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# STARS AND STRIPES®

stripes.com

Volume 83 Edition 193 ©SS 2025

CONTINGENCY EDITION

FRIDAY, JANUARY 17, 2025

Free to Deployed Areas



JANAE CHAMBERS/U.S. Navy

Aviation Ordnancemen wait to inspect ordnance attached to an F/A-18E Super Hornet aboard the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower in the Red Sea, on April 12. U.S. Navy vessels deployed to the Red Sea, including the USS Eisenhower, have launched over 200 missiles to defend against Houthi rebels' campaign that began November 2023.

## Intense battle in Red Sea

Navy fires over 200 missiles to stave off militant attacks on shipping

BY ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

NAPLES, Italy — The U.S. Navy has defended against nearly 400 attack drones and missiles in the Red Sea since Iranian-backed Houthi militants began their assault on commercial and military ships more than a year ago, a pace that has seen the service firing back at levels comparable to World War II battles.

Navy forces have fired more than 200 missiles against those attacks since the Houthis began their campaign in the strategic water-

way in November 2023. Destroyers and cruisers also have fired more than 150 artillery rounds, said Vice Adm. Brendan McLane, commander of Naval Surface Forces.

Many of the munitions were fired in larger-scale battles, said McLane, speaking Tuesday during a panel discussion at the Surface Navy Association conference in Arlington, Va.

"We've done the analysis with what we used to shoot in World War II, and we're at about two rounds per incoming missile to shoot (Houthi strikes) down," he said.

That matches the current rates of fire to those of the historic battles fought more than 80 years ago, he added.

In a recent attack, the destroyer USS Spruance was "in a fight where they shot down three anti-ship ballistic missiles, three anti-ship cruise missiles and seven one-way (aerial drones) that were coming towards" them, said McLane, who didn't specify when Spruance was attacked.

SEE BATTLE ON PAGE 4

## Marine head: Moving troops over to Guam is 'wrong way'

BY BRIAN MCELHINEY  
*Stars and Stripes*

The commandant of the Marine Corps warned this week that a plan to move thousands of troops from Okinawa to Guam would position forces too far away to deter Chinese aggression in the Indo-Pacific, according to media reports.

Gen. Eric Smith, at a Defense Writers Group meeting Wednesday in Washington, D.C., said the plan "puts us going the wrong way," according to reports from news websites military.com and Task & Purpose.



Smith

"Guam puts us on the other side of the International Date Line, but it puts us a long way from the crisis theater, from the priority theater," Smith said, according to the reports.

"Every time you give China a foot, they take a mile. They only understand one thing, which is a credible deterrent force. And that credible deterrent force has to be present to win, which — to me — means being [in] the first island chain," he said, according to military.com.

The chain includes the Kuril Islands north of Hokkaido; Japan itself; the Ryukyu Islands, which include Okinawa; Taiwan; and the Philippines.

A full transcript of Smith's remarks was not available Thursday. However, U.S. Marine Corps Headquarters spokeswoman Capt. Brenda McCarthy confirmed the accuracy of Smith's comments in an email Thursday.

More than 4,000 Marines are expected to move from Okinawa

SEE MOVING ON PAGE 6

# BUSINESS/WEATHER

## US agency sues Southwest, fines Frontier for delays

Associated Press

The Transportation Department is stepping up enforcement of persistent flight delays with a lawsuit against Southwest Airlines and a fine against Frontier Airlines.

The agency said the U.S. District Court lawsuit it filed in California on Wednesday alleges that Southwest illegally operated chronically delayed flights and disrupted passengers' travel plans. It says it's seeking "maximum civil penalties."

"Airlines have a legal obligation to ensure that their flight schedules provide travelers with realistic departure and arrival times," Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said in a statement. "Today's action sends a message to all airlines that the department is prepared to go to court in order to enforce passenger protections."

The Transportation Department said its investigation found that Dallas-based Southwest operated two chronically delayed flights — one between Chicago

Midway International Airport and Oakland, Calif., and another between Baltimore, Md. and Cleveland, Ohio.

Both flights were chronically delayed for five months and together resulted in 180 flight disruptions between April and August 2022, the agency said.

The department fined Frontier Airlines \$650,000 in civil penalties. \$325,000 of the fine will be suspended if the carrier does not operate any chronically delayed flights in the next three years.

### EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates			
Euro costs (Jan. 17)	0.95	Switzerland (Franc)	0.9129
British pound (Jan. 17)	\$1.19	Thailand (Baht)	34.59
Japanese yen (Jan. 17)	154.00	Turkey (NewLira)	35.4421
South Korean won (Jan. 17)	1414.00		
Commercial rates		(Military exchange rates are those available to customers at military banking facilities in the country of issuance for Japan, South Korea, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. For nonlocal currency exchange rates (i.e., purchasing British pounds in Germany), check with your local military banking facility. Commercial rates are interbank rates provided for reference when buying currency. All figures are foreign currencies to one dollar, except for the British pound, which is represented in dollars-to-pound, and the euro, which is dollars-to-euro.)	
Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3769		
Britain (Pound)	1.2197		
Canada (Dollar)	1.4387		
China (Yuan)	7.3328		
Denmark (Krone)	7.2580		
Egypt (Pound)	50.3994		
Euro	0.9728		
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7881		
Hungary (Forint)	402.01		
Israel (Shekel)	3.6225		
Japan (Yen)	156.15		
Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3084		
Norway (Krone)	11.3748		
Philippines (Peso)	58.62		
Poland (Zloty)	4.15		
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7520		
Singapore (Dollar)	1.3679		
South Korea (Won)	1459.85		

### INTEREST RATES

Prime rate	7.50
Interest Rates Discount rate	4.50
Federal funds market rate	4.33
3-month bill	4.31
30-year bond	4.88

## WEATHER OUTLOOK

### FRIDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



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## MILITARY

# Austin found at fault for diagnosis failures

BY MATTHEW ADAMS  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin is responsible for the Pentagon neglecting to tell Congress and the White House that the former Army general was incapacitated last year due to treatment for prostate cancer as his office is required to do, the agency's watchdog concluded in a report released Wednesday.

Austin came under scrutiny last year for failing to disclose his cancer and complications that led to an extended hospital stay. A report issued by the Defense Department's inspector general faults Austin for communication failures in which his hospitalization was kept secret for days, including from President Joe Biden.

"I wish [Secretary Austin] were a normal person, but he's the [defense secretary]. We have a big institutional responsibility. He can't just go totally dark on his staff. ... Please pass to him that we can't keep his hospitalization a secret forever. It's kind of big deal for him to be in the [surgical intensive care unit]. And I'm worried sick," then-chief of staff Kelly Magsamen wrote in texts to Austin's junior military assistant.

Austin was first diagnosed with cancer in December 2023, with his hospital stay stretching into January. By February, the defense secretary took responsibility for secrecy about his illness.

"I want to be crystal clear; we did not handle this right. I did not handle this right," Austin told reporters at the Pentagon in February. "I should have told the president about my cancer diagnosis. I should have told my team and the American people, and I take full responsibility."

The inspector general's yearlong investigation found Austin's strong desire for privacy likely influenced his staff in deciding not to prod further into his condition. To date, no one on Austin's staff has been singled out as responsible for the failure.

The IG report points to Austin for not informing Congress or the White House of his initial treatment in December 2023 for prostate cancer and not telling his staff or the White House of his worsening complications on Jan. 1, 2024, which led him to be



ALEXANDER KUBITZA / Office of the Secretary of Defense Public Affairs

**Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin hosts a holiday morale call from the Pentagon last month. An inspector general report released Wednesday faulted Austin for not alerting Congress and the White House to his prostate cancer treatments.**

taken by ambulance to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md.

The report states when Austin went for the initial medical procedure December 2023, he kept information private from Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks; Air Force Gen. Charles "CQ" Brown, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and nearly all his staff. He told one junior staff member, "if anyone had any questions, they're more than welcome to ask [me] directly," according to the report.

When Austin had to be transported by ambulance to Walter Reed on New Year's Day, the report states the evidence based on contemporaneous statements and actions of those involved indicates Austin requested the ambulance not use lights and sirens and told his personal security officer, "We're not notifying anybody."

On Jan. 2, Austin transferred some of his more pressing responsibilities to Hicks.

The report states neither Austin nor

Hicks "met the requirement to immediately notify the comptroller general and Congress of the vacancy" of the secretary's office from Jan. 2 to Jan. 5.

At the time, Austin said he was experiencing fever, chills and shallow breathing on that day, and doctors decided to move him to the intensive care unit for several days of close monitoring.

Yet Biden did not learn of Austin's prostate cancer until Jan. 9. That same day, the White House ordered all Cabinet members and secretaries must immediately notify the administration if at any time they cannot perform their duties.

"We believe that the combined impact of his condition and the complications from the Dec. 22 procedure, and the effects of his illness and treatment, particularly including his procedures on Jan. 6 and Jan. 8, should at least have prompted consideration by Secretary Austin and others as to whether his authorities should have been transferred to Deputy Secretary Hicks

during periods of his hospitalization," the report reads.

A separate internal review of the situation was conducted shortly after the situation. The Pentagon concluded in February that privacy restrictions and staff hesitancy as the reasons for the failure to notify the president and other U.S. officials about Austin's prostate cancer and subsequent complications.

The internal review made eight recommendations that included ensuring key defense officials in the order of succession are familiar with relevant processes and procedures, as well as the department reviewing and updating internal reporting practices associated with the transfer of duties, Air Force Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder, the Pentagon's top spokesman, said at the time.

"There was no finding of ill-intent or an attempt to obfuscate," Ryder said.

The inspector general's investigation into Austin's handling of his illness and hospitalization took a year to complete and was released just days before Austin is set to leave office on Jan. 20.

Two senior defense officials, who spoke to reporters Wednesday on the condition of anonymity, made a point to emphasize there was no cover-up by anyone in the department, and the IG report states there was no break in command at any time and the secretary was not incapacitated and unable to carry out his duties.

"The actual report says that there were no risks to see to, the report did not identify any adverse impacts on [Defense Department] functions and there was no evidence that the secretary experienced severe cognitive impairments during his time at Walter Reed ... or otherwise unable to carry out his duties," one official said.

The IG report made 20 recommendations to improve notifications within the department and other critical stakeholders, as well as the effective assumption of functions and duties by the deputy defense secretary or other senior department leaders in the chain of succession, according to the report.

Austin responded on Jan. 3 concurring with all 20 recommendations.

## Overseas military pharmacies moving to interactive phone-in refills

BY JONATHAN SNYDER  
*Stars and Stripes*

U.S. military pharmacies overseas are instituting an interactive, voice-response system for prescription refills, the Defense Health Agency announced recently.

The transition to the new system started at military hospitals and clinics in September and is about 78% complete, DHA spokesman Peter Graves told Stars and Stripes by email Wednesday.

"We are currently working with the vendor to provide local numbers for our [outside the continental U.S.] sites, which will broaden communication capabilities for our beneficiaries," he said. "Our goal is to transition

completely by June 2025."

The change means military pharmacies may create a new phone number for their prescription refill lines.

"Most [military treatment facilities] have already updated their pharmacy labels and websites with their new number, and they are call forwarding the old refill number to aid patients who still have prescriptions with the old number on it," Graves said.

The change should be seamless for beneficiaries whose usual treatment facility uses a local phone tree or 1-800 number.

Patients can still refill prescriptions using the MHS Genesis Patient Portal online, according to a DHA news release.

Some patients who prefer the

phone system over the online refill method are hopeful this upgrade will be an improvement.

"Hopefully this actually makes it easier," one commenter wrote Dec. 18 on Tricare's official Facebook page. "MHS Genesis has made it more difficult to refill online than the previous online system."

DHA says the transition will not affect existing prescriptions or refills and that all remaining refills will automatically move over to the new system.

"The digital refill call system is already active, and we are working towards new capabilities that are being piloted by Edwards [Air Force Base], to include refill pickup notifications," Graves said.



ANNA NOLTE/U.S. Air Force

**A pharmacy technician with the 18th Medical Support Squadron hands a prescription to a patient at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa.**

## MILITARY

# Report: Military pay in line with private sector

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

U.S. service members earn more in money and benefits than most civilians in similar demographics, the Defense Department said this week following the release of a military pay review done every four years.

No major changes to the military's compensation system were called for in Wednesday's report, officially titled the Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation.

"Our retention is really high, so I'm thinking that the longer members serve, the more fully they understand the value of the total compensation package," a defense official told reporters Wednesday.

The assessment considered salaries and benefits such as housing and subsistence allowances.

Junior enlisted troops fared especially well when compared with Americans of similar career experience and education levels, ranking in the 93rd percentile. Most officers, meanwhile, were in the 75th percentile for financial compensation, the study found.

The study didn't account for a salary bump passed by Congress in December that will give junior enlisted troops a 14.5% pay raise and all other service members a 4.5% increase in 2025.

Although DOD compensation is competitive with the civilian labor market, there are some areas for improvement, another senior defense official told reporters

Wednesday.

"This may ultimately require us to consider policy and programmatic changes to compensation as well as nonmonetary programs to ensure successful recruitment, retention and readiness of the force moving forward," the official said.

The report looked at the effect of dual-income households on military retention and how issues such as permanent change of station moves and child care access factored into the life decisions of armed forces personnel.

For military spouses with careers, frequent moves pose challenges to finding employment and advancing their own careers. The circumstances can be a cause for service members to end their military careers.

Offering greater access to child care was one of the improvements the report suggested that the Pentagon make.

The report also recommended that DOD reconsider its current target of paying service members at the 70th percentile of comparable civilian jobs and boost the figure to the 75th percentile.

The military needs to do a better job communicating with service members and recruits about compensation packages and benefits that often get overlooked, such as free dental and health care, the report said.

Defense officials said they would begin implementing the report's various recommendations.



PHOTOS BY AARON LAU/U.S. Navy

Sailors aboard the destroyer USS Carney stand watch in the ship's Combat Information Center during an operation to defeat a combination of Houthi missiles and unmanned aerial vehicles, in October 2023.

## Battle: Navy has defeated 380 Houthi attack drones in 15 months

FROM PAGE 1

On Nov. 11, Spruance and the destroyer USS Stockdale came under Houthi fire, fending off at least eight drones and eight missiles while transiting the Bab el Mandeb, a strait that connects the Red Sea to the Gulf of Aden.

Over the past 15 months, the Navy has fired 120 SM-2, 80 SM-6, and 20 Evolved Sea Sparrow and SM-3 missiles, as well as 160 rounds from its 5-inch guns. Those weapons defeated 380 Houthi attack drones and ballistic and cruise missiles, McLane said.

Those missile expenditures have cost the Navy hundreds of millions of dollars. SM-2 missiles are priced at about \$2.1 million apiece while the SM-6 missiles cost about \$3.9 million each. SM-3 missiles range from \$9.6 million to \$27.9 million, according to Missile Defense Advocacy Alliance data.

McLane acknowledged the expense, saying that modest threats increasingly were being addressed with lower-cost alternatives such as guns, electronic countermeasures and aircraft.

But commanders shouldn't be considering the cost of a weapon when responding to a threat, McLane said speaking separately during a "status of the forces" address at the convention.

The Navy has sent 26 vessels into the Red Sea and nearby waters since November 2023, including the aircraft carriers USS Dwight D. Eisenhower and USS Harry S. Truman, to protect ships.

The Houthis have vowed to disrupt shipping until there is a cease-fire in Gaza.

It wasn't clear Thursday whether they would end their attacks should a ceasefire negotiated between Israel and Hamas, the war-



The destroyer USS Carney engages Houthi missiles and drones in the Red Sea in October 2023. The Navy has defended against nearly 400 Houthi attack drones and missiles since the group began its assault on ships more than a year ago, Vice Adm. Brendan McLane said.

ring parties in Gaza, begin Sunday.

Since Nov. 19, 2023, there have been at least 111 reported attacks, attempted attacks, hijackings and suspicious behavior incidents involving ships in the Red Sea.

Two vessels have been sunk, four mariners have been killed and two others were severely injured in attacks, according to Joint Maritime Information Center data. There have been no injuries or damage to Navy sailors or ships from Houthi actions.

But in an apparent "friendly fire" incident, the cruiser USS Gettysburg shot down an F/A-18 Super Hornet on Dec. 22 as the fighter jet was responding to a Houthi drone and missile attack on U.S. forces in the Red Sea.

Both aviators aboard were rescued, with one suffering minor injuries.

Houthi tactics have evolved from the use of inexpensive drones and cruise missiles shot in irregular intervals to a "marked escalation in the scale and complexity of enemy techniques and capabilities," McLane said.

Those advanced techniques include the use of anti-ship ballistic missiles and roving, one-way aerial attack drones in preassigned three-dimensional target areas, also known as kill boxes, he said.

That weapons engagement zone has taught sailors valuable lessons in the use of drones and directed energy weapons, such as high-energy lasers, McLane said.

"We've sped up our own learning and teaching so that our deploying ships are always prepared with the latest (tactics, techniques and procedures) before they go over the horizon," he said.



JOAQUIN CARLOS DELA TORRE/U.S. Marine Corps

Service members at Fort Myer-Henderson Hall, Va., rehearse Jan. 10 for the upcoming presidential inauguration. The Quadrennial Review of Military Compensation found that troops are paid better than most of their civilian counterparts.

## MILITARY

# Army doctor gets 13-year sentence

## Stockin gets maximum amount of prison time allowed under a plea deal

By GARY WARNER  
Stars and Stripes

Maj. Michael Stockin, an Army doctor, was sentenced Wednesday to 164 months in prison for sexually abusing 41 patients under the guise of providing medical care at Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington.

Col. Larry Babin, the military judge of the trial, said he had deliberated more than 12 hours before reaching his decision to sentence Stockin, 39, to the maximum amount of prison time allowed under a plea deal made with Army prosecutors.

Babin also ordered Stockin forfeit all future pay and benefits and be dismissed from the Army — the equivalent of a dishonorable discharge for officers.

As a result of the conviction, Stockin will lose his medical license and be required to register as a sex offender. As a felon, he'll be barred in many states from voting or owning firearms.

Stockin showed no emotion Wednesday in court as Babin issued his ruling. Stockin, dressed in a dark blue service uniform with a fresh high-and-tight hair-

cut, was accompanied by his attorneys to the back of the courthouse where military police were waiting to take him into custody.

The 15-minute court session was a short, sharp end to a three-year investigation and prosecution of what Army legal officials have said is the largest known case of sexual abuse in U.S. military history. Twenty-two of Stockin's 41 known victims testified or gave statements in the court-martial.

"The resilience of the victims in this case should be celebrated," said Maj. Ryan Keeter, the Army's lead prosecutor in the trial. "They have been living with the trauma that has come from Maj. Stockin's actions for years."

Robert Capovilla, the lead defense attorney, issued a statement after the trial noting Stockin faced a maximum sentence of more than 250 years in prison had he not agreed to the negotiated plea deal.

"Major Stockin took full responsibility for his actions, and he made no excuses," Capovilla said. "The defense hopes and prays that the victims and Maj. Stockin will finally be able to heal and to move

forward with their lives."

Stockin was taken into custody by military police and was being held at the Northwestern Joint Regional Correctional Facility at Lewis-McChord, according to base officials.

Stockin's conviction is automatically sent for review to the Army Court of Criminal Appeals at Fort Belvoir, Va., said Michelle McCaskill, a spokeswoman for the Army Office of the Special Trial Counsel.

If the conviction is upheld, Stockin would then be dismissed from the Army.

Stockin joined the Army in 2013 and previously was assigned to Tripler Army Medical Center in Hawaii and Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md. He also served a six-month deployment in Iraq.

Stockin was assigned to Lewis-McChord in 2019. After complaints about sexually abusive behavior, he was removed from seeing patients in February 2022.

An 18-month Army investigation led to 23 charges against Stockin in August 2023. The charges expanded to 54 by Janu-

ary 2024. A two-month trial on the charges was scheduled for January 2025.

But a plea deal was reached in September in which Stockin agreed to plead guilty to 36 counts of sexually abusive contact for fondling patients' genitals during medical appointments. He also pleaded guilty to five counts of indecent viewing — telling patients to disrobe and expose their genitals.

Ryan Guilds, a lawyer representing seven victims in the court-martial case, said his clients felt the judge's decision to give Stockin the maximum sentence "sends the right message."

"Maj. Stockin showed disdain in the way he treated the Army and the uniform that he should have been honored to wear," he said.

But Guilds said the Pentagon still needs to pursue a thorough investigation into how Stockin was able to molest patients for so long before action was taken to remove him from duty.

Several former patients have filed federal claims seeking \$5 million from the Army for its failure to properly manage Stockin



KOMO News

**Army Maj. Michael Stockin had faced a possible 250 years in prison if he had not agreed to the plea deal, his lawyer said.**

and allowing his crimes to continue after initial complaints.

As of Wednesday, at least 26 patients had filed claims, totaling \$130 million. The claims are the first step in gaining the legal right to sue the federal government in civil court. Additional patients could file claims.

"Stockin has been sentenced for his role — now the Army must also be held accountable," said Christine Dunn, an attorney who represents some of the victims pursuing civil claims against the government.

## Japan sets new mission to NATO

Associated Press

TOKYO — Japan on Thursday formally inaugurated an independent mission to the NATO military alliance as Tokyo and NATO seek to bolster cooperation amid escalating tension from Russia, China and North Korea.

Previously, the Japanese embassy in Belgium also covered NATO. The new mission is led by Osamu Izawa, who takes over the role currently filled by the ambassador to Belgium, Masahiro Mikami.

In Tokyo on Thursday, Japan and NATO held high-level consultations to discuss regional security issues in East Asia and Europe, according to the Foreign Ministry.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and closer ties between Moscow and Beijing, NATO has deepened its links with Japan and three other Indo-Pacific partners, Australia, New Zealand and South Korea, though not as part of the military alliance.

Japan's Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba has advocated a NATO-like security framework in Asia, though he has not given details.

Countries with shared security concerns are strengthening ties as competition escalates between the United States and China.



STEPHANIE SERRANO/U.S. Air Force

**Two U.S. B-1B Lancers were escorted Wednesday by South Korean 15K Slam Eagles and Japan Air Self-Defense Force Mitsubishi F-2s in airspace between South Korea and Japan.**

## US B-1Bs fly with jets from Japan, South Korea

By JOSEPH DITZLER  
Stars and Stripes

Japanese and South Korean fighters escorted U.S. bombers on a display of air power Wednesday in the skies over the Sea of Japan, or East Sea, according to Air Force Global Strike Command.

Two Mitsubishi F-2s of the Japan Air Self-Defense Force and two F-15K Slam Eagles of the South Korean air force escorted a pair of Air Force B-1B Lancer bombers in a show of deterrence and interoperability, the command said in a news release that day.

The military uses the term interoperability to refer to the ability of one nation's armed forces to use the equipment and training meth-

ods of another country's military.

The escort flight was the first air power demonstration of the year by the three countries, according to the release. The flight "builds upon a history of strong trilateral cooperation, enabling an immediate coordinated response to regional security challenges.

"This increasingly steady and sophisticated trilateral interoperability of our aerial and maritime forces strengthens our collective deterrence and defense posture," the release states.

Escort flights of this nature sometimes follow missile tests or other demonstrations of military strength by North Korea.

In this case, the North on Tuesday tested several short-range

ballistic missiles, according to the Japanese and South Korean militaries, which said they tracked the launches.

North Korea's communist regime also fired an intermediate-range ballistic missile on Jan. 6, its first test of the new year.

The state-run Korean Central News Agency described the missile as a hypersonic weapon, but the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff expressed skepticism of that claim in a statement that said the description was likely exaggerated.

The Air Force did not identify the Lancers' home station, but it routinely sends bombers on long flights from the United States called bomber task force missions

to demonstrate its ability to respond globally on behalf of its allies.

Two Lancers last flew in South Korea on air support drills at Pilsung Range, 100 miles southeast of Seoul, in October.

One Lancer dropped bombs there in June during a live-fire exercise.

The flight occurred a day before President Joe Biden made his televised farewell address from the Oval Office.

His administration strengthened military cooperation between Japan and South Korea as a response to security challenges from China, and diluting decades of hard feelings between the two lingering since World War II.

## PACIFIC

# Oil spill reported at USMC site on Okinawa

By BRIAN McELHINEY  
AND KEISHI KOJA  
*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — A construction vessel leaked oil at the site of a future Marine Corps airfield in northern Okinawa this week but caused no environmental damage, according to Japan's coast guard.

Hydraulic oil spilled at 11:40 a.m. Wednesday from a drill on a vessel that was boring into the seabed in Oura Bay, according to a coast guard news release on the same day. The vessel was working on construction for the airfield in waters about 4,400 feet north-northeast of Cape Henoko in Nago city.

The airfield is under construction at the Marines' Camp Schwab on reclaimed land to replace Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in densely populated Ginowan city. The U.S. and Japanese governments agreed to move the base in 1996, but the Okinawa prefectural government has repeatedly delayed construction.

Oil seepage was confirmed on the ocean surface around noon, and contractors installed an oil fence and an oil absorption mat to recover the spill, according to the release. Recovery work was successfully completed at 1:10 p.m.

An investigation is underway to determine the cause and how much oil was spilled, a coast guard spokesman said by phone Thursday.

Some Japanese officials speak to the press only on condition of anonymity.

Contractors hired by the Okinawa Defense Bureau, an arm of Japan's Ministry of Defense, began ground improvement work in Oura Bay on Dec. 28, the bureau announced in a news release the previous day.

The work involves solidifying the soft seabed to ensure stability for the airfield by "laying sand at the required locations on the seabed and driving sand piles," the bureau said.

In July, contractors drove test piles into the seabed to prepare the site for steel pipes that will support the seawall.

The construction zone is divided into two main sections: 279 acres on Schwab's north side and 91 acres in the south, according to Okinawa Prefecture's website.

Work on the Oura Bay side, or north side, had been on hold since April 21, 2020, when Okinawa Gov. Denny Tamaki, citing safety and environmental concerns, refused to approve design changes meant to solidify the seabed.



BRIAN McELHINEY/Stars and Stripes

**A crane used to drive test piles floats in Oura Bay at the site of a future U.S. Marine Corps runway at Camp Schwab, Okinawa, in July. A construction vessel leaked oil at the site this week, Japan's coast guard said.**

Tamaki filed, and lost, three lawsuits, culminating in a September 2023 defeat at the Supreme Court.

Japanese Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism Tetsuo Saito approved the con-

struction permits Dec. 28, 2023, after Tamaki ignored a deadline from Fukuoka High Court.

## Moving: Force Design plan calls for USMC to better defend islands east of Taiwan

FROM PAGE 1

under the Defense Policy Review Initiative, a 2012 agreement between the U.S. and Japan to reduce the military presence on Okinawa, which hosts nearly 30,000 of the 55,000 U.S. troops stationed in Japan.

About 100 logistics support troops from III Marine Expeditionary Force began moving from

Okinawa to Guam last year, according to a Dec. 14 joint statement by the Marine Corps and Japan's Ministry of Defense.

Camp Blaz on Guam is expected to house 1,300 members of III MEF and another 3,700 Marines as a rotational force.

The base is still under construction.

Smith told reporters Wednesday

that he is not sure the plan "is in the best strategic interest of America."

"We're committed to coming down to about 10,000 on Okinawa and getting ourselves to Guam," he said, according to military.com. "But Guam is a challenge. I mean, Apra Harbor [at Naval Base Guam] still has to be refurbished; [it] has to be redone

to allow for big decks to get in there."

The service "supports the tents outlined in the DPRI agreement and the plan for the movement of units from Japan to Guam or Hawaii starting in 2024," McCarthy wrote in a separate email Wednesday.

"The Marine Corps will continue to explore options for the best

location for the future force in the region."

The Pentagon identified China as an aggressive presence in the East and South China seas and a global "pacing challenge" in its 2022 National Defense Strategy.

The Marines' Force Design plan calls for the service to better defend the small islands east of Taiwan and to counter China.

## Japan, Philippines officials want Trump's commitment to region

By SETH ROBSON  
AND HANA KUSUMOTO  
*Stars and Stripes*

Japan and the Philippines plan to remind the new U.S. administration about the need for continued American commitment to Indo-Pacific security, according to the U.S. allies' foreign ministers.

The two nations have boosted security cooperation with the United States under outgoing President Joe Biden amid aggressive actions by China in disputed areas of the South China and East China seas.

Japanese Foreign Minister Takeshi Iwaya, during a Wednesday press conference in Manila with his Philippine counterpart, Enrique Manalo, said the pair are committed to communicating with Donald Trump's administration

after he becomes president again Monday.

"We will approach the next U.S. administration to convey that constructive commitment of the United States in this region is important also for the United States itself," Iwaya said, according to a video of the press conference posted on YouTube.

A Philippine journalist asked whether Trump might scale back or put a price on commitment to the region.

Maintaining and strengthening the multilayered cooperation among the U.S., Japan and the Philippines is important amid the increasingly severe strategic environment, Iwaya said.

The three nations are cooperating on maritime security, resis-

tance to economic coercion, resilient critical infrastructure and cyber security, he said.

Iwaya noted the strategic importance of sea lanes in Southeast Asia and economic growth in the region.

Manalo told reporters that the Philippines and Japan would work with like-minded states, including the U.S., to uphold a rules-based international order and work for a free and open Indo-Pacific.

The diplomats' comments follow reports that China's "monster" coast guard cutter, the 541-foot-long CCG 5901, has been operating in Philippine waters since Jan. 4.

In recent days, the vessel came within 70 nautical miles of Zamboales province, home of the former

U.S. naval base at Subic Bay on the Philippines' main island of Luzon, the state-run Philippine News Agency reported Monday.

Philippine assets are challenging Chinese vessels in its territorial waters daily, Philippine National Security Council assistant director general Jonathan Malaya told reporters the next day.

"Right now, we have two Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) vessels shadowing them, closely monitoring them," he said, according to the Philippine News Agency. "We have sent assets also from our forces and from the PCG aerial assets to continue monitoring them."

Beijing's territorial claims in the South China Sea are legitimate concerns for the international community because they link di-

rectly to regional peace and stability, Iwaya said at Wednesday's press conference.

"Japan strongly opposes any attempt to unilaterally change the status quo by force or build up tension in the region. We strongly ask for easing of tensions," said Iwaya, who is scheduled to attend Trump's inauguration in Washington.

Japan and the Philippines plan to move forward on agreements to facilitate their troops training in each other's territory, he said.

This spring, Japan for the first time will join the annual, large-scale Balikatan military exercise in the Philippines. Details about the training are being finalized, a spokesman for Japan's Joint Staff said by phone Thursday.

## NATION

# 'Oligarchy' threatens US democracy, Biden warns

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden used his farewell address to the nation Wednesday to deliver stark warnings about an “oligarchy” of the ultra-wealthy taking root in the country and a “tech-industrial complex” that is infringing on Americans’ rights and the future of democracy.

Speaking from the Oval Office as he prepares to hand over power Monday to President-elect Donald Trump, Biden seized what is likely to be his final opportunity to address the country before he departs the White House to spotlight the accumulation of power and wealth in the U.S. among just a small few.

“Today, an oligarchy is taking shape in America of extreme wealth, power and influence that literally threatens our entire democracy, our basic rights and freedoms, and a fair shot for everyone to get ahead,” Biden said, drawing attention to “a dangerous concentration of power in the hands of a few ultra-wealthy people and the dangerous consequences if their abuse of power is left unchecked.”

Invoking President Dwight Eisenhower’s warnings about the rise of a military-industrial complex when he left office in 1961, Biden added, “I’m equally concerned about the potential rise of a tech-industrial complex that could pose real dangers to our



MANDEL NGAN/AP

**In his farewell address from the Oval Office on Wednesday, President Joe Biden spotlighted the accumulation of power and wealth in the U.S. among just a small few.**

country as well.”

Biden used his 15-minute address to offer a model for a peaceful transfer of power and — without mentioning Trump by name — raise concerns about his successor.

It marked a striking admonition by Biden, who is departing the national stage after more than 50 years in public life, as he has

struggled to define his legacy and to steel the country against the return of Trump to the Oval Office. This time, the president, who has repeatedly called Trump a threat to the nation’s system of governance, went even further, warning Americans to be on guard for their freedoms and their institutions during a turbulent era of rapid technological

and economic change.

Biden sounded the alarm about oligarchy as some of the world’s richest individuals and titans of its technology industry have flocked to Trump’s side in recent months, particularly after his November victory. Billionaire Elon Musk spent more than \$100 million helping Trump get elected, and executives like Meta’s Mark Zuckerberg and Amazon’s Jeff Bezos have donated to Trump’s inaugural committee and made pilgrimages to Trump’s private club in Florida for audiences with the president-elect as they seek to ingratiate themselves with his administration and shape its policies.

Biden’s speech in the Oval Office is the latest in a series of remarks on domestic policy and foreign relations he has delivered that are intended to cement his legacy and reshape Americans’ grim views on his term. Earlier in the day, he heralded a long-awaited ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas, which could end more than a year of bloodshed in the Middle East.

“It’ll take time to feel the full impact of what we’ve done together but the seeds are planted and they’ll grow and they’ll bloom for decades to come,” Biden said. It was a tacit acknowledgment that many Americans say they have yet to feel the impact of his trillions of dollars spent on domestic initiatives.

## Trump’s outsider Cabinet picks gaining support on Hill

BY LISA MASCARO

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — One by one, all the president-elect’s men, and women, are falling into place in his Cabinet.

While defense secretary pick Pete Hegseth’s nomination was teetering toward collapse just weeks ago, he now appears on track for confirmation after a fiery Senate hearing that focused on his drinking, views of women in combat and lack of high-profile management experience for the top U.S. military job.

President-elect Donald Trump’s other nominees pushed Wednesday through a gauntlet of confirmation hearings with the help of allied Senate Republicans carrying them toward the finish line, despite Democratic objections. One of them, potential FBI director Kash Patel, popped into a private Senate GOP lunch Wednesday to say hello.

“These nominees are bold choices,” said Sen. John Barrasso of Wyoming, the GOP whip, in earlier remarks.

He predicted the Senate will begin start voting on Inauguration Day, Monday, to confirm Trump’s picks.

### ■ A long haul for some of Trump’s picks.

To be sure, Trump’s more controversial choices of Patel, Tulsi Gabbard and Robert F. Kennedy Jr., have yet to come before senators for public questioning. Once they do, they face a long haul ahead in winning over skeptics from both sides of the political aisle.

In a letter to Republican senators Wednesday, an organization headed by Trump’s former vice president, Mike Pence, said it was “deeply concerned” over Kennedy over his views on abortion, and urged senators to reject him for secretary of health and human services.

But Hegseth’s ability to mount a political comeback, take the fight to his critics and

turn his nomination into a litmus test of Trump’s Make America Great Again movement stands as a powerful example of the incoming White House’s ability to get what it wants. The Trump team’s allies, including billionaire Elon Musk and others, amplified support for Hegseth, pushing him forward.

“If anyone in the Senate GOP votes against confirming Pete Hegseth after his stellar performance today, there will be a primary challenge waiting for you,” wrote Trump ally Charlie Kirk on X. “You can take that to the bank.”

### ■ Momentum for Hegseth, some others.

The Senate Armed Services Committee is expected to vote on Hegseth’s nomination on Monday, sending it to the full Senate for consideration, with confirmation possible later that week.

With a nod of support from GOP Sen. Joni Ernst of Iowa, a combat veteran and sexual assault survivor who initially had questions for Hegseth, the former Army National Guard veteran powered past his biggest potential roadblock. Ernst faced an onslaught of personal and political attacks as she wavered on supporting Hegseth, an early signal to others.

Sen. Kevin Cramer, R-N.D., said the criticism of Hegseth was not as powerful as the image of “a warrior with dust on his boots who’s actually done the things.”

On Wednesday, a half dozen more Trump nominees appeared before Senate committees as his team floods the zone, senators dashing between hearing rooms to participate in as many sessions as possible.

Pam Bondi, the nominee for attorney general, was grilled by Democrats probing



ROD LAMKEY JR./AP

**Chris Wright, President-elect Donald Trump’s nominee to be secretary of energy, left, is greeted by Sen. John Hickenlooper, D-Colo., ahead of a Senate committee hearing Wednesday.**

whether she believed Trump lost the 2020 election, she said Joe Biden won, or would stand up to presidential pardons for those convicted of crimes in relation to Jan. 6, 2021.

“You say the right things, that you’re going to be the ‘people’s lawyer,’” said Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn.

“But I believe being the ‘people’s lawyer’ means you have to be able to say no to the president of the United States,” he said. “You have to be able to say Donald Trump lost the 2020 election, you dodged that question. ... You have to be able to say Jan. 6 insurrectionists who committed violence shouldn’t be pardoned.”

Bondi responded: “I don’t have to say anything. I will answer the questions to the best of my ability, and honestly.”

Another Trump nominee, Russ Vought, a Project 2025 architect tapped to lead the White House Office of Management and Budget, was asked if he would commit to re-

leasing congressional approved funding for Ukraine. He vowed to “always commit to upholding the law.”

And California Democratic Sen. Alex Padilla asked Trump’s Energy nominee Chris Wright if he still believes “wildfires are just hype,” in the aftermath of the devastating Southern California fires that have killed at least 25 people and destroyed thousands of homes.

Wright said he stood by his past comments. He then said climate change is real before Padilla cut him off.

### ■ Republicans eye quick votes after Trump’s inauguration.

On Monday, Trump is expected to go inside the Capitol after he is inaugurated to sign paperwork to formally nominate his picks for top Cabinet and administrative positions, launching the confirmation process.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune has said the Senate will vote on nominees as soon as they are ready.

First up could be Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla., a former Trump rival for the 2016 GOP presidential nomination, who is now the president-elect’s choice for secretary of state.

Rubio promised an “America First” foreign policy agenda during his own confirmation hearing Wednesday. As a well-known senator, he is expected to have broad support from Republicans, as well as Democrats. His confirmation vote could be as soon as Monday evening.

Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer all but acknowledged Democrats, as the minority, are essentially powerless to prevent Trump from getting his desired team.

“It’s important to have a record of these nominees,” Schumer said Wednesday as the hearings pushed ahead. “Even if they get confirmed in the end.”

## NATION

# Florida AG Moody will take Rubio's US Senate seat

Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Florida Attorney General Ashley Moody will take Marco Rubio's seat in the U.S. Senate, Gov. Ron DeSantis announced Thursday, making Moody only the second woman to represent Florida in the chamber.

Elected as the state's top law enforcement officer in 2018, Moody campaigned on a pledge to voters that she'd be a prosecutor, not a politician. But along with DeSantis, she boosted her political profile during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, calling on the federal government to "hold China responsible" for the outbreak.

In elevating her to the post, DeSantis praised Moody as a key player in his political battles, a law and order prosecutor who's prepared to help President-elect Donald Trump "secure and shut the border," rein in inflation, and overhaul what he described as a federal bureaucracy "run amok."

"I'm ready to show up and fight for this nation and fight for President Trump to deliver the America First agenda on Day 1," Moody said during Thursday's announcement at a hotel in Orlando.

"The only way to return this country to the people, the people who govern it, is to make sure we have a strong Congress doing its job, passing laws and actually approving the regulations that these unelected bureaucrats are trying to cram down on the American people," she added.

Before running for statewide office, Moody worked as a federal prosecutor. In 2006, she was elected to the post of circuit judge in Hillsborough County, home to Tampa. A fifth generation native of Plant City, Fla., Moody was once named queen of the city's famed strawberry festival. She's a three-time graduate of the University of Florida and she and her



MARTA LAVANDIER/AP

**Florida Attorney General Ashley Moody speaks at a news conference in Miami in 2023.**

husband, a law enforcement officer, have two sons.

As the state's attorney general, Moody has been instrumental in defending DeSantis' conservative agenda in court and has joined other Republican-led states in challenging the Biden administration's policies, suing over changes to immigration enforcement, student loan forgiveness and vaccine mandates for federal contractors.

"I'm happy to say we've had an Attorney General that is somebody that has acted time and time again to support the values that we all share," DeSantis said. "We in Florida established our state as a beachhead of liberty, as the free state of Florida. And she was with us every step of the way."

Moody isn't the state's only AG to use the office as a stepping stone to a national post. Her predecessor, Pam Bondi, is Trump's pick to lead the Justice Department and is testifying Thursday in the Senate.

Under Florida law, it was up to the Republican governor to choose Rubio's replacement after Trump picked the three-term senator to be his next secretary of state. Moody will serve in the Senate until the next general election in 2026, when the seat will be back on the ballot.



BEN CURTIS/AP

**Scott Bessent, President-elect Donald Trump's choice to be Secretary of the Treasury, appears before the Senate Finance Committee for his confirmation hearing at the Capitol in Washington on Thursday.**

## Treasury nominee: Trump can unleash an 'economic golden age'

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. Treasury nominee Scott Bessent told his confirmation hearing Thursday that President-elect Donald Trump has an opportunity to unleash "a new economic golden age."

In testimony, Bessent said the U.S. must secure vulnerable supply chains, levy sanctions to address national security concerns "and critically, we must ensure that the U.S. dollar remains the world's reserve currency."

Lawmakers on Capitol Hill are questioning Bessent's stance on taxes, tariffs, trade and other issues during his confirmation hearing before the Senate Finance Committee.

Trump's choice for treasury secretary is a South Carolina billionaire who, before becoming a Trump donor and adviser, donated to various Democratic causes in the early 2000s, notably Al Gore's presidential run.

He also worked for George Soros, a major supporter of Democrats.

Bessent was one of several people Trump considered for the posi-

tion. Trump took his time before settling on Bessent as his nominee. He also mulled over billionaire investor John Paulson and Howard Lutnick, whom Trump tapped as his nominee for commerce secretary.

The treasury secretary is responsible for serving as the president's fiscal policy adviser and managing the public debt. He would also be a member of the president's National Economic Council.

If confirmed, Bessent will oversee massive agencies within the Treasury Department, including the Internal Revenue Service. The IRS received a massive boost in funding from Democrats' Inflation Reduction Act, though that money has been in constant threat of being cut.

Trump expects him to help reset the global trade order, enable trillions of dollars in tax cuts, ensure inflation stays in check, manage a ballooning national debt and still keep the financial markets confident.

"Productive investment that grows the economy must be prioritized over wasteful spending that

drives inflation," Bessent testified.

Senators were expected to question the money manager for hours on his views on cryptocurrency, the Trump-era tax cuts and potential conflicts of interest.

Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., a member of the finance committee, sent Bessent more than 100 written questions in advance, interrogating him on such topics as agency independence, housing, treasury workforce issues and financial stability oversight.

In addition, Democrats on the Senate Finance Committee are circulating a document that alleges Bessent has avoided paying roughly \$1 million in taxes related to his hedge fund. He will be asked about this during his hearing.

Bessent has backed extending provisions of the 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, which Trump signed into law in his first year in office. Estimates from various economic analyses of the costs of the various tax cuts range from nearly \$6 trillion to \$10 trillion over 10 years.

He calls for spending cuts and shifts in existing taxes to offset the costs that extending the tax cuts would add to the federal deficit.

## Adviser says president-elect is exploring options to 'preserve' TikTok

Associated Press

Donald Trump's pick for national security adviser, Florida Rep. Mike Waltz, said in an interview on Wednesday that the president-elect is exploring options to "preserve" TikTok.

Waltz made the comment when Fox News anchor Bret Baier asked him about a report from The Washington Post that said Trump was considering an executive or-

der to suspend enforcement of a federal law that could ban the popular platform nationwide by Sunday.

Last week, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in a legal challenge to the statute brought by TikTok, its China-based parent company ByteDance, and users of the app. The Justices seemed likely to uphold the law, which requires ByteDance to divest Tik-

Tok on national security grounds or face a ban in one of its biggest markets.

"If the Supreme Court comes out with a ruling in favor of the law, President Trump has been very clear: Number one, TikTok is a great platform that many Americans use and has been great for his campaign and getting his message out. But number two, he's going to protect their data," Waltz said.

"He's a deal maker. I don't want to get ahead of our executive orders, but we're going to create this space to put that deal in place," he added.

Separately on Wednesday, Pam Bondi, Trump's pick for attorney general, dodged a question during a Senate hearing on whether she'd uphold a TikTok ban.

Trump has reversed his position on the popular app, having tried to

ban it during his first term in office over national security concerns. He joined TikTok during his 2024 presidential campaign and his team used it to connect with younger voters, especially male voters, by pushing content that was often macho and aimed at going viral. He pledged to "save TikTok" during the campaign and has credited the platform with helping him win more youth votes.

## NATION



MARCO POSTIGO STOREL/AP

Students with the Gaza Solidarity Encampment block the entrance of Hamilton Hall at Columbia University after taking over it, April 30, in New York.

## Colleges settle antisemitism cases as Trump threatens to revoke funds

By COLLIN BINKLEY  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Many colleges accused of tolerating antisemitism on their campuses have been settling with federal civil rights investigators in the weeks before the inauguration of President-elect Donald Trump, who urged a tougher response to campus protests against the war in Gaza.

By settling with the Education Department, the schools close the cases against them as long as they meet the terms of the agreements, which mostly have required training, policy updates and reviews of past complaints.

But many colleges at the center of the highest-profile cases — including Columbia and Cornell — face investigations that remain unresolved and could run the risk of harsher penalties after Trump takes office. Trump has not said what he would like to see come of the investigations, but he has threatened to revoke federal money for schools that fall short of his demands.

“Colleges will and must end the antisemitic propaganda or they

will lose their accreditation and federal support,” Trump said in a virtual address to Jewish donors in September. “No money will go to them if they don’t.”

Settlements with the Education Department’s civil rights branch have piled up in recent weeks with the University of Washington, the University of California, Johns Hopkins, Rutgers and the University of Cincinnati. Those follow other voluntary agreements signed by Brown and Temple universities, along with the University of Michigan.

The flurry of recent deals has drawn outrage from Republicans in Congress who say the Biden administration is letting colleges off the hook.

Rep. Tim Walberg, R-Mich., chair of the House Education and Workforce Committee, said the settlements are “toothless” and fail to hold colleges accountable for permitting antisemitism. In a statement, he said the Trump administration should “examine these agreements and explore options to impose real consequences on schools.”

One of the committee’s priori-

ties will be “calling out woke higher education institutions — especially those that allow antisemitism to run rampant,” Walberg said at a Wednesday meeting.

More than 100 U.S. colleges and school districts remain under investigation over alleged antisemitism or Islamophobia following the Oct. 7, 2023, attack by Hamas on Israel. That includes Columbia, Cornell, Yale, Princeton and other prestigious schools targeted by a Republican campaign against antisemitism.

The Department of Education investigations stem from complaints that schools violated Title VI, which bars discrimination or harassment on the basis of race, color and national origin at colleges and universities that receive federal funding.

Several colleges facing investigations declined to comment on their status.

Whether Trump pushes the Education Department to use the so-called “nuclear option” is still in question. But without a deal before Jan. 20, colleges raise the risk that they could become test cases for Trump.

## Bill to age check porn sites still under scrutiny

By LINDSAY WHITEHURST  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court on Wednesday seemed open to a Texas law aimed at blocking kids from seeing online pornography, though the justices could still send it back to a lower court for more consideration of how the age verification measure affects adults’ free-speech rights.

Texas is among more than a dozen states with such laws aimed at blocking young children and teenagers from viewing pornography. The states argue the laws are necessary as online porn, including hardcore obscene material, has become almost instantaneous to access on smartphones online.

Chief Justice John Roberts, a member of the court’s conservative majority, raised similar concerns. “Technological access to pornography has exploded, right?” he said.

The Free Speech Coalition, an adult-entertainment industry trade group, says the Texas law wrongly affects adults by requiring them to submit personal identifying information online, making it vulnerable to hacking or tracking. The adult-content website Pornhub has stopped operating in several states, citing the technical and privacy hurdles in complying with the laws.

The Free Speech Coalition agrees that children shouldn’t be seeing pornography, but it argues the new law is so broadly written it could also apply to sexual education content or simulated sex scenes in movies.

The law also leaves a loophole by focusing on porn sites rather than the search engines often used to find porn, the group says in court documents. Content filtering is a better alternative to online age checks, it says.

Justice Amy Coney Barrett appeared skeptical, pointing to the growing number of ways kids can get online.

“Content filtering for all those different devices, I can say from personal experience, is difficult to keep up with,” said Barrett, who has seven children.

This isn’t the first time the Supreme Court has confronted the issue. In 1996, the court struck down parts of a law banning explicit material viewable by kids online. In 2004, a divided Supreme Court ruled against a different federal law aimed at stopping kids from being exposed to pornography but said less restrictive measures like content filtering are constitutional.

Texas argues that technology has improved significantly in the last 20 years, allowing online platforms to quickly and easily check users’ ages with a quick picture, making it more like ID checks at traditional stores that were upheld by the Supreme Court in the 1960s.

The states won in the 5th Circuit Court of Appeals, where a divided panel overturned a lower court and allowed the age verification requirement to go into effect. The Supreme Court previously refused an emergency appeal asking to put the age verification on hold while the legal fight continues.

Still, some of the nine justices worried that the lower court hadn’t applied a strict enough legal standard in determining whether the Texas law and others like that could run afoul of the First Amendment.

“How far can a state go in terms of burdening adults showing how old they are?” Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson asked.

The court is expected to decide the case by June.

## US recovers \$31M in Social Security payments to dead people

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. government clawed back more than \$31 million in Social Security payments that improperly went to dead people, a recovery that one official said Wednesday was “just the tip of the iceberg.”

The money was reclaimed as part of a five-month pilot program after Congress gave the Department of Treasury temporary ac-

cess to the Social Security Administration’s “Full Death Master File” for three years as part of the omnibus appropriations bill in 2021. The SSA maintains the most complete federal database of individuals who have died, and the file contains more than 142 million records, which go back to 1899, according to the Treasury.

The Treasury projects that it will recover more than \$215 mil-

lion during its three-year access period, which runs from December 2023 through 2026.

“These results are just the tip of the iceberg,” the Treasury’s Fiscal Assistant Secretary David Lebryk said. He urged Congress to give the Treasury full access to the master file, saying it would “significantly reduce fraud, improve program integrity, and better safeguard taxpayer dollars.”

The effort has shown areas where the government is preventing fraud, waste and abuse — which is also one of Donald Trump’s campaign promises.

The president-elect has tapped two business titans — Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy — to lead the Department of Government Efficiency, or DOGE, a new non-governmental task force assigned to find ways to fire federal work-

ers, cut programs and slash federal regulations, all part of what Trump calls his “Save America” agenda for his second term.

A representative from the Trump transition team did not immediately respond to a request for comment on whether the incoming administration would continue the efforts or seek to make the Treasury’s temporary access to the file permanent.

## NATION

# Cellphone bans in schools gaining traction

By Andrew DeMillo  
Associated Press

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. — Arkansas' Republican Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders and California's Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom have little in common ideologically, but the two have both been vocal supporters of an idea that's been rapidly gaining bipartisan ground in the states: Students' cellphones need to be banned during the school day.

At least eight states have enacted such bans over the past two years, and proposals are being considered in several more states this year.

Here is a look at the push by states for such bans.

## ■ Why are states banning cellphones at schools?

The push for cellphone bans has been driven by concerns about the impact screen time has on children's mental health and complaints from teachers that cellphones have become a constant distraction in the classroom.

Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy, who has called on Congress to require warning labels on social media platforms about their effects on young people's lives, has said schools need to provide phone-free times.

Nationally, 77% of U.S. schools say they prohibit cellphones at school for non-academic use, according to the National Center



LEA SUZUKI, SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE/AP

**A student uses a cellphone after unlocking the pouch that secures it from use during the school day at Bayside Academy in August in San Mateo, Calif.**

for Education Statistics. But that number is misleading. It does not mean students are following those bans or all those schools are enforcing them.

Kim Whitman, co-founder of the Phone Free Schools Movement, said the issue is catching on because parents and teachers in both red and blue states are struggling with the consequences of kids on mobile devices.

"It doesn't matter if you live in a big city or a rural town, urban or suburban, all children are struggling and need that seven-hour break from the pressures of phones and social media during the school day," she said.

## ■ What states are enacting bans?

At least eight states — California, Florida,

Indiana, Louisiana, Minnesota, Ohio, South Carolina and Virginia — have enacted measures banning or restricting students' use of cellphones in schools.

The policies range widely. Florida was the first state to crack down on phones in school, passing a 2023 law that requires all public schools to ban cellphone use during class time and block access to social media on district Wi-Fi.

A 2024 California law requires the state's nearly 1,000 school districts to create their own cellphone policies by July 2026.

Several other states haven't banned phones, but have encouraged school districts to enact such restrictions or have provided funding to store phones during the day.

Sanders announced a pilot program last year providing grants to schools that adopt phone-free policies, and more than 100 schools signed on. In her state of the state address this week, Sanders proposed an outright ban.

"We will ban cellphones in our schools, bell to bell, so that our kids are not distracted, in class or out of it," Sanders said.

Other governors recently calling for bans include Kelly Ayotte of New Hampshire, who was sworn in this month, Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds and Nebraska Gov. Jim Pillen. New York Gov. Kathy Hochul has suggested she'll seek a statewide policy, but has not offered specifics.

## ■ What is the opposition to the bans?

The cellphone bans have faced opposition from some parents who say they need to be able to contact their children directly in case of emergency.

Some parents have pointed to recent school shootings where having access to cellphones was the only way some students were able to communicate with loved ones for what they thought might be the last time.

But supporters of the bans have noted that students' phones could pose additional dangers during an emergency by distracting students or by revealing their location during an active shooter situation.

Parents opposed to the ban have also said they want their children to have access to their phones for other needs, such as coordinating transportation.

Keri Rodrigues, president of the National Parents Union, said she agrees about the dangers of social media on children but that the bans sought by states are taking too broad of an approach. Banning the devices during the school day is not going to solve underlying issues like bullying or the dangers of social media, she said.

"We have not done our job as grown-ups to try to teach our kids the skills they need to actually navigate this technology," she said. "We've just kicked the can down the road and thrown them into the deep end of the pool when they're by themselves after school."

# Bezos' New Glenn rocket reaches orbit on 1st test flight

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — Blue Origin launched its massive new rocket on its first test flight Thursday, sending up a prototype satellite to orbit thousands of miles above Earth.

Named after the first American to orbit Earth, the New Glenn rocket blasted off from Florida, soaring from the same pad used to launch NASA's Mariner and Pioneer spacecraft a half-century ago.

Years in the making with heavy funding by Amazon founder Jeff Bezos, the 320-foot rocket carried an experimental platform designed to host satellites or release them into their proper orbits.

All seven main engines fired at liftoff as the rocket blazed through the predawn sky to the delight of spectators lining nearby beaches. Bezos took part in the action from Mission Control and Blue Origin employees erupted in cheers once the craft successfully reached orbit 13 minutes later, a feat that

drew praise from SpaceX's Elon Musk.

The first-stage booster missed its landing on a barge in the Atlantic, but the company stressed that the more important goal was achieved. Bezos said before the flight it was "a little crazy" to even try to land the booster on the first try.

"We did it!" Blue Origin's CEO Dave Limp said via X about reaching orbit. "On to spring and trying again on the landing."

For this test, the satellite was meant to remain inside the second stage while circling Earth. Plans called for the second stage to be placed in a safe condition to stay in a high, out-of-the-way orbit in accordance with NASA's practices for minimizing space junk.

New Glenn was supposed to fly before dawn Monday, but ice buildup in critical plumbing caused a delay. The rocket is built to haul spacecraft and eventually astronauts to orbit and also the moon.



JOHN RAOUX/AP

**Blue Origin's New Glenn rocket lifts off from Launch Complex 36 at the Cape Canaveral Space Force Station on Thursday in Cape Canaveral, Fla.**

# NASA's stuck astronaut steps out on spacewalk after 7 months in orbit

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — One of NASA's two stuck astronauts got a much welcomed change of scenery Thursday, stepping out on her first spacewalk since arriving at the International Space Station more than seven

months ago.

Suni Williams, the station's commander, had to tackle some overdue outdoor repair work alongside NASA's Nick Hague. They emerged as the orbiting lab sailed 260 miles above Turkmenistan.

"I'm coming out," Williams ra-

dioed.

Plans called for Williams to float back out next week with Butch Wilmore. Williams and Wilmore launched aboard Boeing's new Starliner capsule last June on what should have been a weeklong test flight.

But Starliner trouble dragged out their return, and NASA ordered the capsule to come back empty. Then SpaceX delayed the launch of their replacements, meaning the two won't be home until late March or early April — 10 months after launching.

It was the first spacewalk by NASA astronauts since an aborted one last summer. U.S. spacewalks were put on hold after water leaked into the airlock from the cooling loop for an astronaut's suit. NASA said the problem has been fixed.

## WORLD

# S. Korean court rejects petition to release Yoon

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — Lawyers for impeached South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol failed in their court effort to secure his release on Thursday, a day after he was detained at his residence for questioning over rebellion allegations linked to his martial law declaration last month.

Yoon was sent to a detention center near the country's capital, Seoul, after undergoing more than 10 hours of questioning on Wednesday at the headquarters of the Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials, during which he exercised his right to remain silent. Yoon refused further questioning by the anti-corruption officials on Thursday as his lawyers maintained that the investigation was illegal.

Lawyers had asked the Seoul Central District Court to consider his release, questioning the validity of the detention warrant for Yoon issued by the Seoul Western District Court.

But the Central District Court denied their petition late Thursday.

Yoon had avoided several requests to appear for questioning before the anti-corruption agency and police carried out a major law enforcement operation involving hundreds of personnel to detain him at his residential compound in Seoul.

Investigators are expected to move to place him under arrest in the coming days.

The anti-corruption agency, which is leading a joint investigation with the police and the military over whether Yoon's martial law declaration amounted to attempted rebellion, has 48 hours either to request a court order for his formal arrest or to release him.

On Thursday, his lawyers for-

mally declared that Wednesday's raid at the presidential residence, which led to the detention of a head of state, was illegal, in complaints filed with prosecutors.

Yoon didn't attend a hearing at the Central District Court on Thursday, which was part of the review over his detention warrant, because of security concerns, according to Seok Dong-hyeon, one of the president's lawyers.

Hundreds of Yoon's supporters rallied for hours in streets near the court and the detention center where Yoon was being held, waving banners and chanting slogans calling for his release.

Yoon set off the country's most serious political crisis since its democratization in the late 1980s when he attempted to break through gridlock in legislation by declaring martial law and deploying troops around the National Assembly on Dec. 3. The standoff lasted only hours before lawmakers managed to get through the blockade and voted to lift the measure.

His presidential powers were suspended when the opposition-dominated assembly voted to impeach him on Dec. 14, accusing him of rebellion. His fate now rests with the Constitutional Court, which has begun deliberating on whether to formally remove Yoon from office or reject the charges and reinstate him.

Yoon and his allies have defied efforts to investigate his role in the chaos of Dec. 3. He ignored requests to appear for questioning for weeks, remaining in his official residence to avoid detention as his lawyers turned away police, citing a law that protects locations potentially linked to military secrets from search without the consent of the person in charge — Yoon himself.

# UK leader Starmer, on a visit to Kyiv, signs '100-year partnership' agreement

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer signed a 100-year partnership agreement with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy on Thursday, part of a European show of support and promises to keep helping Ukraine endure in its nearly three-year war with Russia.

The announcement came days before Donald Trump is sworn in as U.S. president with what he says is a plan to end Europe's biggest conflict since World War II.

"We are with you not just today or tomorrow, for this year or the next, but for 100 years long after this terrible war is over and Ukraine is free and thriving once again," Starmer told Zelenskyy,

promising that the U.K. would "play our part" in guaranteeing Ukraine's post-war security.

Starmer said that the landmark century-long agreement commits the two sides to cooperate on defense — especially maritime security against Russian activity in the Baltic Sea, Black Sea and Sea of Azov — and on technology projects including drones, which have become vital weapons for both sides in the war. The treaty also includes a system to help track stolen Ukrainian grain exported by Russia from occupied parts of the country.

Ukraine's alignment with the West, and potential future membership in NATO, have angered Russian President Vladimir Putin, who still wants to exert influence

over the independent nation.

While Starmer was meeting with Zelenskyy at the presidential palace, debris from Russian drones shot down by Ukraine's air defenses fell in at least four districts of Kyiv, according to city administration chief Tymur Tkachenko.

Starmer said that the drones were "a reminder" of what the Ukrainian people are up against and their resolve.

Starmer's unannounced visit is his first trip to Ukraine since he took office in July, though he said that it was his seventh meeting with Zelenskyy.

The Italian defense chief was also in Kyiv on Thursday, two days after Germany's defense minister visited.

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## WORLD

## US aid package funds contract to bolster Israeli air defenses

By LARA KORTE  
Stars and Stripes

Israel will upgrade the layered system shielding it from aerial attacks under a new contract made possible by American funding, according to a statement Thursday by the Israeli Defense Ministry.

The \$5.2 billion deal with defense technology firm Rafael Advanced Defense Systems is the first of its kind under a U.S. aid package approved by Congress last year.

Israel will strengthen the Iron Dome and David's Sling systems as a result of the contract, which the ministry announced Thursday on X. The deal also covers work on Iron Beam, a laser system Israel is developing to shoot down missiles.

The news comes amid talks of a ceasefire with Hamas to halt the fighting in Gaza. Negotiations were delayed by a "last-minute crisis," Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Thursday.

Iron Dome was designed to defend against short- and medium-range rockets and missiles as well as drones. It demonstrated "exceptional performance" during the war with Hamas, the Defense

Ministry statement said.

The U.S. has been a key partner in the production of Iron Dome, in addition to helping develop and produce the Arrow Weapon System and David's Sling, which target medium- to long-range missiles, the ministry said Thursday.

Maj. Gen. Eyal Zamir, director general of the Israeli Defense Ministry, thanked the United States, which he credited with making the contract possible through the aid package it provided.

The defense system upgrades are part of a larger \$8.7 billion U.S. aid package Israel secured last fall to support its ongoing military efforts.

Israeli forces continue to use the defense systems against attacks from Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen.

In October, U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin deployed a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense, or THAAD, missile battery and a crew of military personnel to assist Israel against incoming fire.

A defense official confirmed to Stars and Stripes in late December that THAAD had been used in the region recently but did not provide further details.

## Netanyahu: 'Last-minute crisis' with Hamas holding up truce

Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel — Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Thursday that a last-minute dispute with Hamas was holding up Israeli approval of a long-awaited ceasefire that would pause the fighting in the Gaza Strip and release dozens of hostages. Israeli airstrikes, meanwhile, killed at least 72 people in the war-ravaged territory.

The statement from Netanyahu's office signaled complications with the deal shortly after U.S. President Joe Biden and key mediator Qatar announced it was complete. That created a dual reality: War-weary Palestinians in Gaza, the relatives of hostages held there and world leaders all welcomed an agreement, expected to begin Sunday, even as Netanyahu said it was not yet finalized.

"Hamas is backing out of the understandings and creating a last-minute crisis that prevents a settlement," Netanyahu's office said.

It was not yet clear if Netanyahu's statements merely reflected

jockeying to keep his fractious coalition together or whether the deal was at risk.

The Israeli Cabinet was expected to vote on the deal Thursday, but Netanyahu's office said that officials won't meet until Hamas backs down, accusing the militant group of reneging on parts of the agreement in an attempt to gain further concessions, without saying which parts.

A U.S. official with knowledge of the negotiations said Hamas made a last-minute revision that relates to the distance Israeli forces would withdraw from at least one largely populated area in Gaza that the official would not identify. The issue is expected to be resolved quickly and enable the ceasefire to begin as planned this weekend, according to the official, who was not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity.

In a briefing Thursday, David Mencer, an Israeli government spokesman, said the Israeli delegation of negotiators remained in

Qatar, "continuing its efforts to reach a solution."

Izzat al-Rishq, a senior Hamas official, said the militant group "is committed to the ceasefire agreement, which was announced by the mediators."

The deal announced Wednesday would see scores of hostages held in Gaza released and a pause in fighting with a view to eventually wind down a 15-month war that has destabilized the Middle East and sparked worldwide protests.

Hamas triggered the war with its Oct. 7, 2023, cross-border attack into Israel that killed some 1,200 people and took 250 others hostage.

Israel responded with a fierce offensive that has killed over 46,000 Palestinians, according to local health officials. Israel says it has killed over 17,000 fighters, without providing evidence.

The military campaign has also leveled vast swaths of Gaza, and pushed around 90% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million people from their homes.

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## ENTERTAINMENT

# Tubi wants you to 'find your rabbit hole'

Free streaming service vastly popular for massive library of weird and obscure content

By **TRAVIS M. ANDREWS**  
*The Washington Post*

**K**ing Arthur pursued the Holy Grail. Indiana Jones scoured for precious artifacts. Harold and Kumar sought White Castle burgers.

Adam Schmersal hunts for a different type of jewel: the most ridiculous movies on the most ridiculous streaming service. And he's struck pay dirt again and again.

There's "Dracula's Angel," a gothic horror romance that's animated in the style of the Sims video game series. There's the films of Dustin Ferguson, a director who puts out B-movies at an astonishing rate. Their titles speak for themselves: "Spider Baby or, the Maddest Story Ever Told," "Demonoids From Hell," "Amityville in the Hood," "Arachnado 2: Flaming Spiders."

And don't forget "Big Bad CGI Monsters."

"It's unreal what he does," says Schmersal, a 36-year-old service technician in Ohio. "It's not good."

But it's not boring.

Then there's "Baby Cat," about a woman who falls in love with a cat, which is played by a human wearing cat ears. Yes, romantically.

"I couldn't predict the next five seconds the entire time I was watching," Schmersal says.

He dubs these flicks Tubi Treasures, and he has been posting his discoveries to Reddit for the past year.

These are the kind of movies you might have once found mindlessly flipping through the channels, back before streaming came along and algorithms began crafting our entertainment diets.

But Tubi is a streaming service that doesn't feel like one. Owned by Fox, it's free, so long as you can stomach a few ads (you know, like old TV). It's a type of streaming service referred to in the industry as a FAST service — free, ad-supported TV.

You probably already have it installed somewhere — your phone, your smart TV, your gaming system, your Roku, who knows, maybe your microwave — without even knowing it.

Tubi isn't only filled with so-bad-they're-good movies. It's got a bit of everything. A Criterion movie here. A strange Rob Lowe-hosted game show there. "Bad Boys," "Dances with Wolves" and every episode of "Columbo" and "The Magic School Bus" are neighbors on the streaming service. It's like a T.J. Maxx or a Mar-



The free streaming service Tubi has some recognizable classic movies, but more than its share of outlandish options as well.

shalls: an awful lot of bargain-bin fare, not particularly organized — currently, you'll find "Despicable Me 3" but not its predecessors — but also packed with diamonds in the rough if you're willing to spend time sorting through the riffraff.

Tubi chief marketing officer Nicole Parlapiano said the service has the largest content library in streaming. It has more than 275,000 movies and TV episodes, according to a press release.

Since the service debuted in 2014, it has been sitting quietly on our devices. But all the while it has been growing like a weed, joyously embraced by millions. Tubi streamed 10 billion hours of content in 2024 and recently surpassed 97 million users, a jump of nearly 20 million from May, while paid services such as Netflix and Hulu grow ever more expensive while adding ad-supported tiers that still require a monthly subscription fee.

(Tubi is not to be confused with Mubi, the art house-movie-focused service and distribution company. Tubi is a fast-food drive-thru to Mubi's Michelin-starred tasting menu.)

Other FAST services, including Samsung TV Plus and Roku TV, are nipping at its heels, but Tubi appears to stand alone in fan loyalty. Search "Tubi" on any social media platform and you'll unearth such enthusiastic posts about it that you'll wonder whether Fox planted the endorse-

ments itself.

"Tubi is the s—" reads a Reddit post. "Uninstall Netflix and Prime, folks — learn to love Tubi and physical media," director Andrew Rakich proclaimed on Bluesky.

One X post, like most posts about Tubi, is deliciously over the top: "1. Nationalize Tubi 2. Outlaw all other streaming services 3. Put all content on Tubi 4. Also make it a social network."

"We just try to really respect the viewer and what they're into and lean into it, no matter how ridiculous and out of pocket it can be," Parlapiano says. She wants the service to "feel too good to be free. That's what we aim for — delight and surprise. We just want you to find your rabbit hole on Tubi."

Hmm, that sounds an awful lot like ...

"It is a lot like cable," says Christy Turner, a 53-year-old photographer and IT consultant in Calgary, Canada. "It's like picking up the remote in the old-school days, just scrolling through and finding something."

Tubi also offers a growing — and equally eclectic — bunch of original programming, including "The Thicket," a western starring Peter Dinklage and Juliette Lewis, and the daytime talk show-esque "We Got Time Today," hosted by Deion Sanders and Rocsi Diaz.

"The joke is that Tubi will take any-

thing, and sometimes it does feel that way when I see a movie like 'Sharks of the Corn,' which is about sharks attacking a cornfield in Kentucky," says 24-year-old Austin Elliott, a film enthusiast and Tubi superfan who lives in Connecticut. On the other hand, Elliott says, "I appreciate that they're so open door that they'll take any independent filmmakers' work, whether they spent \$50 or \$50 million making their projects."

Gregory Frye, a 41-year-old American expat living in Europe and working as a consultant, says he installed a virtual private network or VPN to watch Tubi from afar because no other service offers the same thrill of discovery.

"I feel like I'm walking into my dream rental shop, where I can find all this crazy stuff I didn't know existed — and old-school cult classics," he says.

Having her own movies in that shop made 41-year-old filmmaker Delinda Kay feel like a celebrity in her small town of South Boston, Va. For Black filmmakers such as herself, she says, Tubi is a god-send.

"Tubi doesn't need to market for you," Kay says. "Tubi is the market. ... Where I live, that's all that everyone talks about. For Black cinema, it's golden."

That's one reason 50-year-old Dallas author Candice Johnson loves the service. Sure, not all the movies are perfect. It's not uncommon to see a boom mic in a shot. But, she says, "we may not get to see these movies ... otherwise. And that's what keeps people watching. For some of us, we get to see people who look like us."

For better or worse, it seems like Tubi has no gatekeepers. Or, really, any keepers at all.

Tubi's video-store quality can be a double-edged sword for filmmakers. Indie filmmaker Michael Sarrow's second feature film, "Smile as You Kill," follows a man who kidnaps an advertising guru and forces him to create an ad campaign to pay for his health care. It was made on a shoestring and will probably have the best chance of reaching audiences when it hits Tubi and other FAST services.

"It's so much easier to get someone to give a small film like ours a shot when it's free to watch and they only have to sit through a few ads," Sarrow says.

But such films can be difficult to find on a service celebrated for being supersaturated with content.

"There are millions of other movies on Tubi," Sarrow says, "so how do you stand out?"

But for viewers, the fact that nothing immediately stands out is part of the fun. It's the quest for the next gem.

"That's what I love about Tubi," says Schmersal, the Tubi Treasures hunter. "They kind of take in the strays."

**"The joke is that Tubi will take anything, and sometimes it does feel that way when I see a movie like 'Sharks of the Corn,' which is about sharks attacking a cornfield in Kentucky. I appreciate that they're so open door that they'll take any independent filmmakers' work, whether they spent \$50 or \$50 million making their projects."**

Austin Elliott

a film enthusiast and Tubi superfan

## MUSIC

# Fascinated by 'Human Fear'



## Q&A: Franz Ferdinand discuss new album, resurgence of 2000s indie and Charli XCX

By SIAN WATSON  
Associated Press

Two decades ago, the Scottish rock band Franz Ferdinand sent a jolt across the music world. They waltzed in striped shirts and quickly became global icons for their deliriously hooky songs, hitting a critical mass in the chant-along singles “Take Me Out” and “Do You Want To.” A lot has changed in that time, but the band never wavered in their dedication to 2000s indie ebullience. Over the last few years there’s been a bit of an indie music resurgence, but for Franz Ferdinand, it never went away.

On Jan. 10, they released “The Human Fear,” their sixth studio album and the first in seven years, mark-

ing the end of the longest break between full-lengths in their career.

Frontman Alex Kapranos says the album tackles relationships forming and breaking down. “The title is a clue to the scene,” he teases. “But it wasn’t written to the theme, at least not consciously.”

In an interview with The Associated Press in London, Kapranos and Franz Ferdinand bassist Bob Hardy discussed “The Human Fear,” the resurgence of indie music and the band’s love for Chappell Roan and Charli XCX. Responses have been edited for length and clarity.

**AP: What is the story behind “The Human Fear”?**

**Kapranos:** The last song that was written, the last lyrics that were written was (for) the song “Hooked.”

It starts off with the line, “I’ve got the fear / I’ve got the human fear.” And I realize that so many of the songs had an underlying theme of fear to them. But not necessarily succumbing to fear, but more like overcoming fear.

“The Doctor” is about the fear of leaving an institution, and “Bar Lonely” is the fear of leaving a relationship. “Night or Day” is the fear of committing to a relationship. But fear is fascinating because fear is universal. We all experience fear. We all experience the same fears. But how we respond to it is individual. And that’s how we find who we are, our personalities. And overcoming fear feels good. That’s

**SEE FEAR ON PAGE 15**

Alex Kapranos, left, and Bob Hardy, of Franz Ferdinand, pose on Nov. 28 in London. The Scottish indie band is back with a new album, “The Human Fear.”

SCOTT A GARFITT, INVISION/AP

## MUSIC



Alex Kapranos of Franz Ferdinand performs with the band during the Bonnaroo Music and Arts Festival in 2023 in Manchester, Tenn.

## Fear: Franz Ferdinand makes the music it loves

FROM PAGE 14

why we watch horror films or ride rollercoasters — because you overcome fear and then feel very alive for having done so.

**AP: The latest single, “Audacious,” deals with fear as well.**

**Kapranos:** The song starts off addressing that feeling that we all have sometimes, which is, you know, you feel that your life is collapsing around about you for one reason or another. It could be a relationship that is disintegrating. Often, it’ll go that things tend to happen to you (all) at once. The relationship starts going south as well as your professional life. And then you realize that the washing machine leaked and your basement’s flooded and just all that kind of annoying stuff. Your phone gets nicked or whatever. And it can be overwhelming. And you just, you have this sense of fear that, “Gosh, everything’s collapsing.”

I guess I was feeling a little bit like that when I was writing the song for one reason or another. And I thought, “What am I going to do?” ... I’m just going to do something astonishingly audacious. I’m going to go into it with an audacious attitude and get through it that sort of way. And don’t blame anybody else for it as well. Like, own the responsibility of overcoming the fear myself.

**AP: Has your writing process changed?**

**Kapranos:** We’re not one of these kinds of bands that will sit down and say, “Right, we’ve got two months to write an album.” For me, you’re always writing, you’re always coming up with ideas. And so, on this album, there’s ideas that were written in the studio literally the day before it was sent off to be mastered. And there’s also ideas ... I think the oldest idea is the bassline (of

one of the songs, which is from 1995.

I think the way my brain works is like if you imagine going into the office of a university’s eccentric professor that’s scattered with bits of paper. It’s all kind of like catastrophic, organizational hell, but they know exactly where everything is. That’s what my brain is like with bits of ideas and bits of songs and stuff like that. I know where they are, and when I need to use them, they’ll come out.

**Hardy:** And the show has become the reward for making records, to me. It all kind of focuses playing it live in front of an audience and seeing people react to it in the moment. When you release a record, you don’t see people listen to it at home. You know, the way you kind of get the reaction is these live shows.

**AP: What do you think about the current resurgence of indie?**

**Hardy:** It’s never gone away.

**Kapranos:** There was a period in the late-2000s where there was point of saturation where, like, you turned on any mainstream radio show and you heard nothing but indie bands. And when it becomes that saturated, maybe the quality control goes down slightly. And then when that happens, there’s always a reaction to it. And I think over the last decade, there’s been a bit of, “Right, OK, so we’re going to listen to, like, pure pop instead.” And of course, there’s some brilliant stuff like Charli XCX. Amazing. Chappell Roan (is) incredible. But there’s a lot of stuff that’s maybe not quite premier tier as well. And I think there’s been maybe a little bit of a reaction to that.

I think from our perspective, just, yeah, make the thing that you love and then you’re not really going to go wrong.

### REVIEW

#### Bad Bunny

Debí Tirar Más Fotos (Rimas)

Bad Bunny’s sixth studio album is an opus on his beloved Puerto Rico.

On “Debí Tirar Más Fotos,” which translates to “I should have taken more photos,” Benito Antonio Martínez Ocasio pulls from the island’s rich musical history and hybridizes it.

The journey to “Debí Tirar Más Fotos” began with the release of “El Club” in early December, a song that effortlessly combines house rhythms, electronic production — courtesy MAG, La Paciencia and Saox — and nylon-stringed plena guitars. It was an interesting tease: Here, Benito marries pop modernity with a classical, Puerto Rican folk style. Not unlike Mexican corridos, with narrative lyrics that spread messages to its people, plena has been known as “El Periodico Cantado” or “the singing newspaper” in English.

Then came “Pitorro de Coco,” named after the Puerto Rican coconut-flavored spirit, a downtrod-

den holiday song built on a jíbara rhythm that interpolates a song from Chuíto el de Bayamón’s “Música Jíbara Para Las Navidades.”

Both, it would turn out, were ideal introductions to a new era for the artist. “Debí Tirar Más Fotos” is rooted in música jíbara and other Puerto Rican folkloric musical styles but works to evolve them. That’s found in the salsas “Baile Inolvidable” and “La Mudanza,” or the opening track “NuevaYol,” a love letter to New York that weaves dembow into a sample of El Gran Combo de Puerto Rico’s “Un Verano en Nueva York.” It shouts out both Willie Colón and Toñita, the matriarch of one of the city’s last-standing Puerto Rican social clubs.

“Debí Tirar Más Fotos” is an album for his loyalists and new listeners alike, but most importantly, it is one of Bad Bunny’s best because it does what he has always done best: celebrates the music at the heart of Puerto Rico and brings it to the world.

— Maria Sherman  
Associated Press



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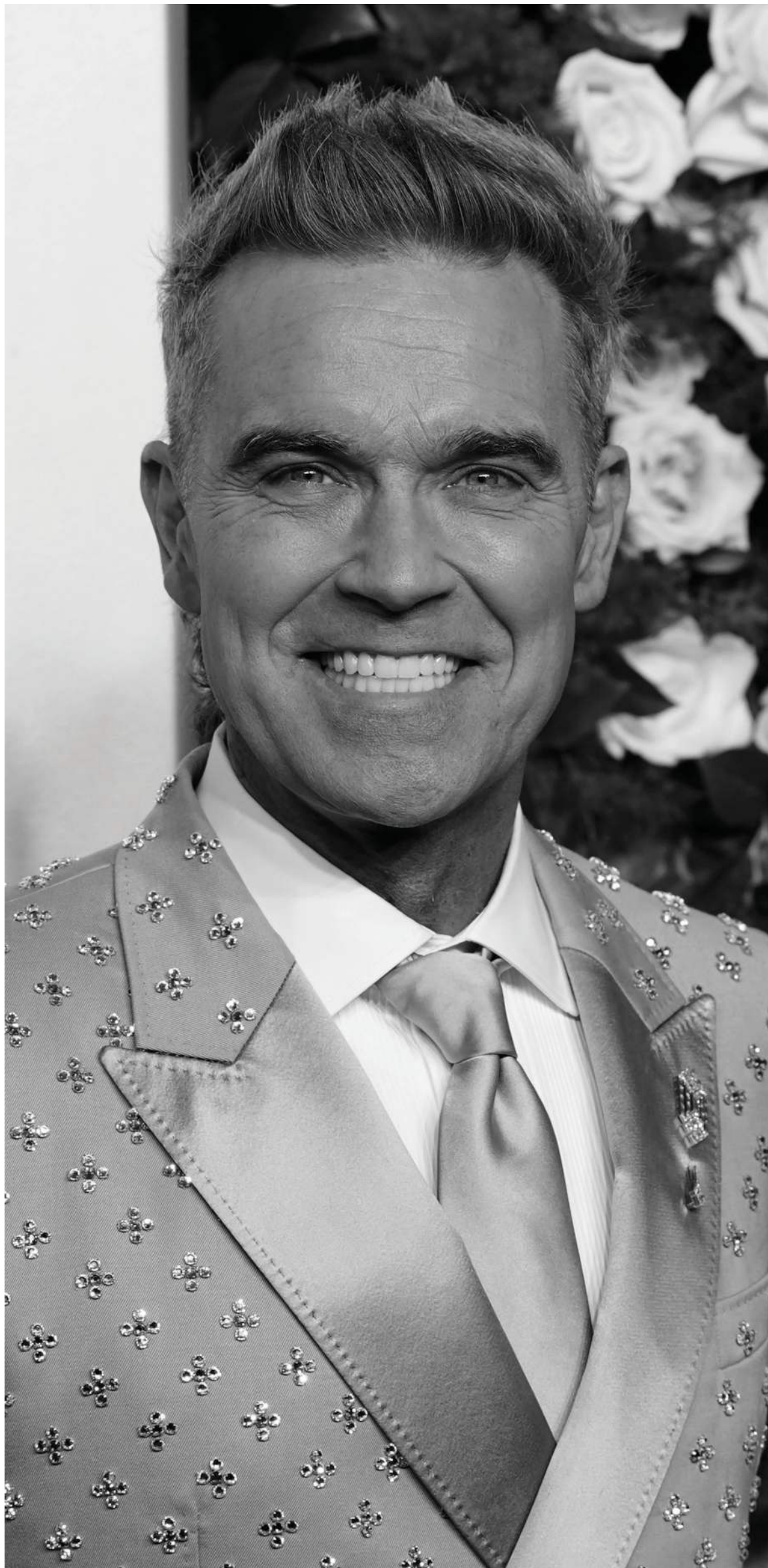
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## MOVIES



JORDAN STRAUSS, INVISION/AP

British pop star and former Take That singer Robbie Williams arrives at the 82nd Golden Globes on Jan. 5 in Beverly Hills, Calif. A biopic of his life, "Better Man," is now in theaters.

# Monkey business

British pop star Williams talks about his new biopic, fame and reforming his bad-boy image

BY JAKE COYLE  
Associated Press

It was after one particularly emotional premiere of the new biopic about his life that Robbie Williams resolved he couldn't be "the crying guy" at every screening. "Better Man," which chronicles the life of Williams, the British pop star and former Take That singer, can hit him differently at different times. Jet lag is a factor. So is who's in the building. One screening with his band, he says, was "healing." But he's self-conscious enough about all the emotion that he can be defensive about it.

"In real life I don't cry that much," Williams says and then smiles. "You have a (expletive) biography about you and have the world go, 'I've seen you and heard you,' and come tell me how you deal with it."

One twist? The Williams heard in "Better Man" is Williams, himself. But the Williams seen in the movie is a computer-generated chimpanzee.

Michael Gracey, who directed the 2017 musical hit "The Greatest Showman," had the novel idea that Williams should get the big-screen biopic treatment, but with a monkey. Relying on Weta's motion-capture technology, the actor Jonno Davies stands in for Williams.

In "Better Man," now in theaters, that makes for a compelling spin on the music biopic, partly because it's still a quite R-rated journey through the ups and downs of megastardom.

Williams, who met a reporter recently on a stopover in New York, also hopes it will expand his footprint in America, where he's famously less famous than he is in Europe.

"If I want to phone Macron, I phone Macron. If I want to phone Keir Starmer, I phone Keir Starmer. If I want to phone Trump, he's not taking my call," Williams says with a laugh. "Maybe he would, I don't know."

"Maybe this film moves the needle for me," Williams, 50, adds. "Or if it doesn't, I'll do something else."

What both a conversation with Williams and "Better Man" have in common is a frankness about the experience of fame. More than a litany of chart-topping successes, "Better Man" is a chronicle of fame-induced trauma, complete with drug addiction and mental breakdown.

Williams, now, though, is a reformed bad boy — a family man with four kids with all kinds of plans, like building hotels and buying sports teams.

"At the moment," he says, "I have the wide optimism of a new artist."

**Associated Press: Did your identification with monkeys predate "Better Man"?**

**Williams:** Well, let me know, in the biography of your life, what animal would play you?

**I don't know. A chipmunk?**

I asked my friend this morning, Joey McIntyre, from New Kids on the Block, and he said, "an owl." And I agreed with him. An owl would be good for him. Did this predate? I guess so, subconsciously. My MO has been cheeky. What's more cheeky than a cheeky monkey? I've been a cheeky monkey all my life. There's no more cheekier monkey than the coke-snorting, sex-

addict monkey that we find in the movie.

**I've never seen a monkey do so much coke.**

Yeah, we've seen a bear do a lot of coke, but never a monkey.

**Do you think it's easier for audiences to empathize with a monkey than with you?**

We care for animals more than we care for humans, most of us. I guess there is a removal, as well. It's very much a human story but if you're watching it and someone's playing Robbie Williams, you're thinking: Does he look like him? Does he act like him? Does

SEE FAME ON PAGE 17

## MOVIES

**Fame:** Singer candid about ‘not unusual’ experience in entertainment industry

FROM PAGE 16

he talk like him?

**As someone who’s been open about difficulties in life, you’re not new to the idea that people don’t have a lot of sympathy for wealthy pop stars. You were probably suffering very human things at a time when people didn’t see you as human.**

I think they have sympathy once you come through the other side and you’re talking about something in the past. Everybody loves a story of redemption. The redemption is: I was this guy who experienced this thing but I’ve endured and overcome it. You throw in a word like “endure,” and I can already hear British people going “(Expletive) you! What did you endure? Knickers being thrown at you.” Dude, I was mentally ill. I still am, but I’m in a good place. I couldn’t derive joy from anything because I was mentally ill. I won a sprinting race with two broken legs.

**It was that bad?**

Yeah. My story’s not unusual. There’s a boy band documentary that’s going to be on telly in Britain that I’ve taken part in, and everyone’s story is the same. They’ve got the bends. They experienced this thing that warped them and gave them mental breakdowns.

I can’t apologize for the truth, and the truth is there’s something about this matrix-bending, washing-machine fame that’s deeply unhealthy. No matter what job you have or what path you choose in life, you spend the second 20 years of your life sorting out the first 20 years. It just so happens I did it in public and told people exactly what was going as it was going on. And still do.

**When One Direction singer Liam Payne died, you seemed to understand what he might have been going through.**

Here’s the thing: I’m always astonished — may he rest



Paramount Pictures

**Jonno Davies as Robbie Williams, sort of, in “Better Man.” Davies acted through motion-capture technology.**

in peace, bless him, beautiful boy — that the entertainment industry isn’t littered with those types of cases, that we can’t point to 30 of them.

**Fame, as you describe it, would seem clearly unhealthy. But does some part of you need it?**

It’s different now. I (expletive) love it. I wouldn’t trade it for the world. I’m 50 and I’m incredibly grateful for fame. It facilitates everything that I need and want to do with my life. I was just too young to receive it, and I wasn’t surrounded by good people. And I wasn’t good people. But now I can’t speak highly enough of it. (Laughs)

**Part of your appeal has always been your candor. In**

**your experience, though, does show business work against remaining authentic?**

It depends who you are. Most people I meet in the industry, they’re nice folk. But a lot of the people that I meet also are narcissists and they understand on some level that it’s best to cover up their true nature. So they do. Now there’s cancellation, so you’ve got a lot of people terrified of saying the wrong thing.

The interesting that I’ve carved out for me, by mistake, is that the only villain in my story when I talk is me. None of my opinions are political. None of my opinions are cancellable. The only person that can cancel me is me.

**So how did you turn your life around? You’ve often credited your wife.**

Ayda was credited with saving my life before she saved my life. I was like, “You (expletive).” I was like: I’ve done a lot of work on myself here. Don’t give her all the credit. But now I can give her way more credit than I was giving her because I’ve realized how much she’s done.

Without that grounding, my life would be a lot different. I probably wouldn’t be here. Because I have somebody in my life that’s worth me being the best version of myself 24 hours out of the day, I’m better. And because there’s four young souls that need looking after, my purpose is a lot different. I suppose my purpose at one time, due to finding hedonism incredibly intoxicating, was to be the most (expletive) person in the room. But now I want to be the most well person in the room. I intend to be the well-est person in the mother-(expletive) room. (Laughs)

**When you go on a worldwide tour next year, do you do things differently to help you stay sane?**

Yeah and no. The no bit is: It’s OK. I’ve come to realize, I didn’t die. There’s a bit more wisdom now. The lunatic that was in the car is still in the car, but he doesn’t drive anymore.

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## TRAVEL

# A Bahraini refuge for creativity, community

Passion Art Cafe and Studio in Budaiya inspires with its decor and no-frills classes

By SHANNON RENFROE  
*Stars and Stripes*

I was searching for something creative to fill my free time, with Bahrain's early sunsets and dropping nighttime temperatures setting the mood for indoor pursuits.

What I found is a hybrid refuge — a café, an art studio, even a form of therapy. The moment I stepped through the doors of Passion Art Cafe and Studio, I felt the serenity that this unique spot in Bahrain seeks to provide.

The café sits tucked beneath the art studio, with an outdoor seating area that, unsurprisingly, remained empty on a cool day.

Stepping inside felt like entering a cozy living room and a charming backyard garden. The ceiling was adorned with cascading vines — plastic, but still enchanting — woven with delicate fairy lights that added a warm glow.

The seating ranged from a plush couch to traditional tables, inviting guests to sip coffee while painting or indulging in a slice of their lemon poppy seed cake, which sat temptingly under a glass cloche.

That cake was extraordinary; it had the perfect balance of lemon and sugar, with a subtle hint of almond adding depth. Curds of candied lemon peel and a light dusting of poppy seeds adorned the top.

I paired it with saffron coffee, drawn by the spice's deep connection to Middle Eastern culture and its unmistakable flavor. Saffron is delicate and can easily overwhelm if not handled carefully. In this case, it enhanced the coffee with grassy undertones and floral depth.

The result was beautifully balanced and I encourage anyone to try something saffron-flavored, whether a sweet or savory dish. You will either love it or hate it.

Upstairs from the café is a space designed for creativity, where visitors can take up activities like freestyle painting, ceramic painting or clay modeling, complete with 10 bright orange potter's wheels.

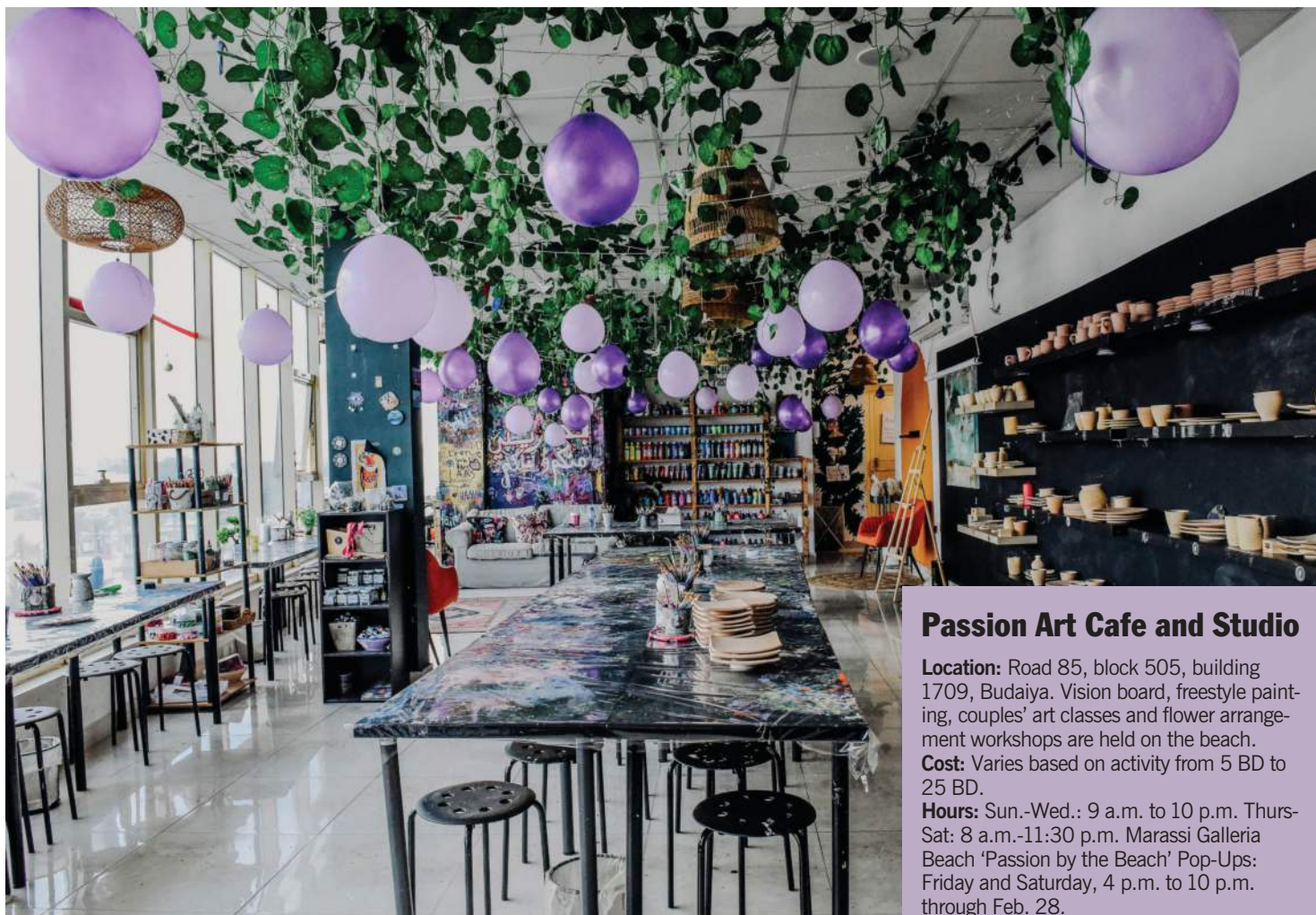
At a glance, they could be mistaken for 1970s pedicure stations. Each wheel is paired with a small wooden stool topped with a pillow for comfort.

This is where clay-throwing classes take place four times each week. Students are encouraged to channel their stress and negative emotions into the ball of French clay, symbolically throwing it away as they hurl it into the center of the potter's wheel. The clay can be molded into bowls, vases and other creations.

Another studio section opens into a well-lit room with large tables draped in thick, paint-splattered plastic lining, bearing the smudges of years of creativity.

My eyes were immediately drawn to a graffiti-covered wall at the back of the studio, a mesmerizing chaos, beautiful in its rawness. The clientele here paints on stretched canvases, sculpts clay models or embellishes premade pieces available for purchase.

The entry door is littered with sticky



PHOTOS BY SHANNON RENFROE/Stars and Stripes

A whimsical creativity space at Passion Art Cafe in Budaiya, Bahrain, welcomes customers with cascading vines, fairy lights and purple balloons on Jan. 7. Below the space is a café with both indoor and outdoor seating.



Rustic charm meets creativity in the pottery corner at Passion Art Cafe in Budaiya. This is where clay-throwing classes take place four times each week.

notes from customers that affirm the joy and inspiration they found here. Some messages, especially those from children, stand out with their unfiltered sincerity, hinting at moments of newfound confidence. A full-length mirror affixed to a pillar proclaims in glittering letters, "You look good."

Above, acrylic hummingbirds dangle from the ceiling. They reminded me of my mother and her reflections on hummingbirds from her years of bird-watching with the Audubon Society.

In some cultures, these tiny creatures

symbolize healing, joy and lightness. Whether or not the birds were intentionally symbolic, they felt perfectly suited to the space.

The café and studio, which opened in April 2022, is owned by sisters Bayan and Mariam AlQassab. Mariam, an experienced painter, leads the art classes, while Bayan left her day job two years ago to team up.

The sisters say their hope is that others are inspired to discover and embrace their own passions. Whether it's for a birthday party, a date night, a team-building event

## Passion Art Cafe and Studio

**Location:** Road 85, block 505, building 1709, Budaiya. Vision board, freestyle painting, couples' art classes and flower arrangement workshops are held on the beach.

**Cost:** Varies based on activity from 5 BD to 25 BD.

**Hours:** Sun.-Wed.: 9 a.m. to 10 p.m. Thurs-Sat: 8 a.m.-11:30 p.m. Marassi Galleria Beach 'Passion by the Beach' Pop-Ups: Friday and Saturday, 4 p.m. to 10 p.m. through Feb. 28.

**Information:** +973 3366 8199; @Passion art.bh on Instagram

Shannon Renfroe



At the heart of Passion Art Cafe lies a wall of sticky notes and memories, where visitors can pen affirmations, gratitude and artistic inspirations.



Passion Art Cafe has a graffiti wall that customers can decorate. From bold Arabic calligraphy to vibrant splashes of color, the artwork stands as a testament to the creativity the café aims to inspire.

or a casual outing, I highly recommend a visit to Passion Art Cafe.

The experience is refreshingly authentic — no frills, just the purity of art.

renfroe.shannon@stripes.com  
@ShannonStripes

# CROSSWORD AND COMICS

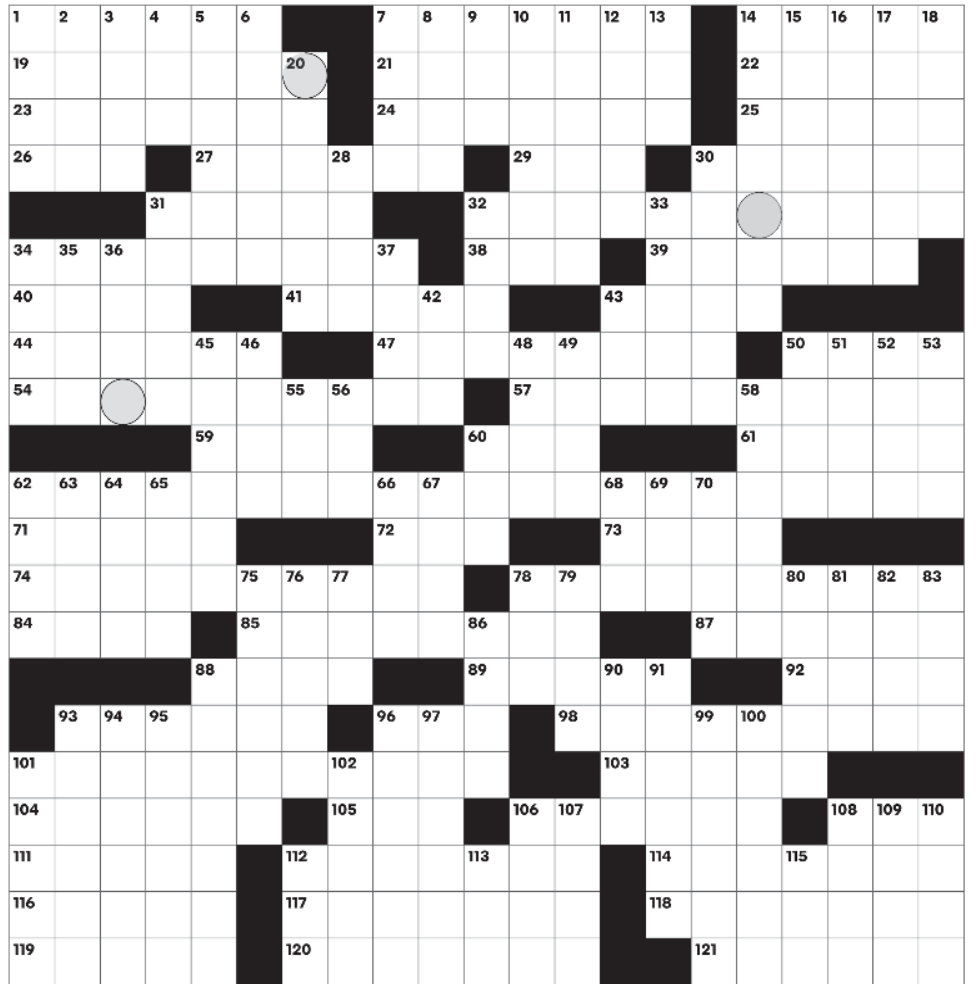
## NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

### ALL THINGS CHANGE

BY KAREEM AYAS / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

Kareem Ayas is a high school teacher of English literature and film studies in Harlem. He grew up in Syria and Lebanon, moved to the United States in 2014 and started solving the Times crossword with co-workers during lunch breaks. Soon his puzzle habit led to constructing. Kareem says he gets his best theme ideas "as I walk my dog at midnight while listening to Duran Duran." Keep your thinking cap on, because he adds, "More often than not I start with the question 'What crossword rules can I break?'"

- ACROSS**
- 1 Turmoil
  - 7 Protagonist of Arabian folk tales
  - 14 /
  - 19 They might be sewn in at a beauty parlor
  - 21 Mustangs sometimes race with them
  - 22 Many a Quentin Tarantino film role
  - 23 Classic Chevys
  - 24 Vanity fare?
  - 25 Super-excited
  - 26 Donkey Kong, e.g.
  - 27 Some chords
  - 29 Trash
  - 30 Unhappy spectators
  - 31 Live interview shout-out
  - 32 Common sales promotion
  - 34 End of fall?
  - 38 Increases
  - 39 Made less effective, in gamer slang
  - 40 Like some picture frames
  - 41 Part of a fishing line to which a hook is attached
  - 43 Characters from Homer and Herodotus?
  - 44 Goes higher, at an auction
  - 47 Part of a modern assembly line
  - 50 Some works of Pablo Neruda
  - 54 Landmark featured in "Roman Holiday"
  - 57 Reveals everything
  - 59 Biblical inspiration for Caleb, in Steinbeck's "East of Eden"
  - 60 Landscaper's roll-out
  - 61 Jason of "Aquaman"
  - 62 Sign on a tray at a cash register . . . or a hint to entering 32-Across
  - 71 Like Sherlock Holmes's "game"
  - 72 Away from work, for short
  - 73 Bit of plankton
  - 74 Place for some light rest?
  - 78 Band with the 2001 No. 1 hit "How You Remind Me" . . . or a hint to entering 54-Across
  - 84 Long-running tour title for Taylor Swift
  - 85 Cultural meeting place
  - 87 Washington airport, informally
  - 88 Smartphone precursors, for short
  - 89 Typical features of locker rooms
  - 92 European capital said to be the site of the first decorated Christmas tree
  - 93 Gin or djinn, e.g.
  - 96 Part of overalls
  - 98 Mercilessly harsh treatment, in an expression . . . or a hint to entering 117-Across
  - 101 Pivot without warning . . . or a hint to entering 19-Across
  - 103 Not straight, in a way
  - 104 Pilot
  - 105 Questionable gift, for short?
  - 106 Musician once nicknamed "The Beale Street Blues Boy"
  - 108 One of 10 on each end of a beer pong table
  - 111 Tough-guy title role
  - 112 "Nice going!"
  - 114 Harsh "reading"
  - 116 Part of a bridal gown 117 1/4
  - 118 Registers
  - 119 Some bank deposits
  - 120 Mentee
  - 121 Start to boil
  - 16 Current measure
  - 17 Start to boil
  - 18 Mess (around)
  - 20 Emotional strains
  - 28 Last word of the New Testament
  - 30 Second strings
  - 31 Prefix with -centric
  - 32 Onion or garlic
  - 33 2024 Shakira single "(\_\_\_ Paréntesis)"
  - 34 Compartmentalize
  - 35 Swear
  - 36 Quintet of experts on "Queer Eye," familiarly
  - 37 Late actress Garr
  - 42 Chaney of "The Hunchback of Notre Dame"
  - 43 Pointy part on a husky
  - 45 Italian motorcycle brand
  - 46 Insta alternative
  - 48 Prominent instrument in Seal's "Kiss From a Rose" and Sonny and Cher's "I Got You Babe"
  - 49 Revealing word
  - 50 Plains tribe
  - 51 "Hot \_\_\_!"
  - 52 North Carolina campus town
  - 53 Leave rolling in the aisles
  - 55 Love all, essentially
  - 56 One of the Wilsons of Heart
  - 58 Skewer
  - 60 Thruway advisory
  - 62 \_\_\_ Modern (London attraction)
  - 63 Way off
  - 64 Coffee named for the district it's grown in
  - 65 Many, many moons
  - 66 Rejections
  - 67 Weird Al Yankovic's parody of the song "Lola"
  - 68 Little suck-up?
  - 69 Antlered animal
  - 70 Many moons
  - 75 Gordimer who wrote "The Conservationist"
  - 76 Non \_\_\_ (unwelcome)
  - 77 Major K-pop septet
  - 78 Nonverbal OK
  - 79 Privy to
  - 80 The Flash's civilian identity \_\_\_ Allen
  - 81 Bickering
  - 82 Structure for a shark dive
  - 83 1980s Chrysler debut
  - 86 Brain piece
  - 88 Oxygen atoms have eight of them
  - 90 Queen's realm
  - 91 One working the knight shift?
  - 93 Mena of the "American Pie" films
  - 94 Elemental
  - 95 Pretty soon
  - 96 Parisian eatery
  - 97 Effect
  - 99 Storing, as some ashes
  - 100 Vice president with a Nobel Peace Prize
  - 101 Fruit pastries
  - 102 Put off
  - 106 Head shop purchase
  - 107 Memory unit
  - 108 Pacify
  - 109 Sch. with the Daily Bruin newspaper
  - 110 Vet's concern
  - 112 TikTok, for one
  - 113 "Busy" one
  - 115 Littl'un



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## GUNSTON STREET

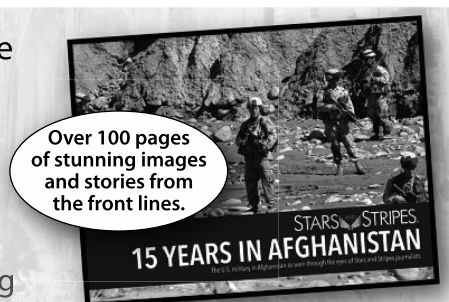


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## FACES

# Humor and endurance

Conan O'Brien the next Mark Twain comedy award recipient

BY ASHRAF KHALIL  
Associated Press

Comedian and host Conan O'Brien was named the newest recipient of the Mark Twain Prize for lifetime achievement in comedy on Thursday.

O'Brien, 61, has carved out an improbable decadeslong career arc, moving from goofy television interloper to comedic elder statesman. Along the way, he survived one of the most public failures in the history of television on "The Tonight Show" — only to launch a successful, and sustained, next act.

His travel series "Conan O'Brien Must Go" sparked popular and critical acclaim, with a second season coming. In March, O'Brien will host the Academy Awards three weeks before his own Mark Twain ceremony in Washington.

Deborah Rutter, president of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, in a statement called O'Brien "a master of invention and reinvention, consistently pushing the envelope in search of new comedic heights."

O'Brien offered his own tongue-in-cheek assessment, saying in the Kennedy Center statement that he would be "the first winner of the Mark Twain Prize recognized not for humor, but for my work as a riverboat pilot." He will be honored on March 23 in a special ceremony in which he will receive a bronze bust of Twain, the iconic American writer and satirist whose real name was Samuel Clemens.

Mark Twain recipients are honored with a night of testimonials and video tributes, often featuring previous award winners. The ceremony will stream on Netflix at a later date yet to be announced.

O'Brien leaped into the spotlight from near-total obscurity in 1993, when he was chosen to replace the legendary David Letterman as host of "Late Night" despite no significant on-camera experience. The former Harvard Lampoon

editor had spent the previous years as a writer for "Saturday Night Live" and "The Simpsons," appearing on camera only as an occasional background extra in "SNL" skits.

Bringing a skittish, awkward energy that contrasted with Letterman's deadpan persona, O'Brien constantly made fun of his own gangly appearance and inappropriateness for the job. He went on to host "Late Night" for 16 years, longer than any other host.

In 2009, O'Brien's career and persona took a turn. He became the man who publicly gained and lost his dream job while America watched.

O'Brien was tapped to replace Jay Leno as host of "The Tonight Show" despite public warnings from his own guests that Leno wasn't ready to cede the throne. After seven months of declining ratings, NBC executives brought Leno back for a new show that would bump "The Tonight Show" back. O'Brien refused to accept the move, leading to a public spat that ended with a multimillion-dollar payout for O'Brien and his staff to exit the network in early 2010.

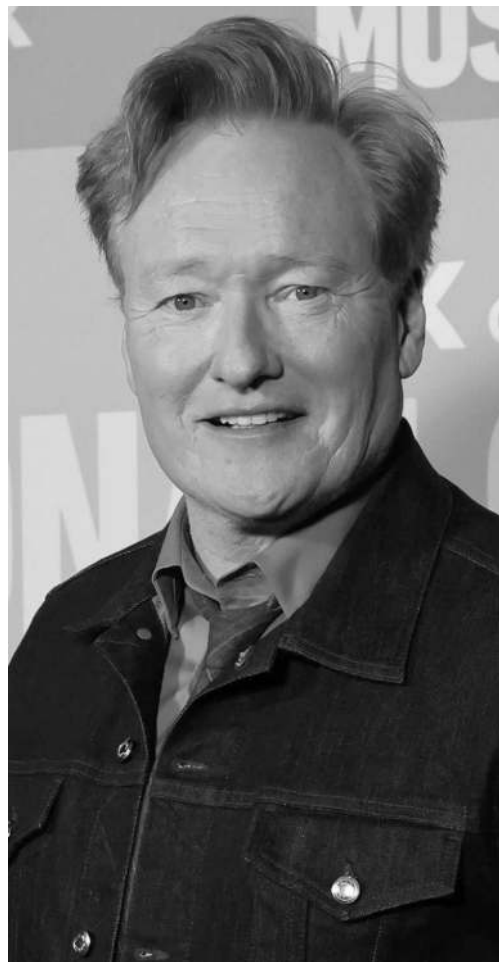
The aftermath split the comedy world, with Leno cast as the villain and O'Brien as the victim who was set up to fail.

In an emotional goodbye on his final "Tonight Show," O'Brien described himself as lucky and refused to sound bitter.

"Every comedian dreams of hosting 'The Tonight Show,' and for seven months I got to do it," he said. "I did it my way with people I love, and I don't regret one second."

He ended with a sort of generational rallying cry.

"All I ask is this one thing, particularly of young people that watch: Please do not be cynical," O'Brien said, his voice cracking. "Nobody in life gets exactly what they thought they were going to get, but if you work really hard and you're kind, amazing things will happen." O'Brien reemerged later in 2010 with a new



TNS

**Conan O'Brien will be busy in March. O'Brien will host the Academy Awards on March 2, then receive the Mark Twain Prize for lifetime achievement in comedy March 23.**

talk show on the cable station TBS. Despite the channel's lower profile, the show ran for 11 years while he launched parallel ventures like the podcast "Conan O'Brien Needs a Friend" and the travel show "Conan Without Borders," a precursor to his current show.

Other comedians receiving the lifetime achievement award include both Letterman and Leno, along with George Carlin, Whoopi Goldberg, Bob Newhart, Carol Burnett and Dave Chappelle.

## 'SNL' creator Michaels donates archive to UT

Lorne Michaels, the creator of the long-running sketch comedy television show "Saturday Night Live" has donated his career archive to the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, the center announced Wednesday.



Michaels

The collection includes behind-the-scenes rehearsal notes, scripts and photographs of iconic characters and sketches from a show that launched the careers of comedians Gilda Radner, John Belushi, Bill Murray, Eddie Murphy, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler and others. It also includes some of the 80-year-old Michaels' personal correspondence.

The Ransom Center is one of the top literary and humanities archives and research institutions in the country. Its literary archive includes the collections of Nobel Prize winner J.M. Coetzee, Pulitzer Prize winners David Mamet and Norman Mailer, actor Robert De Niro, the television drama "Mad Men" and the "Gone With the Wind" collection of Hollywood producer David O. Selznick.

## Hasty Pudding names Hamm Man of the Year

Actor Jon Hamm, who came to fame starring as ad executive Don Draper on the AMC series "Mad Men," was named Tuesday as the 2025 Man of the Year by Harvard University's Hasty Pudding Theatricals.



Hamm

The theater group, which dates to 1844 and claims to be the world's third-oldest still operating, said Hamm will receive his Pudding Pot award at a celebratory roast Jan. 31.

Hasty Pudding Theatricals honors people who have made lasting and impressive contributions to the world of entertainment.

Hamm is best known for starring in "Mad Men," but he has had a storied acting career. Among his achievements, he received Emmy, Golden Globe and Screen Actors Guild Award nominations for his portrayal of Sheriff Roy Tillman in the FX series "Fargo." He's starred in several movies, including "Bad Times at the El Royale," and he's hosted "Saturday Night Live" three times.

Other recent Man of the Year winners have included Barry Keoghan last year, Bob Odenkirk in 2023 and Jason Bateman in 2022.

Hasty Pudding Theatricals' Woman of the Year Award will be awarded Feb. 6.

# Drake sues Universal Music for defamation

BY DAVE COLLINS  
Associated Press

A hip-hop superstar beef was cranked up another notch Wednesday when Drake sued Universal Music Group for defamation over rival Kendrick Lamar's diss track "Not Like Us."

The lawsuit, filed in federal court in New York City, alleges UMG — the parent record label for Drake and Lamar — published and promoted the track even though it included false pedophilia allegations against Drake and suggested listeners should resort to vigilante justice. Lamar is not named in the suit.

The result, the suit says, was intruders shooting a security guard and two attempted break-ins at Drake's Toronto home, online hate and harassment, a hit to his reputation and a decrease in his brand's value before his contract renegotiation with UMG this year.

"The lawsuit is not about the artist who created 'Not Like Us,'" the lawsuit says, referring to Lamar. "It is, instead, entirely about



Rappers Lamar, left, and Drake

UMG, the music company that decided to publish, promote, exploit and monetize allegations that it understood were not only false, but dangerous."

The suit later alleges, "UMG did so because it understood that the Recording's inflammatory and shocking allegations were a gold mine."

And, the suit claims, the music company has made large investments and used its connections to arrange for "Not Like Us" to be performed at next month's Super Bowl, where Lamar will be the halftime entertainment.

The lawsuit, which is seeking a trial and an undisclosed amount of

money for damages, also repeated allegations in other legal filings that UMG falsely pumped up the popularity of "Not Like Us" on streaming services.

The track is nominated for five Grammys, including record of the year and song of the year.

UMG disputed the lawsuit's allegations in a statement.

"Not only are these claims untrue, but the notion that we would seek to harm the reputation of any artist — let alone Drake — is illogical," the company said. "We have invested massively in his music and our employees around the world have worked tirelessly for many years to help him achieve historic commercial and personal financial success."

The company added: "Throughout his career, Drake has intentionally and successfully used UMG to distribute his music and poetry to engage in conventionally outrageous back-and-forth 'rap battles' to express his feelings about other artists. He now seeks to weaponize the legal process to

silence an artist's creative expression and to seek damages from UMG for distributing that artist's music."

The feud between Drake, a 38-year-old Canadian rapper and singer and five-time Grammy winner whose full name is Aubrey Drake Graham, and Lamar, a 37-year-old Pulitzer Prize winner, is among the biggest in hip-hop in recent years, with two of the genre's biggest stars at its center.

The two were occasional collaborators more than a decade ago, but Lamar began taking public jabs at Drake starting in 2013. The fight escalated steeply last year.

Drake's lawyers, from New York-based Willkie Farr & Gallagher, said the lawsuit seeks to hold UMG accountable for knowingly promoting false and defamatory allegations against him. They said the shooting and break-in attempts at Drake's home, and the online vitriol, prompted him to move his family out of the house, and that he fears for his and their safety.

# AMERICAN ROUNDUP

## Judge: Police department can wind down oversight

**LA** NEW ORLEANS — The New Orleans Police Department can begin winding down its long-standing federal oversight, a judge ruled Tuesday in response to a request from the city and the Justice Department to start wrapping up the monitoring program.

U.S. District Judge Susie Morgan said the police department has transformed itself into a more transparent and accountable agency, even though more work remains to be done over the next two years.

In 2013, the City of New Orleans agreed to what it called “the nation’s most expansive” federal oversight plan after a U.S. Justice Department investigation found evidence of racial bias, misconduct and a culture of impunity.

In the years since oversight started, the department has created a framework of audits and data analysis, increased transparency by revising and publishing online training materials and policies, and enhanced efforts to cut down on long-time issues such as payroll fraud, police officials said.

## Traffic into Manhattan drops in 1st week of toll

**NY** NEW YORK — A new toll on drivers entering the core of Manhattan brought modest but measurable traffic reductions to New York City’s heavily gridlocked streets in its first week of operation, according to preliminary data released Monday by the state’s transit authority.

Known as “congestion pricing,” the first-in-the-nation program launched on Jan. 5, collecting \$9 from most passenger cars entering the city below Central Park during peak hours and higher fees on trucks and other vehicles. In the days since, total traffic in the tolling zone has dropped by 7.5% — or roughly 43,000 cars per day — compared to the equivalent period last year, Metropolitan Transportation Authority officials said.

“Just look out the window: there is less traffic, quieter streets, and we think everyone has seen it,” said Juliette Michaelson, the MTA deputy chief of policy and external relations. “Traffic patterns are already changing and they will continue to change.”

First proposed decades ago, the program is intended to raise billions of dollars in revenue for the cash-strapped MTA while easing congestion on the city’s streets. It follows similar initiatives in London, Singapore and Stockholm, which also saw immediate reductions in traffic after their tolls went live.

## New governor axes DEI, OKs vaccine exemptions

**WV** CHARLESTON — Republican Gov. Patrick Morrisey issued a slew of aggressive executive orders on his first full day as West Virginia’s chief executive Tuesday, including one en-



JULIO CORTEZ/AP

## Guardian of the Capitol

The moon rises in its full stage behind “The Guardian,” a bronze, 17-foot statue representation of an American Indian man by Enoch Kelly Haney sitting atop the Oklahoma State Capitol building, on Monday, in Oklahoma City.

abling families to receive religious exemptions from required school vaccinations—a massive departure for a state with one of the strictest vaccine policies in the nation.

Another order called for the termination of all Diversity, Equity and Inclusion, or DEI, initiatives from state-run institutions, something Morrisey said he believes will protect West Virginians from racial and gender discrimination — especially “inappropriate” preferential treatment for certain groups over others.

“I think the public deserves nothing less,” he said at a news briefing at the state Capitol. According to U.S. Census estimates for 2024, West Virginia’s population is just under 93% white.

West Virginia Democratic Party Chair Mike Pushkin was not impressed with the executive orders, calling them a “troubling example” of executive overreach that “could harm us for generations.”

## Bill would limit colleges’ admission practices

**FL** TALLAHASSEE — A Florida state lawmaker has filed a bill that would ban some public colleges and universities from admitting immigrants who are in the country without legal permission. The proposal comes the day after Gov. Ron DeSantis called for a special legislative session to help implement President-elect Donald Trump’s immigration policies.

The proposal was filed Tuesday

by Republican state Sen. Randy Fine, who is currently running for a seat in Congress to replace Rep. Mike Waltz, Trump’s pick for national security adviser.

Fine’s bill would ban public schools of higher education with an acceptance rate of less than 85% from admitting students in the country without legal authorization.

The state is home to an estimated 1.2 million immigrants living in the U.S. without permission, according to the Pew Research Center. Currently, Florida students who are without such permission can qualify for in-state tuition at public colleges and universities. Fine has also filed a bill that would repeal that provision.

## Violence-prevention office created after shooting

**WI** MADISON — Wisconsin’s Democratic governor on Tuesday created an office dedicated to preventing gun violence, a month after a school shooting near the state Capitol.

Gov. Tony Evers also called on the Republican-controlled Legislature to pass a series of gun control and public safety measures, saying reducing violence should be a “shared priority that transcends politics.”

Republican majorities in the Legislature shrunk after the November election, leading Evers and Democrats to say they hoped for more bipartisanship and consideration of ideas that have been summarily rejected in the past. But following the

Dec. 16 shooting at the Abundant Life Christian School in Madison that left a student, teacher and the 15-year-old shooter dead, Republicans have not voiced support for any gun control measures backed by Democrats.

Wisconsin polls have repeatedly shown high public support for a variety of gun control measures.

## State pulls back on effort to curtail diesel vehicles

**CA** SACRAMENTO — California’s efforts to limit pollution from diesel-powered trains and big rigs were stalled in anticipation of pushback from the incoming Trump administration.

The California Air Resources Board said Tuesday it withdrew its requests for federal approval to implement stricter emissions rules for locomotives and semi-trucks because the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency had yet to approve them. The decision came just days before Democratic President Joe Biden leaves office.

During his first administration, Donald Trump attempted to thwart various California climate efforts, including rules to cut down on greenhouse gas emissions from transportation sources.

One of the rules California pulled after the EPA failed to approve it would have phased out the sale of new diesel-powered semi-trucks and buses by 2036. The Air Resources Board passed the regulation in

2023. Another rule, which the agency also approved, would have banned locomotive engines more than 23 years old by 2030 and increased the use of zero-emissions technology to transport freight from ports and throughout railyards.

Both rules were opposed by industry as costly mandates that would be difficult to implement.

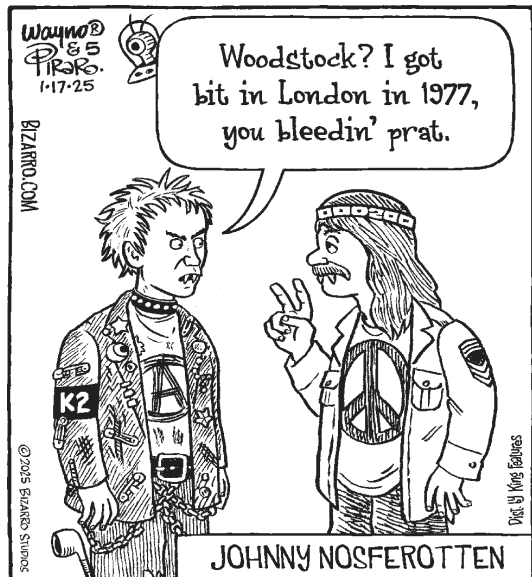
## Town OKs plan to remove 2 dams to rehabilitate river

**ME** YARMOUTH — The Yarmouth town council voted unanimously this month to remove two town-owned dams on the Royal River and consider fish passage improvements at a stretch of rapids in between them, a historic vote more than two decades in the making.

The decision follows a federal proposal released last spring and is the most authoritative step to removing the Bridge Street Dam and East Elm Street Dam since 2009, when the town began studying how their removal could improve the Royal River’s health and fisheries.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers determined in April that removing the dams has the greatest potential to improve river habitat and restore fish access toward the headwaters of the Royal, historic spawning grounds for sea-going fish like alewives that have largely disappeared upstream of the dams.

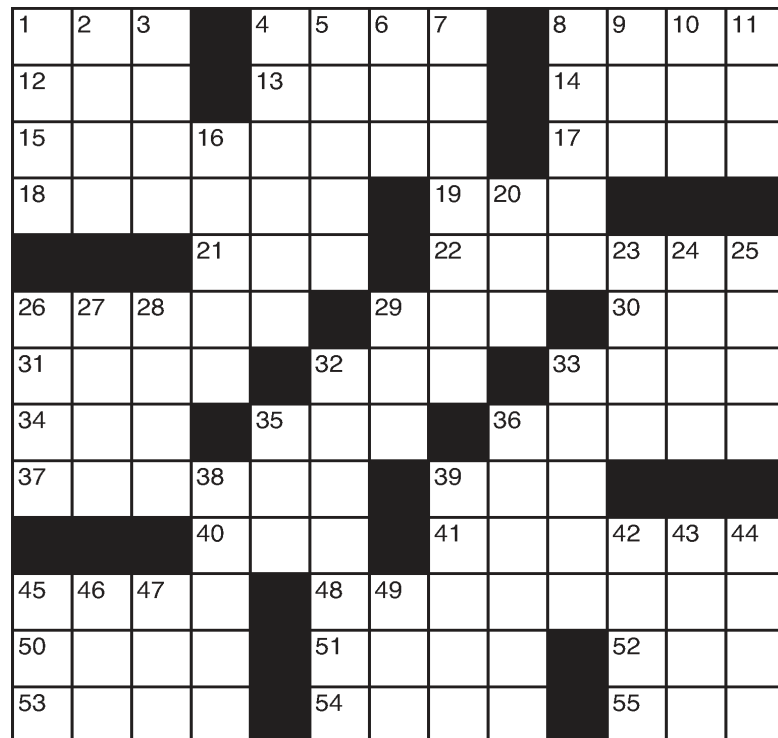
Bizarro



Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword



ACROSS

- 1 Cry
- 4 Vault
- 8 Daly and Allen
- 12 Common title start
- 13 Killer whale
- 14 Web addresses
- 15 Pithy joke
- 17 Legume
- 18 Suggests
- 19 TV guide abbr.
- 21 Wager
- 22 Expulsion
- 26 Errand runner
- 29 Whatever number
- 30 Hwy.
- 31 Caspian Sea feeder
- 32 Keats creation
- 33 Go caroling
- 34 Capitol VIP
- 35 Year in Madrid
- 36 Epic narratives
- 37 On/off switch
- 39 "You've got mail" co.
- 40 Documentarian Burns
- 41 Obligations
- 45 Beige
- 48 The whole crowd
- 50 Ache
- 51 Aswan's river
- 52 Victory

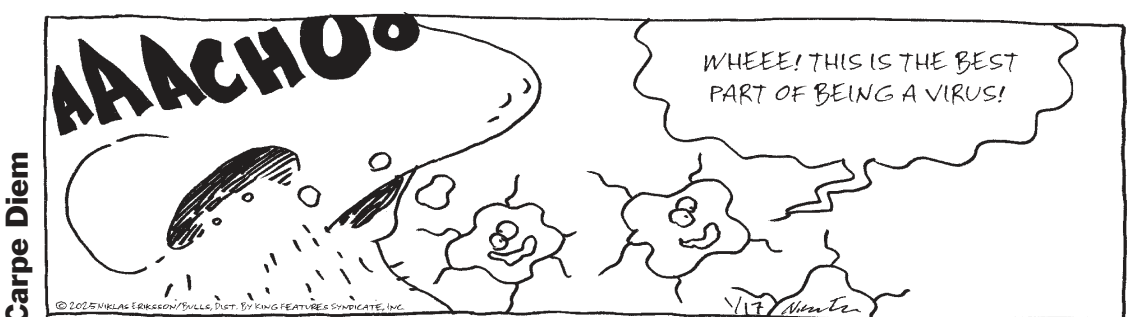
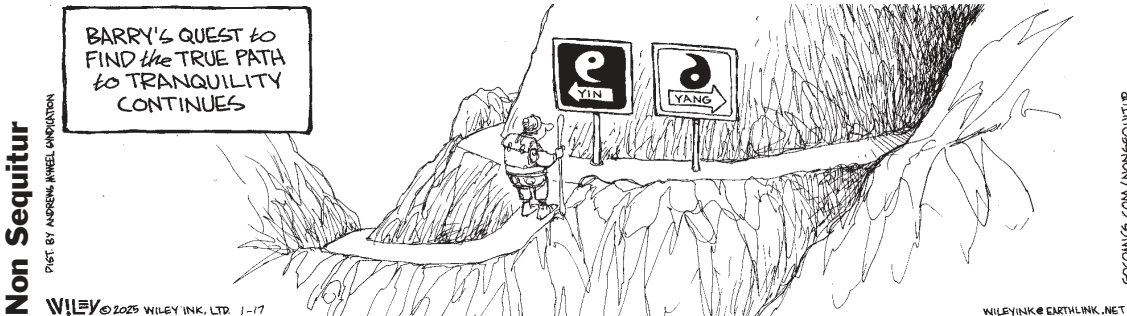
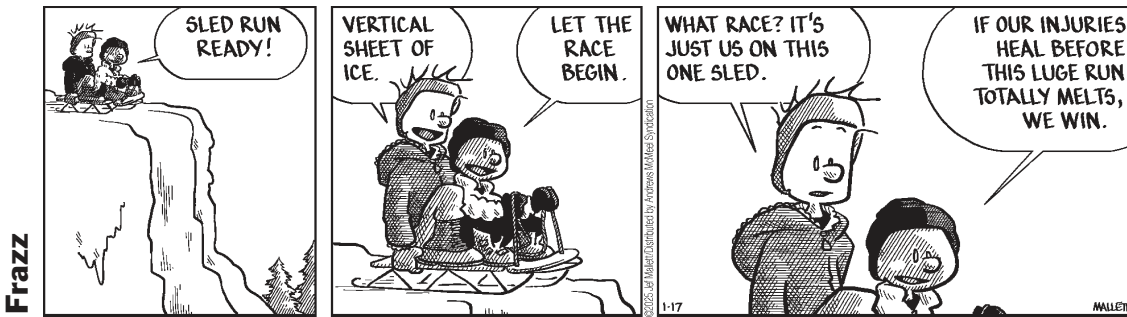
- 53 Abbr. on a schedule
- 54 Ticked (off)
- 55 Annex

- 24 Sicilian peak
- 25 Bylaws, briefly
- 26 Sudden wind
- 27 Disc-shaped cookie
- 28 Sharp tooth
- 29 Commotion
- 32 Penny
- 33 Like seawater
- 35 Boxing legend
- 36 Turned bad
- 38 Hog's "hello"
- 39 "Hello" singer
- 42 Illinois neighbor
- 43 Wife of Geraint
- 44 Fax
- 45 Clean air org.
- 46 Baseball fan's headwear
- 47 Tear
- 49 Compete

DOWN

- 1 Halt
- 2 "It can't be!"
- 3 Hive population
- 4 Hang around
- 5 Painter Max
- 6 Expert
- 7 Series opener
- 8 Big brass
- 9 Rage
- 10 Org. with a style manual
- 11 Nine-digit ID
- 16 Slander in print
- 20 Purchase
- 23 Advanced math

Answer to Previous Puzzle



1-17

CRYPTOQUIP

JNX' IH TOAEMZ VH LN RNMOXVH  
LPEO RXIKJ RTWWTZH DTIEHLJ  
HDHIJ GTJ TL GEMMHILEVH?  
NP, ATKH MN!

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: I HAVE CONCLUDED THAT I SHOULD NEVER ARGUE WITH NINETY-DEGREE ANGLES. THEY'RE ALWAYS RIGHT.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: R equals C

**Bizarro**

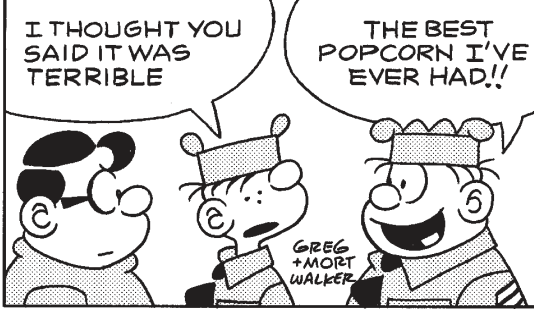
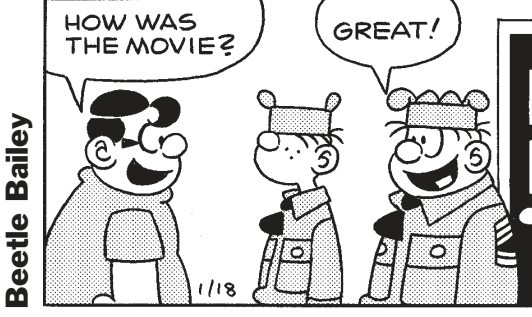
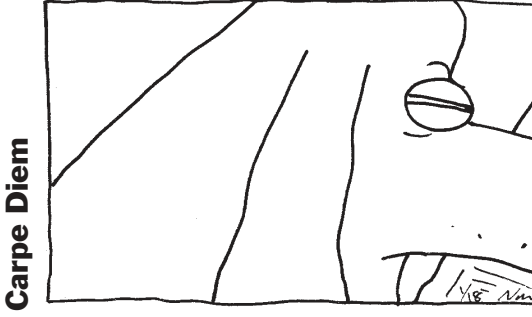
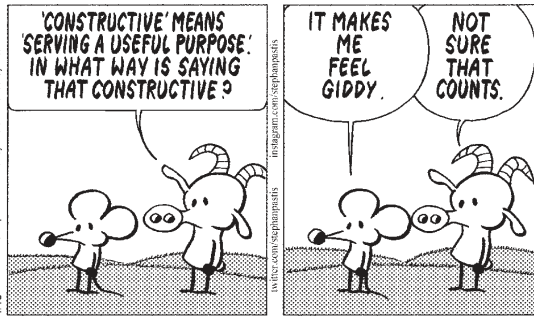
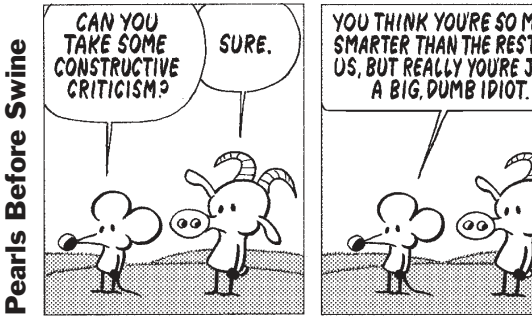
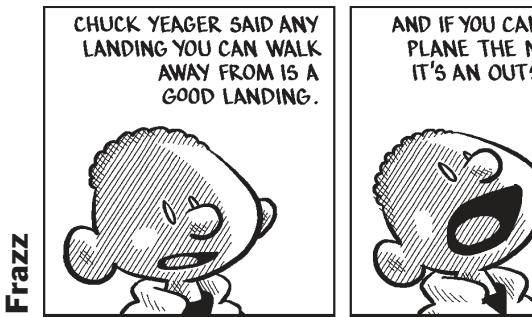


**Loose Parts**



**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 Detox center
- 6 Gives up
- 12 Swiss metropolis
- 13 Unexpected
- 14 Ingratiate
- 15 Stahl of "60 Minutes"
- 16 Disposition
- 17 "La — Bonita"
- 19 Casual shirt
- 20 Third son
- 22 Capote nickname
- 24 Canine greeting
- 27 Furnace fuel
- 29 Branches
- 32 President of South Africa, 1994-1999
- 35 Pronto
- 36 Monumental
- 37 Half dozen
- 38 Fannie — Lamar
- 42 Sashimi fish
- 44 Neatnik's nightmare
- 46 Jazzy James
- 50 Legislative group
- 52 Camelot king
- 54 Aerie newborn
- 55 Organize an art show
- 56 Pueblo structures
- 57 Recognizes

**DOWN**

- 1 Nevada city
- 2 Within (Pref.)
- 3 Obeys
- 4 "Selma" director DuVernay
- 5 Male singing voice
- 6 Humpty's perch
- 7 Skip — (flutter)
- 8 Tax-collecting org.
- 9 Birds of prey
- 10 Duel tool
- 11 Ocular woe
- 12 Tiara jewel
- 18 Rug cleaner
- 21 — -friendly
- 23 "Awesome, dude!"
- 24 Navarro of "The View"

**25 Scale**

- members
- 26 Pink wading bird
- 28 Relaxed
- 30 Roman 1051
- 31 Coltrane's instrument
- 33 Aromatherapy spot
- 34 Sgt., e.g.
- 39 Lauder of cosmetics
- 41 Paris subway
- 42 Cruising
- 43 Lettuce unit
- 45 Reply to "Shall we?"
- 47 Spring meltdown
- 48 Mild rebukes
- 49 "How — you?"
- 51 Cleric's tunic
- 53 Scamper

**Answer to Previous Puzzle**

S	O	B		L	E	A	P		T	I	M	S
T	H	E		O	R	C	A		U	R	L	S
O	N	E	L	I	N	E	R		B	E	A	N
P	O	S	I	T	S		T	B	A			
			B	E	T		O	U	S	T	E	R
G	O	F	E	R		A	N	Y		R	T	E
U	R	A	L		O	D	E		S	I	N	G
S	E	N		A	N	O		S	A	G	A	S
T	O	G	G	L	E		A	O	L			
			R	I	C		D	U	T	I	E	S
E	C	R	U		E	V	E	R	Y	O	N	E
P	A	I	N		N	I	L	E		W	I	N
A	P	P	T		T	E	E	D		A	D	D

**1-18**

**CRYPTOQUIP**

UYKF ELPYF K XWESKIJ NW  
 KHFRQ LF YKD EKIGHKXFGQRN  
 FLKQKD HWQ K SKPRKIF? DRIN  
 LI FYR XQWUID.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: YOU'RE ASKING ME TO CONSUME THIS CURLY CABBAGE VARIETY EVERY DAY AT DINNERTIME? OH, KALE NO!  
 Today's Cryptoquip Clue: F equals T

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## OPINION

Laura Law, Chief Operating Officer  
Lt. Col. Katie R. Fidler, Europe commander  
John Rodriguez, Europe chief of staff  
Lt. Col. Marci Hoffman, Pacific commander

## EDITORIAL

Robert H. Reid, Editor in Chief  
reid.robert@stripes.com

Sean Moores, Managing Editor for Presentation  
moores.sean@stripes.com

Ann Pinson, Digital Managing Editor  
pinson.ann@stripes.com

## BUREAU STAFF

## Europe/Mideast

Erik Slavin, Europe & Mideast Bureau Chief  
slavin.erik@stripes.com

+49(0)631.3615.9350; DSN (314)583.9350

## Pacific

Aaron Kidd, Pacific Bureau Chief  
kidd.aaron@stripes.com

+81.42.552.2511 ext. 88380; DSN (315)227.7380

## Washington

Joseph Cacchioli, Washington Bureau Chief  
cacchioli.joseph@stripes.com

(+1)(202)886-0033

Brian Bowers, Assistant Managing Editor, News  
bowers.brian@stripes.com

## CIRCULATION

## Mideast

David Schultz, District Manager  
schultz.david@stripes.com

xsscirculation@stripes.com

+49(0)152.5672.5036; DSN (314)583-9111

## Europe

Carlo Aquino, Circulation Manager  
aquino.carlo@stripes.com

memberservices@stripes.com

+49(0)631.3615.9136; DSN (314)583.9136

## Pacific

Mari Mori, customerhelp@stripes.com  
+81-3 6385.3171; DSN (315)227.7333

## CONTACT US

## Washington

tel: (+1)202.886.0003

633 3rd St. NW, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20001-3050

## Reader letters

letters@stripes.com

## Additional contacts

stripes.com/contactus

## OMBUDSMAN

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Stars and Stripes (USPS 0417900) published daily (except Saturday, Sunday, 25 December and 1 January) for 50 cents (Monday through Thursday) and one dollar on Friday by Stars and Stripes Pacific, OPC 706 BOX 7, APO AP 96301-9001. Periodicals postage paid at San Francisco, CA Postmaster: Send address changes to Pacific Stars and Stripes, OPC 706 BOX 7, AP 96301-9001.

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## After the Gaza ceasefire, getting serious about peace

BY DAVID IGNATIUS

*The Washington Post*

The Gaza ceasefire and hostage release agreement announced Wednesday is joyous news that hopefully marks an end to this terrible conflict. But a speech this week by Secretary of State Antony Blinken shows just how hard it will be to make a new beginning toward Israeli-Palestinian peace.

Leaving a job allows you to say exactly what you think about intractable problems. And that's what Blinken did Tuesday in unusually blunt remarks about the Middle East. He talked about obstacles rather than breakthroughs. If speeches could bleed, this one would be dripping red.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the yoke worn by every secretary of state I have covered, back to George Shultz in the 1980s. They all labored to create a "two-state solution," a goal that seems screamingly obvious to everyone except the parties directly involved. Martin Indyk, a two-time U.S. ambassador to Israel and blessed among peacemakers, said a decade ago that the conflict had broken his heart. Maybe it broke Blinken's, too.

"I wish I could tell you that leaders in the region always put their people's interests ahead of their own interests. They did not," Blinken said. Make no mistake: That was a message to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Blinken began his speech by reciting the standard talking points about U.S. policy in the region: deepening partnerships, deterring aggression, de-escalating conflicts. This is the elevator music of diplomacy. And he faithfully recorded Israel's triumphs in the long arc of revenge for Oct. 7, 2023. Hezbollah had been "ravaged," Iran was "on its back foot," the balance of power in the region was "shifting dramatically."

But then he leaned into a discussion of a Gaza war that has haunted him and the State Department since Hamas began the nightmare.

And he used language that he has usually suppressed in public. Gaza has brought "immeasurable suffering on Palestinian civilians," he said. "Nearly the entire population has lost a loved one. Nearly the entire population is enduring hunger. Nearly the entire population ... has been displaced."

Blinken, whose stepfather was a Holocaust survivor, has been a deeply faithful friend to Israel, as has his boss, President Joe Biden. But you could sense his anger with Netanyahu, who for more than a year has obstructed American efforts to plan for a "day after" in Gaza that might alleviate the misery there.

"Israel's government has systematically undermined the capacity and legitimacy of the only viable alternative to Hamas: the Palestinian Authority," Blinken said. As for humanitarian aid to Palestinian civilians, "Israel's efforts have fallen far short of meeting the colossal scale of need in Gaza."

Frustration turned to raw anger in Blinken's description of Israeli actions in the West Bank, actions that have deepened tension there. Under Netanyahu, Blinken said, "Israel is expanding official settlements and nationalizing land at a faster clip than any time in the last decade, while turning a blind eye to an unprecedented growth in illegal outposts." Meanwhile, attacks by extremist settlers on Palestinians "have reached record levels."

I've watched this ever-escalating Israeli encroachment in the West Bank for 40 years now. From north to south, the land that peacemakers imagined would someday become a Palestinian state is now sliced and diced so many ways by Israeli roads, settlements and outposts that there's little fabric left, only threadbare patches of ground.

Blinken put the matter bluntly: "Israel must decide what relationship they want with the Palestinians. That cannot be the illusion that Palestinians will accept being a non-people without national rights." I pray that members of the incoming Trump administration heed

Blinken's warning: "Israelis must abandon the myth they can carry out de facto annexation, without cost and consequence to Israel's democracy, to its standing, to its security."

For the first time, Blinken publicly detailed the "day after" plan for Gaza that he began to float several months ago. It's centered on the Palestinian Authority that Netanyahu has tried so hard to undermine. The PA would invite international partners to help manage governance and reconstruction in Gaza. The United States would help train and equip a PA-led force that could gradually take over security there. The transition would be anchored in a United Nations resolution and overseen by a senior U.N. official.

It's not only a sound plan. It's the only plausible pathway out of the death and destruction in Gaza. Netanyahu surely understands that. But he has blocked Blinken's efforts for months. That's terrible for Palestinians, obviously. But it also leaves Gaza a festering mess on Israel's border.

Middle East diplomats always urge Israelis and Palestinians both to make "tough choices." But after so many months, it must feel to Blinken like pounding his head against a brick wall. "The unimpeachable reality is that, up to this point, they have either failed to make these difficult decisions, or acted in ways that put a deal and long-term peace further from reach," Blinken said.

You can argue that Blinken should have made this speech months ago. Or that Biden should have used the United States' enormous leverage to force Israel toward a stable outcome in Gaza. Blinken himself conceded that he didn't get every decision about Gaza right.

The Gaza ceasefire and hostage release could truly mark a new start toward negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians, rather than just another lull in fighting. Blinken's clear-eyed comments are a gift for anyone who, after the horror of Gaza, wants to get serious about peace.

## Acquiring Greenland has merit. Trump's tactics don't

BY JONAH GOLDBERG

*Tribune Content Agency*

Whether it was Will Rogers or Tony Soprano, the old advice of "buy land, God's not making any more of it" is good real estate advice, but it's hardly an iron law. First of all, God does make more land from time to time. And so do humans. This raises a second famous piece of advice, also of unclear authority. When it comes to real estate only three things matter: location, location, and location.

And that brings us to Greenland.

Donald Trump wants to acquire it. Nay, he says we need to acquire it. The last time he was president, he floated the idea and was roundly mocked for it. But not by me, and I am hardly adverse to mocking Trump when the moment calls for it. For myriad reasons, it would be in our interest for the United States to annex, lease, absorb, or otherwise acquire the giant island. The most important of these reasons is, of course, location.

That's why I've long thought acquiring Greenland — peacefully! — was a good idea (Indeed, last year, I despaired of the "Greenland effect" — the phenomenon whereby Trump's embrace of a good idea makes it less popular.).

But my opinion doesn't count for much. James Stavridis, the former Supreme Allied Commander of NATO, and hardly a MAGA

toady, agrees. He writes that the Mexico-sized island "is a vital element of the Greenland-Iceland-UK 'gap' that guards the northern approaches to the Atlantic Ocean from Russian naval forces."

It's also believed Greenland has huge deposits of crucial rare-earth minerals, essential to all manner of high-tech industries, industries China is trying to control or dominate, in part by establishing a near monopoly on such resources.

Long before anyone appreciated the importance of this stuff, the Truman administration recognized the value of Greenland and tried to persuade the Danes — who administer the quasi-independent nation — to part with it. The Danes politely said no. But the issue was mostly resolved a few years later when Denmark became a founding member of the NATO alliance. They agreed to work with us on using it to bolster western defenses.

Trump claims that's not good enough. In a recent press conference, Trump refused to rule out the use of force to take Greenland (and the Panama Canal).

"For purposes of National Security and Freedom throughout the World, the United States of America feels that the ownership and control of Greenland is an absolute necessity," Trump insists.

The best defense — really the only defense — of Trump's rhetoric is that it's a negotiating

tactic: Start with an outlandish ask, and then find a compromise that would have been impossible without it.

Again, the problem with this classic example of turd-polishing Trump's rhetoric is that Denmark and Greenland are already generously cooperating with the U.S. on national security issues. We literally have a vital military installation in Greenland already. So, what could that compromise be? Some special leasing deal for mining? OK, maybe. But, surely, there's a better way to pursue that with a long-time ally than threatening military force?

Acquiring Greenland is a serious idea, but pursuing it in an unserious way is worse than not pursuing it at all.

Say what you will about the calumnies and blood libel against "neocons," none of them floated the idea of provoking a foreign war with democratic allies.

But when Trump threatens exactly that, well, that's just so cool apparently.

The people who insist that Trumpian nationalism is a Very Serious Idea invariably find themselves having to bend their Very Serious Arguments to the fact that Trump doesn't care about arguments and ideas. He's just a real estate guy who likes putting his name on stuff.

Jonah Goldberg is editor-in-chief of The Dispatch and the host of The Remnant podcast.

# SCOREBOARD/MLB

## DEALS

### Wednesday's transactions

#### BASEBALL Major League Baseball American League

**ATHLETICS** — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with SS/RHP Shotar Morii, RHPs Ricardo Osorio, Edwin Mendoza and Jesus Delgado, OFs Carlos Salmeron and Breyson Guedez, and C Aiverson Barzarte.

**BALTIMORE ORIOLES** — Traded C Blake Hunt to Seattle in exchange for cash considerations. Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with C Yeison Acosta, SSS Meykel Baro, Jorge Drullard, Jose Luis Pena and Ronald Terrero, Cs Ricardo Chirinos, Jose Flores, Victor Saez and Manuel Vasquez, OFs Fabian Cordero, Johanse Gomez, Rayner Herrera and Lisandro Sanchez, RHPs Alexander Diaz, Emmanuel Pena, Laurens Sosa, Samuel Teran and Benjamin Vasquez, LHPs Darlin Valencio, Yurior Villavicencio and Kelvin Zapata and 3B Frandy Guillen.

**BOSTON RED SOX** — Acquired C Blake Sabol from San Francisco in exchange for international bonus pool space. Designated RHP Chase Shugart for assignment.

**CHICAGO WHITE SOX** — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with RHPs Nathanael Valerio, Yobal Rodriguez, Jhonny Morao, Cesar Familia, Albert Munoz and Felix Doroteo, OFs Jeremias Aponte, Orlando Patino, Frank Mieses and Alan Escobar, 3B Alejandro Cruz, Cs Jose Mendoza and Diego Natera, INFs Yordani Soto, Igor Escobar and Jelfrank Silva.

**CLEVELAND GUARDIANS** — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with SSS Heins Brito, Luis Garcia and Luis Galan.

**DETROIT TIGERS** — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with SSS Angel De Los Santos, Sterling Bazli, LHP Anderson Diaz, C Carlos Benavides and OF Cris Rodriguez.

**HOUSTON ASTROS** — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with RHPs Adrian Ruiz, Dayson Cova, Emilio Payro, Ismael Obregon, Jesus Sosa, Juan Fraide, Omar Damian and Ronald De Los Santos, INFs Pablo Martenez, Juan Rojas, Jose De La Cruz, Anderson Areinamo, Santiago Martinez and Eric Mota, OFs Anthony Millian Puerto, Freddy Ramos and Kevin Alvarez, Cs Emilio Gonzalez, Esteban Castro and Ire Garcia.

**MINNESOTA TWINS** — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with RHPs Santiago Castellanos, Rainier Marin, Eliezer Lucena, Eli Urena and Rainer Marin, 3B Jammesson Val, OFs Telion Serrano, Cristian Bonifacio, Cs Daniel De La Valle, Aaron Salazar, Pablo Castillo and SSS Hariton Castillo, Jose Barrios, Santiago Leon and Darwin Almanzar.

**NEW YORK YANKEES** — Acquired minor league RHP Michael Arias from Chicago in exchange for cash considerations.

**SEATTLE MARINERS** — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with SS Kendry Martinez, C Manuel Almeida, OFs Elias Perez, Yorgor Bautista and Maikol Rodriguez, RHPs Ismanuel Pina, Christopher Quiroz, Darwin Ramos, Cesar Farias, Wisler Infante, Randal Munoz and Henry Alcantara. Designated 2B Samad Taylor for assignment.

**TAMPA BAY RAYS** — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with OFs Emile Torres and Maykel Coret, LHP Jensey Duran, SSS Raymer Medina and Warel Solano and 2B Emmanuel Cedenio.

**TORONTO BLUE JAYS** — Traded RHP Brett de Geus to Pittsburgh for cash considerations.

#### National League

**ARIZONA DIAMONDBACKS** — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with Cs Ismael Mejia, Jeshua Mendez, Santiago Gil, OFs Jose Pitre, Mayki De La Rosa, Elian De La Cruz, Ronny Suarez and Albert Medina, 3B Victor Santana, Feliz Genao, SSS Daonil Montero, Angel Sanchez, Rodrigo Gonzalez, Juan Brima, Alam Bruno and Eybert Sanchez, LHPs Keivan Vasquez, Miguel Valdez and RHP Malvin Baez, Yauri Jimenez and Johan Calcano.

**ATLANTA BRAVES** — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with RHPs Yangel Martinez and Lionel Prevosti and SSS Juan Elejandro and Yassel Garcia.

**CINCINNATI REDS** — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with RHPs Starlin Alberto, Cesar Maiz, Ramces Camargo, Ramces Camargo and Oscar Ramirez, INFs Liberts Aponte, Juan Caricipe, Sandor Feliciano, Jealmy Frias, Omar Guadamuz, Angel Salio and Deinis Chourio, INF/OF Wanderly De La Cruz, OFs Isaac Garcia, Jose Martinez, Diego Munoz and Rey Reyes, C/1B Abel Pena and C Enry Torres.

**MIAMI MARLINS** — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with SSS Anthony Abreu, Steven Herrera, Johan Machado, Andrew Salas and Luis Arana, OFs Jesus Perez and Sandy Presbot, RHPs Edelson Canelon, Kevin DeFrank, Santiago Linares, Pedro Montero, Adrian Pena and Isaac Prince, LHPs Keyner Cedenio and Diego Godoy, Cs Diego Martinez and Moises Morales.

**NEW YORK METS** — Claimed RHP Austin Warren off waivers from San Francisco. Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with INFs Elian Pena, Giomar Ubiera, Jose Padilla, Yorber Semprun and Roni Garcia, RHPs Yobanny Sanchez, Kleber Gamez, Jose Vielma, Darling Perez and Olmedo Barria, LHP Pablo Medina, Cs Adrian Silva and Jose Serracin and OFs Aiberson Blanco and Jhonael Cuello.

**PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES** — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with SS Romeli Expinosa, OF Daber Cruceta, INF Rafael Oropeza, C Nelson Prieto, RHPs Deiry Gonzalez, Filippo Sabatini, Jeremy Vilorio and LHP Reyner Zambrano.

**PITTSBURGH PIRATES** — Acquired RHP Brett de Geus from Toronto in exchange for cash considerations. Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with INF Luis

Cruz, 2B Fredderick Ovalle, C Victor Familia, LHPs Yoslaniel Hernandez, Yhosneiber Torres, OFs Edgar Walker, Gabriel Rodriguez and Limanol Payero, RHPs Hamlet Santos, Jose Sequera, Alejandro Rondon, Claudio Estelle, Eydan Fermin, Fernando Figuera, Jose Sequera, Justino Francisco, Leudy Reyes and Robinson Smith and SSS Armstrong Muhozi, Darell Morel, Hyun Seung Lee, Johan De Los Santos and Yoander Santana.

**ST. LOUIS CARDINALS** — Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with 3B Michael Cordero, SSS Sebastian Dos Santos, Miguel Hernandez, and Yeferson Portolatin, RHPs Juan Carlos Garcia, and Daniel Gomez, CFs Kenly Hunter, Royelny Strop, and Yordy Valdez, OF Yostin Pena, INF Jesus Perez and C Juan Rujano.

**SAN DIEGO PADRES** — Agreed to terms with SS Santiago Vargas to a minor league contract.

**SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS** — Traded RHP William Kempner to Miami in exchange for future considerations. International Bonus Pool Money. Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with CF Djean Macares, RHPs Jose Gonzalez, Yesid Mendoza, Ebduar Loina, Jeremiah Jones and Abraham Utrera, LHP Winkel Del Rosario, SSS Josuar Gonzalez, Yulian Barreto, Alexander Camacaro and Yeison Oviedo, Cs Diego Alambarrío, Carlos Martinez and Miguel Caraballo and LF Rainer Espinoza.

**WASHINGTON NATIONALS** — Assigned RHP Joan Adon outright to Rochester (IL). Agreed to terms on minor league contracts with Ronny Bello 2B, Cs Junior Castillo, Edgardo Figueroa and Daniel Hernandez, SSS Rony Bello, Marconi German, Adrian Tussen and Brayan Cortesia, RHPs Juan Lopez, Jesus Carrasco, Manuel Ruiz, Jhondel Salas and Hernan Mejia, OFs Esneider Vargas and Jonierbis Garces.

#### BASKETBALL National Basketball Association

**CHARLOTTE HORNETS** — Acquired G Josh Okogie and three second-round draft picks from Phoenix in exchange for C Nick Richards and a second-round draft pick.

**LOS ANGELES LAKERS** — Waived G Quincy Olivari.

**NEW YORK KNICKS** — Recalled C Ariel Hukporti and G Tyler Kolek from the Westchester Knicks of the G League.

**TORONTO RAPTORS** — Assigned Fs Jonathan Mogbo, Eugene Omoruyi and Ja'Kobe Walter to the Raptors 905 of the G League.

**WASHINGTON WIZARDS** — Assigned G Patrick Baldwin, Jr. to the Capital City Go-go of the G League.

#### FOOTBALL National Football League

**BALTIMORE RAVENS** — Claimed WR Diontae Johnson off waivers from Houston.

**BUFFALO BILLS** — Signed QB Anthony Brown to the practice squad. Released DT Eli Ankou from the practice squad.

**CLEVELAND BROWNS** — Named Tommy Rees offensive coordinator.

**DENVER BRONCOS** — Signed WR Michael Bandy to a reserve/futures contract.

**GREEN BAY PACKERS** — Signed DL Leonard Payne to a reserve/futures contract.

**HOUSTON TEXANS** — Elevated WR Jared Wayne from the practice squad to the active roster. Signed WR Alex Erickson to the taxi squad.

**INDIANAPOLIS COLTS** — Signed OT Luke Tenuta to a reserve/futures contract.

**KANSAS CITY CHIEFS** — Signed WR Jason Brownlee to the practice squad. Released TE Robert Tonyan from the practice squad.

**MINNESOTA VIKINGS** — Signed QB Brett Rypien, RB Zavier Scott, LB Max Tooley, OLB Gabriel Murphy, G Henry Byrd, OTs Marcellus Johnson and Leroy Watson, WRs Lucky Jackson and Thayer Thomas, DL Jonathan Harris and Travis Bell, CBS Kahlef Hailassie and Reddy Stewart to reserve/futures contracts.

**NEW YORK GIANTS** — Fired defensive back coach Jerome Henderson and safeties coach Michael Treier.

**TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS** — Signed LB Deion Jennings to a reserve/futures contract.

#### HOCKEY National Hockey League

**DALLAS STARS** — Sent Arttu Hyyry to Texas (AHL).

**LOS ANGELES KINGS** — Recalled Samuel Helenius from Ontario (AHL).

**PITTSBURGH PENGUINS** — Placed G Tristan Jarry on waivers.

**TAMPA BAY LIGHTNING** — Sent F Jack Finley to Syracuse (AHL).

**VANCOUVER CANUCKS** — Sent Jonathan Lekkerimaki to Abbotsford (AHL).

**WINNIPEG JETS** — Acquired D Isaack Phillips from Chicago in exchange for D Dmitri Kuzmin.

#### SOCCER Major League Soccer

**D.C. UNITED** — Signed D Kyle Rowles to a two-year contract.

**FC CINCINNATI** — Re-signed D Nick Haglund to a two-year contract.

**LA GALAXY** — Signed D Mathias Jorgensen to a two-year contract.

**LAS VEGAS FC** — Transferred F Khori Bennett to Kuwait club Al-Nasr SC.

**NASHVILLE SC** — Signed D Chris Applewhite to a two-year contract.

**ORLANDO CITY SC** — Acquired \$50,000 in 2025 general allocation money (GAM) from Real Salt Lake in exchange for G Mason Stajduhar.

**PORTLAND TIMBERS** — Acquired \$100,000 in 2025 general allocation money (GAM) from Charlotte FC in exchange for M Eryk Williamson. Signed M Joao Ortiz to a two-year contract.

#### NWSL

**CHICAGO STARS FC** — Signed M Manaka Hayashi to a three-year contract.

**KANSAS CITY CURRENT** — Released F Opeyemu Ajakaye per mutual agreement.

## COLLEGE BASKETBALL

### Wednesday's men's scores

#### EAST

Army 70, Lafayette 68  
Boston U. 63, Lehigh 58  
Bowie St. 76, Howard 73  
Bucknell 86, Holy Cross 82  
Colgate 73, Navy 66  
Duquesne 73, George Washington 65  
La Salle 79, Davidson 76  
St. Bonaventure 63, Richmond 49  
UMass 120, Fordham 118, 30T

#### SOUTH

Chattanooga 63, Wofford 81, OT  
Florida St. 82, Pittsburgh 70  
Furman 73, ETSU 70  
North Carolina 79, California 53  
Radford 79, Gardner-Webb 75  
SMU 54, Virginia 52  
Samford 75, Mercer 74  
South Alabama 75, Southern Miss. 62  
Tennessee 74, Georgia 56  
Troy 77, Louisiana-Monroe 58  
Tulane 80, FAU 65  
UAB 92, South Florida 83  
UNC-Asheville 93, SC-Upstate 92  
UNC-Greensboro 70, The Citadel 57  
VMI 66, W. Carolina 50  
Vanderbilt 66, South Carolina 63  
Virginia Tech 79, NC State 76  
Wake Forest 80, Stanford 67  
Winthrop 102, Charleston Southern 97, 30T

#### MIDWEST

Bradley 118, Indiana St. 65  
Butler 82, Seton Hall 77  
Cleveland St. 76, N. Kentucky 58  
Drake 66, Illinois St. 62  
Fort Wayne 120, Wright St. 113, 20T  
George Mason 67, Dayton 59  
Ill.-Chicago 97, Murray St. 93, 20T  
Iowa St. 74, Kansas 57  
Loyola Chicago 81, Rhode Island 77  
Michigan St. 90, Penn St. 85  
Oakland 72, IU Indianapolis 59  
S. Illinois 73, Missouri St. 51

#### SOUTHWEST

Houston 70, West Virginia 54  
Texas 77, Oklahoma 73  
Texas St. 94, Georgia St. 80  
Utah 73, TCU 65

#### FAR WEST

Cincinnati 68, Colorado 62  
Omaha 80, Denver 62  
Purdue 69, Washington 58  
UNLV 65, Utah St. 62

### Men's Top 25 schedule

#### Saturday's games

No. 1 Auburn (15-1) at No. 23 Georgia (14-2)  
No. 2 Iowa St. (14-1) at West Virginia (12-3)  
No. 3 Duke (14-2) at Boston College (9-7)  
No. 4 Alabama (14-2) at No. 8 Kentucky (13-3)  
No. 5 Florida (15-1) vs. Texas (11-5)  
No. 6 Tennessee (15-1) at Vanderbilt (13-3)  
No. 7 Marquette (14-2) vs. Xavier (10-7)  
No. 9 Kansas (12-3) vs. Kansas St. (7-8)  
No. 10 Houston (12-3) at UCF (11-4)  
No. 11 Texas A&M (13-3) vs. LSU (11-5)  
No. 13 Oregon (15-2) vs. No. 17 Purdue (13-4)  
No. 14 UConn (13-4) vs. Creighton (10-6)  
No. 15 Mississippi St. (14-2) vs. No. 21 Mississippi (14-2)  
No. 16 Gonzaga (14-4) vs. Santa Clara (12-6)  
No. 24 Wisconsin (13-3) at USC (10-6)

### Wednesday's women's scores

#### EAST

Army 74, Lafayette 65  
Cleveland St. 74, Robert Morris 53  
Colgate 62, Navy 54  
Dayton 80, Duquesne 71  
Holy Cross 63, Bucknell 37  
James Madison 93, Marshall 65  
Lehigh 80, Boston U. 54  
Michigan St. 70, Rutgers 60  
Providence 51, Xavier 45  
Saint Joseph's 72, Fordham 65  
UConn 71, St. John's 45  
UMass 82, La Salle 66  
Villanova 66, DePaul 55  
West Virginia 73, Colorado 46

#### SOUTH

Charleston Southern 78, Winthrop 50  
East Carolina 72, Charlotte 65  
George Mason 69, Loyola Chicago 39  
Georgia Southern 69, Texas St. 62  
Longwood 72, High Point 68  
Old Dominion 78, Appalachian St. 71  
Radford 71, Gardner-Webb 70  
Rhode Island 64, VCU 50  
Richmond 98, St. Bonaventure 60  
SC-Upstate 60, UNC-Asheville 57  
UTSA 70, Memphis 68

#### MIDWEST

Ball St. 66, Kent St. 57  
Bowling Green 74, Ohio 53  
Buffalo 77, E. Michigan 55  
Cent. Michigan 75, Akron 55  
IUPUI 75, Wright St. 63  
Miami (Ohio) 73, N. Illinois 52  
Michigan 82, Washington 69  
North Dakota 80, South Dakota 54  
Saint Louis 64, George Washington 63  
Seton Hall 58, Marquette 52  
Tulane 66, Wichita St. 62  
UMKC 73, Denver 66, OT  
W. Michigan 41, Toledo 38  
Youngstown St. 75, N. Kentucky 66

#### SOUTHWEST

Arkansas St. 67, La.-Lafayette 65, OT  
North Texas 61, Rice 53  
Tulsa 79, FAU 64

#### FAR WEST

Boise St. 93, San Jose St. 64  
Colorado St. 62, San Diego St. 58  
Fresno St. 74, Utah St. 54  
Oregon 69, Purdue 53  
UCLA 83, Penn St. 67  
UNLV 84, Air Force 51  
Wyoming 66, Nevada 61



AARON GASH/AP

**Bob Uecker, the longtime Milwaukee Brewers broadcaster who was known as "Mr. Baseball", died Thursday at the age of 90.**

# 'Mr. Baseball' icon Uecker dies at 90

Associated Press

**MILWAUKEE** — Bob Uecker, the voice of his hometown Milwaukee Brewers who after a short playing career earned the moniker "Mr. Baseball" and honors from the Hall of Fame, has died. He was 90.

The team announced Uecker died Thursday morning, calling it "one of the most difficult days in Milwaukee Brewers history." In a statement released by the club, Uecker's family said he had battled small cell lung cancer since early 2023.

"Even in the face of this challenge, his enthusiasm for life was always present, never allowing his spirit to falter," the family said.

Uecker was best known as a colorful comedian and broadcaster who earned his nickname during one of his numerous appearances on Johnny Carson's late night show.

Born and raised in Milwaukee, Uecker signed his first professional contract with the Milwaukee Braves in 1956 and reached the majors in 1962. He lasted six seasons in the big leagues as a backup catcher, finishing with a .200 average and 14 homers.

"Career highlights? I had two," he often joked. "I got an intentional walk from Sandy Koufax and I got out of a rundown against the Mets."

Uecker also befriended former Brewers owner and MLB commissioner Bud Selig, who initially hired him as a scout. Selig liked to joke about how Uecker's initial scouting report was stained with mashed potatoes and gravy.

Selig eventually brought Uecker to the broadcast booth. Uecker became the voice of the Brewers in 1971, in the second year after the team moved from Seattle.

Uecker remained with the club from that point on and became one of its most indelible figures.

"There's no single person in this franchise's history who has been as iconic and as important as Bob

Uecker," said Jeff Levering, a member of the Brewers' broadcast team since 2015.

Even as his celebrity status grew nationwide, Uecker savored the opportunity to continue calling games to fans in his hometown.

"To be able to do a game each and every day throughout the summer and talk to people every day at 6:30 for a night game, you become part of people's families," Uecker once said. "I know that because I get mail from people that tell me that. That's part of the reward for being here, just to be recognized by the way you talk, the way you describe a game, whatever."

Uecker was honored by the Hall of Fame with the Ford C. Frick award in 2003 and spent nearly 20 minutes keeping the Cooperstown, New York, crowd of about 18,000 in stitches.

"Ueck" got his big break off the field after opening for Don Rickles at Al Hirt's nightclub in Atlanta in 1969. That performance caught Hirt's attention, and the musician set him up to appear on "The Tonight Show" with Johnny Carson. He became one of Carson's favorite guests, making more than 100 appearances.

Carson was the one who dubbed Uecker "Mr. Baseball." And the name stuck.

But Uecker's comedy was just a part of his abilities. His warm storytelling and delivery made Uecker a natural to become one of the first color commentators on network TV broadcasts in the 1970s with ABC.

From there, Uecker reached most households as one of the Miller Lite All-Stars in popular commercials for the beer brand based out of Milwaukee.

"You talk about all the things Bob has done, he never wanted to leave Milwaukee," Selig said. "Above all, he made himself into a great play-by-play announcer. That's what he did. He's everything to this franchise and loves every minute of it."

## NBA

# Pistons starting to click

Winning record at midway point makes Detroit one of season's biggest surprises

By **TIM REYNOLDS**  
Associated Press

They lead the NBA in wins so far in January. They'll have a winning record at the midpoint of the season. They've won five of their last six games at home, and they've also won five of their last six games on the road.

And chances are, you wouldn't guess which team fits that billing.

It's the Detroit Pistons. Yes, the Pistons.

Doormats and punchlines no more, the Pistons are adding themselves to the list of great surprises in the NBA this season. They're now 21-19 after winning Monday night against the New York Knicks at Madison Square Garden, meaning they'll hit the halfway mark of the season with a winning record for the first time since 2017-18.

"We believe we can beat anybody," center Isaiah Stewart said.

"That's our belief. We're good enough to beat any team in this league. That's the belief we've got and we believe in each other. We're always pouring confidence into each other to go out there and be the best versions of ourselves. When we have that collectively as a group, that's a lot of energy — a lot of positive energy that we're putting out there."

The notion of the Pistons beating anybody — literally, anybody — a year ago would have been comical. That was the team that lost a record 28 consecutive games, the worst single-season stretch in NBA history. They were 4-37 through 41 games, tying the sixth-worst start to a season ever. They were so bad that Pistons owner Tom Gores had to do the unthinkable and fire a coach in Monty Williams with five years and \$65 million or so left on his contract.

This year's Pistons started 0-4 under new coach JB Bickerstaff. The preseason expectations of being bad once again looked pretty secure. But they've now won 10 of their last 12 games and lead the NBA with seven wins so far in January. They could be a play-in team. They could be a playoff team. They might have an All-Star in Cade Cunningham. The way he's playing right now, Cunningham — bidding to be Detroit's first All-Star since Blake Griffin in 2019 — might want to go ahead and make plans for a trip to San Francisco next month for that very reason.

"I'm just thankful for my team, thankful for this coaching staff," Cunningham said. "We've

**"That's our belief. We're good enough to beat any team in this league."**

Isaiah Stewart  
Pistons center



FRANK FRANKLIN II/AP

**Cade Cunningham is playing like the star he was projected to be when the Pistons took him No. 1 overall in 2021. He's averaging 24.5 points, 9.4 assists and 6.6 rebounds a game.**

got to keep going. We've got a lot more work to do."

The Pistons have already smashed last season's win total of 14. They're maybe a couple weeks away from rewarding bettors that went on the high side of their season-long win total that was set at 25.5 by BetMGM Sportsbook. It's happening with Cunningham — the No. 1 overall pick in the 2021 draft — now looking like a bona fide breakout star, with season averages of 24.5 points, 9.4 assists and 6.6 rebounds per game.

"Our job is to put him in position to be successful. And then he's got to go out there and do it," Bickerstaff said. "Over these 40 games now, he and I and his teammates have learned a lot about each other and how we can best help each other. And that's what it's about — each of us playing our role and doing what we're supposed to do together and collectively to just help one another, make this team as good as we possibly can. Cade knows his role and what this team needs, and he's executed perfectly."

It does seem fitting that Bickerstaff is getting to be part of something good, since he was fired by a good team in Cleveland after last season. The Cavaliers had an over-under of 48.5 wins entering the season; they're an NBA-best 33-5 right now.

Oklahoma City, Houston, Chicago, Portland, Brooklyn and Atlanta are also among the teams on pace to top their expected win totals for the season. But they won't get there in January, like



DUANE BURLESON/AP

**Pistons center Isaiah Stewart celebrates after scoring against the Toronto Raptors on Jan. 11. The victory was one of Detroit's seven wins so far in January.**

the Pistons might. If that's the metric for measuring surprises, then the Pistons might be the biggest stunner so far this season.

"The best part about this team is finding different ways to win the game," Bickerstaff said.

It's been a long time coming. It's not time to start selling playoff tickets quite yet, Detroit. But before now, the last time the Pistons were even two games over .500 — barely above mediocre — was March 2019, nearly six years ago.

These are good signs. Signs of progress. Signs of belief. For a franchise that hasn't won a playoff game in 17 years — that's 173 players, 10 coaches and two arenas ago — there might be real hope this time.

## Scoreboard

### Eastern Conference

#### Atlantic Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	28	12	.700	—
New York	27	15	.643	2
Philadelphia	15	24	.385	12½
Brooklyn	14	27	.341	14½
Toronto	10	31	.244	18½

#### Southeast Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	23	19	.548	—
Atlanta	21	19	.525	1
Miami	20	19	.513	1½
Charlotte	9	28	.243	11½
Washington	6	32	.158	15

#### Central Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Cleveland	34	5	.872	—
Milwaukee	22	17	.564	12
Indiana	22	19	.537	13
Detroit	21	19	.525	13½
Chicago	18	23	.439	17

### Western Conference

#### Southwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Houston	27	12	.692	—
Memphis	26	15	.634	2
Dallas	22	19	.537	6
San Antonio	19	20	.487	8
New Orleans	10	32	.238	18½

#### Northwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Oklahoma City	33	6	.846	—
Denver	24	16	.600	9½
Minnesota	21	19	.525	12½
Portland	13	26	.333	20
Utah	10	29	.256	23

#### Pacific Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Clippers	22	17	.564	—
L.A. Lakers	21	17	.553	½
Sacramento	20	20	.500	2½
Golden State	20	20	.500	2½
Phoenix	19	20	.487	3

### Tuesday's games

Oklahoma City 118, Philadelphia 102  
Cleveland 127, Indiana 117  
Atlanta 122, Phoenix 117  
Milwaukee 130, Sacramento 115  
New Orleans 119, Chicago 113  
Denver 118, Dallas 99  
Brooklyn 132, Portland 114

### Wednesday's games

New York 125, Philadelphia 119, OT  
Toronto 110, Boston 97  
Atlanta 110, Chicago 94  
Memphis 129, San Antonio 115  
Milwaukee 122, Orlando 93  
New Orleans 119, Dallas 116  
Houston 128, Denver 108  
Charlotte 117, Utah 112  
L.A. Lakers 117, Miami 108  
Golden State 116, Minnesota 115  
L.A. Clippers 126, Brooklyn 67

### Thursday's games

Indiana at Detroit  
Phoenix at Washington  
Cleveland at Oklahoma City  
Houston at Sacramento  
L.A. Clippers at Portland

### Friday's games

Orlando at Boston  
Minnesota at New York  
Charlotte at Chicago  
Denver at Miami  
Toronto at Milwaukee  
Utah at New Orleans  
Oklahoma City at Dallas  
Memphis at San Antonio  
Brooklyn at L.A. Lakers

### Saturday's games

Phoenix at Detroit  
Atlanta at Boston  
Philadelphia at Indiana  
Washington at Golden State  
Cleveland at Minnesota  
Houston at Portland

### Sunday's games

San Antonio at Miami  
Denver at Orlando  
Philadelphia at Milwaukee  
Brooklyn at Oklahoma City  
L.A. Lakers at L.A. Clippers  
Chicago at Portland  
Washington at Sacramento

### Monday's games

Dallas at Charlotte  
Detroit at Houston  
Minnesota at Memphis  
Atlanta at New York Knicks  
Phoenix at Cleveland  
Boston at Golden State  
Utah at New Orleans  
Chicago at L.A. Clippers

# NHL

## Scoreboard

### Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division							
GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA	
Toronto	45	27	16	2	56	136	128
Florida	45	26	16	3	55	148	137
Tampa Bay	42	23	16	3	49	153	119
Boston	46	22	19	5	49	122	144
Ottawa	43	22	18	3	47	124	120
Montreal	43	21	18	4	46	131	143
Detroit	43	20	19	4	44	124	139
Buffalo	44	17	22	5	39	136	148

Metropolitan Division							
GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA	
Washington	44	29	10	5	63	159	113
New Jersey	46	26	15	5	57	143	116
Carolina	45	26	16	3	55	149	127
Columbus	44	21	17	6	48	152	153
Philadelphia	45	19	20	6	44	138	157
Pittsburgh	46	18	20	8	44	137	173
N.Y. Rangers	43	20	20	3	43	124	134
N.Y. Islanders	43	17	19	7	41	114	131

### Western Conference

Central Division							
GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA	
Winnipeg	45	30	12	3	63	162	109
Minnesota	45	27	14	4	58	135	127
Dallas	43	28	14	1	57	140	105
Colorado	45	27	17	1	55	150	140
St. Louis	45	21	20	4	46	127	134
Utah	43	18	18	7	43	120	130
Nashville	43	14	22	7	35	106	135
Chicago	44	14	28	2	30	113	152

Pacific Division							
GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA	
Vegas	44	29	12	3	61	151	119
Edmonton	44	28	13	3	59	145	120
Los Angeles	41	24	12	5	53	121	100
Calgary	43	21	15	7	49	116	127
Vancouver	43	19	14	10	48	125	136
Anaheim	44	18	21	5	41	108	138
Seattle	45	19	23	3	41	132	146
San Jose	46	14	26	6	34	120	161

**Note:** Two points for a win, one point for overtime loss. Top three teams in each division and two wild cards per conference advance to playoffs.

#### Wednesday's games

Buffalo 4, Carolina 2  
Edmonton 5, Minnesota 3

#### Thursday's games

Anaheim at Tampa Bay  
Detroit at Florida  
New Jersey at Toronto  
San Jose at Columbus  
Washington at Ottawa  
Philadelphia at N.Y. Islanders  
Calgary at St. Louis  
Chicago at Nashville  
Montreal at Dallas  
Seattle at Winnipeg  
N.Y. Rangers at Utah  
Edmonton at Colorado  
Los Angeles at Vancouver

#### Friday's games

Pittsburgh at Buffalo  
Vegas at Carolina

#### Saturday's games

Philadelphia at New Jersey  
Boston at Ottawa  
Dallas at Colorado  
Anaheim at Florida  
Calgary at Winnipeg  
Columbus at N.Y. Rangers  
Detroit at Tampa Bay  
Pittsburgh at Washington  
Toronto at Montreal  
San Jose at N.Y. Islanders  
Minnesota at Nashville  
Vegas at Chicago  
St. Louis at Utah  
Edmonton at Vancouver  
Los Angeles at Seattle

#### Sunday's games

Ottawa at New Jersey  
N.Y. Rangers at Montreal  
Detroit at Dallas

#### Scoring leaders

##### Through Wednesday

	GP	G	A	PTS
Nathan MacKinnon, COL	45	15	55	70
Leon Draisaitl, EDM	44	31	34	65
Nikita Kucherov, TB	40	20	43	63
Connor McDavid, EDM	41	19	43	62
Mikko Rantanen, COL	45	25	36	61
Mitch Marner, TOR	45	14	46	60
Kyle Connor, WPG	45	26	33	59
Jack Eichel, LV	43	11	43	54
Jack Hughes, NJ	46	17	35	52
Mark Scheifele, WPG	45	26	26	52

# Utah struggles for success at home

By JOHN COON  
Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY — Finding success at home has turned into a persistent struggle for the Utah Hockey Club.

Utah beat San Jose for its lone win in the first four games of a January homestand and has lost to Florida, Montreal and the New York Islanders. The team has won just three times in its last 14 games in Salt Lake City, and its six home victories are the fewest in the NHL.

"I don't know why we've been struggling at home in front of our fans that have showed a lot of support for us," forward Nick Bjugstad said. "I feel for them. I just think we'll find a way, but it's going to take some digging and looking in the mirror."

For a team hovering on the fringe of the Western Conference playoff picture, the margin for error is growing perilously thin.

Ironically, road success is keeping the club within striking distance of a spot. Utah has a dozen wins away from home after rattling off five straight road victories in mid-December.

Inconsistent offense has undercut Utah's efforts to build momentum at home. Over its last four games at Delta Center, the club has allowed 3.0 goals per game but is scoring an average of 1.8.

"Guys are trying," forward Nick Schmaltz said. "Sometimes (the shots) go in. Sometimes they don't. You've got to work through it, keep putting the work in on practice days and working on your finishing. It'll come eventually. Once we see one go in, guys get a little more confident. Hopefully we can get on a roll."

Tight finishes decided late are a recurring staple at home this season. At one point, seven consecutive Utah home games were



RICK EGAN/AP

Utah Hockey Club left wing Lawson Crouse reaches for the puck during the first period against the Montreal Canadiens on Tuesday in Salt Lake City. Utah is just 6-10 at home this season going into Thursday.

decided by one goal.

A couple of games against San Jose show how razor-thin the margin is. Utah lost to the Sharks in overtime Oct. 28 after allowing two goals in a 25-second span late in regulation, and then beat them Saturday when Barrett Hayton got the game-winner with 1:23 left.

That eased some of the frustration briefly. Subsequent losses to New York and Montreal brought the frustration back.

"It's part of the growth, it's part of who we want to become, it's part of the journey," Utah coach Andre Tourigny said. "We want to create that relationship with our fans. We want to win, we want to get in the

race, climb in the standings and all those things. That comes with a ton of pressure internally and externally."

Fan support hasn't dipped amid struggles on the home ice.

Utah has reported a sellout crowd of 11,131 for every home game during the team's inaugural season. Because of partially obstructed views for some seats, full-view seat capacity for hockey games is lower than seating capacity for Utah Jazz games (18,206) and live concerts (13,898).

Single-goal-view seats are not counted or tracked in attendance figures reported to the league. Demand for tickets has led Utah to

open a portion of these seats to fans anyway.

Utah launched a pair of community ticket programs in January to offer single-goal-view seats for up to 2,000 fans each home game for \$10 a seat. One program is geared specifically toward local university students, and Utah will host a college game night March 20th when it takes on Buffalo.

These programs add on to an earlier program Utah announced in September that provides 100 partial-view upper-bowl tickets every home game at no-cost to local nonprofits, schools, community groups and charitable organizations.

# Struggling Penguins place Jarry on waivers

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — The Pittsburgh Penguins ran out of patience waiting for two-time All-Star goaltender Tristan Jarry to emerge from a slump, placing him on waivers Wednesday ahead of a pivotal seven-game road trip that could determine the course of the rest of their season.

The 29-year-old Jarry is 8-7-4 with a 3.32 goals against average and a .886 save percentage this season for Pittsburgh, which is on the fringe of the playoff race in the Eastern Conference due in large part to subpar play in net.

The Penguins have allowed an NHL-high 173 goals, with neither Jarry nor Alex Nedeljkovic establishing themselves behind a defense prone to lapses.

Pittsburgh will call up promising rookie Joel Blomqvist to join Nedeljkovic on the road trip, which starts Friday in Buffalo. Blomqvist went 3-5 with a 3.60 goals against average and a .904 save percentage during a stint with the Penguins earlier in the season.



Jarry

It seems unlikely a team would be willing to claim Jarry and pick up his salary, meaning he will be re-assigned to Pittsburgh's American Hockey League affiliate once he clears waivers.

"At this point, (I) just feel it's best in the long run for the team and for Tristan to allow Joel to come up here," Penguins general manager Kyle Dubas said Wednesday. "We think over the past year-and-a-half, with his play in Wilkes-Barre and when he's been up here with us, he's earned the right to have a go at it."

The decision comes 18 months after Dubas signed Jarry to a five-year deal with an average annual value of \$5.375 million. Jarry was an All-Star in 2020 and 2022 but has struggled most of the last two seasons.

"He's continued to come in here, put the work in and that's not been a question at all," Dubas said. "That just hasn't materialized the

way we would like it to on the ice. At this level, you get to the point where you have to do what's right ... for him and for us."

Jarry ceded the starting job to Nedeljkovic last spring. While he reclaimed his spot atop the depth chart coming out of training camp, he stumbled out of the gate and was sent to Wilkes-Barre/Scranton for a lengthy conditioning stint.

While there was a brief uptick in his play after he returned, Jarry has lost five straight starts and continues to struggle early in games. He's allowed a goal on an opponent's first shot six times this season and allowed a shorthanded goal on Seattle's second shot in a 4-2 defeat to the Kraken on Tuesday.

"When you lose, this is the kind of stuff that can happen," Pittsburgh captain Sidney Crosby said Wednesday. "A goaltender already has a ton of pressure, and it's difficult for us because we feel like as a team we're responsible if we don't give our goalies enough help sometimes. I think that's the tough part."

## COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF/AUSTRALIAN OPEN

## Ohio State has purposely paced itself on offense

By STEPHEN HAWKINS  
Associated Press

Ohio State has been purposely pacing itself on offense all season, huddling more and trying to limit the number of snaps in each game of what the Buckeyes hoped and anticipated would be a long run.

"I know it sounds crazy, the huddle, it's almost like going back in time," coach Ryan Day said. "But it's sort of a new thing, really, because of the no-huddle offenses that have been around, and certainly we have been a part of that. ... We don't always do that, but it has allowed us an opportunity to be more cohesive on offense."

While Ohio State (13-2) has certainly slowed down, it's getting ready for its school-record 16th game. That will be for the national championship against Notre Dame (14-1) on Monday night in Atlanta.

None of the other teams in the expanded 12-team playoff average fewer plays than the Buckeyes' 61.8 per game that rank 120th out of 134 Division I teams. That includes 57 in each of their



National Championship  
No. 6 Ohio State (13-2)  
vs. No. 5 Notre Dame (14-1)  
AFN-Sports  
1:45 a.m. Tuesday CET  
9:45 a.m. Tuesday JKT

last two playoff games, wins over undefeated Big Ten champion Oregon in the Rose Bowl and SEC runner-up Texas in the Cotton Bowl.

Ohio State's lowest average in at least 25 seasons is only slightly down from its 63.9 plays a game in 2023. But it's still more than 10 plays a game below the 72.1 average over a 10-season span that began with its last national championship in 2014, when the College Football Playoff debuted as a four-team playoff.

"That's kind of by design," said first-year Buckeyes offensive coordinator Chip Kelly, who be-



KYUSUNG GONG/AP

First-year Ohio State offensive coordinator Chip Kelly, center, has had the Buckeyes pacing themselves all season in anticipation of a long playoff run, an approach that has gotten them into the CFP title game.

tween coaching Oregon and UCLA spent four seasons as an NFL head coach when those were 16-game regular seasons. "We didn't have games we were running 100 snaps a game. ... We had a long-term plan."

Oregon averaged more than 81 plays a game in 2012, Kelly's final season there. Even Ohio State averaged more than 80 plays a game in 2018, which was Urban Meyer's final season before Day took over as head coach.

Indiana, a first-round loser with two fewer games, is the only one of the 12 playoff teams with fewer total snaps than the Buckeyes' 927 this season.

TreVeyon Henderson has 967 yards rushing with 10 touchdowns for Ohio State, and Quinshon Judkins has 960 yards and 12 TDs — neither has run more than 17 times in a game, with Henderson's season high being 11. Graduate transfer quarterback Will Howard has thrown for 3,779 yards and 33

touchdowns, and he has three receivers with at least 50 catches.

"In terms of the way that we designed this year, part of it was the fact that we felt like by cutting down the number of snaps it would certainly help with the length of our season and the health of our team," Day said. "But also getting in a huddle and having Will Howard look 10 guys in the eye and break a huddle together, kind of grew as a team as the season went on."

## Swiatek moves into third-round match against Raducanu

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Iga Swiatek rushed through the first set in 26 minutes and completed her 6-0, 6-2 second-round win over Rebecca Sramkova in an hour at the Australian Open.

The five-time Grand Slam champion makes a habit of advancing quickly through the early rounds at the majors. She's won almost 12% of her sets in Grand Slams by 6-0, which puts her in exclusive company.

So when No. 49-ranked Sramkova ended a seven-game losing run by holding serve Thursday, she raised her arm to acknowledge the applause from the Rod Laver Arena crowd. It was one of the few chances she had to celebrate.

"It was good to play in such an efficient way and just finish it quick," Swiatek said. "Also, you know, just feel the court and how it is in RLA."

Second-seeded Swiatek next faces 2021 U.S. Open champion Emma Raducanu, who recovered from an early break in the second set to hold off Amanda Anisimova 6-3, 7-5.



ASANKA BRENDON RATNAYAKE/AP

Iga Swiatek plays a forehand return to Rebecca Sramkova during a second-round match at the Australian Open in Melbourne on Thursday.

Taylor Fritz hasn't wasted any time advancing to the third round, dropping just eight games across two rounds and spending just over

three hours on court.

The 2024 U.S. Open runner-up and No. 4 seed beat Cristian Garin 6-2, 6-1, 6-0 to move into a third-

round match against 38-year-old Gael Monfils, who last week became the oldest player to win an ATP Tour title.

Also advancing on the men's side were local hope Alex de Minaur, seeded 8th, No. 16 Lorenzo Musetti, No. 19 Karen Khachanov and No. 21 Ben Shelton, who beat Pablo Carreno Busta 6-3, 6-3, 6-7 (4), 6-4.

Raducanu has struggled with injuries since her breakthrough major in 2021, when she became the first qualifier to win a Grand Slam singles title.

She didn't play a warmup tournament ahead of this year's Australian Open because of a muscle strain and needed time during her match against Anisimova to get treatment on her back from a trainer.

After advancing beyond the second round for the first time at Melbourne Park, the No. 61-ranked Raducanu was confident she'd recover in time for her next challenge against Swiatek.

"It'll be a very good match for me, another opportunity to test my game," she said. "Going into it, I

have nothing to lose. I'm just going to swing."

Swiatek is moving on from the doping infringement which led to her one-month ban last year. And she's not showing any signs of it being a distraction.

She did everything at pace in the second round, including quick claps of her racket to acknowledge the crowd after her win. Swiatek didn't face a break point against Sramkova and converted five of the six she had. She finished off points with winners off both sides, and also hit some clean volleys on her ventures to the net.

She's feeling slightly less pressure this year, too, after losing the No. 1 ranking to two-time defending Australian Open champion Aryna Sabalenka.

"Yeah, there was a lot of pressure starting the year as No. 1, but I think overall last year I didn't think about it this much anyway," she said. "Also, I realized last year that I don't have 100% influence on what happens with my ranking sometimes. So now I just focus on tennis."

## NFL PLAYOFFS

## Lions' investment in run game paying off

BY LARRY LAGE  
Associated Press

ALLEN PARK, Mich. — The Detroit Lions were built to run.

The Lions' longest-tenured players, offensive tackle Taylor Decker and center Frank Ragnow, were first-round picks in 2016 and 2018.

In general manager Brad Holmes' first draft with Detroit in 2021, he selected two-time All-Pro tackle Penei Sewell with the No. 7 overall pick.

The Lions bolstered the backfield in 2023, signing free agent David Montgomery and drafting Jahmyr Gibbs in the first round. Detroit also addressed a desperate need in free agency by adding guard Kevin Zeitler last offseason.

The investments have paid off. The Lions, a top-seeded team in the NFL playoffs for the first time, have one of the league's best ground games.

While the running backs get much of the praise, Montgomery said the big guys up front deserve more love.

"We've got the best O-line in the world," Montgomery said. "I don't think they get enough credit. There's no 1,000-yard scrimmage for me, there's almost 2,000 yards scrimmage for Jah."

The sixth-seeded Washington Commanders, who will play at Detroit on Saturday night in the divisional round, are well aware of the upcoming challenge that will test one of their weaknesses.

"Hats off, they've got two backs, very physical, perimeter and whatnot," Commanders linebacker Frankie Luvu said. "But it's not about them. It's about us. And when it's time to make hits, we're going to make them pay."

Washington ranked 30th in the 32-team league against the run during the regular season, giving

up 137.5 yards rushing per game. In a 23-20 win over Tampa Bay in the wild-card round last Sunday night, the Buccaneers ran for 101 yards.

Gibbs and Montgomery averaged a combined 138.5 yards rushing during the regular season and had fun off the field embracing their Sonic and Knuckles nicknames.

In his second NFL season, Gibbs led the league with a franchise-record 20 touchdowns and ranked fifth with 1,412 yards on the ground. He also had 517 yards receiving and four touchdown receptions.

"Jah is special," Montgomery said. "He's a generational talent."

In his sixth season, Montgomery had 775 yards rushing and 12 touchdowns before a knee injury in the 14th game threatened to end his season.

Montgomery avoided surgery and rested for the final three games of the regular season and took advantage of the team's bye.

"I wouldn't be out there if I wasn't ready," he said. "I think it feels better than it did before I got hurt."

Lions offensive coordinator Ben Johnson, a candidate to be an NFL head coach next season, said Montgomery has looked good in practice.

"I expect David to come in and pick up where he left off," Johnson said.

Gibbs made the most of increased opportunities without sharing carries with Montgomery.

The two-time Pro Bowl player ran for more than 100 yards in three straight games for the first time in his career, and averaged 162.3 yards from scrimmage and scored six touchdowns.

"It's kind of his show," Montgomery said.



MATT SLOCUM/AP

Eagles quarterback Jalen Hurts looks to pass during the first half against the Green Bay Packers on Jan. 12 in Philadelphia. Despite a 22-10 win, the passing game continued to be a weak point for the Eagles.

## Hurts admits passing game has room for improvement

Eagles QB emphasizes his priority is final score, not stats

BY EJ SMITH

The Philadelphia Inquirer

PHILADELPHIA — In the aftermath of the Eagles' wild-card round win against the Green Bay Packers, Jalen Hurts is focused on the result.

It's fair to acknowledge the uneven production and mid-game stagnation from Philadelphia passing game during the 22-10 win last Sunday — even Hurts did during his Wednesday news conference — but the Eagles quarterback also reiterated the priority he places on the final scoreline over the passing statistics.

"I think you guys need to understand that I don't play the game for anything other than to win," Hurts said. "My role in each game will be different and the approach in each game is different, you just want to go out there and do your job and take advantage of opportunities obviously. I think some things are magnified a little bit more because there's less opportunity in certain areas, but ultimately it's about winning the game. We're talking about playoff football."

Hurts finished last Sunday's game 13 for 21 with 131 passing yards and two touchdowns as the offense once again leaned heavily on running back Saquon Barkley to serve as the group's steady force. After starting the game with six straight completions, Hurts' next nine dropbacks featured seven incompletions and two sacks.

His struggles were amplified by

pressure as Green Bay began putting extra defenders up to the line of scrimmage to stress Philadelphia's protection plans. According to Pro Football Focus, Hurts was 2-for-8 for 19 yards when pressured and had a passer rating of just 39.6.

When asked what his assessment was of his performance after reviewing the film, Hurts conceded there were some missed chances the offense would like to have executed better.

"I think there are some opportunities, there's always going to be something that you want back," Hurts said. "You wish you could have done or taken advantage of, but ultimately I think we all made plays when we needed to the most and that's what matters."

Hurts & Co. will face another stiff test this Sunday against the Los Angeles Rams at Lincoln Financial Field, matched up against a defense that had nine sacks in a wild-card upset over the Minnesota Vikings.

Although he faced the Rams' defense already this season in a 37-20 win at SoFi Stadium in November, Hurts said he isn't sure what to expect in the rematch due to the nature of the postseason and the evidence of the Packers playing the offense differently last weekend.

"I don't really know what they're going to do," Hurts said. "They're a great team, I think even Green Bay kind of did some different things that we were not

expecting as an offensive unit. It's the playoffs, you have to be ready for everything."

This isn't the first time the Eagles' passing game has come under scrutiny despite a winning result. Hurts finished the team's Week 14 victory over the Carolina Panthers 14-for-21 for 108 yards and two scores in a game that ended with star receiver A.J. Brown voicing his frustration with the passing game.

Brown, who had four catches for 43 yards in the 22-16 win over Carolina, had an even smaller role against the Packers. He finished with one catch for 10 yards and just three targets, the lowest number of targets he's had in a game he finished healthy since joining the Eagles before the 2022 season.

When asked if it would be important to get Brown more involved this coming Sunday against Los Angeles, Hurts said he'd like to get each of his primary targets, including DeVonta Smith, Dallas Goedert and Barkley, more touches. It's worth noting Barkley had a career- and franchise-high 255 rushing yards in the team's first meeting against the Rams in Week 12.

"They've got a great defense, they've been very disruptive up front," Hurts said. "We've just got to come and execute, I think it starts in the trenches in a game like this. We've been able to run the ball effectively, so hopefully we can continue to impose our will up front."



RICK OSENTOSKI/AP

Detroit Lions running back Jahmyr Gibbs led the league this season with a franchise-record 20 touchdowns and ranked fifth with 1,412 yards on the ground. He also had 517 yards receiving and four TD receptions

# NFL PLAYOFFS

## Crafting connection

### Daniels-to-McLaurin has blossomed throughout year in helping Commanders advance to divisional round

By **STEPHEN WHYNO**  
*Associated Press*

ASHBURN, Va. — When the Washington Commanders had to have it — fourth down, trailing in the fourth quarter of a playoff game — Jayden Daniels found Terry McLaurin in the end zone for a touchdown.

That moment marked the pinnacle of the rapport between the dynamic rookie quarterback and dependable sixth-year wide receiver that has been developing since off-season workouts.

Daniels has connected with McLaurin 77 times for 1,033 yards and 13 TDs, and that relationship blossoming on and off the field is a big reason the Commanders are in the postseason and advanced to the divisional round to face NFC-leading Detroit on Saturday night.

“They have built through the year, there’s no doubt,” offensive coordinator Kliff Kingsbury said Wednesday. “The first couple of games, the ball wasn’t coming to him as much as we would have liked, and we’ve had our ups and downs. ... Those two guys are just going to get better and better as they go. They’re two very conscientious players that are team-first guys and work really hard at it.”

Daniels and McLaurin are the first Washington QB-WR duo to be selected to the Pro Bowl since Mark Rypien and Gary Clark in 1991. That was also the franchise’s most recent Super Bowl season.

This one started with very different, much lower expectations. The Commanders were

expected to win six or seven games and start the climb toward being a contender.

Instead, they went 12-5 with the NFL’s fifth-highest scoring offense and beat Tampa Bay to set up another road challenge against the Lions, when McLaurin said he needs to “be ready to make plays for Jayden.” He has since September.

“Come game day, you don’t really think about it,” Daniels said. “You just put the ball in the vicinity for Terry to go make a play, and nine times out of 10 he makes them.”

What Daniels called “continuous growth” for him and McLaurin has not been progress in a straight line, even beyond the early season bumps in the road Kingsbury pointed out. Daniels has thrown the ball McLaurin’s direction as many as 10 times in a game down to as few as twice.

Even through those times, there was never tension between teammates at those positions that can often fester in football. Nothing beyond two athletes at the top of their

sport wanting to maximize their performances.

“We’re extremely competitive people,” McLaurin said. “We really put a lot of time and effort into our craft. Good is not good enough, and you’re not just happy being here. I think that is what we have in common. Even the great plays we’ve had, we’ve still focused on the plays that we missed and the ways that we could continue to get better.”

On the field, coach Dan Quinn has con-

**“Those two guys are just going to get better and better as they go.”**

**Kliff Kingsbury**  
Offensive coordinator



SETH WENIG/AP

**Commanders wide receiver Terry McLaurin, right, celebrates with quarterback Jayden Daniels after scoring a touchdown in November. McLaurin had 13 TD catches this year.**

tently lauded Daniels’ poise beyond his 24 years of age and limited professional experience — something evidenced by the Commanders winning their past five games in a row all on the final play from scrimmage. He also credited McLaurin for the offense’s immense success down the field for the receiver’s ability to read deep throws and get under the ball at the perfect time.

“Obviously you have to have speed, but tracking a deep ball is one of the most difficult things,” Quinn said. “He’s got a knack on a deep ball of tracking it that not everybody has because to get some of the plays that he has to get behind people.”

That has not gone unnoticed among Lions coaches, and defensive coordinator Aaron Glenn compared McLaurin to Detroit All-Pro wideout Amon-Ra St. Brown for his all-around willingness to compete on every catch.

“He does a really good job on 50-50 balls, which you wouldn’t think that he would because of his stature, but he does a really good job of that,” said Glenn, who was a standout cornerback as a player. “He will block, he’ll go across the middle, he’ll take hits, he’ll get back up, get back to the huddle, so he’s a gamer. He’s a gamer, so it doesn’t surprise me the success he’s having.”

McLaurin, after Washington cycled through 10 different quarterbacks in his first five seasons, said he’s “fortunate to play with a young player who’s coming into the league and been so ready right off the bat where a lot of our communication and conversations are more next level.” The play has shown the results of that.

“He makes my job a lot easier when I just know I have to put myself in position to be open,” McLaurin said. “He’s going to put the ball right where it needs to be.”

## Mobile



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## Web



UNBIASED NEWS WHATEVER WAY YOU WANT IT.

## NFL PLAYOFFS

## Divisional round features intriguing rematches

BY SAM FARMER  
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Kobie Turner calls them “get-back” games.

The Rams’ defensive end is talking about redemption, not regression. He doesn’t want to get back to where the team was when it lost by 17 to the Philadelphia Eagles in Week 12. He wants to get back at the Eagles for one that got away.

“We were able to get our get-back on Arizona when they came to SoFi,” Turner said of the Rams beating the Cardinals in Week 17 after getting blown out in Week 2. “Now we have Philadelphia lined up, and who knows what could be next? But the only thing on our minds is getting our get-back versus Philadelphia, and we know what that requires.”

In fact, we’re pretty much in for a get-back weekend with three of the four divisional games being rematches from earlier in the season.

Baltimore plays at Buffalo, and the Bills are looking to avenge a 35-10 loss to the Ravens in Week 4.

It’s Houston at Kansas City, and those teams just played a few weeks ago, with the top-seeded Chiefs winning 27-19.

The only divisional matchup that’s new is Washington at Detroit, and those teams haven’t faced each other since the second week in 2022 when Lions quarterback Jared Goff threw four touchdown passes in a 36-27 thriller won by the Lions. The Commanders quarterback that day? Carson Wentz, who is a decidedly different challenge than Washington super rookie Jayden Daniels.



**Houston Texans (11-7)  
at Kansas City Chiefs (15-2)**  
AFN-Sports  
10:30 p.m. Saturday CET  
6:30 a.m. Sunday JKT



**Washington Commanders (13-5)  
at Detroit Lions (15-2)**  
AFN-Sports  
2 a.m. Sunday CET  
10 a.m. Sunday JKT



**Los Angeles Rams (11-7)  
at Philadelphia Eagles (15-3)**  
AFN-Sports  
9 p.m. Sunday CET  
5 a.m. Monday JKT



**Baltimore Ravens (13-5)  
at Buffalo Bills (14-4)**  
AFN-Sports  
12:30 a.m. Monday CET  
8:30 a.m. Monday JKT

It’s first things first for the Rams, who are singularly focused on upsetting the Eagles on Sunday, with Philadelphia favored by six points at home.

The Rams will be pulling for the Commanders on Saturday night, too, as a Washington victory would keep alive hopes of playing another NFC title game at SoFi Stadium, assuming it would be possible to play a game in Los Angeles at that point.

The Lions, who have never played in a Super Bowl, are favorites to make it to New Orleans and the NFL’s biggest stage. Oddsmakers have Detroit favored by a robust 9½ points this weekend. They are loaded on offense with so

many different ways to score, and Goff already has Super Bowl experience, having gotten there as quarterback of the Rams.

Daniels has been spectacular for the Commanders, who have become more one-dimensional of late with their inability to establish a consistent ground game.

Washington has won five in a row, including beating Philadelphia, while the Lions have only lost two games — by four to Tampa Bay in Week 2, and by six to Buffalo in Week 15 — though both of those defeats came at home.

Baltimore blew out Buffalo when they met in the regular season, but the Bills were missing three key defensive players at the



RYAN SUN/AP

**Philadelphia Eagles running back Saquon Barkley gashed the Los Angeles Rams for 302 total yards Nov. 24 in Inglewood, Calif.**

time. Unlike the first meeting, this game will take place in Buffalo, and likely in the snow.

The Bills started to make a bit of a comeback in the second half of that game, but in the third quarter they ran an ugly trick play that resulted in a big hit on quarterback Josh Allen and a turnover. That extinguished any hopes of rallying.

Lately, the Bills have been remarkably balanced on offense, and Allen — like Baltimore quarterback Lamar Jackson — is among the most dangerous weapons in the league. The early line has the visiting Ravens favored by 1½ points, the closest spread of the weekend.

Divisional weekend begins Sat-

urday with the Texans at the Chiefs. When these teams met in Week 16, Kansas City had gotten Marquise “Hollywood” Brown back — he’s a versatile piece of their offense — and Houston lost receiver Tank Dell to a gruesome knee injury. This time, the Chiefs are favored by 7½ points, while the Texans are riding high after knocking off the Chargers in a home wild-card game.

For the Rams, the biggest challenge will be containing running back Saquon Barkley, who rushed for an Eagles-record 255 yards against them and accumulated an incredible 302 total yards.

Said Rams defensive tackle Braden Fiske: “That definitely left a bad taste in our mouths.”

## Henry: Buffalo had success against RB when he was with Tennessee

FROM PAGE 32

loose on an 87-yard touchdown run on the first offensive snap in the Ravens’ 35-10 win at Baltimore. Henry finished with a season-high 199 yards rushing while also scoring on a 5-yard catch in an outing during which Buffalo surrendered a season-worst 271 yards rushing and 427 total yards.

“Run game, pass game, third down, screen game, red zone. ... We got our butts kicked,” Bills defensive coordinator Bobby Babich said.

Difficult as it was rewatching the film this week, Babich noted it can serve as motivation.

“No one likes losing like we lost. I mean, we’re all competitors,” he said. “Sometimes those scars help you when you do have the chance to play a team again.”

Henry, 31, is enjoying a resurgence in his first season in Baltimore. He finished second in the NFL, behind Philadelphia’s Saquon Barkley, and set franchise season records with 1,921 yards rush-

ing and 16 touchdowns.

“He’s moving a lot faster than what he looks. That’s probably what really messes up the corners and linebackers when he hits the edge,” Ravens cornerback Marlon Humphrey said.

“He’s definitely one of one. But I think the visual and what’s actually happening doesn’t really match up. It’s like, ‘Oh, I have a perfect angle,’ and then he gets around you,” he added. “He’s just different. I know the Bills will have their hand, uh, it’ll be tough.”

The good news for the Bills is they’re healthier entering Sunday, with Bernard, linebacker Matt Milano and cornerback Taron Johnson set to play after the three starters were sidelined in the first game against the Ravens.

Another positive working for Buffalo is having previous success against Henry. In five meetings when he was with Tennessee, Henry topped 100 yards just once while combining for 359 yards rushing with seven touchdowns.

The Ravens, however, pose a multifaceted test for any defense. Stopping Henry is merely half the battle against Baltimore, which became the NFL’s first to top 4,000 yards passing and 3,000 rushing in a season, while finishing with 7,224 total yards — the third most in league history.

“They’re a one-two combination. I don’t know if the NFL has ever seen that type of combination of power, speed, explosiveness,” McDermott said. “That two-dimensional type of weaponry, if you will, is tough on people.”

An underlying subplot in Buffalo revolves around ongoing questions of the defense’s inconsistencies, especially against the run. Buffalo allowed 120-plus yards rushing nine times this year.

The questions date beyond this season involving a defense allowing a combined 500 yards rushing in Buffalo being eliminated in each of the past three divisional playoff rounds.

The criticism has reached a

point where defensive tackle DaQuan Jones is aware of it, but no longer cares what’s being said.

“At the end of the day, our end goal is to win a ring. I’m not going to sit here and harp because people are saying I don’t got the stats or Ed Oliver doesn’t have the stats. OK? What do you want me to do?” Jones said. “We’re chasing something better,” he added. “The next game right now is the Baltimore Ravens, and that’s all we’re focusing about.”

Jones spoke while wearing a Bills-colored sweatshirt with a three-word phrase that includes a profanity printed on it, summing up the defense’s dismissive approach. The shirt was designed by tackle Jordan Phillips, who said the phrase was taken directly from what someone said during a recent defensive meeting.

“Just not really acknowledging the outside noise,” Jones said, “and just having the mindset of just go out there and play our style of football and see what happens.”



JEFFREY T. BARNES/AP

**“No one likes losing like we lost. I mean, we’re all competitors. Sometimes those scars help you when you do have the chance to play a team again.”**

**Bobby Babich**  
Bills defensive coordinator

# SPORTS



**Motown makeover**  
First-half success makes Pistons one of season's big surprises » **NBA, Page 26**

## NFL PLAYOFFS

# Massive challenge

Bills brace for test of stopping Henry after getting trampled by RB in Week 4

BY JOHN WAWROW  
Associated Press

**B**ills coach Sean McDermott joked that Buffalo could use five 300-pound linebackers in assessing what it might take to stop Baltimore's Derrick Henry.

Linebacker Terrel Bernard was a little more realistic Wednesday, saying it's going to require all 11 defenders swarming the running back. Even quarterback Josh Allen, at 6-foot-5 and 240 pounds, acknowledged feeling intimidated the few times he has stood next to the 6-2, 250-pound Henry.

"He's absolutely massive," Allen said. "He's as fast as anybody on the field and once he gets going downhill, he's just tough to bring down because of his sheer size and speed."

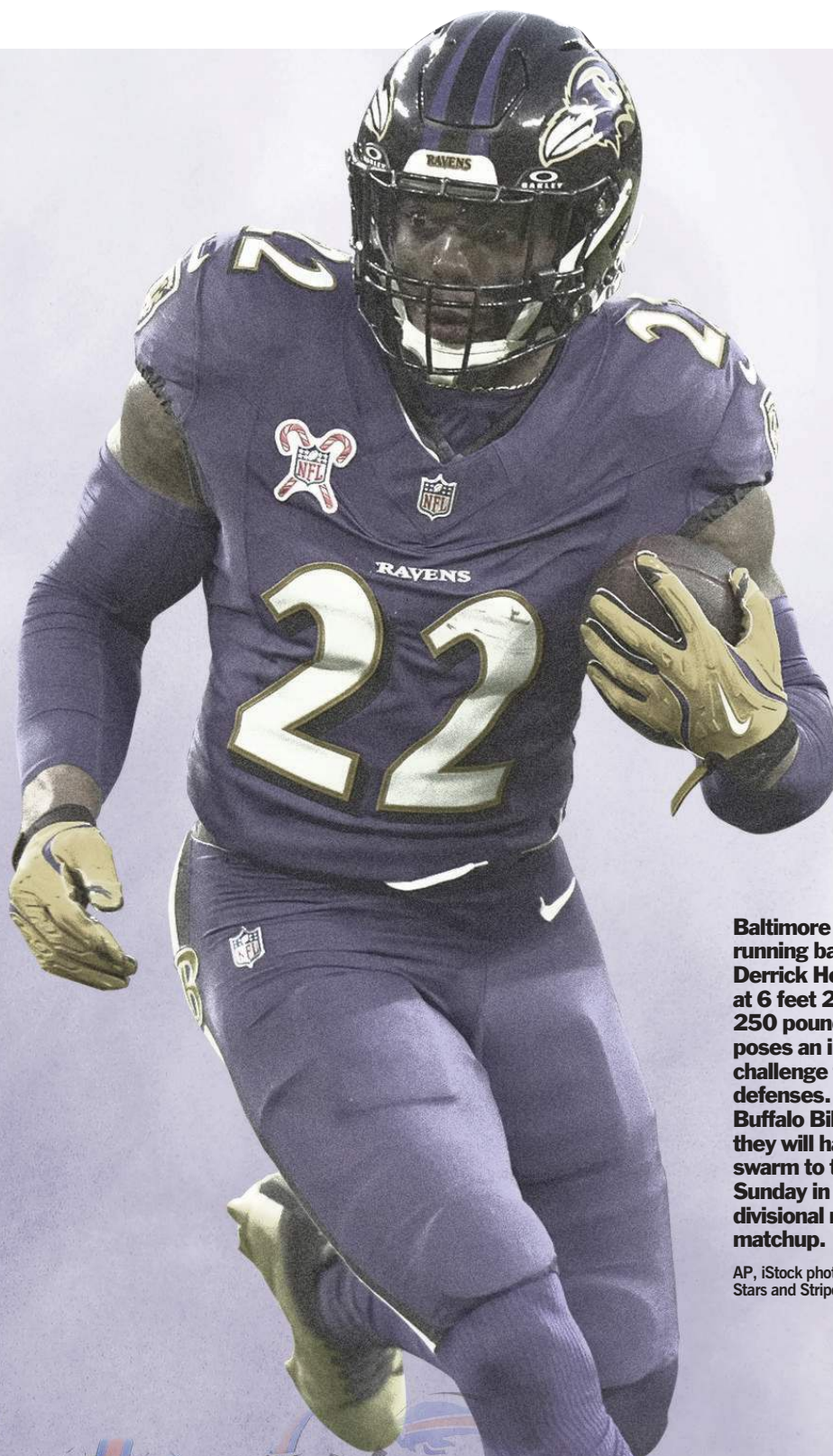
One way or the other, stopping Henry is among the challenges Buffalo (14-4) faces Sunday night when hosting the third-seeded Ravens (13-5) and their league-leading offense in a divisional round playoff game.

Not lost on the Bills is what happened in Week 4, when Henry broke

# 199

Yards rushing for Derrick Henry against the Buffalo Bills on Sept. 29 in Baltimore. Henry had an 87-yard touchdown run and a receiving TD as the Ravens won 35-10.

Associated Press



**Baltimore Ravens running back Derrick Henry, at 6 feet 2 and 250 pounds, poses an imposing challenge for defenses. The Buffalo Bills know they will have to swarm to the ball Sunday in their divisional round matchup.**

AP, iStock photos; Stars and Stripes Illustration

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**Utah Hockey Club struggles to find success on home ice** » **NHL, Page 27**