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WEEKEND
EDITION



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After clinching
playoff berth, Bills
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‘Ukraine is alive and kicking’

Zelenskyy talks resilience in wartime speech

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy stood in an army green outfit on the House floor Wednesday as he implored congressional lawmakers not to turn their backs on the war raging in Ukraine.

He harkened back to American victories in World War II, drawing parallels between Adolf Hitler and Russian President Vladimir Putin and the Battle of the Bulge and the battle for the Ukrainian frontline city of Bakhmut. He quoted President Franklin D. Roosevelt, who led the wartime alliance that triumphed over Nazi Germany. And Zelenskyy paid tribute to America’s long road to independence in a bid to win over the hearts of lawmakers as Congress considered another aid package for Ukraine.

“Your money is not charity,” he said. “It’s an investment in global security and democracy that we handle in the most responsible way.”

Zelenskyy’s speech before a joint meeting of Congress on



JACQUELYN MARTIN/AP

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy presents U.S. lawmakers with a Ukrainian flag — held by Vice President Kamala Harris, left, and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and signed by troops defending Bakhmut — as he addresses a joint meeting of Congress on Wednesday.

SEE UKRAINE ON PAGE 7

More military families count holiday blessings together

Stars and Stripes

Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa or just “the holidays” are tinged with memories of absence for many military families.

But this year, with the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic over and

America’s military no longer involved in the post-9/11 conflicts that kept it occupied for 20 years in Iraq and Afghanistan, more service members are spending the final days of December with their families.

At Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, not far from Hiroshima, Japan, the Tombes family, originally of Richmond, Va., keeps alive a tradition that crosses generations.

“Every year growing up my

mom would gift us a Christmas ornament,” Ashley Tombes said. “So, every year we gift our kids a Christmas ornament that one day, when they have their own houses somewhere else, we will give them all of their ornaments.”

Her husband, Maj. Thomas Tombes, a C-130 pilot with Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron 152, missed their son Liam’s first birthday in 2019 while de-

SEE HOLIDAY ON PAGE 6

BUSINESS/WEATHER

EUROPE GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel	Azores	..	..	\$4.231	..
Germany	\$3.502	\$4.010	\$4.342	\$4.978	Change in price	..	..	-12.0 cents	..
Netherlands	..	\$4.205	\$4.471	\$5.147	Turkey	..	..	\$4.715	\$4.856*
U.K.	..	\$3.946	\$4.278	\$4.914	Change in price	..	..	No change	No change

Fuel prices are updated daily. These prices are effective Dec. 23. The change in price is from Dec. 16.

PACIFIC GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel	South Korea	\$3.189	..	\$4.029	\$4.669
Japan	..	\$4.009	..	\$4.639	Change in price	-12.0 cents	..	-12.0 cents	-16.0 cents
Okinawa	\$4.639	Guam	\$3.179	\$3.689	\$4.019	..

*DieselEFD **Midgrade
Pacific prices for the week of Dec. 23-29

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates	South Korea (Won)	1283.70
Euro costs (Dec. 23)	\$1.04	
Dollar buys (Dec. 23)	0.9182	
British pound (Dec. 23)	\$1.18	
Japanese yen (Dec. 23)	128.00	
South Korean won (Dec. 23)	1244.00	

(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.)

Commercial rates	Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3770
Britain (Pound)	1.2016	
Canada (Dollar)	1.3637	
China (Yuan)	6.9845	
Denmark (Krone)	7.0103	
Egypt (Pound)	24.7216	
Euro	0.9427	
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7977	
Hungary (Forint)	379.00	
Israel (Shekel)	3.4888	
Japan (Yen)	132.34	
Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3064	
Norway (Krone)	9.8420	
Philippines (Peso)	55.32	
Poland (Zloty)	4.37	
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7611	
Singapore (Dollar)	1.3520	

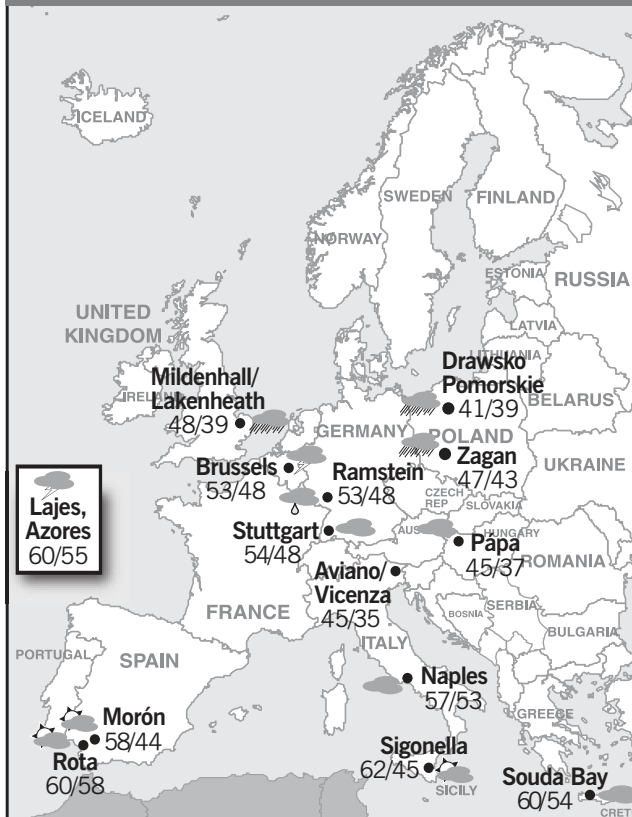
INTEREST RATES	Prime rate	7.50
Interest Rates Discount rate	5.00	
Federal funds market rate	3.83	
3-month bill	4.32	
30-year bond	3.73	

WEATHER OUTLOOK

FRIDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



FRIDAY IN EUROPE



SATURDAY IN THE PACIFIC



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PACIFIC

S. Korea to expand defense cooperation with US

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — South Korea plans more than 20 joint military drills with its U.S. ally next year in the wake of increased North Korean missile testing, the Ministry of National Defense announced Wednesday.

South Korea's military in 2023 will be "deepening and expanding defense cooperation" with the United States to prepare for North Korea's nuclear and missile threats, the ministry said in a news release. The announcement followed a biannual meeting between the country's Joint Chiefs of Staff and Defense Minister Lee Jong-sup.

Reinforcing the alliance with the U.S. is one of South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's six "peace through strength" initiatives, according to the ministry; others include cultivating the defense industry and improving the military's ability to react to "omni-directional threats."

The initiative broadly aims to make advances in the country's defense sector to address regional threats, namely North Korea.

U.S. Forces Korea did not immediately respond Thursday to a request for comment on the ministry's announcement.

Yoon, leader of the conservative People Power Party, took office in May. He soon restarted a number of large-scale military drills with the U.S., including Vigilant Storm, previously known as Vigilant Ace,



DANIEL GAITHER/U.S. Navy

U.S. and South Korean navy SEALs enter a building during an exercise in Coronado, Calif., on Dec. 1.

a five-day aerial exercise with roughly 240 aircraft on Oct. 31 to Nov. 4. Large-scale drills like these were paused when then-Presidents Moon Jae-in and Donald Trump held peace talks with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in 2018 and 2019.

The upcoming plans also include deploying unnamed U.S. strategic assets to the region, as well as conducting more than 20 joint military drills, according to the ministry. It said the drills will

place an emphasis on "realistic" combat scenarios in light of the threat from North Korea.

The U.S. and South Korean military are also considering "a variety of measures to ... display the alliance's overwhelming deterrent against North Korea" to mark the 70th anniversary of the end of Korean War hostilities in 1953, including a joint live-fire demonstration, a military official said during a press briefing on Thursday.

South Korean officials customarily speak to the media on the condition of anonymity.

The ministry added that in addition to the drills, Seoul and Washington will work closely to continue developing Camp Humphreys in Pyeongtaek, the largest U.S. military base overseas.

The base serves the headquarters for USFK, U.N. Command, Eighth Army, 2nd Infantry Division, and U.S.-South Korea Combined Forces Command. Roughly

28,500 American troops are stationed in South Korea, the majority of them at Humphreys.

The announcement comes amid North Korea's unprecedented firing of roughly 70 missiles in 34 missile tests so far this year. North Korea has also conducted other military displays, including flying numerous aerial sorties near the border with the South and firing hundreds of artillery rounds into the sea.

U.S. and South Korean senior officials have said throughout the year that North Korea has fully prepared to conduct its seventh nuclear test, its first since 2017.

North Korea's state-run Korean Central News Agency says its military tests are a defensive response to the South's alliance with the U.S. and alleges the two allies are raising tensions in the Korean Peninsula.

South Korea's military has frequently responded to the North's missile launches and artillery firings with its own shows of force during Yoon's presidency.

Two days after North Korea launched two medium-range ballistic missiles on Saturday, U.S. Air Force B-52 Stratofortress bombers and F-22 Raptors flew with South Korean F-35A Lightning IIs and F-15K Slam Eagles in the Korea Air Defense Identification Zone.

Stars and Stripes reporter Yoo Kyong Chang contributed to this report.
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Japan files more complaints against China for maritime trespassing

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
AND KEISHI KOJA
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — Tokyo lodged diplomatic protests with China over alleged intrusions Wednesday by the China Coast Guard into waters Japan claims as its territory around the Senkakus, islets in the East China Sea, according to Japan's Foreign Ministry.

The complaint follows one lodged Monday over the alleged intrusion of a Chinese naval survey vessel into waters south of Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan's four main islands.

Also Wednesday, a weeklong joint naval exercise by the Chinese and Russian navies got underway in the same region.

A column of four China Coast Guard ships passed the 12-mile territorial limit around the Senkaku chain at 10:37 a.m. Wednesday and remained for less than two hours, a spokesman for Japan's 11th Regional Coast



Japan Coast Guard

Japan says China Coast Guard vessel 2502, shown in 2016, entered Japanese territorial waters twice this week.

Guard told Stars and Stripes by phone on Thursday. He said one of the vessels appeared to be armed with a deck-mounted machine gun.

The four retreated to the contiguous zone, which extends 12 miles beyond the territorial limit, until 9:34 a.m. Thursday when two of the ships re-entered Japan's territorial waters six miles southwest of the Taisho Island, one of the Senkakus, to shadow a Japanese fishing vessel, the spokesman said. He said the two Chinese vessels were still in the area as of 3 p.m. Thursday, despite repeated warnings by Japan Coast Guard vessels to leave.

Japan's Foreign Affairs Ministry lodged complaints with the Chinese Embassy in Japan and with the Chinese government in Beijing on Wednesday and Thursday, a Min-

istry of Foreign Affairs spokesman told Stars and Stripes by phone Thursday.

The Japan Coast Guard was positioned Thursday between the Chinese ships and the Japanese fishing boat to ensure no contact occurred between them, the spokesman said. He said the Japanese continued to warn the Chinese vessels to leave the area.

Chinese vessels have been known to chase and harass Japanese fishermen operating near the islets.

The intrusion around the Senkakus this week was the 28th this year by a China Coast Guard vessel and the first since Nov. 25, the spokesman said.

The diplomatic protests follow complaints lodged with China on Monday when the Chinese survey vessel entered Japan's territorial waters about 40 miles south of Kyushu around 6:50 a.m. the same day, according to the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force. In that incident, the ship remained for approximately four hours before heading west, according to the Self-Defense Force.

Even warships of one country are permitted "innocent passage" through another country's territorial waters under the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea. The convention spells out exceptions to the rule.

The Chinese survey vessel appeared to be following Chinese naval exercises around

Okinawa last week.

On Wednesday, the Chinese and Russian navies commenced a round of previously announced exercises west of the Nansei Island chain that includes Okinawa, according to Japanese public broadcaster NHK.

The Maritime Self-Defense Force on Wednesday dispatched the guided-missile destroyer JS Shirataka from Sasebo Naval Base and a P-1 patrol aircraft from Atsugi Naval Air Facility to surveil four Russian vessels that passed through the Tsushima Strait, which separates Kyushu from the Korea Peninsula, according to a statement on Japan's Joint Staff website.

The two Russian frigates, a missile cruiser and a destroyer remained beyond 50 miles of Japanese territory.

The exercises are expected to conclude Dec. 27, Foreign Affairs Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi said at a Tuesday press conference in Tokyo. Both nations' militaries have recently been ramping up operations around Japan, he added.

A flotilla of six Chinese warships, including the aircraft carrier Liaoning, were spotted in the waters off Japan between Dec. 15 and Tuesday, according to a statement by Japan's Joint Staff on Wednesday.

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Note to readers

Because of the Christmas holiday, Stars and Stripes will not publish on Monday or Tuesday.

MILITARY

Troops struggle with immigration services

Reduced funding to online resources has led to long delays and misinformation

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Col. Junel Jeffrey-Kim has spent 17 of her 23 years in the Army overseas.

Becoming involved with a man from another country had always been something she'd avoided, she said, because she didn't want the stress of a long-distance relationship and the challenges it could create. But in 2017, on her second tour to Korea, she met Rana Kim.

The two broke up when Jeffrey-Kim returned to the U.S. after two years in Korea, but later reconnected and were soon engaged.

She began to file paperwork in April to bring Kim to the U.S. as immigration resources afforded to troops were being cut. She quickly found herself in a system in which an increasing number of service members were relying on a shrinking amount of resources.

It created long wait times, ineffective responses and bad information.

For the 45-year-old Jeffrey-Kim, it's meant months of delays, hundreds of dollars lost to the system, and a slow draining of hope for her future family.

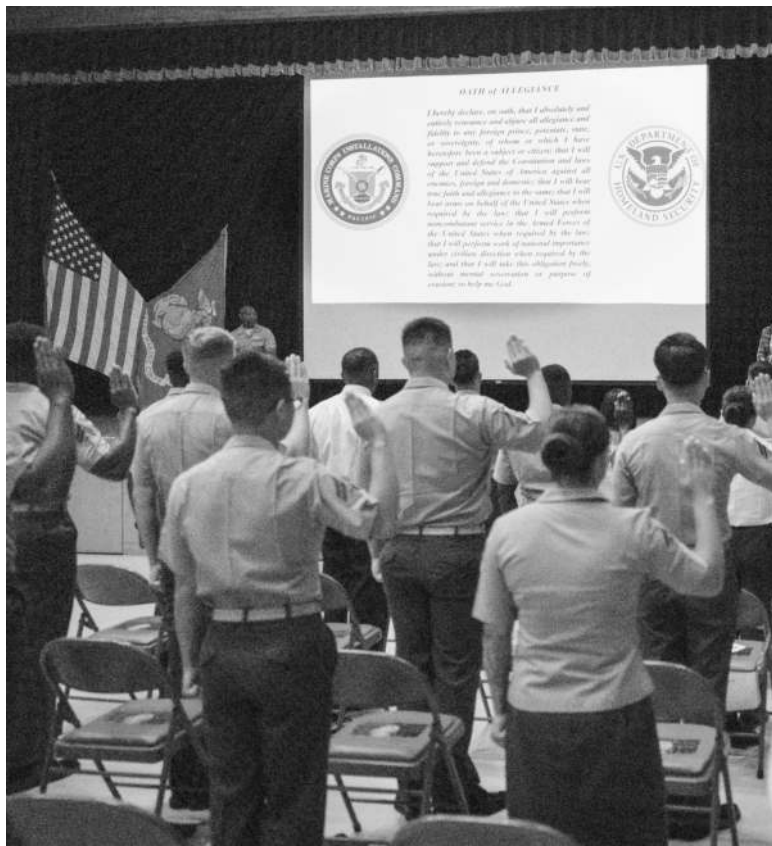
"I love my job and I love working for the Army," she said. "If I get to the end of my life, and I have not had a family, but I've had this wonderful career, none of that will matter."

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services launched in 2007 a phone- and email-based support center for troops whose immigration cases often can be complicated by deployments, lengthy training rotations or other overseas assignments. But about 10 years later, the agency dropped online appointment scheduling for all immigration cases, citing misuse, and funneled those needs through the phone lines.

A few months ago, immigration services stopped responding to the military-only email account and switched its phone line to an automated answering service instead of a live agent.

Phone calls have more than doubled in the last year based on information from the Government Accountability Office and USCIS — from 47,000 to 138,000 — and some troops and their attorneys said they are now unable to get through to make appointments or access accurate information to move their cases forward.

"If I'm not able to just talk to a help desk, I don't know how they're handling the case," said Senior Airman Sakshi Hans, who has been calling the help line for an update on her mother's green card case, which has exceeded the projected wait time by four



JONATHAN BEAUCHAMP/U.S. Marine Corps

U.S. service members take part in a naturalization ceremony hosted at the Camp Foster Community Center on Okinawa on April 25.

months. "I need to go somewhere because I'm on orders, you can at least help me to take care of my family. That is something every person wants."

The degradation of the military help line is part of an increasingly chaotic, understaffed, under-resourced Department of Homeland Security that cannot keep up with the demand for its services, according to several reports from think tanks and other organizations that studied immigration. As of June, immigration services has a backlog of nearly 8.8 million cases, according to the CATO Institute, a libertarian think tank based in Washington.

That's up nearly 3 million from four years ago. The October report blames the increasing backlogs on inefficient systems and an inability to implement new policies meant to improve conditions.

Agency officials declined to answer questions about the increase in call volume or how it is managing the heavier workload. Officials also declined to answer questions about whether calls to the military line flow to a specialized call center, or if the calls are routed to its general contact center where agents are less versed on the specific needs of troops.

There are also special circumstances, such as a pending deployment, that require USCIS to expedite a service member's case.

"The existence of the military help line has helped so many people when it existed with the email system and when there was ac-

tually somebody that would answer the phone. It just relieved so much stress and it solved so many problems," said Margaret Stock, an Alaska-based immigration attorney and retired Army Reserve lieutenant colonel who has worked extensively on military cases. "It's not solving problems and relieving stress anymore. It's creating more stress."

In fiscal 2022, Congress infused USCIS with \$275 million to put a dent in its backlog of cases — most of which are 1.7 million pending cases to sponsor a family member's green card, according to a November report from the Migration Policy Institute. However, USCIS is still working to hire staff, agency officials have said.

"USCIS's ability to quickly staff up will likewise be key in getting the agency back on track, although hiring and training procedures are slow and the effects of new employees might not be felt for months," the report stated.

Impact on families

Jeffrey-Kim first filed a petition in April to bring her Korean fiancé to Washington, D.C., where she is stationed. While visiting him a month later, the two decided to marry.

She called the USCIS military help line first to make certain the marriage wouldn't negatively affect the application. It would help, she said she was told by the agency. All she needed to do was send her marriage license with new paperwork for a foreign relative,

which would replace the previous application. The \$535 fee would be waived because she had already paid it for the first application, the agent told her.

The application was swiftly rejected for lack of payment, Jeffrey-Kim said. She called back and this time was told USCIS would need to process a refund for the fiancé application.

On a third call, Jeffrey-Kim said she learned the refund had been processed for the wrong case. This agent offered to expedite the request because of all the misinformation that Jeffrey-Kim had received.

The expedited request was denied, and the final submission of her application delayed by months.

"It's like a game of hide the answers. If only you knew that was a part of it, then you could play," she said.

All the while, Jeffrey-Kim has been trying to coordinate fertility treatments at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., so the couple can start a family.

"Everywhere I've been asked to go for the Army, I go. I have a wonderful career, and I love my job. This is the one thing I've asked of our nation. Can you please allow me to have a family? That's it. I don't want anything else," she said. "I will keep working. I will do whatever, but this is the one thing I want. For one time, I don't want to be alone."

Jeffrey-Kim filed two complaints with the Citizenship and Immigration Services ombudsman in early September and waited more than two months to hear back.

"They just said they can't help me — with anything. They said they're sorry about my getting the wrong information and saw my legitimate issues, but there's nothing they can do about it. I have given up hope in USCIS," she said.

The ombudsman's office said it has received 133 requests in the past five years in which the person indicated the issue was because of the military help line. The average response time to military cases was 19 days, while it took 45 days in nonmilitary cases, according to the office.

Removing obstacles

USCIS created the military help line in 2007 from legislation enacted after the death of Army Reserve Spc. Kendall Frederick.

The 21-year-old Maryland resident was born in Trinidad, and had been working to get his citizenship for more than a year when he was killed by a roadside bomb in Iraq in October 2005. He had

left his base to get his fingerprints made for his citizenship application for the second time, according to a December 2005 report in The Baltimore Sun.

The late Rep. Elijah Cummings, D-Md., said at the time that Frederick's case highlighted the obstacles in the citizenship process that were unfair to service members. The legislation in Frederick's honor was designed to reduce those challenges through government agency coordination and provided the phone line as a resource.

The 2007 launch included an after-hours email address — a crucial line of support for those stationed overseas.

Common reasons for calling the help line include scheduling appointments, submitting an expedited request, updating personal information, applying for naturalization, replacing a green card, creating an online account, getting a case update, and locating a receipt number, according to USCIS.

About 3% of service members are noncitizens, Rep. Zoe Lofgren, D-Calif., chairwoman of the House Judiciary Committee's subpanel on immigration and citizenship, said during a June hearing on immigrant military members and veterans.

That's about 45,000 immigrant troops, according to Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., chairman of the Judiciary Committee.

"Everyday great immigrant service members risk their lives in support of our country. We rely on them to keep our nation safe and to protect U.S. global interests. In return, we must honor their sacrifices by supporting them and their families, and by giving them every opportunity to become U.S. citizens if they so desire," he said during the hearing.

Military naturalizations have declined 44% since former President Donald Trump's administration, Nadler said. When President Joe Biden took office, he asked the departments of Defense, Homeland Security and Veterans Affairs to work together to improve the process for troops to become citizens. The departments formed the Immigrant Military Members and Veterans Initiative and built an informational website that includes the USCIS military help line as a point of contact.

Stock said she's been disappointed to see that despite Biden's request, USCIS eliminated the email address and enabled the automated answering service. Those changes came days after Debra Rogers, the Department of Home-

SEE STRUGGLE ON PAGE 5

MILITARY

Struggle: With emailing services cut, phone calls doubled

FROM PAGE 4

land Security's director of the new immigration initiative, sat before the House committee.

When trouble began

In late 2018, the USCIS announced the removal of an online scheduling option to make an Info Pass appointment, which is required to go in-person to an agency office. Troops and attorneys now must call to request the appointment, then wait for a call back.

Jonelle Ocloo, an immigration attorney in Maryland, said the change has been "a nightmare."

"Before with Info Pass, you had the freedom to schedule your own appointment," she said. "Yes, there was frustration, because a lot of times all the appointments would be booked and you couldn't get an appointment. It was just a matter of try, try, try."

Stock said she recently had military clients move duty stations, change their address, and months later receive an automated appointment at an office near their old address.

With Info Pass discontinued, Stock spent about 90 minutes on the phone to get the appointment rescheduled. However, the agent

once again booked it at the old location.

In another instance, Stock's client contracted coronavirus and needed to reschedule an interview appointment.

Stock said the agent put her on hold, then hung up after about five minutes, leaving her to wonder whether the request had been processed. This led Stock to send an urgent letter to USCIS in hopes that the agency didn't close the case for abandonment.

The USCIS in July also discontinued an email address associated with the military help line. It was helpful for those troops stationed overseas because the phone line only operates from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. EST, Monday through Friday. Troops stationed in Korea must call between 10 p.m. and 8 a.m. local time.

"They have reduced their customer service and that increases the stress on everyone in the system," Stock said.

She volunteers with the American Immigration Lawyers Association's Military Assistance Program, which is now receiving more help requests than its volunteers can manage.

"A lot of it is stuff that used to get solved with people being able to

get through to a live human at the agency who knew how to handle a problem. But people can't get through anymore, so they can't get their problems fixed. Now they're having to reach out to private lawyers, which increases the cost to everybody," Stock said. "I never used to deal with problems like changing appointments. People could do that on their own. They didn't have to call me about it."

The USCIS declined to offer an official to discuss the military help line.

Matthew Bourke, spokesman for the USCIS, said the agency is "committed to creating a customer experience that is simple, seamless, and secure, while maintaining the integrity of our immigration system."

The magic word

"The thing that is so upsetting is the system was working for years, and they just broke it," Stock said.

She now advises her military clients to repeat the magic word "military" to the automated phone system so they can get a person on the line — though they've already called a number that is exclusively for service members.

Stars and Stripes called the help line Dec. 1. A live agent answered

within about four minutes, and he said he is tasked with answering calls from the general public hotline and the military help line.

"Military members need a special line," Ocloo said. "They may have questions that an ordinary customer service contractor cannot answer. You actually need someone who is versed in the typical issues with service members and their families. You really do have to have a military hotline."

Hans, who called the line to get an update on her mother's green card, said it took her 10 tries to get through the military phone line. Even as she said "military" into the phone, the line would just hang up on her. Once she got through, the agent told her to wait four weeks, and call back if nothing has changed on the online system.

Hans, 39, previously served in the Army, where she was able to attain her own U.S. citizenship. In July, she enlisted in the Air Force Reserve in Ohio to fulfill her goal of working in intelligence — a job that she couldn't land as an immigrant.

Hans said it's important that her mother's green card come through before she goes to Air Force technical school because she is worried about any legal sit-

uation that could come up while she's away.

"I'm her caretaker, and that's why I brought her here," Hans said. "I'm a military person also, and I have to be out. It doesn't mean I should not take care of my parents."

'Shouldn't be this hard'

Jeffrey-Kim and her husband were told his paperwork will take nearly a year to process. To make the best of the separation, they've decided to meet up in different countries when they can, treating each as a honeymoon as they wait.

She's also been connecting with other service members who've married foreign spouses, hearing their stories, and wondering if all the effort will be worthwhile in the end. She's also preparing information to seek help through her congressional representation in Florida, where she is a resident.

"It just shouldn't be this hard to have a family that's not illegal," Jeffrey-Kim said. "You expect them to be professional and you expect them to know their job. If they don't, they shouldn't be advising people."

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Indonesia commander plans operation in South China Sea

By **SETH ROBSON**
Stars and Stripes

Indonesia's newly appointed top military commander wants to boost training with the U.S. and carry out an operation to secure territory near the South China Sea, Nikkei Asia reported Wednesday.

Adm. Yudo Margono, sworn in Monday as commander of the Indonesian Armed Forces, said Tuesday in Jakarta that he wants to make the Super Garuda Shield exercise, involving Indonesia and the U.S., "more comprehensive and wider," Nikkei reported.

The exercise, held on Sumatra and several other Indonesian islands in August, involved 2,000 U.S. troops, 2,000 Indonesian service members and smaller contin-

gents from a dozen other nations. It was the largest installment of a drill held annually for 16 years, according to the U.S. Army.

After being sworn in at the presidential palace in Jakarta on Monday, Margono said he's planning an operation involving the navy, air force and army "to secure the border ... in the North Natuna Sea," according to Nikkei.

Indonesia's Natuna Islands, northeast of Singapore, are close to a part of the South China Sea claimed by China.

Chinese coast guard patrols, now routine, protect illegal Chinese fishing boats near the islands, Carlyle Thayer, an emeritus professor at the University of New South Wales and lecturer at the

Australian Defence Force Academy, told Stars and Stripes in August.

Australia, Canada, France, India, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Timor-Leste, the United Kingdom, Malaysia and Singapore participated in Super Garuda Shield that month.

Thailand and Brunei were recently invited to join next year's exercise and the Philippines and Vietnam are the most likely candidates to be invited next, Thayer said in an email Thursday.

The main drivers for expanding the drills are an agreement between Indonesia and the U.S. to increase the frequency and complexity of their combined training



SETH ROBSON/Stars and Stripes

U.S. and Indonesian service members train at Palembang, Indonesia, during the Super Garuda Shield exercise on Aug. 9.

and China's rapid military modernization and assertiveness in the Natuna Sea, Thayer said.

Next year's exercise will likely add more maritime security training in and around the sea, he said.

Indonesia, which last month hosted the G20 Summit of world leaders including U.S. President Joe Biden and Chinese President

Xi Jinping, may feel a need to demonstrate Indonesia's wider importance to the region and the world, Ian Chong, an associate professor of political science at the National University of Singapore, said in an email Wednesday.

"This may include asserting their own position in the South China Sea," he said.

Navy SEAL chief found dead in San Diego

The San Diego Union-Tribune

The commanding officer of SEAL Team 1 was found dead in his San Diego County home Monday, Navy officials announced Wednesday.

Cmdr. Robert Ramirez III was 47.

Foul play is not suspected in his death, which is under investiga-

tion, Naval Special Warfare officials said.

Capt. David Abernathy, commander of Naval Special Warfare Group 1, which manages all San Diego-based Navy SEAL teams, offered his condolences to Ramirez's family.

"Bobby was an outstanding leader, devoted husband and father,

and a good friend to us all," Abernathy said in a statement. "This is a devastating loss to our community and all who knew him."

Ramirez's awards and decorations include five Bronze Star Medals, three Combat Action ribbons and six medals combined for the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns.

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MILITARY

Coast Guard cutter home for holidays

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Crew members of a U.S. Coast Guard cutter arrived at their homeport with time to spare before Christmas after a 94-day deployment focused on bolstering allied security in the Baltic Sea.

The 160-strong crew of USCGC Hamilton was greeted Wednesday in North Charleston, S.C., by awaiting family members carrying welcome home signs.

The cutter operated in support of the Naples, Italy-based U.S. 6th Fleet, which oversees naval operations in Europe.

"It was an honor to grow the relationship between the United States and our Baltic Sea allies and partners during engagements both at sea and in port," Capt. Matthew Brown, commanding officer of the Hamilton, said in a statement.

The Hamilton deployment represents a small slice of how the U.S. has stepped up military activities in Europe in the aftermath of Russia's full-scale war on Ukraine that was launched in February.

While large units, such as the 101st Air-

borne Division, and other rotational Army brigades represent the bulk of an enlarged American force in Europe now at roughly 100,000 service members, smaller contingents also round out the mission.

Likewise, about 50 Marines and sailors recently wrapped up a monthlong deployment aboard the Spearfish-class expeditionary fast transport ship USNS Trenton, returning to Camp Lejeune, N.C., on Dec. 13.

That mission showcased the II Marine Expeditionary Force's ability to rapidly put troops in the European theater, the Marines said in a statement Wednesday.

The Marines supported various training missions with allies in Greece, the Mediterranean Sea and Rota, Spain.

In the case of the Hamilton, the deployment began with a trans-Atlantic voyage to Rota before the ship made its way through the English Channel and Danish straits, waterways that provide passage for 15% of the world's shipping.

From there, the cutter entered the Baltic Sea and conducted exchanges with naval, coast guard and border guard forces from



BRANDON HILLARD/U.S. Coast Guard

A USCGC Hamilton crew member reunites with his wife at the pier in North Charleston, S.C., on Wednesday.

allied states and prospective NATO members Sweden and Finland, the Coast Guard said.

The mission marked the first time in over a decade that a U.S. military vessel visited the Finnish harbor city of Turku. Meanwhile, the Hamilton was the first Coast Guard cutter to visit Riga, Latvia, in more

than two decades.

Hamilton is a 418-foot national security cutter regarded as the most technologically advanced class of ship in the Coast Guard's fleet.

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Holiday: Service members find ways to celebrate despite difficult situations

FROM PAGE 1

ployed to North Africa, he said.

"I missed Christmas, it was tough, I'm admittedly a family man," Tombes said. "She did a good job keeping me included in pretty much everything."

Tombes' unit had a huge cookout to celebrate the 2019 holiday season together, he said.

"We were out there for a purpose so we just kind of leaned into that and leaned into each other," he said. "Everybody was missing their family and so we just leaned on each other."

Ashley Tombes had given her husband a Christmas story book that wove their children's names into the stories.

"I was able to read it to them over FaceTime, which was pretty special," Thomas said.

His wife said their family doesn't take for granted the fact he's with them for Christmas.

"Even when he is not deployed there are training exercises and things," Ashley said. "He had missed holidays in the past before, so we are thankful he is home."

Hanukkah in Naples

Cmdr. Loretta Stein, a doctor at Naval Support Activity Naples in Italy, hasn't been home for Hanukkah in more than 10 years.

But that doesn't mean Stein and her husband, Josh Green, spend the annual eight-day celebration, also known as the Festival of Lights, without family.



JONATHAN SNYDER/Stars and Stripes

From left, Liam, Ashley, Jack, Thomas and Abigail Tombes pose at their home at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan, on Dec. 14.

No matter where Stein has been assigned, including Japan, she has sought out other Jewish people and worked to offer opportunities, such as shabbat dinners or Hanukkah parties, that strengthen the Jewish community and make people feel at home.

"It gives me a sense of belonging, warmth and joy to see people together and creating new memories that are not about not being home, but creating a new home," Stein said.

This year, the couple will observe Hanukkah with a traditional lighting of the menorah, songs and games, and eating of potato pancakes, or latkes, served with Green's homemade applesauce.

The gathering will include members of their Jewish com-

munity, or family, some of whom may not have anyone else to celebrate with or be familiar with the minor Jewish holiday that commemorates the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem in the second century BC.

"It is an opportunity for celebration," said Green, who along with Stein, is a Jewish lay leader at NSA Naples. "So, we try to make sure we touch on all of it (festivities) so anyone that is within our community has something they can connect with."

Illuminating Yokota

At Yokota Air Base in western Tokyo, Air Force Tech. Sgt. Brandon Newman, from New Castle, Ind., remembers the virtual Christmas he observed during a



JUAN KING/Stars and Stripes

U.S. Air Force Tech. Sgt. Brandon Newman, shown here Dec. 7, decorates his family's home at Yokota Air Base.

2013 deployment to Kuwait. He phoned his wife, Michelle Newman, and their children over a sketchy internet connection.

"You know back then we had Skype," he said. "I called back (home) on Christmas Day and watched them open up some presents; they watched me open up some gifts they sent me and exchange pleasantries."

Now living in the Yokota East Side housing area, he decorates his home with abandon, stringing lights on the house and posting inflatable figures on the lawn.

"Back in the states I just always like decorating and putting up Christmas lights," Newman said. "My thing is decorating the outside, my wife's decorating the inside, so just kind of a tradition we kept from being stateside to bring it over here."

Not far from the Newmans'

home, Coast Guard Lt. Cmdr. Irving Cintron, 43, from Puerto Rico, goes all out too on Christmas lights, a la Clark Griswold.

He lines his building with heavy-duty lights and with permission from his neighbors coordinates a sound-and-light show featuring 10 to 15 minutes of Christmas music each evening. His production is in its second season.

The Cintrons' post the show on Facebook with an invitation to the base community to come and see firsthand.

"When he put it out on Facebook people were really happy to see that something was happening for Christmas," Cintron's wife, Dailys, told Stars and Stripes.

Stars and Stripes reporters Jonathan Snyder, Alison Bath and Juan King contributed to this report.
stripes@stripes.com

EUROPE

Kremlin: Zelenskyy visit means he wants war

By E. EDUARDO CASTILLO
Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian officials on Thursday derided Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's wartime visit to the United States, claiming in several statements that his whirlwind trip to cement support in Washington proved he and his American allies weren't "striving for peace" in Ukraine.

Zelenskyy received thunderous applause from members of Congress during a hastily organized trip on Wednesday, his first known trip outside Ukraine since Russian troops invaded the country on Feb. 24. Hours before the president's arrival, the U.S. announced a new \$1.8 billion military aid package.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov warned that providing Zelenskyy's troops with more sophisticated weapons would not end the conflict, which has produced grinding though largely stalemated ground battles for territory and Russian air attacks on civilian power and water supplies.

Moscow did not hear "real calls for peace" during Zelenskyy's U.S. visit and thinks Washington is determined to "de facto and indirectly fight with Russia to the last Ukrainian," Peskov said. He also criticized Ukraine's "barbaric shelling of residential buildings"

in Russian-occupied areas of eastern Ukraine.

The Moscow-installed leader of Ukraine's partially occupied Donetsk region reported that Ukrainian shelling of a hotel in the city of Donetsk killed two people and wounded several others Wednesday night, including a former Russian deputy prime minister.

On Thursday, a car bomb killed a Kremlin-appointed local official in Ukraine's southern Kherson region, Russian state media reported. The casualties demonstrated the high stakes and fierce fighting as Russia and Ukrainian forces battle for control of four regions that Russian President Vladimir Putin illegally annexed in September.

Zelenskyy landed in Poland on Thursday while traveling back to Ukraine, according to information he posted on social media. He wrote that he met "a friend of Ukraine" on his way home. A video showed him being greeted by Polish officials after getting off an airplane. He and Polish President Andrzej Duda hugged, exchanged greetings and then sat down to speak.

Earlier in the day, Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova echoed Peskov's dim assessment of the Ukrainian leader's travels, saying the talks in Washington "showed that neither



ANDRIY ANDRIYENKO/AP

A police officer talks with a local resident as they stand in front of a school that was damaged in Russian shelling in Kramatorsk, Ukraine, on Thursday.

Ukraine nor the United States are striving for peace.

"They are simply determined to continue hostilities," Zakharova said.

Russia's ambassador to the U.S., Anatoly Antonov, accused Zelenskyy and American officials of "focusing on war ... and further tying the Ukrainian regime to the needs of Washington."

Russian state TV sought to downplay the military and politi-

cal support Zelenskyy has received in Washington, stressing in a news segment that not all members of Congress showed up to listen to Zelenskyy's speech. Commentators also criticized the Ukrainian leader's "casual attire" during his White House visit with President Joe Biden.

Russia and Ukraine held several rounds of talks in Belarus and Turkey early on in the war, and Zelenskyy repeatedly called for a

personal meeting with Putin. The talks stalled after the last meeting of the delegations in Istanbul in March yielded no results.

After Putin annexed the Ukrainian regions and declared martial law there, Zelenskyy said he no longer was willing to negotiate with the Russian president. He stressed that one of the conditions for dialogue to begin would be the "restoration of (Ukraine's) territorial integrity."

Ukraine: More aid on its way amid discontent from some GOP

FROM PAGE 1

Wednesday capped his first visit outside Ukraine since Russia's invasion 300 days ago and was reminiscent of another historic address more than 80 years earlier. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., noted her father, a former congressman, witnessed British Prime Minister Winston Churchill address Congress in December 1941 to rally support for a fight against tyranny.

"Eighty-one years later this week, it is particularly poignant for me to be present when another heroic leader addresses the Congress in a time of war — and with democracy itself on the line," Pelosi said in a statement.

Lawmakers, many of them clad in the blue and yellow colors of the Ukrainian flag, greeted Zelenskyy with rapturous applause and cheers. His 25-minute speech, delivered in accented English, was frequently halted by standing ovations.

Zelenskyy told Congress his country is at a critical point in the 10-month war as Russian troops dig in along a 600-mile front stretching across Ukraine's eastern Donbas region and the south. Ukraine's ability to wrest back the

territory occupied by Russia heavily depends on continued American resources, he said.

"We have artillery, yes, thank you," Zelenskyy said. "Is it enough? Honestly, not really."

Ukrainian forces remain outmanned and outgunned, he said. But, as he repeatedly emphasized, they remain standing. Bakhmut, a battlefield city that Zelenskyy visited Tuesday, is "soaked in blood" and blasted by artillery fire every hour but it too is still standing, he said.

"Ukraine holds its line and will never surrender," he said, drawing loud applause.

Zelenskyy credited much of Ukraine's resilience to the material assistance and leadership of the U.S., which he said has played a key role in uniting Europe against Russian aggression.

"I hope my words of respect and gratitude resonate in each American heart," he said. "Against all odds, and doom and gloom scenarios, Ukraine didn't fall. Ukraine is alive and kicking."

In a gesture of Ukraine's appreciation, Zelenskyy presented a Ukrainian flag signed by soldiers fighting in Bakhmut as a gift to Congress. Vice President Kamala



ANDREW HARNIK/AP

President Joe Biden walks with Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to the Oval Office at the White House on Wednesday.

Harris and Pelosi held up the flag before Pelosi gifted the American flag that flew over the Capitol on Wednesday to Zelenskyy.

His address came as lawmakers considered the passage of close to \$50 billion in new emergency aid to Ukraine, the largest package yet. It is included in a \$1.7 trillion spending bill and would push U.S.

support for the war effort to more than \$100 billion this year.

It would provide \$13 billion to prop up Ukraine's economy and address energy supply shortfalls as Russia continues to bombard Ukrainian infrastructure in hopes of plunging the country into a cold and dark winter.

The assistance would also set aside \$9 billion for training, equipment and supplies for the Ukrainian military and \$2 billion to help refugees.

Zelenskyy last appeared before Congress in March via video and invoked Pearl Harbor as he pressed for further military assistance from the United States. His wife, Olena Zelenska, came to Capitol Hill in person in July to plead with lawmakers for air defense systems as she showed them graphic images of the war's youngest victims.

On Wednesday, the U.S. announced it would finally provide Ukraine the most advanced air-defense weapon of all: the Patriot missile battery. The system is part of \$1.8 billion in new security aid that also includes guided rockets, ammunition and armored vehicles.

Congress remains united in its

solidarity with Ukraine, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., insisted to reporters after Zelenskyy's speech. He has played down growing discontent among some Republicans who argue aid to Ukraine is wasteful or could be better spent elsewhere.

"The most important thing going on in the world is to beat the Russians in Ukraine," McConnell said. "Fortunately, they have a leader that everyone can look up to and admire. And it's nice to have something here at the end of the year that we all actually agree on."

Zelenskyy appeared to acknowledge the political divisions in the U.S. on Wednesday, calling on the Senate and the House to remain bipartisan in their decisions. Republicans are set to take control of the House in January.

"The world is too interconnected and too interdependent to allow someone to stay aside," Zelenskyy said. "Our two nations are allies in this battle and next year will be a turning point, I know it — the point where Ukrainian courage and American resolve must guarantee the future of our common freedom, the freedom of people who stand for their values."

NATION



ROSS D. FRANKLIN/AP

Double-stacked shipping containers provide a new wall between the United States and Mexico in Arizona's San Rafael Valley, on Dec. 8. Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey will take down the makeshift wall, settling a lawsuit and political tussle with the U.S. government.

Arizona to remove shipping containers from Mexico border

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey will take down a makeshift wall made of shipping containers at the Mexico border, settling a lawsuit and political tussle with the U.S. government over trespassing on federal lands.

The Biden administration and the Republican governor entered into an agreement that Arizona will cease installing the containers in any national forest, according to court documents filed Wednesday in U.S. District Court in Phoenix.

The agreement also calls for Arizona to remove the containers that were already installed in the remote San Rafael Valley, in southeastern Cochise County, by Jan. 4 without damaging any natural resources. State agencies will have to consult with U.S. Forest Service representatives.

The resolution comes two weeks before Democrat Katie Hobbs, who opposes the construction, takes over as governor.

The federal government filed a lawsuit last week against Ducey's administration on behalf of the Bureau of Reclamation, the Department of Agriculture and the Forest

Service.

Before the lawsuit, Ducey told federal officials that Arizona was ready to help remove the containers. He said they were placed as a temporary barrier. But he wanted the federal government to say when it would fill any remaining gaps in the permanent border wall, as it announced it would a year ago.

The federal government "owes it to Arizonans and all Americans to release a timeline," Ducey wrote last week, responding to news of the pending federal lawsuit.

The work placing up to 3,000 containers at a cost of \$95 million was about a third complete, but protesters concerned about its impact on the environment held up work in recent days.

Meanwhile, limits on asylum seekers hoping to enter the U.S. had been set to expire Wednesday before conservative-leaning states sought the Supreme Court's help to keep them in place. The Biden administration has asked the court to lift the Trump-era restrictions, but not before Christmas. It's not clear when the court might rule on the matter.

Senate reaches deal, seeks to pass \$1.7T spending bill

By KEVIN FREKING
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Senate appeared back on track Thursday to pass a \$1.7 trillion bill to finance federal agencies through September and provide roughly \$45 billion in military and economic assistance to Ukraine after lawmakers reached agreement on a final series of votes.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer announced that the Senate had an agreement to consider some 15 amendments before voting on final passage of the package. Most of the amendments will be subject to a 60-vote threshold to pass, generally dooming them to failure in the evenly divided 100-member Senate.

"It's taken a while, but it is worth it," Schumer said in announcing the series of votes, which were needed to lock in an expedited vote on final passage and get the bill to President Joe Biden's desk before a partial government shutdown would begin at midnight Friday. The House will take up the bill after the Senate completes its work.

The massive bill includes about \$772.5 billion for non-defense, discretionary programs and \$858 billion for defense and would finance agencies through September. Lawmakers were racing to get the bill approved before a shutdown could occur, and many were anxious to complete the task before a deep freeze and wintry conditions leave them stranded in Washington for the holidays. Many also want to lock in government funding before a new GOP-controlled House next year could make it harder to find compromise on spending.

Senators heard from Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy about the importance of U.S. aid to his country for its war with Russia on Wednesday night, but when lawmakers left the chamber that night, prospects for a quick vote



J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE/AP

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., left, speaks with Senate Appropriations Committee Chair Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., the House Appropriations Committee chair, on Wednesday, at the U.S. Capitol.

looked glum. Sen. Chris Coons, D-Del., remarked "this bill is hanging by a thread."

Lawmakers were in disagreement over which amendments were to be voted upon to lock in a final vote with Republicans looking to ensure that they had a chance to vote on a proposed amendment from Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, seeking to extend coronavirus pandemic-era restrictions on asylum seekers at the U.S.-Mexico border, also referred to as Title 42. His amendment would have prohibited federal dollars from being used to end the restrictions.

Passage of the Lee amendment would most certainly have doomed the bill in the House, forcing lawmakers to regroup and pass another stopgap spending measure at current funding levels to avert a shutdown.

But then, Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, an independent from Arizona, offered an amendment to boost border security funding and extend Title 42 restrictions. That gave some Democrats an opportunity to vote for her proposal rather than Lee's. The measure gained

only 10 yes votes while 87 voted against it. Republicans called the amendment a "ruse" that didn't do enough and was designed to provide political cover from some of its supports on the hot-button immigration issue.

Soon afterward, Lee's amendment also went down to defeat, 50-47, which put the Senate on a glidepath to a final vote in the early afternoon.

The spending bill is supported by Schumer and Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell, though for different reasons.

McConnell is citing the bill's 10% boost in defense spending, which he says will give America's armed forces the funding and certainty needed to ensure the country's security.

McConnell is facing pushback from many Republicans who don't support the spending bill and resent being forced to vote on such a massive package with so little time before a potential shutdown and the Christmas holiday. But it's expected that enough Republicans agree with him that the bill will reach the 60-vote threshold needed to pass.

FTX founder Bankman-Fried allowed \$250M bond, house arrest

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The cryptocurrency entrepreneur Sam Bankman-Fried can post \$250 million bond and live in his parents' home in California while he awaits trial on charges that he swindled investors and looted customer deposits on his FTX trading platform, a judge said Thursday.

Assistant U.S. Attorney Nicolas Roos said in U.S. District Court in Manhattan that Bankman-Fried, 30, "perpetrated a fraud of epic

proportions." Roos proposed strict bail terms, including a \$250 million bond and house arrest at his parents' home in Palo Alto, Calif.

An important reason for allowing bail was that Bankman-Fried agreed to waive extradition, Roos said.

Magistrate Judge Gabriel W. Gorenstein agreed to the bond and also approved the house arrest proposal. He also said Bankman-Fried would be required to get an

electronic monitoring bracelet before leaving the Manhattan courthouse.

Bankman-Fried, arrested in the Bahamas last week, was flown to New York late Wednesday after deciding not to challenge his extradition.

While he was in the air, the U.S. attorney in Manhattan announced that two of Bankman-Fried's closest business associates had also been charged and had secretly pleaded guilty.

Carolyn Ellison, 28, the former chief executive of Bankman-Fried's trading firm, Alameda Research, and Gary Wang, 29, who co-founded FTX, pleaded guilty to charges including wire fraud, securities fraud and commodities fraud.

U.S. Attorney Damian Williams said in a video statement that both were cooperating with investigators and had agreed to assist in any prosecution. He warned others who enabled the alleged fraud to

come forward.

"If you participated in misconduct at FTX or Alameda, now is the time to get ahead of it," he said. "We are moving quickly, and our patience is not eternal."

Prosecutors and regulators contend that Bankman-Fried was at the center of several illegal schemes to use customer and investor money for personal gain.

He faces the possibility of decades in prison if convicted on all counts.

NATION

Temps fall fast and far as storm threatens

By **HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH**
AND **JILL BLEED**
Associated Press

MISSION, Kan. — Temperatures plunged far and fast Thursday as a winter storm formed ahead of Christmas weekend, promising heavy snow, ice, flooding and powerful winds across a broad swath of the country and complicating holiday travel.

The National Weather Service reported that temperatures across the central High Plains plummeted 50 degrees in just a few hours. In much of the country, the Christmas weekend could be the coldest in decades.

The frigid air will move through the central United States to the east, with windchill advisories affecting about 135 million people over the coming days, weather service meteorologist Ashton Robinson Cook said Thursday.

Forecasters are expecting a bomb cyclone — when atmospheric pressure drops very quickly in a strong storm — to develop near the Great Lakes, which will increase winds and create blizzard conditions, Cook said.

Already, roads in rural stretches of western South Dakota were blocked, leaving people stranded with dwindling supplies of food and heating sources.

“It’s just kind of scary for us here, we just kind of feel isolated and left out,” said Shawn Bordeaux, a Democratic state law-



CHRIS MACHIAN, OMAHA (NEB.) WORLD-HERALD/AP

Looking east toward Iowa from the Nebraska side, emergency crews closed Interstate 80 in both directions after winter weather caused several accidents on Wednesday in Omaha, Neb.

maker, who said he was running out of propane heat at his home near Mission on the Rosebud Indian Reservation because snow drifts made it impossible for a delivery driver to re-supply him.

In Texas, temperatures were expected to quickly plummet Thursday, but state leaders promised there wouldn’t be a repeat of the February 2021 storm that overwhelmed the state’s power grid and was blamed for hundreds of deaths.

Elsewhere in the U.S., author-

ities worried about the potential for power failures and warned people to take precautions to protect older and homeless people and livestock — and, if possible, to postpone travel.

“This event could be life-threatening if you are stranded with wind chills in the 30 below to 45 below zero range,” according to an online post by the National Weather Service in Minnesota, where transportation and patrol officials reported dozens of crashes and vehicles off the road.

Michigan State Police prepared to deploy additional troopers to help motorists. And along Interstate 90 in northern Indiana, crews were braced to clear as much as a foot of snow as meteorologists warned of blizzard conditions there starting Thursday evening. About 150 National Guard members also have been deployed to help snow-bound Indiana travelers.

More than 1,700 flights had been canceled Thursday morning within, in or out of the U.S., ac-

ording to the tracking site Flight-Aware, with Chicago O’Hare and Denver airports seeing the most. Freezing rain forced Delta to halt departures from its hub in Seattle.

Amtrak, meanwhile, canceled service on more than 20 routes, primarily in the Midwest. Service between Chicago and Milwaukee, Chicago and Detroit, and St. Louis and Kansas City, Mo., was suspended through Christmas Day.

Some shelters in the Detroit area already were at capacity. The Detroit News reported that the 140 beds at COTS, a family-only shelter in Detroit, were full. The facility is hoping to make room for others, though, spokesperson Aisha Morrell-Ferguson told the newspaper Wednesday.

In Montana, temperatures fell as low as 50 below zero at Elk Park, a mountain pass on the Continental Divide. Several ski areas announced closures Wednesday and Thursday because of the extreme cold and winds. Schools also closed, and several thousand people lost power.

In famously snowy Buffalo, New York, forecasters predicted a “once-in-a-generation storm” because of heavy lake-effect snow, wind gusts as high as 65 mph, whiteouts and the potential for extensive power outages. The NHL postponed the Buffalo Sabres’ home game against the Tampa Bay Lightning and rescheduled it for March 4.

California town grapples with toll of quake on homes, water

By **ADAM BEAM**
AND **AMY TAXIN**
Associated Press

RIO DELL, Calif. — Outside the Dollar General, the store manager ticked off the items she had to share with families trying to jumpstart their lives after an earthquake jolted them from their beds and cut off the town’s water and power.

“Batteries or candles?” a worker asked a woman toting a toddler on her hip, and handed the child a plastic candy cane filled with sweets.

Just days before Christmas in Rio Dell, the former lumber town grappled with the aftermath of early Tuesday’s magnitude 6.4 earthquake that injured at least 17 people, shook homes off foundations, damaged water systems and left tens of thousands without electricity, some for more than a day.

By Wednesday afternoon, power was restored to the homes of tens of thousands of residents, and Christmas lights wrapped around trees on the community’s main street came back on. However, most of the town’s 3,500 residents lacked safe drinking water, according to local officials.

Twenty-six homes were deemed unsafe, leaving an estimated 65 people displaced, most of whom were expected to be staying with family and friends, said Rio Dell City Manager Kyle Knopp. Another 37 homes were damaged, and even those that suffered no physical cracks required intense cleanup inside, where the floors were cluttered by knocked down shelves and broken dishware.

By Wednesday night, Pacific Gas & Electric announced that it had restored electric power to essentially all of the approximately 70,000 customers who had quake-related outages.

Along this stretch of Northern California’s coast, earthquakes are common, and people talk about them much like the weather. But the one that shook people from their homes was different to many who found themselves tossed violently from their beds and stumbling around in the dark of night in search of safety.

When his house began to shake, Chad Sovereign ran into his 10-year-old son Jaxon’s room, grabbed him, and dove under a door frame. The brick chimney



GODOFREDO A. VÁSQUEZ/AP

Port-a-potties have been placed outside the fire department after an earthquake in Rio Dell, Calif., on Wednesday.

collapsed, pulling the wall with it and leaving a gaping hole in their home.

“It felt like the end of the world,” Sovereign said. “I was telling him I love him. I didn’t say goodbye to him, (but) in my head I was. I was just telling him, ‘I love you, I love you, I love you,’ over and over.”

Sovereign said the family lost water and power, but they could remain in their home. They filled up their bathtub with whatever water was left before the shutoff

and used it to flush the toilets.

The quake was centered in nearby Ferndale, about 210 miles northwest of San Francisco and near the Pacific coast. The area is known for its redwood forests, scenic mountains and the three-county Emerald Triangle’s legendary marijuana crop — as well as the Mendocino Triple Junction, a geologic region where three tectonic plates meet.

On Wednesday, the community fire station was turned into a drive-thru hub. Residents pulled

up their cars and had water loaded into their trunks, while a local food truck handed out tacos and burritos courtesy of World Central Kitchen. Other volunteers propped up folding tables and gave out apples, peaches, bagels and canned food.

What was once a bustling lumber town with shops in the 1970s is today a small, humble community made up of retirees, commuters and renters. When a nearby mill went bankrupt and a major thoroughfare moved, Rio Dell became a shadow of its former self, residents said. But it remains a place where people know each other and when reeling from disaster they can go to City Hall and seek advice on who can replace their broken windows — and get it, too.

Outside Dollar General, store manager Cassondra Stoner said she was told she could distribute water, batteries and candles but to hold off on other items until they could be inspected — something she couldn’t always do.

“I couldn’t help myself, and I gave somebody one ibuprofen and some baby diapers because I am not going to let a kid go without diapers,” she said.

STARS AND STRIPES

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Farewell to a strange, Twitter-obsessed year

BY GEORGE F. WILL

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON

The strangeness of 2022 was exemplified by the extravagant investment of time, brain cells and media passion in fretting about Twitter. This medium, which humanity progressed without for 10 millennia, suddenly seemed to some worrywarts as vital as oxygen and proteins, and as perishable as the planet. Progressives, constantly hungering for cataclysms (“Democracy is dying!” “Earth is boiling!”), worried that an end of politically motivated, government-influenced curating of content on Twitter, which is a 16-year-old adolescent, might doom this 246-year-old nation. Only 23% of Americans, disproportionately progressives, use Twitter, and 25% of the 23% generate 97% of the tweets.

Elon Musk’s culling of Twitter employees so terrified Robert Reich, the former labor secretary’s numeracy lapsed: Musk, Reich tweeted, “fired half of Twitter’s workforce and drove off even more.” The president’s arithmetically challenged press secretary, Karine Jean-Pierre, said her boss has created “ten thousand million jobs,” 2 billion more than the world’s population.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency denied that Vladimir Putin’s nuclear saber-rattling explained its recommendation that, if nuclear war seems imminent, Americans taking shelter should practice social distancing and wear masks. FEMA says its “nuclear explosion” guidelines predate the war in Ukraine.

This year was replete with reminders that we increasingly live in a “permission society” that requires government’s approval to do even sensible things. For ex-

ample, when Hurricane Ian ripped the roofs off many Floridians’ homes, Terence Duque, a Texas roofer, hastened to Florida’s Charlotte County to ply his suddenly much-needed trade. This commercial activity between consenting adults got Duque arrested by the County’s Economic Crimes Unit for being useful: for conducting business without — wait for it — a Florida license.

Great 2022 moments in identity politics: Billionaire Rick Caruso, running for mayor of Los Angeles (which is 49.1% “Hispanic or Latino”) against Karen Bass, who is Black, disputed a debate moderator’s assertion that the next mayor would be “an African American woman or a white man.” Caruso said he was “Latin,” because of his Italian heritage. A Minneapolis teachers union contract stipulated that if public school layoffs are necessary, white teachers will be terminated before “educators of color.” The Oregon Health Authority’s office of equity and inclusion delayed a meeting because “urgency is a white supremacy value.” The University of Kansas offered a course in “Angry White Male Studies.” The number of colleges and universities that require or encourage Indigenous “land acknowledgment” (saying the institution occupies stolen land): too numerous to count. The number that are returning the land: zero.

The Associated Press’s style mavens said “pregnant women” is acceptable phrasing, although “pregnant people” is more inclusive and preferable to “overly clinical” language such as “people with uteruses” or “birthing people.” In Springfield, Mo., the gender-theory training program for teachers encourages them to assume “gender is a universe” that includes “nonbinary,” “pansexual” and “polyamorous.” Although

a Black member of Duke’s volleyball team claimed she was “racially heckled throughout the entirety of the match” at Brigham Young University, no one else was found to have heard this, and a video of the event recorded no evidence of it. Still, the usual people were as theatrically dismayed by it as they had been by actor Jussie Smollett’s fictitious encounter with American racism. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg says racism is “physically built into some of our highways.”

A Duke assistant director of “diversity, equity, inclusion” programs apologized to “the government of China” (aka the Chinese Communist Party) for an “incorrect and insensitive” email identifying China and Tibet as different countries. A Syracuse University dean performed a similar grovel for the same offense.

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, scourge of the plutocracy, last year had “Tax the Rich” written on the back of her custom-made dress at the Met Gala, where a table cost up to \$300,000. This year, arrested at an abortion rights protest, the histrionic congresswoman walked with her hands behind her back, as though handcuffed, until she passed some supporters, to whom she gave a clenched-fist salute.

Finally, let’s revisit Twitterdom. In yet another unsuccessful attempt to become a senator from Ohio, Josh Mandel tweeted, “The last letters in Democrat: RAT. The last letters in Republican: I CAN. That should tell you everything you need to know.” About Mandel, yes. One 2022 tweet (from the Financial Times’ Edward Luce) almost made Twitter seem worth the fuss: “Kanye West and Nick Fuentes are about to be run over by a train and you could only save one. What kind of cocktail would you order?” Gin martini.

Taliban strike another blow to Afghanistan’s women

BY SHABANA BASIJ-RASIKH

Special to The Washington Post

In the autumn of 2020, during the pandemic’s bleakest days, one of my students at the School of Leadership, Afghanistan drew a picture.

It depicts a tent in a field ringed by mountains. The tent is blue fabric, staked to the ground at its corners with a mesh opening in one of its walls. Behind the mesh, obscured, stands a woman. She holds strings of colorful balloons, the strings extending out through the mesh, and she is releasing them, one by one, and letting them rise into the air.

The girl who drew the picture, this young Afghan artist, explained it this way: The blue tent is the blue burqa. The woman inside is every Afghan woman forced to erase herself beneath that blue fabric or behind the walls of her home. She stands for every woman who is alone and quarantined not just by COVID-19 but by elements of society that claim ultimate jurisdiction over her life and future, and who fights back by sending her daughters to school. Daughters like the artist herself.

The woman in the blue tent opens her hand and her colorful balloons float away.

Two years later, in the midst of days bleaker than any I could have ever imagined for my country, the men of the Taliban sit comfortably in Kabul and take aim with their weapons and casually blast the balloons of our hopes out of the sky, one by one.

The latest shot came on Tuesday, when the Taliban decreed that women are now barred from attending universities in Afghanistan, effective immediately and indefinitely. It’s a project that began in March, when they banned girls from attending school past sixth grade yet kept universities open.

That’s over now. What remains in my country is this: Girls can attend school through sixth grade — or, said another way, more or less until they enter puberty. And then nothing.

In the Taliban’s Afghanistan, there is no need for adolescent girls to study. There is no need for young women to learn. Women have their purpose. The relentless codification of control over their futures, their ambitions, and their bodies has unfolded across 2022 with slow brutality.

Almost since the day the Taliban seized power last summer, I have asked the world not to look away from Afghanistan. I have asked you not to look away from Afghan women and girls, and from the men who are the judges, juries and executioners of dreams.

I ask this for the same reason that Rina Amiri, the U.S. special envoy for Afghan women, girls and human rights, wrote on Twitter last month: “Those who fear a radicalized Afghanistan should be alarmed by the Taliban’s policies against women & girls, denying them education, work in most sec-

tors, even small joys such as the right to go to a park. This extremism will lead to instability, poverty & more population flight.”

Yes. It absolutely will. It already has. So look, and see, and act.

Act to boldly support and publicly advocate for Afghan women — women who are beaten and shot at, and whose bodies appear cast away at roadsides and in dumpsters and who still call even now for freedom and the right to work and to learn. To Muslim-majority nations I say: Act and speak out in the strongest terms against the Taliban’s utterly un-Islamic decrees.

I personally benefited from the bravery of Afghan women in the 1990s under the Taliban’s first regime. I am who I am because they did what they did for girls like me, risking their lives to teach us in secret. It’s in their honor that I continue our fight for dignity and justice, now and forever.

A new generation of Afghan women is being pushed off the pathway toward education and independence. The bright balloons that once filled our sky are punctured and falling to earth.

These women and their hopes are allies against extremism that the world can’t afford to lose. See them, hear them, honor them. Don’t look away.

Shabana Basij-Rasikh, a Washington Post Global Opinions contributing columnist, is co-founder and president of the School of Leadership, Afghanistan.

NATION

Gamers oppose purchase of Activision by Microsoft

Associated Press
 SAN FRANCISCO — A group of gamers is suing to stop Microsoft from buying video game publisher Activision Blizzard, arguing that the \$68.7 billion acquisition would stifle competition and reduce consumer choice.

The lawsuit was filed late Tuesday in a U.S. federal court in San Francisco on behalf of 10 individual gamers who are fans of Activision Blizzard's Call of Duty franchise and other popular titles such as World of Warcraft, Overwatch and Diablo.

Microsoft is facing a number of legal challenges as it tries to finalize what would be the priciest-ever merger of technology companies. The Federal Trade Commission

earlier this month sued to block the takeover, saying it could suppress competitors to Microsoft's Xbox game console and its growing games subscription business. Antitrust regulators in the United Kingdom and European Union are also investigating the deal.

Several of the plaintiffs in the private antitrust lawsuit said they play Activision Blizzard games on Sony's PlayStation, the main rival to Microsoft's Xbox. Others said they play them on personal computers, Xbox or Nintendo's Switch.

In response to the lawsuit, Microsoft said Wednesday the merger "will expand competition and create more opportunities for gamers and game developers as we seek to bring more games to more people."

Economy grew 3.2% in 3rd quarter, an upgrade from earlier estimate

Associated Press
 WASHINGTON — Shrugging off rampant inflation and rising interest rates, the U.S. economy grew at an unexpectedly strong 3.2% annual pace from July through September, the government reported Thursday in a healthy upgrade from its earlier estimate of third-quarter growth.

The rise in gross domestic product — the economy's output in goods and services — marked a return to growth after consecutive drops in the January-March and April-June periods.

Still, many economists expect the economy to slow and probably

slip into recession next year under the pressure of higher interest rates being engineered by the Federal Reserve to combat inflation that earlier this year reached heights not seen since the early 1980s.

Driving the third-quarter growth were strong exports and healthy consumer spending.

Investment in housing plunged at an annual rate of 27.1%, hampered by higher mortgage rates arising from the Fed's decision to raise its own benchmark rate seven times this year.

Thursday's GDP report was the Commerce Department's third

and final look at the July-September quarter. The first look at the fourth quarter comes out Jan. 26. Forecasters surveyed by the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia expect the economy to grow again the last three months of the year — but at a slower, 1% annual rate.

In its previous estimate of third-quarter growth, issued Nov. 30, the Commerce Department had pegged July-September growth at an annual rate of 2.9%. Behind the upgrade to Thursday's 3.2% was stronger growth in consumer spending, revised up to a 2.3% annual rate from 1.7% in the November estimate.

Applications for jobless claims up slightly last week; job security still seen

Associated Press
 WASHINGTON — Slightly more Americans filed for unemployment benefits last week as the labor market continues to show strength even as the Federal Reserve has tried for nearly a year to slow the economy by raising its

main lending rate. Applications for jobless claims for the week ending Dec. 17 inched up by 2,000 to 216,000 from the previous week's 214,000, the Labor Department reported Thursday. Jobless claims are generally viewed as a representation of layoffs.

The four-week moving average of claims, which smooths out some of the week-to-week swings, fell by 6,250 to 221,750.

About 1.67 million people were receiving jobless aid the week that ended Dec. 10, about 6,000 fewer than the week before.

Despite the Fed's attempt to fight stubbornly high inflation by raising interest rates to cool the economy, American workers are still experiencing extraordinary job security, with nearly two jobs for every unemployed person. U.S. employers added 263,000 jobs last month.

Though the U.S. economy shrank in the first half of this year — part of which came before the Fed started hiking rates — the government said Thursday that the economy grew at an unexpectedly strong 3.2% annual pace in the third quarter.

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TRICARE

WORLD

Turkey, Saudi Arabia decry Taliban's university ban

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — Turkey and Saudi Arabia became the latest Muslim-majority countries to condemn a decision by Taliban authorities to bar women from universities, while about two dozen women staged a protest in the streets of Kabul on Thursday.

In another sign of domestic opposition, several Afghan cricketers condemned the university ban. Cricket is a hugely popular sport in Afghanistan, and players have hundreds of thousands of followers on social media.

They have yet to publicly speak about the ban or react to the global backlash against it, although a

spokesman for the Ministry of Higher Education, Ziaullah Hashmi, said in a tweet Thursday that a news conference would be held this week to explain the move.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Thursday that the ban was "neither Islamic nor humane."

Saudi Arabia, which until 2019 enforced sweeping restrictions on women's travel, employment and other crucial aspects of their daily lives, also urged the Taliban to change course.

The Saudi foreign ministry expressed "astonishment and regret" at Afghan women being denied a university education.

Fire starts on Russia's sole aircraft carrier at shipyard

Associated Press

MOSCOW — A fire broke out onboard Russia's sole aircraft carrier on Thursday, Russian state media reported.

The Admiral Kuznetsov, a flagship of the Russian Navy, suffered a "minor" fire while undergoing repair work at a shipyard in the Arctic port of Murmansk, according to reports by the Russian state Tass and RIA Novosti news agen-

cies. Both cited Aleksey Rakhmanov, head of the state-owned United Shipbuilding Corporation (USC) which is overseeing a major refit of the carrier, as saying that the blaze was quickly extinguished and caused no casualties.

Delays and accidents have marred the Admiral Kuznetsov's ongoing overhaul, which began in 2017 and is expected to return to service in early 2024.

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WEEKEND



US, UK troops go head-to-head
Video games, Page 18



Somebody who loves her

British actor Naomi Ackie stars in music-filled 'I Wanna Dance with Somebody,' intended to be a more dignified, less salacious Whitney Houston biopic

Q&A with Ackie and director Kasi Lemmons, Page 15
Review, Page 16

SONY PICTURES/AP

WEEKEND: LIFESTYLE

Tapping into their childhood

Toymakers aiming products at adults looking for comfort

BY ANNE D'INNOCENZIO
Associated Press

Since the pandemic, Elizabeth Hulanick has turned to toys from her childhood to relieve stress. She and her co-workers chip in to buy Legos at Target and play at their desks. She also started playing with Silly Putty again, noting she felt comforted by the bouncy rubbery stuff that changes colors.

Even her American Girl doll named Samantha, which she keeps in her china cabinet, resonates more these days; she waited one year for her mother to buy her that doll when she was a child and now, she says, it serves as a reminder to always be patient.

“(This) probably will be with me forever. I always need something to be tinkering with, and that’s probably the safest bet for me to stick with a toy versus keep trying to figure out how to fix cars or something like that,” the 37-year-old Piscataway, N.J., resident said.

Long before the pandemic, many adults turned to toys from Legos to collectible items to tap into their inner childhood for comfort. But all the stresses from the health crisis accelerated and solidified the trend, according to Jim Silver, editor-in-chief of TTPM, a toy review site.

Even as the pandemic’s threat ebbs, toy makers from Mattel’s American Girl to Build-a-Bear Workshop Inc. see adults’ interest in playthings as long-lasting and are creating new products, services and websites aimed for the older group.

This so-called “kid-adult” market is significant. Ages 18 and older represented 14% of U.S. toy industry sales, or \$5.7 billion for the 12 months ending September 2022. It grew 19% since the 12 months ending September 2021, according to the NPD Group Inc., a market research firm. This group also enjoyed the second-fastest increase after customers ages 12 to 17.

Starting early this year, Mattel’s American Girl Cafe added more adult fare like beet and goat cheese salads and cocktails like Aperol spritzes and Bloody Marys after seeing adults show up without children. Last year, Build-a-Bear launched a website called Bear Cave for the 18-year-old and over, highlighting items like stuffed rabbits holding a bottle of wine. And Basic Fun took a high-tech spin on the traditional Lite Brite toy from the 1960s and recreated it as wall art with thousands of pegs and 45 LED lights aimed at the adults in time for the holidays — with a \$99 price tag.

Lego A/S has been steadily increasing its products for adults since 2020; it now has 100 sets, including intrepid space



PHOTOS BY BEBETO MATTHEWS/AP

Marisa Dragos, 23, left, along with her childhood friend Lisa Costantino, 24, right, sit for lunch at American Girl Cafe with two store-borrowed dolls, Dec. 2 in New York. American Girl Cafe has added more adult fare and cocktails to its menu.



Jamie Cygielman, right, general manager and president at American Girl, pictured Dec. 2 in New York, said roughly half its sales went to adults after a relaunch of the first six American Girl dolls in May 2021 to celebrate its 35th anniversary.

exploration and luxury cars.

“The pandemic certainly served as a catalyst for this trend as adults found themselves stuck at home with nothing else to do with a lot of time in their hands,” said Genevieve Cruz, senior director at Lego, which sees adults of all ages embracing the colorful building blocks. “But we do believe that the trend goes beyond the pandemic.”

Executives say what makes this time different is that consumers are really getting into the role-playing. Build-a-Bear says adults are actually taking their stuffed animals to bed. At American Girl, women get dressed up in outfits inspired by their favorite dolls and are bringing their dolls from their childhood to the cafes and sitting with them, said Jaime Cygielman, general manager and president at American Girl. They’re also bringing them to the doll hospital or the hair salon at the stores to have them repaired or have their hair coiffed, she noted.

Such role-playing could be seen at a recent visit to the American Girl Cafe in Manhattan, where Marisa Dragos, 23, along with her childhood friend Lisa Costantino, 24, were eating lunch, with two of the dolls they borrowed from the store. They were visiting from Los Angeles.

“(My mom) feels sad I’m still in my childhood bedroom because I can’t really afford to move out right now,” Dragos said. “I think it’s funny to me. I still have the dolls, just kind of sitting in my room, but I feel like they’ve grown with me. They are my little friends that I hang out with.”

Among the hottest items for adults: Star Wars and Harry Potter-themed Lego sets, plush items like Squishmallows — whimsical stuffed creatures from Jazwares — and action figures from the likes of Marvel, according to NPD.

McDonald’s also is tapping into this group, releasing adult Happy Meals in October with nostalgic figurines designed

by the fashion brand Cactus Plant Flea Market. McDonald’s President and CEO Chris Kempczinski said the company sold half its supply of collectibles in the first four days of the promotion.

The toy industry, which generated annual sales of roughly \$38 billion last year, could use some help from adults.

For the first nine months of this year, the number of toys sold slipped 3%, while spending rose by the same amount due to higher prices. That’s a big change from the first two years of the pandemic when sales soared as parents splurged on toys from board games to dolls to entertain their children who were staying close to home.

Sharon Price John, CEO of Build-a-Bear, said she started noticing adults buying the stuffed animals for themselves five years ago and it’s only grown since. In response, the company is focusing its online business with the adult in mind. In 2019, it launched its “After Dark” collection of edgy bears that one adult valentine gives to another.

“There are many more teens and adults in our stores just enjoying the experience and not just with their families, like with each other,” John said.

Now, 40% of its total sales at Build-a-Bear come from adults and teens, up from 20% in 2012.

Finding that inner youth through toys is not just being embraced by consumers in their 20s to 40s.

Loren Brereton, 61, was recently visiting the American Girl store with her granddaughter Alana, 7. She said that during the pandemic, she took comfort looking at her own daughter’s dolls. She also pulled out some of her son’s Legos and other toys and played with them. She is now thinking of buying a few playthings for herself.

“All of those games have brought me comfort when I was a kid, but, you know, sort of changed you at different times when you needed it,” she said. “And you needed it.”

WEEKEND: MOVIES



SONY PICTURES/AP

Naomi Ackie stars as Whitney Houston in "I Wanna Dance with Somebody," which focuses on the woman behind the icon, troubles, triumphs and all.

Studying the 'essence' of Whitney Houston

Actor, who plays the pop star in 'I Wanna Dance with Somebody,' and her director discuss their corrective new biopic

BY LINDSEY BAHR
Associated Press

Naomi Ackie, who plays Whitney Houston in the new biopic "I Wanna Dance With Somebody," is the first to admit that she is not a doppelgänger for the pop star. In fact, she'll go so far as to say she doesn't look like her at all.

"I was like, are you guys sure? Are you absolutely sure?" Ackie said during a recent interview with The Associated Press.

But the people who really knew Houston, her family and record producer Clive Davis among them, were all convinced that the rising British actor was right for the film, meant to be a music-filled celebration and a kind of corrective to other projects that took a more salacious treatment.

The film, written by "Bohemian Rhapsody" scribe Anthony McCarten, shows Houston's ascent from New Jersey choir girl to global superstar, with a focus on the woman behind the icon, troubles, triumphs and all, up until her death in 2012 at age 48. It opened in theaters Friday.

"It's a study on the essence of Whitney and not the image of Whitney," Ackie said. "I thought, if I'm going to do this, I'm going to speak on Whitney's internal world, and everything else is completely out of my control."

An important part of that journey was finding the right director to help hold her hand and challenge her when needed. Kasi Lemmons was a stranger to Ackie when they met, but they developed a quick, deep bond on a soul level.

They spoke to the AP about Houston; society's complicated relationship with

icons; and telling the truth while keeping her dignity intact. Remarks have been edited for brevity and clarity.

AP: Kasi, what was your relationship to Whitney and how did that inform your approach?

Lemmons: I watched her rise to fame as a young actress in New York City who was part of the Black dance world. I can remember the first moment I saw her, like who is this beautiful creature with this voice? But we also had ownership of her. We were all up in her business and it was all speculation, right? We didn't really know her. Then 10 years later, at the



Lemmons

(her father and manager) John Houston and he's talking about the brand, the image. That was the experience that stayed with me that I wanted to bring to the movie.

Ackie: And that was exactly what I needed. Someone who had direct contact and had an insight, especially to that relationship, because it was one of the ones that was most challenging to try and unpack. But you took me by the hand and just said, "I've got you."

The question of identity is important here as everyone has different ideas of who she is and who she should be. How did you internalize that conflict?

Ackie: I think it's very easy to identify

with that, especially if you're a woman and especially if you're a woman of color. That part felt quite simple to me, when you are told what you should be and for a time, you can adhere to that. And then at some point something in you shifts and you can't anymore.

This movie gives new depth to the song 'I Wanna Dance with Somebody' in connecting it to her relationship with Robyn Crawford (portrayed by Nafessa Williams).

Ackie: That was you, wasn't it?

Lemmons: I would ask (the screenwriter) why is it called that? And he'd say it's spirit and the effervescence and the uplift. And I'm like, 'OK but it has to have meaning.' He had written it in the script, that the song is 'about wanting to dance with somebody really badly but for whatever reason you can't.' And I was like, I think that's about Robyn!

Her performance of 'The Star-Spangled Banner' at the Super Bowl in 1991 is a big moment in the film. Tell me about re-creating that, and why that was so important to her.

Ackie: How many performances of that song have been made? And for her to make it so individual, so memorable? Obviously (I'm) not American, and it even made me patriotic! But filming, I mean, it's meant to be in Florida, and we were filming in November.

Lemmons: In Boston.

Ackie: Yeah, you could see my breath.

Lemmons: We took a little bit of that out. I think one of my favorite things is that it was a moment where she was being herself. She didn't want to wear a gown. She chose the outfit that she wore. And she said no, it's going to be in my rhythm.

I want it slow. And then to take it to these great heights? We tried to just bring the excitement of everybody observing it, even if you saw it on television, even if you weren't there.

This film doesn't shy away from her drug use either, but it does so sensitively.

Lemmons: We wanted it to be truthful. I have to commend the estate for letting us go places. Sometimes I had to push them past their comfort zone, and they were willing to say, OK, yeah, and that was great of them because I don't think I would have done the film if it hadn't been an aspect of it. It's part of the story, and it was something I observed and was what ultimately led to her demise.

Ackie: We have to remind ourselves constantly that this is an illness. These people suffering are not villains of their own story or other people. They are the victims of this illness and kind of allowing space and holding space for Whitney to be treated with a bit of compassion when it comes to that. How awful it must be to suffer through all your struggles and your addictions and then have a big portion of the media ripping into you and making fun of you during that period. I can't even imagine. So it's important to show it but also make sure that we hold on to her dignity.

Lemmons: That was it, to hold onto her dignity and to really make you admire the things that were admirable about her. And even in that struggle, there were things that were very admirable. It's very human: We try and we fail; we hope and we dream. We hope it's going to get better and put our best foot forward, and then we fall backwards.

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS

‘The Last Wish’ is a purrfectly fun Puss in Boots film

By LINDSEY BAHR
Associated Press

Quick, without looking, guess how long it's been since there's been a Shrek movie or even a Shrek-adjacent one. More than a decade seems too long for such a popular franchise, right? And yet here we are, 11 years later, welcoming back Antonio Banderas' swashbuckling feline in "Puss in Boots: The Last Wish," which opened in theaters Wednesday.

No wonder he's forced to think about his mortality in this one — segments of the audience will be, too, when they realize how much time has passed. It wasn't for lack of trying, but things were happening behind the scenes with directors coming and going. Then Universal acquired DreamWorks and they went back to the drawing board. Somehow, television spinoffs kept coming.

The good news is that the character is evergreen. As soon as Banderas starts speaking, and singing, as his playfully egotistic character, it'll feel like hardly any time has gone by at all. In "The Last Wish," the ever-confident Puss in Boots is shaken to discover that he's used up eight of his nine lives and, for the first time, has started worrying about his own death.

It might seem a little dour for a children's animated comedy, but when you start to think about other kids' movies, it's a common theme. Are they the anxieties of the middle-aged creators creeping out or an empathy machine for kids to think about the adults in their lives? Both? Does it matter? It's a device to rattle our hero, who has a bounty on

his head and a big, bad wolf (Wagner Moura) on his tail.

First he tries out retirement life in a home with Mama Luna (Da'Vine Joy Randolph), in which he's forced to behave like a cat — using a litter box ("so this is where dignity goes to die," he says) and eating cat food as opposed to his stove-top cooking as a cover of The Doors' "The End" plays in the background. But he gets a lifeline in the legend of a single wish from a star that's fallen to earth and is waiting to be granted, sending him, Kitty Softpaws (Salma Hayek Pinault) and a gratingly earnest dog (Harvey Guillén) on an adventure to get said wish.

This is where the movie really finds its groove, with the introduction of Goldilocks (Florence Pugh) who is a kind of crime lord to her family of bears, Mama (Olivia Colman), Papa (Ray Winstone) and Baby (Samson Kayo), and, separately, a no longer little Little Jack Horner (John Mulaney) who are all after the wishing star, too.

The vocal cast is an embarrassment of riches, especially Pugh, Colman, Winstone, who are right out of a PG-rated Guy Ritchie movie and should get their own spinoff.

Directed by Joel Crawford, with Januel Mercado as co-director, "Puss in Boots: The Last Wish" has enough good jokes to keep anyone amused for an afternoon at the movies.

Ultimately, it doesn't matter how much time has lapsed, Banderas is welcome back as the "leche-whisperer" whenever he wants.

"Puss in Boots: The Last Wish" is rated PG for rude humor, language, action/violence and some scary moments. Running time: 102 minutes. Now playing at select AAFES theaters.



SONY PICTURES/AP

Whitney Houston's performance of the national anthem at the Super Bowl in 1991 is one of the moments re-created by Naomi Ackie, above, and director Kasi Lemmons in "I Wanna Dance With Somebody."

Clumsy Houston biopic mars star Ackie's skill

By MARK KENNEDY
Associated Press

Whitney Houston's voice was one of a kind. The creative team behind a new big-budget biopic of the singer had no choice but to agree.

Naomi Ackie, who plays Houston in "I Wanna Dance With Somebody," turns in a fierce performance but is asked to lip-sync to Houston hits. The effect is, at best, an expensive karaoke session.

The dilemma that Houston's prodigious gift put everyone in is understandable: The chances of finding someone who resembles the singer is hard enough; finding someone who also has the awe-inducing, fluttery vocal ability is a fool's errand.

The solution could have been choosing between focusing on Houston's story or making a documentary that features her singing. It's unfair to ask Ackie to act her heart out and also have her execute large parts of Houston's iconic live performances in mimic mode. It's an uncanny canyon.

The movie is written by Anthony McCarten, who told Freddie Mercury's story in "Bohemian Rhapsody" and is having quite a moment with two shows on Broadway — "The Collaboration" about artists Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat and "A Beautiful Noise," a musical about Neil Diamond. McCarten clearly has impressed producers with an ability to tell the stories of modern icons but with Houston the hook is, well, business pressure.

"I Wanna Dance With Somebody" is more like a hyped-up "Behind the Music" episode set to Houston's greatest hits. It leans on all the clichés: overbearing parents, bad-boy boyfriends and giddy, champagne-popping montages on the way up and sullen montages on the way down as she's hunted by paparazzi.

Houston is portrayed as a woman who seizes her destiny only late in her cut-short life after struggling with the burden of being the family breadwinner for most of it.

Stanley Tucci plays a subdued and concerned

Clive Davis — the record executive helped produce the film and comes off like a prince — and Nafessa Williams is superb as Houston's best friend, manager and lover.

McCarten frames the climax of Houston's life at the 1994 American Music Awards, where she won eight awards and performed a medley of songs. It is where director Kasi Lemmons' camera starts and ends, part of an excruciating final section goodbye to the icon that lasts for what feels like an hour and ends with a heavy-handed, written statement that Houston was the "greatest voice of her generation."

Credit to the Houston estate for not sanitizing Houston's life: showing her early love affair with a woman; her pushy, demanding parents; the backlash from some in the Black community; and not shying away from the descent into drugs that killed her in 2012 at age 48.

Some highlights of the film include Houston and Davis picking hit songs in his office, the re-creations of the filming of the video "How Will I Know" and Houston's triumphant national anthem performance at Super Bowl XXV.

Less well-realized is the section exploring her filming of "The Bodyguard" — the filmmakers try to pass off an old clip of Kevin Costner on the set, a trick they try again later with Oprah — and the portrayal of husband Bobby Brown is not nuanced, leaving him the clear villain of the piece. Lemmons ("Harriet") uses a recurring image of a faucet dripping, a graceless way of foreshadowing her death.

Ackie's performance is to be cheered, reaching for the authenticity that Andra Day channeled when she tackled a doomed musical icon in "The United States vs. Billie Holiday."

But so much clumsiness, scenes featuring unnaturally heightened drama with little insight and the compromised authenticity of the performances drag "I Wanna Dance With Somebody" down.

"I Wanna Dance With Somebody" is rated PG-13 for strong drug content, some strong language, suggestive references and smoking. Running time: 146 minutes. Now playing at select AAFES theaters.



DREAMWORKS ANIMATION LLC/AP

From left: Kitty Softpaws (voice of Salma Hayek), Perro (Harvey Guillén) and Puss in Boots (Antonio Banderas) in "Puss in Boots: The Last Wish." The film has an outstanding voice cast.

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEW

The silent film era roars again in 'Babylon'

Chazelle's 3-plus-hour feverish, overstuffed extravaganza celebrates '20s Hollywood before the onset of talkies

By JAKE COYLE
Associated Press

“Perhaps the ballyhoo meant nothing,” Kevin Brownlow wrote in his defining history of the silent film era, “The Parade’s Gone By...”

It’s probably true that even avid moviegoers have increasingly drifted away from the films of what Brownlow called, with good reason, “the richest in cinema’s history.” In 1952, the Sight and Sound poll of critics had seven silents in the top 10 films of all time. The recent, much debated Sight and Sound list had just one.

In “Babylon,” Damien Chazelle’s feverish and sprawling celebration of those halcyon Hollywood days and their abrupt termination, the director of “La La Land” has, with orgiastic zeal, sought to bring back the ballyhoo.

Yet Chazelle’s three-plus-hour extravaganza isn’t the dutiful, nostalgic ode you might expect of such a Tinseltown period piece. It’s much messier and more interesting than that. In resurrecting the silent era and the onset of the talkies, “Babylon,” like Stanley Donen’s “Singin’ in the Rain” before it, has trained its focus on a transitional moment in moving images, painting a picture of how technological progress doesn’t always equal improvement.

Here, in unrelenting excess and hedonism, is the manic, madcap energy of the movies and the crushing maw of the medium’s perpetual evolution. That early freewheeling frenzy is snuffed out (ironically) by the advent of sound and other forces that seek to domesticate the movies.

“Babylon” is about how the movies are always reborn, but brutally so. Though it may be a chaotic shamble, Chazelle’s film makes this one point brilliantly clear: Cinema will be tamed for only so long; the parade will go on.

This is, to be sure, not a strictly accurate history. Chazelle has taken a “print the legend” approach to ’20s Hollywood, drawing partly from the pre-code scandals and myths of Kenneth Anger’s “Hollywood Babylon.” His film, a romp and tragedy at once, is sometimes enthrallingly, often exhaustingly played at a manic pitch, careening from set piece to set piece. Striving to impress the wildness of the time, “Babylon” overdoes it, striking a cartoonish over-the-top note from the start, and then, for three hours, trying vainly to sustain its drug-fueled fever dream of bygone Hollywood. That makes for an overstuffed and — especially by the increasingly wayward third act — meandering film.

But it’s also an insistently alive one that’s hard to look away from, with flashes of brilliance. For a director known for more tasteful and sentimental excursions, “Babylon” is a lurid descent into debauchery. Sometimes it’s an unnatural fit. It’s too showy and too long. But Chazelle’s film is something to reckon with, and the kind of ambitious swing that a young director of talent deserves credit for daring.

We start in Bel Air, which in 1926 is almost comically rural. In long groves of trees a fixer named Manny (Diego Calva,



Paramount Pictures

Margot Robbie, center, is an actress trying to break into the movies in “Babylon,” a film about bygone Hollywood.



PARAMOUNT PICTURES/AP

Diego Calva plays a immigrant with dreams of rising in the film industry in “Babylon.”

an arresting breakthrough) is cajoling workers to help him get an elephant up the hill for a mammoth party to be thrown by a movie mogul (Jeff Garlin). A spot on the guest list is all he needs for most favors. In the film’s first opening minutes — an avalanche of elephant excrement that cakes even the camera lens; at the mansion in the hills, a bacchanal of sex and cocaine — exist both the indulgence and grotesqueness of Hollywood.

The party scene seems designed to match or better Martin Scorsese’s “The Wolf of Wall Street” for extravagance. There’s a riff here on the Fatty Arbuckle-Virginia Rappe scandal, but in the heady swirl, the only things that really register are Manny, a Mexican immigrant with dreams of rising in the industry, and Nel-

lie La Roy (Margot Robbie, in an echo of her performance in “Once Upon a Time ... in Hollywood”), a young actress trying to break into the movies.

In its ecstatic early scenes, “Babylon” throbs with their almost primal showbiz aspirations. They’re quickly on their way. Nellie is cast as a last-minute fill-in while Jack Conrad (Brad Pitt), a silent star in the Douglas Fairbanks mold, brings Manny along with him the next day to set. Each will make their nimble way up, with a widespread cast of characters swirling around, including a Black band leader (Jovan Adepo), a tuxedo-clad chanteuse named Lady Fay Zhu (a bewitching Li Jun Li) and gossip reporter Elinor St. John (Jean Smart, fabulous).

Nothing is quite as vivid in “Babylon”

as its teeming studio of outdoor sets (care of production designer Florencia Martin) where Nellie and Manny each find themselves the day after the party. There is so much more to come after these scenes: the epochal arrival of “The Jazz Singer;” Nellie’s farcical first try on a sound stage; a nighttime dance with a poisonous snake; Jack’s painful slide out of the limelight, followed by his come-to-Jesus moment with Elinor; a late misjudged plunge into a dark Los Angeles underworld with a mob boss played creepily by Tobey Maguire; a leap ahead to a 1950s movie theater playing “Singin’ in the Rain.” Some of these scenes (the sound stage, Elinor’s moment) are terrific. Much is overcooked. “Babylon” is never quite rooted in either Nellie or Manny, whose arcs feel increasingly dictated by the film’s real narrative engine, Hollywood history.

But the best of “Babylon” is there, a couple hours earlier, at the carnivalesque Kinoscope lot in the desert. It’s a mad moviemaking nirvana, with films being shot all over and many of the participants woman or people of color — a reminder that the early days of film were in some ways more open and inclusive than the Hollywood eras that came later. A Dorothy Azner-like filmmaker directs Nellie, who proves a natural. Up the hill, Manny strives to assist the sprawling sand-and-sword epic that’s desperate to get one last shot before losing the light. “Babylon” is never so exhilarating as when sweat, luck and a chance butterfly conspire to make a moment of movie magic that’s sealed with those divine words: “We got it.”

“Babylon” is rated R for strong and crude sexual content, graphic nudity, bloody violence, drug use and pervasive language. Running time: 189 minutes. Now playing in select AAFES theaters.

WEEKEND: VIDEO GAMES

US, UK wage a digital war

Troops go to battle in Call of Duty tournament

BY BRIAN BOWERS
Stars and Stripes

U.S. and British troops stepped into an intense digital battleground last week, but their adversaries weren't Russian trolls or Chinese hackers. They were fellow service members with names like Red-ninjaturtle, Naz3re and Ac-quiesce.

And the battlefield was the Call of Duty Endowment Bowl, which featured a modified version of Warzone 2.0, the battle royale mode of the first-person shooter Call of Duty Modern Warfare II.

CODE Bowl III drew esports teams from each of the branches of the U.S. military as well as Britain's Royal Air Force, British Army and Royal Navy. The event on Dec. 16 was part of the action at the multiday Call of Duty League tournament in Raleigh, N.C.

Although teams from various services have faced off in previous tournaments, it was the first time all of them competed at the same time, said Space Force Master Sgt. Mike Sullivan, who founded the Air Force and Space Force esports teams.

It also was the first time competition had occurred in a big-league setup, complete with major livestream coverage, giant screens, a three-tiered competitor platform and LED displays emblazoned with each service's esports logo. For example, the Marines' logo features a bulldog chewing on a game controller, the Space Force has a helmeted Guardian and the Navy has a cyborg goat, with the motto "Goats & Glory."

The event was sponsored by the Call of Duty Endowment, an organization supported by Call of Duty's publisher Activision and designed to help veterans find jobs. Before the competition, the endowment held a hiring seminar and job fair featuring employers such as Activision, Fidelity Investments, the Raleigh Police Department, tech companies and retailers.

But that afternoon, the focus shifted squarely onto the tournament.

Most of the services hold competitions to fill the rosters of their

esports teams, which also compete in such games as Rocket League and Valorant.

In most cases, team members continue to hold regular military jobs. For example, Master Sgt. Ian Mills said his team includes Marines whose jobs range from combat engineer to military policeman at bases across the United States and even on Okinawa.

And most have a long history of gaming.

"I've been gaming all my life," Mills said. "It's part of who I am."

Most of the team members saw their military training as a key to success in multiplayer video games.

Mills said Marines always place a premium on such principles as concise communications, intentional maneuvers and weapon skills.

"We take that and apply it to the digital realm," Mills said.

Air Force Staff Sgt. Brandon Fletcher said situational awareness is vital.

"It's all about your IQ and your position in the game ... and your gun skills," Fletcher said.

But he thought another skill might

give the Air Force team an edge: communications.

"We are good at communication and that translates into the game," the airman said.

But anyone who's played Warzone or any other battle royale games knows that keeping teammates on track is important to survival.

Coast Guard Petty Officer 2nd Class Steve Medina said that he sometimes needs to restrain a teammate from getting overly aggressive — in other words, "Keep the lion in the cage."

"If we get too competitive, there's no fun in it," Medina added.

And having fun is a key part of the equation. Many of the teams play together recreationally during their personal time.

And those connections went beyond fun during the isolation that occurred during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, Sullivan said.

"It became a mental health and

"It's all about your IQ and your position in the game ... and your gun skills."

Air Force Staff Sgt.
Brandon Fletcher



BRIAN BOWERS/Stars and Stripes

Marines prepare to compete in CODE Bowl III on Dec. 16 in Raleigh, N.C. The event drew esports teams from each branch of the U.S. military as well as Britain's Royal Air Force, British Army and Royal Navy.



JASMINE MIESZALA/U.S. Coast Guard

Members of the U.S. Coast Guard team drop into the action in Warzone 2.0, a battle royale mode of Call of Duty Modern Warfare II.



JASMINE MIESZALA/U.S. Coast Guard

The action at CODE Bowl III plays out on a big screen over the competitors' game stations.

resiliency matter," the guardian said.

For CODE Bowl, the services fielded two teams apiece — each with two service members and one professional player — for a total of 18 teams. The scores for both teams were combined to calculate each service's results.

Fighting took place in the same dusty Middle Eastern town of al Mazrah that's featured in the standard Warzone 2.0 game. However, with only 54 competitors instead of the usual 120,

high. They celebrated by launching their trophy into space and beaming back a video.

This year, other services were aiming to bring the trophy back to the ground — or at least back into the atmosphere.

Before the digital bullets began to fly, team members were confident.

"Well, we're Marines," Mill said. "... We win battles in every domain."

And Medina proudly pointed out that his Coast Guard team had a strong record in military tournaments, and said the only reason the Space Force won last year's CODE Bowl was because the Coast Guard didn't send a team.

In the Raleigh competition, the goal was to survive the longest and kill the most foes in each of four rounds.

After three rounds, the Air Force had won two and the Navy one, while the Space Force consistently placed highly. If Vegas had been taking bets, these three probably would have been favored going into the final fight.

However, the top U.S. Air Force team was knocked out relatively early in the final round and Britain's Royal Air Force racked up the points.

When the scores were tabulated, the Royal Air Force team took the trophy — and the bragging rights. The Space Force landed in second place and the U.S. Air Force took third.

But win or lose, some see it as a bonus just to have the opportunity.

"It's crazy to think that playing video games is something you can do in the military," Fletcher said.

gameplay was modified to incorporate smaller maps and faster contraction of the circle that defines the available fighting space. This "mini-royale" made for action that was much faster and more intense than in the standard game.

Warzone 2.0 was launched only a month before the competition, and the modified version only a matter of days beforehand, giving the team very little time to become familiar with the differences.

But the tight timeline wasn't a big concern to the competitors.

"We adapt to shifting threats," the Marines' Mills said.

Fletcher said the Air Force team had a training day once they could get their hands on the modified version of Warzone and kept on playing. "We play it as much as we possibly can," he said.

Each year's CODE Bowl competition is for bragging rights and last year's winner, the Space Force, set the bar high — very

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Witnessing the power of faith in Fátima, Portugal

In what might be mistaken for a God-forsaken corner of central Portugal, tens of thousands witnessed an apparition in 1917 — and the lonely little town of Fátima became a major pilgrimage site for Catholics. Of the several “apparition sites” in Europe, Fátima might just be my favorite to visit.

It started on May 13, 1917, when three children were tending sheep. Suddenly, the sky lit up and a woman — Mary, the mother of Christ, “a lady brighter than the sun” — appeared standing in an oak tree. In the midst of bloody World War I, she brought a message that peace was coming. The war raged on, and on the 13th day of each of the next five months, Mary dropped in again to call for peace.

Word spread, bringing many curious pilgrims. The three kids — Lúcia, Francisco, and Jacinta — were grilled mercilessly by authorities trying to debunk their preposterous visions, but the children remained convinced of what they’d seen.

Finally, on Oct. 13, 70,000 people assembled near the oak tree. They were drenched in a rain-storm when suddenly the sun came out, grew blindingly bright, danced around the sky (writing “God’s fiery signature”), then

plunged to the earth. When the crowd came to its senses, the sun was shining and the rain had ended.

In 1930, the Vatican recognized the Virgin of Fátima as legit.

Today, thousands of believers come every year to rejoice in this modern miracle. Many walk from as far away as Lisbon — 80 miles south of here.

Fátima is a welcoming place even if you’re just a curious gawker.

It’s a huge complex, with two big churches bookending a vast esplanade adjacent to a practical commercial center. Wandering through that area, you see the 21st-century equivalent of a medieval pilgrimage center: lots of beds, cheap eateries, fields of picnic tables and parking lots and countless religious souvenir stands — all ready for the mobs who inundate the place on the 12th and 13th days of the month from May through October.

The esplanade, a huge assembly ground facing the basilica, is impressive. The fountain in the middle provides holy water for pilgrims to take home. You’ll see the oak tree and Chapel of the



Rick Steves



DOMINIC ARIZONA BONUCCELLI/Rick Steves' Europe

Fátima’s basilica and nearby apparition site are impressive even without the fanfare of pilgrimage days.

Apparitions marking the spot where Mary appeared, a place for lighting and leaving candles and a long smooth route on the pavement for pilgrims to approach the chapel on their knees.

The towering Neoclassical basilica culminates in a 200-foot spire with a golden crown and crystal cross-shaped beacon on top.

Pope John Paul II kicked off the construction of Fátima’s

grand Church of the Holy Trinity with a stone from St. Peter’s tomb in the Vatican. Completed in 2007, the huge church can hold 9,000 devotees.

On festival days, up to 100,000 pilgrims come to Fátima. Some shuffle on their knees, traversing the mega-huge, park-lined esplanade. In 2017, on the 100th anniversary of the miracle, half a million pilgrims — including Pope Francis — gathered here.

Whether you’re a devout Catholic or just a curious onlooker, a visit to Fátima lets you marvel at the power of faith: Two huge churches and millions of pilgrims — all of it started by three young children and “a lady brighter than the sun.”

Rick Steves (www.ricksteves.com) writes European guidebooks, hosts travel shows on public TV and radio and organizes European tours. You can email Rick at rick@ricksteves.com and follow his blog on Facebook.

Many bright diversions await during the last week of the year

A span of time unlike no other, German speakers have a special term for it: “Zwischen den Jahren,” or between the years, refers to the week between Christmas and New Year’s Day. For many, it’s a time to unwind, reflect and regroup, but with the kids off from school, and many adults as well, spending time at home together for days on end can lead to cabin fever. Luckily, diversions in the form of outdoor activities, shows and holiday-themed events offer the impetus for day trips or short breaks.

Christmas markets and villages



Karen Bradbury

While most of Germany’s Christmas markets shut down as of Dec. 24, a few reopen their doors post-Christmas to spread cheer into the New Year. In some cities, the chalets selling gifts and souvenirs disappear while food and drink vendors keep the bratwurst sizzling and the glühwein flowing. Markets remaining open into January include those in Speyer and Baden-Baden. In Wiesbaden, the holiday market on Luisenplatz welcomes visitors from noon-7 p.m. Dec. 26 and from 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Dec. 27-30. Kaiserslautern’s so-called “Silvestermarkt” takes place downtown from 10 a.m.-8 p.m. daily Dec. 27-30.

The Wallonian city of Liège is the site of Belgium’s biggest Christmas village, a merry extravaganza organized along the lines of a town from times long past. Visitors can peruse various neighborhoods formed by vendors’ stalls, visit a church and its nativity scene, take a turn on the ice rink or toboggan run, or sample regional specialties. The “Village de Noël de Liège” remains open through Dec. 30. Online: villagedenoel.be

In the city of Colmar in France’s Alsace region, six different markets set up shop among its ancient, half-timbered buildings. These markets remain open daily through Dec. 29. Online: noel-colmar.com



Phantasieland

Through Jan. 29, the Phantasieland amusement park hosts its beautifully decorated “Winter Dream.”

Holiday-themed shows and theater

In addition to the many circuses that take place this time of year, larger cities host productions of traditional family favorites. International Festival Ballet presents its version of Tchaikovsky’s *The Nutcracker* in Munich Dec. 26-27 and in Stuttgart Dec. 30. “Abba Gold-The Concert Show” brings the hit music of past decades to stages in Wiesbaden (Dec. 26), Koblenz (Dec. 27) and Saarbrücken (Dec. 29). For more, see eventim.de online.

The U.K. enjoys a uniquely British form of entertainment during the holiday season. A pantomime is a dramatic production starring campy versions of fairy-tale characters in new tellings of old tales. The joy of a pantomime is the way in which the audience gets involved, singing along and shouting words of advice that’s bound to go unheeded. The Cambridge Arts Theatre presents Dick Wittington and his Cat through Jan. 8; KD Theatre

in The Maltings, Ely serves up *Cinderella* through Jan. 2; *Peter Pan* plays at The Cresset in Peterborough through Dec. 31. For more options, see bigpantoguide.co.uk

Winter festivals

Tollwood is an annual winter festival spreading its seasonal magic across Munich’s Theresienwiese. In addition to the circus and acrobatics show beneath the big top, visitors can enjoy a food plaza with dishes from around the world, a curling rink, glittering sculptures, fire shows, live music and general merriment around the witch’s cauldron. Entry to the grounds is free. Online: tollwood.de

The town of Triberg in the Black Forest hosts “Christmas Magic.” From Dec. 26-30, Germany’s highest waterfall is festooned with lights and entertainment is laid on by musicians, jugglers, musicians and other artists. In its Wonderland zone, kids can meet fairy-tale characters and watch puppets and trail-biking demos. An impressive display of fireworks happens at 9 p.m. each night between Dec. 27 and 30. Advance tickets bought online cost 20 euros for adults and 16 for children; those 8 and under enter for free. Online: triberger-weihnachtszauber.de

Amusement parks

The Phantasieland amusement park in Brühl, Germany, combines thrills and holiday cheer with its “Winter Dream” seasonal opening. Through Jan. 29, visitors can enjoy pretty decorations, shows and tasty treats. Riding the attractions in the dark is another fun opportunity. The park is open 11 a.m.-8 p.m. most days; adult admission costs 57 euros Dec. 26-30. Online: phantasieland.de

Europa Park in Rust, Germany, offers a similar “Winter Magic” experience. Through Jan. 8, the festively decorated park offers a Christmas village, 3D projections, campfires and shows, along with rides. The park is open from 11 a.m.-7 p.m. most days. Entry costs 55 euros for adults, less for those under 12. Online: europapark.de

WEEKEND: TRAVEL



JEFF ELKINS/For The Washington Post

A collection of eight signature scented candles from Super 8. Mike Mueller, the president of Super 8 by Wyndham, said the candles are “just a fun, kitschy way” to set expectations for a stay.

‘Scents of the Open Road’

Testing and rating Super 8’s new collection of candles

BY HANNAH SAMPSON
The Washington Post

Candles have the power to bring us back to our favorite vacations: the romantic big-city getaway, the cozy-grandma beach cottage, the fir-scented national park.

It’s nothing new for hotel brands to melt their essence into wax — usually for a hefty price in the gift shop. We’re looking at you, St. Regis candle, with your notes of roses, lilies and fruit blossoms. But an offering from an economy chain known more for roadside convenience than luxury is more of a head-scratcher.

Enter Super 8, a nearly 50-year-old brand with more than 1,200 hotels in the U.S. and a mission to reach a new generation of road trippers. The chain, part of Wyndham, debuted a batch of eight candles on Dec. 1. The “Scents of the Open Road” collection intends to represent a range of travel experiences, from sleeping on hotel sheets to grabbing a cup of joe to refilling the tank.

That begged the question: What does a Super 8 candle smell like? We wanted to know, so Super 8 provided a bundle for The Washington Post to review.

The cost: \$19.74, a nod to the year the first Super 8 opened. After initially selling out, more candles went on sale Dec. 14. Mike Mueller, the president of Super 8 by Wyndham, said the company’s hotels are rarely a destination, but more often a stop along the way to greater adventure. The candles, he said, were “just a fun, kitschy way” to set expectations for a stay.

“Even though we’re an economy brand, no matter what you’re paying for your hotel stay, you should have a great experience,” he said.

For our sniff test, we enlisted 10 Washington Post colleagues. The candles were unlit in an office environment for the purpose of safety. Testers knew only that the candles came from Super 8 but did not have information about each scent; their reviews are part reaction, part guess about what they were reacting to.

Candles were rated on a scale from 0 to 10, for a maximum possible score of 100. No scent came close to a perfect score, and several earned a 0 from at least one smeller. Some testers, however, had clear favorites, with one vowing that they would stay in a Super 8 room if it smelled like the candle.

8. Morning Jolt

Total score: 33

Super 8’s description: Fresh ground coffee, for those get-up-and-go kind of days.

Regardless of how our testers felt about actual coffee, they were not even lukewarm about this coffee-scented candle. A few called out an animalistic overtone: “canned meat” or “notes of singed fur.” Others had closer guesses, comparing the scent to flan, an iced cookie or stale chocolate. One hit the scent on the nose: “cheap latte.”

7. Brain Freeze

Total score: 36

Super 8’s description: Thirst-quenching cherry slushie, a truly sweet cup-holder treat.

Brain freeze is rarely a pleasant experience, so it’s appropriate that reviewers largely had negative feelings about this scent. One was fully on board, noting that the experience was “like how the color pink should smell.” Some invoked cherries — either the car air freshener or carwash soap varietal — while others were reminded of “those cupcake dolls we had as a kid” or “kids makeup.” The toughest note went even younger: “sanitized changing table.”

6. Lite Bite

Total score: 38

Super 8’s description: Because every great morning starts with a little something to get you started.

Most testers accurately identified this scent as being food-related — but that didn’t mean they loved what the chef was cooking. “Bad drugstore ice cream,” one suggested; “if high fructose had a smell,” another scoffed. Another waxed nostalgic, reminded of “vanilla Lip Smackers.” The most accurate sniffer called out the right notes: “sweet, syrupy, vanilla. Like breakfast.”

5. Tucked In

Total score: 39

Super 8’s description: Crisp, clean linen, essential for a super night’s sleep.

Comments: Clean hotel sheets: pretty great. The smell of clean hotel sheets? A mixed bag. The least impressed of our group got notes of “urinal sponge” and “gas station bathroom,” but more tuned into the “clean” fragrance. From “cleaning supplies” to “dryer sheet,” this scent was “kind of like laundry.” Well, exactly like laundry. Said one of the biggest fans: “Soapy, bath (in a good way) scent.”

4. Snack Time

Total score: 40

Super 8’s description: Smokey, savory beef jerky, the perfect road trip snack.

Comments: One of the more divisive odors, this scent was the only to land two 0s and two 9s. The key seemed to be how you feel about smoke as a smell. The highest scores were enthusiastic about “charred embers after you put the campfire out.” Someone called it a “boyfriend smell.” Detractors were much more negative about bonfires, and also pointed out notes of “old bacon grease” or “beef jerky from a grocery store if you burned it with a lighter.”

3. Fresh Feels

Total score: 57

Super 8’s description: Fresh and reinvigorating, like a hot shower after a long day’s drive.

Comments: We do not know what a hot shower after a long drive smells like, but we know that it is pretty good. While some reviewers found the hints of “low quality motel/hotel toiletries” or “bathroom soap,” others suggested pineapple hard candy or sugar cookie. The biggest fans were perhaps reminded of the post-shower experience, praising the scent of “fresh, clean cotton sheets.”

1. Roam Free (tie)

Total score: 60

Super 8’s description: A windows down, spirit of the open road kind-of feeling.

Comments: The scent fell flat with some, who labeled it as “cheap aftershave” or “incense.” But overall, the fragrance was a winner that seemed to capture fresh air and forests. Our testers called it “outdoorsy,” reminiscent of a road trip and “a bit woody.” It gave strong late-fall vibes: “Warm, reminds me of a fire but not super strong,” one wrote. “Cozy.”

1. Pit Stop (tie)

Total score: 60

Super 8’s description: Glorious gasoline, the fuel that keeps the journey going.

The takeaway from this endeavor is that no one knows what gasoline smells like — or the candle doesn’t actually smell like fuel. Whatever the case, most of our testers were fans, naming multiple delightful possibilities. “Eggnog!” wrote one, explaining: “there’s cinnamon, custard and the unmistakable scent of nutmeg.” Some smelled lemon, or “candy you’d get at an old folks home.” The journey of one review practically required its own road trip: “Yellow mustard. And pink bubble gum. And they added cinnamon. And they had a baby.”

WEEKEND: TRAVEL



SEAWORLD PARKS & ENTERTAINMENT, MIRAL/TNS

A rendering of the SeaWorld Abu Dhabi Aquarium Observation Deck is shown above. The park will include one of the world's largest aquariums, interactive exhibits, rides and a conservation-focused research and rescue center. SeaWorld CEO Swanson said the park "really showcases what the next generation of SeaWorld could be and will be."

Showcasing SeaWorld's 'next generation'

Company's 1st theme park outside United States to open in UAE in '23

BY KATIE RICE
Orlando Sentinel

SeaWorld's first theme park outside the United States, SeaWorld Abu Dhabi, will open in the United Arab Emirates next year with six marine environments, five floors of indoor attractions and no killer whales.

John Linn, SeaWorld's vice president of global theme park development, said the park is the culmination of over 50 years of SeaWorld's theme park experience and will include "all the cool things we wanted to do that we never got the approval to."

"We're not going to have to work very hard at all to differentiate ourselves (from similar attractions)," Linn said. "Frankly, the problem I'm going to have personally is how to explain to our board that this phenomenal product that we have in the Middle East — why aren't we doing that in the United States?"

Speaking at the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions' expo last month in Orlando, Fla., Linn declined to reveal details on park content but said it will rank among the world's best aquariums and marine attractions.

"While I can't give away any secrets, I can say without hesitation that what we are doing, what we are going to deliver on, is going to amaze everybody," he said. "It's going to be something different and something unique."

Abu Dhabi developer Miral, which is partnering with Orlando-based SeaWorld Parks & Entertainment on the project, said in September that it had reached 90% construction completion on the Yas Island development and expected to open it sometime in 2023. SeaWorld CEO

Marc Swanson recently confirmed that general opening timeline in a Nov. 9 earnings call.

SeaWorld Abu Dhabi was announced in 2016 with an initial target opening date of 2022. When it opens, the park will include one of the world's largest aquariums, with over 6.6 million gallons of water and 68,000 marine animals, in addition to interactive exhibits, rides and a conservation-focused research and rescue center.

Since the park's announcement, SeaWorld has said the park will not include orcas, also called "killer whales" for their natural hunting patterns.

SeaWorld has worked to distance itself from its fraught past involving orcas over the past decade. Backlash surged after the 2013 documentary "Blackfish" used the story of SeaWorld Orlando orca Tilikum, who caused the deaths of three people including trainer Dawn Brancheau, to highlight the hardships of orcas living in captivity.

In recent years, SeaWorld has ended its killer whale breeding program, phased out its entertainment-based orca shows and emphasized its long-standing focus on marine life conservation.

"Although killer whales are not part of the theme park, we will offer opportunities to educate the community and raise awareness about this inspiring creature alongside other marine life species," SeaWorld Abu Dhabi's website reads.

In an unsigned statement, SeaWorld said the park will include the United Arab Emirates' "first dedicated marine life research, rescue, rehabilitation and return center" that will specialize in indigenous marine life ecosystems in the Persian Gulf and work to advance global conservation efforts.

Swanson said the park "really showcases what the next generation of SeaWorld could be and will be" as it expands SeaWorld's brand to an international audience.

The park's habitats will be completely indoors, something Linn said he was initially "scared to death" about due to the attraction's focus on the natural world. But Miral has helped the project exceed expectations, he said.

"I couldn't be prouder as to how we executed it," he said.

One challenge of the indoor setting was recreating natural lighting for its resident sea creatures. Linn said SeaWorld's teams created innovative lighting technology to mimic the full spectrum of sunlight.

"I can't share numbers, but you could buy a minor, maybe even a major attraction for the amount that we invested on this project and the lighting for our animals," he said.

Theme park companies have selected Abu Dhabi to expand their brands in recent years. Warner Bros opened the world's largest indoor theme park, Warner Bros World Abu Dhabi, there in 2018 and announced a Harry Potter-themed addition to the park last month.

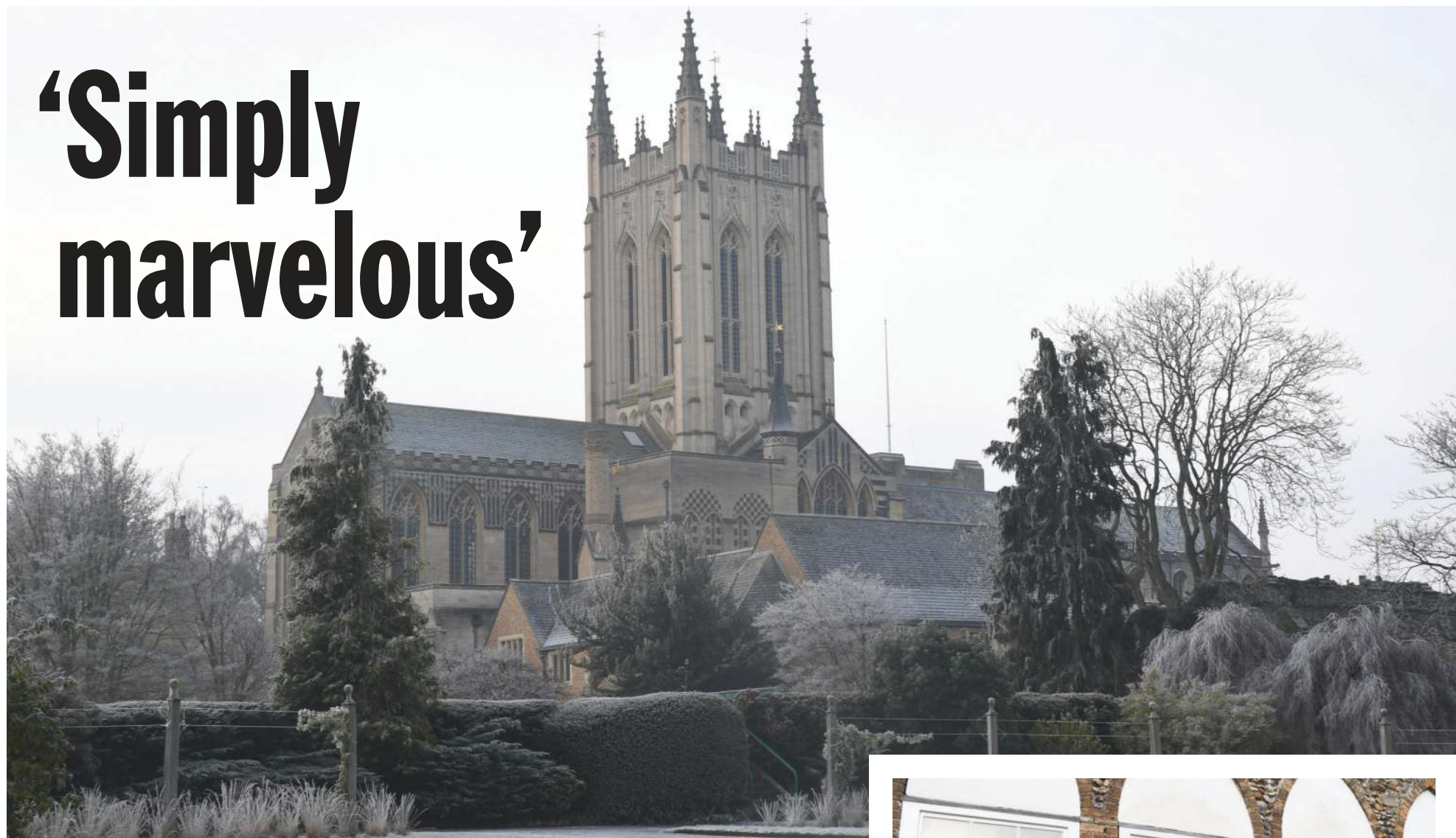
SeaWorld has tried to expand into the Middle Eastern country since 2006, Linn said. The company's first attempt, the defunct Worlds of Discovery Dubai project, was canceled after the 2008 financial crisis.

He said SeaWorld also looked to build an attraction in China but ultimately, "the UAE really felt like the right place for us," he said at the panel titled "The Future of Entertainment & Leisure in the Middle East, UAE and Abu Dhabi."

That turned out to be a lucky decision, Linn said, as China's "zero COVID" policies have closed theme parks such as Shanghai Disney multiple times during the pandemic.

"I am thrilled that we landed where we did," Linn said. "I can't imagine having worked on a project like this ... any place but Abu Dhabi."

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS



PHOTOS BY KYLE ALVAREZ/Stars and Stripes

The St. Edmundsbury Cathedral as seen from the main pathway of the Abbey Gardens in Bury St. Edmunds, England, on Dec. 13. The 14-acre park has won numerous awards, including the Green Flag award for a rose garden that is on full display in the spring and summer.

An array of allure at Abbey Gardens in Bury St. Edmunds

BY KYLE ALVAREZ
Stars and Stripes

A 14-acre park whose wonders include the remnants of one of England's most famous monasteries and an award-winning rose garden is less than a half-hour from the trio of near-by military installations.

But the serenity I felt at the Abbey Gardens in the heart of Bury St. Edmunds made me feel as if I was far removed from it all.

I had an unexpected tour guide, whose appreciation for the place left an unforgettable mark. I met Malcolm Mayhew that morning at the park coffee shop.

A 68-year-old retiree who survived lung cancer a few years ago, Mayhew makes it a point to enjoy the park every day as a token of his new appreciation for life.

"This place is just marvelous, simply marvelous," he said as we walked around the park, drinking our coffee. "I come here more for the exercise. It's something to enjoy and it lets me get my 10,000 steps a day, although I'm a bit slow since I only have one lung."

The ruins of an 11th-century Benedictine monastery, which was once a major pilgrimage site, are preserved at the park.



A frozen rose in the Appleby Rose Garden in the Abbey Gardens. The rose garden is named after John T. Appleby, an American serviceman who served with the 487th Bomb Group during World War II in Lavenham and wrote the book "Suffolk Summer."

The importance of the location to the pilgrims was due to who was buried there. King Edmund the Martyr ruled East Anglia in the ninth century and was killed by Danish invaders in 869.

On my visit, the ruins were covered in ice, snow and fog, giving the park a mystical feel. I had a sense of experiencing a documentary in real time.

During our 45-minute walk, Mayhew explained various areas of the park. One intriguing spot

he described is the bowling area, a large, square patch of grass where people used to play an older version of modern-day bowling.

Before the visit, I had heard from some friends about the Appleby Rose Gardens and their gorgeous rosebushes.

But I wondered what such a place would be like on the cusp of wintertime. It turned out to be one of the most peaceful outings of my time in England so far.



Malcolm Mayhew waits for his coffee at the Abbey Gardens coffee shop on Dec. 13. Mayhew, 68, is retired and a lung cancer survivor who comes to the park every day.

Abbey Gardens

Address: Mustow Street, Bury St. Edmunds, England

Hours: Through February: Monday to Saturday, 7:30 a.m.-5 p.m.; Sunday and holidays, 9 a.m.-5 p.m.; April through August: Monday to Saturday, 7:30 a.m.-8 p.m.; Sunday and holidays, 9 a.m.-8 p.m.; September and March: Monday to Saturday, 7:30 a.m.-6 p.m.; Sunday and holidays, 9 a.m.-6 p.m.

Cost: Free

Information: <https://www.westsuffolk.gov.uk/leisure/Parks/abbey-gardens.cfm>

The frozen roses, combined with the architectural wonder that is St. Edmundsbury Cathedral, which overlooks the entire park, is an image that will stick with me for a long time.

As I walked into the rose garden, I saw a plaque detailing how it came to be. It's named after American service member John

T. Appleby, a member of the 487th Bomb Group stationed in Lavenham during World War II who later wrote the book "Suffolk Summer," according to the West Suffolk Council, the organization in charge of maintaining the park.

The rose garden walk took on a more somber tone as I came across a stone plaque honoring Holocaust victims. It also commemorates the Palm Sunday massacre of 57 Jewish residents on March 19, 1190.

As I walked out of the Abbey Gardens, I took stock of the time I'd spent there. Besides feeling the thrill of it, I expanded my knowledge of local history.

Now I muse about what impression the springtime version of this wonderful park will make when I bring my family in a few months.

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WEEKEND : FOOD & DINING

Mainz's El Burro is worth the ride

Restaurant serves great Mexican food — a pleasure rarely found in Germany

BY ALEXANDER RIEDEL
Stars and Stripes

Since “south-of-the-border” food in Germany means Wiener schnitzel and Swiss chocolate, it should come as no surprise that truly great Mexican fare is difficult to find here.

So difficult, in fact, that Christian Pulisic of the U.S. men's soccer team once claimed to have driven three hours just to visit the nearest Chipotle when he played professionally in Dortmund.

Quality Mexican cuisine had eluded my wife and me since our move to the Kaiserslautern Military Community. That is, until we came across El Burro Mexican Kitchen on a recent outing to Mainz.

The mid-sized restaurant is in the heart of the historic city core, steps from the landmark sandstone cathedral and the Gutenberg Museum, home to some of the world's first printed books.

The restaurant offers a rugged, modern chic look, accented with tasteful lighting and decor without any off-color kitsch.

Although we arrived spontaneously without a reservation, we were quickly seated next to a large window. The restaurant began to fill up during the later evening hours with Mainz State Theater patrons looking to grab dinner before the show.

Instead of paper menus, which are available upon request, we used the English online menu, accessed via QR code. Choices include familiar classics from enchiladas and chimichangas to geographically extended offerings such as tapas and Argentine rump steaks.

In addition to the meat-lovers favorites, the restaurant surprised us with a wide selection of vegetarian, vegan and even gluten-free options and alternatives for nearly all menu items.

Coming in from a cold, cloudy day, we started off with a plate of warm nachos topped with mildly spiced chili sin carne, a delightful meatless alternative to the classic chili con carne, which is also available.

Drink options include such obvious staples as Mexican and German brews, but also local Rhine-Hessian wines. And since El Burro also offers a full bar, the menu features beverage-specific happy hours. Mojito Monday,



The elderflower spritzer at El Burro. The restaurant also features a menu of alcoholic and nonalcoholic cocktails, such as an Ipanema with lime, brown sugar and ginger ale.



A warm brownie is served with vanilla ice cream at El Burro. The Mexican restaurant's dessert menu also includes churros, chimichanga dulce and cakes.

Margarita Mittwochs and daiquiri Donnerstags are some of the examples.

My wife paired the appetizer with a margarita that was discounted in price but not flavor. As the designated driver, I went for the elderflower spritzer and later ordered two more glasses of the simple yet refreshing concoction.

As a main dish, my wife landed on the los tacos plate, with savory shredded barbacoa beef topped with creamy black bean puree, pico de gallo and some of the best house-made guacamole this side of the Rhine.

The best part of the dish, however, was likely the homemade corn tortillas, which incorporate a method known as the nixtamal procedure. Based on the practices carried on from ancient Meso-



PHOTOS BY ALEXANDER RIEDEL/Stars and Stripes

The taco plate with beef barbacoa from El Burro Restaurant and Bar in Mainz, Germany. Tacos are also offered with classic selections of chicken and chili con carne, along with meatless options.



The street food burrito at El Burro comes with seasoned popcorn and corn chips. The vegetarian version of the dish comes with grilled vegetables or Planted “chicken” made of pea protein.

americans, it involves cooking and steeping kernels overnight, according to a traditional recipe.

This softens the outer hulls so they can be easily ground into soft dough, maintaining the corn's nutritional value.

As a longtime vegetarian, I was excited to try the vegetarian chicken burrito. The dish's meat substitute is listed on the menu as Planted, the brand name of a chicken replacement product made from pea protein.

I don't usually go for the increasingly popular meatless products and was worried whether my selection had ruined my dinner. Instead, I was surprised with a pleasantly seasoned blend

of flavors and textures that, while not convincingly meaty, is likely to suit most palates.

I also ordered the admittedly weird combo of sweet potato fries with a side of perfectly tangy homemade chipotle mayonnaise, which would also go well with any of the offered meat dishes.

The portions were generous and very nearly prevented us from moving on to the dessert menu. Among its enticements are churros with homemade chocolate sauce, chimichanga dulce and a changing selection of cakes.

I couldn't say no, however, to a decidedly more American



El Burro Mexican Kitchen Mainz

Address: Dominikanerstrasse 2, 55116 Mainz. There is limited street parking along Grosse Langgasse next to the restaurant. Parkhaus Kronenberger Hof and Weissliliengasse are also nearby. The restaurant is also within walking distance from the main train station.

Hours: Monday through Thursday, noon-11 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, noon-1 a.m.; Sundays, noon-10 p.m. To-go orders are available.

Prices: Appetizers start at 6.10 euros. Entrees start at 10.80 euros and go up to 28.50 euros for the rump steak. A children's menu is also available. Drinks include local beer on tap at 4.10 euros, soft drinks starting at 4 euros and homemade lemonades and iced teas starting at 4.60 euros.

Information: 06131 21 44 795; <https://el-burro.de/>

choice, the brownie caliente with vanilla ice cream to close out the meal.

El Burro is not only a trendy watering hole in central Mainz, but also a veritable oasis for those looking for Mexican comfort foods. Whether from near or far, this burro is worth the ride.

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WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS

A hidden civilization

Discover a slice of ancient Egypt above the streets of modern Tokyo

BY KELLY AGEE
Stars and Stripes

Pedestrians crossing the busy streets of Shibuya would never know that towering over them is a collection of ancient Egyptian artifacts in an eight-story museum.

The Museum of Ancient Egypt was the first in Japan dedicated to the ancient civilization along the Nile. It opened in the Maison Shibuya building in July 2009 and holds 1,000 pieces, Japan's largest collection of ancient Egyptian dynasty art, according to the museum website.

The exhibit contains items from the pre-dynastic period through the Roman empire.

The museum is a short walk from Shibuya Station. Exiting the building elevator, guests enter a small hallway where photographs of Egyptian sites are displayed. A small statue of Bastet, a cat's head with a woman's body, the goddess of protection, stands nearby.

The artifacts belong to Tadashi Kikukawa, a collector of Egyptian relics and founder of the museum. Kikukawa is a managing director with Nomura, a global financial services group, according to his LinkedIn page. The museum is open only on weekends.

Guests must exchange their shoes for uwabaki, Japanese house slippers, as they approach the museum foyer. There, they'll find artifacts and an antique couch where they may rest before continuing their journey.

A tour guide hands out flashlights that will come in handy later. The self-guided tour begins with an eight-minute video on the history of Egypt from ancient times to the present. It's available in Japanese and English.

Museum of Ancient Egypt

Location: 1-12-18 Tokyo, Shibuya City, Jinnan, 150-0041 Maison Shibuya building, eighth floor

Directions: A short walk from Shibuya Station via the Hachiko exit.

Hours: Noon to 6 p.m. Saturday and Sunday; last admission is at 5:30 p.m.

Costs: Admission is 1,500 yen; 1,200 yen for university students; 1,000 yen for high school students and younger.

Food: Plenty of restaurant options nearby.

Information: www.egyptian.jp/top.html

A highlight of the exhibit is the burial chamber galley, a dark room where guests may employ their flashlights to inspect the exhibits. A wooden sarcophagus from the Ptolemaic dynasty, 305-30 B.C., adds a spooky touch to the room.

Don't worry, the sarcophagus is empty. The hieroglyphics that cover it depict the winged moon goddess, Isis, and Anubis, the god of death. The bottom part of the coffin contains an excerpt from the Book of the Dead, in which the heart of the deceased is weighed on a scale against a feather that belongs to Ma'at, the goddess of truth, according to ancientegyptonline.co.uk, a site dedicated to ancient Egypt.

Other exhibits include the Excavation Hutt Gallery and the Temple Gallery, which contain busts of Egyptian leaders, including Ptolemy II Philadelphus, also known as Ptolemy the Great, pharaoh from 284 to 246 B.C.;



PHOTOS BY KELLY AGEE/Stars and Stripes

The Museum of Ancient Egypt in Tokyo was the first in Japan dedicated to the ancient civilization along the Nile. It opened in the Maison Shibuya building in July 2009 and holds 1,000 pieces.



A bust of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, also known as Ptolemy the Great, is among the artifacts on display in the museum.



The Museum of Ancient Egypt is a short walk from Shibuya Station's famous Hachiko exit.

serpents, which symbolized guards; Egyptian currency; and stones inscribed with hieroglyphics.

A fortune teller will read visitors' fortunes using Egyptian-themed tarot cards. Mine indicated I need to stop overthinking relationships and commu-

icate better. It also suggested I have a compatible personality.

In the museum gift shop are books on ancient Egypt and fortune cards, which are sold individually, for 150 yen, or about \$1.10. I purchased the card that depicts the ankh, a familiar cross with a teardrop loop on top. The

card bears the admonition: "You can spend every day energetically and healthy; being fit and healthy will help you work and study well."

The Museum of Ancient Egypt is a very bizarre find that lovers of ancient Egyptian history must see.

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WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING



PHOTOS BY KELLY AGEE/Stars and Stripes

The French toast from Aoyama Flower Market Tea House in Tokyo is just topped with powdered sugar and berries with dollops of ice cream and whipped cream on the side.



The Sakura soda from Aoyama Flower Market Tea House.



The Aoyama Flower Market Tea House in Tokyo is a unique place where guests are surrounded by colorful blooms and greenery.



Aoyama Flower Market Tea House

Address: 1-1-24 Kichijoji Minamicho Musashino Tokyo, 180-0003

Directions: Located in the Kichijoji Station Atrium shopping center on the B1 floor

Hours: Open daily, 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Prices: Most dishes cost between 550 yen and 1,200 yen

Dress: Casual

Information: foreign.aoyamaflower-market.com/foreign/teahouse/m

Picture-perfect and delicious

Tea house in Tokyo is a floral delight

BY KELLY AGEE
Stars and Stripes

When my friend invited me to Sunday brunch recently, we searched for a place with delicious food but also beautiful scenery that would make an enviable backdrop for social media.

The Aoyama Flower Market Tea House is a unique place where guests are surrounded by colorful blooms and greenery. It's conveniently located on the basement floor of Kichijoji Station.

The tea house is easy to spot. It's covered inside and out, and wall-to-wall, with fresh and artificial flowers for a visually stunning effect. The restaurant can accommodate about 25 people; the spacious tables give hungry customers room to relax.

The menu is available only in Japanese and consists of herbal teas, blended teas, French toast and an assortment of pastries.



The Aoyama Flower Market Tea House in Tokyo is covered wall to wall with fresh and artificial flowers.

I opted for eggs-and-cheese on bread, French toast and the seasonal Sakura soda, all for 3,000 yen, or about \$25. It was a little on the pricey side but well worth the visit.

All the food is picture-perfect, but also fresh and very tasty. The

French toast is just goey enough in the middle and topped with powdered sugar and berries with a dollop of both ice cream and whipped cream on the side. Its flower garnish makes the entire serving a perfect, Instagram-able photo.

The eggs-and-cheese on bread was tasty. It's a vegetarian meal made of a bread slice with semi-runny eggs mixed with cheese in the middle. The bread is very fresh with a light taste and texture. It comes with a side salad crowned with fresh fruit.

For my drink option I side-stepped tea in favor of the Sakura soda. I always enjoy the sweet and floral taste of Sakura.

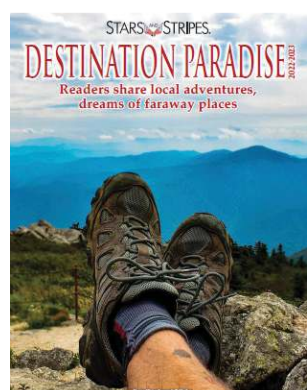
A highlight on the menu is the Mini Sweets Set, which gives customers the option to add a cream puff, rose jelly, cheese-cake or cookie to their drink or meal for an extra 550 yen.

The high-quality tea is pesticide-free and grown on a farm that specializes in fresh, healthy products. The herbal tea is a blend of spearmint, lemon balm, marjoram, rosemary and lemon-grass. Other options include rose tea, Bora Bora fruit tea, sweet Earl Grey and green tea.

Flower tea or organic iced coffee are available by the pitcher for 825 yen.

As you exit the restaurant, the staff will hand you a beautiful flower in a plastic bag with water as a parting gift, free of charge.

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STARS AND STRIPES

WEEKEND: LIFESTYLE

Outliving old norms

Older Japanese men, lost in the kitchen, turn to housework school

BY MARINA LOPES
AND JULIA INUMA
The Washington Post

Masahiro Yoshida hung up his suit jacket and pulled a pink apron over his button-down shirt. After avoiding the kitchen for most of his 65 years, it was time to cook.

As with most Japanese men, Yoshida's mother prepared all his meals until he got married, when his wife assumed that role. But after he retired four years ago from his job as a government administrator, she proposed they share meal prep. Yoshida agreed but got lost making basic dishes. YouTube tutorials were confounding.

So like a growing number of older men here, he signed up for classes. His six-month course at the Better Home cooking school covered skills such as how to mince garlic, chop mushrooms and shop for meat — all integral for the stroganoff he would attempt before graduating. "I had no idea how complex the cooking process was," Yoshida admitted.

Strict gender roles have governed domestic life in Japan for generations. Men often retire without ever having held a paring knife or washed a dish. Those who lose a spouse often find themselves unable to do the most rudimentary chores. An old Japanese saying — "Danshi-chubo-ni-hairazu," or "men should be ashamed to be found in the kitchen" — has spooked husbands from most any housework. Even those who wanted to help typically lacked the know-how.

Evidence of this isn't merely anecdotal. According to a survey conducted by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Japanese men take on less household responsibility and child care than their counterparts in any of the world's richest countries. On average, they spend just 40 minutes a day on the combination, five times less than their wives. Only 14% reported regularly cooking for themselves.

As the country ages, however, and the average life span for men stretches into the mid-80s, some women are drawing a line and declaring themselves done with picking up after their husbands.

"The biggest problem is that men don't see themselves as the responsible party when it comes to housework," said Yasuyuki Tokukura, who runs the nonprofit group Fathering Japan and advises the government on gender issues within households. The traditional division of labor persists despite the significant number of women now working outside of the home; indeed, dual-income households are more than twice as prevalent as those with single incomes.

Simmering resentments frequently come to a head once a man's career ends and his wife starts to question the arrangement, Tokukura said.

"The power dynamic changes. The wife asks, 'Why do I have to do all the housework if you are no longer bringing in the money?'"

These days, many women are pulling husbands like 65-year-old Yoshida into the kitchen. Yet the men must first learn the basics.

The government is willing to assist, with some community centers offering free classes to teach cooking, cleaning, ironing and laundering.

Motohiko Onoue is the founder of the home economics school Kaji Osu, though he tends to look more corporate than culinary in his starched shirt, navy slacks and leather dress shoes. On a Friday morning this month, he gathered a dozen students around a stove at a neighborhood



NORIKO HAYASHI/For The Washington Post

Takashi Kaneko, 74, signed up for a cooking class for men in Shiki, Japan, after his wife died and he realized he knew virtually nothing about how to cook. Strict gender roles have governed domestic life in Japan for generations.



TARO KARIBE/For The Washington Post

Masahiro Yoshida slices beef for the stroganoff that he and other students are making in their class in Tokyo. Yoshida recently agreed to share meal prep with his wife.

center in Shiki, a city outside Tokyo, to demonstrate how to make healthy chicken nuggets from scratch. The session was part of a six-week course that addressed how to cook with miso, clean around stove burners and remove stains from clothing.

When Onoue started his school five years ago, other men laughed at him. "A housework school for men? That's ridiculous," he was told.

Yet he saw a niche market with much potential. Attracting students wasn't easy initially; only one man came to his first group lesson. That's when Onoue decided to

bring his lessons to the men, working with community programs to advertise the courses anytime retirees showed up with questions about retirement benefits or their national health insurance policies.

He even offers students private consultations to focus on the aspects of housework that they find most daunting. To encourage critical thinking, recipes don't come with the usual step-by-step sequence.

"Men who are used to business thinking need a problem to solve. I give them the basic materials and instructions, and let them figure it out," Onoue said.

These courses are also popular with men who suddenly find themselves widowed or divorced and don't know the basics of self-care.

Takashi Kaneko, 74, decided to sign up after his wife died of liver cancer four years ago. He was living mostly on microwaveable foods and found himself desperate for company. Not only had his wife taken care of all the cleaning and cooking, on top of working as an administrative assistant, but she also curated his social life. After she passed, Kaneko realized he did not have many friends of his own.

He has learned how to host his adult children the way his wife once did.

"When my kids come to visit, it's usually after they're tired from work, and they want to relax. If their mother were alive, she would surely have cooked for them and made them feel at home, so I want to do the same," Kaneko explained.

The classes introduced him to men in his suburban neighborhood outside Tokyo, who were trying to learn household skills, too. Five of them were fixing a meal recently, Kaneko standing tall in front of the stove and helming the frying pan as the others took turns placing mounds of minced chicken in oil.

"Don't overdo it," he warned 80-year-old Kikuo Yano, laughing as he rounded out the nuggets with a spoon.

Yano has been taking classes this fall to surprise his wife of 43 years.

"All this time my wife has done everything," the retired architect acknowledged. "I haven't done anything around the house. If I don't know how to, I guess there's nothing I can do. But if I learn how to do it, then it's time I help."

He now wakes up early to press his clothes. Ten times he has practiced a curry dish he plans on serving his family on New Year's Day.

"You see this shirt?" he says, running his hands up and down the sleeve, a smile stretching across his face. "I ironed it myself."

WEEKEND: LIFESTYLE

Stirring up a glass of Christmas cheer

London's top mixologists offer their tips for making holiday cocktails at home, provide a few recipes to try

By LOUISE DIXON
Associated Press

Looking to create a bit of winter luxury when tending bar at home this holiday season? London's top cocktail-makers have some tips:

“Christmas is a special time when you want to join with friends and family. And sometimes, the centerpiece of any happiness is to have a good drink,” says Salvatore Calabrese, an Italian-born drinks expert and author who has been making cocktails at top hotels, bars and private clubs for over 40 years.

Currently at the cocktail bar Velvet, at London's five-star Corinthia hotel, Calabrese goes by the nickname “The Maestro.”

The Maestro's advice?

First, choose the right glassware.

“The glass is the star. It's the canvas of the drink,” he says. So if it looks elegant, things already feel festive.

Next, think about the quality of the ice and how it dilutes the drink.

“Remember, ice is like the heat for the chef when he is cooking,” Calabrese says.

Cracked ice cubes that disintegrate in your palm are a no-go, as is crushed ice for Christmas.

“It's not a Tiki night,” Calabrese jokes. “It is about an elegant night, so make the effort and maybe you can make your own homemade ice.”

Also, he advises, plan. Even prepare your cocktail in advance. Especially when a drink is a little complicated.

“Put it in the freezer or in the fridge, so it's nice and cold, so the only thing you have to do is to put it in a mixing glass or, to show off, put it in the shaker and shake,” Calabrese says.

Jake Burger, co-owner of The Distillery, a 19th century pub and gin distillery in London's Notting Hill neighborhood, says that knowing when to shake and when to



stir is something a lot of home mixologists get wrong.

“It's fun using a cocktail shaker, so people think we should shake everything,” he jokes. But it's only really needed when using fruit juices, egg whites or cream, he

says. Otherwise, stirring is best.

“As a general rule, if all the ingredients are alcoholic, you probably don't need to shake it,” Burger says. “So as an Englishman, it pains me to say it, but James Bond got it wrong. A martini should definitely be stirred, not shaken.”

Liana Oster, bar director at The NoMad Hotel London, suggests adding some seasonal luxury by decorating your glasses. She creates a peppermint-bark paint by melting equal parts cacao butter and white chocolate, with a few drops of peppermint essence added in. She then paints a swirl on one side of a cold glass, sprinkles some crushed-up candy cane on it, and then places it in the fridge until needed.

This works particularly well with a heavier cocktail with a lot of body, as it will “mellow it out” on the palate, Oster says.

Alex Girvan, brand ambassador for Masons of Yorkshire, has more ideas on garnishes. For his chocolate orange martini, Girvan explains how he creates simple yet delicious dipped-chocolate candied fruits.

First, dehydrate orange slices by placing them on a baking sheet, sprinkling them with a bit of brown or fine granulated sugar (known in Britain as caster sugar), and then putting them in the oven on low heat for about an hour, until dried out. Then melt some dark chocolate and dip the slices. Place them in the fridge until hard.

To serve, balance them on the side of the glass.

Girvan also suggests a sharing platter of garnishes, “almost like a charcuterie board.” By laying out rosemary, orange peel and lemon zest on sticks, “everybody can just pick the one that they like and pop it into their drink, and maybe they'll try something that they've never had before,” he says.

“Just make a little effort,” Calabrese sums up, “because really, a great cocktail is a great journey from the beginning. And when you taste something nice and delicious, the world seems to be a better place.”



Scrooge Sour

from Common Decency,
at The NoMad Hotel London

1 egg white
0.75 ounces simple syrup
0.75 ounces lemon juice
2 ounces Irish whiskey

Pour the egg white into the larger tin of your shaker, and the simple syrup and lemon juice into the smaller tin. Dry shake together in the shaker to emulsify the egg and the alcohol. Then hard shake with ice and pour over a strainer into your glass.

Add 0.75 ounces mulled wine slowly into the corner of the glass, and then sprinkle edible gold dust over the half of the surface to cover and garnish.



Truffle Sazerac

from Velvet, at Corinthia London

0.8 ounces Bourbon
1 ounce Cognac
Homemade truffle syrup (you can make your own by heating a few drops of truffle oil with a teaspoon of sugar)
A few drops of orange bitters

Mix ingredients together over ice and stir. Serve over fresh ice and garnish with a slice of fresh truffle.



Wintertime Negroni

from The Distillery

1 ounce London Dry Gin
1 ounce Campari
0.5 ounces sweet vermouth
0.5 ounces sloe gin

Mix ingredients together over ice and stir. Serve over fresh ice and garnish with an orange wedge studded with cloves.



Chocolate Orange Martini

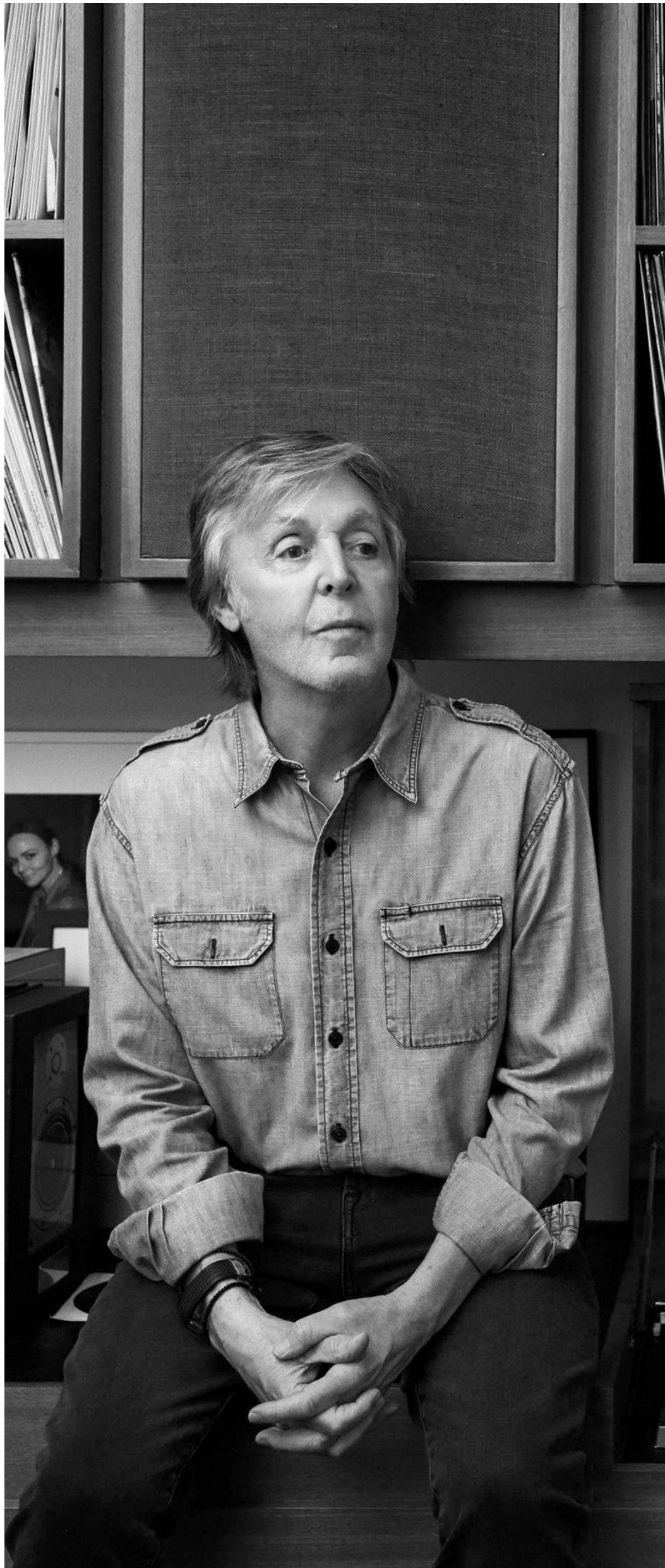
from the Masons of Yorkshire

2 ounces chocolate vodka
1 ounce triple sec

Mix ingredients together over ice and stir. Serve in a martini glass and garnish with a chocolate-dipped, candied orange segment.

COCKTAIL PHOTOS BY LOUISE DIXON/AP

WEEKEND: MUSIC



Spotlighting Paul's 'Pipes of peace'

New McCartney singles box set features 163 tracks, 10 hours of music

By JIM HARRINGTON
Bay Area News Group

Shopping for that special Paul McCartney fan in your life this holiday season?

Look no further than "The 7" Singles Box," an amazing box set that features 163 tracks — in the form of 80 7-inch singles — running over 10 hours of music.

The collection includes such hits and fan favorites as "My Love," "Live and Let Die," "Band on the Run," "Silly Love Songs," "Coming Up," "Ebony and Ivory," "Say Say Say," "No More Lonely Nights" and "Wonderful Christmastime."

The offerings range from 1971's "Another Day" to 2022's Record Store Day Song of the Year, "Women and Wives" (from 2020's "McCartney III"), representing a half-century of McCartney's creative output.

It's an absolute treasure chest for vinyl fans, with recreations of 65 singles (with original B-sides, with restored artwork) that Paul has put out over the years. It also features 15 singles, originally offered up as on 12-inch, picture discs, CD singles and other formats, which have never been released as 7-inch platters.

The vinyl set — which is limited to 3,000 copies — is gorgeously packaged in a special wooden art crate, designed and built in Derbyshire, England, and includes a 148-page book that features a personal foreword by Sir Paul himself as well as an essay by music journalist Rob Sheffield and other material.

It is, however, pricey — at \$611.98. Yet, these singles can also be streamed through Spotify, Amazon Music and various streaming services. Visit paulmccartney.com for all the details.

Paul McCartney has released a box set, "The Singles Box," that features 163 tracks — in the form of 80 7-inch singles — running over 10 hours of music. Among the songs featured on the release are "My Love," "Live and Let Die," "Band on the Run" and "Silly Love Songs."

Mary McCartney



WEEKEND: MUSIC



MATT ROURKE/AP

The War on Drugs drummer Charlie Hall teamed up with several members of the NFL's Philadelphia Eagles and other musicians to record the seven-song LP "A Philly Special Christmas." Proceeds from the record will benefit the Children's Crisis Treatment Center and other charities in Philadelphia.

Rock drummer, Eagles players collaborate on Christmas album

BY DAN GELSTON
Associated Press

The burly, bearded men belting out holiday classics have made the night before Christmas more than just a time this year to watch the Philadelphia Eagles try and slay the competition.

Lane Johnson, Jason Kelce and Jordan Mailata — with help from some melodic teammates — have made a season already pretty jolly a bit more sweet-sounding with the release of their Christmas album, "A Philly Special Christmas."

Yes, the album title is an ode to Old Saint Nick, in this case former QB Nick Foles and the trick play (called Philly Special) that helped the Eagles win their only Super Bowl in the 2017 season.

The trio of Eagles offensive lineman can sing about as well as they can pass protect — Johnson might not even let Santa Claus down the chimney as he holds the record for most consecutive games without allowing a sack — and an All-Star cast of musicians was assembled to record the album.

Leading the charge was Charlie Hall, drummer for the Grammy-winning band The War on Drugs.

"If we're going to do this, let's make it meaningful. Let's make it awesome," Hall said. "It's not a goof."

The tone is light, but this is no novelty record.

"Oh, football players making a record, it's like 'Super Bowl Shuffle,'" Hall said with a laugh. "But no, this was born out of sincerity and a deep love and appreciation of music."

The cover art features Johnson, Kelce and Mailata sketched in an homage to the Peanuts characters on the "A Charlie Brown Christmas" album and the songs are standards found on Christmas playlists.

"I did not think it was going to get to this level of quality," Kelce said.

The guys in green sing "White Christmas," "Blue Christmas" and "Silent Night," and Eagles radio announcer Merrill Reese narrates "The Night Before Christmas."

There's a philanthropical slant to the album as well, with proceeds going to the Children's Crisis Treatment Center in Philadelphia. More than \$250,000 has already been raised, according to The

Philadelphia Inquirer.

Good luck buying the album, though.

Well, at least a vinyl copy; pressings have gone quickly. One batch sold out in 120 seconds — some albums are going for \$4,000 on eBay — and the final order sold out Dec. 16. "A Philly Special Christmas" is available on streaming services.

The idea for an album was kicked around by Kelce and friends around last Christmas, and former Eagle Connor Barwin used his music connections — The War on Drugs have headlined the former defensive end's charity show — to get the ball rolling. The album was recorded over several days at various Philadelphia-area studios this past summer.

"It's 98 degrees and we're recording a Christmas album," Kelce said, wearing a Christmas sweater, Eagles Santa hat and holding a beer, in a making-of video.

Barwin served as an executive producer. The seven-song LP from Vera Y Records also features musicians from The Hooters, Dr. Dog and 98-year-old saxophone player Marshall Allen of Sun Ra Arkestra.

The recording team brought in a vocal coach to assist the Eagles as they made the transition from the huddle to the studio.

"That was the lesson in all this, just being game for something," Hall said. "They're like, 'yeah, show me what to do. Show me how to be better and I'll do it.' Just totally coachable."

Kelce, who sang the national anthem at a 76ers game last season, channeled his inner Bruce Springsteen for the classic "Santa Claus is Coming to Town."

Kelce bursts into laughter when Mailata, 25, hits the high notes of falsetto on the the "I-I-I am dreaming of a white Christmas" doo-wop part popularized by The Drifters.

"What Jordan did, you could call singing," Kelce said. "What Lane did, you could call singing. I don't know if you could call what I did singing. I'm very much just a yeller in certain tones."

Mailata has the best pipes of the bunch; he competed on the Fox reality show "The Masked Singer."

"Jordan could straight up quit football and be a singer if he wanted to," Hall said. "But they're all great. Their voices are like a reflection of their personalities. Lane has this incredibly soulful voice. If they were to get out of this line of business, Jordan would have no trouble finding a gig singing."

Adeem the Artist

White Trash Revelry (Four Quarters/Thirty Tigers)

"Going to Hell," a banjo-driven romp on the new album "White Trash Revelry," explains in jest the cause of Adeem the Artist's unspecified musical limitations.

The East Tennessee-based singer-songwriter has considerable gifts, too, and that's no joke.

Buzz about Adeem the Artist, who uses the pronoun they, began to build with the 2021 album "Cast-Iron Pansexual." Their follow-up is a twangy, tangy examination of gender identity, faith, race and other topics of cultural contestation, offered by a blue-collar troubadour with a biting tenor and sharp wit.

A "redneck fundraiser" conducted by Adeem allowed them to start a label and hire a strong supporting cast for "Revelry," and the resulting range of musical stylings is wide.

The facetious single "Run This Town" sounds like a potential rockabilly anthem for too many election campaigns as it skewers the political process. "Painkillers & Magic" is a Tex-Mex take on hurt that faith can't heal, and the piano ballad "For Judas" ponders the power of love and pain of betrayal. "Redneck, Unread Hicks" addresses the sanctity of marriage to string band accompaniment, while "Heritage of Arrogance" rocks as it rails against an inheritance of oppression.

Lyrics reference Robert Johnson, Jimmie Rodgers, Johnny Cash, the Louvin Brothers and Charlie Daniels, reflecting Adeem's broad musical vocabulary. Limitations aren't an issue; "White Trash Revelry" is the bracing work of an artist without boundaries.

— Steven Wine



Sam Fender

Live From Finsbury Park and Seventeen Going Under Deluxe Edition (Geffen)

It's an interesting play to release a live album just as you're emerging as an artist of arena rock stature. But that's what Sam Fender has done with "Live From Finsbury Park."

Turns out it's not a bad idea. That's because the album, recorded in July at an outdoor concert in London, will only whet the appetite of audiences who have discovered Fender's angsty, substantial rock and roll but haven't seen him live. He released it on vinyl, in tandem with a deluxe CD edition of his breakthrough 2021 release, "Seventeen Going Under" that includes two solid new cuts.

Tickets will be harder to come by now.

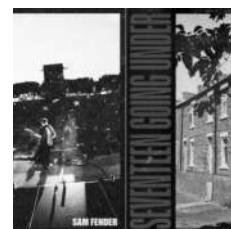
Fender hails from a working-class seaside town in northeast England, and his music has been compared to Bruce Springsteen. That's fair. He has acknowledged in interviews that Springsteen is his favorite artist, even as he says the comparisons don't do him any favors.

The similarities surface in concert more than on his studio work. The sound of 45,000 people singing along with gusto to every aching lyric of Fender's brilliant song, "Seventeen Going Under," will feel familiar to Springsteen fans. So will the crowd spontaneously carrying on with the "oh-wo-wo-wo-wo" melody well after the band stops playing. But Fender is no copycat. He's so direct and honest in his delivery that he connects with audiences on his own terms. His sound is identifiably British, and he writes soaring, anthemic songs that rarely feel derivative and sings them with passion and conviction.

He sings about his father on "Spit of You" ("I can talk to anyone, but I can't talk to you"), and of mental illness on "Dead Boys," a song about young men he grew up with who didn't make it. He sings about difficult relationships, lost relatives, faith, hope and regret. His experiences are his own, but he makes it all feel universal.

Fender has played in New York and Los Angeles but canceled North American concert dates earlier this year to look after his own mental health. This new music makes it a near certainty that his audience will be there when he's ready, primed to sing along.

— Scott Stroud



Johnson



Kelce



Mailata

Daisy Edgar-Jones to portray Carole King in film adaptation of Broadway hit 'Beautiful'

Daisy Edgar-Jones has been cast as Carole King in "Beautiful," the movie adaptation of the beloved Broadway musical about the life and career of the prolific songwriter and singer.

The 24-year-old British actress had her breakout role in Hulu's romance drama "Normal People" in 2020. Then, earlier this

year, she starred in the film adaptation of the bestselling book "Where The Crawdads Sing."

King gave Jones her seal of approval. "Daisy has a spirit and energy that I recognized as myself when I was younger," King told Variety on Dec. 15.

New York Daily News

WEEKEND: TELEVISION

Q&A



JEFF DALY, CNBC/AP

Kevin O'Leary and Bethenny Frankel, hosts of the show "Money Court," on the set in Miami. The two hear disputes or problems in small businesses and decide how to proceed.

Expanding her advice business

Frankel, co-host of CNBC's 'Money Court,' discusses the show, her social media product tests and advising her daughter

BY BROOKE LEFFERTS
Associated Press

Bethenny Frankel has never been shy about offering her opinion, but lately, giving advice has become her business. The reality TV star and producer, entrepreneur and bestselling author has a new CNBC show, "Money Court," where she and co-host Kevin O'Leary hear business dilemmas and come up with solutions.

On the show, Frankel and O'Leary hear disputes or problems in small businesses, including pricing strategies, work culture issues and ways to expand. The hosts make a ruling on the best way to proceed. Frankel has also recently built a large following on her Instagram feed for her brutally honest posts about food and beauty products. On the same day, she could be testing who makes the best pasta sauce, and whether a high-end end night cream is better than a drugstore brand.

Frankel, who may be best known for her role in the Bravo reality series "Real Housewives of New York City, recently talked to The Associated Press about her new hosting duties, social feeds and advising her daughter. Answers have been abbreviated for clarity and brevity.

AP: You and Kevin have strong personalities. How do you get along?

Frankel: I thought we would be sparring a little bit and be in some sort of a power struggle and that there would be like a

gender situation and ... there was none of that. We both elevated each other's game. It was definitely the sum is greater than its parts, playing with a better tennis player, and the entrepreneurs benefited from that relationship. I gained a respect for him as an entrepreneur, as a business advisor, as a man with experience. It's not that easy to keep up with me, and I don't care how rich or successful someone is. It was really inspiring.

You've made millions as an entrepreneur, and he's mainly a venture capitalist and investor. How do those different skills help the show?

Kevin has invested and made more money than I have. But he hasn't himself started a business from the ground up, like what goes on day to day. So my expertise is in the culture, the dynamic, the relationships, the marketing, all that other stuff, in addition to the numbers. Numbers are easier to play around with than personalities and workplace culture, and dynamics and actually knowing what it's like. I'm better in understanding the actual people.

Were you surprised by the positive response to your product tests on social media?

I am the Justin Bieber of CVS! (laughs) I walk in (and people say) 'I bought this because of you.' I go into a Target and someone says, 'You're doing the Lord's work.' And I'm like, B strong? (her philanthropic foundation) 'No, the lip gloss!' I'm



Frankel has recently built a large following on Instagram, where she posts brutally honest reviews of food and beauty products.

EVAN AGOSTINI, INVISION/AP

like, 'Whaat?' So it's really fun. It's a different audience. Old and young. It's young girls, that found me on TikTok. It's moms that are obsessed with it because they just don't know what the hell is going on. It's really been interesting. It was totally accidental. There's no one that could ever intend or predict that absurdity.

Have any companies taken issue with your posts if you don't like a product?

No. The beauty business is very strong and resilient and even the negativity helps them because I'm giving them sort of some advice because they are not seeing everything. They're in their own business and ... while they might just dabble around, I'm seeing everything. So cutting through is great. What happens is brands have offered to pay me to review a product which I have declined. Brands have asked me if I would partner with them after I have already liked something ... then I've said great because I already said, 'I like this,' wonderful. So really it has a lot of integrity. And it's hard to turn down just people throwing money at you. But I do

every day for things that I don't like. That brand will send me something, send me a fruit basket and say, we heard you didn't like this. Maybe you'll like this. It's been nice. I have a lot of respect for the beauty space that I didn't before.

Do you give your 12-year-old daughter Bryn advice?

I'm very in tune, and I'm very strict and also indulgent. She is absolutely not spoiled because she gets checked. And she doesn't care about all the stuff and the fame and all the beauty products. ... I mean, she's very into hair. But if she gets something, she gets rid of two things. So she's very balanced and ... there's still a discipline there. And yes, I give her great advice, but I have a way of approaching it that I feel works.

With multiple jobs and businesses, what are you most proud of?

I'm proud of the mother that I am and ... there's no situation where I put work first before her. I'm proud of curating the career that I want, that I get excited to sit down and talk about (her podcast) "Re-wives" in the way that I want to, in the context that I want to with the people that I want to talk to about it, that I get to do it my way. That I get to do this "Money Court" show about the things that are important to me, that I get to say no repeatedly and turn down millions of dollars, for "Housewives," because it's not where I want to be.

WEEKEND: TELEVISION

‘National Treasure’ hunt strikes gold

Actor who stars in ‘Edge of History’ says friendships made filming Disney+ series his ‘best experience’

By ALICIA RANCILIO
Associated Press

When Antonio Cipriano was cast in the Disney+ series “National Treasure: Edge of History,” he knew it was a great professional opportunity but wasn’t expecting how formative the experience would be for him personally.

“When I say it was the best experience I’ve ever had, I don’t think I’m actually exaggerating at all,” said Cipriano over Zoom from a hotel in Los Angeles. “The cast, crew, creatives, everybody. We were all (filming) in Baton Rouge (La.), so we were all at summer camp, basically, like we were all in one spot and hung out with each other every single day and went to New Orleans and had amazing experiences.”

This “National Treasure” is a continuation of the movies starring Nicolas Cage, Penelope Cruz and Justin Bartha with a Generation Z cast. (Bartha and Harvey Keitel reprise their roles for the series.)

Lisette Olivera stars as Jess, an undocumented immigrant from Mexico living in the U.S., who discovers a clue connected to her late father that may lead to a hidden treasure.

Jess enlists her friends, including Cipriano’s character, Oren, to help solve the mystery. A ruthless black market antiquities dealer — played by Catherine Zeta-Jones — is hot on her trail because she wants to find the treasure first.

When we first meet Oren he’s a bit excitable, easily distracted, and is

deeply invested in the latest expensive sneaker drop. His friends both love and roll their eyes at him, including ex-girlfriend Tasha, whom Oren would like to win back. Zuri Reed portrays Tasha.

“In addition to being incredibly talented and funny, Antonio is also just naturally lovable, which we really needed for Oren. Oren starts off the season as a selfish, goofball man-child, so we needed an actor who was so likable that audiences would hang in with him for the ride as his character grew,” showrunners Cormac and Marianne Wibberley said in an email.

Cipriano credits the Wibberleys with encouraging him to make suggestions for his character: “At some point you start to really know who you’re playing and then you’re like, ‘OK, let me say how I think he would say this.’ They were very open to that kind of stuff ... You’re thinking on

your toes all the time, like, ‘What can I do here? What can I do here?’”

The Wibberleys say a Cipriano suggestion provided one of their “favorite moments in the show.”

“Antonio did come up with a super fun, little dance during a big character moment in one of the episodes,” they said. “He choreographed it himself.”

Cipriano got his start in theater and has an incredibly strong singing voice. He originated the role of Phoenix in “Jagged Little Pill,” written by Diablo Cody and inspired by the Alanis Morissette album, and saw it through workshops and out-of-town performances before its 2019 Broadway debut. The show was only a few months into its Broadway run when everything shut down due to the pandemic. Cipriano then went home to Grosse Pointe, Mich., to be with his family.

“Every actor who went through COVID can tell you it was just the craziest,” he said. “You’re just submitting tape after tape after tape after tape. Most of the time you don’t hear back. It’s just kind of thrown off into the void.”

Upon reading the script for “National Treasure,” Cipriano was instantly hooked: “I knew this was something I was going to fixate on.

“I got two callbacks. I had done chemistry reads and all this stuff, and I was like, ‘This is it, this is it.’ And then I didn’t get it ... Then about a month later, after I had let it go, I got a call from my manager, ‘Hey, remember ‘National Treasure?’ ‘Oh, the one I really wanted? Yeah, I think I can remember.’” Cipriano was asked to do a screen test

which landed him the role.

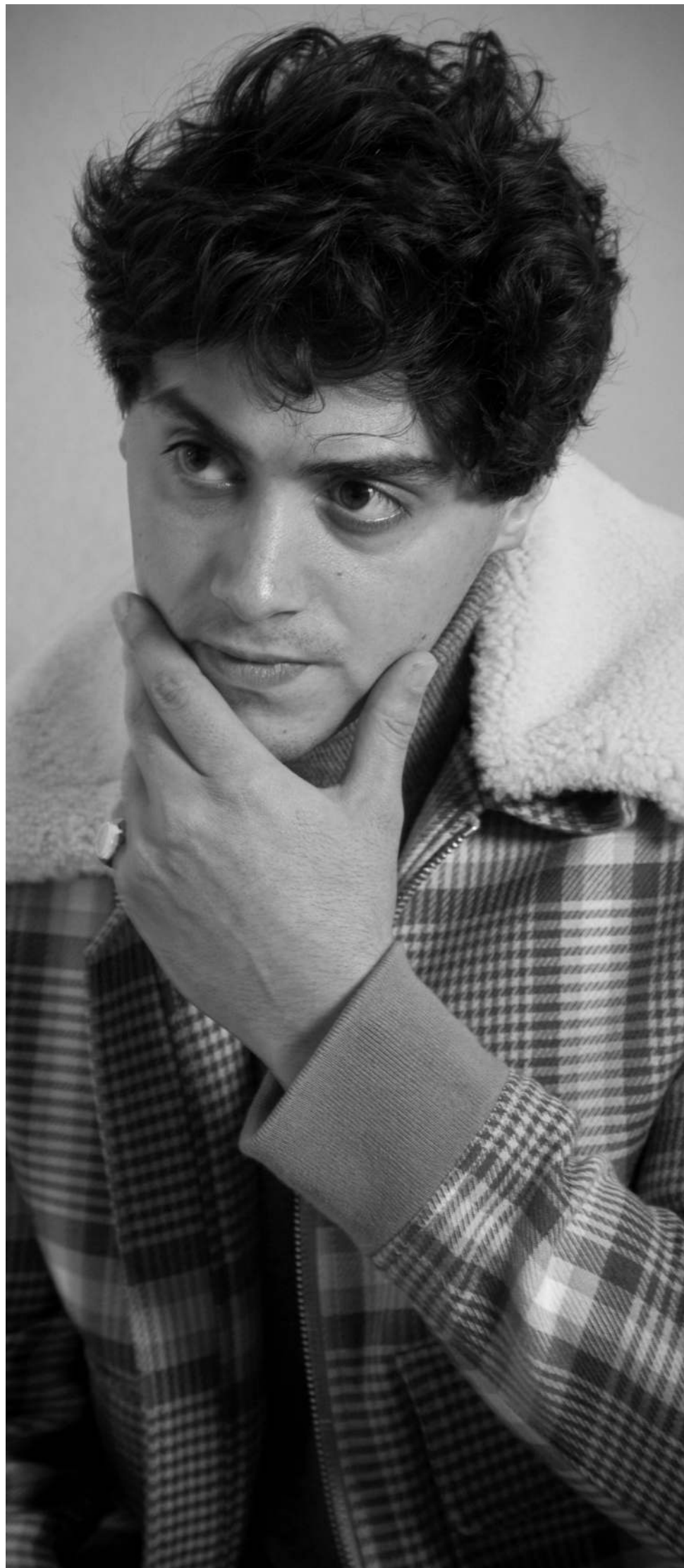
Early on, he and his castmates — including Olivera, Reed, Jordan Rodrigues and Jake Austin Walker — formed a pact to have each other’s backs while filming: They told each other, “If you’re ever having a weird day, anything like that, we got you, we’re going to be on set with you, too and it’s OK to have a bad day.” That’s what is so amazing about this cast.”

The actors spent all their free time together, and Cipriano said it was “a learning curve” to call it a night because they had work the next day.

“It’s very hard when you have all your friends in the same building as you and down the street, like, how are you supposed to not hang out? Quality time is my love language. I literally just wanted to hang out with them every second of every day,” he said.

“We were all (filming) in Baton Rouge (La.) so we were all at summer camp, basically, like we were all in one spot and hung out with each other every single day and went to New Orleans and had amazing experiences.”

Antonio Cipriano



ANDY KROPA, INVISION/AP

Antonio Cipriano poses for a portrait in New York on Nov. 21 to promote his series “National Treasure: Edge of History,” a continuation of the movie franchise.

WEEKEND: HEALTH & FITNESS

Hydration hooley

New Science study: Advice to drink eight cups daily doesn't hold water

By ANAHAD O'CONNOR
The Washington Post

We've all heard the age-old advice to drink eight cups of water a day. But if you fall short, don't worry: That advice is probably wrong anyway.

That's according to new research, published in the journal *Science*, which found that for most healthy adults, drinking eight cups of water a day is completely unnecessary. The advice is misguided in part because it doesn't take into account all the water that we get from our food and from other beverages like coffee and tea. The research found that our water needs vary from one person to next and depend on factors like your age, sex, size, physical activity levels and the climate that you live in.

The authors of the study say that for healthy adults, there is no real benefit to drinking eight cups of water a day. Nor is it dangerous: Your body will just excrete the extra water you consume in your urine.

"If you drink eight cups of water a day, you'll be fine — you're just going to be spending a lot more time in the bathroom," said Herman Pontzer, a professor of evolutionary anthropology and global health at Duke University and a co-author of the study.

The advice to drink eight cups of water a day stems from a 1945 recommendation from the Food and Nutrition Board of the National Research Council, which encouraged adults to consume about 64 ounces of water daily. The recommendation referred to a person's total daily intake of water, including from all their foods and beverages, but it was widely misinterpreted to mean that people should drink eight 8-ounce glasses of water every day.

Some experts have argued that the widely held belief was not rooted in science. One study of 883 elderly adults for example found that there was no evidence of dehydration among the 227 people in the study who routinely drank less than six glasses of water daily.

"Until we have more evidence-based documentation that fluid intake of eight glasses per day improves some aspect of an elderly person's health," the researchers concluded, "encouraging a fluid intake above a level that is comfortable for the individual seems to serve little useful purpose."

Nevertheless, the advice is so widely ingrained that many companies use it to market products. You can buy 64-ounce water bottles designed to motivate you to drink the equivalent of eight cups of water daily, and water-bottle sensors that will track your water intake and remind you to "hydrate" every 30 to 40 minutes.

"We have guidelines telling people how much water to drink," said Pontzer, who wrote a book on metabolism called "Burn." "But the reality is that people have been kind of making it up."

To see how much water people really need, Pontzer and his co-authors analyzed data on 5,600 people in 26 countries who ranged in age from 8 days old to 96 years old. The participants included people from all walks of life, like farmworkers, athletes and non-athletes, sedentary office workers in Europe and the U.S., and people from farming and hunter-gatherer societies in South American and Africa.

The participants were tracked with a gold-standard technique called "doubly labeled water," which uses water laced with tracers that can be used to track the body's production of carbon dioxide, allowing the researchers to get precise measurements of the participants' daily energy expenditure. It also allowed them to estimate the amount of water the participants generated from metabolism and the water that they consumed.

"It's really accurate at measuring how many calories you burn each day but also how much water you take in and how much goes out," Pontzer said.

Using this method, the researchers determined how much water the participants lost and replaced each day, a measurement known as water turnover. They found that a person's daily water turnover was largely determined by their size and their level of body fat, which contains less water than muscle and other organs.

The more "fat-free" mass a person has, the more water they need. Since men tend to have larger bodies and less body fat compared to women, they generally use more water. "Men use more water every day because we have a bigger system to keep hydrated," Pontzer said.

The research showed that how much water you need changes over your lifetime. In general, our water needs peak between the ages of 20 and 50 and then decline in parallel with the slowing down of our metabolisms. That's because the amount of water you need is partly dependent on your metabolism and how many calories you burn.

"All of the work that your cells do every day is water-based," Pontzer said. "The ratio of the amount of water that you use to the number of calories that you burn stays fairly consistent over your life span."

Two other important factors that determine your water needs: Your climate and whether you lead a sedentary lifestyle. People who live in hotter climates and engage in more physical activity have higher levels of water turnover.

The study found that people from less developed regions of the world have higher levels of water turnover than people from developed countries.

"We think that's because if you're in a poorer country, you're likely to be working outside every day, and you have less access to climate control," Pontzer said. "People in poorer countries are also often doing jobs that require more physical activity."

He noted that as the world gets hotter, it is going to cause our water needs to increase, which will worsen problems for the 2 billion people across the globe who have limited or inadequate access to clean water.

Asher Y. Rosinger, an expert who was not involved in the study, said the research was "incredibly impressive" and the findings "make a lot of sense." He said that for the most part, people tend to consume the amount of water that their bodies need.

But he cautioned that water turnover is not necessarily a precise measure of how hydrated a person is.

"In those hot environments, people are using more water, but we don't necessarily know whether it's sufficient to meet their water needs," said Rosinger, the director of the Water, Health and Nutrition Lab at Penn State.

So how much water should you drink? The answer is simple: Drink when you're thirsty. Prioritize water, and try to avoid sugary drinks, which can cause metabolic problems. Coffee and tea are fine as well.

While the caffeine they contain can increase urination, they will still be hydrating so long as you consume less than 400 milligrams of caffeine, Rosinger said. Keep in mind that you get water from your food as well. Some water-rich foods are fruits, vegetables, beans, yogurt, brown rice and soups.

"If you're paying attention to your body and drinking when you feel like you need to, then you should be fine," Pontzer said.



WEEKEND: FAMILY



Can you read me a story?

Books about bedtime may not help kids sleep, but there are other benefits

By JENNIE YABROFF
The Washington Post

Once upon a time there was a little boy who didn't want to go to bed. His mother, who did want to go to bed, read him a story about a very sleepy bunny. The little boy soon closed his eyes and fell asleep, and they all slept happily after.

In my house, at least, this story would be shelved with fantasy fiction, along with books that promise you can potty train your toddler in one weekend and raise a child to adulthood without ever raising your voice. Some nights my son closes his eyes after one book. Some nights he's still wide-awake after 10.

Yet judging from the children's section of any bookstore, you'd think bedtime books were the secret to getting wiggly little bodies to settle down and nod off. So many of them, from classics such as "Goodnight Moon," "Little Fur Family" and "Harold and the Purple Crayon" to contemporary favorites such as "Goodnight, Goodnight Construction Site," "Llama Llama Red Pajama" and the Good Night Our World series, end with the main characters heading off to dreamland. The implied sequence of events is clear: This kid/animal/machine is going to sleep now, and you will, too.

Of course, there are also myriad books with the overt aim of getting kids to sleep — "The Going to Bed Book," "Goodnight Already!" and "The Rabbit Who Wants to Fall Asleep," to name just a few. So many children's books are either explicitly or implicitly about sleep, it can make a weary parent wonder why this is such a perennial theme, and whether these books actually have the desired effect.

"As a parent, I was always way more tired than my kids were," says Janet Costa Bates, author of the children's book "Time for Bed, Old House," which ends with not just the child but his grandfather and his grandfather's entire house falling asleep.

Like Bates, I view bedtime as a reward for making it through the day. But for kids, experts say, it can feel like just the opposite: "For many kids, bedtime resistance is about not wanting to stop doing fun activities. Of course they would prefer to keep playing with their Legos or watching their favorite show rather than lying in a dark, boring room," says Kate Lyn Walsh. Walsh is a behavioral sleep psychologist at Riley Children's Health in Indianapolis and assistant professor of clinical pediatrics at the Indiana University School of Medicine.

Walsh, like most pediatricians and sleep experts, suggests establishing a soothing routine to ease the transition from party time to lights out. Science bears this out: Studies suggest that nighttime routines benefit not just the quality of kids' sleep, but also their overall well-being in early childhood. While those routines can be as prosaic as brushing teeth and putting on pajamas, reading may be especially beneficial. Studies show reading before bed can help with word consolidation — the process by which new words become part of the reader's vocabulary — and improve the bond between parents and children. Most important, it's fun, but not too fun.

"We know that kids who have bedtime routines that do not involve electronics, and instead involve more calming activities, like reading, are able to sleep faster," says Sabhyata Agrawal, a pediatric sleep specialist and assistant professor of pediatrics at Yale School of Medicine. "In my experience, [going to] sleep requires you to focus in a relaxed, calming manner. Reading helps you accomplish both goals."

But does it matter what you read? Is it really as simple as reading stories about sleepy animals? It's certainly an appealing concept and helps explain the popularity of books such as "The Rabbit Who Wants to Fall Asleep." Written by a motivational speaker and behavioral scientist, the book all but promises that its repetitive story will knock out even the most adamant sleep resister. An author's note suggests that it be read in a "slow and calm voice," and the reader is given parenthetical instructions to yawn throughout.

Like many somnolent tomes, "Rabbit" was a bestseller, but that could well be a measure of parental frustration. After all, the parody bedtime book, "Go the F*** to Sleep," was a bestseller, too.

The ideal bedtime reading, Agrawal says, should hit a sweet spot for engagement. "The content has to be interesting enough for children to want to listen to it in the first place and make it part of the routine," she says. At the same time, a book with a lot of action and adventure or high emotional stakes may rouse the listener rather than nudging them toward slumber. Every parent must find this delicate balance on their own.

And there is room for variety.

"Books don't always have to be about going to sleep!" Walsh says. "They can be any book a child enjoys and wants to read. Reading together should be something that kids enjoy doing with their caregivers."

THE MEAT AND POTATOES OF LIFE

Lisa Smith Molinari



Nasal crud an uninvited holiday guest this year

This holiday season, I've done everything differently. Due to a nasty respiratory infection that has been terrorizing my lungs and sinuses for nearly a month, our family's time-honored Christmas traditions have been replaced with alternative holiday rituals.

Normally, I would fill bowls with festive red and green M&Ms and place them throughout the house. Instead, I've adorned our house with sticky bottles of cherry flavored Robitussin DM and Kleenex tissues sopping with verdant snot. In lieu of singing Christmas carols, I've been uttering deep, raspy vocalizations that would give "Exorcist" demon Pazuzu a run for his money.

Rather than put on my grandmother's red, beaded necklace for a pop of holiday color, I'm wearing two deep circles around my eyes so dark, I look like I was hit by an Amazon delivery truck. Instead of hitting the stores for presents lovingly selected for loved ones, I've done all my shopping slumped over a laptop, ordering thoughtless gift cards with messages that say "Merry Christmas!" but really mean "Go out and buy your own damned gift this year, sucker."

In lieu of watching my favorite Christmas movies while I trim a freshly cut tree, I dragged a fake tree from the basement and plugged it in before collapsing onto the couch, where I fell asleep with my mouth open. I would have plugged in one of my vintage, ceramic Christmas trees to light up my bedroom, but this year the outlet beside my bed supplies electricity to a cool mist humidifier. Rather than dreaming of dancing sugar plums, I've been sleeping with my head elevated to facilitate sinus drainage.

Instead of ringing Christmas bells, I'm ringing up the Naval Health Clinic at 7:30 a.m. to beg for a follow-up appointment because I still feel like crap after a full course of Prednisone. Instead of writing holiday cards, I'm using my pen to complete sudoku puzzles while I wait in the pharmacy for my prescriptions. Rather than nibbling Christmas cookies, I've been trying to choke down Augmentin horse pills to kill the bacteria that infected my sinuses two weeks after a respiratory virus invaded my lungs.

Instead of celebrating Christmas like I always have with my family and our annual traditions, I've been too sick and tired to deal with it all.

The only comfort in this most unfortunate holiday has been that I am not alone. Misery loves company as they say, and this holiday season, many people have been miserably sick like me. Hospitals all over the U.S. have been swamped with patients complaining of respiratory symptoms of the coronavirus, flu virus, or respiratory syncytial virus. In early December, the Centers for Disease Control warned us to mask up again to guard against a possible "triple-demic" surge of the three viruses, which could overwhelm our understaffed health care system.

The CDC also urged the public to get flu shots, get the latest COVID-19 booster, wash hands, social distance, take rapid tests, yadda, yadda, yadda. Ironically, experts link this year's explosion in flu and RSV cases to people's vulnerable immune systems after two years of masking and minimizing exposure to viruses.

I was signed up to get my flu shot and COVID-19 bivalent booster on Dec. 5 at my local military health clinic. However, our clinic's COVID-19 policy wouldn't permit anyone in the facility with a cough, runny nose or fever, so I had to cancel my immunizations despite testing negative for COVID-19.

So let me get this straight ... I can't get boosted for COVID-19 because I have RSV symptoms, and I have RSV symptoms because I've been protecting myself from COVID-19?

Just like the holidays, I'm too sick and tired to sort it all out. Instead, I'll wish you all a Mucusy Crustmas ... er, I mean, a Merry Christmas!

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

STEP ON IT!

BY LAURA TAYLOR KINNEL / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

Laura Taylor Kinnel, of Newtown, Pa., teaches math and is the director of studies at a Friends boarding school near Philadelphia. This is her sixth crossword for The Times, most of them Sundays. Laura's son and his fiancée asked her to construct a crossword for their outdoor wedding reception last June. The result was printed on a large foam board, and guests worked on it with dry erase markers. The completed puzzle now hangs in the newlyweds' living room. — W.S.

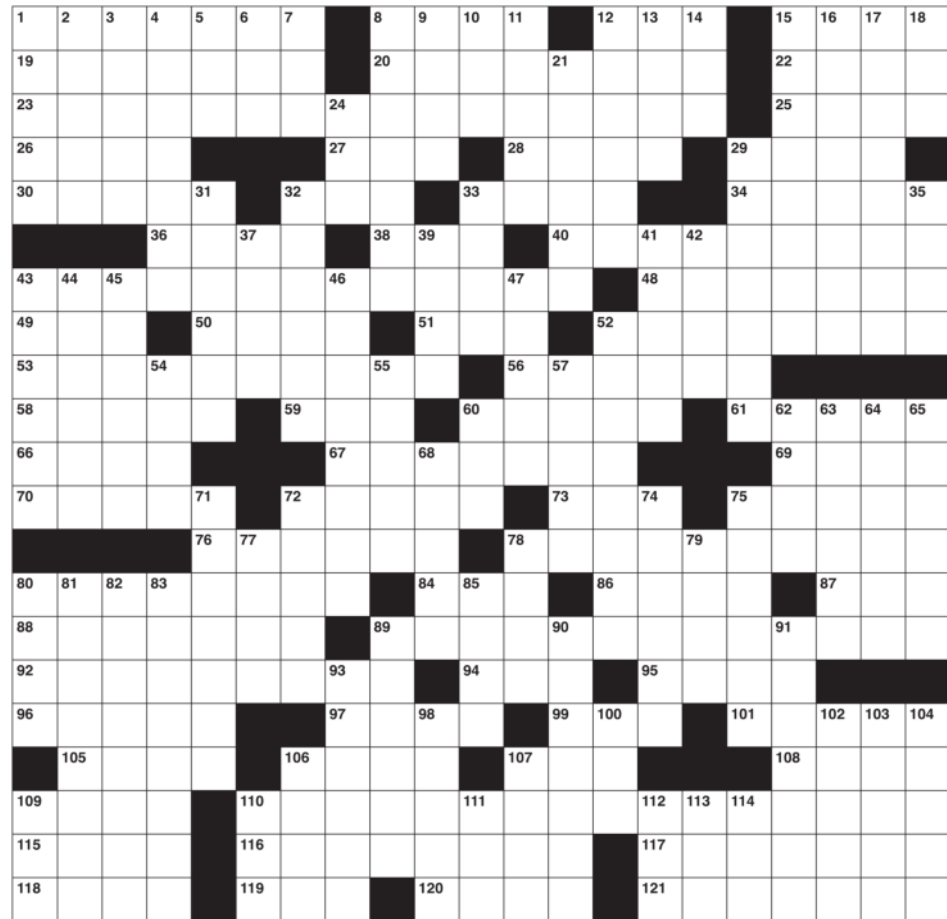
ACROSS

- 1 Letting up
- 8 35mm. options
- 12 Rotter
- 15 What a cafeteria tray can be used as
- 19 Creative, as thinking
- 20 Tug of war or capture the flag
- 22 Le Pew of Looney Tunes
- 23 Hypotenuse-finding formula
- 25 Opposed to, in dialect
- 26 Frost
- 27 Prefix with pronoun
- 28 "No ifs, ____ or buts"
- 29 Asia's vanishing ____ Sea
- 30 Ethereal glows
- 32 Young Henry V, to Falstaff
- 33 Eins + zwei
- 34 A-lister
- 36 Evening, informally
- 38 Pharmaceutical pioneer Lilly
- 40 Having an impeccable reputation, say
- 43 One drinking soft drinks at a party, perhaps
- 48 "Le Bonheur de Vivre" painter
- 49 "Dust Tracks ____ Road" (Zora Neale Hurston memoir)
- 50 Egg on

- 51 Implement at a regatta
- 52 Doesn't comply with
- 53 A Kool-Aid flavor
- 56 Serve
- 58 Ham it up
- 59 Member of the fam
- 60 Eliot's "____ Marner"
- 61 Cause of class struggle?
- 66 Boor
- 67 Symbol of Irish heritage
- 69 Garnish on a Moscow mule
- 70 Some young ladies abroad: Abbr.
- 72 Things frequently stolen
- 73 Pierre ou Marie
- 75 Auditioners' goals
- 76 Like some lips
- 78 Common frequency for college classes
- 80 Bum
- 84 Non reversal?
- 86 Langston Hughes classic
- 87 Insta blurb
- 88 Invertebrate with a floral eponym
- 89 "The Pink Panther" character
- 92 Having successfully made it, slangily
- 94 Top-level foreign policy grp.
- 95 Avant-garde
- 96 ____ de leche
- 97 Internet star Majimbo known for her comedy videos
- 99 Prince, but not a princess

- 101 "Go jump in a lake!"
- 105 Oil alternative, in baking
- 106 Durable furniture material
- 107 Texter's transition
- 108 ____ Antipova ("Doctor Zhivago" character)
- 109 Gallic greeting
- 110 Composer who studied under Joseph Haydn
- 115 Bit by a bit
- 116 Tournament favorites
- 117 Group of tonal languages
- 118 Day originally marked by a full moon in the early Roman calendar
- 119 Hunk
- 120 Like some forecasts and complexions
- 121 Wish otherwise

- 12 Rapper with the 2018 No. 1 album "Invasion of Privacy"
- 13 Midwest college town
- 14 Biden or Harris, for short
- 15 One on a rack
- 16 "In witness whereof," "as hereinbefore mentioned," etc.
- 17 Disorder from which Dostoyevsky and many characters in his novels suffered
- 18 Cozy spot
- 21 Approach
- 24 Protein-mimicking molecule
- 29 Compound at a nail salon
- 31 Ink on a contract
- 32 Beats around the bush . . . or bushes
- 33 Sublime soprano
- 35 Brings up, as a subject
- 37 39+ weeks, for a pregnancy
- 39 Mane character in "The Wizard of Oz"?
- 41 Leaves out
- 42 Prefix with constriction
- 43 Wedding-cake supports
- 44 Charm
- 45 Didn't participate
- 46 Big cheese's place?
- 47 Physicist Schrödinger
- 52 Like carbon monoxide
- 54 James who sang "A Sunday Kind of Love"



- 55 Like sumo wrestlers, medically speaking
- 57 Single-handedly
- 60 Adheres
- 62 Blackthorn fruit
- 63 Shiny top
- 64 Voting rights matriarch ____ Boynton Robinson
- 65 "Who, me?" response
- 68 Deceived, in a way
- 71 Like one who's seen a ghost
- 72 In a few words
- 74 Hand warmer
- 75 Post-merger overhauls, informally
- 77 Digital digest with the motto "Cure ignorance"
- 78 Tastes
- 79 Something to knock on
- 80 Remunerated
- 81 Made invalid
- 82 Prevaricate
- 83 Preceders of pis
- 85 Pres. Carter's alma mater
- 89 Post-merger acquisitions?
- 90 Cloud nine feeling
- 91 Swirling storm
- 93 Essential
- 98 Many a Winter Olympian
- 100 ____ goal (soccer blunder)
- 102 Cousin of a crow
- 103 Childish retort
- 104 Painter Édouard often confused with painter Claude
- 106 Fancy Feast flavor
- 107 Some boxers
- 109 Name found in "Variety"
- 110 Setting for simmering
- 111 Onetime auto make with the Metro and Prizm models
- 112 Stately shade tree
- 113 Howe'er
- 114 Ball-and-socket joint

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"Gunston Street" is drawn by Basil Zaviski. Email him at gunstonstreet@yahoo.com, and online at gunstonstreet.com.

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- People saying Free Dog (different breeds) for adoption.

Automotive 140

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CR-2022-000484

**IN THE HIGH COURT OF JUSTICE
BUSINESS AND PROPERTY COURTS OF ENGLAND AND WALES
COMPANIES COURT (ChD)**

IN THE MATTER OF USAA LIMITED
and
IN THE MATTER OF USAA S.A.
and
IN THE MATTER OF USAA S.A. UK BRANCH
and
**IN THE MATTER OF
PART VII OF THE FINANCIAL SERVICES AND MARKETS ACT 2000**

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that USAA Limited (the **Transferor**) and USAA S.A. (acting through its head office in Luxembourg and its branch in the United Kingdom) (the **Transferee**) presented an application to the High Court of Justice, Business and Property Courts of England and Wales, Companies Court (ChD) in London (the **Application**) pursuant to section 107 of the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000 (the **Act**) for orders:

- under section 111 of the Act sanctioning a scheme (the **Scheme**) providing for the transfer by the Transferor to the Transferee of all of the Transferor's insurance business (comprising the Transferor's run-off business in respect of risks situated in the European Economic Area and the Transferor's live and run-off business in respect of risks situated in the United Kingdom) (the **Transfer**); and
- making ancillary provisions in connection with the Scheme pursuant to section 112 and 112A of the Act.


The Application was heard before the Honourable Mrs Justice Joanna Smith DBE on 21 November 2022 and the orders sanctioning the Scheme and making ancillary provision in connection with the Scheme were granted. Pursuant to the orders granted by the Honourable Mrs Justice Joanna Smith DBE, the Scheme will become effective at 23:59 pm (Central European Time) on 31 December 2022.

In addition to any right to cancel provided for in the terms of any policy included in the Transfer, if your insurance policy is included in the Transfer, and the risk to which it relates is situated in an EEA member state, the laws of such EEA member state may give you a right to cancel your policy as a result of the Scheme. If you have such a right, you must exercise this right within 30 days starting from the date hereof or (if different) within the time limit specified by the laws of such EEA member state.

25 November 2022

Norton Rose Fulbright LLP, 3 More London Riverside, London, SE1 2AQ, United Kingdom
Solicitors acting for USAA Limited, USAA S.A. and USAA S.A. UK Branch Ref: NOJ/1001131239

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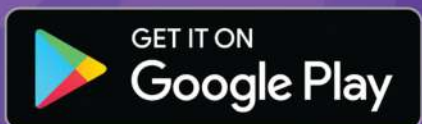
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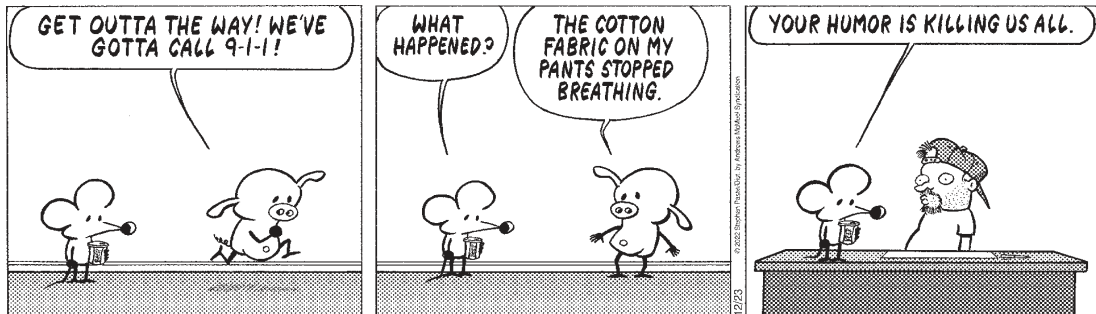
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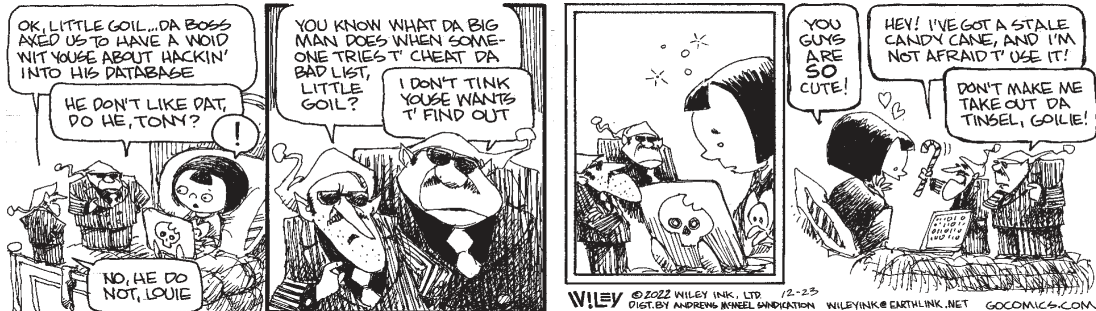
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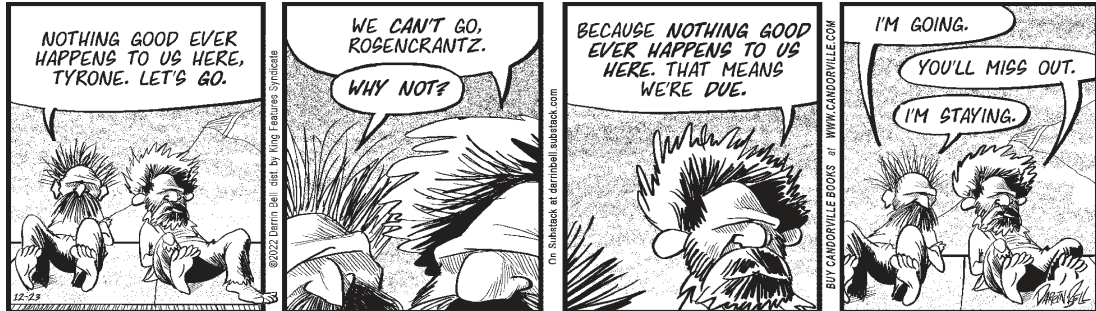
Pearls Before Swine



Non Sequitur



Candorville



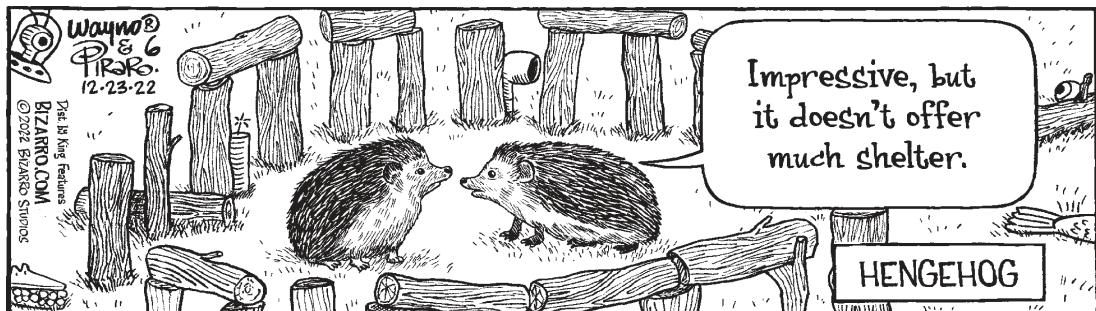
Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



Bizarro



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

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50					51					52		
53					54					55		

ACROSS

- 1 Lush
- 4 Soho residence
- 8 Fine spray
- 12 J. Edgar's org.
- 13 Composer Stravinsky
- 14 Related
- 15 Forest evergreen
- 17 Sleeveless garment
- 18 "Heavens!"
- 19 Ram's mate
- 21 Ger. neighbor
- 22 Flip-flop
- 26 Young horses
- 29 "Awesome!"
- 30 PC program
- 31 Buckeye state
- 32 Surpass
- 33 Pirate's drink
- 34 HBO rival
- 35 Saute
- 36 — apso (small dog)

- 54 Texter's sign-off
- 55 Moment

- 25 Women's links org.
- 26 Expense
- 27 Surprised greeting
- 28 King of the jungle
- 29 Trigger's rider
- 32 Join an environmental protest
- 33 Specter
- 35 Aviate
- 36 Hereditary
- 38 Blunder
- 39 Pirate's plunder
- 42 Showy flower
- 43 Head, to Henri
- 44 Fair-hiring org.
- 45 Hot tub
- 46 Aachen article
- 47 Long. crosser
- 49 Stolen

DOWN

- 1 Bay Area force, briefly
- 2 Theater award
- 3 Turner or Fey
- 4 Type of test
- 5 Shrek and others
- 6 Nemesis
- 7 Maple fluid
- 8 Expert
- 9 White House nickname
- 10 Bro's sib
- 11 Stick with a kick
- 16 Poet's muse
- 20 Bankroll
- 23 Olympic swimmer Torres
- 24 Mil. addresses

Answer to Previous Puzzle

F	E	M	A		M	A	R	S		W	A	D	
E	R	I	C		O	M	I	T		E	L	O	
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12-23

CRYPTOQUIP

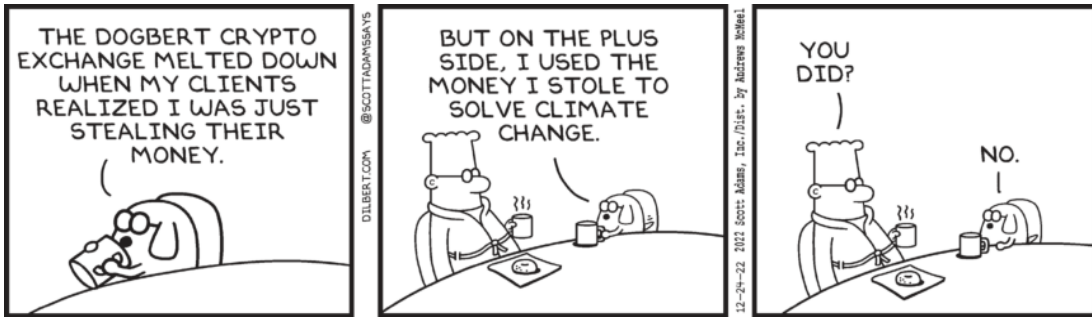
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 KWD QJST ZUT MDFEUC CQJSTEUF
 LJX, KWDL'VD ZKKZQHEUF
 GEKWJXK GZVAEUF.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: SHE'S DESTINED TO WED SOMEONE WITH THE SAME NAME AS ACTOR FERRELL. IT'S A WILL-FATED ROMANCE. Today's Cryptoquip Clue: F equals G

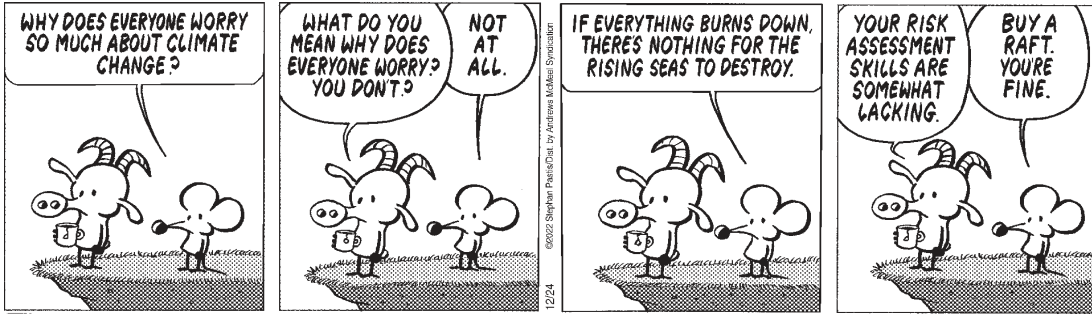
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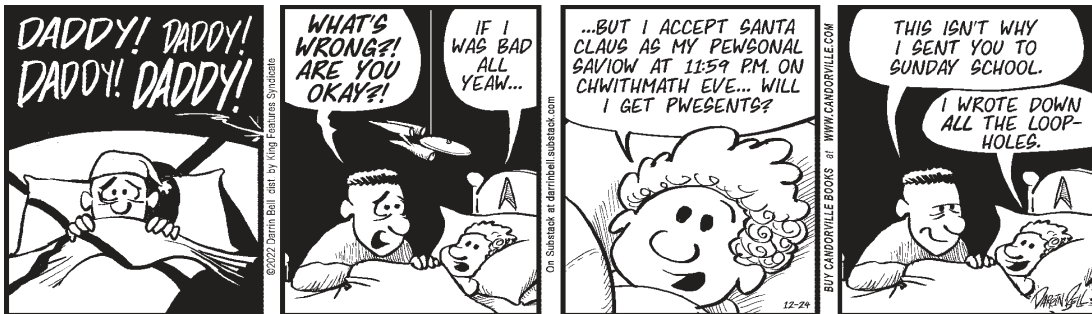
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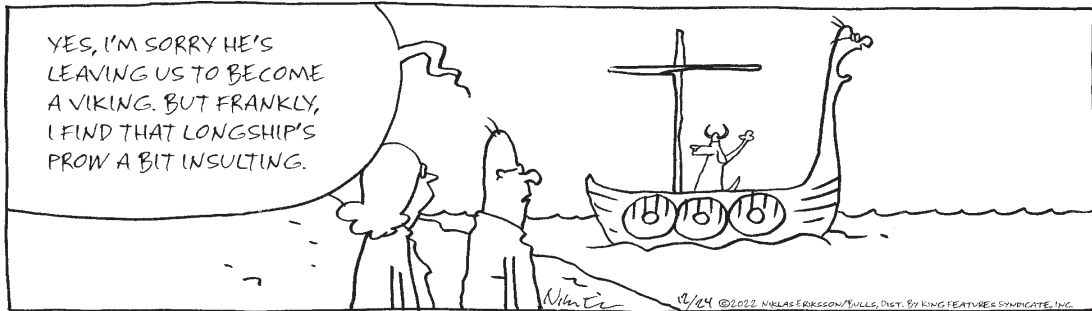
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Beetle Bailey



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ACROSS

- 1 Sum
- 6 Razzed
- 12 Physicist Fermi
- 13 Lengthen
- 14 Composer Mahler
- 15 Nap
- 16 "Alternatively," in a text
- 17 Flightless birds
- 19 Coquettish
- 20 Otherwise
- 22 Greek cross
- 24 Playwright Levin
- 27 Aviation prefix
- 29 Competes
- 32 Jolly, seasonal fundraiser
- 35 Implement
- 36 Bridge fee
- 37 Joke
- 38 Cpl.'s subordinate
- 40 New Mexico resort
- 42 Plopped down
- 44 Corned beef recipe
- 46 Cookbook author Rombauer
- 50 Prolific inventor
- 52 "What a relief!"
- 54 Illinois city
- 55 Orange juice and champagne
- 56 Choir singers
- 57 Ansel or Abigail

DOWN

- 1 Threaded fastener
- 2 Guesser's words
- 3 Church donation
- 4 Obamacare acronym
- 5 Chair for two
- 6 Bach's "—, Joy of Man's Desiring"
- 7 Be
- 8 Arles summer
- 9 Saving from danger
- 10 Within (Pref.)
- 11 Crucial time
- 12 Conceit
- 18 Red wines
- 21 Attorney's profession
- 23 Glamorous Gardner
- 24 Follower (Suff.)

- 25 2016 Olympics city
- 26 Animal shelter activity
- 28 Sooner State
- 30 Greek vowel
- 31 Droop
- 33 Seasonal helper
- 34 — -mo (replay speed)
- 39 "O Holy Night" singers
- 41 Rho follower
- 42 Back-to-school mo.
- 43 "Zip- — -Doo-Dah"
- 45 Literary collections
- 47 Leeway
- 48 Green shade
- 49 Nabokov novel
- 51 "No seats" sign
- 53 Secreted

Answer to Previous Puzzle

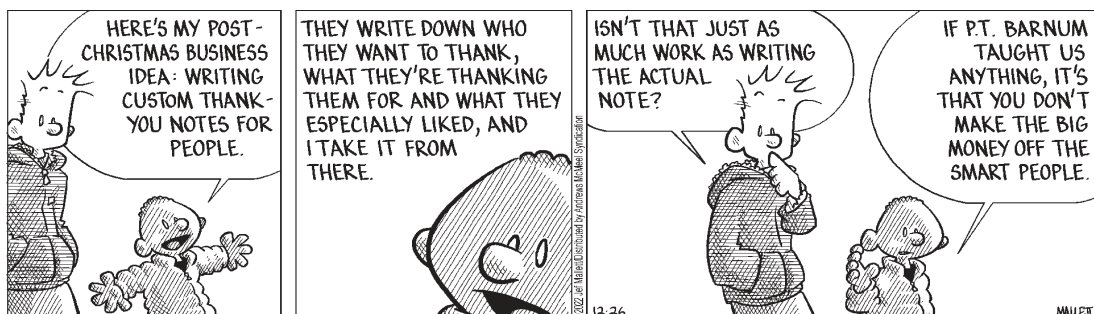
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F	B	I		I	G	O	R		A	K	I	N		
P	I	N	E	T	R	E	E		V	E	S	T		
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C	O	L	T	S		R	A	D		A	P	P		
O	H	I	O			T	O	P		G	R	O	G	
S	H	O			F	R	I		L	H	A	S	A	
T	I	N	G	L	E				B	I	O			
			A	Y	E				O	N	S	I	T	E
S	E	L	F			S	H	O	E	T	R	E	E	
P	I	A	F			I	O	T	A		I	T	O	
A	N	T	E			T	T	Y	L		S	E	C	

12-24

CRYPTOQUIP

BPHC BH BHQH FC EFD SQIWEVH
 UCX U CICQHVDFIWM LHQMIC
 BUM CHUQEO, F MPIWSHX
 "PHUSPHC PHVL WM!"
 Yesterday's Cryptoquip: IF SOMEBODY COMES IN FROM THE COLD AND BEGINS SCOLDING YOU, THEY'RE ATTACKING WITHOUT WARMING.
 Today's Cryptoquip Clue: B equals W

Frazz



Dilbert



Pearls Before Swine



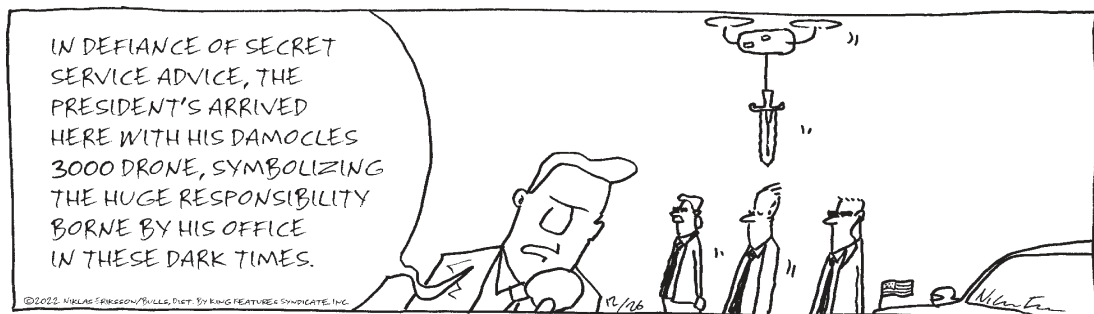
Non Sequitur



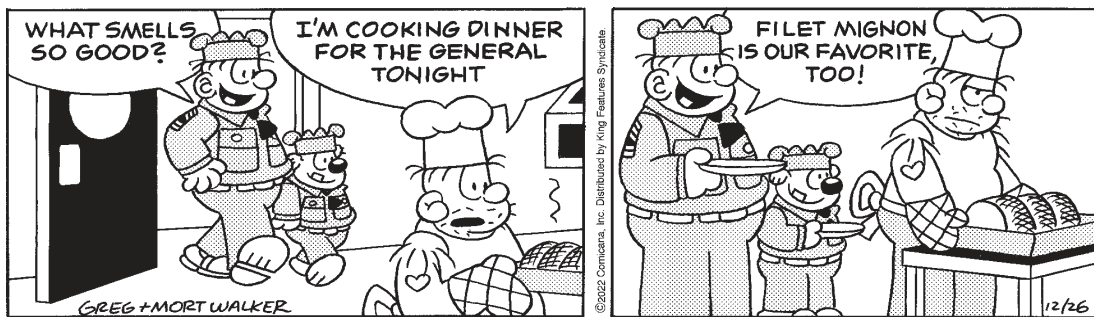
Candorville



Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



Bizarro



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

1	2	3	4		5	6	7		8	9	10	11
12					13				14			
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31				32				33		34		
35			36		37				38			
		39		40		41						
42	43				44		45			46	47	48
49						50				51		
52						53				54		
55						56				57		

ACROSS

- 1 Kudrow of "Friends"
- 5 Uncle, to Pedro
- 8 Pack cargo
- 12 Between jobs
- 13 Sound of wonderment
- 14 Toothpaste holder
- 15 Synthesizer pioneer
- 16 Lift weights
- 18 Isn't colorfast
- 20 Autographed
- 21 Contented sounds
- 23 Comic Philips
- 24 Meryl Streep film
- 28 Eager
- 31 Actress Tyler
- 32 Blinding light
- 34 Lamb's dam
- 35 Washing machine unit
- 37 Pressing appliance
- 39 As well
- 41 USMC ranks
- 42 New Orleans team
- 45 Daytona 500 acronym
- 49 Metallic hue
- 51 Incite
- 52 Hindu royal
- 53 Toward the stern
- 54 Canal zones?

- 55 Differently
- 56 Derek and Diddley
- 57 Smack a baseball

- 24 Unwell
- 25 Brazilian city
- 26 Rousing tributes
- 27 Some police tactics
- 29 — Jima
- 30 Lair
- 33 Jazz singer James
- 36 "Blue Bloods" actor Wahlberg
- 38 Matters
- 40 Wagerers' site (Abbr.)
- 42 Beget
- 43 Asia's — Sea
- 44 Thick chunk
- 46 Gullet
- 47 Taj Mahal site
- 48 Take five
- 50 Martian's ride

DOWN

- 1 Branch
- 2 Pop star
- 3 — gin fizz
- 4 Sea off Greece
- 5 First-class
- 6 Chit
- 7 Resistance units
- 8 Mark of shame
- 9 Triangular pastry
- 10 Reed instrument
- 11 Travel
- 17 Thanksgiving dessert
- 19 Deputy — (cartoon canine)
- 22 Elite Navy group

Answer to Previous Puzzle

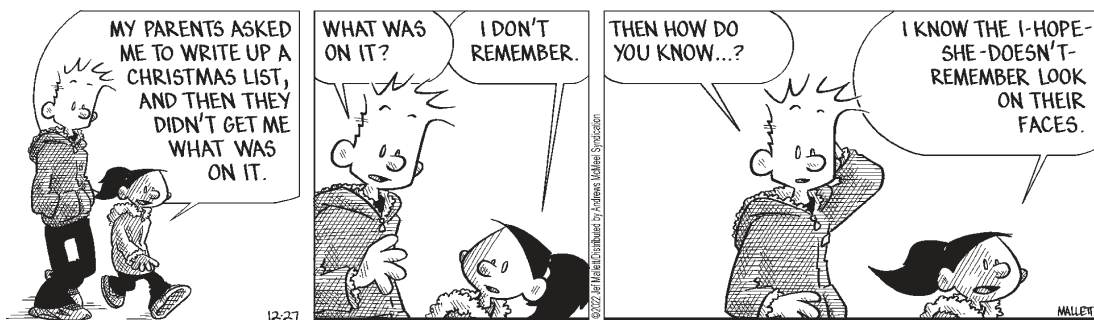
T	T	A	L		J	E	E	R	E	D		
E	N	R	I	C	O		E	X	T	E	N	D
G	U	S	T	A	V		S	I	E	S	T	A
O	T	O	H		E	M	U	S		C	O	Y
					E	L	S	E		T	A	U
I	R	A		A	E	R	O		V	I	E	S
S	I	D	E	W	A	L	K	S	A	N	T	A
T	O	O	L		T	O	L	L		G	A	G
					P	F	C		T	A	O	S
S	A	T		H	A	S	H		I	R	M	A
E	D	I	S	O	N		O	H	G	O	O	D
P	E	O	R	I	A		M	I	M	O	S	A
T	E	N	O	R	S		A	D	A	M	S	

12-26

CRYPTOQUIP

HW C KYSYEOHZT YGKSCHUN
 " Z R C Z Y G X S M N H M Q I C N
 N Z P X Y Q A M P N ! , " C O Y Z R Y T
 W C U M P N E S C N Z I M O A N ?
Saturday's Cryptoquip: WHEN WE WERE IN BIG TROUBLE AND A NONRELIGIOUS PERSON WAS NEARBY, I SHOUTED "HEATHEN HELP US!"
 Today's Cryptoquip Clue: T equals Y

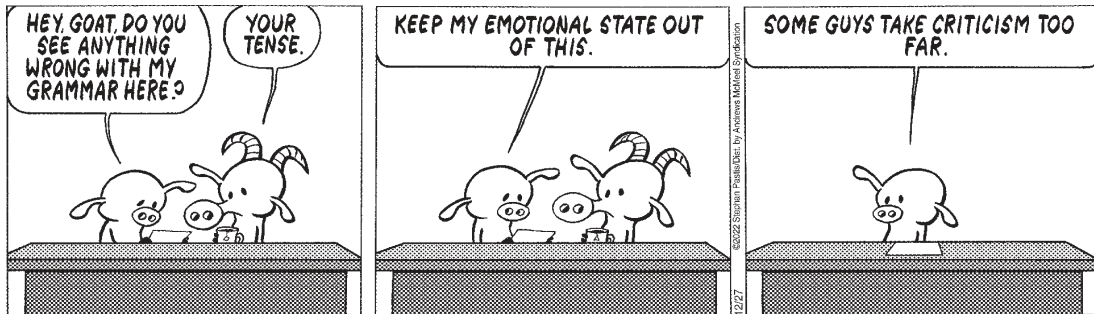
Frazz



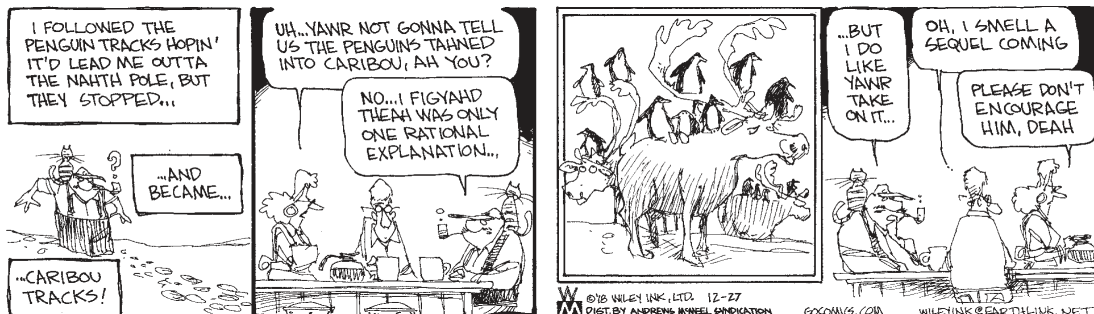
Dilbert



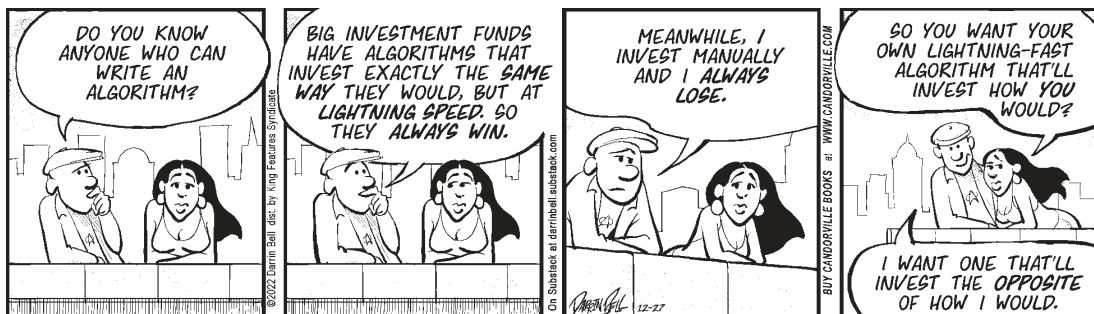
Pearls Before Swine



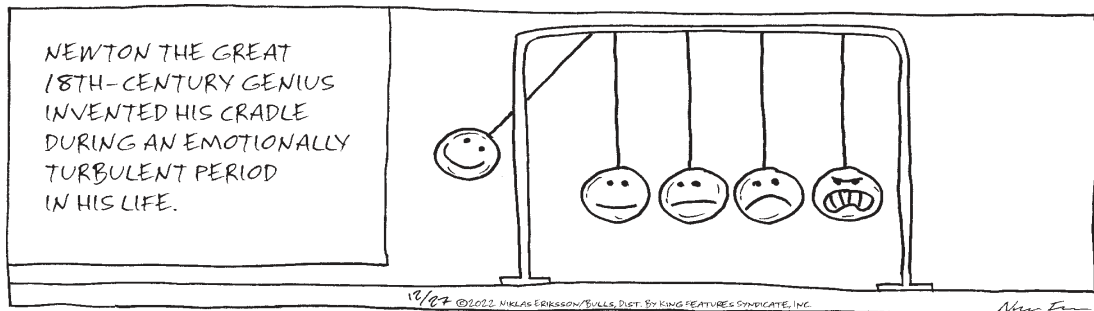
Non Sequitur



Candorville



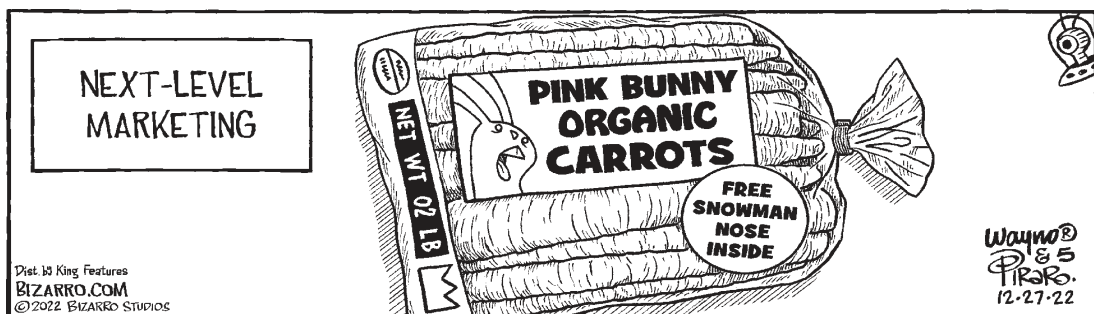
Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



Bizarro



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

1	2	3	4		5	6	7		8	9	10	11
12					13				14			
15					16				17			
18					19				20			
			21				22					
23	24	25				26				27	28	29
30						31				32		
33			34	35					36	37		
			38				39					
40	41	42				43				44	45	46
47						48				49		
50						51				52		
53						54				55		

ACROSS

- 1 Exerciser's target
- 5 Gilbert and Sullivan princess
- 8 Body lotion ingredient
- 12 Ceremony
- 13 Fanatic
- 14 Without
- 15 Eve's grandson
- 16 Syria's capital
- 18 Vandalized
- 20 1980s Attorney General
- 21 Sly one
- 22 Vinyl records
- 23 Fathered
- 26 Fairy tale maidens
- 30 NPR's Shapiro
- 31 Eggy quaff
- 32 King, in Cannes
- 33 Moistens
- 36 Representative
- 38 Chopping tool
- 39 Bikini top
- 40 Maxim
- 43 Blocking, as a river
- 47 Courtier of ancient Syracuse
- 49 Fuzzy image
- 50 Historic Scott
- 51 Online chats, briefly
- 52 "Money — object"
- 53 Antitoxins
- 54 Halloween greeting
- 55 To-do list item

DOWN

- 1 Wilma's hubby
- 2 Director Wertmuller
- 3 Molecule part
- 4 "Take care"
- 5 Alphabetized list
- 6 Group of two
- 7 \$ dispenser
- 8 Size up
- 9 Valentine border
- 10 Burden
- 11 Being, to Brutus
- 17 Clock radio toggle
- 19 Pantheon member
- 22 Trail the pack
- 23 Feeling down
- 24 A Gershwin brother
- 25 Crater part
- 26 Two, in Acapulco
- 27 Before

- 28 Horror star Chaney
- 29 Command to Fido
- 31 Compass dir.
- 34 Asian temple
- 35 Corp. bigwig
- 36 Oft-tattooed extremity
- 37 Chess ploy
- 39 Low-voiced singer
- 40 Totals
- 41 Challenge
- 42 From the U.S.
- 43 Audition CD
- 44 "Casablanca" role
- 45 "Sister Act" sisters
- 46 Understand, slangily
- 48 Freedom, for short

Answer to Previous Puzzle

L	I	S	A		T	I	O		S	T	O	W
I	D	L	E		O	O	H		T	U	B	E
M	O	O	G		P	U	M	P	I	R	O	N
B	L	E	E	D	S		S	I	G	N	E	D
					A	A	H	S		E	M	O
I	R	O	N	W	E	E	D		A	V	I	D
L	I	V		G	L	A	R	E		E	W	E
L	O	A	D		F	L	A	T	I	R	O	N
					T	O	O		S	G	T	S
S	A	I	N	T	S		N	A	S	C	A	R
I	R	O	N	B	L	U	E		U	R	G	E
R	A	N	I		A	F	T		E	A	R	S
E	L	S	E		B	O	S		S	W	A	T

12-27

CRYPTOQUIP

AZ W YLWEQ YLHY BWKRY-KHYT
 OKZYLTKLZZA RZMWTYP WR
 JWQTJP YZ YHQT DT HR H
 DTDOTK? BKHY MLHEMT!
 Yesterday's Cryptoquip: IF A CELEBRITY EXCLAIMS "THAT EXPLOSION WAS STUPENDOUS!," ARE THEY FAMOUS BLAST WORDS?
 Today's Cryptoquip Clue: D equals M

SCOREBOARD/SPORTS BRIEFS

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Bowl schedule

Wednesday, Dec. 21
New Orleans Bowl
 New Orleans
 W. Kentucky 44, South Alabama 23
Thursday, Dec. 22
Armed Forces Bowl
 Fort Worth, Texas
 Baylor vs. Air Force
Friday, Dec. 23
Gasparilla Bowl
 Tampa, Fla.
 Missouri vs. Wake Forest
Independence Bowl
 Shreveport, La.
 Houston vs. Louisiana
Saturday, Dec. 24
Hawaii Bowl
 Honolulu
 Middle Tennessee vs. San Diego St.
Monday, Dec. 26
Quick Lane Bowl
 Detroit
 New Mexico St. vs. Bowling Green
Tuesday, Dec. 27
First Responder Bowl
 Dallas
 Memphis vs. Utah St.
Birmingham Bowl
 Birmingham, Ala.
 Coastal Carolina vs. East Carolina
Camellia Bowl
 Montgomery, Ala.
 Georgia Southern vs. Buffalo
Guaranteed Rate Bowl
 Phoenix
 Wisconsin vs. Oklahoma St.
Wednesday, Dec. 28
Military Bowl
 Annapolis, Md.
 UCF vs. Duke
Liberty Bowl
 Memphis, Tenn.
 Arkansas vs. Kansas
Holiday Bowl
 San Diego
 No. 15 Oregon vs. North Carolina
Texas Bowl
 Houston
 Texas Tech vs. Mississippi
Thursday, Dec. 29
Pin Stripe Bowl
 New York
 Syracuse vs. Minnesota
Cheez-It Bowl
 Orlando, Fla.
 No. 13 Florida St. vs. Oklahoma
Alamo Bowl
 San Antonio
 No. 12 Washington vs. No. 21 Texas
Friday, Dec. 30
Orange Bowl
 Miami Gardens, Fla.
 No. 6 Tennessee vs. No. 10 Clemson
Duke's Mayo Bowl
 Charlotte, N.C.
 No. 25 NC State vs. Maryland
Sun Bowl
 El Paso, Texas
 No. 18 UCLA vs. Pittsburgh
Gator Bowl
 Jacksonville, Fla.
 No. 19 Notre Dame vs. No. 20 South Carolina
Arizona Bowl
 Tucson, Ariz.
 Wyoming vs. Ohio
Saturday, Dec. 31
Peach Bowl
 Atlanta
College Football Playoff Semifinal
 No. 1 Georgia vs. No. 4 Ohio St.
Fiesta Bowl
 Glendale, Ariz.
College Football Playoff Semifinal
 No. 2 Michigan vs. No. 3 TCU
Music City Bowl
 Nashville
 Kentucky vs. Iowa
Sugar Bowl
 New Orleans
 No. 5 Alabama vs. No. 11 Kansas St.

PRO FOOTBALL

NFL

AMERICAN CONFERENCE						
East						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
x-Buffalo	11	3	0	.786	385	250
Miami	8	6	0	.571	345	344
N.Y. Jets	7	7	0	.500	281	263
New England	7	7	0	.500	300	269
South						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Tennessee	7	7	0	.500	255	293
Jacksonville	6	8	0	.429	334	328
Indianapolis	4	9	1	.321	245	337
e-Houston	1	12	1	.107	235	344
North						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Cincinnati	10	4	0	.714	369	288
Baltimore	9	5	0	.643	304	263
Cleveland	6	8	0	.429	313	326
Pittsburgh	6	8	0	.429	251	309
West						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-Kansas City	11	3	0	.786	414	322
L.A. Chargers	8	6	0	.571	312	340
Las Vegas	6	8	0	.429	338	337
e-Denver	4	10	0	.286	218	253
NATIONAL CONFERENCE						
East						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
x-Philadelphia	13	1	0	.929	411	268
x-Dallas	10	4	0	.714	394	269
N.Y. Giants	8	5	1	.607	287	312
Washington	7	6	1	.536	265	276
South						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Tampa Bay	6	8	0	.429	247	288
Atlanta	5	9	0	.357	306	333
Carolina	5	9	0	.357	276	314
New Orleans	5	9	0	.357	286	315
North						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-Minnesota	11	3	0	.786	351	349
Detroit	7	7	0	.500	369	364
Green Bay	6	8	0	.429	287	314
e-Chicago	3	11	0	.214	290	358
West						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-San Francisco	10	4	0	.714	338	210
Seattle	7	7	0	.500	355	355
e-Arizona	4	10	0	.286	292	372
e-L.A. Rams	4	10	0	.286	230	320

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Wednesday's men's scores

EAST
 Boston College 70, Virginia Tech 65, OT
 Brown 67, New Hampshire 51
 Buffalo 129, SUNY-Canton 62
 Coppin St. 107, James Madison 100, 2OT
 Duquesne 74, Winthrop 57
 Howard 63, Mount St. Mary's 62
 Lafayette 90, La Salle 65
 Mass.-Lowell 68, Boston U. 60
 Niagara 73, Binghamton 67
 Ohio 95, Delaware 76
 Robert Morris 77, St. Francis (Pa.) 66
 Villanova 78, St. John's 63

SOUTH
 Belmont 79, Samford 56
 Clemson 79, Georgia Tech 66
 East Carolina 60, High Point 49
 FAU 67, N. Kentucky 52
 FIU 79, Incarnate Word 74
 Florida Gulf Coast 84, Canisius 81
 Florida St. 73, Notre Dame 72
 Georgia 72, Chattanooga 65
 Georgia St. 91, Toccoa Falls 52
 Kentucky 88, Florida A&M 68
 LSU 72, ETSU 68
 Liberty 88, Mid-Atlantic Christian 50
 Louisiana Tech 108, Jarvis Christian 52
 Memphis 83, Alabama St. 61
 Mercer 82, Troy 79
 Middle Tennessee 83, Murray St. 67
 Morehead St. 66, Alice Lloyd 50
 North Alabama 83, Williams Baptist 45
 North Carolina 80, Michigan 76
 Northeastern 73, Davidson 70
 Old Dominion 78, George Mason 77
 Richmond 81, Bucknell 71
 SE Louisiana 80, Southern U. 62
 South Alabama 71, Jacksonville St. 66
 Tennessee 86, Austin Peay 44
 Tulane 84, MVSU 63
 UC Santa Barbara 61, Appalachian St. 50
 UCF 73, Stetson 58
 UNC-Wilmington 74, Campbell 66
 VCU 74, Navy 52
 William & Mary 90, Randolph 56

MIDWEST
 Ball St. 58, Georgia Southern 54
 Cincinnati 72, Detroit 54
 Cleveland St. 78, Mount St. Joseph 48
 Drake 124, St. Ambrose 48
 E. Illinois 92, Iowa 83
 Evansville 73, Bellarmine 61
 Kansas St. 73, Radford 65
 Michigan St. 67, Oakland 54
 N. Iowa 62, St. Bonaventure 52
 Ohio St. 95, Maine 61
 Purdue 74, New Orleans 53
 S. Illinois 70, SE Missouri 68
 SIU-Edwardsville 69, Saint Louis 67
 St. Thomas (MN) 78, N. Dakota St. 68
 Valparaiso 77, Stonehill 67
 W. Michigan 61, Siena Heights 41
 Youngstown St. 76, Cent. Michigan 65

SOUTHWEST
 Abilene Christian 113, Howard Payne 52
 Arkansas 85, UNC-Asheville 51
 Houston 83, McNeese St. 44
 Kent St. 73, New Mexico St. 63
 Tarleton St. 114, Huston 56
 Texas 100, Louisiana-Lafayette 72
 Texas St. 87, Science and Arts 72
 Texas Tech 111, Houston Christian 67
 UTEP 75, NC A&T 62

FAR WEST
 Auburn 84, Washington 61
 Cal St.-Fullerton 59, Sacramento St. 49
 California 73, Texas-Arlington 51
 Colorado 86, S. Utah 78
 Long Beach St. 82, Idaho 75
 Loyola Marymount 76, Tulsa 64
 Nevada 78, Norfolk St. 66
 Oregon St. 57, Denver 52
 Saint Mary's (Cal.) 66, Wyoming 54
 San Francisco 97, Arizona St. 60
 Southern Cal 73, Colorado St. 64
 TCU 75, Utah 71
 UCLA 81, UC Davis 54

Duquesne 68, Howard 55
 E. Michigan 66, Wright St. 54
 Georgetown 69, North Texas 44
 Harvard 73, Boston U. 58
 Hofstra 64, New Orleans 60, OT
 James Madison 78, Saint Joseph's 66
 Lafayette 53, St. Francis (NY) 52
 Lehigh 70, Yale 63
 Marshall 60, Chattanooga 56
 Mississippi 75, Temple 55
 New Hampshire 63, Merrimack 60
 Penn St. 79, Cornell 48
 Pittsburgh 85, North Alabama 83
 St. John's 80, Wagner 51
 Stony Brook 69, Md.-Eastern Shore 59
 UConn 98, Seton Hall 73
 UMass 81, St. Peter's 34
 Villanova 81, La Salle 55

SOUTH
 Austin Peay 64, UNC-Asheville 51
 Davidson 68, Charlotte 55
 Duke 70, Virginia 56
 East Carolina 64, Hampton 60
 Florida Gulf Coast 91, Mercer 81
 Florida St. 92, Miami 85
 Georgia 63, San Diego St. 44
 Georgia Tech 82, Furman 41
 Jacksonville St. 59, Campbell 47
 Kentucky 95, Ohio 86
 Loyola Chicago 56, Idaho St. 44
 Mississippi St. 87, New Mexico 58
 N. Kentucky 72, Cincinnati 52
 NC A&T 86, NC Central 79
 Norfolk St. 70, William & Mary 52
 Richmond 55, Tarleton St. 43
 Samford 69, N. Colorado 66
 South Carolina 102, Coastal Carolina 39
 South Florida 66, Arkansas 65, OT
 Tennessee St. 105, Wilberforce 54
 Tulane 71, Tennessee Tech 49
 UAB 70, Alcorn St. 56
 UCF 64, Elon 46
 UNC-Greensboro 134, Va.-Lynchburg 29
 UNC-Wilmington 60, W. Carolina 51
 Vanderbilt 76, Alabama A&M 46
 Virginia Tech 86, High Point 66

MIDWEST
 Colorado 71, Marquette 48
 Green Bay 92, Chicago St. 42
 IUPUI 85, N. Illinois 72
 Illinois 81, FAU 46
 Indiana 67, Butler 50
 Indiana St. 72, Detroit 47
 Iowa 92, Dartmouth 54
 Kansas St. 77, Morgan St. 46
 Louisville 81, DePaul 67
 Maryland 88, Fort Wayne 51
 Memphis 66, Xavier 63
 Missouri St. 55, UALR 48
 N. Dakota St. 74, St. Thomas (MN) 56
 Nebraska 85, Kansas 79, 3OT
 Notre Dame 85, W. Michigan 57
 Ohio St. 84, Oregon 67
 S. Dakota St. 86, UMKC 54
 S. Indiana 90, Brescia 48
 Saint Louis 82, S. Illinois 54
 South Dakota 101, Oral Roberts 57
 Toledo 74, Oakland 44
 West Virginia 82, Miami (Ohio) 51
 Youngstown St. 79, Mount Vernon Nazarene 42

SOUTHWEST
 Abilene Christian 82, McMurry 52
 Arizona 78, Texas-Arlington 59
 Baylor 73, Long Beach St. 52
 Cent. Arkansas 68, Champion Christian College 48
 Lamar 60, Texas A&M-Texarkana 51
 Purdue 59, Texas A&M 53
 SMU 57, Incarnate Word 44
 TCU 75, Nicholls 32
 Texas 96, Houston Christian 34
 Washington St. 70, Houston 63

FAR WEST
 BYU 70, Monmouth (NJ) 50
 Cal Baptist 69, W. Kentucky 61
 Gonzaga 82, Montana 67
 Hawaii 54, San Jose St. 43
 Lindenwood (Mo.) 82, Utah Tech 68
 Loyola Marymount 69, CS Northridge 62
 Sacramento St. 67, Cal St.-Fullerton 55
 Southern Cal 71, Saint Mary's (Cal) 45
 UC Irvine 64, Grand Canyon 51
 UC San Diego 61, Seattle 56
 UC Santa Barbara 102, Cal Lutheran 42
 UNLV 93, N. Arizona 73
 Utah Valley St. 59, Idaho 57

Wednesday's women's scores

EAST
 Colgate 66, St. Bonaventure 52
 Delaware 66, American 50
 Drexel 62, Delaware St. 44

BRIEFLY

NFL 'Sunday Ticket' headed to YouTube

Fans will have to Google it beginning next season if they want to access the NFL's "Sunday Ticket" package.

The NFL announced an agreement on Thursday for Google to distribute the package of out-of-market Sunday afternoon games on YouTube TV and YouTube Premium Channels.

The seven-year deal is worth a little more than \$2 billion per season. The package has been on DirecTV since 1994. The satellite provider has paid \$1.5 billion per year on an eight-year contract that expires at the end of this season.

The NFL had been seeking \$2.5 billion per season for the package. It could still reach that total since the league retains commercial rights to bars and restaurants and is in the midst of selling those rights.

Myers signs 1-year contract with Reds

CINCINNATI — Wil Myers signed a one-year contract with the Cincinnati Reds on Thursday, joining his third big league club after spending the previous eight seasons with San Diego.

The Reds announced the deal. It includes a mutual option for the 2024 season.

The 32-year-old Myers has started major league games at first base, third base and each of the outfield spots. He is a .254 hitter with 153 homers and 521 RBIs in 1,063 games.

Cincinnati went 62-100 last season. It was its first season with at least 100 losses since it went 61-101 in 1982.

Myers hit .261 with seven homers and 41 RBIs in 77 games in his final season with the Padres. He was 3-for-29 in 10 playoff appearances.

Myers' \$20 million option was declined by San Diego last month, and he received a \$1 million buyout that completed an \$83 million, six-year contract.

NHL postpones two games as cold, snow hit

The NHL postponed two games scheduled for Friday because of a major winter storm that began rolling across the eastern two-thirds of the United States and Canada, bringing blizzard conditions and bone-chilling temperatures.

Buffalo's home game against Tampa Bay was postponed on Wednesday, and a day later the NHL postponed Detroit's visit to Ottawa until Feb. 27.

The Lightning's game against the Sabres has been rescheduled to March 4. The NHL has instead moved the Flyers game at Buffalo to Jan. 9.

From The Associated Press

DEALS

Wednesday's transactions

BASEBALL
Major League Baseball American League
BALTIMORE ORIOLES — Agreed to terms with RHP Mychal Givens on a one-year contract. Designated 1B Lewin Diaz for assignment. Acquired C James McCann and cash considerations from the New York Mets in exchange for a player to be named later.
BOSTON RED SOX — Agreed to terms with 1B Niko Goodrum on a minor league contract.
CLEVELAND GUARDIANS — Agreed to terms with RHP Caleb Simpson on a minor league contract.
HOUSTON ASTROS — Agreed to terms with DH Michael Brantley on a one-year contract.
NEW YORK YANKEES — Agreed to terms with LHP Carlos Rodon on a six-year contract. Designated RHP Junior Fernandez for assignment. Agreed to terms with RHP Tommy Kahnle on a two-year contract.
OAKLAND ATHLETICS — Agreed to terms with RHP Drew Rucinski on a one-year contract. Designated LHP Zach Logue for assignment.
National League
CHICAGO CUBS — Agreed to terms with SS Dansby Swanson on a seven-year contract.
COLORADO ROCKIES — Agreed to terms with RHP Matt Carasiti on a one-year contract.
PITTSBURGH PIRATES — Named Miguel Perez manager, Eric Munson hitting coach, Dan Meyer pitching coach, Drew Benes bullpen coach, Brady Conlan inte-

grated baseball performance coach, Dallas McPherson bench coach, Tyler Brooks athletic training coach, Jordan Williams assistant athletic training coordinator and Alan Burr strength and conditioning coach for Indianapolis (AAA). Named Calix Crabbe manager, Jon Nunnally hitting coach, Cale Johnson pitching coach, Blake Butler integrated baseball performance coach, Gary Green bench coach, Victor Silva athletic training coordinator and Glenn Nutting strength and conditioning coach for Altoona (AA). Named Robby Hammock manager, Ruben Gotay hitting coach, Fernando Nieve pitching coach, Justin Orton integrated baseball performance coach, Collin Wilber development coach, Casey Lee athletic training coordinator and Ryoji Ejima strength and conditioning coach for Greensboro (High-A). Named Jonathan Johnston manager, Quentin Brown hitting coach, Matt Ford pitching coach, Casey Harms integrated baseball performance coach, Gustavo Omana development coach and Alexa Dehaeseleer athletic training coordinator for Bradenton (Low-A).

BASKETBALL
National Basketball Association
NBA — Fined Dallas head coach Jason Kidd an undisclosed amount for coming onto the court to confront and direct inappropriate language toward a game official during a Dec. 19th game against Minnesota. Rescinded a second-round 2025 draft pick on New York Knicks for early free agency discussions.

FOOTBALL
National Football League
BUFFALO BILLS — Re-signed DT Brandin Bryant to the practice squad. Released DT Kendal Vickers from the practice squad.

CAROLINA PANTHERS — Claimed CB Justin Layne off waivers from Chicago.
DENVER BRONCOS — Designated RB Chase Edmonds to return to practice from injured reserve.
JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS — Signed S Tyree Gillespie to the practice squad.
LAS VEGAS RAIDERS — Signed LB Harvey Langi to the practice squad. Released LV Austin Calitro to the practice squad.
LOS ANGELES CHARGERS — Promoted DL Christopher Hinton from the practice squad to the active roster. Placed DL Joe Gaziano on injured reserve. Signed WR Jason Moore and DL Aaron Crawford to the practice squad.
NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS — Designated P Jake Bailey to return to practice from injured reserve. Designated OT Andrew Stueber to return to practice from the non-football injury (NFI) list.
PITTSBURGH STEELERS — Signed DE Mike Ta'ua to the practice squad.
SEATTLE SEAHAWKS — Signed DT Daviyon Nixon. Waived RB Tony Jones.
TENNESSEE TITANS — Signed QB Joshua Dobbs from the Detroit practice squad. Signed OL Zack Johnson to the practice squad. Placed OL Dillon Radunz on injured reserve.

HOCKEY
National Hockey League
BOSTON BRUINS — Recalled F Craig Smith from Providence (AHL).
FLORIDA PANTHERS — Reassigned F Aleksii Heponiemi to Bridgeport (AHL).
NEW YORK ISLANDERS — Recalled RWS Hudson Fasching and Simon Holmstrom and G Cory Schneider from Bridgeport (AHL). Reassigned F Blade Jenkins from Worcester (ECHL) to Bridgeport.
OTTAWA SENATORS — Returned LW

Jake Lucchini to Belleville (AHL).
PHILADELPHIA FLYERS — Recalled GS Samuel Ersson and Nolan Maier from Lehigh Valley (AHL).
VANCOUVER CANUCKS — Sent D Travis Dermott to Abbotsford (AHL) on a conditioning loan. Returned G Collin Delia to Abbotsford. Recalled G Arturs Silovs from Abbotsford.
WINNIPEG JETS — Reassigned G Arvid Holm to Manitoba (AHL).
SOCCER
Major League Soccer
ATLANTA UNION — Acquired \$175,000 in 2023 General Allocation Money (GAM) from Real Salt Lake in exchange for the No. 7 overall pick in the 2023 MLS SuperDraft.
COLORADO RAPIDS — Acquired F Calvin Harris from FC Cincinnati in exchange for \$100,000 in 2023 general allocation money (GAM) and \$100,000 in 2024 GAM.
D.C. UNITED — Acquired D Ruan Gregorio Teixeira from Orlando City SC in exchange for the 2nd overall pick in the 2023 MLS SuperDraft.
NEW YORK RED BULLS — Signed M Jayden Reid to a one-year contract.
REAL SALT LAKE — Traded D Aaron Herrera to CF Montreal in exchange for a total of \$500,000 in general allocation money (GAM), a 2023 international roster spot and a first-round pick in the 2023 MLS SuperDraft.
VANCOUVER WHITECAPS FC — Acquired \$50,000 in general allocation money (GAM) from Charlotte FC in exchange for M Brandon Cambridge.
National Women's Soccer League
HOUSTON DASH — Named Sam Laity head coach.
ORLANDO PRIDE — Signed F Marta Vieira da Silvato a two-year contract.

NHL

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference							
Atlantic Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Boston	31	25	4	2	52	123	69
Toronto	33	20	7	6	46	107	79
Tampa Bay	32	20	11	1	41	115	97
Detroit	32	14	11	7	35	98	105
Buffalo	32	16	14	2	34	127	109
Florida	34	15	15	4	34	113	115
Montreal	33	15	15	3	33	93	114
Ottawa	32	14	16	2	30	98	103
Metropolitan Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Carolina	32	20	6	6	46	96	82
New Jersey	33	22	9	2	46	112	83
Pittsburgh	32	19	9	4	42	111	91
N.Y. Rangers	34	18	11	5	41	111	93
N.Y. Islanders	33	18	13	2	38	104	92
Washington	34	17	13	4	38	104	99
Philadelphia	33	11	15	7	29	82	109
Columbus	32	10	20	2	22	87	130
Western Conference							
Central Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Dallas	34	19	9	6	44	121	97
Winnipeg	32	21	10	1	43	108	81
Minnesota	32	19	11	2	40	104	90
Colorado	31	18	11	2	38	93	82
St. Louis	33	16	16	1	33	101	119
Nashville	31	14	13	4	32	80	95
Arizona	31	10	16	5	25	85	116
Chicago	31	7	20	4	18	70	120
Pacific Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Vegas	35	23	11	1	47	117	96
Los Angeles	35	18	12	5	41	116	123
Seattle	31	18	10	3	39	108	98
Edmonton	34	18	14	2	38	124	117
Calgary	33	15	12	6	36	104	103
Vancouver	31	13	15	3	29	103	122
San Jose	34	10	18	6	26	103	127
Anaheim	34	9	22	3	21	81	143

Note: Two points for a win, one point for overtime loss. Top three teams in each division and two wild cards per conference advance to playoffs.

Wednesday's games
 New Jersey 4, Florida 2
 Detroit 7, Tampa Bay 4
 Colorado 2, Montreal 1, OT
 Nashville 4, Chicago 2
 Edmonton 6, Dallas 3
 Vegas 5, Arizona 2
 Minnesota 4, Anaheim 1

Thursday's games
 Philadelphia at Toronto
 Carolina at Pittsburgh
 N.Y. Islanders at N.Y. Rangers
 Washington at Ottawa
 Winnipeg at Boston
 Seattle at Vancouver
 Calgary at Los Angeles
 Minnesota at San Jose

Friday's games
 Boston at New Jersey
 Detroit at Ottawa
 Philadelphia at Carolina
 Winnipeg at Washington
 Florida at N.Y. Islanders
 Colorado at Nashville
 Montreal at Dallas
 Columbus at Chicago
 Vancouver at Edmonton
 Los Angeles at Arizona
 St. Louis at Vegas
 Calgary at Anaheim

Saturday's games
 No games scheduled

Sunday's games
 No games scheduled

Monday's games
 No games scheduled

Scoring leaders
 Through Wednesday

	GP	G	A	PTS
Connor McDavid, EDM	34	29	36	65
Leon Draisaitl, EDM	34	21	34	55
Tage Thompson, BUF	32	26	24	50
Nikita Kucherov, TB	32	13	36	49
Jason Robertson, DAL	34	24	24	48
David Pastrnak, BOS	31	21	22	43
Erik Karlsson, SJ	34	12	30	42
Sidney Crosby, PIT	32	18	24	42
Kirill Kaprizov, MIN	32	19	23	42
R. Nugent-Hopkins, EDM	34	18	23	41
Artemi Panarin, NYR	34	8	32	40
Mikko Rantanen, COL	31	22	18	40
Matthew Tkachuk, FLA	31	14	25	39

6 tied with 38 pts.

Ovechkin revels in Messi's victory

BY STEPHEN WHYNO
Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Va. — The happiest professional athlete outside of soccer about Lionel Messi winning the World Cup might be hockey star Alex Ovechkin.

A longtime fan of Messi, Ovechkin is reveling in Messi getting the job done with Argentina, including scoring twice and converting his kick in penalties in the instant-classic final against France on Sunday.

"I was very excited," Ovechkin said Monday. "Of course, everybody knows he's my favorite player and to see finally he get his dream and win the World Cup, it's pretty big for him and I'm very happy for him."

Ovechkin got a Messi Barcelona jersey and a trip to Spain to watch him play there and go behind the scenes as a gift from teammates to celebrate his 1,000th NHL game three years ago. He has met him and taken pictures with him.

There are plenty of parallels between Ovechkin finally hoisting the Stanley Cup with the Washington Capitals in his 13th NHL season and Messi winning the World Cup in likely his last opportunity at age 35. Much like Ovechkin drove the bus on the Capitals' first title run in franchise history and won the Conn Smythe Trophy as playoff MVP, Messi was dominant throughout the tournament, becoming the first player to score in group play and each of the knockout rounds.

"Yeah, but I don't know how



Nick Wass/AP

The Washington Capitals' Alex Ovechkin poses next to teammates with a Lionel Messi soccer jersey during a pre-game ceremony in honor of his 1,000th game on April 5, 2018, in Washington.

he's going to celebrate," Ovechkin said. "That's a different part of the story."

Ovechkin and the Capitals famously went swimming in fountains in Washington and partied with the Cup like few teams have done in recent history. Messi would have to put on quite the show in Buenos Aires to match

that feat.

While watching Messi fulfill his dream, Ovechkin is on the verge of making more history in his sport. Last week he became just the third player to reach the 800-goal mark and he is one short of tying and two from passing Gordie Howe for second on the NHL career list.

Ovechkin met Howe, who died

in 2016, at the 2009 All-Star Game in Montreal and has a picture of them in his home autographed by "Mr. Hockey."

"It's probably my top thing in my collection," Ovechkin said. "Obviously, Kobe Bryant, Michael Jordan, Wayne Gretzky's stick, Mario Lemieux's stick, it's probably the top one."

Lightning rookie Perbix growing with each game

BY EDUARDO A. ENCINA
Tampa Bay Times

TORONTO — Even though Nick Perbix entered training camp on the short list of rookies who could crack the Lightning lineup, the growth the 24-year-old has shown in his first two months as an NHL defenseman is pretty extraordinary.

Just 24 games into his career, Perbix has earned playing time for being trustworthy with the puck, making the right pass and being responsible in the defensive end. His ice time has gradually increased, he's now teamed with Victor Hedman on the top defense pair, he's become more involved offensively and he even saw his first power-play assignments this past week with Mikhail Sergachev sidelined by a hand injury.

"He's cemented himself in our lineup, and that's to his credit," Hedman said. "He's been playing some really good hockey, and he just gets more and more confident each day. You can tell he's ready to take on a bigger role. He's not overthinking it out there. And he's calm with the puck and makes the right



CHRIS O'MEARA/AP

Tampa Bay Lightning defenseman Nick Perbix plays the puck during a Dec. 6 game against the Detroit Red Wings in Tampa, Fla.

plays, and he's just going to get calmer and calmer and more comfortable in his play. He's got some really good tools, and he's using them."

Perbix — a 2017 sixth-round pick who spent last season playing his final season at St. Cloud State, representing the United States in the Olympics and getting his first professional experience at AHL

Syracuse — admitted being a little overwhelmed entering this season.

But he didn't show it. He's been calm both on and off the ice. He asks a lot of questions, and he's tried to take something from every member of the team's defense core.

"I think it's just kind of building," Perbix said. "I just focus on maybe picking out one thing each

game to really dial in on and then build off that on the next game and so on. This is still the toughest league in the world, and I can tell that for sure with the skill that we all play against. I definitely have felt more comfortable as the process has gone along.

"I mean, there's just so many things (I've learned). And it started on the first day of camp playing with these guys and kind of going from kind of being in awe of them to now I'm just kind of learning from them, going up and talking to them and asking them questions."

In Thursday's 4-1 win over Columbus, Perbix skated a career-high 22:43, second only to Hedman. He also got his first opportunity on the power play, skating on the second unit in place of Sergachev.

"The one thing I think helps the transition for some of these guys, when you see that poise with the puck, the game kind of slows down for him," Lightning coach Jon Cooper said. "He's still learning. He has a long way to go, but that composure has really helped him here."

NBA

Knicks lose draft pick for tampering

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The New York Knicks will lose a draft pick for getting started too soon with their Jalen Brunson pursuit.

The NBA penalized the Knicks a second-round selection in the 2025 draft Wednesday after finding that the Knicks began free-agency discussions involving Brunson before the date when they were allowed.

Brunson was the Knicks' big acquisition in the summer — a four-year, \$104 million deal — and the point guard has been terrific, leading them to an eight-game winning streak that is the longest current one in the league.

The Knicks were the favorites to land the New Jersey native all along if he decided to leave the Dallas Mavericks. The Knicks had hired his father, Rick, as an assistant coach under Tom Thibodeau. Rick Brunson had played for the Knicks and his agent was Leon Rose, who is now the Knicks president.

Yet the NBA found after an investigation that the Knicks went even further to increase their ad-



AJ MAST/AP

New York Knicks guard Jalen Brunson shoots over Indiana Pacers guard Andrew Nembhard during the first half in Indianapolis on Sunday. The Knicks won 109-106.

vantage by taking part in discussions involving Jalen Brunson before free agency opened on June

30. The league said the Knicks cooperated with the investigation. Brunson is averaging 20.8

points and 6.2 assists per game, by far the best of his five-year career.

AROUND THE NBA

Nowitzki's honors on Christmas feel fitting

By TIM REYNOLDS
Associated Press

The tributes officially started in 2019 with Dirk Nowitzki Way, a street that was renamed in Dallas to honor the greatest Mavericks player of all time. Then in January, the Mavs retired his No. 41 jersey. Then in September, Germany retired the No. 14 jersey he wore for his country.

Even after scoring 30,000 points, he is still not enjoying all the fuss.

"It's been super surreal," Nowitzki said, "and a little embarrassing for me."

Merry Christmas, Dirk. Here comes another celebration. Two of them, actually.

On Wednesday, he'll be announced as a nominee for the 2023 enshrinement class by the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame. And on Sunday, when the Mavs host the Los Angeles Lakers as part of the NBA's Christmas quintupleheader, the Dirk Nowitzki Statue will be unveiled at American Airlines Arena.

It will be the ultimate Christmas present and incredibly fitting that it comes on a day where a slew of international stars that Nowitzki helped pave the way for — Philadelphia's Joel Embiid, Milwaukee's Giannis Antetokounmpo, Denver's Nikola Jokic and fellow Maverick Luka Doncic — will get showcased on the NBA's big day.

"It's been super fun to watch,"



BRANDON DILL, LEFT, EMIL LIPPE, RIGHT/AP

Left: Milwaukee Bucks forward Giannis Antetokounmpo handles the ball against the Grizzlies on Dec. 15 in Memphis. Right: Mavericks guard Luka Doncic shoots a three-point basket against the Portland Trail Blazers in Dallas on Dec. 16.

Nowitzki said when asked about the ongoing imprint international players are making on the game. "And along the way, if I inspired somebody to pick up a basketball or if I motivated a guy to work harder or dream of the NBA, of course, that's humbling to me ... super humbling. That makes me proud, for sure."

It's not a new development. The last four MVPs — in reverse order, Jokic, Jokic, Antetokounmpo, Antetokounmpo — are from Ser-

bia and Greece. It seems reasonable to think that this season's MVP will be an international player as well, with Jokic, Doncic and Embiid likely among the early frontrunners.

Entering Tuesday, the NBA's top five scorers are from five different countries — Embiid (Cameroon), Doncic (Slovenia), Oklahoma City's Shai Gilgeous-Alexander (Canada), Antetokounmpo (Greece) and Kevin Durant (United States).

Such was unthinkable just a few years ago. Over a 13-season span, from 2004-05 through 2016-17, only one international player cracked the top five — Nowitzki, who was fourth on two occasions during that stretch. Every other slot was taken by an American.

This is what former Commissioner David Stern wanted — and why he prioritized making the NBA go international.

"It was his vision to truly make the NBA and basketball a global sport," Commissioner Adam Silver said last weekend before a Miami-San Antonio game in Mexico City. "I began at the league in 1992, shortly before the Barcelona Olympics and the Dream Team. We saw the impact that had. Now looking back 30 years, 30 years of playing games in Mexico City, it's really happening."

The Christmas lineup this year goes like this — Philadelphia at New York first, then the Lakers at Dallas, Milwaukee at Boston, Memphis at defending champion Golden State, then Phoenix at Denver in the nightcap. Some star power will be missing, with the Lakers without Anthony Davis and the Warriors without Stephen Curry. It'll be LeBron James' 17th Christmas appearance, and the first for the Grizzlies.

"These are the games that everybody grew up watching," James said last year when asked about Christmas.

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	22	10	.688	—
Brooklyn	20	12	.625	2
Philadelphia	18	12	.600	3
New York	18	14	.563	4
Toronto	14	18	.438	8

Southeast Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Miami	16	16	.500	—
Atlanta	16	16	.500	—
Washington	12	20	.375	4
Orlando	12	21	.364	4½
Charlotte	8	24	.250	8

Central Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Milwaukee	22	9	.710	—
Cleveland	22	11	.667	1
Indiana	16	16	.500	6½
Chicago	13	18	.419	9
Detroit	8	26	.235	15½

Western Conference

Southwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Memphis	19	11	.633	—
New Orleans	18	12	.600	1
Dallas	16	16	.500	4
San Antonio	10	20	.333	9
Houston	9	22	.290	10½

Northwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Denver	19	11	.633	—
Portland	17	15	.531	3
Utah	18	16	.529	3
Minnesota	16	16	.500	4
Oklahoma City	14	18	.438	6

Pacific Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Phoenix	19	13	.594	—
L.A. Clippers	19	14	.576	½
Sacramento	17	13	.567	1
Golden State	15	18	.455	4½
L.A. Lakers	13	18	.419	5½

Wednesday's games

Philadelphia 113, Detroit 93
Cleveland 114, Milwaukee 106
Brooklyn 143, Golden State 113
Indiana 117, Boston 112
Chicago 110, Atlanta 108
Toronto 113, New York 106
Dallas 104, Minnesota 99
Orlando 116, Houston 110
Oklahoma City 101, Portland 98
Sacramento 134, L.A. Lakers 120
L.A. Clippers 126, Charlotte 105

Thursday's games

San Antonio at New Orleans
Washington at Utah

Friday's games

L.A. Clippers at Philadelphia
San Antonio at Orlando
Chicago at New York
Detroit at Atlanta
Milwaukee at Brooklyn
Minnesota at Boston
Toronto at Cleveland
Dallas at Houston
Indiana at Miami
New Orleans at Oklahoma City
Portland at Denver
Memphis at Phoenix
Washington at Sacramento
Charlotte at L.A. Lakers

Saturday's games

No games scheduled.

Sunday's games

Philadelphia at New York
L.A. Lakers at Dallas
Milwaukee at Boston
Memphis at Golden State
Phoenix at Denver

Scoring leaders

Through Wednesday					
	G	FG	FT	PTS	AVG
Embiid, PHI	22	233	226	716	32.5
Doncic, DAL	29	318	216	934	32.2
Antetokounmpo, MIL	26	295	210	821	31.6
G.-Alexander, OKC	29	299	277	904	31.2
Tatum, BOS	30	301	215	917	30.6
Durant, BKN	31	335	212	934	30.1
Curry, GS	26	262	124	779	30.0
Mitchell, CLE	29	298	146	855	29.5
Booker, PHO	28	282	153	784	28.0
Young, ATL	29	254	226	799	27.6
Davis, LAL	25	255	166	685	27.4
James, LAL	23	245	85	624	27.1
Morant, MEM	25	236	160	676	27.0
Brown, BOS	30	294	127	786	26.2

COLLEGE FOOTBALL



MATTHEW HINTON/AP

Western Kentucky quarterback Austin Reed throws while being pressured by South Alabama defensive lineman Jamie Sheriff during the first half of the New Orleans Bowl on Wednesday.

Reed, Western Kentucky win New Orleans Bowl

By **BRETT MARTEL**
Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Prolific Western Kentucky quarterback Austin Reed has a knack for finishing a season with a flourish.

Reed passed for four touchdowns and a New Orleans Bowl-record 497 yards, leading Western Kentucky to a 44-23 victory over South Alabama on Wednesday night.

“He played his most complete game tonight,” WKU coach Tyson Helton said. “Elite players, when they’re put on a platform ... they show up.”

It was just the latest memorable season-ending performance for Reed. He set Division II title-game records in 2019 by passing for 523 yards and six TDs in West Florida’s 48-40 victory over Minnesota State.

Reed’s bowl total gave him 4,744 yards and 40 touchdowns passing this season, which leads the nation in both categories — for now.

Reed entered the game ranked second nationally in yards passing behind Washington’s Michael Penix Jr., who has 4,354 yards passing. Penix plays against Texas in the Alamo Bowl on Dec. 29.

“I know Michael Pennix will pass me,” Reed said. “But it’s a blessing to at least be able to lead right now and be able to play in this offense.”

Reed’s touchdown total puts him three ahead of Ohio State’s

C.J. Stroud, USC’s Caleb Williams and Houston’s Clayton Tune, each with 37. Tune and Williams await bowl games, and Stroud could play twice more if Ohio State wins its semifinal matchup with Georgia in the College Football Playoff.

The Hilltoppers also set a New Orleans Bowl record with 522 team yards passing. Receiver Dalvin Smith threw a 25-yard TD pass to Jaylen Hall on a play that started with Reed’s backward pass to Smith.

South Alabama’s Carter Bradley passed for 360 yards and three touchdowns, and was intercepted twice. Much of his production came in the second half with his team down by three or more TDs.

“We did not play anywhere near to our standard,” South Alabama coach Kane Wommack said. “We did not come out of the gate well. We did not call it well and we did not execute well. And when you look at that, that is a complete loss that you can point to nobody other than the head coach. So that game is on me, and I did not have this team prepared.”

Both teams combined for 74 completions, tying an NCAA record for overall completed passes in a bowl game.

Reed considered the transferring in recent weeks before deciding against it. His first performance since recommitting to WKU left him gratified by that choice.

“Tonight was a perfect example

of why I chose to come back and what’s going to happen here next year,” Reed said.

Two of Reed’s scoring strikes went to Malachi Corley, who increased his TD’s receiving total to 11 this season.

Reed also threw a 44-yard touchdown pass to Smith on the game’s opening possession and hit tight end Joey Beljan for a 27-yard score on his second series.

After the Jaguars failed on fourth-and-4 from the WKU 46, the Hilltoppers needed just three plays to take a three-TD lead on Smith’s receiver pass to Hall.

“When our offense is hitting on all cylinders, it stresses the other team out,” Helton said. “Tonight we applied that pressure to South Alabama where they felt like they had to get out of their game.”

Georgia Tech transfer Kaleb Oliver made his fourth interception this season on a pass tipped by defensive tackle Lorenzo Hernandez, thwarting South Alabama’s first scoring threat.

The Jaguars didn’t score until Diego Guajardo’s 30-yard field goal with 1:38 left in the half — enough time for Reed to lead the Hilltoppers to a fourth TD, in part because of two defensive penalties as time ran out.

Given an untimed down from the 1, WKU cashed in when Reed delivered a short forward toss to Corley crossing against the flow of the offense and around the right end to make it 31-3 at half-time.

NIL casts cloud over early signing period

By **RALPH D. RUSSO**
Associated Press

The early signing period for college football opened Wednesday, and in many ways it looked the same as usual.

There were surprising last-minute flips by blue-chip recruits, pick-a-hat commitment ceremonies held at high schools across the country and Alabama signing the nation’s top-rated class.

Hanging over it all, though, was the impossible to quantify but hard to ignore influence of NIL money impacting players’ decisions.

This was the second signing class since the NCAA lifted a ban on college athletes being able to earn money for the use of their names, images and likenesses. There are still no clearly defined, detailed and uniform rules regulating how third parties can pay athletes.

“I think there’s major concerns with what’s going on in college football,” said Penn State coach James Franklin, who emphasized he supports athletes being able to cash in on NIL opportunities. “Right now, there’s really no guardrails. There’s not a whole lot of guidance, and there’s not a whole lot of governance.”

Penn State has a recruiting class ranked in the top 15 in the country, according to 247 Sports’ composite rankings.

It is still against NCAA rules to use NIL payments as a recruiting inducement or offer pay-for-play deals. But with money and NIL deals flowing to athletes through booster-funded collectives, it seems nearly impossible for the NCAA to enforce those rules.

“We all want something if we can get it,” said new Nebraska coach Matt Rhule, who returned to the college game after three years in the NFL. “You can see (NIL is) being misused and mis-handled in a lot of places.”

While coaches complain about bad actors, nobody names names and NIL is now part of the recruit-

ing conversation, whether coaches like it or not.

“The reality is this day and age you have to make decisions on how you’re going to handle this,” Southern California coach Lincoln Riley said.

Riley said he believed USC lost recruits to other schools because of NIL deals, but he added that “everybody did.”

Notre Dame coach Marcus Freeman said of NIL deals: “If that’s the only reason they want to come to Notre Dame, we’re not going to be the right place for them.”

The Fighting Irish were on the short end of two surprising flips pulled off by Oregon.

The Ducks received commitments from five-star defensive back Peyton Bowen of Texas and four-star running back Jayden Limar from Washington. Both had been committed verbally — and very much nonbinding — to Notre Dame.

Oregon coach Dan Lanning and his staff also flipped four-star defensive back Daylen Austin from an LSU pledge and four-star quarterback Austin Novosad from a Baylor commitment.

Oregon also signed five-star Matayo Uiagalelei, who picked the Ducks over Ohio State and Southern California. The California linebacker is the brother of former Clemson quarterback D.J. Uiagalelei.

The Ducks secured the top-rated class in the Pac-12 — and top 10 in the nation — despite losing out on five-star quarterback Dante Moore earlier in the week. Moore, from Michigan, was a late flip to UCLA.

NIL might be changing recruiting, but the leaderboard of best classes looks familiar.

The Crimson Tide landed two five-star defensive linemen, Qua Russaw and James Smith, from the same Montgomery high school to lock up a class that will challenge the 2022 Texas A&M signing class for the highest score ever generated by the 247 composite.



BARRY REEGER/AP

Penn State head coach James Franklin reacts during a game against Michigan State on Nov. 26 in State College, Pa.

NFL

'Immaculate Reception' still lifting spirits 50 years later

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Quarterback Terry Bradshaw barely got off the pass, which was deflected in a collision between defender and receiver. Everyone thought the game was over except a hustling fullback, Franco Harris. He made an improbable shoestring catch and raced into the end zone, securing the Pittsburgh Steelers' first-ever playoff win, the start of a long dynasty.

That was 50 years ago today, on Dec. 23, 1972. But even though the NFL has officially designated it the greatest play in league history, it was even bigger than that.

"Dec. 23 will henceforth be celebrated in Pittsburgh as the Feast of the Immaculate Reception," legendary local sportscaster Myron Cope proclaimed.

He got the idea from a caller whose boyfriend had coined the name in a barroom victory celebration — putting a twist on the recent-

ly passed Catholic Feast of the Immaculate Conception, which marks the belief that the Virgin Mary was conceived without sin.

The coinage was as durable as it was instant, "using religious terminology to almost mythologize a sporting event," said Anne Madarasz, chief historian and director of the Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum.

The Immaculate Reception crystallized the rise of the Steelers — even as their namesake industry was on the decline, as was the Pittsburgh of compact immigrant neighborhoods with multiple ethnic Catholic parishes.

By 1980, just as the Steelers were celebrating their fourth Super Bowl victory, Pittsburgh's famed steel industry was moving from decline to all-out collapse. Many young people moved out of the demoralized region in search of jobs across the country (helping build the Steelers' national fan base, by the way).

Still, those who left and those who stayed had the memory of a play called immaculate — a story with a never-give-up moral.

"This was our cultural rallying point," said the Rev. Lou Vallone, a retired Catholic priest of the Diocese of Pittsburgh.

"It's what kept us going as we saw our immigrant culture begin to dissipate, as the economics went down, the steel mills closed, as people moved out into the suburbs, as people moved out of the area," said Vallone. He used to preside at Masses at St. Peter Church, the parish nearest the stadium, where the congregants included game-day tailgaters clad in Steelers black and gold.

The city's and region's population decreased in the years after the catch. The ranks of Catholics — 40% of the region's population in 1972 — dropped by about a third. Many ethnic and other parishes have closed or merged, and often merged again. A church named for the Immacu-



NATE GUIDRY, PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE/AP

Former Pittsburgh Steelers running back Franco Harris stands next a statue of himself on Sept. 12, 2019, at Pittsburgh International Airport. Harris died Tuesday at the age of 72.

late Conception recently closed.

But the mythology of the Immaculate Reception endures.

At the Pittsburgh International Airport, a statue immortalizing Harris, who died Tuesday, at the moment of his catch stands next to another historical figure, someone named George Washington.

And where Three Rivers Stadium once stood — now a sea of parking spaces near the Steelers' current stadium — there's a monument to the Immaculate Reception. You

might call it a shrine.

It includes a marker where fans who are so inclined can put their foot in the exact spot where Harris' foot landed.

And as with the Immaculate Reception, people have been putting themselves in Harris' cleats since they first poured onto the field in 1972, joining him in an end zone celebration.

"It's not just him crossing the goal line, it's the team and the city," Madarasz said.

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NFL



ADRIAN KRAUS/AP

Bills tight end Dawson Knox waves to fans as he walks off the field after last weekend's 32-29 victory over the Miami Dolphins.

Next: Buffalo set to be top-seeded team in AFC

FROM PAGE 48

The Bills enter the weekend tied with Kansas City (11-3), but have the tiebreaker edge after beating the Chiefs in October. Buffalo also has a one-win edge over the third-seeded Cincinnati Bengals (10-4), with the two scheduled to play on Jan. 2.

Clinching a playoff spot never gets old for Bills coach Sean McDermott, who said: "You never, never take for granted all the work that goes into that."

In 24 seasons as an NFL coach, beginning with the Philadelphia Eagles in 1999, McDermott's teams have now qualified for the postseason 17 times.

McDermott then deflected questions on what he's helped build in Buffalo by turning his attention to closing out the season without any lapses.

"You've got to be careful of that relaxation syndrome," he said. "You've got to stay on it. You've got to stay urgent in your approach, and put in the work that's necessary to win."

That urgent approach is what helped the Bills get here over six years.

Buffalo's turnaround coincided directly with the arrival of McDermott and GM Brandon Beane.

Both were hired five months apart in 2017, and after working together in Carolina.

While McDermott focused his attention on establishing a culture of accountability on a team that previously lacked direction, Beane rebuilt the roster and sala-

ry structure of a lineup that featured too many overpaid and underperforming players.

Most important, McDermott and Beane were in agreement in determining to pin the franchise's future on drafting quarterback Josh Allen, who has since established himself as one of the NFL's top stars.

At 50-24, Allen capped his 50th win on Saturday with his 20th 300-yard passing outing and ninth with four TDs passing. His 171 touchdowns also match Dolphins Hall of Fame quarterback Dan Marino for most by a player in his first five NFL seasons.

Putting aside his personal numbers, Allen isn't surprised by the success the Bills have enjoyed in crediting McDermott and Beane.

"I think it's cool. But at the end of the day we still haven't accomplished our main goal, and that's what drives us every single day," Allen said, referring to winning a Super Bowl.

"We're switching over all the signs to championship caliber," Allen added. "That's what we want to do. That's what we set out to do each and every year."

Notes: A major winter storm set to hit on Buffalo on Friday led the Bills to alter their travel plans. The team left Chicago after practice on Thursday, rather than Friday. ... DT Ed Oliver (calf) was added to the injury report in being listed as practicing on a limited basis on Wednesday. ... Poyer said he expects to play against the Bears despite missing two practices with a knee injury.

League-leading Eagles put eight in Pro Bowl Games

By ROB MAADDI
Associated Press

The NFL-leading Philadelphia Eagles had a league-best eight players, including quarterback Jalen Hurts, selected for the first Pro Bowl Games.

The league announced rosters for the NFC and AFC on Wednesday. Players from both conferences will compete in weeklong skills competitions culminating in a flag football game on Sunday, Feb. 5, at Allegiant Stadium in Las Vegas. The NFL eliminated its full-contact all-star game in September.

Kansas City and Dallas each had seven players chosen for the Games. San Francisco and Baltimore are next with six. Only two teams — Jacksonville and Chicago — aren't represented on the initial rosters.

Joining Hurts from the Eagles (13-1) are wide receiver A.J. Brown, running back Miles Sanders, right tackle Lane Johnson, center Jason Kelce, left guard Landon Dickerson, linebacker Haason Reddick and cornerback Darius Slay. Hurts, Sanders, Dickerson and Reddick are first-timers. It's Kelce's sixth, Slay's fifth and Johnson's fourth. Sanders and Reddick were selected as backups.

Patrick Mahomes is the AFC's starting quarterback. Josh Allen and Joe Burrow are his backups. Kirk Cousins and Geno Smith are backing up Hurts.

Smith is a first-time pick in his 10th season in the NFL. He's the first quarterback since Rich Gannon (1999) to earn his first Pro Bowl selection in Year 10 or later of his career.

Trent Williams, the 49ers' left tackle, was chosen for the 10th



ADAM HUNGER/AP

Philadelphia quarterback Jalen Hurts was one of eight Eagles players named to the NFC roster of the Pro Bowl Games.

time. Aaron Donald became the first defensive lineman to make the Pro Bowl in each of his first nine seasons. He's the only representative from the defending Super Bowl champion Los Angeles Rams (4-10).

Miami's Tyreek Hill was selected to his seventh consecutive Pro Bowl, joining A.J. Green as the only wide receivers to earn Pro Bowl honors in each of their first seven seasons.

Twenty-five of the 88 players selected are first-timers, including rookie cornerbacks Sauce Gardner of the New York Jets and Tariq Woolen of the Seattle Seahawks. It's the second time two rookie cornerbacks made the initial Pro Bowl roster. The first occurred in 1982 when Pro Football Hall of Famer Ronnie Lott and Everson Walls made it.

Saquon Barkley is the NFC's starting running back. Sanders and Dallas Cowboys running back Tony Pollard are the backups. Nick Chubb is the AFC's starting

running back. Derrick Henry and Josh Jacobs back him up.

The NFC's starting wideouts are Brown and Justin Jefferson. CeeDee Lamb and Terry McLaurin also made the squad. The AFC's starting receivers are Hill and Stefon Diggs.

Davante Adams and Ja'Marr Chase also made the roster.

George Kittle starts at tight end for the NFC and T.J. Hockenson made the team after a midseason trade from Detroit to Minnesota.

AFC starting tight end Travis Kelce made the team for the eighth time. Mark Andrews backs him up.

The roster selections were determined by the consensus votes of fans, players and coaches.

Each group's vote counted one-third toward determining the teams. The NFL is the only sports league that combines voting by fans, coaches and players to determine its all-stars. It was also the first professional sports league to offer online all-star voting in 1995.

Scoreboard

Pro Bowl Rosters

Sunday, Feb. 6
At Allegiant Stadium
Las Vegas
x-starter
AFC
OFFENSE

Quarterbacks: x-Patrick Mahomes, Kansas City; Josh Allen, Buffalo; Joe Burrow, Cincinnati.

Tight ends: x-Travis Kelce, Kansas City; Mark Andrews, Baltimore.

Wide Receivers: x-Tyreek Hill, Miami; x-Stefon Diggs, Buffalo; Davante Adams, Las Vegas; Ja'Marr Chase, Cincinnati.

Tackles: x-Laremy Tunsil, Houston; Teron Armstead, Miami; Orlando Brown, Kansas City.

Guards: x-Joel Bitonio, Cleveland; x-Quenton Nelson, Indianapolis; Joe Thuney, Kansas City.

Centers: x-Creed Humphrey, Kansas City; Mitch Morse, Buffalo.

Running Backs: x-Nick Chubb, Cleveland; Josh Jacobs, Las Vegas; Derrick Henry, Tennessee.

Fullback: x-Patrick Ricard, Baltimore.

DEFENSE

Defensive Ends: x-Myles Garrett, Cleveland; x-Maxx Crosby, Las Vegas; Trey Hendrickson, Cincinnati.

Interior Lineman: x-Chris Jones, Kansas City; x-Quinnen Williams, New York; Jeffery Simmons, Tennessee.

Outside Linebackers: x-Matt Judon, New

England; x-Khalil Mack, LA Chargers; T.J. Watt, Pittsburgh.

Inside/Middle Linebackers: x-Roquan Smith, Baltimore; C.J. Mosley, NY Jets.

Cornerbacks: x-Sauce Gardner, NY Jets; x-Pat Surtain II, Denver; Marlon Humphrey, Baltimore; Xavien Howard, Miami.

Free Safety: x-Minkah Fitzpatrick, Pittsburgh.

Strong Safeties: x-Derwin James, LA Chargers; Jordan Poyer, Buffalo.

SPECIALISTS

Placekicker: Justin Tucker, Baltimore.

Long snapper: Morgan Cox, Tennessee.

Punter: Tommy Townsend, Kansas City.

Return Specialist: Devin Duvernay, Baltimore.

Special Teamer: Justin Hardee, NY Jets.

OFFENSE

Quarterbacks: x-Jalen Hurts, Philadelphia; Geno Smith, Seattle; Kirk Cousins, Minnesota.

Tight Ends: x-George Kittle, San Francisco; T.J. Hockenson, Minnesota.

Wide Receivers: x-Justin Jefferson, Minnesota; x-A.J. Brown, Philadelphia; Cee-Dee Lamb, Dallas; Terry McLaurin, Washington.

Centers: x-Jason Kelce, Philadelphia; Frank Ragnow, Detroit.

Running Backs: x-Saquon Barkley, NY Giants; Tony Pollard, Dallas; Miles Sanders, Philadelphia.

Fullback: x-Kyle Juszczyk, San Francisco.

DEFENSE

Defensive Ends: x-Nick Bosa, San Francisco; x-Brian Burns, Carolina; Demarcus Lawrence, Dallas.

Interior Lineman: x-Aaron Donald, LA Rams; x-Jonathan Allen, Washington; Dexter Lawrence, New York.

Outside Linebackers: x-Micah Parsons, Dallas; x-Za'Darius Smith, Minnesota; Haason Reddick, Philadelphia.

Inside/Middle Linebackers: x-Fred Warner, San Francisco; Demario Davis, New Orleans.

Cornerbacks: x-Darius Slay, Philadelphia; x-Trevon Diggs, Dallas; Tariq Woolen, Seattle; Jaire Alexander, Green Bay.

Free Safety: x-Quandre Diggs, Seattle.

Strong Safeties: x-Budda Baker, Arizona; Talanoa Hufanga, San Francisco.

SPECIALISTS

Placekicker: Jason Myers, Seattle.

Long snapper: Andrew DePaola, Minnesota.

Punter: Tress Way, Washington.

Return Specialist: KaVontae Turpin, Dallas.

Special Teamer: Jeremy Reaves, Washington.

SPORTS



Knicks forfeit second-round pick

New York penalized for starting pursuit of Brunson too early » **NBA, Page 44**

NFL

Next up

After clinching playoff berth, Bills shift focus

By JOHN WAWROW
Associated Press

Safety Jordan Poyer never got a sniff at making the playoffs during his first four NFL seasons until signing with the Buffalo Bills in 2017.

So much has changed since for the player and team, which at the time was in the midst of a 17-year playoff drought.

In what's becoming an annual tradition, the AFC-leading Bills (11-3) began transitioning the motivational messaging at their practice facility from "playoff caliber" to "championship caliber" after clinching a fourth straight postseason berth and fifth in six years following a 32-29 win over Miami.

That led to Poyer on Wednesday reflecting on how far the franchise has come, and how much unfinished business remains.

"It's almost kind of surreal, right?" Poyer said. "Coming here in 2017, you heard about the drought and this, that or the other, but it really had nothing to do with us. But at the same time, we wanted to build something special."

He then quickly shifted the focus from the past to the present, and the immediate task at hand in preparing to play at the Chicago Bears (3-11) on Saturday.

"We got a lot of work to get done," Poyer added. "We'd like to be where our feet are at. We've got a huge game this weekend that we're really excited about."

A team that opened the season with Super Bowl aspirations still has a few objectives to achieve before the playoffs even begin.

A win or a tie on Saturday would clinch Buffalo its third straight AFC East title. With three games left, Buffalo also has the inside track to finish first in the AFC, and with it a bye through the wild-card round of the playoffs, and home-field advantage through the conference championship game.

SEE NEXT ON PAGE 47

When safety Jordan Poyer signed with the Bills, they were in the midst of a 17-year playoff drought. They've made the playoffs every year since.

BRYAN BENNETT/AP



NFL casts cloud over early signing period » College football, Page 45

