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Expert warns of risks with Russian jets in Mideast

By J.P. LAWRENCE
Stars and Stripes

Russian fighter jets are creating the risk of an accidental shoot-down by flying over U.S. bases in Syria without telling American counterparts first, a U.S. defense official warned.

“Russia has continued to violate protected airspace above U.S. and coalition positions in Syria,” Capt. Daniel de La Fe, a spokesman for 9th Air Force (U.S. Air Forces Central), said Thursday. “Russia’s violations of this airspace have the potential to be misinterpreted as an act of aggression and lead to escalation.”

Drone attacks by Iranian-backed militias already have U.S. troops stationed in the Middle East on high alert for aerial threats, and the Russian overflights could put them on edge even more, military officials and analysts said.

Russian aircraft flying over American bases in Syria are also most likely collecting intelligence and sharing it with adversaries of the U.S. in the region, Joseph Votel, a retired general who helmed U.S. Central Command from 2016 to 2019, said Thursday.

U.S. troops in Syria and Iraq have faced more than 100 attacks from Iranian-backed militias since the start of the Israel-Hamas war on Oct. 7, the Defense Depart-

SEE RISKS ON PAGE 8

To our readers

This holiday edition of Stars and Stripes will be on sale Saturday through Tuesday. Publication will resume with Wednesday’s edition.



DAVID ROWE/U.S. Navy

Sailors man the rails of the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz, on June 28. The ship is in Puget Sound Naval Shipyard for several months of maintenance before it goes into retirement.

Navy’s supercarrier strategy will go on after USS Nimitz is gone

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The USS Nimitz has been the template of American sea power for nearly a half-century.

Commissioned four days after the fall of Saigon ended the Vietnam War in 1975, the 100,000-ton supercarrier powered by two Westinghouse A4W nuclear reactors could set off at 30 knots to trouble spots around the world and catapult 80 attack jets at enemies.

“You don’t have to ask anyone’s permission to use their bases or provide fuel for your ship

— you just go and stay for as long as you need,” said Mark Cancian, a retired Marine colonel who is now a senior adviser with the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

The Navy would add nine more Nimitz-class carriers to the fleet over the next 34 years. When the Nimitz-class carrier USS George H.W. Bush was commissioned in 2009, the Navy simultaneously retired its last non-nuclear carrier, USS Kitty Hawk.

USS Nimitz is in Puget Sound Naval Ship-

yard for several months of maintenance before it starts what’s likely its final assignment: retirement. It will be followed in regular intervals by its older sister ships.

“Inactivation of Nimitz class aircraft carriers is currently scheduled to begin with USS Nimitz in 2026, subject to congressional budget approval,” said Alan Baribeau, a spokesman for the Office of Corporate Communications at Naval Sea Systems Command.

SEE LEGACY ON PAGE 7

BUSINESS/WEATHER

BlendJet recalling nearly 5M portable blenders

Associated Press

BlendJet is recalling about 4.8 million of its portable blenders over laceration and fire hazards after receiving dozens of reports of injuries, federal regulators said Thursday.

BlendJet 2 Portable Blenders can overheat or catch fire, according to a notice from the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, and their blender blades can break off during use.

There have been 329 reports of blades breaking during use to

date, the CPSC said, as well as 17 additional reports of overheating or fires that resulted in about \$150,000 of property damage claims. The company has also received 49 reports of minor burn injuries and one reported laceration injury.

Regulators urged consumers to stop using the recalled blenders immediately and contact BlendJet for a free base unit replacement. To receive the replacement part, customers will need to remove and cut up the base's rubber seal

and email or upload a photo using BlendJet's website.

BlendJet said in a prepared statement that the recall impacts older Blender 2 blenders and that BlendJet 2 blenders now available for purchase through the company's website and retail partners have updated components and are not subject to the recall.

BlendJet 2 blenders with serial numbers that begin with numbers "5543" or higher are not under recall, the Benicia, Calif., company said.

EXCHANGE RATES			
Military rates		Commercial rates	
Euro costs (Jan. 2)	\$1.08	Bahrain(Dinar)	0.3769
British pound (Jan. 2)	\$1.24	Britain (Pound)	1.2734
Japanese yen (Jan. 2)	139.00	Canada (Dollar)	1.3224
South Korean won (Jan. 2)	1256.00	China(Yuan)	7.0805
		Denmark (Krone)	6.7324
		Egypt (Pound)	30.9258
		Euro	0.9034
		Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.8144
		Hungary (Forint)	345.66
		Israel (Shekel)	3.6117
		Japan (Yen)	141.50
		Kuwait(Dinar)	0.3073
		Norway (Krone)	10.1291
		Philippines (Peso)	55.42
		Poland (Zloty)	3.93
		Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7501
		Singapore (Dollar)	1.3198
		South Korea (Won)	1297.02
		Switzerland (Franc)	0.8379
		Thailand (Baht)	34.43
		Turkey (NewLira)	29.5648
(Military exchange rates are those available to customers at military banking facilities in the country of issuance for Japan, South Korea, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. For nonlocal currency exchange rates (i.e., purchasing British pounds in Germany), check with your local military banking facility. Commercial rates are interbank rates provided for reference when buying currency. All figures are foreign currencies to one dollar, except for the British pound, which is represented in dollars-to-pound, and the euro, which is dollars-to-euro.)			
INTEREST RATES			
Prime rate			8.50
Interest Rates Discount rate			6.00
Federal funds market rate			5.33
3-month bill			5.40
30-year bond			3.95

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MILITARY

Sailor who helped stop suicide gives more help

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — A Navy Seabee whose quick thinking helped prevent a suicide earlier this year is ensuring that more sailors have the assistance they need to navigate the rigors of life in the service.

Petty Officer First Class Cayla George this year helped establish an Alcoholics Anonymous chapter at Naval Air Station Sigonella in Sicily. That effort followed a February episode in which a co-worker tried to end their life.

George's reaction to a phone call from a number she didn't recognize is credited with initiating a team response that saved the sailor's life, the Navy said in a statement.

The caller said the service member was in their barracks room attempting suicide, George said Dec. 19.

With the person still on the phone, George texted base duty personnel to alert them. After hanging up, she made calls that reached security and first responders, who were able to get to the service member in time, George said.

"I was very, very thankful I was able to answer the phone, take it seriously and be able to immediately offer some aid and start the process of getting the service member some help," George said.

The sailor had given the caller George's cellphone number as someone on base to contact. Previously, George had spent time with the sailor after noticing they were having trouble sleeping and potentially feeling alone and homesick. Those problems could be indicators a person may need help, she said.

After spending a day with the sailor, George thought they would be OK. It seemed the sailor was just going through typical stress and needed more interaction with people who cared about them, she said.

But the attempted suicide "just goes to show that, sometimes, we don't know," George said.

"Sometimes, we just have to be very, very aware and be ready to



JAMES HONG/U.S. Navy

Petty Officer 1st Class Cayla George receives the Seabee Memorial Scholarship Association's 2023 Everyday Hero Award from Senior Chief Petty Officer Marc Comaduran at the Naval Construction Battalion Center in Gulfport, Miss., on Nov. 16. The award was created to recognize Seabees for heroic actions, on or off duty.

"Sometimes, we just have to be very, very aware and be ready to help one another if it comes up."

Petty Officer 1st Class Cayla George

help one another if it comes up," she said.

For her actions, George received the Seabee Heritage Command's 2023 Everyday Hero Award during a ceremony at the Naval Construction Battalion Center in Gulfport, Miss., on Nov. 16.

A facilities management specialist who has served in the Navy for nearly nine years, George has been assigned to Sigonella since 2022.

She is responsible for 81 facilities and 22 tenant commands at the base, according to the Navy.

She also is the team lead in her department for a Navy program that works to help sailors better overcome stress and problems in life. And George is the assistant drug and alcohol program adviser, she said.

As a volunteer, George was part of a group at NAS Sigonella that reestablished memorial crosses for service members killed in traffic accidents near the base in November, and she is the general service representative for the base AA chapter.

In the wake of the suicide attempt, George coordinated training to help public works department colleagues who might be contemplating suicide and ensured others struggling with the news that a fellow sailor had tried to end their life got help, according to the Navy's statement.

George's commitment to helping other sailors, especially those new in the service, is rooted in her first years in the Navy, she said. She remembers tough deploy-

ments to Djibouti and Somalia. There were few conversations and resources to help her prepare for and cope with stress and exhaustion.

Limited help, such as brief conversations about stress and suggestions to talk about it with a chaplain, came only after a stressful situation. More guidance and resources were needed to help her be a stronger sailor, George said.

"That would go for all of our junior sailors," she said. "The more resources we have, the stronger we're going to be as a team and as a Navy."

Suicides among sailors have been on the rise since 2006, according to the Navy's website.

In 2022, 71 active-duty sailors killed themselves, a rate of 20.6 per 100,000, according to the Defense Department's annual report on suicide in the military.

The most current data on the Navy's website indicates that as of Aug. 9, 41 active-duty sailors had taken their own lives.

The Navy isn't the only branch grappling with suicide. Last year, 331 active-duty service members militarywide died by suicide, a rate of 25.1 per 100,000, according to the DOD report.

George said the service member she helped has returned to the U.S. She hasn't spoken with them but has learned they are doing well.

"It was good to know that one (potential loss) went the other way," she said.

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Lawyers to handle sexual assault cases for military

DOD move takes decisions on major crimes out of commanders' hands

By LOLITA C. BALDOR
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. military on Thursday opened a new chapter in how it investigates and prosecutes cases of sexual assault and other major crimes, putting independent lawyers in charge of those decisions and sidelining commanders after years of pressure from Congress.

The change, long resisted by Pentagon leaders, was finally forced by frustrated members of Congress who believed that too often commanders would fail to take victims' complaints seriously or would try to protect alleged perpetrators in their units.

The new law was fueled by a persistent increase in sexual assaults and harassment across the military. The Air Force, the Marine Corps and the Navy all saw reported sexual assaults go up last year, but a sharp 9% drop in reports from the Army — the largest military service — drove the overall number down. In 2021, reported assaults spiked by 13%.

Under the law, new special counsels will have the authority to make prosecution decisions on a number of crimes, including murder, rape and several other sexual assault-related offenses, kidnapping, domestic violence, making or possessing child sexual abuse images, stalking and retaliation.

In a statement, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III called it "the most important reform to our military justice system since the creation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice in 1950."

It's unclear, however, what impact the change will have on the broader problem of sexual misconduct in the military, including if it will trigger an increase in prosecutions and, if so, whether that will have any deterrent effect.

Senior officials from the military services who are familiar with the new program said they already have more than 160 certified special trial counsels who will take over the prosecution decisions as of Thursday. Many of those lawyers, however, have already been involved, providing advice and support for months on cases that are underway. The officials spoke to reporters on the condition of anonymity to discuss the new program under rules set by

the Defense Department.

As of Thursday, the special trial counsels will have sole authority to make prosecution decisions on new cases involving the major crimes. Any advice on already existing cases is nonbinding, the officials said.

According to the officials, the Army will have 65 certified trial counsels, the Air Force will have 40, the Marine Corps will have 33 and the Navy will have 24, with 23 attorneys who are not yet certified assisting in the cases. About 10 more are expected to be certified in the summer.

The lawyers will be scattered around the U.S. and the world, with larger numbers at bases and locations where there are more service members and more crime.

The officials said they expect each trial counsel to handle as many as 50 investigations and roughly eight to 12 trials a year.

An independent commission that studied sexual assaults in the military suggested in its report that the use of special counsels would have a positive impact. It said the special counsels would make better decisions on what cases should go forward, resulting in higher conviction rates. Increased convictions, the report said, will encourage more accused perpetrators to make plea agreements, which alleviates the need for victims to testify at trials.

"These outcomes will also increase confidence in the public that the military is correcting its course in the prosecution of special victim cases," the report said.

Sean Timmons, managing partner at the Tully Rinckey law firm, which specializes in military cases, said the change doesn't really get at the underlying behavioral problems. As a result, he said, it is unlikely to have any real impact or deterrent effect on misconduct by service members. He said that it could result in more people being fired as a result of board proceedings but that in agreements in which the victims don't testify, the cases may end up being weaker.

"My analogy of that is we're rearranging the chairs on the Titanic," said Timmons, a former Army judge advocate general. "Nothing will really change other than semantics and appearances. That's the unfortunate reality."

Correction

A story in Friday's edition of Stars and Stripes about Army volunteers visiting an orphanage in South Korea incorrectly identified Jang Seon Jung. He is the mayor of Cheonan city.

MILITARY



A U.S. Navy diver jumps from the USNS Salvor during the ongoing CV-22 Osprey recovery efforts off the coast of Yakushima, Japan, on Wednesday.

Crews continue search for 8th airman a month after Osprey crash in Japan

BY ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

U.S. and Japanese crews continue to search for the remains of the last of eight crew members killed when an Air Force CV-22B Osprey crashed off the coast of southwestern Japan in late November, the Air Force said recently.

Divers searched the waters around Yakushima, an island just south of Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan's four main islands, for the remains of Maj. Eric Spendlove, 36, of St. George, Utah, Air Force Special Operations Command said in a Facebook post Wednesday.

"Locating and recovering our eighth Airman remains the primary effort," the command wrote.

Salvage teams meanwhile are working to recover the tiltrotor aircraft, according to several Air Force Special Operations Command news releases.

A Navy rescue and salvage ship, the USNS Salvor, joined the search Dec. 23, and its crew is coordinating with teams from the Japan Coast Guard, Japan Self-Defense Force, local law enforcement, volunteers and other U.S. military assets, the command announced in a news release that day.

More than 1,000 military and law enforcement personnel and over

100 civilians had joined the search as of Dec. 12. The teams by Dec. 8 had searched the entirety of Yakushima's 55-mile coastline and more than 31,000 square miles of the surrounding ocean surface, Air Force Special Operations Command said Dec. 12.

At least 46 U.S. and Japanese aircraft, 11 aerial drones and 23 ships have participated in the search, while 10 underwater unmanned vessels and more than 50 divers have searched the ocean floor, the command said.

The Osprey, which operated under the callsign Gundam 22, crashed off the coast of Yakushima on Nov. 29 during a routine training mission.

The aircraft was assigned to the 353rd Special Operations Wing at Yokota Air Base in western Tokyo and had departed Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni near Hiroshima that day. It was en route to Kadena Air Base on Okinawa.

The cause of the crash is still under investigation, but preliminary findings determined it was likely an equipment failure rather than human error.

The body of Staff Sgt. Jake Galihier, 24, of Pittsfield, Mass., was found within hours of the crash alongside an empty life raft and wreckage from the aircraft.

The remains of five more airmen were discovered on Dec. 4 along with the aircraft's fuselage about 100 feet below the ocean's surface.

Two were identified Dec. 5 as Maj. Luke Unrath, 34, of Riverside, Calif., and Tech Sgt. Zachary Lavooy, 33, of Oviedo, Fla.

Three more were identified Dec. 6 as Capt. Terrell Brayman, 32, of Pittsford, N.Y.; Staff Sgt. Jake Turnage, 25, of Kennesaw, Ga.; and Senior Airman Brian Johnson, 32, of Reynoldsburg, Ohio.

The Secretary of the Air Force posthumously promoted Brayman to major with an effective date of Dec. 15, Air Force Special Operations Command said in a Dec. 13 news release.

The body of the seventh crewmember, Maj. Jeff Hoernemann, 32, of Andover, Minn., was discovered Dec. 10 and publicly identified on Dec. 11 after his family was notified.

Following the crash, the Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps grounded their Ospreys under a service-wide operational stand down until the investigation determines the cause of the crash and recommendations are made to return the aircraft to service.

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Army stops paying storage costs for deployed soldiers

Service cites cost, eyes new plan

BY DOUG G. WARE
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Army is replacing a years-old policy that allowed soldiers who are sent on deployment to store personal items — such as vehicles — at no cost while they're gone, the service said.

The decision was made by Army personnel officials in recent months and the move took effect on the first day of fiscal 2024.

"Effective 1 October, 2023 ... activities are therefore no longer authorized to fund [household goods] or [privately owned vehicles] storage requests for deploying soldiers," Army Sustainment Command wrote in a memo outlining the change. "There is no authority to grant exception to this policy, however, unit commanders may use their designated motor pool or a designated fenced area to store [vehicles] for soldiers on [temporary deployments] at no additional cost."

"Although [regulations] establish that a service member ... may store special storage of [household goods] and [private vehicles] if authorized/approved, the Army has no written policy authorizing or approving these entitlements," it continued.

The impetuses for the change, officials said, were budget constraints and a determination that there's no Army policy that "explicitly authorizes" such storage benefits for soldiers sent on contingency operations, which are deployments in which soldiers may have to engage in combat.

Army personnel officials indicated to Stars and Stripes on Thursday, however, that a new policy for storage benefits is coming.

"Army Sustainment Command discontinued the use of operational funds to store vehicles privately owned by soldiers deploying on non-contingency operations due to

policy and funding constraints [or issues]," said Sgt. Pablo Saez, an Army spokesman. "We understand the burden this could potentially place on soldiers, and [the Army] is drafting policy that would enable such storage."

Costs associated with moving and storing personal items can be high. The Pentagon's joint travel regulations note that they include "shipment, drayage, packing, crating, unpacking and uncrating."

News of the change drew frustration from some in social media channels.

"Once again our soldiers are being asked to pay the burden of being deployed," one critic wrote.

"I can't imagine why recruiting and retention are hurting," another said.

Neither the Army nor the Air Force or Navy met their recruiting targets for fiscal 2023. All three were a few thousand recruits short of their goal and are working to overcome modern recruiting challenges — such as a smaller pool of qualified candidates and low interest in military service among younger Americans.

According to recent Pentagon data, just 23% of Americans between 17 and 24 qualify physically and academically for military service.

Recently, the Army has had trouble even storing some of its own stuff. In October, a report by the Defense Department inspector general said almost \$2 billion worth of the Army's land combat equipment had been deteriorating due to improper storage.

Among those items were gas turbine engines worth more than \$89 million, which the report said were stored for long periods outside when they should have been put away indoors.

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X-37B space plane blasts off on a long, secretive mission

Associated Press

The U.S. military's X-37B space plane blasted off Thursday on another secretive mission that's expected to last at least a couple of years.

Like previous missions, the reusable plane resembling a mini space shuttle carried classified experiments. There's no one on

board.

The space plane took off aboard SpaceX's Falcon Heavy rocket from NASA's Kennedy Space Center at night, more than two weeks late because of technical issues.

It marked the seventh flight of an X-37B, which has logged more than 10 years in orbit since its debut in 2010.

The last flight, the longest one yet, lasted 2½ years before ending on a runway at Kennedy a year ago.

Space Force officials would not say how long this orbital test vehicle would remain aloft or what's on board other than a NASA experiment to gauge the effects of radiation on materials.

Built by Boeing, the X-37B re-

sembles NASA's retired space shuttles. But they're just one-fourth the size at 29 feet long. No astronauts are needed; the X-37B has an autonomous landing system.

They take off vertically like rockets but land horizontally like planes, and are designed to orbit between 150 miles and 500 miles high.



U.S. AIR FORCE/AP
Built by Boeing, the military's X-37B space plane resembles NASA's retired space shuttles.

MILITARY

Docs show toxins lurked in Air Force nukes

Many service members now have cancer

BY TARA COPP
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A large pool of dark liquid festering on the floor. No fresh air. Computer displays that would overheat and ooze out a fishy-smelling gel that nauseated the crew. Asbestos readings 50 times higher than the Environmental Protection Agency's safety standards.

These are just some of the past toxic risks that were in the underground capsules and silos where Air Force nuclear missile crews have worked since the 1960s. Now many of those service members have cancer.

The toxins were recorded in hundreds of pages of documents dating back to the 1980s that were obtained by The Associated Press through Freedom of Information Act requests. They tell a far different story from what Air Force leadership told the nuclear missile community decades ago, when the first reports of cancer among service members began to surface:

"The workplace is free of health hazards," a Dec. 30, 2001, Air Force investigation found.

"Sometimes, illnesses tend to occur by chance alone," a follow-up 2005 Air Force review found.

The capsules are again under scrutiny.

The AP reported in January that at least nine current or former nuclear missile officers, or missileers, had been diagnosed with the blood cancer non-Hodgkin's lymphoma.

Then hundreds more came forward self-reporting cancer diagnoses. In response the Air Force launched its most sweeping review to date and tested thousands of air, water, soil and surface samples in all of the facilities where the service members worked. Four current samples have come back with unsafe levels of polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, a known carcinogen used in electrical wiring.

In early 2024, more data is expected, and the Air Force is working on an official count of how many current or former missile community service members have cancer.

Some current missileers told the AP they were concerned by the new reports but believe the Air Force is being transparent in its current search for toxins. Many of them take some of the same precautions missileers have for generations, such as having "capsule



DANIEL BROSAM/U.S. Air Force

Airman 1st Class Jackson Ligon, left, and Senior Airman Jonathan Marinaccio, Air Force technicians, connect a re-entry system to a spacer on an intercontinental ballistic missile during a test on Sept. 22, 2020, at a launch facility near Great Falls, Mont.

clothes," the civilian attire they change into once inside the capsule to work the 24-hour shift. The clothes go straight into the laundry after a shift because they end up smelling metallic.

"Whenever you hear 'cancer' it's a little concerning," said Lt. Joy Hawkins, 23, a missileer at Malmstrom Air Force Base in Montana. To Hawkins and fellow missileer Lt. Samantha McGlinchey, who spoke to a visiting AP reporter as they completed an underground shift at launch control capsule Charlie, the news meant they would need to be diligent about medical checkups. "There's more testing, things to come, cleanup efforts," McGlinchey, 28, said. "For us early in our careers, it's better to be caught so early."

Others worry the dangers will again be played down.

When the latest rounds of test results were released, the Air Force did not initially reveal that samples showing contamination had critically higher PCB levels than EPA standards allow — and dozens of other areas tested were just below the EPA's threshold, said Steven Mayne, a former senior enlisted nuclear missile facility supervisor at Minot Air Force Base in North Dakota who now runs a Facebook group that is dedicated to posting Air Force news or internal memos.

"At this point the EPA, OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration) and senators from North Dakota and Montana need to look into this matter," Mayne said.

In December 2022, former Malmstrom missileers Jackie Perdue and Monte Watts, both of whom have been diagnosed with

non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, asked the Defense Department's inspector general to investigate.

"I believe health and safety standards have been violated, or not considered, and should be investigated," said Perdue, who served as a nuclear missile combat crew commander at Malmstrom from 1999 to 2006, in an inspector general complaint obtained by the AP.

Past Exposures

There are currently three nuclear missile bases in the United States: F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming, Minot and Malmstrom. Each base has 15 underground launch control capsules that act as hubs for fields of 10 Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missile silos each. The capsules are manned around the clock, 365 days a year. Missileers spend 24 hours or more each shift working underground in those capsules monitoring the ICBMs, ready to launch them if directed by the president.

The Air Force acknowledges the current review can't provide full answers on what past missileers were exposed to, but the data will establish a health profile likely to help them apply for veterans benefits.

However, there are plenty of warning signs about past toxic risks in the documents obtained by AP.

"Type and content of asbestos, please phone ASAP," a handwritten note reads on memo dated Nov. 9, 1992.

All of the documents obtained by the AP have been redacted to have the names blocked out, but the urgency was evident. "PRI-

ORITY," the handwritten note says, in all caps.

An environmental team at Malmstrom capsules Hotel and Juliet got worrisome asbestos readings from underneath a generator in the capsule equipment rooms. The equipment room is also underground, contained within the same, sealed-in workspace. The EPA's threshold for asbestos exposure is 1% for an eight-hour workday. But missileers were locked in there for 24 hours at a time, at least. If the weather was bad and the replacement crew couldn't make the drive to the site, a team could be stuck underground for as long as 72 hours. Hotel and Juliet recorded solid samples of chrysotile asbestos — a white asbestos that can be inhaled — between 15% to 30%.

At missile silo Quebec-12 in 1989 it found levels of up to 50% amosite asbestos, a brown asbestos found in cement and insulation. And a team looking at Malmstrom's Bravo capsule that same year had warned that even if it was left undisturbed, it could be dangerous. "Diesel room — when running leaks asbestos," it warned.

In his inspector general complaint, former Malmstrom missileer Watts said there was asbestos in the floor tile as well, and that missileers also "routinely removed, handled and replaced these tiles as part of required survival equipment inventories."

The documents also reveal multiple PCB spills throughout the decades. A 1987 report talks about a missileer calling his commander to report a severe headache and lightheadedness. The crew finds a clear, sticky syrup leaking under

the capsule's power panel.

Leaking consoles

By the mid-1990s a new missile targeting system was needed, and each capsule began a refurbishment to install a wall-sized computer console called REACT, for Rapid Execution and Combat Targeting System. The system would allow the U.S. more quickly to reprogram and retarget its nuclear missiles. Demolition of the old computer and construction of REACT began inside each of the 15 Malmstrom capsules.

Missileers wonder if the REACT refurbishment further disturbed asbestos and PCBs that were still in the capsules. But once installed, the new console also exposed missileers to a new toxin.

A clear liquid began to leak, followed by a fishy, ammonia-like smell. The crew began to complain of headaches and nausea, and the capsule was evacuated two hours later.

Malmstrom's team learned that the liquid was dimethylformamide, an electrolyte used in REACT's video display unit capacitors, because F.E. Warren, the Wyoming base, had recently reported similar leaks.

"The capacitors overheat and vent into the capsule in lieu of catastrophic failure," a 1996 memo found after a second dimethylformamide leak at Bravo. "To date, we have no idea how much of this material is contained in the capsules nor do we have any idea of the relative hazard to missile crews and maintenance personnel who come in contact with this material."

Medical studies on dimethylformamide's link to cancer are split; some report a clear tie to liver cancer, others say more study is needed.

Changes coming

All of the capsules will be closed down in a few years, as the military's new ICBM, the Sentinel, comes online. As part of the modernization, the old capsules will be demolished. A new, modern underground control center will be built on top of them. Air Force teams working on the new designs are aware of the cancer reports and are applying modern environmental health standards in the new centers — requirements that did not exist when the Minuteman capsules were first built, said Maj. Gen. John Newberry, commander of the Air Force's nuclear weapons center.

"We are absolutely learning from or understanding what's going on with Minuteman III, and if there's something that we need to look at from a Sentinel side," Newberry said.

The old capsules will remain in use until then.

PACIFIC

Old housing area gets 2nd life as defense site

Marine Corps newest Guam base tapped to protect America’s westernmost Pacific territory

BY SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

SITE EXCALIBUR, Guam — A former military housing area near the Marine Corps’ newest base is the most developed of numerous missile-defense facilities in the works to protect America’s westernmost Pacific territory.

The South Finegayan neighborhood, just south of Camp Blaz, has been home to Task Force Talon since September.

The unit is part of the Army’s 38th Air Defense Artillery Brigade, headquartered at Sagami-hara, Japan.

The battalion-sized unit is made up of 200 soldiers on Guam and 100 operating Japan-based radars. The task force has deployed six Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD, launchers, a radar, command and communications gear and dozens of armored vehicles along suburban streets where a few vacant houses still stand amid overgrown fields.

The spot, renamed Site Excalibur, resembles the sort of austere base U.S. troops might occupy in a combat zone, but it is “by far the most developed site” of numerous missile-defense facilities planned for Guam, Task Force Talon commander Col. Jonathan Stafford told Stars and Stripes at the site Nov. 30.

Responding to threats

The effort to build a 360-degree missile-defense system on Guam is a response to perceived threats from potential adversaries like China and North Korea, including ballistic, cruise and hypersonic missiles.

The system is expected to be



SETH ROBSON/Stars and Stripes

Task Force Talon members, from left, Master Sgt. Ayinde Waverly, Master Sgt. Steven Smith and Capt. Riley Campbell and unit commander Lt. Col. Jonathan Stafford stand near a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD, launcher at Site Excalibur, Guam, on Nov. 30.

operational by 2027 and comprise up to 20 sites across the island, according to the Missile Defense Agency.

Locations for the Enhanced Integrated Air and Missile Defense System range from Guam’s northernmost coastline to the island’s relatively remote southern region, according to a fact sheet released by the agency in May.

The system’s components — radars, sensors, launchers, interceptors, support facilities and a command-and-control center — would be spread around the island to achieve its 360-degree capability, according to Joint Region Marianas, the installation management command on Guam.

Long-term location

At Site Excalibur, soldiers work

inside shipping containers.

“The housing area was closed years ago and left abandoned,” Stafford said. “We have a number of milcon (military construction) projects being designed to be built here in the coming years. This is going to be the (task force’s) long-term location.”

A motor pool and a headquarters building are the most needed facilities, said Capt. Riley Campbell, commander of Echo Battery, 3rd Air Defense Artillery Regiment, which operates the THAAD launchers on Guam.

“Our motor pool is just a tarp,” she said at the site, gesturing to a vehicle parked under a fabric rain shelter.

A decade ago, the island’s missile defense was provided by warships equipped with the Aegis

weapon system. THAAD was deployed to Guam in 2013 in response to North Korean ballistic missile tests directed at the island, Stafford said.

“At that time, we had just fielded THAAD,” he said of the system that uses kinetic energy to destroy an enemy missile far above the ground.

Last year, a THAAD system operated by the United Arab Emirates made its first real-world intercept against an incoming Houthi ballistic missile. Task Force Talon initially operated from Andersen Air Force Base, east of Blaz. The move to Site Excalibur means soldiers have a lot more space for the missile-defense equipment, Stafford said.

“At our old site, we weren’t able to deploy all our launchers,” he

said. “Here, we can finally deploy all six.”

The move means there are fewer issues deconflicting the launchers from aircraft, Stafford said.

Familiar turf

Typhoon Mawar, which struck Guam in May, complicated the soldiers’ move, Stafford said, noting that troops displaced from their homes by the storm continued the missile-defense mission.

Most Task Force Talon soldiers come to Guam on two- to three-year tours. Their security is provided by Guam National Guard troops, he said.

“Being from Guam, we know about the local areas,” Capt. Denise Chargualaf, who leads the security force at Site Excalibur, said during Stars and Stripes’ visit.

“When I was a teenager, I used to play here with friends,” she said of the housing area.

Another guard soldier securing the site, Staff Sgt. Lynn Rengulbai, said she lived there with her family from 1985 to 1989. The daughter of an Air Force bomb loader, Rengulbai was guarding a checkpoint yards from where her old home stood.

“Back then there were a lot of military on Guam,” she recalled.

Spc. Christopher Timoteo, another Guam guard member at the site, also has happy memories of playing there with friends and family as a youngster.

“Being from the island, it’s cool how we can visit this site and see how much it has changed,” he said.

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Marine Corps asks for feedback on Hawaii upgrade plan

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii — The Marine Corps is seeking public comment on a draft environmental assessment for plans to modernize equipment, facilities and training in Hawaii to prepare its ground forces for expeditionary-style warfare in the Pacific.

“The proposed equipment changes are evolutions of existing equipment and combat capabilities and have operational characteristics similar to those historically used by Marine Corps ground forces in Hawai’i,” the assessment states.

The modernization would not change the number of Marine Corps ground forces in Hawaii, the assessment states.

The document concludes that the modernization would not adversely affect levels of noise, air quality, water and cultural resources, public health or transportation.

Construction of needed facilities and upgrading of equipment would happen over an eight-year period, with completion expected in 2031.

All construction would be confined to within Marine Corps Base Hawaii.

For example, the Marines would train with the Navy-Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System, or NEMESIS, at the Marine base at Kaneohe Bay. The system consists of a Naval Strike Missile carrier atop a joint light tactical vehicle. The Marines plan to deploy two platoons

of nine launchers each, according to the draft plan.

“Compared to cannon artillery training previously conducted on military training ranges in Hawai’i, NEMESIS training would involve a smaller transportation vehicle (JLTV vs 7-ton truck), a smaller number of personnel and equipment per training cycle, a smaller footprint, and would not involve ‘live fire’ of the weapon system on O’ahu,” the draft states.

None of the facilities proposed to be renovated or demolished under the proposed plan are listed or eligible for listing in the National Register of Historic Places, the assessment states.

“In developing facilities alternatives, the Marine Corps sought to maximize reuse and renovation of existing facilities and minimize the need for new construction,” the assessment states.

Training would continue on areas controlled by the Marine Corps and Army in the state, and “modernized equipment would not increase activity or impose new or greater environmental impacts on these training ranges,” the assessment states.

The Marine Corps is in the process of redirecting its mission “from sustained operations ashore to great-power and peer-level competition, with special emphasis on the Pacific,” the assessment states.

“This shift in mission, along with technological advancements in equipment sets, requires adjustments in how the Marine Corps organizes, trains, and

equips its force,” the assessment states.

Marine Corps units in Hawaii and Okinawa are already in the midst restructuring as part of Force Design 2030, which is aimed at creating an agile force more adept at fighting in the kinds of contested maritime spaces that would be central in a conflict with China.

The draft may be found at www.mcbehawaii.marines.mil.

Comments can be submitted by mail to Peer Amble, Stantec GS Inc., 737 Bishop St., Suite 3050, Honolulu HI 96813 or emailed to MCBH-EA@stantecgs.com.

The public comment period ends Jan. 25.

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MILITARY

NATO sees drop in Russian aircraft intercepts

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

NATO scrambled fighter planes more than 300 times this year to intercept Russian military aircraft flying near member countries' airspace, according to an alliance statement Friday, a number that represents a notable decline from the previous year's.

The spike to about 570 intercepts in 2022 came during a time of high tension as Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February of that year. It's unclear why the pace of in-

tercepts slowed in 2023, since tensions with Russia remain high.

That's in part due to the addition of Finland to the alliance in April. The Finnish decision to seek NATO membership resulted from the invasion of Ukraine, as Finland shares an 830-mile-long border with Russia.

Most of the 2023 intercepts occurred over the Baltic Sea, an area where NATO has a standing air-policing mission responsible for guarding against Russian planes approaching allied air-

space in unpredictable ways.

"Along NATO's eastern flank, Russian military aircraft have a history of not transmitting a transponder code indicating their position and altitude (as well as) not filing a flight plan," NATO said in the statement.

The 2022 figure was nearly double that of 2021, German news agency DPA reported at the time.

"Russia's war against Ukraine has created the most dangerous security situation in Europe in decades," NATO spokesman Dylan White said Friday. "NATO

fighter jets are on duty around the clock, ready to scramble in case of suspicious or unannounced flights near the airspace of our allies."

Since the 2022 invasion of Ukraine, NATO has bulked up air defenses along its eastern flank and added fighter jets to its air policing mission, which stretches from the Baltics to Romania.

Still, while NATO carries out hundreds of intercepts annually, actual breaches of allied airspace remain rare. And most aerial encounters between NATO and

Russian jets are handled safely, NATO said in the statement.

Dangerous episodes have occurred, though. In March, a Russian fighter jet collided with a U.S. drone over the Black Sea, forcing the unmanned aircraft to crash into international waters.

U.S. European Command at the time accused the Russian pilots of "aggressive actions" that "could lead to miscalculation and unintended escalation."

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Legacy: Nimitz likely headed for retirement for its next assignment

FROM PAGE 1

While the Nimitz may disappear from the fleet, the idea it came to represent — the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier strike force — will live on.

The first ship of a new super-carrier class, USS Gerald R. Ford, is in the eastern Mediterranean as a sign of American support for Israel following the attack by Hamas militants from Gaza.

The Chief of Naval Operations Navigation Plan — the sea service's public playbook — says a carrier accompanied by guided missile cruisers, anti-aircraft destroyers and attack submarines is America's top option for quick response to hot spots from the Red Sea to the Strait of Taiwan.

"Nuclear-powered aircraft carriers, which will remain the most survivable and versatile airfields in the world, provide long-range, persistent sea control, power projection and organic sensing in contested seas, as well as flexible options across the spectrum of conflict," the Navy's recently released shipbuilding plan says.

The sentiment isn't shared by all in the Pentagon and Congress.

Critics of the carriers' dominance over official debate and dollars include advocates pushing for an increased focus on attack submarines, hypersonic missile boats and Unmanned Surface Vehicles — ships without any crew.

In the October 2023 issue of the U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings, retired Navy Vice Admiral David H. Lewis wrote that the Nimitz was a response to the world conflicts of 1975 — mainly the Soviet Union and its proxies worldwide.

"There was a clear adversary to beat," Lewis wrote. "The challenges were less about technology

and more about how many, when and where to allocate resources."

Cancian says the debate over carriers splits naval strategists into two camps. To advocates, they are "90,000 tons of American sovereignty, deployable anywhere on the globe" while critics see them as soaking up too much of the defense budget for "increasingly vulnerable monuments to a naval age gone by."

Carriers are at their best when they stack the odds heavily in favor of the side Americans are on — a role they have played in Iran, Iraq, Syria and the current conflict with Iranian-backed Houthi rebels firing missiles at shipping in the Red Sea.

"I don't think the Houthi missiles can get past a carrier's defenses," Cancian said. "I'm not as sure about an attack by the Chinese."

American ships and weapons are likely technologically superior overall to what the Chinese can bring to a battle, Cancian said. But the gap isn't so great that the outcome of a swarm attack by Chinese missile boats and attack aircraft is assured.

According to a Reuters news agency report, China is in the midst of a major naval construction program, with 370 ships, up from 340 just over a year ago. China plans to have 435 ships by 2030.

The United States has 291 ships, but their total tonnage is twice the total of China's Navy.

New weapons require new defensive measures or strategies. Underwater drones like those used by Ukraine against Russian ships in the Black Sea can be launched far from the target. Russia says it is developing hypersonic cruise missiles that can



PRESTON L. JARRETT/U.S. Navy

U.S. Navy Sailors man the rails on the flight deck of the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz on its return to home port in July. Nimitz was returning to its home port in Bremerton, Wash. following a seven-month deployment to U.S. 3rd and 7th Fleet areas of operations.



SAMUEL OSBORN/U.S. Navy

Sailors conduct flight operations on the flight deck of the USS Nimitz. Nimitz is in Puget Sound Naval Shipyard for maintenance before it starts what's likely its final assignment: retirement.

evade the ship's anti-aircraft defenses.

The possibility of significant battle damage could lead military commanders to restrict the exposure of a \$14 billion Ford-class

carrier with over 4,000 Americans aboard, Cancian said.

While Navy policy backs the continued construction and use of large aircraft carriers, alternatives are part of the future mix.

Five American USVs — unmanned surface vehicles — took part in the Integrated Battle Problem (IBP) exercise to develop crewless ships that would operate alongside manned ships in the future.

A Navy modernization report called for a 2050 goal of having more than a quarter of the fleet consist of unmanned vessels.

The use of the supercarrier in the mid-21st century will be a question for after the Nimitz is gone. Its designation, "CVN-68," stands for the 68th aircraft carrier commissioned by the Navy since the USS Langley was converted from a coal-carrying transport into CV-1 in 1920.

While the Navy has made no official announcement, the federal SAM.gov contracting website has solicited possible subcontractors to work on "CVN 68 Inactivation, Defueling Accomplishment" to be completed by 2030.

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MIDEAST



ALISHA GLEASON/U.S. Navy
USS Bataan and USNS Medgar Evers conduct a replenishment in the Mediterranean Sea on Aug. 4. Along with the dock landing ship USS Carter Hall, Bataan now is in the eastern Mediterranean to reintegrate the Bataan Amphibious Ready Group, the Navy said Thursday.

Bataan, Carter Hall in Mediterranean after Mideast stint; Ford at Souda Bay

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — A U.S. amphibious ready group sent to counter Iranian interference with commercial shipping in the Persian Gulf recently left the Middle East after nearly five months in the region.

The amphibious assault ship USS Bataan and the dock landing ship USS Carter Hall, along with embarked elements of the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit, entered the eastern Mediterranean Sea on Thursday, U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa said in a statement the same day.

There they will join the amphibious transport dock ship USS Mesa Verde, reintegrating the Bataan Amphibious Ready Group, the Navy said.

The group, which includes more than 3,000 sailors and Marines, arrived in the Middle East on Aug. 6. The Pentagon's deployment of additional forces to the region came after Iran tried to seize two oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman in early July.

The attempts, during which Iranian naval forces fired on one of the ships, were the latest in a string of actions by Tehran to harass oil tankers. At the time, the Navy said Iran had harassed, attacked or seized 20 commercial ships since 2021.

In other U.S. Navy activity in the Mediterranean, the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford arrived Tuesday for another port call at U.S. Naval Support Activity Souda Bay on the Greek island of Crete, accord-

ing to a post on the base's official Facebook page.

Ford, which left its homeport in Norfolk, Va., on May 2, has been on duty in the region for nearly eight months. It last visited the base earlier this month.

The carrier's deployment was extended for a third time earlier this month, part of U.S. efforts to keep the Israel-Hamas war from broadening.

The cruiser USS Normandy, part of the Gerald R. Ford Carrier Strike Group, made its second port call this month in Piraeus, Greece, also on Tuesday. The ship last visited the port Dec. 3, the Navy said in a statement the same day.

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Risks: 'They're definitely stirring the pot,' analyst says of Russia's actions in Mideast

FROM PAGE 1

ment says.

A drone attack on a base in northern Iraq on Christmas left three U.S. service members injured, leading to retaliatory airstrikes.

The downing of a Russian pilot could lead to open conflict, said Votel, now a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute.

"I am always concerned about the potential for escalation and for one incident elevating the overall posture," he said.

Votel and a U.S. defense official said there have been fewer of these overflights and airspace violations since Oct. 7 than there were over the summer.

That was when Russian pilots attempted to goad U.S. counter-

parts into dogfights, and at one point a Russian fighter jet in Syria fired flares at a U.S. drone and damaged its propeller.

Although both Russia and the U.S. have declared missions in Syria to defeat Islamic State, their backing of opposing Syrian groups has led to deconfliction protocols. These include agreements on areas where the two countries pledged to notify each other prior to transiting. Both sides have accused the other of violating these agreements.

Russia does not want a regional war between its ally Iran and the U.S., but it wouldn't mind if Middle Eastern conflicts distract the Pentagon from the war in Ukraine, Jonathan Lord, a senior fellow at the Center for a New Amer-

ican Security, said Thursday.

"They're definitely stirring the pot," Lord said. "Because tensions are generally heightened, there is a greater risk of miscalculation, everyone's a little jumpier and the Russians are ones to press in those situations."

In addition, Russian planes flying over American bases have been equipped with sensors that most likely gather info, and Moscow has a motive to disclose any data they collect to Iran and Syria, U.S. military leaders and analysts say.

"I think you have to make that assumption going into this," Votel said.

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Palestinians pour into southern Gaza as Israel advances

Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Tens of thousands of Palestinians streamed into an already crowded town at the southernmost end of Gaza in recent days, according to the United Nations, fleeing Israel's bombardment of the center of the strip, where hospital officials said dozens were killed Friday.

Israel's unprecedented air and ground offensive against Hamas has displaced some 85% of the Gaza Strip's 2.3 million residents, sending swells of people seeking shelter in Israeli-designated safe areas that the military has nevertheless also bombed. That has left Palestinians with a harrowing sense that nowhere is safe in the tiny enclave.

People arrived in Rafah in trucks, in carts and on foot. Those who haven't found space in the already overwhelmed shelters have built tents on the roadsides.

"People are using any empty space to build shacks," said Juliette Touma, director of communications at UNRWA, the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees. "Some are sleeping in their cars, and others are sleeping in the open."

Israel's widening campaign, which has already flattened much of the north, is now focused on the urban refugee camps of Bureij, Nuseirat and Maghazi in central Gaza, where Israeli warplanes and artillery have leveled buildings.

But fighting has not abated in the north, and the city of Khan Younis in the south, where Israel believes Hamas' leaders are hiding, is also a smoldering battleground. Militants have continued to fire rockets, mostly at Israel's south.

The war has already killed over 21,500 Palestinians, most of them women and children, and sparked a humanitarian crisis that has left a quarter of Gaza's population starving.

An additional 187 Palestinians were killed across the Gaza Strip over the past day, Ashraf al-Qidra, the spokesman for the Health Ministry in the Hamas-ruled territory, said Friday. The ministry's death toll does not distinguish between civilians and combatants.

Israeli officials have brushed off international calls for a cease-fire, saying it would amount to a victory for Hamas, which the military has promised to dismantle. It has also vowed to bring back more than 100 hostages still held by the militants after their Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel that triggered the war. The assault killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians.

The military says 168 of its soldiers have been killed since the ground offensive began.

The U.N. said late Thursday that around 100,000 people have arrived in Rafah, along the border with Egypt, in recent days. The influx crams even more people into one of Gaza's most densely populated areas.

Israel has told residents of central Gaza to head south, but even as the displaced have poured in, Rafah has not been spared. A strike Thursday evening destroyed a residential building, killing at least 23 people, according to the media office of the nearby Al-Kuwaiti Hospital.

Israel said this week it was expanding its ground offensive into central Gaza, targeting a belt of crowded neighborhoods that were built to house some of the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees from the 1948 war surrounding Israel's creation.

Israel blames the high death toll on Hamas, which it accuses of embedding inside the civilian population, saying that its forces have uncovered weapons troves and underground tunnel shafts in residential buildings, schools and mosques.

US destroyer downs drone, ballistic missile in Red Sea

Stars and Stripes

A U.S. Navy guided-missile destroyer shot down a drone and an anti-ship ballistic missile fired by Houthi rebels in the Red Sea on Thursday, according to U.S. Central Command.

The USS Mason was in the southern Red Sea around 5:45 p.m. Thursday when it shot down the missile and drone, which marked the 22nd attempted attack by Houthi rebels against interna-

tional shipping since Oct. 19, CENTCOM said in a Friday post to X, formerly Twitter.

The attack also came just two days after U.S. fighter jets and the guided-missile destroyer USS Laboon, part of the Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group, fended off a dozen drones, three anti-ship ballistic missiles and two land attack cruise missiles over the course of 10 hours on Tuesday in the Red Sea.

NATION

Woman out of jail after asking friend to kill mom

By Heather Hollingsworth
Associated Press

Gypsy Rose Blanchard, the Missouri woman who persuaded an online boyfriend to kill her mother after she had forced her to pretend for years that she was suffering from leukemia, muscular dystrophy and other serious illnesses, was released Thursday from prison on parole.

Blanchard was released early in the day from the Chillicothe Correctional Center, said Karen Pojmann, a spokesperson for the Missouri Department of Corrections. Blanchard was granted parole after serving 85% of her original sentence, Pojmann said.

Blanchard's case sparked national tabloid interest after reports emerged that her mother, Claudine "Dee Dee" Blanchard, who was slain in 2015, had essentially kept her daughter prisoner, forcing her to use a wheelchair and feeding tube.

It turned out that Gypsy Blanchard, now 32, was perfectly healthy, not developmentally delayed as her friends had always believed. Her mother had Munchausen syndrome by proxy, a psychological disorder in which parents or caregivers seek sympathy through the exaggerated or made-up illnesses of their children, said her trial attorney, Michael Stanfield.

"People were constantly telling Dee Dee what a wonderful mother she was, and Dee Dee was getting all of this attention," he said.

Through the ruse, the mother and daughter met country star Miranda Lambert and received charitable donations, a trip to Disney World and even a home near Springfield from Habitat for Humanity.

Stanfield said Gypsy Blanchard's mother was able to dupe doctors by telling them her daughter's medical records had been lost in Hurricane Katrina. If they



NATHAN PAPES, THE SPRINGFIELD NEWS-LEADER/AP
Gypsy Rose Blanchard takes the stand during the trial of her ex-boyfriend Nicholas Godejohn, in 2018, in Springfield, Mo.

asked too many questions, she just found a new physician, shaving the girl's head to back up her story.

Among the unnecessary procedures Gypsy Blanchard underwent was the removal of her salivary glands. Her mother convinced doctors it was necessary by using topical anesthetic to cause drooling.

Gypsy Blanchard, who had little schooling or contact with anyone but her mother, also was misled, especially when she was younger, Stanfield said.

"The doctors seem to confirm everything that you're being told. The outside world is telling you that your mother is a wonderful, loving, caring person. What other idea can you have?" Stanfield said.

But then the abuse became more physical, Stanfield said. Gypsy testified that her mother beat her and chained her to a bed. Slowly, Gypsy also was beginning

to understand that she wasn't as sick as her mom said.

"I wanted to be free of her hold on me," Gypsy testified at the 2018 trial of her former boyfriend, Nicholas Godejohn of Big Bend, Wis., who is serving a life sentence in the killing. She went on to add: "I talked him into it."

When she took the stand at his trial, prosecutors already had cut her a deal because of the abuse she had endured. In exchange for pleading guilty in 2016 to second-degree murder, she was sentenced to 10 years in prison. The first-degree murder charge she initially faced would have meant a life term.

According to the probable cause statement, Gypsy Blanchard supplied the knife and hid in a bathroom while Godejohn repeatedly stabbed her mother. The two ultimately made their way by bus to Wisconsin, where they were arrested.

Trump removed from Maine's primary ballot

By Nicholas Riccardi and David Sharp
Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine — Maine's Democratic secretary of state on Thursday removed former President Donald Trump from the state's presidential primary ballot under the Constitution's insurrection clause, becoming the first election official to take action unilaterally as the U.S. Supreme Court is poised to decide whether Trump remains eligible to return to the White House.

The decision by Secretary of State Shenna Bellows follows a ruling earlier this month by the Colorado Supreme Court that booted Trump from the ballot there under Section 3 of the 14th Amendment. That decision has been stayed until the U.S. Supreme Court decides whether Trump is barred by the Civil War-era provision, which prohibits those who "engaged in insurrection" from holding office.

The Trump campaign said it would appeal Bellows' decision to Maine's state courts, and Bellows suspended her ruling until that court system rules on the case. In the end, it is likely that the nation's highest court will have the final say on whether Trump appears on the ballot in Maine and in the other states.

Bellows found that Trump could no longer run for his prior job because his role in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol violated Section 3, which bans from office those who "engaged in insurrection."

Bellows made the ruling after some state residents, including a bipartisan group of former lawmakers, challenged Trump's posi-

tion on the ballot.

"I do not reach this conclusion lightly," Bellows wrote in her 34-page decision. "I am mindful that no Secretary of State has ever deprived a presidential candidate of ballot access based on Section 3 of the Fourteenth Amendment. I am also mindful, however, that no presidential candidate has ever before engaged in insurrection."

The Trump campaign immediately slammed the ruling. "We are witnessing, in real-time, the attempted theft of an election and the disenfranchisement of the American voter," campaign spokesman Steven Cheung said in a statement.

Legal experts said that Thursday's ruling demonstrates the need for the nation's highest court, which has never ruled on Section 3, to clarify what states can do.

"It is clear that these decisions are going to keep popping up, and inconsistent decisions reached (like the many states keeping Trump on the ballot over challenges) until there is final and decisive guidance from the U.S. Supreme Court," Rick Hasen, a law professor at the University of California-Los Angeles, wrote in response to the Maine decision. "It seems a certainty that SCOTUS will have to address the merits sooner or later."

While Maine has just four electoral votes, it's one of two states to split them. Trump won one of Maine's electors in 2020, so having him off the ballot there, should he emerge as the Republican general election candidate, could have outsized implications in a race that is expected to be narrowly decided.

University chancellor says he was fired for making porn

Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. — Former University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Chancellor Joe Gow said Thursday that the school's governing board fired him because members were uncomfortable with him and his wife producing and appearing in pornographic videos.

The Universities of Wisconsin Board of Regents, which oversees UW-Madison, UW-La Crosse and 11 other regional campuses, voted unanimously



Gow

during a hastily convened closed meeting Wednesday evening to fire Gow. After the vote, Universities of Wisconsin President Jay Rothman and regents President Karen Walsh issued statements saying the regents had learned of specific conduct by Gow that subjected the university to "significant reputational harm."

Rothman called Gow's actions "abhorrent" and Walsh said she was "disgusted." But neither of them offered any details of the allegations.

Gow told The Associated Press in a phone interview Thursday morning that regents had discovered that he and his wife, former UW-La Crosse professor Carmen Wilson, had been producing and appearing in pornographic videos.

He maintained that he never mentioned UW-La Crosse or his

role at the university in any of the videos and the firing violated his free speech rights.

"My wife and I live in a country where we have a First Amendment," he said. "We're dealing with consensual adult sexuality. The regents are overreacting. They're certainly not adhering to their own commitment to free speech or the First Amendment."

Gow also complained that the regents never told him what policy he violated and he was never given a hearing or other opportunity

to present his case. He said he's contemplating a lawsuit.

Rothman said in an email to the AP on Thursday morning that Gow failed to act as a role model for students, faculty and the community and mistakenly believes the First Amendment equates to a "free pass to say or do anything that he pleases."

"Good judgement requires that there are and must be limits on what is said or done by the individuals entrusted to lead our universities," Rothman wrote.

‘Swatting’ of officials may prompt heavier penalties

By JEFF AMY
Associated Press

ATLANTA — A spate of false reports of shootings at the homes of public officials in recent days could be setting the stage for stricter penalties against so-called swatting in more states.

U.S. Sen. Rick Scott of Florida, Boston Mayor Michelle Wu, Georgia U.S. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene and Ohio Attorney General Dave Yost have been among the victims.

Several Georgia lawmakers targeted say they want increased penalties for swatting, like laws enacted this year in Ohio and Virginia. Similar bills are pending in other states and Congress.

Here’s a look at the issue:

■ **What is ‘swatting’?** Swatting is the act of making a prank call to emergency services to prompt a response at a particular address. The goal is to get authorities, particularly a SWAT team, to show up.

Calls in multiple states in recent days featured the voice of a man calling himself “Jamal,” claiming he had shot his wife because she was sleeping with another man and say-

ing he was holding the boyfriend hostage, demanding \$10,000.

Two Ohio lawmakers said they thought they were targeted recently for helping pass a law making swatting a felony in the state.



Greene

■ **Who’s been targeted recently?** A man in New York called the Georgia suicide hotline just before 11 a.m. Monday, claiming that he had shot his girlfriend at Greene’s home in Rome, Ga., and was going to kill himself next, said Kelly Madden, the Rome police spokesperson. The call was quickly transferred to police when suicide hotline responders recognized the congressman’s address.

The department said it contacted Greene’s private security detail to confirm she was safe and that there was no emergency. The call was

then determined to be a swatting attempt so the response was canceled while police were on the way.

Scott wrote on X that police were sent to his home in Naples, Fla., while he and his wife were out at dinner on Wednesday night. Police said they met Scott’s private security service at the home, but didn’t find anything out of place.

“These criminals wasted the time & resources of our law enforcement in a sick attempt to terrorize my family,” Scott wrote.

In Boston, a male caller claimed on Christmas Day that he had shot his wife and had tied her and another man up at Wu’s home. The Democratic mayor said she was surprised to open the door and see flashing lights, but said her home has been targeted by multiple swatting calls since she took office in 2021.

“For better or worse, my family are a bit used to it by now, and we have a good system with the department,” Wu told WBUR.

Also targeted have been a Republican congressman from New York, Georgia’s lieutenant governor and a former state senator in Nebraska. Dixon was among four

Georgia state senators who were recently swatted. In Ohio, a total of three current or former state lawmakers were affected.

■ **How widespread is the problem?** Hundreds of cases of swatting occur annually, with some using caller ID spoofing to disguise their number. And those targeted extend far beyond public officials.

Police in Lincoln, Neb., told KETV-TV that they had handled three swatting calls in the same 48-hour period in which they went to the unoccupied home of former state Sen. Adam Morfeld.

The FBI said last year that it had created a national database in conjunction with other law enforcement agencies to track swatting incidents nationwide. Police had for months reported a huge surge in fake claims about active shooters at schools and colleges. There have also been reports of hundreds of swatting incidents and bomb threats against synagogues and other Jewish institutions since the Israel-Hamas war began.

■ **Do false threats pose other risks?** Such calls have proven dangerous and even outright dead-

ly.

In 2017, a police officer in Wichita, Kan., shot and killed a man while responding to a hoax emergency call. Last year, the city agreed to pay \$5 million to settle a related lawsuit, with the money to go to the two children of 28-year-old Andrew Finch.

In 2015, police in Maryland shot a 20-year-old man in the face with rubber bullets after a fake hostage situation was reported at his home.

■ **What kind of response could this prompt?** Police are investigating the recent threats. No arrests have yet been reported.

Ohio last year made it a felony offense to report a false emergency that prompts response by law enforcement. And Virginia increased the penalties for swatting to up to 12 months in jail.

Dixon, the Georgia state senator, said in a statement he planned to introduce a bill during the upcoming legislative session to strengthen penalties for false reporting and misuse of police forces.

“This issue goes beyond politics — it’s about public safety and preserving the integrity of our institutions,” he said.

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WAR IN UKRAINE

Russia fires dozens of missiles, drones at Ukraine

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia launched 122 missiles and dozens of drones against Ukrainian targets, officials said Friday, killing at least 30 civilians across the country in what an air force official called the biggest aerial barrage of the war.

At least 144 people were injured and an unknown number were buried under rubble during the roughly 18-hour onslaught, Ukrainian officials said. A maternity hospital, apartment blocks and schools were among the buildings reported damaged across Ukraine.

In the capital, Kyiv, broken glass and mangled metal littered city streets. Air raid and emer-

gency service sirens wailed as plumes of smoke drifted into a bright blue sky.

Kateryna Ivanivna, a 72-year-old Kyiv resident, said she threw herself to the ground when a missile struck.

"There was an explosion, then flames," she said. "I covered my head and got down in the street. Then I ran into the subway station."

Meanwhile, in Poland, authorities said that what apparently was a Russian missile entered the country's airspace Friday morning from the direction of Ukraine and then vanished off radars.

In the attack on Ukraine, the air force intercepted most of the

ballistic and cruise missiles and the Shahed-type drones overnight, said Ukraine's military chief, Valerii Zaluzhnyi.

Western officials and analysts had recently warned that Russia limited its cruise missile strikes for months in an apparent effort to build up stockpiles for massive strikes during the winter, hoping to break the Ukrainians' spirit.

The result was "the most massive aerial attack" since Russia's full-scale invasion in February 2022, Air Force commander Mykola Oleshchuk wrote on his official Telegram channel.

It topped the previous biggest assault, in November 2022 when Russia launched 96 missiles, and this year's biggest, with 81 mis-

siles on March 9, according to air force records.

Fighting along the front line is largely bogged down by winter weather after Ukraine's summer counteroffensive failed to make a significant breakthrough along the roughly 620-mile line of contact.

Ukrainian officials have urged the country's Western allies to provide it with more air defenses. Their appeals have come as signs of war fatigue strain efforts to keep support in place.

British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said the attack should stir the world to further action in support of Ukraine.

"These widespread attacks on Ukraine's cities show (Russian

President Vladimir) Putin will stop at nothing to achieve his aim of eradicating freedom and democracy," Sunak said on social media platform X, formerly Twitter. "We must continue to stand with Ukraine — for as long as it takes."

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba said the scale of the attack should wake people up to Ukraine's continuing needs.

"Today, millions of Ukrainians awoke to the loud sound of explosions," he wrote on X. "I wish those sounds of explosions in Ukraine could be heard all around the world. In all major capitals, headquarters, and parliaments, which are currently debating further support for Ukraine."



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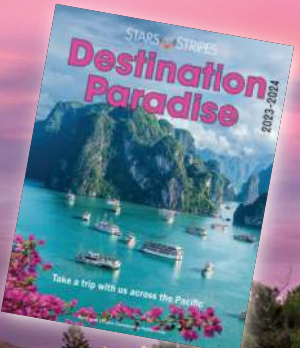
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STARS AND STRIPES

NATION

How science can make fake meat taste better

BY ALLYSON CHIU

The Washington Post

There's a growing category of foods using an age-old technique that experts say could be a dark horse in the race to create more affordable and tasty meat alternatives: fermentation.

Protein-rich products made from fermenting tiny organisms called microbes could play a significant role in supporting a shift away from more resource-intensive ways of producing food.

A modeling study published last year in *Nature* found that replacing 20% of global consumption of beef and other grazing livestock with microbial proteins grown from fungus could cut annual deforestation in half by 2050 and lower greenhouse gas emissions.

There were more than 130 companies focused on fermentation for alternative proteins last year, an increase of 12% over the number of known companies in 2021, according to an industry report from the Good Food Institute, a nonprofit that promotes meat alternatives.

"We've been using fermentation for millennia to make food products," said Adam Leman, lead scientist for fermentation at the Good Food Institute. "We're able to use a lot of the same types of microbes that we've been using for a long time, but just using them in better ways to offer up more solutions for protein, for fats, and generally for feeding all the people that we can."

What is fermentation?

Fermentation is a natural process that uses live microorganisms to transform raw ingredients into products with improved shelf life



Meati Foods

An alternative meat product from Meati Foods.

and nutrition.

Tempeh, yogurt, kimchi and beer are just some examples of popular fermented foods and beverages.

The alternative protein industry uses this traditional process as well as two other types of fermentation: biomass and precision.

Biomass fermentation takes protein-rich microorganisms, such as yeast, filamentous fungi and microalgae, which grow quickly to produce large amounts of protein efficiently, Leman said.

"Many of those products are then minimally processed, say with a heat treatment and then a drying or flash freezing to optimize their texture and shelf life," he said. "They can often contain

beneficial nutrients alongside the protein, like dietary fiber and B vitamins."

Precision fermentation uses microbes to produce specific ingredients that influence the functionality and taste of foods.

The ingredients created through this type of fermentation, which include proteins, vitamins, enzymes, fats and natural pigments, can be used to enhance plant-based goods and lab-grown meat to make foods that more closely resemble traditional animal products.

"One thing that we know about alternative protein products is that it's really important that we try to reach taste and price parity with conventional animal prod-

ucts," said Shayna Fertig, a senior adviser at the Good Food Institute. "The aim is really to make these products taste as close to the counterpart that they're replacing as possible."

If you are planning to try these products, it's important to be aware of potential allergies, Leman said.

People who are allergic to certain types of mold might also be sensitive to some of the products that use fermented fungi. Specific proteins created through fermentation can also be the same as the ones found in the equivalent animal product, Leman said.

For example, if you're allergic to a protein in traditional milk, you'll likely be allergic to the ver-

sion of that protein made from fermenting fungus.

Sustainable improvement

Food components produced through fermentation can make up the bulk of an alternative meat or they can be part of a blend of ingredients. Adding an ingredient created by fermentation to a plant-based patty, for instance, can create a meaty aroma and flavor and even mimic the "bleeding" of a patty.

"One of the cool things that the microbial world gives us is certain types of [protein-rich] fermentation-derived products that could be really savory or umami tasting, or things that can be very neutral that can get added to other foods that people like," Leman said.

Using fermentation to create alternative meat products also has a host of potential environmental benefits.

Aside from being less resource-intensive than traditional animal products, microbes can be fed using a variety of nutrients, many of which could come from agriculture side streams that would otherwise be waste, experts said.

The speed and efficiency of growing these microorganisms — which is often done in a bioreactor — could also help keep operational costs down.

"This kind of technology has great potential in terms of reducing greenhouse gas emissions, reducing water use, land use, and reducing natural resource degradation," said Frank Hu, chair of the department of nutrition at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health.

"In the meantime, it can produce very nutritious products."

America's sugar shortfall leaves candy-makers scrounging

BY ILENA PENG

Bloomberg News

Bonbons and candy canes may dominate the American holiday aesthetic, but U.S. confectionery companies are feeling anything but jolly as they head into one of the sugar market's tightest years in recent memory.

Prolonged droughts in major cane-producers Mexico and Louisiana have helped push U.S. sugar futures to the highest ever for this time of year and forced users to turn to high-cost imports instead. Sweets-makers paying up to snag supplies are choosing to protect their margins by raising prices for consumers — and hoping shoppers don't balk at the mark-up.

"We just found that it was better to just pay more for sugar and pass it along to the consumer than to be completely out of sugar," said Kirk Vashaw, chief executive officer of Dum Dums lollipop maker

Spangler Candy Co. "And there's a lot of other companies that I think thought the same thing."

Candy is big business in the U.S.: Confectionery retail sales are forecast to be \$48.8 billion this year, according to consumer research group Euromonitor International. With about 1,600 manufacturing sites across all 50 states, the U.S. sector employs more than 200,000 people, the National Confectioners Association estimates — with more than double the number of indirect roles, like suppliers.

Rising food costs have been a problem ever since pandemic-era supply chain snags and labor shortages blindsided businesses in 2020. Even now, food prices for many everyday items remain at their highest levels ever — and sweets have been particularly hard hit. Consumer prices for confectionery items rose 13.4% in the

12-month period ending Nov. 25, according to data from consumer researcher NIQ, outpacing overall grocery gains.

Although inflation is a problem the world over, the U.S. sugar market has been uniquely impacted due to its protectionist regulations. U.S. rules cap both domestic sales and the volume of foreign supplies that can be brought in under low duties; all other sugar imports past those so-called tariff-rate quotas are subject to higher taxes. The regulations are intended to protect grower profits, especially given higher U.S. production costs, and prevent other countries from flooding the U.S. with sugar.

"Congress has to continually balance seeking trade opportunities outside of the U.S. while protecting U.S. producers from unfair practices used by other countries to prop up their own industries,"

Rob Johansson, director of economics and policy analysis for the American Sugar Alliance, said in an email.

But critics say the rules aren't nimble enough to keep pace with any domestic production shortfall. An October report from the U.S. Government Accountability Office found the program cost sugar users like consumers and food manufacturers more than it benefited producers, resulting in a net economic loss of as much as \$1.6 billion a year. Johansson, whose group represents a coalition of sugarcane and sugar beet producers, said the GAO report "used biased and dated information."

In normal years, imports from Mexico, which get preferential treatment, and those allowed under quota limits from other countries are generally enough to fulfill U.S. demand. But Mexican imports haven't held up: In Novem-

ber, the U.S. imported the least sugar from Mexico for that month since at least fiscal 2011, USDA data show.

In fact, shortfalls have become so acute this season that buyers are increasingly turning to so-called high-tier tariff imports, or the ones taxed more for surpassing the quota limits. The U.S. Department of Agriculture forecasts that those priciest imports are approaching the record highs seen after hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005 destroyed much of Louisiana's cane crop and took refineries offline.

The U.S. is currently at "a high moment of anxiety when it comes to our sugar supply," said Grant Colvin, the executive director of the Alliance for Fair Sugar Policy, a coalition of sugar users who advocate for regulation reforms. "The program is designed to inflate the cost of sugar."

NATION

Migrant kids 'just living in survival mode'

US faith groups say more foster families needed

BY GIOVANNA DELL'ORTO
Associated Press

HOMESTEAD, Fla. — Snuggling on the sofa across from the Christmas tree, Sol proudly showed off the dog her foster parents gave her for earning all A's even though she crossed the southern U.S. border knowing very little English.

"They helped me a lot," said the 14-year-old eighth grader. Then she blushed, hid her face in Cosmo's fur, and added in Spanish, "Oooh, I said that English!"

Sol — who is from Argentina — is among tens of thousands of children who arrive in the United States without a parent, during a huge surge in immigrants that's prompting congressional debate to change asylum laws.

Faith and community groups across the country are trying to recruit many more foster families to help move the children from overwhelmed government facilities. U.S. authorities encountered nearly 140,000 unaccompanied minors at the border with Mexico in fiscal year 2023, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection. Almost 10,000 are still in custody of the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement, according to its latest data.

"It's amazing the quantity of children who are coming," said Mónica Fariás, who leads the Unaccompanied Refugee Minors Program for Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Miami. "We're actively recruiting parents."

Program leaders have been going to churches and other community organizations every weekend to find more families like Andy and Caroline Hazelton, Sol's foster parents.

Over the past four years, the Hazeltons — a couple in their early 30s living in a Miami suburb, with three biological daughters ages 8, 6 and almost 2 — have fostered five migrant minors for several months and more for shorter periods. Two teens were from Afghanistan, but most came from Central America.

"Our faith inspired us," Andy Hazelton said, adding they felt the need to respond to the Gospel exhortation of helping others as one would help Jesus when they heard about families being separated at the border.

Like other foster families, the Hazeltons say they focus not on the often stridently divisive politics of immigration, but simply on



PHOTOS BY REBECCA BLACKWELL/AP

Sol, left, a 14-year-old from Argentina, kisses 8-year-old Maddie Hazelton as they play together in the kitchen of Sol's foster parents, Andy, right, and Caroline Hazelton, in Homestead, Fla. Sol is among tens of thousands of children who have arrived in the United States without a parent during a huge surge in immigrants that's prompting congressional debate to change asylum laws.



Andy Hazelton holds a globe ornament on which he and his wife have marked the home countries of migrant kids they have fostered, on the family's Christmas tree. The Hazeltons, a couple in their early 30s, have three biological daughters ages 8, 6 and almost 2.

assisting children in need. A globe ornament on their living room Christmas tree is marked with dots for the birthplaces of each family member.

"Every Christmas we have new kids in our home," Caroline Hazelton said, adding that even the Muslim Afghan teens, who had never seen a stocking bulging with presents, quickly joined the festivities.

Like most youths in these programs, those boys were eventually reunited with their birth family — the mother hugged Caroline for 10 minutes, sobbing in gratefulness. With Sol, whose father has gone missing on the journey across the desert, and other children without relatives in the United States, foster families' commitments can last years.

As Sol packed her school lunch in a "Stranger Things" bag under Cosmo's watchful eyes, the Hazeltons said they would be happy to have her stay forever and already refer to their four daughters.

Regardless of the length of stay, foster parents say they need to give the children enough stability to get comfortable with unfamiliar U.S. customs — from air conditioning to strict school routines — and to learn more English.

"We're never going to be like their parents. Thank God we live in a country where things can be easier," said Carlos Zubizarreta. A foster child himself 50 years ago, he's been a foster parent in the Miami area for about 30 children over nearly two decades, in

addition to having biological, now adult children.

Nevertheless, he always finds it hard when each foster child leaves after they've shared nightly dinners, vacations, and household tasks like car maintenance. Zubizarreta plans to continue to foster as long as he feels that is what God is calling him to do.

In Baltimore, Jason Herring has been a foster father for a year, to five children from Central America through a program run by Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service that focuses on short-term care for those whose return to biological parents is being assessed by the government.

He says he is not religious — initially, he feared he wouldn't be accepted in the program for being gay. That led him to sympathize with the plight of children suffering because of adult decisions they have no power over.

"I understand what it feels to be the other," he said. "You don't have to be a perfect parent, just be there."

Like all foster families, those taking in unaccompanied migrant children must be licensed by their state, and often receive extra training specific to immigration law and trauma, said Amanda Nosel, the Lutheran agency's program manager for foster care in Baltimore.

"There's certainly a national shortage in foster parents right now. We have so many kids who need homes," Nosel said.

Acclimating to a new country in a caring family setting is especially important given the deep and increasing level of trauma these children carry, from what they had to flee in their countries through the journey to the United States.

"It's trauma on top of trauma. Kids are just living in survival mode," said Sarah Howell, a clinical social worker in Houston with long experience counseling migrant children, including a teenage girl she's raising.

They often internalize fear and grieving so much that they appear mature beyond their age, while still being terrified that any new familial relationship will abandon them. It takes a while before foster parents are relieved to see regular child or teen behavior make an appearance — even if that means refusing all but junk food or sibling bickering, it's still a sign of normalcy.

"All of them are kids, but with an adult age," said Bernie Vilar, who works as a mentor in a home for vulnerable youth, including those who age out of Miami's Catholic Charities foster care. Vilar, 24, was homeless when he was younger, and he tries to pass on the passion for education that helped him survive that.

But he says many are too burdened by the debts they owe the smugglers who brought them to the U.S. to be interested in anything but work, while others struggle with depression after witnessing death and violence on their journeys.

Brandon Garcia, 20, seems to have beaten the odds. After crossing alone at 15 because his parents told him he would have no opportunities in Guatemala's Indigenous highlands, he spent six months living with the Hazeltons and is now in Vilar's group home, finishing technical college.

He still misses his family, but loves the Hazeltons' daughters as his own sisters. At a holiday party in a suburban Miami bowling alley organized by the Catholic Charities program, he played with them at intervals between bites of pizza and aiming for strikes with other young men.

Garcia said the speed of change as he adapted to the United States was hard, but he has never thought of going back. His happiest moment came when the Hazeltons brought him to Orlando's theme parks — a holiday tradition that they plan to continue this year with Sol — and they watched the fireworks display.

"I felt the same happiness as with my family," Garcia said. "I told myself, this is a country of great opportunities, and I have to take advantage of them."

NATION

Parents fear future after lead poisoning

Blood tests find high levels in kids who snacked on squeeze pouches

By JONEL ALECCIA
Associated Press

When Cora Dibert went for a routine blood test in October, the toddler brought along her favorite new snack: a squeeze pouch of WanaBana cinnamon-flavored apple puree.

"She sucked them dry," recalls her 26-year-old mother, Morgan Shurtleff, of Elgin, Okla.

Within a week, the family got an alarming call. The test showed that the 1-year-old had lead poisoning, with nearly four times as much lead as the level that raises concern. Only later did Shurtleff learn that the fruit puree Cora's grandmother bought at a Dollar Tree store may have been the cause.

"That was the scariest thing that ever happened to me," Shurtleff says.

Cora is among dozens of young kids across the U.S. poisoned by lead linked to tainted pouches of the cinnamon-and-fruit puree.

The exact number of affected children is unclear. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports at least 205 confirmed, probable or suspected cases from 33 states. Using a different reporting method, the Food and Drug Administration counts at least 69 kids ages 6 and younger sickened in 28 states as of Dec. 14.

Tests show victims had blood lead readings up to eight times higher than the federal reference level of concern, health officials said. Samples of the puree showed lead contamination more than 200 times higher than the FDA allows.

The pouches were sold under three brands — WanaBana, Schnucks and Weis. The products were produced at a plant in Ecuador and first imported to the U.S. in November 2022, the officials said.

Testing of cinnamon samples supplied to the factory showed "extremely high" levels of lead — more than 2,000 times higher than a proposed FDA maximum, the agency said.

FDA officials have raised the prospect that the contamination was intentional. One possibility is that the cinnamon was contaminated for economic reasons, the

agency said. That could mean an ingredient such as lead may have been added to boost the value of the cinnamon.

Spices such as turmeric, cinnamon and paprika have been known to be mixed with lead chromate or lead oxide, compounds that mirror the spices' colors, said Karen Everstine, technical director for FoodchainID, a company that tracks food supply chains.

"The intent is not to make people sick. Nobody wants to do that because then they get caught," Everstine said. "What they want to do is make money."

That angers Shurtleff.

If it's true, "they made my child sick for a dime," she said. "The more I think about it, the angrier I get."

At the same time, she and other parents are most concerned about the lasting effects on their kids.

"I'm pretty worried, considering the effects are irreversible," said Shurtleff, who works as a nurse.

No amount of lead exposure is safe for children and the effects on brain development can show up years later, said Dr. Jennifer Sample, a pediatric toxicologist who consults for industry and academics.

"It's irritability. It's behavioral concerns. It's learning difficulties," she said.

When kids ingest lead, the heavy metal travels through the bloodstream and spreads to organs, including the brain, Sample explained. Once there, the lead substitutes inside cells for vital nutrients such as calcium and iron, causing permanent damage.

Because kids' brains are flexible and still growing, early detection and changes in diet may offset the harm, experts said. The children nevertheless will likely need years of monitoring and intervention.

"The effects in the brain at the cellular level are irreversible, but the downstream effects don't have to be," Sample said.

Lead poisoning can be treated with chelation, a therapy that uses drugs that bind to metals in blood to remove them from the body. But it's only used with higher lead



PHOTOS BY NATE BILLINGS/AP

Cora Dibert is held by her parents at The Bridge Church, Dec. 2, in Mustang, Okla. A routine blood test for Cora revealed that the 1-year-old had lead poisoning, with nearly four times as much lead as the level that raises concern.



Alan Shurtleff, left, Morgan Shurtleff, right, and their daughter, Cora, pose for a photo at The Bridge Church, in Mustang, Okla.

levels and it's usually difficult to administer to the very young.

Instead, affected kids should eat a diet high in vitamin D, calcium and iron and be given a stimulating environment that encourages brain development.

The prognosis is sobering for families whose children were sickened.

Mustafa Al-Khaled, a Norfolk, Neb., civil engineer, sued WanaBana LLC because his 17-month-old son, Arian, was diagnosed with acute lead poisoning after eating the pouches regularly since August.

"As a parent, it's really hurtful to be in this situation," said Al-Khaled, who is among about a dozen parents of affected kids who contacted Ron Simon, a Houston food-safety lawyer who filed the case. "Why I'm here is to protect this child."

Al-Khaled and his wife, Dania, rushed Arian for testing in early November after learning that the WanaBana products had been recalled. They were already worried because Arian had been crying uncontrollably, losing weight and passing white-colored stool.

A test showed the boy's blood lead level was 15.3 micrograms of lead per deciliter of blood. That's more than four times higher than the 3.5 micrograms per deciliter that the CDC uses to identify children with elevated lead levels.

Health officials in Nebraska retrieved samples of the WanaBana pouches from Al-Khaled's home. Test results are still pending.

"We're really worrying about the future," Al-Khaled said. "Is this going to harm him later?"

That fear is shared by Talia Hurdle, 29, of Mount Vernon, N.Y. Her 18-month-old son, Jamari, ate WanaBana apple cinnamon pouches two or three times a day for months, she said.

He's a picky eater, she explained, and the pouches that sold at the Dollar Tree for \$1.25 for a pack of three were an inexpensive way to give him food he liked. Jamari's blood level was 17.5 micrograms when he was first tested in September.

"It's sad because you give your baby stuff to help them continue to be healthy, but look what happened," Hurdle said.

A few weeks after Jamari

"I'm pretty worried, considering the effects are irreversible."

Morgan Shurtleff
mother

stopped eating the puree, his lead level was down to 10.5 micrograms per deciliter. Levels dropped for Cora Dibert and Arian Al-Khaled, too, once they quit eating the pouches.

That's a good sign, said Sample, the toxicologist.

"These parents can breathe a sigh of relief that they're not going to be as harmed as they could have been with a longer exposure," she said.

Shurtleff worries that not all families know about the danger. The FDA said some Dollar Tree stores still have the fruit pouches on their shelves, weeks after they were recalled. Dollar Tree Inc. officials said in a statement they have added register locks to prevent sales of the products, instructed stores to destroy the affected packages and are working with a third party to confirm they're removed from shelves.

After Cora's diagnosis, Shurtleff was at work, preparing to give a vaccination, when she noticed her young patient was eating a WanaBana apple cinnamon pouch. She immediately told the parent about the recall.

"They were just in shock. They hadn't heard anything about it," Shurtleff said. "Then they were like, 'We still have some in our pantry. I guess we should throw it out.'"

NATION

America's animal shelters 'beyond full'

Facilities overcrowded with pets from families facing economic, housing woes

By MICHAEL HILL

Associated Press

MENANDS, N.Y. — Kaine is a big, buoyant dog looking for a home. But lately, he's spending a lot of time at the office.

Animal shelters around the U.S. are bursting at the seams amid the rising cost of living, so the gray and white 7-year-old has been staying in a worker's office at the Mohawk Hudson Humane Society while awaiting adoption.

The shelter near Albany, N.Y., is "beyond full," said CEO Ashley Jeffrey Bouck. That means Kaine — along with his crate, dog bed and chewy toys — has to share space with a staffer, a desk and file cabinets.

"He is one of our 'office fosters' as we're calling it," Bouck said as she visited Kaine's office recently. "They are here all day and all night. They are not going into a kennel because we don't have a kennel for them to go into."

The number of animals entering shelters began to climb in 2021, after a pandemic-related dip. Adoptions haven't kept pace with the influx of pets — especially larger dogs like Kaine — creating a snowballing population problem for many shelters. Shelter Animals Count, a national database of shelter statistics, estimates that the U.S. shelter population grew by nearly a quarter-million animals in 2023.

Shelter operators say they're in crisis mode as they try to reduce the kennel crush.

The issue is sometimes blamed on owners abandoning "pandemic puppies" purchased during the COVID-19 lockdowns. But advocates and operators say the evidence actually points to economic factors such as higher pet care costs and housing insecurity.

"The economy right now is really challenging for a lot of families," said Kim Alboum of the Bissell Pet Foundation, a national animal welfare organization. "And with the housing crisis, people are losing their homes and are having to downsize or move in with others. And this is a recipe for disaster for people that have larger dogs."

Overcrowded shelters with limited space are more of a dog problem than a cat problem, advocates say. Mohawk Hudson, for instance, has a lot of pit bulls, mastiffs and cane corsos.

Some people can no longer afford to care for their pets, particularly when it comes to the rising cost of veterinarian services. Advocates say a shortage of veterinarians has exacerbated the problem by reducing access to care.

North of New York City, Ulster



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL HILL/AP

Mohawk Hudson Humane Society CEO Ashley Jeffrey Bouck plays with Kaine, a dog awaiting adoption, in the office where he is housed because of overcrowding at the shelter, on Nov. 30, in Menands, N.Y.



Animal shelters around the nation are bursting at the seams, often with larger dogs. Adoptions haven't been keeping pace with the number of animals coming in, creating bottlenecks.

County SPCA executive director Gina Carbonari said she's noticed more people coming in to their pet food pantry to ask for dog food in recent months.

The tumultuous housing market has added to the problem. Bouck

said that when evictions increase, so too does the number of stray animals.

When renters move into new, more affordable housing, they often encounter restrictions on pets, with larger dogs and pit bulls

more likely to be barred.

"So you have to make a choice now," Carbonari said, "Well, do I have housing? Or am I going to be homeless with my dog?"

In Ohio, the number of animals surrendered to the Cleveland Animal Protective League due to housing or financial challenges jumped by 56% this year to 388. That includes people who can't afford the care, have a conflict with their landlord, are moving or have no home. The number of stray cats and kittens brought in by good Samaritans also has increased significantly.

Advocates say they're seeing shelters that have not had to euthanize animals recently rely again on the practice to help control overpopulation. Some cities have required owners to spay or neuter their pets, but often such policies aren't enforced.

Around the country, shelters and advocates are working to reduce intakes and encourage more adoptions.

That includes expanding foster programs that send animals to temporary homes instead of shelters. Other programs ease the financial burden of owning a dog or a cat, through pet food pantries and veterinary services like spay and neuter clinics.

Animal Care Centers of NYC, which runs New York City's public shelters, limited cat intakes to only the most urgent cases for several weeks this summer and similarly limited dog intakes for six

weeks beginning Oct. 7. Many New York City shelters also were keeping dogs in offices, as well as hallways, to avoid having to euthanize them.

Last year Mohawk Hudson reduced the number of its contracts with municipalities to take in strays and has decided not to keep taking in pets surrendered from owners.

Increasing adoptions is especially crucial, argued Best Friends Animal Society CEO Julie Castle, saying that millions of people buy new pets each year even as hundreds of thousands of animals die in shelters.

"We know people are going to get pets, so let's go back to the basics of really ... marketing adoptions, because at the end of the day, we are in a competitive space with breeders and pet stores," Castle said.

The national animal welfare organization, which runs a sanctuary in Utah, partners with businesses and shelters and rescue groups to run adoption events around the country, where adoption fees are waived or reduced.

While some shelters have responded to the crush by adding more capacity, advocates believe a long-term solution has to confront the reasons why shelters are resorting to housing animals in their offices.

"People will say, 'Oh, can't you just build more kennels?'" Bouck said. "And we could fill those up in two seconds."

NATION

Reflections at 50: Endangered Species Act

Original staff
at cutting edge
of conservation

By TRAVIS LOLLER
Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — On Dec. 28, 1973, President Richard Nixon signed the Endangered Species Act. “Nothing,” he said, “is more priceless and more worthy of preservation than the rich array of animal life with which our country has been blessed.”

The powerful new law charged the federal government with saving every endangered plant and animal in America and enjoyed nearly unanimous bipartisan support.

The Act was so sweeping that, in retrospect, it was bound to become controversial, especially since it allowed species to be listed as endangered without consideration for the economic consequences. In that way it pitted two American values against each other: the idea that Americans should preserve their incredible natural resources (the United States invented the national park, after all) and the notion that capitalism was king and private property inviolate.

Left to navigate this minefield was a group of young biologists in Washington — the first Office of Endangered Species.

The snail darter

Ichthyologist Jim Williams, the office’s first “fish guy,” was hired in 1974. He describes his cohort as “a bunch of conservation-minded biologists that were all on a mission to save every last one of our chosen group of organisms come hell or high water, and, by the way, to hell with the bureaucrats and politicians.”

His unconventional attitude and methods soon became apparent with the listing of the snail darter, a little fish now so notorious it has become synonymous with government overreach.

At the time, it was only known to exist in the Little Tennessee River — which the Tennessee Valley Authority was planning to dam.

“I started talking about listing it, and boy, oh boy, did the crap hit the fan,” Williams says.

His boss told him the listing was so controversial it might spell the end of the Endangered Species Act.

It didn’t.

But the law would never again enjoy the support of its earliest days. Whether the government should try to save all species from extinction, or if not, where to draw the line, became a point of conflict that has never been fully resolved.



C. KENNETH DODD JR./AP

Jim Williams, center, conducts fish surveys along the Cahaba River in Alabama in 1978. Williams was the first “fish guy” at the first Office of Endangered Species.

Ken Dodd, rattlesnakes

Herpetologist Ken Dodd was recruited to the office in 1976.

“There was not a whole lot of conservation theory at the time to draw on,” he says. “So we were really at the cutting edge of determining what is necessary for conservation.”

Like Williams, Dodd regularly butted heads with administrators. He also followed the science where it led without thought for whom it might inconvenience. But the thing that actually got him fired — in 1979 — was not a listing but a letter.

A man named Dominique D’Ermo owned a Washington restaurant that was serving rattlesnake meat he said came from Pennsylvania. That would have violated a law called the Lacey Act.

“So I wrote to the restaurant and said, ‘Hey, Dominique, I think you need to get a better source,’” Dodd says.

It turned out Interior Secretary Cecil Andrus was a patron. When he learned what Dodd had done, “He fired me.”

Dodd hired an attorney. Meanwhile, according to Williams, “We all went down to a T-shirt shop, got shirts that said ‘Save Ken Dodd and Rattlesnakes.’”

The ensuing publicity made an impact. Soon, Dodd was back at work.

Gray wolf season

Mammologist Ron Nowak joined the office in 1973. The animals he was responsible for were often furry and charismatic, but he still had problems with his listings.

In the 1980s the gray wolf was coming back in Minnesota from “just a tiny remnant of a couple hundred animals to maybe several hundred or a thousand” thanks to the Endangered Species Act.

Wildlife officials wanted to open a hunting season.

That would require a regulation



C. KENNETH DODD JR./AP

Herpetologist C. Kenneth Dodd Jr. holds a pink Grand Canyon Rattlesnake in 1982.

showing it would benefit the wolves and was the only way to control their population.

“They told me, ‘You have to write the regulation,’” Nowak says. “And I said, ‘It would be illegal.’”

Someone else wrote the regulation. Conservation groups sued, calling Nowak as a witness. The conservation groups won.

Nowak’s success may have made him overconfident, he said, because he then sought outside help that forced the agency to move on a stalled listing for the Louisiana black bear, the inspiration for the original teddy bear. By late 1987, his unit had been “disembodied” and he was reassigned.

Today, Nowak has nothing but praise for his colleagues.

“They wanted to show a true reflection of that part of the natural world that was in danger of disappearing,” he says.

“You could go there at night or on weekends, and they’d be there, not for any extra pay, but just because they believed in it.



MIKE LOCKHART, U.S. GEOLOGICAL SURVEY/AP

A polar bear roams the Beaufort Sea region of Alaska in 2009.



RICHARD VOGEL/AP

A California condor named Hope takes to flight at the Condor habitat at the Los Angeles Zoo.

“And you could find them out in the field, sometimes, actually going to just try to look for these animals and plants. Really, I think it was a unique place — one that we may never see again.”

Climate change, condors

LaVerne Smith was hired in 1978 as a botanist, but her title and duties shifted over a long career.

When Smith started, “The agency was just getting hiring people, getting staffed up, trying to figure out what to do with this amazing new piece of legislation,” she says.

One of the early decisions was whether to bring the last of the critically endangered California condors into captivity for breeding. It was controversial, but it worked.

“They’re out sailing around the Grand Canyon. And I think anyone who’s seen one — the day I saw one sail over the Grand Canyon, I was like, ‘Oh my God! That was all worth it.’”

Smith later transferred to Alaska, where she led the listing for the polar bear, the first animal to be listed as endangered because

of climate change.

“That is a whole new era of challenge for the agency,” she says.

Smith calls it “terrifying” but tries to remain hopeful.

“People were very worried that we would never be able to do anything for the condor,” she says. “Certainly it still requires a lot of protection and a lot of help, but it’s still out there.”

The boss

John Spinks, an early chief of the Office of Endangered Species, was aware that some of his staff would make end runs around the bureaucracy.

At one point there was a particular listing that was being blocked by Interior Department attorneys.

He wrote a memorandum about the problems that got leaked to The Washington Post and “caused all hell to break loose,” he says.

“Of course, we were as clean as the driven snow. There was nothing that would ever come back to us. That was many years ago, but I still think about that with great satisfaction.”

NATION

Too much too soon?

After surviving a muddy quagmire, future of Burning Man uncertain

BY SCOTT SONNER

Associated Press

RENO, Nev. — The blank canvass of desert wilderness in northern Nevada seemed the perfect place in 1992 for artistic anarchists to relocate their annual burning of a towering, anonymous effigy. It was goodbye to San Francisco's Baker Beach, hello to the Nevada playa, the long-ago floor of an inland sea.

The tiny gathering became Burning Man's surrealistic circus, fueled by acts of kindness and avant-garde theatrics, sometimes with a dose of hallucinogens or nudity. The spectacle flourished as the festival ballooned over the next three decades.

Some say it grew too much, too fast.

Things came to a head in 2011 when tickets sold out for the first time. Organizers responded with a short-lived lottery system that left people out of what was supposed to be a radically inclusive event. As Burning Man matured, luxurious accommodations proliferated, as did the population of billionaires and celebrities.

Katherine Chen, a sociology professor in New York City who wrote a 2009 book about the event's "creative chaos," was among those who wondered whether Burning Man "would be a victim of its own success."

Exponential growth led to increasing questions about whether organizers had veered too far from the core principles of radical inclusion, expression, participation and the pledge to "leave no trace."

That last hurdle was never harder to clear than this year as "Burners" tried to leave over Labor Day weekend after torching the 80-foot wooden sculpture that is "the Man."

A rare rainstorm turned the Black Rock Desert into a muddy quagmire 110 miles north of Reno, delaying the departure of 80,000 revelers. Once out, organizers had six weeks to clean up under terms of a federal permit.

By the smallest of margins, they passed the test in November, with a few adjustments recommended for the future. The verdict from the U.S. Bureau of Land Management means Burning Man is in line to use federal land again next year.

Debate over the event's future, however, is sure to continue as divisions grow between the aging hippie-types and wealthier, more technologically inclined newcomers. Veteran participants fear the newer set is losing touch with Burning Man's roots.

The event has made a quantum leap from a gathering of hundreds to one that temporarily becomes Nevada's third largest city after



PHOTOS BY ANDY BARRON/AP

Burning Man participants walk through dust at the annual Burning Man event on the Black Rock Desert of Gerlach, Nev., on Aug. 29, 2014. Burning Man organizers don't foresee major changes in 2024 thanks to a hard-won passing grade for cleaning up this year's festival.

"The rain weeded out the people who didn't want to be there for the right reason."

Katrina Cook

Burning Man attendee

metropolitan Las Vegas and Reno. The festival drew 4,000 in 1995 and topped 50,000 in 2010.

It's no wonder seasoned Burners sound a bit like griping cribbage players on a rural town square when they mutter: "It ain't like it used to be."

"Back then, it was much more raw," said Mike "Festie" Malecki, 63, a retired Chicago mortician turned California sculptor who made his 13th trip this year to the land of colorful theme camps, towering sculptures, drum circles and art cars.

"There are more (people) who come out to party and don't participate. We call them spectators," he said.

Senior organizers long have wrestled with whether to become more civilized or remain what co-founder Larry Harvey described as a "repudiation of order and authority."

Ron Halbert, a 71-year-old from San Francisco, has worked sup-



An old wooden yacht art car rolls through the playa at Burning Man on the Black Rock Desert on Aug. 31, 2012, near Gerlach, Nev.

port for Burning Man's 90-piece orchestra for 20 years and remains optimistic.

"It's still the gathering of the tribe," he said.

The event is permitted tentatively for the same 80,000 attendance cap next year.

Organizers are considering some minor changes, though generally resist making new rules, Executive Director Marian Goodell said.

Critics on social media howled at the mayhem left behind this year, posting photos of garbage piles, abandoned vehicles and overflowing portable toilets while ridiculing the "hippies" and their leave-no-trace mantra.

But that mayhem may have actually helped bring Burning Man

back to its roots.

Katrina Cook of Toronto said it forced people to be true to the founding principles of participation and radical self-reliance.

"The rain weeded out the people who didn't want to be there for the right reason," Cook said.

Mark Fromson, 54, was staying in an RV, but the rains forced him to find shelter at another camp where fellow burners provided food and cover. Another principle of Burning Man, he said, centers on unconditional gift giving with no expectation of something in return.

After sunset, Fromson set off barefoot through the muck for a long trek back to his vehicle, slogging through thick clay that clung to his feet and legs. The challenge,

he said, was the mark of a "good burn."

Nevertheless, Jeffery Longoria of San Francisco, who marked his fifth consecutive voyage to Burning Man last summer, said its core principles are going to evolve no matter what as a new generation takes over.

"The people that created this community, a lot of them are getting older and retiring and there's a lot of new young people coming in, the kind that have, you know, a couple \$100,000 RVs and are kind of just careless about the environment."

Soren Michael, a Los Angeles technology worker who made his 11th trip this year, said the biggest change has been the ability to communicate with the outside world from the desert.

"It was almost part of the appeal to be disconnected," he said.

Twenty years ago, the psychedelic celebration like none other already was attracting academic scholars — anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, economists and communications professors — curious about how the makeshift civilization functioned without real-world rules.

Burning Man references started popping up in TV episodes and talk show punchlines. The rich and famous began venturing to Black Rock City, as the festival's temporary metropolis is called.

A full-blown exhibit about the phenomenon debuted in 2018 at the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington. Even then, veteran Burners complained about the event becoming as much a curiosity to see as to do.

That's in part the problem veterans have with the advent of glamor camping, or glamping, in which private companies provide packaged trips to concierge camps with luxury RVs and lavish meals under chandeliers. Some believe the camps violate Burning Man principles.

The growing number of billionaires and celebrities who fly in on private jets to Black Rock City's temporary airstrip "seems to be everyone's favorite thing to hate," Goodell said. But wealth shouldn't be a cause for shame, she said.

"The question is not about glamping," she said. "Comfort doesn't assume lack of engagement. It's whether you have a glamping camp and you're not really engaging."

Burning Man's purpose remains the same: building a creative, stimulating environment, the essence of which people can take back to their own communities.

"We thought that from the beginning," Goodell said. "We just didn't know it would be 80,000 people."

No taming her fire: Teen bull rider aims high

BY ANNE M. PETERSON
Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Najiah Knight drops her 100-pound frame onto a snorting 1,300-pound bull and adjusts her ropes, warming the sticky rosin. Music blares across the arena, but Najiah can hear only her dad, in the chute with her, and her mom, cheering from the stands. She nods to indicate she's ready, and a cowboy pulls the door of the chute.

The gate swings open, and Najiah — a 17-year-old gladiator entering a ring where men rule — begins her dance with the bull.

Najiah, a high school junior from small-town Oregon, is on a yearslong quest to become the first woman to compete at the top level of the Professional Bull Riders tour. She can't join until next year, when she's 18, and even then, she'll have to prove she's good enough to qualify. There's fierce competition: Only about 30 of the best riders globally reach the top. It takes time, travel, money and, perhaps most of all, guts. The sport is dangerous, with riders frequently injured and even killed.

None of that fazes Najiah. If there's one quality she doesn't have, it's fear.

"Since I was a little kid, 3 years old, I would tell my dad that this is what I'm gonna do," she said. "I'm going to be a bull rider. I'm going to make it. As I got older, it was 'I'm going to be in the PBR, I'm going to be the first girl.'"

"That is my why. That is my drive," said Najiah, the only woman to qualify in the 16-18 age division for last month's Junior World Finals in Las Vegas.

There, wearing a helmet and mouthpiece, she made adjustments to the rope circling her bull. She threw her hips forward. Then came the nod — go time. In that moment, there's no emotion, just focus.

"You've got to be in the game, you've got to follow the bull," Najiah said.

Bull riders try to stay on the bucking animal for eight seconds, one hand in the air. It's violent and chaotic. If eight seconds is achieved, both bull and rider are scored.

Like many of the teens that day, Najiah fell in just a couple seconds. But she'd get another chance.

Fearless from the start

Back home, Najiah is more typical teenager than rodeo star. She lives on the outskirts of Arlington, a blink-and-you'll-miss-it town of 628 people along Interstate 84, which cuts across Oregon.

Najiah plays volleyball and basketball for Arlington High, which fields combined teams with a nearby school. You'd never know from looking at her how tough she



JOHN LOCHER/AP

Najiah Knight competes during the Junior World Finals rodeo on Dec. 7, in Las Vegas. Najiah, a high school junior from small-town Oregon, is on a yearslong quest to become the first woman to compete at the top level of the Professional Bull Riders tour.



AMANDA LOMAN/AP

Knight uses a practice barrel to work on bull riding skills at the family's home in Arlington, Ore., on Oct. 18.

is, her coach says. But her parents realized from the start that their girl was fearless.

At age 3, Andrew Knight said, Najiah started riding sheep — known as mutton busting. "It was like she had velcro pants on, and she'd stick to them," he said with a laugh. "There was not an inch of movement budging her off."

As her mom, Missi, put it: "There was no taming that fire."

When Najiah was 7, she started riding steers. At 9, she was on miniature bulls. From 2018 to 2020, she was ranked among the country's top 15 mini bull riders. In 2020, she was the first girl to ride New York's Madison Square Garden. In the third round, she beat all the boys.

A broken arm and the pandemic sidelined Najiah for a bit. But for about two years, she's been riding junior bulls — a step below the big



LM OTERO/AP

Bull rider Najiah Knight looks at neon lights showing a bull in an Ariat store, one of her current sponsors, in the Fort Worth Stockyards, on Oct. 4, in Fort Worth, Texas.

bulls.

At home, Najiah trains with Andrew in the driveway, a barrel set up with springs and levers to simulate a bull ride. He rides a fine line between coach and dad. If he feels fear, he said, his daughter will, too. His motto is one of positivity.

Aiming for perfection

In Vegas, two days after her first ride, Najiah got her second attempt in the Junior World Finals.

With her dad, she readied for the ride — the duo able to communicate without speaking. She nodded, motivated as always.

But again, she was tossed by the bull short of eight seconds. She was disappointed, but not discouraged.

"I wanted it to go perfectly, just the perfect ride, but it doesn't always go that way," she said.

Najiah is direct about what she wants to accomplish: Be the first woman on PBR's top-level tour, Unleash The Beast; be named Rookie of the Year; and win a world championship. Every ride is a step toward that goal.

Najiah and her family have been strategic in her promotion. They've cultivated her social-media image and courted key sponsorships — she has deals with Cooper Tires and Ariat, the boot and clothing maker.

Everyone from experienced riders to casual fans can see Najiah's passion and fearlessness. But it's hard to say how feasible her dream is, fellow riders and

league officials say.

"There is the hopeful side of me that wants her to be a world champion," PBR CEO Sean Gleason said. "I believe that anything is possible for her. She's been committed. She's been working at it for a long, long time."

"But it's a very difficult sport. The hill to climb is high for anybody."

Doing it for herself

Najiah doesn't see her gender as an obstacle. "I'm just a bull rider," she often says with a shrug.

But she also wants to be a role model for women and Native Americans. Najiah and her family are Paiute, part of the Klamath Tribes, and she proudly wears a beaded hat band and necklaces before she rides. She's active outside the arena, too — last year, she appeared at a Ride to the Polls event to encourage young Navajo voters in Kayenta, Ariz.

"I'm pretty sure I'm the only woman Native bull rider that I know," she said.

The Vegas competition hasn't swayed her.

When she turns 18, she expects to compete on the Pendleton Whisky Velocity Tour. From there, she'll work toward needed points for the top level.

Najiah — and her family, the league and her sponsors — know it's a long road.

She long ago accepted the danger of the sport and the challenge to make it to the top.

"I don't care about what anyone else thinks," she said. "I do this for me."

AUTOMOTIVE

More auto buyers in US turning to hybrids

By TOM KRISHER

Associated Press

DETROIT — America's automakers have staked their futures on the notion that electric vehicles will dominate sales in the coming years, spurred by buyers determined to reduce carbon emissions and save on fuel.

But so far, while EV sales are growing, their pace is falling well short of the industry's ambitious timetable for transitioning away from combustion engines. Instead, buyers are increasingly embracing a quarter-century-old technology whose popularity has been surging: The gas-electric hybrid, which alternates from gas to battery power to maximize efficiency.

So far in 2023, Americans have bought a record 1 million-plus hybrids — up 76% from the same period last year, according to Edmunds.com. As recently as last year, purchases had fallen below 2021's total. This year's figures don't even include sales of 148,000 plug-in hybrids, which drive a short distance on battery power before a gas-electric system kicks in.

Though electric vehicle sales are nearing an annual record of over 1 million this year, their year-over-year growth rate has begun to stall. EVs still account for only about 7% of all U.S. auto sales.

The slowdown has raised concern among automakers that buyer interest in EVs is faltering. Some companies are cutting production and scaling down plans for new battery or assembly plants.

The reasons why hybrids have quickly become the preferred choice for many buyers vary. They range from the higher prices of comparable EVs to concern about the scarcity of charging stations to a recognition that hybrids provide many of the same advantages without the hassles of EVs.

Ford, the nation's No. 2 hybrid seller behind Toyota, expects to produce enough hybrids to quadruple sales within five years. General Motors, which abandoned most hybrids in the U.S. four years ago in favor of EVs, now says it's considering bringing them back.

In the meantime, surveys show that consumers remain uneasy about either the availability of charging stations or the sale prices of EVs — even factoring in tax credits that the federal government makes available for EV purchases in many cases.

"Your standard hybrid makes the most sense to most people," said Ivan Drury, a director at the Edmunds.com auto website. "I think you'll find that people don't want to deal with the hassle or the difficulties of charging."

Hybrids do emit some tailpipe



JEFF CHIU/AP

Shalinder Singh, a California Uber driver, was drawn to the 2024 Honda CR-V Hybrid by the gas savings.

pollution. But because they burn less fuel than autos equipped solely with gasoline engines, their emissions are less. What's more, purchase prices for hybrids are akin to those of gas vehicles and typically far less than for comparable EVs.

"People are perfectly fine with a car that gets 45 or 50 miles per gallon, and you don't have to do anything" different from current behavior, said Scott Adams, owner of a Toyota dealership in suburban Kansas City.

Here are some key reasons why hybrids, which use both a gas engine and battery power to efficiently turn the wheels, have taken off this year:

■ **Saving the planet:** The proliferation of wildfires, heat waves and more intense storms has led more people to view climate change as a grave crisis, one they can help mitigate by burning less carbon-spewing fuel. Yet even among those people, some remain skeptical that an electric vehicle

will allow them to travel long distances or tow trailers.

"People want to participate in this — the idea of reducing carbon," said Jack Hollis, who heads North American sales and marketing for Toyota, which leads in hybrid sales and has moved only gradually toward EVs. "I think the hybrid gives them what they're most looking for."

■ **A lower price:** EV prices have been dropping, mainly a consequence of federal tax credits and price cuts by Tesla, the market leader. Yet they're still pricier than hybrids or gas vehicles.

After peaking at nearly \$63,000 last year, the average EV sale price fell to just over \$60,500 in November, not including tax credits or prices from Tesla, which doesn't release them. Fewer EVs, though, will likely qualify for the tax credits in 2024 because of rules that will limit buyers from claiming a full credit if they purchase cars with battery materials from China or other countries that

are considered hostile to the United States.

The average price of a hybrid has stabilized at roughly \$42,000. A typical hybrid costs somewhat more than its gasoline counterpart. A Toyota RAV4 hybrid with all-wheel-drive, for example, starts at \$32,825, \$1,600 more than a comparable gas version.

Like many hybrid buyers, Shalinder Singh, an Uber driver from Sunnyvale, Calif., said that for him, the gas savings helped tip the price equation in favor of a 2024 Honda CR-V hybrid over the corresponding gasoline model.

"The mileage for the hybrid is too good," said Singh, who makes frequent trips to San Francisco and San Jose.

The Environmental Protection Agency says a front-wheel-drive CR-V Hybrid gets 40 mpg in city and highway driving, 10 mpg better than the gas version. The owner of a hybrid CR-V who drives 15,000 miles annually would save \$450 a year on fuel over the gas model.

■ **Lifestyle needs:** Angie Rodesky, who recently moved to Jefferson City, Mo., said her children wanted her to buy a Tesla to replace her old vehicle. Though she did consider an EV to help reduce emissions, she settled on a RAV4 hybrid because she travels frequently to see children in Florida and Delaware.

"I have a fear of plugging something in and not being able to travel as far, because it's a 16-hour road trip from Delaware to Missouri," Rodesky, 55, said. "I needed to make sure I had a vehicle that was comfortable to ride in and had good gas mileage."

After buying a 2023 model from Adams Toyota near Kansas City,

she had to wait a month for it to arrive, mainly because of heavy customer demand for the vehicle.

Brad Sowers, owner of Jim Butler Kia and other St. Louis-area dealerships, said customers who consider EVs often ask for hybrids or other alternatives.

"They look at it as a baby step into the EV world," Sowers said. "They're saying to themselves, 'I can't really do 100% battery psychologically.'"

■ **Colder weather:** Dealers say many hybrid buyers appear to have done research and know that cold weather reduces the range of an EV battery. Tests conducted in Norway, where nearly 80% of new vehicles are electric, found that EVs lose between 10% and 36% of their range during winter.

Most U.S. EV purchases occur on the coasts, where charging stations are more prevalent and weather is often warmer. In the Midwest, where stations are farther apart, Sowers said consumers worry about decreased wintertime range.

"It's cold here," he said. "The (charging) infrastructure isn't that great."

■ **Reliability:** In its auto reliability survey this year, Consumer Reports found that hybrids were the industry's most reliable type of power system. Electric vehicles were least reliable. EVs contain glitch-prone new technology, Consumer Reports said. Hybrids have less.

And with hybrids having been sold in the United States for more than two decades, automakers have had time to refine the vehicles' engineering and construction. In general, vehicles that have been manufactured for longer periods are more reliable, said Jake Fisher, senior director of auto testing at Consumer Reports.

Analysts say they still think more EVs than hybrids will eventually be sold in the United States. With government help, the industry is moving to build many more charging stations. Ford, GM, Hyundai and others have reached agreements for owners of their vehicles to charge them at many of Tesla's widespread stations. The industry is standardizing its plugs to match Tesla's.

With direct-current fast chargers, charging times are becoming faster. Battery technology will likely improve cold-weather range, too.

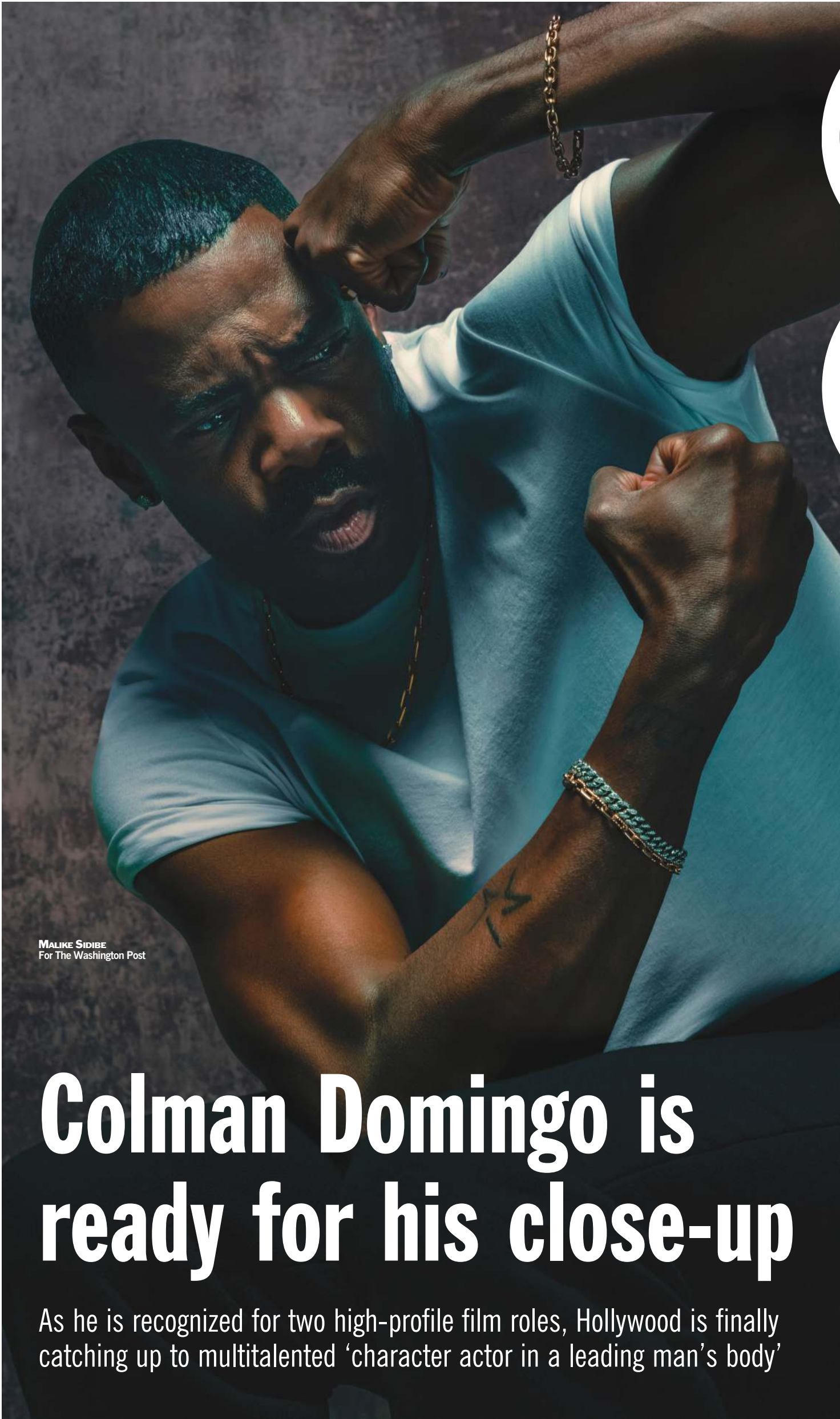
In addition, next year, EVs' tax credits will be counted at the time of sale, thereby reducing the price and easing monthly payments. This year, buyers had to wait for income tax returns to receive their money. In addition, over time, tighter fuel economy and pollution regulations will likely compel automakers to sell more EVs.



CHARLIE RIEDEL/AP

Scott Adams, owner of Adams Toyota in Lee's Summit, Mo., said the ease of a switch from a gasoline car to a hybrid appeals to consumers.

MOVIES



MALIKE SIDIBE
For The Washington Post

Colman Domingo is ready for his close-up

As he is recognized for two high-profile film roles, Hollywood is finally catching up to multitalented ‘character actor in a leading man’s body’



Above: Colman Domingo as the violent misogynist Mister in “The Color Purple.” Top: Domingo as Bayard Rustin in a scene from “Rustin.” Domingo is being lauded for his lead roles in both films.
Warner Bros. Pictures (above), Netflix (top)

BY HELENA ANDREWS-DYER
The Washington Post

Colman Domingo didn’t see this coming. The Oscar buzz for not one but two films, the flashing bulbs as he glides down red carpets looking “clean” with a capital “C” as his pal Lenny Kravitz would put it, the full-out anointing as Hollywood’s next leading man at the big age of 54. None of it. But trust, if there was ever an actor ready for his close-up, it’s Colman Jason Domingo.

“I feel that I’m truly being seen the way I’ve always seen myself,” said Domingo via Zoom from his sunny guest bedroom in suburban Southern California. He considers himself a shoulder-the-wheel artist, capable of both disappearing into a part or standing out, if necessary. Confidence and Colman have always been on a first-name basis; it’s this level of recognition that’s unexpected. “What’s happening now in my career? I didn’t see any of this. I didn’t have that specific of a dream.”

What’s happening can best be described cosmically. After three decades of wearing every hat the entertainment industry has on the shelf, the stars are finally aligning for Domingo. He’s being lauded for leading roles in “Rustin,” for which he received a Golden Globe nomination, and “The Color Purple” — two films that show the boundless breadth of his talent.

“Every line he’s written in a play, every moon he gazed at with his mother, every night on a bartending shift ...” said actress Kim Dickens, her voice catching as she detailed her close friend and former “Fear the Walking Dead” co-star’s road thus far.

Everything he has done in his life has led him here — that tiny circle in the middle of it all.

“There’s a bull’s-eye on me now, but it’s a bull’s-eye that I created,” said Domingo,

SEE CLOSE-UP ON PAGE 21

MOVIES

Close-up: Actor finds love for each hero and villain he plays

FROM PAGE 20

who can't forget a piece of advice (or maybe it was a warning) he received years ago: "You're a character actor in a leading man's body. It's going to take this industry a little while to catch up."

Well, both are here — timing and the industry — and Domingo is ready to reimagine what a leading man can truly be with two characters who couldn't be more different or defining.

In "Rustin," Domingo plays Bayard Rustin, the civil rights activist who was the brains behind the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. A close confidant of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Rustin stood just to his right as he delivered the "I Have a Dream" speech. But as an openly gay man, the movie shows, Rustin was purposely marginalized in favor of more supposedly palatable heroes.

Domingo called the role "seismic." He threw himself into the real-life man physically and psychologically, the connective tissue between the activist and artist palpable on screen. But the actor steps cautiously around the notion that because the two men's identities intersect in many ways — gay, Black, from Pennsylvania — that Domingo could simply slip into the role like a second skin. That it was somehow easy.

"I never want to have anyone doubt the work that goes into it. I'm not just playing myself. There's crafting the work of body, mind, soul and language that has to be done. I'm crafting a character using all parts of myself," Domingo said.

The same actor who embodies the bigness of Rustin also skirts the narrow lines of "The Color Purple's" Mister, a violent misogynist whose soul has been so crushed under the weight of early 20th-century oppression that he squeezes the life out of everyone in reach.

Domingo's calling card is interrogation, digging and digging until he hits something hard to hold onto. He's so good at it that when Oprah Winfrey (who originated the role of Sofia in the 1985 film and co-produced this latest iteration) and "The Color Purple" director Blitz Bazawule were discussing casting Domingo, the queen of talk had this to say: "With Colman, you will always know that there's some good in Mister."

Corey Hawkins, who plays Mister's son Harpo in the film, described Domingo as "an artist who asks the right questions."

The first question Domingo asks is always the same: "What do I love about this character?" Then he keeps going. "What do I think this character's possible problem is? What happens if they don't solve it?" And on and on until the actor and his character have come to an understanding.

"That's for any hero or villain that I play. I have to love these characters. I love Mister in 'The Color Purple,'" he said.

Really? Mister? The brutish patriarch of author Alice Walker's 1982 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel that is so filled with venom that he poisons everything around him, his unlucky wife, Celie, chief among his victims. That Mister?

"I was able to find to some tenderness in Mister, which comes as a surprise," Domingo said. While not necessarily redeemed in the film, Domingo's Mister is rendered in a new light by the closing song.



MALIKE SIDIBE/For The Washington Post

After three decades in the entertainment industry, the stars are aligning for actor Colman Domingo, whose breadth of talent is on display in two major films.

It begins with a moment in the film that happens in a flash. Mister is drunk outside Harpo's juke joint. The father and son stumble into an accidental embrace, and Mister lays his head on Harpo's shoulder. It's a brief but powerful peek into a man defined by his rage. Domingo and Hawkins discovered the moment in rehearsal. They wanted to explore what trauma does to a man. That's when the hug happened, and Harpo asks, "Are you okay, Pop?"

"It's a simple act that cracks open the world for them, and it was just a moment when Colman made a choice," Hawkins said. "That was just Colman trying things. He's fearless, and I think that is rare," added Hawkins, who was a student at the Juilliard School when he first saw Domingo onstage in the 2008 Broadway rock comedy "Passing Strange."

Actor Glynn Turman, a veteran of the stage and screen, echoed Hawkins' take on how unique Domingo's approach is, even among artists.

"He's extremely daring. I love that about him. In a time where everyone plays it so safe and are so self-conscious of their approaches, he's not afraid to break those limits at all," said Turman, who starred opposite Colman in "Rustin" and "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom."

Turman, 76, considers Domingo to be cut from the same cloth.

"I'm fed from the energy of Colman. I'm fed by his passion for the craft — not just the fame but the craft. I consider myself a craftsman," Turman said. To underscore that point, the actor recalled a compliment from James Earl Jones while playing his son in the 1976 film adaptation of "The River Niger," a Broadway play.

"He said, 'I like the way you work and that's it,'" Turman said. "And I think Colman approaches the craft the same way. It's about getting a good piece of material and adding our touch."

Domingo's touch is undeniable in his work, which has gained attention from critics and awards voters alike. He won an Emmy, his most prestigious award to date, for his portrayal of Ali, the no-nonsense Narcotics Anonymous sponsor to Zendaya's Rue in "Euphoria." He has received two Independent Spirit Award nominations. One was for "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom," in which he held his own opposite Oscar winners Viola Davis and Chadwick Boseman. The other was for the stripper road-trip saga "Zola," in which he plays a pimp named X, who goes from smiling to sinister in 60 seconds.

That last character is what did it for

Kravitz, who has known Domingo since the pair acted together in 2013's "The Butler."

"I know Colman. Colman is my friend," emphasized Kravitz, who wrote the original song for "Rustin." Still, he was deep into watching "Zola" before he realized that it was Domingo playing the villainous X. "I didn't even see Colman. I saw that character. I thought it was somebody else. When that happens, it's pretty incredible. I knew it looked like Colman."

Domingo, said Kravitz, is timeless. Not just his style but his very way of being.

"Colman is just beginning. Even though we have so much behind us, we also have so much in front us, God willing," Kravitz added.

That's the thing about Domingo, he seems intimately familiar and entirely new. Like a hit song with just enough rhythm and blues laid underneath that it reminds you of a slow dance from 20 years ago. Like an actor whose face you can't forget but whose name you somehow do. Not for long though.

He didn't have a blueprint of what a creative life would or could look like. But in 1990, when his friend Guy suggested that Domingo, who was taking a break from Temple University, come out to San Francisco just to see what was what, his mother said: "Just go. School will always be there."

"She said, 'I want you to be happy. Don't just get a job.'" And with that advice, he went west at 21 to become the fourth roommate in a studio apartment. He hit the ground running, using whatever work he did in acting class to boost his résumé. After 10 years, he had built up an enviable and successful career doing regional theater and any guest TV spots that filmed in the area. Then, New York came calling.

He started over and hustled for another decade, eventually cobbling together the life of a working artist with acclaimed turns in "The Scottsboro Boys" and "Passing Strange." He directed his own show. He wrote the book for "Summer: The Donna Summer Musical."

"I had a rent-stabilized apartment in New York and I was like, 'I'm good. This is good,'" Domingo said. "That's the life of an artist, you try to find joy in what you did. I dreamed of just being happy." What's happening now wasn't on his vision board. But his late mother, Edith, always knew.

"She prayed over me and wanted good things for me, things that I couldn't even see myself," Domingo said. "She wanted Spike Lee and Steven Spielberg and Oprah to know me. I didn't think that was a possibility."

And now — after eight seasons of a network show, several lauded guest turns, directing, producing and writing — the old warning that it would take Hollywood a minute to catch up to him is becoming his reality. Yes, he loves the love. But what Domingo is most proud of is the respect he's getting.

"I have been pouring into others for years. Other productions, other people's Oscars. Let's just say it. Lovingly. Willingly. I don't know how to do it any other way. I was raised to be generous and be kind and to trust that the universe will take care of me," Domingo said. "And it seems like, right now, the universe is truly taking care of me."

MOVIES

A fresh approach to a literary classic

Finding new dimensions, sisterhood and healing in the big-budget, musical version of ‘The Color Purple’

BY LINDSEY BAHR
Associated Press

It’s not a secret that Fantasia Barrino did not want to play Celie again. The “American Idol” winner hadn’t had the best time doing “The Color Purple” on Broadway.

The protagonist of Alice Walker’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel tells her story of sexual, physical and psychological abuses in the early 20th century South in a series of letters to God. It was a character Barrino found it difficult to leave behind at the end of the day. Even the prospect of starring in her first major motion picture didn’t seem worth it.

But director Blitz Bazawule had a different vision: He wanted to give Celie an imagination. This Barrino found intriguing.

“Once she understood the assignment, she quickly agreed,” Bazawule said during a recent interview with The Associated Press.

Now, four decades after “The Color Purple” became a literary sensation and a Steven Spielberg film, the story is on the big screen again. This time it’s a grand, big-budget Warner Bros. musical starring Barrino, Taraji P. Henson, as the sultry singer Shug Avery, and Danielle Brooks, reprising her Broadway role as the strong-willed Sofia. It opened in theaters on Christmas.

“I’m glad that I didn’t allow my fear of my past experience with Celie, because of where my life was at that time, to hinder me from doing something is great,” Barrino said. “I’m riding on a high right now.”

Oprah Winfrey is one of several big-name producers on “The Color Purple,” alongside Spielberg, Quincy Jones and Scott Sanders. Winfrey got her acting break and first Oscar nomination playing Sofia in the 1985 adaptation, before helping Sanders turn it into a Broadway musical 20 years later.

Bazawule was not an obvious candidate to direct this film, however. The multi-hyphenate Ghanaian artist had received acclaim and recognition for co-directing Beyoncé’s visual album “Black is King.” The only other film he had under his belt was the microbudget “The Burial Of Kojo,” which was made for less than \$100,000.

But he had ambitious ideas involving large-scale musical numbers that would take audiences on a dazzling journey through the history of Black music in America, from gospel to blues to jazz. And, of course,



WARNER BROS. PICTURES/AP

Fantasia Barrino was not eager to revisit her Broadway role of Celie in the new film version of “The Color Purple” because she previously struggled to leave behind the abuses inflicted on the character.



WILLY SANJUAN, INVISION/AP

Ghanaian director Blitz Bazawule was not an obvious choice to helm the new adaptation of “The Color Purple,” but he brought an ambitious vision to the project.

Celie’s inner life. He wasn’t at all sure he would get it, but he knew the story he wanted to tell.

“I thought, if I could just find a way to show the audience how this Black woman from the rural South was able to imagine her way out of pain and trauma it will debunk a myth that is that people who have dealt with abusing trauma are docile and passive or waiting to be saved,” Bazawule said. “If we could just imbue in (Celie) that scale, then that’s the version that needed to exist. Thankfully they said yes.”

They would have to jump through some hoops, however, to secure the kind of budget (reportedly around \$100 million) that they needed to support the vision, including auditioning Henson, an Oscar-nominated



CHRIS PIZZELLO, INVISION/AP

Taraji P. Henson had to audition for the role of Shug despite being an Oscar-nominated actress. Her payoff was a part in a movie with a \$100 million budget, a Black producer, a Black director and a predominately Black cast.

actor, and Brooks, who already had a Tony nomination for her portrayal of Sofia.

“We were not the studio’s choices” Henson said. “I just felt some way about having to audition. I’m Academy Award nominated. I had just got finished singing on NBC’s ‘Annie Live.’ But I checked my ego and I did it. I went in as Shug. I found a dress, had a flower in my hair and faux fur stole, and I kicked the door down because I didn’t want them to ever second-guess me again.”

For Brooks, it was a six-month process that had her doubting herself. A lot of the people involved in “The Color Purple” felt the exhaustion of both having to



WILLY SANJUAN, INVISION/AP

Danielle Brooks found filming “The Color Purple” on location revelatory when compared to playing Sofia in a stripped-down Broadway production.

prove themselves yet again but also wanting to rise to the challenge nonetheless because this film was worth it.

“This is a huge undertaking to be part of,” said Brooks. “This movie is about legacy, and it’s what I’ve been calling a cinematic heirloom.”

Her Broadway production was very minimalist and stripped down, so to be on location in Georgia, around Macon, Savannah, Atlanta and the small town of Grantville, was revelatory.

“My world really opened up because I got to use all of my senses,” Brooks said. “I got to explore all of Sofia because now I have a juke joint and I have a dinner table. I have a house. We had a white mob attacking me.”

The juke joint was a real set

that required a real swamp to be dredged, where they’d stage Shug’s showstopper, “Push Da Button.”

“It’s probably the perfect confluence of my amazing technical and creative teams,” Bazawule said.

The film gives a new boldness to Celie and Shug’s relationship with one another and more dimensions to the male characters, including Colman Domingo’s Mister.

And all carry the weight of responsibility not only to the material and its predecessors but also to future films made with primarily Black casts at this level.

“It’s not the first time I have been in a production of this scale, but what matters to me is that it’s a Black production and it’s a production with Black producer, a Black director, predominately Black cast,” Henson said. “It’s like usually we’re supposed to make a dollar out of 15 cents. And after 20+ in the game, it’s like finally the studio trusted us to deliver.”

The question of awards is a loaded one. Though “The Color Purple” has all the makings of a big Oscar contender (Barrino and Brooks have already been nominated for Golden Globes), it comes with history. Spielberg’s film was nominated for 11 Oscars and infamously won none. And then there is the even stickier subject of Black women and Hollywood awards. Halle Berry remains the only Black best actress Oscar winner.

Bazawule is not particularly interested in the “dog and pony show” of awards season. It’s hard for him to fathom how anyone can pit one film against another, but he does understand that there are real gains in earning potential and creative freedom that happen if his actors, especially the women, get nominated and win.

“Our job was to go in and honor Alice Walker’s brilliant book. We did that. We found our healing through it and we’re an amazing group together. Our Q&A’s are out of this world,” he said, before taking a pause. “Now THAT I want and award for.”

All seem to agree that what they experienced is bigger than any validation from an award.

“There’s something magical about this story,” Brooks said. “It really does tamper with your heart in the best way. It opens it up. I’ve never experienced anything like what I’ve experienced during the journey of working on ‘The Color Purple.’”

MOVIES



METRO-GOLDWYN-MAYER PICTURES PHOTOS/AP

“The Boys in the Boat” comes at a great time for USRowing, which worked with producers in the hopes of raising funds for and awareness of the sport.

Rowing in the same direction

Hollywood treatment of ‘The Boys in the Boat’ a timely gift to sport during an Olympic year

By **EDDIE PELL**
Associated Press

The journey from nowhere to an Olympic gold medal is a tale as old as time.

Just as well-worn, but far less explored, are the stories about great athletes who realize they can’t make it anywhere unless they can bankroll the trip.

“The Boys in the Boat” is Hollywood and director George Clooney’s way of stringing those plotlines together. That it opened Christmas Day, a mere seven months before the start of the Paris Olympics, was good fortune for the people who oversee rowing in the U.S. and know the general public mostly either: a) doesn’t think about that sport, or; b) sees it as the exclusive playground for East Coast and Ivy League elites.

USRowing worked with producers of the movie to sponsor dozens of screenings across the country with two purposes: raising funds for an organization that received about \$3.5 million of its \$15 million budget in 2023 from charitable donations, and building awareness across racial and socioeconomic lines. One jarring stat: In 2021, a study found that only 2% of women who competed in NCAA rowing were Black. (Men’s rowing isn’t sanctioned by the NCAA, and so, wasn’t part of the study.)

“What we’re trying to do here, and what so many clubs are do-

ing around the country, is trying to create programs and opportunities” for people to row, said USRowing CEO Amanda Kraus.

“TBITB” is about a group of poor students at the University of Washington who try out for the junior varsity crew team. It’s 1936, and far from seeking Olympic glory, these guys are simply trying to find a way to make a buck.

“All you gotta do is make the team,” one of them says. “How hard can that be?”

Plenty hard, it turns out, and what ensues is the “Miracle on Ice,” except on water — and with one other notable difference: Most of those hockey kids always knew where their next meal was coming from.

Certainly there are others out there in a country of 330 million looking for a fresh start, a taste of the great outdoors and a chance to try something new. Kraus believes her sport might be that thing — and that those potential rowers don’t have to be daughters and sons of millionaires.

Rowing is hoping to inspire more people like Arshay Cooper, who was a member of the first all-Black high school rowing team at Manley High School in Chicago. Cooper authored a book, “A Most Beautiful Thing,” that itself was made into a movie produced by basketball stars Grant Hill and Dwyane Wade.

The sport also hopes to build more programs, such as Learn to



George Clooney, center, directed “The Boys in the Boat,” adapted from the 2013 book of the same name, about the American rowing team and its eventual quest for gold at the 1936 Berlin Olympics.

Row Day, when rowing clubs are urged to welcome newcomers and teach them about the sport.

So much about rowing is a steep climb. Kraus says it costs around \$50,000 a year to support a Team USA rower; that comes after the tens of thousands expended on their development at the grassroots and college levels. But, she said, building a pipeline is an investment worth making, and it doesn’t mean everyone has to end up at the Olympics.

“We hope people can get inspired to really check the sport out for themselves,” Kraus said. “You can be 30 or 40 or 70 and go do a ‘Learn to Row’ course at your local club. That’s a real thing. You don’t have to row in

college to be part of this sport.”

USRowing has around 74,000 members (by comparison, the U.S. Tennis Association has 680,000) and, like all niche sports, the Olympics are its time to shine. That makes a rowing movie a Christmas present for this sport.

The high point in the film — based on the 2013 book of the same name by Daniel James Brown that’s considered rowing’s bible — takes place during a particularly fraught time. At the 1936 Berlin Games, Nazi flags get better placement than the Olympic rings and Adolf Hitler is a constantly glowering presence.

Nobody, however, poses a bigger threat to the boys from

Washington than the leader of America’s Olympic committee, who appears unbothered as he tells their coach that, even though they won their era’s version of the Olympic trials, a team with a better pedigree and more money will take their place in Berlin unless they raise \$5,000 in a week. It’s an absurd and unfair insult, and one that, sadly, isn’t that far removed from today’s realities: Politics rule. And even in a billion-dollar Olympics industry, so many athletes have to scratch for pennies, especially in America, where the government doesn’t pay for anything.

They make it — getting over the hump with a bit of unexpected help — and soon find themselves rubbing elbows at the opening ceremony with Jesse Owens. The great sprinter assures the rowers he’s not there to prove anything to Hitler, but rather to his own country, which still treats Blacks like second-class citizens.

We know how the Owens story ends. Now, we know how the rowers’ story ends, too.

It’s a quintessential underdog sports drama, all the way to the epilogue intended to give moviegoers the feels about the mysticism of a sport very few understand. If only a few of them put down the popcorn and navigate to an online donations page — or maybe even a local crew club — then the U.S. rowing community will have a hit on its hands.

MOVIES

Michael Mann still has another gear

At 80, director driving 'Ferrari'

BY JAKE COYLE
Associated Press

Michael Mann, who gave Crockett a white Ferrari on “Miami Vice,” pummeled cars with bullets in the shootout in “Heat” and set the thriller “Collateral” in a taxicab, has had an affection for automobiles since growing up in Chicago.

“It’s a city in which you drive, you know?” Mann said. “It rains and things get quite beautiful. The streets get black and the cars get reflective. I like motion. I like speed.”

Mann has also been a racing hobbyist. Off and on for years, he competed in the Ferrari Challenge — a four-day race, he fondly recalls, during which “the rest of the world just goes away.” So, the driving instructions that Enzo Ferrari (Adam Driver) gives in Mann’s latest film, “Ferrari” — “Break later, hold the line” — are familiar to him.

“Let me put it this way,” Mann said, grinning, during a recent interview. “At one point I was practicing on a road in Atlanta and I did 75 laps without stopping.”

What Mann remembers from those laps — at least the four of five good ones he strung together — is a taste of what mastery of the car might feel like.

“If I can have a sense of something, I can project and imagine it pretty fully,” Mann said. “So I do truly understand the passion and addiction — what Jean Behra the race driver described as the ecstasy of when there’s this unity, a harmonic between you and the machine.”

Mann, the 80-year-old filmmaker of “The Last of the Mohicans,” “The Insider” and “Thief,” has himself long exhibited a rare harmony with the machinations of filmmaking. He makes fine-grained, visceral dramas that thrum with existentialism. The fervor of his obsession, the rigor of his research, the intensity of his drive has often mirrored the compulsions of his single-minded protagonists.

“He said to me one time, ‘It’s hard not to get philosophical about an engine’ — which I think is so much who he is,” Driver said. “So many things have to be operating down to the millimeter for an engine to work and the timing and all these movable elements. Then there’s the driver. It’s similar to him and the camera.”



MATT LICARI, INVISION/AP

Adam Driver, left, and director Michael Mann pose for a portrait to promote “Ferrari” on Oct. 12 in New York. The film captures Enzo Ferrari, played by Driver, at a critical time in his personal life and for his company. It is Mann’s first film since the 2015 hacker drama “Blackhat.”

“Ferrari,” which opened in theaters Dec. 25, is Mann’s first film since 2015’s “Blackhat.” He’s wanted to make it for three decades. Its script, based on Brock Yates’ 1991 Ferrari biography, was written by Troy Kennedy Martin, who died in 2009.

While you will find plenty of speed and gorgeous, rosso corsa-colored cars in “Ferrari,”

that’s not what compelled Mann to make the movie. The film, set in 1957 Modena, Italy, captures Ferrari in the tumultuous lead-up to the Mille Miglia, a 1,000-mile cross-country race. He’s struggling to keep his troubled business afloat while splitting his personal life between wife Laura (Penélope Cruz) and another woman, Linda Lardi (Shailene Woodley), with whom he has a young son, Piero.

“Those torrid passions, almost operatic, and powerful emotional driving forces, that’s why I did the movie. Not because of the

cars,” Mann said, adding with a laugh: “There’s nothing wrong with the cars. I love the cars.”

Death hangs over “Ferrari.” When we encounter Enzo and Laura, they’re grieving the death of their son, Dino, from the year before. For Enzo’s fleet of drivers, the prospect of death on the road is present on every hairpin turn and in

every crack in the pavement.

“There’s death all around, and all around this movie,” said Mann, noting the post-World War II context of Italy. “But Ferrari is in the present and he’s looking for what’s next, what’s next.”

“Heat,” which Mann revisited in the

2022 bestseller “Heat 2,” co-written with Meg Gardiner, was a crime epic of causality, in which each character’s decisions mark their fate. In “Ferrari,” the price of passionate determination is just as clear. Still, Enzo keeps moving relentlessly forward in “Ferrari” even as the film builds

toward catastrophic collision.

“I don’t feel there’s a price to pay for it. I think bad outcomes go with the territory. You don’t win,” Mann said. “You have to be able to overcome adversity and setbacks and soul-destroying disappointments. You have to be able to find the means to overcome that or you can’t accomplish anything.”

“I think wanting to accomplish, wanting to exceed limits, that’s an absolutely universal human trait,” Mann continues. “Our whole history as a species is to run faster, go further, discover what hasn’t been there before, move beyond the limited circumstance we find ourselves in when they’re terrorizing us or limiting us or even just boring us.”

It can be tempting to see Mann as a technical stylist. But spend five minutes with him and it’s clear he’s overwhelmingly consumed by the psychology of his characters. Driver estimates character psychology was 90% of their conversations.

The two found a connection, Mann said, in their self-critical intensity. “If something’s not working right, my first thought is it’s my fault,” the director said. “I think he’s the same way. We’re both, for better or worse, afflicted with that sense of responsibility.”

Mann is developing “Heat 2”

as a film, potentially with Driver playing a young Neil McCauley, the character played by Robert De Niro in the original.

On set in Modena, Driver witnessed Mann deal with all kinds of setbacks — waning time, location issues, distracted extras. “And Michael will just will his film into existence from sheer focus and tenacity,” Driver said.

Even in his 80s, Mann has lost little of his velocity.

“I know for myself, I’m better at doing a picture that has me on the frontier,” he said. “Where it’s something I haven’t done before.”

In that, it’s hard not to hear echoes of Vincent Hanna, Al Pacino’s detective in “Heat.” “I gotta hold on to my angst,” Hanna said. “I preserve it because I need it. It keeps me sharp, on the edge, where I gotta be.”

“I’m usually oriented to: I’m totally f—ed. What am I going to do next?” Mann said. “That tortures me.”

Has anything changed in Mann’s taste in movies over the years, either those he makes or watches? He ponders the question, mentioning an oft-returned-to favorite (John Huston’s “The Asphalt Jungle”) and a recent favorite (Greta Gerwig’s “Barbie”). Then he answers.

“I probably have less patience for slow.”

LIFESTYLE



PHOTOS BY LOUISE DIXON/AP
A Sipsmith Sloe Negroni, photographed in London in December. Sloe gin has a traditional association with Christmas.

Add old English twist to your holiday cocktails with sloe gin

BY LOUISE DIXON
Associated Press

Sloe gin is a festive old English drink that’s especially well-suited to the winter holidays. You can drink it over ice, try it in a cocktail, or forage for sloe berries and make a home batch. Family recipes have been passed down for generations, but for novices, it’s easy to experiment at home.

The berries

Sloe gin’s origins go back to the hedgerows of blackthorn bushes that served as fences all across England when common farmland was divvied up in the 17th century. Their plum-like, inky blue-purple sloe berries became synonymous with the English countryside.

After realizing that the raw berries tasted tart and astringent, people tried to make wine from them. But the astringency remained, and then “someone had the bright idea of resting it on a spirit,” says Joe Horning, the liquid quality and innovations manager at the London-based Sipsmith Gin.

By steeping sloe berries in alcohol, the low-quality gin of the time was transformed into a more palatable tippie. As distilling methods improved, a more refined drink was created. And bartenders further elevated its profile with the invention of the famous Sloe Gin Fizz in the early 20th century and pre-Prohibition cocktails like the Charlie Chaplin.

Green and seasonal

There’s been a resurgence recently in the popularity of sloe gin, according to Siobhan Robinson, owner of the East London craft distillery Mother’s Ruin.

“As we got more interested in the environment and foraging and what we’re doing to the world, I think there’s been a renaissance of people making their own sloe gin, and a real interest in sloe gin,” she says.

Sloe gin also has a Christmas association because the berries are at their ripest in the autumn, and its “earthy warm flavor” suits the time of year, she adds.

She suggests using it in hot cocktails, like a Hot Sloe Gin Punch, a Hot Toddy with whiskey, or even adding a slug to hot chocolate for a punchy festive treat.

Technically, sloe gin isn’t a gin at all, Robinson says. With the addition of sugar and sloes, it becomes a liqueur, and has a far lower alcohol content than a standard gin, around the same strength as a strong wine.

While sloe gin is traditionally drunk over ice as a digestif, it is also versatile in modern cocktails.

Horning suggests substituting raspberry flavors like Chambord for a twist on a French martini or a kir royale. He also recommends a sloe Negroni, reducing the measures to allow for a shot of sloe gin in addition to London dry gin, Campari and sweet vermouth.

Foraging and DIY

When you forage for sloes, Horning says, feel the berries for ripeness, but also look for a yeast powder on the berry’s core, “a telltale sign that the fruit’s ripe.” As for quantity, “the more the merrier.”

Old traditions dictate that each berry is given a pinprick to let the juices flow into the base spirit, but Horning recommends freezing the berries instead. That causes small ruptures in the skin, allowing the juices to come through, and is far less time-consuming.

The sloes should be rested in a Mason jar of gin, filled just below the liquid level. Resting periods can vary from months to a year. There are no hard-and-fast rules; Horning recommends two to three months, while Robinson thinks the longer the better.

Either a sugar syrup or honey should be added at the end, and less is more.

“Sweeten cautiously, because you can always add more sugar if need be, but you can’t take away,” Horning advises.

Both he and Robinson agree it’s all about experimentation and play.

If sloe berries aren’t readily available, you can substitute damsons, a similar fruit, or experiment with any fruits and a base of gin or even vodka.

“Pick your fruit, put it in alcohol, add sugar, leave it for a long time, drink it and see if you like it,” Robinson says, laughing.

Here are some cocktail recipes:

- Mother’s Ruin Sloe Gin Sour**
1 oz (30ml) sloe gin
1 oz (30ml) bourbon
1½ oz (50ml) freshly squeezed lemon juice
Dash of angostura bitters
Drop of foaming bitters (we use Ms. Better’s Bitters Miraculous Foamer)
Add ice and all the ingredients to a shaker, shake for 30 seconds, and strain into a glass so the ice stays in the shaker.
- Mother’s Ruin Sloe Gin Fizz**
1½ oz (50ml) sloe gin
¾ oz (25ml) freshly squeezed lemon juice
¼ oz 12.5ml sugar syrup (buy or make your own)
Sparkling water
Add ice and all ingredients except the sparkling water to a shaker, shake for 30 seconds, and strain into a glass filled with ice. Top up with sparkling water and stir gently.



Mother’s Ruin Sloe Gin Fizz.

- Sipsmith Sloe Negroni**
½ oz (15ml) London dry gin
½ oz (15ml) sloe gin
½ oz (15ml) Campari
½ oz (15ml) sweet vermouth
An orange twist or wedge
Combine equal parts Sipsmith London dry gin, Sipsmith sloe gin, vermouth and Campari in a rocks glass over ice. Garnish with an orange twist or wedge.

- Sipsmith Hot Mulled Sloe.**
- Sipsmith Hot Mulled Sloe**
1 oz (30ml) sloe gin
2 oz (60ml) hot water
2 oz (60ml) cloudy apple juice
Assorted spices (we use cinnamon sticks, star anise, cloves and cardamom pods)
Vanilla pod (cut down the middle)
A cinnamon stick (to garnish)
Half an orange slice (to garnish)
Add the assorted spices and vanilla to a pan. Top with cloudy apple juice. Simmer for 5 to 10 minutes until just before boiling.
Ladle into a mug, teacup, or Irish coffee mug, and add sloe gin. Garnish with a half orange slice and/or a cinnamon stick.



AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Argument over gifts turns deadly, deputies say

FL LARGO — A Florida woman holding her 11-month-old son in a baby carrier was fatally shot by her 14-year-old brother while trying to defuse an argument over Christmas gifts he was having with a 15-year-old brother who also was armed, authorities said.

The 15-year-old brother then shot his 14-year-old brother, though not fatally, for killing their sister on Dec. 24 in Largo, Fla., which is located in the Tampa metro area, the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office said in a news release.

The argument over gifts started while the three siblings were Christmas shopping with their mother and the sister's two sons, ages 6 and 11 months. It continued when they went to their grandmother's house where the sister, 23, told the younger brother to stop arguing with his older brother since it was Christmas Eve. The younger brother then told his sister he was going to shoot her and her infant, and then he shot her in the chest, the sheriff's office said.

The older brother then shot his younger brother outside the home and fled, tossing his firearm in a nearby yard, authorities said. He was taken to a mental health facility after he was located since he had threatened to harm himself.

Magnitude 3.8 quake shakes small town

AR ETOWAH — A magnitude 3.8 earthquake rattled parts of northeastern Arkansas on Wednesday, according to geologists.

The earthquake occurred shortly before noon near the town of Etowah, the U.S. Geological Survey reported. The rural town, which has a population of about 250 people, is located about 50 miles north of Memphis, Tenn.

The Arkansas Division of Emergency Management said there were no reports from county officials of damage or injuries.

Etowah is near the New Madrid fault line, which has been responsible for numerous small and large earthquakes. Beginning in late 1811, a series of powerful earthquakes occurred along the fault line, including one with an estimated magnitude of 7.7.

Man charged with hate crimes over stabbing

NY NEW YORK — A New York City man has been charged with attempted murder and assault as hate crimes following the Christmas Day stabbing of two teenage tourists from Paraguay at an eatery inside Grand Central Terminal, authorities said.

Witnesses said Esteban Esono-Asue, 36, also known as Steven Hutcherson, made derogatory comments about white people shortly before the unprovoked attack on the 14- and 16-year-old



KIICHIRO SATO/AP

Big sky country

A person walks a dog along Pascagoula Beach Park at sunset on Wednesday in Pascagoula, Miss.

girls inside the Manhattan transit hub Monday morning, according to a criminal complaint.

He was being held without bail Wednesday after pleading not guilty Tuesday to the charges, which also included child endangerment.

According to the complaint, Esono-Asue initially was asked to leave the Tartinery dining area by an employee, who said Esono-Asue responded by saying: "I'll leave, I don't want the white man to get at you," or something similar.

A second employee said he made another anti-white comment after he approached her and asked for a table to place an order.

Shortly after he was seated and given water, Esono-Asue walked over to a table of people, who appeared to be white, pulled a knife from his pocket and stabbed one of the girls in the back, the second employee told authorities.

As the family scrambled to get away, the man stabbed the younger girl in the thigh, Metropolitan Transportation Authority officials said. Both girls were taken to a hospital with injuries that were not believed to be life-threatening.

Man sentenced in remote desert power plant fire

NV LAS VEGAS — A Colorado man was sentenced Wednesday to prison in Nevada following his arrest last January for setting his car afire at a remote facility in what authorities initially characterized as a terror attack on the electric system serving Las Vegas Strip casinos.

Mohammed Reza Mesmarian, 35, was sentenced to two to 10 years following his plea in November to guilty but mentally ill on charges of felony arson and property destruction in the incident at a remote desert solar array about 25 miles northeast of downtown Las Vegas.

Mesmarian received credit for nearly a year already served in custody and could be paroled in early 2024.

Mesmarian, a dentist, is from Aurora, Colo., where state records showed he faced Dental Board discipline and his license to practice was restricted in July 2022. Records also showed that Mesmarian filed Chapter 7 bankruptcy in October 2022.

Police reported that no one was injured in the Jan. 4 fire, which wasn't immediately detected. Mesmaian was found and arrested a day later at a campground at Lake Mead, the Colorado River reservoir behind the Hoover Dam east of Las Vegas.

More comment time sought for nuke project

NM SANTA FE — New Mexico's congressional delegation wants the public to have more time to weigh in on a proposed transmission line that would bring more electricity to one of the nation's top nuclear weapons laboratories, saying the comment period should be extended by 60 days.

The project comes as Los Alamos National Laboratory looks to power ongoing operations and fu-

ture missions that include manufacturing key components for the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

Native American tribes and environmentalists already have voiced opposition to the multimillion-dollar power line project, which would cross national forest land in an area known as the Caja del Rio and span the Rio Grande at White Rock Canyon. Several pueblos have cultural and spiritual ties to the area.

The congressional delegation said in a letter to the National Nuclear Security Administration that the current 30-day comment period falls on numerous federal and religious holidays and overlaps with multiple Pueblo feasts, making it difficult for any meaningful participation.

A coalition of environmental groups also sent a request for extending the comment period to March 17.

Chase ends with police ripping apart truck's cab

TX CHANNELVIEW — Texas police on Wednesday ripped apart the cab of a tractor trailer and pulled the truck's driver out after pursuing him in a slow highway chase that shut down the road for hours.

The confrontation on a stretch of highway east of Houston came hours after sheriff's deputies began trying to pull over the truck, which could be seen on television news footage crawling along the interstate.

Deputies finally brought the 18-wheeler to a stop on the shoulder of

Interstate 10 using spike strips to puncture its tires.

For hours, the driver had ignored police commands to exit and continued to rev the engine of the disabled vehicle, Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzalez said.

Police eventually used a bulldozer-like vehicle to pulverize the cab before sending a dog into the truck and then pulling the driver out at around 4 p.m. In TV footage, officers could be seen walking the man to a stretcher, his face bloodied.

Gonzalez said the driver appeared to be suffering from "heavy impairment" but that authorities don't know what was behind his behavior.

State: Some medical pot products being retested

MS JACKSON — The Mississippi State Department of Health said Wednesday that "a large number" of medical marijuana products are on hold so they can be retested.

The department first issued the hold on Dec. 21.

A news release from the department said the products are being retested "to validate results related to the use of pesticides and presence of mycotoxins," which are produced by fungi. No illnesses from the products have been reported, the department said.

The department said as batches of products are cleared, the hold on those will be lifted and the products will be back on the market.

FACES

Hit-Boy's highs and lows

Grammy-nominated producer helping dad navigate career after prison

BY JONATHAN LANDRUM JR.
Associated Press

When Hit-Boy walks the red carpet at the Grammy Awards on Feb. 4, he expects to proudly strut into the ceremony with his father beside him for the first time.

For three decades, Hit-Boy's dad was in and out of prison, with his recent stint lasting nine years until his release several months ago. With his father's newfound freedom, the super producer — who has worked with music heavyweights such as Jay-Z, Nas and Kanye West — is focused on strengthening their father-son bond while navigating the music industry together.

Hit-Boy has the Grammys and a producer of the year, non-classical nomination in his sights. He's had three songs involving Brent Faiyaz, Blxst and The Alchemist. He also produced three Nas albums, including "King's Disease III," which is up for best rap album; one with Musiq Soulchild; and his two "Surf or Down" albums, which featured the producer as a rapper and his father on several tracks under the stage name Big Hit.

When Hit-Boy first heard about being a nominee again, he felt an instant "wave of emotions." He was one of the most productive producers this past year compared to others in his category — which includes Jack Antonoff, Metro Boomin, Dernst "D'Mile" Emile II and Daniel Nigro.

"I literally broke down in tears," said Hit-Boy, a three-time Gram-

my winner through Jay-Z and Kanye West's "... In Paris," Nipsey Hussle's "Racks in the Middle" and Nas' album "King Disease." He's worked with top performers including Beyoncé, Mary J. Blige, Drake, Mariah Carey, Ariana Grande and Jennifer Lopez.

But for Hit-Boy, this past year was different.

"When I really look back and had that moment to reflect, I was like 'Wow, I didn't have the biggest artists in the world that's going to stream,'" he said. "They are going to make it work. I was working with artists that don't have million-dollar budgets behind them."

Throughout the year, Hit-Boy said he worked mostly with Nas and his father, Big Hit, who recorded his lyrics for the intro on "Surf or Down Vol. 1" while incarcerated. After his father's release, Hit-Boy took him directly to the studio, where they both laid down tracks.

This month, Big Hit, 52, released his debut album "The Truth Is In My Eyes," which features Snoop Dogg, Benny The Butcher, Musiq Soulchild, Dom Kennedy, The Alchemist and Mozzy. He said it was tough being away from his son and watching his success from afar.

"It was torture just knowing the kind of impact I could've had and what I missed in his life," said the rapper, who was arrested during a traffic stop in Illinois in 2014. He had an outstanding warrant that stemmed from a hit-and-run accident in Los Angeles that left several people injured.

At the time, Hit-Boy said his fa-

ther was gaining positive momentum and made good impressions with the likes of Jay-Z and 50 Cent before his arrest, which the producer called devastating.

"I thought about how I could have shaped and molded him," Big Hit said. "Being a wonderful addition. Instead of bringing him down, I could have tightened him up. But I still did my best in the situation where I was at. But we're pushing full speed ahead. We're bridging that gap."

Since Big Hit's release, Hit-Boy has been laser-focused on keeping his father busy and spending time with him almost daily while creating an independent lane for their careers. The producer said he's funded "every single thing since he touched down."

"It's bigger than just doing the music," Hit-Boy said. "I'm creating that network, helping them to have a workflow. I'm spending money on these marketing plans. I'm coming with all the best ideas I can. Every day is an adventure. My whole life, he's got out and went back in. Stressed out that he might do something to jeopardize it again."

"It's part of that brainwork where you just got to hold it down and financially. I wanted to build, put together pieces that would bring people completely into his world."

Hit-Boy said several labels have offered Big Hit deals, but they turned them down. The producer said they'll be better off on their own for now.

"They wanted to put some cool money in his pocket," Hit-Boy



AP

When record producer and recording artist Hit-Boy, shown in 2022, walks the Grammy red carpet for the Feb. 4 awards ceremony, he expects to have his father beside him for the first time.

said. "But I've been in the game since I was 19. He got locked up at 19 until he was in his 30s. Now, I'm in my 30s and I'm locked up in the industry, because I'm still to this day in a bad publishing deal with Universal Music Publishing Group. I would feel so crazy to let my dad get caught up with these same systems, the same ways and ideologies that I've been fed since I was a kid. I just can't go for it."

Hit-Boy, 36, and his team decided against releasing Big Hit's new album on digital stream plat-

forms. He wants people to buy directly from them, which according to his team has so far worked out.

Hit-Boy said he and his father are making music, doing business together like he always wanted. If he could win a Grammy with his dad, mother and young son in attendance, it would mean the world to him.

"Every time I won a Grammy, he was locked up," he said. "That would be dope to win. I'm going to speak it into existence."

Video gamers exploit massive mistake in NBA 2K

BY HERB SCRIBNER
The Washington Post

An in-game error in NBA 2K24 netted some players thousands of dollars' worth of in-game content free.

Just after midnight on Dec. 26, eagle-eyed players noticed the game's MyTeam mode — in which players collect digital cards that unlock past and present NBA players with different stats and abilities — was offering a "deal of the day" promotion for a digital card of NBA star Paul George. The card's purchase price, however, was lower than its sell price. Savvy gamers bought and sold the card multiple times and, as a result, stashed away millions of coins (1 million coins is worth \$150) as the error was left untouched overnight.

With their coins stacked, gamers purchased any card they wanted, including the costly and ultra-rare Kobe Bryant card, which can cost around 2 million coins (or about \$300). Players also snagged the new Victor Wembanyama card (worth about \$75), which has been deemed one of the best

players to use in the game. Other top-tier player cards, such as LeBron James and Giannis Antetokounmpo (which were obtainable by locking in a set of other high-priced cards), were also rounded up.

The debacle happened on the day after Christmas, when NBA 2K, a gaming fran-

chise played by millions every year and owned by the billion-dollar company Take-Two Interactive, typically sees a new influx of players.

It wasn't until late in the morning on Dec. 26 that 2K fixed its mistake and made it so that George's card sold for less than its buy price. Several gamers posted photos of their accounts wiped of all their coins, but not the cards they gobbled up during the exploit.

"The Paul George massacre is an embarrassing event. It has completely dismantled and ruined the game mode as we know it."

Cody Richinson

NBA 2K YouTuber who goes by Big C Richy

Representatives for NBA 2K had not responded by Dec. 29 to multiple requests for comment about players taking advantage of the error, the cost of its cards or if it plans to institute bans for players who purchased cards during this window.

Many on the online NBA 2K community typed out their frustrations on X (formerly

Twitter) and ranted in YouTube videos. Some players said the error allowed some users to have the best teams in the game, meaning newbies who got the game on Christmas wouldn't stand a chance during online competitions. Others argued that the exploit was unfair for those who spent hundreds if not thousands of dollars on the game, since so many people obtained costly players free without repercussions.

"What customer that spent hundreds of dollars would want to continue spending money when they could just simply wait for the next exploit to happen?" said Richinson. "I will give them the benefit of the doubt that it is the holidays, and not everyone's around to make a decision, but I hope the right thing is done."

The "right thing," according to several gamers, is an acknowledgment of the incident by 2K and at least one free high-end card for all to help balance out the rosters. Some players have gone as far as to file tickets to NBA 2K's support team looking for compensation, too.

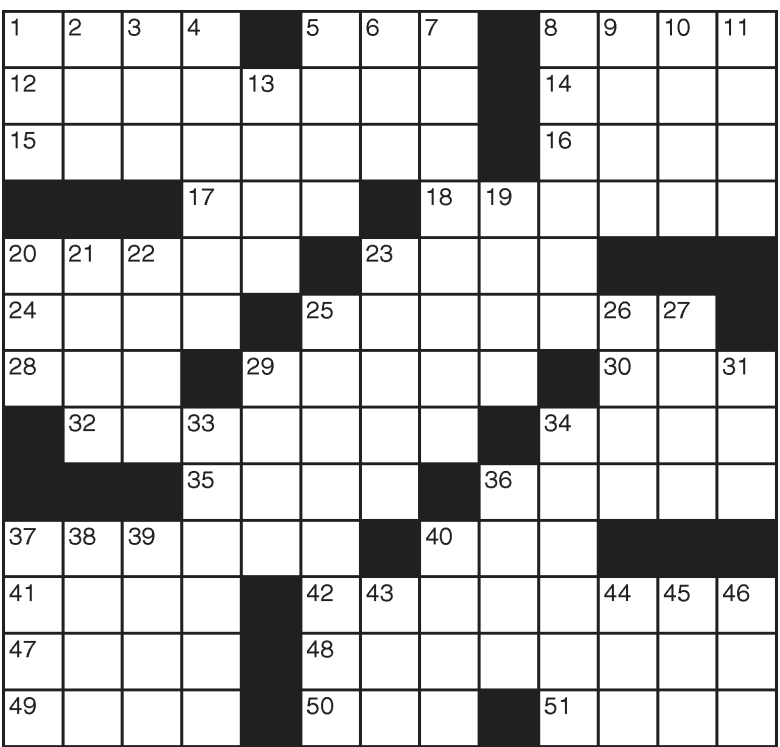
Bizarro



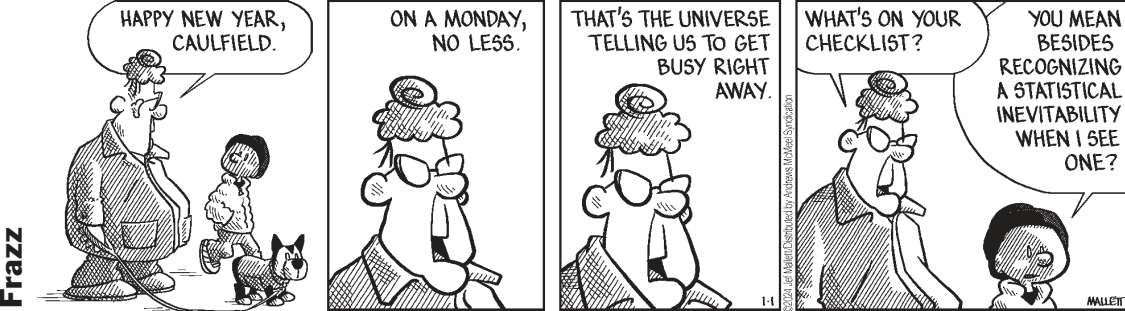
Loose Parts



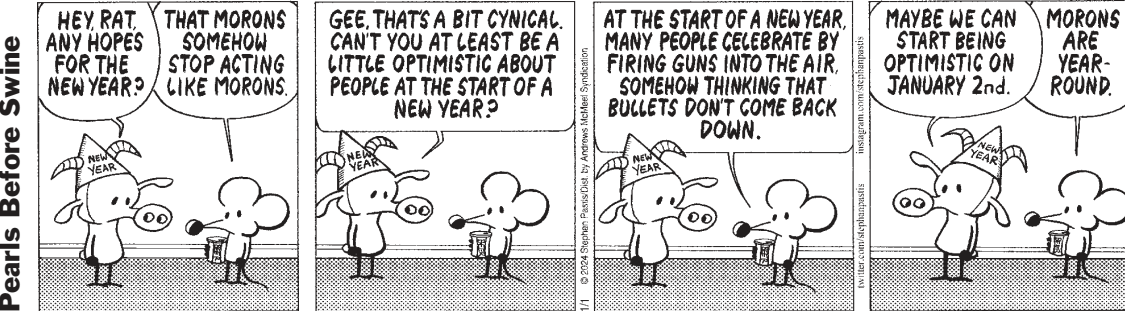
Eugene Sheffer Crossword



Frazz



Pearls Before Swine



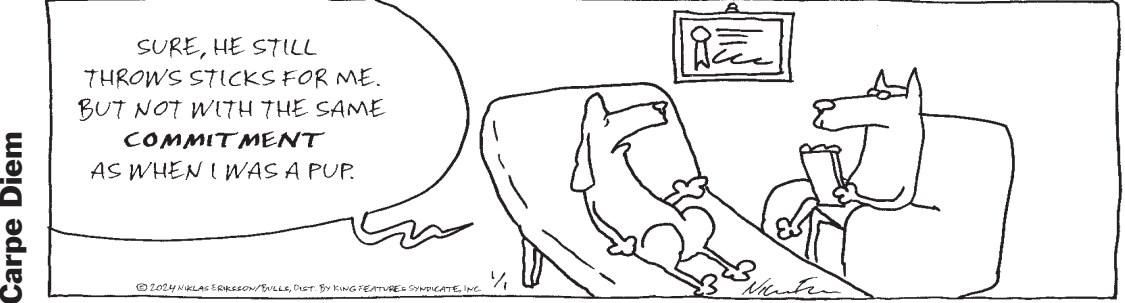
Non Sequitur



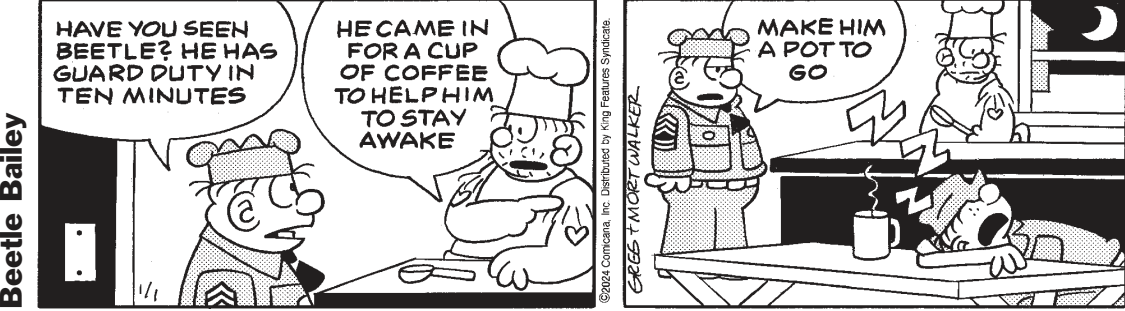
Candorville



Carpe Diem

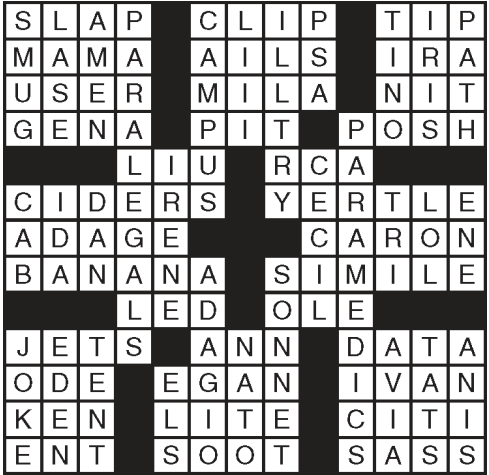


Beetle Bailey



- ACROSS
- 1 Dalai —
5 Happy hour venue
8 Basra resident
12 Some pots and pans
14 Tubular pasta
15 — Day (fresh start)
16 Sheltered
17 Uplands, for short
18 Noted Jewish scholar
20 Mexican snacks
23 “Maureen” singer
24 In — (lined up)
25 Shows up
28 “The Matrix” role
29 Chimney ducts
30 Motorist’s org.
32 Eager to listen
34 Melodies
35 Stately trees
36 Roman 1152
37 Will subject
40 PC alternative
41 Comfy-cozy calculations
47 Perfume by Dana
48 Type of word puzzle
49 Church section
50 Map lines (Abbr.)
- DOWN
- 1 — -Manuel Miranda
2 Verb for you
3 Cut the lawn
4 Regardless
5 Sheepish remarks
6 Schedule abbr.
7 Molds anew
8 Showy shrub
9 Streamlet
10 Suit to —
11 Actress Jessica
13 Saturates
19 March time
20 Sunbather’s goal
21 Location
51 Sweet beginning?
22 “Neato!”
23 Eggs on
25 Tree-lined promenades
26 Banister
27 Rani’s wrap
29 Pool table surface
31 “Do — say!”
33 Alliance
34 Entry
36 BLT spread
37 “Como — usted?”
38 Break suddenly
39 Vats
40 Baseball VIPs
43 Halloween mo.
44 Consumed
45 Crater edge
46 High school subj.

Answer to Previous Puzzle



1-1 CRYPTOQUIP

J W R Y E C Y M C S N J C G S Y

N H G C D Z O H S J M I Q J D C J I P R

R D Y I - G P M O J M B , J ' G R Q Y H S

“BCS YHS YW EZ RIPZ!”

Saturday’s Cryptoquip: IF A PERSON COULD THINK UP A PLOT FOR A BOOK OF FICTION, I BELIEVE THAT’D BE A NOVEL IDEA.

Today’s Cryptoquip Clue: B equals G

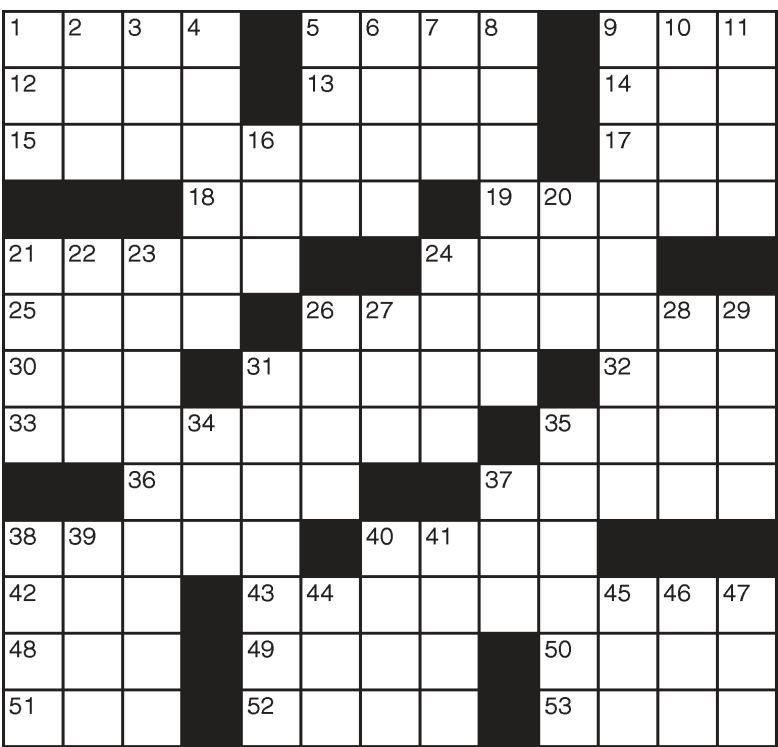
Bizarro



Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword



- ACROSS**

 - 1 Idle or Bana
 - 5 Nick and Nora's pooch
 - 9 Deli meat
 - 12 Rip
 - 13 Italian cheese, for short
 - 14 Super serve
 - 15 Family reunion footage, e.g.
 - 17 Skillet
 - 18 Nitwit
 - 19 Speedy
 - 21 Sneeze sound
 - 24 Sly
 - 25 Greek consonants
 - 26 Table protector
 - 30 Comic Notaro
 - 31 Kelly of "One Tree Hill"
 - 32 Yale grad
 - 33 Chat
 - 35 Stated
 - 36 Heath
 - 37 Back street
 - 38 Mel who voiced Bugs Bunny
 - 40 Faction
 - 42 Oft-pierced body part
 - 43 Kitchen appliance with beaters
 - 48 Genesis vessel
 - 49 Actress Falco
 - 50 Skirt panel
 - 51 German article
- DOWN**

 - 1 Ordinal suffix
 - 2 Old Olds
 - 3 "— Spartacus!"
 - 4 Beliefs
 - 5 Per person
 - 6 Feed the piggy bank
 - 7 Part of TNT
 - 8 "Barbie" actress Ferrera
 - 9 McDonald's offering for kids
 - 10 Antioxidant berry
 - 11 Repair
 - 16 Cattle call
 - 20 Hearty quaff
 - 21 Rental units (Abbr.)
 - 22 Stylish
- 52 Bribes

53 Deception
- 23 Kudos

24 Bit of merchandise

26 Indigent

27 Designer Claiborne

28 "I cannot tell —"

29 Spruced up

31 Sponges

34 Calendar abbr.

35 Santa's ride

37 USN bigwig

38 Rosary unit

39 News reporter Logan

40 Use scissors

41 "The — of March"

44 Ruckus

45 Tic-tac-toe loser

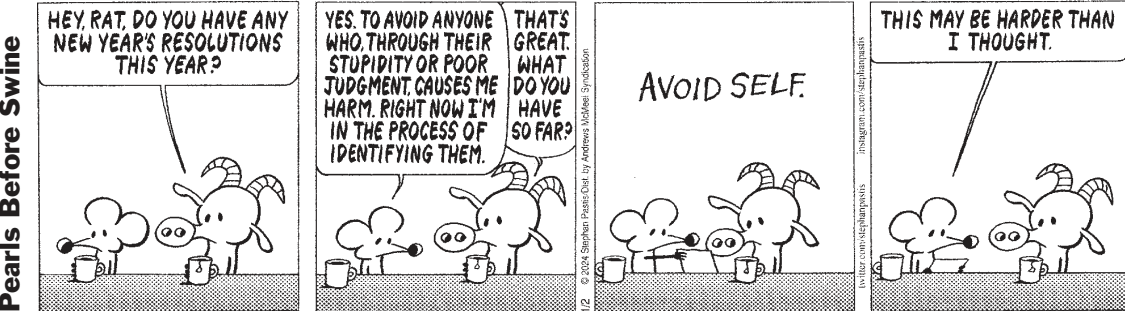
46 Mound stat

47 "Toy Story" dinosaur

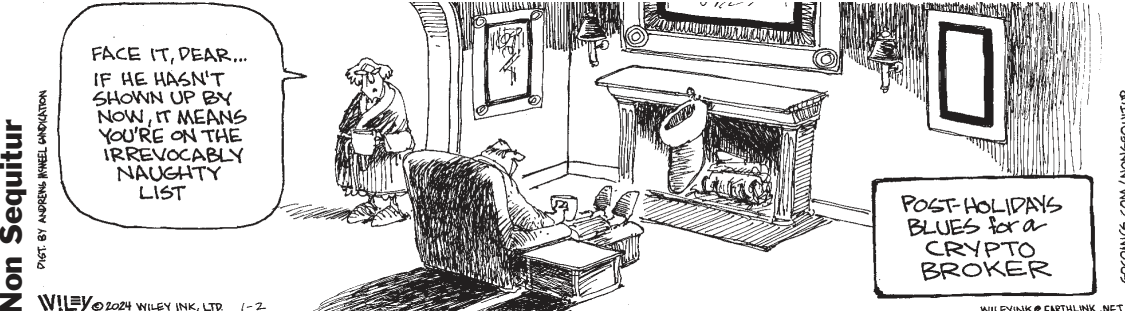
Frazz



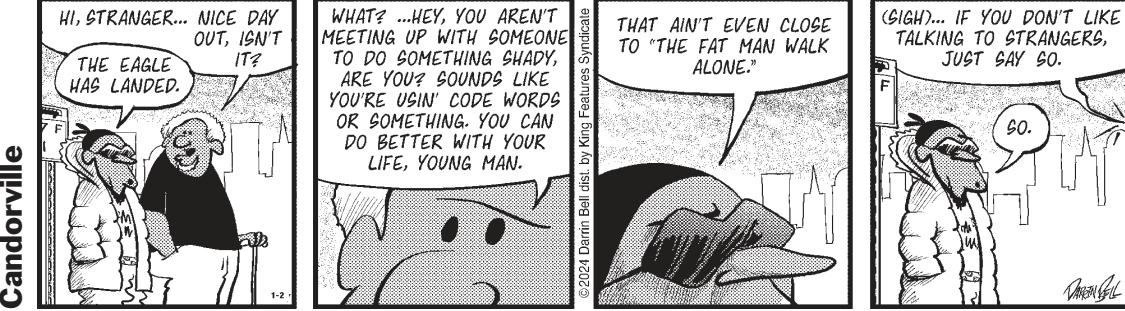
Pearls Before Swine



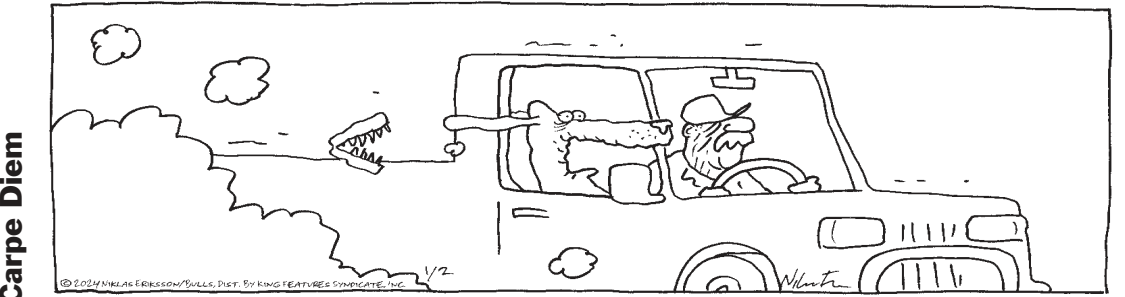
Non Sequitur



Candorville



Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



Answer to Previous Puzzle



1-2 CRYPTOQUIP

DGO SGNQX UGN XAZSFLVA

ZGBAVGXU ODG FAZAYFSDAZ

KDA GQPYSKGFU ZUZKAB'Z

PNJSKLGJZ? ZBAQQ-BLJXAX.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: IF SOMEONE TRIED TO RUDELY CUT IN WHILE I WAS SLOW-DANCING, I'D SHOUT "GET OUT OF MY SWAY!"

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: Q equals L



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Jacqueline Smith

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OPINION

Year-end grade for 118th Congress: Barely passing

By JONATHAN BERNSTEIN
Bloomberg Opinion

Let’s start with the good news about the first session of the 118th Congress. Lawmakers successfully avoided — or postponed — any major self-inflicted disasters. The debt limit was extended on time, averting a potential default. Temporary spending bills were passed before the deadline, twice, pushing any possible federal government shutdown until January. And several other key programs, such as those contained in the farm bill, similarly were extended.

It’s a bit of a myth that no significant legislation passes during election years and even more of a myth that important laws can’t be passed with a divided government. But so far, this is shaping up to be a historically inactive Congress — just barely doing the minimum. Fewer than 30 bills were enacted into law in 2023, by far the fewest since at least 1973. Even that’s probably an understatement, given the minimal effect of what did pass compared to what happens during a typical session.

This is one time where it’s easy to see who’s at fault. That would be House Republicans, the party and chamber that took a week to elect a speaker last January and then spent three weeks in October dumping him and choosing another. Senate Republicans, the majority of Senate Democrats, and (to the extent they could) House Democrats were all willing to bargain in good faith on many items and achieve compromises.

House Republicans basically had two poses. They were either attempting to pass show bills that the most extreme party members could endorse and coerce the rest of their conference to support, or they allowed the Senate versions of must-pass items to get through,

usually with more Democratic votes than Republican. They also set a modern record for bills they tried to pass on the floor that were defeated in final votes, yanked at the last minute because they didn’t have the votes, or failed to win procedural votes. The latter used to be something that happened every few years, but it became common in Kevin McCarthy’s House.

And while it’s true that Congress managed to avert major disaster this session, plenty of important things fell through the cracks. For example, aid to Ukraine, Israel, other allies and border programs hasn’t been approved. Lawmakers also failed to meet the deadline to re-authorize PEPFAR, leaving the fight against HIV/AIDS in Africa in limbo. And while passing temporary funding measures has prevented a government shutdown, keeping spending on autopilot makes it impossible to adjust for changing circumstances — or, for that matter, the priorities of the new House Republican majority. In each of these cases, the inability of House Republicans to agree internally or to bargain with other actors within the system has not only harmed the nation, but also prevented them from having policy wins.

This isn’t to say that Senate Republicans or Democrats in either chamber are perfect. After bipartisan cooperation on spending bills in committee, most of those measures stalled on the Senate floor; aid to Israel and Ukraine is stalled while members try to cut a deal on border policies. There’s room for argument about which party is most at fault for those impasses, but at least there have been serious good-faith negotiations between the parties in the Senate. House Republicans haven’t even tried.

On the Senate side, the confirmation process is still broken, highlighted by Alabama Republican Tommy Tuberville’s long and un-

Why I now believe in the horseshoe theory of politics

By JONAH GOLDBERG
Tribune Content Agency

This is the season for columnists to offer some new idea that encapsulates the year that was. I got nothing. But 2023 was the year I finally abandoned my opposition to an old idea — the horseshoe theory of political ideologies.

The term is often attributed to French author Jean-Pierre Faye’s 1996 book “Le Siècle des idéologies” (“the century of ideologies”), but the concept is much older. It basically holds that the extreme right (“fascism”) and extreme left (“communism”) bend toward each other like the ends of a horseshoe.

While I’ve always thought totalitarian regimes — Stalin’s Russia, Hitler’s Germany — have more similarities than differences, I didn’t believe that the horseshoe theory mapped well in the American context. For starters, it depends heavily on the European understanding of the left-right ideological continuum (literally derived from the seating chart of the French National Assembly). In contrast to the Anglo-American tradition, in the continental tradition, right vs. left fights were more about how to use state power, rather than how to limit it. Statism just wasn’t much of a dirty word for either side.

Meanwhile anti-statism, including an ornery passion for civil liberties — i.e. classical liberalism — has always been a core component of American exceptionalism. Indeed, left and right in U.S. politics often become less statist as they become more extreme. This is a familiar observation about the right. Wanting to

abolish government agencies, privatize or de-regulate state functions, was long a hallmark of the American right; it’s hard to see how becoming more libertarian makes you more “fascist.” But the American left has an anti-statist streak, too. For instance, defunding the police, legalizing drugs, open borders, decriminalizing prostitution, abolishing the “prison industrial complex”: These are more anarchic ambitions than statist. True communists like their cops and prisons.

In short, while the American left and right have always had plenty of disagreements, they were usually hashed out within the framework of America’s deep-seated classical liberalism. But what happens when the extremes abandon that liberalism? They start looking awfully similar. For instance, few extremists from either pole really oppose cancel culture or censorship, they just want the ability to cancel or censor people or ideas they don’t like. Donald Trump is a zealous advocate for his free speech rights, but holds nearly opposite views for his critics. The left and right may see huge differences between left-wing identity politics and right-wing identity politics — and there are huge differences — but it’s still identity politics, and the notion that individuals should be judged by what groups they belong to is profoundly illiberal.

Perhaps the most discomforting convergence is over the Constitution. It may offend some of its detractors to hear it, but The Federalist Society, with its deeply conservative and passionate commitment to constitutional fidelity, has always been a bulwark of classical

successful effort to change Pentagon abortion policy by blocking routine promotions. That’s the one that got attention, but Republicans continue to slow-walk every executive branch and judicial nomination, including those they actually support. Republicans deserve the bulk of the blame there, but Senate Democrats have also failed to respond in any kind of aggressive way.

Congressional oversight has taken a back seat for years and didn’t improve in 2023. The House mainly focused on repeating wild and false accusations generated by Republican-aligned media. The Senate wasn’t much better. The chamber put some pressure on the Supreme Court following the ethics scandal involving justices, but not much. And executive branch oversight was limited, although a few hearings were held, such as a session on air traffic safety, following media attention to the problem.

Prospects for anything better in 2024 seem unlikely. New House Speaker Mike Johnson has already drawn attacks from the House Freedom Caucus, demonstrating more than anything that they are the problem, not the ideology or skills of individual party leaders. It’s still possible that House Republicans will insist on an extended government shutdown in January or February, and unlikely that Congress will pass this year’s long-delayed spending bills. As far as other problems facing the nation being solved, don’t count on it. We’ll be lucky to get through 2024 without one of those self-inflicted disasters finally happening.

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liberalism because the Constitution is a quintessentially liberal charter. Indeed, that’s why Trump has reportedly turned his back on disloyal Federalist Society lawyers, many of whom wouldn’t aid his effort to steal the election. There’s even a right-wing project called “common good constitutionalism” which seeks to dethrone The Federalist Society and abandon constitutional originalism in favor of a results-driven approach to the law and the Constitution. Some on the left might object, but from my perspective as a traditional conservative, that approach mirrors the left’s invocation of a “living constitution” to defeat constitutional interpretations it doesn’t like.

Of course, these trends predate 2023 by quite a bit. But what’s changed is how much more willing the political center is to let itself be defined by the logic and rhetoric of the extremes. The result is a kind of bipartisan consensus around the more European idea of fighting for control of the state, led by fairly mainstream politicians terrified of their party’s bases.

Why the rhetoric of the fringes has become mainstream probably has a lot to do with the changing media landscape and weakness of parties. But what remains constant is the importance of rhetoric itself, which, as the late literary critic Wayne Booth said, is “the art of probing what men believe they ought to believe.” And the loudest voices are bending the arc of our politics toward illiberalism.

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SCOREBOARD/OLYMPICS

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Thursday’s men’s scores	
EAST	
56	Albany (NY) 86, LIU 69
	Case Western 87, Oswego St. 74
	Christopher Newport 102, Old Westbury 56
	Hobart 70, Immaculata 58
	Hood 91, Goucher 58
56	Hope 87, Yeshiva 79
	Husson 96, La Verne 75
	Maryland 75, Coppin St. 53
	Staten Island 77, St. Rose 67
	Stevenson 76, NJ City 63
56	Trinity (FL) 84, Clark 83
SOUTH	
72	Jacksonville St. 93, Fort Valley St. 57
	Rhodes 84, Whittier 79
	UALR 81, Tennessee Tech 75
	UT Martin 91, Tennessee St. 75
	Wilkes 56, Centre 53
MIDWEST	
72	Ashland 103, Miami (OH) Middletown Thunderhawks 58
	Bradley 69, Truman St. 47
	Cleveland St. 75, Oakland 67
	Lakeland 97, Benedictine (Ill.) 85
	Milwaukee Engineering 69, Wis.-Stevens Pt. 67
72	Ramapo 65, St. Scholastica 63
SOUTHWEST	
72	Oklahoma 88, Cent. Arkansas 72
	Texas Southern 108, CBS Ambassadors 72
	Texas Tech 96, Sam Houston St. 60
	UTSA 103, Prairie View 89
FAR WEST	
72	CS Northridge 83, Cal Poly 73
	Cal Lutheran 70, Tufts 66
	Chapman 83, Pacific Lutheran 72
	Claremont Mudd 74, Emmanuel 60
	E. Washington 91, Portland St. 57
72	Elmhurst 102, Whitman 92
	Idaho 61, Sacramento St. 58
	Long Beach St. 81, Cal St.-Fullerton 71
	Montana St. 74, Idaho St. 66
	Oregon 82, Southern Cal 74
72	Pacific (Ore.) 119, Northwest Indian 71
	Redlands 98, UC Santa Cruz 82
	UC Davis 76, UC Santa Barbara 62
	UC Irvine 73, UC Riverside 66
	UC San Diego 76, CS Bakersfield 64
72	UCLA 69, Oregon St. 62
	Weber St. 93, Montana 63

Men’s AP Top 25 schedule

Saturday’s games	
72	No. 2 Kansas (11-1) vs. Wichita St. (8-4) at Kansas City, Mo.
	No. 3 Houston (12-0) vs. Penn (8-5)
	No. 7 FAU (10-2) at Florida Gulf Coast (5-9)
	No. 10 Marquette (10-3) vs. No. 22 Creighton (9-3)
	No. 14 BYU (11-1) vs. Wyoming (7-5)
72	No. 16 Duke (8-3) vs. Queens (NC) (6-8)
	No. 19 Memphis (10-2) vs. Austin Peay (7-7)
	No. 20 James Madison (12-0) vs. Texas St. (6-6)
Sunday’s games	
72	No. 4 Arizona (9-2) at Stanford (5-5)
	No. 12 Oklahoma (10-1) vs. Monmouth (NJ) (7-5)
	No. 24 Mississippi (12-0) vs. Bryant (8-6)

Thursday’s women’s scores

EAST	
56	Pittsburgh 56, Le Moyne 39
	Rhode Island 59, Harvard 56
SOUTH	
56	Duke 68, Coppin St. 34
	Florida Gulf Coast 106, Webber International 42
	Georgetown 57, Kennesaw St. 55
	Miami 81, Alabama St. 36
	Norfolk St. 96, UNC-Wilmington 55
56	UALR 59, Tennessee Tech 57
	UT Martin 75, Tennessee St. 69
MIDWEST	
56	DePaul 77, Alcorn St. 39
FAR WEST	
56	CS Bakersfield 52, UC San Diego 48
	Cal Poly 68, CS Northridge 43
	Cal St.-Fullerton 67, Long Beach St. 61
	Columbia 74, San Francisco 67
	E. Washington 68, Portland St. 58
56	Idaho 88, Sacramento St. 51
	Oregon St. 80, Morgan St. 51
	UC Irvine 67, UC Riverside 52
	UC Santa Barbara 60, UC Davis 49

Women’s AP Top 25 schedule

Saturday’s games	
72	No. 1 South Carolina (11-0) at East Carolina (7-3)
	No. 2 UCLA (11-0) vs. No. 6 Southern Cal (10-0)
	No. 4 Iowa (12-1) vs. Minnesota (11-1)
	No. 5 Texas (12-0) vs. No. 10 Baylor (11-0)
	No. 7 LSU (12-1) vs. Jacksonville (4-8)
72	No. 8 Colorado (10-1) vs. No. 12 Utah (10-2)
	No. 11 Kansas St. (12-1) at Cincinnati (8-3)
	No. 17 Ohio St. (10-2) at Michigan (10-3)
	No. 21 Creighton (9-2) vs. St. John’s (7-6)
	No. 23 TCU (13-0) vs. BYU (10-3)
72	No. 25 West Virginia (11-0) at Kansas (7-4)

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Bowl glance	
Friday, Dec. 22	
Georgia Tech 30, UCF 17	Gasparilla Bowl Tampa, Fla.
	Saturday, Dec. 23
	Camellia Bowl Montgomery, Ala.
	N. Illinois 21, Arkansas St. 19
	Birmingham Bowl Birmingham, Ala.
Duke 17, Troy 10	Armed Forces Bowl Fort Worth, Texas
	Air Force 31, No. 24 James Madison 21
	Famous Idaho Potato Bowl Boise, Idaho
	Georgia St. 45, Utah St. 22
	68 Ventures Bowl Mobile, Ala.
South Alabama 59, Eastern Michigan 10	Las Vegas Bowl Las Vegas
	Northwestern 14, Utah 7
	Hawaii Bowl Honolulu, Hawaii
	Coastal Carolina 24, San Jose St. 14
	Tuesday, Dec. 26
Minnesota 30, Bowling Green 24	Quick Lane Bowl Detroit
	First Responder Bowl Dallas
	Texas St. 45, Rice 21
	Guaranteed Rate Bowl Phoenix
	Kansas 49, UNLV 36
Virginia Tech 41, No. 23 Tulane 20	Wednesday, Dec. 27
	Military Bowl Presented Annapolis, Md.
	Duke’s Mayo Bowl Charlotte, N.C.
	West Virginia 30, North Carolina 10
	Holiday Bowl San Diego, Calif.
Southern Cal 42, No. 16 Louisville 28	Texas Bowl Houston
	No. 22 Oklahoma St. 31, Texas A&M 23
	Thursday, Dec. 28
	Fenway Bowl Boston
	Boston College 23, No. 17 SMU 14
Rutgers 31, Miami 24	Pinstripe Bowl New York
	Pop-Tarts Bowl Orlando, Fla.
	Kansas St. 28, No. 19 NC State 19
	Alamo Bowl San Antonio, Texas
	No. 14 Arizona 38, No. 12 Oklahoma 24
Clemson vs. Kentucky	Friday, Dec. 29
	Gator Bowl Jacksonville, Fla.
	Sun Bowl El Paso, Texas
	No. 15 Notre Dame vs. No. 21 Oregon St.
	Liberty Bowl Memphis, Tenn.
Memphis vs. Iowa St.	Cotton Bowl Arlington, Texas
	No. 7 Ohio St. vs. No. 9 Missouri
	Saturday, Dec. 30
	Peach Bowl Atlanta
	No. 10 Penn St. vs. No. 11 Mississippi
Maryland vs. Auburn	Music City Bowl Nashville, Tenn.
	Orange Bowl Miami
	No. 4 Florida St. vs. No. 6 Georgia
	Arizona Bowl Tucson, Ariz.
	Toledo vs. Wyoming
Toledo vs. Wyoming	Monday, Jan. 1
	ReliaQuest Bowl Tampa, Fla.
	No. 13 LSU vs. Wisconsin
	Citrus Bowl Orlando, Fla.
	No. 20 Iowa vs. No. 25 Tennessee
No. 8 Oregon vs. No. 18 Liberty	Fiesta Bowl Glendale, Ariz.
	No. 1 Michigan vs. No. 5 Alabama
	Rose Bowl College Football Playoff Semifinal
	Pasadena, Calif.
	No. 1 Michigan vs. No. 5 Alabama
No. 13 LSU vs. Wisconsin	Allstate Sugar Bowl College Football Playoff Semifinal
	New Orleans
	No. 2 Washington vs. No. 3 Texas
	Monday, Jan. 8
	CFP National Championship Houston
Semifinal winners	
FCS playoffs	
Semifinals	
Friday, Dec. 15	
South Dakota St. 59, UAlbany 0	
Saturday, Dec. 16	
Montana 31, North Dakota St. 29, 2OT	
Championship	
Saturday, Jan. 7	
South Dakota St. vs. Montana	

PRO HOCKEY

NHL							
Eastern Conference							
Atlantic Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Boston	33	20	7	6	46	104	86
Florida	34	20	12	2	42	99	89
Toronto	32	17	9	6	40	117	109
Tampa Bay	36	17	14	5	39	120	123
Detroit	35	16	15	4	36	124	119
Montreal	34	15	14	5	35	98	117
Buffalo	36	14	18	4	32	107	125
Ottawa	30	13	17	0	26	104	105
Metropolitan Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
N.Y. Rangers	33	24	8	1	49	113	90
Philadelphia	34	19	11	4	42	105	93
Carolina	36	19	13	4	42	121	115
N.Y. Islanders	34	16	9	9	41	104	115
Washington	32	17	10	5	39	78	91
New Jersey	33	18	13	2	38	113	118
Pittsburgh	33	16	13	4	36	100	90
Columbus	36	11	18	7	29	111	132
Western Conference							
Central Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Colorado	35	21	11	3	45	129	109
Winnipeg	33	20	9	4	44	110	84
Dallas	33	20	9	4	44	115	102
Arizona	34	18	14	2	38	108	99
Nashville	35	19	16	0	38	109	109
St. Louis	34	18	15	1	37	102	112
Minnesota	33	16	13	4	36	106	106
Chicago	34	11	22	1	23	82	124
Pacific Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Vancouver	36	23	10	3	49	136	93
Vegas	37	22	10	5	49	127	103
Los Angeles	32	20	8	4	44	114	77
Seattle	36	13	14	9	35	97	113
Edmonton	32	16	15	1	33	118	106
Calgary	35	14	16	5	33	103	117
Anaheim	34	13	21	0	26	91	113
San Jose	36	9	24	3	21	74	155
Note: Two points for a win, one point for overtime loss. Top three teams in each division and two wild cards per conference advance to playoffs.							
Wednesday's games							
N.Y. Rangers 5, Washington 1							
Florida 3, Tampa Bay 2							
New Jersey 4, Columbus 3, OT							
Ottawa 4, Toronto 2							
Boston 4, Buffalo 1							
Pittsburgh 7, N.Y. Islanders 0							
Minnesota 6, Detroit 3							
St. Louis 2, Dallas 1							
Carolina 5, Nashville 2							
Chicago 2, Winnipeg 1, OT							
Arizona 5, Colorado 4, OT							
Seattle 2, Calgary 1							
Anaheim 5, Vegas 2							
Los Angeles 5, San Jose 1							
Thursday's games							
Carolina 5, Montreal 3							
Philadelphia 4, Vancouver 1							
Vegas 3, Los Angeles 2							
Edmonton 5, San Jose 0							
Friday's games							
N.Y. Rangers at Florida							
Nashville at Detroit							
New Jersey at Ottawa							
Toronto at Columbus							
Washington at N.Y. Islanders							
Chicago at Dallas							
Colorado at St. Louis							
Arizona at Anaheim							
Philadelphia at Seattle							
Saturday's games							
Minnesota at Winnipeg							
Columbus at Buffalo							
Carolina at Toronto							
Montreal at Florida							
N.Y. Rangers at Tampa Bay							
Nashville at Washington							
New Jersey at Boston							
St. Louis at Pittsburgh							
Edmonton at Los Angeles							
Sunday's games							
Winnipeg at Minnesota							
Boston at Detroit							
Buffalo at Ottawa							
N.Y. Islanders at Pittsburgh							
Montreal at Tampa Bay							
Chicago at Dallas							
Edmonton at Anaheim							
Philadelphia at Calgary							
San Jose at Colorado							
Monday's game							
Vegas vs. Seattle at T-Mobile Park							
Scoring leaders							
Through Thursday							
	GP	G	A	PTS			
Nikita Kucherov, TB	35	24	34	58			
Nathan MacKinnon, COL	35	19	37	56			
J.T. Miller, VAN	36	15	33	48			
Artemi Panarin, NYR	33	19	27	46			
William Nylander, TOR	32	16	30	46			

Push to safeguard Olympics promises thousands of jobs

By JOHN LEICESTER
Associated Press

PARIS — With a name that doesn’t ring old-school French like Jean, Pierre or Jacques, and a home address in a tough suburb of Paris where riots flared, Salah Benkadir is discovering how hard it can be to make prospective employers in France see beyond their prejudices.

Despite having a high school diploma in sales and work experience as a vendor on his résumé, the 19-year-old job seeker said that when he sends it to stores making hires, often no one calls him back.

“I feel like I’ve got a label stuck to me. It is very unpleasant,” he says.

But with the Olympic Games soon to hit Paris, Benkadir thinks his fortunes may be about to improve. Organizers urgently need thousands of security guards to help keep athletes and spectators safe and reduce the likelihood of another deadly extremist attack in the French capital.

Demand for people at checkpoints, to scan tickets and help manage crowds is so great that France’s state employment agency is offering free and expedited security guard training courses, with no specialist qualifications required.

The “We need you!” approach and promises of plentiful paid work from July to September during the Summer Games and Paralympics are a welcome change for job seekers who have felt ostracized from the labor market. Benkadir hopes that by training for and then working in the huge Olympic security operation, his skills afterward will be more evident to employers in the retail industry than his mix of French-North African roots and his post code: 92000 Nanterre.

Nanterre was the epicenter of rioting that spread across France over the summer after a police officer shot and killed a 17-year-old in the town just west of Paris. The death of Nahel Merzouk during a traffic stop hit Benkadir close to home: Some of his brothers were friends with the youngster, he said.

Like other suburbs of Paris with large immigrant populations, Nanterre is blighted by inequality, disadvantaged housing projects and young people who feel the odds are stacked against them, in part because they’re Black and brown. Benkadir hopes to bust through those obstacles with an Olympics security job that will “show we are versatile, that we invest ourselves

in different projects, that we don’t just stay in one place, that we really want to succeed.”

Proof of that: He and about 30 other young men from Nanterre invested a morning of their time earlier in December to attend an Olympic jobs presentation. Benkadir and his friends got a ride there from one of their dads. Others traveled by public transportation. Gathering in a semicircle, they listened intently as an introductory speaker explained: “The Olympic Games are coming and there’s a huge lack of personnel.”

In the Paris region alone, state employment agency Pole Emploi is looking for at least 6,000 people in the next four months to take a free three-week training course that will qualify them to work as security stewards at the Olympics and other public events like concerts. That’s on top of the 14,000 security workers who have already been newly trained.

“It’s rare to have so much work all at one time,” said Najat Semdani, in charge of the recruitment drive. She said it will “benefit people who have been left by the wayside a bit” and those who have experienced “the accidents of life” — including people who left school with no qualifications, youngsters from underprivileged neighborhoods and those who have long been unemployed.

After more than 20 years of living on the streets and in assisted housing, Starsky-Aldo Fandio thinks an Olympics security job might be his ticket to longer-term work afterward. A Pole Emploi adviser wearing a “We are here for you!” badge on his lapel walked the 45-year-old Fandio through how to apply for the training.

“Then you’ll get job offers and be asked if you’re interested in working for the Olympic Games,” the adviser, Stephane Lange, explained.

The security operation will be unprecedented in scale for France, with tens of thousands of police officers and thousands of soldiers to be bolstered by 17,000 private security guards.

Bruno Le Ray, the organizing committee’s security director, said he can’t yet gauge whether they’ll fall short and, if so, by how many. In an interview, he described the security operation as “colossal.” If private stewards can’t be recruited in sufficient numbers, the military could be called upon to provide additional resources.

NBA/COLLEGE BASKETBALL

AROUND THE NBA

Young's numbers rarely in question

BY TIM REYNOLDS
Associated Press

The numbers that Atlanta guard Trae Young are putting up are notable, averaging 28.1 points and 11.3 assists per game so far this season. Keep that up for an entire season, and he'll do something that only Oscar Robertson, Tiny Archibald and James Harden have accomplished.

Stats like those typically get a player at least mentioned in an MVP conversation.

With Young, it might not even be a guarantee that he'll be in the All-Star conversation.

The Hawks opened their post-Christmas schedule at Chicago on Tuesday night, when Young was trying to do something nobody has ever pulled off in NBA history. He had at least 30 points and 10 assists in each of his last seven games, tying Robertson's league-record stretch done in the 1964-65 season. Nobody other than Robertson, until now, had ever managed that in more than five consecutive games.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm going to stop you right there,” Young said after he tied Robertson's mark over the weekend. “Let's go to another question. I don't want to talk about my stats. Let's talk about something else. Thank you, though. Appreciate you.”

He had to settle for tying Robertson's record of 30-10 point-assist games: Young had 21 points and 13 assists in Atlanta's 118-113 loss at Chicago on Tuesday.

But maybe the way Young didn't want to talk about tying the mark is a sign of maturity from someone who has a confident swagger that can be perceived as arrogance. To his credit, he's 6-foot-1 and might be the lightest guy in the league; the Hawks list him at 180 pounds, which seems generous. He doesn't often let being the smallest player on the floor impede him in any way when it comes to putting up numbers.

But sometimes, his numbers get looked at as empty calories. Young's stretch of 30-point, 10-assist games seemed barely noticed, what with the league going into its Christmas schedule and with Detroit on a 28-game slide that tied the worst run in NBA history after losing to Boston on Thursday in overtime.

And it should be noted, the banged-up Hawks went 3-4 in those seven games with Young on this 30-10 tear. Great numbers, not great results.

“You can't evaluate a player's performance necessarily based on their stat line,” Hawks coach Quin

Snyder said. “That's particularly true when you have a playmaker or a leader on the court.”

While Young's intangible leadership skills might also get lost in the shuffle, if people did evaluate him solely on the numbers, he'd be far more revered.

Young averaged 26.7 points and 10.3 assists before the All-Star break last season—and didn't make the All-Star Game. In the formula used to determine the starters, Young finished fifth among Eastern Conference guards in the fan voting, sixth in the media voting and, perhaps most damning, 12th in voting among fellow players. There were 375 players who returned All-Star ballots last season (player voting counts as 25% of the formula) and only 13 (3.5%) of them listed Young as someone who should start.

Those who got more votes last season: Kyrie Irving, Donovan Mitchell, Jaylen Brown, DeMar DeRozan, Harden, Tyrese Haliburton, Darius Garland, Jalen Brunson, LaMelo Ball, Jrue Holiday and Zach LaVine.

“Let me say this: We have a tendency to put Trae under a microscope and that's a credit to who he is as a player,” Snyder said. “And that's a good challenge for him. ... Players want to improve and they want to be coached.”

Snyder has pointed out some of the things he believes Young doesn't get enough credit for, like taking charges—no small feat since basically everyone in the NBA is bigger than he is.

In fairness, there are things that go unnoticed. There are also things that are noticed.

People in Miami still haven't forgotten how Young told the fans there that “it's over” when the Hawks went up 117-111 with 59.9 seconds left of a game in 2019. It, indeed, was over: The Heat scored the next 22 points and won by 14 in overtime. Fans in New York won't forget how Young took a theatrical bow there when the Hawks were beating the Knicks in the 2021 playoffs, either.

Young made it clear that he wasn't happy about not being picked for the team that USA Basketball sent to the World Cup in Manila earlier this year. That, combined with no All-Star nod and not making the All-NBA team last season, seems to have made Young even more defiant.

“If you don't think I've been disrespected, I mean, you're just not telling the truth,” Young said when this season started.

NBA scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	24	6	.800	—
Philadelphia	21	9	.700	3
New York	17	13	.567	7
Brooklyn	15	16	.484	9½
Toronto	12	18	.400	12

Southeast Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Miami	19	12	.613	—
Orlando	18	12	.600	½
Atlanta	12	18	.400	6½
Charlotte	7	22	.241	11
Washington	5	25	.167	13½

Central Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Milwaukee	23	8	.742	—
Cleveland	18	13	.581	5
Indiana	16	14	.533	6½
Chicago	14	19	.424	10
Detroit	2	29	.065	21

Western Conference

Southwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Dallas	18	14	.563	—
New Orleans	18	14	.563	—
Houston	15	14	.517	1½
Memphis	10	20	.333	7
San Antonio	5	25	.167	12

Northwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Minnesota	23	7	.767	—
Denver	23	10	.697	1½
Oklahoma City	20	9	.690	2½
Utah	13	19	.406	11
Portland	8	22	.267	15

Pacific Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Clippers	18	12	.600	—
Sacramento	17	12	.586	½
L.A. Lakers	17	15	.531	2
Phoenix	15	15	.500	3
Golden State	15	16	.484	3½

Thursday's games
Boston 128, Detroit 122, OT
New Orleans 112, Utah 105
Indiana 120, Chicago 104
Minnesota 118, Dallas 110
Denver 142, Memphis 105
San Antonio 118, Portland 105
Miami 114, Golden State 102
L.A. Lakers 133, Charlotte 112

Friday's games
Brooklyn at Washington
New York at Orlando
Milwaukee at Cleveland
Sacramento at Atlanta
Toronto at Boston
Philadelphia at Houston
Charlotte at Phoenix
Oklahoma City at Denver
San Antonio at Portland
Memphis at L.A. Clippers

Saturday's games
Miami at Utah
Toronto at Detroit
New York at Indiana
L.A. Lakers at Minnesota
Philadelphia at Chicago
Dallas at Golden State

Sunday's games
Atlanta at Washington
Boston at San Antonio
Brooklyn at Oklahoma City
L.A. Lakers at New Orleans
Orlando at Phoenix
Sacramento at Memphis



Hawks guard Trae Young reacts after a foul call while playing the Cleveland Cavaliers on Dec. 16.



Creighton's Baylor Scheierman defends Villanova's TJ Bamba on Dec. 20. Villanova won in OT, and the Bluejays dropped in the rankings.

TOP 25 THIS WEEK

Creighton hosting Marquette hoping to get back on track

BY JOHN MARSHALL
Associated Press

Creighton came within a few seconds of the Final Four last spring and has the type of roster that could make another deep run this season.

After a solid start to the season, the Bluejays have hit a few bumps in the road, losing two of their past three games to plummet down the AP Top 25.

No. 22 Creighton gets a big chance to get back on track Saturday at home against No. 10 Marquette.

“Any time you're in a position in the Big East to beat a good team, it stings when you lose, especially when you did a lot of things right,” Creighton coach Greg McDermott said after the Bluejays' 68-66 overtime loss to Villanova last week.

The Bluejays (9-3) opened the season with five straight wins before losing to No. 15 Colorado State at the Hall of Fame Classic in Kansas City. Creighton pulled out a solid win against Oklahoma State and crushed in-state rival Nebraska before losing to UNLV and Villanova dropped the Bluejays 10 spots in this week's poll.

The Bluejays will certainly have their hands full with the Golden Eagles (10-3).

Marquette has an impressive list of wins, including No. 2 Kansas at the Maui Invitational, No. 21 Texas and UCLA. The Golden Eagles followed the Kansas win with a loss to top-ranked Purdue in Maui, lost to Wisconsin and opened Big East play with a loss to No. 25 Providence, which moved into the AP Top 25 for the first time this season on Monday.

Marquette is coming off a 30-point win over Georgetown.

Zags and Aztecs

No. 13 Gonzaga has not been

No. 10 Marquette (10-3)
at No. 22 Creighton (9-3)
AFN-Sports2
Saturday 8 p.m. CET
Sunday 4 a.m.. JKT

nearly as dominant in its nonconference schedule as it typically is, with three losses already.

The Zags get one last test before the West Coast Conference schedule starts on Friday, when they play San Diego State.

Gonzaga has a new-look roster this season, with several newcomers and All-American Drew Timme no longer in the middle. The Zags have wins over UCLA and Southern California, but also lost to top-ranked Purdue, reigning national champion UConn and Washington.

The Aztecs have had a solid follow up to their run to last year's national championship game, entering Friday's game 10-2. San Diego State lost to BYU early in the season and has won three straight since losing at Grand Canyon on Dec. 5.

The Aztecs started at No. 17 in the AP preseason poll and re-entered at No. 25 two weeks ago before dropping out after the Grand Canyon loss.

Owls rising

No. 7 Florida Atlantic had its highest ranking as a program last week, proving last year's Final Four run was no fluke.

The Owls have nearly everyone back from that team and has two wins over ranked teams, including a gritty overtime victory over No. 4 Arizona last weekend in Las Vegas.

Florida Atlantic had one game last week, and it was against another team that made a memorable March run in recent years — Florida Gulf Coast.

FLAG FOOTBALL

Female players given sense of community

Women thriving ahead of sport's addition to 2028 Summer Olympics

By PAT GRAHAM
Associated Press

DENVER — There were times when Jo Overstreet felt all alone as a standout flag football player on boys teams growing up in Texas.

Sure, she was accepted. Considered just one of the boys.

She longed for something more — a sense of sisterhood.

These days, the 40-year-old receiver for Team USA sees a thriving community of females of all ages and all abilities lifting the sport to new heights. It's an expansion that will only be enhanced with the sport's recent addition to the Olympic program for the 2028 Summer Games in Los Angeles.

The non-contact game featuring plenty of fast-paced action has really been on the rise for a while, with girls-specific teams and leagues springing up from coast to coast — from continent to continent, too. Eight states have sanctioned girls flag football as a high school varsity sport — more are initiating pilot programs — and college scholarships are now offered for female players on the NAIA level. The NFL has even thrown its weight behind flag football through leagues and events.

"This is so big for women to be able to say, 'I have a dream to play football' — and to actually know that opportunity is really there," said Overstreet, a former basketball player at the University of Houston who hopes to be in the mix for a spot on the inaugural Olympic roster. "Just saying that to myself now, I'm still in shock."

Flag football is a sport many may have grown up playing, either through gym class in elementary



REBECCA BLACKWELL/AP

Teammates huddle up during a training session for Keiser University's flag football team in West Palm Beach, Fla., on Nov. 30. Keiser is one of nearly two dozen NAIA schools with a flag football program.

school or a youth league or perhaps on the playground at recess. It became even more visible last winter, when the NFL turned to flag football as part of its Pro Bowl festivities.

On the international level, the game consists of five players per side on a field that's 50 yards long — plus 10 yards for each end zone — and 25 yards wide (about half the traditional American football field). The offensive team has four downs to reach midfield for a first down. If they reach midfield, the team has four downs to score.

Even more, every offensive player is an eligible receiver.

The speedy nature has caught on, too.

According to research by USA Football, over a stretch between 2014 and 2022, the participation rate for girls ages 6-12 increased by 178%. There were roughly 112,000 girls in this age range that played the sport in 2021 and 2022.

Like Makayla Martinez, a 14-

year-old wide receiver from Phoenix who stood out during the USA Football/Los Angeles Rams' talent identification camp last summer. She started playing at 5 years old after watching her cousins take the field. She switched to soccer, though, not seeing a route going forward in flag football — until now.

"My dad was like, 'There's this girls' team that's starting. Do you want to give it a try?'" Martinez recounted. "I was like, 'No, not really.' Because I only had played on a boys team. But I gave it a shot. I went for it. I just started focusing on flag football, because I saw that it was growing."

Currently, Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Nevada and New York offer flag football as a varsity girls sport on the high school level. More states are testing it out, with New Jersey recently moving it from a club sport to one overseen by the New Jersey State Inter-scholastic Athletic Association for the next two spring seasons.

The powerful promotional arm of the NFL is generating growth, too. The league has set up camps, clinics, a circuit and even exhibitions.

The Klam family of Austin, Texas, used to be a baseball household, traveling all over to tournaments for their son. Now, Jason and Amberly Klam are fully invested in the world of flag football, even starting their own female travel teams. Their 19-year-old daughter, Ashlea, has long been a star in the sport — since she first stepped onto the field for a boys team at 7 years old. A few years later, Ashlea joined an all-girls squad and they traveled all over.

That led them to launch Texas

Fury, an all-girls flag football select travel team. At first, they had six girls. These days, the Fury has more than 60 players and seven different teams in various age groups.

Ashlea earned a flag football scholarship to Keiser University in West Palm Beach, Fla., one of nearly two dozen NAIA schools that have programs. Last May, Ottawa University in Kansas cemented its dynasty by winning the program's third straight NAIA women's flag football title over Thomas University (Georgia) at Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta.

"My daughter getting an opportunity to go play in college — it's one of those dreams come true," Jason Klam said. "And with the sport being added to the Olympics, the future is just tremendous."

Ashlea Klam was back home in Austin in October — lobbying for Texas high schools to include girls flag football as a varsity sport — when she awoke to a text from her parents. A simple screenshot: Flag football was officially in for the 2028 LA Games. Her sport, the one that meant so much that she passed on going to Army to compete in track and field, was gaining inclusion (along with cricket, baseball-softball, lacrosse and squash).

"I had full faith it was going to" make it in, Ashlea Klam said. "We can really show everyone that flag football deserves to be there — and that flag football should be everywhere."

The United States and Mexico already have a robust rivalry on the women's side. The Americans beat a Mexico team led by star QB Diana Flores during the International Federation of American

"This is so big for women to be able to say, 'I have a dream to play football' — and to actually know that opportunity is really there."

Jo Overstreet
Team USA receiver

Football's Americas Continental Flag Football Championship in Charlotte, N.C., over the summer. At the World Games the year before, Flores led her squad to a gold medal.

It's years away, of course, but it could be quite a gold-medal showdown at the LA Games.

The roster? It's still a ways away, but beginning next season, there are official USA Football sanctioned events, tournaments and combines to kick off the selection process. It's anyone's guess who makes the team as the sport may start luring athletes from other sports (imagine the speed of track stars such as Sydney McLaughlin-Levrone and Sha'Carri Richardson).

"The announcement (of flag football being in the Olympics) was rocket fuel to an already very fast-paced growth trajectory for the passion of girls and women wanting to play football," Scott Hallenbeck, the CEO of USA Football, said of a sport that's an invitational Olympic event for now, but already working ahead to be included on the program for the 2032 Brisbane Games. "It's been an explosion of participation."

Receiver Madison Fulford discovered flag football nearly two years ago while playing in an intramural league. In no time, the Limestone University track standout was putting her speed and agility to use for the national team, where she scored four TDs in the gold-medal game versus Mexico last summer.

Fulford balances her time between serving as an Air Force mental health counselor in San Antonio with wearing the red, white and blue for the national team and running flag football skills camps all over the country for young women.

Anything to inspire the next female flag football player.

"I tell them to just have fun," Fulford said. "Have a fun time bonding with your teammates, your sisters."



ERIC GAY/AP

Kirby White, center, tries to dodge Devon Callihan, left, and Naj'i Cain during practice with Texas Fury, an all-girls flag football select travel team, during drills Dec. 10 in Austin, Texas.

NFL



Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce inspects his helmet last week against the Las Vegas Raiders. Kelce chucked his helmet toward the benches during a sideline outburst in the loss.

NICK TRE. SMITH/AP

Bengals, Chiefs fighting for playoffs instead of AFC title

BY DAVE SKRETTA
Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — The Cincinnati Bengals and Kansas City Chiefs are accustomed to playing each other for a spot in the Super Bowl when the snow begins to fly.

On Sunday, they are merely playing to get into the playoffs.

The Bengals (8-7) have won three of their last four games to keep their AFC wild-card hopes alive, but they desperately need to beat Kansas City (9-6) to give themselves a good shot at making the postseason field.

And the Chiefs have lost three of their last four and still need a win, or some help from Las Vegas and Denver, to clinch their eighth straight AFC West title.

“It’s so unpredictable year to year what teams are going to rise up,” said Bengals coach Zac Taylor, who has managed to keep his team in the hunt for a third straight playoff appearance despite losing Joe Burrow just 10 games into the season.

“You look around the AFC, across the board and the teams still in it,” Taylor continued, “it’s just going to come down to who can figure out how to win and keep the momentum going a little bit.”

The Bengals’ momentum was stanchd last week in Pittsburgh, where they allowed the Steelers to race to a 24-0 halftime lead in a 34-11 defeat. Jake Browning, who has played well in Burrow’s place, threw three interceptions in the game.

“Obviously it’s been a different quarterback,” Browning said, “but we’ve gone on runs before,



**Cincinnati Bengals (8-7)
at Kansas City Chiefs (9-6)**
AFN-Sports
10:25 p.m. Sunday CET
6:25 a.m. Monday JKT

and had to play before where it’s like, ‘Hey, let’s focus on one game at a time.’ So we just have to focus on playing the Chiefs and whatever happens, happens.”

While the Bengals believe momentum is still on their side, the Chiefs are as devoid of it since Andy Reid took over as coach.

Unless it’s momentum in the wrong direction.

Perhaps the worst performance in Reid’s decade in Kansas City was their latest, when they did not allow an offensive TD — or a completion after the first quarter, for that matter — yet still lost to the Raiders on Christmas. Las Vegas returned a fumble for a touchdown and got a pick-6 thrown by Patrick Mahomes on consecutive plays in the 20-14 win.

Now, the defending Super Bowl champions no longer have a shot at the No. 1 seed in the AFC with two games to go.

“We’re still in first place in the AFC West. We have one more game to win the division,” Mahomes said. “We understand it’s not going to be easy. But if we continue to work, we win this game

and go to the playoffs, we know we can do what we set out to do at the beginning of this season, and that’s get to the Super Bowl.”

Banking on big plays

The Chiefs’ offense has been known for its big plays over the years, but Mahomes is averaging just 6.6 yards through the air per attempt this season, the sixth-worst mark in the AFC.

And thanks in part to the fact that Kansas City’s wide receivers have more dropped passes than any other team, his average completed air yards is better only than Bears backup Tyson Bagent.

But the Bengals could offer a chance for Mahomes, who has already thrown a career-worst 14 interceptions, to open it up. They allowed the Steelers’ George Pickens to have TD catches of 66 and 86 yards last week.

Cameras are watching

Several times this season, TV cameras have caught Chiefs players in moments of frustration. It was Mahomes charging after an official after an offside penalty on Kadarius Toney in a loss to Buffalo, and it was Travis Kelce last week, when their star tight end chucked his helmet at the bench and Reid refused to give it back to him.

“When you’ve won a lot of games,” Reid said, “your tolerance level for not doing as well as you should goes down. Things happen. That’s the great part about it: This is emotional. The game of football is an emotional game.”

Healthy QBs have fueled success for Ravens, Dolphins

BY NOAH TRISTER
Associated Press

BALTIMORE — When Tua Tagovailoa outdueled Lamar Jackson early last season — with both quarterbacks playing like MVP candidates — it showed how much potential the Dolphins and Ravens might have.

Those teams both had to wait a year, but now they’re sitting at the top of the AFC. They just needed their star passers to stay healthy.

“I got a lot of respect for Lamar, the things that he’s done throughout his career,” Tagovailoa said. “I can vividly remember when I was in college, I think he was in the NFL, and he reached out to me. He told me I was balling, and I thought that was the one of the coolest things. I think that was the year he won the MVP.”

Jackson is now the favorite to win his second MVP after leading the Ravens to a big victory Monday night at San Francisco. Baltimore (12-3) has the top record in the NFL and can clinch the No. 1 seed in the AFC with a victory over Miami on Sunday. If the Dolphins (11-4) win at Baltimore, they would control their own path to the top seed in the conference.

On the other hand, the loser of this game might not win their own division.

So there’s quite a bit at stake — much more than there was in Week 2 last season. That was when Tagovailoa threw for 469 yards and six touchdowns as the Dolphins rallied from a 21-point fourth-quarter deficit to beat the Ravens 42-38. It was something of a coming-out party for the Miami offense in its second game under coach Mike McDaniel.

“They did some great things against us in the passing game,” Baltimore coach John Harbaugh said. “Made some huge plays. It was a massive comeback. Obviously, it was a tough pill to swallow for us.”



**Miami Dolphins (11-4)
at Baltimore Ravens (12-3)**
AFN-Sports
7 p.m. Sunday CET
3 a.m. Monday JKT

That same day, Jackson became the first quarterback in NFL history with both a touchdown pass and a touchdown run of at least 75 yards in one game.

Both teams went on to make the playoffs, but each lost its postseason opener. By then, Jackson was out with a knee injury and Tagovailoa’s concussion problems left him unavailable, too. They’ve both played every game this season.

Tagovailoa was limited in practice this week because of his left thumb and quad, and the teams have other health concerns. Star receiver Jaylen Waddle (ankle) and running back Raheem Mostert (knee, ankle) missed practice time for Miami. So did receiver Tyreek Hill (ankle).

Safety Kyle Hamilton (knee) and rookie receiver Zay Flowers (calf) missed some practice for the Ravens.

Scenarios

Miami can clinch the AFC East with a victory this weekend, but if the Dolphins lose and Buffalo beats New England, then Bills-Dolphins in Week 18 would decide the division.

The Ravens would win the AFC North with a victory in either of their last two games. But lose both, and the door would be open for Cleveland to snatch the division with two victories.



REBECCA BLACKWELL/AP

Quarterback Tua Tagovailoa has mostly remained healthy this year, unlike last season when the Dolphins lost in the playoffs without him.

Scoreboard

American Conference							
East							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
x-Miami	11	4	0	.733	463	314	
Buffalo	9	6	0	.600	403	276	
e-N.Y. Jets	6	10	0	.375	251	352	
e-New England	4	11	0	.267	212	322	
South							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
Houston	8	7	0	.533	328	331	
Indianapolis	8	7	0	.533	354	372	
Jacksonville	8	7	0	.533	331	343	
e-Tennessee	5	10	0	.333	274	321	
North							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
x-Baltimore	12	3	0	.800	417	244	
x-Cleveland	11	5	0	.688	382	331	
Cincinnati	8	7	0	.533	318	345	
Pittsburgh	8	7	0	.533	257	291	
West							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
Kansas City	9	6	0	.600	333	265	
Denver	7	8	0	.467	327	377	
Las Vegas	7	8	0	.467	285	294	
e-L.A. Chargers	5	10	0	.333	325	369	
National Conference							
East							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
x-Philadelphia	11	4	0	.733	392	366	
x-Dallas	10	5	0	.667	451	286	
e-N.Y. Giants	5	10	0	.333	214	371	
e-Washington	4	11	0	.267	309	453	
South							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
Tampa Bay	8	7	0	.533	326	302	
Atlanta	7	8	0	.467	287	288	
New Orleans	7	8	0	.467	331	297	
e-Carolina	2	13	0	.133	236	381	
North							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
y-Detroit	11	4	0	.733	412	355	
Green Bay	7	8	0	.467	333	331	
Minnesota	7	8	0	.467	314	299	
Chicago	6	9	0	.400	314	345	
West							
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA	
y-San Francisco	11	4	0	.733	444	267	
L.A. Rams	8	7	0	.533	357	332	
Seattle	8	7	0	.533	320	352	
e-Arizona	3	12	0	.200	275	403	
e-Eliminated from playoffs							
x-clinched playoff spot							
y-clinched division							
Thursday's game							
Cleveland 37, N.Y. Jets 20							
Saturday's game							
Detroit at Dallas							
Sunday's games							
Arizona at Philadelphia							
Atlanta at Chicago							
Carolina at Jacksonville							
L.A. Rams at N.Y. Giants							
Las Vegas at Indianapolis							
Miami at Baltimore							
New England at Buffalo							
New Orleans at Tampa Bay							
San Francisco at Washington							
Tennessee at Houston							
Pittsburgh at Seattle							
Cincinnati at Kansas City							
L.A. Chargers at Denver							
Green Bay at Minnesota							
Sunday, Jan. 7							
Atlanta at New Orleans							
Buffalo at Miami							
Chicago at Green Bay							
Cleveland at Cincinnati							
Dallas at Washington							
Denver at Las Vegas							
Houston at Indianapolis							
Jacksonville at Tennessee							
Kansas City at L.A. Chargers							
L.A. Rams at San Francisco							
Minnesota at Detroit							
N.Y. Jets at New England							
Philadelphia at N.Y. Giants							
Pittsburgh at Baltimore							
Seattle at Arizona							
Tampa Bay at Carolina							
NFL calendar							
Jan. 13-15 — Wild Card playoff games.							
Jan. 20-21 — Division playoff games.							
Jan. 28 — AFC and NFC championship games.							
Feb. 11 — Super Bowl 58 at Allegiant Stadium in Las Vegas.							

Flacco fuels Browns' playoff push

QB passes for 3 TDs to improve to 4-1 as Cleveland's starter

By Tom Withers
Associated Press
CLEVELAND — Joe Flacco has turned a seemingly cursed season into a charmed one.

Cleveland's quarterback for just over a month, Flacco passed for 309 yards and three touchdowns and the Browns clinched an unlikely playoff berth — just their second since 2002 — despite numerous injuries this season with a 37-20 win over the New York Jets on Thursday night.

The Browns (11-5) are assured of a wild-card spot and still have a chance to win the AFC North and maybe the conference's No. 1 overall seed, something that seemed unfathomable just weeks ago as major injuries piled up.

But things have changed since Flacco arrived.

The 38-year-old quarterback improved to 4-1 as a starter with the Browns, who plucked the Super Bowl 47 MVP off his couch in New Jersey last month to hopefully rescue their season. He's done that and more.

In the final minutes, Browns fans chanted "Flac-co! Flac-co!" to a quarterback they once reviled with Baltimore and now revere.

"You don't know how many of these moments you're going to get," Flacco said. "I'm going to remember this for the rest of my life."

Flacco threw two TD passes to Jerome Ford in the first half as the Browns built a 20-point lead over the Jets (6-10), who chose not to resign the 15-year veteran after he spent three seasons with them — and after Aaron Rodgers tore his left Achilles tendon in Week 1.

Flacco torched New York for 296 yards in the first half and became the first QB in 34 games to go over 300 yards against the Jets. He's also the first Cleveland quarterback to pass for more than 300 in four straight.

Flacco insisted revenge wasn't on his mind, but Jets receiver Garrett Wilson said the QB was out to prove something.

"He's wound like that," Wilson said. "He told me at the end of last season, he wasn't going to be a backup. He was going to play and he held to that. Joe's a great guy. The type of teammate you want. He deserves everything."

The atmosphere was electric from the start inside Cleveland Browns Stadium as fans who have felt mostly heartbreak for decades got a chance to celebrate.

"It was special," Flacco said. "This is obviously a unique situation for me, so I've got a lot of different emotions running through



SUE OGROCKI/AP

Cleveland Browns quarterback Joe Flacco celebrates after a first down against the New York Jets during the second half Thursday in Cleveland. Flacco passed for 309 yards and three touchdowns in the 37-20 win.

my head."

The Jets were forced to start Trevor Siemian for the second week in a row with Zach Wilson sidelined by a concussion.

Siemian had some nice moments, but an overthrow late in first quarter was returned 30 yards for a TD by safety Ronnie Hickman to put the Browns up 20-7.

New York allowed a season-high in points and yards (428). Although the Jets gave up just 61 yards in the second half, they dug themselves too big a hole.

Jets linebacker Jermaine Johnson had a pick-6 in the second quarter when he beautifully deflected Flacco's pass to himself and returned it 37 yards.

Nothing has been easy this sea-

son for the Browns, who have continued to win despite being over-run by injuries since the opener. Flacco is their fourth starting quarterback, as they're missing both first-team offensive tackles and 12 players — including QB Deshaun Watson and running back Nick Chubb — are on injured reserve.

So it was fitting they went into their biggest game this season missing their starting kicker, punter and wide receiver Amari Cooper, who was coming off a franchise record-setting 265-yard performance on Sunday in Houston.

New guys

The Browns got their first looks at kicker Riley Patterson and punter Matt Haack, both signed earlier

this week.

Patterson, filling in for an injured Dustin Hopkins, went 4 of 5 on extra points and made a 33-yard field goal with 2:54 left.

Haack averaged 51.7 yards on three punts.

Garrett & Garrett

Browns star defensive end Myles Garrett ended a five-game streak without a sack by taking down Siemian in the first half.

Garrett played with a heavy heart, disclosing after the game that his uncle, Chris Johnson, died on Christmas.

"Still hard to believe," he said. "I was speechless then. I really just don't know how to put it into words now. I've had headaches just daily just because I don't know how to handle it emotionally. So it just comes out in different ways, like just pains. I feel like sometime in a fog."

Wilson went over 1,000 yards receiving for the second straight season. He also did it as a rookie in 2022 and is one of 10 active players with two 1,000-yard seasons to start their career.

Scary moment

Browns wide receiver Elijah Moore suffered a head injury in the second quarter.

After catching a 22-yard pass from Flacco, Moore's helmet was driven into the turf as he went down. He rolled onto his back and appeared to twitch as teammates quickly called for medical personnel.

Moore, who spent the past two seasons with the Jets, was helped off the field and escorted to Cleveland's locker room.



RON SCHWANE/AP

Browns defensive end Myles Garrett celebrates on Thursday against the Jets in Cleveland. Garrett played after his uncle died on Christmas.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Long odds for a split national championship

By RALPH D. RUSSO
Associated Press

The question seemed like a valid one moments after unbeaten ACC champion Florida State was left out of the College Football Playoff.

Could the fourth-ranked Seminoles, with a victory against defending national champion and No. 6 Georgia in the Orange Bowl, be voted No. 1 in the final Associated Press Top 25 college football poll?

“As a matter of principle, I’d consider ranking Florida State No. 1 regardless of whether they are in the CFP field,” said ESPN’s Rece Davis, a longtime AP Top 25 voter. “Much like the selection process itself, the exercise is who, in my judgment, is the best team.”

In reality, though, the current state of college football’s postseason all but renders the conversation moot.

Between players transferring or opting out to concentrate on NFL draft preparations and coaching staffs turned upside down by hirings and firings, the better question these days is how much consideration should poll voters give to postseason games outside the CFP at all?

“This is my 14th time as an AP voter, and I definitely think I will be less likely to vote teams considerably up or down after the bowls than I did in the past,” said Scott Rabalais of The Advocate of Baton Rouge (Louisiana).

On Saturday at the Orange Bowl, Florida State will be a shell of the team that won the Atlantic Coast Conference championship. Quarterback Jordan Travis is still recovering from a broken leg, an injury

“Nothing else needs to be said if we’re the only undefeated team.”

Kalen DeLoach
Florida State LB

that essentially kept the Seminoles out of the playoff. Many of FSU’s best players, including defensive end Jared Verse, running back Tre Benson and receiver Keon Coleman, have opted out as they look toward the NFL draft.

Earlier this week, No. 2 quarterback Tate Rodemaker chose to transfer and skip the game.

Some of the Seminoles who will play weren’t shy about saying they should be No. 1 if they finish as the only unbeaten Power Five team.

“It’s only right,” linebacker Kalen DeLoach told reporters at the Orange Bowl. “Nothing else needs to be said if we’re the only undefeated team.”

The Seminoles will face a Georgia team in much better shape. Nineteen Bulldogs hit the transfer portal after the season, though most were backup players. It does look as if All-America tight end Brock Bowers and highly regarded tackle Amarius Mims will miss the game after seasons interrupted by injuries.

“If Florida State handles Georgia easily and the three CFP games are duds, then I’d gladly vote the Seminoles No. 1, but it’s

not going to happen,” said AP Top 25 voter Robert Cessna of the Bryan-College Station (Texas) Eagle.

No. 1 Michigan (13-0) faces fourth-seeded Alabama (12-1) in the Rose Bowl semifinal and No. 2 Washington (13-0) plays No. 3 Texas (12-1) in Sugar Bowl semifinal on Monday. The final AP Top 25 is released a few hours after the Jan. 8 national championship game.

Rabalais covers No. 13 LSU, which will play Wisconsin in the ReliaQuest Bowl in Tampa on Monday without Heisman Trophy winner Jayden Daniels, who has opted out.

“The lack of a player of Daniels’ caliber has to be taken into consideration were LSU to lose and I was deciding where to put them on my final ballot,” he said.

In some cases, the teams playing in the bowls barely resemble the ones that earned those postseason trips and rankings.

Take the Sun Bowl, with No. 15 Notre Dame (9-3) facing No. 21 Oregon State (8-4) in El Paso, Texas, on Friday.

Neither team will have its starting quarterback after Notre Dame’s Sam Hartman (NFL draft) and Oregon State’s DJ Uiagalelei (transfer) opted out.

The Irish are missing most of their starting offense, including All-America offensive tackle Joe Alt and running back Audric Estime, a second-team All-American. Offensive coordinator Gerad Parker recently took the head coaching job at Troy.

Beavers coach Jonathan Smith left for Michigan State after the regular-season finale. Now they



COLIN HACKLEY/AP

Florida State was left out of the College Football Playoff because QB Jordan Travis was injured near the end of the season. Still, the Seminoles could be the only undefeated team after the bowls.

are down to a third-string quarterback, though one with starting experience in Ben Gulbranson, and have had several key players transfer out. Leading rusher Damien Martinez is serving a suspension.

“The stats count. It counts in the win-loss column. When people look at Notre Dame and Oregon State’s record in the future, it’s going to include the results of this game. In that regard, well, I’ll factor it in,” Matt Brown from the The Athletic said on the AP Top 25 College Football Podcast. “On the other hand, if Notre Dame and Oregon State had these rosters for most of the year? The teams that take the field will really not be top-20 teams.”

The Peach Bowl with No. 10 Penn State facing No. 11 Mississippi is shaping up to have fairly good representation from each team, though Nittany Lions All-American offensive lineman Olu Fashanu has said only that he will be with the team, not that he will play. Teammate and standout defensive end Chop Robinson isn’t going to play.

“It’s almost like we’re going

back in time to how bowl games are perceived,” Brown said.

For a big chunk of the 20th century, bowl games were few and not taken into account in the final AP poll. Not until 1968 did the AP begin releasing a final poll after bowls were played.

As late as 1973, Alabama and Notre Dame shared the national title because the coaches’ poll didn’t take into account bowl games. The Fighting Irish beat the Crimson Tide in the Sugar Bowl and finished No. 1 in the AP poll, but the coaches had already declared Alabama No. 1.

The last time there was a split national title was 2003, when Southern California was voted No. 1 by AP after being left off the BCS title game, won by LSU over Oklahoma.

The four-team playoff has all but ensured it will never happen again. The Florida State snub provide at least a chance to consider the possibility, but with a 12-team playoff coming next season, shared national championships will — like the wishbone and tear-away jerseys — be part of college football’s past.

Unfinished business behind Beck returning to Dawgs

By TIM REYNOLDS
Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — There is a silver lining of sorts for Georgia, even after seeing its school-record run of 29 consecutive victories end and not being selected for the College Football Playoff to take a shot at what could have been a third consecutive national championship.

Carson Beck is coming back.

And if things had gone a little differently for the Bulldogs, that might not have been the case.

Beck detailed what went into his decision to return to Georgia in 2024 on Thursday, with the notion of having some unfinished business next season — after this season’s plans went awry by the Bulldogs losing to Alabama in the Southeastern Conference title game — prominent in his thought process.

“I mean, I feel like that’s always part of it,”



LYNNE SLADKY/AP

Georgia quarterback Carson Beck is returning to play in 2024 after this season’s plans went awry.

Beck said. “I feel like if we hadn’t lost that game, maybe things would be different. But obviously that’s the way that things panned out and mentally that definitely had an effect on my decision.”

Beck is expected to be Georgia’s starter Saturday when the sixth-ranked Bulldogs (12-1, No. 6 CFP) take on No. 4 Florida State (13-0, No. 5 CFP) in the Orange Bowl. It’s a chance for Georgia to give its senior class a 50th win, which would be a school record for one class.

Beck surely could have gone pro after this season. The fourth-year junior — who waited three years for his shot at being a starter — was generally considered to be a first- or second-round NFL draft prospect after a season where he completed 72% of his passes for 3,738 yards and 22 touchdowns.

But Georgia lost to then-No. 8 Alabama 27-24 in the SEC championship game, and that left Beck with a decision: Stay and try to win the SEC and CFP next season, or go pro now.

“I think I knew, truly, like a few days after the game,” Beck said. “In my heart, I knew exactly what I wanted to do and what I was

going to do. I just had to talk to people and make sure that everyone was kind of in agreement with what I wanted to do.”

Florida State understands the challenge Beck presents. He’s remarkably consistent, with at least 243 yards in 12 of his 13 games this season. He rarely turns the ball over; he had six interceptions in 399 pass attempts. He ranks sixth nationally in completion percentage and passing yards, plus eighth nationally in yards per pass attempt.

“And what you see with him that he probably doesn’t get acknowledged for — he’s not a scrambler — but he does know how to escape the pocket and when to escape,” Florida State defensive coordinator Adam Fuller said. “He usually does it with really good efficiency and gets first downs. So, I mean, you put that together and that’s why he’s had such a good year. That’s why they’ve been so efficient on offense. He gets a lot of credit for that. He deserves it.”

COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF



Washington wide receiver Rome Odunze, center, celebrates his touchdown against Oregon State with teammate tight end Jack Westover and wide receiver Jalen McMillan in the first half Nov. 18 in Corvallis, Ore.

NOTEBOOK

Washington takes lesson of ‘Boys in the Boat’ to semis

BY BRETT MARTEL
Associated Press

What does Olympic rowing in 1936 have to do with the College Football Playoff at the dawn of 2024?

Plenty, if you play for the second-seeded Washington Huskies. Shortly before departing Seattle for a Sugar Bowl semifinal matchup against Texas, Huskies coach Kalen DeBoer took the team to the movies. They watched “The Boys in the Boat,” which recounts how an underdog, eight-man crew from the University of Washington wound up representing the United States at the Berlin Games, where they beat the Nazis and won gold.

Washington tight end Jack Westover not only grew up a Huskies fan, but also attended regattas at Lake Washington — which anyone who’s watched a UW football game on TV has seen because the stadium was built along the shoreline, next to the university’s boathouse.

The film, directed by George Clooney, recounts “a big part of Huskie history,” Westover said Thursday.

His team, he said, related well to a story of kids from modest backgrounds beating out favored Ivy League crews during the US Olympic trials.

“We don’t have all the five-star recruits. We all had to work our way up. Our best players have been through a lot,” said Westover, a former walk-on. “That’s kind of what’s been our separator

this year a little bit, is how we handled tough situations. We thrive in those situations where we’re counted out because we’ve all been there.”

The trip to a small cinema near campus was good for team bonding, too, offensive tackle Troy Fautanu said. One racing scene in particular, which also featured one of Washington’s oldest West Coast rivals, stood out.

“When that crew first beat Cal, oh man, you should have heard the room,” Fautanu said. “Everyone was cheering, was going crazy. It was, for sure, an awesome experience.”

Washington quarterback Michael Penix Jr., this season’s Heisman Trophy runner-up, is one of those Huskies whose road to success was long and difficult. He transferred to Washington after an injury-plagued four years at Indiana — and has since led the nation in yards passing the past two seasons.

In an eight-man boat, Penix noted, “Each guy has a certain job to do, and once you try to do too much and try to carry the team, when you’re supposed to be in rhythm and sync with one another, it causes the boat to slow down.”

Targeting

Texas will start the Sugar Bowl without safety Derrick Williams Jr., who was flagged for targeting in the second half of the Big 12 championship game against Oklahoma State.

Texas appealed the call but it was upheld, triggering a first-half

suspension for Williams in its next game.

Williams is a 6-foot-2, 192-pound freshman who has seen most of his action on special teams, but has also become part of a rotation at safety that includes Kitan Crawford, Jerrin Thompson and Michael Taaffe.

Williams is seventh on the team with 39 tackles. Thompson and Taaffe are tied for the team lead with three interceptions each.

Matching the hype

It didn’t take long for Alabama left tackle Kadyn Proctor to live up to his billing as a five-star recruit.

“It was sometime during fall camp when I realized, during the scrimmage that, like, he’s a dog,” linebacker Dallas Turner said. “He’s not a regular freshman that you can give the freshman treatment to.”

Proctor started all 13 games, earning recognition as a freshman All-American, and his development coincides with the improvement from the Crimson Tide offense over the course of the season.

Right tackle JC Latham pointed to the improvement Proctor has made against pass rushers who rely on speed, which came as the newcomer started to refine his body.

“He’s definitely gotten stronger, more explosive,” Latham said of Proctor, who is listed at 6-foot-7 and 360 pounds. “He’s gotten bigger, but he already came in a freak of nature.”

Breaking: Both bowl game matchups are fully balanced

FROM PAGE 40

said. “And Michigan carries some of that, but they don’t really make a living on that. What they do extremely well is formation you.”

In a game where yards are likely to be hard to get and points at a premium (the over/under is 44.5), Michigan quarterback J.J. McCarthy will need to be at his most efficient against an Alabama secondary that features two All-America defensive backs in Kool-aid McKinstry and Terrion Arnold.

Prediction: Alabama 23-20.



Rose Bowl
No. 5 Alabama (12-1)
at No. 1 Michigan (13-0)
AFN-Sports
11:10 p.m. Monday CET
7:10 a.m. Tuesday JKT

Sugar Bowl

The nightcap of the CFP semifinal doubleheader figures to a very different game than Alabama-Michigan.

Washington and Texas both have top-15 offenses, talented quarterbacks in Michael Penix Jr. and Quinn Ewers, multiple future NFL draft picks to throw to and problems stopping the pass.

That’s a recipe for points.

The one group that stands out on defense: The Texas defensive line, which features All-American T’Vondre Sweat and second-team All-American Byron Murphy II.

“There’s not a lot of teams in the country that have the interior guys like Texas has, specifically Murphy and Sweat,” Cubelic said.

Part of the reason teams attack the Longhorns secondary, especially their inexperienced safeties, is because they mostly give up on the running game. Texas is allowing 80.5 yards per game and 2.87 per carry, top-five in the country in each.

Washington counters with an offensive line that was underappreciated much of the season, but ended up winning the Joe Moore Award as the best in the country. Led by second-team All-America tackle Troy Fautanu, the Huskies allowed only 11 sacks while throwing the ball 37 times per game.

Washington doesn’t run it in volume, but coach Kalen DeBoer and offensive coordinator Ryan Grubb seemed to evolve as opponents ad-



Sugar Bowl
No. 3 Texas (12-1)
at No. 2 Washington (13-0)
AFN-Sports
2:50 a.m. Tuesday CET
10:50 a.m. Tuesday JKT

justed to try to take away the deep throws the Huskies love. Running back Dillon Johnson’s role in the offense expanded later in the season, with Penix often lining up under center.

“They have relied on (Johnson) the last few weeks, and he’s been very good downhill,” Kuchar said. “And I think their confidence is growing every week. I think he’s taking a lot of pressure off Penix.”

Stops could be hard to come by for the Huskies, but Texas coach Steve Sarkisian’s red-zone offense has been a problem much of the season. The Longhorns have scored touchdowns on 49% of their opportunities, 120th in the country.

Then again, tightening up near the goal line hasn’t been a strength for Washington’s defense. The Huskies have allowed 31 touchdowns in 44 red-zone trips (70.45%).

Prediction: Texas 35-28.



AARON E. MARTINEZ, AUSTIN AMERICAN-STATESMAN/AP

Texas quarterback Quinn Ewers throws a pass during practice at the Superdome ahead of the Sugar Bowl in New Orleans on Thursday.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF

Alabama lineman Eboigbe returns better than ever

By JOHN ZENOR
Associated Press

Justin Eboigbe said he just wanted to come back as “a better version of myself.”

It’s the goal that helped push the Alabama defensive end through all the rehab from an injury that ended his 2022 season, the weeks in a neck brace and numerous hours wearing a bone stem device.

Eboigbe has come back better than ever. He returned from a neck injury that sidelined him for most of last season with easily his best year, earning individual accolades and helping to give himself and the Crimson Tide chances for a happier ending.

“During the whole rehab, I just kept knowing that I was going to show a better version of myself than what I last did,” said Eboigbe, who recently received a master’s degree in sports management. “That was my whole focus, my whole goal, my whole mindset each day attacking rehab. And I just hoped that I could prove what I’ve been saying and telling myself.”

He has been a key part of a defense that has helped propel the Tide to a Southeastern Conference title and into the College Football Playoff after missing both chances last season. Alabama faces Michigan on Jan. 1 in the Rose Bowl semifinal game in Pasadena, Calif.

Eboigbe has racked up 60 tackles (one more than his total through four years) with 11½ tackles for loss and seven sacks, easily topping his career totals.

He earned second-team AP All-SEC honors and an invitation to the Senior Bowl with a shot at the NFL. Eboigbe was named a semifinalist for the College Sports Communicators Comeback Player of the Year Award, prompting coach Nick Saban to proclaim it would be hard for him “to think that there’s many guys out there that did more for their team.”

Eboigbe was injured in a Tues-

day practice ahead of the fifth game last season during a team running period pitting the starters against each other.

“I went to strike the blocker and felt a stinging sensation in both of my arms,” he said. “I knew something wasn’t right. I told the training staff and they actually wanted me to pull me from practice that day, but I wanted to finish out practicing.”

An MRI the next day showed he had a herniated disc pushing against his spinal cord, and that he got lucky after continuing to practice.

“They were basically telling me, you could have been paralyzed,” he said. Head trainer Jeff Allen assured him the injury was season-ending but not a career-ender.

When he got home that day, Eboigbe called Kansas City Chiefs wide receiver Justyn Ross, who had endured a similar injury at Clemson. Ross outlined his experiences in recovering from the surgery and advised him that “you have to trust in your mind that everything’s going to be OK,” Eboigbe said.

Pittsburgh neurosurgeon David Okonkwo operated on both players.

Eboigbe had to wear a neck brace for two weeks, taking it off only for showers. Then he had to wear a bone stem device to help stimulate bone growth four hours a day for three months.

It was two months before Eboigbe was able to work out with resistance bands, and late January before he could lift weights again. He was cleared to practice in early April, several months earlier than expected. That allowed him to get the nerves from that first contact out of the way.

“Everything that they told me I did and I did it exactly correct,” Eboigbe said. “They weren’t expecting me to come back as soon as I did.”



AL GOLDIS/AP

Michigan defensive back Mike Sainristil, left, breaks up a pass intended for Michigan State wide receiver Tre Mosley Oct. 21 in East Lansing, Mich. Sainristil made the switch from WR to DB and has thrived.

Michigan’s Sainristil stars in offense to defense shift

By LARRY LAGE
Associated Press

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — Position switches in college football often occur when a player isn’t producing.

That wasn’t the case with Mike Sainristil at Michigan.

In his third season at wide receiver in 2021, he was a key target and his highlight-worthy catches seemed to set him up for a bright future on offense with the Wolverines.

Jim Harbaugh had another idea entering spring ball last year, suggesting Sainristil switch to defensive back.

“He saw something that maybe I didn’t see in myself at the time,” Sainristil recalled recently in an interview. “My mindset was prove him right, prove myself right and take advantage of the opportunity.”

He has done just that, becoming a key contributor in the secondary last season and arguably the best player on a highly ranked defense this year.

The AP All-Big Ten cornerback is about to face a tough test in his third straight College Football Playoff appearance.

Michigan, whose season included a sign-stealing scandal that led to the Big Ten Conference suspending Harbaugh for three

games, plays Alabama on New Year’s Day at the Rose Bowl to compete for a shot at the national championship.

“With everything that has been said this year about this program, about this team, about the success we’ve had,” Sainristil said, “what better opportunity to have against a team like Alabama to go be able to prove who we are.”

Jalen Milroe has led a resurgent passing game for the Crimson Tide since getting benched in Week 2 against South Florida.

The dynamic quarterback has seven touchdown passes without an interception over the past three games and had some clutch passes against Georgia in the SEC championship game as well as a remarkable completion on fourth-and-goal from the 31 for a touchdown to Isaiah Bonds to beat Auburn.

Former Georgia receiver Jermaine Burton is Alabama’s big-play threat, averaging 22.2 yards on 35 catches with eight touchdowns. Bond has 44 catches for 621 yards and four scores.

The Wolverines allowed a FBS-low 9.5 points, led college football with five defensive touchdowns and gave up 152.6 yards passing a game to rank second.

Sainristil had a lot to do with that.

He made five interceptions, two more than any teammate, and returned two picks for scores. He also had 30 tackles, including three for losses and a sack.

“He checks all the boxes,” Michigan defensive back Josh Wallace said. “He plays outside, inside. He can cover anybody. He’s just a great physical guy and is not scared of contact.”

The 5-foot-10, 182-pound Sainristil makes up for his lack of size with plenty of fight, and his off-the-field intangibles also are assets when teams evaluate prospects for the NFL draft. Sainristil is often smiling, thankful for a life that would’ve been much different if his family hadn’t fled Haiti and raised him in the Boston area.

On the field with his coverage and run-support skills, he reminds some of a smaller version of Detroit Lions defensive back and former Alabama star Brian Branch.

“Some coach is going to say he’s an ideal nickel for what we do and they’re going to take him on Day 2,” said Dane Brugler, NFL draft analyst for The Athletic. “Scouts say he’s like a player-coach, an influencer, a leader, and those buzz words will push him higher on some boards.”

“With his toughness, you would never guess he’s a former receiver.”



MICHELLE HAAS HUTCHINS/AP

Alabama defensive lineman Justin Eboigbe, left, returned from a neck injury that sidelined him for most of the 2022 season with his best year, helping give himself and the Crimson Tide chances for a happier ending.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF

Sweat has been dominant on Texas DL

By JIM VERTUNO
Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — Early in the Big 12 championship game, Texas defensive tackle T’Vonde Sweat was on offense, lined up in a goal line formation to deliver what everyone expected to be a crushing block for someone else seeking a touchdown.

At 6-foot-4, 362 pounds, Sweat is a masher. But he barely brushed against an Oklahoma State defender before tip-toeing toward the back of the end zone for a soft pass, a cradled catch and a TD. A big man TD, followed by a Heisman pose.

Sweat’s touchdown launched the Longhorns to a 49-21 rout that secured the program’s first Big 12 title since 2009 and put them in the College Football Playoff for the first time. And it put the exclamation mark on a regular season in which Sweat could arguably be considered Texas’ most valuable player.

All of it is why Sweat, a fifth-year senior and the Outland Trophy winner as the nation’s top interior lineman, chose to return to Texas this season. He is the fourth Longhorn to win the Outland but the first since 1977.

“(Coach Steve Sarkisian) told me, ‘Buy in one last time and everything could go perfect.’ You know what I mean?” Sweat said. “Right

now, it’s the truth.”

Sweat has been an immovable force, teaming with 310-pound Byron Murphy II to create a tandem and a dominant Texas run defense that has held opponents under 100 yards rushing in six of the last seven games. Four were held to 31 yards or less. National rushing leader Ollie Gordon of Oklahoma State managed only 34 yards against Texas.

“I believe they are the best tandem in the nation,” Sarkisian said. “They work so well with one another.”

Like Sweat, Murphy also caught a touchdown (in the third game against Wyoming). Sweat had to wait a long time for his turn.

“Murphy, he’s an explosive guy,” Sweat said. “Me, I’m just like a big ol’ tank. It’s kind of hard to move me.”

Washington will have to try when the Longhorns (12-1) and Huskies (13-0) meet Jan. 1 in the playoff semifinal in the Sugar Bowl. Sweat and Murphy have combined for seven sacks, while Sweat is more often getting the push that collapses the pocket around opposing quarterbacks.

Sweat said he models his game after Ndamukong Suh, the former Nebraska All-American wrecking ball who went on to an all-pro career in the NFL. Texas fans might shudder at that comparison. Suh nearly



ERIC GAY/AP

Outland Trophy winner T’Vonde Sweat has been an immovable force, teaming with 310-pound Byron Murphy II to create a tandem and a dominant run defense.

wrecked the Longhorns all by himself in the 2009 Big 12 championship game.

Texas was a program on the rise, or so Sweat thought, when he signed. Texas had played in the Big 12 title game in 2018 and beat Georgia in the Sugar Bowl to end that season.

“We’re baaaaack!” then-quarterback Sam Ehlinger proclaimed after the Georgia win.

The Longhorns went backward instead. Coach Tom Herman was

fired after the 2020 pandemic-shortened season. The low point was a 5-7 finish in Sarkisian’s first season in 2021.

Texas went 8-5 in 2022, which included an Alamo Bowl loss to the Washington team the Longhorns play Monday night. Sweat considered a jump to the NFL. Instead, he saw the potential in himself and the team to return.

Sweat has earned All-America honors and was named Big 12 defen-

sive player of the year. And he has called this season “100%” a contract year for his NFL draft hopes next spring. Sweat has enjoyed every minute of his final season, adopting a “Make ‘Em Sweat” brand slogan he often wears in oversized necklaces and chains.

“To me, it ain’t no surprise, you know what I mean?” Sweat said. “I feel like this is why I came back ... to showcase I can be that guy and now people can see it.”

Huskies’ Odunze looks for a final starring chapter

By TIM BOOTH
Associated Press

SEATTLE — Rome Odunze will leave Washington in the discussion as the best wide receiver ever to wear the purple and the gold.

He’s made all the big catches asked of him, had one very important and memorable run, played the middle portion of the year with a broken rib and finished the year as a first-team All-American on seemingly every list.

All that’s left for is the big stage of the College Football Playoff, where Odunze and the No. 2 Huskies will face No. 3 Texas in the Sugar Bowl on Monday.

“I think what people don’t talk about enough is how great of a person he is outside of football, like the most humble guy you could ever meet. Just an awesome guy all around,” Washington running back Dillon Johnson said. “But as a football player, man, he’s just different. He’s the best receiver that I’ve seen.”

On the Huskies’ way to the first 13-0 season in school history, the last Pac-12 championship in the former form of the conference and a spot in the playoff, Odunze became a star. While quarterback Michael Penix Jr. ended up finishing second in the Heisman Trophy voting, it was Odunze on the other end of so many of his passes.

Odunze has 81 receptions for 1,428 yards and 13 touchdowns going into the matchup with Texas. Seemingly every time Washington needed a clutch conversion or a big touchdown, the ball ended up in the hands of Odunze.

It got to the point where Washington coach Kalen DeBoer almost took it for granted. Almost.

“It’s the touchdowns. It’s the moving of the



LINDSEY WASSON/AP

Washington wide receiver Rome Odunze makes a catch for a touchdown against Utah. Odunze finished the year as a first-team All-American on seemingly every list.

chains in the big, big moments. There’s been so many we forget about a lot of (them) and you take it for granted the gaudy stats that he has,” DeBoer said. “Just over and over again, think about how many times he’s come through when you really needed it. A lot of times you think about when you lose football games or you didn’t come through in the big moment. You remember those. I can’t remember Rome not coming through.”

But what Odunze has accomplished this season shouldn’t be taken for granted, especially in the context of what he played through

during the midpoint of the year. Odunze suffered a fractured rib and collapsed lung after getting hit while recovering an onside kick in the final seconds of Washington’s 31-24 win at Arizona on Sept. 30.

Odunze was taken to a Tucson hospital after the game for observation but wasn’t cleared to fly back to Seattle. So with the help of his mom and members of the Washington medical staff, Odunze drove from Tucson to Seattle — with a stopover in his hometown of Las Vegas — while dealing with the uncomfortable injury.

Odunze’s injury didn’t come to light until after the Huskies won the Pac-12 championship when they beat Oregon for a second time. But two Saturdays after getting hurt against Arizona, Odunze had eight catches for 128 yards and two touchdowns in the first win over the Ducks.

“(If) it’s not detrimental to you, the future, your career, to your body physically, I think that those things are the things I try and play through, especially when there’s not like structural damage or something that you’re at risk to messing up in the future,” Odunze said.

It could be argued that Odunze was even better after he was hurt because of how he came through in important moments. The second of his two touchdowns in the first Oregon win was the game-winner with 1:38 left. Two of his three catches against Utah went for touchdowns. He had seven catches for 106 yards and two TDs on a miserable rainy night at Oregon State, including his 19-yard catch on third-and-3 with less than two minutes left that clinched the victory.

In the Apple Cup against Washington State, Odunze again caught two TD passes, but it was his 23-yard run on fourth down that sparked Washington’s final drive and led to a game-winning field goal.

And in the second matchup with Oregon, Odunze had eight more catches on the way to the conference title.

Now comes his biggest stage to date, facing a Texas defense that was 94th in the country, giving up 240.8 yards per game passing.

“I knew he was a dog when I first got here,” Penix said. “It was just a matter of time, just being able to get him the ball, just get him those opportunities to show it to the world.”

SPORTS

Full strength
Success of Dolphins, Ravens tied to finally having healthy QBs » **NFL, Page 34**



Alabama quarterback Jalen Milroe throws the ball long against Texas during the second half Sept. 9 in Tuscaloosa, Ala. Despite each being the lower seed in their respective bowl game, both Texas and Alabama have the skills to pull out a win and meet again, this time in the College Football Playoff national championship game.

Breaking down semifinals

Texas, Alabama have edge to reach national championship game

BY RALPH D. RUSSO
Associated Press

The final four-team College Football Playoff promises to be one of the closest in the 10-year history of the event.

The combined spread of the two New Year's Day semifinals sits at six points, according to FanDuel Sportsbook. No. 1 Michigan is a 1½-point favorite against fourth-seeded Alabama in the Rose Bowl. No. 3 Texas is a 4½-point favorite over No. 2 Washington in the Sugar Bowl.

That's the smallest combined line for the CFP semifinals since the 2017 playoff, when Georgia beat Oklahoma in overtime at the Rose Bowl as a 2½-point favorite and Alabama was favored by 3½

against Clemson in the Sugar Bowl and rolled over the Tigers.

The matchups that will decide each CFP semifinal, with the winners advancing to the Jan. 8 championship game in Houston.

Rose Bowl

Alabama's offense and quarterback Jalen Milroe have been a work in progress this season. Recent Crimson Tide teams have paired eventual first-round draft pick quarterbacks with a bevy of star receivers to create explosive offenses.

This isn't that. Alabama is 30th in the country in yards per play (6.36) and has allowed 43 sacks, a woeful 123rd nationally, while throwing only 302 passes (122nd nationally).

"The big question will be which Alabama offensive line shows up, because the one we saw against Georgia (in the SEC championship game) was dominant. There have been times this year where they have been a flat-out liability," Cole Cubelic, who works as an analyst for ESPN and the SEC Network, said on the AP Top 25 College Football Podcast.

Michigan doesn't have one player up front defensively that stands out as a star — the way Alabama All-America edge rusher Dallas Turner does — but they are deep and committed to stopping the run, often with eight players close to the line of scrimmage.

Michigan will want to put the game in Milroe's hands. Early in the season that seemed like the

way to beat Alabama, whose only loss was by 10 points at home to Texas. Now, less so.

Milroe is 6-foot-2, 220 pounds with speed and a powerful arm. He is a player with difference-making skills, but his game has holes, especially as a mid-range passer. Milroe will miss some open throws, but he has thrown only six interceptions and Alabama has lost only four fumbles.

"They're going to have to do that to have some success on the ground," said Mike Kuchar, the co-founder of the X&O Labs football research company. "I don't see them lining up and coming downhill on Michigan's defense at all."

Michigan allowed 4.28 yards per play, fourth in the nation. The

numbers suggest an elite defense, but beware: The Wolverines saw few potent offenses in the Big Ten.

What coach Jim Harbaugh and offensive coordinator Sherrone Moore's team has shown is a knack for being able to run when they needed to most in big games against Penn State and Ohio State.

Alabama hasn't locked down the run as well as most of Nick Saban's best teams (3.7 yards per carry against, 31st in the country), but nobody is going to bully the Crimson Tide.

"It's going to take some creativity. It's going to take some pre- and post-snap movement, whether that's split-zone, jet-motion, different things like that," Cubelic

SEE BREAKING ON PAGE 37

Young's reputation, not stats, in question » **NBA, Page 32**

