

Select seasons of "The Millionaire Matchmaker" are now streaming on Netflix and in April 2024, Stanger appeared in a new series, "Patti Stanger: The Matchmaker," on the CW. She told The Times that she'd gladly return to television, ideally to make "The Millionaire Matchmaker 2.0."

"That's my fantasy," she said.

The reason for these series' enduring appeal is simple, Mundhra said. "There's just an incredibly captivating, voyeuristic quality to these shows," she said. "It never ceases to amaze me how people will just captivatedly watch two people on an awkward date."

In the crowded market of reality dating series, matchmaking shows also take a step further than what Adam Cohen-Aslatei, the chief executive of matchmaking company Three Day Rule, calls "abs on the beach shows."

"It's a higher-caliber show. It's a higher-intent kind of a show. People are paying a lot of money for it, so there's more at risk, if you will," Cohen-Aslatei added. "These shows tend to be real. It feels like real people having real challenges that we all have."

Cohen-Aslatei said the shows also tend to dive into deeper themes about relationships and dating that can essentially teach viewers how to approach their own dating lives in a more productive way, Cohen-Aslatei said. "We're not born to know how to date," he added.

WEEKEND: HEALTH & FITNESS

Could you have autism?

Growing number of adults being diagnosed later in life

BY KENYA HUNTER
Associated Press

Natasha Nelson, a 35-year old entrepreneur in Stone Mountain, Ga., didn't have an innate sense of social norms. She didn't know why people meeting for the first time would choose to engage in small talk instead of deep conversations, or why people like to make their beds.

Then, a few years ago, she was diagnosed with autism, just after her youngest daughter received the same diagnosis.

"If your life has always felt like it was in chaos and you don't feel comfortable and you don't feel like you thrive and you just feel like you're constantly surviving and going from one thing to the next, what you got to lose?" Nelson said, encouraging people to seek a diagnosis.

Common signs of autism include trouble with social communication and a fixation on certain routines or topics — Nelson says "people have become my special interest now" — and may go unnoticed during someone's childhood.

But it can be costly and difficult to obtain an autism diagnosis later in life due to a shortage of medical professionals trained to work specifically with adults. Here's more information on what you should know about adult autism diagnoses:

What is autism and when is it usually diagnosed?

Autism spectrum disorder is a range of intellectual, language and social difficulties, like rigidly following routines, having fixed or obsessive interests and struggling to hold eye contact or understand non-



BEN GRAY/AP

Natasha Nelson, who was diagnosed with autism in August 2023, just after her youngest daughter received the same diagnosis, sits in a sensory room she uses to calm her children in her Stone Mountain, Ga., home on Feb. 14.

"We're human beings in general. We like routines ... just having a bit of pleasure and feeling better with routines does not mean you're autistic. It goes a little bit deeper than that."

Dr. Arthur Westover
a psychiatrist who specializes
in autism at the University of Texas
Southwestern Medical Center

verbal communication. Autism is typically diagnosed during childhood, and the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends all children be screened as early as 18 months.

Why are more adults being diagnosed with autism?

More adults have sought insight on their own neurodiversity in the last decade — often after their children are diagnosed or after seeing social media posts. A study published last year in JAMA Network Open showed a 452% increase in autism diagnoses among adults age 26 to 34 from 2011 to 2022.

Some traits of autism can go unnoticed until adulthood, when there are new social

demands. Others may have learned how to hide certain behaviors, known as masking.

"Adults have learned to compensate over time," said Whitney Ence, a psychologist at the University of California, San Francisco, who works with autistic adults. "They may have learned like 'I can't display that in public, and so I do that in private.'"

There's also an overlap of symptoms between various disorders like attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and obsessive-compulsive disorder that can complicate an autism diagnosis due to difficulties with nonverbal social cues or executive functions like attention span, working memory and problem-solving.

What are the symptoms of autism in adults?

Symptoms present differently for everyone, and many of the traits are common for people without autism, like enjoying routines or enjoying going down rabbit holes of information.

But to meet the diagnostic definition of autism, the symptoms must cause significant impairment, said Dr. Arthur Westover, a psychiatrist who specializes in autism at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center.

"We're human beings in general. We like routines ... just having a bit of pleasure and feeling better with routines does not mean you're autistic," Westover said. "It goes a little bit deeper than that."

Russell Lehmann, 34, has lived with his autism diagnosis for more than 20 years. The motivational speaker has routines that he describes as both comfortable and stressful. Eating the same food and buying

the same groceries, he said, brings him comfort. But if he skips going to the gym for an hour and a half every day, he becomes overwhelmed with feelings of depression and failure.

"It's like no gym, no day," he said. "... My routine is an incredibly existential burden, because every night I go to bed knowing I have to do a routine I do not like simply to function."

How does a diagnosis happen?

While there are various online screening tools, autism is a complex diagnosis, so experts recommend talking to your primary care physician for a psychiatry referral.

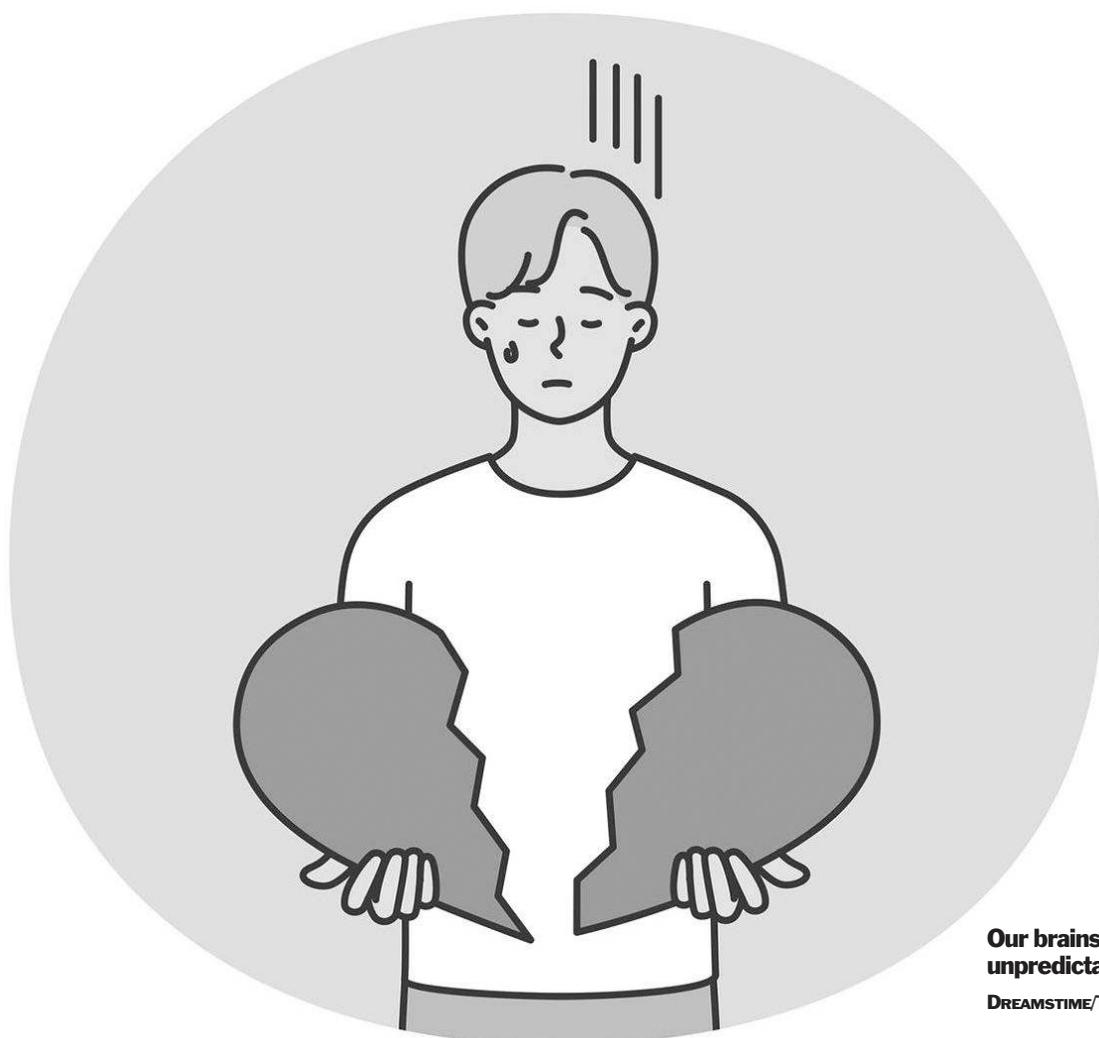
That psychiatrist might want to interview people who were present in your early childhood, like family and friends, who can attest to symptoms being present at that time.

Some psychiatrists may refer you to a psychologist, who can give you a standardized diagnostic autism test or will use their own clinical judgment. There is no brain scan or blood test for autism.

Getting an autism diagnosis as an adult can be costly and take some time. Westover said there's a major shortage of specialists who work with autistic adults. Nelson's diagnosis took three years and she paid more than \$3,000 out of pocket.

Ence also suggests that you ask yourself a few questions when considering getting a professional diagnosis, and to know that you may run into a waitlist: "What is leading me down this pathway to think that I need a professional diagnosis? Do I need access to services? Are there services I don't have available to me?"

WEEKEND: FAMILY



Our brains love
unpredictability.
DREAMSTIME/TNS

Wanting what we can't have

Here's why our feelings sometimes grow stronger as someone pulls away

BY ERIKA ETTIN
Tribune News Service

The story starts the same. You like someone. They like you. You continue liking this person. This person stops liking you (or never did?) and pulls back. You like this person more. This person, feeling smothered, continues to pull back. You continue to obsess more.

Why is this, though? Why should a person's feelings actually grow the less and less someone is reciprocating those loving feelings? There are a few theories:

Over-investment

Elite Daily describes this theory. A principle on which our minds work is reciprocity. If we do something for someone, even if we haven't asked for something in return, we still subconsciously expect someone to do something in return of about equal value. These things could range from dinner to a gift to something as simple as a text message. When the person of interest does not reciprocate, however, rather than withdrawing, we instead invest more in the hopes of the other person responding. And then once we've invested more, the amount of reciprocation required — in our minds, anyway — increases.

Elite says, "Annoyingly, investing too much time and energy in someone without the person wanting it will usually push the person away. So, when you want someone who you simply cannot have, the best thing is to relax, step back and not invest so much into that someone (no matter how difficult that may be)."

Perceived value and scarcity

This is my theory. The less someone responds or reciprocates to one's advances, the more "perceived value" the pursuer thinks this person has ("She must be so busy!" "He must be so overcome with options!" "She must have such a high-profile job that she doesn't have time to reply to my text from six days ago ... but who's counting?"), so we try harder since this person must really be "worth it" if they are in such high demand, or a scarce resource.

And, sadly, the higher we perceive this other person's value, the lower we often perceive our own. This person's lack of response, though, should not imply a higher value. Rather, at its simplest, it should imply a lack of proper communication ("I'm simply not interested") or just rudeness.

People think you're better/smarter/more successful when you treat them worse. Let's turn this concept on its head and instead recognize the people who reply, are kind and actually want to date you.

Defense mechanisms

If there are 20 people you can "get" or "date" or whatever you want to call it, and there's one person you can't, some people will go for the unattainable because there will then be no accountability for a relationship not working. Let's say you date someone who actually likes you, and after a number of months, the relationship fizzles. It's no one's fault, but you took an active role. If you chase the unattainable, though, you can never say that you took that active role. Rather, you never made it to the point of the relationship, and thereby never allowed yourself to succeed or fail.

Science

The brain's "happy drug" is dopamine. Our brain craves this feeling. So, by going for someone we know we can't have — or we can only have sometimes — our brains love the unpredictability because the highs are higher than if we got the desired reward all the time.

This is why breadcrumbing, essentially stringing someone along, is so prevalent. Our brain says, "Yes! We want this!" With the extra dopamine, though, comes added anxiety. "When is he going to text?" "I haven't heard from her in three days, and I know she's back from her weekend trip by now." "If he wants to go out this weekend, he needs to ask since it's already Friday afternoon." Is that a worthwhile trade-off? I say no.

In all, it's best to devote time and energy to what you do have and not what you don't ... or can't. It will save time, energy and heartache in the end.

THE MEAT AND POTATOES OF LIFE

Lisa Smith Molinari



Restore 'care' to the primary care system

"What can I do for you today?" my new primary care manager said, after tap-tap-tapping on and opening the door of the examining room at the Naval Health Clinic. This was my fourth — or was it the fifth? — new PCM in the past two years. I'd lost count.

I told this civilian doc that I'd made the appointment because my prescriptions were expiring, but also, I was worried about my high blood pressure and cholesterol levels. "One of my last PCMs suggested lifestyle changes, so I've lost some weight, and —" I began, but the doc interrupted.

"So, you'd like to get lab work done. Okay, what else can I do for you?" I got the distinct impression she was in a rush, so I quickly mentioned my arthritis and a concern about one prescribed medication. Had I been on it too long?

She handed me a chart document that had been copied so many times, the print was faded and askew, and asked me to track my blood pressure readings at home. She performed a basic exam, listening with her stethoscope and tapping on my stomach, that took no more than a minute and a half.

"You can log in and see your lab results when they come in. If you have concerns, follow up with me. Give me five minutes after you leave to get those prescriptions ordered," she said, then bid me adieu.

It was the fastest doctor's appointment I'd ever had in my 32 years as a military spouse.

As a longtime Navy wife and patron of dependent military medicine services, I am accustomed to having to change PCMs often due to military moves and the necessary transfer of medical staff to and from military treatment facilities (MTFs). I had been generally satisfied with the care.

However, since our last PCS in 2013, our family has experienced drastic fluctuations in the quality and accessibility of military healthcare services at our clinic. Our clinic was initially buzzing with staff and patients, but many of the specialty offices soon closed or were limited to active duty only. Two years ago, I was told that there was only one PCM at our clinic and a two-month wait to get an appointment. Last year, I was assigned a terrific new PCM, but he was gone after only six months. The next two PCMs I met only once before they were gone.

In 2013, the Defense Health Agency (DHA) was established to address Congress' concerns about "inefficiencies" (i.e., costs) in military health. The DOD instructed DHA to ensure that MTFs spend most of their resources on wartime readiness and treatment of military service personnel. DHA's mission was expanded in 2017 to transfer the management and administration of all MTFs worldwide to DHA. The transition was completed in November 2022.

The required emphasis on readiness caused an increase in training and deployment of medical personnel, taking them away from their jobs at 736 MTFs and causing staffing shortages. Uniformed family practice professionals felt underpaid and overworked, and many left the service. DHA shed 200,000 retired and dependent beneficiaries and 12,800 military health billets to cut costs. Beneficiaries were forced out, only to find inadequate Tricare providers.

Eventually, the US Inspector General, watchdogs and the press began openly recognizing the staffing shortages and access to care issues at MTFs, resulting in DOD directives and a Military Health System Strategic Plan for 2024 to 2029 to address the problems. However, the FY 2025 Budget requests only slightly more (.02% to 1.8%) funding for military health system functions.

As I waited at the pharmacy for my prescriptions to be filled, I scanned WebMD for answers to the questions that my new doc didn't have time to entertain. I wondered how long this PCM would last and hoped that, one day soon, I'd have a Primary Care Manager who actually had time to care.

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

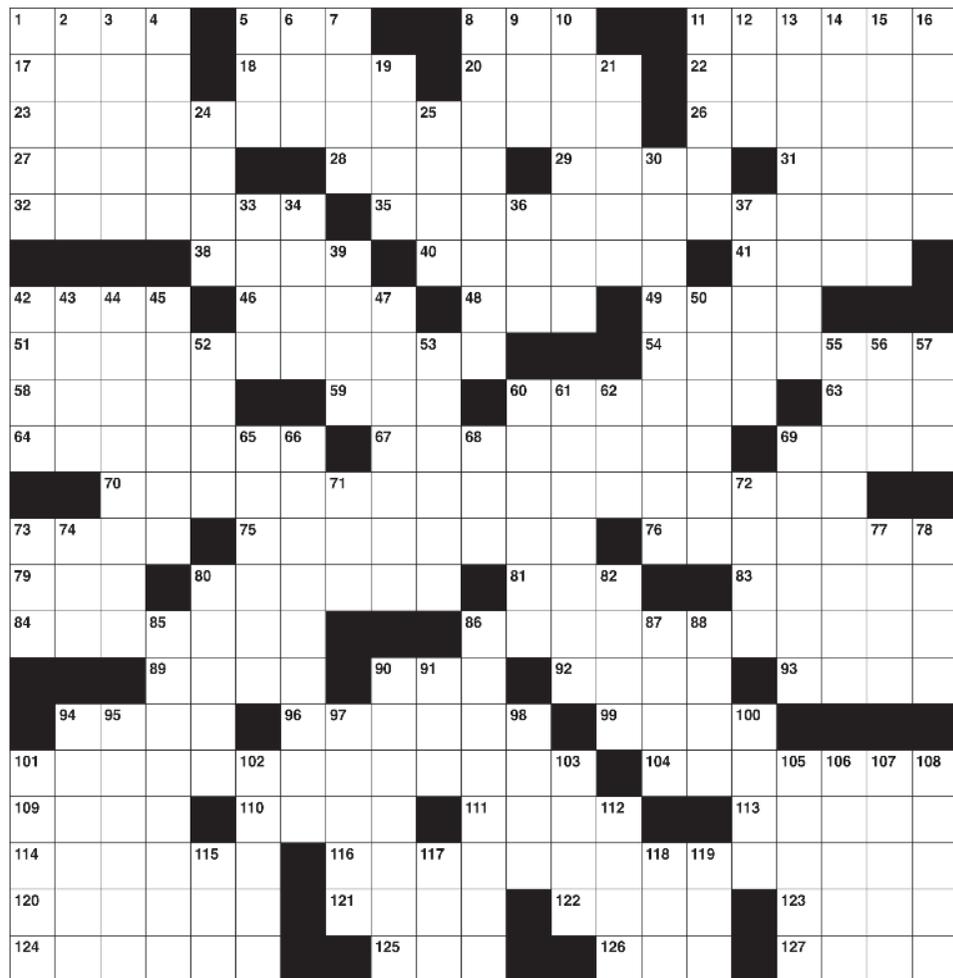
NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

BY RICH KATZ AND JEFF CHEN / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

Rich Katz, of Park City, Utah, does freelance work in corporate restructuring and bankruptcy liquidations. Jeff Chen, of Seattle, is a professional puzzlemaker and editor who's a frequent contributor here. This puzzle started when one of them noticed the double entendre at 86-Across. They thought 116-Across made a nice exclamation point to the theme set. — W.S.

- ACROSS**
- 1 Dressed (in)
 - 5 Facial cream amount
 - 8 Harriet Tubman was one for the Union
 - 11 Place in a pyramid, say
 - 17 Site of the U.S.S. Arizona Memorial
 - 18 Head of a noted animal rescue project
 - 20 Prospectors' targets
 - 22 "Take me to your _____" (alien demand)
 - 23 TV's "Search for the Titanic," for one?
 - 26 Fifth-century conqueror who tried (and failed!) to take Rome
 - 27 Charcuterie assortment
 - 28 It's hard to see
 - 29 Champagne name
 - 31 Honk
 - 32 Chestnuts
 - 35 Instructions for slaying Dracula?
 - 38 Tibetan beasts
 - 40 Realm
 - 41 Concern in data transmission
 - 42 Shoppers' conveniences
 - 46 Tributary of the Colorado River
 - 48 Bit of Rasta headwear
 - 49 Tribe along the Missouri River
 - 51 Broadway offering titled with dots and dashes?
 - 54 Ones moving with the music?
 - 58 High-protein diet
 - 59 Nat _____ (channel)
 - 60 Prove untrue
 - 63 Farm call
 - 64 Belfry locale
 - 67 Indian dish featuring potatoes and cauliflower
 - 69 Rear
 - 70 TED Talk about neuropsychology?
 - 73 Syllables of reproof
 - 75 "So is this our plan or not?"
 - 76 Ones whistling while they work?
 - 79 "May Day is _____ Day in Hawaii" (holiday slogan)
 - 80 Like tightwads
 - 81 Poetic tribute
 - 83 Lose ground, say
 - 84 Scout's container
 - 86 U-Haul ad?
 - 89 Sister of Hades
 - 90 Picture of Pluto, for instance
 - 92 Org. holding an annual basketball championship since 1939
 - 93 Metaphorical bit of progress
 - 94 Spiced quaff
 - 96 Bud after Jack, perhaps?
 - 99 _____ mind
 - 101 Email thread with a "Donate now!" message?
 - 104 "Chow time!"
 - 109 Chuck
 - 110 "I solemnly swear . . .," for one
 - 111 Longtime restaurant critic _____ Greene
 - 113 Feature of the Nifia, but not the Pinta
 - 114 Milan fashion house
 - 116 Giddiness at completing this crossword puzzle?
 - 120 Flattened, in a way
 - 121 Contribution to a pot
 - 122 Reason someone might go streaking
 - 123 To be, in Gay Paree
 - 124 Common sonata enders
 - 125 Pluto, e.g.
 - 126 Aired of the game show "The Cube"
 - 127 Off to someone's inbox
 - 21 Vodka brand, informally
 - 24 "My goodness!"
 - 25 Thigh muscle, informally
 - 30 Toy inventor with a background in sculpture and architecture
 - 33 Living _____
 - 34 Take off the top
 - 36 Thurman of film
 - 37 Partner of dagger
 - 39 Hardly a romp
 - 42 Wrigglers by the Nile
 - 43 "Like _____," rap hit fueling the Drake/Kendrick Lamar beef of 2024
 - 44 Fabric similar to suede
 - 45 _____ week (TV ratings period)
 - 47 Cover for a hardwood floor
 - 50 This evening, in commercials
 - 52 Climber's aid
 - 53 Alone
 - 55 What face emojis with hearts for eyes mean
 - 56 Long, long time
 - 57 Roll of green
 - 60 Harmonic R&B subgenre
 - 61 Goaded
 - 62 When doubled, chocolate treat
 - 65 Journalist Holt
 - 66 Herbal supplement used as a cold remedy
 - 68 Condition that may involve repetitive behaviors, for short
 - 69 Dragster
 - 71 Term of endearment
 - 72 It's a thing
 - 73 R&B trio with the 1999 No. 1 hit "No Scrubs"
 - 74 Something blue that follows Black or Red
 - 77 Adam's apple locale
 - 78 Spanish muralist whose "American Progress" is in the lobby of 30 Rockefeller Plaza
 - 80 Welcome at the door
 - 82 Imprint, as a lasting memory
 - 85 Home of Si Racha, where the hot sauce was invented
 - 86 Did some winter riding
 - 87 The third one is often dangerous
 - 88 Roof overhang
 - 90 Computers' process of storing data
 - 91 Superlative suffix
 - 94 Cylindrical Mexican pastry
 - 106 In the 1%
 - 107 Decorate
 - 108 Believe it!
 - 112 It's passed on the way to the bar, for short
 - 115 Keanu's role in "The Matrix"
 - 117 Classic muscle car
 - 118 Ball
 - 119 Tous _____ jours (every day, in French)
- DOWN**
- 1 Pink drink, for short
 - 2 Place for a flag pin
 - 3 Up
 - 4 Cable channels?
 - 5 It's stranded in a cell
 - 6 Early I.S.P.
 - 7 Spike
 - 8 Bad thing to end on annual basketball championship since 1939
 - 9 Lead-in to approval
 - 10 Polite affirmation
 - 11 Put over the moon
 - 12 Something that, if you cut a hole in it, actually has fewer holes than before
 - 13 Inked up
 - 14 Just awful
 - 15 Offerings in some fruit bowls
 - 16 Actor Benjamin of "Miss Congeniality"
 - 19 Position of authority



GUNSTON STREET



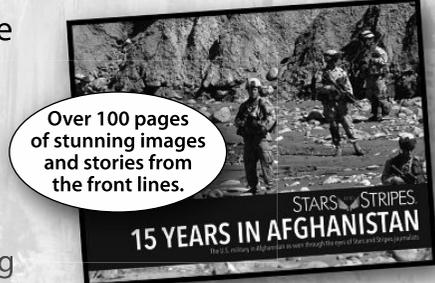
"Gunston Street" is drawn by Basil Zaviski. Email him at gunstonstreet@yahoo.com, and online at gunstonstreet.com.

RESULTS FOR ABOVE PUZZLE



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FACES

A different side of 'Pawn Stars'

'Pawn After Dark' podcast selling itself with History Channel show hosts, celebrity guests

By JOHN KATSILOMETES
Las Vegas Review-Journal

When Rick Harrison of "Pawn Stars" tops out in a negotiation for an item, he says, "That's the best I can do."

But away from the hit series on the History Channel, Harrison and his castmate Austin "Chumlee" Russell are raising the stakes with "Pawn After Dark." The podcast launched this month with premiere guest T.J. Lavin, a BMX star and "The Challenge" host.

Episodes drop Thursdays on the @PawnAfterDark YouTube channel, Spotify and Apple Podcasts.

"This came about because I love to talk," Harrison said after a recent taping with UFC legend Chuck Liddell for an upcoming episode. And Chum, he likes to talk even more than I do."

The show is set after hours at Gold and Silver Pawn, home base of "Pawn Stars" since the show's debut in 2009. The show has banked episodes with the D Las Vegas and Circa co-owner Derek Stevens, WWE icon The Godfa-

ther, guitar-rock flamethrower Ashba (late of Guns N' Roses and Sixx:A.M.), former "Incredible Hulk" and bodybuilding titlist Lou Ferrigno, ex-UFC champ Forrest Griffin and Liddell.

The guys' fondness for combat sports, rock stars and downtown magnates is evident already. Expect guests to expand to Las Vegas professional franchise owners, "Pawn Stars" experts and Las Vegas resident entertainers.

The guests bring their own items to amuse the hosts. Liddell packed a Geiger counter equipped with tiny tubes, or, "Super old-school, punk rock," as Harrison said.

"Should I be scared to open this?" Russell asked. "I'm just pressing buttons. I don't know if I broke it or not." Chum's history of damaging historic items is a real-life concern.

The show is unaffiliated with the History Channel, its concept driven by Tracy Whittaker, CEO of Rick Harrison Productions and executive producer of "Pawn Stars" for 11 years.



L.E. BASKOW, LAS VEGAS REVIEW-JOURNAL/TNS

Former UFC champ Chuck Liddell, left, laughs with Rick Harrison Jan. 23 before filming an episode of the "Pawn After Dark" podcast with Austin "Chumlee" Russell (not pictured) at the Gold & Silver Pawn Shop in Las Vegas. "This came about because I love to talk," Harrison said, noting that Russell does, too.

"Tracy is the brains behind all of this," Harrison said.

Unlike their conversations on "Pawn Stars," the language on the "Pawn After Dark" is grown-up, what you would hear around the shop off-camera.

"On 'Pawn Stars,' we're more or less G-rated, every once in a while, PG," Harrison said. "Here we can go PG-13 and not worry about it."

Similar to the television series, the podcast is a welcome distract-

tion. Chats about odd items in a Vegas pawn shop are a timeless and inclusive experience.

"We just want to have a fun conversation. We don't want to get any politics involved, nothing like that," said Harrison, a well-known Donald Trump supporter away from the show. "We want no drama. We just want it to be like an old Phil Donahue show, but with a little bit more joking around."

Corey Harrison, the third leg of

the "Pawn Stars" fiefdom, is living in Tulum, Mexico, and not a part of the podcast.

"He's soaking up the sun and probably drinking margaritas," Russell said. "I'm sure he'll be back for the regular show, but for the time being it's me and Rick. But you know, Corey would be an interesting guest to have on."

Chumlee then laughed, like a guy knowing "Pawn Stars" has yet to hit its limit.

Book series tells Marvel backstories

Associated Press

If you love movies or comics, you've likely followed the adventures of Spider-Man, Iron Man and other superheroes. A new line of books will let you explore the backstories of their creation.

On Wednesday, Bloomsbury and Marvel announced a multi-year, multivolume licensing agreement for "Marvel Age of Comics." The books will combine history and personal narrative, starting this fall with Stuart Moore's "Doctor Strange," Paul Cornell's "The Mighty Avengers of the 1970s" and Chris Ryall's "Daredevil." The illustrations will feature original work from Marvel's digital archive.

Initiated by Marvel, the new series was inspired in part by Bloomsbury's 33 1/3 books, short and compact works about popular music ranging from the Clash and Judy Garland to Madonna and Kendrick Lamar.

"We've been tremendous fans of Bloomsbury's work on projects



like 33 1/3, and we can't wait to see them take a similar approach combining their reverence for the material, academic expertise and unique insights with some of our greatest publishing moments for the new 'Marvel Age of Comics' series," Sven Larsen, vice president of licensed publishing at Marvel, said in a statement.

Haaris Naqvi, director of publishing at Bloomsbury USA, said he had been a fan of Marvel since childhood and welcomed the comics empire's proposal for a "smart" series on its history.

Amazon MGM takes creative reins of Bond

Associated Press

In a James Bond shake-up that stirred the film industry, Amazon MGM announced Thursday that the studio has taken the creative reins of the 007 franchise after decades of family control. Longtime Bond custodians Michael G. Wilson and Barbara Broccoli said they would be stepping back.

Amazon MGM Studios, Wilson and Broccoli formed a new joint venture in which they will co-own James Bond intellectual property rights — but Amazon MGM will have creative control.

Financial terms weren't disclosed. The deal is expected to close sometime this year.

"With my 007 career spanning nearly 60 incredible years, I am stepping back from producing the James Bond films to focus on art and charitable projects," Wilson said in a statement. "Therefore, Barbara and I agree, it is time for our trusted partner, Amazon MGM Studios, to lead James Bond into the future."

Amazon bought MGM Studios in 2022 for \$6.1 billion, a purchase that was significantly motivated by the acquisition of one of the movies' most beloved and long-running franchises. Since the Daniel Craig era of 007 concluded with 2021's "No Time to Die," Broccoli and Wilson have reportedly clashed with Amazon MGM over the direction of Bond.

The announcement Thursday means that for the first time in the more than half a century of Bond, a Broccoli won't be green-lighting the next 007 film, or picking who inherits his tux. Amazon MGM also anticipates expanding the franchise beyond movies.

"We are grateful to the late Albert R. Broccoli and Harry Saltzman for bringing James Bond to movie theaters around the world, and to Michael G. Wilson

and Barbara Broccoli for their unyielding dedication and their role in continuing the legacy of the franchise that is cherished by legions of fans worldwide," said Mike Hopkins, head of Prime Video and Amazon MGM Studios. "We are honored to continue this treasured heritage, and look forward to ushering in the next phase of the legendary 007 for audiences around the world."

Bond had been a family business since Albert "Cubby" Broccoli secured the rights to adaptations of Ian Fleming's novels and kicked off a run of 25 Bond films produced by Eon Productions, beginning with 1962's "Dr. No." Those movies have accrued \$7.6 billion at the box office.

In 1995, the elder Broccoli handed over control of Eon to his daughter, Broccoli, and stepson, Wilson. In recent years, the 64-year-old Broccoli has largely taken the lead as Wilson, 83, has aged into retirement.

"My life has been dedicated to maintaining and building upon the extraordinary legacy that was handed to Michael and me by our father, producer Cubby Broccoli," Broccoli said in a statement. "I have had the honor of working closely with four of the tremendously talented actors who have played 007 and thousands of wonderful artists within the industry. With the conclusion of 'No Time to Die' and Michael retiring from the films, I feel it is time to focus on my other projects."

Broccoli and Wilson's previous standoff with Amazon MGM had essentially frozen development on the next Bond movie. No script, director or star has yet been announced for the next installment, an unusually long break for a franchise that has typically spaced films two or three years apart.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Governor taps brother for university board post

NM LAS VEGAS — The governor of New Mexico has appointed her brother to the board of regents at New Mexico Highlands University, as concerns about wasteful spending and cronyism roil the state's regional university system.

Greg Lujan — the 64-year-old brother of Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham — has been appointed as the student regent to the five-member board at Las Vegas, N.M.-based Highlands University, pending state Senate confirmation, the governor's office confirmed Tuesday. Jodi McGinnis Porter, a spokesperson for the governor, said Lujan was chosen from among several student applicants. Lujan, a mortgage loan officer, returned to college last year to pursue a degree in business and applied sciences, McGinnis Porter said.

Republican state Sen. James Townsend of Artesia told the Albuquerque Journal that the appointment of a sibling will be met with skepticism in the confirmation process.

"I just think she's put her brother in a really unfortunate circumstance," Townsend told the Journal.

Yum Brands moves KFC corporate office to Texas

KY LOUISVILLE — Kentucky Fried Chicken is being uprooted from its ancestral home state in a shake-up announced Tuesday by its parent company that will relocate the chain's U.S. corporate office to Texas.

The food chain now known as KFC — launched by Colonel Harland Sanders and his secret blend of 11 herbs and spices — will be based in Plano, Texas, and about 100 KFC corporate employees will be relocated in the next six months, said Yum Brands, which owns KFC, Taco Bell and Pizza Hut.

Yum said the move is part of its broader plans to designate two brand headquarters in the U.S. — in Plano and Irvine, Calif. KFC and Pizza Hut will be headquartered in Plano, while Taco Bell and Habit Burger & Grill will remain based in Irvine, the company said.

Advocates defend texts on Toni Morrison Day

OH COLUMBUS — Lawmakers and literacy advocates in Ohio used the birthday of one of America's most frequently banned authors on Tuesday to defend difficult texts that they fear could be impacted by new pushes against diversity initiatives and the teaching of "controversial" topics.

Ohio established Toni Morrison Day — named for the late Nobel and Pulitzer Prize-winning author born and raised in northeast Ohio



CHARLIE RIEDEL/AP

Young man and the sea

A boy is silhouetted against the Gulf as he runs toward the waves off the coast of Treasure Island, Fla., on Monday.

— in a nearly unanimous bipartisan vote in 2020. Her books include "The Bluest Eye," "Song of Solomon" and "Beloved."

During a news conference, children's author Elisa Stone Leahy, of Right to Read Ohio and Authors Against Book Bans, said that Morrison's "powerful, incredible stories" may be difficult but they also change lives. She said they serve as an inspiration to current authors, many of whom are concerned.

In Ohio, the well-funded Protect Ohio Children Coalition has worked in recent years to gather information on schools and school boards that it says are pushing "dangerous and radical materials" on Ohio students and it posts to its website an "indoctrination map" targeting districts.

Airbnb sues city over short-term rental rules

LA NEW ORLEANS — Airbnb is suing the City of New Orleans for requiring the company and short-term rental platforms to ensure properties they market are in compliance with city laws.

"What we're looking at now due to Airbnb's lawsuit is that they do not want to be regulated," City Council President J.P. Morrell said in a statement.

Airbnb said its lawsuit comes "after exhausting all available paths toward sensible solutions."

For years, New Orleans leaders

have struggled with how to manage the influx of illegal short-term rentals catering to the millions of visitors who flock to The Big Easy annually while managing a lack of affordable housing.

Last year, the city council adopted regulations set to go into effect in June requiring Airbnb and other companies verify that all New Orleans properties listed on their platform have permits from the city.

Grocery workers end strike; talks to resume

CO DENVER — More than 10,000 King Soopers grocery workers across the Denver area ended their 12-day strike late Monday after union leaders said they secured some basic protections for returning workers and agreed to resume bargaining with the Kroger-owned chain.

Employees and management had hit a wall in contract negotiations over staffing and health care, but it was the Kroger-owned supermarket chain's allegedly unfair negotiating practices that pushed workers to go on strike at 77 stores in Denver and its suburbs earlier this month.

Kim Cordova, president of United Food and Commercial Workers Local 7, said the union will return to negotiations with an agreement that Kroger can't implement any offer for at least 100 days and can't lock out workers out during that time. The return-to-work agree-

ment protects all employees from losing their health care through April.

King Soopers has denied all of the allegations, saying it acted in full compliance with the law and its collective bargaining obligations.

Governor vetoes bill to speed counting of ballots

AZ PHOENIX — When Arizona was among the last states to finish tallying ballots cast in the 2024 general election, state Republicans dubbed it the laughingstock of the nation and reignited their push to get faster results.

They fast-tracked legislation aimed at speeding up the counting of ballots by moving up the deadline for voters to drop off early ballots, but Democratic Gov. Katie Hobbs on Tuesday vetoed the measure over concerns that it would make it harder for people to vote.

Arizona election results tend to come in after other states in part because of the signature verification process that state law mandates for mail ballots. Voters can currently drop off their mail ballots at polling places until 7 p.m. on Election Day. In recent elections, the state has taken close to two weeks to report its results.

Republican Senate President Warren Petersen was among those who called for moving up the mail ballot drop-off deadline by

four days. The Arizona Association of Counties said the majority of the state's county recorders supported the bill. He called the veto a "huge mistake."

Ban of gender-affirming care for minors now law

KS TOPEKA — Kansas became the latest state to ban gender-affirming care for minors Tuesday after the Republican-controlled Legislature overrode the Democratic governor's veto of the measure.

Kansas is the 27th state to ban or restrict such care. GOP lawmakers reversed Gov. Laura Kelly's veto less than a month after President Donald Trump issued an order barring federal support for gender-affirming care for youth under 19.

The new law is set to take effect this month, and critics have predicted that doctors or parents or both will file a state-court lawsuit challenging it.

Supporters of such bans argued that they protect vulnerable children from what they see as a "radical" ideology about gender and from making irreversible medical decisions too young.

Groups backing transgender rights immediately announced that they would provide financial assistance and other help to families seeking care for transgender youth outside Kansas.

From wire reports



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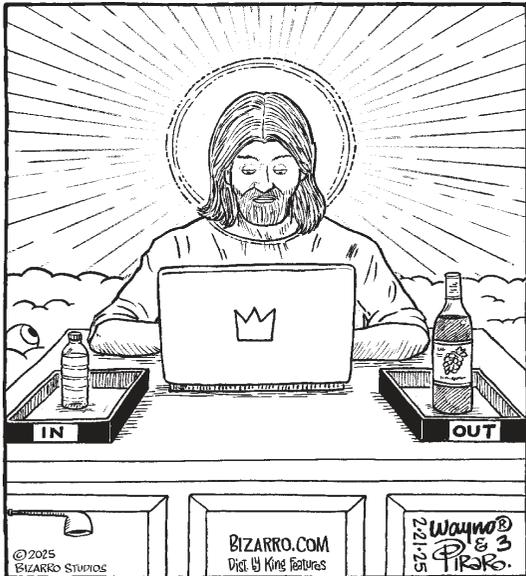
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ShopMyExchange.com/vets

Bizarro



Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

Grid for Eugene Sheffer Crossword with numbered squares from 1 to 51.

ACROSS

- 1 Crater part
4 Leave an impression?
8 Hardy cabbage
12 Greek vowel
13 Euro fraction
14 Mob scene
15 Auto buyers' needs, at times
17 Curved lines
18 Weasel's kin
19 Overly aggressive
20 Skater Ohno
22 A/C measures
24 Kick back
25 Gives for a while
29 Test for coll. seniors
30 Visibly upset
31 TiVo precursor
32 Get the better of
34 Takeout order?
35 See to
36 Legal aides, briefly
37 Colorado ski resort
40 Couch
41 Perched on
42 Fuel-efficient automobile
46 Wheelchair access
47 Hide
48 Capote nickname

DOWN

- 1 — room
2 "Give — whirl!"
3 Small monkey
4 — Lodge
5 Ship wood alternative
6 MSNBC
7 Uplands, for short
8 Grammy-winning bluegrass artist Alison
9 Broadcasts
10 Scottish lake
11 Online crafts site
16 Happy melody
19 Weak
20 Jason's ship
21 Andean land
22 Plank
23 Small pie
25 Low-fat
26 Emotes
27 Bruins' sch.
28 " — chic!"
30 Fed. agents
33 Treeless tract
34 Loopy
36 Dessert wines
37 Swiss river
38 Flag feature
39 Small dogs, for short
40 Bagel seasoning
42 "Me time" resort
43 Debussy's "La —"
44 Altar constellation
45 Floor cover

Answer to Previous Puzzle

Answer grid for the previous crossword puzzle with words like LUST, MIO, SCAR, etc.

2-21

CRYPTOQUIP

E L H C C F L D A S E L L V E Q K
I D Z D A X T V D C F B E L Z F F B D R F H Z S ,
A S F H Z S R F A I D Y K Y D Q X Y J X T V D .
E A ' L Q D B E - F J Y X .

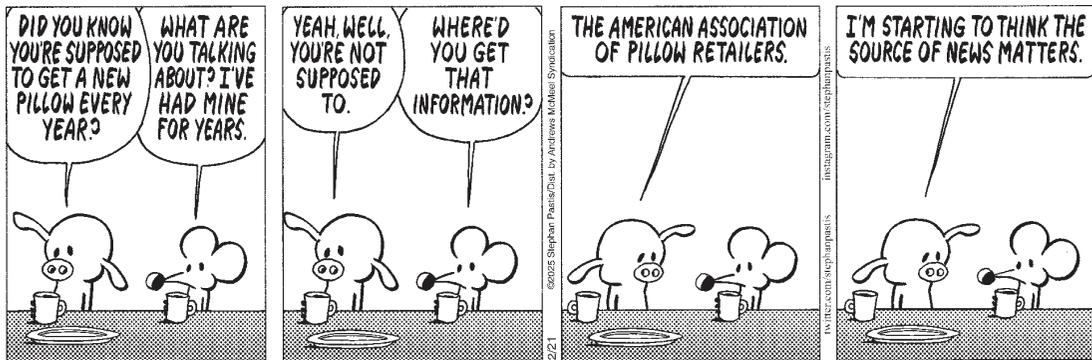
Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHAT CAN YOU CALL A GROUP OF PEOPLE IF THEY ARE WATCHING A POTATO SACK RACE? SPEC-TATERS.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: I equals V

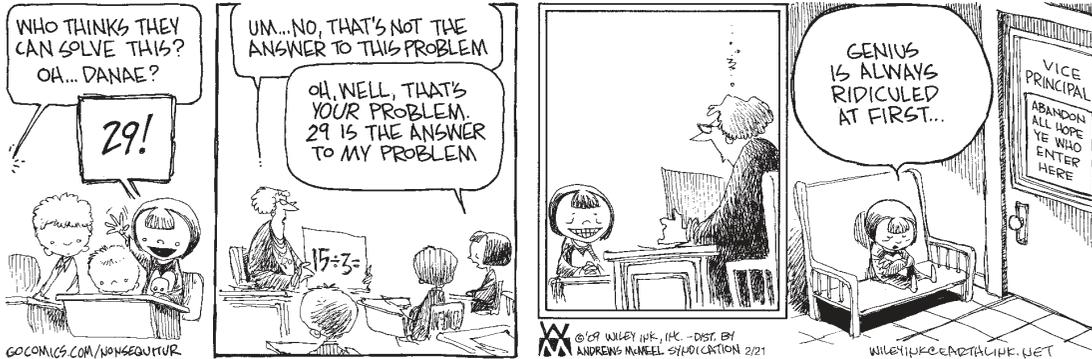
Frazz



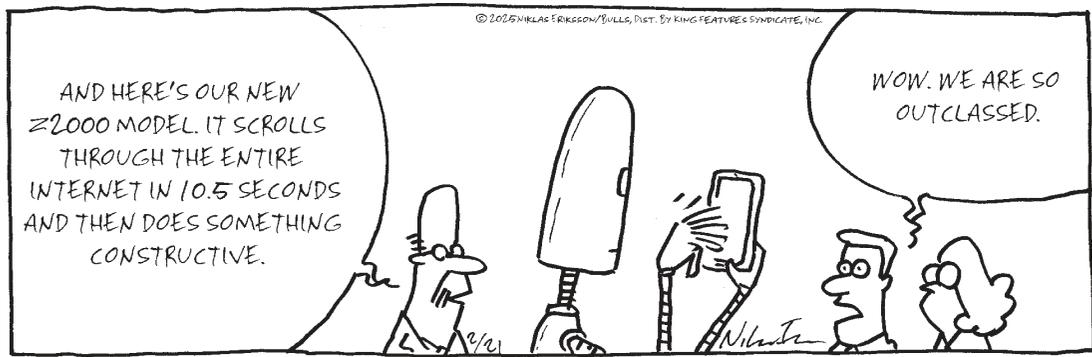
Pearls Before Swine



Non Sequitur



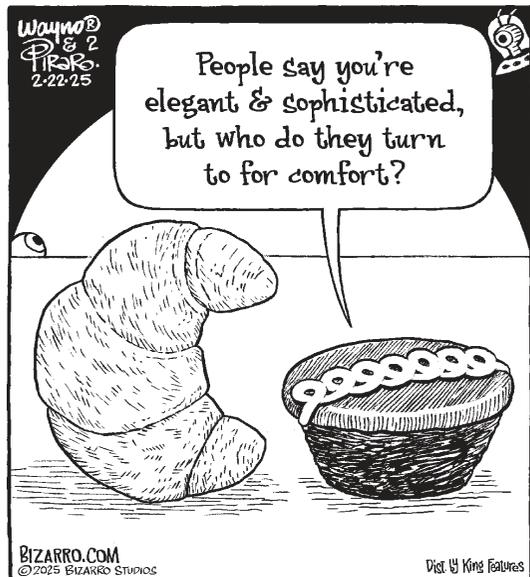
Carpe Diem



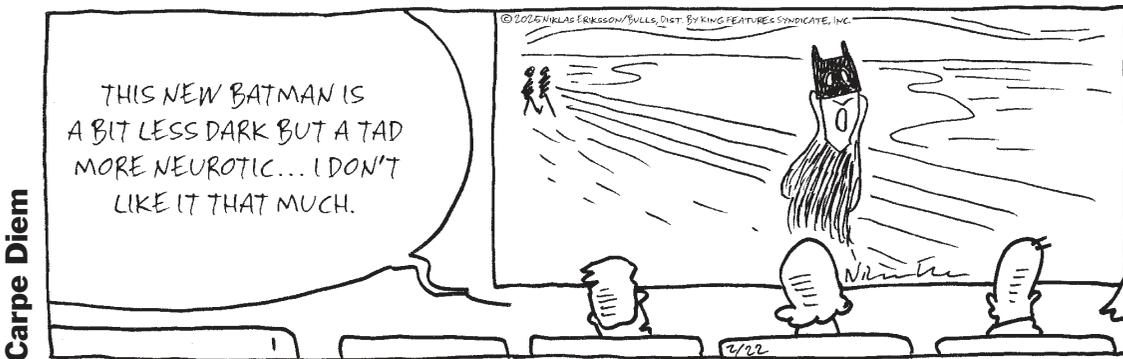
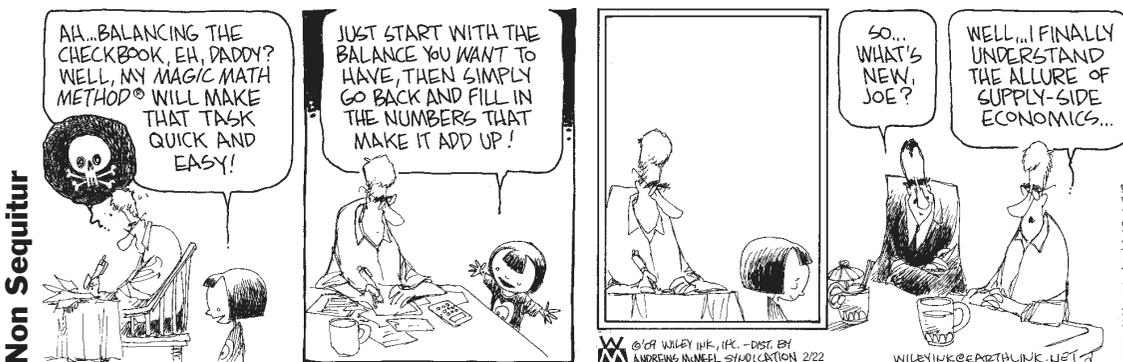
Beetle Bailey



Bizarro



Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

1	2	3	4		5	6	7	8		9	10	11	
12					13					14			
15					16					17			
18					19				20				
			21	22			23	24					
25	26	27					28			29	30	31	
32							33						
34					35		36						
			37				38						
39	40	41			42	43				44	45	46	47
48					49					50			
51					52					53			
54					55					56			

ACROSS

- 1 Enlist again
- 5 Fraud
- 9 Texter's "Wow!"
- 12 Off-white
- 13 Meditative practice
- 14 Queen — ("Halo" singer's nickname)
- 15 Melville mariner
- 16 Castle defense
- 17 "— Spartacus!"
- 18 Barbie, e.g.
- 19 Diner order
- 20 Favorites
- 21 Chapel vow
- 23 Goof up
- 25 Postal delivery
- 28 Gleams
- 32 Venezuelan corn patty
- 33 Cameo shapes
- 34 Tinseltown awards
- 36 Easily attachable
- 37 Letters after Q
- 38 Still
- 39 Depressed state
- 42 "— Town"
- 44 Ancient Dead Sea land
- 48 Whatever
- 49 Writer Morrison

- 50 Flag Day month
- 51 Numbered rd.
- 52 "M*A*S*H" star
- 53 Biblical garden
- 54 Witticism
- 55 "The heat —!"
- 56 Dick Tracy's love

- 20 VIP's transport
- 22 Sweeties
- 24 Avignon's river
- 25 Kung — chicken
- 26 MGM motto start
- 27 VCR button
- 29 Snooze
- 30 "Xanadu" band
- 31 Tax form ID
- 35 Bar seats
- 36 Aleppo native
- 39 MacDonalD's place
- 40 A law — itself
- 41 Russian refusal
- 43 Loosen
- 45 Ranch visitor
- 46 Wallet stuffers section
- 47 Clothing store
- 49 — chi

DOWN

- 1 Peruse
- 2 Reverberate
- 3 Russian river
- 4 Leisure area for everyone
- 5 Emblem
- 6 "Neato!"
- 7 Playing marbles
- 8 Wrestling surface
- 9 Theater award
- 10 Vegan's no-no
- 11 Workout venues

Answer to Previous Puzzle

R	I	M		E	T	C	H		K	A	L	E	
E	T	A		C	E	N	T		R	I	O	T	
C	A	R	L	O	A	N	S		A	R	C	S	
			M	I	N	K			P	U	S	H	Y
A	P	O	L	O		B	T	U	S				
R	E	S	T		L	O	A	N	S	O	U	T	
G	R	E		T	E	A	R	Y		V	C	R	
O	U	T	S	M	A	R	T		D	E	L	E	
				T	E	N	D		P	A	R	A	S
A	S	P	E	N				S	O	F	A		
A	T	O	P			S	M	A	R	T	C	A	R
R	A	M	P			P	E	L	T		T	R	U
E	R	S	E			A	R	T	S		S	A	G

2-22

CRYPTOQUIP

IOJL Z IJLH HG HOJ NWCF
 VSWLLZLR HG VECPOWKJ W
 OGCKJ GN HIG PGSGCK, Z
 RGH W CGWL NGC FB FGLJB.
 Yesterday's Cryptoquip: I SUPPOSE THIS SLIMY VEGETABLE POD IS GOOD ENOUGH, THOUGH NOT VERY REMARKABLE. IT'S MEDI-OKRA.
 Today's Cryptoquip Clue: R equals G

STARS AND STRIPES.

OPINION

Laura Law, Chief Operating Officer
Lt. Col. Katie R. Fidler, Europe commander
John Rodriguez, Europe chief of staff
Lt. Col. Marci Hoffman, Pacific commander

EDITORIAL

Robert H. Reid, Editor in Chief
reid.robert@stripes.com

Sean Moores, Managing Editor for Presentation
moores.sean@stripes.com

Ann Pinson, Digital Managing Editor
pinson.ann@stripes.com

BUREAU STAFF

Europe/Mideast

Erik Slavlin, Europe & Mideast Bureau Chief
slavlin.erik@stripes.com

+49(0)631.3615.9350; DSN (314)583.9350

Pacific

Aaron Kidd, Pacific Bureau Chief
kidd.aaron@stripes.com

+81.42.552.2511 ext. 88380; DSN (315)227.7380

Washington

Joseph Cacchioli, Washington Bureau Chief
cacchioli.joseph@stripes.com

(+1)(202)886-0033

Brian Bowers, Assistant Managing Editor, News
bowers.brian@stripes.com

CIRCULATION

Mideast

David Schultz, District Manager
schultz.david@stripes.com

xsscirculation@stripes.com

+49(0)152.5672.5036; DSN (314)583-9111

Europe

Carlo Aquino, Circulation Manager
aquino.carlo@stripes.com

memberservices@stripes.com

+49(0)631.3615.9136; DSN (314)583.9136

Pacific

Mari Mori, customerhelp@stripes.com
+81-3 6385.3171; DSN (315)227.7333

CONTACT US

Washington

tel: (+1)202.886.0003

633 3rd St. NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20001-3050

Reader letters

letters@stripes.com

Additional contacts

stripes.com/contactus

OMBUDSMAN

Jacqueline Smith

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A Donald Trump outrage that stands apart

BY DAVID IGNATIUS

The Washington Post

Tuesday was a dark day for the United States. President Donald Trump and his administration embraced Russia as a peace partner without demanding that it pay any price for its illegal invasion of Ukraine. And then, in a statement that turned morality upside down, the president blamed Ukraine for causing the war.

Trump is an outrage-generating machine. He appears to take perverse pleasure in saying things that shock, and I normally ignore the daily presidential detonation. But this time was different. The tragic loss of life in Ukraine will mean nothing — and a true resolution of the conflict will be impossible — if we can't distinguish between the attacker and the victim.

"You should have never started it. You could have made a deal," Trump said of the nation that was attacked on Feb. 24, 2022, by a Russian leader who had declared that Ukraine deserved no independence or sovereignty because it wasn't a "real country." Vladimir Putin's casus belli was a chilling act of dehumanization, and it was followed by a brutal assault that would have succeeded but for the brave resistance of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and the Ukrainian people.

Those are the moral and strategic issues at the center of the conflict. But somehow, in Trump's monomania, the war is about him. He has said often, with no evidence, that Russia wouldn't have invaded if he had been president. Now, he's claiming Ukraine spurned his help and brought this existential fight upon itself.

"I could have made a deal for Ukraine that would have given them almost all of the land, everything, almost all of the land, and no peo-

ple would have been killed, and no city would have been demolished, and not one dome would have been knocked down. But they chose not to do it that way," Trump said.

What can he be talking about? Trump had left the White House more than a year before Russia's full-scale invasion. Zelenskyy was eager to negotiate a real peace deal with Russia while Trump was president, overeager, perhaps. But nothing came of it because Putin wanted conquest, not compromise.

Trump compounded the quarrel with Zelenskyy with a snide social media post on Wednesday in which he called the Ukrainian leader "a Dictator without Elections," who "had better move fast or he is not going to have a country." Even Zelenskyy's leading domestic rival, former President Petro Poroshenko, agrees that elections are unwise while the war is going on, but that evidently doesn't matter to Trump.

The president has effectively made Zelenskyy his adversary and, implicitly, moved toward open embrace of Russia's anti-Zelenskyy line. His words are also likely to leave deep scars in Ukraine. One retired U.S. Army officer who's working in Kyiv sent me an anguished message on Wednesday: "What the hell is happening in America? From here, we look like we've lost our minds. We're not just losing our standing with current leaders but we're losing the next generation who are watching and learning that America cannot be trusted."

Trump's fact-free outburst is doubly unfortunate because it undermines what seems to me the good work being done by his subordinates to think about a "fair, enduring, sustainable" peace, as Secretary of State Marco Rubio put it Tuesday in Saudi Arabia. The two essential issues in this negotiation, as national

security adviser Michael Waltz rightly said, will be territory and security guarantees. Ukraine will have to give up some land — if, and only if, it gets assurances that Russia won't attack again.

I wish Rubio and Waltz hadn't met their Russian counterparts in Riyadh so soon and on such an equal footing, ignoring the war crimes that Russia has committed. But that's a disagreement in judgment. At some point, the United States needed to sit down again with Russia and think about a path forward. The Russians, true to form, seemed to be smirking before the formal meeting, as if they had gotten away with something. Indeed, they had.

But once a decision was made to go forward as the administration chose, a confident president would keep his mouth shut while his deputies do the preliminary work of preparing what will be a complicated negotiation. Trump needs to leave them alone as they work with Ukraine and Europe to see whether they can craft a stable agreement that would bring peace after three horrific years of combat, for the benefit of all. If he conducts a daily "weave" on top of the negotiations, splicing in his personal beefs and grudges, the process will become an impossible tangle.

You can almost hear Trump's voice as he seeks to impose a pro-Russia peace agreement on an unhappy Ukraine, arguing: This is all Zelenskyy's fault.

Trump has it right that the time has come to end this terrible war. He put the pieces in place and began the process. But then his monstrous ego became involved, and the peacemaking became bogged down in nonsense. This president, it must be said, is his own worst enemy. If he truly wants peace in Ukraine, he should follow the first rule for negotiators: In public, just shut up.

The Supreme Court can fix this mess of its own making

BY GEORGE F. WILL

The Washington Post

This week, the Supreme Court can begin cleaning up a predictable mess — it was predicted by a justice at the time — that it made with a misbegotten decision 20 years ago. The justices in conference on Friday are set to begin considering whether to decide a case that gives the court an opportunity to overturn *Kelo*, a decision so bad it provoked the passage of many beneficial state laws.

When a regional health care provider announced plans to build a hospital in downtown Utica, N.Y., Bryan Bowers, a local developer, and his partner saw an opportunity. They purchased an unoccupied building, planning to turn it into medical offices, which would have competed with a nearby building occupied by some incorporated cardiologists. They, too, saw an opportunity, one dependent on getting government to employ coercion on their behalf. Wanting to turn the property that Bowers bought into a parking lot, they asked a county government development agency to seize the property using its power of eminent domain. The agency did so, arguing that the cardiologists' corporation would serve community prosperity better than Bowers' plan would.

How did we get to government forcibly transferring property from Party A to Party B, a competitor, because government guesses (read on) that the latter will enhance local "betterment." (And perhaps pay more taxes to the coercing government.) Here is how:

The Constitution — the Fifth Amendment's

takings clause — stipulates "nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation" (emphasis added). At least 48 state constitutions contain a "public use" restriction on government's eminent domain power. The phrase has, however, become frayed.

The Constitution's framers were parsimonious with words and did not scatter adjectives carelessly. "Public use" meant for use by the general public, e.g., roads, bridges, courthouses, etc. But in 1954, in a case arising from D.C., the Supreme Court essentially rewrote "public use" as "public purpose," a category capacious enough to encompass removing "blight." The blight was real in the D.C. neighborhood that the eminent domain case came from: Most dwellings did not have indoor toilets; tuberculosis and syphilis rates were high. Elsewhere, however, private developers, colluding with avaricious governments, began construing "blight" broadly to include cracked sidewalks, loose awning supports and other flimsy pretexts for wielding eminent domain power.

In *Kelo*, the court further diluted the concept of "public use," making it mean "public benefit." The court upheld (5-4) the New London (Conn.) Development Corp.'s condemnation of a not-at-all-blighted blue-collar neighborhood so some unknown bigger taxpayer might benefit. After the condemnation, the Pfizer pharmaceutical corporation proposed, for a while, building a research facility where feral cats now roam.

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, dissenting

with William H. Rehnquist, Clarence Thomas and Antonin Scalia, presciently warned that the consequences of the decision "will not be random." Affluent, articulate, well-lawyered factions would prey upon vulnerable, less sophisticated people.

In *Kelo*, the court tried to weave legal cobwebs that would restrain the locomotives of local governments. It said New London's taking was constitutional only because it was part of a "carefully considered development plan." (Not carefully enough. Twenty-five years later, the land on which the destroyed neighborhood flourished is empty except that construction of a non-taxpaying community center has begun.) And because the identity of the private beneficiary was "not known when the plan was adopted."

In the Bowers case, crony capitalism is undisguised. His property is being taken (with compensation but against his will) for a specific private competitor. So much for the *Kelo* cobwebs. Lower courts construed *Kelo* to justify, even mandate, limitless deference to local governments wielding the life-shattering power of eminent domain.

Since *Kelo*, 47 states have written laws making private-party-to-private-party forced transfers of property more difficult. The Institute for Justice, aka the fourth branch of government, which prods the third (judiciary) to make the other two behave, lost in *Kelo*. It is, however, representing Bowers in his attempt to alter what the court did in *Kelo* when it construed almost to disappearance a right enumerated in the Bill of Rights.

SCOREBOARD/COLLEGE

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Wednesday's men's scores

EAST

Army 76, American 69
Boston U. 68, Loyola (Md.) 66
Colgate 79, Navy 75
Duquesne 73, Fordham 64
Georgetown 93, Providence 72
Holy Cross 74, Lafayette 69, OT
Penn St. 89, Nebraska 72
Richmond 63, La Salle 58
Saint Joseph's 79, George Washington 68
West Virginia 62, Cincinnati 59

SOUTH

Auburn 67, Arkansas 60
Charlotte 78, Temple 72, OT
Chattanooga 91, W. Carolina 86
ETSU 65, UNC-Greensboro 49
Florida St. 74, Miami 66
Furman 80, Samford 72
High Point 83, Charleston Southern 60
Kentucky 82, Vanderbilt 61
Longwood 90, Gardner-Webb 77
Mercer 62, The Citadel 52
N. Iowa 82, Belmont 75
North Carolina 97, NC State 73
Tulane 86, East Carolina 81
VCU 80, UMass 51
Winthrop 81, Presbyterian 77
Wofford 82, VMI 43

MIDWEST

Drake 74, Ill.-Chicago 57
Evansville 79, Indiana St. 74
IU Indianapolis 80, Detroit 71
Illinois St. 82, Bradley 71
Missouri 110, Alabama 98
Murray St. 62, S. Illinois 60
N. Dakota St. 77, S. Dakota St. 68
Oregon 80, Iowa 78
SMU 97, Notre Dame 73
South Dakota 85, St. Thomas (MN) 80
St. John's 82, DePaul 58
Valparaiso 66, Missouri St. 64

SOUTHWEST

North Texas 63, Tulsa 44
Oklahoma St. 104, UCF 95
South Alabama 60, Arkansas St. 56
South Florida 78, UTSA 73
Texas St. 80, Louisiana-Monroe 63
UAB 90, Rice 89

FAR WEST

Boise St. 86, New Mexico 78
Denver 71, Oral Roberts 60
Gonzaga 84, Washington St. 63
Omaha 78, UMKC 66
Rutgers 89, Washington 85, OT
Saint Mary's (Cal.) 79, Portland 66
Utah St. 105, San Jose St. 57

Men's Top 25 schedule

Friday's games

No. 12 Michigan (20-5) vs. No. 14 Michigan St. (20-5)
No. 16 Marquette (19-6) at Villanova (15-11)

Saturday's games

No. 1 Auburn (23-2) vs. Georgia (16-10)
No. 2 Florida (22-3) at LSU (13-12)
No. 3 Duke (22-3) vs. Illinois (17-9) at New York
No. 4 Alabama (21-4) vs. No. 17 Kentucky (17-8)
No. 5 Houston (21-4) vs. No. 8 Iowa St. (20-5)
No. 6 Tennessee (21-5) at No. 7 Texas A&M (20-5)

TENNIS

Dubai Duty Free Championships

Wednesday
At Dubai, United Arab Emirates
Purse: \$3,664,963
Surface: Hardcourt outdoor
Seedings in parentheses
Women's Singles
Round of 32

Mirra Andreeva (12), Russia, def. Marketa Vondrousova, Czechia, 7-5, 6-0.
Sorana Cirstea, Romania, def. Alycia Parks, United States, 3-6, 6-4, 6-1.
Peyton Stearns, United States, def. Zheng Qinwen (7), China, 3-6, 6-4, 6-4.
Emma Navarro (8), United States, def. Belinda Bencic, Switzerland, 7-6 (6), 2-6, 6-3.

Women's Singles

Round of 16
Sofia Kenin, United States, def. Jasmine Paolini (4), Italy, 6-4, 6-0.
Linda Noskova, Czechia, def. Jessica Pegula (5), United States, 6-3, 7-6 (8).
Iga Swiatek (2), Poland, def. Dayana Yastremska, Ukraine, 7-5, 6-0.
Elena Rybakina (6), Kazakhstan, def. Paula Badosa (9), Spain, 4-6, 7-6 (8), 7-6 (2).
Mirra Andreeva (12), Russia, def. Peyton Stearns, United States, 6-1, 6-1.
Clara Tauson, Denmark, def. Aryna Sabalenka (1), Belarus, 6-3, 6-2.
Karolina Muchova (14), Czechia, def. McCartney Kessler, United States, 6-3, 1-6, 7-6 (5).
Sorana Cirstea, Romania, def. Emma Navarro (8), United States, 7-6 (5), 3-6, 7-5.

Women's Doubles

Round of 16
Bethanie Mattek-Sands, United States, and Luisa Stefani, Brazil, def. Irina Khromacheva, Russia, and Anna Danilina (8), Kazakhstan, 7-5, 7-6 (0).
Xu Yifan and Zhaoxuan Yang, China, def. Olivia Nicholls, Britain, and Tereza Mihalikova, Slovakia, 6-3, 6-1.
Alexandra Panova, Russia, and Fanny Stollar, Hungary, def. Sara Errani and Jasmine Paolini (4), Italy, walkover.
Hsieh Su-wei, Taiwan, and Jelena Ostapenko (3), Latvia, def. Desirae Krawczyk,

No. 9 Texas Tech (20-5) vs. West Virginia (15-10)
No. 11 Wisconsin (20-5) vs. Oregon (18-8)
No. 15 Missouri (19-6) at Arkansas (15-10)
No. 18 Clemson (21-5) at SMU (19-6)
No. 19 Arizona (17-8) vs. BYU (17-8)
No. 21 Mississippi St. (18-7) at Oklahoma (16-9)
No. 23 Kansas (17-8) vs. Oklahoma St. (12-13)
No. 24 Mississippi (19-7) at Vanderbilt (17-8)
No. 25 Louisville (20-6) vs. Florida St. (15-10)

Sunday's games

No. 10 St. John's (22-4) vs. UConn (17-8)
No. 13 Purdue (19-7) at Indiana (15-11)
No. 22 Memphis (21-5) vs. FAU (15-10)

Wednesday's women's scores

EAST

Army 63, American 43
Boston U. 55, Loyola (Md.) 38
Buffalo 76, Kent St. 70
Colgate 76, Navy 72, OT
Fordham 56, Duquesne 53
Holy Cross 83, Lafayette 42
Lehigh 73, Bucknell 59
Rhode Island 70, Saint Joseph's 65
Temple 70, Wichita St. 51
UConn 91, Seton Hall 49
UMass 87, Loyola Chicago 62
VCU 81, St. Bonaventure 37
Villanova 70, Georgetown 65

SOUTH

Coastal Carolina 64, Georgia Southern 58
High Point 68, Charleston Southern 52
James Madison 62, Georgia St. 55
Longwood 75, Gardner-Webb 46
Marshall 76, Appalachian St. 58
Memphis 80, UAB 71
Radford 63, UNC-Asheville 39
Richmond 67, George Washington 57
South Alabama 66, Southern Miss. 57
Winthrop 60, Presbyterian 55

MIDWEST

Bowling Green 70, W. Michigan 63
Butler 58, Xavier 54
Cent. Michigan 74, E. Michigan 62
Creighton 65, St. John's 62
Green Bay 59, Cleveland St. 50
Iowa St. 64, Houston 53
Marquette 69, Providence 51
Miami (Ohio) 70, Akron 58
Milwaukee 77, IUPUI 70
Minnesota 74, Purdue 61
Nebraska 94, Oregon 90, OT
Ohio 74, N. Illinois 70
Saint Louis 72, Dayton 63
Toledo 70, Ball St. 66
Wright St. 60, Oakland 53

SOUTHWEST

Cincinnati 59, Texas Tech 56
Texas St. 69, Louisiana-Lafayette 58
Tulsa 73, Tulane 54

FAR WEST

Air Force 82, Utah St. 77
Arizona 65, BYU 57
Baylor 84, Colorado 62
Colorado St. 68, Fresno St. 48
New Mexico 72, San Jose St. 65
S. Utah 49, Abilene Christian 46
San Diego St. 72, Nevada 43
Southern Cal 83, Michigan St. 75
TCU 82, Arizona St. 66
Utah Valley St. 74, Utah Tech 51

United States, and Giuliana Olmos, Mexico, 6-2, 6-2.
Yulia Putintseva, Kazakhstan, and Linda Noskova, Czechia, def. Gabriela Dabrowski, Canada, and Erin Routliffe (2), New Zealand, 4-6, 6-3, 10-2.

Taylor Townsend, United States, and Katerina Siniakova (1), Czechia, def. Lulu Sun, New Zealand, and Peyton Stearns, United States, walkover.
Laura Siegemund, Germany, and Beatriz Haddad Maia, Brazil, def. Asia Muhammad, United States, and Demi Schuurs, Netherlands, 6-2, 6-3.

Zhang Shuai, China, and Kristina Mladenovic, France, def. McCartney Kessler, United States, and Clara Tauson, Denmark, walkover.

Qatar ExxonMobil Open

Wednesday
At Doha, Qatar
Purse: \$2,760,000
Surface: Hardcourt outdoor
Seedings in parentheses
Men's Singles
Round of 16

Alex de Minaur (2), Australia, def. Botic Van de Zandschulp, Netherlands, 6-4, 6-4.
Andrey Rublev (5), Russia, def. Nuno Borges, Portugal, 6-3, 6-4.
Jack Draper (8), Britain, def. Christopher O'Connell, Australia, 6-2, 6-1.
Felix Auger-Aliassime, Canada, def. Hamad Medjedovic, Serbia, walkover.
Daniil Medvedev (4), Russia, def. Zizou Bergs, Belgium, 6-2, 6-1.
Jiri Lehecka, Czechia, def. Fabian Marozsan, Hungary, 6-4, 6-2.
Carlos Alcaraz (1), Spain, def. Luca Nardi, Italy, 6-1, 4-6, 6-3.
Matteo Berrettini, Italy, def. Tallon Griekspoor, Netherlands, 7-6 (4), 6-7 (6), 6-4.

Men's Doubles

Quarterfinals
Neal Skupski and Joe Salisbury, Britain, def. Michael Venus, New Zealand, and Nikola Pietrangeli, Croatia, 4-6, 6-3, 10-5.
Harri Heliouvaara, Finland, and Henry Patten (2), Britain, def. Fernando Verdasco, Spain, and Novak Djokovic, Serbia, 7-5, 6-4.

PRO SOCCER

MLS

Western Conference

	W	L	T	Pts	GF	GA
Austin FC	0	0	0	0	0	0
Colorado	0	0	0	0	0	0
FC Dallas	0	0	0	0	0	0
Houston	0	0	0	0	0	0
LAFC	0	0	0	0	0	0
LA Galaxy	0	0	0	0	0	0
Minn. United	0	0	0	0	0	0
Portland	0	0	0	0	0	0
Real Salt Lake	0	0	0	0	0	0
St Louis City	0	0	0	0	0	0
San Diego FC	0	0	0	0	0	0
San Jose	0	0	0	0	0	0
Seattle	0	0	0	0	0	0
Sporting KC	0	0	0	0	0	0
Vancouver	0	0	0	0	0	0

Eastern Conference

	W	L	T	Pts	GF	GA
Atlanta	0	0	0	0	0	0
CF Montréal	0	0	0	0	0	0
Charlotte FC	0	0	0	0	0	0
Chicago	0	0	0	0	0	0
Columbus	0	0	0	0	0	0
D.C. United	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cincinnati	0	0	0	0	0	0
Inter Miami CF	0	0	0	0	0	0
Nashville	0	0	0	0	0	0
New England	0	0	0	0	0	0
NYC FC	0	0	0	0	0	0
New York	0	0	0	0	0	0
Orlando City	0	0	0	0	0	0
Philadelphia	0	0	0	0	0	0
Toronto FC	0	0	0	0	0	0

Note: Three points for victory, one point for tie.

Saturday, Feb. 22

Minnesota at Los Angeles FC
New York City FC at Miami
CF Montréal at Atlanta
New York at Cincinnati
Chicago at Columbus
Toronto FC at D.C. United
Philadelphia at Orlando City
Sporting Kansas City at Austin FC
FC Dallas at Houston
New England at Nashville
Colorado at St Louis City
Real Salt Lake at San Jose
Charlotte FC at Seattle

Sunday, Feb. 23

Vancouver at Portland
San Diego FC at LA Galaxy

DEALS

Wednesday's transactions

BASEBALL

MAJOR LEAGUE BASEBALL
American League
CLEVELAND GUARDIANS — Agreed to terms with LHP John Means on a one-year contract. Placed 1B David Fry on the 60-day IL.

KANSAS CITY ROYALS — Agreed to terms with RHP Ross Stripling on a minor league contract.

National League

COLORADO ROCKIES — Agreed to terms with LHP Scott Alexander on a one-year contract. Designated INF Aaron Schunk for assignment.

WASHINGTON NATIONALS — Agreed to terms with RHP Lucas Sims on a one-year contract. Placed RHP Mason Thompson on the 60-day IL.

BASKETBALL

National Basketball Association
CHICAGO BULLS — Waived F Adam Sanoogo. Signed G Jahmir Young to a two-way contract.

GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS — Signed F Kevin Knox II and G Yuri Collins to 10-day contracts.
TORONTO RAPTORS — Signed G Jared Rhoden to a 10-day contract.

FOOTBALL

National Football League
BALTIMORE RAVENS — Re-signed WR Keith Kirkwood to a contract extension.
LAS VEGAS RAIDERS — Signed WR Kyle Philips to a contract.

NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS — Released LB Sione Takitaki.
NEW ORLEANS SAINTS — Named Phil Galiano special teams coordinator.

PHILADELPHIA EAGLES — Named Kevin Patullo offensive coordinator.

HOCKEY

National Hockey League
CALGARY FLAMES — Recalled Ds Yan Kuznetsov and Ilya Solovoyov from Calgary (AHL).

MINNESOTA WILD — Sent G Dylan Ferguson to Iowa (AHL).
SEATTLE KRACEN — Recalled G Ales Stezka from Coaches Valley (AHL).

SOCCER

Major League Soccer
HOUSTON DYNAMO FC — Singed M Nicolas Lodeiro to a one-year contract.
LA GALAXY — Acquired F Matheus Nascimento on loan from Brazilian Série A side Botafogo for the 2025 season. Placed M Sean Davis on waivers.



JOSE CARLOS FAJARDO, BAY AREA NEWS GROUP/AP

The Tuskegee bench erupts after a 3-pointer against Morehouse. HBCUs worry they will need to make massive cuts if forced to put hundreds of student-athletes on their payrolls.

HBCU leagues ask Congress for help

By CLIFF BRUNT

Associated Press

Just a few years after sports at historically Black schools were thriving, many now are merely surviving.

HBCUs are seeking help before things get worse. The commissioners of four major historically Black conferences have sent a letter to the Congressional Black Caucus requesting a meeting and voicing concerns that the growing push to make athletes school employees could potentially destroy their athletic programs if it continues.

Anthony Holloman, commissioner of the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Conference (SIAC) said Yvette Clark, chairwoman of the Congressional Black Caucus, has responded with an offer to meet with the commissioners later this month. The SIAC, Central Intercollegiate Athletic Association (CIAA), Mid-Eastern Athletic Conference (MEAC) and Southwestern Athletic Conference (SWAC) cover 48 Division I and Division II HBCU programs and roughly 15,000 athletes.

The commissioners worry their schools will need to make massive cuts if forced to put athletes on their payrolls. Athletes would have to pay taxes on their incomes and scholarships and the schools would be taxed for employing them. That would make college less affordable for students and come at significant cost to a group of schools that do not generate significant athletic revenue.

The letter also says a growing patchwork of state laws are also creating disparities among the states their programs are in, leading to confusion for prospective students.

“To ensure that college sports broadly — and HBCU sports especially — can continue to thrive, it’s essential that Congress allow for consistent and nimble national go-

vernance and affirm that student-athletes are not designated as employees of their universities,” the letter said.

The conferences have said their institutions rely heavily on school appropriated funds and donations. Some of those are drying up — Holloman said another issue for HBCUs is that corporations are eliminating divisions that have focused on diversity, equity and inclusion, taking away the valuable donations that come with them.

Holloman said some schools have diversified revenue streams to try and compete. For example, the SIAC, the CIAA and the SWAC have deals with the Allen Media Group that allows them to make money from streaming their events on HBCU Go.

Still, he said there is a large disparity between the HBCUs and Power Four programs’ income from broadcast rights. Changes in name, image and likeness (NIL) rules have created a greater disparity between the Power Four programs and the HBCUs. Holloman said both issues and the length of time the transfer portal is open makes retention difficult for HBCU programs.

Just a few years ago, HBCU athletics were on the rise. Deion Sanders’ success coaching Jackson State drew national interest, and the rise in social awareness that followed George Floyd’s murder fueled a spike in donations that helped several programs.

“While there have been historic changes recently in collegiate sports to support student-athletes overall, opportunities for our predominantly Black students at our institutions are at risk,” the letter said. “Pending regulatory decisions and litigation threaten to change the face of college sports devoid of our input and, more importantly, without the voices of our student athletes.”

SOCCER

Players, coaches favor shifting MLS to global calendar

BY ANNE M. PETERSON
Associated Press

As Major League Soccer readies to open its 30th season, some players and coaches are advocating for a fall-to-spring calendar, a major move that would align the league with its international counterparts.

Such a shift would give MLS a more competitive position for player transfers, while also freeing up players for club duty during the summer, when many major global tournaments take place.

But there are obvious challenges, like the weather during a season that begins in late February and runs through the playoffs to December.

Teams like Minnesota United and the Chicago Fire already face downright hostile weather during the winter months. On Tuesday night, when the Colorado Rapids beat LAFC in a CONCACAF Champions Cup match in Denver, temperatures hovered in the single digits. Frigid temperatures also greeted the Champions Cup match on Wednesday in Kansas between Lionel Messi's Inter Miami and Sporting KC.

"We experienced the game in Chicago last year at the beginning where it was 15-10 degrees cold. But I think once the players got

going, you still saw a game with intensity and tempo and, you know, I don't think you see it at the same level in a lot of those summer matchups. I know it's not (popular) across the board, but I like the idea," said FC Cincinnati coach Pat Noonan.

With a warming climate, some of those midsummer games in places like Texas become difficult, too. Last season, a match in Austin was pushed back because of extreme heat.

MLS opens its new season Saturday, and it certainly won't be balmy in those northern states. But the current schedule allows the league to mostly avoid the months when the NFL and the college football postseason rule.

"MLS has done a great job of understanding what the United States is like," Seattle Sounders coach Brian Schmetzer said. "It's just bigger and it's got more diversity and climate and all of those things. And you have to take all that into consideration, because we won't be able to play in some markets during those winter months."

If MLS aligned with Europe, the season would probably open in mid-August with a break in mid-December before resuming in February. The championship would likely be in May.



JOE MAHONEY/AP

MLS teams like the Colorado Rapids would likely have weather-related issues with moving to a fall-to-spring calendar, as they would have to deal with even more frigid temperatures and snow during the winter months.

Noonan and Houston Dynamo general manager Pat Onstad both said aligning with international leagues would make it easier for teams to bring in top talent.

"This is a difficult time of year to go get players. As our league gets better and better, we're trying to get now the best players from other clubs. And if you do that in the January window, you're destroying the other club's season. So it becomes really difficult until we match up with the rest of the world. So from a recruitment stand, it'll be a big change if we can do this as a league," Onstad said at the league's media day.

Complicating matters is MLS'

already crowded schedule — and top players called in and out of their national teams during the busy summer months.

The U.S. will host the Club World Cup from June 15 to July 13. Inter Miami and the Sounders will represent MLS in the 38-team field, with games to be played across 11 U.S. cities.

There's also the ongoing CONCACAF Champions Cup and this summer's Leagues Cup featuring teams from MLS and Mexico's Liga MX. League teams will also participate in the U.S. Open Cup.

St. Louis goalkeeper Roman Bürki said he is in favor of aligning with the European schedule. Barring that, he suggested that

perhaps the Leagues Cup — played in the thick of the summer — could be moved to the preseason and most players could be given more time off during the summer.

Before the MLS final between the LA Galaxy and New York Red Bulls in December, Commissioner Don Garber was asked whether the league was considering an international calendar.

"Making those changes is something we've got to be very, very thoughtful about. I do think that we are considering, more than ever before, this opportunity to change. But it's not something that we're ready to talk about right now," Garber said.

US women using SheBelieves Cup to foster young talent

BY KRISTIE RIEKEN
Associated Press

HOUSTON — Nineteen-year-old Claire Hutton is one of four players on the U.S. women's national team roster for the start of the SheBelieves Cup this week who have never appeared in a game for the team.

The defensive midfielder for the Kansas City Current said she "gets chills" just thinking about the opportunity she's getting to compete at this level.

"It's amazing," she said Wednesday. "Early on in my career just to get this experience under me and to be around such amazing players and people seeing their habits on and off the field is just going to help me keep growing as a person, as a player, and hopefully make the most of my career."

Hutton and the United States met Colombia on Thursday night in the second of two games in Houston to open the 10th annual edition of the tournament, which



REED HOFFMANN/AP

Kansas City Current midfielder Claire Hutton, right, tries to dribble around Portland Thorns FC midfielder Jessie Fleming during an NWSL match at CPKC Stadium last March in Kansas City, Mo.

also includes Australia and Japan. The three-city event also features games in San Diego and Glendale, Ariz., and runs through next Wednesday.

Each team will play one game in each city, with the winner deter-

mined by points. The U.S. has won the tournament seven times, including in each of the past five years.

The inclusion of Hutton and fellow newcomers Tara McKeown, Gisele Thompson and Michelle

Cooper is part of coach Emma Hayes' plan to make developing talent a priority ahead of the Women's World Cup qualifiers next year.

Hayes said she sat down with the team's leadership group this week to explain the importance of growing the team from within.

"But there's no point talking about the development of a program without providing opportunities for people to do it," she said. "But with that comes the risk, and of course it won't look polished in its entirety. But I trust the process and I've been a coach for a long, long time to know that doing it this way will give us a much better chance down the road to compete at the top end."

Cooper, a 22-year-old forward who also plays for the Current, said she and Hutton have talked at length about what it means for them to be included on the team for this tournament.

"I'm super glad that we get to share this experience," she said.

"Because we both are super happy that Emma's investing in the youth and making sure that we close the gap between the full team and the U-23's and all the youth teams underneath that and making sure we're all in the same slate."

While the new additions to the team are thrilled to be learning from the established players, the veterans are also getting a boost from the infusion of young talent. Veteran midfielder Sam Coffey said the young players have added an "exciting vibe" to their preparations for the tournament.

"There's so much opportunity for us as a team to continue to deepen our player pool, to continue to layer in our understanding of tactics and the way we want to play," Coffey said. "And so, I think it's been such a cool experience to kind of help bring some of the newer and younger ones along. I know that's something none of us take lightly and we love kind of the aspect of leadership that that brings."

NHL/COLLEGE FOOTBALL

NHL scoreboard

Eastern Conference							
Atlantic Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Florida	57	34	20	3	71	192	165
Toronto	55	33	20	2	68	169	156
Tampa Bay	55	31	20	4	66	197	153
Ottawa	56	29	23	4	62	158	156
Detroit	55	28	22	5	61	160	171
Boston	57	27	24	6	60	157	182
Montreal	56	25	26	5	55	163	194
Buffalo	54	22	27	5	49	171	185
Metropolitan Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Washington	55	36	11	8	80	196	140
Carolina	56	33	19	4	70	184	154
New Jersey	57	31	20	6	68	175	142
Columbus	56	26	22	8	60	184	186
N.Y. Rangers	55	27	24	4	58	165	168
N.Y. Islanders	55	25	23	7	57	152	162
Pittsburgh	57	23	25	9	55	164	201
Philadelphia	57	24	26	7	55	162	192
Western Conference							
Central Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Winnipeg	56	39	14	3	81	202	134
Dallas	55	35	18	2	72	182	139
Minnesota	56	33	19	4	70	163	159
Colorado	57	33	22	2	68	186	174
Utah	56	24	23	9	57	158	170
St. Louis	56	25	26	5	55	154	171
Nashville	54	19	28	7	45	144	179
Chicago	55	17	31	7	41	149	191
Pacific Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Edmonton	55	34	17	4	72	182	152
Vegas	56	33	17	6	72	185	155
Los Angeles	53	29	17	7	65	151	136
Vancouver	55	26	18	11	63	155	166
Calgary	55	26	21	8	60	148	165
Anaheim	54	24	24	6	54	137	165
Seattle	57	24	29	4	52	169	183
San Jose	57	15	35	7	37	148	216

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.

Saturday's games

Minnesota at Detroit
Edmonton at Philadelphia
Washington at Pittsburgh
N.Y. Rangers at Buffalo
Colorado at Nashville
Dallas at New Jersey
Seattle at Florida
Anaheim at Boston
Carolina at Toronto
Chicago at Columbus
Montreal at Ottawa
Winnipeg at St. Louis
Utah at Los Angeles
Vancouver at Vegas

Sunday's games

Minnesota at Detroit
Dallas at New Jersey
Seattle at Florida
Anaheim at Boston
Carolina at Toronto
Chicago at Columbus
Montreal at Ottawa
Winnipeg at St. Louis
Utah at Los Angeles
Vancouver at Vegas

Monday's games

San Jose at Winnipeg
Vegas at Los Angeles

Wings unfazed by schedule ahead

By TED KUFFAN

Detroit News

DETROIT — The Red Wings have 27 games left this season and those 27 taken as a whole aren't easy.

In fact, Detroit owns the toughest remaining schedule in the NHL, with opponents holding a .587 win percentage.

Included in those games are three against Carolina and two games each against Eastern Conference-leading Washington, Vegas, Minnesota and defending Stanley Cup champion Florida.

To end an eight-year streak of missing the playoffs, the Wings are going to earn it navigating through that kind of schedule. They currently hold the second and final Eastern Conference wild-card spot, leading Columbus and Boston by one point each (61-60).

But inside the locker room, Detroit isn't necessarily bothered by the strength of schedule discussion. Parity is a popular buzzword in the NHL, and the Wings have seen that come to fruition over the last several seasons.

"Anyone can beat anyone on any given night," said forward Andrew Copp, repeating a cliché that does ring true. "We played Edmonton real well this year and it's maybe the No. 1 team in the league. (Then) there are some games maybe we shouldn't have lost that we did lose."

Two losses to San Jose and one to Buffalo stand out in that regard.

What Detroit is banking on is the current version of the team, the one that has gone 15-4-1 under Todd McLellan since McLellan replaced Derek Lalonde on Dec. 26, is a more accurate version of the Wings, and a team capable of navigating the tough schedule.

"We've been two different teams so far," Copp said. "One before Christmas, and one after Christmas. The one after Christmas has been playing real good and beaten a lot of the top teams in the league."



DUANE BURLESON/AP

Red Wings goaltender Cam Talbot (39) and defenseman Simon Edvinsson (77) celebrate with teammates after a 2-0 win over the Lightning. Detroit is trying to end an eight-year streak of missing the playoffs.

"Going into (league-leading) Winnipeg and winning, Edmonton and Washington we beat at home, those are three of the top teams in the league that we have beaten. There are games we shouldn't have lost. But I don't think we're afraid of the schedule by any means."

Who this team is will be determined in these remaining 27 games. They believe an identity hasn't fully been determined or forged yet, but coach Todd McLellan feels it will be by the end of the regular season.

"Who are we? That's going to get answered in the next 27 games," McLellan said. "Are we the October-to-December, or December-to-February (Red Wings)? Who are we? It's not going to be easy or perfect. Are we a playoff team? Close to a playoff team? Or a distant (miss)? We have to figure this out, and part of this is the belief system we've talked about, and de-

velop an identity and playing towards it."

Impressive pace

Sometimes the second day of practice after a long layoff, which Detroit has had with the ongoing 4 Nations Face-Off tournament going on, can be a little difficult for everyone.

But McLellan was pleased with the pace and intensity of Wednesday's practice, almost 24 hours after an enthusiastic return to the ice.

"Usually the second day can be a little tougher than the first; you still have a lot of crap left in your legs from the day before," McLellan said. "The intensity was just as high, and it was designed that way, and they battled to the end."

"No complaints about that. The ice got chewed up pretty quick, so passing was a little ragged, but that's OK because that's like playing late in the game."

McLellan has talked about these four days of practice as a mini-training camp and it certainly has felt like it.

"It's an opportunity to grow our game a little bit, spend more time on concepts that we think we need," McLellan said. "We can go harder in practice in that we don't have to conserve anything, no three games in four nights with travel or anything like that. We've gone hard the last couple of days and we'll begin to taper (heading into the weekend)."

The Wings don't have a game until Saturday when they host the Wild, then entertain Anaheim the next day, before playing in Minnesota again on Tuesday. Three games in four nights, which will get a team back into the swing of things quickly.

"The answer will come Saturday and Sunday to see whether we did what we had to do to prepare," McLellan said.

SEC, Big Ten prepared to push for CFP seeding changes

By BRETT MARTEL

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — The Big Ten and Southeastern Conference commissioners said Wednesday they will push for something closer to "straight seeding" in the College Football Playoff next season to give less of a break to lesser-ranked conference champs and better reflect how teams are ranked by the playoff selection committee.

"I'm prepared to vote for seeding change," SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey said. "But it has to be unanimous."

At least for next season, anyway.

Sankey and Big Ten commissioner Tony Petitti, speaking after joint meetings in New Orleans with their conferences' 34 athletic directors, acknowledged that their leagues

ultimately will be driving changes in the CFP format after the 2025 season.

However, they declined to address details of anything related to 2026 or beyond that might have been discussed — topics that likely include expansion of the playoffs and more automatic bids for their own conferences.

Sankey said those negotiations should include leaders of all the conferences, who meet next week in Dallas at a CFP gathering, but that the SEC and Big Ten can certainly be trusted to keep everyone's interests in mind.

"If I was just representing the SEC, we'd still have a four-team playoff," said Sankey, whose own conference's addition last year of Texas and Oklahoma was part of a nation-

wide shift that added uncertainty to college sports. "It was neither our idea, nor was it our commentary, nor was it our need — even post-expansion."

"My view is the 12-team playoff last year helped everybody's regular season, or brought people into the conversation. From my seat, we've deployed leadership in a responsible way."

Last college football season was the first under the expanded 12-team CFP format.

While it was largely viewed as a success, a provision that rewarded byes to the four highest-ranked major conference champions drew scrutiny after all four of those teams — Arizona State, Boise State, Georgia and Oregon — lost their CFP openers in the quarterfinals.

Ohio State and Notre Dame each won three playoff games before the Buckeyes knocked off the Fighting Irish in the title game.

Petitti said both conferences are in favor of going to "straight seeding," so that "there's no difference between rankings and seedings."

"The committee just puts in for the 12 teams next year — just says, 'These are the 12 teams in the order that they fall,' based on their judgment and the criteria they're given in the selection room," Petitti said.

An exception still would occur when one of the five highest-ranked conference champions is ranked outside the top 12. That team would get in next season, as Clemson (No. 16 CFP) did last season.

MLB

Jays' Springer likely to share leadoff spot, will play in left field

Associated Press

DUNEDIN, Fla. — His spot at the top of the batting order no longer secure and his statistics trending downward, George Springer has plenty to prove as he enters the penultimate season of his six-year deal with the Toronto Blue Jays.

Manager John Schneider plans to give the veteran right fielder some reps in left field this season and said the leadoff spot will likely be “a fluid situation.”

“He’s open to anything and everything, which is awesome,” Schneider said. “So it’s just trying to use him appropriately.”

Springer, 35, posted strong numbers in his first year with Toronto — an injury-riddled 2021 season — but his statistics have been on a steady decline since.

He hit .267 with 25 homers and 76 RBIs over 133 games in 2022. A year later, he played in 154 games and hit .258 with 21 homers and 72 RBIs.

The four-time All-Star endured a terrible first half last season. He was able to pull his numbers up but still hit just .220 over 145 games with 19 homers and 56 RBIs.

“Obviously I did not do what I had hoped to do last year,” Springer said. “I understand that, I accept that, I acknowledge that. I think a lot of it is just understanding what went wrong, how it went wrong and understanding how to get yourself out of it slowly but surely.”

Springer chose not to reveal specifics of any adjustments he has made as camp returned to normal Wednesday on the heels of the failed Vladimir Guerrero Jr. contract extension talks. The 25-year-old slugger plans to become a free agent after this season.

“I just kind of watched it from afar,” Springer said. “I know who he is, I know what kind of player he is, but the most important thing is

he’s a great human.

“He’s here to win and obviously a guy like that on your team — for however long — is great.”

After spending his first seven seasons with the Houston Astros, Springer, the 2017 World Series MVP, signed a team-record \$150 million deal with the Blue Jays in early 2021.

His arrival signaled the franchise was aiming for big things after a wild-card round appearance in the pandemic-shortened 2020 season. Springer has helped Toronto return to the playoffs in two of the next three years, but the team didn’t make the Divisional Series.

With a veteran-heavy starting rotation and homegrown players Guerrero and Bo Bichette entering contract years, the pressure is on the Blue Jays to take advantage of an open competitive window that could slam shut if there’s a weak first half.

“I’m very confident in the group that we have and the mentality,” Springer said. “It isn’t about tomorrow. It’s about now and I think guys understand that.”

Springer’s engaging personality and jovial style helps keep things light and energetic around the player development complex.

“He’s a veteran guy who has been through a lot,” Schneider said. “He knows when to push the envelope and knows when to back off. He knows when to have a little bit of urgency and knows when to not panic.”

Schneider expects he’ll “mix and match” in the leadoff spot this season depending on the opposition and pitching matchups. That list, at least as of Wednesday, included Springer, Bichette, Will Wagner and Andres Gimenez.

“There’s a handful of guys who can do it and we’re just going to try to maximize (it) each night,” Schneider said.



DARRYL WEBB/AP

Under the watchful eye of manager Dave Roberts (30), Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher Roki Sasaki throws during his first live bullpen session during spring training practice Wednesday in Phoenix.

Some opposing players laud Dodgers' big-spending push

BY DAVID BRANDT

Associated Press

GLENDALE, Ariz. — Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred shared conflicting feelings about the big-spending Los Angeles Dodgers this week, praising the franchise’s competitive spirit in one breath before worrying about the financial disparity they’ve created in the next.

Players elsewhere around the league don’t seem nearly as conflicted.

“Teams spending money is never bad for baseball and never bad for players. Ever. In any situation,” Athletics slugger Brent Rooker said.

If Manfred is looking to find some sympathy from Major League Baseball’s rank-and-file regarding his worry over the sport’s financial health, it’s probably not going to come from the guys on the field.

MLB is the only major professional sport in America that doesn’t have a salary cap, though there are luxury tax penalties for passing certain spending thresholds. Last season, Los Angeles had a \$353 million luxury tax payroll and had to pay a \$103 million tax. The Athletics had the lowest luxury tax payroll at just under \$84 million.

The Dodgers’ spending didn’t slow this offseason. Los Angeles signed two-time Cy Young Award winner Blake Snell to a \$182 million, five-year deal and also made sizable investments in players like Teoscar Hernández, Michael Conforto, Tanner Scott, Kirby Yates and Roki Sasaki.

That came one year after the organization splurged on more than \$1 billion in commitments to Japanese stars Shohei Ohtani and Yoshinobu Yamamoto.

The Dodgers’ spending has dwarfed all but a few franchises. Opposing players might be envious of those fat paychecks, but it’s hard to find them complaining.

Even Manfred — who said he’s received emails from fans worried about competitive balance — can’t fault LA’s approach.

“The Dodgers have gone out and done everything possible, always within the rules that currently exist, to put the best possible team on the field and that’s a great thing for the game,” Manfred said on Tuesday. “That type of competitive spirit is what people want to see.”

Walker Buehler threw the final pitch of the 2024 season, recording the last out for Los Angeles in its World Series-clinching Game 5 victory. He left the Dodgers to sign a \$21.05 million, one-year deal with the Boston Red Sox during the winter, but the right-hander isn’t about to talk smack about his former employer.

The 30-year-old knows exactly why players are flocking to Chavez Ravine.

“I don’t think it’s odd,” he said. “It’s a first-class organization and obviously coming off a huge World Series and, I think on top of that, you layer in that on a team right now where there’s probably four or five Hall of Famers, I think it’s an attractive place to play.”

That doesn’t mean there isn’t some awe from players about the

formidable roster LA has built thanks to its deep pockets.

“I worked out with some guys that ended up signing with the Dodgers and was like, at a certain point, ‘I didn’t know they had room on the 40-man (roster),’” Red Sox pitcher Patrick Sandoval said.

The Arizona Diamondbacks are one of the teams trying to keep pace with Los Angeles in the NL West. They signed ace right-hander Corbin Burnes to a \$210 million, six-year deal in December, but they are still projected to have a payroll that will be roughly half the size of the Dodgers.

“I don’t think it’s unfair at all,” D-backs manager Torey Lovullo said. “They’re within the rules, they’re doing what they have to do to get the best players on the field. When I was a kid, it was the Yankees, remember? George Steinbrenner was going crazy with his spending and it yielded World Championships. That’s what we’re all chasing.”

Third baseman Max Muncy is in the eighth season with LA and said a big payroll certainly helps to build a talented roster, but it doesn’t mean much once the season starts. He points to 2023, when the Diamondbacks swept the Dodgers out of the postseason in the NL Division Series despite having a much smaller payroll.

“This sport is really tough,” Muncy said. “It doesn’t matter what kind of roster that you have. Time after time, teams have shown that you get into the playoffs and anything can happen.”



NATHAN DENETTE, THE CANADIAN PRESS/AP

Toronto Blue Jays outfielder George Springer catches a ball in the outfield during spring training in Dunedin, Fla., on Wednesday.

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Klavzar steps up for No. 2 Florida

By MARK LONG
Associated Press

GAINESVILLE, Fla. — Urban Klavzar was an afterthought when the season began, the fifth guard on Florida's talented roster. He even missed the first three games while awaiting NCAA clearance.

Once he did play — getting on the court in mop-up duty — he looked more like a walk-on than a starter-in-waiting. He missed 23 of 33 shots, hitting just 3 of 16 from 3-point range, and had coaches and teammates wondering what was going on with a guy who had been so difficult to defend in practice.

Klavzar wasn't sure, either. But he kept working — and waiting. He finally got a chance when starting guards Walter Clayton Jr. (ankle) and Alijah Martin (hip pointer) missed time. And Klavzar has since made himself indispensable for the second-ranked Gators (23-3, 10-3 Southeastern Conference).

He has hit 11 of 18 shots during Florida's five-game winning streak, including 9 of 13 from behind the arc. He drained consecutive 3s in a win against Vanderbilt in early February and then went 3-for-3 from distance at top-ranked Auburn four days later, including two in a 13-second span that helped the Gators pull off one of the biggest upsets of the season.

On Tuesday night against Oklahoma, his coast-to-coast drive in the final seconds of the first half was as impressive a play as any of the ones made by Florida's Big Three: Clayton, Martin and Will Richard.

"He's really raised his level,"

Gators coach Todd Golden said. "We just have a deep team, and we've had a bunch of guys step up when their numbers are called."

Klavzar finished with a career-high 10 points in 22 minutes in an 85-63 romp over the Sooners. His 3-pointer from the corner in the first half started a 17-3 run that turned a six-point game into a rout and left Oklahoma coach Porter Moser shaking his head the rest of the night.

"They have the pieces to win it all," Moser said. "They defend very hard. They protect the rim. They shoot it. They have really good positional size. They've got five guys who have great range. I think they're one of about five or six teams that could be playing on that last weekend, without a doubt."

"Your head just explodes with the level of (talent) with a handful of these teams, and Florida is absolutely right there with the best of this league."

No one should be stunned to see the Gators with their highest ranking since entering the NCAA Tournament at No. 1 in 2014. Florida's starting backcourt — Clayton, Martin and Richard — has played a combined 400 collegiate games. And big men Alex Condon, Thomas Haugh and Rueben Chinyelu provide plenty of punch in the paint.

But Florida's depth has been the shocker. Backup guard Denzel Aberdeen has made huge strides in three years under Golden. Center Micah Handlogten, after weeks of waffling, chose to give up a medical redshirt and play 11 months after gruesomely breaking his left leg — and is showing



ALAN YOUNGBLOOD/AP

Florida guard Urban Klavzar drives past Oklahoma guard Jeremiah Fears during the second half Tuesday in Gainesville, Fla. Klavzar went from the fifth guard on the Gators roster to an indispensable part of the team.

flashes of returning to form.

And then there's Klavzar, who is considered a sophomore because he played 13 games at Catholic University of Murcia in Spain during the 2022-23 season.

"You always got to be ready and patient, even if you can't hit shots or if you're not getting a lot of minutes, I think you always got to stay

ready," Klavzar said. "Got to be professional, and I think patience is one of the most important things in basketball."

The 6-foot-1 guard from Domzale, Slovenia, has five assists, four rebounds and three steals in the last five games while delivering eye-popping plays on both ends of the floor.

"It's definitely hard to do what he's doing," Clayton said. "But Urb's in the gym all the time; Urb's getting shots up. It's definitely hard. I think he's doing his best to stay warm over there for whenever he does come in. He's staying ready. I'm glad he knocking down shots; it's been big for us."

Missouri coach takes PA mic to head off court storming

By DAVID SOLOMON
Associated Press

COLUMBIA, Mo. — After Missouri fans stormed the court following a victory over then-No. 1 Kansas on Dec. 8, Tigers coach Dennis Gates made sure there wouldn't be an encore after the No. 15 Tigers beat the No. 4 Alabama Crimson Tide 110-98 on

Wednesday night.

Gates called a timeout with 1.5 seconds remaining, and grabbed the public address microphone to emphatically tell the capacity crowd of 15,061 to stay off the court.

"Please, do not rush the court! Please, do not rush the court!" Gates said to the fans.

That was in sharp contrast to the Jay-

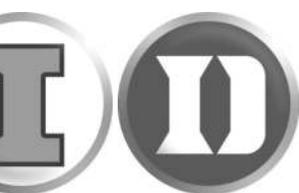
hawks game where Gates called a late timeout to give the Kansas bench personnel a chance to safely leave the court, and was openly critical of Missouri for making an announcement for fans not to rush the court.

The Tigers were fined \$250,000 after the Jayhawks game, and face a \$500,000 fine for a second offense. In Southeastern Confe-

rence play, the fine is paid to the opposing school.

"We need that money to go to NIL," Gates said. "We don't need to be getting fines out there. But, to safety, I hope that becomes a normal thing when you are excited, which I credit our crowd for being. I just didn't want us to rush the court and get a fine."

On AFN

									
No. 6 Tennessee (21-5) at No. 7 Texas A&M (20-6) AFN-Sports 6 p.m. Saturday CET 2 a.m. Sunday JKT		No. 8 Iowa State (21-5) at No. 5 Houston (22-4) AFN-Sports 8 p.m. Saturday CET 4 a.m. Sunday JKT		Georgia (16-10) at No. 1 Auburn (24-2) AFN-Atlantic 10 p.m. Saturday CET 6 a.m. Sunday JKT		No. 17 Kentucky (18-8) at No. 4 Alabama (21-5) AFN-Sports 12 a.m. Sunday CET 8 a.m. Sunday JKT		Illinois (17-10) at No. 3 Duke (23-3) AFN-Atlantic 2 a.m. Sunday CET 10 a.m. Sunday JKT	

NBA

30: Nuggets coach Malone says big man better than ever

FROM PAGE 48

This season, he's showing off the latest wrinkle to his game — long-range shooting. He's hitting a career-best 45% from beyond the 3-point line.

"He is playing the best basketball of his life," Malone said. "At his heart, he's still the same person. He's still Nikola Jokic from Sombor, Serbia. He's never forgotten where he's come from, or who's helped him get here."

Given his style of play, Malone believes Jokic could last in the league at an elite level for a while.

"The way (Jokic) dominates the game is with intelligence and skill, not athleticism," Malone said. "He's not driving down the lane and dunking on people every night. So I think that bodes well for his longevity."

That is, if the desire remains strong. He said that sticking around long enough so his kids can see him play is, "not going to be a factor for me."

Jokic returned to town after competing for Chuck's Global Stars in the All-Star Game last weekend. He had two points in 10 minutes as his squad lost to Shaq's OGs in the final.

It wasn't exactly his idea of rest and relaxation.

"Part of the business, part of the job," Jokic said of his trip to San Francisco for the weekend festivities. "I would rather be somewhere else ... it's a blessing and a curse."

Now, it's back to work for the Nuggets, who have won eight in a row and are currently the third seed in the Western Conference.

They're returning to health, too, with Michael Porter Jr. (hamstring), Russell Westbrook (hamstring) and Aaron Gordon (calf) all going through practice Wednesday. The only player missing was Peyton Watson (knee).

They have 27 games remaining to tinker with lineups and find the right combinations for a playoff push.

"People say, 'Oh, that's a tough decision,'" Malone said. "I look at it the opposite way. I'm really fortunate to have a tough decision to make where you have quality players that have really impacted winning. It's never about one player. It's about what's best for our team."

That's the attitude of Jokic, too.

"He's our heartbeat," said Julian Strawther, who took part in the Rising Stars event over the weekend. "It's not always being a vocal leader but leading by example with the things he does and how hard he works. Having him on our side, it makes us feel a lot better."



WILLIAM LIANG/AP

Lakers guard Luka Doncic celebrates after making a shot against the Charlotte Hornets on Wednesday night in Los Angeles. Doncic scored 14 points on 5-for-18 shooting in the Lakers' surprising 100-97 loss.

Still shaking off the rust

Lakers believe Doncic will work through shooting frustration soon

BY GREG BEACHAM
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Luka Doncic couldn't find his shot in his third game with the Los Angeles Lakers, and LeBron James couldn't make up for it.

Yet the Lakers all say they aren't worried after their embarrassing 100-97 loss to the Charlotte Hornets on Wednesday night.

Doncic scored 14 points on 5-of-18 shooting, including a 1-for-9 performance on 3-point attempts. The Slovenian superstar added 11 rebounds and eight assists, but also committed six turnovers and five personal fouls while playing 33 minutes in his longest performance since joining the Lakers in a blockbuster trade with Dallas.

"Obviously, it's going to take a little time," Doncic said. "Today, a lot of rustiness from my part. Started the game with like four or five turnovers. That can't happen. Just got to play basketball the right way."

The evening was clearly frustrating to Doncic, who was playing only his third NBA game following a 6½-week absence due to a calf strain incurred on Christmas. On a couple of occasions when this normally electrifying scorer managed to make a shot against the Hornets, Doncic reacted with a visible mix of relief and frustration.

Doncic is 16 for 45 from the field in his three games with the Lakers, but just 5 for 24 on 3-point attempts — including 2 for 16 in his two home games, where fans have buzzed with anticipation of each shot and then groaned at each clank.

Back-to-back losses to cellar-dwelling Utah and Charlotte are grim results for a team that had won 10 of 11, but the 40-year-old James also isn't concerned about Doncic's start in purple and gold.

"It's his third game since Christmas, and it's his third game with us," James said. "He still doesn't know all the plays. He doesn't know all the defensive coverages, all the signals and things that we've built up since September. Obviously, we're trying to fast-track it on the fly. He's coming back from his injury.

He's getting back into form, so we're working through it together."

Not everything was grim about Doncic's performance against Charlotte, his first in which he didn't have a minutes restriction since his injury return. He led Los Angeles in rebounds, and his plus-13 rating was the Lakers' best number despite his turnovers.

With the game on the line in the final seconds, Doncic was the one inbound to James, who missed two 3-point attempts in the final six seconds. Doncic had no problem with not being in the late-game spotlight.

"He had it going, so obviously we're going to go to him," Doncic said. "I think it'll go both ways. One time it's going to be him, and one time me. I think it depends on how the game is going."

The Lakers acquired Doncic from the Mavs on Feb. 2 in a seismic trade that sent Anthony Davis to Dallas.

Doncic played in both of the Lakers' final two games before the All-Star break, but he logged only 47 total minutes while the Lakers eased him back into competition. Doncic then got several days of recovery and reset while the rest of the NBA's top players convened in San Francisco for the All-Star Game.

"Honestly, I was getting my mind off basketball a little bit," Doncic said. "I'm just excited to come back and play. I missed a lot of time. I've never missed this much time, so it was something new to me. Now I'm just excited to get back to play."

Doncic won't have time to dwell on this slow start: The Lakers jumped on a plane to Portland after their loss, and they'll face the Trail Blazers on Thursday before visiting Denver on Saturday.

And the Lakers' next home game? It's against the Mavericks on Tuesday.

With the shock of the midseason trade fading more each day, Doncic is eager to look to the future.

"This is one of the greatest clubs in the world, and I'm just happy to be here," Doncic said. "Obviously, I'm going to need some time, but I'm happy to represent the Lakers."

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	39	16	.709	—
New York	36	18	.667	2½
Philadelphia	20	34	.370	18½
Brooklyn	20	34	.370	18½
Toronto	17	38	.309	22

Southeast Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	27	29	.482	—
Atlanta	26	29	.473	½
Miami	25	28	.472	½
Charlotte	14	39	.264	11½
Washington	9	45	.167	17

Central Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Cleveland	44	10	.815	—
Indiana	30	23	.566	13½
Milwaukee	29	24	.547	14½
Detroit	29	26	.527	15½
Chicago	22	33	.400	22½

Western Conference

Southwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Memphis	36	18	.667	—
Houston	34	21	.618	2½
Dallas	30	26	.536	7
San Antonio	23	29	.442	12
New Orleans	13	42	.236	23½

Northwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Oklahoma City	44	10	.815	—
Denver	36	19	.655	8½
Minnesota	31	25	.554	14
Portland	23	32	.418	21½
Utah	13	41	.241	31

Pacific Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Lakers	32	21	.604	—
L.A. Clippers	31	23	.574	1½
Sacramento	28	27	.509	5
Golden State	28	27	.509	5
Phoenix	26	28	.481	6½

Wednesday's game

Charlotte 100, L.A. Lakers 97

Thursday's games

Boston at Philadelphia
Memphis at Indiana
Chicago at New York
Cleveland at Brooklyn
Orlando at Atlanta
L.A. Clippers at Milwaukee
Charlotte at Denver
Phoenix at San Antonio
L.A. Lakers at Portland

Friday's games

Memphis at Orlando
Milwaukee at Washington
New York at Cleveland
Miami at Toronto
Detroit at San Antonio
New Orleans at Dallas
Minnesota at Houston
Oklahoma City at Utah
Golden State at Sacramento

Saturday's games

Phoenix at Chicago
Brooklyn at Philadelphia
L.A. Lakers at Denver
Houston at Utah
Charlotte at Portland

Sunday's games

New York at Boston
Dallas at Golden State
L.A. Clippers at Indiana
Detroit at Atlanta
Miami at Milwaukee
Phoenix at Toronto
Washington at Orlando
Memphis at Cleveland
San Antonio at New Orleans
Oklahoma City at Minnesota

Scoring leaders

Through Wednesday

	G	FG	FT	PTS	AVG
Gil-Alexander, OKC	53	596	419	1720	32.5
Antetokoun., MIL	41	521	254	1302	31.8
Jokic, DEN	49	556	247	1458	29.8
Maxey, PHI	46	442	232	1269	27.6
Edwards, MIN	54	494	268	1483	27.5
Durant, PHO	41	408	208	1121	27.3
Tatum, BOS	52	475	267	1406	27.0
Booker, PHO	48	411	309	1256	26.2
Brunson, NY	53	478	306	1384	26.1
Lillard, MIL	44	350	280	1133	25.8
Davis, DAL	43	410	257	1107	25.7
Cunningham, DET	50	475	210	1271	25.4

NBA

Portis gets 25 games for violation of drug policy

BY TIM REYNOLDS
Associated Press

The NBA has suspended Bucks forward Bobby Portis Jr. for 25 games without pay because he tested positive for the painkiller Tramadol, a violation of the league's anti-drug program.

Portis cannot play again until April 8 — the 79th game of Milwaukee's 82-game regular-season schedule — at the earliest. His suspension starts with the Bucks' game Thursday against the Los Angeles Clippers.



Portis

"I was dealing with an elbow injury and using an NBA-approved medication for pain and inflammation," Portis said in a statement released by the team. "During that time, I made an honest mistake and took a pain-reducing anti-inflammatory pill that is not approved. I feel horrible and recognize that I'm responsible for what I put in my body."

Portis took the painkiller "unintentionally," said his agent, Mark Bartelstein. Portis thought he was taking Toradol, which is approved and is something that he has taken before, Bartelstein said in details first given to ESPN and that he later confirmed to The Associated Press. Portis did not realize that he was taking Tramadol — which was properly prescribed, but is on the NBA's banned substance list.



SCOTT STRAZZANTE/AP

Just days after Victor Wembanyama's first All-Star appearance, the San Antonio Spurs announced that their young star will likely be out for the rest of the season with a blood clot in his shoulder.

Wembanyama likely to miss rest of season

Star diagnosed with blood clot in shoulder

BY TIM REYNOLDS
Associated Press

San Antonio star Victor Wembanyama is not expected to play again this season after a blood clot condition was found in his right shoulder, a massive blow to the league and the second major health-related hit for the Spurs this season.

Wembanyama's condition — deep vein thrombosis — was diagnosed this week after he returned from the All-Star Game, the Spurs said Thursday. It is almost always treated with blood-thinning medication, which typically precludes a player from participating in a contact sport such as basketball.

Athletes who are involved with contact sports are typically advised to avoid using such medication because of the heightened chance of bleeding.

Wembanyama's issue comes about 3½ months after Spurs coach Gregg Popovich had a stroke and was forced to take a leave from the sideline.

The 7-foot-3 Wembanyama was the league's rookie of the year last season and the frontrunner to be defensive player of the year this

season. He has already taken 403 3-pointers and blocked 176 shots this season — no player in NBA history has ever finished a season with those numbers, and Wembanyama did it this year by the All-Star break.

He is averaging 24.3 points, 11 rebounds, 3.8 blocks and 3.7 assists; the only other player to finish a season averaging all that was Kareem Abdul-Jabbar in 1975-76. The Spurs open their post-All-Star schedule later Thursday in Austin, Texas, against the Phoenix Suns. Wembanyama was doubtful for that game because of illness.

"I'm in shock," Miami forward Kevin Love said when told of the news shortly after the Spurs announced Wembanyama's condition. "Absolute shock."

Such cases have affected NBA players before, including now-retired Hall of Famer Chris Bosh — whose career was cut short after he was diagnosed with blood clots.

Serena Williams was diagnosed with the problem known as a pulmonary embolism — a clot on the lung — in 2011, and was the dominant women's tennis player in the world again when she returned.

Giannis eager to play with his new teammates but remaining cautious

BY STEVE MEGARGEE
Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Giannis Antetokounmpo is excited about playing with his new Milwaukee Bucks teammates but isn't quite sure how soon that time will come.

Antetokounmpo returned to practice Wednesday after missing Milwaukee's final six games before the All-Star break with a strained left calf, but neither he nor coach Doc Rivers was saying whether the two-time MVP would be available Thursday when the Bucks host the Los Angeles Clippers.

The Bucks released an injury report Wednesday afternoon that listed both Antetokounmpo and seven-time all-NBA guard Damian Lillard (strained right hamstring) as questionable for the Clippers game.

"I'm OK," Antetokounmpo said. "Am I 100%? I don't know. We'll see. But I was able to go through practice. It felt good. We'll see. We'll see tomorrow if I'm 100%."

Antetokounmpo last appeared in a game Feb. 2 and still hasn't played alongside trade-deadline acquisitions Kyle Kuzma, Kevin Porter Jr. and Jericho Sims. The



Antetokounmpo

Bucks want to remain cautious with Antetokounmpo after an issue with the same calf prevented him from playing at all in their first-round playoff loss to the Indiana Pacers last season.

"I kind of had the same feeling I had and felt the same pain I had before I got hurt last year," Antetokounmpo said.

Antetokounmpo's 2023-24 campaign ended when he got knocked out of a 104-91 victory over the Boston Celtics in the 79th game of the regular season. Antetokounmpo now says the calf had started bothering him before that game, and he wanted to make sure he took a wiser approach to the issue this time.

"I felt it days prior to that, maybe like a week or two prior to that, and then you overcompensate," Antetokounmpo said. "You keep on playing and you're like, 'OK, it's just going to be tight. It's just going to be stiff. I'm going to play through it.' But I didn't. I wasn't able to play through it and I got hurt. I kind of had the same feeling (this time)

and I'm smarter. I don't want to be in the same position, so me and my team had the best idea to take a few games off, get it right, get back healthy. You don't want to go out there and play with fear."

The Bucks (29-24) are fifth in the Eastern Conference and will need a healthy Antetokounmpo to have any realistic chance of making a deep postseason run as they attempt to bounce back from two straight first-round exits. The 6-foot-11 forward ranks second in the NBA in scoring (31.8) and fifth in rebounding (12.2).

How the Bucks will look once Antetokounmpo starts playing alongside this reshaped roster remains uncertain.

The Bucks acquired Kuzma in a trade that sent three-time All-Star Khris Middleton and 2024 first-round pick AJ Johnson to the Washington Wizards. The Bucks got Porter from the Los Angeles Clippers in exchange for MarJon Beauchamp and added Sims from the New York Knicks for Delon Wright.

Antetokounmpo noted the moves made the Bucks less predictable and will enable them to play at a quicker pace.

"The team looks great right now," Antetokounmpo said. "We're playing very, very

fast. Everybody's competing. Defensively I think we're going to be way, way better. We're big. And I'm excited."

Antetokounmpo acknowledged it feels different not to have Middleton as a teammate for the first time in his 12-year career. Antetokounmpo ranks first and Middleton second in team history in games and minutes played. The two of them helped the 2020-21 Bucks win the franchise's first NBA title in 50 years.

As he saw the various tributes to Middleton that appeared on social media after the trade, Antetokounmpo said he got emotional. Antetokounmpo had issued his own post calling Middleton "my GOAT" and including pictures of their 2021 championship celebration.

"It was definitely kind of hard," Antetokounmpo said. "But as I've said since day one, I'm still going to go out and do my job. I think we get evaluated every single day. I'm going to come in, do my job, do what I'm asked to do. I think we get paid a lot of money to play basketball, so I'm just going to try to play basketball, enjoy the team and make my team great. I wish Khris the best. It's bigger than basketball."

SPORTS



No hard feelings

Some opposing players cheer LA's spending spree » **MLB, Page 44**

Jokic gets better with age

3-time NBA MVP turns 30, averaging a triple-double in one of his best seasons

By PAT GRAHAM
Associated Press

DENVER

The Denver Nuggets gathered around Nikola Jokic near the 3-point line Wednesday and belted out a rather off-key version of "Happy Birthday" in honor of him turning 30.

Usually so poised on the court, the three-time NBA MVP seemed almost bashful.

"I don't like my birthday," Jokic explained. "Getting older."

And better?

"Like wine," he cracked.

In a lot of ways, Jokic remains very much a kid at heart, right down to his new Peppa Pig-themed sneakers. But his game has certainly matured to the point where he keeps setting the bar higher and higher for himself and just might be in the midst of his finest season of them all. He's averaging 29.8 points, 12.6 rebounds and 10.2 assists.

In addition, he's posted a league-leading 25 triple-doubles, which is four shy of tying the franchise record he set in 2022-23.

His coach, Michael Malone, was stumped by just what might be the ceiling for his big man?

"Geez, I don't know. He keeps on pushing the envelope," Malone said. "When you're dealing with greatness, you never want to put a ceiling on that. We want to give him room to grow and watch that, because it's really fun to be a part of that process."

Jokic began suiting up for the Nuggets as a 20-year-old kid who needed to improve his fitness and hone his footwork. Over the past decade, he's blossomed into one of the league's most hard-to-contain players and led the Nuggets to their first NBA championship in 2023.

He's married now with two young kids. He has a bronze medal he earned with Serbia last summer at the Paris Olympics. His sponsor, 361 Degrees, is getting ready to launch his signature shoe, which is inspired by Peppa Pig, the character in the long-running children's series. ("They made it. I like it. They're going to be cool," Jokic said.)

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DAVID ZALUBOWSKI/AP

Denver Nuggets center Nikola Jokic dribbles around Portland Trail Blazers forward Toumani Camara on Feb. 12 in Denver. Jokic, who turned 30 on Wednesday, is averaging 29.8 points, 12.6 rebounds and 10.2 assists a game this season.

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