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EUROPE & PACIFIC
WEEKEND EDITION



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STARS AND STRIPES®

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ERIC KAYNE/Stars and Stripes

Members of the Army's 3rd Infantry Regiment (also known as The Old Guard) honors America's fallen heroes by placing American flags at gravesites for service members on May 22, in Washington at Arlington National Cemetery.

2025 in focus

From slices of life to biggest moments, Stars and Stripes documented it all. See some of the best work. **Pages 4-6**

US forces kill, capture members of ISIS in Syria

BY LARA KORTE
Stars and Stripes

U.S. forces killed at least seven members of the Islamic State group and captured another 18 during a series of strikes in Syria this month, U.S. Central Command announced Tuesday.

The attacks follow the killing of two U.S. soldiers and a civilian interpreter in central Syria on Dec. 13.

The U.S. military and its partner forces carried out 11 missions between Dec. 20-29 that killed or captured a total of 25 ISIS members, CENTCOM said in a statement.

The operations also destroyed four ISIS weapons caches, CENTCOM said.

"We will not relent," Adm. Brad Cooper, commander of CENTCOM, said in the statement. "We are steadfast in commitment to working with regional partners to root out the ISIS threat posed to U.S. and regional security."

Two members of the Iowa National Guard and an American interpreter were killed Dec. 13 when a lone gunman ambushed U.S. and Syrian forces. President Donald Trump characterized the deaths as an "ISIS attack" and vowed swift and forceful retaliation.

In addition to the 11 missions announced Tuesday, U.S. forces conducted another large-scale strike in Syria on Dec. 19 with Jordanian partners using fighter aircraft, attack helicopters and artillery to attack more than 70 ISIS targets, according to the release.

"This is not the beginning of a war — it is a declaration of ven-

SEE STRIKES ON PAGE 3

BUSINESS/WEATHER

Protests erupt in Iran over currency's plunge

Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran — Iran's largest protests in three years erupted Monday after the country's currency plummeted to a record low against the U.S. dollar, and the head of the Central Bank resigned.

State TV reported the resignation of Mohammad Reza Farzin, while traders and shopkeepers rallied in Saadi Street in downtown Tehran as well as in the Shush neighborhood near Tehran's main Grand Bazaar. Merchants at the market played a crucial role in the 1979 Islamic Revolution that ousted the monarchy and brought Islamists to power.

Witnesses reported similar rallies in other major cities including Isfahan in central Iran, Shiraz in the south and Mashhad in the northeast.

In some places in Tehran, police fired tear gas to disperse protesters.

Monday's protests were the biggest since 2022, when the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Jina Amini in police custody triggered nationwide demonstrations. She was arrested by the country's morality police for allegedly not wearing her hijab properly.

Witnesses told The Associated Press that traders shut their shops Monday and asked others to do the same. The semiofficial ILNA news agency said many businesses stopped trading even though some kept their shops open.

Iran's rial on Sunday plunged to 1.42 million to the dollar. On Monday, it traded at 1.38 million to the dollar.

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates

Euro costs (Dec. 31)	0.83
British pound (Dec. 31)	$1.32
Japanese yen (Dec. 31)	152.00
South Korean won (Dec. 31)	1396.00

Commercial rates

Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3745
Britain (Pound)	1.3476
Canada (Dollar)	1.3698
China (Yuan)	7.0056
Denmark (Krone)	6.3467
Egypt (Pound)	47.6902
Euro	0.8499
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7828
Hungary (Forint)	327.875
Israel (Shekel)	3.1854
Japan (Yen)	156.283
Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3073
Norway (Krone)	10.0616
Philippines (Peso)	58.881
Poland (Zloty)	3.5879
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7461
Singapore (Dollar)	1.2844
South Korea (Won)	1442.06
Switzerland (Franc)	0.7903
Thailand (Baht)	31.429
Turkey (NewLira)	42.9399

(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

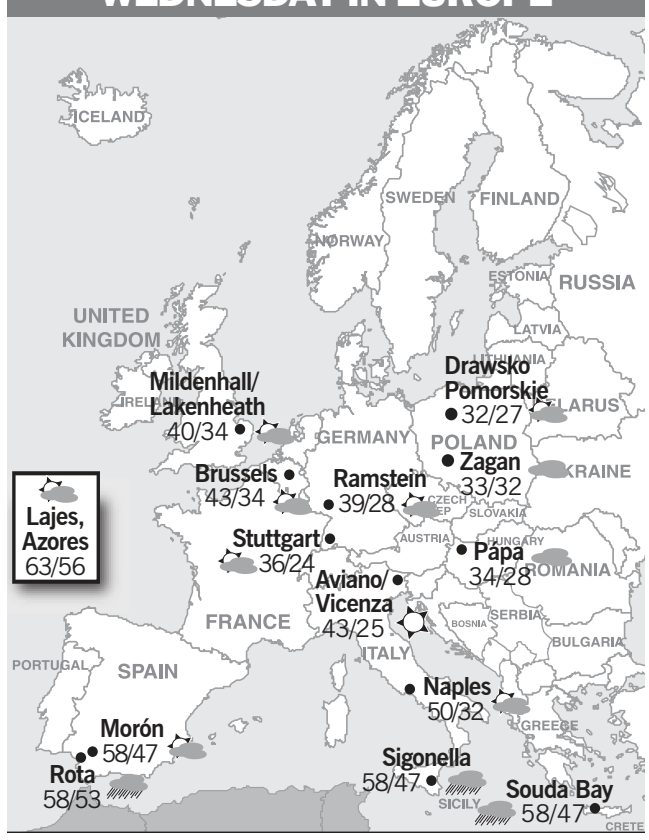
Prime rate	6.75
Interest Rates Discount rate	3.75
Federal funds market rate	3.62
3-month bill	3.65
30-year bond	4.80

WEATHER OUTLOOK

WEDNESDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



WEDNESDAY IN EUROPE



THURSDAY IN THE PACIFIC



This weather is compiled from weather.com reports.

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MILITARY

2 killed in US strike on suspected drug boat

By Corey Dickstein
Stars and Stripes

U.S. military forces struck a suspected drug smuggling vessel in the Eastern Pacific on Monday in the 30th known drone strike on alleged narcotics boats in waters off South America since September.

Two alleged male "narcoterrorists" linked to an unnamed "designated terrorist organization" were killed in the attack Monday as part of Operation Southern Spear, according to a U.S. Southern Command news release. President Donald Trump and others in his administration have said most of the Southern Spear strikes have targeted Venezuelan criminal organization Tren de Aragua, which the U.S. has labeled a foreign terrorist organization.

Drone video footage released by SOUTHCOM shows at least two missiles striking the vessel before it appears to catch fire. SOUTHCOM provided few other details about the strike, including its exact location.

"Intelligence confirmed the vessel was transiting along known narcotrafficking routes in the Eastern Pacific and was engaged in narco-trafficking operations," the SOUTHCOM statement reads.

The latest strike brings to at least 107 the number of individuals killed in the U.S. military drone strikes since the first on Sept. 2.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has insisted the U.S. military knows via intelligence exactly who it has killed in the strikes, but he has declined to make any such evidence public.

Some U.S. lawmakers — mostly Democrats — have been critical of the campaign, deeming the strikes illegal and unauthorized by Congress.

Trump has claimed the strikes have led to an about 97% drop in drug trafficking by sea.

The latest strike comes just days after the U.S. attacked a facility on Venezuela's coast on Dec. 24, Trump announced last week. He said the facility was used to load drug-smuggling boats.

That drone strike — the first known U.S. attack on Venezuelan soil — was conducted by the CIA, according to the New York Times, who cited unnamed American officials.

The facility was believed to be used by Tren de Aragua in drug smuggling operations, the Times reported.

No one was killed in that attack.

Trump in recent weeks has also increased his pressure campaign on Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. Trump has said he wants to see Maduro leave office.

The U.S. has built up a large maritime force in the region that includes thousands of sailors, Marines and special operations forces.

And Trump has announced a blockade on sanctioned Venezuelan oil tankers.

The U.S. has since seized two oil tankers and pursued a third, U.S. officials have said.



Zachary Ta/U.S. Army

U.S. soldiers secure a landing zone within the U.S. Central Command area of responsibility in this undated photo. CENTCOM announced Tuesday that U.S. forces killed at least seven members of the Islamic State and captured another 18 during a series of strikes in Syria from Dec. 20 to 29.

Strikes: US troops remain in Syria for anti-ISIS operations with local forces

FROM PAGE 1

geance," Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said in a social media post following the Dec. 19 strike.

The U.S. has maintained a military presence in Syria for more than a decade, primarily as part of its anti-ISIS mission. Although the group was territorially defeated in 2019, pockets of ISIS fighters and sympathizers in the country still pose a threat to American and regional security, military officials say.

About 1,000 U.S. troops remain in Syria, working alongside Kurdish partners in the Syrian Democratic Forces and the newly installed government led by President Ahmed al-Sharaa.

ISIS has inspired at least 11 plots or attacks against targets in the United States this year, according to CENTCOM. In response, the command and its Syrian partners have conducted operations that resulted in more than 300 terrorists being detained and more than 20 killed, the command said in the Tuesday statement.

"Continuing to hunt down terrorist operatives, eliminate ISIS networks, and work with partners to prevent an ISIS resurgence makes America, the region, and the world safer," Cooper said.

Estonia spy chief says no signs of Russia plan for attack on NATO

By John Vandiver
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — Russian provocations in Eastern Europe are on the decline, according to Estonia's spy chief, who says President Vladimir Putin shows no signs of wanting to attack NATO in the coming year.

The threat assessment out of Estonia, a NATO frontline state on the border with Russia, also indicated that increased allied military maneuvers in the Baltics are having a deterrent effect.

"We've seen that, as a result of our responses, Russia has altered its behavior following various incidents that have occurred more broadly in the region. So far, it's still clear that Russia respects NATO and is currently trying to avoid any open conflict," Foreign Intelligence Service Director General Kaupo Rosin told public broadcaster ERR in an interview.

Rosin's analysis of the current security situation contrasts with recent statements by other top officials in Europe, including NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, who warned earlier this month that the prospect of war loomed over Europe.

"We are Russia's next target, and we are already in harm's way," Rutte said during a speech in Berlin.

Rosin, however, said that Russia has taken note of NATO countries' efforts to ramp up investments in military firepower. Efforts to track Russian activities around the Baltics also have altered the Kremlin's calculus, he said.

The past year has been marked by a series of high-profile incidents that has sparked NATO to take a more vigilant stance on its eastern flank. In September, NATO aircraft were forced for the first time in alliance history to shoot down an aerial threat over Poland when a swarm of about 20 Russian drones crossed into the country.

Days later, Russian fighter planes crossed into Estonian airspace. Other suspected Russian drone incursions in other NATO countries such as Romania also have rattled allies.

But Rosin said Russia has since adjusted drone and airplane flight paths "to minimize risk."

"We're also seeing that Russian aircraft are now very carefully monitoring their flight paths over the Baltic Sea, strictly adhering to their trajectories to avoid triggering incidents," he said.

Meanwhile, a series of suspected sabotage incidents in the Baltic Sea in late 2024 and early 2025 that involved the cutting of undersea communication and energy cables, prompted NATO to launch a new surveillance mission in the region. Rosin said those efforts paid security dividends in 2025.

"What we've seen is that, in response to reactions from the West or NATO, Russia has taken various measures to prevent such incidents from happening again in the future," Rosin said.

There have been no cable cutting-related incidents since NATO's Baltic Sentry mission was launched last January, he said.

"Of course, this doesn't rule out the possibility of future incidents because military activity remains high and the war in Ukraine is ongoing. In theory, such events are still possible, but at the moment we don't see any indication that Russia is deliberately trying to escalate," Rosin said.

MILITARY

2025 in focus

From slices of life to 2025's biggest moments, Stars and Stripes journalists documented events involving the military community. Here is some of the best of their work.



COREY DICKSTEIN/Stars and Stripes

Brayden Forsythe, 10, of Haymarket, Va., checks out a Carl Gustaf recoilless rifle used by Army Rangers during military service's 250th birthday festival on June 14, on the National Mall in Washington.



LYDIA GORDON/Stars and Stripes

U.S. Army 2nd Cavalry Regiment soldiers taking part in the V Corps Best Squad Competition tackle the obstacle course at Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany, on May 13.



GARY WARNER/Stars and Stripes

Oliver Fringer, in a naval officer's cap, waits with his mother, Laura Fringer, for the disembarkation of Lt. Kyle Fringer from the USS Nimitz as it arrives at Bremerton on Naval Base Kitsap, on Dec. 16.



PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN/Stars and Stripes

A woman in Baumholder, Germany, looks down at a U.S. flag flown during a parade on March 18, to mark 80 years since American troops arrived during World War II.



U.S. soldiers salute near the memorial at the Somme American Cemetery in Bony, France, on May 25.

PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

MILITARY



DAVID CHOI/Stars and Stripes

U.S. Marines from 2nd Battalion, 23rd Marine Regiment, establish security around a beachhead during the Korean Marine Exercise Program in Pohang, South Korea, on Aug. 6.



PHILLIP WALTER WELLMANN/Stars and Stripes

Priscilla Presley gazes at a bronze statue of her former husband, Elvis Presley, in Bad Nauheim, Germany, March 20. Priscilla met Elvis in the spa town in 1959, when she was 14.



COREY DICKSTEIN/Stars and Stripes

Army 1st Lt. Griffin Hokanson of the 75th Ranger Regiment climbs a rope during the Best Ranger Competition at Fort Benning, Ga., on April 11.



ERIC KAYNE/Stars and Stripes

National Guard troops deployed on Aug. 14 at the National Mall in Washington, D.C.



AKIFUMI ISHIKAWA/Stars and Stripes

The son of Tech. Sgt. David Stubblefield, of the 374th Logistics Readiness Squadron, poses in a colorful kimono on Japan Culture Day at Yokota Air Base in western Tokyo, on Jan. 24.

MILITARY



PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN/Stars and Stripes

U.S. soldiers assigned to the 5th Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment wait under a full moon for the arrival of fellow squadron members by helicopter at a landing site near Camp Reedo, Estonia, March 14. The soldiers were involved in a reconnaissance exercise.



LYDIA GORDON/Stars and Stripes

Army Staff Sgt. Kristopher Gorbea, a drone squad leader with 2nd Cavalry Regiment, holds a soldier-made kamakaze drone awaiting lift off at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Germany during exercise Saber Junction on Sept. 9.



LYDIA GORDON/Stars and Stripes

Spc. Basil Holland of the 502nd Infantry Regiment prepares to fly a C100 drone fashioned with a 3D-printed grenade dropper called the Widowmaker at Hohenfels, Germany, on Oct. 9.



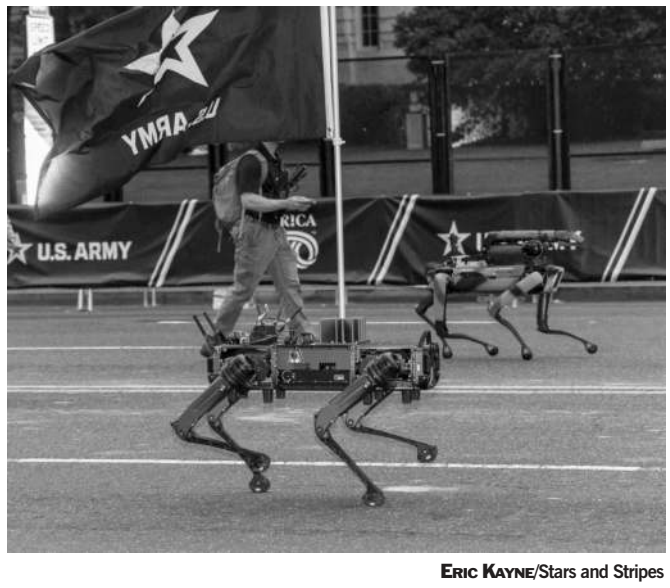
ERIC KAYNE/Stars and Stripes

Casey Showalter gives Deen, a four-year old Labrador, a bath on Sept. 12 at Fort Meade, Md.



ALEX WILSON/Stars and Stripes

Soldiers launch an FIM-92D Stinger missile toward a dummy drone target during a Cobra Gold drill in Lopburi, Thailand, on Feb. 28.



ERIC KAYNE/Stars and Stripes

Robotic dogs march on June 14 during the Army's 250th anniversary parade and celebration in Washington.

MILITARY

UN Command firm on Korean border authority

By Seth Robson and Yoojin Lee
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPREYS, South Korea — The United Nations Command reasserted its authority over the border between North and South Korea amid a series of recent border crossings from the North.

Tensions remain high at the Demilitarized Zone, the 160-mile-long, highly-fortified corridor that surrounds the border.

South Korean troops in October fired warning shots at 20 armed North Korean soldiers that temporarily crossed the military demarcation line. A similar incident involving 30 North Koreans occurred in August.

"The United Nations Command reaffirms its commitment to maintaining the Armistice Agreement, including the MDL (military demarcation line), and to supporting measures that prevent escalation and promote stability within the Demilitarized Zone," the U.N. Command said in a statement emailed Monday by spokeswoman Song Ho Chong.

The command provides security on South Korea's side of the DMZ and investigates potential violations of the armistice that paused hostilities in the 1950-53 Korean War.

Since 2024, the South's military has relied on markers in the DMZ when responding to North Korean armistice violations and to avoid accidental clashes, said Col. Lee Sung-jun, a spokesman for South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff, at a Dec. 22 press briefing.

"In areas where markers are not clearly identifiable, responses are based on a comprehensive assessment of military maps and the (U.N. Command's military demarcation line) marker coordinates," he said.

Critics claim the South's military relies on a line south of the actual border when determining whether a crossing has occurred, South Korea's Yonhap News Agency reported Sunday. That gives an edge to North Korea, according to the report.

For example, South Korea's conservative People Power Party chief spokesman Park Sung-hoon, in a Dec. 22 statement, characterized the border move as ceding territory to North Korea.

In cases where the South Korean military's map of the border differs from the U.N. Command's reference line, the military has been using the southernmost line, he said.

"This measure has pushed the Military Demarcation Line back by tens of meters in some places, inevitably creating significant chaos and a security vacuum on the front lines," he said.

The U.S.-led U.N. Command recognizes the line established in the Korean Armistice Agreement and depicted on a map on July 27, 1953, according to Song's email.

Matters relating to the DMZ require consultation with the U.N. Command, Chung Bin-na, spokeswoman for the South Korean Ministry of National Defense, said at a Dec. 18 press briefing.

Report blames procedural, supervisory failures for '24 death of airman in Alaska

By Wyatt Olson
Stars and Stripes



Kenneth Boyton/U.S. Air Force

Staff Sgt. Charles Crumlett, seen here in 2018, died at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska, on March 14, 2024.

An airman in Alaska died of head injuries while working on an F-22A Raptor last year due in part to the maintenance team's failure to follow procedures and a lack of adequate supervision, according to an Air Force report released Monday.

Staff Sgt. Charles Crumlett, 25, was killed March 15, 2024, while working as part of a six-member maintenance team with the 90th Fighter Generation Squadron at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, according to the 32-page report by the Air Force Aircraft Accident Investigation Board.

Crumlett, of Streamwood, Ill., had been with the squadron only a month and had completed only academic training on Raptor maintenance, the investigation states.

Required maintenance on the jet included extending and retracting configurable rail launchers, which move in and out of the jet's right and left weapons bays.

The standard maintenance practice on the launchers is to use a computerized maintenance aid. In this case, the maintainer should have been operating the launchers via the maintenance aid while having eyes directly on it, the investigation states.

"In contravention of standard practice, the multi-functional display (MFD) in the cockpit was used to actuate the desired functions," the investigation states.

"There is no line-of-sight between the cockpit ladder and the right-side weapons bay, and the maintenance team chief retracted the [configurable rail launcher] when all personnel were not clear; [Crumlett] was in the bay and his head was impinged between the plume deflector and the bulkhead, causing fatal head trauma."

The investigation concluded the mishap resulted from a "failure to follow prescribed procedures" and "failure to maintain awareness and supervisory direction."

Three additional factors substantially contributed to the accident: the maintenance team was performing multiple tasks simultaneously; had not developed proficiency, in part because three members were in training; and possessed a "false sense of security" regarding the launcher rail and weapons bay because of a misunderstanding about the function of a safety switch.

The maintenance team lacked a clear idea of who was leading the launcher maintenance tasks, the investigation found.

"This created confusion about who was performing what task at what time," the report states.

Verbal communication was difficult because of noise coming from an auxiliary power unit. Maintainers wore double ear protection and at times used hand signals.

During the launcher task, a thumbs-up signal from one of the maintainers was misinterpreted as an all-clear in the weapons bay when Crumlett was still inside, the investigation found.



U.S. Coast Guard

The Coast Guard's three icebreakers at Coast Guard Base Seattle in October. The Coast Guard has signed a contract to build six new icebreakers in Louisiana and Finland.

Coast Guard issues contract to build 6 icebreakers in Louisiana, Finland

By Gary Warner
Stars and Stripes

Shipyards in Louisiana and Finland will jointly build six new Arctic Security Cutter icebreakers, the U.S. Coast Guard announced Monday.

Bollinger Shipyards of Lockport, La., and Rauma Marine Constructions Oy of Rauma, Finland, received the contracts as part of an international agreement negotiated by the Trump Administration.

The contract with Rauma Marine Constructions Oy is for two cutters to be built in Finland, with delivery in 2028. The Bollinger contract includes up to four ships, with delivery in 2029.

"This plan is designed to take immediate advantage of our Finnish partners' icebreaker expertise while coordinating the on-shoring of that expertise in the United States in the long run," the Coast Guard said in a statement.

The U.S. Coast Guard currently has one heavy and two medium icebreakers in its fleet. The 50-year-old Polar Star is the only heavy icebreaker operated by the U.S. Coast Guard and is normally tasked to operate several months a year on Operation Deep Freeze, which opens shipping channels for scientific stations in Antarctica.

Congressional critics have called for action to close an Arctic region "icebreaker gap" with Russia and China. Russia, which has a long coastline on the Arctic, operatea about 40 icebreakers of various sizes; some are nuclear powered. The Russians have also fielded the first of its Ivan Papanin-class of armed icebreakers, carrying anAK-176MA 76mm gun in a turret on the foredeck and positions for missile launchers to be added.

China has four icebreakers operating in the Arctic and has taken part in joint voyages with Russian vessels in the far north.

The Coast Guard's Force Design 2028, initiated by Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem, includes the new Arctic cutters as a way to create "a more agile, capable and responsive fighting force."

The Coast Guard said the icebreakers will increase American presence and capabilities in the northern polar region.

"The Arctic Security Cutters will deliver the essential capability to uphold U.S. sovereignty against adversaries' aggressive economic and military actions in the Arctic," said Adm. Kevin E. Lunday, newly confirmed commandant of the Coast Guard.

NATION

Guard to patrol New Orleans for New Year's

BY SARA CLINE AND JACK BROOK
Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS, La. — A National Guard deployment in New Orleans authorized by President Donald Trump will begin Tuesday as part of a heavy security presence for New Year's celebrations a year after an attack on revelers on Bourbon Street killed 14 people, officials said Monday.

The deployment in New Orleans follows high-profile National Guard missions the Trump administration launched in other cities this year, including in Washington and Memphis, Tenn. But the sight of National Guard troops is not unusual in New Orleans, where troops earlier this year also helped bolster security for the Super Bowl and Mardi Gras.

"It's no different than what we've seen in the past," New Orleans police spokesperson Reese Harper said.

The Guard is not the only federal law enforcement agency in the city. Since the start of the month, federal agents have been carrying out an immigration crackdown that has led to the arrest of at least several hundred people.

Harper stressed that the National Guard will not be engaging in immigration enforcement.

"This is for visibility and just really to keep our citizens safe," Harper said. "It's just another tool in the toolbox and another layer of security."

The Guard is expected be confined to the French Quarter area popular with tourists and won't be engaging in assisting in immigration enforcement, Harper said. Guardsmen will operate similar to earlier this year when they patrolled the area around Bourbon Street following the vehicle-ramming attack on Jan. 1.

The 350 Guard members will stay through Carnival season, when residents and tourists descend on the Big Easy to partake in costumed celebrations and massive parades before ending with Mardi Gras in mid-February.

In total, more than 800 local, state and federal law enforcement officials will be deployed in New Orleans to close off Bourbon Street to vehicular traffic, patrol the area, conduct bag searches and redirect traffic, city officials said Monday.

The extra aid for New Orleans has received the support of some Democrats, with Mayor LaToya Cantrell saying she is "welcoming of those added resources."

The increased law enforcement presence comes a year after Shamsud-Din Jabbar drove around a police blockade in the early hours of Jan. 1 and raced down Bourbon Street, plowing into people celebrating New Year's Day. The attacker, a U.S. citizen and Army veteran who had proclaimed his support for the Islamic State militant group on social media, was fatally shot by police after crashing. After an expansive search, law enforcement located multiple bombs in coolers placed around the French Quarter. None of the devices detonated.

In the immediate aftermath of the attack, 100 National Guard members were sent to the city.



ALEX BRANDON / AP

President Donald Trump and Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu walk into Trump's Mar-a-Lago club, Monday in Palm Beach, Fla., after an arrival greeting.

$8.6B deal to upgrade Israeli F-15 fleet after Trump-Netanyahu visit

BY LARA KORTE
Stars and Stripes

Israel will receive more than two dozen F-15s in accordance with a contract signed this week with American firm Boeing, according to the Pentagon.

The $8.6 billion deal was announced Monday shortly after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Donald Trump met in Florida to discuss the next steps of the U.S.-brokered ceasefire agreement in Gaza.

Boeing will deliver at least 25 of the fighter jets over the next decade, and Israel has the option to order another 25, the Defense Department said in a statement.

The F-15IA is Israel's model of the Boeing F-15EX Eagle, which can carry hypersonic weapons and has a greater payload capacity than any other fighter jet, according to the company.

The ceasefire halted two years of war between Israel and the Iran-backed Islamic militant group Hamas, which had been in control of the Gaza Strip.

Since the Hamas attacks on Oct. 7, 2023, that started the war, the U.S. has provided at least $16.3 billion in direct military aid to Israel, according to the Council on Foreign relations.

After the meeting with Netanyahu, Trump told reporters that the U.S. may have to launch new attacks if Iran looks to reconstitute its nuclear program.

American airstrikes in June targeted several key nuclear enrichment sites using "bunker buster" bombs. At the time, the Pentagon said the Iranian enrichment sites had been completely obliterated by the operation.

But new concerns have arisen that Tehran may be continuing nuclear development outside those facilities, The Associated Press reported Monday.

"Now I hear that Iran is trying to build up again," Trump said. "And if they are, we're going to have to knock them down."

Homeland Security says fraud investigation underway in Minneapolis

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Federal Homeland Security officials were conducting a fraud investigation on Monday in Minneapolis, Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem said.

The action comes after years of investigation that began with the $300 million scheme at the nonprofit Feeding Our Future, for which 57 defendants in Minnesota have been convicted.

Prosecutors said the organization was at the center of the country's largest COVID-19-related fraud scam, when defendants exploited a state-run, federally funded program intended to provide food for children.

A federal prosecutor alleged earlier in December that half or more of the roughly $18 billion in federal funds that supported 14 programs in Minnesota since 2018 may have been stolen. Most of the defendants are Somali Americans, they said.

Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz said then that fraud will not be tolerated and that his administration "will continue to work with federal partners to ensure fraud is stopped and fraudsters are caught."

Noem on Monday posted a video on the social platform X showing DHS officers going into an unidentified business and questioning the person working behind the counter. Noem said that officers were "conducting a massive investigation on childcare and other rampant fraud."

"The American people deserve answers on how their taxpayer money is being used and ARRESTS when abuse is found," U.S. Immigration and Custom Enforcement posted.

The action comes a day after FBI Director Kash Patel said on X that the agency had "surged personnel and investigative resources to Minnesota to dismantle large-scale fraud schemes exploiting federal programs."

Patel said that previous fraud arrests in Minnesota were "just the tip of a very large iceberg."

President Donald Trump has criticized Walz's administration over the fraud cases to date.

In recent weeks, tensions have been high between state and federal enforcement in the area as the Trump administration's immigration crackdown focused on the Somali community in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area, which is the largest in the country.

Among those running schemes to get funds for child nutrition, housing services and autism programs, 82 of the 92 defendants are Somali Americans, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office for Minnesota.

Walz spokesperson Claire Lancaster said that the governor has worked for years to "crack down on fraud" and was seeking more authority from the Legislature to take aggressive action. Walz has supported criminal prosecutions and taken a number of other steps, including strengthening oversight and hiring an outside firm to audit payments to high-risk programs, Lancaster said.

NATION

Arctic blast packing snow, wind slams US

By Holly Ramer
Associated Press

A surge of Arctic air brought strong winds, heavy snow and frigid temperatures to the Great Lakes and Northeast on Tuesday, a day after a bomb cyclone barreling across the Midwest left tens of thousands of customers without power.

Blustery winds were expected to add to the chill, with low temperatures dipping below freezing as far south as the Florida panhandle, the National Weather Service said.

The wild storm hit parts of the Plains and Great Lakes this week with sharply colder air, strong winds and a mix of snow, ice and rain, leading to treacherous travel. Forecasters said it intensified quickly enough to meet the criteria of a bomb cyclone, a system that strengthens rapidly as pressure drops.

Nationwide, more than 115,000 customers were without power Tuesday morning, around a third of them in Michigan, according to Poweroutage.us.

As the storm moves into Canada, the frigid air trailing behind it will spread across much of the eastern two-thirds of the country, the National Weather Service said, powering the lake-effect "snow machine" in areas downwind of the Great Lakes.

Some areas in western and upstate New York saw a foot or more of snow Monday and their totals could reach up to 3 feet this week, forecasters said. Strong winds on Monday, including an 81 mph gust in Buffalo, New York, knocked down trees and wires across the region, the weather service said.

"At this point, the worst does seem to be over, and we are expecting conditions to improve especially by later today," said Andrew Orrison, a weather service meteorologist.

Dangerous wind chills across parts of North Dakota and Minnesota plunged as low as minus 30 F on Monday. And in northeast West Virginia, rare nearly hurricane-force winds were recorded on a mountain near Dolly Sods, according to the National Weather Service.

On the West Coast, strong Santa Ana winds with isolated gusts topping 70 mph brought down trees in parts of Southern California where recent storms had saturated the soil. Downed powerlines forced the shutdown of a freeway north of Los Angeles for several hours on Monday. Blustery conditions were expected through Saturday, along with thunderstorms.



Joel Bissell/AP

Snow is cleared from a parking lot in Grandville, Mich. on Monday.

American Kennel Club adds 3 breeds to its roster

By Jennifer Peltz
Associated Press

NEW YORK — They're ready to embark on 2026.

Three more dog breeds joined the American Kennel Club's roster of recognized breeds on Tuesday, making them eligible for many U.S. dog shows and likely increasing their visibility to the pet-loving public.

One of the newcomers is a terrier named for a U.S. president. Another is a toy dog from Cold War-era Russia. The third is a centuries-old French hunting hound. Here's a closer look:



Stacey Salter Moore/AP

A Russian Tsvetnaya Bolonka poses for photographs during a Meet the Breeds event in June in Dallas.

Basset fauve de Bretagne

■ The stats: 12.5 to 15.5 inches at the base of the neck; 23 to 39 pounds

■ The topline: A hardy, sociable, compact hound that can hunt all day — and needs mental and physical activity.

■ The pronunciation: bah-SAY' fove deh breh-TAHN'-yeh

■ The translation: Fawn-colored, low-set dog from Brittany

■ The history: Versions of these coarse-coated, tan-hued hounds go back at least as far as 16th-century French aristocratic circles. The breed has been championed in the U.S. in recent years by Cindy Hartman, a South Carolina service dog trainer who brought a pair of fauve puppies back from France in 2001. She has since trained and placed about 20 fauves as medical alert dogs for people with diabetes, she said.

■ The quote: "They're wicked smart, and so if you're wanting a dog that's just going to lay around all day long, a fauve is not for you," Hartman said. "But yet, when challenged mentally and physically, they're happy to come in with you and curl up on the sofa for the evening."

Teddy Roosevelt terrier

■ The stats: 8 to 14 inches at the base of the neck; 8 to 25 pounds

■ The topline: A solid, energetic small canine that will rid your barn of rodents, alert you to strangers, do dog sports — or just entertain you with its antics.

■ The history: Originally seen as a short-legged variant of the rat terrier, these dogs were deemed a breed of their own in 1999. The breed was named for President Theodore Roosevelt because of his fondness for dogs, including terriers.

■ The quote: "They know how to get you to laugh," says Cindy Rickey of Waynesville, N.C., the secretary of the American Teddy Roosevelt Terrier Club. While many terrier breeds are known for being independent-minded, her Teddy competes in obedience. "They're terriers, no doubt about it, but they also have this tremendous desire to please," she explains.



American Kennel Club/AP

A Teddy Roosevelt Terrier walks outdoors.

Russian tsvetnaya bolonka

■ The stats: Up to 10¼ inches at the base of the neck; 7 to 9 pounds

■ The topline: A sweet but clever little companion that wants playful interaction, not just snuggling (though it likes that, too).

■ The pronunciation: zvit-NEYE'-ah boh-LON'-kah



David Woo/AP

A Basset Fauve De Bretagne stands for photographs during a Meet the Breeds event February in San Diego.

■ The translation: Russian colored lapdog

■ The history: The breed was developed in Soviet-era Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) after World War II as a pet for apartment dwellers. American fans have been working to establish bolonki (the proper plural) in the U.S. since the early 2000s.

■ The quote: "Having a bolonka is like having a 3-year-old kid running around your house. … They can enjoy their time lying on the couch with you, but you've got to be prepared to play with them and keep them entertained," says Denise Dang of Oklahoma City, the secretary of the Russian Tsvetnaya Bolonka Club of America. Owners also need to care for a thick, wavy coat that's low-shedding but can get matted. Even if it's cut fairly short, a bath every couple of weeks is wise, Dang says.

The big picture

The AKC recognizes 205 breeds, including these three newcomers. Fanciers of many others — though, as yet, no "doodles" or other popular poodle hybrids — have voluntarily entered a pipeline that takes years of breeding, documentation and consensus-building.

The club doesn't limit the number of breeds it might eventually recognize. Spokesperson Brandi Hunter Munden says it's not "adding dogs indiscriminately," but rather providing "an established framework for growth, breed standards, competition and education in the U.S."

The controversy

Animal-rights activists have long deplored dog breeding and the AKC for supporting it, and the criticism hardened this year into a lawsuit over the health of French bulldogs, pugs, dachshunds and Chinese shar-peis. The group People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals is seeking a court order to stop the AKC from continuing to promulgate the current "standards," or ideal characteristics, for those breeds.

The AKC denies the allegations and has asked a court to dismiss the case, calling the suit frivolous.

WORLD

Dancing the morning away

S. Korea's hottest new clubs open at 9 (a.m.)

BY MICHELLE YE HEE LEE
The Washington Post

SEOUL — The partygoers bopped their heads to club beats, holding a drink in one hand and fist-pumping with the other.

The vibes were just like a typical night out here. Except it was 9 o'clock. In the morning. And the drinks? Iced Americanos.

"Morning raves" have become the latest sensation among some South Koreans in their 20s and 30s who are looking for wholesome alternatives to booze-filled nights. They're saying "no" to soju bombs — a common after-work rite involving a shot glass of potent rice wine dropped into a glass of beer — and round after round of drinking into the night.

They're increasingly saying "yes" to morning runs and dancing while sipping on coffee.

"I came here today with a plan: Make this my stage," said Kim Hyo-hee, 32, who joined the rave after a 5K jog with her running group. "I used to go clubbing when I was younger, but it's exhausting, and you have to drink. But this is clean fun, and it's cardio. I start my day feeling great."

These dance parties have become popular around the world, including in Europe, the United States, Australia and Singapore, as the "sober-curious" movement of young people reevaluating their relationship with alcohol takes hold.

But South Korea is an unlikely place to be taking part. After all, alcohol is a huge part of life here — both social and professional.

South Korea is ranked among the top five advanced economies for binge-drinking, according to a 2025 report by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development.

There is a deeply ingrained etiquette around drinking, like turning your face sideways to sip your drink in front of someone who's older than you, and never pouring a drink for yourself.

At social outings, groups of friends put on elaborate performances pouring soju and beer for others. Drinking games are so popular that one — "APT" — even made it into a K-pop song that was nominated for a Grammy this year.

Booze-filled work dinners are a central part of South Korean corporate culture, and alcohol has long been a way for employees to network and bond despite the strict seniority-based hierarchy. But surveys show people in their 20s and 30s dread those dinners, where some bosses pressure juniors to drink beyond comfort.



Event staff feed the rave crowd caviar-and-rice balls.



An attendee sips coffee at the rave. The events are popular among young South Koreans looking for alternatives to alcohol-fueled get-togethers.

PHOTOS BY JINTAK HAN/The Washington Post



A "morning rave" at K-beauty brand Kahi's retail location in Seoul on Dec. 13.

Hangover-free fun

Now, some younger South Koreans are wondering: What else can we do for fun other than drink?

"South Korea needs more occasions where people can have fun without alcohol," said Kim Go-yang, 36, a social worker from Seoul who went to the recent morning rave. "What's the fun in drinking all the time? You just end up getting into trouble."

At a rave hosted by K-beauty brand Kahi on a recent Saturday morning, about 100 people gathered in the basement-level store starting around 8 a.m.

It was a little awkward at first, with no liquid courage to get attendees revved up. But after the caffeine kicked in, the crowd was uncontrollable. There was hollering, jumping — and even an impromptu party train dance around the store.

Some people huddled around the DJ to dance, while others hung back and enjoyed the music from a distance. Some wore headphones enabling them to crank up the volume louder than the store could handle.

As people finished their cans of iced coffee provided by Kahi, along came a procession of store workers holding LED lights and tubs of caviar. The crowd went wild as one employee — moving her head to music — made caviar-and-rice balls and fed them to partygoers, for a jolt of carbs and sodium.

The K-beauty brand wanted to capitalize on morning raves as a marketing opportunity, given the interest among younger clients, the company's representatives said.

"Some people view party culture negatively, and others love music but can't fully enjoy it because of that perception. So I think this shift is really great," said Seo Minji, or DJ Minji, one of those at the turntable that morning. The dance party ended promptly at 10:30 a.m.

Culture shift

Event organizers, running crews, coffee shops and brands across the country are now catering to this emerging market of young South Koreans who are increasingly health-conscious. They are hosting dance parties, runs, yoga classes, book talks and "coffee chats" before work — specifically branded for healthy morning types.

The trend has been driven by people in their 20s, many of whom began emphasizing health during the coronavirus pandemic, which uprooted cultural norms of all kinds, said Yoon Duk-hwan, a consumer trends researcher and co-author of the annual book "Trend Monitor."

They are now challenging alcohol-heavy work gatherings and nightlife-driven culture, Yoon said. The coronavirus pandemic also allowed for new company rituals shifting away from alcohol, like switching to work lunches instead of dinners, Yoon said.

Younger South Koreans also are seeking more agency over their daily lives, underscoring anxieties they feel about what they can't control — like the job market, the AI takeover and income inequality, Yoon said.

"They are now in search of discipline. Rather than going somewhere to drink and get messy every day, they'd rather focus on maintaining control over what they enjoy," Yoon said.

The alcohol market is shifting, too.

Alcohol consumption has dropped gradually over the past decade. In 2023, South Korean adults drank 2.2 gallons of alcohol per person annually, a drop from 2.6 gallons in 2011, according to a Health Ministry report this year.

Meanwhile, there's been a rise in the consumption of nonalcoholic beverages, according to consumer reports. The nonalcoholic and low-alcohol beer market in South Korea grew by 118% from 2020 to 2024, according to Euromonitor International, a data analytics company.

"I love seeing people of all ages enjoying themselves together without drinking," said Kim Yoo-jin, a 27-year-old consultant who attended the rave, then went to practice jujitsu.

One of the communities for early social events is Seoul Morning Coffee Club, which in 2022 began hosting small groups of people who wanted to meet others over a cup of joe before work.

Word spread online, and the group's Instagram page now has about 53,000 followers. It now hosts a variety of events throughout the country, including six morning raves through the summer and fall, some of which drew as many as 600 people, said Siwon Moon, the club's brand marketing director.

WORLD



RUSSIAN DEFENSE MINISTRY PRESS SERVICE/AP

A Russia's Oreshnik missile system is seen during a training in an undisclosed location in Belarus.

Russia: Nuclear-capable Oreshnik missiles active

Associated Press

Russia's Oreshnik missile system has entered active service, Russia's Ministry of Defense said Tuesday, as negotiators continue to search for a breakthrough in peace talks to end Moscow's war in Ukraine.

Troops held a brief ceremony to mark the occasion in neighboring Belarus where the nuclear-capable missiles have been deployed, the ministry said. It did not say how many missiles had been deployed or give any other details.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said earlier in December that the Oreshnik would enter combat duty this month. He made the statement at a meeting with top Russian military officers, where he warned that Moscow will seek to extend its gains in Ukraine if Kyiv and its Western allies reject the Kremlin's demands in peace talks.

The announcement comes at a critical time for Russia-Ukraine peace talks. President Donald Trump hosted Zelenskyy at his Florida resort Sunday and insisted that Kyiv and Moscow were "closer than ever before" to a peace settlement.

Moscow first used the Oreshnik, which is Russian for "hazelnut tree," against Ukraine in November 2024, when it fired the experimental weapon at a factory in Dnipro that built missiles when Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union.

Putin has praised the Oreshnik's capabilities, saying that its multiple warheads, which plunge toward a target at speeds up to Mach 10, are immune to being intercepted.

Saudi Arabia bombs Yemen port after arms shipment from UAE

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Saudi Arabia bombed Yemen's port city of Mukalla on Tuesday after a weapons shipment from the United Arab Emirates arrived for separatist forces in the war-torn country, and starkly warned that it viewed Emirati actions as "extremely dangerous."

The bombing followed days of tensions over the advance of the separatist forces known as the Southern Transitional Council, which is backed by the Emirates. Despite the warning, the Council and its allies issued a statement supporting the UAE's presence, even as others allied with Saudi Arabia demanded Emirati forces withdraw from Yemen in 24 hours' time.

The confrontation threatened to open a new front in Yemen's decadelong war, with forces allied against the Iranian-backed Houthis possibly turning their sights on each other in the Arab world's poorest nation long stalked by famine and disease.

It also further strained ties between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, neighboring nations on the Arabian Peninsula that increasingly have competed with each other over economic issues and the region's politics, particularly in the wider Red Sea region.

"I expect a calibrated escalation from both sides. The UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council is likely to respond by consolidating control," said Mohammed al-Basha, a Yemen expert and the founder of the Basha Report, a risk advisory firm.

"At the same time, the flow of weapons from the UAE to the STC is set to be curtailed following the port attack, particularly as Saudi Arabia controls the airspace."

A military statement carried by the state-run Saudi Press Agency announced the strikes, which it said came after ships arrived there from Fujairah, a port city on the UAE's eastern coast.

"The ships' crew had the disabled tracking devices aboard the vessels, and unloaded a large amount of weapons and combat vehicles in support of the Southern Transitional Council's forces," the statement said.

"Considering that the aforementioned weapons constitute an imminent threat, and an escalation that threatens peace and stability, the Coalition Air Force has conducted this morning a limited airstrike that targeted weapons and military vehicles offloaded from the two vessels in Mukalla," it added.

It wasn't clear if there were any casualties from the strike.

Thieves drill into, steal from German bank

Associated Press

GELSENKIRCHEN, Germany — Thieves stole tens of millions of euros worth of property from safety deposit boxes inside a German bank vault that they drilled into Monday during the holiday lull, police said.

Some 2,700 bank customers were affected by the theft in Gelsenkirchen, police and the Sparkasse bank said.

Thomas Nowaczyk, a police spokesperson, said investigators believe the theft was worth between 10 million and 90 million euros, worth between $11.7 million and $105.7 million.

German news agency dpa reported that the theft could be one of Germany's largest heists.

The bank remained closed Tuesday, when some 200 people showed up demanding to get inside, dpa reported.

A fire alarm summoned police officers and firefighters to the bank branch shortly before 4 a.m. Monday. They found a hole in the wall and the vault ransacked. Police believe a large drill was used to break through the vault's basement wall.

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The Daily Guide to Navigating The Military Business Market

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AMERICAN ROUNDUP

State hopes stricter laws will quiet illegal fireworks

HONOLULU — Mike Lambert heard fewer illegal fireworks exploding in his suburban Honolulu neighborhood in the months after a chain of blasts at a house party last New Year's Eve led to the deaths of six people, including a 3-year-old boy.

As the director of Hawaii's Department of Law Enforcement, Lambert wondered if the tragedy had sparked a shift in Hawaii residents' penchant for igniting illegal fireworks.

Police can now issue $300 tickets to those who shoot off fireworks, while repeat offenders and people whose actions cause serious injury or death could get prison time for felony crimes.

As of earlier this month, Honolulu police said officers had issued 10 fireworks citations. Matayoshi said the number is an improvement from zero in past years. He expects it to jump dramatically on New Year's Eve.

Man fatally shoots neighbor blocks away

OK COMANCHE — An Oklahoma man firing a gun he bought as a Christmas present has been charged with manslaughter after authorities say a stray bullet left his yard during target practice and fatally struck a neighbor who was sitting on a porch a half mile away.

Cody Wayne Adams, 33, was charged Friday in Stephens County with first-degree manslaughter.

Stephens County deputies were called to a home north of Comanche on Christmas Day after Sandra Phelps was shot while sitting on the front porch of a home and holding a child, according to a sheriff's affidavit. Witnesses said Phelps said "ouch," and then collapsed.

Investigators determined Phelps suffered a gunshot wound, and she was pronounced dead about 20 minutes after deputies received the call about the shooting, the affidavit states.

Authorities contacted Adams, who told deputies he had recently bought himself a .45-caliber handgun and had been shooting at a can in his yard, about a half-mile from where Phelps was shot. When deputies told Adams they suspected he shot Phelps, "Adams became visibly upset and began to cry," Stephens County Sheriff's Capt. Timothy Vann wrote in the affidavit.



EAKIN HOWARD/AP

Bear necessities

Fans watch players warm up before an NFL football game between the San Francisco 49ers and the Chicago Bears in Santa Clara, Calif., on Sunday.

Anonymous money fuels $5M in attacks on official

GA ATLANTA — It's the biggest mystery in Georgia politics right now: Who's paying for the attacks on Republican Lt. Gov. Burt Jones?

Someone operating under the name "Georgians for Integrity" has dumped around $5 million into television ads, mailers and texts. The attacks claim Jones, who already has President Donald Trump's endorsement in his run for governor next year, has been using his office to enrich himself.

The Jones campaign is hopping mad, threatening legal action against television stations if they don't stop airing ads that a lawyer calls "demonstrably false" and slanderous.

State loses $540M in climate-related grants

MI DETROIT — What a difference a year (and a political leadership change) makes.

At this time in 2024, Michigan was expecting a windfall of federal funds to fuel a transition to clean energy, along with billions of dollars' worth of green manufacturing projects subsidized by the Biden administration's signature climate spending bills.

But since President Donald Trump began his second term in January and began scrapping federal climate programs he refers to collectively as "the green new scam," Michigan has seen a wave of project and grant cancellations, along with renewed investment in fossil fuel-based manufacturing and power generation.

Roughly $540 million in climate-related grants to Michigan have been canceled or held up since Inauguration Day, according to a national database compiled by Atlas Public Policy, while shifting market forces and the end of federal tax credits for electric vehicles have caused clean manufacturing investments in Michigan to whipsaw from billions annually in recent years to $3 billion in canceled investments this year.

Michigan Attorney General Dana Nessel has sued over the grant cancellations, joining other 22 states to argue the administration "unilaterally and illegally terminated" the program, overstepping checks and balances to cancel congressionally approved funding.

Nonprofit receives $3.4M to build opioid clinic

WY CASPER — When Nebraska's Department of Health and Human Services announced its plan to divvy up millions in opioid settlement money, one recipient stood out: The Central Wyoming Counseling Center.

The Wyoming nonprofit is the only out-of-state organization slated to receive some of Nebraska's Opioid Treatment Infrastructure Cash Fund, receiving $3.4 million to build a crisis stabilization center in Kimball County, which borders Wyoming.

The Central Wyoming Counseling Center's former acting CEO Steve Corsi is now CEO of Nebraska's DHHS.

Corsi had no involvement in the grant review or selection process, said DHHS spokesperson Jeff Powell.

Other grants awarded in this round are: $4.4 million to Heartland Counseling Services for a crisis stabilization center near South Sioux City; $2 million for Centerpointe, which operates in Lincoln and Omaha, to expand short-term residential treatment; $350,000 for Bryan Medical Center in Lincoln; and $276,000 for ARCH in Omaha.

Pilots killed after collision identified

NJ HAMMONTON — Authorities on Monday identified two pilots who died after their helicopters collided midair in southern New Jersey.

Kenneth Kirsch, 65, and Michael Greenberg, 71, were friends who both lived in New Jersey and would often have breakfast together at a cafe near the crash site in Hammonton, about 35 miles southeast of Philadelphia.

Hammonton Police Chief Kevin Friel said in a statement that Kirsch, of Carney's Point, was pronounced dead at an area hospital after being flown there, while Greenberg, of Sewell, died at the crash site.

The Federal Aviation Administration described the crash as a midair collision between an Enstrom F-28A helicopter and Enstrom 280C helicopter over Hammonton Municipal Airport. Only the pilots were on board.

Man charged with trying to aid Islamic State

TX DALLAS — A 21-year-old Texas man who authorities say provided bomb materials and money to people he believed were affiliated with the Islamic State group has been federally charged with international terrorism, the U.S. Department of Justice announced Monday.

John Michael Garza Jr. of Midlothian is accused of giving bomb-making materials to an undercover federal agent who he believed was an "ISIS brother," the Justice Department said, using a different abbreviation for the Islamic State group.

The Dec. 22 sting operation came after an undercover New York City Police Department employee found a social media account belonging to Garza that followed several accounts supporting the Islamic State group.

From The Associated Press

WEEKEND



‘Ordinary’ anything but for singer Alex Warren

Music, Page 28

In pursuit of greatness

Determination displayed by actor Chalamet, director Safdie reflect pingpong-playing protagonist’s singular drive in film ‘Marty Supreme’

Movies, Pages 16-17

Timothée Chalamet stars in “Marty Supreme.”
A24/AP

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Comfort in the past

Both old, young finding refuge in analog, low-tech activities

BY MICHAEL LIEDTKE
Associated Press

As technology distracts, polarizes and automates, people are still finding refuge on analog islands in the digital sea.

The holdouts span the generation gaps, uniting elderly and middle-aged enclaves born in the preinternet times with the digital natives raised in the era of online ubiquity.

They are setting down their devices to paint, color, knit and play board games. Others carve out time to mail birthday cards and salutations written in their own hand. Some drive cars with manual transmissions while surrounded by automobiles increasingly able to drive themselves. And a widening audience is turning to vinyl albums, resuscitating an analog format that was on its deathbed 20 years ago.

The analog havens provide a nostalgic escape from tumultuous times for generations born from 1946 through 1980, says Martin Bispels, 57, a former QVC executive who recently started Retroactv, a company that sells rock music merchandise dating to the 1960s and 1970s.

"The past gives comfort. The past is knowable," Bispels says. "And you can define it because you can remember it the way you want."

But analog escapes also beckon to millennials and Generation Z, those born from 1981 through 2012 — younger people immersed in a digital culture that has put instant information and entertainment at their fingertips.

Despite that convenience and instant gratification, even younger people growing up on technology's cutting edge are yearning for more tactile, deliberate and personal activities that don't evaporate in the digital ephemera, says Pamela Paul, author of "100 Things We've Lost To The Internet."

"Younger generations have an almost longing wistfulness because so little of their life feels tangible," Paul says. "They are starting to recognize how the internet has changed their lives, and they are trying to revive these in-person, low-tech environments that older generations took for granted."

Here are some glimpses into how the old ways are new again:



AP

Divjeev Sohi, 19, shifts gears in a Jeep Wrangler on July 29 on the streets of San Jose, Calif. He and his brother, Prabh, 22, like to drive manual transmissions.

Keeping those cards coming

People have been exchanging cards for centuries. It's a ritual in danger of being obliterated by the tsunami of texting and social media posts. Besides being quicker and more convenient, digital communication has become more economical as the cost of a first-class U.S. postage stamp has soared from 33 to 78 cents during the past 25 years.

But tradition is hanging on thanks to people like Megan Evans, who started the Facebook group called "Random Acts of Cardness" a decade ago when she was just 21 in hopes of fostering and maintaining more human connections in an increasingly impersonal world.

"Anybody can send a text message that says 'Happy Birthday!' But sending a card is a much more intentional way of telling somebody that you care," says Evans, who lives in Wickliff, Ohio. "It's something that the sender has touched with their own hand, and that you are going to hold in your own hand."

More than 15,000 people are now part of Evans' Facebook group, including Billy-Jo Dieter, who sends at least 100 cards per month commemorating birthdays, holidays and other milestones. "A dying art," she calls it.

"My goal has been to try to make at least one person smile each day," says Dieter, 48, who lives in Ellsworth, Maine. "When you sit down and you put the pen to the paper, it becomes something that's even more just for that person."

The singularity of a stick shift

Before technology futurist Ray Kurzweil came up with a concept that he dubbed "Singularity" to describe his vision of computers melding with humanity, the roads were crammed with stick-shift cars working in concert with people.

But automobiles with manual transmission appear to be on a road to oblivion as technology transforms cars into computers on wheels. Fewer than 1% of the new vehicles sold in the U.S. have manual transmission, down from 35% in 1980, according to an analysis by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

But there remain stick-shift die-hards like Prabh and Divjeev Sohi, brothers who drive cars with manual transmissions to their classes at San Jose State University along Silicon Valley roads clogged with Teslas. They became enamored with stick shifts while virtually driving cars in video games as kids and riding in manual transmission vehicles operated by their father and grandfather.

So when they were old enough to drive, Prabh, 22, and Divjeev, 19, were determined to learn a skill few people their age even bother to attempt: mastering the nuances of a clutch that controls a manual transmission, a process that resulted in their 1994 Jeep Wrangler coming to a complete stop while frustrated drivers got stuck behind them.

"He stalled like five times his first time on the road," Prabh recalls.

Even though the experience still causes Divjeev to shudder, he feels it led him to a better place.

"You are more in the moment when you are driving a car with a stick. Basically you are just there to drive and you aren't doing anything else," Divjeev says. "You understand the car, and if you don't handle it correctly, that car isn't going to move."



BILLY-JO DIETER/AP

Billy-Jo Dieter, 48, who is part of Megan Evans' "Random Acts of Cardness" Facebook group, writes cards to strangers in Ellsworth, Maine. She sends at least 100 cards per month commemorating birthdays, holidays and other milestones.

Rediscovering vinyl's virtues

Vinyl's obsolescence seemed inevitable in the 1980s when compact discs emerged. That introduction triggered an evisceration of analog recordings that hit bottom in 2006 when 900,000 vinyl albums were sold, according to the Recording Industry Association of America. That was a death rattle for a format that peaked in 1977, when 344 million vinyl albums were sold.

But the slump unexpectedly reversed, and vinyl albums are now a growth niche. In each of the past two years, about 43 million vinyl albums have been sold, despite the widespread popularity of music streaming services that make it possible to play virtually any song by any artist at any time.

Baby boomers expanding their decades-old album collections aren't the only catalyst. Younger generations are embracing the lusher sound of vinyl, too.

"I really love listening to an album on vinyl from start to finish. It feels like I am sitting with the artist," says 24-year-old Carson Bispels. "Vinyl just adds this permanence that makes the music feel more genuine. It's just you and the music, the way it should be."

Carson is the son of Martin Bispels, the former QVC executive. A few years ago, Martin gave a few of his vinyl records to Carson, including Bob Marley's "Talkin' Blues," an album already played so much that it sometimes cracks and pops with the scratches in it.

"I still listen to it because every time I do, I think of my dad," says Carson, who lives in Nashville, Tenn.

After starting off with about 10 vinyl albums from his dad, Carson now has about 100 and plans to keep expanding.

"The current digital age of music is fantastic, too, but there's nothing like the personal aspect of going into the record store and thumbing through a bunch of albums while making small talk with some of the other patrons to find out what they're listening to," Carson says.

Paul, the author of the book about analog activities that have been devoured by the internet, says vinyl music's comeback story has her mulling a potential sequel.

"A return to humanity," she says, "could turn out to be another book."

WEEKEND: VIDEO GAMES



UBISOFT/TNS photos

Players will need to plant lots of lavender to create soap, a product that certain groups use in Anno 117: Pax Romana, the newest entry in the long-running strategy series.

New Anno will scratch strategy fans' itch

Latest entry in city-building series, 117: Pax Romana, offers Civilization players gameplay that is both familiar and new

BY GIESON CACHO
The Mercury News

With Sid Meier's Civilization VII a disappointment, Anno has an opportunity to snag the strategy game spotlight. The Ubisoft franchise has been in the shadow of Firaxis' long-running classic, though it takes a different approach when it comes to mixing history and video games. Whereas Civilization focuses on nation-building from ancient times to the future, Anno takes a narrower approach. Instead of running an empire that stands the test of time, Anno focuses on city building and creating colonies that work in unison to fend off and conquer their rivals.

Thinking about the Roman Empire

The latest entry to the long-running strategy series is Anno 117: Pax Romana, which takes place during the height of the Roman Empire. Players take on the role of a governor tasked with running an island. They start off with a trading post and they'll have to send woodcutters to the forest and build sawmills for lumber.



That's how the campaign starts, but from there, the city building quickly grows more complex. Players have to nurture food resources, clothing, a military, public services and other needs. As a newcomer to the series, it can be overwhelming, and the best tutorial that Anno 117 offers players is the single-player campaign, where they choose between Marcus Naukratius or Marcia Tertia, who each have their own storylines.

Although the origin stories about how they become governor differ, players are on equal footing when it comes to the political drama and shape of the campaign, which takes them through the death of the emperor and an exile to Albion, a new locale that's a stand-in for Britain. The highlands and moors are where much of the campaign takes place before returning to Latium, where Anno 117 opens up the full sandbox experience.



Players are exiled to the island of Albion, a new locale that's a stand-in for Britain, after the death of the emperor in the single-player campaign of Anno 117.

Going from Civ to Anno

As a Civ fan jumping into Anno 117, the gameplay is both familiar and new. It feels more granular when it comes to city building as players have to figure out the logistics of each structure and resource. Players have to place production facilities near warehouses and those also need to be near shops. The land and naval combat adds spice and drives the conflict in the campaign. Players have research bonuses that are comparable to a tech tree, and how quickly they advance is influenced by the choice of island residents and structures. Religion is also another feature that adds bonuses to an island and is the counterpoint to research. On top of that, each island is fertile in distinct resources, meaning players have to colonize quickly to score the best ones.

This should all be familiar to veterans of Civ, but despite the similarities, players will run into roadblocks and pitfalls because of the complex systems. For novices, Anno 117 has a learning curve the size of Mount Everest, and it's daunting when realizing how everything is connected.

Major stumbling blocks

Players will run into issues such as the lack of workers before realizing that building an army pulls service members from an island's population. They can expand and build more resources, but not realize that the fire risk is rising within a city and that a building fire station is more effective in the center of town rather than at the edges. It's not the major concepts that are intimidating. The systems make sense, but rather, it's how they integrate with each other and how they're deployed that pose a challenge. Players need to do research on city layouts and the best ratios of buildings to people.

After mastering that, the scope expands. It's not just about building an effective megalopolis on one island. Players have to figure out how to specialize each location so that it fills a role in the wider colonies. Meanwhile, players also have to manage trade routes and diplomatic relations with other governors to acquire resources. All of this is needed to keep the Roman and Celtic populations happy and their needs fulfilled, while also offering security from attack.

The campaign fails to explain these intricacies well, so players will have to find outside sources to figure out what they're doing wrong. Thankfully, there are plenty of resources online to guide players or which at least offer hints on how to improve their city building.

For those who love researching and stress-testing systems, Anno 117 is a game with bottomless depth. It will take time to explore it or to even tread its waters. Becoming fluent in the game's system will take weeks, but mastering Anno 117 will take months, and that's the draw of this game. It offers the potential for limitless fun that perhaps can last as long as the Pax Romana itself.

Platforms: PC, PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X and S
Online: ubisoft.com/en-us/game/anno/117-pax-romana

WEEKEND: MOVIES

American dreamer

Timothée Chalamet wants to be great. 'Marty Supreme' just might get him there

BY JAKE COYLE
Associated Press



Timothée Chalamet, far right, and Josh Safdie pose for a portrait on Dec. 15 in New York. Chalamet stars in Safdie's "Marty Supreme," a hyperkinetic 1950s-set New York tale of a singular striver.

VICTORIA WILL/AP

Timothée Chalamet squints as he gazes out at the Manhattan shoreline. It's a few hours before the premiere of his new movie, "Marty Supreme," but at this moment, he's sitting on a quiet bench at the end of a West Side pier.

It's brisk and there's snow on the ground, but it's sunny and Chalamet, dressed warmly in a parka, is enjoying the perspective looking back at the city. For him, it's like looking back on himself.

"Now in my late 20s, there should be every reason to go, 'All right, career's good. Let me start shilling out,'" says Chalamet, who has since turned 30 on Dec. 27. "But it's like I've quadrupled down on the original pursuit of my life. I've gotten out of the pool and redived from a higher board."

That high dive is "Marty Supreme," Josh Safdie's hyperkinetic 1950s-set New York tale of a singular striver. Chalamet plays Marty Mauser, a Jewish kid working at a shoe store who aspires to be the best table tennis pro in the world. The character is loosely based on a real-life player, Marty Reisman, but the movie is just as much a reflection of Chalamet and Safdie's own whatever-it-takes ambitions.

"The gift of my life is this work," Chalamet says while seagulls fly overhead. "You want to honor it. Not in some Keynesian way — I don't know if that's the right economist to cite. Capitalistic is not what I mean. I mean: If you're not going up, you're kind of going down. 'He not busy being born is busy dying,' the great Dylan quote. Ooh, is that on the money."

Since his breakthrough performance in 2017's "Call Me By Your Name," Chalamet has been on an ever-ascending path that seemed to reach a culmination when he, soon after finishing shooting on "Marty Supreme," declared that he's "in pursuit of greatness" while accepting the best actor award from the Screen Actors Guild for his performance as Bob Dylan in "A Complete Unknown."

But "Marty Supreme" is yet another new level for Chalamet. His Marty, far from a period-piece study, is a blur of forward motion. (To shoot the film's sprinting poster, Safdie closed down two blocks, so Chalamet would be up to full speed.) To make his dreams a reality, Marty uses every desperate scheme and every bit of grandiose swagger. He's a quintessentially American hustler, and it's probably the defining performance of Chalamet's young career. A year after he came so close, it could win him his first Academy Award.

"It's not like a long arc thing for me," he says. "It's like I'm chasing a feeling."

Taking 'Marty' mainstream

"Marty Supreme," which opened wide on Christmas Day, is a big test. A24 spent $70 million on it, making it one of the indie studio's biggest budgeted movies ever. To build the hype, Chalamet has unveiled some very Marty-esque stunts, including an 18-minute video of a pseudo-Zoom call about the movie's marketing. That led to a real orange blimp, emblazoned with "Dream Big," flying over Los Angeles.

When The Associated Press caught up with Safdie at his Chelsea office, he had recently returned from promoting the movie in London, Brazil and Los Angeles. For him, "Marty Supreme" could hardly

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REVIEW

Genre-defying 'Marty Supreme' fueled by hustle

By Monica Hesse
The Washington Post

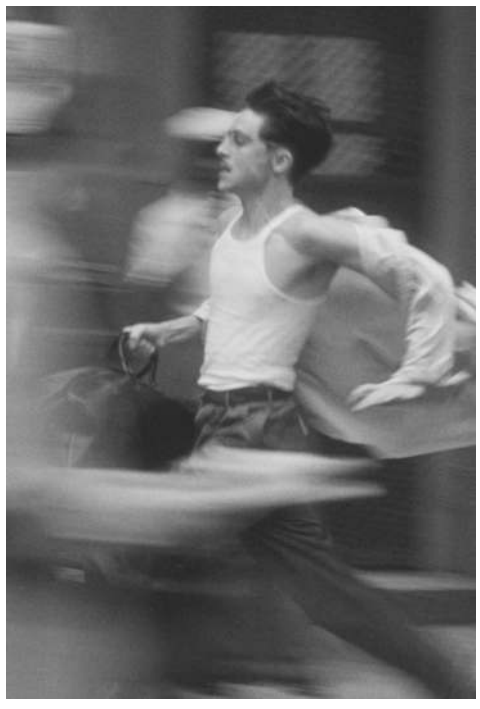
The first thing to know about "Marty Supreme" is that the ping-pong is phenomenal.

In early trailers, it was hard to tell whether this was a study of a table tennis champion or a spoof about a table tennis champion, i.e. another entry into the classic genre in which audiences are introduced to a niche hobby ("Best in Show" for dog breeding, "Drop Dead Gorgeous" for beauty pageants) only for the film to mock everyone who participates in it.

But "Marty Supreme" presents ping-pong as a riveting, nail-biting sport that fills stadiums in countries around the world. Unfortunately for would-be champion Marty Mauser (Timothée Chalamet, playing a fictionalized version of mid-century champ Marty Reisman), none of those countries is the United States. This fact goes a little way toward explaining the relentless hustle and desperation with which he attacks life; a 1950s New York shoe salesman plagued by the knowledge that he is one of the top athletes in the world, but in a sport everyone else thinks is just the silly game you play while waiting for a bowling lane to open up.

By the time the main action kicks off, Marty has a few frenetic days to get himself to the world championships in Japan — a misadventure that involves shotguns, mafiosi, Broadway debuts, elaborate shady plots, plumbing mishaps and a big dog.

A different movie might have sentimentalized Marty's journey, giving him a dying mother, an expectant wife or a neighborhood in dire straits — some stake in the game bigger than Marty himself. But his mother (a delightfully unrecognizable Fran Drescher) is a pest who feigns illnesses to get her son to return her calls. And though he does knock up his plucky childhood friend-with-benefits (Odessa A'Zion) in the movie's first scene, Marty treats Rachel's pregnancy as a barrier rather than a motivator.



A24/AP

Timothée Chalamet stars as would-be ping-pong champion Marty Mauser in "Marty Supreme."

The main thing driving Marty is an unshakable belief in his own greatness, and this is where the character gets interesting. If you claim to be the best in the world, but you really *are* the best in the world, is that monstrous ego or just truth-telling? If you have to swindle a few marks to prove what everyone else should have believed all along, is that forgivable? "Marty Supreme" almost fits into another popular film genre: Biopics Of Disagreeable Men, the geniuses (from Steve Jobs to Alan Turing to Mozart) who are revealed as not just singular talents, but also immense jackwagons. The fact that Marty's singular talent isn't building a decoder to win World War II but rather smacking a tiny ball with a tiny paddle across a tiny net is both absurd and relatable, beautiful and pathetic.

None of this would work were it not for the swaggering, high-wire performance of Chalamet. His trademark delicate beauty, worn so easily in films like "Little Women" and "Call Me By Your Name," has been toned down by stained teeth and pockmarked skin. His manner is rodent-like, but he's got charisma for days ("I could sell shoes to an amputee," he says matter-of-factly). When he strips off his shirt to play, his arms flail like pipe cleaners, but he's mesmerizing when he dives for the ball.

All around, you would be hard-pressed to come up with a better-cast film. Venture capitalist Kevin O'Leary ("Shark Tank") makes his acting debut as a wealthy pen company CEO, proving that sometimes the best casting decision is hiring someone to essentially play themselves. Gwyneth Paltrow returns from a long screen absence to play Kay — a former movie star whom Marty identifies as a potential benefactor — with enough savviness to make you remember that long before Goop, this woman won an Oscar.

After I had figured out what "Marty Supreme" is not — not a mockumentary, not (exactly) a genius biopic — it took me a while to place what it is. It's a sports drama while Marty is competing, it's a heist while Marty is scheming, it's a sweaty action flick while Marty is hustling. It's one or two shakes of "The Talented Mr. Ripley," and it's very often funny. Eventually I realized that in tone and pacing it most closely reminded me of "Uncut Gems," and then I felt like a dummy for not getting there sooner: Josh Safdie, who directed and co-wrote "Marty" (with Ronald Bronstein), also co-directed and co-wrote the 2019 Adam Sandler movie about a jeweler racing to pay off a gambling debt.

Every scene was high-stakes, propelling this compelling, unlikable man one step closer or further from a destiny you were never quite sure he deserved. Every interaction felt as though it might end in sex or blood or death or humiliation — all the highs and lows of life, condensed into a potent 2½ hours; the highs and lows of a sport compressed onto a 9-by-5 wood composite table.

The ping-pong is sublime.

"Marty Supreme" is rated R for profanity, sexual and violent content, bloody images and nudity. Running time: 150 minutes.

Dreamer: 'Singularly driven' Chalamet saw himself in character

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be more personal. Pingpong paddles filled his office, as did an old piece of awning scrounged from Rodney Dangerfield's New York comedy club. Safdie once tried to turn pro at table tennis, himself, before moviemaking became his obsession.

"My dad is the ultimate dreamer," Safdie says. "He still dreams to this day. When I was a kid, I'd ask him where I came from. And he'd say, 'You came from the stars.' It put this intense feeling inside me that there was huge future ahead of me."

When Safdie and his brother, Benny, set out to make films, they had a New York hustler mentality. For their second feature, "Daddy Longlegs," they approached the filmmaker Ronald Bronstein, then working as a projectionist, and told him he had to star in the film. Bronstein wasn't even an actor.

"I thought: This guy is made out of helium and I've had my feet stuck in lead for six years," recalls Bronstein, who co-wrote "Marty Supreme."

The hardscrabble life of independent filmmaking made Safdie accustomed to giving everything to get his movies made. To convince a potential financier to pay for the basketball portions of 2019's "Uncut Gems," Safdie, a non-drinker, remembers downing half a dozen whiskies during a meeting.

"You're in a position where you're at their beck and call," he says. "You'll do whatever it takes."

When Safdie and his brother finished "Uncut Gems," years of pouring everything into Howard Ratner (Adam Sandler's character in the film) left him feeling purposeless. "You start to ask yourself: What is the purpose of a dream?"

'Timmy Supreme'

Safdie and Chalamet first met in 2017, at the premiere of the Safdie brothers' "Good Time," just months before the release of "Call Me By Your Name."

"I didn't know anything about the guy. Some agent told me he was the next big superstar. And you hear that a lot from agents," says Josh Safdie. "But you got the sense that he saw it. And he had a vision for it. He had this energy to him. He was Timmy Supreme."

Safdie sent Chalamet a video of table tennis players from 1948 set to Peter Gabriel's "I Have the Touch." The suggestion was: This is a period movie told with contemporary topspin. For years, while working on other movie sets, Chalamet built up his table tennis skills.

"Josh wanted me to tap into a period of my life when my audacity was all I had," Chalamet says. Immediately, he saw himself in Marty. "I was singularly driven starting at 14."

Safdie and Chalamet have launched something almost anathema in theaters this holiday season: a wholly original, big-budget, R-rated movie fronted by star power. Signs suggest audiences aren't just ready, they're hungry for it. The limited opening of "Marty Supreme," in six cinemas, set per-screen records. There were 92 sellouts.

"I said this when I went to (former high school) LaGuardia last year: Don't act for other actors. Act for real audiences," Chalamet says. "While we were shooting 'Dune 3' over the summer, Denis (director Villeneuve) said at some point he realized it was more about pleasing real people. You look at the business structure of the film industry, how it's been contracting since the '80s — it's ludicrous to be focused on anything but real audiences."

New York hustle

"Marty Supreme" is also a part of the proud lineage of New York movies, and self-consciously crafted in an American movie tradition. It may feel like a millennial watershed, but its production design is by a legend of an earlier era, Jack Fisk. The 74-year-old Bronx filmmaker Abel Ferrara appears in it. They're veterans of a grittier, more handcrafted time stretching back to the 1970s that's been particularly influential to Safdie. Robert Altman's 1902-set 1971 film "McCabe and Mrs. Miller," he notes, is the exact same time difference between when it takes place and when it was shot as "Marty Supreme."

"The tradition, particularly of New York filmmaking, movies like 'French Connection,' I try to let them seep into me," Safdie says. "That's why I'm casting Abel Ferrara. I'm trying to at least cultivate those influences."

That "Marty Supreme" is a deeply New York film, and maybe a new classic one, is also a special point of pride for Chalamet, who grew up in Hell's Kitchen. Leaning forward as the afternoon winter light brightens the waterfront, Chalamet remembers he used to play soccer as a kid on this pier.

"Just to be here, back where I'm from. What a dream," Chalamet says. "I also feel like my artistry has grown, not as a talking point or as hyperbole, but as a humble fact of foundation."

It's the kind of thing Marty might say. Indeed, some of Chalamet's recent declarations have struck some like he's still in character. Asked whether he's sincere or engaging in a little Method marketing, Chalamet takes a long pause and smiles. "It's both."

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEW

An ‘Anaconda’ reboot no one asked for

Midlife-crisis comedy with Jack Black and Paul Rudd shows limits of star power

By Chris Klimek
The Washington Post



Sony Pictures Entertainment photos

Wannabe horror auteur Doug (Jack Black), left, and actor Griff (Paul Rudd) try to create a no-budget, guerilla-style remake of the 1997 film “Anaconda” in the similarly titled film.

How many of you had a reboot of the campy 1997 ophiological horror flick “Anaconda” on your Christmas list? Too bad; you’re getting one anyway.

But wait! Those geniuses at Sony Pictures know you’re rolling your eyes at their latest retread, and it turns out they’re way ahead of you. Their new “Anaconda” is no mere reboot but in fact a midlife-crisis comedy about four pals who travel from Buffalo to the Amazon (as played by Queensland, Australia) to knock out a no-budget, guerilla-style remake of the 1997 Sony Pictures trash classic “Anaconda,” a fondly recalled object from their youths.

Still on the fence? Your stars are Paul Rudd and Jack Black, those winningly youthful 56-year-olds whose shtick is, like Rudd’s face, evergreen.

Truth be told, that portrait in Rudd’s closet is starting to sweat a bit in “Anaconda,” but the movie is still funny. Ish.

I mean, it’s cute. Amusing.

Sporadically.

But funny? Funny like how “Superman” (the 2025 one) turned sweet-kid shutterbug Jimmy Olsen into the most irresistible man in Metropolis? Funny like the feral-children bloodbath finale of “Weapons”? Funny like the snowman threesome in “The Naked Gun”? (The 2025 one.) Funny like Michael Cera in “The Phoenician Scheme”? Like every single frame of Benicio Del Toro’s performance in “One Battle After Another”?

I’m afraid not. (I’m also afraid, *not*, because this “Anaconda” lays as rancid an egg as a creature feature as it does as a comedy.)

Look, humor is subjective and mysterious. I have proffered specific examples of things from The Cinema of 2025 that delighted me personally so that you, reader, may calculate your own probability of enjoying “Anaconda” (the 2025 one). Which in my objective, impartial, utterly science-based opinion contains nothing remotely as laughter-inducing as any of the aforementioned examples.

This is more like “Snakes on a Plane” without a plane, and it fails to heed the lesson of that 2006 shrug of a movie: You can’t engineer a cult classic. Only the audience has that authority. Only *we* can decide to reclaim, say, “Showgirls” or “The Room” or “Anaconda” as misunderstood masterpieces, vacating the harsh judgments issued against them when they were new. (The original “Anaconda” was in fact a hit, even if critics hated it. The point stands.)

The problem comes into clear focus when the credits reveal this “Anaconda” was hatched by writer-director Tom Gormican and co-writer Kevin Etten, the duo behind 2022’s not-that-funny, still-funnier-than-this “The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent.” That film featured Nicolas Cage as himself, making a plot point of the star’s financial woes and late-career lack of discernment. Gormican and Etten were also two of the five credited writers on last year’s grim straight-to-Netflix lega-sequel “Beverly Hills Cop: Axel F,” which is to say they have lots of experience making things that ought to be much more fun than they are.



From left, Thandiwe Newton as a just-divorced former actor who might rekindle her old fling with Griff and Steve Zahn as a cameraman, round out the group in “Anaconda.”

Unlike Cage in “Massive Talent,” Rudd and Black are not technically playing themselves, but they may as well be, so dependent is the film on the leads’ familiar comic personas. Black’s character, Doug, is a wannabe horror auteur and otherwise happy family man who feels constricted by his job making wedding videos. He’s haunted by the prevalence in his work life of Paula Cole’s 1996 hit “I Don’t Wanna Wait,” as though to remind us that Black first really popped as that snobby record store clerk in “High Fidelity.” Rudd’s Griff went to Hollywood to become an actor, but his star has risen no higher than a multiepisode guest appearance on “S.W.A.T.” (the 2017 one).

Rounding out this foursome of college pals are Steve Zahn as a cinematographer — well, a cameraman — whose substance abuse problems (“I’m Buffalo sober”) cause chaos, and Thandiwe Newton as a just-divorced former actor who might be game to rekindle her old fling with Rudd’s character. Newton is a marvelous performer, but you wonder if she might’ve made an enemy, given that her wigs in this movie are less convincing than the CGI snake in “Anaconda” ’97.

Brazilian actor and director Selton Mello, playing this film’s answer to the Jon Voight character from the original, gives the best performance here by a lot. He’s also the subject of the one needle-drop-as-joke that actually hits.

This thing is so leaden that one has ample time to reflect that Rudd, Black and Zahn were all between 28 and 30 when the original “Anaconda” came out. That’s not old, but it’s not fresh-out-of-school, getting-kicked-off-their-parents’-health-coverage young, either. This is such a petty nit to pick that I would never mention it if the movie didn’t point it out by having the 58-year-old Zahn’s idiot character suggest, idiotically, that the anaconda in “Anaconda” was a metaphor for young-adult problems such as finding your own health insurance.

“Anaconda” wasn’t even 1997’s funniest gorefest about hot young actors getting punctured and/or pulped — that would be Paul Verhoeven’s “Starship Troopers” — but there was an innocence to it. At least some of the creators involved were doing their damnedest to make a real movie. J-Lo was trying her best. Ice Cube was trying his best. Voight, playing a Paraguayan (!) snake handler, was trying ... a thing.

The movie peaked when the snake swallowed him whole, then regurgitated him, and the slime-coated, still-living rascal actually winked.

This “Anaconda” never *stops* winking. Its juice isn’t worth the squeeze.

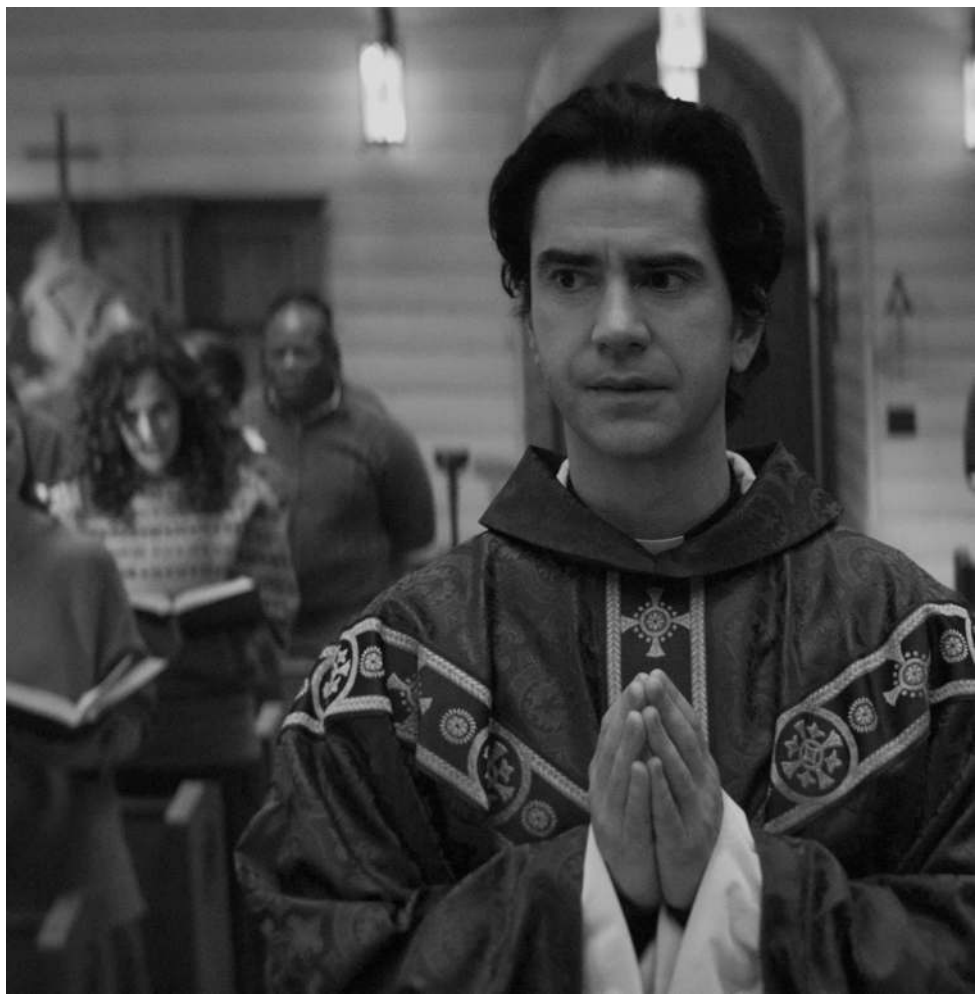
“Anaconda” is rated PG-13 for violence/action, strong language, some drug use and suggestive references. Running time: 100 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.

Scary watches for the dead of winter

By Mary McNamara
Los Angeles Times

When the sun vanishes early and the chill of darkness comes on deep and fast, there has always been an instinct to gather around a source of warmth and illumination for tales of fearsome happenings. Especially during the holidays. In Victorian times, the telling, or reading, of ghost stories was a Christmas tradition; the most enduring Yule-time tale — Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," written in 1843 — is first and foremost a ghost story.

Almost 200 years later, the electronic hearth offers plenty of chilling tales with which one can continue the tradition and honor the rattling chain of Jacob Marley's ghost. Here are a few personal favorites, beginning with three from Mike Flanagan, TV's master spinner of spectral tales.



Netflix/TNS

Hamish Linklater stars in the Netflix series "Midnight Mass."

'The Haunting of Bly Manor'

This contemporary retelling of Henry James' "The Turn of the Screw" is a masterpiece of modern gothic. As in the original story, a young woman, here an American named Dani (Victoria Pedretti), takes a job as governess to two young children, Miles (Benjamin Evan Ainsworth) and Flora (Amelie Bea Smith), who live in a grand and isolated manor with housekeeper Hannah Grose (a terrific T'Nia Miller). The children, as ever, are both charming and odd, and tragedy moves through the echoing corridors of Bly Manor. Flanagan blurs the psychological and the supernatural even more vigorously than James did. (Netflix)

'The Haunting of Hill House'

This series, which predates "Bly Manor" and shares many cast members, is a modern-day adaptation of Shirley Jackson's classic of the same name. Steven Crain (Michiel Huisman) has become a bestselling author with a book based on a family tragedy that took place while his parents, Olivia (Carla Gugino) and Hugh (Henry Thomas), were renovating an (you guessed it) isolated mansion where things are not as they seem. As adults, Steven's siblings are still angry at their brother's betrayal and, more important, haunted by what happened to them in Hill House, which we see in a series of increasingly terrifying flashbacks as the house continues to call to them. (Netflix)

'Midnight Mass'

After serving four years in prison for a drunk-driving accident in which a woman was killed, Riley Flynn (Zach Gilford) returns to his isolated (naturally) hometown on Crockett Island where a new priest, Father Paul Hill (Hamish Linklater), is attempting to revitalize the local church. Flynn attempts to rebuild his life even as mysterious events begin plaguing the island. With one of the best midseason reveals in TV history, "Midnight Mass" has plenty of jump scares while exploring, with surprising delicacy, the need for, and perils of, religious faith. (Netflix)

'Krampus'

In this Christmas horror comedy, the dysfunctional Engels family is plagued by vicious gingerbread men, dark elves and demonic toys deployed by a horned monster which, according to European folklore, is unleashed to punish naughty children. (Peacock)

'Mama'

An exquisite, heartbreaking and genuinely terrifying contemplation of trauma and familial love. Five years after his twin brother has gone on a murderous rampage and abducted his daughters after losing his fortune in the 2008 stock market crisis, Luke Desange (Nikolaj Coster-Waldau) finally finds the girls in a remote cabin. Filthy and feral, Victoria (Megan Charpentier) and Lily (Isabelle Nélisse) have apparently been surviving on their own, though Lily insists it was "Mama." Adapting to life with Luke and his girlfriend Annabel (Jessica Chastain) is difficult, in part because whatever kept them alive in the forest is not prepared to let them go. (Amazon)

'Doctor Sleep'

Flanagan is at it again, adapting Stephen King's sequel to "The Shining." Little Danny is now Dan Torrance (Ewan McGregor), a recovering alcoholic who tries to use his "shine" sparingly and for good, while keeping the evil spirits trying to contact him at bay. He accidentally connects with Abra Stone (Kyliegh Curran), a young girl with powers as strong as his own, and together they must battle a group of psychic vampires, led by Rose the Hat (Rebecca Ferguson), who are killing children. Great performances and frightening plot twists abound. (Netflix)

'Crimson Peak'

A true Victorian Gothic tale in which budding author Edith (Mia Wasikowska) marries the mysterious Sir Thomas Sharpe (Tom Hiddleston), who convinces her to move to his dilapidated and (say it with me now) isolated mansion so he can use his newly invented digging machine to revitalize his family mine. There she meets his sister Lucille (Chastain), to whom Thomas is disturbingly attached, and encounters all manner of spooky threats. (Prime Video)

'The Conjuring'

The film that kick-started the franchise remains the best one in it. When Roger and Carolyn Perron (Ron Livingston and Lili Taylor) and their five daughters move into a big and (ahem) isolated farmhouse, things go south fairly quickly. Carolyn turns to demonologists Ed and Lorraine Warren (Patrick Wilson and Vera Farmiga), who discover that a witch who once lived in the house has cursed it and the land around it. Director James Wan creates some of the most memorable, and cinematically elegant, jump scares ever filmed. (HBO Max)

'His House'

After losing their daughter as they fled the horrors of South Sudan to seek asylum in the U.K., Rial (Wunmi Mosaku) and Bol (Sope Dirisu) find themselves assigned to a falling-down house in a neighborhood filled with racists. Rial begins to see visions of her daughter and a mysterious man before realizing that the house is haunted by a night witch and traumatic memories of their past. (Netflix)

'The Ritual'

After one of their friends is killed during a robbery, four men decide to take a hiking trip in Sweden to mark his passing. When one is injured, they leave the trail and take a shortcut through the brooding forest. Big mistake. Frightening talismans lead to bigger, bloodier scares and larger threats that include a cult and an ancient forest monster. (Netflix)

'Penny Dreadful'

Victor Frankenstein (Harry Treadaway) and his monster (Rory Kinnear) meet and mingle with Dorian Gray (Reeve Carney), Dr. Henry Jekyll (Shazad Latif) and Count Dracula (Christian Camargo) in the three seasons of John Logan's Gothic, gory and genuinely fun pastiche of the Victorian supernatural tales known as penny dreadfuls. Come for the monsters, stay for Eva Green's clairvoyant Vanessa Ives, and, in Season 2, Patti LuPone. (Prime Video)

'The Terror'

The first season of this anthology series is based on Dan Simmons' bestselling supernatural-tinged imagining of what happened to the HMS Erebus and the HMS Terror when they went missing during an 1845 expedition to find the Northwest passage through the Arctic. Starring Jared Harris, Ciarán Hinds, Tobias Menzies and a panoply of fine actors, it is a chilling (literally and figuratively) descent into madness. In the second season, subtitled "Infamy," evil, both natural and supernatural, stalks Chester Nakayama (Derek Mio) after he and his family are incarcerated during World War II. Historical horror at its best. (AMC+)

'Sleepy Hollow'

In modern-day Sleepy Hollow, fallen Continental Army officer Ichabod Crane (Tom Mison) wakens, 230 years after he beheaded a mysteriously evil horseman. He meets Sheriff's Lt. Abigail Mills (Nicole Beharie), who, after some convincing, joins him in his quest to foil the Horseman who has also risen again. This one is a charming, family-friendly series, with plenty of time-displacement comedy (and some very loose historical references) to alleviate the scares. (Hulu)

Souvenirs to suit everyone

Expert tips on choosing meaningful vacation gifts that will delight your family and friends

BY HANNAH SAMPSON
The Washington Post

Buying souvenirs can be so fraught that bad ones have become a punch line: My uncle went to Las Vegas and all I got was this lousy T-shirt.

There's no law, of course, that says you have to cram your precious suitcase space with trinkets for your in-laws, co-workers and the neighbor who checks your mail. But bringing back a piece of your trip can be meaningful for the traveler and the people back home, said Elaine Swann, author of "Elaine Swann's Book of Modern Etiquette."

"It's thoughtful, and it brings the recipient surprise and delight," she said. "It's an incredibly kind gesture."

Summer Hull, editorial director at the Points Guy, keeps a couple of shopping rules in mind when she travels: Opt for a gift the recipient is likely to use, and make sure it's something the destination does especially well.

"It's not going to burden them; they're probably going to enjoy it," she said.

A disclaimer: Some souvenirs might be unethical or potentially illegal, so travelers should ask where an item came from and check the U.S. Customs and Border Protection website for banned items. Experts urge travelers to buy products made by locals rather than items manufactured far from a destination to ensure the purchase helps the destination.

"Ideally, visit places where you can see the craftsmen and women at work to cut down on the chances of exploitation," United Kingdom-based travel writer Abi King said in an email.

Here are more suggestions and best practices for gifts that should spark joy:

For kids: stickers, candy

Most families with young kids are waging a war against clutter. Thoughtful travelers will try to avoid souvenirs that are bulky or age-inappropriate.

As a travel reporter and a mom, I've been guilty of last-minute shopping sprees at Times Square tchotchke shops or airport bookstores. Did my toddler need a plush alligator wearing an I Heart NY shirt? Not at all.

A better choice for little kids can be stickers, especially ones that you can't find at home: They take up very little space, give busy hands a task and inspire larger art projects.

Elizabeth de Quillacq, owner and founder of the travel agency Souvenir & Far, said in an email that she likes to buy kids' souvenirs at a grocery store.

"Candy, snacks, and treats kids can't get at home are always a hit," she said.

She also likes to find "small, tactile items tied to everyday life," like a backpack or hair accessories that kids will actually use.

For family: home goods, personalized mementos

Ideally, you know your family members well enough to have a sense of what they'd love. But think about whether your knowledge is up-to-date: Your cousin may have adored dolphins once, but what are the odds she's still collecting them 15 years later?

Several experts pick out Christmas ornaments for themselves or family members. Amir Eylon, president of the market research consulting firm Longwoods International, has two trees, with one devoted to trip-related baubles.

He looks for local artisan goods as gifts, ideally items with a story that he can share with his family members. Last year at a holiday market in Chicago, he found a Ukrainian Christmas tree. It was, he said, the "first thing my wife put up this year."

Practical items tied to the destination can also be a good fit. Hull brought back chopsticks for her entire family when she visited Japan, including training versions for her kids.

"They were under $10 each for really good chopsticks," she said. "And we still use them."

Katy Nastro, travel expert at the cheap-flight alert service Going, often defaults to food but tries to appeal to a wide audience with her picks. She said salt and condiments tend to be winners.

On a seven-day river cruise on the Danube, Confetti Travel Service founder Marie Russell bought her family members chocolate from each city so they could taste a variety, she said in an email.

Swann has also given food as a gift to family; she picked up sauces on a trip to Jamaica that she gave to her sister, a sous chef.



iStock photos

Postcards are cheap, easily packable souvenirs and an example of a good gift for co-workers you don't know well because they're somewhat generic and can be put on their desks.



Chopsticks, such as these at a street market in Ishikawa Japan, are an example of a practical item that reflects a vacation destination.

She recalled another gift from her daughter, who went to Las Vegas with friends to celebrate her 21st birthday: mugs for Swann and her husband with their names on them.

"We cherish those mugs," Swann said.

For friends: wine, olive oil and skin care

If your bestie is wild about coffee or notebooks, you know what to do on vacation. But if your buds have less-obvious interests, consider something they can consume that's done well in the destination. Hull named wine, olive oil, tea or shortbread as examples.

Nastro, who said she has a "size of my hand" policy for souvenirs other than liquids, likes locally-made perfumes or solid lotions because they travel well and help transport the recipient to the place the item came from.

For colleagues: snacks, postcards

If you want to bring something back to the office, you can't go wrong with food. Who doesn't love a spread of New York City bagels, saltwater taffy from the Jersey Shore or Kit Kats from Japan? After a recent trip to Louisville, Eylon said he brought back bourbon balls for his office.

Another easy-to-pack, inexpensive and thoughtful item: a simple postcard.

If you don't know your co-workers well, Swann suggested gifts that are "somewhat generic" such as items for their desk.

Don't forget the house sitter

Your travel party might be small, but it can take a village to go on vacation. There's the pal who waters your plants, the sitter who watches your pet, the friend who shared her destination tips or the travel adviser who rearranged your flight when plans changed.

They may not expect anything from your trip — but chances are they'd be moved by one.

"It's never expected, of course, but it's always incredibly thoughtful and appreciated," Savanna Westwood, owner and founder of the Savvy Sitter, said in an email. Clients will usually offer a cash tip to their pet sitters, but Westwood says sometimes they will also bring back something like sweets, magnets or key chains.

Laurel Brunvoll, owner of Unforgettable Trips, said she has received gifts from clients including silver necklaces from Ireland and Finland, vanilla from Tahiti, chocolate from Belgium and "cards from Kenya handmade from elephant poop."

She has also gifted bookmarks, tea towels, reusable bags that look neat and lotions or oils.

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Feeling love for the Matterhorn



GRETCHEN STRAUCH/Rick Steves' Europe

A clear view of the spectacular Matterhorn isn't guaranteed, especially if your Zermatt visit is a quick one.

I have a confession: I'm in love with the Matterhorn.

There's just something about this pyramid-shaped peak, the most recognizable mountain on the planet. Just seeing it is one of the great experiences in Switzerland — and hiking with that iconic summit as a background is even better.

The 14,692-foot Matterhorn towers above Zermatt, a tiny but hugely touristed town of roughly 6,000 people nestled at the dead end of a long valley in Switzerland's remote southwest. While it's barely two hours from Bern and Interlaken by train (or about three hours from Zürich or Lausanne), it's not really on the way to anywhere. Especially considering its inconvenient location, many travelers find it overrated. If you make the trek and are met with only cloudy weather, you may end up with a T-shirt that reads, "I went all the way to Zermatt and didn't even see the Matterhorn."



Rick Steves

But in sunny weather, riding the high-mountain lifts, poking through lost-in-time farm hamlets and ambling along on scenic hikes — all with that famous pointy mountain nodding its white head in the background — make the trip worthwhile. And Zermatt itself also has pockets of traditional charm, with streets lined with chalet after chalet and overflowing flower boxes.

The town has no gas-engine vehicles — only electric buses and taxis that slalom between the pedestrians like four-wheeled Vespas. (Drivers must park down in the valley and ride the train into town.) Strolling up the town's main street, Bahnhofstrasse, is a joy: Even bikes are forbidden on the main drag; the street is reserved for people and, in summer, a twice-daily parade of goats. Zermatt strives to be a high-class mountain resort, but for active guests.

Once upon a time, Zermatt was a humble village of farmers, but with the first ascent of the Matterhorn in 1865, a popularity surge in the burgeoning sport of "mountaineering" and the arrival of trains in 1891, Zermatt found itself on the Grand Tour of Europe. Over time, its residents learned it was easier to milk the tourists than the goats, and mountain tourism became the focus. Aside from the stone quarries that you might notice on the way into town, tourism is Zermatt's only industry.

This little town is capable of entertaining about two million guests each year, hosting more than a hundred modern chalet-style hotels and a well-organized and groomed infrastructure for summer and winter sports. From town, multiple lifts are there to whisk you up to all sorts of hikes, ski slopes and incredible views. But really it all comes back to the star of the show: the Matterhorn.

High summer into early fall is the best time to come to Zermatt. Visiting in spring is generally a bad idea, as most trails, lifts and restaurants are closed then. Early fall also works, as most lifts and trails remain open until the snow returns. (In winter, skiers take over the town, and prices jump even higher than in summer.) Zermatt has earned its reputation for untrustworthy weather. While two good-weather days are enough to experience the highlights, add at least one buffer day to your itinerary as insurance against rain.

The Zermatt region has three high-mountain summit stations linked by lifts and hikes: Matterhorn Glacier Paradise (closest to the Matterhorn), Gornergrat (with a historic cogwheel train that goes to 10,000 feet), and Rothorn (farthest up the valley from the Matterhorn). While prices are steep, the community has invested hundreds of millions of dollars in their mountain lifts in recent years. They're absolutely state-of-the-art, and experiencing them is unforgettable.

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Pairing active outdoor pursuits with outstanding views

While New Year's resolutions vary, many lists include getting fit and seeing new things. Sporting challenges set against stunning backdrops could deliver on both counts, so why not hike, run, bike or raft your way through some of Europe's most iconic routes in 2026?

Hiking

Europe's best-loved long-distance hiking trails offer heights, history and views beyond compare. The Camino de Santiago, a network of routes leading to the magnificent cathedral that serves as the final resting place of the apostle St. James in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, is perfect for those in search of a spiritual connection with pilgrims who traversed the same terrain a thousand years prior. The Alta Via 1, a 10-day trek through the jagged limestone peaks of the Dolomites range in Italy, offers ever-changing vistas, World War I history lessons and rifugios serving top-notch cuisine at the end of a long day.



Karen Bradbury

The South West Coast Path, a 630-mile route along England's southwest peninsula, acquaints walkers with the dramatic coastal scenery that's wowed fans of popular TV series such as "Poldark" and "Doc Martin," and more recently the film "The Salt Path."

A stunning trail that's suitable for those with an overall good level of fitness is the Tour du Mont Blanc (TMB), a 105-mile circuit that wraps itself around the Mont Blanc massif, the Alps' highest peak. The trail passing through France, Italy and Switzerland takes most hikers a week to 10 days to complete, but numerous starting or jumping-off points make doing just a portion of it an option too. Hikers with just four to five days to spare will often opt to take on the leg between Chamonix or Les Houches, both in France, and finish in Courmayeur in Italy. A TMB hike can be experienced in many ways, from camping with all one's gear in tow to a guided hut-to-hut tour. Those feeling up to taking on the TMB as a trail run can lighten their loads by organizing a baggage transfer service. Due to the route's extreme popularity, particularly in July and August, it's essential for those booking their own lodging to make arrangements months in advance. The website autourdumontblanc.com/en helps hikers get on their way.



iStock

The South West Coast Path, a 630-mile route along England's southwest peninsula, offers dramatic coastal scenery. Pictured: Cape Cornwall.

Cycling

With its countless miles of dedicated cycling paths and bike-friendly cities, much of Europe is a cyclist's paradise, and hopping on a bike to make one's commute to work or school is a part of daily life for millions. The EuroVelo network, made up of 17 long-distance cycle routes that cross and connect 39 countries within Europe, already offers riders some 35,000 miles of marked routes and continues to grow. The presence of campgrounds, hostels and other forms of accommodation makes cycling holidays an attractive option for all kinds of travelers. Many of Europe's most popular cycling routes follow the course of its famous waterways, including the Rhine, Danube, Elbe and Loire rivers.

Those intrigued by the thought of crossing the Alps by bike but fearful they might not be up to the task might wish to consider the Alpe-Adria Cycling Route. This 260-mile path starts in Salzburg, Austria, and finishes in the town of Grado, a town on Italy's Adriatic coast between Venice and Trieste. The inclusion of disused railway lines and tunnels, along with an 11-minute train journey through the Tauern tunnel, takes away much of the gain in elevation. Typically taking from seven to 10 days to complete, highlights include Austria's spa town of Bad Gastein, the Hohe Tauern National Park and Lake Faak. Once in Italy, cyclists can look forward to exploring medieval Udine, visiting the star-shaped fortress town of Palmanova and sampling the zesty white wines of the Collio wine-growing region. Cyclists can book their own accommodations and side trips, or leave all the planning to any one of several providers. The Epic Road Rides website is a great resource for planning cycling adventures. Online: tinyurl.com/8be9zvrv

Whitewater rafting

Paddling a rubber raft down rushing rapids under the leadership of a licensed guide promises unspoiled natural beauty, the chance to bond with fellow rafters and plenty of adrenaline when the waters really start to churn. Europe's whitewater rafting hotspots include the Sjoa River in central Norway, the Inn River in Austria's Tyrol region, the Noce River in the Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol region of northern Italy, the Verdon Gorge in southeast France and the Cetina River in southern Croatia.

For multi-day adventure, consider a guided rafting tour through Montenegro's Tara Gorge, billed as the deepest canyon in Europe. The longer tours along this pristinely clean river cutting its way through the Durmitor National Park generally start in Splaviste and finish near Scepan Polje, and are rated as suitable for beginners. Online: tinyurl.com/5ktmcexn



PHOTOS BY ZADE VADNAIS/Stars and Stripes

The Prinzhorn Collection's "Who Am I?" exhibition explores identity through works by artists with schizophrenia and memory disorders. It is on display through April 19 at the museum in Heidelberg. There is also a permanent collection.

Mind trip into the misjudged

Obscure Heidelberg museum features art created by psychiatric patients

BY ZADE VADNAIS
Stars and Stripes

After a recent trip to Florence, Italy, left me with more than my fill of classical and medieval artwork, I started looking for something different in my next art museum experience. I wanted something raw, personal and a little strange.

That's how I ended up at the Prinzhorn Collection in Heidelberg, a small museum with a big emotional punch. It focuses on art made by psychiatric patients, mostly between 1840 and 1945.

The museum is named after Dr. Hans Prinzhorn, a psychiatrist and art historian who began collecting the work while treating patients at Heidelberg University's clinic around 1920. He believed their creations should be viewed as art, not just medical curiosities.

The heralded German city about an hour's drive from Kaiserslautern is a popular destination, so I was surprised that I and most of the people I asked had never heard of this museum, which is an easy walk from Bismarckplatz, near the entrance to the Old Town.

Parking was a breeze, which is not something I usually say about city museums. Since it is located on the grounds of the university's psychiatric hospital, underground garages offer plenty of room.

Upon admission, I was given two English-language guides, one for the permanent collection and one for the temporary exhibition titled "Who Am I?"

The latter explores how people understand and express identity through art, with a special focus on artists diagnosed with schizophrenia and memory disorders.

It runs through April 19 and includes some of the most memorable work in the museum. Some pieces are conceptual, while others feel intensely personal.

One that stuck with me was a hand-sewn jacket by Agnes Richter, a seamstress who was committed in 1893. She embroidered autobiographical phrases into the fabric in tight spirals of old German script.

The stitching covers every inch, inside and out. It feels like a wearable testament from a woman determined not to be erased by her mental illness or by a world that may not have known what to do with her.

The permanent exhibition is small but compelling. It includes a rotating selection from more than 40,000 paintings, drawings and sculptures that range from fragmented to surprisingly refined.

Some artists featured in the permanent collection also had work displayed in the temporary show. I eventually started connecting with the voices of various creators.

One piece in the main exhibition that held my attention was a deceptively simple drawing displayed inside a darkened box with a small viewing hole.

A button allows viewers to change the lighting angle. From the front, it shows a peaceful garden scene, but when lit from behind, a hidden image of a human skull and brain appears through the paper.

Many of the works in the Prinzhorn Collection were created by people who had been hospitalized in Heidelberg. That makes the setting feel especially intimate, as if the art is still in conversation with the place it came from.

The collection's history adds further weight to the experience. Much of the art was labeled "degenerate" by the Nazis in the 1930s and nearly destroyed. It survived by getting "lost" in university storage.

I spent just over an hour at the museum, although I can imagine a longer stint for visitors who have someone accompanying them, bouncing their thoughts off each other as they browse.

Regardless of the duration, the experience lingers long after you leave.

If you're planning a trip to Heidelberg, carve out time to visit this unobtrusive spot, whose quiet quirkiness makes it one highly memorable mind trip in a city known for producing some of the world's greatest minds.

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Sammlung Prinzhorn

Address: Voss Strasse 2, Heidelberg, Germany
Hours: Tuesday and Thursday-Sunday, 11 a.m.-5 p.m.; Wednesday, 11 a.m.-8 p.m.; closed Monday
Prices: Adults, 10 euros; under 15, free
Information: Phone: +49 6221 56 4739; Online: sammlung-prinzhorn.de

Zade Vadnais



A hand-sewn jacket by Agnes Richter is embroidered with autobiographical text in dense spirals of old German script. The stitching covers every inch, inside and out.



A row of personal sketchbooks and diaries offers a glimpse into the inner worlds of psychiatric patients.



A 1910 self-portrait by Friedrich Leonhard Fent depicts the artist's ascent to heaven, blending spiritual longing with psychological intensity.



A wall of self-portraits at the Prinzhorn Collection museum reflects the exhibition's focus on personal identity and self-perception.



Jars filled with everyday objects on display at the Prinzhorn Collection museum capture themes of memory, obsession and containment.

A slice of home while in Poznan

American-style menu, sports watch parties make Surfing Cowboy a staple for Camp K

BY SHATYRA COX
Stars and Stripes

Many Americans stationed overseas quickly learn that familiar comfort food can be hard to come by, something I found out firsthand soon after my arrival in Poland for my current assignment.

Surfing Cowboy in Poznan has quietly filled that gap, becoming a dependable taste of home for soldiers and civilians at Camp Kosciuszko, headquarters of a garrison that in 2023 put down the U.S. Army's first permanent roots in the country.

Surfing Cowboy had already made an impression on me before I ever set foot inside the place.

While I was living out of the Sheraton hotel during the first two weeks of my Poland deployment, I didn't have the option of cooking for myself as I prefer and had to look to the local restaurant scene.

Surfing Cowboy was the only one on Uber Eats that consistently offered food I genuinely enjoyed.

Scrolling through the app and spotting a Philly cheesesteak on the menu felt like a small but meaningful comfort during an otherwise overwhelming transition.

The sandwich featured seasoned beef and melted cheese on a crusty roll, though the cheese lacked the richness of the Cheez Whiz I'm accustomed to, and the onions were more subtle than expected.

I would have welcomed the addition of mushrooms, but overall it delivered. The cheesesteak was served with a side of fries, which I quickly polished off with the house version of ranch dressing.

At that time, it never occurred to me that the restaurant I've ordered from more often than I'd like to admit, given my general disinclination for dining out, is also a staple in the Camp K community.

That realization came later, when I was invited by the U.S. Army Garrison Poland public affairs team to attend the restaurant's weekly trivia night, an event widely known on post.

As soon as I walked in, I noticed familiar faces, and the atmosphere felt less like a typical night out and more like a community gathering. Laughter, friendly competition and casual conversations filled the space, reinforcing the sense that this was a place to which people naturally gravitated.

I wanted to try something other than the Philly for my first dine-in experience, so I got chicken wings and a side of macaroni and cheese.

The flavor choices for the wings include barbecue and lemon pepper, but the latter is not offered with a high heat level.

I ended up ordering the spiciest option, the Ya Mama wings, along with a side of lemon pepper seasoning to create my own version at the table.

Meanwhile, the mac dish was creamy and cheesy enough to get the job done.

Surfing Cowboy leans fully into its mission of offering a slice of home. Beyond its American-style menu, the restaurant hosts watch parties for major sporting events, drawing eager spectators despite the time difference.

On occasion, the staff has even stayed open late for marquee matchups, including this year's Southeastern Conference football championship between the Georgia Bulldogs and the Alabama Crimson Tide.

The restaurant provided a gathering spot for people who do not have access to the game at home or at the barracks.

A schedule of upcoming watch parties is posted on the restaurant's Instagram page.

Surfing Cowboy also served a Thanksgiving dinner complete with all the traditional dishes of the holiday, providing U.S. personnel in the area with another source of feel-good familiarity.

Beyond the food, the customer service at Surfing Cowboy really stood out to me.

The staff was welcoming and attentive, and it was clear they genuinely enjoyed what they do and valued the American community in the area.

First-time visitors are treated like regulars, with an ease and familiarity that encourages them to return.

For me, Surfing Cowboy has become more than just a place to eat. It's an anchor point where home cooking and shared experiences intersect.

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PHOTOS BY SHATYRA COX/Stars and Stripes

Patrons take part in American trivia night at Surfing Cowboy in Poznan, Poland. The restaurant regularly hosts themed events and watch parties that draw soldiers and civilians from nearby Camp Kosciuszko.



Above, the Philly cheesesteak sandwich at Surfing Cowboy in Poznan is served with fries. Right, the baked macaroni and cheese features a creamy pasta base topped with a golden, oven-browned cheese crust.

AFTER HOURS POLAND

Surfing Cowboy

Address: Kantaka 8/9 lok. 1, Poznan, Poland
Hours: Tuesday through Thursday, 5-10 p.m.; Friday, 5 p.m.-midnight; Saturday, noon-midnight; Sunday, noon-8 p.m.; closed Monday
Cost: $3.50-$13 for appetizers and snacks; $9-$12 for burgers and sandwiches; $13-$20 for main dishes including ribs and steak; $4-$6 for desserts; $3.50-$7 for beer and soft drinks; $6-$12 for cocktails and mixed drinks.
Information: +48 885 948 885, @surfingcowboypoznan on Instagram

ShaTyra Cox



Samurai & Ninja standout

Experience feudal history of Japan at Tokyo museum

By Jeremy Stillwagner
Stars and Stripes

Two of the stars of Japanese history are samurai and ninja, and the Samurai and Ninja Museum in Tokyo gives guests the opportunity to learn about and even experience different aspects of the two groups' stories.

The standard tour experience covers three floors with most of it focusing on the samurai, as they were the more documented group throughout Japanese history.

You should consider arriving at the museum 15 to 20 minutes before your tour, so you have enough time to look at the exhibits in the waiting area and take pictures in replica samurai armor.

When the tour starts, you'll head upstairs into a room dedicated to the early history of the samurai.

Here, you'll learn about how the first emperor of Japan was chosen, his link to Shintoism, the symbolic nature of the Japanese flag and how the samurai were first created.

Next the tour focuses on samurai armor and weapons. The guide goes into detail about how much the helmets weighed, the difference between the two types of katana — the long, curved, single-edged sword — carried by samurai and their evolving arsenal throughout history.

At the end of this section, you'll learn about the decline and eventual dissolution of the samurai as Japan moved away from its feudal system and modernized its military.

The final room showcases ninjas and their role in feudal Japanese society. You'll learn about the multi-purpose nature of their equipment before the tour culminates in a shuriken, or throwing star, throwing competition. At the end of the competition, the winner gets to keep their shuriken, and everyone is shepherded into the small gift shop.

Pictures are permitted throughout the tour, and videos are allowed only to get shots of the displays to respect the privacy of the employees and other guests.

The standard tour is about an hour long. Private tours and longer tours with more hands-on activities are available at an increased price. Be aware that some tours are located at different branches around Tokyo.

Book your tickets online as the tours are often fully booked, especially toward the end of the day. The tours are and displays are entirely in English.

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Photos by Jeremy Stillwagner/Stars and Stripes

A display at the Asakusa branch of the Samurai and Ninja Museum showcases sets of samurai armor.



Katanas, the weapons of choice of samurai, lay in various states of assembly at the Samurai and Ninja Museum.

On the QT

Location: 1-8-13, Asakusa, Taito-ku, Tokyo, 111-0035, Japan. It's about a 3-minute walk from Tawaramachi Station on the Ginza line. There are multiple branches offering additional experiences throughout Tokyo and Kyoto.
Times: 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. daily. The last tour each day starts at 6 p.m.
Cost: 3,000 yen, or $19.19 per person, for general admission tickets. Tickets for children ages 3 to 12 are 300 yen off for all ticket types. No dedicated parking is available at the museum.
Dress: Casual
Information: Online: mai-ko.com/samurai

Jeremy Stillwagner



A mannequin re-creates ninja wear at the museum in front of a poster explaining the lives and accomplishments of several notable ninjas from Japan's history.

Discover the art of fried chicken

Popular South Korean chain BHC beats competitors with its irresistible toppings

BY YOOJIN LEE
Stars and Stripes

South Korea's bounty of fried chicken restaurant chains attracts not only locals but also tourists from around the world.

Despite the competition, the BHC chain stands out. Besides its two widely known versions of deep-fried chicken — classic and sweet-and-sour — the chain has several specials on its menu.

Bburinkle and Matcho-King are signature items, and we ordered both during a recent visit along with sides of cheese balls, bburing hot dogs and rose tteokbokki.

Bburinkle is a powdery cheese topping, like the flavor of Cheetos. The crunchy batter is covered with this addictive seasoning, which is almost like biting into a huge serving of chips, but the inside is filled with tender, juicy chicken.

Pickled radish is served alongside the chicken to refresh the palate. Chewy potato noodles dipped in rose sauce make up the tteokbokki.

Matcho-King is a soy sauce-based fried chicken topped with slices of spicy pepper, adding excitement to the flavor.

BHC has a dark-meat-only option called Combo, while the boneless option is only with white meat. The Matcho-King combo we ordered included only drumsticks and wings, perfectly coated in sweet soy sauce but still crunchy.

Instead of the original mozzarella cheese balls, we ordered their new side menu, kaymak cheese balls. A staple of central Asia, kaymak adds rich and creamy flavor to the cheese ball along with its unique yogurt-like taste.

The bburing hot dogs are known for their chewy dough, with a texture almost like cheese. The outside is covered with bburinkle powder, making them good to pair with chicken.

BHC stands for "Byul Hana Chicken," which means "one star chicken." Founded in 1997, the brand has grown into a global chicken franchise, starting overseas in Hong Kong.

After opening in Los Angeles in February 2023, the chain has expanded to three locations in the U.S., according to its website.

BHC Chicken promotes its brand by frying only locally sourced chickens in high oleic sunflower oil. With more than 2,200 restaurants in South Korea, BHC Chicken has been a culture of its own among many chicken brands in the country.

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AFTER HOURS S. KOREA

BHC Chicken

Location: BHC Chicken Songtan Terminal Branch, 781-9 Jisan-dong Pyeongtaek-si Gyeonggi-do, South Korea
Directions: A 3-minute drive from the main gate at Osan Air Base, South Korea.
Hours: Open every day from noon to midnight
Prices: Chicken from 20,000 won to 25,000 won, $14 to $17; sides are 4,000 won to 7,000 won, or $3 to $5.
Dress: Casual
Information: 031-666-5463, parking lot available

Yoojin Lee



PHOTOS BY YOOJIN LEE/Stars and Stripes

Rose tteokbokki, matcho-king, bburinkle, bburing hot dogs and kaymak cheese balls at BHC Chicken.



Five kaymak cheese balls and three bburing hot dogs. A staple of central Asia, kaymak is rich and creamy and has a yogurt-like taste.



Five kaymak cheese balls are $4 at BHC in South Korea.

New collectible trading cards depict Japan's remote islands

BY ISAMU HAMAMURA
The Japan News

Zenrin Co., a leading map company headquartered in Kitakyushu, has been selling trading cards featuring inhabited remote islands in Japan to try and convey their charm.

Zenrin produces and sells stationery and miscellaneous goods featuring map designs under its brand. However, the company sometimes must exclude remote islands during the design stage due to the islands' distance from the mainland and taking the whole balance into consideration. This led to the idea of creating trading cards specifically focused on inhabited remote islands.

Zenrin picked 70 of the nation's 304 inhabited islands for the trading cards, which hit shelves in July. They are collectible cards that are not for battling, similar to collectibles such as manhole cover cards or dam cards, designed to encourage tourism in a certain region. The company started selling cards of another 80 islands last month.

The card's target audience is map enthusiasts. While primarily aimed at men over the age of 40, younger generations and those who simply found them interesting have also purchased the cards. Reactions, especially on social media, have been very positive. "We created the cards in the hope of sparking interest in remote islands," said Keisuke Takahashi, the project planner. "We'd be delighted if the trading cards encourage people to learn about these islands or even visit them."

The front of each card features a map of the island along with its data including its name and population. Using Zenrin's map data, the map includes roads and contour lines showing the island's topography. The map also features the island's latitude and longitude, making its location within the entire Japanese archipelago easily understandable.

The back of each card features the island's silhouette, designed with the idea that "a little game element would be fun." The company recommends using the feature to create a quiz game in which players guess the island based on the silhouette.

Another feature of the cards is the three-tier rarity system, determined by the island's population. The categories are: 100 or more residents, 10-99 residents and one to nine residents. Ten islands from the ones released in July, including Nakajima Island in Kamiamakusa, Kumamoto Prefecture, are categorized as rare, which means their cards have a glossy finish on the front.

The cards are sold in packs containing seven cards for 550 yen including tax. They are available in Zenrin's online store as well as at locations like the map goods store "Map Design Gallery & Lab" in the Tenjin district in Fukuoka City.

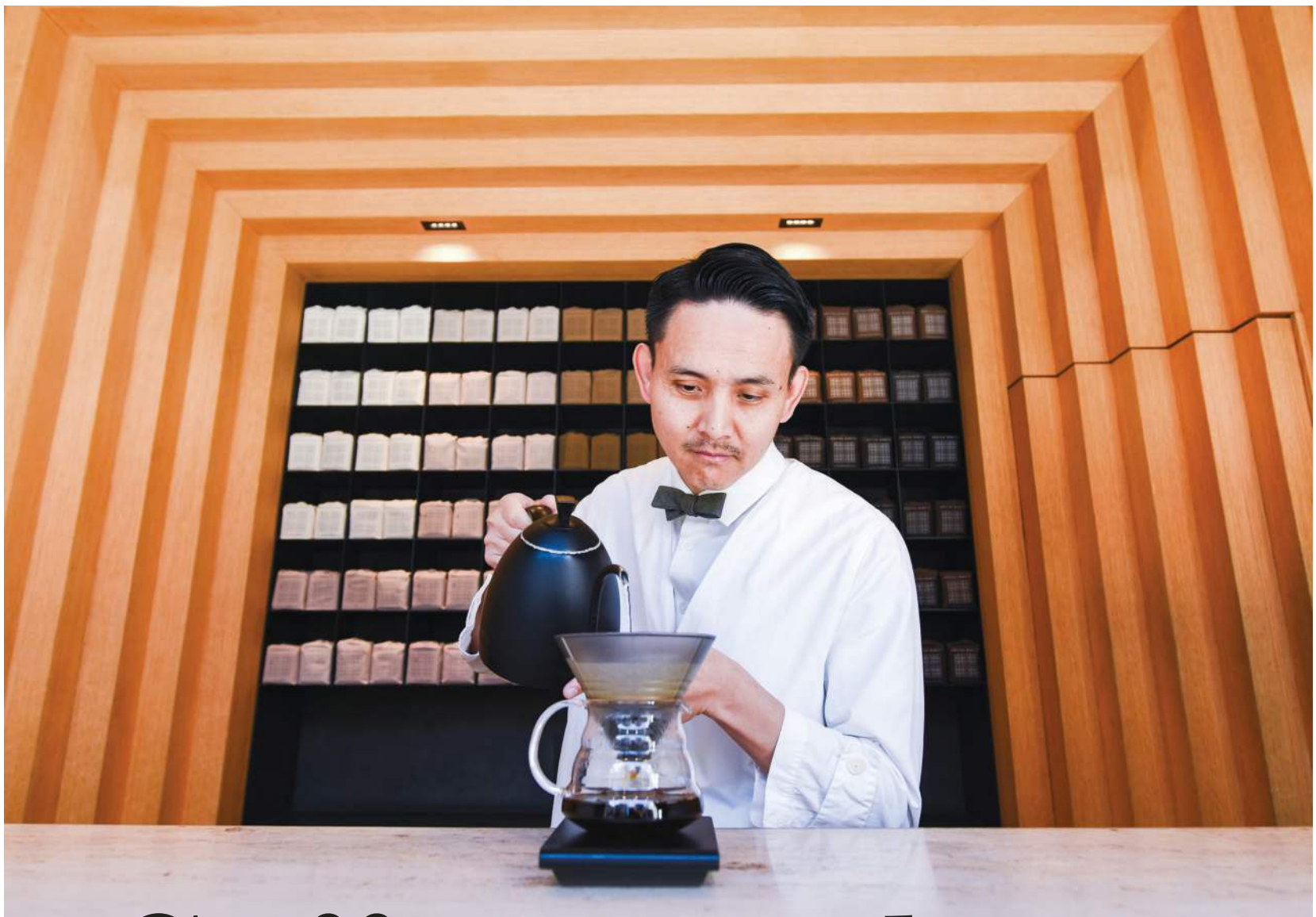
Juri Naganawa, who oversees the card designs, said: "We've seen posts on social media from people who bought the cards and then visited the islands. We hope these cards will spark conversations among people."



The Japan News

Zenrin Co.'s trading cards of inhabited remote islands.

WEEKEND: TRAVEL & FOOD



Coffee omakase

High-end dining experience is Japan's love letter to caffeine

BY MATT VISER
The Washington Post

Walking in the quiet neighborhood, you begin to wonder whether you're in the right place. The building isn't marked, and the address is gatekept unless you've secured a reservation.

Inside, a barista wears a crisp black jacket and a broad smile, and birds are chirping on the sound system. A giant black ball fills most of the room, containing seating for four. For the next 90 minutes, you will be treated to a six-course coffee menu with an extravagance that is almost impossible to overstate.

I am definitely in the right place.

Italy brought us cappuccinos. Australia introduced the flat white. Cuba created the cafecito, and the Middle East, the qahwa.

Japan is bringing us coffee omakase.

In a coffee culture that has grown more elaborate, meticulous — and, yes, at times more than a little pretentious — this is next level. Treats and sweets are served between courses, meant to evoke seasonal themes. World-champion baristas prepare drinks with the banter of a friendly bartender.

In Japan, there are a number of cafes specializing in coffee omakase. Over the course of three days, I sampled four of them in a highly caffeinated journey through Tokyo and Kyoto. It evoked the dining experience associated with high-end sushi, placing you in the hands of an expert to curate and overwhelm your senses. (Omakase translates to "I'll leave it up to you.")

Some come to Japan for the sushi or wagyu, or the viral trends of soufflé pancakes and udon carbonara. I sampled some of those, too, but my primary interest was in this delicate treatment of the world's most common beverage.

A regular joe, this is not.



PHOTOS BY NORIKO HAYASHI/For The Washington Post

Baristas prepare a drink at Tokyo establishments Lonich, above, and Koffee Mameya Kakeru, top.

Quest for the perfect cup

Benjamin Brewer, director of quality control for Blue Bottle, said people across the continent are embracing coffee omakase, "not only Japan, but South Korea and Hong Kong. India, Vietnam and Singapore are all seeing major growth."

Brewer's employer, based in Oakland, Calif., has one of the most exquisite programs in Kyoto.

"This is a big shift" in the coffee world, Brewer said.

Japanese culture is known for seeking perfection, and the art of extracting coffee — with the right pH levels in the water, the perfect temperature, the best grind settings — has set a high standard among baristas.

Japan has always had a rich coffee history, and some of the older cafes, called kissatens, still exist. There's Cafe de l'ambre ("coffee only," the sign proclaims) in Ginza, or Chatei Hatou in Shibuya. Walking into them can feel like walking back in time, with dark wooden rooms and coffee served in small porcelain cups.

In her book "Coffee Life in Japan," Merry White wrote that coffee was once used as medicine and as a stimulant for 17th-century prostitutes in Nagasaki. In the early 20th century, it became a commonplace beverage.

"The expansion of the world's coffee industries, I will argue, was in its early days closely related to the rise of coffee drinking in Japan," White writes.

Japan manufactures much of the elegant glassware and intricate designs used for pour-overs. Coffee is in the ubiquitous vending machines, well-stocked in the 7-Eleven, FamilyMart and Lawson convenience stores.

Europe is a price-sensitive market, where protests erupt when espresso costs go up. But Japan is used to expensive coffee. The prices for a multicourse omakase experience don't run cheap, ranging from $55 to $120.

"There's a legacy," Brewer said. "I mean, it's coffee, right? It's something that we're all interacting with on a daily basis, but there's, like, a very specific way of inter-

SEE OMAKASE ON PAGE 27

Omakase: Inspired by the past and imagined future of coffee

FROM PAGE 26

acting with it, which is: Can we make this better? Can we make this more personal? Can we make this more hospitable?"

Mad science meets 'happy' cows

Deliberately hiding the location of the tasting added a bit of mystery to the experience, but that's part of the appeal of Cokuun, the unmarked coffee house where I tried my first omakase.

At a time when most stores are courting influencers and trying to showcase themselves on TikTok, Cokuun has a basic website and little more.

It is the work of Hidenori Izaki, who in 2014 became the first Asian competitor to win the World Barista Championship. Growing out of experimenting he did during the COVID-19 pandemic, he opened Cokuun to the public a couple of years ago. He deliberately chose to describe it as coffee omakase to evoke a phrase that refers to a luxury.

Inside is a large black bubble that contains four seats around a bar. The design is based on a traditional teahouse, where a small entrance required samurai to leave their swords outside. Everyone inside is equal, Izaki explained.

Water is shipped several times a week from mountain springs in southern Japan. Glassware and porcelain cups have been made specially for this experience. In some courses, a dropper is used to inject small doses of espresso.

Izaki puts on black plastic gloves to grate a pear, creating juice that needs to be consumed within 15 minutes to best appreciate the delicate flavors. It is combined with water that has been infused with a cherry blossom branch from deep inside the mountains of Japan.

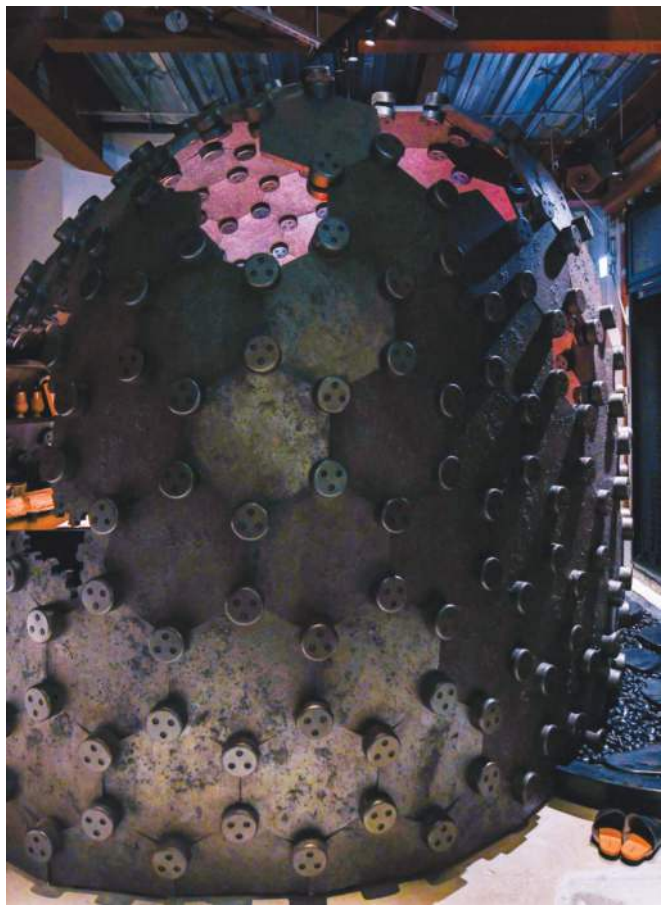
Another course includes Umami Milk, gathered from a farm he chose because each cow had a name and the owner remembers all of them.

"The cows looked very happy," he said, and, to prove it, he provided a photo book titled, "Happy Cow, Delicious Milk."

He likes a coffee from an area of Costa Rica where fog makes the trees take longer to grow, leading to more complexities in the bean. It's naturally processed, giving it a fruitier flavor.

"We try to find a rare coffee, with a story," he said.

Walking out, it feels as though I've attended a theater production, with coffee as the main character and the barista as chief narrator.





NORIKO HAYASHI/For The Washington Post

Left: The giant black ball in which coffee is served at Cokuun in Tokyo. The design is based on a traditional teahouse, where a small entrance required samurai to leave their swords outside. Right: A barista within.







Left: A mocktail consisting of Fuji apple, tonka bean, carrot water, lavender oil, yeast-fermented tomato and almond yogurt whey at Cokuun. Center and right: Drinks at Lonich.

Steeped in ceremony

I've often used my coffee obsession as a way to guide my travel. Finding the best local coffee shops, stateside or abroad, often leads me off the beaten path. How different countries consume coffee can provide deeper clues into their culture.

But the spread of specialized coffee can make a coffee shop in Brooklyn feel almost identical to one in Paris. That's part of what makes the Japanese experience feel like a new twist.

At Lonich, a shop with baristas who have backgrounds in whisky and wine, a signature cocktail is shaken in a metal mixer like a martini.

Another drink has nonalcoholic gin from Japan, flower extract syrup from France and a coffee from Panama, all served in a martini glass, resulting in a floral explosion in your sip.

In some cases, the multicourse, sit-down coffee experiences were enough to provide a caffeine jolt. But they often took place over 90 minutes with cups only large enough for a taste. In some instances, still fighting jet lag, I still went for another cup of coffee afterward.

Baristas in bow ties

Earlier in his 20-year career in the Japanese coffee industry, Eiichi Kunimoto attempted to emulate Italy with espresso-style drinks and fast-paced service. But, eventually, he made the style more Japanese, culminating in Koffee Mameya Kakeru. East of the Sumida River in a quiet and walkable neighborhood outside of the city's bright lights and busy streets, there's a well-lit room and comfy blond wooden chairs lining a U-shaped table.

A performance takes place in the middle, with three islands filled with coffee equipment. Six baristas in bow ties and white coats work together to craft different drinks.

"Coffee is something that ties people and time together," Kunimoto said. "We get that inspiration from the ancient Japanese tea ceremony. We know many people think of coffee as an energy drink booster. I think we're thinking carefully now how we can tell that story and can have that experience."

On my visit, we try oolong tea brewed with cascara, the fruity husk removed from coffee beans.

We drink coffee at 140 degrees and 46 degrees, noting how the taste changes with the temperature.

We have coffee flower tea, made from a flower that grows on the coffee plant but only blooms for one week.

Food pairings included fresh grilled corn with uni on top that had been infused with coffee and soy sauce.

Stimulating all the senses

Blue Bottle has played a big role in expanding the specialty coffee culture in Japan, and its shop in Kyoto is a shrine to some of that work. It's located in a 100-year-old traditional Japanese townhouse, and it offers special tastings during certain times of the year.

Brewer has crafted a menu that looks at the future of coffee. He tries to celebrate coffee from Vietnam, which is the world's second-largest coffee producer but can be overlooked in the specialty coffee market.

Climate change is affecting current coffee regions, and there's not enough diversity in arabica — the bean most often used for specialty coffee — to sustain.

"Coffee as we know it is expected to go extinct by 2050," he says.

Sitting down in a wooden room with jazz music playing from a vinyl record player, barista Kurumi Hisakawa starts by saying she will aim to stimulate all five senses over nine courses. Her instructions take a Zen-like approach.

"All of us have different experiences. We're all individuals," she says. "Take time. Let loose. Use senses."

The menu here is, in some ways, simple. It's focused mainly on black coffee prepared different ways. But it also showcases the complexity in a small bean.

Some of the coffees smell like perfume. Some are potent and strong. Others have a delicate, tealike quality.

Walking out of Blue Bottle's cafe, the last of my four coffee omakase experiences, I feel refreshed — and caffeinated.

I am definitely in the right place.

It feels as though I've attended a theater production, with coffee as the main character and the barista as chief narrator.

WEEKEND: MUSIC

Not exactly 'Ordinary'

Big ballad took Alex Warren from TikTok to Grammy nomination for best new artist

By Maria Sherman
Associated Press

It jolted the winter, came alive in the spring, dominated the summer and went three-times platinum in the fall. Alex Warren's bombastic ballad "Ordinary" is, by many measures, a defining song of 2025. It's also an unusual hit: slower than a traditional song of the summer, full of gloss, an ascendant hook and inoffensive, religious-adjacent lyricism.

For those reasons, "Ordinary" has fast-tracked the 25-year-old singer-songwriter into mainstream musical fame, coming to a head in November when he earned his first Grammy nomination. The nomination for best new artist arrived just four months after the release of his debut album, "You'll Be Alright, Kid."

"I bawled in my wife's arms," he said of the moment he found out about the nomination. For those who didn't believe in his music career, he says, "the biggest justification ever was the nomination."

The person behind the song

Most know Warren for "Ordinary," but fame is not new for him. Before the chart-topping hit, Warren made a name for himself as a social media prankster in the TikTok collective "Hype House." And while that past might seem at odds with his new public persona, Warren always exuded perspicacity, the result of a troubled childhood that separated him from his comedic cohort. His father died of cancer when he was 9, he says, and his mother of complications due to alcoholism. A period of homelessness followed in his teens, before the TikTok fame.

Still, he's remained curious and playful. At The Associated Press headquarters in New York, he chatted with staff and made disarming, self-deprecating comments. An example: In preparation to see the singer Shawn Mendes later, he dosed himself in cologne. "I need to smell as good as Shawn Mendes looks," he joked.

Social media success doesn't always yield a creative career — consider Warren and the innovative Addison Rae, a fellow best new artist nominee, exceptions to the rule — but it did prime him for the life he leads now. "Everything that I went through back then definitely allowed me to do this," he says.

Growing up online — and having "different versions" of himself presented on social media — has "definitely allowed me to now be unequivocally myself," he says.

A not so 'Ordinary' track

Warren wrote "Ordinary" a year ago at a writing camp. He says he knew there was something special about the track — though he and his collaborators were mostly alone in that feeling.

"A lot of people were like, 'Oh it's a ballad, it's a love song ballad. That's not a single, that's a song on the album. That's a feature, you should give it to someone else,'" he recalls. But he pushed it on TikTok, and soon, it connected.

"The TikToks got it to do 4 million streams in a day, which was crazy," he said.

Then he performed it on Netflix's "Love Is Blind." He played it with Ed Sheeran, Jelly Roll, Luke Combs and the Jonas Brothers. It built to ubiquity.

The song has connected, he theorizes, not only for its anthemic chorus. There's a "hopefulness but also urgency" to the song, he says, a sensibility some listeners have likened to Christian music. And while it isn't worship music, "We drew a lot of inspiration from that," he says of its composition.

> **"This is a once in a lifetime opportunity, to take advantage of a cool moment that I've had, and I'm hoping that it can continue."**
>
> **Alex Warren**

That spirit carries throughout his debut album, "You'll Be Alright, Kid." Warren returns to the record often and learns more about himself with each listen. "To me, these songs are just real, and I hope that people listen to this record and learn something about themselves," he says. "That's the biggest thing. That was for me. It was me finding out who I was, and who I wanted to be as a husband, as a friend, as a father, and that's kind of what I got out of it. And I hope someone gets something else out of that, you know?"

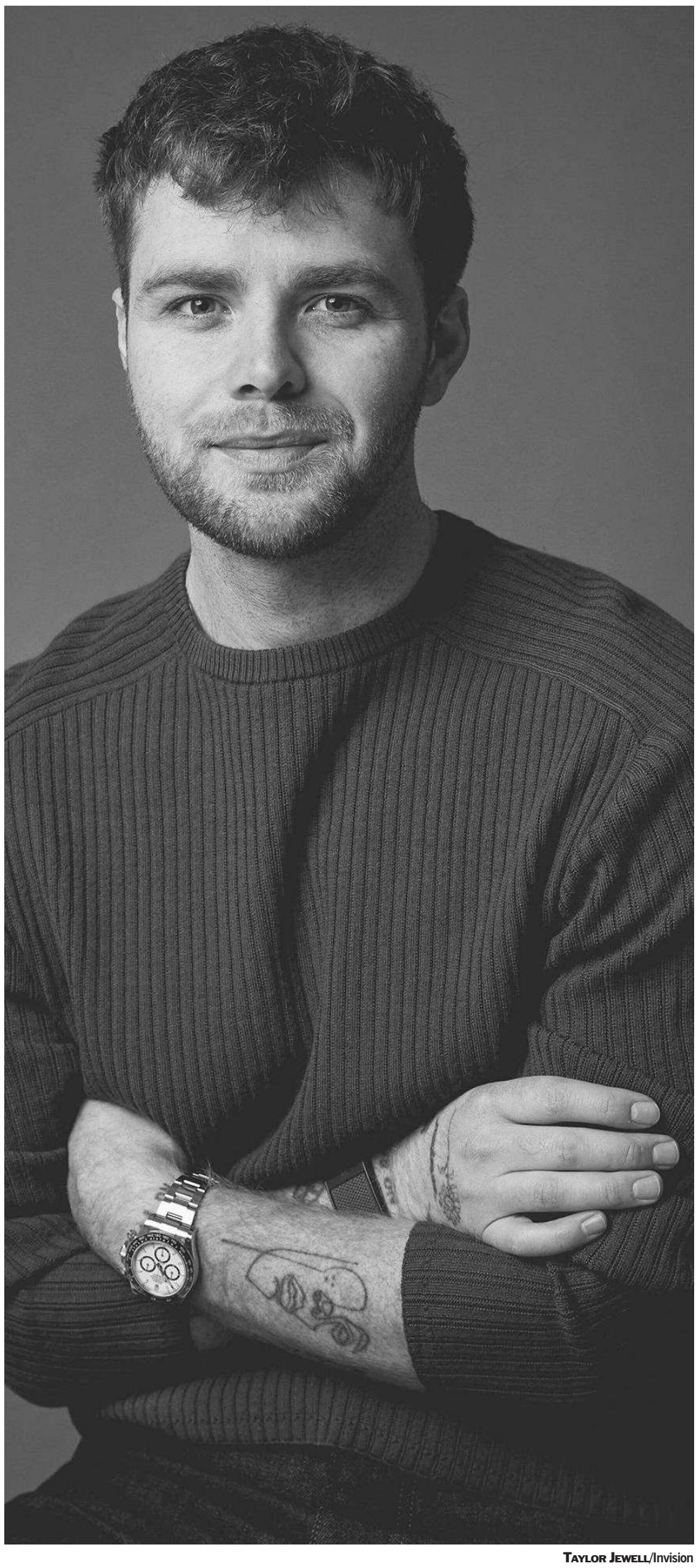
But for now, he's enjoying the ride that "Ordinary" and his success has provided.

"How often is someone gonna be in this position?" he asks.

"This is a once in a lifetime opportunity, to take advantage of a cool moment that I've had, and I'm hoping that it can continue. And I hope that my songs continue to do well, and I continue to be able to write about the things that go on in my life. And if not, at least I can say I took full advantage of everything."

And in February, it'll take him to the Grammys.

The 68th Grammy Awards will be held Feb. 1 at Crypto.com Arena in Los Angeles. The show will air on CBS and stream on Paramount+.



TAYLOR JEWELL/Invision

Alex Warren poses for a portrait on Dec. 11 in New York. His hit ballad, "Ordinary," has fast-tracked the 25-year-old singer-songwriter into mainstream musical fame.

WEEKEND: MUSIC

Opinions split on 2 country album Grammys

By Maria Sherman
Associated Press

Flashback to February. It's the 2025 Grammys, and Beyoncé has made history. Not only was she finally awarded the top prize of album of the year, but she also became the first Black woman to win best country album, for "Cowboy Carter." Recent changes by the Recording Academy have made it even more monumental: She might be the last person to ever win the award.

In June, the Academy announced that the Grammys' country album title was splitting into two categories. A new award was created, traditional country album. The preexisting country album category has been redefined and is now contemporary country album, reflecting the genre's ongoing sonic evolutions.

The decision was divisive: Some viewed it as backlash to Beyoncé's win. Others welcomed the addition of a new award and the creative doors it might open. Some questioned how the categories would be defined in a genre where the word "traditional" is loaded.

Here's everything you need to know about the change — and what it could signify in the future.

From 'Cowboy Carter' to now

Charles L. Hughes, Rhodes College professor and author of "Country Soul," says Beyoncé's victory was a welcomed surprise, despite being obviously worthy. That's because her album inspired a larger conversation about reclamation, standing in opposition to the music industry's rigid power structures and "indicated how significant this historical question remains of whether or not Black folks have equal access to success in a genre of music that bears such strong Black influences and has from the very beginning," Hughes said.

He believes the decision to alter the country album categories was not in direct response to her win — "I think it is a more complicated story," he says — but the timing might've been less than ideal, emboldening fans to view it as reactionary. He hopes the changes will open the category to more diversity of sounds and "whether this leads to a broader opening and opportunity for Black artists, especially Black women in country music," he posits.

Francesca T. Royster, a DePaul University professor and author of "Black Country Music: Listening for Revolutions," views Beyoncé's victory as positively connected to this change. She wonders if artists — particularly artists of color, who never had their music recognized in country music categories, think of artists like "Millie Jackson or Candi Staton, Bobby Womack" — would now see their work recognized. "Having these two categories just allows for more experimentation and maybe less of a double standard," she says, "in terms of artists who are often held to higher standards to conform to, or be recognizable as, meeting an idea about what country music is."

"It makes sense that the Grammy categories for country would become a little bit more expansive," she says, "because I think the music is more expansive and the audience is also more expansive than it's ever been."



AP

Jelly Roll, nominated in the contemporary country album category for 2026, says he might someday be motivated to make a traditional country album now that the Recording Academy has decided to split best country album into the two categories.



AP

Beyoncé won the best country album Grammy in 2025, for "Cowboy Carter." Some believe that the Grammys split the category into two — best contemporary country album and best traditional country album — because of her victory.

Traditional vs. contemporary

According to the Recording Academy's rule book, the traditional country category is defined by "country recordings that adhere to the more traditional sound structures of the country genre, including rhythm and singing style, lyrical content, as well as traditional country instrumentation."

Those are: acoustic guitar, steel guitar, fiddle, banjo, mandolin, piano, electric guitar and live drums. This is also where subgenres like outlaw country, Western and Western swing would fit.

The contemporary country category description is a bit more conceptual. The rule book states that albums eligible in this category "utilize a stylistic intention, song structure, lyrical content, and/or musical presentation to create a sensibility that reflects the broad spectrum of contemporary country style and culture."

The hope is that those titles are "relevant to the legacy of country music's culture, while also engaging in more contemporary music forms."

The questions Hughes poses: "Whose tradition are we talking about?" And how is "country music's culture" defined?

"It's almost tautology. 'Well, it's traditional country if it sounds like traditional country,'" he says.

In that reading, contemporary country could simply account for everything else.

Royster says both categories seem to "speak to an aesthetic as well as political agenda, many agendas." To her, the traditional category would appeal to artists who believe that "this is a past form that needs to ... continue to be recognized and respected." Similarly, the contemporary category is "linked to the culture of country but is also expansive."

"In both cases, there's a kind of story behind the story."

A historical precedent

Adding a new genre category is not unique to country music. Consider a sister genre, R&B. In 1999, the Recording Academy also introduced a traditional category to the R&B field to spotlight artists who chose to hybridize the genre as well as those who prefer nostalgic structures.

It didn't stay stagnant from there: In 2021, the Academy changed the best urban contemporary album category to best progressive R&B album, to spotlight those records that weave R&B with other genres.

The 2026 nominees

In the contemporary country album category, Kelsea Ballerini's "Patterns" faces off against Tyler Childers' "Snipe Hunter," Eric Church's "Evangeline vs. the Machine," Jelly Roll's "Beautifully Broken" and Miranda Lambert's "Postcards from Texas."

In the traditional category, it is Charley Crockett's "Dollar a Day," Lukas Nelson's "American Romance," Willie Nelson's "Oh What a Beautiful World," Margo Price's "Hard Headed Woman" and Zach Top's "Ain't In It For My Health."

Royster wonders if with this first year of nominees, "there's less risk in terms of recognizing the kind of 'country-ness' of these artists." Royster views the lineup as "artists (whose) country creds would still be recognized even if they're also bringing in other elements. I would hope in the future there might be more room in the category."

For Hughes, the nominees further confuse the distinctions. Consider this example: Zach Top's album borrows heavily from George Strait's sound, which emerged in the '70s as a mesh of honky-tonk traditions and contemporary country. Hip-hop also emerged in the '70s. They were simultaneous. "But I have a feeling we won't be seeing a lot of hip-hop-inspired artists in the traditional category," he says.

But that doesn't mean it might not evolve in the future. "If the Grammys fundamentally exist to give people recognition," he says, "The more, the merrier."

What country musicians say

"Anytime the pipe widens, more water gets through. And this was the pipe widening, baby," Jelly Roll, who is nominated in the inaugural best contemporary country album category, told The Associated Press. "I love it. I'm happy. I'm a fan of both sides. It encourages me to maybe make a traditional country album one day, you know? So, this is cool."

Three-time Grammy award winner Brad Paisley has a similar stance: There's a benefit to having more country music recognitions.

"Awards are really tools to sort of get awareness for something that you made, you know?" he said. "They're never the goal. It's always more like, 'Oh, cool, this might make more people listen to it.' … If this means they got to make more little gold gramophone statues to give out, and two people get them versus one, great."

That said: Paisley's not sure which category he would fall into, or if the division could color an artist's creative decisions. "I'd almost have to think it through like, 'No, no, we're going for the Grammy on this. I better not do this on this record or something.' But hopefully that doesn't ever enter into it," he says.

Hopefully, it's just a panel decided who belongs in which category, "and then two people get to go home happy versus one. And that's good in my book," he said.

WEEKEND: TELEVISION

Digging into the vaults for vintage shows

Why Gen Z, Gen Alpha are feasting on older, nostalgic TV programs

BY STEPHEN BATTAGLIO
Los Angeles Times

John Campbell is a senior vice president at Walt Disney Co. who oversees streaming ad sales. He also coaches his second grade daughter's basketball team and recently asked her teammates to name their favorite TV show.

"Eleven out of 13 girls said 'Hannah Montana,'" Campbell said in a recent interview, citing the popular Disney series starring Miley Cyrus that produced its last episode in 2011, before any of his players were born.

Campbell was pleased they selected a show from the Disney library but wasn't all that surprised based on the advertising demand he's seeing for the company's vintage shows.

A recent study from National Research Group found that 60% of all TV consumed is library content. Among Generation Z, 40% say they watch older shows because they find them comforting and nostalgic. Disney's own research finds that 25% of the programs kids call their favorites were made before 2010.

While newer cutting-edge series typically win critical kudos and accolades, Gen Z and Gen Alpha viewers are binge-watching programs that became hits on the broadcast and cable networks in the prestreaming era. They are also devouring holiday movies and specials, even on traditional TV.

"We do see, especially around the holiday time, that people are looking for that comfort, that sense of ease," Campbell said.

As more TV ad spending moves from traditional networks to streaming, Campbell said Disney is capitalizing on the retro trend thanks to its massive library of series. The company has seen the Gen Z audiences devour hits of yesteryear such as "How I Met Your Mother," "Modern Family" and "Golden Girls."

"Scrubs" and "Malcolm in the Middle" are such strong performers on Hulu and Disney+, the company has ordered reboots that advertisers are eager to be a part of, according to Campbell. Disney has even worked with advertisers to make throwback commercials to run in classic films on its streaming platforms and TV networks.



NBC, GETTY IMAGES/TNS

"Scrubs," a medical comedy from the early 2000s (shown above, cast members Sarah Chalke, Zach Braff and Donald Faison) is such a strong performer on Hulu and Disney+, that Disney has ordered a reboot. Season 10 of the series, which last aired in 2010, is set to premiere in February.



ABC /TNS

Estelle Getty, Bea Arthur, Rue McClanahan and Betty White in "The Golden Girls," another one of the shows now popular with Gen Z.



TNS

The Disney Channel show "Hannah Montana" produced its last episode in 2011 but is still popular among young girls today.

"The younger audience is drawn to the perceived simplicity of the old times and humor," Kavita Vazirani, executive vice president of research, insights and analytics, ABC News Group & Disney Entertainment Networks. "It's programming that just makes them feel good, and it's something that they can watch with their friends, their families."

Older shows have long had a place among young viewers. Previous generations grew up watching reruns of "The Brady Bunch" and "I Love Lucy" after school, when their choices on broadcast TV were scant.

But the current viewer has an endless plethora of viewing choices through streaming and cable. One executive at another media company not authorized to comment publicly cited research that said teens and young adults are gravitating to the more conventional sitcoms and dramas from the early 2000s, believing they were made explicitly for their age group.

During that era, the WB Network — later merged into the CW — was turning out young adult dramas such as "The Gilmore Girls" and "Dawson's Creek," while the Disney Channel was at the height of its popularity. "Friends," the idealized rendering of urban life for young adults and long a favorite on streaming, was the ratings leader at the time.

The appetite for such programs showed up in the most recent "Teens and Screens" study by the Center for Scholars & Storytellers @ UCLA, which found that among 10- to 24-year-olds, 32.7% said they want to see "relatable stories that are like my personal life." The previous year, the top answer was fantasy, which ranked second in 2025.

But another reason young viewers are digging into the vaults is volume.

The UCLA survey showed that the favorite show among the measured age group is the Netflix series "Stranger Things." The series has only 42 episodes over five small-batch seasons.

When a young viewer finds an older successful series that ran on a network for years when 22 episodes per season was standard, they can binge for hundreds of hours.

"There are a lot of seasons of available episodes that you can watch, in typically any random order you want to," said Nii Mantse Addy, chief marketing officer at the streaming service Philo, which also has seen a sharp rise in viewing of library programs.

"There's not as much decision fatigue," Addy said. "The shows provide something that you can go back to and just turn on and know kind of how it's going to make you feel."

Executives also say that binge-watching old shows provides a respite from the angst young people experience while scrolling through social media, which escalated through the COVID-19 lockdowns.

But social media platforms have also been a tool to help consumers discover new programs. Fans of vintage series post TikTok videos reacting to episodes that first aired years ago. There are also fan communities online and "rewatch" podcasts that are driving people to seek out programs.

"Social media has been quite a catalyst for essentially introducing these old shows to a whole new audience, whether it's through memes, viral clips or whatever it may be," Vazirani said. "It's like the modern-day water cooler, essentially."

"The younger audience is drawn to the perceived simplicity of the old times and humor. It's programming that just makes them feel good, and it's something that they can watch with their friends, their families."

Kavita Vazirani
Executive vice president of research, insights and analytics, ABC News Group & Disney Entertainment Networks

WEEKEND: TELEVISION



CRAVE/AP photos

Hudson Williams, left, and Connor Storrie play hockey players who sustain a yearslong secret relationship in "Heated Rivalry," a popular television series streaming on HBO Max.



Author Rachel Reid, whose "Game Changers" novels inspired HBO Max's "Heated Rivalry" series, says she wrote her books out of a love of hockey and a reaction to the homophobia surrounding the sport. Shown: Williams, left, and Storrie, stars of "Heated Rivalry."

Warm reception for 'Heated Rivalry'

Queer erotic hockey romance based on 'Game Changers' novels currently the No. 1 series on HBO Max

By Connie Panzariello
Associated Press

The hockey romance "Heated Rivalry" is scoring big. Since its Thanksgiving weekend debut, the steamy television adaptation of Rachel Reid's 2019 novel has dominated social media feeds and inspired a growing fan base devoted to the queer relationship at its center.

The story traces Canadian Shane Hollander and Russian Ilya Rozanov as they sustain a decadelong secret relationship, mixing slow-building yearning with explicit sexual scenes. Jacob Tierney, who developed, wrote and directed the series, said he was drawn to the project for its "pure queer joy."

Audiences have met that joy with a passionate response, propelling "Heated Rivalry" to the No. 1 series on HBO Max as the first season headed into its finale Dec. 26. Along the way, it has generated new interest in the "Game Changers" book series that it's based on and drawn attention to sports romance fiction, especially stories with queer storylines.

Originally developed for the Canadian streaming service Crave, the show scored a distribution deal with HBO and has already been renewed for a second season.

"Unashamedly, when pitching, it was just like, this is a Harlequin romance. This has a happy ending," Tierney said. "This is about two boys in love and a lot of sex."

A game changer for hockey romance fans

Hockey romance books have grown in popularity within the broader sports romance genre, fueled by readers drawn to the intensity of sport as much as the relationships at its center. Mackenzie Walton, who edited the "Heated Rivalry" novel, said the genre's staying power comes from how deeply the stories immerse readers in the sport itself.

"It's much more common when I read a hockey romance that I get the sense that hockey is important at the heart of the book, and I think readers really respond to that sense of authenticity," Walton said.

According to the book's publisher Harlequin, Reid's six-novel "Game Changers" series has sold 650,000 copies since the first was published in 2018.

"Anytime Hollywood pays attention to, and respects, romance fans, they notice and show their appreciation," Leah Koch, co-owner of the romance bookstore The Ripped Bodice, wrote in an email. She added that producing a high-quality adaptation of a story queer readers might not have expected to reach television signals a growing recognition of both their cultural interests and their economic impact.

Content creator Josh Banfield has been making Instagram videos about the show since its November premiere. He believes part of the show's popularity with queer fans is the slow-burning aspect of Shane and Ilya's romance.

"There's something nice about seeing the yearning and seeing that they do maintain contact with each other and still have this connection," Banfield said.

Finding the perfect Shane and Ilya for 'Heated Rivalry'

Fans and the creators behind the book and TV show also credit the lead actors, Connor Storrie and Hudson Williams, for the show's success. Tierney said he knew they were his Ilya and Shane almost instantly.

"The show was going to live and die based on this casting," Tierney said. "I think once they did their chemistry read together, everybody was like, 'OK, fine, done.'"

Rachel Reid, author of the books, said she was happy with the adaptation and with those chosen to play the characters she wrote.

"If I built the perfect actors in a lab, I could not have built better people to play these characters," Reid said.

It was also important to both Tierney and Reid to have Shane played by someone of Asian descent, as the character is in the books, to keep a sense of diversity in a genre that tends to have mostly white characters.

Going beyond the typical 'alpha-jock' story

Hockey romances still tend to be dominantly white and heterosexual. According to Koch, readers who come to the Ripped Bodice's locations are looking for more people like Shane — queer and diverse — to be in their stories.

Customers frequently seek out queer sports romances and those that "go beyond the typical alpha-jock trope," she wrote. But she's skeptical that the success of "Heated Rivalry" will lead to more mainstream books or shows with queer stories.

"A breakthrough title does sometimes allow other authors more access, but not always," Koch wrote.

"But hey, maybe they'll prove me wrong, and wouldn't that be nice?"

Romance blogger Laura Dusi-Showers said women in particular are responding to the male-on-male romance in a hockey book because of the fantasy aspect of seeing something different than their everyday lives.

As for why it works, she said it was due to hockey being a "manly, aggressive sport" with no out NHL players. "I think it's opening people's eyes to what could be," Dusi-Showers said.

This was the reason Reid wrote her books in the first place: wanting to tell a different story.

"The series just came from a love of hockey, but also my own conflicted feelings about all the bad things about the culture around the sport, especially the homophobia," Reid said.

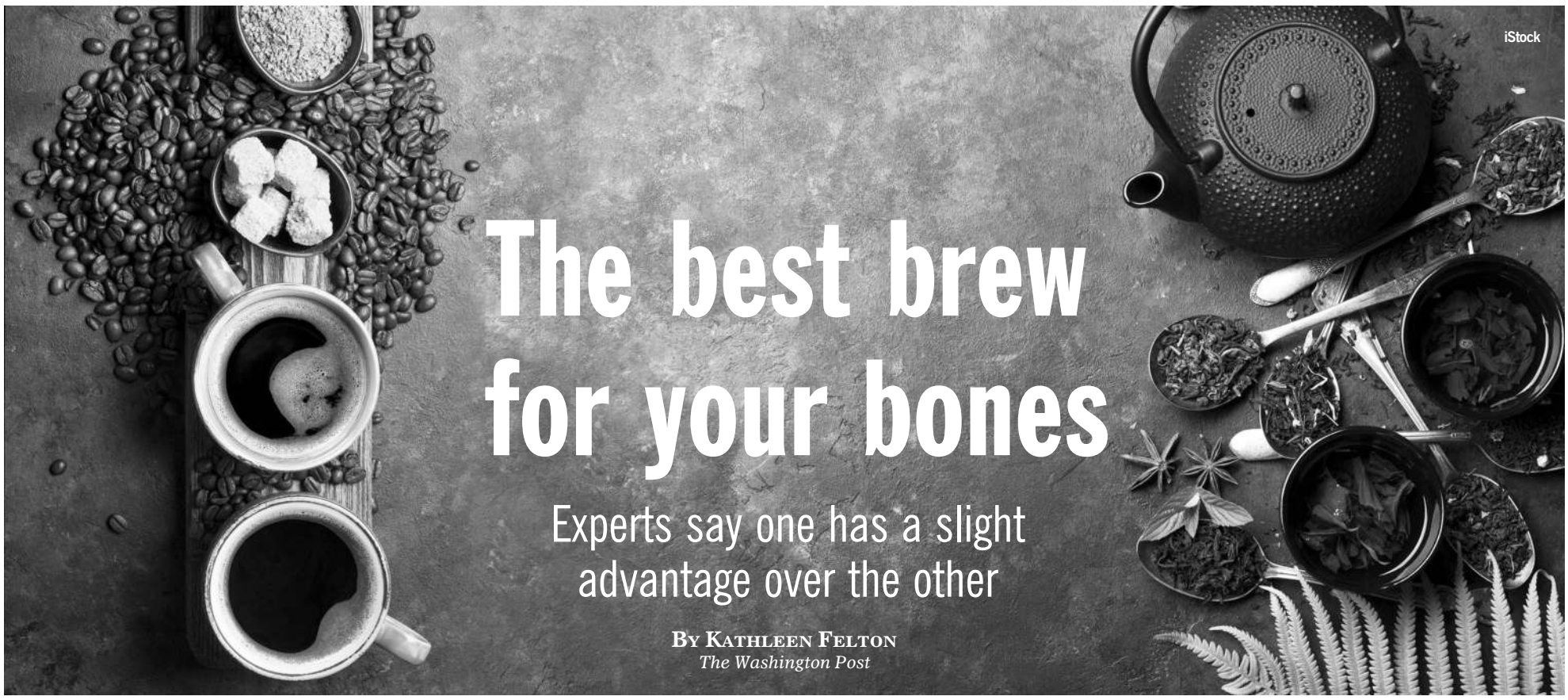
Reid's debut book in her hockey series, "Game Changer," is about Scott Hunter, the fictional first hockey player to come out publicly, and his juice-bar barista boyfriend Kip Grady. Part of this story was told in "Heated Rivalry's" third episode and featured as a climactic moment in the fifth episode.

As to why fans are responding so strongly to the show and the actors, Reid singled out the acting.

"They're getting really, really emotional or excited about one little quiet part or one line delivery, and that has nothing to do with the sex on the show," she said, pointing specifically to Williams' performance as the more awkward and less self-assured Shane.

"Maybe a choice that Hudson made as an actor is making everybody lose their minds, and I love to see that."

WEEKEND: HEALTH & FITNESS



The best brew for your bones

Experts say one has a slight advantage over the other

By Kathleen Felton
The Washington Post

Both tea and coffee have various health benefits, but tea may come out slightly on top when it comes to the health of your bones, a recent study suggests. And too much coffee — five or more cups a day — might have a negative effect on your bone health.

Researchers from Flinders University in Australia looked at data from the Study of Osteoporotic Fractures, an ongoing analysis of nearly 10,000 women ages 65 and older. They recorded participants' tea and coffee consumption and the bone mineral density in their hip and femoral neck — the part most likely to fracture when you break a hip — at various follow-up periods. The findings were published last month in the journal Nutrients.

At the 10-year mark, tea drinkers showed slightly higher total hip bone mineral density than those who reported drinking coffee.

"We don't exactly know why" tea appears more protective than coffee, said Ryan Liu, a co-author of the study. "However, based on existing research in cells, it could potentially be due to tea containing compounds like catechins that may stimulate bone-building cells and therefore result in increased bone mineral density."

But this bone mineral density increase from tea wasn't dramatic.

"It's true there is a slight benefit of tea related to bone mineral density, but the difference is so, so small that clinically it may not be really relevant," said Michael Holick, a professor of endocrinology, diabetes, nutrition and weight management at Boston University Chobanian & Avedisian School of Medicine, who wasn't involved in the study.

Low bone mineral density increases a person's risk of osteoporosis and "progressive thinning of the bone as we age, which makes someone more susceptible to fractures," said Kendall Moseley, medical director of the Johns Hopkins Metabolic Bone & Osteoporosis Center. Around 10 million Americans have osteoporosis, and another 44 million with low bone mineral density are at risk of developing the condition, according to the Osteoporosis Workgroup, a panel of experts in the Department of Health and Human Services.

Though tea drinkers had a slight advantage over coffee drinkers when it came to hip bone mineral density in this study, you don't have to give up your cup of joe for the sake of your bones — although drinking it in moderation is a good idea, experts said. There are many other ways to strengthen your bones as you age.

Coffee and bone health

With coffee, the researchers observed a threshold effect or a tipping point: Moderate intake, around two to three cups a day, didn't seem to negatively affect bone mineral density. But drinking five or more cups of coffee daily was associated with lower bone mineral density levels. Coffee drinkers who reported a higher lifetime alcohol consumption also showed lower femoral neck bone mineral density.

Tea and coffee consumption in this study were self-reported, and researchers "asked for the number of cups, but not necessarily the type of tea, or the brewing methods of coffee, or cup size or strength," said Anika Anam, an assistant professor of medicine at the Yale School of Medicine who wasn't involved with the study.

The researchers accounted for participants' use of oral estrogen, a type of hormone therapy that can strengthen bones, but not transdermal estrogen, a patch applied to the skin, so it didn't account for all the factors that can affect bone strength.

> **"You can continue drinking coffee, but there are some subgroups that make you more at risk for decreased bone mineral density."**
>
> **Ryan Liu**
> co-author of new study

Osteoporosis is "a multifactorial disease," she added. Many factors play a role in the likelihood of developing this condition, including family history, alcohol use, tobacco use and race and ethnicity.

Should you switch to tea?

Not necessarily, experts said. "There's been a lot published about caffeine and bone density, and a lot of it is conflicting," Anam said.

Some other research, for example, has suggested a more beneficial relationship between coffee and bone health: A 2016 study of postmenopausal Korean women published in PLOS One and a 2018 longitudinal study in BMC Public Health linked coffee intake with a lower osteoporosis risk. A meta-analysis on long-term coffee and tea consumption published earlier this year found *both* beverages to be associated with reduced risk of developing the condition.

The research "is not saying you should go out of your way to stop or coffee's bad," Liu said. "You can continue drinking coffee, but there are some subgroups that make you more at risk for decreased bone mineral density," such as having a higher lifetime alcohol intake or drinking more than five cups a day.

The takeaway? If you're a coffee drinker, it's reasonable to keep an eye on your overall intake and try not to exceed two to three cups a day, experts said. This aligns with recommendations from the Food and Drug Administration to stick to no more than 400 milligrams of caffeine daily, which is about three 12-fluid-ounce cups.

"Like anything else in life, moderation is always good," Holick said. The study "basically concludes you can have a couple cups of coffee and not have any impact."

What else can you do?

Beyond whether you prefer coffee or tea, there are other strategies that have been shown to support bone density as you age. Here's what experts suggest:

- Get enough bone-strengthening nutrients in your diet. "I think of the bones like you're building a house," Moseley said. "When you're eating, or building a house, you want to construct the strongest house possible, and your diet is similarly constructing the strongest bones possible. A diet enriched in calcium with ample vitamin D is going to build a stronger house and make your bones less susceptible to breaking."

Adults between 19 to 70 years old need 600 IU of vitamin D, and older adults need 800 IU, according to the National Institutes of Health. Women ages 19 to 50 should aim for 1,000 milligrams of calcium per day from supplements and food, according to the Mayo Clinic, and 1,200 mg daily after age 51; men need 1,000 mg until age 71, at which point they should also increase their intake to 1,200 mg for strong bones. In addition to dairy, "there are lots of good sources of calcium: green leafy vegetables like kale and collard greens, and sardines with bones," Anam said. Some brands of nondairy milk and orange juice are now fortified with calcium and vitamin D to the same extent as in milk, Holick added.

- Add resistance exercise to your routine. Resistance training may support bone mineral density, research has found, particularly for postmenopausal women. Pilates or barre classes, weight-bearing exercises such as jumping jacks, stair climbing, hiking, using resistance bands or walking on the treadmill or outside can all be helpful, Anam said.
- Don't smoke, and keep alcohol consumption low. While healthy habits such as diet and exercise support your bones, unhealthy habits can have a detrimental effect. "If you're putting bad things into your body, consuming too much alcohol or smoking, or having too many proinflammatory foods, those things might harm your bones, hurting your health and making your bones weaker and more susceptible to fracture," Moseley said.

The bottom line? For tea drinkers, "it's interesting that there appears to be some benefit at the hip for bone mineral density, but I wouldn't say, 'I'm going to start drinking a lot of tea,' or if you drink tea, that would negate ignoring your calcium intake," Anam said.

WEEKEND: FAMILY



PETER HAMLIN/AP illustration

Volunteering with children

Modeling altruism can build character and create lasting family memories

BY CATHY BUSSEWITZ
Associated Press

When Cami Teacoach's son turned 3, she set out to find volunteer opportunities they could do together. He made Valentine cards for senior citizens. They hiked and picked up trash. He helped harvest produce at community gardens and made seed balls out of mud, throwing them into the forest to promote wildflower growth.

Teacoach had reached out to many organizations looking for volunteer projects that she could do with her young child, but most places said no, so she came up with her own.

"Everyone was like, 'A 3-year-old can't do that,'" Teacoach said. "And I was like, 'No, I swear, he really can if you would just give him a chance.'"

Volunteering with children can instill confidence in youngsters, teach social and problem-solving skills and provide unique ways for families to bond. During the holiday season, many people seek such opportunities, looking for ways to give back.

But often, nonprofit organizations seek helpers who are at least 18 years old. Finding volunteer work to do as a family with young children can be challenging, but there are opportunities, if you persist.

"There's a million different ways to help people and volunteer. So many families want to do this and literally just don't know where to start," said Polly Lagana, executive director of Volunteer New York!, which connects people with service opportunities. "In a turbulent time in our world, families — and parents in particular — are very interested in showing their kids how they can help out and how they can give back."

Children excel at activities such as sorting coats, packing groceries and following through on tasks, said Sapreet Saluja, executive director of New York Cares, which works with organizations to develop volunteer programs in New York City.

"I've been very impressed with the detail orientation and the precision and the following of directions and the care that some kids I've seen, as young as 6, take to the tasks that they're doing," Saluja said. "It's been explained to them that this is to benefit someone, and it's important, and they're following the directions and they want to get it just right. And in many cases, they're more detail-oriented than the adults, which I think is very inspiring."

To get started, look for organizations in your community that match volunteers with family-friendly projects and reach out to ask if there's a minimum age requirement.

Here are some other ways to involve little ones in projects that help the community.

Provide choices

Children prefer to have agency and information to make a decision, so include them when you're choosing an activity, Lagana said.

Consider volunteering for a mission that you can explain to your child, such as cleaning up litter.

"Kids are unbelievably curious. They ask questions about what they're doing, what they're seeing, what they're feeling, what they're hearing, and it opens up a dialogue," Saluja said.

Sharing food

Children understand hunger, and they can help alleviate the problem. They can sort grocery boxes at a food pantry or help deliver to home-bound individuals.

Aviva Davis was about 8 when she and her brother Brendan began helping her parents deliver Meals on Wheels to senior citizens and medically frail individuals in Denver. Initially, they rode in the car with their parents and helped bring food to the door. When they were older, they took turns driving.

"It definitely opened my eyes to what the world is like outside of our bubble. We saw all sorts of different things and I saw not everyone lives the same way," said Davis, now 17. "But even at such a young age I could realize it's amazing what we're doing that we could help people that aren't as lucky as we were."

Create your own opportunities

When Teacoach couldn't find organizations willing to accept her toddler, she started a group in Pittsburgh called VolunTOTs, which creates service opportunities for children as young as 3. The children and their parents pack 500 boxes of groceries to distribute to families in need, play bingo with seniors in nursing homes and make dog treats for an animal rescue center, among other projects.

Parents have told Teacoach their children's conduct improves after volunteering. "They feel so good about themselves, they were a helper, and that translates into better behavior," she said.

Stephanie Bernaba's family started "Tough Cookies," a project where they bake and deliver cookies to veterans, when her son Matthew was in eighth grade and had to complete a service project for school.

The project helped the teens learn social skills and meet people in various stages of life and health conditions, Stephanie Bernaba said.

"We went to the first couple of places and I was really scared, because I'm more of a shy person," Matthew Bernaba, now 15, said. "For the first couple of deliveries I was more to myself, and as we kept going, we talked more with the veterans and got to hear great stories from them."

THE MEAT AND POTATOES OF LIFE

Lisa Smith Molinari



When every game is 'just one more game'

"Just one more game," I've thought too many times to count, as my trembling finger clicks the digital button that will instantly deal me another enticing set of Spider Solitaire. I innocently fell into this deep abyss sometime last year, when I overheard the ladies in my boot camp fitness class talking about a game app on their phones. My life hasn't been the same since.

As I lay, draped over the love seat, night after night in our living room, binge-watching morally bankrupt reality shows and disturbing true crime documentaries, my reading glasses mirror my cell phone's screen, hiding dark circles and crazed eyes. I tap madly at the miniature digital cards, jonesing for that burst of endorphins or adrenaline or whatever it is that happens when I complete the game without spending the 50,000 coins I've accumulated to buy help.

Years ago, when binge-watching became a thing, our family spent a rainy weekend holed up in our base house streaming "Breaking Bad." I felt guilty for being a couch potato, but since the pandemic, sloth-like behavior is the norm.

Nowadays, I not only stream episode after episode of my latest shows, I also multitask to double my entertainment. During sheltering in place, I began scrolling through eBay — creating a watchlist of silly items I had no room to store like vintage ceramic Christmas trees and hobnail glass — when watching endless television wasn't stimulating enough.

When I made my first purchase, I realized that this behavior could easily slip into compulsive shopping, drain our life savings and fill our house with useless knickknacks, so I looked for games to play on my phone instead.

I thought playing socially acceptable, intellectual games would offer healthy brain stimulation along with something to brag about, so I began playing Blockudoku, Sudoku and the free New York Times games. Finally, I could hobnob with my social media friends who posted about solving this week's Wordle in two tries, and I could beat my husband's Blockudoku score.

However, when my failure to solve a Connections puzzle became a crushing blow that sent me into a spiral of self-loathing, I thought Spider Solitaire would provide a better balance — a game that was not so silly that I'd feel the need to keep it a secret, but not so intellectual that I would hate myself if I lost.

Unfortunately, Spider Solitaire was the perfect fit. It filled my need for extra entertainment, its repetitiveness was soothing and it was complex enough to make me feel smart, but random enough to protect my ego. This combination spelled doom for my already weakened circadian rhythms.

Soon, a new dysfunctional habit was formed. My husband, an early bird, would bid me good night around 9:30 pm, leaving me with the television clicker and the snoring dog, where I was free to indulge my addiction until the wee hours.

Before long, the resulting nightly sleep deprivation left me in a perpetual zombie-like state, unable to function at my age level, much less my potential. The time had come, I decided. Time to reverse the damage that the pandemic foisted upon my circadian rhythms.

This New Year, my resolution is to reinstate my previous routine of plugging my phone into the kitchen charger after dinner, not to be accessed until the next morning. I'll still allow myself nightly binge-watching, which I now consider a basic human necessity after a day of tedious work. If sudden withdrawal causes me to crave a secondary form of entertainment, I'll limit my activities to innocuous pursuits that won't interfere with sleep, self-esteem or human relationships, like crochet or filing my nails.

Through it all, I'm learning that folding my hand and walking away from the table can sometimes be the best strategy to winning the game of life.

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

PRESENT TIME

BY DAVID KWONG / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

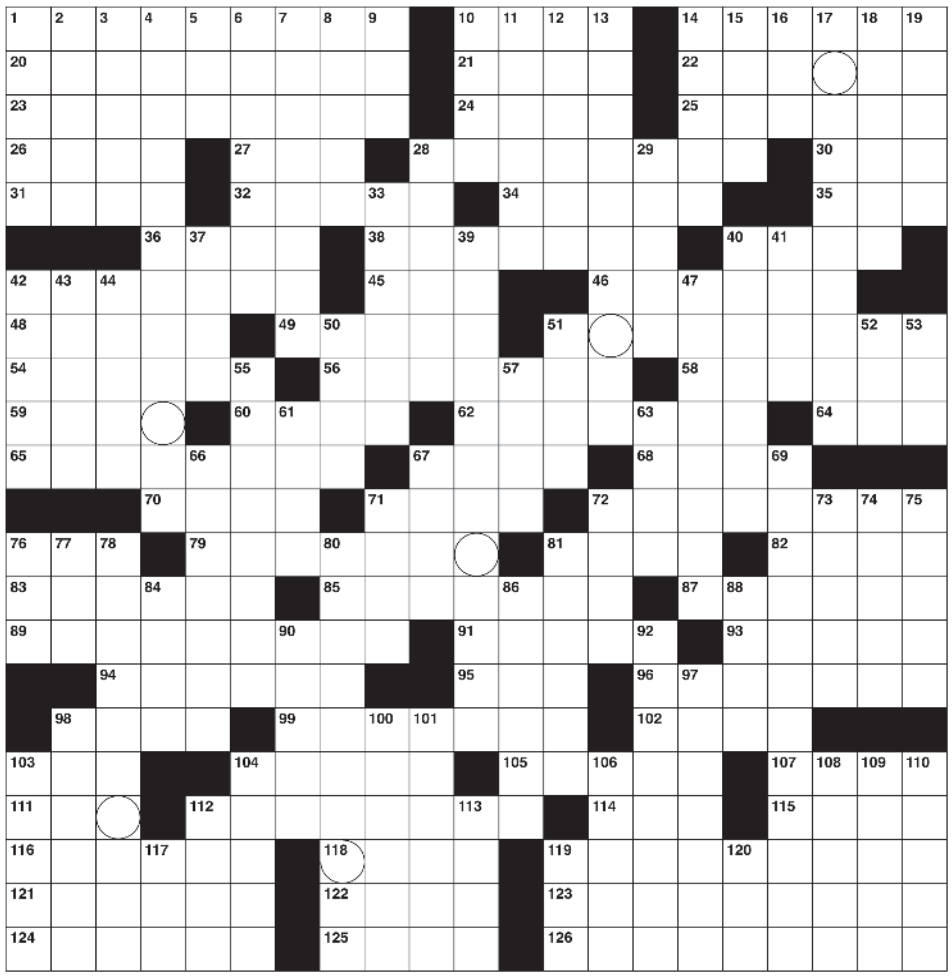
David Kwong is a magician in Los Angeles. When he was 7, a magician at a pumpkin patch fooled his father, a biochemist (“the smartest man in the world” in the son’s eyes), with a magic trick. That’s when David knew what he wanted to be when he grew up. David’s traveling show, “The Enigmatist,” concluded a successful run in London last month. — W.S. Note: Once the puzzle is complete, the circled letters, when read from left to right, will spell a punny two-word phrase.

ACROSS

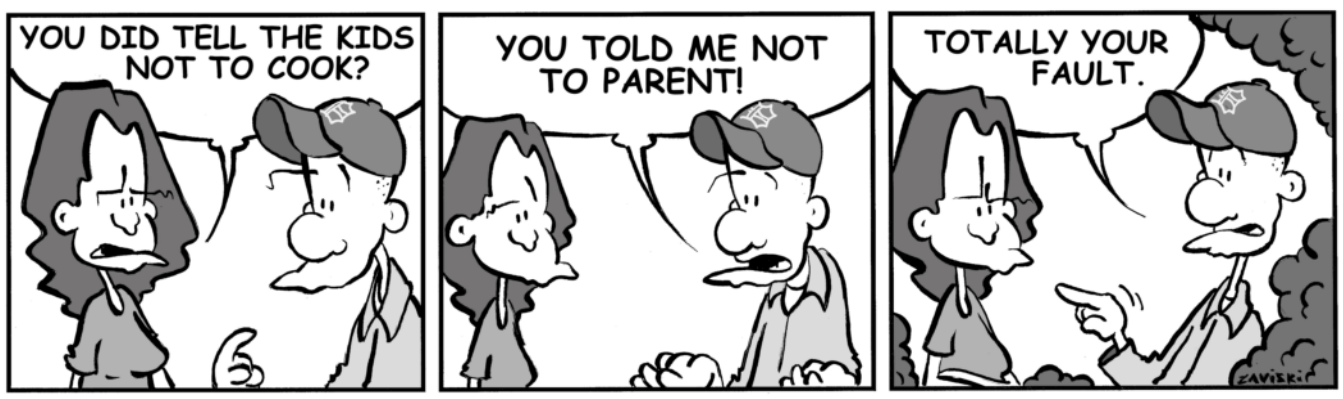
1 Some Arctic transports
10 S.E.C. football powerhouse, for short
14 1950s hangout with a jukebox
20 Game piece made of four squares
21 “The Kite Runner” protagonist
22 Skulks
23 Joins gradually
24 “Doggone it!”
25 Treatment
26 Blue colorant obtained from the indigo plant
27 Wrangler alternative
28 Brightly colored Mediterranean flowers
30 Rap’s Run-____
31 Course catalog?
32 When Aries transitions to Taurus
34 Sweetly, on scores
35 “I’ll pass”
36 Input of certain mining
38 Montalbán who played Khan in “Star Trek II: The Wrath of Khan”
40 Timer setting
42 Areas of influence
45 Mental health org.
46 Fraudulently make seem like
48 Covers completely
49 Wyoming peak
51 Like a corporation with a new logo, perhaps
54 Comment from someone caught in the rain
56 Yellow avenue in Monopoly
58 A bit off, say
59 Hyatt alternative
60 Hard-boiled genre
62 TheForce.net for “Star Wars,” for example
64 Dark side
65 Former big name in browsers
67 U.F.O.-watching org.
68 By way of, informally
70 Kemo ____ (the Lone Ranger)
71 Sailor’s patron
72 Fleetwood Mac hit named for a Celtic goddess
76 Daddy
79 Eponymous British financier James ____
81 By saying this you mean well
82 Wrap seller
83 Adopted, as a pet
85 Wasn’t folded in a suitcase, say
87 Developed, as baby teeth
89 Sci-fi miniaturizer
91 Emanations
93 Boldly face
94 Kind of cipher in which A becomes B, B becomes C, e.g.
95 Guardians, on a scoreboard
96 Bit of birdspeak
98 Damp, mildewy quality
99 They hold water
102 Silence
103 Lying faceup
104 ____ Park, Calif.
105 Air
107 Disney subsidiary
111 A little help?
112 Evaded, as a sensitive issue
114 Some pings, in brief
115 “Fie on ____!” (Shakespearean cry)
116 Skips over
118 Few and far between
119 Regulars at parks with ramps, informally
121 Reply after having one’s memory jogged
122 Some time ago
123 “What’s done is done!”
124 Stick (to)
125 Garden interloper
126 Church parts crossing naves

DOWN

1 Make furious
2 “The Family Circus” cartoonist Bil ____
3 Tennis line judge’s ruling
4 Duke Ellington classic with the lyric “That was my heart serenading you”
5 West side of L.A.?
6 “Is there still time for me to join you?”
7 51 to the hour
8 Stage direction
9 Phillipa of Broadway
10 Grammy winner Erykah
11 ____ Gorman, “The Hill We Climb” poet
12 Copy
13 Iced-tea-and-lemonade refreshments
14 Spending romp
15 Output of certain mining
16 Counterpart of a sub
17 Fast start?
18 Father, familiarly
19 Mentally overpower, with “out”
28 Like most moccasins
29 Great Dane of cartoons, informally
33 More livid
37 Keister, in Leicester
39 2015 chart-topping hit for the Weeknd
40 Symbolic for its time
41 Shoe company with an iconic checkerboard design
42 Descendant
43 Apple: Fr.
44 Is without
47 Rabid in appearance
50 Woman’s nickname that sounds like two letters
51 Rice-A-____
52 “Borderlands” director Roth
53 Hiding place
55 Gene pools?
57 Org. with its own alphabet
61 Abbr. not found on most smartphones
63 “Aren’t ____ lucky one?!”
66 It has a lot of secretaries
67 Shirt collar stiffener
69 Where to find six “presents” in this puzzle?
71 Knock ’em dead
72 Coolidge who sang the theme for “Octopussy”
73 Just getting started with
74 Green shade
75 What Joe Montana was in the ’80s
76 A TD scores six of these
77 “Fancy, that!”
78 Prickly denizen of coral reefs
80 Famed lawyer in the 1925 Scopes Monkey Trial
81 Most minimal
84 Some Korean exports
86 Calmed deceptively
88 Baseball slugger’s stat
90 Bird used to deliver messages on “Game of Thrones”
92 Blueprints
97 Author Zora Neale ____
98 Noodled on, with “over”
100 Girlfriend in “Ferris Bueller’s Day Off”
101 Informant
103 “Ta-ta!”
104 Tricky pool shot
106 Someone enjoying a walk in the park
108 Mentally with it
109 ____ four
110 Fits one inside the other
112 Porcine : pigs :: cervine : ____
113 Essential
117 It might be good for a change
119 One who knows the drill?: Abbr.
120 Teslas, e.g., for short



GUNSTON STREET



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

RESULTS FOR ABOVE PUZZLE






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

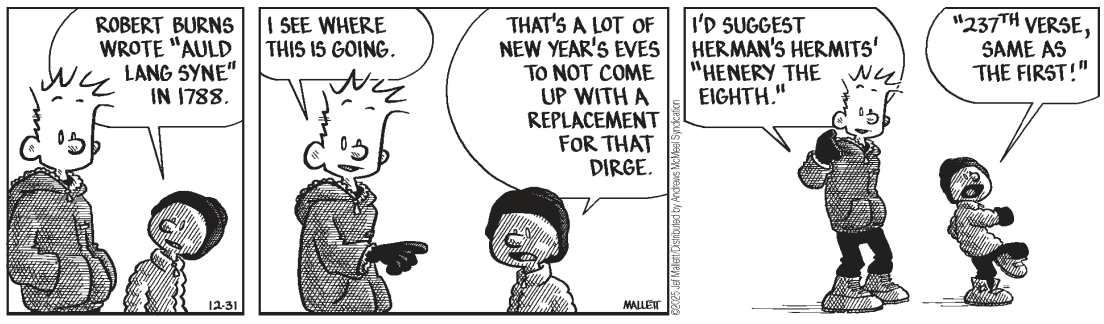
Bizarro



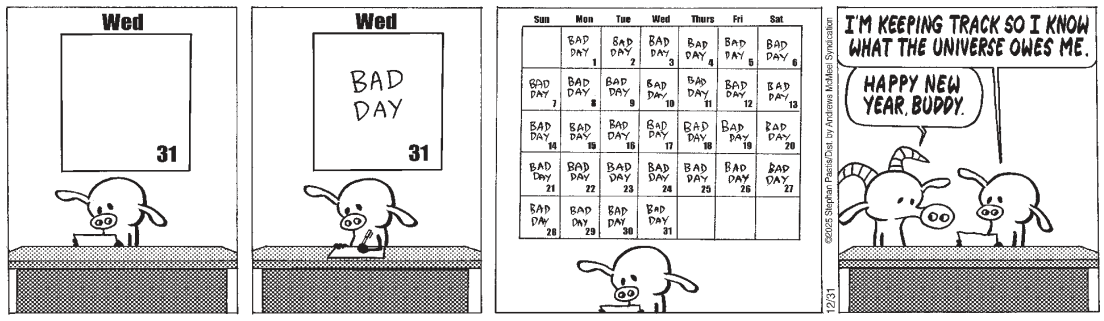
Loose Parts



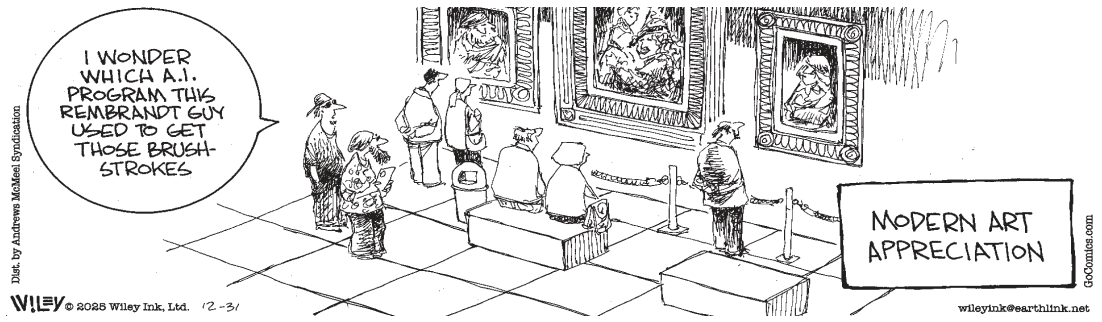
Frazz



Pearls Before Swine



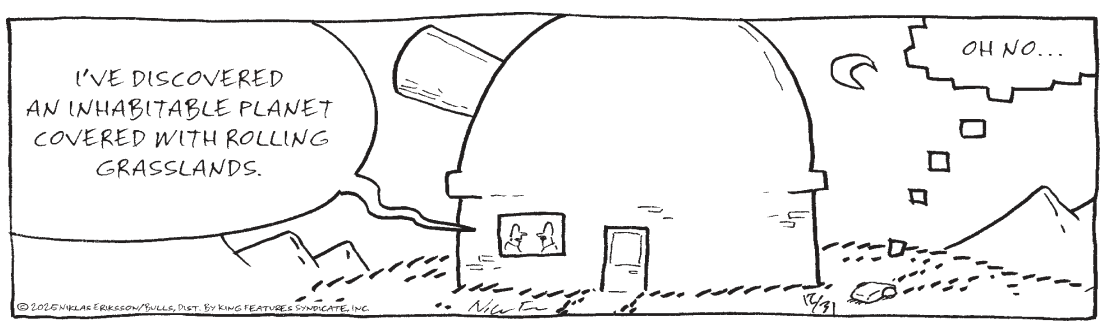
Non Sequitur



Wumo



Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

1	2	3	■	4	5	6	7	■	8	9	10	11
12			■	13				■	14			
15			■	16				17				
18			19		■	■	20			■	■	■
■	■	■	21		22	23	■	24		25	26	27
28	29	30					31	■	32			
33			■	34				35	■	36		
37			38	■	39				40			
41				42	■	43				■	■	■
■	■	■	44		45	■	■	46		47	48	49
50	51	52				53	54		■	55		
56				■	57				■	58		
59				■	60				■	61		

ACROSS

1 Pantheon member
4 Miles away
8 Brew topper
12 Before
13 Taboo
14 "— la Douce"
15 PBS funder
16 "Animal House" fete
18 Masked hero
20 French diarist Anaïs
21 Winter blanket
24 Brilliance
28 New Year's Eve topper
32 Apiece
33 Vegetable peeler brand
34 Pre-stereo records
36 "Rocks"
37 Reply to "Shall we?"
39 Beer bash
41 "The Waste Land" author
43 Fly like a hawk
44 San Francisco's — Hill
46 Leniency
50 Restaurant area for special events
55 Sashimi fish
56 Met melody
57 Top-of-the-line
58 Author Fleming
59 Little dent
60 Thunder god
61 Use a shovel

DOWN

1 Post-millennial demographic gp.
2 Twistable cookie
3 Beloved
4 Word of opposite meaning
5 Egg — young
6 "Life of Pi" director Lee
7 "Casual" singer Chappell —
8 Spouse-to-be
9 Hockey's Bobby
10 Invoice fig.
11 Mother's Day month
17 Thanksgiving dessert
19 Trio after Q
22 "Hmm, I guess so"
23 Declines
25 Hideaway
26 Bank statement no.
27 Yon folks
28 North —
29 Skater's leap
30 South Asian flatbread
31 Takeout request
35 Annoying emailer
38 "In America" writer Susan
40 "How — you?"
42 Gift from Santa
45 Nanny's headache
47 Incursion
48 Spiced tea
49 Soprano — Huang
50 Knee protector
51 "Entourage" agent
52 — Tin Tin
53 "What a cute kitten!"
54 Musician Yoko

Answer to Previous Puzzle

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

12-31

CRYPTOQUIP

X T G Z W Y R Y B D B F F Y D U DTYBKW AU G LYX'D VGQYCSZU GIIBGK ZSHU VYC LUKUACGZSYI? HYY RUGC'D UQU.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: IF SOME FISH IN AN ORNAMENTAL BACKYARD POND LIKE TO HIDE SHYLY, THEY'RE PROBABLY COY KOI.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: D equals S

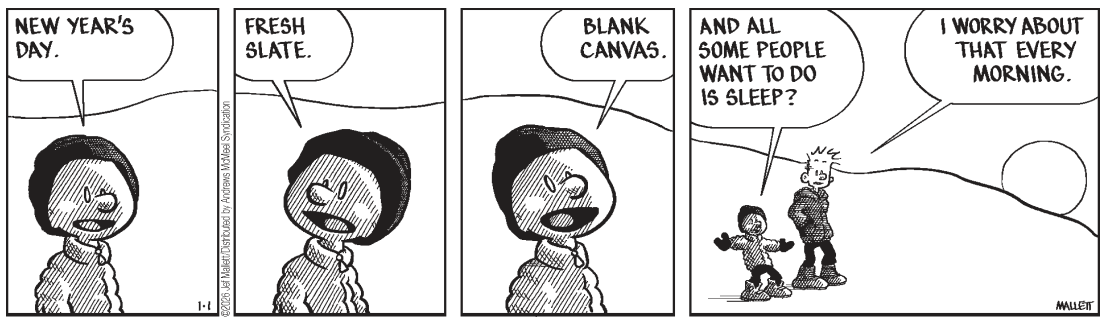
Bizarro



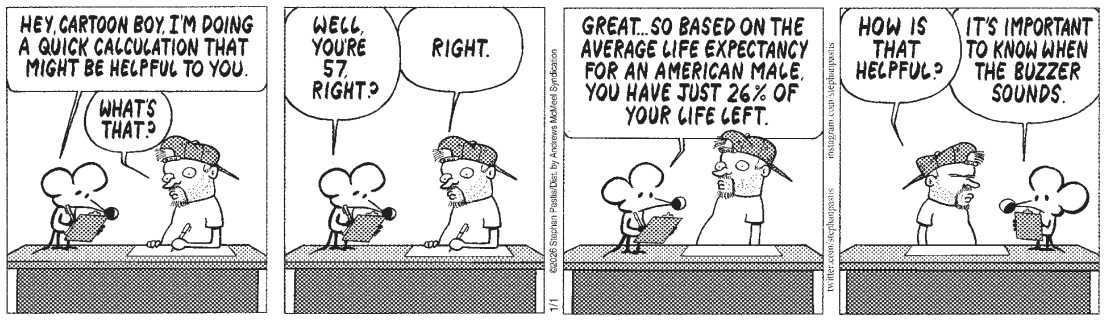
Loose Parts



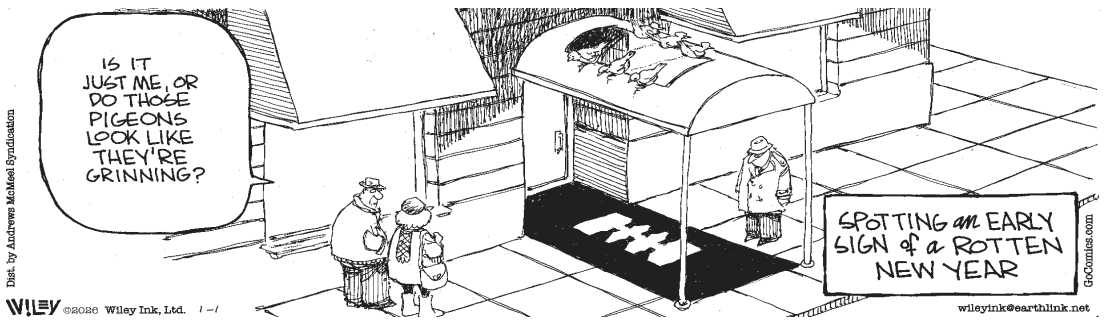
Frazz



Pearls Before Swine



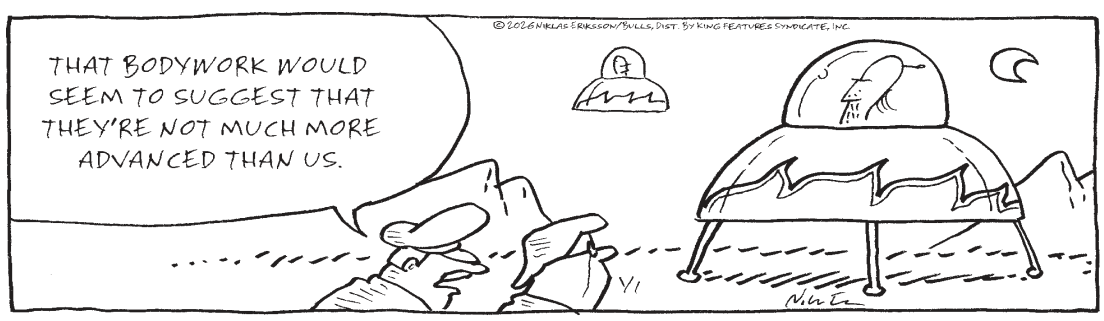
Non Sequitur



Wumo



Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

1	2	3	■	4	5	6	7	■	8	9	10	11
12			■	13				■	14			
15			16					■	17			
■	■	18			■	19		20				
21	22				23	■	24			■	■	■
25			■	26		27	■	28		29	30	31
32			33	■	34		35	■	36			
37				38	■	39		40	■	41		
■	■	■	42		43	■	44		45			
46	47	48				49	■	50			■	■
51				■	52		53				54	55
56				■	57				■	58		
59				■	60				■	61		

ACROSS

1 "Mazel —!"
4 Exile isle
8 Grouch
12 Acapulco gold
13 Shoe fillers
14 Loathe
15 Dove
17 Diminutive suffix
18 Perfect serve
19 "Pencils down!"
21 Sand substance
24 Purring pet
25 Roman 151
26 Blasting stick
28 Young sheep
32 Org.
34 Weir
36 Wife of Zeus
37 San —, California
39 French monarch
41 Press for payment
42 New Deal org.
44 White Rabbit's cry
46 Trinidad music
50 D.C. figure
51 Mayberry boy
52 Visionary
56 NYC gallery
57 Barbie, e.g.
58 Briny expanse
59 Mimic
60 Thompson of "Love Actually"
61 Pair

DOWN

1 Surpass
2 "... cone — cup?"
3 Singer
4 Result
5 Kauai souvenir
6 Optimum
7 Storage site
8 Fast feline
9 "Phooey!"
10 Aleutian island
11 Pager sound
16 Here, in Dijon
20 — de mer
21 Con job
22 "Casablanca" role
23 Moreover
27 Roofing goo
29 Olympic winner
30 Very dry
31 Lucid
33 Annual celebration
35 French pronoun
38 Antonym (Abbr.)
40 Chevy model
43 Comment to the audience
45 Texter's chuckle
46 Prolonged sleep
47 Each
48 Mai Tai garnish
49 Former L.A. Laker Lamar
53 Shade provider
54 Stitch
55 Eastern path

Answer to Previous Puzzle

G	O	D	■	A	F	A	R	■	F	O	A	M
E	R	E	■	N	O	N	O	■	I	R	M	A
N	E	A	■	T	O	G	A	P	A	R	T	Y
Z	O	R	R	O	■	■	N	I	N	■	■	■
■	■	■	S	N	O	W	■	E	C	L	A	T
P	A	R	T	Y	H	A	T	■	E	A	C	H
O	X	O	■	M	O	N	O	S	■	I	C	E
L	E	T	S	■	K	E	G	P	A	R	T	Y
E	L	I	O	T	■	S	O	A	R	■	■	■
■	■	■	N	O	B	■	■	M	E	R	C	Y
P	A	R	T	Y	R	O	O	M	■	A	H	I
A	R	I	A	■	A	O	N	E	■	I	A	N
D	I	N	G	■	T	H	O	R	■	D	I	G

1-1

CRYPTOQUIP

ZACM DLG'QC LGS YM ZYMSCQ TMI OLVC OATQU YNYNKCO ONQTUC DLG, ZATS VYXAS DLG XCS? NLKI NGSO.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHAT DO YOU SUPPOSE SHOULD BE A COW'S FAVORITE ANNUAL TIME FOR CELEBRATION? MOO YEAR'S EVE.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: N equals C

Bizarro



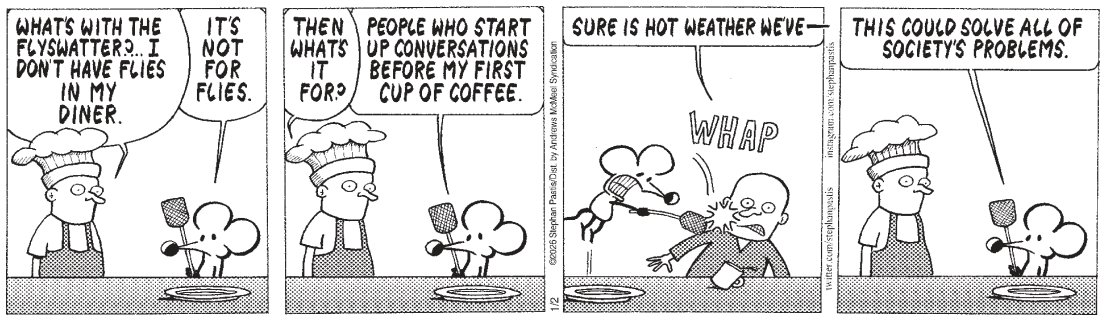
Loose Parts



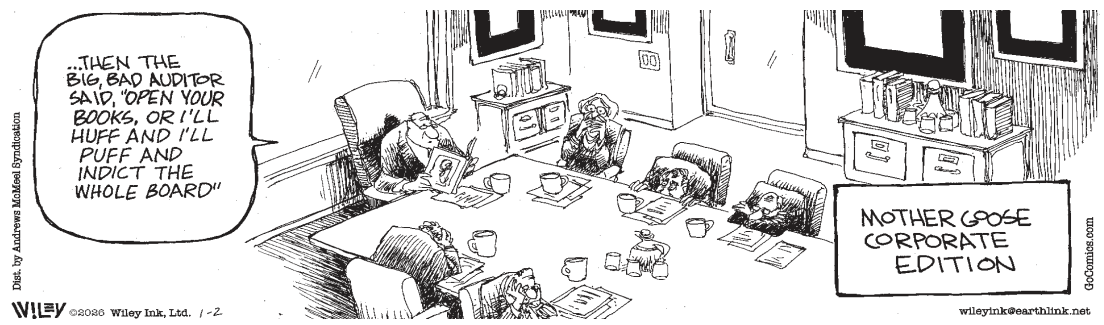
Frazz



Pearls Before Swine



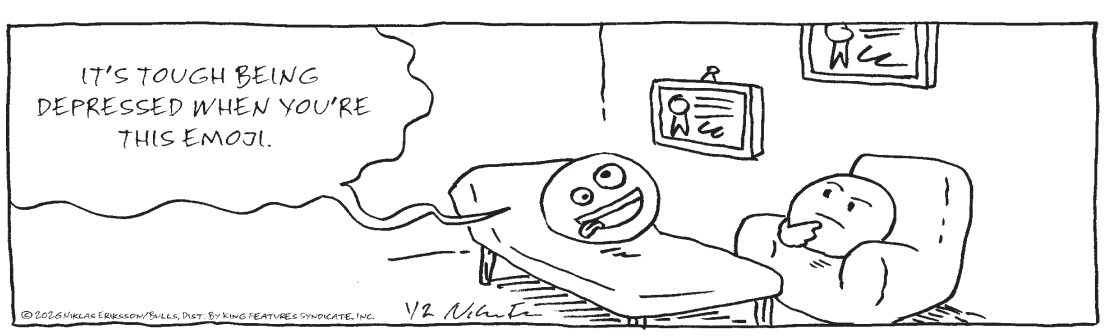
Non Sequitur



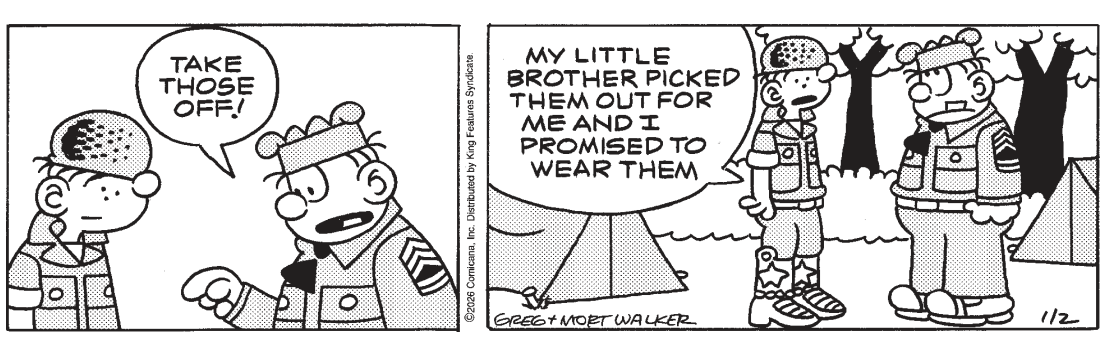
Wumo



Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

1	2	3	■	4	5	6	■	7	8	9	10	11
12			■	13			■	14				
15			■	16			17					
18			■	19					■	■	■	■
20			21	■	22			■	23	24	25	26
■	■	■	27	28		■	29	30				
31	32	33			■	■	■	34				
35					36	■	37			■	■	■
38				■	39	40		■	41	42	43	44
■	■	■	■	45				46	■	47		
48	49	50	51						■	52		
53					■	54			■	55		
56					■	57			■	58		

ACROSS

1 Oklahoma city
4 Super Bowl org.
7 Doldrums
12 Its cap. is Brussels
13 "Xanadu" band
14 Carnival attractions
15 ET's craft
16 Short cylindrical pasta with ruffled edges
18 Orange Muppet
19 "Rent" actor Taye
20 Pizzazz
22 Sign before Virgo
23 Division word
27 ACLU concerns
29 Gilda of "SNL"
31 Bakery sackful
34 Winter coasters
35 Boo — of "To Kill a Mockingbird"
37 "Evita" role
38 Vacationing
39 Buckeyes' sch.
41 Wrestling style
45 Quartz variety
47 Use a straw
48 In an extreme way
52 Chopper
53 Tennis great Chris
54 Golf prop
55 Pistol
56 Big buttes
57 Map lines (Abbr.)
58 Mini-albums, for short

DOWN

1 Full of excited chatter
2 Crusoe's creator
3 Palliative plants
4 Dweeb
5 Swings wildly
6 Skier's hangout
7 Bali products
8 Tipsy
9 Commotion
10 "Planet —" (album by Doja Cat)
11 Govt. stipend
17 "Firebird" composer Stravinsky
21 Without question
23 Does nothing
24 Compass dir.
25 Media mogul Turner
26 Hosp. areas
28 Italian "three"
30 Fire sign?
31 Monk's title
32 Attorney's field
33 — Mae (Whoopi's role in "Ghost")
36 Meditative practice
37 Schnitzel, e.g.
40 De-ices, in a way
42 Grammar topic
43 Snafu
44 Unlocks
45 Performs
46 Peepers
48 "The One I Love" band
49 Broad st.
50 — Moines
51 A Gershwin brother

Answer to Previous Puzzle

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

1-2

CRYPTOQUIP

FZT CQC V CVBQJH XQEZ EFQS VNN PZG FVT XBDS DJG EGVEZDBG PD VJDPZGB? PD HGP PD PZG DPZGB PQCG.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHEN YOU'RE OUT IN WINTER AND SOME SHARP ICICLES SCRAPE YOU, WHAT MIGHT YOU GET? COLD CUTS.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: H equals G

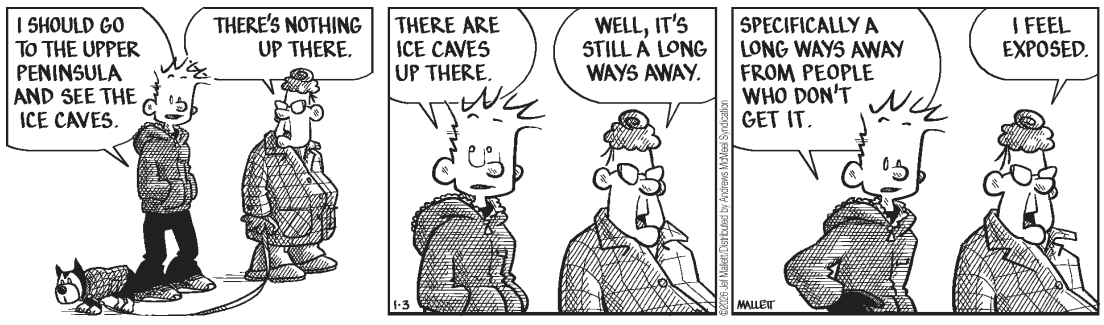
Bizarro



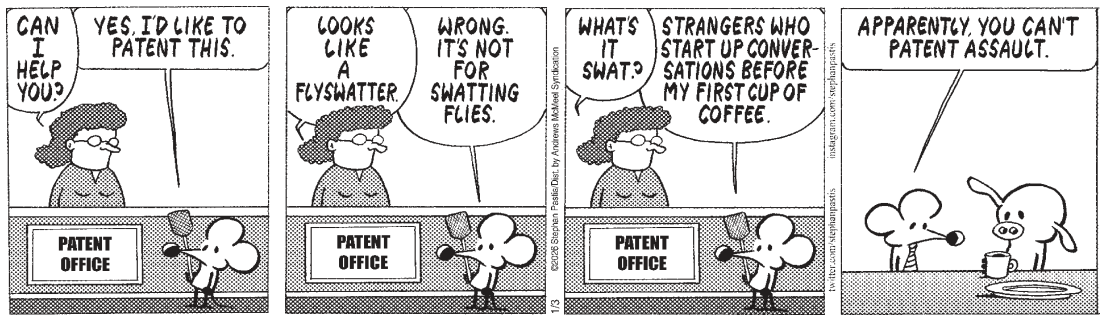
Loose Parts



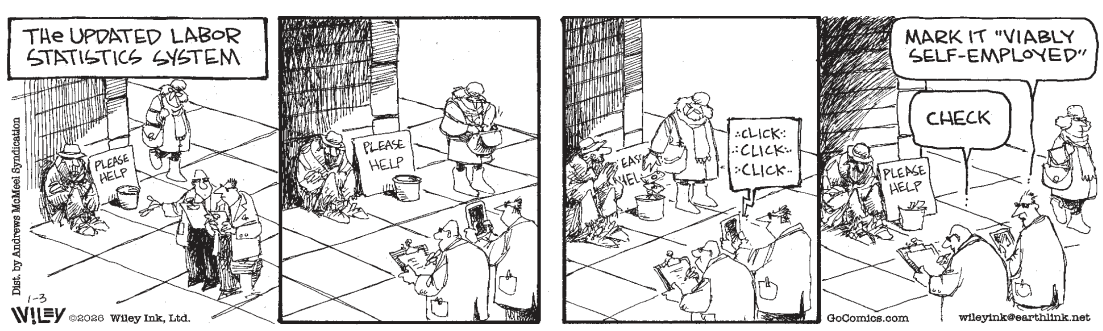
Frazz



Pearls Before Swine



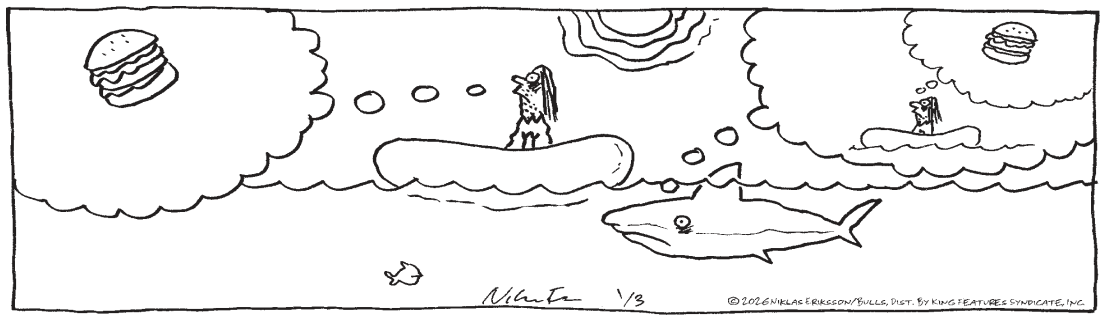
Non Sequitur



Wumo



Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

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

ACROSS

1 Pickle holder
4 Slightly
8 Nuisance
12 Miner's quest
13 Sassiness, informally
14 "As — saying ..."
15 Mauna —
16 Voting group
17 Classic Kinks song
18 Coffee station appliance
21 Red — beet
22 U.K. military fliers
23 Unspoken
26 "Uh-huh"
27 — Pérignon (French bubbly)
30 Lawyer Clooney
31 Selleck of "Blue Bloods"
32 New Delhi dress
33 Part of LGBTQ
34 Resistance unit
35 Fitness program with Latin music
36 South, in Spanish
37 Note after fa
38 Dessert-creating appliance
45 Cast a ballot
46 United — Emirates
47 Eggs
48 Country singer Jackson
49 Actress Hatcher
50 Stannum
51 Interior designer Berkus
52 Fill up
53 Vintage

DOWN

1 Gag
2 Villain in "Wonder Woman"
3 Harvest
4 Optimally
5 Oklahoma city
6 Big fusses
7 Propriety
8 Kebab go-with
9 Furry sci-fi critter
10 Auction
11 Boris Godunov, for one
19 Bar
20 Pirate's chart
23 Kids' game
24 "I — Rock"
25 Low isle
26 — Kippur
27 Weir
28 Sphere
29 Ms. Farrow
31 Menaces
32 1973 Toni Morrison novel
34 Wilder's "— Town"
35 Dead man walking?
36 Public outburst
37 Brainy
38 Tennis great Lendl
39 Pop flavor
40 Coup d'—
41 Geometric calculation
42 Japanese instrument
43 Satan's forte
44 McNally partner

Answer to Previous Puzzle

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

1-3 CRYPTOQUIP

QY NVC XSZS AGHRRQRB IV YVCRU H MLNUQTQRB MOEVVG, NVC MEVCGU LRVX IEHI STSZNVRS XQGG UZVA VCI.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHY DID A DARING FISH SWIM ALL THE WAY FROM ONE SEASHORE TO ANOTHER? TO GET TO THE OTHER TIDE.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: E equals H

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Jacqueline Smith

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OPINION

25 good things that happened in 2025

The Washington Post Editorial Board

A daily grind of negative news makes it hard to remember everything that happened in a given year. Continuing our longstanding tradition of using yearend to reflect on moments of joy and hope, here are 25 events during 2025 that renewed our sense of optimism.

■ 1. The Catholic Church elected Robert Prevost to become the first American pope. The Chicago native took the name Leo XIV.

■ 2. Despite tariffs, the U.S. economy kept growing throughout 2025, thanks largely to a boom in AI innovation. The S&P 500 soared to new heights, up more than 15% for the year.

■ 3. GLP-1 drugs continued their revolution in treating diabetes and obesity. The U.S. obesity rate fell to 37%, down from its peak of almost 4% in 2022.

■ 4. Overdose deaths continued their steady decline, with the most recent provisional data from April showing a roughly 25% drop compared to the previous year.

■ 5. The U.S. maintained its role as the center of global medical innovation. The Food and Drug Administration approved a twice-a-year HIV shot, the closest thing to an AIDS vaccine. Scientists have also achieved multiple breakthroughs in genetic therapies, including the first-ever treatment for Huntington's disease. Meanwhile, new blood tests show promise to detect signs of ALS years before symptoms emerge, and scientists have begun to uncover how faulty mitochondria can contribute to neurodegenerative diseases such as dementia, opening pathways for potential treatments.

■ 6. Quantum computing technology made enormous strides. Google announced that a new machine could run an algorithm 13,000 times faster than a top supercomputer would be able to in the realm of classical physics.

■ 7. NASA scientists published a study containing the most compelling evidence yet of ancient microbial life on Mars.

■ 8. The commercial space industry pulled off impressive engineering feats. Firefly Aerospace became the first company to successfully land a probe on the Moon. Blue Origin launched its first NASA mission and managed to land the rocket's booster. (The company's owner, Jeff Bezos, also owns The Post.) Meanwhile, SpaceX launched more than 100 Starlink missions this year, often using the same booster dozens of times.

■ 9. No hurricanes made landfall in the United States for the first time in a decade.

■ 10. In a sign that U.S. energy markets are becoming increasingly diverse and competitive, March was the first month the country recorded making more than half its electricity from non-carbon-based sources.

■ 11. Support for nuclear energy reached new highs in 2025, with 59% of Americans backing it. That includes a majority of Democrats, up 15 points since 2020.

■ 12. China's carbon emissions appeared to plateau in 2025. If that trend holds, it means the world's largest contributor to global greenhouse gases might have stalled.

■ 13. Targeted conservation efforts managed to notch some wins for wildlife. Green sea turtles are no longer endangered, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature. A study out of India, home to 75% of the world's wild tigers, found that the country's population of the big cat doubled in the last decade. And after the removal of four dams in Oregon and California's Klamath River, salmon returned after having disappeared for more than a century.

■ 14. More than 20 states enacted laws or policies banning or restricting cellphone use in K-12 classrooms, helping children focus again on learning.

■ 15. Idaho, Indiana, Tennessee, Texas and Wyoming adopted universal school choice programs, bringing the total to 18 states.

■ 16. California enacted a law to embrace phonics, an enormous victory for advocates of the science of reading.

■ 17. Venezuelan opposition leader María Corina Machado came out of hiding to collect the Nobel Peace Prize for her work promoting freedom under the nose of dictator Nicolás Maduro.

■ 18. The last surviving Israeli hostages taken by Hamas on Oct. 7, 2023, regained their freedom after more than two years in captivity as part of a peace deal to stop hostilities in Gaza.

■ 19. Eight million people escaped extreme poverty, defined as living on less than $3 a day.

■ 20. Bolivian voters elected centrist Rodrigo Paz as president, ending two decades of socialist misrule. The economist campaigned on the slogan "capitalism for all."

■ 21. Costa Rica became the newest country to earn the status of being a "high-income" country, according to the World Bank, thanks to multiple years of strong growth.

■ 22. New York City is finally getting its rat population under control, thanks to the belated embrace of keeping trash in containers.

■ 23. Sports fans witnessed extraordinary accomplishments: Shohei Ohtani delivered the greatest single-game performance in baseball history. Rory McIlroy won the Masters Tournament, completing his career Grand Slam. U.S. track star Melissa Jefferson-Wooden smashed a world championship record at the 100-meter world finals.

■ 24. Netflix saved "Sesame Street." The streaming giant provided a new home for the iconic children's show, which had long struggled financially.

■ 25. Last but not least, who could forget Taylor Swift's engagement to Travis Kelce?

Why West Africa is worth worrying about

The Washington Post Editorial Board

A not insignificant cohort of President Donald Trump's advisers want the United States to abandon widespread commitments abroad and instead become a regional power focused on the Western Hemisphere. The president's righteous strike against Islamic State targets in Nigeria is a reminder that America is capable of much more.

"MERRY CHRISTMAS to all, including the dead Terrorists, of which there will be many more if their slaughter of Christians continues," Trump wrote on social media after targeting jihadists in the state of Sokoto, which has been a hot spot for kidnapping schoolkids.

Egregious sectarian language aside, Washington responsibly conducted the operation in coordination with the Nigerian government.

It's a welcome change in a part of the world that has always been little more than an afterthought for the president. The question is whether this is a one-off decision or the start of a more consistent and coherent policy.

We understand the desire to want to abandon the entire region. American and French forces had coordinated with governments in Niger and Mali but were pushed out as new leaders took power following coups.

It can be hard to keep track of all the jihadist groups.

The U.S. strikes in Nigeria targeted the Islamic State's Sahel Province branch, which has clashed violently in recent years for territory with JNIM, an al-Qaida affiliate that is currently trying to seize control of Mali by blocking fuel from entering the capital city of Bamako.

If Mali falls, it would mark the first takeover of a country by an anti-Western Islamic terrorist group since the Taliban took Afghanistan.

The Sahel region — stretching from Mauritania through Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger to Chad — has become the world's biggest epicenter for global terrorism.

Half of all terrorism deaths take place in that largely forgotten and neglected stretch. Having lost the territory they once controlled in Iraq and Syria, the terror groups have found fertile soil in West Africa.

The Islamic State's history shows that when the group establishes a stable presence, it's only a matter of time before it looks to wreak havoc around the world. It's tempting to want to pretend that the chaos in West Africa isn't an American problem, but the world isn't that simple.

The U.S. once had a regional counterterrorism plan known as the Trans-Sahara Counterterrorism Partnership, but a recent audit found the program underfunded, leaderless and mostly ineffective.

The Pentagon has also been considering merging Africa Command back into European Command, which it spun off from in 2008.

This could mean fewer resources and less attention for the region.

In addition to the security reasons for continued engagement, the U.S. would be foolish to cede the young and growing continent to China and Russia.

Nigeria, a relatively wealthy country in the region, is still battling insecurity on several fronts.

The central government has been ineffective at restoring security.

It's good that Abuja is willing to work closely with Washington to stop the slaughter, and Trump would be wise to remain engaged.

SCOREBOARD

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

USA Today Men's Top 25 Poll

The USA Today Sports Top 25 men's basketball poll, with team's records through Sunday in parentheses, total points based on 25 for first place through one point for 25th, ranking in last week's poll and first-place votes received.

		Pts	Prv	1st
1	Michigan (11-0)	764	1	20
2	Arizona (12-0)	753	2	11
3	Iowa State (12-0)	700	3	0
4	Connecticut (12-1)	670	4	0
5	Duke (11-1)	611	6	0
6	Purdue (11-1)	605	5	0
7	Gonzaga (13-1)	584	7	0
8	Houston (11-1)	570	8	0
9	Michigan St. (11-1)	527	9	0
10	BYU (12-1)	521	10	0
11	Vanderbilt (12-0)	423	11	0
12	N. Carolina (12-1)	401	12	0
13	Nebraska (12-0)	357	13	0
13	Louisville (10-2)	357	14	0
15	Alabama (9-3)	315	15	0
16	Texas Tech (10-3)	305	16	0
17	Kansas (10-3)	281	17	0
18	Arkansas (9-3)	240	18	0
19	Illinois (9-3)	237	19	0
20	Tennessee (9-3)	219	20	0
21	Virginia (11-1)	175	21	0
22	Florida (8-4)	143	22	0
23	Iowa (10-2)	91	23	0
24	Georgia (11-1)	65	24	0
25	St. John's (8-4)	38	NR	0

Dropped out: No. 25 Southern California (12-1).

Others receiving votes: Kentucky (9-4) 35; Southern California (12-1) 25; Utah State (10-1) 14; Auburn (8-4) 7; Clemson (10-3) 6; Saint Louis (12-1) 6; ; Oklahoma State (11-1) 5; Seton Hall (11-2) 5; Saint Mary's (12-2) 4; UCLA (10-3) 4; Yale (11-1) 4; LSU (11-1) 3; California (12-1) 2; Indiana (10-3) 1; Miami (Ohio) (13-0) 1; Villanova (10-2) 1.

Monday's men's scores

EAST

Binghamton 100, Elmira 60
Hofstra 86, Campbell 72
Manhattan 74, Rider 71
Merrimack 80, Sacred Heart 72
Missouri State 61, Delaware 43
Mount St. Mary's 66, Iona 59
NJIT 95, SUNY-Canton 60
Northern Kentucky 79, Robert Morris 77
Penn State 90, North Carolina Central 67
Quinnipiac 64, Marist 58
Rutgers 65, Delaware State 50
Saint Peter's 70, Fairfield 66
UMBC 93, Coppin State 59

SOUTH

Alabama 102, Yale 78
Auburn 106, Queens 65
Charleston 72, Drexel 63
Elon 103, Northeastern 91
Florida 94, Dartmouth 72
Georgia 89, LIU 74
Hampton 62, Stony Brook 59
Jacksonville State 78, Western Kentucky 67
LSU 90, Southern Miss 62
Lamar 76, Northwestern State 61
Louisiana Tech 75, UTEP 63
Mississippi State 94, Alabama State 56
Murray State 84, Southern Illinois 81
Ole Miss 79, Alcorn State 43
South Alabama 85, Mobile 52
South Florida 111, Georgia College 50
UNC Wilmington 87, North Carolina A&T 78
Vanderbilt 96, New Haven 53
William & Mary 84, Towson 70

MIDWEST

Akron 115, Concord 64
Ball State 93, Earlham 30
Bradley 76, Evansville 68
Cincinnati 89, Lipscomb 62
Cleveland State 99, IU Indianapolis 86
Detroit Mercy 73, Youngstown State 68
Illinois 90, Southern University 55
Illinois State 73, Drake 56
Indiana State 81, Belmont 80, OT
Iowa 90, UMass Lowell 62
Iowa State 89, Houston Christian 61
Michigan 112, McNeese 71
Michigan State 114, Cornell 97
Milwaukee 77, Purdue Fort Wayne 55
Minnesota 60, Fairleigh Dickinson 43
Northern Iowa 58, Valparaiso 48
Purdue 101, Kent State 60
UIC 102, Illinois Tech 64
Wright State 88, Oakland 73

SOUTHWEST

Arkansas 103, James Madison 74
Baylor 124, Arlington Baptist 61
Houston 69, Middle Tennessee 60
Nicholls State 76, Texas A&M-CC 71
Oklahoma 93, Mississippi Valley State 69
Oklahoma State 103, Bethune-Cookman 77
Stephen F. Austin 75, East Texas A&M 48
TCU 115, Jackson State 64
Tarleton State 69, Texas-Arlington 63
Texas A&M 111, Prairie View A&M 82

FAR WEST

Arizona 99, South Dakota State 71
New Orleans 85, Texas Rio Grande Valley 69
Northern Arizona 112, Benedictine Mesa 60
UNLV 89, La Sierra 47
Utah Tech 80, Southern Utah 66
Utah Valley 73, California Baptist 66
Washington 74, Utah 65

AP Men's Top 25 schedule

Wednesday's games

No. 4 UConn (12-1) at Xavier (9-4)
No. 6 Duke (11-1) vs. Georgia Tech (9-4)
No. 21 Virginia (11-1) at Virginia Tech (11-2)

Friday's games

No. 2 Michigan (11-0) vs. No. 24 USC (12-1)
No. 3 Iowa State (12-0) vs. West Virginia (9-4)
No. 7 Gonzaga (13-1) vs. Seattle (11-3)
No. 9 Michigan State (11-1) at No. 13 Nebraska (12-0)
No. 16 Louisville (10-2) at Stanford (11-2)

Saturday's games

No. 1 Arizona (12-0) at Utah (8-4)
No. 5 Purdue (11-1) at Wisconsin (8-4)
No. 6 Duke (11-1) at Florida State (7-6)
No. 8 Houston (11-1) at Cincinnati (7-5)
No. 10 BYU (12-1) at Kansas State (9-4)
No. 11 Vanderbilt (12-0) at South Carolina (8-4)
No. 12 North Carolina (12-1) at SMU (11-2)
No. 14 Alabama (9-3) vs. Kentucky (9-4)
No. 15 Texas Tech (10-3) vs. Oklahoma State (11-1)
No. 17 Kansas (10-3) at UCF (11-1)
No. 18 Arkansas (9-3) vs. No. 19 Tennessee (9-3)
No. 20 Illinois (9-3) at Penn State (8-4), 7 p.m.
No. 21 Virginia (11-1) at North Carolina State (9-4)
No. 22 Florida (8-4) at Missouri (10-3)
No. 23 Georgia (11-1) vs. Auburn (8-4)
No. 25 Iowa (10-2) vs. UCLA (10-3)

Monday's women's scores

EAST

Army 64, Howard 56
Binghamton 62, Fairleigh Dickinson 51
Brown 76, Wheaton College (MA) 24
Fairfield 84, Manhattan 59
Harvard 70, Delaware 63
Iona 72, Rider 53
LIU 87, Berkeley College 30
Marist 57, Sacred Heart 55
Maryland 97, Wisconsin 59
Merrimack 60, Mount St. Mary's 56
Monmouth 74, Georgian Court 40
NJIT 75, Delaware State 62
North Carolina 90, Boston College 39
Oakland 61, Robert Morris 58
Penn 78, Maryland-Eastern Shore 57
Quinnipiac 67, Saint Peter's 27
UMass Lowell 109, St. Joseph's (BKN) 45

SOUTH

Appalachian State 82, Carolina 31
Auburn 64, Jackson State 48
Coastal Carolina 103, Columbia (SC) 41
Columbia 63, Florida Gulf Coast 44
Eastern Kentucky 70, Hampton 52
Florida A&M 71, Southeastern 65
Georgia 97, Charleston Southern 52
Kennesaw State 86, Life University 41
Louisiana 97, Dillard 56
UNC Asheville 84, Brevard 31
UNC Wilmington 76, Columbia International 37
Virginia 76, SMU 52

MIDWEST

Belmont 68, Southern Illinois 56
Drake 78, UIC 62
IUPUI 58, Milwaukee 49
Illinois State 105, Indiana State 64
Lindenwood 71, Ottawa (KS) 36
Minnesota 71, Indiana 48
Murray State 90, Evansville 80
North Dakota State 94, Saint Mary's (MN) 36
Northern Iowa 86, Valparaiso 52
Northern Kentucky 88, Purdue Fort Wayne 85, OT
Notre Dame 94, Pittsburgh 59
Rochester Christian 86, Detroit Mercy 80
St. John's 73, Marquette 66
St. Thomas 64, Northern Illinois 46
USC 74, Nebraska 66
Villanova 81, DePaul 48
Youngstown State 70, Cleveland State 63

SOUTHWEST

Abilene Christian 112, Nelson 54
East Texas A&M 71, Stephen F. Austin 68
McNeese 74, Incarnate Word 53
Nicholls State 63, Texas A&M-CC 57
Oral Roberts 86, Oklahoma Wesleyan 51
Tarleton State 66, UT Arlington 57
Texas Southern 119, College of Biblical Studies 58
Texas State 95, Huston-Tillotson 33
UT Rio Grande Valley 87, New Orleans 81, OT
UTEP 102, University of the Southwest 43

FAR WEST

California Baptist 82, Utah Valley 51
Eastern Washington 78, Bushnell 37
Long Beach State 68, Hope International 62
Michigan 92, Oregon 87, 2OT
New Mexico State 52, Eastern New Mexico 48, OT
Southern Utah 78, Utah Tech 60
Washington 94, Northwestern 73

AP Women's Top 25 schedule

Wednesday's games

No. 1 UConn (13-0) at Providence (8-6)
No. 4 UCLA (12-1) at Penn State (7-6)
No. 8 TCU (13-0) at BYU (12-1)
No. 10 Iowa State (13-0) at Houston (6-6)
No. 19 Ohio State (11-2) at Purdue (8-5)
No. 21 Texas Tech (14-0) vs. UCF (8-4)
No. 22 Baylor (11-3) at Oklahoma State (12-2)

Thursday's games

No. 2 Texas (15-0) at Missouri (12-3)
No. 3 South Carolina (13-1) vs. Alabama (14-0)
No. 5 LSU (14-0) vs. No. 11 Kentucky (13-1)
No. 6 Michigan (10-1) at Washington (10-2)
No. 7 Maryland (13-0) at Illinois (12-1)
No. 8 Oklahoma (12-1) at Texas A&M (7-2)
No. 12 Vanderbilt (13-0) at Arkansas (11-4)
No. 13 Louisville (12-3) vs. SMU (7-6)
No. 14 Iowa (11-2) vs. No. 20 Nebraska (12-0)
No. 15 Ole Miss (13-2) vs. Georgia (13-0)
No. 16 North Carolina (11-3) vs. California (9-5)
No. 18 Notre Dame (9-2) at Georgia Tech (5-9)
No. 23 Tennessee (8-3) vs. Florida (12-3)
No. 24 Michigan State (12-1) at Indiana (11-2)

Saturday's games

No. 1 UConn (13-0) vs. Seton Hall (9-4)
No. 4 UCLA (12-1) vs. No. 17 USC (9-3)
No. 8 TCU (13-0) at Utah (10-3)
No. 21 Texas Tech (14-0) vs. Arizona (9-3)
No. 25 Princeton (12-1) at Penn (8-3)

Sunday's games

No. 2 Texas (15-0) vs. No. 15 Ole Miss (13-2)
No. 3 South Carolina (13-1) at Florida (12-3)
No. 5 LSU (14-0) at No. 12 Vanderbilt (13-0)
No. 7 Maryland (13-0) vs. Indiana (11-2)
No. 8 Oklahoma (12-1) vs. Mississippi State (13-1)
No. 10 Iowa State (13-0) vs. No. 22 Baylor (11-3)
No. 11 Kentucky (13-1) vs. Missouri (12-3)
No. 13 Louisville (12-3) vs. Virginia Tech (11-3)
No. 16 North Carolina (11-3) vs. Stanford (12-2)
No. 18 Notre Dame (9-2) at Duke (7-6)
No. 19 Ohio State (11-2) vs. Rutgers (8-5)
No. 20 Nebraska (12-0) vs. Purdue (8-5)
No. 23 Tennessee (8-3) at Auburn (10-3)
No. 24 Michigan State (12-1) vs. Illinois (12-1)

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

College Football Playoffs

Quarterfinals
Wednesday, Dec. 31
At Cotton Bowl

No. 2 Ohio St. (12-1) vs. No. 10 Miami (11-2)

Thursday, Jan. 1
At Orange Bowl

No. 4 Texas Tech (12-1) vs. No. 5 Oregon (12-1)

At Rose Bowl

No. 1 Indiana (13-0) vs. No. 11 Alabama (11-3)

At Sugar Bowl

No. 3 Georgia (12-1) vs. No. 6 Mississippi (12-1)

Semifinals
Thursday, Jan. 8
At Fiesta Bowl
Glendale, Ariz.

TBD

Friday, Jan. 9
At Peach Bowl
Atlanta

TBD

FCS playoffs

Championship
Monday, Jan. 5

Illinois St. vs. Montana St.

NCAA Division II playoffs

Championship
Sunday, Jan. 4

North Central vs. Wis.-River Falls

Bowl Glance

Dec. 27
Military Bowl

East Carolina 23, Pittsburgh 17

Pinstripe Bowl

Clemson 22, Penn St. 10

Fenway Bowl

Army 41, UConn 16

Pop-Tarts Bowl

No. 12 BYU 25, No. 24 Georgia Tech 21

Arizona Bowl

Fresno St. 18, Miami (OH) 3

New Mexico Bowl

No. 23 North Texas 49, San Diego St. 47

Gator Bowl

No. 20 Virginia 13, No. 25 Missouri 7

Texas Bowl

Houston 38, LSU 35

Dec. 29
Birmingham Bowl

Georgia Southern 29, Appalachian State 10

Dec. 30
Independence Bowl
Shreveport, La.

Coastal Carolina vs. Louisiana Tech

Music City Bowl
Nashville, Tenn.

Tennessee vs. Illinois

Alamo Bowl

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

PRO HOCKEY

NHL

EASTERN CONFERENCE
Atlantic Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Detroit	40	23	14	3	49	125	129
Tampa Bay	38	22	13	3	47	126	101
Montreal	38	20	12	6	46	127	129
Florida	38	21	15	2	44	124	121
Buffalo	38	20	14	4	44	120	120
Boston	40	20	18	2	42	124	132
Ottawa	38	18	15	5	41	125	124
Toronto	38	17	15	6	40	124	129

Metropolitan Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Carolina	38	24	11	3	51	129	110
N.Y. Islanders	39	21	14	4	46	111	108
Philadelphia	37	19	11	7	45	112	106
Washington	39	20	14	5	45	124	111
N.Y. Rangers	41	19	17	5	43	106	110
New Jersey	38	20	16	2	42	106	114
Pittsburgh	37	16	12	9	41	117	122
Columbus	38	17	15	6	40	116	128

WESTERN CONFERENCE
Central Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Colorado	38	29	2	7	65	153	87
Dallas	39	25	7	7	57	139	105
Minnesota	40	24	10	6	54	126	104
Utah	40	18	19	3	39	119	116
Nashville	38	17	17	4	38	109	127
St. Louis	40	15	17	8	38	100	137
Winnipeg	37	15	18	4	34	107	114
Chicago	38	14	18	6	34	106	124

Pacific Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Edmonton	40	20	14	6	46	135	132
Vegas	37	17	9	11	45	117	115
Anaheim	39	21	16	2	44	134	137
Los Angeles	38	16	13	9	41	99	102
San Jose	39	19	17	3	41	120	136
Seattle	37	16	14	7	39	95	111
Calgary	39	17	18	4	38	103	116
Vancouver	38	16	19	3	35	109	130

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.

Monday's games

Florida 5, Washington 3
Carolina 3, N.Y. Rangers 2, OT
Columbus 4, Ottawa 1
Edmonton 3, Winnipeg 1
Buffalo 4, St. Louis 2
Colorado 5, Los Angeles 2
Calgary 2, Boston 1, OT
Nashville 4, Utah 3
Minnesota 5, Vegas 2
San Jose 5, Anaheim 4
Vancouver 3, Seattle 2, SO

Tuesday's games

Carolina at Pittsburgh
Montreal at Florida
New Jersey at Toronto
N.Y. Islanders at Chicago
Philadelphia at Vancouver

Wednesday's games

N.Y. Rangers at Washington
Nashville at Vegas
Minnesota at San Jose
Tampa Bay at Anaheim
Winnipeg at Detroit
New Jersey at Columbus
Buffalo at Dallas
St. Louis at Colorado
Boston at Edmonton
Philadelphia at Calgary

Thursday's games

Washington at Ottawa
Utah at N.Y. Islanders
Detroit at Pittsburgh
Montreal at Carolina
Tampa Bay at Los Angeles
Winnipeg at Toronto
Dallas at Chicago
Nashville at Seattle

Friday's games

Vegas at St. Louis
N.Y. Rangers vs. Florida at LoanDepot Park
Minnesota at Anaheim
Seattle at Vancouver

Saturday's games

Pittsburgh at Detroit
Utah at New Jersey
Buffalo at Columbus
Philadelphia at Edmonton
Montreal at St. Louis
Tampa Bay at San Jose
Winnipeg at Ottawa
Toronto at N.Y. Islanders
Chicago at Washington
Colorado at Carolina
Nashville at Calgary
Minnesota at Los Angeles
Boston at Vancouver

Sunday's games

Montreal at Dallas
Pittsburgh at Columbus
Colorado at Florida
Carolina at New Jersey
Vegas at Chicago

DEALS

Monday's transactions

BASEBALL
Major League Baseball
American League

ATHLETICS — Agreed to terms with LF Tyler Soderstrom on a seven-year contract.

National League

MIAMI MARLINS — Acquired OF Esteury Ruiz from the Los Angeles Dodgers in exchange for RHP Adriano Marrero. Designated INF Eric Wagaman for assignment.

BASKETBALL
National Basketball Association

TORONTO RAPTORS — Signed C Mo Bamba to a rest-of-season contract.

FOOTBALL
National Football League

ATLANTA FALCONS — Promoted WR Chris Blair and OLB Khalid Kareem from the practice squad to the active roster.

BALTIMORE RAVENS — Reinstated G Ben Cleveland from the suspended list.

BUFFALO BILLS — Released K Michael Badgley from the practice squad.

GREEN BAY PACKERS — Claimed DT Jonathan Ford off waivers from Chicago.

HOUSTON TEXANS — Reinstated WR Justin Watson from injured reserve. Waived DE Solomon Byrd from the active roster.

INDIANAPOLIS COLTS — Signed QB Seth Henigan to the practice squad.

LOS ANGELES RAMS — Reinstated CB Roger McCreary from injured reserve.

MINNESOTA VIKINGS — Placed DL Elijah Williams on injured reserve. Promoted CB Zemaiah Vaughn from the practice squad to the active roster.

NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS — Released CB Miles Battle and OL Brenden Jaimes.

PHILADELPHIA EAGLES — Waived LS Charley Hughlett from the active roster.

PITTSBURGH STEELERS — Reinstated DT Daniel Ekuale from the suspended list. Signed DT Kyler Baugh to the practice squad. Released DB Daryl Porter from the practice squad.

SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS — Declined to activate QB Kurtis Rourke from the non-football injury list.

SEATTLE SEAHAWKS — Reinstated LB Derick Hall from the suspended list.

TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS — Waived RB Josh Williams from the active roster.

HOCKEY
National Hockey League

BOSTON BRUINS — Reinstated D Jonathan Aspirot from injured reserve.

CAROLINA HURRICANES — Recalled D Gavin Bayreuther from Chicago (AHL). Sent F Bradly Nadeau to Chicago. Claimed F Noah Philp off waivers from Edmonton.

EDMONTON OILERS — Reinstated D Connor Clattenburg from long-term injured reserve and sent him to Bakersfield (AHL).

OTTAWA SENATORS — Reinstated F Shane Pinto from injured reserve.

UTAH MAMMOTH — Recalled G Matt Villalta from Tucson (AHL). Placed G Karel Vejmelka on injured reserve.

SOCCER
Major League Soccer

LOS ANGELES FC — Acquired F Jacob Shaffelburg from Nashville SC in exchange for general allocation money.

LOS ANGELES GALAXY — Signed M Justin Haak to a one-year contract.

MINNESOTA UNITED — Acquired G Drake Callender from Charlotte FC in exchange for general allocation money.

NASHVILLE SC — Acquired general allocation money from Los Angeles FC in exchange for M Jacob Shaffelburg.

SAN JOSE EARTHQUAKES — Signed M Beau Leroux to a three-year contract.

AP ATHLETES OF THE YEAR

Ohtani named record 4th time

2-way MLB star ties Woods, Armstrong, LeBron with highest for male honorees

BY BETH HARRIS
Associated Press



BRYNN ANDERSON/AP

The Dodgers' Shohei Ohtani is introduced before Game 3 of the World Series against the Blue Jays on Oct. 27 in Los Angeles. Ohtani helped the Dodgers to a second straight championship.

PASADENA, Calif. — Shohei Ohtani is catching up with more legends.

The baseball superstar ends 2025 by winning The Associated Press Male Athlete of the Year for the fourth time, tying him with Tiger Woods, Lance Armstrong and LeBron James for most among male honorees.

"Receiving this award multiple times is something truly special," Ohtani said in Japanese in an exclusive interview with the AP.

Ohtani received 29 of 47 votes in balloting among sports journalists from the AP and its members after his two-way dominance culminated in a repeat World Series title for his Los Angeles Dodgers, delivering perhaps the greatest single-game individual performance in sports history along the way. He previously won the award in 2024, his first season with the Dodgers, and in 2023 and 2021, when he was with the Los Angeles Angels.

The AP honor has been given out since 1931. Multisport standout Babe Didrikson Zaharias won six times over the 1930s, '40s and '50s, the most by a man or woman.

The ultra-competitive Ohtani's latest win broke a tie with Michael Jordan, who along with Woods, he followed while growing up in Japan.

"Last year, I said I wanted to win this award again, and I will work hard so that I can win it again next year as well," he said.

Swedish-American pole vaulter Armand Duplantis, who won his third consecutive world title and has set the world record 14 times, including four times in 2025, was second with five votes in balloting announced Tuesday. Carlos Alcaraz, the world's top-ranked tennis player who won titles at the French and U.S. Opens, was third with four.

Two-way supremacy

Ohtani has shown remarkable consistency since joining the Dodgers on a then-record $700 million, 10-year contract in December 2023.

He won his fourth career Most Valuable Player award (second with the Dodgers) by unanimous vote, the first player in major league history to do so.

This year, he posted a 1.014 OPS and hit 55 home runs. Returning to the mound for the first time since 2023, he had a 2.87 ERA and 62 strikeouts in 47 innings over 14 starts.

Ohtani saved his best for the postseason.

In Game 4 of the National League Championship Series against the Milwaukee Brewers, he pitched six scoreless innings with 10 strikeouts and hit three home runs to earn MVP honors. He said it was his greatest game in a career full of incredible feats.

"If you think about it in terms of a single game, I'd say that's probably true," he said. "It was a crucial game in the postseason, and I personally feel I played quite well in that game."

Does he surprise himself?

"Well, yes, there are times when I feel that way about myself, and of course there are times when I think I'm not good enough," he said, "So I suppose athletes experience both kinds of feelings."

Another championship

Ohtani showed he's human in Game 7 of the World Series. He singled in the first inning and then took the mound on short rest, but he struggled with his command. He gave up a three-run homer to the Toronto Blue Jays' Bo Bichette along with five hits in 2⅓ innings.

But he and Los Angeles raised a second straight World Series trophy after outlasting Toronto in arguably the most scintillating Series in recent memory.

"Shohei obviously has the weight of the world on his shoulders as far as expectations, being probably the face of baseball, certainly when you're talking about the world," Dodgers manager Dave Roberts said after Game 7. "It's just really special what he's done. Just a great person and a great competitor."

Ohtani's presence has been transformative for MLB's global reach. Game 7 of this World Series averaged 13.1 million viewers in Japan, the most-watched World Series game on a single network there ever, and 51 million watched worldwide to make it the most-viewed since Game 7 of the 1991 World Series.

Getting better

"I think the higher your goals are, the more you have to do, and the more you want to do," Ohtani said. "If you're satisfied with where you are now, I don't think it's possible to achieve your goals without putting in the effort. So, setting goals high is what I believe is most important."

LA carefully managed Ohtani's return to pitching this year by gradually increasing his workload after rehabbing from elbow surgery in September 2023. His innings were initially capped before he was allowed to make longer starts as he felt better.

"When it comes to feeling nervous, being on the mound definitely makes me more tense," he said. "It's a position where you can single-handedly ruin a game, and at the same time, it's also a position where you can contribute to a win. So in my mind, I feel that being a pitcher is truly a special role."

At 31, Ohtani has undergone three major surgeries: two on his right elbow and another on his left shoulder. Regardless of the physical and mental wear and tear, he plans on remaining a two-way player his entire career.

"I think it's best to keep doing it right up until the moment I retire," he said.

Wilson wins following 4th WNBA MVP award

BY DOUG FEINBERG
Associated Press



RICK SCUTERI/AP

Las Vegas Aces center A'ja Wilson holds up her MVP trophy following Game 4 of the WNBA finals.

A'ja Wilson stood atop the WNBA again in 2025, winning an unprecedented fourth MVP as her Las Vegas Aces earned a third championship in four seasons.

For that, she earned The Associated Press Female Athlete of the Year on Wednesday for the first time in her career. It's the second consecutive year a basketball player won the award after Caitlin Clark was honored in 2024.

"It's an honor when you think about the group of women who have won before," Wilson said in a phone interview. "Just to have my name be a part of it, I'm blessed."

Wilson is only the fifth basketball player to be honored as the Female Athlete of the Year since it was first presented in 1931, joining Sheryl Swoopes (1993), Rebecca Lobo (1995), Candace Parker (2008, 2021) and Clark.

A group of 47 sports journalists from the AP and its members voted. Wilson received 17 votes, tennis star Aryna Sabalenka was second with nine and Paige Bueckers was third with five.

"The things she's done on the court have never been done. To me, she's in a category all her own," Las Vegas coach Becky Hammon said of Wilson. "People always ask who's on your Mount Rushmore? I'm saying she's on Everest — there's nobody up there with her."

Hammon has been impressed with everything about Wilson in her four years coaching the Aces.

"Her relatability, her being down to earth makes her a great superstar," Hammon said. "Her skill set is unmatched, but she's also the easiest player to coach. To have that mixture of humility, grace and skill, there's a reason why she's doing things that have never been done."

This season was different for Wilson and Las Vegas, which had cruised to its previous two titles as a heavy favorite. This year, with a month to go, the Aces were sitting at .500 and were in danger of missing the playoffs after coming off a record 53-point loss against Minnesota.

Wilson rallied her team to wins in the final 16 regular-season games to secure the No. 2 seed, and Las Vegas went on to win the championship.

"This season I found myself through the adversity and mud we went through," she said.

Despite her numbers being on par with her unanimous MVP season the year before, Wilson heard the chatter that she wasn't playing as well and that she wasn't the front-runner to repeat as the league's top player.

The 29-year-old used that as fuel on the court. She led the league with 23.4 points and 2.3 blocks per game.

"The way they talk about us, the way they talk about me, I'm ready for that, I'm ready for the noise," Wilson said. "It's always going to be something. If we sit here and try to please everybody, we're going to go insane. I'm just going to continue to prove why I'm one of the greatest and why my team is part of a dynamic dynasty."

Wilson raised her game even further in the playoffs, helping the Aces survive decisive winner-take-all games in the quarterfinals and semifinals. She then helped Las Vegas sweep Phoenix in the WNBA Finals, hitting the winning shot in Game 3.

"It's fair to say the expectations for her are so sky high now, she'll be compared to a degree to the unanimous MVP she was the year before," ESPN analyst Rebecca Lobo said. "Even though she wasn't unanimous MVP this year, the journey she had this season was different and she was playing the best basketball of her career in the playoffs.

"Every year, you wonder how she'll get better, and she always does."

Wilson became the first player in either the WNBA or NBA to win the MVP, Defensive Player of the Year, Finals MVP and lead the league in scoring in the same season.

Wilson broke a tie with Swoopes, Lisa Leslie and Lauren Jackson, who all won the WNBA MVP three times. She plans to have another relaxing offseason as she won't play overseas or in Unrivaled, the domestic 3-on-3 league.

Wilson became a free agent at the end of the season and could be in for a significant raise as the league and players union negotiate a new collective bargaining agreement, but she is widely expected to return to the Aces.

NBA

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
New York	23	9	.719	—
Boston	19	12	.613	3½
Toronto	20	14	.588	4
Philadelphia	16	14	.533	6
Brooklyn	10	20	.333	12

Southeast Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	18	15	.545	—
Miami	18	15	.545	—
Atlanta	15	19	.441	3½
Charlotte	11	21	.344	6½
Washington	7	24	.226	10

Central Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Detroit	24	8	.750	—
Cleveland	18	16	.529	7
Chicago	15	17	.469	9
Milwaukee	14	19	.424	10½
Indiana	6	27	.182	18½

Western Conference

Southwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
San Antonio	23	9	.719	—
Houston	20	10	.667	2
Memphis	15	17	.469	8
Dallas	12	22	.353	12
New Orleans	8	26	.235	16

Northwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Oklahoma City	28	5	.848	—
Denver	22	10	.688	5½
Minnesota	21	12	.636	7
Portland	14	19	.424	14
Utah	12	19	.387	15

Pacific Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Lakers	20	10	.667	—
Phoenix	19	13	.594	2
Golden State	17	16	.515	4½
L.A. Clippers	10	21	.323	10½
Sacramento	8	24	.250	13

Monday's games

Phoenix 115, Washington 101
Milwaukee 123, Charlotte 113
Miami 147, Denver 123
Toronto 107, Orlando 106
Golden State 120, Brooklyn 107
Minnesota 136, Chicago 101
Houston 126, Indiana 119
Oklahoma City 140, Atlanta 129
Cleveland 113, San Antonio 101
New York 130, New Orleans 125
Portland 125, Dallas 122

Tuesday's games

Philadelphia at Memphis
Boston at Utah
Detroit at L.A. Lakers
Sacramento at L.A. Clippers

Wednesday's games

Golden State at Charlotte
Minnesota at Atlanta
Orlando at Indiana
Phoenix at Cleveland
New Orleans at Chicago
New York at San Antonio
Denver at Toronto
Portland at Oklahoma City
Washington at Milwaukee

Thursday's games

Houston at Brooklyn
Miami at Detroit
Philadelphia at Dallas
Boston at Sacramento
Utah at L.A. Clippers

Friday's games

San Antonio at Indiana
Brooklyn at Washington
Denver at Cleveland
Atlanta at New York
Portland at New Orleans
Orlando at Chicago
Charlotte at Milwaukee
Sacramento at Phoenix
Oklahoma City at Golden St.
Memphis at L.A. Lakers

Saturday's games

Minnesota at Miami
Philadelphia at New York
Atlanta at Toronto
Charlotte at Chicago
Portland at San Antonio
Houston at Dallas
Utah at Golden St.
Boston at L.A. Clippers

Sunday's games

Detroit at Cleveland
Indiana at Orlando
Denver at Brooklyn
New Orleans at Miami
Minnesota at Washington
Oklahoma City at Phoenix
Milwaukee at Sacramento
Memphis at L.A. Lakers

2025 has been a year of the injured

Top players such as Jokic join the rising wave of hurt players

By Tim Reynolds
Associated Press

MIAMI — Indiana's Tyrese Haliburton is going to miss the entire season because of the torn Achilles he suffered in Game 7 of the NBA Finals. Boston's Jayson Tatum — who hopes otherwise — might also miss the whole season after tearing his Achilles in the playoffs last spring. Milwaukee's Giannis Antetokounmpo, the Los Angeles Lakers' LeBron James and Oklahoma City's Jalen Williams have all missed big chunks of time this season with various injuries.

And now, Denver's Nikola Jokic is going to miss some time as well.

Nobody — not even those six All-NBA players from last season — is immune from the injury bug this season.

The final day of 2025 is Wednesday and from an NBA health perspective, it might be time to say good riddance to these 12 months. Some of the league's biggest names have dealt with significant injury issues in this calendar year, and in many cases those woes are carrying over into 2026.

"It sucks," Denver coach David Adelman said after Jokic was hurt.

He's not wrong.

Jokic got hurt Monday night in Miami, on a play with about three seconds left in the first half where he would have been better off just doing nothing.

It seemed like he was trying to help a teammate defend a drive, got his foot stepped on in the process, hyperextended his left knee and now Nuggets fans — from Denver to Serbia and all points in between — are waiting to hear the team announce the severity of the injury. The best-case scenario probably would be for Jokic to miss only a few weeks, which could be the case if there's no serious structural damage.

But in the NBA, when the games basically come every other day on average, even missing just one month could mean missing 15 or more games.

It feels like a ton of guys are hurt. The NBA says the actual numbers say otherwise.

"The data we have so far this season is we have the lowest number of injuries in the last three years," NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said this month.

"I'll stop there and say, regardless where the level of injuries stands versus prior years, of course the soft tissue injuries concern us. All injuries concern us, for that matter. The most frustrating issue right now, and the one that we have seemingly the least control over, is keeping star players on the floor.

"I think we have made progress," he added. "We've made adjustments in scheduling. We've made adjustments in the sharing of information among teams. We've made adjustments in the care of players."

All that is true. This is also true: The NBA, even with all its power, can't control luck. Sometimes, a guy gets stepped on and his knee doesn't move the way it's supposed to move.

"Next man up," Nuggets guard Jamal Murray said.

That is the phrase heard in probably every locker room in the world when a player gets injured, but the reality is there's no way the Nuggets can replace Jokic because three-time MVPs aren't exactly easy to find.

Here are only some of the big names, the award-candidate-type names, the All-Star-level names who missed a lot of games in 2025, whether it was this season or last or both: Philadelphia's Joel Embiid and Paul George, Dallas' Kyrie Irving and Anthony Davis, San Antonio's Victor Wembanyama, Sacramento's Domantas Sabonis, Miami's Tyler Herro, the Los Angeles Clippers' Bradley Beal, Denver's Aaron Gordon, Atlanta's Trae Young and New Orleans' Zion Williamson.

And remember, they only get added to the roster of injured that already includes Haliburton, Tatum, James, Williams, Antetokounmpo and now Jokic.

"It's frustrating," Silver said. "It's frustrating for our teams. It's frustrating for our fans. But I do think we have to be true to what the evidence is as opposed to saying there's a narrative out there that injuries are up or injuries are up because of scheduling. They're not. But we continue to slice and dice the data in every way we can, plus we look at qualitative information. People who have been around this game for a long time, what are they seeing? Are players training differently? Are there better techniques out there to keep players healthier?"

It'll be a great day when the NBA and other leagues can get some answers. Maybe some clues will come in 2026.



Lynne Sladky/AP

Denver Nuggets center Nikola Jokic, right, attempts to stop a drive from Miami Heat forward Jaime Jaquez Jr. during the first half on Monday in Miami. Jokic suffered an ankle injury later during the game.

> **"It's frustrating for our teams. It's frustrating for our fans."**
>
> **Adam Silver**
> NBA Commissioner



Sam Hodde/AP

Denver Nuggets forward Cameron Johnson winces from an injury during the fourth quarter against the Dallas Mavericks on Dec. 23 in Dallas.

Leaders

Through Monday

Scoring

	G	FG	FT	PTS	AVG
Doncic, LAL	23	240	216	775	33.7
Gil.-Alex., OKC	31	338	250	991	32.0
Maxey, PHI	28	294	170	860	30.7
Mitchell, CLE	30	318	151	906	30.2
Jokic, DEN	31	330	201	927	29.9
Brown, BOS	29	316	169	861	29.7
Brunson, NY	28	292	157	825	29.5

Assists

	G	FG	FT
Jokic, DEN	32	351	11.0
Cunningham, DET	29	279	9.6
Giddey, CHI	30	270	9.0
Doncic, LAL	23	198	8.6
Johnson, ATL	30	253	8.4

Rebounding

	G	OFF	DEF	TOT	AVG
Jokic, DEN	32	97	292	389	12.2
Towns, NY	30	91	265	356	11.9
Zubac, LAC	28	96	216	312	11.1
Gobert, MIN	33	128	234	362	11.0
Duren, DET	29	126	191	317	10.9
Clingan, POR	29	130	177	307	10.6
Ware, MIA	33	113	236	349	10.6

NFL

Harbaugh hoping QB Jackson can return for Ravens' finale

By Noah Trister
Associated Press

OWINGS MILLS, Md. — John Harbaugh said he had some coaches and players over to watch the Pittsburgh-Cleveland game that could have eliminated his Baltimore Ravens from the playoffs.

When the Browns won, saving Baltimore's season for now, the reaction was what you'd expect.

"It was uncorked man. It was raucous," Harbaugh said. "It was great. Everybody was jumping around and fired up and happy. A lot of hugging."

Now it's time to get back to business for the Ravens, who improbably have a chance to win the AFC North on Sunday night when they play at the Steelers. To stay alive, Baltimore needed a win at Green Bay last weekend and a loss by Pittsburgh. Both those results happened.

The Ravens (8-8) managed to beat the Packers 41-24 on Saturday night despite Lamar Jackson's absence. Jackson has been nursing a back injury, but Tyler Huntley improved to 2-0 as the starting quarterback this season and Derrick Henry ran for 216 yards and four touchdowns.

Then Cleveland pulled off a 13-6 upset against the Steelers on Sunday. Harbaugh said he wasn't watching that game like a coach.

"I'm in fan mode to be honest with you," he said. "I'm complaining about the play calls."

Harbaugh said he'll have a better sense Wednesday about Jackson's status for this next game, but the Baltimore coach shot down the idea that Huntley's success would make the Ravens at all hesitant to bring back Jackson.

> **"If Lamar's ready to go, he's playing."**
>
> **John Harbaugh**
> Baltimore Ravens head coach

"The fact that we have a lot of confidence in Tyler is a real big positive, a real plus, but it doesn't factor into whether Lamar plays," Harbaugh said. "If Lamar's ready to go, he's playing."

Jackson has missed four games this season because of hamstring and back problems, but he played earlier this month when Baltimore lost at home to Pittsburgh, 27-22.

The rematch will be the final game of the entire NFL regular season — a major showcase on national television.

That's after both teams struggled for much of the season and neither was able to pull away with the division.

"It's a great opportunity. We'll be playing a division championship game on Sunday," Harbaugh said. "We've worked hard to get to this position. There's a lot of different paths in football, and there's a lot of different paths in life, and this is the path of the 2025 season. So here we are, and our goal is to make the most of it."

Baltimore Ravens (8-8)
at Pittsburgh Steelers (9-7)
AFN-Sports
2:15 a.m. Monday CET
10:15 a.m. Monday JKT

It's the second straight season the Steelers and Ravens are playing an elimination game. Baltimore beat Pittsburgh 28-14 in the playoffs back in January.

If Jackson is able to play, this will be a chance for him to move past a rocky stretch. He hurt his hamstring in Week 4, and by the time he came back, the Ravens were 2-5. They won their first four games after his return, but he dealt with other health issues and still hasn't had a full week of practice since early November.

Losses at home to Cincinnati, Pittsburgh and New England meant Baltimore was facing elimination when it went to Green Bay, and Jackson missed the second half of the game against the Patriots. He wasn't able to play against the Packers, but Harbaugh said there was progress last week with his back injury.

"It was not good at all early in the week, and it improved as the week went on," Harbaugh said. "That was cause for optimism."

49ers in position for NFC's top seed

By Josh Dubow
Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — When defensive stars Nick Bosa and Fred Warner went down with long-term injuries early in the season, it seemed like any chance for the San Francisco 49ers to contend for a title went away, too.

Yet somehow, San Francisco heads into a showdown against Seattle in the regular-season finale with the opportunity to clinch the No. 1 seed in the NFC playoffs with a win against the Seahawks.

"Back when Fred got hurt, if you told anybody we'd be 12-4 and be battling Week 18 for that one seed, you're absolutely crazy," fullback Kyle Juszczyk said. "Nobody would've believed you. So it's been a special season already, and one I definitely don't take for granted. But we're not done. I have all the confidence in the world that we can get this thing done."

The 49ers (12-4) are in position get home-field advantage for a postseason that will end with the Super Bowl on their home field Feb. 8 after holding off Chicago in a thrilling 42-38 win Sunday night.

Seattle Seahawks (13-3)
at San Francisco 49ers (12-4)
AFN-Sports
2:05 a.m. Sunday CET
10:05 a.m. Sunday JKT

They will have a quick turnaround, with the game against Seattle moved to Saturday night to get a national television window.

"It's a hell of a deal to have the opportunity to play for the one seed," coach Kyle Shanahan said. "These guys have earned it. We've got to go to bed early and get ready to come back because we found out it's Saturday, so it's going to happen soon."

Brock Purdy overcame a pick-6 on the opening play from scrimmage to become the seventh player ever to post back-to-back games with at least five combined touchdowns passing and rushing.

Purdy threw for 303 yards and three scores — including a late, go-ahead strike to Jauan Jennings — and ran for two scores to lead San Francisco to its sixth straight win since he returned from a toe injury.

Purdy has thrown for 893 yards with 11 TD passes, two TD runs and a 131.5 passer rating in the last three games for the Niners.

"I thought Brock had a hell of a game, again," Shanahan said. "He made some huge plays in this game, kept some drives alive with his legs, made some off-schedule plays and was an assassin out there throughout the whole day."

Weekly statistics

AFC individual leaders

Quarterbacks

	Att	Com	Yds	TD	Int
Maye, NE	474	340	4203	30	8
Nix, Den	589	374	3790	25	11
Lawrence, Jac	530	319	3752	26	12
Herbert, LAC	512	340	3727	26	13
Allen, Buf	460	319	3668	25	10
Mahomes, KC	502	315	3587	22	11
C.Ward, Ten	537	320	3117	15	7
D.Jones, Ind	384	261	3101	19	8

Rushers

	Att	Yds	Avg	LG	TD
Cook, Buf	307	1606	5.2	64t	12
Taylor, Ind	309	1559	5.0	83t	18
Henry, Bal	287	1469	5.1	59	16
Achane, Mia	238	1350	5.7	59t	8
Etienne, Jac	246	1075	4.4	71	7
Hall, NYJ	243	1065	4.4	59t	4
Pollard, Ten	228	1034	4.5	65t	5
C.Brown, Cin	219	947	4.3	37	6
Warren, Pit	197	892	4.5	45t	6
Jeanty, Las	240	888	3.7	64t	5

Receivers

	No	Yds	Avg	LG	TD
Chase, Cin	117	1316	11.2	64t	7
Collins, Hou	71	1117	15.7	57t	6
Flowers, Bal	82	1073	13.1	56	3
Sutton, Den	73	1012	13.9	52t	7
Diggs, NE	82	970	11.8	33	4
Waddle, Mia	64	910	14.2	46t	6
Pierce, Ind	43	871	20.3	50	4
Metcalf, Pit	59	850	14.4	80t	6
Kelce, KC	73	839	11.5	44	5
Meyers, Jac	70	791	11.3	50	3

Punters

	No	Yds	Lg	Avg
Rehkow, Cin	60	3063	70	51.1
Stout, Bal	49	2466	74	50.3

Scoring Touchdowns

	TD	Rush	Rec	Ret	Pts
Taylor, Ind	20	18	2	0	120
Henry, Bal	16	16	0	0	96

Kicking

	PAT	FG	LG	Pts
Dicker, LAC	34/35	37/40	59	145
Fairbairn, Hou	26/26	38/42	57	140
C.Little, Jac	45/46	28/32	68	129

Kickoff Returners

	No	Yds	Avg	LG	TD
R.Davis, Buf	30	921	30.7	97t	1
I.Williams, NYJ	23	695	30.2	83	0

NFC individual leaders

Quarterbacks

	Att	Com	Yds	TD	Int
Prescott, Dal	589	397	4482	30	10
Goff, Det	536	366	4233	33	7
Stafford, LAR	519	341	4179	40	5
Darnold, Sea	451	303	3850	25	14
Ca.Williams, Chi	535	310	3730	25	6
Mayfield, TB	521	327	3490	25	10
Love, GB	439	291	3381	23	6
Hurts, Phi	454	294	3224	25	6

Rushers

	Att	Yds	Avg	LG	TD
B.Robinson, Atl	250	1250	5.0	81t	6
J.Williams, Dal	252	1201	4.8	66	11
McCaffrey, SF	303	1179	3.9	41	10
Gibbs, Det	224	1143	5.1	78t	13
Barkley, Phi	280	1140	4.1	65t	7
K.Williams, LAR	234	1100	4.7	34	10
Dowdle, Car	229	1066	4.7	53	6
Swift, Chi	213	1047	4.9	25	9
Walker, Sea	205	930	4.5	55t	5
Jacobs, GB	234	929	4.0	40t	13

Receivers

	No	Yds	Avg	LG	TD
Smith-Njigb., Sea	113	1709	15.1	63t	10
Nacua, LAR	114	1592	14.0	58	8
Pickens, Dal	92	1420	15.4	45	9
St. Brown, Det	106	1262	11.9	52	11
McBride, Ari	119	1174	9.9	31	11
Olave, NO	100	1163	11.6	62t	9
Lamb, Dal	74	1073	14.5	74t	3
J.Williams, Det	59	1043	17.7	64	7
Robinson, NYG	92	1014	11.0	50	4
A.Brown, Phi	78	1003	12.9	45	7

Punters

	No	Yds	Lg	Avg
Whelan, GB	41	2102	72	51.3
Mann, Phi	69	3476	70	50.4

Scoring Touchdowns

	TD	Rush	Rec	Ret	Pts
Gibbs, Det	17	13	4	0	102
McCaffrey, SF	17	10	7	0	102

Kicking

	PAT	FG	LG	Pts
Myers, Sea	47/47	39/44	57	164
Aubrey, Dal	45/46	35/40	64	150
Bates, Det	53/55	23/29	59	122

Kickoff Returners

	No	Yds	Avg	LG	TD
McCaffrey, Was	26	769	29.6	58	0
Moore, SF	33	907	27.5	98	0

AFC team statistics

Average per game

Offense

	Yards	Rush	Pass
New England	374.5	121.8	252.8
Buffalo	370.4	156.4	214.0
Denver	349.1	118.9	230.2
Indianapolis	345.4	120.7	224.7
L.A. Chargers	341.1	122.1	219.0
Jacksonville	338.5	118.2	220.2
Baltimore	330.5	157.8	172.7
Kansas City	330.2	108.0	222.2
Cincinnati	327.0	90.6	236.4
Houston	326.2	107.4	218.9
Miami	308.2	123.8	184.4
Pittsburgh	300.4	103.5	196.9
N.Y. Jets	272.4	126.7	145.8
Cleveland	266.0	95.7	170.3
Tennessee	263.7	94.5	169.2
Las Vegas	247.8	74.9	172.8

Defense

	Yards	Rush	Pass
Houston	272.4	94.8	177.6
Cleveland	278.6	114.8	163.8
Denver	282.1	89.7	192.4
L.A. Chargers	288.1	104.7	183.4
New England	302.4	104.1	198.3
Buffalo	303.8	140.4	163.4
Kansas City	307.6	104.9	202.7
Jacksonville	310.5	86.1	224.4
Las Vegas	327.2	118.9	208.3
Miami	342.0	125.5	216.5
Tennessee	346.8	117.8	229.0
N.Y. Jets	348.4	135.0	213.4
Indianapolis	350.5	99.9	250.6
Baltimore	352.3	107.1	245.2
Pittsburgh	356.8	111.6	245.2
Cincinnati	392.2	148.9	243.3

NFC team statistics

Average per game

Offense

	Yards	Rush	Pass
Dallas	398.6	124.6	274.0
L.A. Rams	396.7	126.3	270.5
Chicago	375.8	149.4	226.3
Detroit	369.4	119.9	249.5
San Francisco	362.6	110.2	252.3
Seattle	350.8	119.8	231.0
Green Bay	345.8	119.3	226.5
Atlanta	340.5	124.7	215.9
N.Y. Giants	330.6	127.1	203.4
Arizona	326.3	94.0	232.3
Washington	321.6	134.2	187.4
Tampa Bay	319.3	112.9	206.4
New Orleans	311.9	93.4	218.5
Philadelphia	311.5	119.2	192.2
Carolina	296.2	122.4	173.9
Minnesota	269.5	106.5	163.0

Defense

	Yards	Rush	Pass
Minnesota	292.7	123.9	168.8
Seattle	292.9	94.4	198.6
New Orleans	305.5	125.1	180.4
Green Bay	308.6	116.5	192.1
Philadelphia	316.7	123.2	193.4
Atlanta	323.3	128.2	195.1
Carolina	326.6	122.2	204.3
L.A. Rams	327.1	105.7	221.3
Detroit	335.8	117.6	218.1
San Francisco	338.9	103.3	235.6
Tampa Bay	340.5	104.1	236.4
Arizona	355.4	125.9	229.4
Chicago	357.3	135.3	222.0
N.Y. Giants	364.1	145.4	218.7
Dallas	376.8	123.2	253.6
Washington	389.1	145.7	243.4

NFL

Scoreboard

American Conference

East

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-New England	13	3	0	.813	452	310
x-Buffalo	11	5	0	.688	446	357
e-Miami	7	9	0	.438	337	386
e-N.Y. Jets	3	13	0	.188	292	468

South

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
x-Jacksonville	12	4	0	.750	433	329
x-Houston	11	5	0	.688	366	265
e-Indianapolis	8	8	0	.500	436	374
e-Tennessee	3	13	0	.188	277	437

North

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Pittsburgh	9	7	0	.563	371	363
Baltimore	8	8	0	.500	400	372
e-Cincinnati	6	10	0	.375	396	472
e-Cleveland	4	12	0	.250	259	361

West

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-Denver	13	3	0	.813	382	308
x-L.A. Chargers	11	5	0	.688	365	321
e-Kansas City	6	10	0	.375	350	314
e-Las Vegas	2	14	0	.125	227	420

National Conference

East

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-Philadelphia	11	5	0	.688	362	301
e-Dallas	7	8	1	.469	454	477
e-Washington	4	12	0	.250	332	434
e-N.Y. Giants	3	13	0	.188	347	422

South

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
Carolina	8	8	0	.500	297	364
Tampa Bay	7	9	0	.438	364	397
e-Atlanta	7	9	0	.438	334	384
e-New Orleans	6	10	0	.375	289	364

North

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
y-Chicago	11	5	0	.688	425	396
x-Green Bay	9	6	1	.594	388	344
e-Minnesota	8	8	0	.500	328	330
e-Detroit	8	8	0	.500	462	397

West

	W	L	T	Pct	PF	PA
x-Seattle	13	3	0	.813	470	289
x-San Francisco	12	4	0	.750	434	358
x-L.A. Rams	11	5	0	.688	481	326
e-Arizona	3	13	0	.188	335	451

e-Eliminated from playoffs
x-clinched playoff spot
y-clinched division

Thursday's games

Dallas 30, Washington 23
Minnesota 23, Detroit 10
Denver 20, Kansas City 13

Saturday's games

Houston 20, L.A. Chargers 16
Baltimore 41, Green Bay 24

Sunday's games

Cincinnati 37, Arizona 14
Cleveland 13, Pittsburgh 6
Jacksonville 23, Indianapolis 17
Miami 20, Tampa Bay 17
New England 42, N.Y. Jets 10
New Orleans 34, Tennessee 26
Seattle 27, Carolina 10
N.Y. Giants 34, Las Vegas 10
Philadelphia 13, Buffalo 12
San Francisco 42, Chicago 38

Monday's game

Atlanta 27, L.A. Rams 24

Saturday, Jan. 3

Carolina at Tampa Bay
Seattle at San Francisco

Sunday, Jan. 4

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

Wild Card playoffs

Jan. 10-12

Divisional playoffs

Jan. 17-18

INTs cost Rams, Stafford's MVP case

By Bill Trocchi
Associated Press

ATLANTA — Matthew Stafford reached a career milestone, though his three interceptions hurt the Rams' chances of winning a game and perhaps his own of winning the NFL's MVP.

Stafford set a career high in touchdown passes in a season with 42 when he hit Puka Nakua for an 11-yard score with 2:46 to play, but the Falcons answered with a 51-yard field goal with 21 seconds left and upset the Rams 27-24 on Monday night.

Stafford was 22 for 38 for 269 yards with two touchdowns and a season-high three interceptions, one of which was returned for a touchdown. It was the quarterback's first three-interception game since Week 1 of the 2022 season.

"He's a total stud," Rams coach Sean McVay said. "We wouldn't be in a lot of the great situations we're in without him. But tonight was, it was a night that he's capable of playing better."

Stafford helped rally the Rams from a 24-3 second-half deficit to tie the score at 24 on his scoring toss to Nakua. His first touchdown was a 27-yard pass to Terrence Ferguson in the third quarter that pulled the Rams within 24-10.

Stafford was also sacked three times, which matched a season high, but didn't feel like the Falcons' pressure was overwhelming.



Brynn Anderson / AP

Los Angeles Rams quarterback Matthew Stafford, left, scrambles from Atlanta Falcons linebacker Khalid Kareem in the second half on Monday in Atlanta. Stafford is a contender for league MVP.

"Every week is a new challenge," Stafford said. "Just because you play good one week doesn't mean you're going to play good the next, and vice versa. So just got to go out there and continue to trust what we've done all year, and then we got to just show up and make the plays on game day."

Stafford's previous high for touchdowns in a season was 41, which he accomplished twice. He had 41 in 2011 with the Lions and in 2021 with the Rams.

MVP Race

Stafford was the betting favorite to win the first MVP award of his 17-year career ahead of Patriots second-year quarterback Drake Maye. On Sunday, Maye had a near-perfect afternoon against the Jets, presumably closing the gap on Stafford. Maye was 19 for 21 for 256 yards and five touchdowns in New York as the Patriots rolled to a 42-10 win. He played the first six possessions of the game and led the Patriots to six touchdowns.

Stafford is averaging 278 passing yards per game to Maye's 262.7, has 42 passing TDs to Maye's 30 and the quarterbacks are even with eight interceptions apiece. Maye's big day against the Jets pulled him virtually even with Stafford in passer rating prior to the Falcons game.

Maye also has 409 rushing yards and four rushing touchdowns while Stafford has -2 rushing yards and no rushing touchdowns on the season. Maye's completion percentage, which leads the NFL, is 71.7 to Stafford's 65.2 (18th).

The Patriots clinched the AFC East on Sunday and enter Week 18 with a 13-3 record, while Stafford's Rams are 11-5 and will enter the playoffs as a wild card.

The Patriots will close the regular season at home against the Dolphins and still have a shot at the No. 1 seed in the AFC, so Maye figures to play. Los Angeles will host the Arizona Cardinals and McVay said Monday his starters will play.

Bucs' playoff chances still alive despite 4th straight loss

By Alanis Thames
Associated Press

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — Tampa Bay Buccaneers linebacker Lavonte David delivered a speech to his teammates in the locker room following Sunday's 20-17 loss to the Miami Dolphins.

Baker Mayfield wanted to keep the contents of that message in-house, but the quarterback of the reeling Buccaneers indicated that the veteran's words were clear that their playoff chances are still alive.

"Here's the thing," Mayfield said. "We still have a chance next week. We've been blessed with a chance next week, and guys need to handle it the right way. Lavonte spoke to the team after the game and hit the nail on the head, so we've got to respond."

The Buccaneers (7-9) have won the NFC South the past four years and have made six consecutive playoff appearances, but both streaks are in jeopardy because of a dismal stretch in which they've lost seven of their past eight games and four straight.

They were close to snapping their skid on Sunday. After falling behind 17-7 to the Dolphins, who

Carolina Panthers (8-8) at Tampa Bay Buccaneers (7-9)
AFN-Sports
10:30 p.m.Saturday CET
6:30 a.m. Sunday JKT

are already eliminated from the postseason, Tampa Bay pulled within three points with 54 seconds left on Mike Evans' 4-yard touchdown catch.

"We didn't deserve it," Evans said. "They played like they had a chance at the playoffs, and we played like we were ready to go home."

The Bucs are still alive in the postseason hunt, however, with the Carolina Panthers' 27-10 loss to Seattle on Sunday setting up a key Week 18 matchup between the division rivals.

The Buccaneers would still clinch their fifth consecutive division title and a playoff berth if they beat Carolina (8-8) in next week's regular-season finale to force a



Lynne Sladky / AP

Tampa Bay Buccaneers wide receiver Jalen McMillan, left, is tackled by Dolphins cornerback Jack Jones during the first half on Sunday in Miami Gardens, Fla.

two-way tie. If Tampa Bay, Carolina and Atlanta all tie at 8-9, the Panthers would win the division. The Falcons beat the Rams on Monday night and play the Saints on Sunday.

"We have to get ourselves together before we worry about anybody else," said Buccaneers coach Todd Bowles. "Carolina or anybody else. We're just shooting ourselves in the foot at every chance. That starts with me, I've got to coach them better. They've got to play better, and then we've got to figure out how we can stop making our mistakes to move on. So if we play and do the things we did today next week, we won't be going anywhere."

The Buccaneers have just two wins since beating playoff-bound San Francisco 30-19 on Oct 12 to put Tampa Bay at 5-1. They fell one game behind Carolina in the division following a 23-20 loss against the Panthers last week.

Mayfield began the season in MVP conversations but has struggled during this recent stretch. He has thrown an interception in each of the past four games, including two on Sunday, and has failed to record 200 yards passing in five of his past seven games.

Mayfield, who threw for 145 yards with a touchdown and interception at Carolina last week, said he hopes that playing at home will give Tampa Bay an advantage.

"We need to rebound from this, hit the reset button," he said. "Like Todd said, erase it. It's about us executing. Listen, to have a chance at home to get in the playoffs and win the division, wouldn't have it any other way."

COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF



LYNNE SLADKY/AP

Miami quarterback Carson Beck (11) passes the football during the first half of an NCAA college football game against North Carolina State, Saturday, Nov. 15, 2025, in Miami Gardens, Fla.

Ex-backup QBs Beck, Sayin now seek titles as starters

BY STEPHEN HAWKINS
Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Texas — Heisman Trophy finalist Julian Sayin and Carson Beck have already been part of national championship teams. Both quarterbacks are now trying to win a title of their own as a starter.

"Obviously to be a part of a championship team and then lead a championship team are two totally different things," said Beck, the Miami quarterback who spent the previous five seasons with Georgia. "It's everything that I've ever worked for."



Sayin

Beck's chance to do that in his final college season is with the Hurricanes (11-2, CFP No. 10 seed) after they made the College Football Playoff for the first time.

Their quarterfinal game in the Cotton Bowl on New Year's Eve is against Ohio State. Sayin is the starter for the Buckeyes (12-1, CFP No. 2 seed) after being a freshman backup behind Will Howard for their national title last season.

"Growing up, I always wanted to play on the biggest stage," Sayin said. "So it's been awesome ... just developing and gaining confidence throughout each week and just building that into the next week."

Beck with Bulldogs

Georgia won back-to-back national titles in 2021 and 2022 when Stetson Bennett was the starting QB. Beck's only snaps in those playoff games came late in the 65-7 win over TCU in the second one.

The Bulldogs then went undefeated in the 2023 regular season after Beck became the starter, but lost the SEC championship game to Alabama and were left out of the last four-team playoff. They got back to the SEC championship game and won last year, but he suffered an elbow injury before halftime that required surgery. He missed their playoff game and transferred to Miami, where he couldn't throw in spring practice.

"It's been an unreal journey, honestly, and nobody knows half the story of the things that I've had to go through and the adversities I've had to face and push through," he said. "But for this full-circle moment and be in this position, and with this team and these guys and these coaches, it's meant the world to me."

Beck is 35-5 as an FBS starter, an .875 winning percentage that is the best for any active player with at least five games. He won his first CFP start in the Hurricanes' first-round win at Texas A&M on Dec. 20.

"He's just amazing as a quarterback, not only as a quarterback, but as a friend in the locker room, too," Miami's AP All-America tackle Francis Mauigoa said.

Sayin to Smith

Sayin initially signed with Alabama in December 2023, and the five-star prospect had started classes on the Tuscaloosa campus the month after before entering the transfer portal and going to Ohio State and through that spring with the Buckeyes.

No. 10 Miami (11-2)
at No. 2 Ohio State (12-1)
Cotton Bowl
AFN-Sports
1:30 a.m. Thursday CET
9:30 a.m. Thursday JKT

"A special, special quarterback, best in the country to me," Ohio State All-America sophomore receiver Jeremiah Smith said. "Can make any and every throw, just is precise with everything. Probably the smartest person I've ever been around. ... I always knew that he was going to be the starter here with the way he practiced, the way he did everything."

Sayin just kept working and learning last season from Howard.

"Seeing (Howard), the way he prepared last year in the playoffs, and was able to play his best football when it mattered the most," Sayin said. "As a quarterback, and as coach (Ryan) Day says, the best players are their best in the biggest games."

The Cotton Bowl will be Sayin's first CFP game, and will be about 3½ weeks after his only loss as a starter, to No. 1 Indiana in a Big Ten championship game matchup of undefeated teams. Sayin completed 21 of 29 passes for 258 yards with a TD and interception in that game.

Seeds: Indiana got even better following previous season's big turnaround

FROM PAGE 48

"There's not a game that's gone by where I'm not involved or listening to every call and making sure it's what we've agreed upon going in (to the game)," Day said, explaining why he's taking over the playcalling from new South Florida coach Brian Hartline. "So it's similar to the way it was before."

The other quarterfinal matchup pits Texas Tech (12-1), the Big 12 champion, against Oregon (11-1).

Indiana (13-0) never lost its focus in 2025, thanks partly to second-year coach Curt Cignetti but mostly because the Hoosiers' returning contingent — players such as linebacker Aiden Fisher, defensive end Mikail Kamara and receivers Elijah Sarratt and Omar Cooper Jr. — wouldn't allow it.

Neither did the newcomers such as Mendoza and starting center Pat Coogan, who immediately embraced Indiana's mission to avenge the two losses that tainted Cignetti's otherwise flawless first season: At eventual national champion Ohio State and at eventual national runner-up Notre Dame.

Outsiders entered this season wondering whether the remarkable turnaround of the losingest football program in Football Bowl Subdivision history was merely a one-hit wonder. Yet with each passing week, the Hoosiers answered the challenge, turning some doubters into believers.

"For us, it's not really three weeks of being off, it's more so about getting better at what you do right now," Fisher said. "And when the time comes to scout another opponent, you'll be an even better player and in a better situation to do that. I think that's a big thing."

No. 9 Alabama (11-3)
at No. 1 Indiana (13-0)
Rose Bowl
AFN-Sports
10:10 p.m. Thursday CET
6:10 a.m. Friday JKT

Now comes the toughest test so far: A game at the Rose Bowl against Alabama, which has won six national championships since 2009. Cignetti is a former Crimson Tide assistant while Alabama coach Kalen DeBoer is a former Indiana assistant.

"We understand we've got a great football team with Indiana," DeBoer said. "Coach Cignetti, just what he's done is amazing here these last two years, just building the program as quickly as he's done to the level it's at. Really looking forward to us diving back into our process here, getting back to work."

So far, the Hoosiers have met every challenge with late scores to win at Iowa, at Oregon and at Penn State before upsetting then top-ranked Ohio State on Dec. 6. Cignetti has relied on those lessons to help his team through his long layoff.

"Until we knew the opponent, we treated it like two bye weeks. Now we have almost two weeks to prepare for the opponent," he said last week. "Would I prefer to play earlier? Yeah, I probably would, to be quite honest with you. But that's not the case. We're excited about playing. We're off to a good start, and it will be a tremendous challenge."



JULIO CORTEZ/AP

Texas Tech linebacker Ben Roberts celebrates after making a tackle during the Big 12 title game against BYU on Dec. 6 in Arlington, Texas.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF



JAMES PUGH/AP

Mississippi State linebacker Nevaeh Sanders applies pressure as Georgia quarterback Gunner Stockton throws the ball away during the second half in Starkville, Miss. on Nov. 8.

Ole Miss defense seeks redemption after earlier humiliation by Georgia

BY CHRIS BURROWS
Associated Press

No. 6 Mississippi (12-1) vs. No. 3 Georgia (12-1)
AFN-Sports
2:10 a.m. Friday CET
10:10 a.m. Friday JKT

Redemption will be on the minds of Mississippi Rebels defensive players when they meet third-ranked Georgia at Thursday's Sugar Bowl in the quarterfinals of the College Football Playoff.

"We all wanted to play them again," said Ole Miss defensive back Wydett Williams Jr., whose unit labored through a season-worst performance during a 43-35 loss at Georgia earlier this season. "We're happy we get to play them."

Georgia (12-1), the Southeastern Conference champions and third seed in the CFP bracket, and No. 6 Ole Miss (12-1), the CFP's sixth seed, traveled on Monday to New Orleans, where they will make final preparations for their New Year's Day matchup in the Superdome.

In handing the Rebels their only loss this season, Georgia gained 510 yards of offense and didn't punt once, but did need a 17-0, fourth-quarter rally to win.

Ole Miss defensive coordinator Bryan Brown says Georgia's offense looks even better now than when they met on Oct. 18.

"First, they take care of the football," said Brown, who assumed the coordinator role exclusively after his former co-coordinator, Pete Golding, was named head coach on Nov. 30, when ex-coach Lane Kiffin left for LSU.

"They execute at a higher level and they've got their play makers making plays," Brown added.

Meanwhile, Georgia coach Kirby Smart said that in his experience, rematches often don't resemble the earlier matchup.

"It's really overrated in terms of re-matches and things like that," Smart said. "How you play (on a given day) defines what the outcome of the game is — your ability to be explosive, turn the ball over, win situational football ... and it really has very little to do with the time before you played them.

"I don't think either team is exactly the same," Smart added. "Both teams have evolved some. And everybody will have new wrinkles."

Quarterback Gunnar Stockton threw for 289 yards on 26-of-31 passing against the Rebels, including three touchdown passes to tight end Lawson Luckie. If Stockton's more than 3,100 yards and 23 touchdowns passing weren't impressive enough, Brown asserted that Stockton's value goes beyond the numbers.

"He's a gamer," Brown said, smiling in admiration. "He extends plays and he makes the right plays. It's not all measurements for a quarterback; it's about making the right plays. That's what he does. That's what he is. He's a football player."

Williams saw the Georgia loss as a turning point for the Rebels' defense, which closed with five consecutive wins to secure a CFP berth.

"After that game, we had to lock in more," Williams said. "We had to bond more as a team, whatever we had to do to play better on the defensive side — anything we needed to do, we pressed on harder."

Ole Miss then opened the CFP with a resounding 45-10 triumph over No. 17 Tulane (the CFP's 11th seed) to set up its rematch with the Bulldogs. During its past six contests, the Rebel defense has improved in areas such as quarterback pressures and turnover ratio (plus-4 during that span).

"We got better at communication, playing faster and with more confidence," Brown said.

Lone loss sparked Moore, Oregon toward playoff run

BY JOHN MARSHALL
Associated Press

No. 5 Oregon (12-1) vs. No. 4 Texas Tech (12-1)
AFN-Sports
9 a.m. Friday CET
7 p.m. Friday JKT

A loss changed Dante Moore's mindset and fueled Oregon's run to the College Football Playoff.

Frustrated by an uneven performance against top-ranked Indiana in October, Moore vowed not to put enormous pressure on himself again and he's been stellar ever since.

"I made that game bigger than what it was, had a lot of emotions that game, some of my teammates saw it," Moore said. "I didn't have that smile on my face. I didn't have that joy. I was kind of too locked in, to be honest. But from that game on, I just learned how to adapt and just treat it like another day at practice to go out there, have fun, throw the ball, have confidence — if you make a mistake, cool, next play."

Moore's next play will come at the New Year's Day Orange Bowl against No. 4 seed Texas Tech (12-1).

The game that serves as a CFP quarterfinal will likely come down to whether the fifth-seeded Ducks (12-1) can solve the Red Raiders' violent, stifling defense.

Moore has been superb at Oregon, but it was a bumpy ride to Eugene.

Moore received his first college offer as an eighth grader and was one of the nation's top recruits coming out of Martin Luther King Jr. High School in Detroit. The 6-foot-2, 206-pound quarterback had committed to Oregon but chose to play at UCLA after Ducks offensive coordinator Kenny Dillingham became Arizona State's head coach. Moore had plenty of hype surrounding his arrival as one of the highest-rated players in Bruins' history.

He got off to a strong start at UCLA before the wheels started falling off.

In a stretch of three straight games against ranked opponents, Moore threw six interceptions and had one returned for a touchdown in each game. He also was sacked 16 times and completed just 45% of his passes.

Once UCLA's season ended, Moore opted to return to where he first committed. Oregon already had Dillon Gabriel entrenched as the starter, but Moore had no problem taking a back seat in 2024 to learn from a quarterback who became a Heisman Trophy finalist while leading the Ducks to the No. 1 seed in the CFP.

Moore thrived once it was his turn this season, throwing for 3,095 yards and 28 touchdowns with eight interceptions. He had a huge game against James Madison in the opening round of the playoffs, accounting for five touchdowns and 357 yards in the 51-34 win.

"I think Dante's grown in a lot of ways," said Oregon defensive coordinator Will Stein, who is remaining with the Ducks through their playoff run before becoming Kentucky's head coach.

"I mean, obviously, he's playing at a really high rate right now. He's operating the offense like you want."

Moore's lone shaky game this season came in the 30-20 loss to Indiana on Oct. 11, when he had two interceptions and threw for just 186 yards. Since then, Moore has thrown for 1,650 yards and 13 touchdowns with five interceptions while completing 73% of his passes.

Oregon's season is still alive thanks in large part to Moore — and that one wobbly performance.



LYDIA ELY/AP

Oregon quarterback Dante Moore slides with the ball during the first half against Indiana on Oct. 11 in Eugene, Ore. The Ducks lost 30-20, prompting Moore to reevaluate his mindset for the game.

SPORTS

Costly mistakes

Falcons take advantage of Stafford's 3 interceptions to beat Rams ›› NFL, Page 45



MICHAEL CONROY/AP

Indiana's Louis Moore intercepts a pass in front of Ohio State's Davison Igbinosun during the Big Ten title game in Indianapolis on Dec. 6.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL PLAYOFF

Rested or rusty?

Top seeds eager to start as quarterfinals arrive

BY MICHAEL MAROT
Associated Press

No. 1 Indiana spent several December weeks reveling in the luster of the best season in school history.

The Hoosiers sung the school's fight song in the confetti celebration following their first Big Ten championship since 1967 and first outright title since 1945. They were featured on "60 Minutes." They signed their offensive and defensive coordinators to contract extensions. They even flew to New York City and took photos of quarterback Fernando Mendoza and his brand new Heisman Trophy in Times Square.

And now that they know their Rose Bowl opponent after Alabama rallied for a 34-24 victory at Oklahoma, they have spent the past 10 days prepping to prove they're worthy of holding both the No. 1 ranking and the top seed in the College Football Playoff.

"We understand that just like the Big Ten Championship game, just like any other big games we played this season, this page is now folded, although I will be in the (Heisman) fraternity for the rest of my life," Mendoza said after returning to campus with the Heisman. "Our focus right now is winning the College Football Playoff. That's what would make this trophy so much sweeter."

Last year was the first for the expanded 12-team playoff, and the top four seeds with first-round byes — Oregon, Georgia, Boise State and Arizona State — all lost in the quarterfinals. This year's top seeds — Indiana, Ohio State, Georgia and Texas Tech — want to prove last year was a fluke.

The Bulldogs (12-1) face conference foe Ole Miss (12-1) in a New Year's Day rematch at the Sugar Bowl; Georgia dealt the Rebels their only loss. The defending champion Buckeyes (12-1) have spent the past couple weeks getting healthy and making one key change. Coach Ryan Day will be calling the plays when Ohio State faces Miami (11-2) in the Cotton Bowl on Wednesday night.

SEE SEEDS ON PAGE 46



MIKE STEWART/AP

Georgia head coach Kirby Smart and his team celebrate after winning the Southeastern Conference championship against Alabama on Dec. 6 in Atlanta.

Jokic's injury latest in wave of hurt players ›› NBA, Page 43

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