



CHRISTMAS

Troops find ways to create piece of home and holiday cheer

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Mickey Mouse will soon become public domain, but with some caveats

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Florida State players, coaches still hurting as they try to refocus

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Earning their spot

How Fort Moore regiment turns soldiers into Rangers

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Soldiers in the Army's Ranger Selection and Assessment Program 1 course at Fort Moore train on the Georgia installation's Cole Range on Oct. 25.

COREY DICKSTEIN/Stars and Stripes

To our readers

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

Report: Soldiers have little incentive to push People First

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

An initiative developed by the Army to deal with a culture crisis has failed to get the job done because its objectives conflict with other priorities, like training for

combat, a new service-sponsored study said.

The Army's People First initiatives set goals that are at odds with demands of the training benchmarks for soldiers, according to a Rand Corp. report released this

week.

"At the unit level, soldiers perceive that incentives are based on training outcomes and that there is little recognition or reward for People First outcomes," the report said. "Soldiers rely on other sol-

diers first and big Army last when faced with work-life balance challenges."

Researchers had been asked to examine ways to overcome prob-

SEE PUSH ON PAGE 6

BUSINESS/WEATHER

NY bill may interfere with Chick-fil-A closing Sundays

AP/Report for America
ALBANY, N.Y. — New York lawmakers have introduced a bill that would require restaurants in state highway system rest areas to operate seven days a week, a measure apparently aimed at interfering with a policy at the fast food chain Chick-fil-A of staying closed on Sundays.

The bill, introduced last week, is yet another salvo in a yearslong political battle involving the company, whose late founder Truett Cathy infused its business prac-

tices with his conservative Christian values.

Loved by many for its chicken sandwiches, but disliked by others over its founder's opposition to same-sex marriage, Chick-fil-A has always kept its locations closed on Sundays so employees can enjoy time with their families and "worship if they choose," according to the company's website.

While the bill, if passed, would apply to all restaurants, Chick-fil-A is mentioned by name in some written legislative materials

explaining the justification for the proposed law.

State Assemblymember Tony Simone, the Democrat who introduced the bill, said it is meant to give travelers in New York a variety of food options, including healthy foods, at rest stops, rather than an effort to eventually push Chick-fil-A out.

"Look, if you want to eat fried chicken while traveling over the holidays, then Chick-fil-A should be open on Sundays," Simone said.

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates		Switzerland (Franc)	0.8527
Euro costs (Dec. 26)	\$1.08	Thailand (Baht)	34.47
British pound (Dec. 26)	\$1.24	Turkey (NewLira)	29.2184
Japanese yen (Dec. 26)	140.00	(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.)	
South Korean won (Dec. 26)	1268.00	INTEREST RATES	
Commercial rates		Prime rate	8.50
Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3770	Interest Rates Discount rate	6.00
Britain (Pound)	1.2732	Federal funds market rate	5.33
Canada (Dollar)	1.3231	3-month bill	5.38
China (Yuan)	7.1325	30-year bond	4.04
Denmark (Krone)	6.7560		
Egypt (Pound)	30.9014		
Euro	0.9062		
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.8139		
Hungary (Forint)	345.96		
Israel (Shekel)	3.6097		
Japan (Yen)	142.12		
Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3072		
Norway (Krone)	10.1734		
Philippines (Peso)	55.50		
Poland (Zloty)	3.93		
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7512		
Singapore (Dollar)	1.3224		
South Korea (Won)	1298.70		

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MILITARY

Former Marine who refused vaccine arrested

By JONATHAN SNYDER
AND HANA KUSUMOTO
Stars and Stripes

MARINE CORPS AIR STATION IWAKUNI, Japan — A former Marine who refused the COVID-19 vaccine while serving in Japan and defied orders to return home was arrested this month at her former duty station.

Japanese police allege that Catherine Arnett, 25, was detained by military police after attempting to enter MCAS Iwakuni around 2:30 a.m. Dec. 1, a city police spokesman told Stars and Stripes on Tuesday. She was turned over to Iwakuni city police around 11:30 a.m. that day and released from custody “last week,” the spokesman said.

Arnett was returned to California in Marine Corps custody earlier this year and spent 113 days in

brigs awaiting a court-martial before the Corps dropped all charges against her, set her free and administratively discharged her.



Arnett

As a lance corporal at MCAS Iwakuni, Arnett refused at least three times to board aircraft bound for the U.S. and faced discharge for refusing the vaccine. She was charged separately with insubordination, missing a military flight, disobeying an officer and other offenses over her refusal to leave Japan.

Arnett, who described herself as a staunch Catholic, said the 2021 vaccine mandate from Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin was an un-

lawful order. Her case drew attention from a foundation critical of vaccines, Children’s Health Defense, founded by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who interviewed her on his podcast.

Another nonprofit foundation, founded by former SEAL Eddie Gallagher, in June helped raise \$50,000 for Arnett’s legal expenses.

Arnett did not respond to a Dec. 6 request from Stars and Stripes by Facebook Messenger and a phone call Tuesday seeking comment. In response to an email Tuesday, a woman who described herself as Arnett’s secretary said Arnett was engaging in an act of civil disobedience by returning to MCAS Iwakuni.

“Ms. Arnett was solely standing on the principle that since the man-

date was unconstitutional from the jump, all other actions that transpired as a result were also unlawful orders,” Jamie Engel said by email Friday. “She arrived at the base to take the stand and drive home the concept that she refused to take her DD214 and still refuses to comply with any separation orders.”

DD-214 is the official form issued to a service member upon their discharge from military service.

Military police at MCAS Iwakuni detained Arnett on suspicion of violating the status of forces agreement between Japan and the U.S., the spokesman said. Some government officials in Japan may speak to the media only on condition of anonymity.

“Catherine Arnett was separat-

ed from the United States Marine Corps several months ago and has since had no official affiliation with the service,” base spokesman 1st Lt. Aaron Ellis told Stars and Stripes by email on Wednesday. “Since Catherine Arnett is a civilian, we do not have any additional information.”

Unauthorized entries of U.S. military installations in Japan may be prosecuted by Japanese authorities, Ellis said.

The case was referred to Japanese prosecutors, but no decision had been made as of Tuesday to prosecute Arnett, a spokesman for the Yamaguchi District Public Prosecutor’s Office said by phone Tuesday.

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Air Force spouse finds mission in annual wishing tree at air base

By KELLY AGEE
Stars and Stripes

YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan — An Air Force spouse who started an annual wishing tree in her front yard at this airlift hub in western Tokyo nearly gave up the practice this year.

Then the base experienced a tragic loss Nov. 29. Eight airmen perished when their Yokota-based CV-22 Osprey crashed off the coast of Yakushima, an island in southern Japan.

What started in Florida nearly 10 years ago as an expression of personal loss became for Annastasha Larsen and her neighbors an expression of community loss and hope.

Anyone is welcome to write their wish on a slip of paper Larsen provides and attach it to the 30-foot pine tree in the Larsen yard on Pease Drive in Yokota’s eastside housing area. Larsen shares the home with her husband, three children and a dog.

“It has been a way to express my grief, hope for the future and memorialize others,” Larsen told Stars and Stripes via Facebook

Messenger on Dec. 12. “My wish is that others can feel loved here, feel love for others and love for our community. I hope it can help us all heal a little from that tragic accident.”

More than 150 anonymous messages were hanging Wednesday on the tree, including: “I wish strength for the families of our lost brothers,” and “I wish peace and happiness for my husband who has suffered a tremendous loss.”

The messages can also be light-hearted or personal. “I want to be the best ballerina in the world,” reads one.

People can leave their messages by stopping by any time of the day and writing on a tag left outside the tree in a waterproof box alongside a pen. Larsen puts the tags into waterproof sleeves to protect them from the weather, and she checks the notes every day.

An annual event for the Larsens since 2020, the wishing tree began in July 2014 after Annastasha’s second pregnancy loss, she said. The idea came to her as a way of

processing her grief. The first wishing tree was a crepe myrtle in their front yard in Mary Esther, Fla.

“I wanted a way to mark the due date and memorialize our baby,” Larsen said. “I wanted to look to the future with hope and this seemed to be a way to do that. Surprisingly, our little neighborhood and beyond really took it to heart and participated, even though they didn’t know my story.”

Larsen said she didn’t plan on another wishing tree, but her sister died in November 2020, coincidentally while the world was in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic.

“I know it was a difficult year for everyone,” Larsen said. “Everyone lost something or someone.”

She revived the wishing tree tradition, this time at Yokota, in her sister’s memory, she said.

“I hoped it would help others come together, feel empathy and feel community when we had been separated, sad, frustrated and were tired of being alone and feeling alone,” Larsen said.



KELLY AGEE/Stars and Stripes

Annastasha Larsen, creator of a wishing tree, poses outside her home at Yokota Air Base, Japan, on Wednesday.

She carried on the tradition in subsequent years as a means of communicating holiday cheer and to help others think of new beginnings for the new year.

She hesitated this year about putting out tags for the wishing tree. Children had come by previously and made a mess of it or wrote rude or mean things, she said.

But then the Osprey crash happened.

“The wishing tree seemed to naturally fit in this time of year and in such a close-knit community like Yokota,” Larsen said. “It has been a bright spot in our lives, each year.”

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USFK employee held in connection with fatal bar fight, Seoul police say

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

OSAN AIR BASE, South Korea — A South Korean man employed by U.S. Forces Korea is under investigation after a bar fight in Seoul resulted in the recent death of another USFK employee.

The two men, both South Koreans employed at Yongsan Garrison in the capital city, were drinking at a bar near the base

with acquaintances around 9 p.m. Wednesday when one of them beat the other, a Yongsan Police Station investigator told Stars and Stripes by phone Friday.

South Korean officials regularly speak to the media on a customary condition of anonymity.

Firefighters were called to the scene after a bystander reported a person had “passed out after getting in a fight,” the investiga-

tor said. The victim was pronounced dead soon after at a nearby hospital, he added.

The investigator did not identify either man but said both were about 60 years old and coworkers at the garrison.

The suspect was being held pending further investigation, the investigator said.

Yongsan spokesman Luciano Vera in an email Friday identified

the pair as a Korean Service Corps employee and a civilian employee at the garrison. Vera referred further questions to the police.

The Korean Service Corps, created during the Korean War in 1951, employs South Korean civilians to provide transportation and other logistics support to the U.S. military.

Yongsan Garrison maintains a

small footprint in Seoul with around 500 U.S. personnel. USFK, U.N. Command, Eighth Army and the Combined Forces Command relocated their headquarters from Yongsan to Camp Humphreys, roughly 40 miles south of the capital city.

Stars and Stripes reporter Yoo Kyong Chang contributed to this report.
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MILITARY

‘It’s worth every bit of the struggle’

Fort Moore course turns soldiers into Army’s elite Rangers

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

FORT MOORE, Ga. — Exhausted after three straight days of intense training exercises that took the young soldiers more than 50 miles on foot, they plopped down against pine trees just inside the wood line on the post’s Cole Range.

One of the soldiers — a private — limped his way through the center of the makeshift defensive formation of tired troopers, insisting to a noncommissioned officer checking on his conditions that he was “all good, sergeant,” and only suffering from minor chaffing. Two more soldiers limped past the same NCO, telling him that they, too, were good to go and ready to continue their attempts to earn a spot in one of the Army’s most elite formations — the 75th Ranger Regiment.

“They’re gonna make it,” said Army 1st Sgt. Tyler Fillion, the senior enlisted leader for the Fort Moore-based regiment’s Selection and Training Company. “They want it. They’re tough.”

Fillion carefully watched the latest class of Ranger hopefuls navigate the eight-week course to earn a spot in the special operations formation known as Ranger Assessment and Selection Program 1, or RASP 1.

“Look, at this point, everyone’s broken,” he said. “They’re going to end up going 80 miles or something on foot by the end of today. Everyone is at the baseline of just, ‘Ouch.’ We’re looking for those guys and girls who can put that aside, put their head down, and keep getting after it. If you can do that. If you can show you want it, we’re probably going to take you.”

Each year more than 1,000 soldiers — the vast majority being new troops fresh out of Army initial entrance training — come to Fort Moore, the former Fort Benning, to attempt to join the legendary Ranger Regiment, according to data provided by the unit. Somewhere between 30% and 50% of those who start the eight yearly RASP 1 courses will earn the Ranger’s coveted tan beret and a spot in the regiment that has for decades produced some of the Army’s highest achieving soldiers.

The special operations unit, which includes three combat battalions at Hunter Army Airfield, Ga., Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., and Fort Moore, where the regiment and its military intelligence apparatus are also headquartered, was among the U.S. military’s most heavily deployed



PHOTOS BY LANDON CARTER/U.S. Army

Ranger candidates climb ropes during physical training as part of the Ranger Assessment and Selection Program in April 2023, which qualifies soldiers to join the 75th Ranger Regiment.



New Army Rangers don the coveted tan berets after graduating a Ranger Assessment and Selection Program course at Fort Moore, Ga., in March.

formations during operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria during the Global War on Terror.

The unit’s soldiers earned countless valor and combat medals — including two Medals of Honor — and Purple Hearts as they carried out dangerous, classified combat operations nearly daily for some 20 years. In recent years, the regiment’s Rangers have dominated Army soldier competitions in the U.S., with 75th Rangers winning the last three Best Ranger Competitions among others, including 2023’s Best Mortar and Best Squad competitions.

Fillion, a longtime Ranger who joined the 75th via RASP 1 as a sergeant in 2010 after serving two deployments to Iraq in the conventional Army, said the RASP programs that he has helped oversee for the last year and a half play a critical part in ensuring the Ranger regiment retains its reputation as the Army’s premier light infantry and direct-action raid force. From the first day when Ranger hopefuls enter the regiment’s pre-RASP program — a Ranger-run course meant to get soldiers in shape to succeed at RASP 1 — they are introduced to the unit’s unique

culture, which Fillion said is built around teamwork, the dedication to mental and physical excellence and the will to continue the mission at all costs.

The secretive unit has long shied away from media attention, but it recently invited Stars and Stripes to observe some of the training in RASP 1 and RASP 2, a similar, shorter Ranger assessment program for staff sergeants through captains to earn leadership positions in the 75th Ranger Regiment. Though unit leaders were careful not to reveal specific details about the RASP courses to ensure future candidates enter the program with limited knowledge of what to expect, they offered some insights of how physically grueling and mentally taxing the Ranger tryouts can be.

That is by design, Fillion noted. Rangers must be prepared to go to combat at any time, if events in their selection course are “as difficult as the worst day of combat,” then they can enter any situation knowing they can succeed, he said. But as the Army — and the military overall — faces unprecedented recruiting challenges at a time when fewer young Americans than ever have an interest in military service or even qualify to enter the ranks, Fillion has a message to anyone with even the

slightest interest in becoming a Ranger: Come try out.

“We have people who think they need to be an Olympic athlete, you need to be a Division I [college] athlete to come here, and that’s not the case,” Fillion said. “You have to have a certain type of inner resolve, but you don’t need to be [Olympic swimmer] Michael Phelps ... or Mr. ultramarathon runner — you need the drive to want to harden yourself to have that kind of resolve.”

So, what qualities are Fillion and his Ranger cadre looking for in those who earn the tan beret? A never-quit, team-first attitude and a dedication to the eight Army special operations attributes: Integrity, courage, perseverance, personal responsibility, professionalism, adaptability, teamwork, and capability, Fillion said.

The physicality for which the Rangers are known will come once a soldier joins the unit and is subjected to its purpose-built physical training program run by strength and conditioning experts. The unit holds all its troops from the infantrymen who make up the majority of the 3,000-Ranger regiment to its lawyers and human resources officers to stringent, higher-than-normal fitness and conditioning standards.

“If somebody’s physically weak, we’ll get them stronger,” Fillion said. “If they have the desire and the other attributes — they’re getting hired, and we’ll build them up.”

RASP 1

In January 2010, after almost a decade of war in Afghanistan and Iraq, the 75th Ranger Regiment scrapped its long-held selection process known as the Ranger Indoctrination Program, or RIP, in favor of a longer, more skill-focused program in RASP 1. The new program for soldiers in the ranks of E-1 to E-5 added a second, four-week phase to RIP’s program, which aimed to provide new Rangers with the skills that they would need in the intense combat that they were almost assured to find once they joined their units.

“We were taking people straight from RIP, and 90 days later they were in a pretty kinetic environment, whether it’s Baghdad or Afghanistan, so they said, ‘Hey, how can we provide a better product?’” Fillion said. “The first four weeks really remain the same as RIP — and that’s the assessment of who the candidates are. Then, the second four weeks are about the training, still assessing, but giving them the skills they need to succeed at their battalion on marksmanship, demolition, those things that they need so we can provide a

CONTINUED ON PAGE 5

MILITARY

FROM PAGE 4

better warfighter to the unit.”

The eight yearly iterations of RASP typically begin with 135 to 170 Ranger candidates, said Tracy Bailey, a spokeswoman for the 75th Ranger Regiment. They are led by a noncommissioned officer cadre purposely selected from across the regiment, said Fillion, who added cadre members were among the highest performing NCOs in the 75th.

He called the cadre RASP 1’s “special sauce” because they lead from the front, conducting all the training right alongside the Ranger candidates. When RASP 1 candidates conduct PT sessions, cadre do the same exercises, often with more weight, Fillion said.

“Everything the candidates do, the cadre is doing,” he said. “The leaders go first. There should be someone out here showing [Ranger candidates] what the expectation is all the time. Because they don’t have a model for that ... And that sets the model and their minds that when they go to their Ranger battalion, they’re going to be led by an NCO who doesn’t say, ‘Do what I say,’ they’re going to say, ‘Hey, follow me. I’m going to teach you how to do this because I’m going to do it too.’”

Many of the events that Ranger candidates face are linked to the unit’s legacy from operations in World War II such as the Cabanatuan Raid, which saw Rangers sneak behind Japanese lines to free some 500 American prisoners in the Philippines, and Operation Gothic Serpent, the 1993 Battle of Mogadishu in Somalia depicted in the book and movie “Black Hawk Down.” The RASP 1 course even includes a history test for Ranger candidates, Fillion said.

The unit’s storied history is part of its culture, he said. Tying the regiment’s past accomplishments to candidates suffering allows them to embrace that legacy.

Fillion said the first two weeks of RASP 1 are easily the most intense — designed to bring young soldiers to the brink of their mental and physical capabilities.

Throughout the course, soldiers low crawl across long distances, ruck march for miles with heavy loads, fight hand-to-hand, face mass casualty events and strenuous workouts that push most candidates to the brink, Fillion said.

“We want them to leave this program, knowing that when we put them in a Ranger battalion, and they’ve got to go to the top of that mountain, they’re gonna get there,” he said. “And we want them to know that they have the reservoir of strength to be able to go there.”

RASP 2

For higher-ranked soldiers looking to enter the 75th Ranger Regiment and for its seasoned Rangers attempting to earn new leadership roles in the formation, RASP 2 is meant to challenge their ability to make good decisions un-



PHOTOS BY LANDON CARTER/U.S. Army

Army soldiers in the 75th Ranger Regiment’s Ranger Assessment and Selection Program conduct physical training with a worm during an iteration of RASP in 2023. The course qualifies soldiers to serve in the elite Ranger Regiment.

der physical and mental stress.

The three-week course is meant to validate soldiers — including longtime Rangers — in the ranks of staff sergeant to captain as prepared to lead Rangers, Fillion said. While RASP 1 focuses largely on training, RASP 2 is about proving the skills that soldiers already possess.

On a recent day on Cole Range, several dozen RASP 2 candidates spent hours on various challenges that included long runs and mental puzzles squeezed between brief strength training sessions and obstacle courses.

After completing one of the sessions, a longtime Ranger, Sgt. 1st Class Moore — whose first name was withheld by public affairs officials citing U.S. Army Special Operations Command security policy — described the course as “very physically and mentally taxing.”

The physical activities and puzzles are meant to demonstrate a Ranger’s ability to think clearly and make quick decisions under the stressors of combat, said Fillion, who has completed RASP 2 twice and might attend again next year, if he is selected for a sergeant major position in the Ranger regiment. The repetitive valida-

tion of everyone in the regiment’s senior ranks — including validation courses for top officers such as battalion and regimental commanders — is part of what makes the unit run smoothly and maintain its elite fighting capabilities, Fillion said.

For Moore, an infantryman and veteran of five combat tours who has served in the Ranger Regiment since he enlisted in 2011, passing RASP 2 would earn him a promotion to a Ranger platoon sergeant. He said he found the physical requirements for RASP 2 similar to RASP 1, but RASP 2 candidates must come with greater knowledge.

“[The cadre] is not here to teach you, they’re here to validate,” Moore said. “RASP 1 is more about teaching you how to be physically fit, how to maintain your physicality, how to land navigate. ... In RASP 2 those are skills you better already have.”

He said teamwork was the key to success in the course. Like Fillion, he encouraged those interested in joining the Rangers to come to RASP and give it a shot — especially if they are willing to be humbled.

“If you have the drive to serve, the 75th Ranger Regiment is where you want to do it,” Moore said. “If you want to constantly be pushed to be better and feel inferior to all your peers and grow thick skin — the 75th Ranger Regiment is where to do it. It’s worth every bit of the struggle.”

Fillion concurred. Becoming a Ranger is not easy, the first sergeant said, but those who earn their way into the unit have accomplished something incredible.

“Not only do they earn their spot, they continue to earn it every day, they continue to meet the standard, they continue to better themselves, and they continue to better those around them,” Fillion said. “Then we take it a step further and revalidate all of the senior leaders around this formation — they’ve not only proved themselves and earned their spot, but they continue to do it over and over and continue to prove they belong here.”



Ranger candidates pictured during marksmanship in an iteration of a Ranger Assessment and Selection Program in 2023.

MILITARY

Congress to investigate Osprey program

Committee launches effort after eight Air Force service members died in Japan crash

By TARA COPP
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A congressional oversight committee has launched an investigation into the V-22 Osprey program following a deadly crash in Japan which killed eight Air Force special operations service members.

The entire Osprey fleet remains grounded following the Nov. 29 crash with the exception of limited Marine Corps flights in emergencies.

More than 50 U.S. service members have died in Osprey crashes over the lifespan of the program,

and 20 of those died in four crashes over the last 20 months.

The Osprey is a fast-moving airframe that can fly like both a helicopter and an airplane — but its many crashes have led critics to warn it has fatal design flaws.

The government of Japan, the only international partner flying the Osprey, has also grounded its aircraft after the Nov. 29 crash.

On Thursday the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Accountability sent a letter to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin requesting a massive amount of documentation on the

Osprey's safety record to be delivered to the committee by Jan. 4.

“Our servicemembers remain in harm’s way without resolution of known mechanical issues,” wrote the committee chairman, Kentucky Republican James Comer.

“While, statistically, the Osprey is not considered as dangerous as some other military aircraft, the Committee remains alarmed that most fatalities involving the aircraft have happened during training exercises, not combat operations.”

The Osprey only became operational in 2007 after decades of test-

ing. Since then, it's become a workhorse for the Marine Corps and Air Force Special Operations Command, and was in the process of being adopted by the Navy to replace its C-2 Greyhound propeller planes, which transport personnel on and off aircraft carriers at sea.

Shortly after the Nov. 29 crash, the Air Force said that a malfunction of the aircraft, not a mistake by the crew, was probably the cause.

The Osprey has faced persistent questions about a mechanical problem with the clutch that has troubled the program for more than a decade.

There also have been questions as to whether all parts of the Osprey have been manufactured according to safety specifications and, as those parts age, whether they remain strong enough to withstand the significant forces created by the Osprey's unique structure and dynamics of tiltrotor flight.

Marine Corps Ospreys also have been used to transport White House staff, press and security personnel accompanying the president. White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said those Ospreys are also grounded.

Push: Study says initiative fails because of conflict with priorities

FROM PAGE 1

lems associated with the conflict between mission requirements and work-life balance, given the Army senior leadership's focus on putting people first.

The findings showcase the difficulty in revamping a culture damaged by high-profile instances of sexual assault, misconduct and violence, such as the 2020 murder of Spc. Vanessa Guillen by a fellow soldier at the Texas base formerly known as Fort Hood.

After a scathing 136-page internal report detailed widespread problems at the base, now called Fort Cavazos, the Army came up with the People First concept to address culture issues across the service.

Sine then, a patchwork of programs has been developed with the goal of improving command culture and team-building at the unit level.

But while the Army's top generals and senior enlisted leaders have touted their focus on improving soldiers' quality of life, those efforts break down when the rubber hits the road, according to researchers.

“Put simply: The message of



CESAR SALAZAR JR./U.S. Army

U.S. soldiers execute tactical movement at Pabrade Training Area in Lithuania on Nov. 17. A report released this week found that the goals of the Army's People First initiatives are at odds with soldiers' training objectives and benchmarks.

“People First” is not reaching the officers and staff NCOs in charge of managing and training soldiers with anything near the priority that the Army's senior leadership has set,” Rand said.

Although top Army leaders provide guidance on managing decisions related to matters such as soldiers' time off, those lessons

are not “evenly heard or understood at lower levels,” Rand said.

One reason for that is the message gets diluted as it moves down the chain of command.

For example, the chief of staff of the Army and other four-star leaders may set priorities that allow for a degree of readiness risk when balancing quality of life con-

cerns, but the trickle-down take-away is that improving combat readiness is the overriding imperative.

“The People First priorities had disappeared or had been so subsumed into readiness language that it was clear that the focus was on training, not people,” Rand said.

Moreover, units perceive no discernable reward for excelling at People First initiatives compared with the clearer career-boosting incentives of achieving training goals. Unit leaders told Rand that when so-called “white space” was on their calendar to allow for people-oriented matters rather than specific missions, higher headquarters tended to fill that time up with other taskings.

Soldiers interviewed by Rand said the Army should identify opportunities to assess a leader's commitment to People First concepts in officer and noncommissioned officer performance reviews, known as OERs and NCOERs, respectively.

“Having something that says, ‘List 8 People First accomplishments you oversaw’ (in an OER) would go a long way,” one soldier told Rand.

Researchers made a series of recommendations to address the problems. They concluded that “striking the right balance ... will have an impact on how the Army recruits and retains its strength.”

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RAF Lakenheath airman cleared of motorcyclist's death

By KYLE ALVAREZ
Stars and Stripes

RAF LAKENHEATH, England — An American airman who was behind the wheel of a car that fatally struck a British motorcyclist last year was found not guilty this week of causing his death.

Senior Airman Mikayla Hayes was on trial for a crash Aug. 26, 2022, on the A10 highway at Southery in West Suffolk that killed Matthew Day, a 33-year-old father of one, British media reported.

She had been charged with causing death by careless driving.

On Thursday, a Norwich Crown Court jury acquitted Hayes after a weeklong trial.

An aerospace ground equipment maintainer at RAF Lakenheath, Hayes was driving home from work at the time of the crash, U.S. Visiting Forces spokesperson Maj. Keavy Rake said in a statement Thursday.

As she pulled out from the B1160 Lynn Road onto the A10, her Hon-

da Accord hit Day, who was driving a Yamaha motorbike.

Eyewitness Graeme Pratt told the court that he saw Hayes look both ways before the collision, according to media reports.

In her testimony, Hayes wept and said, “I still to this day have no idea why I didn't see that motorcyclist,” the BBC and other news outlets reported.

A defense expert, Robert Wagstaff, said Day had a small amount of THC in his system, indicating

that he had taken marijuana before driving. That slowed Day's reaction time, Wagstaff testified, according to British media reports.

Day's mother, Trudi Betson, said the family respects the verdict and thanked prosecutors for bringing the case to trial, ITV News reported.

Hayes will remain in England under the supervision of her command, Rake said.

The Air Force had asserted jurisdiction in Hayes' case. Her at-

torneys contended that because she was on active duty at the time and was returning from a work shift at Lakenheath, she should be tried by a U.S. military court. But in November 2022, a judge sided with prosecutors and ruled that the case would be handled by the British justice system. Hayes requested a jury trial and pleaded not guilty.

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NATION



CHARLIE NEIBERGALL/AP

Former President Donald Trump reacts to supporters during a caucus rally on Dec. 1 in Waterloo, Iowa.

Tape reveals Trump pressured Mich. officials not to certify vote

Associated Press

Donald Trump pressured two election officials not to certify 2020 vote totals in a key Michigan county, according to a recording of a post-election phone call disclosed in a new report by The Detroit News.

The former president's 2024 campaign neither confirmed nor denied the recording's legitimacy, insisting in a statement that all of Trump's actions after his defeat to Democrat Joe Biden were taken to uphold his oath of office and ensure fair elections.

Trump has consistently repeated falsehoods about the 2020 election as he runs again for the White House. No evidence has emerged in a litany of federal, state and outside investigations of voter fraud that could have changed the outcome of the election.

The Nov. 17, 2020, telephone call included then-President Trump, Republican National Committee Chairwoman Ronna

McDaniel and Wayne County elections authorities Monica Palmer and William Hartmann, both of them Republicans, The Detroit News reported. Trump told the two canvassers that they would look "terrible" if they certified results after having initially opposed certification, the newspaper said.

The newspaper said the recordings were made by a person who was present for the call with Palmer and Hartmann.

The report comes as Trump seeks the 2024 Republican nomination while grappling with multiple criminal indictments, including a federal case and a Georgia case tied to his efforts to overturn Biden's victory. As he campaigns for a return to the White House, Trump continues to repeat the lies that the 2020 election was stolen, despite multiple recounts and court cases confirming his defeat.

Biden won Michigan, with

Wayne County, which includes Detroit, providing a trove of Democratic votes. As such, it was one of the key places Trump focused on in the weeks after Election Day in 2020.

"We've got to fight for our country," Trump said on the recordings, according to The News. "We can't let these people take our country away from us."

National GOP Chairwoman McDaniel, a Michigan native, reportedly said during the call: "If you can go home tonight, do not sign it," adding, "We will get you attorneys."

Trump is said to have reinforced the point, assuring the local officials: "We'll take care of that."

Steven Cheung, a Trump spokesman, said in a statement Friday that Trump's actions were "were taken in furtherance of his duty as President of the United States to faithfully take care of the laws and ensure election integrity."

Flu, COVID cases rising; holiday increase possible

By MIKE STOBBE

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Look for flu and COVID-19 infections to ramp up in the coming weeks, U.S. health officials say, with increases fueled by holiday gatherings, too many unvaccinated people and a new version of the coronavirus that may be spreading more easily.

High levels of flu-like illnesses were reported last week in 17 states — up from 14 the week before, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Friday.

"Folks are traveling a lot more this season. They want to see their families," said the CDC's Dr. Manisha Patel. "And all of that sort of adds to the mix" in the spread of viruses.

Health officials are keeping an eye on a version of the ever-evolving coronavirus, known as JN.1. The omicron variant was first detected in the U.S. in September and now accounts for an estimated 20% of cases. The CDC expects it to reach 50% in the next two weeks, Patel said.

It may spread easier or be better at evading our immune systems, but there is no evidence that the strain causes more severe disease than other recent variants, health officials say. And current evidence indicates vaccines and antiviral medications work against it.

As for flu, early signs suggest current vaccines are well-matched to the strain that is causing the most illnesses, and that strain usually doesn't cause as many deaths and hospitalizations as some other versions.

But the bad news is vaccinations are down this year, officials say. About 42% of U.S. adults had gotten flu shots by the first week of December, down from about 45% at the same time last year, according to the CDC.

Americans have also been slow to get other vaccinations. Only about 18% have gotten an updated COVID-19 shot that became available in September. At nursing homes, about a third of residents are up to date with COVID-19 vaccines.

And only 17% of adults 60 and older had received new shots against another respiratory virus. RSV, respiratory syncytial virus, is a common cause of mild coldlike symptoms but it can be dangerous for infants and older people.

The CDC last week took the unusual step of sending a health alert to U.S. doctors urging them to immunize their patients against the trio of viruses.

The Carolinas are currently seeing the heaviest traffic for respiratory infections in emergency rooms, according to CDC data posted this week.

It's not as dire as some past winters, but some patients are still waiting days to get a hospital bed, noted Dr. Scott Curry, an infectious diseases specialist at the Medical University of South Carolina in Charleston.

"We've barely been cold in South Carolina, and flu tends to hit us very hard when people actually get some cold weather to deal with," he said. "We could get worse, very easily, in the next four to eight weeks."

Federal Reserve's favored inflation gauge tumbles in November

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Federal Reserve's preferred measure of prices fell last month, another sign that inflation is easing and that Americans should benefit from reduced interest and get relief from painful price shocks in 2024.

Friday's report from the Commerce Department showed that U.S. consumer prices slid 0.1% last month from October and rose 2.6% from November 2022. The month-over-month drop was the largest since April 2020 when the economy was reeling from the

COVID-19 pandemic.

Excluding volatile food and energy prices, so-called core inflation last month rose 0.1% from October and 3.2% from a year earlier.

The numbers show somewhat more progress against inflation than economists had expected. Inflation is steadily moving down to the Fed's year-over-year target of 2% and appears to be clearing the way for Fed rate cuts in 2024. That, in turn, could translate into lower rates on everything from mortgages to credit cards. The rate on the benchmark 30-year

fixed-rate mortgage is already dropping: This week it dipped to a six-month low 6.67%, down from 7.79% in October.

Americans have already seen some relief from high prices. Consider the ingredients of a BLT sandwich: Prices are down almost 1% over the past year for bacon, more than 10% for lettuce and 4% for tomatoes. Car rental prices have tumbled 11%, air fares 12%, furniture 3%.

After nearly two years of Fed rate hikes — 11 since March 2022 — inflation has come down from the four-decade highs it hit last

year. The Labor Department's closely watched consumer price index was up 3.1% last month from November 2022, down from a 9.1% year-over-year increase in June 2022.

Encouraged by the progress, the Fed has decided not to raise rates at each of its last three meetings and has signaled that it expects to cut rates three times next year.

"A sustained easing in price pressures will support a shift in the (Fed's) policy stance next year, from holding rates steady to lowering them over time," said

Rubeela Farooqi, chief U.S. economist at High Frequency Economics. "The exact timing will depend on how the labor market, inflation and growth will evolve next year. Based on our forecasts, we expect the Fed to start cutting rates by the middle of next year."

Despite widespread predictions that higher rates would cause a recession, the U.S. economy and job market have remained strong. That has raised hopes the Fed can achieve a "soft landing" — bringing inflation to its 2% year-over-year target without sending the economy into recession.

NATION

Biden pardons thousands of pot offenders

By Zeke Miller
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden is pardoning thousands of people who were convicted of use and simple possession of marijuana on federal lands and in the District of Columbia, the White House said Friday, in his latest round of executive clemencies meant to rectify racial disparities in the justice system.

Biden is also granting clemency to 11 people serving what the White House called “disproportionately long” sentences for non-violent drug offenses.

Biden said his actions would help make the “promise of equal justice a reality.”

“Criminal records for marijuana use and possession have imposed needless barriers to employment, housing, and educa-

tional opportunities,” Biden said. “Too many lives have been upended because of our failed approach to marijuana. It’s time that we right these wrongs.”

The categorical pardon issued Friday builds on his categorical pardon issued just before the 2022 midterm elections that made thousands convicted of simple possession on federal lands eligible for pardons. The White House said thousands more would be eligible under Friday’s action.

Biden reiterated his call on governors and local leaders to take similar steps to erase marijuana convictions.

“Just as no one should be in a federal prison solely due to the use or possession of marijuana, no one should be in a local jail or state prison for that reason, either,” Biden said.

Pornhub agrees to pay \$1.8M and an independent monitor to resolve trafficking charge

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The owner of Pornhub, one of the world’s largest adult content websites, has admitted to profiting from sex trafficking and agreed to make payments to women whose videos were posted without their consent, federal prosecutors in New York announced Thursday.

Aylo Holdings, the website’s parent company, reached a deferred prosecution agreement to resolve a charge of engaging in unlawful monetary transactions involving sex trafficking proceeds, according to the office of Breon Peace, U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of New York.

The deal calls for the Montreal-based company to pay more than \$1.8 million to the U.S. government, as well as make separate payments to the individual women harmed by the trafficking. It also requires appointment of an independent monitor for three years, after which the charges will be dismissed.

“It is our hope that this resolution, which includes certain agreed payments to the women whose images were posted on the company’s platforms and an independent monitoring brings

some measure of closure to those negatively affected,” Peace said in the statement.

James Smith, head of the FBI’s New York office, said Aylo Holdings “knowingly enriched itself by turning a blind eye” to victims who told the company they had been deceived and coerced into the videos.

Prosecutors said Aylo has agreed to pay victims compensation, but details such as who is eligible and how they can apply will be forthcoming.

The charge stemmed from Aylo’s role in hosting videos and accepting payments from GirlsDoPorn.

Operators of that now-defunct adult film production company were charged and eventually convicted of a range of sex trafficking crimes, including coercing young women into engaging in sexual acts on camera that were then posted on Pornhub and other adult sites without their consent.

Aylo Holdings, which was formerly known as MindGeek, said in a statement that it “deeply regrets” hosting content from GirlsDoPorn on its streaming video platforms.



DAVID CRANE, THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER/AP

Police, fire, and swift water rescue personal respond to a car in the wash in North Hills, Calif. on Thursday. Rescue personal were unable to locate a victim in the car and continued the search downstream.

Pacific storm that flooded coast heads toward southeastern Calif.

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — A Pacific storm that pounded coastal areas northwest of Los Angeles brought more heavy rain and scattered roadway flooding as it pushed through San Diego to the deserts on its way into Arizona early Friday.

As millions scrambled to finish their holiday shopping or headed out onto highways, a wide swath of Southern California was expected to remain under a flood watch into the night before the region dries out in time for Christmas.

After slowly moving down the coast during the week, the brunt of the storm reached San Diego late Thursday. Just before midnight, a

squall with gusts up to 55 mph dumped more than a half-inch of rain at Point Loma in 30 to 40 minutes, the National Weather Service said.

Rain also began arriving in southwest Arizona. The weather service’s Flagstaff office said the center of the low-pressure system was expected to move from southwest of San Diego to near Yuma by evening.

On Thursday, the storm unleashed extraordinary rainfall on coastal counties northwest of Los Angeles, flooding homes and stranding motorists on streets inundated with water.

Downpours swamped areas in the Ventura County cities of Port

Hueneme and Oxnard, and about 35 miles up the coast in Santa Barbara County.

Between midnight and 1 a.m., the storm dumped 3.18 inches of rainfall in downtown Oxnard, surpassing the area’s average of 2.56 inches for the entire month of December, according to the National Weather Service.

The storm swept through Northern California earlier in the week as the center of the low-pressure system slowly moved south off the coast. Forecasters described it as a “cutoff low,” a storm that is cut off from the general west-to-east flow and can linger for days, increasing the amount of rainfall.

Biden says Japanese purchase of US Steel warrants ‘serious scrutiny’

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden believes “serious scrutiny” is warranted for the planned acquisition of U.S. Steel by Japan’s Nippon Steel, the White House said Thursday after days of silence on a transaction that has drawn alarm from the steelworkers union.

Lael Brainard, the director of the National Economic Council, indicated the deal would be reviewed by the secretive Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States, which she participates in and includes economic and national security agency representatives to investigate national security risks from foreign investments in American firms.

She said in a statement that Biden “believes the purchase of this iconic American-owned company by a foreign entity — even one

from a close ally — appears to deserve serious scrutiny in terms of its potential impact on national security and supply chain reliability.”

“This looks like the type of transaction that the interagency Committee on Foreign Investment Congress empowered and the Biden administration strengthened is set up to carefully investigate,” she said. “This administration will be ready to look carefully at the findings of any such investigation and to act if appropriate.”

Under the terms of the approximately \$14.1 billion all-cash deal announced Monday, U.S. Steel will keep its name and its headquarters in Pittsburgh, where it was founded in 1901 by J.P. Morgan and Andrew Carnegie. It will become a subsidiary of Nippon.

Chaired by Treasury Secretary

Janet Yellen, the CFIUS screens business deals between U.S. firms and foreign investors and can block sales or force parties to change the terms of an agreement for the purpose of protecting national security.

United Steelworkers International swiftly opposed the new transaction.

The union “remained open throughout this process to working with U.S. Steel to keep this iconic American company domestically owned and operated, but instead it chose to push aside the concerns of its dedicated workforce and sell to a foreign-owned company,” said David McCall, president of United Steelworkers, in a statement after the transaction was announced, adding that the union wasn’t consulted in advance of the announcement.

NATION

Many kids still skipping kindergarten

Since pandemic, some parents don't see point

BY CHEYANNE MUMPHREY
AND SHARON LURYE
Associated Press

BY ZAIDEE STAVELY
EdSource

CONCORD, Calif. — Aylah Levy had some catching up to do this fall when she started first grade.

After spending her kindergarten year at an alternative program that met exclusively outdoors, Aylah, 6, had to adjust to being inside a classroom. She knew only a handful of numbers and was not printing her letters clearly. To help her along, the teacher at her Bay Area elementary school has been showing her the right way to hold a pencil.

"It's harder. Way, way harder," Aylah said of the new grip.

Still, her mother, Hannah Levy, says it was the right decision to skip kindergarten. She wanted Aylah to enjoy being a kid. There is plenty of time, she reasoned, for her daughter to develop study skills.

The number of kindergartners in public school plunged during the COVID-19 pandemic. Concerned about the virus or wanting to avoid online school, hundreds of thousands of families delayed the start of school for their young children. Most have returned to schooling of some kind, but even three years after the pandemic school closures, kindergarten enrollment has continued to lag.

Some parents like Levy don't see much value in traditional kindergarten. For others, it's a matter of keeping children in other child care arrangements that better fit their lifestyles. And for many, kindergarten simply is no longer the assumed first step in a child's formal education, another sign of the way the pandemic and online learning upended the U.S. school system.

Kindergarten is considered a crucial year for children to learn to follow directions, regulate behavior and get accustomed to learning. Missing that year of school can put kids at a disadvantage, especially those from low-income families and families whose first language is not English, said Deborah Stipek, a former dean of the Graduate School of Education at Stanford University. Those children are sometimes behind in recognizing letters and counting to 10 even before starting school, she said.

But to some parents, that foundation seems less urgent post-



LOREN ELLIOTT/AP

Christina Engram spends time at home with daughter, Neveah, 6, left, and son, Choncey, 4, in Oakland, Calif., on Nov. 24. Engram decided to keep her daughter in child care another year instead of going to kindergarten after being told Neveah didn't have a spot in the after-school program.

pandemic. For many, kindergarten just doesn't seem to work for their lives.

Students who disengaged during the pandemic school closures have been making their way back to schools. But kindergarten enrollment remained down 5.2% in the 2022-23 school year compared with the 2019-20 school year, according to an Associated Press analysis of state-level data. Public school enrollment across all grades fell 2.2%.

Kindergarten means a seismic change in some families' lifestyles. After years of all-day child care, they suddenly must manage afternoon pickups with limited and expensive options for after-school care.

Some worry their child isn't ready for the structure and behavioral expectations of a public school classroom. And many think whatever their child misses at school can be quickly learned in first grade.

Christina Engram was set to send her daughter Neveah to kindergarten this fall at her neighborhood school in Oakland, until she learned her daughter would not have a spot in the after-school program there. That meant she would need to be picked up at 2:30 most afternoons.

"If I put her in public school, I would have to cut my hours, and I basically wouldn't have a good income for me and my kids," said Engram, a preschool teacher and a mother of two.

Engram decided to keep Neveah in a child care center for another year. Engram receives a state child care subsidy that helps her pay for full-time child care or preschool until her child is 6 and must enroll in first grade.

Compared with kindergarten,



JEFF CHIU/AP

Hannah Levy high-fives her daughter Aylah, 6, in Albany, Calif., on Nov. 8. Levy enrolled her daughter at Berkeley Forest School instead of a traditional kindergarten. She wanted her to enjoy being a kid.

she believed her daughter would be more likely to receive extra attention at the child care center, which has more adult staff per child.

"She knows her numbers. She knows her ABC's. She knows how to spell her name," Engram said. "But when she feels frustrated that she can't do something, her frustration overtakes her. She needs extra attention and care. She has some shyness about her when she thinks she's going to give the wrong answer."

In California, where kindergarten is not mandatory, enrollment for that grade fell 10.1% from the 2019-20 to 2021-22 school year. Enrollment seemed to rebound partially in the next school year, growing by over 5% in fall 2022, but that may have been inflated by the state's expansion of transitional kindergarten — a grade before kindergarten that is available to older 4-year-olds. The state Department of Education has not disclosed how many children last

school year were regular kindergartners as opposed to transitional students.

Many would-be kindergartners are among the tens of thousands of families that have turned to homeschooling.

Some parents say they came to homeschooling almost accidentally. Convinced their family wasn't ready for "school," they kept their 5-year-old home, then found they needed more structure. They purchased some activities or a curriculum — and homeschooling stuck.

Others chose homeschooling for kindergartners after watching older children in traditional school. Jenny Almazan is homeschooling Ezra, 6, after pulling his sister Emma, 9, from a school in Chino, Calif.

"She would rush home from school, eat dinner, do an hour or two of schoolwork, shower and go to bed. She wasn't given time to be a kid," Almazan said. Almazan also worried about school shootings

and pressures her kids might face at school to act or dress a certain way.

To make it all work, Almazan quit her job as a preschool teacher. Most days, the children's learning happens outside of the home, when they are playing at the park, visiting museums or even doing math while grocery shopping.

"My kids are not missing anything by not being in public school," she said. "Every child has different needs. I'm not saying public school is bad. It's not. But for us, this fits."

Kindergarten is important for all children, but especially those who do not attend preschool or who haven't had much exposure to math, reading and other subjects, said Steve Barnett, co-director for the National Institute for Early Education Research and a professor at Rutgers University.

"The question actually is: If you didn't go to kindergarten, what did you do instead?" he said.

Hannah Levy chose the Berkeley Forest School to start her daughter's education, in part because she valued how teachers infused subjects like science with lessons on nature. She pictured traditional kindergarten as a place where children sit inside at desks, do worksheets and have few play-based experiences.

"I learned about nature. We learned in a different way," daughter Aylah said.

But the appeal of a suburban school system had brought the family from San Francisco, and when it came time for first grade, Aylah enrolled at Cornell Elementary in Albany.

Early this fall, Levy recalled Aylah coming home with a project where every first grader had a page in a book to write about who they were. Some pages had only scribbles and others had legible print. She said Aylah fell somewhere in the middle.

"It was interesting to me because it was the moment I thought, 'What would it be like if she was in kindergarten?'" she said.

In a conference with Levy, Aylah's teacher said she was working with the girl on her writing, but there were no other concerns. "She said anything Aylah was behind on, she has caught up to the point that she would never differentiate that Aylah didn't go to Cornell for kindergarten as well," Levy said.

Levy said she feels good about Aylah's attitude toward school, though she misses knowing she was outside interacting with nature.

So does Aylah.

"I miss my friends and being outside," she said. "I also miss my favorite teacher."

MIDEAST

Gaza death toll exceeds 20,000, officials say

BY NAJIB JOBAIN
AND SAM MAGDY
Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Israel's war to destroy Hamas has killed more than 20,000 Palestinians, health officials in Gaza said Friday, as Israel expanded its offensive and ordered tens of thousands more people to leave their homes.

The deaths amount to nearly 1% of the territory's prewar population — the latest indication of the 11-week-old conflict's staggering human toll.

Israel's aerial and ground offensive has been one of the most devastating military campaigns in modern history, displacing nearly 85% of Gaza's 2.3 million people and leveling wide swaths of the tiny coastal enclave. More than half a million people in Gaza — a quarter of the population — are starving, according to a report Thursday from the United Nations and other agencies.

Israel declared war after Hamas' Oct. 7 attack, in which militants from Gaza stormed into southern Israel, killing some 1,200 people and taking some 240 hostages. Israel has vowed to keep up the fight until Hamas is destroyed and removed from power in Gaza and all the hostages are freed.

After many delays, the U.N. Security Council adopted a watered-down resolution Friday calling for

immediately speeding up aid deliveries to desperate civilians in Gaza.

The United States won the removal of a tougher call for an "urgent suspension of hostilities" between Israel and Hamas. It abstained in the vote, as did Russia, which wanted the stronger language. The resolution was the first on the war to make it through the council after the U.S. vetoed two earlier ones calling for humanitarian pauses and a full cease-fire.

Martin Griffiths, the U.N. humanitarian affairs chief, lamented the world's inaction.

"That such a brutal conflict has been allowed to continue and for this long — despite the widespread condemnation, the physical and mental toll and the massive destruction — is an indelible stain on our collective conscience," he wrote on the social media platform X.

Israel, shielded by the United States, has resisted international pressure to scale back its offensive. The military has said that months of fighting lie ahead in southern Gaza, an area packed with the vast majority of the enclave's 2.3 million people, many of whom were ordered to

flee combat in the north earlier in the war.

Evacuation orders have pushed displaced civilians into ever-smaller areas of the south as troops focus on the city of Khan Younis, Gaza's second-largest.

The military said late Thursday that it is sending more ground forces, including combat engineers, to Khan Younis to target Hamas militants above ground and in tunnels.

On Friday, it ordered tens of thousands of residents to leave their homes in Burej, an urban refugee camp, and surrounding communities in central Gaza, suggesting a ground assault there could be next.

In the city of Rafah, on the border with Egypt, an airstrike on a house killed six people, according to Associated Press journalists who saw the bodies at a hospital. Among the dead were a blind man, his wife and their 4-month-old child, said the infant's grandfather, Anwar Dhair.

Rafah is one of the few places in Gaza not under evacuation orders but has been targeted in Israeli strikes almost every day.

The air and ground campaign continued in the north, where Israel

says it is in the final stages of clearing out Hamas militants.

Mustafa Abu Taha, a Palestinian farm worker, said many areas of his hard-hit Gaza City neighborhood of Shijaiyah have become inaccessible because of massive destruction from airstrikes.

"They are hitting anything moving," he said of Israeli forces.

Gaza's Health Ministry said Friday that it has documented 20,057 deaths in the fighting and more than 50,000 wounded. It does not differentiate between combatant and civilian deaths. It has previously said that roughly two-thirds of the dead were women or minors.

Israel blames Hamas for the high civilian death toll, citing the group's use of crowded residential areas for military purposes and its tunnels under urban areas.

Israel's military says 139 of its soldiers have been killed in the ground offensive. It says it has killed thousands of Hamas militants, including about 2,000 in the past three weeks, but it has not presented any evidence to back up the claim.

For most of the war, Israel also stopped entry of food, water, fuel and other supplies except for truck convoys of aid from Egypt, which cover only a fraction of the needs in Gaza.

Because of insufficient aid enter-

ing Gaza, the extent of starvation has eclipsed the near-famines of recent years in Afghanistan and Yemen, and the risk of famine is "increasing each day," Thursday's report said.

An Israeli military liaison officer with Gaza said there is no food shortage in Gaza, saying sufficient aid is getting through.

"The reserves in Gaza Strip are sufficient for the near term," Col. Moshe Tetro said from the Kerem Shalom cargo crossing, without elaborating.

Israel opened the Kerem Shalom crossing several days ago amid international demands to increase the flow of aid. But the military on Thursday struck the Palestinian side of the crossing, killing four staffers, and the U.N. said it was unable to pick up aid there for delivery. It was not immediately known if the U.N. resumed work there Friday. The Israeli military said it was targeting militants.

The war has also pushed Gaza's health sector into collapse.

Only nine of its 36 health facilities are still partially functioning, all located in the south, according to the World Health Organization.

The agency reported soaring rates of diseases in Gaza, including a fivefold rise in diarrhea and increases in cases of meningitis, skin rashes and scabies.

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WORLD

Japan's Cabinet approves largest-ever defense budget

By HANA KUSUMOTO
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — Japan's Cabinet on Friday approved the country's largest-ever defense budget, a significant increase over current spending, for the coming fiscal year.

The fiscal 2024 defense budget amounts to 7.95 trillion yen, or about \$55.9 billion, a 16.5% increase over this year's budget, which was a record-high increase from the previous year, according to the budget document released by the Ministry of Defense.

Japan has seen 12 consecutive increases in defense spending, according to the document. It is also the second year since the three defense policy documents, National Security Strategy, National Defense Strategy, and Defense Buildup Program, have been adopted, which called for strengthening Japan's fundamental defense capability.

A government white paper

this year stressed diplomatic solutions to conflicts but said that Japan must also prepare to defend itself with increased deterrence.

"The international society is facing the greatest challenge since the end of the war, with existing order facing serious challenges and entering a new era of crisis," the budget document stated.

Japan aims to gradually increase its defense spending to 8.9 trillion yen, or about \$62.5 billion, by fiscal 2027, according to the document.

According to next year's budget, Japan will continue to work to strengthen the core areas of its defense, such as standoff defense capabilities and integrated air and missile defense, including Aegis-equipped ships, and improve mobility, secure ammunition and strengthen defense facilities.

The approved budget includes 734 billion yen, or about \$5.16 bil-

lion, for stand-off defense capability, such as 32.3 billion yen to develop new surface-to-ship and surface-to-surface guided missiles, new items in the budget.

It also allocated about 1.25 trillion yen, or about \$8.78 billion, for integrated air and missile defense capabilities to effectively respond to increasingly diverse and complex airborne threats.

This includes 373 billion yen, or about \$2.62 billion, for two destroyers equipped with the Aegis system, an integrated radar and missile system capable of air, surface and underwater defense. The destroyer plan replaces a previously scrapped plan for a land-based Aegis Ashore missile defense system. The destroyers will be deployed in 2027 and 2028, according to the document.

Also, 75.7 billion yen, or about \$532.4 million, is set aside for joint development of a glide phase interceptor with the United States.

Falling Christmas tree kills woman as storms blow through Europe

Associated Press

BERLIN — A storm brought heavy rain and strong winds across northern Europe overnight and into Friday, bringing down trees and prompting warnings of flooding on the North Sea coast. A woman in Belgium was fatally injured by a falling Christmas tree, while another tree killed a person in the Netherlands.

The 65-foot Christmas tree collapsed onto three people at a busy market in Oudenaarde in western Belgium late Thursday, killing a 63-year-old woman and injuring two other people. The Christmas market was immediately canceled.

A woman who was struck by a falling tree on Thursday in the eastern Dutch town of Wilp later died of her injuries, her employer said.

Pre-Christmas rail travelers in parts of Germany faced disruption. National railway operator

Deutsche Bahn said Friday there were cancellations on routes from Hamburg and Hannover to Frankfurt and Munich, while long-distance services from Hamburg northward to Kiel and Flensburg weren't running, among other disruptions.

The company said that falling trees damaged overhead electric wires or blocked tracks largely in northern Germany, but also in the central state of Hesse.

In Hamburg, the Elbe River flooded streets around the city's fish market, with water waist-high in places.

German authorities warned of a storm surge of up to nearly 10 feet or more above mean high tide on parts of the North Sea coast on Friday.

Streets around harbors flooded overnight in some Dutch North Sea towns including Scheveningen, the seaside suburb of The Hague.

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NATION

Some Black Americans see link with Palestinians

BY NOREEN NASIR
AND AARON MORRISON
Associated Press

Cydney Wallace, a Black Jewish community activist, never felt compelled to travel to Israel, though “Next year in Jerusalem” was a constant refrain at her Chicago synagogue.

The 39-year-old said she had plenty to focus on at home, where she frequently gives talks on addressing anti-Black sentiment in the American Jewish community and dismantling white supremacy in the United States.

“I know what I’m fighting for here,” she said.

That all changed when she visited Israel and the West Bank at the invitation of a Palestinian American community organizer from Chicago’s south side, along with two dozen other Black Americans and Muslim, Jewish and Christian faith leaders.

The trip, which began Sept. 26, enhanced Wallace’s understanding of the struggles of Palestinians living in the West Bank under Israeli military occupation. But, horrifyingly, it was cut short by the unprecedented Oct. 7 attacks on Israel by Hamas militants. In Israel’s ensuing bombardment of the Gaza Strip, shocking images of destruction and death seen around the world have mobilized activists in the U.S. and elsewhere.

Wallace, and a growing number of Black Americans, see the Palestinian struggle in the West Bank and Gaza reflected in their own fight for racial equality and civil rights. The recent rise of protest movements against police brutality in the U.S., where structural racism plagues nearly every facet of life, has connected Black and Palestinian activists under a common cause.

But that kinship sometimes strains the more than century-long alliance between Black and Jewish activists. From Black American groups that denounced the U.S. backing of Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territory to Black protesters demonstrating for the Palestinians’ right to self-determination, some Jewish Americans are concerned that support could escalate the threat of antisemitism and weaken Jewish-Black ties fortified during the Civil Rights Movement.

“We are concerned, as a community, about what we feel is a lack of understanding of what Israel is about and how deeply Oct. 7 has affected us,” said Bob Kaplan, executive director of The Center for Shared Society at the Jewish Community Relations Council of New York.

“Antisemitism has to be seen as a reprehensible form of hate ... as any form of hate is,” he said. “Antisemitism is as real to the Ameri-



Jabari Shaw holds a Palestinian flag during an Oakland Unified School District board meeting in Oakland, Calif., on Nov. 8. The board is considering a resolution calling for a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas.

JANE TYSKA, BAY AREA NEWS GROUP/AP

“The Americans and the Israelis are conducting the same policies against us and the Black Americans. So we should support each other.”

Mousa Qous

executive director of the African Community Society Jerusalem

can Jewish community, and causes as much trauma and fear and upset to the American Jewish community, as racism causes to the Black community, or anti-Asian feeling causes to the Asian community, or anti-Muslim feeling causes in the Muslim community.”

But, he added, many Jews in the U.S. understand that Black Americans can have an affinity for the Palestinian cause that doesn’t conflict with their regard for Israel.

According to a poll earlier this month from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, Black adults were more likely than white and Hispanic adults to say the U.S. is too supportive of Israel — 44% compared to 30% and 28%, respectively. Black Americans, however, weren’t any more likely than others to say the U.S. is not supportive enough of the Palestinians.

Generational divides also emerged, with younger Americans more likely to say the U.S. is too supportive of Israel, according to the poll. Even within the Jewish American community, some younger and other progressive Jews tend to be more critical of some of Israel’s policies.

Black American support for the Palestinian cause dates back to the Civil Rights Movement, through prominent left-wing voices, including Malcolm X, Stokely

Carmichael and Angela Davis, among others. More recent rounds of violence, including the 2021 Israel-Hamas war and now Israel’s unprecedented bombing campaign against Gaza shown live on social media have deepened ties between the two movements.

“This is just the latest generation to pick up the mantle, the latest Black folks to organize, build and talk about freedom and justice,” said Ahmad Abuznaid, the director of the U.S. Campaign for Palestinian Rights.

During a week-long truce between Israel and Hamas as part of the recent deal to free dozens of hostages seized by Hamas militants, Israel released hundreds of Palestinian prisoners and detainees. Many were teenagers who had recently been picked up in the West Bank for minor offenses like stone-throwing and had not been charged.

Some Black Americans who watched the Palestinian prisoner release and learned about Israel’s administrative detention policy, where detainees are held without trial, drew comparisons to the U.S. prison system. While more than two-thirds of jail detainees in the U.S. have not been convicted of a crime, Black people are jailed at more than four times the rate of white people, often for low-level offenses, according to studies of the American judicial system.

“Americans like to talk about being innocent until proven guilty. But Black folks are predominantly and disproportionately detained in the United States regardless of whether anything has been proven. And that’s very similar to Israel’s administrative detention,” said Julian Rose, an organizer with a Black-run bail fund in Atlanta.

Rami Nashashibi, executive director of the Inner-City Muslim Action Network, invited Wallace and the others to take part in the trip called “Black Jerusalem” — an exploration of the sacred city through an African and Black American lens.

They met members of Jerusalem’s small Afro-Palestinian community — Palestinians of Black African heritage, many of whom can trace their lineage in the Old City back centuries.

“Our Black brothers and sisters in the U.S. suffered from slavery and now they suffer from racism,” said Mousa Qous, executive director of the African Community Society Jerusalem, whose father emigrated to Jerusalem from Chad in 1941 and whose mother is Palestinian.

“We suffer from the Israeli occupation and racist policies. The Americans and the Israelis are conducting the same policies against us and the Black Americans. So we should support each other,” Qous said.

During the trip, Wallace was dismayed by her own ignorance of the reality of Palestinians living under Israeli occupation.

At an Israeli checkpoint outside the Western Wall, the Jewish holy site, Wallace said her group was asked who was Jewish, Muslim or Christian. Wallace and the others showed IDs issued for the trip, but

when an Israeli officer saw her necklace depicting her name in Hebrew, she was waved through, while Palestinians and Muslims in the group were subjected to intense scrutiny and bag checks.

“Being there made me wonder if this is what it was like to live in the Jim Crow-era” in America, Wallace said.

Israel’s Law of Return grants all Jews the right to settle permanently in Israel and acquire Israeli citizenship — a concept that drew support from many Black American civil rights leaders, including A. Phillip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, Dorothy Height, Shirley Chisholm and Martin Luther King, Sr., the father of the slain civil rights leader.

Over the last decade, however, Black Americans and the Palestinians have also found growing solidarity.

In 2020, the murder of George Floyd by a white police officer resonated in the West Bank, where Palestinians drew comparisons to their own experiences of brutality under occupation, and a massive mural of Floyd appeared on Israel’s hulking separation barrier.

In 2014, protests in Ferguson, Mo., erupted after the police killing of Michael Brown, a Black teenager, which gave rise to the nascent Black Lives Matter movement. While police officers in Ferguson fired tear gas at protesters, Palestinians in the occupied West Bank tweeted advice about how to manage the effects of the irritants.

“There tends to be this doubt or astonishment that Black people care about other oppressed people around the world,” said Phil Agnew, co-director of the national advocacy group, Black Men Build, who has taken four trips to the West Bank since 2014.

It would be a mistake, Agnew said, to ignore significant numbers of Black and Jewish Americans who are united in their support for the Palestinians.

None of the members of the “Black Jerusalem” trip anticipated it would come to a tragic end with the Oct. 7 Hamas attacks in which some 1,200 people were killed in Israel and about 240 taken hostage. Since then, more than 18,700 Palestinians have been killed in Israel’s blistering air and ground campaign in Gaza, now in its third month. Violence in the West Bank has also surged.

Back home in Chicago, Wallace has navigated speaking about her support for Palestinians while maintaining her Jewish identity and standing against antisemitism. She says she doesn’t see those things as mutually exclusive.

“I’m trying not to do anything that alienates anyone,” she said. “But I can’t just not do the right thing because I’m scared.”

NATION

OK consumers, self-checkout here to stay

At times fast and frustrating, tech evolves with times

BY ANNE D'INNOCENZIO
Associated Press

NEW YORK — The promise of self-checkout was alluring: Customers could avoid long lines by scanning and bagging their own items, workers could be freed of doing those monotonous tasks themselves and retailers could save on labor costs.

All that has happened since the rollout of self-checkout but so has this: Customers griping about clunky technology that spits out mysterious error codes, workers having to stand around and monitor both humans and machines, and retailers contending with theft.

“Going to the grocery store used to be simple, and now it’s frustrating,” said Cindy Whittington, 66, of Fairfax, Va. “You’re paying more. You’re working harder to pay for merchandise at their store. And it’s become an ordeal to check out. I should get a 5% discount.”

In 2021, self-checkout usage represented 30% of transactions, almost double from 2018, according to a survey of retailers by FMI, an industry group. And 96% of retailers surveyed offer self-checkout.

But the technology is also facing a reckoning amid the critical holiday shopping season.

Some retailers are adding restrictions, while others are pulling out completely.

This past fall, Walmart removed self-checkout kiosks in three stores in Albuquerque, N.M., as part of a location-by-location approach, but on the whole it is adding more than it is taking away. To reduce wait times, Target is now limiting the number of items to 10 that shoppers can scan in a handful of stores nationwide.

British supermarket chain Booths has been getting rid of its self-checkout at the majority of its stores for the past 18 months in reaction to customer backlash. A year ago, grocery chain Wegmans, citing “losses,” discontinued its self-checkout app that lets shoppers scan and bag items while they shop. However, it continues to offer self-checkout registers at its stores.

Self-checkout, first tested in supermarkets in the late 1980s, gained momentum 20 years ago. But grocers ramped it up even more three years ago to address the pandemic-induced severe labor shortages.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics says technological advances such as self-checkout and online sales have been the main driver in the



PHOTOS BY ANNE D'INNOCENZIO / AP

Shoppers use self-checkout at a Uniqlo store in New York. Self-checkout faces a reckoning of sorts just as retailers are in the midst of their busiest time of the year.

“I get a big kick out of sliding the product across the reader, and it goes beep. There’s a certain satisfaction to it.”

Ellen Wulforst
shopper

declining number of cashier jobs, although there are no precise estimates on how many cashiers have been replaced by self-checkout.

According to Labor Department data, there are about 1.2 million people currently working as cashiers, compared to 1.4 million in 2019 and the BLS expects the number to fall by another 10% over the next decade.

“We are at an inflection point where if Americans are willing to do this and show an interest, then stores will probably expand it because they want to slash that labor cost,” said Christopher Andrews, associate professor and chair of sociology at Drew University and author of “The Overworked Consumer: Self-Checkouts, Supermarkets and the Do-It-Yourself Economy.”

“But right now they’re just seeing downside. They’re seeing frustrated customers. They’re seeing increased costs and shoplifting.”

Theft is indeed an issue.

Andrews said a technology that relies on shoppers to do their own scanning and punch in product quantities tempts even law-abiding citizens to be dishonest. It’s easy to just scan every other item or punch in codes for a cheaper item. Shoppers could also make honest mistakes, leading to losses



ANNE D'INNOCENZIO / AP

A self-checkout station is shown at a Uniqlo store in New York.

for stores.

John Catsimatidis, chairman and CEO of Red Apple Group, owner of Gristedes and D’Agostino’s food stores in New York City, said he has no interest in self-checkout because of theft and he noted that the technology is not where it needs to be.

“Dishonest people will always find a way to slip a package through,” he said.

Still, self-checkout isn’t going away, especially with still stubborn labor shortages. And plenty of people love it.

Ellen Wulforst, 65, said using self-checkout brings back her childhood when she played with a toy register.

“There’s something childish and fun about it,” Wulforst said. “I get a big kick out of sliding the product across the reader, and it goes beep. There’s a certain satisfaction to it.”

For Robin Wissmann Doherty of South Salem, N.Y., who has a progressive neurodegenerative disease and uses a walker, self-

checkout makes her shopping experience easier.

The 67-year-old said she likes to shop at Stop & Shop because it has a “scan and go” technology that allows her to scan her items with a device as she shops and then tallies up her bill.

She can either pay at a kiosk or at a manned register.

“The laser gun works for disabled people,” she said.

Stew Leonard Jr., president and CEO of Stew Leonard’s, a supermarket chain that operates stores in Connecticut, New York and New Jersey, said 25% of its customers use self-service. That number could be up to 50% in the next few years.

He noted one-third of its registers are unmanned, but he’s in a “holding pattern” and is thinking of limiting the number of items to be scanned.

Retailers have been adding cameras or sensors at kiosks to monitor shoppers.

Kroger, for example, has deployed artificial intelligence tech-

nology at a majority of stores that triggers alerts when something is amiss.

For example, if a shopper fails to scan a particular item successfully, the system flags the error on the screen and prompts the customer to self-correct. If customers are unable to resolve the issue themselves, a light above the self-checkout blinks to attract workers’ attention.

There have been inroads for more advanced technology.

Amazon’s “just walkout technology” is in more than 70 Amazon-owned stores and more than 100 third-party retailers across the U.S., including airports.

It uses sophisticated cameras and allows shoppers to enter the store with a credit or debit card or by simply hovering their palm over an Amazon One palm payment device, and then walk out without having to stand in line to check out.

Japanese fashion retailer Uniqlo has RFID chips embedded in price tags to power a self-checkout system at its Fifth Avenue store in Manhattan, as part of a wide scale rollout at its stores.

Customers place their items in bins at self-service stations and pay — without having to scan items.

Still, for some workers who were supposed to be liberated from the monotonous task of ringing up customers, the tedium just comes in a different form.

Bernadette Christian, 59, a worker at Giant Food in Clinton, Md., mans six self-service stations at once, and she’s afraid to help or confront shoppers who she said have become angrier since the pandemic.

“It would be easy for us to be cashiers, and it would be a lot more safer in today’s world,” she said.

NATION

Study: Flooding drives millions to move

Climate-driven migration patterns emerge in report

BY MICHAEL PHILLIS
AND CAMILLE FASSETT
Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — Flooding is driving millions of people to move out of their homes, limiting growth in some prospering communities and accelerating the decline of others, according to a new study that details how climate change and flooding are transforming where Americans live.

In the first two decades of the 21st century, the threat of flooding convinced more than 7 million people to avoid risky areas or abandon places that were risky, according to a paper Monday in the journal *Nature Communications* and research by the risk analysis organization First Street Foundation.

Climate change is making bad hurricanes more intense and increasing the amount of rain that storms dump on the Midwest. And in the coming decades, researchers say millions more people will decide it is too much to live with and leave. First Street found that climate change is creating winners and losers at the neighborhood and block level.

Zoom out to consider the whole country and Americans appear to be ignoring the threat of climate change when they decide where to live. Florida, vulnerable to rising seas and strong storms, is growing fast, for example. But that misses an important way people behave locally. Most moves are short distance; people stay near family, friends and jobs.

Jeremy Porter, head of research at First Street, said “there’s more to the story” than population gains in Sun Belt states.

“People want to live in Miami. If you live in Miami already, you’re not going to say, ‘Oh, this property is a 9 (out of 10 for flood risk), let me move to Denver,’” Porter said. “They are going to say, ‘This property is a 9, but I want to live in Miami, so I’m going to look for a 6 or a 7 or a 5 in Miami.’ You are going to think about relative risk.”

That’s what First Street projects over the next three decades: blocks in Miami with a high chance of getting hit by a bad storm are more likely to see their population drop even though a lot of the city is expected to absorb more people.

Behind these findings is very detailed data about flood risk, population trends and the reasons people move, allowing researchers to isolate the impact of flooding even though local economic



NOAH BERGER/AP

Brenda Ortega, 15, salvages items from her flooded Merced, Calif., home on Jan. 10. Flood risk and climate change are pushing millions of people to move from their homes, according to a new study by the risk analysis firm First Street Foundation.



ROBERT F. BUKATY/AP

Joe Stanhope and Tori Grasse carry furniture from the flooded outdoor patio of the Quarry Tap Room, on Dec. 19, in Hallowell, Maine. Nathan Stanhope, rear, wades through the floodwater to retrieve more items. Waters continue to rise in the Kennebec River following a severe storm Dec. 18.

conditions and other factors motivate families to pick up and live somewhere else. They analyzed population changes in very small areas, down to the census block.

Some blocks have grown fast and would have grown even faster if flooding wasn’t a problem, according to First Street. Expanding but flood-prone places could have grown nearly 25% more — attracting about 4.1 million more people — if that risk were lower.

When First Street projected out to 2053, many of the new climate abandonment areas were in Michigan, Indiana and other parts of

the Midwest. Flood risk is just one factor driving this change and it doesn’t mean communities are emptying out, said Philip Mulder, a professor focused on risk and insurance at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

“People can live in smarter places within those communities. That’s just as true for Detroit as it is for Miami,” he said.

When people know a home is prone to flooding, they are less likely to buy it. Some states, however, don’t require that flood history be disclosed, according to Joel Scata, a senior attorney on the

Natural Resources Defense Council’s climate adaptation team.

Even for people who get assistance to move, the choice can be excruciating. Socastee, a community near Myrtle Beach, S.C., flooded not only when hurricanes hit, but sometimes just when it rained hard and water would reach doorways and saturate yards. First Street’s data says Horry County won’t grow quite as fast over the next three decades because of flood risk.

One resident who endured repeated flooding said it “makes you sick” with worry whenever it

storms and rips away your sense of security.

Terri Straka decided to move from the area but had a hard time convincing her parents to do the same. Eventually, she brought them to a house for sale and said it could be their dream home. They reluctantly agreed to move.

“Them being able to visualize what a future might look like is absolutely critical to people being able to move. They have to imagine a place and it needs to be a real place that they can afford,” said Harriet Festing, executive director of Anthropocene Alliance that supports communities like Socastee hit by disaster and climate change.

Older people move less often and it takes money to move, so if people don’t get enough assistance and don’t have the means, they are more likely to stay in risky areas. When people do start to move, it can create momentum for others to depart, leaving behind fewer residents to support a shrinking local economy, according to Matt Hauer, a demographic expert and study author at Florida State University.

But there are also winners. Louisville, Ky., Detroit and Chicago as well as several other big cities have a lot of space with little flood risk, which will be attractive in the future, First Street found.

The University of Wisconsin’s Mulder said of cities like Chicago: “They shouldn’t discount their relative benefits that will come from being a safer place in a warming world.”

NATION

Growing concerns for Christmas tree breeders

Soil changes from warming climate force farmers to adapt their crops

BY MELINA WALLING
Associated Press
CHICAGO — Christmas tree breeder Jim Rockis knows what it looks like when one dies long before it can reach a buyer.

Rockis farms trees in West Virginia and Pennsylvania, where he and other producers often grow their iconic evergreens outside their preferred habitat higher in the mountains. But that can mean planting in soil that's warmer and wetter — places where a nasty fungal disease called *Phytophthora* root rot can take hold, sucking moisture away from saplings and causing needles to crisp to burnt orange.

"After a while, it just gets to the core of it," Rockis said. "They just wither away."

Christmas tree growers and breeders have long prepared for a future of hotter weather that will change soil conditions, too. People buying trees may not have noticed a difference in availability this year and may not even in the next couple; the average Christmas tree takes eight to 10 years to reach marketable size.

But that means the trees being grown right now are the beloved holiday traditions of tomorrow for millions of families.

"You've got to start thinking about how you are going to adapt to this," Rockis said.

That's why researchers like Gary Chastagner, a Washington State University professor called "Dr. Christmas Tree" for his decades of work on firs and other festive species, have been working with breeders like Rockis to see if species from other parts of the world — for instance, Turkish fir — are better adapted to conditions being

wrought by climate change. In the past two years, surprisingly high numbers of evergreens died of fungal disease outbreaks in Washington and Oregon. Chastagner has been concerned that changing soil temperature and moisture "may change the frequency at which we would see some *Phytophthora* that are more adapted to warmer soil conditions." Some may attack trees even more aggressively, he added.

Chastagner and his team are doing more sampling work to understand the causes of these outbreaks and whether they represent a pattern that could extend into the future.

But some scientists say there isn't enough research on warming soil temperatures that could affect Christmas trees and many other crops, especially trees.

A European study this year in the journal *Nature Climate Change* found that soil heat extremes are increasing faster than air heat extremes, which can affect the health of grasslands, forests and some agricultural areas.

The same weather conditions that can put trees under stress favor many pests and diseases that can attack them, such as insects and fungi. The changes in forests and farm fields might not happen overnight, said Bert Cregg, a professor of horticulture and forestry at Michigan State University. But over time with a warming climate, "some trees may become more difficult to grow," he said.

Changes in soils also have implications for soil carbon storage, a climate change solution that the U.S. has already put a lot of money and effort into researching. Warmer soil temperatures reduce its



PHOTOS BY JASON REDMOND/AP

Gary Chastagner, a Washington State University professor called "Dr. Christmas Tree" shows an example of a less-desirable tree due to fewer top branches, grown in a small plantation of Turkish fir trees to produce disease and insect-resistant Christmas trees at the school's Puyallup Research and Extension Center on Nov. 30 in Puyallup, Wash.

long-term carbon storage ability, partly because microscopic life underground is affected, researchers say.

"The activity of these microbes usually increases with temperature, so it's less stable to store carbon there," said Almudena Garcia-Garcia, one of the *Nature Climate Change* authors and a postdoctoral scientist at the Helmholtz Center for Environmental Research — UFZ in Leipzig, Germany.

Although getting more information on how changing soils will affect crops and carbon alike is vital, scientists sometimes struggle to get enough data, said Melissa Widhalm, associate director and regional climatologist at Purdue University's Midwestern Regional Climate Center. Since soil temperature is measured differently than air temperature, the records don't go back very far, making it difficult to understand long-term trends.

Widhalm, who was not involved with the *Nature Climate Change* research, said she wished more studies like it existed in other places like North America, and that the results are compelling because they combined physical observations in the ground with satellite data and computer simulations. "This paper did a nice job quantifying soil temperature-moisture relationships that scientists know exist but are difficult to measure," she said.

Garcia-Garcia said her team plans to study soil temperature changes more in the future, in more locations if they can. "All the



Chastagner shows Trojan and other fir seedlings at the school's Puyallup Research and Extension Center.



Elliott holds up a petri plate of the fungal disease *Phytophthora* growing from diseased roots as part of a Trojan fir greenhouse trial.



Plant Pathology Researcher Marianne Elliott talks about the effects of the fungus *Armillaria* and *Phytophthora* on tree stump samples taken from Christmas tree farms to determine possible climate-related mortality at Washington State University.

sources of information indicate this is happening," she said. "We are always studying extreme events from measurements in the air. But what is happening below our feet?"

WORLD

Jesus' birthplace preps for muted holiday amid war

By JULIA FRANKEL
AND JALAL BWAITEL
Associated Press

BETHLEHEM, West Bank — Bethlehem is gearing up for a subdued Christmas, without the festive lights and customary Christmas tree towering over Manger Square, after officials in Jesus' traditional birthplace decided to forgo celebrations due to the Israel-Hamas war.

The cancellation of Christmas festivities, which typically draw thousands of visitors, is a severe blow to the town's tourism-dependent economy. But joyous revelry is untenable at a time of immense suffering of Palestinians in Gaza, said Mayor Hana Haniyeh.

"The economy is crashing," Haniyeh told The Associated Press earlier this month. "But if we compare it with what's happening to our people and Gaza, it's nothing."

More than 20,000 Palestinians have been killed and more than 50,000 wounded during Israel's blistering air and ground offensive against Gaza's Hamas rulers, according to health officials there, while some 85% of the territory's 2.3 million residents have been

displaced. The war was triggered by Hamas' deadly assault Oct. 7 on southern Israel in which militants killed about 1,200 people, most of them civilians, and took more than 240 hostages.

Since Oct. 7, access to Bethlehem and other Palestinian towns in the Israeli-occupied West Bank has been difficult, with long lines of motorists waiting to pass military checkpoints. The restrictions have also prevented many Palestinians from exiting the territory to work in Israel.

City leaders fret about the impact the closures have on the small Palestinian economy in the West Bank, already struggling with a dramatic fall in tourism since the start of the war. The Palestinian tourism sector has incurred losses of \$2.5 million a day, amounting to \$200 million by the end of the year, the Palestinian minister of tourism said Wednesday.

The yearly Christmas celebrations in Bethlehem — shared among Armenian, Catholic and Orthodox denominations — are major boons for the city, where tourism accounts for 70% of its yearly income. But the streets are



MAHMOUD ILLEAN/AP

An installation of a scene of the Nativity of Christ with a figure symbolizing baby Jesus lying amid the rubble, in reference to Gaza, inside the Evangelical Lutheran Church in the West Bank town of Bethlehem, on Dec. 10.

empty this season.

With most major airlines canceling flights to Israel, over 70 hotels in Bethlehem have been forced to close, leaving some 6,000 employees in the tourism sector unemployed, according to Sami Thaljieh, manager of the Sancta Maria Hotel.

"I spend my days drinking tea and coffee, waiting for customers who never come. Today, there is no tourism," said Ahmed Danna, a Bethlehem shop owner.

Haniyeh said that while Christmas festivities have been canceled, religious ceremonies will

take place, including a traditional gathering of church leaders and a Midnight Mass.

"Bethlehem is an essential part of the Palestinian community," the mayor said. "So at Midnight Mass this year, we will pray for peace, the message of peace that was founded in Bethlehem when Jesus Christ was born."

George Carlos Canawati, a Palestinian journalist, lecturer, and scout leader, called his city "sad and heartbroken." He said his Boy Scout troop will conduct a silent march across the city, in mourning of those killed in Gaza.

"We receive the Christmas message by rejecting injustice and aggression, and we will pray for peace to come to the land of peace," said Canawati.

The enthusiasm of Bethlehem's Christmas festivities have long been a barometer of Israeli-Palestinian relations.

Across the Holy Land, Christmas festivities have been put on hold. There are 182,000 Christians in Israel, 50,000 in the West Bank and Jerusalem and 1,300 in Gaza, according to the U.S. State Department. The vast majority are Palestinians.

Nuns, monks provide delicacies to win fans and pay bills

By GIOVANNA DELL'ORTO
AND MARÍA TERESA
HERNÁNDEZ
Associated Press

MEXICO CITY — It's the fortnight before Christmas and all through the world's Catholic convents, nuns and monks are extra busy preparing the traditional delicacies they sell to a loyal fan base even in rapidly secularizing countries.

For many monastic communities, especially those devoted to contemplative life and with vows of poverty, producing cookies, fruitcakes, even beer for sale is the only means to keep the lights on.

But it's also an enticing way to strengthen their ties with lay people who flock to their doors — and in some cases their websites — in the holiday season.

"Our kitchen is a witness to God's love to those outside," said Sister Abigail, one of the 10 cloistered nuns of the Perpetual Adorers of the Most Blessed Sacrament in Mexico City.

"We are in the Lord's presence, and we're always thinking that it will make someone happy, the



LAURA LEON/AP

Customers buy marmalades and cakes made by cloistered nuns, at a market at the Reales Alcazares in Seville, Spain, on Dec. 5.

person who will eat this, or they will gift it and someone will receive it with joy," added the sister, whose convent makes sweets, egg-nog and its bestseller, tamales.

Most monasteries have to be financially self-sufficient. Many in countries like Spain have to maintain not only an aging, shrinking cohort of monks and nuns, but also monumental, centuries-old build-

ings, said Fermín Labarga, a professor of church history at the University of Navarra in Pamplona.

Since the small-scale farming with which they supported themselves for centuries stopped being profitable decades ago, most have turned to crafts, including the wildly popular gourmet food production that uses only homemade ingredients and recipes passed

down generations.

"An immense majority of people goes to buy the nuns' sweets," said Pipa Algarra, who in her 90 years in the southern Spanish city of Granada has come to know each of the dozens of convents' specialties. Among the oldest is alfajor, a cookie with roots dating back more than a thousand years when this region was a Muslim kingdom, while this year's novelty is sushi rolls introduced by Filipino sisters.

"The nuns, aside from supporting themselves with this, make really good sweets. And the prayer that comes with it is priceless," added Algarra, who remembers as a child going to convents with her friends to get dough trimmings from the Communion wafers the nuns also produced.

As a cloistered order, the 14 Poor Clares sisters in Carmona, Spain, have to work to earn their daily bread — in their case, making some 300 "English cakes" and 20 other kinds of sweets a month to sell at their 15th-century convent turnstile, said the abbess, Verónica Nzula.

There's a summer slowdown when southern Spain is so sweltering nobody takes coffee breaks with cookies, Nzula quipped.

But the production revs up for Christmas as the sweets are also sold at a special market devoted to convent products in nearby Seville.

"While we work, we pray the rosary and we think of the people who will eat each sweet," said Nzula. She learned the recipes from older sisters after arriving more than 20 years ago from Kenya, like all but one of the current sisters.

Most nuns and monks involved in preparing the delicacies are quick to point out that their main mission is to pray, not to cook — and that doing both involves finding a delicate balance.

"We brew to live, we don't live to brew," said Brother Joris, who supervises the brewery at Saint-Sixtus Abbey in Westvleteren, Belgium. "There needs to be equilibrium between monastic life and economic life. We don't want to end up as a brewery with a little abbey on the side."

MOVIES

Acting outside her comfort zone

How Carey Mulligan became Felicia Montealegre in Bradley Cooper's Leonard Bernstein biopic, 'Maestro'

By LINDSEY BAHR

Associated Press

Carey Mulligan recently realized that she's spent much of her professional career holding back.

That might be surprising to hear for an actor with two Oscar nominations, a Tony nod and a laundry list of extraordinary films and enviable roles. She just didn't get precious about her work, and preferred the old Laurence Olivier adage: "Why don't you just try acting?"

That changed in the past several years, in no small part because of Bradley Cooper and "Maestro," an all-encompassing project that pushed her out of that comfort zone to play Felicia Montealegre, the elegant actor and wife of Leonard Bernstein.

As with "Promising Young Woman," "Maestro," now streaming on Netflix, would prove to be a transformative experience for her understanding of herself as an actor and what she's capable of. It's likely to earn her another Oscar nomination and possibly her first win.

Mulligan spoke to The Associated Press about the journey to becoming Montealegre, and the people who helped her get there.

The voice

Mulligan had become used to only ever getting a few months of prep for most of her roles. Suddenly she had years, which was both wonderful and daunting after Cooper approached her about the role in the summer of 2018. In addition to learning everything she could about Montealegre and even giving herself over to "dream work" with Cooper, she immediately got to work studying her character's unique dialect. Montealegre was born in Costa Rica, raised in Chile in a multilingual household and educated at British school in Santiago.

Luckily, there were long recorded interviews that Mulligan listened to over and over. She also worked closely with famed dialect coach Tim Monich, who had met Montealegre once.

"She was just as you see her in the Murrow Person-to-Person interview. I was a rube-ish 26-year-old and I had never met anyone as easy, relaxed, and elegant as she," Monich wrote in an email. "In a room with her, what a voice. And Carey has that, too... Carey's voice is one of her glories, and over quite a few roles we have played and altered it for different characters."

His process, Monich wrote, includes something he calls Language Lab, "in which we listen to the real voices and then imitate them, riff on them, and play with them until they are the actors' real voices, too."

Mulligan and Cooper often met and just talked as the characters so that by the time they got on set they wouldn't have to think about it.

The paintings

Felicia was a painter and Mulligan was not. An earlier script included scenes of



ABOVE: NETFLIX; RIGHT: REBECCA CABAGE, INVISION/AP

Carey Mulligan as actress Felicia Montealegre, the wife of conductor and composer Leonard Bernstein, in a scene from "Maestro." The film is now streaming on Netflix.

her painting on camera, and Mulligan promptly signed up for a few months of classes. During a bout of COVID-19, in which she found herself quarantined in Santiago after having visited Montealegre's extended family there, she asked Netflix to send her an easel, paints and canvas and she spent the next 10 days copying Montealegre's paintings.

Though the scene didn't end up in the movie, her paintings did. Kind of. Mulligan laughed that production designer Kevin Thompson put them in the "deep, deep background."

"They were dotted around the set. I don't know if you can see any of them though. To be honest, they're not very good," Mulligan said. "And the one that is in the hallway is NOT me. That was original Felicia."

The look

"Maestro" spans decades and required Mulligan to play her from age 24, in 1946 when she met Bernstein at a party, to her death in 1978 at age 56. Hair and makeup had to make Mulligan, 38, look both younger and older as well as depict her evolving, and famous, clothing and hair styles through the '50s, '60s and '70s.

In the early scenes, shot in black and white and on film, she learned that costumes that pop in that format might not actually look great in real life — but Oscar

winning costume designer Mark Bridges ("The Arist") was proficient in both. Her favorite of the many looks, though, was probably the dramatic blue dress she wore for the performance of "MASS."

"It was the best dress for walking away," Mulligan said. "I was like, this is amazing because she just can't bear to be there to watch him receive the accolades."

It was an interesting experience seeing herself age, through makeup and prosthetics, too.

"I absolutely loved being in my late 50s. I don't know why. I just thought, 'This is probably my sweet spot. Like, I think this is where I feel in my soul,'" she said. "The makeup was so unbelievably real, but it sort of presents this slightly odd mortality crisis that you look at yourself go, well, this is exactly what I will look like if I ever got incredibly sick. It's a little trippy."

One time it even confused a doctor who had come to set to prescribe her some antibiotics and didn't believe that she was 12-weeks pregnant, asking her "are you sure" and "how do you know?"

"I was like why is this doctor being so weird? Then I looked in the mirror and realized oh, it's because Sian (Grigg) and Duncan (Jarman) made me look 56 and it would have been a miracle baby," Mulligan said. "I went to makeup and said 'a doctor has just looked at me and thought I was in my late 50s. So kudos because



"I absolutely loved being in my late 50s. I don't know why. I just thought, 'This is probably my sweet spot.'"

Carey Mulligan

on seeing herself age through makeup and prosthetics in "Maestro"

that's pretty good makeup."

The connection

For Mulligan, a review that calls her "lovely" is just about the worst thing that a person can write. She was sad to learn that that's exactly how most critics described Montealegre's work.

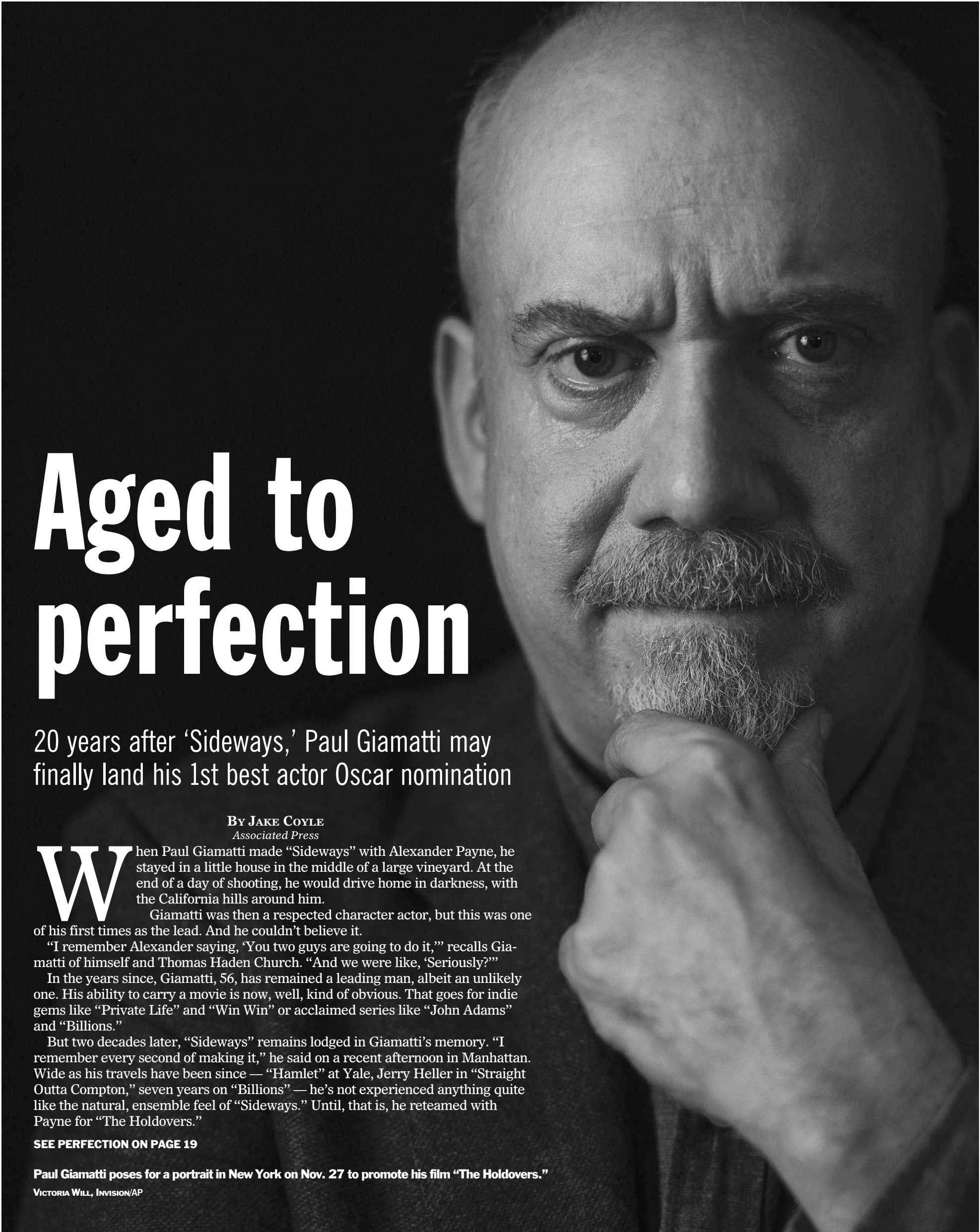
"She got a lot of 'she's lovely' and this sort of patronizing, mediocre, middle-of-the-road reviews," Mulligan said. "I just thought, oh, gosh, you know, to be married to Leonard Bernstein, who's like touched by God and then get a review that's like 'she's fine.'"

But something else resonated too. On one of the recordings, Mulligan said, "She was talking about the Actors Studio and she was saying she finds it just so embarrassing that these actors are throwing themselves around crying and telling all their secrets and pretending to be animals and how ridiculous."

She has a theory that like herself, Montealegre was just nervous to fully commit because she didn't want to fail. "Maestro" gave Mulligan the space to finally give herself over to becoming the character.

"She just never could quite do it. That really hit me."

MOVIES



Aged to perfection

20 years after ‘Sideways,’ Paul Giamatti may finally land his 1st best actor Oscar nomination

BY JAKE COYLE
Associated Press

When Paul Giamatti made “Sideways” with Alexander Payne, he stayed in a little house in the middle of a large vineyard. At the end of a day of shooting, he would drive home in darkness, with the California hills around him.

Giamatti was then a respected character actor, but this was one of his first times as the lead. And he couldn’t believe it.

“I remember Alexander saying, ‘You two guys are going to do it,’” recalls Giamatti of himself and Thomas Haden Church. “And we were like, ‘Seriously?’”

In the years since, Giamatti, 56, has remained a leading man, albeit an unlikely one. His ability to carry a movie is now, well, kind of obvious. That goes for indie gems like “Private Life” and “Win Win” or acclaimed series like “John Adams” and “Billions.”

But two decades later, “Sideways” remains lodged in Giamatti’s memory. “I remember every second of making it,” he said on a recent afternoon in Manhattan. Wide as his travels have been since — “Hamlet” at Yale, Jerry Heller in “Straight Outta Compton,” seven years on “Billions” — he’s not experienced anything quite like the natural, ensemble feel of “Sideways.” Until, that is, he reteamed with Payne for “The Holdovers.”

SEE PERFECTION ON PAGE 19

Paul Giamatti poses for a portrait in New York on Nov. 27 to promote his film “The Holdovers.”
VICTORIA WILL, INVISION/AP

MOVIES

Perfection: Giamatti-Payne reunion took years to materialize

FROM PAGE 18

"I've never done anything like it again," says Giamatti, "except this is the closest thing to it."

"The Holdovers," playing in theaters and available digitally, marks the long-incoming reunion of Giamatti and Payne. Just as in "Sideways," their alchemy produces something wry and moving. The setting — a 1970s boarding school — has moved from California sunshine to snowy New England, and from pinot to whisky.

But a faint connection between the two movies is there. Giamatti plays Paul Hunham, an irascible classics professor, widely disliked by his students, who's forced to spend Christmas break with a handful of them. The movie, a broad comedy at first, peels away a tender humanistic drama around the trio of Hunham, a bright, less well-off student (Dominic Sessa) and the school's grieving head cook (Da'Vine Joy Randolph).

For Giamatti, the bookends of "Sideways" and "The Holdovers" inevitably prompt reflection on the distance he's traveled in the intervening decades.

"All the stuff in between, I mean the life changes, the professional stuff — it's just insane. My whole life changed. I got divorced. Massive change," Giamatti says.

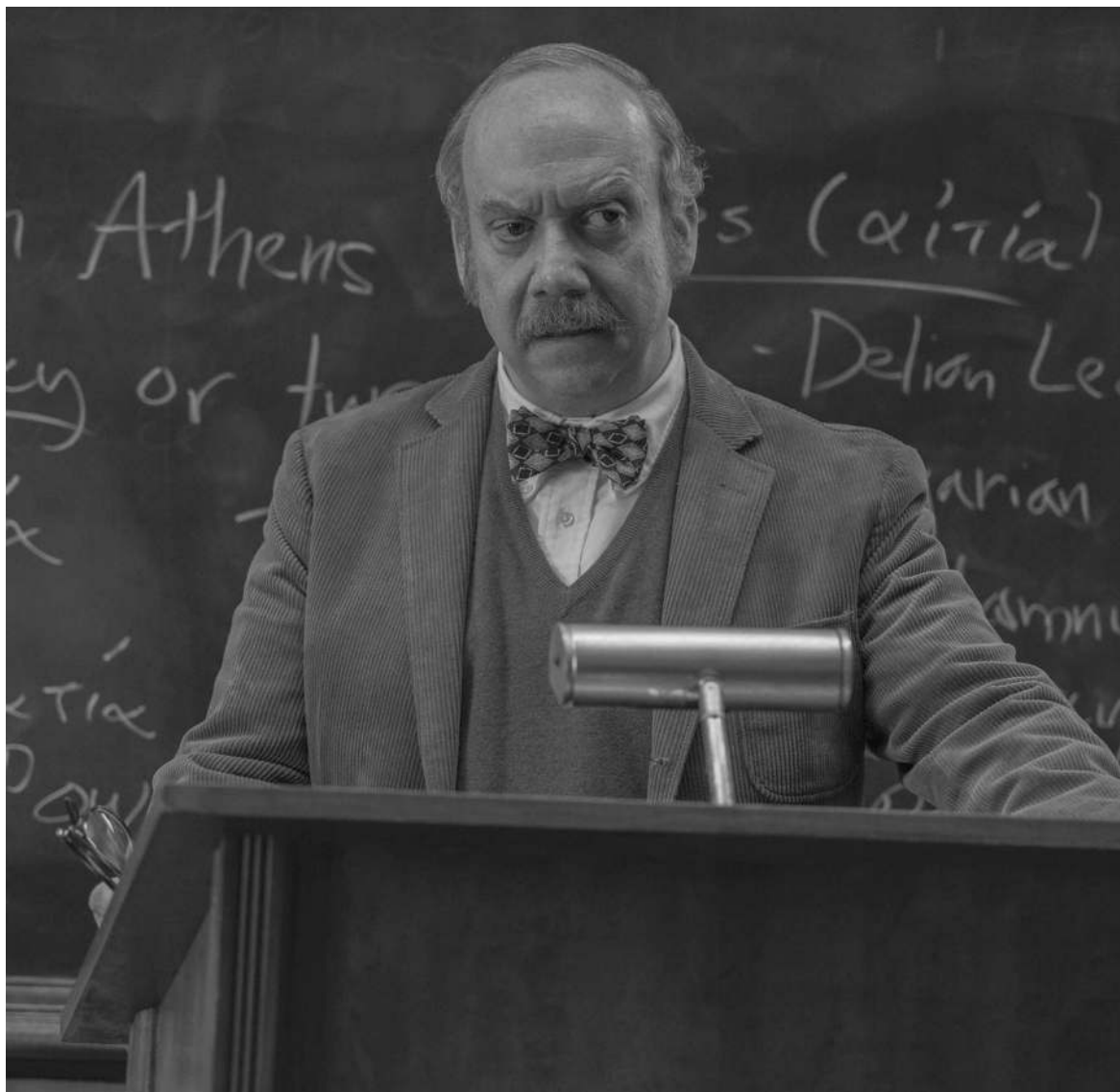
"I never talked to Alexander about this, but I thought there were similarities between the two characters. But it's a guy 20 years on from the other guy. And probably there's a lot of me 20 years on going into it."

Hunham, like Giamatti's struggling writer Miles Raymond of "Sideways," is a prickly misanthrope stuck in a midlife stasis. In Giamatti's hands, the dialogue of an erudite grouch sings. One example: "Christ on a crutch, what sort of fascist hash foundry are you running?"

"I kind of like this character better, for some reason," Giamatti says. "He's not as self-pitying. He's got a little more zest. He, like, enjoys being the a—hole that he is."

Payne and Giamatti have talked for years about making another movie, including a private eye film ("It'd be so great," says Giamatti) and a Western ("I'm like, I would do anything in a Western"). But it wasn't until Payne got together with screenwriter David Hemingson with the idea of loosely adapting the 1935 French comedy "Merlusse" that they hit on the right project.

"I wanted to work with that guy again for 20 years," says Payne. "I've been lucky to work with a lot of terrific actors, but we had a really terrific professional relationship making 'Sideways.' I was waiting for the right



FOCUS FEATURES/AP

Paul Giamatti is pictured in a scene from "The Holdovers." Giamatti plays an irascible classics professor, widely disliked by his students, who's forced to spend Christmas break with a handful of them.

"That would be lovely if (an Oscar nomination) happened. I'm not counting on anything. But for the first time, I do feel like putting myself behind it because I'd like (the film) to get acknowledged in some way."

Paul Giamatti

thing — and created it. I told David Hemingson: We're writing for Paul Giamatti."

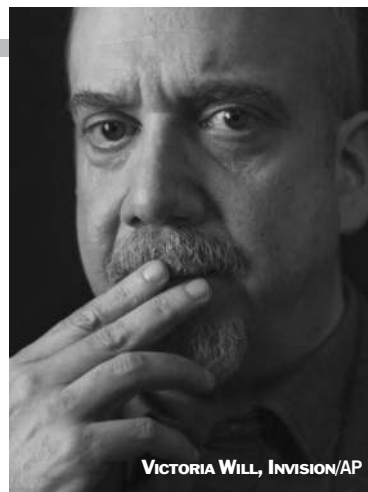
"He's just the best actor," Payne adds. "He's the finest actor. Not casting aspersions on others, I just think there's nothing he cannot do."

The part of Hunham also had connections to Giamatti's own upbringing. His father, A. Bartlett Giamatti, was an academic. Aside from being president of Yale and commissioner of Major League Baseball, he was also a professor of English Renaissance literature. His mother, Toni,

taught at the Hopkins School, the New Haven, Conn., prep school. The younger Giamatti, himself, attended the boarding school Choate as a day student.

"I think it's why he was like, 'You'll get this character. This is sort of written for you.' Because he knows I went to a school like that, and I had a background like that," says Giamatti. "He even knows I'm interested in Roman history. A lot it was kind of a big gift of like: You kind of know all of this."

Asked for an example of how he and Payne work together,



Giamatti describes a scene from "Sideways" when his character runs into his ex-wife and learns she's newly married and pregnant. Miles, crushed, struggles to keep up a cheery facade.

"We had done three takes or something, and he came up to me and said, 'Don't stop smiling. Whatever you do, whatever she says, you can't stop smiling,'" says Giamatti. "That was one of the best examples to me of how an actor and a director can work together. He saw something I was doing and he just kept pulling it out of me."

On "The Holdovers," Giamatti and Payne had their first argument. In a scene toward the end

of the film, Hunham is in a tense meeting with the parents of Sessa's character. In the middle of it, Giamatti decided to sit down — an instinctual choice that, he felt, showed Hunham was breaking protocol.

"He came up to me and he said, 'Talk to me about sitting down,'" recalls Giamatti.

They discussed Giamatti's reasoning and as they began to shoot it, Payne announced: "Sitting down, I buy it." But by then, Giamatti had rethought it. He asked to try it standing up. Each had come around to the other's idea. Giamatti decided he liked standing better.

"And that was the biggest disagreement we had," says Giamatti, laughing.

During the actors strike, Giamatti and his castmates (Randolph and Sessa have also been widely celebrated for their performances), weren't able to promote the film. Normally, missing out on interviews wouldn't be something Giamatti would lose sleep over.

"But it was funny, I kept saying to my girlfriend, 'I actually want to be talking about it. I think I'm frustrated that I can't,'" Giamatti says.

Twenty years ago, Giamatti was surprisingly passed over for an Oscar nomination for "Sideways." This time, many are predicting he'll receive his first Academy Award nomination for best actor. (He was nominated for best-supporting actor in 2006 for "Cinderella Man.")

"That would be lovely if it happened. I'm not counting on anything," Giamatti says. "But for the first time, I do feel like putting myself behind it because I'd like it to get acknowledged in some way. Whether it's me or not, that's fine. If the movie does, if (Randolph) does, if Hemingson does or Alexander does — it'd be great if somebody does."

If Giamatti is nominated for best actor, it would be an overdue acknowledgement of one this era's finest actors, one who's long imbued everyman characters with wit and warmth. Calling them "schlubs" wouldn't do justice for the justice he does them. So good at it is Giamatti that you might mistake the very down-to-earth actor for a regular guy, too.

But don't be fooled. Take Giamatti's new podcast, Chinwag, in which he and author Stephen Asma follow their fascinations with things like Sasquatch. Regular guy?

"I'm not. I'm really into weird (expletive)," Giamatti says, cackling. "I've always been into really weird (expletive). I said to my friend, 'I'm tired of not talking about Sasquatch and sitting on the fact that I'm fascinated by UFOs and ghosts.'"

GALLERY



ANJA NIEDRINGHAUS/AP

Hundreds of Marines gather at Camp Commando in the Kuwait desert during a Christmas Eve visit by Santa Claus in 2002.

Far from home for the holidays

Spending the holidays in remote and sometimes dangerous places far from home and loved ones is nothing new for men and women in uniform.

But that doesn't mean service members can't find ways to create a little piece of home and holiday cheer.

Stars and Stripes honors them all through images that capture the spirit of holidays past.

Spc. Adam Wells, an armament soldier with the 4th Battalion (Attack Reconnaissance), 4th Aviation Regiment, watches as celebrities inspect his AH-64 Apache attack helicopter at a Christmas event with the USO on Dec. 24, 2018, at Camp Dahlke West in Afghanistan.

J.P. LAWRENCE
Stars and Stripes



MATT MILLHAM/Stars and Stripes

Master Sgt. Tamara Gregory decorates a Christmas tree in Al Faw Palace in Baghdad, a former residence of Saddam Hussein, on Dec. 13, 2006. Gregory and a coworker, Chief Petty Officer Phillis Noiseaux, spearheaded the operation to put the tree in the palace. Both were assigned to the Secretary of the Combined Joint Staff, Multi National Force — Iraq.

GALLERY



MEGAN McCLOSKEY/Stars and Stripes

Pfc. Derik Briskey, left, 21, and Sgt. Justin Caughey, 26, reservists with Company B, 6th Engineer Support Battalion serving in Iraq with the 9th Engineer Support Battalion out of Okinawa, build a gingerbread house on Christmas Eve 2006.



Wounded service members at the 7th General Hospital in England raise a nonalcoholic toast to the impending arrival of what would be the last year of World War II, Dec. 31, 1944. When the photo ran in the Stars and Stripes, London edition issue of Jan. 2, 1945, the original caption read: "This is the sober toast to the New Year by men who know what life is like on the Western Front — GIs recuperating from wounds in the general hospital in England. The beverage in those massive mugs is milk. Yes, we said milk."

Stars and Stripes



J.P. LAWRENCE/Stars and Stripes

1st Lt. Hannah Levine, of Eagle Troop, 2nd Squadron, 1st Cavalry Regiment, found what she described as the one living tree at the remote Camp Dahlke West in Afghanistan, Dec. 24, 2018. She had the tree chopped down and decorated it. "I was raised in a family where we don't believe in fake Christmas trees," said Levine, 24, of Sugarloaf, Pa.



HEATH DRUZIN/Stars and Stripes

Christmas cake in the chow hall on Dec. 25, 2015, at Resolute Support headquarters in Kabul, Afghanistan.



JAMES LINN/Stars and Stripes

Santa Claus hands out presents to children, dependents of South Vietnamese Special Forces soldiers stationed at Nahon Cho, Vietnam, on Dec. 21, 1968. Some Montagnard children from the area also joined in on the fun.



A live turkey was sent as a Christmas present to the Green Berets of Detachment 35, "B" Company, 5th Special Forces Group, at Nahon Cho, South Vietnam, on Dec. 21, 1968. Hopefully, they knew what to do with it.

JAMES LINN/Stars and Stripes

Marines of Headquarters Company, Combat Logistics Regiment 37, throw candy from their "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer" float during the Camp Kinser, Okinawa, Christmas parade on Dec. 7, 2007. Sgt. Cody Perry said the float was his idea and it took the unit about three weeks to turn the up-armored 7-ton truck into a reindeer.

CINDY FISHER/Stars and Stripes



APPRECIATION

Andre Braugher was seriously good

Actor knew how to wield his extraordinary genius, even when it was used in service of a punchline

By TRAVIS M. ANDREWS
The Washington Post

You didn't want to end up in the box with Andre Braugher. That is to say, you wouldn't want to be interrogated by Detective Frank Pembleton, or Capt. Raymond Holt, or any of the other lawmen and soldiers that Braugher — who died Dec. 11 at 61 from what was later confirmed to be lung cancer — inhabited in his career. The interrogation room was his greatest stage. As Pembleton, his fiercely religious and religiously fierce detective on NBC's "Homicide: Life on the Street," he described how a person might end up there.

"You are a citizen of a free nation. Having lived your adult life in the land of guaranteed civil liberties, you commit a crime of violence, whereupon you are jacked up, dragged down to police headquarters and deposited in a claustrophobic anteroom containing three chairs, a table and cold brick walls," he intoned.

"Have a seat, please."

Braugher tackled serious roles with an almost frightening intensity. Trained at Juilliard, his career began in 1989 as Kojak's partner, Detective Winston Blake, on the small screen and as a free man who joins the Union Army in the film "Glory." A few years later, he became Pembleton, the resolute, self-righteous Baltimore detective on "Homicide," a role that earned him his first of two Emmys. (The second was for the FX limited series "Thief.") "I've worked with a lot of wonderful actors," David Simon, who worked on that show and who wrote the book on which it was based, posted on X. "I'll never work with one better" than Braugher.

If Pembleton is one pillar of his TV-acting legacy, Holt — the no-nonsense leader of a band of clownish (but still competent) detectives in the sitcom "Brooklyn Nine-Nine" — is the other.

Holt is consistently exasperated by his people, even when he's impressed by their work. Playing opposite Andy Samberg and a bunch of other goofballs, Braugher used his gravitas to elevate the comedy, allowing us to imagine what would happen if one of his aging hard-bitten cops had been plucked off the set of a gritty drama and dropped into a sitcom universe.

No episode exemplified this better than Season 5's "The Box" (of course), which finds a tuxedo-clad Holt en route to the

theater. But Detective Jake Peralta (Samberg) has a dentist (Sterling K. Brown) suspected of murdering his business partner in the interrogation room. They don't have enough evidence to put him away, so they need a confession. "An interrogation with a ticking clock and everything on the line," Holt says. "I better call Kevin and tell him I won't be attending the opera. There's someone else I'd rather hear sing."

He then calls his husband and reminds him the tickets are under his name. He spells it out: "H. O. L. T."

What follows is an homage to "Homicide," which also featured an episode-length interrogation, only this time it's played for laughs. Holt and Peralta spend the night trying to break the dentist. At one point, Holt loses his temper during an argument about the validity of a dentist considering himself a doctor.

"Most people want to become actual doctors," he says.

"That's ridiculous," replies Brown's character. "It's not like we're college professors calling ourselves doctors. ... When someone has a heart attack on a plane, do they yell out, 'Yo, does anybody here have an art history Ph.D.?'"

Holt flies off the handle, a white-hot temper taking over — the full-on Pembleton. But instead of screaming something Pembletonian, such as, "Son, you are ignorance personified!" he says this: "A Ph.D. is a *doctor-ate*."

It's literally *describing* a doctor. ... The problem here is that medical practitioners have co-opted the word 'doctor.' I know we live in a world where ANY-

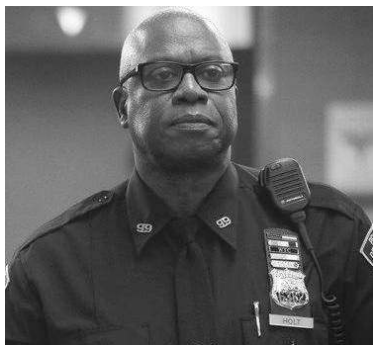
THING CAN MEAN ANYTHING AND NOBODY EVEN CARES ABOUT ETYMOLOGY!"

Braugher was always in complete control of his instrument: a baritone that could fluctuate between plush velvet and serrated blade. His intensity could be a warm embrace or a deadly chokehold.

Consider another line from that same "Brooklyn Nine-Nine" episode:

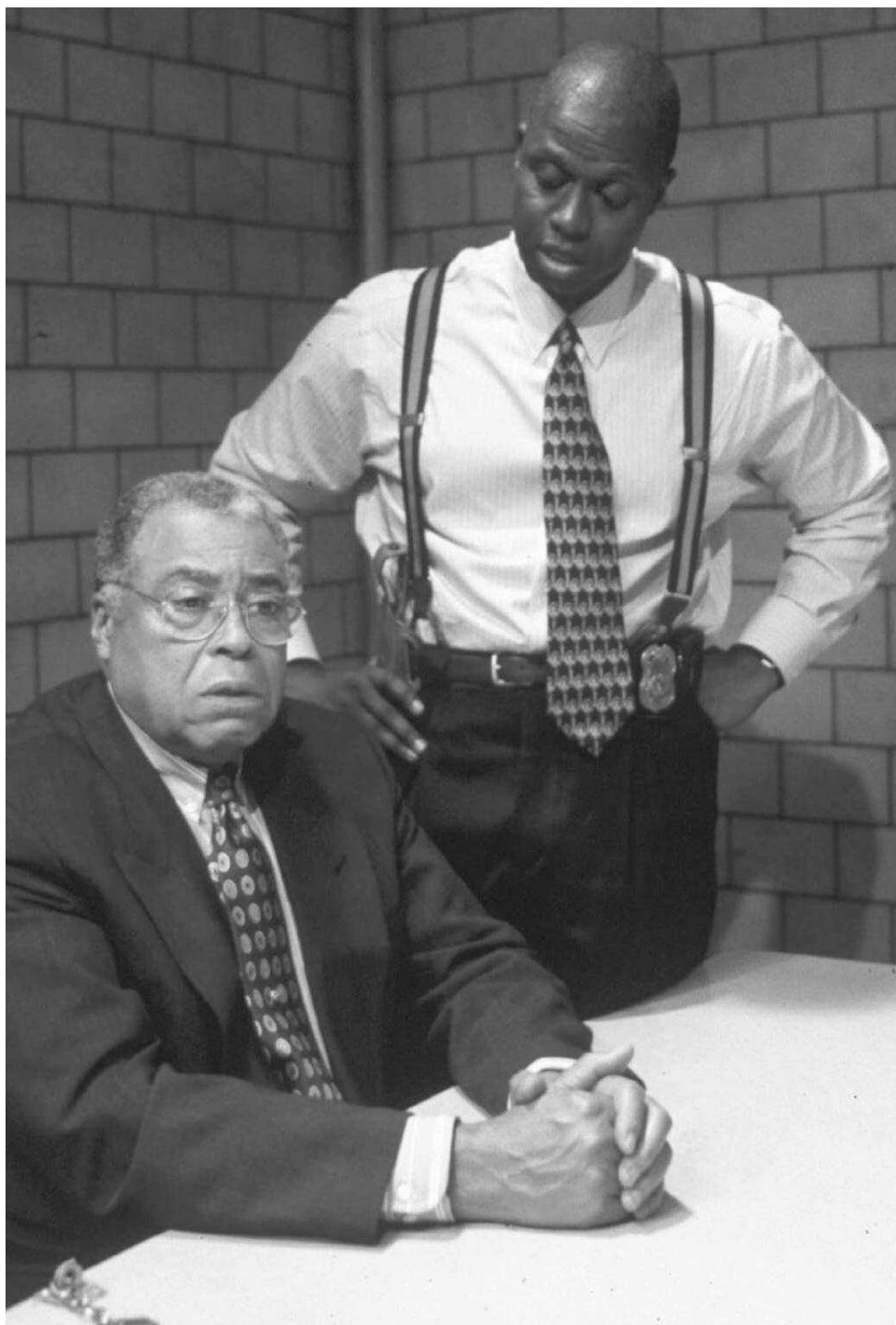
"I imagine a bear mistook the rotting corpse for a female of its species and had intercourse with it," Holt says, remarking on a victim's body that was found by hikers in a desecrated state. "Nothing I haven't seen before."

Those are grisly sentences, the stuff of true crime, twisted thrillers and terrifying horrors. Braugher gets the laugh by stating it matter-of-factly, as if he's put off by having to explain something so obvious.



NBC/TNS

Braugher, as Capt. Raymond Holt, used his gravitas and baritone voice to elevate the comedy of "Brooklyn Nine-Nine."



NBC/AP

Andre Braugher as Detective Frank Pembleton, right, questions Felix Wilson, played by guest star James Earl Jones, in an episode of "Homicide: Life on the Street." Braugher won the first of his two career Emmy Awards for the Pembleton role.

Some people say the role of Holt ruined Braugher's career. These people are wrong. Whether he was playing the title role in Shakespeare's "Henry V," or investigator Tommy Goodman in "Primal Fear," or the thief in "Thief," Braugher practiced total and absolute dedication to understanding the characters. Just because one was in a 22-minute network sitcom didn't mean it required less conscientiousness, less commitment. So when an episode of "Brooklyn Nine-Nine" revolved around Holt's knowledge of "Sex and the City," Braugher began studying.

"It deeply bothered Andre that he didn't know the show, so we spent days getting him up to speed. He was quizzing his wife at night too. He cared so deeply and was so, so funny," wrote Ryan Case, a director and editor who worked on the show, on X. "My 'challenge' editing him in the 'Brooklyn' pilot was finding takes where he wasn't smiling. We wanted to save that for the end. He was like a giddy schoolchild doing his first comedy and it was so wonderful."

The most impressive thing about Braugher, as many have noted since his death, might be the opportunities he didn't take, because his family — his wife and fellow "Homicide" actress Ami Brabson

and their three sons — came first. Alan Sepinwall wrote in Rolling Stone about his time interviewing the actor: "The part that stayed with me wasn't about Andre Braugher, world-class thespian, but rather when he talked about how he had worked out to a science how to maximize time with Brabson and the kids, despite working 3,000 miles away from them."

In a 2020 interview with Variety, Braugher talked about how he hadn't done as much as he might have, if his priorities had been different. "I think it could have been larger," he said of his career. "I think it could have spanned more disciplines: directing, producing, all these other different things. But it would have been at the expense of my own life."

"I haven't been in Australia. I haven't been in Prague. I haven't been shooting in San Paolo or whatever," he said. "I've got three boys, and I want them to know me as someone other than the guy who takes them to the circus every once in a while. I wanted to be there through the course of their life because I know how important fathers are."

The rest of us were lucky for the time we got to spend watching Braugher in the box, grateful we weren't the ones in there with him.

TELEVISION

Fighting to expand the ‘Tam Fam’

Tamron Hall wants to keep the tradition of daytime talk shows alive

By STEPHEN BATTAGLIO
Los Angeles Times

After veteran TV journalist Tamron Hall made a deal in 2018 to host her own daily daytime talk show, she heard plenty of warnings about the challenges ahead. Tyra Banks told Hall it would be the toughest job she’s ever had. Sally Jessie Raphael told her to “watch her back.” Oprah Winfrey, who remains the model for all aspiring hosts, said: “I don’t know how you do it being a mom, because it takes every ounce of you.”

When another talk show host Hall met at a party sounded off on the topic, she had a retort ready.

“I said, ‘My grandfather was a sharecropper who was born in 1901, and he couldn’t read,’” the Texas native recalled. “I make my living with words. I’ll figure it out.”

Hall did figure it out. On Dec. 4, her show “Tamron Hall” hit its 760th episode, making it the second-longest-running syndicated talk show in the history of the Walt Disney Co. The program airs on Disney’s ABC stations, covering 95% of the U.S.

Hall was nominated for the talk host award at this month’s Daytime Emmy Awards. It was her third such nomination, and she’s won the category twice. In 2020, Hall was the first freshman host to get the honor. (Kelly Clarkson won this year.)

While Hall has mastered the grind of daily hosting, the program also has to contend with the current TV landscape upended by the consumer shift to streaming video.

The daytime talk show was once a major staple for audiences, providing a portal into pop culture and a source of companionship for people at home during the day.

But like the rest of the traditional TV business, the genre has been in a steady decline in recent years as it now competes against big budget scripted programs on streaming services, which viewers can watch any time on demand. Even older viewers, long the most reliable daytime viewers, are spending more time streaming true crime shows during the day.

“It’s harder to get people to follow any kind of ongoing habitual pattern of watching talk shows,” said Hilary Esty McLoughlin, an independent producer and former syndication program executive.

Over the last two years, three of the longest-running daytime talk hits, “Ellen,” “Dr. Phil” and “Rachel Ray,” ended their runs. Only one significant new entry is on tap for next season: Production company Debmar-Mercury is developing a show with comic actor Ken Jeong.

The number of people watching traditional TV during the day continues to slide. In the current season that began in September, an average of 8.65 million people are viewing television in daytime, according to Nielsen data, a 9% decline from a year ago.

With ratings and ad revenues in decline, local TV stations that have long depended on syndicated programming are also looking to cut costs and are asking for more hours from their news departments. Fox TV stations will launch new syndicated programs only after a summer trial run can prove they are viable.

“Tamron Hall,” which debuted in 2019, has managed to defy the downward ratings trend. The show averaged 978,000 viewers through mid-November, a slight increase over last year, according to Nielsen data. Others in the genre including “The Kelly Clarkson Show,” “The Drew Barrymore Show,” “The Jennifer Hudson Show” and “Sherri” with host Sherri Sheppard, have all

seen drops of 8% to 11%.

Hall believes that viewers — whom she refers to as her “Tam Fam” — are still finding the program, as some repeat episodes perform better in the ratings than the first time they ran. Making it through five seasons has been for the host especially satisfying, given the path she took to get the show launched.

Hall, 53, was a top anchor at NBC News for more than 10 years after a successful run in local TV that started in Bryant College Station, Texas. She had a following on MSNBC, where she had a daily newscast, and won true crime fans on ID Discovery, where she hosted “Dateline: Crime.”

In 2014, she became the first Black woman to be a co-host of NBC’s morning franchise “Today” as part of the program’s third hour — an historic designation she took pride in.

But in 2017, NBC News hired Megyn Kelly, who emerged as a hot property at Fox News. The network converted “Today’s” third hour into a vehicle for her.

Hall lost her role on the third hour, a move criticized by the National Association of Black Journalists, and she left the network. (A year later, Kelly was forced out at NBC after she made comments on her show defending the use of blackface on Halloween).

Hall believes her departure from NBC actually deepened her bond with viewers. “We’ve all experienced the feeling of not being chosen,” she said. “People saw a version of their own lives in that. It’s been instilled into people rooting for me.”

Daytime talk show hosts may again never dominate the cultural conversation, or top celebrity earnings list, the way Winfrey did during much of her 29-season run. But the format still provides a platform that can be a launching pad for other projects.

Hall has become an author with a series of novels featuring a character named Jordan Manning, a journalist with a background in forensic science. The first title, “As the Wicked Watch,” has been optioned for a possible TV project at CBS, and a second book is out in March.

She also sold a children’s book and is at work on a cookbook. With experience as an executive producer of her own program — a condition she insisted on — she has also been approached about producing other shows.

Hall has a paparazzi photo of herself leaving NBC Studios at Rockefeller Center for the last time.

“Sometimes I cry when I look at it,” she said, recalling how she was 48 at the time and didn’t know what was next for her. “Now, I walk out the door and people are happy to see me.”

Tamron Hall has a Daytime Emmy Award for talk show host out of her three nominations. “Tamron Hall,” which debuted in 2019, recently hit its 760th episode.

CJ RIVERA, INVISION/AP



MUSIC

LESTER BANGS AT 75

BY GEORGE VARGA
The San Diego Union-Tribune

Oscar-winning film director Cameron Crowe was just 15 when he met fellow San Diego native Lester Bangs here in 1973, but he remembers the encounter with his early mentor as if it happened last week.

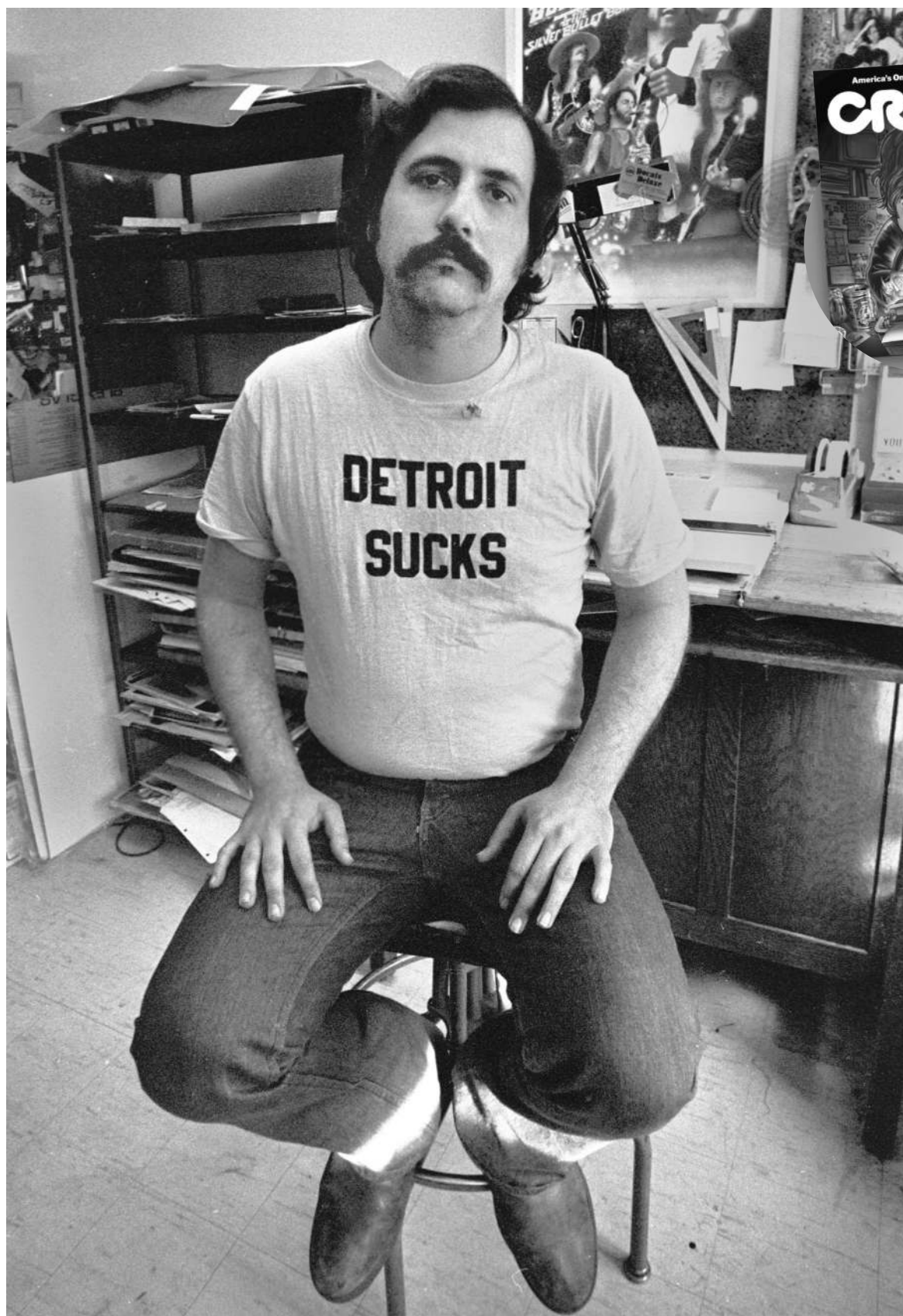
“Meeting Lester himself, at an interview he was doing at (radio station) KPRI while he was visiting home for the holidays, he struck me like an avuncular uncle,” said Crowe of Bangs, whose seminal writing was celebrated in Jim DeRogatis’ 2000 book, “Let It Blurt — The Life and Times of Lester Bangs, America’s Greatest Rock Critic.”

“He had a black leather jacket, a size too small, a friendly face, a young man’s paunch, an overgrown mustache and a red Guess Who shirt,” Crowe continued. “The mustache and physique reminded me of Meathead (Rob Reiner’s character) in the ‘All in the Family’ (TV series). He gave me some advice but treated me as an equal. He also said: ‘I have to catch the bus back to El Cajon. I’m heading over to see my ex-girlfriend so she can break up with me again’.”

Actor Philip Seymour Hoffman portrayed Bangs in Crowe’s acclaimed 2000 film “Almost Famous,” which in 2019 was transformed into a musical at the Old Globe and opened on Broadway last November. Dec. 14 marked what would have been Bangs’ 75th birthday.

Bangs was born in Escondido, Calif., grew up in El Cajon and died in New York in 1982 at the age of 33 from an apparently accidental overdose of Darvon, a

Legacy of ‘America’s Greatest Rock Critic’ endures 4 decades after his death



ABOVE: COURTESY OF CHARLIE AURINGER; INSET: SHORE FIRE MEDIA AND CREEM/TNS

Above: An undated photo of Lester Bangs in the offices of Creem magazine. Bangs died in 1982 at 33. Inset: The cover of the new issue of Creem magazine, nearly half of which features Bangs’ work.

prescription drug. His impact has been well documented in various mediums.

The 1981 Ramones’ song “It’s Not My Place (In the 9 to 5 World)” includes the line: Hangin’ out with Lester Bangs. R.E.M.’s Michael Stipe gives him

a fond shoutout in the band’s 1987 classic “It’s the End of the World As We Know It (And I Feel Fine),” singing: “Mountains sit in a line / Leonard Bernstein, Leonid Brezhnev, Lenny Bruce and Lester Bangs.”

In 1990, the now-deceased

author David Foster Wallace dedicated his first co-written book, “Signifying Rappers,” to Bangs. The mustachioed music critic also inspired Ariel Pink’s 2006 song, “Cuz You’re Dead (Lester Bangs).”

In 2018, Bangs was the subject

of the New York Public Theatre production “How to be a Rock Critic.” It debuted in San Diego in 2015 as part of La Jolla Playhouse’s annual DNA New Work Series.

The foundation for the play is DeRogatis’ seminal Bangs book, the first biography ever written about a rock critic. A veteran music critic and creative writing professor, DeRogatis now uses some of Bangs’ work in his curriculum at Columbia College Chicago.

“The mind boggles, thinking of Lester at age 75, but then we can say the same of Mick Jagger at 80,” DeRogatis said.

“To some extent, our rock ‘n’ roll heroes remain frozen in time at the point when we discovered them. In Lester’s case, it might be the proto-punk of his El Cajon/San Diego days, or the gonzo legend of his Creem (magazine) period in the mid-’70s, or the already older, wiser sage who wrote for The Village Voice in his New York days toward the end, when I began reading every word he wrote.

“I like to think of that Lester, but happier and still with us, using that one-of-a-kind incisive intellect and cutting wit to celebrate or rant against every corner of our complicated culture.”

‘Almost scary-brilliant’

Grossmont College English professor Raul Sandelin, a long-time champion of Bangs’ work, wrote, produced and directed the 2013 film documentary “A Box Full of Rocks: The El Cajon Years of Lester Bangs.” For more than a decade he hosted the annual Lester Bangs Memorial Reading events at Grossmont College, located in El Cajon, which in 2019 featured DeRogatis as a special guest. Bangs was a Grossmont student between 1966 and 1968.

The 1987 book “Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung: The Work of a Legendary Critic: Rock ‘n’ Roll as Literature and Literature as Rock ‘n’ Roll” features dozens of articles that Bangs wrote for an array of publications, including Rolling Stone, Creem and The Village Voice. One chapter includes 15 articles Bangs penned for Creem.

After being dormant for years, Creem was reborn in 2022 as a

SEE BANGS ON PAGE 25

MUSIC

Bangs: Critic covered wide range of genres with passion, wit

FROM PAGE 24

subscription-only print and on-line magazine. “Psychotic Reactions” was edited by Greil Marcus, an esteemed music author who — like Bangs — is a former writer for Rolling Stone. It was followed in 2003 by “Mainlines, Blood Feasts & Bad Taste: A Lester Bangs Reader,” which was compiled by another Rolling Stone and Creem alum, John Morthland.

The most recent homage to Bangs is the new issue of Creem, for which Bangs worked as an editor and critic from 1971 to 1976. He is the issue’s sole cover subject. Forty-six of its 109 pages are devoted to him and his work, as befits a voracious writer who could expound on garage-rock, heavy-metal, punk, jazz and more with equal skill and wit, insight and irreverence.

“On the page, his writing presence could be powerfully sharp and almost scary-brilliant,” said Crowe, who as a teen succeeded Bangs as the music critic for the underground newspaper San Diego Door.

Black Sabbath and John Coltrane. The Stooges and James Taylor. Van Morrison and Kraftwerk. Lou Reed and Otis Rush. Ray Charles and Jethro Tull. Sun Ra and Cheech & Chong. Captain Beefheart and the Carpenters. Bob Dylan and Kiss. Patti Smith and the Captain & Tennille. Deep Purple and the Mekons. Miles Davis and the Shaggs. John McLaughlin and Foghat.

Bangs wrote memorably about them all, including a series of confrontational interviews with Lou Reed that soon became the stuff of legend. His 1975 interview with Reed for England’s NME began: “Lou Reed is a completely depraved pervert and pathetic death dwarf — a wasted talent living off the dumbbell nihilism of a ’70s generation”

Bangs’ 1977 review of the album “The Beach Boys Love You” took a far different tack, beginning: “The Beach Boys present the most convincing argument in our entire culture for never growing up.” His review the same year of Ted Nugent’s “Free For All” album kicked off by invoking the words of Ugandan dictator Idi Amin.

“Music was the only thing Lester cared about,” said Creem Editorial Director Jaan Uhelszki. She began working at the magazine, then headquartered 90 miles from Detroit, on the same day in 1971 that Bangs began his tenure as editor. Her desk was next to his. Like Crowe, she credits Bangs as a pivotal mentor for her and other young writers.

“He was convinced the secret of the universe was encoded in songs and that rock stars were



TNS

From left: Lester Bangs, Patti Smith and Lou Reed at The Bottom Line in New York City in 1975. Bangs’ interviews with Reed were famously combative.



MOVIECLIPS/YouTube

Philip Seymour Hoffman portrayed Bangs in writer-director Cameron Crowe’s acclaimed 2000 film “Almost Famous.” Bangs was a pivotal mentor for Crowe as a young writer and rock critic.

prophets who had something to say,” Uhelszki said. “I’ve never been around anyone so dedicated to the sound and wanting to find the truth in music and lyrics. That is how he was wired and everything else fell by the wayside.

“Lester and Cameron both had the same drive. They were both savants, the smartest kids in the class. Lester was unruly and passionate about music. And Cameron is very controlled and almost by-the-book passionate about music.”

She chuckled. “Lester had big gestures and outbursts,” Uhelszki elaborated. “If he hated or loved something, you knew it. Cameron kept it all inside and put it on the page. Both of them were great hangs and musicians loved being around them. Cameron was like Steve Martin, making very subtle wisecracks. Lester walked in a room and changed the air — fun was going to be had!” Crowe agreed.

“Lester was just so entertaining,” he said.

“I remember getting my first copy of Creem from a kindly stoner at the front desk of The Trip, a head shop next to the Spreckels Theatre (in downtown San Diego). He let me purchase it from the 18-and-over rack of reading material. Rolling Stone was then an ‘adult’ publication too ...

“Lester’s writing was unlike some of the stuffier record reviews I’d read in mainstream publications. I loved Robert Hilburn for the precision of his reviews in the Los Angeles Times and was addicted to Lester for his humor and his danger. He was reckless, and alive, and his banter had sound and fury in it. It read like music. And he was from San Diego!”

Gym-class renegade

Bangs was raised by a mother who was a devout Jehovah’s Witness. Not remotely religious, he soon developed a lifelong

passion for music and writing.

Jerry Raney and Jack Butler, long among San Diego’s most respected and accomplished rock musicians, befriended Bangs when all three were in junior high in El Cajon. Bangs would sometimes sit in on harmonica with Raney and Butler’s high school band, Thee Dark Ages.

Both musicians describe the teenage Bangs as “brilliant,” “very intellectual,” “really cool” and “smarter than anyone else” they knew. He shared their love for such British invasion bands as the Rolling Stones and Yardbirds, although Bangs soon also embraced such jazz giants as Coltrane and Davis.

He convinced Raney to pay attention to the early Jeff Beck’s innovative guitar playing. And he turned Butler into an avid fan of Captain Beefheart & His Magic Band, after insisting Butler listen to the group’s classic, room-clearing 1969 double album, “Trout Mask Replica,” in its entirety, on headphones.

But the first written work by Bangs that Raney and Butler cite had nothing to do with music. Rather, it was a hand-scrawled notebook Bangs filled to make up for repeatedly missing his and Raney’s gym class at El Cajon Valley High School.

“Lester wasn’t really into sports and he wouldn’t put on shorts for gym class or participate,” said Raney, who rose to prominence playing guitar and singing in the San Diego bands Glory — which also featured Butler — and the Beat Farmers.

“If you missed class, you lost 10 points for the day. And to make it up, you’d have to write a paper on sports and you’d get a point back per page. Lester kept writing and writing all this stuff.

When he turned it in to Coach Foster, it looked pretty much like a book! It was called: ‘Hector, The Homosexual Monkey’.”

“It was one of the funniest things ever!” Butler said. “And it got Lester kicked out of gym class and into study hall, so he kind of won that battle. I don’t think he ever said: ‘I want to be a writer.’ But he didn’t have to, because it was clear to everyone that’s what he would do. He started writing for Rolling Stone, mailing in album reviews to them, and we thought it was the coolest thing.”

‘Sloppiest human on Earth!’

As can be expected when reflecting on someone who died more than 40 years ago, not everyone who knew Bangs has the same recollections of him.

Uhelszki, Creem’s editorial director, thought Bangs would follow his heart, become a great novelist, get married and live a long life. She was stunned when Crowe phoned in 1982 to inform her of Bangs’ death.

Raney and Butler did not see Bangs as the marrying kind. Neither were surprised that he only lived to be 33.

“Lester burned the candle at both ends,” Raney said. “He was quite the partier.”

Uhelszki, Raney and Butler readily agree that Bangs’ reputation for being uber messy was well-earned.

“His mom’s house was immaculate, but I’d never seen anything like Lester’s room,” Raney said. “It was so messy you could barely walk into it!”

“He was the sloppiest human on Earth!” said Butler, one of Bangs’ college roommates. “But we were all slobs then and none of us had any money.”

“Oh, my God, Lester was the messiest person ever!” Uhelszki fondly recalled.

“I sat next to him at Creem for six years, for better or worse, and his desk was covered with banana peels, Taco Bell wrappers, old socks, stacks of press releases. He had a hermit crab, which he loved, in his bathtub — meaning he didn’t take baths or showers himself.

“But he was a really prolific writer and a true professional, even though he dropped out of Grossmont and didn’t have any editorial or journalistic training. He knew so much more than I did.”

What legacy does Bangs leave for today’s aspiring young writers?

Crowe, his former protege, offers a knowing response.

“Write your heart, write your rage, write your passion,” Crowe said. “Help the next generation if they ask you for advice.”

MUSIC

Triple threat

Singer, songwriter and killer dancer Tate McRae is poised for pop stardom

By AUGUST BROWN
Los Angeles Times

Performing with poise on live TV is a rare skill, but it's one that 20-year-old Tate McRae learned young.

As a 12-year-old from Calgary, Canada, the dancer and budding singer-songwriter won third place on the 2016 season of "So You Think You Can Dance" and performed with fellow Canuck Justin Bieber. So when McRae took the stage at "Saturday Night Live" on Nov. 18 — this time debuting as a pop star in her own right — she was more prepared than most.

"My parents came, and we were all freaking out," McRae said in an interview at the Los Angeles offices of her management company. "I think there's way more pressure on 'SNL' just because it's one of the last live TV shows. Whatever happens, happens, even if I fall on my face. I was just like, 'I don't want to let anyone down.'"

Her two performances that night showed the athleticism and artful precision of her dancing, on the Top 10 smash "Greedy," and her poised, confessional songwriting, on the ballad "Grave." She instantly joined a pantheon of heroes — Britney Spears, Janet Jackson — who arrived fully aware of how to physically inhabit their music.

In the wake of peers like Billie Eilish and Olivia Rodrigo (a close friend of McRae's) redefining young women's creative agency in pop, McRae is likely up next — her sophomore LP, "Think Later," came out Dec. 8 amid hot anticipation.

"My fans have seen me writing songs in my bedroom since I was 13," McRae said. "I don't think I realized then how much I was in the public eye. Your perspectives and tastes change so much. I'm realizing the repercussions of people looking at you through a microscope."

McRae's hometown is often needled as Canada's Texas, best known for its annual massive Stampede rodeo. Pursuing art made her an outlier growing up in Calgary.

"In our town, I think it was a little frowned upon," McRae said, dressed in LA's Gen Z starlet uniform of pristine athleisure wear. "We got a lot of strange looks when I first started traveling for dance and putting myself out there."

McRae moved to Los Angeles when she was 17, with her mom (a ballet instructor) in tow. Her TV and dance fame helped her



Beth Saravo

Tate McRae is likely to be the next artist to help redefine young women's creative agency in pop music, joining peers such as Billie Eilish and Olivia Rodrigo (who is a close friend of McRae's).

already-compelling songwriting blow up on TikTok, and she was highly sought after in the LA pop firmament. But within days of settling in there, she did not trust this city.

"I looked put together on the outside, but I was really confused and lost," McRae said. "I was in a place where I was like, 'I absolutely despise it here, but I have to stay here because of work.' I was used to Calgary, where people don't have other intentions than what they're telling you."

She signed to RCA and found chart success when her seething ballad "You Broke Me First" hit No. 17 on the Billboard Hot 100. Her songwriting reflected the hopes and disillusionment of that time — titles included bummed-out sentiments like "Too Young to Be Sad" and "Feel Like S—."

Her debut LP, "I Used to Think I Could Fly," reached the Top 20 last year. The lowercase-only, sad girl pop wave was still in full swing, but McRae wore it a little uncomfortably.

"People are just very critical of

young women; they get attacked as soon they share their passions," McRae said. "They expect women to be perfect and also constantly be evolving and saying the right thing, dating the right people, putting out the right image. When I first started going into writing sessions, I remember people doubting me a lot, because they're like, 'What does this 16-year-old know?' I would look at myself and be like, 'Well, what do I know?' There's like, six 30-year-old men around me and I have no idea if I'm doing the right thing."

So McRae made a vow to get back to the unself-conscious, physically exuberant performer she'd grown up as. "Think Later" is a pivot back to a nimble, confident sense of herself. This time, she worked in close quarters with writer-producer Ryan Tedder, the One Republic frontman and A-list collaborator for Adele and Taylor Swift.

She's as meticulous about production notes as she is about her dance routines.

"It's psychotic. I'll go through like 27 mixes and I'm like, 'The snare sounds like pots and pans, change that,'" she said. "But a girl's intuition, I think it's the coolest thing to watch."

Tedder took it all to heart on singles like the reverse-flirty kiss-off "Exes," and "Greedy," a lithe and brash single where McRae taunts a leering dude that "I'm runnin' this room around and I'm still half your age / You're lookin' at me like I'm some sweet escape / It's obvious that you want me, but I would want myself."

A song like that requires moves to match, and McRae worked with acclaimed choreographer Sean Bankhead (Lil Nas X, FKA Twigs, Victoria Monét) to craft the indelible images in the "Greedy" music video. There, McRae hits a perilous arabesque pose on top of a weight bench and moodily drives a Zamboni over an ice rink.

"Where do you go when you know she can almost do anything?" Bankhead wrote in an

email to The Times. "It's really refreshing when I can work with an artist who can understand not only my more intricate timing and musicality, but push them to really find a place where they are in command of the camera and the stage. I'm glad she trusted me and was open even if I asked to see her dolphin dive out of a tilt," he said, using technical terms for the dance moves McRae aced.

Her new LP also finds her grappling with the cynicism and loneliness of young fame, most pointedly on a pair of songs — "Calgary" and "Plastic Palm Trees" — that find her disconnected from her past yet not fully arrived in her future, either. Like Eilish, she's finding that the spotlight can wreck a young woman's confidence, even if she's fairly certain of her abilities.

"I hate taking photos, and I hate seeing myself on video," McRae said. "I would spend all day getting glammed up and have 50 people staring at me on a set, and then you're filmed, and then I would always think I looked horrible. People are always looking at women and trying to see what's wrong, and never looking at just the performer in you. Guys go onstage, and they have the best time ever. A girl does that and it's like, 'Her outfit sucks, her hair is bad.' I had to really get over that barrier of being so self-destructive."

Her personal life hasn't changed much since "Greedy" took off, though, even if her gal pals now include artists like Rodrigo, who texted McRae asking her to be in the video for "Bad Idea Right?" "I'm really lucky I have friends that are in the industry that are normal people. But I don't know if I'm very fond of LA dating," she said. (McRae last dated NHL player Cole Sillinger.)

When she tours next summer, the stages will be much bigger — McRae headlines the Greek Theatre in July and caps off with a Madison Square Garden show in August. Just as important to her, she'll headline her first Calgary show. (The venue is unannounced, but the July 5 date coincides with the kickoff of her hometown Stampede.)

If there are any childhood haters in the audience, they'll have no choice but to applaud this time.

"I know way too many people in Calgary," McRae laughed. "I just don't want all my brother's friends staring at me."



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OPINION

Christmas canceled in land of Jesus’ birth

By QUEEN RANIA AL ABDULLAH
Special to The Washington Post

Bethlehem usually comes alive at Christmas. Not this year. In the Holy Land, celebrations have been canceled: no parades, no bazaars, no public tree lightings. In my country, Jordan, where Jesus was baptized, our Christian community has chosen to do the same.

In the occupied West Bank, one Bethlehem church has adapted its nativity scene, placing the infant Jesus among the rubble of a bombed-out building. It is a reflection of the story playing out on screens everywhere: the horrific images of the destruction of Gaza, and especially, its bloodied and broken children.

I watch a video of a Gazan father stroking his daughter’s face, telling someone to look at how beautiful she is. She could almost be sleeping, if not for her white shroud.

I scroll on and see a young boy struggling through rain and flooded roads, carrying the body of an even smaller child he refused to leave behind. A mother holding her daughter’s limp body close: “Put your heart on my heart,” she tells her, crying out as others try to take her away. She was not ready to let her go.

We need to see in these children’s faces the faces of our own. Each of these videos is a desperate plea to the world to recognize their humanity and their hurt.

The people of Gaza have not lost hope in others’ humanity—even as so many fail to see theirs.

Since Oct. 7, the vast majority of casualties in Israel, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip have been civilians. Whether killed, kidnapped or unjustly detained, each person leaves an unfillable void. There is no difference between the pain Palestinian and Israeli

mothers feel over the loss of a child. Every day that goes by without a cease-fire, so much more is being tragically lost.

In just over two months, Israel has turned Gaza into a hellscape. Almost 20,000 dead. At least 8,000 are children — more than the death tolls of Pearl Harbor, the Sept. 11 attacks and Hurricane Katrina combined.

About 2 million out of 2.2 million people in Gaza have been displaced — almost an entire population turned to refugees. More than 50,000 Gazans have been wounded, but only eight hospitals out of 36 are operational.

On top of all this, hunger. Nearly half of the people in Gaza are starving. In more than two months, less than a week’s worth of the aid they need has been allowed in. How could starving a population be considered a legitimate form of self-defense?

International organizations are now calling Gaza a graveyard for children. How perverse that the Holy Land should be described as something so profoundly unholy.

This has become an unequivocal humanitarian nightmare. With each passing day, the threshold of what is acceptable falls to new lows, setting a terrifying precedent for this and other wars to come.

No matter what side you support, you can still demand a cease-fire, the release of hostages and detainees, and unrestricted access to aid.

Some will brush this off as a bleeding-heart plea, arguing that an immediate cease-fire is neither strategic nor sustainable. It is an indictment of the times that a call for a return to sanity could be dismissed as sentimentality. We also hear many talking about peace the day after as though to absolve themselves of the responsibility to act now.

A cease-fire is just the beginning. We must

also embark on the difficult process of rehumanization — recognizing the humanity of others and acting on that universal kinship.

I am a mother, and my heart breaks for parents in Gaza doing everything in their power to keep their children alive — and then losing them.

All parents share the impulse to shield their children from the worst of the world. No matter who you are or where you come from, your instinct to care for and protect those you love is one you must honor in yourself but also in strangers — even adversaries. Honoring it selectively diminishes our own humanity.

There is another video I will never forget: a mother, saying her goodbyes to her children. After going to bed on empty stomachs, they had been killed in their sleep by an airstrike.

Their mother’s grief is unbearable; her guilt that they died hungry broke me. “It’s OK, my boy. You are with God now,” she says to one son. “I named him Ayoub [Job] for patience,” she explains, and then, through tears: “I will be patient, my child.”

In the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and the Quran, the prophet Job loses his possessions, children and health. Yet, he remains steadfast in his faith. His patience is honored by Jews, Christians and Muslims, who, at different points in history, have shared the Holy Land in peace. His story is one of pain but also hope.

This war has to end. Today, it boils down to one question that each of us must answer: If you could prevent hundreds or thousands more children from dying, would you?

If so, demanding a cease-fire is the absolute minimum you can do. And we, all of us, must do so together.

Rania Al Abdullah is the queen of Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

Colorado Supreme Court just proved Trump’s point

By JIM GERAGHTY
Special to The Washington Post

If you’re going to throw a presidential candidate off the ballot for engaging in an insurrection through his personal actions, shouldn’t he first be convicted of engaging in an insurrection?

Fomenting an insurrection is against the law. It’s right there in the federal criminal code, 18 U.S. Code § 2383—Rebellion or insurrection: “Whoever incites, sets on foot, assists, or engages in any rebellion or insurrection against the authority of the United States or the laws thereof, or gives aid or comfort thereto, shall be fined under this title or imprisoned not more than ten years, or both; and shall be incapable of holding any office under the United States.”

For the sake of argument, forget a conviction on this charge for a moment. If you’re going to throw a presidential candidate off the ballot for insurrection, shouldn’t he at least be charged with engaging in an insurrection?

You may love Donald Trump, or you may hate him. But he’s entitled to his day in court. He’s entitled to a legal defense, to cross-examine witnesses and present counterevidence. And as you probably noticed, Trump is going to have a lot of days in court. Prosecutors have not been shy about bringing criminal charges against Trump. He is facing 91 felony counts in four criminal cases in the District of Columbia, New York, Florida and Georgia. He faces charges of conspiracy to defraud the U.S. government and conspiracy to obstruct an official proceeding, and also charges of falsifying

business records, violating Georgia’s anti-racketeering law, illegally possessing classified documents, obstruction and willful retention of national defense information.

Just about all of the charges are serious, with the possible exception of the ones related to the payments to Stormy Daniels. But do you know what charge Trump does not face? Engaging in an insurrection.

I have a hard time believing it is because Jack Smith or any other prosecutor forgot, or overlooked, the possibility of this charge. Smith seems like a smart guy, so the most reasonable conclusion is that Smith either doesn’t believe that the evidence exists to convict Trump on that charge, or that he and his team are unlikely to persuade a jury to convict Trump on that charge.

You don’t get to kick a guy off the ballot because you think he has committed a crime but can’t prove it. If that’s going to be the new standard going forward, we should expect state Supreme Courts in red states to kick President Joe Biden off the ballot because the payments from foreign businessmen to members of Biden’s family stink worse than the swamp water that apparently all of our national monuments are built upon.

The U.S. Supreme Court will probably strike down this decision by Colorado’s highest court to remove Trump from the state primary ballot. But even that common-sense conclusion is going to be met with a lot of arguments that this is a right-wing court protecting Trump. We’re already seeing arguments that Justices Neil Gorsuch, Brett Kavanaugh and

Amy Coney Barrett ought to recuse themselves because Trump appointed them. (If that’s the standard, shouldn’t Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson recuse herself from this case because it involves the front-running challenger to the president who appointed her to the court?) Some Democrats also want Clarence Thomas to recuse himself because of the outspoken political views of his wife, Virginia “Ginni” Thomas, and her ties with Republicans close to Trump.

An issue in this case is not “What do you think of Trump?”; it’s whether the Colorado Supreme Court has grounds to keep Trump off the ballot that are consistent with the Constitution and legal precedent.

Trump often complains that he is judged by a different standard than everyone else, that all kinds of sinister people inside and outside of the deep state are out to get him, and that all kinds of allegedly impartial authorities are engaged in “ELECTION INTERFERENCE.”

This was indisputably an effort to keep Trump off Colorado’s ballot by longtime foes of the president, including the group Citizens for Responsibility and Ethics in Washington. These justices have gone way out on a limb, reaching the opposite conclusion of judges in Michigan and Minnesota, not exactly right-wing wonderlands.

Four Colorado Supreme Court justices have helped prove Trump’s point, at least in this particular circumstance. Thanks, guys!

Jim Geraghty is National Review's senior political correspondent, where he writes the daily "Morning Jolt" newsletter.

Bizarro



Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

1	2	3	4		5	6	7		8	9	10	11
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35			36		37				38			
		39		40		41						
42	43				44		45			46	47	48
49						50				51		
52						53				54		
55						56				57		

- ACROSS
- 55 Canonized Fr. women
- 56 Sailor
- 57 Antitoxins
- 1 Hendrix hairdo
- 5 Cat's cry
- 8 "Brave New World" drug
- 12 Faux pas
- 13 Tours pal
- 14 Streetcar
- 15 German car name
- 16 Winter quaff
- 18 Kid's sandwich, for short
- 20 Low cards
- 21 Cupid's alias
- 23 "— the fields we go ..."
- 24 Santa's bagful
- 28 Taxpayer IDs
- 31 New England cape
- 32 "— Kick Out of You"
- 34 Suffix with cash
- 35 Answer an invite
- 37 Floral wreaths
- 39 TV Tarzan Ron
- 41 Style
- 42 Respectful bow
- 45 Neighbor of Sweden
- 49 Christmas mantel decor
- 51 Shakespeare villain
- 52 Carton sealer
- 53 Behold
- 54 Scratched (out)
- DOWN
- 1 Pronto
- 2 Err
- 3 Flo — ("Low" rapper)
- 4 Speaks one's mind
- 5 Game played with tiles
- 6 Punk-rock subgenre
- 7 Skater Katarina
- 8 Boutiques
- 9 Calls for room service
- 10 Created
- 11 Adams and Irving
- 17 Nevertheless, briefly
- 19 Zwei follower
- 22 Fulton's power
- 24 Standard
- 25 ICU pros
- 26 Letter holder
- 27 More intense
- 29 Actor Beatty
- 30 Fourth-yr. students
- 33 Designer Gucci
- 36 Locales
- 38 Eagles' homes
- 40 Tibetan bovine
- 42 Bygone fliers
- 43 Rat- —
- 44 Fine spray
- 46 Aftermath
- 47 Antiquing aid
- 48 Luke's teacher
- 50 PBS funder

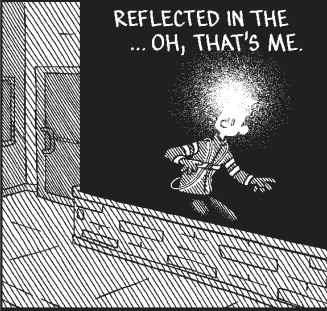
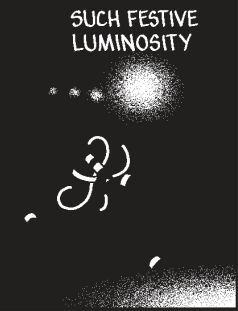
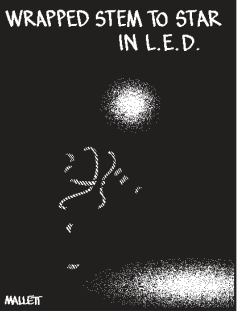
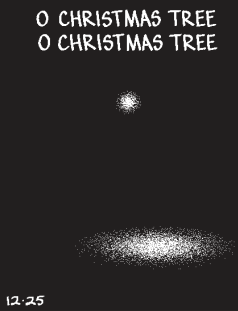
Answer to Previous Puzzle

	G	O	M	E	Z		S	M	A	C	K	S
M	O	N	A	M	I		C	A	S	H	I	N
P	O	N	Y	U	P		A	R	I	O	S	O
S	N	O	B		F	U	N	K		W	S	W
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S	C	I		E	L	O	N			N	E	W
O	F	F	I	C	E	P	A	R	T	I	E	S
D	O	O		S	I	R	E			N	E	T
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E	O	N		L	E	N	A			W	A	R
L	O	D	G	E	R			T	A	I	C	H
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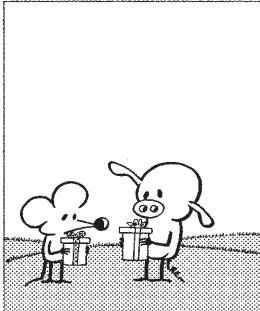
12-25 CRYPTOQUIP

UBHC TEQQCWYT LWTBC IBQQK
ZUQOOWYT WY IKHWY TWGQ
QHJB MCBQE PME JBEWICLHI?
“POQQJQ YHGWZHZ!”
Saturday’s Cryptoquip: HORROR FILM AFICIONADOS’ FAVORITE YULETIDE TUNE: “HAVE YOURSELF A SCARY LITTLE CHRISTMAS.”
Today’s Cryptoquip Clue: T equals G

Frazz



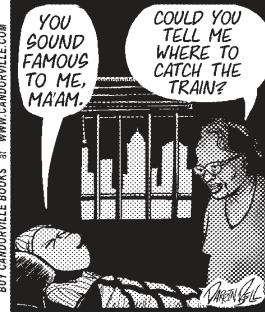
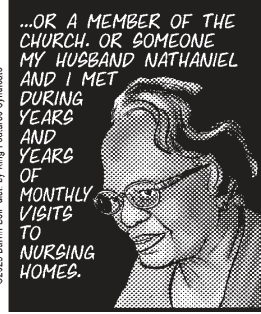
Pearls Before Swine



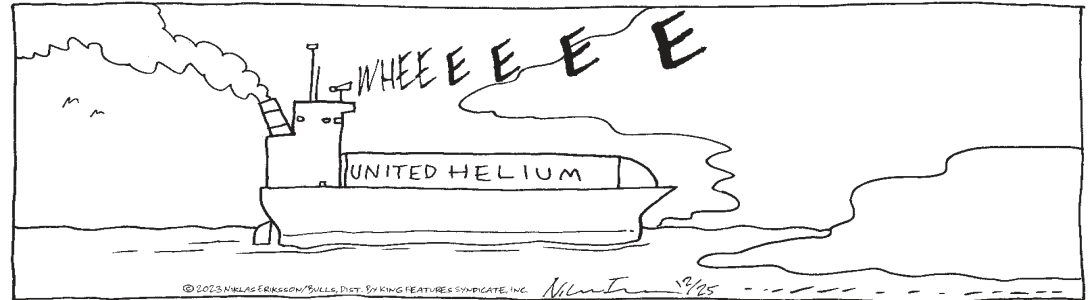
Non Sequitur



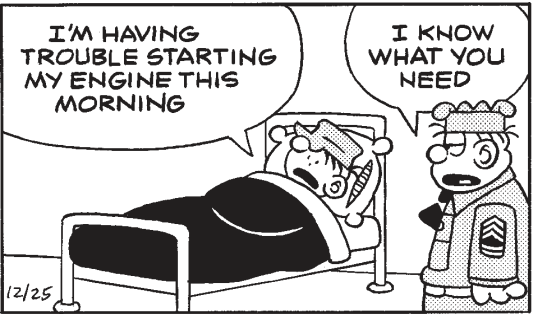
Candorville



Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



Bizarro



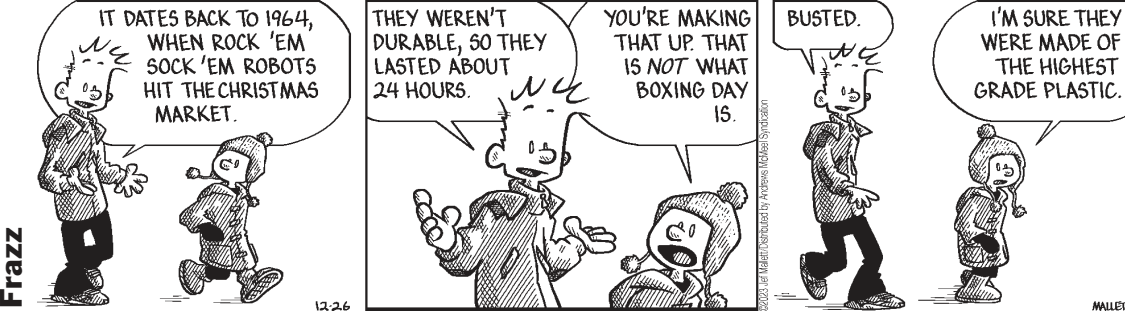
Loose Parts



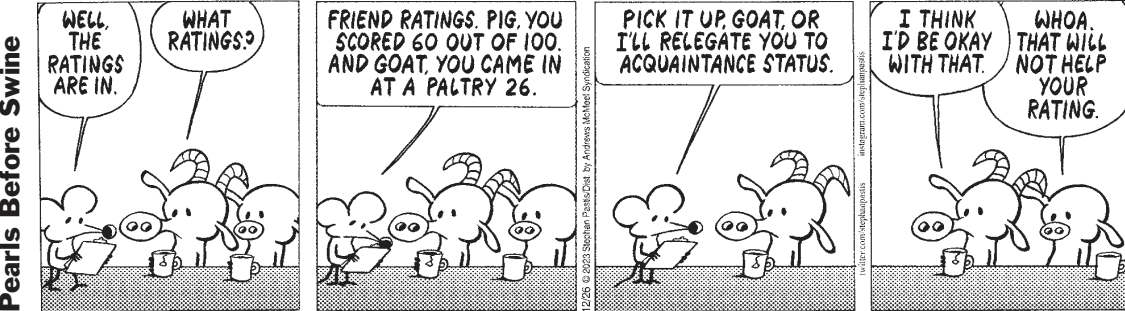
Eugene Sheffer Crossword

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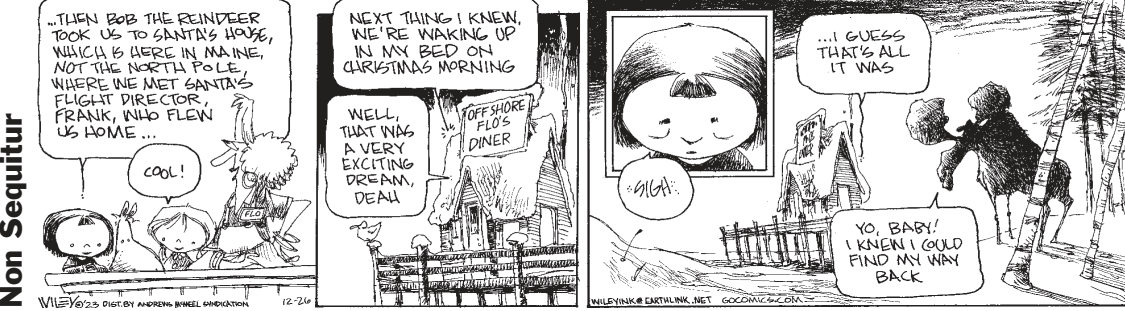
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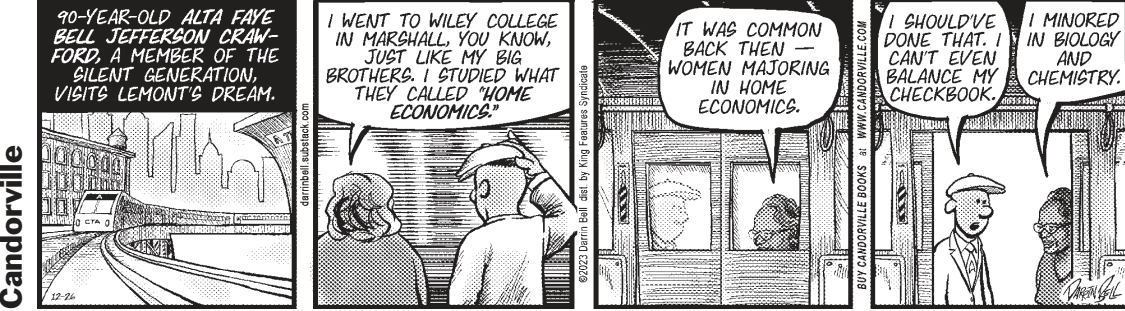
Pearls Before Swine



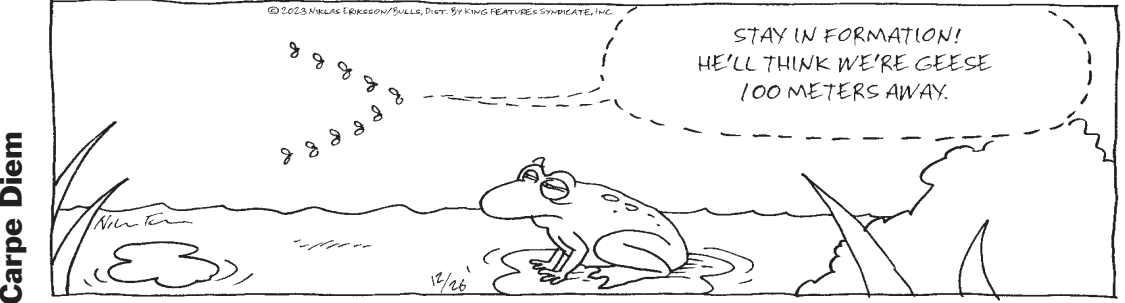
Non Sequitur



Candorville



Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



- ACROSS**
1 Chicago paper, for short
5 "Didn't I tell you?"
8 Teen hangout
12 Ms. Rowlands
13 Like aspirin, briefly
14 "Dies —" (Latin hymn)
15 Worldwide (Abbr.)
16 Term paper feature
18 "Downton Abbey" servant
20 Ancient letters
21 Tax-collecting org.
22 Key lime —
23 Autumn pears
26 Relief for tired tootsies
30 To and —
31 Pioneering ISP
32 911 responder
33 Fodder for a film editor
36 Respect, slangily
38 Oklahoma city
39 Common title start
40 Elroy's dog
43 Inner part of a shoe
47 Haunted house sound
49 Skin care brand
50 "Three Sisters" sister
- DOWN**
1 End-of-wk. cry
2 Nevada city
3 Division word
4 Sea off Poland
5 Remote locations?
6 Thames town
7 Green prefix
8 Stately dance
9 "East of Eden" twin
10 Tardy
11 Sediment
17 Half a sextet
19 "— Doubtfire"
22 D.C. figure
- 51 Tours pal
52 Stratagem
53 Equipment
54 Lobbyists' org.
55 Ticked (off)
- 23 Favorite pal, in texts
24 Acapulco gold
25 — Canals
26 Nemesis
27 Old Oldsmobile
28 Strike caller
29 "Butter" K-pop band
31 Khan title
34 Toothpaste target
35 Big fusses
36 Saigon soup
37 Snappy reply
39 Debate issue
40 In — (dazed)
41 Only
42 Forum wear
43 Disaster aid gp.
44 Sad
45 Lighten
46 Used henna
48 Light touch

Answer to Previous Puzzle

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

12-26 CRYPTOQUIP

KN P J L S J U A F L Z N X J J L J L

O G I X Y X S , U V Y F O O G V F R P J L

F X J Y S P A V G F X L L J R Z F G J L

“Z J X L K J N V I G U P J F G U .”

Yesterday’s Cryptoquip: WHAT GREETING MIGHT SHEEP DWELLING IN SPAIN GIVE EACH OTHER FOR CHRISTMAS? “FLEECE NAVIDAD!”

Today’s Cryptoquip Clue: L equals D

FACES



The earliest version of Disney's most famous character, Mickey Mouse, and arguably the most iconic character in American pop culture, will become public domain on Jan. 1, 2024.

AP

Mickey will soon belong to you and me, sort of

Long-awaited copyright expiration looms for earliest version of character

BY ANDREW DALTON
Associated Press

M-I-C-K-E-Y will soon belong to you and me.

With several asterisks, qualification and caveats, Mickey Mouse in his earliest form will be the leader of the band of characters, films and books that will become public domain as the year turns to 2024.

In a moment many thought might never come, at least one version of the quintessential piece of intellectual property and perhaps the most iconic character in American pop culture will be free from Disney's copyright as his first screen release, the 1928 short "Steamboat Willie," featuring both Mickey and Minnie Mouse, becomes available for public use.

"This is it. This is Mickey Mouse. This is exciting because it's kind of symbolic," said Jennifer Jenkins, a professor of law and director of Duke's Center for the Study of Public Domain, who writes an annual Jan. 1 column for "Public Domain Day." "I kind of feel like the pipe on the steamboat, like expelling smoke. It's so exciting."

U.S. law allows a copyright to be held for 95 years after Congress expanded it several times during Mickey's life.

"It's sometimes derisively referred to as the Mickey Mouse Protection Act," Jenkins said. "That's oversimplified because it wasn't just Disney that was pushing for term extension. It was a whole group of copyright holders whose works were set to go into the public domain soon, who benefited greatly from the 20 years of extra protection."

"Ever since Mickey Mouse's first appearance in the 1928 short film "Steamboat Willie," people have associated the character with Disney's stories, experiences, and authentic products," a Disney spokesperson said in a statement to The Associated Press. "That will not change when the copyright in the 'Steamboat Willie' film expires."

Current artists and creators will be able to make use of Mickey, but with major limits. It is only the

more mischievous, rat-like, non-speaking boat captain in "Steamboat Willie" that has become public.

"More modern versions of Mickey will remain unaffected by the expiration of the "Steamboat Willie" copyright, and Mickey will continue to play a leading role as a global ambassador for the Walt Disney Company in our storytelling, theme park attractions, and merchandise," Disney's statement said.

Not every feature or personality trait a character displays is necessarily copyrightable, however, and courts could be busy in the coming years determining what's inside and outside Disney's ownership.

"We will, of course, continue to protect our rights in the more modern versions of Mickey Mouse and other works that remain subject to copyright," the company said.

Disney still solidly and separately holds a trademark on Mickey as a corporate mascot and brand identifier, and the law forbids using the character deceptively to fool consumers into thinking a product is from the original creator. Anyone starting a film company or a theme park will not be free to make mouse ears their logo.

Disney's statement said it "will work to safeguard against consumer confusion caused by unauthorized uses of Mickey and our other iconic characters."

Another famous animal sidekick, Tigger, will join his friend Winnie the Pooh in the public domain as the book in which the bouncing tiger first appeared, "The House at Pooh Corner," turns 96. Pooh, probably the most celebrated prior character to become public property, took on that status two years ago when A.A. Milne's original "Winnie the Pooh" entered the public domain, resulting in some truly novel uses, including this year's horror film "Winnie The Pooh: Blood and Honey."

Young Mickey could get the same treatment. "Now, the audience is going to set the terms," said Cory Doctorow, an author and activist who advocates for broader public ownership of works.

Oldman says roles in 'Batman,' Potter films 'saved' him as a dad

BY CARLOS DE LOERA
Los Angeles Times

Veteran actor Gary Oldman is praising his appearances in the blockbuster franchises of "Harry Potter" and Christopher Nolan's "Dark Knight" trilogy for saving him in his darkest hour.

The 65-year-old actor — who played Sirius Black in the "Harry Potter" films and Det. Jim Gordon in the "Batman" movies — recently opened up about how those big-time roles helped him professionally and personally.

"At 42 years old I woke up divorced and I had custody of [my] boys," Oldman said on "The Drew Barrymore Show" this month. "[T]hat was hard because there was a shift in the industry where a lot of productions were being [filmed] in Hungary, Budapest, Prague, Australia, you know, all of these places. So, I turned down a lot of work."

As Barrymore explained, production moved to these locations for "tax reasons" that would benefit movie studios' budgets.

"Thank God for 'Harry Potter,'" Oldman continued. "I tell you, the two — 'Batman' and 'Harry Potter' — really, they saved me, because it meant that I could do the least amount of work for the most amount of money and then be home with the kids."

The Oscar winner noted that it was really important to him to make sure that his two younger children didn't feel like they were "being brought up by a nanny."



TNS

Gary Oldman, who won an Academy Award in 2018 for his portrayal of Winston Churchill in "Darkest Hour," says roles closer to home in London helped him be a better parent.

He was so committed to this that he flew back and forth from London to L.A. 27 times while filming 2005's "Batman Begins," just to optimize his time with his kids.

Even with a slew of Academy Award and Emmy nominations and widespread respect from his peers, Oldman still thinks his greatest accomplishment is that his children are good.

"My kids are not geniuses, but they're really, really nice people," he said. "I think [that we need] more nice people in the world. We've got geniuses, we've done enough of them. We need really kind people. Good heart and not mean-spirited. I think they saved my life."

Federal court revives suit over Nirvana album cover

A federal appeals court on Dec. 21 revived a child sexual exploitation lawsuit filed by the man who appeared naked as a 4-month-old on the cover of Nirvana's 1991 album "Nevermind."

Spencer Elden's lawsuit against the grunge rock group alleges that he has suffered "permanent harm" as the band and others profited from the image.

The suit says the image violated federal laws on child sexual abuse material, although no criminal charges were ever sought.

A federal judge in California threw out the lawsuit last year but allowed Elden to file a revised version, which the judge later dismissed on grounds that it was outside the 10-year statute of limitations.

The most recent decision by the Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in California reversed that ruling and sent the case back to the lower court. The appellate panel found that each republication of an image "may constitute a new personal injury" with a new deadline and cited the image's appearance on a 30th anniversary reissue of "Nevermind" in 2021.

Peso Pluma most-viewed artist of year on YouTube

Mexican singer Peso Pluma is YouTube's most-viewed artist of the year in the United States, beating out Taylor Swift, Bad Bunny, Drake and NBA YoungBoy to take the top spot.

The 24-year-old from Jalisco, Mexico, amassed more than 8.5 billion YouTube views globally this year.

This recognition comes during a year filled with wins for the Mexican singer, whose real name is Hassan Emilio Kabande Laija.

His breakthrough song, "Ella Baila Sola" with Eslabón Armado, ranked third on YouTube's Top 10 Songs list in the U.S., while "La Bebe (Remix)" with Yng Lvcas took the fourth spot.

"Ella Baila Sola" made history as the first regional Mexican song to reach the Billboard Hot 100 chart, peaking at No. 5. The song also reached No. 1 on Billboard's Global 200 and spent 19 weeks at No. 1 on Billboard's Hot Latin Songs chart. The song, now certified 21-times platinum, won top Latin song at the Billboard Music Awards.

From wire reports

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Passenger hid bullets in baby diaper at airport

NY NEW YORK — It was a loaded diaper, but not like you would think.

Security officers found 17 bullets concealed inside a disposable baby diaper at New York’s LaGuardia Airport, the Transportation Security Administration said.

Officers pulled the otherwise clean diaper from a passenger’s carry-on bag after it triggered an alarm in an X-ray machine at an airport security checkpoint, the TSA said.

According to the agency, the passenger initially claimed he didn’t know how the bullet-filled diaper ended up in his bag. Later he suggested his girlfriend put it there, the agency said.

The TSA identified the passenger as a man from Arkansas who was ticketed for a flight to Chicago’s Midway Airport, but did not disclose his name. Port Authority police cited him for unlawful possession of the 9 mm ammunition.

Woman bought vase for \$3.99, sold for \$107K

VA RICHMOND — Jessica Vincent had just started surveying the shelves of a Virginia thrift store when a vase caught her eye. It was shaped like a bottle and had ribbons of color, aqua green and amethyst purple, that spiraled up its glass surface like stripes of paint.

The piece looked old among the clutter of measuring cups, candles and other tchotchkes. After adjusting her eyes, Vincent made out the words “Murano” and “Italia” on its base.

“I bought it thinking it would look beautiful in my house somewhere,” said Vincent, 43, a horse trainer who paid \$3.99 at a Goodwill outside of Richmond. “I definitely didn’t buy it thinking, ‘Oh, I’m going to sell this.’”

Her thinking changed after some research. The vase sold through the Wright Auction House for \$107,100. The buyer, a top collector from Europe, wished to remain private.

Man ordered to pay back \$1.2M in romance scam

MO ST. LOUIS — A Texas man who was part of a romance scam that bilked a Missouri woman out of \$1.2 million was sentenced to three years in federal prison and ordered to repay the money.

Rotimi Oladimeji, 38, of Richardson, Texas, was sentenced one year after he pleaded guilty to two counts of mail fraud, two counts of wire fraud and one count of conspiracy to commit mail fraud and wire fraud, the U.S. Attorney’s office in St. Louis said in a news release.

Oladimeji and two others spotted the victim on the “Silver Singles” online dating site, prosecutors said. Posing as a Belgian national who was a veterinarian and animal behaviorist living in St. Louis, they made plans to meet with her but never followed through.

The scammers claimed the man needed money because he was not



YUKI IWAMURA/AP

Sweet shot

People take photos with giant candy canes, Wednesday, in New York.

being allowed to leave the United Arab Emirates, where he had gone for a business deal.

News helicopter crashes, killing pilot, photographer

PA PHILADELPHIA — The Philadelphia television news crew members who died after their helicopter crashed in a southern New Jersey forest were returning from a trip to film a Christmas lights display, an investigator said Thursday.

Todd Gunther, an investigator with the National Transportation Safety Board, told reporters near the crash site that WPVI’s Chopper 6 took off from Northeast Philadelphia Airport on Tuesday night and “had flown over to report on some Christmas light activity, and then they were returning back to base when the accident occurred.”

Killed in the crash were the pilot, 67-year-old Monroe Smith of Glenside, Pa., and a photographer, 45-year-old Christopher Dougherty of Oreland, Pa.

Gunther said investigators will look at anything that may have either contributed to or caused the crash, which occurred on a clear, cold night.

Firefighters rescue quarry worker who got trapped

GA DALLAS — A worker at a Georgia rock quarry was rescued after spending hours

trapped and partially buried in a funnel-shaped hopper filled with gravel.

“He is conscious and alert,” Lt. Steve Mapes of Paulding County Fire and Rescue told reporters after the worker was pulled free. “He knows what happened. He’s talked to the rescuers. He’s complaining of pain in his back and his legs, and he’s cold.”

The man, whose name was not released, somehow got buried chest-deep in gravel inside a hopper that’s about 30 feet deep, Mapes said. The hoppers act like giant funnels to fill trucks at the quarry in Paulding County northwest of Atlanta.

Mapes said rescue workers were able to talk with the trapped worker throughout the ordeal, which lasted roughly five hours as firefighters worked to free him without triggering a rockslide that could bury him completely.

Mother refuses to sign child’s probation terms

MS JACKSON — The mother of a 10-year-old child who was sentenced by a Mississippi judge to three months of probation and a book report for urinating in public has refused to sign his probation agreement and has asked for the charge against her son to be dismissed, the family’s attorney announced.

The child’s mother had initially planned on signing the agreement to avoid the risk of prosecutors up-

grading her son’s charge, as they threatened, but she changed her mind after reading the full agreement, attorney Carlos Moore said.

“We cannot in good conscience accept a probation agreement that treats a 10-year-old child as a criminal,” Moore said. “The terms proposed are not in the best interest of our client, and we will take all necessary steps to challenge them.”

The terms for the 10-year-old’s probation were similar to those prosecutors would demand of an adult, including sections that prohibited the use of weapons and demanded he submit to drug tests at a probation officer’s discretion, Moore said.

Mayor apologizes for wrongful racial arrests

MA BOSTON — Boston Mayor Michelle Wu issued a formal apology Wednesday to two Black men who were wrongly accused in a 1989 murder of a white woman, a case that coarsened divisions in a city long split along racial lines and renewed suspicion and anger directed at the police department by the city’s Black community.

“I am so sorry for what you endured,” the mayor said during a news conference. “I am so sorry for the pain that you have carried for so many years.”

Alan Swanson and Willie Bennett were wrongly named as suspects in the Oct. 23, 1989, death of Carol Stuart, whose husband, Charles

Stuart, had orchestrated her killing.

Stuart, who was also white, blamed his wife’s killing — and his own shooting during what he portrayed as an attempted carjacking — on an unidentified Black gunman, leading to a crackdown by police in one of the city’s traditionally Black neighborhoods in pursuit of a phantom assailant.

Free school meal program costs more than expected

MN ST. PAUL — Minnesota’s program to provide free school breakfasts and lunches to all students regardless of income is costing the state more than expected because of a jump in demand.

When Democratic Gov. Tim Walz signed the legislation last spring, advocates said the free meals would ease stresses on parents and help reduce childhood poverty while lifting the stigma on kids who rely on them.

Republican lawmakers objected to the program as it moved through the Legislature, saying it was a poor use of taxpayer dollars to subsidize meals for students whose parents could afford them. Now, with costs rising faster than expected — \$81 million more over the next two years and \$95 million in the two years after that — some question whether the state can afford the ongoing commitment, Minnesota Public Radio reported.

MLB

League widening runner's lane to first

By RONALD BLUM

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Major League Baseball is widening the runner's lane approaching first base to include a portion of fair territory, changing a more than century-old rule that caused World Series controversy over interference calls.

MLB also is shortening the pitch clock with runners on base by two seconds to 18 and further reducing mound visits in an effort to speed up games.

Another change adopted Thursday by the sport's 11-man competition committee requires a pitcher who warms up on the mound before a half inning to face at least one batter.

The new runner's lane overrides a rule that has existed since the National League mandated in 1882 that runners must be within the 3-foot box on the foul side of the base line during the final 45 feet between home and first. Violators were subject to being called out for interfering with fielders taking a throw. The rule was designed to prevent collisions; foul lines intersected the middle of bases until the bags were moved entirely into fair territory in 1887.

"If you're sitting at home or you're even in the game, it just doesn't make sense," Yankees manager Aaron Boone said of the old rule.

The change widens the lane to include 18-to-24 inches of fair territory until the edge of the grass, though MLB said it will allow a grace period for compliance because of the need to modify artificial turf surfaces.

The old rule has long sparked frustration because right-handed hitters necessarily begin their sprint to first base in fair territory, and the first base bag is fully in fair ground, too.

Umpires' interpretations of the rule have sparked disputes.

The New York Mets' J.C. Martin was in fair territory when he was hit on the left wrist by pitcher Pete Richert's throw following his sac-



MATT SLOCUM/AP

The Nationals' Trea Turner knocks the glove away from the Astros' Yuli Gurriel during Game 6 of the World Series on Oct. 29, 2019, in Houston. Major League Baseball is widening the runner's lane approaching first base to include a portion of fair territory in an effort to reduce such controversial plays.

rifice bunt in the 10th inning of Game 4 of the World Series in 1969. That allowed Rod Gaspar to score the winning run from second against Baltimore as plate umpire Shag Crawford and first base umpire Lou DiMuro failed to call interference.

"Since then I've always watched over the years everybody running down the lane," Richert said Thursday. "I'd say that 30% to 40% of them run inside and it's never called, and changing it now is not going to make any difference in those calls. It'll just justify the no-call. Every once in a while I'll be watching a game and I'll see it and I'll go, 'There they go. They missed another one.'"

The decision went the other way in the seventh inning of Game 6 of

the World Series in 2019, when Washington's Trea Turner was called out for interference by plate umpire Sam Holbrook when he was hit on the back of the right leg by Houston reliever Brad Peacock's throw, a decision upheld in a video review.

"It's just going to make things easier for the ballplayers and the umpires," Holbrook said of the change. "Players can run straight to the bag, especially the right-handed hitters. It's been talked about for a while. I think they're trying to do the right thing."

The out cost Washington a run when Anthony Rendon homered, and Martinez was ejected for arguing after the half inning, needing to be restrained by bench coach Chip Hale.

"I don't know how long that rule has been in place, probably a hundred years," Martinez said the following day. "These judgment calls are difficult. The umpires do the best they can on getting it right. I know that."

When Turner was called out for interference on a throw to first by Chicago Cubs catcher Willson Contreras following an errant pitch on a third strike on May 19, 2021, Martinez was ejected by umpire Chris Conroy. The manager picked up the first base bag and slammed it to the ground and then kicked it. After another similar call went against Washington on June 14, 2023, Martinez printed out a photo showing where the baserunner was and held it up during his postgame news confe-

rence.

The changes were approved by the committee over objections from all five players who voted.

"Following last season's profound changes to the fundamental rules of the game, immediate additional changes are unnecessary and offer no meaningful benefits to fans, players or the competition on the field," the union said in a statement. "This season should be used to gather additional data and fully examine the health, safety, and injury impacts of reduced recovery time."

Speeding up games remained a priority for the committee.

Nine-inning games averaged 2 hours, 40 minutes during the regular season in the first year of the pitch clock, down 24 minutes from 2022 and the lowest since 1985. That speed-up carried over to the postseason, where nine-inning World Series games averaged 3:01, the fastest since 1996. However, the average increased over the course of the season from 2:37 in April to 2:44 in September.

Mound visits are being cut from five to four, with a defensive team still getting an additional visit in the ninth inning if it has none left after the eighth. A catcher can signal for a mound visit, stopping the clock, without heading to the mound, and the clock will resume after a foul ball when the pitcher has the ball and is ready to resume the game, eliminating the requirement he also be on the mound — MLB hopes that eliminates pitchers walking onto the grass next to the mound.

MLB said the requirement to have a reliever who warms up on the mound face at least one batter was instituted because a pitcher took the mound for an inning and then was replaced without throwing a pitch 24 times last season, plus twice more in the World Series.

MLB withdrew its proposal to have the plate umpire reset the pitch clock immediately after a batter uses a timeout.

Sources: Dodgers get prized pitcher Yamamoto

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Prized free-agent pitcher Yoshinobu Yamamoto and the Los Angeles Dodgers have agreed to a \$325 million, 12-year contract, according to multiple reports.

Yamamoto is set to join Japanese countryman Shohei Ohtani with the Dodgers, who signed the two-way superstar to a record \$700 million, 10-year deal last week.

The Dodgers did not confirm the agreement with Yamamoto on Thursday night. MLB.com and ESPN were among the outlets citing anonymous sources in reporting the deal.

The New York Yankees and New York



Yamamoto

Mets were among the many clubs that pursued Yamamoto.

It's the third major pitching coup for the NL West champion Dodgers this offseason. In addition to Ohtani, the team signed right-hander Tyler Glasnow to a \$136.5 million, five-year contract after he was traded from the Tampa Bay Rays to Los Angeles.

Ohtani made a video pitch to Glasnow to join him in Hollywood.

"It was important to Shohei that this wasn't the one move we were going to

make," Dodgers President of Baseball Operations Andrew Friedman said at Ohtani's introductory news conference last week.

Yamamoto was 16-6 with a 1.21 ERA this season, striking out 169 and walking 28 in 164 innings. He is 70-29 with a 1.82 ERA in seven seasons with the Orix Buffaloes. Yamamoto struck out a Japan Series-record 14 in a Game 6 win over Hanshin on Nov. 5, throwing a 138-pitch complete game.

Orix posted the 25-year-old right-hander on Nov. 20 and Major League Baseball teams had until Jan. 4 to sign him.

Yamamoto's deal with the Dodgers would be the largest and longest ever guaranteed to a big league pitcher.

Ohtani was a two-time AL MVP with the Los Angeles Angels before becoming a free agent this offseason and moving to the Dodgers.

Yamamoto pitched his second career no-hitter, the 100th in Japanese big league history, on Sept. 9 for the Buffaloes against the Lotte Marines. The game, watched by MLB executives, extended his scoreless streak to 42 innings.

A two-time Pacific League MVP, Yamamoto also threw a no-hitter against the Seibu Lions on June 18 last year. His fastball averaged 95 mph and topped out at 96.6 mph in Japan's semifinal win over Mexico at the World Baseball Classic in March.

NBA

AROUND THE LEAGUE

Experiencing the rough patches

Long losing streaks are uncomfortable for rookie players

By Pat Graham
Associated Press

Victor Wembanyama has adjusted to many things — food, culture, double teams — since the top pick’s arrival with the San Antonio Spurs.

There’s just no getting accustomed to all the losing.

Pick an NBA player’s name, any name, and they’re not hard-wired for skids. Players like Wembanyama have typically always been on winning teams before coming to the league, not ones that stack up defeats at historic rates. For Wembanyama, along with youngsters like Cade Cunningham and Ausar Thompson in Detroit and Bilal Coulibaly of Washington, losing has become part of their NBA education.

Misery does love company, and the Pistons, who lost their 25th straight game Thursday night, have some in the Spurs and Wizards. Despite the presence of Wembanyama, the Spurs have dropped 20 of 21, while the Wizards are in the midst of losing 17 of 20.

“Sometimes, you’ll be in a game and maybe think about the losing streak and causes you to do a little extra or just do something you wouldn’t normally do,” Thompson recently said. “Panic a little bit.”

Thompson’s certainly not used to this. He won a state title in high school, along with two titles with Overtime Elite, a professional basketball league based in Atlanta that’s opening another door to the pros for talented young players.

Now, he’s trying to help a struggling Pistons team. The record for the longest losing streak within a single season is shared by the 2010-11 Cleveland Cavaliers and 2013-14 Philadelphia 76ers, who both dropped 26 consecutive games. The 76ers also had a 28-game losing streak that started in the 2014-15 season and carried over to 2015-16.

“It’s just a miserable existence,” said NBA on TNT analyst Greg Anthony, who was a member of the 1995-96 Vancouver Grizzlies team that dropped 23 straight contests. “Your food doesn’t taste as good. You don’t sleep as well. There’s a lot of stress and anxiety. It wears on you, because everybody in your world knows you’re going through it.

“The city knows it, the country knows it, the entire league. You’re



ERIC GAY/AP

Spurs head coach Gregg Popovich talks to center Victor Wembanyama on the sideline. Wembanyama, the No. 1 pick in the most recent NBA Draft, has had to experience a difficult first season in San Antonio.



JOHN RAOUX/AP

Rookie forward Ausar Thompson, right, and the Detroit Pistons are on a 25-game losing streak, one loss shy of tying the record.

the butt of jokes. As a competitor, that is a really difficult experience to have to go through.”

The Pistons (2-26), Wizards (5-22) and Spurs (4-23) may have scuffling in common. But not all rebuilds are the same. Detroit has an array of first-round talent, and the Spurs boast Wembanyama (he’s averaging 19 points and 11 rebounds). Washington, meanwhile, is generating headlines as much for its moves off the court — possibly relocating out of the District of Columbia — as the mounting losses. On the floor, the Wizards are trying to build around Coulibaly, Jordan Poole and Kyle Kuzma, the veteran forward who

won an NBA title with LeBron James and the Lakers.

Other single-digit win teams include Portland (7-20), Memphis (8-19) and Charlotte (7-19).

It’s a race to the bottom right now, with Detroit in the driver’s seat — and no Wembanyama awaiting in the 2024 draft.

“Your whole career, your whole life as an athlete, you’re always in the mindset of winning,” Anthony said. “And typically, most guys have been on good teams where if you do certain things, well, you’re going to have a chance to win. But when you get in those kinds of situations, where you don’t have control over your own destiny in a

specific game, that can really try you and challenge you, and everybody involved. It can just be a really ... poisonous existence.”

The Pistons had all the signs of a team prepared to improve on their 17-65 mark from a season ago. Cunningham was back from shin surgery, they landed Thompson and Marcus Sasser in the most recent draft and had a year of growth from Jaden Ivey, the 2022 fifth overall pick out of Purdue. They also brought in veteran coach Monty Williams.

Instead, it’s been loss after loss after loss after loss, etc.

Anthony knows the feeling.

That first season, Anthony experienced a losing streak that started with a loss on Feb. 16, 1996, to Atlanta, and didn’t end until the Grizzlies knocked off Kevin Garnett and the Minnesota Timberwolves on April 23.

“In a weird way, that was like winning a playoff game,” Anthony recalled. “It was a really, really big deal. You can’t even describe the relief that one feels having gone through that.”

Wembanyama almost felt like the weight had been lifted when the Spurs saw their 18-game losing streak end with a win over the Lakers last Friday. On Sunday, though, they lost 146-110 to New Orleans.

The Spurs are young and bumps are part of the journey.

“It might explain it but it doesn’t mean it’s OK,” Wembanyama said. “I mean, any team’s goal is trying to be consistent. We’re on our way. There are no excuses.”

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	21	6	.778	—
Philadelphia	19	8	.704	2
New York	16	11	.593	5
Brooklyn	13	14	.481	8
Toronto	11	16	.407	10

Southeast Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	16	11	.593	—
Miami	16	12	.571	½
Atlanta	12	15	.444	4
Charlotte	7	19	.269	8½
Washington	5	22	.185	11

Central Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Milwaukee	21	7	.750	—
Cleveland	16	13	.552	5½
Indiana	14	13	.519	6½
Chicago	13	17	.433	9
Detroit	2	26	.071	19

Western Conference

Southwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Dallas	16	11	.593	—
New Orleans	17	12	.586	—
Houston	13	12	.520	2
Memphis	8	19	.296	8
San Antonio	4	23	.148	12

Northwest Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Minnesota	21	6	.778	—
Oklahoma City	18	8	.692	2½
Denver	19	10	.655	3
Utah	11	18	.379	11
Portland	7	20	.259	14

Pacific Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Sacramento	16	10	.615	—
L.A. Clippers	17	11	.607	—
Phoenix	14	13	.519	2½
L.A. Lakers	15	14	.517	2½
Golden State	13	14	.481	3½

Thursday’s games

Utah 119, Detroit 111
New Orleans 123, Cleveland 104
Chicago 114, San Antonio 95
Oklahoma City 134, L.A. Clippers 115
Memphis 116, Indiana 103
Milwaukee 118, Orlando 114
Minnesota 118, L.A. Lakers 111
Washington 118, Portland 117

Friday’s games

Toronto at Philadelphia
Denver at Brooklyn
Atlanta at Miami
Dallas at Houston
Phoenix at Sacramento
Washington at Golden State

Saturday’s games

Milwaukee at New York
Boston at L.A. Clippers
Denver at Charlotte
Houston at New Orleans
Orlando at Indiana
Detroit at Brooklyn
Memphis at Atlanta
Utah at Toronto
Cleveland at Chicago
L.A. Lakers at Oklahoma City
Portland at Golden State
San Antonio at Dallas
Minnesota at Sacramento

Sunday’s games

No games scheduled.

Monday’s games

Milwaukee at New York
Golden State at Denver
Boston at L.A. Lakers
Philadelphia at Miami
Dallas at Phoenix

Scoring leaders

Through Thursday					
	G	FG	FT	PTS	AVG
Embiid, PHI	24	283	251	843	35.1
Doncic, DAL	26	292	166	850	32.7
Durant, PHO	23	248	167	713	31.0
Antetokmpo, MIL	27	308	207	833	30.9
G.-Alxnder, OKC	25	277	188	768	30.7
Fox, SAC	20	209	117	601	30.1
Curry, GS	25	219	147	706	28.2
Young, ATL	25	219	180	705	28.2
Mitchell, CLE	22	212	118	610	27.7
Tatum, BOS	26	242	136	697	26.8
Jokic, DEN	28	288	133	742	26.5
Lillard, MIL	26	197	202	682	26.2
Maxey, PHI	26	233	127	679	26.1
Brunson, NY	27	240	121	682	25.3

NBA/COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Bucks face long holiday road trip

BY STEVE MEGARGEE
Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Milwaukee Bucks forward Bobby Portis says he didn't even bother getting a Christmas tree for his home this year.

There was no need. He and his teammates are making an extended holiday visit to New York. NBA players have become accustomed to the possibility they'll be working away from home on Christmas. But no team's ever had a holiday trip quite like the one the Bucks are experiencing. "Obviously I ain't going to be able to open no presents under my tree," Portis said earlier this week, pointing out the team is leaving Friday. "They'd be sitting at the crib under the tree for five or six days after Christmas."

The Bucks have consecutive early afternoon games with the New York Knicks on Saturday and again on Christmas Day before visiting the Brooklyn Nets on Wednesday. According to the Elias Sports Bureau, this marks just the second time an NBA team has played three straight road games in the New York metro area, and the first time that it's coincided with Christmas.

The Washington Wizards played at Brooklyn and then followed it up with two games against the Knicks in March 2021. The Atlanta Hawks will become the third team to play consecutive road games in the Big Apple when they have back-to-back games in Brooklyn on Feb. 29 and March 2 before facing the Knicks at Madison Square Garden on March 5.

After going unbeaten during a season-long, six-game homestand, the Bucks are trying to make the best of this unusual trip. "Aside from home, there's no place like New York on Christmas, right?" Bucks guard Pat Connaughton said. "I know a lot of people love New York on Christmas time, so we're fortunate to be able to spend it there."

Many of the Bucks have relatives joining them. Bucks guard Malik Beasley plans to get an artificial tree to put in his hotel suite. Rookie Andre Jackson Jr., who grew up in Amsterdam, N.Y., and went to Albany Academy, is hoping to fit in a trip upstate to see his grandmother. Two-time MVP Giannis Antetokounmpo says his extended family is coming along. "Everybody's going to be there," Antetokounmpo said. "It's going to be like a huge party."

Antetokounmpo's younger brother, Alex Antetokounmpo of the NBA G League's Wisconsin Herd, will be in the area playing a

On AFN



**Milwaukee Bucks (21-7)
at New York Knicks (16-7)**
AFN-Sports
6 p.m. Monday CET
2 a.m. Tuesday JKT



**Golden State Warriors (13-14)
at Denver Nuggets (19-10)**
AFN-Sports
8:30 p.m. Monday CET
4:30 a.m. Tuesday JKT



**Boston Celtics (21-6)
at Los Angeles Lakers (15-14)**
AFN-Sports
11 p.m. Monday CET
7 a.m. Monday JKT



**Philadelphia 76ers (19-8)
at Miami Heat (16-12)**
AFN-Sports
2 a.m. Tuesday CET
10 a.m. Tuesday JKT



**Dallas Mavericks (16-11)
at Phoenix Suns (14-13)**
AFN-Sports
4:30 a.m. Tuesday CET
12:30 p.m. Tuesday JKT

game against the Long Island Nets on Dec. 27. Antetokounmpo even brought up the possibility of attending a Broadway show.



An Oregon State fan, front, and a Washington State fan hold "Pac-2" signs, representing the two schools that will remain in the Pac-12 after the 2023-2024 academic year.

Pac-12 resolves revenue distribution disagreement

BY RALPH D. RUSSO
Associated Press

Oregon State and Washington State announced Thursday they have reached an agreement in principle with 10 departing Pac-12 schools on revenue distribution for 2023-24 that ends a legal battle sparked by conference realignment.

Last week, Oregon State and Washington State were given control of the Pac-12 and assets when the state Supreme Court of Washington declined to review a lower court's decision to grant the schools a preliminary injunction.

Financial terms of the settlement were not released, but in a joint statement Washington State and Oregon State said the departing members will forfeit a portion of distributions for this school year and guarantees to cover a specific portion of "potential future liabilities."

"This agreement ensures that the future of the Pac-12 will be decided by the schools that are staying, not those that are leaving. We look forward to what the future holds for our universities, our student-athletes, the Pac-12 Conference and millions of fans," Oregon State President Jayathi Murthy and Washington State President Kirk Schulz said in a statement.

The conference, which Oregon State and Washington State intend to keep alive and hope to rebuild, will retain its assets and all future revenues.

"This agreement allows OSU

Bowl games on AFN

Armed Forces Bowl
James Madison vs. Air Force
AFN-Sports2
9:30 p.m. Saturday CET
5:30 a.m. Sunday JKT

Quick Lane Bowl
Bowling Green vs. Minnesota
AFN-Sports
8 p.m. Tuesday CET
4 a.m. Wednesday JKT

Las Vegas Bowl
Utah vs. Northwestern
AFN-Sports2
1:30 a.m. Sunday CET
9:30 a.m. Sunday JKT

Guaranteed Rate Bowl
Kansas vs. UNLV
AFN-Sports
3 a.m. Wednesday CET
11 a.m. Wednesday JKT

and WSU to maintain control of the hundreds of millions of dollars coming into the conference in future years, as we have always maintained they would, while calling for the vast majority of funds earned in 2023-24 to be distributed equally among the 12 members," the 10 departing schools said in a joint statement.

The schools said the "fine details" of the agreement would be worked out in the coming days.

The Pac-12 was ripped apart this summer after the league's leadership failed to land a media rights agreement that would keep it competitive with other power conferences.

Next year, USC, UCLA, Oregon and Washington will join the Big Ten; Arizona, Arizona State, Colorado and Utah will join the Big 12; and Stanford and California will join the Atlantic Coast Conference.

Oregon State and Washington State were left behind. The

schools sued the conference and the 10 departing schools in September, claiming they should be the sole board members of the Pac-12.

Oregon State and Washington State said the other members relinquished their right to vote on conference business when they announced their departures and a Superior Court judge in Whitman County, Wash., agreed.

The departing schools appealed the ruling, but the Washington Supreme Court passed on hearing the appeal.

Oregon State and Washington State plan to operate as a two-team conference, allowable for two years by NCAA rule, and then rebuild.

They have a scheduling agreement in place with the Mountain West for football next season and are working on a deal to have an affiliation with the West Coast Conference for basketball and other Olympics sports for two years.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Transfer portal makes it tougher to retain players

Coaches try to maintain relationships to keep them from leaving

By PETE IACOBELLI
AND JOHN ZENOR
Associated Press

College recruiting may start in the homes of the high school player but more than ever it never really stops once they are on campus.

Job 1: Recruit. Job 2: Retain.

The ready opportunities for players to transfer makes it even more important for coaches around the country to devote plenty of time to them once they arrive, hoping to keep promising youngsters and starters alike out of the transfer portal. Schools also want athletes to feel they can earn plenty of endorsement money or compensation right where they are.

"I think the most important thing is relationships," Alabama coach Nick Saban said in a familiar refrain among coaches.

The days of blue-chip recruits patiently waiting their turn to get on the field largely be gone.

Even starting quarterbacks such as Ohio State's Ryan McCord and Oklahoma's Dillon Gabriel and Texas A&M defensive lineman Walter Nolen, among plenty of others, have entered the transfer portal.

The portal window is open until Jan. 2, with another one running from April 15-30. It has become a key plug-and-play method for powerhouses and rebuilding programs alike. The top three Heisman Trophy finishers — winner Jayden Daniels (LSU), runner-up Michael Penix Jr. (Washington) and Bo Nix (Oregon) — were quarterbacks who arrived via the portal. Penix has led his team to the playoff.

Some transfers are looking for more playing time. Others for more money via name, image and likeness deals and better fits. Whatever the players' reasons for leaving, those coaches have to focus more than ever on keeping them.

Washington State coach Jake Dickert highlighted the predicament facing his program in the decimated Pac-12 in November, citing how far his school is behind on the NIL front compared to teams like Oregon, Washington and USC. He figured December would bring "open target season" for the Cougars.

"We need to provide them with as much resources as we have here to keep this team together, to keep recruiting, to keep going," Dickert said.

More and more coaches have spoken up about the need for more



L.G. PATTERSON/AP

Heisman Trophy winner Jayden Daniels made his way to LSU through the transfer portal.

financial resources being available for NIL deals. N.C. State coach Dave Doeren was just one of them, saying earlier this season: "I'd love to see 5,000 people donate \$1,000 to our NIL and get us to a point where we can recruit, retain and develop and have a program in the NIL world where the guys on our roster are able to benefit from that."

Clemson coach Dabo Swinney said tampering with other teams' players is a big problem. Swinney said the days after the season end-

ed were spent meeting with his team.

"Rosters are not the same because of the portal, because of the trend of guys not playing and you can get in a bad spot pretty quick," the Tigers coach said. He noted his team is in dire straits at cornerback for the Gator Bowl against Kentucky after Nate Wiggins was among several players opting out of the bowl to turn pro and Toriano Pride Jr. entered the portal.

Nebraska coach Matt Rhule said a key is to prioritize the current players over who may be available in the portal.

"I always want to take care and honor the guys that were here first," Rhule said. "If guys decide to leave then I'm going to go fix the problem because they left. I'm just not going to tell a guy here to leave so that I can go get somebody else. I want to be the guy that I promised all the parents I am in recruiting."

Rhule, a former Carolina Panthers coach, can lean on advice from longtime NFL executive Bill Polian about maintaining a healthy locker room environment: make sure you don't bring in a free agent as the team's highest-paid player.

Having a cohesive team and strong coach-player relationships doesn't guarantee some won't leave. But it can't hurt.

Kentucky coach Mark Stoops said there is added emphasis on maintaining relationships, including with promising young players



ALONZO ADAMS/AP

After starting at quarterback for two seasons at Oklahoma, quarterback Dillon Gabriel entered the transfer portal.

who may not be getting as much playing time as they hoped. Once a month, Stoops tells his coaches to leave their offices and spend time in the weight room or elsewhere with their players.

"We constantly work on that relationship and making sure that we touch base with those players in particular and all of our guys," Stoops said. "This is a relationship

business. As busy as we are, as much as we all have to do, spending time with the players, investing in the players, having the players at your house, having them in for meetings. Keeping that contact is, in my opinion, one of the most important things."

Marshall coach Charles Huff said the portal options force coaches "to develop genuine relationships with every player in your locker room" not just the starters and seniors.

"I started a deal where I call one or two in my office a week just to say hello, how's mom," Huff said. "It doesn't take long for that girlfriend you don't call or write to drift away."

"That gap between the relationship they had with you in recruiting and that relationship they have now, when it starts to widen, all of sudden homesickness sets in, a friend from another school calls and says, 'Hey, I'm playing, why aren't you playing?'"

Auburn coach Hugh Freeze has staffers charged specifically with "developing relationships" with the players.

"I don't know that any of us are ever gonna be 100 at it and it certainly makes it very difficult to manage your recruiting and roster," Freeze said. "But it's part of the game now, and it's not a part that many of us like, but you better pay attention to it for sure because it's here."



SAM CRAFT/AP

Defensive lineman Walter Nolen (0) entered the portal despite having a standout season at Texas A&M.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

FSU board approves lawsuit against ACC

By RALPH D. RUSSO
Associated Press

The Florida State board of trustees on Friday cleared the way for a lawsuit against the Atlantic Coast Conference, challenging a contract that binds the school to the league for the next 12 years and creating a potential path to leave without paying more than \$500 million in penalties.

"I believe this board has been left no choice but to challenge the legitimacy of the ACC grant of rights and its severe withdrawal penalties," Florida State Board of Trustees chairman Peter Collins said during a trustees meeting.

Florida State outside counsel David Ashburn said a lawsuit was ready to be filed that claims the ACC's grant of rights violates anti-trust law and has unenforceable withdrawal penalties. Ashburn said it would cost a school \$572 million to withdraw from the conference. The lawsuit also accuses the ACC of breach of contract and violation of public policy.

Florida State is looking for a way out of the conference it has been a member of since 1992 because it believes the ACC is locked into an undervalued and unusually lengthy media rights deal with ESPN that runs through 2036. The school leaders also say the league refuses to change its revenue distribution model to match FSU's value.

Florida State leaders have been pushing for unequal distribution of revenue for more than a year.

"It's time for us to try to do something about it," Florida State President Richard McCullough said.



ERIK VERDUZCO/AP

Florida State views the Atlantic Coast Conference as a league that holds back its athletic program.

McCullough said the trustees' approval of the legal challenge was not a direct reaction to Florida State recently being left out of the College Football Playoff, despite having an undefeated record.

"This is not a reaction, but something we've done a lot of due diligence on," he said.

The ACC has agreed to create a bonus system that would direct more revenue to schools that have postseason success in football and

basketball. It did not immediately comment on Friday's decision.

Florida State leaders have made it known they are unhappy with the school's current situation in the ACC, where revenue distribution lags way behind the payouts to schools in the Southeastern and Big Ten conferences. That gap is likely to grow substantially in the near future as new media rights deals kick in for the SEC and Big Ten while the ACC is locked into a

deal with ESPN that still has more than a decade left.

"We are not satisfied with our current situation," McCullough said during an August board meeting.

Earlier this month, Florida State won the ACC football title game but became the first Power Five conference champion to finish with an undefeated record and still be left out of the College Football Playoff.

The snub of the Seminoles (13-0) for a playoff spot that went to SEC champion Alabama reignited frustrations at Florida State with what many of their supporters view as a conference that holds back their athletic program — and most notably the football team.

Any ACC school that wants to leave the conference would have to challenge the grant of rights to be able to get out before joining another league. The grant of rights gives the ACC control over media rights for its member schools — including the broadcast of games in all sports. In addition, any school that wants to leave the ACC would have to pay an exit fee of three times the league's operating budget, or roughly \$120 million.

The length of the ACC's agreement and potential financial penalties have protected the conference from being poached by other leagues the way the Big 12 and Pac-12 have been in the most recent round of realignment.

But it has also caused consternation in the conference as its members see a future where SEC and Big Ten schools are receiving upwards of \$75 million annually from their conferences and ACC schools are struggling to stay within \$30 million of their competitors.

"It'd be tough to run any other kind of company like this," FSU board chairman Peter Collins said in August.

Florida State is not the only ACC member concerned about the growing revenue gap, but it has been by far the most vocal.

AP sports writer Mark Long contributed.

Living: Florida State players go from highest high to lowest low

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could be more, although Norvell declined to discuss any juniors or seniors weighing choices.

All while commiserating a wild, 24-hour span in which they celebrated the program's first ACC title since 2014 only to be left out of the CFP the next day.

"It's been challenging," Norvell said. "You basically got 12 hours to celebrate what was an unbelievable accomplishment for this team. Then you had to learn how to work through disappointment, hurt, frustration, anger, every bit of it. And you're 18- to 22-year-old kids and a 42-year-old coach."

Norvell called it one of the toughest two-week stretches of his coaching career. But he also refused to let Florida State's accomplishments go unrecognized.

"I will always have the feelings of what happened," Norvell said. "But at the end of the day, I wasn't in that room. It wasn't my choice, so my beliefs of what it is, that's that. ... I'm so proud of what and who this team is and what they represented for 13 weeks of the season."

"It doesn't take away from what these guys have accomplished throughout the course of this year."

Florida State practiced Tuesday as the team continued preparing for Georgia. Quarterback Tate Rodemaker and Brock Glenn led the offense. All-ACC selections defensive end Patrick Payton and linebacker Kalen DeLoach guided the defense.

The Seminoles are pushing forward in hopes of finishing the year undefeated. Florida State has won three national titles and won't be able to secure a fourth in 2023, but there is a chance for a perfect finish to an imperfect season.

Jones has been among the most vocal, saying he is looking forward to his NFL Draft preparations but insisted he would play in the Orange Bowl.

"We set out to win every game that was put in front of us," Jones said. "That doesn't take away from me going out here and doing what I have to do for my brothers. I wasn't the only one who got left out of the playoffs. We all got left out of the playoffs."

"It was big for me to just come back and do what I got to do."



ERIK VERDUZCO/AP

Florida State players celebrate after beating Louisville in the ACC championship game. The Seminoles have to be content with that title and a berth in the Orange Bowl.

NFL

Chiefs can clinch division with win

By DAVE SKRETTA
Associated Press
 KANSAS CITY, Mo. — The one-sided nature of the Chiefs’ recent history with the Las Vegas Raiders perhaps appropriately mimics the way the AFC West has turned into a one-team division since Andy Reid arrived in Kansas City just over a decade ago.

After second-place finishes in his first three seasons, Reid has led the Chiefs to seven straight division titles, and they could clinch their eighth on Monday with a victory over the Raiders — or a tie if the Broncos lose to the Patriots the previous night. The only streak longer in NFL history belongs to the Patriots, who won 11 straight AFC East championships from 2009 to 2019.

“That’s something we talk about at the beginning of the year: Our first goal is to win the AFC West,” Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes said. “We have to be ready this week, and that would clinch our first goal if we are able to do that.”

The Chiefs (9-5) also are trying to keep their hopes alive of earning the AFC’s No. 1 seed and lone first-round playoff bye. They head into the weekend two games back of the Ravens and a game behind the Dolphins, whom they have already defeated.

The Chiefs have an easier fin-



**Las Vegas Raiders (6-8)
at Kansas City Chiefs (9-5)**
 AFN-Sports
 7 p.m. Monday CET
 3 a.m. Tuesday JKT

ishing stretch than either of those teams, and it begins with Las Vegas (6-8), which they have beaten six straight times and 11 of the past 12 in a series dating to Sept. 16, 1960, when the Chiefs were in Dallas and the Raiders in Oakland. The Raiders have won only once at Arrowhead since Oct. 28, 2012.

“It’s a team that I’m just tired of losing to,” said Raiders cornerback Amik Robertson, who thought back to their 31-17 loss to the Chiefs in late November. “We’ve got the pieces. We’ve got the guys to be able to beat that team, and unfortunately we took an ‘L.’ That’s something I thought about for a long time. I’m happy that it’s back, that we’ve got an opportunity.”

Despite the lopsided nature of the rivalry, the Chiefs and Raiders remain just that: rivals.

There is a mutual hatred between the franchises, borne of the



CHARLES KRUPA/AP

Chiefs running back Clyde Edwards-Helaire, center, celebrates his touchdown on Saturday with Travis Kelce, left, and Jerick McKinnon. Kansas City can clinch the AFC West by winning on Christmas Day.

days of Len Dawson and Jim Otto, nurtured through the era of Bill Kenney and Jim Plunkett, and continuing into the present. Mahomes is 10-1 in his career against the Raiders.

“Any time you play a team like this,” Raiders quarterback Aidan O’Connell said, “you got to stay within yourself. Play one play at a time. Obviously there is history between the two teams, but I think any game you have to lock in on each play, each situation, try to stay ahead of the sticks and just make smart decisions.”

Fluke or fabulous

The Raiders raised plenty of eyebrows a week ago, when they set a franchise scoring record in their 63-21 victory over the Chargers. They scored a club-record 42 points in the first half, and eight Raiders reached the end zone.

Now, they need to prove that it was not a one-off occurrence.

“We’re not expecting to have 60 points every time we go out there, but it was more the style and togetherness that we played with,” Adams said. “When you can go out there and play together like that and everybody does their job and play at a high level, it’s fun. So, hopefully we can continue to do that.”

Finishing matters

The Chiefs are last in the NFL in fourth-quarter scoring, averaging 2.8 points per game — a full point behind Arizona, the next-to-last team. They were shut out by New England last week and managed only a field goal the previous week against Buffalo.

“We’ve got to do better there,” Reid said. “Bottom line, you have to score.”

Rams continue to surge toward playoffs

By GREG BEACHAM
Associated Press
 INGLEWOOD, Calif. — Sean McVay turned the Los Angeles Rams’ already jubilant locker room into a party Thursday night with an announcement: The players are off until Tuesday, allowing them to spend the entire Christmas holiday with their families.

These surprising Rams earned their holiday with a surge of five wins in six games down the stretch, culminating in another impressive victory over a fellow NFC playoff contender.

Matthew Stafford passed for 328 yards and two touchdowns, rookie Puka Nacua had nine catches for a career-high 164 yards and a score, and the Rams surged forward in the race for a postseason berth with a 30-22 victory over the New Orleans Saints.

Kyren Williams rushed for 104 yards and a touchdown, and Demarcus Robinson added 82 yards receiving and another score for the Rams (8-7), who are above .500 for the first time since Week 1 after sitting at 3-6 in their bye week last month.

“We earned the opportunity to be at this point, in my opinion,” Stafford said. “We’ve had stakes since the bye, so I’m just proud of the way these guys have put their head down, gone to work and shown up.”

With its second win in five days during a self-described remodeling season, Los Angeles also jumped past Minnesota (7-7) and moved to



RYAN SUN/AP

Rams quarterback Matthew Stafford passes against the Saints on Thursday. Stafford led Los Angeles to its fifth win in six games.

sixth in the NFC standings in its bid to secure a wild-card playoff spot — and an increasingly possible opening-round showdown with the Detroit Lions, Stafford’s team for 12 seasons.

Los Angeles led 30-7 with 12:44 left in the fourth quarter after scoring on six of its first eight possessions, but allowed its opponent to make it close for the second straight game after a late 21-point lead turned into an eight-point win over Washington last weekend.

“It’s a short week, so it’s tougher to finish,” Rams safety John Johnson said. “Maybe the tank hit empty before we wanted it to, but now we can regroup, recharge and get back to it.”

Derek Carr threw TD passes to Juwan John-

son and A.T. Perry in the fourth quarter, with a 2-point conversion trimming the Rams’ lead to eight points with 3:53 to play. But Nacua recovered an onside kick and then got a key first down on a 9-yard jet sweep, and the Rams ran out the clock on their fourth straight home victory.

“We sure make it interesting, don’t we?” McVay asked. “But I love the resilience of this group. They just continue to show up. I thought there was a lot of really good stuff throughout the course of this game.”

Carr passed for 319 yards and hit Rashid Shaheed for an early 45-yard TD for the Saints (7-8), whose two-game winning streak ended with a painfully slow start and 458 yards allowed by their defense, which even coach Dennis Allen acknowledged was confused at times by the aggressive, complex pre-snap motions in McVay’s offense.

Although this loss hurts its chances, New Orleans is still in serious contention for a playoff spot and the NFC South title because it finishes the season with two games against division opponents, starting with Tampa Bay on New Year’s Eve.

“We certainly would have liked to start the game and play better, but we didn’t,” Allen said. “We’re not into the percentages. We let an opportunity go by, and now we have to get ready for the things we can control. We’ll regroup. We’re still in this thing.”

Scoreboard

American Conference						
East						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Miami	10	4	0	.714	441	294
Buffalo	8	6	0	.571	379	254
e-N.Y. Jets	5	9	0	.357	201	287
e-New England	3	11	0	.214	186	299
South						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Houston	8	6	0	.571	306	295
Indianapolis	8	6	0	.571	344	343
Jacksonville	8	6	0	.571	319	313
e-Tennessee	5	9	0	.357	257	301
North						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
x-Baltimore	11	3	0	.786	384	225
Cleveland	9	5	0	.643	309	289
Cincinnati	8	6	0	.571	307	311
Pittsburgh	7	7	0	.500	223	280
West						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Kansas City	9	5	0	.643	319	245
Denver	7	7	0	.500	304	351
Las Vegas	6	8	0	.429	265	280
L.A. Chargers	5	9	0	.357	303	345

National Conference						
East						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
x-Dallas	10	4	0	.714	431	264
x-Philadelphia	10	4	0	.714	359	341
N.Y. Giants	5	9	0	.357	189	338
e-Washington	4	10	0	.286	281	423
South						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Tampa Bay	7	7	0	.500	296	290
New Orleans	7	8	0	.467	331	297
Atlanta	6	8	0	.429	258	278
e-Carolina	2	12	0	.143	206	348
North						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Detroit	10	4	0	.714	382	331
Minnesota	7	7	0	.500	290	269
Green Bay	6	8	0	.429	300	301
Chicago	5	9	0	.357	287	329
West						
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-San Francisco	11	3	0	.786	425	234
L.A. Rams	8	7	0	.533	357	332
Seattle	7	7	0	.500	300	335
e-Arizona	3	11	0	.214	259	376

e-Eliminated from playoffs
x-clinched playoff spot
y-clinched division
Thursday's game
L.A. Rams 30, New Orleans 22
Saturday's games
Cincinnati at Pittsburgh
Buffalo at L.A. Chargers
Sunday's games
Cleveland at Houston
Detroit at Minnesota
Green Bay at Carolina
Indianapolis at Atlanta
Seattle at Tennessee
Washington at N.Y. Jets
Jacksonville at Tampa Bay
Arizona at Chicago
Dallas at Miami
New England at Denver
Monday's games
Las Vegas at Kansas City
N.Y. Giants at Philadelphia
Baltimore at San Francisco
Thursday, Dec. 28
N.Y. Jets at Cleveland
Saturday, Dec. 30
Detroit at Dallas
Sunday, Dec. 31
Arizona at Philadelphia
Atlanta at Chicago
Carolina at Jacksonville
L.A. Rams at N.Y. Giants
Las Vegas at Indianapolis
Miami at Baltimore
New England at Buffalo
New Orleans at Tampa Bay
San Francisco at Washington
Tennessee at Houston
Pittsburgh at Seattle
Cincinnati at Kansas City
L.A. Chargers at Denver
Green Bay at Minnesota
NFL calendar
Jan. 13-15 — Wild Card playoff games.
Jan. 20-21 — Division playoff games.
Jan. 28 — AFC and NFC championship games.
Feb. 11 — Super Bowl 58 at Allegiant Stadium in Las Vegas.

NFL

League’s best meet in prime matchup

By JOSH DUBOW
Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — The NFL schedule makers couldn’t have come up with a better Christmas night matchup than the one between the Baltimore Ravens and San Francisco 49ers.

The top team in the AFC visiting the NFC’s best. Dominant defenses facing high-powered offenses. The top two MVP favorites.

The game Monday night between the AFC-leading Ravens (11-3) and the NFC-leading 49ers (11-3) might just be a preview of a far more important game at the Super Bowl in Las Vegas in February.

“You can’t ignore it,” Ravens safety Kyle Hamilton said. “It’s two great teams going at it. We’re on Christmas Day; it’s kind of as big as it gets.”

The game Monday night marks just the second time in NFL history that the teams with sole possession of the best record in each conference played this late in the season. The other came in 2005 when Seattle beat Indianapolis in Week 16.

There have been 14 times that the Super Bowl featured a regular-season rematch and both the Ravens and 49ers are listed as the favorites to get to the title game, according to FanDuel Sportsbook.

“(The) Super Bowl is in February,” Ravens quarterback Lamar Jackson said. “We’re in December right now. We have to focus on Monday night. I’m not worried about what people are saying.”

Baltimore and San Francisco have been two of the best teams the past five seasons when they’ve had healthy starting quarterbacks. That’s definitely the case this year with Jackson playing like he did when he won the MVP in 2019 for Baltimore after having



**Baltimore Ravens (11-3)
at San Francisco 49ers (11-3)**
AFN-Sports2
2:15 a.m. Tuesday CET
10:15 a.m. Tuesday JKT

his last two seasons cut short by injuries.

He has his best crop of receivers to help him out this season and a versatile defense that has allowed the fewest points in the NFL.

“You always know what you’re going to get from their team,” Niners coach Kyle Shanahan said. “We haven’t played them in a little bit, but I know that hasn’t changed. You always see them on tape, you always see their numbers and they still have the same quarterback who will always be as big of an issue as there is.”

Brock Purdy is on a record-setting pace for the 49ers, leading the NFL in TD passes (29), passer rating (119) and yards per attempt (9.9).

He’s helped by the game’s best group of playmakers, led by do-everything running back Christian McCaffrey, and a dominant defense featuring All-Pros Nick Bosa and Fred Warner.

“They do it all on both sides of the ball,” Ravens coach John Harbaugh said. “They’re tough, they’re physical, they’re disciplined. They play hard. They play winning football. ... I have a lot of respect for the coaches and the players. There’s just nothing about how they’re built that you couldn’t respect, so we understand that. What I’m looking to see is how we respond to that chal-



MATT YORK/AP

49ers running back Christian McCaffrey, center, celebrates after scoring against the Cardinals on Sunday in Glendale, Ariz. McCaffrey leads the NFL in rushing for the NFC’s top offense.

Playoff implications

The 49ers clinched the NFC West last week, while the Ravens were assured of a playoff spot after beating Jacksonville. Both teams still have more to play for in the final three games.

San Francisco can be assured of the No. 1 seed and a first-round bye with wins in two of the final three games. The Ravens can clinch the AFC North with a win and Cleveland loss this week but might need to beat Miami next week to earn the top seed.

Sack streaks

Baltimore’s pass rush has been fruitful this year, and one player

has already made history. Justin Madubuike has at least a half-sack in 11 consecutive games, tying an NFL record.

“He’s playing at a high level. He’s pretty relentless,” Harbaugh said. “He has a lot of guys around him playing really well, too. So, those guys kind of feed off each other, protect one another (and) create opportunities for one another.”

The Ravens have a league-leading 50 sacks. Baltimore also has a sack in 35 consecutive games, the NFL’s longest active streak.

Stop the run

One big concern for the 49ers could be their run defense after al-

lowing 234 yards — their most in a game in more than six seasons — against the Cardinals in a win last week. Slowing down Jackson and the Ravens will be a tough challenge even after Baltimore lost Keaton Mitchell to a season-ending knee injury.

The main issue against the Cardinals was a season-high 16 missed tackles that contributed to six runs of at least 10 yards.

“There’s definitely a few plays last week that we that we’d like to have back and it would have looked a lot better in the stat sheet,” Bosa said. “But we watched the tape and we don’t feel it was as bad as the stat sheet says.”

Slumping Eagles hope to end skid against Giants

By AARON BRACY
Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Three weeks ago, Philadelphia had a quarterback who was a leading MVP candidate and a team that looked poised for a return trip to the Super Bowl.

Now, the Eagles are plummeting in the standings.

Consecutive losses to the 49ers, Cowboys and Seahawks, plus inconsistent play by QB Jalen Hurts and the offense as a whole, have stymied the Eagles. Their struggles on defense resulted in the demotion of the coordinator and suddenly put coach Nick Sirianni on the defensive in Philadelphia.

“We’re in a little bit of a skid right now that I’m very confident that we’ll be able to get out of be-

cause of the people that we have in this building and the accountability not only that I hold the standard to for the team and myself, but also what they hold the standard to,” Sirianni said on Wednesday.

The Eagles (10-4) will get a chance to snap out of their funk in a Christmas Day matchup against the New York Giants (5-9).

While Philadelphia already has clinched a playoff berth, the Giants need to win out and get a lot of help to make the postseason.

The Giants won’t get an opponent in a giving mood this holiday season.

Philadelphia’s latest loss came on Monday night at Seattle when Hurts threw two late interceptions in a 20-17 defeat. Before the game, Sirianni made a surprise switch



**New York Giants (5-9)
at Philadelphia Eagles (10-4)**
AFN-Sports2
10:30 p.m. Monday CET
6:30 a.m. Tuesday JKT

on defense that had Matt Patricia take the play-calling duties from Sean Desai. Though there also has been criticism of first-year offensive coordinator Brian Johnson, Philadelphia’s head coach said there won’t be changes there.

“The criticism on this offense should come at me because this is

my offense,” Sirianni said.

The double-digit favorite Eagles will have a chance to get right against a Giants team that is statistically one of the worst in the league. New York is 31st of 32 teams in total offense and 24th in total defense.

“I’d say they’re still real good,” Giants coach Brian Daboll said. “Got a lot of talent on their team.”

Sirianni believes it’s just a matter of time before that talent has the Eagles soaring again.

“I know a lot of our guys have been through a lot and been through some tough times,” he said. “That’s what life is, and those moments are in life. You draw back on those moments and know you have overcome, and you are better off because of it. And that’s

been a consistent message there through some of these difficult times that we’re going through right now.”

Sack attack?

Philadelphia’s beleaguered defense could get a big boost from its defensive line against the Giants. The Eagles’ front four is one of the team’s strengths, though it’s even struggled in that area of late. For the season, Philadelphia’s 224 pressures are fourth in the NFL. In the Giants, they’ll be facing a banged-up offensive line that allowed seven sacks last week and has allowed QB Tommy DeVito to be sacked 35 times in seven games. New York starting RT Evan Neal (ankle) has missed five straight games.

SPORTS



Another rule change
Lane to first base being widened into field of play » **MLB, Page 33**

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Living with the heartache



COLIN HACKLEY, ABOVE, AND PHIL SEARS, RIGHT/AP

Above: Florida State quarterback Jordan Travis is tackled by North Alabama defensive back Shaun Myers on Nov. 18. Travis was injured during the play and lost for the season. The injury kept the unbeaten Seminoles out of the College Football Playoff. Right: Florida State defensive back Jarrian Jones returns an interception for a touchdown against Southern Mississippi. Jones says he'll never forget the snub by the CFP committee and that it feels "like somebody ripped your heart out of the chest."

Florida State players, coaches still hurting from playoff snub

BY BOB FERRANTE
Associated Press

The heartache won't go away. Not anytime soon, anyway. Not for Florida State players and coaches who were driven to earn a spot in the College Football Playoff and play for another title.

The Seminoles had to settle for the Atlantic Coast Conference championship, which followed a perfect regular season.

"Nobody can take that from us," senior defensive back Jarrian Jones said.

The CFP selection committee dropped Florida State (13-0) from fourth to fifth and outside the four-team playoff, a move it justified because of star quarterback Jordan Travis' season-ending broken leg. It prompted outrage from coach Mike Norvell and FSU administrators, and had state lawmakers crying out for answers.

No one felt the pain like the players who did everything right for months.

"I ain't going to lie, I'm going to

be hurt with that for the rest of my life," Jones said. "It just feels like somebody ripped your heart out of the chest."

Since the playoff snub, Norvell and his assistants have been busy. They hit the road to visit 2024 commitments and a few prospects they'd like to flip on national signing day. They've hosted several transfer prospects, most notably quarterbacks Cameron Ward (Washington State) and DJ Uiagalelei (Oregon State). They've landed a commitment from Georgia defensive end Marvin Jones Jr., the son of one of the Seminoles' top linebackers in program history.



Norvell

They've also tried to listen and advise players through upcoming decisions on their futures. Stand-out defensive end Jared Verse, running back Trey Benson and receiver Johnny Wilson are among those who have opted out of the Orange Bowl against Georgia (12-1) on Dec. 30. There

SEE LIVING ON PAGE 37

INSIDE

Coaches try to maintain relationships to keep players out of transfer portal
Page 36



Pistons, Spurs, Wizards have growing pains » **NBA, Page 34**

