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STARS AND STRIPES®

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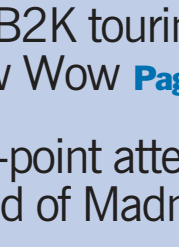
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'It takes money to kill bad guys,' Hegseth says

By Matthew Adams
Stars and Stripes

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said Thursday that the Pentagon has asked the White House for additional funds for the war in Iran but declined to set a figure, which has been reported at $200 billion.

"It takes money to kill bad guys," Hegseth said. "So we're going back to Congress and our folks there to ensure that we're properly funded for what's been done, for what we may have to do in the future."



Hegseth

The Washington Post first reported the request, citing an unnamed senior Trump administration official.

Hegseth did not directly confirm the $200 billion figure when asked about it by a reporter, saying "the number could move."

Hegseth and Air Force Gen. Dan Caine, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, briefed the media at the Pentagon on Thursday. In addition to the reported funding request, they spoke about the volume of attacks launched at Iran and Wednesday's dignified transfer of six U.S. airmen who died last week in western Iraq.

Hegseth opened the briefing by

SEE MONEY ON PAGE 7

RELATED

Iran attacks energy sites, defies Trump calls for restraint
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Photos by Ryan M. Breeden/Stars and Stripes

Members of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit's Battalion Landing Team take positions at the Central Training Area on Camp Hansen, Okinawa, on March 6. Analysts say moving U.S. Marines from Japan to the Middle East has left a gap in Indo-Pacific defense.

Experts warn of Indo-Pac gap

As Marines deploy from Japan to Middle East, allies have to fill void

By Brian McElhiney
Stars and Stripes

Sending a Marine expeditionary unit from Okinawa to stand by in the Middle East leaves a gap in U.S. power in the Indo-Pacific while increasing the defense burden on its Asian allies, according to analysts.

The amphibious assault ship USS Tripoli and roughly 2,500 members of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit have been en route to the Middle East since March 13, according to multiple news reports.



Members of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit's Battalion Landing Team train on Camp Hansen.

The Tripoli and its amphibious ready group — the amphibious transport docks USS San Diego and USS New Orleans — are homeported at Sasebo Naval Base, Japan.

The III Marine Expeditionary Force and 7th Fleet referred questions about the deployment to the Pentagon, which declined to comment Monday, citing operational security.

SEE GAP ON PAGE 4

BUSINESS/WEATHER

EUROPE GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel
Germany	$4.356	$4.746	$5.098	$5.593
Change in price	+25.8 cents	+24.5 cents	+23.9 cents	+25.8 cents
Netherlands	..	$6.097	$6.685	$7.402
Change in price	..	+26.1 cents	+25.9 cents	+18.7 cents
U.K.	..	$4.783	$5.135	$5.511
Change in price	..	+24.5 cents	+23.9 cents	+21.2 cents
Azores	..	..	$4.998	..
Change in price	..	..	+23.9 cents	..
Turkey	..	..	$4.848	$5.224*
Change in price	..	..	+23.9 cents	+21.2 cents

Fuel prices are updated daily. These prices are effective March 20. The change in price is from March 13.

PACIFIC GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel
Japan	..	$4.749	..	$5.129
Change in price	..	+24.0 cents	..	+21.0 cents
Okinawa	$4.499	..	..	$5.579
Change in price	+94.0 cents	..	..	+66.0 cents
South Korea	$3.809	..	$4.779	$5.159
Change in price	+22.0 cents	..	+24.0 cents	+21.0 cents
Guam	$3.839**	$4.459	$4.809	..
Change in price	+22.0 cents	+25.0 cents	+24.0 cents	..

*DieselEFD **Midgrade

Pacific prices for the week of March 20-27

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates

Euro costs (March 20)	0.85
British pound (March 20)	$1.30
Japanese yen (March 20)	155.00
South Korean won (March 20)	1,461.00

Commercial rates

Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3751
Britain (Pound)	1.3344
Canada (Dollar)	1.3718
China (Yuan)	6.8726
Denmark (Krone)	6.4851
Egypt (Pound)	52.2164
Euro	0.8681
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.8329
Hungary (Forint)	340.83
Israel (Shekel)	3.1194
Japan (Yen)	158.19
Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3060
Norway (Krone)	9.5401
Philippines (Peso)	60.13
Poland (Zloty)	3.71
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7503
Singapore (Dollar)	1.2806
South Korea (Won)	1,496.34
Switzerland (Franc)	0.7924
Thailand (Baht)	32.75
Turkey (NewLira)	44.3169

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

INTEREST RATES

Prime rate	6.75
Interest Rates Discount rate	3.75
Federal funds market rate	3.62
3-month bill	3.70
30-year bond	4.89

WEATHER OUTLOOK

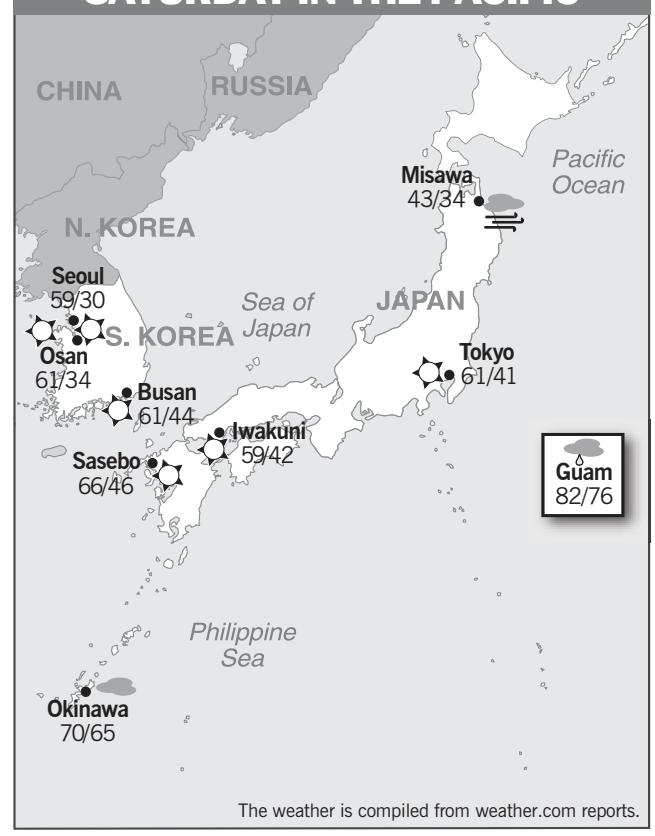
FRIDAY IN THE MIDDLE EAST



FRIDAY IN EUROPE



SATURDAY IN THE PACIFIC



The weather is compiled from weather.com reports.

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MILITARY



PERRI WOOD/U.S. Marine Corps

An avionics technician checks an AV-8B Harrier II jet March 12 at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point, N.C.

Marines plan week of events to mark AV-8B Harrier II retirement

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

The legacy of the Marine Corps AV-8B Harrier II ground-attack "jump jet" will be celebrated during a week's worth of events late this spring in North Carolina.

The "Harrier Sundown Celebration" will be hosted by the 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point from June 1-4, according to a memorandum posted Tuesday on the Marine Corps Administration website.

For the "AV-8B Sundown Ceremony," the main event will be a ceremony held on the Cherry Point flight line on June 3.

The Boeing AV-8B Harrier II is being replaced in Marine squadrons by the Lockheed Martin F-35B Lightning II, a fifth-generation stealth fighter and ground-attack aircraft. The B variant has a vertical takeoff and landing capability like the Harrier.

The Harrier officially reaches the end of its service life at the close of the 2026 fiscal year on Sept. 30. The official deactivation is scheduled for September, the Marines said in the memo.

The Harriers trace their lineage to the British-designed Hawker Siddeley Harrier Gr. 1, which first flew in December 1967. It was the first operational warplane with vertical/short takeoff and landing (V/STOL) capabilities.

The Marines procured the aircraft as the AV-8A Harrier. The plane's vertical takeoff and landing ability allowed the Marines to operate from rough airfields and amphibious assault ships.

The design was extensively modified, and its engines were upgraded, in a joint effort by McDonnell Douglas and British Aerospace. The Marines introduced the AV-8B Harrier II in 1985. Boeing took over the aircraft program when it acquired McDonnell Douglas in 1997.

The AV-8B Harrier II flew thousands of bombing and close-ground-support missions during Operation Desert Storm in 1991 and bombed targets during the NATO intervention in Kosovo in 1999. It has played a role in many of the major U.S. interventions during the wars on terrorism following the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

The sundown week events will include a gala, golf tournament, 5K run, picnic, and other social events hosted by the 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing, local businesses, local governments, and the Marine Corps Aviation Association. An open house will feature Marine squadrons and include the Harrier's simulator.

Interested participants can find the full list of events, including those open to the public or requiring prior registration, by checking the AV-8B Harrier II sundown official website.

Air Force says domestic dispute led to deadly shooting at NM base

BY JOSEPH DITZLER
Stars and Stripes

A veteran died and an active-duty service member was injured in a "domestic related" shooting Tuesday evening at Holloman Air Force Base, N.M., according to the service.

The injured service member was in stable condition Wednesday, the base said in a news release that day. Neither individual has been identified.

The shooting happened near the base convenience store around 5:30 p.m., according to the release and information provided Tuesday by base spokesman Capt. Daniel Barnhorst.

The veteran, described as a civilian who previously served at Holloman, was pronounced dead at the scene, the Air Force said.

The installation was placed on lockdown after reports of the shooting, Barnhorst told Stars and Stripes by email. The lockdown was lifted shortly after security personnel arrived around 5:30 p.m. and determined the scene was safe.

"This was an isolated incident and there is no ongoing threat to our community," the base said in Wednesday's release. "Based on the current investigation, this incident was domestic related, but the individuals were not married."

The convenience store will be closed until further notice, according to a Tuesday post on Holloman's official Facebook page.

The Air Force declined to release the name of the veteran who died. A spokesman for the Otero County Sheriff's Office was not available for comment Wednesday evening.

Holloman is home to the 49th Wing, where F-16 Fighting Falcon and MQ-9 Reaper drone pilots are trained, according to the base website. The installation is about 12 miles southwest of Alamogordo in southern New Mexico and roughly 200 miles south of Albuquerque.

DOD facilities see increase in security threats

Base force protection levels up, incidents reported in several states

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

MacDill Air Force Base was locked down for about three hours Wednesday after a second security incident at the Florida home of U.S. Central Command in recent days, installation officials said.

Base officials lifted the shelter-in-place order about 2 p.m., local time after a threat to MacDill had been "cleared," according to a social media post.

Officials did not describe the nature of the incident on Wednesday but said they "take all threats seriously and will continue to prioritize the safety and security of our installation, our mission and our people."

MacDill, outside Tampa, Fla., houses CENTCOM, which is overseeing combat operations against Iran in the Middle East. It is also home to U.S. Special Operations Command and the Air Force's 6th Air Refueling Wing.

The threat Wednesday came just two days after a suspicious package was found at MacDill's visitor center, which led to the closure of the center and the base's Dale Mabry gate for about six hours on Monday.

Base first responders and the FBI cleared the package from the scene, officials said. FBI Tampa said Wednesday that the suspicious package contained "possible energetic materials." The investigation is ongoing.

MacDill increased its security posture after that incident, raising it to Force Protection Condition-Charlie, the second-highest security level for federal government installations. Most Defense Department bases were operating at FPCON-Bravo on Wednesday, according to DOD.

MacDill officials said Wednesday the base would remain at FPCON-Charlie. They warned that the heightened security index would likely lead to delays and heavy traffic at installation access points.

The Wednesday shelter-in-place order at MacDill also comes amid an increase in security incidents across the Defense Department.

U.S. Northern Command, which oversees operations and troops in the United States, had already ordered higher-than-usual security measures this month after the U.S. and Israel launched operations against Iran.

Those measures include heightened gate security, 100% identification checks of individuals entering installations, more frequent vehicle searches and the suspension of the Trusted Traveler Program, which allows certain Defense Department civilian employees, service members and their dependents to escort people onto installations in their vehicles without a background check.

On Wednesday, Sheppard Air Force Base in Wichita Falls, Texas, was also investigating a "security incident," which forced it to close a base gate. The gate reopened and was back to normal operations the same day.

One day earlier, officials at Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst in New Jersey found a suspicious package on the base, prompting them to raise their security level to FPCON-Charlie. Officials later "determine that package posed no threat."

And Thursday, The Washington Post reported that unidentified drones had been detected over Fort McNair, the Washington Army base where Secretary of State Marco Rubio and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth live.

Officials had not determined where they came from, officials told the Post.

The incidents come as Operation Epic Fury, the Pentagon's operations against Iran, near its third week.

The bombing campaign aimed at Iran's hard-line regime was launched Feb. 28 alongside Israel's military and has since seen American forces strike more than 7,800 targets, according to CENTCOM.

Thirteen U.S. service members have been killed in combat operations, including six killed in the crash of a KC-135 fuel tanker in Iraq on March 12.

Three of the fallen members of the Air Force crew were assigned to MacDill Air Force Base, officials said.

MILITARY

Court reverses airman's conviction in sex doll case

Service member kept childlike silicone doll in dorm room

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

The military's highest court has upheld the dismissal of a case involving an airman who said he performed sexual acts with a childlike silicone doll in the privacy of his dorm room.

The U.S. Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces on Monday affirmed the judgment of the Air Force criminal appeals court, which ruled that Airman Zachary Rocha's conduct was constitutionally protected.

In the court's majority opinion, justices wrote they lacked the authority to make their own findings of fact and reviewed an appeals' court decision for the application of "correct legal principles."

The high court wrote that it was not sure another review by the Air Force appeals court was justified, stating justices answered the most important question when they "stated Rocha had a constitutionally protected liberty interest to privately engage in sexual activities with his doll," according to court papers.

But in a scathing dissent from the majority, the court's top judge warned the decision lowers the legal threshold for deviant behavior among personnel and sends a message that the U.S. military's justice system accepts "the unabashed sexualization of children."

"And so," wrote Chief Judge Keith Ohlson, "hundreds of thousands of servicemembers who serve in the Air Force and Space Force are now authorized to penetrate … child sex dolls while on base and at their leisure. "

"This result is indefensible," he said, writing alongside Judge John Sparks, who joined in dissent.

The 3-2 decision concludes a case that took five years for the U.S. military's legal system to resolve.

In March 2021, Rocha was convicted in a general court-martial at Mountain Home Air Force Base, Idaho, of one count of indecent conduct for "engaging in sexual acts with a sex doll with the physical characteristics of a female child," according to court documents.

> **"This result is indefensible."**
>
> **Chief Judge Keith Ohlson**
> U.S. Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces

A panel of officers, the equivalent to a jury in civilian court, found his behavior discredited the armed forces and sentenced him to a bad conduct discharge and 90 days in jail.

Rocha admitted to purchasing a silicone sex doll, described in court filings as being about 4 feet tall with female prepubescent features.

It was discovered in his room about three weeks after he bought the doll during an on-base dormitory inspection.

Those who saw the clothed doll on Rocha's bed said they were startled by its lifelike appearance, according to court documents.

An Air Force investigator testified in 2021 that he "saw a doll that scared (him) because it kind of looked like a child," according to court filings.

Rocha told investigators he benefited emotionally from the doll, whom he named Adele. He also said he engaged in sexual acts with the doll but denied having sexual interest in children, court papers state. Rocha said he stopped his sexual activity when realizing the doll looked childlike, according to court documents.

In December 2022, the Air Force appeals court overturned Rocha's dismissal on due process grounds. The justices found Rocha did not have fair notice that performing sexual acts with an inanimate object, alone and in a private setting, was criminal under military law.

The armed forces court of appeals, however, reversed the decision. Rocha did have fair notice, the court said, given that service members of "ordinary intelligence" should recognize conduct with parallels to child sexual abuse material is criminal under military law.

But the court sent the case back to the Air Force appeals court a second time, to address another of Rocha's claim, that private sex acts with a doll are constitutionally protected conduct.

The Air Force appeals court agreed. In January 2025, justices found Rocha had a "constitutionally protected liberty interest to privately engage in sexual activities with his doll," according to court papers.

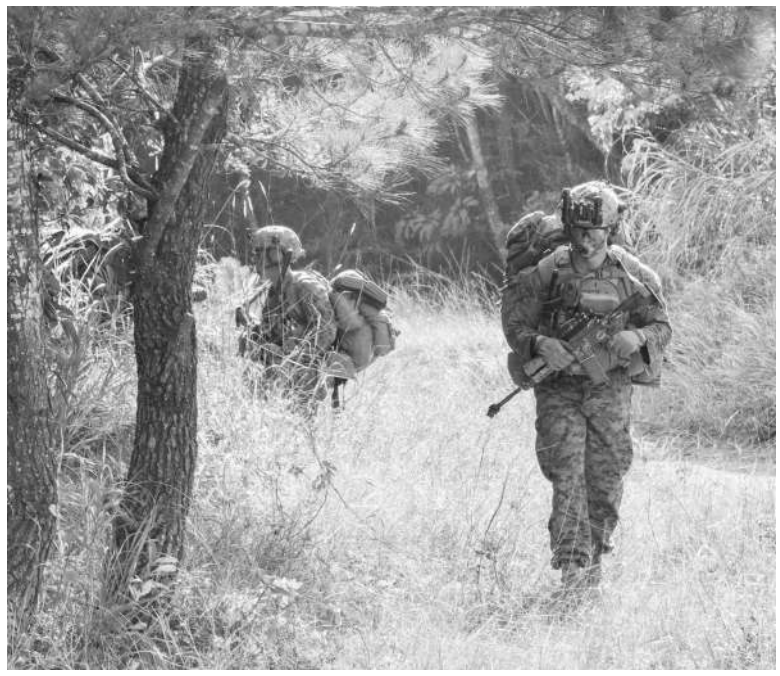
Even "considering potential discredit to the service, we have found that (Rocha's) conduct—masturbation, in solitude, in secret, and in private — should warrant" the constitutional protection afforded by the Supreme Court's decision in Lawrence v. Texas. That landmark decision struck down a Texas law criminalizing sodomy between consenting adults.

Ohlson, in his dissent, emphasized his support for the legal precedents that uphold for both civilian and military members of the armed forces "the expansive and robust right to privacy when it comes to sexual activity among consenting adults."

But, he said, "no federal court has ever held that Lawrence creates a constitutional right for a person to penetrate a child sex doll."

The doll, he noted, did not have the appearance "of some blow-up gag gift from a novelty shop," he wrote in his opinion.

"It was made of silicone, mimicking skin, and was obtained from a website which 'specializes in anatomically correct dolls.'" Rocha told "investigators that he talked to this doll, showered with it, put baby powder on it, brushed its hair, slept with it, and gave it the name of a real girl he knew in middle school," Ohlson stated.



RYAN M. BREEDEN/Stars and Stripes

Members of the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit's Battalion Landing Team take positions while training on Camp Hansen, Okinawa.

Gap: Adversaries likely to exploit situation, experts say

FROM PAGE 1

The 31st MEU has "unique capabilities" that would not be easily replaced without moving another expeditionary unit into the region, said retired Marine Col. Grant Newsham, a senior researcher with the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies in Tokyo.

"Unfortunately, the U.S. Navy doesn't have enough amphibious ships in working order to keep enough MEU's fully operational and deployable these days," he said Wednesday.

The 31st is one of seven Marine expeditionary units and the only one permanently deployed in the Pacific. It features a combination of air, ground and support elements designed to quickly respond to combat and noncombat situations, including humanitarian assistance and evacuations.

Even if additional forces from the I MEF in California were moved into the region, "the lack of amphibious ships is a constraint," Newsham said.

The 855-foot Tripoli can carry MV-22 Osprey tiltrotors, F-35 fighter jets and a variety of helicopters, such as the MH-60S Seahawk.

Sending the unit out of the Pacific "certainly sends a negative message to U.S. allies and partners about U.S. commitment and focus" on the region, said retired Navy Lt. Luke Collin, former director for Japan and Australia at the U.S. National Security Council and principal at the Asia Group advisory firm in Washington, D.C.

But pulling U.S. combat ships, aircraft, long-range munitions or integrated air and missile defense systems out of the Pacific "could have more significant impacts on U.S. deterrence," he said Wednesday.

"Although I don't expect China, Russia, or North Korea to push aggression further in the near-term, they will certainly seek to exploit this situation to press the narrative that the U.S. is a declining and unreliable power in Asia," Collin said.

The outcome of a conflict in the Indo-Pacific may not hinge entirely on the Marines' absence, said Benjamin Blandin, a research fellow with the Yokosuka Council on Asia Pacific Studies.

"In case of a direct Chinese attack on Japan or Taiwan, both should be able to hold up for at least a few weeks, granting enough time for the [Marine Corps] to come to the rescue," he said Thursday.

Newsham said regional allies in the interim must rely on their own defense capabilities.

"It's just the reality of the world today and the size of the U.S. military," he said.

Aircraft operating from USS Nimitz in southeastern Pacific

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

Squadrons of attack aircraft have been sent to the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz as it heads south for exercises in the Pacific Ocean south of San Diego, the Navy said late Wednesday.

"I can confirm that our air wing joined us after getting underway from San Diego," Lt. Cmdr. Peter Pagano, spokesman for the Nimitz, said in an email from aboard the ship.

Pagano said the exact makeup of the squadrons would be released Friday in a statement from U.S. 4th Fleet, the command responsible for U.S. naval forces operating in Caribbean, Central and South American regions.

The Nimitz left its homeport, Naval Base Kitsap in Bremerton, Wash., on March 7. The nearly 51-year-old carrier was headed to Naval Station Norfolk, Va., where it was to arrive in mid-April for its planned decommissioning.

After departing Bremerton, the Navy announced the Nimitz would participate in the Southern Seas 2026 exercises. The Nimitz made a brief stop at North Island Naval Air Station, in San Diego, before departing on the morning of March 14.

Navy photos released Tuesday show aircraft the service says were operating on the carrier on March 14 and 15.

MILITARY



DEZIREE KEAY/U.S. Army

U.S. and South Korean soldiers operate a convoy support center during Freedom Shield drills in Yeongju, South Korea, on March 12.

Freedom Shield exercise prepares S. Korean forces to lead in wartime

BY YOOJIN LEE
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — The United States and South Korea have wrapped up a major joint exercise focused on preparing Seoul to assume wartime operational control of allied forces.

The 10-day Freedom Shield exercise, which ended Thursday, emphasized readiness for a potential transition in which South Korea would take the lead in defending the peninsula during a conflict, according to a joint news release from U.S. Forces Korea and South Korea's Ministry of National Defense.

The training also incorporated lessons from recent conflicts and aimed to improve the allies' ability to respond quickly and effectively to complex security challenges, the release said.

"As we prepare for the [operational control] transfer, this year's [Freedom Shield] reaffirmed the common value of peace and stability of the Korean Peninsula shared between [South Korea] and the U.S.," Gen. Jin Yong-sung, chairman of South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff, said in the release.

Under a long-standing agreement first reached in 2006, the U.S. plans to transfer wartime operational control to South Korea, though the timeline has been repeatedly delayed.

The effort advanced in October when a bilateral committee approved a permanent Combined Ground Component Command. In January, U.S. Undersecretary of Defense for Policy Elbridge Colby met in Seoul with South Korean Defense Minister Ahn Gyu-back to discuss further steps toward the transition.

Although the main Freedom Shield exercise has concluded, four additional training events are scheduled to continue into next week, South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff spokesman Col. Jang Do-young said Thursday at a briefing in Seoul.

U.S. Army Gen. Xavier Brunson — head of United Nations Command, Combined Forces Command and U.S. Forces Korea — said Freedom Shield demonstrated the alliance's ability to operate as a unified force.

"No other alliance trains as we do from competition, to crisis, to conflict all with an eye to peace and stability on the Korean Peninsula and in Northeast Asia," he said in the release. "There is no substitute for training, there is no excuse for not being ready."

Freedom Shield began March 9 amid a broader series of overlapping exercises involving U.S. and allied forces in South Korea and Japan.

About 18,000 troops participated, according to South Korean media reports. A companion exercise, Ulchi Freedom Shield, is held annually in the summer.

Other recent drills included the Korean Marine Exercise Program, which ended Thursday, and the Air Force's Beverly Midnight exercise linking Japan-based wings.

A large-scale field training component, Warrior Shield, also took place across South Korea.

"What [Freedom Shield] showed me is a combined, joint force prepared to fight and win," Command Sgt. Maj. Robin Bolmer said in the release. "I have every confidence in these service members. They are ready."

Chinese vessels chase boat into disputed waters

BY BRIAN MCELHINEY AND KEISHI KOJA
Stars and Stripes

Chinese coast guard vessels entered waters Japan claims around the disputed Senkaku Islands while chasing a Japanese fishing boat this week amid heightened tensions between Tokyo and Beijing.

Two vessels came within 12 miles southwest of Minamikojima at around 5:30 a.m. Monday while pursuing the fishing boat, according to a Japan coast guard news release that day. They departed at 7:20 p.m. the next day, according to a separate release Tuesday.

The Senkakus are administered by Japan but claimed by China and Taiwan. The area reportedly holds a wealth of natural resources, including fish, oil and natural gas.

Twelve miles marks a country's territorial limit at sea. Two other Chinese ships were seen in Japan's contiguous zone, which extends 24 miles from the territorial baseline, according to the coast guard.

On Wednesday, four Chinese coast guard vessels — including the pair that entered the territorial limit on Monday — made another incursion shortly after 4 p.m., according to a Japan coast guard release that day. The Chinese vessels departed after about two hours.

In both instances, the Chinese vessels were met by a larger contingent of Japanese vessels that used electronic message boards to warn them to leave the area, a coast guard spokeswoman said by phone Thursday.

The purpose of Wednesday's incursion is unclear, she added.

"There were no fishing boats operating around the Senkakus on Wednesday, and we do not clearly know why they intruded," she said. Some Japanese government officials must speak to the press only on condition of anonymity.

Some members of the Yaeyama Fisheries Cooperative Association, which represents fishermen on Ishigaki island, have reported informal coast guard requests to stay away from the Senkakus, the association's managing director, Kokichi Irabu, told Stars and Stripes last month.

Ishigaki is about 95 miles southeast of Uotsuri Island, the largest of the Senkakus.

Japan and China square off frequently over the five small, uninhabited islands and three reefs off Taiwan's northeastern tip. Tokyo frequently accuses Beijing of harassing Japanese fishing boats there and sends its coast guard to intercede.

"The activities of Chinese coast guard vessels, such as navigating in Japanese territorial waters around the Senkaku Islands while making their own claims, are a violation of international law," said Tuesday's release.

The incidents marked the fourth and fifth incursions this year, according to the coast guard.

In 2025, Chinese coast guard vessels entered Japanese territorial waters around the islands 27 times, the agency said. They also sailed in the contiguous zone around the Senkakus a record 357 times that year.

Tensions between Japan and China have risen in recent months.

During a November parliamentary session, Japanese Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi said Tokyo could use military force if Beijing attacks Taiwan. Chinese President Xi Jinping has pledged to unify the democratic island with the mainland, by force if necessary.

University of Michigan named possible Pentagon partner amid probes

The Detroit News

DETROIT — The Defense Department has named the University of Michigan as a potential partner institution for service members' higher education in a memorandum by Secretary Pete Hegseth despite multiple federal investigations into the university.

Michigan was named last month as a potential replacement for several institutions, the majority of them private, with which the military has long partnered for professional military education. Those institutions included Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Columbia University and Yale University.

These schools have come under fire by President Donald Trump for how they handled protests related to the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza, alleged antisemitism on campus and other concerns, including their relationships with foreign governments.

University leaders have embraced the opportunity.

"As a top-ranked public research university, the University of Michigan has a distinguished centuries-long history of educating some of the nation's most elite active-duty military leaders and veterans," UM spokeswoman Kay Jarvis said in an emailed statement.

The university is also establishing an "expedited review process" for military applicants to the university who were previously admitted to Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, Jarvis said. This would allow "elite service members to have their credentials considered through a simplified application process that ensures applicants receive timely decisions," she added.

But the school has been named in at least two federal investigations by the Trump administration, including one into alleged antisemitism and another into foreign funding, particularly by the Chinese communist government, of university programs.

It's not clear if those investigations are ongoing.

PACIFIC

Navy taps robotics, AI to maintain warships

BY ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

A U.S. company has secured a contract worth up to $71 million to use robotics and artificial intelligence to support Navy ship maintenance, as the service continues to invest in advanced technologies.

The Navy and the General Services Administration awarded the contract to Pittsburgh-based Gecko Robotics, which will use wall-climbing robots, drones and sensors to scan and monitor warships for structural issues, the company said in a news release Wednesday.

The contract calls for work over five years on 18 vessels in the U.S. Pacific Fleet, including guided-missile destroyers and littoral combat ships.

Gecko said its technology uses AI to create detailed digital models and identify structural issues, including those not visible to the naked eye.



Gecko Robotics

Pittsburgh-based Gecko Robotics will use artificial intelligence to create detailed digital models and identify structural issues in Navy warships, including those not visible to the naked eye.

"The previous way of doing this is putting a ship into dry dock, building scaffolding all around the ships and then gathering information, you know, point by point; gathering very little information," company cofounder Jake Loosararian told CNBC on Tuesday. "We gather millions more information and data sets, and we do so in about three to four months, faster than has ever been done before."

The company did not respond to a request for additional comment.

The contract reflects the service's broader push to incorporate robotics and AI into shipbuilding and maintenance.

In December, Navy Secretary John Phelan announced a $448 million investment in the Shipbuilding Operations System, an initiative that uses AI to aggregate data, streamline engineering and identify delays early in the construction process.

Initial tests showed that planning submarine construction schedules was reduced from 160 hours of manual work to less than 10 minutes, the Navy said in a Dec. 9 news release.

Other countries are also investing heavily in similar technologies.

In South Korea, companies including Samsung Heavy Industries, Hanwha Ocean and HD Hyundai are expanding the use of robotics and AI in shipbuilding. HD Hyundai plans to deploy about 200 robots in its shipyards, according to a January report by The Chosun Daily.

Japan is also expected to announce a $100 million investment in AI technology, some of which could support U.S. shipbuilding efforts, Maritime Executive reported Tuesday.

The Navy has set a goal of having 80% of its ships ready for deployment, a benchmark it is still working to achieve, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Daryl Caudle said in January.

The Gecko contract is structured as an indefinite-delivery, indefinite-quantity agreement, meaning the Navy is not required to spend the full amount.

Other military services and federal agencies may also use the contract, according to the announcement.

Sunken WWII bomber may become first of its kind in a museum

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

The Devastator torpedo bomber's role in World War II was short-lived but historic.

U.S. Navy pilots flew the TBD-1 Devastator against the Japanese in the 1942 Battles of Coral Sea and Midway. Developed by Douglas Aircraft Co. in 1937, the Devastator was the Navy's first carrier-based plane with an enclosed cockpit.

The 129 Devastators produced by Douglas, however, were already outdated and quickly replaced by the speedier, nimbler Grumman TBF Avenger.

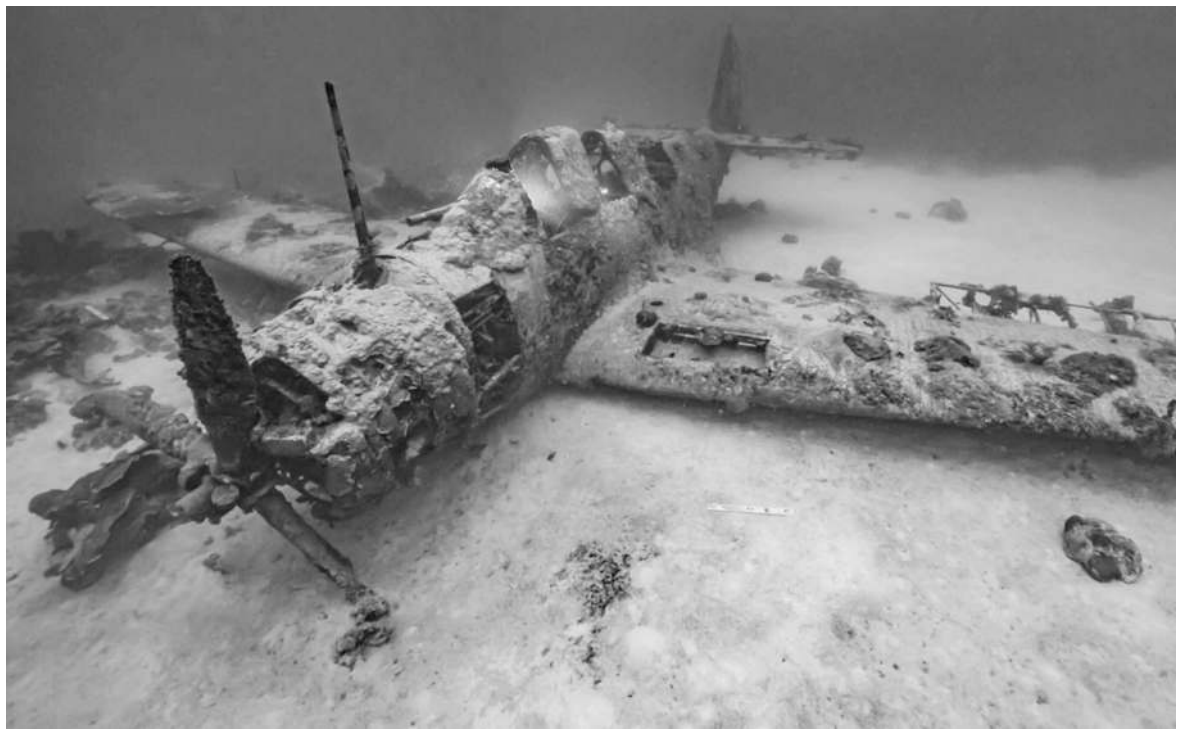
The Devastator became a footnote in history, and no vestige of the bomber is found in any museum or collection anywhere in the world.

Now, the Devastator Rising Project is intent on changing that by retrieving a nearly intact wreck resting in a shallow Pacific lagoon for future display in Washington, D.C.

A consortium formally launched the project in January. It is composed of the Air/Sea Heritage Foundation, the Naval History and Heritage Command, Texas A&M University's Center for Maritime Archaeology and Conservation and the Marshall Islands Cultural and Historic Preservation Office.

But reclaiming a Devastator from the sea has been a decades-long avocation for Russ Matthews, director of the Air/Sea Heritage Foundation based in Boise, Idaho, he said in a Feb. 17 phone interview.

Matthews described himself as a lifelong aviation junkie, with a particular interest in the Battle of Midway in June 1942. The story of the Devastators "grabbed him," he said.



Photos by Air/Sea Heritage Foundation

The largely intact wreck of Devastator torpedo bomber BuNo 1515, ditched by its crew on Feb. 1, 1942, lies on the floor of a Marshall Islands lagoon in this undated photograph.



TBD-1 Devastator torpedo bomber flies above Wake Island in late February 1942.

In 2003, he became involved in a project by the International Group for Historic Aircraft Recovery that set out to document a pair of Devastators resting 120 feet below the surface of Jaluit Lagoon in the Marshall Islands. Divers had discovered the largely intact planes six years earlier.

Based on seven expeditions to the wrecks over about 20 years — during which the Air/Sea Heritage Foundation was established in 2017 — data indicated that the plane identified by Bureau Number 1515 would be the best candidate for recovery, Matthews said.

BuNo 1515 had been part of a group that flew from the Yorktown on Feb. 1, 1942, for a shore bombardment of the Marshall Islands.

But the plane, along with BuNo 0298, encountered bad weather and drifted off course. Realizing they did not have enough fuel for the return trip, the crews jettisoned their bombs and ditched the planes in the lagoon.

Japanese troops captured the crews on a nearby island the next day, and they spent almost four years as POWs. All returned home after the war.

Naval History and Heritage Command first and foremost wants to recover BuNo 1515 because it would at long last bring an example of the aircraft to a museum, Samuel Cuellar, an underwater archaeologist leading the effort on behalf of the command, said by phone Wednesday.

The plane may be retrieved in the summer of 2028 at the earliest, he said.

Plans call for putting it on permanent display at the new National Museum of the United States Navy, which is expected to open in 2030.

Beyond that, Cuellar said, the artifact will highlight the tales of the men operating the Devastators.

Despite flying obsolete, outgunned aircraft, "they still went forth," he said.

"These were some of the first encounters that American pilots had with the Japanese in some of these engagements," Cuellar said. "That is also something that's really important, to be able to tell the story, not only of the planes, but more importantly, the pilots that flew them and the crews that manned them."

MIDEAST

Iran attacks energy assets, defying Trump

By Patrick Sykes, Dana Khraiche and Fiona MacDonald
Bloomberg News

Iran maintained attacks on energy assets around the Middle East even after President Donald Trump called for restraint, with strikes on key oil and gas infrastructure triggering a fresh surge in prices.

Tehran's response to Israel's assault on the giant South Pars gas field "is underway and not yet complete," the semi-official Iranian Students' News Agency cited a military spokesman as saying on Thursday. The targeting of energy facilities escalated the conflict as it nears the end of its third week, with no sign of an imminent ceasefire.

Saudi Arabia said a drone hit its Samref refinery on the Red Sea, a vital exit route for the world's biggest oil exporter with the Strait of Hormuz still effectively shut.

Qatar's Ras Laffan Industrial City — home to the world's largest export plant for liquefied natural gas — suffered "extensive damage" after an Iranian missile strike sparked a fire. The United Arab Emirates shut a major gas facility due to falling debris from missiles.

Iran's strikes on Qatar have damaged facilities that produce 17% of the company's LNG export capacity and it will take as many as five years to repair them, Reuters reported, citing QatarEnergy CEO Saad al-Kaabi.

The latest attacks increased the potential for other countries to join the U.S. and Israel in the conflict. Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud warned overnight that the kingdom's restraint isn't "unlimited" and it reserves the right to take military action if necessary.

"It could be a day, two days, or a week," he told reporters in Riyadh, adding that the relationship between the kingdom and Tehran has "completely shattered."

Trump said in a social media post late Wednesday that neither the U.S. nor Qatar, which shares South Pars, was involved in the Israeli operation targeting the field, and Washington "knew nothing about this particular attack."

That contradicted a person familiar with the administration's knowledge of the operation, who said earlier that the U.S. was aware of the strike but didn't participate.

"NO MORE ATTACKS WILL BE MADE BY ISRAEL," Trump said on Truth Social, calling on the Islamic Republic to act with restraint.

If Iran continues its strikes on Qatari assets, the U.S. "will massively blow up the entirety of the South Pars Gas Field at an amount of strength and power that Iran has never seen or witnessed before," he said.

Brent crude rose more than 10% to as high as $119 a barrel on Thursday, bringing its advance since the start of the war to more than 67%.

European natural gas rose as much as 35% to more than double pre-war levels.

Global equities extended losses and bonds tumbled amid widening fears that the war will stoke inflation and hurt economic growth.

Saudi Arabia said it shot down ballistic missiles fired toward the capital, Riyadh. Two oil refineries in Kuwait were struck by drones that caused fires, according to Kuwait Petroleum Corp. Iraq reported a loss of power generation after Iran halted gas supplies from South Pars in the wake of the Israeli attack.

Money: Top officials attend dignified transfer of 6 airmen

FROM PAGE 1

saying the families of the six airmen killed in the crash of their Air Force KC-135 Stratotanker had a simple message for him.

"We grieved with their families, and we listened. What I heard through tears, through hugs, through strength and through unbreakable resolve was the same from family after family. They said, 'Finish this, honor their sacrifice. Do not waver. Do not stop until the job is done,' " Hegseth said.

Hegseth and Caine were among top U.S. officials who attended the dignified transfer at Dover Air Force Base, in Delaware, as the airmen were returned to their families.

Three of the airmen were part of the 99th Air Refueling Squadron: Maj. John A. Klinner, 33, of Auburn, Ala.; Capt. Ariana G. Savino, 31, of Covington, Wash.; and Tech. Sgt. Ashley B. Pruitt, 34, of Bardstown, Ky. The squadron is stationed in Birmingham, Ala., but functions administratively under the 6th Air Refueling Wing at MacDill Air Force Base in Florida.

Also killed were Capt. Seth R. Koval, 38, of Mooresville, Ind.; Capt. Curtis J. Angst, 30, of Wilmington, Ohio; and Tech. Sgt. Tyler H. Simmons, 28, of Columbus, Ohio, who were assigned to the 121st Air Refueling Wing at Rickenbacker Air National Guard Base in Ohio.

The refueling aircraft went down in friendly airspace on March 12.

The circumstances of the crash remain under investigation, though U.S. Central Command said it was not caused by hostile or friendly fire. Another plane involved landed safely.

Caine said the crash is still under investigation.

Hegseth said his 13-year-old son popped into his office last night as he was editing his remarks to ask about the war and the families his dad met at Dover.

"I looked at him and I said, 'They died for you, son, so that your generation doesn't have to deal with a nuclear Iran,' " he said. "It's the truth and they did. So to the families who said, 'finish this,' we will."

Thirteen service members have been killed and nearly 200 have been wounded during Operation Epic Fury, U.S. Central Command has confirmed. The vast majority of the wounded had minor injuries, and more than 180 of them have returned to duty, CENTCOM said.

Hegseth said the U.S. has struck more than 7,000 targets and Thursday "is the largest strike package yet," a line the Pentagon has repeated often during the campaign.

"The last job anyone in the world wants right now, senior leader for the [Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps]," the secretary said. "Temp jobs, all of them."

U.S. forces on Tuesday employed multiple 5,000-pound bunker buster bombs on Iranian missile sites along Iran's coastline near the Strait of Hormuz, U.S. Central Command posted on X at the time.

Caine said Thursday the U.S. has destroyed 120 Iranian Naval vessels and 44 mine layers.

"We're flying further to the east now and penetrating deeper into Iranian airspace to hunt and kill one way attack garrisons, destroying Iran's ability to project power outside of its borders," the chairman added.

Air Force A-10 Warthogs are being used in the southern flank against vessels along the Strait of Hormuz, Caine said. Also in the southern flank are AH-64 Apache helicopters.

The chairman also acknowledged the U.S. remains "aggressive" against Iran's ballistic missiles because "they still retain some capability."

Hegseth was quick to say the U.S. remains "on plan" to achieve President Donald Trump's objectives. Trump, along with other top officials, have said objectives are to destroy Iran's missile capabilities, destroy Iran's navy and ensure Iran never obtains a nuclear weapon.

The Pentagon did not take questions about whether the Trump administration is considering deploying thousands of U.S. troops to reinforce its operation in the Middle East, as Reuters has reported.

More than 2,000 Marines and at least one warship are headed from the Pacific to the Middle East, multiple news outlets reported last Friday.

One U.S. official, speaking on the condition of anonymity, told The Associated Press that roughly 2,500 Marines from the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit and the amphibious assault ship USS Tripoli have been ordered to deploy.

The Tripoli would join the world's largest aircraft carrier, the USS Gerald R. Ford, as well as the USS Abraham Lincoln as part of an armada of American warships, stealth fighters and air defense systems in the region. About 50,000 troops have been deployed.

The Ford, along with nearly 4,500 personnel, is operating in the Red Sea in support of Operation Epic Fury.

USNI News reported on Tuesday that the Ford would soon leave the Red Sea to undergo repairs at U.S. Naval Support Activity Souda Bay on the Greek island of Crete, citing an unnamed senior U.S. official.

Military officials contacted by Stars and Stripes would not say whether Ford would depart the Middle East, citing operational security.



Julia Demaree Nikhinson/AP

President Donald Trump arrives on Air Force One on Wednesday at Dover Air Force Base, Del., to attend the casualty return for the six crew members of an Air Force refueling aircraft who died when their plane crashed in western Iraq while supporting operations against Iran.

MIDEAST

NATO allies weigh Strait of Hormuz actions

By John Vandiver
Stars and Stripes

NATO's top official on Thursday downplayed signs of a widening rift inside the alliance even as a dispute between the United States and key European allies over how to reopen the Strait of Hormuz has revealed divisions within the 32-nation military bloc.

Secretary-General Mark Rutte, speaking from NATO's Brussels headquarters, said allies are "intensely discussing" how to contend with the closure of the key Middle East oil chokepoint as energy costs continue to climb.

The talks center on finding "the best way forward to tackle this huge security issue. And let me add that I'm confident that allies, as always, will do everything in support of our shared interests," Rutte said. "So we will find a way forward."

While Rutte has previously stated there isn't a direct role for the alliance in the ongoing joint U.S.-Israeli military campaign against Iran, he said Thursday that the overarching aim of the effort is in Europe's security interests.


Rutte

"This is important for European security, for the Middle East. It is vital for Israel itself. A nuclear Iran would potentially have been a direct threat to the future of Israel, but again, to the whole Middle East and to Europe," Rutte said.

Rutte's comments come after President Donald Trump earlier this week lashed out at NATO. Trump has warned of potential consequences related to a lack of support when it comes to dealing with the Strait of Hormuz, through which roughly one-fifth of the world's oil travels.

Trump on Tuesday, when asked by a reporter whether the situation was cause for rethinking American involvement in NATO, reiterated past complaints that the United States shoulders most of the security burden in Europe.

"It's one of the reasons we have deficits and we help other countries, and then they don't help us," Trump said. "I mean, it's certainly something that we should think about."

Trump said that if he were to decide to leave NATO, an alliance formed in the aftermath of World War II to counter the Soviet Union, he has the authority to do so on his own.

"I don't need Congress for that decision," Trump said, before adding, "I have nothing currently in mind, but I will say that I'm not exactly thrilled."

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., a longtime backer of NATO who in 2023 backed legislation aimed at making it more difficult for a president to unilaterally quit the alliance, said Tuesday on X that Europe's refusal to provide military assets for an effort to open Hormuz could put the future of NATO at risk.

"The repercussions of providing little assistance to keep the Strait of Hormuz functioning are going to be wide and deep for Europe and America," Graham said. "I consider myself very forward-leaning on supporting alliances, however, at a time of real testing like this, it makes me second guess the value of these alliances."

Reactions in Europe have been mixed since the start of Operation Epic Fury, which launched Feb. 28. Early on, German Chancellor Friedrich Merz said he and Trump were on "the same page." But in the past week, German officials have distanced themselves from the campaign and said they would not participate in any military operation to open the Strait of Hormuz.

Other countries in Europe also have not signaled any interest is assisting the U.S. in such an effort.

However, both the United Kingdom and Romania have allowed the U.S. to use bases on their soil to launch attacks on Iran, and Ramstein Air Base in Germany has seen an uptick in U.S. military air traffic. Spain's prime minister said he would block U.S. access to Spanish bases for Iran missions.

And while NATO isn't playing an active role in the conflict, it has stepped up its air defenses over the past week in response to Iranian missiles being directed at Turkey.

NATO now has three Patriot air defense units deployed to Turkey, home to Incirlik Air Base and a radar manned by U.S. troops that plays a key role in the alliance's integrated air defense network.

Lawmakers criticize Trump's rhetoric toward NATO allies

By Svetlana Shkolnikova
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Members of the House Armed Services Committee reproached the Trump administration Wednesday for its rhetoric toward NATO allies who have declined U.S. requests to take an active role in the war against Iran, describing the tone as damaging to longstanding partnerships.

The criticism, from Democrats and Republicans, came after Trump lashed out at NATO countries and others in recent days for rebuffing his calls for help opening the Strait of Hormuz, a key shipping lane for oil that Iran has made effectively impassable after the U.S. and Israel launched a war against Tehran.

Trump has warned that NATO allies faced a "very bad future" if they did not help secure the waterway, fumed that they were "making a very foolish mistake," complained that "we helped them, but they didn't help us" and on Tuesday wrote that the U.S. was the most powerful country in the world and did "not need the help of anyone!"

He also called out European leaders, saying "Keir is no Churchill" after British Prime Minister Keir Starmer said the Iran war was never envisioned as a NATO mission and remarking "he'll be out of office very soon" when asked about French President Emmanuel Macron's refusal to join a task force to reopen the strait.

Such language, coupled with the Trump administration's treatment of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and earlier threats to make Canada the 51st state and take away Greenland from Denmark, has caused "grave damage" to the alliance, said Rep. Don Bacon, R-Neb.



Eric Kayne/Stars and Stripes

Daniel Zimmerman, left, the assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, and Air Force Gen. Alexus Grynkewich, head of U.S. European Command, testify during a House Armed Services Committee on Wednesday in Washington.

"I've been very supportive of the president on Iran and I think getting rid of Maduro is a good thing but I've been appalled by this administration's tone, rhetoric, tactic, strategy," he said, referring to the Venezuelan leader captured by the U.S. in January. "When it comes to Europe, the denigrating of our allies has been terrible."

Rep. Scott DesJarlais, R-Tenn., praised Trump for pressuring NATO countries to step up their defense spending but said he believes "maybe we backslid a little bit in terms of relationships" because of how Trump has "talked about and talked to and talked down to" world leaders.

"Tone matters," he said. "I don't profess to tell the president how to talk or how to interact, but I do think it's important that we maintain strong relationships."

Their concerns, voiced during a committee hearing on the U.S. military posture in Europe, were echoed by scores of Democrats. Rep. Adam Smith of Washington, the panel's ranking member, said Trump has made clear that he has "nothing but contempt" for NATO partners.

"The rhetoric has to change," Smith said. "We have to make it clear that we support this alliance, or, I guess, we have to decide we don't and walk away from it."

Trump on Tuesday said leaving NATO is "certainly something we should think about" and said he did not need congressional approval for such a decision. A law passed in 2023 requires the approval of two-thirds of the Senate for the U.S. to withdraw from the alliance, though legal experts say Trump could try to bypass it.

Daniel Zimmerman, the assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, told lawmakers Wednesday that the U.S. remained committed to NATO and said Trump wants to see the alliance "be the best version" of itself and for member countries to "carry their share of the load."

But that defense rang hollow for some lawmakers. Rep. Donald Norcross, D-N.J., said if he or Zimmerman spoke to their wives the way Trump speaks about U.S. allies "we probably wouldn't be married."

Some European countries have bristled at the tone from Washington. German Chancellor Friedrich Merz said Monday that he hoped "we will treat one another with the necessary respect within the alliance." Luxembourg's Deputy Prime Minister Xavier Bettel likened Trump's push for European assistance in the war against Iran to "blackmail."

Zimmerman acknowledged Wednesday that while there were "some discussions" with NATO allies before the U.S. and Israel launched their first strikes on Iran last month, the U.S. largely kept allies in the dark in an effort to "preserve operational security."

Still, European countries such as Britain and Romania have allowed American military aircraft to use their military bases for the campaign. Air Force Gen. Alexus Grynkewich, head of U.S. European Command, told lawmakers on Wednesday that the support has been critical.

"The access that our allies provide, the ability to overfly their countries, the ability to operate from their countries … many of them are helping in substantial ways in this," he said.

NATION



ANNA MONEYMAKER/TNS

Federal Reserve Chair Jerome Powell speaks during a news conference following the Federal Open Markets Committee meeting at the Federal Reserve on Wednesday in Washington, D.C.

Fed holds rates steady, Powell vows to stay amid DOJ probe

BY MARIA ELOISA CAPURRO
Bloomberg News

Federal Reserve officials left interest rates unchanged and continued to expect one rate cut this year as they acknowledged increased uncertainty due to war in the Middle East.

Chair Jerome Powell emphasized that to resume lowering rates, officials would have to see progress in reducing inflation, especially goods inflation that has been boosted by tariffs.

"If we don't see that progress, then we won't see the rate cut," Powell said in remarks to reporters after the Fed released its decision.

That progress may be difficult to achieve. In economic forecasts released with their decision, officials raised their outlook for inflation in 2026 to 2.7% from 2.4%. Notably, they saw the core measure — which excludes volatile food and energy categories — also rising to 2.7%.

The S&P 500 index extended losses as Powell spoke, while Treasury yields and the dollar rose.

Powell surprised Fed watchers by making some definitive statements about his near-term future at the central bank. He told reporters he had "no intention" of resigning as a member of the Fed's Board of Governors until an investigation by the Department of Justice into a building renovation project is "well and truly over."

He said that if his successor is not confirmed before his term as chair ends in May, he would serve as chair pro tempore. The Fed has conferred that temporary designation in the past on a board member to lead the institution when the chair role was vacant. Powell's term as a governor extends until January 2028.

He said he hadn't decided whether he would depart if the investigation were closed.

The Federal Open Market Committee voted 11-1 to hold the benchmark federal funds rate in a range of 3.5% to 3.75%. Governor Stephen Miran dissented, calling for a quarter-point reduction.

In their post-meeting statement, policymakers underscored the uncertainty they're facing in the economy due to the conflict in the Middle East, as did Powell in his press conference.

"It is too soon to know the scope and duration of the potential effects on the economy," Powell said. "The thing I really want to emphasize is that nobody knows."

Asked about the impact of surging oil prices on inflation, Powell acknowledged that central bankers typically don't raise rates when energy prices jump because the impact on inflation is temporary.

But that approach, he said, has always depended on the public continuing to expect inflation will settle around the Fed's 2% goal over the long term. He also noted that inflation in the U.S. has been above the Fed's 2% target for five years.

Powell said the committee had again discussed the possibility that the Fed's next rate move could be a hike but added, "the vast majority of participants don't see that as their base case."

Dems walk out of Bondi briefing on Epstein files

BY JIMMY JENKINS
Bloomberg News

WASHINGTON — Congressional Democrats walked out of a briefing with U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi and Deputy Attorney General Todd Blanche that was intended to cover the Justice Department's handling of files related to sex trafficking investigations of disgraced financier Jeffrey Epstein.

Rep. Robert Garcia of California denounced the Wednesday evening session of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee as a "fake hearing" and said Bondi had repeatedly refused to say whether she would comply with a subpoena for a committee deposition regarding the Epstein inquiry.

"This has been completely set up in a way that's been irresponsible. And quite frankly, we believe a way for the attorney general to get out of her answering questions under oath and to the public which we will not accept," Garcia told reporters.

Asked as she left Capitol Hill whether she would appear for the deposition, scheduled for on April 14, Bondi said "I made it crystal clear, I will follow the law."

Rep. James Comer, the Republican chair of the oversight panel, said that he continues to pursue the subpoena for testimony and said that lawmakers will "talk about" holding her in contempt if she does not comply.

"We were there to answer questions," Bondi said about her appearance Wednesday. "We sat there saying, 'anything you want to ask us,'" and then Democrats "stormed out of the meeting."

In an X post a short time later, the Republican-led panel said that "both Attorney General Bondi and Deputy Attorney General Blanche were answering substantive questions, and Attorney General Bondi stated she would follow the law regarding her subpoena."

"It's clear Democrats don't want answers or justice for survivors; they just want theatrics for their latest partisan stunt," the panel said in the post, which was retweeted by Chad Gilmartin, a Bondi spokesman.

The Justice Department has released more than 3 million pages of documents, emails, photos and other files related to probes into Epstein in response to a law that Congress passed. Some of the files, however, included redactions.

Critics claimed the redactions were excessive and mishandled, including hiding the names of alleged co-conspirators to Epstein.

The department has been allowing lawmakers to view some unredacted files on computers at one of the agency's satellite offices in Washington, but Democrats accused Bondi and her aides of using that system to improperly monitor the searches conducted by members of Congress.

Bondi appeared before the committee last month in a hearing that grew contentious. Lawmakers pressed her on the department's rollout of the Epstein files. Democrats also accused her of using the Justice Department to target enemies of President Donald Trump.

Sen. Ron Wyden has accused Blanche of blocking the Drug Enforcement Administration from releasing an unredacted document from the Epstein files about an investigation involving narcotics trafficking and money laundering.

Markwayne Mullin moves closer to DHS confirmation

BY DAVE GOLDINER
New York Daily News

Sen. Markwayne Mullin won a committee vote to become the new Homeland Security secretary by a narrow 8-7 margin with a boost from Democratic Sen. John Fetterman.

The nomination of Mullin, who has a bitter feud with Republican colleague Sen. Rand Paul, advanced to the full Senate after Fetterman broke ranks with the rest of his party to advance Mullin's confirmation.

Paul, the committee chair, voted against the Oklahoma lawmaker, whom he accused of having "anger issues" and backing political violence in an unusually bitter spat stemming from the attack on Paul by an angry neighbor.

"My AYE is rooted in a strong committed, constructive working relationship with Senator Mullin for our nation's security," Fetterman tweeted, explaining his vote.

The confirmation will now proceed to the Senate floor where it could get final approval next week as Mullin prepares to replace fired DHS Secretary Kristi Noem.

Republican supporters, along with Fetterman, say they hope Mullin can figure out a way to end the partial government shutdown that has roiled air travel by forcing airport screeners to work without paychecks for about a month.

Lines at security checkpoints have stretched out the door at airports in some spring break hot spots and have topped an hour at some times at New York's JFK, LaGuardia and Newark airports.

Noem was fired after a tumultuous tenure marked by perceived policy and public relations missteps, especially her handling of President Donald Trump's mass deportation effort that led to the killings of two U.S. citizens by immigration agents in Minneapolis.

Democrats have refused to fund all of DHS without reforms to the immigration crackdown.

Mullin vowed to take a less confrontational and partisan approach, which could soften Democratic opposition to funding Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Border Patrol.

Mullin retracted his remarks blaming protester Alex Pretti for his own killing on the streets of Minneapolis in January and said immigration agents should generally get warrants from judges before entering private homes.

He also said he would reverse Noem's policy of requiring personal approval of all DHS payments of more than $100,000, which he branded "micromanagement."

NATION

Allegations lead to calls to rename Chavez landmarks

Los Angeles Times

Dozens of California schools, streets, parks and libraries bear the name of Cesar Chavez — on top of the statues erected and holiday established in his honor.

But in the wake of new sexual abuse allegations against the iconic labor leader, some elected officials and organizations are calling for change.

A steady stream of leaders from communities across the state said Wednesday they planned to reevaluate the numerous ways Chavez has been memorialized.

The Associated Press reported Thursday that California's legislative leaders announced they are going to rename César Chavez Day as Farmworkers Day in light of the allegations.

The legislation would need Gov. Gavin Newsom's approval. He said Wednesday he was open to changing the name of the holiday but made no commitment.

Los Angeles city officials said they, too, were discussing what to do about the upcoming holiday and future events to honor Chavez.

Washington Gov. Bob Ferguson's office said Thursday that he won't issue a proclamation honoring César Chavez Day, March 31, this year. The California Museum said it will remove Chavez from the state's Hall of Fame. Celebrations of Chavez in Texas and in his home state of Arizona have been canceled at the request of the Cesar Chavez Foundation, the AP reported.

Many officials expressed a desire to continue honoring the wider farmworker labor movement, even while minimizing Chavez as an individual figure.

The moves follow publication of a New York Times investigation detailing disturbing allegations that Chavez sexually assaulted two underage girls in the 1970s, as well as fellow iconic farmworker leader Dolores Huerta in the 1960s.



KAYLA BARTKOWSKI, LOS ANGELES TIMES/TNS

Cesar E. Chavez Memorial Park in San Fernando, Calif., includes a statue of the late labor leader. But amid new sexual abuse allegations against Chavez, some officials and organizations are seeking changes.

Huerta, as well as one of the girls, said Chavez raped her.

There were also calls to purge Chavez's name from buildings, streets and other features.

On Wednesday afternoon, near the intersection of where Sunset Boulevard becomes Cesar E. Chavez Avenue, California Rising founder Raul Claros called on the city and elected officials to change the road's name "as soon as possible."

His organization, a coalition of nonprofits, faith-based groups and community leaders, has launched a Change.org petition to gather signatures to support renaming it Dolores Huerta Avenue.

"We're demanding the city of Los Angeles to show leadership, for our school district, our state legislators and our federal partners join us in this movement," he said.

"We know in the Latino community, a lot of this abuse has been tolerated for generations. In our culture, we're told to stay quiet," he added. "That stops now."

LA City Councilmember Ysabel Jurado, whose district includes Boyle Heights, called for "the renaming of all public locations and events that bear his name, as we prioritize accountability and stand with those who have been harmed."

In the agricultural Central Valley, Fresno City Councilmember Miguel Arias said he would pursue renaming the local Cesar Chavez Boulevard.

"Public streets and building names are meant to honor individuals who uplifted our community and represented its highest values," he wrote on Facebook. "Given what we now know, Cesar Chavez's actions do not meet that standard, and we have a responsibility to act accordingly."

A statue of Chavez on the Fresno State University campus was covered Wednesday by a black tarp and plastic, Bakersfield Now reported.

Notre Dame announces free tuition for families earning under $150,000

Chicago Tribune

Undergraduate students from families with an annual income below $150,000 can now attend the University of Notre Dame for free beginning in the 2026-27 academic year, according to a university statement.

The change is part of a broader university initiative, Pathways to Notre Dame, which was initially announced at the inauguration of the university president, Rev. Robert Dowd, in 2024.

It aims to make the institution affordable and accessible for families at all income levels — a goal Dowd said is central to the university's mission.

"In order to be the community of learning we are called to be, cost must never be a barrier," Dowd said. "By expanding the Pathways to Notre Dame program with this announcement, we continue to make strides to make a Notre Dame education more affordable."

Beyond tuition, most undergraduate families making less than $60,000 annually will be eligible for financial assistance that covers fees, housing and food, according to the statement.

Yale University has similarly expanded its financial-aid program ahead of the 2026-27 academic year, eliminating all expected costs for undergraduate families with annual incomes below $100,000. Families earning under $200,000 will also receive need-based scholarships that meet or exceed the cost of tuition at Yale, the university said.

Ariz. sheriff running Guthrie investigation faces recall campaign

BY BRIAN NIEMIETZ
New York Daily News

A congressional candidate in Arizona is leading a campaign to recall Pima County Sheriff Chris Nanos, whose department is heading up the Nancy Guthrie investigation.

Tucson GOP hopeful Daniel Butierez is hoping to turn the city's 7th Congressional District red after Adelita Grijalva finishes the term started by her dad prior to his death in March 2025.

Butierez is also circulating a recall petition in response to Nanos' alleged misrepresentation of his law enforcement background in a sworn deposition, according to the Arizona Republic.

Nanos' work history, which is in question, will reportedly be reviewed during a meeting of county officials. It's alleged that he was untruthful about suspensions early in his career with the El Paso Police Department in Texas.

Butierez spoke about his efforts to oust Nanos in a Facebook video posted Tuesday.

"Help us get these done, get these signed, and let's get the sheriff out of office and get someone in there that we can feel confident in," Butierez suggests.

He urged Pima County voters to help him get on the ballot and push Nanos out of office regardless of signees' political affiliation.

Nanos' department has been under a microscope since Feb. 1, when Nancy Guthrie, the 84-year-old mother of NBC "Today" host Savannah Guthrie, was reported missing from her southern Arizona home. The FBI is also participating in an ongoing search for the seemingly abducted victim. Few clues have been made public despite extensive media coverage and a $1 million reward from the Guthrie family.



Nanos

Video and images retrieved from Guthrie's doorbell camera show an armed man wearing gloves and a mask approaching her front door in the hours she's believed to have disappeared. Savannah Guthrie conceded in a Feb. 24 Instagram video "she may already be gone."

When asked about the accusation against him, Nanos wished an Arizona Republic reporter "good luck with your hit piece."

He hasn't responded to a Daily News request for comment. Nanos was elected to serve a second term as sheriff in 2024.

Women's museum bill approved by House panel includes transgender ban

BY JACOB KRESSE
CQ-Roll Call

WASHINGTON — A Smithsonian museum honoring women has been stalled for years, waiting on Congress to clear the way for its construction. On Wednesday the House Administration panel advanced a measure that would finally place it on the National Mall.

But the vote on the once bipartisan issue fell along party lines, after Democrats pulled their support over last-minute changes that would ban transgender exhibits and give the final say on a location to President Donald Trump.

As amended, the bill would allow the museum to be built within the reserve of the Mall, where new construction is tightly controlled. While the bill names the so-called South Monument site across from the National Museum of African American History and Culture, it also hands the president the power to "designate an alternative site" of his choosing.

Congress originally authorized the Smithsonian American Women's History Museum in 2020, alongside plans for a Museum of the American Latino. Now it must give the OK to build on the Mall, a task that is proving easier said than done.

While Democrats supported the initial version of the museum siting bill introduced by Rep. Nicole Malliotakis, R-N.Y., they objected to the substitute amendment from Rep. Mary Miller, R-Ill., including its location leeway for Trump, how it handles design proposals and its emphasis on "biological women."

"The accomplishments of real women should never be overshadowed," Miller said at the markup.

But Democrats on Wednesday said the changes were a "poison pill," while accusing Republicans of slow-walking the Latino museum, which is also waiting on a green light from Congress to build on the Mall. Lawmakers had hoped to package the two siting bills together, only to decouple them as anti-immigration rhetoric flared in recent years.

NATION

Ethics panel rejects hearing delay request from Fla. lawmaker

South Florida Sun-Sentinel

A U.S. House subcommittee created to consider ethics charges against U.S. Rep. Sheila Cherfilus-McCormick has rejected her requests to delay its work until after the conclusion of her criminal trial and to conduct its hearing examining her conduct behind closed doors.



Cherfilus-McCormick

The result: a public hearing of the House Ethics Committee adjudicatory subcommittee will be held, as scheduled, on March 26.

The decision was announced late Wednesday afternoon by the Republican chairman and top Democrat on the House Ethics Committee. In January, they announced the formation of an adjudicatory subcommittee to examine the Cherfilus-McCormick case.

In the latest announcement, U.S. Reps. Michael Guest, R-Miss., and Mark DeSaulnier, D-Calif., said the adjudicatory subcommittee met Tuesday in executive session to hear arguments about her motions to delay the proceedings and to conduct them privately.

"After careful deliberation, the adjudicatory subcommittee voted unanimously to deny both motions," their statement said.

Cherfilus-McCormick, a Broward-Palm Beach county Democrat, was elected in a January 2022 special election to fill the vacancy created by the death of U.S. Rep. Alcee Hastings.

She has been under investigation for most of her time in Congress. In January, the Ethics Committee said its investigative subcommittee found "substantial evidence of conduct" described in a criminal indictment against her last year.

Cherfilus-McCormick and other alleged co-conspirators were indicted in November on charges that she stole money that had been overpaid to her family-owned health care company when she was its CEO during the COVID-19 pandemic and laundered the proceeds, with much of the money used to help fund her first successful campaign.

Party-switching congressman loses posts

The Sacramento Bee

U.S. Rep. Kevin Kiley of California has been removed from all his House committee assignments, a consequence of his decision earlier this month to leave the Republican Party to become an Independent.

Kiley was formally taken off three committee assignments Wednesday in what his spokesperson John Pirsos said is a procedural move under House rules. Pirsos said Kiley expected the removal and has asked to be readmitted to the committees as an Independent.

The House GOP Steering Committee, which includes Speaker Mike Johnson, will need to approve Kiley regaining his seats on the Education and the Workforce, Transportation and Infrastructure and Judiciary committees. A spokesperson for Johnson, who Kiley has repeatedly criticized in recent months, did not immediately respond to a request for comment.

The removal comes less than two weeks after Kiley announced he would become an Independent for the remainder of his House term and register as a "No Party Preference" to run in California's newly drawn 6th Congressional District.

He attributed the changes to his frustration with "partisanship" and the ways it is "weakening the country."

The decisions follow Prop 50, which redrew the state's congressional map in an effort to gain Democratic seats in districts currently held by Republicans. Kiley, who unsuccessfully pleaded with his party to stop mid-decade redistricting, was left with a district that will heavily favor Democrats.



U.S. Rep. Kevin Kiley

Earlier this month, Kiley said he would run in District 6, in a race that features a crowded field of Democratic contenders.

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WORLD

Cuban leader blasts Trump's 'takeover' talk

By Nora Gámez Torres
Miami Herald

As Cuba adopts a more belligerent tone following President Donald Trump's talk of "taking" the country, two tankers carrying Russian oil and gas are headed to the island, in defiance of the de facto oil embargo the U.S. has imposed on the communist-run nation.

Cuban leader Miguel Diaz-Canel replied to repeated comments from Trump about taking the island with a defiant message of his own, telling the United States that any aggression will be met with "impregnable resistance."

"The U.S. publicly threatens Cuba almost daily with the forceful overthrow of its constitutional order," he said in a publication on X on Tuesday night, the first time he has specifically addressed the U.S. president's comments about Cuba. "Faced with the worst-case scenario, Cuba has one certainty: Any external aggressor will encounter an impregnable resistance."

It is unclear if the change in tone by Díaz-Canel and other officials reflects not just Cuba's leadership red lines about political changes but the chance that help might be on the way.



Adalberto Roque, AFP/TNS

Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel attends an Act of Solidarity with Venezuela, in Havana, on Oct. 17.

Citing maritime tracking data, Jorge Piñón, an expert at the University of Texas at Austin who tracks oil shipments to Cuba, said that two tankers carrying Russian oil appear to be heading to Cuba.

The Sea Horse is reported to be carrying approximately 200,000 barrels of Russian diesel fuel. Bloomberg reported that the Anatoly Kolodkin, under U.S. sanctions, is carrying 700,000 barrels of Russian Urals crude oil.

"The Sea Horse is no longer drifting and it is moving at its own power at 9.9 knots," Piñón said. "Our calculation shows that it would take her approximately five days to reach Cuba's north coast."

At least two American warships are currently patrolling Cuba's north coast, tracking sites show. If the tankers approach closer to the island, the Trump administration would need to decide whether to let the Russians provide Cuba with its first oil shipments in three months.

The Trump administration cut off oil supplies from Venezuela and Mexico to the country in an effort to bring Cuban leaders to the negotiating table. The oil shortages have worsened a severe economic crisis that has brought the country to the verge of collapse. Cubans have been protesting for 11 nights in a row, banging pots and pans during the night blackouts, including in the capital, Havana.

After suggesting "a friendly takeover" of Cuba, Trump said earlier this week that he might have the "honor" of taking Cuba, calling it "a weakened nation."

"I mean, whether I free it, take it. I think I can do anything I want with it, if you want to know the truth," Trump told reporters at an event in the Oval Office on Tuesday.

"Cuba is now in a very bad shape. We will be doing something with Cuba very soon," Trump said at the White House on Tuesday at the top of a meeting with Ireland's prime minister. Also in the room was Secretary of State Marco Rubio, who is leading U.S. talks with Cuba and gave the clearest sign that the administration wants to see Díaz-Canel stepping down from his formal position as president of the country.

Speaking of the country's economic problems, Rubio said Cuba doesn't "get subsidies anymore, so they are in a lot of trouble, and the people there don't know how to fix it, so they have to get new people in charge." He also said measures announced Monday by a top Cuban official to allow Cubans abroad to own private enterprises and invest on the island are not "dramatic enough" to fix the ailing nations' problems.

Venezuela's interim leader replaces longtime defense chief

Miami Herald

Venezuela's interim president, Delcy Rodríguez, on Wednesday removed Defense Minister Vladimir Padrino López after more than a decade in the post and appointed Gen. Gustavo González López as his replacement, in a major shake-up of the country's military leadership amid a fragile political transition.

The appointment of González López — a close ally of Interior Minister Diosdado Cabello — could strengthen Cabello's control over the country's powerful security apparatus, analysts say, at a pivotal moment when competing factions within the ruling coalition are maneuvering to retain influence following the capture of strongman Nicolás Maduro in a pre-dawn U.S. raid in Caracas in January.

"We thank Gen. Vladimir Padrino López for his dedication, his loyalty to the nation, and for having been, all these years, the leading soldier in the defense of our country," Rodríguez said in a message posted on Telegram.

She added that the outgoing minister will take on "new responsibilities that will be entrusted to him," without providing further details.

Padrino López had led the defense ministry since Oct. 24, 2014, when he was appointed amid a wave of anti-government protests that marked the beginning of Maduro's first term. Over the years, he became one of the most powerful figures within Venezuela's military establishment and a central pillar sustaining the Chavista government through political crises, sanctions and internal dissent.

González López, the new defense chief, is a veteran intelligence and security official widely considered close to Cabello, one of the most powerful figures remaining within the Chavista hierarchy. Since Jan. 6, he had served as commander of the Presidential Honor Guard while also leading the Military Counterintelligence Directorate, one of the country's most feared security agencies.

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WEEKEND



Harry Styles longs for normality on new album

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An unlikely hero

Ryan Gosling plays a middle school science teacher who goes to space to save humanity in 'Project Hail Mary'

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Changing your focus to analog

Embrace film photography with this guide

By Kelvin Chan and George Walker IV
Associated Press

Film photography has been undergoing a renaissance, especially with younger people who love its unique look and analog vibe.

But while Generation Zers and younger millennials embrace film, analog cameras are not as easy to use as the digital cameras they grew up with. What does ISO mean? What is an f-stop anyway? How do I figure out the right aperture?

George Walker IV, an Associated Press photojournalist based in Nashville, has tips for those who seek to understand the basics of film-based photography.

Walker, who joined the AP in 2023 after 30 years as a photographer at The Tennessean newspaper, said shooting on film is a good way to learn the basics of photography because it "forces me to be patient and concentrate to make the pictures that matter."

"You have a finite number of frames on a roll of 35 mm film, usually 24 or 36. And you should make those pictures count."

How film works

Before the advent of digital cameras in the early 2000s, photography relied on physical film instead of electronic files stored on memory chips.

Photographic film is a light-sensitive cellulose material used for making images, by exposing the silver-halide coating through the camera lens to create a latent image on the film that's then used for making photographic prints.

This results in pictures with a distinctive grainy or unfiltered feel that attracts analog fans turned off by digital photos that seem too perfect. Enthusiasts are also drawn to film as an antidote to digital fatigue and the instant gratification of their smartphones. It's part of a broader revival of old-school hobbies and content that includes vinyl records, knitting and writing letters.

How to buy film

There are multiple formats but the type used in most consumer cameras is 35 mm, which comes in little canisters. Buy it at a photo shop or online. Some drugstores also sell film, but the selection is often limited.

When buying film, pay attention to the ISO rating, also known as the film speed. The higher the number, the more sensitive the film is to light.

For making photographs in a low-light situation, like a basketball gym or a night football game, photographers might use a film rated at ISO 1600 or higher. To capture a scene in full sun, ISO 400 or less is best.

Beginners should consider black and white film, which is more forgiving than color for exposures and forces you to focus on a shot's composition and lighting.

You'll need a film camera

Nowadays, new film cameras are limited to a handful of point-and-shoot, niche or high-end models.

However, there are plenty of secondhand vintage models for sale on eBay and at camera shops. Or try asking around to see if anyone you know has an old camera sitting forgotten in a drawer.

Look for a model from one of the big five camera makers that dominated the predigital photo era: Canon, Nikon, Pentax, Olympus and Minolta.

What kind of film camera do you want?

Point-and-shoot cameras are small, cheap and easy to carry around and use. They typically don't have any controls, except for a button to turn the flash on.

Single-lens reflex, or SLR, cameras let you go fully manual. They have lots of dials and adjustments, and the ability to swap lenses, so you can make great pictures. If you do want to learn and experiment, a fully manual camera is best. But they're also bigger and bulkier and can be intimidating for novices.

If you can't decide, a good rule of thumb is that the best camera is always the one you have with you.

How to load a roll of film

Now that you've got film and a camera, it's time to put them together.

With a manual camera, open the back and feed the film leader, or tip, into a slot on the spool on the right. Use the winding lever to advance the film to make sure it's latched on properly. Close the camera back. When you wind the film, the rewind knob on the left will turn if the film is loaded correctly.

The process is a little easier with point-and-shoot cameras, which usually have automatic winding. There should be a label inside indicating where to position the film leader. If not done correctly, you'll either get an error message or the film counter won't advance.

Now that the film is loaded, be sure to keep the camera back closed until you're finished making exposures and the film is fully rewound into the canister, otherwise you'll ruin the whole roll.



Photos by Frank Augstein/AP

A journalist takes a picture with an analog camera on March 11. Film cameras can be hard to find new, but there are plenty of secondhand vintage models for sale on eBay and at camera shops.



When buying film, make sure to note its ISO rating or speed. The higher the number, the more sensitive the film is to light.

How to use your manual camera's controls

If you've decided to get a manual camera but don't know how to use it, you'll need to learn how to control the exposure by adjusting the shutter speed and the aperture, also known as the f-stop, and setting the film speed or ISO.

When it comes to exposure, think of a faucet filling a glass. The f-stops control the flow of water — or light hitting the film. So f-16 looks like a trickle while f-2.8 is a fire hose. The shutter speed, meanwhile, controls how long the faucet is open.

F-stops also control depth of field, or how much of the photograph is in focus. The smaller the f-stop, the more will be in focus.

The shutter speed is used to capture action, like a race car or a bird in flight. Exposures made with a fast shutter speed of, say, 1/250 or 1/500 of a second or higher are better at freezing the action.

Manual cameras typically have a light meter visible through the viewfinder that shows whether you've got the right exposure.

With a manual camera, you'll also need to focus the image by hand, which needs practice. When photographing people or animals, concentrate on making sure the eyes are in focus.

For still life photographs and landscapes, focus on what you think is important to see, like a flower petal or a mountain peak.

The technology is different, but the principles are the same. The number one rule is to fill the frame with what you want to see. And study the professionals and masters of photography, such as Gordon Parks, Henri Cartier-Bresson and Ansel Adams.

What to do when you've shot a roll of film

You can get film processed at a drugstore or photo shop, or mail it to an online lab. Some cities have community darkrooms that photographers can join.

Processing film takes both time and money, which varies according to how soon you want it; whether it's color or black and white; the number of exposures; and other services.

You can also get back the negatives — those exposed and developed film strips. In the old days, it was important to keep them in case you wanted to print additional copies later. Now, with photo labs offering digital files as well as physical prints, many people don't bother collecting them, though most experienced photographers prefer to hang on to them.

Screens pair with sound

By Gregg Ellman
Tribune News Service

In the crowded headphone market, aside from great sound, products often need another feature to stand out. And that's exactly what the MorningBlues wireless headphones VWS X1 (on sale for $499.00 from $599.00; currently a $100 coupon is also available to use at checkout) have with their unique, detachable OLED touchscreens on each earcup.

They are promoted by MorningBlues as the world's first headphones with detachable screens. These are the first I've seen or heard of, so I'm not going to dispute that claim.

You can display your own personal images, text or video. MorningBlues also has a gallery of vibe portraits to choose from. Each display can glow at night, making them really stand out. If you don't want them on, since they are held on magnetically, you can just remove them. Each display measures approximately 2.2 by 2.2 by 0.35 inches.

The MorningBlues companion app allows you to customize the displays and upload your files. The app also controls brightness and audio features.

While the displays are innovative, if the headphones didn't have great sound, you wouldn't want them. But they shone in the sound category at any volume level across all my playlist categories.

Each padded earcup has a 40mm dynamic driver, powered by Jamo and a Qualcomm advanced audio chipset. The active noise cancellation worked well in blocking outside noise.

The Bluetooth 5.4 headphones have multipoint connectivity. The headphones are listed to run for 60 hours, and the displays run independently for nine hours. The displays are charged with the included portable charging case. There's no IP rating, so please don't take them for a swim.

Online: morningblues.com



MorningBlues/TNS

Choose from preset images or upload your own to the two displays on the VWS X1.

WEEKEND: VIDEO GAMES



Bethesda photos

The Terran Armada story in Starfield not only features a new faction and sentient robots, but also a new, ready-to-go, fully decorated cabin outpost.

The quiet charm of cozy game Starfield

April update to Bethesda blockbuster to bring immersive space travel, new plot and more decor among other features

BY GENE PARK
The Washington Post

In 2023, I reviewed the Xbox-published game Starfield and gave it 4 out of 4 stars. It somehow became my most controversial review, in part because its critics deemed the game "outdated" and dull.

More than two years later, I'm here to double down on my love for this game. I think it's a misunderstood experience. But I'm not going to blame players for that misunderstanding.

The game drew an audience of 15 million by 2024, but it hasn't approached the cultural footprint of Bethesda Game Studios' past work, including the blockbuster The Elder Scrolls, and the Fallout franchise, which it acquired in 2004. Now Starfield is preparing for its largest update yet, bringing new story content, expanded space travel systems and an April 7 release on PlayStation 5.

Bethesda's developers are celebrated as masters of the role-playing space, so it was reasonable to expect that Starfield would hit those same highs. The game was marketed that way, promising opposing factions and political tension that never materialized. It also touted a cast of dynamic companions, the type of characters who develop complex relationships in other Bethesda games but here rarely reached the same depth.

Many players were aghast that a space game would feature no talking alien civilizations, overlooking how one of the most advanced space simulators on the market, Elite Dangerous, also has no alien races to interact with. But Starfield was made by a blockbuster studio, and gaming's most famous blockbuster space saga remains Mass Effect — a series with little interest in simulating space travel but enormous focus on character relationships and dramatic arcs.

But I've played Starfield for hundreds of hours by enjoying it the same way I did in 2023, as the world's most expensive, biggest-budget "cozy" game. My Stardew Valley is in the star field. I've ignored much of its story to create several of my own as a moon farmer, a collector of rare books and an expert builder of spaceships. The game has robust mechanics for creating "outposts," which are just space homes.



Also new to the game: Milliewhale, an outpost alien pet.

Cozy games are usually defined as games with low stakes and routine activities like farming, decorating and collecting with no "endgame" mission, just an overall imperative to live well in a game's world. Animal Crossing and Stardew Valley are the two most prominent games in this genre. For me, Starfield was Animal Crossing in orbit as I hunted various galaxies for out-of-print books to line the shelves in my recreation room on a planet called Leviathan IV. I installed user-generated modifications to create space stations complete with guest suites and a hydroponic indoor garden.

The new updates, which I had the chance to preview, lean into what I've enjoyed, offering more ways to "live" in the game. The game will now have its own, official space station home with a "Bond villain chic" aesthetic, including an indoor swimming pool. Outposts will have more decor options, including alien pets and robot buddies.

The biggest, most exciting update for all kinds of players is the Free Lanes feature, which will finally allow full space travel between planets. One of the loudest criticisms of the game, which I share, was how space travel left a bit too much to the imagination, relegated to loading screens. With Free Lanes, spaceships can now cruise at light speed between planets. Players can even set a destination, turn on autopilot and roam their ship. It means more time to just walk around and admire the decor.

The game is also finally updating and adding more "places of interest." Because the game is admittedly "irresponsibly large," as lead creative producer Tim Lamb put it while presenting these features to the press, planets will randomly generate "places of interest" to create the illusion of world-building.

The Terran Armada story features more of what people want: a dramatic and dangerous plot featuring a new faction, this time with what appears to be a legion of sentient robots. Bethesda is mum about the details of this, and all the better. The developers promised a lot with the 2024 Shattered Space story, but, like many others, I found it shallow and unfinished, with bugs that persist today. At the very least, Terran Armada will offer more shipbuilding potential, a huge plus for me, as someone obsessed with the game's ability to link machines and rooms to create operable, livable spaceships.

Lamb acknowledged in an interview that Starfield fans enjoy it as a cozy game. He describes it as a "player-directed" experience. I asked him about what he believes is the most misunderstood aspect of the game. He said some players "get it," when they tell themselves, "This is just a place for me to have a version of a cozy game."

"In order for the areas that have population to be meaningful, you have to have this large tapestry in the background," Lamb said, describing how the gameplay is different from the busywork adventures of their previous titles. "If you tripped over something every five steps, it wouldn't feel like this discovery."

And there it is. I get that if you expected a space opera like Star Wars, my love of Starfield will seem alien. It still tries to do too much, not being as good of a simulation as Elite Dangerous, while having a story less exciting than that of Mass Effect. I started to yawn when Lamb detailed the expansive "weapon modification" system for the new updates.

But you can bet I perked right back up when he talked about having a billiards room by the indoor space pool in the asteroid mansion. He pushed his friend into a pool before making his player sit in a lounge chair. For Starfield players like me, it felt right at home.

Online: bethesda.net/en/game/starfield

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS

‘Ready or Not,’ more bloodshed is coming

Sequel to 2019 film darker and heavier than original

BY JOCELYN NOVECK
Associated Press

When we last left our new bride, Grace, at the end of 2019’s “Ready or Not,” she was smoking a well-earned cigarette, having survived a night of slaughter. She sat on a stone step as a mansion went up in flames behind her, her wedding dress ripped and caked with blood, dirt and grime (but mostly blood.)

“In-laws,” she’d explained dryly, when asked by police what had happened. It was the biggest laugh of the movie — and also well-earned, especially by us, after all that gore.

Now, seven years later, we have “Ready or Not 2: Here I Come,” which takes off from that same moment. But the mood does not remain light. Uttering that last line, Grace (Samara Weaving) then collapses into unconsciousness and is carted away by ambulance. And her troubles, of course, are just beginning.

It’s hard to pinpoint why this next level of Grace’s very bad wedding night, again directed by Matt Bettinelli-Olpin and Tyler Gillett, feels darker and heavier — and hence less enjoyable — than the original, which managed to maintain a bouncy feel, even with bodies combusting at an absurd rate. But if we have to blame someone, we’re gonna go with the doctor from “The Pitt.”

Yep, that would be Shawn Hatosy. We never thought dear, handsome Dr. Jack Abbott could be such a downer. There’s a particularly odious scene where Hatosy’s character, Titus, seems to echo the murderous Shakespearean protagonist that he is, come to think of it, probably named after — Titus Andronicus. His twin sister, Ursula, is played by Sarah Michelle Gellar, and together they’re quite the depressing duo.

But back to the plot: Grace had triumphantly stayed alive ’til dawn in the first movie, thus winning the dastardly game she’d been forced to play moments after marrying Alex, her rich boyfriend. Required by family ritual to draw a game card from a deck, she’d unluckily drawn hide-and-seek, which meant she had to hide while the extended family hunted her down with weapons both antique and modern. Only gritty Grace survived.

The supporting cast of the first movie, including Andie MacDowell and Adam Brody, is not back (duh). In their place is a new group, including Hatosy, Gellar, Elijah Wood as the attorney who runs the grim proceedings and Kathryn Newton as Grace’s sister, Faith.

Or should we say estranged sister. Faith shows up at Grace’s hospital bed, having not seen her in years, because she was listed as Grace’s emergency contact. There’s a detective in the room, too. Grace is now, annoyingly, suspected of arson and murder.



SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES/AP

From left, Kathryn Newton, Sarah Michelle Gellar and Samara Weaving in a scene from “Ready or Not 2: Here I Come,” the sequel to the 2019 film.

But soon none of that matters. Because, it turns out, Grace is being hunted yet again — not by her in-laws, the Le Domas family, which is gone, but by four other families jockeying for the High Seat on the council that rules the world. Is Grace up to the challenge of this new level of play?

Of course she is, and so is Weaving, who proves yet again that she’s better than the material: expressive in both fear and feistiness, a good screamer and able to step back for an occasional moment of humor.

Lookalike Newton proves an appealing companion, and of course Faith and Grace eventually stop bickering and start bonding. “I tried to invite you to the wedding,” Grace says helpfully at one point. Reminder: the wedding ended in a bloodbath.

Speaking of a bloodbath, deep into the movie’s production notes comes an icky statistic: Some 250 gallons of stage blood were used for the film. Maybe all that blood was needed, but the extra 15 minutes of run time, compared to the original, feel unnecessary. You start to wonder when dawn will come. And while most of the deaths have a cartoonish element, there’s nothing cartoonish when Titus is involved.

No, there is little to redeem this truly mendacious character. So fair warning: If you’re still in the middle of the current season of “The Pitt,” where Hatosy’s Abbott is busy being heroic and also taking off his shirt, it might be better to wait a bit before you watch him here, doing the very opposite of saving lives.

“Ready or Not 2: Here I Come” is rated R for strong bloody violence, gore, pervasive language and brief drug use. Running time: 148 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.

In sonic-driven ‘Undertone,’ a paranormal podcast turns perilous

BY JAKE COYLE
Associated Press

Writer-director Ian Tuason’s feature debut, the sonic-driven horror “Undertone,” has, at least at the outset, an appealingly stripped-down quality.

The 30-something Evy Babic (Nina Kiri) lives with her dying, comatose mother (Michèle Duquet). The movie never leaves their small, two-story home. Upstairs, Evy’s mother lies wordlessly in a bed. Downstairs, Evy, at 3 a.m. puts on headphones, sits in front of a microphone and calls up her paranormal podcast co-host Justin (Adam DiMarco’s voice) to talk “all things creepy.”

It’s a testament to Tuason’s evident filmmaking talent that, with these bare bones, “Undertone” swells into a gripping and unsettling experience. This is a movie that summons many of its scares with a sudden boost in audio levels, the thunderous tick of a clock or the scream of ... a tea kettle. It’s even rated “R” not for bloodcurdling violence or satanic ghouls but, simply, “language.”

It’s these subtle qualities that make “Undertone” a spare but deftly dense film and Tuason a filmmaker to watch. It’s the movie’s disappointing second half, though, that breaks its quiet spell. After conjuring a tapestry of tension through narrative drips, as well as literal ones, Tuason throws in the whole kitchen sink, drowning out “Undertone” with a cacophony of genre cliches. Ancient Christian lore is invoked, as are children’s lullabies, and the riveting nuance of “Undertone” slips away in all the feedback.

“I want it to be over,” Evy tells Justin. “Is that a bad thing to say?”

Evy’s mother hasn’t eaten in two days, and Evy’s emotional exhaustion is clear when she first connects with her London-based co-host. You might here be wondering if the movie digs into this guilt, but “Undertone” is better at leaving carefully placed clues than following through on them.



A24/AP

Podcaster Evy Babic (Nina Kiri) gets spooked by a bunch of audio files emailed to her anonymously in “Undertone.”

For the episode they begin taping, Justin tells Evy that an anonymous emailer has sent a mysterious message with 10 audio files. They begin listening to them one by one, while recording. In them, a married and pregnant couple, Jessa and Mike, are trying an experiment. Mike, who’s doing the recording, says that Jessa talks in her sleep. In fact, it turns out she sings (“London Bridge Is Falling Down”), and it doesn’t get better from there.

Our experience of this, and the eerie subsequent recordings, is entirely aural. While “Undertone” is far from the first horror film to grasp the power of sound design, it’s cunning in its deployment of a found-footage tale that unspools through the ears.

This has to do with the recordings themselves, but it’s also due to the vulnerable place they put Evy. Some of the best moments in Tuason’s film play on our anxiety for her, as she listens in the darkened night. As the unfolding story grows closer to her, we feel like someone, at any moment, is going to emerge from a shadow while Evy, unaware, sits isolated by headphones. Call it noise-canceling horror.

One idea that “Undertone” plays with is something Justin mentions: audio pareidolia, the term for when the brain imposes words or patterns out of random, disorganized sounds. As they investigate the recordings, Evy and Justin are often playing them backward. Their interpretations become ours. The movie itself is a jumble of auditory clues that may or may mean something.

I’d rather “Undertone” stayed on this track, but, as if fretful of being too minimalistic, Tuason piles on more layers. Evy finds out she’s pregnant and isn’t sure she wants to keep it. We can tell from all the Catholic accoutrement around the house, Evy’s mother, if conscious, might have a strong opinion on this choice. The dark origins of the children’s songs, too, relate to mothers and children.

But for a highly contemporary movie centered around podcasting, “Undertone” morphs into an old-fashioned thrill ride, full of Catholic idols and creaky doors and light bulbs that go in and out. Kiri is exceptional in carrying a film in which she’s the only talking, present actor. But that a movie so threadbare manages to feel like too much is both the film’s accomplishment and its failure.

“Undertone” is rated R for language. Running time: 94 minutes.

WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEW



AMAZON MGM STUDIOS/AP

Science teacher Ryland Grace (Ryan Gosling) doesn't think he's the right man to save the sun in "Project Hail Mary," adapted from a story by science-fiction author Andy Weir.

Gosling's our only hope

Actor plays an unlikely science hero in crowd-pleaser 'Project Hail Mary'

BY LINDSEY BAHR
Associated Press

It's been a minute since we've had a big-screen space epic that's as fun as it is awe-inspiring. The last memorable one might have been "The Martian," so perhaps it shouldn't be all that surprising that the drought is ending with another Andy Weir story adapted by Drew Goddard.

"Project Hail Mary," directed by Phil Lord and Chris Miller, is the kind of spectacular cinematic adventure that we've been missing: a clever, sincere, most-ages crowd-pleaser that's full of life, energy and a love of science, quirky T-shirts and "Interstellar." It's the kind of movie Disney really should be making, but, in this case, we have Amazon MGM to thank. And it will probably just get better with age and repeat viewings.

Ryan Gosling is put to the ultimate movie star test as the only person on the screen for a large part of the picture. It begins with his character, Ryland Grace, waking up from an extended sleep in a spaceship. His long hair and bushy beard suggest he's been sleeping for quite some time (his highlights may tell a different story, but maybe I should repeat to myself it's just a show and really just relax). Even worse, he's alone and he has no idea how he got there or who he is.

The movie's not out to annoy you with wheelspinning: There are soon flashbacks and an alien friend added to the mix as he starts to piece together a picture of who he was on Earth ("Am I smart?" he wonders out loud) and try to complete his apparent mission to save the sun.

Except there's the small matter that Grace is pretty sure he's not a hero. On Earth, he was a middle school science teacher. When his students ask about the strange dots that have appeared outside the Earth's atmosphere that seem to be causing the sun to die, he assures them that the world's top minds are figuring it out. Against all movie logic when it comes to the extraordinary nobody, he's not excited to discover that he might be their only hope.

Some government types have found an old paper he wrote while getting his doctorate, an idea that made him the laughingstock of the scientific community. He tries to tell them at every step of the way that they've got the wrong guy for the job. "I ride a bike to work ... and it's not for exercise," he tells Sandra Hüller's project manager Eva Stratt. But he's scrappy and keeps working the problem.

"Project Hail Mary" does make you wonder whether a guy who looks like Gosling could disappear into the backdrop of his own life the way Grace has. But really, what's the point of that thought exercise? It doesn't require too much suspension of disbelief to get invested in the journey of someone who essentially has to learn to believe in himself. And it doesn't hurt when it also comes with an improbably cute alien sidekick who we'll come to know as Rocky. He's voiced by James Ortiz and is kind of like a golden retriever crossed with a genius architect. They soon become the best of friends, which can only mean one thing: You're probably going to cry at some point.

While Grace and Rocky are the main show, Hüller is a particular standout as the dry, practical head of the operation. Gosling already spoiled her big, irresistible karaoke moment in his "Saturday Night Live" monologue, but I suspect it'll still be a highlight. "The Bear's" Lionel Boyce also lights up every scene he's in as a private security/bodyguard type.

Lord and Miller haven't directed a live action movie in some time, whether or not you count the "Solo" Star Wars debacle, and it's nice to have them back and teaming with a cinematographer with a keen grasp of scale and visual effects like Greig Fraser.

As in Lord and Miller's animated movies, their tone and pace remain singular. "Project Hail Mary" might blow past a two-hour run time and yet there's rarely a dull moment with all the problem-solving, earnest irreverence and unabashed commitment to imbuing life and wit into every molecule of the story. Daniel Pemberton's unusual, buoyant score and Joel Negron's sharp editing are key.

So many filmmakers feel the need to overwhelm their intergalactic spectacles with pathos to match the cosmos. It's kind of refreshing that "Project Hail Mary" doesn't have a dead wife or kid weighing down our protagonist — just an alien friend and all of life on Earth.

"Project Hail Mary" is rated PG-13 for some thematic material and suggestive references. Running time: 156 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.

Get animated with the best of Lord and Miller

BY KATIE WALSH
Tribune News Service

The filmmaking team of Phil Lord and Chris Miller have undeniably shaped our cinematic sensibilities over the last decade, and with their new film, the heartwarming space movie "Project Hail Mary," starring Ryan Gosling, they're taking their style into the previously unexplored territory of the live-action sci-fi epic.

Since the film is so "Lord and Miller" in its approach, tone and perspective, you might be wanting to explore more of their work, which spans Oscar-winning animation, comedy and more. So here's where to find the best of Lord and Miller's work as writers, directors and producers.

The pair met in college at Dartmouth, and got their start with the animated series "Clone High," which premiered on MTV in 2003. The adult animated series featured the clones of historical figures in a fictional high school, and developed a cult following. The series, as well as the 2023 revival, is available to stream on HBO Max.

But the mainstream breakout for Lord and Miller came with their 2009 animated feature "Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs," about an inventor who makes a machine that can convert water into food and then has to stop the food storms (the film is loosely based on the 1978 children's book by Judi and Ron Barrett).

"Cloudy with a Chance of Meatballs" received positive reviews and a Golden Globe nomination, and is available to rent on all digital platforms.

Lord and Miller then branched out into live-action comedy with the films "21 Jump Street" (2012) and the sequel "22 Jump Street" (2014), starring Channing Tatum and Jonah Hill in this reboot of the '80s TV series about undercover cops in high school. Both films are available to stream on Paramount+.

But the duo might be best known for their Lego movies, animated features about the favorite interlocking blocks. After the success of "The Lego Movie" in 2014, which they directed, it turns out just about anything can be Lego'd into a movie, and so Lord and Miller produced "The Lego Batman Movie" (2017), actually one of the best Batman movies, full stop, and "The Lego Ninjago Movie" (2017). Stream "The Lego Movie" on Netflix and the "Batman" and "Ninjago" movies on HBO Max.

They won an Academy Award for producing the daring and artful animated feature "Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse" (2018), along with director and co-writer Rodney Rothman, a film that not only challenged what a superhero film could be but what an animated film could look like. Stream it on Netflix.

They followed that up with the even more exciting "Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse" (2023), directed by Joaquim Dos Santos, which also earned an Oscar nomination. Stream that on Disney+ or rent it elsewhere.

In between "Spider-Verses," they produced the Netflix animated feature "The Mitchells vs. the Machines" in 2021, which also earned an Oscar nomination.

But perhaps one of their most exciting recent producorial credits is on the 2024 indie feature "Los Frikis," directed by Tyler Nilson and Michael Schwartz. The film tells the true story of a group of punks in 1990s Cuba who risk their health in order to live at a government-run treatment home for HIV-positive patients.

The film stars Adria Arjona, Héctor Medina and Eros de la Puente in this moving tale of resiliency and community. Stream it on Kanopy or rent it on other digital platforms.



SPAI, NETFLIX/TNS

Rick Mitchell (Danny McBride), left, and Katie Mitchell (Abbi Jacobson) in "The Mitchells vs. the Machines" from 2021. The animated feature was nominated for an Oscar.

Heard but not seen

Ian Tuason's debut film, 'Undertone,' a minimalist horror, uses audio and soundscapes to scare you

By Lindsey Bahr
Associated Press



A24/AP

Nina Kiri as podcaster Evy in a scene from "Undertone." In the film, she and her remote co-host try to decode a series of unnerving audio files sent anonymously.

Alfred Hitchcock famously claimed he didn't watch his films in theaters. When asked if he missed out on hearing the audience scream, he said, "No. I can hear them scream when I'm making the picture."

While Ian Tuason, the mind behind the buzzy new auditory horror "Undertone," reveres and references Hitchcock as much as the next horror filmmaker, he has to disagree with him on this one. For Tuason, the real screams are the point.

"My favorite thing about this whole process is just watching it with audiences. I think that's probably why I wanted to make a horror film ... just to kind of witness the reactions," Tuason said in a recent interview with The Associated Press. "The same way as when you tell a ghost story at a campfire, it doesn't feel that great unless you see your friend scared."

His debut film "Undertone," now in stateside theaters, is already doing just that. After playing at the Sundance Film Festival, it had some calling it the "scariest movie you'll ever hear."

"Undertone" is a minimalist horror, set in one location, with essentially one character. Evy (Nina Kiri) is a paranormal podcaster who is taking care of her dying, comatose mother upstairs. She's the skeptic of the podcast, which she does with a remote co-host (Adam DiMarco) in the middle of the night. Nothing can scare her, but this new investigation, in which they try to decode a series of unnerving audio files sent anonymously, has rattled her.

Why sound is so scary

Tuason always dreamed of being a filmmaker, but he began his career in virtual reality and made a name for himself as an early proponent of immersive 3D sound for his cinematic horror shorts, which have been viewed millions of times. Soundscapes became his calling card. So, when he sat down to write "Undertone," he included every audio cue, resulting in a 250-page script.

"Sound in movies, it makes space for the audience to imagine what they're not seeing," Tuason said. "Whatever you imagine that's scary is going to be way scarier than what I can show you. There's going to be millions of different versions of this movie in millions of minds and that's all because of the power of suggestion driven by sound and a lot of negative space."

In the process of shooting, he even found himself taking out a lot of the visuals he thought he'd need, stripping it down to its barest form: a woman listening to audio clips through her noise canceling headphones and freaking herself, and the audience, out. They figured it out with the help of a local Toronto postproduction studio, REDLAB. When A24 came on board to distribute the film, it was able to do the mix again in Dolby.

"It's definitely meant to be seen in the theater in Dolby, because that is the exact vision that Ian had," said producer Cody Calahan. "But at home, on headphones, alone, it is a different experience ... You can kind of watch it twice."

The story behind the film

Behind the film is a deeply personal story of demons, loss and grief. In 2020, during the pandemic, both of Tuason's parents received terminal cancer diagnoses, and he moved back home to their Toronto suburbs to care for them. His mom died a few months later, followed by his father 2½ years later. During that time, Tuason was drinking a lot too, but also writing, melding together an audio play he'd created with the story of a lone caregiver.

He wrote it figuring that he'd just have to make it himself with whatever resources he had. It could be set in his childhood home (nothing to rent) and feature one actor ("I could afford that," he said). And he didn't hold back: Even he was surprised by his own capacity for honesty about some of his darkest moments.

"I didn't really have to write in a way where I'm trying to pitch it," Tuason said. "I think that's what gave it its honesty. Because I was going to make it either way."

His main character, Evy, is him, he said. But he wrote Evy as a woman and not a man because, Tuason said, he needed the character to face a choice that would change their life; He couldn't think of anything bigger than the question of whether to have a child.

Throughout it all, Tuason worked on himself as a person too, leaving the skeptic behind and turning into a believer, he said. He knows the Evys of the world will doubt it, but he sees meaningful connections everywhere now, even in the film's release date that he had nothing to do with.

"It's a miracle that I made this thing and then A24 bought it, and then Sundance and then the release on Friday the 13th," Tuason said. "My dad passed on Friday, the 13th. And March was the last month I had with my mom."

What's next: kung fu, 'Paranormal Activity'

Though moviegoers might just be discovering Tuason, Hollywood has already taken notice. In December, he was tapped to direct a new "Paranormal Activity" film. He knows that horror is what people want from him, and as a self-proclaimed people pleaser, he wants to do that, too. But he does have dreams of delving into other genres as well, like science fiction and, eventually, kung fu.

"It's going to be modern-day kung fu," he said.

But now, he's focused on getting "Undertone" out to the world. And he's grateful that he's starting to see it as a film and a character, separate from himself.

"It's starting to feel less and less like me," he said. "There wasn't any separation for the longest time, but now I watch it in the theater and I'm a little bit more distanced ... now I can look at it and kind of just focus on the technique, the art and have it live as a thing separate from me."



Chris Pizzello, Invision/AP

Director Ian Tuason poses for a portrait to promote his film "Undertone" on March 4 in West Hollywood, Calif. On his shirt is the butterfly that joined him for the photo shoot.

WEEKEND: TRAVEL

Exploring Slovenia's romantic Lake Bled



DOMINIC ARIZONA BONUCCELLI/Rick Steves' Europe

A short hike up to Bled Castle rewards visitors with sweeping views.

Tiny Slovenia, nestled where the Alps meet the Adriatic Sea, is one of Europe's most unexpectedly charming destinations, with spectacular natural beauty and a fascinating recent history — yet much of it is still far off many tourists' path. One of its brightest gems is a romantic getaway that once entertained emperors and presidents: Lake Bled.

Nestled up against the northeast side of the rugged Julian Alps, just south of the Austrian border, Lake Bled is almost certainly the most photogenic, relaxing spot in Slovenia (and that's saying a lot). The picture-perfect lake laps up against a tiny church-topped island, sheer cliffs that lead to an improbably perched medieval castle, and the bare feet of toe-dipping vacationers. Since the Habsburg days, this has been where Slovenes take their guests — whether kings or cousins — to show off their nation's natural wonders.

The four-mile path that rings the lake is an understandably popular route for a stroll. At a leisurely pace, the path takes about an hour and a half on foot, but I'd allow more for snapping photos of the ever-changing views. While walking the lakeside is slo-mo bliss, biking lets you fast-forward through the scenery. Either way, you'll pass several grand villas, most of them built by local aristocrats in the early 19th century. The most noteworthy is the former residence of Yugoslav president-for-life Marshal Tito — today the Hotel Vila Bled, a fine place to stop for a coffee and pretend Tito invited you to drop by.



Rick Steves

No visit to Lake Bled is complete without a trip to its steeple-capped island, which nudges the lake's quaintness level over the top. The most romantic route to the island is on one of the lake's distinctive flat-bottomed *pletna* boats. Like the iconic gondolas of Venice, these boats carry on a tradition dating back generations. Locals still build their *pletnas* by hand with larch wood from a design passed down from father to son for centuries. Since the boats have no keel, the skilled oarsmen must work hard to steer them with each stroke. Watching them row is a special experience — but a *pletna* ride is expensive, and the oarsmen stick close to their 30-minute waiting time on the island. Fortunately, you can rent a simple wooden rowboat for much less money (and enjoy the *pletna* boats from the outside).

The pretty Church of the Assumption, atop the tiny island's summit, stands on the site of an eighth-century Slavic pagan temple. It's a popular spot for weddings — even though tradition dictates that grooms carry their bride up the 99 steps leading from the boat dock up to the church door. According to local superstition, ringing the church bell three times with one big pull on the rope — which hangs right down to the altar — will grant you a wish. I can't promise that it works, but each I time tug the rope and make a wish, I open my eyes to find myself on an enchanting island in the middle of a stunning lake.

Even on a short visit, I'd make the short hike up to Bled Castle for a little bit of history and lots of big views. Dating in one form or another from about 1,000 years ago, it had been the seat of the Austrian bishops who controlled Bled in the Middle Ages. The various sights at the castle — a decent history museum, frescoed chapel, old-fashioned printing press and wine cellar — are cute, but the draws are the sweeping panoramas.

No matter what, be sure to try the town's sweet specialty, a cream cake called kremna rezina: a layer of cream and a thick layer of vanilla custard artfully sandwiched between sheets of delicate, crispy crust. For many Slovenes, the chance to sample this famous dessert is reason enough to visit Bled.

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

Balloon, birds, bones: travel ideas for adventurous souls

With spring school vacation week looming tantalizingly close for many of the military community's school-age youth and children, parents may find themselves on the lookout for destinations and day trips appealing enough to lure their offspring away from screen time and into the great outdoors. Here are a few ideas:

Balloon rides over Krakow: With its UNESCO-listed squares and buildings, Poland's medieval gem is impressive enough at eye level; for another view of its towers, turrets and tiled rooftops, consider a ride in a tethered balloon, an experience offered by Balon Widokowy throughout the year. When weather conditions allow for an ascent, the balloon, which can carry up to 30 passengers at a time, rises up to a height of nearly 500 feet, about as high as a roughly 40-story building. The experience generally lasts from 10 to 14 minutes. Adult tickets purchased online go for 125 Polish Zloty (about $34); children pay 70 PLZ. Online: balonwidokowy.pl



Karen Bradbury

Treetop rambling and a long slide in the Black Forest: A treetop walking path and nature trail offering hanging bridges, nets and other interactive stations make the Naturerlebnispark Waldkirch in Germany's Black Forest region a fun destination for families with kids of all ages. The park has another claim to fame — it's home to what's billed as Europe's longest high-speed tubular slide. The 620-foot-long slide is used to come back down to earth following the treetop ramble, and costs an additional 2 euros on top of the park's regular entry fees of 8 euros adults, 6 euros children ages 4-15 and free for children up to the age of 3. Only those ages 8 and older may use the slide. Online: baumkronenweg-waldkirch.de/en

Stand-up paddling through Ljubljana: Many of the top sights of Slovenia's compact capital city are located alongside the river that flows straight through its heart. Instead of exploring via booking a boat tour, active types can opt for the two-hour SUP experience offered by Bananaway. Following land-based instruction, a guide leads a small group onto their boards and into the flow, passing by willow trees and under landmarks including the Triple Bridge. Storytelling and game-playing round off the experience. Both morning and late afternoon trips are sometimes offered. The tour costs 59 euros for adults and 49 euros for youth ages ten-17. Online: bananaway.eu



iStock

A tethered balloon ride offers a view from above in Krakow, Poland. The experience lasts just 10-14 minutes.

Puffin spotting in Wales: Skomer Island lies just under a mile off the southwest coast of Pembrokeshire, Wales. Exposed headlands, towering offshore rocks and sheltered inlets make this island a paradise for many forms of wildlife, particularly seals, rabbits, the sea birds known as shearwaters and, most famously, puffins. Along with neighboring Skokholm Island, the area forms southern Britain's largest puffin breeding colony. The puffins begin their annual return to the island in April, and their numbers are usually greatest from mid-June through mid-July. A visit to the island in early spring offers the additional prospect of spotting a profusion of wildflowers.

Skomer, a National Nature Reserve, can be visited by booking trips through Pembrokeshire Islands Boat Trips. Embarking from Martin's Haven, visitors can opt for various types of adventures. The classic day trip, including a 15-minute boat ride each way and 4½ hours of independent exploration, is offered from April 1 through Sept. 30, Mondays excepted. Prices range from 32 to 42 UK pounds for adults and 24 to 30 UK pounds for ages 2-11, varying by season. Online: tinyurl.com/3xhm6ftw

Tiptoeing past daffodils in Germany's Eifel Region: The Eifel region is a volcanic, low-lying mountain range found within the states of Rhineland-Palatinate and North Rhine-Westphalia. Each year in spring, bright yellow seas of delicate flowers blanket the contours of its landscapes. Among the best places to spot the early bloomers are the Perlenbach and Fuhrtsbachtal valleys near Monschau and in Oleftal valley near Hellenthal. Hikers will delight in a day wandering along the Narzissenroute (Daffodil Route), a 10-mile trail that begins at the gate to the Eifel National Park in Monschau-Höfen. Wear sturdy hiking boots; the trail is muddy. Online: tinyurl.com/28hp685x

Exploring an ossuary in Naples: Among Naples, Italy's many unsettling attractions is found the Cimitero delle Fontanelle, or Cemetery of Fountains. For more than 400 years, the remains of victims of epidemics and those who couldn't afford a proper burial found their final place of rest in a mining quarry.

The entrance is found just to the right of the Church of Maria Santissima del Carmine. Once inside, three vast tunnels lead past skulls, tibiae and femurs, at least 40,000 remains. Some of these unknown souls have been "adopted," their skulls placed in special wooden cases and given a name and story. The site is easily reached by a 10-minute walk from the Materdei metro stop. It is open most days, and entry is free. Online: tinyurl.com/427zyhpd

WEEKEND: TRAVEL



NATALIE B. COMPTON/The Washington Post

The writer's "classic double room" at the Grand Hôtel des Balcons in Paris cost $170 during the offseason. The 49-room hotel, a couple blocks from the Luxembourg gardens and a 10-minute walk from Notre-Dame cathedral, is family-run and housed in a 19th-century townhouse. The room had lots of storage space, a clean bathroom and a comfortable bed.

How to stay in Paris on a budget

Writer visits French capital and compares hotels in $100, $200 and $300 price ranges to help you get your money's worth

BY NATALIE B. COMPTON
The Washington Post

It should come as no surprise that hotels in one of the most visited cities on Earth do not run cheap. Those famous hotels, the ones you see celebrities and Instagram influencers post about with balconies overlooking the Eiffel Tower? They charge more than $1,000 per night for their worst room.

It's not just a problem for the crème de la crème of properties. Across the board in Paris, prices are high. The average hotel rates in the French capital, as of February, are $346.86, which is up 13.8% year over year according to STR, a global hospitality data and analytics company.

"Just generally, hotel prices have gone up in the last couple years," said Matt Kepnes, author of "How to Travel the World on $75 a Day," who recently moved to Paris. "It's much harder globally to find inexpensive properties unless you're traveling really offseason."

Paris is no different, with prices fluctuating wildly with demand throughout the year. In my hunt for a reasonable room last month, I found rates for hotels around $150 that could skyrocket to more than $400 come peak season — namely, the sunniest parts of spring, summer and fall.

For better deals, Kepnes recommends turning your search beyond the central core of Paris, looking instead to the city's outer arrondissements (or neighborhoods).

"Anything in the 2nd is going to be super expensive," he said. "But if you look at places in the 20th, which is a cool area ... the 9th, the 14th, the 15th, the 17th — they're a little further out, but the rates are cheaper."

How cheap? Finding a hotel for under $100 per night is a challenge — at least if you want something "hygienic," said journalist Lindsey Tramuta, who wrote the book "The Eater Guide to Paris." Even private rooms in some hostels can run for upward of $150.

But there are exceptions.

The one-star chain HotelF1 is considered the cheapest brand in Paris, but its locations are outside of the Boulevard Périphérique — the ring road that circles Paris proper. That might not be a deal breaker. To the city's south, there's HotelF1 Paris Porte de Châtillon (average nightly rates around $75), about a 30-minute walk from the Catacombs of Paris, and just a bit further down the road you'll hit the famous seafood restaurant Le Duc.

But generally, Tramuta isn't sure the financial savings of staying beyond the Périphérique are worth the added time on the Métro back into the city center, and recommends looking to less expensive chains instead.

So where does that leave the budget-conscious traveler? I tested properties in three price categories to see what you could get for around $100, $200 and $300. Here's what I learned:

Hipotel Père Lachaise: $99

Hipotel Père Lachaise is a block from the famous cemetery of the same name in the 11th Arrondissement. Nearby, there are multiple organic markets, cafés and restaurants, including the hot-spot bistro Le Servan. Online, the hotel showed rates that ran as low as $68 and as high as $161, depending on the season. I booked a standard twin room that fit two people for $99, including taxes.

When I arrived, the lobby was updated and clean, complete with spa water for visitors and a welcoming staff member to check me in. My room was dormlike in decor but shockingly massive, and had a huge floor-to-ceiling window that opened up onto a quiet street. There was plenty of storage space and a luggage rack, plus a small writing desk. The beds — two twins pushed together, very European — were firm but comfortable, with very basic bedding (see also: bleached-to-death sheets).

Highlights: Firm, comfortable bed(s), clean and spacious. Even the bathroom was gigantic. The shower may have looked like a tiny old capsule in the corner, but the water pressure was quite strong, and it never ran out of hot water. Also within a short walk to Métro Lines 2, 3 and 9, and within walking distance from cool restaurants.

Lowlights: Gray floors, gray walls and gray furniture accented the spartan-ness of the room. The bathroom, while clean, felt beat-up, and like in many European hotel bathrooms, the shower flooded the entirety of the tile floor. Thin walls meant you could hear your neighbors coming and going in the hallway; light sleepers may want earplugs.

Did we get what we paid for? 100%. The hotel was in a lovely stretch of a great

SEE PARIS ON PAGE 21

Paris: Writer discovers higher-cost hotels aren't always better

FROM PAGE 20

neighborhood. You would be hard-pressed to find a larger room at a better price.

Grand Hôtel des Balcons: $170

Bumping up my budget meant one thing: location, location, location. I chose the Grand Hôtel des Balcons because it was a couple blocks from the Luxembourg gardens and a 10-minute walk from Notre-Dame cathedral. It's a family-run hotel with 49 rooms, housed in a 19th-century townhouse, which felt very Parisian. My room was $170 per night, but they can teeter into the $300 territory during peak season. For $16 per day, you can add a continental breakfast.

The hotel sits on a quiet street, but it's just around the corner from nice boutique clothing stores, antique-book shops, small restaurants and the Boulevard Saint-Germain, a major thoroughfare with even more businesses. As the name suggests, my room had a typical Parisian balcony. (Too narrow for table and chairs, but you can enjoy the lovely view.)

Highlights: The hotel was full of charm and really gave you a sense of place; you have the wrought iron railing and flower boxes on your window, which overlooked the townhouses across the narrow street. You still handed over your brass key to the front desk to store in a cubby when you came and went. While small, the room had lots of storage space, very bright lighting, a clean bathroom with a good shower and a comfortable bed. And it was only a few minutes' walk from Métro Lines 4 and 10.

Lowlights: If I was paying peak rates, I might be disappointed by some of the small room's dated features, such as a very loud and annoying bathroom fan and the carpeting. There was a hot water kettle, but only cheap packets of instant coffee and tea bags.

Did we get what we paid for? A little worn, the Grand Hôtel des Balcons was still lovely and bright, and worthy of its off-peak rate.



PHOTOS BY NATALIE B. COMPTON/The Washington Post

The writer spent $310 for this basic room in the midluxury Hôtel Pulitzer Paris in the 9th Arrondissement. It was small but ornate and featured an expensive-feeling bed, robes and slippers in the closet and a Nespresso machine and a glass bottle of complimentary water on the desk.



This standard twin room at the Hipotel Paris Père Lachaise, in the 11th Arrondissement, booked for $99, looks dormlike but is clean and spacious. The walls are thin, but the bed is firm and comfortable.



The basic but clean bathroom at the Hipotel Père Lachaise feels a bit beat-up, but the shower never ran out of hot water and the water pressure was strong.

Hôtel Pulitzer Paris: $310

In the $300-per-night range, I turned to the Michelin Key website for recommendations and found the Hôtel Pulitzer Paris. Located in the 9th Arrondissement's Opera District, it's part of a small collection of boutique properties across Western Europe and promised contemporary design in "unique spaces." Reviews raved about location and the service, and I liked that it didn't look too modern — as many other hotels in this midluxury price range appeared. I didn't want to wake up wondering where I was; I wanted to wake up feeling like I was in France.

Check-in was seamless, and I took the elevator to the fifth floor to find my room. ($310 per night, including taxes. In peak season, prices can climb to $400 per night.) It was smaller than I had expected but much more ornate than those of the previous two hotels. Attention to detail was evident in every corner of the room, between the artwork, the sultry lighting and helpful hooks for hanging clothing.

Highlights: The room was full of luxurious touches, from the expensive-feeling bed to the robes and slippers in the closet. Turndown service included a chocolate on the pillow. The desk was stocked with a Nespresso machine and a glass bottle of complimentary water. A big window overlooked very Parisian rooftops in a quiet courtyard. You're very much in the action in a vibrant neighborhood and within a short walk from the Grands Boulevards or Le Peletier Métro stations.

Lowlight: The lobby and guest rooms are pumped with the hotel's signature fragrance. For anyone with a scent sensitivity, this would be a major setback — maybe even a deal breaker. And while the lighting seemed dark by design, it made me sleepy when I was trying to get some work done during the day; I nearly asked the front desk for an extra lamp.

Did we get what we paid for? The actual build of the hotel's interior made it feel exponentially more luxurious than the other hotels. Between the fantastic bed, the in-room amenities and the helpful staff, it felt worthy of the price tag.

The takeaway

The most expensive hotel wasn't my favorite of the three. While the bed, decor and amenities were more luxurious, I slept great at the other two and preferred that they were on quieter streets. Not to mention the less you spend on your hotel, the more you might have for dining out and shopping.

After this experiment — and about a dozen prior trips to the city — I can tell you that Paris isn't about being in your hotel room, anyway. It's about walking along the Seine and people-watching from sidewalk cafés. That being said, a dump can ruin your trip. I benefited from spending a few hours scouring hotel booking sites and reading reviews from multiple sources before locking in my reservations. There were many budget hotels that looked promising, until you read that people felt unsafe staying in them or that management wouldn't fix a clogged toilet for days. So keep your eye out for a deal, but proceed with caution.

WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS



A white stork carries a stick while repairing its nest in Winden, Germany, on March 7. The birds add new sticks each year, with some nests eventually growing several feet wide.

Peak beak

Pair of German towns provide leisurely paths to avian awe with their stork-peeping possibilities

BY ZADE VADNAIS
Stars and Stripes



A placard marks the Stork Trail in Winden on March 7. The signs guide visitors along the route with its 30 occupied stork nests.

Until just recently, the largest bird I had ever seen outside a zoo was a bald eagle in Alaska. Its stick nest sat atop a light pole in the coastal town of Homer.

That happened during my assignment to Eielson Air Force Base, Alaska, which ended in 2023. So when spring arrived after my husband and I moved to Germany in 2025, I was stunned to see gigantic white storks nesting comfortably among village rooftops.

Perched on church towers, balanced on chimneys and standing in enormous stick nests that looked as if they had been lifted from a storybook, the birds seemed completely at home.

Winden and Knittelsheim, two villages about an hour southeast of Kaiserslautern, have made the birds such a part of daily life that my recent stroll there turned into a slow-moving scavenger hunt.

The long-legged birds are easy to spot once you start looking. Their stick nests, reused year after year, can grow up to about 6½ feet wide. In Winden alone, roughly 30 nests are occupied each year.

The best way to experience the village is along the roughly 2.5-mile Storchen-wanderweg, or Stork Trail, which loops through quiet streets, farmland and a small park before following a stream back toward town.

The route passes through several landscapes, giving visitors a chance to see the birds flying overhead, searching for food in open fields or tending to their nests above the village.

Stork-themed placards mark the trail, and information boards explain the birds' migration, nesting habits and role in local folklore. The signs are written in German, but a free translation app helped me quickly decipher them.

Along the route, you will often hear the birds before you see them. Storks communicate by clattering their long red bills, a hollow wooden sound that echoes from rooftops and chimneys.

A few minutes away, Knittelsheim offers a quieter but equally charming stork scene. The village streets are lined with traditional houses, many topped with nests. Look up and you might spot a stork standing like a sentry on a rooftop or circling above nearby fields.

Spend a little time watching them and their personalities begin to show. The birds are confident around people and not easily startled. Some stare curiously down from their nests, while others ignore passing pedestrians entirely.

In Knittelsheim, one particularly daring stork had claimed a nest in a church garden that could not have been more than about 10 feet off the ground.

Whether that confidence comes from generations of protection by local residents or simply from the sanctuary of church grounds is open to debate.

Traditionally, storks were believed to bring fertility, healthy babies and prosperity to households, along with protection from fire and misfortune.

There are practical reasons for the warm welcome as well. Storks help control pests by feeding on mice, voles, insects and small reptiles, and they coexist easily with people without damaging crops.

White storks follow a predictable seasonal rhythm, which makes planning a visit easy. The birds typically return to Germany from their wintering grounds in sub-Saharan Africa or southern Spain in late February, when males begin reclaiming and repairing nests.

Eggs are usually laid in late March or April, and fluffy chicks begin appearing in May. Most birds head south again in August or September, making spring and early summer the best window for viewing, especially if you hope to spot chicks in the nests.

You do not have to travel far from Kaiserslautern to see them. Villages like Katzweiler, between Kaiserslautern and Wolfstein, also host nesting storks each year.

For those who cannot make the trip, livestream cameras are affixed to select stork nests, letting viewers watch the birds build nests, raise chicks and go about daily life without leaving the couch.

But for the full experience, Winden and Knittelsheim make the best destinations in the Kaiserslautern Military Community. Spend an afternoon wandering quiet streets, scanning rooftops and listening for that unmistakable bill-clattering overhead.

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On the QT

Address: The Storchen-wanderweg Winden trail starts and ends at the village's train station, Bahnhofstrasse 17, Winden, Germany
Hours: The trail is open 24/7 year-round, but the best stork viewing is during daylight hours between March and August.
Price: Free
Information: Online: storchenwanderweg.de

Zade Vadnais



PHOTOS BY ZADE VADNAIS/Stars and Stripes

A white stork stands in Knittelsheim, Germany, on March 7. The large migratory birds spend spring and summer in Germany before traveling to winter in southern Europe or sub-Saharan Africa.



A stork stands in a nest atop a rooftop chimney in Knittelsheim. In many European traditions, storks nesting on rooftops are believed to bring prosperity, healthy children and protection from misfortune.

WEEKEND: FOOD & DINING



REY LOPEZ/For The Washington Post

Spice-and-herb blends can upgrade store-bought microwave popcorn.

How to make popcorn really pop with flavor

BY BECKY KRYSTAL
The Washington Post

One of the best things about microwave popcorn is how little you have to do to it. Pull a bag out of the package, toss it in the microwave, wait just long enough to not scald your fingers, tear open the bag and eat.

So do you need to improve on microwave popcorn? No. But should you open up your pantry and give it a try? Yes.

Microwave popcorn flavors typically revolve around varying degrees of butter and salt. That's only the tip of the iceberg, though, when it comes to things that can take this snack aisle staple to the next level.

"It's a blank canvas, and it's fun to experiment," says Karen Brittain, owner of Vermont-based Karen's Artisan Popcorn, whose line includes such wide-ranging ingredients as chipotle, maple, rosemary and cardamom.

Whether you start with a bag out of the microwave or pop your own corn, it doesn't take much in the way of effort or ingredients to whip up your own custom batch. Here's how:

Apply the toppings evenly

Most of the time, simply dumping your flavorings of choice on top of a bowl of popcorn isn't going to cut it. You may end up with bits that fall to the bottom of the bowl, only a superficial layer on top, uneven pockets of seasoning or a combination thereof.

In some cases, the tackiness of hot popcorn might be enough to get things to stick, Madison Paap, owner of Popcorn Monkey in Manassas, Va., says, but the safest option is to use a small amount of neutral oil.

She prefers a two-pronged approach, tossing the popcorn first with some of the dry seasoning, then combining a bit more with oil and tossing that mixture in, as well. If you're feeling extra fancy, briefly heat your oil (or butter) with your spices or herbs to bloom their flavors. Brittain likes misting the popcorn with oil (olive, neutral or coconut), too.

As to how much seasoning to apply, it depends on what you're using and your personal preference. Paap suggests starting with 1 tablespoon seasoning per bag of popped popcorn (about 11 cups), while Brittain recommends closer to 1 teaspoon for that amount. Still, both agree on the most important part: You can always add more seasoning, but you can't take it away, so start conservatively and go from there.

Create your custom flavor

To season your popcorn, you can go sweet, savory or somewhere in between.

"Don't be afraid to raid your spice cabinet," Paap says. Even the "weird flavors ... work great," she says, noting that some of Popcorn Monkey's most eclectic, popular flavors ("swamp venom," ghost pepper) actually started off as rib rubs.

Spice-and-herb blends, such as furikake, za'atar and everything-bagel spice, are great ready-made possibilities that can add both flavor and texture. Old Bay is a Mid-Atlantic classic.

Mustard powder stars in one of Brittain's customer favorites, while cheese powder (typically cheddar) can pair especially well with buttered popcorn, Paap says. (Nutritional yeast is a common vegan alternative.) Tomato powder, made from dehydrated and ground tomatoes, can deliver enticing tang.

As to sweet, you can toss the popcorn with your choice of sugar. Naturally, Vermont resident Brittain is inclined to maple sugar. Brown sugar and coconut sugar — Brittain likes to combine the latter with a bit of cocoa powder — are nice, as well. A drizzle of chocolate or caramel (or both!) can add instant flair.

A combination of sweet and heat makes a fine addition. Pair chocolate or caramel with a pinch of chile flakes, splash of sriracha or other hot sauce, or dab of gochujang.

Dining like Axl Rose

Swabian classics take stage at Stuttgart eatery recently visited by artist

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Axl Rose was an urchin on the street when he paid a visit to a cozy eatery in Stuttgart's seedy red-light district.

The legendary Guns N' Roses frontman made local headlines in August when he pulled up to Weinstube Fröhlich in a chauffeured Mercedes Maybach.

We're a family of Gunner fans, and of Rose in particular, so it was on our to-do list to walk in his footsteps after learning of his Stuttgart visit.

Weinstube Fröhlich is one of the older eateries in the Leonhardsviertel district and is something of a city institution. It serves Swabian classics in an intimate setting with wood-panel walls and a warm interior that contrasts with the lowbrow street scene outside.

I'd been to the restaurant a couple of times in the distant past, but seeing Rose's visit reminded me that it was a really enjoyable spot.

When we were seated during a recent visit, a family affair of six people, the first question I asked the waitress was what Axl ordered.

She said he had the roast beef and also ordered an additional dish of spaetzle to go. I was a little disappointed he didn't go for the veal liver, which would have made us simpatico.

While many people turn their nose up at the thought of liver, the dish was a real standout at Weinstube Fröhlich.

The bites of meat were tender and mild by liver standards, with just a tiny hint of that signature metallic aftertaste.





PHOTOS BY JOHN VANDIVER/Stars and Stripes

Veal liver in a dark sauce was on the menu at Weinstube Fröhlich, an eatery in downtown Stuttgart.

It wouldn't be a German weinstube if schnitzel and spaetzle weren't also on the eatery's menu.

AFTER HOURS GERMANY

Weinstube Fröhlich

Address: Leonhardstrasse 5, Stuttgart, Germany
Hours: Tuesday-Saturday, 5:30 p.m.-12 a.m.
Prices: Between $25 and $40 for entrees.
Information: + 49 711 242471
weinstube-froehlich.de

John Vandiver

The dark brown syrupy sauce it was served in also delivered the flavor. I had a side of roasted potatoes, and before that ate the beef tartare for an appetizer, which was silky and delicious.

The menu features the usual southern German standards, like homemade maultaschen, or large meat-filled dumplings, and the regional style of potato salad.

While the offerings aren't extensive, everything is well-made, which probably explains the crowd. Reservations are recommended, especially on Fridays and Saturdays.

One of my dining companions ordered Axl's roast beef and gave it high marks. Others ordered schnitzel and maultaschen, both of which were met with approval.

The wine cart also has lots to choose from, with a heavy emphasis on varieties from the region.

Nightrain, a flavored fortified wine and Axl's old favorite back when he was "feeling like a space brain," didn't make the menu, though.

For us, the visit felt like a warm welcome into a cozy Stuttgart tradition, with the jungle right outside.

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WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS



PHOTOS BY ALEJANDRO CARRASQUEL/Stars and Stripes

At Battle Combat Arena in Suwon, South Korea, a multilevel layout rewards a tactical approach to laser tag.

A multilevel maze of light

Laser tag site lends strategy to shopping center trip in Suwon

BY ALEJANDRO CARRASQUEL
Stars and Stripes

A static voice crackles through an intercom: "Battle ready."

Flashes of neon reflect off a maze of ramps and corridors as players cautiously step forward, scanning glowing barriers for their opponents.

Inside the Fantaseum shopping center in Suwon, South Korea, Battle Combat Arena offers a large indoor laser tag field capable of hosting up to 20 players at once. The arena unfolds across a two-level maze for fast-paced, competitive play.

The battlefield is defined by faint neon lighting. Blue marks the blue team's territory, red marks the opposing side, and green illuminates the central zone where both teams can engage.

The multilevel layout encourages a tactical approach. Ramps and overhead walkways provide vantage points across the battle space, while narrow corridors offer cover from opponents moving through the maze below.

As a seven-minute round unfolds, the once-confusing maze begins to feel familiar. Players start to recognize shortcuts, ambush points and defensive positions that turn the arena into a tactical playground.

After several matches, the experience becomes surprisingly physical. Players sprint between cover, crouch behind barriers and move quickly along ramps while attempting to tag opponents before being eliminated.

For service members, the appeal lies in the blend of strategy and competition, where communication and positioning — even elements of military training — can influence the outcome.

Price depends on the number of rounds purchased. Two battles cost 14,000 won, or about $9.46; three battles cost 18,000 won; and four battles cost 22,000 won per player.

Players are advised to arrive with a group. Matches are strictly team-based — free-for-all play is not available — so participants should be prepared to join others or assemble their own team.

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At the Fantaseum shopping center, Battle Combat Arena offers a large indoor laser tag field capable of hosting 20 players at once.



A Battle Combat employee prepares a player for the arena.



On the QT

Directions: About 35 minutes by car from Osan Air Base or a seven-minute walk from Mangpo Train Station. Fantaseum shopping center, 3rd floor, Gyeonggi-do, Suwon-si, Yeongtong-gu.
Times: Open daily, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.
Costs: 14,000 won for two battles.
Food: Fantaseum boasts a number of restaurants and snack cafes, including an Ashely Queens Buffet.
Information: Online: fantaseum.co.kr

Alejandro Carrasquel

Dry bonsai gives new life to withered trees

BY AKIO OIKAWA
Japan News

Bonsai reward their owners for the meticulous, affectionate care they receive by growing over many years. If they wither, they can be reborn as "dry bonsai," a new type of bonsai that is gaining attention for its marvelous blend of bonsai's traditional beauty with modern sensibilities, such as through the addition of vibrant colors.

Bonsai has long been a cherished Japanese hobby, with quite a few pieces reaching the level of art. However, even with devoted care, they can wither and die.

Bonsai artist Shigeo Fujita, 60, accepts such bonsai and gives them new life.



Fujita

Fujita says that he came up with the idea for dry bonsai as he wanted to preserve their beauty forever.

A Japanese black pine with browned foliage and a shimpaku juniper tree reduced to a bare trunk and branches are among the withered bonsai trees that have made their way across Japan to Fujita's atelier in Chiba.

When working with these bonsai trees, Fujita first removes the soil, and then sterilizes, cleans and thoroughly dries the trees. He also prunes the branches and refines the shape of the roots. Finally, he attaches things like preserved conifer needles and high-quality artificial cherry blossoms one by one to the tips of the branches.

The entire process takes about one to three months, depending on the size of the piece.

"Since no two pieces are in the same condition, I handle each one carefully," Fujita said.

Fujita is creative and free-thinking. For example, he gives a Japanese black pine that seems to have lived for 40 years blue leaves, not green. He adorns a satsuki azalea with cherry blossoms in full bloom. Some of his pieces are designed to be exposed down to their roots.



Yomiuri Shimbun photos

A framed, wall-mounted dry bonsai puts a modern twist on a traditional Japanese aesthetic.

His dry bonsai pieces are a fusion of traditional Japanese aesthetics with contemporary sensibilities, never boring viewers.

Fujita was born in Chiba Prefecture in 1965 and began working as a bonsai artist in 1992. He presented his first dry bonsai in 2016 and trademarked the term in 2018. He has promoted the art form through exhibitions at his gallery in Tokyo's Ginza district and elsewhere.

Once dry bonsai was launched, it gained popularity not only as an ornament for the home but also as shop and office decor, mainly because it is easy to handle and does not require watering or pruning.

Fujita has received more and more requests to accept withered bonsai trees that can be used for dry bonsai. He now works on 300 to 400 pieces monthly.

"Even if they are given new life, they each retain the unique dignity created by nature. I want people to fully appreciate their beauty," Fujita said.

Fujita's dry bonsai were featured at the Milan Design Week in Italy in April last year. About 20 colorful pieces were displayed.

As interest in Japanese culture grows, his atelier receives more inquiries from overseas customers."I think the dry bonsai's high design quality is being recognized," Fujita said. "I want to actively promote its appeal overseas, as well as in Japan."



A Japanese black pine dry bonsai, center, features blue leaves, while an azalea dry bonsai, left, bears cherry blossoms. The green and red leaves on the azalea on the right reflects how the leaves change colors with the seasons. The dried trees take one to three months to create.

Cream puffs for all

Starbucks Japan introduces new beverage flavor for spring

BY JUAN KING
Stars and Stripes

The Japanese shu cream, or cream puff, is available in liquid form at most Japanese Starbucks locations for a limited time.

The coffee chain kicked off its Cream Puff Frappuccino promotion on March 13, a first in this flavor, according to the Starbucks Japan website. The offering is part of the chain's Springtime theme until April 20 at participating stores.

As a huge fan of cream puffs, I took the opportunity to try a coffee drink based on the dessert.

Knowing the typical rush by visitors during Japanese campaigns like this one, I was fortunate to get into a local shop on the morning of the first day with no extensive wait.

The drink can be purchased at the store counter, but the company encourages the use of its mobile order-and-pay application, which often saves time and helps beat the rush.





Cream puff Frappuccinos and lattes are available for the first time at Starbucks in Japan, for a limited time, during the coffee chain's Springtime promotion.

The beverage comes in Starbucks' tall size only and is priced at 687 yen — about $4.32 — for takeout, or 700 yen to enjoy it in the shop.

With no waiting, I indulged and bought two cream puff frappes to go, along with a couple of cream puff lattes. The lattes come in a choice of hot or cold for 609 yen for takeout in the same tall size, and 620 yen for in-store consumption.

Like its dessert equivalent, I expected sweetness from this Frappuccino, but it was not too sweet, which was a good thing. It does ignite the taste buds with its combination of vanilla-flavored milk and caramel sauce, which creates a similar custard taste to actual cream puffs, along with crunchy bits of pastry on the top.

The hot cream puff latte did not overwhelm with sweetness, but mimicked a cream puff pastry. You can still taste and feel the effects of the espresso beneath.



PHOTOS BY JUAN KING/Stars and Stripes

Brightly colored signs advertising cream puff coffee drinks send a powerful suggestions at Starbucks locations in Japan.

The pastry bits drift to the bottom of the hot drink and soften, unlike in the cold Frappuccino. That taste of cream puff is better cold, in my opinion.

Additions to the frappe may include a choice of chocolate chunks and chocolate sauce drizzled over top, or a couple of shots of Blonde espresso, which are available at some locations.

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Starbucks Japan

Location: Available at most Starbucks locations throughout Japan.
Hours: Store hours vary.
Prices: 680 yen for Cream Puff Frappuccino and 609 yen for Cream Puff latte with takeout.
Dress: Casual
Information: starbucks.co.jp

Juan King

It's all in the rice: The nuanced world of Japanese sake

BY KATIE WORKMAN
Associated Press

If your experience with sake is limited to the warm cup at your local sushi spot, you're missing the larger world of sake, which is as nuanced and layered as wine.

The traditional Japanese drink is brewed (not distilled) from rice, yeast, water and koji, a mold that converts the rice starch into sugar. Premium sakes might add some distilled alcohol. Sometimes other ingredients are added for flavor, but purists stick to the essentials.

"It's quite incredible to think of the variation in flavor sake provides, given these constraints," says Yoko Kumano, who with Kayoko Akabori owns the shop Umami Mart in Oakland, Calif. The pair have written a book, "Everyday Sake."

Kumano also likes to remind people that sake is a food-pairing beverage.

"It is meant to be enjoyed with food — and not just sushi," Kumano says. Umami Mart's monthly sake club has tried pairings with cheese, pizza, French cuisine and more.

Here are some sake facts so you can sound savvy at a restaurant or wine store.

It begins with rice

The first step in making sake is rice polishing, or seimaibuai. Each grain's outer layers are milled away to reveal its starchy center. The more polished the rice, the lighter and more refined the sake; the less polished, the earthier the flavor. Sake also varies based on whether distilled alcohol is added and how it's filtered, stored and served.



KATIE WORKMAN/AP

A variety of sake are displayed at Mr. Wright's wine store in New York in March.

The two main families of sake are Junmai and Honjozo. Within those, you have grades like Ginjo and Daiginjo, reflecting how much the rice has been polished.

Junmai

Means "pure rice," with no distilled alcohol added. These sakes range from light to full-bodied, and often have more umami and structure than other sakes. Think earthy, rice-forward flavors that pair beautifully with grilled meats or heartier dishes. Junmai is often served warmed or at room temperature, highlighting its comforting depth of flavor.

Honjozo

Contains a touch of distilled alcohol, which lightens the texture and enhances aroma without significantly changing the alcohol content. Smooth and versatile, it pairs with everything from tempura to sushi to teriyaki.

Ginjo

More delicate, made with rice polished down to 60% of its original size and fermented at lower temperatures. A bit of distilled alcohol may be added to enhance aroma. The flavor is often floral and fruity. Ginjo is best served chilled, and pairs well with lighter dishes like sashimi, sushi, salads and delicate seafood.

Daiginjo

The most extensively milled sakes, with at least 50% of the outer rice layers removed. The result is aromatic, delicate and often considered the highest-quality sake. Expect a higher price tag.

Nigori

Coarsely filtered, leaving some rice sediment (kasu) behind, giving it a milky appearance and slightly sweet, creamy texture. It pairs well with spicy dishes.

Sparkling sake

In recent years, sparkling sakes — some naturally carbonated, some artificially — have become popular as a festive touch to many occasions.

Nama

Kumano says Nama (unpasteurized sake) has been growing more popular, and appeals to people who like fresh, young beverages like Beaujolais Nouveau or fruity wheat beer. Make sure it's refrigerated both at the store and at home.

Creative additions

Hirohisa Hayashi, chef-owner and sake sommelier at Hirohisa restaurant in New York City, makes different versions of plum sake each year. He steeps plums in low-alcohol sake, sometimes with shiso (a minty herb) and Okinawan brown sugar.

Serving and storage tips

Ultimately, whether sake is served warmed, chilled or at room temperature is subjective. "In general, classic dry junmai sake is often said to become softer and more approachable when (slightly) warmed. On the other hand, if you warm a fragrant daiginjo, its delicate aromas and refined character can be lost," Hayashi says.

Sake is best consumed within a year of bottling. Store it in a cool, dark place. Once opened, refrigerate and enjoy within a week.

Glassware

Traditional cups include small ochoko boxes, but wine glasses also work well.

Finally, take a cue from Japan: Pouring for others and refilling their glasses before they're empty is an act of hospitality and attentiveness. And don't forget to clink glasses and say "Kanpai" ("Cheers") before you sip.

WEEKEND: LIFESTYLE



EMILIE MEGNIEN/AP

People participate in a Scream Club meeting March 8 at Piedmont Park in Atlanta, one of the many U.S. cities with chapters.

Scream your way to stress relief

Clubs popping up around the U.S. offering way to physically 'blow off some steam' through communal yelling

BY ALBERT STUMM
Associated Press

With a gut-wrenching wail that rippled from her body, Amber Walcker joined about a dozen screaming people in West Seattle who let their frustrations float away over the Puget Sound.

It was just the start. The two group screams that followed, each one longer and more intense, released the pain from Walcker's recent job loss. Her added stress from raising two young children dissolved as it blended with the sound of lapping water, and a deep sense of calm descended upon her.

"I had such a sense of feeling grounded. In that same moment, all your senses are heightened," Walcker said. "From then on out, I was hooked."

That day in September was the first meeting of Seattle's chapter of Scream Club, one of 17 chapters that have popped up in less than a year around the United States, including in Austin, Texas; Chattanooga, Tenn.; Atlanta; Detroit; and San Juan, Puerto Rico.

How it all started

The first chapter, in Chicago, began as a result of a couple's rough patch.

Co-founders Manny Hernandez and Elena Soboleva had recently moved in together after dating long-distance for a year and a half. They were walking along Lake Michigan when Hernandez, a breathwork practitioner and men's coach, suggested they let out all their frustrations with a scream at the end of a pier.

When they asked permission of the few people around, everyone decided to scream together, their raw emotion echoing over the water.

"After we did it, some people were crying, including Elena," Hernandez said. "That's when we looked at each other and said, 'This is probably something that we should start.'"

How it works

Depending on the chapter, Scream Club meetings can be weekly or monthly, but they always take place in a park or near a body of water to minimize disturbance. Sessions typically begin with participants writing down the thing they want to release on biodegradable paper.

That's followed by a series of collective deep breaths and vocal warmups, such as humming while breathing in and out.

"You can really strain your throat if you just do it," said Soboleva, a personal brand and business mentor. "So it's gradual, breathing from your diaphragm and carefully starting off slow and warming up to louder and louder."

Everyone screams together three times, taking several deep breaths in between, and throws their paper into the water.

"That third scream, you have to feel it in your body," said Walcker, who started the club's Seattle chapter. "Get down, be in a primal stance, whatever it feels like to you in that moment."

What's to gain

The Scream Club's techniques are descendant of primal scream therapy, a theory that Los Angeles psychoanalyst Arthur Janov devised in the 1960s. Janov believed childhood trauma created neuroses in adults, which could be treated by tapping into the pain and releasing it with screaming and crying under a therapist's supervision.

Research in the decades since, however, has not found scream therapy to be an effective treatment for mental health conditions, said Ashwini Nadkarni, a psychiatry professor at Harvard Medical School.

Still, it's a fantastic stress reliever.

Nadkarni said the scream itself engages circuits in the amygdala and the hippocampus — "the oldest part of our brain" that is responsible for processing stress and emotion. Screaming also activates the sympathetic nervous system, or fight-or-flight stress response. Once the screaming stops, the parasympathetic system kicks in, which signals the body to rest.

"It's the same cycle of regulation that happens when you exercise," she said. "Your heart's racing, you get short of breath, and then you relax and you feel that calm."

Besides the physical release, the simple act of getting together to do something with others provides benefits.

"The idea of people getting together to enhance community in ways that help them blow off some steam is incredible," she said.

Why people come

Hernandez said it's not standard practice to publicly share the reasons for coming, but many people linger afterward and talk about their problems. Some at the Chicago chapter recently lost a loved one, one person was battling cancer for a second time and many were struggling with relationships.

Walcker noted that some people even come to scream for joy. Whatever the reason, the Seattle chapter usually meets just before sunset to watch the sun dip below the water afterward.

"It's kind of like putting everything to rest," she said. "And that everyone knows that that's the end of that, and we can all start fresh."

Making romance a visual reality

Q&A: 'Reminders of Him' author, director discuss approach to adapting book to film

BY BRAYDEN GARCIA
Fort Worth Star-Telegram

Colleen Hoover has been busy.

The Texas native is one of the bestselling authors of the past decade, with more than 35 million books sold of 25 written works and counting.

Her first brush with the big screen came in 2024, when Sony released the Blake Lively and Justin Baldoni-starring "It Ends with Us," based on her 2016 book. The film proved to be a massive financial success, earning $351 million worldwide against a $25 million budget.

Just over a year later, Paramount released a film adaptation of her 2019 book "Regretting You," which starred Mckenna Grace. The film earned $90 million against a $30 million budget.

Now, Hoover's next film adaptation — "Reminders of Him" — is in theaters.

The story's protagonist is a woman who suffers a great tragedy and serves time in prison, then tries to reconnect with her young daughter. But she faces resistance from everyone except a bar owner with ties to her child.

After serving as an executive producer on her previous two adaptations, Hoover co-wrote and produced "Reminders of Him."

Ahead of the film's release, Hoover and "Reminders of Him" director Vanessa Caswill spoke to the Star-Telegram. The conversation ranged from Hoover adapting her own book, collaborating with Caswill and casting country music star Lainey Wilson in the film.

This interview has been edited for clarity and length.

Fort Worth Star-Telegram: Vanessa, I wanted to start with you on "Reminders of Him." You've worked on several book adaptations before in "Little Women" (2017) and "Love at First Sight." I'm curious how you balance audience expectation with the reality of the movie you want to make?

Caswill: I read the script first and didn't read the book, so I read it as an audience member who's not a book fan. I really value that experience because I wanted to hold the audience and nonbook readers in my mind the whole time, but equally, I really wanted to honor the book and make sure that fans felt like they were getting the story that they remember. I think it's just about having a sense of balance around it and making sure that it feels like a film, in its own right.

Colleen, I know this is your first screenwriting credit. I would just love to hear about the writing process of you and co-writer Lauren Levine. Are you rereading the book and pulling out notes from when you first wrote it? Or how did that process go?

Hoover: Oh, Lauren and I have known each other for, like, a decade. She was the one who bought rights to one of my first books ["Confess"] that was ever adapted to a miniseries. We've always wanted to write a script together, but this one, we just blocked off a few weeks and then spent a lot of time together, where we were on each side of the desk. At the time, I didn't know script formatting. I knew what I wanted in the script, so it was a lot of dictation at first, and she would put it how it needs to go. Then we would just pass the script back and forth. She would get in there and change things that she saw, and then I would read it, and give my notes and change things. It was just a really collaborative process.

Then, when Ness (Vanessa) came on board, there were a lot more changes, because she came with a bunch of great ideas. I would say it was just so collaborative and ongoing.

As far as the script goes, Vanessa, I'm curious what your philosophy is with the source text. Are you strictly following the script, or also looking at the book? Do you ask Colleen for advice?

Caswill: Yeah, I mean, I guess once I've read the script and really liked it and knew I wanted to direct it, then I just use the book as, like, a bible. I've read it so many times, I have it all marked up; I've listened to the audiobook loads. I don't know, each time I read it I was finding more visual stuff out and more emotional things. I just kept on using it the whole way through.

Colleen, I believe this is the fastest adaptation of yours from publish to release. "It Ends with Us" was about eight years, "Regarding You" was about six years and "Verity" will be about eight years. "Reminders of Him" is coming just over four years after publication. I know four years doesn't seem like a long time, but I'm curious for you what it's like to have an adaptation made so quickly?



JORDAN STRAUSS, INVISION/AP

Colleen Hoover attends a March 9 movie premiere for "Reminders of Him" in Los Angeles.

Hoover: It didn't feel quick. I'm shocked it's only been four years. The other ones I sold before I even wrote "Reminders of Him," so it's felt like a very long process to see the other three come to the screen. I think that's more along the normal lines. But with "Reminders of Him," right after I wrote it, Lauren and I knew we wanted to adapt it so we had already started working on the script right after it published. I think that helped.

This movie is about redemption, regret, hope. But motherhood is a huge theme in the book and in the movie. Colleen, I know you have children. Vanessa, I'm not sure about you. I have close friends who have kids and they talk about how it completely changes your worldview. As creative people, how has having children made you rethink the way you make your art?

Hoover: I don't think you can not incorporate being a mom when you're writing about a mom. I think that a lot of this story came from the fact that, I had created Kenna's character and the struggle she's going through, but then I had to put myself in her shoes. I was like, "Oh, this poor woman." I could not imagine not being able to hold my child right after birth and connect to it and know, like, "Who is this child?" So, yeah, I think it definitely impacted writing the book.

Caswill: Yeah, I have two daughters. I think that any stories about mothers and daughters really get me. Being a mom is the great work of my life. And the thing that I feel like I fail at all the time [laughs]. I think that's definitely just a real deep connection to this story being about these two mothers. There's so many things I love about this story, but I think that's the one that gets me. I'm processing as I work through it.



RICHARD RODRIGUEZ/TNS

"Reminders of Him" author Hoover, left, and director Vanessa Caswill discuss the movie adaptation of Hoover's book March 10 in Dallas.

The romance is also very strong in this movie. You both have experience in this genre, so I'm curious if there's a secret weapon that you know you need to deploy for it to be a successful romantic story?

Hoover: A secret weapon. Oh, man.

Caswill: I think one of the most exciting things about this, and any romance, is when there's forbidden love. Where there's a real push-pull dynamic. The character's heads want one thing, and their bodies want another, and maybe their heart wants something else. I think we have that in this story. It's kind of like the fact that they can't, or they don't want to, or they actually hate each other, but they don't. Is a thing that makes it have a lot of chemistry and tension.

You also have Lainey Wilson in this movie. She was on "Yellowstone" and is now making her feature film debut. How did you get her in the cast?

Caswill: She auditioned. We knew that she was keen, and I met with her. She actually read for a couple roles, but we had such a great meeting and immediately hit it off. Do you remember when I got off [the phone] with her and was just like, "Oh, my God, she's amazing. I love her." Straight away I knew if she was keen, we should 100% have her in it.

Hoover: I think the challenge was, she's so busy. I think we probably would have liked her in an even bigger role and have her on screen more. But someone with that caliber and that schedule, you take what you can get. But maybe one of these days, she'll have more time to do more acting. I think that she enjoyed it.

WEEKEND: MUSIC



GARY GERARD HAMILTON/AP

Bow Wow, center, poses for a portrait with, from left, Raz-B, Omarion, Lil' Fizz and J-Boog of B2K on Feb. 19 in New York. The musicians are co-headlining the Boys 4 Life Tour.

Rebuilding a brotherhood

More than 2 decades after its breakup, R&B group B2K reunites for new music, and tour co-headlined with Bow Wow

BY GARY GERARD HAMILTON
Associated Press

When the members of B2K — J-Boog, Omarion, Lil' Fizz and Raz B — went their separate ways, the ensuing years were filled with verbal attacks and discord.

But now, the jokes are flying and the camaraderie is sincere for the platinum-selling 2000s R&B group. It seems a miracle that they're speaking to each other, much less prepping for B2K's first major tour in years, co-headlining with Bow Wow.

"O washed his hands with all of us: 'I'm not working with y'all,'" J-Boog said recently of Omarion while laughing.

"I did," Omarion replied with a smirk. "I was dead serious."

The Boys 4 Life Tour kicked off last month in Louisville, Ky. The tour is presented by Black Promoters Collective.

It's been more than two decades since B2K's breakup, but group members have since battled internal dysfunction, public disses and yearslong periods of not speaking. For diehard fans, it may be hard to believe this reunion is here, but the "Bump, Bump, Bump" artists are just as surprised.

"It definitely starts with maturity," said Fizz, now 40. "We've all taken the time to heal and work, to grow, to get to this mature space."

"It goes beyond the scope of anything that has to do with entertainment," said Omarion, 41, piggybacking off of Fizz. "I hope people really get that message because brotherhood can be difficult — or it can be a beautiful thing."

The tour will hit 28 cities. Other notable millennial acts like Amerie, Pretty Ricky, Crime Mob, Waka Flocka Flame will join as support. B2K, whose name means boys of the millennium, and Bow Wow toured together in 2002 during the wildly popular Scream Tour II.

"I never would have thought in a million years that me and the boys would be able to tour again together," Bow Wow said. "For this to just come full circle, it's amazing."

Reunited ... again

The tour arrives amid a surge of early 2000s nostalgia, including fashion, film and TV, and even food, as Taco Bell introduced its Decades Y2K Menu last fall. Hilary Duff has made a comeback, and the Backstreet Boys have held a successful residency at The Sphere in Las Vegas.

In an era where cellphones weren't ubiquitous, there was no YouTube and today's iteration of social media didn't exist, the then-15 and 16-year-old teen sensations gained worldwide fame in 2001, packing malls with screaming fans and selling out arenas with hits like their top-40 debut single "Uh Huh," and "Bump, Bump, Bump" featuring Diddy, which hit No. 1 on Billboard's Hot 100.

But the group disbanded after only six years and three albums. Internal friction and financial disagreements with manager Chris Stokes were all contributing factors, as well as feelings of betrayal when Omarion stayed with management to launch what would become a successful solo career.

The high-energy dance quartet delivered a surprise performance at last year's BET Awards, and group members joined Omarion on stage for his final Millennium tour stop last April.

B2K's last tour came in 2019 after more than a decade apart. Later, Fizz joined the cast of the reality series "Love & Hip-Hop: Hollywood" along with Apryl Jones, the mother of Omarion's children, and shocked viewers by revealing they were in a relationship. The "Ice Box" and "Touch" singer said he was "unbothered" by the relationship, creating an instant viral catchphrase that would become the title of his book.

"It had to start with me and the mistakes that I had to own up to," said Fizz to the Associated Press about rebuilding his friendship with Omarion. "When you do that work, and you heal from it — and you have the hard conversations — you can move past and then start learning how to trust again."

Bow Wow's bite

Bow Wow, 38, also needed to smooth things out with Omarion. The pair have toured together throughout the years, building a tight bond early on that led to their popular 2007 dual "Face Off" album. But the relationship became frosty in later years, and while on tour last year, they didn't perform any songs together — or

SEE B2K ON PAGE 29

WEEKEND: MUSIC REVIEWS



SCOTT A GARFITT, INVISION/AP

Harry Styles performs Feb. 28 during the Brit Awards 2026 in Manchester, England.

Harry Styles a regular bloke on album 'Kiss All the Time.'

BY MIKAEL WOOD
Los Angeles Times

One widely held view of Harry Styles is that he's a cool guy who makes boring music. What if he's actually a boring guy who makes cool music?

That's the prospect raised by the 32-year-old pop star's new album, "Kiss All the Time. Disco, Occasionally.," which came out March 6 and immediately racked up more than 60 million streams on Spotify — the biggest album opening of 2026 so far.

It arrives four years after Styles' previous LP, "Harry's House," another instant blockbuster that topped the charts in both the U.S. and the U.K., was named album of the year at both the Grammys and the Brit Awards and powered a sold-out tour that crisscrossed the globe for nearly 24 months.

Yet to hear Styles tell it, this former member of the mega-successful British boy band One Direction has been trying since then to live like a regular bloke. In September, he ran the Berlin Marathon under an assumed name — OK, kind of a regular bloke — and he's spoken wistfully of seeking out the anonymity of dark nightclubs in order to reclaim the experience of dancing among strangers.

"Spending so much time onstage, it's really easy to forget what it feels like to be in the middle of a crowd," he told John Mayer in an interview on Mayer's radio show.

Styles seems to have remembered the sensation on the beat-heavy "Kiss All the Time," his fourth solo LP. Again and again here he evokes a kind of blissful abandon, the more unself-conscious the better; he keeps singing about getting lost, as he puts it in "Dance No More," where "there's no difference in between the tears and the sweat."

Having found his way back into the spotlight, he goes on: "Move it to the side with your hands up high / Keep your customer satisfied and live your life." It's a startlingly pragmatic way to describe the work of pop stardom, as though Styles has clocked the oily charmers who broke out while he was lying low — think of Benson Boone, think of Role Model, think especially of Sombr — and concluded that the parts of the job he doesn't like are best left to them.

Which of course you can look at as a textbook fourth-album play by a survivor of the bruising teen-idol complex — Styles' contribution to a reckoning-with-celebrity canon that includes Beyoncé's "4" (to name a high point) and Justin Timberlake's "Man of the Woods" (to name a low).



Harry Styles

Kiss All the Time.
Disco, Occasionally.
(Columbia Records)

"Oh, what a gift it is to be noticed," he sings in "Paint By Numbers," one of a handful of acoustic ballads that pepper "Kiss All the Time's" thumping dance tracks, "But it's nothing to do with me."

Well, Harry, if you say so.

Still, there's something genuine-seeming about Styles' longing to retreat. He's always been a paradox: a source of endless charisma about whom it's virtually impossible to discern anything concrete. With his first three albums of glittery throwback soft rock, the rap on Styles among a certain class of tastemaker was that he'd cultivated a squishy woke-heartthrob persona by sanding the rough edges of the transgressors who preceded him.

Yet the singer's pivot to club music feels like an honest solution to the problem of his reluctance (or his inability) to fill in a picture of himself. "It's a little bit complicated when they put an image in your head and now you're stuck with it," he sings in "Paint by Numbers," which pretty handily demonstrates how lightweight the introspection is here. That's one of the easier-to-parse lyrics on "Kiss All the Time"; more often, he's singing about getting your feet wet or about "a baby sleeping upon a candy bar" — and doing it with his voice washed in reverb, as though he's just one more instrument in a mix meant to rouse not to illuminate.

Working with his trusty producers Kid Harpoon and Tyler Johnson, Styles builds gorgeously detailed grooves like the blissed-out gospel-house "Aperture"; "Are You Listening Yet?" (Talking Heads gone indie-sleaze); and "Season 2 Weight Loss," which places drummer Tom Skinner's live playing amid an intricate latticework of vintage-synth blips. Throughout the LP, the objects of Styles' admiration — New Order, middle-era Radiohead, LCD Soundsystem — are almost comically obvious. But the obviousness is kind of endearing.

Mitski



Nothing's About to Happen to Me (Dead Oceans)

On her eighth studio album, singer-songwriter Mitski crafts a stunningly dark tapestry concerned with solitude and death, in which psychological unrest manifests physically as a spooky house.

And yes, there are cats.

Mitski has described the new 11-song collection, "Nothing's About to Happen to Me," as a musical continuation of her celebrated 2023 release, "The Land is Inhospitable and So Are We." She again blends Americana and alt-rock with meticulous orchestral and choral arrangements.

But this is more than a simple second edition. At its core, the new release is a free-standing concept album and gothic multimedia project about a reclusive woman's progression from lonesome despair to horror. In her telling, haunter and haunted are often one in the same — and in the same home.

Backed by her large touring band, Mitski unleashes her musical arsenal sparingly but effectively. She utilizes instrumental bursts to shape the narrative and build drama in a manner more common in musical theater than in popular music. Fats Kaplin's mournful pedal steel frequently shines, pairing seamlessly with Mitski's melancholy.

Her patient vocals outline a loose but gutting narrative of an unraveling. On the opener "In a Lake," she sings, "I've tried very hard to be good, but / When they think you're bad, people act worse."

Mitski's songs sometimes feel nostalgic for a bygone Romantic era, but the raucous, indie rock "Where's My Phone?" piledrives into digital-age anxieties and paranoia. Guitarist and longtime producer Patrick Hyland plays with a chunky urgency that contrasts with the languid delivery. "I keep thinking, 'Surely, somebody will save me'," Mitski sings in the first verse. "At every turn, I learn that no one will."

"I'll Change for You," a standout track on the album, starts out jazzy and becomes increasingly unstructured and unsettled as it recounts a needy drunk dial. Mitski's vocals find a gorgeous, heartbreaking depth as she sings, "If you don't like me now / I'll change for you." But it is clearly too late.

By track nine, "That White Cat," the narrator's solitude has metastasized to deeper disorder, and she raises her voice. "The white neighborhood cat / Marking my house," Mitski sings, "It's supposed to be my house / But I guess according to cats / Now it's his house."

Those hoping for relief would be wise to look elsewhere.

Mitski is practicing her craft at a high level here, and she has once again created a powerful artistic statement. But the relentless darkness results in a claustrophobic listen — as is its goal.

— Jim Pollock
Associated Press

B2K: Putting fans first

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speak to each other.

"I love the fact that we can put our differences to the side. And plus, O knows me — O knows I can be a little bit crazy at times," Bow Wow said with a grin. "I'm just happy that we came back around. ... It starts with growth."

There aren't many faces more recognizable with the Y2K era than Shad Moss. As a 13-year-old, then called Lil Bow Wow, he released "Bounce with Me" featuring Xscape in 2000, hitting No. 1 on Billboard's hot rap tracks, leading the way for his multiplatinum debut album. Other hits included the youth-friendly "Take Ya Home" and joining Destiny's Child's "Jumpin' Jumpin'" remix before later finding adult success with "Like You" featuring Ciara and "Shortie Like Mine" with Chris Brown and Johntá Austin.

Today, he's earning a new generation of fans as his family-friendly movies like "Johnson Family Vacation" and "Like Mike" are streaming.

New era, new music

Both Bow Wow and B2K plan to release new music. B2K's upcoming album, currently untitled, drops this spring and will be its first together since the soundtrack to the beloved 2004 dance film "You Got Served."

"We picked every record; we're making all the decisions," said J-Boog of the album. "Our hearts and our opinions and our feelings and our stories are actually really in this as grown men."

Omarion is also gearing up for a new solo album, and Bow Wow has several projects planned.

Bow Wow, who has reiterated this is B2K's moment, says his main goal is to please the fans — something that the egos involved haven't always made a priority.

"I'm at my point in my life where I don't care who's bigger," said the "Use Me" artist. "I'm approaching this tour like I'm a team player. ... first time I feel like a group member — except I'm the one that can't dance."

WEEKEND: MUSIC

Shakira's dreams are coming true

Q&A: The Colombian artist discusses her global tour and Rock Hall nomination

BY MARIA SHERMAN
Associated Press

Shakira is on her way to drop her son off at flag football practice. It's an ordinary experience for a mother who, in the not-so-recent past, has been at the center of some pretty extraordinary circumstances.

The boundary-breaking Colombian performer has spent the last year on her first global tour since 2018, where she has made history: Nearly 20 years after her first concert in Mexico City's Zócalo, the capital's main square, Shakira returned earlier this month to break the plaza's attendance record with about 400,000 fans showing up to see her.

It's impressive for any artist and one that certainly backs up her reputation as the Queen of Latin Music. Across her three-decade-plus career, Shakira has set records and challenged genre lines: from 1991, when she signed a deal with Sony Music Colombia at just 13 years old and released her debut album "Magia" — to breakthrough albums like 1998's "Dónde Están los Ladrones?" and 2001's "Laundry Service" — all the way to her most recent, 2024's "Las Mujeres Ya No Lloran."

But this year is different.

"I'm being able to make so many of my dreams, as an artist, come true on this tour," she told The Associated Press recently over the phone. "It's everything I ever dreamt about."

That's not all: In February, it was announced that she is a 2026 nominee for induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame — a logical selection for an artist lauded for her ability to bridge Latin music with rock and pop.

If she were to be inducted, she would join a small class of Latinos who have done so. She would become the first artist from Colombia, as well as the first Latina born and raised in Latin America, to enter the Rock Hall.

In an interview with the AP, Shakira discusses her history-making Mexico City show, her Rock & Roll Hall of Fame nomination, her next big goal and more. This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity:



CHARLES SYKES, INVISION/AP

Shakira, shown in 2025 on her first global tour since 2018, is a 2026 nominee for induction into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame.

Associated Press: Your Zócalo concert was massive. What was going through your mind?

Shakira: That's such a unique moment in time. After playing 13 stadium concerts in Mexico City, I never thought I was gonna have so many people gathering at Zócalo to watch my show one more time. It was just absolutely incredible. And one of those experiences that are unforgettable and that I wish my parents could have seen. That was just really, really, truly magical.

The love and friendship story that I have with Mexico is just uncanny, you know? Nothing compares to it, and it's given me so much. My Mexican fans have given me so much of love and support since the beginning of my career. It was quite incredible also to be able to perform "Dónde Estás Corazón," which was (my) first song that ever played on Mexican radio, like outside my country, you know? And so that was like a full-circle moment.

You're also headed to the Pyramids of Giza for the first time in nearly 20 years.

It was just one of the most unforgettable performances of my life, and I just wanted it to happen again with this show, with this tour, which to me is the tour of my life. ... I actually feel like I'm just starting my career. It's a weird feeling because it's been 30 years, but I feel at the threshold of a new beginning and that is all because my audience has been so emotive and so loyal as well. I've had a blast really performing in every country, every city where we've been. And the next thing is going to be Copacabana (Beach in Rio de Janeiro) as well.

We're gonna have probably 2 million people on the beach, so that's gonna be pretty crazy, I'm sure.

When I think of the beginning of your career, I think of your rock records. And this year, it was announced that you're a nominee for Rock & Roll Hall of Fame induction.

I feel really humbled and excited at the same time. It's incredible to be nominated for the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame and a little bit surreal as well. You know, I've experimented with different genres in my career, but I started out as a rock artist and continued to make rock. My last album, "Las Mujeres Ya No Lloran," there are rock tunes like "Tiempo Sin Verte" or "Cómo Dónde y Cuándo" and every album there are rock tunes because that's an intricate part of my artistic persona. And everything that I listen to is rock music. So, to be nominated for the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, knowing that there are so many incredible icons of rock music that I adore, that inspired me; like, The Rolling Stones (are in there) ... to me, it is just a privilege and really an amazing moment in my career.

I don't know what's going on. But this year, like, all my wishes are coming true and I think this nomination is one of those things that you probably fantasize about sometime in your career but try not to get too fixated on it. Being nominated is a huge deal for me and my fans who followed my rock career.

What does it mean for your community — for Latinos, for Colombians?

I feel very proud as a Latina. I feel like, "Oh damn, I don't know how many Latinos are there, or Latinas, or at least Colombians." I think it might be the first time for a Latino woman, someone born and raised in Latin America, you now, but who is loved and has been devoted to rock 'n' roll since I was, I don't know, 15. Yeah.

I've been listening to rock music and that's how I started my career as well. So yeah, it's just pretty surreal, I gotta say. But I'm very happy for my community as well. I'm happy to feel that I'm representing a part of my community there.

You've said your dreams have come true this year. What's left on the list?

I don't know what's going on! But this year, all of those dreams I had way, way back, now they're coming true. So, I'm going to just ask for more. I've always thought it would be pretty crazy to sing at the Eiffel Tower or the Champs-Élysées in Paris. That would be like the ultimate concert as well. But you know, I can't complain. Being in Copacabana this year and the (Giza) Pyramids in Egypt and in Zócalo, that fills my heart. I feel so accomplished as an artist this year, but I'm also so pumped. I really am in love with making music and performing that music, and it's brought so much joy to my life again, after the difficulties that I've been through and bitter moments that I had to endure — like every human being who goes through hardship.

Right timing, right project

Kidman and Curtis, producers and stars of 'Scarpetta,' discuss their new series

BY GARY GERARD HAMILTON
Associated Press

When Jamie Lee Curtis' blockbuster film "True Lies" premiered worldwide, it would've been improbable to think that 30 years later she would be giddy about a TV show — about as improbable as performing her iconic helicopter stunt without special effects.

"I guarantee you when I was ... literally hanging under a helicopter above the Florida Keys over the Seven Mile Bridge in Florida, I did not imagine I'd be sitting in New York City that many years later with Nicole Kidman," Curtis said. "Not only being co-bosses on a show, but then also playing her slutty sister. I was not imagining that as my future."

The Oscar winners co-executive-produced and star in "Scarpetta," a new mystery crime series from Prime Video, based on Patricia Cornwell's popular books.

Curtis credits Kidman as one of the major Hollywood players who helped shrink the gulf between perceptions of film and TV roles with prestige series like "Big Little Lies" and "Nine Perfect Strangers."

Kidman, 58, plays the titular character Dr. Kay Scarpetta, a forensic pathologist who solves complex murders. Upon returning to Virginia, she comes across cases eerily reminiscent of one three decades prior that catapulted her career forward. To prepare for the role, Kidman spent time with a medical examiner in Tennessee, where she learned how to hold a scalpel, and how to identify and dissect organs.

"My sister and my mother were obsessed with the novels, so I would read them," the Emmy-winning Kidman said. "When I mentioned it to my sister, she was like, 'Well, I mean, that's it. You have to do it.'"

Perfect timing for an adaptation

The book rights to Cornwell's iconic fiction series were optioned throughout the years with megastars sometimes attached, including actors Demi Moore, Angelina Jolie, and even Kidman previously. But those iterations didn't come to fruition.

At the 2021 Oscars, Kidman approached Curtis' table and introduced herself — they'd never met, despite working in similar circles for decades. Months later, when Kidman heard Curtis was leading the charge on "Scarpetta," she wanted in.

"I have a philosophy where characters come to you at the right time," Kidman said. When she first considered playing Kay Scarpetta, the timing wasn't right, and neither were the scripts. But the second time, it all came together. "Here she is, and I'm ready now," she said, reflecting on her decision to embrace the project.

Curtis plays Scarpetta's free-spirited sister Dorothy. The "Halloween" franchise star had no intention of acting in the show but agreed to at Kidman's request. The eight-episode season was led by showrunner Liz Sarnoff, whose credits include "Lost" and "Barry," and is also a longtime fan of the books.

The cast includes Emmy winner Bobby Cannavale as Pete Marino, Kay's ex-partner and Dorothy's husband and "The Mentalist" star Simon Baker, who plays FBI profiler and Scarpetta's husband Benton Wesley. Another Oscar winner, Ariana DeBose, is Dorothy's tech-savvy daughter, primarily raised by Kay.

A companion storyline set in the '90s follows the doctor's early career, with Rosy McEwen, who bears a striking resemblance to Kidman, portraying the younger version. Jake Cannavale — Bobby's actual son — plays the young Marino, with Hunter Parrish portraying babyfaced Benton.

DeBose, who presented Curtis with her Oscar for "Everything Everywhere All at Once," was offered the role in a personal text message from Curtis. Her character, Lucy, is grieving her dead wife and seeks comfort in an artificial intelligence replica. It's a pivot for an actor known for upbeat Broadway performances.

"I hope audiences will also find a way to have compassion for her," said the 35-year-old, of the role that had real-life reverberations. Five months after filming, DeBose faced a loss of her own when her mother died. "I'm more clear now than I was when I was actually shooting this series ... that grief manifests in very different ways," she said.



PRIME VIDEO/AP photos

Nicole Kidman and Jamie Lee Curtis play sisters Kay and Dorothy in "Scarpetta." The two are also executive producers on the series, based on the popular mystery crime books by Patricia Cornwell.



Bobby Cannavale and Kidman in a scene from "Scarpetta." Cannavale plays Kay's ex-partner and Dorothy's husband.

Betting big on screen adaptations

Cornwell, who has sold more than 120 million copies of the "Scarpetta" series worldwide, was heavily involved in the adaptation.

"Dream come true — literally," said the New York Times bestselling author, who started the series in 1990. The 69-year-old, who began penning "Postmortem" while working in the office of Virginia's chief medical examiner, is currently writing the 30th book centered around a serial poisoner. She says Kidman and Curtis uncovered new layers of her beloved characters.

"I'm learning things from them," she said. "When I sit back and I'm working on my book, suddenly I'm seeing Jamie in my head, or I'm hearing Nicole. My characters have come alive."

Prime has found massive success with popular novel adaptations like "Reacher," "Jack Ryan," the "Bosch" universe and "Cross," all possessing deep troves of source material. It is betting "Scarpetta" will be its next big hit.

Kidman, whose divorce from country music star Keith Urban was finalized in January, has a busy slate of upcoming projects, including the series "Margo's Got Money Troubles," "Girls and Their Horses" and "Discretion," as well as the films "The Young People" and "Practical Magic 2."

Curtis' view of Hollywood

Curtis hopes the series, produced by her company Comet Pictures, inspires young women in the industry, giving them more models for leadership, both in front of and behind the camera.

"I hope that they see people — women — doing all these different jobs. This show doesn't exist without me calling Jason Blum, saying, 'Hey, I found out that the rights to Patricia's books are available. Let's (expletive) go!'" said Curtis, recalling her conversation with the Blumhouse Television founder, who helped produce it. "They will hear that and go, 'Oh, that's how you get (expletive) done!' You persevere."

Two "Scarpetta" seasons were ordered, and Curtis has famously said she will leave acting before Hollywood leaves her. Could more success delay her plan, though?

"When my parents were in their heyday, they were enormous movie stars. There is a point where the industry just moves on. ... I want to be able to end it on my own terms ... I've been saying that since I was 30," said the 67-year-old Emmy winner. "I want to be able to walk away with the dignity and pride in my work, and not kind of be grasping at something that's fading away."

"Pay no attention to her," Kidman interrupted, and said to Curtis, "We're not listening to that because we're asking you to stay forever."

The two teased each other playfully, like real-life sisters.

"She will be working well past 100, probably," Kidman said, "And we'll all be going, 'That's an inspiration.'"





PHOTOS BY MINGSON LAU/AP

Left, a ropa vieja dish from Cuba Libre Restaurant and Rum Bar's GLP-Wonderful menu is prepared for serving at the restaurant in Philadelphia and right, the same dish from the restaurant's standard menu. The restaurant, located in Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Atlantic City, N.J. and Orlando, Fla., developed the five-option menu last fall.

'Abundance is different for everybody'

Smaller, less expensive portions becoming a big restaurant trend as customers watch their budgets and waistlines

BY DEE-ANN DURBIN
Associated Press

The biggest new restaurant trend is small. Special menus with petite, less expensive portions are popping up all over, from large chains like Olive Garden and The Cheesecake Factory to trendy urban eateries and farm-to-fork dining rooms.

Restaurants hope that offering smaller servings beyond those on the children's menu will meet many different diners' needs. Some people want to spend less when they go out. Others are looking for healthier options or trying to lose weight. Younger consumers tend to snack more throughout the day and eat smaller meals, said Maeve Webster, the president of culinary consulting firm Menu Matters.

"These are really driven by, I think, changes in the way people are thinking about their relationship with food, the way they spend money on food, what is a good value and what's not," Webster said.

Looking for value

Beth Tipton, the co-owner of Daniel Girls Farmhouse Restaurant in Connersville, Ind., introduced an eight-item Mini Meals menu last fall after several customers requested smaller portions. The menu, which includes daily specials like a half piece of meatloaf with green beans, mashed potatoes and gravy for $8, now accounts for about 20% of the restaurant's orders, she said.

Older adults make up about half of the restaurant's clientele, Tipton said, and some customers told her the regular menu was a stretch for their budgets. As someone who underwent weight loss surgery, she also knew from experience that many restaurants won't allow adults to order from their children's menus.

"We wanted it to be available to all without the word 'kids meals' attached," Tipton said. "With the rising costs all around us, we wanted to help in any way we can, and this is a great option."

Eating out and GLP-1s

Some restaurants are adding menus to court users of GLP-1 weight loss and diabetes drugs like Zepbound, Wegovy, Ozempic and Mounjaro.

Last fall, restaurateur Barry Gutin ran into two different friends who told him they were taking GLP-1s and struggling to find restaurant meals that met their dietary needs and smaller appetites. GLP-1 users tend to eat less, so they need nutritionally dense foods that are low in fat and high in protein and fiber.

Gutin, the co-owner of Cuba Libre Restaurant and Rum Bar in Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., Atlantic City, N.J. and Orlando, Fla., reached out to a doctor who specializes in weight loss and to Cuba Libre's culinary director, Angel Roque. Over the next month, they developed the chain's GLP-Wonderful menu, which is available during dinner.

The menu has five classic Cuban options. Roque said the pollo asado on Cuba Libre's regular menu has nearly 1,000 calories; on the GLP-1 menu, that's slimmed down to 400 calories, but heavy on protein and fiber. He said it was also important to keep the GLP-1 meals flavorful and colorful, to stimulate appetites.

"Many times when people are on those kind of regimes, they feel that they can't do the same as everybody else. So we wanted to show them, yes, at Cuba Libre, you can," Roque said.

Gutin said the menu has increased business. He estimated that 10 to 20 groups at each location every week have at least one person who requests the GLP-Wonderful menu. "People say, 'Thank you for serving us'," Gutin said.

Big chains go small

Olive Garden, whose seven-item "Lighter Portions" menu rolled out nationwide in January, said GLP-1 users were one consideration. The Italian-style restaurant chain also wanted to appeal to patrons pursuing healthier diets or more affordable meals, said Rick Cardenas, the president and CEO of Olive Garden's parent company, Darden Restaurants.

"There is a consumer group out there that believes in abundance, but abundance is different for everybody," Cardenas said in September during a conference call with investors. "So consumers can choose. We're not changing our entire menu to make it a smaller portion."

The Asian fusion chain P.F. Chang's began offering medium-sized portions last fall. The Cheesecake Factory added smaller, lower-priced Bites and Bowls to its menu last summer, while TGI Fridays recently began testing an "Eat Like A Kid" menu with smaller portions.

A long-term change

Smaller portions aren't a new concept. Twenty years ago, small-plate tapas restaurants were all the rage, for instance.

But to Webster, the menu consultant, the scaled-down dishes appearing now feel like a longer-term shift. For one thing, the trend is not tied to any particular cuisine. Webster also thinks consumers are thinking more about food waste than they used to, and smaller portions can alleviate some of their concerns.

"I think it is a core need that consumers have, and a demand that has been lingering under the surface for a long time because restaurant meals, particularly at chains, have become so large," she said. "Sure, it sounds great to take leftovers home, but they never taste as good."

During a recent visit to Shelburne, Vt., from his home in North Carolina, Jack Pless was delighted to see the Teeny Tuesday menu at Barkeaters Restaurant, which specializes in locally sourced food. Pless, who's in his 60s and used to own a restaurant, said he can't eat as much as he used to at meals.

"So many times you go out to restaurants, especially me or my wife, and we'll take home a box and it'll sit in the refrigerator for two, three days and start to grow a beard," he said.

Julie Finestone, the co-owner of Barkeaters, said she introduced the Teeny Tuesday menu last month to bring in more weekday business during the winter. She was concerned about the cost of offering lower-priced food options, like $12 Reuben sliders, but said the decision has brought in more business than she expected. Finestone said she's pretty confident Teeny Tuesday will become a year-round fixture.

"Some people, it's dietary. Some have smaller appetites. Some people don't like to overindulge in the middle of the week," Finestone said. "I think that it just spoke to people."

WEEKEND: FAMILY





PHOTOS BY MAGGIE PENMAN/The Washington Post

Caroline Catlin's free pep talk library in Seattle, left, and free flowers from her own garden, right.

Pep talks on the sidewalk

Woman facing cancer diagnosis builds library of optimism for passersby

BY MAGGIE PENMAN
The Washington Post

Caroline Catlin is an unlikely optimist. A lot of her life revolves around death.

She works as a grief counselor for kids and teenagers who have lost a loved one. She volunteers taking pictures for terminally ill patients and their families. And she has an incurable form of brain cancer: Grade 3 anaplastic astrocytoma.

So maybe it's surprising that she is also the creator of a sunny little box on her sidewalk in Seattle with a sign that reads "little free pep talk library."

Some of the notes inside read:

Long ago, you were kind to someone, and they still remember!

Baby steps are still progress.

Growth and healing are never linear.

You're doing great.

A little bigger than a mailbox, the bright yellow box is tucked into the ivy. Inside are two baskets of index cards: One says "take one" and one says "make one."

Once Catlin watched her mailman walk past and then return to write a note. It read, "Tough times pass but tough people last."

Catlin's favorite pep talks are the ones that clearly come from kids, like one that said "You are a good friend" with a backward n.

Catlin set up the box about a year ago toward the end of a long, gray winter when she was feeling a heaviness about things in her life and in the world. She wanted something bright, and found the yellow cube on Facebook Marketplace. A friend helped her mount it to the fence outside her home.

"I needed to do something to make things a little brighter," Catlin said. "Even though it was a small thing, it felt significant to me."

Catlin struggled for years with headaches, fatigue and memory loss before finally getting a diagnosis in January 2019.

"I was in grad school, and I just couldn't function," she said.

Doctors found terminal brain cancer. She was 27, and she was told she had three to five years to live.

Catlin paused her studies to focus on her treatment — surgery, radiation and chemotherapy.

Catlin worried that she might not live to see her brothers get married or that she and her now-wife might not get to grow old together. "And then, at some point, I had to stop crying and get up and wash my face and eat food and be with my family," she said.

Her treatment went better than her doctors expected, and Catlin's cancer has been stable for almost seven years. She has a scan every five months to check for a reoccurrence and feels as of she's living in limbo between feeling grateful and fearful.

Catlin's work and her creative projects keep her going. When she was in treatment for her cancer, she and her friends started making up "Joy Missions" for one another.

"We would have to find one thing — like, where is the best cookie in this whole area?" Catlin said. Those moments of happiness became a lifeline for Catlin, and she said her pep talk box is a way to share those feelings with her community.

In the summer when she has flowers in her garden, she and her wife pick them and leave them for passersby. Recently a neighbor left a note thanking the couple, saying they came by often to pick up flowers this past summer after their mother died.

Catlin said she sees at least one person stopping by every day — more when the weather is good. Recently she posted in a neighborhood group soliciting new pep talks, and she got a reply from a stranger: "This spot gives me so much joy every time I walk by with my dog! Was going through a hard time last year and picked a card that honestly resonated with me so well in the moment."

Recently, Catlin's little free pep talks were discovered and shared by Rachael Harms Mahlandt, the creator of the Worldwide Sidewalk Joy Map — which shows the locations of little free art galleries, puzzle exchanges, toy swaps, mug exchanges and more.

The project started during the coronavirus pandemic, when she and her family would go for walks near their home in Portland, Ore., and discovered boxes that people had set up to bring their communities a little closer.

Harms Mahlandt and another local artist made a map for people to explore little free spaces in Portland. Harms Mahlandt receives submissions every day from people all over the world who encounter or make these sidewalk creations. The day she heard about Catlin's pep talk box, it immediately stood out.

"Then I actually got to visit Seattle last weekend and got to see it in person," Harms Mahlandt said.

At the time she didn't know Catlin's story — but when she learned that the creator of the pep talk box has terminal cancer, she was stunned.

"I think it's really easy for us when we're dealt a really rough hand like that to be really bitter, to be really negative," Harms Mahlandt said. "So when people are going through something like that and then choose to make a free pep talk library with their time and energy that is limited. ... it's really beautiful."

Catlin said that for her, there's no other choice.

"You have to actively choose life and finding hope and cultivating joy every single day, or else it's not necessarily going to show up for you," she said.

THE MEAT AND POTATOES OF LIFE

Lisa Smith Molinari



Finally understanding the happiness codependency

I've always dabbled in self-destructive habits. Teeth grinding, overeating, nail biting, staying up too late, procrastinating. These vices are my dysfunctional coping strategies for dealing with excess stress, emotions, anxiety and the blues.

When our three children were young and we were in that busy stage of military life that seems like a runaway train trip — deployments, teacher conferences, carpools, grocery shopping, bills, in-laws, soccer practices, clogged toilets — there was no time to reflect. Things simply had to get done.

Eating straight out of a carton of ice cream, having too many glasses of wine on a Friday night, sobbing after watching a touching commercial, wearing pajamas all day and serving Froot Loops for dinner were effective coping strategies for dealing with heightened stress levels.

Despite the chaos, those were some of the happiest years of my life as a military spouse and mother. How could that be if I was under so much stress?

Now, my husband has retired from the Navy and has a steady corporate job. Our nest is empty. I finally have a career. We never have to move again. That runaway train dropped us off in a small New England town where life is peaceful and predictable.

Then why is it that I still fall prey to teeth grinding, procrastination and staying up until ungodly hours of the night, playing Spider Solitaire games on my phone and binge-watching true crime documentaries while eating sleeves of Thin Mint Girl Scout cookies?

The answer came after a recent trip to the hair salon.

"So how're the kids?" my hairdresser asked, as always. I told her about our son, Hayden, being praised at his software engineering job. I told her about our middle child, Anna, getting a huge break in her fashion design career last week.

"And I have great news about Lilly," I said, beaming. "She passed her final nursing school exam and is getting pinned on Friday!"

Hairdressers are experts at faking interest in their clients' chatter, but Kristy has known me since Navy orders brought us to Rhode Island 13 years ago. She knew when my kids graduated high school. She knew that Lilly, our youngest, fell apart during her freshman year in college. She knew about Lilly's major depression and panic disorder diagnoses, and the months of treatment that followed.

She knew that during that time, I was a complete wreck.

Kristy learned that in the midst of Lilly's struggle, she'd decided to become a nurse. I'd told her that Lilly was a natural empath, for whom nursing was a perfect career. She'd heard the story of Lilly at age 5 overhearing an argument between her parents, then climbing into her father's lap to lighten his mood. "Your breath doesn't stink today, Daddy," she'd offered with a smile.

Kristy knew that Lilly battled and beat her depression during nursing school, and passed demanding classes while working full time in the hospital ER.

Kristy stopped folding foils and grinned. "That's the best news ever!" she said, and she meant it. She told me good news about her three adult kids too.

On my way to my car I felt light, buoyant, happy. It hit me. For moms like Kristy and me, happiness is dependent on our children's well-being. Twenty years ago was a happy time for me even though life was chaotic, because my kids were content, well-adjusted and thriving.

And today, with a less chaotic empty nest, my mood still hinges on my adult children's satisfaction with their lives.

Some might call my happiness dependency dysfunctional, but I believe that mothers are only as happy as their least happy child, regardless of their age.

This week, I didn't overeat, procrastinate, bite my nails, grind my teeth or stay up too late. My three adult children are happy, so all is right in my world.

Read more at themeatandpotatoesoflife.com and in Lisa's book, "The Meat and Potatoes of Life: My True Lit Com." Email: meatandpotatoesoflife@gmail.com

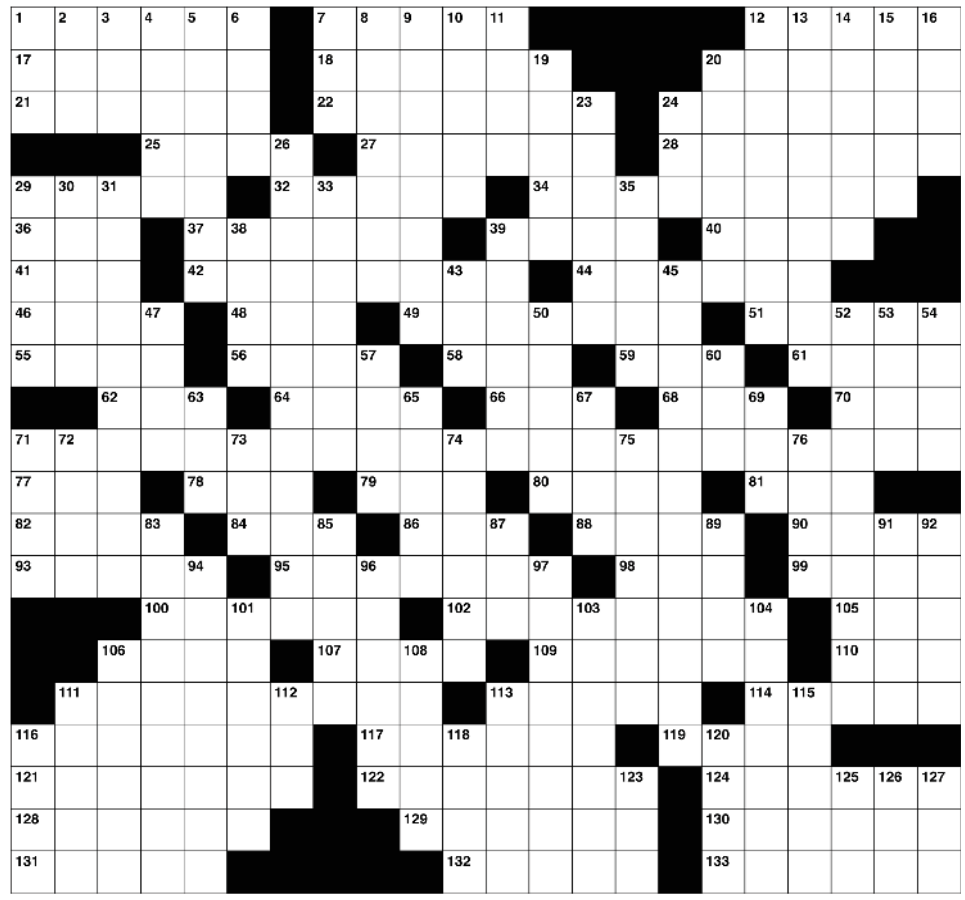
WEEKEND: CROSSWORD AND COMICS

NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

JOIN TOGETHER

BY KELLY RICHARDSON / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

Kelly Richardson is a freelance writer in Northern Michigan. This is her second puzzle for The Times and her first Sunday. Its starting point was the timely 71-Across. Amazingly, every answer that crosses it is related. Kelly is a columnist for her hometown paper, The Traverse City Record-Eagle, which syndicates the Sunday Times puzzle. Now she has something personal to write about for her next column. — W.S.



ACROSS

1 Clip on, say
7 Facing the pitcher
12 Some budget-friendly grocery stores
17 It's on a roll!
18 Sculpted
20 Minimalist swimwear
21 Mineral found in seaweed
22 Certain supervisor on a film set
24 Cozy garment
25 Giveaway
27 Setting for ''Gorillas in the Mist''
28 Spot for a grill
29 Starters
32 ''Rumor has it …''
34 Most slipshod
36 On the ____
37 Etta James record in the Grammy Hall of Fame
39 Fungal structure
40 Division des États-Unis
41 ''Big Blue''
42 So-called ''rooster sauce''
44 Fails ignominiously, in slang
46 Drag show accessories
48 ''____ Song'' (Taylor Swift hit)
49 30 minutes to 3, in British English
51 Beethoven's ____ (the ''Fate'' Symphony)
55 Caitlin Clark's alma mater
56 Gritty genre
58 ____ tai (cocktail)
59 What makes a dresser dressier?
61 ''Je vous en ____'' (French words of politeness)
62 Fuss
64 Eager
66 Relay race segment
68 ''Vous êtes ____'' (notation on a French map)
70 Not Dem. or Rep.
71 March 8 observance connecting billions of people around the world … including the 22 people whose names cross this answer
77 Member of the fam
78 Feel bad
79 Like some humor
80 Style for Detroit's Fisher Building
81 Kind of moment
82 Make out, in Manchester
84 Backwoods refusal
86 Soft shoe, informally
88 Ephron who wrote ''When Harry Met Sally …''
90 Similar
93 Sch. in College Station, Tex.
95 It's dangerous to ride a bicycle with this
98 Reactor safety agcy.
99 Get one's feet wet?
100 Become rich and successful, so to speak
102 Like raw footage vis-à-vis enhanced footage
105 Pronoun for most of the people in this puzzle
106 Ancient Greek instrument
107 Muppet who was once a regular guest on ''The Rosie O'Donnell Show''
109 Lustrous
110 Loo
111 Formal notes
113 ''City of a Thousand Minarets''
114 French school
116 Storage unit
117 Settle in, say
119 Used-up crayons
121 ''Nearly done!''
122 Big name in sparkling water
124 Kathmandu resident
128 Some paintings of water lilies at 116-Down
129 Role for Geena Davis in ''A League of Their Own''
130 Casino worker
131 ''Therefore …''
132 Verbally notify
133 Highly embellished

DOWN

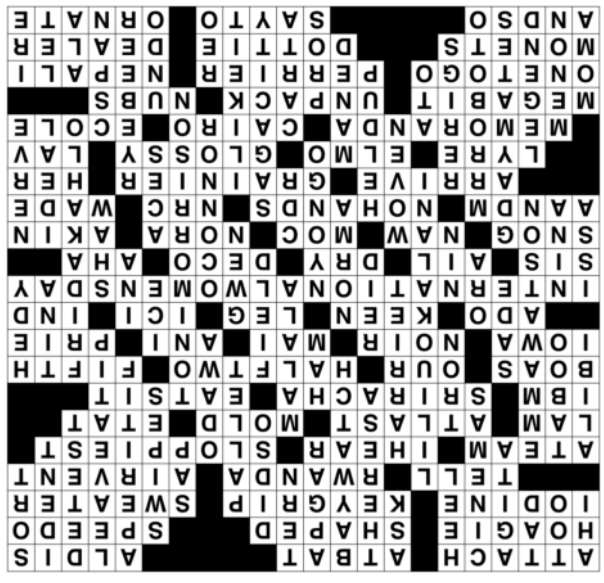
1 Poke fish, often
2 As well
3 Touch
4 Feeling of distress
5 Movie palaces
6 Cry from a dog walker
7 Inquire
8 ____ May, former British P.M.
9 Drama series co-starring Pamela Anderson
10 ____ score (neonatal measure)
11 Seabird
12 Predinner beverage
13 Show gratitude for service
14 Loathe
15 Part of PIN: Abbr.
16 Photocopier function
19 Simple rebuttal
20 Makes a choice on Tinder, e.g.
23 Structure in a shipping container
24 Sucker
26 First (and last) queen of Hawaii
29 Good thing for a suspect to have
30 Verboten
31 Actress who portrayed Hermione Granger
33 Tubman of the Underground Railroad
35 Indigenous people of the Great Lakes
38 Sci-fi franchise that takes place in ''the Grid''
39 2014 Peace Prize laureate Yousafzai
43 Green eggs' partner
45 Author who won a Pulitzer for ''Beloved''
47 One-named singer of ''Smooth Operator''
50 Sally with two Oscars
52 Mexican painter known for her self-portraits
53 Turner who was twice inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame
54 Inventor and actress Lamarr
57 Tara of ''Sharknado''
60 ____ Spice, Grammy-nominated rapper
63 ''R.I.P.'' singer Rita ____
65 Silent film star Talmadge
67 ____ Stefani, lead vocalist for No Doubt
69 Celebrity chef Garten
71 Rae who co-created ''Insecure''
72 Singer and civil rights activist Simone
73 Memoirist Anaïs who wrote ''Life shrinks or expands in proportion to one's courage''
74 Oscar winner Lupita
75 Groundbreaking Supreme Court justice appointed in 1981
76 Anna Howard ____, leader in the suffrage movement
83 Aussie greeting
85 Like some textiles
87 Burnable storage unit, in brief
89 They can't be returned
91 As good as it gets
92 Skydiving requirement
94 Styx song that starts ''Domo arigato''
96 Delayed
97 Wisdom
101 Equips again, as a ship
103 ''Not bad!''
104 Roggenbock, e.g.
106 Babe the Blue Ox, e.g.
108 Like zebras, but not tigers
111 Baseball announcer's update
112 From ____ Z
113 Spanish letter
115 Floor show?
116 See 128-Across
118 Experts
120 Ctrl-Z action
123 ____ Speedwagon
125 In the manner of
126 Tennis call
127 Fuming feeling

GUNSTON STREET



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

RESULTS FOR ABOVE PUZZLE





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AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Carpool fail: 'Nice try – but jackets don't count'

CA LOS ANGELES — When it comes to cheating the carpool lane in California, drivers can be creative.

There was the safety dummy that was misappropriated by impatient commuters. The mannequin wearing a baseball cap in Glendora and one with a drawn-on mustache in the Bay Area.

So by those standards, what the California Highway Patrol discovered when they pulled over a driver in the carpool lane in West Covina recently would be half-hearted.

According to a social media post by the CHP's Baldwin Park office, officers recently pulled over a driver in the high-occupancy vehicle lane of the 10 Freeway and found a jacket wrapped around the passenger seat headrest.

"Nice try — but jackets don't count toward Carpool Lane requirements," the CHP said in its post.

The driver was cited for violating the carpool lane, which could be a more than $400 ticket.

Authorities did not release the identity of the driver.

Capitol Police budget request tops $1B

DC WASHINGTON — The Capitol Police must expand to face a rise in threats to lawmakers' safety, Chief Michael Sullivan told House appropriators on Tuesday.

The department is seeking more than $1 billion for fiscal 2027, an increase of 20% over current levels and its largest request to date.

This was Sullivan's first budget hearing since his hiring as chief last June, after serving as interim leader of the Phoenix Police Department. His hiring came as Capitol Police leadership has continued to face scrutiny over its handling of the Jan. 6, 2021, attack and some embarrassing lapses that let guns through security checkpoints.

The force must do more to boost retention as it loses officers to retirement and competes with other agencies like Immigration and Customs Enforcement, Sullivan testified before the Legislative Branch Appropriations subcommittee.

Lawmakers were largely supportive of Sullivan's request, with several mentioning threats they themselves received.



CARLOS AVILA GONZALEZ, SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE/AP

This flight is fancy

Andrea Magallon and her son Leonel, 9, of Modesto, Calif., fly a kite at Alameda South Shore Beach in Alameda, Calif., on Sunday.

Judge orders extension of application deadline

TX DALLAS — Texas' school voucher-style program application window has been extended by two weeks, following a federal judge's order Tuesday. He cited concerns about the exclusion of Islamic schools from the program.

With applications to the Texas Education Freedom Accounts set to close at 11:59 p.m. Tuesday, U.S. District Judge Alfred Bennett, of the Southern District of Texas, granted a temporary restraining order. At a Tuesday morning court hearing, he called it "troubling" that Islamic schools were being left out, according to the Houston Chronicle.

"We welcome the court's decision to extend the application deadline," said the Council on American-Islamic Relations-Texas in a statement. "All families, regardless of their faith, deserve equal access to educational opportunities supported by public programs."

More than 200,000 students applied to the $1 billion program, according to the state Comptroller's Office, which runs TEFA. Families can receive public money to support their child's private schooling and homeschooling.

While at least 2,200 schools have been approved to accept TEFA funds, no accredited Islamic schools have been signed off to take part in the state program.

City moves to drop representation in lawsuit

NY NEW YORK — Former New York City Mayor Eric Adams is set to lose his taxpayer-funded legal representation in a sexual assault case against him, the city's Law Department said Tuesday.

Corporation Counsel Steve Banks argued in a court filing that Adams shouldn't be represented by the city because he wasn't acting within the bounds of his city employment when the alleged assault occurred.

The move from the Mamdani administration to yank the free legal representation could pose a financial problem for the former mayor, who is millions in the hole already for his now-dismissed federal corruption case, per city records.

Former transit bureau employee Lorna Beach-Mathura accused Adams of sexually assaulting her after she sought career advice from him in 1993. The suit, which alleges Adams drove her to a vacant lot and solicited oral sex from her, was filed in Manhattan Supreme Court in March 2024.

Bill sets rules for social media firms on warrants

CO DENVER — Colorado lawmakers are poised to pass legislation requiring social media companies to more swiftly respond to search warrants, months after law enforcement said they were slow to provide information on a student who later shot two classmates at a Jefferson County high school.

Senate Bill 11 passed the state House with bipartisan support Monday, clearing the chamber on a 57-5 vote. Once the Senate — which already passed the bill — waves the House version through a final procedural vote, it will head to Gov. Jared Polis for passage into law.

The bill would require social media companies with more than 1 million Colorado users to establish a streamlined process for responding to search warrants in the state. The bill would require the companies to establish a hotline to respond to law enforcement questions, and it would require them to acknowledge the receipt of the warrants within eight hours.

The companies would also generally be required to comply with the warrants within three days.

Brothers sentenced in HIV-drug scheme

FL MIAMI — Two brothers found guilty of buying tens of millions of dollars worth of black-market HIV drugs and reselling them to numerous pharmacies in the Miami area and other locations will be imprisoned for a couple of decades.

Defendants Charles and Patrick Boyd were sentenced to 20 years and 18 years in prison, respectively, last Friday after they were convicted in October of defrauding the Food and Drug Administration. Jurors found that the brothers — accused of conspiring with a South Florida business partner who cut a plea deal — used a wholesale business based in Miami and Maryland to buy more than $90 million of illicit pharmaceutical drugs and distribute them to unwitting customers nationwide.

U.S. District Judge William Dimitrouleas also ordered the brothers to pay a forfeiture judgment of $21.8 million to the U.S. government, reflecting their unlawful profits.

"They sold black-market HIV drugs with falsified paperwork designed to conceal the drugs' illicit origin from both customers and the FDA," prosecutors Alexander Thor Pogozelski and Jacqueline Zee DerOvanesian said in a sentencing memo.

'Baywatch' star arrested, allegedly set animals free

WI BLUE MOUND — "Baywatch" star Alexandra Paul was arrested in Wisconsin over the weekend for trespassing on a farm, where she allegedly set free several animals.

Paul was among some 50 protesters who showed up at Ridglan Farms in Blue Mound as part of an animal rights demonstration on Sunday, according to a statement from the Dane County Sheriff's Office obtained by People. Deputies were called to the property around 8:58 a.m., after the group allegedly "broke into the facility and began removing numerous dogs," authorities said.

In total, 20 people were arrested in connection with the incident.

Ridglan Farms is one of only two large dog breeders in the U.S. that offer up animals to use as scientific research.

Paul played Stephanie Holden on "Baywatch" from 1992 to 1997.

From wire reports



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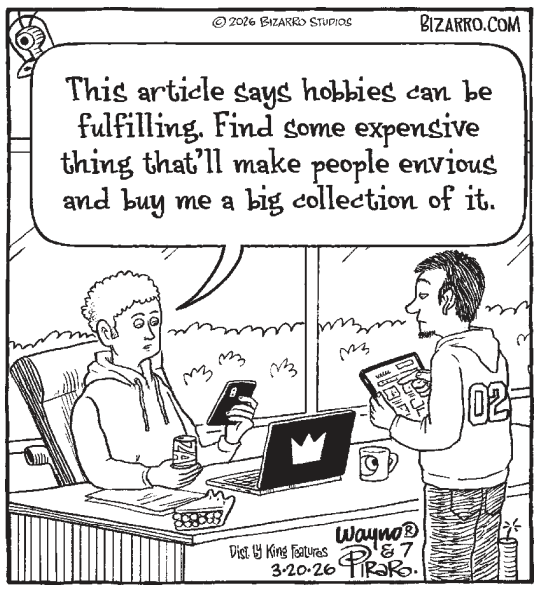
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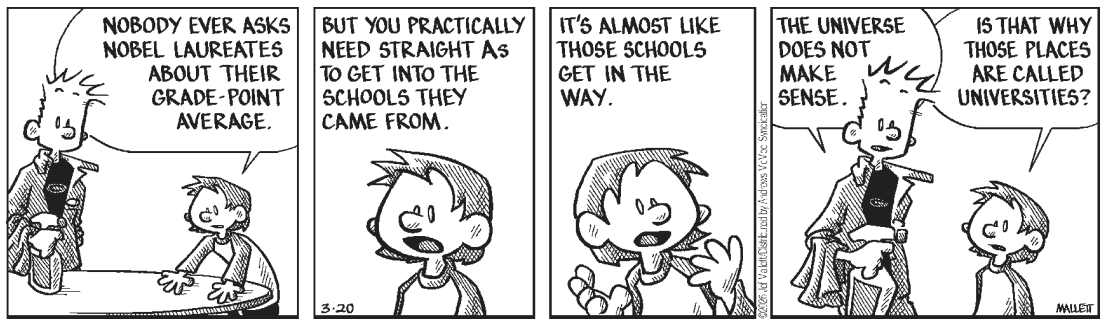
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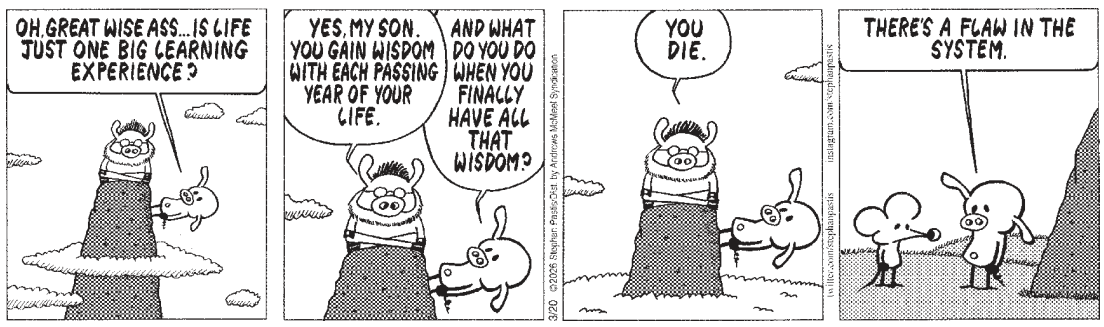
Loose Parts



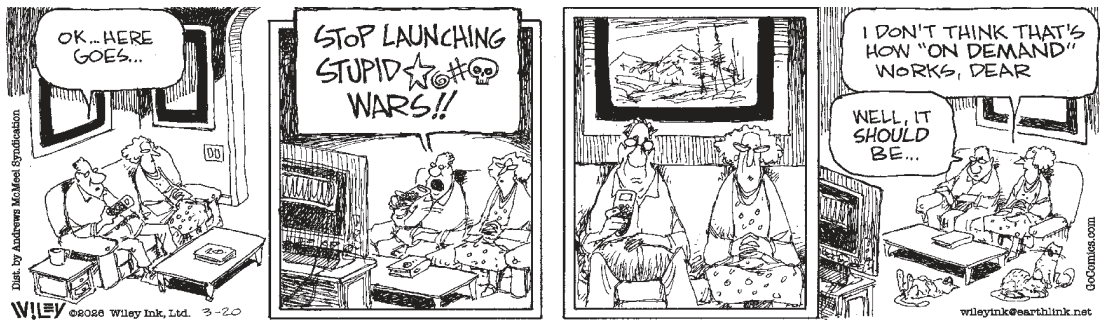
Frazz



Pearls Before Swine



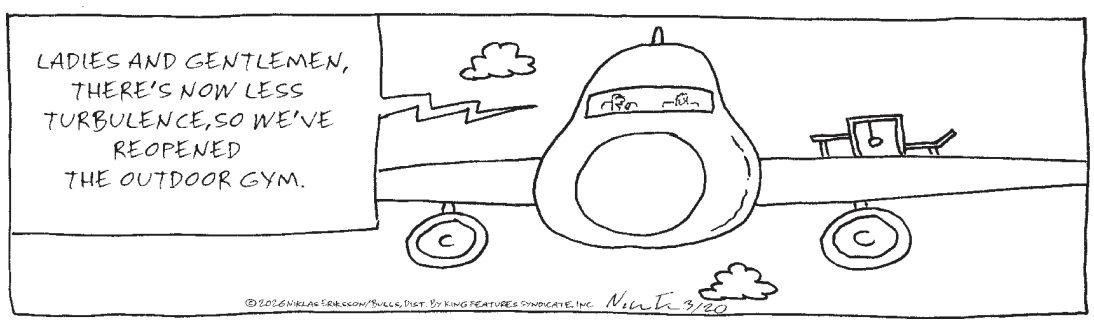
Non Sequitur



Wumo



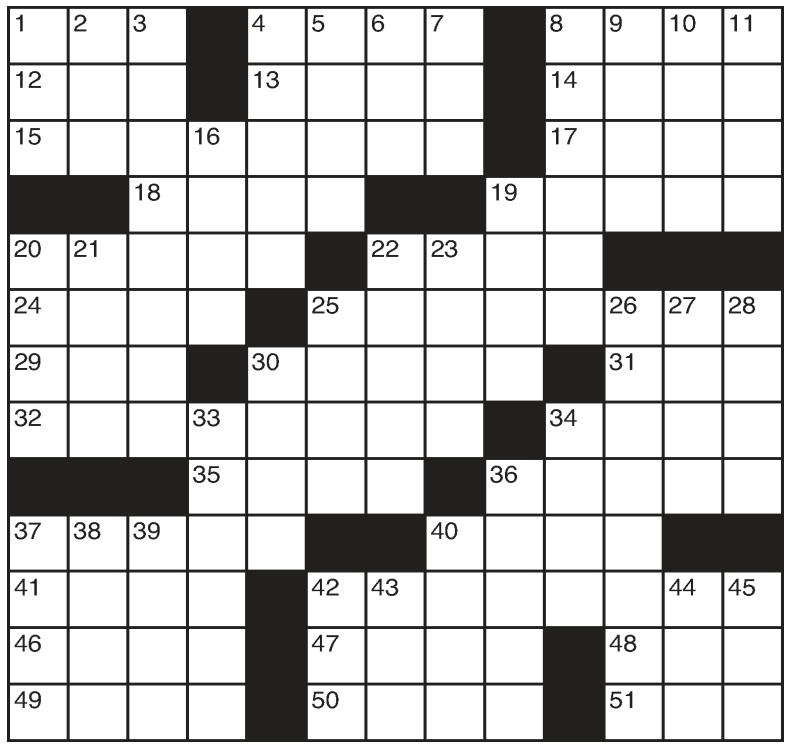
Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



Eugene Sheffer Crossword



ACROSS

1 Revue segment
4 Lena of "Chocolat"
8 Engrossed
12 "The Crown" actress Claire
13 Fizzy drink
14 K thru 12
15 Always playing the same role
17 "So be it"
18 Novelist Jennifer
19 Hammer parts
20 Really dig
22 Counterfeit
24 "Sad to say ..."
25 Hearty entree
29 Fond du —
30 Arizona city
31 "Strange Magic" gp.
32 Catholic prayer
34 Harsh criticism
35 Flan ingredients
36 Composer Saint-—
37 Ties up, as a boat
40 Ad agcy. client
41 Firecracker sound
42 Company symbol
46 Singer India.—
47 Border on
48 Bit of wit
49 Swift jets
50 Prejudice
51 Timetable abbr.

DOWN

1 Toward the stern
2 Coquettish
3 Lettering design
4 Grouchy Muppet
5 Cash advance
6 Egos' counterparts
7 Rebellion leader Turner
8 Kingdoms
9 — mater
10 "Close one!"
11 Metal boxes
16 Hollywood clashers
19 Sidewalk eatery
20 Big bash
21 Norwegian saint
22 Big rigs
23 Air filter acronym
25 Titanic destroyer
26 Old message transmitter
27 Flair
28 Stir-fry pans
30 Labels
33 Unites
34 Datum
36 Dundee residents
37 Some corp. recruits
38 Rowboat needs
39 Taking action
40 Water, to Juan
42 Science room
43 Japanese sash
44 Deposit
45 Conclude

Answer to Previous Puzzle

S	T	O	P		C	U	B		A	D	D	S	
P	A	R	R		A	F	R		D	I	N	A	
E	D	G	E		R	O	I		L	S	A	T	
C	A	S	T	R	O		N	E	A	R			
			Z	A	B	A	G	L	I	O	N	E	
T	R	E	E	S		M	U	M		B	O	D	
R	I	A	L		L	I	P		P	E	T	E	
A	P	R		K	E	G		R	I	S	E	N	
P	A	N	N	A	C	O	T	T	A				
		I	O	T	A		R	E	N	O	W	N	
F	I	N	N		R	B	I		I	S	E	E	
A	R	G	O		R	I	B		S	H	A	M	
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3-20

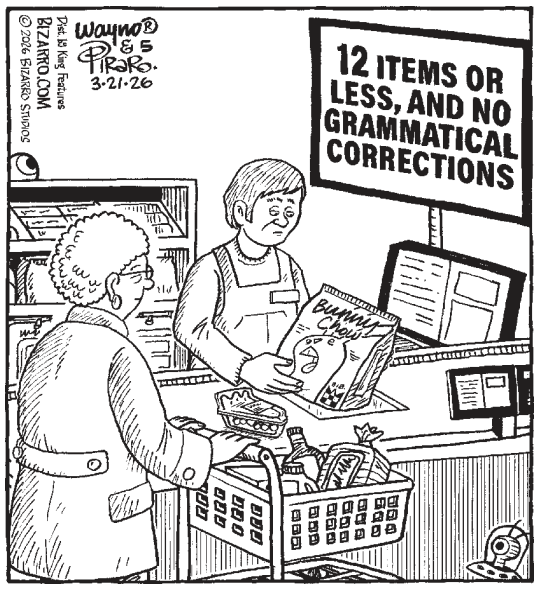
CRYPTOQUIP

HUAHWU TVMN DJHUF-GJDXJWZF DMAGZXND TNA ZFU JDUQ VC XZF XAWWVDVAC MFVZWD: XFZDN MUDM MJGGVUD.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: WHAT SOCIAL GROUP MIGHT MANY YOUNG FEMALE WHALES WANT TO BECOME MEMBERS OF? THE GIRL SPOUTS.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: H equals P

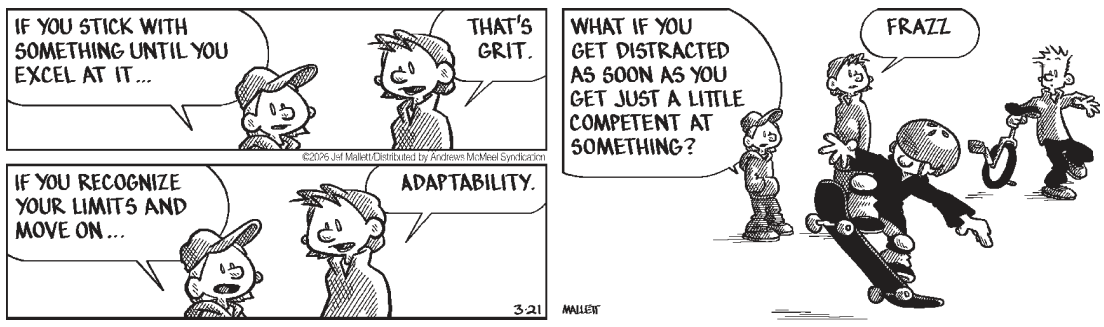
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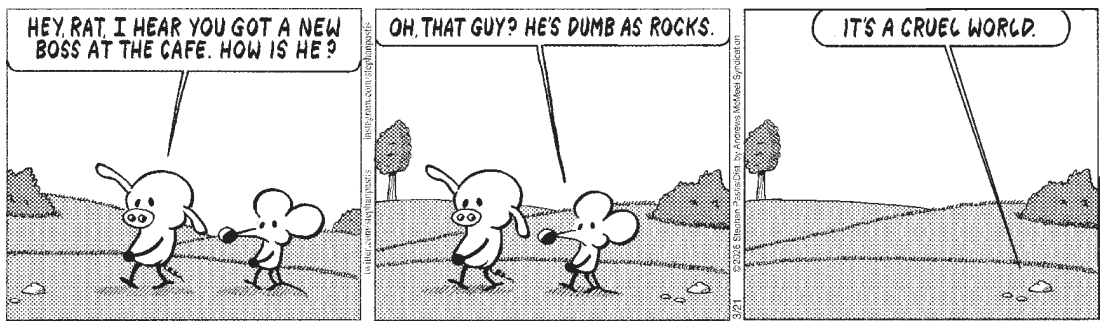
Loose Parts



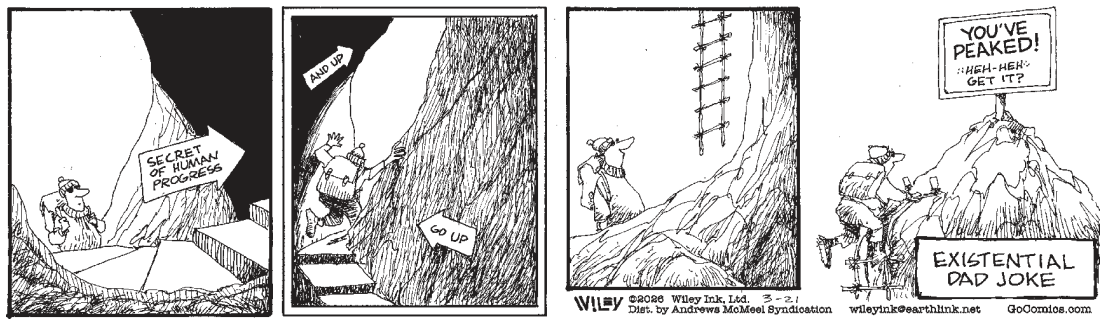
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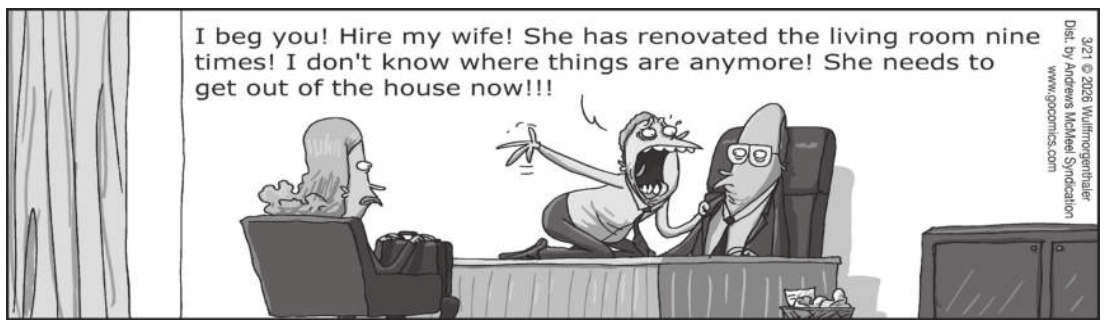
Pearls Before Swine



Non Sequitur



Wumo



Carpe Diem



Beetle Bailey



Eugene Sheffer Crossword

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

ACROSS

1 Unpaid TV ads (Abbr.)
5 Bagel seasoning
9 Smartphone download
12 Wheelchair access
13 Not many
14 "— Sera, Sera"
15 Disney exec Robert
16 Volcanic flow
17 Internet address
18 Extra-long
19 Lanka lead-in
20 Poet Whitman
21 Cagers' gp.
23 Mao — -tung
25 Pictures
28 Gave a shout-out?
32 Mission man
33 Dish
34 Skedaddles
36 Overlooks
37 Baton Rouge sch.
38 Knock
39 Fall (over)
42 "Unh-unh"
44 Invitation letters
48 Lupino of film
49 The Salvation —
50 Slanted type (Abbr.)
51 Tyler of "Ad Astra"
52 Invoice stamp
53 Astronauts' org.
54 Casual shirt
55 Daly of "Judging Amy"
56 Joel of "Cabaret"

DOWN

1 Prudish
2 Long story
3 Visa alternative
4 Chinese appetizer
5 Dips for chips
6 Miles away
7 Humor
8 Former Delta rival
9 Blue hue
10 Knitting stitch
11 Hit with snowballs, say
20 Abundant source
22Borscht base
24 Old photo tint
25 Tape player spec.
26 PC alternative
27 Fuss
29 Vegas opener?
30 Paris summer
31 — Moines
35 Solar beam
36 Dr. Jekyll's alter ego
39 Bagpiper's garb
40 Actress Falco
41 Roof overhang
43 Whitaker's Oscar-winning role
45 Flag feature
46 Bud holder
47 Stage show
49 Suitable

Answer to Previous Puzzle

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

3-21

CRYPTOQUIP

FTSV BA YSMJAXY QYW FTWR VTWN ZWV PAJBY SRB VTWMX RAYWY SXW DWXN PJAZZWB? RSDSJ BWPARZWYVSRVY.

Yesterday's Cryptoquip: PEOPLE WITH SUPER-MUSCULAR STOMACHS WHO ARE USED IN CAR COLLISION TRIALS: CRASH TEST TUMMIES.

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: T equals H

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OPINION

Ukraine's aid against Iran shows a true ally

By Mikhail Alexseev
Los Angeles Times

Wars truly let you tell friend from foe.

With U.S. airstrikes devastating Iran's dangerous ballistic missile and nuclear capabilities, Iran and its proxies lashed out at American military bases, U.S. allies and sea lanes across the Middle East. Ukraine rushed to our defense. Russia, having enabled the ayatollahs for decades, continued to help Tehran.

Ukraine's assistance in this conflict is valuable and could be critical.

More than 70% of Iranian strikes — more than 2,000 by mid-March — came from Shahed drones. Capable of carrying 100-pound payloads, the drones hit Camp Arifjan in Kuwait, killing six American service members; U.S. 5th Fleet headquarters in Bahrain; the United States' $300-million Terminal High Altitude Area Defense battery in Jordan; three U.S. embassies and consulates; allied airbases; and oil refineries, fuel tanks, desalination plants, cargo ships, airports and seaports.

The U.S. military has been shooting down about 90% of the drones, but 10% of Iran's fleet is a major threat. Iran reportedly had about 80,000 Shaheds stockpiled before the war and could still make about 1,000 of them a month. Drones can be hidden better than missile complexes or nuclear facilities. Any ebbing of drone strikes could be deceptive, with Iran amassing them for another swarming assault.

Moreover, at about $25,000, a Shahed drone costs one-tenth to one-four-hundredth as much as the interceptors that the U.S. and allies have used against them. By mid-March, U.S. forces reportedly had expended around 1,000 Patriot (PAC-3) interceptors — nearly double the United States' annual production and more than Ukraine used in four years fighting off Russia. This rate is hard to sustain. Rapid dispatch of 10,000 cheaper ($10,000) U.S.-made Merops interceptor drones — a brainchild of a Ukrainian sergeant and former Google Chief Executive Eric Schmidt — is helping. But that is still far short of Iran's pre-war drone inventory.

Ukraine knows the peril and the challenge better than anyone else. It has sustained 65,000 Shahed-type drone attacks from Russia over three years, more than 150 a day on average last year. Despite those staggering volumes, Ukraine holds the fort. It has developed highly effective Bullet interceptor drones. While not as sophisticated as Merops, the Bullet costs about a tenth as much and is up to 100 mph faster. Ukraine is on track to produce 1,000 Bullets daily.

Ukrainians' battle-hardened expertise is priceless. They didn't hesitate to share it. Responding to requests, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy immediately sent specialists and troops to the Gulf, including to the U.S. military base in Jordan. They have been evaluating defenses, training U.S. and allied forces, and helping with electronic warfare, sonic sensors and software.

Ukraine is helping the U.S. military achieve core objectives, which ought to reduce uncertainty currently driving up gas prices and the cost of living here at home.

Russia looks the other way, or worse.

This January, Moscow increased military shipments to Iran, most likely including attack helicopters, air defense systems, spare parts for Su-35 fighter jets, radio-electronic equipment and sniper rifles. The armored vehicles it provided earlier helped Tehran brutally suppress mass protests this January, defying President Donald Trump.

Moreover, Western intelligence showed Russia revealing to Tehran the locations of U.S. troops, aircraft and ships and giving advice on how to best use Shaheds against American and allied targets. It could be more than advice. Remnants of a Russian-made Shahed-type drone shot down over the Middle East's largest port were found in Dubai.

Moscow has every incentive to help Iran keep its chokehold on the Strait of Hormuz. It undermines the U.S. economy and leverage. Washington has already suspended sanctions on Russian oil, allowing India to resume purchases. At around $100 a barrel, these sales beef up Vladimir Putin's war chest faster than before. The money will boost Russia's effort to upgrade the Shaheds, which can be securely shipped to Iran through the Caspian Sea.

Rather than letting Russia expand its reach, this is also a moment when, to end the war on Ukraine, Trump could again wield the potent tools he used earlier in his presidency: demand that Moscow agree to a 90-day ceasefire for peace talks, reposition U.S. submarines to call Russia's nuclear bluff and revisit the idea of providing more powerful, long-range weapons to Ukraine.

The Iran and Ukraine conflicts are intertwined. Inaction would hurt the U.S. national interest: Failing to help Ukraine stop Moscow would mean enabling Russia to help Iran stall the U.S. in the Middle East. A partnership with Ukraine would serve the U.S. national interest: With Ukraine's expertise and drones, U.S. and allied forces can free up more sophisticated interceptors that Kyiv could use against Russia's ballistic missiles currently destroying Ukraine's infrastructure.

There's a deeper reason why Ukraine is helping the U.S. and why we need to help Ukraine more. My polls with Ukraine's National Academy of Sciences Institute of Sociology keep showing that Ukrainians are determined to defend the same core values upon which our nation was founded 250 years ago: freedom and independence. Sustaining bonds with such nations is vital.

Mikhail Alexseev, a professor of international relations at San Diego State University, is the author of "Without Warning: Threat Assessment, Intelligence, and Global Struggle" and principal investigator of the multiyear "War, Democracy and Society" survey in Ukraine.

Before a Cuba deal, make Havana release the prisoners

By Roberto González
Special to The Washington Post

President Donald Trump has been presiding over a startling turn in U.S. policy on Cuba. In January, he announced that Washington would "work a deal" with Havana, which is facing one of its most severe economic crises in decades. Earlier this month, Cuban President Miguel Díaz-Canel confirmed that talks were ongoing. Then, on Monday, the same day Cuba was hit with a total power grid collapse, Trump moved beyond dealmaking language.

Speaking to reporters at the White House, Trump said he expected to have the "honor of taking Cuba in some form."

Should the administration be right that Cuba has been so weakened, it may have on its hands the rarest of geopolitical openings. That opening should not be wasted. Before Washington offers any sanctions relief or diplomatic thaw, it should state one condition in public and without ambiguity: the unconditional release of all Cuban political prisoners.

A government that seeks dollars while jailing dissidents is not reforming. It is refinancing repression. Cuba still imprisons hundreds of people for political reasons. Even after last year's Vatican-brokered agreement to release 553 prisoners, rights groups could verify only about 200 protest-related detainees among those freed. The United States has continued to cite the unjust detention and torture of Cubans who joined the major nationwide protests in July 2021, and independent monitors say many families still face surveillance, intimidation and arbitrary restrictions.

The categories are telling: peaceful protesters, independent journalists, artists and civic activists. An independent journalist, José Gabriel Barrenechea, was sentenced in January to six years in prison after joining a peaceful street protest during a blackout in 2024. Families of prisoners of conscience report worsening harassment and denial of adequate medical care. Any negotiation that treats their imprisonment as a secondary matter would only legitimize repression.

Conditioning engagement on liberty is a staple of American statecraft. During the Cold War, the Jackson-Vanik amendment denied unconditional trade benefits to Soviet-bloc regimes that restricted emigration; a White House fact sheet later called it "an extraordinary success" in securing freedom of emigration from the Soviet Union and its successor states.

That standard survived the Cold War. In 2012, President Barack Obama kept Myanmar sanctions in place, even while acknowledging reforms, because of "remaining political prisoners" and persistent serious abuses. By 2016, when he finally terminated the nearly two-decade national emergency with respect to Myanmar, the White House cited "the release of many political prisoners" as part of the reason.

And there is even more recent evidence of this approach bearing fruit. This year, under intense U.S. pressure, Venezuelan officials released opposition figures, activists and other political prisoners. High-profile releases began at Washington's request, and by late February a leading legal rights group said more than 540 political prisoners had been freed since Jan. 8, shortly after President Nicolás Maduro was ousted. Reuters later reported that Caracas had bowed to Trump administration demands and released hundreds as part of a desire for broader normalization with Washington. The releases were incomplete and uneven, but that is precisely the lesson: Pressure works best before relief is banked.

That is why Havana's concessions must come before any handshake, not halfway through the process and not buried in a confidential side understanding.

For Trump, this is also a question of legacy. He can pursue an opening that leaves Cuba's bravest citizens behind, or he can establish a standard worthy of both American interests and American principles.

Roberto González is chief advocacy officer at the Human Rights Foundation and an adjunct professor at Fordham University School of Law.

SCOREBOARD/NHL

DEALS

Wednesday's transactions

BASEBALL
Major League Baseball
American League

BALTIMORE ORIOLES — Optioned RHP José Espada to Norfolk (IL). Sent LHP Luis De León to Norfolk.
HOUSTON ASTROS — Sent C Collin Price to Sugar Land (PCL).
KANSAS CITY ROYALS — Optioned RHP Mitch Spence to Omaha (IL).
NEW YORK YANKEES — Sent RHPs Harrison Cohen and Carson Coleman to Scranton/Wilkes-Barre (IL).
TORONTO BLUE JAYS — Optioned C Brandon Valenzuela to Buffalo (IL).

National League

CINCINNATI REDS — Sent RHPs Hagen Danner and Luis Mey to Louisville (IL).
LOS ANGELES DODGERS — Selected the contract of 3B Santiago Espinal.
MIAMI MARLINS — Sent LHP Robby Snelling, C Brian Navarreto, INFs Jesús Bastidas, Jacob Berry and Johnny Olmstead and OF Daniel Johnson to Jacksonville (IL).
ST. LOUIS CARDINALS — Optioned RHP Richard Fitts to Memphis (IL).
SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS — Optioned C Jesús Rodríguez and LHP Carson Whisenhunt to Sacramento (PCL). Sent INFs Parks Harber and Buddy Kennedy to Sacramento.
WASHINGTON NATIONALS — Optioned C Harry Ford to Rochester (IL).

FOOTBALL
National Football League

ARIZONA CARDINALS — Signed WR Devin Duvernay and TE Teagan Quitoriano to one-year contracts.
CHICAGO BEARS — Signed DE James Lynch and LB Jack Sanborn to contracts.
CINCINNATI BENGALS — Announced the retirement of LB Logan Wilson.
CLEVELAND BROWNS — Signed DT Kalia Davis and LB Julian Okwara to contracts.
DETROIT LIONS — Signed LBs Damone Clark and D.J. Wonnum to contracts.
INDIANAPOLIS COLTS — Signed WR Nick Westbrook-Ikhine, DB Cam Taylor-Britt and LB Akeem Davis-Gaither to contracts.
LAS VEGAS RAIDERS — Signed DT Thomas Booker to a contract. Signed T Spencer Burford to a contract.
LOS ANGELES CHARGERS — Signed LS Josh Harris to a contract.
MIAMI DOLPHINS — Traded WR Jaylen Waddle and a fourth-round pick to Denver in exchange for a first-round pick, a third-round pick and a fourth-round pick.
NEW YORK GIANTS — Signed WR Darnell Mooney and G Joshua Ezeudu to contracts.
SAN FRANCISCO 49ERS — Signed DE Sam Okuayinonu, WR Christian Kirk, LB Garret Wallow and P Corliss Waitman to contracts.
SEATTLE SEAHAWKS — Signed WR Cody White to a one-year contract.
TENNESSEE TITANS — Signed T Austin Deculus to a contract.

HOCKEY
National Hockey League

BOSTON BRUINS — Recalled C/LW from Providence (AHL) on an emergency basis.
COLORADO AVALANCHE — Recalled C/LW Ivan Ivan from Colorado (AHL).
NASHVILLE PREDATORS — Signed F Zachary L'Heureux to a two-year contract.
SEATTLE KRAKEN — Recalled F Jani Nyman from Coachella Valley (AHL).

SOCCER
Major League Soccer

LA GALAXY — Signed D Jose Magaña to a contract.
MINNESOTA UNITED FC — Hired Danny Cruz and Tom Soehn as assistant coaches.

National Women's Soccer League

DENVER SUMMIT FC — Signed F Yuzuki Yamamoto to a contract.

AP SPORTLIGHT

March 20

1954 — In the first televised NCAA championship game, La Salle defeats Bradley 92-76 and sets a record for most points in the title game.
1965 — Gail Goodrich's 42 points lead UCLA to a 91-80 victory over Michigan in the NCAA basketball championship.
1968 — Dave Bing of the Detroit Pistons finishes the season with a league-leading 27.1 average, becoming the first guard in 20 years to lead the NBA in scoring.
1976 — The Boston Celtics' John Havlicek becomes the first NBA player to score more than 1,000 points per season for 14 consecutive years.
1988 — Mike Tyson knocks out Tony Tubbs in the second round to retain his world heavyweight title in Tokyo.
2005 — LeBron James, 20, becomes the youngest player to score 50 points in an NBA game when he scores 56 in the Cleveland Cavaliers' 105-98 loss to the Toronto Raptors.
2006 — Japan beats Cuba 10-6 in the title game of the inaugural World Baseball Classic.
2010 — Northern Iowa pulls off one of the biggest NCAA upsets in years by knocking No. 1 overall seed Kansas with a 69-67 win. Ali Farokhmanesh buries an open 3-pointer with the shot clock still in the 30s to give the Panthers a four-point lead with 35 seconds left.
2020 — After 20 years with the New England Patriots, six-time Super Bowl winning quarterback Tom Brady officially agrees to sign with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

PRO SOCCER

MLS

Eastern Conference

	W	L	T	Pts	GF	GA
NYC FC	3	0	1	10	11	3
Nashville	3	0	1	10	8	2
Inter Miami CF	2	1	1	7	6	6
New York	2	1	1	7	4	5
D.C. United	2	2	0	6	4	4
Charlotte FC	1	1	2	5	4	5
Chicago	1	2	1	4	5	4
Toronto FC	1	2	1	4	4	7
New England	1	2	0	3	7	6
Atlanta	1	3	0	3	5	8
Cincinnati	1	3	0	3	3	8
CF Montréal	1	3	0	3	4	10
Orlando City	1	3	0	3	5	12
Columbus	0	2	2	2	4	6
Philadelphia	0	4	0	0	2	7

Western Conference

	W	L	T	Pts	GF	GA
Vancouver	4	0	0	12	14	1
LAFC	4	0	0	12	8	0
San Diego FC	3	0	1	10	11	3
San Jose	3	1	0	9	6	1
Seattle	3	1	0	9	5	2
Real Salt Lake	3	1	0	9	7	5
Colorado	2	2	0	6	7	6
Houston	2	1	0	6	5	5
FC Dallas	1	1	2	5	6	6
LA Galaxy	1	2	1	4	6	7
Austin FC	1	2	1	4	5	7
Sporting KC	1	2	1	4	4	7
Minn. United	1	2	1	4	4	11
Portland	1	3	0	3	6	11
St Louis City	0	3	1	1	1	6

Note: Three points for victory, one point for tie.

Saturday's games

Columbus at Toronto FC
Chicago at Philadelphia
Orlando City at Nashville
D.C. United at Atlanta
New York at Charlotte FC
Houston at FC Dallas
Colorado at Sporting Kansas City
New England at St Louis City
Los Angeles FC at Austin FC
San Jose at Vancouver

Sunday's games

CF Montréal at Cincinnati
Miami at New York City FC
Seattle at Minnesota
LA Galaxy at Portland
Real Salt Lake at San Diego FC

NWSL

	W	L	T	Pts	GF	GA
Angel City	1	0	0	3	4	0
Bay FC	1	0	0	3	2	1
Kansas City	1	0	0	3	2	1
North Carolina	1	0	0	3	2	1
Seattle	1	0	0	3	2	1
Gotham FC	1	0	0	3	1	0
Houston	1	0	0	3	1	0
Portland	1	0	0	3	1	0
Denver FC	0	1	0	0	1	2
Orlando	0	1	0	0	1	2
Louisville	0	1	0	0	1	2
Utah Royals FC	0	1	0	0	1	2
Boston FC	0	1	0	0	0	1
San Diego	0	1	0	0	0	1
Washington	0	1	0	0	0	1
Chicago	0	1	0	0	0	4

Note: Three points for victory, one point for tie.

Friday's games

Washington at Louisville
Denver Summit FC at Orlando
Seattle at Portland

Saturday's games

Boston Legacy FC at Houston
North Carolina at Gotham FC
Angel City at Bay FC

Sunday's games

Kansas City at Chicago
San Diego at Utah Royals FC

Wednesday, March 25

Denver Summit FC at Gotham FC
Utah Royals FC at Washington
Orlando at Chicago
Kansas City at Seattle
Portland at San Diego

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Men's NIT

Wednesday

Wake Forest 82, Navy 72
Dayton 80, Bradley 66
Illinois State 79, Kent State 58
California 91, UIC 73
George Washington 79, Utah Valley 78
Nevada 89, Murray State 75
New Mexico 107, Sam Houston 83
Saint Joseph's 69, Colorado State 64

Crosby productive in return to Pens' lineup after injury

By Bob Sutton
Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — Sidney Crosby is back.

The Pittsburgh captain was productive almost immediately in his return to the lineup Wednesday night after missing nearly a month with a lower-body injury sustained while competing for Canada at the Milan Cortina Olympics.

Crosby had a goal and an assist, but it wasn't enough as the Penguins lost 6-5 in overtime to Metropolitan Division-leading Carolina.

But the game was a valuable step for the team's scoring leader.

"Definitely some rust," Crosby said. "You've just got to find a way to make sure you adapt as soon as possible. Every game is so big. To come back at this point in the year, you've got to find a way to get that timing and make sure my game is where it needs to be."

The 38-year-old Crosby logged about 18½ minutes. His team-high 28th goal tied the game at one midway through the second period. He assisted on Erik Karlsson's tying goal in the third period, pushing his points total to 61 in 57 games.

Crosby was injured four weeks ago when his right leg buckled during a collision with Czechia's Radko Gudas during Canada's quarterfinal victory.

Pittsburgh coach Dan Muse said Crosby found a good rhythm quickly.

"I thought that Sid's line was good," he said.

Crosby also spent time in the penalty box — in the second period for roughing and in the third for tripping.

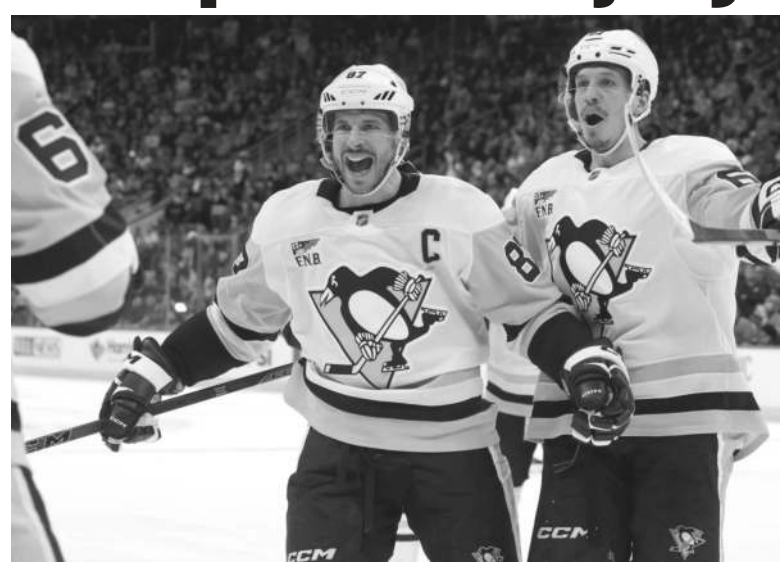
The Penguins and Hurricanes combined for seven third-period goals.

"Some lead changes, things like that," Crosby said. "But sometimes that's what the game dictates and obviously it's about winning at the end of the day, so we've got to find a way to win that game."

Pittsburgh, eying its first playoff appearance since 2022, went 5-3-3 during Crosby's 11-game absence.

"It's never easy watching, but I think you gain even more appreciation when you're up top, and you just see on a nightly basis, the way we compete, the way we work," Crosby said before the game.

The Penguins, who were second in the Metropolitan Division going into Thursday, completed a 2-1-2 trip. Crosby will play in a home game for the first time since Feb. 2 when Pittsburgh meets Winnipeg on Saturday.



Karl B. DeBlaker/AP

Pittsburgh's Sidney Crosby and Rickard Rakell, right, skate over to congratulate Erik Karlsson on his goal against Carolina on Wednesday.

Johnston scores SO winner, helps Stars close gap on Avs

By Pat Graham
Associated Press

DENVER — Jake Oettinger made 33 saves through overtime, Wyatt Johnston scored the shootout winner and the Dallas beat Colorado 2-1 on Wednesday night to tighten the race for first place in the division, conference and league standings.

The Stars (43-15-10, 96 points) pulled within two points of the Avalanche (44-13-10, 98 points), who lead the NHL atop the Western Conference. It's the closest any team has been to Colorado since Dec. 10.

Johnston had the lone goal in the shootout while Oettinger stopped all three of the Avs' shots, including Nathan MacKinnon to seal the win. It's the third straight shootout this season between the Central Division rivals.

Jason Robertson also scored for Dallas, which bounced back from a 6-3 loss to Utah on Monday. It ended their streak of gaining a point in a franchise record-tying 15 straight games (14-0-1).

Oettinger improved to 12-0-1 over his last 13 games.



David Zalubowski/AP

Stars center Wyatt Johnston celebrates scoring the winning goal during a shootout against the Avalanche on Wednesday.

Colorado dropped to 1-3-1 over its last five games, including a 7-2 loss to Pittsburgh on Monday. Scott Wedgewood made 17 saves against the Stars after being pulled in the first period against Pittsburgh.

Cale Makar scored his 20th goal of the season on a power play to give the Avalanche a 1-0 lead in the first period. Robertson tied it on a rebound in the second.

Both teams are banged up, but approached this game with a playoff intensity. Colorado is missing several forwards, including captain Gabriel Landeskog (lower body). Dallas was without Mikko Rantanen (lower body) and center Roope Hintz (lower body).

These teams have been evenly matched all season. The Stars knocked off the Avs 5-4 in a shootout at Ball Arena on Oct. 11, while Colorado won 5-4 at Dallas on March 6. The teams meet again April 4.

NHL

‘Things don’t last forever’

Capitals usher in youth movement on the fly as they prepare for life after Ovechkin

By Stephen Whyno
Associated Press

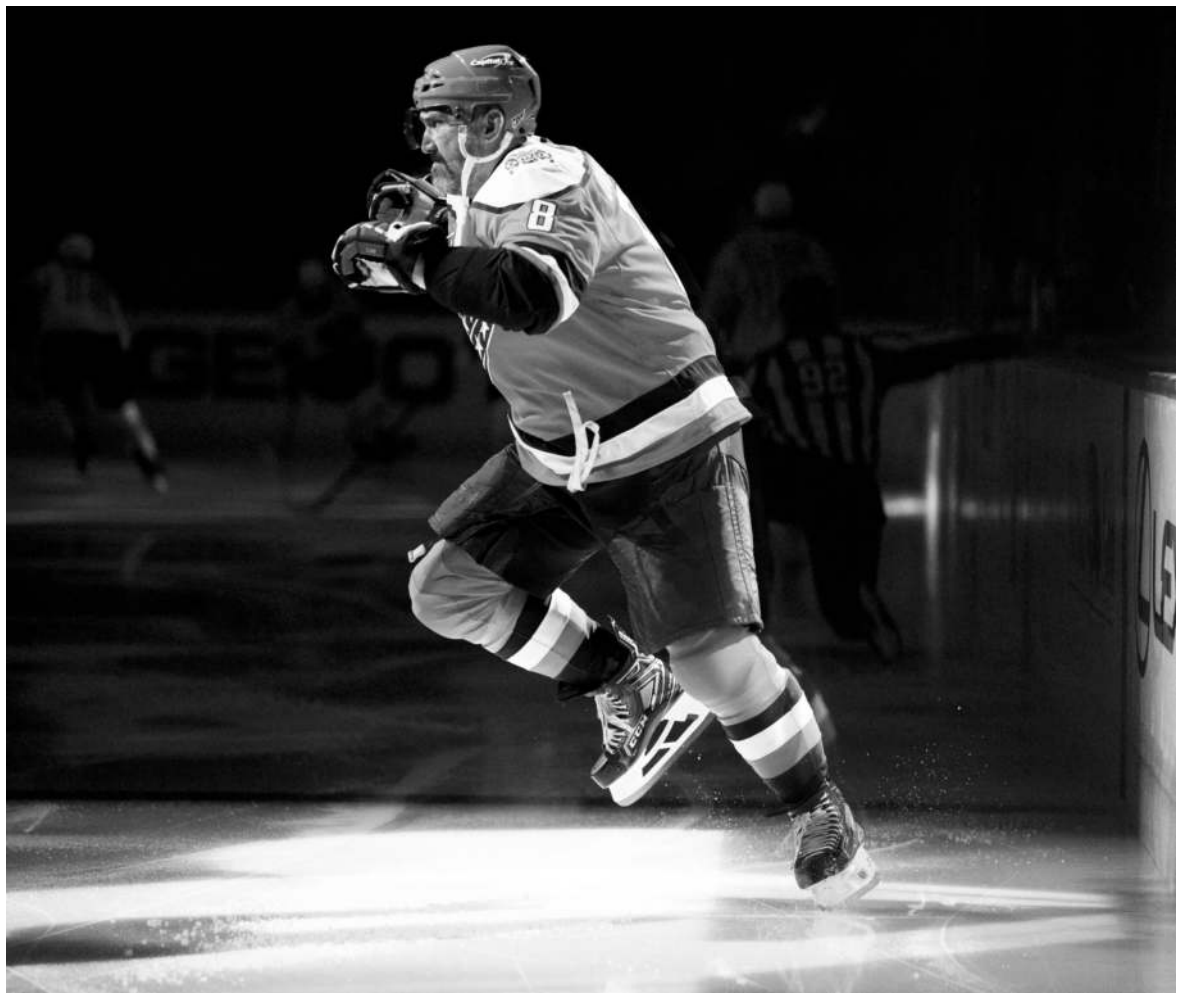
Alex Ovechkin became the fresh face of the franchise for the Washington Capitals more than two decades ago when they selected the big, skilled Russian winger with the first pick in the 2004 NHL draft.

He’s now 40 and nearing the end of his 21st season with them. He hoisted the Stanley Cup as playoff MVP in 2018 and last year passed Wayne Gretzky as the league’s career goal-scoring leader.

Ovechkin has yet to say whether this is it or if he wants to play again in 2026-27, so the front office is planning for either contingency. While doing so, Washington is ushering in a youth movement on the fly, with the trade of 36-year-old organizational cornerstone John Carlson the latest step in turning the page on a generation of players responsible for not only a championship but 16 playoff appearances in 18 seasons.

Gone are longtime No. 1 center Nicklas Backstrom, do-it-all winger T.J. Oshie, goaltender Braden Holtby and now Carlson, who has been the team’s top defenseman almost from the time he made his debut.

“They’re these guys (who go from) sometimes they don’t even have a shaving kit to getting married and having families and having the careers that they’re having,” assistant general manager Ross Mahoney said in a phone interview. “Things don’t last forever.”



Nick Wass/AP

Washington Capitals left wing Alex Ovechkin takes to the ice before game against the Philadelphia Flyers in February in Washington. Ovechkin has yet to say whether he wants to continue playing next season.

Building a new core

The Capitals have done something rare in the NHL since the salary cap era began in 2005: replenish talent while consistently contending. Brian MacLellan, the general manager from 2014-24, and successor Chris Patrick have simultaneously bought and sold at times and made some shrewd offseason trades and free agent signings along the way.

The result is a new core of players in their mid-to-late 20s and early 30s, all signed through at least 2029: goalie Logan Thompson, defensemen Jakob Chychrun, Matt Roy and Martin Fehervary, and forwards Dylan Strome, Pierre-Luc Dubois, Aliaksei Protas and Tom Wilson, the latter of whom is likely to succeed Ovechkin as captain.

“That’s a pretty good starting point for a competitive team, a Stanley Cup-winning team,” Patrick said. “We just felt like going into the deadline, if we are going to make moves, we should make moves with that in mind — giving us assets that we can use to try to add impact players to this current group.”

Sending Carlson to Anaheim just before the deadline made it a sad day for former teammates. He spent 17 years with the Capitals, so Ovechkin called it probably the toughest day of his career from a personal standpoint.

The first- and third-round picks the Capitals got in the trade were among the best returns any team received for a pending free agent rental player. That deal and trading mid-30s fourth-line center Nic Dowd to Vegas added to a stockpile of draft capital: 13 selections in the first three rounds over the next four years.

Some of those picks will be used and others dealt for immediate help. A fast-rising cap has reduced the pool of high-end free agents available on July 1 because teams have plenty of space to re-sign their best players, so the trade market has become the place to go for talent.

“There’s not as big a bucket to shop from this summer, so I think having assets that are tradeable is good,” Patrick said. “Are those trades going to happen? I don’t know. We hope. There tend to be names that become available for some reason or another.”

Elite prospects in pipeline

The rare playoff misses and sell-offs have allowed Mahoney and his staff to infuse the organization with prospects from all over the world.

Already in the NHL are Ryan Leonard, the No. 8 pick in 2023, and fellow winger Ivan Miroshnichenko, a first-rounder the previous year. Defenseman Cole Hutson, selected 43rd in ‘24 joined them this week after signing his entry-level contract Sunday fresh off his college season at Boston University ending. Ilya Protas, a find at No. 75 in that same draft, is leading the American Hockey League’s Hershey Bears in scoring at the age of 19 and is close to following his older brother to Washington.

“I’m really happy with where we’re at,” said Mahoney, who been head of amateur scouting since 2000. “My guys have done a fantastic job of trying to kind of stockpile the shelves again.”

Protas, a 6-foot-5 center, might be able to slide into Dowd’s old spot as soon as next season. Hutson is a dynamic, offensively minded player whose impending arrival in part paved the way for Carlson to go to the Ducks, because there’s a succession plan in place. He scored his first goal in Wednesday night's win.

“We felt a little bit more comfortable saying if we have to let a guy kind of towards the end of his career, in his mid-30s go, and could get good assets in return, hopefully we’re in a good spot,” Patrick said. “We won’t be right away, but within the next couple seasons hopefully we’re in a pretty good spot with where our younger guys have come.”

Mahoney, as he did in the late 2000s when the likes of Ovechkin, Backstrom, Mike Green and Alexander Semin were 20 and 21, would love to “speed up the clock” and fast-forward this next crop of prospects to being NHL ready. He knows that’s not possible, acknowledging, “You’ve got to be patient and let it evolve.”

And yet the expectation still is to win now — and whenever Ovechkin hangs up his skates. The Capitals are confident the players who have studied under him will keep the positive culture going and trust that management will keep making moves to supplement the core already in place.

“No one can replace Alex Ovechkin and what he brings to a team,” Patrick said. “Those guys, they just want to know that we’re going to be a competitive team and when it’s time to push the chips in, we will.”

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Buffalo	68	42	20	6	90	237	200
Tampa Bay	66	41	21	4	86	237	184
Montreal	67	37	20	10	84	236	222
Boston	68	37	23	8	82	224	214
Detroit	68	37	23	8	82	200	203
Ottawa	67	34	24	9	77	226	209
Toronto	69	29	28	12	70	216	241
Florida	67	33	31	3	69	201	225

Metropolitan Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Carolina	68	43	19	6	92	241	202
Pittsburgh	68	34	18	16	84	235	210
N.Y. Islanders	68	39	24	5	83	200	192
Columbus	67	35	21	11	81	217	209
Philadelphia	67	32	23	12	76	195	207
Washington	69	34	27	8	76	216	204
New Jersey	68	35	31	2	72	186	207
N.Y. Rangers	68	28	32	8	64	193	215

Western Conference

Central Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Colorado	67	44	13	10	98	250	172
Dallas	68	43	15	10	96	237	185
Minnesota	69	39	18	12	90	230	199
Utah	68	35	27	6	76	214	191
Nashville	67	30	28	9	69	199	228
Winnipeg	67	28	28	11	67	191	206
St. Louis	68	27	30	11	65	178	224
Chicago	67	25	30	12	62	178	217

Pacific Division

	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA
Anaheim	68	37	27	4	78	225	237
Edmonton	69	34	26	9	77	243	235
Vegas	68	31	23	14	76	220	211
Seattle	67	31	27	9	71	193	205
Los Angeles	67	28	24	15	71	180	201
San Jose	66	32	28	6	70	207	234
Calgary	68	27	34	7	61	169	213
Vancouver	67	21	38	8	50	176	248

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

N.Y. Islanders 3, Toronto 1
Columbus 5, Carolina 1
Montreal 3, Boston 2, OT
Minnesota 4, Chicago 3, OT
Nashville 4, Winnipeg 3, SO
Edmonton 5, San Jose 3
Vancouver 5, Florida 2
Tampa Bay 6, Seattle 2
Buffalo 2, Vegas 0

Wednesday’s games

New Jersey 6, N.Y. Rangers 3
Carolina 6, Pittsburgh 5, SO
Washington 4, Ottawa 1
Dallas 2, Colorado 1, SO
Calgary 2, St. Louis 1, SO
Philadelphia 3, Anaheim 2, OT

Thursday’s games

Montreal at Detroit
N.Y. Islanders at Ottawa
N.Y. Rangers at Columbus
Winnipeg at Boston
Chicago at Minnesota
Seattle at Nashville
Florida at Edmonton
Buffalo at San Jose
Tampa Bay at Vancouver
Utah at Vegas
Philadelphia at Los Angeles

Friday’s games

Carolina at Toronto
New Jersey at Washington
Colorado at Chicago
Florida at Calgary
Anaheim at Utah

Saturday’s games

Winnipeg at Pittsburgh
Vegas at Nashville
Buffalo at Los Angeles
Dallas at Minnesota
Philadelphia at San Jose
Seattle at Columbus
N.Y. Islanders at Montreal
St. Louis at Vancouver
Toronto at Ottawa
Boston at Detroit
Tampa Bay at Edmonton

Sunday’s games

Winnipeg at N.Y. Rangers
Colorado at Washington
Carolina at Pittsburgh
Nashville at Chicago
Columbus at N.Y. Islanders
Vegas at Dallas
Tampa Bay at Calgary
Buffalo at Anaheim
Los Angeles at Utah

NBA



TONY GUTIERREZ/AP

Hawks guard CJ McCollum makes a pass around Mavericks forward Marvin Bagley III on Wednesday in Dallas. Atlanta won its 11th straight game, creating a jumble in the Southeast Division standings.

Southeast teams surging as playoff chase intensifies

BY TIM REYNOLDS
Associated Press

MIAMI — Atlanta is on a 11-game winning streak, its best stretch in more than 11 years. Orlando and Miami had recent stretches of seven straight victories. The Magic's streak was snapped when they lost to the Hawks on Monday. Charlotte, which beat the Heat on Tuesday, might be playoff-bound for the first time in a decade.

The Southeast Division is ... good?

Seems so. At least, it's not historically bad as was the case last season when Atlanta, Orlando, Miami, the Hornets and Washington combined for the worst record by any division in NBA history. And it's possible the division could send four teams to the playoffs for the first time since 2014.

Division races and championships don't mean much anymore and haven't for some time. But the four Southeast teams in the mix with playoff hopes — everybody but the Wizards — sure seem as though they are feeding off one another and have been since the All-Star break.

"I would say that's probably a factor," Heat coach Erik Spoelstra said. "Everybody also knows what time it is right now. You have to make moves. You have to do something. And we knew that coming out of All-Star break."

Everyone got the message. Most everyone, that is.

Washington seems to have no interest in winning right now, proven by the way it played defense — or not — against Miami's Bam Adebayo in his 83-point game last week. The Wizards will start anew next year, they hope, with Trae Young and Anthony Davis to build around.

Otherwise, the division is rolling. The five teams are a combined 42-27 since the break, the best mark by any division in the NBA during that stretch. The Hawks are 12-1, Miami has gone 9-4, the Magic are 10-5, Charlotte is 9-5 and Washington is 2-13.

This is how good the Southeast has been in recent weeks: Atlanta was ninth in the Eastern Conference after a loss to the Heat on Feb. 20. The Hawks were 9-0 since that game going into Monday night — and were still ninth in the East.

Monday's win pulled Atlanta into a tie with Philadelphia for eighth place; and the Hawks moved into a tie for seventh, with Miami, with the victory Wednesday. If the season ended now, they would be the No. 8 seed going into the play-in tournament.

Imagine: an 11-game winning streak, and you move up one spot.

"Everybody's trying to be aggressive but also solid at the same time," Atlanta coach Quin Snyder said. "I think that's really important. We don't want to be gambling. We just want to make people work."

The Hornets are fun to watch, unless you're on the other bench. Kon Knueppel is a serious challenger to his former Duke teammate, Dallas' Cooper Flagg, for Rookie of the Year. Charlotte shoots a bunch of 3s, it plays fast and it's got a little swagger.

The Hornets added through the draft. The Hawks might have added by subtraction; trading Young ended all the speculation about his future in Atlanta and his now-former team is 20-10, the third-best record in the East, just a half-game behind Detroit and Cleveland since that deal got done. The Heat, they just try to outwork everybody — as always — and found some gems in Pelle Larsson and Kasparas Jakucionis to go alongside the likes of Adebayo.

And Orlando evidently just needed a little conflict.

Teams don't always flourish when coaches and star players clash. The Magic might have done just that. It was clear earlier this season — a couple of times this season, actually — that coach Jamahl Mosley and star forward Paolo Banchero weren't in total lockstep. Banchero said some things, Mosley subtly clapped back and things seemed goofy up near Disney World.

Funny thing is, when Orlando seemed to be in trouble, everything started to work.

"We're both competitors," Banchero said when asked about his relationship with Mosley. "There were times where I was frustrated and I wasn't playing as well as I think I should be. But it never became me pointing the finger at him or being disrespectful. It was all constructive; he's talking to me, I'm talking to him. And winning, it cures everything. ... Something I feel I learned at Duke is when there's a little bit of conflict, it makes you lock in a little more."

Less than a month remains in the regular season. The jostling between the Hawks, Miami, Magic and Charlotte could go all the way to the wire. The Southeast might not have a bona fide title favorite in that group — but it does have four teams that could be hitting their best stride at the right time.

"It's just this time of year," Mosley said. "Every game matters."

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Boston	46	23	.667	—
New York	45	25	.643	1½
Toronto	39	29	.574	6½
Philadelphia	37	32	.536	9
Brooklyn	17	52	.246	29

Southeast Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	38	30	.559	—
Miami	38	31	.551	½
Atlanta	38	31	.551	½
Charlotte	35	34	.507	3½
Washington	16	52	.235	22

Central Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Detroit	49	19	.721	—
Cleveland	42	27	.609	7½
Milwaukee	28	40	.412	21
Chicago	28	41	.406	21½
Indiana	15	55	.214	35

Western Conference

Southwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
San Antonio	51	18	.739	—
Houston	41	27	.603	9½
Memphis	24	44	.353	26½
New Orleans	24	46	.343	27½
Dallas	23	47	.329	28½

Northwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
x-Oklahoma City	55	15	.786	—
Minnesota	43	27	.614	12
Denver	42	28	.600	13
Portland	34	36	.486	21
Utah	20	49	.290	34½

Pacific Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Lakers	44	25	.638	—
Phoenix	39	30	.565	5
L.A. Clippers	34	35	.493	10
Golden State	33	36	.478	11
Sacramento	18	52	.257	26½

x-clinched playoff spot

Wednesday's games

Boston 120, Golden State 99
Oklahoma City 121, Brooklyn 92
Portland 127, Indiana 119
New Orleans 124, L.A. Clippers 109
Toronto 139, Chicago 109
Minnesota 147, Utah 111
Atlanta 135, Dallas 120
Memphis 125, Denver 118
L.A. Lakers 124, Houston 116

Thursday's games

Detroit at Washington
Orlando at Charlotte
Cleveland at Chicago
L.A. Clippers at New Orleans
L.A. Lakers at Miami
Phoenix at San Antonio
Milwaukee at Utah
Philadelphia at Sacramento

Friday's games

Golden State at Detroit
New York at Brooklyn
Atlanta at Houston
Boston at Memphis
Portland at Minnesota
Toronto at Denver

Saturday's games

Oklahoma City at Washington
Cleveland at New Orleans
L.A. Lakers at Orlando
Memphis at Charlotte
Golden State at Atlanta
Indiana at San Antonio
Miami at Houston
L.A. Clippers at Dallas
Philadelphia at Utah
Milwaukee at Phoenix

Sunday's games

Portland at Denver
Brooklyn at Sacramento
Washington at N.Y. Knicks
Minnesota at Boston
Toronto at Phoenix

Scoring leaders

Through Wednesday

	G	FG	FT	PTS	AVG
Doncic, LAL	57	606	445	1880	33.0
Gil.-Alex., OKC	58	629	469	1827	31.5
Edwards, MIN	58	585	340	1710	29.5
Maxey, PHI	61	616	333	1767	29.0
Brown, BOS	62	643	360	1766	28.5
Jokic, DEN	54	540	345	1524	28.2
Leonard, LAC	54	530	324	1525	28.2
Mitchell, CLE	61	593	321	1711	28.0
Brunson, NY	64	595	317	1684	26.3
Booker, PHO	53	450	370	1369	25.8



DAVID J. PHILLIP/AP

The Lakers' Luka Doncic celebrates after making a 3-pointer against the Rockets.

Doncic nets 40; LA wins 7th straight

BY KRISTIE RIEKEN
Associated Press

HOUSTON — Luka Doncic had 40 points and LeBron James added 30 as the Los Angeles Lakers extended their winning streak to seven games with a 124-116 win over the Houston Rockets on Wednesday night.

It's the 10th win in 11 games for the Lakers, who also beat the Rockets 100-92 on Monday night.

Los Angeles led by 4 with about 90 seconds remaining when Doncic found James for an alley-oop dunk. Kevin Durant had a turnover on the other end, and Doncic made a 3-pointer to push the lead to 120-111 with less than a minute left.

Doncic had 10 assists and nine rebounds to finish one rebound shy of a triple-double. James was 13-for-14 from the floor and had five rebounds to give him 12,002, making him the 23rd player in NBA history to reach 12,000 rebounds.

Alperen Sengun had 27 points and 10 assists for Houston in his return after missing two games with a back issue. Amen Thompson added 26 points and 11 rebounds as the Rockets lost for the third time in four games.

Durant had just two points in the first half and finished with 18 points and six rebounds.

The Lakers trailed by 2 before Rui Hachimura and Doncic made consecutive 3-pointers to take a 113-109 lead with about three minutes to go.

Thompson made a layup for Houston before a dunk by Hachimura left LA up by 4 with less than two minutes left.

The game was tied early in the fourth quarter before James scored the first four points in a 6-0 run that gave the Lakers a 102-96 lead with less than nine minutes to go.

NCAA WOMEN'S TOURNAMENT



CHRIS CARLSON/AP

Texas forward Madison Booker brings the ball down court during the first half of the final of the SEC tournament. She led the Longhorns with an 18.9-point average and was the MVP of the SEC Tournament.

Top-seeded Texas has clear road map back to Final Four

BY JIM VERTUNO
Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — Texas is rolling into the women's NCAA Tournament with a No. 1 seed and a friendly road map for a return trip to the Final Four.

The Longhorns aren't the overall No. 1 seed for March Madness. That's UConn. But with a standout duo of Madison Booker and Rori Harmon, an emerging impact player in Justice Carlton and the momentum of a romp through the SEC tournament, they can make a solid argument they're the team to beat as they chase the program's first national title in 40 years.

"They're good enough," coach Vic Schaefer said. "We're a veteran team in the right places. Our youth is mature now ... This is a team that can do it."

Texas (31-3) opens play Friday against Missouri State (22-12) after it beat Stephen F. Austin in a First Four matchup Wednesday.

Should the Longhorns win their first two games on their home court, they'll make just a 3-hour drive north to Fort Worth for the Sweet 16 and a regional final in front of what would likely be a very pro-Texas crowd.

"That's a pretty big deal to me," said Harmon, a fifth-year player from the Houston area. "I'm all about my family and traveling and what's easiest for them."

After a Final Four finish last season, the Longhorns are "extremely" hungry to win that elusive national title, Booker said.

"We want to be the last one standing," she said.

Texas' lone national championship came in 1986 when it was the first national title winner to go undefeated. The Longhorns made the Final Four in 2003, then waited 22 years to return, only to get bounced by a thumping loss to SEC rival South Carolina.

Texas was determined to get back there. The league coaches made the Longhorns preseason favorites for the SEC title. They didn't get that, but won their first league tournament crown. The season started with consecutive wins in consecutive days over UCLA and South Carolina, and closed with that rollicking win over the Gamecocks.

"I've seen us peak a lot in the past few games, even in practice," Harmon said. "The challenge is to play even better."

Booker, a preseason All-American, led Texas with an 18.9-point average this season and was the MVP of the SEC Tournament. She and Harmon, a fifth-year point guard who averages 6.2 assists, are the engines that drive the Longhorns in the locker room and on the court.

But it's been Carlton's scoring potential that gives them the occasional turbo boost. She scored 10 points in the first quarter of a win over Georgia, 12 in the first quarter of a win over Kentucky and nine in the first quarter of a win over Oklahoma.

In the SEC tournament title game, Carlton knocked South Carolina on its heels with 13 points in the first quarter on 6-of-7 shooting. The Gamecocks never recovered.

Texas needs more of that. Carlton has started 23 consecutive games and her production has been up and down. She averages 8.7 points and four rebounds, but hasn't posted consecutive double-figure scoring games since December.

After playing just three minutes in the Longhorns' last four NCAA Tournament games last season, Carlton enters this one with the confidence she can light up the basket in an instant.

"I do really enjoy that punch-first mentality," Carlton said after the SEC championship game.

The regular season wasn't as easy as Texas' record suggests. The Longhorns' toughest moments and criticism often came from their own coach.

Schaefer benched Harmon for most of the fourth quarter in regular-season losses at LSU and Vanderbilt. After an 18-point loss in Nashville on Feb. 12, he went on a postgame rant that questioned his team's heart and called Texas "probably the softest team I've had in years."

The Longhorns haven't lost since and Schaefer has softened around the edges a bit. The 65-year-old has been to the Final Four three times, but has yet to win a championship.

"They just keep winning ... I think we're playing our best basketball," Schaefer said. "You know, none of us are perfect and we all have our days, but these kids are special."

FIRST FOUR

Prince sparks 17-0 run in Nebraska's victory

Associated Press

DURHAM, N.C. — Britt Prince scored 22 points on 10-for-14 shooting, Nebraska opened the third quarter with a 17-0 run, and the Cornhuskers beat Richmond 75-56 on Wednesday night at the NCAA First Four.

No. 11 seed Nebraska (19-12) plays sixth-seeded Baylor on Friday in the Round of 64.

Prince came around a screen, was fouled on a pull-up jumper from the free-throw line and converted the three-point play to open the second half. Her 3-pointer with 4:42 left in the third capped a 17-0 run that made it 51-32.

Maggie Doogan — the Atlantic 10 player of the year for the second consecutive season — was 8-for-13 shooting and had 24 points and 10 rebounds for the Spiders.

Missouri State 85, Stephen F. Austin 75: At Austin, Texas, Kaemyn Bekemeier had 22 points and 13 rebounds, Lainie Douglas added 14 points and 10 rebounds, and the Lady Bears beat the Ladyjacks in a matchup of 16 seeds.

Missouri State (23-12), which has won at least one game in each of its last four NCAA Tournament appearances, plays top-seeded Texas on Friday.

The Lady Bears shot 48% (33-for-69) and outrebounded SFA 50-30 to overcome 19 turnovers, which the Ladyjacks converted into 22 points.

Missouri State used a 9-0 run to take the lead for good late in the first half. Angel Scott capped the spurt with a 3-pointer that made it 45-37 with 1:55 to go in the second quarter.

Scoreboard

First Four
Wednesday, March 18
At Durham, N.C.
Nebraska 75, Richmond 56
At Austin, Texas
Missouri St. 85, Stephen F. Austin 75
Thursday, March 19
At Columbia, S.C.
Southern U. (19-13) vs. Samford (16-18)
At Iowa City, Iowa
Virginia (19-11) vs. Arizona St. (24-10)
Fort Worth 3
First Round
Friday, March 20
At Austin, Texas
Texas (31-3) vs. Missouri St. (23-12)
Oregon (22-12) vs. Virginia Tech (23-9)
At Ann Arbor, Mich.
NC State (20-10) vs. Tennessee (16-13)
Michigan (25-6) vs. Holy Cross (23-9)
Saturday, March 21
At Morgantown, W.Va.
Kentucky (23-10) vs. James Madison (26-8)
W. Virginia (27-6) vs. Miami (Ohio) (28-6)
At Louisville, Ky.
Alabama (23-10) vs. Rhode Island (28-4)
Louisville (27-7) vs. Vermont (27-7)
Second Round
Sunday, March 22
At Austin, Texas
Texas-Missouri St. vs. Oregon-Virginia Tech winner
At Ann Arbor, Mich.
Michigan-Holy Cross winner vs. NC State-Tennessee winner
Monday, March 23
At Morgantown, W.Va.
West Virginia-Miami (Ohio) winner vs. Kentucky-James Madison winner
At Louisville, Ky.
Louisville-Vermont winner vs. Alabama-Rhode Island winner
Sacramento 2
First Round
Saturday, March 21
At Los Angeles
UCLA (31-1) vs. Cal Baptist (23-10)
Oklahoma St. (23-9) vs. Princeton (26-3)
Friday, March 20
At Minneapolis
Mississippi (23-11) vs. Gonzaga (24-9)
Minnesota (22-8) vs. Green Bay (25-8)
At Durham, N.C.
Baylor (24-8) vs. Nebraska (19-12)
Duke (24-8) vs. Coll. of Charleston (27-5)
At Baton Rouge, La.
Texas Tech (25-7) vs. Villanova (25-7)
LSU (27-5) vs. Jacksonville (24-8)
Second Round
Monday, March 23
At Los Angeles
UCLA-Cal Baptist winner vs. Oklahoma St.-Princeton winner
Sunday, March 22
At Minneapolis
Minnesota-Green Bay winner vs. Mississippi-Gonzaga winner
At Durham, N.C.
Duke-Coll. of Charleston winner vs. Baylor-Nebraska-winner
At Baton Rouge, La.
LSU-Jacksonville winner vs. Texas Tech-Villanova winner
Sacramento 4
First Round
Saturday, March 21
At Columbia, S.C.
South Carolina (31-3) vs. Southern U.-Samford winner
Clemson (21-11) vs. Southern Cal (17-13)
At Iowa City, Iowa
Georgia (22-9) vs. Virginia-Arizona St. winner
Iowa (26-6) vs. Fairleigh Dickinson (30-4)
Friday, March 20
At Norman, Okla.
Michigan St. (22-8) vs. Colorado St. (27-7)
Oklahoma (24-7) vs. Idaho (29-5)
At Fort Worth, Texas
Washington. (21-10) vs. S. Dakota St. (27-6)
TCU (29-5) vs. UC San Diego (24-8)
Second Round
Monday, March 23
At Columbia, S.C.
South Carolina—Southern U.-Samford winner vs. Clemson-Southern Cal winner
At Iowa City, Iowa
Iowa-Fairleigh Dickinson winner vs. Georgia—Virginia-Arizona St. winner
Sunday, March 22
At Norman, Okla.
Oklahoma-Idaho winner vs. Michigan St.-Colorado St. winner
At Fort Worth, Texas
TCU-UC San Diego winner vs. Washington-S. Dakota St. winner
Fort Worth 1
First Round
Saturday, March 21
At Storrs, Conn.
UConn (34-0) vs. UTSA (18-15)
Iowa St. (22-9) vs. Syracuse (23-8)
At Columbus, Ohio
Notre Dame (22-10) vs. Fairfield (28-4)
Ohio St. (26-7) vs. Howard (26-7)
At Nashville, Tenn.
Illinois (21-11) vs. Colorado (22-11)
Vanderbilt (27-4) vs. High Point (27-5)
Friday, March 20
At Chapel Hill, N.C.
Maryland (23-8) vs. Murray St. (31-3)
North Carolina (26-7) vs. W. Illinois (26-5)
Second Round
Monday, March 23
At Storrs, Conn.
UConn-UTSA winner vs. Iowa St.-Syracuse winner
At Columbus, Ohio
Ohio St.-Howard winner vs. Notre Dame-Fairfield winner
At Nashville, Tenn.
Vanderbilt-High Point winner vs. Illinois-Colorado winner
Sunday, March 22
At Chapel Hill, N.C.
North Carolina-W. Illinois winner vs. Maryland-Murray St. winner

NCAA MEN'S TOURNAMENT

Miami asserts itself in First Four vs. SMU

By Jeff Wallner
Associated Press

DAYTON, Ohio — Eian Elmer scored 23 points and Miami (Ohio) beat SMU 89-79 on Wednesday night in the First Four for its first NCAA Tournament victory in 27 years.

Elmer went 6-for-9 from 3-point range as the 11th-seeded RedHawks (32-1), undefeated during the regular season, advanced in the Midwest Region to play No. 6 seed Tennessee.

Brant Byers added 19 points, including four 3s, and Luke Skaljac had 17 points for Miami, making its first NCAA Tournament appearance since 2007. The RedHawks finished 16-for-41 from 3-point range.

"The message I gave our guys before the game was they should leave no doubt with who the more attacking team was," Miami coach Travis Steele said. "I thought that was very evident from the jump ball all the way to the end of the game."

Jaden Toombs led SMU (20-14) with 20 points and 11 rebounds. Jaron Pierre Jr. scored 18 points and Boopie Miller had 15 for the Mustangs, who reached the NCAA Tournament for the first time in nine years. They're still looking for their first victory in the event since 1988.



Jeff Dean/AP

Miami (Ohio) players celebrate on the bench during the first half of a First Four game against SMU in Dayton, Ohio, on Wednesday.

The RedHawks went 31-0 during a captivating regular season — the only Division I team to go unbeaten in 2025-26 and just the nation's eighth undefeated regular season in the past 50 years.

But Miami lost its MAC Tournament opener to UMass, putting its NCAA Tournament hopes in jeopardy because of a schedule that ranked 339th in overall strength and featured no Quadrant 1 games.

Some analysts and critics questioned whether they belonged in the field with an at-large bid, but the RedHawks silenced some skeptics Wednesday with a rousing victory over an Atlantic Coast Conference opponent.

"We're not really focused on proving whether we belong, honestly," Elmer said. "Everybody in the locker room thinks we do. I just think if anything we're just going to go out there, play our hardest and have fun."

Elmer had 14 points and went 4 of 6 from 3-point range in the first half. Byers hit back-to-back 3s to give Miami an 11-point lead.

"They put five guys on the court that can shoot the 3, so they're hard to guard," SMU coach Andy Enfield said. "We outscored them in the paint 46-20 tonight, which was our game plan to really try to score the ball in the lane."

The Mustangs missed their first seven 3-point attempts before Pierre connected with 7:02 remaining in the first half. They went 5 of 19 from long distance.

Almar Atlason hit a pair of 3s to give the RedHawks a 63-50 advantage early in the second half. He scored 12 points.

Skaljac's transition 3 extended Miami's lead to 71-57.

SMU had a size advantage, but foul trouble negated some of that. Mustangs 7-foot-2 center Samet Yigitoglu fouled out with 1:31 remaining. He finished with eight points and six rebounds.

The undersized RedHawks matched SMU with 35 rebounds and 17 second-chance points.

"Listen, our group is uber-confident," Steele said. "We know we belong. I told our guys afterwards, man, I'm happy, but the job is not finished. We want to continue to advance in this thing."

Prairie View A&M tops Lehigh for 1st March Madness win

By Jeff Wallner
Associated Press

DAYTON, Ohio — Dontae Horne scored 25 points and Cory Wells had 19 points and 11 rebounds as Prairie View A&M earned its first NCAA Tournament victory, 67-55 over Lehigh on Wednesday night in the First Four.

"Definitely gratifying," coach Bryan Smith said. "A heck of a basketball game. We're definitely excited to survive and advance and move on to the first round on Friday night."

Lance Williams added 10 points for the Panthers (19-17), making their third tournament appearance after going 5-27 last season. They advance as the No. 16 seed in the South Region to face top seed and defending national champion Florida.

"As basketball players you watch every NCAA Tournament, and just to think that you're here now and you'll be playing the team who just won last year," Wells said. "We're going to go out there and compete regardless."

Horne also had seven rebounds and four steals. Horne, Wells and Williams each played all 40 minutes.

Lehigh leading scorer Nasir Whitlock, the Patriot League Tournament MVP, went scoreless for more than 26 minutes and finished with five points. He was 2-for-15 shooting.

The last time Whitlock did not reach double figures was Nov. 9, when he had two points in a 69-47 loss at West Virginia.

"Definitely not the way I think anybody up here thought it was going to go," Whitlock said. "But that's just basketball. Sometimes it goes your way, sometimes it doesn't. Today is one of those days where I thought we couldn't really get too much going."

Hank Alvey led the Mountain Hawks (18-17) with 23 points and 15 rebounds. He was the only scorer in double digits for Lehigh.

Prairie View A&M has won eight straight, including a 72-66 victory over Southern in the SWAC championship game.

The Mountain Hawks, in the tournament for the sixth time, won the Patriot League Tournament by beating Boston University 74-60 in the title game. The lone NCAA Tournament victory for Lehigh was an upset of Duke in 2012.

Andrew Urosevic hit consecutive 3-pointers, the second benefiting from a kind bounce, to give the Mountain Hawks their largest lead at 23-15. But just when it appeared they might start to pull away, Wells scored five straight points — including a 3 — to help the Panthers get back into the game.

Lehigh led 29-27 at halftime despite Whitlock, who averages 21 points per game, being scoreless. The Mountain Hawks were 3 of 13 from 3-point range in the opening half.

Whitlock missed his first nine shots before connecting on a 3 with 13:12 remaining.

"We've got a great player in Nasir Whitlock, but he had somebody blanketed in front of him all night long," Lehigh coach Brett Reed said. "It was harder for him to get angles and opportunities to really finish at the rim or get the separation that he needed."

With the Mountain Hawks' top scorer held in check, Prairie View A&M extended its lead to 51-41 on a jumper by Wells with 8:34 left.

"I think the first time we were here in 2019, we got off to a great start," Smith said. "I think we were up by 11 on Fairleigh Dickinson at halftime, but we didn't finish. The main thing was to finish, and I think we did that. I think we defended. We flew around."

Scoreboard

FIRST FOUR
Tuesday, March 17
At Dayton, Ohio

Howard 86, UMBC 83
Texas 68, NC State 66

Wednesday, March 18

Prairie View 67, Lehigh 55
Miami (Ohio) 89, SMU 79

EAST REGIONAL
First Round
Thursday, March 19
At Greenville, S.C.

Duke (32-2) vs. Siena (23-11)
Ohio St. (21-12) vs. TCU (22-11)

At Buffalo, N.Y.

Louisville (23-10) vs. South Florida (25-8)
Michigan St. (25-7) vs. N. Dakota St. (27-7)

Friday, March 20
At San Diego

St. John's (28-6) vs. N. Iowa (23-12), **AFN-Sports, 12 a.m. Saturday CET, 7 a.m. Saturday JKT**
Kansas (23-10) vs. Cal Baptist (25-8), **AFN-Sports, 2:30 a.m. Saturday CET, 9:30 a.m. Saturday JKT**

At Philadelphia

UCLA (23-11) vs. UCF (21-11)
UConn (29-5) vs. Furman (22-12)

Second Round
Saturday, March 21
At Greenville, S.C.

Duke-Siena winner vs. Ohio St.-TCU winner

At Buffalo, N.Y.

Michigan St.-N. Dakota St. winner vs. Louisville-South Florida winner

Sunday, March 22
At San Diego

Kansas-Cal Baptist winner vs. St. John's-N. Iowa winner

At Philadelphia

UConn-Furman winner vs. UCLA-UCF winner

SOUTH REGIONAL
First Round
Friday, March 20
At Tampa, Fla.

Florida (26-7) vs. Prairie View (19-17), **AFN-Pacific, 2:15 a.m. Saturday CET, 9:15 a.m. Saturday JKT**
Clemson (24-10) vs. Iowa (21-12), **AFN-Pacific, 11:45 p.m. Friday CET, 6:45 a.m. Saturday JKT**

Thursday, March 19
At Oklahoma City

Vanderbilt (26-8) vs. McNeese St. (28-5)
Nebraska (26-6) vs. Troy (22-11)

At Greenville, S.C.

North Carolina (24-8) vs. VCU (27-7)
Illinois (24-8) vs. Penn (18-11)

At Oklahoma City

Saint Mary's (Cal.) (27-5) vs. Texas A&M (21-11)
Houston (28-6) vs. Idaho (21-14)

Second Round
Sunday, March 22
At Tampa, Fla.

Florida-Prairie View winner vs. Clemson-Iowa winner

Saturday, March 21
At Oklahoma City

Nebraska-Troy winner vs. Vanderbilt-McNeese St. winner

At Greenville, S.C.

Illinois-Penn winner vs. North Carolina-VCU winner

At Oklahoma City

Houston-Idaho winner vs. Saint Mary's (Cal.)-Texas A&M winner

MIDWEST REGIONAL
First Round
Thursday, March 19
At Buffalo, N.Y.

Michigan (31-3) vs. Howard (24-10)
Georgia (22-10) vs. Saint Louis (28-5)

Friday, March 20
At Tampa, Fla.

Texas Tech (22-10) vs. Akron (29-5), **AFN-Sports2, 5:30 p.m. Friday CET, 12:30 a.m. Saturday JKT**
Alabama (23-9) vs. Hofstra (24-10), **AFN-Sports2, 8 p.m. Friday CET, 3 a.m. Saturday JKT**

At Philadelphia

Tennessee (22-11) vs. Miami (Ohio) (32-1)
Virginia (29-5) vs. Wright St. (23-11)

At St. Louis

Kentucky (21-13) vs. Santa Clara (26-8), **AFN-Sports, 5 p.m. Friday CET, 12 a.m. Saturday JKT**
Iowa St. (27-7) vs. Tennessee St. (23-9), **AFN-Sports, 7:30 p.m. Friday CET, 2:30 a.m. Saturday JKT**

Second Round
Saturday, March 21
At Buffalo, N.Y.

Michigan-Howard winner vs. Georgia-Saint Louis winner

Sunday, March 22
At Tampa, Fla.

Alabama-Hofstra winner vs. Texas Tech-Akron winner

At Philadelphia

Virginia-Wright St. winner vs. Tennessee-Miami (Ohio) winner

At St. Louis

Iowa St.-Tennessee St. winner vs. Kentucky-Santa Clara winner

WEST REGIONAL
First Round
Friday, March 20
At San Diego

Arizona (32-2) vs. LIU (24-10), **AFN-Pacific, 6:30 p.m. Friday CET, 1:30 a.m. Saturday JKT**
Villanova (24-8) vs. Utah St. (28-6), **AFN-Pacific, 9 p.m. Friday CET, 4 a.m. Saturday JKT**

At St. Louis

Miami (25-8) vs. Missouri (20-12), **AFN-Sports2, 3 a.m. Saturday CET, 10 a.m. Saturday JKT**
Purdue (27-8) vs. Queens (21-13), **AFN-Sports2, 12:30 a.m. Saturday CET, 7:30 a.m. Saturday JKT**

Thursday, March 19
At Portland, Ore.

Wisconsin (24-10) vs. High Point (30-4)
Arkansas (26-8) vs. Hawaii (24-8)
BYU (23-11) vs. Texas (19-14)
Gonzaga (30-3) vs. Kennesaw St. (21-13)

Second Round
Sunday, March 22
At San Diego

Arizona-LIU winner vs. Villanova-Utah St. winner

At St. Louis

Purdue-Queens University winner vs. Miami-Missouri winner

Saturday, March 21
At Portland, Ore.

Arkansas-Hawaii winner vs. Wisconsin-High Point winner
Gonzaga-Kennesaw St. winner vs. BYU—NC State-Texas winner

NCAA MEN'S TOURNAMENT

Coach Odom seeking to end Virginia's 7-year win drought

By Steve Reed
Associated Press

The last time Virginia won an NCAA Tournament game, Tony Bennett and the Cavaliers celebrated by cutting down the nets after defeating Texas Tech 85-77 in an overtime thriller for the national championship.

That was seven years ago.

The Virginia men's basketball program faded after that. The Cavs have reached the NCAA Tournament three times in the past five years only to get knocked out in the First Four once and the first round twice.

Virginia (29-5) is back and ready to snap that dubious drought, if not contend for a national title.

First-year coach Ryan Odom — the same guy who led 16-seed UMBC to the historic upset of the No. 1 overall seed Cavaliers in 2018 — has Virginia playing well entering this year's tournament. The Cavs have won 13 of their last 15 games and took No. 1 Duke to the wire in the ACC Tournament championship game.

Virginia is the No 3. overall seed in the Midwest Region and will face 14-seed Wright State on Friday.

"I can't speak for what happened before I got here, but obviously coach Bennett really established an incredible program, and with everything that happened with him leaving they had a rough patch," said Cavaliers guard Dallin Hall, a BYU transfer. "But coach Odom is really good at inspiring confidence in his players. We felt like we've been the top team in the country all year long, just with the talent we have, the coaching staff, the culture."

Hall described Odom as a players' coach who gives players the freedom and confidence to reach their full potential on the court.

This isn't the same style of Virginia team that many had come to know under Bennett.

For years, the Cavs played what was called "Bennett Ball," a methodical, defensive-first approach that emphasized offensive efficiency and a slow pace. Bennett designed the approach to control the tempo of the game and take opponents out of the flow of their game.

This year, Virginia is 72nd in the nation in scoring offense under Odom, averaging 80.6 points per game.

"When we're not being on the attack, being the aggressors, as we like to say it, he really gets on us," Hall said. "He wants us to just go for it. That's a term we use a lot."

Defensively, the Cavaliers are still good.



Nell Redmond/AP

Virginia coach Ryan Odom has the Cavaliers playing a different brand of ball from the one they were known for under Tony Bennett. Virginia faces Wright State looking for its first NCAA win in eight years.

They are first in the nation in blocked shots per game (6.5), led by Ugonna Onyenso, who had nine rejections against Duke — four of those coming against ACC player of the year Cameron Boozer. He finished with 21 blocks in three ACC Tournament games, obliterating Tim Duncan's 31-year-old record of 14 set with Wake Forest.

Odom said despite the loss to the Blue Devils, a game that slipped away in the final two minutes, he likes the team's chemistry heading into the NCAA Tournament, saying that his players "take up for one another" and they play with a high level of joy.

"I like where our guys are at," Odom said. "I feel like we can compete with the top teams in the country."

Leaning: 3-point shots remain volatile bets amid rise in attempts

FROM PAGE 48

Division I teams fittingly have taken nearly 40% of their shots from behind the arc in this 40th season of the 3, yet a fraction of Final Four teams and NCAA champions in the 3-point era have utilized it to this year's levels with their seasons on the line.

Higher volume

At its core, the 3-pointer is a volatile bet.

The reward can be far-reaching offensive efficiency beyond simply the 50% added value compared to a traditional field goal. But it boasts a tougher conversion rate as officials have moved the arc back multiple times — from 19 feet, 9 inches to 20 feet, 9 inches in 2008-09, then to 22 feet, 1¾ inches to match the international distance for 2019-20.

As a result, the 3-point shooting percentage has barely moved. Division I teams have bounced from around 33-35% shooting on 3s going back to the 2002-03 season, with this year at 34.1% entering the week.

Yet 3s have gone from accounting for 32.1% of all shot attempts in 2002-03 to a 24-season high of 39.5% this year, according to SportRadar. And 3s account for 29.8% of all made shots in Division I, up from around 25% in 2002-03.

Those are thresholds rarely reached by teams that have pushed all the way to the sport's final weekend:

■ Only 28 of 152 (18.4%) teams to reach the Final Four in the 3-point era have had 3s account for this year's percentage of their made shots.

■ Only 21 of those Final Four teams (13.8%) had 3s account for this year's percentage of shot attempts.

■ And seven of 38 champions (18.4%) have had 3s account for more than 39% of their shot attempts, including the past three winners in UConn (2023-24) and Florida (2025).

Villanova's two championships under Jay Wright remain outliers. Notably, his 2018 winner that blew through six tournament games to win it all behind eventual NBA players Jalen Brunson, Mikal Bridges and Donte DiVincenzo held the all-time highest marks among the champs; 3s accounted for 38% of the Wildcats' made shots and 47.5% of their attempts.

His other champion, in 2016, won on a buzzer-beating 3-pointer by Kris Jenkins.

"You've got to be able to shoot the 3 to go deep in the tournament," the retired Villanova coach said. "Not just because 3s are more valuable than 2s, but now the way teams play defense, if you can't shoot 3s, they're going to load up on your 3-point shooters and take them away. And they're gonna force you to make non-shooters make plays."



Ben McKeown/AP

Duke's Dame Sarr attempts a 3-pointer during the second half against Virginia in Durham, N.C., on Feb. 28.

The right looks

That's Oats' focus, too.

Alabama's 4,436 attempted 3s are 339 more than the next closest Division I team, according to SportRadar. Alabama has shot 35.5% behind the arc in that span, with 3s accounting for 48.3% of the Tide's shot attempts.

The approach helped make Alabama the No. 1 overall seed in 2023 and powered a Final Four run in 2024 and last year's trip to the Elite Eight after hitting a tournament-record 25 3s in a Sweet 16 romp against BYU.

"The math part of it is how can you create the most efficient offense, and how can you try to keep the other team from running the efficient offense?" said Oats, whose team is the Midwest Region's 4-seed. "Well if you're all in on getting the most efficient shots you can, the 3-point line and taking 3s has to be a part of that. It just does."

Yet two of those runs ended when the Crimson Tide couldn't hit from outside. That 2023 team led by eventual No. 2 overall NBA pick Brandon Miller went 3-for-27 (11.1%) on 3s in a Sweet 16 loss to San Diego State. Alabama went 8-for-32 (25%) in last year's regional-final loss to Duke.

Hall of Fame coach Rick Pitino, now at St. John's, has never shied from the 3, going back to Providence's unexpected Final Four in the first season of the 3-pointer to cutting down the nets at Kentucky in 1996, followed by Louisville in 2013 in a later-vacated title push.

Can a team win it all firing off all these 3s?

"100% — if you defend the 3. That's the key," said Pitino, whose Big East champion is the East Region's 5-seed. "It all comes down to defense. It's not how many you make, how many you take, but how many you stop. So if everybody is shooting the 3, the team that's gonna win it is the team that defends the 3."

Gravity's pull

Duke coach Jon Scheyer is only in his fourth season as successor to retired Hall of Famer Mike Krzyzewski, so he's been willing to adjust his approach in these early years of his tenure. That's included an uptick in 3-point usage.

"For me, it's actually not even the fact of shooting more 3s," Scheyer said. "It's about having the threat to shoot the 3. And I think that's the biggest key, is spacing. ... Because that's what opens up drives. That's what open up free throws. That's what opens second-chance points. So I think naturally by having really good spacing, you do end up shooting more 3s."

The Blue Devils use what Scheyer has likened to a "smashmouth" approach with a big frontline led by freshman NBA prospect and Associated Press first-team All-American Cameron Boozer. And yet, even as the No. 1 overall tournament seed has routinely pummeled teams in the paint and on the glass, the 3-pointer accounts for a similar percentage of Duke's attempted shots (44.4%) and made baskets (31.8%).

Scheyer figures it's about finding the right balance in shot selection, along with a good shooter's "gravity" in pulling defenders from the paint.

"You can still establish yourself inside while you still shoot 3s," Scheyer said. "Now if you're shooting other shots and just living on the perimeter, well yeah, I think it's tough to win that way, because the best shot you can get is a layup or a dunk or get to the free-throw line. But if you're shooting 3s, you better be really good at it."

NCAA MEN'S TOURNAMENT

Purdue seniors start farewell tour putting focus on team success

By Michael Marot
Associated Press

Trey Kaufman-Renn, Fletcher Loyer and Braden Smith chose Purdue for all the traditional reasons.

They wanted to become part of the school's proud basketball fraternity. They wanted their names linked together in program history. They wanted to earn degrees from a respected academic school, and, yes, just maybe, they could be the seniors to finally hang an NCAA championship banner in Mackey Arena.

Now as this trio embarks on its March Madness farewell tour, it has become the face of something else — an old-school group of players more committed to finishing what they started than cashing in someplace else.

"You're right, you may get more money (at another school), but what's the dollar amount on the relationships I've built?" Kaufman-Renn said recently. "What's the dollar amount on the values I've learned? For me, it's an easy, easy thing (to stay). It's more of a value thing at this point and you hope the younger guys and their parents are teaching them the right thing."

What these three have shown over the last four seasons is how to put the team ahead of personal aspirations.

Together, they've appeared in 143 games, started 108 and while the rest of the basketball world focuses on Smith needing two assists to break Bobby Hurley's Division I career record Friday against Queens in St. Louis, this group is more concerned about advancing to Round 2 with win No. 115 and tying the career record.

"We're not done yet," Smith said.

By sticking around longer than most players in today's game, Kaufman-Renn, Loyer and Smith have seen and done things that seem increasingly unfathomable:

■ They made top five rankings the norm, even claiming the No. 1 spot in this season's AP preseason poll for the first time.

■ They won back-to-back Big Ten regular-season outright titles in 2022-23 and 2023-24 before rallying to add the league's tourney title last weekend.

■ And one year after becoming the second No. 1 seed in tourney history to lose to a No. 16 seed, they ended Purdue's 44-year Final Four drought by reaching the title game. Last year, they even came within one possession of returning to the Elite Eight despite losing two-time national player of the year Zach Edey to the NBA.

Now, Kaufman-Renn, Loyer and Smith dream about finishing their careers on college basketball's biggest stage in Indianapolis, just a short drive from their campus and their Indiana hometowns.

"It's March, it's what you work for growing up. It's what you work for all offseason," Loyer said. "Obviously, you want to build that resume in the regular season, but now it's time to really go."

Now, as this trio's improbable journey nears its end, there's one unfinished item on the long to-do list they came to school with and one new mission to complete — showing future Boilermakers that sticking around and working as a team comes with more lasting rewards than fame or fortune.

"I assume for Purdue, it's never really going to change because that's the type of people coach (Matt) Painter gets," Smith said. "That's the reason I wanted to come back and the reason I chose this place in the first place. I don't think you have a culture really like this (anywhere else) and I think that's what makes it really special, so, yeah, I think, other than us, you're probably not going to see it (a group staying together for four years) a whole lot."



Nam Y. Huh/AP

Purdue players celebrate after guard Braden Smith scored a basket during the second half against Michigan in the championship of the Big Ten Conference tournament March 15 in Chicago.



George Walker IV/AP

Florida guard Isaiah Brown, left, battles Vanderbilt guard Duke Miles, right, for the ball during the second half of the semifinals of the Southeastern Conference tournament March 14 in Nashville, Tenn.

Florida brushes off SEC loss, eyes title repeat

By Mark Long
Associated Press

GAINESVILLE, Fla. — Nothing will convince Florida coach Todd Golden that losing in the Southeastern Conference Tournament was a positive.

Not even six consecutive wins and another national title.

"I get it, but I'm not with it," Golden said Monday. "We're going to definitely learn from it. We're going to use it to our advantage, for sure, but I'm never going to be like, 'Oh, man, I'm glad we lost.'"

The Gators (26-7) landed a No. 1 seed in the NCAA Tournament despite getting thumped by Vanderbilt in the semifinals of the league tourney. Florida got punched in the mouth early and never responded, a disappointing — some might call it eye-opening — showing before the Big Dance.

Golden is hoping the 17-point setback serves as a wake-up call for a team that had won 12 in a row up to that point. The defending national champion Gators open their repeat bid Friday night in nearby Tampa against Prairie View A&M, which beat Lehigh in a First Four game.

"When you do lose, you can really drill down on some areas that you need to improve on," Golden said. "When you're winning, I think that's more difficult. It's more difficult to teach. It's more difficult to hold accountable. But now we don't have that issue off a loss and hopefully we respond the same way that we did after we lost to Auburn on January 24th."

Florida looked downright unstoppable during its streak that included an average margin of victory of 20.5 points. But it seemed off against Vanderbilt, missing 10 layups, turning the ball over 14 times and allowing wide-open looks from 3-point range.

Was it a blip? A bad matchup? Or maybe something more foreboding?

Golden has insisted it was a one-off performance, not a sign of something being wrong or a blueprint for how to beat the best rebounding team in the country.

"The great thing for us is we have already been an iteration of ourselves that we need to be to make a deep run," he said. "That's what we've been over the last two months. So we need to get back on track to what we were.

"We have been playing like the No. 2 team in America since January (6th). We know what we're capable of. We know what that looks like. We just have to go back out and do it."

Florida has responded all season, whether it was stringing together wins after losses or answering questions about perceived flaws: Can the Gators close out tight games? Yes. Are they good enough from 3-point range? For sure. Do they have consistent contributors off the bench? No doubt.

Florida started the season 5-4 and was unranked by January. But the Gators have since figured out how to mesh dual point guards Boogie Fland and Xaivian Lee, how to get more shots for sixth man Urban Klavzar and how to best utilize the most dominant frontcourt in school history, a lineup that features Rueben Chinyelu, Alex Condon and Thomas Haugh.

The group was good enough to go toe-to-toe with Arizona, Duke and UConn early and good enough to reel off 12 straight in SEC play late. Now is it good enough to repeat?

"We want to bring the fight to everybody," Golden said. "We do that more often than not. We talk a lot to our team about being the mentally and physically tougher team. … Vandy got us because they ran to the fight quicker than we did.

"We can't allow anybody else to dictate how we play. It's really important that we take pride in that and take the accountability that it's on us and not on anybody else."

SPORTS

Youth movement

Capitals preparing contingencies with Ovechkin's future undecided ›› NHL, Page 42



Florida guard CJ Ingram shoots a 3-pointer against Mississippi State during the second half March 3 in Gainesville, Fla.

MORGAN HURD/AP

NCAA MEN'S TOURNAMENT

Leaning into it

3-point attempts stay on the rise heading into March Madness

BY AARON BEARD
Associated Press

No team has made more 3-pointers, nor launched more, than Alabama in the past four seasons. And nothing will shake coach Nate Oats from believing they're at the core of building a winner in modern basketball.

Teams might struggle to match the Crimson Tide's sheer volume heading into March Madness, but they're leaning into those long-distance shots, too.

"Finding efficient shots is at the top of what we do," Oats said recently. "It's at the top of what everybody in the NBA is looking at is generating efficient shots. And if you're not thinking about how to get open catch-and-shoot 3s, I don't think you're thinking about creating efficient shots."

This marks the 40th season with the 3-pointer fully integrated into college basketball, an advancement that has transformed the sport since its 1986-87 introduction. Years of pounding the ball inside to bigs have given way to skilled players stretching defenses to create space for shooters to take those matchup-tilting shots.

In the NCAA Tournament, the 3 is an equalizer capable of igniting seismic upsets like Middle Tennessee's takedown of Michigan State in 2016 or the first-ever 16-vs-1 win with UMBC beating Virginia in 2018. Going cold can just as easily mean an abrupt end to the season. So the question remains: How much should a team rely on the 3 in March?

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Doncic scores 40, Lakers win 7th straight ›› NBA, Page 43

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