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LI ZHANG/U.S. Navy

Petty Officer 2nd Class Wenhao Yang, a recruiter with Navy Talent Acquisition Group Golden Gate, speaks with students at Westmoor High School during the 2025 San Francisco Fleet Week.

Recruit, retain, repeat

After banner year, services eye ways to maintain growth, keep troops

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. military is coming off a big recruiting win in 2025, surpassing the 146,473 new enlistees from 2024.

Now top military and political leaders want to determine how to keep the trend going and retain those who have signed up.

"This is a barometer of the health of the nation, the willingness of young people to serve," said Anthony Tata, undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, speaking at the Reagan National Defense Forum in Simi Valley, Calif., last weekend.

The Army recruited 61,000 new soldiers, the Navy signed up 44,096 future sailors, the Marines counted 32,328 added to its ranks and the combined Air and Space forces total topped 30,000.

Tata said the first hurdle to getting young men and women to consider military life is to just get the idea on most teenagers' radar.

"Only about half of our 17-, 18-, 19-year-olds in the country are even aware of a military option," he said.

Speakers at the forum said successful recruiting efforts appeal to both patriotism and pragmatism.

"You joined us, we didn't join you," said Gen. Eric Smith, commandant of the Marine Corps.

According to a Reagan Defense Forum sur-

SEE RECRUIT ON PAGE 4

NDAA

House OKs raise, Europe and S. Korea troop stability

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The House passed a sprawling annual defense policy bill on Wednesday raising troop pay, restricting the Trump administration's ability to reduce U.S. troop levels in Europe and South Korea, providing aid for Ukraine and repealing decades-old laws authorizing military force in the Middle East.

Lawmakers voted 312-112 for the legislation, which authorizes a record $901 billion in national security spending for 2026 — $8 billion more than President Donald Trump had requested. The Senate is expected to take up the 3,000-page bill, known as the National Defense Authorization Act, next week.

The legislation reflected bipartisan efforts to push back against the Trump administration's moves to disengage from Europe and Ukraine as well as mounting lawmaker frustration with the Pentagon's campaign against suspected drug boats in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific.

"This bill does something that, to my knowledge, we haven't really done this year in Congress and that is reassert some of the authority of the congressional branch," said Rep. Adam Smith of Washington, the top Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee.

The bill blocks the Pentagon from reducing the number of troops in Europe below 76,000 or relinquishing the role of NATO's Supreme Allied Commander until Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth certifies to Congress that the decision was made in consultation

SEE NDAA ON PAGE 5

BUSINESS/WEATHER

EUROPE GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel
Germany	$3.343	$3.928	$4.293	$4.068
Change in price	-4.5 cents	-4.9 cents	-5.2 cents	-9.3 cents
Netherlands	..	$4.962	$5.547	$5.327
Change in price	..	-7.5 cents	-7.1 cents	-18.5 cents
U.K.	..	$5.463	$5.827	$5.698
Change in price	..	+3.0 cents	+3.0 cents	+3.0 cents
Azores	..	..	$4.193	..
Change in price	..	..	-5.2 cents	..
Turkey	..	..	$4.043	$3.818*
Change in price	..	..	-5.2 cents	-9.3 cents

Fuel prices are updated daily. These prices are effective Dec. 12. The change in price is from Dec. 5.

PACIFIC GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel
Japan	..	$3.949	..	$3.719
Change in price	..	-5.0 cents	..	-10.0 cents
Okinawa	$3.289	..	..	$3.719
Change in price	No change	..	..	-10.0 cents
South Korea	$3.029	..	$3.979	$3.749
Change in price	-4.0 cents	..	-5.0 cents	-10.0 cents
Guam	$3.059**	$3.639	$4.009	..
Change in price	-4.0 cents	-5.0 cents	-5.0s cents	..

***DieselEFD **Midgrade**
Pacific prices for the week of Dec. 12-18

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates	
Euro costs (Dec. 12)	0.83
British pound (Dec. 12)	$1.31
Japanese yen (Dec. 12)	153.00
South Korean won (Dec. 12)	1,429.00

Commercial rates	
Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3744
Britain (Pound)	1.3418
Canada (Dollar)	1.3774
China (Yuan)	7.0640
Denmark (Krone)	6.3624
Egypt (Pound)	47.4782
Euro	0.8518
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7818
Hungary (Forint)	326.55
Israel (Shekel)	3.2171
Japan (Yen)	155.00
Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3065
Norway (Krone)	10.0846
Philippines (Peso)	58.92
Poland (Zloty)	3.59
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7484
Singapore (Dollar)	1.2916
South Korea (Won)	1,469.76
Switzerland (Franc)	0.7940
Thailand (Baht)	31.69
Turkey (NewLira)	42.6141

(Military exchange rates are those available to customers at military banking facilities in the country of issuance for Japan, South Korea, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. For nonlocal currency exchange rates (i.e., purchasing British pounds in Germany), check with your local military banking facility. Commercial rates are interbank rates provided for reference when buying currency. All figures are foreign currencies to one dollar, except for the British pound, which is represented in dollars-to-pound, and the euro, which is dollars-to-euro.)

INTEREST RATES

Prime rate	7.00
Interest Rates Discount rate	3.75
Federal funds market rate	3.88
3-month bill	3.68
30-year bond	4.79

WEATHER OUTLOOK

FRIDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

FRIDAY IN EUROPE

SATURDAY IN THE PACIFIC

The weather is compiled from weather.com reports.

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PACIFIC

US, Japan demonstrate joint airpower

By Joseph Ditzler and Hana Kusumoto
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — Japanese fighters and United States strategic bombers made a show of force together Wednesday, a day after 11 Chinese and Russian aircraft flew routes close to Japan and South Korea.

Japan also lodged "grave national security concerns" through diplomatic channels about ongoing activities around Japan by the Russian and Chinese militaries, including their Tuesday flights, according to Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Minoru Kihara.

"We intend to continue to take all possible measures to ensure vigilance and surveillance and to take measures against airspace intrusions in order to resolutely protect our country's land, waters and airspace," Kihara said at a news conference that was held Wednesday.

The Japan Joint Staff posted photographs Thursday on social media platform X of Japanese F-15 Eagles in formation over the Sea of Japan with two U.S. B-52 Stratofortress bombers.

"[Japan Self-Defense Force] and the U.S. Armed Forces conducted a bilateral exercise amid an increasingly severe security environment surrounding Japan," the joint staff said in the post.

The Chinese aircraft carrier Liaoning, operating close to Okinawa since Dec. 5, had launched and recovered as many as 50 fighters Sunday, according to public broadcaster NHK on Monday.

Japan on Sunday alleged that a Chinese J-15 launched from the Liaoning intermittently locked radar on two Japan Air Self-Defense Force F-15s, which had scrambled in response to potential airspace violations near Okinawa.

The joint staff post on X about Wednesday's airpower demonstration alluded to recent events.

"This bilateral exercise reaffirms the strong will between Japan and U.S. not to tolerate unilateral changes to the status quo by force," it said.

Three F-35 Lightning II multirole fighters from Japan's 3rd Air Wing and three F-15s from the 6th Air Wing took part, along with two B-52s, according to a news release Thursday from the joint staff.

The B-52s' tail markings indicate their home station is Barksdale Air Force Base, La.

Chinese and Russian fighters and bombers on Tuesday flew past Okinawa and around the southern end of Japan.

China's Ministry of National Defense described the joint patrol as part of the two militaries' annual cooperation plan, according to the ministry.

Both Japan and South Korea scrambled fighters to keep watch on the Russians and Chinese.

South Korea alleged the combined patrol entered the Korean Air Defense and Identification Zone. Neither Japan nor South Korea alleged violations of their territorial airspace.

Japan tracked two Russian Tu-95 Tupolev bombers, an A-50 early warning aircraft and two Su-30 fighters, according to a joint staff news release Tuesday.

The A-50 and Su-30s flew a box in the Sea of Japan while the bombers flew south and rendezvoused with two Chinese H-6 bombers and four Chinese J-16 fighters, according to the joint staff.

The group continued through the Miyako Strait, after which the fighters doubled back and the bombers continued northeast to a point opposite Kyushu, the southernmost main island of Japan. They returned on the same route, according to the joint staff.

South Korea on Wednesday protested the flights to the two countries' military attaches in Seoul.

U.S. Forces Japan referred questions Thursday to Pacific Air Forces in Honolulu, which did not respond immediately to an email from Stars and Stripes.

B-52s have made routine appearances in the Pacific as bomber task forces, an Air Force strategy to deliver air power over long distances anywhere on the globe. In July, two B-52s were escorted by South Korean and Japanese fighters during an airpower demonstration off the Korean Peninsula.

George Washington wraps first deployment since return to Japan

By Alex Wilson
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The bellow of a ship's horn coupled with the cheers of about 100 people waiting pierside signaled the arrival Thursday morning of the USS George Washington and the conclusion of its annual deployment.

Scores of sailors in dress blues manned the aircraft carrier's rails as it steamed through Tokyo Bay toward its usual pier at the home of the U.S. 7th Fleet. Waiting friends and families held welcoming signs and flowers for their loved ones.

Sarah Hoopengardner, of Washington, D.C., and her children Tripp, 11, and Lily, 10, were on the pier to greet their husband and father, Cmdr. David Hoopengardner, a planning officer with Carrier Strike Group 5.

"We are excited that he gets to come home for Christmas and celebrate the holidays," she told Stars and Stripes before the ship arrived.

The family plans to mark the occasion with a steak dinner and by decorating their Christmas tree.

The carrier's arrival closed out its first annual deployment since its return to Japan in November 2024.

Previously homeported in Yokosuka from 2008 to 2015, the George Washington subsequently spent nearly six years in the United States for midlife nuclear refueling and maintenance.

During its six-month journey this year the ship traveled approximately 56,000 miles, with port stops in Guam, the Philippines and South Korea, ship spokesman Lt. Cmdr. Mark Langford told Stars and Stripes by email Thursday.

Photos by Jonathan Baez/Stars and Stripes

Petty Officer 2nd Class Andre Garrett greets his wife, Crystal, and 3-year-old son Andre after the aircraft carrier USS George Washington returned to Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan, on Thursday.

Friends and family of U.S. Navy sailors aboard the George Washington watch as the aircraft carrier pulls into Yokosuka Naval Base.

Sailors in dress blues man the rails of the George Washington as tugboats guide the ship into its pier at Yokosuka Naval Base.

Rear Adm. Eric "Pappy" Anduze, commander of Carrier Strike Group 5, and Capt. Timothy Waits, the George Washington's skipper, delivered brief pierside remarks to media Thursday but took no questions.

"Through every operation, every exercise and every milestone, our sailors performed with professionalism and pride, living up to our Navy's core values of honor, courage and commitment," Anduze said.

One of the carrier's two escorts, the guided-missile destroyer USS Shoop, arrived last week, while the other, the guided-missile destroyer USS Robert Smalls, is due at Yokosuka in several weeks.

This was the first operational deployment for the F-35 Lightning II with the embarked Carrier Air Wing 5, signaling a "new era of Navy fifth-generation air power permanently stationed" in the region, Anduze said.

The carrier's aircraft and pilots arrived home at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan, on Saturday.

The George Washington also participated in several large-scale exercises, including Talisman Sabre 2025 in Australia, ANNUALEX alongside the Japan Self-Defense Force and Carrier Strike Group Exercise 2025 with South Korea, Anduze said.

The carrier made a lengthy mid-deployment stop in September, during which sailors honored Petty Officer 3rd Class Jose Antonio Rivera Lynch IV in a Sept. 25 Bell's Across America ceremony. Lynch, an aviation boatswain's mate was presumed lost overboard off Australia's northern coast.

The ship departed Sept. 30 but returned to Yokosuka on Oct. 18 with carrier's air wing still on board.

President Donald Trump spoke in the carrier's vaulted hangar Oct. 28 for nearly an hour to approximately 6,000 U.S. and Japanese troops.

MILITARY

US seizes oil tanker off Venezuela coast

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump said Wednesday that the United States has seized an oil tanker off the coast of Venezuela as tensions mount with the government of President Nicolás Maduro.

Using U.S. forces to take control of a merchant ship is incredibly unusual and marks the Trump administration's latest push to increase pressure on Maduro, who has been charged with narcoterrorism in the United States. The U.S. has built up the largest military presence in the region in decades and launched a series of deadly strikes on alleged drug-smuggling boats in the Caribbean Sea and eastern Pacific Ocean. The campaign is facing growing scrutiny from Congress.

"We've just seized a tanker on the coast of Venezuela, a large tanker, very large, largest one ever seized, actually," Trump told reporters at the White House, later adding that "it was seized for a very good reason."

Trump did not offer additional details. When asked what would happen to the oil aboard the tanker, Trump said, "Well, we keep it, I guess."

The seizure was led by the U.S. Coast Guard and supported by the Navy, according to a U.S. official who was not authorized to comment publicly and spoke on the condition of anonymity. The official added that it was conducted under U.S. law enforcement authority.

AP

An oil tanker being seized by U.S. forces off the coast of Venezuela, Wednesday.

The Coast Guard members were taken to the oil tanker by helicopter from the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford, the official said. The Ford is in the Caribbean Sea after arriving last month in a major show of force, joining a fleet of other warships.

Video posted to social media by Attorney General Pam Bondi shows people fast-roping from one of the helicopters involved in the operation as it hovers just feet from the deck.

The Coast Guard members can be seen later in the video moving throughout the superstructure of the ship with weapons drawn.

Bondi wrote that "for multiple years, the oil tanker has been sanctioned by the United States due to its involvement in an illicit oil shipping network supporting foreign terrorist organizations."

Venezuela's government said in a statement that the seizure "constitutes a blatant theft and an act of international piracy.

"Under these circumstances, the true reasons for the prolonged aggression against Venezuela have finally been revealed. … It has always been about our natural resources, our oil, our energy, the resources that belong exclusively to the Venezuelan people," the statement said.

The U.S. official identified the seized tanker as the Skipper.

The ship departed Venezuela around Dec. 2 with about 2 million barrels of heavy crude, roughly half of it belonging to a Cuban state-run oil importer, according to documents from the state-owned company Petróleos de Venezuela S.A., commonly known as PDVSA, that were provided on the condition of anonymity because the person did not have permission to share them.

The Skipper was previously known as the M/T Adisa, according to ship tracking data. The Adisa was sanctioned by the U.S. in 2022 over accusations of belonging to a sophisticated network of shadow tankers that smuggled crude oil on behalf of Iran's Revolutionary Guard and Lebanon's Hezbollah militant group.

The network was reportedly run by a Switzerland-based Ukrainian oil trader, the U.S. Treasury Department said at the time.

Venezuela has the world's largest proven oil reserves and produces about 1 million barrels a day.

PDVSA is the backbone of the country's economy. Its reliance on intermediaries increased in 2020, when the first Trump administration expanded its maximum-pressure campaign on Venezuela with sanctions that threaten to lock out of the U.S. economy any individual or company that does business with Maduro's government. Longtime allies Russia and Iran, both also sanctioned, have helped Venezuela skirt restrictions.

The transactions usually involve a complex network of shadowy intermediaries. Many are shell companies, registered in jurisdictions known for secrecy. The buyers deploy so-called ghost tankers that hide their location and hand off their valuable cargoes in the middle of the ocean before they reach their final destination.

Maduro did not address the seizure during a speech before a ruling-party organized demonstration in Caracas, Venezuela's capital. But he told supporters that the country is "prepared to break the teeth of the North American empire if necessary."

Maduro has insisted the real purpose of the U.S. military operations is to force him from office.

Sen. Chris Van Hollen, D-Md., a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said the U.S. seizing the oil tanker cast doubt on the administration's stated reasons for the military buildup and boat strikes.

"This shows that their whole cover story — that this is about interdicting drugs — is a big lie," the senator said. "This is just one more piece of evidence that this is really about regime change — by force."

Vincent P. O'Hara, a naval historian and author of "The Greatest Naval War Ever Fought," called the seizure "very unusual" and "provocative." Noting that the action will probably deter other ships from the Venezuela coastline, he said, "If you have no maritime traffic or access to that, then you have no economy."

Recruit: Focus shifting to keeping recruits, families engaged

FROM PAGE 1

vey this year, 59% of Americans say they would encourage their children to join up.

Sen. Jim Banks, R-Ind., said that the main source of recruits is the children of servicemembers.

"About 80% of military recruits come from a home where mom or dad served in the military," said Banks, a former Navy Reserve officer. "At the end of the day it's about patriotism, it's about teaching children in school that America is great, that America is worth serving and fighting and dying for."

Rep. Jimmy Panetta, D-Calif., agreed with Banks that patriotism was often the primary motivation of new recruits.

"That really is the through line, the foundation of why people join," Panetta said. "What can you do for your country?"

But Panetta added that retaining recruits beyond their initial service commitment often flips the question on its head.

"The pragmatism aspect of it is 'what can the country' do for me as well," Panetta said. "We in Congress have to ask, what else are we doing to keep these people in the military."

Smith said life often changes dramatically for a recruit who signed up as a teenager when it comes time to decide whether to make the military a career.

"There's a saying that you recruit the Marine, but you retain the family," Smith said. "You can recruit an individual and they'll serve those four years, but the odds are they're going to get married."

If pay, housing, food and health care are seen as deficient compared to civilian life, the original motivation to join can be undermined when deciding whether to reenlist or leave the service.

"Once you lose them, you'll never get them back," Smith said.

Progress is being made in improving housing, food, education, medical care and child care, Tata said.

Base pay has been on the rise. Congress approved increases of 4.6% in 2023, 5.2% in 2024, and 4.5% in 2025, with an additional 10.5% increase for junior enlistees effective April 2025. The just-released 2026 National Defense Authorization Act calls for another 3.8% across-the-board pay bump for service members. The proposal also calls for increasing the family separation allowance from $250 to $300 per month. Service members would also be able to use parental leave up to two years after the birth or adoption of a child.

The Pentagon is working to reduce military spouse unemployment, which is currently about 20%. The Defense Department wants to work with states to make it easier for military spouses to transfer teaching, legal, business and other professional credentials between duty posts.

BREA DUBOSE/U.S. Armu

Lt. Col. Erin Fritzler, commander of the Los Angeles Recruiting Battalion, and recruits salute during the May 17 Torrance Armed Forces Day Parade in Torrance, Calif.

Panelists praised the services' efforts to aid borderline recruits by enrolling them in prep courses to improve their mental and physical benchmarks on military entrance tests.

"It's bringing young men and women up to our standards, not lowering our standards," Tata said.

MILITARY

Establishment of blast safety officers in bill

By Phillip Walter Wellman
Stars and Stripes

The Pentagon would be required to better protect troops from the effects of weapons blasts by assigning dedicated blast safety officers across every branch of the military under a provision in the annual defense policy bill that's moving through Congress.

If implemented, the introduction of dedicated blast safety officers would be the latest government measure aimed at protecting troops from the effects of blasts on the brain, as growing evidence has pushed the military to increasingly acknowledge, track and manage blast exposure as a force-wide safety and readiness issue.

Language in the compromise version of the fiscal year 2026 National Defense Authorization Act requires the Department of Defense to establish blast safety officer positions in the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force and Space Force by Sept. 30, 2026.

The officers would be responsible for monitoring and managing exposure to loud blasts during military activities where explosives or heavy-weapons use presents a risk. They would receive training and maintain certification in blast safety, but the legislation does not specify whether the positions would be filled by commissioned officers, enlisted troops, civilians, or medical personnel.

The directive comes amid a growing body of research over the past decade linking repeated blast exposure to measurable changes in brain structure, function and biological markers, even in the absence of a diagnosable concussion.

The research has drawn particular concern for troops in specialties such as artillery, mortars and breaching, whose duties can involve frequent exposure to low-level blast overpressure during training and operations.

The 2026 NDAA, dated Dec. 7, stipulates that blast safety officers will oversee blast exposure monitoring programs, ensure troops receive training on blast-related health risks and mitigation measures, and coordinate the use of protective equipment and wearable sensors.

Jose Lora/U.S. Army

U.S. Army paratroopers carry out live-fire exercises with an M119 Howitzer in North Macedonia, in October. Language in the 2026 National Defense Authorization Act requires the Pentagon to establish blast safety officer positions in the services by Sept. 30.

The officers are also tasked with maintaining long-term exposure records and coordinating medical follow-up for troops exposed to blasts, integrating that data into existing DOD occupational and environmental health systems, according to the document.

The bill also directs the services to assign blast safety officers to any component where blast overpressure hazards are reasonably anticipated and to ensure those officers are trained and certified in blast safety.

In an earlier version of the bill released in August, the House Armed Services Committee signaled concern about the issue, writing that it "remains concerned about the impact of blast overpressure exposure on service members and their brain health."

The committee cited experiences in training and operational environments that demonstrate "possible adverse effects on brain health and cognitive performance — including headaches, decreased reaction time, attention difficulty and memory loss — resulting from both acute and chronic exposure to blast overpressure."

NDAA: House-passed version repeals '91, '02 authorizations for use of force

FROM PAGE 1

with NATO allies and is in the best national security interests of the U.S.

It places similar limitations on reducing troop levels in South Korea below 28,500. Trump has repeatedly stated his desire to remove U.S. troops from South Korea and force Europe to become more self-reliant. In October, the Army said it would downsize its presence in Romania, drawing criticism from top Republican defense hawks.

Lawmakers also inserted a provision authorizing $400 million for the Ukraine Security Assistance Initiative for each of the next two years despite the Trump administration requesting no funding for the long-running program arming Kyiv.

The legislation also pressures the Pentagon to be more forthcoming about its attacks on boats the Trump administration says are carrying drugs to the U.S. A provision withholds 25% of Hegseth's travel budget until he turns over executive orders behind the strikes as well as unedited videos of them to the House and Senate Armed Services Committees.

"That's just basic oversight," Smith said. "We are supposed to be a co-equal branch of the government."

Congress in the legislation is also asserting its constitutional power to declare war, repealing two authorizations for the use of military force in Iraq in 1991 and 2002. Trump used the 2002 authorization to partly justify a 2020 drone strike that killed Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani.

Critics said the laws could be abused by a president to carry out actions far from their original intent. The White House said Tuesday that the repeals aligned with Trump's commitment to ending "forever wars." Trump's authority as commander in chief is not expected to be affected — a 2001 authorization continues to underpin nearly all U.S. counterterrorism operations around the world.

Service members will see a 3.8% pay raise under the legislation as lawmakers seek to build on last year's initiatives to improve troop quality of life. The bill increases the family separation allowance for deployed service members from $250 to $300 and authorizes $1.5 billion in new construction of barracks, dormitories, housing and child care centers.

The legislation also authorizes $26 billion for shipbuilding, $38 billion for aircraft, $25 billion for restoring munition stockpiles, and $145 billion for the research and development of new technology for troops.

The cornerstone of this year's bill is weapons acquisition reform, which Republican Mike Rogers of Alabama, the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, said was broken and "failing our warfighters." The legislation cuts regulatory red tape and requires the Pentagon to look to commercial off-the-shelf solutions before embarking on costly system-building programs.

Debate on the House floor on Wednesday also turned to what was left out of the bill.

Democrats railed against the removal of a bipartisan, bicameral provision that would have provided Tricare coverage of in-vitro fertilization and other fertility services for military families. House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., stripped the measure from the final bill.

"Today's Republican-led bill destroyed any hope for a Christmas miracle for the service men and women who just want to have a baby and raise a family," said Rep. Teresa Leger Fernández, D-N.M.

A spokesperson for Johnson has told reporters that Johnson is supportive of access to IVF "when sufficient pro-life protections are in place." Some anti-abortion advocates oppose IVF because it creates unused or discarded embryos, which they see as people.

The final legislation also removed a provision that would have reversed Hegseth's decision to revert several Army bases to their original names. The names had originally honored Confederates and were changed as part of a Congress-directed effort to scrub mentions of the Confederacy from military assets.

Measure would reimburse families $1,500 for DODEA dual enrollment courses

By Jennifer H. Svan
Stars and Stripes

Students in Defense Department high schools could see more college-level coursework opportunities and financial resources under a provision in the annual defense spending bill.

Overseas military families would especially benefit from the proposal, which would authorize the Department of Defense Education Activity director to enter into agreements with postsecondary institutions to give students access to dual enrollment programs, so they can earn college and high school course credit simultaneously.

The proposal also calls for providing up to $1,500 annually to students per school year to cover the costs of dual enrollment, according to the bill.

"Currently, DODEA students pay out of pocket for these opportunities and must organize these arrangements, whereas high school students nationwide have access to state-funded dual enrollment programs," Rep. Robert Aderholt, R-Ala., said in June when introducing the bill.

The legislation authorizes DODEA to use existing Defense Department funds to pay for the college-level courses both overseas and in the U.S., he said.

On Wednesday, the House passed a compromise version of the fiscal year 2026 National Defense Authorization Act. The Senate is expected to take up the 3,000-page bill next week.

DODEA already offers a dual enrollment program, but it "is incredibly challenging for parents," who must bear the costs and find qualifying coursework, said Kim Day, a military spouse and parent who has been a longtime advocate for education reform in DODEA.

Parents and students must research colleges that offer qualifying courses; pay for and register for the classes themselves; and submit information showing why they think the class should qualify for credit, Day said.

Under DODEA policy, eligible students in grades 10-12 who are enrolled at least half time in a DODEA high school may earn both high school and college credit through an accredited college or university, with prior approval from the school principal, DODEA spokeswoman Jessica Tackaberry said. Dual enrollment classes must meet DODEA graduation requirements, and the work is documented on the student's official transcript, she said.

But the key piece remains funding, an issue the school advisory committee at Humphreys High School in South Korea has been pushing for several years, said Day, the committee's former chairwoman.

"Families are expecting to find what they had in the States, only to find out it really isn't offered in the way they are used to," she said.

MILITARY

NATO is Russia's 'next target,' top leader warns

By John Vandiver
Stars and Stripes

Time to prepare for a potential war with Russia is running out, NATO's top official said Thursday in a warning that chastised some allies for moving too slowly when it comes to ramping up defense spending.

"We are Russia's next target, and we are already in harm's way," Secretary-General Mark Rutte said during a speech in Berlin, where he was joined by German Foreign Minister Johann Wadephul.

Both faced questions about the new American national security strategy, which was unveiled last week and has since caused a stir in Europe. While the strategy emphasized that Europe is "strategically and culturally vital" to the United States, it also took sharp aim at the European Union, which the U.S. says has weakened the Continent with lax immigration rules and top-down bureaucracy.

Europe faces the "stark prospect of civilizational erasure," the strategy states.

Rutte and Wadephul downplayed the notion that the new strategy signals a division between Europe and the United States. Still, it has caused panic in some quarters, with various officials and security analysts warning of a looming rupture in a trans-Atlantic alliance that has been the cornerstone of U.S. security strategy since World War II.

One concern that has emerged is that the American commitment to providing NATO with its nuclear deterrent against Russia may not be reliable.

"It is obvious the United States is no longer willing to risk their lives for Europe like they were in the old days," Danish lawmaker Rasmus Jarlov said during a television appearance Wednesday. "The only credible response against that is to have your own nuclear weapons. Now that American weapons no longer back us up, we need other weapons that can."

Rutte, however, said Thursday that there was no indication of the U.S. backing away from any of its commitments to NATO.

Though he didn't single out any countries, he said some complacency remains in the 32-nation bloc, despite ongoing hostilities in Ukraine and various acts of gray-zone warfare around Europe that have been blamed on Russia.

"Too many don't feel the urgency, and too many believe that time is on our side. It is not," said Rutte, who added that Russia could be prepared for a war on NATO within five years.

In his remarks at a forum hosted by the think tank that puts on the annual Munich Security Conference, Rutte lauded Germany, once a NATO spending laggard, as an alliance leader on ramping up expenditures.

For his part, Wadephul said he expects Germany to reach NATO's new benchmark of dedicating 5% of GDP to defense well before a 2035 deadline.

The comments come at a time when the United States is demanding that allies in Europe shoulder more responsibility for the defense of the Continent.

Last week, news reports emerged that some Pentagon officials want to shift most military defense responsibilities to allies by 2027. Rutte, however, said no such deadline exists.

"The whole rumor about 2027 is not right. The U.S. has also confirmed that. So that's off," Rutte said.

Still, Rutte emphasized that failure to increase defense spending at a faster pace increases the odds that Russian President Vladimir Putin will launch an attack on NATO territory.

"Conflict is at our door," Rutte said. "Russia has brought war back to Europe, and we must be prepared for the scale of war our grandparents and great grandparents endured."

For NATO, boosting support for Ukraine also is viewed as a way to keep Russia on its heels. While President Donald Trump attempts to negotiate a peace deal between the two countries, allies must keep the pressure on Moscow by getting more arms to Ukrainian troops, Rutte said.

Russia has been making incremental gains in Ukraine, which is struggling with a manpower shortage and insufficient air defense systems to ward off attacks.

The Russian war machine is now cranking out thousands of attack drones and missiles per month and is close to "peak production," Rutte said

Since the Kremlin's 2022 full-scale invasion, more than 1 million Russian troops have been killed or injured in the fighting, Rutte said, adding that this year, Russia has lost about 1,200 troops a day.

"If (Putin) is prepared to sacrifice ordinary Russians in this way, what is he prepared to do to us?" Rutte said.

Evgeniy Maloletka/AP

European Union Commissioner for Enlargement Marta Kos, right, attends a joint press conference after an informal meeting of EU ministers for European affairs in Lviv, Ukraine, on Thursday.

Zelenskyy: Territory claims dominate US-led peace talks

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Thursday that negotiators are wrestling with the question of territorial possession in U.S.-led peace talks on ending the war with Russia, including the future of Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region and the Russian-occupied Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant, one of the world's 10 biggest atomic plants.

Zelenskyy revealed details of the ongoing discussions before he headed into urgent talks Thursday with leaders and officials from about 30 countries that support Kyiv's efforts to obtain fair terms in any settlement to halt nearly four years of fighting.

Zelenskyy said Ukraine submitted a 20-point plan to the U.S. on Wednesday, with each point possibly accompanied by a separate document detailing the settlement terms.

"We are grateful that the U.S. is working with us and trying to take a balanced position," Zelenskyy told reporters in the Ukrainian capital Kyiv. "But at this moment it is still difficult to say what the final documents will look like."

Russia has in recent months made a determined push to gain control of all parts of Donetsk and neighboring Luhansk, which together make up Ukraine's valuable Donbas industrial region.

Ukraine doesn't accept the surrender of Donbas, Zelenskyy said, saying that both sides remaining where they currently stand along the line of contact would be "a fair outcome."

American negotiators have put forward the possibility of a "free economic zone" in the Donbas, with the Russians terming it a "demilitarized zone," according to Zelenskyy.

Russian officials have not publicly disclosed their proposals.

U.S. negotiators foresee Ukrainian forces withdrawing from the Donetsk region, with the compromise being that Russian forces do not enter that territory, Zelenskyy said.

But he said that if Ukraine must withdraw its forces, the Russians should also withdraw by the same distance.

Army to review policies following charges against doctor

By Rose L. Thayer
Stars and Stripes

The Army Inspector General will review medical treatment policies and practices after an OB-GYN assigned to Fort Hood's hospital was charged with secretly recording more than 40 patients, the service said Wednesday.

The inspector general's review will run alongside the Army's own internal evaluation to reinforce "institutional accountability as a bedrock of the Army's health care system," the service said.

"We are looking closely at how training is conducted, how standards are enforced and how leaders ensure that policies are being followed," Lt. Gen. Mary K. Izaguirre, the Army Surgeon General, said in a statement after touring Carl R. Darnall Army Medical Center at Fort Hood, Texas, on Tuesday.

The Army did not provide the full scope of its internal review or the inspector general's, such as whether any bases beyond Fort Hood will be included.

Though the Army and its inspector general can review and evaluate hospitals, they will need to work with the Defense Health Agency to implement any changes or recommendations.

Izaguirre said the service is committed to working with the agency "quickly and transparently to maintain faith with soldiers and families."

The surgeon general visited Fort Hood alongside Under Secretary of the Army Mike Obadal and Rear Adm. Matthew Case, acting deputy director of the DHA.

They reviewed DHA policies and their implementation in Army medical facilities and surveyed patient safety practices, protective safeguards, management standards and overall care quality.

"Our ethical and moral imperative is to ensure deployment-ready forces while providing a safe and professional environment for all patients," Obadal said in a statement. "When our soldiers and our families visit a military medical treatment facility, they place enormous trust in the providers and the system."

DHA officials also said Wednesday in a statement they are committed to an environment of trust and safety.

"We joined Army leadership at Darnall so current and future patients know we are doing everything possible, so they feel safe and confident in the high level of care we expect in our facilities," the DHA said.

McGraw

The tour occurred on the same day the Army Office of Special Trial Counsel announced it charged Maj. Blaine McGraw, 47, with 54 counts of indecent visual recording and three additional crimes.

McGraw, an OB-GYN, was accused Oct. 17 of secretly recording a patient and was immediately suspended, according to Fort Hood officials.

Army Criminal Investigation Division arrived within hours to begin an investigation, which has included sifting through more than half a terabyte of digital media.

The charges against McGraw cover actions that began Jan. 1 and involve 44 women, one of whom was recorded outside of the hospital.

He is the second Army doctor in the past two years to face criminal charges for sexual misconduct with patients.

Maj. Michael Stockin was convicted at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Wash., of sexually abusing 41 patients and sentenced to nearly 14 years in prison.

MILITARY

Spanish squad wins Army drone competition

By Matthew M. Burke
Stars and Stripes

GRAFENWOEHR, Germany — Staff Sgt. Eric Navarro and three teammates quietly crept through the undergrowth at a vast Army training ground in rural Bavaria until they found a small gap in the forest canopy to send their Vesper one-way attack drone aloft.

The quadcopter whirred toward a shipping container town Wednesday in the Grafenwoehr Training Area, which was hosting the inaugural U.S. Army Europe and Africa Best Drone Warfighter Competition.

After identifying several mannequin targets, Navarro's team piloted the aircraft through a window at just the precise moment and into a net next to a mannequin sitting at a desk, simulating a strike.

"We always launch from cover and concealment and then utilize gaps in tree lines for radio line of sight to maintain the link with our birds," Navarro said as soon as the course was completed, his face slathered in camouflage paint.

His attention then turned to the competition.

"Good, quiet rivalries are what make the best units," he added.

The quartet from the Joint Multinational Readiness Center's 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment in nearby Hohenfels was the second-place finisher and top-performing American team in the contest. A team from Spain took the overall prize.

Drones have become the focal point of Army training exercises in Grafenwoehr and Hohenfels in recent years.

Lydia Gordon/Stars and Stripes

Army Spc. Andrew Santana flies a Skydio X10 drone before an event on the final day of U.S. Army Europe and Africa's first-ever Best Drone Warfighter Competition in Grafenwoehr, Germany, on Wednesday.

The competition, which played out over three days, symbolized both how mainstream drone warfare has become in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, and how important it is to the Army's wholesale transformation in doctrine and tactics.

The service's modernization initiative known as Transforming in Contact has been shaped by the innovative Russian and Ukrainian drone use throughout the nearly 4-year-old conflict, which has put the new ways of warfare on display.

Besides Transforming in Contact, the Army has undertaken a series of counter-drone training exercises collectively dubbed Project Flytrap.

Sponsored by the 7th Army Training Command, the competition featured 10 teams from across the region, including rotational units from Poland and NATO allies Italy and Spain.

Their competition events included written exams, a drone obstacle course and real-world application. All the teams brought different drone platforms.

Navarro's Vesper weighs just over a pound and can remain airborne for up to 50 minutes, according to the manufacturer's website. The aircraft can reach speeds up to 45 mph and travel up to 28 miles.

Soldiers in the lethality test, one of two field events, were graded on basic soldier skills, individual camouflage, tactical movement through the woods, launch and reconnaissance to name a few, said planner Chief Warrant Officer 4 Charles Myers.

The other event tested aerial land navigation, accuracy and maneuverability.

After surveilling the town, the teams received points for reporting back to the ground force commander. They were then given a complex task of calling for additional strikes and killing the mannequin at the desk simultaneously.

The hardest part of the competition, Navarro said, was going in with little information and having to make split-second decisions, like where to launch.

Judges roaming the training area at the time shouted that his team's performance was "remarkable" and the best they'd seen.

Some teams had not brought correct equipment or tested their drones before flight, leading to failure, Myers said.

Navarro and his team are members of the Readiness Center's opposition force, so they have honed their skills tormenting rotational units training in its infamous "Box," the name used to describe the operational area where war games take place.

They were honored alongside their Spanish counterparts at a ceremony at Balli Airfield after the competition's conclusion. As the best American team, they will travel to Alabama in February for the Army's top competition, Myers said.

Sgt. 1st Class Logan Parks, a drone program manager at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center, said the contest was essential to drone warfare's tactical and doctrinal growth.

"It highlights where different teams are at in comparison to their partners or their peers, and it shows either shortcomings or strengths that they have to either remedy or emphasize," he said. "It also gives them an example of what a tactical battle space could have in store for them so that they can prepare for it back at home station."

Marines on Guam gather Christmas toys for youngsters in Micronesia

By Seth Robson
Stars and Stripes

MARINE CORPS BASE CAMP BLAZ, Guam — Some of the first arrivals at this growing Marine base in the western Pacific will play Santa this month for youngsters on the islands of Guam, Tinian, Saipan and Rota.

About a dozen Marines worked like elves Wednesday inside a Camp Blaz warehouse designed to house explosive ordnance disposal gear. But instead of weapons and ammo they were carrying boxes and sacks of toys.

Toys for Tots, which began in the Marine Corps Reserve in 1947, has operated at Blaz since the base activated in October 2020, according to Sgt. Davis Williams, a training noncommissioned officer.

Only 150 Marines are assigned to Blaz so far, but approximately 4,000 more are expected from Okinawa as part of a 2012 agreement between the United States and Japan to reduce the American military footprint on the southern Japanese island.

Planning for this year's Toys for Tots campaign started in April and toy collection started in October, when the Marines provided collection boxes to local businesses through the Guam Chamber of Commerce, Williams said at the warehouse.

"We are very much excited to give back to the community," he said.

Marines collected 8,296 toys from the businesses last week. They sorted the items by gender, age group and destination, he said.

Toys in boxes or bags at the warehouse on Wednesday include headphones, watches, art supplies, toy cars, action figures, balls, stuffed animals, sensory toys and science kits, Camp Blaz spokesman Maj Mark Crum said by email Thursday. A small bicycle stood apart.

Social service organizations are helping arrange venues for the toy handout, said Jean Chabanne, director of government and external affairs at Blaz.

"The toys will be given to the kids directly by the Marines," she said.

Toys are bound for Saipan by ship and for Rota and Tinian by air freight, Chabanne said during a break from sorting boxes.

Another Marine helping with the toys, Sgt. Erwin Mariano, said he got a baseball and bat as a Christmas present as a kid on Guam from a Marine participating in Toys for Tots.

Mariano remembered that experience when he enlisted in the Marines, he said.

The data systems administrator also joined the campaign in 2023 at Marine Corps Logistics Base Barstow, Calif., he said.

"We were on a fire truck in dress uniform," he recalled of the day he handed out toys. "It was really great seeing the kids with smiles on their faces and taking pictures."

West Virginia Guard member laid to rest

Associated Press

GRAFTON, W.Va. — A West Virginia National Guard member who was fatally shot last month in the nation's capital was laid to rest with full military honors in a private ceremony.

Spc. Sarah Beckstrom's funeral took place Tuesday at the West Virginia National Cemetery in Grafton, Gov. Patrick Morrisey said in a statement.

"The ceremony was deeply moving and reflected the strength, grace, and love of a remarkable young woman and the family and friends who surrounded her," Morrisey said.

Beckstrom graduated with honors from Webster County High School in 2023 and joined the National Guard several weeks later. She served in the 863rd Military Police Company.

Beckstrom and Staff Sgt. Andrew Wolfe were ambushed as they patrolled a subway station three blocks from the White House on Nov. 26. She died the next day.

Rahmanullah Lakanwal, a 29-year-old Afghan national who was also shot during the confrontation, has been charged with murder. He pleaded not guilty.

Morrisey has said Wolfe, who remains in a hospital in Washington, is slowly healing and his family expects he will be in acute care for another few weeks.

MILITARY

Fort Hood Fight Night has a nice ring to it

Next round in Army's boxing history hits different for fans, participants

By Rose L. Thayer
Stars and Stripes

AUSTIN, Texas — Pfc. Sativa James entered her first boxing gym at 7 years old, tagging along as her brothers tried the sport. She begged her dad to let her try it, too.

With a small lie to make James a year older, she got into the gym and discovered where her height and long limbs were meant to be.

"I fell in love with it," said James, 21, who entered the Army after success on the youth boxing circuit. She won the USA Boxing Youth National Championships in 2019 and 2020 at 154 and 165 pounds, respectively.

Now a unit supply specialist with 1st Battalion, 62nd Air Defense Artillery Regiment, her arrival to Fort Hood, Texas, lined up with the post's revival of boxing — an old Army tradition that disappeared from most bases when the Army centralized its soldier-boxers into the World Class Athlete Program and the post-9/11 wars increased the operational tempo of the force.

Fort Hood will host its third fight night of the year Friday, and James is scheduled to face 1st Lt. Ijeoma Akubueze, from 1st Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment.

"I don't get nervous anymore," James said the upcoming fight. "It's exciting. Everyone's here to have a good time and see the skills of boxing."

The event grew from a soldier's comment to Fort Hood's commander, Lt. Gen. Kevin Admiral, that he'd like to see more boxing equipment on post. The fights were an instant success, with soldiers boxing in front of "sold-out" crowds with thousands more watching online.

Tickets are free, but people lined up hours before the doors opened for the June and September events, maxing out the 2,600-person capacity of Abrams Physical Fitness Center, according to Fort Hood. Friday's event will also air on television with commentators thanks to local TV station KWTX.

"We're always on the lookout for bold, exciting ways to bring the Fort Hood community together and in true American fashion, sports remain one of the best ways to do that," said Amber Pafford, chief of marketing and advertising at Fort Hood Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation. "For 250 years, boxing has pulsed through Army history as a motivating way to keep soldiers sharp and mission ready. Fort Hood Fight Night takes that legacy to the next level. It doesn't just unite our community; it puts our soldiers' grit and unstoppable talent on display."

Friday's card features seven bouts, contested in amateur weight classes. Each fighter is a soldier representing their unit.

"It's something different," said Capt. Yamil Acevedo, active-duty liaison officer for the fight nights and assistant coach. "It's not like a Best Squad competition. It's not like a Best Ranger, Best Sappers. It's individuals going in the ring and being competitive."

Acevedo fought in the June event and has since coached and trained alongside the roughly 20 soldiers selected through tryouts as part of the "family" of fighters. Outside the gym, he's the operations and training officer for 15th Brigade Support Battalion.

"You'll see some of our majors and battalion commanders talking smack to each other in the stands," Acevedo said. "That's what we want. We want them to because we want the units to come out and support."

For decades, the Army employed some of America's top boxers with each post hosting its own teams and competing with each to hone their skills and showcase talent, said Charles Leverette, boxing coach for the Army's World Class Athlete Program at Fort Carson, Colo.

PHOTOS BY ROSE L. THAYER/Stars and Stripes

Pfc. Sativa James, right, spars in the ring with LeeAnne Brown, an amateur boxer, at No Day Off boxing gym in Austin, Texas, last month. James will compete in a fight night at Fort Hood, Texas, on Friday.

Capt. Tyler Thompson watches as Capt. Yamil Acevedo, active-duty liaison officer for the fight nights and assistant coach for the boxing group at Fort Hood, demonstrates a workout drill at No Day Off.

"I was on the last team that they had at Fort Hood," Leverette said. "With war and deployments, we got away from other units and posts participating. … We are in the Army, so we're soldiers first."

Leverette credits the Army for launching his boxing career. While assigned to Fort Polk, La., he saw an ad at the gym for an upcoming boxing event and decided to compete. He won a four-day pass to visit home and discovered his life's work.

He was a member of the World Beaters boxing team at Fort Hood in the late 1990s, until the Army merged all its boxers into the World Class Athlete Program. Leverette served as assistant coach of the Army's team and for the 2012 U.S. Olympic team. He came home from the London Games to take over as head coach for the Army and retired from active duty three years later.

The Army's modern boxing tradition dates to the lead-up to World War I, when President Theodore Roosevelt worked with his friend Maj. Gen. Leonard Wood, future chief of staff of the Army, to incorporate one of the president's favorite sports into military training, said Mickey Phillips, retired naval officer and a sports and military historian.

Phillips found the military's first official reference to boxing in the Army's 1914 Manual for Physical Training. Senior leaders believed boxing and wrestling helped to instill physical aggression in troops, his research found. The physical hits also prepared for the feeling of an explosion during war. The U.S. Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., soon began to incorporate boxing into future officer education and still does today.

"The concussion of bombs exploding, people weren't ready for that," Phillips said. "I was blown off my feet in Afghanistan and Iraq. I played nine years of football and it's the only time I was hit as hard."

Roosevelt's influence persisted in the military long after "the war to end all wars." Up until 2012, the military hosted the Armed Forces Boxing Championship, an Olympic qualifying event featuring service members from all the branches. It ended when international boxing officials decided to remove protective headgear from amateur fights, Leverette said.

Army boxing reached a peak at the 1988 Olympics in Seoul, South Korea, where the service was represented on Team USA by the head coach, the assistant coach and three fighters. Active-duty soldiers Andrew Maynard (light heavyweight) and Ray Mercer (heavyweight) won gold medals, as did former soldier Kennedy McKinney (bantamweight).

Leverette welcomed the return of boxing to Fort Hood, not just for the nostalgia of his own time there, but as the Army's head coach. He'll get to see what athletes can do in a real fight before they make the team.

"Just like you're taking a chance with regular recruiting, you don't know what you're getting until they get here," he said. "Anybody can put on a good show, but do you really have it?"

James said she wants to leverage her fighting at Fort Hood into a tryout for the Army team. She enlisted with that exact goal in mind — and a chance at the 2028 Los Angeles Olympics, she said.

But the event also offers newcomers to the sport a chance to see if they have what it takes. Friday's card includes Capt. Tyler Thompson, a battery commander in 4th Battalion, 5th Air Defense Artillery Regiment. He picked up boxing three years ago at age 27.

Juggling command time and training has taken some creativity, he said.

"The sport is so demanding, and the job is so demanding," Thompson said.

He won his September bout and is eager for this second opportunity.

"It was exciting, it was phenomenal, scary, all of the above," Thompson said. "When the lights were really blinding, I looked at the front row, and I could always see my mom. That kind of helped me out, helped the nerves, helped calm me. … She's always been my biggest critic and my biggest coach."

Since Fort Hood's first fight night in June, Leverette said he's fielded interest from other installations looking to join the boxing revival. He's making plans to host a boxing camp next year and see the talent that is growing organically across the service.

"It's bigger than just the kids participating. Their battle buddies might be downrange or stationed somewhere else, and they go pick up the Stars and Stripes or the local paper and they go, 'Man, this is my battle buddy. We went to basic training together.' So it goes a long way," Leverette said. "It's not just that one kid or particular soldier at that post. It's Army-wide."

Fort Hood's Fight Night begins at 6 p.m. Friday. It is available to watch online at https://www.facebook.com/forthoodarmy or on the post's local CW TV station starting at 6:30 p.m.

NATION

Military leaders defend Guard deployments

By Svetlana Shkolnikova
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Military leaders under congressional questioning on Thursday defended the deployment of the National Guard to American cities, saying the mobilization was lawful and troops were thoroughly trained to understand the limits of their authorities.

Air Force Gen. Gregory Guillot, the commander of U.S. troops in North America, said military personnel have detained one civilian since being deployed as part of President Donald Trump's stated campaign to use troops to support federal law enforcement, protect federal facilities and combat crime.

The person detained in June in Los Angeles was promptly handed over to proper law enforcement personnel, Guillot told the Senate Armed Services Committee, noting that National Guard troops are instructed not to perform law enforcement activities such as make arrests or search for evidence.

"It is essential that everyone involved in this mission understands precisely what they are authorized to do, but perhaps more importantly, what they are authorized not to do," he said.

Guillot acknowledged that troops do not receive any specific training on how to deal with people with mental health issues but are trained to de-escalate tense situations. Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., said police in Washington often interact with people experiencing mental health episodes.

Trump started calling up troops to Democrat-led cities in June amid protests in Los Angeles over his administration's crackdown on illegal immigration. He has since ordered deployments to Washington, D.C.; Chicago; Memphis, Tenn.; and Portland, Ore., over the objections of local leaders.

Democrats have questioned the legality of the moves, arguing they put troops in jeopardy and detracted from readiness amid growing threats from foreign adversaries. Two West Virginia National Guard members deployed to Washington were shot — one fatally — last month as they patrolled near the White House.

Sen. Tammy Duckworth, of Illinois, a combat veteran who served in that state's Army National Guard, said she called for the Senate Armed Services Committee to hold a hearing on the matter because troops were being mobilized under false pretenses.

"The power to deploy troops domestically must remain exceptional, accountable and rooted in law — not in one man's judgment about what constitutes disorder," she said.

She said the administration has spent more than $340 million on deployments to Illinois, Oregon, Washington and Tennessee. A report released by Democrats on Wednesday found the Pentagon had committed at least $258 million to support Trump's orders to deploy troops, not including to Washington.

Mark Ditlevson, the Pentagon official overseeing the policies and plans related to the missions, said Thursday that the deployments are a "modest burden" on the Defense Department and most of the incurred costs are reimbursable by the Department of Homeland Security.

"We are constantly assessing all costs related to these deployments, readiness costs, fiscal costs, and I can say without a shadow of a doubt this is not having a negative effect," he said.

Guillot said about 700 National Guard troops have been federalized and only the 100 troops in California have been allowed to carry out their mission of protecting federal functions and facilities. Courts have blocked deployments in Oregon and Illinois and a federal judge in California on Wednesday ruled that the Trump administration must return control of troops to the state.

A legal fight over the deployment of more than 2,000 National Guard troops to Washington, where Trump has unique law enforcement powers, is ongoing. Several members of the public who attended the Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on Thursday wore "Free DC" T-shirts.

Trump administration officials declined to make commitments to senators on whether National Guard personnel would be deployed from one state to another in the future on authorities that extend beyond their current mission to protect federal law enforcement and facilities.

Ditlevson said any orders would be evaluated to make sure they are "100% legal."

Republicans on Thursday voiced their support for Trump's deployment of the National Guard to tamp down on violence that they said local and federal law enforcement were too underfunded and stretched thin to handle.

Sen. Roger Wicker, of Mississippi, the committee's chairman, said the mobilizations were "not only appropriate but essential." He dismissed concerns from Democrats that the deployments were a waste of money, reduced readiness or violated a law prohibiting the use of the military for domestic law enforcement.

"In my judgment, mobilizing the Guard is an excellent opportunity for units to enhance cohesion, complete mission-essential tasks and ensure training is complete," he said. "Moreover, Guardsmen operate with the highest degree of professionalism — they serve purely in support roles, never crossing the line into law enforcement functions."

Washington state under emergency as rain triggers floods, mudslides

Associated Press

MOUNT VERNON, Wash. — Washington state was under a state of emergency Thursday from a barrage of torrential rain that has sent rivers flowing over their banks, caused a mudslide to crash down on a highway and trapped people in floodwaters. Tens of thousands of residents could face evacuation orders.

Heavy rain continued to fall over parts of the state Thursday morning, prompting road closures, water rescues and suspension of Amtrak trains between Seattle and Vancouver. Rainfall intensity increased in several counties in Washington's Cascade Mountains, which had seen up to 6 inches of rain in a 24-hour period. One area, Snoqualmie Pass, picked up an additional 1.7 inches of rain in six hours, the National Weather Service said.

After days of seemingly unrelenting heavy rain Gov. Bob Ferguson declared a statewide emergency by Wednesday night, warning "lives will be at stake in the coming days." Some residents have already been ordered to higher ground, with Skagit County, a major agricultural region north of Seattle, ordering those within the Skagit River's floodplain to evacuate.

"Catastrophic flooding is likely" in many areas and the state is requesting water rescue teams and boats, Ferguson said on the social media platform X on Wednesday night.

Hundreds of National Guard members will be sent to help communities, said Gent Welsh, adjutant general of the Washington National Guard.

In a valley leading out to the foothills of Mount Rainier southeast of Seattle, Pierce County sheriff's deputies on Wednesday rescued people at an RV park in Orting, including helping one man in a Santa hat wade through waist-deep water. Part of the town was ordered to evacuate over concerns about the Puyallup River's extremely high levels and upstream levees.

A landslide blocked part of Interstate 90 east of Seattle, with photos from Eastside Fire & Rescue showing vehicles trapped by tree trunks, branches, mud and standing water.

Ivy Ceballo, The Seattle Times/AP

Motorists drive over flooded Guide Meridian Road in Northern Bellingham in Wash., on Wednesday.

Officials also closed a mountainous section of U.S. 2 due to rocks, trees and mud.

More than 17,000 customers in Washington were without electricity Thursday, according to PowerOutage.us.

The Skagit River was expected to crest at roughly 47 feetin the mountain town of Concrete early Thursday, and roughly 41 feet in Mount Vernon early Friday.

Noem defends Trump's hard-line immigration policies at hearing

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem defiantly defended the Trump administration's hard-line immigration policies on Thursday during a House committee hearing, portraying migrants as a major threat faced by the nation that justifies a crackdown that has seen widespread arrests, deportations and a dizzying pace of restrictions on foreigners.

Noem, who heads the agency central to President Donald Trump's approach to immigration, received backup from Republicans on the panel but fierce questioning from Democrats who called for her resignation. The secretary, whose testimony was interrupted by protesters calling for an end to deportations, vowed she "would not back down."

Noem, who was testifying in front of the House Committee on Homeland Security to discuss "Worldwide Threats to the Homeland," emphasized in her remarks how big a role she believed immigration played in those threats to the country. Her remarks, and the Democrats' questioning, focused heavily on the Trump administration's immigration policies, whereas in years past the hearing has centered on issues such as cybersecurity, terrorism, China and border security.

"What keeps me up at night is that we don't necessarily know all of the people that are in this country, who they are and what their intentions are," Noem said. She said that was why Trump's administration was being "so aggressive" in "finding those people who shouldn't be in this country to begin with."

Trump returned to power in January with what he says is a mandate to reshape immigration in the U.S., claiming the country is under an invasion.

In the months since, the number of people in immigration detention has skyrocketed; the administration has continued to remove migrants to countries they are not from; and, in the wake of an Afghan national being accused of shooting two National Guard troops, Noem's department has dramatically stepped up checks and screening of immigrants in the U.S.

NATION

Senate rejects health care credit extension

BY MARY CLARE JALONICK
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Senate on Thursday rejected legislation to extend Affordable Care Act tax credits, essentially guaranteeing that millions of Americans will see a steep rise in costs at the beginning of the year.

Senators rejected a Democratic bill to extend the subsidies for three years and a Republican alternative that would have created new health savings accounts — an unceremonious end to a months-long effort by Democrats to prevent the COVID-19-era subsidies from expiring on Jan. 1.

Ahead of the votes, Senate Democratic Leader Chuck Schumer of New York warned Republicans that if they did not vote to extend the tax credits, "there won't be another chance to act," before premiums rise for many people who buy insurance off the ACA marketplaces.

Republicans have argued that Affordable Care Act plans are too expensive and need to be overhauled. The health savings accounts in the GOP bill would give money directly to consumers instead of to insurance companies, an idea that has been echoed by President Donald Trump.

Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., said ahead of the vote that a simple extension of the subsidies is "an attempt to disguise the real impact of Obamacare's spiraling health care costs."

J. SCOTT APPLEWHITE/AP

Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., joined at left by Sen. John Barrasso, R-Wyo., speaks to reporters after a closed-door meeting with fellow Republicans, at the Capitol in Washington, Tuesday.

But Democrats immediately rejected the GOP plan, saying that the accounts wouldn't be enough to cover costs for most consumers.

The dueling Senate votes are the latest political messaging exercise in a Congress that has operated almost entirely on partisan terms, as Republicans pushed through a massive tax and spending cuts bill this summer using budget maneuvers that eliminated the need for Democratic votes. In September, Republicans tweaked Senate rules to push past a Democratic blockade of all of Trump's nominees.

The Senate voted 51-48 not to move forward on the Democratic bill, with four Republicans — Maine Sen. Susan Collins, Missouri Sen. Josh Hawley and Alaska Sens. Lisa Murkowski and Dan Sullivan — voting with Democrats.

The legislation needed 60 votes to proceed, as did the Republican bill, which was also blocked on a 51-48 vote.

Some Republicans have pushed their colleagues to extend the credits, including Sen. Thom Tillis of North Carolina, who said they should vote for a short-term extension so they can find agreement on the issue next year. "It's too complicated and too difficult to get done in the limited time that we have left," Tillis said Wednesday.

But there appeared to be little interest in compromise. Despite the potential for bipartisan agreement, Republicans and Democrats have never engaged in meaningful or high-level negotiations on a solution, even after a small group of centrist Democrats struck a deal with Republicans last month to end the 43-day government shutdown in exchange for a vote on extending the ACA subsidies. Most Democratic lawmakers opposed the move as many Republicans made clear that they wanted the tax credits to expire.

Still, the deal raised hopes for bipartisan compromise on health care. But that quickly faded with a lack of any real bipartisan talks.

The votes were also the latest failed salvo in the debate over the Affordable Care Act, President Barack Obama's signature law that Democrats passed along party lines in 2010 to expand access to insurance coverage.

Republicans have tried unsuccessfully since then to repeal or overhaul the law, arguing that health care is still too expensive. But they have struggled to find an alternative. In the meantime, Democrats have made the policy a central political issue in several elections, betting that the millions of people who buy health care on the government marketplaces want to keep their coverage.

"When people's monthly payments spike next year, they'll know it was Republicans that made it happen," Schumer said in November, while making clear that Democrats would not seek compromise.

Trump's proposed 'gold card' $1M visa program goes live

BY WILL WEISSERT
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump announced Wednesday that his long-promised "gold card " was officially going on sale, offering legal status and an eventual pathway to U.S. citizenship for individuals paying $1 million and corporations ponying up twice that per foreign-born employee.

A website accepting applications went live as Trump revealed the start of the program while surrounded by business leaders in the White House's Roosevelt Room.

The program is meant to replace EB-5 visas, which Congress created in 1990 to generate foreign investment and had been available to people who spend about $1 million on a company that employs at least 10 people.

Trump sees the new version as a way for the U.S. to attract and retain top talent, all while generating revenue for federal coffers. He's been promoting the gold card program for months and once suggested that each card would cost $5 million, though he more recently revised that to the $1 million and $2 million pricing scheme.

The president said all funds taken in as part of the program will "go to the U.S. government" and predicted that billions would flow into an account run by the Treasury Department.

The new program is actually a green card, effectively offering permanent legal residency with the chance for citizenship.

The president made no mention of requirements for job creation for applying corporations or on overall caps on the program, which exist under the current EB-5 program.

Instead, he said he'd heard complaints from business leaders who had been unable to recruit outstanding graduates from U.S. universities because they were from other countries and lacked permission to stay.

Trump has built his political career around clamping down on the U.S.-Mexico border and championing hard-line immigration policies. His second administration has spent its first 10-plus months launching mass deportation pushes and sweeping immigration crackdowns that have targeted cities including Los Angeles and Charlotte.

But he's also drawn criticism from leading voices of his movement for repeatedly suggesting that skilled immigrants should be allowed into the U.S. — something the gold card program could facilitate.

Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick said the program will include $15,000 for applicant vetting and that the thorough process used to scrutinize backgrounds would "make sure these people absolutely qualify to be in America." Companies will be able to receive multiple cards but will be limited to one individual per card, he said.

Foreigners without visa could face screening of social media accounts

BY REBECCA SANTANA
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Foreigners who are allowed to come to the United States without a visa could soon be required to submit information about their social media, email accounts and extensive family history to the Department of Homeland Security before being approved for travel.

The notice published Wednesday in the Federal Register said Customs and Border Protection is proposing collecting five years' worth of social media information from travelers from select countries who do not have to get visas to come to the U.S. The Trump administration has been stepping up monitoring of international travelers and immigrants.

The announcement refers to travelers from more than three dozen countries who take part in the Visa Waiver Program and submit their information to the Electronic System for Travel Authorization, which automatically screens them and then approves them for travel to the U.S. Unlike visa applicants, they generally do not have to go into an embassy or consulate for an interview.

DHS administers the program, which currently allows citizens of roughly 40 mostly European and Asian countries to travel to the U.S. for tourism or business for three months without visas.

The announcement also said that CBP would start requesting a list of other information, including phone numbers the person has used over the past five years or email addresses used over the past decade. Also sought would be metadata from electronically submitted photos, as well as extensive information from the applicant's family members.

The application that people are now required to fill out to take part in ESTA asks for a more limited set of questions such as parents' names and current email address.

NATION

Dems: Trump's tariffs cost households $1,200

By Paul Wiseman
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Sweeping taxes on imports have cost the average American household nearly $1,200 since Donald Trump returned to the White House this year, according to calculations by Democrats on Congress' Joint Economic Committee.

Using Treasury Department numbers on revenue from tariffs and Goldman Sachs estimates of who ends up paying for them, the Democrats' report Thursday found that American consumers' share of the bill came to nearly $159 billion — or $1,198 per household — from February through November.

"This report shows that (Trump's) tariffs have done nothing but drive prices even higher for families," said Sen. Maggie Hassan of New Hampshire, the top Democrat on the economic committee. "At a time when both parties should be working together to lower costs, the president's tax on American families is simply making things more expensive."

In his second term, Trump has reversed decades of U.S. policy that favored free trade. He's imposed double-digit tariffs on almost every country on Earth. According to Yale University's Budget Lab, the average U.S. tariff has shot up from 2.4% at the beginning of the year to 16.8%, the highest since 1935.

The president argues that the import taxes will protect U.S. industries from unfair foreign competition, bring factories to the United States and raise money for the Treasury.

"President Trump's tariffs have actually secured trillions in investments to make and hire in America as well as historic trade deals that finally level the playing field for American workers and industries," said White House Spokesman Kush Desai. "Democrats spent decades complaining about lopsided trade deals undermining the American working class, and now they're complaining about the one president who has done something about it."

The taxes are paid by importers who typically attempt to pass along the higher costs to their customers.

Democrats did well in elections last month in Virginia, New Jersey and elsewhere largely because voters blame Trump and the Republicans for the high cost of living, just as they'd blamed Trump's predecessor, Joe Biden, for the same thing a year earlier.

Economist Kimberly Clausing of the UCLA School of Law and the Peterson Institute for International Economics, told a House subcommittee that Trump's tariffs amount to "the largest tax increase on American consumers in a generation, lowering standards of living for all Americans." Clausing, a Treasury Department tax official in the Biden administration, has calculated that Trump's import taxes "amount to an annual tax increase of about $1,700 for an average household."

Fed cuts key interest rate, hopeful of economy in 2026

By Christopher Rugaber
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Federal Reserve reduced its key interest rate by a quarter-point for the third time in a row Wednesday but signaled that it may leave rates unchanged in the coming months.

The cut decreased the Fed's rate to about 3.6%, the lowest it has been in nearly three years. Lower rates from the Fed can bring down borrowing costs for mortgages, auto loans, and credit cards over time, though market forces can also affect those rates.

Chair Jerome Powell suggested at a news conference that after six rate cuts in the past two years, the central bank can step back and see how hiring and inflation develop. In a set of quarterly economic projections, Fed officials signaled they expect to lower rates just once next year.

Fed officials "will carefully evaluate the incoming data," Powell said, adding that the Fed is "well positioned to wait to see how the economy evolves."

The chair also said that the Fed's key rate was close to a level that neither restricts nor stimulates the economy, a significant shift from earlier this year, when he described the rate as high enough to slow the economy and quell inflation. With rates closer to a more neutral level, the bar for further rate cuts is likely higher that it was this fall.

Jacquelyn Martin/AP

Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell speaks at the Federal Reserve, on Wednesday, in Washington.

"We believe the labor market will have to noticeably weaken to warrant another rate cut soon," Ryan Sweet, global chief economist at Oxford Economics, said.

Three Fed officials dissented from the move, the most dissents in six years and a sign of deep divisions on a committee that traditionally works by consensus. Two officials voted to keep the Fed's rate unchanged: Jeffrey Schmid, president of the Kansas City Fed, and Austan Goolsbee, president of the Chicago Fed. Stephen Miran, whom President Donald Trump appointed in September, voted for a half point cut.

Trump on Wednesday criticized the cut as too small, and said he would have preferred "at least double." Trump could name a new Fed chair as soon as later this month to replace Powell when his term ends in May. Trump's new chair is likely to push for sharper rate cuts than many officials will support.

Powell was also optimistic about the economy's growth next year, and said that consumer spending remains resilient while companies are still investing in artificial intelligence infrastructure. He also suggested growing worker efficiency could contribute to faster growth without more inflation.

Jobless aid claims jump to 236K, but continuing claims lowest since April

By Matt Ott
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits jumped last week, but the total number of those collecting benefits fell to the lowest level in eight months.

U.S. jobless claim applications for the week ending Dec. 6 climbed by 44,000 to 236,000 from the previous week's 192,000, the Labor Department reported Thursday. That's more than analysts' forecast of 213,000.

The total number of Americans filing for jobless benefits for the previous week ending Nov. 29 fell by 99,000 to 1.84 million, the government said. That's the lowest level for continuing claims since mid-April.

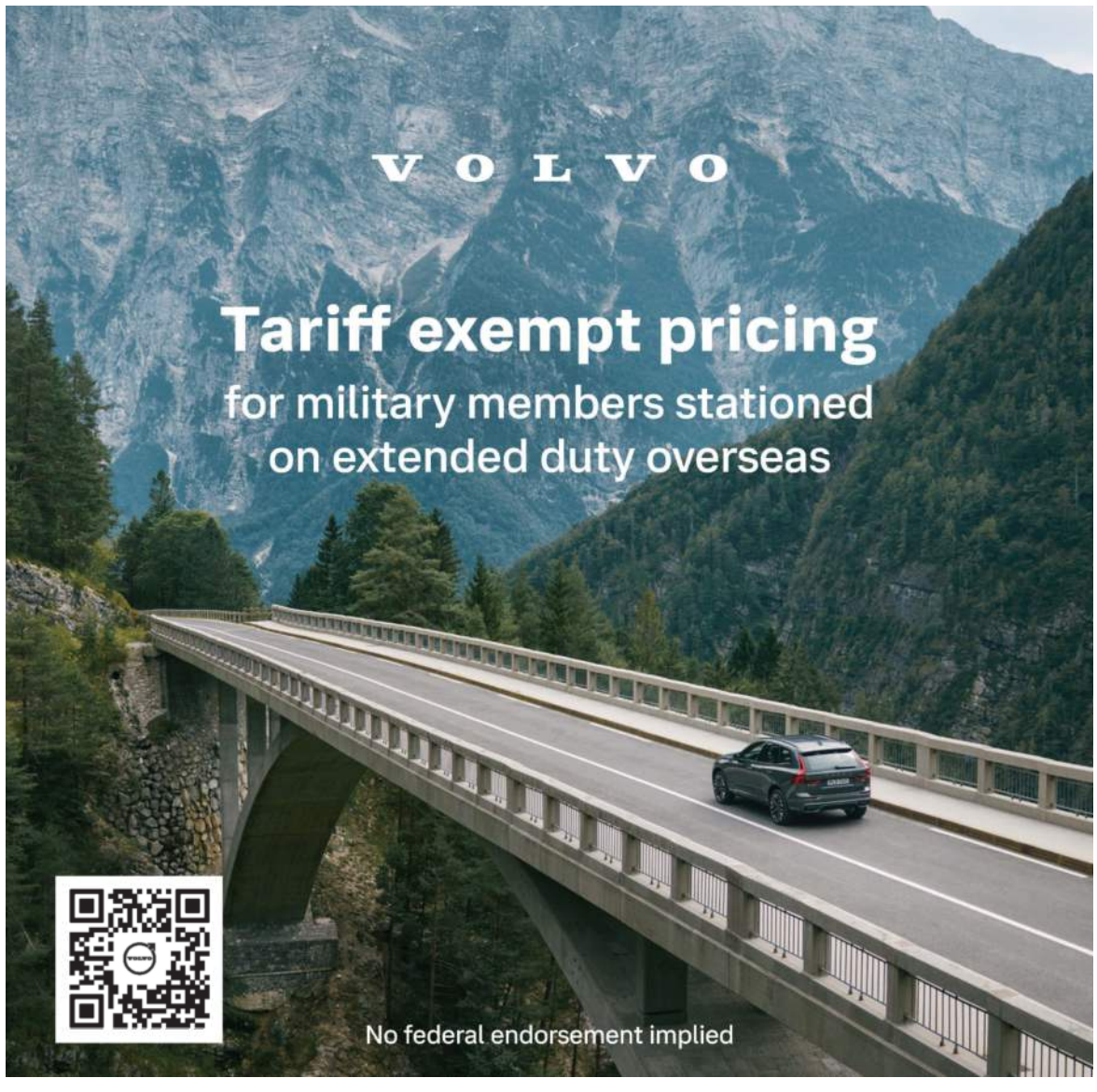
Applications for unemployment aid are viewed as a proxy for layoffs and are close to a real-time indicator of the health of the job market.

Jobless claims figures in recent years have remained in a historically healthy range, suggesting that overall layoffs have been muted despite recent high-profile job cuts. Hiring is also sluggish, which makes finding a job for those out of work challenging.

For now, the U.S. job market appears stuck in a "low-hire, low-fire" state that has kept the unemployment rate historically low.

Last week, private payroll data firm ADP estimated U.S. job losses of 32,000 in November.

The surprisingly weak report comports with recent government employment data, which has shown a significant decline in job growth since President Donald Trump implemented his sweeping tariffs on U.S. trading partners in April.



WORLD

Bulgaria's government resigns after protests

Associated Press

SOFIA, Bulgaria — Bulgaria's government resigned on Thursday after mass protests gripped the country and just weeks before the European Union nation is due to join the eurozone.

The resignation of the minority coalition, led by the center-right GERB party, was announced minutes before parliament was scheduled to vote on a no-confidence motion tabled by the opposition over economic mismanagement and supported by growing public anger with widespread corruption.

"Ahead of today's vote of no confidence, the government is resigning," Prime Minister Rosen Zhelyazkov told reporters in parliament.

The demonstrations on Wednesday came after last week's protests that were sparked by the government's budget plans for higher taxes, increased social security contributions and spending increases. The government later withdrew the contentious 2026 budget plan.

The protesters' demands had expanded to include calls for the center-right government to step down.

"The decisions of the National Assembly are meaningful when they reflect the will of the people," Zhelyazkov said, referring to the anti-government protests. "We want to be where society expects us to be."

Students from Sofia's universities had joined the protests, which organizers said outnumbered last week's rallies that drew more than 50,000 people. Media estimates based on drone visuals put the number of protesters at over 100,000.

At the core of the protesters' frustrations is the role of Bulgarian politician and oligarch Delyan Peevski, who has been sanctioned by both the United States and the United Kingdom, and whose MRF New Beginning party backs the government. Peevski has been accused by opponents of helping shaping government policy in line with oligarchic interests.

"We have no doubt that the government will receive support in the upcoming vote of no confidence. Regardless, the decisions of the National Assembly are important when they reflect the will of the sovereign," the prime minister said.

Zhelyazkov's government survived six votes of no confidence since it was appointed in January, but this time the large turnout of protesters on the streets was a game changer.

The resignation will be formally submitted to parliament on Friday, which must adopt a resolution to accept it.

Venezuelan Nobel laureate vows to return to country

Associated Press

CARACAS, Venezuela — Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado said Thursday that "decisive" actions by the United States, including the seizure of an oil tanker, have left the repressive government of President Nicolás Maduro at its weakest point, and she vowed to return to the country to keep fighting for democracy.

Machado's statements to reporters came hours after she appeared in public for the first time in 11 months, following her arrival in Norway's capital, Oslo, where her daughter received the Nobel Peace Prize award on her behalf on Wednesday.

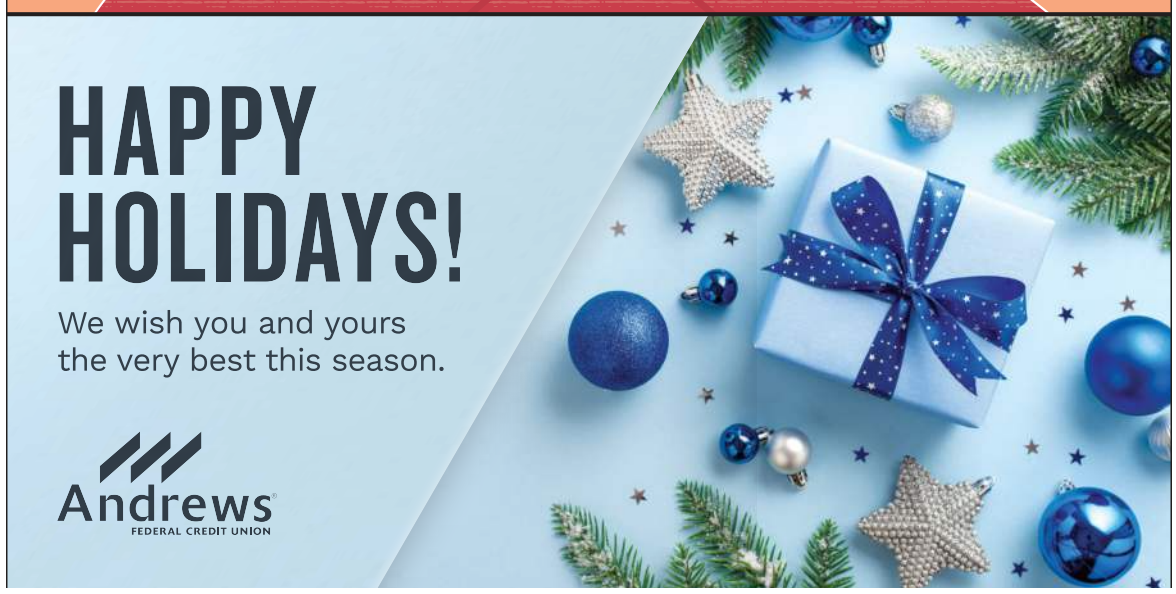
"I think that the actions of President Trump have been decisive to reach where we are now, where the regime is significantly weaker," she told reporters. "Because before, the regime thought it had impunity .... Now they start to understand that this is serious, and that the world is watching."

Machado sidestepped questions on whether a U.S. military intervention is necessary to remove Maduro from power. She told reporters that she would return to Venezuela "when we believe the security conditions are right, and it won't depend on whether or not the regime leaves."

Machado arrived in Oslo hours after Wednesday's prize ceremony and made her first public appearance early Thursday, emerging from a hotel balcony and waving to an emotional crowd of supporters. She had been in hiding since Jan. 9, when she was briefly detained after joining supporters during a protest in Caracas.

Machado left Venezuela at a critical point in the country's protracted crisis, with the Trump administration carrying out a deadly military operations in the Caribbean and threatening repeatedly to strike Venezuelan soil. The White House has said the operations, which have killed 80 people, is meant to stop the flow of drugs into the U.S.

But many, including analysts, U.S. members of Congress and Maduro himself, see the operations as an effort to end his hold on power.



WEEKEND

Craig's Benoit Blanc a man of mystery

Movies, Pages 15-16

Singer we need

'Art of Loving' Grammy nominee Olivia Dean quietly amassing a fervent following with pop-soul grooves, sincere emotions

Music, Pages 30-31

Jack Davison

Gadgets & Tech — 14 Travel & Food — 20-25 Books — 29 Health — 32 Crossword — 34

WEEKEND: GADGETS & TECHNOLOGY

Bedtime stories for AI era

Children's books teaching young kids downsides of tech, importance of privacy

BY SHIRA OVIDE
The Washington Post

Lorrie Cranor influenced what you know about digital privacy. Now she's aiming for preschoolers.

The Carnegie Mellon University professor helped pioneer an internet misery benchmark that tallied the 244 hours a year each American would need to read online privacy policies. (It's probably far higher now.) Cranor, whose research into passwords shaped workplace security policies, showed up to an interview in her homemade dress adorned with our terrible passwords.

Now Cranor has written a children's book, "Privacy, Please!" to help parents and children as young as 4 start talking about privacy in a digital world with few boundaries.

Cranor's book mostly delves into privacy through concepts that little kids grasp, such as privacy in the bathroom, sharing secrets with friends and quiet time alone under a cozy blanket. Overt technology only appears occasionally, including when the child narrator doesn't want to have their photo taken.

Cranor said that she wants her book to spark kid-friendly family conversations about the value of personal space, respect for others and digital well-being.

"By teaching young children about privacy, we can help them understand that their boundaries matter and give them the vocabulary to talk about their privacy needs," Cranor said.

No one wants a version of "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" with a data-gobbling Mark Zuckerberg. (Wait. Do I?) But Cranor's book is among the signs that our technology anxieties are sprouting children's fiction dealing with digital overuse, the data surveillance economy and privacy erosions.

Potty time and turtles

Starting about a decade ago, Cranor and her collaborators asked hundreds of adults and children to draw pictures of what privacy meant to them. Many children (and some grown-ups) drew images of cherished time alone in bedrooms or bathrooms, sometimes with impatient siblings on the other side of the door.

Cranor said that the privacy illustration project and experiences raising her three children showed her that little kids instinctively understand the benefits of personal privacy and healthy secrecy.

Then last year, Cranor and her graduate students led an adult data privacy clinic at a local library. They wanted to include a companion story time for young children, but the librarians said there were no age-appropriate books introducing privacy concepts.

So Cranor decided to write her own. She relied on her privacy illustration research and solicited input from preschool teachers and parents of young children.

Lorrie Cranor's "Privacy, Please!" gently introduces kids to privacy concepts.

"The feedback that I heard is, actually, this is really needed and useful," said Cranor, director of the CyLab Security and Privacy Institute at Carnegie Mellon.

Cranor's self-published storybook doesn't hammer kids over the head with technology. Instead, privacy concepts come up gently.

The illustrations by Alena Karabach in "Privacy, Please!" repeatedly show a turtle, including one pulling into its shell "to feel safe." It's contrasted with a grumpy-looking goldfish in a bowl that can't so easily retreat from prying eyes.

There are pages intended to bring up when a child might want to show artwork to others and when they prefer to work on it without anyone watching. In one panel explicitly about technology, the narrator says, "It's nice to put my technology away and play outside where there's lots of privacy."

I described Cranor's book to Mitch Prinstein, chief of psychology at the American Psychological Association.

"I like the idea very much," he said. "It's interesting to start to think about how to educate and shape some of those attitudes toward privacy."

A budding genre for young kids?

Cranor's book isn't the only one introducing children to the downsides of technology and related life lessons.

A 2021 picture book, "Old MacDonald Had a Phone," encourages time away from devices. A sample line: "The hens wouldn't lay/ On their phones all day."

Daniel J. Solove, director of the privacy and technology law program at George Washington University, also self-published a novel for slightly older children, "The Eyemonger." A creature with 103 eyes promises to "put an end to all crime / because I'll be watching each of you all of the time."

Solove told me that he wrote "The Eyemonger" after he couldn't find a book to discuss privacy with his son. In what Solove said is largely a metaphor for government surveillance, the Eyemonger by the end regrets his extreme zeal for security.

"We all need some time when nobody sees," the creature says.

Cranor's book arrives as Prinstein said that adults' and children's attitudes toward technology and privacy might be starting to shift.

Lorrie Cranor

"Privacy, Please!" author Lorrie Cranor wears her homemade terrible password dress.

Children at middle school age or younger are upset when they learn their data is collected in ways they don't expect and used for profit, Prinstein said.

And while even young children use a lot of technology and often interact with other people through devices, he said they increasingly want real-life connections.

"There's a craving for that right now," he said.

Victrola Zen speaker ready for the outdoors with its solar panel, design, weather-resistant rating

VICTROLA/TNS

The new Victrola Zen Outdoor Solar Speaker not only has powerful, crystal-clear sound but also is a beautifully designed piece of art that delivers all-day, solar-powered playback. With its stone color, it is designed to blend naturally into an outdoor environment.

BY GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service

The new Victrola Zen Outdoor Solar Speaker ($299.99) not only has powerful, crystal-clear sound but also is a beautifully designed piece of art that delivers all-day, solar-powered playback.

The somewhat rounded, stone-colored speaker is designed to blend naturally into an outdoor environment. A flat bottom keeps it in place, and a solar panel on top ensures there's always power. All this is designed with an IP65 weather-resistant body.

A metal grill is on the front cover of the speaker and rubber control buttons for power, pairing and Auracast multispeaker connections are on the opposite side of the grill. All the buttons have corresponding LED indicator lights. There is a rubber flap over the USB-C port that must be closed to keep the speaker weather-resistant.

With its rugged design, one advantage of the speakers is that they can be placed pretty much anywhere: on a patio, in a stable or, as I chose for testing, buried to blend in with my landscape.

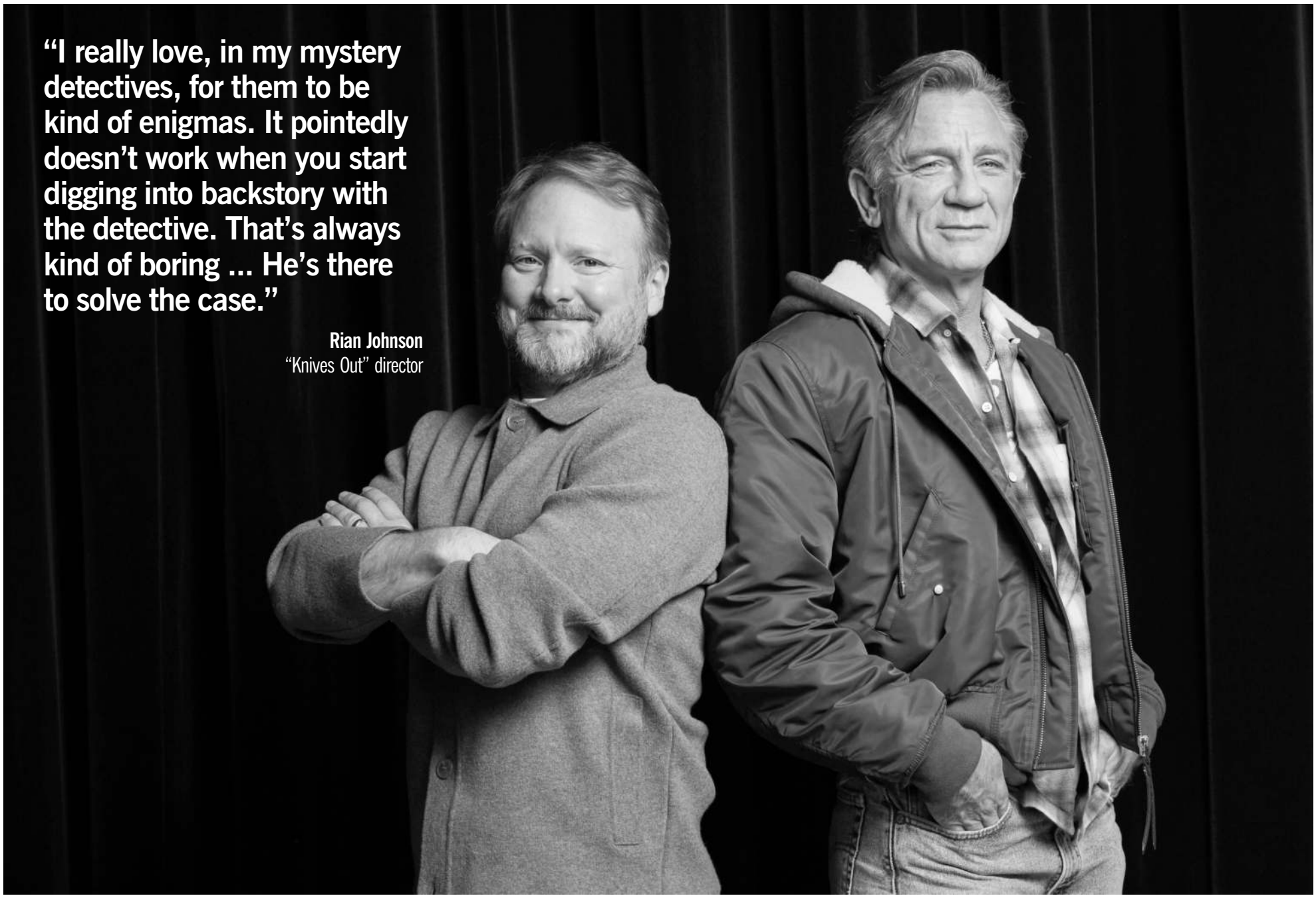
The speakers performed flawlessly, with sound that was clear, crisp and powerful, and had a nice amount of bass. I used two speakers for my testing, and they paired without issue and played for an entire day. In addition to the solar panel, there is a USB-C battery inside.

And while they are great for the outdoors, don't hesitate to pick them up and bring the great sound indoors.

The Victrola Zen was named a winner in this year's Consumer Electronics Show Picks Awards in the Twice category. The category honors products that are at the forefront of innovation, and solutions that push boundaries.

Online: victrola.com/collections/bluetooth-speakers/products/zen-outdoor-solar-speaker

WEEKEND: MOVIES



MATT LICARI, INVISION/AP

"Knives Out" director Rian Johnson and star Daniel Craig pose for a portrait in New York on Nov. 3. The latest mystery in the series, "Wake Up Dead Man," is now on Netflix.

The enigma that is Benoit Blanc

The greatest mystery of the 'Knives Out' films is the detective, whose personality is slowly revealed throughout the trilogy

BY JAKE COYLE
Associated Press

The greatest mystery in Rian Johnson's "Knives Out" movies might be Benoit Blanc.

Over the course of three films, Johnson and actor Daniel Craig have stingily dropped clues to Blanc's past and personal life. Since Blanc first introduced himself in "Knives Out" as "a respectful, quiet, passive observer ... of the truth," following the breadcrumbs has been a sport of its own.

There are, for instance, the vague, offhand references to cases he's cracked before: something with a tennis champion, another with a ballet dancer and, in the latest chapter, "Wake Up Dead Man: A Knives Out Mystery," we hear about something dastardly at the Kentucky Derby that he solved.

Blanc has been profiled in The New Yorker and a guest on "The View." He appears to live with Hugh Grant. He dislikes the board game Clue. Having been caught singing Sondheim and, in the new one, humming "Skimbleshanks: The Railway Cat," from "Cats," we know he loves musical theater.

Over the course of the "Knives Out" trilogy, Johnson and Craig have colored in Blanc with sporadic and comic revelations, adding subtle, and sometimes personal, characteristics.

"I'm not as much into musical theater as Rian," Craig says, sitting beside his director in a recent interview.

"So he claims in front of a microphone," Johnson adds.

Every "Knives Out" movie is wholesale change. New setting. New case. New cast of characters. But Craig and Johnson are the mainstays. Together, they've turned Blanc, the last of the gentleman sleuths, into one of the greatest — "Halle Berry!" — protagonists in recent movies.

In "Wake Up Dead Man," now on Netflix, Blanc takes up the case of a monsignor (Josh Brolin) who dies mysteriously in the middle of a church service. Of the movie's many delights — among them, Josh O'Connor's co-leading performance as a priest under suspicion and a cast of parishioners including Andrew Scott, Jeremy Renner and Glenn Close — is seeing Craig continue to find new little wrinkles to Blanc.

'A Southern lilt'

Rather than being set in stone, Blanc has evolved. Take that accent. The first script, Johnson recalls, described "the slightest hint of a Southern lilt." But Craig, taking inspiration from Tennessee Williams and Shelby Foote, pushed the accent closer to, as Chris Evans' character says in "Knives Out": a "Kentucky-fried Foghorn Leghorn drawl." In "Glass Onion," he laid it on even thicker, part of a scheme revealed only later into the film.

"My biggest fear was that it would devolve," Craig says, chuckling. "If it ever becomes pastiche, it's like, 'Whoa, let's get out of here.' God knows I'm not comparing myself to Gene Wilder, but the way Gene Wilder did comedy was: It's all through truth. As long as you're as truthful as you can get in that situation, the funny comes out."

As thoroughly established in the role as Craig is, he very nearly missed out on Blanc. Craig was initially unavailable for "Knives Out" due to production on "No Time to Die." Johnson sought other possible actors.

"It was literally five weeks later we were shooting. We didn't think you were available," Johnson says. "Then something happened where suddenly you guys got delayed for three months and we had a window."

"I read it and I was shocked that someone would send this to me," Craig says. "Overjoyed. I saw it from the off-go. I read it and I visualized it. It's a testament to his writing. I mean, come on. Benoit Blanc."

'Halle Berry!'

In forming the role, Craig took inspiration from Jacques Tati's debonair but bumbling Monsieur Hulot and Cary Grant's elegant panache in "To Catch a Thief." He combed through out-of-print books of Southern expressions. (One that got cut: "Butter my buns and call me a biscuit.")

SEE BLANC ON PAGE 16

WEEKEND: MOVIES

‘Wake Up Dead Man’ a test of fans’ faith

New ‘Knives Out’ installment combines religion, mystery to concoct an unsatisfying stew

BY MARK KENNEDY
Associated Press

After two installments of his “Knives Out” franchise skewered old and new money, director and writer Rian Johnson targets religion in his third, a gloomy and clunky outing that may test fans’ faith in the filmmaker.

“Wake Up Dead Man: A Knives Out Mystery” gets a new starry cast to orbit Daniel Craig’s foppish detective Benoit Blanc, mixes operatic overacting with sly humor and bites off more than it can digest attempting cultural satire. The pacing is off, too. You won’t exactly need to be nudged awake, but it gets pretty soggy there for a while in the middle.

Blanc takes his sweet time to appear, which means that the first half of the movie is carried by the young Catholic priest Jud Duplenticy — a name Johnson apparently thinks is witty — who is sent to a troubled New York parish called Our Lady of Perpetual Fortitude run by a monsignor who is “a few beads shy of a rosary.”

The young priest — played by a really winning and soulful Josh O’Connor — is a former boxer with a troubled past who in his new faith has found guidance and meaning. He preaches the gospel of love and calls himself “young, dumb and full of Christ.”

What he finds is that the parish is run by a thunder-and-lightning monsignor who preaches the gospel of fear. Played deliciously by Josh Brolin, Monsignor Jefferson Wicks uses shame and guilt to keep his tiny flock in line against a permissive world.

Netflix

Daniel Craig, right, returns as Benoit Blanc in “Wake Up Dead Man.” Josh O’Connor plays Rev. Jud Duplenticy, who teams up with Blanc to solve a monsignor’s murder.

“Anger lets us fight back,” he announces. “I hold the line.” Johnson is making a leaden dig at those in power who inflame divisions for their own power.

When Wicks is found dead, Blanc finally shows up. The manner of the death is a classic detective book trope: The so-called locked-room mystery. Blanc calls this crime’s “Holy Grail.”

There are many suspects, of course: His devoted secretary (Glenn Close), an alcoholic doctor (Jeremy Renner), the groundskeeper (Thomas Haden Church), a sci-fi novelist in decline (Andrew Scott), a cellist with nerve pain (Cailee Spaeny), a MAGA-like political hack (Daryl McCormack) and the woman who raised him, a resentful lawyer (Kerry Washington). Johnson tries hard to give each depth, despite their sheer number, with telling details, like the way they tap a spoon on a teacup.

Chief among the suspects is our bare-knuckle priest, whose relationship with the older Man of God has gone from bad to worse. “You’re poisoning the church,” he tells the monsignor, and vows to “cut you out like a cancer.” No wonder the town’s police chief (Mila Kunis) quickly zeroes in on the younger man.

There’s no way you can solve this one, so just relax and let it stutter-stop several times to its overcooked end. Along the way, Johnson makes jokes about Oprah, “The Phantom of the Opera” and even Netflix, the hand that feeds him, while dead bodies go headfirst down the stairs thunk-thunk-thunk, an $80 million diamond appears and suspects scream, as storms swirl, that “Vengeance is mine!”

Perhaps the movie’s best bits are when the young priest and detective team up to solve the crime. Blanc reveals himself to be a “proud heretic” who only “kneels at the altar of the practical” and believes religion is just storytelling, a means of control. The younger priest believes the opposite and is torn between sleuthing and his ministry, his open heart propelling the movie while Craig’s Foghorn Leghorn, Southern-fried dandyism grows increasingly tiresome. (Although fans do get to hear him utter “Scooby Dooby Doo.”)

Johnson has so far made a few glancing blows against cults of personality and the dynamics of in-groups, but nothing terribly crushing. He then comes to more tricky waters when the monsignor seemingly emerges alive from three days in a crypt, a riff from a foundational tenet of Christianity: the resurrection itself. It’s the ultimate in glib.

A satisfying conclusion awaits but, truth be told, it has been a bit of a slog, with soft digressions into social critiques and the meaning of faith grafted onto a setup that, by the third movie in the franchise, shows its seams instantly. Wake up, indeed.

“Wake Up Dead Man: A Knives Out Mystery” is rated PG-13 for violent content, bloody images, strong language, some crude sexual material and smoking. Running time: 140 minutes. Now streaming on Netflix.

Blanc: Character has evolved over course of series

FROM PAGE 15

Along the way, Craig has improvised some of Blanc’s best expressions. In “Wake Up Dead Man,” he suddenly blurts out, as if moved by the swelling whodunit hijinks: “Scooby Dooby Doo!” A sip of Renner-sponsored hot sauce in “Glass Onion” led to the infamous “Halle Berry!”

“All of the best lines in there are things Daniel just brings,” Johnson says. “He says, ‘What about this?’ and I start laughing. And it’s the best line in the movie.”

“I have a security team and there’s a guy that says it,” Craig says of the etymology of “Halle Berry.” “I stole it. I said, ‘Can I have that?’ and he said ‘Yep.’”

For Craig and Johnson, Blanc has been an ongoing conversation. “Wake Up Dead Man,” the most sincere of the three mysteries, deals significantly with matters of faith and religion. The two worked to sharpen Blanc’s perspective. In the film, he declares himself “a proud heretic. I kneel at the altar of the rational.”

Then there are the ornate flourishes of dialogue Johnson pens for Blanc. Modeled on Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot, Blanc is the knowing product of a rich literary tradition, dusted off for modern times. In contemporary satires, Blanc is the retro linchpin.

That means Craig delivering lines like “I suspect foul play” silhouetted against a fireplace, and vowing to uncover “what this flock of wicked wolves is hiding” while framed in a stained-glass window.

“Delicious,” Craig says with a grin.

A franchise of their own

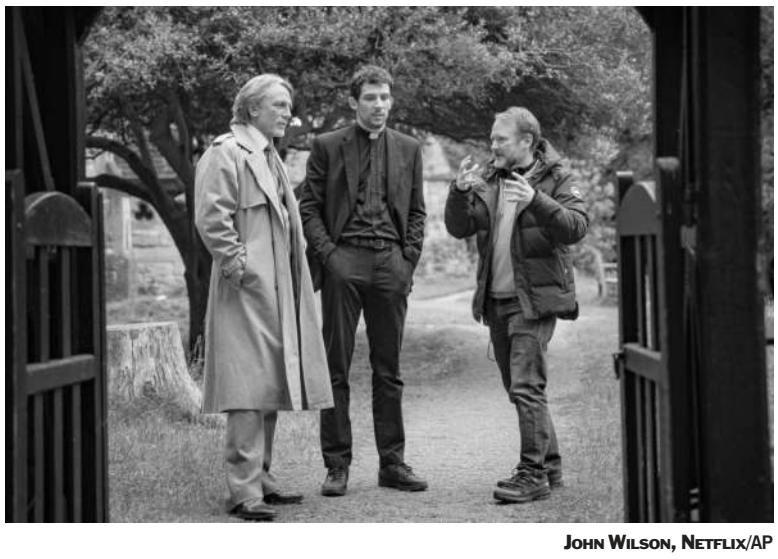
It’s ironic that, on the heels of their own experiences with iconic film series, Johnson and Craig have built a franchise all their own. Johnson released “Knives Out” two years after the much-debated “Star Wars: The Last Jedi.” As he exited the James Bond films, Craig donned the suit of another justice-seeker, albeit one with much different swimwear.

“I don’t think either of us really thought about it that way,” Johnson says. “It’s just been making one movie after another, just trying to keep it challenging and fresh for ourselves. It feels almost accidental that suddenly we’ve made three. It definitely wasn’t setting out to build, God forbid, the filthiest word in the universe, IP. We’re just trying to make movies.”

“I’ve been doing this for long enough that as soon as you start counting your chickens on a job, it’s all over,” Craig adds.

Yet it’s now possible, especially as the two contemplate a fourth “Knives Out” film, that there are young moviegoers who know Craig more as Blanc than they do that other B-name. If Johnson and Craig do keep “Knives Out” going, even as a two-film deal with Netflix concludes, it will allow Johnson the chance to restock his whodunit cupboard. But it will just as surely offer the opportunity to relaunch, and play with, Blanc.

“I really love, in my mystery detectives, for them to be kind of enigmas. It pointedly doesn’t work when you start digging into backstory with the detective,” Johnson says. “That’s always kind of boring because character is only revealed through action and the action of a detective is such a strong thing. He’s there to solve the case.”



JOHN WILSON, NETFLIX/AP

Actors Daniel Craig, left, and Josh O’Connor, center, with writer/director Rian Johnson, right, on the set of “Wake Up Dead Man: A Knives Out Mystery.”

In some ways, Blanc is like a movie star. He shows up, dazzles and goes home to his largely unseen private life. Craig likes it that way.

“Going back to ‘Death on the Nile’ and ‘Evil Under the Sun,’ Petey (Ustinov) turns up looking glorious from somewhere — who knows where; some party in the South of France,” Craig says. “And he ends up leaving in the end and going off somewhere. He’s sort of alienated from the rest of the people. He has to be, because he’s the guy who suspects everybody.”

Every few years, Blanc comes and goes. Everything in between is a riddle.

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS

A fluffy 'Dust Bunny'

Fuller brings TV flair to big screen with a shallow but neat kiddie-centric hard R genre exercise about childhood trauma

BY KATIE WALSH
Tribune News Service

TV legend Bryan Fuller, known for his cult classic television series like "Pushing Daisies" and "Hannibal," just earned an Independent Spirit Award nomination for Best First Feature, for "Dust Bunny." It's somehow a surprise that the well-known TV creator just directed his first film, after spending almost three decades working in television, on series like "Dead Like Me" and "American Gods." Now, he turns to the world of indie film, reuniting with actor Mads Mikkelsen, his Hannibal Lecter, on the dark fairy tale "Dust Bunny."

Fuller has a thing for idioms, exploring these tropes to their most extreme ends (e.g., "pushing daisies"), and so in "Dust Bunny," he imagines what those bits of fluff could be if our nightmares came to life. He also posits an outlandish notion: What if a kid hired an assassin to kill the monster under her bed?

Aurora (Sophie Sloan) is an imaginative young girl who hears things that roar and scream in the night, the dust bunny under her bed a ravenous, monstrous thing. When her parents go missing, she's convinced they've been eaten by the monster bunny, and seeks out the services of an "intriguing neighbor" (Mikkelsen, that's how he's credited), whom she has seen vanquishing dragons in the alley outside. With a fee that she purloins from a church collection plate, she implores him for help, and he agrees, as he learns more about this young girl's challenging childhood.

At first, "Dust Bunny" feels a little light, the story skittering across its densely designed surface, with very little dialogue in the first half. But it grows and grows, more bits and pieces of story accumulating together as Fuller reveals this strange, heightened world. We meet Intriguing Neighbor's handler Laverne (Sigourney Weaver), revealing the larger, "John Wick"-ian world of killers that he inhabits. Wicked Laverne chomps through her scenes like the monster bunny chomps through the floorboards — literally, as she consumes charcuterie, dumplings and "suckling pig tea sandwiches" with gusto. Indeed, some monsters are seated across the table, Cheshire cats grinning in florals.

The film is essentially "Leon: The Professional" meets "Amelie" (one of Fuller's favorite films), but with his distinct wit and flair. But that style also means that "Dust Bunny" is quite fussy and mannered, and if you don't buy into the film's arch humor and stylized world, you're liable to bounce right off of it. As Fuller opens the world up, revealing a sly FBI agent (Sheila Atim) and more and more baddies (David Dastmalchian, Rebecca Henderson), the story becomes more intriguing beyond its unwieldy childhood trauma metaphor, but there's also not quite enough embroidered on this tapestry. It feels shallow, the world only gestured toward, not fleshed out.

ROADSIDE ATTRACTIONS/TNS

Aurora (Sophie Sloan) enlists her Intriguing Neighbor (Mads Mikkelsen) to deal with a monster under her bed in "Dust Bunny," Bryan Fuller's first feature film.

Fuller demonstrates a strong command over his visual domain, but the pat allegory he presents about the monsters with whom we have to learn to live feels a bit muddled. Sloan and Mikkelsen are terrific together, but you feel that there is much more they could sink their teeth into here, and perhaps the limits of the story reveal the limits of the budget, carefully wallpapered over with opulent production design — explosions of patterns and color crafted by Jeremy Reed, captured with shadowy but lush cinematography by Nicole Hirsch Whitaker.

Fuller's foray into film feels like a first feature — a bit of a surprise for someone so experienced. But the project sports his signature style, even if it doesn't add up to much more than a neat kiddie-centric hard R genre exercise.

"Dust Bunny" is rated R for violence. Running time: 106 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.

'Ella McCay' about political scandal is wooden, muddled

BY JOCELYN NOVECK
Associated Press

"I can't trust my brain right now," says our hero, Ella, deep into James L. Brooks' bafflingly disjointed, uneven, unfunny and illogical "Ella McCay."

And finally, nearly two hours into a perplexing muddle of a storyline, we have some clarity of thought. No, dear, we want to tell Ella, played by the lovely Emma Mackey, who is truly the only reason to watch any of this. No, your brain is fine (and by the way, what a depressing line to put in the mouth of your most intelligent character — a hard-working woman in politics). It's your script you can't trust, Ella! Run away from it. Now.

It's hard to understand how "Ella McCay," the first original feature from writer-director Brooks in 15 years, goes so utterly haywire. Is this really the same mind that wrote the memorable "Broadcast News"? "Terms of Endearment"? "As Good As It Gets"? We get a bit of a hint in the studio's press notes, which mention that Brooks began his script "without a specific storyline in mind."

Hmm. Perhaps that (unintentionally) explains this tangle of half-baked characters and subplots — each more head-scratching than the next but also boring — and an ending that's unbelievable, by which we mean not believable. What's even less believable is that smart supporting actors like Jamie Lee Curtis, Ayo Edebiri, Woody Harrelson and Rebecca Hall didn't walk out in protest of a lack of coherence. (Well, actually, Hall is gone in a matter of minutes.)

The main action takes place over three days in 2008, in an unnamed state. An aggressively folksy Julie Kavner as narrator tells us Ella is a great person, and super-bright, and at 34, one of the youngest people to serve as lieutenant governor.

She's also a moral compass — both in the dog-eat-dog world of politics, where she just wants to pass good laws that help good people — and in her messed-up family. This family includes her weaselly father (Harrelson, intermittently amusing) who, in a flashback to when Ella was 16, loses his job in a sexual harassment scandal.

20TH CENTURY STUDIOS/AP

Jack Lowden, left, and Emma Mackey play husband and wife in "Ella McCay." His character Ryan is first gentleman to Ella (Mackey), the lieutenant governor.

Soon after, when Ella's mother (Hall, wasted) tells her that Dad is moving the family to California, Ella insists on staying put, at her school. She'll live with her loyal and loving Aunt Helen (Curtis), who runs — of course! — the diner next door.

Flash forward 18 years, and Ella is summoned by her governor boss (Albert Brooks). He tells her he's in line for a Cabinet position, which means Ella would be interim governor. "You wouldn't get this any other way," he notes, helpfully,

There's one prickly problem. Ella is enmeshed in scandal; she's been having amorous relations, with her own husband, at lunchtime, in a room that's technically state property. (Yep, this is the best scandal they could come up with.)

Also, there's a reporter who knows this, and he's trying to extort her in exchange for better access (to what, is unclear). Her husband is the one handling it. And so we flash back to high school to meet Ryan, who seems nice enough (but truly ridiculous as a high school student — there clearly was no de-aging budget).

Anyway, Ryan (Jack Lowden) is now poised to become the state's first gentleman. We can see how Ella likes his easy good looks. But then, poof, he suddenly becomes a total jerk and we can't believe Ella would even think to be married to such a cad. But there's a lot here that we wouldn't think would happen.

So Ella becomes governor. Yay! But Ryan is peeved to be sidelined. In a quickly abandoned subplot involving his mother, he threatens to leave Ella unless she allows him to co-govern. If only Ella would listen to Helen, who tells her, in advice that's ignored, that Ryan is "a ticking time bomb in your life." Which just might be the one decent line given to poor Curtis in the whole movie.

Then we have the strange story of Ella's agoraphobic younger brother, Casey (Spike Fearn), and his former would-be girlfriend, Susan (Edebiri). In a long sequence that feels like it comes from nowhere, just like the subplot about the state troopers and the overtime — don't ask! — Casey works up the courage to find Susan and ask her to be his girlfriend. The talented Edebiri almost makes your ticket price worthwhile — she's adorable. But the scene is ludicrous.

Finally, somebody just says "this script is a mess." Oh, wait — that's the scribble in my screening notebook.

Anyway, it all comes to a denouement in a confrontation with Ella's political opponents. We won't reveal the specifics, but soon after, when Ella and Helen have a screaming session in the living room — you know, just for fun — it's tempting to join in.

Like them, we're confused. We're annoyed. And we're not getting these two hours back.

"Ella McCay" is rated PG-13 for strong language, some sexual material and drug content. Running time: 115 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.

WEEKEND: MOVIES

Season's streaming

A guide to Netflix's best, worst Christmas movies of the year

BY MOIRA MACDONALD
The Seattle Times

Once again, it's time to festoon ourselves with garlands, fire up the twinkle lights and examine the very special cinematic universe that is Netflix Christmas movies. This year brings four new ones, filled with holiday sweaters and adorable, if sparsely stocked, retail establishments (seriously, this is sort of a theme). And I watched and rated them all. Now, will somebody please bring me a frosted cookie and some eggnog? Happy holidays to us all!

Netflix photos

Connor Swindells, left, and Olivia Holt as small-time thieves Nick and Sophie in "Jingle Bell Heist," a sort of holiday-themed "Oceans Two." The two fall in love while planning a London department store robbery.

'A Merry Little Ex-Mas'

The premise: Kate (Alicia Silverstone) and Everett (Oliver Hudson), long-married parents of two mostly grown-up children, are getting divorced — but Kate, who is kind of a lot, is determined that they will still celebrate their traditional family Christmas together. These plans are affected, however, when Kate learns about Everett's frighteningly chic girlfriend Tessa (Jameela Jamil), who cheerfully points out that this whole situation is like the movie "The Holiday," except "in that movie, the ex-wife is dead." Merry merry!

The setting: The fictional, snow-laden town of Winterlight, Vt., and yes, that's really its name, and it absolutely looks like a Norman Rockwell painting; somebody observes that living there is like growing up in a Yankee Candle. Kate lives in a gingerbread house come to life — seriously, I burst out laughing when I saw it; you have never seen such cuteness — that everyone refers to as The Mothership for some reason. The town also boasts the world's most adorable hardware store, which does not appear to actually stock any hardware.

The naughty: The screenplay, which makes Kate a mess of contradictions — this woman is so eco-conscious she won't let her kids shop retail, and yet lives in an enormous house lit top-to-bottom with Christmas lights. To Silverstone's credit, she mostly sells this character; it's as if Cher from "Clueless," 30 years later, moved to Vermont and got obsessed with found-object Christmas decor.

The nice: Kate and Everett's cute habit of calling each other Betty and Al (it's a Paul Simon thing), and Kate's impressive collection of holiday aprons. Actually, a lot of this movie is pretty cute, approaching the platonic ideal of a Netflix holiday movie (in short: former teen star, snow, more white-lit Christmas trees than you ever thought possible). Also delightful: a person who gets to deliver a line beginning, "As the mayor of Winterlight and your friend ..." and then goes on to give romantic advice. I am going to start saying this myself when delivering advice.

The decor: Perfect small-town charm, right down to the ever-falling snow and the many, many artfully lit swags in Kate's home.

Rating: 3.5 lights

"A Merry Little Ex-Mas," stars Alicia Silverstone, left, and Oliver Hudson as a divorced couple. It received the best rating of the season's new Netflix holiday films.

Sydney (Minka Kelly) has a fling with Henri (Tom Wozniczka), the son of an executive with whom she's trying to land an account, in "Champagne Problems."

'Champagne Problems'

The premise: Sydney (Minka Kelly), a high-powered executive with extremely selective lactose intolerance (yes, I'm sorry, this is an actual plot point), is in Paris over the holiday to land a storied Champagne account — but finds out, as one does, that Henri, the cute Parisian (Tom Wozniczka) with whom she had a romantic fling the night before her meeting, is actually the son of the Champagne company's founder. Oops!

The setting: Two settings, both of them delightful: Paris, drenched in sparkling lights and a subdued French version of holiday cheer, and the Champagne mogul's picturesque château in the country, dusted in snow and looking like a Christmas card.

The naughty: Sydney and Henri are, alas, extremely boring, particularly since this movie insists on surrounding them with minor characters who are far more entertaining. I was particularly fond of a dour German potential buyer of the Champagne business who likes to talk about how "in Germany, 'Die Hard' is considered a tragedy"; a tightly wound French executive who commits the extremely French act of cheese sabotage; and a cheerful gazillionaire with a habit of "premature congratulations." Wait, who are Sydney and Henri again, and why do I care? And why is Sydney, on the night before the most important meeting of her professional life, running around Paris buying American self-help books (???) and tilting her head cutely at Henri? Is this movie's unspoken secret that Sydney is very, very bad at her job?

The nice: I am delighted to inform you that this movie includes a very photogenic dog in a Santa outfit, not to mention an excellent villain — he's a scheming colleague of Sydney's — who has the sort of wickedly precise blond highlights that signal a dark heart.

The decor: Fairly restrained, as Netflix holiday movies go; the halls of that château are tastefully decked, but not over-the-top. Bonus points, though, for a scene involving light-strewn horse-drawn carriages, and for the extremely well-distributed snow. French snow is, apparently, a bit more stylish than American snow.

Rating: 3 lights (including an extra half star solely for the dog)

'Jingle Bell Heist'

The premise: A pair of cute small-time thieves, Sophie (Olivia Holt) and Nick (Connor Swindells), plot to rob the posh London department store where Sophie works as a clerk. Call it, I don't know, a holiday-themed "Ocean's Two." Their plans seem ambitious, particularly as Sophie and Nick don't seem like the brightest bulbs on the Christmas tree, but hey, robbing the Louvre in real life apparently wasn't that hard, was it? And of course they end up falling for each other, because it's that kind of movie.

The setting: London at Christmastime, where the streets are bustling and jingle bells are ringing. Much of the action takes place at Sterling's, a fictional and not entirely plausible department store whose main sales floor seems curiously empty of merchandise.

The naughty: This movie does not have the courage of its convictions, if that is something that can be said of a Netflix Christmas movie, and we quickly learn that Sophie and Nick aren't really thieves but nice people who have had bad things happen to them. Which is not as much fun as if they were just sort of evil; "Jingle Bell Heist" needs more com in its rom.

The nice: That being said, I did appreciate the sprightly costume details, such as Nick and Sophia dressing for the heist in cutely coordinating striped outfits for some reason, or the hat worn by the store owner's scheming wife

SEE STREAM ON PAGE 19

WEEKEND: MOVIES

Streaming: While not classics, these 4 films are worth a watch

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(Lucy Punch) that makes her look as if her head is surrounded by tiny black birds in flight. Also charming: Nick's flatmate Ralph (Michael Salami), who wears a wizard's hat decorated in tinsel and makes random comments like "You ever been to a mass gathering of Shreks?"

The decor: Despite Sterling's lack of product inventory, it is VERY nicely decorated with elaborate trees and lights everywhere.

Rating: 2.5 lights

'My Secret Santa'

The premise: A single mother named Taylor (Alexandra Breckenridge), who has lost her job as a cookie inspector and is desperate to earn money to pay for her daughter to attend an elite snowboarding academy (the preceding phrase feels like it was written by a Netflix Christmas movie bot, doesn't it?), disguises herself as an older man in order to get a job playing Santa at a resort hotel. In other words, kind of a holiday version of "Mrs. Doubtfire," minus Robin Williams. And, because this is a Netflix rom-com, Taylor meets a blandly handsome fellow named Matthew (Ryan Eggold) who has excellent taste in overcoats — and who turns out to be the manager of the resort. Complications!

The setting: The fictional Sun Peaks, a reasonably posh ski resort in a generic mountain town ... somewhere?

The naughty: Well, there's a scene where someone thinks Santa is having a sexual encounter in a bathroom stall — but it all turns out quite innocently. It's part of a lengthy fast-costume-changing sequence that's a complete rip-off of "Mrs. Doubtfire," just not as funny. Really nothing about this movie makes any sense (Taylor is some sort of former rock star? Matthew is the son of the resort owner, but a "free spirit"? Taylor's teenager is an angelic creature from outer space who just wants her mom to be happy?), but ho ho ho.

The nice: Kudos to the makeup department, for turning Breckenridge into a reasonably plausible and extremely twinkly Santa, and to the spin that Tia Mowry, as a scheming colleague (someone in every Netflix Christmas movie is required to be a schemer), puts on the line "This man is an impostor!" like she's been waiting to deliver it for years. And really, Matthew's overcoat game is very solid.

The decor: This movie very weirdly takes place in what appears to be an actual universe: Taylor's single-mom apartment is quite modest and barely holiday-decorated at all, and the resort hotel is your basic bland corporate box with a few garlands and department store Christmas trees thrown in. Which means this movie, though realistic, is an abject failure as a Netflix Christmas movie, despite the presence of Santa. I'm sorry, but I need to be firm here: A Netflix Christmas movie needs to have warm-white string lights and festive swags of greenery EVERYWHERE, so much so that you fear for these fictional people's electric bills and/or the denuded shrubbery they left behind. I do not make up these rules, friends; I merely enforce them.

Rating: 2 lights

Moira Macdonald's rating system

1 light: Not even worth hate-watching
2 lights: If there's nothing else to watch, try this
3 lights: Watchable, some semblance of plot
4 lights: Cute, heartwarming
5 lights: A classic to rewatch every year

Netflix

"My Secret Santa," with Ryan Eggold, left, and Alexandra Breckenridge, right, in a Santa costume, is like "Mrs. Doubtfire."

AMAZON PRIME/AP

Michelle Pfeiffer plays a mom tired of being unappreciated during the holidays in "Oh. What. Fun."

Heroes of the holidays

'Oh. What. Fun.' misses mark despite noble goal of highlighting moms

By Lindsey Bahr
Associated Press

Michelle Pfeiffer plays a mom on the edge at Christmas time in the new movie "Oh. What. Fun." If the sarcastic punctuation wasn't enough of a tipoff, Pfeiffer's character Claire is not having the best time.

Claire's grown kids (Felicity Jones, Chloë Grace Moretz, Dominic Sessa) don't appreciate her efforts. Her husband (Denis Leary) is supportive without being helpful. And she is operating as a one-woman show, managing this precious time with her family and trying to keep it all cozy and happy and fun through constant, thankless labor (cooking, cleaning, wrapping, planning). But after one particularly cruel oversight from her family, she takes off from her suburban prison and doesn't tell anyone. For once, she's decided to go do something for herself.

Promising though it may seem, "Oh. What. Fun." is a movie that does very little with its setup and terrific cast (including the likes of Danielle Brooks, Joan Chen, Maude Apatow, Rose Abdoo and Eva Longoria in almost cameo-sized roles), opting instead for the most generic version of itself.

The movie, streaming on Prime Video, begins with a kind of "low point" (for a beautiful, well-off, stay-at-home Texas mom, that is) in which she tells some children in a neighboring car at a gas station to be nicer to their exhausted mother in the front seat. "She'll be dead someday," she says calmly and seriously. She wishes the mother a Merry Christmas, gives the kids a piercing look and then we get the dreaded freeze-frame/record scratch and a voice-over about being entitled to a little outburst around the holidays and a half-hearted rant about how many holiday movies are about men.

"They need to make a movie about the true heroes of the holidays: moms," Claire says. Sure, yes, preach, Claire, even if her exclusions are suspect and her examples need further review. I'm pretty sure "Home Alone" was at least a little bit about the mom, and that "Planes, Trains and Automobiles" doesn't deserve the vitriol. Alas, noble intentions aside, "Oh. What. Fun." probably wasn't what she had in mind.

Director Michael Showalter co-wrote the script with the short story's author, Chandler Baker, and is committed to keeping the proceedings light and breezy. But the effect is a movie that seems almost embarrassed to commit to its own silly premise, rushing through everything instead of letting us enjoy this cast. Everyone gets assigned one tidy problem or flaw, and no one has any sort of lived-in familial chemistry with one another.

Claire wants one thing for Christmas: for her family to have submitted her to a contest to meet her favorite daytime talk show host, Zazzy Tims (Longoria). Of course, no one got the hint. But her breaking point really comes when she realizes everyone has gone to an event that she planned without her. No one noticed she wasn't in one of the cars. And so, instead of driving herself to meet them, she decides to drive to Burbank and crash the Zazzy Tims show instead.

Showalter attempts to turn this road trip into a kind of "Planes, Trains and Automobiles" journey, even having her share a dingy motel room with Brooks, playing a suspiciously contented delivery driver (a little on the nose for an Amazon movie). But it barely commits to the bit, and they soon go their separate ways instead of embarking on a buddy trip.

There must be a kind of director's jail for such restrained use of a performer like Jason Schwartzman (as Claire's son-in-law), or using Chen as a one-joke "perfect" neighbor with her all-white and silver Christmas decorations.

In its own way, "Oh. What. Fun." has also accidentally tapped into the cinematic zeitgeist. This is a year in which on-screen mothers aren't just on the edge — they're in complete and total free fall. Jennifer Lawrence's feral barking in "Die My Love," Rose Byrne's waking nightmare in "If I Had Legs I'd Kick You," Jessie Buckley's primal agony in "Hamnet." Even Teyana Taylor's postpartum apathy in "One Battle After Another" could fit.

Lighter versions are welcome too — there's nothing like comedic release. But if the idea was to make something for the moms, "Oh. What. Fun." is about as thoughtful as a hastily scribbled card on a piece of printer paper the morning of her birthday. We can all do better.

"Oh. What. Fun." is rated PG-13 for some drug use, sexual material and strong language. Running time: 106 minutes. Now streaming on Prime Video.

WEEKEND: FOOD

‘Stollen tastes like Christmas’

German bakers continue rich tradition of producing sweet Dresden specialty

BY KIRSTEN GRIESHABER
Associated Press

When pastry chef Tino Gierig is asked what the famous Dresden stollen tastes like, his eyes sparkle and his voice rises to an enthusiastic singsong as he describes the rich delicacy filled with raisins and other dried fruits.

“Stollen tastes like Christmas, like family, like tradition, like homeyness, peace, serenity,” he said as he lovingly kneaded his buttery yeast dough before folding in golden raisins in his Dresdner Backhaus bakery.

Bakers in the eastern German city of Dresden have been making stollen for hundreds of years and it is now a treasured Christmas tradition. It is usually cut on the first weekend of Advent — the four-week period leading up to Christmas — and served with coffee and Christmas cookies.

After baking several loaves of stollen in his Dresden bakery in November, Gierig picked off some slightly burned raisins from the top, brushed the pastry with butter, sprinkled granulated sugar on top and in a final touch dusted it with powdered sugar.

The 55-year-old is precise in his baking, and also particular about how to define his hand-baked Christmas specialty: “It’s a heavy yeast dough; it’s not bread; it’s not cake. It’s a pastry that is only made for the Advent season.”

In Germany, the dessert is often called Christstollen, and to Gierig it looks “like Christ child wrapped in swaddling clothes.”

“This kind of baking has a lot to do with symbolism,” Gierig said.

PHOTOS BY EBRAHIM NOROOZI/AP

A stollen, a traditional Christmas pastry, sits on a table Nov. 11 in a bakery in Dresden, Germany. Bakers in the eastern German city have been making stollen for hundreds of years.

The ingredients used to make stollen include buttery yeast dough, golden raisins, candied orange and lemon peels as well as sweet and bitter almonds.

Pastry chef Tino Gierig makes stollen at his Dresdner Backhaus bakery. After it’s baked, he sprinkles granulated sugar on top and dusts it with powdered sugar.

A protected brand

While Gierig’s description sounds like an ode to Christmas baking and the creation of stollen in particular, stollen is also big business with an organization that is dedicated to protecting and promoting the brand.

The Dresden Stollen Protection Association awards a coveted golden quality seal as a certificate of authenticity to bakeries that fulfill certain conditions and which are located in or near Dresden. The products are checked every year to make sure they fulfill all the expectations of the association.

According to the strict rules, stollen must be made with heaps of butter — at least 50% of the flour content — as well as a generous load of golden raisins, candied orange and lemon peel as well as some sweet and bitter almonds. The addition of margarine, artificial preservatives or artificial flavors is not allowed.

The Dresdner Christstollen is additionally protected by European Union rules that stipulate where and how it needs to be produced, just like Lübecker Marzipan from the northern German city of Lübeck, Schwarzwälder Schinken ham from the Black Forest, or Aachener Printen gingerbread from the western German city of Aachen.

Nonetheless, the bakeries, which have often been run by the same families for many generations, can add their own mix of spices and flavors. They usually include vanilla and cardamom, and sometimes tonka beans, cinnamon, nutmeg or cloves.

“There are just so many flavors from all over the world in there that have blended together, making it simply a wonderful symbiosis,” Gierig said.

In 2024, more than 5 million loaves were sold, about 20% of which were exported. Austria and Switzerland are the main countries of export, but Gierig says he also sells many stollen online to customers in the United States.

When stored in a dry, dark and cool place, the specialty keeps for many weeks.

A tradition with roots in the Middle Ages

While today’s recipes are fancy in ingredients and elaborate in preparation, Dresden stollen’s medieval origins are humble.

Stollen was first mentioned in 1474 on an invoice from the city’s Christian Bartolomai Hospital, according to the association.

However, at that time, it was not yet considered a Christmas delicacy, but a fasting pastry that consisted only of flour, yeast and water.

Butter was not allowed until Pope Innocent VIII in Rome granted a special request by Elector Ernest of Saxony to lift the butter ban in 1491. From then on, stollen bakers have been also allowed to use more substantial ingredients.

While some of the more exotic spices were hard to get during the Communist decades in East Germany, stollen was among the most coveted delicacies in the country. Even Germans living in postwar capitalist West Germany were always hoping to get an original Dresden stollen package for Christmas from their brethren in the East as none of the stollen made in the west came anywhere close to the original.

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Ghent, altarpiece are medieval, marvelous

Once one of Belgium's medieval powerhouses, Ghent has hardly been preserved in amber. It's a living urban center, with its share of big-city scruffiness and the vibrant student population you'd expect to find in the home of one of Belgium's biggest universities. But at its heart, Ghent still looks much like it did circa 1500, when this was one of Europe's greatest cities: bristling with towers, rich with art and thronged with upscale citizens.

As early as the 1200s, Ghent's population had grown to around 65,000 — north of the Alps, only Paris was larger. Two-thirds of its citizens were textile workers, meaning Ghent was arguably Europe's first industrial city.

Ghent is very walkable, and I enjoy strolling through the old town in this extremely Flemish city, where the native language is Dutch (but everyone also speaks English). On a recent visit, I started in a square called Korenmarkt (Grain Market), the center of historic Ghent.

Near the square is St. Michael's Bridge, which provides Ghent's best 360-degree panorama. The waterway underfoot — now plied by tourist-laden boats — was the city's busy harbor. Lining the embankment are several ornately decorated guild houses — meeting halls for the town's boatmen, grain traders and weighers.

From here, I turned around to head away from the river, past a medieval church, toward the big, wooden roof of the market hall. Just a couple decades ago, this space was no more than an ugly parking lot. Now, it's a public square, partially sheltered by the hall's modern twin-gabled roof meant to evoke the rooftops of medieval Ghent. While many residents embrace the market, some find its avant-garde style jarring.

Rick Steves

Next door is the Belfry. Although most of this tower has stood here since the 14th century, its Neo-Gothic spire was added when Ghent proudly hosted a World's Fair in 1913.

On the other side of the Belfry is St. Bavo's Square and Ghent's top sight: St. Bavo's Cathedral. This towering Gothic church houses the pearl of Flemish painting — the Ghent Altarpiece, also known as the Adoration of the Mystic Lamb. Jan and Hubert van Eyck's work has been called the most influential painting in European art. It's considered the first masterpiece done in oil, and the first to portray the stark realism of the everyday world.

Hubert began the painting, but after his death, his younger brother Jan completed his vision in 1432, taking a colossal stride in Northern European art from medieval stiffness to Renaissance humanism.

CAMERON HEWITT/Rick Steves' Europe

The Ghent Altarpiece may be the most influential painting in European art history — and perhaps the most stolen masterpiece in existence.

The work is monumental: 15 feet wide and 11 feet tall, it's composed of a dozen separate panels depicting hundreds of figures and weighs more than a ton. Its central panel shows pilgrims gathered to honor the Lamb of God (representing Jesus), while other panels depict the Annunciation, Adam and Eve, the Virgin Mary and John the Baptist.

It's astounding that the Ghent Altarpiece has survived for six centuries. It's been the victim of a half-dozen art thefts, making it quite possibly the most stolen painting in existence. Even Hitler claimed it as war booty. In 1934, someone broke into St. Bavo's and stole the Just Judges panel, and, nearly a century later, the panel has yet to turn up. In its place is a top-notch copy, and the theft remains Belgium's greatest unsolved art mystery.

Leaving the church, I walked north to Hoogpoort, the main street of medieval Ghent, and followed it to the hulking castle across the canal: the Castle of the Counts.

You get a real feel for the medieval world as you twist through the towers and ramble the ramparts of this rough-stone fortress, built in 1180. It has all the parts of a typical castle: courtyard and keep, throne room, chapel, 18-foot-deep dungeon and high walls. Inside are displays of authentic swords and suits of armor, along with a guillotine that was last used in 1861.

This article is used with the permission of Rick Steves' Europe (www.ricksteves.com). Rick Steves writes European guidebooks, hosts travel shows and organizes European tours.

Circuses, cabarets, nativity scenes and ballets abound during holiday season

Family-friendly entertainment options abound this time of year. There are circuses and cabarets aplenty, while certain operas and ballets were composed specifically for the season. Here's a sampling of shows quite possibly worth discovering:

Pantomime: Pantomime is a form of theatrical entertainment featuring songs, topical jokes and slapstick comedy. Based on fairy tales or nursery stories, their intended audiences are children, but they're staged in a way that makes them fun for adult viewers as well. Also referred to as pantos, they tend to feature exaggerated characters, elaborate costumes, reversed gender roles and lots of audience participation. Pantos are particularly loved by British audiences around the Christmas holidays. For family-friendly pantomime, a good bet is the Theatre Royal Bury St. Edmunds, housed in a playhouse designed and built back in 1819 with many of its original features intact. The venue's production this season is "Rapunzel," and performances are scheduled through Jan 18. While tickets to shows during the school holiday break can be difficult to come by, performances in mid-January still have seats available. The cost of tickets begins at 15 UK pounds, about $20. Online: tinyurl.com/4697smf2

Karen Bradbury

Living nativity scenes: The tradition of staging presepi, or living nativity scenes, remains popular throughout Italy. The first such staging of Jesus' manger birth is credited to St. Francis of Assisi, who created such a scene in a cave in Greccio in 1223 following his own pilgrimage to Bethlehem. It's possible to visit the original site in Greccio, as well as Naples, which is known for its creation of static nativity scenes combining religious figures with hometown places and characters. A great place to be swept away by a live staging of the nativity is Matera, a city in the region of Basilicata, in the heel of Italy's geographical boot. An area once notorious for its squalor has been completely transformed, and what's now a UNESCO World Heritage site is poised to host its 15th edition of a theatrical representation of Jesus' birth. On the dates of Dec. 13-14, 20-21, 27-28 and Jan. 3-4, visitors from around the world will watch the spectacle play out in the form of five key scenes. Tickets are sold in accordance with specific dates and time slots for entry; tickets go for 13.90 euros for adults and 6.90 euros for children ages 5-10; no charge for 4 and under. Online: presepematera.it

AP

Acrobats are part of the fun at Circus Krone. This season's Winter Circus will run from Dec. 25 through April 12.

Ballet: That most Christmas-y of all ballets, "The Nutcracker," tells the timeless story of Clara's Christmas Eve present, a nutcracker doll that comes to life and battles the Mouse King amid a journey to the realm of the Sugar Plum Fairy. The staging of the tale featuring the music of the famous Russian composer Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky remains a holiday staple throughout Germany, performed by many ballet companies. In Mannheim, for example, three companies offer "Nutcracker" performances. The cost of tickets to the version performed by the Prague Festival Ballet Company in the Rosengarten on Dec. 27 begins at 31.40 euros. Online: tinyurl.com/4unk9k58

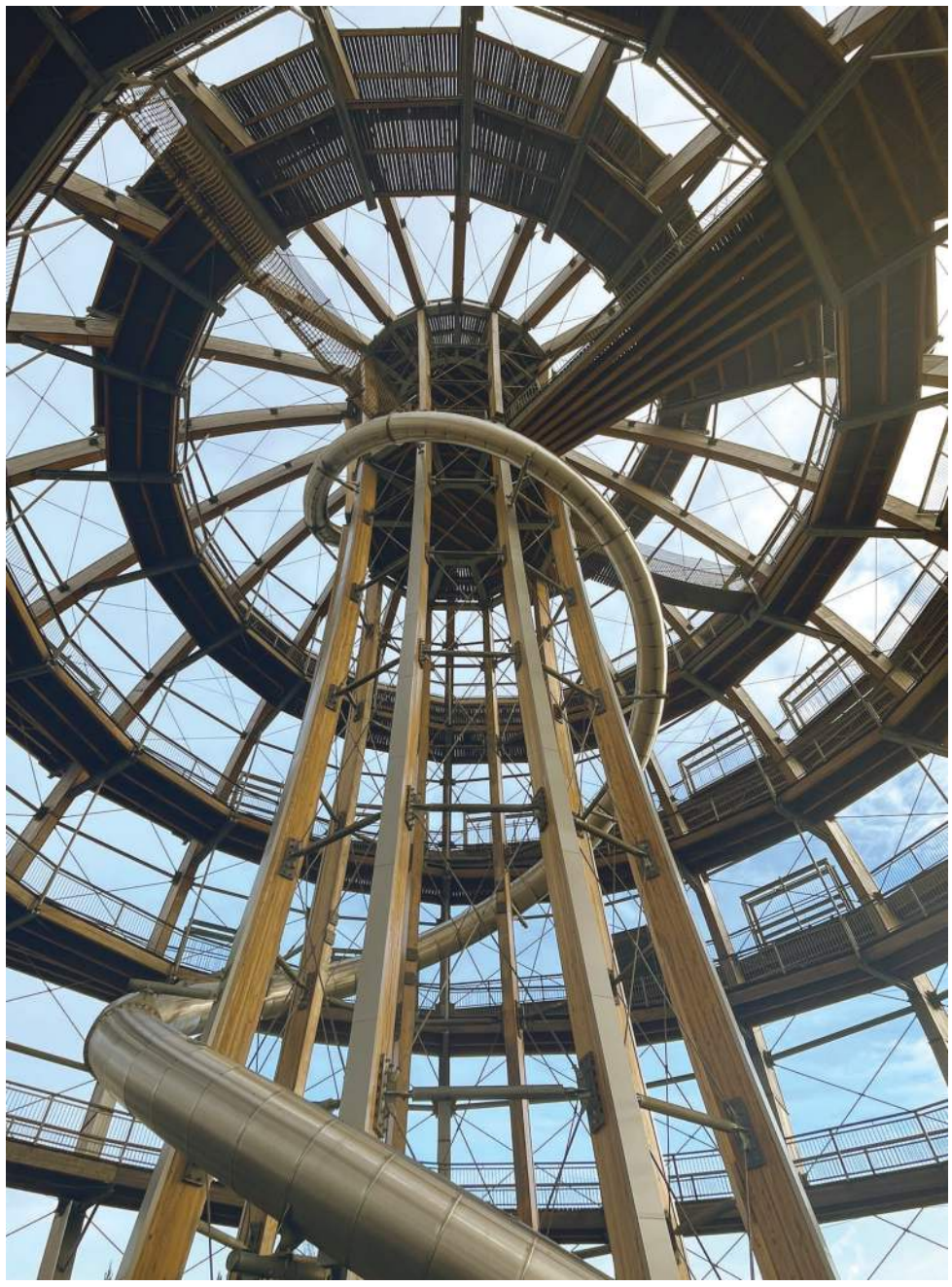
Musicals: Germany loves its musicals, with some of its most lavish productions staged in Hamburg, Berlin and Stuttgart. A viewer should be aware, however, that even shows with English titles might feature dialogue and singing in German. Disney's "The Lion King," a hit with audiences in Hamburg since 2001, is performed entirely in German. A musical that could appeal to those with limited knowledge of the local language is "We Will Rock You," currently at the Stage Palladium Theater at the SI-Centrum in Stuttgart. The musical tells a story set in the not-too-distant future in which all iterations of independent thought and creativity have been quashed. A group known as the Bohemians rebel by singing hits made famous by the British rock band Queen. The production, which opened in October and will run at least into the spring of 2026, features 24 of the legendary band's songs. The cost of tickets to the 2-hour, 45-minute show begins at 50 euros. Online: tinyurl.com/39w6w4at

Circus: Going to the circus during the Christmas season is a popular pastime in many European countries, particularly in Finland, France, the Netherlands and Switzerland. In Germany, many cities host traveling circuses, but one with its own venue is Circus Krone, based in the Circus-Krone Bau in Munich. This season's Winter Circus runs between Dec. 25 and April 12. The 2½-hour show including intermission offers clowns, artists, acrobats, animal acts and plenty more. Ticket prices begin at 19 euros for adults and 16 euros for children under 12. Circus Krone will also offer performances in Ingolstadt, Rosenheim and Würzburg. Online: circus-krone.com

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS

PHOTOS BY MATTHEW M. BURKE/Stars and Stripes

Erlebnisholzkugel, or "wooden adventure sphere," at inMotion Park in Steinberg am See, Germany, is a hulking curiosity looming in the Bavarian countryside. The park features the sphere, a high-ropes course that's closed during the winter months and a children's climbing trail, among other fun family attractions.



Erlebnisholzkugel's 260-foot slide is a hit with kids of all ages.

Sphere of adventure

Giant wood-and-steel structure at inMotion Park in Steinberg am See offers slippery fun, stunning views

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

Along a quiet country road in Bavaria's Steinberg am See, a giant wood-and-steel structure looms like something out of a dystopian steampunk comic.

This behemoth, however, is intended to inspire delight rather than dread, as indicated by its name: Erlebnisholzkugel, which translates to "wooden adventure sphere."

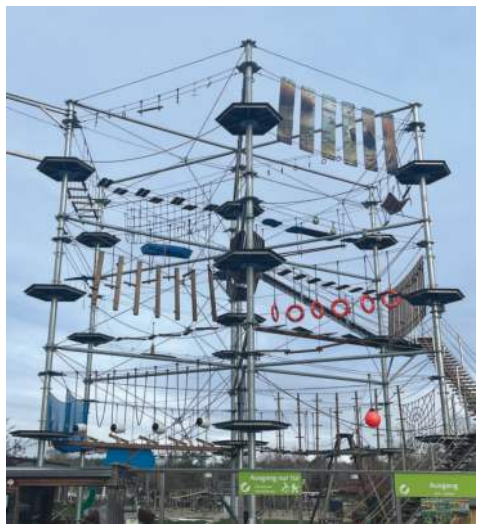
At 130 feet tall and 160 feet wide, it's the largest such contraption in the world, according to a brochure by owner inMotion Park. It features a 2,300-foot-long circular walking path that curls around to the top, and a 260-foot slide.

The sphere is a marvel of modern engineering and one of the coolest things I have ever seen. It weighs around 500 tons, the same as 85 elephants, and features 835 pieces of wood in the frame, 360 tension rods and 40,000 screws, the brochure said.

My wife stumbled upon inMotion Park's website in recent weeks, and we knew immediately we had to go at our first opportunity.

On a nippy November afternoon, we made the 45-minute drive from Grafenwoehr to check it out. For additional reference, the place is about 40 miles southeast of Tower Barracks and 15 miles northeast of the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels.

As we approached, it looked like a ghost town. There were people passing the giant sphere on public walking trails around its perimeter and a few people in its restaurant enjoying coffee and pastries, but the attractions were devoid of people.



The high-ropes course at inMotion Park in Steinberg am See is open April 6 through the end of October.

I thought the sphere might even be closed until I went inside and bought a family pass for my wife and two kids.

The attraction's breadth and majesty became immediately apparent as we entered, feeling ant-sized in comparison. My kids ran ahead, up the spacious wooden walkway. Pretty soon, they were two levels above, giggling and jeering at their slowpoke parents.

The 6% grade makes it fully accessible to the elderly and those in wheelchairs. My pregnant wife had no problem walking up the slope.

The children's climbing trail costs 3.50 euros per child, or 2.50 euros if combined with a sphere ticket.

About three-quarters of the way up, we encountered the longest slide I have ever seen. My kids rushed inside, and before we knew it, they were celebrating on the ground.

As someone who is afraid of extreme heights, I felt my anxiety levels increase the farther we climbed. Yet I never felt unsafe due to the construction.

My wife and I walked to the top of the sphere, where there is a sitting area with panoramic views. Then we leisurely made our way down as the sun set, orange and yellow in the distance.

InMotion Park also offers a high ropes course for adults, available from April to October, and a low ropes course for kids, featuring 30 stations that provide adventure and motor skills training, weather permitting.

Expanded Christmas hours between Dec. 13 and Dec. 20 keep the sphere awash in colored lights and open until 9:30 p.m.

We can't wait to go back for the Christmas lights and again when it gets warmer for the kids ropes course.

For this visit, the views of the setting sun and Lake Steinberger were hot soup for the winter soul.

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On the QT

Address: In der Oder 7, Steinberg am See, Germany
Hours: Six days a week, 9:30 a.m.-5:30 p.m.; closed Wednesday; public holidays, 9 a.m.-6 p.m. Expanded Christmas hours Dec. 13-20, until 9:30 p.m., last admission 9 p.m. The giant slide and certain adventure stations are open, weather depending. The ropes course is open April 6 through the end of October. Restaurant and lakeside terrace, 11 a.m.-5 p.m.
Costs: Parking is 1 euro for two hours and 4 euros for the day. Admission into the globe costs 13 euros for adults, 10 euros for children and 29 euros for families. Discounted tickets are available for students and the elderly. Children's climbing trail tickets cost 3.50 euros apiece or 2.50 euros if combined with a sphere ticket.
Information: Online: dieholzkugel.de

Matthew M. Burke

WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING

Chimaek checks box for chicken

Fried dishes at Wiesbaden Korean eatery do pass muster, but fowl out on distinctiveness

BY BRADLEY LATHAM
Stars and Stripes

Whether it's Popeyes, Bojangles, Buffalo Wild Wings or the occasional 20-piece nuggets at McDonald's, I'm a sucker for fried varieties of the world's most popular road-crossing poultry.

So a social media post advertising a new Korean fried chicken restaurant that was set to open the first week of November in Wiesbaden naturally intrigued me. I immediately added it to the top of my list of places to try.

Chimaek, located in this German city's downtown just a few steps away from local hot spot Scotch 'n' Soda, serves up a limited but tasty selection of crispy bites and other Asian street food.

The restaurant takes its name from a combination of the words for fried chicken and beer, which is also the term used for the culinary pairing in Korea, and I couldn't think of a more fitting choice for my first experience at the new joint.

I ordered a medium chicken box with "spicy" gochujang sauce and curly fries, a side of chicken gyoza, kimchi and a beer.

The kitchen was out of chicken gyoza, so I opted for the veggie alternative.

The dining area is small, with seating for only about 20 folks comfortably, but I found it warm and welcoming when I arrived on my Tuesday afternoon visit in mid-November. There were only about five other patrons inside, but with around eight tables, the place seemed pretty full.

The beer was bottled but crisp and cold as I enjoyed a few sips during my short wait. My order arrived quickly in disposable plastic and cardboard containers, but what it lacked in presentation was mostly made up for in taste.

I immediately went for the kimchi, as it had been a couple of years since my last Korean restaurant outing. It had a strong vinegary bite, almost a bit too much, and I could have used a little more heat. It wasn't bad, but at almost 5 euros for the side portion, I found it somewhat lacking.

The gyoza were on par with most other takeout or delivery dumplings I've had over the years. The sweet soy dipping sauce, with a touch of chile spice, gave the side a few bonus points.

But bird was the word for highlight of the day. The boneless chunks of chicken were tender and juicy with a crispy exterior. The sauce had a nice little kick and was enough to be satisfying, but as with the kimchi, the "Germany spicy" standard was a bit below my preferred heat level.

Although the curly fries were warm and had a nice crunch and a soft interior, they were drizzled with a slightly sweet mayo. They didn't taste bad, but the variation just wasn't my jam, as I'm more of a ketchup or barbecue sauce guy when it comes to fried potatoes.

All in all, that meal was fairly run-of-the-mill. I wanted to explore the menu a bit more after being underwhelmed with my first visit, so I popped in the following week for another round.

I ordered the dakgangjeong bibimbap bowl and the bao buns with sweet orange sauce. The bowl was a decently large portion of rice, chicken, edamame, corn, kimchi and a few more vegetables topped with a fried egg. The individual elements blended well while still feeling relatively light.

The bao bun burgers were my favorite dish between my two visits. The spongy, pillowy buns cradled large hunks of chicken covered in a sweet, citrusy sauce with fresh greens and cucumber, and their texture contrasted in a fun way with that of the crispy filling.

If I were to come back, I'd probably order the bao again with the spicy sauce.

My second trip to Chimaek was more enjoyable, but I wouldn't go too far out of my way to eat there again.

On the other hand, I also wouldn't balk at a friend's or colleague's suggestion for a meetup there.

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Chimaek opened in Wiesbaden, Nov. 4. It offers a modest variety of Korean fried chicken, bowls and other Asian street food.

AFTER HOURS GERMANY

Chimaek

Address: Wagemannstrasse 33-35, Wiesbaden, Germany
Hours: Monday-Saturday, noon-9:30 p.m.; Sunday, 2-9:30 p.m.
Prices: Appetizers, 7 to 15 euros; chicken boxes and bowls, 11 to 16 euros; drinks, 3 to 4 euros
Phone: +49 6115 8086823

Bradley Latham

PHOTOS BY BRADLEY LATHAM/Stars and Stripes

The medium chicken box with curly fries and boneless fried chicken covered in spicy gochujang sauce at Chimaek in Wiesbaden, Germany. Five sauces, made in-house, are offered with the Korean fried chicken.

The bibimbap bowls at Chimaek combine boneless fried chicken with edamame and vegetables on rice, topped with a fried egg.

The bao bun burgers at Chimaek combine enjoyable textures with the pillowy, steamed buns cradling crispy fried chicken and fresh greens.

The veggie gyoza and a side of kimchi served at Chimaek served with a sweet and slightly spicy dakgangjeong sauce.

Calling all fans of pop culture

Comic Con Okinawa is a free event at Camp Foster on Sunday for sci-fi, fantasy and cosplay aficionados

BY RYAN BREEDEN
Stars and Stripes

Sci-fi, fantasy and cosplay fans will soon pack Camp Foster for the annual Comic Con Okinawa, a free event showcasing pop-culture talent and creative communities across the island.

Hosted by Marine Corps Community Services, the convention runs from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Sunday. Festivities will span the Fieldhouse, the Community Center and the Globe & Anchor inside Ocean Breeze.

This year's lineup includes gaming events, art exhibitions, cosplay activities and appearances tied to franchises such as Pokemon, Power Rangers, Yu-Gi-Oh! and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

Special guests include Elise Baughamn, known for voicing Pan in the "Dragon Ball" series; actor Eddie McClintock of SyFy's "Warehouse 13"; and Jeremy Clark, a comic book inker whose work includes titles such as "Batman," "Gargoyles" and "Blade Runner."

An Artist Alley will feature creators from across the community. The event will also display works by the finalists of an art contest, with pieces displayed throughout the venue.

For fans seeking early access, Gold Pass Exclusive tickets are available through Eventbrite.com for $17.50 for ages 5-12 and $33 for ages 13 and older. The pass includes entry to a "Pre-Con" event from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturday at the Globe & Anchor, as well as early entry, priority seating and Q&A access on Sunday.

Comic Con Okinawa began in 2011 at the Camp Foster library and has grown into one of the installation's most popular community events. More than 4,000 people attended last year, according to Marine Corps Installations Pacific.

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On the QT

Directions: Festivities on Camp Foster will span the Fieldhouse, the Community Center and the Globe & Anchor inside Ocean Breeze.
Times: 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Sunday.
Costs: Free on Sunday. For fans seeking Saturday access, Gold Pass Exclusive tickets are available through Eventbrite.com for $17.50 for ages 5-12 and $33 for ages 13 and older.
Food: Pizza, hamburgers and Hawaiian plate lunches will be available from vendors throughout the venue.
Information: tinyurl.com/4bvcd4t4

Ryan Breeden

PHOTOS BY BRODY ROBERTSON/U.S. Marine Corps

Above and below: Convention-goers pose Dec. 7 and 8, 2024, during Okinawa Comic Con at Camp Foster, Okinawa. This year's free event is this Sunday.

Duck into Tokyo's Mokubaza for a quick curry break

BY JEREMY STILLWAGNER
Stars and Stripes

If you need a break from the busy streets of Harajuku while in the heart of Tokyo, head for a quick bite of curry at Mokubaza.

The place is small but comfortably seats 15 to 20 people. You may have to wait at peak times, and I don't recommend going with a group larger than four people.

The menu is relatively small with the keema curry as the centerpiece. There are 14 curry options to choose from, with additional toppings at an extra charge.

The menu has pictures of all 14 to help you decide which one to try.

The curries carry a nice flavor, and the egg, meat and cheese complement each other well. The seasonings and spices give the food a nice zing, but not so much that it stops being enjoyable.

Curries are available in large, regular and small servings upon request, with slight price differences from the regular size. The large comes with slightly more curry, meat and rice. The dishes are very filling, and you may have trouble finishing even a small size depending on your appetite.

Mokubaza also has an extensive drink menu. The staff can make just about any cocktail you can imagine. The drink menu is organized by alcohol type, but if you don't drink, the menu has an alcohol-free section toward the back.

Mokubaza has an English menu and some of the staff speak English, which makes communication and ordering a bit less stressful if you can't speak Japanese.

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JEREMY STILLWAGNER/Stars and Stripes

The twin cheese keema from Mokubaza in Harajuku, Tokyo. This is one of 14 keema curry dishes patrons can choose.

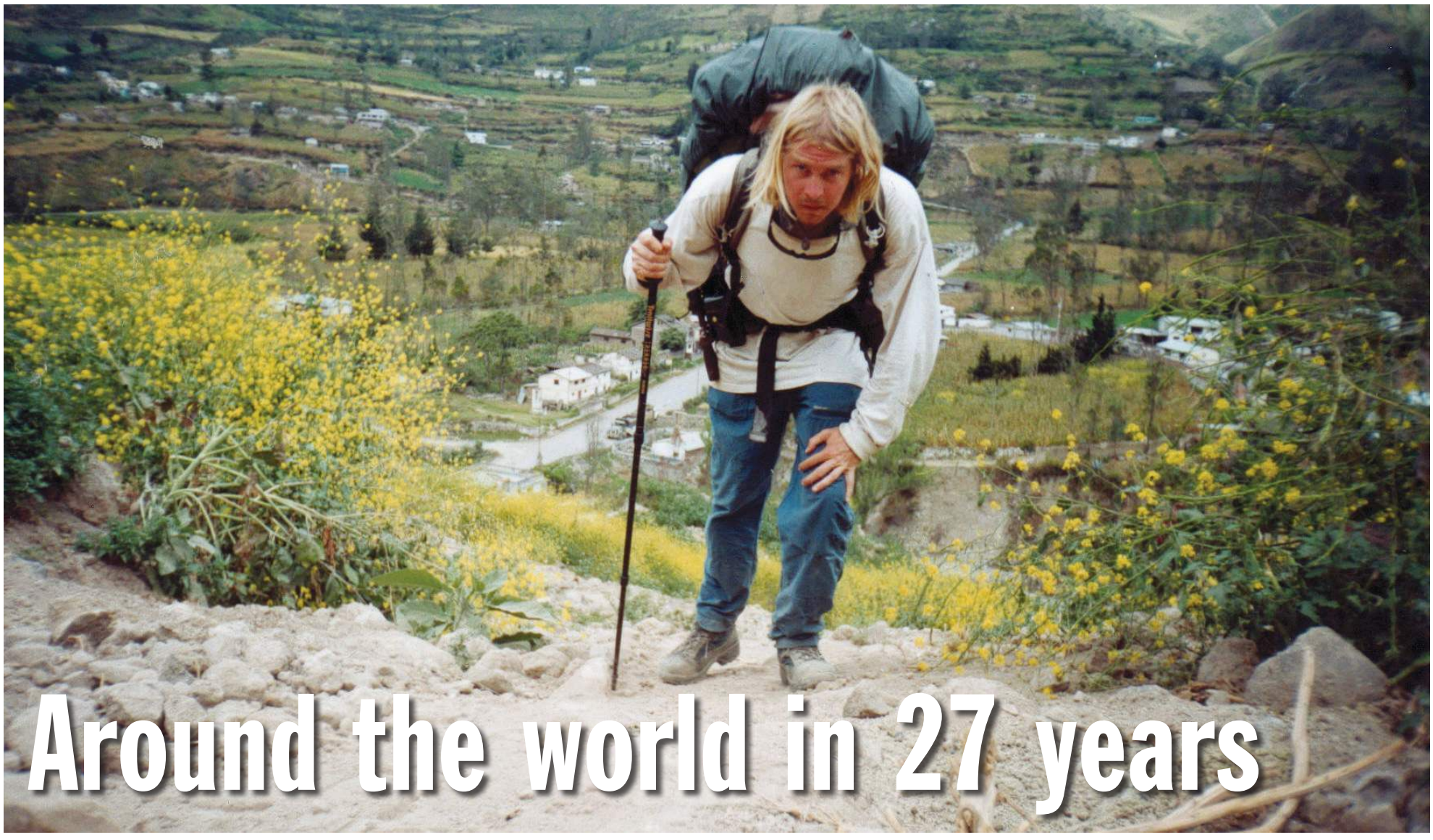
AFTER HOURS JAPAN

Mokubaza

Location: 2-28-12 Jingumae, Shibuya, Tokyo 150-0001
Directions: Take the East Exit at Harajuku Station, cross the street and head north. Keep right at the fork and follow the road for about 10 minutes. Continue straight at the four-way intersection. Turn right at the next light. Mokubaza will be straight ahead with at the middle of a small Y-intersection.
Hours: Open 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. and 6 p.m. to 9:30 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday. Closed Sunday and Monday.
Prices: Expect to pay between 1,200 yen and 1,650 yen, or.
Dress: Casual
Information: Online: mokubaza.com; MOKUBAZA_curry on X

Jeremy Stillwagner

WEEKEND: TRAVEL



Around the world in 27 years

British man's quest, which began as a bet to walk from bottom of South America back home, now almost over

By Sydney Page
The Washington Post

Karl Bushby made a barroom bet that he could walk from the southern tip of South America all the way home to England. His friends had little faith.

"Suddenly, it became a challenge," Bushby said of the bet he made in his 20s. "That conversation gathered steam, until eventually I did the math and thought, 'this is doable' … I became semi-obsessed with what it would take to achieve something like this."

A few years later, in 1998, he stood at the edge of Punta Arenas, Chile — about as far from his hometown of Hull, England, as a person can get on foot — ready to begin a 31,000-mile expedition he thought would take roughly 12 years.

It's been 27 years, and Bushby, now 56, is still walking.

"The plan was to do something pretty extraordinary," he said.

He's walked through Patagonia, the Andes, Central America, Mexico, the length of the United States, Russia, Mongolia and parts of Asia. He's traversed some of the most remote, hostile and politically fraught places on earth, and crossed deserts, jungles and war zones.

At the start of his quest, Bushby made two rules for himself, neither of which he has broken.

"I can't use transport to advance, and I can't go home until I arrive on foot," Bushby said. "If I get stuck somewhere, I have to figure it out."

Photos by Karl Bushby/The Washington Post

Left to right: Karl Bushby in Alaska in 2005; in Canada in 2004; in Russia in 2008. Top: Hiking in Ecuador in 2000.

Bushby's trek — which he has called the Goliath Expedition — has taken far longer than he anticipated because of financial challenges, visa issues, travel bans, political barriers and the COVID-19 pandemic.

He is expected to arrive home in Hull by September 2026.

Bushby was a paratrooper in the British Army, an experience he said sparked his appetite for challenge, travel and exploration.

"Once you're in the army and you get to travel and see some of these amazing places, that really inspires and motivates a wanderlust," Bushby said. "Paratroopers are all about fitness and endurance and distance, so that all played into it."

Bushby also said being in the army — and losing several friends — made him think a lot about death.

"There was an emphasis on the fact that life is short, and you should live it the best you can," he said.

All these factors, Bushby said, shaped his desire to take on the global walk at age 29. He started the trek with $500.

"I had no support," he said, adding that he usually sleeps in a tent along the road, or sometimes in people's homes if he's invited.

Bushby's family started helping him out financially, and people began donating as they heard of his trek. Companies offered to sponsor him. By the time he got to Canada in 2003, Bushby had a book deal, and later, a production company contacted him to turn his story into a film.

"One of the lessons from this is the fact that nobody does this alone," Bushby said. "I may be the guy alone on the road, but there is a massive network of support that keeps me upright and moving forward."

Even with support, Bushby has faced several seemingly insurmountable obstacles. He walked through the Darién Gap between Panama and Colombia — known as one of the most perilous jungle passages in the world.

Later, he reached the Bering Strait between Alaska and Russia in 2006. It was the first of two bodies of water he'd cross.

In the winter, he said, the strait does not entirely freeze over.

"It is this massive body of crushed ice and seawater … you're literally climbing over the ice to make any short distance," he said.

In August 2024, Bushby reached the second body of water on his route. He swam across the Caspian Sea from Kazakhstan to Azerbaijan to circumvent traveling through Iran or Russia. He swam for 31 days, sleeping on support boats each night.

Bushby then walked to Turkey and into Europe. He recently reached Hungary and is now on the final stretch, with about 932 miles left until he's in Hull.

When he started the expedition, he would walk about 19 miles a day, but he has recently cut back to 15.

Bushby said he has learned a lot over the past nearly three decades, but one thing stands out: "99.99 percent of the people I've met have been the very best in humanity," he said. "The world is a much kinder, nicer place than it often seems."

Needled by your tats?

If you want to get that ink erased, it's going to hurt and it's going to cost you

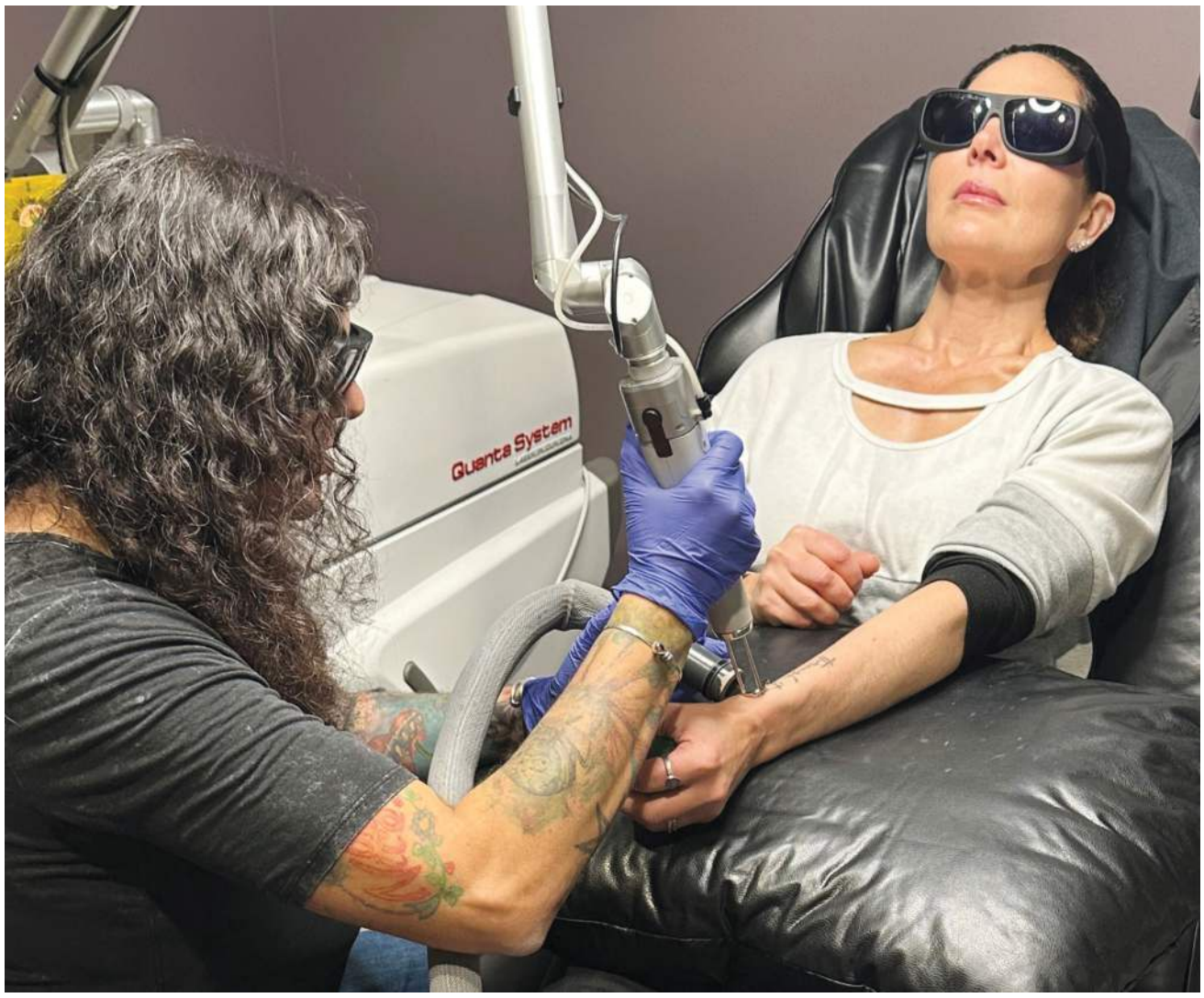
BY COREY WILLIAMS
Associated Press

Colin Farrell's had it done — many times. So have Angelina Jolie and Megan Fox. Heck, even Bart Simpson did.

Whether it's Marilyn Monroe's face, Billy Bob Thornton's name, a sultry rose or even Bart's partially inscribed homage to his mother, some tattoos simply have to go for one reason or many others.

But the process of taking them off is longer, much more costly and ouch — extremely more painful than getting them put on, according to professionals in the industry.

Also, due to health reasons, some souls who braved the ink needle, should be wary of the laser when having their body art erased or covered up.



COREY WILLIAMS/AP

Tracy Herrmann has one of her tattoos removed by Chroma Tattoo & Laser Tattoo Removal owner Jaime Howard on Nov. 19 in West Bloomfield, Mich. The studio moved to Brighton, Mich., at the end of November.

Tattoos have been around for centuries

The oldest known tattoos were found on remains of a Neolithic man who lived in the Italian Alps around 3,000 B.C. Many mummies from ancient Egypt also have tattoos, as do remains from cultures around the world.

Tattoo removal likely is almost as old as the practice of inking and included scraping the skin to get the pigments off or out.

A more "civilized" method evolved in the 1960s when Leon Goldman, a University of Cincinnati dermatologist, used "hot vapor bursts" from a laser on tattoos and the skin that bore them.

Many choose tattoos to honor someone

A 2023 survey by the Pew Research Center determined that 32% of adults in the United States have tattoos. About 22% have more than one, according to the survey.

Honoring or remembering someone or something accounts for the biggest reason Americans get their first tattoo. About 24% in the survey regret getting them.

Tracy Herrmann, 54, of Plymouth, Mich, just west of Detroit, has eight tattoos and is in the process of getting four phrases, including "One step at a time," "Surrender" and "Through it all," removed from her feet and arms.

She started inking up about six years ago and says she doesn't regret getting tattoos.

"Maybe a different choice, maybe," Herrmann said following her fourth tattoo removal session at Chroma Tattoo & Laser Tattoo Removal. The studio moved from West Bloomfield, Mich. to Brighton, Mich. at the end of November.

"There was a period in my life that I felt I needed some extra reminder," Hermann said. "I thought I would just embrace the period in my life, so that helped and then just to surrender and give it over to God. So, half of them were really, really pivotal to getting me over a hump in my life."

Boredom among reasons to remove tats

Herrmann says the four getting lasered are part of her past and that's where she wants them to stay.

"Now, I just want to move forward and go back to the original skin I was born with," she said. "But the other four I'm going to keep. They still mean a lot to me, but they're more hidden."

Reasons for getting a tattoo removed are as varied and personal as the reasons for getting them in the first place, says Ryan Wright, a registered nurse and owner of Ink Blasters Precision Laser Tattoo Removal in Livonia, Mich.

"A lot of people, when they get a new tattoo that makes some of their old tattoos look bad they get (the older tattoos) removed or reworked," Wright said.

Chroma owner Jaime Howard says boredom plays a role, too.

"They got a tattoo off a whim and they're like 'hey, I'm really bored with this. I don't want this anymore,'" Howard said. "It's not about hating their tattoo; it's about change for yourself."

Like snapping a 'rubber band' on your skin

Howard and Wright, like many who perform laser removals, use something called a Q-switching, or quality switching, lasers. It concentrates the light energy into intense short bursts or pulses.

> **"It's very painful. Nine out of 10. It kind of feels like a rubber band being snapped on your skin with hot bacon grease."**
>
> **Ryan Wright**
> owner of Ink Blasters Precision Laser Tattoo Removal

"It's very painful. Nine out of 10," Wright said. "It kind of feels like a rubber band being snapped on your skin with hot bacon grease."

Howard has had some of her tattoos removed and admits the procedure is painful.

But "you get through it," she said. "A couple of days later you're still feeling the sunburn, but it's OK. If you want it bad enough, you'll take it off because that's what you want."

Light heat from the laser breaks the ink into particles small enough to be absorbed by the body and later excreted as waste.

It's not a "one and done." Wright said. Tattoo removal can take eight to 12 treatments or more. A new tattoo can go over the old one once the skin has had time to sufficiently heal.

Howard consulted with Herrmann as her fourth session at Chroma began. They spoke about the previous session and how far along they were with the ink removal. Both then donned dark sunglasses to protect their eyes from the brightness of the laser. Herrmann winced. Seconds later, it was done. But she still has more sessions ahead.

"Oh gosh, it's a 10 when you're getting it done," Herrmann said of the pain. "It's pretty intense. It's doable. I know price is sometimes an issue, but it's worth it."

Removal can be costly

Howard says the minimum she charges is $100 per session. Wright says that on a typical day he does about a dozen treatments and that cost depends on the square-inch size of the tattoo.

"The cost is really the technology in the laser," Wright said. "It's not like a time thing. Most treatments are under a minute. You're paying for the technology and the person who knows how to use the technology. You can damage the skin if you don't know what you're doing."

Tattoo removal not safe for everyone

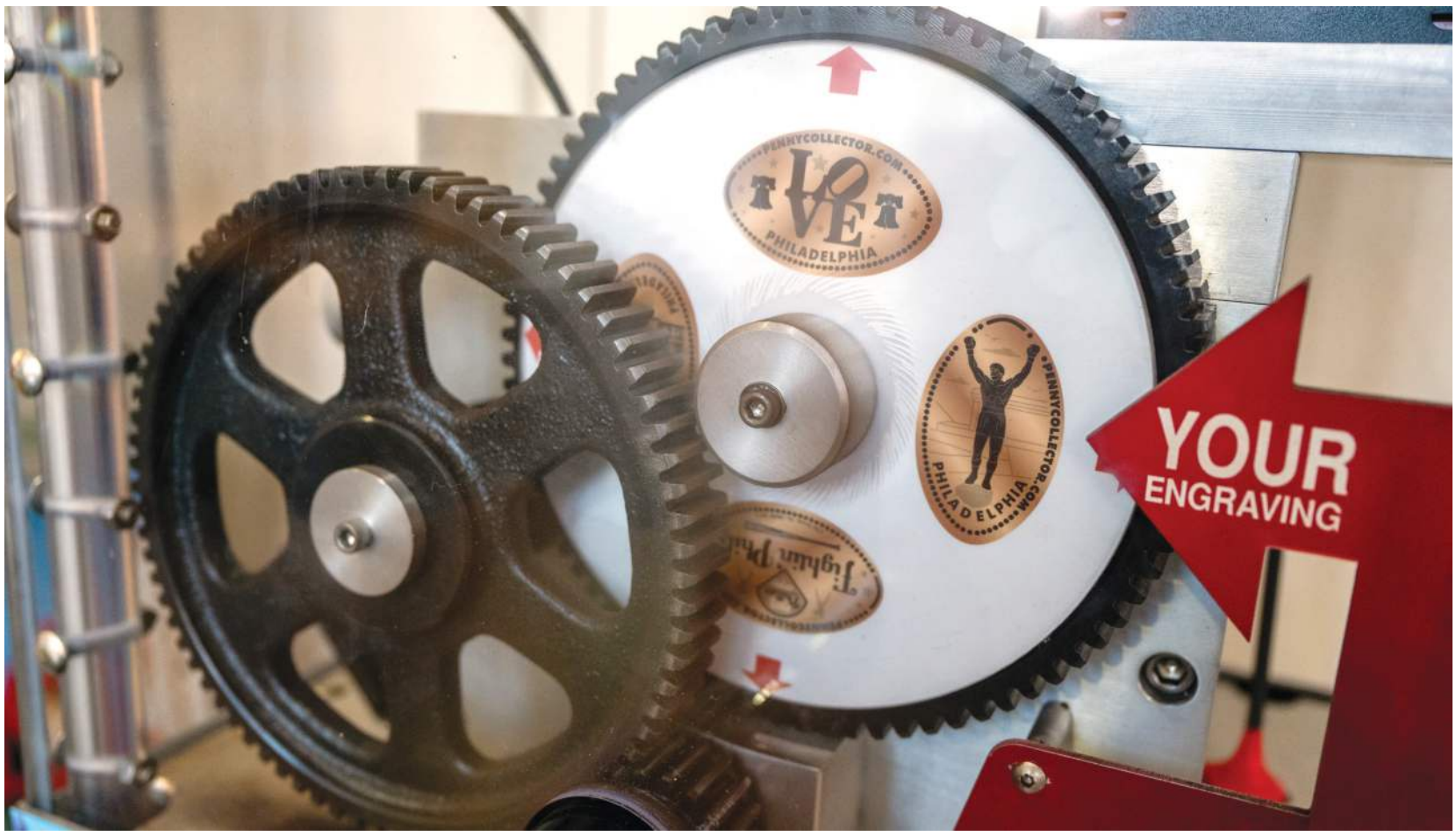
Using lasers to remove tattoos comes with some risks. Skin that bore the tattoo can be left lighter than surrounding skin. There also can be temporary scarring, infection, redness or soreness, according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

Consultations on the procedure's complications should take place before laser tattoo removal. Wright says his clients have to sign a waiver that they understand possible complications.

People who have diabetes and are not controlling the diabetes should be wary, he said.

"Anybody with autoimmune disease or any immune deficiencies," Wright said. "We can't do it if you're on blood thinners. I go over the side effects with everyone."

WEEKEND: LIFESTYLE



PHOTOS BY TOM GRALISH, THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER/TNS

One of the two penny press machines in the Independence Visitor Center in Philadelphia. Eight designs are offered between the two machines.

Forever cranking out travel memories

How souvenir penny presses could survive the end of the one-cent coin

BY EMILY BLOCH
The Philadelphia Inquirer

A wheel cranks on the machine at the Independence Visitor Center in Philadelphia, slowing with every turn until: CLINK! A reward drops out the bottom, waiting to be collected.

It's a familiar, elongated penny. In its new form, Honest Abe's head is swapped for an illustration of Rocky — naturally.

Philadelphia — along with other cities with tourist draws nationwide — is peppered with old-school penny press machines, allowing visitors to mark a noteworthy trip with an inexpensive souvenir. It's a tried-and-true practice that could be in peril now that the U.S. Treasury has ended penny production.

After a 232-year run, the government announced it was ending penny production because of its eroded value and the rise of digital payment systems. A final batch was struck recently at the Philadelphia Mint.

Dating back more than a century, penny press machines can be found in museums, at visitor centers, at zoos and on boardwalks, usually costing only a dollar for a kitschy souvenir. The first elongated souvenir coins in the United States date to the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, with four designs to commemorate the event.

Old City's Independence Visitor Center and a handful of other historic locations across town continue to offer machines to press those pennies into something new and beautiful.

The machines are a hit because they're "interactive, iconic and adaptable" with different settings, visitor center spokesperson Maita Soukup said. "We are hopeful the coin press will continue bringing joy and cranking out travel memories in this new postpenny world," she said.

The visitor center has two machines and eight designs, including Rocky, the LOVE sculpture, Ben Franklin and the Liberty Bell.

Ali Furmall stopped by on a recent weekday afternoon while visiting Philly from Spokane, Wash. She and her husband casually collect the pennies when they travel. She opted for a design with the logo of Reading Terminal Market, one of her favorite destinations during their stay.

Ali Furmall of Spokane, Wash., displays the four pennies she got from the press machines at the visitor center.

"I have a couple of pennies with national park themes that I like a lot," she said. "I generally prefer iconic landscapes or landforms."

As for the discontinuation of penny production, Furmall shook off any concerns.

"I'm not sure that pennies are so necessary for commerce," she said. "So these machines might become the primary way they're used."

Enthusiasts say they do not expect penny pressing to end entirely — just for it to change.

"The future of penny presses is just getting started," Albert Guerrero said. Alongside his wife, Amy, he co-owns Pennybandz, a pressed penny company that sells machines as well as accessories — like wearables and journals — to hold pressed pennies. "We truly believe the retirement of the penny won't mark the end of pressed coins."

Stu Hockstein, the administrator behind PennyPresses.net — a website for pressed penny collectors and lovers that documents all things related to the elongated coins — tends to agree. His website includes a map documenting more than 3,300 machines nationwide along with features like a Penny Pals trading service.

In Philly, some of the machine locations mentioned on the PennyPresses.net map include the Philadelphia Zoo, the Betsy Ross House and the Franklin Institute.

Hockstein says the eventual elimination of penny production was inevitable, citing the coins' high cost to mint.

"Well, it finally happened," he said. As for how it affects the future of penny machines, he says it's twofold.

First off, it will take quite some time for pennies to go away entirely.

"It will take 20 to 30 years for pennies to be removed from circulation," Hockstein said. "But more importantly, the pressed penny machine manufacturers have been moving away from a business model that involves the customer placing their own pennies in the machines."

Over the years, modern penny press machines have started coming preloaded with their own pennies or blanks (called slugs), and accepting paper bills, credit cards, or tap to pay. That means no more fishing around the bottom of your purse for a penny covered in lint.

You can see examples of those machines at the very place where the U.S. Mint started (back in 1793) and stopped making pennies recently. The mint's gift shop includes a pressed penny machine with four designs. It costs a dollar.

Guerrero, of PennyBandz, says that while almost 300 billion actual pennies are still in circulation, the change will give companies like his time to upgrade the quality of and access to blanks. Right now, coin-operated machines that require a penny cost businesses less than ones with upgraded tech that can accept a dollar bill or credit card.

"When that time eventually comes, we're already prepared to offer beautiful copper blanks that press just as well, if not better, and give that same satisfying collectible experience," he said.

As older penny press machines fall into disrepair, Hockstein says, they will likely be replaced with newer models that include blanks. In short: "Although pennies may eventually be going away, the hobby is here to stay."

And you know what they say: Every penny counts.

APPRECIATION

Frank Gehry made us care about design

Sometimes-controversial architect left a legacy that transcends mere beauty

BY PHILIP KENNICOTT
The Washington Post

In person, Frank Gehry was not oracular, or overbearing. He didn't discourse on the history of architecture, even though he changed that history forever. He had a few well-rehearsed stories, but they tended to be ironic or self-deprecating, such as how he once lobbied for a second Pritzker Prize because it had been a long time since 1989, when he earned his first one.

He was joking, of course. His sense of humor was wry and he liked to chatter.

Gehry died Dec. 5 at the age of 96, a good, long, spectacular life, lived exuberantly and left a legacy that few architects will ever equal. In terms of raw fame, he achieved the same level as Frank Lloyd Wright: He was a household name and perhaps the only American architect about whom even people who don't care about architecture might have an opinion. His supposedly high-handed genius was mocked on "The Simpsons," and he was the subject of Sydney Pollack's last film, the 2005 "Sketches of Frank Gehry" — basically 90 minutes of Olympic-level schmoozing about art and life between two old friends.

That fame gave him opportunities, which he often pursued for his own creative satisfaction. Music was a passion, and he took particular pleasure in leaving the world one of its finest venues for classical music, the Walt Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles (finished in 2003 after more than 15 years of design, drama and delay). Disney Hall is a delight to move through and to sit in, the acoustics are splendid and the hall has been instrumental in helping the Los Angeles Philharmonic become one of the world's most admired ensembles.

Not every Gehry project was successful. The Fisher Center at Bard College, a performing arts space, feels a bit like a large sculpture advertising its Gehry design affixed to a fairly basic, humdrum concert hall. And yet, the last time I went there, two years ago, I liked it more and more, in part because it was doing two things at once: giving the world a stylish, sculptural face, while keeping everything essential about the building's function simple and modest.

A decade ago, while walking through Prague, I came upon one of Gehry's most delightful buildings, colloquially known as Ginger and Fred, or the Dancing House, designed in collaboration with the Czech architect Vlado Milunic. It stands on a corner of Prague that was destroyed by U.S. bombing during World War II, and it seems to be a building in the throes of either destruction or resurrection, or both at the same time. It sways in and bends out, dramatically breaking with the frontage line of the buildings around it. Some people hated that, too, along with its radical breach with the historical styles of Prague. But spend any time in Prague, and you realize its architecture is radically eclectic, with an insatiable tendency toward fantasy, elaboration, curvaceous forms and ornament.

How many buildings make you laugh, not at them, but with them? It is mischievous, but solid, a bit like Gehry himself.

His design vision was extraordinary, and like most visionaries, he occasionally stumbled. But unlike many visionaries, he was enormously practical about the nuts and bolts of making a building come together.

The Washington Post

Frank Gehry, shown at his studio in Los Angeles in 2012, died on Dec. 5. The American was the most famous and often the most controversial architect of his era.

AP

The Walt Disney Concert Hall catches the ample rays of the California sun in downtown Los Angeles, as seen in 2009.

iStock

Gehry's office building known as the Dancing House in Prague, Czech Republic, in 2022.

Around the same time I discovered Ginger and Fred, I was in a small American city that had built itself an art museum that was painfully, obviously, egregiously in the style of Gehry. I won't say which museum or which city. But it took only a passing glance and a few minutes inside to realize that it wasn't designed by Gehry, and had none of the practical, problem-solving good sense of a Gehry building. Gehry helped make this kind of building possible, by pioneering the use of software that facilitated the design and construction of unconventional, nonlinear architectural forms.

But the proliferation of bad buildings that mimic Gehry isn't Gehry's fault. Nor is he to blame for the tendency to think of architecture as simply a grandiose form of sculpture, a trend in architecture that is abating. And he isn't to blame for the age of the so-called "starchitect," the dominance of the field by a small number of superstars. That, alas, is simply how capitalism conspires with ignorance to reduce any field or human endeavor to its most marketable actors.

Gehry should, however, get much of the credit for the broad public interest in architecture, the comfort that ordinary people have in expressing opinions about buildings, in taking delight — or feeling furious about — the built environment. His fame made it fashionable to be engaged with architecture, and there is always the hope that public engagement can be enlightened, deepened and directed toward a world in which beautiful, healthy, sustainable buildings are understood as a basic right of humans, who need shelter.

Gehry's architecture was never merely beautiful. His buildings work for a living and earn their keep. But at their best, they are surpassingly beautiful, and any experience of surpassing beauty has radical potential.

Great beauty makes us restless and needy — like Gehry — and demanding — like Gehry. And when we take that restlessness and need and make demands on the world, things can change.

Gehry's legacy helps us formulate that demand: We should build a world that delights us.

Gehry should get much of the credit for the broad public interest in architecture, the comfort that ordinary people have in expressing opinions about buildings, in taking delight — or feeling furious about — the built environment.

WEEKEND: BOOKS

Fear amid family members' Nazi past

Author tries to learn truth behind WWII-era accusations against grandparents

BY REBECCA BRENNER GRAHAM
Special to The Washington Post

In 1994, a suburban wife, mother and journalist named Christine Kuehn received a mysterious letter in the mail from a filmmaker. Its message? A suggestion that her grandparents were Nazi spies who facilitated the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

As Kuehn would soon learn, when her father, Eberhard, was a child in 1935, he moved with his half sister, Ruth, along with his brother and their parents, from Germany to Hawaii. The Japanese empire needed white spies on Oahu. The letter that Kuehn received suggested that from 1935 to 1941, her family sent intelligence along to the Japanese.

Kuehn spent three decades researching her new book, "Family of Spies: A World War II Story of Nazi Espionage, Betrayal, and the Secret History Behind Pearl Harbor," drawing from family and government archives, countless books, and fragmented conversations with her aunt and father. The resulting narrative is hamstrung by an assumption that people must be monsters to do evil. But the tale still offers promising leads for historians and other scholars, not to mention raw material for future novelists and filmmakers, as well as a ready-made page-turner for beach readers.

Kuehn's German grandfather, Otto, was a prisoner of war during World War I who later found his footing in the Nazi Party. When he married Kuehn's grandmother Friedel, she brought along Leopold, her son from an earlier relationship, and Ruth, her daughter from a brief affair with a Jewish architect.

Otto and his stepson Leopold attended their first Nazi rally in 1930. During the Night of the Long Knives, in 1934, Otto was assigned to kill a man, crept into his bedroom and accepted a bribe instead. Leopold was a more diligent follower of Nazi orders. He ascended to the position of deputy in Joseph Goebbels' Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. Ruth, meanwhile, soon started an affair with Goebbels. Kuehn's research led her to believe that Goebbels discovered Ruth's half-Jewish ancestry, a development that prompted the family's relocation. Leaving Leopold behind to serve the Reich, the family arrived in Hawaii in 1935.

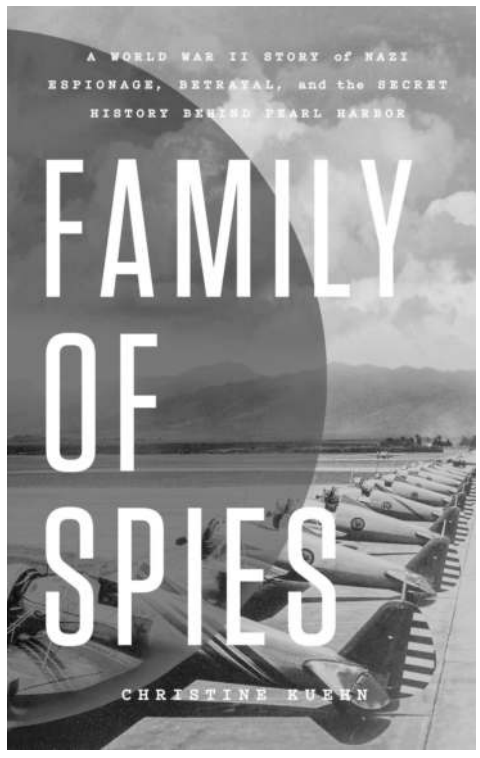
Introduced to the Kuehn family by Goebbels, the Japanese government paid exorbitant sums of money to Otto and Friedel to host lavish parties so that they could collect secrets on Oahu, where the family's whiteness was a source of power. Ruth dated strategically, and she and Friedel opened a faux hair salon to serve as a front where they could overhear information. Otto and Friedel dressed their young son, Hans, as a sailor so that American naval men would invite the cute child aboard their ships. He was trained to report details back to his father, who conveyed the information to Japanese intelligence.

Kuehn writes with dual aims: Working from a place of love, she seeks to understand what happened to her father, but she's also on a mission to wrestle with whether her family was evil. She bravely confronts this fearful question, but it limits the book's interpretive range. She posits a hierarchy of monsters, topped by Adolf Hitler and other famous Nazis. The next tier includes her family. She speculates that if her grandfather had remained in Germany and worked, as he had hoped to, with Heinrich Himmler, he might "have found a way to appease Hitler on the Jewish question. The Kuehns had Jewish friends. Maybe he would have saved thousands."

Ultimately, though, she concludes that he "was a Nazi up for a role that could only have been filled by someone with profound hatred in their heart." Rather than consider how ordinary people could contribute to evil, she moves her grandfather to the top tier of monsters.

Below her family in her imagined calculus is the mass of ordinary people. Kuehn does not think her family is ordinary. True, most people were not Nazi spies on Oahu. Nevertheless, historian and philosopher Hannah Arendt's account of the "banality of evil" demonstrates that many of those who carried out the horrors of World War II — and of the Nazi regime in particular — could look and act perfectly ordinary because in so many ways, they were.

Kuehn's carefully constructed narrative features some wonderful writing that



helps the story glide from Europe across the globe and back again. A well-developed cast of characters and a strong sense of place make for a gripping story, despite the limitations of Kuehn's conceptual framework.

In her research for this book, she courageously delved into the possibility that she was kin not just to spies but to something worse. What may have been harder to admit is that those who cause death and destruction don't need to be monsters at all.

5 notable books by Sophie Kinsella

BY HILLEL ITALIE
Associated Press

Sophie Kinsella, who died Wednesday at age 55, had a special talent for characters who persevered through the most embarrassing mishaps — often of their own making.

Here are five novels that helped keep readers laughing, and relating, over the past 30 years.

'The Tennis Party' (1995)

Fellow writers could only envy Kinsella's success, how early it came and how seemingly easy. As the author would remember, she was a 24-year-old financial journalist who, while commuting by train one day, thought to herself, "I want to have a go at this; I want to write a book." Within two years, she was the bestselling author of "The Tennis Party" under her real name, Madeleine Wickham.

Released in the U.S. as "40 Love," her debut novel centered on the misadventures of a weekend tennis party and introduced readers to her conversational touch about everything from love to money to ... tennis.

"They all have a lot of baggage," the author explained on her website. "They sleep with each other, they behave very badly, drink a lot of Pimms, thrash tennis balls around, and things come to a head quite intensely."

'The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic' (2000)

She published her first books as Wickham, before becoming a global brand as "Sophie Kinsella," using her middle name and her mother's maiden name. Spurred by this first "Shopaholic" novel, millions cheered on the hopelessly indebted financial journalist Becky Bloomwood, who helps keep the economy turning with her "investments" in clothing, household and other products.

Among the most cherished fantasies in her dreamworld: that some "dotty old woman in Cornwall" will mistakenly receive her "humongous" credit card bill and pay if off without checking the name. Becky, meanwhile, will be sent the woman's bill for three tins of cat food, "which, naturally, I'll pay without question."

The 2009 film "Confessions of a Shopaholic," based on the first two of Kinsella's nine-novel series, starred Isla Fisher and Hugh Dancy.

'Can You Keep a Secret?' (2003)

As Kinsella, the novelist had a mission to get her characters in trouble. Emma Corrigan has a proper job as a marketing assistant and a proper and "heartbreakingly handsome" boyfriend. She is also prone to panic and distraction, to going about in public with her blouse unbuttoned or unleashing a spurt of soda on a client's shirt. And she has a few secrets she would like to hold on to, whether it's pouring orange juice on the plant of a colleague who annoys her or how she sometimes holds back laughter while having sex — "just normal, everyday little secrets."

This book was adapted into a 2019 movie starring Alexandra Daddario and Tyler Hoechlin.

'The Undomestic Goddess' (2005)

Her alliteratively named characters were ever fish out of water, sometimes on the driest land. Samantha Sweeting is a London lawyer who can't take it anymore, boards a train to the countryside and finds herself working as a housekeeper, for which she has no known skills.

"I had so much fun charting Samantha's comedy disasters in the kitchen, her battles with the ironing board, her gradual slowing down and relaxing and finding love," the

AP

Author Sophie Kinsella, photographed in 2004. Kinsella died Wednesday of brain cancer. She was 55.

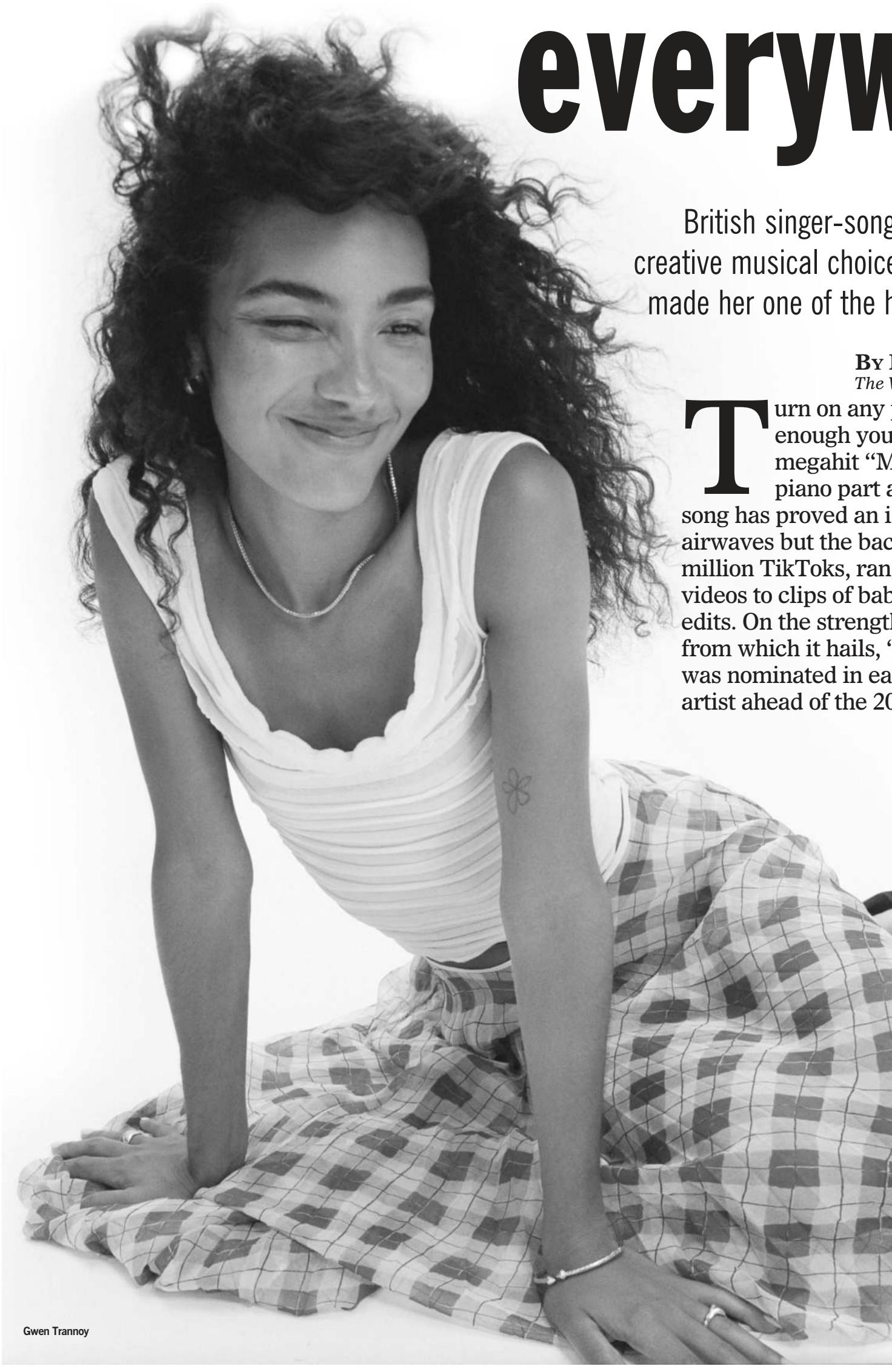
author writes on her website. "It's a story of an uber-professional realizing there's more to life than work, and starting to appreciate the little things."

'Twenties Girl' (2009)

Just your typical supernatural adventure, in which 27-year-old Lara Lington is visited by the ghost of her flapper/great-aunt Sadie and sent off to retrieve Sadie's long-lost necklace. Subplots include Lara being dumped by her boyfriend and wondering if she can succeed in business as a headhunter.

She also lies a lot, to her parents. Yes, her work is going great. Yes, she loved their Christmas gift. No, she doesn't just subsist on pizza and yogurt and vodka. And so on: "Seven lies. Not including all the ones about Mum's outfit."

How Olivia Dean ended up everywhere



Gwen Trannoy

British singer-songwriter's courage in making creative musical choices, channeling emotion has made her one of the hottest pop acts in America

By Ethan Beck
The Washington Post

Turn on any pop station, and soon enough you'll hear Olivia Dean's megahit "Man I Need." With its jaunty piano part and strutting drum beat, the song has proved an ideal fit for not only the airwaves but the background of more than 1.2 million TikToks, ranging from iPhone unboxing videos to clips of babies dancing to relationship edits. On the strength of that hit and the album from which it hails, "The Art of Loving," Dean was nominated in early November for best new artist ahead of the 2026 Grammy Awards.

Madison Davis, a 25-year-old marketing manager in Jersey City, N.J., first stumbled upon Dean's music this year — before "Man I Need" was released in August — as buzz about the singer was percolating. Dean's 2023 debut album "Messy" and its hit single "Dive" had already helped build a fan base in her native Britain, but she hadn't yet found a larger audience stateside.

"I wanted her to be a little secret for a little longer," Davis said, admitting she knew Dean wouldn't remain a niche favorite for long. "A part of me was like, 'Oh my gosh, she is going to blow up.'"

And she did. The 26-year-old London-born singer-songwriter spent 2025 becoming one of the hottest pop acts in America. Though social media ubiquity has fueled her rapid rise, Dean's success is more than a viral blip.

In November, Dean played her biggest hit on the "Saturday Night Live" stage, singing about how the early stages of dating someone can feel like "a type of alchemy" in front of a seven-piece band wearing matching pink outfits — spotlighting a fashion sense that's become one of Dean's trademarks. But for her second song, she didn't play her latest single, "So Easy (To Fall in Love)," which was climbing the charts on the strength of its bossa nova guitars and tasteful horns.

SEE DEAN ON PAGE 31

WEEKEND: MUSIC

Dean: Artist tapping into unique mood

FROM PAGE 30

She opted instead for a waltzing deep-cut, "Let Alone the One You Love," which details the disappointments at the end of a relationship. It might seem like an unlikely choice, but leaning into those raw, personal feelings is part of why Dean's new fans, including Davis, are enraptured by the singer-songwriter. Her candid approach to writing about romantic entanglements, combined with pop-soul grooves, allows Dean to tap into a mood that's underrepresented in the current pop music climate.

According to Dean's collaborators, that sound is a product of the singer's assured creative choices. Her decision not to replace her band of several years after finding success in Britain, for example, or her choice of strong vocalists such as Carole King or Amy Winehouse as role models. Even as Capitol Records UK (and Island Records US) began positioning her for a big break in the States, they say, Dean stayed focused on her craft.

"That's where Olivia's confidence comes in," songwriter Bastian Langebaek, who has production credits on both of Dean's albums, said in a Zoom call. "She's brave enough to do it her way."

For American listeners, it might seem like Dean came out of nowhere. But her first break came at 18 years old, when British drum-and-bass act Rudimental hired her as a background vocalist.

In 2019, Dean signed with Virgin EMI Records. "She was signed six years ago, so this has been a true artist development story, built step by step," said Jo Charrington, president of Capitol Records UK.

By the time Dean's debut album arrived, the enthusiasm around her songcraft had reached a roar in Britain. Matt Hales, who co-produced much of that debut, realized she might become a superstar after seeing a "raucous feeling of love" at her concerts.

"In the onslaught of data we have these days — who actually wants to buy a ticket to come and see an artist and come out on a wet evening — that is a pretty good indication still that something's happening on the ground," Hales, 53, said in another Zoom call. "Going to those first shows, which were already big. She never did small shows."

Her fan base was also beginning to grow across the pond. As Dean embarked on a U.S. tour

JACK PLUNKETT, INVISION/AP

Olivia Dean, shown performing Oct. 11 at the Austin City Limits Music Festival in Austin, Texas, has built a strong fanbase stateside.

this summer, she performed to sold-out halls in New York, Boston, Salt Lake City and Los Angeles. Her label was feeling confident that a strong sophomore album would solidify her rise in America, according to Hales. "There were all kinds of plans being made on her behalf," he said. "But it all hinged on, first of all, her finding the songs and also her being up for the adventure."

Dean chose many of the same collaborators for "The Art of Loving," including Hales and

> **"She's brave enough to do it her way."**
>
> **Bastian Langebaek**
> songwriter with production credits on both of Olivia Dean's albums

Langebaek, the latter of whom she's known since her school days. Early on, Dean floated the album's title to Langebaek, which helped clarify their goals. "With someone like Olivia, it's always these long conversations, crying and laughing, that sum up what the song wants to be," Langebaek said.

Starting with "Nice to Each Other," singles from the new record began trickling out in late May. But shortly after its release in August, "Man I Need" exploded on social media. Uniquely, its rise wasn't attached to a particular trend or type of video. Plenty focused on romances, turning the hook of "Come be the man I need" into a complaint or a celebration, but Dean's hit became the theme song for self-help TikToks, videos of puppies and influencers trying boba tea shops.

But Dean wasn't omnipresent only online. As "Man I Need" rose into the Billboard Top 40 in early October, she performed at the Austin City Limits festival. During Sabrina Carpenter's headlining set, Dean was included in a scripted bit where Carpenter arrests an audience member for "being too hot." The clip of Dean and Carpenter faux flirting has since received over 200,000 likes on TikTok.

A little over a week later, Dean left for a run of arena shows opening for Carpenter. "Once she was on tour with Sabrina — I didn't even go to that tour, but that was on TikTok and Instagram — I started seeing a lot of stuff about her," Davis said. And by the end of the month, Dean's trio of singles — "Man I Need," "Nice to Each Other" and "So Easy (To Fall in Love)" — were all climbing up the Billboard Hot 100.

Isabelle Murphy, 20, first heard Dean through her mom's playlists and became intrigued by the emotional honesty of songs such as 2023's "Dive." If authenticity is always in short supply in pop, Dean "has such a beautiful way [of] showing the raw feelings," Murphy said, "that aren't necessarily always ones that people sing about."

Dean's 2026 American tour sold out almost immediately. But those arena shows will likely feel different than last summer's concert at Brooklyn Paramount in New York, where Murphy saw Dean right before "Man I Need" was released.

"She is just genuinely mesmerizing to look at because you could tell that she's so joyful performing," Murphy said. "Her smile is genuinely contagious when she's up there doing what she loves."

Summer Walker

Finally Over It
(LVRN/Interscope)

Atlanta R&B star Summer Walker's searing music could be the perfect soundtrack to a binge-worthy reality show. It's entertainingly messy and satisfyingly authentic.

Her 2019 debut album "Over It," with its stellar trap production and melodramatic tales, made her an R&B phenom. Subsequently, "Over It" became the most-streamed album by a female R&B artist, surpassing Beyoncé's 2016 LP "Lemonade."

Walker's 2021 follow-up "Still Over It" debuted at No. 1 on the Billboard 200 chart and doubled down on the fire and fury that made her a star (highlighted by "4th Baby Mama," on which she tells her ex and notable Atlanta producer London on Da Track, "I wanna start with yo' mama / she should've whooped yo a—").

Walker

The Atlanta native's thesis on modern dating evolved into a lucid reality: The plight of Black women finding permanent romance is often a futile journey, filled with deception and degradation.

Walker attempts to close that chapter with "Finally Over It," the last installment of her three-part arc. But it doesn't fully land as a proper goodbye. Instead, the project, released on Nov. 14 via Atlanta-based label LVRN, often sounds empty and loaded with stars who rarely advance its sound.

The album's cover art features Walker in a wedding dress next to an elderly man in a wheelchair, giving a nod to late model Anna Nicole Smith, who at 26 famously married an 89-year-old billionaire. The stirring imagery signals a message that Walker, who recently nabbed two more Grammy nominations, is trading the sour dating games for a calmer lifestyle, where her financial needs are met.

It's a theme she debuted during this year's MTV Video Music Awards, for which she channeled Pamela Anderson's look at the same ceremony in 1999. But unlike Anderson, Walker hit the red carpet with an older gentleman as her date.

"Finally Over It" doesn't continue that narrative. The two-part project (aptly titled "For Better" and "For Worse") fails at underlining Walker's current era, drowned out by a star-studded guest list that's not very impactful.

On "Finally Over It," 10 out of 18 songs feature other artists. It's a hefty list for an artist who shines brightest on her own. Chris Brown's subtle contributions on the Mariah Carey-sampling "Baby" aren't memorable. Similarly, Anderson .Paak's giant verse on "1-800 Heartbreak" sounds like a disjointed soliloquy rather than actually fitting Walker's slow-groove R&B.

"Baller," featuring NeNe Leakes, GloRilla, Sexyy Red and Monaleo, sounds, at best, like a lesser companion to her 2025 single "Spend It" (a better track that's unfortunately not on the album). But the features are too distracting, often making the track sound like a cliché better fit for an Instagram caption about needing "a baller, shot caller." Not even Monaleo's enticing guest verse could save the song.

There are outliers, though. Doja Cat's appearance on "Go Girl" is witty and sexy, sharpening the song's sultry self-love lines. Bryson Tiller's verse on "Give Me a Reason" perfectly matches Walker's emotional intensity, crafting a quintessential track about a casual situation unexpectedly turning sweeter.

But Walker is most potent by herself. "Don't Make Me Do It/ Tempted," an album standout, is a worthy return to her roots that salivates in the uncertainty of a rocky relationship ("How come all this pleasure gotta come with pain?" she ponders).

The country-tinged "FMT" (an acronym for "F— My Type") is audacious and refreshing, one of few tracks where Walker completely embraces a new era of trading genuine love for a "transactional relationship" — the kind she teased on the album cover. "FMT" also proves that Walker's subtle vocals seamlessly match a more folksy sound, paving the way for more experimentation.

Similarly, the Teddy Swims-assisted "Allegedly" is another standout for its acoustic soul that underscores the hesitancy of surrendering to love. It's a blissful duet, wading in reluctance.

The best moments of "Finally Over It" are too few and far between, though. The album is the sonic version of a wedding ceremony filled with unnecessary guests attempting to outshine the bride. Luckily, they don't. But their mere presence often detracts from Walker's undeniable talent and songwriting prowess that helped define contemporary R&B.

— DeAsia Paige
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

WEEKEND: HEALTH & FITNESS

Is fiber the next protein-like fad?

Roughage is something most people in the West could use more of, but nutritionists advise caution with 'fibermaxxing'

BY DEE-ANN DURBIN
Associated Press

U.S. consumers who have had their fill of finding protein added to everything from cereal to ice cream are about to meet the next big food fad: fiber.

Americans have been boosting their protein intake for years; even Pop-Tarts and Starbucks are selling protein-enhanced products. But the number of new products promoted with high or added fiber saw a big uptick in the U.S. this year, according to market research firm Mintel. Hundreds of videos on social media celebrate the benefits of dietary fiber and share recipes to help viewers get more of it.

There's even a term for trying to meet or exceed the recommended daily fiber intake: fibermaxxing.

"I think fiber will be the next protein," PepsiCo CEO Ramon Laguarta said during a recent conference call with investors. "Consumers are starting to understand that fiber is the benefit that they need."

PHOTOS BY DEE-ANN DURBIN/AP

Boxes of Fiber One cereal sit on a shelf at a Kroger grocery store in Ann Arbor, Mich. Fiber One cereal packs 18 grams of fiber into a ⅔-cup serving.

Fiber's benefits

Unlike muscle-building protein, fiber isn't sexy. It's a carbohydrate found in plants that your body can't break down. It helps feed gut bacteria and move food through the digestive system.

"Folks don't want to talk about it at a dinner party," said Debbie Petitpain, a registered dietitian nutritionist and a spokeswoman for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

There are two main types of fiber. Soluble fiber dissolves in water and forms a gel-like material that feeds gut bacteria. It's found in foods like oats, peas, beans, apples and carrots. Insoluble fiber doesn't dissolve in water and moves food through the digestive system. It's found in whole wheat flour, popcorn, wheat bran, nuts, green beans and potatoes.

Studies have shown that fiber lowers cholesterol levels, regulates blood sugar and promotes weight loss, since high-fiber foods tend to make eaters feel more full. It may also protect against heart disease, diabetes, diverticulitis and colon cancer, according to the American Heart Association.

Petitpain said rising use of GLP-1 weight loss drugs could be one reason for the renewed focus on fiber, since GLP-1s naturally slow digestion and fiber can prevent constipation. She said there have been similar spikes in interest when people wanted to alleviate symptoms from high-fat diets like Atkins or keto.

How much fiber do we need?

Most people in Western countries could use more fiber because their diets are low in vegetables, fruits and whole grains, said Sander Kersten, director of the Division of Nutritional Sciences at Cornell University.

Under the U.S. Department of Agriculture's guidelines, adults should aim for 14 grams of fiber for every 1,000 calories they consume. That's about 25 grams of fiber for women and 38 grams for men each day. Petitpain said Americans generally only get about two-thirds of that amount.

For reference, 1 cup of raspberries contains 8 grams of fiber, while a banana contains 3.2 grams, according to the USDA. A one-half cup of avocado contains 5 grams of fiber and 1 cup of lima beans contains 13.2 grams. Fiber One, a bran cereal, packs 18 grams of fiber into a ⅔-cup serving.

Cereal bars promoting fiber sit on a shelf at a Kroger grocery store in Ann Arbor, Mich. Long-term studies about the benefits of fiber have looked at the consumption of whole foods and not packaged products with added fiber.

What are good ways to increase fiber?

Kersten said long-term studies about the benefits of fiber have looked at the consumption of whole foods and not packaged products with added fiber.

"The way it is consumed as an additive and part of a diet that doesn't contain a lot of fiber may be different than a naturally fiber-rich diet," Kersten said. "You can eat a very processed, Western diet and consume foods that are enriched, but we don't know if it confers the same benefit."

Whole foods also help the body in other ways, Petitpain said. An apple contains 4.8 grams of fiber as well as water, vitamins and minerals, for example.

Here are some recommendations from the Mayo Clinic for adding fiber to your diet:

- Choose a breakfast cereal with 5 grams or more of fiber a serving. Top it with a sliced banana or berries.
- Choose breads with at least 2 grams of fiber per serving and try other grains like brown rice, whole-wheat pasta and quinoa.
- When baking, substitute whole-grain flour for white flour. Add wheat bran to muffins and cookies.
- Try to eat five or more servings of fruit and vegetables daily. If you eat canned fruit, make sure it's canned in fruit juice and not syrup, and make sure canned vegetables are low in sodium.

Think twice about fibermaxxing

There is no defined upper limit for fiber intake, Kersten said. But increasing fiber can cause painful gas and bloating, especially if it's done quickly.

Petitpain said people should increase their fiber intake gradually and drink plenty of water.

"You're feeding gut bacteria a food, and you can't break it down. You rely on them, and if you give them second, third and fourth servings, there's not enough of them to handle the extra load," Petitpain said.

Certain populations should also be extra careful about their fiber intake, Petitpain said. People who are sensitive to gluten or allergic to foods like soy, shellfish or psyllium husk should read labels carefully since some foods with added fiber contain those ingredients.

More broadly, Kersten questions the trend of focusing on one nutrient, whether it's protein or fiber.

"We don't need nutrients; we need foods. Ultimately, what you want to be striving for is a healthy diet, and you should choose foods that are considered to be an important part of a healthy diet," he said.

WEEKEND: FAMILY

ANTONIA KATSANOS/AP

An Elf on the Shelf doll is shown in various poses at the home of Antonia Katsanos in Totowa, N.J., in past years.

Stress of Elf on the Shelf

Parents under pressure offer creative tips for posing Santa's spy

BY ALICIA RANCILIO
Associated Press

A few years ago, Kurt Neesley, of Redondo Beach, Calif., was brainstorming where to put his family's Elf on the Shelf for his three kids to find the next morning.

He decided to make it look like the doll, named Elfie, had painted on their kitchen wall. Neesley used Tootsie Rolls to build an elf-size climbing wall, posed Elfie on it with a paintbrush, and painted a message in green reminding the kids to behave. There was even paint splatter on the floor. (The paint, Neesley said, was left over from St. Patrick's Day when a leprechaun visited and made a mess.)

"Three glasses of wine usually gets the creativity flowing," said Neesley, who had planned to repaint that kitchen wall anyway. "Elf on the Shelf can be very stressful."

This isn't just the holiday season. It's Elf on the Shelf time, and parents like Neesley need ideas.

Elf on the Shelf, who turns 20 this year, has created lots of family memories, laughter and the occasional parental panic over where to move the elf next.

If you're unfamiliar with Elf on the Shelf, here's how it works: Parents stage the doll in different spots around the home during December. The idea is that Santa Claus has dispatched the elves to keep track of the naughty and nice.

The idea of small, mischievous elves who protect the home — if they are treated well — can be found in Scandinavian folklore. The modern Elf on a Shelf began in Atlanta in the 1970s, when Carol Aebersold introduced her twin daughters to a magical elf doll named Fisbee who would visit each December. They would wake to find Fisbee in a different spot each morning after his trip overnight to the North Pole.

The sisters, Chanda Bell and Christa Pitts, remember telling Fisbee what they wanted for Christmas, believing he gave them a direct line to Santa. "It's the most wholesome thing you'll ever see," said Bell, who also recalls that the elf would be placed up high so they couldn't touch it. (This is now part of the lore. Children must not touch the elf because that will take away its magic.)

In 2004, Aebersold and Bell self-published a "The Elf on the Shelf" book that came with a doll. Pitts helped with sales and marketing. It eventually took off.

Bell and Pitts co-founded a company, Lumistella, which has also created other dolls from Santa's world. Netflix streams four Elf on the Shelf-related movies, and there's an Elf float in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

Antonia Katsanos of Franklin Lakes, N.J., has made her family's Elf, named Twinkle, a year-round presence for her two daughters.

"The elf is watching, you have to eat your dinner. You can't just be good at Christmastime," she'll say. Twinkle has left notes to the girls asking them to pick up their Barbies.

Twinkle can also be mischievous. One morning, the girls found her seated in the shower by the soap, dressed like a mermaid. Other days, she was in the ice machine or hanging upside down in the car.

"I am a creative person, but you do go dry at some point doing this over and over again, year after year," said Katsanos. "I Google ideas and look at Instagram. It's sometimes a nuisance. I've popped up from sleep at 3:30 a.m. remembering I need to move the elf."

Seeing her daughters' faces in the morning when they discover where Twinkle is makes it worthwhile, she said.

Others keep the tradition low-key.

"We don't get elaborate; we just move the elf," said Ashley Zavala of St. Paul, Minn., who works late as a bartender and doesn't want the stress of dealing with anything too detailed when she gets home.

"Our kids like it and they don't know the difference because they haven't had their elf do crazy things."

Still, Zavala looks at pictures online and sends clever ideas to her cousin, who goes all out.

One option for parents who feel fresh out of ideas is to recruit a kid who has aged out of the experience.

"Reacher" star Alan Ritchson says his older son has done just that, and it's worked brilliantly.

"Here's the cheat code. You get a 13-year-old who figures it out a couple years earlier than he should, and then he becomes your little Elf on the Shelf weapon. So they get excited. They'll never miss a night. And you get a kid who's coming up with ideas for you. That's the trick," he said.

Ohio father Neal Hoffman was inspired by Elf on a Shelf to create a similar tradition for Jewish families. His Mensch on a Bench doll and book combo teaches kids about Hanukkah. Hoffman successfully pitched the idea on ABCs "Shark Tank" in 2014, where he recruited investors.

Sandi Celentano, also of Franklin Lakes, N.J., introduced both Elf on the Shelf and Mensch on a Bench to her interfaith household, but it was too much work, so she stopped.

"The amount of time and energy that it took thinking of creative ways to display these things every single day — it just took over everyone's lives. I've boycotted it for about three or four years," she said.

THE MEAT AND POTATOES OF LIFE

Lisa Smith Molinari

Gift giving? Good grief

"So, what does everyone want for Xmas?" the text from my daughter, Anna, to our family read on a recent morning. The coffee in my gut curdled. As usual, I have no idea what anyone wants, much less myself. I dread the mere thought of Christmas shopping.

When our three kids, Hayden, Anna and Lilly, were young, gift giving was fun. As long as there was a pile of gifts to open on Christmas morning, they were happy. I'd visit a couple toy departments and the outlet mall, and my holiday shopping was done faster than it took to wrap everything.

Now, our kids are single young adults. Although they still rely on their parents to provide a gift-filled Christmas morning, each individual has his or her own specific wishes, motivations and tolerance levels.

Hayden (age 30) gives generously, but already has everything he needs. Three years ago, he declared, "Don't give me anything that doesn't fit in the palm of my hand."

Anna (27) has such specific tastes, I know better than to buy her anything she hasn't already sent me a link for.

Lilly (25) is the opposite of her siblings. She just wants a whole bunch of presents to open, regardless of what's inside.

I simply can't keep track. It may be the Season of Giving, but instead of feeling festive when I think of Christmas shopping, I'm filled with confusion, exhaustion and dread.

Almost instantly, my husband, Francis, responded to Anna's text, "Cologne for me," followed quickly by, "Also, I really liked the pajama pants Lilly got me two years ago. Another pair, same material, please." Firmly planted on the narcissistic side of the personality scale, Francis has multiple ideas for gifts that people could (and really should) buy him, because he deserves nice things.

However, even Francis' clear wish list drives up my blood pressure, because it's never finalized. Just when I think I've gotten everything on his list — a Vineyard Vines quarter zip, L.L. Bean whalebone corduroys, New Balance sneakers in size 11 quadruple E, scented candles, cigars, cologne, pajamas and various other luxury items he's requested — he'll add one more thing. "If anyone's still looking for a gift for me…," he's been known to say at 2 p.m. on December 24th.

A few years ago, I tried to make the family gift giving ordeal fun again. I planned a game night, and cleverly drafted "The Molinari Christmas Questionnaire." The survey asked for favorite Christmas cookies, movies and activities, as well as personal gift requests. I made tacos and set up games, thinking my brilliant idea would become a time-honored holiday tradition.

Instead, Hayden and Anna rolled their eyes at the questionnaire, Lilly disliked the taco meat and all three got into an argument after I forced them to play shuffleboard. "That's it! Everybody out!" I blared only minutes into the first game. That night not only lives on in perpetual infamy in our collective holiday memories, it provided zero relief from my holiday shopping dread.

Recently, a young Army spouse co-worker asked to reschedule our Zoom meeting time so she could take advantage of a nearby one-day holiday sale. She explained that she buys five gifts for each of her three school-aged boys each year — "Something they need, something they want, something to read, something to do and something from Santa."

I was amazed. Her simple five-gift plan eliminated guesswork, managed expectations and was budget-friendly — but still included the element of surprise. Genius!

"Why didn't I think of that in my 30 years of motherhood?" I asked myself. "It's no wonder I loathe Christmas shopping! I reluctantly buy a bunch of crap without knowing what anyone wants, then on Christmas morning, I wince as they open their gifts, seeing that look in their eyes that says, 'What the hell am I gonna do with a hand blender?'"

As I wait for the rest of my family to answer Anna's text, I resolve this season to give myself the one gift I really need and deserve — grace. It's exactly what I've always wanted.

Read more at themeatandpotatoesoflife.com and in Lisa's book, "The Meat and Potatoes of Life: My True Lit Com." Email: meatandpotatoesoflife@gmail.com

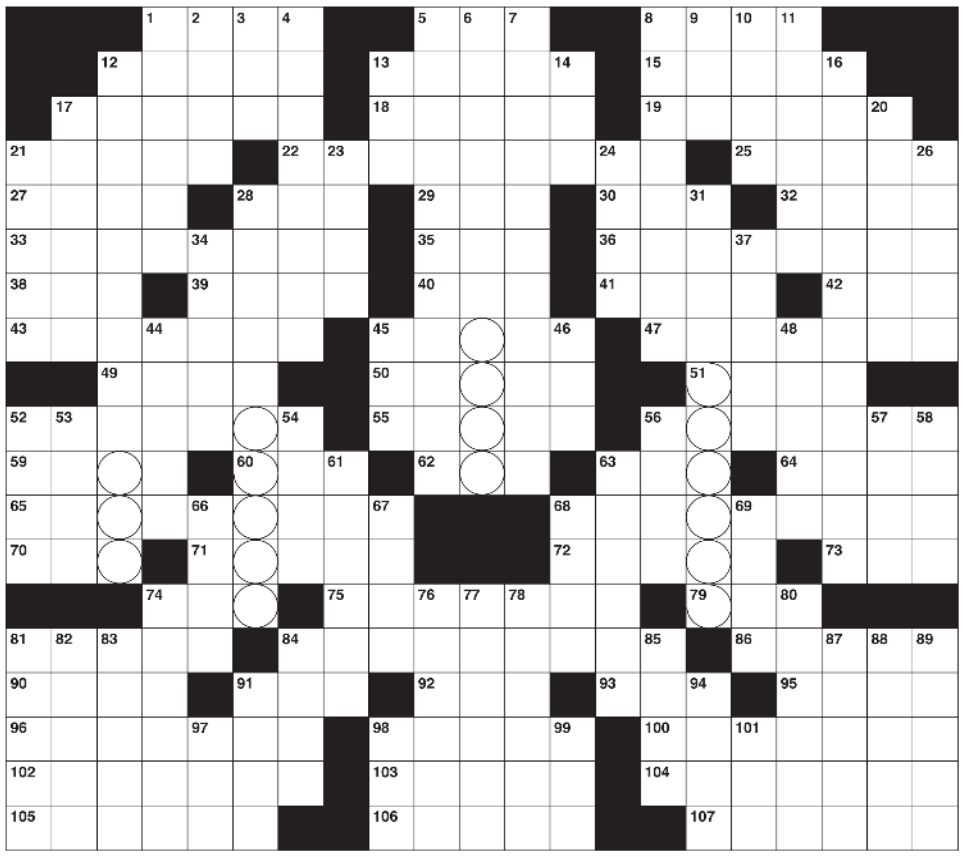
WEEKEND: CROSSWORD AND COMICS

NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

HOG WILD

BY NATAN LAST / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

Natan Last, of Brooklyn, works in immigration policy on behalf of refugees and asylum seekers. This is his 42nd crossword for The Times. He is the author of a new book, ''Across the Universe: The Past, Present and Future of the Crossword Puzzle,'' exploring the crossword's relationship to technology, politics and culture. — W.S.



ACROSS

1 Post-vacation pile
5 Brooklyn Brewery's Special Effects, e.g., in brief
8 Historical Dutch settler
12 ____ guisado (Caribbean stew)
13 Vapid
15 Campaign manager?
17 Puzzle type that was the Oxford Dictionaries' 2005 U.K. ''word of the year''
18 Metallurgist's evaluation
19 Butterflies, so to speak
21 Actress Zosia ____ of ''Girls''
22 ''Zip it''
25 Accommodates
27 Mountains where St. Bernards were originally bred
28 Former Portuguese colony on the Malabar Coast
29 Chemical essential to cellular metabolism, for short
30 ____ feed (news reader)
32 ____ Sea, Kazakh/Uzbek body of water
33 Spiral-shelled mollusk
35 Org. for Penguins and Ducks
36 ''Enough already''
38 Make some calls
39 ''W'' on a light bulb
40 Three-way intersection
41 Coin collector?
42 Singer with the 2014 No. 1 album ''1,000 Forms of Fear''
43 Dealer's manager
45 In check
47 Nuclear restraint pact
49 ____ Castorp, protagonist of Thomas Mann's ''The Magic Mountain''
50 Summa cum ____
51 ''Hold this''
52 College voter?
55 Ancient drinker of the fermented beverage chicha
56 Taxes levied during trade wars
59 Chop house?
60 Cancer research agcy.
62 Locale for drones
63 Preposition that can be represented by a number
64 Matador's opponent
65 Gay rights activist Marsha P. Johnson, for one
68 Beat badly
70 Energy
71 Sarge's boss
72 Knighthood, for one
73 ''When r u getting in?''
74 Mantou or bao, in Chinese cuisine
75 ''Awwww!''
79 ''Awesome!''
81 Lethargy
84 Grammy-winning Paramore hit of 2014
86 Actress Thompson of ''Sorry to Bother You''
90 Bok ____
91 Dearie
92 Co-star of 2025's ''Kiss of the Spider Woman,'' to fans
93 Break down in tears
95 Aquiline : eagle :: cygnine : ____
96 Lenape people from whom a New Jersey river gets its name
98 Egypt/Sudan border region
100 Noodling in a jazz tune
102 Annoying
103 In the majority?
104 Core-sculpting belt
105 Utter chaos
106 1994 co-Nobelist Shimon
107 Greasy spoon, e.g.

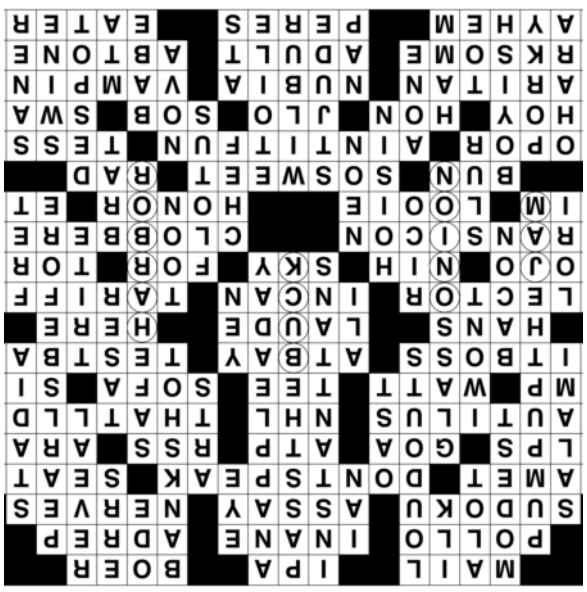
DOWN

1 Self-effacing
2 Oodles
3 Strain
4 Baseballs that are hard-hit but then caught, in lingo
5 Bottlefuls for a summer look, perhaps
6 Skirt responsibility
7 Proverbial cure-all
8 Basketball attempt that uses the backboard
9 Martín Espada's ''____ to the Soccer Ball Sailing Over a Barbed Wire Fence''
10 Leaves the straight and narrow
11 Expose
12 First Eurodance hit in the U.S. (1989)
13 Ending with mammal or Mendel
14 Good quality for an artist
16 With 87-Down, idiom about wasting one's efforts... as seen in four columns in this puzzle?
17 Italian sub ingredient
20 Diamonds can sometimes be found in them
21 ''Quit whining, dude!''
23 Malt-drying kiln
24 ''O, had I but followed the ____!'': ''Twelfth Night''
26 John who painted ''Backyards, Greenwich Village''
28 2022 sequel to ''Knives Out''
31 Refuge
34 ''You can't make me!''
37 Arm of the police department
44 Essayist Francis
45 Comedian Wong
46 Cash on the Ginza
48 Overdone
52 1999 Ron Howard film about a reality show
53 Actress Petty of ''A League of Their Own''
54 Anti-mob law acronym
56 Animated character, informally
57 Act the worrywart
58 ____ fountain
61 Sauce served with Peking duck
63 Michelle Obama or Jill Biden, in brief
66 Indistinct speech
67 It's a gas
68 ''Yes, ____!'' (phrase popularized by the restaurant drama ''The Bear'')
69 Young miscreant
74 Like some charm
76 Patron of lost causes
77 Literary runt of the litter
78 ''L'____ du Nord'' (Minnesota motto)
80 Dictatorial figure
81 Open-weave fabric
82 New York School poet Frank
83 ''Th-th-th-that's all, folks!'' speaker
84 First-rate
85 Flare up?
87 See 16-Down
88 More prudent
89 About to explode, say
91 Pink character in the ''Toy Story'' movies
94 Farmer Hoggett's entrant in a sheepherding contest
97 Turf ____ (football injury)
98 Part of a day care schedule
99 @ @ @
101 Inits. at Grand Central Terminal

GUNSTON STREET

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

RESULTS FOR ABOVE PUZZLE



WORLD

A symphony of woofs

2,397 golden retrievers gather in a park in Argentina, setting an unofficial world record

By Isabel Debre
Associated Press

BUENOS AIRES, Argentina — A passerby could hear the cacophony from miles away in the Argentine capital, the unmistakable sound of 2,397 dogs barking — and breaking the unofficial world record for the largest-ever gathering of golden retrievers.

Excitement pulsed through Bosques de Palermo, a sprawling park in Buenos Aires, as golden retriever-owners from all over Argentina transformed the park's grassy expanse into a sea of bright yellow fur.

Dog owners of all ages, their clothes covered in dog hair and stained with slobber, plopped down on picnic blankets with their beloved goldens to take in the surreal sight of so many other, exceptionally similar-looking ones. Children squealed with delight and giddily petted every dog that pranced about.

Families posed for pet selfies under the blazing Southern Hemisphere's summer sun.

Sipping Argentina's traditional yerba mate drink, attendees swapped fun facts about their favorite breed — such as goldens' famed ability to sniff out low blood sugar and cancer — and shared stories of their retrievers comforting them throughout all of life's ups and downs.

"Since we were children, she's been a constant presence in our family. We've had vacations with her. We've done everything together," said Nicolás Orellana, a 26-year-old wearing a T-shirt with a photo of a golden retriever on it. His family said they drove an hour and a half from their hometown in Buenos Aires province for the event.

"It's a type of dog that's known to create a special bond," he said, kneeling to pet his contented-looking 13-year-old dog Luna.

Natacha Pisarenko/AP

Maximiliano Rivero holds up his pet Manola in a Palermo neighborhood park as people try to set a world record of most Golden Retrievers gathered in a park, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, on Monday.

Golden Retrievers sit with their caretakers.

A woman plays with her dog at a Palermo neighborhood park.

Around them, fellow golden retrievers sniffed each other furiously, some decked out in costumes ranging from Argentine soccer jerseys and national flags to tutus and Star Wars bandanas.

Through the tsunami of tail-wagging and treat-giving, 10 dog-loving volunteers clad in yellow vests roved with clipboards to register each golden retriever in attendance.

After hours of meticulous counting, the final number came in late Monday. With 2,397 golden retrievers recorded, the event's organizer, Fausto Duperre, announced that Argentina had broken the informal world record set last year when an event in Vancouver drew 1,685 goldens.

"This is a historic event," gushed Duperre, a 28-year-old Argentine actor who has become something of a golden retriever influencer on social media, where he regularly posts content about his 10-year-old golden named Oli.

"I'm truly grateful and happy, proud, excited and overjoyed all at once," he added.

High hopes for a big group photo of the dogs alone on the field quickly faded as it became clear that no owner — nor dog — would withstand even a few moments of separation. Plus, there was the all-too-real fear of dogs getting lost among their thousands of furry counterparts. Owners yanked at leashes and wrangled with the most restive dogs to keep them close.

Some said they were expecting total chaos from Monday's event but were surprised to report that it turned out to be easy and delightful — like the dogs themselves.

"I was afraid I would lose her, I was afraid she would fight, I was afraid another dog would attack her," said Elena Deleo, 64, stroking her golden retriever Angie. "But no, they're all affectionate, all gentle. ... It's just a very lovely experience."

16K fossil footprints in Bolivia reveal dinosaur behavior

Associated Press

TORO TORO, Bolivia — Legend once had it that the huge, three-toed footprints scattered across the central highlands of Bolivia came from supernaturally strong monsters — capable of sinking their claws even into solid stone.

Then scientists came here in the 1960s and dispelled children's fears, determining that the strange footprints in fact belonged to gigantic, two-legged dinosaurs that stomped and splashed over 60 million years ago, in the ancient waterways of what is now Toro Toro, a village and popular national park in the Bolivian Andes.

Now, a team of paleontologists, mostly from California's Loma Linda University, have discovered and meticulously documented 16,600 such footprints left by theropods, the dinosaur group that includes the Tyrannosaurus rex. Their study, based on six years of regular field visits and published last Wednesday in the peer-reviewed journal PLOS One, reports that this finding represents the highest number of theropod footprints recorded anywhere in the world.

"There's no place in the world where you have such a big abundance of (theropod) footprints," said Roberto Biaggi, a co-author of the study led by Spanish paleontologist Raúl Esperante. "We have all these world records at this particular site."

The dinosaurs that ruled the earth and roamed this region also made awkward attempts to swim here, according to the study, scratching at what was squishy lake-bottom sediment to leave another 1,378 traces.

They pressed their claws into the mud just before water levels rose and sealed their tracks, protecting them from centuries of erosion, scientists said.

"The preservation of many of the tracks is excellent," said Richard Butler, a paleontologist at the University of Birmingham who was not involved in the research. He said that, to his knowledge, the number of footprints and trackways found in Toro Toro had no precedent.

"This is a remarkable window into the lives and behaviors of dinosaurs at the end of the Cretaceous," Butler added, referring to the period around 66 million years ago at the end of which an asteroid impact abruptly extinguished all dinosaurs and 75% of living species along with them, according to scientists.

Although they've survived for millions of years, human life has threatened these traces. For decades, farmers threshed corn and wheat on the footprint-covered plateaus. Nearby quarry workers didn't think much of the formations as they blasted rock layers for limestone. And just two years ago, researchers said, highway crews tunneling through hillsides nearly wiped out a major site of dinosaur tracks before the national park intervened.

Such disturbances may have something to do with the area's striking absence of dinosaur bones, teeth and eggs, experts say. For all of the footprints and swim traces found across Bolivia's Toro Toro, there are virtually no skeletal remains of the sort that litter the peaks and valleys of Argentine Patagonia and Campanha in Brazil.

But the lack of bones could have natural causes, too. The team said the quantity and pattern of tracks — and the fact they were all found in the same sediment layer — suggest that dinosaurs didn't settle in what is now Bolivia as much as trudge along an ancient coastal superhighway stretching from southern Peru into northwest Argentina.

The range in footprint sizes indicated that giant creatures roughly 33 feet tall moved in a herd with tiny theropods the size of a chicken, 1 foot tall at the hip.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man wants prosecutor removed after long delay

NC RUTHERFORDTON — A man who says members of a secretive North Carolina religious group held him down and beat him wants the prosecutor kicked off his case, accusing the district attorney of siding with a church that dozens of former congregants have said abused them.

Matthew Fenner said in court documents that he has waited more than eight years for a retrial in the kidnapping and assault case involving Word of Faith Fellowship only for District Attorney Ted Bell to schedule the second trial for a church leader during the week Fenner had interviews for a medical residency. Fenner said Bell has refused to delay it.

In a sworn statement, Fenner said Bell wants to stay on Word of Faith's good side because he supports the locally influential church and its hundreds of members in the small county who could stay in his favor for his reelection bid in 2026.

Bell said the allegations about how he has handled the case are all false and that he will respond to all of Fenner's allegations in court.

A leader of Word of Faith, Brooke Covington, was scheduled to stand trial this week on second-degree kidnapping and simple assault charges, but that has been delayed to consider Fenner's request. Covington's previous trial on the same charges ended in a mistrial.

Fenner joined Word of Faith as a teenager in 2010 with his mother. He was at a service at the church's compound in Spindale, N.C., when members including Covington started what the church called a "blasting" session on him, according to Fenner. Members held him down and choked and beat him for two hours while others prayed to expel "homosexual demons," Fenner said.

DAVID GRUNFELD, THE TIMES-PICAYUNE/THE NEW ORLEANS ADVOCATE/AP

Caught in a moment

Mason Diemer, who is stationed at Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base New Orleans, kisses his wife, Chanelle, both from Washington state, on their one-year wedding anniversary, at the top of the steps at Jax Brewery in the French Quarter, on Tuesday, in New Orleans.

8 African penguin chicks hatch at zoo, officials say

MD BALTIMORE — Eight African penguins recently hatched at the Maryland Zoo, a success that experts said could raise awareness of the critically endangered species and possibly help boost their population in the wild.

Keepers at the zoo in Baltimore on Monday announced the birth of the chicks. Officials said their experts began breeding their African penguins in mid-September and continued through the end of February to mimic the spring-to-summer breeding season for these birds in their native South Africa and Namibia.

The eight chicks were born in late October and early November, and are the offspring of four sets of parents, zoo experts said. Keepers chose to name the newborns after vegetables and fruits, and two of them have been dubbed Cayenne and Kiwi. Zoo officials said they would reveal the names of the other six chicks in coming weeks.

The wild population of African penguins, known by the scientific name Spheniscus demersus, has plummeted due to overfishing and habitat loss even though they're a protected species, according to Maryland Zoo bird curator Jen Kottyan.

Experts worry there's a chance that the penguins could become extinct in the wild in the next 10 years.

Carpenter who killed customer is executed

FL STARKE — A man convicted of fatally stabbing a woman during a home invasion decades ago was executed Tuesday evening in Florida.

Mark Allen Geralds, 58, was pronounced dead at 6:15 p.m. following a three-drug injection at Florida State Prison for the February 1989 murder of Tressa Pettibone. The execution was the 18th in Florida this year, further extending the state record for total executions in a single year with one more planned next week.

Pettibone was attacked in her Panama City home on Feb. 1, 1989. Later that day, her 8-year-old son arrived home from school and found his mother fatally stabbed on the kitchen floor, according to court records. Geralds was a carpenter who had done remodeling work at the home about a year before.

About a week before the killing, Geralds ran into Pettibone and her two children at a shopping mall, and Pettibone mentioned that her husband was away on business. Later Geralds approached Pettibone's son at the video arcade and asked when the boy's father would return and what time he and his sister left for and returned from school each day, according to the records.

True crime TV producer now on Most Wanted list

CA SANTA ANA — The former head of a California company that produced true crime TV shows has been added to the FBI's Most Wanted list, years after being charged with portraying herself as an heiress to get millions of dollars from lenders.

Mary Carole McDonnell, 73, is believed to be in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, the FBI said on Dec. 5.

McDonnell is the former chief executive at Bellum Entertainment LLC, based in Burbank, Calif., which produced shows such as "It Takes a Killer" and "I Married a Murderer."

Bellum was having financial problems in 2017. McDonnell was able to get a $14.7 million loan from a bank after falsely claiming she was related to the founders of aviation and aerospace company McDonnell Douglas and had $28 million in a trust account, according to court documents.

"It is alleged that McDonnell also defrauded additional financial institutions in a similar fashion, with an estimated loss of over $15 million," the FBI said.

A grand jury indicted McDonnell in 2018 on charges of fraud and identity theft. She has not been found.

Rescue team sees more calls amid online videos

VT STOWE — A rescue team that covers Vermont's tallest mountain has seen a rise in calls from inexperienced skiers who end up getting lost and in dangerous locations after being influenced by videos on social media.

After seeing footage online of skiers chasing fresh powder tracks in the backcountry, people are increasingly skiing out of bounds, finding themselves lost in the woods and in need of rescue.

On Nov. 29, Stowe Mountain Rescue responded to a 911 call from a skier and snowboarder lost in the woods on Mount Mansfield. The two 19-year-olds drove up from New York to ski in the backcountry outside Stowe Mountain Resort after seeing videos of others doing so on social media, according to the rescue team.

"They referenced a TikTok video which had influenced them," Stowe Mountain Rescue chief Jon Wehse said. "These people are unprepared, they're ill-equipped, they're not in the right shape and they have no spatial awareness of where they are on the mountain, so it causes a problem very quickly."

Stowe Mountain Rescue now sees around eight missions to help groups of lost skiers per season, up from around three such calls only five years ago.

Suspect in custody in fatal shooting on campus

KY FRANKFORT — One student was killed and another was critically wounded in a shooting at a residence hall at Kentucky State University on Tuesday, and a suspect who is not a student at the school has been arrested, officials said.

The shooting happened around 3 p.m. and was an "isolated incident," Scott Tracy, assistant chief of police for Frankfort, said during a news conference Tuesday evening. Tracy said police swiftly responded to the shooting.

Authorities haven't publicly addressed a motive.

Frankfort police said Jacob Lee Bard was booked into jail on murder and first-degree assault charges in connection with the shooting. Police said Bard is from Evansville, Ind., which is about 150 miles west of Frankfort.

Classes, final exams and campus activities at the university have been canceled for the rest of the week, according to the school. The fall term was scheduled to end Friday, according to the school website.

Kentucky State is a public historically Black university with about 2,200 students.

From wire reports

WHERE HEROES SHOP

All honorably discharged Veterans and Department of War civilians with CAC can shop tax free at ShopMyExchange.com. In addition, the Department of War expanded in-store military exchange and commissary shopping privileges as well as MWR resale facility use to all Veterans with service-connected disabilities.

EXCHANGE®

The Exchange is a Department of War Organization

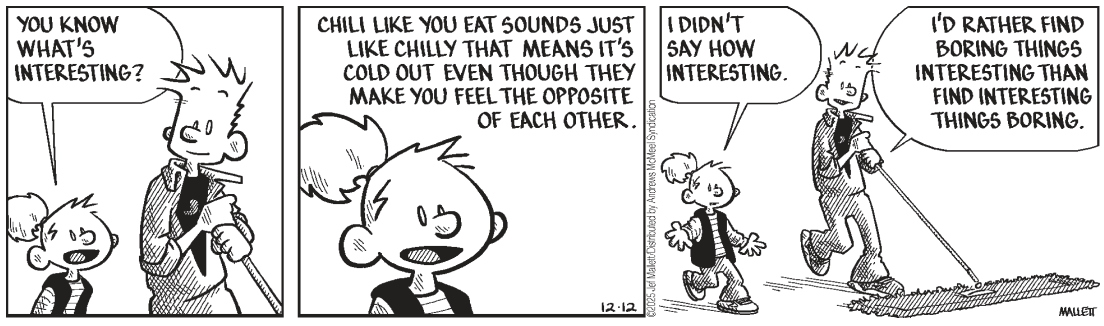
LEARN MORE ABOUT THESE BENEFITS AT

SHOPMYEXCHANGE.COM/VETS

Bizarro

Loose Parts

Frazz

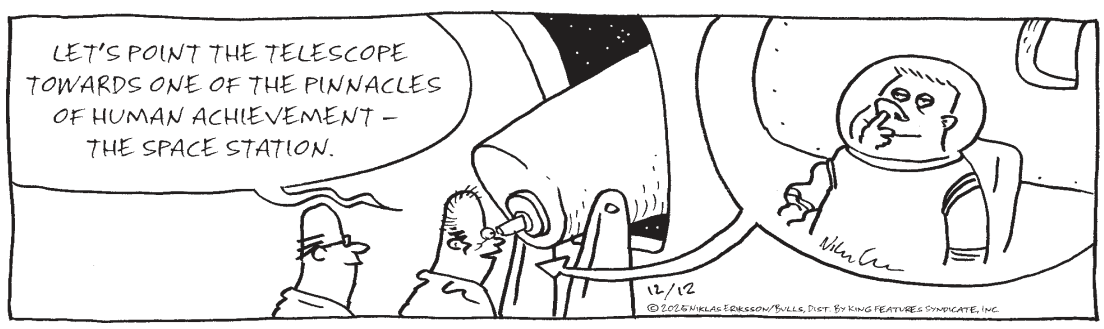


Pearls Before Swine

Non Sequitur

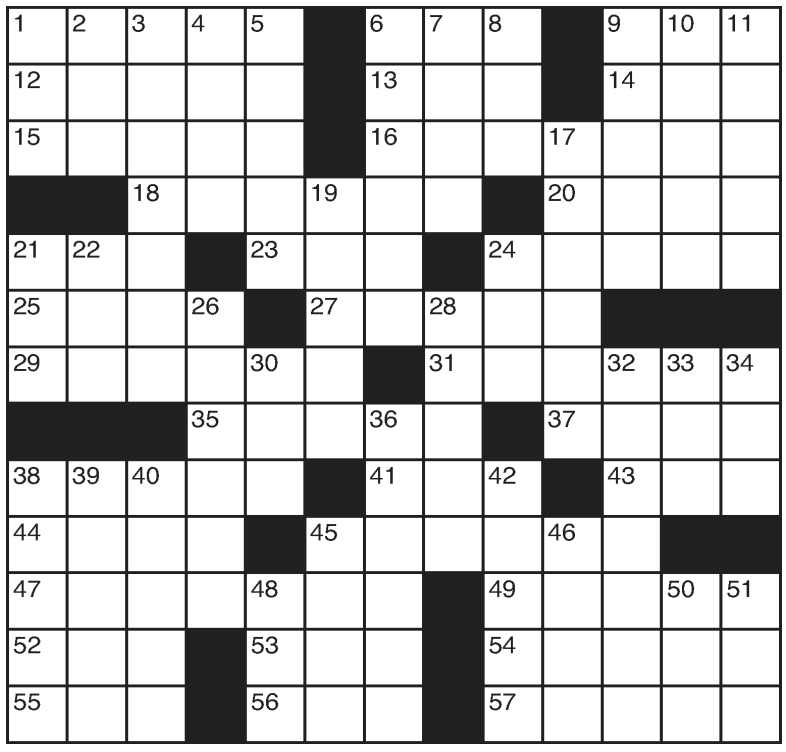
Wumo

Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey

Eugene Sheffer Crossword



ACROSS

1 Rainy month
6 "Kapow!"
9 Radiator sound
12 "— No Good" (Ronstadt hit)
13 Brit. record label
14 Author Harper
15 Pop star John
16 Massachusetts university
18 Garden figurines
20 Playwright William
21 Neckline shape
23 Ballot marks
24 Lawn tool
25 Estate measure
27 Emporium
29 Carl Sagan series
31 Business goal
35 Hosiery shade
37 Without help
38 Poker declaration
41 Louvre treasures
43 "Top Hat" studio
44 Pleasing
45 Partial
47 South Carolina university
49 Garden intruder
52 "I — Rock"
53 Super serve
54 Show again
55 Wd. from Roget
56 Young bloke
57 Big rigs

DOWN

1 Nay undoer
2 D.C. figure
3 New Jersey university
4 Press
5 Fine china
6 Command
7 You love (Lat.)
8 Russian space station
9 Word on the street?
10 Suit fabric
11 Passover meal
17 YouTube uploads
19 Soccer star Lionel
21 Rug cleaner, briefly
22 Green prefix
24 Mess up
26 Insignia
28 Puccini piece
30 British ref. work
32 New York university
33 Variety
34 Overly
36 Put on weight
38 Early Peruvians
39 Gossamer
40 Whale's home
42 Russian rulers
45 — Raton
46 Duel tool
48 "On the Road" narrator
50 King Charles —
51 ER workers

Answer to Previous Puzzle

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

12-12 CRYPTOQUIP

QCM GTJRQ YQJTHY CDED EDJTTL QELNRI QM QJTH, ZBQ J ODC BRMGDRDS OTMCDEY HDGQ ZBSSNRI NR.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHAT MIGHT YOU CALL SOMEBODY WHOSE WORK IS DESIGNING PUBLIC RECREATION AREAS? A PARK-ITECT.

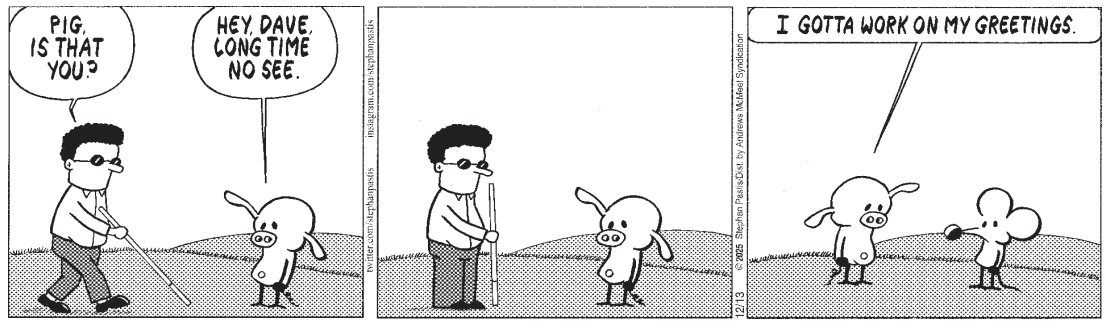
Today's Cryptoquip Clue: T equals L

Bizarro

Loose Parts

Frazz

Pearls Before Swine



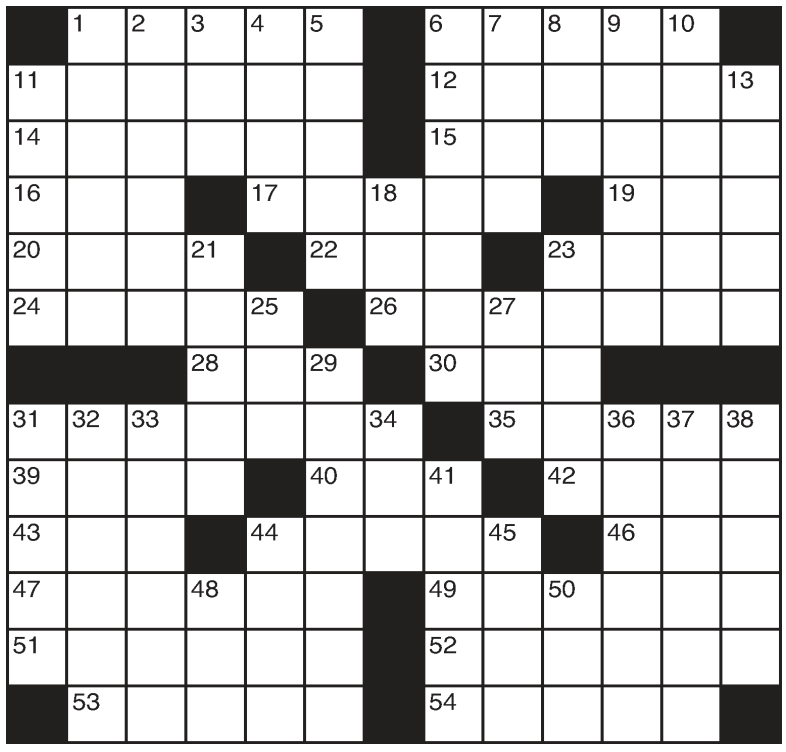
Non Sequitur

Wumo

Carpe Diem

Beetle Bailey

Eugene Sheffer Crossword



ACROSS

1 Autumn pears
6 Transmits
11 Red wine
12 Set afire
14 Write cryptograms
15 Depressing experience
16 Sports fig.
17 Roof overhangs
19 Goof up
20 Slay
22 PC alternative
23 Florence's river
24 Result
26 Commuting option
28 Calendar abbr.
30 Seminary subj.
31 Eating area on a train
35 "Poison" shrub
39 Sediment
40 Filch
42 Pop
43 Prince Valiant's son
44 Fashion
46 VCR button
47 Mexican general Villa
49 Texas city
51 Sound system
52 Woke up
53 Online mortgage, e.g.
54 Beam

DOWN

1 Painter Thomas Hart —
2 Corsage flower
3 — -mo (replay speed)
4 Programmer's output
5 Fulton's power
6 Brandy cocktail
7 Hollywood clashers
8 SSE's opposite
9 Moolah
10 Buffet table heater
11 Gettysburg general
13 Flynn of film
18 Rug cleaner, briefly
21 Revealing works of art?
23 Top grade
25 Chest muscle
27 Scale members
29 Animated film
31 Applauds
32 Make fizzy
33 Aromatic herb
34 "Crying" singer Orbison
36 Wee bite
37 Carol starter
38 Chocolate source
41 Voting groups
44 The Mets' old home
45 Dutch cheese
48 — -Magnon
50 Brit. record label

Answer to Previous Puzzle

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

12-13 CRYPTOQUIP

N H J H V H X J H X J N E V Z T P V H X V Z T Q A H W I ' N U V J G K A L G V M V U T C V W T S E W V J H X - S W V N X V A K A L C W T G Q Z H N : M V W P K A H .

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: TWO PLANT STALKS WERE REALLY TRYING TO TALK, BUT A FEW UNOPENED FLOWERS KEPT BUDDING IN.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: X equals H

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OPINION

Not all realize that there are two Black Americas

By Theodore R. Johnson
Special to The Washington Post

When dozens of African nations gained their independence in the early 1960s, their diplomats arrived in the United States to present their credentials and assume their posts. But just south of the Mason-Dixon line in northern Maryland, many of them soon met the ugly side of America — they were routinely refused service in hotels and highway diners because of their race. When a journalist asked one proprietor why an African dignitary was treated so poorly, she responded, "He looked like just an ordinary run of the mill n——- to me. I couldn't tell he was an ambassador."

For centuries, Black migrants to America quickly learned that they would be treated the same as the Black people already here. Slavery and Jim Crow did not care if your parents were from Jamaica, Nigeria or South Carolina. Six decades after Jim Crow, though, these distinctions are a growing part of a changing country. Today, 1 in 5 Black Americans are immigrants or children of immigrants. Though racism persists, immigration reform and the successes of the Civil Rights Movement diversified Black life in America. And not everyone is happy about it.

Look no further than the White House. Whereas President Donald Trump's insults toward African Americans frequently demean their intellect and paint them as ungrateful, his rants against Black immigrants are often dehumanizing and fixated on removal. Last week at a Cabinet meeting, he disparaged Somalis in Minnesota, calling them "garbage" and saying, "They contribute nothing. I don't want them in our country."

Though such cruelty suggests that some things never change, the emergence of two Black Americas in recent generations is proof that a lot has. A nativity gap has emerged between those long rooted here and those who've immigrated more recently, revealing disparities in income, education, politics and identity. The country has yet to understand these changes and runs the risk of collapsing distinct histories into a singular Black experience, exacerbating rather than reducing racial tensions, and clinging to a caricature of what it means to be Black in America.

Half of Black immigrants in the U.S. are from the Caribbean. More than half of Black immigrants have arrived since 2000, and those from Africa are the fastest-growing cohort and the primary source of the group's present population growth. About a third of Black immigrants hold college degrees, matching the percentage of all immigrants. Their household income is 30% higher than the native Black population, and they are just as likely to own a home. A recent paper from the National Bureau of Economic Research finds that it's this group that's narrowing the earnings gap between white and Black Americans.

Some of this has benefited Trump. Studies show that Black immigrants are typically more conservative, have less connection to political parties and conceive of racial identity differently than native Black Americans. This contributed to Trump's near-doubling of Black support in the 2024 presidential election. Working-class resentments and labor competition have increased Black support for restrictive immigration policy, a hallmark of Trump's campaign. And in Minneapolis, he performed better in neighborhoods with large Somali populations in the 2024 election than in 2020. But now, his administration is targeting those same communities, disproportionately deporting Black immigrants.

Misunderstanding the changing face of Black America means that well-laid plans are sure to result in unintended consequences. Politicians devising strategies that rely on a monolithic Black America with uniform policy preferences — such as partisan gerrymandering — may end up in a worse political position. For all the differences in a diversifying Black America, studies also find that the longer Black immigrants are in the U.S., and subjected to racial inequality, the more likely they are to develop solidarity with African Americans.

Back on that rural stretch of Maryland highway in the early 1960s, President John F. Kennedy's administration appealed to diner owners to serve African ambassadors, who were essential to the country's Cold War strategy. A few businesses relented — but only to serve the dignitaries, not the local Black population. To show the absurdity of this policy, a trio of Black American journalists from the Afro-American in Baltimore rented a limousine, tailcoats and top hats before arriving at diners pretending to be a delegation from the fake nation of Goban. They were served at some places, and the resulting front-page story proved embarrassing for the proprietors and state leadership. But it was only when civil rights activists threatened to send 1,500 Freedom Riders to protest the whites-only diners denying the dignitaries that desegregation finally arrived, for Africans and African Americans alike.

And as has been the case since the nation's beginning, Black migrants for generations and from every corner of the world have come to understand — even if reluctantly — that their lives in America are inextricably linked to the Black people already here.

Theodore R. Johnson, a contributing columnist for The Washington Post and retired naval officer, writes on issues of race, democracy, and American identity. He's the author of the book "If We Are Brave."

The single most important test to judge robotaxis by

By Marc Lamber
Special to The Washington Post

In 34 years representing car-crash victims, I've heard the same story over and over, with varying details — the driver at fault was texting, had consumed "just two drinks," fell into a late-night doze. But the outcome is consistent: a life cut short or changed forever.

From that vantage, I propose a simple test for driverless robotaxis: Do they reduce harm compared with human drivers?

Driverless robotaxis are no longer a science project. Waymo, for one, operates and is expanding in Phoenix; San Francisco; Los Angeles; Austin, Texas; and Atlanta. Yet public debate often remains mired in fear. A single high-profile incident can prompt calls to regulate the vehicles county by county.

We treat every robotaxi error as a verdict on the entire technology, while the daily carnage of human driving fades into the background. That is backward. We are grading machines against perfection and grading ourselves on a curve.

Consider that seat belts and airbags did not eliminate car crashes; they made survival more likely. Robotaxis deserve to be judged against the same standard — not a fantasy of zero risk but a defensible comparison to humans.

The emerging industry data makes a strong case on behalf of robotaxis. Across roughly 96 million rider-only miles, Waymo reports that its vehicles caused 91% fewer serious-injury-or-worse crashes versus human benchmarks in similar conditions, 92% fewer crashes involving pedestrian injuries, and about 79% fewer air-bag-deployment crashes.

Those are not just numbers; they are a scorecard of lives not shattered. And they are a strong argument for expanding the use of these vehicles nationwide.

We should not hold autonomous vehicles to a zero-risk standard that human drivers fail every day. What we should do is demand transparency and continuous improvement. We should build on the crash reporting framework introduced in the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's 2021 Standing General Order and pass the AV Safety Data Act to require standardized federal reporting of miles driven, collisions and unplanned stops so the public can directly compare robotaxis to human drivers, apples to apples.

Even with safer cars, however, accidents involving humans and pets will happen. National protocols should guarantee immediate human contact for anyone affected and preservation of relevant video and sensor data, followed by rapid, independently reviewed fixes when failures occur.

Moreover, access to robotaxis must be equitable from day one. If a city grants public trust to a new mode of transportation, the benefits cannot be limited to the wealthy or well-connected. This means setting coverage and response-time floors in transit deserts, requiring wheelchair-accessible deployments, protecting against algorithmic redlining, allowing cash or prepayment for those without credit cards or access to online banking and capping price spikes where alternatives are thin.

Early deployments show another robotaxi advantage that rarely makes headlines: consistency. Robotaxis don't "just check a text" or speed up to beat a yellow light. They are never accused of sexual assault. The software follows the same rules at 2 p.m. as at 2 a.m.

Some critics may say my position is too generous to technology. I would say it is, instead, appropriately generous to human life. For generations, we have accepted a level of violence on our roads that would be intolerable in any other public system. If robotaxi technology demonstrates a consistent upward safety trend, we have a duty to let its use expand. If it fails to, we have a duty to slow or stop its adoption until it does.

For lawyers like me who see the aftermath of road violence up close, fewer catastrophic cases would be a civic achievement, not a loss.

The public standard is clear enough for a middle-school civics class: Judge by outcomes.

Count the injuries that never happen. Count the parents who make it home to their children.

Marc Lamber is a Phoenix-based personal injury attorney with the law firm Lamber Goodnow.

SCOREBOARD

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Schedule

Saturday, Dec. 13
EAST

Navy (9-2) vs. Army (6-5) at Baltimore

College Football Playoffs

First Round
Friday, Dec. 19

No. 9 Alabama (10-3) at No. 8 Oklahoma (10-2)

Saturday, Dec. 20

No. 10 Miami (Fla.) (10-2) at No. 7 Texas A&M (11-1)
No. 11 Tulane (11-2) at No. 6 Mississippi (11-1)
No. 12 James Madison (12-1) at No. 5 Oregon (11-1)

Quarterfinals
Wednesday, Dec. 31
At Cotton Bowl, Arlington, Texas

Miami/Texas A&M winner at No. 2 Ohio St.

Thursday, Jan. 1
At Orange Bowl, Miami Gardens, Fla.

James Madison/Oregon winner at No. 4 Texas Tech

At Rose Bowl, Pasadena, Calif.

Alabama/Oklahoma winner at No. 1 Indiana

At Sugar Bowl, New Orleans

Tulane/Mississippi winner at No. 3 Georgia

FCS playoffs

Quarterfinals
Friday, Dec. 12

Stephen F. Austin at Montana State

Saturday, Dec. 13

Illinois St. at UC Davis
Villanova at Tarleton St.
South Dakota at Montana

Semifinals
Saturday, Dec. 22

Illinois St.-UC Davis winner vs. Villanova-Tarleton St. winner
Stephen F. Austin-Montana State winner vs. South Dakota-Montana winner

NCAA Division II playoffs

Semifinals
Saturday

Newberry at Ferris State
Harding at Kutztown

Championship
Saturday, Dec. 20

Semifinal winners

NCAA Division III playoffs

Quarterfinals
Saturday

John Carroll at Berry
Susquehanna at Johns Hopkins
Bethel (Minnesota) at North Central (Illinois)
Wheaton (Illinois) at UW-River Falls

Semifinals
Saturday, Dec. 20

John Carroll-Berry winner vs. Bethel-North Central winner
Susquehanna-Johns Hopkins winner vs. Wheaton-UW-River Falls

Bowl Glance

CFP Rankings Listed
Dec. 13
Celebration Bowl
Atlanta

South Carolina St. vs. Prairie View A&M

LA Bowl
Inglewood, Calif.

Boise State vs. Washington

Dec. 16
Salute to Veterans Bowl
Montgomery, Ala.

Troy vs. Jacksonville State

Dec. 17
Cure Bowl
Orlando, Fla.

Old Dominion vs. South Florida

68 Ventures Bowl
Mobile, Ala.

Louisiana vs. Delaware

Dec. 18
Xbox Bowl
Frisco, Texas

Arkansas State vs. Missouri State

Dec. 19
Myrtle Beach Bowl
Conway, S.C.

Kennesaw State vs. Western Michigan

Gasparilla Bowl
Tampa, Fla.

Memphis vs N.C. State

Dec. 22
Famous Idaho Potato Bowl
Boise, Idaho

Utah St. vs. Washington St.

Dec. 23
Boca Raton Bowl

Louisville vs. Toledo

New Orleans Bowl

Western Kentucky vs. Southern Miss

Frisco Bowl
Frisco, Texas

Ohio vs. UNLV

Dec. 24
Hawai'i Bowl
Honolulu

Cal vs. Hawaii

Dec. 26
GameAbove Sports Bowl
Detroit, Mich.

Central Michigan vs. Northwestern

Rate Bowl
Phoenix

New Mexico vs. Minnesota

First Responder Bowl
Dallas, Texas

FIU vs. UTSA

Dec. 27
Military Bowl
Annapolis, Md.

Pittsburgh vs. East Carolina

Pinstripe Bowl
Bronx, N.Y.

Clemson vs. Penn St.

Fenway Bowl
Boston

UConn vs. Army

Pop-Tarts Bowl
Orlando, Fla.

No. 12 BYU vs. No. 22 Georgia Tech

Arizona Bowl
Tucson, Ariz.

Fresno St. vs. Miami (OH)

New Mexico Bowl
Albuquerque

No. 25 North Texas vs. San Diego St.

Gator Bowl
Jacksonville, Fla.

Missouri vs. Virginia

Texas Bowl
Houston

LSU vs. No. 21 Houston

Dec. 29
Birmingham Bowl

Georgia Southern vs. Appalachian State

Dec. 30
Independence Bowl
Shreveport, La.

Coastal Carolina vs. Louisiana Tech

Music City Bowl
Nashville, Tenn.

Tennessee vs. Illinois

Alamo Bowl
San Antonio, Texas

No. 16 Southern Cal vs. TCU

Dec. 31
ReliaQuest Bowl
Tampa, Fla.

No. 14 Vanderbilt vs. No. 23 Iowa

Sun Bowl
El Paso, Texas

Arizona St. vs. Duke

Citrus Bowl
Orlando, Fla.

No. 13 Texas vs. No. 18 Michigan

Las Vegas Bowl

No. 15 Utah vs. Nebraska

Jan. 2
Armed Forces Bowl
Fort Worth, Texas

Texas State vs. Rice

Liberty Bowl
Memphis, Tenn.

Navy vs. Cincinnati

Duke's Mayo Bowl
Charlotte, N.C.

Mississippi St. vs. Wake Forest

Holiday Bowl
San Diego, Calif.

No. 17 Arizona vs. SMU

AP SPORTLIGHT

Dec. 12

1965 — Chicago's Gale Sayers scores six touchdowns with 336 combined yards to lead the Bears to a 61-20 rout of the San Francisco 49ers. The six TDs give Sayers an NFL-record 21 for the season. Sayers' first touchdown is a reception, the next four rushing and the final, an 85-yard punt return.

1968 — Arthur Ashe becomes the first Black person to be ranked No. 1 in tennis.

2015 — Keenan Reynolds ends his Navy career with a clean sweep against Army. Reynolds rushes for two touchdowns and throws for another score to lead the No. 21 Midshipmen to their 14th straight win over the Black Knights, 21-17. Reynolds is the first quarterback over the 116-game series to go 4-0.

2015 — The Golden State Warriors' NBA-record start ends at 24 wins when the Milwaukee Bucks beat them 108-95.

DEALS

Wednesday's transactions

BASEBALL
Major League Baseball
American League

ATHLETICS — Traded RHP Ryan Watson to Boston in exchange for INF Justin Reimer.
BALTIMORE ORIOLES — Claimed LHP Josh Walker off waivers from the Atlanta Braves. Designated C Drew Romo for assignment.
TEXAS RANGERS — Acquired RHP Carter Baumler from the Pittsburgh Pirates in exchange for RHP Jaiker Garcia and cash considerations.

National League

ATLANTA BRAVES — Agreed to terms with OF Mike Yastrzemski on a two-year contract.
COLORADO ROCKIES — Hired Tommy Tanous as assistant general manager.
PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES — Acquired RHP Yoniel Curet from the Tampa Bay Rays in exchange for RHP Tommy McCollum.

FOOTBALL
National Football League

ARIZONA CARDINALS — Declined to activate RB Trey Benson from injured reserve. Signed OL Wyatt Bowles and Tyler Cooper to the practice squad.
ATLANTA FALCONS — Signed S Jordan Fuller to the practice squad.
CHICAGO BEARS — Signed LB Ty Summers to the practice squad.
CINCINNATI BENGALS — Signed WR Xavier Johnson to the practice squad. Designated DE Shemar Stewart to return from injured reserve.
CLEVELAND BROWNS — Signed DT Maurice Hurst to the practice squad. Signed T Jeremiah Byers and RB Trayveon Williams to the active roster. Released DT Simeon Barrow Jr. from the practice squad. Signed CB Tre Avery to the active roster. Waived S Christopher Edmonds.
DENVER BRONCOS — Designated G Ben Powers to return from injured reserve.
DETROIT LIONS — Claimed S Jalen Mills off waivers from the Houston Texans. Waived TE Hayden Rucci. Designated G Christian Mahogany to return from injured reserve.
HOUSTON TEXANS — Signed FB Jakob Johnson to the practice squad. Designated WR Justin Watson and TE Harrison Bryant to return from injured reserve.
INDIANAPOLIS COLTS — Placed CB Charvarius Ward on injured reserve. Signed K Blake Crupe and QB Brett Rypien to the active roster. Signed C Jimmy Morrissey to the practice squad. Designated DT DeForest Buckner to return from injured reserve.
LAS VEGAS RAIDERS — Designated OT Kolton Miller to return from injured reserve.
LOS ANGELES CHARGERS — Signed RB Jaret Patterson to the practice squad.
MINNESOTA VIKINGS — Signed LB Josh Ross to the practice squad.
NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS — Placed RB Craig Reynolds on the practice squad injured reserve. Reinstated RB Jashaun Corbin from practice squad injured reserve.
NEW YORK GIANTS — Signed WR/KR Xavier Gipson to the practice squad. Released WR/KR Ray-Ray McCloud from the practice squad. Designated WR Beaux Collins to return from injured reserve.
NEW YORK JETS — Signed QB Adrian Martinez to the practice squad. Signed TE Nick Muse to the practice squad. Signed DE Eric Watts to the active roster. Placed DL Tyler Baron on injured reserve.
PHILADELPHIA EAGLES — Declined to activate T Myles Hinton from injured reserve. Designated LS Charley Hughlett to return from injured reserve.
PITTSBURGH STEELERS — Placed OL Calvin Anderson on injured reserve. Signed OL Dylan Cook to the active roster. Signed OT David Sharpe to the practice squad. Released RB Trey Sermon from the practice squad.
SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS — Signed DB Isaiah Bolden to the practice squad.
SEATTLE SEAHAWKS — Designated OL Jalen Sundell and TE Eric Saubert to return from injured reserve.
TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS — Activated WRs Mike Evans and Jalen McMillan from injured reserve. Waived DT C.J. Brewer and WR Ryan Miller.
WASHINGTON COMMANDERS — Placed TE Zach Ertz on injured reserve. Signed RB Chase Edmonds to the active roster. Signed CB Kevon Seymour to the practice squad.

HOCKEY
National Hockey League

BUFFALO SABRES — Signed F Trevor Kuntar to a one-year, two-way contract.
NEW YORK RANGERS — Placed F/C Adam Edstrom on long-term injured reserve.
OTTAWA SENATORS — Assigned F Olle Lycksell to Belleville (AHL).
PITTSBURGH PENGUINS — Assigned F/C Samuel Poulin to Wilkes-Barre/Scranton (AHL).
ST. LOUIS BLUES — Placed F Jordan Kyrou on injured reserve.
TORONTO MAPLE LEAFS — Placed D Dakota Mermis on injured reserve. Recalled D Henry Thrun from Toronto (AHL).

SOCCER
Major League Soccer

ATLANTA UNITED — Signed MF Santiago Pita to a homegrown contract for the 2026 MLS season, with club options through 2029.
AUSTIN FC — Acquired $50,000 in 2026 general allocation money (GAM) from Sporting Kansas City in exchange for G Stefan Cleveland.
ORLANDO CITY SC — Acquired $500,000 in 2026 general allocation money (GAM) from CF Montréal in exchange for D Dagur Dan Thórhallsson.
REAL SALT LAKE — Acquired nearly $1.5 million in 2026/2027 general allocation money (GAM) and potential incentives from CF Montreal in exchange for MF Brayan Vera.

National Women's Soccer League

UTAH ROYALS — Signed G DeAira Jackson and MF Aria Nagai to salary cap-exempt contracts for the 2026 NWSL season.

COLLEGE

MICHIGAN — Fired head football coach Sherrone Moore.

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Wednesday's men's scores

EAST

Delaware 70, George Washington 58
Fordham 75, Fairleigh Dickinson 54
Hofstra 92, SUNY-Old Westbury 23
Iona 69, Bryant 63
Maine 69, Boston University 59
Marshall 77, Western Kentucky 61
Merrimack 59, Princeton 56
NJIT 70, New Haven 64
St. Bonaventure 85, Colgate 77
UMass 76, Boston College 74
UMass Lowell 122, Fisher 73
Yale 93, Albany 82

SOUTH

Florida Atlantic 112, Saint Leo 55
Miami (OH) 90, UNC Asheville 87, OT
New Mexico 81, VCU 78
Nicholls St. 117, Coll. of Biblical Studies 49
North Carolina State 85, Liberty 45
South Florida 81, Charleston 75
Tulane 84, Tougaloo 72

MIDWEST

Eastern Kentucky 68, Eastern Illinois 59
Nebraska 90, Wisconsin 60
North Dakota 89, Crown College 43
Notre Dame 80, Idaho 65
Purdue 85, Minnesota 57
Purdue Fort Wayne 80, E. Michigan 65
Southern Illinois 83, Tenn.-Martin 54

SOUTHWEST

Baylor 97, Norfolk State 67
Houston 80, Jackson State 38
Texas State 86, Southern University 83
Tulsa 117, Arkansas-Pine Bluff 84

FAR WEST

Boise State 86, Duquesne 64
Cal State Fullerton 116, Bethesda 66
Cal State Northridge 89, Fresno State 87
Montana 102, Salish Kootenai College 46
San Diego State 89, Lamar 71
Utah Valley 73, Idaho State 69
Weber State 64, Kansas City 60

Top 25 schedule

Saturday's games

No. 1 Arizona (8-0) vs. No. 12 Alabama (7-2) at Birmingham, Ala.
No. 2 Michigan (8-0) at Maryland (6-4)
No. 6 Purdue (8-1) vs. Marquette (5-5)
No. 7 Houston (8-1) vs. New Orleans (2-7)
No. 8 Gonzaga (9-1) vs. No. 25 UCLA (7-2) at Seattle
No. 9 Michigan St. (8-1) at Penn St. (8-1)
No. 10 BYU (7-1) vs. UC Riverside (5-5)
No. 11 Louisville (8-1) vs. Memphis (4-4)
No. 13 Illinois (7-2) vs. No. 23 Nebraska (9-0)
No. 14 N. Carolina (8-1) vs. SC Upstate (6-5)
No. 15 Vanderbilt (9-0) vs. Central Arkansas (4-6)
No. 16 Texas Tech (7-2) vs. No. 17 Arkansas (7-2) at Dallas
No. 18 Florida (5-3) vs. George Washington (8-2) at Sunrise, Fla.
No. 19 Kansas (7-3) at NC State (6-3)
No. 21 Auburn (7-3) vs. Chattanooga (4-5) at Atlanta
No. 22 St. John's (5-3) vs. Iona (7-3)

Wednesday's women's scores

EAST

Fairleigh Dickinson 57, Saint Peter's 34
George Washington 63, Delaware 59
Maryland 91, Delaware State 21
Princeton 81, Rutgers 63
Rhode Island 57, Providence 51
St. John's 73, Stony Brook 42
Syracuse 88, Colgate 42

SOUTH

Coastal Carolina 67, UNC Greensboro 61
Louisville 93, Ball State 62
Troy 132, Oakwood 62
Virginia 76, Howard 50
Virginia Tech 92, Presbyterian 36

MIDWEST

Bradley 65, South Dakota 62
Green Bay 74, IUPUI 47
Illinois 70, Missouri 62
Iowa State 74, Iowa 69
Minnesota 82, Alabama A&M 44
Purdue Fort Wayne 70, Milwaukee 60
San Diego State 64, Kansas State 53
South Dakota State 59, Northern Iowa 57
St. Thomas 112, Crown College 23
Wisconsin 74, San Diego 46

SOUTHWEST

SMU 57, Coppin State 49
Texas 110, UT Rio Grande Valley 45
Texas State 64, North Texas at Dallas 38

FAR WEST

Arizona 87, Eastern Kentucky 83
California 68, Idaho 61
E. Washington 71, Washington State 69
Saint Mary's 60, Fresno State 57
Utah 91, Boise State 58

PRO HOCKEY

NHL

EASTERN CONFERENCE
Atlantic Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Detroit	31	17	11	3	37	99	105
Tampa Bay	30	17	11	2	36	94	76
Boston	31	18	13	0	36	101	96
Montreal	29	15	11	3	33	93	105
Florida	29	15	12	2	32	92	93
Toronto	29	14	11	4	32	97	93
Ottawa	29	13	12	4	30	90	96
Buffalo	30	12	14	4	28	92	106

Metropolitan Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Washington	30	18	9	3	39	103	75
Carolina	29	18	9	2	38	98	83
N.Y. Islanders	31	17	11	3	37	92	89
Pittsburgh	28	14	7	7	35	88	81
Philadelphia	28	16	9	3	35	85	78
New Jersey	30	17	12	1	35	88	92
N.Y. Rangers	32	15	13	4	34	83	84
Columbus	30	13	11	6	32	91	103

WESTERN CONFERENCE
Central Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Colorado	30	21	2	7	49	118	70
Dallas	31	21	5	5	47	109	80
Minnesota	30	16	9	5	37	85	81
Chicago	30	13	11	6	32	89	91
Utah	32	14	15	3	31	96	94
Winnipeg	29	14	14	1	29	88	89
St. Louis	31	11	13	7	29	79	109
Nashville	29	11	14	4	26	78	103

Pacific Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Anaheim	30	19	10	1	39	111	98
Vegas	29	14	6	9	37	90	86
Los Angeles	30	14	8	8	36	82	80
Edmonton	30	13	11	6	32	99	106
San Jose	31	14	14	3	31	87	103
Seattle	28	12	10	6	30	70	85
Calgary	32	12	16	4	28	82	96
Vancouver	30	11	16	3	25	85	108

Note: Two points for a win, one point for overtime loss. Top three teams in each division and two wild cards per conference advance to playoffs.

Tuesday's games

Philadelphia 4, San Jose 1
Tampa Bay 6, Montreal 1
Anaheim 4, Pittsburgh 3, SO
New Jersey 4, Ottawa 3
N.Y. Islanders 5, Vegas 4, SO
Carolina 4, Columbus 1
Dallas 4, Winnipeg 3
Boston 5, St. Louis 2
Buffalo 4, Edmonton 3, OT
Nashville 4, Colorado 3, SO

Wednesday's games

Chicago 3, N.Y. Rangers 0
Detroit 4, Calgary 3
Florida 4, Utah 3
Seattle 3, Los Angeles 2, OT

Thursday's games

Anaheim at N.Y. Islanders
Carolina at Washington
Montreal at Pittsburgh
Ottawa at Columbus
San Jose at Toronto
Tampa Bay at New Jersey
Vegas at Philadelphia
Boston at Winnipeg
Dallas at Minnesota
St. Louis at Nashville
Detroit at Edmonton
Florida at Colorado
Buffalo at Vancouver

Friday's games

Chicago at St. Louis
Seattle at Utah

Saturday's games

Anaheim at New Jersey
Ottawa at Minnesota
San Jose at Pittsburgh
Tampa Bay at N.Y. Islanders
Carolina at Philadelphia
Edmonton at Toronto
Montreal at N.Y. Rangers
Vegas at Columbus
Washington at Winnipeg
Detroit at Chicago
Florida at Dallas
Nashville at Colorado
Calgary at Los Angeles

Sunday's games

Vancouver at New Jersey
Utah at Pittsburgh
Philadelphia at Carolina
Boston at Minnesota
Edmonton at Montreal
Buffalo at Seattle

COLLEGE SOCCER

Men's Division I tournament

Semifinals
Friday, Dec. 12
Cary, N.C.

Furman vs. Washington
Saint Louis vs. NC State

Championship
Monday, Dec. 15

Semifinal winners

OLYMPICS

Vonn back in top shape amid training for Milan

By Andrew Dampf
Associated Press

Twelve more pounds of muscle. Equipment dialed in. A new superstar coach.

At age 41, Lindsey Vonn is feeling more powerful than she has in years. So powerful that she already pulled away from the field in the very first official downhill training session of the season Wednesday.

Next up, Vonn will get her Olympic racing season underway this weekend with two World Cup downhills and a super-G in St. Moritz, Switzerland.

"Physically I'm in possibly the best shape I've ever been in," Vonn said at a news conference in the Swiss resort. "And my body doesn't hurt, so that's the best part of all."

Vonn returned to skiing last season after nearly six years of retirement — and following a partial replacement surgery on her right knee, which included inserting two pieces of titanium.

Having been the most successful speed racer ever during the first part of her career, Vonn had mixed results last season. She didn't reach the podium until her final race last March when she finished second in a super-G on home snow in Sun Valley, Idaho.

"My goal was to get a lot stronger this summer," Vonn said. "I was thinner than I would have liked last season. I didn't really have any time to prepare so I didn't have time to gain my mass back. I was still quite a bit lighter than I was when I was racing in my prime.

"But I was able to gain about 12 pounds this summer, which I was thrilled about," Vonn added. "It took a lot of hard work. I was probably the most disciplined I've ever been with my diet and just how I approached the entire summer. I put everything I had into being as physically prepared as possible."

Vonn is aiming to compete in three events at the Feb. 6-22 Milan Cortina Winter Olympics: downhill, super-G and the new team combined race.

"For my age, I feel pretty damn good," Vonn said. "I probably feel better now than I did before I tore my first ACL in 2013. So that was quite a long time ago."

Vonn's 43 downhill wins and 28 super-G victories are both World Cup records. Her 82 World Cup victories are third all time behind American teammate Mikaela Shiffrin (104) and retired Swedish great Ingemar Stenmark (86).

In Wednesday's opening training session on the St. Moritz course, Vonn placed 0.59 seconds ahead of Kajsa Vickhoff Lie of Norway and 0.71 ahead of Italian standout Sofia Goggia.

Vonn had another training session Thursday. Then the downhill races are scheduled for Friday and Saturday followed by the super-G Sunday.

A year ago, Vonn made her return to the World Cup circuit in St. Moritz after nearly six years of retirement and placed 14th in a super-G.

Vonn said she tried "20 to 30 pairs" of new boots last season before eventually pulling out an old pair that was collecting dust in her basement.

Aksel Lund Svindal, a former overall World Cup champion like Vonn, joined her coaching staff for this season.

"Lindsey was very convincing that this was a job that I could do better than most people," Svindal said.

St. Moritz is the first of five speed weekends that Vonn will likely compete in before the Olympics. The others are: Val d'Isere, France, on Dec. 20-21; Zauchensee, Austria, on Jan. 10-11; Tarvisio, Italy, on Jan. 17-18; and Crans Montana, Switzerland, on Jan. 30-31.

JEAN-CHRISTOPHE BOTT, KEYSTONE/AP

Lindsey Vonn, right, of the United States, and Coach Aksel Lund Svindal discuss the women's Downhill training race at the Alpine Skiing FIS Ski World Cup in St. Moritz, Switzerland, on Wednesday.

JAE C. HONG/AP

Anastasia Tatalina of the Russian Olympic Committee competes in the women's freestyle skiing Big Air qualification round of the 2022 Beijing Olympics. Tatalina obtained neutral status to compete in 2026.

9 Russian, Belarusian skiers to obtain neutral status for Winter games

By Graham Dunbar
Associated Press

GENEVA — Three skiers from Russia and six from Belarus — including former Olympic and world champions — were approved Wednesday to compete in qualifying events for the 2026 Milan Cortina Winter Games in February.

Their return after exclusion during the full military invasion of Ukraine could be within days at Davos in Switzerland. Former world junior cross-country ski champion Savelii Korostelev posted "debut this weekend" on his social media channels.

The International Ski and Snowboard Federation (FIS) said it cleared the applications of the nine to get neutral athlete status and return to competitions for the first time since February 2022.

FIS did not state if it rejected some applications, or how many, though the Russian ski federation told state news agency TASS six of its athletes had asked for neutral status.

A further level of International Olympic Committee vetting must be passed before any qualified athlete can be invited to the Winter Games that open Feb. 6. IOC guidelines to sports bodies have kept Russian athletes excluded from team events in a system enforced for the Paris Summer Games last year.

Athletes who want to compete as neutral individuals without any symbols of national identity must not have publicly supported the war and not have ties to military or state security agencies.

Title-winning athletes

Freestyle skier Hanna Huskova took gold in women's aerials for Belarus at the 2018 Pyeongchang Olympics and silver four years later in Beijing.

Anastasia Tatalina was a Big Air world champion for Russia in 2021, and was fourth in freeski slopestyle at the 2022 Beijing Olympics. She also competed in Pyeongchang.

Russian cross-country skiers Korostelev and Dariya Nepryaeva also got neutral status ahead of World Cup races this weekend at Davos.

Both won world junior titles on Feb. 25, 2022 — one day after the war started — racing in Norway. Days earlier, Nepryaeva's older sister Natalya left the Beijing Winter Games with gold, silver and bronze medals in cross-country skiing.

Court ruling cleared path

The Russian ski federation and athletes won a ruling last week at the Court of Arbitration for Sport forcing FIS to start processing applications for neutral status

Russian athletes and team officials could face challenges getting visas to enter some countries that host qualifying events on the World Cup circuits in Alpine, cross-country and freestyle skiing, and snowboarding.

FIS said the approved athletes can compete "provided that they formally accept the conditions associated with the AIN status," citing the IOC's French acronym for Individual Neutral Athlete.

The ski and snowboard governing body said more decisions on neutral athletes will be made in "upcoming days and weeks."

The eventual group of Russian athletes competing in Italy in February is likely to be fewer than 20 — a steep drop from more than 200 that went to the Beijing Winter Games, where they won 32 medals including five gold.

NBA

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
New York	17	7	.708	—
Boston	15	9	.625	2
Toronto	15	11	.577	3
Philadelphia	13	10	.565	3½
Brooklyn	6	17	.261	10½

Southeast Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	15	10	.600	—
Atlanta	14	11	.560	1
Miami	14	11	.560	1
Charlotte	7	17	.292	7½
Washington	3	19	.136	10½

Central Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Detroit	19	5	.792	—
Cleveland	14	11	.560	5½
Milwaukee	10	15	.400	9½
Chicago	9	14	.391	9½
Indiana	6	18	.250	13

Western Conference

Southwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Houston	15	6	.714	½
San Antonio	17	7	.708	—
Memphis	11	13	.458	6
Dallas	9	16	.360	8½
New Orleans	3	22	.120	14½

Northwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Oklahoma City	24	1	.960	—
Denver	17	6	.739	6
Minnesota	15	9	.625	8½
Portland	9	15	.375	14½
Utah	8	15	.348	15

Pacific Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Lakers	17	7	.708	—
Phoenix	14	11	.560	3½
Golden State	13	12	.520	4½
Sacramento	6	18	.250	11
L.A. Clippers	6	18	.250	11

Tuesday's games

Orlando 117, Miami 108 (Quarterfinal Game 1)
New York 117, Toronto 101 (Quarterfinal Game 3)

Wednesday's games

Oklahoma City 138, Phoenix 89 (Quarterfinal Game 2)
San Antonio 132, L.A. Lakers 119 (Quarterfinal Game 4)

Thursday's games

Boston at Milwaukee
L.A. Clippers at Houston
Portland at New Orleans
Denver at Sacramento

Friday's games

Atlanta at Detroit
Chicago at Charlotte
Cleveland at Washington
Indiana at Philadelphia
Utah at Memphis
Brooklyn at Dallas
Minnesota at Golden State

Saturday's games

Orlando vs New York
Oklahoma City vs San Antonio

Sunday's games

Washington at Indiana
Charlotte at Cleveland
Philadelphia at Atlanta
Milwaukee at Brooklyn
New Orleans at Chicago
Sacramento at Minnesota
L.A. Lakers at Phoenix
Golden St. at Portland

Monday's games

Detroit at Boston
Toronto at Miami
Dallas at Utah
Houston at Denver
Memphis at L.A. Clippers

Scoring leaders

Through Wednesday

	G	FG	FT	PTS	AVG
Doncic, LAL	18	195	176	630	35.0
Gil.-Alex., OKC	24	259	210	782	32.6
Maxey, PHI	23	246	148	724	31.5
Mitchell, CLE	23	244	122	702	30.5
Jokic, DEN	23	241	141	671	29.2
Brown, BOS	23	246	128	669	29.1
Edwards, MIN	20	193	120	573	28.7
Brunson, NY	22	219	123	623	28.3
Reaves, LAL	21	178	168	583	27.8
Markkanen, UTA	22	203	136	608	27.6

Wembanyama set to return soon

By Greg Beacham
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Victor Wembanyama could rejoin San Antonio this weekend in its NBA Cup chase.

After the Spurs beat the Los Angeles Lakers 132-119 on Wednesday night to secure a Cup semifinal game against Oklahoma City, coach Mitch Johnson indicated his superstar center might be ready to return from his four-week injury absence.

"Very much so," Johnson said. "He had a really good day today. He had a very intense day this morning, and we'll have to see how he responds or reacts (Thursday)."

Johnson said Wembanyama went through a vigorous workout at San Antonio's morning shootaround in Los Angeles. The 7-foot-4 Frenchman worked out on the court again during pregame warmups at the Lakers' downtown arena with no extra protection on his strained left calf, which has kept him out for 12 straight games since Nov. 14.

Wembanyama averaged 26.2 points, 12.9 rebounds, 4.0 assists and 3.6 blocks in 12 games before getting shut down by injury. He has eased his way back into on-court activity, also doing pregame work before the Spurs' win at New Orleans on Monday.

Eric Gay/AP

Spurs forward Victor Wembanyama cheers from the bench against the Memphis Grizzlies in San Antonio on Dec. 2. Coach Mitch Johnson said Wembanyama will be ready to play again soon, possibly this weekend.

That extra work might be over soon, and just in time for San Antonio's hopes of Cup contention: The Spurs face defending NBA champion Oklahoma City on Saturday night in Las Vegas. The winner is in the Cup title game Tuesday.

San Antonio is an impressive 9-3 without Wembanyama, looking very much like a burgeoning powerhouse with a talent-rich roster following six consecutive non-playoff seasons.

"I think Victor would tell you we have a deep team, and we rely upon playing together as a team," Johnson said. "He may be the biggest puzzle piece, but he needs everybody else to complete the puzzle."

Stephon Castle, last season's Rookie of the Year, had 30 points and 10 rebounds in Los Angeles while leading the Spurs to a solid win over Luka Doncic and the Lakers.

Eight San Antonio players scored at least eight points, with De'Aaron Fox getting 20. Keldon Johnson added 17, while Harrison Barnes and Julian Champagnie had 16 apiece as the Spurs stayed comfortably ahead.

"I felt like we came together and clamped down when we needed it most," Castle said. "Just knowing the stakes of the game ... I feel like we did the little things more tonight than any other game."

Pacers coach Carlisle closes on 1,000th win

By Tim Reynolds
Associated Press

A big moment in NBA coaching history is looming. It might happen Friday. Maybe on Sunday. Maybe sometime next week. But it's going to happen, and it's going to be something the likes of which the league won't see again for at least a few years.

Rick Carlisle is going to get his 1,000th career win as a coach.

It should be a moment to savor, although Carlisle — the Indiana coach who is now 999-878 in his career — typically doesn't want much fanfare directed his way. He'll become the 11th coach in NBA history to reach that milestone, joining Gregg Popovich, Don Nelson, Lenny Wilkens, Jerry Sloan, Pat Riley, George Karl, Doc Rivers, Phil Jackson, Larry Brown and Rick Adelman. With the exception of Rivers, who is still coaching, they're all in the Basketball Hall of Fame.

"It was a tough game. Great to win it," Carlisle said Monday night after the Pacers held off Sacramento, 116-105. "We've got some time to practice this week, so we'll make the best of that. And, more tough games coming."

He sounded the same — focused, direct, matter-of-fact — after a game between two sub-.500 clubs as he did last season when Indiana was contending for a title.

Getting to the 1,000-win mark is a capper to a 2025 worth savoring for Carlisle, who took Indiana to the NBA Finals last spring before it fell to Oklahoma City in a Game 7 that still has a pronounced effect on the team. That was the game where point guard Tyrese Haliburton tore his Achilles, an injury that means he won't play this season. The Pacers went from one win shy of a world title to being a team in the throes of a reloading season, just like that.

The lineup this season is very different. Carlisle isn't. He evolves, sure, but he doesn't change. Styles of play come and go, but an insistence on playing the right way is a constant.

"I can't say enough about him and the respect I have for him," Thunder coach Mark Daigneault said during those finals last season. "I think the whole is better than the sum of the parts. Almost consistently across every year he's ever coached, the team is better than their sum. I think that's a reflection of him. His teams play a clear identity, stay in character through all the ups and downs."

This era of NBA basketball could basically be called the 3-point era, with teams shooting more and more of them each year. Houston under Mike D'Antoni shot a billion of them and Golden State with Stephen Curry — who has more 3s than anyone in NBA history — are surely part of the 3-point craze across all levels of basketball as well.

Rob Gray/AP

Indiana Pacers head coach Rick Carlisle is one win away from becoming the 11th in NBA history to reach 1,000 career victories.

But no NBA coach has seen his teams make more 3s than Carlisle, who was a knockdown shooter himself as a kid in upstate New York, then at Maine, then at Virginia, then the NBA. Carlisle's teams have made about 17,800 3s in his career, roughly 1,000 3s more than Rivers has seen his teams make.

The next coach to get to 1,000 after Carlisle gets there should be Miami's Erik Spoelstra, who just crossed the 800-win threshold so he's clearly a few years away. And after that, it might be a long while before someone else joins Club 1,000: Besides Spoelstra, the only current NBA coach with more than 500 wins is the Warriors' Steve Kerr with 567.

Spoelstra, like most coaches, raves about Carlisle. Spoelstra and the Heat lost the 2011 NBA Finals to Carlisle when he was in Dallas.

It's a defeat that Spoelstra has said made him better, and Miami won titles in 2012 and 2013. Plus, Carlisle has spent nearly two decades leading the National Basketball Coaches Association — fighting for his colleagues.

"It's a position really nobody wants," Spoelstra said. "But without him, the benefits and the retirement package and all these things that really help coaches ... he's been just a terrific leader in that role. And then in terms of how many wins he has, it just shows you his longevity, his basketball acumen. I have the utmost respect for him."

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

Moore arrested after dismissal from Michigan

By Larry Lage
Associated Press

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — Sherrone Moore was being held in jail Thursday while police investigate the situation that led to his arrest hours after the once-promising coach was fired at Michigan for what the school said was an inappropriate relationship with a staff member.

Authorities have yet to release details on Moore's arrest, other than to say he has been held since Wednesday night in the Washtenaw County Jail and remains under investigation.

Pittsfield Township police had issued a statement that said officers were called to investigate an alleged assault and took a person into custody, without mentioning anyone by name. The statement, however, was released in response to media inquiries about Moore.

The police department updated its statement in the morning to say the suspect is scheduled for arraignment on Friday.

Moore, 39, was fired by Michigan, college football's winningest program that has been mired in scandal, after the school verified evidence of his relationship with the staffer.

Athletic director Warde Manuel said the behavior "constitutes a clear violation of university policy."

The announcement did not include details of the alleged relationship. Moore, who is married with three young daughters, did not return a message from the AP seeking comment.

He led 18th-ranked Michigan to a 9-3 record this year after going 8-5 in his debut season.

Moore signed a five-year contract with a base annual salary of $5.5 million last year. According to the terms of his deal, the university will not have to buy out the remaining years of his contract because he was fired for cause.

The Wolverines are set to play No. 14 Texas on Dec. 31 in the Citrus Bowl. Biff Poggi, who filled in for Moore when he was suspended earlier this season in relation to the Jim Harbaugh-era sign-stealing scandal, will serve as interim coach. Moore was suspended for two games as part of self-imposed sanctions for NCAA violations related to the scandal.

The NCAA added a third game to the suspension, which would have kept Moore off the sideline for next year's opener against Western Michigan.

RYAN SUN/AP

Sherrone Moore was fired as head coach of Michigan football after two seasons for what the university said was an inappropriate relationship with a staff member.

JAY LAPRETE/AP

Ohio State quarterback Julian Sayin threw for 3,323 yards and 31 touchdowns, and his 78.4% completion rate leads the nation.

Sayin looks forward to following past Buckeyes as Heisman finalist

By Marcus Hartman
Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Julian Sayin has been to New York City before, but the Ohio State quarterback's previous experiences were nothing like the one he's gearing up for this weekend.

"My parents are from the East Coast, so they've gone a couple times and I went back," said the Carlsbad, Calif., native who will join Indiana quarterback Fernando Mendoza, Notre Dame running back Jeremiyah Love and Vanderbilt QB Diego Pavia in the Big Apple this weekend as Heisman Trophy finalists.

> **"I think it's just going to be an awesome opportunity."**
>
> **Julian Sayin**
> on being at the Heisman Trophy ceremony in New York

"I think I went around Christmas time actually when I was 12, and we just went around the city and did whatever it was," Sayin said. "We didn't go on a tour or anything."

Sayin may not win college football's most coveted trophy after Mendoza led the Hoosiers to an upset win over the Buckeyes in the Big Ten Championship last Saturday, but he is looking forward to the Heisman ceremony on Saturday night.

"I think it's just going to be an awesome opportunity to be in New York and take it all in and experience the spirit of the ceremony. It's going to be awesome," said Sayin, who joins Dwayne Haskins Jr., Justin Fields, Chase Young, C.J. Stroud and Marvin Harrison Jr. as Ohio State players to be invited to the Heisman ceremony since 2018.

The trip to New York caps a regular season in which Sayin threw for 3,323 yards and 31 touchdowns as a first-year starter for the defending national champions.

His 78.4% completion rate leads the nation and would be a national record if he can maintain it through the College Football Playoff, besting Oregon quarterback Bo Nix's mark of 77.4% in 2023.

Another former Duck came up when Sayin was asked about his memories of the Heisman ceremony. He said he was an Oregon fan when Marcus Mariota won the statue in 2014.

"That would probably be my memory," he said. "I was always watching them (Oregon) as a West Coast kid.

"They were big, and it was awesome to see an idol of mine win that award. So it's really special to have my name in that conversation."

When the weekend is over, he will get back to preparing for the CFP.

Second-seeded Ohio State will play Dec. 31 in the Cotton Bowl against either No. 7 Texas A&M or No. 10 Miami. Those teams play Dec. 20 in College Station, Texas.

"I'm excited to watch that one and just be prepared for both because they're both great teams and either one of them could win that game," Sayin said.

He will hope to have a better ending than Mariota, whose Ducks lost to Ohio State in the first College Football Playoff championship game during his Heisman season in 2014.

"Yeah, that one hurt as a fan to watch," Sayin said with a laugh. "That one hurt."

AUTO RACING/NFL

NASCAR settles antitrust case

Lawsuit from 23XI, Front Row ends with agreement to make charters permanent

BY JENNA FRYER
Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — A federal antitrust case accusing NASCAR of being a monopolistic bully was settled Thursday after the stock car racing series agreed to make the charters at the heart of its business model permanent for its teams.

The lawsuit filed by Michael Jordan's 23XI Racing and Front Row Motorsports had shadowed NASCAR for more than a year. The retired NBA great pushed ahead, telling the jury he felt he was one of the few who could challenge the series.

Jordan, 23XI co-owner Denny Hamlin and Front Row owner Bob Jenkins joined NASCAR Chairman Jim France as they stood together outside the courthouse. The group announced that that charters — at the heart of NASCAR's revenue model — will be made permanent for all Cup Series teams. Both 23XI and Front Row Motorsports, the two plaintiffs, will get them back after racing uncharted most of this past season.

"Today's a good day," Jordan said.

The financial terms were not disclosed. An economist earlier testified 23XI and Front Row were owed over $300 million in damages.

The settlement came on the ninth day of the trial before U.S. District Judge Kenneth Bell, who set aside motions hearing for an hour-long sidebar. Jeffrey Kessler, attorney for 23XI Racing and Front Row, emerged from a conference room at the end of the hour to inform a court clerk "we're ready." Kessler then led Jordan, Hamlin and Bob Jenkins to another room for more talks.

23XI and Front Row filed their lawsuit last year after refusing to sign agreements on the new charter offers NASCAR presented in September 2024. Teams had just one day to sign the 112-page document, which guarantees access to top-level Cup Series races and a revenue stream, and 13 of 15 organizations reluctantly agreed. Jordan and Jenkins sued instead and raced most of the 2025 season uncharted.

Both teams said a loss in the case would have put them out of business.

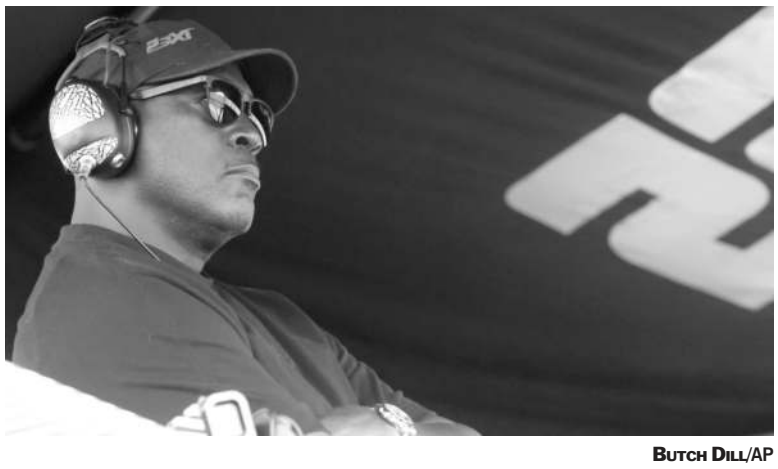
"What all parties have always agreed on is a deep love for the sport and a desire to see it fulfill its full potential," NASCAR and the plaintiffs said in a joint statement. "This is a landmark moment, one that ensures NASCAR's foundation is stronger, its future is brighter and its possibilities are greater."

Bell told the jury that sometimes parties at trial have to see how the evidence unfolds to come to the wisdom of a settlement.

"I wish we could've done this a few months ago," Bell said in court. "I believe this is great for NASCAR. Great for the future of NASCAR. Great for the entity of NASCAR. Great for the teams and ultimately great for the fans."

All teams felt the previous revenue-sharing agreement was unfair and two-plus years of bitter negotiations led to NASCAR's final offer, which was described by the teams as "take-it-or-leave-it." The teams believed the new agreement lacked all four of their key demands, most importantly the charters becoming permanent instead of renewable.

The settlement followed eight days of testimony in which the France family, the founders and private owners of NASCAR, were shown to be inflexible in making the charters permanent.



BUTCH DILL/AP

NASCAR settled the antitrust case brought by 23XI Racing, co-owned by Michael Jordan, and Front Row Racing on Thursday.

NFL scoreboard

American Conference

East

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
New England	11	2	0	.846	351	241
Buffalo	9	4	0	.692	376	293
Miami	6	7	0	.462	281	296
e-N.Y. Jets	3	10	0	.231	256	349

South

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Jacksonville	9	4	0	.692	328	272
Houston	8	5	0	.615	283	208
Indianapolis	8	5	0	.615	376	285
e-Tennessee	2	11	0	.154	201	357

North

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Pittsburgh	7	6	0	.538	308	311
Baltimore	6	7	0	.462	311	320
Cincinnati	4	9	0	.308	314	413
e-Cleveland	3	10	0	.231	223	301

West

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Denver	11	2	0	.846	308	235
L.A. Chargers	9	4	0	.692	299	271
Kansas City	6	7	0	.462	315	252
e-Las Vegas	2	11	0	.154	196	332

National Conference

East

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Philadelphia	8	5	0	.615	289	271
Dallas	6	6	1	.500	381	386
e-Washington	3	10	0	.231	262	354
e-N.Y. Giants	2	11	0	.154	279	367

South

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Tampa Bay	7	6	0	.538	299	325
Carolina	7	6	0	.538	247	297
e-Atlanta	4	9	0	.308	252	313
e-New Orleans	3	10	0	.231	206	315

North

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Green Bay	9	3	1	.731	322	247
Chicago	9	4	0	.692	334	335
Detroit	8	5	0	.615	394	304
Minnesota	5	8	0	.385	255	281

West

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
L.A. Rams	10	3	0	.769	379	227
Seattle	10	3	0	.769	387	226
San Francisco	9	4	0	.692	307	269
e-Arizona	3	10	0	.231	282	348

e-Eliminated from playoffs

Thursday's game

Atlanta at Tampa Bay

Sunday's games

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

Monday's game

Miami at Pittsburgh

Thursday, Dec. 18

L.A. Rams at Seattle

Saturday, Dec. 20

Philadelphia at Washington
Green Bay at Chicago

Sunday, Dec. 21

Buffalo at Cleveland
Cincinnati at Miami
Kansas City at Tennessee
L.A. Chargers at Dallas
Minnesota at N.Y. Giants
N.Y. Jets at New Orleans
Tampa Bay at Carolina
Atlanta at Arizona
Jacksonville at Denver
Las Vegas at Houston
Pittsburgh at Detroit
New England at Baltimore

Monday, Dec. 22

San Francisco at Indianapolis

Thursday, Dec. 25

Dallas at Washington
Detroit at Minnesota
Denver at Kansas City

Saturday, Dec. 27

Houston at L.A. Chargers
Baltimore at Green Bay

49ers refreshed from bye prepared for playoff run

BY JOSH DUBOW
Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — The San Francisco 49ers waited three months to get their long-awaited bye week and took advantage of the time off late in the season.

Colton McKivitz spent time wine tasting in Napa. Christian McCaffrey rested up and spent time with his newborn daughter. Trent Williams went back home to Houston.

Most importantly, everyone got a chance for a mental and physical break before San Francisco (9-4) prepares to make a late-season playoff push over the next four weeks.

"It was different having a bye this late. I don't know if I'd ever ask for that or wish upon it, but it was kind of nice. Usually, you have your bye week early on and I annoy the hell out of my family because I'm like, 'No, we have to do this for lunch, we have to do this right now because when this is over I'm going like 11, 10 weeks straight.' So it was a little different having it in December where it was almost a little more relaxing because you've made so much of the season already and excited to get back now for the best time of the year in football." coach Kyle Shanahan said Wednesday.

The 49ers have done well in recent years after the bye week, winning their first game back in three straight seasons and five out of the last six. They play their first game back at home Sunday against Tennessee (2-11) as they try to keep pace with Seattle (10-3) and the Los Angeles Rams (10-3) in the tough NFC West.

San Francisco plays three of its final four games at home. The Niners are in prime position to get back to the playoffs after missing it last season and are still in the running for a possible division title or even No. 1 seed if they get some help down the stretch.

While playing 13 straight weeks to start the season was grueling, they now get the benefit.

San Francisco will get kicker Eddy Pineiro back this week after he missed two games with a right hamstring injury but could still be without other key players, with linebacker Tatum Bethune and defensive end Sam Okuayinonu still sidelined by ankle injuries and linebacker Nick Martin in concussion protocol.

Fullback Kyle Juszczyk was able to practice on a limited basis after injuring his ribs before the bye week and defensive lineman Yetur Gross-Matos will have his practice window opened and could return from a hamstring injury that has sidelined him since Week 5.

Linebacker Eric Kendricks remains slowed by a calf injury.

Remembering Rivers

Shanahan wasn't totally surprised about Indianapolis signing 44-year-old quarterback Philip Rivers nearly five years after he last played an NFL game.

Shanahan nearly did the same in the 2022 season. Shanahan called Rivers after Jimmy Garoppolo broke his foot in December of that season about the possibility of coming out of retirement and joining the Niners.

San Francisco didn't a need a starter right away because it wanted to see what rookie Brock Purdy could do, but the team still had Rivers watch installations to get familiar with the system if Purdy ever got hurt.

Purdy helped lead the 49ers to the NFC title game before injuring his elbow in a loss to Philadelphia. San Francisco was ready to give Rivers a chance had it beaten the Eagles that game and advanced to the Super Bowl.

Cleveland Browns (3-10)
at Chicago Bears (9-4)
AFN-Sports2
7 p.m. Sunday CET
3 a.m. Monday JKT

Los Angeles Chargers (9-4)
at Kansas City Chiefs (6-7)
AFN-Atlantic
7 p.m. Sunday CET
3 a.m. Monday JKT

Indianapolis Colts (8-5)
at Seattle Seahawks (10-3)
AFN-Atlantic
10:25 p.m. Sunday CET
6:25 a.m. Monday JKT

Minnesota Vikings (5-8)
at Dallas Cowboys (6-6-1)
AFN-Sports
2:15 a.m. Monday CET
10:15 a.m. Monday JKT

NFL

Rams' Adams happy to keep playing alongside Stafford

By Greg Beacham
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Davante Adams is so happy in his first season with Matthew Stafford and the Los Angeles Rams that the star receiver says he plans to retire whenever his quarterback does — and he hopes that isn't any time soon.

Adams on Wednesday repeated the stance he first expressed on a team podcast, emphasizing his happiness in Los Angeles after a tumultuous few seasons with the Raiders and Jets.

"That was kind of a joke, kind of serious," Adams said with a smile. "I really don't know how long I'm going to play. I just kind of mess around with (Stafford). I did make that comment to him, though. That was serious. At this point, I'm just grateful to be a part of something like this, and ride it out and see where we go."

The 37-year-old Stafford hasn't given any concrete indication about how long he plans to play, but he has contemplated his future in every offseason since winning a Super Bowl ring with the Rams in February 2022. Stafford and Adams are both under contract for next season, and Adams has directly told Stafford that he doesn't want the fun to end.

"He just laughed," Adams said. "He didn't really take it too seriously, but I need him to know it's kind of serious, though."

Stafford

The 32-year-old Adams has been one of the most accomplished receivers of his generation during a career that began with his eight-year Green Bay partnership with Aaron Rodgers, who threw passes to Adams during three of his four MVP seasons.

Three years after leaving the Packers, Adams has landed with another quarterback performing at a level that's making him a top contender for his first MVP award. And like several accomplished NFL veterans before him, Adams is grateful to be part of the steady excellence produced by NFC-leading LA (10-3), which hosts Detroit (8-5) on Sunday.

"I think it takes some time to get to know people," Adams said. "What you can see on the outside is that (Stafford) was a baller, he's tough, but then you get around him and you see just how good of a leader he is, how poised he is. His ability to move onto the next play, good or bad. It's a lot of different things within the poise realm."

Adams leads the NFL this season with 14 touchdown receptions, and he has 56 catches for 718 yards. Despite getting no practice time with Stafford in training camp, the veterans have formed a connection while thriving with Puka Nacua in coach Sean McVay's inventive passing schemes.

While Adams says his "body is getting tired" after 12 NFL seasons, he is loving the opportunity to play for a strong organization with a chance to play for his first Super Bowl. Green Bay reached four NFC championship games during his tenure, but lost all four.

Adams signed with the Rams as the effective replacement for Super Bowl MVP Cooper Kupp, and he has been thrilled by his decision from the start. Last summer, Adams expressed excitement about being with a team that doesn't have a "black cloud" hanging over it after his stops in Las Vegas and New York.

"It's honestly been exactly what I hoped it'd be," Adams said. "Come in and have a fast start playing with a young team that's fired up and has a lot of energy, a lot of juice. It's just been fun to piggyback off what's already been happening around here for a long time. I don't think I came in and did anything unbelievable. I didn't turn this thing around. I was just another piece to the puzzle and it's been fun being a part of a fun operation."

Notes: WR Tutu Atwell will be active for Los Angeles on Sunday, McVay said. Atwell has played in just one game since Oct. 2 after injuring his hamstring, but he is fully healthy. The Rams still declined to activate him for the past two weeks, and they would have lost the $10 million receiver for the season if they hadn't activated him from his 21-day practice window this week. ... CB Darious Williams (tibia) appears to be healthy after missing last Sunday's win. ... LB Byron Young (knee) was listed as limited in a theoretical practice, since LA only did a light workout.

Jacob Kupferman/AP

Los Angeles Rams wide receiver Davante Adams leads the NFL this season with 14 touchdown receptions, and has 56 catches for 718 yards in forming a dynamic combination with quarterback Matthew Stafford.

Detroit Lions (8-5)
at Los Angeles Rams (10-3)
AFN-Sports2
10:25 p.m. Sunday CET
6:25 a.m. Monday JKT

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The Daily Guide to Navigating The Military Business Market

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NFL

Bills focus inward, not on defending AFC East vs. Pats

By John Wawrow
Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — For Buffalo left tackle Dion Dawkins, the expectation of winning at New England on Sunday is more important than the motivation to prevent the Patriots from wrenching the AFC East title away from the Bills.

Of course, Dawkins on Wednesday said "it's very important" for Buffalo (9-4) to stop Drake Maye and upstart New England (11-2) from ending the Bills' divisional run of dominance. But Buffalo's expectation to win every week isn't any different.

"We play the game to win. So our goal is to win everything," Dawkins said.

"But it ain't about defending the title," he added, pumping his fist and pretending to shout the final three words in a loud whisper. "We just got to be the best version of ourselves."

Dawkins' comments about this weekend's matchup were echoed by numerous teammates and coach Sean McDermott.

With a win, the Patriots would sweep the season series and clinch their first AFC East title since 2019, while relegating the Bills to chasing a wild-card playoff berth. Even Buffalo wins, it would still need help to catch New England over the final three weeks.

Buffalo Bills (9-4)
at New England Patriots (11-2)
AFN-Sports
7 p.m. Sunday CET
3 a.m. Monday JKT

"We think we understand as a team what's at stake. But I don't think that's going to influence anything," Josh Allen said.

"At the same time, (an AFC East title) doesn't guarantee you anything other than making the playoffs," the reigning MVP added. "At the end of the day, that's our main goal. And we have an opportunity to put ourselves in a better position."

The Bills have little to show for winning five straight division titles. The closest they've come to a Super Bowl berth is a pair of losses to Kansas City in the AFC championship game in 2020 and last season.

And yet, should Buffalo make the playoffs as a wild card, it'd have to start on the road, where it has lost six straight postseason games. That run includes three losses under Allen and dates to 1992, when the Bills defeated Miami in the AFC championship before a 52-17 loss to Dallas in the Super Bowl.

After a stretch of four losses in seven games, Buffalo has looked better the past two weeks, winning at Pittsburgh and beating Cincinnati at home. McDermott says his team has begun to show its toughness.

"We're getting there. I think we're moving in the right direction," McDermott said. "It's maybe happened a little bit later than we would have liked, but I really appreciate how the players and the staff have persevered through it all."

Against Pittsburgh, the Bills finished with a season-high 249 yards rushing while playing without their two starting offensive tackles. Against the Bengals, Buffalo's injury-depleted defense — top pass rusher Joey Bosa was out — manufactured a blitz that led to cornerback Christian Benford's game-changing interception return for a touchdown.

Receiver Gabe Davis was among the few Bills players willing to address the stakes for this weekend head-on.

"Can we still go to the playoffs if we're not the AFC East champs?" Davis asked rhetorically.

"Now do I believe that we are going to be AFC East champs? Yeah. I believe that," he added. "And I believe everyone here still has the goal to be an AFC East champ."

Gene J. Puskar/AP

Buffalo quarterback Josh Allen sets up a play during the first half against the Cincinnati Bengals in Orchard Park, N.Y., on Sunday. The Bills are at risk of losing their streak of five straight AFC East titles to the Patriots.

Nix unfazed by Broncos' surprise underdog status

By Pat Graham
Associated Press

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. — Bo Nix doesn't view being a home underdog against Green Bay this weekend as any sign of disrespect.

He doesn't really read anything into it at all, even if Denver has won 10 straight games and currently owns the AFC's No. 1 seed.

"My mom thinks we'll win," the second-year quarterback said after Wednesday's practice. "So that's all that matters."

The red-hot Broncos (11-2) are looking at the game on Sunday as almost a playoff preview — intensity-wise, anyway — given the Packers (9-3-1) are one of the NFC's top teams.

"I know they're going to come in with a really good plan. I know it's going to be a really good football game," said Nix, whose team is a 2½-point underdog at Empower Field at Mile High despite winning 11 straight home games. "It's pretty much going to be like playoff football, and that's what you get in December. At the end of the season, that's what you're playing for."

Jeff Lewis/AP

Quarterback Bo Nix has led Denver to 10-straight wins, but the Broncos are still underdogs at home this week against Green Bay.

One thing Nix will do is constantly scan the field for Green Bay's No. 1 — pass-rush specialist Micah Parsons, who has 12½ sacks this season. Parsons can line up just about anywhere on the defensive front and cause disruption.

"You definitely don't want to make them bigger than the game," Nix said of elite pass rushers. "But you definitely don't want them to take over the football game. We'll always be aware of where (Parsons) is at for certain calls, but you definitely have to play the game and you have to also allow our players to do their best against him."

Green Bay Packers (9-3-1)
at Denver Broncos (11-2)
AFN-Sports
10:25 p.m. Sunday CET
6:25 a.m. Monday JKT

The teams have some familiarity with each other after holding a joint practice in August 2024. Packers coach Matt LaFleur reflected on that day in his news conference Wednesday, saying, "they kind of put it on us pretty good."

Denver cornerback Pat Surtain II concurred.

"I believe we did," Surtain said with a grin.

It was a spirited day, too, with tempers boiling over after Broncos linebacker Nik Bonitto appeared to knock quarterback Jordan Love to the ground on a play. Love later acknowledged it was one of his own linemen who crashed into him just as he was about to release the ball.

"Very competitive, but I feel like we brought more energy and juice," Surtain said.

That practice really put the Denver defense on the radar for LaFleur. The Broncos have a league-best 55 sacks this season, which is the most by a team through 13 games since the New Orleans Saints had 56 in 2000.

"I didn't know a ton about that defense at that time," LaFleur said. "They were legit."

Can the Broncos use anything from the joint practice going into Sunday?

"It feels like it was five years ago," Denver coach Sean Payton said. "We'll look at (the film), but we're really looking at this point in the season. We have such a volume of tape with their personnel that we're currently seeing. I have a hard time remembering last week let alone the joint practice. I know we had good work, and the teams worked well together."

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Moore fired, arrested

Ex-Michigan coach in custody after dismissal for policy violation » College football, Page 44

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

AJ MAST/AP

Indiana quarterback Fernando Mendoza celebrates after winning the Big Ten championship game against Ohio State in Indianapolis on Dec. 6.

Mendoza wins player of the year

Indiana QB and Heisman finalist led Hoosiers to 13-0 record, top CFP seed to earn AP honors

BY ERIC OLSON
Associated Press

Fernando Mendoza was named Associated Press player of the year on Thursday after leading unbeaten and top-ranked Indiana to its first Big Ten championship since 1967 and the No. 1 seed in the College Football Playoff.

The redshirt junior quarterback was the overwhelming choice over fellow Heisman Trophy finalists Diego Pavia of Vanderbilt, Jeremiah Love of Notre Dame and Julian Sayin of Ohio State. Mendoza received 32 of 51 first-place votes from a nationwide panel of media members who cover college football. Pavia got nine to lead the rest of the group, which also included Jacob Rodriguez of Texas Tech.

"I'm shining now but only because there are so many stars around me," Mendoza said, describing his rise from lightly recruited high school prospect in 2021 to a candidate for the sport's most prestigious awards. "There's an analogy that the only reason we're able to see stars in the sky is because the light reflects from all different types of stars. I have so many stars around myself — whether it's my teammates, my coaches, my family, support staff — that I'm able to shine now in this light, and I'm so happy for everyone to be a part of this."

Mendoza, the Hoosiers' first-year starter after transferring from California, is the triggerman for an offense that has surpassed program records for touchdowns and points set during last season's surprise run to the CFP.

Mendoza has thrown for a Bowl Subdivision-leading 33 touchdowns and run for six, giving him a school-record 39 TDs accounted for.

He was the first Big Ten quarterback since 2000 with three straight games with at least four TD passes and no interceptions. Mendoza's 21-of-23, 267-yard, five-touchdown passing day in a 63-10 win at Illinois in the conference opener established him as a serious contender for national honors.

Mendoza is among 10 FBS quarterbacks who have completed better than 70% of their passes. He ranks among the most accurate passers on attempts of at least 20 yards, hitting on 23 of 43 (53.5%), and when under pressure (52.1%), according to Pro Football Focus.

Ranked the No. 72 quarterback prospect by ESPN when he was a senior at Christopher Columbus High School in Miami, Mendoza was pledged to Yale for almost six months before he decommitted and signed with California.

He sat out as a redshirt in 2022 and won the starting job for the final eight games in 2023. Mendoza was 10th in the nation in passing in 2024 and ranked among the top transfer prospects after the season. He landed at Indiana, where his brother Alberto was the No. 3 quarterback last year. This year, Alberto is the top backup to his big brother.

NASCAR settles in federal antitrust case

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