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Some Chiefs finally getting big chance
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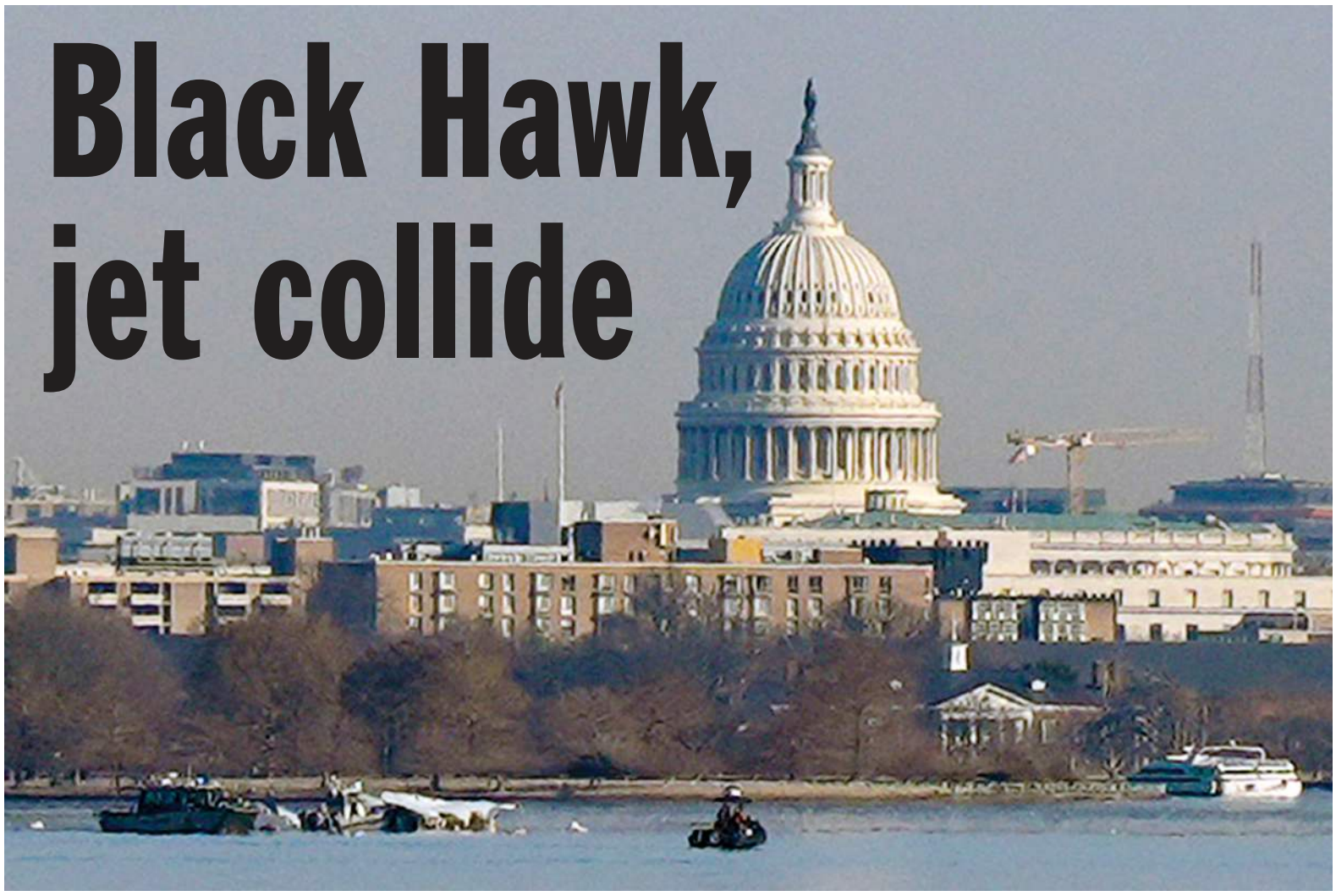
STARS AND STRIPES®
stripes.com

Volume 83 Edition 203 ©SS 2025 FRIDAY, JANUARY 31, 2025
平成12年4月5日 第三種郵便物認可 日刊（土日除く）
発行所 星条旗新聞社 〒106-0032 東京都港区六本木7丁目23番17号 定価￥100
$1.00

Black Hawk, jet collide



CAROLYN KASTER/AP

Search and rescue efforts are seen around a wreckage site in the Potomac River from Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport, Thursday, in Arlington, Va. An Army UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter and an American Airlines passenger plane collided as the jet approached the airport.

Helo on training mission, plane carrying figure skaters plunge into river

BY LOLITA C. BALDOR, TARA COPP AND ERIC TUCKER
Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Va. — All 64 people aboard an American Airlines jet that collided with an Army helicopter were feared dead in what was likely to be the worst U.S. aviation disaster in almost a quarter century, officials said Thursday.

At least 28 bodies were pulled from the icy waters of the Potomac River after the helicopter apparently flew into the path of the jet late Wednesday as it was landing at Ronald Reagan National Airport near Washington, officials said. The plane carried 60 passengers and four crew. Three soldiers were aboard the helicopter.

MARK SCHIEFELBEIN/AP

All 64 people aboard the American Airlines jet that collided with the Army helicopter were feared dead, officials said Thursday.

"We don't believe there are any survivors," said John Donnelly, the fire chief in the nation's capital. "We are now at the point where we are switching from a rescue operation to a recovery operation."

The plane was found upside-down in three sections in waist-deep water, and first responders were searching an area of the Potomac River as far south as the Woodrow Wilson Bridge, roughly 3 miles south of the airport, Donnelly said. The helicopter wreckage was also found.

If no one survived, the collision would be the deadliest U.S. air

SEE COLLIDE ON PAGE 6

Hegseth sets path to remove DEI in DOD

BY CAITLYN BURCHETT
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Race and sex will no longer be considered in military promotions and academy admissions as Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth moves to weed out diversity- and equity-based programs across the U.S. military.

"The [Defense Department] will strive to provide merit-based, color-blind, equal opportunities to service members but will not guarantee or strive for equal outcomes," Hegseth wrote in a memo released Wednesday titled "Restoring America's Fighting Force."

According to the memo, the Defense Department will not take into account sex, race or ethnicity when considering troops for promotions or special duty. Additionally, no department component will establish sex-, race- or ethnicity-based goals for academic admissions, career fields or organizational composition.

Hegseth's memo also prohibits elements of the Defense Department from teaching people about critical race theory, DEI, or gender ideology as part of a curriculum or workforce training. Advisory boards, councils and working groups will cease operations related to diversity, equality and inclusion.

DEI policies, Hegseth wrote in the memo, are incompatible with the values of the Defense Department.

"We will focus on lethality, meritocracy, accountability, standards and readiness," Hegseth wrote. "Providing service members an equal opportunity to excel will help us remain the strongest and most lethal fighting force the world has ever known."

SEE HEGSETH ON PAGE 3

BUSINESS/WEATHER

EUROPE GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel
Germany	$3.512	$4.053	$4.408	$4.068
Change in price	-0.6 cents	+0.2 cents	-0.1 cents	-5.6 cents
Netherlands	..	$4.493	$5.014	$4.852
Change in price	..	-2.2 cents	-2.1 cents	-5.3 cents
U.K.	..	$4.053	$4.408	$4.068
Change in price	..	+0.2 cents	-0.1 cents	+1.1 cents
Azores	..	..	$4.263	..
Change in price	..	..	-0.1 cents	..
Turkey	..	..	$4.079	$4.307*
Change in price	..	..	-0.1 cents	No change

Fuel prices are updated daily. These prices are effective Jan. 31. The change in price is from Jan. 24.

PACIFIC GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel
Japan	..	$4.049	..	$3.709
Change in price	..	No change	..	-6.0 cents
Okinawa	$3.479	..	..	$3.709
Change in price	No change	..	..	-6.0 cents
South Korea	$3.189	..	$4.079	$3.739
Change in price	No change	..	No change	-6.0 cents
Guam	$3.219**	$3.759	$4.109	..
Change in price	No change	+1.0 cents	No change	..

***DieselEFD **Midgrade**

Pacific prices for the week of Jan. 31 - Feb. 6

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates	
Euro costs (Jan. 31)	0.93
British pound (Jan. 31)	$1.22
Japanese yen (Jan. 31)	152.00
South Korean won (Jan. 31)	1401.00

Commercial rates	
Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3769
Britain (Pound)	1.2465
Canada (Dollar)	1.4416
China (Yuan)	7.1719
Denmark (Krone)	7.1549
Egypt (Pound)	50.2348
Euro	0.9589
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7912
Hungary (Forint)	389.71
Israel (Shekel)	3.5790
Japan (Yen)	154.06
Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3084
Norway (Krone)	11.2888
Philippines (Peso)	58.31
Poland (Zloty)	4.03
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7512
Singapore (Dollar)	1.3491
South Korea (Won)	1444.04
Switzerland (Franc)	0.9069
Thailand (Baht)	33.66
Turkey (NewLira)	35.7750

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

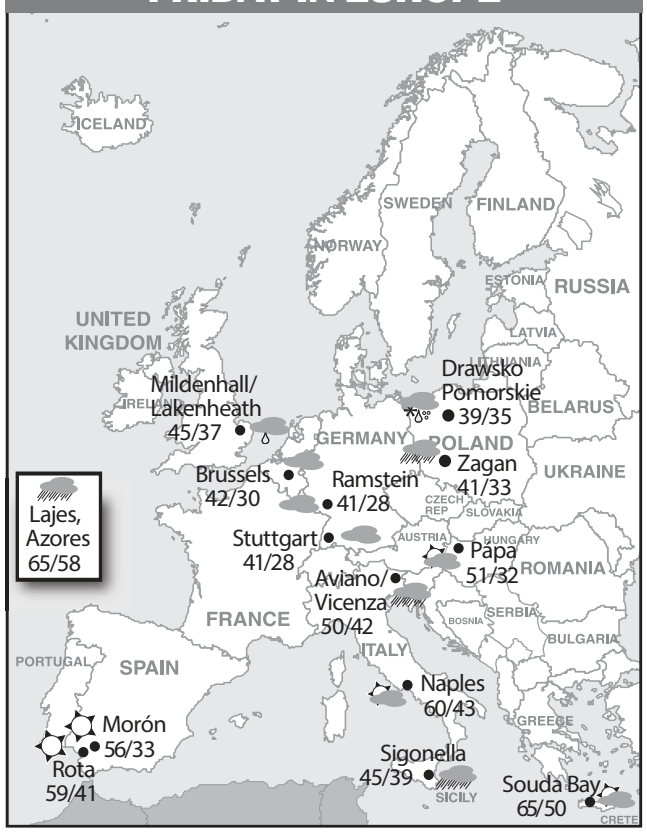
INTEREST RATES

Prime rate	7.50
Interest Rates Discount rate	4.50
Federal funds market rate	4.33
3-month bill	4.30
30-year bond	4.76

WEATHER OUTLOOK

FRIDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

FRIDAY IN EUROPE



SATURDAY IN THE PACIFIC

The weather is compiled from weather.com

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MILITARY

Driscoll vows to put troops first as Army leader

By Svetlana Shkolnikova
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Dan Driscoll, an Army veteran and businessman, told senators Thursday that he would serve as the soldiers' secretary of the Army, "not of the generals or of the bureaucracy," if he is confirmed as President Donald Trump's pick to lead the largest military service.

Driscoll, 38, said his experience as a third-generation soldier has prepared him to lead more than a million soldiers and civilians and he intends to use that personal insight to boost recruiting, modernize the Army and effectively oversee its $200 billion budget.

"My sacred duty to our Army is to ensure our soldiers have the world's finest training, equipment and leadership to accomplish any mission," he said in a confirmation hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee.

One of those missions is securing the U.S. border with Mexico, where Trump is deploying hundreds of service members as part of an effort to make border security a top priority of the Defense Department.

Sen. Jack Reed of Rhode Island, the top Democrat on the committee, said he was worried the surge of troops will harm the Army's readiness, taking time away from training for war.

Service members stationed at the border are typically tasked with conducting vehicle maintenance, light construction, transportation and observation and detection from the ground and air.

"This is a role for the Department of Homeland Security," Reed said.

But Driscoll said the Army could balance multiple priorities, pointing to the steady presence of soldiers at the border for years.

"I think the Army stands ready to execute on any mission for the president of the United States and the secretary of defense, up to and including helping secure our border," he said.

He promised to "always follow the law" after several Democratic senators raised concerns that the Army will be forced into domestic law enforcement roles under the Trump administration.

"I reject the premise that the president or secretary of defense would ask for an order" that contravened the Constitution, he said.

Driscoll otherwise developed a friendly rapport with the committee and appeared to earn the support of Republicans and Democrats. The committee will vote on his nomination before the full Senate decides whether to confirm him.

Trump has touted Driscoll as a "disrupter and change agent," much like recently confirmed Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth.

Driscoll

Sen. Roger Wicker of Mississippi, the Republican chairman of the committee, said Driscoll's Army service, legal background and financial experience have prepared him to handle "the myriad responsibilities of Army secretary."

Driscoll graduated from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in three years so he could join the Army in 2007 and follow in the footsteps of his father, who served in Vietnam, and his grandfather, who was a decoder during World War II.

He completed the Army Ranger School, served as an armor officer and deployed to Iraq in 2009 with the 10th Mountain Division as a calvary scout. His military awards include the Army Commendation Medal and the combat action badge.

Driscoll left service in 2010 at the rank of first lieutenant and then used the post-9/11 GI Bill to attend Yale Law School, where he met Vice President JD Vance. He went on to serve as a senior adviser to Vance and worked at several investment banking and consulting firms in North Carolina.

Driscoll told senators Thursday that he is committed to telling the "rich history" of the Army as it celebrates its 250th anniversary this year. He said a compelling story extolling the value of military service will encourage more young people to join.

"This is the year to tell the story of the women and men in uniform who have done amazing things on behalf of our country and who I think would say, like me, have had their lives changed by this experience," Driscoll said.

Coast Guard suspends anti-harassment policy

By Jennifer H. Svan
Stars and Stripes

The Coast Guard is pausing a policy intended to eliminate harassment while it reevaluates guidance issued by the service's recently ousted top admiral.

The "Harassing Behavior Prevention, Response, and Accountability" instruction was suspended pending a 90-day comprehensive review, acting Commandant Adm. Kevin Lunday said in a message Monday to all Coast Guard members.

The policy defined "harassing behavior" to include harassment, sexual harassment, bullying, hazing, retaliation and reprisal. It consolidated reporting, investigation and other procedures related to harassment and outlined corrective action for substantiated incidents.

Lunday

It allowed anyone, civilian or military, who witnessed or was subject to behavior believed to be harassing to make a complaint to any person of authority in the member's or employee's chain of command.

Lunday did not say why the policy was put on hold, but his message emphasized that harassment is still prohibited by military general order, and he directed leaders to "act promptly in response to any allegation of misconduct."

Pending complaints made under the suspended policy should be resolved at "the lowest appropriate level," Lunday said.

He also directed leaders to defer action until the Coast Guard Investigative Service, which has the authority to conduct criminal investigations, declines or completes an investigation.

Investigation and resolution of sexual harassment complaints will still follow standard requirements, Lunday said, but "proof by preponderant evidence" is required for a complaint to be reported to the service's anti-harassment program and taken on by the chief prosecutor.

Commands should defer processing for separation until the chief prosecutor gets involved, he said.

Hate incidents will continue to be investigated per current rules, Lunday said, and Coast Guard personnel are still able to file other complaints, such as those pertaining to equal-opportunity protections.

The now-suspended instruction was issued in 2023 by Adm. Linda Fagan, who was relieved of her post Jan. 20 by the new administration of President Donald Trump.

Fagan, the first female officer to lead a branch of the armed forces, was fired because she failed to address border security and meet recruiting and retention goals, mismanaged acquisitions and lost trust with the force in her handling of the cover-up of a sexual assault scandal at the U.S. Coast Guard Academy, a senior Homeland Security Department official said on condition of anonymity, Stars and Stripes reported at the time.

An internal investigation known as Operation Fouled Anchor, which was summarized in a January 2020 report, concluded that academy leaders hadn't ensured a safe environment for cadets, yet no one was held accountable.

Another reason for Fagan's dismissal was that she "excessively focused" on diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives among Coast Guard members and at the academy, the Homeland Security official said. On Jan. 21, Trump issued an executive order eliminating all Defense Department diversity, equity and inclusion programs, a directive he characterized as an effort to promote leadership and merit in the military.

The order also applies to the Coast Guard, which falls under the Department of Homeland Security.

Hegseth: Officials say DOD doesn't have any full-time DEI staffers

FROM PAGE 1

The memo was released two days after President Donald Trump signed an executive order canceling DEI programs across the military. The order calls for the Defense Department and the Department of Homeland Security to provide detailed guidance for the implementation of this order to their respective agencies within 30 days of the order signing. Within 180 days, the secretaries must submit a report through the White House deputy chief of staff for policy documenting the progress of implementing the order, along with any recommendations for action to fulfill the objectives of this order.

In line with this, the Pentagon is creating a task force to oversee the abolishment of DEI offices, as well as "any vestiges of such offices that subvert meritocracy, perpetuate unconstitutional discrimination and promote radical ideologies related to systemic racism and gender fluidity."

The task force, which will report to the undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, will provide an initial report by March 1 of actions taken by the Defense Department to end DEI initiatives. A final report is due by June 1.

Officials have said the Defense Department doesn't have any full-time workers assigned to DEI so they don't expect to have to fire people, as other federal agencies have. But senior defense leaders have been poring over their websites to delete pages that mention diversity. Lacking clear guidance, staffers were pulling down websites in often inconsistent ways.

The Army temporarily removed its sexual assault guidelines before they later came back online.

The Air Force last week was told to eliminate barrier analysis working groups, which aim to improve equal employment for women, minorities, LGBTQ+ and disabled service members. Courses featuring videos about the Tuskegee Airmen and Women Airforce Service Pilots, or WASPs, disappeared from its basic training curriculum but were later restored.

Gen. David Allvin, Air Force chief of staff, in a statement Monday said he directed the service to implement the president's orders swiftly — "no equivocation, no slow-rolling, no foot-dragging."

Last year, service academies came under legal fire for race-conscious admissions after the Supreme Court rejected affirmative action in college admissions, ruling in cases brought by Students for Fair Admissions against Harvard University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

But the decision included a notable exception for the country's military academies, with a footnote that mentioned "the potentially distinct interests that military academies may present."

The U.S. Naval Academy and the U.S. Air Force Academy have faced lawsuits for considering race in admission processes. In the case of the Naval Academy, a federal judge ruled in December that the academy can continue using affirmative action.

"Over many years, military and civilian leaders have determined that a racially diverse officer corps is a national security interest," U.S. District Judge Richard D. Bennett wrote in his ruling. "The Naval Academy has established a compelling national security interest in a diverse officer corps in the Navy and Marine Corps."

PACIFIC

Pro soccer coaches assist DODEA players

BY BRIAN MCELHINEY AND KEISHI KOJA
Stars and Stripes

KADENA AIR BASE, Okinawa — Young soccer players from two Defense Department high schools on Okinawa trained recently with the coaches of Japan's top-rated professional team.

About 45 students from Kadena and Kubasaki high schools learned tips and tricks from the leaders of Vissel Kobe, champions for two years running of Japan's premier J1 professional league. The workshop took place last Friday afternoon on a soggy field at Kadena's Ryukyu Middle School.

Rain had threatened to move the session indoors but held off long enough for the students to receive hands-on instruction from the six coaches. Vissel Kobe's players arrived afterward for a photo with the students.

Before the workshop, Kadena junior Elijah Whip said he was looking forward to seeing "what the coaches expect from a higher-level team — kind of like the level they play at, how they expect players to play in that system."

The session began with a warmup exercise, followed by a four-versus-two rondo, or training drill, Vissel Kobe head coach Tomo Sugawara told Stars and Stripes. Then the coaches worked with the players on ball possession in a three-on-three configuration.

Finally, they played a short game with everyone using the full field and two balls "because there were a lot of people," Sugawara said.

"I felt that both boys and girls had a good spirit of challenge," he said. "They were very aggressive with the ball, and they seemed to be enjoying it from the bottom of their hearts."

Defense Department high school soccer players warm up for a training session with Japanese professional coaches.

The language barrier didn't seem to be a problem for the coaches or the American students.

"I really like the camaraderie that I'm seeing with all of the coaches," Kadena girls varsity coach Charley Smith said while watching her players on the field. "Even though we don't speak the same language, I'm impressed that they can still have their skills shine through all of this."

Kubasaki sophomore Reina Eastman was wearing a Vissel Kobe jersey featuring Spanish midfielder Andrés Iniesta, who played with the team from 2018-23. She said the jersey belonged to her father, Kubasaki girls varsity coach Chris Eastman.

PHOTOS BY KEISHI KOJA/Stars and Stripes

Vissel Kobe head coach Tomo Sugawara controls a ball during a practice with Defense Department high school players at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, on Jan. 24.

Reina Eastman said the coaches emphasized speed during the session, and she hopes to use that in the upcoming DODEA Pacific soccer season, which begins Feb. 15 and runs through May.

Some of the drills the coaches introduced were different from what she was used to, as well.

"The warmup was definitely different. I've never done something like that," she said. "They told us to do 'shark,' and then we were supposed to run quickly in different directions."

Vissel Kobe is on Okinawa along with eight other J1 teams for a preseason training camp through Saturday at Nishihara town, according to the team's website. The J1 season also begins in February.

This was the first time a professional Japanese team trained with kids at a Department of Defense Education Activity school on Okinawa, regional athletic director Tom McKinney told Stars and Stripes before the session.

U.S. Consulate General Naha helped organize the session, DODEA-Pacific chief of staff Todd Schlitz said on the field as the session was getting underway.

"What better to do on a Friday afternoon than bring some professional athletes in to hang out with our kids and show them some stuff," he said.

DODEA students in Japan, Germany selected for US Senate Youth Program

BY JEREMY STILLWAGNER
Stars and Stripes

Alliyah Regala has acquired a list of accomplishments that qualified her for a place in the U.S. Senate Youth Program when it meets in the nation's capital the first week of March.

A senior at EJ King Middle High School at Sasebo Naval Base, Japan, Regala is president of the student council, secretary of the National Honor Society chapter and administrative officer for the school's Navy Junior Reserve Officer Training Corps program.

Despite that, she was hesitant to apply for the competitive, merit-based program. Only 104 students — two from each state, the District of Columbia and the Defense Department Education Activity — are chosen.

Hotel and transportation expenses are paid for by The Hearst Foundations, and each delegate is awarded a $10,000 scholarship for undergraduate studies.

"Sasebo is pretty small, and the opportunities are a lot more limited," she said in a recent phone interview. "I was kind of intimidated about going through with it, but it was my mom who pushed me to actually go through and finish up the application."

Regala and Emily Wheeler, a junior at Stuttgart High School in Germany, will represent DODEA schools when the Senate Youth Program meets March 1-8. They'll hear policy addresses by U.S. senators, Cabinet members and officials from the Departments of State and Defense.

They may also get a chance to meet with the president and a justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

To qualify to apply for the program, high school juniors and seniors must show leadership in elected or appointed positions that relate to government, public affairs, history or community service.

The selection process is lengthy. The students wrote essays, answered questions, submitted a video resume, took tests on the government and elected officials, and participated in a remote interview, Regala said.

Moderators look at an applicant's knowledge, character and composure while discussing controversial topics.

"They asked me questions that were a little heavier because it was Election Day when I did my interview," she said. "They asked questions about the election and controversial political topics, and I was just honest."

The chosen students are given the opportunity to interact and network with one another through online group chats.

Alliyah Regala

Alliyah Regala, a senior at EJ King Middle High School on Sasebo Naval Base, Japan, poses with Principal Jennifer Gamble and Vice Principal Catherine Mince after being selected for this year's U.S. Senate Youth Program.

"I definitely got to understand the difference between the DODEA and the American students. I feel like in DODEA we're a little bit sheltered in a way," Regala said. "Not many of us understand what's going on in America because we're overseas, so at first I was a little intimidated when I met all these kids."

PACIFIC

N. Korea's failed launches may signal tech shift

By David Choi
Stars and Stripes

North Korea's failure to deliver on its plans to put three spy satellites into orbit last year was unsurprising, experts say, but it indicates Pyongyang is pursuing a newer, efficient form of rocket technology.

The first and only attempt to launch a satellite last year ended in a mid-flight explosion on May 27, sending debris over the Yellow Sea, according to South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Pyongyang attributed the failure to a rocket powered by a new "liquid oxygen" engine used to carry the satellite, according to the state-controlled Korean Central News Agency the next day.

Analysts described this purported shift in rocket propulsion technology as an evolution of North Korea's space program and the reason for its failure to launch three satellites in 2024.

"If we're to believe [North Korea's] statement, then they're moving on from military-grade engines to civilian-application engines," Tianran Xu, an Open Nuclear Network analyst based in Austria, said by phone Wednesday. "They are more energetic for sure, but that's a new line of technology they're pursuing. So, if that's true, it's no surprise that they ended in failure on their first try."

The communist regime vowed to launch three spy satellites into orbit in 2024. The pledge came in December 2023 at its annual plenary meeting of the Central Committee of the Workers' Party of Korea.

KCNA

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un, center, watches a missile launch alongside military officials in this image release by the state-run Korean Central News Agency on Sept. 19.

North Korean rockets carrying satellites traditionally use "well-tested" engines that also power long-range missiles, such as the Hwasong-17 intercontinental ballistic missile, Xu said.

The Russian and Chinese militaries favored these engine types in the 1950s due to their durability and low maintenance for "launch-ready" rockets.

They are fueled by military-grade propellants that can be stored for years at room temperature, Xu said.

However, because of its high boiling point, military-grade fuel can be inefficient compared to other propellants used commercially today, such as liquid oxygen kerosene, or the purest form of oxygen, he said.

Liquid oxygen kerosene boils off very easily compared to military-grade fuel and cannot be stored for long periods of time, Xu said.

A move away from military-grade fuel is a natural step in propulsion technology for North Korea's fledgling space program, said Yang Uk, a research fellow at the Asan Institute for Policy Studies in Seoul.

"The decision to go liquid oxygen is the logical choice if you'd like to pursue more serious development," he said by phone Thursday.

Xu and Yang agreed that Pyongyang's transition to liquid oxygen kerosene will take some time, but it can still launch satellites using its existing rocket technology.

North Korea has a "tendency to aim for high-hanging fruit, and then, as a result, is often met with setbacks and difficulties," Xu said.

"If I was them, I would definitely focus on the reliability of launch vehicles, rather than aiming for the best performance engine," he said. "But that's not what Kim wants."

North Korea most likely will perfect the technology someday, Yang predicted.

Of its nine satellite launches since 1998, only three successfully reached orbit.

The first reconnaissance satellite, placed into orbit Nov. 21, 2023, was the only one that succeeded of three launch attempts that year.

Satellites successfully launched in 2016 and 2012 were designed for nonmilitary applications, such as weather forecasting, according to KCNA.

KCNA reported that the reconnaissance satellite photographed "major target regions" in South Korea and the United States, such as the White House, the USS Carl Vinson aircraft carrier docked at South Korea's largest port, and Pyeongtaek city, the site of the U.S. Army's Camp Humphreys and the Air Force's Osan Air Base.

The state-run outlet did not release photos taken by the satellite.

South Korea's military said it was operational but had no military value.

Air Force launches new jungle survival course

By Alex Wilson
Stars and Stripes

NORTHWEST FIELD, Guam — A new Air Force course in jungle survival is preparing airmen to operate from remote airfields if a conflict forces their squadrons to disperse.

Under the agile combat employment, or ACE, doctrine, Air Force units, including fighter squadrons, will scatter to contingency airfields, making them harder targets. These airfields may be in austere locations or cut off from regular supply lines.

"We basically made a course for every airman — not just defenders — that focuses on if supply is interrupted and you have to survive," course instructor Senior Airman Christopher Bennett told Stars and Stripes during a tour on Dec. 12. "Food, water, shelter — can you do that, and can you be tactically proficient enough to survive in a small team until you get that supply reintroduced?"

The Jungle Agile Combat Employment Course places trainees in the heavily forested northwest corner of Guam for 10 days of survival skills and tactics, said Capt. Wyatt Huff, operations officer for the 736th Security Forces Squadron.

The training covers water purification, trap making, evasion tactics, wilderness navigation, game cleaning and other survival skills, Bennett said.

The course takes place at the $300 million Pacific Regional Training Center at Northwest Field on Andersen Air Force Base. It is one of only three such facilities globally in the Defense Department and the only one of its kind in the Air Force.

The program, which completed beta testing over the summer, has already graduated airmen, Marines, soldiers and members of the Air National Guard.

"There's really only two places you can do it right now, and they're oversaturated," Huff said. "So that's where getting this course stood up goes — it allows it to get to more people."

The Air Force adapted aspects of its training from the Marine Corps' Jungle Warfare Training Center on Okinawa and the Army's Lightning Academy in Wahiawa, Hawaii, but with less emphasis on combat, said Bennett, also with the 736th.

Along with survival skills, the course emphasizes agile combat employment, first codified in 2021 to enhance flexibility and adaptability.

The ACE doctrine calls for dispersing Air Force assets — including aircraft, personnel and maintenance gear — across multiple sites. It follows a "hub-and-spoke" model, moving operations from spots like Kadena Air Base on Okinawa to a network of smaller, dispersed airfields.

This strategy "can complicate adversary planning and provide more options for joint force commanders," according to a June report by the Congressional Research Service.

Troops completing the survival course come from various backgrounds, including ground combat support, security forces, communications and airfield operations, Huff said.

Alex Wilson/Stars and Stripes

This static F-16 Fighting Falcon is used for fire-rescue, survival and other training at the 36th Contingency Ready Group's training center on Guam.

Some attend for team operations experience in jungle environments, but the course is also useful for personnel stationed in locations such as Hawaii or Japan.

"The main thing is it's getting airmen exposure to an environment that a lot of people probably haven't thought about in their lifetime," Huff said.

MILITARY

Collide: 3 soldiers aboard helicopter as investigation underway

FROM PAGE 1

crash since 2001.

There was no immediate word on the cause of the collision, but officials said flight conditions were clear as the jet arrived from Wichita, Kan., with U.S. and Russian figure skaters and others aboard.

"On final approach into Reagan National, it collided with a military aircraft on an otherwise normal approach," American Airlines CEO Robert Isom said. "At this time, we don't know why the military aircraft came into the path of the ... aircraft."

President Donald Trump opened a White House news conference after the crash with a moment of silence honoring the victims, calling it an "hour of anguish" for the country.

But he spent most of his time casting political blame, lashing out at the Biden administration and diversity efforts at the Federal Aviation Administration, saying they had led to slipping standards — even as he acknowledged that the cause of the crash was unknown.

Without evidence, Trump blamed air traffic controllers, the helicopter pilots and Democratic policies at federal agencies.

Images from the river showed boats around the partly submerged wing and the mangled wreckage of the plane's fuselage.

Inside Reagan National Airport, the mood was somber Thursday morning as stranded passengers waited for flights to resume, sidestepping camera crews and staring out the terminal's windows at the Potomac, where recovery efforts were barely visible in the distance.

Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy, who was sworn in earlier this week, was asked if he could reassure Americans that the United States still has the safest airspace in the world.

"Can I guarantee the American flying public that the United States has the most safe and secure airspace in the world? And the answer to that is, absolutely yes, we do," he said.

The night was clear, the plane and helicopter were both in standard flight patterns and there was standard communication between the aircraft and the tower, Duffy said.

"We have early indicators of what happened here," Duffy said, though he declined to elaborate pending an investigation.

It is not unusual to have a military aircraft flying the river and an aircraft landing at the airport, he said.

Asked if the plane was aware that there was a helicopter in the area, Duffy said the helicopter was aware that there was a plane in the area.

Asked about Trump suggesting in an overnight social media post that the collision could have been prevented, Duffy said: "From what I've seen so far, do I think this was preventable? Absolutely."

If everyone aboard the plane was killed, it would be the deadliest U.S. airline crash since Nov. 12, 2001, when an American Airlines flight crashed into a residential area of Belle Harbor, N.Y., just after takeoff from Kennedy Airport, killing all 260 people aboard.

The last major fatal crash involving a U.S. commercial airline occurred in 2009 near Buffalo, N.Y.

Everyone aboard the Bombardier DHC-8 propeller plane was killed, including 45 passengers, two pilots and two flight attendants. Another person on the ground also died, bringing the total death toll to 50. An investigation determined that the captain accidentally caused the plane to stall as it approached the airport in Buffalo.

Passengers on Wednesday's flight included a group of figure skaters, their coaches and family members who were returning from a development camp that followed the U.S. Figure Skating Championships in Wichita.

"We are devastated by this unspeakable tragedy and hold the victims' families closely in our hearts," U.S. Figure Skating said in a statement.

Two of those coaches were identified by the Kremlin as Russian figure skaters Evgenia Shishkova and Vadim Naumov, who won the pairs title at the 1994 world championships and competed twice in the Olympics. The Skating Club of Boston lists them as coaches and their son, Maxim Naumov, is a competitive figure skater for the U.S.

Club CEO Doug Zeghibe described the group as highly talented, saying their loss would resonate through the skating community for years.

"Folks are just stunned by this," Zeghibe said. "They are like family to us."

The FAA said the midair crash occurred before 9 p.m. EST in some of the most tightly controlled and monitored airspace in the world, just over 3 miles south of the White House and the Capitol.

American Airlines Flight 5342 was inbound to Reagan National at an altitude of about 400 feet and a speed of about 140 mph when it rapidly lost altitude over the Potomac River, according to data from its radio transponder.

The Canadian-made Bombardier CRJ-701 twin-engine jet, manufactured in 2004, can be configured to carry up to 70 passengers.

A few minutes before landing, air traffic controllers asked the arriving commercial jet if it could land on the shorter Runway 33 at Reagan National, and the pilots said they were able.

Controllers then cleared the plane to land on Runway 33. Flight-tracking sites showed the plane adjust its approach to the new runway.

Less than 30 seconds before the crash, an air traffic controller asked the helicopter if it had the arriving plane in sight.

The controller made another radio call to the helicopter moments later: "PAT 25, pass behind the CRJ." Seconds after that, the two aircraft collided.

The plane's transponder stopped transmitting about 2,400 feet short of the runway, roughly over the middle of the river.

Video from an observation camera at the nearby Kennedy Center showed two sets of lights consistent with aircraft appearing to join in a fireball.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said Thursday that the Army's 12th Aviation Battalion that includes the Black Hawk helicopter involved in the deadly crash near Ronald Reagan National Airport has been granted a 48-hour operational pause.

The Army described the helicopter as a UH-60 Black Hawk from Bravo Company of the 12th Aviation Battalion at Davison Army Airfield, based at Fort Belvoir in Virginia. The helicopter was on a training flight. Military aircraft frequently conduct training flights in and around the congested and heavily restricted airspace of Washington for familiarization and continuity of government planning.

Hegseth said in a recorded video posted on X that the crew was "fairly experienced" and conducting an "annual proficiency training flight." They had night vision goggles.

Stars and Stripes reporter Matthew Adams contributed to this report

CAROLYN KASTER/AP

Search and rescue efforts are seen around a wreckage site in the Potomac River from Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport.

MARK SCHIEFELBEIN/AP

Members of emergency crews conduct recovery efforts.

Md. senators warned of overcrowding air space

BY SAM JANESCH
The Baltimore Sun

WASHINGTON — Almost nine months before Wednesday night's midair collision at Ronald Reagan National Airport, Maryland's two U.S. senators warned about the safety implications of overcrowding the air space around the airport.

U.S. Sen. Chris Van Hollen and then-U.S. Sen. Ben Cardin joined their counterparts from Virginia to be the only four holdouts in the 100-member Senate to vote against a Federal Aviation Administration reauthorization bill.

Their concerns stemmed from a provision that added 10 new flights to DCA, one of the busiest airports in the country.

Van Hollen said at the time that he was "outraged" about the change and that an amendment for additional safety measures was not brought up for a vote.

"The runway at DCA is already the busiest in our nation and the addition of these 10 flights jeopardizes both its safety and operations," the Democratic senator said in a statement after voting against the bill. "I am deeply concerned about the long-lasting implications this will have for my constituents who travel to and from DCA."

MILITARY

14 from figure skating community killed in crash

By Dave Skretta and Jimmy Golen
Associated Press

NORWOOD, Mass. — Two teenage figure skaters, their mothers and two world champion coaches from Boston were among the 14 members of the skating community killed when an American Airlines flight collided with an Army helicopter Wednesday night and crashed into the frigid waters of the Potomac River.

Skating Club of Boston CEO Doug Zeghibe said Thursday that skaters Jinna Han and Spencer Lane were among those killed, along with 1994 pairs world champions Evgenia Shishkova and Vadim Naumov.

In all, 14 of the victims were coming back from a national development camp for promising young skaters following the U.S. Championships in Wichita, Kan., Zeghibe said.

"Skating is a very close and tight-knit community. These kids and their parents, they're here at our facility in Norwood, six, sometimes seven days a week. It's a close, tight bond," Zeghibe said. "This will have long-reaching impacts for our skating community."

The Kremlin also confirmed that Shishkova and Naumov were aboard. Among their students is their 23-year-old son, Maxim, a former U.S. junior champion who has finished fourth at senior nationals the past three years, narrowly missing the podium on Sunday while his parents watched at INTRUST Bank Arena in Wichita.

Maxim Naumov flew home Monday. "He had no reason to stay at the national development camp," Zeghibe said in a briefing inside the rink about 30 minutes south of Boston.

"Both of his parents were with him while he was competing. It's well-known Mom was always too nervous to watch him skate," the club official said, pausing to contain his emotions. "But his dad was with him, and Dad was in the 'kiss-and-cry' sharing his great performance."

Sixty passengers and four crew members on the American Airlines plane and three soldiers aboard a training flight on the Black Hawk helicopter are presumed dead after the collision in Washington on Wednesday night. There was no immediate cause identified, but officials said flight conditions were clear as the jet coming from Wichita was making a routine landing when the helicopter flew into its path.

Washington Fire Chief John Donnelly said officials do not believe anyone survived.

"We are heartbroken to learn that figure skaters, along with their families, friends and coaches, are understood to be among those on board," U.S. Figure Skating said in a statement. "Our thoughts are with everyone affected by this tragedy.

"Figure skating is more than a sport — it's a close-knit family — and we stand together."

Considered one of the most prestigious clubs in the world, the Skating Club of Boston produced Olympic and world champions Dick Button and Tenley Albright, Olympic medalists Nancy Kerrigan and Paul Wylie and scores of U.S. champions.

Among them were Alisa Efimova and Misha Mitrofanov, who won the pairs title last week. The club sent 18 skaters to Wichita, including Jimmy Ma, who finished fifth at the U.S. championships on Sunday.

Spencer Lane is a sectionals champion who had become popular among the skating community on social media, where he has thousands of TikTok followers. On Wednesday, he had posted a video showing him doing a triple toe loop to wrap up the development camp.

"I am so happy to have qualified for national development camp earlier in November. It has been my goal almost ever since I became aware that it was a thing. I learned so much new information that I can apply to my everyday life, and met so many amazing people," Lane had said in an Instagram post Wednesday.

He later posted a photo of him aboard the plane just before it departed from Wichita.

Naumov and Shishkova moved to the U.S. and became coaches, first at the International Skating Center of Connecticut and since 2017 at the Boston club that has served as a training ground for world-class skaters since 1912.

For the Boston club, the accident was an eerie reminder of a 1961 plane crash that killed the entire U.S. delegation en route to the world championships in Prague. The world championships were canceled that year out of respect for the American team killed in the crash.

Robert F. Bukaty/AP

A woman brings flowers to The Skating Club of Boston, from which six athletes, coaches and family associated with the club are believed to have perished in the collision of a passenger aircraft and military helicopter in Washington on Wednesday.

Some of the deadliest plane crashes in US history

Associated Press

An American Airlines jet originating from Witchita with 60 passengers and four crew members aboard collided Wednesday night with an Army helicopter while coming in for a landing at Ronald Reagan National Airport near Washington, D.C.

Everyone aboard was feared dead, officials said Thursday.

Fatal crashes of commercial aircraft in the U.S. have become a rarity in recent decades.

The deadliest recent crash was in 2009 near Buffalo, N.Y. All 45 passengers and the four crew members were killed when the Bombardier DHC-8 propeller plane crashed into a house.

One person on the ground also was killed.

The collision Wednesday of the Bombardier CRJ-701 twin-engine plane and UH-60 Black Hawk occurred over the Potomac River, and the aircraft fell into the water.

In 1982 an Air Florida flight crashed into the Potomac and killed 78.

Here are some of the deadliest commercial plane crashes in the U.S. since the Air Florida disaster according to reports from the National Transportation Safety Board:

■ Feb. 12, 2009: A Colgan Air plane crashed near Buffalo, N.Y., killing everyone aboard the Bombardier DHC-8 propeller plane, including 45 passengers, two pilots and two flight attendants. Another person on the ground also died, bringing the total death toll to 50.

■ Aug. 27, 2006: A Comair aircraft crashed when taking off in Lexington, Ky., after it left from the wrong runway and ran off the end. Two crew members and 47 passengers were killed.

■ Nov. 12, 2001: Just after takeoff, an American Airlines flight crashed into a residential area of Belle Harbor, N.Y. All 260 people aboard the plane were killed.

■ Sept. 11, 2001: Nearly 3,000 people were killed as 19 al-Qaida hijackers seized control of four jetliners, sending two of the planes into New York's World Trade Center, a third into the Pentagon in Arlington, Va., and the fourth into a field in western Pennsylvania. It remains the deadliest terror attack in history.

■ Jan. 31, 2000: An Alaska Airlines flight crashed into the Pacific Ocean near Anacapa Island, Calif. The crash killed 83 passengers and five crew members.

■ July 17, 1996: A Trans World Airlines flight crashed in the Atlantic Ocean near East Moriches, N.Y., on its way to Paris, France. All 230 people on board were killed, and the airplane was destroyed.

■ May 11, 1996: A Valujet Airlines flight crashed into the Everglades about 10 minutes after takeoff from the Miami International Airport. The crash killed all 105 passengers and five crew members.

■ Oct. 31, 1994: An American Eagle flight in Roselawn, Ind., crashed, killing 64 passengers and four crew members.

■ Sept. 8, 1994: A USAir flight crashed while attempting to land in Pittsburgh. It killed 127 passengers and five crew members. The airplane was destroyed by the impact and fire.

■ July 19, 1989: A United Airlines flight experienced an engine failure and crashed while attempting to land in Sioux City, Iowa, killing 110 passengers and one crew member.

■ Aug. 16, 1987: A Northwest Airlines flight crashed just after taking off in Romulus, Mich., striking light poles, a rental car facility and the ground. The crash killed 148 passengers and six crew members.

■ Aug. 2, 1985: A Delta Air Lines flight crashed when approaching to land at the Dallas Fort Worth International Airport during a thunderstorm. It struck a car and two water tanks, and killed 134 passengers and crew members.

■ July 9, 1982: A Pan American World Airways flight crashed just after takeoff near New Orleans, and collided with trees and houses, killing 145 people onboard.

■ Jan. 13, 1982: An Air Florida flight plummeted into the Potomac, killing 70 passengers and four crew members. That crash was attributed to bad weather.

Dave Sherman/AP

In this Feb. 12, 2009, photo, the wreckage of Continental flight 3407 lies amid smoke at the scene after crashing into a suburban Buffalo home and erupting into flames.

MILITARY

Portraits of Esper, Milley removed at Pentagon

BY MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The portraits of former Defense Secretary Mark Esper and retired Army Gen. Mark Milley, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, were removed from the Pentagon after Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth revoked Milley's personal security detail and security clearance.

A portrait of Milley that honors his service as chief of staff of the Army from 2015 to 2019 was no longer displayed as of Wednesday. His portrait honoring his time as chairman of the Joint Chiefs was removed by Jan. 20, shortly after President Donald Trump began his second term in office and only 10 days after it was hung.

A portrait of Esper's time as Army secretary, a position that he held from November 2017 to July 2019 before becoming Trump's defense secretary during his first term, was no longer displayed as of Wednesday. But his portrait honoring his service as defense secretary was still hanging Wednesday afternoon.

Only nail holes remain where the Army portraits once hung.

The move comes after years of Trump criticizing Milley for perceived disloyalty. The retired general told Washington Post associate editor Bob Woodward that Trump is "fascist to the core" and Milley had faced a series of death threats that he attributed to Trump's steady drumbeat of verbal attacks.

Esper also criticized Trump in the years following the president's election loss in 2020. Trump abruptly fired Esper as defense secretary in the final days of his first term as president. Esper's downfall came after publicly disagreeing with Trump and saying active-duty military troops should not be sent to control protests in several American cities at the time. This occurred when Trump sought to pull the military more directly into the administration's response to nationwide civil unrest sparked by the killing of George Floyd, a Black man, by a Minneapolis police officer who is white.

The White House

President Donald Trump is joined by from left, national security adviser Robert C. O'Brien; Vice President Mike Pence; Secretary of Defense Mark Esper; Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Army Gen. Mark A. Milley; and Brig. Gen. Marcus Evans, deputy director for Special Operations on the Joint Staff, right, on Oct. 26, 2019, in the White House.

Both Army portraits were funded through donations from the Association of the United States Army, not taxpayer dollars, and were a gift from the Army honoring their service, The Associated Press reported.

Portraits of Army leadership remain the property of the service and will be returned to the Army Center of Military History. The Milley portrait as chairman of the Joint Chiefs, however, belongs to the Defense Department and it was unclear Wednesday what is being done with it.

"Stripping Gen. Mark Milley's protective detail & security clearance doesn't do anything for American military 'lethality.' Nor does removing his portraits from the Pentagon," Rep. Chrissy Houlahan, D-Pa., said on X. "[Defense Secretary Hegseth], please stop wasting time on [Trump's] petty grievances & do the real work to protect our nation."

The Army portraits being taken down came shortly after Hegseth pulled Milley's personal security detail and security clearance, along with calling for an investigation to review his military rank.

"The secretary has also directed the [Defense Department inspector general] to conduct an inquiry into the facts and circumstances surrounding Gen. Milley's conduct so that the secretary may determine whether it is appropriate to reopen his military grade review determination," Pentagon spokesman John Ullyot said in a statement late Tuesday night.

The move to revoke Milley's security detail comes after Trump revoked those protections and security clearances for other former officials in his first administration, including former Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, Brian Hook, Pompeo's top aide, and former national security adviser John Bolton.

"As for Gen. Milley, the president's position on this remains the same as it does for John Bolton and the other individuals. He doesn't believe these people should have the right to have security clearances and private details for the rest of their lives," White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said Wednesday. "Again, taxpayers are funding it. And the individuals you are mentioning are quite wealthy, I understand, so they can get their own private security if they wish."

Before leaving office, President Joe Biden preemptively pardoned Milley, along with Dr. Anthony Fauci and members of the House committee that investigated the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol.

Milley, 66, served as chairman from 2019 to 2023 before retiring. Trump nominated Milley for chairman during his first administration in December 2018. Milley later drew ire from Republicans for following the military's withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, which resulted in the deaths of 13 service members.

At the time of the appointment, Trump called Milley a "great gentleman" and a "great soldier."

Their relationship began to sour in the summer of 2020, after Milley expressed regret for having accompanied Trump to St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington hours after Lafayette Square was cleared by police and the National Guard of protesters.

Months later, after the Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol, Trump reportedly felt betrayed that Milley had called his Chinese counterpart, Gen. Li Zuocheng, to assure him the U.S. was "100 percent steady."

During an appearance on Fox News on Wednesday, Hegseth was asked about Milley's portraits being taken down and orders involving the retired general. The secretary said without hesitating that "accountability is back."

"If you actively undermined the chain of command, as Gen. Milley did under the previous Trump administration, we're going to review those actions. There will be a review of the rank he will retain on retirement and he'll have that process," Hegseth said.

Philippine president offers deal to China in South China Sea

BY JIM GOMEZ
Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines — Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. offered on Friday to remove a U.S. missile system from the Philippines if China halts what he called its "aggressive and coercive behavior" in the disputed South China Sea.

The U.S. Army installed the Typhon mid-range missile system in the northern Philippines in April last year to support what the longtime treaty allies described as training for joint combat readiness. China has repeatedly demanded that the Philippines remove the missile system, saying it was "inciting geopolitical confrontation and an arms race."

Asked by reporters about China's criticism of the missile system, Marcos said he did not understand the Chinese position because the Philippines does not comment on China's missile systems which "are a thousand times more powerful than what we have."

"Let's make a deal with China: Stop claiming our territory, stop harassing our fishermen and let them have a living, stop ramming our boats, stop water cannoning our people, stop firing lasers at us and stop your aggressive and coercive behavior, and we'll return the typhoon missiles," Marcos told reporters in central Cebu province.

"Let them stop everything they're doing and I'll return all of those," he said.

Chinese officials did not immediately comment on the Philippine leader's remarks.

The U.S. Army's mobile Typhon missile system, which consists of a launcher and at least 16 Standard Missile-6 and Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles, was repositioned about two weeks ago from the northern Philippines to a strategic area nearer the capital, Manila, in consultation with Philippine defense officials, a senior Philippine official told The Associated Press.

The Philippine official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because of a lack of authority to discuss the sensitive issue in public, said the U.S. missile system is now nearer an area where Chinese and Philippine coast guard and navy forces have been involved in increasingly tense face-offs in the South China Sea.

Tomahawk missiles can travel over 1,000 miles, which puts parts of mainland China within their range.

The missile system will remain in the Philippines indefinitely, the Philippine official said.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Mao Ning said last week that the Philippines is "creating tensions and antagonism in the region and inciting geopolitical confrontation and an arms race" by allowing the U.S. missile system to be positioned in its territory.

"This is a highly dangerous move and an extremely irresponsible choice," Mao said.

Philippine Defense Secretary Gilberto Teodoro has rejected China's demand that the missile system be removed as interference in Philippine internal affairs.

The U.S. and the Philippines have repeatedly condemned China's increasingly assertive actions to press its territorial claims in the South China Sea, where hostilities have flared over the past two years with repeated clashes between Chinese and Philippine coast guard forces and accompanying vessels.

Aside from China and the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan also have overlapping claims in the busy waterway, a key shipping route which is also believed to be sitting atop large undersea deposits of gas and oil.

NATION

Gabbard blasts nation's previous intel failures

By David Klepper and Farnoush Amiri
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Tulsi Gabbard, President Donald Trump's pick to be director of national intelligence, faced sharp criticism from Democrats and Republicans alike Thursday during a fiery confirmation hearing focused on her past comments sympathetic to Russia, her meeting with Syria's now-deposed leader and her past support for government leaker Edward Snowden.

Gabbard started her hearing by telling lawmakers that big changes are needed to address years of failures of America's intelligence service. She said too often intelligence has been false or politicized, leading to wars, foreign policy failures and the misuse of espionage. And she said those lapses have continued as the U.S. faces renewed threats from Russia and China.

"The bottom line is this must end. President Trump's reelection is a clear mandate from the American people to break this cycle of failure and the weaponization and politicization of the intelligence community," Gabbard told the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Gabbard promised to be objective and noted her military service, saying she would bring the same sense of duty and responsibility to the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, which oversees and coordinates the work of 18 intelligence agencies.

Gabbard, a former Democratic congresswoman from Hawaii, is a lieutenant colonel in the National Guard who deployed twice to the Middle East and ran for president in 2020. She has no formal intelligence experience, however, and has never run a government agency or department.

It's Gabbard's comments, however, that have posed the biggest challenge to her confirmation. Gabbard has repeatedly echoed Russian propaganda used to justify the Kremlin's invasion of Ukraine and criticized Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy as a corrupt autocrat.

She's been accused of spreading Russian disinformation by Republican lawmakers and has even won praise in Russian state-controlled media. Sen. Jerry Moran, R-Kan., asked Gabbard on Thursday whether Russia would "get a pass" from her.

"Senator I'm offended by the question," Gabbard responded. "Because my sole focus, commitment and responsibility is about our own nation, our own security and the interests of the American people."

A 2017 visit with Syrian President Bashar Assad is another point of contention. Assad was recently deposed as his country's leader following a brutal civil war in which he was accused of using chemical weapons. Following her visit, Gabbard faced criticism that she was legitimizing a dictator and then more questions when she said she was skeptical that Assad had used chemical weapons.

Gabbard defended her meeting with Assad, saying she used the opportunity to press the Syrian leader on his human rights record.

"I asked him tough questions about his own regime's actions," Gabbard said.

In a back-and-forth that at times grew heated, lawmakers from both parties raised concerns about her past statements supportive of Snowden, a former National Security Agency contractor who fled to Russia after he was charged with revealing classified information about surveillance programs.

Gabbard said that while Snowden revealed important facts about surveillance programs she believes are unconstitutional, he violated rules about protecting classified secrets. "Edward Snowden broke the law," she said.

Sen. Michael Bennet, D-Colo., repeatedly pressed Gabbard on whether she believed Snowden is a traitor. "Yes or no, is Edward Snowden a traitor to the United States of America?"

Gabbard declined to respond directly.

As a lawmaker, Gabbard sponsored legislation that would have repealed a key surveillance program known as Section 702, which allows authorities to collect the communications of suspected terrorists overseas.

John McDonnell/AP

Tulsi Gabbard, President Donald Trump's choice to be director of national intelligence, appears before the Senate Intelligence Committee for her confirmation hearing on Capitol Hill on Thursday.

Gabbard argued then that the program could be violating the rights of Americans whose communications are swept up inadvertently, but national security officials say the program has saved lives.

She now says she supports the program, noting new safeguards designed to protect Americans' privacy.

Gabbard defended her change of opinion, and said her critics are opposed to her nomination because she asks tough questions and doesn't always follow Washington dogma.

Kennedy makes his final plea to skeptical senators

By Amanda Seitz and Stephen Groves
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s long record of questioning the safety of childhood vaccinations persisted as a flash point for him Thursday during a confirmation hearing where a key Republican quickly raised concerns about his views.

Sen. Bill Cassidy, a physician who chairs the health committee, opened the hearing with tough questions for Kennedy.

He asked him to reject a long-discredited theory that vaccines cause autism.

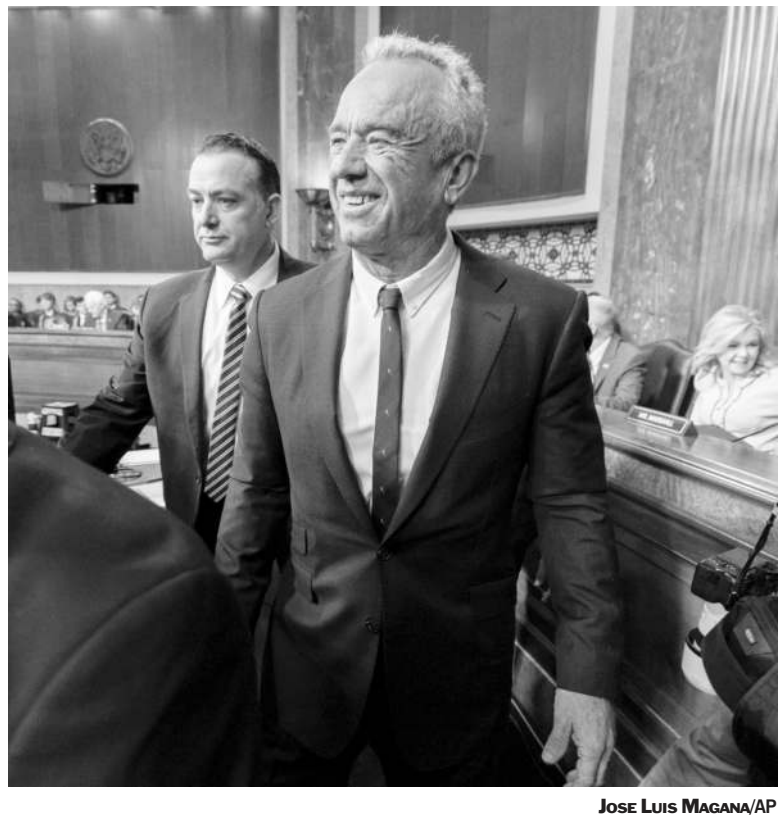
Kennedy refused to flatly do so.

"It's no secret I have some reservations on your past positions on vaccines and other issues," Cassidy told the nominee.

Cassidy, of Louisiana, is considered to be a crucial vote for Kennedy to be confirmed as the Trump administration's top health official.

He shared with Kennedy a personal story about an 18-year-old woman whose liver was failing from a hepatitis infection.

"It was the worst day of my medical career because I thought $50 of vaccines could have prevented this all."



Jose Luis Magana/AP

Robert F. Kennedy Jr. arrives to testify before the Senate Finance Committee during his confirmation hearing to be secretary of health and human services, at the Capitol on Wednesday.

Cassidy noted that Kennedy's broad popularity and name recognition had given him a powerful platform for his views on vaccines and said Kennedy's advocacy had led people to forego the COVID-19 vaccine.

He then bore into Kennedy's views on common vaccines, Lyme disease and approvals for future vaccines.

"If you are approved to this position, will you say unequivocally, will you reassure mothers unequivocally and without qualification that the measles and hepatitis B vaccines do not cause autism?" Cassidy asked.

Kennedy avoided answering directly, but said "if the data is there, I will absolutely do that."

Then, in a rare show of across-the-aisle cooperation, Sen. Bernie Sanders, a Vermont independent, followed up on Cassidy's line of questioning.

Again, Kennedy refused to give a definitive answer.

At times, the questioning was intensely personal. Sen. Maggie Hassan, Democrat of New Hampshire, shared her anguish as a mother who has spent decades wondering what caused her 36-year-old son's cerebral palsy. She worried about whether vaccines contributed to her son's condition after an infamous study years ago falsely found a link between autism and vaccines. That study has since been roundly discredited.

Hassan said Kennedy's suggestions that vaccines could cause autism were hurting families.

"He is re-litigating and churning settled science so we can't go forward and find out what the cause of autism is and treat these kids and help these families," she said, later adding: "When you continue to sow doubt about settled science, it makes it impossible for us to move forward."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends infants receive doses of the hepatitis vaccination.

In his opening remarks, Kennedy once again rejected the "anti-vaccine" label and instead said he is "Pro-safety."

Sanders, the senior minority party member on the committee, pressed Kennedy to concede that health care was a human right, as his father, Robert F. Kennedy, and his uncles, John F. Kennedy and Edward Kennedy, had done. Kennedy again did not give a definitive answer.

NATION

Fed holds rates steady

By Christopher Rugaber
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Federal Reserve left its benchmark interest rate unchanged Wednesday after cutting it three times in a row last year, a sign of a more cautious approach as the Fed seeks to gauge where inflation is headed and what policies President Donald Trump may pursue.

In a statement, the Fed said the job market is "solid," and noted that the unemployment rate "has stabilized at a low level in recent months." The Fed also appeared to toughen its assessment of inflation, saying that it "remains somewhat elevated." Both a healthier job market and more stubborn inflation typically would imply fewer Fed rate cuts in the coming months.

In a news conference Wednesday, Fed Chair Jerome Powell largely deflected questions about recent comments from Trump, including one from last week, when Trump said he would lower oil prices and then "demand" lower rates. He also said he would speak with Powell about it.

"I'm not going to have any response or comment on whatever the president said," Powell said. Asked if Trump had communicated his desire for lower rates directly to Powell, the Fed chair said he had "no contact."

Regarding the Fed's key rate, Powell conveyed a more deliberate approach, noting that the economy is mostly healthy — the unemployment rate is a low 4.1% and growth topped 3% at an annual rate in the fall.

"With ... the economy remaining strong, we do not need to be in a hurry to adjust our policy stance," Powell said.

Asked about the potential impact of the sharp policy changes Trump has proposed regarding tariffs, immigration, tax cuts, and deregulation, Powell said Fed policymakers are "waiting to see which policies are enacted."

"We don't know what will happen," he added. "We need to let those policies be articulated before we can even begin to make a plausible assessment of what their implications for the economy will be."

Kathy Bostjancic, chief economist at Nationwide Financial, said Powell's comments suggest the Fed won't cut rates again until the middle of this year.

Seth Wenig/AP

A news conference by Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell is seen Wednesday at the New York Stock Exchange in New York.

"We are all in wait and see mode, including the Fed," she said.

The Fed reduced its rate last year to 4.3% from 5.3%, in part out of concern that the job market was weakening. Hiring had slowed in the summer and the unemployment rate ticked up, leading Fed officials to approve an outsized half-point cut in September. Yet hiring rebounded last month and the unemployment rate declined slightly, to a low 4.1%.

Menendez gets 11 years in prison

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Former U.S. Sen. Bob Menendez was sentenced Wednesday to 11 years in prison for accepting bribes of gold and cash and acting as an agent of Egypt — crimes his lawyer said he's been mocked for as "Gold Bar Bob."

The judge delivered the sentence after Menendez tearfully addressed the court, saying he'd lost everything he cared about, except his family. The Democrat resigned last year after becoming one of only a handful of U.S. senators ever convicted while in office.

"You were successful, powerful, you stood at the apex of our political system," U.S. District Judge Sidney H. Stein told Menendez in a packed Manhattan courtroom. "Somewhere along the way, and I don't know when it was, you lost your way and working for the public good became working for your good."

The ex-senator was convicted of selling his once-considerable clout for bribes worth a fortune. FBI agents who searched his house found $480,000, some of it stuffed inside boots and pockets of clothing, and gold bars worth an estimated $150,000.

Prosecutors said that in exchange for the loot, which also included a luxury car, Menendez did corrupt favors for three New Jersey businessmen. They said he tried to protect associates from criminal investigations, helped two of them in business deals with foreign powers, and also met with Egyptian intelligence officials and took steps to help that country access millions of dollars in U.S. military aid.

Julia Demaree Nikhinson/AP

Former U.S. Sen. Bob Menendez, D-N.J., departs Manhattan federal court after his sentencing on Wednesday in New York.

"What's been the result?" Stein said. "You lost your Senate seat. You lost your chairmanship and you lost your good name."

Menendez, 71, portrayed himself to the judge as a sympathetic figure, stressing his decades of public service and declaring that he was chastened by the experience. Afterward, talking to reporters with TV cameras and microphones outside, he turned defiant.

"I am innocent," he proclaimed, vowing to appeal.

Menendez, who beat a prosecution in another corruption case a decade ago, aligned himself with President Donald Trump's recent criticisms of the judicial system, particularly in New York City.

"This process is political and it's corrupted to the core. I hope President Trump cleans up the cesspool and restores the integrity to the system," Menendez said, reading from a sheet of paper.

The judge ordered him to report to prison June 6.

US to send up to 30K detained migrants to base in Guantanamo

Miami Herald

President Donald Trump signed a presidential memorandum Wednesday to ready a detention facility for migrants in the U.S. naval base in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, that could hold as many as 30,000 people as his administration ramps up deportations.

The memo directs the secretaries of Defense and Homeland Security to take "all appropriate actions" to expand the Migrant Operations Center in Guantanamo Bay "to full capacity to provide additional detention space for high-priority criminal aliens unlawfully present in the United States, and to address attendant immigration enforcement needs" identified by the agencies.

"We have 30,000 beds in Guantanamo to detain the worst criminal illegal aliens threatening the American people," Trump said in remarks before signing the Laken Riley Act at the White House, a new law that allows for the detention of immigrants suspected of committing theft and other crimes.

"Some of them are so bad we don't even trust the countries to hold them because we don't want them coming back, so we're going to send them out to Guantanamo," Trump added. "This will double our capacity immediately. It's a tough place to get out of."

The base is well known as the detention center for suspected terrorists after the 9/11 attacks. But the U.S. government also keeps a facility where some Cuban and Haitian migrants intercepted at sea by the U.S. Coast Guard await the result of their asylum cases. The State Department manages that facility, with assistance from the Department of Homeland Security and the Pentagon. The Guantanamo facility came under fire during the Biden administration for human rights violations, a claim that the State Department has vehemently denied.

Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem and White House "border czar" Tom Homan told reporters Wednesday that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement will run the facility following "the highest standards" and that the White House was already working on the plan.

US economy grows 2.3% from October to December, 2.8% for full year

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The American economy ended 2024 on a solid note with consumer spending continuing to drive growth.

The Commerce Department reported Thursday that gross domestic product — the economy's output of goods and services — expanded at a 2.3% annual rate from October through December.

For the full year, the economy grew a healthy 2.8%, compared with 2.9% in 2023.

The fourth-quarter growth was a tick below the 2.4% economists had expected, according to a survey of forecasters by the data firm FactSet.

Consumer spending grew at a 4.2% pace, fastest since January-March 2023 and up from 3.7% in July-September last year. But business investment tumbled as investment in equipment plunged after two straight strong quarters.

Wednesday's report also showed persistent inflationary pressure at the end of the 2024. The Federal Reserve's favored inflation gauge — called the personal consumption expenditures index, or PCE — rose at a 2.3% annual pace last quarter, up from 1.5% in the third quarter. Excluding volatile food and energy prices, so-called core PCE inflation was 2.5%, up from 2.2% in the July-September quarter.

NATION

Asteroid samples hint at ancient water world

By Marcia Dunn
Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — Asteroid samples fetched by NASA hold not only the pristine building blocks for life but also the salty remains of an ancient water world, scientists reported Wednesday.

The findings provide the strongest evidence yet that asteroids may have planted the seeds of life on Earth and that these ingredients were mingling with water almost right from the start.

"That's the kind of environment that could have been essential to the steps that lead from elements to life," said the Smithsonian Institution's Tim McCoy, one of the lead study authors.

NASA's Osiris-Rex spacecraft returned 4 ounces of dust and pebbles from the near-Earth asteroid Bennu, delivering the sample canister to the Utah desert in 2023 before swooping off after another space rock. It remains the biggest cosmic haul from beyond the moon. The two previous asteroid sample missions, by Japan, yielded considerably less material.

Small amounts of Bennu's precious black grains — leftovers from the solar system's formation 4.5 billion years ago — were doled out to the two separate research teams whose studies appeared in the journals Nature and Nature Astronomy. But it was more than enough to tease out the sodium-rich minerals and confirm the presence of amino acids, nitrogen in the form of ammonia and even parts of the genetic code.

Some if not all of the delicate salts found at Bennu — similar to what's in the dry lakebeds of California's Mojave Desert and Africa's Sahara — would be stripped away if present in falling meteorites.

"This discovery was only possible by analyzing samples that were collected directly from the asteroid then carefully preserved back on Earth," the Institute of Science Tokyo's Yasuhito Sekine, who was not involved in the studies, said in an accompanying editorial.

Combining the ingredients of life with an environment of sodium-rich salt water, or brines, "that's really the pathway to life," said McCoy, the National Museum of Natural History's curator of meteorites. "These processes probably occurred much earlier and were much more widespread than we had thought before."

NASA's Daniel Glavin said one of the biggest surprises was the relatively high abundance of nitrogen, including ammonia. While all of the organic molecules found in the Bennu samples have been identified before in meteorites, Glavin said the ones from Bennu are valid — "real extraterrestrial organic material formed in space and not a result of contamination from Earth."

Bennu — a rubble pile just one-third of a mile across — was originally part of a much larger asteroid that got clobbered by other space rocks. The latest results suggest this parent body had an extensive underground network of lakes or even oceans, and that the water evaporated away, leaving behind the salty clues.

Sixty labs around the world are analyzing bits of Bennu as part of initial studies, said the University of Arizona's Dante Lauretta, the mission's chief scientist who took part in both studies.

Most of the $1 billion mission's cache has been set aside for future analysis. Scientists stress more testing is needed to better understand the Bennu samples, as well as more asteroid and comet sample returns. China plans to launch an asteroid sample return mission this year.

Many are pushing for a mission to collect rocks and dirt from the potentially waterlogged dwarf planet Ceres in the main asteroid belt. Jupiter's moon Europa and Saturn's moon Enceladus also beckon as enticing water worlds. Meanwhile, NASA has core samples awaiting pickup at Mars, but their delivery is on hold while the space agency studies the quickest and cheapest way to get them here.

"Are we alone?" McCoy said. "That's one of the questions we're trying to answer."

Rick Bowmer/AP

Recovery team members carry a capsule containing NASA's first asteroid samples to a temporary clean room at Dugway Proving Ground in Utah on Sept. 24, 2023.

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NASA's 2 stuck astronauts take their first spacewalk together

By Marcia Dunn
Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — NASA's two stuck astronauts took their first spacewalk together Thursday, exiting the International Space Station almost eight months after moving in.

Commander Suni Williams and Butch Wilmore floated out to perform maintenance work and wipe the station's exterior for evidence of any microbes that might still be alive after launching from Earth and escaping through vents.

"Here we go," Wilmore said as he emerged 260 miles above Spain.

The pair expected to stay just a week when they arrived at the space station last June. But their brand new ride, Boeing's Starliner capsule, encountered so much trouble that NASA decided to return it empty.

That left the two test pilots, both retired Navy captains, in orbit until SpaceX can bring them home. That won't happen until late March or early April, extending their mission to 10 months because of a SpaceX delay in launching their replacements.

NASA TV/AP

U.S. astronauts Suni Williams, foreground, and Butch Wilmore, behind, work outside the International Space Station during a spacewalk on Thursday.

Williams performed a spacewalk two weeks ago with another NASA astronaut. It marked Wilmore's first time outside this trip. Both racked up spacewalks during previous space station stays.

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WORLD

Hamas frees 8 as Israel starts prisoner release

Associated Press

KHAN YOUNIS, Gaza Strip — Israel released 110 Palestinian prisoners on Thursday after eight hostages in the Gaza Strip were freed by Hamas-led militants earlier in the day in a sometimes chaotic process that briefly called the exchange into question and underscored the fragility of a ceasefire that began this month.

Crowds of Palestinians — the relatives and friends of released prisoners but also scores of jubilant supporters — mobbed buses carrying the prisoners. As soon as they stepped off the buses, the crowd hoisted the prisoners in the air.

The prisoners released include 30 who were serving life sentences for deadly attacks against Israelis; seven were allowed to return to the occupied West Bank, but the rest were being transferred to Egypt before further deportation.

The prisoner releases began late Thursday after militants in Gaza freed three Israelis and five Thai nationals, who were working on farms in southern Israel when taken hostage more than 15 months ago.

The releases are part of a ceasefire aimed at ending the deadliest and most destructive war ever fought between Israel and Hamas, and securing the release of dozens more hostages abducted in the Hamas-led attack on Oct. 7, 2023, that ignited the war.

Scuffles erupted as the convoy of buses carrying the Palestinian prisoners departed from their Israeli prison in the West Bank. Palestinian teenagers threw stones outside the complex and Israeli forces fired tear gas as they tried to clear the area.

Three Palestinians were wounded in the confrontations outside the prison, according to Palestinian Red Crescent, which said Israeli forces had used gunfire and stun grenades to disperse crowds.

NASSER NASSER/AP

A picture of President Donald Trump is set on fire during a protest against his latest statements regarding the transfer of Palestinians from Gaza, in the West Bank city of Ramallah, on Wednesday.

As Red Cross buses approached, the families of Palestinian prisoners caught their first glimpses of their loved ones through the bus windshields, some shattered in the melee of stone-throwing and tear gas-firing.

Zakaria Zubeidi — a prominent former militant leader and theater director who took part in a dramatic jailbreak in 2021 before being rearrested days later — wore a gray prison jumpsuit and flashed a victory sign from inside one of the buses.

The uproar came hours after a chaotic hostage handover in the Gaza Strip, where masked militants shuttled some captives through a rowdy crowd of thousands of Palestinians.

Hamas released seven of the hostages in front of the destroyed home of its slain leader, Yahya Sinwar, as thousands pressed in.

The first hostage — female soldier Agam Berger, 20 — was released after Hamas paraded her in front of a smaller crowd in the heavily destroyed urban Jabaliya refugee camp in northern Gaza.

Hours later, a chaotic scene unfolded at a handover of the other seven in the southern city of Khan Younis. Footage showed hostage Arbel Yehoud, 29, looking stunned as masked militants hustled her through the shouting crowd, pushing people back. Also released were Gadi Moses, an 80-year-old Israeli man, and five Thai laborers. Both Yehoud and Moses are dual German-Israeli nationals.

More antisemitic graffiti appears in Australia after explosives found

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Three more incidents of antisemitic graffiti were found across Sydney on Thursday morning, leading Australian political leaders to warn of an escalation in hatred and decry as terrorism explosives found earlier in a trailer on the city's outskirts.

Law enforcement earlier this month found a list of Jewish targets together with a cache of Powergel — an explosive used in the mining industry — in Sydney's outer suburb of Dural, state police said Wednesday. The amount uncovered could create a bomb with a blast zone of around 130 feet, officers said.

"This represents, undeniably, an escalation in race hatred, race-filled hatred and potential violence in New South Wales," the state's Premier Chris Minns told reporters on Thursday.

News of the discovery — which police chiefs said was leaked to a newspaper, compromising a clandestine investigation — followed months of antisemitic arson, window-smashing and graffiti in Sydney and Melbourne, Australia's most populous cities, concentrated in the areas where many Jewish people live. Thursday's target included a Jewish school.

"It is utterly appalling and shameful," Minns said. A police investigation into months of such crimes has prompted 10 arrests and Minns expected more.

Russian drone strikes apartment in Ukraine

BY ILLIA NOVIKOV
Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — A Russian drone blasted a hole in an apartment building in northeastern Ukraine during a nighttime attack, killing at least four people and injuring nine others, officials said Thursday.

The Shahed drone blew out a wall and surrounding windows in the apartment block in Sumy, a major city, just after 1 a.m., the Sumy regional administration said. Four people were rescued from the rubble, and a child was among the injured, it said, adding that 120 people were evacuated.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called it "a terrible tragedy, a terrible Russian crime."

A Russian artillery strike on the Donetsk city of Kramatorsk injured eight people, including two young children, Donetsk regional head Vadym Filashkin wrote on his Telegram channel Thursday.

Congo's leader calls for mobilization against Rwanda-backed rebels

MOSES SAWASAWA/AP

M23 rebels escort government soldiers and police who surrendered to an undisclosed location in Goma, Democratic republic of the Congo, on Thursday.

Associated Press

GOMA, Congo — Congo's leader called for a massive military mobilization to help fight Rwanda-backed rebels who were attempting to seize more territory in the country's east, as a crucial meeting of neighbors asked the Congolese government to talk with the rebels. Rwanda's leader also threatened to "deal" with any confrontation with South Africa regarding the conflict.

In his first public remarks since the M23 rebels advanced into eastern Congo's largest city, Goma, on Monday, President Félix Tshisekedi late Wednesday vowed "a vigorous and coordinated response" to push back the rebels while reaffirming his commitment to a peaceful resolution. "Enlist massively in the army because you are the spearhead of our country," he urged young people.

As much of Goma remained without electricity and water on Thursday, several bodies allegedly of government soldiers were lying in the streets as residents looked on in seeming horror.

The M23 rebels are backed by some 4,000 troops from neighboring Rwanda, according to U.N. experts, far more than in 2012 when they first captured Goma. They are one of more than 100 armed groups vying for control in Congo's mineral-rich east, which holds vast deposits estimated to be worth $24 trillion that are critical to much of the world's technology.

After capturing much of Goma, a humanitarian hub critical for more than 6 million people displaced by the conflict in eastern Congo, the rebels were advancing toward South Kivu's provincial capital, Bukavu, causing fear and panic among residents, witnesses said Thursday.

WEEKEND

Putting a new spin on grief

Music, Pages 28-29

Trouble in 'Paradise'

Not all is as it seems in Sterling K. Brown's thought-provoking latest TV venture

Actor Q&A, Page 30

Sterling K. Brown stars in "Paradise."
Disney

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WEEKEND: GADGETS & TECHNOLOGY

Dissecting DeepSeek

Why the AI chatbot, its large-language models are getting a lot of attention

BY CHRIS VELAZCO
The Washington Post

For the past few days, the tech industry has fully embraced its inner Jan Brady — it's all about DeepSeek, DeepSeek, DeepSeek. But what does that actually mean for you? In the short term, at least, you've got at least one more buzzy artificial intelligence chatbot to talk to — or ignore entirely. But the eruption of this Chinese startup onto the wider AI stage could have lasting effects on how quickly and efficiently AI tools are developed. We'll keep an eye on all that for you. In the meantime, it's worth breaking down just what all the commotion is about — and what DeepSeek can actually do:

What's it like to use DeepSeek?

Honestly, it's a lot like any other AI chatbot — minus some flashy features, such as a realistic voice interface or the ability to generate images on the fly.

You might also notice some hiccups or delayed responses. By Monday night, the app's responses slowed to a crawl and, for a while, even stopped entirely because of a crush of user traffic.

Even so, there are a few niceties here, like a search tool that compiles (sourced) information from across the web into neat answers. It, for instance, correctly contextualized President Donald Trump's recent firing of 17 inspectors general and rightly identified a few of them — even when I got the number wrong in my query.

Using DeepSeek's search tool is a must if you — for some reason — insist on getting your news from AI because the app admits its models were trained on information no newer than July 2024.

You can also use DeepSeek's app to summarize documents you upload to it or to interpret text in front of your phone's camera or in images you upload.

It's pretty good at this stuff, except for when it isn't. Consider a photo I took of the Bay Bridge in San Francisco. It's nothing special, but I wondered whether DeepSeek could make out the "Pier 22½" on the side of the building.

Instead, it's convinced something in the image says "www.997788.com," a string of Chinese characters and "XINJIANG." Xinjiang is a region in northwestern China. Huh? DeepSeek didn't reply to a request for comment.

Oh, and a quick reminder since we're talking about giving DeepSeek files to parse: In addition to things you upload, data like your chats, device details and even "keystroke patterns" ultimately wind up on servers in China.

As with other AI apps, like ChatGPT, you can switch between models. The default experience quickly spits out detailed answers, but DeepSeek's new R1 model — branded under the "DeepThink" banner in the app — is more illuminating. The answers it produces are often similar and are generated more slowly, but you get a better sense of the process behind generating those responses.

Ask the standard model about Tank Man, for instance, and the app quickly refuses to play ball. But when you ask the same question with DeepThink enabled, you can briefly see the service puzzling through its answer:

"Okay, so I need to figure out who Tank Man is," the app seems to remark to itself. "Let me start by recalling what I know." By the time it generates the text "Tank Man is related to some historical event in China. Maybe the Tiananmen Square …" some inbuilt controls seemingly kick in and attempt to direct the conversation elsewhere.(In case you were wondering, asking it questions about Taiwanese independence also prompts some forceful nationalist answers.)

So, yeah: Mainland China tendencies aside, the experience is ... pretty good? Other services like ChatGPT still have a lead in certain features, and if you're a devoted user of other AIs, I don't see much reason to switch (for now, anyway).

CHRIS VELAZCO/The Washington Post

DeepSeek's artificial intelligence chatbot iPhone app rocketed to the top of Apple's free app lists, according to headlines released Jan. 10. It outshined even AI stalwart ChatGPT and Meta's Threads.

So why did DeepSeek blow up the way it did?

That kind of depends on where you're coming from.

For many normal folks, the first sign of furor came from headlines pointing out that DeepSeek's iPhone app — released Jan. 10 — had rocketed to the top of Apple's free apps list, outshining AI stalwart ChatGPT and Meta's Threads.

That's not entirely a surprise. It's reasonably full-featured, it provides seemingly solid answers — though they're always worth double-checking — and it doesn't nag you to pay for a subscription.

For those more closely dialed into the industry, the commotion around DeepSeek isn't *really* because of the app. It's the origins of the large-language models that power it.

Long story short, the Chinese startup claimed in a recent paper that it trained its AI model with older, slower Nvidia chips and low investment — under $6 million.

If those claims are accurate, it's proof that a company can develop an impressive AI model without the cutting-edge hardware and costs incurred by companies such as OpenAI.

For scale, OpenAI CEO Sam Altman once said the company's GPT-4 model — released in 2023 — cost "more than" $100 million to train.

This low-cost, high-impact approach to training AI had even President Donald Trump offering faint praise for the Chinese startup, saying he viewed it as "a positive."

"The release of DeepSeek, AI from a Chinese company, should be a wake-up call for our industries that we need to be laser-focused on competing to win," he said in Miami Monday night.

Satechi's new Mobile XR Hubs give devices extra ports, capabilities

BY GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service

Satechi's new Mobile XR Hubs enable users to connect, power, play and charge devices and accessories with ease.

The first, the Satechi Mobile XR Hub with Audio ($44.99), brings back something Apple took away from us years ago: the 3.5mm audio jack. The Mobile XR Hub with Audio also supplies built-in mic functionality for recordings and calls.

The hub also supplies 10Gbps data transfer and pass-through charging while the other ports are in use. You get video output with XR/AR Glasses or an external monitor.

The other new item, the Mobile XR Hub with microSD Reader ($44.99), gives your mobile device a memory card slot (a card is not included) to transfer videos and photos to the card. This can be used to share photos with other devices or free up digital space.

The Mobile XR Hub with Audio has three ports: one USB-C PD Port, which supports up to 100-watt charging, and USB 2.0 data and audio support. A second USB-C port supports the XR glasses or 4K @ 60Hz visuals on an external monitor and USB 3.0 at up to 10Gbps speeds. The 3.5 mm audio port provides both input and output, along with volume control.

The Mobile XR Hub with microSD has nearly the same USB-C features and support. However, remove the audio support and swap in the micro SD UHS-I memory card reader with transfer speeds up to 33MBs.

Both hubs connect to devices with a built-in USB-C connection. They supply up to 27W of pass-through power for iPhones, 45W for Nintendo Switch and 100W for laptops.

The Satechi site has a complete list of compatible devices.

Online: Satechi.net

SATECHI/TNS photos

Left, the Satechi Mobile XR Hub with Audio and right, the Satechi Mobile XR Hub with microSD Reader (card not included).

WEEKEND: VIDEO GAMES

COMMENTARY

REMEDY ENTERTAINMENT/The Washington Post

Alan Wake 2 evokes David Lynch's celebrated television show "Twin Peaks" and his movie "Lost Highway" by featuring multiple protagonists, including two coffee-addicted FBI agents investigating bizarre murders in a sleepy Pacific Northwest town.

The deep impact of David Lynch

Auteur leaves his mark on game titles ranging from Alan Wake to Zelda

BY GENE PARK
The Washington Post

Besides George Lucas, David Lynch is arguably the film and TV director with the most influence on video games.

To be "Lynchian" in part is to bewitch the audience in a dream state, and video games are a medium that can viscerally re-create moving through imagination. Plenty of games take direct inspiration from his work. But Lynch himself understood the connection. In 2000 he directed a surreal PlayStation 2 commercial, 60 seconds of flames, blaring alarms and impossible imagery.

Lynch once took interest in creating a game, Woodcutters From Fiery Ships, a compelling but doomed project with a Japanese developer of PC adventure games. Lynch described it as a "conundrum thing ... a beautiful kind of place to put yourself. You try to make a little bit of a mystery and a bit of a story, but you want it to be able to bend back upon itself and get lost, really get lost." He told the Guardian the project was "blocked from the get-go" because players wouldn't be interested in such a thing. Two decades of hindsight and history would prove that instinct wrong, as some of the most popular and influential games would carry that spirit.

The most famous example might surprise, but Nintendo's Legend of Zelda series often played with surrealism. Its first real attempt — as well as its first major shot at a story breaking the confines of princess rescues — was 1993's Game Boy game Link's Awakening. Nintendo even brought in "Twin Peaks" co-creator Mark Frost for a conversation about the game's story. Later, on the Nintendo 64, Majora's Mask questioned the roles each of us play through the masks we wear. These two games remain the most tragic tales ever told by the House of Mario.

Lynch never delved completely into horror, but his DNA is all over the genre, particularly in video games. Silent Hill, released in 1999 for the first PlayStation, eschewed the horror game's fascination with creatures and zombies to create something far more paranoid and unnerving, and a motley crew of Konami developers looked to Lynch for guidance. Last year, art director Masahiro Ito confirmed that early ideas for Silent Hill 2 were inspired by Lynch's film "Lost Highway." The Silent Hill series itself inspired decades of psychological horror games, all the way to last year's indie masterpiece Mouthwashing.

Lynch never delved completely into horror, but his DNA is all over the genre, particularly in video games.

That even the famously puritan Nintendo joined this wave isn't so surprising. In the 1990s, Japan's obsession with "Twin Peaks" ignited a sort of Lynchmania, with people even re-creating funerals for Laura Palmer. The show's depiction of Americana fascinated Japan and countless would-be video game creators.

"Twin Peaks" is all over Final Fantasy VII, the groundbreaking 1997 PlayStation game that might be the medium's first big-budget project. Director Yoshinori Kitase has said "Twin Peaks" is his favorite show of all time, and his game's plot dives deep into the nature of consciousness and self-identity. Fans have noted some strong musical ties, too: On YouTube, one playlist collects songs from the show that sound suspiciously similar to the game's jazzier score.

In 2010, eccentric game director Hideteka Suehiro, most famously known as Swery65, would release Deadly Premonition, a retelling of "Twin Peaks" that coincidentally uses gameplay elements from Majora's Mask to create a township of people with schedules and odd behaviors.

And before he became arguably the most popular and celebrated game director in the world, a young Hideo Kojima criticized U.S. military fetishism by lacing it with supernatural wickedness in his Metal Gear series.

In 2001, Kojima imagined an all-too-familiar future of a digital hellscape poisoned with misinformation. For Lynch, the horror lies in life's uncertainties, while Kojima held a mirror to our tech-obsessed future where AI builds hell on earth. Kojima said in 2018: "Thank you Lynch-sensei. You gave me courage."

The list of games Lynch inspired are countless (the Persona series is another prominent example). But besides Kojima, acclaimed Finnish game director Sam Lake is perhaps gaming's most successful creative in evoking Lynch. His thriller series Alan Wake takes place in Lynch's home region of the Pacific Northwest, like "Twin Peaks," and the second game stars a pair of coffee-addicted and awkward FBI agents.

"There would not be Alan Wake without him," Lake said of Lynch in his acceptance speech of the Andrew Yoon Legend Award at the New York Game Awards this month.

"A journey into a secret mystery. I think this is what we seek — a presence we sometimes fleetingly sense in our everyday lives, but something that is invisible to us, denied from us," Lake said. "We suspect it's there, but we are blind to it, and we can't reach it until a doorway opens and allows us to pursue it and journey into a hidden world. It can be wonderful, and it can be terrifying."

AP

Filmmaker David Lynch, photographed in 2010, and the eerie, dreamlike quality of his works was a perfect fit for the video game arena. Lynch, who directly contributed to the development of some titles and influenced others, died Jan. 15.

Even though they never met, it's clear Lake has a firm grasp of why Lynch's influence is felt across all artistic mediums. Alan Wake 2 was The Washington Post's best game of 2023 because of its mixed-media approach combining film, pop music, literature and gameplay to create an interactive puzzle box of the collective consciousness.

It calls to mind Lynch's approach to creating evocative sounds. "Sound is, and I think every director would realize this, 50 percent of the picture," Lynch said in a 2014 interview with the Paris Review about his longtime sound editor, the late Alan Splet. "To get it married to the picture is the trick."

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS

PARAMOUNT+/TNS

Michelle Yeoh returns as Philippa Georgiou, a black ops agent within Starfleet, in "Star Trek: Section 31."

'Section 31' a good start

Streaming 'Star Trek' film entertaining, but still feels like a pilot episode

BY ROBERT LLOYD
Los Angeles Times

The contortions through which a series goes before it reaches the air — the creative decisions and studio demands, the castings and recasting, the rewrites and punch-ups, the shrinking or expanding budgets, the shrapnel of the collision of art and business — are usually nothing to take note of. But in the case of "Star Trek: Section 31," now streaming on Paramount+, the product seems so much an expression of the process, it seems worth mentioning.

Originally conceived as a spinoff series from "Star Trek: Discovery" to star Michelle Yeoh as Philippa Georgiou, an agent of Starfleet's secret black ops arm, the project was downgraded or promoted to a "feature," officially the 14th in the "Star Trek" canon, and the franchise's first "TV movie." Even though this decision apparently preceded production, most everything about "Section 31" says "pilot episode," as if whatever ideas informed the aborted series were still driving the starship, as characters are positioned for episodes yet to come — as if the film did not want to let go of the possibility of being a TV show.

We do at least go into "Section 31" caring about Georgiou, whom we last saw near the end of "Discovery" Season 3, on the threshold of a time portal that will send her back to when the Prime and the Mirror Universes were still aligned in order to save her life.

Back in the Mirror Universe, described here as "a parallel universe with the most criminal population in recorded history," Georgiou had brutally ruled the Terran Empire. How this came to be is the subject of some backstory at the top of "Section 31," a gruesome and slightly ridiculous process, as if emperors were chosen at the end of a Galaxy's Got Evil competition (details not given), or if, after pulling the sword from the stone, Arthur had to chop off the head of the last guy to try before they let him be king. The backstory, which will drive the later plot, is meant to make her character tragic, but we came to know her during her time on the starship Discovery, living among nice people, which had softened her considerably. She was practically lovable by the time she entered that portal.

Perhaps you will be surprised, then, to find Georgiou sliding back into what looks like narcissism, running her version of Rick's Cafe Américain in the borderlands outside Federation Space back in the 23rd century, using the alias Madame du Franc (and speaking a little French). Introductory narration tells us that after her return from the 32nd century to 2257 she joined Section 31 for a time and then went missing. How this lines up with Georgiou having already been introduced as an agent of Section 31 in the second season of "Discovery," which is to say, the agency she's going back into the past to join, I'm not at all sure. Time travel will break your brain if you let it.

Into this gin joint, out of all the gin joints in the galaxy, walks the Section 31 Alpha Team, tasked with taking on missions it would be unseemly for the Federation to be seen doing. They are trying to obtain a new terrorist hypergizmo — nobody knows exactly what it is, but they know it's bad — that might be showing up on the black market there.

Team leader Alok (Omari Hardwick) is a 20th-century Earthman turned into an "augment" during the Eugenics Wars. Quasi (Sam Richardson) is a shapeshifting Chameloid. Zeph (Robert Kazinsky) is a man in a big mechanical exoskeleton. There are others as well, but you get the picture.

Alok persuades Georgiou to join them in their quest, offering her "a chance to get back in on the action on a galactic scale," rather than spending her life "tending bar." (She doesn't actually do that.) And on we go. "Section 31" packs in the tropes. You get martial arts battles; extraterrestrial nightclub scenes (they're still using Auto-Tune, sadly); a fight on moving vehicles; sparks and flames; the familiar technobabble, jury-rigged fixes and brilliant last-minute improvisations. Plus a flying garbage truck.

It's a bit of a tonal mishmash. For the most part, the comedy, which does come out of the characters, works better than the tragedy, which feels imposed upon them. The series might have been something of a romp, once it got going.

The film, for that is what we have, is diverting, if sometimes frustrating. Yeoh is, as ever, wonderful in whatever mode she's required to play. Richardson, not a million parsecs from the character he played in "The Afterparty," is always a welcome presence. But the cast, too busy to get to know one another, feels stranded on the verge of something that will never come — a second episode, which the denouement explicitly sets up, with others to follow in consecutive weeks, rather than however many years it would take a sequel feature to arrive, should one ever come.

"Star Trek: Section 31" is rated PG-13 for violence/bloody images, suggestive material and some language. Running time: 95 minutes. Now streaming on Paramount+.

Ferrell, Witherspoon collide in 'You're Cordially Invited'

BY JAKE COYLE
Associated Press

Are you with the bride or the groom? Hold on, scratch that. Are you with Reese Witherspoon or Will Ferrell?

"You're Cordially Invited," a new comedy directed by Nicholas Stoller, brings together two stars whose movie worlds are nearly as divided as wedding guests on separate sides of the aisle. Ferrell is most closely associated with broad comedies and Witherspoon the more romantic variety. And while both have expanded beyond their wheelhouses, they are each A-list refugees from movie genres — laugh-out-loud comedies, rom-coms — that have largely faded from theaters in recent years.

"You're Cordially Invited," which debuted Thursday on Prime Video, unites these two once-ubiquitous box-office forces in a streaming-only wedding comedy that cross-pollinates "Father of the Bride" with "Wedding Crashers." The combination works well enough, though it'd be fairer to deem "You're Cordially Invited" a funnier-than-average wedding movie than it would be a top-grade Ferrell comedy.

Here, Ferrell plays the overly doting father to Jenni (Geraldine Viswanathan). He's a widower whose happiness rests to an unsound degree on his daughter. Jim steams her clothes and styles her hair. He's not crashing the wedding; he's baking the cake.

When Jenni returns home with a ring on her finger and her now-fiancé (Stony Blyden) in tow, Jim experiences the happy news more like a nightmare. Still, he gathers himself together and books a destination wedding on the small Georgia island where he and his wife were married.

Meanwhile, we're introduced to Margot (Witherspoon), a high-powered reality TV executive in Los Angeles whose younger sister (Meredith Hagner) is getting married to her boyfriend (Jimmy Tatro). Her abiding issue is a disconnect with her Atlanta-era family and their disapproving mother (Celia Weston).

When, a year later, these two groups arrive on the island, Jim and Margot eye each other suspiciously right up until they each attempt to check in at the same time. Thanks to the untimely death of the inn's longtime owner, the place has been double-booked for the weekend — a particularly awkward situation given the island can only accommodate one wedding at a time. The supporting roles throughout "You're Cordially Invited" are well cast, including the inn's new manager (Jack McBrayer).

After some hesitation, Margot and Jim resolve to share the venue. This, of course, is the not particularly subtle concept of the film. The arrangement gradually devolves into an all-out war between Margot and Jim, while the two very different wedding parties — one a multicultural DJ-ing crew, the other longtime Southerners — mingle congenially.

The main deficiency of "You're Cordially Invited," also scripted by Stoller ("Neighbors," "Forgetting Sarah Marshall"), is that everything about it proceeds from its concept. The characters feel engineered to suit it, and everything in its plot is orchestrated to serve the rival wedding feud. Nothing in how things evolve will surprise you or feel particularly organic.

That said, there's a wide array of comic talent throughout Stoller's film that enlivens it. Ferrell, who has made unadjusted fathers a specialty since "Saturday Night Live," finds more ways to make Jim a compelling comic character than most anyone could. Having the chance to see him in a big studio comedy has gotten so foolishly infrequent that "You're Cordially Invited" is worth RSVP'ing to for that too-rare opportunity, in itself.

"You're Cordially Invited" is rated R for language throughout and some sexual references. Running time: 109 minutes. Now streaming on Prime Video.

PRIME VIDEO/AP

Reese Witherspoon, left, and Will Ferrell co-star as guests who have double-booked destination weddings in "You're Cordially Invited."

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS

Lessons in love from 'Dog Man'

Adapted from Pilkey's books, the film a cutely frenetic animated story about the fears, challenges of parenting

By Katie Walsh
Tribune News Service

Never fear, "Dog Man" is here — to save your families from the doldrums of January moviegoing. The popular children's books by Dav Pilkey (a spinoff of the "Captain Underpants" series) are adapted with a silly, self-referential charm by writer/director Peter Hastings, the result a cutely frenetic but somewhat narratively flimsy animated feature.

Hastings and team maintain the childlike illustration style of the books, with crayon lines and shading on the somewhat simply designed characters, and the colloquial, slangy writing (the law enforcement officers are "supa cops"; various important buildings are "ova there").

"Dog Man" feels like a bedtime story made up by a dad, then rendered in a sweetly kiddie aesthetic. The character's origin story is told in a quick introduction: Ohkay City police Officer Knight and his trusty dog Greg make a great team (Greg's the brains of the operation), but when they're injured in a terrible explosion, doctors have to attach Greg's head to Officer Knight's body, resulting in Dog Man, Supa Cop (Hastings). Dog Man's success chagrins his boss, Chief (Lil Rel Howery), and delights the local TV reporter Sarah Hatoff (Isla Fisher).

Dog Man's nemesis is an evil orange tabby named Petey (Pete Davidson) who loves nothing more than to dream up wilder and wilder robots to take down his rival. Dog Man, for his part, is continually throwing Petey in Cat Jail, from which he keeps escaping. But everything changes when Petey, fed up with his assistant Butler (Poppy Liu), clones himself and out pops an adorable orange kitten, Li'l Petey (Lucas Hopkins Calderon).

It's the entrance of Li'l Petey that grounds and focuses the affably chaotic "Dog Man," which often teeters on the edge of completely out of control. The film is so visually dense, so rapidly wordy, so referential to its own form, that details often fly by in a blur. But the emotional beats are solid, especially when it comes to the themes of found family and the fears and challenges of raising a little version of yourself.

"Dog Man" is a very obvious and emotionally naked tale about the fears of parenting, specifically from a young dad's perspective (the movie references to films like "Die Hard" and "Robocop" also underline the millennial/Generation X dad POV). Petey wails "what have I done with my life?" as Li'l Petey cries, and then wonders, "if I made you, why aren't you like me?" as he realizes that his mini-me isn't as interested in evil as he is. When he abandons his son, in a repeat of his own childhood trauma, Dog Man rescues the young kitten and teaches him how to be actively compassionate, which leads to Li'l Petey later imparting the wise nugget that, "love isn't just a feeling; it's also something you do."

UNIVERSAL PICTURES, DREAMWORKS ANIMATION/AP

Dog Man, right, voiced by Peter Hastings, rescues Li'l Petey, left, voiced by Lucas Hopkins Calderon, from his nemesis Petey and teaches him to be compassionate.

These touching themes underpin the otherwise goofy and juvenile story about a reanimated evil fish, Flippy, programmed by Petey to destroy all Do-Gooders, who somehow manages to turn all the buildings in Ohkay City into kaiju-style monsters. That storyline blurs into a messily amusing cacophony, only serving as a springboard for Petey's redemption.

Davidson lends his irascible appeal to Petey in an excellent vocal turn. The writing and performances of Petey and Li'l Petey's characters emerge as the bright spots of the film, their surprisingly satisfying character arcs eclipsing the wordless heroics of Dog Man.

Still, the whole film barely stretches to its 89-minute run time, and there's not enough to the conceit to pad out more of the story. However, the lessons of compassion and empathy are profound, and remind us that tales of good triumphing over evil are evergreen, even when it doesn't seem to be reflected in the world around us. Even though the movie is called "Dog Man," it's the wisdom about friendship and love from Li'l Petey that stand out from the din in this wacky, wonderful film.

"Dog Man" is rated PG for some action and rude humor. Running time: 89 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.

Bloody and witty 'Companion' about role of humanity in AI world

By Jocelyn Noveck
Associated Press

"Iris, wake up!" Early in "Companion," lovely Iris and her nerdy-nice boyfriend Josh are driving to a secluded lake house for a stay with friends. Iris wakes from a nap and lovingly tells Josh she was dreaming about him. They reminisce about how they first met at the supermarket. All those oranges tumbling onto the floor! Ha ha.

In 20 minutes, absolutely everything about this sweet scene will be turned on its head in a terrifying and sinister manner. You will be surprised and shocked. Unless you saw the trailer, which reveals the whole thing.

And so we begin with a dilemma, dear moviegoer. "Companion," an exceedingly clever and entertaining sci-fi-horror-thriller-comedy by Drew Hancock in his feature debut, has more twists and turns than a corkscrew. But it's utterly impossible to write about the film without revealing the first of those twists.

So if you like coming in totally cold to a movie, then we're sorry to see you go, but stop reading! Otherwise, stay with us — we promise there'll be more surprises to come.

Moving on: Iris (Sophie Thatcher) and Josh (Jack Quaid) arrive at the estate. A nervous Iris stops at the door, worried that Josh's friends won't like her. He urges her to simply brighten up and act happy.

Kat (Megan Suri), Josh's ex, greets them. She is gorgeous, and frosty to Iris. Eli (Harvey Guillén) and his handsome boyfriend Patrick (Lukas Gage) are nicer. Then there's Sergey (Rupert Friend), Kat's aloof Russian boyfriend — sugar daddy, really — and owner of the house. The password to his devices is Stalin's birthday, which tells you something.

WARNER BROS. PICTURES/AP

Josh (Jack Quaid), left, rents a custom sex robot, Iris (Sophie Thatcher), to be his "Companion" in the titular sci-fi-horror-thriller-comedy by Drew Hancock.

Things get dark, quickly. The next morning, someone dies. They will not be the first — this is a horror movie. And suddenly Iris, caked in blood, finds out what everyone else knows about her, but she did not: She's a robot. Well, a sex bot. A custom "companion" programmed by Josh to be as docile as he wants. He can even control the level of her intelligence.

Iris doesn't understand. "I feel things," she protests. Just the programming, Josh replies. Her tears? They come from a refillable reservoir in her body. But she has memories, she says — like when they met! Oh, that scenario was chosen from a drop-down menu, she's told.

But now that we're all on the same page, the action can really begin. For reasons we won't detail here, Iris ends up on the run. What are the odds of a sex bot escaping her preprogrammed limitations? Suffice it to say that whatever you expect to happen, does not.

The supporting cast is excellent — especially Gage, as a Patrick chock full of surprises — but the leads are especially well cast. Thatcher manages to be, while, like, not actually human, way more relatable than the actual humans. And she's able to convey subtle changes in programming, too — like becoming 60% more intelligent, a neat trick.

And Quaid, with his full-cheeked Quaid-ian good looks, is an ideal choice for a "nice guy" who grows more odious by the minute. One of his lower points comes when he explains to Iris how the world seems to be "rigged against people like me."

"I don't even own you," he rails — "you're a (expletive) rental! I deserve so much more than this."

Hancock is obviously exploring the fertile area of artificial intelligence — the movie is set in a "not-too-distant future" where bots are an acceptable relationship choice and cars drive themselves, but most everything else looks the same. Like it could be us, just a few years from now. Yikes.

The irony, though, is that it's not the cool futuristic flourishes but good old-fashioned human intelligence that makes the movie work. The humor and tone could have gone so wrong, but they didn't. Kudos to Hancock for making the film crackle along wittily, drawing in even those of us prone to shudder at movies with a fast-rising body count.

"Companion" is rated R for strong violence, sexual content and language throughout. Running time: 97 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.

WEEKEND: BOOKS

How Neko Case found her singular voice

Musician's memoir tells of tough childhood, wayward path to success

By Louis Bayard
Special to The Washington Post

In my alternative Super Bowl, the whole football part would be dispensed with right away and we would go straight to the halftime show, which would feature not some overexposed musical celebrity surrounded by dancers and drum majorettes and slightly less exposed demi-celebrities, but singer-songwriter Neko Case. In that vast, buzzing arena, she would stand there as she so often has: her legs planted like a sod farmer's, her auburn hair falling in ripened waves, her pale fingers strumming a treble guitar, her mouth reaching to a microphone pitched always just a little too high. In one of music's straightest-shooting voices, she would tell you about deep red bells and lonely moons and blackbirds frying on a wire and tornadoes that somehow love you.

In your mind, perhaps, you are already seeing the Super Bowl stadium emptying. But let's stay awhile, you and I, and spend the last half of the game reading Case's gorgeous memoir, "The Harder I Fight the More I Love You," which hits you in the same places her songs do: heart and gut, funny bone and sad bone. Turns out her high lonesome sound comes from a dark lonesome place, and going there on the page is the same tender pain as listening to her.

The real wonder is that she lived to tell the tale. Her parents were themselves children: 17 and 18 and "poor as empty acorns" when, in 1970, without meaning

to, they had a child they were in no position to raise. Dad was an odd, lonely, uncommunicative bong smoker. Mom was a drinker and grifter who, in the book's most bizarre turn, faked her own death to get out of being a mother.

The parents soon separated, and Neko's childhood, absent any siblings, became a grueling Pacific Northwest odyssey of poverty and solitude. To keep herself alive, she ate flour and pancake mix, raw rice and pasta. She went to school hoping nobody would notice her Kmart clothes and puffy perm. At 14, she was raped by a classmate's older brother. At 16, she was "a skinny, feral, lonely kid" with unbrushed hair and a rage that "flew off of me, in sparks."

Music was the road out. She remembers listening to the record player in her school library. "Have you ever seen a cat staring at a particular spot on the wall, absorbed by something you can't see? That was what I was like when the needle dropped on the record. My whole body would enter a state of suspended animation, a rapt sort of tension."

In high school, she ripped her jeans and pierced her nose and caught every punk rock act that came through town. Even when she enrolled in an art and design school in Vancouver, music remained "more important than eating and breathing." She scratched out an existence in unfinished basement apartments, warehouses and old theaters. She played drums in an all-female band and, under some duress, began to sing a little, though she didn't initially like the sound that came out: a "blunted point of a shape with no vibrato … neither pretty nor powerful."

She learned to harness it, though, and somehow a songwriting voice emerged, steeped in rock and country and gospel and the hard facts of her own life. After performing with a Canadian band called the New Pornographers (a career-shaping gig she gives surprisingly short shrift to here), she gathered the nerve to launch herself as a headliner. Years of touring and scrabbling scored her guest shots on Letterman and Leno and Conan, and three Grammy nominations, but Case is too honest to shape her journey as an arc of triumph. She recalls too well, and in often hilarious detail, the thousands of miles of highway, the many hours of lugging equipment up staircases, the staggering onstage to face audiences who have no clear idea of who you are.

"Nothing is guaranteed and there is no retirement plan or safety net or insurance unless you have a trust fund, and you never come off the road," she writes. "The next upcoming tour is always like some fetid, rotting rope bridge to an ancient temple. Somebody is gonna get hurt, but there may be glory and treasure."

AP

Singer-songwriter Neko Case reveals how her rough, destitute upbringing contributed to her trademark high, lonesome sound.

Throw in "the endless freight of being a woman" in a male-dominated business, and you might expect a quantum of bitterness. Only the whole while, Case's eye and ear have instead been busying themselves. She remembers "peach and watermelon sunsets you can taste" and "friendly lizards who sit with you for a cup of coffee." The "copper sparkly cinnamon sound" of Rickie Lee Jones' "Chuck E's in Love." A youth pastor who looked like "a boiled hot dog in a turtleneck." The "scaly little dinosaur feet" of a neighbor's turkey and the "bouquet of cold fists" of a Chicago winter and "moments so lonely they become like personal national parks." So when she declares, near book's end, that we live in a "staggeringly beautiful world," you believe her because you've seen the trail of sorrow that led her there.

Protagonist molds the man of her dreams in the novel 'Blob'

By Elizabeth Hand
The Washington Post

The meet-cute that opens "Blob," Maggie Su's offbeat debut novel, takes place outside a bar. The narrator, Vi, has been a regular for months, as she tries to get over a breakup with her longtime boyfriend. Tonight, her attention is drawn to a pair of beady eyes. As she looks closer, she realizes they don't come from a human but stare at her from a "beige gelatin splotch" next to a trash can.

Vi, who kept snakes, turtles and lizards as childhood pets, is intrigued rather than repulsed. "I'll come back," she promises the blob. At 5 a.m., massively hungover, Vi stumbles back to the alley. The blob has moved from where she first saw it. She touches it. It's not slimy but feels like a baby's skin. And it breathes. She gives the blob a name: Bob.

Vi takes Bob back to her grotty basement apartment, puts it in a bowl of water and passes out while watching TV and

eating junk food. When she wakes, "the blob is on my chest, eating Fruity Pebbles from my palm one by one." She goes to work, leaving it in her apartment with "Top Chef" reruns, only to find it (him?) watching World Wrestling Entertainment matches when she returns.

Su's ambitions extend beyond a Chiller Theater rom-com, despite her goofy setup and Vi's snarky running commentary. Vi, with her condescension and sometimes outright contempt for those who care about her, can be hard to like. It's to Su's credit that not just Vi's family and friends, but the reader as well, are continually enraged and amused by her prickly protagonist. Vi's efforts to mold Bob into an ideal companion may backfire, but they force her to confront her many failures — of compassion and empathy but mostly of nerve.

Vi, the child of a white Midwestern mother and a Taiwanese father, has spent her "entire life ... hovering above my otherness like a kid in a dunk tank." She is a depressive, contrarian and often obnoxious college dropout. Her failed college stint studying biochemistry didn't prepare her for Bob. So, she improvises. She orders Bob to grow an arm. He does, along with eyelids, limbs, facial features, a fully formed head. "At this rate, I could make a person by sunrise," Vi realizes. She prints out photos of her movie heartthrobs, all men, all white. Like Bob.

The "Grow a Hot White Guy" narrative arc has some hilarious moments. In one of the novel's funniest scenes, Vi takes the now fully developed, movie-star-handsome Bob to a family dinner, introducing him as her Danish boyfriend. No one notices that he answers questions by parroting facts he's learned from watching "Jeopardy!"

The comedy alternates with more serious moments from Vi's past — accounts of miserable family dinners with the well-meaning middle-class parents who tried in vain to protect a child who endured racial slurs at school.

Eventually, Bob leaves blobhood behind, developing not just human appearance but curiosity and desire. "For a while, he seemed happy enough to eat and breathe and exist — the perfect companion." As Bob yearns for more, even if he's not sure what that more is, Vi briefly grows creepily — even dangerously - possessive.

To say more would spoil the dark fun of this book. Suffice it to say that "Blob" isn't a horror novel, and Bob isn't the only one who evolves from a disagreeable lump into someone willing to accept who and what they are.

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Tranquil Tomar a break from Portugal's tumult

With a rich culture, friendly people, affordable prices and a salty setting on the edge of Europe, Portugal understandably makes a rewarding destination for travelers. Bustling Lisbon and the sunny Algarve coast are well known to tourists (for good reason), but quieter places also offer tantalizing tastes of Portuguese flavor.

About 90 miles northeast of Lisbon, just east of the pilgrimage site of Fátima, is lushly green Tomar — a quaint town of about 20,000 residents, set under a historic fortress. It's a place with lots of local ambiance, yet remarkably untouristed — and well worth a stop.

While there was a settlement here in Roman times, Tomar's importance started in the 12th century with the construction of a hill-topping castle, the Convento de Cristo. Gualdim Pais, a Grand Master of the Knights Templar religious order, put Tomar on the map by building the castle with Middle Eastern architectural techniques picked up during Crusades to the Holy Land.

To get the lay of the land, I strolled Tomar's riverside. The tiny Nabão River, running north-south through the middle of town, is all Tomar's — it starts nearby and flows just a few miles before emptying into the Tagus River outside of town. Mid-river, a peaceful island with a pleasant park and a rebuilt medieval waterwheel shows off what must have been impressive technology in its day. At the old bridge, Ponte Velha, I headed right through the old town to the main square, Praça da República. The town's easy-to-navigate grid is a reminder that Tomar was a garrison town built to defend the castle.

Rick Steves

Praça da República is a tempting spot to slow down and nurse a drink at a café, enjoying the relaxed tempo of local life.

The neighborhood offers plenty of inviting spots to grab a bite or a drink, such as the classic Café Paraíso, a time-warp eatery retaining the humble vibe of mid-century days.

Since Tomar is inland, pork and beef are staples on any menu here. All over town I noticed loaves of bread stacked into a very tall "crown," decorated with flowers. Women carry these on their heads in a festival every four years, incorporating pagan and harvest rituals into the Catholic celebration during the Festa dos Tabuleiros (Festival of the Trays) in late June or early July. Thanks to this tradition, expect fantastic bread with any meal here. Enjoy it with a glass of local Tejo wine, or try a Portuguese craft beer.

Towering above Tomar is its castle, with an Oz-like oratory built 800 years ago. This circular chapel is where knights would go to be blessed before battle as they defended Portugal against the Moors, protected pilgrims heading for the Holy Land or championed Portugal in the Age of Discovery.

Rick Steves

Tomar's Praça da República is a classic Portuguese square where you can relax at a café and enjoy the Old World scene.

The Convento de Cristo's interior gives a glimpse of the mystical wonder of the Knights Templar. The original castle and oratory were built when such impressive architecture was new in Europe. The oratory was designed so horses (important in the Templars' success on the battlefield) could be ridden in and blessed. Later, a big conventional church was added.

The oratory's wall was cut open to connect the church and the oratory with a grand, triumphal arch. The church's nave is decorated in the incredibly intricate Manueline style — motifs that pay tribute to the sea trade that made Portugal rich.

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.

Plan a getaway to the south to jump-start the spring season

Despite the noticeably longer hours of daylight, spring in Europe can still feel a million miles away. One of the welcome signs of the lighter and brighter season that's soon to come is blossoming beauty, so why not plan a getaway to a place where buds and flowers are about to make their first appearance?

Côte d'Azur, France

With their tiny yellow blossoms resembling pompoms and a heady scent, mimosa trees are a common sight along the roads of Provence. An Australian native, the tree was brought to the area in the late 18th century and found the Mediterranean climate to its liking. The Mimosa Route, a themed stretch of highway stretching nearly 80 miles, is at its best and brightest from January through March. The route begins in Bormes-les-Mimosas and passes through Rayol-Canadel, Sainte-Maxime and Saint-Raphaël before terminating in Mandelieu-La-Napoule, close to the largest mimosa forest in Europe. This town attracts guests from far and wide for its Fête du Mimosa, set to take place Feb. 12-16 in 2025. The festival is made up of carnival-like festivities, with highlights including a night parade of decorated floats that begins at 6:30 p.m. Feb. 15 and the Grand Corso parade and Battle of the Flowers at 2:30 p.m. Feb. 16. Online: tinyurl.com/yc682x8d

Karen Bradbury

Mimosa also figures into the celebrations of the seaside town of Villefranche-sur-Mer, where carnival festivities unfold in its picturesque harbor. The "Combat Naval Feuri," slated for Feb. 17, will see locals clad in traditional clothing board wooden fishing boats known as "pointus" to engage in a mock battle and toss flowers to the spectators back on shore. Folklore groups add color and music to the scene. Online: tinyurl.com/4zk94st5

The city of Nice, France, always does carnival in a big way, with festivities stretching across four weekends. On dates from Feb. 12 through March 2, tens of thousands of revelers will get caught up in the spirit of this year's theme, "King of the Oceans." Among the many program highlights are the so-called Flower Parades, in which costumed actresses ride upon lavishly decorated floats and toss flowers to the crowds. Ticket prices for these parades, slated for Feb. 19, 22 and 26, as well as March 1, begin at 7 euros for adults. Online: nicecarnaval.com/en

iStock

Flower Parades make a lovely introduction to the season in Nice, France. This year's parades begin Feb. 9.

Mallorca, Spain

The largest of the Balearic Islands is home to more than four million almond trees, which blossom in tender shades of pink and white from late January through late February. Some of island's largest groves are found in the central and eastern regions, particularly around the towns of Bunyola, Lloseta, Marratxí, Sant Llorenç, Santa Maria, Selva and Sencelles. While Mallorca's relatively mild climate makes hiking or cycling reasonable options for blossom-spotting, a favorite activity is to board a vintage train that departs from the capital city Palma and makes its way to Sóller. One-way tickets on the hourlong route cost 23 euros, while a return ticket goes for 30 euros. The train runs four times daily between 10:30 a.m. and 6 p.m. Online: trendesoller.com/eng/index

Agrigento, Italy

Agrigento, founded as a Greek colony in the sixth century BC, is home to a vast archaeological area, the Valley of the Temples. Each year in spring, the UNESCO-listed property, along with the city itself, serves as the site for the Sagre del Mandoro in Fiore, or Almond Blossom Festival. From March 8-16, the blooming of the area's almond trees makes a pretty backdrop to daily performances from folkloric groups from the area and beyond. Each year, the Italian Ministry of Culture nominates a city to be the country's Capital of Culture, and this year, Agrigento, a city near Sicily's southern coast, will wear the crown. Visitors can anticipate a full program of culture throughout the year. Online: tinyurl.com/3dh8nfxe

Seville, Spain

Seville in early spring is filled with the sweet scent of orange blossoms, which tend to peak in late February or early March and last for approximately three weeks. Part of the urban landscape for centuries, the trees are thought to have been brought over from Asia by sailors and cultivated by the Muslim population for use in perfumery. Despite their wonderful aroma, this type of orange tree produces a bitter orange that doesn't make for good eating on its own; however, it does make a great base for bitter orange marmalade. Walks through the Alcazar, Maria Luisa Park or the Cathedral, with its gorgeous Patio de los Naranjos, are treats of scent and sight. Online: tinyurl.com/3ksnxye3

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

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A guide to hurkle-durkling

Scotland's proud tradition of lazing in bed is trending in wellness tourism

By Andrea Sachs
The Washington Post

On vacation, you might suppress the urge to seize the day. Instead, you sink deeper into the sheets, disappearing under the duvet like the moon behind a cloud.

By all appearances, you are doing nothing. But, quite the opposite: You are hurkle-durkling.

Hurkle-durkling is not a cutesy term generated by artificial intelligence or the travel public relations machine. It's a 19th-century Scottish word that the Dictionaries of the Scots Language defines as "to lie in bed or lounge about when one should be up." The practice is experiencing a resurgence: a calming antidote to the frenzy of travel, a finger to the lips — shhh — to the clamor outside your hotel door.

"Some people think we need to fill every hour with activity," said Caroline McQuistin, a photographer and lifestyle expert based in Scotland. "But sometimes it's nice to lean into rest when you are far away from home."

In September 2023, Susie Dent, a celebrity lexicographer from England, chose "hurkle-durkling" as her "word of the day," admitting on TikTok that she's "a hurkle-durkler." The following January, McQuistin demonstrated the concept in an Instagram post that garnered more than 145,000 likes. In the clip, she burrows under the covers, reads a book, sips a hot beverage, knits and gazes out the window at a frosted Isle of Skye landscape — ideal hurkle-durkling conditions.

"I do be hurkling and I do be durkling," the video says, "and once I've hurkled my last durkle in a given morning, I will get up."

The custom even appears in Hilton's 2025 trends report, where the hospitality company noted a growing interest in hurkle-durkling, a more alert version of the sleepcation, among hotel guests. Both trends fall under the booming category of wellness tourism, a sector the Global Wellness Institute projects will exceed a trillion dollars this year.

Unlike other wellness experiences, such as sylvotherapy (you need to hike to the forest to bathe in it) or snowga (yoga in snow), hurkle-durkling takes no effort whatsoever.

"The concept is that you are staying in bed a little bit longer than you should have and not feeling any pressure to go anywhere or do anything," said Michael McCuish, the Scottish vice president of Away From the Ordinary, a travel agency that specializes in Scotland. "You're just enjoying the luxuriousness of going nowhere and staying comfy and cozy under the covers."

How to hurkle-durkle

To properly hurkle-durkle, you will need a cozy place to lie, such as a bed, fainting couch or chaise. It is typically a dry sport, so a soaking tub or steam room doesn't really qualify.

The optimal position is flat on your back, curled up like a fiddlehead or reclining against a heap of pillows. Standing up, with the exception of opening the door for room service, is frowned upon. Whatever you wore to bed, keep on wearing it.

McQuistin said hurkle-durkling is personal, shaped by your environment, amenities and style of relaxing. Her tool kit features a bed, pj's and a cup of coffee.

"As long as it's doing your body and soul good and not causing harm to anyone by neglecting what you need to do for them," she said, "then I'd say you're hurkle-durkling."

McCuish, who considers himself an expert, suggests pairing your hurkle-durkling with another old Scottish pastime, coorie. He describes it as "the act of snuggling and finding somewhere warm," such as cozying up by a fire with a good book and wee dram. To make it a true hurkle-durkle, replace the couch or overstuffed chair with a bed.

Hurkle-durkling typically occurs in the morning. Depending on your meal schedule, it can overlap with breakfast.

In Scotland, McCuish recommends staying at a hotel known for its Scottish breakfast, such as the Gleneagles in Auchterarder or the Balmoral in Edinburgh.

"It's traditional to get a little nip," McCuish said. "So whilst you're hurkle-durkling, you can have a little morning whisky with your porridge."

Sleeping isn't really part of the experience, nor is being overly productive. You want to be awake enough to appreciate the act of luxuriating but not so roused that you feel compelled to do your taxes or catch up on your Duolingo lessons. If reading requires too much brain power, the experts suggest gazing at the scenery.

"Looking out the window is an entertainment in its own right," McCuish said. "You can enjoy incredible landscapes or watch nature or the gentle pitter-patter of rain against the window."

The Deer Path Inn, an Anglophile property north of Chicago, provides a starter set for guests new to lounging in bed. One package includes a book curated by the Lake Forest Book Store, tea service and three literary-themed cocktails.

"It's like a guilty pleasure, isn't it? Staying in bed when your alarm goes off," said James Barnett, the inn's general manager. "The desire to do that is something we can all relate to."

Time to get up

At some point, hurkle-durkling starts to flirt with laziness. Though it's perfectly acceptable to ignore the clock, be aware of the signs signaling it's time to get up and dressed — for example, if you are no longer enjoying the experience, McQuistin said, "because you are berating yourself" for being slothful.

McCuish sets a deadline of afternoon, so you can catch a few sights during daylight hours. If you plan to hurkle-durkle the following morning, you can stay out late.

"It's different than being hungover," he said. "It's gifting yourself a long life."

DIY shoes: one of Spain's best souvenirs

Handmade shop in Valencia offers espadrille classes that include cava, snacks

By Andrea Sachs
The Washington Post

The cobblers' tools covered a wood table: long sewing needles, a fabric awl, scissors, spools of ribbon, a lighter and, naturally, a glass of sparkling wine.

At Handmade, a boutique shoe store bordering an old town plaza in the coastal Mediterranean city of Valencia, Spain, shoemaking workshops come with cava, plus a smorgasbord of Spanish snacks.

The goal of the activity on a recent winter afternoon was for participants to design their own pair of espadrilles. The traditional Spanish footwear originated in the fields of Catalonia, sheathed the feet of Republican soldiers battling fascists during the Spanish Civil War and rose to the upper echelons of society thanks to a Surrealist artist with a mandible-shaped mustache. Today they appear on fashion runways and beachy boardwalks.

Handmade's classes, which are offered at the company's nine locations, are part a flourishing sector of immersive experiences. Through the hands-on, feet-in approach, visitors gain a deeper understanding of the object's history and cultural bearing. Best of all, you take home the fruits of your labor, aided by cava and little cakes.

"Whether espadrilles, Roman sandals or Dutch clogs, each pair is a link to a place and a trip," said Ulrich Grimm, a Parsons School of Design lecturer and former executive at Calvin Klein.

Catalan fields to haute couture

Though the French might disagree, the shoes are Spanish-born.

Elizabeth Semmelhack, senior curator at the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto, said coiled-soled sandals from 6,200 years ago were unearthed from Cueva de los Murciélagos, in the Spanish province of Córdoba. They are the oldest evidence of espadrilles.

"In Spain, espadrilles are an ancient, authentic, folkloric item," said Luis Moreno, 39, who founded Handmade in 2010 and has expanded to Italy and the Caribbean. "My grandfather was working with the plant that we use to make espadrilles almost 80 years ago, and my parents made soles."

Throughout Spain, and the wider Mediterranean region, visitors can buy espadrilles in souvenir shops and clothing stores for roughly the same price as a pan of paella. In Valencia, the going rate is about $15 for a basic pair.

While I considered purchasing a pair off the shelves and moving on, I ultimately decided I wanted to spend a couple hours with the shoe, to honor it before wearing it.

The word "espadrille" springs from "espardenya," the Catalan name for the shoe, which in turn refers to "esparto," a pesky grass that thrives in hot, dry climates. Esparto is the item's defining feature: True espadrilles must have soles made of the organic material or a close relative like jute.

PHOTOS BY MICHAEL ROBINSON CHÁVEZ/For The Washington Post

Catalina Stadlin Agudelo prepares a display at Handmade Avarcas and Espadrilles in Valencia, Spain, on Dec. 12. The shoe boutique was founded in 2010 and has expanded to Italy and the Caribbean. It offers a shoemaking workshop daily.

A display at Handmade Avarcas in Valencia.

Long ago, farmers in Catalan discovered the fiber plant growing on their land. They tossed the weed in the river. More sprouted. At the dump site, they had a eureka moment: The water-soaked grass had mutated into a durable yet pliable substance they could use as a raw material, similar to twine or rope.

The top is made of leftover scraps of canvas. The shoe came in one size that didn't always fit all. The addition of ties or ribbons keep them from flying off.

The espadrille experienced a Cinderella-esque transformation when Salvador Dalí, the iconoclast Surrealist artist, started swanning around Spain in the humble shoe.

"He was high class, but he liked to hang out with poor people," said Sofia Del Valle, who works at Handmade's workshop in Valencia. "He started a trend in a small region of Catalonia."

According to fashion experts, the espadrille climbed even higher — in stature and status — when Yves Saint Laurent reimagined the shoe with a wedge in the 1970s and "further cemented the espadrille into the world of fashion," Semmelhack said.

Moreno also credits Coco Chanel, who befriended Dalí when he fled the Spanish Civil War for Paris, for the espadrille's haute makeover. "Those two turned it into a luxury item," he said.

Making your own shoes

In Valencia, the Handmade workshop is held daily inside a shop that feels like a shoe addict's closet. Espadrilles scale the walls, from floor to ceiling. The array of styles is vast: flat and wedge, bare and ornate, braided ribbons and hand-painted designs, a pinwheel of colors.

During my visit, Del Valle and Catalina Stadlin Agudelo, the tag-teaming instructors, wore tocados de flor, or flower headdresses, in their hair. Two months shy of Valencia's espadrille season, which typically runs from March through November, the pair bundled up in warmer footwear.

The class, which typically costs about $90, focuses on the traditional flats. I didn't have to worry about catching a wedge in Valencia's cobblestone lanes.

A place mat with a map illustrated the regional variations. Del Valle said the Catalan style, favored by Dalí, is the simplest design. The Pamplonica is more intricate, because the wearer needed sturdy getaway gear when trying to outrun the bulls. The alpargatas from Andalusia are the most difficult, requiring eight needles and the same number of hours to construct."This one is impossible to make" for novice shoemakers, Del Valle said.

She sent me into a stack of shoes to select a color. I flipped through beige, pink, black and navy blue before settling on seafoam green. Ribbons came next.

"There is meaning behind the colors of the ribbons," Moreno said. They may designate a region, a family, an occasion or an event. Yellow, for instance, represents Catalonia as well as the fight for independence. White is, no surprise, reserved for weddings. Black and white is classic, the "shoe of a peasant," he said.

After much deliberation, I chose ocean blue, inspired by the shifting shades of the Mediterranean Sea under a peekaboo sun. Del Valle instructed me to poke eight holes in the top of the shoe, which felt sacrilegious until the ribbon refused to exit. From then on, I was merciless, boring holes large enough to fit a cigarillo.

"Chicken, chicken, chicken," she exclaimed, as I flapped my arm like fowl to extricate the needle without impaling my chin.

After crisscrossing the ribbon until it covered the toe section, I threaded the silky material through four holes in each side. The ends trailed behind like kite strings.

A new appreciation for the pros

"It's cava time!" Del Valle announced, tinkling a bell. To accompany the wine, she set down a tray of goodies — salami, coca de llanda (a mini sponge cake), anise-flavored rosquilletas (breadsticks).

I wish I could say the second espadrille was easier to make, but it wasn't. I cross-stitched inside the shoe and knotted the ribbon several times. Del Valle mended my mistakes with aplomb. "We can hide that hole," she said, when I accidentally stabbed the ribbon.

More than two hours later, I tried them on, and she showed me how to lace them up. I glanced at my foot, which was less jet-setting socialite and more gladiator attending a barre class. I was proud of the creation and my tiny contribution to the espadrille's lore — definitely worth paying several times the price for the shoe alone.

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS

PHOTOS BY MATTHEW M. BURKE/Stars and Stripes

A key tells visitors to the Weissenstein Castle ruins in Waldershof, Germany, what towns and villages they are looking at from atop the renovated tower. The castle sits at an elevation of 2,814 feet.

A renovated tower at Weissenstein Castle in Waldershof, Germany.

On the QT

Address: Burgruine Weissenstein, Waldershof, Germany
Hours: Daylight hours year-round
Cost: Admission is free. Parking fees vary according to length of time and are paid through a smartphone app.
Information: Online: burgruine-weissenstein.de, notthafft.de/geschichte/weissenstein.htm

Matthew M. Burke

Hitting the heights

Hike easy-to-follow trails to see magnificent mountain views from ruins of Weissenstein Castle in Waldershof, Germany

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

Not every European castle is historically significant, but there is still intrigue to discover in them, as I did on a recent trek up to the Weissenstein Castle ruins in Steinwald Nature Park in Waldershof, Germany.

Approximately 45 minutes northeast of Grafenwoehr, the well-marked, well-maintained loop through the forest to the castle offered picturesque nature scenes, spectacular mountain views and a first-hand look at how medieval nobility once lived.

I decided to visit the place at the suggestion of a colleague. The large parking lot was covered in a sheet of ice but still full of cars when I arrived, with only a few hours before nightfall.

The trails were safe and easy to follow, even with a thin layer of snow. I used the AllTrails application to chart my route, which covered 2 miles in total. A left at the first fork offered the quickest path to Weissenstein.

The first leg of the journey was flat; then the path rose slowly through the pine trees. Along the way, I passed other hikers and saw families with children whizzing downhill on their sleds. That said, though, I spent much of my trek in solitude.

Hikers make their way through the snow to the Weissenstein Castle ruins in Steinwald Nature Park in Waldershof, Germany, on Jan. 11.

Suddenly, a view of the ruins opened up before me. The castle sits at an elevation of 2,814 feet and has two covered areas where visitors can rest. One of them is a kiosk, where I read the history using an app to translate the German.

Weissenstein Castle first appeared in German records in 1279, the park's tourism website said. It passed from the Weissensteiner family to the influential noble Notthafft family, which ruled a considerable territory from nearby Poppenreuth to Krummennaab in the south.

Tall granite towers were incorporated into the design of the castle, which never played an important role in history and was abandoned in 1560. Nevertheless, it has plenty of lore.

The ruins of Weissenstein Castle in Waldershof, Germany, seen here on Jan. 11, offer spectacular mountain views and a window into how medieval nobility once lived.

The site is said to be haunted by an unidentified female ghost who wails loudly each time a member of the Notthafft family dies. Considering that an online history of the family says the Weissenstein line died out in 1718, what the ghost still has to mourn about is anybody's guess.

There is also a treasure supposedly buried on the property, a magic ring brought back from a crusade.

I carefully climbed the steep steps into what once was an interior area with a tunnel and door. After a few more flights, I was in the tower. Then I was on a deck roof constructed on what had likely been a parapet or rooftop.

The view was magnificent. I could see for miles around, and a stone marker indicated what nearby towns I was looking at.

What Weissenstein Castle lacks in name recognition, it makes up for in other areas. And I have to say the mountain bike trails there looked to me like an invitation to return when warmer days arrive.

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WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING

NEO a new fave breakfast, brunch spot

Ramstein-Miesenbach Café Deli fills a void in the center of town

BY JENNIFER SVAN
Stars and Stripes

The acute lack of breakfast and coffee spots in the heart of Ramstein-Miesenbach, Germany, went a long way toward being remedied with the 2024 opening of NEO Café Deli, and already a table for breakfast or brunch there is hard to come by.

On Wednesdays, the first weekday the restaurant is open, the phone starts ringing for reservations for the rest of the week, said Nelly Cherdron, who realized a longtime dream when she started the café with her sister, Olga Di Fede, in July.

The menu is small but simple, with a mix of breakfast choices, sandwiches, coffee and other hot drinks, aperitif cocktails, beer and nonalcoholic beverages.

NEO also offers various daily specials and homemade cakes. I tried the Neo favorite, a hearty sandwich on a sesame bagel with avocado, cream cheese, feta cheese and tomatoes.

It came with a side salad made with homemade dressing and topped with pomegranate seeds. It tasted fresh and filled me up, so I didn't mind paying 14.90 euros for a sandwich.

On another outing, the matcha latte with a generous slice of German bee sting cake — a layer cake made with vanilla cream and a crunchy honey-almond topping — made a nice duo.

Luckily for procrastinators and late risers, NEO serves breakfast all day, along with its bagel sandwiches and paninis. Pancakes drizzled with pistachio cream and served with fresh fruit are among its most popular menu items, Cherdron said.

Pistachio is a menu theme at the café. Besides the pancakes, other staples include a pistachio cream-filled croissant and a latte known as pistachio bliss.

Avocado is also well-represented and can be found in the aforementioned Neo favorite and the avocado lover. The generous slices in that bagel sandwich mingle with avocado cream and smoked salmon.

More than six months since the launch of the restaurant, Cherdron and Di Fede said they are thrilled that their business idea has been so well-received by both Germans and Americans.

The sisters had long thought about running a café, but it always seemed to be more of a pipe dream, said Cherdron, who grew up in the local area.

That changed when a century-old house in the center of Ramstein village became vacant. The place used to be a post office and a vaping lounge.

Cherdron and Di Fede were initially hesitant because the house needed a lot of work to be functional as a business again.

But the owner agreed to help with renovations, bringing the dream into fruition. There is a play area for small children at the café. Upstairs, a one-family apartment the sisters own serves as a vacation rental or temporary lodging accommodation.

"We love it," Cherdron said while sitting at a café table with a view of the village's main street. "We see a lot of people use it."

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PHOTOS BY JENNIFER SVAN/Stars and Stripes

The sweet delights served in NEO Café Deli in Ramstein-Miesenbach, Germany, include a green tea matcha latte and a slice of German bee sting cake, or bienenstich in German.

NEO Café Deli's bagel sandwiches include the Neo favorite: cream cheese, avocado, tomato and feta cheese on a sesame seed bagel.

Sweet treats made with pistachio cream, including this croissant sprinkled with powdered sugar, are one of NEO's specialties.

Sisters Olga Di Fede, left, and Nelly Cherdron opened NEO Café Deli last summer in Ramstein-Miesenbach, Germany. It opened in the town's center in July after extensive renovations to an old house that used to be a post office, a vaping lounge and a fabric shop, among other businesses.

AFTER HOURS GERMANY

NEO Café Deli

Address: Landstuhler Strasse 4, Ramstein-Miesenbach, Germany
Hours: Wednesday to Friday, 9 a.m.-3 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday, 9 a.m.-2 p.m.
Prices: Breakfast ranges from 9.80 euros for a classic German breakfast with bread, sausage cold cuts, an egg, butter and jelly; to 14.20 euros for a larger meal that includes the classic items plus bacon, cheese, scrambled eggs and Black Forest ham. Paninis range from 5.90 to 6.20 euros. Pistachio pancakes are 11.50 euros. Bagel sandwiches range from 14.90 to 16.20 euros. Coffee and hot drinks start at 3 euros and go up to 5.50 euros. Aperitif cocktails start at 4.70 euros for prosecco miol; a mimosa is 5.20 euros; the Aperol spritz, Lillet wild berry and lavender spritz are 7 euros apiece.
Information: Phone: +49 6371-5975324; Instagram: neo_ramstein

Jennifer Svan

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS

Scenic mountain path suitable for all

Poetry, exercise equipment make Maansan Trail an interesting winter hike option in Pyeongtaek

BY ERIC MENDIOLA
Stars and Stripes

Service members and their families at Camp Humphreys and Osan Air Base can enjoy an easy, refreshing winter hike at the nearby Maansan Trail in Pyeongtaek, South Korea.

The trail is about 1½ miles out and back with an elevation gain of 295 feet. It took about 50 minutes to complete, which makes it perfect for a quick, refreshing hike.

At the trail's entrance, there are bathrooms and a cafe called Bee & Honey.

The hike starts on a staircase leading into the wooded trail. The rest is on a gradual slope with only a couple of areas that felt a little steeper.

As you make your way through the trail, small signs start dotting the path with poems written in Korean and English. Artwork has also been placed throughout the trail, from small figurines to larger, more intricate pieces.

There are also benches scattered throughout the trail and also some exercise equipment. This is great if you decide you want to hang around the area longer instead of just doing the hike straight through.

On the QT

Directions: About a 30-minute drive from Camp Humphreys and Osan Air Base. 17 Daean-ri, Hyeondeok-myeon, Pyeongtaek-si, Gyeonggi-do.
Times: Open 24/7, but no lighting for night hikes.
Costs: Admission is free.
Food: The Bee & Honey cafe near the trail's entrance offers an assortment of hot and cold beverages, waffles and honey.
Information: A small lot near the entrance offers free parking.

Eric Mendiola

Most of the trail is surrounded by trees but there are clearings that open onto a view of the expansive Anseongcheon River.

The trail is marked with signs that show the way and guide you back to the trailhead.

This hike is suitable for children old enough to walk but is not recommended for strollers, as the trail is unpaved. It is also a great beginner's hike.

Regardless of the season, the Maansan Trail is a great time and worth adding to your list of completed hikes.

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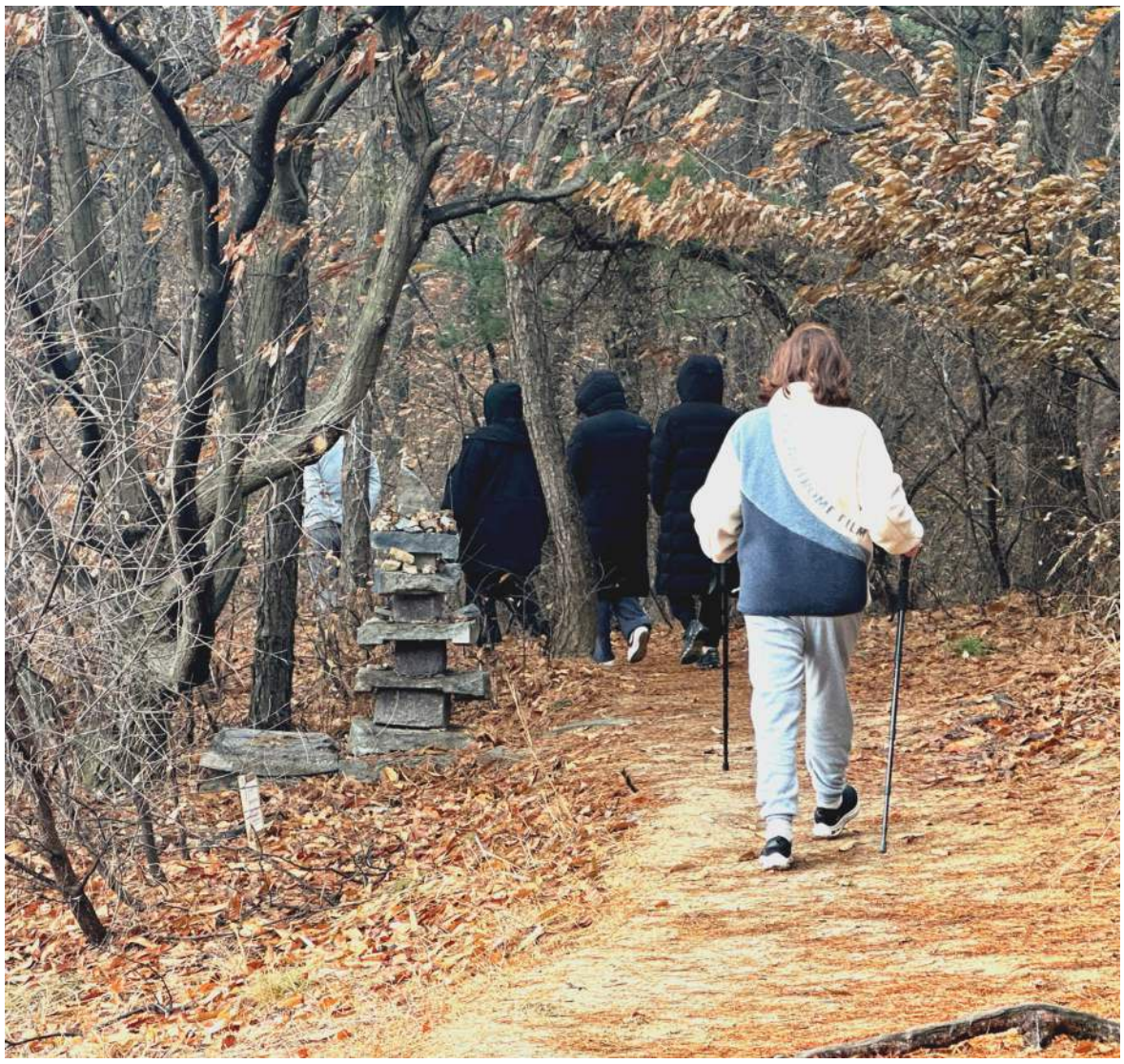
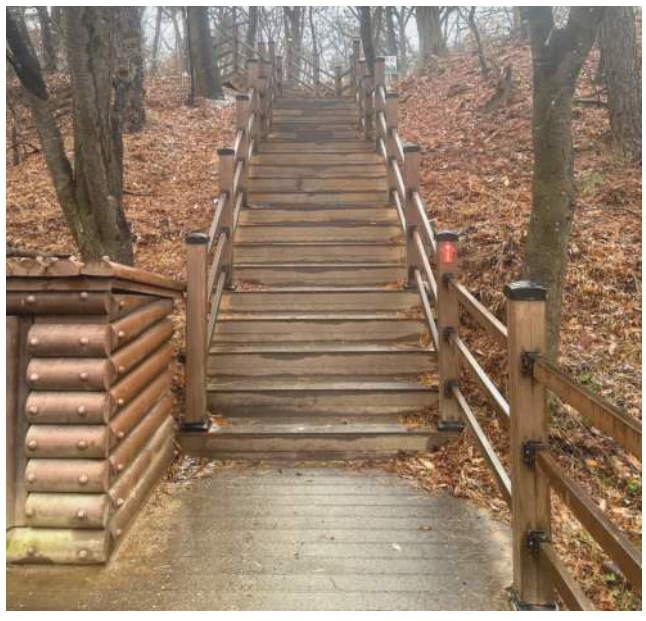


PHOTOS BY ERIC MENDIOLA/Stars and Stripes

Hikers make their way Jan. 6 along the Maansan Trail in Pyeongtaek, South Korea. It's mostly flat and only 1½ miles out and back, so it's suitable for all ages — as long as you don't have a stroller.

Small signs in Korean and English invite passersby to pause to contemplate poetry and artwork along the way.



A staircase beckons hikers onto the wooded trail. Most of the slope is gradual with only a couple of steepish areas.

Exercise equipment along the trail create a good excuse to stop and get some reps in to boost the workout.

WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING

Meal challenge its own reward

Finishing your meal doesn't make it free, but demolishing a hamburg steak tower is still satisfying at Tokyo's Teppan Kingdom

BY JEREMY STILLWAGNER
Stars and Stripes

You'll have plenty of dining options while out and about in Tokyo's Akihabara district, including its famous maid cafes, but Teppan Kingdom is a must for those craving steak.

The restaurant is surrounded by arcades and a short walk from Akihabara Station's Electric Town exit. It occupies two floors and is relatively small but can easily seat groups of four.

My friends and I waited only about two minutes before we were escorted to our third-floor table.

The menu greeted us with a wide selection of traditional steaks and hamburg. It even shows from which part of the cow each cut originates. Hamburg, popular in Japan, is basically seasoned hamburger meat formed into a patty and served with sauce.

AFTER HOURS JAPAN

Teppan Kingdom Akihabara

Location: 101-0021 Tokyo, Chiyoda City, Sotokanda, 1 Chome−10−9 2F - 3F Ty2 Bldg
Hours: Open daily, 10:30 a.m. to 11 p.m.; last order at 10:45 p.m.
Price: Meals range from 700 yen to 4,250 yen
Dress: Casual
Information: Online: gardengroup.co.jp/brand/teppan_oukoku

Jeremy Stillwagner

PHOTOS BY JEREMY STILLWAGNER/Stars and Stripes

The hamburg tower challenge at Teppan Kingdom Akihabara, a steak restaurant in Tokyo, includes up to four giant meat patties. Teppan Kingdom is a short walk from Akihabara Station's Electric Town exit.

My eyes were immediately drawn to the menu's challenge section. I decided to order the hamburg steak tower with four 5-ounce hamburg steaks, cheese, an egg, corn, green beans and potato salad. Each order comes with the option of an additional plate of rice. The tower costs about 2,000 yen, or about $13.

Unfortunately, you don't win anything for completing any of the challenge orders — they're just larger portions.

We waited about 10 minutes for our orders, which came simultaneously.

The hamburg steaks were juicy, and the egg and cheese complemented the taste of the meat extremely well. The meal overall was very filling, and I barely finished mine.

Overall, Teppan Kingdom is a great option for a break from the busy streets and packed arcades of Akihabara and a filling meal without breaking the bank.

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Cucumbers are trendy, but how healthy are they really?

BY MICHAEL MERSCHEL
American Heart Association News

Cucumbers have always been cool. Now, thanks to social media, they're also hot.

Viral cucumber recipes racked up millions of views in the past year, thrusting the salad bar staple into the spotlight. Which might leave you wondering: Healthwise, can cukes endure the glare? Or should they be deleted from your diet?

Unlike some online trends, this is one you can, for the most part, go ahead and sink your teeth into, said Dr. Matthew Landry, an assistant professor of population health and disease prevention at the University of California, Irvine.

"Anytime we can get folks to eat more fruits and vegetables — I love seeing that," Landry said. He calls cucumbers affordable, versatile and a relatively healthy replacement for chips or other snacks.

DREAMSTIME/TNS

Noshing on water-heavy foods, like cucumber, can help us stay hydrated.

Generally speaking, cucumbers have "a lot of things in the benefits column," he said, and few negatives. But among those negatives is the fact that "they're not super-nutritious."

A cucumber does carry a few nutrients. A predominant one is vitamin K, "which is important in our bodies for blood clotting," he said.

An 8-inch cucumber, with the peel, would have roughly 40% of an adult man's daily recommended amount of vitamin K, or 55% of an adult woman's daily needs, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. But that's from the entire cucumber. A more traditional half-cup serving would have about one-sixth the amount of a whole cuke.

Cucumbers also have a bit of vitamins C and A, Landry said. "But again, I would say that the amounts are pretty small, and that's even if you would eat an entire cucumber."

Several medical sources online emphasize cucumbers' potassium levels as helpful in controlling high blood pressure. But Landry said the levels of potassium are small: An entire cucumber would have only 13% of a man's daily needs or 17% of a woman's. Leafy greens such as kale or collard greens would be better sources of that mineral, he said.

Cucumbers have a bit of fiber — 1.5 grams if you eat a whole one — but their lack of bulk means they aren't great at making you feel full. The Food and Drug Administration recommends children ages 4 and older and adults get 28 g of fiber daily. But the nutritional appeal of cucumbers, Landry said, is as much about what they don't have as it is about what they do.

They are at least 95% water, he said. That can help with hydration, but it also means cucumbers are a low-calorie vegetable, with only 45 calories a cuke. "You could eat cups of them, and barely reach 100 calories or so."

Botanically speaking, cucumbers are fruits. But culinarily, they are classified as vegetables due to their nutrient profiles. And like many vegetables, they also have a low glycemic index, making them a good snacking choice for someone with Type 2 diabetes, Landry said.

WEEKEND: LIFESTYLE

How to cope with losing mementos

Experts and survivors of natural disasters explain how to process the loss of heirlooms, keep their memories alive

BY JULIA RUBIN
Associated Press

They're the possessions that tell your story: the photos of old friends and relatives. The ring your mom left you. The hand-knit Christmas stockings. Your grandfather's secretary desk and the letters inside.

When disasters strike, these artifacts of your own rich history might be the toughest belongings to lose.

"It still hits me now — a picture of my dad that my grandmother painted, which was hanging on the wall by the piano," says Martha Tecca, whose house in Lyme, N.H., burned to the ground 10 years ago. She and her husband had been on a hike, and lost everything but the clothes they were wearing. "The things that are sort of generational — those are the pieces you feel worst about at the time."

Of course, lost things are just things. Those who mourn them are conscious that others are suffering far worse from catastrophes, including the wildfires, hurricanes, floods and other natural disasters that have struck with greater intensity in recent years.

Still, these family heirlooms, mementos and handmade relics are irreplaceable. How do you cope with losing them — and perhaps recapture some of the lost memories?

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ANNIE NG/AP

Be patient in processing it all

"Grief is the natural response to loss, whatever that loss is," says Mary-Frances O'Connor, a psychology professor at the University of Arizona and author of "The Grieving Body: How the Stress of Loss Can Be an Opportunity for Healing." "Objects are often cues for our memory, our habits, for our culture, our social interaction."

And it takes time, she says, "to understand: What does it mean for our life that this thing is gone?"

There are so many immediate, practical tasks to attend to after a catastrophic event — finding a place to live, filing insurance claims — that it might take a while to really absorb the loss of mementos.

In Barbara Lambert's case, she gave herself permission to stop searching for everything that might have been lost, reluctant to stir up sadness over things she hadn't looked at in a long time, anyway. Lambert's Larchmont, N.Y., home was gutted by the remnants of Hurricane Ida in 2021.

She grabbed documents, jewelry and medications as the waters rose around her legs. But the flood destroyed relics like scrapbooks, old Playbills from Broadway shows, ticket stubs and her son's grade-school art.

"It's very overwhelming, devastating, but you realize what you really need to get through life," she says.

Look to community

Jenny Mackenzie's home in Peacham, Vt., was destroyed along with half her family's belongings in the floods created by the remnants of Hurricane Beryl in 2024. While she was able, over time, to find and restore items like her daughters' stuffed animals in the debris, the toughest loss was a handmade canoe she'd received as a college graduation present. She found it two weeks later in shards along the river.

Were it not for friends and neighbors, she "would have walked away" from the mud-filled house without trying to retrieve much. But dozens of people turned up to help. A neighbor came and dug up what was salvageable of her beloved garden beds, since replanted. Other neighbors spent days rescuing and restoring furniture. Picture "over 60 people shoveling mud and passing our possessions across the river," she recalls.

Natural disasters often affect entire communities, O'Connor notes, so "this is a shared loss."

"Our shared response builds meaning, and memorializes," she says.

Tecca said friends around the

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WEEKEND: LIFESTYLE

PHOTOS BY TECCA FAMILY/AP

The Tecca family and friends celebrate Easter in 2014 in the dining room of their house in Lyme, N.H., which burned down the following year. Friends held a "digging party" after the house fire to help the family find things in the ashes.

Mementos: Old memories can be recorded and new memories captured

FROM PAGE 26

country sent photos to help fill the gaps in her collection, unsolicited. One friend got Tecca and her husband new copies of their college diplomas.

"In terms of things, we ended up getting more than we lost," she said.

Jack Pitney and his wife were at Toys R Us with their toddler when a mudslide slammed into their Glendale, Calif., house in 2005. They came home to find his playroom buried, and with it, all his toys.

"The only one he had left was in his hand: It was the one we had just bought," Pitney says. "It was a big deal. For a 2-year-old, there is no such thing as an unimportant toy."

Friends and colleagues brought toys from their own homes, helping to distract his son from what had happened.

Remember, it's not the things that matter, but the stories

Personal items matter because of the histories behind them, but they're not the only way to tell those tales.

"The stuff is just a vehicle for the stories," says Matt Paxton, author of "Keep the Memories, Lose the Stuff." A decluttering expert, he often works with families who struggle to let go of sentimental belongings.

Even those who have just experienced a calamity should still document and hold on to the meaning of what's lost, he says:

"You're the most raw you've ever been right now. But now is the time to record the stories. You don't need the things for your legacy to live forward."

Write down the memories and tell them to your kids and friends. Document the heirlooms and their history on apps like Artifcts, he says. Digitize any photos and videos you still might have, and any going forward. Your kids' art? Scan it.

"The oldest story in the book is telling stories and passing them on — that's why it hurts so much when we lose them," he says.

Christmas stockings knitted by Martha Tecca's mother hang in 2014 by the original 1790s fireplace in their old Lyme house. "The things that are sort of generational — those are the pieces you feel worst about at the time," she says of losing heirlooms.

While experts recommend digitizing, they acknowledge that a tactile object can evoke a more emotional response.

"Humans are such visual beings, but it's not our only sense," says Jennifer Talarico, a psychology professor at Lafayette College. She cites the feel of a souvenir in your hand, the sound of a loved one's voice on voicemail, the taste of something that takes you back to childhood.

Many items have stories that no one else would understand. Paxton remembers one family that held on to their grandmother's remote, the one she loved to watch "Jeopardy!" with.

The new stuff will carry extra meaning too

Many survivors found, with time, that not everything from the experience was negative.

"It sounds weird maybe, but there was something in there that was a little bit freeing, free of having all that stuff. Of not knowing what to do with it," Lambert said.

Going to a new home and acquiring new things marks a transitional moment, Talarico says. It's OK to mourn, but have faith that you can refill photo albums with new memories.

A disaster, she says, "might be a marker of the before and after, but there is an after."

The gifts from friends carry tremendous emotional value themselves, says Tecca, who now lives in a different town. There are new stories, of the fire and of rebuilding.

"Every piece in our house at the moment is something someone gave us, or that we intentionally got," she says. "The things become precious, the things you now fill your house with."

Tips for holistic recovery

Soothe yourself, and be patient

Grief can be hard on the body, says Mary-Frances O'Connor, a psychology professor at the University of Arizona and author of "The Grieving Body: How the Stress of Loss Can Be an Opportunity for Healing."

Move. Get good sleep, but accept that you might have insomnia. Establish new routines to replace the old ones.

"Our body is reacting to not having habits, to uncertainty," O'Connor says. "Our body also takes time to absorb the blow."

Recovering from loss requires "understanding the impact that it's having," O'Connor says. Have patience, she says.

Document the memories, let the material things go

"You've got to write down the stories. Document the stories," says Matt Paxton, a decluttering expert and author of "Keep the Memories, Lose the Stuff."

Pass on what those lost treasures represented. Capture their meaning for yourself and future generations. The actual things themselves are, in the end, just things.

"The old adage that you can't take it with you is true," he says. "It's not the items, it's the stories they tell."

Preserve and document the keepsakes you still have

Use technology: Photograph your sentimental belongings, scan and digitize. Start with the top five most important things, say, and top 20 photographs that matter, Paxton suggests. Use apps that help catalog things and documents. (Paxton's company is cluttercleaner.com, and he recommends Fairsplit.com, Trustworthy.com and the Artifcts app, among others.)

Offline, label things so the next generation will know their sentimental value.

In many cases, friends and acquaintances will have photos and meaningful items to share.

Friends and acquaintances might want to pitch in on recovery or send things. Let them. Share stories and talk.

Disasters and trauma often affect whole families, communities, "even a whole state and country," O'Connor says. So it helps to remember "that our shared response builds meaning and memorializes, and it's often by turning to others that we find the strength to go on."

Look forward to a meaningful future

Disaster and recovery will create new precious memories, and new photo albums full of photos.

"Choose to keep living and creating new memories and recording old memories," Paxton says.

Besides mourning the past, O'Connor says, another aspect of healing "is restoring a meaningful life: Who am I now, in this new chapter of my life? How does it change my interactions?"

"Restoring a meaningful life is also stressful, but what we see in research is that being able to move back and forth between coping with loss and coping with restoration is a sign of mental health," she says. "Accepting that both are part of the process."

Julia Rubin

WEEKEND: MUSIC

LEAH HENNEL/For The Washington Post

Jula in her father's basement music room, which holds the almost 10,000 vinyl records she inherited. On her Instagram and TikTok pages, @soundwavesoffwax, she hosts a daily "listening party" to explore decades and genres of music that her late father, Richard, loved.

Her dad, the 10,000 records he left behind and a viral lesson in grief

BY JANAY KINGSBERRY
The Washington Post

A year ago, just days after my husband Michael had died, I gave away his shoes. The boots, running sneakers and Jordans he kept on the shelves at our back door were the first things I brushed against each time I came home — a cold greeting from the empty house waiting for me. His smartwatch, still resting on our dresser, brings a similar pang when I think about the data it might hold: the steps and heartbeats of a young man who hadn't yet succumbed to cancer.

In group counseling, we call these things "the stuff of grief" — remnants that strike at the core of our pain. Or, more hopefully, tether us to memory. For me, it's the opened bottles of spirits on Michael's bar cart, reminders of nights we entertained our friends; his houseplants, sprouting new shoots from the foundation he laid; the thousands of photos he took on vacation of dusky desert sunsets and crisp white beaches.

In grasping for a connection to him, I cling most desperately to those things — and search widely for the language, science and communities that might offer a salve. On social media, they often take the form of poems and personal

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Records: Video series has resonated with thousands of viewers

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perspectives, artwork and affirmations.

Then there is Jula (pronounced *you-lah)*. As the holidays neared last year, she appeared in my social media feed with a prompt and poised greeting: "Welcome to another day of listening to my late father's record collection." The video speeds up as Jula runs her fingers along vinyl records densely packed into wooden shelves in her bedroom before randomly plucking Blondie's 1978 "Parallel Lines." The record spins on a decorative turntable as Jula nods along from her bed and then offers a short and engaging take.

"Debbie Harry is seriously so cool — her vocals are mwah," Jula says, kissing her pinched fingers and tossing them from her lips. "She's so laid-back yet has so much feeling in her voice."

Since September, the 24-year-old Polish Canadian woman has held a daily "listening party" on her Instagram and TikTok pages, @soundwavesoffwax, to explore decades and genres of music that her father, Richard, loved — punk, disco, pop, jazz, techno, new wave and '60s psych rock. The project has exploded online, resonating with more than 460,000 followers combined so far — and she still has nearly 10,000 records to go.

"I hope to listen to them all," Jula told me on a blistering winter day from her home in Alberta. "This has been such a beautiful experience for me sonically and emotionally." Jula spoke to The Washington Post on the condition that only her first name be used out of concern for her safety. Her last name has not been publicized.

Review series such as Jula's are far from monolithic in 2025. Nor are vinyl records, which now outsell CDs. But Jula views her page as a grieving project above all — a welcome detour amid our doomscrolling, where music buffs, casual browsers and the bereaved connect over loss, memory and the role of music in emotional healing.

"The community has been everything that I wanted from this project," Jula said.

Scroll through her comment section, and you'll find followers sharing stories of the music and objects linking them to their loved ones. Musicians or their surviving family members thank Jula for excavating their work. Audiophiles offer their own analyses and insights about rare gems in her possession.

And they love Jula. Her casual, cool charm draw comparisons to 1980s MTV VJ Martha Quinn, while her quirks and Gen Z sensibilities disarm the most discerning music purists. Fans are quick to forgive her blunders (like the time she mispronounced David Byrne's last name as "Byrun"), chuckle at her endearing admissions (she first heard "Funkytown" watching "Shrek 2") and remain *mostly* patient as she learns how to care for her records. Just days into the series, Jula recalls, she ditched her aesthetically pleasing but audio-challenged Urban Outfitters record player for a professional Technics turntable after followers decried that she was "ruining" her records.

PHOTOS BY LEAH HENNEL/For The Washington Post

Jula records a video in her room, where she has been holding daily "listening parties" since September.

Lively and playful visuals animate Jula's videos: little figurines gingerly placed on the center of spinning records; regular cameos from her cat, Przemyslowa; her eclectic wardrobe and graphic T-shirts; and the props that tease her reflections to come.

A musician herself, Jula exudes a natural ease and language in her reviews, balancing thoughtful introspection with youthful enthusiasm. "A low-fi aesthetic with really nice sonic textures and syncopated rhythms," she said of a techno record from her own collection, which she occasionally plays as a parallel to the series. "I find the mood of this album to perfectly match the solstice — it's kind of darker, and there's some really interesting creativity happening within such a concise sound world."

Other reviews feel like a window into her journey of grief and discovery. "A heartful farewell with lots of gratitude. His voice sounded especially vulnerable in this one," Jula says in her video for "Pacific Ocean Blue" by Dennis Wilson.

"You could hear his voice straining, which added to the overall emotion. The pacing of the song really taking its time — a single wave crashing in the ocean."

Jula places one of her many figurines on a record she shares online.

A legacy of listening

As both a musician and literature teacher, Richard was always listening for poetry in music, Jula said of her father. He loved discovering his favorite artist's favorite artists, was particularly drawn to singer-songwriters and wrote music of his own. He wanted to be a DJ, she said, and would make CD mixtapes for his friends and often play his accordion at weddings and the local Polish hall. When Jula's parents had guests over for dinner, the evening always reached the same finale: Someone steering the conversation to music and Richard running downstairs to grab a record or two or three to play. From there, he would prattle on about the songs' craft, tracing the influence and history of their sound.

"He was always talking about music. My whole life it's always been the number one thing we connected [over] or even talked about," Jula said. "I'd be, like, 8 years old, and he would be reading me lyrics and [explaining] a double entendre. … When I got older, I started showing him music that I liked, and we just continued that for the rest of his life."

When Richard died a few years ago in his 50s, Jula knew that she wanted to have his records — a collection he had begun as a boy, earning money doing small jobs for neighbors. Most of them were packed in boxes or held by relatives and friends before Jula slowly brought them all home.

"After he passed, I did not do anything with the records — like, I didn't even enter that [music] room for a while," she said. "I was really lucky to have them in my mom's house, where they could just sit there so I didn't have to think about it right away."

But when Jula moved back into her childhood home in April, she chose to stay in Richard's music room — where shelves of records tower over her bed and cat tree.

Eventually, she started listening to the music again, choosing a different record to play each morning and realizing how much she missed having someone to talk to about it. That's when a friend suggested she make a social media page, certain it would connect with "a couple of people" interested in her commentary.

Instead, 14 million people would watch her first post. "What an incredible gift he left for you," one commenter wrote. "You get to follow in his sonic footsteps and will be able to have the same visceral experience he may have had when the needle hits the groove for each of those records."

Music and memory

Sometimes the music stirs a swirl of emotions, tears or tender moments for Jula: a tribute song to fathers. Or an album with a considerable amount of scratches. ("It's like a little footprint of him," she said.) Most often they are records tied to her strongest memories — her voice cracking as she spoke about her father's love for Paul Simon or falling silent as she paid tribute to the late Kris Kristofferson in September.

"That video was probably the most difficult video for me to film. That's why I didn't really talk much," Jula said. "I grew up listening to his music, and that was just really emotional for me."

For as much as she knows about her father's love for music and his dad-rock classics, Jula's listening journey still finds ways to surprise her. Every now and then, she finds a zany or eclectic record tucked into the shelves: an album full of corny jokes, a compilation of Coca-Cola jingles, a Jan and Dean Batman-inspired record with surf songs and sound effects that play out like an audio comic book. When she pulls out those records, she wonders whether she's discovering one of her dad's guilty pleasures and imagines how he might have listened to it quietly at night.

In a noisy era of streaming libraries, trendy headphones and smart shuffles, music listening and discovery have become solitary practices. But the music she can hold in her hand, Jula says, invites her to pause and fully engage with the experience. Whether she's crocheting or working on a puzzle, it's when she flips a record or hears the subtle interruptions caused by the scratches and physicality of the album that she's reminded to reconnect with the music — and with her father.

In that way, @soundwavesoffwax feels like an act of preservation, Jula said, of both her father's memory and sharing music as he always intended: for thousands to hear.

"In a way, I'm doing that for him and with him, which is, like, the most beautiful way for me to process this," she said. "His spirit is holding me in this time, and is just cheering and dancing with what I'm doing with what he has left."

WEEKEND: TELEVISION

Q&A

DISNEY/AP

James Marsden, left, plays the president of the United States and Sterling K. Brown, right, a Secret Service agent, in new Hulu series "Paradise."

Finding 'Paradise'

'This Is Us' star Sterling K. Brown discusses Hulu series, why he insisted upon being listed No. 2 on the call sheet

BY ALICIA RANCILIO
Associated Press

As an executive producer and star of the new Hulu series "Paradise," Sterling K. Brown put the hours of TV he watches to good use and cast actors he admires.

"I got a chance to hire people that I am a fan of," said Brown in a recent interview. "I remember meeting Julianne Nicholson at the Emmys the year that she won for 'Mare of Easttown.' I was so geeked out that I got a chance to be in the same room with her ... Now I get to be on a show with her."

Brown is known for his role as Randall in the series "This Is Us," which ended in 2022. He was nominated for an Oscar for his supporting role in "American Fiction." In "Paradise," Brown is a Secret Service agent to James Marsden's president of the United States. A shocking murder is revealed shortly into the first episode, which unspools a deeper mystery beyond just whodunit.

"When James became available, I was like, 'please.' I had just finished watching 'Jury Duty' and this dude is so funny." Brown said that "Paradise" is an opportunity for Marsden "to show something that a lot of people haven't had a chance to see him do."

Marsden says Brown is one of Hollywood's good guys: "He's one of the most graceful, generous, good human beings that I've been fortunate to meet in this business. He's so humble and cares so much about not only his work, but the people around him. He wants everybody to be great. When I think of people I need to be more like, it's this man."

"Paradise" has themes of climate change, privilege and the pecking order of who in society gets saved during an emergency. There's a relevance to the series that Brown says is coincidental because Dan Fogelman — creator and writer of "This Is Us" — conceived of "Paradise" 10 years ago. It makes sense to him, though, why it would provoke thought.

"There is obviously a very interesting coalescing of capitalism and politics across the world, especially within our country," he said. "Our show sort of looks directly at that in terms of who wields the real power and asks, should it be that way."

Disney, Hulu's parent company, has thrown its support behind the series. It dropped the premiere Jan. 26 on Hulu and Disney+. The second and third episodes streamed Tuesday on Hulu. Future episodes stream weekly.

In a Q&A, Brown talks about choosing "Paradise," podcasting and missing the audition process. Answers are shortened for clarity and brevity:

Associated Press: How is everyone in your world, including your "This Is Us" co-stars Mandy Moore and Milo Ventimiglia, who lost their homes in the LA fires?

Brown: Everybody is safe and everybody is healthy. Everybody who has been affected directly from Mandy and Milo to other friends are putting their lives together one day at a time. It's a really strange sort of phenomenon where I feel blessed and heartbroken at the same time for everybody that has lost so much, so I try to make myself a service in whatever way I can.

REBECCA CABAGE, INVISION/AP

Sterling K. Brown poses for a portrait on Jan. 22 in Los Angeles. The "This Is Us" actor stars in and helps executive-produce the new Hulu series "Paradise," now streaming.

What made you say yes to "Paradise"?

It was an opportunity to work with ("This Is Us" creator, showrunner) Dan (Fogelman) again. I read the pilot. I loved the pilot. I love that the character was very different than Randall or anything that I had done and that people had seen me do before. There was an invitation to be an executive producer on the show as well. It's also my first time being No. 1 on the call sheet, and I'm 48 years old. People wanted to put me No. 1 on the call sheet, and I was superstitious about it, and I was like, "You know what? Just make me No. 2," and they're like, "Are you serious?" I was like, "Yeah, totally cool. It's fine." I'd say "I think I've been successful at not being No. 1." It felt like this was the right time and the right fit.

Besides filming different projects, you've also launched two podcasts. One with your wife, Ryan Michelle Bathe, and a "This Is Us" rewatch podcast with Chris Sullivan and Moore. Why did you want to add those to your plate?

A lot of folks have come up to Ryan and I, like, "You guys need a show." Our dynamic is pretty special and fun and playful and crazy. It was like, "OK, if our friends are thoroughly entertained by us, then maybe a larger public will be entertained by us as well." And it proved to be so. We got nominated for an NAACP Image Award. Hopefully we'll get a chance to do more. Then, Chris (Sullivan) and I were having brunch, and he brought up the idea of doing a rewatch podcast. I was like, "Bro, I would be down." We asked Mandy to join us. For the three of us, it's really an excuse to get together and enjoy each other's company.

You're mostly offered roles now. Do you ever miss auditioning?

I do. When you book a job through an audition, you're like, "I know I deserve to be here." A perfect example was "The People v. O.J. Simpson (American Crime Story)." I was looking around (at John Travolta, Sarah Paulson, Courtney B. Vance, David Schwimmer and Cuba Gooding Jr.). I was like, "One of these things is not like the other. Like, all you people are famous. I'm just me." But I had auditioned for it and knew the role.

Now, it's like I have to make sure I prove to people that I deserve the offer that I got.

WEEKEND: TELEVISION

‘I feel like my best is yet to come’

Good says goodbye to ‘Harlem’ and hello to her future with Majors

BY GARY GERARD HAMILTON
Associated Press

Meagan Good is in a season of harvest, reaping rewards from the hard work she’s sowed throughout her three-decade career. For the “Harlem” star, gratitude is her mantra.

“As crazy as, not even just this last year, the last few years have been for me, this is the happiest I’ve been in a long time. And it’s pretty wonderful,” said Good this month with tears welling in her eyes, emotions heightened as she thought of her relationship with Jonathan Majors, her time on “Harlem” and the Los Angeles wildfires. “I’m just thankful for the journey and I’m thankful to be loved.”

Much of that love has been provided by embattled actor Majors, and the fluctuating journey includes their scrutinized relationship; leading Tyler Perry’s “Divorce in the Black” film; and starring in the third and final season of “Harlem,” which premiered Jan. 23 on Prime Video.

“It’s incredible that the people who have supported us and have watched the show have waited on us like ‘Game of Thrones,’” said Good, who plays Camille, a Columbia University professor of sex and love. “It’s really cool to be a part of something so amazing that people love.”

GARY GERARD HAMILTON/AP

Meagan Good poses for a portrait on Jan. 16 in New York. The third and final season of Good’s “Harlem” premiered Jan. 23 on Prime Video. Next, she is focusing on her future with fiance Jonathan Majors.

The resilience of ‘Harlem’

“Harlem” has been a survivor, emerging from the coronavirus pandemic and the Hollywood actors and writers strikes. The Tracy Oliver dramedy follows four women in their 30s (Good, Grace Byers, Jerrie Johnson and Shoniqua Shandai) living in Manhattan’s historic Black neighborhood as they navigate love, friendships and careers. While the series didn’t reach the acclaim of Issa Rae’s “Insecure,” it earned a staunch fan base.

“If you really think about shows about New York, it’s almost like purposefully excluding Black people ... so when we reflect on shows like ‘Friends’ or even ‘Sex and the City,’ I probably can count on one hand how many Black people I’ve seen in those shows. But in New York, it’s unavoidable because Black people have created the culture here, specifically in Harlem,” said Johnson, who plays Tye, a queer dating app designer for LGBTQ+ people of color.

“We loved our ‘Living Single,’ and that’s why we loved it because we love seeing these women meeting in this small little apartment to commune with each other ... that’s why we have such a cult following because there was a hole in the market that Tracy brilliantly filled.”

Good, 43, said the relationship she shares with her cast, crew and streaming platform is one she hadn’t experienced. “This definitely has been the best professional experience I’ve had in my entire career in terms of emotionally, mentally, professionally, spiritually.”

It’s an emphatic declaration by the former child star whose first major film appearance came in Ice Cube’s 1995 classic “Friday,” who shined in “Eve’s Bayou” and became a household name to kids on Nickelodeon’s “Cousin Skeeter” series.

Relationship questions

Many fans questioned her relationship with Majors, the rapidly rising star of “Creed III” and “Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania.” It began toward the end of 2023 following the 35-year-old’s arrest for allegations of escalating incidents of physical and verbal abuse toward ex-girlfriend Grace Jabbari.

But the “Think Like a Man” and “Shazam! Fury of the Gods” actor said her Christian faith and life lessons prepared her for the backlash.

“I think about being in my 20s and you see the Media Take Outs and it’s a hundred nice things and there’s like one or two bad things. And I would just internalize it and I would cry and it would hurt my feelings so much,” said Good, who also cited criticism from fellow Christians about her attire and film choices, false skin-bleaching allegations and the end of her near decade-long marriage with pastor and Hollywood executive DeVon Franklin as perseverance-builders. “I had been praying for maybe like five or six years, ‘Lord, please deliver me from what people think about me.’ ... But I will say the part of it that is still hard for me is to see them drag people I love.”

Majors was convicted of one misdemeanor assault charge and a harassment violation. He avoided jail time but was ordered to complete a yearlong counseling program. He also settled a civil suit with Jabbari, but the ordeal nearly extinguished his career.

Good, who was by Majors’ side at court dates and became engaged to him in November, is optimistic his career will regenerate. (Coincidentally, Good starred in 50 Cent’s “21 Questions” hit music video in which he proposes scenarios to a potential girlfriend to see if she’d stand by him, including incarceration.)

“The idea that people are like, ‘Well, she got paid,’” said Good, rolling her eyes at suggestions it’s a publicity stunt — “it could be hurtful, but I just don’t care anymore. And that’s a good feeling.”

What’s next for Good

Good, who aspires to star in an action film, has been open about her desire to have children and is focusing on her future with Majors, including launching a health and wellness brand together.

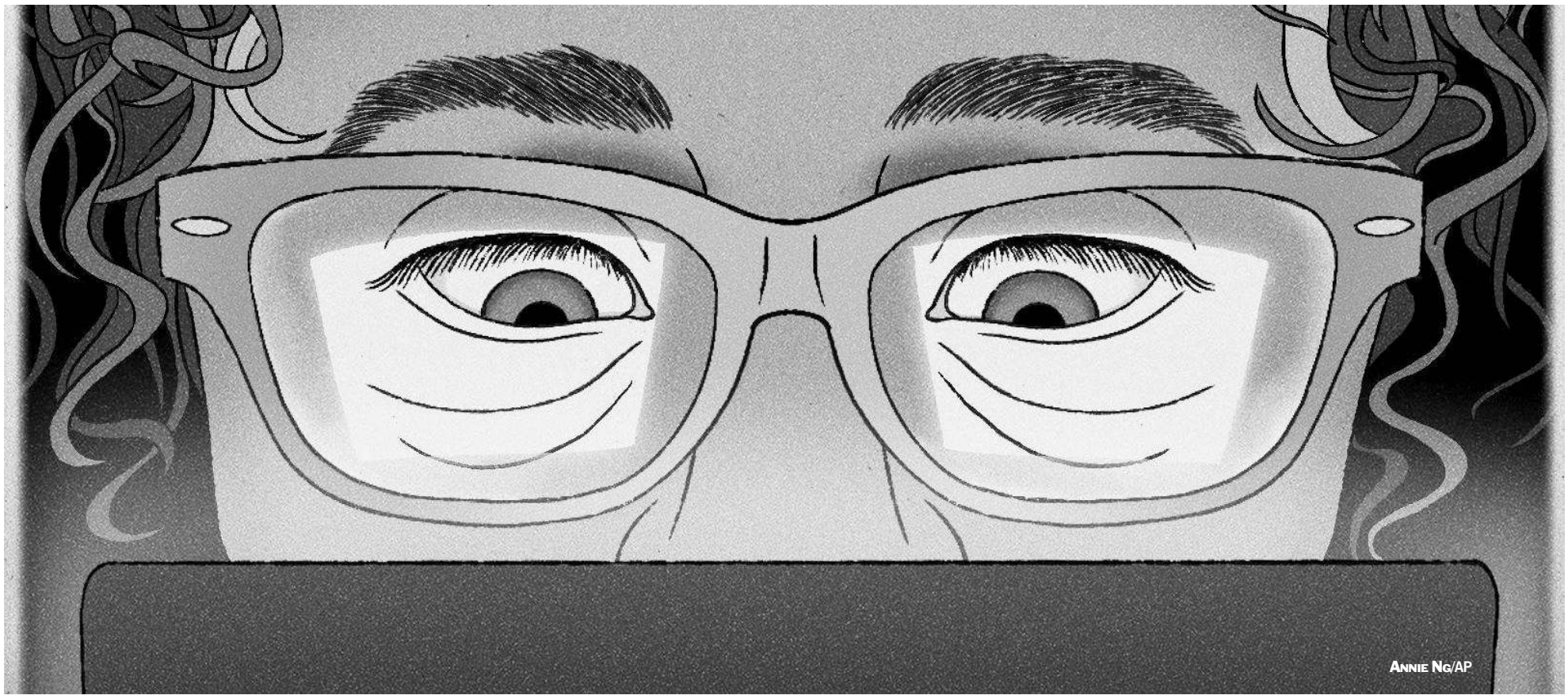
Admirers and industry colleagues believe Good deserves much more recognition.

“People have tried to pigeonhole her in a certain area that now she’s breaking free. I always tell her that this is her phoenix moment ... the ashes actually being a metaphor for people’s expectations of her,” Johnson said. “About 75% of my favorite movies that shaped my upbringing have Meagan Good in them ... I’ve learned so much about transitioning into womanhood and adulthood through the characters that she’s played.”

Good, however, stresses her focus is not on recognition or major awards but reaching the hearts of people. She circles back to gratitude for a career that has defied Hollywood odds.

“To have any appreciation is a gift,” Good said. “I feel like my best is yet to come. And I feel like even now, I’m kind of just getting started.”

WEEKEND: HEALTH & FITNESS



Taking a closer look at digital eye strain

Experts explain why prolonged staring at screens can affect your vision and offer some tips for reducing symptoms

BY CATHY BUSSEWITZ
Associated Press

The trouble started every day at around 3 p.m., after Cathy Higgins had spent five or six hours staring at an array of computer screens at her desk. Her university job overseeing research projects involved peering closely at numbers and details on contracts, applications and budgets.

"My vision was so blurry, I couldn't even see what was on the screen, and I was squinting so much that I could not function," Higgins said.

When her eyesight got bad, Higgins walked around and spoke with members of her staff. She began planning in-person meetings for afternoons. But she would resume the computer work late at night after her children went to bed.

"If I had to continue working through the blurry vision, that's when the migraines would happen," Higgins said.

Digital screens are pervasive, not only at work but in our homes, schools and shops. An estimated 104 million Americans of working age spend more than seven hours a day in front of screens, according to the American Optometric Association. All that screen time can take a toll.

Too much exposure to screens can lead to dry or watery eyes, fuzzy vision and headaches. It can also lead to myopia, or nearsightedness, in some people, especially children. Some technology workers even describe short bouts of vertigo when they look at screens for too long.

Overworked eyes

One reason for the discomfort is that staring closely at screens for prolonged periods causes the muscle that helps the eye focus to tighten up.

"That muscle's not supposed to stay tight all day long. And if it does, it's like picking up a light weight and trying to hold it over your head for hours," American Optometric Association President Steven Reed said. "It's not hard to pick it up. But after a while, even though it's not a heavy lift, your body just gets tired."

Fortunately, exposure to blue light from computer screens and devices has not been shown to cause permanent eye damage, according to the American Academy of Ophthalmology.

Nevertheless, symptoms can disrupt work, family time and rest. As an optometrist in Mississippi, Reed sees patients who complain of frequent eye pain, headaches and blurry vision associated with computer use. He advises getting an eye exam and taking frequent breaks.

For Higgins, trying to catch up on the work she couldn't do when her eyes were too fatigued on weekdays cut into time she spent with her daughters on weekends.

"They'd be playing together, and I couldn't be as engaged as I would have liked to have been in what they were doing," she said.

Here are some tips from eye health professionals to reduce eye strain caused by devices:

Follow the 20-20-20 rule

Take a break every 20 minutes from sitting at a computer. During the break, focus your eyes on something that's about 20 feet away for 20 seconds. Pausing close-up work and looking at something in the distance gives tired, tight muscles time to relax.

"Luckily, eye strain is temporary," said Raj Maturi, an ophthalmologist at Midwest Eye Institute in Indianapolis who serves as spokesperson for the American Academy of Ophthalmology. "The best way to avoid these symptoms is by taking breaks from our screens or near work activities and using lubricating eye drops, if needed."

People usually blink about 18 to 22 times per minute. But when looking at a screen, the rate drops to three to seven times per minute, according to the Cleveland Clinic. That's where eye drops come in.

It's good to move around and go outside, but when you don't have time for an outdoor walk, frequent 20-second breaks can help.

Change your desk setup

Some people find that using a larger computer monitor helps reduce eye fatigue. You can also increase the font size on your laptop, monitor or smartphone screen.

Higgins did all of the above after she started a new job as senior vice president at Stand Up to Cancer. Since she works remotely from home in Midlothian, Va., she got a 29-inch monitor and sits about three feet away from it, about a foot farther than in most office setups.

The changes helped. She still has occasional issues with blurriness, but not as frequently.

"When I have an extended day, like a 12-hour day, that's when I start to have vision issues again," she said.

Sitting an arm's length away from your screen and adjusting it so you're looking slightly downward also can help reduce eye strain, according to the American Academy of Ophthalmology.

Be wary of product claims

Some products, such as blue light glasses, are marketed with claims that they will reduce digital eye strain, improve sleep and prevent eye disease. But several studies have found the glasses are not very effective, according to the American Academy of Ophthalmology. It's really our behavior with digital devices that causes symptoms, not the small amount of blue light coming from screens, the group said.

Extracurricular optics

After stepping away from computers at work, many people find themselves reading or scrolling on smartphone screens. It's not just workers: Children are using laptops, tablets and smart screens throughout the day.

Too much screen time or focusing on nearby objects can accelerate the onset and progression of nearsightedness, especially in children, said Ayesha Malik, pediatric optometrist in the division of ophthalmology at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. Anyone streaming shows should do so on a television, instead of a tablet, to help relieve eye strain, she said.

Children should follow the 20-20-20-2 rule, which includes an extra "2" at the end to encourage playing outdoors for two hours a day, which helps with eye development, she said.

"The reality is that most children are engaging with screens throughout the day at school and home. It becomes difficult to track the total number of hours," Malik said. "Aim for not more than 20 minutes during any one session."

Sleeping soundly

The blue light that digital screens emit can increase alertness, so watching Netflix on an iPad or scrolling through social media feeds in bed may make it hard to get restful sleep.

To give your eyes and brain the rest they need, doctors recommend turning off screens one to two hours before going to sleep. You can also set devices to "dark mode" in the evening to reduce the impact of bright light. If you're used to streaming videos at night, try listening to an audiobook or podcast instead.

American Girl dolls making a comeback

Fans of all ages say their stories reflect historical reality then, now

BY GRETA KAUL
The Minnesota Star Tribune

Kirsten Larson moved to Minnesota in 1854 at age 9 when her family left Sweden. That year, she lost a friend to cholera, made friends with a Dakota girl, stole animal pelts from a dead fur trapper, struggled to learn English in school and let a raccoon into her family's house, causing it to burn down.

Kirsten is an American Girl doll. She also is an icon for many Minnesota girls who grew up with the American Girl line of dolls in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, along with its catalogs and books describing a year in the life of each fictional girl.

The dolls have seen a resurgence in popularity in recent years — they were the subject of a "Saturday Night Live" skit in 2023 — and have become popular collector's items and transitioned smoothly from historical fiction to the modern vernacular of memes.

But Kirsten and the other American Girl dolls represent far more than all that, said Mary Mahoney, a historian, an author and co-host of the podcast "Dolls of Our Lives," at a recent Minnesota History Center program in St. Paul.

"Things like this matter so much because people need to see themselves in the past to feel like they matter," Mahoney said after her talk, which was attended by dozens of people and more than a few dolls — mostly Kirstens.

Bridges to the past

American Girl debuted in 1986. Besides Kirsten, the early dolls included Molly, who grew up during World War II; Addy, whose family escaped slavery and rebuilt their lives in Philadelphia; Samantha, a Victorian-era orphan; and Felicity, a Revolutionary War-era girl.

The American Girl company has since added more dolls, including 2024's doll of the year: Lila, a gymnast from St. Paul, Minn.

Mahoney and her friend Allison Horrocks discovered a mutual love of American Girl in a history Ph.D program at the University of Connecticut. Both identify as Mollys.

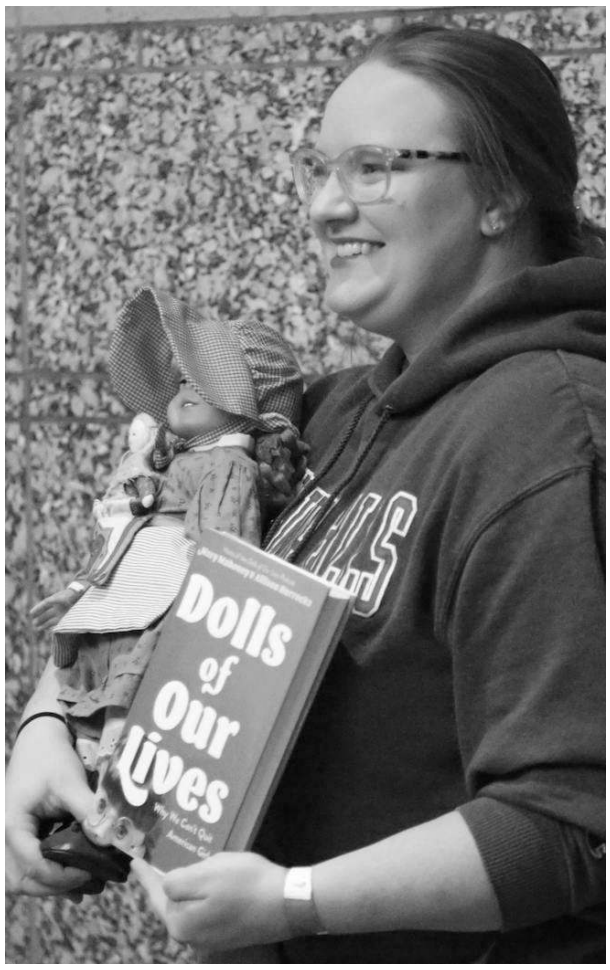
"We were asked in the program what made you want to be historians, and all these people listed these monographs that were so serious, and I said Molly," said Mahoney, who added that Molly served as a bridge between her and her grandmother.

"I would show her pictures from the Molly books, and she was very nonchalant, and she'd say 'Yeah, I had that. We had a Victory garden.'"

Mahoney and Horrocks started the podcast, rereading the books and discussing them in a loving but critical, and often comedic, way through a modern historical lens. In 2023, the two released a book with the same name as the podcast, "Dolls of Our Lives."

As with all history, Mahoney said, the American Girl books reflect not just the time they were set but also when they were written. Take Kirsten's books: "They're stories about the 1850s in Minnesota and also stories about the 1980s in the U.S.," Mahoney said.

Like many depictions of frontier life at the time — think "Dances with Wolves" and the "Little House" TV show — the Kirsten books focus on a family of white settlers. While they include Indigenous characters, they don't consider the implications of white settlement from the view of the people already living there.



GRETA KAUL/TNS

Aurora Fenzl brought a Kirsten doll to a recent program about American Girl dolls at the Minnesota History Center in St. Paul, Minn.

The characters in the books aren't "thinking about settler colonialism or things that we might think of if we were rewriting these books today," Mahoney said. At the same time, the books also suggest how people thought about immigration in the 1980s, when they were written.

Just as history is complicated, the books and readers' relationships with them are, too. Mahoney said she and Horrocks have heard from women who came to the United States as children from all over the world and resonated with Kirsten's story.

Revisiting childhood

Mahoney said there could be lots of reasons why adults who grew up with the American Girl stories — which focus on strong girls and the importance of family, friends and feelings — are coming back to them.

"I think we're seeing the rise of nostalgia for childhood interest for millennials and Gen Z, and I think there has to be something with that," she said. "Maybe a return to childhood, either for fun or out of the stresses of modern life."

After the program, attendee Aurora Fenzl said American Girl books helped her get into reading. Growing up in Mound, Minn., she said she appreciates that American Girl exposed her to stories about people who didn't look like most of the people in her community.

Following her grandfather's death, Fenzl remembered watching the movie based on the Felicity doll's story, which involves the character's grandpa dying.

"To go through that and have that support and that visualization of, it's OK to be sad — it really helped in that moment," she said.

Hannah Peterson, who grew up in St. Paul, said American Girl books helped her learn that girls in the past had lived through hard times. She said that framework still helps her understand difficult things today.

"They've gotten through things, this might just be our version," she said.

Peterson, who is pregnant, said she hopes to introduce American Girl to her daughter. "I hope she likes them," she said.

THE MEAT AND POTATOES OF LIFE

Lisa Smith Molinari

In defense of being a bit more like Raggedy Ann

I'd invite Raggedy Ann over for coffee if I could. She would get me. I think we'd be pals.

It all started in childhood, as most things do. I did the usual things little girls did back in the 1970s. I rode my yellow Schwinn down the street with the wind in my hair and the ace of hearts in my spokes. I dressed our cat in doll clothes until she hissed and scratched. I watched "Fat Albert" and "Hong Kong Phooey" cartoons. I played Barbies with the girl who lived on the corner. You know, the normal stuff.

But I also did other things. Things I've never heard other people reminisce about. Sometimes I'd lay face down in the grass and find a nice long blade to stick up my nose to make me sneeze. I'd chop earthworms into small segments on the tree stump in front of our house, believing the pieces would regenerate into multiple worms. I'd find my mom's old 45 records and play them over and over again, memorizing strange lyrics like "I bought myself an idol with a golden head" and "Bodiddle-diddy-bop I got a job."

Sounds like a serial killer in the making, but really, I was just quirky.

As an adult, my eccentricities continued to surface. I wanted to keep up with current trends, but somehow they eluded me, and I gravitated toward my own unique preferences.

There's nothing in my house from Pottery Barn or Williams Sonoma. Don't get me wrong, their stuff is fabulous, but they don't stock the interesting things I've found at church rummage sales, on eBay or washed up on the beach.

It never bothered me, until we'd have people over to our house, and then my differences seemed glaring. Our guests sometimes made comments that I chose to interpret as compliments, such as, "What an interesting wine glass," "Well, isn't this cozy," or "My grandmother had one just like that." I'd tell them all about the dumpster or the garage sale, and sometimes they'd furrow their brows.

As a military spouse, I attended many socials and events with my Navy husband, which required me to show up appropriately dressed and engage in conversation with people I didn't know very well. It was hard enough to find an acceptable outfit to wear from my trend-blind collection of old and new-to-me clothes from my eclectic closet. Then, I had to engage in the torture of mingling and chit chatting. In an effort to transform vapid small talk into something deeper and more interesting, I might pop prying questions like, "So, how's your relationship with your mother?"

One military spouse I knew during our tour in Norfolk, Va., described me as being "intense." This was certainly a criticism, but considering that I prefer substantive friendships, I was flattered.

Over the years, I've learned that most mothers and wives don't have strong opinions about "The Godfather" movies, own 30 vintage ceramic Christmas trees or read high school Physics textbooks for fun. Most don't secretly wish to be a lounge singer, or elaborately sort M&Ms before eating them.

No one understands why I'm like this, and frankly neither do I. I've sometimes wished that I could be more like everyone else. Being in tune with what is popular makes it easier to fit in. A new military spouse on base will likely be successful making friends if she invites her neighbor to check out a trendy new bistro. But if she excitedly suggests, "Hey, you wanna go dumpster diving, then binge watch documentaries?" she'll probably just get awkward silence in return.

Regardless, we are who we are. People can't change what makes them happy. Every person is unique in some way, some more than others. When I forget to appreciate my distinctively authentic personality, I think of Raggedy Ann.

She'd like my house. We'd put on my old aprons, spread crunchy peanut butter on saltines, sing along to Ethel Merman and watch Hitchcock movies. Maybe we'd give Holly Hobbie a ring and make it a real party.

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

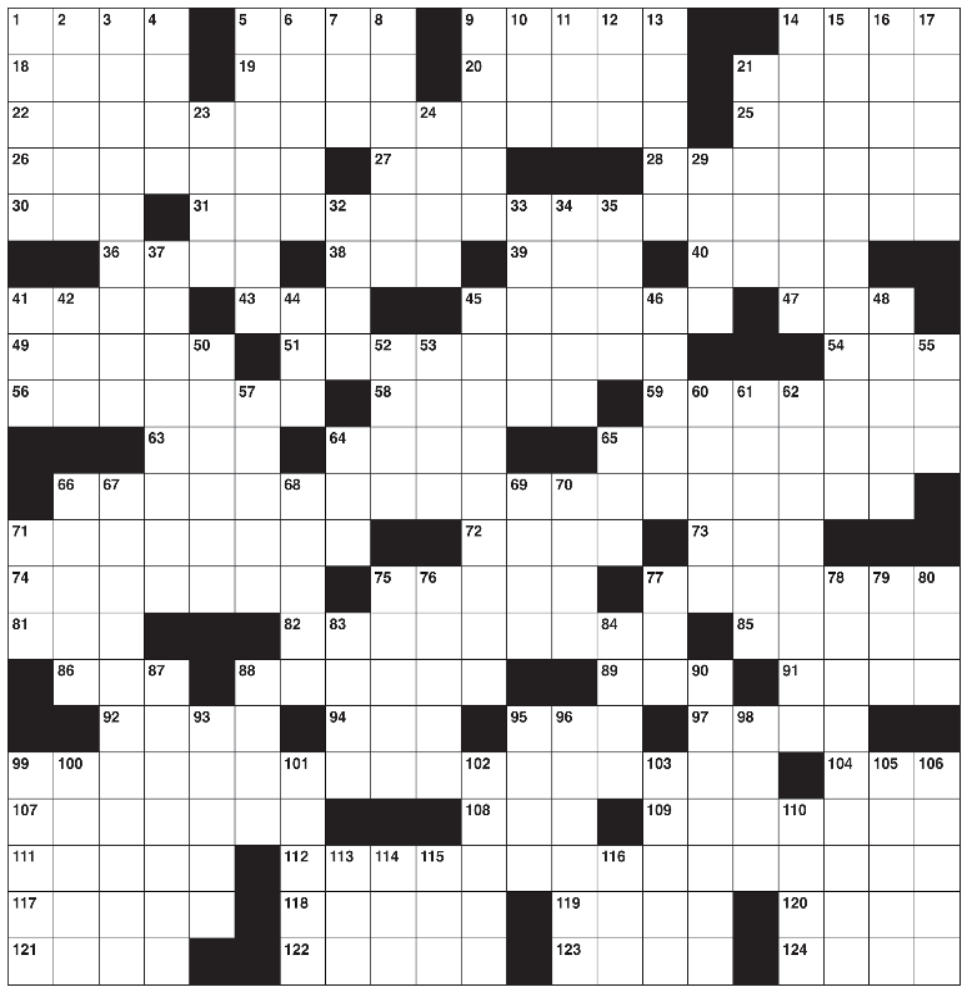
WEEKEND: CROSSWORD AND COMICS

NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

WORD PROBLEMS

BY EMILY SHARP AND KUNAL NABAR / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

Emily Sharp, of San Jose, Calif., is an ecologist who does habitat restoration and environmental education. Her partner, Kunal Nabar, is a software engineer in Brooklyn. They met when they lived next-door to each other during their freshman year at Vanderbilt. Together they brainstormed this puzzle's theme answers during a road trip through Oregon last summer. — W.S.



ACROSS

1 Department store department
5 Tater
9 Indian state along the Himalayas
14 Largest organ in the human body
18 ''None for me''
19 Big name in syrup
20 Dessert you might top with gummy bears and chocolate chips, informally
21 Practical
22 Hard / work
25 Place for a bob and weave
26 Measured
27 Sky safety org.
28 Starting point, of sorts
30 Key above a tilde
31 New York × paper
36 James who wrote the screenplay for ''The Night of the Hunter'' (1955)
38 Language suffix
39 One answering to a board, for short
40 ''Strega ____'' (classic children's folk tale)
41 ''That's just . . . wrong''
43 Arjuna's skill, in the ''Mahabharata''
45 Come to rest, as sediment
47 Creature whose narrow waist is called a petiole
49 Encyclopedia filler
51 √ generate
54 Food that becomes its own container if you change the last letter
56 Brush wolves, by another name
58 Fixes a hole, say
59 Post-spring cleaning event
63 Essential ____
64 Heap
65 Nashville neighborhood known for its many recording studios
66 It's what – you think
71 Theatrical release, typically
72 Many humanitarian grps.
73 ____ Khan
74 Turkish travel stops
75 ''Gimme an A …!'' e.g.
77 Like the presidency of Martin Van Buren
81 Back, informally
82 (Pixar movie)^2
85 Puts on the line
86 Egg ____
88 Pickleball venues
89 Certain sib
91 Dove calls
92 Something tied with a tongue?
94 ''____ got it!''
95 Studio with an iconic lion
97 Pressure, so to speak
99 ∫ workout routine
104 Name that drops ''-jah''
107 Burrowing rodent
108 That, in Spanish
109 Like some parking and poetry
111 Come up
112 Rocket science + brain surgery
117 Social work spaces for some remote workers
118 Boondi ____ (yogurt dish with fried chickpea flour)
119 Strove
120 Subj. for a bio major
121 Winter haven for some small mammals
122 Word with peace or beauty
123 Gridiron positions
124 Throws out

DOWN

1 Small fly
2 Leaders in Qatar
3 Bad sign for a weary traveler
4 Fishtail, say
5 Aspen, for one
6 Hugo-winning sci-fi author Bacigalupi
7 Coffee container
8 Ding-dong
9 Note in the F minor scale
10 Spanish title: Abbr.
11 Break down
12 Actress Edebiri of ''The Bear''
13 Transmogrify
14 Staying power
15 It has been called ''the roof of Africa''
16 Words of defeat
17 Spanish babies
21 Be of ____ (assist)
23 Building manager, familiarly
24 Confront
29 Philosopher Descartes
32 Females 35-44, e.g.
33 English translation of the Irish ''aigéan''
34 Post-embryo stage
35 Onesie wearers
37 Cross the line
41 Mixed martial arts org.
42 Iconic Warhol subject
44 Letters before ''.gov''
45 Advance film copies sent to critics
46 Relent
48 Nature's fishhook, you might say
50 Tamp down
52 Sleipnir's rider, in myth
53 Soft rock
55 Pokémon with a catlike appearance
57 Put in power
60 Like about 60 percent of the world's population
61 One of the ''holy trinity'' ingredients in Indian cuisine
62 Real pain in the butt?
64 Sitter's charge
65 Personal approaches, in brief
66 Coins made primarily of copper
67 ''When I was much younger . . .''
68 ____-Japanese War
69 S-shaped molding in architecture
70 Cross, as a stream
71 Evergreen variety
75 Bend
76 Gave zero stars, say
77 Nail polish brand
78 What few people know
79 Old-time film studio
80 Things eds. edit
83 Bail
84 ''Semper Fi'' grp.
87 Ticked (off)
88 Michael of ''Barbie''
90 Some equipment in hand-to-hand combat
93 Meanspirited sorts
95 This and that: Abbr.
96 Record feature
98 Suffix with kitchen
99 Big Apple purchases
100 ''Visions'' singer/songwriter Jones
101 Company whose logo is said to resemble Mount Fuji
102 Evergreen variety
103 Cried foul, perhaps?
105 Subtly indicate
106 Pastoral poems
110 Suit
113 Fashion designer Dapper ____
114 Loud noise
115 Season of 2024's Jeux Olympiques
116 ''Pachinko'' author ____ Jin Lee

GUNSTON STREET

"Gunston Street" is drawn by Basil Zaviski. Email him at gunstonstreet@yahoo.com, and online at gunstonstreet.com.

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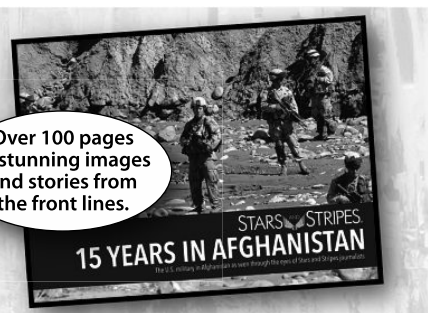

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FACES

SUNDANCE INSTITUTE/AP

Incarcerated activists used contraband cellphones to feed "The Alabama Solution" documentary filmmakers footage of the reality of life inside: forced labor, drugs, violence, intimidation, retaliation and the undisclosed truths behind many prisoner deaths.

Exposing prison problems

'Alabama Solution' documentary shows horrifying truths about system 'cloaked in secrecy'

BY LINDSEY BAHR
Associated Press

Incarcerated men in the Alabama prison system risked their safety to feed shocking footage of their horrifying living conditions to a pair of documentary filmmakers. The result is "The Alabama Solution," which premiered this week at the Sundance Film Festival in Park City.

Filmmakers Andrew Jarecki and Charlotte Kaufman became interested in Alabama prisons in 2019. Jarecki, the filmmaker behind "The Jinx" and "Capturing the Friedmans," and Kaufman first gained access to the restricted grounds through a visit with a chaplain during a revival meeting held in the prison yards. There, men pulled them aside and whispered shocking stories about the reality of life inside: forced labor, drugs, violence, intimidation, retaliation and the undisclosed truths behind many prisoner deaths.

The Associated Press has written extensively about the problems in the state's prison system, including high rates of violence, low staffing, a plummeting parole rate and the use of pandemic funds to build a new supersized prison.

This process eventually led them to incarcerated activists Melvin Ray and Robert Earl Council (also known as "Kinetik Justice") who had for years been trying to expose the horrifying conditions and deep-seated corruption across the system. They helped feed dispatches to the filmmakers with contraband cellphones.

"We're deeply concerned for their safety, and we have been since the first time we met them," Kaufman said. "They've been doing this work for decades and as you see in the film, they've been retaliated against in very extreme ways. But there are lawyers who are ready to do wellness checks and visit them and respond to any sort of retaliation that may come."

CHARLES SYKES, INVISION/AP

Producer Alelur "Alex" Duran and directors Charlotte Kaufman and Andrew Jarecki pose for a portrait to promote the documentary during the Sundance Film Festival on Jan. 27 in Park City, Utah.

On Tuesday at the first showing of the film, she had Council on the phone listening in. They put the microphone up to the cellphone so that Council could speak.

"We thank you all for listening, for being interested," Council said. "On behalf of the brothers of Alabama, I thank you all."

Several family members of their incarcerated subjects were also in the audience, including Sandy Ray, the mother of Steven Davis, who died in 2019 at William E. Donaldson Correctional Facility, his face beaten beyond recognition. Prison officials said Davis was killed in self-defense because he didn't put down his weapons. The prisoners tell a vastly different story.

Alelur "Alex" Duran, who spent 12 years in prison in New York, also helped produce the film. Jarecki said they wouldn't have taken on the subject without the expertise of someone who had been incarcerated.

"What you're seeing in this film is going on all over the nation," Duran said.

Also embedded in the story is Alabama's long history of contracting prisoners to do work at private companies from Burger King to Best Western, an issue that the AP investigated for more than two years. The cheap, reliable labor force has generated more than $250 million for the state since 2000 — money garnished from prisoners' paychecks, the AP wrote in December. Parole numbers have also plummeted in recent years.

"We want to show viewers the truth about a system that has been cloaked in secrecy," Jarecki said. "We hope the film sparks an effort to allow access for journalists and others so the public can have transparency into how incarcerated citizens are treated and how our tax dollars are being spent. We hope to inspire Alabama's leadership to acknowledge the crisis and to overhaul its prison system and its use of forced labor."

The film will have a theatrical release before it debuts on HBO sometime this year, but the specific dates and details are still being worked out. And while it is in its early days, the impact, Jarecki said, has already been seen, including in a class action labor lawsuit.

Additional Grammy performers announced

The San Diego Union-Tribune

Stevie Wonder, Herbie Hancock, John Legend, Sheryl Crow, Coldplay singer Chris Martin and Lainey Wilson are among the artists that have been added to the performance lineup for Sunday's Grammy Awards telecast.

Other new additions announced Wednesday morning include 2025 Oscar nominee Cynthia Erivo, Brad Paisley, St. Vincent, Janelle Monáe, Brittany Howard and Jacob Collier.

The telecast from Crypto.com Arena in Los Angeles will include a tribute to Quincy Jones, the legendary musical polymath who won 28 Grammys between the 1960s and the last decade. He was a key mentor to Wonder, Hancock and Collier, among many others.

Hancock

Jones will be saluted separately from the show's "In Memoriam" segment, which will pay tribute to other notable musicians who died within the past year. There will also be a tribute to Los Angeles in the wake of the recent devastating wildfires. It is unclear which of the newly added performers will be featured during the Jones tribute, the "In Memoriam" section and the tribute to Los Angeles.

Wilson

In other Grammy news, Beyoncé — who has a field-leading 11 nominations this year — and Taylor Swift have both been confirmed to attend the telecast, where both will be vying for album of the year honors.

The winners in more than 80 of the 94 categories will be announced Sunday during the annual Grammy Premiere Ceremony, which will be livestreamed at 12:30 p.m. PT on grammy.com and the Grammy YouTube channel. The main event will begin airing at 5 p.m. on CBS and will stream on Paramount+. The show will be hosted by Trevor Noah.

On Wednesday, the Recording Academy — under whose auspices the Grammys are presented — announced the lineup of performers and presenters for the Premiere Ceremony.

Performers will include Renée Fleming, Yolanda Adams, Joe Bonamassa, Angelique Kidjo, Wayne Brady, Joyce DiDonato, Béla Fleck, Taj Mahal, Deborah Cox, Scott Hoying, Muni Long, Kelli O'Hara and Kevin Puts.

Presenters will include sitar great Anoushka Shankar, whose two nominations this year are the 10th and 11th of her career. She'll be joined by fellow presenters Rhiannon Giddens, Jimmy Jam, Queen Sheba, Brady, Hoying and famed recording engineer Bob Clearmountain, whose home and recording studio were both destroyed during this month's Pacific Palisades wildfire.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Independently developed jet breaks sound barrier

CA MOJAVE — A sleek white aircraft became the first independently developed jet to break the sound barrier Tuesday, tearing through the air tens of thousands of feet above the Mojave Desert and a crowd of delighted onlookers.

The XB-1 aircraft accelerated to Mach 1.05 within about 11 minutes of taking off, according to Boom Supersonic and live video of the test flight.

The flight at the Mojave Air & Space Port in Mojave, Calif., took place as the company works to revive supersonic passenger travel, which died with the grounding of the Anglo-French Concorde more than two decades ago.

Boom plans to focus next on the Overture airliner, which it says will carry as many as 80 passengers while moving at about twice the speed of today's subsonic airliners.

The aircraft, which flew for the first time in March, is made almost completely from lightweight carbon fiber. It uses an augmented reality vision system to help with landing, since its long nose and high-angle approach can make it difficult for pilots to see.

CHARLIE RIEDEL/AP

In unison for their Jayhawks

Kansas fans cheer during a NCAA men's basketball game against University of Central Florida, on Tuesday, in Lawrence, Kan. Kansas won.

Man sentenced in sexual assault at youth center

NH CONCORD — A former leader at a New Hampshire youth detention center who was convicted of holding down a teen while he was raped in 1998 was sentenced Monday to 20 to 40 years in prison.

Bradley Asbury, now 70, was found guilty in November on two counts of being an accomplice to aggravated sexual assault.

Asbury had pleaded not guilty.

"With due respect to the court, I'm maintaining my innocence of these charges and do intend to appeal the convictions," he said in the Manchester court before sentencing.

Asbury served as a house leader at the Sununu Youth Services Center in Manchester. He was accused of restraining 14-year-old Michael Gilpatrick on a staircase with help from a colleague, while a third staffer raped the teen and a fourth forced him to perform a sex act.

Key senator won't seek reelection, opening seat

MI LANSING — Michigan Sen. Gary Peters, who led the Democrats' Senate campaign efforts the past two election cycles, has announced he will not seek a third term in 2026, creating a highly contested battleground seat expected to be coveted by both major political parties.

The 66-year-old's unexpected decision Tuesday to step aside after just two terms comes as a surprise and poses a challenge for Democrats in Michigan during a turbulent period, likely dividing their strong bench between the gubernatorial and Senate races in 2026.

Having lost Michigan in the presidential race, Peters' decision forces Democrats to defend a critical Senate seat in Michigan without the advantage of an incumbent, complicating their efforts to regain control of the chamber, where Republicans hold a 53-47 majority. Expected to be among the names most circulated for the position is Pete Buttigieg, the former U.S. transportation secretary, who moved to Michigan in recent years.

Liberal justice is asked to step aside in union case

WI MADISON — The Republican-controlled Wisconsin Legislature on Tuesday asked that a liberal state Supreme Court justice step aside in a pending case that seeks to overturn a 2011 law that effectively ended collective bargaining for most state workers.

If Justice Janet Protasiewicz agrees not to hear the case, the court would be deadlocked 3-3 between liberals and conservatives. The lawsuit has massive implications for union rights in the battleground state.

A Dane County Circuit judge last month overturned the bulk of the law, saying it violates equal protection guarantees in the Wisconsin Constitution by dividing public employees into "general" and "public safety" employees.

The judge put the ruling on hold pending the appeal. The Wisconsin Supreme Court, controlled 4-3 by liberals, has not yet decided whether to take the case.

Protasiewicz is the court's newest member and ran in 2023 as an opponent of the union law, known as Act 10.

Protasiewicz said during the campaign that she believes Act 10 is unconstitutional. She also told the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel that she would consider recusing herself from any case challenging the law.

New Coca-Cola Orange Cream banks on nostalgia

GA ATLANTA — A year after the launch of the short-lived Coca-Cola Spiced, Coke is adding another new flavor to its lineup.

Coca-Cola Orange Cream is scheduled to go on sale Feb. 10 in the U.S. and Canada. It will be sold in regular and zero sugar varieties.

Atlanta-based Coca-Cola Co. said Monday that it developed the soda, which mixes cola with orange and vanilla flavors, in response to growing consumer demand for the comforting, nostalgic flavor.

Orange cream — first introduced with the Creamsicle ice cream bar in 1937 — has enjoyed a recent renaissance. Olipop, a probiotic soda, introduced an orange cream flavor in 2021. Carvel reintroduced its Orange Dreamy Creamy ice cream last year for the first time since 1972. Wendy's also debuted an Orange Dreamsicle Frosty last spring.

Coke said Coca-Cola Orange Cream won't be a permanent flavor but would remain on sale at least through the first quarter of 2026.

McMaster now state's longest serving governor

SC COLUMBIA — Wednesday was a big day for South Carolina Gov. Henry McMaster. Yes, he gave his eighth State of the State address. And he became the Palmetto State's longest serving governor at 2,927 days, thanks in large part to his evolving political instincts over 40 years in politics and a boost from President Donald Trump.

It's another bit of history for the 77-year-old Republican who also is the oldest governor in South Carolina's 249 years as a state.

South Carolina originally had two-year terms for governor, and they could not seek reelection. That was later extended to four-year terms and not until 1980 did the state allow a governor to serve two consecutive terms.

Since then, three governors have made it all eight years, and thanks to the quirk of the calendar and inauguration dates Democrat Dick Riley served eight years plus four days from 1979 to 1987.

McMaster should blow well past the Riley record because he took over for Gov. Nikki Haley in 2017 when Trump appointed her U.N. ambassador during his first term. McMaster finished the last two years of that term and has been reelected twice. His final term runs out in January 2027.

A DNC in crisis is set to elect its new chairman

NY NEW YORK — The Democratic National Committee will elect a new chair on Saturday as the party seeks new leadership to guide Democrats through Donald Trump's second presidency.

Eight candidates have lined up to replace outgoing Chair Jaime Harrison. The contest will be decided at the DNC's winter meeting in suburban Washington.

This is not a flashy election, although big questions loom about money, strategy and diversity.

The leading candidates, Minnesota's Ken Martin and Wisconsin's Ben Wikler, are low-profile state party chairs with few obvious differences in how they would lead. Neither candidate is promising radical change.

The debate has largely focused on the nuts and bolts of political campaigns: messaging, media strategy, fundraising and on-the-ground organizing. On those issues, the candidates largely agree that changes are needed to improve the party's brand — especially among working-class voters.

From The Associated Press

EXCHANGE

WHERE HEROES SHOP

All honorably discharged Veterans and Department of Defense civilians with CAC can shop tax free at ShopMyExchange.com. In addition, the Department of Defense expanded in-store military exchange and commissary shopping privileges as well as MWR resale facility use to all Veterans with service-connected disabilities.

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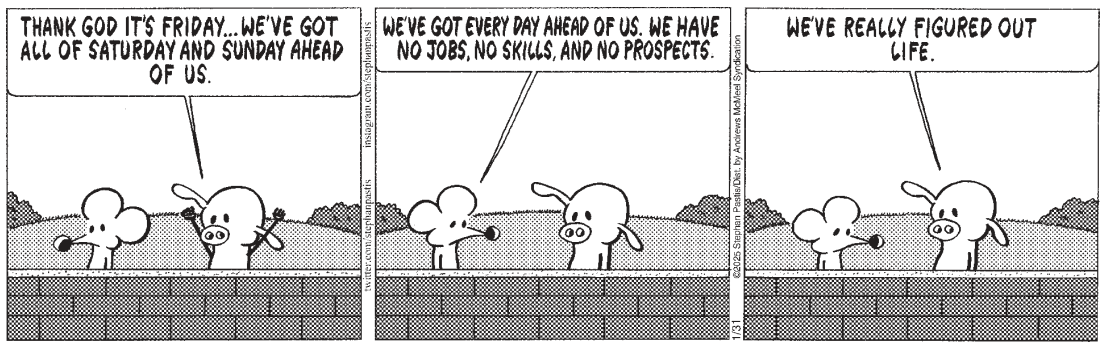
Bizarro

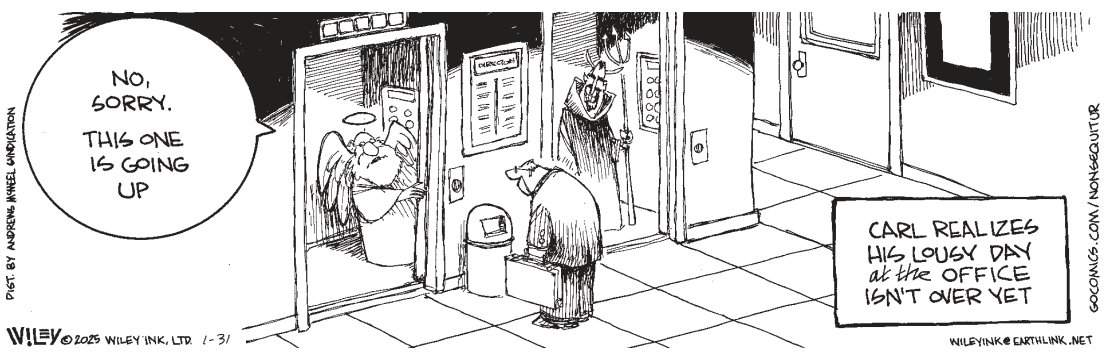
Loose Parts

Frazz

Pearls Before Swine



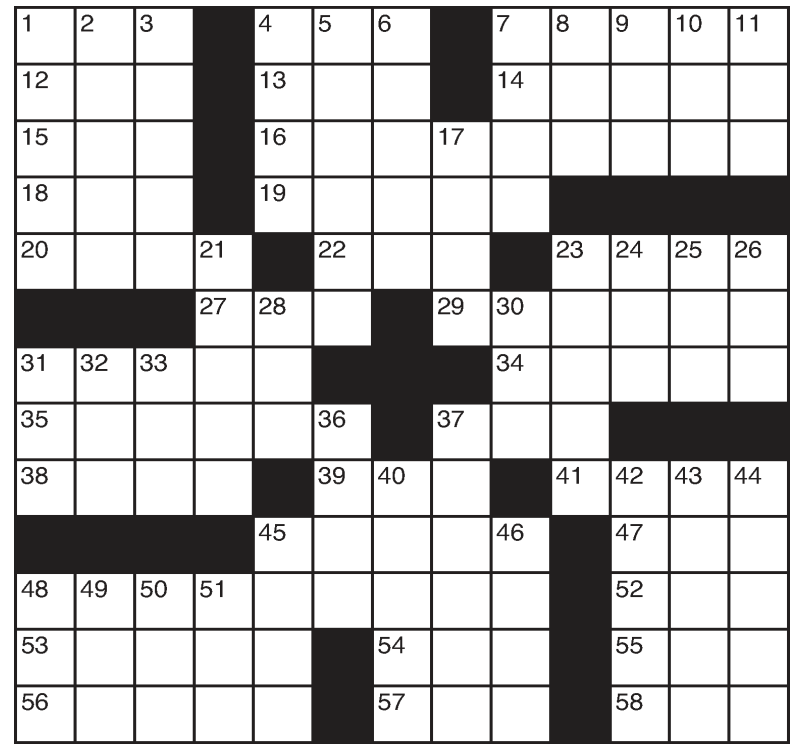
Non Sequitur



Carpe Diem

Beetle Bailey

Eugene Sheffer Crossword



ACROSS

1 URL ending
4 "Now I get it!"
7 Shimmering fabrics
12 Texter's "I think"
13 Young bloke
14 Mover's rental
15 H.S. proficiency test
16 Held in trust
18 Census stat
19 Wonderland visitor
20 Hindu deity
22 Moray, for one
23 Ski lift type
27 TV screen choice
29 Beekeeper's place
31 Blood line?
34 Sweetie
35 Monastery
37 Play part
38 Romanov ruler
39 College URL ender
41 Appear
45 Chopin piece
47 Roman 56
48 Branch of government
52 Puzzle
53 "— Called Wanda"
54 Actress Ruby
55 Before
56 Give up amateur status
57 Pink Floyd's Barrett
58 Rds.

DOWN

1 Humidor item
2 Alpha's opposite
3 Cable company device
4 — Romeo
5 Saluted
6 "Paper Moon" tyke
7 "Time" co-founder
8 Sushi fish
9 Goat's plaint
10 Where Lux. is
11 Devious
17 Bruins' sch.
21 Wedding setting
23 Leans
24 Sheepish "Hello!"
25 Branch
26 Bagel variety
28 One for the road?
30 Cpl.'s subordinate
31 Sternward
32 Hosp. areas
33 Estuary
36 Bigfoot's kin
37 Hollywood's Hepburn
40 Couples
42 Santa's crew
43 Tennis great Chris
44 Blends
45 Repeat
46 Sized up
48 Binge
49 "Avatar" craft
50 Chips go-with
51 Leb. neighbor

Answer to Previous Puzzle

P	I	C		P	A	G	E		J	E	E	R
F	D	A		O	D	E	A		A	R	T	Y
C	A	L	Y	P	S	O	S		N	I	N	A
		A	O	L		M	E	X	I	C	A	N
D	U	B	O	I	S		S	E	T			
A	N	A		N	A	T		S	O	B	E	R
M	I	S	S		G	O	T		R	I	C	O
E	T	H	O	S		V	A	C		B	R	O
			L	A	M		M	U	K	L	U	K
C	U	R	A	C	A	O		R	O	I		
A	N	O	N		C	R	I	T	I	C	A	L
S	T	A	G		R	E	M	I		A	V	I
S	O	R	E		O	O	P	S		L	A	P

1-31 CRYPTOQUIP

P R U F L N C I O S N C X U H Q U L N H M U X S F R U F L N H Q B F N M Q N M I Q' B R N C B Q B F N L I Q U X F R Q H? "R N H Q B P Q Q M R N H Q."

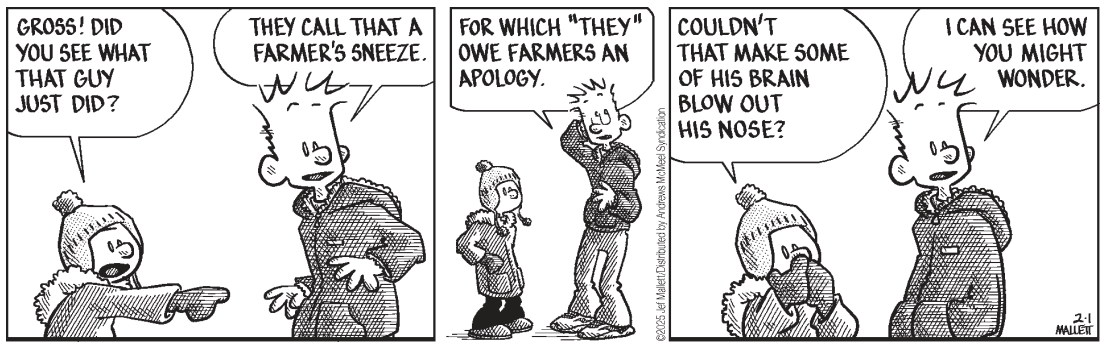
Yesterday's Cryptoquip: YOU'VE GOT TO SEE THE AMAZING NEW TORTOISE SHELTER THEY HAVE AT THE ZOO. IT'S TURTLY AWESOME!

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: L equals C

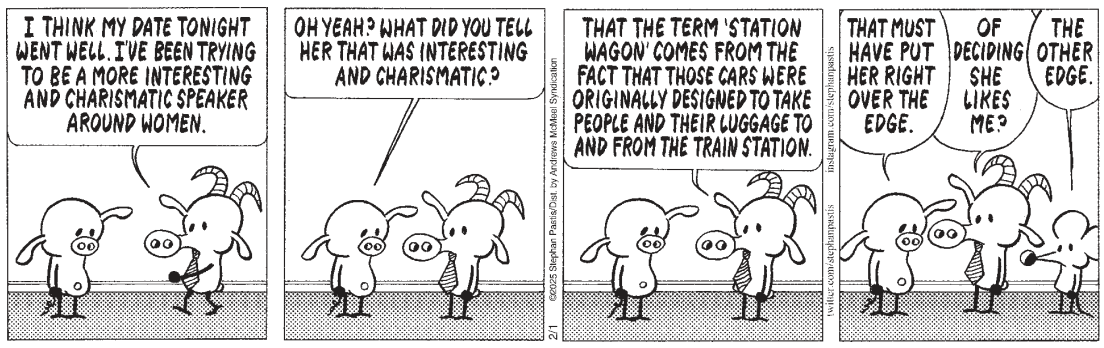
Bizarro

Loose Parts

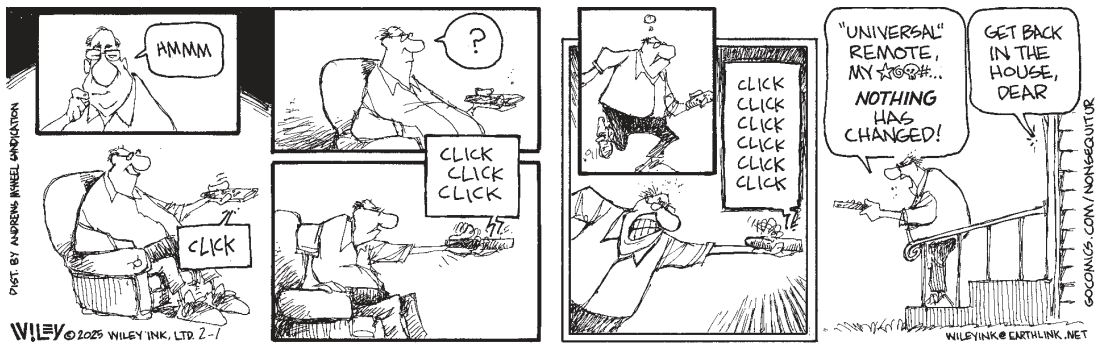
Frazz



Pearls Before Swine

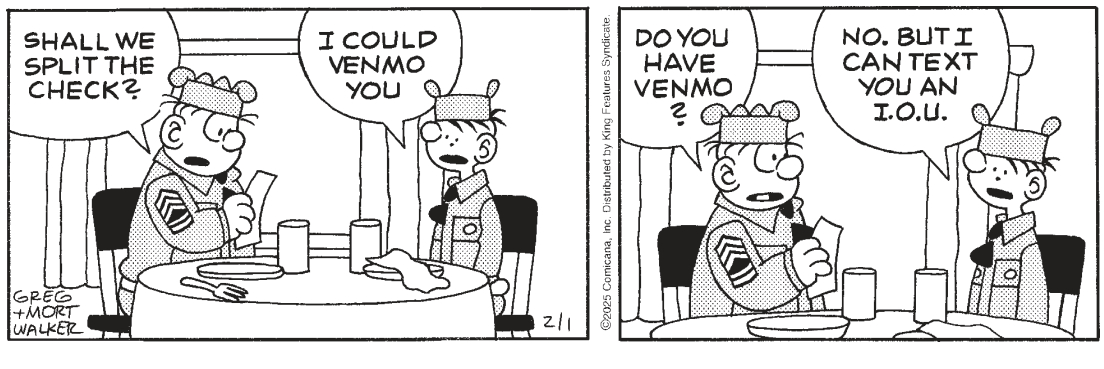


Non Sequitur

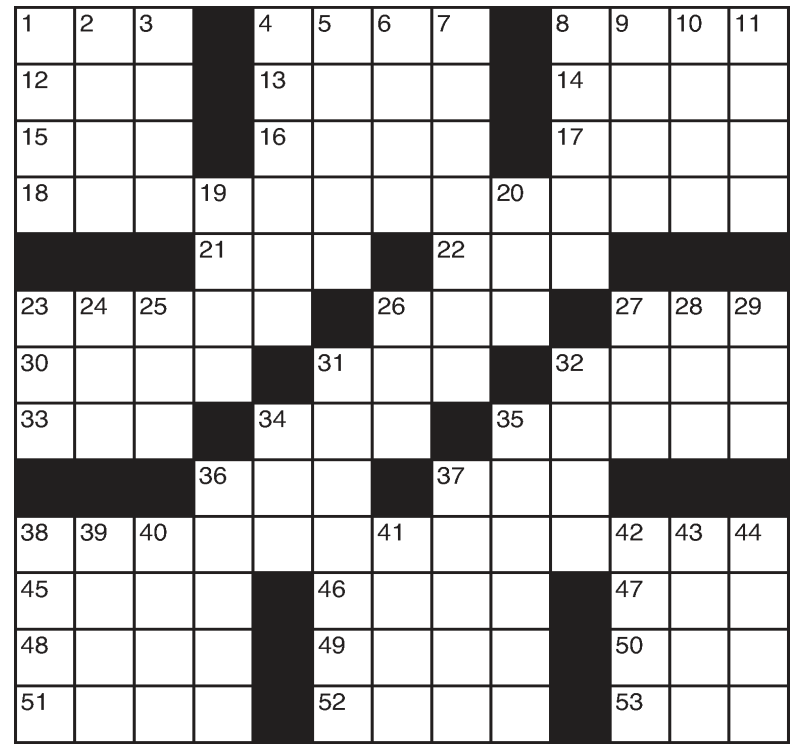


Carpe Diem

Beetle Bailey



Eugene Sheffer Crossword



ACROSS

1 Sheepish "Hello!"
4 Out of control
8 Regretted
12 U.S. Navy vessel
13 — Crunch (breakfast cereal)
14 Singer Guthrie
15 Mel of baseball
16 Manitoba tribe
17 The same
18 Cold-hardy salad veggie
21 Whatever amount
22 Green shade
23 Kick out
26 Send electronically
27 Extinct bird
30 Sunrise direction
31 Future flower
32 Border on
33 Tipsy
34 A Bobbsey twin
35 Dish
36 Cat's coat
37 Three, in Rome
38 Young person, metaphorically
45 Mideast airline
46 Bern's river
47 Actress Longoria
48 Lighten
49 Wall St. debuts
50 Profit
51 Times Sq. force
52 Salamander
53 Hosp. areas

DOWN

1 Gust
2 Wine region
3 Envelope abbr.
4 Emphasize
5 Tie the knot
6 Autobahn auto
7 Skateboarder's protection
8 Indian yogurt dish
9 Language of Pakistan
10 Power co. supply
11 Stadium top
19 Diplomacy
20 — -Mex cuisine
23 Long, skinny fish
24 — alai
25 Proposal fig.
26 Gaiety
27 CEO's degree, often
28 Chic no more
29 Chowed down
31 Shopper's quest
32 Novelist Waugh
34 Mother Teresa, for one
35 Mass celebrant
36 Mailed a tax return
37 Toss
38 Beheld
39 Stage show
40 Grate
41 Superhero's garment
42 Vegas game
43 Always
44 D.C. baseball team

Answer to Previous Puzzle

C	O	M		A	H	A		L	A	M	E	S
I	M	O		L	A	D		U	H	A	U	L
G	E	D		F	I	D	U	C	I	A	R	Y
A	G	E		A	L	I	C	E				
R	A	M	A		E	E	L		T	B	A	R
			L	C	D		A	P	I	A	R	Y
A	O	R	T	A				F	L	A	M	E
F	R	I	A	R	Y		A	C	T			
T	S	A	R		E	D	U		S	E	E	M
				E	T	U	D	E		L	V	I
J	U	D	I	C	I	A	R	Y		V	E	X
A	F	I	S	H		D	E	E		E	R	E
G	O	P	R	O		S	Y	D		S	T	S

2-1 CRYPTOQUIP

JS KCMYNXUB NPAFQ CLFN XNCYZJY, NPBBJY YMQ BFNDJY, KJEUZ ZUFR DF XAYBBJSJFQ YB BAYL-FNFJEMB?

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHAT COULD YOU NAME A COMPANY THAT COMES TO PEOPLE'S HOUSES TO CLEAN THEM? "HOME SWEEP HOME."

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: L equals V

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Stars and Stripes (USPS 0417900) published daily (except Saturday, Sunday, 25 December and 1 January) for 50 cents (Monday through Thursday) and one dollar on Friday by Stars and Stripes Pacific, OPC 706 BOX 7, APO AP 96301-9001. Periodicals postage paid at San Francisco, CA Postmaster: Send address changes to Pacific Stars and Stripes, OPC 706 BOX 7, AP 96301-9001.

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OPINION

'Ambition must be made to counteract ambition'

By Theodore R. Johnson
Special to The Washington Post

In the week after his inauguration, Donald Trump issued a series of executive orders contravening the Constitution and existing law. Nothing was beyond the reach of his pen: birthright citizenship, federal workforce layoffs, militarization of the border, pardons for people who attacked Capitol police. The directives were not just about how laws should be enforced or differing interpretations of constitutional rights, they were power grabs for authorities belonging to Congress and the Supreme Court.

A certain amount of this was to be expected — giving agencies new guidance and testing the bounds of the office is something every president does. To constrain this impulse, the Founders incorporated guardrails into the republic's design: a system of checks and balances as well as protections against factional politics. Trump is a challenge to both. His historically large number of executive orders — part of a political shock-and-awe campaign meant to break the opposition's will — was the first salvo. But Trump's aims are not confined to achieving specific policy outcomes. This time, the primary goal is not to build a border wall but to construct a government that will never tell him no.

He sees the inability of his first administration to bring government to heel as its central failure. When he lost the popular vote and the Electoral College in 2020, he asked Congress, the Supreme Court, a few states, and even his vice president to reverse the election outcome. None delivered, and he was impeached for his role in the Jan. 6 storming of the U.S. Capitol. The experience scarred him. Two weeks later, he skipped the inauguration and left the White House only because government and insufficient partisan loyalty stood in the way of his unconstitutional ambition. Now legitimately back in office, he appears to be daring anyone to hold him back.

The main obstacles to a runaway presidency are the other two branches of government, separate but constitutionally equal, with each holding a distinct set of responsibilities. In the Federalist Papers, James Madison explained that successful government hinges on the hearty ego of each branch jealously guarding its authorities from the others: "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition." The greatest threat to this scheme, he argued, is when government succumbs to a faction — that is, when its first allegiance is to partisan goals rather than the Constitution.

In practice, some factionalism has utility. The two-party system that arose soon after the founding demonstrated that sometimes competition between the parties — not the branches — is the truest source of checks and balances. But when political polarization is high, and one party has the advantage in all three branches, it has too much latitude to pursue its agenda unchecked. This is the design flaw that Trump exploits. His executive actions aim to impose, fund and enforce his agenda. His first-term appointees to the Supreme Court have granted the office immunity from criminal prosecution while unraveling decades of precedent on abortion, affirmative action and federal oversight. And Republican leadership in Congress has already shown it is primed to take its direction from him, too.

In these instances, Madison's essays offer one last hope: that the republic would be guided by men of principle whose wisdom, patriotism and commitment to justice would ensure they prioritized the country over party and the president. Madison also assured us that the "influence of factious leaders may kindle a flame within their particular States" but that it would never go national. Trump, at the onset of his second presidency, has proved Madison wrong on both counts.

Unlike the first time around, the most important qualification for this Trump administration is personal devotion. Republicans in Congress are increasingly willing to provide him their full support or quiet acquiescence — understanding that anything less risks loss of status and maybe even a primary loss. His judicial appointees are helping him get to yes on his list of asks. In a unified government, it makes presidential favor more sacred than the separation of powers, more attractive than principled politics.

The two most important checks on government — equal branches and party competition — are weakened when party identity becomes more important than branch responsibilities. And when a party has been captured by the president, the republic risks compliance to a single person. A swaggering executive with an entourage of yes-men in every corner of government is the exact person the Constitution was designed to keep from the presidency.

It remains to be seen whether Trump will successfully build the deferential government of his ambitions. There are already numerous court challenges to his executive orders. Republican lawmakers are scrambling to defend the executive branch's glaring encroachments on their authority. Even supporters acknowledge the legality of his actions are questionable. But until the ego and ambitions of the branches and the parties keep Trump's in check, he will continue grabbing power for himself, taking everything within reach of the presidential pen.

Theodore R. Johnson, a contributing columnist for The Washington Post and retired naval officer, writes on issues of race, democracy, and American identity. He's the author of the book "If We Are Brave."

Incentivizing false allegations harms the innocent

By Nafees Alam
InsideSources.com

Recent controversies in sports and entertainment have highlighted a troubling trend: prominent figures are facing accusations of weaponizing the #MeToo movement through false claims.

Critics argue that some individuals fabricate allegations to further their careers or agendas. While legal consequences for such accusations can take years to unfold, the court of public opinion has already exposed a significant issue: society's glorification of victimhood has created incentives that, for some, outweigh the ethical risks of making false accusations in pursuit of social and financial rewards.

The late Charlie Munger famously said, "Show me the incentive, and I'll show you the outcome." Today, this rings true in a world where victimhood often translates into social currency and financial gain. The rewards for being perceived as a victim are so enticing that false accusations are increasingly common. For those willing to take the gamble, the potential payoff is immense. A successful, false claim could lead to monetary settlements, media attention, or career advancement. Even when allegations fail to reach court, public opinion often rallies around the accuser, granting them social validation and status.

This dynamic creates a risk-reward scenario that some find worth exploiting. Jussie Smollett, for example, staged a hate crime against himself and faced legal repercussions after being exposed. Smollett's case raises an ethical question: Can individuals like him bear all the blame when society has created a system that incentivizes victimhood? In many ways, the root of the problem lies in a culture that elevates victim narratives while failing to hold false accusers accountable.

Crystal Mangum falsely accused members of the Duke University lacrosse team of sexual assault, causing severe harm to the accused. The Title IX case involving Virginia Tech revealed how gender bias can influence investigations. Amber Heard's defamation trial with Johnny Depp demonstrated the consequences of false or exaggerated allegations. Aziz Ansari faced backlash after being accused of misconduct stemming from post-intimacy regret. Each case underscores how modern culture amplifies accusations, often without scrutiny.

These examples reveal a societal pattern. When victims are celebrated and victors vilified, the allure of victimhood becomes hard to resist. The incentives attached to being perceived as a victim are so pervasive that even highly successful individuals may feel tempted to adopt the role, regardless of its authenticity. In this environment, it is unsurprising that some resort to false accusations to gain social or economic advantage.

The cultural mantra of "believe all victims" creates a landscape where the first to accuse gains a decisive advantage, regardless of the claim's credibility. False claims become a competitive strategy when all parties are equally innocent, with devastating consequences for the falsely accused.

The implications extend beyond high-profile cases into everyday life. Someone caught cheating on a partner might falsely accuse the paramour of sexual assault to avoid accountability. Others might exploit dating apps to target individuals with fabricated claims. Family disputes could escalate into false allegations of inappropriate behavior to exclude certain relatives from gatherings. Even friendships could be weaponized, with baseless allegations of emotional abuse used to alienate the accused while elevating the accuser.

The ethical dilemma surrounding victimhood's incentivization is profound. On one hand, believing accusers is essential for addressing genuine injustices. On the other, this same cultural narrative inadvertently creates opportunities for exploitation. Victimhood is now so heavily rewarded that the pursuit of social and financial gains often overshadows the importance of truth and integrity.

The ethics of truth have fallen prey to the economics of lies. To address this, society must balance empathy for victims and a commitment to fairness, evidence and accountability. Only then can we dismantle the incentives that make false allegations so appealing.

Nafees Alam is a professor in social work at Boise (Idaho) State University. He wrote this for InsideSources.com.

SCOREBOARD/AUTO RACING

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Wednesday's men's scores

EAST

American 75, Lafayette 68
Army 84, Colgate 72
Bucknell 79, Loyola (Md.) 67
Fordham 88, La Salle 72
George Washington 75, Richmond 66
Houston 63, West Virginia 49
Maryland 76, Wisconsin 68
Navy 79, Lehigh 54
Rhode Island 88, UMass 82
Saint Joseph's 76, Duquesne 72
Temple 90, Charlotte 89, 2OT
UConn 72, DePaul 61

SOUTH

Alabama 88, Mississippi St. 84
Arkansas St. 81, Southern Miss. 68
Auburn 87, LSU 74
Charleston Southern 82, SC-Upstate 75
Chattanooga 84, W. Carolina 60
FAU 94, UTSA 74
Florida Gulf Coast 83, Jacksonville 79
Furman 72, Samford 70
Gardner-Webb 92, Longwood 87
George Mason 58, Loyola Chicago 53, OT
Mercer 80, The Citadel 46
Mississippi 72, Texas 69
North Florida 101, Stetson 100, OT
Old Dominion 78, Appalachian St. 77
Queens (NC) 75, North Alabama 67
UNC-Asheville 72, Radford 65
UNC-Greensboro 70, ETSU 65
VMI 74, Wofford 67
Virginia 82, Miami 71
Virginia Tech 76, Florida St. 66
Winthrop 76, Presbyterian 67

MIDWEST

Creighton 86, Xavier 77
Drake 66, N. Iowa 52
Evansville 78, Murray St. 74
Ill.-Chicago 93, Bradley 70
Illinois St. 81, Belmont 78
Indiana St. 72, Missouri St. 67
Kansas St. 85, Oklahoma St. 57
North Texas 58, Wichita St. 54
Rutgers 79, Northwestern 72
South Dakota 91, Omaha 87
St. Thomas (MN) 86, Oral Roberts 71

SOUTHWEST

Cent. Arkansas 75, West Georgia 70
SMU 76, California 65
Texas Tech 71, TCU 57
UAB 78, Tulsa 68

FAR WEST

Boise St. 66, Nevada 56
Saint Mary's (Cal.) 67, Santa Clara 54
Stanford 70, Syracuse 61
Utah St. 76, UNLV 71

Men's Top 25 schedule

Sunday's games

No. 16 Oregon (16-4) vs. Nebraska (12-8)
No. 18 Illinois (14-6) vs. Ohio St. (11-8)
No. 19 Memphis (16-4) at Rice (11-9)

Wednesday's women's scores

EAST

American 54, Lafayette 52
Army 65, Colgate 60
Bucknell 54, Loyola (Md.) 49
Creighton 84, Georgetown 70
La Salle 67, St. Bonaventure 58
Lehigh 87, Navy 66
Maryland 82, Penn St. 73
Rhode Island 53, Fordham 35
Robert Morris 74, Wright St. 53
Seton Hall 71, Butler 48
St. John's 62, Providence 55
UMass 71, George Washington 54

SOUTH

Baylor 75, UCF 64
Charleston Southern 62, SC-Upstate 58
Charlotte 67, Memphis 59
Coastal Carolina 76, Marshall 64
East Carolina 72, Wichita St. 62
Georgia St. 66, Old Dominion 62
James Madison 77, Georgia Southern 60
Longwood 64, Gardner-Webb 52
N. Kentucky 79, Detroit 49
Radford 63, UNC-Asheville 47
Saint Joseph's 60, Davidson 46
South Florida 75, UTSA 63
Tulane 68, FAU 52
Winthrop 67, Presbyterian 58, OT

MIDWEST

Ball St. 83, Ohio 61
Bowling Green 82, Akron 69
Buffalo 73, W. Michigan 40
Cincinnati 73, Houston 65
Dayton 67, Loyola Chicago 64
Fort Wayne 79, Youngstown St. 56
George Mason 80, Saint Louis 53
Kansas 57, Texas Tech 50
Kent St. 79, E. Michigan 59
Marquette 67, Xavier 38
Milwaukee 66, IUPUI 62
N. Illinois 80, Cent. Michigan 75
S. Dakota St. 63, N. Dakota St. 55
Toledo 64, Miami (Ohio) 59
UConn 84, DePaul 58
Wisconsin 82, Michigan 75

SOUTHWEST

North Texas 70, Temple 67
Oklahoma St. 83, Arizona St. 71
Oral Roberts 95, Omaha 57
Rice 64, Tulsa 45

FAR WEST

Air Force 78, Utah St. 66
Colorado 67, BYU 66
Fresno St. 65, Nevada 59
Wyoming 77, San Jose St. 64

Women's Top 25 schedule

Saturday's game

No. 21 West Virginia (16-4) vs. No. 24 Oklahoma St. (17-3)

PRO HOCKEY

NHL

Eastern Conference
Atlantic Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Florida	52	30	19	3	63	170	152
Toronto	51	30	19	2	62	155	147
Ottawa	50	26	20	4	56	137	136
Boston	52	25	21	6	56	141	166
Tampa Bay	49	26	20	3	55	172	140
Detroit	50	24	21	5	53	143	156
Montreal	50	24	21	5	53	151	169
Buffalo	50	19	26	5	43	156	171

Metropolitan Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Washington	50	34	11	5	73	174	119
Carolina	51	31	16	4	66	171	140
New Jersey	53	29	18	6	64	164	133
Columbus	50	24	19	7	55	169	168
N.Y. Rangers	50	24	22	4	52	149	152
Philadelphia	52	23	23	6	52	154	178
N.Y. Islanders	49	22	20	7	51	135	143
Pittsburgh	53	21	24	8	50	154	193

Western Conference
Central Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Winnipeg	52	35	14	3	73	184	125
Dallas	50	32	17	1	65	159	123
Minnesota	51	30	17	4	64	151	146
Colorado	52	29	21	2	60	170	165
Utah	50	21	21	8	50	141	150
St. Louis	51	23	24	4	50	142	154
Nashville	49	18	24	7	43	131	157
Chicago	50	16	29	5	37	132	171

Pacific Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Edmonton	50	32	15	3	67	166	135
Vegas	51	31	15	5	67	174	143
Los Angeles	48	26	16	6	58	135	122
Vancouver	50	23	17	10	56	143	156
Calgary	49	24	18	7	55	133	146
Anaheim	50	21	23	6	48	129	157
Seattle	52	22	27	3	47	153	168
San Jose	53	15	32	6	36	139	196

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

Carolina 4, N.Y. Rangers 0
Buffalo 7, Boston 2
Winnipeg 4, Montreal 1
Chicago 4, Tampa Bay 1
N.Y. Islanders 5, Colorado 2
Washington 3, Calgary 1
Anaheim 6, Seattle 4
Dallas 4, Vegas 3, OT

Wednesday's games

Minnesota 3, Toronto 1
Florida 3, Los Angeles 0
New Jersey 5, Philadelphia 0
Vancouver 3, Nashville 1
Pittsburgh 3, Utah 2, OT

Thursday's games

Chicago at Carolina
Los Angeles at Tampa Bay
Minnesota at Montreal
Washington at Ottawa
Winnipeg at Boston
N.Y. Islanders at Philadelphia
Anaheim at Calgary
Detroit at Edmonton
Columbus at Vegas
San Jose at Seattle

Friday's games

Nashville at Buffalo
Vancouver at Dallas
Columbus at Utah
St. Louis at Colorado

Saturday's games

Chicago at Florida
N.Y. Rangers at Boston
Los Angeles at Carolina
Minnesota at Ottawa
N.Y. Islanders at Tampa Bay
Nashville at Pittsburgh
Toronto at Edmonton
Winnipeg at Washington
Detroit at Calgary

Sunday's games

New Jersey at Buffalo
Philadelphia at Colorado
Montreal at Anaheim
Columbus at Dallas
N.Y. Islanders at Florida
Vegas at N.Y. Rangers
St. Louis at Utah
Detroit at Vancouver
Calgary at Seattle

Monday's game

Ottawa at Nashville

Tuesday's games

Minnesota at Boston
Columbus at Buffalo
Ottawa at Tampa Bay
New Jersey at Pittsburgh
Florida at Washington
Vegas at N.Y. Islanders
Edmonton at St. Louis
Carolina at Winnipeg
Toronto at Calgary
Philadelphia at Utah
Colorado at Vancouver
Detroit at Seattle
Dallas at Anaheim
Montreal at San Jose

DEALS

Wednesday's transactions

BASEBALL
Major League Baseball
American League

CLEVELAND GUARDIANS — Sent RHP Pedro Avila outright to Columbus (IL).
DETROIT TIGERS — Designated RHP Alex Faedo for assignment. Agreed to terms with RHP Tommy Kahnle on a one-year contract.
SEATTLE MARINERS — Sent LHP Tyler Jay outright to Tacoma (PCL).
TORONTO BLUE JAYS — Agreed to terms with RHP Adam Kloffenstein on a minor league contract.

National League

ATLANTA BRAVES — Agreed to terms with RHP Wander Suero on a minor league contract.
CINCINNATI REDS — Acquired LHP Taylor Rogers and cash considerations from San Francisco in exchange for RHP Braxton Roxby. Designated RHP Owen Whited for assignment.
MIAMI MARLINS — Claimed RHP Connor Gillispie off waivers from Atlanta.
PITTSBURGH PIRATES — Agreed to terms with 2B/OF Adam Frazier on a one-year contract. Designated RHP Elvis Alvarado for assignment.
WASHINGTON NATIONALS — Requested unconditional release waivers on LHP Joe La Sorsa.

BASKETBALL
National Basketball Association

NBA — Fined F Dillon Brooks $25,000 for using profane language during a live television interview.

FOOTBALL
National Football League

BALTIMORE RAVENS — Released assistant head coach/pass game coordinator Chris Hewitt.
BUFFALO BILLS — Re-signed QB Shane Buechele to a one-year contract. Signed TE Zach Davidson to a reserve/futures contract.
DALLAS COWBOYS — Re-signed vice president of player personnel Will McClay to a multiyear contract extension. Hired Dave Borgonzi as linebackers coach, Aaron Whitecotton as defensive line coach and Andre Curtis as defensive pass game coordinator.
MIAMI DOLPHINS — Hired Craig Aukerman as special teams coordinator and Robert Prince as wide receivers coach.

HOCKEY
National Hockey League

DALLAS STARS — Placed D Nils Lundkvist on injured reserve.
LOS ANGELES KINGS — Sent C Samuel Helenius to Ontario (AHL).
MINNESOTA WILD — Recalled F Ben Jones from Iowa (AHL).
MONTREAL CANADIENS — Recalled D Jayden Struble from Laval (AHL). Placed LW Emil Heineman on injured reserve.
ST. LOUIS BLUES — Agreed mutually with F Brandon Saad to terminate the remainder of his contract.
SAN JOSE SHARKS — Reassigned RW Scott Sabourin and G Vitek Vanecek to San Jose (AHL).
SEATTLE KRAKEN — Placed Philipp Grubauer on waivers for the purpose of reassignment to Coachella Valley (AHL).
TORONTO MAPLES LEAFS — Designated LW Matthew Knies for injured reserve.
VANCOUVER CANUCKS — Reinstated C Dakota Joshua off injured reserve. Placed C Kiefer Sherwood on injured reserve. Reinstated D Noah Juulsen from injured reserve. Sent C Max Sasson to Abbotsford (AHL).
WINNIPEG JETS — Placed C Morgan Barron on injured reserve.

SOCCER
Major League Soccer

NASHVILLE SC — Acquired $200,000 in 2025 general allocation money from Inter Miami CF in exchange for one international roster spot.

National Women's Soccer League

KANSAS CITY CURRENT — Re-signed F Temwa Chawinga to a three-year contract extension.
UTAH ROYALS — Signed D Nuria Rabano to a three-year contract.

AP SPORTLIGHT

Jan. 31

1941 — Joe Louis knocks out Red Burman in the fifth round at Madison Square Garden to retain the world heavyweight title.
1988 — The Washington Redskins score 35 points in the second quarter to overcome a 10-0 deficit and beat the Denver Broncos 42-10 in the Super Bowl. MVP Doug Williams passes for four touchdowns and a record 340 yards. Timmy Smith rushes for a record 204 yards.
1998 — Martina Hingis, 17, becomes the youngest player in the Open era to defend a Grand Slam title, capturing her second Australian Open with a 6-3, 6-3 victory over Conchita Martinez.
1999 — John Elway gets his second straight Super Bowl ring, weaving his magic for the final time during the Denver Broncos' 34-19 win over the Atlanta Falcons.
2009 — Serena Williams routs Dinara Safina 6-0, 6-3 to win the Australian Open — her 10th Grand Slam title — and return to the No. 1 ranking.
2011 — For the first time since the WTA rankings began in 1975, the top 10 players are from 10 countries. Denmark's Caroline Wozniacki remains No. 1.

JOHN LOCHER/AP

Joey Logano celebrates after winning his third NASCAR Cup Series Championship at Phoenix Raceway on Nov. 10 in Avondale, Ariz.

Cup champ Logano tunes out critics

BY MARK LONG
Associated Press

Joey Logano has found a way to tune out months of negativity.

Critics? Naysayers? Anyone who thinks his third Cup Series championship was a fluke?

"I can't hear it because my trophies, they kind of, like, echo around me," Logano quipped during a Zoom call with media Wednesday.

Logano won his third title in November, sparking debate about whether NASCAR's current playoff format is the best way to determine the series' worthiest champion. Few could make a strong case for that being Logano in 2024.

He won four races, had 13 top-10 finishes and rarely had the car to beat over 37 events.

He got huge breaks along the way, too. He used what amounted to a Hail Mary to win in Nashville — stretching his empty fuel tank through five overtimes — just to qualify for the postseason. And then he was actually eliminated from playoff contention in the second round only to be reinstated when Alex Bowman's car failed a postrace inspection.

While competitors have since called for NASCAR to tweak its playoff format, with some wanting to move the finale to a different track every year instead of keeping it at Phoenix Raceway, Logano — not surprisingly — believes the setup is just fine.

"The playoff system is very entertaining," he said, adding that teams often get hot in other sports and win it all. "It takes a lot to get through the 10 races to win the championship. ... When the playoffs start, a lot of times you see teams that fire up.

"And we've been one of those teams, thankfully, and it's worked out for us three times. But I don't think that means you have to change the playoff system."

NASCAR said earlier this week that no tweaks would be made to the championship format in 2025. Instead, officials plan to study it for another year before making any decisions.

"I think it deserves a look for sure and probably a change down the road," Hendrick Motorsports driver William Byron said. "I just don't know what that change is. I feel like we've just gotten into such a routine of going to the same racetrack for the final race, and having similar tracks that lead up to it has gotten a little bit predictable. But you could say probably the same thing in other sports, with the Chiefs hosting the AFC championship every year.

"It's just kind of the nature of sports, probably; it gets a little bit repetitive. But it'd be nice to see the final race to move around."

Team Penske has won the last three Cup Series titles, with Logano sandwiching championships around teammate Ryan Blaney. All of those came in Phoenix, where the finale landed in 2020 after nearly two decades at Homestead-Miami Speedway.

NASCAR has made wholesale changes to its schedule in recent years, including moving the season-opening Clash and the all-star race.

The Clash is now at historic Bowman Gray Stadium in Winston-Salem, N.C., for Sunday's exhibition.

The all-star race went from North Carolina to Tennessee to Texas and back to North Carolina.

No one would be surprised to see the finale end up with similar movement.

"We have some tracks that could be awesome for the championship, like Vegas and Homestead and even Charlotte," Byron said. "Just being open to all the different ideas would probably be cool and bring some buzz and also just kind of even the competition out."

COLLEGE

Ward says winning Manning Award is benefit in the NFL

By Tim Reynolds
Associated Press

CORAL GABLES, Fla. — Cam Ward's college career got one more accolade Wednesday, when he was announced as the winner of the Manning Award as the nation's top quarterback.

And the now-former Hurricanes star, who quite possibly will be the No. 1 pick in the NFL Draft later this spring after leading the top-ranked offense in college football this past season, knows the award can be a springboard to good things at the next level.

"Once again, we've got just an outstanding young man who had an unbelievable year in Miami," football legend Archie Manning said. "Their offense just lit up throughout the year. And now he's preparing for the NFL draft where he's going to be in a great position."

Of the 11 quarterbacks with at least 25 touchdown passes in the NFL this season, three of them — Washington's Jayden Daniels (2023), Cincinnati's Joe Burrow (2019) and Tampa Bay's Baker Mayfield (2017) — are recent Manning Award winners.

"I think it's going to help me in a tremendous way," Ward said. "If you look at the past winners, specifically last year and Jayden Daniels and the rookie season that he's had, it's helped him a lot. And just being able to connect with the Mannings at all times — they're only a phone call away from me — I just think this award is going to just help me just in the long run."

Ward is the 20th winner of the award and the first Hurricanes quarterback to have the honor, which was created by the Sugar Bowl to honor the college football accomplishments of Archie, Peyton and Eli Manning. The three Mannings vote for the award, as do a panel of reporters.

Ward ended his college career with a Division I (FBS and FCS level) record 158 touchdown passes. His total of 18,189 passing yards — 6,908 at Incarnate Word, 6,968 at Washington State and 4,313 with Miami — is third-most in NCAA history behind only Case Keenum and Dillon Gabriel.

Ward rewrote the Hurricanes' record book in 2024, his lone season with Miami. He leaves as the program's single-season leader in yards, completions (305), touchdown passes (39) and completion percentage — both for a season and a career, at 67.2%.

"I'm sure looking back on it now, Cam will admit, another year of college football just prepares you for that big transition to the NFL," Archie Manning said. "Cam, he's done it right and I think he's got a great future."

Ward leaves as a Hurricanes legend, despite spending basically 11 months with the program from start to finish. As an All-American, his name will hang on a banner attached to the ceiling of the Miami indoor practice facility.

The Hurricanes finished 10-3, missing out on the College Football Playoff and Atlantic Coast Conference title game by one win.

"I wish I had more time in Miami to be able to win a championship, whether it's ACC or national," Ward said. "At the end of the day, I believe everything happens for a reason. And the teammates that I was surrounded by this year are the best group of teammates I've had, off the field more than on the field. The camaraderie we had, whether it was in the hotel or the locker room, that's the thing I'm going to miss the most."

ADRIAN KRAUS/AP

Miami's Cam Ward, who is preparing for a possible No. 1 overall pick in the NFL Draft in April, was announced as the winner of the Manning Award given annually to the nation's top quarterback.

KATHLEEN BATTEN/AP

Houston guard Emanuel Sharp defends West Virginia guard Sencire Harrisduring the second half Wednesday in Morgantown, W.Va. The Cougars are allowing 55.6 points per game through Wednesday.

No. 6 Houston's defense fuels 13-game win streak

By John Raby
Associated Press

MORGANTOWN, W.Va. — West Virginia's Javon Small gestured and yelled for a teammate — any teammate — to get open closer to the basket. When that didn't work, the Big 12's leading scorer forced up a 3-pointer just before the shot clock expired.

Clank.

Small was the latest star stifled by No. 6 Houston, which has been making a habit out of sapping opponents' strengths.

The Cougars (17-3, 9-0 Big 12) are riding a 13-game winning streak behind the nation's stingiest defense and priding themselves in slowing down the other team's top scorers.

"We're a defensive-minded team," Houston guard L.J. Cryer said after a 63-49 win over the Mountaineers on Wednesday night. "We go to practice and we emphasize defense a lot. You achieve what you work on and what you emphasize. When the ball's not going in, you've got to rely on your defense. And on the nights that the ball isn't going in, we're going to win because of that."

Opponents have to find a Plan B when the Cougars throw double and triple teams at them. Cryer, Joseph Tugler, J'Wan Roberts and Terrance Arceneaux took turns harassing Small, who attempted just seven shots and was held to eight points, nearly 12 below his league-leading average.

It's happened quite often this month.

UCF's Keyshawn Hall, who scored a career-high 40 points in his previous game, was held to six points against Houston on 2-for-12 shooting.

Utah's Gabe Madsen was limited to eight points on 3-of-10 shooting against the Cougars. The Utes, who have scored at least 80 points 10 times this season, were held to 36 points, their lowest scoring output since 2011.

BYU's Richie Saunders managed just nine points against Houston one game after scoring a career-high 30 against Arizona State.

The Cougars, whose 18-game league winning streak dating to last season is the second-longest in Big 12 history, are allowing 55.6 points per game, 2.4 points fewer than the next best defensive team, Drake. Opponents are shooting a national-worst 36% from the field against Houston.

The Cougars started the season ranked at No. 4, but started 4-3 with overtime losses to San Diego State and No. 4 Alabama in Las Vegas and a five-point loss to top-ranked Auburn.

They haven't lost since.

Kelvin Sampson, who has been Houston's coach since 2014, said defense has been the Cougars' bread and butter for nearly a decade. He's especially proud that in this era of the transfer portal and name, image and likeness opportunities, he's able to teach the same players. Eight of the Cougars' top 10 players returned this season, including four starters.

"And that does make a difference," Sampson said. "Part of our secret sauce is our program. And then having great kids. Character matters. Having kids you don't mind losing with. There's some teams, whether it's bad attitudes or wrong attitudes or what, you're always having to coach that. I never have to worry about effort or attitude. I'm blessed that way. I've got a great staff. That's buoyed us here for a long time."

Cryer is Houston's top scorer averaging 13.5 points per game — which is 18th in the Big 12 — followed closely by Emanuel Sharp at 13.4. But the Cougars are filling the basket enough that their average 21-point scoring margin leads the country, and Houston is forcing 6.1 more turnovers than it commits, good for fourth-best.

"Defensively, they're just well connected," West Virginia coach Darian DeVries said. "They're very aggressive. They really load to the ball. It's hard to really crack them.

"Not many teams have."

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

TOP 25 THIS WEEK

Vanderbilt coach OK with cost of success

Byington wants big wins to become common but for now 'let the fans enjoy' storming court

BY DAVE SKRETTA
Associated Press

When he was hired by Vanderbilt to rebuild the men's basketball program after years of mediocrity, Mark Byington envisioned a moment like the football team experienced last October, when fans stormed the field following a win over Alabama.

Byington might have to start getting used to such moments.

In the span of just over a week, the Commodores edged No. 6 Tennessee and pulled an upset of ninth-ranked Kentucky — heck, they played No. 4 Alabama tough in a road loss in between — and finally crashed the AP Top 25 after nearly a decade in the hinterlands. They came in at No. 24 in this week's poll, one of 10 schools from the mighty SEC in the rankings.

"There's big-picture things I wanted to happen around here and ... at one point I want it to be where we're not surprised, that we don't feel like the underdog in these games, and we're going into them knowing that that our program is good and we expect to win," Byington said. "We're not there yet, so let the fans enjoy it."

Even if the celebrations prove costly. The court-storming after the victory over the Vols cost the Commodores a $250,000 fine from the SEC, and a second storming after the win over the Wildcats earned them another $500,000 punishment.

"We got to start a GoFundMe page or something to pay fines," Byington said. "We'll figure it out."

They have a bit of time. The Commodores, who are ranked for the first time since Dec. 7, 2015, get a slight reprieve from what has been the toughest league in the country before traveling to SEC newcomer Oklahoma on Saturday.

Things only get tougher from there. Vanderbilt has a stretch spanning about a month where it visits fifth-ranked Florida, plays Texas and No. 1 Auburn, heads to Tennessee and Kentucky for rematches, welcomes No. 23 Ole Miss to Memorial Gymnasium, visits No. 13 Texas A&M and finishes up with No. 20 Missouri.

"It's not time to reflect, and it's on to what's next. And I've always kind of had the mentality," Byington said. "If you get too low in this league, I mean, it's going to stomp you and crush you. And if you get too high, somebody's going to knock you off. And so we keep it simple. Let's just keep getting better. We'll see what happens."

Tennessee's tough stretch

Everyone in the SEC is going to have a brutal stretch at some point, and Rick Barnes and the Vols are going through theirs right now. After losing to the Commodores, they knocked off No. 14 Mississippi State before falling to two more ranked teams. The lost a 53-51 slugfest on Saturday against top-ranked Auburn in a game that wasn't decided until the closing seconds.

The Vols then started a three-game homestand against ranked teams on Tuesday night with a 78-73 loss to No. 12 Kentucky. The Gators arrive on Saturday for another showdown of top-10 teams, and then Missouri visits Thompson—Boling Arena next week.

"We have a chance to be so much better and I think we can get better," Barnes said. "We're coming to the end of January. A lot of basketball left. We want to be at our best at the end of the year and we got guys that are going to continue to work to do that."

GEORGE WALKER IV/AP

Vanderbilt fans storm the court after the team's win over Kentucky on Saturday in Nashville, Tenn. It was the second court-storming in just over a week after fans celebrated an earlier win over Tennessee in similar fashion. The big wins cost the school $750,000 but also sent the Commodores into the Top 25.

WADE PAYNE/AP

Tennessee coach Rick Barnes talks to his players during a timeout in the second half against Kentucky on Tuesday in Knoxville, Tenn.

Still streaking — barely

Two-time defending national champion UConn entered the week having lost three of its past five games, all to unranked foes, and tumbled six spots to No. 25 this week. The Huskies narrowly extended their poll streak to 52 consecutive weeks, the fourth-longest current run behind Houston (98), Kansas (77) and Tennessee (72).

It won't be easy to keep it going this week. UConn beat DePaul 72-61 on Wednesday before a trip to No. 9 Marquette on Saturday.

Missouri Valley love

Drake received some Top 25 votes earlier this season and continues to roll along at 19-2 overall and 9-2 in league play after beating Northern Iowa 66-52 on Wednesday night. But the Bulldogs aren't the only Valley team getting some respect.

Bradley, which hasn't been ranked since the final poll of the 1987-88 season, picked up a vote this week. The Braves won five straight before stumbing Wednesday night in a loss to UIC.

Bradley remains tied atop the league standings at 9-2 and are 18-4 overal. The Braves travel to Northern Iowa on Sunday.

No. 11 Kansas (15-5) at Baylor (13-7)
AFN-Sports2
10 p.m. Saturday CET
6 a.m. Sunday JKT

North Carolina (13-9) at No. 2 Duke (18-2)
AFN-Sports2
12:30 a.m. Sunday CET
8:30 a.m. Sunday JKT

Arkansas (12-8) at No. 12 Kentucky (15-5)
AFN-Sports2
3 a.m. Sunday CET
11 a.m. Sunday JKT

Syracuse (9-12) at California (11-10)
AFN-Atlantic
4 a.m. Sunday CET
Noon Sunday JKT

Ohio State (12-8) at No. 18 Illinois (14-6)
AFN-Sports2
7 p.m. Sunday CET
3 a.m. Monday JKT

NBA

AROUND THE NBA

No front-runners for top rookie yet

BY TIM REYNOLDS
Associated Press

At this point, there is no Victor Wembanyama in this season's NBA rookie class. There is no Paolo Banchero. And there's no Luka Doncic, Ja Morant, Karl-Anthony Towns, Damian Lillard, Kyrie Irving, Blake Griffin, Brandon Roy, Derrick Rose or Chris Paul, either.

They were all unanimous, or just about unanimous, rookie of the year selections. Everybody knew long before the ballots were cast who was going to win the award that season. There was no mystery.

If this season's voting was held today, good luck figuring out what would happen.

No rookie has emerged as the leader of this year's class. There isn't a single first-year player on pace to average 15 points and appear in enough games to qualify for the league's leaderboard; the last time that happened was 2016-17. And right now, according to BetMGM Sportsbook, the favorite to win rookie of the year is someone who has started four games all season, all of them in the last week or so — Miami's Kel'el Ware.

"It means I'm doing something right on the court," Ware said.

He's not wrong, but it also speaks to how nobody in this rookie group has stepped to the front of the class, either — especially considering Tuesday's news that Ware was not picked by the NBA for the Rising Stars event at All-Star weekend.

Here were the current leaders in terms of rookie of the year odds, according to BetMGM, as of Monday night: Ware (+200) tops the list, San Antonio's Stephon Castle (+275) is second, and Memphis' Jaylen Wells and Washington's Alexandre Sarr (both +350) are tied for third.

Grizzlies center Zach Edey (+1400) is fifth. After that, everyone is at least 40-1 at this point.

If Castle wins the award, the Spurs would have done something that's been managed only once in the past half-century — having back-to-back rookies of the year. It happened in 2015 and 2016 when Andrew Wiggins and Towns won for Minnesota.

"He really has a chance to be special," Paul said of Castle, his San Antonio teammate.

Ware is clearly developing as the season goes along. The center out of Indiana didn't have his first double-figure scoring game for the Heat until Jan. 1. He had three consecutive 20-point games last week for Miami — the push that vaulted him into the favorite spot on the BetMGM rookie board — but still wasn't on the initial list for All-Star weekend in San Francisco for the Rising Stars games (and potentially the All-Star Game itself, which the Rising Stars winning team will be part of).

It's all happened very quickly for Ware. A couple weeks ago, he wasn't even seeming like a legit rookie of the year candidate — much less the favorite.

"Believe it or not, he's been ready since he came here," Heat teammate Tyler Herro said. "When he wasn't in the rotation, he was just overly communicative about how he wants to be in the rotation and how he feels like he can help. I always felt like he could help. And now, him just getting his opportunity, I think everybody is starting to see what he's capable of."

The NBA picked 10 rookies for the Rising Stars games: Wells, Sarr, Castle, Edey, the Wizards' Bub Carrington, Orlando's Tristan da Silva, the Los Angeles Lakers' Dalton Knecht, Philadelphia's Jared McCain, New Orleans' Yves Missi and Atlanta's Zaccharie Risacher — the No. 1 pick in last year's draft. McCain is injured and is out for the rest of the season, which could open a spot for Ware or another rookie to be picked in his place.

If nothing else, there might be a real rookie of the year race when it's time to vote in April. There have been very few of those in the last couple decades — with the majority of the winners in that span getting 90% or more of the first-place votes.

A rare exception was in 2022, when Toronto's Scottie Barnes won by getting 48 first-place votes to Evan Mobley's 43. Every other winner over the last 20 years has gotten at least 60% of the first-place votes; the last real "close" race was for the 2002 award, when Amar'e Stoudemire got 59 first-place votes — barely 50%. Yao Ming got 45 that year and Caron Butler got 13.

Nobody is dominant in this class, yet. That might make award season very interesting.

LYNNE SLADKY/AP

Despite having started only four games this season going into Saturday, Miami Heat center Kel'el Ware has emerged as the betting favorite to win rookie of the year, though not by any significant margin.

MATT SLOCUM/AP

San Antonio's Stephon Castle is looking to follow up teammate Victor Wembanyama to give the Spurs back-to-back rookies of the year.

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	33	15	.688	—
New York	32	16	.667	1
Philadelphia	19	27	.413	13
Toronto	15	32	.319	17½
Brooklyn	15	33	.313	18

Southeast Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	24	24	.500	—
Miami	23	23	.500	—
Atlanta	22	25	.468	1½
Charlotte	12	32	.273	10
Washington	6	40	.130	17

Central Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Cleveland	38	9	.809	—
Milwaukee	26	19	.578	11
Indiana	26	20	.565	11½
Detroit	23	24	.489	15
Chicago	20	28	.417	18½

Western Conference

Southwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Houston	32	14	.696	—
Memphis	31	16	.660	1½
Dallas	26	22	.542	7
San Antonio	20	24	.455	11
New Orleans	12	36	.250	21

Northwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Oklahoma City	37	9	.804	—
Denver	28	19	.596	9½
Minnesota	26	21	.553	11½
Portland	18	29	.383	19½
Utah	10	35	.222	26½

Pacific Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Lakers	26	19	.578	—
L.A. Clippers	27	20	.574	—
Phoenix	24	22	.522	2½
Sacramento	24	23	.511	3
Golden State	24	23	.511	3

Wednesday's games

Brooklyn 104, Charlotte 83
Toronto 106, Washington 82
Indiana 133, Detroit 119
Cleveland 126, Miami 106
Boston 122, Chicago 100
Philadelphia 117, Sacramento 104
New York 122, Denver 112
L.A. Clippers 128, San Antonio 116
Dallas 137, New Orleans 136
Minnesota 121, Phoenix 113
Golden State 116, Oklahoma City 109

Thursday's games

Atlanta at Cleveland
L.A. Lakers at Washington
Minnesota at Utah
Houston at Memphis
Orlando at Portland

Friday's games

Dallas at Detroit
L.A. Clippers at Charlotte
Chicago at Toronto
Denver at Philadelphia
Boston at New Orleans
Milwaukee at San Antonio
Phoenix at Golden State

Saturday's games

Atlanta at Indiana
Orlando at Utah
Denver at Charlotte
Brooklyn at Houston
Sacramento at Oklahoma City
Washington at Minnesota
L.A. Lakers at New York
Miami at San Antonio
Phoenix at Portland

Sunday's games

Chicago at Detroit
Dallas at Cleveland
L.A. Clippers at Toronto
Boston at Philadelphia
Memphis at Milwaukee

Scoring leaders

Through Wednesday

	G	FG	FT	PTS	AVG
Gil.-Alexander, OKC	45	513	347	1463	32.5
Antetokoun., MIL	39	494	245	1237	31.7
Jokic, DEN	41	464	205	1217	29.7
Ball, CHA	31	302	141	873	28.2
Durant, PHO	36	356	186	982	27.3
Maxey, PHI	39	368	196	1058	27.1
Tatum, BOS	45	402	237	1200	26.7
Edwards, MIN	47	423	203	1241	26.4
Brunson, NY	47	420	264	1217	25.9
Davis, LAL	42	400	253	1081	25.7

SUPER BOWL LIX

Chiefs chasing an elite feat

Kansas City looks to join Shaq-Kobe Lakers, Yankees and Jordan with rare three-peat

BY JOSH DUBOW
Associated Press

Patrick Mahomes and the Kansas City Chiefs accomplished a feat that had never been done before: Getting back to the NFL's championship game after consecutive Super Bowl wins.

Next up is the rare championship three-peat that hasn't been accomplished in the NFL, NBA, NHL or Major League Baseball in more than 20 years.

The most recent team in those four leagues to win three straight championships was the Los Angeles Lakers with Shaquille O'Neal and Kobe Bryant in the 2000-02 NBA Finals.

Only two NFL teams have ever won three straight championships with Green Bay doing it from 1929-31 when the champion was determined by regular-season record and then again in 1965-67. Vince Lombardi's Packers won the final NFL championship before the start of the Super Bowl era in 1966 and then won the first two games between the AFL and NFL champions that determined the true kings of pro football.

Since the end of that Packers run, there have been seven three-peats in the four biggest North American pro sports leagues:

PETER AIKEN/AP

Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes, left, and tight end Travis Kelce celebrate with the Lamar Hunt Trophy after beating the Buffalo Bills in the AFC Championship Game on Jan. 26 in Kansas City, Mo. They will attempt to win a third consecutive Super Bowl title on Feb. 9.

Oakland Athletics, 1972-74

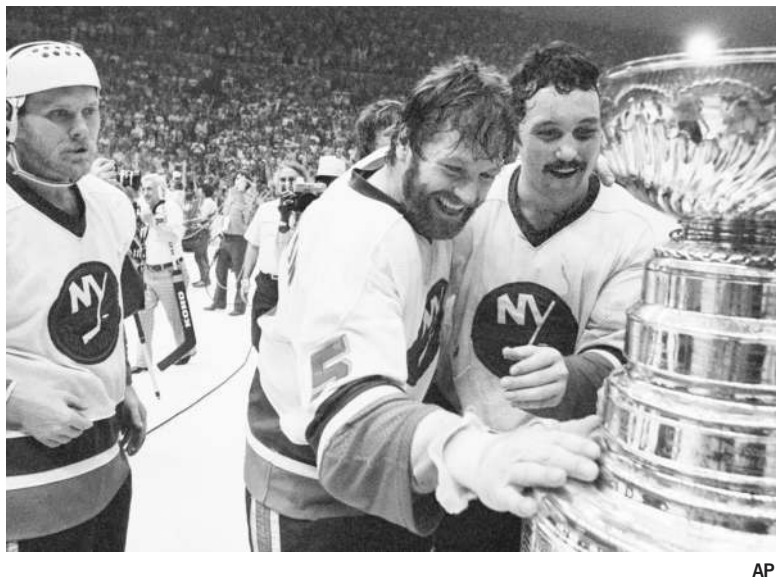
Charlie Finley's Swingin' A's dominated baseball in the early 1970s with a roster filled with big characters. Led by slugger Reggie Jackson, dominant starters Catfish Hunter and Vida Blue, the A's knocked off the Reds, Mets and Dodgers in successive seasons to join the Yankees as the only baseball franchises to win three consecutive titles.

Montreal Canadiens, 1976-79

Montreal dominated the NHL for decades with 23 Stanley Cups. The majority came in the pre-expansion Original Six era, but the Canadiens put together an impressive run in the late 1970s under coach Scotty Bowman. Led by dynamic scorer Guy LaFleur, two Cup-clinching goals by Jacque Lemaire, Hall of Fame defenseman Larry Robinson and goalie Ken Dryden, Montreal raced to four straight titles with a 48-10 record in the four postseason runs.

New York Islanders, 1980-83

As soon as the Canadiens' run ended, the Islanders started one of their own as the last hockey team to win at least three straight titles. Al Arbour's squad was led by high-scoring wing Mike Bossy, defenseman Denis Potvin and goalie Billy Smith. The run started with an overtime clincher by Bobby Nystrom against Philadelphia in the 1980 Stanley Cup Final and then they lost only once in three other trips to the Final.



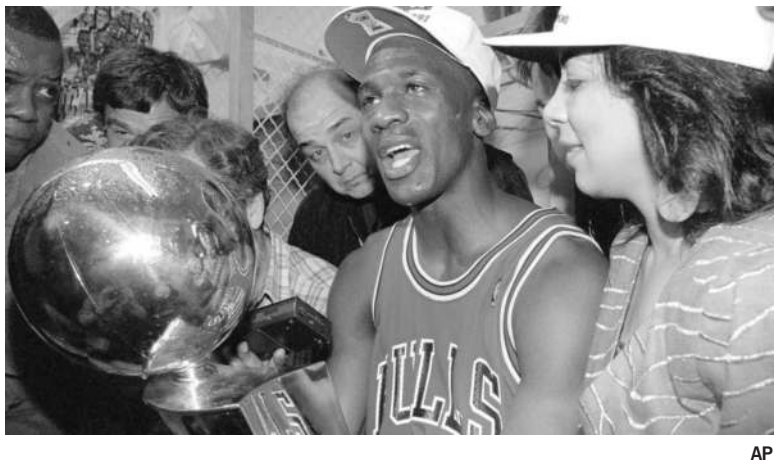
AP

Denis Potvin (5) touches the Stanley Cup after the New York Islanders won the NHL championship at Nassau Coliseum in Uniondale, N.Y., on May 24, 1980. The Islanders' three titles from 1980-83 followed three straight won by the Montreal Canadiens from 1976-79.

Chicago Bulls, 1991-93 and 1996-98

After coming up short in back-to-back seasons against the Detroit Pistons, Michael Jordan and the Bulls broke through in the 1991 NBA Finals by beating Magic Johnson and the Lakers in five games. Chicago dominated for most of the decade, repeating in 1992 and 1993 for the NBA's first three-peat since Boston won eight straight titles from 1959-66.

After a brief step back in the 1994-95 seasons when Jordan stepped away to play baseball, Chicago was even more dominant in its second run. The Bulls won a then-record 72 regular-season games on the way to the title in 1996 and then won again the next two years before Jordan temporarily retired and the team broke up.



AP

Michael Jordan led the Chicago Bulls to three consecutive NBA titles twice, with a short baseball career between the three-peats.

New York Yankees, 1998-2000

The Yankees had several dynastic runs in their history, winning four straight World Series from 1936-39 and then five in a row from 1949-53. But they are the only team to win three straight World Series in the free agency era. Led by homegrown stars Derek Jeter, Mariano Rivera, Andy Pettitte and Bernie Williams, Joe Torre's squad won the franchise's first title in 18 years in 1996.

After a playoff loss to Cleveland the next season, New York won three in a row starting with a then-record 114 wins in 1998. The Yankees dominated in the postseason with a 33-8 record.

Los Angeles Lakers, 2000-02

After coaching the Bulls to both of their three-peats in the 1990s, coach Phil Jackson did the same when he joined a talented Lakers team led by O'Neal and Bryant that had underperformed before his arrival. The Lakers needed an epic Game 7 comeback against Portland in the Western Conference Finals in 2000 on the way to the first title, went 15-1 in the postseason to repeat the following year and then had to pull out another Game 7 conference final win in 2002 against Sacramento on the way to the three-peat.

SUPER BOWL LIX

Dream: What has been commonplace for Chiefs is elusive for most players

FROM PAGE 48

said Hopkins, a three-time All-Pro, who had done just about everything in his career but play for a true championship contender. "A dream come true. I've been in the league 12 years and I haven't gotten this far."

The Chiefs have, of course. They are making their third straight trip to the big game, and fifth in six years, as they try to become the first franchise in NFL history to raise three consecutive Lombardi Trophies come Super Bowl Sunday.

They might as well start scheduling these February business trips.

But for most players, including Hopkins, making it is akin to a crowning achievement, a moment they worked for their entire career. In his case, that meant 178 regular-season games and eight more in the playoffs. His combined production has meant more than 1,000 catches and 13,000 yards, or roughly 7½ miles worth of receptions. And it meant many wins, but just as many losses.

So it was quite the career lifeline for Hopkins when Kansas City, which had lost Brown and Rashee Rice to injuries, asked the Titans about a trade. He joined a franchise with a championship pedigree from a team that finished 3-14 this past season.

"To get traded and try to learn the playbook overnight, it was tough. But this organization and these coaches, they're here for a reason, to get guys to be their best," Hopkins said.

"I never went anywhere where they were talking about the Super Bowl."

Hunt joined the Chiefs under similar circumstances: They needed a running back after Isiah Pacheco got hurt.

He was sitting around at home when it happened, still recovering from a core muscle surgery that had scared many teams off from signing him this season. Hunt picked up the phone and called Andy Reid, who had coached him in Kansas City — before off-the-field issues led to Hunt's release — and who had stayed in contact with him over the years.

"He just said he wanted to be there," Reid recalled. "He's got a good heart, even when he went through his deal. He has a good heart, and I had confidence he could jump in and help us, and I knew he wanted to redeem himself amongst the community."

Hunt immediately became the lead running back for the Chiefs, picking up hard yards every time he touched the ball. When Pacheco returned from his injury, it quickly became apparent that Hunt was still the more productive of the two, and it showed in an AFC title win over Buffalo last week. Hunt ran 17 times for 64 yards and a touchdown.

ASHLEY LANDIS/AP

Kansas City Chiefs wide receiver Marquise Brown, sidelined into December by a preseason shoulder injury, is back on the field and chasing his first Super Bowl championship.

Now, he's headed to his first Super Bowl after playing more than 100 regular-season games.

"It's always special to come full circle," Kansas City general manager Brett Veach said, "and to see the way he's grown and developed on and off the field is great. He's a phenomenal football player and I'm blessed that it worked out and he's back here."

Brown is likewise chasing his first Super Bowl ring, though his path to this point was a bit different.

The fleet-footed yet injury-prone wide receiver signed a one-year deal with the Chiefs prior to the season, hoping to be the No. 1 option for Patrick Mahomes on a team chasing a historic Super Bowl title.

Instead, on the very first play of the preseason, he sustained a shoulder injury that many thought would end Brown's season.

Kansas City held out hope that he might return, though, and his rehab by November was ahead of schedule. Brown finally got on the field in December and has become a part of a wide receiver group that may be the best the Chiefs have had in years.

Just like Hopkins and Hunt, Brown now finds himself playing for a championship on the biggest stage in the game.

"Just seeing Kareem standing there going, 'Wow, this is unbelievable,' or D.J. jumping up and down, who's been in this league a while and been through a few things, or DeAndre — he had a smile on his face, it was a mile wide," Reid said. "I mean, all those things, (Samaje) Perine goes and helps seals the (AFC title) for us — a new addition. All that stuff is great. That's why you do this, that's why you do this as a coach. To get to see those guys that have achieved like they've achieved here."

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SUPER BOWL LIX

Eagles' run fueled by changes after crash last season

By Dan Gelston
Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — The Eagles were indeed flying high as the best in the NFL, boasting a 10-1 record with a No. 1 seed, home-field advantage in the playoffs, and yes, a Super Bowl ring all ahead as credible goals.

This season? On the way to the Super Bowl on Feb. 9 in a rematch from two years ago against Kansas City?

No, try 2023, when coach Nick Sirianni and quarterback Jalen Hurts' run at a Super Bowl instead turned into one of the more epic meltdowns in Philly sports history — and there have been scores of them.

The Eagles were 10-1 until they were clobbered by the 49ers at home by 23 points in an NFC championship game rematch. Dallas beat Philadelphia by 20 points the next week and the losses — and finger pointing — snowballed from there. The Eagles limped to a 1-5 regular-season finish before they were put of their misery in a wild-card loss to the Buccaneers.

Sirianni was on the hot seat despite three playoff appearances and a Super Bowl trip in three seasons with Philadelphia. Changes were mandated — from the assistants to the game plan to drafting to repairing the loose connective tissue inside the locker room.

The harsh lessons learned from last season fueled the Eagles on their way to a 14-win regular season and three more wins in the playoffs.

Team owner Jeffrey Lurie and general manager Howie Roseman declined to move on from Sirianni, and Philadelphia made the moves needed to bring them back to the top of the NFL — and they are one win away from reaching the pinnacle.

"It's been the story of the 2023 to the 2024 Eagles. As bad of a feeling we had about how last year ended, I think it makes you who you are," Sirianni said.

Now, it's off to try to win just the franchise's second Super Bowl.

"That's pretty dope," Sirianni said. "That's all my focus is on."

Hurts and Sirianni

Perhaps a sign their rapport this season has turned more cohesive than taxing, Sirianni insisted Hurts was joking when the QB quipped after the NFC title game that he had been freed from the offense's "straitjacket."

Super Bowl LIX
Kansas City Chiefs (17-2)
vs. Philadelphia Eagles (17-3)
at New Orleans
AFN-Sports
12:30 a.m. Feb. 10 CET
8:30 a.m. Feb. 10 JKT

Hurts had six wins this season when he threw for less than 200 yards passing before he threw for 246 yards and accounted for four touchdowns in Philadelphia's NFC championship game win over Washington.

"We've been winning a couple different ways this year. I think he was just having fun after the game," Sirianni said. "I know this, and he's said this plenty of times: He doesn't care how we win. I don't care how we win, as long as we win. We do everything we can do to be able to win."

The No. 1 storyline in training camp this season was just how thorny was Hurts and Sirianni's relationship last season, and would any issues carry over into this one?

Hurts offered a lukewarm endorsement of Sirianni in the aftermath of the playoff loss in Tampa Bay. He said days later his tepid response was only because he was caught off guard by questions about Sirianni's job status.

"We've been through a lot together, right? A lot of wins, some down times," Sirianni said this week. "That's what kind of forges relationships."

While some of the best Super Bowl winners in history have come with strained relationships between a QB and coach, Hurts has backed Sirianni publicly this season — even if it wasn't always a rousing endorsement. They are, through it all, only the first coach/QB pair in franchise history to make two Super Bowls.

"He's done a great job," Hurts said.

New coordinators

One of the most distressing signs the Eagles were in free fall mode last season with no way out came when Sirianni made former Lions coach Matt Patricia the defensive play-caller and essentially stripped defensive coordinator Sean Desai of any true responsibility. Desai and Patricia were jettisoned in the offseason, as was offensive coordinator Brian Johnson. Johnson lasted only one season in Philadelphia and Hurts regressed, throwing a career-high 15 interceptions and with his passer rating dropping to 89.1 from 101.5.

The new guys couldn't be better.

Offensive coordinator Kellen Moore assumed play-calling responsibilities and has been one of the hottest head coaching candidates in the NFL. The Eagles also jumped on hiring 66-year-old Vic Fangio to run the defense, and he's made it the top-rated one in the league.

The defense has allowed 10, 22 and 23 points and has 10 takeaways — including 21 points off three fumble recoveries against the Commanders — in the postseason.

"The players have to play well to play great defense, so it's a combination of what Vic does and how he motivates the guys to get them to play to the highest level that they can," Sirianni said. "Just got a ton of respect for him and sure glad he's here."

A former backup QB who played behind Dak Prescott with Dallas in 2017 before becoming his position coach the next year, Moore directed a Philadelphia offense that featured Saquon Barkley as the ninth running back in NFL history to rush for 2,000 yards in the regular season.

"There are different things that we've been doing that have really helped us. There are some things that are similar to what we've done in the past because we've been good at those things," Sirianni said. "And then there are things that are new to both what we've done and Kellen's system as well. Kellen's done a phenomenal job of handling all those things, putting our offense in positions that we been successful in."

Barkley arrives

Former Eagles running back Miles Sanders ran for a solid 1,269 yards in the 2022 Super Bowl season and Kenneth Gainwell was — and still is — a serviceable backup.

Hurts was the team's leading rusher with 70 yards in the Super Bowl and Philadelphia had just 115 yards rushing overall.

The Eagles look like a whole new franchise at times with Barkley.

Barkley is near the top of the short list of all-time great Philadelphia sports free-agent signings. He ran for 2,005 yards, rips off 60-yard scoring runs with the ease of a Joel Embiid layup and has turned the offense into its most elite dual threat since the halcyon days of Donovan McNabb and Terrell Owens.

The Eagles aren't going to have a chance at beating the Chiefs if Barkley isn't at his best — no small feat in a season that's earned him comparisons to Terrell Davis and Eric Dickerson as among the best for a running back in NFL history.

Matt Slocum/AP

Eagles coach Nick Sirianni, left, quarterback Jalen Hurts celebrate after winning the NFC Championship game against the Washington Commanders on Jan. 26 in Philadelphia.

Phelan M. Ebenhack/AP

Philadelphia quarterback Jalen Hurts walks off the field after a wild-card playoff loss against the Buccaneers on Jan. 15, 2024, in Tampa, Fla. The loss capped off a 1-5 collapse at the end of last season for the Eagles.

SPORTS

High cost for Commodores

Vandy racking up big wins, big fines for storming court ›› College basketball, Page 43

SUPER BOWL LIX

PETER AIKEN (ABOVE) AND MATT FREED (BELOW)/AP

Running back Kareem Hunt (29) was home recovering from offseason surgery when the Kansas City Chiefs signed him to replace Isaiah Pacheco, who was injured in Week 2. Below: Wide receiver DeAndre Hopkins was playing on a Tennessee Titans team mired in a dismal season when the Chiefs acquired him in a late-October trade.

'Dream come true'

Hopkins, Hunt, other veteran players finally getting their Super Bowl chance as Chiefs chase three-peat

BY DAVE SKRETTA
Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. DeAndre Hopkins was stuck on a downtrodden team in Tennessee headed for the No. 1 overall pick in the draft.

Kareem Hunt was stuck without a job at all.

Yet the veteran wide receiver and running back, along with Marquise Brown, D.J. Humphries and others, managed to strike gold — as in, gold and diamond-encrusted AFC championship rings — when circumstances brought them to Kansas City.

Now, that collection of players will try for even more riches when they face the Philadelphia Eagles in the Super Bowl on Feb. 9, a remarkable twist for NFL careers that had been long on personal success but short on team results.

"Words can't really describe it,"

SEE DREAM ON PAGE 46

INSIDE

Collapse was catalyst for Eagles' changes
Page 47

No runaway choice for rookie of the year

›› NBA, Page 44

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