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# STARS AND STRIPES®

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CONTINGENCY EDITION

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 27, 2024

Free to Deployed Areas



PHOTOS BY ERIC MENDIOLA/Stars and Stripes

A Dungeons and Dragons playing board at the SPC Ross A. McGinnis Warrior Zone on Camp Humphreys, South Korea, on Sunday.

## Different kind of campaign

### Dungeons and Dragons counts rising interest among US troops

By ERIC MENDIOLA  
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — Dungeons and Dragons marked its 50th anniversary this year and with the attention it receives from U.S. service members at this base in South Korea, the tabletop fantasy game is well on its way to 100.

At the SPC Ross A. McGinnis Warrior Zone, a high-tech recreational facility on Camp Humphreys built for online gaming,

eight soldiers gathered Sunday to play the old-fashioned way.

Dungeons and Dragons is a tabletop game whose players create characters and participate in adventures through interactive storytelling. The game is known for its mythical characters, ranging from spell-casting wizards to sword-wielding barbarians and conniving rogues.

A dungeon master sets up the

SEE CAMPAIGN ON PAGE 4



Spc. Tom Amsboro, left, and Spc. Andrew Jancy play D&D.

## Boot camp no problem after cancer for Marine

By LYDIA GORDON  
Stars and Stripes

For newly minted Marine Pfc. Britney Moyeda, getting through boot camp was no sweat in comparison with what she had endured just to get there in the first place.

The 18-year-old was diagnosed with acute lymphoblastic leukemia at age 12 and spent the following four years receiving treatment that included multiple rounds of chemotherapy and surgery before her cancer went into remission in 2022.

With a new lease on life, Moyeda decided

to chase the career she had become enamored with after seeing an elementary school classmate's father in a Marine Corps uniform, People magazine reported in a July story just weeks before her arrival at boot camp.

Moyeda's ambition became reality with her October graduation at Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego in California. She's now at Camp Johnson, N.C., for occupational specialty school in ground supply, and she aspires to become a drill sergeant.

"I have always believed if God left me here, it's because I have a purpose that I have to fulfill," Moyeda told Stars and Stripes in a recent interview. "So, I went for what I wanted most, and it was to be a Marine."

Not long after being declared cancer-free in 2022, the Houston native went to a local recruiting station, where she met with area recruiter Staff Sgt. Joseph Adams.

SEE CANCER ON PAGE 4



Moyeda

# BUSINESS/WEATHER

## Biden to decide on Japanese acquisition of US Steel

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A powerful government panel on Monday failed to reach consensus on the possible national security risks of a nearly \$15 billion proposed deal for Nippon Steel of Japan to purchase U.S. Steel, leaving the decision to President Joe Biden, who opposes the deal.

The Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States, known as CFIUS, sent its long-awaited report on the merger to Biden, who formally came out

against the deal in March. He has 15 days to reach a final decision, the White House said. A U.S. official familiar with the matter, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss the private report, said some federal agencies represented on the panel were skeptical that allowing a Japanese company to buy an American-owned steelmaker would create national security risks.

Monday was the deadline to approve the deal, recommend that Biden block it or extend the re-

view process.

Both Biden and President-elect Donald Trump have courted unionized workers at U.S. Steel and vowed to block the acquisition amid concerns about foreign ownership of a flagship American company. The economic risk, however, is giving up Nippon Steel's potential investments in the mills and upgrades that may help preserve steel production in the U.S.

U.S. Steel would keep its name and its headquarters in Pittsburgh.

### EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates			
Euro costs (Dec. 27)	0.94	Switzerland (Franc)	0.9006
British pound (Dec. 27)	\$1.22	Thailand (Baht)	34.18
Japanese yen (Dec. 27)	152.00	Turkey (NewLira)	35.1414
South Korean won (Dec. 27)	1426.00		
Commercial rates		(Military exchange rates are those available to customers at military banking facilities in the country of issuance for Japan, South Korea, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. For nonlocal currency exchange rates (i.e., purchasing British pounds in Germany), check with your local military banking facility. Commercial rates are interbank rates provided for reference when buying currency. All figures are foreign currencies to one dollar, except for the British pound, which is represented in dollars-to-pound, and the euro, which is dollars-to-euro.)	
Bahrain (Dinar)	.3772		
Britain (Pound)	1.2506		
Canada (Dollar)	1.4402		
China (Yuan)	7.2990		
Denmark (Krone)	7.1723		
Egypt (Pound)	50.9061		
Euro	0.9614		
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7679		
Hungary (Forint)	395.10		
Israel (Shekel)	3.6646		
Japan (Yen)	157.95		
Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3082		
Norway (Krone)	11.3680		
Philippines (Peso)	57.95		
Poland (Zloty)	4.10		
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7547		
Singapore (Dollar)	1.3594		
South Korea (Won)	1467.35		

### INTEREST RATES

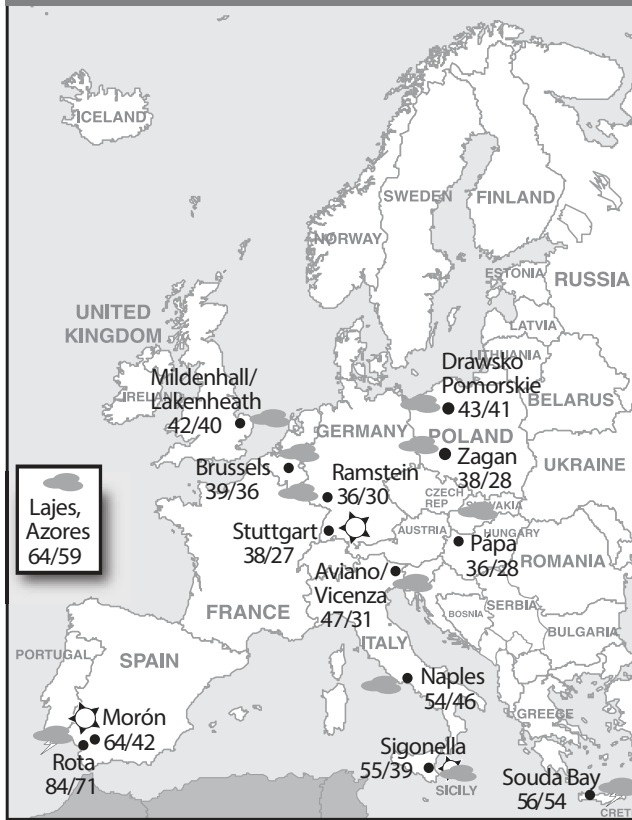
Prime rate	7.50
Interest Rates Discount rate	4.50
Federal funds market rate	4.33
3-month bill	4.39
30-year bond	4.77

## WEATHER OUTLOOK

### FRIDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



### FRIDAY IN EUROPE



### SATURDAY IN THE PACIFIC



The weather is provided by the American Forces Network Weather Center, 2nd Weather Squadron at Offutt Air Force Base, Neb.

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## STARS AND STRIPES

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## MILITARY



PHOTOS BY LUIS GARCIA/Stars and Stripes

Airmen stationed at Kunsan Air Base eat inside O'Malley Dining Facility at Kunsan Air Base, South Korea, on Wednesday.

## US air base in South Korea gets brand new spacious dining hall

BY LUIS GARCIA  
AND ERIC MENDIOLA  
*Stars and Stripes*

KUNSAN AIR BASE, South Korea — Airmen at this air base in western South Korea have a new place to eat with the opening of the new O'Malley Dining Facility, a state-of-the-art, \$22 million project that doubles the size and capacity of its predecessor.

The facility officially opened Wednesday, Christmas Day, on a site adjacent to the old dining hall, now demolished. The new facility features a host of upgrades.

At approximately 39,000 square feet, the new facility is more than twice the size of the old building and can seat up to 800 personnel at a time, compared to just 300 in the old facility, 8th Fighter Wing spokesman Capt. Alvin Nelson said by email on Thursday.

It can also feed more than twice as many people during each meal period than its predecessor.

"The previous DFAC was designed to service 830 personnel per meal period, but the number of personnel on meal cards has increased over the years," Nelson wrote.

"The new facility is designed to service just under 2,000 personnel and can serve approximately 15,000 meals daily during normal feeding hours."

A post on Kunsan's official Facebook page Dec. 23 labeled the new facility the largest of its kind in Pacific Air Forces. By comparison, the largest dining facility in the Air Force is Mitchell Hall at the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colo. It can serve the entire cadet wing, about 4,000 people, in less than 30 minutes, according to the academy website.



Salad bar inside O'Malley Dining Facility.

The expanded size and upgraded features at the O'Malley have been well-received by both staff and diners, said Senior Airman Ambrielle Allen, a shift leader at the facility.

"Walking in and seeing the dining room and the open space — it's huge and impressive," she told Stars and Stripes on Wednesday. "It has more space, newer equipment, and more opportunities because it's getting a lot of new faces in."

The modernized facility is designed to enhance safety and efficiency, with wider kitchen pathways, freezers with safety alarms and a dedicated indoor area for carry-out and box meal pickups, according to Nelson.

"The larger food storage capacities and the largest generator on base will also help prevent food waste during a power outage," he wrote.

Airman 1st Class Brandon Valente, an aircraft metals technology specialist with the 8th Maintenance Squadron, said the new design and atmosphere are significant improvements.

"It's a big upgrade with a lot more atmosphere," Valente said Wednesday at the dining hall. "The booths on the side — I don't see many DFACs with those."

The facility also includes higher ceilings and more natural light, creating an inviting environment for airmen.

"It's great for getting together with friends during lunch or after shifts," Airman 1st Class Christian Driver, also with the 8th Maintenance Squadron, said Wednesday. "Its size and ease of access, no long lines and efficient service make it special."

The transition from the old facility, which ceased operations on Oct. 1, came with challenges, such as moving large equipment.

Allen said she considered her part in the project an accomplishment. "I'm proud because my hands were part of making this happen," she said.

# Air Force widens waiver list to boost recruiting

BY JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

The U.S. Air Force has added several medical conditions to its waiver program, a move that is expected to open career opportunities to hundreds of new recruits each year, the service said this week.

The new policy allows waivers to be granted in certain cases for asthma, hearing loss and food allergies, the Air Force said in a statement Monday.

The Air Force Accessions Center said about 600 applicants are expected to benefit annually.

"We are constantly evaluating how we can bring in the best talent while ensuring our members can serve effectively and safely," AFAC commander Brig. Gen. Christopher Amrhein said in the statement. "By expanding waiver criteria for manageable health conditions, we can access a wider pool of qualified applicants without compromising mission readiness."

The decision comes amid a difficult recruiting environment for the armed services, which have struggled in recent years to attract new members.

The Air Force, after missing its new recruit goal in 2023 for the first time since 1999, bounced back in 2024.

Relaxed tattoo rules and in-

creased bonuses are among the factors that helped the Air Force reach its recruiting mission goals in 2024, service officials have said.

Air Force officials say the recently implemented new waiver policy is a significant change from the previous standard, which disqualified all individuals with a positive asthma diagnosis and did not consider the severity of their condition.

Waivers are now possible for those with clinically diagnosed asthma, provided they do not require daily preventive medication, "and their rescue inhaler use is kept to a minimum," the Air Force said.

Also, applicants with hearing loss in one ear that has been diagnosed as moderate hearing impairment can now be considered for a waiver if the opposite ear meets the standards of mild hearing impairment, the Air Force said.

Meanwhile, people with a documented history of food allergies can now qualify for a waiver, provided there have been no instances of severe life-threatening reactions.

All three of the expanded waiver considerations come with limitations to career fields that could put them at increased risk or worsen their medical condition, the Air Force said.

## Biden signs NDAA despite objection to trans care ban

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden on Monday signed into law a defense bill that authorizes significant pay raises for junior enlisted service members, aims to counter China's growing power and boosts overall military spending to \$895 billion despite his objections to language stripping coverage of transgender medical treatments for children in military families.

Biden said his administration strongly opposes the provision because it targets a group based on gender identity and "interferes with parents' roles to determine the best care for their children." He said it also undermines the all-volunteer military's ability to recruit and retain talent.

"No service member should have to decide between their fam-

ily's health care access and their call to serve our nation," the president said in a statement.

The Senate forwarded the bill to Biden after passing it last week by a vote of 85-14. In the House, a majority of Democrats voted against the bill after House Speaker Mike Johnson insisted on adding the provision to ban transgender medical care for children. The legislation easily passed by a vote of 281-140.

Biden also objected to other language in the bill prohibiting the use of money earmarked to transfer detainees held at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, to some foreign countries and into the United States. He urged Congress to lift those restrictions.

The legislation still must be backed up with a spending package.

## MILITARY

# Japan to set firm standard on PFAS levels in tap water

BY BRIAN McELHINEY  
AND KEISHI KOJA  
*Stars and Stripes*

Japan will soon set a new legal standard for levels of PFAS in tap water and require regular testing for the chemicals.

The Environment Ministry during an online experts meeting Tuesday agreed to adopt a target value of 50 nanograms per liter, or 50 parts per trillion, for PFOS and PFOA — components of PFAS, also known as “forever chemicals” — in its water quality standards. The value was provisionally set in 2020.

If approved, the provisional value would be added to Japan’s water quality standards list in the Water Supply Act, which regulates 51 other substances found in tap water.

The expert panel, made up of eight university professors and researchers, also called for water providers to test tap water for PFAS every three months. That schedule could be reduced to once or twice per year on small-scale water supply services “if the possibility of detecting PFOS and

PFOA is low based on a previous test,” according to a policy draft posted to the ministry’s website.

Marine Corps Installations Pacific, which manages the Marine Corps’ bases in the Indo-Pacific, including Japan, will “continue to adhere to all relevant agreements, obligations and procedures” in coordination with U.S. Forces Japan and Japan’s government, spokesman Wes Hayes wrote in an email.

U.S. Forces Japan did not respond to an email or phone calls on Thursday seeking comment.

The Department of Defense currently requires corrective action to be taken if levels of PFOS and PFOA exceed 70 parts per trillion, according to public drinking water notices on MCIPAC’s website.

The ministry will review the draft for any changes. If approved by the government, it will go into effect in April 2026, a ministry spokesman said by phone Thursday.

“Water providers will need to conduct regular testing and take measures if high contamination is detected,” the spokesman said.

PFAS and its components, PFOS and PFOA, are found in fire-fighting aqueous film forming foam, once commonly used on some U.S. military bases. They are also found in a wide variety of consumer products, including non-stick cookware and stain-resistant clothing and fabrics.

PFAS has been linked to an increased risk of certain tumors of the liver, testicles, breasts and pancreas, according to the American Cancer Society. The Environmental Protection Agency has said that no level of PFAS is safe in drinking water.

U.S. air bases in Japan and Japanese military bases no longer use the aqueous foam. U.S. Forces Japan in mid-November reported it had incinerated its last supply of the foam.

As of Sept. 30, 1,745 water suppliers in Japan had tested for PFAS and found no contamination, according to the policy draft. Levels of PFAS are below the 50 parts per trillion standard for 98.2% of the Japanese population who receive water supply services, the draft stated.

## Campaign: Some see therapeutic benefits from D&D

FROM PAGE 1

game parameters and referees the action. Players describe how their characters react to situations presented to them and roll dice to determine whether their actions succeed.

“This isn’t the first campaign I’ve ran, but it’s definitely been the largest. People are really taking to the characters they have created and putting their own spin on it,” said Sunday’s dungeon master, Spc. Jesse Svevo of the 23rd Brigade Engineer Battalion.

First marketed in 1974 by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson, about 50 million people have played Dungeons and Dragons, according to Dice Cove, an online collective of experienced Dungeons and Dragons players.

The D&D franchise has expanded to include the 2023 movie “Dungeons & Dragons: Honor Among Thieves” and a string of video games, including “Baldur’s Gate 3,” one of last year’s most popular titles.

Many see the game as therapeutic for people who’ve experienced stressful situations, including warfare. In Ukraine, the game and other roleplaying games grew in popularity, including with soldiers and veterans, amid the ongoing conflict with Russia, according to a December 2023 story in New Lines magazine.



ERIC MENDIOLA/Stars and Stripes

**Spc. Andrew Jancy reviews his Dungeons and Dragons character sheet.**

The game is a common sight on military installations like Camp Humphreys, where game times are advertised at the Warrior Zone.

Some soldiers played D&D before joining the Army, but some were introduced to the game while serving.

“I’ve always heard other people talk about it and they have a lot of fun. It just sounded interesting and entertaining, and I like stuff like roleplaying games and fantasy,” said Spc. Brianna Oliver of the 8th Army Headquarters and Headquarters Battalion.

The USO at Maude Hall on

Camp Humphreys also set up a Dungeons and Dragons group a year ago that meets weekly and has grown into a very popular program, said Keith Choison, the USO operations coordinator.

Volunteers, mostly service members, run the program and the games can be as short or long as players like, sometimes several hours, he said Thursday.

That game grew from four players to dozens who play at multiple tables, according to an article in October on the Pacific USO webpage by center manager Danny Morris.

Many troops struggle with being alone during the holiday season and, for some, meeting with fellow service members to play the game has been a healthy outlet.

At the end of the hourlong session at the McGinnis center, the game is paused, to be picked up where it left off. The world, strategies and characters in the game may be fantasy, but the camaraderie built while playing Dungeons and Dragons is real.

“It’s very nice. I personally don’t have a lot of connection with my family, so being with these guys playing and letting myself have that focus on something else is really nice,” said Spc. Andrew Jancy of the 23rd Brigade Engineer Battalion.



U.S. MARINE CORPS

**Pfc. Britney Moyeda, right, hugs her recruiter, Staff Sgt. Joseph Adams, on her boot camp graduation day at Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego on Oct. 25.**

## Cancer: Marine dreams a reality after remission

FROM PAGE 1

“I never sugar-coated anything to her,” Adams said in a recent Marine Corps statement. “I told her there was a chance that it would take months, possibly years, just to get an answer on whether she would qualify to even go to boot camp.”

Moyeda compiled more than 2,000 pages of paperwork documenting her diagnosis and treatment for the agency that medically qualifies applicants to the Corps, according to the statement.

For the next year-and-a-half, she faithfully attended weekly training and held on to the hope that it would all work out for her one day.

“Staff Sgt. Adams and I were prepared for the worst, which was not being able to enlist,” Moyeda said. Her waivers were finally approved, allowing her to take the oath of enlistment into the Delayed Entry Program, which prepares future Marines for basic training.

“My mother was against it at first because she felt that she almost lost me and I’d just be leaving her,” Moyeda said. “I sat down and talked to her, explaining that it was my dream and that I was going to do it with or without her help. ... I made her understand that it was my turn to make my life.”

Before she could enter boot camp, she spent about two years in and out of the gym relearning how to walk and run after her medical treatment had necessitated the use of a wheelchair.

On Oct. 25, she earned her moment at long last, walking across the parade deck in San Diego as a



Texas Children's Hospital

**Britney Moyeda, top, with her sister during Moyeda's cancer treatments at Texas Children's Hospital in Houston, in 2018.**

Marine.

Waiting to congratulate her was Adams, a reunion that surprised Moyeda.

“He didn’t write me or call me during the entire boot camp experience,” she said in the Marine Corps statement. “But when they called the dismissal, that was the first person I saw.”

Now a watch commander in the provost marshal’s office at Marine Corps Air Station Yuma in Arizona, Adams said most people couldn’t fathom what Moyeda had gone through in her life.

“I am happy I was able to facilitate in getting her to where she is today,” he said in the statement. “But really, she did it all on her own.”

## WAR IN UKRAINE

## Zelenskyy appears open to negotiations

## President stresses Ukraine's need for long-term security

BY ISABELLE KHURSHUDYAN  
AND ELLEN FRANCIS  
*The Washington Post*

KYIV, Ukraine — As Ukrainian forces struggle to hold off Russia's army on the battlefield and President-elect Donald Trump looks to broker a peace deal, President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has in recent weeks signaled a greater willingness for negotiations to end the war — a major shift for the Ukrainian leader, who had long vowed to fight for every last inch of his country's land.

Zelenskyy's messaging has been careful; he has not explicitly said Kyiv would agree to concessions — territorial or otherwise — even as Russia occupies more than 20% of Ukraine and would probably retain control of that land after any ceasefire. But after previously stating that negotiations could begin only once Moscow withdrew all its troops, Zelenskyy is now emphasizing the need for long-term security rather than the immediate return of territory.

Zelenskyy's change in rhetoric — something Ukrainian and Western officials have noticed — can probably be attributed to a worsening situation on the front line and an incoming U.S. administration that has put future security assistance for Kyiv in doubt.

Ukrainian officials throughout the first year of the war stressed the importance of reclaiming all of Ukraine's land, including Crimea and other areas Russia has effectively ruled since 2014, as a condition for any deal.

In recent meetings with Trump and European leaders, however, Zelenskyy has focused more on what he has referred to as “lasting peace” for Ukraine.

The top priority is securing an invite to the NATO military alliance and other security guarantees, such as the possible presence of Western peacekeepers, to prevent future Russian attacks.

Officials and analysts said Zelenskyy's tone shift is probably an attempt to be more in line with Trump's emphasis on halting the conflict.

But the Ukrainian leader is also trying to ensure his country doesn't come out empty-handed.

Zelenskyy's administration “understands things are going to change” under Trump, said Michael McFaul, a former U.S. ambassador to Russia who co-chairs the International Working Group on Russian Sanctions with Ukrainian officials.

“I do think for Zelenskyy, this



EVGENIY MALOLETKA/AP

**Injured Ukrainian servicemen arrive from the battlefield Monday to Medical Service “Uif” of the 108th Separate Battalion “Da Vinci Wolves” on Pokrovsk direction, Ukraine.**



GEERT VANDEN WIJNGAERT/AP

**Ukrainian and Western officials have noticed a change recently in rhetoric on negotiations to end the war with Russia used by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.**

frees him up from his locked-in position that they were going to fight until the 1991 borders no matter what,” McFaul added. “He can now say, ‘Well, I would’ve loved to have done that, but Trump has come in and things have changed.’”

In a recent interview with Sky News, Zelenskyy said the “hot phase of the war” could stop if Ukraine received NATO membership.

The land that Russian forces control could then be returned later “in a diplomatic way,” he said. The comments marked his most striking acknowledgment yet that Kyiv would consider at least temporarily ceding territory.

But NATO diplomats said an invitation to the Western military

bloc remains a distant prospect because of misgivings and political uncertainty in member nations allied with Ukraine, including the United States and Germany, and objections from other members, such as Kremlin-friendly Hungary.

A senior NATO diplomat said Zelenskyy cannot back down from the demand for Western security guarantees despite the reluctance among key allies.

“From a Ukrainian perspective, it’s completely logical to push the issue because, of course, if you’re Ukrainian, the only security guarantee that you really attach value to is NATO membership. So he will do everything to push that. Can’t blame the guy for that,” the diplomat said.

Like others cited in this article, the official spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss a sensitive security matter.

Ultimately, most doubt that Russian President Vladimir Putin is ready to negotiate while his troops are making gains on the front line despite heavy casualties. S

Some officials speculate that Zelenskyy is wisely hedging and hoping his more amenable posture will endear him to Trump's White House and leave it open to providing more support for Ukraine's defense if Putin rejects talks.

“I put myself in his shoes, and what else is he supposed to do?” a senior Ukrainian official said. “Should he tell Trump and America that we don’t need their help and we’ll just do it our way? I think he’s handling it perfectly.”

Kyiv's European allies are also contending with a changing reality and trying to shape the outcome.

They have sought to increase support for Ukraine, worried that Trump's return could mean diminished U.S. funding and that Kyiv's position for talks is too weak at this time.

And policymakers across Europe are discussing further boosting spending on their own defense, as NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte warned that allies must “shift to a wartime mindset” and spend much more on defense to remain ready to counter any threats from Russia in the coming years.

“The first step we have to take is for Zelenskyy to be able to negotiate from a position of strength. And at the moment, the front line is moving westwards, not east-

wards,” Rutte told reporters last week. “He doesn’t need more plans, he needs ammunition.”

Putin, meanwhile, has stuck to his maximalist position: an effective Ukrainian capitulation.

In June, he spelled out his conditions for peace talks, demanding that Ukraine hand Moscow permanent sovereignty over four regions that Russia claimed to annex in 2022 — Donetsk, Luhansk, Zaporizhzhia and Kherson, as well as Crimea.

That would involve Kyiv surrendering more territory to Russia, because Russian forces don’t fully control those regions.

Putin has insisted on Ukraine repudiating NATO membership permanently. In a marathon news conference last Thursday, he also referenced Russia's demands in the talks between the two sides in Istanbul during the first months of the war, which called for significantly reducing the size of Ukraine's military.

Zelenskyy's emphasis on security guarantees stems from a deep mistrust of Russia and concern that if the fighting stops now, Putin could just invade again in a few years — as he did in 2022, eight years after illegally annexing Crimea.

A ceasefire without a long-term objective would give Russia an opportunity to replenish its military ranks and weapons stocks, Ukrainian officials said.

With NATO membership appearing unlikely, European allies have floated alternative solutions, such as a peacekeeping force, which Zelenskyy has been open to. But Ukrainian officials maintain that is not an acceptable consolation prize for not being granted NATO membership.

Zelenskyy said after talks in Brussels on Thursday that European guarantees alone would not be sufficient without a “common decision” and a U.S. role.

It is very important for us to have both on board, the United States and the Europeans,” he said.

Ukraine has already signed security pacts with individual countries, but analysts and officials acknowledged that the pacts might not be honored in the future.

“They’re not binding, and they’re not treaties,” McFaul said. “It’s a worrisome thing.”

The senior Ukrainian official said they are “starting to believe” that the war could indeed end next year as talk of a peace deal has picked up since Trump's election. But if not for all the sudden public talk of a peace settlement, “I wouldn’t believe we’re anywhere close to negotiations,” the official said. “I just don’t think it’s possible to come to any agreement with Putin.”

## NATION

# Fate of Trump's Cabinet picks still unclear

## GOP senators' reaction seen as tone-setting

BY MARY CLARE JALONICK  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The fate of President-elect Donald Trump's Cabinet is still unclear after Republican senators spent much of December carefully dodging questions about Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s views on vaccines, accusations of sexual misconduct against Pete Hegseth and Tulsi Gabbard's 2017 meeting with then-President Bashar Assad of Syria.

While some GOP senators have indicated they are all-in for Trump's picks, others have withheld support, for now, especially on some of his more controversial nominees. The dynamic is injecting uncertainty into the process as Republicans prepare to take the Senate majority in January with a four-seat margin and as Trump aggressively challenges them to confirm his Cabinet immediately.

It's not unusual for senators to wait until after confirmation hearings to publicly announce a decision. But Republicans are under more pressure than usual as Trump and his allies make clear that they will confront senators who don't fall in line.

"You only have control of the Senate because of Donald Trump," the president-elect's son, Donald Trump Jr., warned during a media appearance this month. "Without that, you'd be relegated to insignifi-



J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE/AP

**Tulsi Gabbard, President-elect Donald Trump's pick to be director of National Intelligence, right, meets with Sen. Mike Rounds, R-S.D., a member of the Senate Intelligence Committee, on Dec. 9.**

cance."

There has been one casualty of the process so far — former Rep. Matt Gaetz of Florida, who withdrew from contention as attorney general after senators relayed private concerns. But Trump has enthusiastically stood by the rest, including Kennedy for secretary of health and human services, Hegseth for secretary of defense and Gabbard for director of national intelligence.

With hearings starting by mid-January, before Trump is even inaugurated, senators will soon have to decide how closely they will scrutinize the nominees and whether they are willing to vote against any of them. Republicans will have a 53-47 majority, so Trump cannot lose more than three votes on any nomination if Democrats are united in opposition.

The outcome of the confirmation process, and the level of dissent in the Senate, will likely set the tone for Trump's presidency and his relationship with Congress, which was frequently tumultuous during his first term. He often clashed with the

Senate, in particular, but has signaled he expects Republican senators to be more compliant this time around.

"It's not about putting yeses on the board, it's about keeping nos off the board," said Oklahoma Sen. Markwayne Mullin, one of Trump's top allies in the Senate, who speaks with him frequently.

While most Senate Republicans have scrambled to display as much loyalty to Trump as possible, a handful have made clear that they are willing to defend the body's "advise and consent" role. Among the senators to watch are moderate Republicans Lisa Murkowski of Alaska, Susan Collins of Maine and incoming freshman Sen. John Curtis of Utah.

"Anybody who wants to give me heat for doing my job, bring it on," Curtis said Sunday on ABC's "This Week" when asked about vetting Trump's nominees. "This is my job. It's my constitutional responsibility."

Still, even moderate senators have shied away from directly criti-



CRAIG HUDSON/For the Washington Post

**Former Fox News host Pete Hegseth is Trump's nominee for defense secretary.**



CARLOS OSORIO/AP

**Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is Trump's pick to be secretary of health and human services.**

vered diplomatic relations. Gabbard has defended the trip, saying it's important to open dialogue, but critics hear echoes of Russia-fueled talking points in her commentary. Assad fled to Moscow earlier this month after opposition forces overtook Syria in a surprise attack, ending his family's five decades of rule.

Senators have been a bit more openly skeptical of Kennedy, who has long questioned the use of some vaccines.

After a report in The New York Times that one of his advisers filed a petition to revoke approval for the polio vaccine in 2022, Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell issued a statement saying that "efforts to undermine public confidence in proven cures are not just uninformed — they're dangerous," and that "anyone seeking the Senate's consent to serve in the incoming administration would do well to steer clear of even the appearance of association with such efforts."

McConnell, who had polio as a child, is leaving leadership next year but will stay in the Senate.

## Long-revered bald eagle is officially the national bird

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The bald eagle, a symbol of the power and strength of the United States for more than 240 years, earned an overdue honor on Tuesday: It officially became the country's national bird.

President Joe Biden signed into law legislation sent to him by Congress that amends the United States Code to correct what had long gone unnoticed and designate the bald eagle — familiar to many because of its white head, yellow beak and brown body — as the national bird.

The bald eagle has appeared on the Great Seal of the United States, which is used in official documents, since 1782, when the design was finalized. The seal is made up of the eagle, an olive branch, arrows, a flag-like shield, the motto "E Pluribus Unum" and a constellation of stars. Congress



EDYTA BLASZCZYK, ODESSA (TEXAS) AMERICAN/AP

**President Joe Biden signed legislation that designated the bald eagle as the national bird.**

that same year designated the bald eagle as the the national emblem, and its image appears in a host of places, ranging from documents and the presidential flag to military insignia and U.S. currency, according to USA.gov.

But it had never been officially designated to be what many had just assumed it was — the national bird.

## Applications for unemployment benefits remain steady, but continuing claims up

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits held steady last week, though continuing claims rose to the highest level in three years.

Jobless claim applications ticked down by 1,000 to 219,000 for the week of Dec. 21, the Labor Department reported Thursday. That's fewer than the 223,000 analysts forecast.

Continuing claims, the total number of Americans collecting jobless benefits, climbed by 46,000 to 1.91 million for the week of Dec. 14. That's more than analysts projected and the most since the week of Nov. 13, 2021, when the labor market was still recovering from the COVID-19 jobs wipeout in the spring of 2020.

The rising level of continuing claims suggests that some who are receiving benefits are finding it

harder to land new jobs. That could mean that demand for workers is waning, even though the economy remains strong.

The four-week average of weekly claims, which quiets some of the week-to-week volatility, inched up by 1,000 to 226,500.

Weekly applications for jobless benefits are considered representative of U.S. layoffs.

The labor market has hinted at some softening recently but remains broadly healthy and has held up better than many economists predicted considering that interest rates have been elevated for years. The Federal Reserve instituted a series of rate increases in 2022 and into 2023 to try to tame the four-decade high inflation that emerged during the U.S. economy's rebound from a brief but sharp pandemic recession.

The Fed last week cut its benchmark interest rate for the third

straight time in response to broadly receding inflation, though it remains above the U.S. central bank's target of 2%. The Fed caught markets off guard when it projected just two rate cuts in 2025, down from the previous forecast of four.

Earlier this month, the government reported that U.S. job openings rebounded to 7.7 million in October from a 3½ year low of 7.4 million in September, a sign that businesses are still seeking workers even though hiring has cooled.

In November, employers added a strong 227,000 jobs, following a paltry 36,000 in October, when the effects of strikes and hurricanes had sharply diminished employer payrolls. The government also revised up its estimate of job growth in September and October by a combined 56,000.

The government's December jobs report comes out on Jan. 10.

## NATION

# Holiday spending up 3.8% despite higher prices

Associated Press

Sales rose this year during the holiday shopping season even as Americans wrestled with elevated prices for many groceries and other necessities, according to new data.

Holiday sales from the beginning of November through Christmas Eve climbed 3.8%, outpacing the 3.1% increase from a year earlier, according to Mastercard SpendingPulse, which tracks all kinds of payments including cash and debit cards. The last five days of the season accounted for 10% of the spending.

This year, retailers were even more under the gun to get shoppers in to buy early and in bulk since there were five fewer days

between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

Michelle Meyer, chief economist at Mastercard Economics Institute, said the holiday shopping season “revealed a consumer who is willing and able to spend but driven by a search for value” as seen by concentrated online spending during the biggest promotional periods.

Sales growth was higher than the 3.2% increase Mastercard SpendingPulse had projected this fall. The data released Thursday excludes the automotive industry and is not adjusted for inflation.

Clothing sales rose 3.6%, with most of the growth being fueled by online shopping. Spending on restaurants, and sales of electronics

and jewelry also grew. Online sales jumped 6.7% from a year ago and in-person spending rose 2.9%.

Consumer spending accounts for nearly 70% of U.S. economic activity and economists carefully monitor how Americans use their money, particularly during the holidays, to gauge how they’re feeling financially.

The most recent government data on consumer spending, released on Dec. 17, showed shoppers stepped up activity at retail stores last month. But auto dealer sales drove most of those gains as huge storms created a need for new cars in parts of the southeast slammed by Hurricane Helene in October. Big discounts at many retail chains also attracted shoppers.

But the report also hinted at some consumer caution as sales at grocery stores, clothing shops, and restaurants fell. Outside of car dealers and online retailers, sales gains were modest.

Retailers felt more pressure this year due to the shorter holiday shopping period, and also from a presidential election that captured the attention of many consumers. Sales of general merchandise slid 9% in the two weeks ended Nov. 9, according to Circana, a market research group. Sales have been rebounding but stores will have to make up for those losses.

A broader picture of how Americans are spending their money arrives next month when the Nation-

al Retail Federation, the nation’s largest retail trade group, releases its combined two-month statistics based on November-December sales figures from the Commerce Department.

The group expects that shoppers will have made \$979.5 billion to \$989 billion worth of purchases in November and December, which would represent a 2.5%-3.5% increase over the same two-month period a year ago. That would be a slower rate than the 3.9% increase from holiday 2023 over holiday 2022 season.

Overall, retailers had a decent start to the unofficial kickoff to the holiday shopping period despite lots of discounts that started as early as October.

## After a lull, towering waves will wallop Calif. coast again

Los Angeles Times

Stormy seas along the California coast calmed a bit for the Christmas holiday, but powerful ocean waves were expected to return to the Bay Area for the rest of the week.

Waves up to 30 feet high were expected to crash ashore in Northern California between Thursday morning and Sunday afternoon. The National Weather Service issued a high-surf advisory, warning swimmers and boaters to beware of dangerous conditions.

The Bay Area will see high temperatures in the low 60s and a strong chance of rain with patchy fog throughout the weekend, according to meteorologists. The rain could cause flooding in local creeks and heavily paved areas.

Early in the week, as the ocean raged against the coast, the outer portion of the Santa Cruz Wharf collapsed, plunging three people into turbulent waters; all of them were later rescued. Storm-tossed debris killed a man in Monterey Bay.

While waves of this magnitude are uncommon, the deadly condi-



RICHARD VOGEL/AP

People stand at the end of the Manhattan Beach Pier and watch high surf pound the pylons on Tuesday, in Manhattan Beach, Calif.

tions are consistent with this time of year, when the surf is usually highest along California’s coast, according to National Weather Service meteorologist Brayden Murdock.

“The last time we saw some swells like this was probably early January 2023,” Murdock said. “So it’s not terribly common to get this extreme — but this time of year, it’s not out of the question.”

“Luckily, it’s one of the coldest times of year, so there’s not too many people out and about on the shoreline,” he added. “But there are some things that people need to be cautious about.”

In Southern California, conditions were milder. After a foggy and overcast start to Christmas morning, the clouds dispersed, allowing the sun to come through. Weather Service meteorologists had forecast waves cresting between 5 to 10 feet in Los Angeles and Orange counties for Christmas Day. The highest waves, up to 15 feet, were anticipated to last through the week farther north in San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara and Ventura counties.

## US probe faults Philadelphia schools over antisemitism reports

Associated Press

The Philadelphia school district failed to show it protected Jewish students from harassment despite “repeated, extensive notice” that students, teachers and administrators were engaging in antisemitic behavior, the U.S. Department of Education has concluded after a federal civil rights investigation.

Philadelphia school administrators did not adequately address allegations that students were performing Nazi salutes, drawing swastikas on school property and uttering slurs and threats against Jewish students — in some cases neglecting to even document the incidents, the Education Depart-

ment’s Office for Civil Rights found. Federal investigators also cited complaints about allegedly antisemitic social media posts by a school board member, an assistant superintendent and four teachers.

The Philadelphia district did not evaluate whether a hostile environment existed in its schools, and did not demonstrate that it took steps to “eliminate any such hostile environment and prevent its recurrence,” the civil rights office said in a Dec. 18 letter to the district’s lawyers.

The letter noted that Philadelphia officials have agreed to take various steps to resolve the case.

The agreement includes annual training for administrators, faculty and staff; age-appropriate anti-harassment programming for students; better documentation of complaints; and an anti-harassment statement.

“The Philadelphia School District has committed to taking essential steps to redress any hostile environment in its schools so that Jewish students, like all students, can learn in an environment free from discriminatory harassment,” Catherine E. Lhamon, assistant secretary for civil rights, said in a statement.

The Anti-Defamation League, a prominent Jewish advocacy

group, was among several Jewish groups to file complaints against the district earlier this year. The Education Department opened an investigation to determine whether district officials appropriately responded to the alleged harassment as required under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits discrimination based on shared ancestry.

ADL said it hopes the agreement between the Education Department and the school district will help prevent additional harassment and targeting of Jewish students.

Federal investigators said they were concerned that district staff

had retaliated against parents who filed complaints. In one such incident, a teacher identified the complainant by name on her Instagram account and wrote she was “taking the gloves off,” adding: “Zionism is Racism,” the civil rights office said in its letter.

Another teacher reposted the first teacher’s post and wrote: “These are some disgusting, cowardly, genocide supporting fools. They thought they could hide.”

Colleges, universities and high schools nationwide saw pro-Palestinian student protests in response to Israel’s war against Hamas in Gaza.

## NATION

# Big Tech tries to warm up to Trump

Associated Press

NEW YORK — In a string of visits, dinners, calls, monetary pledges and social media overtures, big tech chiefs — including Apple's Tim Cook, OpenAI's Sam Altman, Meta's Mark Zuckerberg, SoftBank's Masayoshi Son and Amazon's Jeff Bezos — have joined a parade of business and world leaders in trying to improve their standing with President-elect Donald Trump before he takes office in January.

"The first term, everybody was fighting me," Trump said in remarks at Mar-a-Lago. "In this term, everybody wants to be my friend."

Tech companies and leaders have now poured millions into his inauguration fund, a sharp increase — in most cases — from past pledges to incoming presidents. But what does the tech industry expect to gain out of their renewed relationships with Trump?



Cook

During an interview Tuesday, Salesforce CEO Marc Benioff said the incoming Trump administration seems more interested in hearing about issues that are important to the industry than the Biden administration.

"Put all the politics aside, everybody wants to reboot some things,"



Zuckerberg

said Benioff, who stressed he strives to stay nonpartisan because he also owns Time magazine. "We are just at a very exciting moment, it's a new chapter for America. I think we should all have our best intentions going forward. I think a lot of people realize there is a lot of incredible people like Elon Musk in the tech industry and in the business community. If you tap the power and expertise of the best in America to make the best of America, that's a great vision."

## Clearing way for AI

A clue to what the industry is looking for came just days before the election when Microsoft executives — who've largely tried to show a neutral or bipartisan stance — joined with a close Trump ally, venture capitalist Marc Andreessen, to publish a blog post outlining their approach to artificial intelligence policy.

"Regulation should be implemented only if its benefits outweigh its costs," said the document signed by Andreessen, his business partner Ben Horowitz,



JOHN LOCHER/AP

Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos has said he was "optimistic" about Donald Trump's second term as president.

Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella and the company's president, Brad Smith.

They also urged the government to back off on any attempt to strengthen copyright laws that would make it harder for companies to use publicly available data to train their AI systems. And they said, "the government should examine its procurement practices to enable more startups to sell technology to the government."

Trump has pledged to rescind President Joe Biden's sweeping AI executive order, which sought to protect people's rights and safety without stifling innovation. He hasn't specified what he would do in its place, but his campaign said AI development should be "rooted in Free Speech and Human Flourishing."

## Easier energy production

Trump's choice to head the Interior Department, North Dakota Gov. Doug Burgum, has spoken openly about the need to boost electricity production to meet increased demand from data centers and artificial intelligence.

"The AI battle affects everything from defense to healthcare to education to productivity as a country," Burgum said on Nov. 15, referring to artificial intelligence. "And the AI that's coming in the next 18 months is going to be revolutionary. So there's just a sense of urgency and a sense of understanding in the Trump administration to address it."

Demand for data centers ballooned in recent years due to the rapid growth of cloud computing and AI, and local governments are competing for lucrative deals with big tech companies.

**"It's a new chapter for America. I think we should all have our best intentions going forward."**

Marc Benioff  
Salesforce CEO

But as data centers begin to consume more resources, some residents are pushing back against the world's most powerful corporations over concerns about the economic, social and environmental health of their communities.

## Changing antitrust talk

"Maybe Big Tech should buy a copy of 'The Art of The Deal' to figure out how to best negotiate with this administration," suggested Paul Swanson, an antitrust attorney for the law firm Holland & Hart. "I won't be surprised if they find ways to reach some accommodations and we end up seeing more negotiated resolutions and consent decrees."

Although federal regulators began cracking down on Google and Facebook during Trump's first term as president — and flourished under Biden — most experts expect his second administration to ease up on antitrust enforcement and be more receptive to business mergers.

Google may benefit from Trump's return after he made comments on the campaign trail suggesting a breakup of the company isn't in the U.S. national interest, after a judge declared its search engine an illegal monopoly. But recent nominations put forward by his transition team have favored those who have been crit-

ical of Big Tech companies, suggesting Google won't be entirely off the hook.

## Fending off EU

Cook's notoriously rocky relationship with the EU can be traced back to a 2016 ruling from Brussels in a tax case targeting Apple. Cook slammed the bloc's order for Apple to pay back up to \$13.7 billion in Irish back taxes as "total political crap."

Trump, then in his first term as president, piled on, referring to the European Commissioner Margrethe Vestager, who was spearheading a campaign on special tax deals and a crackdown on Big Tech companies, as someone who "really hates the U.S."

Brussels was eventually vindicated after the bloc's top court rejected Apple's appeal this year, though it didn't stop Cook from calling Trump to complain, Trump recounted in a podcast in October.

## Making amends?

Altman, Amazon and Meta all pledged to donate \$1 million each to Trump's inaugural fund.

Salesforce's Benioff said Tuesday that he won't be donating money to the inauguration because of his ties to Time, which named Trump as its "Person of The Year" — a decision that land-

ed picture of the president-elect on the magazine's cover. "I think we just donated that photo," Benioff said as he chuckled. "He can use the Time magazine cover for free."

During his first term, Trump criticized Amazon and railed against the political coverage at The Washington Post, which billionaire Bezos owns. Meanwhile, Bezos had criticized some of Trump's past rhetoric. In 2019, Amazon also argued in a court case that Trump's bias against the company harmed its chances of winning a \$10 billion Pentagon contract.

More recently, Bezos has struck a more conciliatory tone. He recently said at The New York Times' DealBook Summit in New York that he was "optimistic" about Trump's second term, while also endorsing the president-elect's plans to cut regulations.

The donation from Meta came just weeks after Zuckerberg met with Trump privately at Mar-a-Lago.

During the 2024 campaign, Zuckerberg did not endorse a candidate for president, but voiced a more positive stance toward Trump. Earlier this year, he praised Trump's response to his first assassination attempt. Still, Trump in recent months has continued to attack Zuckerberg publicly.

And Altman, who is in a legal dispute with AI rival Elon Musk, has said he is "not that worried" about the Tesla CEO's influence in the incoming administration. Musk, an early OpenAI investor and board member, sued the company earlier this year alleging that the maker of ChatGPT betrayed its founding aims of benefiting the public good rather than pursuing profits.

## What about Elon Musk?

"We have two multi-billionaires, Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy, who are tasked with cutting what they're saying will be multiple trillions of dollars from the federal budget, reducing the civil service, the workforce," said Rob Lalka, a business professor at Tulane University.

Musk, he said, has a level of access to the White House that very few others have had — access that allows him to potentially influence multiple policy areas, including foreign policy, automotive and energy policy through EVs, and tech policy on artificial intelligence.

"Elon Musk walked into Twitter's headquarters with a sink and then posted, 'let that sink in,' " he said. "Elon Musk then posted a status update on X, a picture of himself with a sink in the Oval Office and said, 'Let that sink in.' "

## NATION

## Capybaras become holiday season's 'it' animal

Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — The world's largest rodent is having a big moment.

The capybara — a semi-aquatic South American relative of the guinea pig — is the latest in a long line of "it" animals to get star treatment during the holiday shopping season.

Shoppers can find capybara slippers, purses, robes and bath bombs. There are cuddly plush capybaras and stretchy or squishy ones. Tiny capybaras wander across bedding, T-shirts, phone cases, mugs, key chains and almost any other type of traditional gift item.

Last year, it was the axolotl that took pride of place on many products, and the endangered amphibian remains popular. Owls, hedgehogs, foxes and sloths also had recent turns in the spotlight.

Trendy animals and animal-like creatures aren't a new retail phenomenon; think the talking Teddy Ruxpin toys of the 1980s or Furby and Beanie Babies a decade later. But industry experts have said social media is amplifying which animals are hot — or not.

"It's really the launch on TikTok, Instagram and other social media platforms that allow these characters or animals to blow up like crazy," said Richard Derr, who has owned a Learning Express Toys franchise in Lake Zurich, Ill., for nearly 30 years and is also a regional manager for the specialty toy store chain.

Social media is also speeding up the cycle. Must-have animals may only last a season before something new captures customers' imaginations.

"It's really important to keep feeding that beast," Juli Lennett, a



JENNESSA DAVEY/Stars and Stripes

**A capybara munches on grass at Animal Touch, a miniature zoo in Yokohama, Japan.**

vice president and toy industry adviser at market research firm Circana, said. "If you are an influencer, you're not going to talk about last year's stuff."

Skyrocketing plush toy sales — fueled by a need for comfort during the pandemic — are also increasing the demand for new and interesting varieties, Lennett said. In the first nine months of this year, sales of plush animals were up 115% from the same period in 2019, she said. Overall toy sales rose 38% in that time.

Consumers are seeking out increasingly exotic species that they see in online videos, games and movies. Highland cows, red pandas and axolotls, a type of salamander native to Mexico, have all popped up in popular culture. According to Google Trends, searches for axolotls shot up in June 2021 after Minecraft added them to its game.

"Nobody knew what an axolotl was in 2020," Derr said. "Now, everybody knows axolotls."

Cassandra Clayton, a Vermont Teddy Bear Co. product designer, said rising sales to adults are also fueling the demand for unique — and collectible — plush toys.



JEFF ROBERSON/AP

**Sharon Price John, President and CEO of Build-A-Bear Workshop, poses with a plush capybara Dec. 12 in St. Louis.**

"Stuffed animals are really becoming an ageless item," she said. "Especially with the boom of self-care in adults and turning toward comfort objects to help de-stress and relax in your life."

Clayton expects demand for unusual stuffed animals to continue to grow.

Among the oddest she has seen: a stuffed version of a water bear, a type of microorganism also known as a moss piglet or a tardigrade.

"It doesn't necessarily inspire you to cuddle with them, but you're really seeing the industry start turning toward those characters," she said. "I think that's the next trend."

Figuring out the next "it" animal — or microorganism — is a challenge for toy makers.

"You never know exactly when they're going to hit and how big

they're going to be," said Sharon Price John, the president and CEO of Build-A-Bear Workshop, a chain of nearly 500 stores that offers an expanding menagerie of animals and characters for customers to customize, including capybaras and axolotls.

The St. Louis-based company watches social media and gets ideas from talking to store employees and patrons, John said. It usually takes Build-A-Bear up to a year to introduce a new stuffed toy, she said, but the company can move faster if it spots a trend. It sometimes tests a small batch online to make sure a trend is sticking, John said.

Annual trade shows in Asia, Germany and elsewhere are another place to spot new trends. Punirunes — digital, interactive pets that also come in plush varie-

ties — are big in Japan right now and will likely take off in the United States, toy store owner Derr said.

"Here, I can't give them away. They're too new. But give it a year or two," he said.

Companies can kick off their own trends too. Build-A-Bear's Spring Green Frog, introduced in 2020, was an immediate hit thanks to videos posted by customers. It remains popular, with nearly 2 million sold, John said.

John suspects people are drawn to friendly, slow-moving capybaras because watching videos of them are so relaxing.

But shoppers who want one need to act fast. A Build-A-Bear holiday capybara with red and green sprinkles on its fur — dubbed a "cookiebara" — has already sold out, she said.

## Mispronounced words of 2024, from Kamala to Chappell

By JAMIE STENGLE

Associated Press

DALLAS — Vice President Kamala Harris and breakout pop star Chappell Roan were among the year's most talked-about people. Their names were also among the most mispronounced.

Earlier this month, the language-learning company Babbel and closed-captioning company The Captioning Group released a list of the words that news anchors, politicians and other public figures in the United States struggled with the most in 2024. The list also provides a retrospective of the year's most discussed topics and people, from pop culture to politics.

"It's a nice way to kind of look back into the year and see everything that has happened," said Esteban Touma, a linguistic and cultural expert at Babbel.



Chappell Roan

Roan — whose hits include "Good Luck, Babe!" and "Hot to Go!" — shot to fame this year and is nominated for six Grammy awards. According to the list, her name is pronounced CHAP-uhl ROHN, not SHA-pel ROW-an.

During Harris' unsuccessful run for president this year, her great-nieces took to the stage at the Democratic National Convention to clear up how to say her first name, pronounced COM-a-la. Also making the list was U.S. Trans-

portation Secretary Pete Buttigieg, whose last name still leaves people tongue-tied. During his 2020 presidential run, his campaign made posters and T-shirts with the pronunciation "Boot-Edge-Edge" to help.

Other words on the list include:

- Dutch Kooikerhondje, pronounced COY-ker-HUND-che, is a breed of dog that made its way into the lexicon this year. This is largely because Los Angeles Dodgers superstar Shohei Ohtani has a Kooikerhondje called Decoy who won the hearts of fans while delivering a ceremonial first pitch.

- The name of actress Zendaya, who starred in "Challengers," is often mispronounced as zen-DIE-uh, but it should be zen-DAY-a.

- Online fast-fashion giant Shein is SHE-in, not SHEEN.

- Newly discovered exoplanet Speculoos-3b is pronounced SPEK-yuh-lohss three bee.

- Phryge, the mascot of the Paris Olympics, is pronounced FREE-je. It was a nod to the Phrygian cap, an emblematic accessory of the French revolutionaries.

- Semaglutide, the drug in weight-loss medications Ozempic and Wegovy, is pronounced semah-GLOO-tide, not SEE-mah-gloo-tide.

- The last name of Irish actor Barry Keoghan, who starred in "Saltburn," is pronounced key-OH-gin.

Nancy Niedzielski, chair of the linguistics department at Rice University in Houston, pointed out most of the words on the list are not English, so it's not surprising that they would be mispronounced in the U.S. The key to pronouncing them correctly, she

said, would probably just be hearing them spoken.

"There aren't really tricks short of knowing how orthology works in that language," she said.

Several of the words on the U.S. list, including Keoghan, Phryge and Shein, also made the list for the United Kingdom, which Babbel compiled with the help of the British Institute of Verbatim Reporters, an organization for subtling professionals.

Other words on the U.K. list include flygskam, a Swedish term pronounced FLEEG-skam, popularized by climate activist Greta Thunberg, which translates as "flight shame," and the Chagos Islands, pronounced CHAY-goss, which made the list after the British government this year returned sovereignty of the long-contested Indian Ocean archipelago to Mauritius.

## NATION

# Travelers, terminals and tunes

For many airports, the background music no longer is an afterthought

BY DEE-ANN DURBIN  
AND MANUEL VALDES  
*Associated Press*

SEATAC, Wash. — Background music is no longer an afterthought at many airports, which are hiring local musicians and carefully curating playlists to help lighten travelers' moods.

London's Heathrow Airport built a stage to showcase emerging British performers for the first time this summer. The program was so successful the airport hopes to bring it back in 2025. Nashville International Airport has five stages that host more than 800 performances per year, from country musicians to jazz combos. In the Dominican Republic, Punta Cana International Airport greets passengers with live merengue music.

Tiffany Idiart and her two nieces were delighted to hear two nieces during a recent layover at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

"I like it. There's a lot of people here and they can all hear it," said Grace Idiart, 9. "If their flight got delayed or something like that, they could have had a hard day. And so the music could have made them feel better."

Airports are also carefully curating their recorded playlists. Detroit Metro Airport plays Motown hits in a tunnel connecting its terminals. Austin-Bergstrom International Airport in Texas has a playlist of local artists compiled by an area radio station. Singapore's Changi Airport commissioned a special piano accompaniment for its giant digital waterfall.

Music isn't a new phenomenon

in airport terminals. Brian Eno's "Music for Airports," an album released in 1978, helped define the ambient music genre. It's minimalist and designed to calm.

But Barry McPhillips, the head of international creative for Mood Media, which provides music for airports and other public spaces, said technology is enabling background music to be less generic and more tailored to specific places or times of day.

Mood Media — formerly known as Muzak — develops playlists to appeal to business travelers or families depending on who's in the airport at any given time. It might program calmer music in the security line but something more energizing in the duty-free store.

"We see it as a soundscape," McPhillips said. "We design for all of these moments."

There's a science to Mood Music's decisions on volume, tempo, even whether to play a song in a major key versus a minor one, he added.

"How do we want to affect their mood at that moment?" McPhillips said. "It's not just like, 'Here's a load of songs.' It's a load of songs for that 10-minute segment, and then we move to the next 10 minutes."

At the same time, many airports are going low-tech, hiring local musicians to serenade travelers and give them a sense of the place they're passing through.

Chicago's O'Hare and Midway airports have more than 100 live performances each year. Phoenix's Sky Harbor International



PHOTOS BY MANUEL VALDES/AP

Roz McCommon performs amid travelers at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport on Nov. 26 in SeaTac, Wash.

**"We see it as a soundscape. We design for all of these moments."**

Barry McPhillips  
head of international creative  
for Mood Media

Airport began a live music program five years ago and now has two stages featuring local artists.

Tami Kuiken, the manager of airport music in Seattle, said the Seattle-Tacoma airport launched its live music program about a decade ago after a city commissioner heard live music at the airport in Austin, Texas.

"The idea was like, 'Man, why doesn't Seattle have music? We're a music city too,'" Kuiken said.

At first, the airport created a playlist featuring emerging artists along with famous ones like Pearl Jam. Then it decided to try live musicians for a 12-week trial. It was so successful that the airport now features live musicians daily and is building new performance spaces.

"People's anxiety levels are very high when they're traveling," Kuiken said. "The feedback that we started getting was that once they got through the checkpoint and they were greeted with music, all of a sudden their anxiety and stress levels dropped."

The programs also benefit musicians, who get paid to perform and gain wider exposure. When Col-



McCommon sings during a performance at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

orado Springs Airport announced a live music program in March, more than 150 musicians applied. It now hosts two two-hour performances each week.

David James, a singer and guitarist who plays at Seattle's airport about once a week, said waking up in time for a daytime gig took some adjustment. But he's gained new fans from all over the world.

"I get really sweet responses from people all the time, saying, 'That was so soothing to be able to just sit and listen to music in between flights,'" James said. "So it feels like it's especially therapeutic for people."

Country stars like Blake Shelton and Keith Urban have come through Nashville's airport and interacted with local musicians, said Stacey Nickens, the airport's vice president of corporate communi-

cations and marketing. Shelton even gave one his guitar.

Otto Stuparitz, a musicologist and lecturer at the University of Amsterdam who has studied airport music, said airports should think carefully about their selections. Music that's meant to be actively listened to — like live music or catchy pop songs — can be very distracting in an already chaotic environment, he said. He has noticed some airports — especially in Europe — turning off piped melodies altogether.

But McPhillips said big spaces like airports can feel cold and unwelcoming without background music.

"A well-crafted audio strategy is one that people aren't particularly cognizant of," he said. "They just know they're having a good time and that it's appropriate."



McCommon performs at Seattle-Tacoma International Airport.

## NATION

# Chinese-made drones don't fly with lawmakers

## Bans point to potential security threats of drones used widely in US

By DIDI TANG  
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Russell Hedrick, a North Carolina farmer, flies drones to spray fertilizers on his corn, soybean and wheat fields at a fraction of what it would cost him to use a conventional ground spreader.

As a volunteer rescuer, Hedrick uses thermal drones to search for people trapped by mudslides and cargo drones to send water and baby formula to those who are stranded—something he did after Hurricane Helene.

Now he is fretting that one day he will have to ground his drone fleet. Most commercial drones sold in the United States, including those used by Hedrick, are made in China. They have become a target of U.S. lawmakers, who see the dominance of Chinese drones not only as an espionage threat but as a commercial threat because they make it nearly impossible for American manufacturers to compete.

It's another front in the U.S.-China economic and technological competition that's likely to intensify with the return to the White House in January of Republican Donald Trump, who has promised to get tough on China.

Washington has already placed restrictions on Chinese telecommunications companies and imposed high tariffs on Chinese-made electric vehicles as the U.S. competes with China in semiconductors, artificial intelligence and other areas.

A defense bill that Congress passed on Dec. 18 includes a clause to stop two Chinese companies from selling new drones in the U.S. if a review finds they pose "an unacceptable risk" to American national security. Congress has banned federal agencies from acquiring Chinese drones, with some exceptions, and several states have barred publicly funded programs from using or procuring Chinese drones.

A broader ban is worrisome for Americans for whom drones have become a part of their lives and work. It could disrupt wide-ranging operations, from law enforcement to mapping and filmmaking that drone operators say are viable

because of the low cost and high performance of the Chinese drones. American-made drones just aren't comparable, they say.

In Hickory, N.C., Hedrick began flying Chinese-made drones in 2019 to fertilize crops and monitor crop health. A drone spreader costs \$35,000, while a conventional ground sprayer would set him back \$250,000, he said.

"With the drone efficiency, we are able to do things we were never able to do before: to apply fertilizer but use less, which is good for American consumers," Hedrick said.

But it's precisely that reliance on Chinese drones that worries U.S. lawmakers.

"It is strategically irresponsible to allow Communist China to be our drone factory," argued Rep. Elise Stefanik, R-N.Y., who has been tapped by Trump to be the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. She led earlier House efforts to ban new Chinese drones.

It was the role of drones in everyday life that drove Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., to get Congress to restrict the purchase of Chinese drones by federal agencies. Those restrictions were included in a defense bill that Democratic President Joe Biden signed last year.

Scott has compared Chinese drones to spy balloons that could "gather data or carry harmful payloads" across America, posing risks to military bases, critical infrastructure and natural resources.

Michael Robbins, president and chief executive officer of AUVSI, an advocacy group for unmanned vehicles such as drones, opposes an immediate ban. Instead, his group has urged the government to support the U.S. drone-making industry through investment so it can catch up with its Chinese competitors in capability and cost.

He applauds Congress for addressing some of the issues in the 2025 defense budget, including promoting investment in autonomous technology and working to develop a secure supply chain for U.S. drone manufacturing.

John Goodson, CEO of Darkhive, a San Antonio-based drone maker, said a ban would not stop Chinese drone makers from sell-



PHOTOS BY ALLISON JOYCE/AP

Russell Hedrick prepares a DJI drone to put crop cover on his farm on Dec. 17 in Hickory, N.C.



Hedrick prepares a DJI drone to put crop cover on his farm.

ing their products elsewhere in the world but could hurt U.S. drone companies that rely on China for parts.

The best-known Chinese drones are those by DJI Technology Co., a company founded in 2006 and based in the southern city of Shenzhen. It's named in the defense spending bill, along with another Chinese company, Autel Robotics.

DJI has the lion's share of the global drone market and is the dominant player in the U.S. market. Its devices are known for their affordability and high performance. They are even used on the battlefield in Ukraine by both sides, even though DJI does not make military drones.

DJI's drones have been used by first responders to locate disaster victims, mappers to survey roads and utility lines, mosquito control officers to reach swarms of larvae, and filmmakers to capture aerial footage.

Hedrick mobilized drone search efforts as a volunteer after Helene hit. On the first night, he and his teammates located 150 stranded people. When they could not be immediately rescued, Hedrick said his team used DJI cargo drones to send in supplies.

But as U.S.-China relations have soured, DJI drones have come under scrutiny. The U.S. government

has put the company on several blacklists, saying it violates human rights by supplying drones to Chinese police to surveil members of the ethnic Uyghur minority, and alleging links to the Chinese military.

DJI has denied wrongdoing and is suing the Pentagon over the designation that it is a Chinese military company. U.S. customs officials also have blocked some DJI shipments over concerns that the products might have been made with forced labor. DJI has called it "a customs-related misunderstanding."

As for the defense bill, DJI said it contains no provision that would allow the company to defend itself. "We call on a relevant technical intelligence agency to undertake an audit of our products, and we ask for a fair right of reply to any findings," DJI said.

Several states have already restricted the use of Chinese drones. In Tennessee, public agencies are no longer allowed to purchase DJI drones. That caused a headache for Capt. Chris Lowe of the Kingport Fire Department. After his department lost a DJI Mavic Pro drone, he was quoted \$5,000 for a replacement from an approved list of drones, when another DJI Mavic Pro would cost \$1,000 to \$1,500.

"Basically it would be a DJI

clone but doesn't have all the capabilities," Lowe said of the alternative. Without any state assistance, he said he would either forgo a new drone or tighten the belt in equipment maintenance elsewhere.

In Wimberley, Texas, Gene Robinson has used high-resolution drone images to analyze differences in vegetation to discover buried bodies. He said he helped police find a victim's buried arm, making prosecution possible. Robinson doesn't think there's a viable alternative to the DJI drone he uses.

At the Interior Department, the policy against foreign-made drones has hamstrung its drone operations, resulting in the "loss of opportunities to collect data on landscape, natural and cultural resources, wildlife and infrastructure," according to a September report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office.

In Florida, law enforcement officers last year complained to the state senate that a ban on state-funded agencies operating Chinese-made drones left them with costlier aircraft that didn't perform as well. That prompted state lawmakers to appropriate \$25 million to help government-run drone programs acquire compliant models.

Christopher Todd, executive director of the not-for-profit group Airborne International Response Team, described the ban and the subsequent switch as "an absolute mess."

"Lawmakers failed to understand that this issue is far more complicated than simply changing from one drone to another," he said. "You need to learn a new user interface with new shortcuts and new protocols, and then you need to change all of the software and accessories and re-examine all of your network configurations to accommodate the technology change."

But the financial assistance as well as training programs, such as the one provided by his group, made the transition possible, he said.

WORLD

# Azerbaijan mourns air crash victims as theories offered

Associated Press

Azerbaijan on Thursday observed a nationwide day of mourning for the victims of the plane crash that killed 38 people and left all 29 survivors injured as speculation mounted about a possible cause of the disaster, with some experts saying that the airliner was damaged by Russian air defense fire.

Azerbaijan Airlines' Embraer 190 was en route from Azerbaijan's capital of Baku to the Russian city of Grozny in the North Caucasus on Wednesday when it was diverted for reasons yet unclear and crashed while making an attempt to land in Aktau in Kazakhstan after flying east across the Caspian Sea.

The plane went down about 2 miles from Aktau. Cellphone footage circulating online appeared to show the aircraft making a steep descent before smashing into the ground in a fireball. Other footage showed part of its fuselage ripped away from the wings and the rest of the aircraft lying upside down in the grass.

As the official crash investigation started, theories abounded about a possible cause, with some experts alleging that holes seen in the plane's tail section possibly indicate that it could have come under fire from Russian air defense systems fending off a Ukrainian drone attack.

Ukrainian drones had previously attacked Grozny, the provincial capital of the Russian republic of



KAZAKHSTAN'S EMERGENCY MINISTRY PRESS SERVICE/AP

Rescuers work alongside the wreckage of Azerbaijan Airlines Embraer 190 near the airport of Aktau, Kazakhstan, on Thursday.

Chechnya, and other regions in the country's North Caucasus. An official in Chechnya said another drone attack on the region was fended off on Wednesday, although federal authorities didn't report it.

On Thursday, national flags were lowered across Azerbaijan, traffic across the country stopped at noon, and signals sounded from ships and trains as the country observed a nationwide moment of silence.

Speaking at a news conference Wednesday, Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev said that it was too soon to speculate on the reasons behind the crash, but said that the weather had forced the plane to

change from its planned course.

Russia's civil aviation authority, Rosaviatsia, said that preliminary information indicated that the pilots diverted to Aktau after a bird strike led to an emergency on board.

Mark Zee of OPSGroup, which monitors the world's airspace and airports for risks, said that the analysis of the images of fragments of the crashed plane indicate that it was almost certainly hit by a surface-to-air missile, or SAM.

"Much more to investigate, but at high level we'd put the probability of it being a SAM attack on the aircraft at being well into the 90-99% bracket," he said.

# Israel strikes Yemen sites; 5 journalists killed in Gaza

Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — Israeli airstrikes in Yemen on Thursday targeted the Houthi rebel-held capital of Sanaa and the port city of Hodeida, and the World Health Organization's director-general said the bombardment occurred as he was about to board a flight in Sanaa, injuring a crew member.

"The air traffic control tower, the departure lounge — just a few meters from where we were — and the runway were damaged," Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said on X, adding that he and WHO colleagues were safe. "We will need to wait for the damage to the airport to be repaired before we can leave." He didn't mention the source of the bombardment.

The Israeli strikes followed several days of Houthi launches setting off sirens in Israel. The Israeli military said it attacked infrastructure used by the Houthis at the international airport in Sanaa and ports at Hodeida, Al-Salif and Ras Qantib along with power stations. It didn't immediately respond to questions about Tedros' statement.

The latest strikes came a day after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said that "the Houthis, too, will learn what Hamas and Hezbollah and Assad's regime and others learned." Netanyahu monitored the new strikes along with military leaders, his government said.

The Iran-backed Houthis' media outlet confirmed the strikes in a Telegram post but gave no immediate details. The U.S. military

also has targeted the Houthis in Yemen in recent days.

The United Nations has noted that the ports are important entryways for humanitarian aid.

Over the weekend, 16 people were wounded when a Houthi missile hit a playground in Tel Aviv. Last week, Israeli jets struck Sanaa and Hodeida, killing nine people, calling it a response to previous Houthi attacks. The Houthis also have been targeting shipping on the Red Sea corridor, calling it solidarity with Gaza Palestinians.

Meanwhile, an Israeli strike killed five Palestinian journalists outside a hospital in the Gaza Strip overnight, the territory's Health Ministry said. The Israeli military said that all were militants posing as reporters.

The strike hit a car outside Al-Awda Hospital in the built-up Nusseirat refugee camp in central Gaza. The journalists were working for the local news outlet Al-Quds Today, a television channel affiliated with the Islamic Jihad militant group.

Islamic Jihad is a smaller and more extreme ally of Hamas and took part in the Oct. 7, 2023, attack in southern Israel that ignited the war. The Israeli military identified four of the men as combat propagandists and said that intelligence, including a list of Islamic Jihad operatives found by soldiers in Gaza, had confirmed that all five were affiliated with the group.

Hamas, Islamic Jihad and other Palestinian militant groups operate political, media and charitable operations in addition to their armed wings.

## Mobile



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## Web



STARS AND STRIPES

UNBIASED NEWS WHATEVER WAY YOU WANT IT.

## TELEVISION

# Don't write off this year's new shows

These series caught our attention in 2024

By ALICIA RANCILIO  
Associated Press

It could be argued that 2024 wasn't the best year for television.

Highly anticipated shows like the final season of "Stranger Things," "The Last of Us" and "The White Lotus" didn't even make it on the calendar and will instead return in 2025.

Streamers and networks tightened their budgets by saying yes to less.

Writing off this year's selection, however, seems unfair. There were new standout comedies, dramas, reality TV and remakes of old favorites that caught the attention of viewers, awards voters and the zeitgeist.

In no particular order, here are 10 new shows from 2024 to check out before the new year:

## 'Nobody Wants This'

In 2024, pop culture experienced a Brodyissance when Netflix's "Nobody Wants This" reminded many why they had a crush on Adam Brody in the early aughts when he was on "The O.C." In this rom-com created by Erin Foster, Brody plays a rabbi named Noah who begins dating a gentile named Joanne (the always entertaining Kristen Bell) and their courtship as 30-somethings unfolds. Before reaching their happily ever after, a number of obstacles — like religious differences, family pressures and career goals — need to be addressed. Hope is not lost, however, and throughout it all Noah and Joanne remain a good match. The supporting cast, by the way, is also a delight.

## 'Supacell'

The British series "Supacell" introduced a smart spin on the superhero template. Created and written by Rapman, the show centers on a group of Black, working-class people in London who discover they have superpowers. At first, it seems the powerful are linked by just the color of their skin, but their real connection is a family history of sickle cell disease. The show addresses themes like the medical exploitation of the Black community, poverty and how the media often overlooks cases of missing people of color. The



FX/AP photos

Left: Eita Okuno as Saeki Nobutatsu, Anna Sawai as Toda Mariko and Hiromoto Ida as Kiyama Ukon Sadanaga in "Shogun." Above: Hiroyuki Sanada as Yoshii Toranaga. The series about feudal Japan won an historic 18 Emmys this year.

show has been renewed for a second season and is on Netflix.

## 'The Penguin'

Another fresh take on the world of superheroes and their villains is "The Penguin," on Max. The story picks up after the 2022 film "The Batman" starring Robert Pattinson but here, Batman is more a background character to the gangster story of Oz Cobb. Colin Farrell played the criminal kingpin in the Pattinson film and reprises that role here. Cristin Milioti has also gotten her share of positive reviews — and a Golden Globe nomination — for her portrayal of villain Sofia Falcone.

## 'Matlock'

When CBS first announced a new "Matlock" with Kathy Bates in the lead role, it seemed like just a gender-flipped remake. Au contraire. Bates plays Madeline Kingston, a wealthy lawyer who comes out of retirement under the alias Mattie Matlock (with a similar folksy demeanor as Andy Griffith's). Her reason for returning to work is that she needs money but, in reality, she's out for revenge. It's also fun to see how the series addresses older people being often overlooked and underestimated, which Madeline sometimes leans into for



NETFLIX/AP

Nadine Mills in "Supacell," a unique superhero show about Black working-class people.



FX/AP

Brian Jordan Alvarez juggles the normal demands of his job amid societal changes in the FX series "English Teacher."

her own benefit. It streams on Paramount+. (Bates also snagged a Globe nomination.)

## 'The Valley'

When "Vanderpump Rules" spinoff "The Valley" debuted on Bravo in spring, some fans rolled their eyes. It follows three former "Vanderpump" castmates — Jax Taylor, Brittany Cartwright and Kristen Doute — now living more settled lives amid a new circle of friends. Taylor and Doute knew the assignment — or just quickly fell into old habits of saying too much and stirring the pot. The new cast also impressed. Janet Caperna positioned herself as both above the drama and very much living for it. Jesse Lally showed vulnerability over the demise of his marriage to castmate Michelle Saniei, while also being an unapologetic snob. Viewers watched Taylor and Cartwright's marriage spiral, too (they're now divorcing). It streams on Peacock.

## 'Mr. & Mrs. Smith'

Another adaptation with a twist is Prime Video's "Mr. & Mrs. Smith," starring Donald Glover and Maya Erskine. It shares a title with the film starring Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie,

but differs dramatically: Glover and Erskine play spies assigned to pose as a married couple named John and Jane Smith. They quickly go from strangers to coworkers to lovers. Each episode sees John and Jane on a new assignment, with notable guest stars like Alexander Skarsgård, Michaela Coel and Sharon Horgan. The show was nominated for 16 Emmy Awards and three Golden Globes.

## 'Ripley'

Andrew Scott stars in "Ripley," a neo-noir Netflix adaptation about the con artist and serial killer created by Patricia Highsmith. Like the 1999 movie starring Matt Damon, Gwyneth Paltrow and Jude Law, this limited series is based on the Highsmith's "The Talented Mr. Ripley." Tom Ripley is hired by a wealthy businessman to travel to Italy and encourage his son, Dickie, who is living a life of leisure, to return to the States. Ripley ends up becoming enamored with Dickie's lifestyle and the ruse turns deadly.

## 'English Teacher'

Brian Jordan Alvarez created and stars in FX's "English Teacher" as Evan, a high school teacher in Texas, juggling the



BRAVO/AP

"Vanderpump Rules" castmates Brittany Cartwright and Jax Taylor return in "The Valley."

normal demands of the job amid societal changes. In one episode, Evan must show sensitivity to a student who has self-diagnosed herself with a made-up disease. In another, he successfully gets the school's gun safety program shut down but then is told all faculty must receive firearm training. As the adults on the show often struggle with getting it right, it's the students who seem less bothered with labels. The show also has an enjoyable soundtrack. It streams on Hulu.

## 'Shogun'

"Shogun" had a triumphant first season on FX, winning a historic 18 awards at this year's Emmys — including best drama series and best actor and actress in a drama for Hiroyuki Sanada and Anna Sawai. It's set during the power struggles in feudal Japan and is based on a 1975 James Clavell novel. FX didn't skimp on the production value, netting comparisons to "Game of Thrones." It was originally planned as a limited series, but now two more seasons are planned. Episodes stream on Hulu.

## 'Presumed Innocent'

Jake Gyllenhaal starred in his first TV series, for Apple TV+. Gyllenhaal is Rusty Sabich, a Chicago prosecutor accused of killing a colleague. Gyllenhaal's real brother-in-law, Peter Sarsgaard, plays Rusty's adversary, another lawyer trying to prove his guilt. The story comes from a Scott Turow novel that was made into a Harrison Ford film in 1990, but doesn't follow either to the letter. It was the streamer's most watched drama series so far and a second season has been ordered, with Gyllenhaal staying on as an executive producer.

## MOVIES

# Becoming Bob Dylan

How Timothée Chalamet transformed into the iconic '60s singer-songwriter for Mangold's 'A Complete Unknown'

By JAKE COYLE  
Associated Press

**H**ow many roads must a man walk down to play Bob Dylan?

Quite a few, at least, if you're Timothée Chalamet. Off and on for some six years, Chalamet has been obsessively working toward his performance in "A Complete Unknown." He has visited Dylan's childhood home, learned how to play the guitar (and the harmonica) and immersed himself in the early '60s New York that Dylan emerged out of — even if much of it has faded with history by now.

"Cafe Wha? was funny because they have Jimi Hendrix and Bob Dylan painted along the staircase and everything but now it's just, like, Aerosmith covers," Chalamet says, chuckling. "I was like: I don't think this is what it was like when Bob was here."

Chalamet has been building his Dylan for so long that he's been seen playing Dylan songs while in costume as Willy Wonka and on the set of "Dune." His "Dune" co-star, Oscar Isaac (who famously played a fictional Dylan-adjacent folk musician in "Inside Llewyn Davis"), said, "My first thought, it sounded like a really bad idea."

Isaac certainly wasn't the only one to doubt whether Chalamet, or anyone, could tackle someone as iconic and enigmatic as Dylan. But Chalamet's performance — complete with singing and guitar playing — in the James Mangold-directed film, now in theaters, has drawn near-universal praise. Chalamet has been nominated for a Golden Globe; if he were to be nominated and win at the Academy Awards, the 28-year-old would be the youngest best actor winner ever.

Even Dylan, who gave Mangold notes on the film, has said: "Timmy's a brilliant actor, so I'm sure he's going to be completely believable as me. Or a younger me. Or some other me."

The Dylan in question in "A Complete Unknown," loosely based on Elijah Wald's 2015 book, "Dylan Goes Electric! Newport, Seeger, Dylan, and the Night That Split the Sixties," is a young, just-starting-out Dylan. By the end of the film, which culminates in the 1965 Newport Folk Festival, he's gone from folk messiah to Judas.

Chalamet recently spoke to The Associated Press about how he navigated the biggest acting challenge of his career:

**Associated Press: There might not be a much more daunting undertaking for an actor than playing Dylan. How did you decide you wanted to do it?**

**Chalamet:** I like how you framed the question initially, that it's an undertaking. Bob Dylan is not only someone whose behaviorism and whose presence as a cultural figure is iconic, but, more importantly, as a thinker, as an artist, as a shaper of American culture through the last 60, 70 years, he's The Guy in a lot of ways. I obviously felt like you can't go near that if you're not ready to do it. Equally, I had five years to work on this, or six, so there was no truncated process at any point. If you play any



Timothée Chalamet at the Dec. 10 Los Angeles premiere of "A Complete Unknown" and in the film as Bob Dylan.

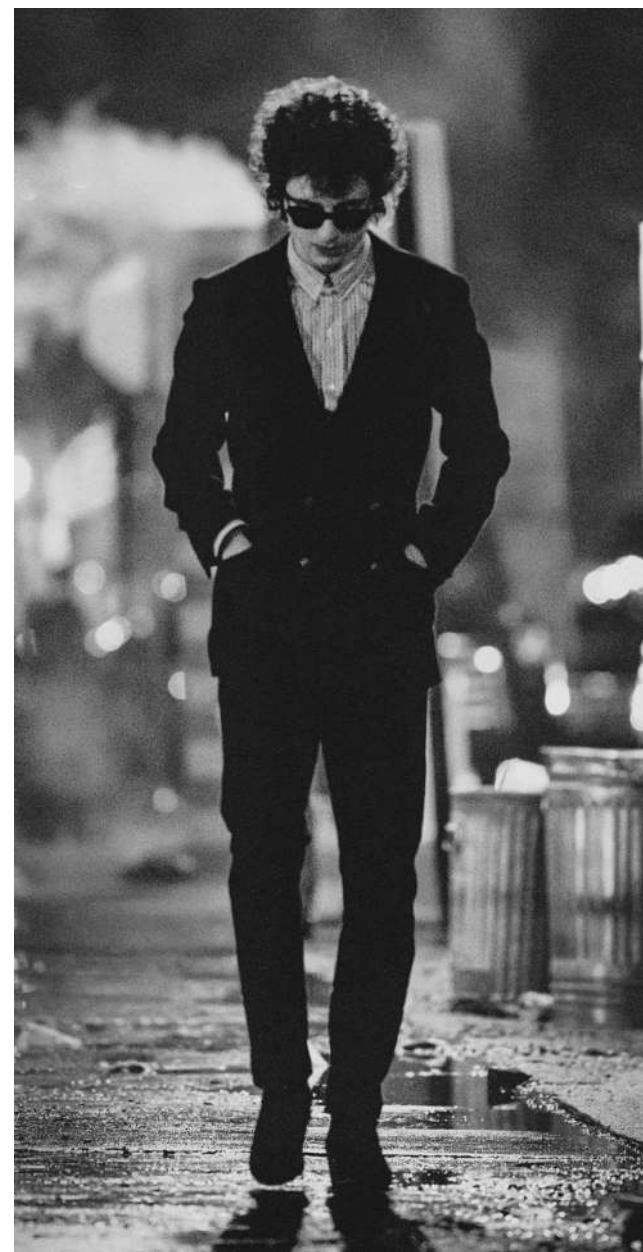
real-life figure, it's sort of a gift. There's the reality of how it happened. But with a musician, your education becomes twofold, or tenfold, because there's not only the record of what he went through in his work, but the feeling he can give you as a person — which for me, with Bob's music, was exponential. It was indescribable — like many people, maybe yourself. And I wouldn't even try to describe it because he wouldn't.

**Where did you begin?**

Weirdly, it was the press conferences. This came to me in an email in 2018. Bob Dylan, to me, was limited to the good friend of my father's in New York, growing up, who had a striking black-and-white portrait of Dylan on his apartment wall. I didn't know much of his music. You know, stuff like "Blowing in the Wind" or "Time's They Are a-Changin'" are so woven in American culture that, of course, I knew those.

I just went up YouTube and before songs popped up, the San Francisco press conference popped up in '65. I was just so fascinated to see an artist who was a definitive figure of the '60s, but who clearly was as much a thinker as he was a forward-facing entertainer. It's really, really rare to find the people that are deep thinkers and lyricists and artists that as much forward-facing entertainers. So when these artists pop up, like Bob Dylan, or I think in today's culture, Frank Ocean, we all have a responsibility to champion these artists. Usually the sensitive nature, or whatever you want to call it, would encourage someone with a deep brain like that to not put themselves out there like that — that's my theory.

**"I feel changed by the experience. I can't speak about the actual film. The process of it, the yearslong endeavor into it, the dignity in playing something that actually happened. Those were new facets to my experience as an artist."**



RICHARD SHOTWELL, INVISION/AP ; SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES/AP

**Were any of the documentaries helpful?**

It was really D.A. Pennebaker's "Don't Look Back." That was a bible to me on this. I love, love, love that film. I love music documentaries. There's a Lil Wayne documentary called "The Carter" that's all these moments. It's just so special when you can get your camera on these music artists when they're at a moment like Bob was in "Don't Look Back." Lil' Wayne in "The Carter" is the

same thing where they're learning to turn their back in some way, but they haven't done it yet.

**What'd you get from 'Don't Look Back'?**

The great thing about "Don't Look Back" is it's just really raw. There aren't the talking heads. It's what's great about Suze Rotolo's book. It's really raw. It's more raw than a lot of the other books about Bob Dylan. It's very clear-sighted about the young relationship she had with Bob. With an artist of such reverence, it's important as

an actor not to simply revere him. Then you'll do justice to the people that already revere him, but to everyone else in the room, they won't get it.

**When did you first pick up a guitar?**

I picked up a guitar on "Call Me By Your Name" because I pluck out the chords of a song in that film. So I had, like, a really rudimentary experience with that. I think sometime in 2018 I had my first lesson with this great guitar teacher named Larry Saltzman who at some point became less of a teacher and more a co-sanity artist

SEE DYLAN ON PAGE 15

## MOVIE REVIEW

## Chalamet cranks up 'A Complete Unknown'

Actor takes a full-bodied, all-encompassing approach as Dylan in lengthy biopic

By ROSS RAIHALA  
Pioneer Press

While watching a screening of the new Bob Dylan biopic "A Complete Unknown" attended by the film's star last week, I kept asking myself the same question. Who, exactly, is this movie for?

Two stridently different, yet equally deranged, fandoms will certainly eat up the film. Hardcore Dylan acolytes will find much to love, and hate, about it as well as plenty of opportunities to endlessly complain and/or debate its finest of points.

Meanwhile, Timothée Chalamet fans will adore the 28-year-old movie star's intensely focused performance that seemingly came from the ABS — Always Be Smoking — school of method acting. (Director James Mangold has said the film is more of a Robert Altman-style ensemble piece than a traditional biopic, but Chalamet is front and center pretty much the entire time.)

I'm unclear, however, what the audiences who made smashes out of "Bohemian Rhapsody" and "Rocketman" will think of this lengthy, ponderous film about an enormously gifted young performer who responds to his nearly instant fame by retreating into his own world and alienating the very people who lifted him up.



SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES/AP

Timothée Chalamet doesn't so much explain the enigmatic man he's portraying as he does luxuriate in his many eccentricities in "A Complete Unknown."

"A Complete Unknown" opens in January 1961, with 19-year-old University of Minnesota dropout Robert Zimmerman arriving in Manhattan with the plan to meet his musical idol, Woody Guthrie (Scoot McNairy). The first sequence is pure magic, as Mangold and his production team did a gorgeous job of re-creating the New York City of more than 60 years ago. It's always a pleasure to see a period piece that nails even the smallest of details. (Unfortunately, Mangold doesn't maintain that level of commitment and used some particularly flimsy and garish

CGI to fill out the Newport Folk Festival crowd scenes later in the film.)

As Dylan soon learns, Guthrie is actually in a psychiatric hospital in New Jersey, where he's confined to his bed and struggling with a case of Huntington's disease that has left him barely able to move or speak. Dylan makes his way to the hospital, where he meets another folk icon, Pete Seeger (Edward Norton), and performs a song for the both of them.

Seeger takes Dylan under his wing and introduces him to Greenwich Village's booming folk scene, where he begins per-

forming in clubs. After an enthusiastic New York Times review, Dylan picks up a record deal and a manager, Albert Grossman (Dan Fogler). A mere 14 months after his arrival, Dylan's self-titled album hits stores.

From there, the film follows Dylan's dizzying rocket ride to the top and concludes with his career-defining performance at the 1965 Newport Folk Festival when he stunned the audience by playing an electric guitar backed by a full rock band. Chalamet, who did his own singing in the film, doesn't so much explain the enigmatic man he's portraying as he does luxuriate in his many eccentricities. Still, Chalamet feels like a slam dunk for an Oscar nomination given his full-bodied, all-encompassing approach here.

Both Mangold and Chalamet clearly aren't afraid to show Dylan as a deeply flawed man, a chain-smoking narcissist who treats everyone around him like garbage — especially the women in his life, especially Joan Baez (Monica Barbaro).

And that brings me back to wondering just who "A Complete Unknown" is for. Yes, the acting is great, but the 141-minute running time does tend to drag. The back end gets particularly tedious with a number of repetitive scenes of uptight folkies clutching their pearls at the thought of Dylan playing rock music.

It's tough to root for Dylan, and when he finally does plug in and crank it up, folks may be more excited by the fact that the film is finally over.

"A Complete Unknown" is rated R for language. Running time: 141 minutes. Now playing in select on-base theaters.

## Dylan: Actor's preparation for role went beyond learning to play guitar

## FROM PAGE 14

through COVID. I think we were keeping each other sane. We would Zoom three, four times a week and doing songs that never made it into the movie.

## What songs did you gravitate toward?

All of it. I really liked all of it. I like the more intimate songs like "Girl From the North Country" or "Boots of Spanish Leather" or "One Too Many Mornings" or "Tomorrow Is a Long Time." But then I also liked "North Country Blues" and "Rocks and Gravel" or "Ballad of Hollis Brown" — things where you hear the iron ore in Bob's voice, the North Country in Minnesota, the Hibbing. The Hibbing that when I visited you really felt like you were on the edge of America, like the edge of the world. These factories that are covered in snow and the icy roads. That stuff, as a New Yorker, I just started to fall in love with.

So much of the movie is about the onset of fame for Dylan and his rejection of the expectations others have for him. Were you

## able to connect with that experience?

Yeah, absolutely, in ways that are more unspoken than I could be definitive about. I just do. I don't know how to use more words than that. And it was empowering to play someone that really just bucked off all pressure.

I've heard you mention his infamous speech in 1963 accepting the Tom Paine award where he said "it is not an old people's world."

That is a young man saying: Why are the older people in this room the signifiers and those who determine who the young lights forward are? Maybe the way he said it — talking about hair loss for older people being representative of their old age (laughs) — wasn't the nicest way of putting it. But what he was saying, it has an element of truth. And at a time when media was more centralized or something, I think his attitude toward it was — I don't know, I don't want to speak for him.

You haven't met Dylan, but

## have you thought about what you'd ask him if you did?

I think I'd just say thank you, really. Not thank you for the opportunity to meet, or thank you for the opportunity to play the role. Thank you for his music and his art and his work.

You traveled through some of the Midwest to retrace his footsteps. How did that help?

I spent time in Duluth and Hibbing and Wisconsin and Chicago. I tried to retrace those steps leading to New York where he arrived in the early '60s. That wasn't some academy process. That wasn't trying to excavate the exact footprint and see if there was some DNA remaining and what that meant about where he was psychologically at the time. That was simply to be in the energy of these places and quell some insecurity I had about growing up in midtown Manhattan in the 2000s and how that would be different from growing up in iron ore country in the '50s and '60s.

Granted, that's a different place than it was 60, 70 years ago



SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES/AP

Timothée Chalamet, seen here in "A Complete Unknown," first picked up a guitar for his role in "Call Me By Your Name." He also learned to play the harmonica for the new Bob Dylan biopic.

— which was also moving to me, honestly. The unspoken metaphor I was feeling was: The world goes on. The times they are a'changing and things have changed. Being a brilliant poet or artist like Bob isn't the remedy for everyone.

I also have this personal affinity for these artists that come from the Midwest of the United States. Kid Cudi is obviously a hip-hop artist I'm hugely admiring of who came from Cleveland. It's beyond me. Because I had a hard enough time getting my career going being from New York. When I got to Hibbing, you

think of this hero's journey of this young man.

You sound altered by this experience. Did it in some way shift your DNA as an actor?

I feel changed by the experience. I can't speak about the actual film. The process of it, the yearslong endeavor into it, the dignity in playing something that actually happened. Those were new facets to my experience as an artist.

Beyond that, people will make of it what they will, which is totally fair. I think that's a great Bob worldview, too. Do with it what you want.

## MUSIC

# Straight to the top

Career-changing songs by Shaboozey, Chappell Roan were among The Associated Press picks as best of 2024

By MARIA SHERMAN  
Associated Press

Ten of the best songs of the year, in no particular order.

## 'A Bar Song (Tippy),' Shaboozey

It is not only the biggest song of the year, but one of the longest-reigning No. 1s of all time, as far as the Billboard Hot 100 is concerned — Shaboozey's "A Bar Song (Tippy)" tied Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road" with 19 weeks atop the charts. It makes sense that these songs resonated in similar ways: Both are cross-genre, monolithic musical moments, classically country and an amalgamation of styles forming something completely modern. Shaboozey's earworm interpolates J-Kwon's "Tippy" and places it squarely on the faded barstool of a hard-working weekend warrior. Like a few too many whiskey shooters, it'll inspire a singalong of "Oh my, good lord" from anyone.

## 'Not Like Us,' Kendrick Lamar

There was a time where describing "Not Like Us" required a taxonomy of the freshly reignited beef between Kendrick Lamar and Drake, a period of diss tracks begetting diss tracks with dizzying alacrity — and a clear victor. The truth is, the song stands on its own: a triumphant declaration of West Coast hip-hop, funny and bombastic.

## 'Like That,' Future, Metro Boomin and Kendrick Lamar

Future and Metro Boomin have long made ideal collaborators, but this year's joint album, "We Don't Trust You," felt like a long time coming. It was an event. Immediately upon its release, "Like That" stood out, not only for its fiery guest verse from Lamar, or its hyper-speed sample of Rodney O and Joe Cooley's "Everlasting Bass" and Eazy-E's "Eazy-Duz-It," but for its ferocity. It's the big ... three?

## 'Good Luck, Babe!,' Chappell Roan

Face it: 2024 belonged to Chappell Roan. A veteran of the music industry now experiencing what feels like an unparalleled rocket launch into fame, Roan has long wielded her theatricality and sexual candor like a wand (and a rabbit) in her songs. But it's "Good Luck, Babe!" that thrust her into the mainstream, a pop megahit that tackles lust, frustration and compulsory heterosexuality atop strings, '80s synths and a soaring vocal performance. How could you not fall in love with her?

## 'Espresso,' Sabrina Carpenter

For the caffeinated — or those in dire need of an energy boost — Sabrina Carpenter's "Espresso" emerged like all great pop hits should: Almost from nowhere, as addictive as its namesake and confounding in its lyrics, directly recalling the Y2K period of off-kilter pop songs with nonsensical

SEE SONGS ON PAGE 17

Shaboozey performs during halftime of an NFL game between the Chicago Bears and Detroit Lions on Nov. 28 in Detroit.

RICK OSENTOSKI/AP



## MUSIC



SCOTT A GARFITT, INVISION/AP

Chappell Roan performs in London on Sept. 20. Roan's pop megahit "Good Luck, Babe!" thrust her into the mainstream this year.

## Songs: Post Malone goes country and records anthem

### FROM PAGE 16

lyrics atop sunny productions. ("That's that me espresso" is up there with the Backstreet Boys' declaration of "I never wanna hear you say / I want it that way.") But this one isn't simply fueled by nostalgia. It's disco-pop when the genre was dead and buried, revitalized and made clever through Carpenter's ever-present sense of humor. Cheeky!

### 'Texas Hold 'Em,' Beyoncé

For career-long fans of Beyoncé, the memory of the once-teen-aged singer who spoke with a soft, pronounced Texas twang is all but distant. For them, a hybridist country album from the superstar performer was simply a prophecy fulfilled. When "Cowboy Carter" arrived, it became immediately clear that B was dedicated to reclaiming country music as a Black woman. It was the introduction of this new era with "Texas Hold 'Em" that solidified it — a honky-tonk stomper with western soul.

### 'Nasty,' Tinashe

Give her No. 1 for the best lyric of the year — "Is somebody gonna match my freak?" Tinashe's "Nasty" is the hit fans of her smooth R&B-pop have been awaiting for years. It's a sultry, good-time hit — a kick, a snare, bare production and a scare beat — melodic and stacked with backing vocals. No wonder TikTok immediately embraced it. "Nasty" is for dancing, a song that evokes a quote regularly attributed to Oscar Wilde: a vertical expression of a horizontal urge.

### 'I Had Some Help,' Post Malone, Morgan Wallen

Of any contemporary pop performer, Post Malone has benefitted the most from his ability to shapeshift. In an alternative universe, it might be hard to think of the "White Iverson" rapper launching a successful country career. In this one, it

makes too much sense — the Texas musician has been dropping "ma'ams" and "sirs" in his speech since day one, and his signature autotuned vibrato works across the genre spectrum. (It's that same idiosyncrasy that had both Beyoncé and Taylor Swift calling him for features this year.) But it is his red solo cup collaboration with controversial hit-maker Morgan Wallen that made waves, an immediate anthem for hanging out in the bed of a pickup truck or at a backyard barbecue.

### 'Igual Que Un Ángel,' Kali Uchis, Peso Pluma

One of the biggest music stories of the past few years has been the increasing popularity of regional Mexican music — a thrilling reflection of Latin music's continued global growth. But the artists at the center of the movement, including Peso Pluma, know that their music succeeds because it both celebrates tradition and transcends it, like in his gruff rapping over corridos. In Kali Uchis' "Igual Que Un Ángel," Pluma experiments with new genres entirely, and she welcomes him into her world. Here, Uchis' glossy, shimmery disco dream-pop is the foundation, and Pluma's stony vocal tone a smooth accent.

### 'Right Back to It,' Waxahatchee and MJ Lenderman

A vocal harmony between Waxahatchee's Katie Crutchfield and MJ Lenderman is a marvel from the jump — two kindred spirits, schooled in folksy Americana and raised in DIY punk — but that's only one fraction of the magic of "Right Back to It." The song considers long-term relationships, the kind of love that can be tested, steady, reliable and, at times, restive. "I let my mind run wild / Don't know why I do it," she sings, "But you just settle in like a song with no end."

# AP's top albums of 2024: include Beyoncé, Charli XCX

By MARIA SHERMAN  
Associated Press

Ten of the top albums of the year:

## 'Cowboy Carter,' Beyoncé

She rode in on a white horse, in patriotic chaps and wielding an American flag. She declared, this "ain't a Country album" but "a 'Beyoncé' album" — positioning herself in opposition to the genre's rigid power structures. And yet, she made the year's best country (and then some) release: Beyoncé's "Act II: Cowboy Carter," a 78-minute, 27-track masterclass in inherited and uncelebrated histories, pulling from Black and brown performers at the core of country's canon, and providing visibility to oft-overlooked progenitors. It may only be 2024, but it's hard to imagine this record not being one of the decade's best.

## 'BRAT,' Charli XCX

It wasn't just brat summer, babes, but a brat movement: English singer-songwriter Charli XCX's sixth album altered the language of 2024. The music oscillates between hedonism and anxiety — but also manages to bring the underground's pop queen into the mainstream without compromising her vision. There was a period where Charli XCX's collaborations with the future-seeking PC Music collective and producer A.G. Cook seemed too progressive for everyday ears. But "Brat," and its vomit-chartreuse iconography, resonated. Listeners were ready to return to the rave — or attend for the very first time — and dance-pop music is far more interesting for it.

## 'Alligator Bites Never Heal,' Doechii

When alligators kill, they do what is known as a "death roll": They sink their teeth into their prey and spin rapidly, flipping their bodies in and out of the water, drowning, disorienting and dismembering whatever was unlucky enough to get in their way. Florida rapper Doechii's breakout mixtape, "Alligator Bites Never Heal," embodies that kind of intensity — not in aggression, per se, but in acuity — for a versatile album that teeters from the romance of her smooth R&B and the particularity of her flows. Single "Boom Bap" made her greatness known. Tracks like "Catfish" confirm it.

## 'Manning Fireworks,' MJ Lenderman

Last year, AP named "Rat Saw God," the album from Asheville, N.C., alt-country indie rockers Wednesday, as one of 2023's best. The band features MJ Lenderman, whose "Manning Fireworks" is almost frustratingly addictive. It's a record of hilariously evocative moments from pathetic people (or is it pathetic moments from hilariously evocative people?) atop purposeful, easy slacker rock melodies. From there, it's a kaleidoscope of brilliant lyrical short stories. For fans of alternative music, it is an immediate classic. We'd suggest placing "Manning Fireworks" next to Pavement on your shelf, but it's unlikely to leave your turntable.

## 'Orquídeas,' Kali Uchis

When Amy Winehouse first emerged, she was celebrated for being a once-in-a-generation voice, an old soul in a modern world — not overly sentimental or stuck, but an artist willing to commu-

icate with the past to make art in the future. In many ways, the same can be said about Kali Uchis and her 2024 album, "Orquídeas." Her superpower is her syrupy voice, which feels in time and out of it — classically and effortlessly smoothing over and disrupting her lush sonic worlds. If 2024 is about fluidity — of genre, language, love, loss and divination — Uchis provides a roadmap from restrained reggaeton to alt-R&B.

## 'GNX,' Kendrick Lamar

The holidays arrived early this year when Pulitzer Prize-winning rapper Kendrick Lamar surprise released "GNX" in late November. It is his first album since 2022's "Mr. Morale & the Big Steppers" — and perhaps more tellingly, his first since his victory lap over Drake in their recently reignited beef that inspired one of the year's best songs, "Not Like Us." In full, "GNX" builds off the promise of his blockbuster single. But it's Lamar's performance that makes this one of the year's best.

## 'Hit Me Hard and Soft,' Billie Eilish

It often seems like there is no record Billie Eilish can't break, no accomplishment she cannot summit. So where was she to go, at just 22, with her third studio album? Up, as it turns out. "Hit Me Hard and Soft" is a 10-track testament to her ambition. It fuses insights pulled from her first two records — the gothic humor and unusual production of her first record and the classist detours of her second — but wizened. No one is doing it like her.

## 'Two Star & The Dream Police,' Mk.gee

Upon first listen, if New Jersey guitar virtuoso Mk.gee confounds, do not worry. He is a 2024 success story who emerged fully formed and completely unusual, only to make fans of everyone from Justin Bieber to Eric Clapton — and their influence is heard throughout "Two Star & The Dream Police." The record is gauzy, ripe for a "lo-fi music to study to" playlist, but also commands attention for its spaced-out production and sparkling pop, all reliant on the malleability of his guitar compositions.

## 'The Past Is Still Alive,' Hurray for the Riff Raff

Hurray for the Riff Raff, the musical moniker of Alynda Segarra, has long studied Americana, blues and folk punk, perfecting their craft with each new release. On the narrative "The Past Is Still Alive," their eighth studio album, Segarra pulls from their background as a hitchhiker, train hopper and outsider artist to document the kind of life-altering adventures — ugly and rejuvenating — that can only happen far from home.

## 'Phasor,' Helado Negro

Nearly a decade ago, Helado Negro — the bilingual musical project of Roberto Carlos Lange — released the single "Young, Latin and Proud," a celebratory exploration of Latino identity that became a rallying cry for indie kids with similar heritage. "Phasor," recorded in English and Spanish, uses electronic sounds to express inspirations pulled from nature. It's wide-ranging, effervescent and ambitious, easy to listen to and a joy to dissect.



PARKWOOD, COLUMBIA, SONY/AP

Associated Press music writer Maria Sherman believes that Beyoncé's "Act II: Cowboy Carter" will be considered one of the albums of the decade.

## VIDEO GAMES



SEGA/AP

In *Metaphor: ReFantazio*, the quasi-medieval Euchronia is corrupted by mutants known as “humans,” which players have to battle to restore sanity.

# Indie designers and Indy to the rescue

Familiar faces as well as new titles from independent publishers help salvage poor year for gaming industry

By LOU KESTEN  
Associated Press

It's been a rough year in the world of video games, which reeled from some high-profile flops (sorry, *Suicide Squad* and *Star Wars* fans) and a relentless series of developer layoffs. Fortunately, indie designers stepped up to fill in the gaps. And toward the end of the year, a few AAA studios rallied with ambitious, big-budget adventures.

The top 10 games of 2024 recall a brighter age when it seemed like anything was possible in our virtual worlds. Here's hoping the industry learns from their success:

## 1. *Metaphor: ReFantazio*

In a politically exhausting year, Japan's Studio Zero pulled off the seemingly impossible: rendering the process of reforming a corrupt world with something resembling ... hope? The corruption that has beset the quasi-medieval Euchronia is quite literal, embodied by hideous mutants known (rather unsubtly) as “humans.” The fight to restore sanity blends stirring battles with unusually thoughtful reflections on justice, all with the eye-popping visuals you'd expect from the creators of the *Persona* series.

## 2. *Animal Well*

The past few years have brought a surge in so-called “metroidvanias” — enormous two-dimensional mazes that blend arcade action with tricky puzzles. Solo designer Billy Basso's *Animal Well* is the apex, presenting a vast underground network whose inhabitants range from mice to flamingos. Every challenge you solve opens a smorgasbord of new challenges, and it's easy to get lost for hours in its eerie, hallucinatory world.

## 3. *Lorelei and the Laser Eyes*

In this drama from Sweden's Simigo, a young woman is



BETHESDA SOFTWARES/AP

Yes, you do get to punch Nazis in *Indiana Jones and the Great Circle*. But the game is more about figuring out enigmas than mindlessly shooting enemies.

invited to explore a hotel that's been seemingly abandoned by its owner, an avant-garde filmmaker. Every room has a puzzle, and the more you solve, the deeper you fall under its spell. It's like being trapped in a David Lynch movie, where you're always questioning the boundaries between dreams and reality.

## 4. *Dragon Age: The Veilguard*

BioWare, the studio behind landmark role-playing games like *Mass Effect* and the original *Baldur's Gate*, finally returns to its strengths with this fantasy epic. It has all the hallmarks of the genre, with a motley crew of fighters, mages and rogues joining forces against a world-threatening evil. The combat is engaging, the stories are unpredictable and the characters are endearingly loopy.

## 5. *Astro Bot*

The most endearing character of the year has to be the adorable protagonist of this adventure from Sony's Team Asobi. The spunky little robot is on a planet-hopping mission to rescue dozens of his fellow droids, with each stop presenting a fresh assortment of running, jumping and punching challenges. It's the sort of game we used to see more of on the PlayStation, and it's thoroughly delightful.

## 6. *Dungeons of Hinterberg*

Luisa is a burnt-out corporate drone who needs a

break. So why not head to the Alps and cut loose by fighting some monsters? Compared to *Metaphor* and *Dragon Age*, the dungeons devised by Austria's Microbird Games are more tightly focused, given that you can only take a few magic spells on each expedition. But the puzzles are clever, and this oddball tourist town has other intriguing mysteries worth investigating.

## 7. *The Legend of Zelda: Echoes of Wisdom*

More dungeons, as Nintendo returns to Hyrule. At long last you get to play as Princess Zelda, who wields a scepter that allows her to duplicate the tools she needs to surmount obstacles — or summon creatures to fight her foes. *Echoes* combines the top-down action of 1987's original-recipe *Zelda* with the improvisation of last year's *Tears of the Kingdom*, and should satisfy fans of both.

## 8. *Indiana Jones and the Great Circle*

Bethesda Softworks delivers a rarity, an AAA action-adventure in which the protagonist spends more time quietly figuring out the enigmas of the Egyptian pyramids and Vatican City than mindlessly shooting enemies. Veteran voice actor Troy Baker does a fine job standing in for Harrison Ford, the dialogue sparkles and the graphics are stunningly detailed. It's one of 2024's biggest surprises — and don't worry, you do get to punch Nazis.

## 9. *Balatro*

This indie smash from solo developer LocalThunk looks simple: a solitaire version of poker in which you score points by racking up good hands. Throw in some jokers, though — say, a “Greedy Joker” that makes diamonds more valuable — and it gets complicated. The higher your score, the more jokers become available. It's a classic “just one more hand” hook; don't download *Balatro* if you expect to get anything else done today.

## 10. *UFO 50*

A team of indie developers led by Spelunky designer Derek Yu conjured up this tribute to the games of the 1980s. It's insanely ambitious, with 50 complete games ranging across every imaginable genre, from shoot-'em-ups to strategy to racing to role-playing. There's even a Pong variant. It's a feast for anyone who remembers the dawn of video games — or is too young to have been there.

# CROSSWORD AND COMICS

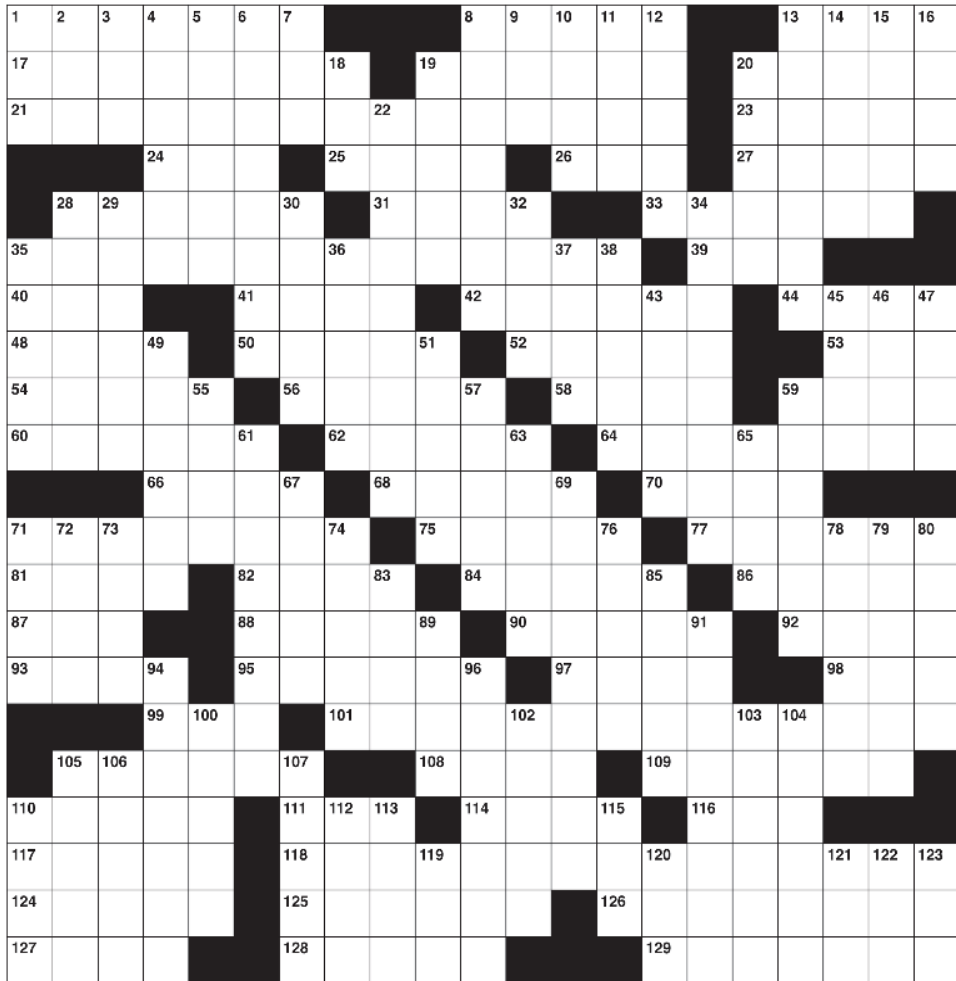
## NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

### ART HEIST

BY DAVID KWONG / EDITED BY JOEL FAGLIANO

David Kwong is a magician and crossword constructor in Los Angeles. He was the head magic consultant on the 2013 heist film "Now You See Me" and has consulted on magic and puzzles for many other films and TV shows. He wrote his honors thesis at Harvard on the history of Eastern magicians and their impersonators. David's new children's book of magic tricks, "How to Fool Your Parents," is in bookstores everywhere. Note: Ten paintings have been stolen by a master thief! To solve this caper, locate each stolen painting in the grid. Then identify the squares in the Across answers from which they've been taken. In their place, the thief has left behind 10 pieces of evidence — letters in the Downs. Read them from top to bottom to reveal a message.

- ACROSS**
- 1 Chess player's study
- 8 Painting stolen from 71-Across
- 13 Cashless deal
- 17 Crunchy root vegetables
- 19 Fertilizer compound
- 20 Painting stolen from 64-Across
- 21 Winter setting in New England
- 23 Hunter on high
- 24 Like the Beatles' "Yesterday," key-wise
- 25 Plum variety often used in spirits
- 26 \_\_\_ center
- 27 Made eyes at
- 28 Schedules
- 31 Architectural annexes
- 33 Bronx cheer
- 35 Capital on the Río de la Plata
- 39 "Anchors Aweigh" grp.
- 40 One step \_\_\_ time
- 41 Oodles
- 42 Downhill event
- 44 Prefix with health
- 48 Niçoise salad need
- 50 Role for Jay Silverheels
- 52 Charles de Gaulle's birthplace
- 53 Neighborhood grocery stores
- 54 Painting stolen from 21-Across
- 56 Nobelist Bohr
- 58 Evenhanded
- 59 Customary practice
- 60 Popeye's witchy foe in early comics
- 62 Like a car's wheels
- 64 Bar with hashish pipes
- 66 Baseball great Hershiser
- 68 Solution strength, in chemistry
- 70 Fat used in candlemaking
- 71 Common scale range
- 75 Champing at the bit
- 77 Fog and haze generated for a theatrical production
- 81 Flimsy, as an excuse
- 82 Pillow cover
- 84 Fastens, in a way
- 86 Nose around
- 87 Director DuVernay
- 88 Crumple into a ball
- 90 Informal speech
- 92 Painting stolen from 33-Across
- 93 Painting stolen from 105-Across
- 95 Opened or closed like an eye, in film lingo
- 97 No longer interested in
- 98 Tour de France units: Abbr.
- 99 Bout enders, for short
- 101 Health professional focused on nutrition
- 105 Household appliance that makes a hissing sound
- 108 "Right now!"
- 109 Connecticut coastal town near Stamford
- 110 Has the gumption
- 111 Actress Thurman
- 114 Abbr. on a music score
- 116 Member of la familia
- 117 "Get \_\_\_!"
- 118 Classic nursery rhyme
- 124 Toronto team, for short
- 125 Attacked by mosquitoes, say
- 126 Claudius, vis-à-vis King Hamlet
- 127 Land in the sea
- 128 Iditarod entries
- 129 Annual star-studded fashion event
- DOWN**
- 1 Three, in Torino
- 2 Letters associated with baseball and batteries
- 3 Many '90s music purchases
- 4 Painting stolen from 101-Across
- 5 Enjoys as a hobby
- 6 Gets irritated by
- 7 Title for Manchin or Murkowski: Abbr.
- 8 First cars made by Ford
- 9 See 122-Down
- 10 Hair removal brand
- 11 Salinger's "For \_\_\_ — With Love and Squalor"
- 12 "Penn & Teller: Fool Us" aier
- 13 Painting stolen from 35-Across
- 14 "\_\_\_ we're waiting ..."
- 15 Cactuslike plants
- 16 Duffer's obstacle
- 18 '60s campus activist grp.
- 19 "1984" drudge
- 20 Eccentric types
- 22 Certain emergency message
- 28 Surgeon's stitch
- 29 Actress Creel of "Saved by the Bell"
- 30 Beauty spot?
- 32 Place to keep plants
- 34 Abundant
- 35 Motel proprietor in "Psycho"
- 36 Ancient Greek region for which part of the Mediterranean is named
- 37 Innocent sort
- 38 God of the Quran
- 43 Hodgepodes
- 45 Dark, in poesy
- 46 Like some vowels and memories
- 47 90° from norte
- 49 On dry ground
- 51 Basic skateboard trick
- 55 Root in some speckled chips
- 57 Adjust to, as a thermostat
- 59 \_\_\_ Clan, iconic hip-hop group of the 1990s
- 61 Catches on
- 63 Painting stolen from 53-Across
- 65 Some partners in lesbian couples
- 67 Franz who composed "The Merry Widow"
- 69 Mapped out again
- 71 Deception
- 72 Shankar at Woodstock
- 73 Minnesota congresswoman Ilhan
- 74 Acme's antonym
- 76 Plunder, archaically
- 78 Online tracker
- 79 Old-fashioned trinket shop vendors
- 80 Twitch
- 83 Think aloud
- 85 Bergen's dummy Mortimer
- 89 Identifies
- 91 "Half a truth is often a \_\_\_": Benjamin Franklin
- 94 Painting stolen from 77-Across
- 96 Abandons
- 100 Places of refuge
- 102 Xerox : copy machine :: \_\_\_ : kitchen wrap
- 103 Most boring
- 104 Lines at the theater?
- 105 Corporate department
- 106 Culmination of many a "Law & Order" episode
- 107 Desensitizes
- 110 Painting stolen from 118-Across
- 112 It might be held during vacation
- 113 Comedian Johnson of "Laugh-In"
- 115 Big inits. in fuel additives
- 119 From Jan. 1 until now
- 120 Male turkey
- 121 Actress de Armas of "Knives Out"
- 122 With 9-Down, legendary Giant
- 123 A nursing one has snaps



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## GUNSTON STREET



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## FACES

# Acting out a fantasy

Harris Dickinson's loosely defined role in 'Babygirl' opposite more experienced Nicole Kidman held challenge, opportunity

By LINDSEY BAHR  
Associated Press

**H**arris Dickinson was nervous to approach Nicole Kidman.

This would not necessarily be notable under normal circumstances, but the English actor had already been cast to star opposite her in the erotic drama "Babygirl," as the intern who initiates an affair with Kidman's buttoned-up CEO. They'd had a Zoom with the writer-director Halina Reijn, who was excited by their playful banter and sure that Dickinson would hold his own. And yet when he found himself at the same event as Kidman, shyness took over. He admitted as much to Margaret Qualley, who took things into her own hands and introduced them.

"She helped me break the ice a bit," Dickinson told The Associated Press.

On set would be an entirely different story. Dickinson might not be nearly as "puckishly audacious" as his character Samuel but in the making of "Babygirl," he, Kidman and Reijn had no choice but to dive fearlessly into this exploration of sexual power dynamics, going to intimate, awkward, exhilarating and meme-able places. It's made the film, which hit stateside theaters Dec. 25, one of the year's must-sees.

"There was an unspoken thing that we adhered to," Dickinson said. "We weren't getting to know each other's personal lives. When we were working and we were the characters, we didn't veer away from the material. I never tried to attach all of the history of Nicole Kidman. Otherwise it probably would have been a bit of a mess."

His is a performance that reconfirms what many in the film world have suspected since his debut seven years ago as a Brooklyn tough questioning his sexuality in Eliza Hittman's "Beach Rats": Dickinson is one of the most exciting young talents around.

Dickinson, 28, grew up in Leytonstone, in East London — the same neck of the woods as Alfred Hitchcock. Cinema was in his life, whether it was Christopher Nolan's "Batman" films at the local multiplex or venturing into town to see the more social realist



A24/AP

Nicole Kidman, left, and Harris Dickinson have a workplace affair in "Babygirl."

films of Mike Leigh and Ken Loach.

"Working-class cinema interested me," he said. "People around me that represented my world."

Appropriately, his entry into making art started behind the camera, with a comedy web series he made as a kid, which he describes as "really bad spoofs" of films and shows of the time. But things started to click when he began acting in the local theater.

"I remember feeling invigorated by it and accepted," he said. "I felt myself for the first time and felt able to express myself in a way where I didn't feel vulnerable and I felt alive and ignited by something."

At around 17, someone suggested that he should give acting a try professionally. He hadn't even fully understood that it was a career possibility, but he started auditioning. At 20, he was cast in "Beach Rats" and, he said, just "kept going." Since then, he's gotten a wide range of opportunities in films both big, including "The King's Man," and small. He's captivated as a male model in Ruben Östlund's Cannes-winning "Triangle of Sadness," an estranged father to a 12-year-old in Charlotte Regan's "Scrapper," an actor bringing an ex-boyfriend to life in Joanna Hogg's "The Souvenir Part II," the charismatic, tragic wrestler David Von Erich in Sean Durkin's "The Iron Claw" and a soldier in Steve McQueen's "Blitz."

But "Babygirl" would present new chal-



JORDAN STRAUSS, INVISION/AP

English actor Harris Dickinson, shown Oct. 19, was cast in his first film when he was 20.

lenges and opportunities with a character who is almost impossible to define.

"He was confusing in a really interesting way. There wasn't loads of specificity to it, which I enjoyed because it was a bit of a challenge to sort of pinpoint exactly what it was that drove him and made him tick," Dickinson said. "There was a directness that unlocked a lot for me, like a fearlessness with the way he spoke, or a social unawareness in a way — like not fully realizing what he's saying is affecting someone in a certain way. But I didn't make too many rules for him."

Part of the allure of the film is the ever-shifting power dynamics between the two characters, which could change over the course of a scene.

As Reijn said, "It's a cautionary tale about

what happens when you suppress your own desires." She was especially in awe of Dickinson's ability to make everything feel improvised and the fact that he could look like a 12-year-old boy in one shot and a confident 45-year-old man in the next.

Since its premiere at the Venice Film Festival this year, the film has led to some surprisingly direct conversations with audiences spanning generations. But that, Dickinson understood, was what Reijn wanted.

"She really wanted to show the ugliness and the awkwardness of these things, of these relationships and sex," he said. "That sort of fumbly version and the performative version of it is way more interesting, to me at least, than the kind of fantasized, romanticized, sexy thing that we've seen a lot."

## Inescapable Mariah Carey holiday hit unlocks another achievement

From wire reports

Mariah Carey, the self-proclaimed "Queen of Christmas," just earned herself another gift this year in the form of two new Billboard records.

Carey's upbeat holiday pop song "All I Want for Christmas Is You" has topped the Billboard Hot 100 chart for a 17th total week and set a new streaming record, according to the music outlet.

The "Fantasy" and "Emotions" singer-songwriter surpassed her own record at No. 1 on the multimetric chart, Billboard reported Monday. The 1994 song's latest peak position gives the five-time Grammy winner her longest career lead on the chart, exceeding her previous 16-week run at No. 1 in 1995 and 1996 with her Boyz II Men duet "One Sweet Day."

"This is amazing!!!! Will never ever ever ever ever take this for granted," Carey wrote Monday on her Instagram stories, which featured Billboard's post about the longest Hot 100 reign. "Merry early Christmas!!!!"

The ubiquitous "All I Want for Christmas Is You" also led



Carey

the Hot 100 chart for a third consecutive week this holiday season, Billboard said, claiming the third-longest run in the chart's 66-year history. (At No. 1 are the 19-week runs for Shaboozey's "A Bar Song (Topsy)" this year and the 2019 record set by Lil Nas X's "Old Town Road" featuring Billy Ray Cyrus.)

Billboard also reported that "All I Want For Christmas Is You" has spent a record 21 weeks atop the Streaming Songs chart since the chart debuted in 2013 and reigns supreme with 48 million official U.S. streams earned in the week ending Dec. 19. At 20 weeks, "Old Town Road" also previously held that chart's record beginning in April 2019.

Carey's Guinness World Record-setting single hailed from her first holiday album, "Merry Christmas," which she released in 1994. It was the first holiday song she ever wrote, and it immediately shot up the charts and never went

away, returning each holiday season and "lodging in the world's collective unconscious like no Christmas song in at least half a century," according to The Los Angeles Times.

### Other news

■ **Christopher Nolan** is following his Oscar-winning "Oppenheimer" with a true epic: Homer's "The Odyssey." It will open in theaters on July 17, 2026, Universal Pictures said Monday. Details remain scarce, but the studio teased that it will be a "mythic action epic shot across the world using brand new IMAX technology." It will also be the first time that an adaptation of Homer's saga will play on IMAX film screens.

■ **Richard Perry**, a hitmaking record producer with a flair for both standards and contemporary sounds whose many successes included Carly Simon's "You're So Vain," Rod Stewart's "The Great American Songbook" series and a Ringo Starr album featuring all four Beatles, died Tuesday in Los Angeles after suffering cardiac arrest. He was 82.

# AMERICAN ROUNDUP

## Dolphins off coast test positive for fentanyl

**TX** DALLAS — Fentanyl has ravaged communities, but effects of the drug may extend even beyond humans.

Researchers at Texas A&M-Corpus Christi found traces of human pharmaceuticals, including fentanyl, in dolphins swimming in the Gulf of Mexico. Also detected were a muscle relaxer and an anti-anxiety drug.

The study, which was recently published in the journal *iScience*, raises concerns about pharmaceutical contamination, public health and the safety of wildlife and waterways. The analysis is the first to confirm the presence of these drugs in live, free-swimming marine mammals, and findings have led to a flurry of headlines in national outlets and science publications.

To begin, researchers collected samples from the blubber of 89 bottlenose dolphins. Most of the samples were taken from live dolphins; six came from dolphins found dead.

Fentanyl was present in 24 of the dolphins, including all six of the dead animals. Researchers cannot say whether fentanyl killed the dolphins, but they said it might have contributed.

## Governor injured when thrown from horse

**NE** OMAHA — Nebraska Gov. Jim Pillen was in intensive care at an Omaha hospital after undergoing a medical procedure to treat an injured spleen suffered when he was bucked off a horse.

The governor was in stable condition, with doctors saying his prognosis was positive despite seven rib fractures, a partially collapsed lung, a minor fracture in one of his vertebrae and a minor kidney injury that is expected to heal on its own.

Pillen, a 68-year-old first-term Republican, was with his family when he was thrown off a new horse and injured, according to the governor's office.

## Boy injured in holiday drone show accident

**FL** ORLANDO — The Federal Aviation Administration said that it has launched an investigation into why several drones collided and fell from the sky during a holiday show over the weekend in downtown Orlando, injuring a 7-year-old boy who required emergency open-heart surgery.

The drones from Sky Elements Drone Shows fell into a crowd of thousands of people watching the show at the city's Lake Eola Park on Saturday night. The show was permitted through the FAA.

Adriana Edgerton told Orlando television station WESH that her son, Alezander, required surgery



JULIA DEMAREE NIKHINSON/AP

## He sees you when you're surfing

A lifeguard wears a Santa hat while watching a surfer on Christmas Eve in Palm Beach, Fla.

after being hit in the chest with a drone.

"The blade cut his mouth, but there's an actual imprint of the drone on his chest," Edgerton said.

## Dead body found in wheel well of plane

**HI** KAHULUI — Maui police are investigating the discovery of a dead body in the wheel well of a United Airlines plane after it landed in Maui, the airline and police department said in statements on Wednesday.

The body was found in the wheel well of one of the main landing gears on Flight 202, which arrived at Kahului Airport from Chicago on Tuesday, United said in an emailed statement. The airline said the wheel well of the Boeing 787-10 was only accessible from the outside of the aircraft, and that it was unclear how or when the person accessed it.

In an emailed statement, the Maui Police Department said it was "actively investigating" the discovery of the dead body.

## Third entangled whale spotted off East Coast

**NC** RALEIGH — A third endangered whale has been spotted entangled in fishing gear off the East Coast, marking an alarming end to the year for a species threatened with extinction.

The whales are North Atlantic right whales, which number fewer than 400 and are vulnerable to ship collisions and entanglement in gear.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said an aerial survey found an entangled whale about 60 miles east of the Outer Banks of North Carolina on Dec. 16.

Another aerial survey found two entangled right whales off Nantucket, Mass., just days earlier, NOAA officials said. Like one of the whales spotted off Nantucket, the whale spotted off North Carolina has suffered a serious injury and is likely to die as a result of the entanglement, NOAA said.

## Ex-cop convicted of lying about leaking info

**DC** WASHINGTON — A retired police officer was convicted Monday of lying to authorities about leaking confidential information to the leader of the Proud Boys extremist group.

U.S. District Judge Amy Berman Jackson convicted former Metropolitan Police Department Lt. Shane Lamond of obstructing justice and making false statements after a trial without a jury.

Lamond was charged with leaking information to then-Proud Boys national chairman Enrique Tarrío, who was under investigation in the burning of a Black Lives Matter banner. Lamond testified at his bench trial that he never pro-

vided Tarrío with sensitive police information.

Tarrío, who testified as a witness for Lamond's defense, said he did not confess to Lamond about burning the banner and did not receive any confidential information from him.

But the judge did not find either man's testimony to be credible. Jackson said the evidence indicated that Lamond was not using Tarrío as a source after the banner burning.

## Officials charged with smoking pot near school

**MI** DETROIT — The Fitzgerald Public Schools superintendent and food services director were allegedly smoking marijuana in a car near Fitzgerald High School and both were arrested for driving under the influence and processing marijuana on school grounds, according to Macomb County prosecutors.

Superintendent Hollie Stange, 38, and Food Services Director Amanda Carroll, 38, both allegedly were in Carroll's vehicle smoking marijuana Friday at a plaza in Warren, according to a news release from the Macomb County Prosecutor's Office.

The women left in separate vehicles and were individually stopped by Warren police. Stange is charged with possession of marijuana on school grounds, possession of a weapon in a weapon-free zone, and driving while intoxicat-

ed. Carroll is charged with possession of marijuana on school grounds, a second-offense driving while intoxicated, and driving while intoxicated with an occupant under 16 years old.

## Kilauea volcano is erupting again

**HI** HAWAII VOLCANOES NATIONAL PARK — One of the world's most active volcanoes spewed lava into the air for a second straight day on Tuesday.

The eruption of Kilauea volcano on Hawaii's Big Island has stayed within the mountain's summit caldera inside Hawaii Volcanoes National Park. No homes were threatened.

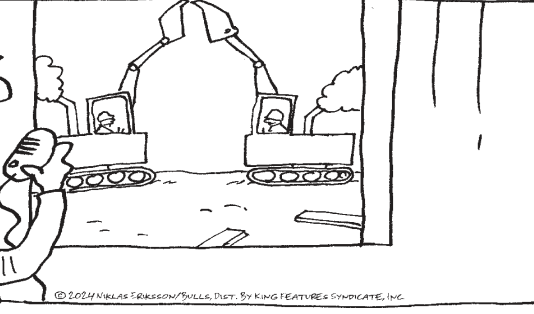
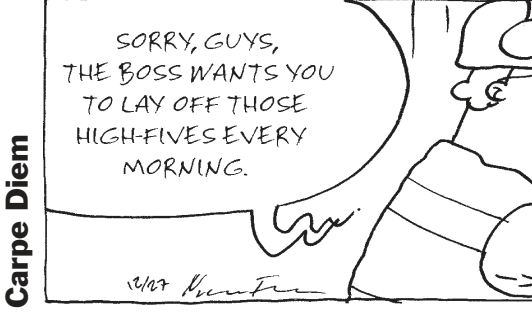
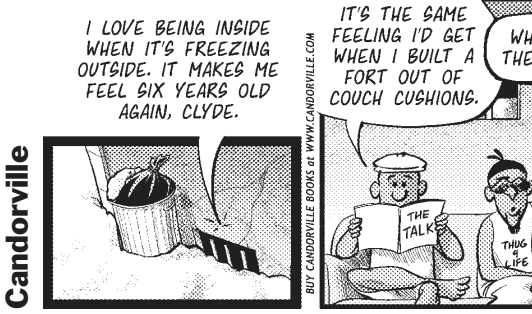
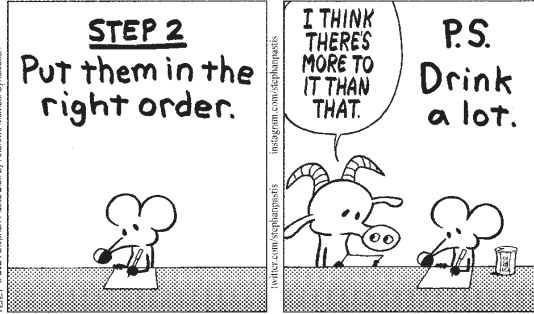
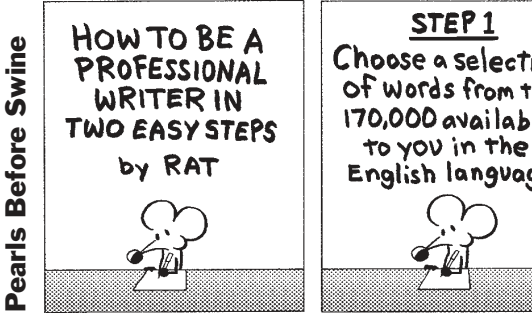
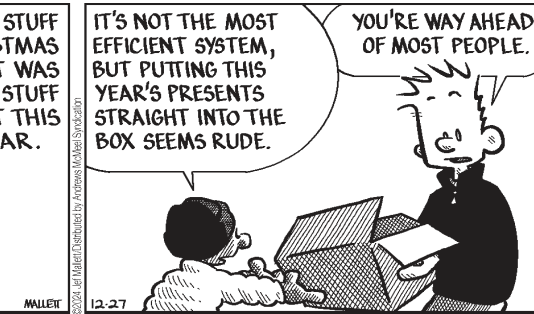
Molten rock began shooting from the volcano before dawn on Monday when fissures opened in the caldera floor and propelled lava 295 feet into the air. The red liquid formed tall fountains and then spread across 650 acres. The Hawaiian Volcano Observatory estimated the lava was about 1 yard thick.

Scientists expect activity to fluctuate in the coming days. The lava paused Monday afternoon but fountains reemerged Tuesday morning. The eruption occurred in an area that's been closed to the public since 2007 due to hazards including crater wall instability and rockfalls.

Bizarro



Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

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

ACROSS

- 1 Patch target
- 4 Karate blow
- 8 Sacred chests
- 12 Flying saucer
- 13 River to the Rhine
- 14 Cowboy's footwear
- 15 Pastry store
- 17 — fide (genuine)
- 18 Prior nights
- 19 Up to now
- 20 Sugar units
- 22 Dalmatian feature
- 24 "East of Eden" son
- 25 Workers' jargon
- 29 Australian state (Abbr.)
- 30 Hilton heiress
- 31 Maui souvenir
- 32 Discuss
- 34 Latin 101 word
- 35 Fresh
- 36 Stage
- 37 Celtic priest
- 40 Reddish horse
- 41 Barbecue order
- 42 Cook the pie too long
- 46 Suit to —
- 47 Departed
- 48 Bill's partner
- 49 "Tootsie" actress Teri
- 50 Tennis barriers
- 51 Bro's kin

DOWN

- 1 Barbecue coating
- 2 "— tree falls ..."
- 3 Hawaiian raw fish dish
- 4 Attorney's load
- 5 Scoffing laughs
- 6 Spanish gold
- 7 Zing
- 8 "— Elementary" (TV sitcom)
- 9 Santa's runway
- 10 Coffee-growing area of Hawaii
- 11 Luminary
- 16 Squared
- 19 Soaks (up)
- 20 Quitter's word
- 21 Celestial bear
- 22 Mouselike mammal

- 23 Fruit in a French tart
- 25 Goalie's goal
- 26 Annual fact books
- 27 Meadows
- 28 Toy with a tail
- 30 Frogs' hangout
- 33 Type of roll
- 34 Melville's captain
- 36 Dessert wines
- 37 Bummer
- 38 Oscar winner Moreno
- 39 Taxi alternative
- 40 Flat fee?
- 42 Have
- 43 Churchill gesture
- 44 Japanese carp
- 45 Daybreak goddess

Answer to Previous Puzzle

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

12-27

CRYPTOQUIP

VN UHAV SWVOHWU BHSHS ZQ  
 CZZHBS NQWACT HOHBZU, SQ  
 DQY ZPVBG ZPHD EQYTS EHCW  
 ZWYRG-UHSQU?

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHEN BABY BIRDS IN A NEST GET ESPECIALLY THIRSTY, WHAT DOES THEIR MOTHER BRING THEM? PEEPSI.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: S equals D

Bizarro



Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

Grid for Eugene Sheffer Crossword with numbers 1-56 indicating starting positions for across and down clues.

ACROSS

- 1 Nitwit
5 Urban fleet
9 Efron of "Neighbors"
12 Mideast gulf
13 Cruising
14 "Evil Woman" band
15 Monthly payment
16 Endure
17 Bldg. divisions
18 "Candy is dandy" poet
19 Likely
20 Capricorn
21 Brit. record label
23 Sound of surprise
25 Curtain fabric
28 Dudes
32 "War and Peace" director
33 Skilled
34 Summary
36 Omitted phonet-ically
37 Mauna — letters
39 Binges
42 Blue
44 Aware of
48 Swiss canton
49 Mystique
50 Bivouac

- 51 Two, in Acapulco
52 Luminary
53 Swiss-born painter Paul
54 Tolkien creature
55 Await approval
56 Bunker fill

- 22 Madame Curie
24 Gets better
25 Super Bowl VIP
26 Vacuum's lack
27 HST follower
29 Guided
30 Gorilla
31 Norm (Abbr.)

DOWN

- 1 Mend a sock
2 Classic theaters
3 Lairs
4 Bar order
5 Chunnel city
6 Now, in memos
7 Compilation album type
8 Perched
9 Nada
10 — mater
11 Price
20 Fairy tale girl

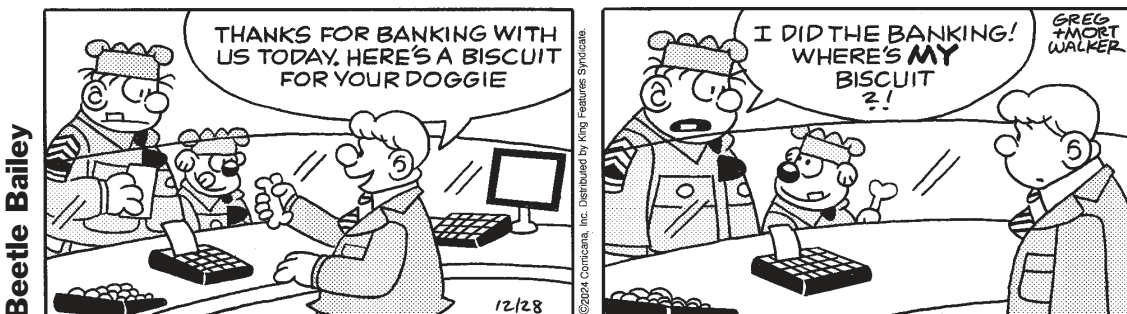
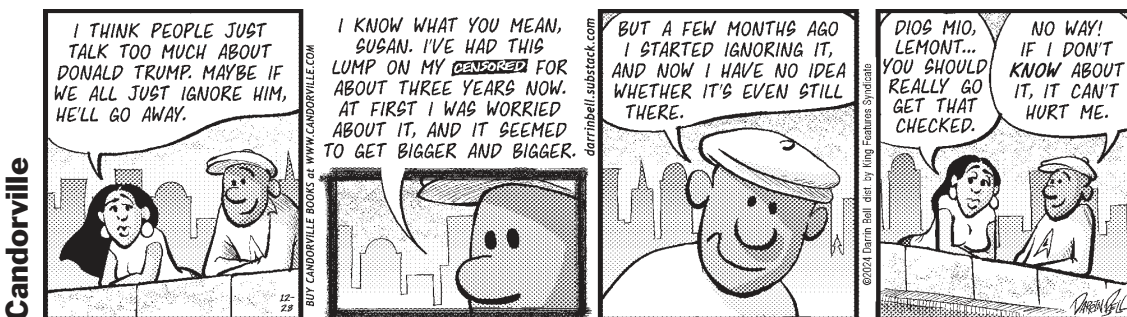
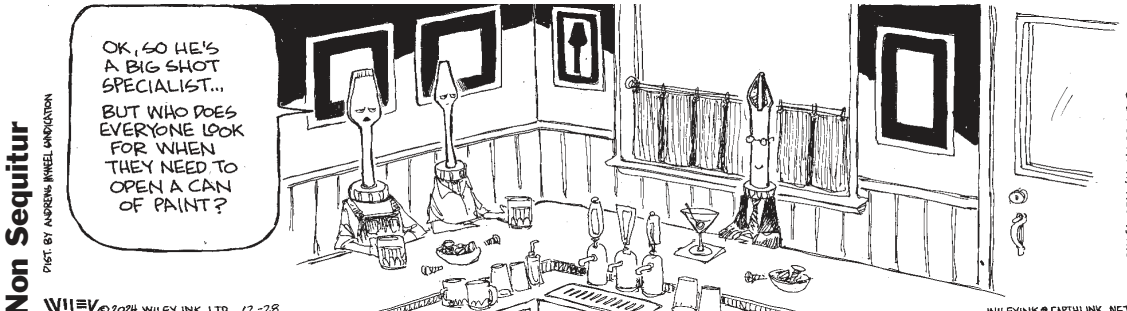
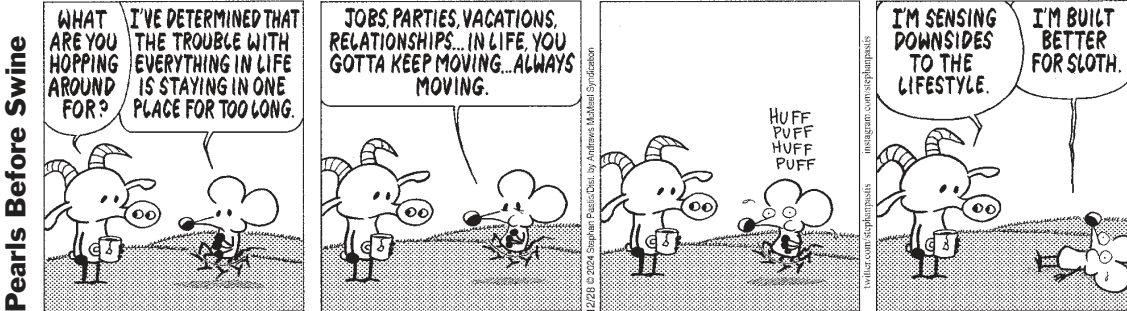
Answer to Previous Puzzle

Completed crossword puzzle grid with words filled in.

12-28

CRYPTOQUIP

GQEKZ OJQPJ FMNGQES UJS
PXMSSMZ NG GNETZ EQTS FJQE
RNCXJIS XCR NFMXJ OQCGMSV:
UXET-1KSCUXMQSZ.
Yesterday's Cryptoquip: IF SEMI DRIVERS NEEDED TO ATTEND FORMAL EVENTS, DO YOU THINK THEY WOULD WEAR TRUCK-SEDOS?
Today's Cryptoquip Clue: J equals H



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Jacqueline Smith

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## OPINION

## Taking the profit motive out of health insurance

BY LEANA S. WEN

Special to The Washington Post

Critics of the U.S. health care system, attempting to capitalize on the fury Americans have expressed toward insurance companies since the targeted killing this month of UnitedHealthcare CEO Brian Thompson, have renewed calls to rethink how the United States pays for care. Some, for example, have returned to the idea of single-payer health care, which would eliminate the need for private insurance.

Such a complete overhaul is not realistic for the foreseeable future. But one idea is worth revisiting: creating models that offer alternatives to for-profit insurers.

This is not a new idea. The original version of the 2010 Affordable Care Act contained a public option — a health plan run by the government — to compete with private insurers. Lobbyists succeeded in getting the provision nixed, though Democrats managed to secure a last-minute compromise: a new nonprofit health insurance entity, called a Consumer Operated and Oriented Plan, or co-op.

Instead of reaping profits for shareholders, co-ops reinvest profits to offer more services and lower premiums. This can make them more attractive to consumers and put pressure on traditional insurers to improve their practices. Accountability is built in, as members elect their own board of directors.

Evergreen Health was one such co-op. The brainchild of Peter Beilenson, a physician and one of my predecessors as Baltimore's health commissioner, Evergreen was intended to be a national model of patient-centered care. Beilenson hired clinicians, paid them a fixed salary regardless of how many patients they saw and opened four health centers where patients could have all their needs tended to in one visit. When they arrived, a

health coach would counsel them on nutrition and mental health before a primary-care physician or nurse practitioner would treat them. If they needed further care, a specialist would come to the clinic to see them.

The idea was that such a “one-stop shop” prioritizing prevention would help patients stay healthier and avoid costly services down the line. Those cost savings would translate to revenue to enable more Evergreen clinics to open across Maryland.

Unfortunately, Beilenson's grand vision never became reality. In 2017, five years after Evergreen started enrolling patients, it was forced to cease operations. And it's not alone: Of the 23 co-ops that came out of the ACA, only three remain in operation. Combined, they serve just 140,000 patients.

Why did co-ops struggle so much? Start with money. The ACA was supposed to provide \$10 billion in grants to help co-ops get off the ground in every state, but that was changed to \$2.4 billion in loans with a tight repayment schedule.

Onerous rules were also a major hurdle. The co-ops were prohibited from using government funding for marketing, a challenge for startups with no name recognition. They also couldn't enlist large businesses as customers, meaning they had to limit outreach to individual buyers and small-business owners.

“Since no one knew who we were, they didn't sign up with us,” Beilenson said. He told me that in their first year, only 44 people enrolled.

Evergreen gained more members as he and his team pivoted to focus on small businesses. Word of mouth helped, too. “A lot of people signed up with us because they believed in the co-op model,” he said. He began to see positive results; for example, he told me, their diabetic patients were 21% less like-

ly to be hospitalized than patients on traditional insurance.

But Evergreen couldn't generate enough revenue to pay back the \$65 million it owed in government loans. Plus, ACA regulations intended to stabilize the insurance market worked against the co-op. The law requires insurers with lower-risk enrollees to pay money to competitors with higher-risk ones, to ensure that they are competing with their plans, not their patients. Because Evergreen's enrollees were deemed healthier than those of its main competitor, it was on the hook to pay CareFirst Blue Cross Blue Shield, a massive, well-established company, nearly 30% of its revenue.

“We were basically running around with one hand tied behind our back and another leg tied to the other leg,” Beilenson said. “There was just no chance of succeeding.”

So what now? Beilenson, though he has long supported a single-payer system, doesn't believe abolishing insurance companies is realistic. But he is optimistic that there could be renewed energy to reengage around the public option — or to make another attempt at co-ops, though without all the obstacles that made them near-impossible to operate the first time around.

I, too, hope the groundswell of consumer fury will prompt lawmakers to reform the insurance industry. They should heed the lessons from the ACA co-ops and give innovators the tools to succeed rather than doom them to fail from the outset, leaving Americans with the same frustrating, unjust and unhealthy system.

Leana S. Wen, a Washington Post contributing columnist who writes the newsletter The Checkup with Dr. Wen, is an emergency physician, clinical associate professor at George Washington University and author of “Lifelines: A Doctor's Journey in the Fight for Public Health.” Previously, she served as Baltimore's health commissioner.

## Republicans on Hill have a new headache: Musk

BY RAMESH PONNURU

Special to The Washington Post

Democrats spent much of the presidential campaign warning that a second Donald Trump presidency would move methodically and remorselessly toward sinister goals: persecuting immigrants, enriching billionaires, ending democracy, imposing theocracy. This time, they said, he and his people would already know how to use the powers of his office. His party would put up less, maybe no, resistance. He now has the backing of the world's richest man. The fact that Trump won a plurality of the popular vote and enjoys his best polling ever has deepened progressive despair.

Last week's fight over the continuing resolution to keep the federal government funded should calm some of these fears. It won't change progressive minds about Republicans' ambitions. But it should suggest that many of the limits on Republican effectiveness that were in place during Trump's first term remain — and new ones have arisen.

Trump has indisputable political talents, but he remains impulsive, manipulable and jealous of attention. These traits contributed to his last-minute intervention against the bipartisan funding deal that House Speaker Mike Johnson had negotiated — an intervention that appears to have been prompted by Elon Musk's frenzy of tweets opposing the deal.

Trump's decision to insist that the legislation include a lifting of the debt ceiling also suggests that he still has little interest in figuring out how to build a legislative coalition. He was effectively demanding that Republicans lift the debt ceiling on a party-line vote. He should have known that they would never accede. Now, seeing his demand so widely ignored has moved him a little closer to lame-duck status. Congressional Republicans may be learning that if enough of them balk at a Trump order — 38 of them voted down the funding bill he endorsed — he cannot credibly threaten all of them.

The president-elect also kneecapped Johnson by telegraphing his disappointment with the way the speaker handled the continuing resolution. This was unfair, since Trump hadn't articulated his key priorities, such as raising the debt limit, or done anything else to make them achievable. It was also counterproductive. By blaming Johnson for the embarrassing zigzags of the spending bill, Trump avoids taking any responsibility himself. But he has increased the chances that House Republicans will be consumed by a fight over their leadership rather than enacting his administration's agenda.

By now, though, Republicans are used to the drawbacks of working with Trump. Their new difficulty is Musk. During Trump's first term, Republicans in Congress and the executive branch had to anticipate what would draw the president's wrath.

Now they will have to wonder, as well, what will bring them negative attention from Musk. They can't count on either man to telegraph his views well ahead of time or privately; they will just have to keep a social media tab open. The two men also have varying views and priorities, with Musk more concerned about controlling federal spending than Trump has ever shown himself to be. (Even Musk, though, did not stir himself against the bipartisan bill to spend nearly \$200 billion more on Social Security — which passed Congress at the same time as the government-funding deal.)

Republicans can't be sure, either, how long Trump and Musk will stay allied. Musk isn't like Steve Bannon, whom Trump could put into political exile and then summon back. He has fame, a fan base, a means of communication and resources of his own. This would be Trump's messiest divorce yet.

Republicans can take comfort from the fact that their pointless budget fight won't have much direct political impact: Voters are unlikely to remember this episode by the midterm elections of November 2026, especially since Congress ultimately avoided a shutdown. What should concern them — and buoy Democrats — is that they seem very likely to produce sequels.

Ramesh Ponnuru, a contributing columnist for The Washington Post, is the editor of National Review and a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute.

# SCOREBOARD

## DEALS

### Wednesday's transactions

**FOOTBALL**  
National Football League

**CINCINNATI BENGALS** — Signed QB Logan Woodside to the practice squad.  
**DETROIT LIONS** — Signed DT Chris Smith to the practice squad.  
**INDIANAPOLIS COLTS** — Signed G Antonio Mafi to the practice squad.  
**MIAMI DOLPHINS** — Declined to activate LB Bradley Chubb and LS Blake Ferguson from injured reserve.  
**NEW ORLEANS SAINTS** — Declined to activate WR Bub Means.  
**SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS** — Signed OT Charlie Heck of the Cardinals' practice squad. Placed OT Jaylon Moor on injured reserve.  
**TENNESSE TITANS** — Claimed LB David Long off waivers from Detroit. Placed LB Kenneth Murry on injured reserve.

### Tuesday's transactions

**BASEBALL**  
American League

**MINNESOTA TWINS** — Acquired UTL Mickey Gasper from the Boston Red Sox in exchange for LHP Jovani Moran.

**FOOTBALL**  
National Football League

**ARIZONA CARDINALS** — Signed OL Jackson Barton to the active roster from the practice squad. Signed LB Benton Whitley to the active roster. Placed OL Paris Johnson Jr. and Jonah Williams on injured reserve. Signed DB Darren Hall to the practice squad.

**ATLANTA FALCONS** — Signed LB Rashan Evans to the practice squad. Signed DT Kyler Baugh to the active roster.  
**BALTIMORE RAVENS** — Signed WR Anthony Miller from the practice squad.  
**BUFFALO BILLS** — Signed LB Nicholas Morrow to the active roster. Placed LB Baylon Spector on injured reserve.  
**CAROLINA PANTHERS** — Signed LB Chandler Wooten to the active roster.  
**CHICAGO BEARS** — Signed DB Adrian Colbert to the active roster.  
**CINCINNATI BENGALS** — Signed DL Domenico Davis and LB Craig Young to the practice squad. Signed QB Logan Woodside to the practice squad.  
**CLEVELAND BROWNS** — Signed K Andre Szmyt to the practice squad. Released DL T.Y. McGill from the practice squad.  
**DALLAS COWBOYS** — Designated T Asim Richards to return from injured reserve.  
**DENVER BRONCOS** — Released DB Levi Wallace. Designated RB Tyler Badie to return from injured reserve. Signed RB Blake Watson to the active roster.  
**DETROIT LIONS** — Waived LB David Long. Signed WR Maurice Alexander to the practice squad.

**GREEN BAY PACKERS** — Signed RB Deshaun Fenwick to the practice squad. Placed RB Ellis Merrilweather on the practice squad injured list.  
**HOUSTON TEXANS** — Placed WR Tank Dell and DB Jimmie Ward on injured reserve.  
**INDIANAPOLIS COLTS** — Signed OL Mark Glowinski to the active roster from the practice squad.  
**JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS** — Signed LB Joe Giles-Harris to the active roster from the practice squad.  
**KANSAS CITY CHIEFS** — Activated TE Peyton Hendershot from injured reserve.  
**MIAMI DOLPHINS** — Signed DL Neil Farrell to the practice squad. Released TE Hayden Rucci from the practice squad.  
**MINNESOTA VIKINGS** — Designated LB Ivan Pace Jr. to return from injured reserve. Signed DB Ambry Thomas to the practice squad.  
**NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS** — Designated LB Curtis Jacobs to return from injured reserve.  
**NEW YORK GIANTS** — Activated LB Dyon-tae Johnson from injured reserve. Waived DT Casey Rogers. Designated DT Armon Watts to return from injured reserve.  
**NEW YORK JETS** — Signed K Greg Joseph to the practice squad. Placed OL Olu Fashtanu on injured reserve. Signed S Jarius Monroe to the active roster from the practice squad. Signed DL Kamron Cline to the practice squad. Released TE Neal Johnson from the practice squad.

**PHILADELPHIA EAGLES** — Released TE Kevin Foelsch.  
**SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS** — Signed OL Charlie Heck to the active roster.  
**TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS** — Designated DB Jordan Whitehead to return from injured reserve.  
**TENNESSEE TITANS** — Signed LB Raekwon McMillan to the practice squad.

**HOCKEY**  
National Hockey League

**LOS ANGELES KINGS** — Reassigned LW Andre Lee to Ontario (AHL).  
**MINNESOTA WILD** — Reassigned C Brendan Gaunce to Iowa (AHL). Loaned C Devin Shore to Iowa.  
**WASHINGTON CAPITALS** — Reassigned C Henrik Rybinski to Hershey (AHL).

## AP SPORTLIGHT

### Dec. 27

**1974** — Ohio State junior running back Archie Griffin wins the Heisman Trophy.  
**1981** — Edmonton Oiler Wayne Gretzky becomes fastest NHLer to get 100 points in a season (his 38th game), with 4 goals and an assist in 10-3 win over the visiting Los Angeles Kings.  
**1987** — Steve Largent of the Seattle Seahawks becomes the NFL's all-time reception leader in the Seahawks' 41-20 loss to Kansas City. Largent's six catches gives him 752, surpassing the 750 by San Diego's Charlie Joiner.

## COLLEGE FOOTBALL

### FCS playoffs

**Championship**  
Monday, Jan. 6  
Montana St. vs. North Dakota St.

### NCAA Division II playoffs

**Championship**  
Saturday, Dec. 21  
Ferris St. 49, Valdosta St. 14

### NCAA Division III playoffs

**Championship**  
Sunday, Jan. 5  
North Central (Ill.) vs. Mount Union

### Bowl game

**Dec. 14**  
**Celebration Bowl**  
Jackson St. 28, South Carolina St. 7  
**IS4S Salute to Veterans Bowl**  
South Alabama 30, W. Michigan 23

**Dec. 17**  
**Frisco Bowl**  
Memphis 42, West Virginia 37

**Dec. 18**  
**Boca Raton Bowl**  
James Madison 27, W. Kentucky 17

**Dec. 19**  
**LA Bowl**  
UNLV 24, California 13

**Dec. 19**  
**New Orleans Bowl**  
Sam Houston 31, Georgia Southern 26

**Dec. 20**  
**Cure Bowl**  
Ohio 30, Jacksonville St. 27

**Dec. 20**  
**Gasparilla Bowl**  
Florida 33, Tulane 8

**Dec. 20**  
**College Football Playoff First Round**  
No. 7 Notre Dame 27, No. 10 Indiana 17

**Dec. 21**  
No. 6 Penn St. 38, No. 11 SMU 10  
No. 5 Texas 38, No. 12 Clemson 24  
No. 8 Ohio St. 42, No. 9 Tennessee 17

**Dec. 23**  
**Myrtle Beach Bowl**  
UTSA 44, Coastal Carolina 15

**Dec. 23**  
**Potato Bowl**  
N. Illinois 28, Fresno St. 20 2OT

**Dec. 24**  
**Hawai'i Bowl**  
South Florida 41, San Jose St. 39, 50T

**Dec. 26**  
**GameAbove Sports Bowl**  
Pitt vs. Toledo

**Dec. 27**  
**Rate Bowl**  
Kansas State vs. Rutgers

**Dec. 27**  
**Las Vegas Bowl**  
Arkansas State vs. Bowling Green

**Dec. 27**  
**Liberty Bowl**  
Texas Tech vs. Arkansas

**Dec. 28**  
**Holiday Bowl**  
Syracuse vs. Washington State

**Dec. 28**  
**Armed Forces Bowl**  
Oklahoma vs. Navy

**Dec. 28**  
**Birmingham Bowl**  
Georgia Tech vs. Vanderbilt

**Dec. 28**  
**Fenway Bowl**  
North Carolina vs. UConn

**Dec. 28**  
**Pinstripe Bowl**  
Boston College vs. Nebraska

**Dec. 29**  
**Independence Bowl**  
TCU vs. Louisiana

**Dec. 30**  
**Music City Bowl**  
Miami vs. Iowa State

**Dec. 31**  
**Arizona Bowl**  
Colorado State vs. Miami (Ohio)

**Dec. 31**  
**Military Bowl**  
NC State vs. ECU

**Dec. 31**  
**Alamo Bowl**  
BYU vs. Colorado

**Dec. 31**  
**ReliaQuest Bowl**  
Army vs. Louisiana Tech

**Dec. 31**  
**Sun Bowl**  
Missouri vs. Iowa

**Dec. 31**  
**Citrus Bowl**  
Michigan vs. Alabama

**Dec. 31**  
**Texas Bowl**  
Louisville vs. Washington

**Dec. 31**  
**Rose Bowl**  
Illinois vs. South Carolina

**Dec. 31**  
**Peach Bowl**  
Baylor vs. LSU

**Dec. 31**  
**Sugar Bowl**  
College Football Playoff Quarterfinals

**Dec. 31**  
**Fiesta Bowl**  
Penn St. vs. Boise St.

**Dec. 31**  
**Rose Bowl**  
Ohio St. vs. Oregon

**Dec. 31**  
**Peach Bowl**  
Texas vs. Arizona State

**Dec. 31**  
**Sugar Bowl**  
Notre Dame vs. Georgia

## COLLEGE BASKETBALL

### AP Men's Top 25

The top 25 teams in The Associated Press' college basketball poll, with first-place votes in parentheses, and total points based on 25 points for a first-place vote through one point for a 25th-place vote and previous ranking.

	Record	Pts	Prv
1. Tennessee (41)	11-0	1528	1
2. Auburn (21)	11-1	1505	2
3. Iowa St.	10-1	1415	3
4. Duke	10-2	1344	5
5. Alabama	10-2	1258	6
6. Florida	12-0	1239	7
7. Kansas	9-2	1097	8
8. Marquette	11-2	1038	9
9. Oregon	11-1	970	10
10. Kentucky	10-2	959	4
11. UConn	10-3	903	11
12. Oklahoma	12-0	850	14
13. Texas A&M	10-2	811	12
14. Gonzaga	9-3	757	13
15. Houston	8-3	615	15
16. Mississippi	11-1	506	17
17. Cincinnati	10-1	494	19
18. Michigan St.	10-2	426	20
19. Mississippi St.	11-1	423	-
20. San Diego St.	8-2	319	23
21. Purdue	8-4	270	16
22. UCLA	10-2	246	18
23. Arkansas	10-2	158	-
24. Illinois	8-3	135	-
25. Baylor	7-3	123	-

**Others receiving votes:** Maryland 119, Dayton 108, Drake 91, St. John's 90, Memphis 65, Michigan 50, Georgia 45, Pittsburgh 27, West Virginia 26, Missouri 25, Ohio St. 23, North Carolina 20, Clemson 18, Arizona St 13, Utah St. 9, Wisconsin 9, Indiana 8, Texas Tech 8, St. Bonaventure 4, Penn St. 3.

### Men's Top 25 schedule

**Friday's game**  
No. 25 Baylor (7-3) vs. Arlington Baptist (0-1)

**Saturday's games**  
No. 13 Texas A&M (10-2) vs. Abilene Christian (8-5)  
No. 14 Gonzaga (9-3) vs. No. 22 UCLA (10-2) at Inglewood, Calif.

No. 16 Mississippi (11-1) at Memphis (9-3)  
No. 20 San Diego St. (8-2) vs. Utah St. (11-1)

**Sunday's games**  
No. 5 Alabama (10-2) vs. S. Dakota St. (9-5)

No. 6 Florida (12-0) vs. Stetson (2-10)  
No. 9 Oregon (11-1) vs. Weber St. (6-7)  
No. 12 Oklahoma (12-0) vs. Prairie View (1-11)

No. 21 Purdue (8-4) vs. Toledo (6-5)  
No. 24 Illinois (8-3) vs. Chicago St. (0-14)

### AP Women's Top 25

The top 25 teams in The Associated Press' women's college basketball poll, with first-place votes in parentheses, and total points based on 25 points for a first-place vote through one point for a 25th-place vote and previous ranking.

	Record	Pts	Prv
1. UCLA (30)	12-0	798	1
2. South Carolina (1)	11-1	764	2
3. Notre Dame (1)	10-2	727	3
4. Southern Cal	11-1	688	7
5. Texas	12-1	641	6
6. LSU	14-0	636	5
7. UConn	10-2	611	4
8. Maryland	11-0	602	8
9. Oklahoma	11-1	535	10
10. Ohio St.	12-0	505	11
11. TCU	12-1	478	12
12. Kansas St	13-1	457	13
13. Georgia Tech	13-0	382	17
14. Duke	10-3	368	9
15. Tennessee	11-0	323	18
16. Kentucky	10-1	322	16
17. North Carolina	12-2	288	19
18. West Virginia	10-2	224	14
19. Michigan St.	11-1	203	15
20. Alabama	12-1	165	-
21. California	13-1	153	24
22. NC State	9-3	147	21
23. Michigan	10-2	122	20
24. Iowa	10-2	114	22
25. Mississippi	8-3	64	25

**Others receiving votes:** Nebraska 26, Vanderbilt 19, Utah 18, Illinois 8, Oklahoma St. 7, Harvard 3, Baylor 1, Florida St. 1.

### Women's Top 25 schedule

**Saturday's game**  
No. 16 Kentucky (10-1) vs. W. Kentucky (9-2)

## PRO BASKETBALL

### NBA

**Eastern Conference Atlantic Division**

	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	22	8	.733	—
New York	20	10	.667	2
Philadelphia	11	17	.393	10
Brooklyn	11	18	.379	10½
Toronto	7	23	.233	15

**Southeast Division**

	W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	19	12	.613	—
Miami	14	13	.519	3
Atlanta	15	15	.500	3½
Charlotte	7	22	.241	11
Washington	4	23	.148	13

**Central Division**

	W	L	Pct	GB
Cleveland	26	4	.867	—
Milwaukee	16	12	.571	9
Indiana	15	15	.500	11
Chicago	13	17	.433	13
Detroit	13	17	.433	13

**Western Conference Southwest Division**

	W	L	Pct	GB
Houston	20	9	.690	—
Memphis	20	10	.667	½
Dallas	19	11	.633	1½
San Antonio	15	15	.500	5½
New Orleans	5	25	.167	15½

**Northwest Division**

	W	L	Pct	GB
Oklahoma City	23	5	.821	—
Denver	16	12	.571	7
Minnesota	15	14	.517	8½
Portland	9	20	.310	14½
Utah	7	21	.250	16

**Pacific Division**

	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Lakers	17	13	.567	—
L.A. Clippers	17	13	.567	—
Phoenix	15	14	.517	1½
Golden State	15	14	.517	1½
Sacramento	13	17	.433	4

**Monday's games**  
Houston 114, Charlotte 101  
Cleveland 124, Utah 113  
Philadelphia 111, San Antonio 106  
Orlando 108, Boston 104  
Miami 110, Brooklyn 95  
Atlanta 117, Minnesota 104  
New York 139, Toronto 125  
Milwaukee 112, Chicago 91  
Oklahoma City 123, Washington 105  
L.A. Clippers 114, Memphis 110  
Dallas 132, Portland 108  
Denver 117, Phoenix 90  
Indiana 111, Golden State 105  
Detroit 117, L.A. Lakers 114

**Tuesday's games**  
No games scheduled.

**Wednesday's games**  
New York 117, San Antonio 114  
Minnesota 105, Dallas 99  
Philadelphia 118, Boston 114  
L.A. Lakers 115, Golden State 113  
Phoenix 110, Denver 100

**Thursday's games**  
Charlotte at Washington  
Miami at Orlando  
Oklahoma City at Indiana  
Chicago at Atlanta  
Brooklyn at Milwaukee  
Houston at New Orleans  
Toronto at Memphis  
Detroit at Sacramento  
Utah at Portland

**Friday's games**  
New York at Orlando  
Indiana at Boston  
San Antonio at Brooklyn  
Memphis at New Orleans  
Minnesota at Houston  
Cleveland at Denver  
Dallas at Phoenix  
Golden State at L.A. Clippers

**Saturday's games**  
Miami at Atlanta  
Oklahoma City at Charlotte  
New York at Washington  
Milwaukee at Chicago  
Phoenix at Golden State  
Detroit at Denver  
Philadelphia at Utah  
Dallas at Portland  
Sacramento at L.A. Lakers

**Sunday's games**  
Brooklyn at Orlando  
Indiana at Boston  
Atlanta at Toronto  
Miami at Houston  
Memphis at Oklahoma City  
San Antonio at Minnesota

## PRO HOCKEY

### NHL

**Eastern Conference Atlantic Division**

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Florida	36	22	12	2	46	126	112
Toronto	35	21	12	2	44	108	98
Boston	36	19	13	4	42	95	109
Tampa Bay	32	19	11	2	40	126	90
Ottawa	34	18	14	2	38	105	98
Montreal	34	14	17	3	31	101	123
Detroit	34	13	17	4	30	88	111
Buffalo	35	12	19	4	28	104	120

**Metropolitan Division**

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
New Jersey	37	23	11	3	49	124	91
Washington	34	23	9	2	48	125	89
Carolina	34	21	12	1	43	118	96
Pittsburgh	36	16	15	5	37	112	133
Columbus	35	14	15	6	34	117	127
Philadelphia	35	15	16	4	34	108	130
N.Y. Rangers	34	16	17	1	33	96	102
N.Y. Islanders	35	13	15	7	33	93	113

**Western Conference Central Division**

NFL

# Chiefs rout Steelers, clinch top seed

BY WILL GRAVES  
Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Andy Reid donned a Santa Claus suit in a giddy Kansas City Chiefs locker room on Christmas Day, then handed his team a present it increasingly looks like it deserves: home-field advantage throughout the AFC playoffs.

How Reid managed to slide into the costume so quickly after Kansas City's clinical 29-10 victory over the reeling Pittsburgh Steelers to lock up the top seed in the AFC for the fourth time in seven years is a mystery (though he hinted there's an elf involved).

How Reid's team manages to pull away from the pack year after year is not.

A lot of Patrick Mahomes. A dash of Travis Kelce. A splash of speed. A defense that quietly goes about its business, even when its leader is standing on the sideline in sweatpants.

Yes, it has been ugly — by Kansas City's lofty standards — at times while the Chiefs have chased a third straight championship. Yet as the playoffs loom, the group that looked so vulnerable for most of the season suddenly seems to be rounding into form.

And the road to the Super Bowl will once again go through Arrowhead Stadium. Just the way the Chiefs like it.

"Getting the No. 1 seed is important," Mahomes said after throwing for 320 yards and three touch-

downs. "It's like winning a playoff game."

Even if how the Chiefs locked it up didn't exactly feel like one.

Kansas City (15-1) spent three hours toying with the Steelers (10-6) like a cat batting around shreds of leftover wrapping paper. The Chiefs raced to an early 13-point lead and were never really threatened by Pittsburgh, which has dropped three straight to see its chances of capturing the AFC North take another hit.

"That sucked, to be blunt," Steelers coach Mike Tomlin said.

It often does when Pittsburgh is on one side of the line of scrimmage and Mahomes is on the other. Mahomes is now 4-0 against the Steelers with 17 touchdowns against just one interception. He connected on first-half scoring tosses to Xavier Worthy and Justin Watson and added a history-making 12-yard touchdown flip to Kelce to seal it in the fourth quarter.

The grab was the 77th scoring reception of Kelce's career, breaking a franchise record set by Hall of Famer Tony Gonzalez. The 35-year-old Kelce celebrated by dunking the ball over the goal post, a nod to Gonzalez's signature move. The gesture drew a 15-yard penalty for unsportsmanlike conduct, though it hardly mattered. Harrison Butker made the longer extra point and the Chiefs were firmly in control.

"It's just showing Tony some



GENE J. PUSKAR/AP

Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce makes a touchdown catch against the Steelers during the second half on Wednesday in Pittsburgh.

love," Kelce said with a laugh on the day he joined Gonzalez and Jason Witten as the only tight ends to reach 1,000 receptions. Kelce fin-

ished with eight catches for 84 yards while playing for an offense that is starting to get its swagger back.

# Jackson breaks QB rushing record in romp

BY KRISTIE RIEKEN  
Associated Press

HOUSTON — Lamar Jackson broke the NFL career rushing record for quarterbacks in the Baltimore Ravens' victory over the Houston Texans on Wednesday.

A highlight came when Jackson dashed 48 yards for a touchdown on a run where he reached a career-best top speed of 21.25 mph.

"I was jogging," Jackson said. "I didn't have to do anything."

It was that kind of day for Jackson, who led the Ravens to the 31-2 victory that bolstered his case for MVP as the Ravens moved closer to the AFC North title.

"It's just another phenomenal performance," coach John Harbaugh said. "He set the all-time NFL record for rushing yards (for a quarterback) in pro football. That kind of speaks for itself. It's just kind of what he does every week."

Jackson threw for 168 yards and two touchdowns and ran for 87 yards with that long score. He pushed his career rushing total to 6,110 to move past Michael Vick, who had 6,109 in his 13-year career.

"Michael Vick, one of my favorite players," Jackson said. "That's just dope."

The Ravens (11-5) have already wrapped up their third straight playoff berth and need a victory over Cleveland next week to win the division over Pittsburgh. The Steelers dropped a third straight with a loss to Kansas City on Wednesday.



DAVID J. PHILLIP/AP

Baltimore's Lamar Jackson ran for 87 yards and broke the career rushing record for quarterbacks in the Ravens' 31-2 win.

Jackson, the MVP last season and in 2019, put on a show rivaled only by the spectacular Super Bowl-caliber halftime performance by Beyoncé to give Baltimore its third straight win. And he needed just more than three quarters to do it, giving way to Josh Johnson with about 10 minutes remaining and the game long decided.

"Just having fun," Jackson said. "The NFL is

not easy. I don't care what nobody says. It looks easy, but it's not."

Jackson threw 9- and 1-yard TD passes and was not touched on the 48-yard scoring scamper that made it 24-2 in the third quarter.

Derrick Henry ran for 147 yards and set the Ravens season record with his 16th touchdown on a 2-yard run in the first quarter.

"This game comes down to guys making plays and they had two exceptional playmakers on their side in Lamar and Derrick Henry," Houston coach DeMeco Ryans said. "They made plays and that was the game."

The AFC South champs struggled to finish drives and got their only points on a safety in the second quarter. C.J. Stroud threw for 185 yards, but was sacked five times and threw an interception and Joe Mixon managed just 26 yards rushing as the Texans (9-7) lost a second straight.

Mixon refused to speak to reporters post-game, but Stroud took the blame for the loss.

"Terrible on my behalf, probably one of my worst games in my whole career," he said. "Just came out flat, didn't have any energy. I didn't lead the offense the way I should have."

Kyle Hamilton intercepted Stroud's pass on the first drive of the second half. Two plays later, Jackson's long TD run made it 24-2.

He set the rushing record on a 6-yard run on Baltimore's next drive. Later in the drive, he scrambled to escape several defenders before finding Andrews for a 1-yard score to leave Baltimore up 31-2.

## Scoreboard

### American Conference

	East					
	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-Buffalo	12	3	0	.800	469	331
Miami	7	8	0	.467	305	329
e-N.Y. Jets	4	11	0	.267	292	344
e-New England	3	12	0	.200	259	361

### South

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-Houston	9	7	0	.563	349	358
Indianapolis	7	8	0	.467	318	359
e-Jacksonville	3	12	0	.200	277	396
e-Tennessee	3	12	0	.200	284	417

### North

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
x-Baltimore	11	5	0	.688	483	351
x-Pittsburgh	10	6	0	.625	363	328
Cincinnati	7	8	0	.467	423	393
e-Cleveland	3	12	0	.200	245	380

### West

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
*-Kansas City	15	1	0	.938	385	288
Denver	9	6	0	.600	363	281
L.A. Chargers	9	6	0	.600	328	274
e-Las Vegas	3	12	0	.200	264	390

### National Conference

#### East

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
x-Philadelphia	12	3	0	.800	402	283
Washington	10	5	0	.667	432	348
e-Dallas	7	8	0	.467	324	404
e-N.Y. Giants	2	13	0	.133	215	362

#### South

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Atlanta	8	7	0	.533	327	349
Tampa Bay	8	7	0	.533	427	352
e-New Orleans	5	10	0	.333	309	346
e-Carolina	4	11	0	.267	283	448

#### North

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
x-Detroit	13	2	0	.867	493	299
x-Minnesota	13	2	0	.867	396	276
x-Green Bay	11	4	0	.733	413	287
e-Chicago	4	11	0	.267	283	342

#### West

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
L.A. Rams	9	6	0	.600	329	347
Seattle	8	7	0	.533	339	340
e-Arizona	7	8	0	.467	344	342
e-San Francisco	6	9	0	.400	331	349

e-Eliminated from playoffs  
x-clinched playoff spot  
y-clinched division  
\*-clinched home-field advantage

#### Wednesday's games

Kansas City 29, Pittsburgh 10  
Baltimore 31, Houston 2

#### Thursday's game

Seattle at Chicago

#### Saturday's games

L.A. Chargers at New England  
Denver at Cincinnati  
Arizona at L.A. Rams

#### Sunday's games

Carolina at Tampa Bay  
Dallas at Philadelphia  
Indianapolis at N.Y. Giants  
Las Vegas at New Orleans  
N.Y. Jets at Buffalo  
Tennessee at Jacksonville  
Miami at Cleveland  
Green Bay at Minnesota  
Atlanta at Washington

#### Monday's game

Detroit at San Francisco

#### Sunday, Jan. 5

Buffalo at New England  
Carolina at Atlanta  
Chicago at Green Bay  
Cincinnati at Pittsburgh  
Cleveland at Baltimore  
Houston at Tennessee  
Jacksonville at Indianapolis  
Kansas City at Denver  
L.A. Chargers at Las Vegas  
Miami at N.Y. Jets  
Minnesota at Detroit  
N.Y. Giants at Philadelphia  
New Orleans at Tampa Bay  
San Francisco at Arizona  
Seattle at L.A. Rams  
Washington at Dallas

## NFL/COLLEGE FOOTBALL

# Chargers defense looks strong after six poor quarters

By DAN GREENSPAN  
Associated Press

EL SEGUNDO, Calif. — After following up their worst performance of the season against Tampa Bay by allowing an easy opening touchdown drive to Denver, even Los Angeles Chargers defensive coordinator Jesse Minter found himself questioning the top unit in the NFL in points allowed.

But the defense got back on track to rally for a 34-27 win that puts the Chargers one victory away from clinching a AFC wild-card berth, a performance that has Minter seeing a group getting back to its best at the most important time of the season.

"I do think that momentum is real, and so to sort of feel us as a defensive unit get our momentum back, yeah, it's huge," Minter said Tuesday. "Hopefully it's something we can carry into preparation this week, which I think the guys have."

The Chargers (9-6) struggled early as the Broncos moved the ball 72 yards in 10 plays to get that first score. They forced one third down, a third-and-2 near midfield, and promptly gave up a 15-yard run.

Things didn't seem any better as Los Angeles fell behind 21-10 midway through the second quarter, but Denver needed to convert a third-and-long on each of the next two touchdown drives. Getting into those situations represented progress to Minter.

"I felt like we started to play better even though they moved the ball," he said. "We let them off the hook a couple times."

The breakthrough came when Joey Bosa had a sack on third down to force Denver's first punt. From that point on, the defense allowed six points.

"I think when you go through a season, you almost expect to have to win games in a lot of different ways," Minter said. "It was the first time it was like where we started off, didn't look great, and just kind of stayed with it, stuck with it."

Outside linebacker Khalil Mack believed it was a matter of time before that first stop came.

"It was known that we were gonna bounce back and kind of get the rhythm going," he said.

The turnaround came at the end of a six-game stretch where the Chargers faced teams all contending for or in a playoff spot. The defense gave up at least 27 points in four of those games; opponents hadn't topped 20 through the first nine. Los Angeles went 3-3, beating Cincinnati, Atlanta and Den-

ver and losing to Baltimore, Kansas City and the Buccaneers.

Still, the resolve on display versus the Broncos gives Minter confidence his group is ready.

"I think we've learned a lot about ourselves over that stretch, and really look forward to trying to be at our best now," Minter said. "It's end of the season. You're into, hopefully, December, January, February football where it's just can you be at your best when your best is needed. So I look forward to attacking these last two regular-season games, and then hopefully more to follow."

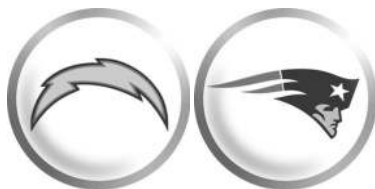
The Chargers can clinch a playoff spot by beating New England (3-12) on Saturday, which would mean limiting rookie quarterback Drake Maye.

The third overall pick has Minter's attention, particularly after his strong showing in a 24-21 loss to Buffalo on Sunday when he threw for 261 yards and two TDs.

"I think you see the talent," Minter said. "I think he's another one of these young quarterbacks that's a playmaker. Has the ability to make plays inside the pocket, outside the pocket, can run, can scramble."

Mack also expressed appreciation for what Maye has shown, but that doesn't change his approach to the most important game yet for the Chargers.

"It's a playoff game, no different than the last one, man," Mack said. "By any means necessary. We got to do everything we can to win the game."



Los Angeles Chargers (9-6)  
at New England Patriots (3-12)  
AFN-Sports2  
7 p.m. Saturday CET  
3 a.m. Sunday JKT



Denver Broncos (9-6)  
at Cincinnati Bengals (7-8)  
AFN-Sports2  
10:25 p.m. Saturday CET  
6:25 a.m. Sunday JKT



Arizona Cardinals (9-6)  
at L.A. Rams (7-8)  
AFN-Sports2  
2 a.m. Sunday CET  
10 a.m. Sunday JKT



Green Bay Packers (11-4)  
at Minnesota Vikings (13-2)  
AFN-Sports  
7 p.m. Sunday CET  
3 a.m. Monday JKT



Chargers cornerback Tarheeb Still gestures after breaking up a pass against the Broncos. L.A. held Denver to field goals in the second half.



JOHN BAZEMORE/AP

Georgia quarterback Gunner Stockton looks to pass after replacing an injured Carson Beck during the SEC title game against Texas.

# Stockton to start at QB for Georgia

By CHARLES ODUM  
Associated Press

No. 2 Georgia is resting its national championship hopes on backup quarterback Gunner Stockton following Carson Beck's season-ending elbow surgery on Monday.

Coach Kirby Smart said Monday that Georgia is preparing Stockton to start in the Sugar Bowl on Jan. 1 in the College Football Playoff quarterfinal against No. 3 Notre Dame. Stockton took over when Beck suffered a right elbow injury in the the first half in the Bulldogs' 22-19 overtime win over Texas in the Southeastern Conference championship game on Dec. 7 in Atlanta.

Georgia announced later Monday that Beck had season-ending surgery to repair his ulnar collateral ligament in the right elbow. The procedure was performed by Dr. Neal ElAttrache in Los Angeles on Monday. Beck is expected to begin throwing next spring.

Georgia's first-round bye in the playoffs has given Stockton, a sophomore, more time to prepare for his new starting role. Smart said the experience with the first-team is the primary benefit in "several practices" since the SEC championship game.

"He got lots of reps prior to these practices, but he's getting much more now," Smart said. "I do think ... when you get ready for an opponent like Notre Dame, you need time and we have time."

The Fighting Irish advanced by beating Indiana 27-17 in the first round. Smart said Stockton and Georgia can focus on Notre Dame.

"But I think the biggest thing is just competition at practice," Smart said. "You know, the situations we put him in. All those things allow him to get better as a quarterback."

Notre Dame coach Marcus Freeman said Stockton will require adjustments by his defense.

"You evaluate, obviously, what they've done all season and you have a separate tape of what Stockton has done," Freeman said Monday. "I think we have 80-something plays of him. He can run their offense. He does things a little bit differently. He can extend plays with his legs, he's a good athlete. The thing I probably noticed most about him, he's an ultra-competitive individual."

Georgia announced on Dec. 9 that Beck and his family were considering treatment options for his elbow.

Beck suffered the injury to his throwing arm in the first half of the SEC championship game and made a dramatic return to the field for the handoff on the game-winning play in overtime. Stockton had to leave the field for one play after having his helmet knocked off.

Even though he was able to take the snap and hand off to Trevor Etienne for the running back's decisive 4-yard touchdown run, Beck was unable to raise his right arm.

Stockton's job may get a little easier with Notre Dame defensive tackle Rylie Mills out. Freeman announced Monday that Mills will miss the rest of the season with a right knee injury he suffered against Indiana.

Mills had 37 tackles and 7½ sacks this season and anchored the interior line while All-American Howard Cross II missed the final three regular season games with a high ankle sprain. Cross returned against Indiana.

Stockton completed 12 of 16 passes for 71 yards with one interception against Texas.

## YEAR IN REVIEW

# Last vestiges of college amateurs going away in '25

BY EDDIE PELLIS  
Associated Press

When the page turns on 2024, it will be time to say goodbye, once and for all, to the amateur athlete in college sports. In theory, the concept held on stubbornly via the quaint and now all-but-dead notion that student-athletes played only for pride, a scholarship and some meal money.

In practice, the amateurs have been disappearing for years, washed away by the steady millions, now billions, that have flowed into college athletics, mostly through football and basketball both through legitimate and illicit means.

In the coming year, the last vestiges of amateur college sports are expected to officially sputter out — the final step of a journey that has felt inevitable since 2021. That's when the Supreme Court laid the foundation for paying college players in exchange for promotions — on social media, TV, video games, you name it — featuring their name, image or likeness (NIL).

The changes have come in spasms so far, not always well thought out, not always fair and not regulated by any single entity like the NCAA or federal government, but rather by a collection of state laws, along with rules at individual schools and the leagues in which they play.

But on April 7, the day final approval is expected for the landmark, \$2.8 billion lawsuit settlement that lays the foundation for players to receive money directly from their schools, what was once considered anathema to the entire concept of college sports will become the norm.

David Schnase, the NCAA's vice president for academic and membership affairs, acknowledges that maintaining the unique essence of college sports is a challenge in the shifting landscape.

"You can use the word 'pro,' you can use the word 'amateur,' you can attach whatever moniker you want to it, but those are just labels," Schnase said. "It's much less about labels and more about experiences and circumstances. Circumstances are different today than they were last year and they are likely going to be different in the foreseeable future."

## Do athletes get rich off these new deals?

Few would argue that college athletes should get something back for the billions they help produce in TV and ticket revenue, merchandise sales and the like.

But is everyone going to cash in? Are college players really getting rich?

Recent headlines suggest top quarterback recruit Bryce Underwood was lured to Michigan thanks to funding from billionaire Oracle founder Larry Ellison, and that a top basketball recruit, A.J. Dybantsa, is head-

ing to BYU — not a hoops powerhouse — for the reported price of \$7 million.

For every Underwood or Dybantsa, though, there are even more Matthew Slukas and Beau Pribulas.

Sluka's agent says his son agreed to play quarterback at UNLV after a promise of receiving \$100,000 and quit three games into the season after the checks never came.

Pribula was the backup quarterback at Penn State who abruptly entered the transfer portal earlier this month, choosing the college version of free agency over a chance to play with the Nittany Lions in the College Football Playoff. He's not the only one hitting the portal in hopes of getting rich before new regulations related to the NCAA settlement take effect.

"We've got problems in college football," Penn State coach James Franklin said.

The settlement will overhaul the current system. Currently, players receive money via third-party collectives that are booster-funded groups affiliated with individual schools. Coming up fast: the schools paying the athletes directly — the term often used here is "revenue sharing" — with collectives still an option, but not the only one.

The NCAA has started collecting data about NIL payments, which date to July 2021. Its first set of numbers, including data from more than 140 schools across more than 40 sports in 2024, show a bracing disconnect between have and have-nots.

For instance, average earnings for football and men's and women's basketball players is nearly \$38,000. But the median earning — the middle number among all the data points on the list — is only \$1,328, a sign of how much the biggest contracts skew the average.

## Women make vastly less than men

The statistics also show a vast difference in earnings between men and women, an issue that could impact schools' ability to comply with Title IX. That 1972 law requires schools to provide equal athletic scholarships and financial aid but not necessarily that they spend the same dollar amount on men and women. Heading into 2025, there is no clarity on how this issue will play out.

Regardless, the numbers are jarring. The NCAA data set shows the average earnings for women in 16 sports was \$8,624, compared with \$33,321 for men in 11 sports. Men's basketball players averaged \$56,000 compared with \$11,500 for women.

## Paying players could cost some and benefit others

The biggest losers from this move toward a professional model could be all the swimmers and wrestlers and field hockey players — the athletes in the so-called non-



Ed Zurca/AP

**Not everyone is getting rich off the new rules in college sports. Matthew Sluka says he was promised \$100,000 in NIL money by UNLV, but the starting quarterback quit three games into the season when he didn't get paid.**

revenue sports whose programs also happen to serve as the backbone of the U.S. Olympic team.

Only a tiny percentage of those athletes are getting rich, and now that universities have to use revenue to pay the most sought-after players in their athletic programs, there could be cuts to the smaller sports.

Also, someone's going to have to backfill the revenue that will now go to the players. Well-heeled donors like Ellison are not around for every school, nor have private equity firms started sending money.

The average fan will have to pony up, and the last six months have seen dozens if not hundreds of athletic directors begging alumni for money and warning them of changes ahead. Already there are schools placing surcharges on tickets or concessions.

How will fans respond to a more transactional model of college sports?

"I don't know that fans have this really great love for the idea of 100% pure amateurism," said Nels Popp, a University of North Carolina sports business professor. "I think what they care about is the colors and the logos and the brand. I don't know that it matters to them if the players are making a little bit of money or a lot of money. They've been making money for the last couple years, and I don't know that that's making fans really back off."

## Olympics transformed away from amateurism in the 1980s

The last time amateurism came under such assault was in the 1980s, when the Olympics unwound the final remnants of

pretending the vast majority of their athletes were anything other than full-time professionals.

The transformation was tinged with a note of honesty: The people putting on the show should reap some benefits from it. Even 40 years later, there's an good argument they remain underpaid.

The contours of the same debate are shaping up in college sports.

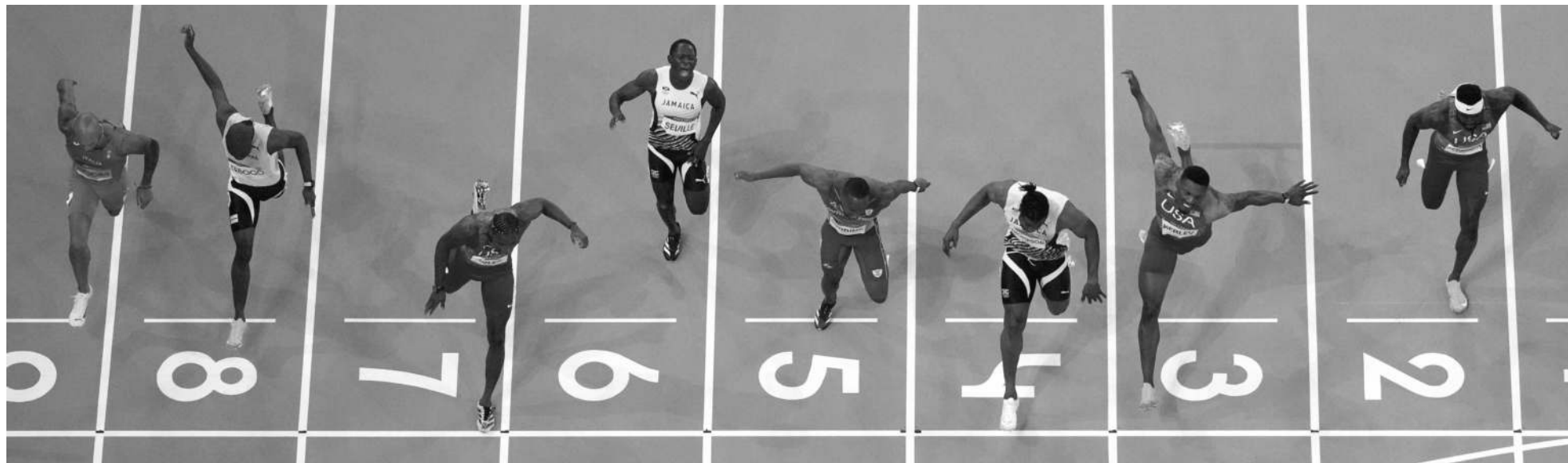
Athletes are pushing for a players' association that would add more transparency to a business that, even with the changes coming, is still largely dictated by the schools.

The NCAA, while acceding to the need to pay the players, wants nothing to do with turning them into actual employees of the schools they play for. It's an expensive prospect that is winding its way through the legal system via lawsuits and labor hearings that many in college sports are desperate to avoid for fear it will push the entire industry off the financial cliff.

Among the few things everyone agrees on is that things aren't going back to a time when athletes pretended to play for pride while the money moved under tables and through shadows. And that this, in fact, could only be the start, not the end, of the transformation of college sports.

"At some point, I think people might have to understand that maybe college athletes don't go to college anymore," Popp said. "Or maybe they don't go to class during the season. There could be more radical changes, and as long as they're wearing the right logo and the right colors, I'm not sure that fans really care."

## YEAR IN REVIEW



DAVID J. PHILLIP/AP

Noah Lyles, of the United States, in lane 7, wins the men's 100-meter final at the Summer Olympics on Aug. 4 in Saint-Denis, France. Lyles won the gold medal by .005 seconds.

# 2024 was full of unforgettable moments

BY TIM REYNOLDS

Associated Press

Patrick Mahomes threw a walk-off pass to win the Super Bowl. Freddie Freeman hit a walk-off grand slam to win a World Series game. Stephen Curry said “nuit, nuit” to win an Olympic basketball title in Paris, Noah Lyles won 100-meter gold by about the smallest margin possible, and Sabrina Ionescu won a WNBA Finals game with a 30-foot heave.

Depending on who you rooted for, some made you cheer, some left you crushed. Some were the sort that have never been seen before, in a good way: Shohei Ohtani, on the night he started baseball's 50-50 club, drove in 10 runs in a performance for the ages. Some were the sort that have never been seen before, in a jarring way: Scottie Scheffler, the world's No. 1 golfer, got arrested before the second round of the PGA Championship and taken away in handcuffs to jail — where he had a sandwich and started warming up for the tee time he ended up making.

And maybe the best way to describe what we had, when all these things happened, are the words Washington Commanders right guard Sam Cosmi used after his team beat the Chicago Bears with a Hail Mary pass:

“Front-row seats,” Cosmi said, “to something amazing.”

## “Nuit nuit”

Stephen Curry, the Golden State Warriors' superstar sharpshooter, made his Olympic debut one to remember and saved his best for last. He hit four 3-pointers in the final minutes, each shot more dramatic than the last, to seal the U.S. win over host France for gold.

Curry's signature celebration is the “night night,” where he puts his hands together at the side of his face, as if it's time to go to sleep. In Paris, he brought shirts that made it perfectly clear to the French what that meant — yes, the message written on the shirts was “nuit nuit.”

## A Super walk-off ...

Kansas City's Patrick Mahomes did something no one has ever done: He threw a Super Bowl-winning touchdown pass on the final play of the title game.

San Francisco kicked a field goal to open



TSVANGIRAYI MUKWAZHI/AP

**Alex Sedrick reacts after scoring the winning try for the U.S. in the women's bronze medal Rugby Sevens match against Australia at the Summer Olympics in Saint-Denis, France, on July 30.**

overtime of Super Bowl 58, and Mahomes had 75 yards to go to try and answer. He scrambled for eight yards on fourth-and-1 to keep the drive alive — a huge play that probably very few remember. He went 8-for-8 on passes in overtime, engineering a perfect drive.

The finale: a 3-yard toss to Mecole Hardman with 3 seconds left in overtime, and the Chiefs were back-to-back champions.

## ... and an Olympic walk-off

OK, technically, the U.S. women's rugby sevens team won the Olympic bronze medal with a kick (a conversion, they call it).

But the real moment was Alex Sedrick, running the length of the field and into history.

Sedrick got the ball with about 8 seconds left, ran through three Australia defenders and took it all the way down the field for a try that tied the game at 12-12 with no time left. Her kick won bronze for the Americans, a result that made star Ilona Maher — the undisputed face of the sport in the U.S. — an even bigger name and breathed new life into the sport in a country where it still has tons of room to grow.

## The women's Final Four

In this case, let's make three games — Iowa vs. UConn, South Carolina vs. N.C. State, then South Carolina vs. Iowa for the title — one moment.

Maybe a movement is the better word.

Caitlin Clark's record-setting year, South Carolina's undefeated run to the national title, UConn's return to the Final Four, they were all part of a scintillating year for women's basketball. The WNBA saw enormous growth — Clark, its rookie of the year, helped fuel that in a big way — and more eyeballs were on the game than ever before.

## On the track

Everything at an Olympics is a moment for someone; a lifetime of work typically coming down to a few seconds.

But in Paris, a few stood out more than others.

Start with Sifan Hassan, trading elbows in the stretch of the marathon to win her third distance medal — this one gold. Or Cole Hocker, looking like Forrest Gump in coming from nowhere to beat the two favorites in the men's 1,500-meter run.

The highlight, of course, was Noah Lyles' .005-second victory in the 100-meter dash. He ran the fastest time of his life and didn't take the lead until the absolute last instant, a finish that even had commentators guessing wrong about who actually prevailed.

## The big swings

Of the 346,000 swings taken by batters in Major League Baseball this year, three probably jumped out more than the rest.

There was Freddie Freeman, hitting the first game-ending grand slam in World Series history to move the Los Angeles Dodgers a step closer to beating the New York Yankees and winning the title.

There was Pete Alonso, saving the season for the New York Mets with a home run to lift them past the Milwaukee Brewers in the deciding game of an NL wild-card series.

And then there was Shohei Ohtani, a night like none other in a season like none other. On the night in Miami when he joined — created, really — baseball's 50-homer, 50-steal club, he hit three home runs, stole two bases and drove in 10 runs on a 6-for-6 night.

## From way downtown

Cleveland's Max Strus lived every kid's hoop-in-the-driveway fantasy ... down by one, time running out, let-it-fly ... a 59-footer to give the Cavaliers a 121-119 victory over Dallas.

But the buzzer-beater of the year: Take a

bow, Sabrina Ionescu. From just inside of the logo, her 3-pointer with 1 second left gave the New York Liberty a win over the Minnesota Lynx in Game 3 of the WNBA Finals — and the Liberty would win the title in five games.

## Scheffler's year

World No. 1 golfer Scottie Scheffler had a year of moments — most of them great (nine wins worldwide), one of them bizarre (the arrest at the PGA Championship).

But the signature moment of 2024 for Scheffler might have been weeping as “The Star-Spangled Banner” played in honor of his Olympic gold medal in Paris. He rallied from six shots back with a final-round 62 to win the gold.

## A ‘Bobbery’

On the way to winning the Stanley Cup, Florida Panthers goalie Sergei Bobrovsky had a save he'll never forget.

Bobrovsky — out of “desperation,” he'd say later — dove backward across the goal mouth, reached out blindly with his left wrist and somehow got his glove side in the way of Tampa Bay's Matt Dumba's shot to keep the game tied at 2-2. It wound up being a game-saver; the Panthers got a goal from Carter Verhaeghe 2:59 into overtime for a 3-2 win.

## Saquon goes up, up and away

Philadelphia Eagles running back Saquon Barkley used a spin move — and a leap — on the same play. The 180-degree hurdle was one of the signature moves of 2024 in the NFL.

It made a 14-yard reception unforgettable. “Best play I've ever seen,” Eagles coach Nick Sirianni said.

## A prayer answered

### ... and not answered

They call it a “Hail Mary” in football, the desperation pass into the end zone with no time left to try and win a game.

The Washington Commanders pulled it off against the Chicago Bears, Jayden Daniels' throw going into team lore. And Virginia Tech thought it had pulled one off against Miami, only to have officials — who originally said the Hokies won — overrule the call after replay review, sealing a win for the Hurricanes.

## YEAR IN REVIEW

## AP MALE ATHLETE OF THE YEAR

## Ohtani joins Jordan as 3-time winner

By BETH HARRIS  
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Shohei Ohtani is keeping elite company.

The Japanese superstar caps 2024 by winning The Associated Press Male Athlete of the Year for the third time, tying him with basketball great Michael Jordan. He trails only four-time winners Lance Armstrong, Tiger Woods and LeBron James.

"I'm very honored," Ohtani said through translator Matt Hidaka in an exclusive interview with the AP. "Obviously all the hard work has paid off. Maybe next year, I'll get the award again."

In balloting by 74 sports journalists from the AP and its members, Ohtani received 48 votes. He previously won the award in 2023 and 2021, when he was with the Angels.

"Growing up in Japan, I did follow Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods," he said.

"I would see their accolades and how they were successful in the United States."

The AP honor has been given out since 1931. Golfer Babe Didrikson won six times, the most by a man or woman.

Swimmer Léon Marchand, of France, who won four gold medals at the Paris Olympics, was second with 10 votes.

Golfer Scottie Scheffler, whose victories this year included the Masters and an Olympic gold medal, was third with nine.

Moving from the beleaguered Los Angeles Angels to the powerhouse Los Angeles Dodgers, Ohtani won his third Most Valuable



MARK J. TERRILL/AP

**Shohei Ohtani hit a career-best .310 and became the first player with 50 home runs (54) and 50 stolen bases (59) in a season while helping the Dodgers with the World Series. He also won his third MVP award.**

Player award and first in the National League, led his new team to its eighth World Series championship and created Major League Baseball's 50/50 club by hitting 54 home runs and stealing 59 bases.

Ohtani signed a then-record

\$700 million, 10-year contract with the Dodgers in December 2023. Already a two-way superstar, he embellished his reputation even further despite not pitching all season while he rehabilitated from a second major

right elbow surgery he had in September 2023.

Ohtani went wild on offense, making every at-bat a must-see moment. The 6-foot-4 designated hitter batted a career-high .310 while easily surpassing his previous career highs in home runs and stolen bases.

In September, he reached the previously unheard of 50/50 mark in a performance for the ages. Against the Miami Marlins in Florida, Ohtani went 6-for-6 with three homers, 10 RBIs, two stolen bases and 17 total bases.

"It wouldn't shock me if he went 60/60 and 20 wins a year from now," Brad Ausmus, who managed the Angels in 2019 during Ohtani's second season in Anaheim, said recently. "This guy is the greatest athlete to ever play the sport of baseball and there's not a close second."

Ohtani carried the Dodgers offensively during the regular season, and he stayed healthy until Game 2 of the World Series. He injured his left shoulder trying to steal second base against the New York Yankees and finished the Series playing hurt.

He underwent surgery a few days after the Dodgers celebrated their championship in early November.

"I don't have full range of motion yet, but it feels a lot better," he told the AP. "There's no pain. There's obviously still a little bit of tightness, but slowly but surely it's getting better."

Ohtani recently received an updated rehab schedule, and he's focused on the near-term.

"It's the small steps that I think are very important to get me to the ultimate goal, which is to just get back healthy," he said.

Ohtani is also throwing in the 70 mph range, which is typical for pitchers early in the offseason.

"I'm going to continue to ramp up slowly," he said.

The Dodgers' rotation for next season is in flux, and Ohtani is waiting to see how it shakes out.

"We may go with a five-man rotation with a bullpen (game), which is what we did a lot during this season or we may have a six-man rotation," he said. "But it's all about balancing out when we can get rest and recuperate. We'll see where that takes us along the playoff chase. I've got to obviously pace myself, but again that situation will guide us to how we get there."

The Dodgers open the 2025 season in Japan, where Ohtani is even more closely watched.

"My personal goal is to be fully healthy by the time the opening games do start," he said. "To be able to pitch and hit would be great, but the situation will kind of guide itself."

Each time Ohtani comes to the plate or steps on the mound, there's great pressure and expectation for him to perform spectacular feats.

"I just go out there and try to stay within myself," he said. "I can only control what I can control and that's where you trust your teammates. The guys behind me, you trust they're going to make the plays for you. I don't really try to overthink it."

## AP FEMALE ATHLETE OF THE YEAR

## Clark honored for impact on women's sports on and off court

By DOUG FEINBERG  
Associated Press

Caitlin Clark, who raised the profile of women's basketball to unprecedented levels in both the college ranks and the WNBA, has been voted the AP Female Athlete of the Year for her impact on and off the court.

After leading Iowa to the national championship game, Clark was the top pick in the WNBA draft as expected and went on to win rookie of the year honors in the league. Fans packed sold-out arenas and millions of television viewers tuned in to follow her journey. Clark's exploits were far-reaching, casting a light on other women's sports leagues along the way.

A group of 74 sports journalists from The Associated Press and its members voted on the award. Clark received 35 votes, Olympic gymnast Simone Biles was second with 25 and boxer Imane Khelif was third, getting four votes.

Clark is the fourth women's basketball player to be honored as the female athlete of the year since it was first presented in 1931, joining Sheryl Swoopes (1993), Rebecca Lobo (1995) and Candace Parker (2008, 2021).

"I grew up a fan of Candace Parker and the people who came before me and to be honored in this way, is super special and I'm thankful," Clark said in a phone interview. "It was a great year for women's basketball and women's sports."

Clark broke the NCAA Division I career scoring record for men and women, finishing her career with 3,951 points while guiding Iowa to its second consecutive national championship game. After her Hawkeyes lost to South Carolina for the title, Gamecocks coach Dawn Staley took the mic during her team's celebration and said, "I want to personally thank Caitlin Clark for lifting up our sport."

For all the success Clark has had and the

attention she has brought to women's basketball, she is often the centerpiece of debates and online toxicity towards her and other players in the league.

For her part, Clark has disavowed the toxic discourse.

Lobo also has been impressed with the way Clark, 22, has handled the pressure and attention that has come her way.

"I would say she's navigated it almost flawlessly. She hasn't had any big missteps or misspeaks at a time you're under constant scrutiny," Lobo said. "She's seemed to say and do all the right things. That's just incredible at a time when it's constant attention and scrutiny. She has not done anything to tarnish this sort of mild persona she has."

As Clark handled the praise — and the backlash — during the heat of competition, it was hard for her to appreciate just what she was able to accomplish over the past year. But after having time to reflect on the whirl-

wind tour, she appreciates those who were there alongside her for the ride.

"I'm thankful for the people I got to do it with," Clark said. "A year ago I was still in the early part of my senior year in college. ... How fast things change, and now I can see how great a college season it was."

Iowa sold out all of its games at home and on the road with Clark as the main attraction. That momentum continued into the pros. Her No. 22 jersey was prevalent wherever she played during her rookie season and will be retired at Iowa.

After a slow start to her WNBA career, Clark eventually found her stride there too. She set the single-game assist record with 19 and also had 337 assists on the season to break that mark as well. Clark, known for her logo-distance 3-pointers, was the fastest player to reach 100 3's when she did it in 34 games which helped Indiana reach the playoffs for the first time since 2016.

## YEAR IN REVIEW

## Elevating: Biles delivered multiple messages at Games



FRANCISCO SECO/AP

**Simone Biles, of the United States, celebrates after winning the gold medal in the vault at the 2024 Summer Olympics on Aug. 3 in Paris. After a surprising exit from the Tokyo Games, Biles won four golds.**

## FROM PAGE 32

said in a recent state-of-the-league address that players are getting a lot more marketing deals, turning them into household names. That includes Las Vegas star A'ja Wilson, who had one of the most dominant seasons in WNBA history, and Clark, who set numerous rookie records.

The decisive Game 5 of the WNBA finals between the New York Liberty and the Minnesota Lynx drew an average of 2.2 million viewers, peaking at 3.3 million, which made it the most-watched WNBA game in 25 years.

"We've been growing in popularity, endorsements, media rights, all of those things," said Amira Rose Davis, a sports historian and assistant professor at the University of Texas at Austin.

Clark, the sharp-shooting Indiana guard became a phenomenon when she played at Iowa, capitalized on a foundation laid by hoops stars such as Diana Taurasi, Candace Parker and Wilson, and turbocharged the visibility of women's basketball.

Ticket sales to Indiana Fever games were up 182% in 2024 from the previous season. The Fever also shattered the attendance record of 13,398 set by the Liberty in 1998 with around 16,084 tickets sold per game. And games featuring Clark and her on-court rival Reese of the Chicago Sky prompted social media debates about basketball, race and culture.

"Something that I always tried to do with me was rise and elevate the game," said Finch, now an adviser for the Athletes Unlimited Softball League. "And that's what (Clark)'s doing, and her teammates. And just to be able to watch her do it and how humbly she does it, and the impact of not only domestic women's basketball, but women's athletics globally. It's a dream."

While many point to the WNBA as a blueprint for success in women's sports, accomplishments in 2024 went far beyond one league or athlete.

Gauff, the 20-year-old tennis superstar, was the world's highest-paid female athlete this year with \$30.4 million in earnings, according to Sportico rankings. Gauff could not defend her 2023 U.S. Open title, but ended her 2024 season with a WTA finals title and a \$4.8 million check — the biggest payout ever for a women's tennis event, per Sportico.

The Olympics neared complete gender parity for the first time among the more than 11,000 men and women who competed in Paris this summer.

More than 34 million people across all NBC platforms in the U.S. watched Biles exorcise the demons of her surprising exit from the Tokyo Games three

years earlier. The 27-year-old shared a message of resilience and redemption as she added four gold medals to her résumé. Nearly everything she did in Paris made headlines — a clap back at social media trolls, a revelation about her mental health, a moment of triumph. Her TikTok showing Team USA's gold medals from team competition has more than 139 million views.

"She became a symbol," Davis said. "Whether you wanted to symbolize her as persevering, or talking about mental health or refusal, the politics of refusal. Or (whether) you wanted to symbolize her as being a quitter — being everything that you're bemoaning about the country. Either way, both projections elevated her even more."

And as Gauff and Biles soared, other women's leagues leveraged that visibility.

The Pro Women's Hockey League brought in 392,259 fans during its inaugural regular season, highlighted by a women's hockey record crowd of 21,105 at the home arena of the NHL's Canadiens for a Montreal-Toronto matchup. The league also reached sponsorship deals with Scotiabank, Air Canada and Hyundai.

The PWHL's strong first season showed its organizers and players that there's an appetite for women's sports, so much so that there are hopes to expand from six to eight teams in 2025.

"For many of us that have been in the game for so long, it's emotional to think about where the game's come from, where we've come to," said Jayna Hefford, the league's senior vice president of hockey operations. "We spend a lot of time reading research and all these things that suggest the time is now and that the fandom is there. And to be able to live that and feel it in real time was pretty special."

Keith Stein and Justine Siegal want to capitalize on the women's sports landscape too.

Siegal, a former baseball player and coach, partnered with Stein, a lawyer and businessman, to create the Women's Pro Baseball League, which last month announced plans to launch in 2026 as a six-team circuit for female players. It will be the first pro league for women since the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League dissolved in 1954.

"Leagues like the WNBA and (National) Women's Soccer League have done a lot of the heavy lifting," Stein said, "and they're part responsible for the moment we're having right now where women's sport is a phenomenon."

"I think there's, in some ways, a lot more momentum behind the development of professional women's sports leagues than for men's."

## Women also got unwanted attention

BY NOREEN NASIR AND  
BRITTANY PETERSON  
Associated Press

For Djaniele Taylor, attending WNBA games was the perfect way to rediscover a sense of community coming out of the long slog of pandemic-era lockdowns.

The 38-year-old Evanston, Ill., resident has attended Chicago Sky games for the past three seasons, after she watched the team win its first championship in 2021. As a queer Black fan, she felt the games were a supportive and safe sporting environment.

"I was hooked and I loved the atmosphere — it was very queer-friendly, very family-oriented, very diverse," she said.

As the popularity of the WNBA skyrocketed this year, the price of Taylor's season tickets more than doubled since 2022. With the growth, she noted a "darker vibe shift," too: What always felt like a positive setting started to take a more hostile turn at times.

As women's sports set new records for attendance and viewership, Taylor and other longtime fans watched with optimism — and unease. It's a cycle female athletes and fans of women's sports recognize: With the increased and sought-after visibility comes added scrutiny — as well as harassment and online abuse toward some players.

This year, fresh off the NCAA spotlight, former college basketball stars Caitlin Clark and Angel Reese made their WNBA debuts for the Indiana Fever and the Chicago Sky, catapulting their personal brands as well as the popularity of the league.

While both deny there's any bad blood between them, tension has been drummed up by fans and increased media attention. Beneath it are racial undertones that originated while the two faced each other in college — Clark on predominantly white Iowa team and Reese for mostly Black LSU.

There has been harassment and abuse — much of it racially motivated and directed at players of color across the league and the wider sports landscape.

"Angel and Caitlin have given us an incredible platform to talk about how we treat Black and white athletes differently in the media," said E.R. Fightmaster, co-host of Jockular, a podcast on the intersection of women's sports and queer identity.

Clark has disavowed the toxic discourse, though some say she hasn't done enough to try to rein in the racism.

"People should not be using my name to push those agendas. It's disappointing. It's not accepta-

ble," Clark said back in June. "Treating every single woman in this league with the same amount of respect, I think, it's just a basic human thing that everybody should do."

The NCAA released a study in October showing online abuse toward athletes peaked during March Madness, with women's basketball players receiving three times more threats than men. For the first time in March Madness history, the women's championship game drew more viewers this year than the men's.

A similar study found racist and sexist posts aimed at female athletes made up nearly half of all monitored abusive posts during the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris.

At the Summer Games, Algerian boxer Imane Khelif faced hateful comments and false accusations about her gender leading up to her gold medal win.

"People want a chance to delegitimize successful women all the time. And so if you are a successful boxer and they can't find anything else to pick on, they are going to say that you are too manly to play," Fightmaster said.

The issue of transgender women competing in women's sports has been highly polarized this year. A former University of Kentucky swimmer was among a dozen athletes filing a federal lawsuit against the NCAA in March, accusing it of violating Title IX rights by allowing a transgender woman, Lia Thomas, to compete at the 2022 national championships.

The lawsuit also cited unconfirmed reports that a transgender woman was playing on the San Jose State women's volleyball team. This fall, colleges began dropping out of matches with San Jose State, which has not confirmed it has a trans woman on the team. The Associated Press has withheld the player's name because she has not publicly commented on her gender identity.

That hasn't stopped politicians from shaping campaigns around keeping transgender women out of women's sports or wading into the polarizing debate on fairness.

About half of U.S. states have a ban on transgender athletes participating in school sports according to their gender identity. West Virginia and Idaho are looking to the U.S. Supreme Court to support their bans.

Even as women's sports reach new heights in viewership and with it ticket sales and lucrative deals, inequalities persist, including disparities in pay, the quality of facilities and the online harassment of female athletes.

## SPORTS



## Chiefs clinch home field

Kansas City rolls past reeling Steelers, locks up No. 1 seed in AFC » **NFL, Page 26**

## THE YEAR IN SPORTS

# Elevating their games

From Caitlin Clark and Simone Biles to a new hockey league, women's sports had a pivotal year

BY ALANIS THAMES  
Associated Press

**R**ecord numbers of basketball fans filled arenas to watch the rookie seasons of Caitlin Clark and Angel Reese unfold. Simone Biles captivated the world at the 2024 Paris Olympics. Coco Gauff made women's tennis history.

It was all part of a pivotal year for women in sports, financially and culturally, and after a steady rise in popularity and reach in recent years, the women's game is more valuable than ever.

"(Clark)'s just moved the needle of the global movement of women in sports," said softball great and Olympic gold medalist Jennie Finch, "and what a thrill it's been to be able to see her rise."

The consulting firm Deloitte estimated in November 2023 that women's sports would generate more than \$1 billion in global revenue this year for the first time ever, which the company said is up about 300% from its last estimate in 2021. Skyrocketing viewership and corporate sponsorships were major factors.

The WNBA in July signed a historic 11-year media rights deal with Disney, Amazon Prime and NBC valued at about \$200 million — a jump from about \$60 million currently. Players hope higher salaries and a greater share of revenue could be on the horizon as parity, star power and competition in the WNBA continue to grow.

The WNBA had its most-watched regular season in 24 years and best attendance in 22 seasons, and commissioner Cathy Engelbert

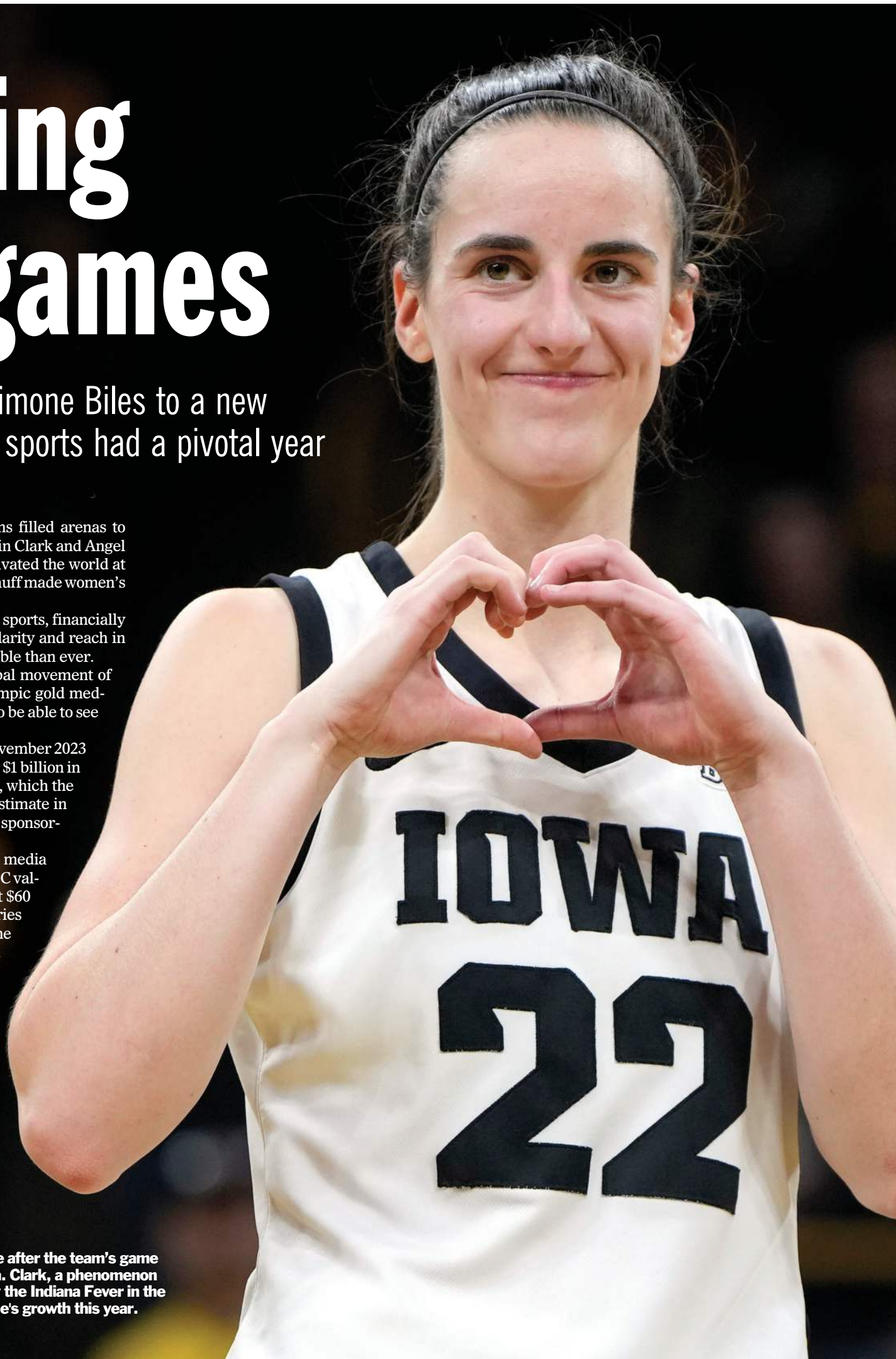
SEE ELEVATING ON PAGE 31

## INSIDE

Clark, Ohtani are voted AP Athletes of the Year  
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Iowa guard Caitlin Clark makes a heart gesture after the team's game against Michigan on Feb. 15 in Iowa City, Iowa. Clark, a phenomenon with the Hawkeyes, was taken No. 1 overall by the Indiana Fever in the WNBA draft and helped turbocharge the league's growth this year.

MATTHEW PUTNEY/AP



Popularity also brought women more scrutiny, online harassment » **Page 31**

'Nuit, nuit' and nail-biters: The year was full of great moments » **Page 29**

Colleges' amateur era will be ending in '25 » **Page 28**