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NFL: Rams' Adams on 5th try for first Super Bowl **Page 48**

EUROPE
& PACIFIC
WEEKEND
EDITION

MOVIES
'Sinners' gets
most-ever
Oscar noms
with 16
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Bragg MPs tapped for Minneapolis deployment

BY KONSTANTIN TOROPIN
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Army has ordered several dozen additional active-duty soldiers to prepare for a possible deployment to Minneapolis if needed, a defense official said Wednesday, amid protests over the Trump administration's immigration enforcement crackdown.

The defense official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive plans, confirmed that members of an Army military police brigade who are stationed at Fort Bragg in North Carolina have been given prepare-to-deploy orders.

If deployed, the troops would likely offer support to civil authorities in Minneapolis, according to the official, who stressed that such standby orders are issued regularly and they do not necessarily mean that the troops would end up going.

About 1,500 active-duty soldiers from the Army's 11th Airborne Division based in Alaska have received similar standby orders. President Donald Trump has threatened to invoke the Insurrection Act, a rarely used 19th century law that would allow him to use active-duty troops as law enforcement.

That threat followed protests that erupted in Minneapolis after a federal immigration officer killed resident Renee Good on Jan. 7.

Trump quickly appeared to walk back the threat, telling reporters a day later that there wasn't a reason to use the act "right now."

"If I needed it, I'd use it," Trump said. "It's very powerful."

When asked about the latest or-

SEE BRAGG ON PAGE 10



FELIX MENA/U.S. Army

A veteran reads the names of fallen service members inscribed on the newly dedicated Ramadi Memorial at Fort Bliss, Texas, on Jan. 17.

'Turmoil, triumphs, tragedies'

Fort Bliss memorial honors those killed in Ramadi on 20th anniversary

BY ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

The names of the 94 service members who died in Iraq as part of the Second Battle of Ramadi are now memorialized at Fort Bliss as the 1st Armored Division marked 20 years since one of its brigades participated in the tide-turning combat operation.

More than 1,200 veterans were at Fort Bliss in west Texas during the weekend for the memorial unveiling, said retired Lt. Gen. Sean MacFarland, who commanded the 1st Brigade Combat Team during the deployment. He said the bri-



Stars and Stripes

First Lt. Miguel Santana sets out on a cordon and search operation in Ramadi, Iraq, in 2006.

gade fought alongside Marines, Navy SEALs and airmen in Ramadi, which experts said marked a change in the United States' understanding of the war and successfully used combat outposts to gain control in the city.

"Thanks to each of you who shared that battleground with us, and each of you who remembers the turmoil, the triumphs and the tragedies," retired Navy Lt. Cmdr. Jocko Willink said Saturday during the memorial dedication ceremony.

SEE MEMORIAL ON PAGE 6

EXCHANGE RATES			
Military rates			
Euro costs (Jan. 23)	0.83	Switzerland (Franc)	0.7919
British pound (Jan. 23)	\$1.31	Thailand (Baht)	31.26
Japanese yen (Jan. 23)	154.00	Turkey (NewLira)	43.2715
South Korean won (Jan. 23)	1,430.00		
Commercial rates		(Military exchange rates are those available to customers at military banking facilities in the country of issuance for Japan, South Korea, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. For nonlocal currency exchange rates (i.e., purchasing British pounds in Germany), check with your local military banking facility. Commercial rates are interbank rates provided for reference when buying currency. All figures are foreign currencies to one dollar, except for the British pound, which is represented in dollars-to-pound, and the euro, which is dollars-to-euro.)	
Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3744		
Britain (Pound)	1.3445		
Canada (Dollar)	1.3809		
China (Yuan)	6.9637		
Denmark (Krone)	6.3715		
Egypt (Pound)	47.1198		
Euro	0.8531		
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.7978		
Hungary (Forint)	326.24		
Israel (Shekel)	3.1428		
Japan (Yen)	158.60		
Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3069		
Norway (Krone)	9.8858		
Philippines (Peso)	59.08		
Poland (Zloty)	3.58		
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7456		
Singapore (Dollar)	1.2825		
South Korea (Won)	1,467.70		

SATURDAY IN THE PACIFIC

CHINA **RUSSIA** *Pacific Ocean*

N. KOREA *Sea of Japan* **JAPAN**

Seoul 30/10
Osan 31/13
Busan 39/23
Sasebo 48/39
Iwakuni 45/34
Tokyo 52/32
Misawa 30/19

Philippine Sea

Okinawa 63/55

Guam 84/76

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MILITARY

House requests details from DOD on Stripes plan

Committee stresses congressional backing of editorial independence

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The House Armed Services Committee has sent two requests to the Defense Department asking how the department will ensure the congressionally mandated independence of Stars and Stripes amid a plan to “refocus” its content, according to two people familiar with the matter.

A bipartisan request was sent after the Pentagon’s chief spokesperson last Thursday posted to the social media site X that it would overhaul the news organization to rid it of “woke distractions that syphon morale, and adapt it to serve a new generation of service members.”

Democratic staff sent a follow-up information request Tuesday after noticing the Pentagon had removed the federal regulation governing the publication.

“We have yet to receive any answers,” a committee staffer speaking on condition of anonymity said Wednesday.

The Pentagon has also not responded to questions from Stars and Stripes requesting details on the planned changes.

The committee staffer said the elimination of the regulation leaves a Department of Defense directive as the only remaining rule addressing the news organization’s editorial independence.

The 1994 directive can be changed on a whim, according to Jacqueline Smith, the ombud-

smen for Stars and Stripes. “Given the overall press restrictions and the moves to take over editorial control of Stars and Stripes, the future of the reputable newspaper that dates to the Civil War is in danger,” Smith wrote in a column published Tuesday morning.

The ombudsman role was created in 1991 by the House Armed Services Committee to report to Congress on threats to the Stars and Stripes mission of providing independent news to the military community.

The Defense Department submitted a rule change to the Federal Register last week, writing that the regulation for the newspaper was “unnecessary and may be removed from the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR) because it does not have an impact or burden to the public.”

The rule change points out that a proposed modernization of the regulation last year drew 88 public comments that broadly supported Stripes’ independence.

Rep. Adam Smith, the top Democrat on the committee, said he is asking the Defense Department to explain how it intends to maintain the journalistic independence of Stars and Stripes, as long affirmed by Congress.

He said he is also urging Republicans to “exercise their congressional responsibilities and control of the legislative branch” so that the newspaper can continue to operate independently and provide “millions of U.S. service members and civilian personnel with critical news and information tailored to their unique needs.”

Eight members of the Senate Armed Services Committee, as well as two additional senators, sent a letter to Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth last week seeking assurances that editorial decisions would not be conditioned on ideological alignment or policy advocacy.

“Congress has been clear for decades that Stars and Stripes must be governed by First Amendment principles and insulated from political influence, regardless of which administration is in power,” the senators, all Democrats and Independents, wrote.



PHOTOS BY NICHOLAS MARTINEZ/U.S. Marine Corps

A U.S. Marine inspects a pre-positioned vehicle at a Norway cave site this month ahead of exercise Cold Response.

Marines gear up in Norway for Cold Response exercise

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Thousands of American troops are gearing up for large-scale combat drills centered on the defense of Norway, even as the U.S. finds itself at odds with numerous allies in Europe over the fate of Greenland.

About 3,000 Marines will be joined by roughly 25,000 personnel from a dozen countries for Cold Response 26, slated to kick off in March.

This month, allied militaries are doing unit-level cold weather training in preparation, Marine Corps Forces Europe and Africa said in a statement released Monday.

“This exercise isn’t just about preparing for today’s threats,” Maj. Gen. Daniel Shipley, commander of MARFOREUR-AF, said in the statement. “It’s about building the capabilities and strengthening the capacity necessary to deter future aggression and safeguard our shared interests.”

In addition to Marines, U.S. special operations troops, P-8 Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft, F-35A Lightning II fighters and other aircraft are among the American military assets participating in the drills.

A major objective of Cold Response is to demonstrate the ability of a U.S.-based Marine air ground task force out of Camp Lejeune, N.C., to quickly deploy across the Atlantic Ocean to support larger NATO missions, the Corps said.

Alongside the U.S. and Norway, Canada, Denmark, Finland,



Marine Corps Col. Patrick Williams speaks with Norwegian army Staff Sgt. Aleksander Wegdahl at a pre-positioning site in Norway this month during preparations for the Cold Response exercise.

France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom are slated to take part.

The Norway drills come as the Arctic is in the international spotlight.

In recent weeks, tensions between the United States and allies across Europe have soared over President Donald Trump’s push to take control of Greenland, a semi-autonomous territory of Denmark.

Denmark, which plans to take part in Cold Response, has repeatedly rejected the idea as a non-starter.

Some officials in Europe have warned that a U.S. annexation of Greenland would spell the end of NATO.

On Wednesday, France called for more expansive NATO military exercises in the Arctic, saying that one should be held in Greenland and that the French are ready

to contribute forces.

In the meantime, it appears to be business as usual among allied militaries, which continue to coordinate their efforts in Europe.

Defense chiefs along with Gen. Alexis Grynkewich, NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe, gathered in Brussels on Wednesday for a meeting to go over defense plans and the situation in Ukraine.

Italian Adm. Giuseppe Cavo Dragone, chairman of the NATO Military Committee, didn’t address the dispute over Greenland directly but said the alliances remains focused on its tasks.

“I can testify to one main point: cohesion is the key quality of this group,” Dragone said as talks got underway. “Yes, we do have differences, and that is normal in an alliance of democracies. But those differences can and do make us better.”

Correction

A Washington Post article about public funding for the Virginia Military Institute that appeared in Thursday’s edition of Stars and Stripes should have reported that VMI receives 27.5% of its budget from state funding. Also, the article incorrectly described an annual ceremony for cadets who died in battle.

It should have said that since 2020, the ceremony honors all VMI alumni who died on the field of battle.

MILITARY

North Korean defections to South still low post-COVID

By YOOJIN LEE
Stars and Stripes

Twelve fewer North Koreans defected across the southern border in 2025 than the year before for an annual tally of 224, according to recent data from South Korea's Ministry of Unification.

Of those, 198 were women and 26 were men, a ministry spokeswoman told Stars and Stripes in a text message Wednesday.

Still, the number of defectors making their way to South Korea the past three years is about one-fifth of those who defected prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, according to numbers the spokeswoman provided. The pandemic lasted from

March 2020 to May 2023, according to the World Health Organization.

Before the pandemic, more than 1,000 people defected from North Korea annually, according to the ministry's statistics. Since then, an average of 200 have made their way south each year, the spokeswoman said.

"The most important factor is North Korea's border shutdown" since the pandemic, Lim Jae-cheon, a professor of diplomacy studies at Korea University in Seoul, South Korea, said by text message Wednesday.

"Another factor appears to be China's forcible repatriation of defectors to North Korea since 2023,"

he said.

Since 1998, when the ministry began keeping count, 34,538 North Koreans have fled south — 24,944 women and 9,594 men.

"The government exercises stricter control over men," Lim said. "For example, most of men in their 20s are serving in the military, and men in their 30s and 40s are bound to their work. It is known that when defectors stay in China, it is easier for women to find a job than men."

The number of defectors is expected to remain steady under the current state of relations between North Korea and China, he said.

The Ministry of Unification operates 25 resettlement facilities,



Jenna Reynolds, 17, of Camp Humphreys, teaches English to North Korean defectors at the YMCA in Pyeongtaek, South Korea, in 2024.

Luis Garcia/Stars and Stripes

known as Hana Centers, to help defectors resettle in South Korea.

Immediate government support for a single defector includes about \$1,020, plus another \$1,090 for housing.

The ministry's 2026 work plan includes promoting "the stable settlement of North Korean defectors as responsible members of society," according to a Dec. 19 ministry news release.

S. Korea's Black Eagles aerobatic team to refuel in Japan for 1st time

By BRIAN McELHINEY, KEISHI KOJA AND YOOJIN LEE
Stars and Stripes

The South Korean air force's demonstration team, the Black Eagles, will make a refueling stop on Okinawa for the first time next week, three months after Japan canceled a similar request.

Nine T-50B Golden Eagle training jets with the 53rd Special Air Squadron and a South Korean C-130J Super Hercules with the 251st Air Transport Flight Group are scheduled to arrive at Naha Air Base on Jan. 28, according to a Wednesday post on the Japan Air Self-Defense Force's website.



South Korea Ministry of National Defense

The Black Eagles, the South Korean air force's aerobatic flight team, performs during an air show at an unspecified location. The team will make a refueling stop on Okinawa for the first time next week.

Okinawa.

The Black Eagles will participate in the Saudi air show for the first time, according to a Wednesday news release from the South Korean air force. The nine T-50Bs include one reserve aircraft and are traveling with four C-130s carrying 120 troops.

The aircraft will depart Wonju Air Base in South Korea on Jan. 28. After refueling in Naha, the group will stop in the Philippines, Vietnam, Thailand, India and Oman before arriving Feb. 2 at Saudi Arabia's Malham Airport, the release said.

In early November, Japan canceled a planned refueling stop by the Black Eagles at the Naha base after the jets flew near Takeshima, a group of islets about 150 miles east of South Korea, Japanese public broadcaster NHK reported Wednesday.

The two countries have a terri-

torial dispute over the remote islets, also known as Dokdo.

Japan protested the flight in late October, Kyodo News reported Nov. 12.

The flight was canceled because of "a lack of coordination between the defense authorities of Japan and South Korea," Japanese Defense Minister Shinjiro Koizumi said during a regular news conference on Nov. 4 in Tokyo. He declined to comment further.

In July, a South Korean C-130 Hercules airlifter, en route to Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, and low on fuel in stormy weather, made an unapproved stop at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa. Its uncleared approach prompted Japan to scramble fighters to intercept the airlifter.

South Korean authorities disciplined 10 people over the incident in August.

UK air chief named NATO's No. 2 commander in Europe

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

NATO's top two military leadership posts will soon be held by officers hailing from their countries' respective air forces, with the U.K.'s Air Chief Marshal John Stringer tabbed to be the next deputy supreme allied commander Europe.

The appointment of two officers from air force backgrounds stands out, as NATO's emphasis has shifted to airpower and integrated air and missile defense, in accordance with lessons from the Russia-Ukraine war.

Stringer will serve under American Gen. Alexis Grynkeiwich, who has the dual role of supreme allied commander Europe and the leader of U.S. European Command.

Stringer will be the first Royal Air Force officer to hold the post of deputy supreme allied commander Europe since 1984, the British defense ministry said in a statement Thursday.

He will take over the post from British navy Adm. Keith Blount in March, the statement said.

The deputy position has historically been held by either British or German officers, while an American has always served as NATO's supreme allied commander Europe.

Since 2022, Stringer has served as deputy commander of NATO's Allied Air Command, which is responsible for planning, coordinating and directing the alliance's air operations.

"This is a critical time for the defense and security of Europe and the North Atlantic, deterring those who would do us harm and keeping the 1 billion citizens of NATO nations safe," he said in the statement. "I look forward to playing my fullest possible part with our vital allies and partners."



Stringer

Army probing off-base death of US soldier in Germany

By LYDIA GORDON
Stars and Stripes

HOHENFELS, Germany — An investigation is underway into the off-base death of a soldier in Bavaria last week. Pvt. Christian Bacchus, 21, died Saturday in an accident near Neustadt an der Waldnaab, 7th Army Training Command spokeswoman Lacey Justinger said Thursday.

The accident was not training-related, she added. The location is about 25 minutes east of Grafenwoehr Training Area. Bac-

chus had served as an armor crewman with the 1st Battalion, 4th Infantry Regiment at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels since September 2023, Maj. Brian Tierce, a spokesman for the center, said Thursday.

He was a native of Washington, D.C., according to an Air Force statement.

No additional details surrounding Bacchus' death have been released due to the ongoing investigation, Justinger said.

MILITARY

Navy closer to free Wi-Fi coverage worldwide

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The U.S. Navy rolled out free Wi-Fi for sailors in unaccompanied housing throughout most of Japan on Thursday, bringing the service to just shy of free coverage worldwide.

Wi-Fi service was launched Thursday at Yokosuka, Naval Air Facility Atsugi and Sasebo Naval Base, said Destiny Sibert, spokeswoman for Navy Installations Command. Service contracts for bases on Okinawa and at Misawa are still being negotiated.

“Additional overseas locations will be added as existing contracts are modified or as new agreements are secured, with the goal of delivering free, high-speed Wi-Fi to the majority of Navy-owned unaccompanied housing by the end of 2027,” Sibert told Stars and Stripes by email Thursday.

Wi-Fi service is provided through a partnership between Navy Installations Command’s Morale, Welfare and Recreation program and the Navy Exchange Service Command, according to the MWR website. Internet filters will bar illegal downloads, gambling, nudity and other mature content.

With the added bases in Japan, free Navy internet is available



ALEX WILSON/Stars and Stripes

TaeQuan Jones, a civilian dependent, left, and Petty Officer 3rd Class Andrey Houck play video games at the USO on Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan, on Thursday.

across 88% of the world, said Vice Adm. Scott Gray, the head of Navy Installations Command.

“For the harder places — isolated places like Djibouti and Diego Garcia, Korea, Singapore — it’ll take a bit longer,” he told Stars

and Stripes in an interview at Yokosuka on Tuesday.

The necessity of internet connections for daily life underscores the importance of the Navy’s Wi-Fi initiative, Gray said.

“I think it’s something that

we’ve needed to do for a long time,” he said. “You know, we needed to recognize that Wi-Fi is not a ‘nice to have’ anymore — it’s like a utility.”

The free service at most bases includes 30 Mbps download/5

Mbps upload, which Sibert said supports “streaming and most online activities.” Sailors who want faster speeds can upgrade, but pricing, speeds and device limits will vary by installation, she said.

“Paid packages will be offered on a flexible basis. Plan options, such as weekly or monthly access, will vary by location, without early termination penalties,” she said

More information is available at www.navymwr.org/wifinext.

Free Wi-Fi service has been available since Nov. 17 at Naval Support Activity Bahrain and Isa Air Base in Bahrain; Naval Support Facility Deveselu in Romania; Naval Support Facility Redzikowo in Poland; Naval Base Guam; and Naval Station Guantanamo Bay.

Installations in the continental United States and Hawaii launched the program on Dec. 2, Sibert said.

The initiative is the result of a 2024 pilot program that tested free Wi-Fi at 12 barracks in the Hampton Roads, Va., area near Naval Station Norfolk and Naval Air Station Oceana, Sibert said.

“The pilot program’s positive results underscored the significant impact of reliable internet access on Sailor well-being and readiness,” she wrote.

Navy bans kratom use as part of Pentagon’s move to outlaw drug

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Navy recently banned the use of the drug kratom and related products, aligning its policy with a broader Defense Department directive prohibiting its use among service members.

All sailors and Marines are prohibited from using products containing kratom or its primary psychoactive components, mitragynine and 7-hydroxymitragynine, Secretary of the Navy John Phelan announced last week in an All Navy message.

The drug — derived from the leaves of *Mitragyna speciosa*, a tropical tree native to Southeast Asia — is sold “in the form of leaves, capsules, gummies, edibles, shots, vapes, and other products,” Phelan wrote.

Use of kratom may constitute failure to obey a lawful general order under the Uniform Code of Military Justice and result in administrative or disciplinary action, he said.

The directive does make an exception for those who unknowingly consume it but warns that someone who “consciously avoids knowledge” of the presence of the



TYLER CROWLEY/U.S. Navy

Secretary of the Navy John Phelan chats with a sailor aboard the aircraft carrier USS George Washington at Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan, in April.

substances will be held equally liable as someone who knew for a fact.

“Protecting Service Member welfare and readiness is paramount to maintaining an effective fighting force,” Phelan wrote. “Additionally, substance misuse by members of the Armed Forces is incompatible with military standards of good order, discipline, performance, and operational readiness.”

The Defense Department in a Sept. 15 memorandum declared

the use of kratom a violation of the UCMJ effective Dec. 31, according to the DOD’s Operation Supplement Safety website.

Although DOD-wide policies affect all branches of the military, individual services regularly publish their own guidance to officially implement directives.

The message describes kratom and its components as having “significant health risks, including seizures, tachycardia, hepatotoxicity, hypertension, and death.”

Kratom can have both stimulant and sedative effects and potentially harmful side effects, including weight loss, liver damage and muscle pain, according to the Mayo Clinic’s website.

While it has been linked to a small number of deaths, the clinic noted that nearly all deaths “involved other drugs of substances that might have been harmful.”

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention determined that kratom caused 91 of 27,338 overdose deaths recorded between July 2016 and December 2017. Post-mortem toxicology tests determined that seven of those deaths involved only kratom, according to the 2019 CDC study.

Bahrain breaks ground on \$15.8M barracks upgrade

By LARA KORTE
Stars and Stripes

Navy sailors stationed in Bahrain on unaccompanied tours are in for a multimillion-dollar upgrade to their living quarters as part of a Pentagon push to spruce up barracks.

Naval Support Activity Bahrain broke ground this month on a \$15.8 million renovation of its housing facilities.

Capt. Zachariah Aperauch, the commanding officer at the installation, called the upgrades an investment in the base’s sailors.

“Many of our service members here at NSA Bahrain are first-tour Sailors who have never been outside the U.S.,” Aperauch said in a Tuesday statement issued by the base. “When we ensure our team has the best possible living conditions, we are investing in both their success here on the installation and the future of their Navy career.”

Planned upgrades include a new roof, insulated exterior doors, new flooring and modern fixtures, as well as an overhaul of plumbing, electrical and telecommunications systems, Naval Facilities Engineering Systems Command said in a recent state-

ment.

The groundbreaking represented a significant milestone, said Lt. Cmdr. Michelle Fitzgerald, director of the Facilities Engineering and Acquisition Division at the Public Works Department Bahrain.

“Being able to initiate these essential renovations and ultimately provide improved living conditions for our service members is extremely rewarding,” Fitzgerald said in a statement Tuesday.

The project is part of a broader Pentagon effort to improve living standards at bases around the world.

Last fall, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth launched a barracks task force to address what he called “substandard housing.”

He cited a Government Accountability Office report from 2023 that highlighted problems such as raw sewage overflows, mold and rodent infestation in service member housing.

The Pentagon last year allocated \$1.2 billion for barracks renovations across all the military services. In December, the Navy said it would direct \$75 million of those funds to support 95 projects across 50 installations.

MILITARY

NATO chief shows he's the 'Trump Whisperer'

By MIKE CORDER

Associated Press

THE HAGUE, Netherlands — For days it seemed there was no way out of the latest standoff between Europe and the United States: U.S. President Donald Trump insisted he must have Greenland — and would settle for nothing short of total ownership.

Even after he dropped the threat of force in a speech in Davos, Switzerland, on Wednesday, the impasse remained. Enter: Mark Rutte.

The NATO secretary-general appears to have been instrumental in persuading Trump to scrap the threat of slapping punitive tariffs on eight European nations to press for U.S. control over Greenland — a stunning reversal shortly after insisting he wanted to get the island “including right, title and ownership.”

In a post on his social media site, Trump said he had agreed with Rutte on a “framework of a future deal” on Arctic security at the World Economic Forum in Davos, potentially defusing tensions that had far-reaching geopolitical implications.

Little is known about what the agreement entails — and Trump could change course again, but for now Rutte has earned his reputation as the “Trump Whisperer.”

That's only the latest nickname for the man long known as “Teflon Mark” during his domination of Dutch politics for a dozen years.

Rutte's reputation for successfully charming the U.S. president took flight last year when he referred to Donald Trump as “daddy” during an alliance summit in The Hague and sent him a flatter-



EVAN VUCCI/AP

President Donald Trump meets with NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte during a meeting on the sidelines of the Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Wednesday.

ing text message.

Matthew Kroenig, vice president and senior director of the Atlantic Council's Scowcroft Center for Strategy and Security, said the scenes in Davos underscored Rutte's ability to keep NATO's most powerful leader on board.

“I think Secretary-General Rutte has emerged as one of Europe's most effective diplomats and Trump whisperers,” Kroenig said. “He does seem to have a way of speaking to Trump that keeps the United States and the Trump administration engaged in NATO in a constructive way.”

Rutte's success in dealing with Trump appears to revolve around his willingness to use charm and

flattery while revealing little of what the two leaders discuss. It's a tactic that Rutte used to marshal coalition partners in nearly 13 years as Dutch prime minister.

Trump himself highlighted Rutte's effusive friendliness before he set off for Davos this week, publishing a text message from the NATO chief on his Truth Social platform. In it, Rutte addressed “Mr. President, dear Donald” and praises Trump for his diplomacy in Syria, Gaza and Ukraine.

“I am committed to finding a way forward on Greenland. Can't wait to see you. Yours, Mark,” the message ended.

Rutte became a poster boy for Dutch consensus politics while

leading four often fractious ruling coalitions on his way to becoming the Netherlands' longest-serving leader, surviving a number of domestic political scandals over the years and earning the nickname “Teflon Mark” because the fallout never seemed to stick to him for long.

The back cover of a 2016 book about Rutte by Dutch journalist Sheila Sitalsing, who followed him when he was prime minister, calls him “a phenomenon.”

“With indestructible cheerfulness he navigates the fragmented political landscape, recklessly forges the most extraordinary alliances and steadily works towards a new Netherlands,” it adds.

Rutte resigned in 2021 to take responsibility for a child care allowance scandal in which thousands of parents were wrongly accused of fraud. But he bounced back to win national elections two months later with a slightly larger share of the vote and began his fourth and last term in office.

In another scandal that he survived, Rutte said in an interview that he couldn't recall being informed about the Dutch bombing of Hawija that killed dozens of Iraqi civilians in 2015. In 2022, he survived a no-confidence motion in parliament in a debate about deleting messages from his old-school Nokia cell phone. Critics accused him of concealing state activity — he insisted the messages took up too much space.

Opposition lawmaker Attje Kuiken quipped: “It appears that the prime minister's phone memory is used just as selectively as the prime minister's own memory.”

His winning smile and enduring

optimism, along with his habit of riding his bicycle to work while chomping on an apple seemed to help cement his popularity in the Netherlands, where such down-to-earth behavior is prized. When his last coalition collapsed in 2023 in a dispute over reining in migration, Rutte again leaned on that image, driving an old Saab station wagon to a royal palace to hand his resignation to King Willem-Alexander.

Just landing the NATO chief's job showed how adept Rutte is at navigating turbulent geopolitical waters. He managed to convince entrenched doubters, including Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, to back his candidacy.

“It took a very long time. It's a complicated process, but it's an honor that it appears to have happened,” Rutte told reporters after securing all the support he needed to become secretary-general.

Rutte's soft diplomatic skills were seen as a key asset for the leader of the 32-nation alliance as it faced Trump's repeated criticism while navigating how to support Ukraine.

Several hours before Trump made his dramatic reversal on Greenland, Finnish President Alexander Stubb — another European leader credited with having a way with Trump — was asked during a panel discussion on European security in Davos “who or what can diffuse the tensions” over Greenland?

“Oh, Mark Rutte,” Stubb said, to laughter in the audience and among the panel that included the Dutchman himself.

Memorial: Veterans remember battle, reunite after two decades

FROM PAGE 1

He led a unit of Navy SEALs in the battle and described the feeling of being constantly surrounded by the enemy. However, he said he always knew U.S. troops were just a radio call away if a situation turned for the worse.

“That's because this was a unified team of American services, from sea, air and land, all branches, all uniforms, one flag and one mission,” Willink said. “The ones we owe the most thanks to — the ones we are eternally grateful for — are the heroes that did not come home, the ones who gave everything for us so that we can be here today.”

First Brigade soldiers deployed first to the Iraqi city of Tal Afar in January 2006 and then in May moved south to Ramadi, where they reported to the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, MacFarland said. The bulk of the city was

under the control of insurgents, primarily foreign fighters from al-Qaida.

The brigade used the clear, hold and build strategy by setting up small outposts throughout the city, he said.

Troops also developed alliances with local tribes, known as the Sunni Awakening, which changed the whole approach to the war — not just in Ramadi but in all Sunni provinces.

MacFarland had picked up the strategy of small outposts from the 3rd Armored Combat Regiment's deployment to Tal Afar the previous year. Military officials credited success in Ramadi for the success later seen when the U.S. surged troops in Iraq.

“It was a, a city that nobody thought we could take. Not our Congress, not our press, only the soldiers that were on the ground and those that led them believed

that we could be successful,” Command Sgt. Maj. James Light, the senior noncommissioned officer of the 1st Armored Division and Fort Bliss, said Saturday.

Light credited the actions of each individual service member for leading U.S. forces through the difficult fight.

The names on the memorial represent each U.S. service member from all military service branches who were killed in action in Ramadi.

The memorial plaque is one of several marking operations in the Global War on Terror that are affixed to a wall of the brigade's headquarters building.

MacFarland got the idea for the memorial after visiting a small plaque the unit had placed on post in 2007. He found it leaning against the wall and in bad shape from years in the desert heat.

He knew his former soldiers

were hurting, too, weathered in their own sense from returning home from combat and finding their new place in the civilian world.

He decided the memorial would be a catalyst to get everyone reconnected.

“I did it because they did so much for me and for all of us,” MacFarland said.

The grassroots effort for a new plaque and a reunion weekend came together with support from several nonprofits, including America's Mighty Warriors, founded by Debbie Lee. Her son Marc Lee, a Navy SEAL, died Aug. 2, 2006, during the battle of Ramadi. Lee's organization provides programs to improve quality of life and recovery for service members and their families.

Speaking at Saturday's memorial dedication, she validated the pain many veterans of the battle

and their loved ones still feel 20 years later.

“To the Gold Star families, your pain and sacrifice did not end with a folded flag,” Lee said. “You live with a weight that does not leave, a grief that does not expire, and a love that never fades. To the teammates who fought beside them, you carry memories burned into your soul, moments that return, uninvited, questions that still echo in the quiet.”

The experience of reconnecting was healing, yet bittersweet, MacFarland said Wednesday as he reflected on the reunion.

There were lots of tears and laughter among folks who hadn't seen each other in two decades.

“I really hope these units will now stay connected and continue to reconnect on their own at the company and battalion level ... and continue to build that support structure,” he said.

EUROPE

Denmark says its sovereignty not negotiable

By **GEIR MOULSON**
AND **JAMES BROOKS**

Associated Press

COPENHAGEN, Denmark — Denmark's prime minister insisted that her country can't negotiate on its sovereignty on Thursday after President Donald Trump said he agreed on a "framework of a future deal" on Arctic security with the head of NATO.

Trump said the outcome would be "all the military access we want" to Greenland.

Trump on Wednesday abruptly scrapped the tariffs he had threatened to impose on eight European nations to press for U.S. control over Greenland, a semiautono-

mous territory of NATO ally Denmark.

It was a dramatic reversal hours after he insisted he wanted to get the island "including right, title and ownership" — though he also said he would not use force.

Much about the potential deal remained unclear on Thursday, though Trump said in a Fox Business interview that "we're going to have total access to Greenland."

"We're going to have all the military access we want," he added.

Trump said the deal, if completed, will also allow for the United States to install an element of his "Golden Dome," part of a multibillion dollar missile defense system,

in Greenland.

Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen said security in the Arctic is a matter for all of NATO and it is "good and natural" that it be discussed between the U.S. president and NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte. She said in a statement that she had spoken with Rutte "on an ongoing basis," including before and after he met Trump in Davos.

She wrote that NATO is fully aware of the kingdom of Den-



Frederiksen

mark's position that anything political can be negotiated on, including security, investment and economic issues — "but we cannot negotiate on our sovereignty."

"I have been informed that this has not been the case," she said, adding that only Denmark and Greenland can make decisions on issues concerning Denmark and Greenland.

Frederiksen said that Denmark wants to continue engaging in constructive dialogue with allies on how to strengthen security in the Arctic, including the U.S. Golden Dome program, "provided that this is done with respect for our territorial integrity."

Denmark has said the U.S., which already has a military presence, can boost its bases on Greenland. The U.S. is already party to a 1951 treaty that gives it broad rights to set up military bases there with the consent of Denmark and Greenland.

NATO spokesperson Allison Hart said Rutte "did not propose any compromise to sovereignty during his meeting with President Trump." She said that negotiations between Denmark, Greenland and the U.S. "will go forward aimed at ensuring that Russia and China never gain a foothold — economically or militarily — in Greenland."

Danish veterans of US wars feel betrayed by Trump threats

By **ANDERS KONGSHAUG**

Associated Press

COPENHAGEN, Denmark — More than 15 years ago, Danish platoon commander Martin Tamm Andersen was leading his countrymen and U.S. Marines through the heat and sand of southern Afghanistan after a Taliban attack.

As Andersen's vehicle moved at the rear of the column, everything was normal — until in one instant the world turned sand-colored. His body shook violently. "I had no idea what was going on," he recalled. He ran his hands over his arms and legs to make sure they were still there.

When the dust settled, he saw one of his soldiers bleeding heavily from his face. Another had been hurled from the turret and lay on the ground, groaning in pain, his back broken in two places. The blast had torn the vehicle apart.

Andersen called in help from the U.S. Marines, who halted a firefight with the Taliban, returned to secure the site, treated the wounded and helped prepare them for evacuation.

At the time, American and Danish troops were comrades in arms who risked their lives for each other in common cause.

Andersen can barely believe what has come of the U.S.-Danish alliance today as President Donald Trump escalates his threats to seize Greenland, a semiautonomous territory belonging to Denmark.

Trump has repeatedly said the United States must take control of the strategically located and mineral-rich island and views force as one way to get it.

"When America needed us after 9/11 we were there," the 46-year-old veteran said in an interview



Andersen



MARTIN TAMM ANDERSEN/AP

A military vehicle is heavily damaged in Helmand province, Afghanistan, Aug. 19, 2010.

with The Associated Press.

"As a veteran and as a Dane, you know, you feel sad and very surprised that the U.S. wants to take over part of the Kingdom of Denmark," he said. "It's a betrayal of the loyalty of our nation to the U.S. and to our common alliance, NATO."

He spoke from the Danish War Museum in Copenhagen, where his armored personnel carrier that hit the improvised explosive device in 2010 in Helmand province is on display.

Before his deployment to Afghanistan, Andersen had also served in Iraq. Good friends were killed and wounded in both wars. He believed his service in the U.S. wars served the cause of freedom and democracy.

As the U.S. intensifies its threats to seize Greenland, that initial shock felt by many across Europe has evolved into a profound sense of sadness, betrayal and fear of what such a move could mean for Europe's security at a time of Russian aggression. Denmark's prime minister has said it would mean

the end of NATO.

For Danish veterans, it feels profoundly personal.

A NATO member since 1949, Denmark has been a stalwart ally to America. Forty-four Danish soldiers were killed in Afghanistan, the highest per capita death toll among coalition forces. Eight more died in Iraq.

"It feels surreal. It feels like it's a bad joke somehow," Andersen said. "I mean, you can't really fathom that this is actually something that is being said out loud. It just seems too crazy."

Søren Knudsen, a Danish veteran who served twice in Afghanistan, was watching television last year when he heard Vice President JD Vance say that Denmark was "not being a good ally." Vance was making Trump's argument that the United States needed to take more "territorial interest" in Greenland for the sake of U.S. security and accusing Denmark of "not doing its job."

He could not believe it. In his Copenhagen home, the 65-year-old Knudsen keeps a photo of him-

self flanked by children in the Afghan city of Qalat. The mission, as Knudsen understood it at the time, was to help the Americans safeguard the future of Afghanistan's youth. At the end of his second tour, U.S. service members gave him an American flag as a parting gift.

For years he proudly displayed the framed flag and a U.S. Bronze Star honoring his service in Afghanistan alongside other medals from his military service.

He removed the medal and the flag in anguish and packed them away.

He told his wife that he will take them out of storage only when the U.S.-Danish alliance is restored.

Knudsen, who is the deputy president of the Danish Veterans Association, said he hears daily from other veterans who express sorrow and hurt at how the U.S. administration has turned against Denmark.

"Many veterans who have wounds, whether on their souls or their body, certainly feel this as an offense straight to their heart,"

he said.

Danish veterans are furious at how the White House rhetoric disregards the right to self-determination of Greenland and Denmark. They also strongly object to Trump's claim that Denmark, after fighting alongside U.S. forces in wartime, is incapable of protecting the West's security interests in the Arctic.

Both Andersen and Knudsen say they understand concerns about security in the region but are convinced that Denmark is ready to continue doing whatever it takes within the NATO alliance to defend the region.

Both men describe maintaining a bond and friendship with American troops they served with. Knudsen's wife is American-born, and his brother-in-law is a U.S. Marine. They are convinced that their onetime comrades do not share Trump's views about the Danes.

Danes often note that the U.S. already has access to Greenland under a 1951 defense agreement, and northwestern Greenland already houses the U.S. Pituffik military base that falls under the Pentagon's Space Force. It is the U.S. that has chosen to reduce its military footprint in Greenland in the past years — and Denmark and Greenland say they would accommodate a beefed up American military presence.

But Trump told the *The New York Times* last week that "ownership gives you things and elements that you can't get from just signing a document."

Knudsen says a U.S. invasion of Greenland "would probably bring me to tears."

"I would be very sorry if it happened, because I would also see this as the final moments of the NATO alliance," he said. "And I would probably see it as the final moment of my admiration and love of what has been the American experiment for 250 years."

EUROPE

Trump hails ‘good’ meeting with Zelenskyy

Bloomberg News

President Donald Trump said he had a “good” meeting with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy in Davos and expressed renewed hope the war Russia started four years ago is going to end.

Zelenskyy rushed to Switzerland on Thursday after saying earlier this week that he was unlikely to travel to the World Economic

Forum’s annual meeting. The Ukrainian leader has been overseeing efforts to respond to massive Russian airstrikes that have left millions of people in vast areas of Kyiv and several other regions without heat, power and water during freezing winter weather.

“The meeting was good,” the U.S. president told reporters after an hour-long sitdown with Zelenskyy. U.S. special envoy Steve

Witkoff and Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner, were set to travel to Moscow later on Thursday.

“They’re meeting with President Putin today, as you know,” Trump said. “We’ll see how it turns out.”

An aide to Zelenskyy also characterized the meeting as “good.”

The latest flurry of diplomatic efforts has in recent days been overshadowed by Trump’s terri-

torial claims on Greenland, with Germany calling on allies to re-focus on ending Europe’s worst conflict since World War II.

“We hope it’s going to end. A lot of people being killed,” Trump said on Thursday. “It’s really a war that has to end.”

Zelenskyy said earlier this week he would reconsider plans to skip the gathering if there were agreements to be signed on security

guarantees and a plan to revive the country’s economy with the U.S.

Witkoff said on Wednesday the work on the latest peace proposals was “90% done.” He and Kushner have been holding talks with Ukrainian counterparts on a 20-point peace plan, security guarantees and postwar rebuilding since November. The teams met again in Davos on Wednesday.

European-style fire trucks at Naples base help boost reliability

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — Two recently acquired European-style fire trucks are helping firefighters at U.S. Naval Support Activity Naples remain fully capable when responding to emergencies.

The new pumper and rescue squad trucks replace older American versions that were well past their 15-year service lives.

Increasingly, those older trucks needed repairs requiring parts that could take as long as six months to arrive, which could have compromised the department’s ability to respond to a fire or other emergency, NSA Naples Fire Chief Jason Kinlaw said.

The department typically reserves a truck for backup in case another needs maintenance or repairs, but due to the parts backlog, it frequently did not have a spare.

The older trucks “put us in a pretty tight bind (that) one little breakdown can really impact the mission,” Kinlaw said.

The new fire trucks at NSA Na-

ples are customized to the department’s specific requirements. For example, the northern Italy company that assembled the trucks measured the department’s tools and other equipment and designed spaces on the Swedish-made frames to precisely fit them.

“We have custom compartments to fit all of our equipment so that it’s stored properly, it’s stored safely and it efficiently fits together,” Kinlaw said.

The trucks’ shorter wheelbase means better maneuverability in tight, confined spaces such as those at Capodichino, NSA Naples’ administrative site that is home to U.S. 6th Fleet.

The wait time for needed parts for the vehicles is estimated to be days at the most, Kinlaw and other fire department officials said.

Because the new ones won’t be spending as much time in the shop, the department can count on them to be more reliably in service, he added.

Kinlaw said that on average, NSA Naples firefighters respond to about



ALISON BATH/Stars and Stripes

Naval Support Activity Naples in Italy recently added a European-style pumper truck and rescue squad truck to the fire department fleet. The trucks replaced older American versions that had become unreliable and were difficult to repair due to long wait times for parts.

two calls daily for fires, medical emergencies and other situations between the base’s two sites, known as Support Site and Capodichino.

Prices for American-made fire trucks have risen sharply, with pumper trucks now often costing more than \$1 million, according to the New York Post report. NSA Naples paid about \$1.1 million to ac-

quire its pair of vehicles.

For now, the new NSA Naples trucks are assigned to Support Site, which includes housing, schools, a hotel and a hospital. Support Site is about 13 miles northeast of Capodichino.

The vehicle additions also cap a multiyear effort to remodel the fire station at Capodichino that included

an industrial kitchen and individual sleeping rooms instead of a bunk house for firefighters.

The estimated \$600,000 remodel improves quality of life for firefighters who spend long hours on the job, Kinlaw said.

“We live together as a family,” he said. “This was critically important to us.”

Cutting-edge Army unit in Germany brings in new top enlisted leader

BY BRADLEY LATHAM
Stars and Stripes

WIESBADEN, Germany — The Army unit responsible for coordinating electronic warfare, cyber operations and artillery fires in Europe welcomed a new senior enlisted leader Thursday.

Command Sgt. Maj. Rickey Jackson transferred enlisted adviser responsibilities of the 56th Artillery Command, also known as Multi-Domain Command Europe, to Command Sgt. Maj. Caleb Webster during a ceremony at Clay Kaserne.

The command has evolved in recent years in line with the Army’s efforts to adapt to changing combat realities seen on the battlefields of Ukraine and elsewhere.

“It is about forging a new way of warfare, where we can reach out to touch any enemy anywhere, anytime, across every single domain simultaneously,” Jackson said during the ceremony.



BRADLEY LATHAM/Stars and Stripes

From left, Command Sgt. Maj. Rickey Jackson, Brig. Gen. Steven Carpenter and Command Sgt. Maj. Caleb Webster are seen Thursday during a ceremony in Wiesbaden, Germany.

Webster brings plenty of experience in the European theater from his most recent assignment as the top enlisted leader of the 41st Field Artillery Brigade in Grafenwoehr.

During the ceremony, Brig. Gen. Steven Carpenter, head of the 56th Artillery Command, highlighted Jackson’s 22 months in the role.

Under Jackson’s leadership, the command quickly transformed from what he and other leaders described as a “champagne headquarters” to one “with teeth,” Carpenter said.

The command supports the Eastern Flank Deterrence Line, a NATO and U.S. Army Europe and Africa initiative that leverages emerging technologies to achieve anti-access/area denial and counter foes’ advantages in mass and momentum.

Through exercises like Arcane Thunder, Avenger Triad and Dynamic Front, the organization moved from conventional artillery fire drills to incorporating activities across domains while integrating and streamlining operations with NATO allies and partners.

“We’ve moved light years ahead from where we were when I walked in,” Jackson said.

He stressed the importance of the deterrence line in safeguarding Europe from Russian aggression.

“If we get (that) right, where our capabilities are creating common operating pictures and integrating systems, then our partners can be in the front and do the things that we’re asking them to do,” he said.

Jackson will become the first field artillery soldier to serve as the senior enlisted leader of U.S. Army Space and Missile Defense Command at Redstone Arsenal in Alabama.

That organization will likely be a focal point for the Army and the Defense Department in the coming months with President Donald Trump’s emphasis on missile defense, including initiatives such as the one dubbed the Golden Dome.

NATION



SAM OWENS, THE SAN ANTONIO EXPRESS-NEWS/AP

Former Uvalde school district police officer Adrian Gonzales, right, embraces his attorney Jason Goss after the jury found Gonzales not guilty Wednesday at the Nueces County Courthouse in Corpus Christi, Texas.

Ex-Uvalde officer acquitted in trial over response to school shooting

Associated Press

CORPUS CHRISTI, Texas — A former Uvalde schools police officer was acquitted Wednesday of charges that he failed in his duties to confront the gunman at Robb Elementary during the critical first minutes of the deadly school shooting.

Jurors deliberated for more than seven hours before finding Adrian Gonzales, 52, not guilty in the first trial over the hesitant law enforcement response to the 2022 attack, in which a teenage gunman killed 19 fourth-graders and two teachers. Had he been convicted, he faced up to two years in prison on more than two dozen charges of child abandonment and endangerment.

Gonzales appeared to fight back tears and hugged his lawyers after the verdict was read in a courtroom in Corpus Christi, hundreds of miles from Uvalde, where his legal team said a fair trial would not have been possible.

“Thank you for the jury for considering all the evidence,” Gonzales told reporters. Asked if he wanted to say anything to the families, he declined.

Several family members of the victims sat in silence in the courtroom, some crying or wiping away tears.

“Faith is fractured, but you never lose faith,” said Jesse Rizo, whose 9-year-old niece Jackie Cazares was killed. He said he was frustrated by the verdict and hopes the state will press ahead with the trial of former Uvalde schools Police Chief Pete Arredondo, the only other officer who has been charged over the police response.

“Those children in the cemetery can’t speak for themselves,” Rizo said. Arredondo’s trial has not yet been set. Paul Looney, his attorney, told The Associated Press that he believes the verdict will result in prosecutors dropping the case against his client.

“These people have been vilified, and it’s horrible what’s been done to them. These guys didn’t do anything wrong,” Looney said.

The nearly three-week trial was an unusual case in the U.S. of an officer facing criminal charges on accusations of failing to stop a crime and protect lives.

The proceedings included emotional testimony from teachers who were shot and survived. Prosecutors argued that Gonzales abandoned his training and did nothing to stop or interrupt the teenage gunman before he entered the school.

“We’re expected to act differently when talking about a child that can’t defend themselves,” special prosecutor Bill Turner said during closing arguments Wednesday. “If you have a duty to act, you can’t stand by while a child is in imminent danger.”

At least 370 law enforcement officers rushed to the school, where 77 minutes passed before a tactical team finally entered the classroom to confront and kill the gunman. Gonzales was one of just two officers indicted, angering some victim’s relatives who said they wanted more to be held accountable.

House moves to pass final bills to fund government

BY KEVIN FREKING
AND LISA MASCARO
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House was looking to pass this year’s final tranche of spending bills on Thursday, an effort that is being complicated by Democratic lawmakers’ concerns that the measure funding the Department of Homeland Security inadequately addresses President Donald Trump’s mass deportation efforts.

The House has already passed eight of the 12 annual appropriations bills that fund federal agencies and programs. If the final four bills pass on Thursday, action would then move to the Senate, with final passage needed before a Jan. 30 deadline to avoid a partial government shutdown.

House Democratic leaders Rep. Hakeem Jeffries of New York, Rep. Katherine Clark of Massachusetts and Rep. Pete Aguilar of California announced in a closed-door meeting that they would oppose the Homeland Security bill. Their members are demanding a forceful stand in response to the Republican president’s immigration crackdown, most recently centered in the Minneapolis area, where more than 2,000 officers are stationed and where a U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officer fatally shot Renee Good, a mother of three.

“There’s a very big concern about ICE being out of control,” said Rep. Rosa DeLauro, the ranking Democratic lawmaker on the House Appropriations Committee.

But Democrats have few good options to express their opposition. DeLauro said that passing a continuing resolution to fund Homeland Security at current levels for the remainder of the budget year would cede spending decisions to Trump.

There’s also little appetite for another shutdown, even if it would affect only a portion of the federal government.

“There is much more we must do to rein in DHS, which I will continue to press for. But the hard truth is that Democrats must win political power to enact the kind of accountability we need,” said Sen. Patty Murray, the top Democrat on the Senate Appropriations Committee.

This year’s Homeland Security bill holds spending for ICE roughly flat from the prior year. It also restricts the ability of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem to unilaterally shift funding and allocate federal dollars as she sees fit.

“It’s not everything we wanted. We wanted more oversight. But, look, Democrats don’t control the House. We don’t control the Senate or the White House. But we were able to add some oversight over Homeland,” said Rep. Henry Cuellar, D-Texas, a member of the Appropriations panel. He said he intends to vote for the bill.

But most Democrats who emerged from the closed-door caucus meeting on Wednesday had a different view.

“I never support lawless operations,” said Rep. Marcy Kaptur, D-Ohio.

“If it’s the status quo, I’m a no,” said Rep. Brad Schneider, D-Ill.

DeLauro, along with Cuellar, made a presentation about the bill to House Democrats during their closed-door meeting. Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash., said she told her colleagues why she thought it was a mistake. Others who spoke up agreed, she said.

“I think this is just a really horrific time, and people understand what’s at stake,” Jayapal said. “We can’t treat this like it’s anything else. Our eyes are not lying to us.”

Autopsy finds immigrant in ICE custody died of homicide due to asphyxia

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A Cuban migrant held in solitary confinement at an immigration detention facility in Texas died after guards held him down and he stopped breathing, according to an autopsy report released Wednesday that ruled the death a homicide.

Geraldo Lunas Campos died Jan. 3 following an altercation with guards. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement said the 55-year-old father of four was attempting suicide and the staff tried to

save him.

But a witness told The Associated Press last week that Lunas Campos was handcuffed as at least five guards held him down and one put an arm around his neck and squeezed until he was unconscious.

His death was one of at least three reported in little more than a month at Camp East Montana, a sprawling tent facility in the desert on the grounds of Fort Bliss in El Paso.

The autopsy report by the El Paso County Medical Examiner’s Office found Lunas Campos’ body showed signs of a struggle, including abrasions on his chest and knees. He also had hemorrhages on his neck. The deputy medical examiner, Dr. Adam Gonzalez, determined the cause of death was asphyxia due to neck and torso compression.

The report said witnesses saw Lunas Campos “become unresponsive while being physically restrained by law enforcement.” It did not elaborate on what happened during the struggle but cited

evidence of injuries to his neck, head and torso associated with physical restraint. The report also noted the presence of petechial hemorrhages — tiny blood spots from burst capillaries that can be associated with intense strain or injury — in the eyelids and skin of the neck.

Dr. Victor Weedn, a forensic pathologist who reviewed the autopsy report for AP, said the presence of petechiae in the eyes support the conclusion that asphyxia caused the death. Those injuries suggest

pressure on the body and are often associated with such deaths, he said.

He said the contusions on Lunas Campos’ body may reflect physical restraint and the neck injuries were consistent with a hand or knee on the neck.

The autopsy also found the presence of prescription antidepressant and antihistamine medications, adding that Lunas Campos had a history of bipolar disorder and anxiety. It made no mention of him attempting suicide.



ROBERT F. BUKATY/AP

Rosie Grutze protests the presence of U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents, on Wednesday, in Portland, Maine. The state has relatively few residents who are in the United States illegally but has a notable presence of refugees in its largest cities, particularly from Africa.

ICE arrives in Maine as court sides with US on Minn. tactics

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Maine became the latest target of the Trump administration’s immigration enforcement crackdown, while a federal appeals court on Wednesday suspended a decision that prohibited federal officers from using tear gas or pepper spray against peaceful protesters in Minnesota.

The 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals was persuaded to freeze a judge’s ruling that bars retaliation against the public in Minnesota, including detaining people who follow agents in cars, while the government pursues an appeal. Operation Metro Surge, an immigration enforcement operation in the Twin Cities, has been underway for weeks.

Attorney General Pam Bondi praised the appeals court on X, saying the Justice Department “will protect federal law enforcement agents from criminals in the streets AND activist judges in the courtroom.”

After the stay was issued, Greg Bovino of U.S. Border Patrol, who has commanded the administration’s big-city immigration campaign, was seen on video repeatedly warning protesters on a snowy Minneapolis street “Gas is coming!” before tossing a canister into the crowd

that released green smoke.

Minnesota is a major focus of immigration sweeps by agencies under the Department of Homeland Security and is where Renee Good was fatally shot by an ICE officer on Jan. 7. State and local officials who oppose the campaign were served with federal grand jury subpoenas Tuesday for records that might suggest they were trying to stifle enforcement.

A political action committee founded by former Vice President Kamala Harris urged donors to contribute to a defense fund in aid of Gov. Tim Walz, her 2024 running mate.

“The Justice Department is going after Trump’s enemies,” Harris’ email said, referring to President Donald Trump.

In Maine, the Department of Homeland Security named the enforcement operation Catch of the Day in an apparent play on the state’s seafood industry. Maine has relatively few residents who are in the United States illegally but has a notable presence of refugees in its largest cities, particularly from Africa.

Secretary of State Shenna Bellows, a Democrat, said she won’t grant a request for confidential li-

cense plates sought by Customs and Border Protection, a decision that reflects her disgust over “abuses of power” by immigration enforcers.

“We have not revoked existing plates but have paused issuance of new plates. We want to be assured that Maine plates will not be used for lawless purposes,” Bellows said.

A message seeking comment from CBP was not immediately returned.

Portland City Council member Pious Ali, a native of Ghana, said there’s much anxiety about ICE’s presence in Maine’s largest city.

“There are immigrants who live here who work in our hospitals, they work in our schools, they work in our hotels, they are part of the economic engine of our community,” Ali said.

Bovino said more than 10,000 people in the U.S. illegally have been arrested in Minnesota in the past year, including 3,000 “of some of the most dangerous offenders” in the last six weeks during Operation Metro Surge.

Julia Decker, policy director at the Immigrant Law Center of Minnesota, said advocates have no way of knowing whether the government’s arrest numbers and descriptions of the people in custody are accurate.

ICE memo: Agents don’t need judge’s warrant at homes

By REBECCA SANTANA
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Federal immigration officers are asserting sweeping power to forcibly enter people’s homes without a judge’s warrant, according to an internal Immigration and Customs Enforcement memo obtained by The Associated Press, marking a sharp reversal of longstanding guidance meant to respect constitutional limits on government searches.

The memo authorizes ICE officers to use force to enter a residence based solely on a more narrow administrative warrant to arrest someone with a final order of removal, a move that advocates say collides with Fourth Amendment protections and upends years of advice given to immigrant communities.

The shift comes as the Trump administration dramatically expands immigration arrests nationwide, deploying thousands of officers under a mass deportation campaign that is already reshaping enforcement tactics in cities such as Minneapolis.

For years, immigrant advocates, legal aid groups and local governments have urged people not to open their doors to immigration agents unless they are shown a warrant signed by a judge. That guidance is rooted in Supreme Court rulings that generally prohibit law enforcement from entering a home without judicial approval. The ICE directive directly undercuts that advice at a time when arrests are accelerating under the administration’s immigration crackdown.

The memo itself has not been widely shared within the agency, according to a whistleblower complaint, but its contents have been used to train new ICE officers who are being deployed into cities and towns to implement the president’s immigration crackdown. New ICE hires and those still in training are being told to follow the memo’s guidance instead of written training materials that actually contradict the memo, according to the whistleblower disclosure.

It is unclear how broadly the directive has been applied in immigration enforcement operations. The Associated Press witnessed ICE officers ramming through the front door of the home of a Liberian man, Garrison Gibson, with a deportation order from 2023 in Minneapolis on Jan. 11, wearing heavy tactical gear and with their rifles drawn.

Documents reviewed by The AP revealed that the agents only had an administrative warrant — meaning there was no judge who authorized the raid on private property.

The change is almost certain to meet legal challenges and stiff criticism from advocacy groups and immigrant-friendly state and local governments that have spent years successfully urging people not to open their doors unless ICE shows them a warrant signed by a judge.

The Associated Press obtained the memo and whistleblower complaint from an official in Congress, who shared it on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive documents. The AP verified the authenticity of accounts in the complaint.

The memo, signed by the acting director of ICE, Todd Lyons, and dated May 12, 2025, says: “Although the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has not historically relied on administrative warrants alone to arrest aliens subject to final orders of removal in their place of residence, the DHS Office of the General Counsel has recently determined that the U.S. Constitution, the Immigration and Nationality Act, and the immigration regulations do not prohibit relying on administrative warrants for this purpose.”

The memo does not detail how that determination was made nor what its legal repercussions might be.

Whistleblower Aid, a nonprofit legal organization that assists workers exposing wrongdoings, said in the whistleblower complaint obtained by The Associated Press that it represents two anonymous U.S. government officials “disclosing a secretive — and seemingly unconstitutional — policy directive.”

Bragg: Governor invites Trump to visit Minnesota and ‘help restore calm and order’

FROM PAGE 1

ders, which were reported earlier by MS Now, the Pentagon said it didn’t have information to provide at this time.

Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, a Democrat and frequent target of Trump, has urged the president to

refrain from sending in more troops and, in a statement Tuesday, invited him to visit Minnesota and “help restore calm and order and reaffirm that true public safety comes from shared purpose, trust, and respect.”

In his second term, Trump has

pushed traditional boundaries by using troops in American cities, often over the objections of local officials, amid federal operations targeting illegal immigration and crime.

Trump deployed federalized National Guard troops to Los An-

geles last June after protesters took to the streets in response to a blitz of immigration arrests. Ultimately, he sent about 4,000 Guard members and 700 active-duty Marines to guard federal buildings and, later, to protect federal agents as they carried out immi-

gration arrests.

He also mobilized Guard troops in places like Chicago and Portland, Ore., but has faced a series of legal setbacks.

Trump said in December that he was dropping that push for the time being.

NATION



GEORGE WALKER IV/AP

A shopper buys groceries Wednesday in Nashville, Tenn., ahead of an expected winter storm.

Crews spread salt, people stock up as a winter storm approaches

Associated Press

ATLANTA—Bags of salt aren't usually a hot item at Bates Ace Hardware in Atlanta, but store manager Lewis Payne sold all 275 he had in stock in one morning as residents braced for a major storm to deliver heavy snow, sleet and freezing rain on a broad section of the U.S. in coming days.

Payne said he had 30 online orders for "ice melt" before 8 a.m. People sprinkle the salts on the ground before a storm to disrupt the formation of ice.

"It's impossible to get right now," Payne said. "We have had to make special trips to our warehouse to pick up extra items because people need them."

The storm was expected to hit

starting Friday, stretching from New Mexico to New England and across the Deep South. The damage could rival that of a major hurricane.

Meteorologists say ice may linger on roads and sidewalks because temperatures will be slow to warm in many areas. Ice could also weigh down trees and power lines, triggering widespread outages.

The city of Carmel, Ind., canceled its Winter Games out of fear residents could get frostbite and hypothermia competing in ice trike relay and "human curling" in which people slide down a skating rink on inner tubes.

College sports teams moved up or postponed games, and the Texas Rangers canceled their annual Fan

Fest event.

The coldest windchills may fall below minus 50 Fahrenheit across the Northern Plains with subzero wind chills reaching as far southeast as the Mid-Atlantic states and Southern Plains, the National Weather Service said.

In Arkansas, the Department of Transportation started treating some roads with brine on Tuesday. The salt helps prevent ice from forming. Over 10 inches of snow were expected in parts of the state.

Rain was complicating efforts to pretreat roads with salt in Alabama on Wednesday because precipitation washes away the brine. The Alabama Department of Transportation encouraged people to stay off the roads if ice forms.

2 women arrested after protest that disrupted Minnesota church service

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — A prominent civil rights attorney and at least one other person involved in an anti-immigration enforcement protest that disrupted a service at a Minnesota church have been arrested, Attorney General Pam Bondi said Thursday.

Bondi announced the arrest of Nekima Levy Armstrong in a post on X. On Sunday, protesters entered the Cities Church in St. Paul, where a local official with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement serves as a pastor. Bondi later posted on X that a second person had been arrested.

The Justice Department quickly opened a civil rights investigation

after the group interrupted services by chanting "ICE out" and "Justice for Renee Good," referring to the 37-year-old mother of three who was fatally shot by an ICE officer in Minneapolis earlier this month.

"Listen loud and clear: WE DO NOT TOLERATE ATTACKS ON PLACES OF WORSHIP," the attorney general wrote on X.

Levy Armstrong, a civil rights attorney and prominent longtime local activist, had called for the pastor affiliated with ICE to resign, saying his dual role poses a "fundamental moral conflict."

"You cannot lead a congregation while directing an agency whose actions have cost lives and inflicted fear in our communities," she said

Tuesday.

Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem posted a photo on X of Levy Armstrong with her arms behind her back next to a person wearing a badge. Noem said she faces a charge under a statute that bars threatening or intimidating someone exercising a right.

FBI Director Kash Patel posted on X that Chauntyll Louisa Allen, the second person Bondi said was arrested, is charged under the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act, which prohibits physically obstructing or using the threat of force to intimidate or interfere with a person seeking reproductive health services or seeking to participate in a service at a house of worship.

Cities see drop in homicide rate

By CLAUDIA LAUER
Associated Press

Data collected from 35 American cities showed a 21% decrease in the homicide rate from 2024 to 2025, translating to about 922 fewer homicides last year, according to a new report from the independent Council on Criminal Justice.

The report, released on Thursday, tracked 13 crimes and recorded drops last year in 11 of those categories including carjackings, shoplifting, aggravated assaults and others. Drug crimes saw a small increase over last year and sexual assaults stayed even between 2024 and 2025, the study found.

Experts said cities and states beyond those surveyed showed similar declines in homicides and other crimes. But they said it's too early to tell what is prompting the change even as elected officials at all levels — both Democrats and Republicans — have been claiming credit.

Adam Gelb, president and CEO of the council — a nonpartisan think tank for criminal justice policy and research — said that after historic increases in violence during the COVID-19 pandemic, this year brought historic decreases. The study found some cities recorded decades-low numbers, with the

overall homicide rate dropping to its lowest in decades.

"It's a dramatic drop to an absolutely astonishing level. As we celebrate it we also need to unpack and try to understand it," Gelb said. "There's never one reason crime goes up or down."

The council collects data from police departments and other law enforcement sources. Some of the report categories included data from as many as 35 cities, while others because of differences in definitions for specific crimes or tracking gaps, include fewer cities in their totals. Many of the property crimes in the report also declined, including a 27% drop in vehicle thefts and 10% drop in shoplifting among the reporting cities.

The council's report showed a decrease in the homicide rate in 31 of 35 cities including a 40% decrease or more in Denver, Omaha, Neb., and Washington. The only city included that reported a double-digit increase was Little Rock, Ark., where the rate increased by 16% from 2024.

Gelb said the broad crime rate decreases have made some criminologists question historic understandings of what drives trends in violent crime and how to battle it.

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WORLD

Trump rolls out Board of Peace, top allies decline

Associated Press

DAVOS, Switzerland — President Donald Trump on Thursday inaugurated his Board of Peace to lead efforts at maintaining a ceasefire in Israel's war with Hamas, insisting that "everyone wants to be a part" of the body that could eventually rival the United Nations — despite many U.S. allies opting not to participate.

In a speech at the World Economic Forum, Trump sought to create momentum for a project to map out a future of the war-torn Gaza Strip that has been overshadowed this week, first by his threats to seize Greenland, then by a dramatic retreat from that push.

"This isn't the United States, this is for the world," he said, add-

ing, "I think we can spread it out to other things as we succeed in Gaza."

The event featured Ali Shaath, the head of a new, future technocratic government in Gaza, announcing that the Rafah border crossing will open in both directions next week.

But there was no confirmation of that from Israel, which said only that it would consider the matter next week.

Shaath, an engineer and former Palestinian Authority official from Gaza, is overseeing the Palestinian committee set to govern the territory under U.S. supervision.

The new peace board was initially envisioned as a small group of world leaders overseeing the

ceasefire, but it has morphed into something far more ambitious — and skepticism about its membership and mandate has led some countries usually closest to Washington to take a pass.

Trump tried not to let those not participating ruin his unveiling party, saying 59 countries had signed onto the board — even though heads of state, top diplomats and other officials from only 19 countries plus the U.S. actually attended. He told the group, ranging from Azerbaijan to Paraguay to Hungary, "You're the most powerful people in the world."

Britain's foreign secretary, Yvette Cooper, said her country wasn't signing on "because this is about a legal treaty that raises much broader issues."



President Donald Trump holds up a signed Board of Peace charter during the Annual Meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, Thursday.

Norway and Sweden have indicated they won't participate, after France also said no.

Canada, Ukraine, China and the executive arm of the European Union also haven't committed.

Iran says crackdown's death toll far lower than rights group total

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Iran offered its first government-issued death toll Wednesday following a crackdown on nationwide protests, giving a far lower figure than activists abroad as the country's theocracy tries to reassert control after unrest recalling the chaos surrounding its 1979 Islamic Revolution.

State television carried statements by the Interior Ministry and the Foundation of Martyrs and Veterans Affairs, an official body providing services to families of those killed in wars, saying

3,117 people were killed. It added that 2,427 of the dead in the demonstrations that began Dec. 28 were civilians and security forces. It did not elaborate on the rest. Iran's government in the past has undercounted or not reported fatalities from unrest.

The U.S.-based Human Rights Activists News Agency said the death toll early Thursday was at least 4,902, with many more feared dead. The human rights group has been accurate throughout the years on demonstrations and unrest in Iran, relying on a network of activists inside the

country that confirms all reported fatalities. Other groups similarly have offered higher numbers than the Iranian government tally.

The Associated Press has been unable to independently assess the death toll, in part due to authorities cutting access to the internet and blocking international calls into the country. Iran also reportedly has limited journalists' ability locally to report on the aftermath, instead repeatedly airing claims on state television that refer to demonstrators as "rioters" motivated by America and Israel, without offering evidence.

Baghdad asked for ISIS prisoner transfers

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — The decision to move prisoners of the Islamic State group from northeast Syria to detention centers in Iraq came after a request by officials in Baghdad that was welcomed by the U.S.-led coalition and the Syrian government, officials said Thursday.

American and Iraqi officials told The Associated Press about the Iraqi request, a day after the U.S. military said that it started transferring some of the 9,000 ISIS detainees held in more than a dozen detention centers in north-

east Syria controlled by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF, in northeast Syria.

The move to start transferring the detainees came after Syrian government forces took control of the sprawling al-Hol camp — which houses thousands of mostly women and children — from the SDF, which withdrew as part of a ceasefire.

Over the past several years, the SDF has handed over to Iraqi authorities a number of foreign fighters, including French citizens, who were put on trial and received sentences.

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WEEKEND



No mercy for audience
in new Chris Pratt flick
Movies, Page 17

Behind the music

2026 chock-full of fascinating documentaries
about pivotal musicians, moments in history

Music, Page 28



ILLUSTRATION BY NOGA AMI-RAV/Stars and Stripes

WEEKEND: GADGETS & TECHNOLOGY

A new way to fight social media addiction

Anti-doomscrolling influencers, who post content encouraging viewers to reduce their social media use, are on the rise

By KAITLYN HUAMANI
Associated Press

It's simple to accidentally become entranced by an endless loop of videos on Instagram or TikTok. But sometimes, that mindless scroll is interrupted by a reminder that what you thought was a 10-minute break spent on your phone was closer to 30 minutes.

Olivia Yokubonis, armed with a kind voice and scientific research, often pops up in feeds on social platforms, gently reminding viewers that they might not remember the video they saw two videos before she appeared on the screen.

Yokubonis is a content creator who goes by the name Olivia Unplugged online, making videos to combat overuse or mindless use of social media. For the most part, people who view her videos welcome the disruption from the endless loop of content, treating it as a wake-up call to get off their phones. Other times, they are snarky.

"People will comment and they'll be like, 'Oh, (it's) ironic that you're posting. And I'm like, 'Where else am I supposed to find you, Kyle? Outside? You're not outside. You are here, sitting here,'" she said. "For us to actually be seen, we have to be where people are."

Yokubonis' content responds to the feeling many have, that they spend too much time on social media or apps.

"Most people have no clue how much time they spend on social media," said Ofir Turel, a professor of information systems management at the University of Melbourne who has been studying social media use for years.

Through his research, Turel found that when he presented people with their screen time information, they were practically "in a state of shock," and many people voluntarily reduced their usage afterwards.

Yokubonis is part of a growing group of content creators who make videos encouraging viewers to close out the app they're on. Some are aggressive in their ap-



proach, some more tame; some only occasionally post about social media overuse; and some, like Yokubonis, devote their accounts to it.

She works for Opal, a screen time app designed to help users "reclaim their focus," she said, but those who engage with her content might not have any idea she is working for the company. Brand logos, constant plugs to download the app and other signs of branding are almost entirely absent from her page.

"People love hearing from people," she said. Millions of views on her videos point to that being true.

"It's a fine line and a balance of finding a way to be able to cut through that noise, but also not adding to the noise," she added.

Ian A. Anderson, a postdoctoral scholar at California Institute of Technology, said he finds this kind of content interesting, but is curious whether it's disruptive enough to prompt action.

He also said he wonders whether those with the strongest scrolling habits are "thoughtless about the way (they're) intaking information."

"If they're paying full attention, I feel like it could be an effective disruption, but I also think there is a degree to which, if you are really a habitual scroller, maybe you aren't fully engaging with it," he said. "I can think of all sorts of different variables that could change the effectiveness, but it does sound like an interesting way to intervene from the inside."

Vueroid dashcams use AI to recognize plates

By GREGG ELLMAN
Tribune News Service

Vueroid's latest dashcam, the S1 4K Infinite (two-channel), is an industry leader, setting a new standard as the first offering artificial intelligence-powered license plate recognition.

Once an incident occurs, there's nothing better than having dashcam footage. As Vueroid points out in its press release, the S1 dash cam serves as insurance, delivering reliable video recordings when they're needed most.

It's near-impossible to say which dashcam has the clearest, sharpest image, but this one has to be near the top. With its Sony Starvis 2 sensor, the dashcam delivers stunning 4K resolution at 60 frames per second from the front camera, which has a 151-degree wide-angle field of view. The front camera has a 2.3-inch LCD. The rear camera's resolution is approximately 2.5K at 30 fps with a 160-degree field of view. A microSD memory card (with a maximum capacity of 512GB) stores the recordings.

Installation is standard and shouldn't take long with the included hardware kit.

If you're not up to the task, a professional installer shouldn't be hard to find. A quick way to get it going is with the included cigarette lighter adapter. Once it's powered up, using it is simple. The buttons on the camera are easy to access and user-friendly for power and mode changes.

Vueroid's proprietary technology enables extensive fine-tuning and customization, with 18 parameters including brightness, sharpness and noise reduction. It has a night-vision mode and Wi-Fi for file transfer.

With the Vueroid Hub app, AI-powered deep learning algorithms restore any unclear video with a few simple taps. License plates captured in motion are often blurred and difficult to definitively read. In just a few steps with the Vueroid Hub app, you select the license plate in question and tell the app to enhance and restore it. It's that easy.

The S1 4K Infinite dashcam (\$429.99 on Amazon but on sale for 379.99) is loaded with features to support its unparalleled video quality, including providing MP4 files that play with ease.

A circular polarizing filter is included,



VUEROID/TNS

The Vueroid S1 4K Infinite dashcam is available in one-, two- or three channel setups. The two-channel delivers 4K resolution at 60 frames per second from its front camera. Its app uses artificial intelligence to unblur license plates.

which reduces reflections and glare off the windshield for clearer images.

The parking mode with motion detection works in low-power mode to save battery life and includes GPS geofencing to turn it off and save power, like when the vehicle is parked safely in a home garage, for example. The vehicle battery protection mode powers off the dashcam to protect the vehicle's battery.

Vueroid also has an S1 4K Infinite in a three-channel setup (adding an interior camera) for \$449.99 on Amazon, and an S1 4K Infinite one-channel with the front camera only for \$349.99 on Amazon (but on sale for 309.99).

Online: vueroid.com/product/vueroid-s1-4k-infinite-2ch

WEEKEND: MOVIES



Team House Studios photos

“Sheepdog” tells the story of a veteran’s journey to reclaim purpose after military service, exploring themes of healing, redemption and post-traumatic growth, while also confronting the harsh realities of veteran suicide and homelessness.

A ‘post-traumatic growth’ film

‘Sheepdog’ brings veterans’ stories and postservice struggles to light

BY KAYLYN BARNHART BATISTA
Stars and Stripes

Filmmaker Steven Grayhm’s journey began in 2011, when his car broke down on the side of the road on his way to Los Angeles.

When a local tow truck company came to his aid, the driver — a military veteran — picked up Grayhm and his car and hauled them to Los Angeles. During the three-hour ride, the veteran shared personal stories about his family struggles and the medications tied to multiple deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“I can’t believe I’m telling you this. I haven’t told my wife this. I haven’t even spoken to a therapist.”

Those words, spoken by the veteran, left a lasting impression and started Grayhm on a nationwide road trip to find other veterans with similar experiences.

“It was easier for that veteran to speak to a complete stranger and share his story than it was to his own family or his community,” Grayhm said.

Over the next 12 years, Grayhm spoke with veterans and their families across the country, gathering the stories that would become the foundation for his film, “Sheepdog,” now in stateside theaters.

“Sheepdog” tells the story of a veteran’s journey to reclaim purpose years after his military service. It explores healing, redemption and growth, and it confronts the harsh realities of veteran suicide and homelessness.

The film opens with a quote by Army Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, “I’m a sheepdog. I live to protect the flock and confront the wolf,” that sets the tone by emphasizing duty, loyalty and the instinct to protect others by facing danger.

“Sheepdog is not a post-traumatic stress movie; it’s a post-traumatic growth movie,” said Grayhm, who wrote,



Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists award nominee Dominic Fumusa, one of the stars of “Sheepdog.”

“I’m a sheepdog. I live to protect the flock and confront the wolf.”

Army Lt. Col. Dave Grossman
“Sheepdog” opening quote

directed and starred in the film. “I thought it was really important to take the audience to those dark places to show what’s at stake, and to fully understand the journey (postservice).”

The film also stars Dominic Fumusa, Virginia Madsen, Vondie Curtis-Hall, Lilli Cooper and Matt Dallas, who portray characters inspired by real veterans and their stories.

“If we could just touch one veteran, save one veteran’s

life with this movie, it would be a success,” Fumusa said.

But “Sheepdog” doesn’t focus only on veterans — it also shines a light on the medical professionals and therapists who dedicate their lives to helping them heal.

Grayhm spent months doing research at Department of Veterans Affairs medical centers across the country, observing therapy sessions, PTSD orientation classes and treatments such as Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) — all of which are depicted in the film.

“There’s a myriad of different therapies and techniques, and I just wanted to be very responsible with what I put into the film based on what I saw and its efficacy that I know was proven to help,” Grayhm said.

The film also highlights the dedication of a VA worker, inspired by a real person Grayhm met during his research.

“Those (VA workers) are the unsung heroes that are going to work every day just trying to make a difference,” Grayhm said. “There are people that show up every day, not getting rich doing it, that truly want to make a difference, and are.”

“Sheepdog” also explores the experiences of families and spouses, highlighting how they navigate the emotional challenges of supporting loved ones coping with PTSD, trauma and reintegration into civilian life.

“We get frustrated with those we love because we know they need help,” Fumusa said. “You can only do so much. For so many people, the challenge is figuring out how to address what our veterans have gone through, and how we can lead each other to a place of healing and support.”

Grayhm hopes the film inspires reconnection and understanding for veterans and their families. For civilians, he sees it as a call to action — to take the time to have a real conversation with a veteran, check in on how they’re doing and invite them to share their experiences.

“We hope the message of the film transcends and reaches all the people that need it most,” Grayhm said.

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS

Blurring the lines

Damon-Affleck buddy routine still strong in ‘The Rip,’ a lean, potent and resonant neo-noir with good/bad cop muddiness

By Jake Coyle
Associated Press

Lines between cop and criminal get murky in Joe Carnahan’s “The Rip,” a crime thriller set across one foggy Miami night, starring Matt Damon and Ben Affleck. Damon and Affleck, of course, are so closely associated with Boston — most recently they produced the 2024 heist movie “The Instigators” there — that a detour to South Florida puts them, a little awkwardly, in an entirely different movie landscape. This is “Miami Vice” territory or Elmore Leonard Land, not Southie or “The Town.” In “The Rip,” they play Miami narcotics officers who come upon a cartel stash house that Lt. Dane Dumars (Damon) says may have \$150,000 hidden in the walls. It turns out to be more than \$20 million, though, and their mission immediately turns from a Friday afternoon smash-and-grab into an imminent siege where no one can be trusted. “The Rip” is a lean and potent-enough neo-noir where almost all the characters are police officers, yet it’s a mystery as to who’s a good guy and who’s not. It’s a nifty and timely premise, even if “The Rip” literally tattoos its message across itself. When Dane sits down with a young woman (Sasha Calle) at the stash house who seems plausibly innocent, she looks at tattoos on his hands and asks what they mean. On one: “AWTGG”: “Are we the good guys?”

As much as the answer might seem a foregone conclusion in a movie starring Damon and Affleck, who are also producers, “The Rip” plays with and against type in ways that can keep you engrossed. (The cast also includes Teyana Taylor, Steven Yeun and Kyle Chandler.) However, the exposition is so light and hurried in “The Rip” that that’s almost all it plays with. We know almost nothing about our characters outside of the action in the movie, making all the potential double-crosses ring hollow. Carnahan opens the film with a flurry of internal interrogations. The Miami police department is full of finger pointing after the fatal shooting, seen in the movie’s first moments, of a detective (Lina Escó). Cutting quickly between angry accusations and equally furious defensiveness, we get the sense that nobody in the department knows who’s clean and who’s dirty. “I hate it, man,” Dane tells Detective Sgt. J.D. Byrne (Affleck). “I hate being a cop.” Various divisions intermingle, including the DEA (agent Mateo “Matty” Nix played by Chandler) and FBI (agent Del Byrne played by Scott Adkins). The omnipresence of drug cartels and the dysfunction in the department has made the police force into a den of thieves, in its own right. When we catch up with Dane’s crew, they don’t look particularly official. On a Friday afternoon, they’re sitting around outside drinking, with armored vehicles parked next to them. When Dane says he’s



Netflix

Matt Damon, left, and Ben Affleck star in “The Rip” as Miami narcotics officers.

got a CrimeStopper tip he wants to check out, they go in civilian cars. With him are four other detectives: Byrne, Mike Ro (Yeun), Numa Baptiste (an underused Taylor, which, coming off “One Battle After Another,” should be illegal) and Lolo Salazar (Catalina Sandino Moreno). Dane and J.D., naturally, are tight. But after they find the money, the tone shifts. Dane doesn’t call the money into their superiors, and instead asks his crew to turn in their phones to him. Everyone begins to wonder: What’s going on? Is Dane crooked? A mysterious phone call comes in: Take \$150,000 and go, or everybody dies. It’s not the cartel calling. Carnahan, who also wrote “The Rip,” has said the movie is inspired by real events as described to him by a Miami detective. But little in how the movie plays out will strike many as particularly plausible. Yet Carnahan, achieving the same dense atmosphere as in his Liam Neeson

wolf thriller “The Grey,” albeit with a lot less snow, imbues “The Rip” with a good cop/bad cop muddiness that makes his film feel resonant. Affleck and Damon have made more than a dozen movies together, but their collaborations seem to be increasing in frequency. They’ve often found interesting ways — like in Ridley Scott’s “The Last Duel” — to shape and contort expectations for themselves on screen. Usually, that’s meant roles that are far from heroic, and often part of an ensemble. (Their production company, Artists Equity, operates with unusual profit participation for the cast and crew.) As a B-movie with a couple of A-listers, “The Rip” will probably go down as a minor and flawed genre exercise. But even in their lesser efforts, the sincerity of Damon and Affleck’s buddy routine remains winning. Even in Miami. “The Rip” is rated R for violence and pervasive language. Running time: 133 minutes. Now streaming on Netflix.

Music film ‘Clika’ stale, can’t seem to find the cinematic beat

By Katie Walsh
Tribune News Service

The title of Michael Greene’s coming-of-age music film “Clika” refers to the slang word for “clique” in the terminology of the corridos tumbados musical genre, or trap corridos, a distinctly American evolution of the Mexican storytelling ballads. This blending of musical cultures takes the narrative quality of traditional corridos and incorporates rap and hip-hop styling, as well as uniquely modern Mexican American stories, as pioneered in large part by groups like Herencia de Patrones, a band out of Yuba City, Calif. Frontman Jay Dee makes his acting debut in “Clika,” a film based in part on his own life story. The film’s producer is musica Mexicana record exec Jimmy Humilde, CEO of Rancho Humilde, and his intent with the project is to prove Mexican American stories worthy of the big-screen treatment. It’s a noble endeavor, and an important one in this moment, in which Latino Americans are being unfairly targeted by the administration. If Humilde and Greene get anything right with “Clika,” it’s asserting the importance of these stories in film, as Latino representation in cinema is often woefully lacking. It also introduces Jay Dee and his music to a wider and more mainstream audience. With a unique vocal styling and sound that is all his own, he will be a true discovery for some viewers, and an exciting screen debut for his already established fans. That’s the good news about “Clika.” The bad news is that they probably should have made a documentary or a concert film to tell Jay Dee’s story instead. Toward the end of “Clika” we get a few clips of real concert footage, as Jay Dee’s character Chito finally finds the musical



SONY PICTURES/AP

Herencia de Patrones frontman Jay Dee makes his acting debut in the coming-of-age music film “Clika,” which is based in part of his life story. success he’s dreamed of, and it’s so much more compelling than the hackneyed gangster tale they’ve reverse-engineered into Jay Dee’s life story. The problems with “Clika” fundamentally come down to script issues. Written by Greene, Humilde and Sean Sullivan McBride (cinematographer and producer Ski-ter Jones also has a “story by” credit), the film is a grab bag of clichés we’ve seen before, with an overreliance on dialogue and voice-over narration that exposes the inexperienced actors. The film tells without showing, the emotional stakes aren’t legible and the characters tell the audience what to think and how to feel without setting up the foundation or allowing us to get there ourselves. Some plot points make very little sense. It’s a standard hardscrabble coming-of-age story — kid from a small town with big dreams wants to escape a life of farm work (Jay Dee did pick peaches in Yuba City like

Chito does) and pursue his goals. When his Tio Alfredo (Cristian E. Gutierrez) learns Chito’s mom (Nana Ponceleon) has fallen behind on the mortgage, he enlists his nephew for interstate marijuana deliveries to make the money to pay off the bank, and the young man gets too caught up in the fast life, rising to a point that will always include a fall. The message that he ultimately takes away is that there are no shortcuts to success. The script is filled with tired tropes and doesn’t set up Jay Dee in a way that showcases his natural presence or way with words. Comedian and podcaster Daniel “Doknow” Lopez, who plays his friend and producer Blunt, is the only performer whose natural ease and charisma in front of the camera translates, and he’s only given fairly corny and dated material, like ogling a sexy fellow peach-picker (Paola Villalobos) who is presented with her hair blowing in slow-mo like it’s an ’80s college sex comedy, and not a gritty rags-to-riches tale. There is a way that this could have been done better, utilizing visual storytelling, establishing atmosphere and a sense of place that could have given a sense of the music, its large appeal and the circumstances that shaped it, while also allowing Jay Dee to shine in his own way. As it stands, he seems out of his depth here. Corridos are about storytelling, and the innovation of trap corridos is incorporating new stories and sounds into traditional music. It’s a shame that “Clika” then feels so stale, cinematically, not matching the skill or style of its subject. Representationally, “Clika” is an important and worthy film. Cinematically, it unfortunately can’t find the beat. “Clika” is rated R for drug content, language throughout and sexual material. Running time: 122 minutes. Now playing in select on-base theaters.

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS

Sci-fi flick offers no ‘Mercy’ for viewer

Schlocky AI mystery is stomach-churning and migraine-inducing

By KATIE WALSH

Tribune News Service

The schlocky dystopian action thriller “Mercy” touts itself as having been “filmed for IMAX,” but that’s not such a selling point when almost the entire film is a dim close-up of Chris Pratt strapped to a chair. This real-time AI mystery is a mashup of “Judge Dredd” and “Searching,” in which a Los Angeles detective (Pratt) has to prove himself innocent of murder during a 90-minute trial conducted by an artificially intelligent system called Mercy, presided over by an entity known as “Judge Maddox” (Rebecca Ferguson).

Written by Marco van Belle and directed by Russian action auteur Timur Bekmambetov, “Mercy” is a remarkably — though perhaps not surprisingly — conservative film, which manages to be both pro-cop and pro-AI. It uncritically presents a city that has been rapidly transformed into a militarized surveillance state, with a judicial system run by robots serving as judge, jury and executioner. But hey, crime is down, or at least cordoned off in the Hollywood “Red Zone.”

Detective Chris Raven (Pratt), one of the first cops to utilize Mercy to try a murder case, finds himself on the wrong side of the



AMAZON MGM STUDIOS/AP

Chris Pratt is strapped to a chair throughout much of “Mercy,” while the artificially intelligent system, presided over by a judge (Rebecca Ferguson), tries to determine if he’s guilty in the death of his wife.

law when his wife (Annabelle Wallis) is found stabbed to death at home, and he’s found blackout drunk at a bar at 11 a.m. He wakes up already inside the Mercy system, with 90 minutes to prove his innocence, or at least get his probability of guilt under 92% and avoid instant death. He has the entire AI surveillance apparatus at his fingertips, including police body camera footage, video doorbells and social media accounts connected to the “municipal cloud,” and he gets

the option to phone-a-friend, like his partner, Jaq Diallo (Kali Reis), distraught daughter Britt (Kylie Rogers), and sponsor Rob (Chris Sullivan), to try and pull the pieces together.

Of course all of this material is to make the film more cinematic, because watching Pratt and Ferguson talk to each other when they aren’t even in the same room isn’t all that compelling, filmed for IMAX or not. But Bekmambetov and cinematographer Khalid Mohtaseb, as well

as a team of six editors, have stitched together the shaky camera footage and the hands-free interface into a visual “surfing the web” aesthetic that can only be described as “stomach-churning.” Don’t sit too close to this one — the quick swiping through bodycam and cellphone footage on an IMAX screen is migraine-inducing.

Since the film is a little over 90 minutes, our street-smart Detective Raven, who has relied on his gut and the terrifyingly invasive

AI tools throughout the trial, is finally liberated from the chair in the third act, as the twisty-turny tale morphs into an attack on Mercy itself. There is some excellent location-shooting in downtown Los Angeles during the climax, seen through the lens of a bodycam or quadcopter or drone camera. It’s not enough to save the aesthetic of the entire film, though, which is somehow both gray and nauseating.

“Mercy” essentially argues that it’s the people behind the prompts that makes AI work (or not). Every person and system is fallible, but there’s no substitute for instinct and street smarts — can a robot achieve that kind of intelligence? The film presents a fable in which a cop and a machine find their way through the maze of this mystery, essentially arguing that law enforcement should have access to this kind of surveillance, which is a concept more sickening than the jiggly found footage of this film.

Not to mention that one would hate to see the carbon footprint of these AI trials. It’s laughable to suggest that the biggest problems of a near-future Los Angeles using an AI-powered judicial system would be a few scruffy Hollywood meth dealers — how would the city under this system even have enough drinking water if it’s serving all those data centers? Perhaps those are the more pertinent questions, but “Mercy” doesn’t choose to engage those.

“Mercy” is rated PG-13 for violence, bloody images, some strong language, drug content and teen smoking. Running time: 100 minutes. Now playing in select on-base theaters.

These films showcase the many talents of Ferguson

By KATIE WALSH

Tribune News Service

This week’s artificial intelligence action thriller “Mercy” isn’t the ideal showcase for the talents of Swedish superstar Rebecca Ferguson. The actress burst onto the international scene in 2015 with her memorable supporting turn in “Mission: Impossible - Rogue Nation” as the feisty Ilsa Faust, launching her as a fully formed movie star (she had been appearing in Swedish TV and film for 15 years already).

While Ferguson is known for her steely action roles, she has quite the range, appearing in horror, musicals and more, and so if “Mercy” isn’t quite doing it for you, here’s a list of her best films and where to stream them.

Of course, start with Faust, who made an indelible impression on the “Mission: Impossible” series. If you can’t rewatch all eight movies (a true treat), take a spin through some of the best entries, directed by Christopher McQuarrie.

Are they they best because Ferguson’s in them? Probably. Stream installments five, six and seven, “Rogue Nation” (2015), “Fallout” (2018) — possibly the best action spy thriller ever made — and “Dead Reckoning Part One” (2023) on Paramount+.

Ferguson also appeared in the under-the-radar “Alien” riff “Life” in 2017, opposite Jake Gyllenhaal and Ryan Reynolds. Is it derivative of the Ridley Scott masterpiece?



NETFLIX/TNS

Rebecca Ferguson, as Captain Olivia Walker, is the best part of Kathryn Bigelow’s “A House of Dynamite.”

Well yes, but it’s still fun. Rent Daniel Espinosa’s film on all platforms.

In 2017, Ferguson also proved she could easily do musicals as well as action and sci-fi, appearing in Michael Gracey’s circus musical fever dream “The Greatest Showman.” With songs by Benj Pasek and Justin Paul, this passion project of star Hugh Jackman also features Zac Efron, Zendaya and Michelle Williams. Is it ridicu-

lous? Yes. Will the songs take up residence in your head? Also yes. Stream it on Disney+.

Ferguson has an aura of cool intensity that directors have put to good use with her heroic roles, but what about villains? In 2019, Mike Flanagan cast Ferguson as a villain, and the actress instantly made Rose the Hat an icon in Flanagan’s “The Shining” sequel “Doctor Sleep.” Somehow it feels like this film is underrated, and it’s worth catching up with if you haven’t seen it, for Ferguson’s performance alone. Rent it on digital platforms.

Also underrated is the 2021 dystopian climate change thriller “Reminiscence,” reuniting Ferguson and Jackman in a noirish romance set in the near future. Give this one a chance and rent it on all digital platforms.

Ferguson is also an integral part of Denis Villeneuve’s “Dune” movies, as Lady Jessica Atreides, the mother of Paul Atreides and Bene Gesserit high priestess. It’s a role that allows her to combine her action hero skills with her intense, inscrutable presence, bridging the gap between hero and villain. Stream “Dune: Part One” and “Dune: Part Two” on HBO Max.

She also knows when to collaborate with a great director, and last year, Ferguson was the best part of Kathryn Bigelow’s nuclear nail-biter “A House of Dynamite,” playing a security specialist in the White House. If only the whole movie focused on Ferguson’s Captain Olivia Walker. Stream “A House of Dynamite” on Netflix.

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEW

‘Ann Lee’ musical dares to feminize religion

Biopic about Shakers leader is both deeply strange, deeply human

BY MONICA HESSE
The Washington Post

In 1774, a small group of splintered-off Quakers from Manchester boarded a rickety ship to America, led by the visions of an illiterate woman named Ann Lee, whom they believed to be the Second Coming of Jesus Christ. Their intent was to flee religious persecution in England and bring the New World closer to God, via a faith whose central tenets included celibacy and gender equality, and a worship practice defined by shaking during prayer.

It was a hard sell — YOU try converting a bunch of followers by telling them they can never have sex again — but at the height of the Shakers’ popularity, there were around 6,000 adherents across the Northeast and Midwest, living in communes whose craftsmanship and architecture still influence American aesthetics today. When Lee, whose charisma and fortitude had guided the whole operation, died in 1784 at age 48, the number began to dwindle. Today there are only three Shakers left, and when they die, the faith dies, too.

This fascinating slice of history is long overdue for a biopic, but you probably never would have expected one that looks like “The Testament of Ann Lee.” For one thing, it’s a musical. It opens with a group of women in period dress, slithering and leaping through a forest by way of Martha Graham-inspired dance moves as Sister Mary Partington (Thomasin McKenzie) solemnly explains that Lee was born on the 29th of February, “as you might expect from a miraculous person.” One colleague I know who saw an early screening confessed that the opening dance made her laugh to the point that she never really recovered, and I’ll admit, when it first happened on my screen, I wasn’t sure whether this was a comedy, a drama or a “Blair Witch” situation.

But I implore you to sit through the early minutes, because what unfolds is a luminous, transporting, deeply strange and deeply human examination of faith and vision. It’s quite unlike anything you’ve seen, but sure-footed enough to convince you there was no other way to tell this story.

Ann Lee is portrayed rapturously by Amanda Seyfried in what is certainly the performance of her — or anyone else’s,



Searchlight Pictures photos

“The Testament of Ann Lee” is a song-and-dance musical about the Shaker religious movement in America. The movement gets its name from the “shaking” its adherents do in worship. The dancing in the film is rarely beautiful but never uninteresting.

for that matter — career. She plays the leader without an ounce of cunning or ego, a pure soul starving for genuine meaning and closeness to God, which only deepens after her already-unhappy marriage deteriorates and she loses each of her four children before their first birthdays (these scenes are unflinching, as a trigger warning to anyone who has ever experienced stillbirth or child loss). She turns to Quakerism, finding catharsis in the dynamic, physical prayer style of the meeting run by Jane and James Wardley (Stacy Martin and Scott Handy). But after the death of her last baby prompts a stint in the insane asylum, she emerges to say that God has revealed to her that sex is the root of all evil. Salvation is possible only via avoiding it.

A more traditional movie might have let this drama unfold with a raised eyebrow, an acknowledgment to the audience that Ann’s testament sounds crazy and so she must be a huckster, a charlatan or mentally ill. But director Mona Fastvold, who co-wrote the script with her romantic partner Brady Corbet, chooses instead to let us believe. When Ann sees a vision, we see it, too, in a collage of bright colors. Her predictions often come true. She requires hard work and sacrifice of her followers, but no more than she is willing to give herself, all toward building a faithful community that bestows upon her the title of “Mother.”

Many religions are perpetuated by male ego — the conquering, the crusading, the fact that God seems to tell so many of them that righteous husbands need multiple wives, but nobody ever receives a burning bush message suggesting that wives should take multiple husbands.



Amanda Seyfried portrays the titular character in “The Testament of Ann Lee” rapturously, giving the performance of her career. She plays the religious leader without an ounce of cunning or ego.

But in “The Testament of Ann Lee,” we are given the rare chance to watch an exploration of a religion born instead of female pain.

Is it any wonder that a woman whose only sexual experiences were brutish and traumatic — in the film, at least, a selfish husband with a spanking fetish that Lee does not share — would envision a faith in which celibacy is divine? That a woman whose children had all died in infancy would embrace a maternal honorific from an ever-growing flock of believers? That, when her gender prohibited her from participating in much of society, she would be drawn to any biblical passages implying that God made women to be as worthy as men? The Book of Revelation describes “a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon beneath her feet, and on her head a crown of 12 stars.” Classically, this was interpreted as a metaphor for the church; the Shakers decide it refers specifically to Lee.

“The Testament of Ann Lee” does not present the Shaker faith as perfect. Most practically, it’s

difficult to build a denomination that, lacking the natural growth mechanism of procreation, must be made entirely of converts. But the imperfections here are different from the kinds we typically see in stories of visionary men. Fastvold and Corbet’s most recent collaboration was “The Brutalist,” which they co-wrote but Corbet directed. It was a similarly sweeping character study, and also a specifically observed masculine film. With Fastvold at the helm, we see the same specificity and confidence tuned toward a very feminine work. How richly satisfying to see a film where the strongest relationship is between a woman and her spiritual journey.

There are many strong performances in “Testament,” most particularly Lewis Pullman (Bill Pullman’s son) as Lee’s brother and faithful deputy and David Cale, the film’s only real comic relief, as the financier who makes the voyage to America possible. But aside from Seyfried’s electric, captivating turn, the two players most worthy of mention do not appear on-screen

at all: choreographer Celia Rowleson-Hall and composer Daniel Blumberg.

The dancing in “Testament,” presented mostly as an expression of prayer rather than performance, is rarely beautiful but never uninteresting. Once you move past the woodland Martha Grahams, characters beat their chests, whirl in circles, and trace and pace the floor in sequences that are ecstatic, tender and heartbreaking. The movements are less choreography than an extension of the soul: A sequence in which Seyfried cradles her own foot as if it were a baby is the most visceral moment I’ve seen on a screen in the past year; a sequence in which the group of nine dances together during their voyage across the Atlantic feels almost holy.

As the characters dance, they often simultaneously sing. Blumberg reworked several classic Shaker hymns for the film into a haunting, propulsive soundtrack. “I Hunger and Thirst” was written in 1837; when it is sung by Seyfried and other characters, it becomes a modern ballad of deep, delicate yearning. “All Is Summer” is a perfectly lovely hymn in its original form; in the movie, it becomes mystical and otherworldly.

The nine traveling Shakers sing it as their ship crashes against waves, takes on water, nearly sinks again and again. At one point, the captain tells everyone they will be drowned by morning. Ann Lee tells him not to worry. She has seen the future. They are destined to make it across the ocean safely; they are destined to save the world.

“The Testament of Ann Lee” is rated R for sexual content, graphic nudity, violence and bloody images. Running time: 137 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Car-free, carefree on Greece's Hydra

The island of Hydra — less than two hours south of Athens by ferry — offers the ideal Greek island experience, and doesn't require a long journey across the Aegean. But those who come here with an agenda should be warned: This is the kind of place that makes you want to buy a bottle of ouzo and toss your itinerary into the sea.

Hydra has one real town, no real roads, no cars and not even any bikes. Water taxis whisk travelers from the quaint little harbor to isolated beaches and tavernas. Donkeys are the main way to transport things here. These surefooted beasts of burden, laden with everything from bathtubs to bottled water, climb stepped lanes. Behind each mule-train toils a human pooper-scooper; I imagine picking up after your beast is required. On Hydra, a traffic jam is three donkeys and a fisherman.

Hydra (pronounced EE-drah) is hardly undiscovered. In 1956, Sophia Loren came here to play a Hydriot sponge diver in the film "Boy on a Dolphin," propelling the little island onto the international stage. (A statue honoring the film sits just outside of town along the coastal path.)

By the 1960s, Hydra had become a favorite retreat for celebrities, well-heeled tourists and artists and writers, who drew

inspiration from the idyllic surroundings. The late Canadian songwriter Leonard Cohen lived on Hydra for a time — and was inspired to compose his beloved song "Bird on the Wire" after observing just that here. To honor the expat poet, the town has named the street in front of his house after him. Not that street names mean much — locals ignore addresses, and few lanes are labeled. Expect to get lost in Hydra ... and enjoy it when you do.



Rick Steves

Today, visitors only have to count the yachts to figure out that Hydra's economy is still based on the sea. Tourists wash ashore with the many private and public boats that come and go, but few venture beyond the harborfront. Locals like to tell of movie stars who make regular visits.

Little Hydra — which has produced military heroes, influential aristocrats and political leaders — is packed with history. Rusted old cannons are scattered about town, and black, pitted anchors decorate squares. Hydra also has a few small museums, including a historical museum and a wealthy shipping magnate's mansion.

But while its history is somewhat in-



Rick Steves

Travelers linger along Hydra's harbor, where humble boats and luxury yachts bob.

teresting, the beauty of Hydra is in relaxing at a café and aimlessly wandering its back lanes.

Although Hydra's beaches are nothing to get excited about, there's no shortage of places to swim. The one swimming spot right in Hydra town has steps that lead down to a series of small concrete platforms with ladders into the sea. And a few decent beaches lie within a pleasant, easy walk of town: Mandraki Bay, Kaminia and Vlychos. Distant beaches on the southwestern tip of the island (Bisti and Agios Nikolaos) really get you away from it all, but are best reached by boat.

As sunset nears, I head for the rustic and picturesque village of Kaminia, which hides behind the headland from Hydra, about a 15-minute walk along the coastal

path. Kaminia's pocket-sized harbor shelters the community's fishing boats, and its taverna, perched on a bluff above, boasts my favorite, irresistible dinner views on Hydra. Sitting on the porch with a glass of ouzo and some munchies, I watch the sun dip gently into the Saronic Gulf.

At twilight, I walk back to town along the lamplit coastal lane, under a ridge lined with derelict windmills.

Succumbing to the lure of a pastry shop, I order some honey-soaked baklava. I tell the baker I'm American. "Oh," he says, shaking his head with sadness and pity. "You work too hard."

I answer, "Right. But not today."

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Beat the winter blues with a warm water-park getaway

Winter blues? Those without time or inclination to travel to one of Europe's southern reaches in search of that elusive winter sun have the option to visit a slew of watery wonderlands, from action-packed pools to romantic, couples-only spas. The majority of visitors to such facilities have just one fairly universal complaint — they tend to be packed on weekends and holidays.

Italy

Aquardens Terme Verona, Italy's largest thermal park, is found in the town of Santa Lucia Pescantina, an easy-to-reach destination for tourists visiting either Verona and Lake Garda. Its spacious pools filled with naturally heated water are attractive to families, whereas admission to the sauna village is reserved for those ages 14 and up. DJ music on Fridays and Saturdays and live bands performing on Sundays give the facilities an upbeat, party vibe on weekends. A unique sauna theater, capable of seating up to 300 people simultaneously, periodically hosts various performances including a 12-minute show based on the opera "Carmen." A four-hour visit to the spa area starts at 45 euros on weekdays; entry to the sauna area costs an additional 12 euros. Online: aquardens.it/en



Karen Bradbury

Germany

Therme Erding, a huge day spa easily reached by commuter train from Munich, is one of the world's largest facilities of its kind. The complex made up of indoor and outdoor pools, wave pools and more than 30 saunas has another claim to fame, its Galaxy water slide area. Among Galaxy's 28 different slides are found Magic Eye, the world's longest tube slide; the Big Bang, a halfpipe slide cut into the roof of the complex; and the X-Treme Fazer, on which guests can reach speeds of up to 45 miles per



Europa-Park

Through March 27, visitors to Rulantica in Germany's Europa-Park can enjoy the Nordic Festival of Lights.

hour. Sauna goers reluctant to shed all clothing are bound to find their happy place in the textile Vital Oasis, in which the wearing of swimsuits is allowed. Adult tickets allowing for two hour's use of saunas, thermal baths and slides start at 33 euros. Online: therme-erding.de/en

Rulantica is a sprawling, all-season water park making up part of the Europa-Park enterprise in Rust. Opened in 2019 and operated as its own separate facility, the park sets itself apart with its unique theme: that of a mystical Nordic island. Scandinavian myths and culture are brought to life through elaborate, attention-to-detail décor and characters with their own backstories. Adrenaline junkies will appreciate a turn on the freefall slides Dug-drob and Vildfål, and once they've raced an opponent on the Vikingløp, they can lay claim to having taken on Europe's largest speed slide. Those who wish to relax may head straight to the (textile-free) Hyggedal sauna area, where three different Scandinavian-style saunas await.

Through March 27, visitors can enjoy the Nordic Festival of Lights, in which clever lighting effects transform Rulantica indoors and out. Those who opt to stay in one of Europa-Park's six themed hotels can take advantage of early access to the water park. A single-day adult ticket costs 39 euros and up. Online: europapark.de/en/rulantica

Poland

Billed by many sources as the biggest water park in Europe, Suntago Water World is located about an hour's drive southwest of Warsaw in the village of Wreca. Opened in 2020, the park offers more than 30 slides, a massive wave pool, adventure river and many other features. Its themed zones include Jamango, a fun-for-all-ages space; Relax, an area with thermal pools and lounge chairs; and Saunaria, a wellness zone featuring 15 themed saunas. Some 700 live palms lend the area the vibe of a tropical getaway. On-site bungalows allow guests to settle in for a weekend or longer. Those visiting Poland's capital city can make a day trip to Suntago on a special bus heading straight to the water park. The cost of an adult ticket valid for a two-hour visit to all three zones of the park begins at 114 Polish Zloty (about \$31.50) when booked at least two weeks in advance. Online: parkofpoland.com/en

United Kingdom

Waterworld, an all-season water park in Stoke-on-Trent, is a family-friendly facility offering wave and bubble pools, a channel with a fast-flowing current and plenty of slides including Thunderbolt, in which riders are dropped feet-first through a trap door into a water flume gushing at a speed of 25 mph. The park periodically hosts Additional Needs events, when the pool is open exclusively to adults and children with special needs and their family members. Adult admission to Waterworld starts at 24 UK pounds (about \$32) at non-peak times when tickets are booked online. Online: waterworld.co.uk

WEEKEND: TRAVEL



Rock formations in the Mangystau region of Kazakhstan can make you feel like an astronaut.

Paul Prim

The Silk Road’s lunar landscape

East of the Caspian Sea, the Mangystau region of Kazakhstan full of history, light on Americans

By JENNIFER MUELLER
The Washington Post

The Toyota 4x4 bounced across a roadless, barren plain. Behind, a cloud of pale dust shimmered in the sun. Ahead, a formation of bleached rocks shot skyward.

Our SUV was heading straight at it. And it was not slowing down.

Was our guide playing chicken ... with a mountain?

“Anton,” I said as the white wall loomed closer.

“Anton.”

My hand braced against the dashboard.

“Anton.”

His eyes turned to me.

“Are we going ... up?”

From behind the wheel, he gave me a look of quiet amusement: “Da.”

My seat tipped sharply back as the walkie-talkie erupted with shrieks and whoops from the Jeep behind us. It was like we had entered our own improbable car commercial, with the scenery to match.

Exiting our vehicles in the saddle between two limestone peaks, we gazed over a lunar landscape that more than rivals Monument Valley.

The valley we were looking across was once submerged under the prehistoric Tethys Ocean. Then, the land shifted. Pangaea broke up, the waters retreated and the elements worked for millennia to shape fossil and rock into massive geological formations. In every direction, great fins of rock, sprawling mesas and crenulated domes thrust up from a bleached plain.

But what is perhaps most astounding is what we didn’t see: a single other person.

Welcome to the Mangystau region of western Kazakhstan, where the intrepid traveler can — literally — escape the beaten path for a few days.

This is a land that has stood arid and empty for so long that millions of years of history are still in evidence. Visitors don’t have to look too hard to find fossilized mollusks, shark teeth and sea anemones scattered on the ground, mementos from when the Ustyurt Plateau lay deep underwater.

More recent history encompasses the ruins of a caravansary

that sheltered traders on an offshoot of the Silk Road.

While that route faded to obscurity after Genghis Khan rolled in with his horde, many of the region’s Sufi temples, necropolises and mosques — the earliest of which were carved into caves more than a thousand years ago — still show signs of being in use.

The geological features of the region tell stories of their own. In addition to the otherworldly spires of Bozzhira, where our Toyota demonstrated its vertical capabilities, intrepid visitors can brave the bare roads of Cape Zhigylgan, a miles-wide depression strewn with rocks the size of buildings. From a distance, it looks as if a giant once sat on the shore of the Caspian Sea and crushed the land beneath her.

That landscape could not be more different from the smooth, confectionary layers of a formation, aptly dubbed “Tiramisu,” that our group explores a few days later. Anton told us that local efforts to hide the location of this photogenic site were foiled by an enterprising tourist with GPS.

On the shores of the shimmering salt sea of Tuzbair, the serious photographers in our group capture undulating white cliffs and the water’s pastel hues, while the less-serious ones take advantage of the wide, flat beach to stage elaborate optical illusions.

Another opportunity for high and low art comes in Torysh, or the “Valley of the Balls,” where hundreds of spherical rocks ranging from pebbles to boulders dot the landscape. Scientists still don’t agree on exactly how they formed; I prefer the local theory that the valley was the playground of the gods.

Perhaps the bigger mystery is how this region has flown under the radar for so long. Some visitors may be deterred by the desert conditions, remote locations or lack of infrastructure, though brief encounters with Russian, Chinese and Italian tourists suggest that Americans could just be late to the party.

If you decide to see for yourself, the gateway to Mangystau is Aktau, a city on the Caspian Sea that was dubbed the 2025 Cultural Capital of the Turkic World.

As one of the hubs in Kazakhstan

SEE KAZAKHSTAN ON PAGE 21

WEEKEND: TRAVEL



Paul Prim photos

This valley was once submerged under the prehistoric Tethys Ocean. The waters retreated, and the elements worked for millennia to shape fossil and rock into massive formations.

Kazakhstan: Although region is remote, tourism sector growing

FROM PAGE 20

stan’s booming trade in oil, gas and minerals, Aktau is well-served by several airlines. International travelers can fly direct to and from Istanbul; Tbilisi, Georgia; or Baku, Azerbaijan, though it’s worth staying on in Kazakhstan to explore the current and former capitals of Astana and Almaty, both reachable by direct flights of roughly three hours — a reminder that this is the ninth-largest country in the world by area.

While still scruffy, Aktau does offer a long boardwalk to stroll, restaurants with a view, cafés with a modern vibe and several decent hotels.

We stayed in the Turan, a well-reviewed tourist-class option near the sea with a banya that can be booked in advance for some postdesert soaking. It is a bargain at roughly \$25 a night, though there’s a case to be made for splashing out roughly three times that amount to stay on the sea in Aktau’s five-star Caspian Riviera Grand Palace Hotel.

Many of Mangystau’s sites can be reached by long day trips from Aktau, but given the distances involved and the poor conditions of most roads (where they exist at all), the best way to immerse oneself in the region is through a multiday tour. We arranged everything through Nomadic Travel, a Kazakh company that worked with us to customize our five-day, six-night itinerary. Its manager, Olga Toporkova, connected us with Anton Dikin, our guide, driver and extremely capable cook.

The remoteness of the region means that, many nights, camping is the only option. Luckily, most equipment was provided. We brought only our headlamps, toiletries and enough layers to navigate a desert climate where temperatures in late May range from the low 40s to upper 80s.

Our group did opt to spend one night at what can best be described as a yurt motel. We enjoyed a hearty dinner that featured classic Kazakh dishes like beshbarmak (beef and noodles), boursak (fried dough), plov (rice and meat) and kurt (fermented cheese balls), as well as access to a shower and Wi-Fi, but we later agreed that we would have rather woken up in our own tents on the steppe.

Because although we may have been sleeping on mats on the ground, we were hardly roughing it. Anton’s setup included a domed tent that was large enough to seat us all for meals and secure enough to keep us snug when the winds howled outside. And there are few sensations like



In Mangystau, you may see more camels than people.

quietly cradling a hot drink as the morning sun begins to illuminate the rocks around you and feeling, for a few moments, as if your little group has the world to itself.

Thanks to recent and planned infrastructure investments in Mangystau, it’s probably a matter of time before the camels and turtles that dot the landscape are supplanted by paved roads and guardrails.

According to Kazakhstan’s Bureau of National Statistics, the number of visitors at accommodations in Mangystau was nearly 409,000 last year, making up about 9% of all visits to resort areas. Most foreign travelers, it seems, come from nearby countries.

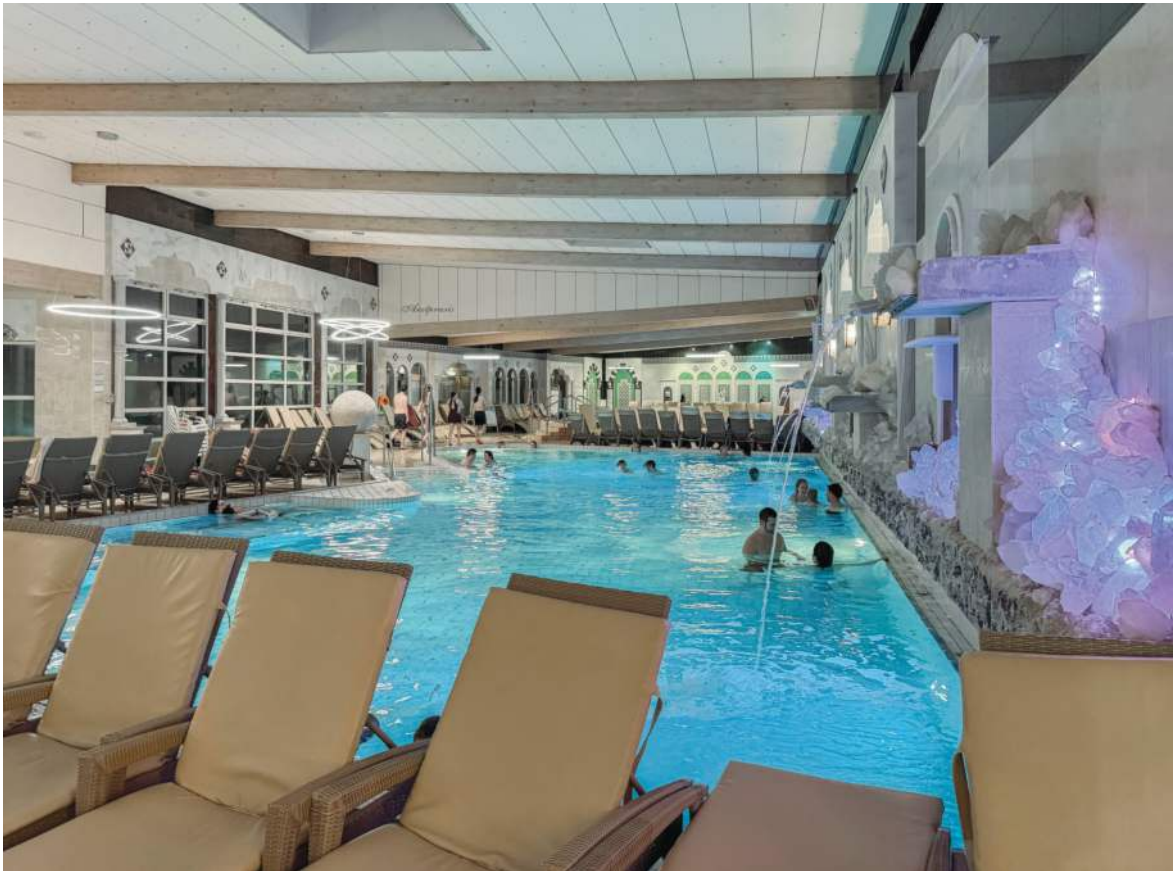
Our final night traveling together, we put the question directly to Anton, who has been leading tours in the region for more than a decade. How many other American groups has he worked with?

There’s that look again.
“None.”



The remoteness of the region means that, many nights, camping is the only option. But there is plenty of room.

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS



PHOTOS BY LYDIA GORDON/Stars and Stripes

The indoor therme at Kristall Palm Beach in Stein, Germany, has crystal-infused pools, all of which list their individual health benefits and temperatures at each entrance. Other types of pools are also available.

Beat the winter blahs at Kristall Palm Beach

Take a warm dip in the Stein, Germany, spa's many pools, saunas

BY LYDIA GORDON
Stars and Stripes

Warmth, relaxation, sunshine and peace — any one of these would make me the happiest person on Earth. Instead, a cold front had the audacity to barrel into Bavaria to ring in the new year, bringing absolutely none of the above.

I wasn't having any of it, and knowing that seasonal depression tends to hit harder after holiday leave, I needed to do something about this dopamine drought.

So I laced up my snow boots, zipped my jacket, packed a bikini and hit the road because I knew there was only one thing that could cure me in these trying times: the spa.

Some stellar recommendations from friends who were probably very tired of hearing my cold-weather complaints helped me to discover Kristall Palm Beach in the Nuremberg suburb of Stein. I first learned about "thermes" — bathhouse oases offering indoor and outdoor pools, saunas and more — while vacationing in Austria a couple of months ago, and I started asking around for something similar within an acceptable distance of Grafenwoehr.



Kristall Palm Beach gets its name from the numerous crystals around the premises, including this 8-ton piece of quartz from the Brazilian state of Minas Gerais at the front entrance.

As of this visit, I had never been to Kristall Palm Beach before, so when I entered and spotted some of the largest crystals I'd ever seen, I knew I was about to experience the epitome of tranquility.

With a four-hour pass ahead of me, I hardly knew where to start: hot tubs, salt pools, water slides, swim-up bars. It all blurred into a very welcome sensory overload.

I drifted between mineral-infused pools in the main therme area before embracing my inner child on the water slides, sprinting up staircases to see how fast I could make it back down.

And in the middle of January,

nothing quite beats sipping a cocktail while floating in a steaming outdoor pool as cold air swirls above you.

About an hour in, I realized I still hadn't explored the sauna area, which had pools, Himalayan salt rooms, steam baths and citrus-scented saunas to fill the large space.

The highlight for me, though, was the salt pool, whose brine content seemed reminiscent of the Dead Sea. I floated without gravity for what felt like minutes but was probably closer to an hour.

Here I remind Americans of the usual caveat that most German saunas are clothing-free. It



Kristall Palm Beach in Stein has a multitude of indoor single-person and group water slides, which are great fun during wintertime.



Kristall Palm Beach has a tanning area with infrared lighting, providing some rays for winter visitors and a contrast to the typically dreary weather outside.

may take a moment to mentally adjust, but the experience is respectful and nonjudgmental. Wrapped in only a robe and armed with just a towel, I stepped into what felt like a different world entirely.

Relaxing in intense heat doesn't come naturally, but once you settle in, the benefits are undeniable, my favorite of which was the deep, uninterrupted sleep I got that night.

While I couldn't document this part of the journey due to strict no-phone rules in the sauna area, I especially enjoyed the Himalayan salt room, which also had infrared spine rests that were great for my back issues.

Outside one part of the facility, a miniature model of a Bavarian village revealed itself, with each little building housing a different themed sauna. There was even a gondola sauna with a view of a staged helicopter.

Sometimes you get comfortable being uncomfortable, a phrase the military taught me and one I've learned to appreciate. And here, in the heat of the sauna, that discomfort is exactly where the stress begins to disappear.

If you're not quite ready to

On the QT

Address: Albertus Magnus Strasse 29, Stein, Germany

Hours: Sunday through Thursday, 9 a.m.-10 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 9 a.m.-midnight. Check the website in advance for notification of any special events.

Cost: Adults and children 16 and over, 20 to 30 euros; children 4-15, 14 to 22 euros; children up to age 4, 4 euros. Prices depend on whether guests purchase a two-hour, four-hour or day pass.

Information: Online: palm-beach.de

Lydia Gordon

take on the sauna area, the therme section offers plenty of family-friendly pools and attractions, including a few smaller saunas for those who prefer to stay away from the main complex.

By the time I left, Bavaria's gray skies hadn't changed, but my mood certainly had.

I know Kristall Palm Beach won't be a one-time visit. Between the affordability, the sheer variety and the reset it offers, it's the kind of place that makes winter not just bearable, but something to look forward to.

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WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING

Darmstadt dining with a great view

Obendrüber, on top floor of department store, offers ever-changing menu, panorama of city

By MICHAEL ABRAMS
Stars and Stripes

It was less a nod to Dry January than a chance to try different flavors and ingredients when my wife and I chose two nonalcoholic cocktails to start the evening during a recent dinner at Obendrüber in Darmstadt, Germany.

The restaurant is on the top floor of the Henschel department store in the center of downtown. What had started as a snowy winter day was now a cold, rainy night as we studied our menus.

The large plateglass windows reflected the inside of the restaurant. Outside, the raindrops on the panes blocked a clear view of the historic palace across the street.

Our beverages — the Spritz Anders for my wife and the Crodino Time for me — arrived as we were contemplating the weather and our meal.

The spritz was made with grape secco, Sanbitter, lime and mint. Anders is German for different, but it wasn't that "anders" from a regular Aperol spritz.

My drink had ginger ale, lime and mint. For the uninitiated, Sanbitter and Crodino are Italian nonalcoholic bitter aperitifs. Both cocktails were tasty and refreshing.

During store hours, you can walk through the clothing departments, up to the fifth floor where the restaurant is located.

Opened in 2019, Obendrüber, which translates to on top or above the top, serves breakfast, lunch and dinner overlooking Darmstadt's marketplace, Old City Hall and the former residential palace.

While breakfasting at Obendrüber has become immensely popular, we were there for dinner.

The menu is not exceptionally large — less than a handful of selections for each course — but offers a choice of meat, vegetarian and vegan dishes.

For starters, my wife chose the lamb's lettuce salad, which was served with croutons and tangerines and a potato dressing.

I ordered caramelized goat cheese served on a bed of golden beets, almonds, apples and a mesclun mix, then drizzled with 13-year-old balsamic vinegar. Both were delicious and satisfying.

The lettuce was not limp as it



AFTER HOURS GERMANY

Obendrüber

Address: Marktplatz 2, Darmstadt, Germany
Hours: 9 a.m.-6 p.m. on Monday; 9 a.m.-11 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday; 9 a.m.-midnight Friday and Saturday; closed on Sunday. The kitchen is open 9 a.m.-noon for breakfast Monday through Saturday, noon-2:30 p.m. Monday through Saturday for lunch and 6-9:30 p.m. Tuesday through Saturday for dinner.
Prices: Soup and salads from 8.50 to 22.90 euros; pasta from 18.50 to 25 euros; entrees 19.50 to 35 euros; dessert 10.50 to 12.50 euros. Wines start at 8.50; soft drinks and beer start at 3.50 euros and cocktails at 11.50 euros.
Information: Online: henschel-darmstadt.de/gastronomie

Michael Abrams

sometimes is, and the goat cheese was crusty on top, soft underneath. The bed of vegetables, fruit, nuts and leaves made it perfect.

We ordered rieslings as dinner drinks, one with alcohol, one without. Both were tangy and went well with our meals.

For our main course, my dining partner chose the turmeric chicken. It came with an herb yogurt dip and rice flavored with saffron, pistachios and apricots. We agreed that the thigh and drumstick were juicy, but the breast was a little dry. It was delicious, though, dipped in the yogurt.

I ordered the truffle pasta. I could smell the truffles even before the server arrived at our table. The pasta was spaghetti cooked al dente, in a Parmesan sauce with pine nuts and topped with shaved truffles. The sauce was creamy, the truffles delightfully pungent. It was rich but delicious.

A note to prospective diners: Obendrüber tries to use seasonal, local products when possible, so the menu is ever-changing. What we had this month might not be available when you go.

For dessert, we split a cinnamon panna cotta. Topped with a tart blood orange sauce and an orange-flavored crisp, the dish, followed by a couple of espressos, was a wonderful way to end



PHOTOS BY MICHAEL ABRAMS/Stars and Stripes

Inside Obendrüber in Darmstadt, Germany, with a view of its open kitchen. The restaurant is on the top floor of the downtown Henschel department store.



The turmeric chicken served at Obendrüber came with a herb yogurt dip and rice flavored with saffron, pistachios and apricots. The thigh and drumstick were juicy, but the breast was a little dry.



The truffle pasta is spaghetti in a Parmesan sauce with pine nuts and topped with shaved truffles. It was rich but delicious.

the meal.

The store was now closed, so we took the elevator from the restaurant's foyer to an exit on the market square.

We'll be back, though. We still need to join the breakfast crowd on some sunny morning.

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Nonalcoholic cocktails Spritz Anders, left, and Crodino Time, right, at Obendrüber.



Caramelized goat cheese served on a bed of golden beets, almonds, apples and a mesclun mix and drizzled with 13-year-old balsamic vinegar.



This lamb's lettuce salad at Obendrüber in Darmstadt was served with croutons, tangerines and a potato dressing.

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS



PHOTOS BY SETH ROBSON/Stars and Stripes

A monk walks toward stone steps leading to the Hofu Tenmangu Shrine in Yamaguchi prefecture, Japan. The shrine is a popular place to pray for academic success.

Where students pray and history lingers

Learn how to stir matcha, pray for academic success at Hofu Tenmangu Shrine

By SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

A brightly painted shrine dedicated to an ancient Japanese academic stands near the southern end of Japan’s main island of Honshu.

Hofu Tenmangu, founded in the year 904, is the oldest of three large shrines in Japan dedicated to Sugawara no Michizane, a scholar, poet and administrator who was banished from the imperial court at Kyushu amid jostling for power.

The shrine stands on a hill overlooking Hofu, a port city of 115,000 residents, about an hour and 15 minutes’ drive west of Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni in Yamaguchi prefecture.

Followers believe that the ancient scholar became the god Tenjin after he died. People come to his shrines to pray for academic success.

Michizane, according to the Visit Hofu website, stayed in the city on his way into exile. When he died on the island of Kyushu in 903, a pillar of light reportedly shined into the sea and a cloud settled on the hill where the Hofu shrine stands.



Hofu Tenmangu Shrine, founded in the year 904, is the oldest of three large shrines in Japan dedicated to Sugawara no Michizane, a scholar, poet and administrator who was banished from the imperial court at Kyushu.

There are 12,000 Tenjin shrines in Japan. The one in Hofu ranks alongside the Kitano Tenmangu in Kyoto and Dazaifu Tenmangu in Kyushu in importance, according to the website.

Before you climb a steep set of stone steps leading to the shrine above Hofu, consider a stop at the Hoshō-an Teahouse to the right of the path leading to the steps.

The teahouse looks like the sort of place that ninjas might infiltrate in a Quentin Tarantino film and stands next to a pond full of giant koi carp and a garden where the leaves turn every shade of brown and red in autumn.

The entrance fee of 800 yen — about \$5 — includes traditional matcha and sweets that, on the day Stars and Stripes visited,

On the QT

Directions: The shrine is at 14-1 Matsuzaki-cho, Hofu City, Yamaguchi prefecture
Times: Open daily, 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. The tea-house is open 9:30 a.m. to 4 p.m.
Costs: Shrine admission is free.
Food: Sweets are available at the teahouse.
Information: Online: hofutenmangu.com

Seth Robson

were shaped like autumn leaves.
The staff will show you how to correctly make your own matcha by stirring powder in a bowl of hot water with a whisk that looks a little like an old-school shaving brush.
Getting the matcha to froth up correctly requires vigorous whisking at about the same speed as a heavy metal guitarist playing a solo. If your wrist skills are deficient, the staff will help you out.
Once you’re amped up on caffeine and sugar, you can bound up the stone steps to check out the carefully crafted shrine and, perhaps, throw a coin into a box and pray for a doctorate in astrophysics.
The shrine, which hosts festivals throughout the year, is surrounded by pleasant parkland and has a kind of pagoda next to it that you can enter and look out over Hofu and nearby hills.

WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING

An Arabian night of dining awaits

Tokyo restaurant Carvaan’s ornate décor, menu inspired by Mediterranean, Middle Eastern style

BY JUAN KING
Stars and Stripes

A birthday celebration for a friend turned out to be an opportunity for a culinary experience in Middle Eastern and Mediterranean cuisine during a recent weekend in Tokyo.

Carvaan is in the heart of Shibuya, the energetic entertainment district of Tokyo. Twelve stories high inside the Shibuya Scramble Square shopping mall, the restaurant is open for lunch and dinner.

Carvaan is the ancient Persian word for caravan, and the inspiration behind this restaurant’s style and menu. Inside you’ll find old-world Arabian décor, including ornate tapestry, directly imported burnished tableware and calm-inducing low lighting, making a great atmosphere for night dining.

Wooden tables centered on the floor are surrounded by multiple booths lining the walls with room for 82 people.

The menu helps diners unfamiliar with Middle Eastern and Mediterranean dining with appetizers up front and main dishes following. A separate menu lists drinks.

You might assume Carvaan, with its elaborate décor and food presentation, could be a pricey dining experience, but surprisingly that was not the case.

We shared a couple of vibrant green kale salads garnished with walnuts, pomegranate and quinoa at 1,980 yen — about \$12.50 — for a full plate and 1,430 yen for half. With a combination of earthy and citrusy tastes, it was both healthy and delicious.



Carvaan

Location: 2-24-12 Shibuya, Shibuya Scramble Square 12F, Shibuya-ku, JP 150-6112
Hours: Open 11:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. daily for lunch and 5 p.m. to 11:30 p.m. for dinner
Prices: Expect to pay up to 3,000 yen for most entrées.
Dress: Casual
Directions: A 5-minute walk from Shibuya Station.
Information: Online: carvaan.jp; reservations and credit cards accepted.

Juan King

Being a fan of lamb dishes, I tried the Moroccan lamb and pomegranate tagine, or slow cooked stew, for 2,970 yen. Chunky Arabian lamb shanks come with cumin spiced basmati rice in a sweet and tangy pomegranate and orange juice sauce.

An order of oven-baked ancient Arabian wheat bread rounded out my dinner. My son managed a succulent Arabian lamb burger with a side of potato wedges.

Sides on the table included Egyptian falafel, or deep-fried fritter usually made of fava beans or chickpeas, and moussaka, a traditional Greek eggplant casserole.

My whole party sampled the seasonal Granny Smith baked apple dessert, featuring a hot, baked green apple stuffed with walnuts, raisins, crumble and Ugandan vanilla custard cream,



PHOTOS BY JUAN KING/Stars and Stripes

Carvaan, whose décor and menu are inspired by the Middle East and the Mediterranean, combines class and affordability in Shibuya, Tokyo. The restaurant provides a wonderful atmosphere for an evening meal.



The Moroccan lamb and pomegranate tagine, or slow cooked stew, comes in a sweet and tangy pomegranate and orange juice sauce.

then topped off with gelato and caramel sauce. No complaints about that choice.

Other dessert choices included a Turkish baklava, a crispy pastry with pistachios, and various flavors of house-made gelato.

A chilled, organic Egyptian hibiscus tea for 770 yen was sweet and satisfactory enough for me. Other beverages included juices, coffee and alcohol-free wine and beer.

The restaurant offers interna-



The Granny Smith baked apple dessert features a hot, baked green apple stuffed with nuts, raisins, crumble and Ugandan vanilla custard cream.

tional beer and wine at the craft beer shop, brewed in-house, located at the entrance with stool seating nearby.

Carvaan also offers vegan, vegetarian and halal options.

Unique to the restaurant are also the natural ingredients it imports from various countries. A couple of these include the Gandhara rock salt from Pakistan and a palm blossom sugar out of Cambodia.

Carvaan’s relaxing atmosphere

combined with excellent service, fine cuisine and good portions making it a charming experience.

Other locations include are found in Hanno and Yokohama. Carvaan delicatessen shops can be found at Shibuchica, in Shibuya Station’s underground shopping mall, and Yokohama. Food there can be purchased for takeout.

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Warm up with creamy rutabaga, parsnip and cheddar soup

BY KATIE WORKMAN
Associated Press

You have to become a little crafty at this time of year about getting vegetables onto the table in ways that still feel interesting. In many places, the cold has settled in, farmers’ market offerings have thinned out, and we’re left with the hardiest of fruits and vegetables.

Root vegetables are the stars now, but they do require inspiration as to how to use them.

Enter soup. Even the most stoic vegetables can be coaxed into something soft, sweet and yielding. This Creamy Rutabaga, Parsnip and Cheddar Soup is the kind you can’t stop spooning up, full of earthy flavor. Parsley is optional, and sour cream adds a nice texture.

Creamy Rutabaga, Parsnip and Cheddar Soup

Serves 6

Ingredients

3 tablespoons unsalted butter
1 cup chopped onion
2 stalks celery, sliced
2 large rutabagas, peeled and diced
2 parsnips, peeled and sliced
5 cups chicken or vegetable broth
1 tablespoon pureed chipotles in adobo
1 ½ cups shredded sharp cheddar cheese
1 cup sour cream
Chopped parsley (optional)
Sour cream for topping (optional)

Directions

In a large pot, melt the butter over medium heat. Add the shallots and the celery and sauté for about 4 minutes, until tender. Add the rutabagas and parsnips and stir, then pour in broth, raise heat to high and bring to a simmer. Lower the heat to medium and simmer, partially covered, 30 minutes.

Use an immersion blender to puree the vegetables in the pot, or transfer the vegetables and some of the liquid to a food processor or blender and puree until smooth. Return the soup to the pot and over low heat, stir in the chipotles in adobo and stir in the cheese gradually, until melted. Add the sour cream and heat until heated through.



CHEYENNE M. COHEN/AP

Creamy Rutabaga, Parsnip and Cheddar Soup is comforting.

WEEKEND: FOOD



ILLUSTRATION BY NOGA AMI-RAV/Stars and Stripes

Pasta police on patrol

YouTube comedians known as Lionfield call out crimes such as using bologna in carbonara as UNESCO rewards Italian cooking

BY ANTHONY FAIOLA
The Washington Post

Inside their recording studio on a recent morning, Matteo Salvatori and Emiliano Santoro's smartphones lit up. Fresh reports were pouring in from their "deputies" — a legion of online followers — of another violent crime against the sanctity of Italian cooking.

The Eastern European suspects in question were repeat offenders; their chosen weapons, TikTok and a frying pan. Previous food felonies included a clip in which the two blonde women heated bologna, eggs and yogurt with raw penne and a mountain of salt before declaring the ensuing abomination a "carbonara."

This time the women had crossed a line as red as ragu.

"They're making ...," said Santoro, his face contorting in mounting horror.

"They're making ...," said Salvatori, hands gesticulating.

The Italians shrieked in unison:

"Pizza soup!"

Later, Santoro and Salvatori — who have built comic careers as Italy's global pasta police — made a de facto citizen's arrest by calling out the women in a YouTube skit that ended with their infamous tagline.

"Not approved!"

To nearly 30 million followers, the duo known as Lionfield — translation of their hometown south of Rome — serve up gastronomic reprimands with heaping helpings of tongue in cheek. But in Italy, reclaiming its globally appropriated food culture is no laughing matter but rather, a national call to arms.

A host of online kitchen Carabinieri has joined government officials and celebrity chefs in a culinary crusade to stop foreign perversion of la cucina italiana — a campaign so serious the government is proffering a new law

to jail peddlers of counterfeit parmesan or masquerading mozzarella for up to four years.

Italians for decades have griped over the Frankenstein monsters created from the parts of their cooking — look at (or avert your gaze from) pineapple pizza. But in the years-long push to have "Italian cooking" broadly recognized by UNESCO — which succeeded in December, in what national officials have called a "first" — pride of cuisine has reached a fevered pitch in il bel paese, touching off a heated debate over Italian food purity and the politicization of cooking.

Italy's UNESCO designation also instantly stirred a pot of contrarians, who poked at Italy for succumbing to the first and worst of deadly sins: pride.

Blasting the "myth" of Italian food "primacy," Giles Coren, restaurant critic for the Times of London, dismissed Italy's celebrated cuisine as "rubbish,"



ANTHONY FAIOLA/The Washington Post

Matteo Salvatori, 32, left, and Emiliano Santoro, 32, better known as the duo Lionfield, film a YouTube clip at their studio in Campoleone, Italy, for their show as the global "pasta police" — calling out culinary crimes against Italian food.

lampooning its indoctrinated supporters as having the palates of "spoilt toddlers."

"It's the light on the hills, darling," they gushed. 'And the shadows cast by the cypresses.' Like the sun doesn't shine anywhere else and nowhere but Italy has trees," Coren wrote.

"And then it was the tomatoes. They didn't stop going on about the tomatoes, which — spoiler alert — are the same as all other

tomatoes."

Aghast, Chiara Amati, a food writer for Corriere della Sera, Italy's largest daily, responded with a takedown of her own, labeling Coren's piece "poisonous, bordering on a diplomatic incident." She kicked him where it hurts: his prowess as a critic.

"He doesn't build a reasoning: he accumulates invectives and

SEE PASTA ON PAGE 27

WEEKEND: FOOD

Pasta: Professor claims current pride in Italian food undeserved

FROM PAGE 26

gags,” Amati opined.

If the retort sounded personal, it’s no surprise. Just a few years after Domino’s pizza left Italy with its tail between its proverbial legs — but as Starbucks is making worrying inroads — the government of Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni is injecting a dose of nationalism into food culture.

Meloni heralded the UNESCO designation by lighting up the Colosseum in the tricolors of the Italian flag, and issuing a video message that ended with a cry of “Long live Italian cuisine! Long live Italy!” At an annual meeting of the right wing in Rome, Meloni bragged of her government’s success in celebrating Italian food, crowing that left-wing politicians “have been gnashing their teeth” and “eating in kebab shops all week.”

Francesco Lollobrigida, Italy’s agriculture minister, who was a force behind the UNESCO bid, has moved to defend Italian food from impostors and posers. Under his watch, tricolor labels are being stamped on Italian domestic wines. In November, he called for an official investigation after finding a particularly offensive jar of canned carbonara for sale at a food market inside the European Parliament building in Brussels.

Food is big business in Italy — generating \$820 billion a year. Infuriated by the rise of Russian parmesan and Chinese pecorino, a new law set to be voted on in early 2026 would double the maximum jail time to four years from two for falsely declaring the country of origin of foods sold in Italy. Fines could more than double to 50,000 euros (\$58,700).

“We’re proud of our food model, but also aware that in order to guarantee its economic value, its quality, safety, and the protection of production regulations, we must be extremely vigilant,” Lollobrigida said in interview with The Washington Post.

Alberto Grandi, professor of food history at the University of Parma and an Italian food contrarian, described the recent outburst of Italian food pride as deeply unnerving — as well as undeserved.

His book — “Italian Cooking Does Not Exist” — claims that Italian cuisine as it is known today owes much of its grandeur to the reimportation of recipes created by Italian immigrants who found abundance in the New World, or from serendipitous foreign influences — like the American soldiers who brought bacon and powdered eggs to Italy during World War II, inspiring Carbonara.

Pre-World War II “pizza,” Grandi argued in an interview with The Post, was largely “gar-



ANTHONY FAIOLA/The Washington Post

Salvatori, left, and Santoro, at their studio in Campoleone. Musicians who studied in United States before returning to Italy, they began filming humorous short clips during the pandemic, and after marveling at the creations served as “Italian food” in America.

lic and pork fat on bread” sold on Neapolitan streets. “The descriptions we have of these vendors’ wares are terrible,” he said. Samuel “Morse, the inventor of the Morse code, says it looked like ‘a piece of bread pulled from the sewer.’”

Pizzerias, he notes, only sprung up across Italy after the economic boom of the 1950s and

— as if purity had anything to do with our past.”

Revisionist history or not, Italians are rallying to defend their cuisine. Purists are quick to point out that dishes like veal parmesan, garlic bread, Alfredo sauce and spaghetti and meatballs are pungent North American fare invented by Italian immigrants — not to be found on

three Michelin stars. “You know, don’t put the culatello on top of the gnocco fritto because it’s gonna be too salty.” He said, “Listen, here it’s New York. And Italian cuisine is different. It’s Italian American cuisine.” I said, “You’re right.”

After its waves of immigrants left decades ago, Bottura said, “Italy evolved and transformed

Purists are quick to point out that dishes like veal parmesan, garlic bread, Alfredo sauce and spaghetti and meatballs are pungent North American fare invented by Italian immigrants — not to be found on the menu of any self-respecting restaurant in Italy today.

60s, well after they had become established in the United States. His heresies have earned him threats and tongue lashings from Italian agriculture groups and right-wing politicians, who call him a tiramisù turncoat, a trattoria traitor.

He remains unbowed. “We hear stern warnings against ‘globalist contamination’ from politicians who grew up eating industrial panettone and Kraft slices in school sandwiches,” Grandi wrote in a recent op-ed in the Guardian. “We are told that Italian cuisine must remain pure, fixed and inviolable

the menu of any self-respecting restaurant in Italy today.

“It’s American cuisine, not Italian,” said Massimo Bottura, the renowned Italian chef who helped push the UNESCO bid. Bottura admitted to trolling the saucy creations of his former disciple, Stefano Secchi, now based in New York City, who earned a single Michelin star for his restaurant, Rezdôra.

“I was looking at his Instagram and busting his balls, saying ‘too much sauce,’ ‘too much of this,’ ‘too much of that,’” said Bottura, whose restaurant, Osteria Francescana in Modena, holds

in a different way.” Correctly cooked pasta, he said, can be poetry; the right balsamic vinegar, sublime. The whole of the Italian cooking tradition — the selection of ingredients, the transformation of food into love — transcendent beyond mere sustenance.

Italian cooking, he said, “is an invitation to look at food as a cultural language.”

The Italianate atrocities being railed against now range from sweet corn pizza in Japan to chicken alfredo at the Olive Garden. Just as often, the complaints are about a lack of respect — the

sacrilegious breaking of spaghetti before putting it in a pot, or — *mamma mia!* — sipping cappuccino (a breakfast drink in its native habitat) after noon.

On YouTube, Santoro and Salvatori’s largest following is outside Italy — with audiences who eat up the Italian purists. Musicians who studied in United States before returning to Italy, they began filming humorous short clips during the pandemic, and after marveling at the creations served as “Italian food” in America.

They’re not necessarily bad, the Lionfield duo and other Italians say. Just label them what they are — Italian-American, not Italian.

One of their early hits: a segment in which Santoro, as Captain Italia, dons an Italian flag as a cape to save a pizza from a descending pineapple slice.

“Now, it’s normal to think about Italians complaining about ... the Italian fusion you find outside of Italy,” Santoro said. “But at that time, five years ago, it was not that common. We were, like, among the first ones to do it publicly. And I think for people it was like ... these guys are Italians, and they’re talking about the breaking of spaghetti. Now, well, it’s a meme.”

These days, they do not stand alone. Angelo Coassin, an Italian chef with 1.8 million TikTok followers, shot a clip of his ultimate nightmare: Dining on pineapple pizza. Another Italian food defender — Michele Lettera, with nearly 900,000 followers — posted a video of an instant carbonara recipe from the United States with a voice-over declaring “defend Spaghetti from American torture.”

Nicolas Calia, a Sicilian marketer, trolled the cheesy, saucy fare at the San Gennaro Festival in Manhattan’s Little Italy on Instagram with head-scratching bewilderment in 2024. Calia also staged a viral 2023 protest at Rome’s Trevi Fountain, holding up homemade signs to tourists declaring, “stop putting cream on your carbonara!!!” and “adding chicken to the pasta is a crime in Italy!!!”

Yet surely his outrage is as manufactured as Velveeta Macaroni and Cheese?

“I’m telling you it’s real, 100 percent, because we see it, and we really feel the pain,” said Calia, who now lives in New York, where he said he is privy to daily indignities against Italian food.

For example, he said: “One day, I saw a lady drinking cappuccino with porcini risotto. But ... how? How can they do it? Any Italian who sees this, they will make a face. Because it hurts. It really hurts.”

WEEKEND: MUSIC



ILLUSTRATION BY NOGA AMI-RAV/Stars and Stripes

Back row, left to right: RZA of Wu-Tang Clan; Marianne Faithfull; Billie Eilish; Philip Bailey Jr. of Earth, Wind & Fire; Charli XCX. Front row, left to right: Ann Wilson of Heart; Courtney Love; Paul McCartney; Linda McCartney. These musical artists, and others, are the subjects of documentaries available to watch in theaters or streaming this year.

Must-watch music documentaries

Many portraits of artistic greatness coming to theaters and streaming throughout the year

CHARLIE VARGAS, HOLLY ALVARADO
The Orange County Register

Music documentaries have long offered more than just behind-the-scenes access.

At their best, they serve as time capsules, preserving pivotal moments in culture while peeling back the layers of the artists who helped shape them. From intimate portraits of reinvention to deep dives into eras that altered the course of popular

music, the genre continues to evolve.

In 2026, a new slate of music documentaries promises to do just that, spotlighting artists at moments of transformation, reckoning, and creative rebirth. Whether revisiting legendary careers or examining the fleeting intensity of modern pop, these films offer music lovers a chance to experience the stories behind the sound.

Starting on the next page, here are 11 music documentaries to add to your watch list in 2026.

WEEKEND: MUSIC

‘Ann Wilson — In My Voice’

Rock & Roll Hall of Fame inductee Ann Wilson is ready to tell her story in her own words. Wilson’s upcoming documentary, “Ann Wilson — In My Voice,” chronicles the life of one of the most iconic singers who brought us “Crazy On You,” “Barra-cuda” and “Magic Man.”

The documentary’s announcement states that the film draws from a “personal archive of home movies, photographs, journals and never-before-seen footage.” Wilson will give additional commentary from friends, family members, music executives and fellow bandmates.

“This film is my story in my own words, told the way I’ve always wanted to tell it. I can’t wait to take you behind the scenes of my music and my story,” Wilson wrote in an Instagram post about the film.

Although the post mentioned it is slated for this year, no details have been shared on an exact release date.

‘The Best Summer’

Tamra Davis, known for her insightful documentary on Kathleen Hanna of Bikini Kill and Le Tigre, is back with a new project that also dusts off rare archival footage. The film features behind-the-scenes looks at some of the most prominent up-and-coming indie-rock and punk bands of the ’90s. Some of the acts include the Beastie Boys, Sonic Youth, Foo Fighters, Pavement, Rancid, Beck, the Amps and some more Bikini Kill.

The inspiration for the film came after Davis evacuated from the Palisades fires last January and discovered a box of videotapes she shot in 1995 at Summersault, a little-known Australian indie music festival.

“The Best Summer” tells an oral and visual history of the tour, featuring performances, candid interviews and never-before-seen backstage footage.

According to Billboard, Davis’ film will be available to view online after its Sundance premiere.

‘Broken English’

The British Invasion is often associated with the groups that led the charge onto American charts, including the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Who, the Kinks and others. Among the leading female acts of the British Invasion was the late singer and actress Marianne Faithfull. While she was a popular figure in the musical movement taking over America, much of her success was overshadowed by personal problems in the ’70s, when she became anorexic, homeless and addicted to heroin.

After nearly a decade, Faithfull made a musical comeback in 1979 with the release of a critically acclaimed seventh studio album, “Broken English.” The album signified a resurgence of her musical career, earning her a Grammy Award nomination for Best Female Rock Vocal Performance, and is now the title of the upcoming documentary.

“Broken English” stars Faithfull (before she passed away last year at 78), alongside Tilda Swinton, George MacKay, Sophia Di Martino, Zawe Ashton and Calvin Demba.

The documentary dramatizes Faithfull’s life and career by presenting real events and framing them within the fictionalized group, known as the “Ministry of Not Forgetting,” composed of Swinton and MacKay, to explore and correct the often-misrepresented legacy of the singer.

The film’s U.S. theatrical debut is scheduled for March 20.



British ’90s boy band “Take That” is the subject of a three-part Netflix documentary, creatively also named “Take That,” which begins streaming Jan. 27. Pictured, from left: Gary Barlow, Howard Donald, Mark Owen, Robbie Williams and Jason Orange.

‘The Disciple’

Wu-Tang Clan is among the most prolific rap groups in the genre’s history. In her directorial debut, Joanna Natasegara dives into the legends and myths surrounding Wu-Tang Clan’s 2015 album “Once Upon a Time in Shaolin” through this movie, airing this week at Sundance. There was only ever one copy of the album created, an intentional choice by RZA, the leader of the group, and Dutch Moroccan rapper and producer Cilvaringz, who felt the streaming age was cheapening music.

Natasegara tells the story of how Cilvaringz, as an outsider, worked his way into Wu-Tang’s inner circle to craft the album that sparked discussions about art’s material value and controversy over who gets to own rare art.

The only copy of the album was sold in 2015 for \$2 million to Martin Shkreli, the disgraced CEO of Turing Pharmaceuticals. It remains the most expensive piece of music ever sold, after NFT company PleasrDAO bought it for \$4 million. The album can only be legally played at private listening parties and is barred from any commercial use until 2130.

‘Hit Me Hard and Soft: The Tour (Live in 3D)’

Billie Eilish, known for megahits such as “Lovely,” “Bad Guy” and “Birds of a Feather,” is teaming up with director James Cameron for her next documentary project. According to The Hollywood Reporter, Eilish first teased the project over the summer during a sold-out concert in Manchester, England, but couldn’t share many details beyond the fact that it was a 3D collaboration with the Oscar-winning director known for “Titanic,” “The Terminator” and the “Avatar” franchise.

Eilish’s previous documentaries include “Billie Eilish: The World’s a Little Blurry,” directed by R.J. Cutler, and the concert movie “Happier Than Ever: A Love Letter to Los Angeles.”

“Hit Me Hard and Soft: The Tour (Live in 3D)” is scheduled to be released in theaters on March 20.

‘Take That’

When it comes to classic ’90s boy bands, the English group Take That is one of the biggest. The group successfully climbed the charts with a combination of catchy pop hits and heartthrob appeal.

However, just a little over a decade into their budding career that captured mil-

lions, the band split. Now, a three-part Netflix documentary, dubbed “Take That,” will take fans and viewers back to the group’s beginnings in the early ’90s, through the present day, and chart their rise, reunion and transition into a three-piece act.

The documentary features interviews with the three remaining musicians, Gary Barlow, Howard Donald and Mark Owen, while former bandmates Robbie Williams and Jason Orange will be featured in archival footage. “Take That” will stream on Netflix on Jan. 27.

‘Antiheroine’

Few figures loom as large — or as polarizing — in alternative rock history as Courtney Love.

The former “Hole” singer, songwriter and actor helped define the sound and attitude of 1990s alt-rock, often commanding as much attention for her public persona as for her music. “Antiheroine,” a new documentary slated to drop this year, aims to shift that narrative by allowing Love to tell her story on her own terms.

Set against the backdrop of her life in London, where Love relocated in 2019, the film traces her evolution as an artist, mother and cultural figure. While her marriage to Nirvana frontman Kurt Cobain inevitably factors into the story, the documentary positions it as only one chapter in a much larger, more complex life.

The film features appearances from longtime peers and collaborators, including Green Day frontman Billie Joe Armstrong, former R.E.M. singer Michael Stipe and Hole bandmates Melissa Auf der Maur and Patty Schemel.

“Antiheroine” is scheduled to make its world premiere within the next week at the Sundance Film Festival.

‘The Moment’

“The Moment” captures Charli XCX at the height of her pop-culture takeover, offering a stylized, mockumentary-style look at a fictionalized version of her explosive summer 2024 rise. Conceived by Charli XCX and directed by longtime collaborator Aidan Zamiri, the film blends real concert footage with scripted scenes to explore fame, pressure and the chaos behind the scenes.

Rather than presenting a straightforward portrait of stardom, the documentary leans into the strange in-between spaces of pop life, backstage hours, rehearsals and the emotional whiplash of

being both celebrated and scrutinized in real time.

The film features a stacked cast of cameos, including Alexander Skarsgård, Kylie Jenner, Rachel Sennott, Rosanna Arquette and Jamie Demetriou, adding to its sharp, satirical edge. “The Moment” is set to premiere at the Sundance Film Festival before arriving in theaters worldwide in late January.

‘Man on the Run’

The newest Paul McCartney documentary takes fans on a ride of his creative rebirth in the years following the breakup of the Beatles, tracing his transition from one of the most famous musicians in the world to an artist rebuilding himself on his own terms.

The documentary focuses on the formation of Wings with his wife, Linda McCartney, and the challenges of defining a new musical identity in the 1970s.

Directed by acclaimed filmmaker Morgan Neville, the film draws from extensive interviews with McCartney, his personal journals and Linda McCartney’s photographs, offering an intimate look at a period often overshadowed by Beatlemania. Rare archival footage and previously unseen material help illuminate the doubts, risks and reinvention that shaped McCartney’s solo career.

“Man on the Run” will screen in select theaters before arriving worldwide on streaming beginning Feb. 25.

‘Earth, Wind & Fire’

A new documentary directed by Questlove will explore the legacy and lasting cultural impact of Earth, Wind & Fire, one of the most influential bands in American music history. Founded by Maurice White, the group helped shape the sound of funk, soul, R&B and pop while delivering a message rooted in spirituality, unity and joy.

The film examines the band’s expansive body of work through rare and previously unseen archival material, drawing from visual, audio and written records with the full support of the band and White’s estate. Rather than functioning as a traditional career overview, the documentary aims to contextualize Earth, Wind & Fire’s music within the broader cultural and social movements that surrounded it.

The Earth, Wind & Fire documentary is set to air on HBO later this year.

‘Bowie In Berlin’

“Bowie In Berlin” studies one of the most transformative periods in David Bowie’s career, when he retreated from fame and relocated to Berlin between 1976 and 1978. Seeking distance from the pressures of stardom and a reset both personally and creatively, Bowie’s time in the city would ultimately lead to the creation of “Low,” “Heroes” and “Lodger,” collectively known as the Berlin Trilogy.

The documentary uses archival footage and rare interviews with four women who played pivotal roles during Bowie’s Berlin years, offering an intimate perspective on a side of the artist rarely seen by the public. Their reflections frame a period of deep artistic reinvention, as Bowie shed his theatrical personas and began performing as himself rather than through characters.

“Bowie In Berlin,” directed by longtime Bowie documentarian Francis Whately, is set to air on BBC Two and BBC iPlayer in autumn 2026.

WEEKEND: FOOD



SCOTT SUCHMAN/For The Washington Post
Chocolate Bundt Cake benefits from an infusion of strong coffee.



TOM MCCORKLE/For The Washington Post
Coffee-spiked Banana Bread is a less obvious place to use the drink.



LAURA CHASE DE FORMIGNY/For The Washington Post
Tiramisu is a natural candidate for the addition of coffee.



You can bake with coffee in a variety of forms: brewed, powder and extract.
MARVIN JOSEPH/The Washington Post

A baker’s secret weapon

Use coffee to amp up desserts, especially ones made with chocolate

BY LEAH KOENIG
Special to The Washington Post

rowing up, my mother made the same chocolate cake for every birthday celebration. She had to — my brother and I would have rioted if she tried to change it. The cake is obscenely chocolatey, yet also light and fluffy, while pushing the limits on how moist a cake can be before it can no longer structurally withstand the buttercream frosting heaped on top. When she shared the recipe with me as an adult — I now bake it for my own two kids’ birthdays — I noticed a curious ingredient: a full cup of hot brewed coffee.

I should not have been surprised. Coffee can be a baker’s secret weapon, adding richness and a hint of acidity to a range of desserts and baked goods. Coffee is a “natural flavor amplifier,” explains pastry chef Helen Goh, author of the cookbook “Baking and the Meaning of Life.” “Its bitter notes cut through sugar and richness, which is useful when I want balance and complexity in a bake.” Coffee is particularly simpatico in chocolate recipes, where the coffee’s bitterness rounds out the chocolate flavor without overpowering it.

“There’s a reason people say coffee and chocolate are a match made in heaven,” says Rose Hattabaugh, a senior recipe developer at Milk Street. Whether you are a novice or experienced home baker, read on for three methods for successfully incorporating coffee into your dessert recipes:

Brewed coffee and espresso

Baking with brewed coffee or espresso, which introduces liquid into the recipe, can add luscious moisture to a finished baked good. You can use any brewing method you prefer, but aim for a strong cup so the coffee flavor can shine through. Meanwhile, there is a reason that my mother’s chocolate cake recipe called specifically for hot, rather than cooled, brewed coffee.

“The hot liquid encourages the dry cocoa powder to bloom,” Hattabaugh says. The type of coffee you choose matters, too.

“A dark roast will contribute a bold, bitter note, while a medium roast tends to be fruitier and more complex,” Goh says. “So match the roast to the dish you are creating for the best flavor.”

Many recipes, such as the traditional Jewish honey cake served around the High Holidays, rely on brewed coffee or espresso for flavor and textural enhancements. It’s a key ingredient in a classic Italian tiramisu.

“But even if a recipe doesn’t specifically call for coffee, you can often add it in,” Hattabaugh says.

“If there’s a liquid in the cake, especially water, try substituting some or all with coffee.”

Home bakers wanting to avoid caffeine can simply swap in decaf coffee; the switch does not noticeably affect the flavor.

Instant coffee and instant espresso

When it comes to my morning cup of coffee, I will always reach for freshly ground beans and my French press over instant coffee. But my caffeine snobbery ends at breakfast, because instant coffee (and espresso), dehydrated brewed coffee in the form of water-soluble granules, are magical baking ingredients. The shelf-stable coffee crystals dissolve readily, allowing bakers to add coffee flavor to some baked goods such as s’mores bars or chocolate Bundt cake.

One tip for using instant coffee effectively is to dissolve it before adding it to a recipe. If you stir it directly into a batter, frosting or whipped cream, it can leave unwanted dark streaks or spots.

“I’ve made that mistake, and I don’t recommend it,” Hattabaugh says. “I like to combine the instant coffee with a tablespoon of boiling water in a small bowl and blend it into a paste.”

Coffee extract

Like vanilla or almond extract, coffee extract is made by steeping the main ingredient, in this case coffee beans, in an alcohol- or water-based solvent. The resulting extract is highly concentrated. A few drops can deliver robust coffee flavor to frostings or ice cream, German chocolate cake or chocolate chip scones without changing the ratio of liquid in the recipe.

“As a general rule, I use brewed coffee for depth and complexity, instant coffee for ease and convenience, and extract for targeted potency,” says Goh, who incorporated coffee extract into the frozen espresso parfait recipe she developed with Yotam Ottolenghi for their cookbook “Sweet.” “Just use it judiciously, as it can easily tip over in intensity. Start with a few drops and adjust incrementally.”

Don’t have coffee extract? Try a splash of coffee-flavored liqueur, such as Tia Maria or Kahlua.

Goh also warns that coffee extracts vary in quality from brand to brand.

“Some can taste a little ‘off’ or artificial, while others may lean overly bitter,” she says.

When buying coffee extract, stick with trusted brands that don’t add superfluous ingredients such as caramel color or citric acid.

Coffee extract also has a long shelf life — up to two years — and can be stored at room temperature in your pantry.

WEEKEND: TELEVISION

REVIEW



PEACOCK/TNS

Emilia Clarke, left, and Haley Lu Richardson play the wives of deceased Cold War spies who enter the field as “Ponies” or Persons of No Interest” to find out what really happened to their husbands, in Peacock’s “Ponies.” The espionage thriller is now available on Peacock.

On a mission to find the truth in Moscow

Cold War-set ‘Ponies’ on Peacock an odd-couple spy story with female friendship and plenty of emotional depth

BY MARY MCNAMARA
Los Angeles Times

Despite its equestrian-themed title, misfit-spies motif and occasional reference to “Moscow rules,” Peacock’s new espionage thriller “Ponies” has little in common with Apple TV’s “Slow Horses.” Set in Cold War Moscow, “Ponies” falls, intriguingly and occasionally uneasily, somewhere between FX’s “The Americans” and underappreciated female-empowerment comedy film “The Spy Who Dumped Me.” Which is not surprising since it was created by Susanna Fogel and David Iserson, co-writers of “The Spy Who Dumped Me,” which the former directed and the latter executive-produced.

Opening with an attempt to extract a CIA asset from the clutches of the KGB, the series centers around Moscow’s American Embassy circa 1977 (with a soundtrack and brief glimpses of a young George H.W. Bush and, later, Elton John, to prove it).

As the American operatives engage in the obligatory shoot-’em-up car chase, two women meet in a market. Though they are each less than thrilled with their almost nonexistent lives as wives of envoys to the associate of the U.S. ambassador (i.e., the spies from the opening sequence), their contrasting attitudes and sparky, odd-couple chemistry is immediately, and a bit ham-handedly, established.

Polite, rule-following and Russian-fluent Bea (Emilia Clarke) believes her husband Chris (Louis Boyer) when he lovingly assures her that this posting will be over in a few years and soon she will be putting her unidentified Wellesley degree to better use.

Tough-talking, streetwise Twila (Haley Lu Richardson) is not so deferential or deluded; she pushes Bea to face down an unscrupulous Russian egg merchant with profanity-laden elan. Unsurprisingly, her marriage to Tom (John Macmillan) is more than a little rocky.

Still, when their husbands die, ostensibly in a plane crash, Bea and Twila are grief-stricken — they have lost not only their husbands but their careers as foreign service wives.

Back in the U.S., Bea is bucked up by her Russian, Holocaust-surviving grandmother (the always welcome Harriet Walter) while Twila realizes she fled her hard-

scrabble Indiana background for good reason.

Determined to find out what really happened to their husbands, the two return to Moscow and confront station head Dane Walter (Adrian Lester), convincing him that their status as wives — the ultimate Persons of No Interest, or “PONI” in spy parlance — offers the perfect cover.

Ignoring the historical fact that both countries have long had female undercover operatives, Dane decides (and convinces then-outgoing CIA head Bush, played by Patrick Fabian) that Russia would never consider two women (including, you know, one fluent in Russian) a threat and, by the middle of the first episode, we’re off.

Reinstalled as secretaries, Bea’s mission is to get close to new asset Ray (Nicholas Podany), Twila’s to ... be a secretary. She, of course, decides to become more involved, enlisting the aid of Ivanna (Lili Walters), an equally tough market merchant.

Everything gets immediately more complicated, and dangerous, when Bea catches the eye of Andrei (Artjom Gilz), a murderous leader of the Russian secret police and intelligence agency who may be able to lead the CIA to the surveillance facility Chris and Tom were trying to find when they died.

Clarke, returning to TV for her biggest role since her career-making turn as Daenerys Targaryen in “Game of Thrones,” is the obvious headliner. And in early episodes she does in fact carry the series, evoking, with as much realism as the relatively light tone of the writing will allow, a woman whose self-knowledge and self-confidence have eroded after she was sidelined into the role of wife.

Richardson, whom many will remember as Portia, long-suffering assistant to Tanya (Jennifer Coolidge) in Season 2 of “The White Lotus,” is given the opposite task. Twila is, in Hollywood parlance, a “firecracker” — you know, the tough-talking dame who inevitably nurses a wounded heart. While drafting Bea as a spy makes a certain amount of sense, Twila’s skill set, as she is told, is being “fearless.” Her real talent, however, turns out to be standing up for “ordinary women,” including a string of prostitutes, murdered and forgotten.

Since neither woman receives the kind of training even most fictionally drafted civilian-spies get in these kinds of

stories, they are forced to rely on their wits, and the yin-yang balance of their good girl/tough girl relationship.

This makes for some great banter and fish-out-of-water moments, but it muddies the tone — are they being taken seriously as spies, or not? — and requires significant suspension of belief (as does the Moscow setting created by Budapest).

Fortunately, compared with their professional counterparts in most espionage dramas, the career agents on both sides appear, at least initially, to be quite limited in their spycraft as well.

An emerging plotline involving sex tapes and blackmail adds all sorts of tension, as well as historical accuracy, and, as things get rolling, the spies become sharper and the notion of surveillance grows increasingly complicated and tantalizing.

Still, “Ponies” is obviously less interested in the granular ins and outs of gadgets, codes and dead drops than it is in the personal motivations of those involved and the moral morass that is the Cold War. “You came to Moscow to find truth?” an asset scoffs.

The cast is uniformly strong, the performances solid and engaging (Walter’s Russian grandma reappears midway through to show everyone how it’s done). If “Ponies” takes almost half of its eight-episode season to equal the sum of its parts, Fogel, who also co-wrote “Booksmart,” is a master spinner of female friendship, and Clarke and Richardson make it impossible not to instantly recognize, and connect with, Bea and Twila.

Their chemistry, and the absurdity of their situation, propels the story over any early “wait, what?” bumps and confusing tonal shifts into an increasingly propulsive and cohesive spy drama, with plenty of “trust no one” twists and turns, and the kind of period detail that would make “Mad Men” proud.

Fortunately, even as it moves with increasing assurance into “Tinker, Tailor” territory, “Ponies” remains a story of love. Which, as spies know only too well, can only exist when you accept, and share, the real truth about yourself. With a cliff-hanging ending, “Ponies” is betting that Bea and Twila will get another season to find their truths, even in Moscow.

All eight episodes of “Ponies” Season 1 are available on Peacock.

WEEKEND: HEALTH & FITNESS



PHOTOS BY JESSICA VALANT/AP

Above and below, physical therapist and Pilates instructor Jessica Valant demonstrates stretch movements in Colorado. She says doing the the cat-cow stretch — arching and curving your back with your hands and knees on the floor — is a good mobility exercise for the spine.

‘Motion is lotion’: the tagline for mobility

Tips and exercises on increasing strength, flexibility as you age

BY ALBERT STUMM
Associated Press

As they age, it’s not uncommon for many people to let out a muted groan when getting out of bed in the morning. But if you “oof” every time you get in a car or “aargh” while bending over to pick up something, it may be time to prioritize exercises that target your mobility.

Dr. Miho Tanaka, a sports medicine surgeon at Massachusetts General Hospital and Harvard Medical School, said good mobility is increasingly recognized as an important part of overall health. She pointed to research showing that high mobility has long-term effects in reducing rates of cancer, cardiovascular disease, dementia and depression.

“It’s not just about how you look and how your level of fitness is at any given point,” Tanaka said. “For anyone who wants to stay active later in life, there has to be a deliberate process of maintaining that level of activity by doing mobility exercises.”

Strength plus flexibility

Mobility and flexibility are often confused, said Jessica Valant, a physical therapist and Pilates instructor near Denver.

Flexibility is simply the extent to which a muscle can lengthen,



A good way to target the hips, Valant says, is to lie on your back and squeeze your knees to your chest.

whereas mobility involves using muscle strength to interact with a network of joints, tendons, ligaments and synovial fluid, which is the lubricant inside the joint.

That network around the shoulders, spine, hips, pelvis and knees needs to work well together. Otherwise, it becomes difficult to reach things in high cabinets, squat down to tie your shoes or lift your grandchildren, let alone participate in outdoor activities or sports.

Mobility exercises strengthen your muscles while increasing your range of motion, which allows you to be more functional with age, Valant said.

“Motion is lotion, which is a saying we use in physical therapy all the time,” she said.

Two early warning signs

Starting from about 30 years old, muscles and tendons start to lose collagen, Tanaka said. That’s the same substance that in hair

and skin relates to going gray and getting wrinkles.

Without regular exercise, weaker muscles put extra pressure on joints, she said. Even active people lose muscle in areas that are overlooked at the gym, such as the rotator cuff around the shoulder and postural muscles that support the spine and neck.

Tanaka said two early warning signs likely point to the need for mobility training.

The first is aching joints and muscle stiffness without first exerting a lot of effort. Back soreness after a long day of sitting at a desk could signal limited hip or pelvic mobility, she said. Achy knees after being on your feet all day may be a sign of weak quadriceps.

The second sign is more acute pain, such as when you don’t get injured but you still experience swollen or painful joints for several days after participating in a

“You don’t have to have a gym to do this,” Simon said.

He suggested working body-weight exercises into your day. That could include setting an hourly timer to get up and walk around the house. When you return to your desk, add chair sits to work the quads, hamstrings, calves and glutes. Assuming your balance is OK, doing push-ups against a wall or a countertop helps to mobilize the shoulders.

Once those exercises become easy, add exercise bands to build strength.

Valant said that people who are sedentary should simply start walking every day.

“It’s the lowest barrier to entry,” she said.

Beyond that, she suggests adding 10 minutes of mobility training to whatever exercise you’re doing. She offers short mobility routines on her YouTube channel targeting the hips, spine and full body.

Some basic hip movements include lying on your side and lifting your top leg, lying on your back and squeezing your knees to your chest and sitting up with your feet together, lowering your knees toward the floor.

For the spine, try the cat-cow stretch, arching and curving your back with hands and knees on the floor. Or sit in a chair with feet on the floor, twisting your shoulders to both sides.

“This isn’t something that changes in five days, but I tell people, give it four weeks,” she said. “You will see results over time.”

WEEKEND: FAMILY



Ng Han Guan/AP

The app *Are You Dead?* is seen on a smartphone in Beijing, China. Developed by three young people in their 20s, the app is essentially a 21st century Chinese digital version of American alert pendants for seniors.

Safe, seen, understood

An app’s blunt life check adds another layer to the loneliness crisis in China

By TED ANTHONY AND FU TING
Associated Press

In China, the names of things are often either ornately poetic or jarringly direct. A new, wildly popular app among young Chinese people is definitively the latter.

It’s called, simply, “Are You Dead?”

In a vast country whose young people are increasingly on the move, the new, one-button app — which has taken the country by digital storm this month — is essentially exactly what it says it is. People who live alone in far-off cities and may be at risk — or just perceived as such by friends or relatives — can push an outsized green circle on their phone screens and send proof of life over the network to a friend or loved one. The cost: 8 yuan (about \$1.10).

It’s simple and straightforward — essentially a 21st-century Chinese digital version of those American pendants with an alert button on them for senior citizens that gave birth to the famed TV commercial: “I’ve fallen, and I can’t get up!”

Developed by three young people in their 20s, “Are You Dead?” became the most downloaded paid app on the Apple App Store in China this month, according to local media reports. It is also becoming a top download in places as diverse as Singapore and the Netherlands, Britain and India and the United States — in line with the developers’ attitude that loneliness and safety aren’t just Chinese issues.

“Every country has young people who move to big cities to chase their dreams,” Ian Lü, 29, one of the app’s developers, said.

Lü, who worked and lived alone in the southern city of Shenzhen for five years, experienced such loneliness himself. He said the need for a frictionless check-in is especially strong among introverts.

“It’s unrealistic,” he said, “to message people every day just to tell them you’re still alive.”

A reflection of life in modern China

Against the backdrop of modern and increasingly frenetic Chinese life, the market for the app is understandable.

Traditionally, Chinese families have tended to live together or at least in close proximity across generations — something embedded deep in the nation’s culture until recent years. That has changed in the last few decades with urbanization and rapid economic growth that have sent many Chinese to join what is effectively a diaspora within their own nation — and taken hundreds of millions far from parents, grandpar-

ents, aunts and uncles.

Today, the country has more than 100 million households with only one person, according to an annual report from the National Bureau of Statistics of China in 2024.

Yuan Sangsang, a Shanghai designer, has been living on her own for a decade and describes herself as a “single cow and horse.” She’s not hoping the app will save her life — only help her relatives in the event that she does, in fact, expire alone.

“I just don’t want to die with no dignity, like the body gets rotten and smelly before it is found,” said Yuan, 38. “That would be unfair for the ones who have to deal with it.”

Is the app tapping into a particular angst?

While such an app might at first seem best suited to elderly people — regardless of their smartphone literacy — all reports indicate that “Are You Dead?” is being snapped up by younger people as the wry equivalent of a social media check-in.

“Some netizens say that the ‘Are you dead?’ greeting feels like a carefree joke between close friends — both heartfelt and gives a sense of unguarded ease,” the business website Yicai, the Chinese Business Network, said in a commentary. “It likely explains why so many young people unanimously like this app.”

The commentary, by writer He Tao, went further in analyzing the cultural landscape. He wrote that the app’s immediate success “serves as a darkly humorous social metaphor, reminding us to pay attention to the living conditions and inner world of contemporary young people. Those who downloaded it clearly need more than just a functional security measure; they crave a signal of being seen and understood.”

That name, though

Death is a taboo subject in Chinese culture, and the word itself is shunned to the point where many buildings in China have no fourth floor because the word for “four” and the word for “death” sound the same — “si.” Lü acknowledged that the app’s name sparked public pressure.

“Death is an issue every one of us has to face,” he said. “Only when you truly understand death do you start thinking about how long you can exist in this world, and how you want to realize the value of your life.”

Last week, though, the developers said on their official account on China’s Weibo social platform that they’d be pivoting to a new name.

THE MEAT AND POTATOES OF LIFE

Lisa Smith Molinari



Even the threshold of hell can be better with friends

Good, bad. Bitter, sweet. Pleasure, pain. Love, hate.

These classic dichotomies most accurately describe my relationship with Ikea — the Scandinavian home furniture store known for ready-to-assemble designs and sleek modern style.

On one hand, I totally dig Ikea’s hip Euro-vibe and self-serve convenience. But on the other hand, for a person like me, whose home decorating style can best be described as hand-me-down-chic, walking into an Ikea is like crossing the threshold of hell.

The other day, I drove an hour north to meet a friend at the nearest Ikea. We became acquainted years ago when our military families were both stationed in Stuttgart, Germany. After we both moved to New England, we thought we’d meet for an afternoon of shopping and catching up.

As long as I’ve known her, my friend has been artistic, popular, stylish, opinionated and interesting. In other words, we don’t have much in common. But somehow, our mutual appreciation for tasteless humor created a common bond between us, and we’ve been friends ever since.

After a quick reunion in Parking Sector B, we found the main entrance. Despite the conspicuous lack of pitchforks and flesh-singeing heat — we were at the veritable threshold of hell, after all — we began our shopping escapade.

The staircase led us to an unplanned lunch of Swedish meatballs and lingonberry soda in the ergonomically ingenious but coldly Scandinavian cafeteria. Then, we set out on the compulsory one-way path that would take us on a mandatory tour of every product in the vast store.

All I needed was a couple of area rugs and a lampshade, but I grabbed two carts, knowing full well that I would fall prey to Ikea’s marketing ploys and throw numerous gadgets and accessories into my carts.

My friend, conversely, was a trained interior designer with years of experience and a keen eye for home decorating style. She knew exactly what she wanted — two shelving units in high gloss pink, a pack of paper napkins in green, a pair of curtain panels in turquoise and a pack of potato chip clips (her husband’s only request.)

Despite her specific mission, she stopped at virtually every showroom, tempted by the irresistibly chic displays and reasonable prices.

“So whaddya think,” she asked me in the kitchen showroom, momentarily forgetting that I have no home decorating skills, “could I make this work as a kitchen island?”

“Sure, looks pretty good to me,” I responded truthfully.

And a few minutes later, among a dizzying array of textile patterns, she inquired, “Oooh — wouldn’t this pop against my new wall color?”

“Sure, looks pretty good to me,” I repeated.

And then, deep in the heart of the rug showroom, she queried, “Isn’t that a cool pattern on that flatwoven piece?”

“Sure, looks pretty good to me,” I said, knowing full well that my friend just needed a sounding board, no matter how frumpy and unrefined.

By the time my friend and I met up at the long checkout lines, we both had carts overflowing with products with Swedish names we found impossible to pronounce.

My friend’s cartful of items was carefully selected to add functional fashion to her elegant and hip home furnishings. While my cart was piled high with impulse buys and sale items, which may or may not complement my collection of hand-me-down furniture and thrift store finds.

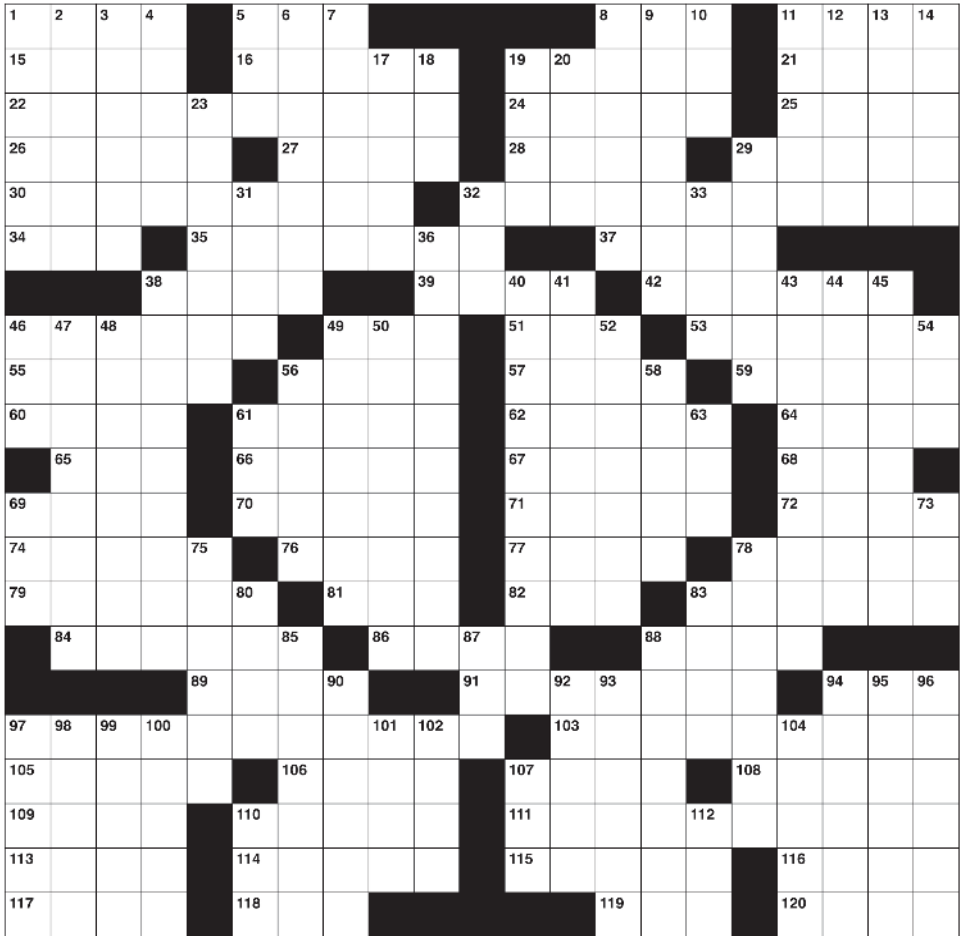
Munching a cinnamon bun on drive home, I felt surprisingly content with my utter lack of home decorating prowess, and glad that my friend did not judge me for my ignorance. Despite our dissimilarities, we both understood that, when picking a rug, a couch, a coffee table or a friend, the best advice to follow is, “Vive le différence.”

Read more at themeatandpotatoesoflife.com and in Lisa’s book, “The Meat and Potatoes of Life: My True Lit Com.” Email: meatandpotatoesoflife@gmail.com

NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

BY DYLAN SCHIFF / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

ACROSS			DOWN
1 Tennis superstar Nadal, familiarly	39 Champagne giant	82 Connecticut governor Lamont	1 Take to the cleaners
5 “Wicked” director Jon M. ____	42 Patient watchers	83 N.B.A. team that plays at Gainbridge Fieldhouse	2 Class with frogs
8 Unspecified degree	46 Birthstone before opal	84 Compound that ripens bananas	3 Dressy clothes
11 Pack (down)	49 Longtime NASCAR sponsor	86 Computer menu heading	4 Point of view
15 “Sign me up!”	51 Ladybug’s prey	88 Owlsh, in a way	5 Filing pro
16 Bygone carrier that had a fleet of “Clippers”	53 Debaters who use deceptive arguments	89 Brontë heroine	6 Roman emperor with a namesake wall
19 Really like	55 Stag	91 Bit of entertainment for a morning commute, maybe	7 Hits Ctrl+Z to fix
21 Woodwind related to the cor anglais	56 Oscar-winning actress Loren	94 A-one ... or an “A” worth one	8 Error message on a Blu-ray display
22 Article of sports equipment that typically has two rubber sheets of different colors	57 Lower-right button on YouTube ads	97 Beachy footwear	9 Benedict Arnold’s offense
24 Delivery option	59 ____ nous (between us)	103 “I’m fine, but thanks anyway!”	10 Practice witchcraft on
25 Sound from a ragdoll	60 Kristen of “Bridesmaids”	105 Literally, “the god”	11 Birthstone after opal
26 Division signs, more formally	61 Seduce	106 Provocative	12 Filled with activity
27 Word sung three times in a row in “Take Me Out to the Ball Game”	62 “In my estimation ...”	107 Parcel of land	13 Mushroom often added to cream sauces
28 Et ____ (and others)	64 Rubber end of a golf club	108 Classic origami design	14 Inherently
29 Games on some kids’ menus	65 Ninth inning, usually	109 Medallions might be seen in them	17 In the air
30 Boss at a blaze	66 Flooded	110 ____ Games, event first held in 70-Across	18 ____ Gala
32 Game on some kids’ menus	67 Iridescent jewelry material	111 Tupac and Eminem, for two	19 Way off in the distance
34 “King Kong” actress Wray	68 Rug cleaner, for short	113 Give off	20 Classical Greek precinct with a noted oracle
35 What might pop up from time to time?	69 Lead-in to aging or anxiety	114 Like an authoritarian	23 Imagine
37 Item in a numismatist’s collection	70 Two-time capital of the Mughal Empire	115 ____ Montoya, “The Princess Bride” swordsmen	29 Randall who created the webcomic “xkcd”
38 “S.N.L.” alum Nora	71 Biting pests	117 Well grounded	31 Sharpen
	72 Follower of catch or latch	118 Hit title for Abba or Rihanna	32 ____-Magnon
	74 Former times	119 Email category	33 Apt name of 12 popes
	76 Cameron who voiced Princess Fiona in the “Shrek” movies	120 Website with a “Craft Supplies & Tools” page	36 Felt someone’s pain
	77 Flo Rida title sung before the words “just a little”		38 Prank of doorbell ringing and running
	78 Big cat hybrid		40 Gradually entering, as a hot tub
	79 No Shave November growth, informally		41 Modern social media craze
	81 Mimic		43 Melodic way of speaking
			44 Turn off
			45 Less laissez-faire



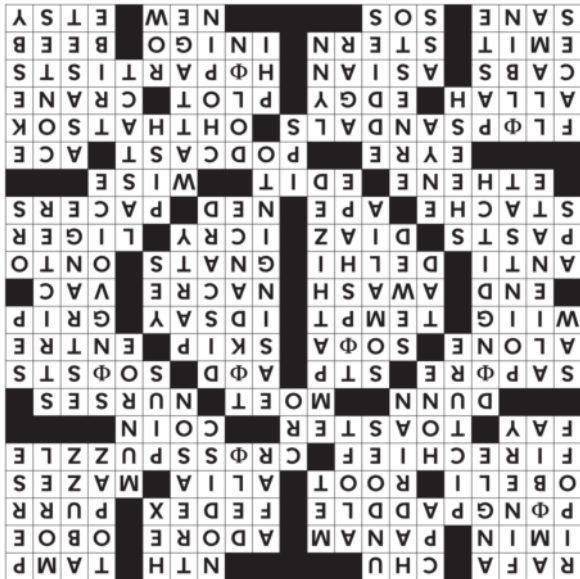
46 Cutter with teeth	73 Hosp. surgical sites	92 Intelligent sea mammal	100 Tomato product
47 Make an enemy of	75 “You’ve gotta be kidding!”	93 Composer of the “Raindrop” prelude	101 Culture medium
48 Identifies digitally?	78 Swan song	94 How china is often sold	102 Country singer Loretta
49 Part of the Horn of Africa	80 Mononymous singer who popularized New Celtic music	95 Short adventure tales	104 “Survivor” group
50 Perfect condition	83 “Baloney!”	96 Barely manages to get through	107 Greek letter that resembles an “I” atop an “O,” as seen eight times in this puzzle
52 Throw out	85 Birth name of Che Guevara	97 Goes up against	
54 Leaf-turning mo.	87 Computer addresses, for short	98 Beast domesticated by the Incas	110 Jerk
56 Put in stitches	88 Lightbulb measure	99 Longtime TV personality Regis	112 Period in the periodic table
58 Subject of an R.S.V.P.	90 Swirling currents		
61 Tiny amount			
63 “Absolutely!”			
69 Tough H.S. classes			

WHY IS IT THAT AFTER WORKING 10 HOURS...

I HAVE TO COME HOME AND SHOVEL THE SNOW!

NOT OUR FAULT, HELICOPTER MOM. TOO COLD.

RESULTS FOR ABOVE PUZZLE



FACES

‘Sinners’ sets Oscars record

Vampire film lands most-ever 16 nominations; saga ‘One Battle After Another’ is 2nd with 13

By JAKE COYLE
Associated Press

Ryan Coogler’s blues-steeped vampire epic “Sinners” led all films with 16 nominations to the 98th Academy Awards on Thursday, setting a record for the most in Oscar history.

Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences voters showered “Sinners” with more nominations than they had ever bestowed before, breaking the 14-nomination mark set by “All About Eve,” “Titanic” and “La La Land.” Along with best picture, Coogler was nominated for best director and best screenplay, and double-duty star Michael B. Jordan was rewarded with his first Oscar nomination, for best actor.

Paul Thomas Anderson’s father-daughter revolutionary saga “One Battle After Another,” the favorite coming into nominations, trailed in second with 13 nominations of its own. Four of its actors — Leonardo DiCaprio, Teyana Taylor, Benicio Del Toro and Sean Penn — were nominated, though newcomer Chase Infiniti was left out in best actress.

In those two top nominees, the film academy put its full force behind a pair of visceral and bracingly original American epics that each connected with a fraught national moment. Coogler’s Jim Crow-era film — the rare horror movie to win the academy’s favor — conjures a mythical allegory of Black life. In “One Battle After Another,” a dormant spirit of rebellion is revived in an out-of-control police state.

Both are also Warner Bros. titles. In the midst of a contentious sale to Netflix, the 102-year-old studio had its best Oscar nominations morning ever. As the fate of Warner Bros., which Netflix is buying for \$72 billion, hangs in the balance amid a challenge from Paramount Skydance, Hollywood is bracing for potentially the largest realignment in the film industry’s history.

The 10 films nominated for best picture are “Bugonia,” “F1,” “Frankenstein,” “Hamnet,” “Marty Supreme,” “One Battle After Another,” “The Secret Agent,” “Sentimental Value,” “Sinners” and “Train Dreams.”

Guillermo del Toro’s “Frankenstein,” Josh Safdie’s “Marty Supreme” and Joachim Trier’s “Sentimental Value” all scored nine nominations.

The nine for “Marty Supreme” included a third best actor nod for 30-year-old Timothée Chalamet, the favorite in the category he narrowly missed winning last year for “A Complete Unknown.” With Jordan and Chalamet, the nominees are DiCaprio for “One Battle After Another,” Ethan Hawke for “Blue Moon” and Wagner Moura for “The Secret Agent.”

Nominated for best actress was the category favorite, Jessie Buckley (“Hamnet”), along with Rose Byrne (“If I Had Legs I’d Kick You”), Kate Hudson (“Song Sung Blue”), Renate Reinsve (“Sentimental Value”) and two-time winner Emma Stone, who landed her sixth nomination, for “Bugonia.”

The year’s most-watched movie, with more than half a billion views on Netflix, “KPop Demon Hunters,” scored nominations for both best song (“Golden”) and best animated feature. Sony Pictures developed and produced the film, but, after selling it to Netflix, watched it become a worldwide sensation.

Blockbusters otherwise had a tough morning. Universal Pictures’ “Wicked: For Good” was shut out. While “Avatar: Fire and Ash” notched nominations for costume design and visual effects, it became the first “Avatar” film not nominated for best picture. The biggest box-office hit nominated for Hollywood’s top award instead was “F1,” an Apple production. The streamer partnered with Warner Bros. to distribute the racing drama.

The supporting actress nominees are Elle Fanning and Inga Ibsdotter Lilleaas for “Sentimental Value,” Amy Madigan for “Weapons,” Wunmi Mosaku for “Sinners” and Taylor for “One Battle After Another.”

For supporting actor, the nominees are Jacob Elordi for “Frankenstein,” Penn for “One Battle After Another,” Stellan Skarsgård for “Sentimental Value,” Del Toro for “One Battle After Another” and Delroy Lindo for “Sinners.”

The Oscars added a new category this year, for casting. That new honor helped “Sinners” and “One Battle After Another” pad their already impressive stats. Along with those two films, the nominees are “Hamnet,” “Marty Supreme” and “The Secret Agent.”

The Academy Awards will take place March 15. Conan O’Brien will return as host.



Michael B. Jordan, center, has a best actor nomination for his dual role in “Sinners,” which received 16 Academy Award nominations.

Academy Award nominees list

- Best picture:** “Bugonia”; “F1”; “Frankenstein”; “Hamnet”; “Marty Supreme”; “One Battle After Another”; “The Secret Agent”; “Sentimental Value”; “Sinners”; “Train Dreams”
- Best Actress:** Jessie Buckley, “Hamnet”; Rose Byrne, “If I Had Legs I’d Kick You”; Renate Reinsve, “Sentimental Value”; Emma Stone, “Bugonia”; Kate Hudson, “Song Sung Blue”
- Best Actor:** Timothée Chalamet, “Marty Supreme”; Leonardo DiCaprio, “One Battle After Another”; Ethan Hawke, “Blue Moon”; Michael B. Jordan, “Sinners”; Wagner Moura, “The Secret Agent”
- Best Supporting Actress:** Elle Fanning, “Sentimental Value”; Inga Ibsdotter Lilleaas, “Sentimental Value”; Amy Madigan, “Weapons”; Wunmi Mosaku, “Sinners”; Teyana Taylor, “One Battle After Another”
- Best Supporting Actor:** Jacob Elordi, “Frankenstein”; Sean Penn, “One Battle After Another”; Stellan Skarsgård, “Sentimental Value”; Benicio Del Toro, “One Battle After Another”; Delroy Lindo, “Sinners”
- Director:** Paul Thomas Anderson, “One Battle After Another”; Ryan Coogler, “Sinners”; Chloé Zhao, “Hamnet”; Josh Safdie, “Marty Supreme”; Joachim Trier, “Sentimental Value”
- Original Song:** “Golden” from “Kpop Demon Hunters”; “Train Dreams” from “Train Dreams”; “Dear Me” from “Diane Warren: Relentless”; “I Lied to You” from “Sinners”; “Sweet Dreams of Joy” from “Viva Verdi!”
- Original Score:** “Bugonia,” Jerskin Fendrix; “Frankenstein,” Alexandre Desplat; “Hamnet,” Max Richter; “One Battle After Another,” Jonny Greenwood; “Sinners,” Ludwig Göransson
- Animated Film:** “Arco”; “Elio”; “KPop Demon Hunters”; “Little Amélie or the Character of Rain”; “Zootopia 2”
- International Film:** “The Secret Agent,” Brazil; “It Was Just an Accident,” France; “Sentimental Value,” Norway; “Sirat,” Spain; “The Voice of Hind Rajab,” Tunisia
- Documentary Feature:** “The Perfect Neighbor”; “The Alabama Solution”; “Come See Me in the Good Light”; “Cutting Through Rocks”; “Mr. Nobody Against Putin”
- Casting:** “Hamnet”; “Marty Supreme”; “One Battle After Another”; “The Secret Agent”; “Sinners”
- Best Sound:** “F1”; “Frankenstein”; “One Battle after Another”; “Sinners”; “Sirat”
- Cinematography:** “Frankenstein”; “Marty Supreme”; “One Battle After Another”; “Sinners”; “Train Dreams”
- Original Screenplay:** “Blue Moon”; “It Was Just an Accident”; “Marty Supreme”; “Sentimental Value”; “Sinners”
- Adapted Screenplay:** “Bugonia”; “Frankenstein”; “Hamnet”; “One Battle After Another”; “Train Dreams”
- Live Action Short Film:** “Butcher’s Stain”; “A Friend of Dorothy”; “Jane Austen’s Period Drama”; “The Singers”; “Two People Exchanging Saliva”
- Animated Short Film:** “Butterfly”; “Forevergreen”; “The Girl Who Cried Pearls”; “Retirement Plan”; “The Three Sisters”
- Documentary Short Film:** “All the Empty Rooms”; “Armed Only with a Camera: The Life and Death of Brent Renaud”; “Children No More: Were and are Gone”; “The Devil Is Busy”; “Perfectly a Strangeness”
- Visual Effects:** “Avatar: Fire and Ash”; “F1”; “Jurassic World Rebirth”; “The Lost Bus”; “Sinners”
- Production Design:** “Frankenstein”; “Hamnet”; “Marty Supreme”; “One Battle After Another”; “Sinners”
- Film Editing:** “F1”; “Marty Supreme”; “One Battle After Another”; “Sentimental Value”; “Sinners”
- Makeup and Hairstyling:** “Frankenstein”; “Kokuho”; “Sinners”; “The Smashing Machine”; “The Ugly Stepsister”
- Costume Design:** “Avatar: Fire and Ash”; “Frankenstein”; “Hamnet”; “Marty Supreme”; “Sinners”

Razzie nods dominated by ‘Snow White’ remake

The Golden Raspberry Awards on Wednesday released the nominees for the 2026 Razzies, “honoring” last year’s most dubious achievements in film.

Among the biggest losers was Disney’s “Snow White,” which was nominated for worst picture and worst remake. The 2025 adaptation of the Disney classic also netted a worst director nomination for Mark Webb and a worst supporting actor nod for “All Seven Artificial Dwarfs,” who also got a nod for worst screen combo.

The 46th Golden Raspberry Awards will crown its 2026 winners on March 14, a day before the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences names its top movies and filmmakers at the 98th Oscars ceremony. The Razzies’ grand prize recipient receives a “\$4.97 gold spray-painted” trophy and a legacy of shame.

The other worst movie nominees are “The Electric State,” “Hurry Up Tomorrow,” “Star Trek: Section 31” and “War of the Worlds.”

“Snow White” and “War of the Worlds” tied for most total nominations, scoring six apiece.

The list of worst actor nominees is headed by Oscar winner Jared Leto for “Tron: Ares.” Scott Eastwood, Dave Bautista, Ice Cube and Abel “The Weeknd” Tesfaye are also up for the award.

The competition for worst actress includes Academy Award winners Natalie Portman for “Fountain of Youth,” Ariana DeBose for “Love Hurts” and Michelle Yeoh for “Star Trek: Section 31.” They’re up against Milla Jovovich for “In the Lost Lands” and Rebel Wilson for “Bride Hard.”

Eagles’ ‘Greatest Hits’ the first album to sell 40M+

Take it easy ... and go quadruple diamond. The Eagles’ 1976 album “Their Greatest Hits 1971-1975” the bestselling album of all time in the U.S., has officially sold more than 40 million units. That’s according to new certification from the Recording Industry Association of America.

It was also announced on Thursday that the band’s 1976 record “Hotel California” has been certified 28x platinum, maintaining its position as the third best-selling album in the U.S.

The second? That’s Michael Jackson’s “Thriller,” which was certified 34x diamond in 2021.

RIAA’s diamond status was once equivalent to selling 10 million albums or songs, but in 2013 the company began incorporating streams to determine certification. Now 1,500 streams of an album is equivalent to one sale.

The Eagles were inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 1998 and were Kennedy Center honorees in 2016.

From wire reports

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Authorities: Ex-attendant posed as pilot for flights

HONOLULU — A former flight attendant accused of posing as a pilot and working airline employee fooled three U.S. carriers into giving him hundreds of free tickets over a span of four years, federal authorities say. But precisely how he is alleged to have done it — and why the airlines wouldn't have caught on sooner — has industry insiders scratching their heads.

Dallas Pokornik, 33, of Toronto, was arrested in Panama after being indicted on wire fraud charges in federal court in Hawaii last October. He pleaded not guilty Tuesday following his extradition.

According to court documents, Pokornik was a flight attendant for a Toronto-based airline from 2017 to 2019, then used fake employee identification from that carrier to obtain tickets reserved for pilots and flight attendants on three other airlines.

U.S. prosecutors said Tuesday that Pokornik even requested to sit in an extra seat in the cockpit — the “jump seat” — typically reserved for off-duty pilots. It was not clear from court documents whether he ever actually rode in a plane's cockpit, and the U.S. Attorney's Office declined to say.

The indictment did not identify the airlines except to say they are based in Honolulu, Chicago and Fort Worth, Texas.

The scheme lasted four years, the U.S. prosecutors in Hawaii said.

Prosecutors to end case against schools chief

NJ MAYS LANDING — Prosecutors have announced they won't proceed with a child abuse trial against Atlantic City's superintendent of schools, just weeks after her husband — the seaside gambling resort's mayor — was acquitted in the case.

La'Quetta Small, 49, had been accused along with her husband, Mayor Marty Small Sr., of endangering and physically abusing their teenage daughter. She was to have been tried separately in the spring, but the viability of the prosecution was thrown into question last month when a jury found the mayor not guilty.

The decision to abandon the case came after the couple's daughter, who turned 18 earlier this month, determined she no longer wanted the case to proceed, Atlantic County Prosecutor William Reynolds announced last week. Prosecutors also moved to drop charges against Atlantic City High School Principal Constance Days-Chapman, who had been charged with failing to report the teen's abuse claim to state child welfare officials.

Prosecutors made the dismissal request to a state judge Friday, but it wasn't clear Tuesday when a ruling on it would be made.



DON CAMPBELL, THE (ST. JOSEPH, MICH.) HERALD-PALLADIUM/AP

Singing in celebration

All God's Children Community Choir performs during the MLK Day Celebration & Community Breakfast, on Monday, in Benton Harbor, Mich.

La'Quetta Small was scheduled to stand trial in April on charges of endangering the welfare of a child and simple assault.

Just weeks before his trial began, Marty Small, 51, was reelected to a four-year term in the Democratic stronghold. During his testimony, Small denied ever harming his child.

Feds revoke conservation nonprofit's bison leases

MT HELENA — The U.S. Department of the Interior announced on Friday that it is revoking grazing permits in Montana's Phillips County that American Prairie had been using to sustain its herd of bison.

The decision comes after a 3½-year battle between the Montana livestock industry, backed by Gov. Greg Gianforte and the Montana Department of Justice, and American Prairie, a conservation nonprofit working to restore the prairie ecosystem of north-central Montana.

The Montana Stockgrowers Association cheered the news, describing it as a “win for public lands ranching in Montana.”

American Prairie called the decision a “troubling precedent” for those reliant on consistent, predictable federal land management decisions.

In its Jan. 16 letter to American Prairie signed by Sonya Germann,

the state director for the Bureau of Land Management's Montana/Dakotas office, the Interior Department took issue with how American Prairie has characterized its herd of bison, estimated in 2024 at approximately 900 animals.

American Prairie had been grazing bison on four leases for about three years as the high-profile case wound through the Interior Department's Office of Hearings and Appeals.

Suspect in incident at Vance's home enters plea

OH COLUMBUS — The individual charged in connection with the vandalism of Vice President JD Vance's Ohio home earlier this month pleaded not guilty on Tuesday.

William D. DeFoor, 26, entered pleas to three counts in federal court in Cincinnati. Prosecutors have charged DeFoor with damaging government property, engaging in physical violence against any person or property in a restricted building or grounds, and assaulting, resisting or impeding federal officers.

The suspect faces up to 10 years in prison on each of the first two charges and up to 20 years on the third.

Federal prosecutors allege the Secret Service saw someone run along the front fence of Vance's

residence in Cincinnati's upscale East Walnut Hills neighborhood just after midnight on Jan. 5 and then breach the property line. The person later identified as DeFoor was armed with a hammer and tried to break out the window of an unmarked Secret Service vehicle on the way up the driveway. The person then moved toward the front of the home and broke 14 historic window panes, according to a federal affidavit.

DeFoor's attorney, Paul Laufman, has said in court that the situation represents “purely a mental health issue” and that his client was not motivated by politics.

Hot dog maker Nathan's Famous sold for \$450M

NY NEW YORK — Nathan's Famous, which opened as 5-cent hot dog stand in Coney Island more than a century ago, has been sold to packaged meat giant Smithfield Foods in a \$450 million all-cash deal, the companies announced Wednesday.

Smithfield, which has held rights to produce and sell Nathan's products in the U.S., Canada and at Sam's Clubs in Mexico since 2014, will acquire all of Nathan's outstanding shares for \$102 each.

The transaction is expected to close in the first half of 2026.

Smithfield said it expects to

achieve annual savings about \$9 million within two years of closing the deal.

Nathan's board of directors, which own or control nearly 30% of the outstanding shares of Nathan's Famous common stock, approved the buyout and agreed to recommend to its shareholders to vote in favor of the deal.

Aurora lights up skies with stunning display

AK ANCHORAGE — Streaks of shimmering green and red bands exploded in the dark skies above Alaska's largest city Tuesday as the aurora provided a light show for early morning dog walkers, joggers and commuters.

Anchorage was not alone in seeing vivid displays of the aurora following a major disturbance in the Earth's magnetic field.

The aurora didn't disappoint, and its reach overnight Monday and into Tuesday was wide. Social media was lit up with stunning aurora photos from places including Alaska, San Francisco, Chicago, Canada and across Europe.

The intense displays came amid intense geomagnetic and solar radiation storms, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Space Weather Prediction Center.

From wire reports



WHERE HEROES SHOP

All honorably discharged Veterans and Department of War civilians with CAC can shop tax free at **ShopMyExchange.com**.

In addition, the Department of War expanded in-store military exchange and commissary shopping privileges as well as MWR resale facility use to all Veterans with service-connected disabilities.



EXCHANGE

The Exchange is a Department of War Organization

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Bizarro



Loose Parts



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

1	2	3		4	5	6	7		8	9	10	11
12				13					14			
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- ACROSS
- DOWN
- 25 Walking stick
- 26 Periodic table listings
- 27 Only
- 28 Year-end celebration
- 30 "Growing Pains" singer Alessia
- 33 High-tech workers?
- 34 Clue
- 36 Major artery
- 37 Ice cream variety
- 38 La Scala solo
- 39 Intend
- 40 Chaste
- 42 Tax prep pro
- 43 Poetic contraction
- 44 Before
- 45 Evergreen tree
- 1 Lobbying org.
- 2 Freud's "The — and the Id"
- 3 "Emile" author
- 4 The Ram
- 5 Molt
- 6 — Lingus
- 7 Mas' mates
- 8 Farm wagon
- 9 Letter-shaped brace
- 10 Depleted
- 11 Pivot line
- 16 Agents, for short
- 19 Taverns
- 20 Avocado dip, for short
- 21 Regarding
- 22 Varieties
- 23 Toothpaste holder
- 1 Part of MPH
- 4 Pronto
- 8 Gymnast Korbut
- 12 Past
- 13 Mother of Zeus
- 14 PlayStation alternative
- 15 Messengers
- 17 Kid's plea
- 18 Feeder filler
- 19 Exposes
- 20 Reacts in horror
- 22 Flag feature
- 24 Applications
- 25 Kind of call
- 29 — standstill
- 30 Bread and pasta, slangily
- 31 — Diamond Phillips
- 32 Lively Baroque dance with a running step
- 34 Pluto's domain
- 35 Unrefined metals
- 36 Singer Mann
- 37 Ballroom dance
- 40 Corn concoction
- 41 Layered cookie
- 42 Singer/actress Love
- 46 Edict
- 47 Impudent
- 48 Three, in Rome
- 49 Catches some rays
- 50 Bailiwick
- 51 Stitch

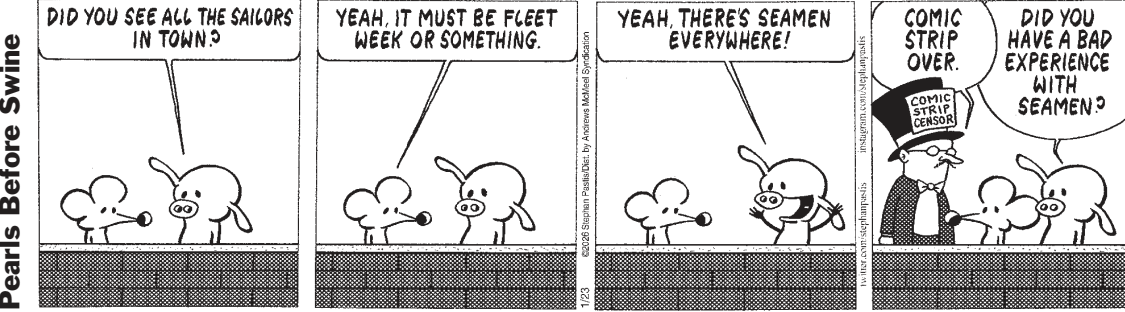
Answer to Previous Puzzle

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			O	C	E	A	N	S	T	A	T	E
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Frazz



Pearls Before Swine



Non Sequitur



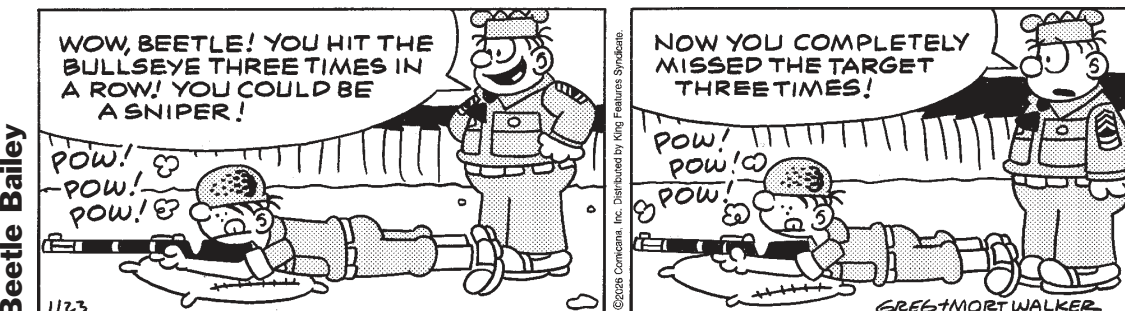
Wumo



Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



1-23 CRYPTOQUIP

X Q Z X K G N D C E W H E Y G K Z N Q

J N E W K G J N Y B W Q J E W Z C B T T

B K J , J E G A B Q C B Z D B H G P

C W J E B A X K B T P W T G A A B .

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHEN YOU'RE PLANNING TO GO OUT IN A NOISY RAINSTORM, YOU SHOULD PUT ON SOME THUNDERWEAR.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: C equals W



Max D. Lederer Jr., Publisher
Laura Law, Chief Operating Officer
Lt. Col. Daniel “DQ” Quinlan, Europe commander
John Rodriguez, Europe chief of staff
Lt. Col. Lucas Crouch, Pacific commander
John Albaugh, Pacific chief of staff

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OPINION

The next president likely won’t give up Trump’s power

BY THEODORE R. JOHNSON
Special to The Washington Post

Since the new year began, the federal government has searched a journalist’s home, captured Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro in a military strike, threatened to seize Greenland and violate NATO commitments, and opened a criminal investigation into Federal Reserve Board Chair Jerome Powell. Congress has refused to exercise its war powers authority, and President Donald Trump brandished the Insurrection Act to quell protests in Minneapolis, where an Immigration and Customs Enforcement agent fatally shot a U.S. citizen.
And it’s only January; the winter is young.
The cracks you hear are not democracy fracturing but a republic thinning — where executive power expands and constitutional restraints weaken. In previous generations, any of these events might have defined an administration. But today, they share the same front page.
Fittingly, the most visible symbol of our thinning republic is ICE, whose actions across the country have become shorthand for uncountable federal power. Americans increasingly disapprove of Trump’s deportation policy and ICE’s tactics, according to polling from last week. But it’ll be another year before their votes can install a new Congress; that makes government feel less democratic. And the extraordinary deference the other branches give the White House makes government seem less representative. It’s a democratic republic in structure and process, but it governs with diminishing regard for the people and behaves like it’s afraid of the president — a republic in name only.
Despite it all, the government has held. There’s been no nation-halting constitutional crisis. No rupture dramatic enough to force a reset. It’s mostly business as usual for today’s branches: the executive flexing its authority, the legislature shrinking from its own and the judiciary shielding the presidency and loosening federal protections for the people. But the resulting imbalance makes it increasingly difficult to check an emboldened executive, especially when partisan loyalties trump most everything else. The greatest risk isn’t that the system will fail; it’s that its institutions — and the public — will grow accustomed to presidential excess.
The Trump administration’s hypocrisies and broken promises already go largely unchecked, suggesting the acclimation to a thinning republic is well underway. It justified the military operation in Venezuela by charging Maduro with conspiring to traffic cocaine while pardoning a former Honduran president serving time for trafficking at least 400 tons of cocaine. It calls itself a champion of states’ rights while threatening to occupy Minnesota with federal forces and targeting the state’s elected officials. It claims to be a defender of the First Amendment while using pepper spray on protesters and cowing the press. Even its professed love for meritocracy is undone by Trump’s acceptance of someone else’s medal for the Nobel Peace Prize.
These contradictions are just the tip of the iceberg: When reporters asked Trump about limits on his power, he answered, “My own morality. My own mind. It’s the only thing that can stop me.”
Democratic republics are not designed to rely on the personal restraint of presidents — doing so makes government capricious and, sometimes, dangerous. History makes the point clear. In 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt used unchecked executive authority to single out Japanese Americans, ordering their incarceration without due process in an operation upheld by the Supreme Court. Fifteen years later, President Dwight D. Eisenhower deployed federal troops to an Arkansas high school to enforce the Constitution, using executive power to ensure the state complied with the Supreme Court’s ruling against racial segregation. President Abraham Lincoln advanced emancipation by executive order, and

President Barack Obama used executive action to temporarily protect undocumented children from deportation. Conversely, Trump has used unilateral authority to target immigrants by ethnicity and national origin for removal.
These actions differ in purpose and consequence, but they share a common feature: People’s access to constitutional rights hinges on presidential whim. The risk is less a factor of who occupies the Oval Office and more that the system learns to accept executive overreach, whoever the president is. Each accommodation signals that limits are negotiable, each successive administration inherits the autonomy normalized by the previous ones.
For many Americans, this thinning is not new. Black Americans, Indigenous peoples, immigrants and those below the poverty line have long lived in a republic that is democratic on paper but unrepresentative in practice. Elections are held. Protests continue. Law exists. But leverage is thin and protections are uneven, contingent and fragile. Some encounter the federal government as an abstraction; others are greeted with its armed enforcement.
The expectation of a snapback — that a change in the White House will restore equilibrium — is misplaced. Thinned republics do not repair themselves without intervention. They require deliberate action: Congress reclaiming its powers, courts insisting on limits and executive authority held accountable by both, along with the people. Without that work, today’s precedents set the baseline for tomorrow, leaving the republic intact in structure but brittle in essence.
Ultimately, the danger is not that the republic will shatter overnight but that it cracks slowly, becoming habituated to an unchecked executive — a country skating on thin ice.

Theodore R. Johnson, a contributing columnist for The Washington Post and retired naval officer, writes on issues of race, democracy, and American identity. He’s the author of the book “If We Are Brave.”

five decades, the number of local, state and federal rules and procedural demands have exploded to the point that they undermine ingenuity and accomplishment and represent a very real barrier to getting done what needs to be done. Thirty years to build an airport? Two decades to get a new mine off the ground?
“How things are done has become far more important than what is done,” attorney Philip K. Howard wrote in his 1995 book “The Death of Common Sense.” Process “once existed to help humans make responsible decisions. Process now has become an end in itself.” And a means for activist groups to exploit the legal system to advance their own political agendas.
But is the tide finally turning? After their electoral losses in 2024, there has been a surge of interest among moderate Democrats — their “abundance” agenda — in reducing the obstacles that frequently stall out needed projects. Perhaps they’ve belatedly realized that not building housing in blue states leads people to move to red states. After the 2030 census, Democrats may find that their path to the presidency runs through lean-red states such as Arizona and Georgia.
Even if it’s politically motivated, a bipartisan push to cut red tape is vital to the nation moving forward and meeting future challenges. It’s time to make America build again.

Streamline US regulations that are obstacles to progress

The Las Vegas Review-Journal Editorial Board
Some of the country’s most pressing problems have a simple solution — remove the regulatory obstacles that slow progress.
One obvious example is housing. The best way to reduce the cost of housing isn’t rent control. It’s to construct 10 million new houses. When supply dramatically increases, prices fall.
There’s an increasing demand for lithium and rare earth minerals. The United States currently imports many of these vital elements. But the nation has significant untapped mineral deposits. Yet thanks to red tape, it can take more than two decades for a new mining project to come online.
These delays and hurdles are typical in virtually every infrastructure endeavor. The Southwest needs more water. Nevada needs access to oil from Eastern states. New infrastructure projects would help alleviate both problems.
In 2022, former President Joe Biden signed the Inflation Reduction Act. It authorized hundreds of billions of dollars toward new green projects. Billions went to build a slew of charging stations for electric vehicles. By the end of 2024, only a few dozen had been built.
Southern Nevada will probably need a new airport in the coming years. Officials here have been planning for this reality since 2006. They hope it will open in 2037.
For most of human history, the biggest problem in accomplishing tasks such as these was practical. Societies didn’t have the technical know-how or tools. Today, it’s an overactive administrative state. Projects, ranging from major undertakings on the scale of Hoover Dam to minor ones such as building a casita, face bureaucratic barriers. Two of the biggest are permitting and environmental reviews.
Consider a chip factory being built near Phoenix. There’s broad agreement that domestically producing cutting-edge computer chips is a national security imperative. Amkor Technology selected a spot to build an advanced semiconductor packaging plant. The facility would put together chips from the nearby Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Co. plant.
Local residents objected, and the company had to move locations. As The New York Times reported, TSMC faced challenges, too.
“Every step requires a permit, and after the permit is approved, it takes at least twice as long as in Taiwan,” TSMC’s chief executive and chairman, C.C. Wei, said last year. He added, “We ended up establishing 18,000 rules, which cost us \$35 million.”
This is not an anomaly. Over the past four or

SCOREBOARD

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Wednesday's men's scores	
EAST	
American 70, Colgate 66 Army 87, Bucknell 84, OT Boston College 65, Pittsburgh 62 Boston University 77, Lafayette 73, OT La Salle 67, Dayton 64 Navy 85, Holy Cross 68 Villanova 66, Georgetown 51 Virginia Tech 76, Syracuse 74	
SOUTH	
Davidson 68, Fordham 63 East Tennessee St. 67, Chattanooga 66 Florida Atlantic 79, Tulane 74 Kentucky 85, Texas 80 Liberty 76, Western Kentucky 69 Longwood 91, Gardner-Webb 56 Mercer 88, Western Carolina 76 North Carolina 91, Notre Dame 69 Presbyterian 87, Charleston Southern 83 Queens 87, North Alabama 62 Rhode Island 69, Richmond 68 The Citadel 77, Furman 75, OT Troy 83, Old Dominion 77, 2OT UNC Asheville 83, USC Upstate 69 UNC Greensboro 85, VMI 78 Winthrop 76, Radford 75 Wofford 88, Samford 78	
MIDWEST	
Bradley 75, Indiana State 68 Cleveland State 85, Wright State 79 Creighton 94, Xavier 93 Drake 101, Murray State 90 IU Indianapolis 103, Oakland 85 Illinois 89, Maryland 70 Illinois State 59, Northern Iowa 54 Nebraska 76, Washington 66 Purdue Fort Wayne 83, Detroit Mercy 76 South Dakota 68, Omaha 64 Valparaiso 69, Southern Illinois 63 Wichita State 77, East Carolina 60	
SOUTHWEST	
North Texas 81, UTSA 62 Sam Houston 93, Kennesaw State 87 Temple 69, Rice 65 Texas A&M 88, Mississippi State 68 Texas-Arlington 71, Tarleton State 64 Tulsa 83, Memphis 66	
FAR WEST	
Arizona 77, Cincinnati 51 California Baptist 73, Utah Tech 64 Gonzaga 84, Pepperdine 60 Grand Canyon 70, San Diego State 69 New Mexico 83, Fresno State 74 Northwestern 74, USC 68 Saint Mary's 81, Oregon State 51 San Diego 96, Washington State 92 Seattle 69, Loyola Marymount 59 Southern Utah 84, Utah Valley 70 West Virginia 75, Arizona State 63	
Men's Top 25 schedule	
Friday's games	
No. 3 Michigan (16-1) vs. Ohio St. (12-5) No. 24 Saint Louis (17-1) at St. Bonaven- ture (11-7)	
Saturday's games	
No. 1 Arizona (18-0) vs. V. Virginia (12-6) No. 2 UConn (18-1) vs. Villanova (14-4) No. 4 Purdue (17-1) vs. No. 11 Illinois (15-3) No. 5 Duke (17-1) vs. Wake Forest (11-7) No. 6 Houston (17-1) at No. 12 Texas Tech (14-4) No. 7 Nebraska (18-0) at Minnesota (10-8) No. 8 Gonzaga (19-1) vs. San Francisco (13-8) No. 9 Iowa State (16-2) at Oklahoma State (14-4) No. 10 Michigan State (16-2) vs. Mary- land (8-10) No. 13 BYU (16-2) vs. Utah (9-9) No. 14 Virginia (16-2) vs. No. 22 North Carolina (14-4) No. 15 Vanderbilt (16-2) at Mississippi State (10-8) No. 16 Florida (13-5) vs. Auburn (11-7) No. 17 Alabama (13-5) vs. Tennessee (12-6)	

No. 18 Clemson (16-3) at Ga Tech (11-8)
No. 19 Kansas (13-5) at Kansas St. (9-9)
No. 20 Arkansas (13-5) vs. LSU (13-5)
No. 21 Georgia (15-3) at Texas (11-7)
No. 23 Louisville (13-5) vs. Va Tech (14-5)

Wednesday's women's scores	
EAST	
American 44, Colgate 41 Army 64, Bucknell 44 Boston University 66, Lafayette 55 Dayton 75, Duquesne 58 George Mason 57, St. Bonaventure 48 Lehigh 67, Loyola (MD) 61, OT Marquette 56, St. John's 55 Navy 72, Holy Cross 58 Rhode Island 60, Davidson 53 Robert Morris 55, Youngstown State 40 Saint Louis 67, Fordham 57, OT West Virginia 53, Arizona State 43	
SOUTH	
High Point 74, Winthrop 60 Louisiana 69, Coastal Carolina 66 Presbyterian 50, Gardner-Webb 46 Radford 78, Longwood 63 UNC Asheville 57, USC Upstate 56 VCU 63, George Washington 60	
MIDWEST	
Ball State 78, UMass 60 Butler 73, DePaul 67 Central Michigan 74, Akron 53 IUPUI 75, Northern Kentucky 70 Iowa State 93, Cincinnati 68 Kansas State 69, Houston 65 Loyola Chicago 64, La Salle 60 Miami (OH) 76, Buffalo 52 North Dakota State 75, St. Thomas 66 Northern Illinois 64, Western Michigan 56 Ohio 82, Bowling Green 57 Purdue Fort Wayne 80, Cleveland State 70 South Dakota State 99, North Dakota 47 Wisconsin 63, Nebraska 60	
SOUTHWEST	
Arkansas State 84, Old Dominion 55 Baylor 73, UCF 48 Central Arkansas 87, West Georgia 66 Tarleton State 51, UT Arlington 37 Texas State 63, Appalachian State 49	
FAR WEST	
BYU 73, Texas Tech 61 Boise State 60, Fresno State 52 Colorado State 67, Grand Canyon 50 Denver 64, Kansas City 54 Minnesota 65, Oregon 60 San Jose State 60, Nevada 57 UCLA 96, Purdue 48 UNLV 78, Air Force 47 Washington 81, Penn State 65 Wyoming 63, Utah State 51	

Women's Top 25 schedule	
Saturday's games	
No. 9 TCU (18-2) at UCF (10-8) No. 19 Texas Tech (19-1) at Utah (14-5) No. 20 Princeton (16-1) at Brown (11-5) No. 22 West Virginia (15-4) at BYU (14-4) No. 24 Nebraska (14-4) vs. Illinois (15-4)	
Sunday's games	
No. 1 UConn (19-0) at Seton Hall (14-5) No. 2 South Carolina (19-1) vs. No. 5 Van- derbilt (19-0) No. 3 UCLA (17-1) at Northwestern (8-11) No. 4 Texas (19-2) at Oklahoma (11-9) No. 7 Michigan (15-3) vs. USC (11-7) No. 8 Louisville (18-3) vs. Boston College (4-17) No. 10 Iowa (16-2) vs. No. 12 Ohio State (17-2) No. 11 Kentucky (17-3) vs. Georgia (16-3) No. 14 Baylor (17-3) vs. Houston (6-12) No. 16 Oklahoma (14-4) at Auburn (13-6) No. 21 Duke (13-6) at Pittsburgh (8-12) No. 23 Alabama (17-3) vs. Mississippi State (15-5) No. 25 Washington (14-4) at Rutgers (9-9)	

S
Taylor Fritz (9), United States, def. Vit Prizmic, Czechia, 6-1, 6-4, 7-6 (4) Jannik Sinner (2), Italy, def. James Duckworth, Australia, 6-1, 6-4, 6-2

DEALS

Wednesday's transactions	
BASEBALL	
Major League Baseball	
American League	
BOSTON RED SOX — Acquired C Nate Baez from Minnesota in exchange for INF Tristan Gray. Agreed to terms with LHP Ranger Suárez on a five-year contract.	
MINNESOTA TWINS — Designated 3B Vi-dal Bruján for assignment.	
TORONTO BLUE JAYS — Agreed to terms with Cs Juan Caricote, Jose Gori, Samuel Orellana, Ayberson Ortega and Isay Veras, INFs Sebastian Casanova, Yariel Cordero, Frelian Flores, Alex Linares, Eiker Lothar, Gabriel Porras and Ruben Sanchez, OFs Deret Gonzalez, Michael Mesa, Luis Nunez and Aneudi Severino, RHPs Sahir De La Cruz, Abrahan Diaz, Fayon Dumorne, Evington Gascon, Yoenis Morales, Adrian Moreta, Manuel Parra, Franiel Severino and Alieski Torres and LHPs Elian Guzman and Celwin Hurkmans on minor league contracts.	
National League	
LOS ANGELES DODGERS — Agreed to terms with RF Kyle Tucker on a four-year contract. Designated CF Michael Siani for assignment.	
NEW YORK METS — Agreed to terms with RHP Luis Garcia on a one-year contract. Designated INF Tsung-Che Cheng for as-signment. Acquired RHP Freddy Peralta from Milwaukee in exchange for RHP Brandon Sproat and SS Jett Williams.	
Football	
National Football League	
ATLANTA FALCONS — Signed TE Joshua Simon to a reserve/futures contract.	
CHICAGO BEARS — Signed TE Qadir Is-mail to a reserve/futures contract.	
DENVER BRONCOS — Designated C Luke Wattenberg to return from injured re-serve.	
HOUSTON TEXANS — Signed TE Layne Pryor to a reserve/futures contract.	
LAS VEGAS RAIDERS — Signed LS Alex Ward to a reserve/futures contract.	
LOS ANGELES RAMS — Signed DB Nate Valcarcel to a reserve/futures contract.	
MIAMI DOLPHINS — Signed DE Seth Cole-man to a reserve/futures contract.	
MINNESOTA VIKINGS — Signed defens-ive coordinator Brian Flores to a contract extension.	
NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS — Designated DT Joshua Farmer to return from injured reserve.	
PHILADELPHIA EAGLES — Signed TE Ja-helm Bell to a reserve/futures contract.	
SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS — Signed OL Za-chary Thomas to a reserve/futures con-tract.	
SEATTLE SEAHAWKS — Designated RB George Holani to return from injured re-serve.	
HOCKEY	
National Hockey League	
BOSTON BRUINS — Sent D Billy Sweeney to Providence (AHL).	
BUFFALO SABRES — Signed F Josh Doan to a seven-year contract extension.	
COLORADO AVALANCHE — Recalled Ds Taylor Makar and Jack Ahcan from Colora-do (AHL).	
DALLAS STARS — Claimed D Vladislav Kolyachonok off waivers from Boston.	
NEW JERSEY DEVILS — Placed D Luke Hughes on long-term injured reserve. Re-called D Colton White from Utica (AHL).	
UTAH MAMMOTH — Recalled F Cameron Hebig from Tucson (AHL).	
VANCOUVER CANUCKS — Reinstated C Teddy Blueger from injured reserve. Sent F Arshdeep Bains to Abbotsford (AHL).	
WASHINGTON CAPITALS — Reinstated RW Tom Wilson from injured reserve. Sent F Ivan Miroshnichenko to Hershey (AHL).	
SOCCER	
Major League Soccer	
PHILADELPHIA UNION — Signed F Stas Korzeniowski to a one-year contract. Ac-quired D Kaiden Moore on loan from Atlan-ta United FC through 2026.	
SAN JOSE EARTHQUAKES — Loaned M Cruz Medina to Chivas (Mexico).	

AP SPORTLIGHT

Jan 23	
1979 — Willie Mays is named on 409 of 432 ballots and elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility.	
1993 — Mike Gartner of the Rangers sets an NHL record when he reaches 30 goals for the 14th consecutive season. Gartner, with three goals in New York's 8-3 victory over the Los Angeles Kings, surpasses Phil Esposito, Bobby Hull and Wayne Gretzky.	
2011 — Francesca Schiavone wins the longest women's match in Grand Slam history — a 6-4, 1-6, 16-14 victory over Svetla-na Kuznetsova that takes 4 hours, 44 min-utes at the Australian Open. Schiavone saves six match points, then converts on her third match point in the longest women's match at a major in terms of time in the Open era.	
2011 — Aaron Rodgers runs for a touch-down and makes a saving tackle, B.J. Raji returns an interception for a score and Sam Shields has two interceptions to lead the Packers to a 21-14 win over the Bears in the NFC championship game. Green Bay, with road wins in Philadelphia, Atlanta and Chicago, becomes the first NFC No. 6 seed to advance to the Super Bowl.	

PRO HOCKEY

NHL							
EASTERN CONFERENCE							
Atlantic Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Tampa Bay	48	31	13	4	66	170	121
Detroit	51	31	16	4	66	159	154
Montreal	50	28	15	7	63	172	167
Buffalo	49	27	17	5	59	163	153
Boston	50	28	20	2	58	166	156
Toronto	50	24	17	9	57	166	166
Florida	48	25	20	3	53	146	160
Ottawa	49	23	19	7	53	163	164
Metropolitan Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Carolina	50	31	15	4	66	173	145
Pittsburgh	49	24	14	11	59	160	148
N.Y. Islanders	50	27	18	5	59	146	141
Philadelphia	49	23	17	9	55	147	155
New Jersey	50	26	22	2	54	131	151
Washington	51	24	21	6	54	162	152
Columbus	49	22	20	7	51	149	164
N.Y. Rangers	51	21	24	6	48	138	159
WESTERN CONFERENCE							
Central Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Colorado	48	34	5	9	77	191	114
Dallas	50	28	13	9	65	169	141
Minnesota	51	28	14	9	65	164	147
Utah	50	26	20	4	56	158	139
Nashville	49	23	22	4	50	141	166
Chicago	49	20	22	7	47	135	154
Winnipeg	49	20	23	6	46	147	151
St. Louis	50	19	23	8	46	121	171
Pacific Division							
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Vegas	48	24	12	12	60	161	147
Edmonton	51	25	18	8	58	171	160
Anaheim	50	26	21	3	55	165	176
Seattle	49	22	18	9	53	137	148
San Jose	49	25	21	3	53	153	173
Los Angeles	49	20	16	13	53	129	139
Calgary	50	21	24	5	47	128	149
Vancouver	50	17	28	5	39	133	183
Note: Two points for a win, one point for overtime loss. Top three teams in each division and two wild cards per conference advance to playoffs.							
Tuesday's games							
Tampa Bay 4, San Jose 1 Ottawa 4, Columbus 1 Montreal 4, Minnesota 3 Dallas 6, Boston 2 Winnipeg 3, St. Louis 1 Buffalo 5, Nashville 3 New Jersey 2, Edmonton 1 Los Angeles 4, N.Y. Rangers 3							
Wednesday's games							
Detroit 2, Toronto 1, OT Anaheim 2, Colorado 1, SO Utah 5, Philadelphia 4, OT Pittsburgh 4, Calgary 1 Seattle 4, N.Y. Islanders 1 Vancouver 4, Washington 3							
Thursday's games							
Buffalo at Montreal Chicago at Carolina Dallas at Columbus Vegas at Boston Florida at Winnipeg Ottawa at Nashville Pittsburgh at Edmonton Detroit at Minnesota							
Friday's games							
Tampa Bay at Chicago Vegas at Toronto St. Louis at Dallas Philadelphia at Colorado Washington at Calgary Anaheim at Seattle N.Y. Rangers at San Jose New Jersey at Vancouver							
Saturday's games							
Buffalo at N.Y. Islanders Utah at Nashville Carolina at Ottawa Detroit at Winnipeg Montreal at Boston Tampa Bay at Columbus Los Angeles at St. Louis Florida at Minnesota Washington at Edmonton							
Scoring leaders							
Through Thursday							
	GP	G	A	PTS			
Connor McDavid, EDM	51	30	55	85			
Nathan MacKinnon, COL	48	38	47	85			
Nikita Kucherov, TB	44	24	49	73			
Macklin Celebrini, SJ	49	24	48	72			
Leon Draisaitl, EDM	48	25	42	67			
Mikko Rantanen, DAL	48	19	44	63			
Mark Scheifele, WPG	49	25	36	61			
David Pastrnak, BOS	45	20	40	60			
Martin Necas, COL	48	22	38	60			
Kirill Kaprizov, MIN	51	25	34	59			

PRO BASKETBALL

NBA					
EASTERN CONFERENCE					
Atlantic Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
Boston	27	16	.628	—	
New York	26	18	.591	1½	
Toronto	27	19	.587	1½	
Philadelphia	23	19	.548	3½	
Brooklyn	12	30	.286	14½	
Southeast Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
Orlando	23	19	.548	—	
Miami	23	21	.523	1	
Atlanta	21	25	.457	4	
Charlotte	16	28	.364	8	
Washington	10	32	.238	13	
Central Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
Detroit	32	10	.762	—	
Cleveland	25	20	.556	8½	
Chicago	21	22	.488	11½	
Milwaukee	18	25	.419	14½	
Indiana	10	35	.222	23½	
WESTERN CONFERENCE					
Southwest Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
San Antonio	30	14	.682	—	
Houston	26	15	.634	2½	
Memphis	18	24	.429	11	
Dallas	18	26	.409	12	
New Orleans	10	36	.217	21	
Northwest Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
Oklahoma City	37	8	.822	—	
Denver	29	15	.659	7½	
Minnesota	27	17	.614	9½	
Portland	22	22	.500	14½	
Utah	15	29	.341	21½	
Pacific Division					
	W	L	Pct	GB	
L.A. Lakers	26	16	.619	—	
Phoenix	27	17	.614	—	
Golden State	25	20	.556	2½	
L.A. Clippers	19	24	.442	7½	
Sacramento	12	33	.267	15½	
Tuesday's games					
Phoenix 116, Philadelphia 110					
Chicago 138, L.A. Clippers 110					
Houston 111, San Antonio 106					
Utah 127, Minnesota 122					
Miami 130, Sacramento 117					
Toronto 145, Golden State 127					
L.A. Lakers 115, Denver 107					
Wednesday's games					
Cleveland 94, Charlotte 87					
New York 120, Brooklyn 66					
Boston 119, Indiana 104					
Detroit 112, New Orleans 104					
Atlanta 124, Memphis 122					
Oklahoma City 122, Milwaukee 102					
Toronto 122, Sacramento 109					
Thursday's games					
Charlotte at Orlando					
Denver at Washington					
Houston at Philadelphia					
Golden State at Dallas					
Chicago at Minnesota					
San Antonio at Utah					
L.A. Lakers at L.A. Clippers					
Miami at Portland					
Friday's games					
Houston at Detroit					
Boston at Brooklyn					
Phoenix at Atlanta					
Sacramento at Cleveland					
Indiana at Oklahoma City					
New Orleans at Memphis					
Denver at Milwaukee					
Toronto at Portland					
Saturday's games					
New York at Philadelphia					
Golden State at Minnesota					
Washington at Charlotte					
Cleveland at Orlando					
Boston at Chicago					
L.A. Lakers at Dallas					
Miami at Utah					
Scoring leaders					
Through Wednesday					
	G	FG	FT	PTS	AVG
Doncic, LAL	34	357	307	1138	33.5
Gil-Alex., OKC	43	470	351	1374	32.0
Maxey, PHI	40	420	217	1199	30.0
Edwards, MIN	35	359	204	1046	29.9
Brown, BOS	40	436	234	1192	29.8
Jokic, DEN	32	339	203	948	29.6
Mitchell, CLE	41	409	210	1183	28.9
Brunson, NY	39	389	196	1087	27.9
Markkanen, UTA	33	314	198	922	27.9
Curry, GS	35	313	165	947	27.1

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Lack of ego fuels No. 24 Saint Louis

By WILL GRAVES
Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Robbie Avila knows it sounds like a cliché, and maybe it is. For Avila and everyone else on No. 24 Saint Louis, though, it also happens to be true.

“‘We have no egos on this team,” the perpetually goggled, occasionally googled — feel free to search “Larry Nerd,” “Cream Abdul-Jabbar” or “Steph Blurry” — senior center said after the Billikens improved to 18-1 with a harder-than-it-needed-to-be 81-77 win over Duquesne on Tuesday. “We know that if we are going to be successful, it’s going to take everybody.”

That’s something the 6-foot-10 big man with a shooting guard’s touch and a point guard’s vision understood when he sat down with Saint Louis coach Josh Schertz after his first season with the Billikens ended with a first-round loss in the NIT.

“Look,” Schertz told Avila, who followed his coach to Saint Louis after they guided Indiana State to the Missouri Valley Conference regular-season crown and the NIT finals in 2024. “This is our NIL (name, image and likeness) budget. This is what percentage I can give you and still have enough left over to put a team around you that’s talented enough to reach the NCAA Tournament.”

Avila, without skipping a beat, told Schertz, “I’m in.”

“‘It wasn’t a ‘Well I need more,’ or ‘I need to get paid this’ or ‘I could go leverage this or hold you hostage,’” Schertz said. “It’s just sets a great tone because really nobody else can complain when your best player ... is sacrificing minutes and shots.”

Just not victories. Never victories. And that’s kind of the point of all this, right?

Selfless approach

Sure, Avila has earned the right to “get his,” if that’s what he wanted. He averaged 17.3 points, 6.9 rebounds and 4.0 assists — the most by a post player in the country — a year ago. He could have told Schertz, “Give me the ball or I’m out of here.”

Only that’s not the way Avila, whom Schertz said values winning as much as any player he’s ever coached, is wired.

“‘The only thing I haven’t done so far in college is, you know, make it to March Madness,’” Avila said. “You know, we were just short sophomore year (at Indiana State). And so I’m going to do whatever it takes to make it that far.”

And if that means having the ball in his hands less and sitting on the bench more to provide opportunities for others on perhaps one of the deepest — and certainly



GENE J. PUSKAR/AP

Saint Louis center Robbie Avila is defended by Duquesne forward David Dixon in Pittsburgh on Tuesday. Though Avila’s numbers are down this season, he has been happy to hand the ball off more to teammates.

among the most democratic — rosters in the country, so be it.

Saint Louis is the only team in the nation with six players averaging at least 10 points. On Monday, junior guard Kellen Thames became the third different Billiken — none of them named “Avila” — to be named Atlantic 10 Player of the Week.

“‘If I need to score 20 one night, maybe that’s what it takes,’” said Avila, whose scoring average (12.8), rebounds (4.3) and minutes played (25.3) are all at their lowest since his freshman season at Indiana State in 2023. “But if I need to be a facilitator or a rebound or something like that, great. And that’s not just me. I think it’s the entire team that has that same type of mentality.”

A mentality that has carried Saint Louis back into the Top 25 for the first time in five years. The Billikens celebrated their return to the polls by fending off a late surge from Duquesne to extend their winning streak to 12. A victory Friday night at St. Bonaventure would match the 1993-94 team for the best 20-game start in the program’s 110-year history.

“‘We’re writing our own story,’” said Thames, a St. Louis native who is the lone remaining holdover from the 2023-24 team that went 13-20 and led to Travis Ford’s dismissal. “There’s a lot of hype around (us). ... The sky’s the limit for us.”

Thames knows how it usually goes these days. A new coach comes in and often wants to bring in his own guys. All it took was one meeting, however, for Thames to be put at ease.

“Schertz recruits personality,” said Thames, who is averaging 10.6 points and 5.3 rebounds a year after being limited to 17 games because of a mysterious and relentless cramping issue that threatened to end his career. “He brings in high-character people. Yeah, everybody wants to do well, but everybody here understands that when the team does well, it’s good for everyone.”

It helps that Schertz runs a system predicated not on set plays, but empowering his players to read the defense and make their own decisions on where the ball should go. It’s not a coincidence that Saint Louis leads the A-10 in assists and assist-to-turnover ratio, one of the reasons its scoring margin (25 points per game) is also tops in the country.

Meet me in Saint Louis

It’s an unselfish approach developed by a coach who is, by nature, unselfish. Schertz spent 13 years turning Lincoln Memorial in Harrogate, Tenn., into a Division II power. The Railsplitters reached the NCAA tournament nine times during his tenure, reaching the championship game twice.

Willingly sticking around a decade-plus in a town of 4,400 tucked hard against the Virginia border doesn’t exactly fit the “young coach on the rise” blueprint. Schertz, however, loved what he was building and was unwilling to jeopardize that for a Division I gig that was considered a step up in prestige only.

“‘They were always in situations where I would have made less money and been in a situation where I didn’t feel like it was a great job,’” he said. “I wasn’t going leave what I had.”

Indiana State finally lured Schertz to the next level in 2021, and it took all of three seasons for him to guide the Sycamores to just their third MVC regular-season title. A deep run in the NIT that made Avila a viral sensation followed before Saint Louis beckoned with an opportunity to take another step up the ladder.

Avila followed Schertz west, confident the success they enjoyed at Indiana State was repeatable. After a somewhat bumpy and injury-marred 2024-25, Schertz spent the offseason finding depth pieces in the portal.

The results have often looked like what the Billikens put on display Tuesday night. Avila, Dion Brown and Trey Green had 14 points. Brady Dunlap had 11. Thames chipped in 10 and Saint Louis survived despite a somewhat sloppy night in which it turned the ball over 16 times and

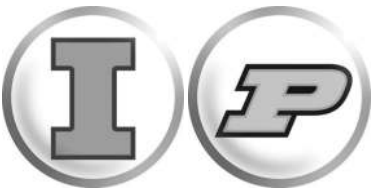
On AFN



Ole Miss (11-8)
at Kentucky (12-6)
AFN-Atlantic
6 p.m. Saturday CET
2 a.m. Sunday JKT



No. 22 North Carolina (14-4)
at No. 14 Virginia (16-2)
AFN-Atlantic
8 p.m. Saturday CET
4 a.m. Sunday JKT



No. 11 Illinois (15-3)
at No. 4 Purdue (17-2)
AFN-Sports2
9 p.m. Saturday CET
5 a.m. Sunday JKT



Wake Forest (11-8)
at No. 5 Duke (17-1)
AFN-Sports2
11:45 p.m. Saturday CET
7:45 a.m. Sunday JKT

almost frittered away a 17-point second-half lead.

In the end, however, the Billikens held on to improve to 6-0 in the A-10 and remain one of three unbeaten teams in the league. They’re well aware that the attention they’re generating will put a target on their back. That’s fine with them. They want the smoke.

“‘You want to be the team to catch,’” Avila said. “You don’t want to be the team that’s second or third, catching up to somebody. I’m an ultimate competitor. I want that target on my back because that means we’re going to get everybody’s best shot, and I think that’s the biggest compliment you can get as a team.”

WINTER OLYMPICS

Ski mountaineering makes Games debut

By PAT GRAHAM
Associated Press

The Milan Cortina Winter Olympics will debut a new sport next month: Ski mountaineering, which combines uphill sprinting (on boots and on skis) and downhill skiing. Although the sport on the global stage is relatively new, it does have roots dating to the late 19th century. Backcountry winter sports have grown in popularity and there is anecdotal evidence that they saw a surge in participation during the pandemic. Something to know about skimo: It's fast, with sprint races lasting about 3 minutes.

How it works

Ski mountaineering will have men's and women's sprint events along with a mixed relay. The race works like this: The racers sprint uphill with skins on the bottom of their skis. A skin is a strip of material that allows for traction going uphill. They then run a section in boots before putting their skis back on to traverse another uphill section. Once at the top, they take the skins off and race downhill. In the men's and women's sprint-event format, there will be a qualifying round where 18 racers qualify over three heats. The top three athletes in each heat advance to the semifinals along with three others based on time. In the semifinal rounds, two advance along with two more "lucky losers," which sets up the race for medals. The mixed relay consists of one female and one male racer from each country. Each will complete two ascents and descents. The female athlete begins, then tags her male teammate for the switch. The team that completes all four laps first wins gold.

Who to watch

The current ski mountaineering

sprint champions are Swiss racer Marianne Fatton and Spain's Oriol Cardona Coll. Another favorite is France's Emily Harrop, who won the test event at the venue last winter ahead of Fatton. Coll won the men's event ahead of Swiss racers Jon Kistler and Arno Lietha. In the mixed relay event, Coll partnered with Ana Alonso Rodriguez for the win. Harrop and Thibault Anselmet were second. Rodriguez said in October she was hit by a car while cycling, tearing knee ligaments, hoping to heal in time. The U.S. earned an Olympic spot in the mixed relay thanks to a World Cup victory from Anna Gibson and Cam Smith.

Venues and dates

The races will be staged in Bormio at the Stelvio Ski Center, with the men's and women's sprint events taking place on Feb. 19. The mixed relay competition takes place two days later.

Memorable moments

The medal winners will be the first in their sport at the Olympics.

Fun facts

There are penalties in the race for things such as disrespectful behavior, unsportsmanlike conduct, technical errors and equipment that's missing. The penalties range from a disqualification to adding time. The first ski mountaineering world championships were held in France in 2002. The sport is presided over by the International Ski Mountaineering Federation (ISMF), representing roughly 55 national federations across five continents. Ski mountaineering was part of the 2020 Winter Youth Olympics in Lausanne. The sport is proposed for the 2030 Winter Games in the French Alps.



ANTONIO CALANNI/AP

The United States' Kelly Wolf competes during the mixed relay at a Ski Mountaineering World Cup event last February. Ski Mountaineering combines uphill sprinting (on boots and on skis) and downhill skiing.



RON WINSETT/ISMF

Anna Gibson competes during a World Cup ski mountaineering mixed team relay in Utah on Dec. 6. She was an accomplished trail runner and gave the sport a try as it becomes an Olympic event.

Gibson tried new sport and earned spot in Milan

By PAT GRAHAM
Associated Press

Several months ago, Anna Gibson was mostly an elite trail runner. Like, sponsored-by-a-shoe-company, soon-to-be world bronze medalist sort of elite. A detour to another endeavor was the last thing on her agenda. Until, that is, a persuasive conversation. It was at a trail race in June that her friend Cameron Smith suggested partnering in an effort to make the U.S. mixed relay team in the newest Olympic sport of ski mountaineering (skimo), which combines uphill skiing with downhill racing.

Given her background — Alpine ski racer/cross-country skier/recreational ski mountaineer/track standout/trail runner extraordinaire — the crossover seemed logical for the 26-year-old from Jackson Hole, Wyo., even if the timing seemed short. The newcomer proved to be a fast learner: In her very first World Cup event, Gibson and Smith won the race and secured a spot at the Milan Cortina Games. "She looked," Sarah Cookler, the head of sport for USA Skimo said, "like a seasoned pro."

The natural

Gibson may be new to competitive ski-mountaineering, but not the sport where skiers ascend the terrain — on skis and on foot — before descending at top speed. Her mom and dad used to race in an annual skimo event in Wyoming. As a kid, she used to beg her parents to let her traverse up the mountain before school.

"I did that having no idea it would be something I actually pursued," Gibson said.

If you had told the 10-year-old version of Gibson she was going to make the Olympics one day, she would've thought it would be in ski racing. She was a slalom specialist.

"Ultimately, what made me stop Alpine racing was just that I didn't love the speed events and I was realizing that I was more of an endurance athlete," Gibson explained.

If you had told the 15-year-old version of Gibson she'd be an Olympian, she would have guessed cross-country skiing or track.

She was a cross-country skiing junior national champion in 2017. She also was a two-time Gatorade cross country runner of the year for Wyoming before running at Brown University and the University of Washington.

Eventually, Gibson gravitated toward trail running, with running apparel company Brooks becoming a sponsor. She finished third in the vertical uphill race at the world mountain and trail running championships in Spain last fall.

"I've gone through a lot of iterations," she said, "but I have always wanted to be an Olympian."

The conversation

Smith, already a fixture on the skimo scene, knew Gibson was a world-class uphill runner. He also knew she had an extensive skiing background.

So he floated the idea of teaming up in ski mountaineering.

"He was like, 'Here's the deal: We're on the edge of making the

Olympics and you could contribute,'" Gibson recounted. "I was just standing there like, 'OK, the answer is not no, but I'm not quite ready to commit yet.'"

A week later, she agreed.

In the mixed relay, each team has one female and one male, who alternate completing four laps that contain ascents and descents.

Gibson wasn't concerned about the skiing portion. She figured she could get up to speed in a hurry. But she was anxious over the tiny details in the transition areas that can add up to crucial seconds. Like quickly putting the skins on the bottom of her skis to ascend, and taking them back off for the downhill.

She practiced in her yard — inside, too, on a yoga mat — over and over to become more proficient. In August, she attended a team training camp in Utah and a month later another in Italy. She was named to the U.S. team.

Making the team

The stakes were high when she was paired with Smith for a World Cup race in Utah early last month. Finish ahead of Canada and earn an Olympic spot. Finish behind Canada and Canada gets the spot.

"I had never even considered winning the race as the outcome," said Gibson, who will have several family members and friends making the trip to Italy. "We were just trying to beat Canada and make it to the Olympics. There was also an element of just full on disbelief because it just felt so unreal what we had just done."

It also showed them they could compete with the best in skimo.

WINTER OLYMPICS

North American rivals set to display power in Milan

By **STEPHEN WHYNO**
Associated Press

One more goal. That's how close the U.S. was to beating Canada in the final at the 2010 Vancouver Olympics before losing in overtime.

One more goal. That's how close the U.S. was from tying Canada in the semifinals at the 2014 Sochi Olympics before losing 1-0.

One more goal. That's how close the U.S. was to beating Canada in the final at the 4 Nations Face-Off a year ago before losing in overtime.

"Canada won, right?" U.S. center Jack Eichel said. "So, they're obviously on top."

Canada has won every major international men's hockey tournament featuring a the NHL's best players over the past 16 years, a run that includes the 2016 World Cup of Hockey. With Sidney Crosby, Connor McDavid, Nathan MacKinnon and Cale Makar joining forces for the first time on the same sheet of ice, the nation known as the cradle of the sport goes into the Milan Cortina Olympics next month as the gold medal favorite.

"It's always been Canada," longtime U.S. star Patrick Kane said.

The U.S. has been closing ground for decades, and the fight-filled 4 Nations put the border rivalry in the spotlight while ramping up expectations that the Games will be another showcase of North American dominance.

"The men haven't been able to get over that hump and defeat Canada and win a gold medal, and I think this is their best chance to do it," said retired U.S. winger T.J. Oshie, whose shootout heroics against host Russia in Sochi is one of the most memorable Olympic moments in history. "This is the best U.S.A. team that I've seen. And if they can come together like they did in the 4 Nations, I think that for the first time, I'd say it's a pretty fair fight going into it."

European powerhouses Sweden and Finland, the latter being the defending Olympic champion, will be in the mix. But in a tournament without the Russians, the U.S. and Canada look like the teams to beat. BetMGM Sportsbook set Canada as a 5-4 favorite, ahead of the U.S. at just over 2-1.

Canada won the 4 Nations on McDavid's goal in



Canada, bottom, and United States, top, players shake hands following an overtime period of the 4 Nations Face-Off championship hockey game 2025 in Boston.

Boston last February and has the deepest, most talented forward group of any of the 12 countries involved. That includes 19-year-old Macklin Celebrini, who was on the couch cheering last February while in awe of the quality of play on display.

"That was the best hockey I've ever watched," Celebrini said. "Just the pace, the amount of skill, physicality — all of it combined is the best."

It could be even faster in Milan, and not only because the rinks are more than 3 feet shorter than NHL-regulation length.

"That'll probably make the game a lot tighter, too,"

Makar said. "The Olympics will be a completely different kind of thing, almost even more amplified."

The U.S. has hopes for its first men's hockey gold medal at the Olympics since the 1980 "Miracle on Ice" team. That's not a pipe dream, as the U.S. National Team Development Program and grassroots growth of the sport has closed the gap on Canada.

"The talent pool and the level of the players of the Americans now I think is as high as it's ever been,"

Kane said. "That's kind of how we felt in 2010, 2014, (and it) keeps getting better."

The teams split at the 4 Nations, games that U.S. center Jack Hughes described as crazy and just a taste of what he and other players are in for in Milan.

"Once you see the level of competition at the 4 Nations, you're so hungry to get back to that and you want to be in the Olympics so bad just because the level of hockey was so high," said Hughes, who is set to play with older brother Quinn at the Games.

Oshie grew up in Warroad, Minn., a 20-minute drive from the Canadian border. He described the simmering rivalry as hatred: "For a long time, they were just almost too good to get past."

Maybe not anymore, particularly given Canada's seeming vulnerability in goal and the U.S. strength at hockey's most important position. But there is no guarantee these teams face off in single-elimination play at the Olympics, so USA Hockey general manager Bill Guerin insists he and his staff did not construct a roster just to beat Canada.

"We built the best team possible," Guerin said. "We did that with us in mind. We're worried about us, not anybody else."



JESSIE ALCHEN/AP

Dallas Stars left wing Jason Robertson is one of several players on standby in the event that an American suffers an injury.

US, Canada have stars on standby if needed as injury replacements

By **STEPHEN WHYNO**
Associated Press

While Jason Robertson and Adam Fox did not make the U.S. Olympic hockey roster, and Sam Bennett and Mark Scheifele were not picked to play for Canada, that doesn't necessarily mean none of those players will be in Milan next month.

USA Hockey and Hockey Canada each has a group of players on standby who could get a call in the event of injuries.

"There's a number of players that we've identified that can fill in if need be," U.S. general manager Bill Guerin said Friday. "There is a plan in place."

Like Guerin, Canada GM Doug Armstrong did not want to reveal how many players are on the waitlist, other than to say all were asked if they wanted to remain in consideration and told they'd need to keep doing Olympic drug-testing.

"It's not one player out, one player in," Armstrong said Thursday. "What we're going to do is say: 'If this style of player gets hurt, we'll have a list of players to look at it. If this style of player, gets hurt, we'll have a list of players to look at.' That list, it's long but not too long because there's different style of players that we want."

United States

Robertson leads all U.S. NHL players in points, and he has helped Dallas reach three consecutive Western Conference finals. Fellow forwards Alex DeBrincat and Cole Caufield are also elite goal scorers.

Fox and former New York Rangers teammate Chris Kreider were the only U.S. players who took part in the 4 Nations Face-Off

early last year who are not reprising their roles in Italy. The U.S. picked five left-handed-shooting defensemen and just three righties, so Fox would seem to be next in line over someone such as undersized Lane Hutsen or New Jersey's Luke Hughes.

In net, there are a handful of options if anything happens to Connor Hellebuyck, Jake Oettinger or Jeremy Swayman. One of Chicago's Spencer Knight, Vancouver's Thatcher Demko and Seattle's Joey Daccord figure to be on speed dial just in case.

Canada

Bennett, a back-to-back Stanley Cup champion with Florida, Travis Konecny and Seth Jarvis are the only skaters from Canada's 4 Nations-winning roster not chosen for Milan. Bennett and Scheifele, a point-a-game player for Winnipeg, were perhaps the most surprising omissions, with 19-year-old Macklin Celebrini, Nick Suzuki and Tom Wilson making it as newcomers.

Canada brought back its entire 4 Nations blue line, though a standout rookie made that decision more difficult than expected. Matthew Schaefer was the top pick in the draft last year and has played so well for the New York Islanders in his first season in the league that he forced himself into the mix.

Goaltending is undoubtedly Canada's biggest unknown, though Jordan Binnington's big-game ability has him penciled in as the starter, with Logan Thompson and Darcy Kuemper also on the roster. Colorado's Mackenzie Blackwood and Scott Wedgewood have excelled for the top team in the NHL so far, which would make both of them slam dunk potential replacements.

WINTER OLYMPICS

Milan may mark end for Nordic combined

Future uncertain amid push to add women

By BRIAN MELLEY
Associated Press

Nordic combined, the only Olympic sport that bars women from competition, dates to the original Winter Games but may not survive beyond the Milan Cortina competition.

The sport that fuses ski jumping with cross-country skiing is in jeopardy because it doesn't have a big following and a small number of countries dominate the podium. If the sport is scrapped, it would be a blow not just to the male athletes, but to the many women who compete internationally who have pushed for inclusion.

The International Olympic Committee was due to decide last year if the sport would be included in the 2030 French Alps Games, but it has now deferred that decision until the spring.

How it works

Combine the daredevil thrill of ski jumping with a physically exhausting cross-country ski race and you get a two-day event unlike any other that was conceived in Norway in the late 1800s to determine the best all-around skier. The athlete who leads after the ski jumping contest starts the cross-country race in the front of the pack. His head start is calculated by converting ski jumping points into seconds. The rest of the pack starts in their order of finish based on the same time handicap. Then it's a 10-kilometer (about 6.2 miles) race to the finish line for gold.

The team event includes four teammates who jump and then join forces in a cross-country ski relay race.

Who to watch

Following the retirements of Norwegian stars Jarl Magnus Riiber, the sport's most dominant competitor, and Jørgen Graabak, the most successful Olympic Nordic combined skier of all time, the field is wide open. Early season standouts in the 2025-2026 World Cup are Austria's Johannes Lamparter and Germany's Julian Schmid.

Venues and dates

The Nordic combined competition runs from Feb. 11-19. The contests are held in two locations: the Predazzo Ski Jumping Stadium and the Tesero Cross-Country Skiing Stadium. Both are in the Val di Fiemme area of the Dolomite mountains.

Memorable moments

Norway and Finland dominated the Olympics until 1960 when Georg Thoma of West Germany won the gold medal in the individual competition in Squaw Valley. The United States first made it to podium in 2010 in Vancouver when Johnny Spillane won the silver medal on the normal hill. His teammate, Bill Demong, won the gold on the large hill, where Spillane finished second. The two also shared the silver medal in the team event. In Beijing four years ago, Riiber was in first place after the jumping round and got a 44-second head



MATTHIAS SCHRADER/AP

Julian Schmid, of Germany, soars through the air during the Nordic combined competition at the world Championships last March. Retirements have made Schmid one of the favorites in Milan.



HENDRIK SCHMIDT/AP

Austria's Johannes Lamparter, right, competes in the cross country portion of a World Cup Nordic combined event on Jan. 18.

start in the cross-country ski race, but took a wrong turn a quarter of the way, costing him a medal. Graabak won gold and Riiber finished eighth.

Fun facts

In the early days of the sport, the competition began with the cross-country ski race, but the order was reversed because the time advantages were often too large for jumpers to overcome. Scoring was changed in 1988 to convert points from jumping into time handicaps in the cross-country race. Rather than taking hours to compute the outcome of the two events, it transformed the final event into an exciting race with a clear winner.

Ski jumping overshadowed by Norwegian cheating scandal

By BRIAN MELLEY
Associated Press

Ski jumping is no fashion contest, but there will be nearly as much scrutiny on what jumpers wear at the Winter Olympics as the form of their flight and the distance they travel. A scandal from last year's world championships in which the Norwegian team was caught doctoring their jumping suits to get a competitive edge has cast a shadow over the sport that will see new contests added this year at the Milan Cortina Games.

Norway's Marius Lindvik, a gold medalist at the 2022 Beijing Games, was disqualified with a teammate at the world championships in March and suspended for three months after team leaders admitted tampering with their suits. Lindvik, who was stripped of his second-place finish, and Johann Forfang said they weren't aware of the alterations that stifened the fabric to give them more lift to fly farther. The scandal was resolved when three team officials were banned for 18 months Jan. 15. Head coach Magnus Brevik, assistant coach Thomas Lobben and staff member Adrian Livelten were suspended for the pe-



Lindvik

riod requested by the International Ski and Snowboard Federation (FIS) which announced the verdicts.

Regulators added new measures this season before the Milan Cortina Winter Games to ensure all competitors play by the same rules.

FIS has modified its rules and brought in a coordinator to oversee screening of gear and hired former Austrian ski jumper Mathias Hafele to work as equipment expert.

How it works

Ski jumping was one of six sports at the first Winter Olympics in 1924 and has featured ever since, evolving to add women's events and seeing technology influence the development of technique, skis, bindings and clothing. The sport dates to the 1800s in Norway, which has been the dominant nation in Olympic competition that now sees daredevils speeding up to nearly 60 mph down a steep ramp and launching themselves into the air to fly farther than the length of an American football field.

Skiers are judged not just on distance, but also on their technique in flight and their landing style. There are two jumps: a large hill and a shorter normal hill. Women who began competing in 2014 on the normal hill will also compete this year in the bigger hill for the first time. There is a team event for men and a mixed team event.

Who to watch

All eyes will be on the Norwegian team to see how they do in the aftermath of the scandal, though Lindvik and others were not among top contenders early in the World Cup season. A story likely to capture attention is of two Slovenian siblings. Nika Prevc won the world championships on both hills last year and brother, Domen Prevc, won on the large hill. Their older brother, Peter Prevc, won four Olympic medals before retiring.

Venues and dates

Competition at the Predazzo Olympic Ski Jumping Hill in Val di Fiemme begins Feb. 7 with the women's normal hill contest and concludes Feb. 16 with the men's super team event.

The scenic setting in the heart of the Dolomites — a UNESCO World Heritage Site — is dubbed the Valley of Harmony for the acoustic properties of the spruce trees that violin maker Antonio Stradivari and other luthiers have used to craft high-quality musical instruments.

Memorable moments

While ski jumping is most popular in northern Europe, most sport fans and casual observers would have better luck naming a last-place finisher than a champ. Michael "Eddie the Eagle" Edwards stole the show at the 1988 Calgary Games as the first British athlete to compete in Olympic ski jumping. He finished at the bottom but succeeded in winning the hearts of fans for his determination to compete — a feat portrayed in a 2016 feature film.

Fun facts

The standard jumping technique to splay skis in a V-formation was once ridiculed. Jan Boklöv of Sweden lost valuable style points in the mid-1980s until it became clear he was flying farther than his foes. Judging standards were later changed as it became widely adopted and Boklöv went on to capture the overall World Cup title in 1989.

MLB/AUSTRALIAN OPEN

Mets stay active with trade for Brewers pitcher Peralta

By Mike Fitzpatrick
Associated Press

NEW YORK — The active New York Mets acquired ace pitcher Freddy Peralta and right-hander Tobias Myers from the Brewers on Wednesday night in a trade that sent two prized young players to Milwaukee.

The Brewers received pitcher Brandon Sproat and minor league infielder/outfielder Jett Williams. Both were rated among the game’s top 100 prospects by Baseball America.

Peralta gives the new-look Mets a frontline starter after their rotation faltered in the second half of a hugely disappointing 2025 season. The move came hours after New York formally introduced free agent addition Bo Bichette at a Citi Field news conference, and one night after the team obtained talented center fielder Luis Robert Jr. in a trade with the Chicago White Sox.

“Acquiring Freddy adds another established starter to help lead our rotation,” Mets president of baseball operations David Stearns said in a statement. “Throughout the offseason, we sought to complement our rotation with another front-end pitcher, and we’re thrilled we are able to bring Freddy to the Mets.”

Peralta went 17-6 with a 2.70 ERA in 33 starts last season, when he led the National League in wins and finished fifth in Cy Young Award voting. He struck out 204 batters in 176⅓ innings and earned his second All-Star selection.

The 29-year-old Peralta hasn’t been on the injured list since 2022, when the right-hander was sidelined by a strained lat and later elbow inflammation. He is set to make \$8 million this season and can become a free agent following the World Series. He is the latest



Starting pitcher Freddy Peralta posted a 17-6 record for the Milwaukee Brewers last year with a 2.70 ERA and 204 strikeouts.

former Milwaukee player acquired by Stearns, who ran the Brewers’ front office from 2015-23.

“He obviously knows the players well. Look, he and I have worked very well together for many, many years. I obviously care about him a lot,” Milwaukee president of baseball operations Matt Arnold said. “Today’s his anniversary and I was at his wedding. We go back a long way. I think I might have ruined his anniversary dinner. Look, he’s a dear friend. Hopefully, again, these are the types of trades that work out for both guys.”

Myers, 27, was 9-6 with a 3.00

ERA in 25 starts and two relief appearances as a rookie in 2024 before going 1-2 with a 3.55 ERA in six starts and 16 relief outings last year as the Brewers won their third consecutive division title and advanced to the NL Championship Series.

“Over the past two seasons, Tobias has become an extremely valuable major league pitcher,” Stearns said.

Arnold said Sproat and Williams will compete for spots on the opening-day roster.

The 25-year-old Sproat made his major league debut in September and went 0-2 with a 4.79 ERA in four starts for New York, which selected him in the second round of the 2023 amateur draft from the University of Florida. He was rated the fifth-best prospect in the Mets’ system by MLB.com.

“He’s a guy we’ve liked going back to the draft. He’s major-league ready. He’s going to compete for a spot in our rotation,” Arnold said. “This guy has incredible stuff. Very high octane, really good movement on his four-seamer and two-seamer. Really good secondary weapons and a really good changeup.”

The 5-foot-7 Williams, 22, batted .261 with 17 homers, 34 doubles and 52 RBIs in 130 games combined at Double-A Binghamton and Triple-A Syracuse last year. He was drafted No. 14 overall by New York in 2022 out of high school in Texas and was its third-rated prospect, according to MLB.com.

“This kid’s a gamer. He’s not that big, but I can tell you he plays with a ton of heart and he’s got incredible tools,” Arnold said. “He’s one of the fastest players in the minor leagues. I think his versatility is something that’s going to fit very, very well for this team.”



Novak Djokovic waves to the crowd after defeating Francesco Maestrelli in their second-round match at the Australian Open on Thursday.

Djokovic closes in on 400 Grand Slam match wins; Wawrinka makes history

By John Pye
Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Novak Djokovic and Stan Wawrinka made it a day for the ages at the Australian Open.

Djokovic improved to 399 wins in Grand Slam matches with a 6-3, 6-2, 6-2 victory over Francesco Maestrelli on Thursday, making the 38-year-old, 24-time major winner just one shy of becoming the first player ever to 400.

He’s aiming to win an unprecedented 25th Grand Slam title. And if he does, he’ll beat Ken Rosewall’s record (aged 37 in 1972) as the oldest man in the Open era to win a major singles championship.

Wawrinka, at 40 years, 310 days, became the first man over 40 to reach the third round of a major since Rosewall in 1978. It took a 4½-hour 4-6, 6-3, 3-6, 7-5, 7-6 (3) comeback victory over 21-year-old qualifier Arthur Gea. That’s the longest match of the 2026 tournament so far.

Wawrinka, who is retiring at the end of the year, will next face No. 9 Taylor Fritz.

Before then, he told the crowd at John Cain Arena: “I think I’ll pick up a beer. I deserve one!”

His was one of three high-profile matches that finished around the same time, with Jannik Sinner beating James Duckworth 6-1, 6-4, 6-2 on Rod Laver Arena.

Day and night

With Sinner facing an Australian wild card, he got the prime-time night slot and bumped 10-time Australian Open winner Djokovic into the afternoon session.

That didn’t bother Djokovic as much as the dropped service game in the third set — his first of the tournament. It stung Djokovic, who broke the Italian qualifier at love in the next game and finished

on an eight-point roll.

He said he took extra time out in the offseason and fine-tuned some skills as he chases his biggest goals.

“When I have more time, then I obviously try to look at my game and different elements that I can really improve. Otherwise, what’s the point?” he said. “That’s the kind of mentality I try to nurture. It’s been allowing to me play at the highest level at this age.”

Iga Swiatek beat Marie Bouzkova 6-2, 6-3 and later said she’s been trying to take lessons from Djokovic’s attitude to sustained success and longevity.

“It’s good to look at people like that and find inspiration,” the six-time major winner said. “For sure I’ve got to learn to appreciate every single match,” she said.

Keys to success

Defending champion Madison Keys was down a double break in the second set before rallying to beat Ashlyn Krueger 6-1, 7-5 and advancing to a third-round match against former No. 1 Karolina Plíšková.

Melbourne is where Keys made her Grand Slam breakthrough 12 months ago and since her return, people have been asking her how confident she is about retaining the Daphne Akhurst Memorial Cup.

“Whether or not I do repeat it,” she said, “I still get to keep Daphne at home!”

In that tough quarter of the draw, No. 4 Amanda Anisimova fended off doubles champion Katerina Siniakova 6-1, 6-4 and sixth-seeded Jessica Pegula won 6-0, 6-2 over McCartney Kessler, her doubles partner.

No. 5 Elena Rybakina advanced over Varvara Gracheva and No. 10 Belinda Bencic was ousted by Nikola Bartunkova.

Source: Bellinger staying with Yankees

By Ronald Blum
Associated Press

Cody Bellinger became the last of the top free-agent hitters to reach a deal, agreeing Wednesday to stay with the New York Yankees for a \$162.5 million, five-year contract, a person familiar with the negotiations told The Associated Press.

The person spoke on the condition of anonymity because the agreement was subject to a successful physical.

Bellinger gets a \$20 million signing bonus payable April 1, \$32.5 million in the first two seasons, \$25.8 million in the next two and \$25.9 million in 2030. He also has a full no-trade provision.

Bellinger has the right to opt out after the 2027 or 2028 seasons to become a free agent again, but if there is a work stoppage that leads to no games being played in 2027, the agreement specifies the opt outs will shift to after the 2027 and 2028 seasons.



Bellinger

A two-time All-Star acquired by the Yankees from the Chicago Cubs in December 2024, Bellinger hit .272 with 29 homers and 98 RBIs last year — including .302 with 18 homers and 55 RBIs at Yankee Stadium. A left-handed hitter, he played in 149 games in the outfield and seven at first base in his first season since 2022 without a stint on the injured list.

Voted the 2017 National League Rookie of the Year and 2019 NL MVP, Bellinger has a .261 average with 225 homers and 695 RBIs in eight seasons with the Los Angeles Dodgers (2018-22), Cubs (2023-24) and New York.

He earned \$57.5 million from the \$80 million, three-year contract he reached with Chicago before the 2024 season. Bellinger declined a \$25 million option for 2026 in favor of a \$5 million buyout.

NFL

Hunt: Adams at forefront of prominent Rams players seeking Super Bowl debut

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major contributions to that Super Bowl title run and also play extensively for the current team. Williams left and returned to the Rams, as did linebacker Troy Reeder and center Coleman Shelton.

Reeder now plays mostly special teams, while Shelton and starting left tackle Alaric Jackson were backups in 2021. Receiver Tutu Atwell was injured as a rookie and right tackle Rob Havenstein is injured now.

But nobody has been waiting longer than Adams for his first shot at a championship ring. He is one of the most consistent receivers of his generation, posting eight seasons with at least 997 yards while moving up to 26th in NFL history with 12,633 yards.

He almost certainly would have recorded another 1,000-yard season with LA, but Adams injured his hamstring in December. The Rams fell out of the No. 1 overall seed in the NFC during his three-game absence to close the regular season, most notably blowing a 16-point lead in the fourth quarter in Seattle.

Adams has been vocal about the rejuvenating effect of working with Stafford and McVay, but he also knows his career is closer to its end than its beginning. After struggling along with his entire offense during an OT victory last week at Chicago, he's hoping to play a major role in what's likely to be a career-defining game against the Seahawks.



Los Angeles Rams (14-5)
at Seattle Seahawks (15-3)
NFC Championship
AFN-Sports
12:30 a.m. Monday CET
8:30 a.m. Monday JKT

"I started off with a great experience with the Packers and didn't have anything else to compare it to, so you kind of, in a sense, take it for granted," Adams said. "I don't think I was taking it for granted, but you go to a situation where you struggle a little bit more in Vegas, and I was blessed to still have a lot of great football there and a lot of great times, but in terms of winning and playing meaningful games, obviously we weren't in that position."

"Being back in a position where you're with a great team and a great situation, you definitely have a greater appreciation for times like this, for sure."

Notes: Los Angeles only held a walkthrough practice at its training complex. ... LB Byron Young (knee soreness) wouldn't have practiced if the Rams had a full workout, McVay said. But Young, LA's sacks leader, is still expected to play Sunday. ... S Quentin Lake stayed home with an illness.



MARK J. TERRILL/AP

Los Angeles wide receivers Puka Nacua, left, and Davante Adams are both seeking their Super Bowl debut, with only a handful of players remaining from the Rams' 2022 championship.



BART YOUNG/AP

Broncos running back J.K. Dobbins (27) is hoping to return after suffering a Lisfranc injury to his left foot Nov. 6 that required surgery. Dobbins rushed for 772 yards and four touchdowns in 10 games this season.

Dobbins returns to Broncos practice as Stidham steps in

BY ARNIE STAPLETON
Associated Press

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. — Denver's offensive backfield looked a whole lot different Wednesday when Jarrett Stidham stepped in at quarterback for injured starter Bo Nix, and running back J.K. Dobbins returned to practice for the first time since foot surgery two months ago.

Stidham will get his first start in two years Sunday when the Broncos (15-3) host New England (16-3) in the AFC championship game.

"We all want to go out there and make him proud," Stidham said of Nix, who's recovering back in Alabama from surgery on his right ankle Tuesday.

What's uncertain is whether Stidham will be handing off to Dobbins, but the veteran looked good in the portion of practice open to reporters as he ran with no limp or any apparent restrictions. He was listed as limited on the practice report.

"It would be a great boost if he's healthy," right tackle Mike McGlinchey said.

Dobbins sustained a Lisfranc injury to his left foot against Las Vegas on Nov. 6 that required surgery. In 10 games, he rushed for 772 yards and four touchdowns while averaging 5 yards a carry.

In the games Dobbins played, Denver averaged 129 yards rushing per game. In the eight games since he got hurt, they've averaged a little more than 100 yards a game. Their average per carry has dipped from 4.8 yards to 3.8 yards.

Stidham steps in for Nix, who broke his right ankle on Denver's



New England Patriots (16-3)
at Denver Broncos (15-3)
AFC Championship
AFN-Sports
9 p.m. Sunday CET
5 a.m. Monday JKT

game-winning drive in overtime against Buffalo on Saturday. He underwent surgery Tuesday in Alabama.

"It was a bummer, I feel for him, just the work that he put in consistently and having the season end like this," cornerback Pat Surtain II said. "You know, after the game emotions running high and then when I heard that news it felt like my energy was drained a little bit. I'm praying for a speedy recovery, but I'm looking forward to this week's matchup and seeing what Stiddy got."

Except for the preseason, Stidham hasn't thrown a single pass since Nix beat him out for the starting job in 2024, after which Stidham insisted he was a starting-caliber NFL QB.

Sunday will mark the fifth career start for the sixth-year pro.

"He's been waiting for this moment the entirety of his career," McGlinchey said. "He's more prepared than anybody would be in this situation. And he can ball. He can flat-out play quarterback and we've seen it every single day at

practice, we've seen it in training camp, we've seen it in the preseason.

"We're lucky to have him and we're lucky that our team and our coaching staff and our front office invest in every situation that could possibly come up on a football field, because not everybody has a quarterback waiting in the wings as talented as Jarrett."

The Patriots, in fact, tried to lure him back to New England last spring before he chose to sign a two-year, \$12 million deal to stay with the Broncos.

A fourth-round draft pick by New England out of Auburn in 2019, Stidham won the backup job to Tom Brady that year. When offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels left the Patriots to become Las Vegas' head coach, he took Stidham with him.

Stidham made two starts in 2022 for the Raiders after Derek Carr was benched. He held his own against San Francisco and Kansas City, which would meet up in the Super Bowl after that season, completing 45 of 70 passes for 584 yards with four touchdowns and three interceptions. He also rushed 14 times for 84 yards.

Broncos coach Sean Payton repeated his belief Wednesday that Stidham was better than some starting quarterbacks around the league, and Surtain said he certainly carries himself like a starter.

"He's got a type of mojo with him, a type of confidence with him that you rarely see" in a backup, Surtain said. "I'm excited for him for this opportunity. He's got everything it takes to shine on this level."

SPORTS



Staying active

Mets keep adding, trade for Brewers ace Peralta » **MLB, Page 46**



JACOB KUPFERMAN/AP

Los Angeles Rams wide receiver Davante Adams appeared in four NFC championship games during his time in Green Bay but the Packers lost each time, leaving Adams in search of his first Super Bowl appearance.

NFL PLAYOFFS

Back on the hunt

Rams WR Adams resumes chase of first Super Bowl appearance after failures

BY GREG BEACHAM
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Davante Adams reached the NFC championship game four times during his eight seasons with Aaron Rodgers and the Packers.

Every time, Green Bay came up just short of the Super Bowl — and Adams still feels the pain.

“It just feels almost like a mythical thing to me at this point,” Adams said Wednesday. “You do everything you can to get there, and it’s been so hard. Been working so hard at it.”

After an ensuing three years spent nowhere near a Super Bowl, Adams is back for his fifth shot when his Los Angeles Rams (14-5) visit the Seattle Seahawks (16-3) on Sunday for another NFC title game.

The 33-year-old Adams is still going strong as the league leader in touchdown receptions and a key component of the NFL’s top offense. But when the decorated receiver says he craves that final, ultimate team success far more than individual accolades, it’s clear he’s among the rare athletes who absolutely mean it.

“Forgive me if I’m not smiling ear-to-ear after the first win or the second (playoff) win, having been here so many times and understanding what it takes to get where we’re ultimately trying to go,” Adams said. “We’re close, and we’ve just got to finish it off.”

Although Adams has been waiting the longest, he’s far from the only Rams player who will be playing for a chance at a Super Bowl debut when they face the top-seeded Seahawks for the third time this season.

Sean McVay led Los Angeles to a championship four seasons ago, but only a handful of players are left from that team — just two on defense.

Matthew Stafford, tight end Tyler Higbee and cornerback Darious Williams are the only players left who made

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US, Canada could exhibit hockey power » Winter Olympics, Page 44

