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EUROPE
& PACIFIC

WEEKEND

EDITION



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STARS AND STRIPES

stripes.com

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Russian Ministry of Defense

A Russian Iskander shortrange ballistic missile system is seen during military exercises in 2019. Tactical nuclear weapons are likely to play a larger role in Russia's strategy for countering NATO, according to a new study by the International Institute for Strategic Studies.

Report: Russia turning tactical

Study says short-range nukes may play larger role in Kremlin strategy

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — Shorter-range nuclear weapons are likely to play a larger role in the Kremlin's strategy against NATO, given the struggle of Russian conventional forces on the battlefield in Ukraine, a new U.S. European Command-sponsored study argues.

The study comes after repeated nuclear saber-rattling by Moscow. It was released Monday and had been sought by EUCOM to shed light on scenarios in which Russia could use nuclear weapons.

"Russia's losses in Ukraine have undoubtedly shifted the pendulum away from high confidence in its conventional, non-nuclear strategic capabilities towards a growing reliance upon (non-strategic nuclear weapons) to deter and defeat NATO in a potential future conflict," the International Institute for Strategic Studies report said.

In localized conflicts such as the one in Ukraine, Russia is unlikely to follow through on its nuclear threats so long as outside forces don't intervene, according to the report.

Moscow's calculus is likely to

change, however, if the U.S. became involved in a "local or theater conflict."

"Russia probably would use (non-strategic nuclear weapons) at the theater level to 'soberize' the West into realizing that it should settle the conflict as quickly as possible, preferably on Russia's terms," the report said.

Factored into that is a perception that the West lacks the will to use nuclear weapons in a like manner or tolerate large numbers of casualties, the report said.

"A particularly concerning development, from the perspective of the West, is Russia's belief in its

ability to gain and maintain escalation dominance, as well as absorb personnel and materiel losses to a degree unimaginable to the West," it said.

The analysis, authored by nuclear arms expert William Alberque, focused on how non-strategic nuclear weapons could factor into Russian battle plans.

Unlike strategic nuclear weapons built for long-range strikes against the United States, Russian non-strategic weapons travel short and intermediate ranges.

They also can employ smaller

SEE TACTICAL ON PAGE 5

Austin: US to begin talks on mission of troops in Iraq

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — U.S. officials will begin talks with the Iraqi government in the coming days about the future of the U.S.-led mission to defeat the Islamic State, including the presence of American troops in the country, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced Thursday.

The two countries agreed to form a Higher Military Commission last August for discussions about the U.S.-led military coalition's next phase in its mission to defeat ISIS. Factors that will be considered include the threat from ISIS, operational and environmental requirements, and the capability of Iraqi security forces, Austin said in a statement.

"Expert working groups of military and defense professionals will examine these three factors and advise the HMC on the most effective evolution of the D-ISIS coalition mission, ensuring that ISIS can never resurge, in consultation with coalition partners at all stages of the process," he said.

The announcement comes as tensions throughout the Middle East heat up. The Iraqi Foreign Ministry issued a statement shortly after Austin's announcement that said these discussions have "a specific and clear timetable that ... begin the deliberate gradual reduction of its advisors on Iraqi soil."

A senior U.S. defense official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, told reporters that the High Military Commission meeting is not a negotiation about the withdrawal of American forces from Iraq.

Iraqi Prime Minister Mo-

SEE MISSION ON PAGE 7

BUSINESS/WEATHER

EUROPE GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel	Azores	Change in price	Turkey	Change in price
Germany	\$3.471	\$4.000	\$4.351	\$4.247	..	..	\$4.201	..
Change in price	-0.4 cents	-0.8 cents	-0.5 cents	-2.5 cents	..	..	-0.5 cents	..
Netherlands	..	\$4.483	\$4.755	\$4.961	..	..	\$4.017	\$4.610*
Change in price	..	+3.6 cents	-3.6 cents	+1.6 cents	..	..	-0.5 cents	No change
U.K.	..	\$4.000	\$4.351	\$4.247	..	..	..	..
Change in price	..	-0.8 cents	-0.5 cents	-2.5 cents	..	..	..	..

Fuel prices are updated daily. These prices are effective Jan. 26. The change in price is from Jan. 19.

PACIFIC GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel	South Korea	Change in price	Guam	Change in price
Japan	..	\$3.989	..	\$3.889	\$3.149	..	\$3.699	..
Change in price	..	-1.0 cents	..	-2.0 cents	+1.0 cents	..	-1.0 cents	..
Okinawa	\$3.109	..	..	\$3.889	\$3.169	\$3.699	\$4.049	..
Change in price	No change	..	..	-2.0 cents	No change	-1.0 cents	-1.0 cents	..

*DieselEFD **Midgrade
Pacific price for the week of Jan. 26 - Feb. 1

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates		Commercial rates	
Euro costs (Jan. 26)	\$1.06	Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3769
British pound (Jan. 26)	\$1.24	Britain (Pound)	1.2722
Japanese yen (Jan. 26)	144.00	Canada (Dollar)	1.3496
South Korean won (Jan. 26)	1302.00	China (Yuan)	7.0798
		Denmark (Krone)	6.86648
		Egypt (Pound)	30.8995
		Euro	0.9209
		Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.8164
		Hungary (Forint)	355.18
		Israel (Shekel)	3.6910
		Japan (Yen)	147.32
		Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3075
		Norway (Krone)	10.4470
		Philippines (Peso)	56.42
		Poland (Zloty)	4.03
		Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7500
		Singapore (Dollar)	1.3394
		South Korea (Won)	1335.11

Switzerland (Franc)	0.8655
Thailand (Baht)	35.68
Turkey (NewLira)	30.2677

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

INTEREST RATES

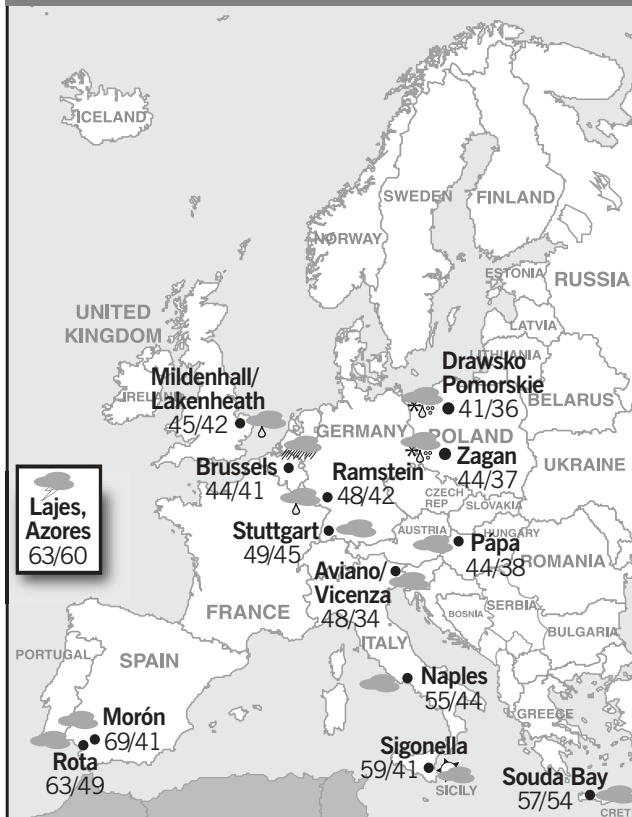
Prime rate	8.50
Interest Rates Discount rate	6.00
Federal funds market rate	5.33
3-month bill	5.38
30-year bond	4.41

WEATHER OUTLOOK

FRIDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



FRIDAY IN EUROPE



SATURDAY IN THE PACIFIC



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

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MILITARY

Mental health support for new military moms sought

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Pregnant service members and new mothers in the military who are struggling with mental health issues could see additional support under a new Senate bill.

The legislation spearheaded by Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, D-N.H., and co-sponsored by Sen. Deb Fischer, R-Neb., aims to launch a pilot program within the Defense Department that would establish perinatal mental health prevention programs at military treatment facilities throughout the country.

Women in military service are more likely than civilians to experience a mental health diagnosis during pregnancy and the year after giving birth — a time span referred to as the perinatal period.

“All too often, the mental health needs of new moms fall to the wayside as they adapt to life with a newborn — and this rings especially true for the brave women serving in our military,” Shaheen said.

About 36% of the beneficiaries of Tricare, the military’s health care program, received a mental health diagnosis during their perinatal periods, according to a 2022 study by the Government Accountability Office. Similar diagnoses are seen in about 20% of women in the general population.

“This should be a wake-up call that we must do more to support [service women],” Shaheen said.

Anxiety, depression and trauma- and stressor-related disorders were the most common diagnoses. These conditions can interfere in the lives of mothers and

their babies, disrupt maternal-child bonding and impact family life, according to research cited by the GAO.

Beneficiaries of Tricare, which include service members and their families, are believed to be at a higher risk for diagnosis due to isolation from social support networks and separation from deployed spouses.

The bill touted by senators would create an advisory committee of service members, beneficiaries and experts to provide input on the proposed pilot program. The program would be implemented in “geographically diverse sites,” according to the legislation.

The GAO study noted offering mental health services within women’s health clinics improved access to treatment by eliminating



RON MOONEY/Martin Army Community Hospital

Lt. Col. Francesca Desriviere, a certified nurse midwife at Martin Army Community Hospital at Fort Moore, Ga., conducts an abdominal ultrasound during a routine obstetrics appointment.

stigma for service members who do not want to be seen going into a mental health clinic.

The Senate bill would allocate \$5 million per year for the proposed pilot program to be spent from fiscal 2025 to 2029. The Defense Department then would be required to submit a study on the effectiveness of the program and whether it was successful in pre-

venting or reducing perinatal mental health conditions.

“Service women sacrifice so much for our nation—it’s our duty to ensure they have access to the best mental health care possible before and after they give birth,” Shaheen said.

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Guided-missile destroyer makes 1st Taiwan Strait passage of year

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — A Navy guided-missile destroyer made a trip through the Taiwan Strait this week, the first reported transit by a U.S. warship this year and one China immediately labeled provocative.

The USS John Finn steamed southwest from the East China Sea to the South China Sea over about 13 hours Wednesday, U.S. 7th Fleet spokeswoman Cmdr. Megan Greene told Stars and Stripes by email a day after the transit.

A Chinese military spokesman said the John Finn’s passage was monitored.

“Recently, the U.S. military has frequently carried out provocative actions and maliciously undermined regional peace and stability,” an unnamed spokesman for China’s Eastern Theater Command said in a Wednesday post on social media website Weibo.

Chinese troops “remain on high alert at all times,” according to the post.

U.S. ships and aircraft routinely interact with foreign military forces, Greene said, but all interactions during the John Finn’s transit were “consistent with international norms” and didn’t impact the trip.

U.S. warships, and less frequently, aircraft, routinely pass through the strait in what the Navy says is an exercise of navigational freedom. China routinely criticiz-



JUSTIN STACK/U.S. Navy

The guided-missile destroyer USS John Finn steams somewhere in the Pacific Ocean on Jan. 11.

es those transits as provocative.

U.S. military ships and aircraft transited the strait at least 11 times last year, a slight increase over the nine made in 2022.

The John Finn’s passage was meant to demonstrate the United States’ “commitment to upholding the lawful use of international waters for all nations as a principle” and to “oppose any attempt to unilaterally change the status quo and undermine the rules-based international order” in the region, Greene added.

“No member of the international community should be intimidated or coerced into giving up their rights and freedoms,” she said. “The United States military flies, sails, and operates anywhere international law allows.”

Beijing considers democratic Taiwan a breakaway province

that must be reunified with the mainland by force, if necessary.

The John Finn’s voyage comes 11 days after Taiwan’s presidential elections on Jan. 13. Lai Ching-Te, vice president and member of Taiwan’s Democratic Progressive Party, is scheduled to be sworn in as president on May 20.

It also comes two days after Taiwan reported tracking six Chinese balloons that flew over, or near, the island, according to Sunday posts by Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense Ministry on X, formerly Twitter.

The last Navy transit of the strait, a P-8 Poseidon patrol and reconnaissance aircraft on Dec. 7, drew a similar response from Beijing.

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Orban to fold on Sweden’s bid for NATO membership

By ZOLTAN SIMON
Bloomberg

Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban is preparing his lawmakers to ratify Sweden’s accession to NATO after Turkey’s parliamentary approval effectively left Budapest as the lone holdout to the military alliance’s enlargement.

Under pressure to act after leaving the ratification protocol languishing in the Hungarian parliament for more than a year, Orban told North Atlantic Treaty Organization Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg on Wednesday that he’ll urge its approval “at the first possible opportunity,” according to a post on the social media site X. Stoltenberg, for his part, said he was heartened by Orban’s apparent commitment.

“I welcome the clear support of the Prime Minister and his government for #Sweden’s #NATO membership,” Stoltenberg said on X. “I look forward to the ratification as soon as parliament reconvenes.”

On Tuesday, the Hungarian prime minister invited Swedish counterpart Ulf Kristersson to Budapest hours before the Turkish assembly ratified Sweden’s bid, which was seen as a face-saving way out of yet another standoff he’s created with European peers. Orban and his ministers have in the past accused Stockholm of undermining bilateral relations by repeatedly criticizing Hungary for democratic backsliding.

“This is definitely a sharp turn and one that aims to prepare Hun-

gary’s ratification of Sweden’s bid,” Agoston Samuel Mraz, the head of Nezapont, a policy think-tank that advises Orban’s government, said about the invitation.

Orban faced renewed pressure from western allies in NATO and the European Union to approve Sweden’s bid following Turkey’s move. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s office may publish the parliamentary legislation in the Official Gazette as soon as Wednesday,

making Turkey’s ratification official.

Hungary’s parliament is expected to reconvene on Feb. 26 from its winter recess, Magyar Nemzet newspaper reported on Wednesday, citing the leadership of Orban’s ruling party.

While Kristersson has yet to comment on how he intends to respond to the invitation, Orban’s suggestion in a post on X that he wanted to “negotiate” Sweden’s accession was cold-shouldered by Stockholm. Foreign minister Tobias Billstrom, speaking to reporters on Tuesday, said there is “no reason to negotiate” with Budapest.

NATO chief Stoltenberg, UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron and Germany’s Foreign Office were among those calling on Orban to act swiftly, with Berlin saying it was “high time” for Hungary to ratify Sweden’s accession.



Orban

PACIFIC

Day care workers to serve jail time for child assault

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Two former day care workers at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam in Hawaii will serve short jail sentences for charges that they harmed an Army officer's toddler in a Navy-run child care facility, according to online court records and the family.

Analyn DeGuzman and Marilyn Kanekoa were each charged with assault in the third degree, a misdemeanor. DeGuzman received a 30-day jail sentence and Kanekoa an eight-day jail sentence during two separate hearings on Jan. 17 in a Honolulu courtroom.

Army Capt. JD Kuykendall's child Bella was 15 months old in August 2022 when he and his wife Kate noticed bruising on the girl's legs and an uncommon redness on her cheeks. They also noticed a change in her demeanor.

After taking their concerns to the Ford Island Child Development Center where Bella went daily for care, facility managers reviewed footage and began an investigation. Both women were fired from the day care, according to a Navy official who spoke on condition of anonymity.

However, the Kuykendalls felt their concerns were downplayed and, after months of discussions with the Navy, JD Kuykendall gained access to the day care's video camera footage through a Freedom of Information Act request and documented the abuse himself.

"The flags indicated crimes were here, but the system left us with sympathetic indifference," he said. "It took hundreds of hours of lobbying to get something to

happen that would have been executed immediately if investigative authorities had taken the situation seriously at the first hour of notification."

Kuykendall eventually took his findings outside of the military to the Honolulu Police Department, and charges were filed against the women in May.

Last week, both women made agreements with the court to avoid admitting fault, according to court records. The plea is known in court as "no contest."

"It's not just about us," Kuykendall said. "It may help prevent this from happening again."

The Navy said last year that it doesn't maintain records of civilian criminal charges against its civilian employees. Therefore, the service had no information on how often situations such as this occur, said Destiny Sibert, spokeswoman for Navy Installation Command Headquarters.

"However, instances of abusive behavior among [child development center] staff are extremely rare," she said. "Navy Child and Youth Programs' top priority is ensuring the safety and well-being of children entrusted to their care."

Bella will be 3 years old in May, and her parents said that she still has headaches, difficulty balancing and is fearful of strangers.

"Since the incident, Isabella deals with psychiatric trauma, and acts in ways completely different from before the incident. These changes include quick escalations in violence when she is scared or triggered, or collapses into herself for extended periods," Kuykendall said.

Russia diplomat accuses US of preparing for N. Korea war

Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS — Russia's top diplomat accused the United States, South Korea and Japan on Wednesday of preparing for war with North Korea.

Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov told a U.N. news conference that this new military bloc brought together by the United States is building up military activity and conducting large-scale exercises. The United States, South Korea and Japan have described their combined military drills as defensive in nature and necessary to

cope with growing North Korean nuclear threats.

All of a sudden South Korea's rhetoric "became even more hostile towards Pyongyang," Lavrov said. "In Japan as well, we hear aggressive rhetoric" and it is seriously talking about setting up NATO infrastructure with U.S. assistance.

Lavrov said the objective of the military bloc is clearly stated: "They're preparing for war with the DPRK," the initials of North Korea's official name, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea.



GAVIN ARNOLDHENDERSHOT/U.S. Navy

Capt. Kristina Morocco begins a surgery aboard the USNS Mercy off the coast of Koror, Palau, on Dec. 27.

Navy hospital ship wraps up annual humanitarian mission in the Pacific

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

A U.S. Navy hospital ship completed a 12-day visit to Micronesia earlier this week, concluding the planned portion of an annual Indo-Pacific tour designed to deliver aid and prepare island nations for natural disasters.

Led by the USNS Mercy, Pacific Partnership culminated with a visit to Chuuk, a cluster of island chains that make up Micronesia's most populous state.

While Chuuk was the last planned stop in the four-month mission, Pacific Partnership won't officially be over until the ship returns to its homeport of San Diego in February, mission spokeswoman Navy Lt. Cmdr. Cheryl Collins said by email Thursday.

The Mercy's time in Chuuk was spent rendering medical care and hosting public health engagements with the local community, according to a Tuesday news release from U.S. Indo-Pacific Command.

"Pacific Partnership is symbolic of the unity and spirit of cooperation that embodies the U.S.-FSM relationship, and our shared goal of an open, connected, prosperous, resilient, and secure Indo-Pacific," Jennifer Johnson, U.S. ambassador to the Federated States of Micronesia, said in the release.

While in Chuuk, teams provided more than 2,200 dental procedures and 82 surgeries aboard the Mercy, and optometrists distributed more than 3,000 pairs of prescription glasses and sunglasses.

Chuuk Gov. Alexander Nar-



JACOB WORTZEL/U.S. Navy

USNS Mercy anchors off Chuuk, Federated States of Micronesia, Jan. 18.

ruhn, during Saturday's closing ceremony, said he hoped the "special friendship" between Micronesia and the Pacific Partnership teams "will span decades, islands and nations," according to the release.

During the community engagements, U.S. Navy environmental health officers taught islanders about methods for food storage and pest control to "improve overall health and prevent common illnesses," the news release said.

The mission kicked off Oct. 10 when the Mercy left its homeport of San Diego for stops in the Marshall and Solomon islands, Palau and Micronesia.

Participants included nearly 1,500 personnel from the U.S. and partner nations, including Australia, Chile, Germany, Japan, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, Logistics Group Western Pacific said in a Nov. 18 news release.

They provided islanders with nearly 12,000 dental procedures, 410 surgeries, 748 medical engagements and more than 25,000

glasses and sunglasses, Collins said.

The mission achieved a historic first during its visit to the Marshall Islands, when Pacific Partnership members sailed aboard the Marshallese hospital ship RMIS Liwaatoo Mour for a four-day tuberculosis eradication campaign in Aur Atoll, according to another logistics group's release.

It marked the first time in the mission's 20-year history that participants operated from a host nation's hospital ship, U.S. Pacific Fleet said in a Nov. 14 news release.

Pacific Partnership grew from the U.S. response to the 9.1-magnitude earthquake and tsunami that devastated parts of South and Southeast Asia in December 2004. The mission has evolved to focus more on building relationships between nations rather than providing direct medical care, according to the Navy.

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EUROPE



PHOTOS BY MANVIR GILL/U.S. Navy

The dock landing ship **USS Gunston Hall** departed Naval Station Norfolk, Va., on Wednesday, as part of the NATO exercise **Steadfast Defender**.

USS Gunston Hall heads out to largest NATO exercise in decades

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — A U.S. Navy amphibious assault ship departed Virginia this week to kick off the largest NATO military exercise in decades, as allies hone their defenses against the threat of Russian aggression in Europe.

USS Gunston Hall left Norfolk on Wednesday as part of Steadfast Defender, the alliance's largest exercise since the Cold War, the Navy said in a statement the same day.

The four-month exercise runs through May 31 and involves about 90,000 forces from 31 allies and Sweden, NATO said.

Gunston Hall, a Whidbey Island-class dock landing ship that has two helicopter pads, holds up to four Landing Craft Air Cushion vessels and has the ability to embark a wide range of different forces.

The ship "is an essential element of the multinational NATO amphibious force," Canadian navy Rear Adm. David Patchell, vice commander of U.S. 2nd Fleet, said in the Navy statement.



Officials say the exercise will demonstrate the alliance's ability to deploy forces rapidly to defend Europe.

Joint Force Command Norfolk and 2nd Fleet worked with allies in planning the exercise. The Navy didn't say how many service members were embarked, but it lists the ship's typical complement as including more than 400 sailors and about 400 Marines.

During Steadfast Defender, Swedish and Finnish forces will embark on Gunston Hall and conduct amphibious assault landings in Norway, the Navy said.

Patchell and other staff from 2nd Fleet will deploy to Norway as Task Force North to command NATO maritime forces, the Navy

said.

Another sea component of the exercise, Joint Warrior, begins late next month.

That exercise, led by the U.K., will include sailors and Marines from U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa, the Naples-based command said Thursday.

In recent years, the Navy has seen demands in the European theater grow, particularly with the war in Ukraine, Russian threats in the Baltic Sea and operations in the Mediterranean Sea related to the Israel-Hamas war.

Last month, NAVEUR-AF/6th Fleet began the process of separating after operating as a single command for nearly 19 years, a move influenced by those increasing needs, analysts say.

Steadfast Defender shows that in this "dangerous and unpredictable security environment," NATO is ready and able to defend allied territory, said Vice Adm. Doug Perry, commander of JFC Norfolk and 2nd Fleet.

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Ukraine, Russia trade blame over fatal plane crash

Associated Press

Russia and Ukraine traded accusations Thursday over the crash of a military transport plane that Moscow said was carrying Ukrainian prisoners of war and was shot down by Kyiv's forces, another heated episode in the information war that has been a feature of the conflict.

Though investigators reportedly found the flight recorders a day after Wednesday's crash, there was little hope that the circumstances would be clarified in a war where both sides have often used accusations to sway opinion at home and abroad.

The Il-76 crashed in a huge ball of fire in a rural area of Russia, and authorities there said all 74 people on board, including 65 POWs, six crew members and three Russian servicemen, were killed.

The crash triggered a spate of claims and counterclaims, but neither side offered evidence for their accusations, and The Associated Press could not independently confirm who was aboard or how the plane was downed.

Russia alleged that Kyiv shot down the plane with two missiles and said the prisoners of war were headed for an exchange. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov described it as "a totally monstrous act."

Ukraine responded by casting doubt on the fact that POWs were aboard and putting forward their own theories, including implying that the plane may have posed a threat.

Without mentioning the crash, the general staff of the Ukrainian military said the country would target any Russian military transport plane believed to be delivering missiles, especially near the border.

Ukrainian officials have noted

that Moscow did not ask for any specific airspace to be kept safe for a certain length of time, as it has in past prisoner exchanges.

Mykola Oleshchuk, Ukraine's air force commander, alleged that "rampant Russian propaganda is directing a fake stream of information to the international audience, attempting to discredit Ukraine in the eyes of the global community."

Ukrainian officials confirmed that a prisoner exchange was due to happen Wednesday. But they said it was called off. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Ukraine would push for an international investigation.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov called for an emergency meeting of the U.N. Security Council, which was expected to take place Thursday afternoon in New York.

The discovery of the transport plane's flight recorders was reported Thursday by the state-owned RIA Novosti news agency, citing emergency services.

Andrei Kartapolov, head of the defense affairs committee in the lower house of the Russian parliament, said Russia would continue exchanging prisoners despite the crash.

"We can't abandon our boys and so we will speak to the devil himself to get them out," he told reporters.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's largest oil and gas company, Naftogaz, said Thursday that one of its data centers had come under a large-scale cyberattack that shut down the company's websites and call centers.

Ukraine's national postal service, Ukrposhta, and the State Service for Transport Safety each also reported technical failures. But neither specified if they were the result of cyberattacks.

Tactical: Analysts worry delivery of weapons to Ukraine may push nuclear threat

FROM PAGE 1

warheads for tactical use on the battlefield, delivering damage in a more concentrated area than their strategic counterparts.

The Russia-Ukraine war has elevated concerns about the potential for nuclear conflict. Various Russian officials, including President Vladimir Putin, have issued warnings that raised alarm.

While the U.S. and its allies in

NATO have repeatedly stated there is no circumstance in which its forces would directly join Ukraine's fight, some analysts have fretted that the delivery of arms to Ukraine could risk a nuclear escalation should Russia be faced with defeat.

Sergei Karaganov, the head of Russia's Council on Foreign and Defense Policy, who has close ties to the Russian political leader-

ship, gained attention in June when he authored an article calling for a pre-emptive nuclear strike against an unspecified ally of the U.S. in Europe that was supporting Ukraine.

Karaganov's ideas sparked widespread debate in Russia on a scope and scale that surprised many in the West, the report said.

He theorized that such a strike would stifle U.S. willingness to

arm Ukraine, paving the way for Russia to prevail in what it sees as a proxy struggle with the West.

Unlike their Cold War counterparts, most senior U.S. civilian and military leaders today haven't needed to master the intricacies of nuclear deterrence, which was a linchpin of American relations with the Soviet Union.

Going forward, the U.S. and its allies should dedicate more re-

sources to understanding Russian military thought related to non-strategic nuclear weapons, which will lead to better deterrence of Russia, according to the report.

"Understanding Russia and maintaining deterrence vis-a-vis Russia are a matter of survival for the West," it said.

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VETERANS

Study: Vet alcohol abuse climbed after pandemic

Findings shows about 15% had drinking issues in 2021, 2022

LINDA F. HERSEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A new study in the *American Journal of Medicine* shows alcohol abuse among veterans climbed in the second and third year of the coronavirus pandemic after dipping at the onset of the lockdowns in 2020.

Veterans are more susceptible than the general population to mental-health and substance-abuse problems, and researchers sought to determine the prevalence of alcohol abuse among veterans during the pandemic.

The study's conclusions stem from studies by Rand Corp., the Veterans Affairs Department and other organizations showing veterans who have been deployed are more likely to suffer from mental health conditions or traumatic brain injuries.

One in five veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have experienced post-traumatic stress disorder or depression, according to Rand, which is higher than the general population.

An estimated one in 11 Americans will be diagnosed with PTSD in their lifetime, according to the American Psychiatric Association.

While there have been small studies on alcohol consumption in the general population during the coronavirus pandemic showing an increase in use, there has been little research on veterans and drinking during and after the pandemic, according to the study.

"Multiple small studies suggest that during the pandemic, about 25% of people drank more than usual, often to cope with stress. Sales of hard liquor, or spirits, accounted for most of the increase," George F. Koob, director of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, said about the pandemic's impact on Americans' alcohol use.

Coronavirus was declared a public emergency in March 2020, leading to sweeping lockdowns and guidance to shelter-in-place. The declaration was lifted in January 2023.

"Few studies have examined longer-term trends in alcohol use beyond the first year of the pandemic, and to the best of our knowledge, no studies to date have examined nationwide trends in alcohol use among veterans three years after the onset of the pandemic," according to the study,



U.S. Army

A new study in the *American Journal of Medicine* shows alcohol abuse among veterans climbed in the second and third year of the coronavirus pandemic after dipping at the onset of the lockdowns in 2020.

"Alcohol was so accessible during the pandemic. Liquor stores remained open. Isolation intensified stressors people already were feeling."

Ella Mae Gray
Air Force veteran and psychotherapist

which was published in December.

The new research looked at alcohol use self-reported by roughly 2.5 million veterans from March 2018 to February 2023 at Department of Veterans Affairs outpatient facilities, which ask patients to complete questionnaires on alcohol consumption.

The statistics represented veterans who completed alcohol consumption scorecards during the study period, researchers said. The scorecards are called AUDIT-C — alcohol use disorders identification test-concise.

The annual screening for veterans has been in place at VA health care facilities since 2004. The scorecards categorize consumption levels as zero risk, low risk or high risk. Findings showed about 15% of veterans studied — or 375,000 veterans — abused alcohol in 2021 and 2022, with the trend continuing into early 2023.

The figure rose one point from the onset of the pandemic, representing about 25,000 more veterans abusing alcohol.

By comparison, the rate of alcohol abuse among the general population in 2021 and 2022 was 6.3%, based on figures from the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

The institute defines high-risk alcohol use for men — also re-

ferred to as heavy drinking — as having five or more alcoholic drinks on any given day or 15 or more per week.

Among women, the amount is four or more glasses of alcohol on any day or eight or more drinks per week.

Researchers for the medical journal looking at alcohol use during and after the pandemic focused exclusively on veterans, looking at gender, age and ethnic groups. They did not seek to study the general population.

Findings showed high-risk alcohol use dipped among veterans in the first year of the pandemic but ticked upward in years two and three of the pandemic. The study looked at veterans by gender, age and ethnic groups who fell into the high-risk category.

Rates of alcohol abuse overall were highest among veterans between ages 18 and 39, at more than 20%, for the period studied.

The study also found the percentage of female veterans who reported engaging in high-risk alcohol use inched passed male veterans.

The researchers said they did not seek to determine the reasons for changes in consumption levels but to identify trends.

"We don't know what future trends will look like, [but] this highlights the need for greater at-

tention, particularly in women, to assess and provide resources to address high-risk alcohol use and alcohol addiction," said Dr. Robert J. Wong, a Stanford University researcher and lead author of the study.

The higher rate among female veterans versus men extended across ethnic groups, the study noted.

Sixteen percent of white female veterans, for example, self-reported high-risk alcohol use from March 2022 to February 2023, the period studied after the pandemic, a one-point increase over alcohol consumption before the pandemic. For white male veterans, the numbers were reversed, dropping from 16% to 15% — though still more than double the general population.

"While the differences seem small, the overall trends are concerning, such that high risk alcohol use among female veterans is rising more rapidly than men to the point that it has surpassed men," Wong said.

Ella Mae Gray, an Air Force veteran and psychotherapist with a practice in Gaithersburg, Md., said the findings do not surprise her.

"There are a lot of people struggling out there," said Gray, a former senior airman who served in the Air Force from 1994-1998 with consecutive tours in Turkey and the United Kingdom. She said she has many clients who are veterans.

"Year one of [the pandemic], veterans were all in, doing what was needed to address a national emergency. We were on it," she said. "By year two of sheltering in place, many folks started turning to unhealthy coping strategies.

"Alcohol was so accessible during the pandemic. Liquor stores remained open. Isolation intensified stressors people already were feeling," she said.

Gray said veterans might already have heightened feelings of isolation from PTSD and depression related to their military service that increased due to shelter-in-place policies during the pandemic.

Female veterans struggling with alcohol addiction seemed at particular risk due to economic uncertainties and family turmoil worsened by the pandemic that has yet to fully stabilize, Gray said.

Women in general bear greater caretaking responsibilities — whether it is for young children or aging parents — in addition to holding down jobs or pursuing higher education, she said.

Gray believes there is a pressing need for more transitional services for veterans that start before they leave the military and help them navigate life as civilians.

"The military serves as such a foundation for service members," she said. "When they get out, all that goes away. There needs to be a more holistic — and realistic — approach for helping our veterans."

Terry Motley, 60, suffers from PTSD and depression related to military service. Motley, of Dallas, said he sought services through the Greenhouse Treatment Center, an alcohol and drug treatment program.

Motley said the coronavirus lockdown triggered addiction problems that extended to narcotics. But he said he found it difficult to ask for help over the phone after doctors' offices closed during the pandemic.

"It has been a slow climb back to recovery. I had a lot of vivid images and flashbacks from my time in the service," said Motley, who served as an Army first sergeant with deployments to Kuwait, Iraq and Germany. He retired from the military in 2002 after 20 years of service.

Maria Esther Ontiveros, a therapist who works with veterans and first responders at Greenhouse Treatment Center, said alcohol was highly accessible to the public during the pandemic, while many programs that assist veterans closed.

She said using alcohol became a convenient way for some veterans to ease negative thoughts and despair brought on by PTSD.

Ontiveros noted substance abuse often is a contributing factor in veteran suicides. Suicide rates among veterans are 1.57 to 1.66 times greater than for nonveterans, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs.

MIDEAST



TIMOTHY VANDUSEN/U.S. Army

U.S. Army soldiers board a CH-47 Chinook helicopter after an exercise at Al Asad Air Base, Iraq, on July 7.

Mission: PM called for exit of American troops after US launched strikes from Iraq

FROM PAGE 1

ammed Shia al-Sudani made headlines earlier this month calling for a drawdown of U.S. forces from the country. The calls have come in response to the U.S. launching airstrikes inside Iraq targeting Iran-backed militants who have been attacking U.S. personnel stationed there.

U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria have been attacked 153 times by Iran-linked militants since October, a military official said Thursday. That includes 61 attacks in Iraq and 92 in Syria.

“There is a need to reorganize this relationship so that it is not a target or justification for any party, internal or foreign, to tamper with stability in Iraq and the region,” Sudani told Reuters on Jan.

10. “Let’s agree on a time frame [for the coalition’s exit] that is, honestly, quick, so that they don’t remain long and the attacks keep happening.”

After toppling Saddam Hussein’s government in 2003, U.S. forces remained in Iraq fighting insurgent and terrorist groups until the U.S. withdrawal in December 2011, when a status-of-forces agreement with the Iraqi government ran out. At the peak of the war in 2007, the Pentagon had committed some 170,000 troops to Iraq.

In 2014, a new terrorist organization — ISIS — launched a blitzkrieg across eastern Syria and into Iraq, capturing massive swaths of both countries, including about one-third of Iraq. Then-U.S. President Barack Obama amassed a

U.S.-led coalition to launch an air campaign against ISIS. Later that year, the U.S. began sending forces back into Iraq to train and advise Iraqi military forces to fight off ISIS. That campaign has continued, despite ISIS fighters having lost almost all of its land in Iraq by 2017.

The United States declared an end to its combat portion of the anti-ISIS mission in 2021, but retained the about 2,500 troops in the country, saying they would remain indefinitely in a support role. Pentagon officials have said the change had little operational impact on the role of U.S. troops in Iraq.

Stars and Stripes reporter Corey Dickstein contributed to the story. adams.matthew@stripes.com

Official: US warned Iran that ISIS-K was preparing attack ahead of deadly blasts

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. government privately warned Iran that the Islamic State’s affiliate in Afghanistan was preparing to carry out a terrorist attack before bombings in Kerman earlier this month that killed 95 people, a U.S. official said Thursday.

The official, who was not authorized to comment and insisted on anonymity to discuss the intelligence, said the U.S. was following its longstanding policy of a “duty to warn” other governments against potential lethal threats.

The official did not detail how the U.S., which does not have diplomatic relations with Iran, conveyed the warning about its intel-

ligence on ISIS-Khorasan, known as ISIS-K, but noted that government officials “provide these warnings in part because we do not want to see innocent lives lost in terror attacks.”

Iranian state media did not acknowledge the U.S. giving Tehran the information, and Iran’s mission to the United Nations did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The ISIS affiliate claimed responsibility for the Jan. 3 attack on Kerman, about 510 miles southeast of Iran’s capital, Tehran.

The dual suicide bombing killed at least 95 people and wounded dozens of others attend-

ing a commemoration for the late Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the leader of the Revolutionary Guard’s expeditionary Quds Force, who had been killed in a 2020 U.S. drone strike in Baghdad.

In the time since, Iran has been trying to blame the U.S. and Israel for the attack amid Israel’s war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip. It has launched missile attacks on Iraq and Syria. It then launched strikes on nuclear-armed Pakistan, which responded with its own strikes on Iran, further raising tensions in a region inflamed by the Israel-Hamas war.

The Wall Street Journal was the first to report that the U.S. had provided the warning to Iran.

Senators question legality of US strikes on Houthis

Bipartisan group says congressional authorization needed for bombings

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A bipartisan group of senators are questioning the White House’s strategy of authorizing ongoing strikes against Houthi rebels in Yemen, raising alarm about whether the military actions and their strategic purpose are legal.

Four senators have appealed to President Joe Biden with their concerns about the potential for the strikes to escalate into a broader war in the Middle East and said Congress must weigh in on a sustained air campaign.

“As tensions in the region rise, we believe that American participation in another war in the Middle East cannot happen in the absence of authorization by Congress, following an open debate during which the American public can be informed of the benefits, risks and consequences of such conflict,” the senators wrote in a letter.

The letter was organized by Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., and signed by Sens. Todd Young, R-Ind., Chris Murphy, D-Conn., and Mike Lee, R-Utah. The senators are leading proponents of reasserting congressional war powers.

The U.S. is entering a third week of carrying out airstrikes against Houthi targets in response to the militant group’s attacks on ships transiting the Red Sea.

“Are they stopping the Houthis? No,” Biden said last week of the airstrikes. “Are they going to continue? Yes.”

Such comments are increasingly worrying lawmakers who believe the U.S. is now in the midst of an ongoing regional conflict that carries the risk of developing into a full-blown war.

The Houthis have said they will not stop their attacks until hostilities end in the Gaza Strip, where Israeli troops are fighting Hamas militants.

“While the Houthis and their backers, namely Iran, bear the responsibility for escalation, unless there is a need to repel a sudden attack, the Constitution requires that the United States not engage in military action absent a favorable vote of Congress,” the senators wrote. “There is no current congressional authorization for offensive U.S. military action

against the Houthis.”

They questioned whether directing military action to defend ships, most of which are not American, falls into the boundaries of presidential power. Biden invoked his authority as commander in chief when notifying Congress of his initial strikes in Yemen on Jan. 11 and in a Wednesday letter to lawmakers doubled down on his right to order a series of strikes on Monday.

“I directed this military action consistent with my responsibility to protect United States citizens both at home and abroad and in furtherance of United States national security and foreign policy interests,” Biden wrote.

The Pentagon has shied away from describing the back-and-forth confrontation with the Houthis as a conflict. Air Force Maj. Gen. Patrick Ryder, the Pentagon’s spokesman, said Tuesday that the U.S. strikes are instead an “action that’s being taken to disrupt and degrade” the Houthis’ ability to attack merchant vessels as well as U.S. Navy ships.

Senators said they have long advocated for a stronger congressional role in any decisions that endanger service members overseas.

Two Navy SEALs were declared dead on Sunday after going missing during a Jan. 11 operation to seize missile components being shipped to Yemen.

“Protecting Americans, American interests and our service members who put their lives on the line every day remain our top priorities,” the senators wrote.

U.S. Central Command, which is responsible for U.S. military operations in the Middle East, last struck Houthi assets Wednesday, attacking two anti-ship missiles in a ninth round of airstrikes against the militants.

Congress has not signed off on any war authorizations since the Iraq War in 2002 and last asserted its war powers in 2019, when it passed a resolution calling on former President Donald Trump to end U.S. support for a Saudi Arabia-led military intervention against the Houthis. Trump vetoed the bill.

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NATION

US economy grew at 3.3% pace last quarter

BY PAUL WISEMAN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The nation's economy grew at an unexpectedly brisk 3.3% annual pace from October through December as Americans showed a continued willingness to spend freely despite high interest rates and price levels that have frustrated many households.

Thursday's report from the Commerce Department said the gross domestic product — the economy's total output of goods and services — decelerated from its sizzling 4.9% growth rate the previous quarter. But the latest figures still reflected the surprising durability of the world's largest economy, marking the sixth straight quarter in which GDP has grown at an annual pace of 2% or more.

Consumers, who account for about 70% of the total economy, drove the fourth-quarter growth. Their spending expanded at a 2.8% annual rate, for items ranging from clothing, furniture, recreational vehicles and other goods to services like hotels and restaurant meals.

The GDP report also showed that despite the robust pace of growth in the October-December quarter, inflationary measures continued to



SETH WENIG/AP

A generator and its blades are prepared to head to the open ocean for the South Fork Wind farm from State Pier in New London, Conn., in December.

ease. Consumer prices rose at a 1.7% annual rate, down from 2.6% in the third quarter. And excluding volatile food and energy prices, so-called core inflation came in at a 2% annual rate.

The state of the economy is sure to weigh on people's minds ahead of the November elections. After an extended period of gloom, Americans are starting to feel somewhat better about inflation and the econ-

omy — a trend that could sustain consumer spending, fuel economic growth and potentially affect voters' decisions. A measure of consumer sentiment by the University of Michigan, for example, has

jumped in the past two months by the most since 1991.

There is growing optimism that the Federal Reserve is on track to deliver a rare "soft landing" — raising borrowing rates enough to cool growth, hiring and inflation yet not so much as to send the economy into a tailspin. Inflation touched a four-decade high in 2022 but has since edged steadily lower without the painful layoffs that most economists had thought would be necessary to slow the acceleration of prices.

The economy has repeatedly defied predictions that the Fed's aggressive interest rate hikes would trigger a recession. Far from collapsing last year, the economy accelerated — 2.5%, up from 1.9% in 2022.

"We continue to forecast an ongoing expansion in economic activity over coming quarters, said Rubeeela Farooqi, chief U.S. economist at High Frequency Economics.

Eventually, she cautioned, higher borrowing rates may dampen consumer spending and GDP. But she added that "there could be some upside to economic growth as the Fed starts to cut rates this year and financial and credit conditions ease.

FAA approves inspection process for grounded Boeings to fly again

Associated Press

Federal regulators have approved an inspection process that will let airlines resume flying their Boeing 737 Max 9 jetliners, which have been grounded since a side panel blew out of a plane in mid-flight earlier this month.

The head of the Federal Aviation Administration said Wednesday that his agency's review of the scary incident on board an Alaska Airlines Boeing jet gave him confidence to clear a path for the planes to fly again.

The official, Mike Whitaker, said the FAA would not agree to any Boeing request to expand production of Max planes until the agency is satisfied that quality-control concerns have been addressed.

"This won't be back to business as usual for Boeing," Whitaker vowed.

The production limits will apply only to the Max, of which there are currently two models, the 8 and the 9. Boeing builds about 30 a month but has wanted to raise production for some time.

Boeing said it will work with the FAA and the airlines to get the grounded planes back in the air.

"We will continue to cooperate fully and transparently with the FAA and follow their direction as we take action to strengthen safety



J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE/AP

Boeing CEO Dave Calhoun speaks with reporters after a meeting at the Capitol in Washington on Wednesday.

and quality at Boeing," the company said. "We will also work closely with our airline customers as they complete the required inspection procedures to safely return their 737-9 airplanes to service."

A panel called a door plug blew off an Alaska Max 9 as it flew 3 miles above Oregon on Jan. 5. The blowout left a hole in the side of the plane, but pilots were able to return to Portland and land safely.

The FAA grounded most Max 9s the next day. Alaska and United Airlines — the only U.S. carriers with Max 9s — have canceled hundreds of flights since then, and United said this week that it will lose money in the first three months

of this year because of the grounding.

The CEOs of both airlines vented their frustration at Boeing earlier this week.

The FAA will require airlines to conduct "detailed visual inspections" of door plugs and other components, adjust fasteners and fix any damage they find before putting Max 9s back into service. The agency said the process was developed using data from inspections of 40 grounded planes.

United, which has 79 MAX 9s, more than any other airline, said it has already done "preliminary preparations and inspections" of its planes, and it expects to put them back into service beginning Sunday.

United said the process involves removing an inner panel, two rows of seats and a sidewall liner before technicians can open the door plugs. They will inspect the plug and surrounding hardware, fix anything they find amiss, and reseal the panel.

The plugs seal places used for extra emergency doors on planes with more seats than Alaska and United Max 9s.

The FAA decision came on the same day that a key senator indicated that Congress will join the scrutiny of Boeing.

Washington state reaches settlement on opioid crisis with Johnson & Johnson

Associated Press

OLYMPIA, Wash. — The Washington state attorney general announced a \$149.5 million settlement Wednesday with drugmaker Johnson & Johnson, more than four years after the state sued the company over its role in the opioid addiction crisis.

"They knew what the harm was. They did it anyway," Attorney General Bob Ferguson told reporters Wednesday.

The attorney general's announcement came as opioid overdose deaths more than doubled from 2019 to 2022, with 2,048 deaths recorded in 2022, according to the most recent numbers from the Washington State Department of Health.

Under the deal, the state and local governments would have to spend \$123.3 million to address the opioid crisis, including on substance abuse treatment, expanded access to overdose-reversal drugs and services that support pregnant women on substances. The rest of the money would go toward litigation costs.

The harm is "left now to policymakers to grapple with," the attorney general said, "or families and individuals who grapple

in a very different way with the real tragedy of addiction."

The settlement agreement still requires approval from a judge. If approved, the deal would send over \$20 million more to respond to the opioid crisis than if the state had signed onto a national settlement in 2021 involving Johnson & Johnson, the attorney general's office said.

Since the 2000s, drugmakers, wholesalers, pharmacy chains and consultants have agreed to pay more than \$50 billion to state and local governments to settle claims that they played a part in creating the opioid crisis.

Under the agreements, most of the money is to be used to combat the nation's addiction and overdose crisis.

Drug overdoses caused more than 1 million deaths in the U.S. from 1999 through 2021, and the majority of those involved opioids. At first, the crisis centered on prescription painkillers that gained more acceptance in the 1990s, and later heroin. Over the past decade, the death toll has reached an all-time high, and the biggest killers have been synthetic opioids such as fentanyl that are in the supply of many street drugs.

NATION



GEORGE WALKER IV/AP

Celia Chastain registers residents as they line up to receive bottled water Wednesday, in Mason, Tenn. A winter storm brought sub-freezing temperatures and snow to Mason and the rest of Tennessee last week. The cold exposed major problems with a water system that dates back to the 1950s.

Water service restored to rural Tenn. town a week after storm

By ADRIAN SAINZ
Associated Press

MASON, Tenn. — The majority of residents in the rural Tennessee town of Mason had water services restored Wednesday, a week after freezing temperatures broke pipes and caused leaks in the decades-old, neglected water system.

Mayor Eddie Noeman told The Associated Press that 75% of the predominantly Black west Tennessee town of 1,300 people has had water restored, with the rest expected to be able to use their faucets by Thursday.

A winter storm brought sub-freezing temperatures and snow to Mason and the rest of Tennessee last week. The cold caused the town's pipes to freeze over and break, creating leaks that lowered water pressure and left many residents without running water. The cold exposed major problems with a water system that dates back to the 1950s,

the mayor said.

Noeman said no money had been invested in the town's water system since 2010.

Residents filled up jugs and buckets at the homes of relatives and friends who live in the area but did not lose water service. Many either bought water or picked some up at giveaways by the fire department and local churches.

"Everybody came together for the town of Mason," Noeman said. "We've had these problems for a very long time."

Larry Camper, 69, still did not have water restored to his home as of Wednesday afternoon, so he filled plastic jugs with water from a spigot outside City Hall. Campersaid he also received water from the mayor and melted snow that stayed on the ground for days after the storm. He said he stockpiled water before the storm because Mason has previously had outages.

"It should have been fixed long before this," he said.

Mason has been beset by problems with infrastructure and financial mismanagement for years. Two former employees were charged with taking town funds, and the state comptroller's office has said the town had thousands of dollars in missing credit card expenditures.

In 2022, the state moved to take over Mason's finances. But officials later reached an agreement that allowed the local government to retain control of its spending.

Noeman said the town had been losing six million gallons of water a year to leaks, but 45 leaks have been repaired since he took office a year ago. A Missouri-based company took over the water system in October, and no problems had been reported until last week's storm, he said.

The state has given Mason \$1.9 million to improve its water system.

Gender-affirming care banned in Ohio despite veto

By SAMANTHA HENDRICKSON
AP/Report for America

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Ohio has banned gender-affirming care for minors and restricted transgender women's and girls' participation on sports teams, a move that has families of transgender children scrambling over how best to care for them.

The Republican-dominated Senate voted Wednesday to override GOP Gov. Mike DeWine's veto. The new law bans gender-affirming surgeries and hormone therapies, and restricts mental health care for transgender individuals under 18. The measure also bans transgender girls and women from girls and women's sports teams at both the K-12 and collegiate level.

The override cleared the chamber 24-8 mostly along party lines, save Sen. Nathan Manning, a Republican from Cuyahoga County who has consistently broken from his party on the issue.

Officials expect the law to take effect in roughly 90 days. The Republican-majority House had voted to override the veto earlier this month.

Two of Kat Scaglione's three children are transgender, and the Chagrin Falls artist is devastated, but not surprised, by the new law. Her 14-year-old daughter Amity is already receiving mental health services and some medication, and would be able to continue her treatment under the law's grandfather clause, but she wouldn't be able to seek anything further, such as hormone therapies, and would have to go out of state to progress in her gender-affirming care.

Scaglione and her partner, Matt, are even considering moving their family out of state entirely, despite

recently buying a house in a school district and community that's safer for Amity and her 10-year-old sister, Lexi, who is also transgender. They don't feel welcome in Ohio, and don't see that changing anytime soon.

"Even as we've settled in and have good things right now, we're constantly looking over our shoulder waiting for something to change to the point where we have to get out now," Scaglione said.

DeWine reiterated Wednesday that he vetoed the legislation — to the chagrin of his party — to protect parents and children from government overreach on medical decisions. But the first week of January, he signed an executive order banning gender-affirming surgeries for people under 18 despite medical professionals maintaining that such surgeries aren't happening in the state.

At least 23 states have now enacted laws restricting or banning gender-affirming medical care for transgender minors, and many of those states face lawsuits. Courts have issued mixed rulings. The nation's first law, in Arkansas, was struck down by a federal judge who said the ban on care violated the due process rights of transgender youth and their families.

The care has been available in the United States for more than a decade and is endorsed by major medical associations.

At least 20 states have approved a version of a blanket ban on transgender athletes playing on K-12 and collegiate sports teams statewide, but a Biden administration proposal to forbid such outright bans is set to be finalized this year after multiple delays and much pushback.

Arizona GOP boss quits after talk with Senate hopeful leaked

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Arizona Republican Party Chairman Jeff DeWit resigned Wednesday after he could be heard in a leaked recording offering a job and asking U.S. Senate candidate Kari Lake to name a price that would keep her out of politics.

DeWit's departure shakes up the Republican Party in a battleground state that will feature prominently in the battle for control of the White House and the U.S. Senate in the November election.

At the time of the recording last March, Lake was waging an unsuccessful court fight challenging her loss in the 2022 race for Arizona

governor and gearing up for a U.S. Senate campaign. Meanwhile, Republicans in Washington, bruised by a disappointing showing in the midterms, were talking openly about plans to seek GOP Senate nominees who would be more viable in general elections.

"There are very powerful people that want to keep you out," DeWit tells Lake in what he described as a "selectively edited" recording. "But they're willing to put their money where their mouth is in a big way."

He did not say who asked him to approach Lake but said they were "back East." He asks her repeated-

ly not to tell anyone about the conversation.

"Is there a number at which—" DeWit asks at one point, before Lake interjects: "I can be bought?"

In a statement announcing his resignation, DeWit said he had planned to fight to keep his job until Lake's team gave him an ultimatum to resign or she would release another, more damaging recording.

"I am truly unsure of its contents, but considering our numerous past open conversations as friends, I have decided not to take the risk," DeWit said.

He said he didn't intend to bribe Lake but was offering candid ad-

vice for her to sit out the Senate race and run again for governor in 2026.



Lake

He was employing Lake at his private company at the time, he said, and they'd had "many conversations where I was looking out for her financial interests."

"Our relationship was based on friendship, and the conversation that is now being scrutinized was an open, unguarded exchange between friends in the living room of her house," DeWit said. "I genuine-

ly believed I was offering a helpful perspective to someone I considered a friend."

Lake's senior advisers, Garrett Ventry and Caroline Wren, said in a statement that "no one from the Kari Lake campaign threatened or blackmailed DeWit."

Lake, a former television news anchor, routinely wears a small microphone during her public appearances while her husband, a former news photographer, records her interactions with supporters, critics, the press and anyone else she encounters. She sometimes posts videos of confrontational encounters on social media.

NATION

Biden, Trump already in November mindset

President eager for rematch; just Haley left for predecessor

By STEVE PEOPLES
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Barely 400,000 votes have been cast in two rural Republican primaries over the span of eight days. But both Donald Trump and Joe Biden are behaving like their parties' nominees already.

Trump's double-digit victory Tuesday in independent-minded New Hampshire, where he was considered more vulnerable than perhaps anywhere else, was a rhetorical tipping point for both Democrats and Republicans.

"It is now clear that Donald Trump will be the Republican nominee. And my message to the country is the stakes could not be higher," President Joe Biden said hours after Trump's victory Tuesday night.

Trump's team largely agreed, even as he raged about former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley's unwillingness to leave the race altogether.

"I say the general election begins tonight," said Trump-adversary-turned-advocate Vivek Ramaswamy, who was standing at the former president's side during his New Hampshire victory speech. "And this man will win it in a landslide."

The bluster is just a sliver of what's to come over the next 10 months. Both parties are building out sprawling political operations backed by billions of dollars in advertising to shape the all-but-certain general election rematch between the current president and his predecessor.

It is a matchup that many voters and some elected officials did not want. Both Biden and Trump have loud detractors within their parties and glaring political liabilities. Yet no other Republican presidential candidate in history has won the first two contests on the primary calendar, as Trump polished off Tuesday night, and failed to clinch his party's nomination. And Biden, who won New Hampshire's Democratic primary without even appearing on the ballot, is facing only token opposition in his bid for the Democratic nomination.

Hours before Biden's New Hampshire win was official, the president shifted two key aides from the White House to his Delaware-based campaign. On Wednesday, Biden served as the keynote speaker at a United Auto



ALEX BRANDON/AP

President Joe Biden, right, stands with Shawn Fain, president of the United Auto Workers, on Wednesday, in Washington. Biden picked up the union's endorsement as he addressed its political convention.

Workers political convention in Washington, where he accepted the group's endorsement. The auto workers' decision marks a significant step in the president's push to win over blue-collar workers in critical Midwestern swing states.

Trump heads to Phoenix on Friday to address Republicans in a swing state that Biden won by 10,000 votes in 2020.

As much as Trump's team would like to shift its full focus toward Biden, one Republican rival is still standing. And at least for now, Haley is still consuming a significant amount of Trump's attention.

The former president's campaign unveiled a new anti-Haley website on Wednesday as Trump railed against her repeatedly on social media.

"Could somebody please explain to Nikki that she lost — and lost really badly," Trump wrote on his social media network. "She also lost Iowa, BIG, last week. They were, as certain non-fake media say, 'CRUSHING DEFEATS.'"

Haley's team vowed on Wednesday to continue fighting Trump for the GOP nomination, even with the prospect looming of an embarrassing home-state primary defeat in South Carolina on Feb. 24.

"New Hampshire is first in the nation. It is not last in the nation," Haley declared before leaving Tuesday night. "This race is far from over. There are dozens of states left to go."

Indeed, primary contests are scheduled in every U.S. state and territory over the next five months ahead of each party's summertime national conventions. The earliest either Trump or Biden could clinch enough delegates to be-

come his party's presumptive nominee is March.

Haley's campaign launched a \$4 million advertising campaign in South Carolina on Wednesday, describing the prospect of a Biden-Trump general election as "a rematch no one wants."

"Biden — too old. Trump — too much chaos," the narrator says. "There's a better choice for a better America."

"I say the general election begins tonight."

Vivek Ramaswamy

Trump-adversary-turned-advocate, after New Hampshire's GOP primary

Haley was to campaign in Charleston on Wednesday evening in what her campaign said was the beginning of her "first-in-the-South swing." She began Wednesday by addressing Republicans via Zoom in the U.S. Virgin Islands, where caucuses on Feb. 8 will decide nine Republican delegates.

"Nikki Haley is the happy warrior," Mark Harris, who leads the major pro-Haley super PAC, said Wednesday.

Harris said his organization would join the campaign in running millions of dollars in TV ads in South Carolina over the next month in addition to sending out mailers, knocking on doors and doing other outreach. As Trump seeks to expand his coalition among elected officials, Harris said Haley's team is more focused on the voters.

"It will not be politicians, it won't be party insiders," Harris



MATT ROURKE/AP

Republican presidential candidate former President Donald Trump speaks at a primary election night party in Nashua, N.H., on Tuesday. Trump won in New Hampshire, defeating Nikki Haley by double digits.

said. "Voters get to make this decision. That's the beauty of American democracy."

Early next week, Haley is scheduled to do a fundraising tour that includes stops in New York, Florida, California, Texas and South Carolina. She's expected to continue to draw continued donor support, despite Trump's grip on the nomination, because significant forces within the GOP do not want him to represent their party on the general election ballot.

Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, said she was glad Haley is staying in the race, but she's not willing to endorse her.

"I think the more people see her particularly since she appears to be the only alternative to Donald Trump right now, the more impressed that they will be," Collins said.

Trump's critics openly fear that he would struggle to win in November and would drag down Republican candidates in other elections. Republicans have struggled in every national election since Trump first captured the White House in 2016.

Indeed, there were new warning signs about Trump's broader political standing tucked within New Hampshire's results that raised questions about his strength in the general election.

Haley beat Trump on Tuesday among Republican primary voters who identified as either moderates or independents, according to AP VoteCast, a survey of the electorate. She also beat Trump among voters with college degrees.

About half of the state's Republican primary voters also said they are very or somewhat concerned that Trump is too extreme to win the general election. And about one-third believe that

Trump broke the law — in his alleged attempt to interfere in the vote count in the 2020 presidential election, his role in what happened at the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, or with the classified documents found at his Florida home after he left the White House.

In a conference call Wednesday, the Biden campaign signaled it was eager to take on Trump, while highlighting the Republican former president's apparent weakness with general election swing voters.

"We have been prepared for this since the launch of this reelection last year," Biden spokesman Michael Tyler said of Trump's grip on the GOP nomination. "We are full steam ahead heading into the general election."

Trump flew back to his Florida estate late Tuesday as he prepared for another series of court appearances.

Still, for all of Trump's baggage, there were new signs following his New Hampshire victory that his party was accepting the reality of his dominance. A new series of elected officials endorsed him, including Texas Sen. John Cornyn, who has publicly disagreed with Trump before and told reporters in May, "We need to come up with an alternative."

Cornyn tried to project confidence in Trump as he spoke to reporters on Capitol Hill on Wednesday even as he acknowledged the former president's need to expand his appeal heading into the next phase of the campaign.

"You can't win with just your own base," Cornyn said. "But President Biden's got serious problems. I mean, all the polling shows that even Democrats aren't excited about his candidacy. So, I like President Trump's chances."

NATION



ANDREW MEDICHINI/AP

Mario Marazziti, in charge of Sant' Egidio's death penalty advocacy group, talks during a press conference in Rome on Tuesday. The Vatican-affiliated Sant' Egidio Community, which has lobbied for decades to abolish the death penalty, turned its attention to the scheduled execution of Kenneth Eugene Smith.

Alabama set to execute inmate with nitrogen gas for first time

Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. — Alabama, unless blocked by the U.S. Supreme Court, was to attempt to put an inmate to death with nitrogen gas on Thursday night, a never before used execution method that the state claims will be humane but critics call cruel and experimental.

Kenneth Eugene Smith, a 58-year-old convicted killer whose 2022 lethal injection was called off at the last minute because authorities couldn't connect an IV line, was scheduled to be executed at a south Alabama prison.

Alabama planned to put a respirator mask over Smith's face and replace his breathing air with pure nitrogen gas, causing him to die from lack of oxygen. The execution will be the first attempt to use a new execution method since the 1982 introduction of lethal injection, now the most common execution method in the United States.

"It's terrifying. This is a situation where we have absolutely no idea what we are walking into," the Rev. Jeff Hood, Smith's spiritual adviser and a death penalty opponent, said Thursday morning.

Smith's attorneys on Thursday asked the U.S. Supreme Court to halt the execution to review claims that the new method violates the constitutional ban on cruel and unusual punishment and deserves more legal scrutiny before it is used on a person.

"There is little research regarding death by nitrogen hypoxia. When the State is considering using a novel form of execution that has never been attempted anywhere, the public has an interest in ensuring the State has researched the method adequately and established procedures to minimize the pain and suffering of the condemned person," Smith's attorneys wrote.

On Wednesday, appeals court judges rejected Smith's argument that it would be unconstitutional to make another attempt to execute him after the failed lethal injection.

Smith is one of two men convicted in the 1988 murder-for-hire slaying of Elizabeth Sennett. Prosecutors said he and the other man were each paid \$1,000 to kill Sennett on behalf of her pastor husband, who was deeply in debt and wanted to collect on insurance.

Alabama Attorney General Steve Marshall said Wednesday night that he believes the courts will allow the execution to proceed.

"My office stands ready to carry on the fight for Liz Sennett. Two courts have now rejected Smith's claims. I remain confident that the Supreme Court will come down on the side of justice, and that Smith's execution will be carried out," Marshall said.

Trump returns to courtroom to defend himself

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Former President Donald Trump's lawyers were poised to begin his defense, including calling him as a witness Thursday, to fight a lawsuit seeking over \$10 million for things he said about advice columnist E. Jean Carroll after she accused him of sexual assault.

Trump was expected to testify after Carroll's lawyers finished the presentation of their case by showing jurors video clips of the Republican front-runner in this year's presidential race saying at a Jan. 17 campaign rally that Carroll's claims were a "made-up, fabricated story" and a 2022 deposition deriding her as "a liar and a very sick person."

Trump attorney Alina Habba asked for a directed verdict in Trump's favor, saying that it was clear from Carroll's testimony that there was insufficient proof to allow the jury to find damages.

"Your honor, Ms. Carroll didn't prove her case, period," she said. Judge Lewis A. Kaplan denied the request.

The Manhattan federal court trial had been suspended since early Monday because of a juror's illness. When it resumed Thursday, the judge said two jurors were being "socially distanced" from the others in the jury box.

Prior to resting, Carroll's lawyers called a single witness — Roberta Myers — who testified that Carroll was a "truth teller," an accomplished writer with a long history of unleashing a "tremendous amount of empathy and a great sense of humor" in her popular monthly advice column while Myers was editor-in-chief of Elle magazine from 2000 to 2017.

It was after her testimony that Carroll's attorneys showed the video clips, including portions of Trump's October 2022 deposition when he denied knowing who Carroll was.

One snippet shown to jurors was when Trump during his deposition misidentified Carroll as his ex-wife, Marla Maples.

If everything went as planned, Trump could have been on the witness stand before the end of the day. Habba told the judge the first defense witness will not be Trump. He is fresh off big victories in the New Hampshire primary on Tuesday and the Iowa caucuses last week.

In court Thursday, Trump appeared relatively subdued compared to his appearances last week. He mostly gazed straight ahead, expressionless, though he seemed to move his lips along with the movement of his mouth in the video showing him saying the trial was rigged.

Carroll, 80, testified at a trial last year in the same courtroom that she was attacked by Trump in the dressing room of a midtown luxury department store in spring 1996. A jury last year agreed that it happened and awarded Carroll \$5 million in damages for sexual abuse and defamation.

Trump denies ever knowing Carroll and says she made up her claims to sell a memoir. He did not testify or attend last year's trial, a decision he now says he regrets.

Kaplan ruled that last year's jury conclusions meant that a new jury chosen last week only needs to decide how much more money, if any, Trump owes Carroll for disparaging her and calling her a liar in 2019 while he was president.

Trump White House official gets 4-month sentence for defying subpoena

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Trump White House official Peter Navarro, who was convicted of contempt of Congress for refusing to cooperate with an investigation into the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol, was sentenced on Thursday to four months behind bars.

He was the second Trump aide convicted of contempt of Congress charges, after former White House adviser Steve Bannon, who also got a four-month sentence.

Navarro was found guilty of defying a subpoena for documents

and a deposition from the House Jan. 6 committee. He served as a White House trade adviser under then-President Donald Trump and later promoted the Republican's baseless claims of mass voter fraud in the 2020 election he lost to Democrat Joe Biden.

He has vowed to appeal the verdict, saying he couldn't cooperate with the committee because Trump had invoked executive privilege. A judge barred him from making that argument at trial, however, finding that he didn't show Trump had actually



Navarro

invoked it. Navarro said in court before his sentencing Thursday that the House committee investigating the Jan. 6 attack had led him to believe that it accepted his invocation of executive privilege. "Nobody in my position should be put in conflict between the legislative branch and the executive branch," he told the judge.

The judge told Navarro that it

took "chutzpah" for him to assert that he accepted responsibility for his actions while also suggesting that his prosecution was politically motivated. "You are not a victim. You are not the object of a political prosecution," the judge said. "These are circumstances of your own making."

Navarro's lawyers had advised him not to address the judge, but he said he wanted to speak after hearing the judge express disappointment in him. Responding to a question about why he didn't initially seek a lawyer's counsel, he

told the judge, "I didn't know what to do, sir."

The judge is allowing Navarro's defense to submit a written brief on the question of allowing him to remain free pending appeal.

Justice Department prosecutors said Navarro tried to "hide behind claims of privilege" even before he knew what the committee wanted, showing a "disdain" for the committee that should warrant a longer sentence. Prosecutors had asked a judge to sentence him to six months behind bars and impose a \$200,000 fine.

WORLD

Man given death sentence for Japanese anime studio attack

By MARI YAMAGUCHI
Associated Press

TOKYO — A Japanese court sentenced a man to death after finding him guilty of murder and other crimes Thursday for carrying out an arson attack on an anime studio in Kyoto that killed 36 people.

The Kyoto District Court said it found the defendant, Shinji Aoba, mentally capable to face punishment for his crimes and announced the sentence of capital punishment after a recess in a two-part session on Thursday.

Aoba stormed into Kyoto Animation's No. 1 studio on July 18, 2019, and set it on fire. Many of the victims were believed to have died of carbon monoxide poisoning. More than 30 other people were badly burned or injured.

Judge Keisuke Masuda said Aoba had wanted to be a novelist but was unsuccessful and so he sought revenge, thinking that Kyoto Animation had stolen novels he submitted as part of a company contest, according to NHK national television.

NHK also reported that Aoba, who was out of work and struggling financially after repeatedly changing jobs, had plotted a separate attack on a train station

north of Tokyo a month before the arson attack on the animation studio.

Aoba plotted the attacks after studying past criminal cases involving arson, the court said in the ruling, noting the process showed that Aoba had premeditated the crime and was mentally capable.

"The attack that instantly turned the studio into hell and took the precious lives of 36 people, caused them indescribable pain," the judge said, according to NHK. During the trial, Aoba told the victims' families that he was sorry, but he did not show sincere regret or face their sufferings fully, and there was little hope for correction, the ruling said.

Aoba, 45, was severely burned and was hospitalized for 10 months before his arrest in May 2020. He appeared in court in a wheelchair.

His defense lawyers argued he was mentally unfit to be held criminally responsible.

About 70 people were working inside the studio in southern Kyoto, Japan's ancient capital, at the time of the attack. One of the survivors said he saw a black cloud rising from downstairs, then scorching heat came and he jumped from a window of the

three-story building gasping for air.

The company, founded in 1981 and better known as KyoAni, made a mega-hit anime series about high school girls, and the studio trained aspirants.

Japanese media have described Aoba as being thought of as a troublemaker who repeatedly changed contract jobs and apartments and quarreled with neighbors.

The fire was Japan's deadliest since 2001, when a blaze in Tokyo's congested Kabukicho entertainment district killed 44 people.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshi- masa Hayashi said the Kyoto Animation attack was "a highly tragic case" and that the government has since stepped up restrictions on gasoline sales, including mandatory identification checks of purchasers. Hayashi, however, declined to comment on the death penalty ruling.

Japan has maintained the death penalty despite growing international criticism. Justice ministry officials say it is a justified response to continuing heinous and violent crimes. A survey by the Japanese government showed an overwhelming majority of the public supports executions.

US congressional delegation affirms support for Taiwan

By CHRISTOPHER BODEEN
Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan — A bipartisan delegation from the United States Congress reaffirmed support for Taiwan during a visit Thursday following its election of a new president. The delegation's visit is the first by U.S. lawmakers to the island since the independence-leaning Democratic Progressive Party won a third-straight term in the Jan. 13 election.

China, America's chief competitor for global influence, claims Taiwan as its own territory and threatens to use force to bring the self-governed island under its control. Beijing strongly condemned Lai Ching-te's election and appears set to continue its policy of refusing to engage with the island's government—a practice that's been in place since outgoing President Tsai Ing-wen's election in 2016.

"The support of the United States for Taiwan is firm. It's real, and it is 100% bipartisan," U.S. Representative Mario Díaz Balart said.

Balart, a Florida Republican, was joined by California Democrat Ami Bera. "In the 21st century, there's no place for aggressive action. We have to learn to live together, to trade together, to work together, to solve problems together," Bera said.

"Just know that we are proud of the people of Taiwan. We are proud of the relationship, and as strong as that relationship has always been. That is assured. It will even be stronger," Balart said.

"So, we look forward to working together to continue to protect the peace, prosperity (and) the future of Taiwan. It's up to the people of Taiwan," Bera said.

President-elect Lai thanked the visiting co-chairs of the U.S. Congressional Taiwan Caucus for their visit, saying that "today's Taiwan is a Taiwan of the world."

Lai also touched on continued military assistance from the U.S. and a proposed agreement to avoid mutual taxation of companies.

Beijing objects to any form of official contact between the U.S. and Taiwan. In 2022, it responded to a visit by then-House Speaker Nancy Pelosi with some of its largest military maneuvers in years, including missile launches and a simulated blockade of Taiwan. It views visits by foreign government officials as a recognition of the island's sovereignty.

President Joe Biden, seeking to calm that complaint, insists there's no change in America's longstanding "one-China" policy, which recognizes Beijing as representing China but allows informal relations and defense ties with Taiwan.

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OCT 5-12 2024 (SPLIT - DUBROVNIK)	OCT 19-26 2024 (SPLIT - DUBROVNIK)
OCT 12-19 2024 (DUBROVNIK - SPLIT)	OCT 26 - NOV 2 2024 (DUBROVNIK - SPLIT)

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WEEKEND



'Genreless' approach opens doors for country
Music, Pages 28-29



Apple TV+ photos

Doing justice to the danger

Long-awaited series 'Masters of the Air' backed by Spielberg and Hanks tells the story of the WWII Flying Fortress bombers

Television, Pages 16-17



WEEKEND: GADGETS & TECHNOLOGY

GADGETS

Practical, innovative

A look at a few of the cool items that were shown at the 2024 CES Show in Las Vegas

By GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service

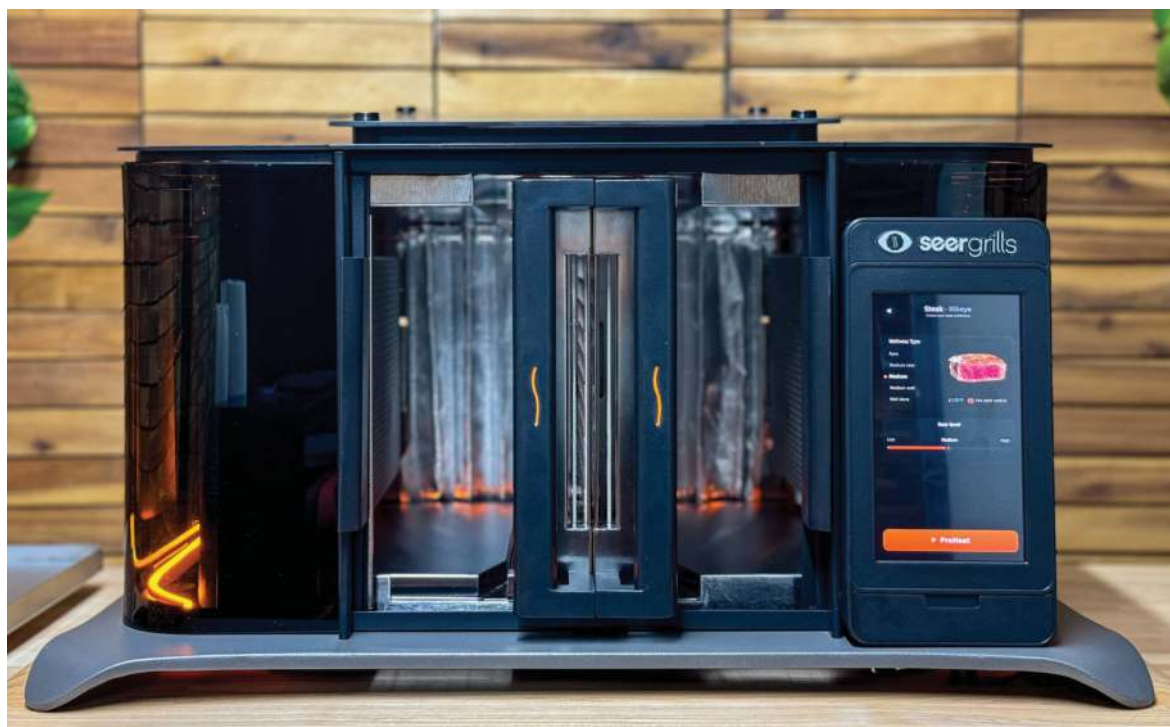
Once again, there were a lot of robots and artificial intelligence technology being shown off in various gadgets at the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas. Here's a quick sampling of just a few of thousands of items I was emailed about, which are already available or set to launch this year.

Seergrill announced the world's first AI-powered **Perfecta outdoor grill**. It is said to use proprietary NeuralFire technology, which will deliver chef-level results in as little as 90 seconds — 10 times faster than you'd get with conventional cooking. It can cook a 1-inch rib-eye steak in 90 seconds and four chicken breasts in two minutes and 30 seconds, according to Seergrill. Users can customize how meals are cooked in the Seergrill app. AI incorporates your information with sensor data to control the novel burner system and achieve the best flavor profile, simplify healthy eating and create protein-rich meals. The Perfecta has a variety of modes, including grill or oven; pizza and rotisserie modules can be added. In chef mode, cooks have complete control over the burners. Propane or gas powers

the stainless steel and ceramic glass-constructed grill. The drip tray is dishwasher safe; the grill has a built-in emergency stop button. Lifetime software updates are included.

Online: seergrills.com; MSRP \$3,500, available in late 2024

GE Lighting, a Savant Company, will launch all-new **Cync Reveal HD+ Full-Color under-cabinet fixtures and pucks**. They are promoted as the first and only full-color and edge-lit bright under-cabinet lights available in the North American market. They offer exceptional clarity, millions of color options and smart control in an elegant, easy-to-install under-cabinet fixture. They illuminate countertops with diffused pools of vibrant colors and pure, clean light. It's an easy-to-install system that allows up to 10 fixtures to be connected



SEERGRILL/TNS

The Seergrill AI-powered Perfecta intelligent outdoor grill can cook a 1-inch rib-eye steak in 90 seconds and four chicken breasts in two minutes and 30 seconds using its proprietary NeuralFire technology.



CATALYST/TNS

The Catalyst Dog Collar for AirTag holds the Apple tracking device in a case. It is adjustable, durable and quick-drying.

to one another. Apps and voice controls can adjust the lighting system, which will be available later this year.

Online: gelifighting.com, MSRP \$59.99

Catalyst, an innovation company known for creating protection for electronic devices, has several new products. Among them are a **Dog Collar for AirTag** and a new **Floating Wrist Lanyard**. The Dog Collar for AirTag



SAVANT/TNS

GE Lighting will launch what it claims are the first and only full-color and edge-lit bright under-cabinet lights available in the North American market.

(\$24.99) is a new type of product for Catalyst. It's designed to hold the Apple tracking device in the Catalyst AirTag Clip-It Case (not included, \$34.99) and is adjustable, durable, quick-drying and resists scratching and licking. The collar is designed not to rub or irritate the dog's fur or skin. AirTags are tracking devices that can tell you where your pet is with an app.



CATALYST/TNS

Catalyst's Floating Wrist Lanyard attaches to Catalyst iPhone cases and other devices to help them float.

Catalyst's Floating Wrist Lanyard (\$29.99) can be attached to all Catalyst Total Protection or Waterproof iPhone cases, and other devices a lanyard can attach to. The bright orange floating strap is adjustable and supports a weight of up to 12 ounces. Online: catalystcase.com

Too Good to Go using AI to help grocers cut waste

By SANNE WASS
Bloomberg

Supermarkets are missing out on untapped revenue from selling food that's about to expire, as store workers waste hours searching for short-dated products and discounting them by hand.

At least that's the pitch from Too Good To Go, an eight-year-old Danish company that cut its teeth addressing restaurant food waste and is now turning to grocery stores' soon-to-expire goods. Starting this month, TGTG is selling an artificial-intelligence-powered solution that assists supermarkets with expiration dates, which are a major pain point for retail food waste. The company will begin its global rollout with the international super-

market chain SPAR.

"Every day across grocery stores, staff go around and very manually go through all the different products to check if anything is about to run out of date," TGTG Chief Executive Officer Mette Lykke said in an interview with Bloomberg Green.

Lykke described this as a time-consuming process that's prone to errors: Short-dated products are often spotted too late, and discounts meant to encourage purchasing leave potential revenue on the table, she said.

TGTG's software factors in customer behavior, seasonality and other considerations to estimate how likely a product is to sell in a store at any given time, then suggests a discount rate as the item ap-

proaches its expiration date.

The tool also helps workers track expiry dates such that only 1% to 7% of products need to be manually checked, Lykke said. And it flags when food could be donated or sold at a steep discount through Too Good To Go's eponymous app.

The company trialed its new tool with a supermarket chain in France, where large grocery stores have since 2016 been banned from throwing away unused food that could be donated. The grocer had been discounting its cheeses by 50% nationwide when they got within two days of their expiration date. Now the store varies discounts based on region and time of year. In Normandy, for example, people buy more Camembert in the summer;

while in the Alps, Swiss cheese sells easily on cold winter days when raclette (a local dish) is on the menu in many homes.

Inflation is driving up demand for cheaper short-dated goods, said Jorgen Dejgaard Jensen, a professor at the University of Copenhagen who researches the economy of food waste. Supermarkets are also increasingly focused on using discounts and promotions of near-expired products to limit food waste and bolster their bottom line.

"If supermarkets don't have to spend too many resources on selling the food at a discount, then it's a better business for them," Jensen said, though he noted the risk of near-expired food ultimately being trashed at home instead.

WEEKEND: VIDEO GAMES

A strong start but weak finish to 2024

Many of the most anticipated video games of the year are scheduled to arrive within the first quarter

BY GENE PARK
The Washington Post

Last year set a high bar for quality video game releases, and 2024 so far isn't quite clearing it.

The pandemic screwed up production schedules for countless big-budget video games, and as a result, 2023's game release schedule ended up with a logjam of incredible games released week after week.

Long production cycles mean we are seeing fewer high-budget games from studios. In the 1990s and early 2000s, many games often took under two years to create, but now they take anywhere from half to a full decade. There is no clearer example than the 11-year gap between Grand Theft Auto V and the sixth title, scheduled for a 2025 release.

This year could've used some of that sizzle, as many projects still have "to be determined" release dates. But 2024 will at least start out very strong, especially in the first quarter:

Prince of Persia: The Lost Crown

Platforms: Switch, PlayStation 5, Xbox, PC
Release date: Jan. 18

Ubisoft revives (for the third time) one of gaming's first stories ever told. This new reboot evokes the 2D roots of the series while updating the tale with flashy action and a modern visual language edited with style and panache.

Like a Dragon: Infinite Wealth

Platforms: PS5, PS4, Xbox, PC
Release date: Jan. 26

The 18-year-old Japanese crime drama series (formerly called Yakuza) has been steadily growing its audience, and its shift to old-school, turn-based gameplay was a surprising and welcome success. Surprising, in part, because the series changed focus away from an extraordinarily well-liked protagonist to a new one, an unemployed 40-something optimist named Ichiban Kasuga, and no one complained because the stories and characters were so well written. The new chapter sees Ichiban visiting Hawaii to further explore his history as he tries to escape the criminal life and go straight.

Tekken 8

Platforms: PS5, Xbox, PC
Release date: Jan. 26

The modern-day fighting game renaissance continues, as the best 3D fighting series introduces new characters and features. It also seems to present the most visually striking fisticuffs ever seen. This game is going to light up fighting game tournaments for years.

Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League

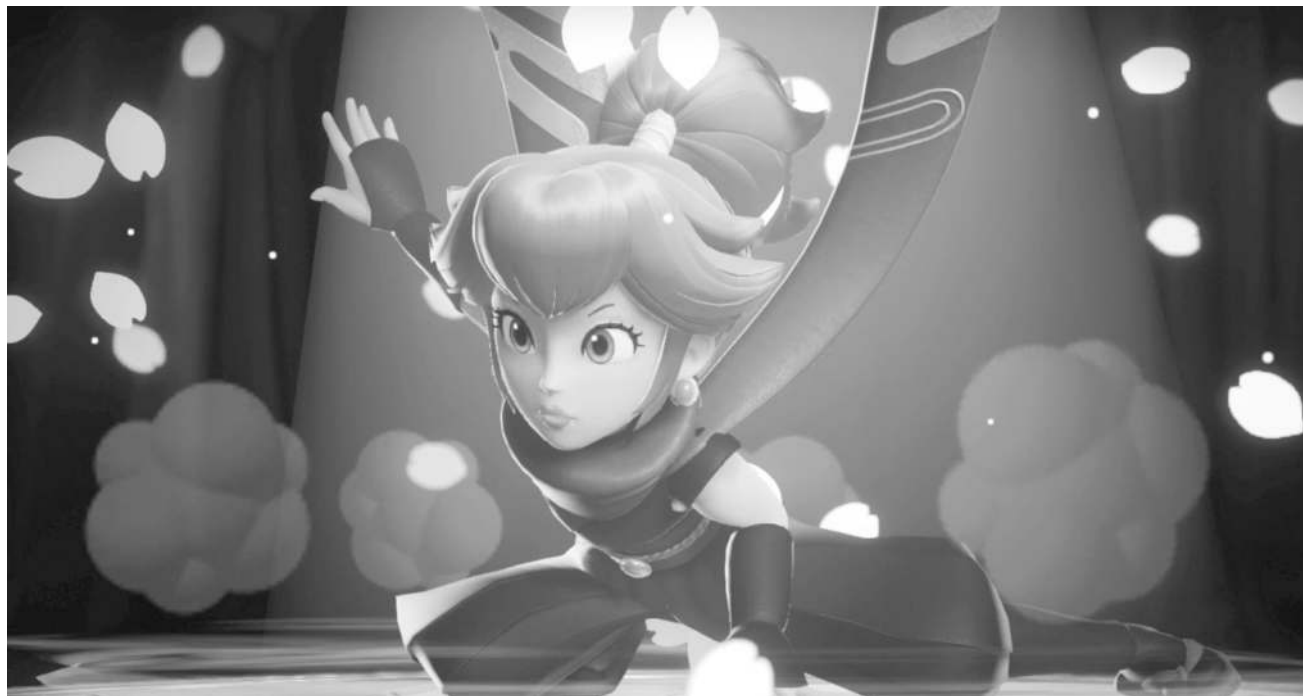
Platforms: PS5, Xbox, PC
Release date: Feb. 2

This is probably the most controversial game on the list simply for its method of business. Developer Rocksteady Studios made its name on single-player, story-focused Batman games, yet this game focuses on multiplayer gameplay meant to be a Fortnite-like "live service," the kind of experience that asks for money and demands engagement time. Despite these red flags, Rocksteady has a great record that deserves a chance. It helps that it seems like it'll be a fun time regardless.

Helldivers 2

Platforms: PS5, PC
Release date: Feb. 8

Speaking of live service, this is a rare PlayStation console exclusive that focuses entirely on multiplayer gameplay. Sony has famously expressed interest in live service games, but this was before many of these games started to fail. But Helldivers 2 seems to be built to succeed by



Nintendo

Princess Peach: Showtime!, which allows the heroine to pick any job she wants, may be the swan song for the Switch.



Square Enix

From left, Aerith, Cloud and Tifa continue on their world-saving battle against evil companies and power-hungry opponents in Final Fantasy VII Rebirth.

focusing on being a simple shooting game with aliens. Like pizza, it's hard to screw up a classic man vs. aliens video game.

Final Fantasy VII: Rebirth

Platform: PS5
Release date: Feb. 29

This is probably the most anticipated game of the year. Final Fantasy VII in 1997 helped establish PlayStation as a dominant entertainment force. The remake trilogy, whose first installment launched in 2020 to critical acclaim, is meant to honor and continue that game's story. Rebirth will cover the second chapter, when the most consequential events break out, including what many believe to be the single most memorable event in a video game story.

Dragon's Dogma 2

Platforms: PS5, Xbox, PC
Release date: March 22

The first game was a flawed masterpiece. Due to a famously rushed development period, the 2012 game had a terrible story and a relatively empty world, but its magic and beast-fighting systems were better than basically those of any other fantasy adventure. The sequel aims to chisel out any flaws to finally let this concept shine. No other game captures David vs. Goliath energy quite like this series.

Princess Peach: Showtime!

Platform: Switch
Release date: March 22

The first lady of video games finally gets another starring role. Last time, her game centered around problem-

atic notions of emotions. This time, she's basically able to take any job she wants, from swordfighter to detective. Nintendo's release schedule is otherwise quiet this year, because it's likely making way for its next console release, so there's a high chance that Peach's stage presence will be the swan song for the world's bestselling game console at the moment.

Rise of the Ronin

Platform: PS5
Release date: March 22

It's an open-world samurai adventure made by the makers of the Nioh series and the early 2000s Ninja Gaiden games. If those words mean anything to you, you won't need any more convincing.

Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes

Platforms: Switch, PS5, PS4, Xbox, PC
Release date: April 23

A fantasy game with 100 characters sounds outlandish, but this wouldn't even be the first of its kind. This is the spiritual successor to the niche but adored Suikoden games, and creator Yoshitaka Murayama returns for another shot. Overshadowed by Final Fantasy VII during the '90s, the 100-hero concept will get a second chance at a far more diverse and welcoming global gaming audience.

Senua's Saga: Hellblade II

Platforms: Xbox, PC
Release date: TBD

After years of cooking, the sequel to psychological horror action game Hellblade: Senua's Sacrifice may finally see the light of day this year. Xbox has had trouble lining up exclusive titles, but Senua's Saga aims to showcase the console's power for photorealistic storytelling. This one is likely aimed for a late 2024 release but has yet to get on the calendar.

Baby Steps

Platforms: PS5, PC
Release date: TBD

Acclaimed game designer Bennett Foddy is known for creating quirky, funny games about moving around. Getting Over It with Bennett Foddy was a viral hit among streamers and YouTube creators. Baby Steps seems to take this concept further by imagining a middle-aged man with the navigational faculties of an infant. No doubt, this is going to be on thousands of streamer screens by the end of the year, whenever it releases.

WEEKEND: TELEVISION



Apple TV+

Edward Ashley, Matt Gavan, Callum Turner, Anthony Boyle and Darragh Cowley star in "Masters of the Air," a history of the American Eighth Air Force.

'Masters of the Air' takes flight

Spielberg, Hanks behind Apple TV+ limited series telling stories of real-life WWII bomber crews

BY PETER LARSEN
The Orange County Register

In June 1943, 36 B-17 Flying Fortress bombers in the U.S. Army Air Force 100th Bombardment Group arrived at an air base in England, each with a flight crew of 10 men, all of them there to battle Nazi Germany in World War II.

Four months later, 34 of the 36 Flying Fortresses had been shot down, giving the group its nickname: The Bloody 100th.

If that sounds like a compelling story to you, well, Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks thought so, too. Along with their fellow executive producer Gary Goetzman, they grabbed the

rights to "Masters of the Air," a history of the American Eighth Air Force, which included the Bloody 100th, for the limited series of the same name.

"Masters of the Air," which premieres with two episodes on Apple TV+ on Friday, completes the trilogy of World War II series that Spielberg, Hanks and Goetzman embarked upon with "Band of Brothers" in 2001 and "The Pacific" in 2010.

It's a sweeping war story, an impeccably crafted series that captures the drama inherent in the life-and-death stakes, with death the more common outcome. The crews climbed into

hulking airplanes, flew dangerous daylight bombing missions over enemy territory and if they survived the terror of anti-aircraft flak and German Messerschmitt fighters, they headed out a day or two later to do it all again.

"One of the things that makes its impression on me when I go back and watch the series? We really tried to do as much justice as we could to the danger," says actor Nate Mann, who plays Maj. Robert "Rosie" Rosenthal in "Masters of the Air." "To the precariousness. To just how harrowing these missions were."

SEE AIR ON PAGE 17

WEEKEND: TELEVISION

Air: Producers reached for the sky in trying to make film feel realistic

FROM PAGE 16

Dream roles

Rosenthal, like the other main characters in the series, was a real person. A young lawyer from Brooklyn, he enlisted after Pearl Harbor and beat the odds of the Bloody 100th to become one of the most decorated bomber pilots of the war.

Mann and actor Anthony Boyle, who plays Maj. Harry Crosby, a B-17 navigator, and later, navigator for the entire bomb group, talked recently about the dreamlike feeling of working on the project that completed a trilogy they first encountered as boys.

"I watched 'Band of Brothers' as a kid," Mann says. "I think it was one of the first TV shows I'd watched in its entirety. It made such a big impression on me."

He also saw "Saving Private Ryan," the 1998 World War II epic for which Spielberg directed Hanks, and later, "The Pacific," too.

"This show, it's the same lineage," Mann says of Goetzman, Hanks and Spielberg. "It was actually seeing how much this story mattered to them, and why this story was so important to tell, I knew I wanted to be a part of that legacy."

The Irish Boyle, who as Crosby, also narrates the series, says his experience was similar.

"Yeah, for me, man, it was those three names," Boyle says, recalling receiving an email about the project that didn't share too many specifics. "You go, 'Oh, of course, I want it. I don't even know what it is, but I want to do it.'"

"Then when I found out it was the third installment of 'Band of Brothers,' which was one of my favorite series growing up, I just wanted to — you know, I'd have held the boom. I'd have just sat in the room and watched it. So to play a role in it was just a really great honor."

Finest details

Boyle and Mann are part of a quartet of lead actors that includes Austin Butler, an Oscar nominee for "Elvis," and Callum Turner as best friends Maj. Gale "Buck" Cleven and Maj. John "Bucky" Egan. (And yes, Buck and Bucky were their real nicknames.)

Barry Keoghan, an Oscar nominee for "The Banshees of Inisherin," plays fellow pilot Lt. Curtis Biddick. And the trio of actors Branden Cook, Josiah Cross and new "Doctor Who" star Ncuti Gatwa arrive in the final episodes of the series as Tuskegee Airmen, Black pilots flying P-51 fighter planes.

A budget estimated at \$250 million to \$300 million enabled all facets of the show to be convincing. Among the more impressive elements are the sets, which include a re-creation of the Thorpe Abbots airfield where the Bloody 100th was based; period costumes, including hair and makeup; and, most impressively, the B-17 Flying Fortresses.

Only a few dozen Flying Fortresses still exist, and just a handful are in flying condition. No problem for "Masters of the Air," which built two full-sized replicas to film on the runways and then created smaller sections of the interiors for close shots of the actors in flight.

Or facsimile of flight, Mann and Boyle say. All of the in-flight scenes were shot on a soundstage with cockpits, navigation, bombardier stations and gun placements attached to massive gimbals that could tilt and turn the bomber parts and actors inside them to simulate flight, strikes by fighter bullets and flak.

Instead of traditional green screen technology, the production created a huge wall and ceiling of LED screens onto which the flights and dogfights were projected. That allowed actors to react in real time on set to the same images that viewers see them react to in the series.

"It was very different for me," Boyle says of filming the airborne scenes. "It felt like we were trying to get as real as possible. As close to what it would have been like."

"We didn't have a green screen; we had 360-degree



Apple TV+ photos

Barry Keoghan plays pilot Lt. Curtis Biddick in "Masters of the Air." All of the in-flight scenes were shot on a soundstage with a huge wall and ceiling of LED screens onto which the flights and dogfights were projected. That allowed actors to react in real time on set to the same images that viewers see them react to in the series.

"The level of detail, right down to the knobs and switches and gauges of those machines was something that was really important to Steven and Tom and Gary to try and get right, in order to make it feel as accurate as possible."

Nate Mann

Maj. Robert "Rosie" Rosenthal, "Masters of the Air"

screens," he says. "There was this new technology we were using so we could actually see the planes coming toward us in 3D. It was like the full thing was coming around you, and we were on these hydraulics 50 feet in the air. They would shake, and when you were shot, the plane would fall over."

It was, both Mann and Boyle say, both immersive and claustrophobic inside the re-created B-17 interiors.

"Yeah, it was claustrophobic," Boyle says. "Especially when you couldn't pee when you're up there for nine hours at a time and you were bursting to go."

True experiences

Both the detail of the mock bombers and the coaching of their military advisers gave both Mann and Boyle the sense that they were doing their best possible work re-creating the actions large and small of their real-life counterparts Rosenthal and Crosby.

"The level of detail, right down to the knobs and switches and gauges of those machines, was something that was really important to Steven and Tom and Gary to try and get right, in order to make it feel as accurate as possible," Mann says.

"One of our military advisers, Taigh (Ramey), actually has flown some of the remaining B-17s that are around," he says. "So he would be on the walkie talking with us, and when we would call cut, he would say, 'OK, this time, you're going to switch this first in order to do that, because that's how it would work.'"

"So that level of specificity is great on our end because it just brings it to life."



Josiah Cross plays one of the Tuskegee Airmen — Black pilots flying P-51 fighter planes — in "Masters of the Air." They don't appear until the final episodes of the series.

All of that helped build the confidence that allowed them to find the emotions they imagined the pilots and crews of the Bloody 100th might have felt.

"You know, you're 25,000 feet up in the air, limited oxygen, it's 40 below zero for hours at a time," Mann says. "And in the midst of that, these men had to focus and work together in order to try and find their target."

"There's some harrowing sequences in there that make a very intensive viewing experience. Then in the midst of that, just to put into context the nature of the war, the nature of this specific conflict, which we're embedding ourselves in."

"They're stories that we were so interested in telling. Because these men, the men of the 100th, deserve to have their memories shared."

WEEKEND: MOVIES

At 94, at last a leading lady

‘About Schmidt’ and ‘Nebraska’ actor June Squibb front and center in the Sundance breakout ‘Thelma’

BY LINDSEY BAHR
Associated Press

June Squibb is perhaps the busiest 94-year-old in Hollywood. This year alone she'll voice a role in “Inside Out 2,” head to New York to star in Scarlett Johansson's directorial debut and film a television series that she can't quite talk about just yet.

And for the first time in her rich and varied career, which brought her from the stage to an Oscar nomination at 84, she is the lead of a film, “Thelma.” It's a grounded but also “Mission: Impossible”-inspired comedy about a grandmother trying to get her money back from a phone scammer. Thelma goes on a scooter ride across Los Angeles, with the late Richard Roundtree in tow, to right the wrong.

“My friends all laugh at me, like ‘What are you doing next?’” Squibb said in an interview with The Associated Press. “Sometimes I say to my agent, who is here, why are people still asking me to work? But I love it and I do it and it's been great.”

The charming film from first-time director Josh Margolin premiered Jan. 18 at the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, where it quickly became one of the must-sees. The filmmakers are looking for distribution partners at the festival.

“I just knew that the minute I read it that I wanted to do it. That's how I decide, because I truly read everything,” Squibb said. “I thought it was beautifully written. And I got excited about that scooter right away. I thought that would be a hoot to drive around on that.”

Thelma is the name of Margolin's grandmother, who was an inspiration for the story. Squibb was on his mind while writing, too, and it was a mutual friend, Beanie Feldstein, who connected them.

“Beanie knows my sister and she knows my real grandma and she was like, ‘Oh, you writing about your grandma? It's got to be June,’” Margolin said. “I said, ‘Yes that's exactly what I want.’”

Feldstein had recently acted in “The Humans” with Squibb and texted her: “I'm going to send you a script.” One read and a 30-minute conversation later, and she was in.

In “Thelma,” she's a widow living alone

in her beautiful apartment. Her family members are busy living their own lives but also concerned about her and wondering when they're going to be able to convince her to go into assisted living. Thelma is especially close with her grandson, played by “The White Lotus” Fred Hechinger, who feels personally responsible that his beloved grandmother has gone missing. Of course, the audience knows she hasn't simply wandered off — she's on a mission, which she knows well she has to do on her own as her family would never let her do anything that potentially dangerous. It's something that resonated for Squibb.

“I think we're all stronger than anyone thinks we are, in many different ways,” Squibb said. “I mean, I have friends that don't get out of the apartment, but they have strength in other areas.”

Her accomplice in this is Roundtree, who is delightful in one of his last film roles as the owner of the scooter she so

desperately needs. He had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and died in October at age 81. Squibb hadn't known the “Shaft” star before “Thelma”: The first thing she said was, “It's about time.” She's not entirely sure why she said it, but was glad that “he thought it was funny.”

“He was so good

and lovely. He was just a joy,” Squibb said. “And he would have gone on working. He was only in his early 80s.”

Squibb loved shooting “Thelma” all over the Valley and Brentwood in Los Angeles, with co-stars like Parker Posey, Clark Gregg and Malcolm McDowell, who made a big impression in his two days on set.

“He's a hell of an actor,” she remembered telling her assistant.

“We all knew, I think, that we were doing something special,” she said. “We had no idea that people would relate to it and react to it the way they are.”

The real Thelma and Squibb have yet to meet, but they'd like to. She gave the actor a “beautiful needlepoint pillow” and they've spoken over the phone about their favorite cop shows.

“My favorites are the ‘FBI’ on Tuesday night — all three of them,” Squibb said. “Oh, boy. You can't drag me away; I love them.”



INVISION/AP

Actress June Squibb poses for a photo in New York on Jan. 27, 2014. Squibb stars in the film “Thelma,” a grounded, “Mission: Impossible”-inspired comedy about a grandmother trying to get her money back from a phone scammer.

She doesn't seem too impressed with the leading lady designation. For her, it doesn't change the work, and some of her favorite roles have been “supporting,” especially those in Alexander Payne's “About Schmidt” and “Nebraska,” for which she received her first Oscar nomination 10 years ago. Both were turning points in her career, she said.

“I'm aware of what Alexander Payne did for me,” she said. “It made a tremendous difference.”

One thing that hasn't changed is her refusal to watch “dailies,” the raw, unedited footage made during the making of a film.

“Some editors go crazy with me because they try so desperately to get me to come in and watch what's been shot. And I will

not do it. I just don't want to,” she said. “When I worked with Jack Nicholson, he wanted me to come in. I said, ‘No, I'm not.’ My early training was on the stage and you really learn not to look at yourself. Don't think about yourself. You just do it. And I think I'm sure that's probably what it is.”

She has no trouble watching the finished product, though — she can even dissociate and just watch it as a film. And she'll keep working as long as she keeps finding interesting parts.

“When I came out of the womb, I said, ‘I'm an actress.’ I did it at a very young age and I decided ‘This is it.’ And I never varied from it or wavered,” Squibb said. “It's just something that I have always loved doing.”

WEEKEND: TV AND MOVIE REVIEWS

A soaring WWII tribute to US bomber pilots

Main draw of 'Masters of the Air' the human drama, but limited series doesn't skimp on quality aerial sequences either

BY MARK MESZOROS

The News-Herald, Willoughby, Ohio

World War II was, indeed, hell — even in the air. You are reminded of this repeatedly in the stellar new Apple TV+ series “Masters of the Air,” as bomber crews in Boeing B-17 Flying Fortresses — the men of the 100th Bomb Group, aka the “Bloody 100th” — are wounded or worse as the United States Air Force strives to gain dominance in the skies over its German counterpart, the Luftwaffe, as D-Day approaches.

Launching with two of its nine hourlong episodes this week, the series is the latest World War II-related project from producers Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks. The director and star, respectively, of the acclaimed 1998 film “Saving Private Ryan” later helped bring to the small screen the highly regarded HBO series “Band of Brothers” (2001) and “The Pacific” (2010), all of which mined great drama from the conflict between the Allied and Axis powers that dominated the first half of the 1940s.

“Masters of the Air” does the same, largely under the guidance of John Orloff, who was nominated for an Emmy Award for writing an installment of “Band of Brothers” and who here is the writer or co-writer of every episode. The series is adapted from the 2006 nonfiction book of the same name by Donald L. Miller.

“Masters of the Air” carries with it a beefy ensemble, which is anchored by stars Austin Butler (“Elvis”) and Callum Turner (“The Boys in the Boat”), who portray Maj. Gale “Buck” Cleveland and Maj. John “Bucky” Egan, respectively.



Apple TV+

Austin Butler and Callum Turner play officers in a bromance in “Masters of the Air.”

Despite their nicknames, the officers have little in common but are the best of friends before each arrives — Bucky before Buck — at the Thorpe Abbots base in the United Kingdom.

Theirs is the most endearing of bromances. They care deeply about and worry for each other throughout the twists and turns that lie ahead for them in the air and on the ground.

And the performances of the stoic Butler — producers wanted a “John Wayne type” for Buck, according to the show’s production notes — and the cool-and-cocky Turner — a “swashbuckling attitude” was the requisite for Bucky — are

two big reasons “Masters of the Air” is so consistently engaging. (And, no, it’s not a coincidence Butler was cast after working with Hanks on filmmaker Baz Luhrmann’s aforementioned 2022 Elvis Presley biopic.)

While the ensemble also boasts “Saltburn” star Barry Keoghan as another daring pilot, Lt. Curtis Biddick, it devotes more time to two other supporting characters: Maj. Harry “Cros” Crosby (Anthony Boyle) and Maj. Robert “Rosie” Rosenthal (Nate Mann).

Cros, who also serves as the series’ narrator, is a navigator with one small problem: He gets pretty sick before he

flies. Fortunately, that situation gets resolved when he gets bumped up in rank and bumped down to the ground, during which time the married officer encounters a female British officer, Sandra Wingate (Bel Powley), who seems to be keeping things from him.

The steady-Eddie Rosie, on the other hand, was born to fly, and his sense of duty is part of the reason he flies an incredibly high number of missions.

Although much of its draw is its human drama, “Masters of the Air” doesn’t short-change you when it comes to aerial sequences, which can be beautiful, riveting and horrifying at any moment.

The limited series, while maintaining a high level of quality, is at its best in its first servings — Cary Joji Fukunaga, who directed the excellent first season of HBO’s “True Detective” and the most recent James Bond movie, 2021’s “No Time to Die,” helms the two episodes debuting this week and the two debuting Feb. 2 and 9 — and its extended, very emotionally satisfying final part (due March 15) is directed by prestige TV heavyweight Tim Van Patten, whose credits include episodes of “The Sopranos” and “Game of Thrones,” as well as “The Pacific.”

As you’d expect — and as you’d hope — “Masters of the Air” leaves you with some information about the real masters of the air and what became of them. That only serves to make you admire them further, as difficult as that is to imagine while you’re watching their fictionalized versions in action serving their country.

“Masters of the Air” is rated TV-MA. Now streaming on Apple TV+.

‘Miller’s Girl’ a wacky, erotic school thriller with a literary bent

BY KATIE WALSH

Tribune News Service

It’s been a long time since we’ve had a worthy entry into the Completely Bonkers Cinematic Canon, which makes Jade Halley Bartlett’s “Miller’s Girl” a real treat. The most important quality that a Completely Bonkers film must have is a lack of self-awareness — it cannot wink or nudge at the audience to say, “hey, see what I’m doing here?” It must take itself utterly seriously, and that is what “Miller’s Girl” does so well, despite being completely divorced from any kind of recognizable reality.

The “Miller’s Girl” in question is Cairo Sweet, played by Jenna Ortega in a riff on her “Wednesday” character (she delivers her lines in a deadpan staccato). She lives in an antebellum mansion in rural Tennessee surrounded by books (many of them kept in antique birdcages for some reason) and no parents: They’re powerful lawyers who constantly travel the globe for work. Cairo describes herself in voice-over as lonely and unremarkable.

The title “Miller’s Girl” has a double meaning: Cairo’s English teacher is named Jonathan Miller (Martin Freeman), and also because she’s a fan of the notoriously banned novelist Henry Miller — she brings a copy of his erotic novel “Under the Roofs of Paris” to the first day of class, along with a copy of Jonathan’s (unsuccessful) collection of romantic short stories, “Apostrophes and Ampersands.”

In this public high school there appear to be all of two teachers — Mr. Miller and Coach Fillmore (Bashir Salahuddin) — and two students — Cairo and her flirty, petulant best friend Winnie (Gideon Adlon), whose catchphrase is “hungry.” The girls devise a plan to seduce their



Lionsgate

Martin Freeman’s teacher Mr. Miller has an inappropriate relationship with Jenna Ortega’s Cairo in “Miller’s Girl.”

teachers, mostly because Winnie has got it bad for Coach Fillmore, and because Cairo needs a topic for her college admissions essay about her greatest accomplishment.

In addition to questionable character and story beats, Bartlett makes some odd directorial choices in terms of where she places the camera for certain significant moments. But “Miller’s Girl” has a delirious style in terms of its production design: Jonathan teaches in a dim room lined with Persian rugs; Cairo’s “ancestral home” is filled with taxidermy and tea cups and old rotary phones.

But its most notable aesthetic trait is its script (also written by Bartlett), which brings a new meaning to the phrase “tortured prose.” There’s the portentously over-

the-top narration, and then there’s the rapid-fire dialogue that makes “Gilmore Girls” look graceful. At one point, Jonathan calls Cairo a genius because she can capably use the word “vituperation” in a sentence. It’s essentially “Thesaurus: The Movie.”

The locus of sexuality in “Miller’s Girl” resides entirely in words — it’s how Jonathan and his wife, the workaholic Beatrice (Dagmara Dominczyk) seduce each other — and it’s how his inappropriate flirtation with Cairo careens off the rails. He gives her a special assignment to write in the style of her favorite author and she chooses Henry Miller, ultimately turning in an erotic essay so filthy it results in a messy climax that proves hard to clean up.

There’s a certain verve to Bartlett’s style — it’s certainly bold even if the plot turns make no sense and the character development is nil. Everyone seems to be having a fun time with the wild Southern Gothic tone, especially Dominczyk, who is in full Blanche DuBois mode as Beatrice, only ever clad in a bra and satin robe, constantly surrounded by stacks of paper and bottles of booze. Both Beatrice and Cairo take a real pleasure in verbally teasing, torturing and emasculating Jonathan, who just seems horny and hen-pecked.

Some might see “Miller’s Girl” as a #MeToo story about relationships with uneven power dynamics, but it plays more like a throwback ’80s or ’90s erotic thriller like “Poison Ivy” or “Wild Things” with a literary bent. This is pure unintentional camp, striking that wild, so-bad-it’s-entertaining chord vigorously. I can’t recommend “Miller’s Girl,” but I also can’t recommend it enough.

“Miller’s Girl” is rated R for sexual content, language throughout, some teen smoking and drinking. Running time: 93 minutes. Now playing in select AAFES theaters.

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Nature, preservation in Austria's Hallstatt

It's rare that a town's charm will get me out of bed early. The postcard-pretty, lake-cuddling town of Hallstatt, two hours south of Salzburg, is one of those places. First thing in the morning, I head to the high end of town to look at the glassy waters of Lake Hallstatt. With the town's church spire mirrored in the tranquil water, a shuttle boat cuts through its reflection, like a knife putting a swirl in the icing on a big cake. For just a moment, it disturbs this oasis of peace.

Hallstatt is located in Austria's Salzkammergut lake district, a scenic wonder that has enthralled nature lovers for centuries. This is Sound of Music country — idyllic and majestic, but not rugged; a gentle land where lakes and mountains are shuffled together like a game of 52-card pick-up.

Before there was Rome, there was Hallstatt. One of Europe's oldest settlements, Hallstatt originated as a salt-mining center (its name means "place of salt"). If you were to dig under some of its buildings, you'd find Roman and pre-Roman Celtic pavement stones from the ancient and prehistoric salt depot. Archaeologists claim that people have been coming here for salt since

7,000 BC (over the millennia, salt has been precious because it preserved meat).

A funicular runs up the mountain to the town's salt mine, one of many throughout the region that offers tours. At the mine,



Rick Steves

visitors slip into overalls, meet their guide and hike deep into the mountain to learn about the history of salt. A highlight of the visit is riding down long banisters, miner-style, from one floor to the next ... praying for no splinters.

Facing the lake is Pension Hallberg, with a display of debris from the bottom of Lake Hallstatt. The most fascinating treasure is a trove of Nazi paraphernalia, including piles of war medallions. The explanation made perfect sense: When it became clear that Germany would lose World War II, those who served the Third Reich wanted to chuck any medals they had won. Lakes were the perfect trash bin.

In this town, when someone is happy to see you, they may say, "Can I cook you a fish?" I still remember the morning fish-selling ritual: A teenage boy



CAMERON HEWITT/Rick Steves' Europe

Above Hallstatt, the steep hillsides of the Dachstein range rise right up over lake shores.

rhythmically grabbed trout from the fishermen's pen and killed them one by one with a stern whack to the noggin. Another guy carried them to the tiny fishery, where they were gutted. A cat waited outside the door, confident his breakfast would be a good one. Restaurateurs and home-makers alike lined up, waiting to buy fresh trout to feed hungry tourists or special friends.

Restaurant Bräugasthof, lake-side and under a grand chestnut tree, is just the place to try some of Lake Hallstatt's prized fish. Reinanke (whitefish) is caught wild out of Lake Hallstatt and served the same day. Saibling (lake trout) is cheaper and also tasty. While you dine, you can feed the swans that patrol the lake and stretch greedily for every bit of bread you toss.

When I think of my favorite

small-town places in Europe, they are where nature and culture mix, where each balcony has a lovingly watered, one-of-a-kind flowerbox, and where swans know just the right time to paddle by for scraps from diners at lakeside tables. Places like Hallstatt.

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

Activities make Canary Islands more than a warm getaway

For decades, many of those fed up with the cold and bleakness of northern Europe's winter months have found their way to one relatively close-by, reliably warm and oftentimes sunny destination: The Canary Islands. While this archipelago makes up part of Spain, its geographical



Karen Bradbury

position off the coast of northern Africa makes it a good bet for warm, if not always hot, temperatures. A great number of these vacationers (according to Statista, about 12.3 million international tourists visited the island chain in 2022) will be content to simply laze about on the beach; for others, exploring new places and experiencing the local culture will make a quick getaway there an immensely more attractive proposition. Here are just a few things to see and do on the Canaries in the weeks and months to come.

Fete the arrival of spring

One of the earliest signs of spring is the blossoming of the almond trees, and on the Canary Islands, this phenomenon occurs early in the year. The community of Punta-gorda, on the island of La Palma, holds its annual Almond Blossom Festival from Jan. 27 through Feb. 4. Beneath the tender pink and white blossoms, villagers and locals let loose at street parties and move to the sounds of live music on stage. Online: tinyurl.com/2ajs8dc9

The town of Tejeda, on Gran Canaria, fetes its flowering beauty Feb. 3-4 with exhibitions and sales of locally-produced arts and crafts. On festival Sunday, traditional Canarian specialties are served up to the sounds of groups playing traditional music. Online: tinyurl.com/scheau9y

Celebrate carnival in the sun

All the pageantry and street party atmosphere of carnival — minus the frigid temperatures — awaits visitors



lpacarnaval.com

Las Palmas on Gran Canaria Carnival is considered one of the Canary Island chain's best celebrations of the season.

arriving between mid-February and mid-March. A few communities really know how to get down, particularly those on Tenerife and Gran Canaria.

The Carnival de Santa Cruz de Tenerife enters into its street party phase beginning with an opening parade on Feb. 9 and ends with a display of vintage automobiles, closing party and fireworks Feb. 18. In between, there are daytime carnivals (Feb. 11 and 17), Shrove Tuesday's big parade (Feb. 13), a ritual known as Burial of the Sardine (Feb. 14) and a children's parade (Feb. 16). Television serves as the theme of this year's festivities. Online: carnavaldetenerife.com

The carnival of Las Palmas on Gran Canaria Carnival is the island's largest and widely considered one of the best of the entire island chain. Festivities include late-night carnivals (Feb. 9-10 and 16-17); a carnival parade (Feb. 10); a children's carnival (Feb. 13); a carnival queen gala (Feb. 9); and a drag queen gala (Feb. 16). Celebra-

tions close with the Burial of the Sardine on Feb. 18. The Jumbo Center in Maspalomas becomes party central to celebrations of a rainbow hue March 15-17. Expect fancy dress, parades, comparsas (dance troupes), murgas (music groups), rondallas (string ensembles) and dozens of Spain's top drag queens battling for the carnival crown. Online: lpacarnaval.com/en

Get carried away by music

Each winter, some of the biggest names in classical music take part in the International Music Festival. The event's 40th edition, running through Feb. 9, features grand orchestras, masterful soloists and other musical greats performing some 60 concerts across all eight islands. Upcoming program highlights include the London Philharmonic Orchestra on Jan. 30 and 31; the Academy of St Martin in the Fields on Feb. 3 and 4 and the Filarmonica Della Scala Feb. 9 and 10. Online: icdcultural.org/index.html

Explore an underwater museum

The Museo Atlántico, located off in Playa Blanca on the island of Lanzarote, bills itself as Europe's only underwater museum. This site consists of 10 different groups of sculptures, the work of the sculptor Jason deCaires Taylor, including one of migrants crossing the deep sea in search of a brighter future. Even those without diving credentials can experience the site by means of a tour led by the museum's cooperating partner, a local diving school. The five-hour experience begins with a trial dive along the shore following a safety briefing, in-pool instruction, boat transfer to and from the museum, and a descent to the statues, which rest at a depth of some 46 feet. The cost of the experience including hotel transfer from select hotels in nearby towns, entrance fee and use of diving gear comes in at 144 euros per person. Online: underwatermuseumlanzarote.com/en

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Forever the Eternal City

A return trip to Rome, decades later, reveals change amid timelessness

BY ALAN BEHR
Tribune News Service

Although it was midwinter, streets in Rome were crowded, and historic sites were surprisingly well-populated with visitors. Christmas decorations stubbornly remained in place, appearing, from my perch above the graceful drape of the Spanish Steps, like campfires burning in the early lowering night. On the Piazza di Spagna, 135 Roman travertine steps below, the Dior shop stood canopied by an enveloping holiday display of butterflies in luminescent silver and gold.

I was back in Rome after a long absence. This time, following years of struggling to learn Italian, I had arrived with my skills in that musical language having been raised from nonexistent to embarrassing. I had memorized some of the notes but remained without practice in the melody. I was on my way to Florence to attend the winter edition of the semi-annual Pitti Uomo menswear event, and it was therefore serendipitous that, walking down the gentle slope of Via Sistina, I found a Borsalino hat shop. On my last visit to Italy, I had worn a classic gray fedora that was later donated to charity — after long and elegant service.

Patrizia, the experienced saleswoman in attendance in the small store (the brand has many retail venues in Italy), guided me to my departed hat's near-twin: an Italian-style fedora in light gray rabbit felt. An inspection in the mirror revealed that this style of headgear, with its broad brim pulled smartly low over my forehead, was literally a crowning improvement on nature. Thereafter, although I was nearly always in places inhabited by international business people and tourists, I was routinely mistaken for Italian. That meant being pressed into using my language skills; whenever my cover was thereby blown, so grateful were the locals that I even made the effort, they would smile — and usually keep right on in Italian.

A helpful exception was at my hotel, the aptly named Splendide Royal, on a hill overlooking the expansive Villa Borghese Gardens, which somehow remained verdant in the dead of winter. The hotel's glass and metal awning in the art nouveau style curved and spread over a cobblestone street. The classical reliefs that crowned the walls of my spacious room were executed with subtle elegance. You know you are in Italy when your hotel room puts your whole house to shame.

I am a big believer in riding the loyalty points wave (pay less, get pampered more), so thanks to my membership in Leaders Club of the Leading Hotels of the World, I was upgraded to a spacious room with a view of the gardens. While waiting for that to be readied, I went upstairs to Mirabelle, a restaurant and bar on a broad terrace that is both open and closed. As I gazed in jet-lagged contemplation over the gardens and enjoyed the kind of fragrant done-just-right cappuccino that you can find all over Italy, I had a strange sense of déjà vu — that I had been here before, taking in almost exactly that view. In particular, the twin towers of a monastery to the west were inexplicably familiar, and I do not recall ever having been an Italian monk.

Hospitality is about service first and foremost, and the hotel staff could not have been nicer. So, when I called for the recommendation of a restaurant in the area, I was eager to hear the first choice. Without hesitation, I was directed to the Piccolo Mondo.

"The Piccolo Mondo!" I exclaimed. "I dined there 32 years ago." The hotel made the reservation. I arrived at the old restaurant to find its vaults painted solid white, as if an Italian wine cellar had gone vacationing on Myko-



PHOTOS BY ALAN BEHR/TNS

Sundown from Hotel Splendide in Rome to the Villa Borghese Gardens. The twin towers at left are part of a monastery.



A woman tries on a Borsalino hat at the Pitti Uomo trade fair in Florence, Italy. The writer visited Italy specifically to attend the winter edition of the Pitti Uomo.

nos. In my travel memoir, "Once Around the Fountain," I had told of that comic first visit, when Rome had been virtually depopulated during an eye-glazing summer heat and with an unfavorable exchange rate that had kept Americans away. I had softly questioned the restaurant bill, only to see it, in retaliation, torn up in front of me — granting my party of two an unintended free meal.

Now, in the winter chill, the 70-year-old restaurant appeared reinvented, exuding refinement and warmth. My main course was a sophisticated assembly of three styles of veal in cauliflower cream — a kinetic, gourmet upgrade over that of my previous experience. When I told the manager that I was there after so long an absence (and a change in management), he was visibly pleased and invited me to return, albeit with a bit more haste.

The next morning, the sun rose over quiet Sunday streets. People were heading to church. I elected to follow and that is how, after twists along the way and a wait at airport-style security, I attended afternoon Mass at St. Peter's Basilica. Four priests celebrated it in a dignified relay. Many of the worshipers had apparently arrived spontaneously while visiting the basilica.

Being the seat of the Catholic world, with Pope Francis possibly in his apartments just above, gave the liturgy a quality of both majesty and inclusion. At the gift shop, I bought small bottles of Vatican-blessed holy water to use as presents. I then reverted to the secular, for Chianti at Mirabella, thereby adding a liquid counterpoint with which to close a Roman sabbath.

When I was nearly finished, I casually asked about the origins of the hotel. A staffer explained that it had formally been a monastery and that it incorporated a part of what had once been the Pullman Boston (now the Sofitel)



Sunday prayers in St. Peter's Basilica, Vatican City. The writer attended an afternoon Mass there while in Rome.

next door. Only then did I realize that the view from the terrace was so familiar because I had photographed it and made a large print. And that was because I had stayed in this portion of the building before, when it was a piece of the Pullman Boston.

Like that hat I had once worn and thought was gone, only to become mine again by repurchase, and like the restaurant where I had dined decades ago and was yet still available to me, the hotel where I had once stayed was again my temporary home in Italy.

Is Rome truly the Eternal City, as it is so often called? We carry smartphones now and can pay by mobile app and in euros whereas before, only Italian national currency would have worked. Wi-Fi is free almost wherever you want it. None of that had existed — not even those nouns — when I had last stayed in this space, but no matter. Rome, with its mystery, charm and monuments of imperial grandeur, had again made good on its promise of the eternal.

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS

Flossenbuerg's history lessons

German town near Czech border contains remnants of a WWII Nazi concentration camp, ruins of a count's castle

By MICHAEL SLAVIN
Stars and Stripes

Just a half-hour from two U.S. bases in Bavaria and a few minutes from the Czech border is the town of Flossenbuerg, which offers a history lesson spanning more than 1,000 years.

On arrival, Flossenbuerg looks like many other quaint Bavarian towns. However, it also provides two prominent snapshots into the area's past.

The first is the remnants of the concentration camp the Nazis built here during World War II. The whole camp can be seen in around an hour, but the weather shortened my trip to 40 minutes.

Before Allied forces liberated it in 1945, forced labor, maltreatment and executions claimed the lives of more than 30,000 people. They are commemorated by the Cemetery of Honor and the Pyramid of Ashes.

The town's large granite deposits were the initial draw for the Nazis, who established the concentration camp in 1938. It would go on to house more than 100,000 prisoners from all over Europe.

By 1942, the focus at Flossenbuerg had switched to the forced production of parts for Messerschmitt aircraft. The camp also became the administrative center for almost 80 smaller ones throughout the region.

Among the buildings still standing are the former camp headquarters, watch towers, utility buildings and crematorium.

Visitors can walk around the site, although some areas may have limited access from December through February. Guided tours in German are offered on Sundays; English tours can be scheduled on request.

Rewinding centuries further into history, the ruins of Flossenbuerg Castle are where some of the best views in the area are found. While there is no definite construction date for the castle, most estimates put it between 1000 and 1100 AD.

Built by Count Berengar von Sulzbach, it occupied a strategic position on top of a hill in the middle of the town.



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL SLAVIN/Stars and Stripes

Visitors to the top of Flossenbuerg Castle, in Bavaria near the Czech border, can enjoy a view for miles on a clear day. The castle was estimated to have been built by Count Berengar von Sulzbach between 1000 and 1100 AD.

Visitors should tread with caution during the winter months, as the rocky terrain tends to be quite slippery.

Dogs are permitted, but it's recommended to keep them on a leash because sheep roam the grounds from time to time. Although the 900-foot hike is not a long one, it requires an uphill climb. The hike to the top only takes about 15 minutes for the average walker.

Although it is a short drive back to base, visitors may want to pack a meal, as the selection of restaurants nearby is limited.

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On the QT

Address: Concentration camp memorial, Gedachtnisallee 5, Flossenbuerg, Germany; castle, Gaisthalweg 2, Flossenbuerg, Germany

Hours: Monday-Sunday 9 a.m.-4 p.m. for the memorial; all day year-round for the castle.

Cost: Free admission to both the castle and the concentration camp.

Information: Online: gedenkstaette-flossenbuerg.de/en

Michael Slavin



A watchtower remains at the Flossenbuerg concentration camp as does the former camp headquarters, utility buildings and a crematorium.



The Valley of Death at the Flossenbuerg concentration camp was the initiative of the Polish Memorial Committee to commemorate the 30,000 people killed at the camp by the Nazis. The camp was established in 1938 and liberated by the Allies in 1945.



The short but steep hike up to Flossenbuerg Castle allows visitors to climb through the remaining ruins. Visitors should tread with caution during the winter months, however, as the rocky terrain tends to be quite slippery.

WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING



PHOTOS BY JENNIFER H. SVAN/Stars and Stripes

Restaurant Vaishnavi retains the décor of the previous Greek restaurant that it now occupies in Homburg, Germany. The restaurant, which serves dishes from both north and south India, opened in the fall of 2022.

Indian food done right

Homburg's Vaishnavi started by a neuroscientist frustrated that local Indian food options didn't match those of her native Kanpur

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

Restaurant Vaishnavi was born out of frustration and passion. Rashmi Katiyar moved to Germany more than 10 years ago and eventually completed her doctorate in neuroscience at Saarland University, where she continues to do research.

"At the same time, I am crazy about food," said Katiyar, who struggled to find food that matched what she loved from her native Kanpur, in northern India.

She opened the restaurant in Homburg with her husband, Jenarthanan Chennai, in the fall of 2022, and since then it's garnered high ratings on Google and in social media posts within the nearby U.S. military community.

Greek frescoes adorn the Mediterranean-style white walls, layered with brick in some places. Vaishnavi used to be a Greek restaurant and Katiyar said she liked the decor so much, she and her husband decided not to change it. Bright Indian textiles cover the tables.

Katiyar says she emphasizes fresh ingredients in her food whenever possible, even if it takes more time. I could really



**AFTER
HOURS
GERMANY**

Restaurant Vaishnavi

Address: Schanz Strasse 1, Homburg, Germany
Hours: Monday to Tuesday and Thursday through Sunday, noon-2 p.m. and 5-10:30 p.m.; closed Wednesdays
Prices: Vegetarian dishes start at 11.90 euros; lamb and fish dishes range from about 14.90 to 16.90 euros; chicken dishes start at 12.90 euros. Most credit cards accepted.
Information: Phone: 06841 777-7085/089; Online: vaishnavi.de

Jennifer H. Svan

appreciate that, especially after eating a curry recently at a different Indian restaurant that tasted like the Styrofoam container it came in.

The menu has some surprising regional variety. Few, if any, other restaurants between Kaiserslautern and Homburg serve south Indian-style dosa, a crispy crepe generally made from rice and lentil batter, and served with various fillings.

I asked Katiyar, who is vegetarian, for her recommendation,

and she said one of her favorites is the baingan bharta, or roasted eggplant. My friend ordered the tried-and-true chicken tikka masala.

The first thing I noticed when the meals arrived was the color. This isn't a place where you get the same dull sauce ladled over your main ingredient.

Both dishes used north Indian spices, Katiyar said, but the tikka masala curry was orange and creamy. A dry-style, brown curry mix held the chopped eggplant, onion, ginger and garlic together.

Both dishes had complex yet distinct flavors and I'd say the tikka masala was the best I can remember having. The moderate heat didn't overpower the flavors in the slightly sweet yogurt-tomato sauce. One portion wasn't enough for the two of us. On the other hand, one of the two orders of garlic naan we received filled both of us up quite nicely.

On special occasions, the restaurant has a buffet, the dates for which are posted on Facebook. It's usually easy to get a table at lunchtime. Reservations are recommended for dinner, which is how it should be when a restaurant is doing things right.

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The vegetarian baingan bharta and the chicken tikka masala are among the meals made fresh at Restaurant Vaishnavi. The tikka masala curry was orange and creamy while a dry-style, brown curry mix held the chopped eggplant, onion, ginger and garlic together.



Just one order of the garlic naan at Restaurant Vaishnavi in Homburg satisfied both Stars and Stripes reporter Jennifer Svan and her friend.

WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING



PHOTOS BY JEREMY STILLWAGNER/Stars and Stripes

Kyle's Good Finds has been serving up American-style baked goods in Tokyo for more than 30 years.

Familiar flavors

American-owned Kyle's Good Finds in Tokyo's Nakano city bakes treats reminiscent of home

BY JEREMY STILLWAGNER
Stars and Stripes

Kyle's Good Finds, a small American-owned bakery in the Nakano city area of Tokyo, might remind you of your favorite mom-and-pop shop that always has the best baked goods.

The 10-minute walk to the bakery, which recently celebrated its 30th anniversary, from Nakano Station's north exit will take you past a variety of cafes, restaurants and convenience stores. When you arrive outside Kyle's Good Finds, a menu in the window lists a tempting variety of cakes, pies, brownies and cookies.

Baked goods are available in whole or by the slice. Of the items I sampled, the carrot cake and brownie were the best.

The carrot cake was pleasantly moist, and the icing complemented the cake's flavor nicely. The

brownie was rich and chocolatey. It's definitely on my list of the top five brownies I've ever had.

I would have preferred a little more banana taste in the banana bread. It wasn't on the same level as the cake and brownie, but I still recommend giving it a try.

The prices are another benefit of stopping by. The three items I tried cost me about 880 yen, which is a little under \$7. For a full pie, cake or other larger items, expect to pay between 1,900 and 4,900 yen. You can also place orders in advance on the bakery's website.

I recommend purchasing your items to go. The two very small tables inside will seat four uncomfortably, and the sales counter is a small space where, when a line forms, customers must enter one at a time so they don't have to squeeze past one another.

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Banana bread and carrot cake from Kyle's Good Finds. The carrot cake and the brownie (not pictured) were well-received.



Kyle's Good Finds

Location: 2-7-10, 1F, Arai, Nakano city, Tokyo 165-0026
Directions: About a 10-minute walk for Nakano Station's north exit.
Hours: Open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., Tuesday-Saturday. Noon to 4 p.m. Sunday.
Prices: Full pies, cakes and other larger items cost from 1,900-4,900 yen. Some items sold by the piece.
Dress: Casual
Information: Phone: 03-3385-8993; Online: kylesgoodfinds.net

Jeremy Stillwagner

Once a joke, ranch-flavored lip balm becomes a hot item

BY JONATHAN EDWARDS
The Washington Post

Burt's Bees and Hidden Valley Ranch played a trick on customers on April 1, 2022, when they announced a new product: ranch-flavored lip balm.

For some, it was a "dream flavor." Others called it "disgusting." Then people on social media began pointing out the date.

April Fools!

Nearly two years later, the two companies are turning that joke into reality. On Jan. 17, they announced they were teaming up to sell a "(very) limited-edition" Dippers Lip Balm set. Burt's Bees and Hidden Valley Ranch, which are both owned by the Clorox Company, are offering a four-pack of lip balm for \$11.99. All of the flavors relate to Buffalo wings — celery, carrot, Buffalo sauce and Hidden Valley Ranch. "This delightfully unexpected union comes just in time for dry lip season and game day," the companies said in a release, referring to the Super Bowl, which is on Feb. 11.

But just like chicken wings during the shortage of 2021, the limited-edition beeswax quickly sold out. By the following day, customers trying to purchase the "wings in balm form" were put on a waitlist.

Kristi Jayne was one of the lucky few who snatched a set just in time.

Jayne, a 45-year-old from Harrisburg, Pa., was scrolling on the BeautyGuruChatter Reddit page Jan. 17 when she learned of the new lip balms.

Her first thought about the combination: "This is the stupidest thing I've ever heard of," she said.

But then Jayne learned there were other flavors besides ranch. Celery, in particular, interested her, because she enjoys lip balms with herbal profiles like lavender or rosemary.

On a whim, Jayne hopped online and became one of the first people to buy what she had denounced just hours earlier.

The Dippers Lip Balm set is the latest in the trend of food companies mashing up products to try to reach more consumers. There was the Kraft Mac &



Current Global

Burt's Bees and Hidden Valley Ranch started selling ranch dressing-flavored lip balm last week. They quickly sold out.

Cheese ice cream, Velveeta-scented nail polish, Cheez-It nail polish, Dunkin' makeup and deodorant that smells like Girl Scout Cookies.

Food collabs have existed for decades, but became more popular after the 2008 recession, said Sue Chan, founder of Care of Chan, an event and marketing agency. Instead of being able to afford houses, millennials have turned to dining as a way to convey status, she added.

The evolution of the internet fueled the trend, she added. Instagram's launch in 2010 gave young foodies a place to showcase ornate dishes from the hottest new restaurants.

The internet also splintered American monoculture. Gone were the days of millions watching the same sitcoms every night and talking about them the next day at the water cooler. Instead, users scroll through algorithm-tailored feeds and stream shows across a host of services at different times.

That splintering has made it tough for marketers to reach a lot of consumers with a prime-time TV commercial or a newspaper ad, Chan said. Crossover products allow them to tap into multiple bubbles at once, and food is a particularly attractive space to operate in because everybody eats.

But after bologna face masks, Pop-Tarts-themed Crocs and Doritos-flavored booze, some say it's time to ditch the food-themed crossovers, particularly any that combine ranch dressing with lip balm.

Chan's verdict: "It's definitely a collaboration gone wrong."

Exploring the Beauty of the Pacific

Pick up the magazine or get it online

STARS AND STRIPES

WEEKEND: TRAVEL



PHOTOS BY NORIKO HAYASHI/For The Washington Post

Thousands of waving maneki-neko cats beckon at Gotokuji temple in Tokyo. At one point in recent years, a local TV station counted 4,000 cat statues — but that was before vast new areas at the temple opened to accommodate the buildup.

Curse of the lucky cats

Tokyo temple where the maneki-neko became famous overwhelmed by existing buildup of statues on grounds and high demand for more

BY RICHARD MORGAN

Special to The Washington Post

Legend goes that the Japanese feudal lord Naotaka Ii of the Edo period was heading home after some casual falconry when a cat seemed to wave at him, inviting him into a Buddhist temple called Gotokuji, in what is now the suburban Setagaya ward in southwestern Tokyo. When a storm quickly arrived, he was enjoying a conversation with the temple's monk instead of getting soaked on the path home.

He saw the encounter as divine proof that the temple was blessed with a lucky cat and later funded a renovation of the temple in 1633. Fame followed the maneki-neko — “the beckoning cat” — that has come to symbolize good fortune with a global fandom.

After the feudal lord's death in 1659, a small shrine was put up

near the temple for his beloved maneki-neko, recalled Takashi Kimura, a monk who speaks for the temple. Some mourners decorated it with cat statues, and, as the figurines gained a following, merchants dating back to Japan's Meiji era (1868 to 1912) started selling them outside the temple gate — then sold them down the street, across town and around the world.

Resting still or sometimes mechanically waving, maneki-nekos can be found in shops, restaurants, homes, dorm rooms, offices and on car dashboards across Japan. Their cultural impact is extensive. They are the reason the Pokémon Meowth has a gold coin on its head. Since 2012, there has been a Lucky Cat Museum in Cincinnati. In 2013, Nintendo debuted a maneki-neko suit in “Super Mario 3D World.” And the following year, Washing-

ton Nationals catcher José Lobatón bought an \$8 maneki-neko in San Francisco's Chinatown, brought it to spring training and named it Gatitotude.

Now the temple where the maneki-neko was born is having a stroke of bad luck. Call it the curse of the lucky cats.

In recent years, as social media has boomed and a gift shop arrived on-site, visitors have bought ceramic cat statues, then left them on the temple grounds — often inscribed with prayers, making them too sacred to consider garbage. At one point, a local TV station counted 4,000 cat statues — but that was before vast new areas at the temple opened to accommodate the buildup. There are now cat statues everywhere, along with a buildup of prayers written on wooden tablets.

During a recent visit, foreign



Visitors take pictures with a maneki-neko at Gotokuji temple in Tokyo. The cultural impact of the cat statues is extensive and has influenced Pokémon, Nintendo and major league catcher José Lobatón.

prayers were spotted in Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Italian, Korean, Portuguese and Thai. One prayer, written in Japanese, sought success on getting into a school of choice.

In May, Japan scrapped some of the world's strictest pandemic-era travel restrictions. Tourists rushed in, also motivated by a weakened yen that made a trip to Japan a bargain.

By October, numbers of monthly foreign tourists exceed-

ed pre-pandemic levels for the first time.

That tourism surge, and its consequential demand on souvenirs and tchotchkes, has overwhelmed the tiny gift shop, which sells 10 sizes of cat statues as well as a general charm, a money charm, a wooden prayer tablet, a gosyuin (temple stamp) and a gosyuin book. On a recent visit, two sizes of cat statues were

SEE CATS ON PAGE 27

WEEKEND: TRAVEL & BOOKS



NORIKO HAYASHI/For The Washington Post

Special wooden plaques, known as ema, hang at Gotokuji temple in Tokyo. Visitors inscribe them with prayers.

Cats: Tourists still visiting amid animal statue shortage

FROM PAGE 26

Her friend Yuko Hikimoto, an English and French interpreter from Yokosuka, mentioned an X factor that Gotokuji delivers for cat lovers: “Dog owners can walk their dogs and greet each other on the street every day. Cat owners can’t. So this temple is a special opportunity for feeling that connection with the community of cat lovers.”

Hikimoto prayed for her two rescued strays: safe morning walks for her 8-year-old, Kuroyan, and comfort for her 4-year-old, Black Panther, who has feline AIDS.

Andrew, a personal trainer from Australia who declined to provide his full name, bought a statue and left it for his ex-boyfriend’s cat, Luna.

“When we were together, we didn’t have pets, but he said I was like his cat; he ignored me because he knew I’d always come back to him,” Andrew said. “I heard after I left him that he replaced me with an actual cat. So I’m praying that Luna — that’s the cat — puts up a fight against his awfulness, just like I did.”

Marian Goldberg, a travel planner from New Jersey, has been to Japan 46 times since 1997. She came to Gotokuji with her daughter, Brianna, who wants a cat so badly that she owns cat trees but no cats yet.

“Gotokuji is so cool, and it’s nice to see the local areas, not just the major parts of the city,” Goldberg said. “It’s kind of like some far-off part of Queens or Brooklyn. Real Tokyo.”

Gotokuji is enjoyed even by people who identify as “more of a dog person,” like Kat Potts, a data analyst for the British government from Essex.

Over the summer, she bought two cat statues, which she brought home with her to join two golden maneki-nekos she already owned (one from Xian, in China, and another that was a gift). Facing the totality of these facts, she sighed.

“Fine,” she relented. “I’m a bit of a cat person.” Gotokuji’s newest convert.

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These competent heroes make journey worthwhile

By CHARLIE JANE ANDERS

The Washington Post

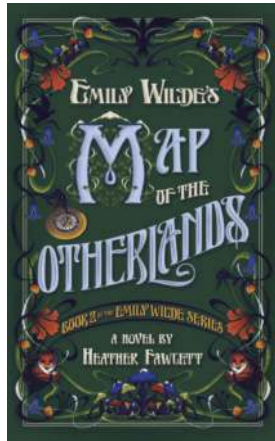
What makes a reader want to follow a protagonist into hell — or at least into some particularly unpleasant situations? It’s not always sweetness or wisdom: Often the best-loved characters are jerks who make awful decisions. But competence goes a long way; we adore a capable protagonist who manages tough situations with ease.

These four recent science fiction and fantasy books prove it.

‘Emily Wilde’s Map of the Otherlands’

by Heather Fawcett

Last year, Fawcett earned justified praise for “Emily Wilde’s Encyclopaedia of Faeries,” a dark academia tale about a Cambridge University professor doing fieldwork on the fair folk, in the company of Bumbleby, a colleague with a huge secret. Wilde is a fantastic character: frosty and reserved, but also generous and kind — and endlessly resourceful, deploying her deep understanding of faerie lore to get out of sticky situations.



The second Emily Wilde book follows much the same trajectory as Leigh Bardugo’s sequel

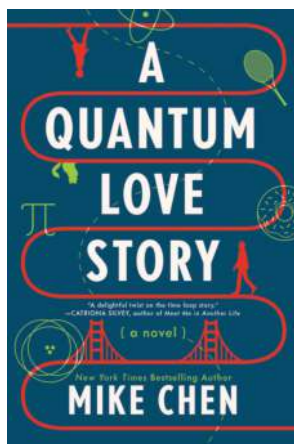
to “Ninth House”: less academia, more personal romance. This time, Bumbleby is in trouble, and Emily risks everything to save him, even as she worries that her academic impartiality is going out the window. In many ways, the second Emily Wilde book is even more compelling than the first.

‘A Quantum Love Story’

by Mike Chen

The movie “Groundhog Day” helped launch a new genre of time-on-repeat stories, but the 2020 film “Palm Springs” heralded a change in this trope: These days, instead of one person trapped in a loop, it’s almost always two, transforming what was once a power fantasy into a relationship story. Chen seizes this device in “A Quantum Love Story,” in which handyman Carter Cho and neuroscientist Mariana Pineda relive the same four days before a particle accelerator accident. The underachieving Carter and the too-driven Mariana might as well be marooned on an island together.

But despite its title — and the romantic potential of the revived timeloop genre — the heart of “A Quantum Love Story” is troubleshooting. Mariana and Carter invent brilliant plans to escape their ouroborous, and each failure gives them more information. Chen subtly hints that these characters aren’t just confined to a never-ending half-week: They’ve been stuck in their lives for years because of unresolved personal baggage. Good thing they’ve got plenty of time on their hands — at least until the final stretch, when the book veers in a wildly different direction.



‘So Let Them Burn’

by Kamilah Cole

What happens after the chosen savior has already saved everyone? Plenty of other writers have explored this theme lately, notably Veronica Roth in “Chosen Ones” — a story of what happens to the heroes after evil is defeated — but in Cole’s hands, this theme becomes a whole lot of fun.

Faron Vincent is the Childe Empyrean, who used her gods-given powers to save her nation from destruction — and now, five years later, she’s using her abilities to cheat at sports. Her sister, Elara, wants to be special too, until she gets her wish when an enemy dragon bonds with her as its rider.

“So Let Them Burn” is the best young-adult novel I’ve read in ages, and one of the best fantasy novels, full stop. The book’s triumphs come down, in large part, to the sensitivity with which Cole handles her main characters, who navigate impossible situations with nimble cleverness. Faron, in particular, is equal parts frustrating and captivating: She appears selfish and childish, until you glimpse the burden she carries. Add a complex world, a rich backstory and plenty of neat twists, and you’ve got a thrill ride with heart.

‘The Tusks of Extinction’

by Ray Nayler

Nayler’s “The Mountain in the Sea” delved into octopus consciousness with terrific results, but “The Tusks of Extinction,” a novella, is even better, with fewer unruly subplots. In “Tusks,” scientists have brought back long-extinct mammoths, which need guidance — so they put the mind of a long-dead elephant expert, Damira, into a mammoth’s body, so she can become their matriarch. But Damira soon finds herself in a familiar situation, caught in a clash with ruthless poachers.

Nayler excels at writing about ecosystems, nonhuman communities and the dilemmas of conservation.

“Tusks” also includes a sharp focus on toxic masculinity and the sort of power trip that would drive a person into an extreme environment to slaughter a beautiful, irreplaceable creature. The result is both breathtaking and heartbreaking.



WEEKEND: MUSIC



This combination of photos shows Jelly Roll performing at the Times Square New Year's Eve celebration in New York on Dec. 31, left; Megan Moroney performing at the Windy City Smokeout festival in Chicago on July 15, center; and Morgan Wallen performing at the 57th Annual CMA Awards on Nov. 8 at the Bridgestone Arena in Nashville. AP

'Not rock's little sister'

Inside country music's new golden era, and what comes next

By MARIA SHERMAN
Associated Press

It was an unexpected musical success story last year, one that has only continued to snowball: Country music, with its loyal listenership on the margins of pop's mainstream, had a crossover moment.

Some of the biggest albums and songs of the year are credited to country musicians like Morgan Wallen, Zach Bryan and Luke Combs, whose hits went beyond country radio stations and onto pop rotations.

But when the 2024 Grammy nominations were announced in November, something seemed amiss. Country was not represented in the main categories — except for Jelly Roll and The War and Treaty, who are up for best new artist. It seemed like a notable absence for a genre that topped the charts all year. The lack of nominations surprised Recording Academy CEO and President Harvey Mason Jr.

"We need to do more work with our country voters and continue to invite more country voters to the process," he told The Associated Press at the time.

That hasn't always been the case: In 2019, Kacey Musgraves won album of the year at the Grammys for her "Golden Hour," a release celebrated for its innovative take on the country genre that combined elements of pop and disco. It's the kind of innovation often celebrated by the Recording Academy.

Still, country music has broken new ground. In July, country acts held the top three spots on the Billboard Hot 100 for the first time in the chart's 65-year history: Controversy hoisted Jason Aldean's "Try That In a Small Town" to No. 1 for a short week, followed by Wallen's "Last Night" and Combs' cover of Tracy Chapman's "Fast Car." The latter also won song of the year at the 2023 Country Music Awards, despite the fact that the original was written in 1988.

Oliver Anthony's viral hit "Rich Men North of Richmond" also made it to No. 1, making him the first artist to debut atop the Billboard Hot 100 without having any prior chart history.

Wallen is in a league of his own. His latest album,

"Since I've been in the game, I can confidently say country is bigger than ever. I think we're in a really strong spot."

Dustin Lynch

with its inventive exploration of trap beats over heartbreaking country, titled "One Thing at a Time," spent 16 weeks at the top of the Billboard 200 in 2023 — which meant he held the top spot for 30% of the year ... and his record was released in March. It also means that Wallen's album spent

SEE COUNTRY ON PAGE 29



CHRIS PIZZELLO/AP

WEEKEND: MUSIC

Country: Genre now enjoying latest 'genreless' crossover musical moment**FROM PAGE 28**

more time at No. 1 than any other album since Adele's "21" dominated over a decade ago. Unsurprisingly, "One Thing at a Time" was the most-consumed album in the U.S. last year.

Across iHeartRadio stations, Wallen accounted for 2.1 billion total audience spins.

Beyond Wallen and those other chart-toppers, newer country talent has begun experiencing some crossover success, like the hip-hop head Jelly Roll (with "Need a Favor"), Lainey Wilson's Deana Carter-referencing "Watermelon Moonshine," and Bailey Zimmerman's hard rock rasp on "Rock and a Hard Place." (Wilson is the only woman on the list, but additional attention can and should be given to other newcomers, like Gabby Barrett, Carly Pearce and Ingrid Andress, among others.)

If pop has begun embracing a "genreless" approach to music, it seems like that unconventionality is opening doors for country as well — and it is accounting for the music's popularity. At least, that's what Dan Smyers of the three-time Grammy award winning duo Dan + Shay believes. "There's so many different sounds in country happening right now," he says, which has inspired "crossover" moments over the past few years — like his group's song "10,000 Hours," which featured Justin Bieber and got Top 40 radio play.

Getting in those all-genre spaces allows for discovery. "Somebody who might have been listening to the Top 40 station in their town goes like, 'Oh, that's cool. I dig that song. I've never really listened to country,'" Smyers says. "And then they start digging into the catalog and listening to our back catalog, or to other country acts, and they fall in love with it. And now it's like this perfect storm with streaming."

"Since I've been in the game, I can confidently say country is bigger than ever. I think we're in a really strong spot," says award-winning "Small Town Boy" singer Dustin Lynch. Particularly in that country acts can now play with different sounds. "I've been able to do very traditional country leaning (music) and had success with that, and a straight-up rock song as well."

He says country music is now in a position where people who "maybe never gave us a chance" are listening to country music with an open-mindedness.

There's something to that: According to Luminate, country music experienced its biggest streaming week ever in 2023, a



AMY HARRIS/AP

Dan Smyers, left, and Shay Mooney of Dan + Shay perform at CMA Fest on June 8, 2023, at Nissan Stadium in Nashville. Smyers says country is popular because "people are starved for authenticity in just everything in life, in TV and movies, especially in music."

whopping 2.26 billion, the data and analytics platform's Midyear Music Report found. In the first 26 weeks of 2023, the data and analytics platform found that country music consumption in the U.S. was up 20.3% year-over-year, a number Wallen is particularly responsible for: He accounted for 40% of the growth in country consumption last year.

The genre has historically been enjoyed by English-speaking Americans, but Luminate's reporting also shows growth in the Philippines, Indonesia, India, Brazil, Mexico, Germany and Vietnam. That's something Darius Rucker has noticed firsthand.

"I've seen what country is doing, especially in Europe. It's crazy. I tour Europe and, you know, we do well. And it's just great to see what America has known forever," he says. "And people just didn't want to embrace, and so many people are embracing now."

"It just shows that country music is not rock and roll's little sister anymore," he adds.

Smyers has his own theories to why country music is experiencing this explosive period. "Western culture is having a moment," he theorizes, referencing the success of the popular television show "Yellowstone." "It was a big movement for that kind of rootsy Americana country sound," he says, which served as another platform for viewers to potentially become country music fans.

But ultimately, he believes "people are starved for authenticity in just everything in life, in TV and movies, especially in music," he says. "And I feel like country music kind of does the authenticity thing better than any other genre."

Up-and-comer Megan Moroney agrees. "I think people are just, like, really drawn more towards authenticity nowadays," she says, highlighting country music's "real life lyrics."

Thanks to social media, where

there's "so much fake stuff," she believes there's a hunger for truth-telling. It's why she describes her single "I'm Not Pretty" not as a "country song," but as a "cultural song," one with lyrics that tackle universal concerns like doom scrolling and insecurity.

Veterans of the genre, too, have taken note of country's big year. Reba McEntire, who joined "The Voice" as a coach for the first time in 2023, taking over from Blake Shelton, views her role there as an opportunity to champion this era of country music performers. "I just kind of stay in my lane and do the best I can with supporting country music," she told AP.

Next month, Dan + Shay will join her, John Legend and Chance the Rapper as season 25's coaches — marking the first time that half of the four spots will have been occupied by country musicians.

Garth Brooks, too, has watched as country music enjoys a new kind of crossover moment — and he's meeting it in a big way. In May of last year, Brooks announced he was launching his own radio station with the streaming platform TuneIn called The Big 615, with a focus on traditional country music un beholden to major labels, which dominate terrestrial radio. He's hoping to use it to promote more women on the airwaves as well as have a positive influence on country music's growing global footprint.

"If you're in country music," he says, "They're going to try and fix your music if they take it outside of the United States — which usually means steel (guitars) and fiddles get taken off. Now, that doesn't work for us," Brooks told AP, referring to archaic radio structures.

"So, what I love, it's fresh(ly) baked out of Nashville and it's a global station. So, you're hearing it the moment it hits the streets. Very proud of it."



Alice Baxley

Green Day, from left: Tré Cool, Billie Joe Armstrong and Mike Dirnt.

They may not be 'Saviors,' but Green Day's pop-punk is still a winning formula

If punk rock is supposed to be about style and ethos, Green Day will forever be the idiom's most authentic mainstay. If it's required to have 90-second songs filled with lightning-quick tempos, obnoxious vocals and an inherent disregard for acceptance ... well, perhaps Green Day aren't that. Anymore, at least. Gone are the days when cussing at and spitting on people felt pure; in are the days that don't feel complete if the band doesn't score a Hot 100 single.

As such, "Saviors," Green Day's 14th studio record in more than 35 years of existence, pulls all the tricks it knows to try to achieve zeitgeist success. The pop is prevalent — but let's not pretend like it ever went away. Some of the group's critics zeroed in on producer Butch Walker as the reason their last few records haven't connected in a large way. It's an odd gripe because there are at least two instances here where Walker's presence feels all but ensured to be there, despite Rob Cavallo getting the nod as the album's producer.

Those two songs? Single "One Eyed Bastard," which lifts its guitar hook almost verbatim from Pink's "So What," which appeared on her "Funhouse," which Walker helped produce. The other is "Goodnight Adeline," which features the ubiquitous drum fill from Weezer's "Beverly Hills" (and to be fair, a million other songs). Knowing Walker has production credits on multiple Weezer records, "Goodnight" feels like it could fit anywhere on "Pacific Daydream" or "Raditude" and nobody would blink an eye. This is a compliment, of course — Walker knows pop music and Green Day, despite what they might want you to believe, knows it quite well, too.

That knowledge is littered all



LINER NOTES

By Colin McGuire

over these 15 tracks in much the same way that duo of songs displays. "Father to a Son" is the requisite ballad with which Green Day has become synonymous since "Good Riddance (Time of Your Life)." This time, however, leader Billie Joe Armstrong's earnestness is replaced with a Beatles-esque string section and a sleek sound that isn't not akin to your favorite modern day pop radio piano-rock star. "Bobby Sox," for its part, echoes All-American Rejects' best moments with its anthemic undertones, while "The American Dream Is Killing Me" swings enough to stick in your head for days, like all the best Green Day songs do.

It all adds up to one big pop music statement that has its political messaging highlighted by the wit with which it is presented. There's isn't a song on the album that couldn't be a No. 1 single — they're all that accessible and endearing. The problem is the formula in the identity: The band is too pop to be punk, but too punk to consistently transcend pop. With that preface, "Saviors" is a very good pop-rock album.

The question therein becomes whether "a very good pop-rock album" is enough to be a savior of anything — be it an entire punk scene or merely Green Day's quest for another chart-topping hit.

WEEKEND: MUSIC

Inside Pitchfork's absorption into GQ

When 'music media' is merged into 'men's media,' what's lost?

By MARIA SHERMAN
Associated Press

Nearly three decades after it was established, Pitchfork, the most influential music publication of the internet age with the power to make or break an artist, is being absorbed by another entity — a men's fashion and style magazine.

The website, beloved for being one of modern music's true centers of gravity and renowned for its daily record reviews scored 0.0 to 10.0, will be folded into GQ, parent company Condé Nast announced Jan. 17.

The decision was made after what Anna Wintour, chief content officer for Condé Nast, called "a careful evaluation of Pitchfork's performance." Wintour called the move "the best path forward for the brand so that our coverage of music can continue to thrive within the company."

As Pitchfork moves into its new configuration, it's worth asking: If many view song discovery as music journalism's primary function, what is the role of insightful culture writing about music when people can find their favorite artists by following recommendations on social media or by playing 15 seconds of a song on a popular playlist?

From music to men's media

Record store clerk Ryan Schreiber founded Pitchfork in 1996 as an indie music blog inspired by fan zines and grew it into "the most trusted voice in music," as its tagline reads.

Pitchfork began in the era of CDs and — with discerning tastes and unrivaled curation — shepherded voracious music fans into the mp3 and peer-to-peer file-sharing age of Napster and into the streaming era beyond. In that time, its voice moved from snarky to incisive (often both at once) and the scope of its coverage adapted to meet the current moment. Schreiber sold Pitchfork to Condé Nast in 2015.

"In the late 2000s, alternative culture was going overground and an artisanal, small-batch approach to life was taking over from the sheeny mass-production of the previous decade," says Laura Snapes, The Guardian's deputy music editor and a long-time Pitchfork contributor.

"Pitchfork was well placed to lead and mirror that shift,"

Snapes says. "They became the go-to chroniclers of this moment and had legitimacy ... you could see the long roots of this culture in the site."

Ann Powers, NPR's music critic, says Pitchfork plays a crucial role in 21st-century media because it is a music-specific publication and not simply a generalist site with a music section. That means its expert writers have been able to go deeper in coverage and criticism, highlighting "intelligent and engaged, truly passionate music writing for the music fan," instead of focusing solely on what would appeal to a general interest audience — particularly at a time where music-specific press is atomizing.

"Pitchfork also became a beautiful space for diversity," Powers says. "It grew into a space where there were a lot of amazing women writers, people of color, covering pop, R&B, experimental and global music with the same passion and dedication that it was covering the kind of indie rock from which it was born."

The choice to move the publication under GQ, she says, reminds her of '90s music magazine culture, where advertisers classified publications like SPIN, Rolling Stone, Vibe and Blender as men's interest. "It truly feels like a setback," Powers says.

Says Snapes: "Music is so much more than a 'men's interest' or leisure pursuit. Pitchfork paid close, longform critical attention to so many different types of music, and so many different niches. I'm not sure how that will live alongside e-commerce pieces on stick vacuums."

The moment Pitchfork changed

Early in the afternoon of Jan. 17, most of the Pitchfork staff were sent a link to a mandatory, 15-minute all-hands with Wintour at 1:30 p.m., three people with involved in the situation told AP. That set off a chain of events in which most affected were told their last day would be Jan. 19.

In screenshots of a public Slack channel accessible by Condé Nast staff, obtained by AP, Melissa Consorte, a Condé Nast vice president, wrote on Jan. 17, "Pitchfork is not going away as a brand."

"This is not a terrible thing for us — GQ and P4K were getting in each other's lanes and this makes it easier for us to use them



AP

Lauren Mayberry performs with her band Chvrches at the Pitchfork Music Festival on July 17, 2015, in Chicago. The influential website Pitchfork is being reconfigured under the men's magazine GQ, a move that leaves many wondering how long-form coverage and diversity in music journalism will be affected.

"This sounds trite, but Taylor Swift isn't tweeting her disappointment that Pitchfork is closing, right? It's 5,000-follower emo bands that got a 7.6 review and has been proud of that for the past two years. It's the independent, experimental artists that are going to suffer."

Gareth Paisey
singer of the Welsh indie band
Los Campesinos!

in a complementary fashion," she said, using the popular shorthand for Pitchfork. "I think this will only help P4K feel bigger and

more recognizable in the long term."

On Jan. 18, Consorte followed up: "Pitchfork is not being shut down or rebranded as GQ — from a client and user perspective, everything will look the same." And in another public Slack channel, Joanna Melissakis, Head of Sales, Beauty at Condé Nast, wrote that "Pitchfork will remain a standalone brand but the internal reporting structure is changing."

A representative for Condé Nast did not agree to speak to The Associated Press on the record. However, one Condé Nast audience development editor shared on X that "by volume, Pitchfork has the highest daily site visitors of any of our titles ... despite scant resourcing, esp from corporate."

An evolving music media landscape

Gareth Paisey, singer of the Welsh indie band Los Campesinos!, is one of many musicians who posted about Pitchfork following the layoff news. His band has received favorable reviews from the publication, but even those with low scores found themselves eulogizing the entity.

"There was a period of time where if Pitchfork said something was good, I thought it was good. And if they panned something, I probably wouldn't bother listening to it," he says. "I think that speaks to its power — how it

was able to push the needle and single-handedly make something seem relevant."

In 2021, guitarist Yasmin Williams says she was almost ready to give up her career pursuits when a positive review from Pitchfork reignited her hope. "I was ready for the next level and it wasn't happening," she recalls. Then Pitchfork's Sam Sodomsky reviewed her album, "Urban Driftwood."

"Then there's a flood of press. I really think it's because of Sam's review," Williams says. She says musicians are concerned about the future of the site because "people trust Pitchfork more than other outlets."

When it comes to his band, Paisey says Pitchfork informed how they were regarded by the public. "We've never been a cool band," he says. "And then for Pitchfork to back us from the start, I think it really did reframe how people thought about us."

He theorizes independent musicians will lose out on coverage in this new editorial shift.

"This sounds trite, but Taylor Swift isn't tweeting her disappointment that Pitchfork is closing, right? It's 5,000-follower emo bands that got a 7.6 review and has been proud of that for the past two years," he says. "It's the independent, experimental artists that are going to suffer."

Maria Sherman writes about music for The Associated Press. She wrote four freelance articles for Pitchfork between 2016 and 2021.

WEEKEND: LIFESTYLE

Change is a-brewing

Latest coffee trends include new bean blends, instant powder, simpler methods of preparation

By **KIM COOK**
Associated Press

Instants that demand respect. Compostable pods. High-altitude blends. And a myriad of related home-brew goodies that lift the senses with the familiar fragrant waft of a humble roasted bean: coffee.

The coffee world can't sit still, it seems — just ask Brooklyn Roasting Company's founder and CEO Jim Munson.

"The coffee market's shifted focus several times over the past 50 years," he says.

"From the convenience-obsessed industry of the '60s and '70s — think Mr. Coffee — to the 'single origin' coffee and Italian espresso drinks in the '80s and '90s, to a 'third wave' that began around 2000, of baristas working \$20,000 espresso machines, precisely dialing their grinders and weighing each shot digitally," Munson says.

He's getting the sense that people right now don't really want to deal with fuss and fancy gear when brewing a cup at home.

"The modern coffee lover appreciates the difference of freshly roasted and ground coffee, but they don't want their morning cup to be overly complicated," he says. "They just want it to be delicious and sustainably sourced."

Instant love

On the grab-and-go front, Food & Wine's senior drinks editor Oset Babur-Winters is noticing interest in instant coffee.

"I'm seeing people take it more seriously. Maybe it's because we're traveling again, or maybe it's just because the tech has gotten better, but real coffee roasters like Partners Coffee and Blue Bottle are investing in instant coffee powder," she says.

Blue Bottle offers a craft espresso instant with notes of dark chocolate, molasses and toasted malt. Their limited edition Ethiopian Samra Origin instant tastes of berry, toffee and lemon.

Instant, or overnight

Partners has various instants and the option to use single-use biodegradable pouches. Pop a pouch into 24 ounces of water and put it in the fridge — the next morning, you've got a week's worth of coffee. Or pour milk or hot water over one and enjoy right now.

Cold brew coffee is also hot as heck, though it, too, takes some prep time to steep. Fans say that makes for a more flavorful and less acidic brew. Cold brew's popularity has skyrocketed in the past several years, according to the National Coffee Association's fall 2023 trend report.

"Another trend is coffee cocktails," Babur-Winters says. (A basic recipe: Add Irish whiskey and brown sugar to hot coffee; top with lightly whipped cream.)



KAFFE/AP

Some of the basics of home coffee making: a grinder, French press and simple mug. Instant is in, fancy is out.

Brewing gear

What's the benchmark for a good countertop maker? Many coffee people say it's maintaining a steady heat.

Straightforward navigation is also a plus. More popular machines take up a smaller countertop footprint, have a simple dashboard and produce a consistently fresh, flavorful cup.

"Coffee machines in general have gotten smarter," says Nicole Papantoniou, the Good Housekeeping Institute's kitchen appliances and innovation lab director. "Many connect to apps, and some even use scales to recommend the perfect grounds-to-water ratio."

She gave shoutouts to coffee-machine makers Spinn and xBloom. Other drip makers receiving positive test reviews from the Good Housekeeping Institute and Better Homes &



BROOKLYN ROASTING COMPANY/AP

Roasted coffee beans harvested from the higher elevations of Ethiopia. Brooklyn Roasting Company founder and CEO Jim Munson says blends like these have become bestsellers for the company.

Gardens were Breville, Cuisinart, Wolf Gourmet, Black & Decker and Braun. Forbes' product testing staff in June rated the Oxo 9-Cup the best stainless steel home coffee maker.

For those who want to step up into pro brewing territory, sophisticated machines include Breville's Barista Express espresso machine. It has a 15-setting bean grinder, built-in tamper, bean storage compartment, extraction pump, multi-angled steam wand for milk frothing — even a water extractor so the grounds become a dry puck for disposal.

Technivorm's Moccamaster has a toggle switch that lets you adjust brew volume for your preferred flavor intensity, and the machine comes in decorator colors including turquoise, white and midnight blue. Kaffe's got stylish glass and brushed stainless storage containers and also a USB-rechargeable milk frother.

For pod coffee fans, Nespresso's slim-line VertuoPlus comes in an array of hues and has an adjustable water reservoir, convenient when there's limited counter space.

About those pods...

Pod or capsule coffee's early popularity took a hit over concerns about single-use-plastic waste, but makers are addressing the issue. Keurig, Nespresso and others now have pods made of recyclable materials.

Nespresso's Re:Ground project is a collab with Zeta Shoes to make sneakers out of recycled Nespresso cups; each pair is composed of about 12 cups. Get a free recycling bag when ordering cups, and the filled bag can be brought to any UPS drop-off station, or to Williams-Sonoma, Crate & Barrel or Sur La Table stores.

Keurig's pods now are also made of recyclable plastic; Con-

sumer Reports advises discarding the aluminum lid and paper filter, and rinsing before recycling; add the used grounds to your plants.

Nescafé has partnered with TerraCycle on a recycling program. Call Nestle's customer service to get a recycling box that you can fill and send back to them.

Or consider re-using capsules. Order a supply of foil or paper capsule lids from My-Cap (they make them for most machines) and then refill your capsules with your own coffee, and seal.

Cool beans

Arabica beans, grown above 2,000 feet, are especially rich and aromatic, and have less caffeine than those grown at lower levels. Munson says blends he buys from high elevations in East Africa and Indonesia have become bestsellers. And Caribbrew, launched in 2018 by Beverly Malbranche while she was in the Columbia-Harlem Small Business Program, offers coffees grown in Haiti above 4,000 feet.

Wunderground sells beans or ground coffee infused with mushroom extract like lion's mane and cordyceps. It has notes of chocolate, hazelnut, vanilla and orange.



WILLIAMS-SONOMA/AP

Technivorm's Moccamaster gets you your cup in under six minutes. The machine comes in multiple colors.



BEE INSPIRED/AP

Bee Inspired's Wake-Up Call gift box includes coffee+cream soap, coffee-flavored honey and an espresso-scented soy candle.

Coffee on the menu

Food & Wine's food editor Paige Grandjean has a hot coffee tip for bakers.

"The complexity and slight bitterness of coffee works wonders on desserts. Add a few teaspoons of instant coffee, or replace ¼ cup of liquid with hot coffee in your next chocolate cake. It'll boost nutty, earthy and fruity notes and balance sweetness," she says. "Or for a quick, easy treat, pour a shot of hot espresso over vanilla ice cream for an after-dinner affogato."

Bon Appetit has some coffee-forward recipes like coffee-glazed vegetables, coffee butter, meat rubs and salted coffee custard pie.

Food 52 suggests a black bean dip infused with coffee. And they have a great gift for coffee lovers: dark chocolate molds filled with coffee cream.

Senses and skin

It's not home brewing, but coffeeophiles can also bring home all kinds of coffee masks, scrubs and body creams using leftover grounds and essences. Bee Inspired, for instance, has a Wake-Up Call box that holds coffee-and-cream bar soap, coffee-flavored honey and an espresso-scented soy candle. It might be just the thing for a sleepy Monday morning in the home office.

WEEKEND: HEALTH & FITNESS



How old is your physical body?

Why it's important to calculate your 'fitness age,' which is different from your chronological age, and how to lower it

By **GRETCHEN REYNOLDS**
The Washington Post

To understand how well you're aging, try calculating your fitness age.

Fitness age is a well-studied scientific concept that uses a few, simple health measures to estimate whether your body is biologically older — or younger — than your chronological age. If you're 50 based on calendar years, you conceivably could have a fitness age of anywhere from about 25 to as old as 75, studies show. It all depends on what shape you're in.

If your fitness age is higher than your chronological age, your chances of dying young from a host of diseases rises substantially, according to a burgeoning body of research.

The good news is you can find your fitness age easily using an online tool. And if it exceeds your calendar age, you can start lowering it today by exercising right.

Why you should calculate your fitness age

To learn your fitness age, you'll need to know your height in centimeters, weight in kilograms and resting heart rate, which you can easily determine using a smartwatch or 15 second pulse test. You'll also need an honest estimate of how hard and often you exercise. Plug this information into an online calculator and you can see right away if you're biologically older or younger than your birth years.

The idea that we have a "fitness age," distinct from our calendar years, first arose more than a decade ago, when studies began showing that aerobic fitness, or, more technically, VO2max (maximum oxygen consumption), predicts longevity and health span as well as or better than more widely used health markers, like blood pressure, insulin sensitivity and even smoking history.

Inspired by this research, scientists in Norway began directly measuring VO2max in thousands of Norwegians, aged between 20 and 90, while, at the same time, checking various markers of their general health, including body composition, blood pressure, heart rate and exercise habits, as well as eventual longevity.

Collating this data, they discovered that some of these health markers correlated closely with VO2max and could be used to estimate aerobic capacity. They created an algorithm that would do just that, cross-checked

VO2max and longevity, and, finally, developed a simple, online fitness age calculator.

'More years still living healthy'

Today, fitness age is still being studied as a predictor of disease, mortality risk and robust good health, said Ulrik Wisloff, the head of the Cardiac Exercise Research Group at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, Norway, and one of the original fitness age researchers. (He has a 1.2% stake in a European fitness app that uses the fitness age algorithm to provide health and training recommendations but does not otherwise benefit financially from this research, he said.)

Since 2019, studies using the calculator's algorithm have shown that a relatively low fitness age is linked to substantially less long-term risk of heart attack, depression, nonalcoholic fatty liver disease, brain shrinkage and dementia in middle-aged and older men and women.

Just as important, if you develop a chronic disease, your symptoms are likely to progress more slowly if your fitness age is low.

"You'll have more years still living healthy than if you have a fitness age above your chronological age," Wisloff said.

"The fitness age calculator is a simple and accessible method to determine both internal and external factors impacting an individual's aging process," said Pamela Peeke, a physician, researcher and recently elected member of the American College of Sports Medicine Foundation Board.

In 2015, she was a co-author and participant in an unpublished study of Senior Olympians. The Senior Olympics are a biennial, elite competition for athletes over the age of 50. More than 4,000 of the athletes used the calculator to assess their fitness age for the study. At the time, their average chronological age was 68. But their average fitness age was 43 — that's 25 years younger.

"As a triathlete competitor, I found my fitness age was, indeed, 25 years younger" than her then-chronological age, Peeke said. "Years later, still physically active, I continue to hold fast" to that quarter-century difference.

How to calculate your fitness age, lower it

The current fitness age calculator is free and maintained by the Norwegian University of Science and Tech-

nology. First posted in 2013, it's been updated and simplified several times and used by about 80 million people around the globe, Wisloff said.

Find the calculator online here: hvemereldst.no/en

Wish your own fitness age were years or decades lower than your calendar age? Just make sure you're moving often and sometimes vigorously, Wisloff said.

Up-tempo exercise, the kind that increases your breathing and heart rate enough that you can barely carry on a conversation, strengthens your aerobic system over time and improves your VO2max, altering your fitness age.

This type of exercise, though challenging, doesn't need to be unpleasant, Wisloff said. It can, instead, be brief, informal and even fun.

Here are a few easy ways to start turning back your fitness clock:

- If you like to walk, look for a hill and stride to the top as quickly as you can. Return to the base and summit another time or two.

- If you have access to a treadmill or stationary bike, try 4 x 4 intervals. Ride or run at a relatively taxing pace for 4 minutes, rest by walking or pedaling lightly for 3 minutes and repeat that sequence four times in total.

- Jump, lunge and bop though a short body weight workout once in a while.

Exerting yourself vigorously for even a few minutes several times a week should soon improve your fitness age, Wisloff said.

Of course, outside of science fiction, none of us actually can rewind time. A low fitness age doesn't make us truly younger or guarantee extra decades of life. Multiple factors besides fitness affect how long and well we live, including our genetics, nutrition, income and good or regrettable fortune. Fitness age only gives us a glimpse into whether our bodies seem to be functioning better or worse than those of other people our same calendar age. But we can use that knowledge to inspire and maybe congratulate ourselves.

"The fitness age calculator is a valuable eye-opener to people who need a reality check and wake-up call" about possibly subpar fitness, Peeke said. "But it's also a rewarding affirmation for people who've maintained a healthy lifestyle," and have the dewy, youthful fitness age to show for it.

WEEKEND: FAMILY

COMMENTARY

Fresh look at eating at an Italian school

American military spouse says health, sustainability drive her son's preschool meal options

By **ALYSSA BLAKEMORE**

Special to *The Washington Post*

Each day on our short walk to our town's scuola materna, my son and I stroll past tiny yards brimming with tomato plants, squashes and citrus trees. A vine of kiwis adorns the entry to one neighbor's home, and rows of olive trees dot a hillside nearby. Juicy cantaloupes in summer, ripe figs in fall — these are but a few of the mouthwatering choices my son enjoys every day at his Italian preschool.

In the six months since we moved to Italy on military assignment, I've been shocked at how well Italy feeds its schoolchildren compared with the United States.

American school lunchrooms prioritize convenience over quality. Though the Biden administration's recent revamp of school nutrition guidelines cuts down on the sugar and sodium, ultra-processed foods remain in the mix. Italy has designed its school lunches with health and sustainability in mind.

Here's what that means in practice: Students in many Italian preschools eat from a set menu, with no outside food allowed — so no bag lunches. Some schools, including my son's, prepare lunch in-house; others cater food from off-site kitchens. In either case, the children enjoy a healthy meal — Italian law restricts public schools from serving fried foods.

In particular, my son loves when his school serves passato di verdure con pastina, a popular pasta dish brightened by a sauce made from freshly cooked winter vegetables.

And these are multicourse meals. A typical lunch in an Italian public school consists of a first course, a second course and a side. Meals are prepared with simple cooking methods to preserve nutritional value. Instead of corn dogs, french fries or potato chips, little Italian learners nosh on cod Vicentina with polenta, raw seasonal vegetables and creamed carrots with rice.

My son's palate continues to expand with seasonal foods on rotation. One day, baked rabbit roll followed parmesan risotto with steamed spinach as an accompanying side.

That might sound a little refined for a 5-year-old, but there is an educational purpose at work. Early exposure to varied foods allows Italian children to develop diverse palates and drives healthy, lifelong eating habits. The Mediterranean diet, linked to lower risk of heart disease, Alzheimer's disease, cancer and Type 2 diabetes, is one of the healthiest in the world.

Italy isn't unique in its approach to school nutrition. A fellow military spouse who lived abroad informed me that Korean preschools and kindergartens cook fresh food on-site. From Estonia to Poland to the Netherlands, others in my circle noticed a significant difference between the food served in international schools and in American schools.

So what's the upshot? Italy still has one of the highest rates of childhood obesity in Europe. A recent study



Photos by Alyssa Blakemore

Fresh vegetable soup and bread are a first course at an Italian preschool. All students eat from a set menu, and no outside food (bag lunches) are allowed.



The lunchroom at Alyssa Blakemore's son's Italian preschool. A typical lunch in an Italian public school consists of a first course, a second course and a side.

shows that only 5 percent of Italian primary schoolchildren have a "good adherence" to the Mediterranean diet outside the classroom.

Does that mean those healthy preschool lunches are wasted effort? I don't think so. Italy maintains a significantly lower rate of adult obesity than the United States — about 40 percent of American adults are obese compared with just 12 percent of Italians.

It's not far-fetched to think that early exposure to a nutritious diet could play a role. Healthy eating habits learned as children are linked to a lower chance of obesity in adulthood. Something good is clearly happening as Italians mature.

As a military mom, I want my child — along with every American kid — to boast wholesome diets that help them grow up strong and maintain healthy habits for life. Italy's healthy and delicious school lunches are setting children up for success — the United States might want to take a page out of their recipe book.

Alyssa Blakemore is a military spouse from Michigan living in Vicenza, Italy.

THE MEAT AND POTATOES OF LIFE

Lisa Smith Molinari



5 football-food recipes sure to please any fan

Even in these gender barrier-breaking times, the vast majority of military spouses (more than 90 percent) are still women. Similarly, NFL football remains a male-dominated sport. No woman has ever played on an NFL team, although there are more women playing important roles off the field.

However, the percentage of females watching professional football games has been on the rise. Women now make up almost half of the NFL viewership. Why are more women watching football? Because husbands like football? Because they like pretty jersey colors? Because women think football players are hot? Because they're "Swifties"?

I must admit, when I attended high school football games as a kid, I went for the hot cocoa. Nowadays, however, I identify as an avid female NFL fan, characterized by loyal viewing (every Steeler game, without fail), owning team apparel (shirts, hats, Terrible Towels, coffee mugs, flag, charm bracelet and cowbell), and cheering during play (e.g., fist-pumping obnoxiously while screeching, "C'mon, Watt! Sack 'em!" with a mouthful of cheese curls).

In the end, who cares why people watch NFL games? They just do. With 24 million men and women expected to tune into the conference championships this Sunday, no one can deny football's appeal. Maybe it's the food? Everyone loves a big pot of simmering chili with a side of sweet cornbread and a cold beer on game day. Our family must've consumed gallons of the stuff, but here are five other favorite football food recipes I've collected over the years:

1. Sausage dip. Otherwise known as "Crack in a Crockpot," this is the stuff dreams are made of. In a slow cooker, add a pound of cooked, crumbled hot Italian sausage, two bricks of cream cheese and two cans of Rotel tomatoes. Cook on high until melted and bubbly. Stir. Serve hot with tortilla chips.

2. Pepperoni strips. Double the recipe or else you'll resent your own children for eating your share. Roll one can of crescent roll dough out onto a cookie sheet; brush with beaten egg. Layer with sliced provolone cheese, pepperoni, provolone, and pepperoni — brushing beaten egg over each layer. Top with second roll of crescent dough, brush with egg and bake 25 minutes at 375 until golden brown. Cut into strips, dip in marinara and watch the rugrats come running.

3. Nacho bar. Pedestrian, maybe. But you gotta admit — it's a crowd pleaser. Spread nacho chips on a cookie sheet and top with good cheese, like crumbled queso fresco or shredded Monterey jack. Bake until cheese melts and serve immediately, with a variety of optional toppings such as spicy crumbled ground beef, shredded chicken, fresh pico de gallo, black beans, sliced lime wedges, guacamole, sour cream, chopped onions, sliced olives and fresh cilantro.

4. Polish chili. Stupidly easy, this recipe involves sautéing garlic, chopped onions, chopped green peppers and sliced Polish kielbasa. Add two big cans of diced tomatoes, two cans of water and two cans of drained cannelloni (white) beans. Simmer an hour, then ladle into bowls containing a few cooked potato pierogi. Serve with warmed, rustic bread.

5. Italian beef sandwiches. Real Chicagoans slow cook beef brisket with a gazillion spices for two days, but I've dumbed the recipe down for the rest of us. Sear a beef round or rump roast in a skillet, then cover with dry Italian dressing mix. Plop it in a crockpot with a can of beef broth and more dry dressing mix. Cook on high for 4-5 hours. Slice the beef thinly. Serve au jus on toasted buns with sautéed green pepper slices and giardiniera (pickled Italian relish). Don't tell Chicagoans, but I add sliced provolone to the toasting buns, because football isn't the same without melted cheese.

On game day, let's put our gender roles and individual motivations aside. Men and women can all agree: Watching NFL is fun for every fan, especially when the football food is fabulous.

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

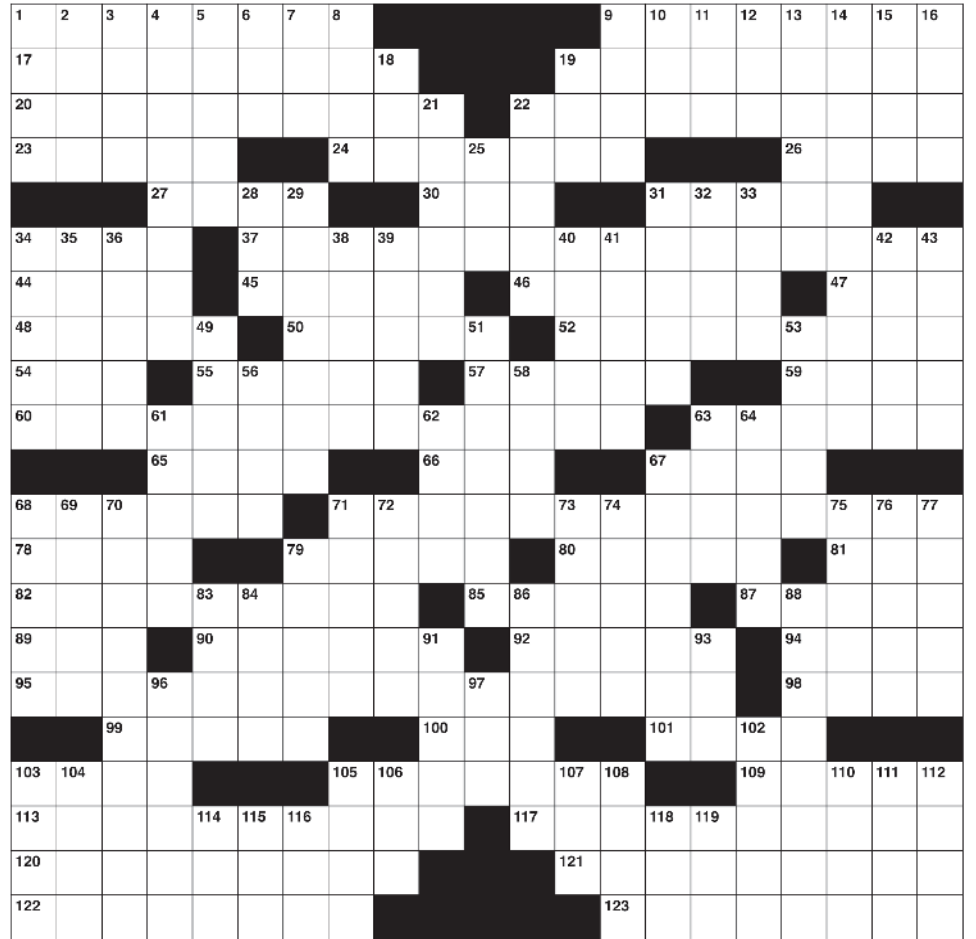
WEEKEND: CROSSWORD AND COMICS

NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

ER, IN OTHER WORDS ...
BY JOHN KUGELMAN / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

John Kugelman is a software engineer and musician from Gainesville, Va. He has worked in cybersecurity for many years. "I like anything that's complicated and puzzle-y," John says. "Any engineering problem is fascinating to me." (And what is crossword construction, after all, but the engineering of words?) This is John's second crossword for The Times, both Sundays. — W.S.

- ACROSS**
- 1 Hurricanes and tornadoes
 - 9 One of 12, biblically
 - 17 "Way to go, me!"
 - 19 Grape from France's Côte-d'Or
 - 20 Great ape?
 - 22 Erotic artist?
 - 23 5-Down's pet
 - 24 Ooze
 - 26 Authors
 - 27 Yesterday, in Spanish
 - 30 ____ Jam (record label)
 - 31 "Let me be perfectly ____" (Pride slogan)
 - 34 Guinness of "The Ladykillers"
 - 37 Street magician?
 - 44 Made, as a putt
 - 45 Stockpile
 - 46 Linger
 - 47 Rock's ____ Fighters
 - 48 Toast with a raised stein
 - 50 Bad thing to drop in polite company
 - 52 Anthony Hopkins won this with only 16 minutes of screen time
 - 54 Reply of disgust
 - 55 One hitting the space bar?
 - 57 Muscat resident
 - 59 Leaves slack-jawed
 - 60 Farmers?
 - 63 Took big steps
 - 65 Unplanned preview, perhaps
 - 66 See here!
 - 67 ____ of Orleans, moniker for Joan of Arc
 - 68 Supply, as elevator music
 - 71 Switch hitter?
 - 78 Zeno of ____, paradoxical thinker
 - 79 Fastest train in the U.S.
 - 80 Spot for a microphone
 - 81 What might be drawn with a "C" in cartoons
 - 82 Plans of study
 - 85 Time's 2023 Athlete of the Year
 - 87 Appropriate
 - 89 Hail, to Caesar
 - 90 Warm touch
 - 92 Gunpowder ingredient
 - 94 Top pair
 - 95 Animal tranquilizer?
 - 98 Trash
 - 99 Pan handle?
 - 100 Communication with one's hands, for short
 - 101 Target of Y.A. fiction
 - 103 Word with straw or swing
 - 105 Big Apple figure
 - 109 "Boy Wonder" of comics
 - 113 & 117 The Grim Reaper?
 - 120 Live content creators
 - 121 They might be flagged as "Potential Spam"
 - 122 Seasonal charity event
 - 123 Cuts down to size
- DOWN**
- 1 V on the N.Y.S.E.
 - 2 Albatross, metaphorically
 - 3 Hypnotized, say
 - 4 Some closet organizers
 - 5 "The Jetsons" boy
 - 6 Crossed (out)
 - 7 Online school closing?
 - 8 Nurses
 - 9 Dash's partner
 - 10 Ancient Romans made it from soot
 - 11 Purchase for a golf course
 - 12 Nexus: Abbr.
 - 13 Peeved
 - 14 Indigo Girls song with the chorus "Adding up the total of a love that's true/Multiply life by the..."
 - 15 Creditor's security
 - 16 Makes a misstep
 - 18 Ready, with "up"
 - 19 Wrinkle-faced dog
 - 21 Cash in
 - 22 Disney villain who's the grand vizier of Agrabah
 - 25 /
 - 28 Replies of disgust
 - 29 Stoolie
 - 31 Somewhat
 - 32 Section of a syllabus
 - 33 ____ Griffin, civil rights pioneer
 - 34 Meat jelly
 - 35 Butler on "The Addams Family"
 - 36 Japanese mushroom
 - 38 "Pass," in a casino
 - 39 Quadcopter, e.g.
 - 40 Concrete support
 - 41 Straws in the wind
 - 42 Sweet-talked
 - 43 Origin of the words "cake" and "egg"
 - 49 Actor George who wrote the 1994 autobiography "To the Stars"
 - 51 Police accountability tool
 - 53 Rapper ____ B
 - 56 List
 - 58 Demure
 - 61 E. R. shout
 - 62 Author Gaiman
 - 63 What a crackerjack cracker jacks
 - 64 Does some field work
 - 67 Superlatively sullen
 - 68 Praline ingredient
 - 69 Valentine candy message
 - 70 Not open to appeal, as a court decision
 - 71 Bass symbol
 - 72 Tiniest bit
 - 73 Actress Fisher of "Eighth Grade"
 - 74 Worshiper of Jah, informally
 - 75 Insurance giant
 - 76 Mental fogs
 - 77 Lock
 - 79 Law enforcer in the Harry Potter universe
 - 83 Longtime actor on "Law & Order: SVU"
 - 84 Give a darn
 - 86 All together
 - 88 Emulate Jack Sprat
 - 91 Old SeaWorld mascot
 - 93 Parkway or expressway: Abbr.
 - 96 Complained
 - 97 Keyboard corner key
 - 102 Straight up
 - 103 Like the open sea
 - 104 Not fooled by
 - 105 Some carry a spare one in a boot
 - 106 Smartphone platform
 - 107 Bit of decoration at a beach house
 - 108 Not just think
 - 110 Zodiac symbol
 - 111 Sicily or Sardinia
 - 112 Ending with late or great
 - 114 "____ out!"
 - 115 "The Dark Side of the Moon" studio
 - 116 Fire (up)
 - 118 Texter's "Truthfully..."
 - 119 French chess piece



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GUNSTON STREET



"Gunston Street" is drawn by Basil Zaviski. Email him at gunstonstreet@yahoo.com, and online at gunstonstreet.com.

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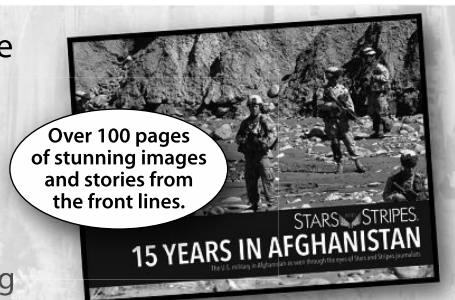


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FACES

Jon Stewart returning to 'Daily Show' on Mondays

By MARK KENNEDY
Associated Press

Comedian Jon Stewart is rewinding the clock, returning to "The Daily Show" as a weekly host and executive producing through the 2024 U.S. elections cycle.

Comedy Central on Wednesday said Stewart will host the topical TV show, the perch he ruled for 16 years starting in 1999, every Monday starting Feb. 12. A rotating lineup of show regulars are on tap for the rest of the week.



Stewart

"Jon Stewart is the voice of our generation, and we are honored to have him return to Comedy Central's "The Daily Show" to help us all make sense of the insanity and division roiling the country as we enter the election season," Chris McCarthy, president and CEO of Showtime/MTV Entertainment Studios, said in a statement.

"In our age of staggering hypocrisy and performative politics, Jon is the perfect person to puncture the empty rhetoric and provide much-needed clarity with his brilliant wit."

Over the years, "The Daily Show" — first hosted by Craig Kilborn, then Stewart and Trevor Noah — has skewered the left and right by making the media a character and playing it straight, no matter how ridiculous.

The show, which won an Emmy Award this month for best talk series, has not had a permanent host since Noah left last year. Current correspondents include Desi Lydic, Michael Kosta, Ronny Chieng and Jordan Klepper.

Stewart didn't leave the show in anger in 2015 and has spoken fondly of it over the years.

"When you lose that structure, you're untethered from the thing that prevents the bad mind from doing its corrupt best," he said on the Strike Force Five podcast during the Hollywood strikes last year. "It goes south and dark really fast."

"It's not like I thought the show wasn't working any more, or that I didn't know how to do it. It was more, 'Yup, it's working. But I'm not getting the same satisfaction,'" he told the Guardian newspaper in 2015.

The show has been a launching pad for the likes of John Oliver, Larry Wilmore, Olivia Munn, Samantha Bee, Roy Wood Jr. and Aasif Mandvi.

Stewart was awarded the Kennedy Center's Mark Twain Prize for American Humor in 2022.



RICHARD SHOTWELL, INVISION/AP

Rocker Billy Idol will headline a pregame concert ahead of the Super Bowl on Feb. 11.

Nice day to start again

Billy Idol gearing up for pre-Super Bowl show, working on a new album

By JONATHAN LANDRUM, JR.
Associated Press

Billy Idol normally takes advantage of riding his motorcycle on the open road knowing there's hardly any traffic because millions are usually glued to watching the Super Bowl.

But this year, Idol's bike won't be leaving his garage on game day. Instead, the legendary British rocker will be strolling on stage to headline a pregame concert in Las Vegas ahead of the big game on Feb. 11 just outside Allegiant Stadium, where the NFL's two best teams face off.

Idol, 68, is expected to perform some of his biggest hits including "Dancing with Myself," "Mony Mony" and "Rebel Yell" during a 35-minute set on two different stages in front of nearly 9,000 anticipated guests.

It's the second time the singer has taken part in a pre-Super Bowl show after he rocked out with Miley Cyrus three years ago outside Raymond James Stadium in Tampa, Fla.

In a recent interview, Idol chatted about his Super Bowl halftime aspirations, his thoughts on his music's longevity and looking to soon release his first studio album in a decade.

Remarks have been edited for clarity and brevity.

Associated Press: What will be your mentality heading into your show hours before the Super Bowl?

Idol: It's about adding excitement to the event. You're pumping people up. That's a fun feeling. You can tell the people are excited, what's going to happen and you're entertaining them in those moments before it really happens.

Would you ever want to perform during Super Bowl halftime?

That would be incredible. But I don't know. It would be fantastic, but I cannot imagine me being asked to do it. It would be great. I'd love to do it. It would be amazing if it involved some other artists or a combination of people. That would be great. It would be one of the craziest things in the world to play. Everybody in the country watches it. Playing the pre-

game for me is good. Pumping people up before it and getting them ready is kind of a fun thought.

You celebrated the 40th anniversary of your album "Rebel Yell" and had a five-night residency in Las Vegas last year. How does it feel to have your music still resonating today?

When we were starting out, I couldn't have imagined the effect of (our) music. We were living one day at a time. The songs were for that time period. They were just for that moment. You weren't thinking about any long-term effects. You're just thinking right now. But the songs have legs. It's like "Wow, people have really embraced this crazy idea I had years ago." They're still enjoying it, and I am too. Who would have thought that 40 years later? I'm still pinching myself.

You released a couple EPs and recently re-released "Rebel Yell." Will you drop any new music soon?

We have a new album coming out in October this year. We're still carrying on and enlarging what my music is about. I enjoy doing it. Me and (guitarist) Steve (Stevens) are still finding ways to excite ourselves. We're not out there going through the motions. We're actually out there taking prisoners. That's how we feel.

How far along are you in the process?

We've got most of it recorded with just some finishing touches. We're doing a cover. We're thinking about videos and all the promotional things that go along with it. There's a lot of stuff we're going to be thinking about this year. But, playing at the Super Bowl, that's pretty fantastic.

You have a built-in fanbase. With your new album, have you taken a different approach musically with your upcoming project compared to past works?

Not really. We're bouncing off our last album "Kings & Queens of the Underground." We did that in England and had strings on it. With this, we tried to make a lot more of an up-tempo album. There are nine songs and six of them are up-tempo. Three of them are kind of slower. It's more of a youthful sounding record. I think it'll allow our audience to have a lot of fun.

Chuck E. Cheese inspiration for TV competition

From wire reports

Chuck E. Cheese's is a place where "a kid can be a kid," and soon, it'll be a place where adults can relive their childhoods in a new competition game show.

Magical Elves, the production company behind "Top Chef," "Brain Games" and "Nailed IT!" is developing a nostalgic game show for adults to live out their youth and win prizes.

"With a legacy spanning over four decades, Chuck E. Cheese has been an integral part of the family experience for both kids and adults across the world," Melissa McLeanas, VP of Global Licensing, Media, and Branded Entertainment Development of Chuck E. Cheese, said.

Teams of two will compete in games such as pinball, air hockey, alley roller and the human claw.

The duos will win tickets and have a chance to exchange the tickets for prizes off the iconic Chuck E. Cheese prize wall.

"As grown adults, we still have dreams of ruling the arcade, taking on the iconic games we love," Magical Elves co-CEOs Jo Sharon and Casey Kriley said. "We're excited to celebrate these legendary arcade games plus the best of today, all with a super-sized twist."

Details on when and where the show will air have not been announced.

Singer-songwriter Melanie dies at 76

Melanie, the singer-songwriter who rose through the New York folk scene, performed at Woodstock and had a series of 1970s hits including "Brand New Key," has died.

Her publicist Billy James told The Associated Press that Melanie died Tuesday. She was 76 and lived in central Tennessee. The cause was not revealed.

With a voice that could shift from high-pitched and coy to a deep soulful rasp, Melanie wrote and sang hits including "Look What They've Done to My Song Ma" and "Lay Down (Candles in the Rain)."

Other news

■ Country singer **Chris Young** was arrested at a Nashville bar after an alleged altercation with Alcohol Beverage Commission agents who were doing compliance checks, according to court documents. Young, who was described as having bloodshot eyes and slurred speech, was arrested Monday night and charged with assaulting an officer, disorderly conduct and resisting arrest, news outlets reported, citing arrest affidavits. Young is known for songs that include "Tomorrow" and "Getting You Home."

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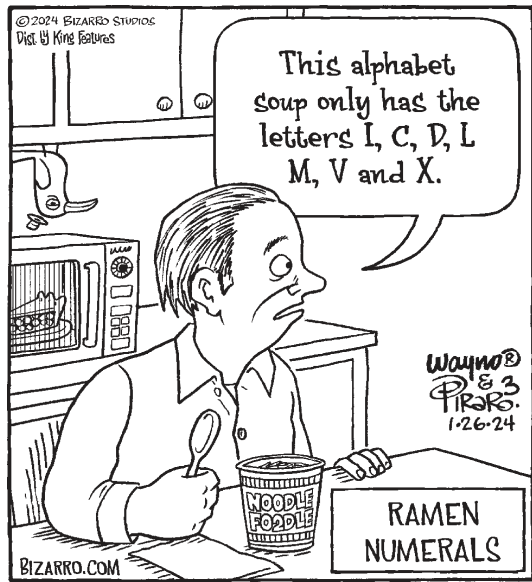


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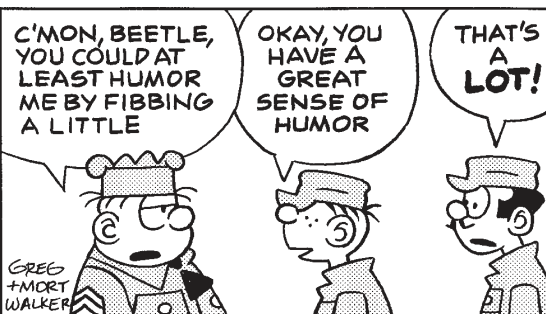
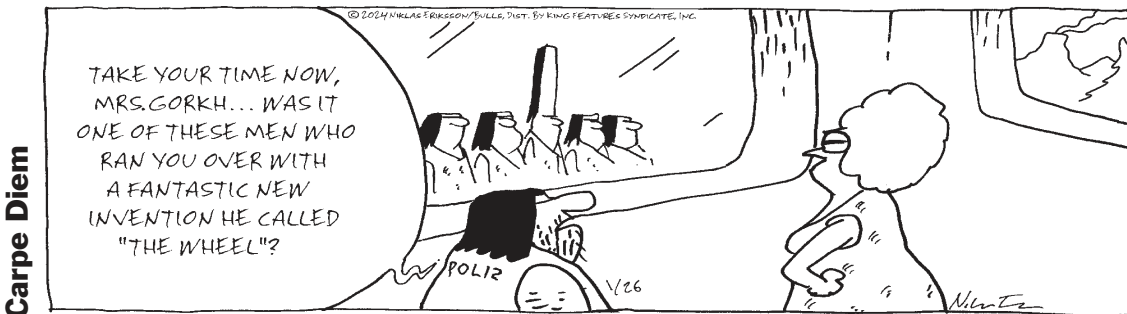
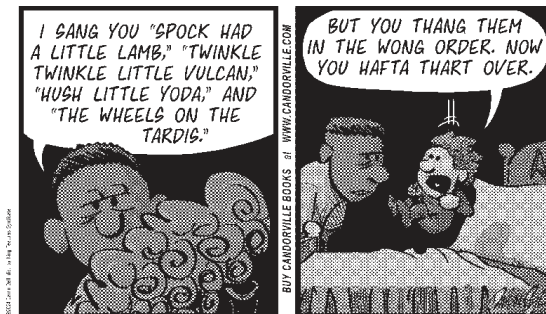
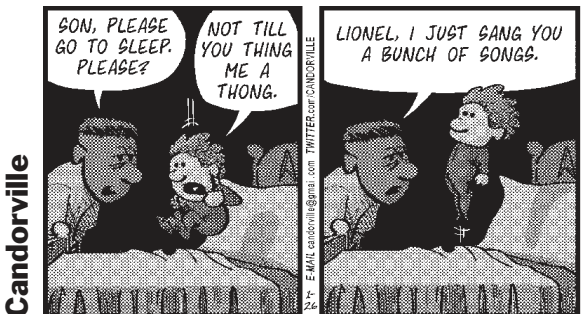
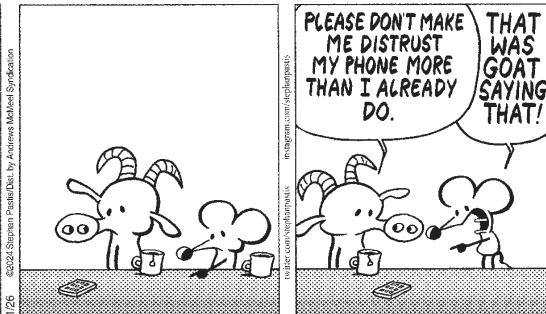
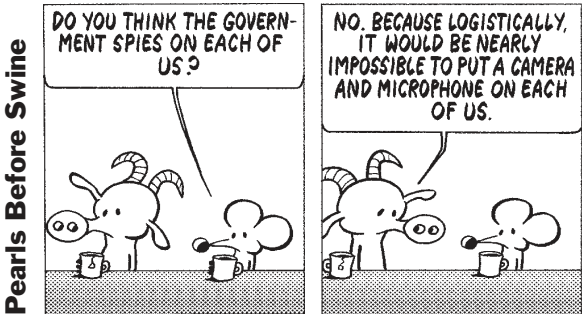
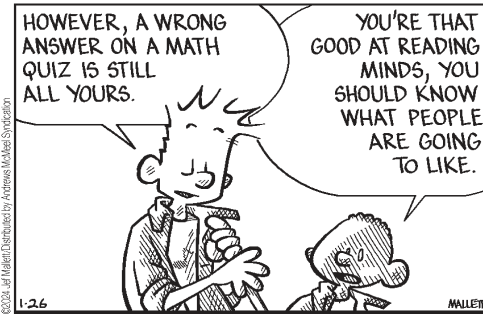


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Eugene Sheffer Crossword



ACROSS

- 1 Clear the tables
- 4 C&W artist McEntire
- 8 BTS genre
- 12 Little rascal
- 13 Algerian port
- 14 Prefix with dynamic
- 15 Traffic jam noisemakers
- 17 Oboe insert
- 18 Pet food brand
- 19 British nobles
- 20 Wee
- 22 Sediment
- 24 Leak slowly
- 25 San Francisco transport
- 29 Fr. holy woman
- 30 Rock legend Joplin
- 31 Flamenco cheer
- 32 Perches for traveling tots
- 34 Oklahoma city
- 35 Sicilian peak
- 36 Almanac data
- 37 Levels
- 40 Extended lunch?
- 41 Toy block name
- 42 Overcrowded circus vehicle
- 46 Petri dish gel
- 47 Rhine feeder
- 48 Fill in — blank
- 49 "Peter Pan" pooch

- 50 Tale teller
- 51 Half a dozen

DOWN

- 1 Pen name
- 2 Actress Thurman
- 3 Wine-and-soda drink
- 4 Spacious
- 5 Blunders
- 6 Prohibit
- 7 Reply (Abbr.)
- 8 Dojo activity
- 9 Equal
- 10 Baseball's Hershiser
- 11 Seed holders
- 16 Abhor
- 19 Right angles
- 20 Pear variety
- 21 Tiny bit
- 22 Blitzen's boss
- 23 Nile bird
- 25 "Misery" star James
- 26 Cooks up
- 27 Landed
- 28 Some wines
- 30 Fast fliers
- 33 Madrid matron
- 34 Deserve
- 36 Not as many
- 37 Flair
- 38 Lyra's brightest star
- 39 Novelist Jennifer
- 40 Circle dance
- 42 "East of Eden" brother
- 43 Chou En —
- 44 Sushi fish
- 45 Actor Harrison

Answer to Previous Puzzle

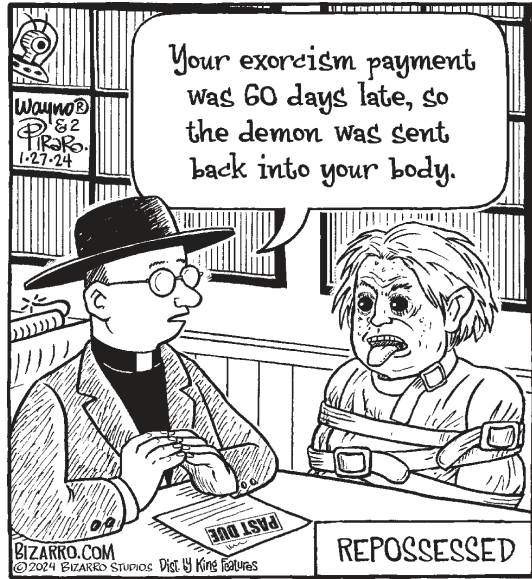


1-26

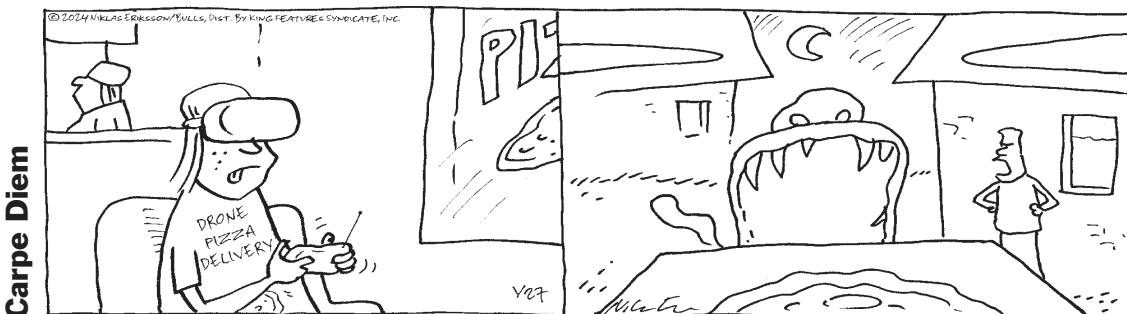
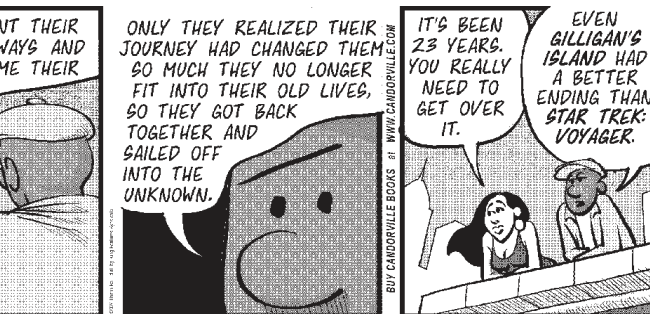
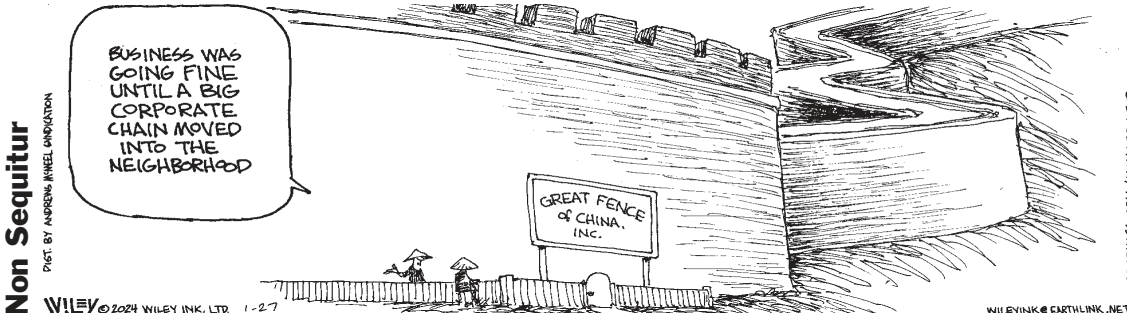
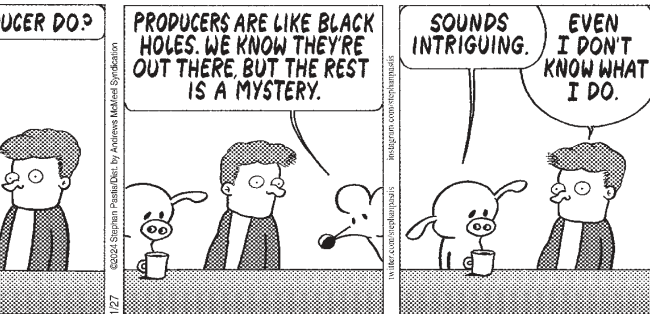
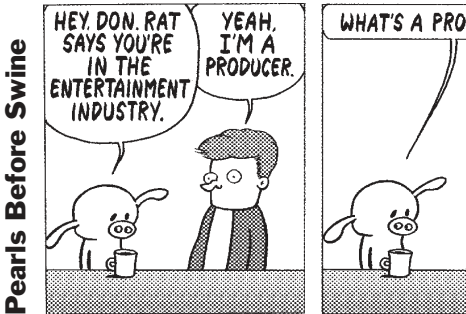
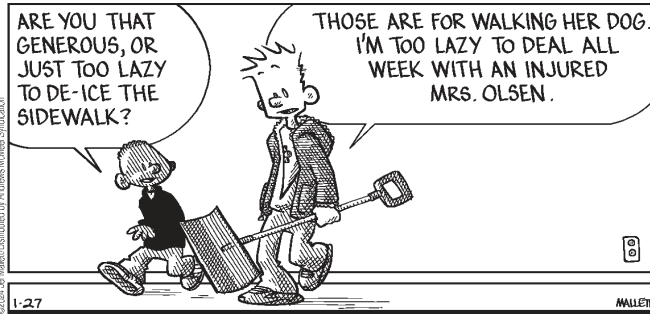
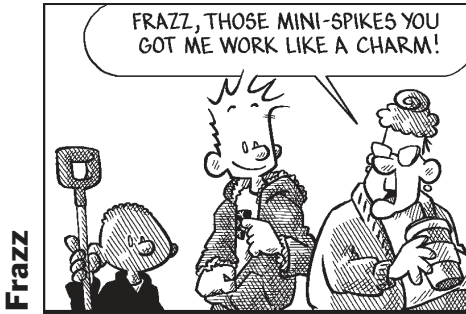
CRYPTOQUIP

P D K N P Z A I J T G N D G T G E N
 E G K E Z H V Z Q V Z I F E N Z A E G
 N Q K S O Z I X H G E K H J O Z R Z
 E N X W F E ? E O Q X H R N X S G .
 Yesterday's Cryptoquip: TOMORROW YOU MAY TAKE ME TO ANY RESTAURANT THAT YOU'D LIKE. WHERE YOU LEAD, I WILL SWALLOW.
 Today's Cryptoquip Clue: E equals S

Bizarro



Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

Grid for Eugene Sheffer Crossword with numbers 1-56.

ACROSS

- 1 Trace of smoke
5 Foot part
9 "That hurts!"
12 "Downton Abbey" role
13 Old Italian money
14 Verse by Pablo Neruda
15 PC picture
16 "Mrs. Maisel" actress Borstein
17 Republicans
18 Deer little one?
19 Born
20 Small pie
21 Sashimi fish
23 "The Bells" author
25 Pasta toppings
28 Most certain
32 Knight wear
33 Banal
34 Endured
36 Kampala's land
37 Airport org.
38 Sinbad's bird
39 Coffee
42 Isr. neighbor
44 Cameo stone
48 Parisian "yes"
49 Actor Alan
50 Abound
51 Three, in Rome
52 "Misery" star James

- 53 "Toodle-oo!"
54 Cutting tool
55 Salinger girl
56 Famed boxing family

- 24 Expenditure
25 Paradise in "On the Road"
26 Altar in the sky
27 Sounds of hesitation
29 Aachen article
30 Norm (Abbr.)
31 Bubble —
35 Texas city
36 Suave
39 Scribbles
40 Atmosphere
41 Perspective
43 Wax-coated cheese
45 "Hud" Oscar winner
46 Bigfoot's kin
47 Dec. holiday
49 Top card

DOWN

- 1 Ragamuffin
2 Early Peruvian
3 Winter fall
4 Italian dessert
5 "Ironic" singer Morissette
6 Anger
7 Willies
8 Whammy
9 Meditative exercise
10 Scent
11 Sobbed
20 Brownish-orange
22 "— the deal ..."

Answer to Previous Puzzle

Answer grid for previous puzzle with words like BUS, REBA, KPOP, IMP, ORAN, AERO, etc.

1-27

CRYPTOQUIP

OE L ECHVQS QSHHIIH ELQADCP
HTRWDNHI, ASHCH UOXSA
FH LWUDIA VDASOVX WHEA
HTQHRA NH-FCOH.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHAT WOULD BE THE BEST SEASON FOR FOLKS TO USE TRAMPOLINES AND POGO STICKS? SPRING TIME.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: Q equals C

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OPINION

NATO ramps up to deal with Russia ... and Trump?

By LEE HOCKSTADER

The Washington Post

BRUSSELS

The Netherlands is touristy and tiny, smaller than West Virginia, but during the Cold War it spelled trouble for the Soviet Union. Its no-nonsense armed forces fielded nearly 1,000 tanks, including hundreds of top-shelf ones designed to help its NATO allies slug it out with Moscow's army on the northern German plains.

Two decades after the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991, the Netherlands' active-duty tank inventory had dropped to zero — a small example of the massive disarmament and military downsizing that took place across Europe after the Cold War ended. "This feels like a funeral," a Dutch tank commander said at a 2011 ceremony marking the moment when the last lumbering tracked vehicles were decommissioned before they were sold off.

Now, the man who took office as the Netherlands' prime minister just before it mothballed its last tanks, Mark Rutte, is the odds-on favorite to head the U.S.-led NATO, which is again locked in a long-term test of wills with the Kremlin. And here at NATO headquarters in Brussels, the question is how Rutte, who will soon leave office as Europe's second-longest-serving premier, would deal with what many regard as a pair of grave threats if he is picked to lead the alliance.

One is President Vladimir Putin's blood-soaked invasion of Ukraine and Russia's stunningly swift pivot to a war economy, with soaring military spending that many Europeans fear is a prelude to further Russian aggression against NATO's vulnerable eastern flank. The other is the specter of a second term for Donald Trump, who disdained the alliance, sketched members that spent paltry amounts for their own defense and shredded seven dec-

ades of NATO deterrence doctrine by threatening "never" to help Washington's European allies if they were attacked.

When I was at NATO headquarters last spring, everyone was focused on Ukraine. Now, one ambassador to the alliance told me, "every discussion we have is about Trump."

Those are vastly different threats but their dovetailing effect is driving a historic rearmament by NATO's European members. Their collective defense spending, which began gradually rising after Putin invaded and illegally annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula a decade ago, is now accelerating rapidly.

Still, few believe it's growing fast enough to fund the bloc's redrawn, highly detailed regional war plans — 4,000 pages of classified documents drafted under the direction of U.S. Gen. Christopher Cavoli, supreme allied commander in Europe. Few think Europe is prepared to address the gathering threat posed by an axis of Russia, China, Iran and North Korea. And no one views it as adequate to replace tens of billions of dollars in proposed new U.S. aid for Ukraine now frozen on Capitol Hill by hard-line Republican lawmakers.

This year, 20 of NATO's 31 members, including the United States, are expected to meet or exceed the bloc's defense spending target of 2% of gross domestic product that was set 10 years ago after Putin annexed Crimea. That reflects about \$450 billion in additional spending over a decade by Washington's NATO partners — a number the alliance likes to tout, but comes to just 4.25% in average annual increases.

And while Europe's collective economic might is many times greater than Russia's, its push to increase defense budgets pales beside Moscow's roughly 70% boost in military spending this year compared with 2023.

Senior NATO officials now think the gather-

ing strategic threats and the alliance's own blueprints to defend its borders justify a much greater commitment. They are discussing a minimum increase of one-third over today's collective military spending by non-U.S. members, to build muscle in five key areas: air and missile defense; long-distance firepower; IT and communications; logistics; and heavy ground combat forces.

That buildup over a decade or more would saddle NATO's non-U.S. members with a bill of at least \$100 billion annually, requiring a seismic political, economic and psychological pivot. It would very likely mean cuts in Europe's generous social welfare programs, and could blunt intensifying efforts to slash greenhouse gas emissions to zero by 2050, which European officials say could cost \$1.6 trillion annually.

Europe has deep pockets, but not deep enough to meet those military, social and environmental goals simultaneously.

Facing down NATO's enemies doesn't translate into armies on the scale of the Cold War, when big European countries had hundreds of thousands of men under arms. But even in an era of tech-driven wars, the buildup NATO foresees would require massive modernization and expansion of forces that atrophied for more than 30 years.

That would be the top priority for Rutte if he is selected to succeed Jens Stoltenberg as NATO's next secretary general. A close second on the priority list, if Trump is reelected, would be managing a mercurial president — a job for which Rutte, who deployed both flattery and a firm hand in dealing with Trump when he was president, might be quite well suited.

Lee Hockstader has been The Washington Post's European Affairs columnist, based in Paris, since 2023. Previously he was a member of the Post editorial board; a national correspondent, a foreign correspondent, and a local reporter.

Microschools: A look into the future of K-12 education

By JONATHAN BUTCHER

The Heritage Foundation

When public schools closed their doors during the COVID-19 pandemic, Dominique Burgess saw an opportunity. With the support of a small group of families, Burgess created an online "microschool" for students ready to continue learning online.

Parents liked her "open for business" sign so much that Burgess now has online and in-person schools enrolling students from 18 states, with plans to open five more locations in the next five years. This National School Choice Week, Burgess's microschool is an example of the new, customized learning options growing nationwide and currently serving some 2 million students. Burgess is the entrepreneur behind Burbrella Learning Academy Inc., which offers a "personalized, non-traditional educational experience" online for students in grades K-12 and students in K-5 at their in-person location in Burlington, N.C.

"We started an online microschool during the pandemic to support homeschooling families, as well as families who had children at home due to COVID and didn't know what to do," Burgess said in an interview. "We specifically looked to be a collaborative partner with families," she explained, adding that she asked families, "What do you need? How can we support?"

Burgess started out with seven families, but within three months of opening, she had students from 35 families enrolled.

Microschools are small, generally private, schools that can offer individualized services due to their size. Parents in North Carolina can use education savings accounts, flexible scholarships that state families can use for education products and services, including tuition, to attend Burbrella.

Burgess says that some of her students come to Burbrella able to read and complete math assignments at grade level, while others do not, and her school is able to help all of them due to the smaller classroom settings.

"Just because you are 8 years old and are supposed to be in the third grade, it doesn't mean you are on the third-grade level," Burgess says. "Operating in learning pods [small groups] allow[s] for our teachers to differentiate and personalize instruction to the needs of each child," she says.

Burgess explains that some of her students attend her location in Burlington five days per week, while others attend two days per week and spend the rest of the week in homeschool settings. According to the National Microschooling Center, a microschool advocacy and research organization based in Nevada, more than half of microschools offer full-day learning services, while one in five microschools have hybrid programs.

Precise estimates of how many students attend microschools nationwide are hard to come by, but at the pandemic's height, a survey conducted by researchers at Harvard and Stanford found that some 3 million students were being educated full- or part-time in a

small setting such as a learning pod or microschool. Today, based on other polling data and enrollment trends, between 1 and 2 million students are in microschools full time — a remarkable number considering the concept was nearly unheard of just three years ago. Burgess has 26 students attending her in-person location with another 136 online.

In addition to being smaller than traditional schools, microschools also make use of non-traditional spaces in which to operate — like an old Foot Locker shoe store in a local mall. Burgess says her North Carolina location has converted the store into a small classroom and uses meeting space in former retail locations next door for activities.

"We want to go into these nontraditional learning spaces and transform it into microschools so people can see that any space can be turned into a learning institution," Burgess says. According to the Microschooling Center, 39% of microschools refurbish commercial business space in which to operate and another 25% use space in churches.

After Burbrella's first year, Burgess says she realized her school was targeting families "who wanted school choice" and "had an understanding of what their children needed ... and wanted more." And families want more of what Burgess is creating. This entrepreneurship, optimism and opportunity are the essence of National School Choice Week.

Jonathan Butcher is the Will Skillman Senior Fellow in Education at The Heritage Foundation.

SCOREBOARD/AUSTRALIAN OPEN

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Wednesday's men's scores

EAST
 American 84, Holy Cross 65
 Army 69, Boston U. 59
 Bucknell 71, Navy 63
 Fordham 71, Rhode Island 68
 Lafayette 70, Loyola (Md.) 44
 Marshall 77, Georgia St. 68
 Providence 67, Seton Hall 63
 South Florida 75, Temple 69
 St. John's 70, Villanova 50

SOUTH
 Alabama 79, Auburn 75
 Chattanooga 79, Wofford 65
 ETSU 74, VMI 73
 Florida 79, Mississippi St. 70
 Furman 78, Samford 68
 Gardner-Webb 76, Longwood 64
 Georgia 68, LSU 66
 High Point 78, SC-Upstate 67
 James Madison 78, Old Dominion 62
 Middle Tennessee 75, Jacksonville St. 67
 Mississippi 77, Arkansas 51
 North Alabama 90, Kennesaw St. 84
 Queens (NC) 96, Cent. Arkansas 79
 Richmond 82, George Washington 74
 Southern Miss. 79, Coastal Carolina 63
 The Citadel 68, Mercer 66
 Troy 78, Texas St. 65
 UNC-Asheville 81, Radford 69
 UNC-Greensboro 85, W. Carolina 82, OT
 Virginia 59, NC State 53, OT
 Winthrop 78, Charleston Southern 59

MIDWEST
 Bradley 71, Murray St. 63
 Davidson 84, Saint Louis 61
 East Carolina 54, Wichita St. 12
 Indiana St. 89, Ill.-Chicago 83
 Iowa St. 78, Kansas St. 67
 Marquette 86, DePaul 73
 Maryland 69, Iowa 67
 Miami 73, Notre Dame 61
 Missouri St. 83, Drake 80, 2OT
 Northwestern 96, Illinois 91, OT
 S. Illinois 75, Valparaiso 69

SOUTHWEST
 FAU 69, Rice 56
 UTSA 89, Tulane 88

FAR WEST
 Colorado 98, Washington 81
 Nevada 77, Colorado St. 64
 New Mexico 95, San Jose St. 75
 Washington St. 79, Utah 57

Men's AP Top 25 schedule

Friday's game
 No. 13 Wisconsin (14-4) vs. Michigan St. (12-7)

Saturday's games
 No. 3 North Carolina (15-3) at Florida St. (11-7)
 No. 4 Houston (16-2) vs. Kansas St. (14-4)
 No. 5 Tennessee (14-4) at Vanderbilt (5-13)
 No. 6 Kentucky (14-3) at Arkansas (10-8)
 No. 7 Kansas (15-3) at No. 23 Iowa St. (14-4)
 No. 8 Auburn (16-2) at Mississippi St. (13-5)
 No. 9 Arizona (14-4) at Oregon (13-5)
 No. 10 Illinois (14-4) vs. Indiana (12-7)
 No. 11 Oklahoma (15-3) vs. No. 20 Texas Tech (15-3)
 No. 12 Duke (13-4) vs. Clemson (13-5)
 No. 14 Marquette (13-5) vs. Seton Hall (13-6)
 No. 15 Baylor (14-4) vs. TCU (13-5)
 No. 16 Dayton (15-2) at Richmond (13-5)
 No. 17 Creighton (14-5) vs. DePaul (3-15)
 No. 18 Utah St. (17-2) at Boise St. (13-5)
 No. 21 BYU (14-4) vs. Texas (13-5)
 No. 24 Colorado St. (15-3) at Wyoming (10-8)

Wednesday's women's scores

EAST
 Army 61, Boston U. 57
 Buffalo 82, Bowling Green 72
 Creighton 77, Georgetown 72
 Duquesne 72, Richmond 59
 George Mason 57, George Washington 41
 Holy Cross 59, American 48
 Loyola (Md.) 67, Lafayette 60
 Loyola Chicago 73, Fordham 64
 Navy 59, Bucknell 48
 Rhode Island 75, La Salle 47
 Saint Joseph's 65, St. Bonaventure 40
 Towson 60, Md.-Eastern Shore 55

SOUTH
 Charleston Southern 63, Winthrop 54
 Davidson 72, UMass 42
 Georgia St. 74, Georgia Southern 66
 North Alabama 79, Kennesaw St. 60
 Radford 59, UNC-Asheville 46

MIDWEST
 Ball St. 91, Miami (Ohio) 56
 Butler 90, Xavier 57
 Cincinnati 58, Oklahoma St. 56
 Green Bay 87, IUPUI 59
 Kent St. 66, E. Michigan 57
 Michigan St. 97, Purdue 70
 N. Kentucky 62, Youngstown St. 56
 Ohio 68, Cent. Michigan 58
 Toledo 72, N. Illinois 52
 VCU 73, Dayton 62

PRO HOCKEY

PWHL

	W	L	OW	OL	Pts	GF	GA
Montreal	3	1	1	1	13	18	17
Minnesota	3	1	1	1	12	15	10
Boston	2	2	1	0	8	12	13
Ottawa	2	1	0	2	8	14	11
New York	2	3	1	0	8	17	14
Toronto	1	5	0	0	5	12	23

Teams awarded three (3) points for a regulation win, two (2) points for an overtime or shootout win, one (1) point for an overtime or shootout loss, and zero (0) points for a regulation time loss.

Wednesday's games
 Boston 3, Ottawa 2
 Montreal 2, Minnesota 1

Friday's game
 New York at Toronto

Saturday's games
 Ottawa at Montreal
 Minnesota at Boston

DEALS

Wednesday's transactions

BASEBALL
Major League Baseball
American League
CHICAGO WHITE SOX — Agreed to terms with 3Bs Eduardo Herrera and Jurdrick Profar, INF Jesus Premoli and RHP Jeziel Boekhoudt on minor league contracts.
KANSAS CITY ROYALS — Named Tripp Kelster assistant coach for Charlotte (IL), Sam Eades assistant pitching coach for Northwest Arkansas (TL), Chris Corbett assistant hitting coach and Chad Gravenorst strength & conditioning coach for Quad Cities (ML), Sam Freeman assistant pitching coach and Kyle MacKinnon assistant hitting coach for Columbia (CRL), Larry Sutton manager, Ken Knutson rehab pitching coach and Myles Fish athletic trainer for (FSL) and Alberto Rivera athletic trainer for Dominican Summer League.
MINNESOTA TWINS — Claimed OF Bubba Thompson off waivers from the New York Yankees.
NEW YORK YANKEES — Sent SS Jeter Downs and RF Oscar Gonzalez outright to Scranton/Wilkes-Barre (IL).
SEATTLE MARINERS — Named Sergio Plasencia bench coach, Seth Mejias-Brea hitting coach and Jose Alcantara Beas strength & conditioning coach for Everett (NL).

BASKETBALL
National Basketball Association
BROOKLYN NETS — Recalled F Noah Clowney from the Long Island Nets of the G League.
LOS ANGELES LAKERS — Assigned G Jalen Hood-Schifino and F Maxwell Lewis to the South Bay Lakers of the G League.
OKLAHOMA CITY THUNDER — Assigned G Tre Mann to the Oklahoma City Blue of the G League.

FOOTBALL
National Football League
BUFFALO BILLS — Signed QB Shane Buechele to a futures contract for 2024.
CLEVELAND BROWNS — Signed K Lucas Havrisik to a futures contract for 2024.
DENVER BRONCOS — Signed DT Rashard Lawrence to a futures contract for 2024.
DETROIT LIONS — Placed TE Brock Wright on injured reserve. Signed DT Tyson Alualua. Signed TE Zach Ertz to the practice squad.
GREEN BAY PACKERS — Released defensive coordinator Joe Barry. Signed K Jack Podlesny to a futures contract for 2024.
KANSAS CITY CHIEFS — Designated OT Prince Tega Wanogho to return to practice from injured reserve.
MIAMI DOLPHINS — Released defensive coordinator Vic Fangio.
NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS — Signed G Michael Jordan to a futures contract for 2024.
SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS — Designated DT Kalia Davis to return to practice from injured reserve.
TENNESSEE TITANS — Named Brian Callahan head coach.

HOCKEY
National Hockey League
ANAHEIM DUCKS — Recalled D Robert Hagg from San Diego (AHL).
CALGARY FLAMES — Placed D Nick DeSimone and C Adam Ruzicka on waivers.
CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS — Signed G Petr Mrazek to a two-year contract.
COLORADO AVALANCHE — Activated LW Artturi Lehkonen from injured reserve. Reassigned G Trent Miner and F Alex Beaucage from Colorado (AHL) to Utah (ECHL).
DETROIT RED WINGS — Reassigned D Brogan Rafferty to Grand Rapids (AHL).
EDMONTON OILERS — Returned LW Adam Erne to Bakersfield (AHL).
MONTREAL CANADIENS — Returned LW Joshua Roy to Laval (AHL).
NASHVILLE PREDATORS — Signed F Cole Smith to a two-year contract.
NEW JERSEY DEVILS — Announced C Michael McLeod and D Cal Foote have been granted indefinite leave of absences.
NEW YORK RANGERS — Recalled F Jake Leschyshyn from Hartford (AHL).
PHILADELPHIA FLYERS — Reassigned D mason Millman from Lehigh Valley (AHL) to Reading (ECHL).
TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING — Reassigned D Philippe Myers to Syracuse (AHL).

SOCCER
Major League Soccer
COLORADO RAPIDS — Signed F Remi Cabral to a one-year contract.
D.C. UNITED — Named Alex Martinez assistant coach and Cody Mizell head of goalkeeping.
CHARLOTTE FC — Named Tommy Wilson technical director.
FC DALLAS — Re-signed D Amet Korca to a one-year contract.
LOS ANGELES FC — Signed D Lorenzo Dellavalle to a contract through 2026, pending receipt of his P-1 visa.
MINNESOTA UNITED FC — Signed M Carlos Harvey through 2025.
ST. LOUIS CITY SC — Transferred F Niko Giocchini to Como (Italian Serie B).
SEATTLE SOUNDERS FC — Signed M Pedro de la Vega to a four-year contract.

National Women's Soccer league
NJ/NY GOTHAM FC — Traded \$60,000 in general allocation money (GAM) to Racing Louisiana in exchange for D Julia Lester, then traded Lester and \$20,000 in general allocation money to Seattle Reign in exchange for D Sam Hiatt.
ORLANDO PRIDE — Signed F Simone Charley to a two-year contract.

Defending champ ousts Gauff from semifinals

Sabalenka to meet Zheng in title match with shot to repeat

BY JOHN PYE
 Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Aryna Sabalenka avenged a U.S. Open final loss to Coco Gauff and will defend her Australian Open title as the overwhelming favorite against first-time finalist Zheng Qinwen.

Sabalenka attacked Gauff's serve with her powerful returns and unloaded 33 winners in the 7-6 (2), 6-4 semifinal victory on Thursday night.

After her breakthrough sequence in 2023 that started with a first major title in Australia and ended in the U.S. final loss to Gauff, Sabalenka is the first to reach consecutive finals at Melbourne Park since Serena Williams in 2015, '16 and '17.

"The key was that I was able to stay focused no matter what, no matter what the score was ... keep fighting for it," Sabalenka said of the difference between her last two Grand Slam encounters against Gauff. "I'm super happy to be in another final of a Grand Slam. Hopefully I can do a little bit better than the last time."

No. 12-seeded Zheng had a 6-4, 6-4 win over No. 93-ranked Dayana Yastremska, ending the Ukrainian player's bid to become just the second qualifier to reach a Grand Slam final in the Open era after 2021 U.S. Open champion Emma Raducanu.

Zheng lost in the U.S. Open quarterfinals to Sabalenka last year in her best previous run at a major.

She said reaching the final a decade after Chinese compatriot Li Na won the Australian title almost completes a dream. One more win will finish it.

"It feels unbelievable. I'm super excited to have such a great performance today and arrive in the final," said Zheng, who hasn't faced a player ranked in the top 50 in six rounds. "I haven't faced big-seeded (players) all the past rounds ... but, you know, it's a match, so let's see what's going to happen in the final."

Taking on No. 2-seeded Sabalenka will certainly be a big step up for the 21-year-old Zheng, who is playing in a major for only the ninth time.

Sabalenka said she'd been "ready for anything" against Gauff, and was happy to have



ASANKA BRENDON RATNAYAKE/AP

Belarus' Aryna Sabalenka celebrates winning her semifinal match against Coco Gauff of the U.S. on Thursday in Melbourne, Australia.

Scoreboard

Australian Open

Thursday
 At Melbourne Park
 Melbourne, Australia
 Purse: AUD 39,264,000
 Surface: Hardcourt outdoor
Women's Singles Semifinals

Aryna Sabalenka (2), Belarus, def. Coco Gauff (4), United States, 7-6 (2), 6-4.
 Zheng Qinwen (12), China, def. Dayana Yastremska, Ukraine, 6-4, 6-4.

Men's Doubles Semifinals

Rohan Bopanna, India, and Matthew Ebden (2), Australia, def. Zhang Zhizhen, China, and Tomas Machac, Czech Republic, 6-3, 3-6, 7-6 (7).

Women's Doubles Semifinals

Hsieh Su-wei, Taiwan, and Elise Mertens (2), Belgium, def. Storm Hunter, Australia, and Katerina Siniakova (3), Czech Republic, 7-5, 1-6, 6-3.

missed a set point as Gauff went on a four-game roll to take a 6-5 lead. Gauff also couldn't serve out, with Sabalenka's booming returns causing her trouble.

In the tiebreaker, Sabalenka raced to 5-1. Chants of "Coco, Coco" went up around Rod Laver Arena but they didn't help Gauff.

Almost a half-hour after her first set point, Sabalenka got five more. She clinched it with a big serve out wide.

Gauff won points on just three of her 17 second serves in the first set. That made her push harder and led to six double-faults.

The second set was tight again, until Sabalenka broke in the ninth game.

Yastremska, who won three matches in qualifying and five matches in the main draw, said she was proud of her performance and giving herself the chance to fly the flag for Ukraine.

"It was a great tournament for me. Usually (you) get in Grand Slams seven matches to play, and I have played nine matches, so I'm very proud of myself," she said.

In doubles, 43-year-old Rohan Bopanna and Matthew Ebden advanced to their second consecutive Grand Slam men's final by beating Zhang Zhizhen and Tomas Machac 6-3, 3-6, 7-6 (7).

some support after facing the 19-year-old American in New York last September.

Gauff went into the semifinals unbeaten in 2024 after winning the title in Auckland, New Zealand.

She was on a 12-match winning streak in majors and attempting to be the first player since Naomi Osaka in 2020-21 to win the U.S. Open and Australian Open back to back.

The first set contained six service breaks. Sabalenka led 5-2 and

OLYMPICS

Sanctions for harassment in US Biathlon

Army National Guard athlete spurred investigation into abuse of teammate

By **MARTHA BELLISLE**
Associated Press

U.S. Biathlon national champion Joanne Reid was sexually harassed and abused for years by a ski-wax technician while racing on the elite World Cup circuit, a watchdog group that oversees sex-abuse allegations in Olympic sports found. When the two-time Olympian complained, she said she was told his behavior was just part of the male European culture.

Teammate Deedra Irwin says she repeatedly had to step in to protect Reid. Outraged by what she called “a culture of harassment and misogyny,” Irwin, a biathlete with the Army National Guard, notified her military superiors, who immediately demanded action.

Only then, in April 2021, did U.S. Biathlon officials alert the U.S. Center for SafeSport.

Its 18-month investigation found that Petr “Gara” Garabik had engaged in repeated sexual harassment and unwanted sexual contact with Reid. The Czech citizen was suspended for six months and put on probation until December 2024.

Wax technicians play a critical role in biathlon, which combines cross-country skiing with precision-rifle shooting, preparing skis for the day’s snow conditions so racers glide over the trails with ease. It was a power dynamic that left Reid vulnerable.

To protect Reid from Garabik, Irwin told the AP she would get between Reid and the wax tech. The women became “battle buddies,” she said — a military term meaning soldiers take care of each other.

“You never go anywhere without your battle buddy so there’s always two against one and there’s always someone to corroborate your story,” she told the AP in December while racing in Austria.

An athlete sexually harassed by a wax tech would have trouble making him stop, “out of concern it would jeopardize the athlete’s performance,” said confidential SafeSport reports on its investigation obtained by The Associated Press.

It was an argument Reid had made in complaints to U.S. Biathlon officials since 2019.

Still, it would take two years for U.S. Biathlon to bring the case to SafeSport, created to investigate and punish abuse in Olympic sports in the aftermath of the Larry Nassar USA Gymnastics sexual molestation scandal that revealed flaws in U.S. sports leaders’ handling of sex-abuse cases.

SafeSport’s investigation found that Garabik “engaged in a pattern of sexualized behavior” involving

Reid, “including sexualized commentary and inappropriate sexualized touching, over the course of six years.”

Garabik’s behavior was well-known and team officials acted like it was normal, or “European,” said Reid, 31, the daughter of Olympic speed-skater Beth (Heiden) Reid and niece of Olympic speed-skate superstar Eric Heiden.

“New women on the team were warned about him,” Reid told the AP. For years she refrained from complaining, she said, as she tried to find her footing as a new team member and for fear the ski-wax techs would quit, leaving the team in trouble.

Garabik told the AP in an email that the case against him was “complete nonsense from the start.” But he acknowledged to SafeSport investigators and the AP that his comments were sexual in nature.

“I have never done anything to anyone without their consent and the fact that I had some jokes and hints was never sexual pressure,” he told the AP. “We always laughed about it. By that I mean other team members.”

Last May, six months after SafeSport concluded its investigation, U.S. Biathlon retroactively changed the criteria for being prequalified for the World Cup team — and Reid was bumped off. Reid had to start over, competing in qualifying races. The change didn’t affect the status of anyone else on the team.

Reid said she believed the move was retaliation for calling attention to how U.S. Biathlon handled the problem. She turned down a spot on the U.S. national team and stopped going to trainings.

“There was no way I was going to put on my uniform and represent them on a world stage,” Reid



MATTHIAS SCHRADER/AP

Joanne Reid, left, and Deedra Irwin embrace at the finish line during the women’s 4 x 6 km relay race at the biathlon World Cup in Anterselva, Italy, on Jan. 22, 2022. Reid, the United States Biathlon national champion, was sexually harassed and abused for years by a ski-wax technician, investigators found.

told the AP.

U.S. Biathlon CEO Jack Gierhart denied the World Cup rule change was retaliation, saying in an interview that it was developed and approved by a committee that includes athletes to set standards to help the organization reach its goals.

Asked about Reid’s SafeSport case at U.S. Biathlon’s annual meeting in December, he said policies were implemented to address the issues.

“Athlete safety is a critical issue for us,” Gierhart told the biathletes and officials attending the Zoom session. “We’re always working to improve how we address that, how we educate our athletes ... how we educate our staff, and the safeguards we put in place.”

Reid told investigators the sexual harassment started in 2016, with constant touching, unwelcomed hugs, lewd jokes and pats on the buttocks. She was in her

early 20s and Garabik in his late 40s.

He grabbed, touched and hugged her whenever they were in the wax cabin together, made inappropriate jokes when she bent over to put on her skis, and sent a stream of flirtatious emojis over WhatsApp, she said.

In March 2017, Garabik showed up drunk at her hotel room, pushed his way inside, held her down and tried to kiss her as she fought back, the SafeSport report said. Her roommate arrived and pulled him off, it said.

In 2019, with Irwin’s support, Reid reported the abuse to then-coach Bernd Eisenbichler. He took Reid off Garabik’s wax rotation and reprimanded him, but the behavior didn’t stop, the report said, and two days later Garabik grabbed Reid’s buttocks while giving her a good-luck hug before a race.

Garabik’s “inappropriate conduct” even after being reprimanded by a coach suggests “an ongoing potential risk to safety of others, particularly women in sport,” the

SafeSport findings said.

In 2020, Reid and Irwin went to U.S. Biathlon High Performance Director Lowell Bailey with their concerns and, they told the AP, he responded that you can’t teach sexual harassment rules to a European.

Asked by the AP about the response, Bailey said: “That’s not true.”

“Maybe they misinterpreted,” he added.

Asked if he would have been required to file a report to SafeSport after the women complained, he said: “I don’t recall the specifics. I can’t speak to that, honestly.”

In February 2021, a year after the athletes complained to Bailey, Garabik told Reid at an event in Slovenia that a package on a high shelf was hers — then grabbed her between the legs and lifted her up by the crotch to reach it, the SafeSport findings said.

In a statement two months later to U.S. Biathlon, Irwin said female athletes were treated with disrespect, “and then everyone refuses to address it and calls it ‘part of European culture’ or ‘just a joke.’”

U.S. Biathlon removed Garabik from working with its teams in November 2021.

This past November, after years of silence, Reid went public with her SafeSport story on her popular Instagram and Facebook pages, and was encouraged by the outpouring of support.

“I am absolutely floored, actually, by the amount of people coming out of the woodwork on behalf of me and the safety of our women’s team and biathletes in general,” Reid told the AP.

“Though it sucks right now it’s an amazing, inspiring thing.”



KIRSTY WIGGLESWORTH / AP

Joanne Reid skis during the women’s 10-kilometer pursuit race at the 2022 Winter Olympics in Zhangjiakou, China.

“There was no way I was going to put on my uniform and represent them on a world stage.”

Joanne Reid

U.S. Biathlon national champion

BASKETBALL

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference					
Atlantic Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
Boston	34	10	.773	—	
Philadelphia	29	13	.690	4	
New York	27	17	.614	7	
Brooklyn	17	26	.395	16½	
Toronto	16	28	.364	18	
Southeast Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
Miami	24	20	.545	—	
Orlando	23	21	.523	1	
Atlanta	18	26	.409	6	
Charlotte	10	32	.238	13	
Washington	7	36	.163	16½	
Central Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
Milwaukee	31	13	.705	—	
Cleveland	26	16	.619	4	
Indiana	24	20	.545	7	
Chicago	21	24	.467	10½	
Detroit	5	39	.114	26	
Western Conference					
Southwest Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
New Orleans	26	18	.591	—	
Dallas	24	20	.545	2	
Houston	20	23	.465	5½	
Memphis	17	27	.386	9	
San Antonio	8	36	.182	18	
Northwest Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
Oklahoma City	31	13	.705	—	
Minnesota	31	13	.705	—	
Denver	31	14	.689	½	
Utah	22	23	.489	9½	
Portland	13	31	.295	18	
Pacific Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
L.A. Clippers	28	14	.667	—	
Phoenix	26	18	.591	3	
Sacramento	24	18	.571	4	
L.A. Lakers	22	23	.489	7½	
Golden State	19	22	.463	8½	
Wednesday's games					
Detroit 113, Charlotte 106					
Minnesota 118, Washington 107					
Memphis 105, Miami 96					
Milwaukee 126, Cleveland 116					
Portland 137, Houston 131, OT					
Phoenix 132, Dallas 109					
Oklahoma City 140, San Antonio 114					
Golden State 134, Atlanta 112					
Thursday's games					
Philadelphia at Indiana					
Utah at Washington					
Boston at Miami					
Denver at New York					
Minnesota at Brooklyn					
Sacramento at Golden State					
Chicago at L.A. Lakers					
Friday's games					
Dallas at Atlanta					
Houston at Charlotte					
Phoenix at Indiana					
L.A. Clippers at Toronto					
Cleveland at Milwaukee					
Oklahoma City at New Orleans					
Orlando at Memphis					
Portland at San Antonio					
Saturday's games					
Washington at Detroit					
Miami at New York					
Philadelphia at Denver					
Houston at Brooklyn					
L.A. Clippers at Boston					
Utah at Charlotte					
New Orleans at Milwaukee					
L.A. Lakers at Golden State					
Minnesota at San Antonio					
Sacramento at Dallas					
Sunday's games					
Oklahoma City at Detroit					
Memphis at Indiana					
Toronto at Atlanta					
Phoenix at Orlando					
Chicago at Portland					
Scoring leaders					
Through Wednesday					
	G	FG	FT	PTS	AVG
Embiid, PHI	32	386	347	1156	36.1
Doncic, DAL	37	423	253	1242	33.6
Antetokoun., MIL	42	489	317	1313	31.3
Gil.-Alex., OKC	43	471	349	1339	31.1
Durant, PHO	37	382	227	1076	29.1
Mitchell, CLE	33	318	174	911	27.6
Fox, SAC	36	351	172	988	27.4
Booker, PHO	35	331	214	953	27.2
Tatum, BOS	41	372	240	1107	27.0
Young, ATL	39	324	273	1049	26.9

Source: Bucks hiring Rivers as coach

BY STEVE MEGARGEE
Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Doc Rivers is finalizing a deal to take over as the Milwaukee Bucks coach a day after the firing of Adrian Griffin, a person with knowledge of the negotiations told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

Rivers and the Bucks were still negotiating Wednesday, according to the person who spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity because no contract had been completed.

ESPN, where Rivers has worked this season an analyst, reported that Rivers has agreed to a deal in principle. ESPN's public relations department released a statement on social media from head of event and studio production David Roberts saying, "We wish Doc well and we look forward to documenting the next chapter of his coaching career."

Interim coach Joe Prunty led the Bucks on Wednesday night for their 126-116 victory over the Cleveland Cavaliers. Bucks general manager Jon Horst held a news conference before the game to discuss Griffin's dismissal, but declined to discuss the coach's potential successor.

"We're not going to talk about Doc tonight," Horst said. "That's not part of this. There will be at some point hopefully a time where we can do that, but this is a chance for us to kind of dive into the Adrian Griffin piece."

Horst indicated he didn't consult players before firing Griffin, who had led the Bucks to a 30-13 record that put them second to the Boston Celtics in the Eastern Conference standings.



MATT SLOCUM/AP

After being fired by the Philadelphia 76ers this past offseason, Doc Rivers is reportedly set to return to coaching with the Milwaukee Bucks, who made the surprise decision to fire Adrian Griffin despite a 30-13 record.

Bucks players said the move caught them by surprise.

"The record speaks for itself," two-time MVP Giannis Antetokounmpo said after Wednesday's game. "He was 30-13. At the end of the day, this is the NBA. Sometimes decisions are made. It's a hard job. I feel and I hope everybody who came to the podium today and spoke about this situation gave Coach Griffin his props and his credit."

"At the end of the day, he's a head coach and he's going to be around the league for a long time. We're going to see him probably in the near future."

Antetokounmpo also showed his support for management.

"At the end of the day, I trust the ownership decision," Antetokounmpo said. "I trust the front office. They've never (steered) me wrong in the past. They've always created a great atmosphere, a great culture, a winning culture. They always did whatever was the best for the team and for us to be in a position to win, so we've just got to do the same here. You've just got to trust this is the best decision for me and the guys, and we've just got to go with it."

Griffin had never been a head coach until the Bucks hired him last summer, though he had spent 16 years as an assistant. The Bucks would be replacing him with some-

one who has nearly a quarter-century of head coaching experience.

Rivers has plenty of Milwaukee ties, as he played for Marquette from 1980-83 and his No. 31 jersey hangs from the Fiserv Forum rafters. He also has a championship background after leading the Boston Celtics to a title in 2008 and a Game 7 Finals appearance two years later.

He didn't have as much postseason success in later stints with the Los Angeles Clippers (2013-20) and Philadelphia 76ers (2020-23). The 76ers fired him last year after they exited in the second round of the playoffs each of his three seasons in Philadelphia.

Hill explains taking Green out of Olympic pool

BY TIM REYNOLDS
Associated Press

USA Basketball says it wants the best for Draymond Green, which is why the federation does not have him in its plans for the Paris Olympics.

Green's omission from the pool of 41 players who are now candidates to play for the United States at the Paris Games was explained Wednesday by men's national team managing director Grant Hill, who spoke highly of the Golden State forward's history with the national team and how he helped the Americans win Olympic gold in 2016 and 2021.

But it was Green's recent history — two suspensions for on-court conduct this season — that Hill and USA Basketball couldn't ignore.

"We all understand and certainly have great respect and sensitivity to this particular period in his career, and he's working through some things both on and off the court," Hill said. "We at USA Bas-



GODOFREDO A. VASQUEZ/AP

Although Draymond Green has won multiple gold medals with the U.S. Olympic team, his recent suspensions led USA Basketball to not consider him for the roster that will play in the 2024 Paris Games.

ketball, we want to support him on his journey. We just didn't feel that playing over the summer gives him the best opportunity to do what he needs to do."

Green appeared in 16 of Golden State's first 40 games this season, his absences primarily because of the two suspensions — five games for grabbing Minnesota's Rudy

Goertzel around the neck during an on-court incident in November, then an indefinite banning after he struck Phoenix's Jusuf Nurkic in the face in December. Green wound up missing 12 games before being reinstated and four more games while ramping up to return to play.

Green is one of four current NBA players with more than one Olympic gold medal. The others — three-time gold medalist Kevin Durant and two-time gold medalists LeBron James and Chris Paul — are among the 41-player list that was released Tuesday. But Green was hardly the only previous gold medalist that didn't make the initial list for this summer; of the 26 active NBA players with gold medals, 13 are in the pool, 13 aren't.

"His contributions have been significant, and he is a real part of the legacy of this organization for his excellence," Hill said. "But in lieu of what's transpired this year, we made a decision to not have him on this list."

NHL/COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Jazz owners look to bring NHL team to Salt Lake City

BY STEPHEN WHYNO
Associated Press

The owners of the NBA's Utah Jazz said Wednesday that they have the immediate ability to bring an NHL team to Salt Lake City and requested the initiation of an expansion process.

The Smith Entertainment Group said in a news release it would use the Jazz's arena as an interim home for an NHL franchise. SEG CEO Ryan Smith said the company is "100% focused on making this happen as soon as possible."

Talks between Smith and the league have been going on since 2022. The NHL said in a statement it appreciates the interest.

"During conversations over the course of the past two years, we have been impressed by Ryan and Ashley Smith's commitment to their community and their passion and vision for Utah, not only as a hockey market but as a preeminent sports and entertainment destination," the league said in a statement. "Utah is a promising market, and we look forward to continuing our discussions."

The announcement comes past the midway point of the hockey season and with remaining uncertainty about the future of the Arizona Coyotes, who are playing a second season in 5,000-seat Mullett Arena on the campus of Arizona State University in Tempe. League and NHLPA leaders said last year they would like a resolution sooner than later about a long-term future for the Coyotes in the Phoenix area.

The Coyotes declined comment on the Salt Lake City release. They have been adamant about remaining in Arizona despite a failed arena vote in Tempe last year.

President and CEO Xavier Gutierrez said in June the team had identified six potential sites for a

privately funded arena. The Coyotes announced in August that owner Alex Meruelo executed a letter of intent to buy a piece of land for a potential arena in Mesa, Ariz.

After a series of questions about the Coyotes at the league's pre-Stanley Cup Final news conference in June, deputy commissioner Bill Daly confirmed conversations with Smith and his interest in bringing the NHL to Salt Lake City.

Daly also said the league has been consistent in saying that expansion wasn't at the top of its priority list. The NHL has 32 teams, same as the NFL and two more than the NBA and Major League Baseball. It added the Vegas Golden Knights in 2017 and the Seattle Kraken in 2021.

"You look at market, you look at ownership, you look at arena and you look at does it make the league stronger," commissioner Gary Bettman said. "And I think it's fair to say that the last two expansions, Vegas and Seattle, have made the league stronger."

Bettman called Arizona a terrific and growing market, adding that the team has been "a little bit of a victim of circumstance." The Coyotes have undergone a series of ownership changes and played in different arenas around the area — most recently in Glendale before moving to Tempe.

"We're in a better position to resist moving than maybe we were 20 or 30 years ago," Bettman said June 3. "We want to make sure we explore all options at this stage of where we are before we would consider having to relocate a club, and I'm hopeful we won't have to."

Five NHL exhibition games had been held at the Delta Center, the home of the Jazz, since 2018. SEG said the location for a potential new arena designed for hockey is yet to be determined.



STEVEN C WILSON/AP

The owners of the NBA's Utah Jazz said Wednesday that they have the immediate ability to bring an NHL team to Salt Lake City.

NHL scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Boston	47	29	9	9	67	164	124
Florida	47	29	14	4	62	152	123
Toronto	46	24	14	8	56	162	148
Tampa Bay	48	25	18	5	55	163	158
Detroit	47	24	18	5	53	166	156
Buffalo	48	21	23	4	46	141	153
Montreal	47	19	21	7	45	130	169
Ottawa	43	18	24	1	37	147	155

Metropolitan Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
N.Y. Rangers	47	29	15	3	61	152	135
Carolina	46	26	15	5	57	157	141
Philadelphia	48	25	17	6	56	145	139
New Jersey	45	24	18	3	51	156	159
N.Y. Islanders	47	20	16	11	51	138	159
Washington	46	22	18	6	50	111	141
Pittsburgh	44	21	17	6	48	133	121
Columbus	46	14	23	9	37	136	173

Western Conference

Central Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Winnipeg	46	30	11	5	65	146	105
Colorado	48	31	14	3	65	185	152
Dallas	47	28	13	6	62	174	144
Nashville	47	25	21	1	51	144	146
St. Louis	46	24	20	2	50	133	146
Arizona	46	23	20	3	49	139	138
Minnesota	47	21	21	5	47	145	160
Chicago	48	14	32	2	30	105	173

Pacific Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Vancouver	48	32	11	5	69	181	123
Vegas	48	28	14	6	62	156	131
Edmonton	43	27	15	1	55	153	123
Los Angeles	45	22	14	9	53	144	121
Seattle	47	20	18	9	49	133	139
Calgary	47	21	21	5	47	146	150
Anaheim	47	16	30	1	33	120	162
San Jose	48	13	31	4	30	101	191

Note: Two points for a win, one point for overtime loss. Top three teams in each division and two wild cards per conference advance to playoffs.

Tuesday's games

Ottawa 4, Montreal 1
Dallas 5, Detroit 4
Tampa Bay 6, Philadelphia 3
Vegas 3, N.Y. Islanders 2
Minnesota 5, Washington 3
Edmonton 4, Columbus 1
St. Louis 4, Calgary 3
Anaheim 4, Buffalo 2
San Jose 3, N.Y. Rangers 2, OT

Wednesday's games

Toronto 1, Winnipeg 0, OT
Florida 6, Arizona 2
Carolina 3, Boston 2
Colorado 6, Washington 2
St. Louis 4, Vancouver 3, OT
Seattle 6, Chicago 2
Buffalo 5, Los Angeles 3

Thursday's games

Arizona at Tampa Bay
Boston at Ottawa
N.Y. Islanders at Montreal
Philadelphia at Detroit
New Jersey at Carolina
Anaheim at Dallas
Nashville at Minnesota
Chicago at Edmonton
Columbus at Calgary

Friday's games

Florida at Pittsburgh
Vegas at N.Y. Rangers
Los Angeles at Colorado
St. Louis at Seattle

Saturday's games

Boston at Philadelphia
Washington at Dallas
Buffalo at San Jose
Nashville at Edmonton
Arizona at Carolina
Montreal at Pittsburgh
N.Y. Rangers at Ottawa
New Jersey at Tampa Bay
Toronto at Winnipeg
Florida at N.Y. Islanders
Vegas at Detroit
Anaheim at Minnesota
Chicago at Calgary
Columbus at Vancouver

Sunday's games

Los Angeles at St. Louis
Columbus at Seattle

Monday's game

Nashville at Ottawa

Tuesday, Jan. 30

Columbus at St. Louis
Seattle at San Jose



RYAN SUN/AP

Michigan went 4-0 with Sherrone Moore, left, leading the team on game days, including against Penn State and Ohio State.

Sherrone could ease transition at Michigan

BY RALPH D. RUSSO
Associated Press

When Nick Saban retired at Alabama two weeks ago, the chain reaction it set off caused five more head coaching changes across major college football in a little more than a week.

Now Michigan, the winningest program in college football history and the defending national champion, is in the market for a coach after Jim Harbaugh decided Wednesday to go back to the NFL with the Los Angeles Chargers.

Michigan is the type of job that could set off another wave of moves, but the chances of that happening seem far less likely.

The Wolverines might very well have their man already on campus in offensive coordinator Sherrone Moore.

"We are working quickly to hire the next head coach for the program and will do everything possible to keep this current staff and team together," Michigan athletic director Warde Manuel said in a telling statement.

With Harbaugh serving two separate suspensions this past season for potential NCAA rules violations, Michigan went 4-0 with Moore leading the team on game days. And those weren't just any games. Moore was in charge when Michigan won at Penn State and against Ohio State to win the Big Ten East.

"We've already seen it, right? You've already got a glimpse of the shining star that he is," Harbaugh said about Moore during the leadup to the national championship game against Washington earlier this month. "He's just phenomenal, so smart, works so hard at it."

The 37-year-old Moore has never been a head coach. He joined Harbaugh's staff in 2018 as tight ends coach on the recommendation of Dan Enos, who spent about six weeks after the 2017 season as a member of Harbaugh's staff before bouncing to Alabama for an-

other gig.

Moore quickly won over Harbaugh.

"First time we sit down, we meet each other," Harbaugh recalled. "And then I asked him, just show me your technique of a zone block and a gap block for a tight end. And he jumped up and just started demonstrating and went through this teaching progression that was, boom, one, two, three, four, and memorable, learnable. But first time I met him I was blown away. Knocked my socks off."

In 2021, the year Michigan bounced back from a terrible pandemic-shortened season that almost cost Harbaugh his job, Moore was promoted to offensive line coach and co-offensive coordinator.

Michigan's offensive line has been one of the best in the country since, the driving force behind a team that won three straight Big Ten titles and three games in a row against rival Ohio State.

Moore might seem to be the obvious choice, but Michigan — similar to Alabama — could tempt just about any coach in the country if it chooses to look outside.

For weeks while Kalen DeBoer led Washington to the national championship game and contract extension talks were tabled, there was speculation the South Dakota native would be an appealing possible replacement for Harbaugh. DeBoer, instead, became Saban's replacement at Alabama.

Jedd Fisch, who went from Arizona to Washington to replace DeBoer, might have been an interesting candidate for Michigan, too. Fisch worked for Harbaugh in 2015 and '16 and just pulled off a remarkable rebuild in three seasons at Arizona.

But those moves also showed why it might be best for Michigan to stay in-house. A coaching change triggers the opening of a 30-day transfer portal window for players at the school with the vacancy.

NFL



GODOFREDO A. VASQUEZ/AP

Michigan coach Jim Harbaugh celebrates the team's national championship on Jan. 8 in Houston. Harbaugh is leaving Michigan to return to the NFL after accepting the Los Angeles Chargers job.

Harbaugh going back to Chargers as coach

By JOE REEDY
Associated Press

COSTA MESA, Calif. — Jim Harbaugh was hired as head coach of the Los Angeles Chargers on Wednesday, leaving Michigan after capping his ninth season as coach of college football's winningest program with the school's first national championship since 1997.

Harbaugh signed a five-year deal a person close to the negotiations told The Associated Press. The person spoke to the AP on the condition of anonymity because the Chargers did not announce the terms.

Harbaugh made the highly anticipated decision to go back to the NFL after a second interview and resume his chase for a Super Bowl that eluded him as a quarterback and coach.

He will be the first former Chargers player to return to the team as head coach. He played for the Bolts in 1999-2000 before retiring following the 2001 season.

"My love for Michigan, playing there and coming back to coach there leaves a lasting impact. I'll always be a loyal Wolverine," Harbaugh said in a statement. "I'm remarkably fortunate to have been afforded the privilege of coaching at places where life's journey has created strong personal connections for me. When I played for the Chargers, the Spanos family could not have been more gracious or more welcoming.

DID YOU KNOW?

Jim Harbaugh was 44-19 over four years as coach of the San Francisco 49ers before leaving the NFL in 2015 to take the head coaching job at his alma mater, Michigan. He led the 49ers to three straight NFC championship games and lost the 2013 Super Bowl to Baltimore, and his coach/brother, John.

SOURCE: Associated Press

"Being back here feels like home, and it's great to see that those things haven't changed."

Harbaugh is the first coach in 26 seasons to win a national title and not return to the school the following season. Nebraska's Tom Osborne retired following the 1997 season after the Cornhuskers split the national title with Michigan.

Los Angeles was looking for a new coach and general manager after Brandon Staley and Tom Telesco were fired on Dec. 15, a day after a 63-21 loss in Las Vegas to the Raiders.

"Jim Harbaugh is football personified, and I can think of no one better to lead the Chargers forward," owner Dean Spanos said in a statement while also borrowing from one of Harbaugh's catch phrases. "Who has it better than us?"

Harbaugh called Michigan athletic director Warde Manuel to inform him he was leaving to lead the Chargers. Michigan tried to keep Harbaugh, offering him a new six-year contract for \$11.5

million per season, according to a person familiar with the negotiations told The Associated Press. The person spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to share details of the deal.

Harbaugh was 86-25 at Michigan and restored college football's winningest program to relevance after it slipped over several seasons.

Harbaugh's alma mater could not offer the one thing he desperately wants — a Super Bowl title.

The Chargers have one of the league's top quarterbacks in Justin Herbert, but finished 5-12 this season and lost eight of their last nine, including the last five. Herbert will be playing for his fourth head coach and possibly fourth offensive coordinator in five seasons.

The Bolts, though, have made only three playoff appearances since 2013 and haven't won a division title since 2009.

Harbaugh returned to Michigan, where he was a star quarterback in the mid-1980s, in 2015 after going 44-19 over four years in San Francisco. He left the 49ers amid tension with the front office. He went to three straight NFC championship games and lost the Super Bowl to Baltimore, and his coach/brother, John, nearly 11 years ago.

AP pro football Writer Rob Maaddi contributed from Tampa, Fla., and AP sports writer Larry Lage contributed from Ann Arbor, Mich.

One: Jackson is only newcomer to this round

FROM PAGE 48

Bowl in Las Vegas on Feb. 11.

"Super proud of him. I just hope he continues to blaze trails and just show people that draft status is what happens on draft day. What happens after that is up to you," Niners All-Pro left tackle Trent Williams said about Purdy. "You get a player like that with the last pick of the draft? Literally like playing the lottery and winning the Powerball when it's at \$2 billion."

The only newcomer to this round among the quartet is Jackson, who becomes the 30th quarterback to start a conference title game in the last 15 seasons. He got there with a masterful performance in a 34-10 victory over the Houston Texans last weekend — throwing for two touchdowns and running for two more — after beginning his career 1-3 in the playoffs.

Take a look at that group of 30 and the pattern is obvious: 20 were first-rounders (including Goff at No. 1 overall to the Los Angeles Rams in 2016, Mahomes at No. 10 in 2017 and Jackson at No. 32 in 2018); five went in the second round, two in the third, one in the sixth (Tom Brady) and one (Purdy) in the seventh. Only one of the 30 was undrafted: Case Keenum, whose Minnesota Vikings fell one game short of Super Sunday after the 2017 season.

Purdy compiled an NFL-best passer rating of 113 this season, accumulating 4,280 yards and 31 TDs while completing 69.4% of his throws. His 9.6 yards per attempt were the most for a qualifying QB since Kurt Warner's 9.9 back in 2000.

Purdy is "putting up numbers that are impressive for first-rounders," said Christian McCaffrey, the San Francisco running back who was a unanimous choice for The Associated Press 2023 NFL All-Pro Team. "At some point it's

not surprising. At some point, it's just who he is."

The Chiefs were coming off back-to-back playoff berths with Alex Smith at quarterback when they made the bold decision to package two first-round picks and a third-rounder to move up 17 spots to draft Mahomes.

After Mahomes sat for most of his rookie year, the Chiefs traded Smith and now have gone to six straight conference title games — the second-longest streak ever — and won two Super Bowls with the two-time MVP at the helm.

A year later, the Ravens jumped back into the first round via a trade to take Jackson so he could replace Super Bowl 47 MVP Joe Flacco.

Jackson became the starter midway through his first season, won the MVP award the following year and was a first-team All-Pro this season as the Ravens, like the 49ers, benefited from going after a young quarterback even when they had a veteran starter in place.

For more than a decade, the Lions boasted a QB taken at No. 1 overall after turning their 0-16 record in the 2008 season into Matthew Stafford.

But poor management and the inability to build the rest of the roster led to zero playoff wins in 12 seasons with Stafford.

So Detroit sent him to the Rams — who won the Super Bowl in his first season there — and Los Angeles dealt two first-round picks to the Lions and made Detroit take on Goff's hefty contract as part of the exchange.

But Goff played like the QB who helped the Rams reach the Super Bowl in the 2018 season, the Lions used the extra draft picks to add talent around him and Detroit is in a conference title game for the second time in the Super Bowl era — and got there by beating the team that discarded him three years ago.



RICK OSENTOSKI/AP

Lions quarterback Jared Goff was taken No. 1 overall in the 2016 draft. He helped beat his former team, which traded him to Detroit in 2021, in the first round of the playoffs this season.

NFL PLAYOFFS

Harbaugh, Reid set for reunion after coaching together with Eagles

BY NOAH TRISTER
Associated Press

OWINGS MILLS, Md. — John Harbaugh once defeated his own brother in a Super Bowl, so going up against someone he used to work with may not be all that emotional.

Still, there's plenty of respect between the Baltimore coach and his counterpart this weekend: Kansas City's Andy Reid.

"Obviously, it's a big deal in terms of the relationship," Harbaugh said this week. "It goes back a long, long, long way. Utmost respect for Andy, utmost appreciation for what he's accomplished as a coach. We were together for 10 years, the first 10 years there in Philly. We were in a lot of championship games, and a lot of playoff games."

They'll face each other as head coaches for the first time in a playoff game when the Ravens host the Chiefs on Sunday. That's somewhat remarkable given how successful they've been. This is Harbaugh's fourth AFC championship game with Baltimore and Reid's sixth in a row with Kansas City.

Reid leads their head-to-head series 5-2 since he and Harbaugh went their separate ways during the former's tenure at the helm of the Philadelphia Eagles.

"John does a phenomenal job. He knows the whole game," Reid said. "He was a great special teams coach, a great secondary coach and he's been a great head coach. Very proud of him and all he's done and accomplished."

Harbaugh was a special teams coordinator in 1998 for the Eagles under Ray Rhodes, then remained in that role for eight seasons after Reid took over the following season.

"Ray Rhodes was great to be around for a year or two. If Ray's out there listening, just thank you very much. I'm always appreciative of what I learned from Ray," Harbaugh said. "Then Andy came in, I

was hoping to stay, and he gave me an opportunity to do it. I was young and just figuring things out. That was good of him, and hope he's glad he did, looking back on it."

Reid said he'd known Harbaugh's father, Jack, before keeping John on his staff in Philadelphia.

"His dad was the best. He was real close with LaVell Edwards (at BYU). I did a thing at a hospital one time with them. I was a young coach, carrying Coach Edwards' bag. And I got to know them, and we were like, the three coaches at this whole convention that showed up at the hospital," Reid said. "We spent a couple of days together and it was great. I never forgot it. So when I met John, I was like, 'If you're half as good as your dad, you're on.' And he's been that."

Harbaugh became a secondary coach for Philadelphia in 2007, then took over the Ravens the following season. He won a Super Bowl in his fifth season in Baltimore. The opponent in that game was San Francisco, then coached by his brother, Jim.

Lately, Reid's Chiefs have been the team to beat in the AFC. Their streak of six straight conference title games has been accompanied by two Super Bowl wins, one of which came last year.

Reid also reached four NFC title games in a row in Philadelphia with Harbaugh on his staff.

Aside from Harbaugh, Reid's coaching tree includes another Super Bowl-winning head coach in Doug Pederson, as well as Sean McDermott of the Buffalo Bills, whom Kansas City defeated last weekend.

"You think about all the great coaches that were on that staff that Andy assembled and mentored and taught us all so much," Harbaugh said. "We were a close group of guys, a staff that loved each other. I see a lot of that on this (Ravens) staff, too."



JULIO CORTEZ/AP

Baltimore Ravens head coach John Harbaugh and Kansas City Chiefs head coach Andy Reid have a history, with Harbaugh having been on Reid's coaching staff with the Philadelphia Eagles from 1999 to 2007.



JEFFREY T. BARNES/AP

Kansas City Chiefs running back Isiah Pacheco reacts after scoring a touchdown against the Buffalo Bills during the fourth quarter of an AFC division playoff game Jan. 21 in Orchard Park, N.Y.

Chiefs' formula is to match star power with draft steals

BY DAVE SKRETTA
Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — The Kansas City Chiefs had not even made it through two plays against Buffalo in the divisional round of the playoffs when Mike Edwards, already playing in place of injured safety Bryan Cook, clashed helmets with Bills wide receiver Stefon Diggs and had to leave their game with a concussion.

With the entire game still to go, and Bills quarterback Josh Allen on the other side, the Chiefs should have been concerned.

But in the latest example of how they've struck gold on Day 3 of the NFL Draft, fourth-round pick Chamarri Conner took Edwards' place and the league's second-ranked defense never missed a beat. Kansas City held the Bills to 24 points — the 18th time in 19 games limiting an opponent to that many or fewer — and hung on for the 27-24 victory Sunday night.

"Chamarri did a heck of a job," Chiefs coach Andy Reid said this week. "He's been working in nickel and dime situations, but to come in and have that extended time in there, and make the plays he made — he sure did a nice job in there."

The Chiefs, who now head to Baltimore on Sunday for their sixth consecutive AFC championship game, will always be known for their star power. They have the NFL's reigning MVP, and arguably the face of the entire league, in quarterback Patrick Mahomes, and Travis Kelce has become just as omnipresent not only for his talent, but for his pop superstar girlfriend as well.

Throw in All-Pro defensive tackle Chris Jones, and there is no shortage of big names carrying the Chiefs



**Kansas City Chiefs (13-6)
at Baltimore Ravens (14-4)**
AFN-Sports
9 p.m. Sunday CET
5 a.m. Monday JKT

deep into the playoffs.

But it takes more than a handful of high-priced stars to win in the NFL. The salary cap demands it. So the teams that are able to hit on late-round draft picks and undrafted free agents, and surround their stars with talented players on relatively paltry rookie contracts, are the ones that are best positioned to make a run at the Super Bowl.

The Chiefs have quietly done that as well as anyone.

In this past year's draft, their Day 2 picks of Rashee Rice and Wanya Morris have been crucial to winning their eighth straight AFC West title. Rice was second among rookie wide receivers in receptions and yards receiving, giving defenses a reason to pay attention to someone other than Kelce, and Morris has appeared in 14 games on the offensive line due to injuries.

Throw in Conner and that's quite a late-round draft haul.

It goes beyond this past year, though. In the previous draft, the Chiefs landed Joshua Williams in the fourth round and fellow cornerback Jaylen Watson and starting running back Isiah Pacheco in the seventh. Tight end Noah Gray and stalwart right guard Trey Smith

were Day 3 picks in 2021, and cornerback L'Jarius Sneed and defensive end Mike Danna the year before that.

Not a bad job by Chiefs general manager Brett Veach, who was largely responsible for picking Mahomes seven years ago.

"I'm a big Brett Veach fan," Reid said. "I told him after the game Sunday, that's on him. This game is him. It's a reflection of all the time and effort his guys have put in. That's sort of what it comes down to. They've given us good football players to coach."

There is a lot that goes into making those draft steals work.

First and foremost, scouting must be on point, and the Chiefs have a group of scouts that is the envy of the league. They've been able to unearth overlooked talent while also identifying players that fit well in their offensive and defensive schemes.

There's the coaching, of course, and the credentials of Reid and defensive coordinator Steve Spagnuolo can be put against anybody. And then there's the locker room, in this case led by Mahomes and Kelce, that breeds confidence in young players that they can contribute in a significant way no matter where they played college ball or when they were drafted.

"If somebody is getting drafted lower and assuming the whole NFL world is accurate — that he's a lower-round pick — and that player becomes something we didn't think, somebody is doing something right," Spagnuolo said. "I'm talking about the coaching and the development, so our assistant coaches I think are doing a great job. But it began with Brett Veach and his staff."

NFL PLAYOFFS

49ers look to clear NFC title game hurdle

San Francisco has lost in last 2 years

By JOSH DUBOW
Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — The most taxing part of getting to the precipice of the Super Bowl only to fall short might be the long journey just to return to that stage for another shot.

Offseason workouts, followed by training camp, a 17-game season and then the early rounds of the playoffs.

The San Francisco 49ers once again got through all that and earned another chance at winning the NFC championship game after losing in frustrating fashion the previous two seasons.

“When you lose the NFC championship, you want to snap your fingers and be there again. But you can’t,” All-Pro fullback Kyle Juszczyk said after beating Green Bay 24-21 on Saturday night to return to this stage.

“There’s so much that has to happen between that last loss and getting back there again. And to finally be back there again, you don’t take it for granted. You know how hard it is and you know how much it means to these guys here that have gone through that. I get emotional thinking about it. We’re back here, and it’s time to take care of business. It’s time.”

The 49ers (13-5) get that opportunity Sunday when they host the Detroit Lions (14-5) for a spot in the Super Bowl.

San Francisco lost at this exact stage of the playoffs the past two



San Francisco 49ers linebacker Dre Greenlaw (57) celebrates with teammates after intercepting a pass in the second half of an NFC divisional playoff game against the Green Bay Packers on Jan. 20 in Santa Clara, Calif.

seasons, blowing a 10-point lead in the fourth quarter on the road against the Los Angeles Rams in the 2021 season and then losing again last year at Philadelphia when the Niners were forced to play much of the game without a functioning quarterback.

Starter Brock Purdy got hit hard on San Francisco’s opening drive and tore a ligament in his throwing elbow. That forced into action fourth-stringer Josh Johnson, who joined the team late in the season, and he tried to keep the

game competitive.

But the Niners fell behind by two touchdowns before Johnson left with a concussion early in the third quarter, forcing Purdy to finish the game even though he couldn’t throw the ball more than a few yards.

Now they are back with a healthy Purdy and the confidence that this time will be different, that they won’t become the fifth team ever to lose in the conference title game in three straight seasons.

“We’ve been thinking about it,

it’s been sort of in the back of our minds, like, last year we had a team to do it, and we feel like we didn’t have a real opportunity at it after the quarterbacks got hurt in that game,” Purdy said. “So I think we’re really excited for it.”

The Niners have been one of the top teams in the league over the past five seasons, with their 61 wins in the regular season and playoffs ranking third in that span. But they don’t have a championship to show for it, as a franchise that won five titles in a 14-year span from 1981-94



Detroit Lions (14-5)
at San Francisco 49ers (13-5)
AFN-Sports
12:30 a.m. Monday CET
8:30 a.m. Monday JKT

is approaching a three-decade drought for championship No. 6.

They have the roster to do it, however, with a league-high five first-team All-Pros and two more players selected to the second team.

But the 49ers know these chances aren’t easy to attain, and some of their players know they might not have many more shots at getting that coveted championship.

That was shown by how difficult it was just to get past the seventh-seeded Green Bay Packers in the divisional round last weekend.

San Francisco needed a late-game rally to overcome a second-half deficit for the first time all season and held on for the three-point win.

“Me personally, I’m 0-2 in NFC championship games,” said 35-year-old All-Pro left tackle Trent Williams. “So this is one we’ve got to get. Obviously, I’m not getting any younger. So I definitely want to get to the top of the mountain. We definitely need this game. We’ve got to come out and play much better than we did (Saturday), but we’ve got another opportunity. That’s all we can ask for.”

Goff, back home in Bay Area, will look to lift Lions to 1st Super Bowl

By LARRY LAGE
Associated Press

ALLEN PARK, Mich. — Jared Goff is California cool, staying easy breezy in good times and bad.

The veteran quarterback, who is from the San Francisco Bay Area, has led the Detroit Lions to the most success they’ve had in generations with two playoff victories in one postseason for the first time since winning the 1957 NFL title.

And yet, he has refused to get too emotionally high about that feat.

Goff would also not get too low — at least publicly — when the Lions won just three games in his debut season with them in 2021 and followed up the next season with a 1-6 start.

“He’s the captain of the ship,” Detroit center Frank Ragnow said Wednesday. “He’s as steady as it gets.”

The Lions will be leaning on Goff to stay the course for at least

another week.

He is heading home to play the 49ers, about an hour from his hometown and alma mater, in the NFC championship game on Sunday.

Goff is from Novato, Calif., attended nearby Marin Catholic High and starred at California before the Los Angeles Rams drafted him No. 1 overall in 2016.

He helped the Rams reach the Super Bowl in his third season, they traded him away two years later and were eliminated by the castaway in a wild-card game earlier this month.

Outside of the Lions’ organization, Goff was viewed as a stopgap quarterback when he was acquired along with a pair of first-round picks and a third-round selection nearly three years ago for Matthew Stafford.

Goff has been much more, validating the faith Lions general

manager Brad Holmes had in him when dealing a popular star for a player his former employer didn’t want.

He got in a groove during the 2022 season, lifting the team to eight wins over their final 10 games and stayed in it during much of Detroit’s breakthrough season in which the franchise won its first division title in three decades and ended an NFL record nine-game postseason losing streak that lasted 32 years.

Even though the stakes are much higher than previous visits to San Francisco in the regular season with the Rams, it’s tough to tell by looking at or listening to Goff.

“It’ll be fun to be able to play a big game there, but I’ve played there quite a few times and we’ll have some friends and family there,” he said with a shrug. “It’ll be cool.”



CARLOS OSORIO/AP

The NFC title game will be a homecoming for Detroit Lions quarterback Jared Goff, whose hometown of Novato, Calif., is about an hour away from Levi’s Stadium in San Francisco.

And when Goff is asked about his cool and calm demeanor, he replies with an aw-shucks answer.

“Yeah, it does come quite naturally,” said Goff, who leads active

NFC quarterbacks with five career playoff wins. “But I do think there’s a part of me that’s intentional about being consistent whether things are good or bad.”

SPORTS



A chance to repeat

Defending champ Sabalenka ousts Gauff in semifinals » Australian Open, Page 41

NFL PLAYOFFS

One is not like the others



SCOT TUCKER, ABOVE, AND NICK WASS, RIGHT/AP

Above: San Francisco 49ers quarterback Brock Purdy earned the moniker “Mr. Irrelevant” for being the 262nd and last player chosen in the 2022 draft. Right: Baltimore Ravens quarterback Lamar Jackson, the 32nd pick of the first round in 2018, is in the AFC championship game for the first time.

Of the four remaining QBs, only Purdy wasn't a first-round pick

BY JOSH DUBOW AND HOWARD FENDRICH
Associated Press

Joe Theismann won one Super Bowl and played in a second with Washington after entering the NFL as a fourth-round draft pick with another franchise.

He starred for a coach Joe Gibbs, whose path to the Hall of Fame featured three championships with three starting QBs — including one selected in the sixth round (Mark Rypien) and one who was chosen in the first round but wound up taking a detour to the USFL before reaching the sport's pinnacle (Doug Williams).



Mahomes

So perhaps Theismann's view is shaded by all of that personal experience. He does not consider it vital for a team to find its quarterback early in the draft, even if recent evidence shows that conference title game participants most often do employ first-rounders at the sport's most important position, a trend reflected in Sunday's matchups: Patrick Mahomes' Chiefs at Lamar Jackson's Ravens in the AFC, and Jared Goff's Lions at Brock Purdy's 49ers in the NFC. Three outta four ain't bad.

“I definitely don't believe that

being a No. 1 pick is the key to getting to a championship game. It's still a team game,” said Theismann, who made it to the Super Bowl after the 1982 and 1983 seasons, beating the Dolphins in the first and losing to the Raiders in the second. “I've always said this: The quarterback is the most dependent player on the field. So if you've got first-round talent at that position, good for you, but that's also no guarantee.”

Of course not. Nothing is certain when it comes to talent evaluation, fulfilling potential shown in college or blossoming in the pros. But it clearly can be a sign of things to come when a QB goes at, or near, the top of a draft, which is why USC's Caleb Williams, North Carolina's Drake Maye and LSU's Jayden Daniels are expected to hear their names called early in April.

So, sure, Purdy famously earned the “Mr. Irrelevant” moniker by being the 262nd and last choice in the 2022 draft and is now set to appear in a second NFC championship game in two NFL seasons, but otherwise, a trio of high picks will help determine which two teams head to the Super

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