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STARS AND STRIPES

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CONTINGENCY EDITION

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Free to Deployed Areas



MALIK LEWIS/U.S. Marines

U.S. Marines from the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit and soldiers from Japan's 1st Amphibious Rapid Deployment Regiment finalize coordination during a training exercise March 15 at Combined Arms Training Center Camp Fuji, Japan.

Turning to 'a historic alliance'

US, Japan deepen military ties to counter threats from China, N. Korea

By DOUG G. WARE
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Japan will take a more proactive role in its own defense as part of an agreement Wednesday between the United States and Japan to deepen their military and security cooperation and bring more stability to the Indo-Pacific region.

"Today, we welcomed a historic alliance decision to optimize U.S. force posture in Japan," Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said at a joint news conference as part of the U.S.-Japan Security Consultative Committee meeting at the State Department.

Enhancing bilateral cooperation to counter potential threats from China and North Korea

PACIFIC

Taiwan's air force shows off fighters defending threatened airspace
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was at the center of the talks, which included Austin, Japanese defense minister Yasukazu Hamada, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Japanese foreign minister Yoshimasa Hayashi.

The leaders said the driving force for the new arrangements boils down to making it eas-

ier for Washington and Tokyo to uphold rules-based order in the Indo-Pacific, a region that has taken on increased importance in recent years due to tension over the sovereignty of Taiwan and provocative Chinese actions in the South China Sea.

An adjustment of U.S. troops in Okinawa and Japanese plans to build new runways on an island used for military exercises are part of the new agreement. Tokyo has also agreed to develop counter-strike capabilities and double defense spending by 2027, pledges that signal a major shift in traditional Japanese military policy.

SEE ALLIANCE ON PAGE 4

COVID-19

Service members believe mandate reversal doesn't address damage

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — Some active-duty service members who refused the COVID-19 vaccine and faced expulsion from the military say a recent Defense Department announcement rescinding the mandatory inoculation order is a hollow victory.

The action, which was announced earlier this week by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and is required by the defense authorization bill passed last month, doesn't address damage to military careers or restore the faith of service members sidelined by their refusal to take the vaccine, said Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Caroline Crumbacker.

"It feels like I should be able to take a breath and feel like I got the outcome I wanted," said Crumbacker, who is assigned to Naval Support Activity Naples in Italy and isn't certain whether she will continue her military career past her January 2025 enlistment end date. "But at the same time, I can't let my guard down."

Crumbacker and other unvaccinated service members said they felt trivialized and ostracized because of their objections and were sidelined when it came to deployments, training and other opportunities.

The Pentagon directive issued Tuesday lets commanders continue to decide whether unvaccinated service members are assigned or deployed to any country, including those with a vaccine requirement. Such restrictions may limit career progression.

"I feel like the next four years would be me trying to undo the

SEE VACCINE ON PAGE 5

MILITARY

DOD civilians push for medical care access

BY KELLY AGEE

Stars and Stripes

YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan — Defense Department civilian employees in Japan mounted an email and phone campaign directed at Congress this week, hoping to reverse a Pentagon decision to reduce their access to medical care at military hospitals.

The group behind the campaign, Japan Civilian Medical Advocacy, also started a petition drive last year after the Defense Health Agency's Indo-Pacific region announced it would limit civilians' access to on-base care. The petition had more than 2,000 signatures as of Thursday.

"Let Congress Know We Are Still Here!" reads a Sunday post on the group's Facebook page. "Help us contact representatives across the United States, letting them

know that DHA continues to put a chokehold on the [Military Treatment Facilities] here in Japan and has further restricted our access to regular care."

Many civilians were caught off guard in October when DHA announced they should make plans to find health care in the surrounding Japanese communities. Limited access to care has created a crisis that puts individuals, their coworkers and their families at risk, according to the post.

The DHA Indo-Pacific region director, Army Maj. Gen. Joseph Heck, said in October the agency is mandated by law to prioritize health care for active-duty service members and their families.

As of Jan. 1, DOD employees like schoolteachers, commissary workers and contractors are limited to urgent or acute care

and some specialty clinics at base hospitals. Some U.S. civilian employees of Stars and Stripes fall into this category.

For routine health maintenance and ongoing care for chronic conditions like diabetes, heart disease or cancer, they are encouraged to seek Japanese health care providers. The alternative is to rely on space-available appointments after the military hospitals schedule service members and their families. Yokosuka Naval Base, the homeport of the U.S. 7th Fleet, in September became the first installation in Japan to limit civilian employees to space-available appointments for most health care needs.

"At this point more bases are being impacted, so there are more voices wanting to be heard," Amber Malone, a teacher at The Sullivans Elementary School at Yokosuka,

told Stars and Stripes on Wednesday by Facebook Messenger.

Malone, of Carmel, Maine, said she contacted offices in her home state for U.S. Sens. Angus King, an independent, and Susan Collins, a Republican, whose staff members took her information and promised to pass it on to their offices in Washington, D.C.

Staffers at both offices said they hadn't heard of the issue, Malone said. She said she provided them with position statements from her Facebook group, the Yokosuka, Atsugi and Zama Civilian Medical Forum, along with updated space-available policies from DHA and other information.

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Oldest living Pearl Harbor survivor marks 105th birthday

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Flag-waving admirers lined the sidewalk outside the National World War II Museum in New Orleans on Wednesday to greet the oldest living survivor of the Japanese Attack on Pearl Harbor as he marked his upcoming 105th birthday.

"It feels great," Joseph Eskenazi of Redondo Beach, Calif., told reporters after posing for pictures with his great-grandson, who is about to turn 5, his 21-month-old great-granddaughter and six other World War II veterans, all in their 90s.

Eskenazi turns 105 on Jan. 30. He had boarded an Amtrak train in California on Friday for the journey to New Orleans. The other

veterans, representing the Army, Navy and Marines, flew in for the event.

They were visiting thanks to the Soaring Valor Program, a project of actor Gary Sinise's charitable foundation dedicated to aiding veterans and first responders. The program arranges trips to the museum for World War II veterans and their guardians.

Eskenazi was at the Army's Schofield Barracks when the Dec. 7, 1941, attack began, bringing the United States into the war.

About 2,400 servicemen were killed.

Eskenazi and his fellow veterans lined up for pictures Wednesday amid exhibits of World War II aircraft and Higgins boats, designed for beach landings.



GERALD HERBERT/AP

World War II veteran Joseph Eskenazi, who at 104 years and 11 months old is the oldest living veteran to survive the attack on Pearl Harbor, sits with fellow veterans, his great grandchildren Mathias, 4, Audrey, 1, and their grandmother Belinda Mastrangelo, at an event celebrating his upcoming 105th birthday at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans, on Wednesday.

Marines cite 'loss of trust,' fire school's commander

BY ROSE L. THAYER

Stars and Stripes

Marine Corps Col. John L. Medeiros was fired Tuesday from his post as the commander of the Assault Amphibian School at Camp Pendleton due to a "loss of trust and confidence" following an investigation into a nonfatal training accident that occurred at the California base, service officials said.

Brig. Gen. Farrell J. Sullivan, commander of the Marine Corps' Training Command, made the decision to relieve Medeiros because of information obtained while investigating the October accident, according to a news release from the command.

However, the release does not clarify if the information was re-

lated to the accident or another issue.

The investigation into the training accident is ongoing, according to the command.

On Oct. 13, an Amphibious Combat Vehicle assigned to the school suffered a "reported mechanical malfunction" and overturned into the surf, according to a USNI report.

No injuries were reported, but the incident led the Marine Corps to stop waterborne operations in the surf zone until further review.

The wheeled ACV is replacing the Marine Corps' aging fleet of tracked Assault Amphibious Vehicles, and Training Command said Wednesday that the Marine Corps is prioritizing safety and stand-



Col. John L. Medeiros

dization in its training environment as part of the transition.

The command did not say who will serve as the school's commander until a replacement is named.

The Assault Amphibian School trains Marines on ACV and Assault Amphibious Vehicle operations and maintenance.

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Soldier killed, another held in altercation at Fort Rucker

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

An Army private at Fort Rucker was killed Tuesday in an altercation with another soldier at the Alabama post, service officials said Wednesday.

Pvt. Abdul N. Latifu, 21, of the Bronx in New York City, died Tuesday afternoon of injuries that he sustained during the altercation just before noon, said David C. Agan Jr., a Fort Rucker spokesman. The other soldier involved in the incident, who has not been publicly identified, was taken into custody by Fort Rucker Public Safety Department officers, Agan said.

Latifu and the other soldier were trainees in the Army's Ad-

vanced Individual Training program at Fort Rucker. AIT is the second stage of initial military training for enlisted soldiers.

Latifu was training to become an Army air traffic control operator, Agan said. He was assigned to the 1st Battalion, 13th Aviation Regiment, 1st Aviation Brigade at the program.

Army Criminal Investigation Division agents are investigating the incident. No formal charges against the soldier detained had been filed as of Wednesday.



Latifu

PACIFIC

Taiwan shows off jets tasked with defense

By **SETH ROBSON**
Stars and Stripes

HSINCHU AIR BASE, Taiwan — Mirage fighter jets soared over this air base near the Taiwan Strait on Wednesday, a routine day for aircraft that answer threats to their nation's airspace.

The aerial display by the French-made multirole, single-engine, fourth-generation fighters was part of drills that Taiwan is holding this week to show off its military capabilities ahead of this month's Lunar New Year holiday.

Dozens of local and foreign journalists watched the fighters ascend with glowing afterburners, touch down a short time later and taxi to camouflaged concrete hangars.

Taiwanese planes scramble as if by schedule as the island's military responds to regular approaches by Chinese military aircraft. Beijing considers democratic, self-governing Taiwan to be a breakaway province that must be reunified with the mainland, by force if necessary.

Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense issues daily statements about Chinese military activities in the waters and airspace around the island. At 6 a.m. Wednesday,

for example, the ministry reported eight Chinese aircraft and three vessels in the previous 24 hours.

Taiwanese armed forces monitored the situation and tasked aircraft, naval vessels and land-based missile systems to respond, according to the ministry.

Tensions around Taiwan spiked Aug. 3, when former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi stopped in Taipei on a broader tour of Asia. The visit prompted China to stage weeklong live-fire drills that encircled the island and included ballistic missile launches.

Taiwan's defense ministry tweeted Thursday morning that 15 Chinese military aircraft and warships had been detected around the island in the past 24 hours. A subsequent tweet said six of the aircraft crossed the strait's median line and entered Taiwan's Air Defense Identification Zone.

Standing in front of a large Taiwanese flag, near a pair of jet fighters and rows of bullets and missiles, Mirage pilot Lt. Col. Wu "Bomber" Bong-yeng told journalists: "Fight as we train; train as we fight."

Members of the Hsinchu-based 2nd Wing, which operates 54 Mi-



PHOTOS BY SETH ROBSON/Stars and Stripes

A Taiwanese air force pilot climbs out of a Mirage 2000 fighter jet after a demonstration flight over Hsinchu Air Base, Taiwan, on Wednesday.



Taiwanese air force Mirage 2000 fighter jets taxi at Hsinchu Air Base, Taiwan, on Wednesday.

rage 2000s, are ready to defend Taiwan's airspace, he said.

Taiwanese pilots don't just scramble to meet Chinese planes,

Wu said. They also train regularly for real-world missions.

Wu declined to say whether he had personally intercepted Chi-

nese aircraft approaching Taiwan, but said: "We are fighter pilots. We are prepared to face every type of challenge."

China was recommitted in the new year to "safeguarding sovereignty and territorial integrity" and "smashing plots for Taiwan independence," a spokesman for its Taiwan Affairs Office said Wednesday, according to The Associated Press.

"The malicious support for Taiwan independence among anti-China elements in a few foreign countries are a deliberate provocation," Ma Xiaoguang said at a bi-weekly news conference, according to the news agency.

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Alliance: New pact includes creating quick-strike force on Okinawa

FROM PAGE 1

"I'm grateful that we're meeting at such a consequential time as Japan strengthens its own defense and further contributes to regional peace and stability," Austin said.

Another part of the new pact includes creating the 12th Marine Littoral Regiment — an improved quick-strike force — on Okinawa by 2025. Austin said the unit will be quicker, more lethal, more capable and will operate with more intelligence, surveillance and transportation capabilities.

Austin said the enhanced agreements reflect the "ironclad commitment" by the United States to defend Japan with all its capabilities, including nuclear weapons, and counter China's "destabilizing actions" in the region.

Colin Kahl, the undersecretary of defense for policy, called the growing U.S.-Japanese alliance an "enduring cornerstone of a free



ALEX BRANDON/AP

Japanese Defense Minister Yasukazu Hamada, from left, Japanese Foreign Minister Hayashi Yoshimasa, Secretary of State Antony Blinken, and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, speak Wednesday.

and open Indo-Pacific."

In recent weeks, the Pentagon has repeatedly identified China as the top U.S. military and economic competitor and has labeled North Korea as a prominent "pacing challenge."

"We agree that [China] is the greatest shared strategic challenge," Blinken said. "Our alliance has never been more crucial to realizing a shared vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific."

The deepening ties between Washington and Tokyo also will include new cooperation in space, the officials said Wednesday. However, specifics on this won't be shared until later this week.

"We agreed that attacks to, from or within space present a clear challenge," Blinken said. "That is significant."

Wednesday's talks were a prelude to a meeting at the White House on Friday between Biden

and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. Earlier this week, Kishida struck a new defense pact with Britain that is also aimed at reining in China. Hamada will meet with Austin again at the Pentagon on Thursday.

Tensions have been rising for years between the U.S. and China over several issues — from trade to the coronavirus and Taiwan's status as a sovereign territory. Other tensions have centered on various Chinese military actions in the South China Sea. Most recently, the Pentagon said a Chinese fighter jet in late December unsafely "buzzed" an Air Force reconnaissance plane there — at one point coming within about 20 feet of the U.S. aircraft's nose, forcing the pilot to take quick action to avoid a crash.

Beijing claims China owns parts of the South China Sea and all of Taiwan.

Some experts contend Wednesday's agreement with Japan is not

enough if the United States wants to effectively manage the problems that China presents now and in the future.

"We may have some tests [with China] that may come upon us in the next five to seven to 10 years," Michele Flournoy, the undersecretary of defense for policy under former President Barack Obama, said Tuesday during a discussion at the Rand Corp. in Washington. "I don't think we understand the Chinese calculus."

Like Blinken, Flournoy helped co-found WestExec Advisors, a Washington consulting firm in 2017. She also worked in the Pentagon during former President Bill Clinton's administration and she was said to be a serious candidate for defense secretary under Biden until Austin got the job.

"I don't think we understand [our adversaries] well," Flournoy said.

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MILITARY

US personnel save 2 lives in Horn of Africa

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — Elite U.S. Air Force pararescue troops and other quick-reaction forces were involved in the rescue of two people at an undisclosed location in the Horn of Africa, military officials said Thursday.

The mission, carried out in late December, entailed a sizable force that included an HC-130J recovery aircraft, Guardian Angels from the 347th Rescue Group and combat rescue helicopters,

the 435th Air Expeditionary Wing said in a statement.

“Alert crews were activated during the pre-dawn hours and responded quicker than the required theater response times,” said the Ramstein, Germany-based wing, which has forward-based units in Africa.

The rescue team operated under the command of the 449th Air Expeditionary Group and the Joint Personnel Recovery Center.

The two people rescued were from a partner force, the 435th wing said in a statement. The mil-

itary declined to say what country the troops were from, but the U.S. provides a wide range of assistance to Somalia’s military.

In the Horn of Africa, the U.S. operates out of Djibouti, home to Camp Lemonnier, and in neighboring Somalia, where U.S. special operations troops work with forces involved in a decadeslong fight against Islamic militants.

In recent years, U.S. troops also have come under occasional attack in Somalia, where they have operated out of remote military outposts.

The December rescue was “in and out” of the undisclosed area “without incident,” the statement said.

Rescuers rushed to the nearest medical facility for surgery, according to the air wing.

The HC-130Js were then called to move the more seriously wounded person to another location for further treatment. Both injured people survived, the wing said.

The rescue unit responds to emergency battlefield situations to return American or partner

forces to friendly control, said Lt. Col. Thaddeus Ronnau, regional director of the Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa’s joint recovery center.

“While personnel may be behind enemy lines or far from needed support, this team is equipped to travel great distances and fight their way in and out if necessary to make the mission happen,” Ronnau said in the statement.

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Vaccine: Many waivers were denied

FROM PAGE 1

past year-and-a-half, two years just to get back to the spot where I was already competitively (for advancement),” said Crumbacker, who at one time thought she would complete 20 years in the Navy. “Why would I want to stay in an organization that treated me like that when (I) was struggling?”

Although Austin rescinded his August 2021 mandate requiring troops to be vaccinated against COVID-19, he made it clear he believed the order was correct, saying the department would continue to promote and encourage the vaccinations.

“All commanders have the responsibility and authority to preserve the department’s compelling interest in mission accomplishment,” Austin stated.

While the memo ended pending involuntary separations for unvaccinated service members who asked for waivers on religious, medical or administrative grounds, it didn’t help the thousands already pushed out of the service solely for refusing the vaccine.

Austin said 96% of all active-duty and reserve service members combined are fully vaccinated.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says COVID-19 vaccinations are safe and effective in preventing disease and mini-

mizing the risk of hospitalization or death in immunized people who contract the virus.

A 2022 study found that mRNA vaccines were 90% effective in preventing death from COVID-19 in adults 60 days after they received a second booster shot, according to data on the CDC website.

Many unvaccinated service members who sought waivers saw their requests denied.

For example, the Navy and Army have involuntarily separated 1,639 and 1,851 active-duty service members, respectively, for refusing the COVID-19 vaccine, according to the latest data available on their websites.

In addition, 402 Navy reserve sailors have been involuntarily separated for refusing the vaccine. No Army National Guard or Army Reservists have been separated for the same reason, the data show.

Meanwhile, the Navy has approved 16 permanent medical and 51 permanent religious accommodation requests for active-duty and reserve personnel. The Army had approved 65 permanent medical and 123 permanent religious waiver requests as of Dec. 8.

Involuntary separation data for the Air Force wasn’t included with its December COVID-19 update.

For the Marine Corps, 3,717 of

its members had been separated as of Dec. 1 for refusing the vaccine, according to the service’s website.

The service had approved 23 waivers on religious grounds and 333 medical or administrative exemptions, according to the data.

Army Sgt. Louis Paulsen, who is assigned to a base near Naples, Italy, said his request for a religious accommodation and subsequent appeal were denied.

On Thursday, he was uncertain whether he still faces an adverse action because of his refusal to take the vaccine. Paulsen said he hadn’t received any notification of a change in his status and was not aware of a documented change in Army policy.

Even if there weren’t consequences, Paulsen, who joined the Army 5½ years ago, said he probably wouldn’t continue past his 2024 enlistment end date.

He said his faith in the Army has been destroyed because the service didn’t follow its requirements when it came to offering the least restrictive means to meet its objectives and accommodate his Roman Catholic beliefs.

The Catholic Church deemed the Pfizer, Moderna and Johnson & Johnson vaccines “morally permissible” in 2021 but left room for objections of conscience.

“There are means of protecting



ALISON BATH/Stars and Stripes

Navy Petty Officer 1st Class Caroline Crumbacker refused to receive the COVID-19 vaccination. She said that despite the Defense Department’s decision this week to end its mandate for service members to get the shot, she is undecided about staying in the Navy past her enlistment end date.

force health while still accommodating religion,” said Paulsen, who named face masks and social distancing as among those options. “Those are the least restrictive means other than forcibly having people put something into their body that very seriously compromises their religion in a permanent, nontemporary fashion.”

Paulsen also is disappointed

that the Defense Department has not indicated a willingness or plan to evaluate the COVID-19 vaccination policy or the treatment of vaccine objectors.

“There’s no lessons learned here,” Paulsen said. “This could happen again.”

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Fort Stewart soldier sentenced to more than 3 years in prison for fraud

By COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

ATLANTA — A soldier based at Fort Stewart, Ga., convicted of stealing millions of dollars of federal money from student loan and coronavirus relief programs will spend some 3½ years in prison, the Justice Department announced Monday.

Chief Warrant Officer 2 Dara Buck was sentenced to 42 months in federal prison Jan. 5 by U.S. District Court Judge R. Stan Baker af-

ter she pleaded guilty last year in the multipart scheme that bilked the U.S. government out of at least \$4.5 million. Buck, 39, pleaded guilty July 14 to charges including conspiracy to commit a crime against the U.S. government.

Baker also ordered Buck to pay restitution of almost \$3.7 million in the case and serve three years of supervised release after her prison term is completed.

Prosecutors described Buck’s crimes as “a prolific fraud

scheme” in announcing her guilty plea in July. They said she admitted to submitting more than 150 fraudulent applications for small business relief during the coronavirus pandemic via the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act’s Paycheck Protection Program, known as PPP.

Prosecutors charged Buck had received some \$3.5 million through fraudulent PPP applications. She admitted to sharing some of those funds with other

conspirators, prosecutors said. They did not identify others involved in Buck’s scheme.

Buck also admitted she falsely submitted Department of Veterans Affairs certifications for those deemed totally and permanently disabled to the Department of Education, resulting in her securing more than one dozen student loans worth more than \$1 million for herself and other conspirators, prosecutors said.

“While serving in the U.S. Army,

Dara Buck engaged in a massive scheme to defraud the taxpayers of the nation she was sworn to serve,” U.S. Attorney Davis H. Estes wrote in the July statement. “With our law enforcement partners, we are committed to identifying and holding accountable those who defraud COVID-19 relief programs to feed their self-serving greed.”

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EUROPE

Russia presses deadly assault for gain in east

By **ANDREW MELDRUM**
Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia said Thursday that its forces are edging closer to capturing a salt-mining town in eastern Ukraine, which would mark an elusive victory for the Kremlin but come at the cost of heavy Russian casualties and extensive destruction of the territory they claim.

More than 100 Russian troops were killed in the battle for Soledar over the past 24 hours, Ukraine's Donetsk Gov. Pavlo Kyrylenko said in televised remarks.

"The Russians have literally marched on the bodies of their own soldiers, burning everything on their way," Kyrylenko said while reporting that Russian forces had shelled a dozen towns and villages in the region in the past day.

Russian forces are using mortars and rockets to bombard Soledar in an unrelenting assault, struggling for a breakthrough after military setbacks have turned what the Kremlin hoped would be a fast victory into a grinding war of attrition that has dragged on for nearly 11 months with no end in sight.

"Civilians are trying to survive amid that bloodbath as the Russians are pressing their attacks," Kyrylenko said.

Soledar's fall would be a prize for a Kremlin starved of good battlefield news in recent months, after losing the significant city of Kherson in December. It would also offer Russian troops a springboard to conquer other areas of the eastern Donetsk province that remain under Ukrainian control, particularly the nearby strategic city of Bakhmut.

The Russians' tactic in the assault on Soledar is to send one or two waves of soldiers, many from the private Russian military contractor Wagner Group who take heavy casualties as they probe the Ukrainian defenses, a Ukrainian officer near Soledar told The Associated Press. When Ukrainian troops suffer casualties and are exhausted, the Russians send in another wave of highly-trained soldiers, paratroopers or special forces, to get a new toehold on the battlefield, said the Ukrainian officer, who insisted on anonymity for security reasons.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov praised the "selfless and



PHOTOS BY LIBKOS/AP

Ukrainian army Grad multiple rocket launcher fires rockets at Russian positions in the frontline near Soledar, Donetsk region, Ukraine, on Wednesday.

"Civilians are trying to survive amid that bloodbath as the Russians are pressing their attacks."

Pavlo Kyrylenko
Donetsk governor

courageous action" of Russian troops, which he said is helping them to press forward in Soledar.

"Gigantic work has been done in Soledar," he said.

Peskov, however, stopped short of confirming a claim by Wagner Group owner Yevgeny Prigozhin, who boasted about capturing Soledar on Wednesday.

"There is still a lot to be done and it's too early to stop and rub our hands, the main work is still ahead," he said in a conference call with reporters.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's deputy defense minister, Hanna Malyar, said at a briefing Thursday: "The enemy continues the assaults, but suffers significant losses and is not successful."

The AP was unable to verify the claims made by either side.

Russia's Defense Ministry made no mention of Soledar in its



Ukrainian soldiers on their positions in the frontline near Soledar, Donetsk region, Ukraine.

daily briefing on Thursday. The ministry announced Wednesday that the country's top military officer — the chief of the military's General Staff, Gen. Valery Gerasimov — was put in charge of the military operation in Ukraine. He replaces Gen. Sergei Surovikin, who was demoted to deputy only three months after he was installed in that job.

Ukrainian officials also said they were taking note of personnel changes at the top levels of the Russian military command, describing them as a sign that Moscow isn't achieving what it had hoped.

"Personnel changes would not occur with such frequency if they were doing well," a senior Ukrainian military official, Brig. Gen.

Oleksiy Hromov, said.

Fighting continued elsewhere in Ukraine.

The deputy head of Ukraine's presidential office, Kyrylo Tymoshenko, reported Thursday that two civilians were killed and a further eight were wounded in Russian attacks on Wednesday.

Citing data from regional officials, Tymoshenko said that one civilian died and five were wounded in the southern Kherson province, where shells hit a maternity hospital, private houses and apartment buildings, while one person was killed in Donetsk.

Two people were wounded in the southeastern Zaporizhzhia province, with one further civilian sustaining injuries in the southeastern Dnipropetrovsk province.



A Ukrainian soldier gives chocolate to children standing guard with national flags at their improvised checkpoint close to Sloviansk, Donetsk region, Ukraine, on Wednesday.

Navy veteran held in Russia is released, US officials say

The Washington Post

A U.S. Navy veteran who had been detained in Russia for nine months was released on Thursday, according to U.S. officials and others familiar with the matter.

Taylor Dudley, 35, of Michigan, had been held since April in the Russian province of Kaliningrad,

located between Poland and Lithuania. He was released at a border crossing with Poland and was traveling to the United States with a team working for former New Mexico governor Bill Richardson, according to a statement from his center, which negotiates for the release of hostages and prisoners abroad.

U.S. officials confirmed the release. It appeared that the U.S. government did not reciprocate with the release of any Russian prisoners, as it has in the past, including with professional basketball player Brittney Griner who was exchanged for convicted arms trafficker Viktor Bout.

A U.S. official described the re-

lease as the result of consular negotiations and was unaware of any role played by outside parties.

"The U.S. Government has no information about a role played by any outside actor in this case. The U.S. Government is focused on providing consular services to Americans. We are all grateful to our embassies in Moscow and

Warsaw for their long-standing work on this case," the official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity to describe internal negotiations.

Dudley reportedly had been attending a music festival in Poland when he was detained. It was not clear why he crossed the border into the Russian province.

NATION

Snowpack helps California combat drought

BY HAYLEY SMITH

Los Angeles Times

At the University of California, Berkeley Central Sierra Snow Laboratory in Donner Pass on Wednesday, snow was piled so high that lead scientist Andrew Schwartz no longer needed stairs to exit the second floor.

"We just walk directly out onto the snow!" Schwartz said. The nearly 11 feet of snow surrounding the lab was the deepest he'd seen so far this year.

The piles of powder are the result of a series of powerful atmospheric river storms that have pummeled California over the last two weeks. The storms have claimed at least 19 lives as they topple trees, overtop levees and send people scrambling for higher ground.

But while the storms have delivered chaos, they have also helped to make a dent in drought conditions. The state's snow water equivalent — or the amount of water contained in the snow — was 226% of normal on Wednesday, marking a high for the date not seen in at least two decades.

The last time snowpack neared such a high on Jan. 11 was in 2005, when it was 206% of normal, according to state data.

Even more promising, the Sierra snowpack on Wednesday measured 102% of its April 1 average, referring to the end-of-season date when snowpack in California is usually at its deepest. This is the first time



PATRICK GRILEY, MAMMOTH LAKES TOURISM/AP

Snowboarders make their way through a heavy snowfall in Mammoth Lakes, Calif., on Monday. The piles of powder are from the atmospheric river storms that have pummeled California over the last two weeks.

that's happened on Jan. 11 in at least 20 years.

"102% of average with another week of stormy weather coming up is absolutely fantastic," Schwartz said. "And assuming we don't see complete and absolute dryness like we did last year, it's shaping up to be a winter that, at the very least, will prevent us from going into further drought, if not help pull us out of the drought."

But Schwartz and other experts were cautious about celebrating too soon. The measurements are not static and could change depending on how the rest of the wet season develops. Last season, for example, a soggy December gave way to a bone-dry January, February and March.

Forecasters say it's too soon to be certain what the coming months will bring. Mike Anderson, state cli-

matologist at the Department of Water Resources, said two more atmospheric rivers were heading for California before conditions are expected dry up around Jan. 20.

Longer-range forecasts are fuzzier, he said, with the latest seasonal outlooks from the National Weather Service's Climate Prediction Center showing equal chances of wetness or dryness in most of Northern California through March. But there is a

chance of one more atmospheric river to close out January.

"We're definitely looking to be in a better situation than we were last year, where everything shut off for a good three months, and there will be that opportunity to continue to make some additions to that snowpack before we get to April 1," Anderson said.

DWR water operations manager Molly White said reservoirs were also seeing boosts from the storms, with some smaller reservoirs recovering fully from drought-driven deficits. But the state's two largest reservoirs, Lake Shasta and Lake Oroville, remain far from full, topping out at 42% and 47% of capacity, respectively, on Wednesday.

The atmospheric rivers also haven't had much effect on Southern California's other major water source, the Colorado River, which remains at perilous lows.

Although rain is helpful, it's snow that holds the most value for the state's water supply, said Schwartz, of the Berkeley Snow Lab. While rainfall comes in pulses that can sometimes lead to massive amounts of flooding or be difficult to capture, snow melts slowly and provides a constant source of water, especially in warmer months when it's needed most.

But like water, too much snow can also pose a threat. When rain falls on snow, it can create ice layers or even make the snow too heavy, which can potentially give way to avalanches.

Suspect in Idaho deaths appears in court; multiday preliminary hearing set for June

Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho — The man charged in the stabbing deaths of four University of Idaho students will have a preliminary hearing in late June, when prosecutors will try to show a judge that they have enough evidence to justify the felony charges.

Bryan Kohberger waived his right to a speedy preliminary hearing during a status conference Thursday morning. The 28-year-old Washington State University graduate student is charged with four counts of first-degree murder and burglary, and has not yet entered a plea and is waiting to learn whether prosecutors in the high-profile case will pursue the death penalty.

He appeared in court wearing an orange T-shirt and pants, and gave the judge short one-word answers when she asked him if he understood his rights during the roughly five-minute-long hearing.

Kohberger's attorney, Anne Taylor, told Magistrate Judge Megan Marshall that Kohberger was willing to waive his right to a speedy preliminary hearing, which would have required that it be held within two

weeks. The hearing itself will likely take four or five days, Taylor said.

"He's willing to waive timeliness to allow us time to obtain discovery in the case and be prepared," Taylor told the judge.

Latah County Prosecutor Bill Thompson said he had no objection to waiting until June or even July for the preliminary hearing.

Marshall set the preliminary hearing for June 26 at 9 a.m., expecting it to last for five days.

The Nov. 13 slayings of Madison Mogen, Kaylee Goncalves, Xana Kernodle and Ethan Chapin left the rural community in Moscow, Idaho, grief-stricken and afraid, prompting nearly half of the university's students to leave town for the perceived safety of online courses.

Weeks went by without a named suspect and few details were released, but on Dec. 30 Kohberger, a graduate student studying criminology from the university located just 10 miles away — was arrested at his parents' home in eastern Pennsylvania. Kohberger was extradited to Idaho last week.

University of Idaho students returned from winter break to start

classes on Wednesday, many of them coming together for the first time since news of the attack spread across campus.

A general feeling of relief was in the air, university spokesperson Jodi Walker said on Wednesday.

"I think everybody's happy to be back under the circumstances," she said. "They're relieved that an arrest has been made, and ready to focus on the semester."

At the preliminary hearing, the prosecutor will be expected to show the magistrate judge that he has enough evidence to justify moving forward with the felony charges; the defense will try to point out holes in the prosecutor's case to show that the charges should be dropped.

If the magistrate judge agrees that there is evidence to justify the charges, the case will be "bound over" into Idaho's 2nd District Court, and a district judge will take over. Then Kohberger will have a chance to enter a plea. If he pleads not guilty, the case will begin working toward a trial.

Thompson has 60 days from the time Kohberger enters a plea to say if he will seek the death penalty.

Flight delays, cancellations minimal a day after outage

Associated Press

Delays and cancellations among flights across the United States were minimal on Thursday, a day after a system that offers safety information to pilots failed, grounding U.S. air traffic and leading to thousands of stranded travelers.

There were 636 delays into, within or out of the U.S. as of Thursday morning, according to flight-tracking website FlightAware. There were 82 cancellations.

The Federal Aviation Administration said Wednesday that preliminary indications "traced the outage to a damaged database file." The agency said it would take steps to avoid another similar disruption.

The breakdown showed how much American air travel depends on the computer system that generates alerts called NOTAMs — or Notice to Air Missions.

Before a plane takes off, pilots and airline dispatchers must review the notices, which include details about bad weather, runway closures or other temporary factors that could affect the flight. The

system was once telephone-based but moved online years ago.

The system broke down late Tuesday and was not fixed until midmorning Wednesday. The FAA took the rare step of preventing any planes from taking off for a time, and the cascading chaos led to more than 1,300 flight cancellations and 9,000 delays by early Wednesday evening on the East Coast, according to FlightAware.

Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg told a news conference that the problems "led to a ground stop because of the way safety information was moving through the system."

Buttigieg said his agency would now try to learn why the system went down.

Pilots and safety officials have complained about NOTAMs for years, saying there are too many of them and that some are unnecessary and written in cryptic abbreviations.

The FAA said in a 2020 report that it modernized the distribution of the notices through a standardized digital format that was to be completed in July of that year.

NATION

Another Biden search yields more papers

From wire reports

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden's legal team found additional classified documents when they searched a second location after finding secret government papers in a different Biden office in early November, according to a person familiar with the investigation.

Earlier this week, an attorney for Biden said the president's personal lawyers had discovered a small number of classified documents at the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement, an institute in downtown Washington that Biden started after serving as vice president. People familiar with the matter said that discovery involved about 10 classified documents.

Biden's lawyers notified government agencies, and the Justice Department opened an investigation to see how the classified material got there and whether there was any other material that should be under government lock and key.

Legal representatives for the president found additional classified material at a second location, a person said Wednesday, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss an ongoing investigation. The person would not say when that material was found. The second batch of classified material was first reported by NBC News.

Spokesmen for the Justice Department, the FBI and the White House declined to comment Wednesday.

Biden acknowledged on Thursday that a document with classified markings from his time as vice president was found in his "personal library" at his home in Wilmington, Del., along with other documents found in his garage.

Biden told reporters at the White House that he is "cooperating fully and completely" with a Justice Department investigation into how classified information and government records made their way to his home and the office of his former institute in Washington.

White House officials have said that Biden's lawyers quickly handed over found documents to the National Archives and Records Administration — the agency tasked with handling presidential records.

A Biden lawyer said the classi-

fied documents at the Penn Biden Center were found Nov. 2, when one of his personal attorneys opened a locked closet to pack up the contents. The White House Counsel's Office notified the Archives, which took possession of the documents the following day, a Biden lawyer said.

That discovery came not long before Attorney General Merrick Garland appointed a special counsel, Jack Smith, to oversee the agency's criminal investigation into former president Donald Trump's possible mishandling of hundreds of classified documents that were taken to Mar-a-Lago after his presidency ended. Officials have said the investigation of Trump concerns not just the possible mishandling of government secrets but also possible obstruction of justice or destruction of records.

To review the discovery of Biden classified documents, Garland tapped U.S. Attorney John R. Lausch Jr., a holdover from the Trump administration. Depending on what this initial investigation yields, Garland could decide to appoint a special counsel.

While the Biden case has obvious echoes of the Mar-a-Lago investigation into Trump's conduct, the details provided by Biden's lawyer Monday suggest key differences that could factor heavily in whether the Biden documents become a criminal matter.

Biden's lawyer Richard Sauber said the Biden documents were discovered by the president's lawyers and voluntarily turned over to authorities. By comparison, in Trump's case, NARA officials pressed for material to be handed over, and then Trump's office was served with a grand jury subpoena demanding their return. After Trump's lawyers delivered 38 classified documents in response to the subpoena, an FBI search recovered more than 100 additional classified documents that were not turned over to authorities.

Much of the criminal investigation into the keeping of classified documents at Mar-a-Lago has centered on what officials have described in court papers as possible obstruction of the efforts to recover all of the documents. So far, no such allegation has been leveled in the Biden matter, though it is at an earlier stage.



JOHN MINCHILLO/AP

Protestors march on the streets around Montefiore Medical Center during a nursing strike, Wednesday, in the Bronx borough of New York.

New York City nurses return to work after deal ends strike

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Two New York City hospitals have reached a tentative contract agreement with thousands of striking nurses that ends this week's walkout that disrupted patient care, officials announced Thursday.

The nurses, represented by the New York State Nurses Association, walked out early Monday after negotiations with management ran aground at Mount Sinai Hospital, in Manhattan, and Montefiore Medical Center, in the Bronx. Each has over 1,000 beds and 3,500 or more union nurses.

Nurses began returning to work at both hospitals Thursday morning, with New York Gov. Kathy Hochul greeting returning nurses

at Mount Sinai just before dawn.

Hochul, a Democrat, said that with the new three-year contract, "they'll receive a well-deserved 19% pay increase here. Also better benefits, higher wages for those with higher education, and again, a working environment that allows them to focus on patient care."

The union has stressed staffing levels as a key concern, saying that nurses who labored through the grueling peak of the coronavirus pandemic are stretched far too thin because too many jobs are open. Nurses say they have had to work overtime, handle twice as many patients as they should, and skip meals and even bathroom breaks.

The agreements with both hospitals include concrete, enforceable staffing ratios, the union said. The agreement with Montefiore also included what the union described as community health improvements and nurse-student partnerships to recruit local nurses from the Bronx.

"Through our unity and by putting it all on the line, we won enforceable safe staffing ratios at both Montefiore and Mount Sinai where nurses went on strike for patient care," NYSNA President Nancy Hagans said in a statement. "Today, we can return to work with our heads held high, knowing that our victory means safer care for our patients and more sustainable jobs for our profession."

First lady has cancerous skin lesions removed

The Washington Post

First lady Jill Biden had two cancerous skin lesions removed Wednesday, the president's physician said, with all cancerous tissue fully removed from both.

Biden underwent a scheduled outpatient procedure at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center that is commonly known as Mohs surgery, said Kevin O'Connor, initially to remove a lesion above her right eye.

During that procedure, doctors confirmed that the lesion was basal cell carcinoma, the most common form of cancer diagnosed in the United States. During Biden's pre-operative prepa-

ration, physicians also identified a lesion on the left side of Biden's chest whose appearance was consistent with basal cell carcinoma, O'Connor said. That lesion was also removed using Mohs surgery, O'Connor said, and all of the cancerous tissue was removed.

In addition, doctors identified a small lesion on Biden's left eyelid during the procedure, but did not conclude that it was likely to be basal carcinoma. They removed

it and sent it to a lab for "standard microscopic examination."

Experts said Biden has an excellent prognosis since her skin cancer was identified and removed early. Basal cell carcinoma is far less serious than other forms of skin cancer, such as melanoma and squamous cell carcinoma, because its lesions rarely metastasize.

Additionally, the cure rate for Mohs surgery is about 98%, said Mathew Avram, director of the Dermatology Laser and Cosmetic Center at Massachusetts General Hospital. There is a very small chance of recurrence, Avram said.



Jill Biden

NATION

Inflation eases to 6.5% over past 12 months

By **CHRISTOPHER RUGABER**
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Rising consumer prices in the United States moderated again last month, bolstering hopes that inflation's grip on the economy will continue to ease this year and possibly require less drastic action by the Federal Reserve to control it.

Inflation eased to 6.5% in December compared with 12 months earlier, the government said Thursday. It was the sixth straight year-over-year slowdown. On a monthly basis, prices actually slipped 0.1% from November to December, the first such drop since May 2020.

The softer readings add to growing signs that the worst inflation bout in four decades is gradually waning. Still, the Fed doesn't expect inflation to slow enough to get close to its 2% target until well into 2024. The central bank is expected to raise its benchmark rate by at least a quarter-point when it next meets at the end of this month.

Even as it gradually slows, inflation remains a painful reality for many Americans, especially with such necessities as food, energy and rents having soared over the past 18 months.

For now, inflation is falling, with the national average price of a gallon of gas declining from a \$5 a gallon peak in June to \$3.27 a gal-

lon as of Wednesday, according to AAA.

Supply chain snarls that previously inflated the cost of goods have largely unraveled. Consumers have also shifted much of their spending away from physical goods and instead toward services, such as travel and entertainment. As a result, the cost of goods, including used cars, furniture and clothing, has dropped for two straight months.

Last week's jobs report for December bolstered the possibility that a recession could be avoided. Even after the Fed's seven rate hikes last year and with inflation still high, employers added a solid 223,000 jobs in December, and the unemployment rate fell to 3.5%, matching the lowest level in 53 years.

At the same time, average hourly pay growth slowed, which should lessen pressure on companies to raise prices to cover their higher labor costs.

Another positive sign for the Fed's efforts to quell inflation is that Americans overall expect price increases to decline over the next few years. That is important because so-called "inflation expectations" can be self-fulfilling: If people expect prices to keep rising sharply, they will typically take steps, like demanding higher pay, that can perpetuate high inflation.



TED SHAFFREY/AP

A Rolling Stones T-shirt is displayed in the Westfield Garden State Plaza shopping mall in Paramus, N.J.

Jobless aid claims lowest in 15 weeks

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. applications for unemployment benefits fell to their lowest level in 15 weeks as the job market continues to show resiliency in the face of attempts by the Federal Reserve to cool the economy.

The number of Americans applying for jobless aid for the week ending Jan. 7 fell by 1,000 to 205,000, from 206,000 the

week before, the Labor Department said Thursday.

The four-week moving average of claims, which softens some of the week-to-week volatility, fell by 1,750 to 212,500.

Jobless claims are generally viewed as a proxy for layoffs, which have been relatively low since the pandemic wiped out millions of jobs in the spring of 2020.

The labor market is closely monitored by Federal Reserve policymakers, who raised interest rates seven times last year in a bid to slow job growth and bring down stubbornly high inflation.

About 1.63 million people were receiving jobless aid the week that ended Dec. 31, a decline of 63,000 from the week before.

On Monday, the Federal Reserve Bank of New York said that consumers now anticipate inflation of 5% over the next year. That's the lowest such expectation in nearly 18 months. Over the next five years, consumers expect inflation to average 2.4%, only barely above the Fed's 2% target.

Still, in their remarks in recent

weeks, Fed officials have underscored their intent to raise their benchmark short-term rate by an additional three-quarters of a point in the coming months to just above 5%. Such increases would come on top of seven hikes last year, which led mortgage rates to nearly double and made auto loans and business borrowing

more expensive.

Futures prices show that investors expect the central bank to be less aggressive and implement just two quarter-point hikes by March, leaving the Fed's rate just below 5%. Investors also project that the Fed will cut rates in November and December, according to the CME FedWatch Tool.

Guantanamo Bay lawyer faces criminal charges

Associated Press

BANGOR, Maine — A defense lawyer in Maine who once represented detainees at the Guantanamo Bay military prison has been charged with several criminal counts, and a prosecutor is recommending his disbarment, court records show.

Scott Fenstermaker was charged with trespassing, assault, reckless conduct and attempted theft in November, according to the records.

Fenstermaker told the Bangor Daily News that the November charges were filed after an argument broke out while he was trying to persuade a towing company owner to release his client's car from an impound lot. He said he was working in his capacity

as a lawyer at the time and it's "not like I was going out and burglarizing homes in my free time."



Fenstermaker

The court case against Fenstermaker is currently awaiting a new judge. A letter from the Maine Board of Overseers of the Bar states that the prosecutor working on Fenstermaker's case is seeking his disbarment.

Fenstermaker worked as a lawyer in New York for three decades and once represented a person who prosecutors said was a courier for Osama bin Laden, the Daily News reported.

Mont. seeking prior authorization for abortions covered by Medicaid

Associated Press

HELENA, Mont. — State officials in Republican-controlled Montana want to require prior authorization before its health department pays for abortions for people covered by Medicaid, a proposal critics say would reduce access and delay or even prevent abortion care for low-income women in the state.

The Department of Public Health and Human Services is taking public comment Thursday on the proposed rule to require doctors to provide more medical information before Medicaid would agree to pay for an abortion to save a woman's life or any other medically necessary reason. The information would include the number

of her pregnancies and children.

Montana is one of 16 states whose Medicaid program is required to cover the costs of "medically necessary" abortions based on state law or a court order, according to the Guttmacher Institute.

A 2019 federal report said seven states at that time, which were not listed, required prior authorization before Medicaid would cover abortion services.

The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services did not immediately respond to a phone message Wednesday seeking more information.

"Given the time sensitive nature of abortion care, requiring doctors to obtain prior authorization be-

fore providing care creates an unnecessary obstacle that may result in delays in care and increase in costs for patients," said Cat Duffy with the National Health Law Program.

In Montana, abortion is legal until 24 weeks of gestation. A 2021 law that sought a reduction to 20 weeks is being challenged in court while the state also indicated it wants the Montana Supreme Court to overturn a ruling that the state Constitution's right to privacy guarantees access to legal abortion.

The proposed rule would only allow physicians — not physician assistants or advanced practice nurses — to provide Medicaid-funded abortion care.

NATION

US spies lag rivals in using open sources

By **NOMAAN MERCHANT**
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — As alarms began to go off globally about a novel coronavirus spreading in China, officials in Washington turned to the intelligence agencies for insights about the threat the virus posed to America.

But the most useful early warnings came not from spies or intercepts, according to a recent congressional review of classified reports from December 2019 and January 2020. Officials were instead relying on public reporting, diplomatic cables and analysis from medical experts — some examples of so-called open source intelligence, or OSINT.

Predicting the next pandemic or the next government to fall will require better use of open source material, the review found.

“There is little indication that the Intelligence Community’s exquisite collection capabilities were generating information that was valuable to policymakers,” wrote the authors of the review, conducted by Democrats on the House Intelligence Committee.

That echoes what many current and former intelligence officials are increasingly warning: The \$90 billion U.S. spy apparatus is falling behind because it has not embraced collecting open-source intelligence as adversaries including China ramp up their efforts.

This doesn’t diminish the importance of traditional intelligence. Spy agencies have unique powers to penetrate global communications and cultivate agents. They scored a high-profile success when the Biden administration publicized ultimately correct intelligence findings that Russian President Vladimir Putin intended to invade Ukraine.

But officials and experts worry that the U.S. hasn’t invested enough people or money in analyzing publicly available data or taking advantage of advanced technologies that can yield critical insights. Commercial satellite imagery, social media and other online data have given private companies and independent analysts new powers to reveal official secrets. And China is known to have stolen or acquired control over huge amounts of data on Americans, with growing concerns in Washington about Beijing’s influence over widely used apps like TikTok.

“Open source is really a bellwether for whether the intelligence community can protect the country,” said Kristin Wood, a former senior official at the CIA who is now chief executive at the Grist Mill Exchange, a commercial data platform. “We collectively



ALEX BRANDON/AP

Kateryna Stepanenko, a Russia analyst, works at her desk at the Institute for the Study of War on Wednesday in Washington.

as a nation aren’t preparing a defense for the ammunition that our adversaries are stockpiling.”

Intelligence agencies face several obstacles to using open source intelligence. Some are technological. Officers working on classified networks are often not able to easily access the unclassified internet or open data sources, for example. There are also concerns about civil liberties and protecting First Amendment rights.

But some experts also question whether agencies are held back by a reflexive belief that top-secret information is more valuable.

Rep. Jim Himes, a Connecticut Democrat and longtime Intelligence Committee member, said he believed there needed to be “some cultural change inside places like the CIA where people are doing what they’re doing for the excitement of stealing critical secrets as opposed to reviewing social media pages.”

In one 2017 test held by the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, a human team competed against a computer programmed with algorithms to identify Chinese surface-to-air missile sites using commercial imagery.

Both the humans and the computer identified 90% of the sites, Stanford University professor Amy Zegart wrote in the book “Spies, Lies, and Algorithms,” but the computer needed just 42 minutes — and it took the human team 80 times longer.

Reports created using commercial satellites, online posts and other open sources — like the daily analyses on Russian and Ukrainian military tactics published by the Institute for the Study of War — are widely read by lawmakers and intelligence officials.

“There is a lot of open-source capability that the U.S. intelligence community can pretty much rely on to be there,” said Frederick Kagan, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute who oversees the creation of those reports. “What it needs to do is figure out how to leverage that ecosystem instead of trying to buy it.”

Most of the 18 U.S. spy agencies have open-source programs, from the CIA’s Open Source Enterprise to a 10-person program in the Department of Homeland Security’s intelligence arm. But top officials acknowledge there isn’t consistency across those programs in how they analyze open-source information or how they use and share it.

“We’re not paying enough attention to each other and so we’re not learning the lessons that different parts of the (intelligence community) are learning, and we’re not scaling solutions,” said Avril Haines, the U.S. director of national intelligence, at an industry event last year sponsored by the Potomac Officers Club. “And we’re not taking advantage of some of the outside expertise and information and work that could be taken advantage of.”

The Open Source Enterprise headquartered at the CIA is the successor to the Foreign Broadcast Information Service, where for generations employees monitored broadcasts to translate them for analysts.

Much of that work was transformed in the last decade. Where people once had to travel long distances to pick up tapes of radio broadcasts in remote places or areas where Americans weren’t welcome, sensors now transmit more signals automatically. And machine translation has largely taken the place of people who had to listen to the tapes and transcribe them.

But officials acknowledge they have to do more.

Haines has begun multiple open-source reviews since becoming director of national intelligence and is expected to finalize recommendations this year. Some people involved in those reviews have suggested that the Open Source Enterprise no longer be designated as leading OSINT efforts across the spy agencies, said people familiar with the reviews who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal government deliberations.

Three people familiar with Open Source Enterprise say the center had cut its budget for multiple years running prior to last year. They argue that’s a sign that open-source work has not always been prioritized at a consistent level.

The CIA recently appointed new leadership for the Open Source Enterprise and in 2021 created a “mission center” dedicated to technology.

There’s no consensus on whether the U.S. should create a new open-source agency or center. Supporters say a new organization could focus on adopting advanced technologies and creating more useful products, while opponents question whether it would be unnecessary bloat and take away resources from other agencies.

Carmen Medina, a retired CIA deputy director of intelligence, now studies how spy agencies can incorporate outside ideas and encourage employees to be more creative and intuitive.

She suggests a pilot program in which a cell of open-source analysts would compete for a number of years against the regular output of people with top-secret clearances.

Medina and others who have worked in top positions and briefed White House officials think that on most days, an open-source group would be competitive and might even produce better analysis using information that’s broadly available.

Florida manatee deaths drop in 2022 but starvation is still a concern

Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — Manatee deaths dropped in 2022 from a record high the year before, but Florida wildlife officials said Wednesday that chronic starvation caused by water pollution remains a major concern.

Preliminary statistics show 800 recorded manatee deaths last year in Florida, according to the state Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. That compares with more than 1,100 in 2021. Both numbers are higher than the average annual deaths of the marine mammals.

The new numbers come as state and feder-

al officials are feeding thousands of pounds of romaine lettuce to manatees at a warm-water power plant on Florida’s east coast in an effort to slow manatee starvation deaths. Threatened animals were fed more than 200,000 pounds of lettuce in the initial trial program last year.

FWC manatee biologist Michelle Pasawicz said the feeding program certainly helped some individual manatees, but the decline in deaths may also be attributed to the weaker, sickest animals perishing in the earlier months of the die-off.

“The manatees do appear to generally be in

better shape overall,” Pasawicz said during an online news conference. “I think we were helping some manatees for sure. A milder winter definitely gives the manatees a better chance.”

So far about 30,000 pounds of lettuce paid for through donations has been fed to manatees at the site on the Indian River Lagoon, near Cape Canaveral. Another 25,000 pounds is on its way, Pasawicz said, as more manatees show up.

“This is a marathon. It’s going to last us for several months,” said Jon Wallace of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.



LYNNE SLADKY/AP

Manatees swim in a canal where discharge from a nearby plant warms the water in Fort Lauderdale, Fla., in 2010.

WORLD

EU-member Sweden says rare earth deposits found

Associated Press

KIRUNA, Sweden — The beginning of the end of Europe's dependency on China for precious rare earth materials may lie buried deep under the rugged reaches of northern Sweden, well above the Arctic Circle.

Sweden's iron-ore miner LKAB said Thursday it has identified "significant deposits" in Lapland of rare earth elements that are essential for the manufacture of smartphones, electric vehicles and wind turbines.

The government-owned company that mines iron ore at Kiruna, nearly 600 miles north of Stockholm, said there are more than 1 million tons of rare earth oxides.

According to LKAB, it's the largest known deposit of its kind in Europe. But the company warned

that it could take at least a decade before mining starts.

Swedish Industry Minister Ebba Busch called Sweden "a gold mine" following the discovery. Her announcement came as the EU's executive Commission puts the finishing touches to a proposal for its Critical Raw Materials Act that should help developing reliable and solid supply chains.

Rare earths now reach into the lives of almost everyone on the planet, turning up in everything from hard drives to elevators and trains. They are especially vital to the fast-growing field of green energy, feeding wind turbines and electric car engines.

But the EU is lagging well behind competitors on the market, getting around 98% of its rare earth minerals from China, with none of them mined in Europe.

Australia nixes Afghanistan cricket series over Taliban

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Afghanistan cricket officials blasted Australia's decision on Thursday to cancel their men's one-day international cricket series.

Cricket Australia cited recent heavier restrictions on women's rights in Afghanistan by the Taliban government for axing the three ODIs in March in the United Arab Emirates.

The Afghanistan Cricket Board said it was "extremely disappointed and saddened by the pathetic statement" from Cricket Australia and it would complain to the International Cricket Council.

It accused CA of prioritizing political interests over fair play and

sportsmanship, undermining the integrity of the game, and damaging the relationship between the two countries.

"Cricket has played a significant role in promoting unity and national pride in Afghanistan," the board said. "After years of war and conflict, cricket has helped to bring people together and provide a sense of normalcy to the country. It has also been an important source of hope and inspiration for all Afghans, particularly young people."

When Kabul fell to the Taliban in 2021, women were banned from playing sports on the grounds that doing so would contravene Islamic laws requiring their hair and skin to be covered.

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GADGETS & TECHNOLOGY

Cooking up smart tech

Highlighting some of the food gadgets on display at CES 2023 in Las Vegas

By CARA RUBINSKY
Associated Press

From an artificial intelligence oven that promises to warn you when your food is about to burn to a mixing bowl designed to take the hassle out of tracking calories, food tech was a key theme at this year's CES tech show in Las Vegas.

Brad Jashinsky, a director analyst at research firm Gartner, said big companies often use CES to make attention-seeking announcements about products that are currently out of reach for most consumers, but may become more widespread and affordable in the coming years.

Also on display was tech that could help restaurants and others reduce food waste and improve supply chains, which Jashinsky said could have a huge impact on their bottom lines.

For those who want to become better home cooks, there was plenty of tech aimed at mostly affluent consumers.

Here are some products that caught our eye:

Easier nutrition tracking

VersaWare is designed for people frustrated by trying to track their nutrition in traditional apps.

It provides a cutting board and a mixing bowl, each attached to a phone-sized device that will display recipes and other information. As you cook, you note what ingredient you're adding and it weighs it and calculates the nutritional information. At the end, you have the statistics for whatever you're making without having to do the math yourself.

The appliances will sync to the company's app, which will include recipes automatically tailored to your nutritional goals — you'll need to decide how comfortable you are sharing that information. For example, if your nutrition plan says a recipe should have 25% less calories, VersaWare says its AI can figure out how to get it there.

"We're trying to shoulder the burden of nutrition tracking," said CEO Jacob Lindberg.

The company is still raising money and hopes to launch in the third quarter of 2023. They haven't determined pricing. The cutting board and mixing bowl will be sold separately.

Reducing food waste

Knowing exactly when an avocado is perfectly ripe may sound a bit niche, but Dutch startup OneThird thinks it's a key to helping reduce food waste.

The company unveiled an avocado scanner designed for supermarkets that's currently being tested in Canada and can tell you whether an avocado is still firm or ready to eat.

OneThird already works with growers, distributors and others along the supply chain to predict the shelf life of avocados, tomatoes, strawberries and blueberries and is working to add more produce.

According to the United Nations, nearly a third of all food globally is thrown away. Reducing that would mean less food waste being tossed into methane-producing landfills.

Another Dutch startup, Orbisk, helps restaurants reduce food waste by tracking where and when it's happening.

Interactive cooking classes

Blok wants to be the Peloton of cooking classes.

It's a large cutting board with a docking station and a digital display where subscribers will be able to watch live cooking classes taught by professional chefs and chat with other participants.

Creators Alissa and Tony Frick envision groups of family members and friends doing classes together virtually four or five times a month. The classes will all be 30 minutes or less. The idea was born during the pandemic, when the Fricks couldn't get together to cook meals with their family.

"We missed that so much," Tony Frick said.

The Fricks have sold 100 units that will be delivered this summer and are hoping to scale up production after that. They anticipate selling the cutting board for \$299 or \$399, with an app subscription expected to cost \$9.99 a month.

Uncertainty-free cooking

Some people love to experiment in the kitchen. If you're not one of them, there's the Tramontina Guru.

The Brazilian company's smart induction cooktop promises to help you make perfect risotto, steak au poivre and caramel toffee, among 200 other recipes.

An app guides you through every step of the cooking



JOHN LOCHER/AP

An image from the Orbisk food waste monitor is displayed on a computer Jan. 3 during CES Unveiled, before the start of the CES tech show in Las Vegas.

process. You can even choose whether you'd like your meat to be rare, medium or well done.

You weigh your ingredients in the pot on the cooktop. When you're ready, you press a button and the cooktop heats to the right temperature for the right amount of time.

"This takes out the guesswork," said Tramontina head chef Flavia Gois.

The basic set including an induction cooktop and pot will be available in the U.S. this spring for \$299.

A very smart mixer

GE unveiled a smart mixer that lets you weigh your ingredients in the bowl while you're working.

The GE Profile also has an auto sensor that can monitor changes in texture and viscosity and adjust speed accordingly. It shuts itself off automatically to avoid overmixing.

And it has voice control so you don't have to stop what you're doing and wash your hands off to operate it.

All that precision doesn't come cheap — the mixer costs \$999.95 and is only available at Crate & Barrel.

Jabra Talk 65 headset offers approximately 14 hours of talk time

By GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service

Jabra's newly launched Talk 65 Bluetooth 5.1 mono headset is a perfect choice for mobile workers.

The headset has a pair of noise-canceling microphones built into a boom, which works as advertised to cancel and cut 80% of the background noise on the user's end of the Talk 65. The microphones enable your caller to hear what you want them to hear: your voice.



JABRA/TNS

The Jabra Talk 65 is a Bluetooth headset that can pair with up to eight devices and cuts 80% of background noise.

On-ear controls worked well in the ergonomically designed black headset for power, volume and answering calls. It is designed to wrap around your ear for comfort and to ensure it stays in place. A USB charge (cable included) will produce about 14 hours of talk time, and the Bluetooth range is 300 feet. An IP54-rated construction will protect against small water splashes, sweat and dirt/dust. Three ear gel sets are included (small, medium and large).

A .41-inch speaker is inside, which also works well for streaming content and listening to voice assistants and GPS directions. The Talk 65 can be paired with up to eight Bluetooth devices and simultaneously with two Bluetooth connections. Online: jabra.com; \$99.99

With the Sensibo AirQ sensor, controlling your home air conditioner or heat pump is a breeze, at home or away. After an easy installation, your air system will

become an intelligent climate machine and save you money.

The Sensibo AirQ is a small piece of hardware you keep in any room to take control of the air settings and quality. The Sensibo AirQ supports any air conditioner or heat pump system with remote control. The 10,000-plus models it works with are listed on the Sensibo website.

With this system, the temperature can be adjusted from anywhere on a smartphone with the Sensibo app, using planned or manual schedules, or geofencing.



Geofencing sets virtual boundaries around your home. Then the app for the device determines your location to know if you are home or away, and whether the system should be on or off.

Other features include the ability to set filter reminders and send commands with voice assistants such as Alexa and Google Assistant. The Sensibo AirQ also connects to Apple HomeKit and other smart home platforms.

The app displays the live condition of the indoor air quality as well as the levels of volatile organic compounds (VOC) and carbon dioxide (CO2).

A single kit sensor is \$129, the double starter kit is \$258, the family kit with three sensors is \$357 and an expert kit with four is \$476.

Online: sensibo.com

The Sensibo AirQ can control your home's air temperature and quality via an app.

SENSIBO/TNS

HEALTH & FITNESS



Ozempic, an injection that keeps blood sugar levels in check for patients with type 2 diabetes, has been in shortage for about four months, according to the database maintained by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

iStock

No fair shot with off-label prescribing

Drugs for diabetes like Ozempic in short supply due to celebrity, social media hype around their weight-loss benefits

By EMMA COURT
Bloomberg News

For more than a month, Shane Anthony, a 57-year-old auto mechanic, hasn't been able to get his diabetes medication.

Ozempic, an injection that keeps blood sugar levels in check for patients with type 2 diabetes, has been in shortage for about four months, according to the database maintained by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, and is backordered at Anthony's Seattle pharmacy. Without the Novo Nordisk A/S-made prescription, he has suffered recurring dizzy spells while repairing cars. Alternative medications are either out of stock or not covered by his insurance.

While increased demand and supply chain delays have left multiple medicines from the antibiotic amoxicillin to Adderall in short supply, the reason for a lack of certain diabetes drugs is unusual: Doctors are prescribing them to non-diabetics who want to use them for weight loss.

"All these famous people, stars who don't need to lose weight, are going and getting it," Anthony said. "I need it to stay healthy and not die."

For the more than 35 million people who live with type 2 diabetes, the shortages have added yet another layer to managing an already complicated and costly chronic illness. They've also exposed weaknesses in America's use of off-label prescribing, which allows physicians to hand out drugs to treat a different condition than the one for which they were officially approved. When those medications are hard to find because of celebrity and social-media hype, patients with diabetes suffer.

Ozempic, known generically as semaglutide, is one of a class of diabetes drugs known as GLP-1 receptor agonists that have been around for nearly two decades. It was first approved in the U.S. in 2017 for use in those with type 2 diabetes. Ozempic mimics a hormone involved in appetite

and eating, helping to stimulate insulin production and lower patients' blood glucose levels. It also often leads to them shedding pounds.

Francisco Prieto, a family physician in Sacramento, Calif., sees at least one person with diabetes per week who is having trouble filling their prescription for Ozempic. Patients call multiple pharmacies and drive around town to see if it's in stock, but some still haven't been able to get it, said Prieto, who also does advocacy work for the American Diabetes Association.

Recently, one of Prieto's patients experienced a three-week delay filling a prescription for Trulicity, a similar type 2 diabetes drug that's also seeing increased demand for weight-loss use. Prieto prescribed a lower dose, and recommended that the patient take two injections a week. He described the compromise as "less than ideal, but better than nothing."

Without their medication, patients with diabetes could be at higher risk for heart disease, heart attacks, infections like COVID-19, disability and even death, Prieto said. And while getting a different prescription can be an option, it can come with new hurdles, including insurance coverage and closer monitoring in case the alternative doesn't work as well.

Both new and established users of Ozempic are being affected by periodic supply disruptions. A representative for manufacturer Novo Nordisk said in a statement that the issues are expected to continue through January. The company cited "incredible demand" and short-term capacity limitations at some factories, and

said that it's investing to grow manufacturing.

Higher doses of Ozempic that aren't usually given to new patients are available, and Novo's other GLP-1 drugs for diabetes aren't in short supply, though there may be normal delays at pharmacies, the company said. In an earnings presentation in November, Novo said that its sales, as measured in Danish kroner, grew by 26% in the first nine months of the year, largely because of higher demand for Ozempic and other diabetes drugs.

Eli Lilly & Co.'s Trulicity and Mounjaro, both approved to treat type 2 diabetes, are

also seeing demand that's resulting in backorders on some doses at pharmacies, a Lilly spokeswoman said. The drugs were listed as being in shortage by the FDA on Thursday. Lilly isn't having supply chain or manufacturing issues, though the company is working to double man-

ufacturing capacity for the category by the end of next year, the spokeswoman said.

Though off-label prescribing is common and legal in the U.S., it has long created issues. In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, people took an unproven drug called hydroxychloroquine, which they believed helped with the virus. That created shortages for patients who take it for lupus and arthritis.

Ozempic is a good candidate for off-label use for obesity, which is also considered a disease and can put people at higher risk for other conditions: Official ads for the drug say patients lose on average up to 12 pounds when taking it. It's

just not clear that everyone using the drug has a medical need for it.

On TikTok, some videos featuring the hashtag #Ozempic have been viewed more than a million times. Medical spas offer the prescription alongside shots of Botox and laser hair removal. Sponsored ads on Google promise weight loss with no exercise or dieting. A plastic surgeon brags on Facebook about using the drug to lose 10 pounds she gained during the COVID-19 pandemic, and says to call her office to get started.

The FDA doesn't regulate this kind of prescribing. That means many decisions about what to do are up to individuals.

"Which disease is most acute and most severe? Which has alternatives? How adequate are those alternatives?" said Holly Fernandez Lynch, an assistant professor of medical ethics and law at the University of Pennsylvania. "These are the kinds of questions that would help you figure out which patients should have priority access."

Fernandez Lynch said a judgment would depend on the individual case. But those who just want to lose a few pounds shouldn't take a scarce resource that someone else needs, she said.

In Seattle, Anthony has recently been able to get an alternative diabetes drug. It's a much older treatment that requires twice-a-day injections before mealtimes, which he didn't have to think about with Ozempic and has found challenging. It's too soon to know how well it will work for him. He also received a letter stating that starting in February, his pharmacy will need an official type 2 diabetes diagnosis to fill an Ozempic prescription.

Prieto, the family physician, said his patients are scared and alarmed about the shortage — especially if the drug has really helped improve their health.

"Right now, diabetes is the greater danger, and those folks have a higher need for the drug," he said.

"All these famous people, stars who don't need to lose weight, are going and getting it. I need it to stay healthy and not die."

Shane Anthony
uses Ozempic for his type 2 diabetes

MOVIES



Marvel Studios

Mantis (Pom Klementieff), left, Groot (voiced by Vin Diesel), Star-Lord (Chris Pratt), Drax (Dave Bautista) and Nebula (Karen Gillan) star in “Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3.”

Up in the air

Questions surround this year’s slate of superhero films

BY DAVID BETANCOURT
The Washington Post

New year. New superhero movies. And the newly relevant question of who will be the champion of comic-book cinema in the near future. As Marvel Studios enters its fifth phase of connected-universe dominance, the renamed DC Studios and its new co-head James Gunn will be trying to get back in the game. And then there’s Sony, which continues to make Spider-Man villain movies that don’t feature Spider-Man in hopes of creating its own winning franchise. Will 2023 mark the last year of Marvel Studios not having a worthy challenger? Will any of the DC heroes on the big screen matter enough this year to survive the red pen of Gunn as he plans his future slate? Is a Kraven the Hunter movie really happening? We’ll be here covering it all for you. In the meantime, here’s a look at the 2023 superhero movie slate:

‘Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania’ (Feb. 17)

Ant-Man is Marvel’s funniest franchise (although the Thors seem to be taking aim at that title of late). That’s saying something in a Marvel Cinematic Universe where humor is a key ingredient in every offering. Ant-Man making it to trilogy status off the comedic chops of lead actor Paul Rudd would be a big deal itself, but that takes a back seat to the movie debut of the MCU’s next Thanos: the time-traveling Kang the Conqueror, played by Jonathan Majors. He first appeared as a variant of the supervillain in an episode of “Loki” on Disney+ but is now the big bad guy that all MCU offerings are marching toward from here on out, as we’re now at the beginning of the studio’s Phase 5. He’s the central cause of a new team of Avengers assembling in two future films, “Kang Dynasty” and “Secret Wars,” in 2025 and 2026, respectively.

‘Shazam: Fury of the Gods’ (March 17)

Asher Angel returns as Billy Batson, who when he says the word “shazam” is struck by lightning and transforms from a kid into an adult superhero (played by Zachary Levi). Helen Mirren and Lucy

Liu star as furious goddesses Hespera and Kalypso, who are none too pleased that Billy and his sibling superheroes have access to the power of the gods.

‘Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 3’ (May 5)

Gunn may be the Kevin Feige of DC Studios now, but there’s still the matter of finishing up his pop music-infused “Guardians of the Galaxy” trilogy, which is likely the job that got him the big chair at DC in the first place (that and his mini Suicide Squad/Peacemaker universe). Future event-level Avengers movies aside, this could be the last we see of characters such as Peter Quill (Chris Pratt), Rocket Raccoon (Bradley Cooper) and Groot (Vin Diesel) in the MCU. Given that Gunn himself has hinted that a major character will die in “Vol. 3,” this is shaping up to be the movie where the music stops.

‘Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse’ (June 2)

This is the highly anticipated sequel to 2018’s Academy Award-winning “Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse” with the African American/Puerto Rican Miles Morales (Shameik Moore) as the lead arachnid kid. Spider-Gwen (Hailee Steinfeld) is also back and helping Miles face



Warner Bros. Pictures

These adopted siblings’ power to turn from kids into superheroes angers goddesses Hespera and Kalypso in the “Shazam” sequel.

off against the wall-crawler of the far future, Spider-Man 2099 (Oscar Isaac). The Spider-Verse is undeniably Sony’s No. 1 solo spider franchise.

‘The Flash’ (June 16)

“The Flash” was supposed to be a big deal, rumored to be a time-travel story that would serve as a reset for future DC movies. But it now just may be a goodbye flick, as Gunn has made clear most if not all of the Zack Snyder Justice League era will not be a part of his new vision at DC Studios. That doesn’t mean “The Flash” won’t have its moment. It’s (so far) outrun the many recent controversies of lead actor Ezra Miller and is still set to mark the return of Michael Keaton as Batman, which could go down as the geek culture moment of 2023.

‘The Marvels’ (July 28)

This “Captain Marvel” sequel — in Marvel Studios’ first franchise to feature a superheroine in the lead role — is also a mini-Avengers movie of sorts, connecting to two other MCU Disney+ series. Monica Rambeau (Teyonah Parris) of “WandaVision” and Kamala Kahn (Iman Vellani) of “Ms. Marvel” also star alongside Brie Larson’s Captain Marvel.

‘Blue Beetle’ (Aug. 18)

DC’s first Latino superhero movie stars “Cobra Kai’s” Xolo Maridueña as Jamie Reyes, who discovers a blue scarab that turns him into an alien-like bug being. Any franchise potential depends on the box-

office response. If “Blue Beetle” has a strong cultural moment, Gunn might have to add it to his big board. Otherwise, this film could be a sequel-less solo outing.

‘Kraven the Hunter’ (Oct. 6)

Sony continues to try to turn Spider-Man villains into viable movie franchises. The Venom franchise has been hit or miss. Vampire flick “Morbius” didn’t have the bite the studio was hoping for. “Kraven the Hunter,” starring Aaron Taylor-Johnson in the lead role, is the next attempt. Can it change the narrative? Or will the only spider-movies that matter be the animated ones and the MCU Spider-Man movies Sony makes jointly with Marvel Studios?

‘Aquaman and the Lost Kingdom’ (Dec. 25)

“Aquaman” was a billion-dollar breath of fresh air for DC. Its sequel is likely the end for Jason Momoa’s undersea franchise given all the changes going on at DC Studios. If we do see Aquaman again under the watchful eye of Gunn, it will most likely be with a new actor. Gunn has already said he’s bringing a new Superman to the screen, meaning this movie is the official end of the Snyder Justice League universe. Gunn has mentioned he’d consider bringing former Superman Henry Cavill back in a new DC role, and the same could be said for Momoa, who has equal box-office appeal.

VIDEO GAMES



SQUARE ENIX/TNS

Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII Reunion follows Zack Fair as he teams with the game's eventual villain to hunt down his mentor.

Fresh spirit, magical reunion

Crisis Core re-release just the first entry in the Final Fantasy VII comeback series

By EBENEZER SAMUEL
New York Daily News

It's been 16 years since Square Enix first released Final Fantasy: Crisis Core on the PlayStation Portable console, and in that time gaming has changed plenty. An era ago, portable games and major-console games could be different experiences. Not anymore.

That's especially important to me because the game's re-release, Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII Reunion, offers me a new chance to appreciate a title I didn't properly love all those years ago. Square is in the midst of a Final Fantasy VII resurrection, headed by FF VII Remake in 2021, and another episode of that due out (hopefully) late this year. Crisis Core: Final Fantasy VII Reunion is the latest entry into the FF VII comeback.

It's also a game with a spirit all its own. Crisis Core follows the story of Zack Fair, another spiky-headed protagonist, but one wholly different from the more well-known Cloud of FF VII fame. Fair makes a brief appearance in the original FF VII, sacrificing himself so Cloud can escape. And in Crisis Core, he finally gets his story told.

It's this story that draws you to the game — and it shines when given the big-screen remake treatment. That's partly because of Zack's story, and partly because of the backstory of what you already know from Final Fantasy VII. Where Cloud is brooding and isolationist, Zack, who becomes a soldier in Shinra and winds up fighting alongside more venerable heroes likes

Angeal and the eventually-infamous Sephiroth, is impressionable, excitable, quippy. From beginning to end of the game, he seems built to juxtapose Cloud, and you can't help but embrace him in a different way.

You quickly invest in his story, too, and the tale doesn't just develop him. You get a strong look at Sephiroth in a new way, especially as the tale develops and Zack finds himself teaming with the eventual villain to hunt down his mentor.

This was a good tale nearly two decades ago, but it's even better now. Square overhauls all the visuals, and you see it in the details of both Sephiroth and Zack's hair, and the texture of the material on Zack's Shinra uniform. Those visuals extend to several extremely detailed locations, many of which we'll see again when Remake Part II arrives. Add in stellar voice acting, and the tale comes to life in a way that it never did on my tiny PSP screen. It all makes Sephiroth's tale terrifically sad; the pathos easily held my attention.

You're playing this game for that fantastic story, but the gameplay holds up its end of the bargain too. Where the original FF VII's turn-based mechanics feel dated today, Crisis Core always had a more modern approach to combat. It was essentially about hack-and-slash action in self-contained battles you'd expect from Final Fantasy.

The twist though: the DMW, or Digital Mind Wave, which was essentially a constantly playing game of slots. When things aligned in battle, Zack was given special

in-combat bonuses (imagine spending no-MP cost for a time), or granted chances to summon or pull off limit moves. It leads to frenetically paced combat that challenges you to target key enemies, remember their weaknesses and take advantage of your bonuses. There's no button-mashing here: Use the advantages you have when you have them or you'll get flattened. Other standard gameplay conventions, such as materials and equipment, give you more to dive into and explore as well.

Just two relics hold back the excellent gameplay. First is a holdover from the game's portable days: You have a lot of ultra-short sidequests in this game. That makes sense since this was originally built for on-the-go gaming: Ultra-quick missions mean lots of bite-sized gameplay. You'll just wish Square tied these missions into the story better; they feel like filler content, absent much of the voice acting and brilliant cutscene of the main story.

The other issue: The overwhelming amount of random battles (many in those sidequests). Most modern JRPGs offer some options to avoid these battles; here, you'll have to take them on.

By and large, though, they're worth undertaking simply because the story and presentation are so magical. This isn't just a PSP game any longer. It's a key piece of FF VII lore, and it finally gets its proper due now.

Platforms: PlayStation 4 and 5, Xbox 1, Xbox Series, Nintendo Switch, PC

Online: jp.square-enix.com/ccffvii_reunion

BTS sends Goose Goose Duck up the Steam charts

By ALYSE STANLEY
The Washington Post

A surprising new entry topped Steam's list of the most-played games last week: Goose Goose Duck, a 2021 social deduction game similar to Among Us, only starring geese and ducks instead of crewmates and imposters. It peaked at more than 560,000 concurrent players on Jan. 5, surpassing major titles like Apex Legends, Elden Ring and Call of Duty: Modern Warfare II. And it has the BTS fanbase, known as the ARMY, to thank.

The free-to-play game's popularity has grown steadily since V from the K-pop group BTS — real name Kim Tae-hyung — played it on a livestream. He began streaming Goose Goose Duck on Nov. 27 on the social networking app Weverse, where he's also played multiplayer titles like the original Among Us and Fall Guys. (Weverse is owned and operated by Hybe, the company behind BTS.)

In Goose Goose Duck, players take on the role of geese and must work together to suss out the dastardly ducks hiding among them in disguise. It shares a similar premise and 2D visuals of Among Us, but with a more extensive list of game modes and possible roles for players, including other birds like the Dodo, who wins by getting voted off, or the Vulture, who wins by eating the remains of their less-fortunate crewmates.

Goose Goose Duck first released in October 2021 after a six-month early access period, and on average saw a few thousand players each day. After Tae-hyung began streaming it, the number of concurrent players shot up almost immediately, from around 15,000 at the start of November to 160,000 by the end.

According to industry analyst Daniel Ahmad, Goose Goose Duck has been going viral in Asian markets over the past month. "We've been tracking the title since late November when it first started gaining traction. Interesting to see it's only really starting to receive attention globally now," he said in a Jan. 5 tweet.

With that spotlight has comes its fair share of issues. Earlier last week, the flood of new players briefly overwhelmed developer Gaggle Studios' servers, resulting in an outage.

"We appreciate all the love and support, we expected a large increase in players but not like this," the indie studio wrote in an update on Steam. "250k increase of our already massive player base was too much. We're working on increasing capacity as fast as we can and will keep everyone updated. We apologize for the inconvenience, we're all working hard to make sure everyone can play."

The outpouring is indicative of the sheer popularity of BTS, one of the world's most successful recording artists with tens of millions of fans. The group, which is currently on hiatus, has previously made waves in the games industry with its collaborations with popular titles Cookie Run: Kingdom and Fortnite.

MUSIC



Anti-Flag enters the new year with the same lineup that solidified the band in 1999.

Atom Splitter PR

Longevity and 'Lies'

Anti-Flag is on top of its game with 13th album

By SCOTT MERVIS
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Anti-Flag is becoming an anomaly in the rock world, entering 2023 with the same four guys who solidified the band in 1999.

There's a reason for the longevity, says drummer Pat Thetic.

"It's really unusual — incredibly unusual — and it's a testament to the fact that we have a mission with the band. We have a belief structure, and we make allowances to be able to keep that mission going."

That included spending the latter part of '22 touring every weekend, as far as Montreal and Alabama, even though two of the members — Thetic and guitarist Chris Head — now have small children at home.

"Rock 'n' roll disrupts your relationships, you know. That's the nature of the beast," the drummer says. "We thought doing weekends would make it less disruptive. But, to be honest with you, after doing this for 25, 30 years, there's no way to do rock 'n' roll without it being disruptive to your personal life. It's just the nature of it."

This will be another busy year, as the Pittsburgh punk band launches it with the release of its 13th album, "Lies They Tell Our Children," the follow-up to 2020's "20/20 Vision." The album, produced by Jon Lundin (Good Charlotte, Senses Fail, Sleeping With Sirens), was recorded at the band's new headquarters

SEE LONGEVITY ON PAGE 17

Collective Soul's Ed Roland on 360 guitars, his Elton John piano and Billy Joel rejection

By RODNEY HO

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution
Collective Soul takes its name seriously.

It is not a fractious crew, relatively speaking. The Atlanta-based band over three decades has generated a coterie of pop-rock classics, performed thousands of times and retains three original members.

The current five-member lineup has been together for nearly nine years, with Jesse Triplett the most recent addition as lead guitarist in early 2014.

"This is the lineup that will be

forever," lead singer Ed Roland said in a recent interview. "We just enjoy each other's company.

"Every night, we're like little kids. We hop out and hug each other. We have fun onstage. We love what we do."

In 2022, the first year since 2019 that could be construed as "normal" for most touring bands, Collective Soul released its 11th studio album, "Vibrating," and performed 61 times.

Here are some highlights from the interview:

■ **Breakthrough hit "Shine"** being by far the band's most

popular song on Spotify: "I'm so appreciative that 'Shine' has allowed me to continue to write. As a songwriter, I'd still put it in my top 20. We never get tired playing it. When I go to Publix and the cashier hands me change, they don't get clapped for it. I have a job where I get claps every night."

■ **On the band's past two albums:** "You get older. You get wiser. I'd say our two most recent albums 'Vibrating' and 'Blood' are the best work we've

SEE ROLAND ON PAGE 17



DAVID ABBOTT/David Abbott

Collective Soul released its 11th album, "Vibrating," in 2022.

MUSIC

Longevity: New record includes an array of collaborations with special guest artists

FROM PAGE 16

in Sharpsburg, with the drums cut at Mr. Smalls Studio.

Anti-Flag considers “Lies They Tell Our Children,” released Jan. 6, a concept album about an American political system “that’s putting profit above people,” in the words of co-frontman Chris #2. The band is at the top of its game on a loud and boisterous set of protest anthems tackling such issues as political corruption (“Sold Everything”), for-profit health care (“Modern Meta Medicine”), the treatment of immigrants (“Shallow Graves”) and the exploitation of workers (“WORK_STRUGGLE”).

Straying from its tried-and-true thrashy punk, Anti-Flag provides tasty elements of screamo, pop and Celtic punk with an array of special guests, including Jesse Leach (Killswitch Engage), Tim McIrath (Rise Against), Brian Baker (Bad Religion), Ashrita Kumar (Pinkshift), Shane Told (Silverstein) and Stacey Dee (Bad Cop/Bad Cop).

“It was a conscious attempt,” Thetic says. “We’re like, ‘All right, let’s try and bring other voices on to our record and see how it goes.’ They do this in hip-hop all the time. In rock, it’s not really done.”

“It’s awesome to do it because within rock you see people all the time in passing on tours and doing different events but you don’t really get to actually work together. It’s like opening up a present when you get their version back and you open it up on the computer and it’s like ‘Oh [expletive], that sounds awesome!’

Bringing in Leach, for example, on “Meta Modern Medicine” makes the song one of the heaviest that Anti-Flag has ever recorded.

“He may not be completely in line with us, musically, but socially and politically, he’s very similar to what we’re trying to achieve,” Thetic says.

Kumar’s contribution to “Imperialism” makes the song pop-catchy while also “changing the whole perspective from just geopolitical imperialism to a personal level of imperialism,” Thetic says.

As for the choice of Lundin as producer, Thetic



Atom Splitter PR

Anti-Flag considers its new release, “Lies They Tell Our Children,” a concept album about the American political system.

says, “He brought an energy and a focus on modern music that we struggle with and a focus on the technology, because we are not as skilled in the technology, obviously, of getting great guitar sounds and great drum sounds. He helped us find the sound we were looking for.”

Anti-Flag will hit the road in February on a cross-country U.S. tour and return to Europe in June to deliver the band’s message, which they’ve always described as anti-war, anti-imperialist and anti-Wall Street but not anti-American.

It’s the message that will keep driving Anti-Flag toward a 25th anniversary with this same lineup.

“We’ve been able to be consistent,” Thetic says, “in that we agree on all the same tactics and beliefs. Sometimes the details of how to achieve the goals differ, but the goals of the band have always been the same. We don’t argue in the band about what battles were fighting. We might argue about whether this chord is the right chord or not, or whether this drum part is to this or too that, but the main mission of the band has been the same from the beginning, and we’ve all been consistent on that.”

Roland: Singer’s band plans to record four-song Elvis EP

FROM PAGE 16

ever done.”

■ **On playing the big hits at every concert:** “You gotta play what got you here. Those get bigger applause, as they should. I’m fine with that.”

■ **On joining Hootiefest in April 2023 with Hootie & The Blowfish in Cancun, Mexico:** “We came from the same label at the same time. Mark Bryan, the band’s guitarist, and I had a band once, the Sweet Tea Project. He played mandolin. Darius [Rucker] had Jesse [Triplett] for awhile. It’s an inbred Southern thing. We’ve worked with the other bands, too. [Everclear and Gin Blossoms.] We’re all at that certain part of our lives. We’re all at peace.”

■ **Elvis Presley EP plans:** “We became friends with someone who owns Elvis Presley’s old home in Palm Springs, Florida. We plan to record there. We are looking to do a four-song EP of Elvis songs for Record Store Day. We will do ‘Bossa Nova Baby,’ ‘All Shook Up,’ ‘Kentucky Rain’ and ‘Burning Love.’”

■ **Roland being Roland:** “My wife gets on me all the time. We’ll be taking a long weekend vacation and we see a bar band. I’ll give them \$100 to play for 15 minutes. I don’t tell them who I am. I play my songs and they think, ‘Wait a second. You sound like the real guy!’ Then they realize it’s me.”

■ **Not dyeing his hair but not**

cutting it short: “I’m now gray haired. But I also wear it long. Not many people pushing 60 do that. So is that Einstein, or that guy from Collective Soul?”

■ **His guitar obsession:** “I own 360 guitars. I have four storage spaces for guitars. If I see it and like it, I buy it. I have played every one of them. Eddie Van Halen gave me his guitar. We toured with Van Halen. Eddie and I became pals. ... Kids will come over and I’ll give them a guitar. It’s a joy to share them.”

■ **His Elton John piano:** “He used to spend a lot of time in Atlanta. One time, we got together and had dinner. He knew how much I respected him and he respected me. He was a mentor. We’d give each other gifts. One time he got me a grand piano. I was shocked. He said, ‘You gotta take it. I only want you to promise me you’ll write songs on it.’ I’m like, ‘Done!’ I write a lot on it. Getting a piano from a pop hero you grew up with. What else is there?”

■ **The Billy Joel pitch:** By 2002, Billy Joel hadn’t recorded new pop music in 20 years so John set it up for Roland to meet him because Roland wanted to produce an album with him. “I told Billy I wanted to make ‘Glass Houses Part 2.’ I told him the rawness of it meant a lot to me as a kid. I would love to be part of it. Billy shut me down.

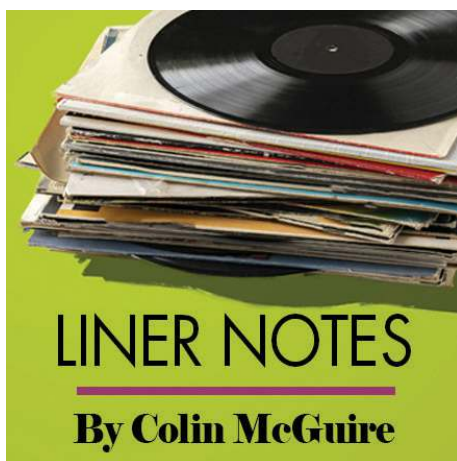
‘Nope,’ he said. ‘Nice meeting you.’”

International appeal drives tours as Bad Bunny leads live music world

With the advent of YouTube, the obsession with looking at live entertainment through a cellphone’s camera lens and a general disinterest in leaving the house anymore, live music isn’t quite what it used to be. Out is a time when tours felt unmissable and summers were reserved for outdoor amphitheater mega-bills around which some fans might even plan entire vacations. In is ... Taylor Swift?

That’s not a shot at Swift, mind you; it’s just that live music isn’t nearly as much of an Important Thing as it was, say, 10 or 20 years ago. Still, according to Pollstar, perhaps the most celebrated temperature-taker of all things live music, the business is far from dead — and it’s certainly not dead if you happen to be a pop star from anywhere not named “America.” According to its latest Live 75 chart, which tracks active tours by the average tickets sold for shows that happened over the past 30 days, four of the top five artists began their musical journeys outside the U.S.

The leader in the clubhouse, of course, is Bad Bunny, who clocked in at about 40,000 tickets sold per show, raking in somewhere around \$6.5 million a night over the past three months. The only artist



to come close to Bunny over the past 30 days in the Live 75 is Daddy Yankee, who garnered about 35,000 tickets per show. From there, the numbers drop considerably as Harry Styles clocks in at about 16,000 tickets a concert, followed by Lizzo, who earned a little less than 15,000 tickets a show and then Dua Lipa, who rounded out the top five with about 14,000 tickets a night.

For those keeping score, that’s two artists from Puerto Rico in Bunny and Yankee, two from the UK in Lipa and Styles, and then the Houston-by-way-of-Detroit

Lizzo. The lesson? If you want to sell concert tickets in 2023, appeal to a worldwide audience.

Speaking of Styles, he’s getting ready to finish up the U.S. run of his most recent tour in Los Angeles at the end of this month before heading to Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea and Denmark, among a handful of other countries for a slate that will run off and on from late February to mid-July. Buzzy English duo Wet Leg will join him on a solid portion of the dates as the tour’s opening act, and the only thing that makes more sense than that band joining that guy out on tour is ... nothing.

As for tours announced in the past few weeks, it turns out Janet Jackson will be hitting the road with Ludacris in mid-April. That jaunt will cover arenas throughout the U.S. and is set to run until mid-June. The Weeknd, whose “Blinding Lights” was recently anointed the most-streamed song ever on Spotify, also announced plans to extend what feels like a tour that will never end (remember when it took over the Super Bowl halftime show 5,000 years ago?), as he plans to go to Europe, Colombia, Mexico and South America beginning this summer. As of this writing, that trek will feature 27 stops

from June to October.

And then there are a couple of fun packages that recently revealed their plans for the coming months on the road, if only for nostalgia’s sake. First, there’s the creatively titled “Twenty” tour that will feature Ruben Studdard and Clay Aiken of “American Idol” fame. Mostly turning up in casinos and theaters stateside, the run begins in April and will wrap up in May ... unless viewers at home vote them off first.

Sorry. Couldn’t resist.

The other act who is both ready to give you some 1990s/2000s nostalgia feels and hop in a tour bus (or van) in the coming weeks? Third Eye Blind. They’ll set out March 10 in New Orleans for something called, shockingly, the “Evening With Third Eye Blind” tour. The slate will migrate east from New Orleans before the band returns to its native California to bid adieu (for now, at least) in mid-April. No word yet on whether they plan to lose the rest of their year by touring in either the summer, fall or winter. To say that after all these years, those guys have semi-charmed lives would be a massive understatement at this point.

OK. Again. Sorry. Couldn’t resist.

Anyway, happy concert-ing!

BOOKS

‘Spare’ willing to share lots of dirt

Prince Harry's explosive memoir reveals details about the royal's upbringing, family and media relationship

BY HILLEL ITALIE
AND JILL LAWLESS
Associated Press

From the book's opening citation of William Faulkner, to Prince Harry's passionate bond with his wife Meghan, you could almost call the Duke of Sussex's memoir "The Americanization of Prince Harry."

Bereaved boy, troubled teen, wartime soldier, unhappy royal — many facets of Prince Harry are revealed in his explosive memoir, often in eyebrow-raising detail. Running throughout is Harry's desire to be a different kind of prince — the kind who talks about his feelings, eats fast food and otherwise doesn't hide beyond a prim facade.

Like an American.

From accounts of cocaine use and losing his virginity to raw family rifts, "Spare" exposes deeply personal details about Harry and the wider royal family. Even Americans may flinch when he confides that a trip to the North Pole left him with frost-bitten genitals that proved most irritating during his brother's wedding to Kate.

Even Americans may flinch when he confides that a trip to the North Pole left him with frost-bitten genitals that proved most irritating during his brother's wedding to Kate.

Brotherhood

The book opens with a famous quote from Faulkner, bard of the American South: "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

Harry's story is dominated by his rivalry with elder brother Prince William and the death of the boys' mother, Princess Diana, in 1997. Harry, who was 12 at the time, has never forgiven the media for Diana's death in a car crash while being pursued by photographers.

The loss of his mother haunts the book, which Harry dedicates to Meghan, children Archie and Lili "and, of course, my mother."

The opening chapter recounts how his father Prince Charles — now King Charles III — broke the news of his mother's accident but didn't give his son a hug.

Harry reveals that years later he asked his driver to take him through the Pont de l'Alma tunnel in Paris, site of the fatal crash, hoping in vain that it would help end a "decade of unrelenting pain." He also says he once consulted a woman who claimed to have "powers" and to be able to pass on messages from Diana.

Harry adds that he and William both "pleaded" with their father not to marry his long-term paramour Camilla Parker-

Bowles, worried she would become a "wicked stepmother."

Harry also is tormented by his status as royal "spare" behind William, who is heir to the British throne. He recounts a long-standing sibling rivalry that worsened after he began a relationship with Meghan, the American actor he married in 2018.

He says that during an argument in 2019, William called Meghan "difficult" and "rude" (the kind of insults an upper-class Englishman might reserve for Americans), then grabbed him by the collar and knocked him down. Harry suffered cuts and bruises from landing on a dog bowl.

Harry says Charles implored the brothers to make up, saying after the funeral of Prince Philip in 2021: "Please, boys — don't make my final years a misery."

Neither Buckingham Palace, which represents King Charles III, nor William's Kensington Palace office has commented on any of the allegations.

Admiration for grandparents

Harry writes with admiration and some affection about Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip. He remembers Philip's "many passions — carriage driving, barbecuing, shooting, food, beer," and above all how he "embraced life," as did his mother. "Maybe that was why he'd been such a fan" of Princess Diana, Harry recalls.

Meanwhile, he acknowledges being intimidated at times by his grandmother, if only because she was the queen. She is no more helpful than anyone else in containing the media leaks, but she is often seen as sympathetic to his wishes, never more so than when she approved of his marriage of Meghan.

Harry also sees her as an engaging, even humorous person beyond her otherwise proper bearing. Reflecting on her death last year he remembers whispering jokes into her ear or convincing her to participate in a widely seen promotional video of the Invictus Games, in which she one-ups the Obamas in a sparring contest.

"She was a natural comedienne," he writes, calling her "wicked sense of humor" a prized confidence between the two. "In every photo of us, whenever we're exchanging a glance, making solid eye contact, it's clear. We had secrets."

Wild teenage years

The memoir suggests the media's party-boy image of Harry during his teen and young adult years was well-deserved.

Harry describes how he lost his virginity at 17 — in a field behind a pub to an older woman who loved horses and treated the teenage prince like a "young stallion." It was, he says, an "inglorious episode."

He also says he took cocaine several times starting at the same age, in order to



ALBERTO PEZZALI/AP

Prince William, left, and Prince Harry walk behind the coffin of Queen Elizabeth II being pulled past Buckingham Palace following her funeral service Sept. 19 at Westminster Abbey in central London. Harry says he and William spoke very little that day.

"feel different." He also acknowledges using cannabis and magic mushrooms — which made him hallucinate that a toilet was talking to him.

Army revelations

Harry offers extensive memories of his decade in the British army, serving twice in Afghanistan. He says that on his second tour, as an Apache helicopter co-pilot and gunner in 2012-2013, he killed 25 Taliban militants.

Harry says he felt neither satisfaction nor shame about his actions, and in the heat of battle regarded enemy combatants as pieces being removed from a chessboard, "Bads taken away before they could kill Goods."

Veterans criticized the comments and said they could increase the security risk for Harry. Retired Col. Richard Kemp said it was "an error of judgment," and regarding enemy fighters as chess pieces is "not the way the British trains people."

"I think that sort of comment that doesn't reflect reality is misleading and potentially valuable to those people who wish the British forces and British government harm," he told the BBC.

The Taliban returned to power in Afghanistan in 2021, and Harry's words have drawn protests in the country. Afghan Foreign Ministry spokesman Abdul Qahar Balkhi called the Western invasion of Afghanistan "odious" and said Harry's comments "are a microcosm of the trauma experienced by Afghans at the hands of occupation forces who murdered innocents without any accountability."

A regular guy

Yes, he's a prince, but he isn't above stopping for burgers and fries at an In-N-Out, or getting clothes from a chain outlet. He's also a compulsive watcher of "Friends" and relates most to the wisecracking Chandler Bing, played by Matthew Perry. And because he's a prince, he got to meet another "Friends" star, Courteney Cox, and indulge in chocolate psychedelic mushrooms at her Los Angeles home.

The real villain

Harry shares painful words about his father and brother, but his real anger is directed at the British media, and at those within the royal circle who cooperated and otherwise stood aside. While Charles remains apparently indifferent to the press, the rest of the family is obsessed with media coverage, Harry writes, himself as much as any of them. He expresses despair over what he calls endlessly false stories about him, the racist caricatures of his wife and of the press' unnerving knowledge of his whereabouts and private correspondence. "One has to have a relationship with the press," he is told by the royal staff.

Personal journey

Harry credits Meghan with changing the way he sees the world and himself. He says he was "awash in isolation and privilege" and had no understanding of unconscious bias before he met her.

The young prince notoriously wore a Nazi uniform to a costume party in 2005, and claims in the book that William and his now-wife Kate encouraged the choice of outfit and "howled" with laughter when they saw it.

He was recorded using a racist term about a fellow soldier of Pakistani descent in 2006, but says he did not know the word was a slur and that the soldier was not offended.

Meghan and Harry cited the U.K. media's treatment of the biracial American actor as one of the main reasons for their decision to quit royal duties and move to the U.S. in 2020.

The book gives no sign that royal family relations will be repaired soon. Harry told ITV in an interview to promote the book that he wants reconciliation, but that there must be "accountability" first.

In the final pages, Harry describes how he and William walked side by side during the funeral procession of Queen Elizabeth II in September, but spoke barely a word to one another.

"The following afternoon, Meg and I left for America," he says.

CROSSWORD AND COMICS

NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

IN PLAY

BY MICHAEL LIEBERMAN, ADAM WAGNER AND RAFAEL MUSA / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

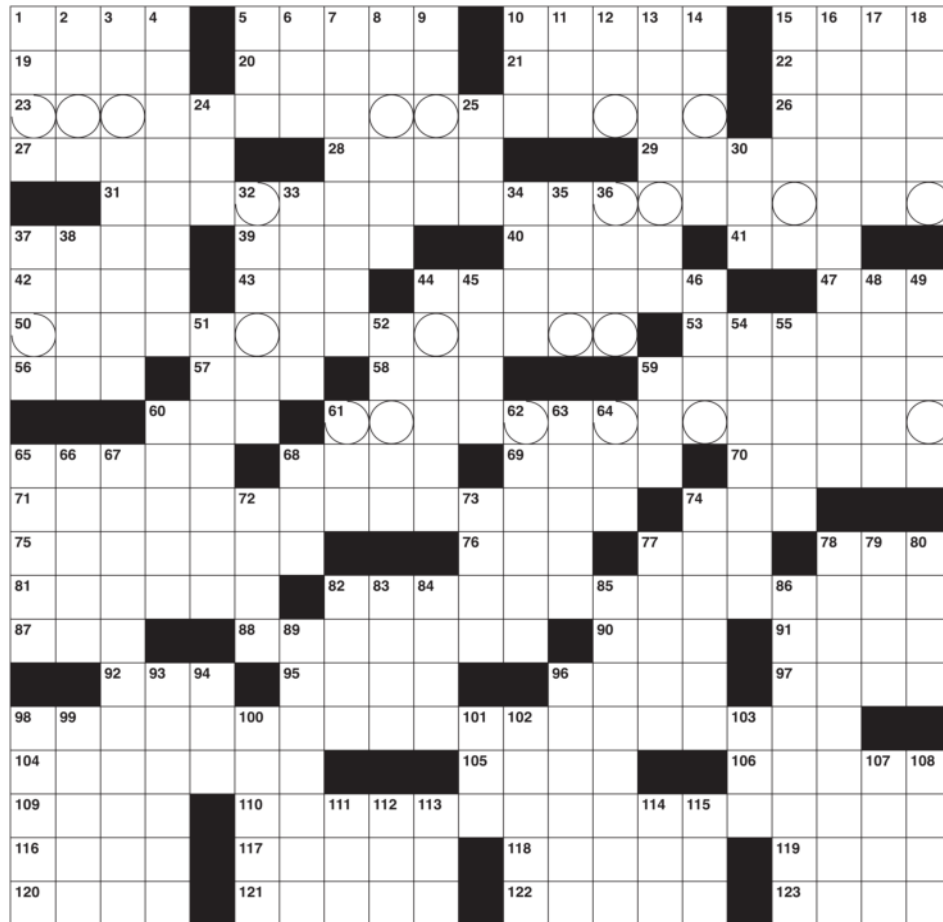
Adam Wagner, of Oakland, Calif., is a creative lead at Patreon, the crowdfunding site for content creators. Michael Lieberman is an attorney in Washington, D.C. Rafael Musa, of San Francisco, is a software engineer at Airbnb. They met through crossword posts on Twitter and now play on the same team in a weekly trivia night over Zoom. The idea for this puzzle was Michael's. Rafael and Adam added to the theme. They all collaborated on the grid and clues. — W.S.

ACROSS

- 1 Image on the flag of Oakland, Calif., appropriately
- 5 Country whose capital is an anagram of its former capital
- 10 Sends 10 texts in a row to, say
- 15 Stage partitions?
- 19 Achings
- 20 Basic Mediterranean sauce
- 21 Eagles' home
- 22 Pork cut
- 23 Stick of butter, geometrically
- 26 Sesame Street resident who refers to himself in the third person
- 27 Attentive
- 28 Change of scenery, in real estate lingo
- 29 Less involved
- 31 Seminal 1980 hit by Joy Division
- 37 Attire for some queens
- 39 Subtle flavor, to a wine taster
- 40 Accomplishes
- 41 Barbecue discard
- 42 White House staffer
- 43 What a V-sign might indicate
- 44 Try to hit, as a piñata
- 47 ___-Locka, Fla.
- 50 Colorado, Idaho and Wyoming, among others
- 53 Lap, maybe
- 56 Visitors from afar, in brief
- 57 Hurry, quaintly
- 58 A matter of course?
- 59 Works in a gallery
- 60 ___ Aviv
- 61 Hit 1998 Eddie Murphy comedy based on books by Hugh Lofting
- 65 "An empty set exists," e.g.
- 68 Stole
- 69 It lacks value
- 70 Leafy salad green
- 71 Recommit to one's fitness ... or what 23-Across depicts literally
- 74 State south of Mumbai
- 75 Perception
- 76 Goof
- 77 South, in much of South America
- 78 Light touch
- 81 Nickname that's an anagram of ONLINE
- 82 What characters in musicals often do ... or what 31-Across depicts literally
- 87 "Discreet Music" musician Brian
- 88 Cars with clutches
- 90 Photographer Goldin
- 91 Prosecco cousin
- 92 Big shots they are not
- 95 Secular
- 96 It's just under a foot
- 97 Explorer Ericson
- 98 Useful people to know ... or what 50-Across depicts literally
- 104 What an economy seat is usually short on
- 105 "Oh, why not?!"
- 106 Kuwaiti currency
- 109 Beseech
- 110 Screen feature that facilitates multitasking ... or what 61-Across depicts literally
- 116 Food that's easy to get hooked on?
- 117 Group character
- 118 Mocking smile
- 119 The "garden" in Bosch's "The Garden of Earthly Delights"
- 120 Old video game console inits.
- 121 Excel
- 122 Swamp plant
- 123 Lamb, for one
- 10 Part of a woodpecker's diet
- 11 /
- 12 Perfume line by pop star Grande
- 13 Beauty pageant since 1952
- 14 Precursors to finals
- 15 Mideast city with an eponymous pepper
- 16 Share a byline, maybe
- 17 Part of a stove
- 18 [That is so funny!]
- 24 Off-road option, for short
- 25 Spoil
- 30 ___ Pro (tech product)
- 32 Require
- 33 "Holy moly!"
- 34 Button added to Twitter in 2022
- 35 Primo
- 36 Govt. agency rules
- 37 Title for food writer Mary Berry
- 38 Hilarious sort
- 44 Library section
- 45 Imperfection, metaphorically
- 46 Labor
- 48 Makes certain knitting stitches
- 49 Before: Sp.
- 51 Group of gift-givers
- 52 Cuddle amorously, in a way
- 54 Magical creature associated with rainbows
- 55 Tri- one more time?
- 59 Rock's ___ Fighters
- 60 Soccer star ___ Heath
- 73 Recover
- 74 ___ pig
- 77 Buy time
- 78 Barely sits still?
- 79 No pro
- 80 "Weekend, here I come!"
- 82 ___ mitzvah (Jewish ceremony for multiple people)
- 83 Flatten, say
- 84 A pop
- 85 Having an intact tamper seal, say
- 86 One might move fast in stores
- 89 Loser to Herbert Hoover in 1928
- 93 Parts of some military uniforms
- 94 ___-Caps (candy)
- 96 Holy place
- 98 Goofs
- 99 Aired anew
- 100 Uses performance-enhancing drugs
- 101 Egypt neighbor: Abbr.
- 102 Say "... say," say
- 103 Agcy. that advises against eating raw cookie dough
- 107 ___ man (frequent subject in The Onion)
- 108 Monopoly payment
- 111 Home of more than one M.L.B. team
- 112 Whole lot
- 113 Bring into play
- 114 Cribbage marker
- 115 Anger

DOWN

- 1 Banks on TV
- 2 Lively dance
- 3 Moon of Saturn found to have a potentially habitable ocean
- 4 Component of some hormone therapy
- 5 National Blood Donor Mo.
- 6 Big inits. in insurance
- 7 Work enthusiastically and energetically
- 8 Genetic variant
- 9 Singer Horan of the boy band One Direction



GUNSTON STREET



"Gunston Street" is drawn by Basil Zaviski. Email him at gunstonstreet@yahoo.com, and online at gunstonstreet.com.

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FACES

Guitar virtuoso Jeff Beck dies

BY HARRISON SMITH
AND BRIAN MURPHY
The Washington Post

Jeff Beck, the British guitar virtuoso who rose to prominence in the 1960s as a member of the Yardbirds, moving the group into the rock-and-roll vanguard before establishing himself as an influential, prolific and breathtakingly adventurous solo artist, died Jan. 10 at a hospital near his home in Surrey, England. He was 78.

The cause was bacterial meningitis, said his publicist Melissa Dragich-Cordero.

Widely considered one of the greatest guitarists in history, Beck shifted seamlessly between genres, recording albums that drew on hard rock, heavy metal, jazz fusion, blues, funk, electronic music and Indian raga. Playing a Fender Stratocaster with the amps turned way up, he helped unleash new sonic possibilities with the guitar, expanding the instrument's vocabulary along with contemporaries including Eric Clapton, Jimi Hendrix and his friend Jimmy Page.

"I don't care about the rules," he once said. "In fact, if I don't break the rules at least 10 times in every song then I'm not doing my job properly."

During his brief tenure with the Yardbirds, Beck helped pioneer the use of feedback and distortion, developing a hard-edged new sound that informed hits such as "Heart Full of Soul," "Shapes of Things" and "Over Under Sideways Down." He later formed the Jeff Beck Group, a rotating group

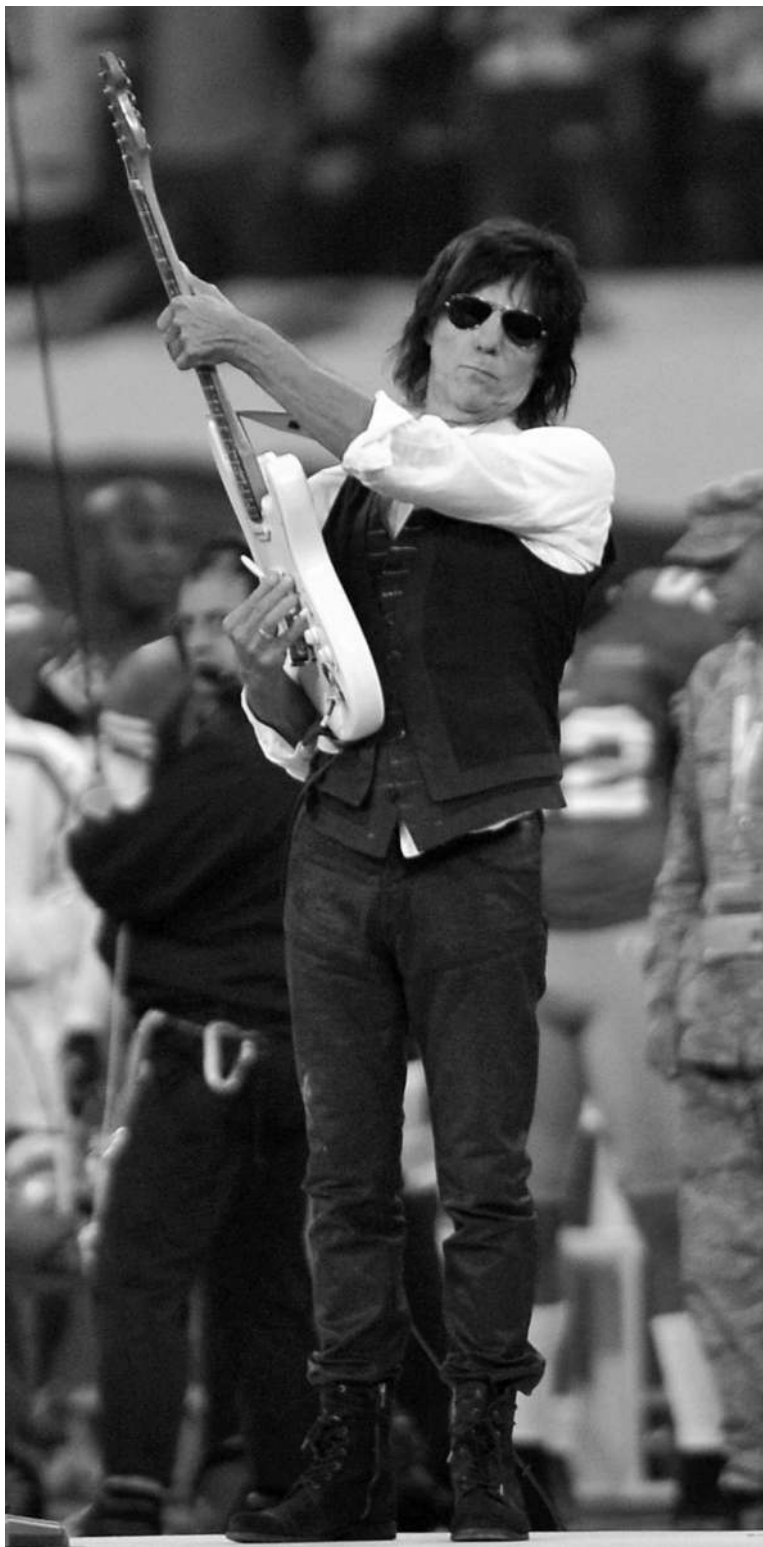
of musicians that initially included singer Rod Stewart and bassist-guitarist Ronnie Wood. That lineup was featured on his 1968 solo debut, "Truth," which peaked at No. 15 in the United States and showcased his blues-influenced playing style, notably on a psychedelic cover of Willie Dixon's "I Ain't Superstitious."

"At every break, Beck's aqueous wah-wah tone makes his instrument sound like it's talking," Rolling Stone later wrote, including the song on its list of the 100 greatest guitar tracks.

Beck received eight Grammy Awards and was twice inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, first as a member of the Yardbirds in 1992 and then as a solo artist in 2009. But his standing as a brilliant and inventive musician was shadowed somewhat by his reputation as a moody loner.

After collaborating with Stewart, Beck worked with singers as varied as Macy Gray, Buddy Guy, Wynonna Judd, Cyndi Lauper and Luciano Pavarotti. He also recorded predominantly instrumental albums such as "Blow by Blow" (1975), which reached No. 4 on the Billboard chart, and joined supergroups including Beck, Bogert & Appice, a power trio that featured bassist Tim Bogert and drummer Carmine Appice. In the 1980s he played with the Honeydrippers, a rock group that included Page and his former Led Zepelin bandmate Robert Plant.

Survivors include his wife, Sandra Cash Beck, whom he married in 2005.



Jeff Beck, shown in London in 2010, died Tuesday at age 78. Beck was known for his work with the Yardbirds and the Jeff Beck Group.

Golden Globes viewership hits a near-record low

NBC's telecast for the 80th Golden Globes on Tuesday averaged a near-record low of 6.3 million viewers, according to Nielsen, the second-smallest audience for the annual ceremony and only slightly better than the viewership garnered by the Globes press conference held during the 2008 writers' strike.

After a diversity and ethics scandal caused NBC to take the Globes off the air last year, the Hollywood Foreign Press Association's attempted comeback didn't gain back viewers and instead might have lost them. The 2021 edition, held bicoastally during the pandemic, was watched by 6.9 million. The pre-pandemic 2020 Globes drew an audience of 18.4 million.

NBC moved the show from its traditional Sunday slot to Tuesday this year. The awards were also live-streamed on Peacock for the first time. (Digital viewership wasn't released Wednesday.)

Other news

■ Penguin Random House announced Wednesday that first day sales for Prince Harry's tell-all memoir "Spare" topped 1.4 million copies, a record pace for non-fiction from a company that also publishes Barack and Michelle Obama, whose "Becoming" needed a week to reach 1.4 million when it was released in 2018.

■ "Abbott Elementary" creator and actor Quinta Brunson announced Wednesday on Twitter that the mockumentary-style comedy series has been renewed for a third season.

■ Joni Mitchell has been chosen to receive the Library of Congress Gershwin Prize for Popular Song. Mitchell, 79, is widely regarded as among the greatest singer-songwriters of her time, with her best known works including "Chelsea Morning," "Big Yellow Taxi" and "Free Man in Paris." Mitchell will be honored March 1 at a tribute concert airing March 31 on PBS stations.

■ Dr. Dre, Missy Elliott and Lil Wayne will be honored Feb. 2 at the Recording Academy's second annual Black Music Collective event during Grammy week. The academy announced Wednesday that the three Grammy winners and executive Sylvia Rhone will receive the Global Impact Award for their personal achievements in the music industry.

■ Lizzo, Taylor Swift and Harry Styles lead the 2023 iHeartRadio Music Awards nominations with seven nods each, with Jack Harlow and Drake close behind with six each. The iHeartRadio Music Awards honor the most played artists of the year on their stations and app, and fans can vote in several categories until March 20. The awards will be aired March 27 on Fox.

From wire reports

'Banshees,' 'Everything' and Zendaya get SAG nominations

BY JAKE COYLE
Associated Press

In nominations to its 29th annual awards, the Screen Actors Guild heaped honors on the casts of the anarchic indie hit "Everything Everywhere All at Once" and the Irish tragicomedy "The Banshees of Inisherin," while throwing some curveballs into the Oscar race.

The awards contenders, voted on by the Hollywood actors' guild SAG-AFTRA, were announced Wednesday on Instagram Live. The nominees for the guild's top award, best ensemble, are: "Babylon," "The Banshees of Inisherin," "Everything Everywhere All at Once," "The Fabelmans" and "Women Talking."

The SAG Awards, which will be held Feb. 26, are considered one of the most reliable Oscar bellwethers. Seldom does a movie or performance not nominated by the screen actors win at the Academy Awards. Actors make up the biggest percentage of the film academy, so their choices have the largest sway.

Last year, all the top SAG winners — the cast

of "CODA," Will Smith, Jessica Chastain, Troy Kotsur and Ariana DeBose — all repeated their wins at the Oscars.

Coming off their wins at the Golden Globes on Tuesday night, Steven Spielberg's "The Fabelmans" and Martin McDonagh's "The Banshees of Inisherin" (a co-leading five SAG nods) increasingly look like this year's front-runners, along with Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert's "Everything Everywhere All at Once" (also five SAG nominations).

Up for best performance by an female actor in a leading role are: Cate Blanchett ("Tár"), Viola Davis ("The Woman King"), Ana de Armas ("Blonde"), Danielle Deadwyler ("Till") and Michelle Yeoh ("Everything Everywhere All at Once").

Nominated for best performance by a male actor in leading role are: Austin Butler ("Elvis"), Colin Farrell ("The Banshees of Inisherin"), Brendan Fraser ("The Whale"), Bill Nighy ("Living") and Adam Sandler ("Hustle").

Nominated for male actor in a supporting

role are: Paul Dano ("The Fabelmans"), Brendan Gleeson ("The Banshees of Inisherin"), Barry Keoghan ("The Banshees of Inisherin"), Eddie Redmayne ("The Good Nurse") and Ke Huy Quan for "Everything Everywhere All at Once."

Up for female actor in a supporting role are: Angela Bassett ("Black Panther: Wakanda Forever"), Hong Chau ("The Whale"), Kerry Condon ("The Banshees of Inisherin"), Jamie Lee Curtis ("Everything Everywhere All at Once") and Stephanie Hsu ("Everything Everywhere All at Once").

On the TV side, nominated for best ensemble in a drama series are: "Better Call Saul," "The Crown," "Ozark," "Severance" and "The White Lotus." Up for best comedy series ensemble are the casts of "Abbott Elementary," "Barry," "The Bear," "Hacks" and "Only Murders in the Building." Julia Garner came away a double nominee, for "Ozark" and "Inventing Anna." Zendaya scored her first SAG nomination for her leading performance in "Euphoria."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Dungeness crab harvest delayed off Pacific coast

WA SEATTLE — The key Dungeness crab harvest areas from Klipsan Beach, Wash., to Cape Falcon, Ore., will not open until Feb. 1 because surveys found legal-sized males still lacked enough recoverable meat in their shells.

A policy group that includes the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife and the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife made the announcement late last week, The Seattle Times reported.

The late start to the 2022-23 commercial season is a disappointment to crabbers. Last season, the harvest started Dec. 1, 2021.

The Dungeness crab harvest is Washington state's most valuable commercial fishery.

Cigarette sales go up in smoke over 20 years

WI MADISON — Cigarette sales in Wisconsin plummeted over the past 20 years, fueled by higher taxes and smoking bans, a report released Wednesday showed.

The number of packs of cigarettes purchased in the state dropped from 420 million in 2001 to just under 193 million in 2022, the Wisconsin Policy Forum report said. On a per capita basis, more than 32 packs of cigarettes were sold per resident in 2022 compared with nearly 78 in 2001.

During that time span, a statewide smoking ban took effect, taxes were increased on cigarettes three times and there was a growth in substitute products like vaping, the report noted. The statewide smoking ban, which included bars and restaurants, took effect in 2011. State taxes were increased in 2002, 2008 and 2009, while federal taxes also increased in 2002 and 2009.

The report notes that due to higher taxes in Wisconsin, some smokers may have illegally smuggled cigarettes or legally purchased them in other states where taxes are lowered.

Suit: School ban on BLM shirts is discriminatory

GA SPRINGFIELD — A Georgia school district is being sued by students who say they were barred from wearing Black Lives Matter T-shirts to school events while their white peers regularly wear shirts printed with Confederate flags.

The lawsuit was filed last week in U.S. District Court against school administrators in Effingham County. It says the district's unfair application of its dress code is part of a broader pattern of discrimination and "deliberate indifference to acts of racial animosity" that violate the civil rights of Black students.

School administrators in Effingham County have cited a district-wide policy prohibiting clothing that "may contribute to disruption," the lawsuit says, to keep students



RUSS DILLINGHAM, (LEWISTON, MAINE) SUN JOURNAL/AP

A good brisk run

Members of the Bates College cross country track team practice in below-freezing temperatures in Lewiston, Maine, on Monday.

from wearing Black Lives Matter shirts.

One of the student plaintiffs was denied entry to a high school football game because she wore a Black Lives Matter shirt, the lawsuit said. It alleges that white students in the school district regularly wear shirts printed with Confederate flags.

Effingham County School Superintendent Yancy Ford said in a statement to news outlets that the district had not yet been served with the lawsuit. He said any response to its claims would be made in court.

Election official misused pandemic relief money

MS JACKSON — An election commissioner in Mississippi's largest county has pleaded guilty to fraud and embezzlement charges related to misuse of pandemic relief money from a group funded by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg.

Hinds County Election Commissioner Toni Johnson, 37, of Clinton, entered the guilty plea Monday as jury selection was beginning for her trial, court records show. She will have to resign and will no longer be able to serve in any office handling public money, according to the state auditor's office.

Johnson was chairwoman of the Hinds County Election Commission in 2020 and 2021. According to the state auditor's office, she used COVID-19 response money from the Center for Tech and Civic Life to buy two 85-inch televisions and per-

sonal protective equipment, which she purportedly had delivered to her own home and one other private home.

In the plea deal, Johnson is expected to avoid prison time.

Program lets some victims shield their addresses

TN NASHVILLE — The Tennessee secretary of state is encouraging victims of human trafficking, stalking, domestic abuse or any sexual offense to protect their addresses from public disclosure under a free state program.

Secretary of State Tre Hargett's office said the Safe at Home address confidentiality program provides approved applicants a substitute address that can be used for voter registration, government services such as a driver's license, access to assistance programs, and other legal needs.

The address can be used by anyone in that household. Safe at Home applicants can complete an application with a partner agency listed at SafeAtHomeTN.com. They can also call 615-253-3043 to find a partner agency.

The program launched in 2019 and was expanded in 2021.

Police: Teacher's injury from pellet gun superficial

VT BARRE — Charges will be forthcoming after a high school teacher suffered a superficial injury after being hit with a

projectile fired from a pellet gun that had been brought to school by a student, Barre police say.

Police say the incident occurred at about 2:45 p.m. on Tuesday as students at Barre's Spaulding High School were being released for the day.

Two students were identified as having brought pellet guns to school, one of which was reported to have been involved in the incident, police say.

In a social media post, Spaulding administrators say they are working with Barre police to ensure the safety of the community, but they cannot reveal many details of the incident.

"We'd like to re-emphasize to our students and staff the importance of 'See something, Say something,'" the post said.

Lobster fishermen must report more about catch

ME PORTLAND — Fishermen in Maine, the state responsible for about 80% of the nation's lobster haul in 2021, must now report more detailed information such as when, where and how many they catch.

Few had to report until this year, making Maine the only state that harvests lobster that didn't require full details, according to the Portland Press Herald.

Fishermen started having to share the additional information with the state and regulators at the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries

Commission beginning Jan. 1.

Fishermen in the state brought in about 109 million pounds of lobster in 2021.

At least 20 horse deaths tied to contaminated feed

LA BATON ROUGE — At least 20 horses in Louisiana have died after ingesting bacteria found in some alfalfa hay cubes from a manufacturer in Colorado, state agriculture officials said.

The Louisiana Department of Agriculture and Forestry began notifying livestock owners and others about potential problems with some bags of "Top Of The Rockies Alfalfa Horse Cubes" in mid-December after horses in Louisiana and three other states began showing neurological symptoms consistent with botulism, state officials said.

The FDA said at least 98 horses in Louisiana, Texas, Colorado and New Mexico have showed symptoms including muscle tremors, trouble swallowing or eating, difficulty standing or collapse. At least 45 of those animals have died or were euthanized due to declining health after eating the cubes.

The department said it had confirmed with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and the California Animal Health & Food Safety Laboratory that Clostridium botulinum type C was in the alfalfa cubes, which causes equine botulism, The Advertiser reported.

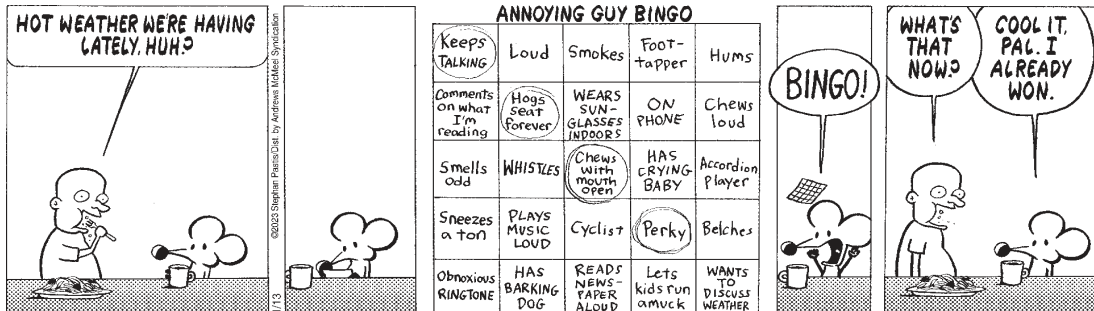
Frazz



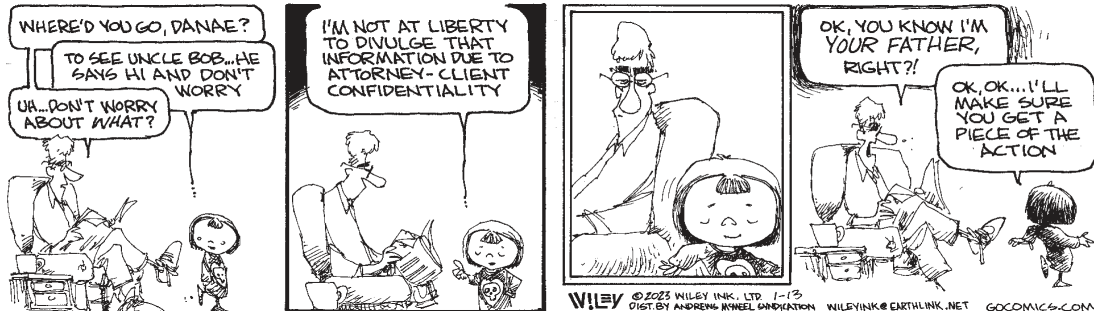
Dilbert



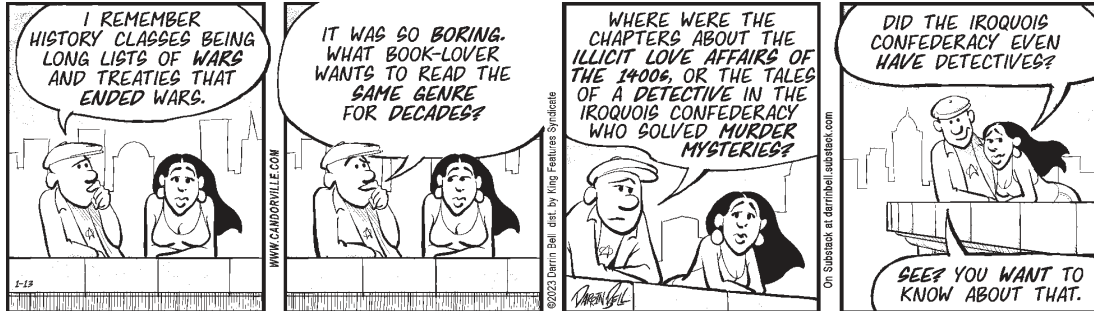
Pearls Before Swine



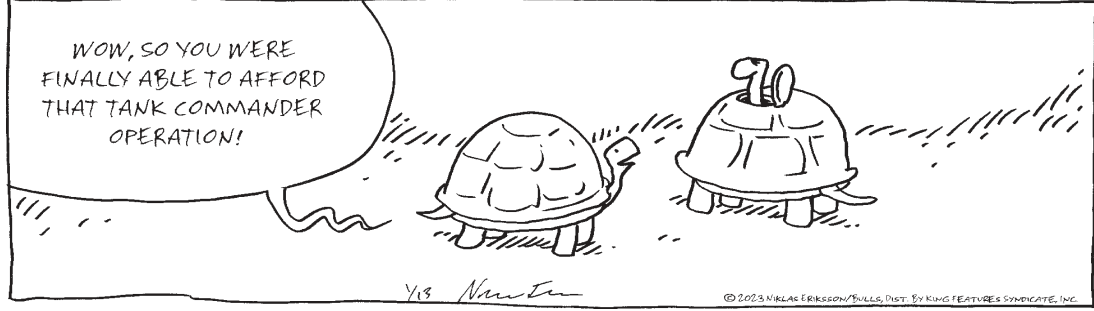
Non Sequitur



Candorville



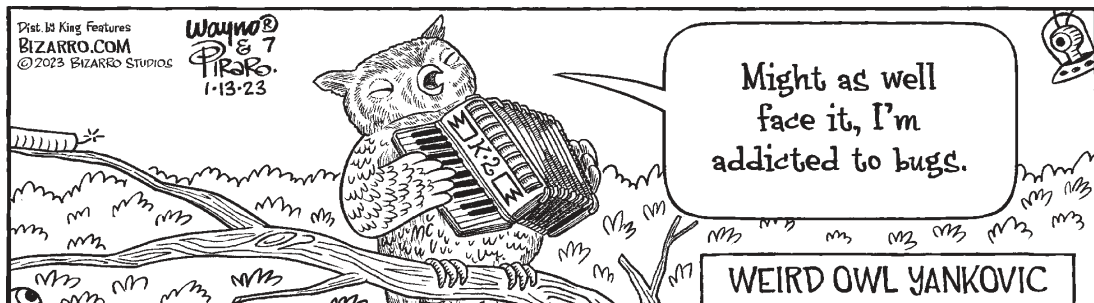
Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



Bizarro



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | | 6 | 7 | 8 | | 9 | 10 | 11 |
| 12 | | | | | | 13 | | | | 14 | | |
| 15 | | | | | | 16 | | | | 17 | | |
| | | 18 | | | | 19 | | | | 20 | | |
| 21 | 22 | | | 23 | | | | | | 24 | | |
| 25 | | | 26 | | 27 | | 28 | | | | | |
| 29 | | | | 30 | | | 31 | | | 32 | 33 | 34 |
| | | | 35 | | | 36 | | | | 37 | | |
| 38 | 39 | 40 | | | | 41 | | 42 | | 43 | | |
| 44 | | | | | 45 | | | | 46 | | | |
| 47 | | | | 48 | | | | 49 | | | 50 | 51 |
| 52 | | | | | 53 | | | | 54 | | | |
| 55 | | | | | 56 | | | | 57 | | | |

ACROSS

- 1 Showy parrot
- 6 Lith., once
- 9 Pooch
- 12 "The Devil Wears —"
- 13 Tic-tac-toe win
- 14 Mess up
- 15 Macho types
- 16 Name of B.B. King's guitar
- 18 Like some pools
- 20 Amorphous mass
- 21 ISP option
- 23 Expert
- 24 Diplomat Silas
- 25 Tex. neighbor
- 27 Fess up
- 29 "Night" author Elie
- 31 Prolific inventor
- 35 Entangle
- 37 Prefix with conference
- 38 Freak out
- 41 "Aladdin" monkey
- 43 Animal doc
- 44 Greek vowels
- 45 Shrimp recipe
- 47 Wilbur Wright's brother
- 49 "The — Express"
- 52 Never, in Bonn
- 53 Oft-pierced body part
- 54 "Lights" singer Goulding

- 55 Pitcher Maglie
- 56 Sit-up targets
- 57 Plow pioneer

- 22 Enjoy Vail
- 24 Carried out
- 26 Home of St. Francis

DOWN

- 1 Speedometer stat
- 2 Exist
- 3 Composer Saint-Saëns
- 4 Mideast gulf
- 5 Comedian Sykes
- 6 Flew alone the heart
- 7 Tart
- 8 Sinbad's bird
- 9 Actress Reese
- 10 Acrylic fiber
- 11 Loon's cousin
- 17 "No need to explain!"
- 19 Florida city
- 21 Part of DJIA Des'—
- 28 Peach —
- 30 SASE, e.g.
- 32 Figaro's home
- 33 Flamenco cheer
- 34 Mosquito barrier
- 36 Indy autos
- 38 Drudges
- 39 Places in the heart
- 40 Orange variety
- 42 Called a strike?
- 45 Thick chunk
- 46 North —
- 48 Salonga of "Miss Saigon"
- 50 Melody
- 51 R&B singer

Answer to Previous Puzzle

| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| S | T | O | P | | M | A | V | | C | E | N | A |
| C | A | R | L | | E | P | I | | A | X | E | L |
| O | R | C | A | | D | E | E | | R | T | E | S |
| T | A | H | I | N | I | | W | E | I | R | D | O |
| | | | | | T | O | E | | M | O | E | |
| M | A | S | S | | V | A | C | U | M | E | D | |
| M | L | I | | | A | M | O | | | E | L | O |
| M | E | D | E | L | L | I | N | | A | S | K | S |
| | | | | | E | V | E | | S | U | N | |
| A | L | C | O | V | E | | U | H | A | U | L | S |
| H | E | A | L | | G | U | M | | L | S | A | T |
| M | E | R | V | | A | N | E | | O | S | S | O |
| E | R | S | E | | D | O | D | | G | R | E | W |

1-13

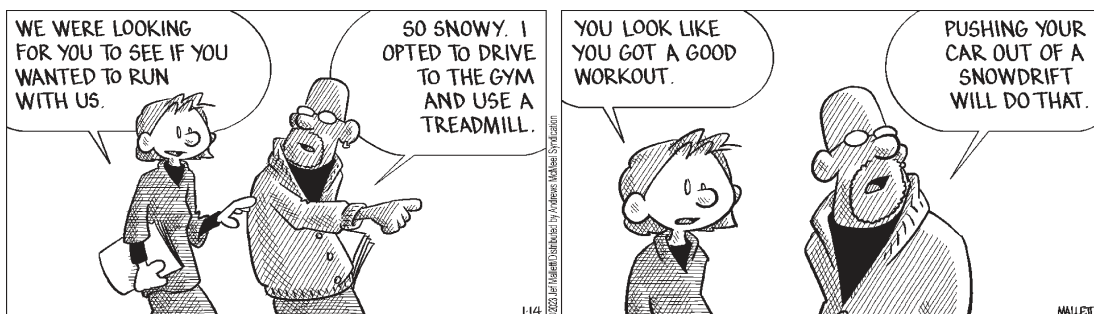
CRYPTOQUIP

K R V B W W Y H K C Q M N W W P K V X ,
 L Y Q W R X Y C A A V T Q N C T H X B W P O
 I T M N L W M Y T X W H N W O ' P W
 N V R W - X V I W H P W Y H X .

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: TO SPEAK ON TWO-WAY RADIOS IN THOSE NORTH AMERICAN MOUNTAINS, COULD PEOPLE USE ROCKY-TALKIES?

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: Q equals G

Frazz



Dilbert



Pearls Before Swine



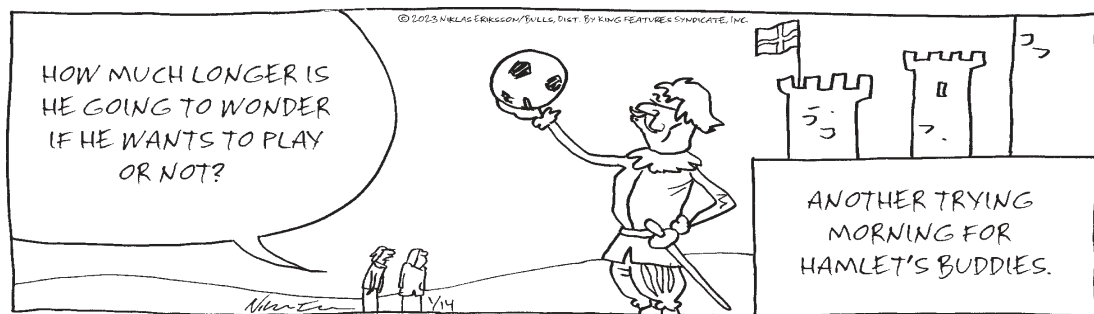
Non Sequitur



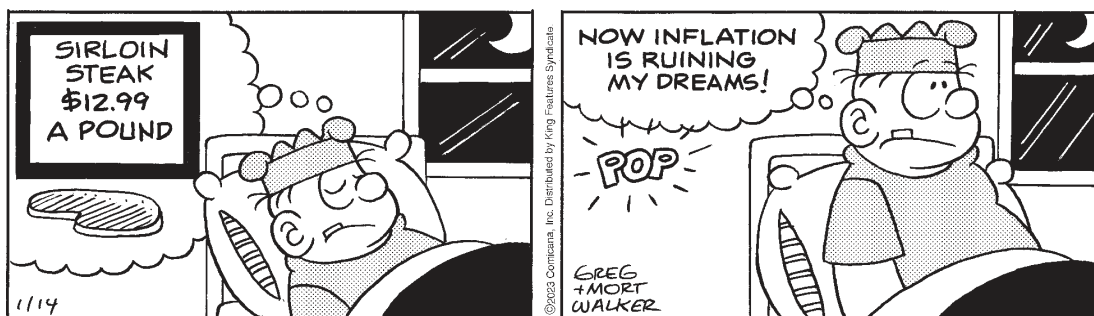
Candorville



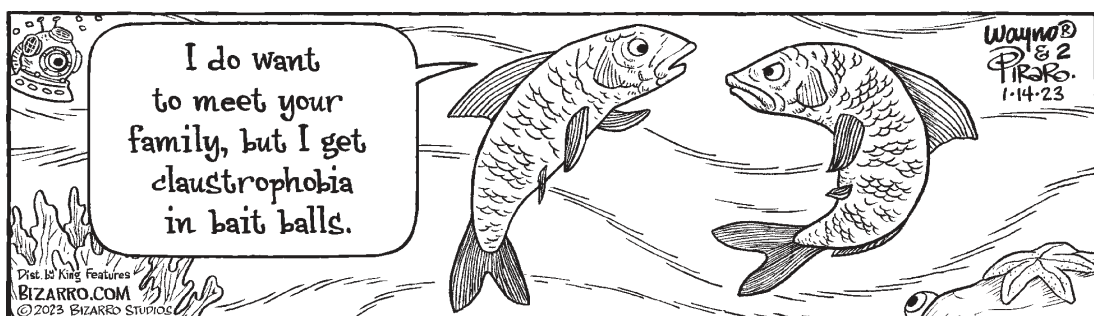
Carpe Diem



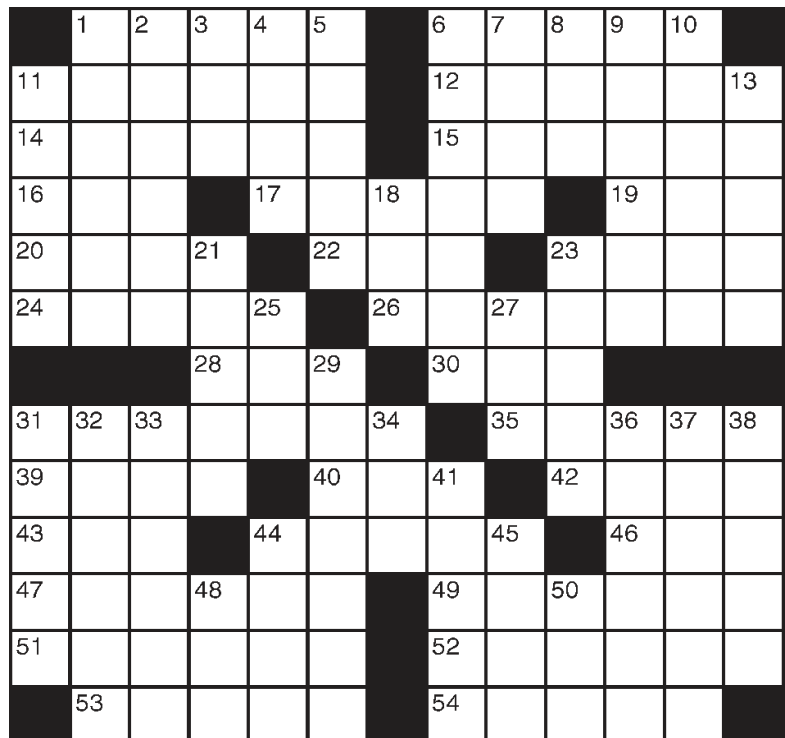
Beetle Bailey



Bizarro



Eugene Sheffer Crossword



ACROSS

- 1 Wee hr.
- 6 Calm intervals
- 11 Clef variety
- 12 Large bay windows
- 14 Like a duck's feet
- 15 Familiar adage
- 16 Post-op area
- 17 Bags
- 19 Canonized Fr. woman
- 20 Corn seasoning
- 22 USN officers
- 23 Future flower
- 24 Characteristic
- 26 "Now, listen to me ..."
- 28 Small batteries
- 30 Longoria of TV
- 31 Supervise
- 35 Redacts
- 39 Director Wertmuller
- 40 SASE, e.g.
- 42 Country singer Evans
- 43 Computer key
- 44 Garlicky mayo
- 46 Dogtag wearers (Abbr.)
- 47 Swindled
- 49 Verdi works
- 51 Zealous

- 52 To a great degree
- 53 Defense gp. until 1977
- 54 Rims

DOWN

- 1 Mine vehicle
- 2 Outer space cloud
- 3 Recede
- 4 Pub orders
- 5 Olympic prize
- 6 Quick glance
- 7 Web addresses
- 8 Cover
- 9 Tenant
- 10 Actor Christian
- 11 Plot surprise
- 13 Bjorn Borg, for one
- 18 Dol. fractions
- 21 Pageant crown
- 23 Herrings' cousins
- 25 Prof's helpers
- 27 Prior night
- 29 Investigate
- 31 "Get Here" singer Adams
- 32 Sun-blocking cap parts
- 33 Write cryptograms
- 34 Rock producer Brian
- 36 "Amen to that!"
- 37 Court contests
- 38 Impudent
- 41 Nearby
- 44 "If it — broke ..."
- 45 Apple product
- 48 Mauna —
- 50 Work unit

Answer to Previous Puzzle



1-14

CRYPTOQUIP

OW R ZRYFQ KRYNQZ CW ZR JL
 OA WSZZ CW NDSYNDQA,
 EQPKZQA R JL PCAXSQA, OA OE
 R YQZOFCSA EYRNE?

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: I LOVE EATING CHEERIOS, BAGELS AND DOUGHNUTS VERY MUCH BECAUSE THEY'RE HOLE-SOME TREATS.
 Today's Cryptoquip Clue: Z equals L

STARS AND STRIPES

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Ernie Gates

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Contradictions in the US medical system in full view

BY CORY FRANKLIN

Chicago Tribune

In a recent "Monday Night Football" game, Buffalo Bills safety Damar Hamlin suffered cardiac arrest and collapsed on the field. An immediate response by the trainers, stadium medical staff and the superb intensive care team at the University of Cincinnati Medical Center saved Hamlin's life. The University of Cincinnati is one of the best places in the U.S. — or the world — for the young man to have been treated.

The episode was a vivid illustration of the contradiction of the American medical system: Our sophisticated emergency treatment is unrivaled even as the comprehensive U.S. patient care system remains the world's most expensive and possibly the most dysfunctional.

Nowhere has this paradox been more evident than during the COVID-19 pandemic. No country has better care for patients with advanced COVID-19, whose lungs are severely damaged by the coronavirus. But these represent only a fraction of all COVID-19 deaths because most patients die of underlying chronic health conditions or untreatable complications. This is where the U.S. is failing, and, consequently, U.S. mortality and deaths per capita are higher than in most of the world.

What accounts for the high U.S. death rate? A look at the national map is illuminating. The states with the highest deaths per capita are overrepresented in the South — Alabama, Mississippi, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Arkansas — along with West Virginia and Arizona. These states, some of the poorest in the country, are among those with the highest rates of obesity and diabetes and the lowest

rates of COVID-19 vaccination. Also of note, West Virginia and Arizona are two states with significantly older populations.

The limited evidence suggests that some combination of age, obesity, diabetes and low vaccination rate, in the setting of poverty, creates conditions for a higher COVID-19 mortality rate. Determining the relative importance of these factors requires performing a statistical technique known as multivariate analysis, and since the beginning of the pandemic, there have been relatively few studies of this type to try to ascertain how much each factor contributes to death from COVID-19. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention should address this research gap.

The worldwide mortality situation is similar. Countries in Eastern Europe, which along with Peru are the only countries in the world with more deaths per capita than the U.S., are also relatively poor and old. Like the high-COVID-19 states in the U.S., Eastern Europe has high rates of obesity and diabetes and low COVID-19 vaccination rates. Eight in 10 people in some parts of Eastern Europe are obese or pre-obese. Diabetes is 2.6 times more prevalent in Eastern Europe than in Western Europe. And among European countries with the lowest vaccination rates, all are in Eastern Europe.

Without improvements in basic health delivery and infrastructure, no matter how many effective ventilators and other sophisticated equipment the U.S. has, we will have a comparatively high mortality as long as COVID-19 persists. We cannot control our aging population — demography is destiny — but in the short term, we can target this population for vaccination more aggressively.

Our patchwork health care system, in which primary care is often fragmented and

insurance-dependent, has done little to address our twin epidemics of obesity and diabetes. There are new breakthrough drugs for both conditions, and those should be made available and affordable for all patients who meet the treatment indications. A national program to encourage lifestyle changes — better diet and more exercise — is essential.

All this may not be enough. Cutting mortality from COVID-19 may require rethinking our long-term approach. The vaccines have been effective and lucrative for the drug manufacturers but have reduced interest and funding for the exploration of other treatments for people who are infected with the virus.

The current strategy of updating vaccines in an attempt to immunize against new variants may fail because viral mutations could occur faster than our ability to keep pace. Our efforts would be better directed toward a universal coronavirus vaccine and new treatments, especially antiviral medications for patients to take in the event of COVID-19 infection. We need a "penicillin miracle" for COVID-19.

Life is a series of contradictions. Hamlin was at once unlucky and lucky. COVID-19 is a disease of the well-fed and affluent and simultaneously a disease of the poor. In that respect, the government and medical community should make a concerted effort to improve the quality of care for the urban and rural poor, as well as for the Indigenous American community, which has been hit hard by the pandemic.

The pandemic is a clarion call for us to make health care more ambitious and more equitable.

Dr. Cory Franklin is a retired intensive care physician.

Lesson of the Ukraine war: There's only 1 superpower

BY HAL BRANDS

Bloomberg Opinion

It feels ghoulish to look for good news in Russia's war in Ukraine, given how much misery that conflict has inflicted. But geopolitical tragedies can serve pedagogical purposes. If nothing else, this war has illustrated what a world without American power would look like — and what it looks like when America uses that unmatched power well.

My day job involves teaching Johns Hopkins University undergrads and grad students about international relations. I periodically have to remind myself that one can forgive millennials and members of Gen Z for having a jaded view of America's global role.

For two decades, the standout events in U.S. foreign policy were costly, failed wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. If you're not old enough to remember the reunification of Germany in 1990 or the Persian Gulf War of 1990-91, you may struggle to think of an international mega-crisis Washington managed with aplomb.

This isn't to give credence to overwrought critiques of American statecraft in the two decades after the Cold War. Many foreign policy successes are invisible, because they involve preventing awful outcomes — perhaps additional, catastrophic terrorist strikes after 9/11; or a global depression in 2008-09 — as well as achieving good ones.

But if your consciousness of U.S. foreign policy is bookended by the Iraq invasion in 2003 and the humiliating withdrawal from Af-

ghanistan in 2021, you might wonder whether Washington really knows what it is doing. And if you grew up in a post-Cold War world where the global wars and vicious rivalries of the 20th century seemed like ancient history, you might ask what the value of the American-led international order really is.

The Ukraine War has been doubly enlightening. First, it starkly illustrates just how grim and brutal a post-American world might be. A Ukraine left to its own devices would have quickly succumbed to President Vladimir Putin's invasion. It would now be suffering show trials, the execution and imprisonment of its leaders, and harsh punishment of anyone who resisted Russian rule.

The reason so many Eastern European countries have clamored to get into America's alliance network over the past 25 years is that they understand that the sort of aggression and barbarism we have seen in Ukraine have been the norm for much of human history. Such outrages have simply been suppressed, to an unprecedented degree, by America's self-interested but comparatively benign leadership since World War II.

Fortunately, the Ukraine war has also offered a timely case study in just how mighty and effective an engaged America can be. President Joe Biden's administration hasn't gotten everything right: Its early assessments of Ukraine's will to fight were far too pessimistic, for instance, and its initial efforts to deter Russian nuclear escalation were muddled and confusing. But the overall performance has been pretty good, helping Ukraine thrive

in a war it wasn't supposed to survive, and demonstrating that the world won't be truly multipolar anytime soon.

America's spies sniffed out Putin's aggression months in advance and gave Ukraine critical warning on how the invasion would unfold. The U.S. has delivered real-time information that has allowed Kyiv to plan its most effective offensives and carry out its most spectacular strikes. That performance is presumably not lost on President Xi Jinping of China, who now must worry that any bid to attack Taiwan might quickly become the worst-kept secret on Earth.

Then there is the contrast between Russian military gear — tanks that combust catastrophically when hit, missiles that don't get close to their targets — and American military equipment. By providing just 20 HIMARS rocket launchers, Washington helped Kyiv turn the tide of Europe's largest land war since 1945; one wonders how much damage Ukraine might be doing with 40 of them instead.

Overconfidence can be deadly, and what has happened in Ukraine is no guarantee that Washington will succeed in the next crisis with Beijing, Moscow or Tehran. But a war in which the U.S. is not even directly involved has provided a vital lesson for America and its rivals: There's still just one superpower.

Bloomberg Opinion columnist Hal Brands is the Henry Kissinger Distinguished Professor at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies, co-author of "Danger Zone: The Coming Conflict with China" and a member of the State Department's Foreign Affairs Policy Board. This column does not necessarily reflect the opinion of the editorial board or Bloomberg LP and its owners.

SCOREBOARD

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Wednesday's men's scores

EAST

Army 72, American 60
 Baylor 83, West Virginia 78
 Binghamton 72, NJIT 71, OT
 Bryant 86, Albany (NY) 69
 Colgate 77, Boston U. 71
 Delaware 72, Towson 59
 Duquesne 92, Saint Joseph's 80
 Hofstra 77, Monmouth (NJ) 57
 La Salle 78, UMass 77
 Lafayette 59, Navy 50
 Lehigh 76, Holy Cross 58
 Loyola (Md.) 67, Bucknell 57
 Mass.-Lowell 80, Vermont 65
 New Hampshire 71, Maine 58
 Penn St. 85, Indiana 66
 Rhode Island 68, St. Bonaventure 67
 Syracuse 82, Virginia Tech 72

SOUTH

Campbell 78, SC-Upstate 63
 Charleston Southern 106, High Point 69
 Chattanooga 95, W. Carolina 76
 Clemson 83, Louisville 70
 Coll. of Charleston 71, UNC-Wilmington 69

Duke 77, Pittsburgh 69
 ETSU 96, The Citadel 74
 FAU 77, FIU 73, OT
 Furman 84, Mercer 66
 Gardner-Webb 79, Presbyterian 78, OT
 Georgia 58, Mississippi St. 50
 Miami 88, Boston College 72
 NC A&T 80, Elon 71
 Radford 66, Winthrop 52
 Richmond 61, Davidson 57
 Samford 83, Wofford 58
 UCF 107, Memphis 104, 2OT
 UNC-Greensboro 72, VMI 57
 W. Kentucky 80, UAB 78
 Wake Forest 90, Florida St. 75
 William & Mary 81, Hampton 65

MIDWEST

Bradley 91, Evansville 46
 Cincinnati 83, East Carolina 55
 Illinois St. 76, Missouri St. 66, OT
 Marquette 82, UConn 76
 Rutgers 65, Northwestern 62
 S. Illinois 69, Indiana St. 61
 Saint Louis 63, George Mason 62
 Xavier 90, Creighton 87

SOUTHWEST

Alabama 84, Arkansas 69
 Houston 83, South Florida 77
 Middle Tennessee 71, Rice 68
 North Texas 67, Louisiana Tech 65
 Tarleton St. 73, Chicago St. 63
 Texas 79, TCU 75
 Texas A&M 82, Missouri 64
 Tulane 97, SMU 88
 UTEP 69, UTSA 57

FAR WEST

Boise St. 84, UNLV 66
 Texas Rio Grande Valley 103, Abilene Christian 86
 UC Davis 62, CS Northridge 54
 UC Irvine 70, Cal St.-Fullerton 65
 UC Riverside 74, UC San Diego 68
 UC Santa Barbara 60, CS Bakersfield 48
 Utah Valley St. 71, Cal Baptist 67
 Washington St. 66, California 51

Wednesday's women's scores

EAST

Albany (NY) 63, Bryant 50
 Army 77, American 56
 Boston U. 72, Colgate 51
 Bucknell 56, Loyola (Md.) 50
 Butler 72, Georgetown 48
 Duquesne 69, St. Bonaventure 38
 East Carolina 72, Temple 51
 George Washington 63, Fordham 57
 Holy Cross 66, Lehigh 64
 La Salle 69, George Mason 62
 Lafayette 69, Navy 57
 NJIT 62, Binghamton 57
 Providence 64, Xavier 50
 UConn 82, St. John's 52
 Vermont 42, Mass.-Lowell 37

SOUTH

Campbell 51, SC-Upstate 49
 E. Kentucky 85, Belkarmine 79
 FAU 76, FIU 66
 Gardner-Webb 90, Presbyterian 86
 High Point 60, Charleston Southern 57
 Longwood 75, UNC-Asheville 65
 Louisiana Tech 81, North Texas 66
 Middle Tennessee 85, Rice 56
 Murray St. 64, Belmont 46
 Radford 74, Winthrop 45
 South Florida 58, Memphis 45
 Tulane 76, Wichita St. 53
 VCU 54, Richmond 51
 W. Kentucky 75, UAB 71

MIDWEST

Akron 60, E. Michigan 43
 Bowling Green 101, Cent. Michigan 68
 Buffalo 69, Ohio 64
 Creighton 75, Seton Hall 53
 Dayton 66, Davidson 60
 Evansville 65, Indiana St. 54
 Ill. Chicago 51, Valparaiso 50
 Iowa 93, Northwestern 64
 Iowa St. 67, Kansas St. 56
 Miami (Ohio) 84, Kent St. 76, OT
 Missouri St. 78, S. Illinois 57
 N. Iowa 70, Drake 69
 Nebraska 80, Penn St. 51
 Toledo 83, Ball St. 76
 Villanova 71, DePaul 64
 W. Michigan 79, N. Illinois 70
 Wisconsin 84, Michigan St. 80, OT

SOUTHWEST

Oklahoma 89, Texas Tech 79
 Oklahoma St. 70, Baylor 65
 Tarleton St. 70, Texas Rio Grande Valley 60

FAR WEST

Colorado St. 71, Boise St. 50
 New Mexico 88, Nevada 58
 S. Utah 70, Utah Valley St. 66
 San Diego St. 49, Fresno St. 43
 UC Davis 83, CS Northridge 73
 UC Irvine 57, Cal St.-Fullerton 39
 UC Riverside 67, UC San Diego 53
 UC Santa Barbara 63, CS Bakersfield 62
 UNLV 84, San Jose St. 58
 Utah Tech 85, Abilene Christian 74
 Wyoming 61, Air Force 60

PRO FOOTBALL

NFL injury report

NEW YORK — The National Football League injury report, as provided by the league (OUT: Player will not play; DOUBTFUL: Player is unlikely to play; QUESTIONABLE: Player is not certain to play; DNP: did not practice; LIMITED: limited participation; FULL: Full participation):

Wild Card Games

Saturday

SEATTLE SEAHAWKS at SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS — **SEATTLE:** DNP: G Phil Haynes (ankle), RB DeeJay Dallas (ankle/quadriceps), DB Xavier Crawford (hamstring), DE Shelby Harris (knee), NT Al Woods (achilles/NIR-resting player), RB Kenneth Walker III (ankle), G Gave Jackson (NIR-resting player). **LIMITED:** TE Noah Fant (knee), S Ryan Neal (knee). **FULL:** OLB Bruce Irvin (pectoral), WR Tyler Lockett (shin), OT Abraham Lucas (knee), G Damien Lewis (ankle), CB Tariq Woolen (ankle). **SAN FRANCISCO:** DNP: QB Jimmy Garoppolo (foot), CB Amry Thomas (ankle), DT Arik Armstead (foot, ankle), G Aaron Banks (ankle, knee), LB Demetrius Flannigan-Fowles (neck). **LIMITED:** DT Javon Kinlaw (knee), RB Christian McCaffrey (knee), OLB Dre Greenlaw (back). **FULL:** DE Nick Bosa (NIR-resting player), DT Kevin Givens

(knee).

LOS ANGELES CHARGERS at JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS — **LOS ANGELES CHARGERS:** DNP: WR Mike Williams (back). **FULL:** OLB Joey Bosa (groin), CB Bryce Callahan (groin), RB Zander Horvath (ankle), ILB Kenneth Murray (neck), LB Amen Ogbongbemiga (biceps), OT Trey Pipkins (knee), S Raheem Layne (thumb). **JACKSONVILLE:** DNP: LS Ross Maticic (back). **LIMITED:** QB Trevor Lawrence (toe), WR Jamal Agnew (shoulder), G Brandon Scherff (abdomen), WR Kendrick Pryor (shoulder). **FULL:** K Riley Patterson (knee).

Sunday

MIAMI DOLPHINS at BUFFALO BILLS — **MIAMI:** DNP: T Terron Armstead (toe/pectoral/knee/hip), LB Bradley Chubb (ankle/hand), OL Liam Eichenberg (hand), LB Melvin Ingram (NIR-resting player), T Kendall Lamm (ankle), RB Raheem Mostert (thumb), T Brandon Shell (knee/ankle), QB Tua Tgovaloa (concussion). **LIMITED:** QB Teddy Bridgewater (knee/right finger), FB Alec Ingold (thumb), LB Jaelan Phillips (toe/wrist), WR Jaylen Waddle (ankle), WR Cedrick Wilson Jr. (hip/groin), RB Jeff Wilson Jr. (illness). **FULL:** CB Kader Khouli (thumb), T Greg Little (achilles), QB Skylar Thompson (ankle). **BUFFALO:** DNP: DT Jordan Phillips (shoulder), S Jordan Poyer

TENNIS

Giron, United States, 6-1, 6-7 (5), 6-2.
 Jenson Brooksby, United States, def. Quentin Halys, France, 7-6 (3), 7-6 (2).

Men's Doubles

Quarterfinals

Nathaniel Lammons and Jackson Withrow, United States, def. Michael Venus, New Zealand, and Jamie Murray (4), Britain, 6-7 (2), 6-4, 12-10.

Quarterfinals

Lucas Miedler and Alexander Erler, Austria, def. Luis David Martinez, Venezuela, and Sebastian Baez, Argentina, 6-4, 6-0.
 Nikola Mektic and Mate Pavic (1), Croatia, def. Maximo Gonzalez and Andres Molteni, Argentina, 7-6 (3), 3-6, 10-5.

Marcel Granollers, Spain, and Horacio Zeballos (2), Argentina, def. Sander Gille and Joran Vliegen, Belgium, 6-4, 6-7 (6), 10-7.

Nathaniel Lammons and Jackson Withrow, United States, def. Fabrice Martin and Jeremy Chardy, France, 6-2, 7-6 (4).

ATP Adelaide International 2

Thursday

At Memorial Drive Tennis Centre Adelaide, Australia

Purse: \$642,735

Surface: Hardcourt outdoor

Men's Singles

Quarterfinals

Jack Draper, Britain, def. Karen Khachanov (3), Russia, 6-4, 7-6 (3).

Kwon Soon Woo, South Korea, def. Mikael Ymer, Sweden, 6-1, 6-2.

Roberto Bautista Agut (4), Spain, def. Alejandro Davidovich Fokina (7), Spain,

DEALS

Wednesday's transactions

BASEBALL

Major League Baseball

American League

BALTIMORE ORIOLAS — Designated 1B Lewin Diaz for assignment.

BOSTON RED SOX — Agreed to terms with 3B Rafael Devers on a ten-year contract extension. Traded LHP Darwinzon Hernandez to Baltimore in exchange for cash considerations.

DETROIT TIGERS — Claimed RHP Edwin Uceta off waivers from Arizona.

KANSAS CITY ROYALS — Agreed to terms with RHPs Brooks Kriske, Mike Mayers, Nick Wittgren and INF/OF Matt Beaty on minor league contracts. Activated LHP Amir Garrett.

MINNESOTA TWINS — Agreed to terms with SS Carlos Correa on a six-year contract. Designated OF Kyle Garlick for assignment.

National League

ARIZONA DIAMONDBACKS — Agreed to terms with RHP Zach Davies on a one-year contract.

LOS ANGELES DODGERS — Acquired INF Miguel Rojas from Miami in exchange for minor league INF Jacob Amaya.

MIAMI MARLINS — Sent SS Charles Leblanc outright to Jacksonville (IL). Designated RHP J.B. Bukauskas for assignment.

MILWAUKEE BREWERS — Sent RHP Trevor Kelley outright to Nashville (IL).

PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES — Sent RHP Francisco Morales outright to Lehigh Valley (IL).

SAN DIEGO PADRES — Named Phillip Wellman manager, Scott Mitchell pitching coach, Jimmy Jones assistant pitching coach, Raul Padron hitting coach, Brian Esposito bench coach, Josh DiLoreto and Maritza Castro athletic trainers, A.J. Russell strength coach, Austin Harris performance analyst and Cullen Mersch video analyst for El Paso (PCL). Named Luke Montz manager, Jeff Andrews pitching coach, Pat O'Sullivan hitting coach, Felipe Blanco bench coach, David Bryan athletic trainer and Travis Craven performance analyst for San Antonio (TL). Named Jonathan Matthews manager, Carlos Chavez pitching coach, Aaron Bray hitting coach, Shane Robinson bench coach, Lauren Gottschall athletic trainer, Chandler Craig strength coach, Gregory Bender performance coach and Jared Pollock video analyst for Fort Wayne (ML). Named Pete Zamora manager, Thomas Eshelman pitching coach, Jed Morris hitting coach, Jhonaldo Pozo bench coach, Josevan Prieto athletic trainer, Mark Spadavecchia strength coach, Charles King perfor-

(NIR-resting player/knee), G Rodger Salfold (NIR-resting player). **LIMITED:** WR Isaiah McKenzie (hamstring). **FULL:** QB Josh Allen (ankle/right elbow), CB Cam Lewis (forearm).

NEW YORK GIANTS at MINNESOTA VIKINGS — **NEW YORK GIANTS:** LIMITED: OL Jon Feliciano (back), DB Adoree Jackson (knee), LB Azeez Ojulari (ankle), DB Jason Pinnock (shoulder), DL Leonard Williams (neck). **FULL:** DB Xavier McKinney (fingers). **MINNESOTA:** DNP: CB Cam Dantzler (NIR-personal/ankle). **LIMITED:** LB Brian Asamoah (knee), C Garrett Bradbury (back), S Harrison Smith (knee). **FULL:** DL James Lynch (shoulder).

BALTIMORE RAVENS at CINCINNATI BENGALS — **BALTIMORE:** DNP: DE Calais Campbell (NIR-resting player), RB Gus Edwards (concussion), OLB Justin Houston (NIR-resting player), QB Lamar Jackson (knee), LS Nick Moore (illness), OLB Jason Pierre-Paul (NIR-resting player), G Ben Powers (NIR-resting player), T Ronnie Stanley (NIR-resting player), CB Brandon Stephens (illness). **LIMITED:** CB Marlon Humphrey (shoulder), QB Tyler Huntley (shoulder/right wrist), CB Marcus Peters (calf). **CINCINNATI:** DNP: G Alex Cappa (ankle), WR Tee Higgins (illness). **LIMITED:** CB Cam Taylor-Britt (groin).

6-3, 6-2.

Men's Doubles

Quarterfinals

Wesley Koolhof, Netherlands, and Neal Skupski (1), Britain, def. Edouard Roger-Vasselin, France, and Santiago Gonzalez (8), Mexico, 6-7 (7), 7-6 (5), 10-6.

Ivan Dodig, Croatia, and Austin Krajicek (3), United States, def. David Vega Hernandez, Spain, and Rafael Matos (7), Brazil, 6-3, 6-4.

Jean-Julien Rojer, Netherlands, and Marcelo Arevalo-Gonzalez (2), El Salvador, def. Robert Farah and Juan Sebastian Cabal (6), Colombia, 6-1, 6-7 (4), 10-4.

WTA Adelaide International 2

Thursday

At Memorial Drive Tennis Centre Adelaide, Australia

Purse: \$780,637

Surface: Hardcourt outdoor

Women's Singles

Quarterfinals

Daria Kasatkina (5), Russia, def. Petra Kvitova, Czech Republic, 6-3, 7-6 (3).

Paula Badosa (9), Spain, def. Beatriz Haddad Maia, Brazil, 7-6 (5), 7-5.

Women's Doubles

Semifinals

Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova, Russia, and Elena Rybakina, Kazakhstan, def. Lyudmyla Kichenok, Ukraine, and Jelena Ostapenko (3), Latvia, 6-4, 7-5.

Taylor Townsend, United States, and Luisa Stefani, Brazil, def. Marketa Vondrousova and Miriam Kolodziejova, Czech Republic, 6-2, 6-3.

Washington to the practice squad. Signed OL Solomon Kindley to a reserve/futures contract.

PITTSBURGH STEELERS — Signed WR Dez Fitzpatrick and DBs Madre Harper, Kenny Robinson and Chris Wilcox to reserve/futures contracts.

HOCKEY

National Hockey League

BOSTON BRUINS — Recalled LW Joonas Koppanen from Providence (AHL). Returned C Chris Wagner to Providence.

CHICAGO BLACKHAWKS — Recalled G Jaxon Stauber from Rockford (AHL). Assigned LW Brett Seney to Rockford.

COLUMBUS BLUE JACKETS — Returned G Jet Greaves to Cleveland (AHL). Recalled F Trey Fix-Wolansky from Cleveland.

LOS ANGELES KINGS — Recalled D Jordan Spence from Ontario (AHL).

MONTREAL CANADIENS — Recalled RW Jesse Ylonen from Laval (AHL).

NASHVILLE PREDATORS — Recalled G Yaroslav Askarov from Milwaukee (AHL). Reassigned D Roland McKeown to Milwaukee.

NEW YORK ISLANDERS — Returned C Aatu Raty and D Robin Salo to Bridgeport (AHL).

PHILADELPHIA FLYERS — Reassigned F Zayde Wisdom from Lehigh Valley (AHL) to Reading (ECHL).

PITTSBURGH PENGUINS — Returned D Mark Friedman to Wilkes-Barre/Scranton (AHL).

SOCCER

Major League Soccer

ATLANTA UNITED — Signed G Clement Diop to a one-year contract.

COLUMBUS CREW — Signed D Keegan Hughes to a one-year contract.

INTER MIAMI CF — Signed D Franco Negri to a two-year contract, pending receipt of his international transfer certificate (ITC) and P-1 visa.

NEW ENGLAND REVOLUTION — Loaned G Djordje Petrovic to Serbia national team.

NEW YORK CITY FC — Re-signed M Justin Haak to a two-year contract.

ORANGE COUNTY SC — Signed D Ryan Doghman.

PORTLAND TIMBERS — Named Ned Grabovoy general manager.

REAL SALT LAKE — Agreed to terms with G Zac MacMath on a contract extension through the 2024 season with a club option for 2025.

National Women's Soccer League

HOUSTON DASH — Announced assistant coaches Sarah Lowdon and Matt Lampson have agreed to terms on new contracts. Signed M Havana Solaun to a one-year contract.

PRO HOCKEY

NHL

EASTERN CONFERENCE

Atlantic Division

| | GP | W | L | OT | Pts | GF | GA |
|-----------|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|
| Boston | 40 | 32 | 4 | 4 | 68 | 156 | 88 |
| Toronto | 42 | 26 | 9 | 7 | 59 | 143 | 109 |
| Tampa Bay | 39 | 25 | 13 | 1 | 51 | 139 | 115 |
| Buffalo | 39 | 20 | 17 | 2 | 42 | 152 | 135 |
| Florida | 42 | 19 | 19 | 4 | 42 | 138 | 145 |
| Detroit | 39 | 17 | 15 | 7 | 41 | 121 | 134 |
| Ottawa | 40 | 18 | 19 | 3 | 39 | 120 | 127 |
| Montreal | 41 | 16 | 22 | 3 | 35 | 109 | 156 |

Metropolitan Division

| | GP | W | L | OT | Pts | GF | GA |
|----------------|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|
| Carolina | 41 | 25 | 9 | 7 | 57 | 130 | 113 |
| New Jersey | 41 | 26 | 12 | 3 | 55 | 141 | 109 |
| N.Y. Rangers | 42 | 23 | 12 | 7 | 53 | 138 | 116 |
| Washington | 44 | 23 | 15 | 6 | 52 | 143 | 123 |
| Pittsburgh | 40 | 21 | 13 | 6 | 48 | 133 | 121 |
| N.Y. Islanders | 42 | 22 | 17 | 3 | 47 | 130 | 116 |
| Philadelphia | 42 | 17 | 18 | 7 | 41 | 119 | 136 |
| Columbus | 40 | 12 | 26 | 2 | 26 | 103 | 158 |

WESTERN CONFERENCE

Central Division

| | GP | W | L | OT | Pts | GF | GA |
|-----------|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|
| Dallas | 42 | 25 | 11 | 6 | 56 | 146 | 111 |
| Winnipeg | 41 | 26 | 14 | 1 | 53 | 138 | 110 |
| Minnesota | 40 | 22 | 14 | 4 | 48 | 129 | 116 |
| St. Louis | 42 | 21 | 18 | 3 | 45 | 136 | 151 |
| Nashville | 40 | 19 | 15 | 6 | 44 | 112 | 117 |
| Colorado | 39 | 20 | 16 | 3 | 43 | 116 | 115 |
| Arizona | 40 | 13 | 22 | 5 | 31 | 110 | 149 |
| Chicago | 39 | 10 | 25 | 4 | 24 | 86 | 144 |

Pacific Division

| | GP | W | L | OT | Pts | GF | GA |
|-------------|----|----|----|----|-----|-----|-----|
| Vegas | 42 | 27 | 13 | 2 | 56 | 140 | 120 |
| Los Angeles | 45 | 25 | 14 | 6 | 56 | 152 | 152 |

AUTO RACING/NBA

'It's just time'

Harvick's 23rd season in NASCAR will be his last

By JENNA FRYER
Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Kevin Harvick received the same answer nearly every time he asked another athlete how they decided to retire: Harvick would just know it was time.

The driver thrust onto the global stage when he was named Dale Earnhardt's replacement just days after Earnhardt's fatal 2001 crash will make this 23rd season his last in NASCAR. The 2014 Cup champion heads into his final year tied for ninth on NASCAR's career list with 60 victories, 13 consecutive playoff appearances and he's one of the final active drivers from the sport's halcyon days.



Harvick

"From talking to all the people I've talked to, it always came down to the same, 'Oh, you'll know, you'll know it is time, you'll know the right moment,'" Harvick said in an interview with The Associated Press ahead of his Thursday announcement.

"It's great to be able to go out on your own terms and plan it how you want it to go, but the biggest thing that sticks out to me is my kids. Being home with them and seeing the impact that you have with them when you are home, being able to be part of that daily process and be that father figure, it's just time."

At the end of this season he will turn his attention to Kevin Harvick Inc., his growing management business, the enjoyable time he's spent in the television booth, some bucketlist racing, and most importantly, his young racing family.

Harvick and his wife, DeLana, were adamant they would not raise racers but the slow early days of the COVID-19 pandemic gave father and son too much free time and 10-year-old Keelan is now karting on the international level. The young racer spent part of 2022 racing in Italy — sometimes traveling abroad without either parent — and Harvick figures he saw his son race only three times last year.

And then there's Piper, his 5-year-old daughter who now wants Dad's attention when she's in her own go-kart.

"You know, Keelan, he needs that father figure in his life, especially as he goes down the racing route," Harvick told the AP. "And then Piper probably asks to go to the go-kart track more than he does, and having to send her to the track by herself really frustrates me."

Harvick had already overcome the NASCAR odds of breaking into

the Southern-based sport from Bakersfield, Calif., when Richard Childress Racing said he'd be a Cup rookie alongside seven-time champion Earnhardt in 2002. But when Earnhardt was killed on the final lap of the 2001 season-opening Daytona 500, Harvick's career was upended.

He was in the rebranded No. 29 Chevrolet five days after Earnhardt's death — less than a week before the 25-year-old's planned wedding to DeLana — and that hectic season in the spotlight was a blur. Harvick won in his third start, less than a month after Earnhardt's death, and split his time between his new Cup ride and the Busch Series championship he was chasing.

Harvick competed in 69 NASCAR national races that season with a pair of Cup victories and five wins en route to the Busch title. He was busy but grew jaded by all the attention, the endless Earnhardt comparisons, and the pressure of replacing a superstar during a yearlong grieving period that had engulfed NASCAR.

Perhaps that is what made Harvick so tough.

He fought with his rivals often early in his career and was suspended for a Cup race in 2002 for his actions in a Truck Series race at Martinsville Speedway a day earlier.

But he never softened, not even after having children.

Harvick doesn't know if his grittiness developed from those first difficult years after Earnhardt's death, but acknowledges an internal pressure to do things his own way and carve out his own legacy that really ramped up around 2006. Some of Earnhardt's sponsors began pulling off the car and Harvick now had to stand on his own and prove his worth.

"We'd gotten through the tough years of transitioning from what Dale liked to what I liked, and through all those battles and conversations, you put your guard up and become a jerk," Harvick told the AP. "Looking back at it now, you can see that you could have handled things differently, but it was digging my heels in thinking 'I need to do this my way now' and that created some tensions. But I wouldn't trade anything other than Dale's death because all those things that came in the next five years were part of surviving and being successful and building something and learning what was right and what was wrong."

Harvick opens the season early next month with the exhibition Clash at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, followed by his final season-opening Daytona 500 on Feb. 19.

NBA scoreboard

| Eastern Conference | | | | |
|-------------------------------|----|----|------|-----|
| Atlantic Division | | | | |
| | W | L | Pct | GB |
| Boston | 30 | 12 | .714 | — |
| Brooklyn | 27 | 13 | .675 | 2 |
| Philadelphia | 25 | 15 | .625 | 4 |
| New York | 23 | 19 | .548 | 7 |
| Toronto | 18 | 23 | .439 | 11½ |
| Southeast Division | | | | |
| | W | L | Pct | GB |
| Miami | 22 | 20 | .524 | — |
| Atlanta | 19 | 22 | .463 | 2½ |
| Washington | 18 | 24 | .429 | 4 |
| Orlando | 16 | 26 | .381 | 6 |
| Charlotte | 11 | 31 | .262 | 11 |
| Central Division | | | | |
| | W | L | Pct | GB |
| Milwaukee | 27 | 14 | .659 | — |
| Cleveland | 26 | 16 | .619 | 1½ |
| Indiana | 23 | 19 | .548 | 4½ |
| Chicago | 19 | 23 | .452 | 8½ |
| Detroit | 12 | 33 | .267 | 17 |
| Western Conference | | | | |
| Southwest Division | | | | |
| | W | L | Pct | GB |
| Memphis | 28 | 13 | .683 | — |
| New Orleans | 25 | 17 | .595 | 3½ |
| Dallas | 23 | 19 | .548 | 5½ |
| San Antonio | 13 | 29 | .310 | 15½ |
| Houston | 10 | 31 | .244 | 18 |
| Northwest Division | | | | |
| | W | L | Pct | GB |
| Denver | 28 | 13 | .683 | — |
| Utah | 21 | 23 | .477 | 8½ |
| Minnesota | 20 | 22 | .476 | 8½ |
| Portland | 19 | 21 | .475 | 8½ |
| Oklahoma City | 18 | 23 | .439 | 10 |
| Pacific Division | | | | |
| | W | L | Pct | GB |
| Sacramento | 22 | 18 | .550 | — |
| L.A. Clippers | 22 | 21 | .512 | 1½ |
| Phoenix | 21 | 22 | .488 | 2½ |
| Golden State | 20 | 21 | .488 | 2½ |
| L.A. Lakers | 19 | 22 | .463 | 3½ |
| Tuesday's games | | | | |
| Philadelphia 147, Detroit 116 | | | | |
| Toronto 132, Charlotte 120 | | | | |
| Miami 112, Oklahoma City 111 | | | | |
| Utah 116, Cleveland 114 | | | | |
| Orlando 109, Portland 106 | | | | |
| Phoenix 125, Golden State 113 | | | | |
| L.A. Clippers 113, Dallas 101 | | | | |
| Wednesday's games | | | | |
| Washington 100, Chicago 97 | | | | |
| Detroit 135, Minnesota 118 | | | | |
| Boston 125, New Orleans 114 | | | | |
| Milwaukee 114, Atlanta 105 | | | | |
| New York 119, Indiana 113 | | | | |
| Memphis 135, San Antonio 129 | | | | |
| Sacramento 135, Houston 115 | | | | |
| Denver 126, Phoenix 97 | | | | |
| Thursday's games | | | | |
| Oklahoma City at Philadelphia | | | | |
| Boston at Brooklyn | | | | |
| Charlotte at Toronto | | | | |
| Milwaukee at Miami | | | | |
| Cleveland at Portland | | | | |
| Dallas at L.A. Lakers | | | | |
| Friday's games | | | | |
| Atlanta at Indiana | | | | |
| New Orleans at Detroit | | | | |
| New York at Washington | | | | |
| Golden State at San Antonio | | | | |
| Oklahoma City at Chicago | | | | |
| Phoenix at Minnesota | | | | |
| Orlando at Utah | | | | |
| Denver at L.A. Clippers | | | | |
| Houston at Sacramento | | | | |
| Saturday's games | | | | |
| Milwaukee at Miami | | | | |
| Boston at Charlotte | | | | |
| Memphis at Indiana | | | | |
| Atlanta at Toronto | | | | |
| Cleveland at Minnesota | | | | |
| Philadelphia at Utah | | | | |
| Dallas at Portland | | | | |
| Sunday's games | | | | |
| New York at Detroit | | | | |
| Houston at L.A. Clippers | | | | |
| Golden State at Chicago | | | | |
| Oklahoma City at Brooklyn | | | | |
| Sacramento at San Antonio | | | | |
| Orlando at Denver | | | | |
| Dallas at Portland | | | | |
| Philadelphia at L.A. Lakers | | | | |
| Monday's games | | | | |
| Boston at Charlotte | | | | |
| Indiana at Milwaukee | | | | |
| New Orleans at Cleveland | | | | |
| Toronto at New York | | | | |
| Golden State at Washington | | | | |
| Miami at Atlanta | | | | |
| Utah at Minnesota | | | | |
| Phoenix at Memphis | | | | |
| Houston at L.A. Lakers | | | | |



Rick Bowmer/AP

The Cavaliers' Donovan Mitchell reacts during a game against Utah on Tuesday, when he scored 46 points, well short of his season high.

AROUND THE NBA

Many layers lead to scoring binges

By NOAH TRISTER
Associated Press

Giannis Antetokounmpo set a career high with 55 points in Milwaukee's win over Washington on Jan. 3 — and it wasn't even the week's top scoring performance in the NBA's Central Division.

That belonged to Cleveland's Donovan Mitchell, with a staggering 71 the previous night.

The NBA these past few weeks has featured an almost nightly display of one-upmanship among the best scorers. Whether it was Mitchell's extraordinary effort for the Cavaliers or Dallas' Luka Doncic reaching 50 points three times in a nine-day span, everywhere you turn, it seems like another player is putting up a huge total.

"I think there are a lot of layers to it. You just see night after night, guys are having enormous offensive games," Wizards coach Wes Unseld Jr. said. "It's fun to watch as a fan, of course. Frustrating when you're trying to game plan to stop some of these guys because they're scoring at all levels — the paint, threes, getting to the line."

Ten players have already scored 50 points in a game this season: Antetokounmpo, Mitchell, Doncic, Joel Embiid, Devin Booker, Anthony Davis, Klay Thompson, Pascal Siakam, Darius Garland and Stephen Curry.

Before 2016-17, no more than eight players had ever had a 50-point game in one season, according to Sportradar. Since then, at least 10 have done it every season, including a record 14 in 2021-22. Some of this is to be expected in what has become a very high-scoring era. NBA teams were averaging 113.8 points per game entering Monday night, the highest mark for the league since 1969-70. But the overall scoring environment tells only part of the story.

In that 1969-70 season, teams averaged 116.7 points, but only two players had a 50-point game. In 1984-85, the highest-scoring season

of the 1980s, teams averaged 110.8 points. But only five players produced a 50-point game that season.

So what's happening lately is not just higher scoring league-wide. Players are also producing huge games with remarkable frequency. Expansion may play a role. The number of teams is 30% higher than it was in 1985. More teams means more games.

But the sport has changed in other ways, too.

"Guys come into this league, and the most impressive thing is the skill set — the handle and the shooting," Golden State coach Steve Kerr said. "What's lacking, I think, is the foundation, the institutional knowledge that players used to have when they came into the league after a few years of college. Sometimes the defense isn't great. Transition defense is at an all-time low in this league."

Nowadays, basically every top scorer has some degree of proficiency from three-point range, whereas back in the '80s, some stars largely ignored the shot and nobody attempted all that many.

"Guys are taking 15 or 16 threes in some games," Los Angeles Clippers coach Tyronn Lue said. "Teams are encouraging guys to take those shots, and if you take so many shots, and if you get hot and make some, you can score a lot of points."

So current players have a variety of ways they can accumulate points in a hurry, and the three-point shot affects the game even beyond that. With so many players capable of making open threes, teams can space the floor in a way that punishes double teams.

"You have to pick and choose the guys you try and double team and get the ball out of their hands because they are not great passers, but there are some guys who can score, but can also pick you apart with their passing," Lue said. "So, when you have guys like that, you want to let those guys try and get theirs and take everyone else out, but sometimes it can backfire on you as well."

AUSTRALIAN OPEN



JOHN MINCHILLO/AP

Serena Williams waves to fans after losing to Ajla Tomljanovic in the third round of the U.S. Open tennis championships Sept. 2, 2022, in New York. The match was expected to be the last of Williams' career.

Tennis starts to move on without Serena in earnest

By HOWARD FENDRICH
Associated Press

Tennis will move on from Serena Williams. It has to. It might not be easy, mind you, given what a transcendent figure she was, on the court and off. But that is what sports do, even when superstars leave. They all leave, of course, and sports always move on.

The matches will be played, new stars will emerge, fans will continue to watch. And Williams will be missed, of course, by spectators, executives from the tours, tournaments and television, as well as by other athletes.

And as the Australian Open gets started Monday, the first Grand Slam tournament to be held since she walked away with a farewell at the U.S. Open in September, shortly before her 41st birthday tennis will get a real taste of what a post-Serena world looks like on a big stage.

That is the case even if her impact won't fade away, as U.S. Open tournament director Stacey Allaster put it: "She leaves an indelible legacy of grace and grit that will inspire athletes, female and male, for many generations to come."

There will surely be those who keep an eye on tangible data at Melbourne Park and as this season, and future seasons, go along. Numbers such as attendance figures and TV ratings will be parsed in an effort to gauge what effect there is from the departure of someone who earned status as a just-one-name-necessary celebrity.

In a way, that is all a bit beside the point, however. "Her legacy is really wide, to the point where you can't even describe it in words. She changed the sport so much. She's introduced people that have never heard of tennis into the sport," said Naomi Osaka, a 25-year-old from Japan who has won four Grand Slam titles but hasn't played a full match since August and will sit out the Australian Open. "I honestly think that she's, like, the biggest force in the sport. That's not intentionally trying to make (Roger) Federer or (Rafael) Nadal smaller. I just think she's the biggest thing that will ever be in the sport."

In recent decades, folks might have worried about what would happen when Chris Evert and Martina Navratilova stopped playing. Or when Bjorn Borg, John McEnroe and Jimmy Connors moved on. Or Pete Sampras and Andre Agassi. Or Steffi Graf. And so on.

"It's always a loss when you have great players leave. But I've been through six or seven generations of this," said Billie Jean King, a two-time inductee into the International Tennis Hall of Fame who won 12 Grand Slam trophies in singles and another 27 in women's or mixed doubles.

"I mean, I remember when Sampras left and when Martina and Chris left. I was like, 'Oh, no! What's going to happen?'

Well, Sampras was there, and guess what? There's Roger Federer. There's Nadal. ... It's the same thing with the women. We've got Iga (Swiatek) now, who's taken over," King said. "Every generation gets better, and the depth of women's tennis is better than it's ever been, and Serena is somewhat responsible for that, because every generation builds on the last generation."

Billie Jean King
12-time major winner

Shortly after Williams lost to Ajla Tomljanovic in the third round at Flushing Meadows, another titan of tennis, 20-time major champ Federer, announced his retirement. Federer hadn't played an official match in more than a full year because of a series of knee operations.

For Williams, there were moments when she stepped away from competing for stretches, either because of health issues or simply because she wanted to spend time on other interests, which she thought contributed to her longevity.

But those she brought to tennis, whether players or fans, should last long beyond that timeframe.

"Serena got a lot of people interested in our sport. And now it's up to the next generation to do that," King said. "People always — the media — goes into this every time: 'Oh, they're leaving! Oh, what's going to happen?' Somebody always comes up to the top. The cream rises to the top."

Unvaccinated Djokovic back in play, year later

By HOWARD FENDRICH
Associated Press

Novak Djokovic had just wrapped up last season by winning the ATP Finals for a record sixth time when, rather than looking ahead to 2023, his mind immediately went back to the way 2022 began: He was unable to compete in last year's Australian Open after being deported from the country because he was not vaccinated against COVID-19.

That whole episode, and the decision to eschew the shots required for entry elsewhere, too, helped define his season and, perhaps to some, his legacy. So as he reflected on his triumph at the year-ending championships in Italy last November, Djokovic viewed it through the prism of what occurred in Australia last January.

"It feels deeply satisfying and, at the same time, huge relief, because of the circumstances that I have been through this year — situations earlier this year, of course, with Australia. ... That had an effect, obviously, on my start of the year," the 35-year-old from Serbia said. "For the first several months, I was trying to find that balance, game-wise but also mentally, in order to be able to come back to the court and find that tennis level that I need."

When the new Grand Slam season begins at the Australian Open on Monday morning, Djokovic will be back. Back in Australia — despite never getting inoculated against the coronavirus — thanks to government decisions to remove any vaccination requirements for visitors and to waive what could have been three-year ban for him as someone whose visa had been revoked. He's now back at a tournament he has dominated like no other, resulting in nine of his 21 major trophies, including the past three times he

played there.

He's also back in position to strive for elite status and to challenge his great rival Rafael Nadal for supremacy in the Grand Slam title chase. Sure, it is Nadal who is the defending champion and who owns a men's-record 22 majors. It is Djokovic, though, who will draw the most attention. And it is Djokovic who will be viewed as the favorite. Djokovic and Nadal have been placed on opposite halves of the bracket in the draw, meaning they can only meet in the final.

The lead-up to this Australian Open has been filled with talk about who will not be there: Serena Williams and Roger Federer ended their playing careers in 2022, as did Ash Barty; No. 1-ranked Carlos Alcaraz, former Australian Open finalist Marin Cilic and seven-time major champion Venus Williams are injured; former No. 1 and four-time Slam winner Naomi Osaka last played a completed match in August and announced on social media on Wednesday that she is pregnant and will be taking the year off. Another former top-ranked player, Simona Halep, is serving a provisional doping suspension.

Once play begins, the talk will squarely be about Djokovic, and most folks in the sport seem to agree he should be back in the field.

Nadal, for one, called it "good for tennis."

"It's nice to see cooler heads prevailing there, (after) politics got in the way," former U.S. Davis Cup captain Mardy Fish said.

Frances Tiafoe, an American who reached the U.S. Open semifinals, said: "We want the biggest players playing in the biggest tournaments in the world, regardless of everything else. We're trying to sell a product at the end of the day, and you want those big names at the big events."



HAMISH BLAIR/AP

Serbia's Novak Djokovic hits a backhand return to Germany's Alexander Zverev in their quarterfinal match at the Australian Open tennis championship in Melbourne, Australia, on Feb. 16, 2021.

NFL PLAYOFFS

Cowboys focus on defensive reboot

By SCHUYLER DIXON
Associated Press

FRISCO, Texas — Safety Jayron Kearsa was more than happy to reflect on a late-season blip from the Dallas defense when the regular season was still going on.

Now that the playoffs have arrived, it's a hard turn to 2023 for the Cowboys in Kearsa's mind.

"That leaves 2022 behind us, and let's start this new season that we have ahead of us the way that we need to start it," Kearsa said Wednesday. "What we did in the regular season means nothing."

In keeping with the idea of a reboot, the Cowboys will visit Tom Brady and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers in a wild-card game Monday night with two defenders expected back in the lineup after missing several games with injuries.

Linebacker Leighton Vander Esch was out the final three games of the regular season with a neck injury, and is set to resume play-calling responsibilities that fell in part to Kearsa.

Defensive tackle Johnathan Hankins, a midseason trade acquisition designed to plug a leaky run defense, is on track to play after missing four games with a pectoral muscle strain.

The Cowboys (12-5) have already lost two cornerbacks to season-ending injuries in Anthony Brown (torn Achilles) and Jourdan Lewis (broken foot).

DaRon Bland, tied for second among NFL rookies with five interceptions, left last week's 26-6 loss to Washington in the regular-season finale with a chest injury but is expected to play against the Bucs (8-9).

"I feel great about where we are," coach Mike McCarthy said. "Anytime you can stand here and come Monday night you're going to have some guys disappointed they're not on the 48(-man roster). To me, that's as healthy as you can ask at this time of year."

The Cowboys led the NFL with

33 takeaways, becoming the first team since the 1972-74 Pittsburgh Steelers to lead the league in that category in consecutive seasons. Dallas also led the league in sacks most of the season, but recorded just six in the final five games.

There were other signs of trouble late in the season.

Kearsa conceded that the defense was trying to find its early season form after consecutive 40-34 scores in December — the first an overtime loss at Jacksonville and the second a home victory over Philadelphia, the NFC's top seed.

Dak Prescott's third pick-6 in the final four games and special teams gaffes boosted the Commanders early in last weekend's loss. But the Cowboys let Sam Howell and the Washington offense control the second half in the rookie quarterback's debut.

When Prescott missed five games after breaking a thumb in a season-opening loss to the Bucs, the defense carried the Cowboys to a 4-1 record in his absence. The late-season D wasn't nearly as dominant.

"Guys realize we're not where we were at the beginning of the year," Kearsa said after the Dec. 24 victory over the Eagles. "Just understanding that it's going to take the conversations, the tough conversations, that's going to get us back to where we need to be when it comes down to playing a relentless style of defense that's not really leaving anything to chance."

Whether it's the fresher reinforcements or banged-up sacks leader Micah Parsons, Kearsa sees the playoff opener as a recharge for everyone.

"Whether you're hurt or not, when the postseason starts, it's kind of like newfound energy," Kearsa said. "You feel good. You're ready to go. We know we're going to have everyone giving their best shot."



PATRICK SEMANSKY/AP

Washington Commanders wide receiver Terry McLaurin makes a catch for a first down against Dallas Cowboys cornerback Trayvon Mullen during the second half Sunday in Landover, Md.



JOSHUA A. BICKEL/AP

Cincinnati Bengals guard Hakeem Adeniji blocks Baltimore Ravens linebacker David Ojabo during the first half Sunday in Cincinnati. The Bengals won 27-16 ahead of a playoff rematch.

Bengals will rely on O-line subs to slow down Ravens

By MITCH STACY
Associated Press

CINCINNATI — With guard Alex Cappa now sidelined, the Cincinnati Bengals are faced with starting two backups on the right side of the offensive line for Sunday's playoff game.

Coach Zac Taylor said Wednesday that Cappa's injury, suffered in last week's game, will keep him out of at least the opening playoff game against the Ravens. Beyond that, he can't say.

Cappa's injury came two weeks after right tackle La'el Collins was lost for the season to a knee injury. Hakeem Adeniji, whose struggles in pass protection in the postseason last year were conspicuous, is playing in place of Collins. Slotting in for Cappa will be Max Scharping, who started 33 games in Houston in his first three seasons and was claimed off waivers in September.

"The O-line is a continuity and repetition position," said center Ted Karras, who is responsible for making blocking calls at the line. "We've been repping all year, but it will be hard, especially to replace Alex because of our relationship, just how to ID the defense, how to distribute all our blockers. He's been a humongous help to me, saved me a few times over the season. So I had to step it up. Everyone's got to step it up. Max has a great opportunity in front of him, and I'm excited to see how he performs."

The 26-year-old Scharping said he's capable of holding down the key position.

"I've been here all year, so it's not necessarily anything lacking," he



JOSHUA A. BICKEL/AP

Ravens linebacker Justin Houston celebrates a sack of Bengals quarterback Joe Burrow in the second half in Cincinnati on Sunday.



AFC wild-card playoff
Baltimore Ravens (10-7)
at Cincinnati Bengals (12-4)
AFN-Sports
2:15 a.m. Monday CET
10:15 a.m. Monday JKT

said. "I'm just hoping to go out there and play to the best of my ability on each play and hopefully be there when (Karras) needs me most."

Cappa was the first free agent targeted — he got a four-year deal worth \$40 million — when Cincinnati began rebuilding its subpar offensive line before the season. It also brought in veterans Karras and Col-

lins, with rookie fourth-round draft pick Cordell Volson fitting in at left guard.

With Jonah Williams at left tackle, the offensive front was together for the first 15 games and became one of the team's greatest strengths through the eight-game winning streak to finish the regular season.

Offensive coordinator Brian Callahan said the scheme won't change much because of the new personnel on the right side.

"They've all been getting reps in all the things that we do and how we run them," Callahan said. "At this point in the year, it's hard to introduce all kinds of shiny new things that are really going to change who you are. We're still going to be who we are as an offense and run a lot of the things that we've run and have had success with over the course of the season."

NFL PLAYOFFS



MATT ROURKE/AP

New York Giants quarterback Daniel Jones works out prior to a game against the Philadelphia Eagles on Sunday in Philadelphia. The Eagles won 22-16 in the Giants' last warm-up before the playoffs.

Giants expecting increased intensity as playoff novices

By TOM CANAVAN
Associated Press

EAST RUTHERFORD, N.J. — For most of the players on the New York Giants, the postseason is uncharted territory.

Of the 53 men on the Giants' active roster heading into Sunday's wild-card round game at the Minnesota Vikings, only 17 players have playoff experience. Roughly half of that number can be considered starters.

Quarterback Daniel Jones, running back Saquon Barkley, offensive tackles Andrew Thomas and Evan Neal, defensive linemen Leonard Williams and Dexter Lawrence, and safeties Xavier McKinney and Julian Love are postseason novices.

Veteran kicker Graham Gano is in the minority on a team making its first postseason appearance since 2016. He's one of five players who has made it to a Super Bowl. He is willing to talk to teammates about what's going to be different. The energy and tempo will increase.

"But really, it's the same game we've been playing since we were kids," Gano said. "I think that's the biggest thing, not to make more of it than what it actually is. It's exciting."

McKinney could hardly hide his excitement about getting to the playoffs in his third season. His path there had some obstacles.

McKinney broke bones in his left hand in an ATV-type accident while on vacation in Mexico during the Giants' bye week in No-



NFC wild-card playoff
New York Giants (9-7-1)
at Minnesota Vikings (13-4)
AFN-Sports
10:30 p.m. Sunday CET
6:30 a.m. Monday JKT

vember. He had surgery and missed seven games, returning on Jan. 1. The last game he missed was against the Vikings.

"I'm excited, we're all excited here," McKinney said. "It's been a while for sure, but we're trying not to be too excited. When you're too excited, you screw up and bad things happen."

Wide receiver Isaiah Hodgins, acquired on waivers in November, isn't taking that approach.

"It's a different mode, you got to have a little bit of a different mentality and a different mindset and go in there and really attack, like tell yourself, I'm going to make these plays," Hodgins said. "I'm going to change the game and I'm going to make a name for myself with everybody watching."

Center Jon Feliciano, in the playoffs the past three years with Buffalo, said not much changes.

"It is a regular game, besides the fact that you go home if you lose," Feliciano said. "When you mess up in a regular game, it's not

the same as doing it here. If you're a competitor, you never want to lose. So for me, it's just the same old, same old."

For Williams, the wait to get to the playoffs was eight years. He doesn't want it to be a short trip, saying now is the time for players to sacrifice.

"We're trying to keep keep this thing riding, keep this train going and hopefully take it all the way," Williams said. "I mean, that's our mindset, but we can't afford to overlook any team. We have to take a week at a time."

Love said people outside the Giants' headquarters are probably more excited than the players. He also thinks the NFC North champion Vikings understand they will be in for a fight after beating New York 27-24 on Dec. 24 on a 61-yard field goal on the final play.

"I feel like no one is under the radar," Love said. "They know who we are, we've shown it for 17, 18 weeks or whatever it is. Teams know who we are, now we've just got to go show it and let our game speak for itself."

The Giants' practice Wednesday was far from normal. The number of media attending doubled to roughly 30-35 people.

Jones said the players understand the stakes.

"The only way we're going to play as well as we want to play is to prepare how we have all year, to trust our process and stick to that," he said. "So, that's largely been the conversation amongst the guys."

Buffalo's Hyde, Crowder prep for possible return

By JOHN WAWROW
Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — When Micah Hyde vowed he'd be ready to return in 2023 shortly after having surgery to repair a herniated disc in October, the Buffalo Bills safety was looking ahead to September.

Not January.

Lo and behold, three months later, Hyde practiced Wednesday and opened the door for a possible chance of returning to play at some point during the playoffs.

"I didn't sleep last night, and not because I was nervous or anything. It's just because I was too excited," Hyde said.

The 10th-year player, however, remained extremely cautious by saying that while his doctors cleared him for practice, they still have the final say on whether he's healed enough to play in a game.

"I feel good. I haven't had any setbacks and they have been killing me in the weight room having me do a thousand lunges," Hyde said, referring to trainers. "I'm ready to go, but it's not up to me."

Hyde, who has hurt in a win over Tennessee in Week 2, was joined at practice by receiver Jamison Crowder, who has been sidelined since breaking his ankle in a victory over Baltimore on Oct. 2.

Crowder, an offseason free agent addition, opened the season sharing slot receiver duties.

Both remain on the injured reserve list, but are eligible to practice over a three-week period after which the Bills have the option of activating them to the roster or



AFC wild-card playoff
Miami Dolphins (9-8)
at Buffalo Bills (13-3)
AFN-Sports
7 p.m. Sunday CET
3 a.m. Monday JKT

ending their season.

Coach Sean McDermott ruled both out from playing Sunday, when the Bills (13-3) host their division rival Miami Dolphins (9-8) in a wild card playoff game.

Hyde was projected to miss six to eight months. After having surgery, he rejoined the team in Buffalo to rehab and also serve in a quasi-assistant coaching role.

Hyde is motivated because he doesn't want to miss out on a chance to be part of what could be a special season. He's also inspired to rejoin a team which has overcome a series of adversity this season: from two snowstorms a month apart disrupting the Bills schedule, to the chilling sight of safety Damar Hamlin going into cardiac arrest and having to be resuscitated on the field during a game in Cincinnati last week.

"All the things that we have been through, you name it, the weather, injuries, D-Ham's situation, just seeing my boys, my teammates go out there and continue to fight ... I have to give it a go," Hyde said.

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NFL PLAYOFFS

No: Purdy hasn't been performing like a rookie

FROM PAGE 32

games and has posted a 119 passer rating in his first five starts for the second-best mark for any quarterback in the Super Bowl era behind the 131.4 for Hall of Famer Kurt Warner.

With a win on Saturday, Purdy will be the first rookie quarterback drafted after the first round to win a playoff game since third-rounder Russell Wilson did it for Seattle in 2012.

"I feel like I'll do a lot of reflecting after the season," Purdy said. "Right now, I'm looking at it like, man, we got the Seahawks. Yes, it's playoffs, but for myself it's, I have to do my job. I'm not trying to think about this storybook ending or anything like that. It's, man, I have a great defense I have to play. I have to do my job in terms of getting the guys the ball and all that will fall into place, but definitely thankful for everything that has happened. We still have a ways to go."

The Niners players have long stopped looking at Purdy as an untested rookie as his play and demeanor are like that of a veteran.

Purdy showed flashes of that in training camp when he won a competition with Nate Sudfeld for a roster spot and it has only grown as he has gotten to play.

"As soon as he got into the game he was our guy," right tackle Mike McGlinchey said. "No matter whether you're a rookie, a five-year vet, a 10-year vet, it doesn't matter, you're the starting quar-



NFC wild-card playoff
Seattle Seahawks (9-8)
at San Francisco 49ers (13-4)
AFN-Sports
10:30 p.m. Saturday CET
6:30 a.m. Sunday JKT

terback and you have to do the starting quarterback's job. That's what he's done to an unbelievable degree."

Along with playing his first playoff game, Purdy has another first as he goes up against the same opponent for a second time.

Purdy went 17-for-26 for 217 yards, two TDs and no turnovers in a 21-13 win at Seattle last month despite getting no practice time during a short week of preparation because of injuries to his ribs and oblique.

While Purdy is healthier this time around, he knows Seattle might have some new wrinkles.

"I feel like I see something new almost every week, so obviously there's six games of film out there on me," he said. "There's still things that I'm sure coordinators are going to try to dial up and everything and try to get me to do some something different. But for myself, I just try to stay grounded in what the progression is, what the read is."



GODOFREDO A. VASQUEZ/AP

Seattle Seahawks quarterback Geno Smith looks for a receiver while under pressure during a game against the New York Jets on Jan. 1 in Seattle. Smith will get his first playoff start Saturday.

The next chapter

Smith's comeback season continues in postseason

By **TIM BOOTH**
Associated Press

RENTON, Wash. — Geno Smith smiled and joked about some of his teammates on Wednesday, showing none of the signs that might be apparent for someone about to add another first to the résumé in the 10th season of his career.

Smith certainly doesn't seem overly stressed with his first playoff start on the horizon.

"I've always had that thought process that if I did get an opportunity that this is where we should be," Smith said. "And like I said, it's not about me. It's about the team and everyone else around me, and how we are collectively coming together and how we collectively have gotten to the playoffs."

The next and maybe final chapter to what has been one of the best comeback stories in the league this season will take place this weekend when Smith and the Seahawks face San Francisco in the NFC wild-card game.

Seattle is a massive underdog to the 49ers and has been written off by most analysts as not being ready for the playoff stage. But that falls in line with Seattle's entire season — derided in the summer as not having enough talent, only to see Smith and his teammates defy those expectations and achieve just enough to sneak into the playoffs on the final day of the regular season.

Making the postseason provides a definition of success to the season for both Smith and the Sea-

Scoreboard

NFL playoffs

Wild card

Saturday, Jan. 14

Seattle at San Francisco. **AFN-Sports, 10:30 p.m. Saturday CET; 6:30 a.m. Sunday JKT**
L.A. Chargers at Jacksonville. **AFN-Sports, 2:15 a.m. Sunday CET; 10:15 a.m. Sunday JKT**

Sunday, Jan. 15

Miami at Buffalo. **AFN-Sports, 7 p.m. Sunday CET; 3 a.m. Monday JKT**
N.Y. Giants at Minnesota. **AFN-Sports 10:30 p.m. Sunday CET; 6:30 a.m. Monday JKT**
Baltimore at Cincinnati. **AFN-Sports 2:15 a.m. Monday CET; 10:15 a.m. Monday JKT**
Monday, Jan. 16
Dallas at Tampa Bay. **AFN-Sports 2:15 a.m. Tuesday CET; 10:15 a.m. Tuesday JKT**

hawks. But he doesn't want getting there to be the end of the story.

"I don't think we should be getting hyped up right now or acting like this is our end goal because we have another goal in mind," Smith said. "Obviously it starts just one game at a time, one play, one practice at a time, staying focused on staying in the moment. But we know that we can't just say, 'Oh, we're happy to be in the playoffs.' There's more to it. We've got to stay focused on that."

Smith finished the season leading the NFL in completion percentage (69.8%) and fifth in passer rating (100.9). He set a number of franchise QB records and was the only quarterback in the league to play every snap this season.

But if Seattle is going to continue its playoff push past the matchup with the 49ers, it needs a better version of Smith than what it got

in the latter part of the season. Smith was great through the first 12 games with a passer rating of nearly 109, a completion percentage of 72.7% and 22 touchdowns against six interceptions. He was a big reason Seattle was 7-5 through those 12 games.

Smith was also partly to blame for the Seahawks finishing 2-3, a stretch that included Seattle's 21-13 loss to San Francisco on Dec. 15. Smith's completion percentage tumbled to 63.3% as some of the easy throws that made Seattle's offense work didn't connect. He threw five interceptions, including two in the loss to Carolina and two in Week 18 against the Rams. Smith was also sacked 15 times during that stretch.

"When we're in third-and-manageable, we've done great, and we've been able to execute, move the chains," Smith said. "For us, it's staying efficient on first and second down, me in particular getting the ball out, being efficient getting the ball to the guys in the right timing and to the right reads, and then everything else kind of goes from there."

San Francisco has been especially troublesome for Smith and the Seahawks. Smith has converted only two third downs via pass in 20 attempts against the 49ers over eight quarters this season. Seattle's only offensive touchdown in the two games came late in the fourth quarter of the 21-13 loss last month, a game where the Seahawks didn't run a play inside the 49ers' 20-yard line until the final drive.



JED JACOBSON/AP

A fan wears a "Mr. Irrelevant" jersey for 49ers quarterback Brock Purdy. The term is applied to the last player taken in the NFL Draft.

NFL PLAYOFFS

Chargers not worried about lack of experience

By GREG BEACHAM

Associated Press

COSTA MESA, Calif. — Kyle Van Noy has already been everywhere the Los Angeles Chargers are trying to go on their franchise's first playoff trip in four years, and the veteran linebacker wants his new teammates to know their postseason inexperience means absolutely nothing on this journey.

"It's just about who comes out there and plays better," the two-time Super Bowl champion said Wednesday. "All the rest of it doesn't matter. I've told these guys that it's not about experience, and home-field advantage is a myth, too. Confidence matters, and that comes back to the preparation you've done."

Van Noy earned his two rings with the New England Patriots and racked up 12 games of playoff experience — more than a good chunk of his Chargers teammates combined — during his first eight years in the NFL.

Los Angeles (10-7) is headed to Jacksonville on Saturday for the Bolts' first playoff appearance since a two-game run after the 2018 season, which stands as the Chargers' only playoff appearance since the 2013 season back in San Diego.

Justin Herbert's showdown with Trevor Lawrence in both touted young quarterbacks' playoff debuts will get most of the attention heading into the game in Jacksonville, but many players on



MARCIO JOSE SANCHEZ/AP

Quarterback Justin Herbert is among the many Chargers stars that have not played in the playoffs. But Herbert leads an offense that is similar to last season's Bengals, who reached the Super Bowl.

both teams will be getting their first tastes of postseason pressure.

Just six Chargers remain from the 2018 playoff team, yet they comprise much of the current team's core: receivers Keenan Allen and Mike Williams, running back Austin Ekeler, pass-rusher Joey Bosa, safety Derwin James and cornerback Michael Davis.

"We're such a different team since then, but we're hungry every year," Ekeler said. "That's why we play the entire game, to get to the playoffs and continue to build on what we're doing. Finally getting back, I feel like we have a lot of guys that have made a lot of leaps in their career. Justin is coming along, and we brought in

veterans that can help us get there, and we finally put a product together."

Other Chargers have playoff experience with other teams, but Van Noy doesn't have to look far for an illustration of his belief in the unimportance of playoff experience.

"He's told us, 'Just look at Cin-

cinnati last year,'" Chargers linebacker Drue Tranquill said.

Indeed, the Bengals ended their franchise's five-year postseason drought and rolled all the way to the Super Bowl last season thanks to a gifted young quarterback, an impressive collection of playmakers around him, and an opportunistic defense. The Chargers have all of those things, and Tranquill is among the young leaders eager to show they can handle their first taste of playoff pressure.

Tranquill, now a four-year NFL veteran, will be playing in his first postseason game since his 12-0 Fighting Irish were thrashed 30-3 by Lawrence's Clemson Tigers in a College Football Playoff semifinal in December 2018.

"You know you're always going to hear about playoff experience, but good things will happen for this team if we play our game," Tranquill said. "Just got to play our brand of football."

Defensive coordinator Renaldo Hill is telling his players all about the importance of seizing playoff opportunities. He made it to just one postseason game in his 10 years as an NFL player, and his sole playoff experience in 11 years as an assistant coach came during his three-year stint as the Pittsburgh Steelers' defensive backs coach.

"We know it's a different temperature during the playoffs," Hill said. "I know our guys are up for the challenge. I told them that it's going to be a different feel."

Late surge has Jaguars' Allen looking dominant again

By MARK LONG

Associated Press

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. — Josh Allen was the last player off Jacksonville's practice field Wednesday. The fourth-year pro spent extra time working through pass-rush drills and then a few more minutes chatting with a coach — an offensive coach.

Allen has started getting technique tips from Jaguars assistant offensive line coach Todd Washington. The recent tweak may have aided in Allen's late-season surge.

The Jacksonville linebacker has 23 quarterback pressures in his last five games. He also returned a fumble 37 yards for a touchdown in the closing minutes to beat Tennessee 20-16 last Saturday and secure the franchise's second AFC South championship.

It was just the latest game-altering play for Allen, who has half of his six sacks during Jacksonville's five-game winning streak and was named the AFC Defensive Player of the Week on Wednesday. He's essentially been the dominant force the Jaguars (9-8) thought they had when they



**AFC wild-card playoff
Los Angeles Chargers (10-7)
at Jacksonville Jaguars (10-7)**

AFN-Sports

2:15 a.m. Sunday CET

10:15 a.m. Sunday JKT

drafted him with the seventh overall pick four years ago and watched him make the Pro Bowl as a rookie.

Allen had been admittedly disappointing since, even going eight consecutive games this season without a sack. But he's taken his play to another level since mid-December, and the Jaguars are counting on him to continue his hot streak when they host the Los Angeles Chargers (10-7) in a wild-card game Saturday night.

"We're ready to take over," Allen said. "We're not in (the playoffs) for no reason. We worked our butts off to get to this point."



PHELAN M. EBENHACK/AP

Jaguars linebacker Josh Allen returns a fumble for a touchdown in the second half against the Tennessee Titans on Saturday. Allen has half of his six sacks during Jacksonville's five-game winning streak.

Allen maybe as much as anyone.

He was seemingly slow to adjust to the team's new 3-4 defensive scheme, one that sometimes requires him to drop into cover-

age. It was a somewhat uncomfortable spot even though it was role he handled well in college at Kentucky.

But Allen looked right at home off the ball against the Titans, es-

pecially when he scooped up Joshua Dobbs' fumble in full stride and went untouched the other way for the go-ahead score. He added a strip-sack on the ensuing possession that helped Jacksonville close it out.

"I think it's just being patient," Allen said. "I've always worked hard. It's just letting those opportunities come. I've been dialed in with myself a little bit more."

"Me working hard before and after practice and doing what I need to do and being where I need to be. I knew when the moment comes, when the opportunity comes, if I keep at it, good things are going to come."

Although Allen's sack totals are down, his 64 quarterback pressures this season rank fourth in the NFL, according to the league's Next Gen stats. More than a third of those have come in the last five weeks.

"I think it's Josh. He's made his mind up that it's the time of the season for him to turn it on, and he's turned it on," defensive coordinator Mike Caldwell said. "He's picked his game up, and he's doing a good job for us."

SPORTS



Back Down Under

This year, unvaccinated Djokovic allowed to play in Australian Open » Page 27

NFL PLAYOFFS

No longer irrelevant

After being taken with final pick, Purdy proves invaluable to 49ers

BY JOSH DUBOW
Associated Press

Brock Purdy has passed every test he's faced so far in his remarkable rookie season.

Coming off the bench with no reps after Jimmy Garoppolo got hurt. Matching up against an all-time great like Tom Brady. His first road start in an intimidating stadium in Seattle. Coming from behind against the Raiders.

Next up for Purdy and the San Francisco 49ers is his first playoff game on Saturday against the Seahawks.

"Right now, I'm looking at it like, man, we got the Seahawks. Yes, it's playoffs, but for myself it's, I have to do my job."

Brock Purdy
49ers rookie quarterback

"I'm not trying to make it bigger than what it is," Purdy said Wednesday. "Obviously, there's more on the line and everything. But I think having six games under my belt in terms of just playing in an NFL game and trying to win for four quarters has helped me get to this point. And all the guys in the locker room have my back. We've all grown together, so we're ready for what's ahead."

Purdy's journey from being "Mr. Irrelevant" as the last pick in the NFL Draft to perhaps the most important player on a Super Bowl contender has been an improbable one.

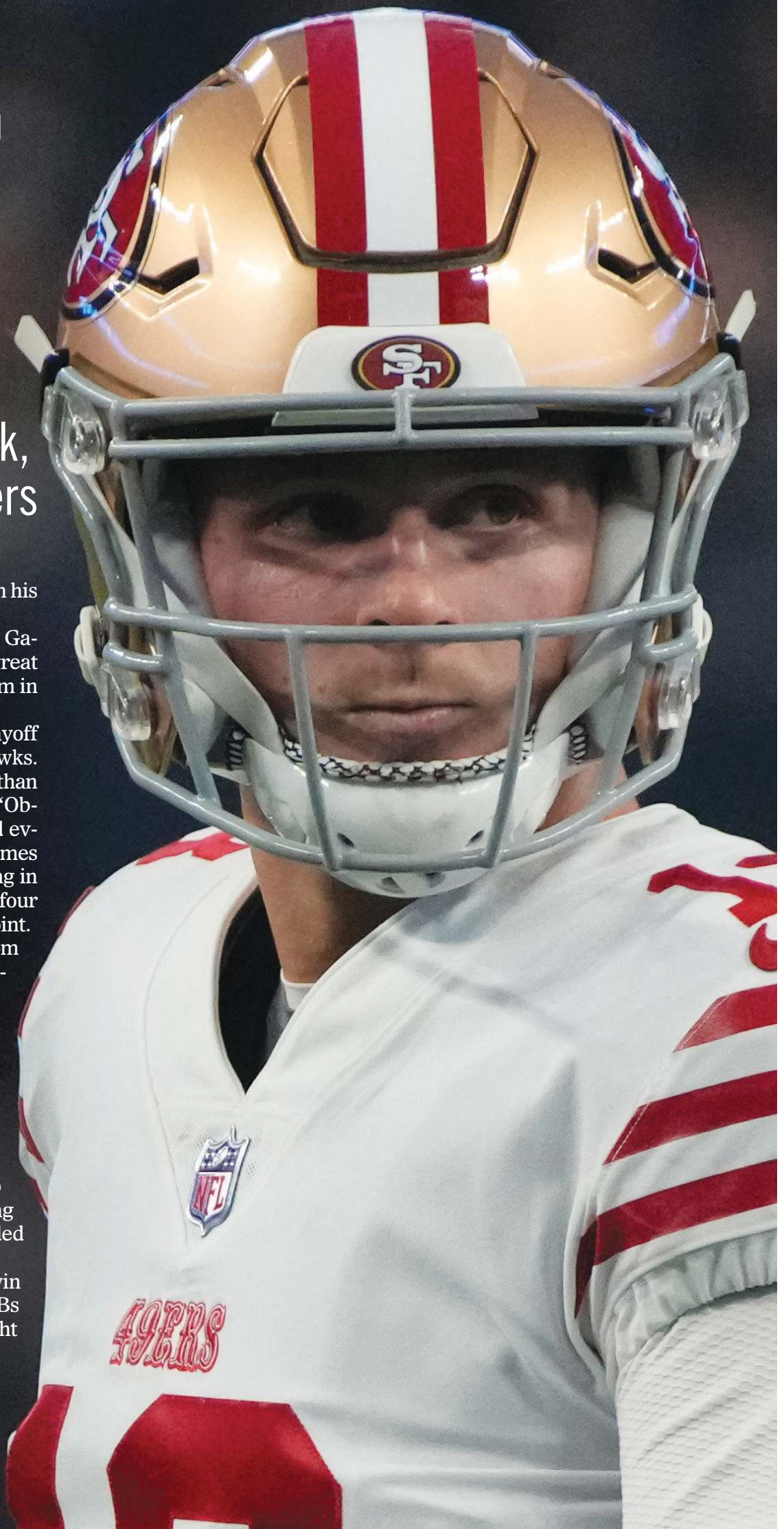
Purdy keeps reaching new milestones in every start as he piles up touchdown passes and wins, putting him in company with some heralded quarterbacks from the past.

Purdy is the first rookie QB since Ben Roethlisberger to win his first five starts, joined Justin Herbert as the only rookie QBs to throw multiple touchdown passes in at least six straight

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Rookie quarterback Brock Purdy was forced into the 49ers' starting lineup after injuries to Trey Lance and Jimmy Garoppolo. He'll start his first playoff game Saturday when San Francisco hosts Seattle.

RICK SCUTERI/AP



Harvick says 23rd season in NASCAR will be his last » Auto racing, Page 26