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EDITION



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# STARS AND STRIPES®

stripes.com

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## Trump touts war gains in Iran

BY LARA KORTE  
*Stars and Stripes*

President Donald Trump on Thursday said the war in Iran was "way ahead of schedule," claiming the Middle Eastern country's military capabilities have been "obliterated," even as Tehran insists it is not interested in negotiations to end the conflict. "We estimated it would take approxi-

mately 4-6 weeks to achieve our mission, and we're way ahead of schedule if you look at what we've done in terms of the destruction of that country," Trump said during a White House Cabinet meeting.

In its latest update, U.S. Central Command said it has significantly degraded Iran's military capabilities, destroying large portions of its navy and missile pro-

duction sites as the war approaches the one-month mark.

The U.S. has struck more than 10,000 targets, destroying 92% of Iran's largest naval vessels and damaging or destroying two-thirds of its missile and drone production sites and shipyards, Adm. Brad Cooper,

**SEE GAINS ON PAGE 7**

### TO OUR READERS

## Content changes take effect today

Stars and Stripes includes a variety of external content in our print edition to provide readers with a broad mix of news, information and viewpoints alongside our core military reporting. This content includes entertainment and lifestyle features, comics and world news. These items have long been part of our effort to provide a well-rounded publication that reflects the wide range of interests of the military community.

Due to a recent directive from the Department of Defense, Stars and Stripes is no longer permitted to utilize certain syndicated and third-party content. It is the department's determination that readers can readily access this content through other outlets. As a result, readers will notice that some familiar content no longer appears in our newspaper.

We recognize that many readers have come to enjoy and rely on these sections as part of their daily reading. They have been included for many years to provide broader news context, useful information and a brief break from the demands of military life. The restrictions on using this content will require significant adjustments to future editions of the newspaper.

Despite this change, our newsroom remains fully committed to our core mission of providing independent, military-focused journalism to the community we serve around the world. We will continue to report on the issues, events, and policies that affect service members, their families, and the broader defense community.

We welcome feedback from our readers on these changes. Thank you for being a loyal reader of Stars and Stripes and valuing our independent journalism.



Scan the QR code to submit feedback

## Swarm to protect

Drone defense option creates wall to shield troops from enemy attacks  
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JACOB SLAYMAKER/U.S. Army

Army personnel test drones at Fort Stewart, Ga., in 2024. The U.S. military is exploring a new way to defend troops in Africa from unmanned aerial threats, using commercial technology to field swarms of drones and sensors that act as a protective shield.

# BUSINESS/WEATHER

## EUROPE GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel	Azores	..	..	\$5.246	..
Germany	\$4.364	\$4.982	\$5.346	\$5.780	Change in price	..	..	+24.8 cents	..
Netherlands	..	\$6.244	\$6.832	\$7.954	Turkey	..	..	\$5.096	\$5.528*
U.K.	..	\$5.019	\$5.383	\$5.815	Change in price	..	..	+24.8 cents	+30.4 cents

Fuel prices are updated daily. These prices are effective March 27. The change in price is from March 20.

## PACIFIC GAS PRICES

Country	Super E10	Super unleaded	Super plus	Diesel	South Korea	\$4.049	..	\$5.029	\$5.459
Japan	..	\$4.999	..	\$5.429	Change in price	+24.0 cents	..	+25.0 cents	+30.0 cents
Okinawa	\$4.499	..	..	\$5.579	Guam	\$4.079**	\$4.699	\$5.059	..
Change in price	No change	..	..	No change	Change in price	+24.0 cents	+24.0 cents	+25.0 cents	..

\*DieselEFD \*\*Midgrade  
Pacific prices for the week of March 27 - April 3

## EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates		Commercial rates	
Euro costs (March 27)	0.84	Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3749
British pound (March 27)	\$1.30	Britain (Pound)	1.3353
Japanese yen (March 27)	155.00	Canada (Dollar)	1.3828
South Korean won (March 27)	1,468.00	China (Yuan)	6.9010
		Denmark (Krone)	6.4735
		Egypt (Pound)	52.5557
		Euro	0.8664
		Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.8246
		Hungary (Forint)	335.17
		Israel (Shekel)	3.1164
		Japan (Yen)	159.53
		Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3067
		Norway (Krone)	9.6459
		Philippines (Peso)	60.10
		Poland (Zloty)	3.69
		Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7472
		Singapore (Dollar)	1.2837
		South Korea (Won)	1,504.89

Switzerland (Franc) 0.7932  
Thailand (Baht) 32.86  
Turkey (NewLira) 44.3618

(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	3.71
30-year bond	4.90

## 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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## STARS AND STRIPES



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## MILITARY

## Coast Guard operating with 'grim uncertainty'

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The 40-day shutdown of the Department of Homeland Security has led to several missed paychecks for the Coast Guard's civilian employees and a "grim uncertainty" of potential missed pay for its military members.

It has prevented the service from paying more than 5,000 utility accounts, putting the Coast Guard's critical infrastructure in "imminent danger" of widespread utility shutoffs and refusals of fuel deliveries.

And it has stalled the processing of more than 16,000 merchant marine credentials, with the backlog growing by 300 per day.

Those are just some of the effects the funding lapse has had on the Coast Guard, which operates under the department in peacetime, the service's vice commandant, Adm. Thomas Allan, told lawmakers on Wednesday.

"These realities erode the sacred trust our men and women have in the nation they serve," Allan said in testimony to the House Committee on Homeland Security. "Every day the shutdown drags

on moves us closer to a tipping point."

It takes the Coast Guard two and a half days to recover from each day it is in a shutdown, he said, meaning if the shutdown were to end Wednesday, the service would not catch up with bills and other affected activities until July 3.

Negotiations to end the shutdown, which began on Feb. 14, took on more urgency this week as lawmakers pushed to resolve the impasse before leaving for a two-week recess on Friday.

But a bipartisan deal has yet to emerge.

Senate Republicans sent a proposal to Democrats on Tuesday to fund the entirety of the department except for parts of Immigration and Customs Enforcement involved in the Trump administration's deportation crackdown.

Democrats, who have unsuccessfully offered bills to separate funding for the department from ICE and Customs and Border Protection, sent a counteroffer with ICE reforms on Wednesday morning, according to Sen. Minority Leader Chuck Schumer of New York.

In the meantime, the Coast Guard has continued "to serve, because that is what our people have sworn to do," Allan told lawmakers as he outlined the impact of the shutdown alongside officials from other department agencies.

"But a crew should never question whether the nation they protect will stand behind them and their families," he added. "Stable funding for DHS is not simply a budgetary matter, it's a matter of trust, readiness and national security."



Allan

The shutdown has created an "unacceptable financial strain" on the Coast Guard's civilian workforce, Allan said, and though service members have continued to get paid, the service is constantly unsure if it can make the next payroll for them.

Such uncertainty has affected mission readiness and likely caused people to question whether they want to be part of a military service that frequently gets impacted by government shut-

downs, he told lawmakers.

"For the Coast Guard, this marks the third shutdown of this fiscal year," Allan wrote in testimony submitted to the committee. "In total, for 85 of the last 176 days — for nearly half the year — our service has been without the funding necessary to operate and pay our people."

The latest shutdown has left crews deployed on national security missions unable to get reimbursed for thousands of dollars of official expenses on their government travel cards — a personal debt that is an "unacceptable burden," he wrote.

It has also crippled the Coast Guard's ability to pay its many contractors and vendors, including companies that perform ship maintenance and are increasingly voicing their unwillingness to work without pay.

The damage could be long-lasting, he said.

"What we worry about is that it's not only a near-term impact, but as we bid for these contracts with these companies in the future, they're not going to come to the Coast Guard, they'll go to the Navy, they'll go to the Marines,"

Allan said.

The service has so far incurred more than \$200 million in unpaid bills to industry partners, he said.

Among them are missed payments for cloud and satellite communications services that threaten to sever vital command-and-control links, according to Allan.

It has also ceased activities that do not protect human life or property from imminent danger, including routine patrols and fisheries enforcement. Many preparations for this summer's World Cup and America's 250th birthday celebrations have also been paused, he said.

Republicans and Democrats continue to blame each other for the shutdown, which was triggered when a deal to provide full-year funding for the department unraveled following the killings of two American citizens by federal immigration agents in Minnesota in January.

President Donald Trump said Tuesday he would take a "good, hard look" at the Republican-proposed deal to end the partial government shutdown but added that "any deal they make, I'm pretty much not happy with it."

## Pentagon deal to quadruple production of anti-missile component

By GARY WARNER  
*Stars and Stripes*

Anti-missile seekers would quadruple in production under an agreement signed between the Pentagon and the anti-missile defense system's builders, the Defense Department announced Wednesday.

BAE Systems and Lockheed Martin agreed to prioritize the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system, a key weapon in fighting missiles and drones fired by Iran at U.S. and allied targets during the current Middle East conflict.

Under the agreement, annual construction of seekers would follow a January deal that saw Lockheed agree to try to increase production of THAAD interceptors from 96 to 400 per year.

The Pentagon released no financial details of the agreement.

Guided by BAE Systems' seekers, THAAD interceptors lock on to ballistic missiles flying as fast as 17,000 mph.

The interceptor strikes the target with sufficient kinetic energy — speed and force — to destroy the incoming warheads.

The system can intercept targets inside and outside Earth's atmosphere.

THAAD can defend a larger geographic area than the Patriot missile, according to a Congressional Research Service report last year. It's part of an anti-mis-



Missile Defense Agency

**A Terminal High Altitude Area Defense interceptor is launched from the Reagan Test Site on the Kwajalein atoll in 2019.**

sile system used by the United States that also includes the Aegis Missile Defense System and the Ground-Based Midcourse Defense System.

Michael Duffey, Under Secretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment, said the THAAD deal would ensure the speed and scale needed for anti-missile de-

fense now and in the future.

"We are providing the certainty our partners need to invest, expand and hire. This is how we place the industrial base on a war-

time footing," Duffey said.

BAE Systems signed on to a seven-year "framework" to increase production fourfold and accelerate delivery of the infrared seeker for THAAD.

"The THAAD seeker provides critical sensing and guidance capabilities to help protect the United States and its global allies from ballistic missiles," BAE Systems said in a statement Wednesday.

BAE Systems said the THAAD seeker production work would be done at their facilities in Nashua, N.H., and Endicott, N.Y.

Each THAAD battery consists of 90 soldiers, six truck-mounted launchers, 48 interceptors (eight per launcher), one Army/Navy Transportable Radar Surveillance and Control Mode 2 (AN/TPY-2) radar, and a Tactical Fire Control/Communications component, according to the congressional report.

"THAAD provides Combatant Commanders a rapidly deployable capability against short-range (up to 1,000 km), medium-range (1,000-3,000 km), and limited intermediate-range (3,000-5,000 km) ballistic missile threats," the CRS report said.

The president of South Korea earlier in March opposed the removal of parts of a THAAD system from his country to the Middle East but said the move would not significantly affect deterrence against Pyongyang.

## PACIFIC

# 7th Fleet's home in Japan set for upgraded facility

BY ALEX WILSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — Construction is underway on a 68,000-square-foot recreation and dining facility at the home of the U.S. 7th Fleet that will replace the bowling alley and food court.

The two-story facility will combine a 28-lane bowling center and a multi-vendor Navy Exchange food court — consolidating services now spread between two single-story buildings — along with game rooms, party spaces and a lounge, said base spokesman Justin Keller.

“The existing 45-year-old center has served the [base] community well for decades,” he wrote in a March 13 email.

The new facility will ensure the next generation of sailors and families will have a facility that meets their needs, Keller said.

An exact construction schedule

is not available, but a complete timeline will be released once utility work concludes, he added.

Vertical work on the facility will coincide with the construction of two new parking garages: a four-story, 466-space garage near Kyuban and Jyuban housing towers and a five-story, 334-space garage near the exchange, said Keller and the Naval Region Japan website.

The three projects are part of a broader, \$500 million initiative between the U.S. Navy and Japanese government to build 13 facilities for the Navy throughout Kanagawa prefecture in exchange for returning the Negishi Housing Annex, Keller said.

The annex is slated to be officially handed over to Japan on June 30, Defense Minister Shinjiro Koizumi said at a March 13 press conference.

Once the new recreation and dining facility is completed, the



JAMES KIMBER/U.S. Navy

Construction of a new food court and bowling center is underway at Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan, seen here in February.

food court will be demolished and replaced with a 279-space parking lot, Keller said.

While the upgrades will eventually result in more than 1,000 additional parking spaces, residents in the meantime will have to grapple with reduced parking and traffic disruptions from construction, Keller said.

The base has established two

temporary spots for people to pick up packages at the post office annex next to the food court, Keller wrote.

Other projects are underway, including upgrades to four single-sailor apartment buildings and construction of the P-39 Ship Handling and Combat Training Facility, a high-tech training space that includes at least five simulators

just 400 yards from Yokosuka's main gate.

“As with the ongoing unaccompanied housing upgrades, the timeline for the new bowling and dining complex is part of a deliberate strategy to balance and minimize impact of construction projects across the installation,” the base said in a March 3 news release.

## Air Force base on Okinawa contains diesel fuel spill

BY BRIAN McELHINEY  
AND KEISHI KOJA  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Air Force has recovered 575 gallons of diesel fuel that spilled at Kadena Air Base on Okinawa and “affected” its stormwater system, according to the 18th Wing.

The base “immediately contained” the spill on Tuesday, the wing wrote in a news release the following day. The spill was caused by an equipment failure and was “reported in accordance with established procedures,” the release said.

“Response teams successfully

recovered the fuel from the affected storm water system and have completed the cleanup,” the wing said. “Additional preventative measures remain in place downstream out of an abundance of caution.”

The wing acknowledged but did not respond to phone and email inquiries on Wednesday and Thursday.

Kadena town's Base Liaison Division was told about the incident Wednesday evening through the Okinawa Defense Bureau — an arm of Japan's Ministry of Defense — which did not share the incident's exact location or if any damage oc-

curred, a spokesman said by phone Thursday. The town lies northwest of the base.

“We are still conducting arrangements to consider how to deal with this matter,” he said.

Okinawa city had received no information from the bureau as of Thursday morning, a spokesman said by phone that day. The city borders the base to the southeast.

A spokesman for Chatan town, bordering the base on the southwest, could not immediately be reached for comment Thursday. Some Japanese government officials must speak to the press only on

condition of anonymity.

Stormwater from Kadena flows northwest into the East China Sea or into the Hija river, which flows through the base and empties into the sea, according to an environmental review released by the Army and Air Force Exchange Service in 2007.

U.S. Forces Japan last year denied a request by the prefecture to test for PFAS — per- and poly-fluoroalkyl substances — at water sources on three U.S. military bases, including Kadena.

In denying the request, USFJ said the prefecture stopped using

the Hija and Dakujaku rivers that flow through Kadena as drinking water sources, according to a December release from Japan's Ministry of Defense.

However, the prefecture resumed water intake from the Hija river when necessary to supplement its water supply, Gov. Denny Tamaki said at the time.

In May 2024, a Boeing E-3 Sentry leaked jet fuel into a stormwater drain on Kadena. The spill was contained, but about 50 gallons of fuel leaked into an outflow that led to Kadena Marina, the wing said at the time.

## Former Army civilian sentenced for sexually abusing 2 girls in Japan

BY JOSEPH DITZLER  
*Stars and Stripes*

A former civilian employee of the U.S. Army was sentenced Tuesday in California to 15 years in prison for sexually abusing two minors while he worked in Japan, according to the U.S. Justice Department.

Thelmo Meneses Santos Jr., 60, of Merced, Calif., “exploited a position of trust” to manipulate two girls for nearly eight years starting when they were age 11, according to the prosecutor's sentencing memo.

Senior District Judge John Mendez of Sacramento sentenced Santos, according to the Justice Department's release. Santos pleaded guilty in September under an agreement with the government.

The abuse stretched between 2015 and 2023 and began with one victim and ended with Santos' arrest after the second victim reported his conduct, according to the memo and the release.

Santos worked in logistics in Tracy, Calif., and at bases in Japan, according to the memo. It did

not identify those bases. The Defense Logistics Agency operates the Defense Distribution Depot San Joaquin in Tracy, according to the agency's website.

Santos admitted the abuse to Army criminal investigators and was arrested in Hawaii on June 6, 2024, according to the release.

While in detention, he emailed the first girl's family to discourage her from testifying against him and to encourage her to retract her report of sexual abuse, according to the sentencing memo.

The first victim tried to recant her statement in July 2024. Questioned on a conference call by an Army investigator and two U.S. Attorneys with a victim and witness advocate present, she said she falsely accused Santos because she was angry that he had taken \$10,000 from her.

The victim later assented to Santos' plea agreement. His efforts to impede her testimony apparently enhanced his sentence, according to the sentencing memo.

In exchange for Santos' guilty

plea, the U.S. Attorney's Office agreed to dismiss three other counts in the original June 2024 indictment and argue for no more than 15 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine, according to records filed in U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of California. He'll be subject to lifetime post-release supervision and must register as a sex offender.

The court docket indicates Santos was declared indigent and the government prosecutors waived a fine, although Santos must pay \$10,000 restitution.

## MILITARY

# Army shelves planned 'Valkyrie' laser system

## Report: Switch to Golden Dome project beneficial

BY GARY WARNER  
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Army has shelved its "Valkyrie" laser anti-missile system, shifting instead to the newer Joint Laser Weapon System, to be built with the Navy as part of the Pentagon's Golden Dome missile defense strategy, according to a congressional report.

The Indirect Fire Protection Capability-High Energy Laser system, or IFPC-HEL, nicknamed "Valkyrie," is designed to deliver 300 kilowatts of energy that developers had hoped could knock cruise missiles and drones out of the sky.

A March 9 report by the Congressional Research Service said the Army's decision to move on from the Valkyrie system reflects technical challenges researchers have encountered with a continuous-wave beam capable of tracking and holding a fast, hardened cruise missile target long enough to destroy its warhead or scramble its inertial



Lockheed Martin

**An artist's rendering of the Indirect Fire Protection Capability-High Energy Laser system, or IFPC-HEL system, nicknamed "Valkyrie."**

guidance system.

The newer Joint Laser Weapon System "represents the next step in the evolution of counter-cruise missile laser weapons," the CRS report states.

President Donald Trump announced the Golden Dome anti-missile "shield" last year. Congressional estimates put the initial cost of the system at \$185 billion, with an operational target of about 2035. If the entire system, including space-

based interceptors, were built, the cost would be over \$1 trillion over several decades, according to Aviation Week magazine.

The "Valkyrie" program has been reduced to a single prototype for testing only, according to the CRS report. The prototype isn't expected to be fully delivered to the Army until September. At that point, the prototype will be used to "inform the Joint Laser Warfighting System" rather than move into

operational production, the CRS report said.

The Army awarded Lockheed Martin \$220.8 million to develop four "Valkyrie" prototypes, according to the report.

The decision on "Valkyrie" comes after the Army's earlier decision not to field the Directed Energy Maneuver-Short Range Air Defense system. The experimental program would have mounted a 50-kilowatt power laser weapon on a Stryker armored combat vehicle.

Though laser weapons remain a major priority in U.S. weapons development, the current technology is likely insufficient to reliably defend against attacks by numerous cruise missiles, the CRS report said.

Russia and China have developed hypersonic cruise missiles capable of traveling more than five times the speed of sound, according to the Army. The U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency reported in 2025 that cruise missiles launched from Russian aircraft or Chinese ships and submarines represent a significant risk to American personnel, ships and installations around the globe.

The report notes that cruise missiles travel at high speed with hardened warheads and guidance systems that can make them more difficult to target long enough with beamed weapons to destroy or disorient the missile.

"Valkyrie" isn't the Pentagon's sole anti-cruise missile defense program, the report said.

The Navy is working on countermeasure programs, such as the High Energy Laser Counter-Anti-Ship Cruise Missile (HELCA-ASCM) program.

The program would use more powerful lasers to defend against potential hypersonic threats.

The Army is working toward fielding the Enduring High Energy Laser system, which could be the first Army program of directed energy weapons.

The EHEL system has been designed with feedback from troops who used energy weapons. They found shortcomings in handling weather variations, maintaining charging power, cooling and parts maintenance. The EHEL is being designed for durable operational use by soldiers and is not planned to go through an extensive prototyping period.

# Army tests shallow-water vessel with mock medical evacuations

BY WYATT OLSON  
Stars and Stripes

JOINT BASE PEARL HARBOR-HICKAM, Hawaii — The Army is wrapping up yearlong testing in Hawaii of its next-generation shallow-draft amphibious boat with a series of mock medical evacuations.

The 8th Forward Resuscitative and Surgical Detachment on Tuesday finished testing how the prototype watercraft could quickly move patients in and around an island chain, whether that need arises from combat casualties or injuries from natural disasters.

The detachment had identified a "gap" in its capacity to quickly move patients between islands, particularly in shallow water, detachment commander Lt. Col. Patrick Kadilak said during a pier-side interview that day on the joint base.

Docked nearby was the SSG Elroy F. Wells, the first of the Army's new Maneuver Support Vessel (Light) amphibious watercraft.

The 177-foot-long MSV-L prototype on Tuesday carried the detachment's autonomous vehicle laden with medical supplies, an Infantry Squad Vehicle and a 20-foot shipping container modified into a surgical operating room.

The container was tailored using existing equipment and could potentially be used on any watercraft, Kadilak said.

Earlier testing was conducted

on the beaches of Bellows Air Force Station on the windward side of Oahu, he said.

"The concept we're kind of working with is the MSV-Light has access to the shallower beaches that other vessels do not, the same as a UH-60 Black Hawk medevac helicopter has access to certain landing zones that a Chinook or an airplane may not," Chief Warrant Officer 2 Matthew Davis, the prototype's vessel master, said in a dockside interview Tuesday.

"Using the MSV-Light we can access a beach, retrieve casualties, perform a [casualty evacuation] operation in a littoral environment to get them to a higher echelon of care, whether that be another island or another larger vessel with more capability."

The MSV-L was intended to replace the Vietnam War-era Landing Craft Mechanized-8 watercraft.

The MSV-L can carry up to 82 tons of cargo, including tanks or Strykers, and travel 30 knots when empty, 21 knots when fully loaded.

The Army originally worked with Oregon-based Vigor Works to build 13 of the vessels over 10 years for the Indo-Pacific, but the future of the new amphibious class is uncertain.

Breaking Defense reported in May that the Army was considering canceling or curtailing the run of MSV-Ls to free up funds for other projects.



WYATT OLSON/Stars and Stripes

**The SSG Elroy F. Wells, the first of the Army's new Maneuver Support Vessel (Light) class amphibious watercraft, assists in a counter-drone demonstration in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in September.**

The prototype has proven agile in delivering the joint force's most potent weapons systems during validation events in recent months.

In September, the Marine Corps 3rd Marine Littoral Regiment used the Elroy F. Wells to move a Navy Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System, or NMESIS, to a beach on Marine Corps Base

Hawaii.

Soldiers with the Hawaii-based 25th Infantry Division in February validated the prototype for use in delivering the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System, or HIMARS, to the shallow-water beaches off Bellows.

The prototype has won over Davis in the year he has been commanding it.

"This vessel has exceeded every requirement that was written," he said. "One of the biggest things I think we've demonstrated out here is the range far surpasses what that requirement was, and although it does have a limited payload, its speed and access with that shallow draft allow it to get to places that other vessels can't and increases the capability of the joint force."

## MILITARY

## AFRICOM works to shield troops from drones

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

STUTT GART, Germany — The U.S. military is testing a new way to shield troops deployed to Africa from unmanned aerial attacks, relying on commercial technology to produce swarms of counter-drones and sensors that serve as a protective wall.

The U.S. Africa Command initiative, dubbed Curtain Call, comes as American troops in Africa contend with a growing drone threat at forward locations.

“The (drone) threat exists in the AFRICOM AOR today, and we’ve been posturing to enable an integrated force protection architec-

ture that can handle those threats,” said U.S. Air Force Lt. Col. Jared Bindl, AFRICOM’s chief innovation officer, in an interview Wednesday. “This concept and its associated capability are one of many we are looking at to reduce the risk to our joint forces.”

While Bindl didn’t specify where precisely U.S. forces have dealt with drone threats, AFRICOM has long been involved in supporting Somalia in its battle against multiple Islamic extremist groups. Over the years, U.S. troops have been drawn into combat after coming under attack there and near Somalia’s border in Kenya.

The Stuttgart-based AFRICOM

said it is developing Curtain Call in collaboration with a Joint Staff innovation program.

In January, AFRICOM ran its first trial during a field exercise in the United States in which engineers worked on technical problems. The command is now taking lessons learned from that drill and applying them to a second test happening in the coming weeks.

The effort currently utilizes as many as 25 flying counter-drones but has the potential to be built up into a swarm of hundreds, defense officials said.

After a second trial run, the next step will be to experiment with the system at operational locations in

Africa. Additionally, anything tested in the AFRICOM theater will likely fill capability gaps for other combatant commands, defense officials said.

AFRICOM’s entry into the development of drone and counter-drone capabilities showcases how the war in Ukraine has sparked an across-the-board push by the U.S. to adapt to a transformed battlefield dominated by unmanned systems.

The Iran war, which also has featured relatively low-cost drones, has shown how such systems can sneak past sophisticated air defenses.

For the Pentagon, a key aspect in

its drive to better prepare for drone warfare is to develop defense systems that can counter large numbers of cheap drones with something equally as cheap. The Pentagon and military services also have emphasized the need to get the defense industry to move faster when it comes to fielding new equipment.

If Curtain Call passes upcoming tests, speed is of the essence for AFRICOM, Bindl said.

“There’s absolutely an impetus for us to challenge the status quo regarding traditional timelines we see, from problem identification to capability delivery, and compress this down to a year or less,” Bindl said.

## Report: Europe’s reliance on US air defenses poses growing risk

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

Europe’s dependence on American air defenses is becoming a strategic liability, as U.S. stockpiles are stretched by war and as Washington and its NATO allies prepare for different future fights, a new think tank report says.

An analysis from the Center for Strategic and International Studies warns that the ongoing U.S.-Israeli campaign against Iran is burning through interceptor missiles at a pace that Western industry cannot quickly replace. At the same time, the U.S. is attempting to focus more on countering China, which could leave Europe exposed, the report said.

“Europe now faces a looming crisis: The U.S.-made interceptors it needs, both for Ukraine today and for its own rearmament against Russia, may simply not be available,” said the CSIS report published Monday.

The report calls for European states to launch an emergency program to rapidly expand production of European-made air defense systems and interceptors.

Europe’s challenge is not the lack of air defense technology but production scale, especially for interceptors to counter ballistic and advanced cruise missiles, the report noted. Expanding interceptor production would require cooperation across the European industrial base.

CSIS recommended that the European Union commit around \$10 billion to a dedicated fund for air defense interceptor production, which would send a demand signal large



OWEN DAVIES/U.S. Air Force

**Rows of inert bombs sit in a U.S. munitions storage facility. As U.S. air defense stockpiles dwindle, Europe’s reliance on American systems is raising security concerns.**

enough to justify new production lines and supply chain investment.

“The war in Iran has laid bare the fragility of Western interceptor stockpiles and Europe’s strategy for sustaining Ukraine,” the report said.

While the Trump administration has halted new tranches of military aid to Kyiv, a NATO agreement allows Europe to purchase American weapons systems, such as Patriot interceptors, for shipment to Ukraine. But that program’s effectiveness “is entirely con-

tingent on available American supply,” the report said.

Underscoring that challenge, The Washington Post on Thursday reported that the Pentagon is considering diverting some of those same U.S.-supplied weapons — including air defense interceptors intended for Ukraine under the NATO arrangement — to the Middle East, though the report stressed that no final decision has been made.

“Given the shortfalls in U.S. stockpiles, the Pentagon will inevitably prioritize rebuild-

ing its own arsenal over supplying foreign partners ... Combined with a greater prioritization of Gulf countries, as well as Asia and the threat posed by China, Europe may well receive almost no deliveries of U.S. air defense interceptors in the near term,” said the report, which was issued before the Post story.

European efforts to break its dependency could have political ramifications. Washington has taken issue with the EU’s 2025 security plan that calls for more than \$150 billion in overall defense investments.

The State Department has raised concerns that the EU initiative could limit American industrial access to European markets. Still, the Pentagon has demanded that European allies invest more in their own defense and break their dependence on American military power.

During February’s Munich Security Conference, Elbridge Colby, the Defense Department’s top policy official, spoke of the need for allies to “indigenize” a large fraction of weapons production.

Given the potential for simultaneous conflicts and already strained supply chains, opposing internal European defense investment efforts makes little strategic sense, the CSIS said.

“In the event of a conflict in the Indo-Pacific, U.S. defense production capacity will prioritize supplying the U.S. warfighter, not resupplying Europe. Thus, it is important for Europe to build up its own defense industrial capacity,” the report said.

## US forces strike another alleged drug boat in Caribbean, killing 4

By MATTHEW ADAMS

Stars and Stripes

U.S. forces on Wednesday conducted a strike in the Caribbean Sea, killing four people, according to U.S. Southern Command.

“Intelligence confirmed the vessel was transiting along known narco-trafficking routes in the Caribbean and was engaged in narco-trafficking operations,” SOUTHCOM said in a post on X.

SOUTHCOM did not provide evidence that the vessel was ferrying drugs. It posted a 15-second vid-

eo that showed a small boat being blown up as it moved on the water.

No U.S. forces were harmed in the operation.

The latest operation comes less than a week after a strike in the Eastern Pacific Ocean that left two dead and one survivor recovered by the Coast Guard.

The U.S. Coast Guard coordinated with Maritime Rescue Coordination Center Costa Rica, and Coast Guard Cutter Bertholf was diverted from its patrol to survey the site of the attack, the Coast

Guard said in a statement last Friday. The Bertholf recovered two dead and one survivor, who were all transferred to the Costa Rican Coast Guard.

The death toll from the campaign against alleged traffickers has risen to at least 163 people since the strikes began in early September.

President Donald Trump has said the U.S. is in “armed conflict” with cartels in Latin America and has justified the attacks as a necessary escalation to stem the flow of drugs. But his administration has

offered little evidence to support its claims of killing “narcoterrorists.”

The U.S. resumed strikes in late January after largely backing off in the region following the capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro on Jan. 3.

Trump said at a regional summit in Doral, Fla., this month that the U.S. and Latin American countries are collaborating to combat cartels and encouraged the use of military force.

“The only way to defeat these enemies is by unleashing the pow-

er of our militaries,” Trump said at the “Shield of the Americas” summit. “We have to use our military. You have to use your military.”

At the time of the summit, U.S. officials released video of an operation in Ecuador targeting a drug trafficker’s training camp. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth posted on X at the time that the U.S. is “bombing Narco Terrorists on land as well.” The New York Times on Tuesday reported the military strike appears to have destroyed a dairy farm.

## MIDEAST

# NATO's Rutte defends support for Iran war

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte doubled down Thursday in his support for the Iran war after coming under recent criticism that he overstepped his role in the alliance when he endorsed President Donald Trump's approach to the conflict.

Rutte, speaking at NATO headquarters in Brussels where he unveiled the alliance's annual report, drew attention in Europe this week for his Sunday comments on CBS News in which he said Trump was making the world safer by attacking Iran.

On Thursday, he was repeatedly questioned by reporters about his remarks on the war and whether it was appropriate given that NATO is not directly involved in the joint U.S.-Israeli campaign.

"Let's not be naive about it,"



NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte gives remarks at the alliance's headquarters in Brussels on Thursday.

Rutte said of the nuclear and missile threat posed by Iran. "And what the United States is doing now is degrading that capability.

And yes, I applaud it."

Rutte said there will always be differing views in an alliance of 32 nations. He added that NATO has

been officially opposed to the notion of Iran obtaining a nuclear weapon for many years.

Still, Rutte's stance puts him in a difficult position. The role of the secretary-general in NATO has always been primarily about keeping the alliance united and managing the relationship with the United States, the bloc's undisputed leader.

In the case of the Iran war, several leaders in Europe have raised alarms about the bombing campaign and its consequences, saying Europe was not properly consulted beforehand and should not risk being drawn into any prolonged conflict.

Trump, however, has repeatedly blasted NATO members for not doing more. He has specifically taken issue with European countries not dispatching warships and minesweepers to the Strait of Hor-

muz, which has been effectively closed since the start of hostilities.

Trump also has suggested there could be consequences for the U.S. relationship with NATO if Europe doesn't get involved. On Thursday, he reiterated the point on his Truth Social website, saying that "NATO nations have done absolutely nothing to help with the lunatic nation," (Iran) and to "never forget this very important moment in time."

Rutte downplayed the possibility of a rift in NATO and heaped praise on Trump, who he said has revitalized the alliance with his demands for bigger defense budgets.

"Without the present administration in the United States and the present president, I don't think you would ever have reached this commitment to spend 5% of our GDP on defense," Rutte said.

## Gains: US officials say talks to end war ongoing

FROM PAGE 1

commander of U.S. Central Command, said Wednesday on X.

The command has also claimed that Iran's drone and missile launch rates are down by more than 90%, drastically reducing its ability to attack American forces and regional neighbors.

"My operational assessment continues to be: Iran's combat capability is declining as U.S. combat capability continues to increase," Cooper said.

The White House says it is engaged in talks to end the joint U.S.-Israeli operation, which has resulted in the deaths of 13 U.S. troops and killed more than 2,400 people in Iran and Lebanon, according to those governments' figures.

The Islamic Republic is waiting for a response to its rejection of a U.S. 15-point plan to end the war, the semi-official Tasnim news agency reported. Tehran has a string of its own conditions, Tasnim said, one of which is a guarantee that the United States and Israel won't resume their attacks.

Iran's conditions to agree to a ceasefire include the payment of reparations for war damages and recognition of Iran's authority over the Strait of Hormuz, Tasnim said, citing an informed source.

U.S. officials, including Trump, insist the talks are still on.

"They are begging to make a deal, not me," Trump said on Thursday, adding: "In the meantime, we'll just keep blowing them away, unimpeded, unstoppable."

The U.S. is preparing to send thousands more troops to the re-

gion, including Marines and paratroopers, as Iran continues its airstrikes and retains a chokehold on the Strait of Hormuz. Israel on Thursday said it had killed the commander of Iran's navy, Alireza Tangsiri, whom Israeli officials said was directly responsible for the blockade of the strait.

Iran is looking to formalize a transit fee for the Strait of Hormuz, with lawmakers working on a draft bill to impose a toll in exchange for providing security to ships passing via the key waterway, according to the Fars news agency.

Trump is under pressure to persuade Tehran to reopen the critical waterway for oil and gas flows, a step needed to arrest a global supply shock. On Thursday, he said Iran allowed 10 boats of oil to sail through the strait as a gesture of goodwill.

Trump had set a deadline for Iran to negotiate an agreement to end the war by the end of the week, though the ongoing impasse has raised questions about the likelihood for a deal in that time frame. Asked for an update Thursday, Trump would only say "we'll see."

Vice President JD Vance may travel to Pakistan for Iran talks this weekend, CNN reported.

Since the war started on Feb. 28, Iran has effectively shuttered the conduit for about a fifth of the world's oil and liquefied natural gas, triggering a global supply shock. The Islamic Republic is still able to export its own crude from the strait, likely earning hundreds of millions of dollars of extra income.



ALASTAIR GRANT/AP

Munitions are unloaded from a cargo plane on the apron at RAF Fairford, England, on Thursday.

While Iran's total number of launches has dropped significantly since Feb. 28, it could be due to a change in strategy, cautioned Kelly Grieco, a senior fellow at the Stimson Center and expert on U.S. defense policy.

Grieco noted that though Iran's volume of attacks has decreased, their accuracy has improved. Missiles and drones targeting energy and civilian infrastructure are having better success hitting their targets compared with the first days of the war, she said. While the decreased volume could be due to the U.S. destroying Iran's weapon stockpiles, it could also be a long-term strategy to keep pressure on the U.S., Israel and the Gulf.

"They've found what they think is the sufficient number (of attacks) to remain that persistent threat, and because the volume is lower, they can sustain that for a really long time," Grieco said. "That's a possibility."

The U.S. may have been successful in destroying Iranian launchers, but the regime also has a desire to limit its fire for the purposes of survival, said Behnam Ben Taleblu, the director of the Iran program at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies.

"This may be the opposite of 'use it or lose it,'" he said.

The Strait of Hormuz, which is an essential maritime corridor for nearly 20% of the globe's oil and gas, remains a key pressure point. The halt in shipping has already led to a surge in fuel prices, and a prolonged disruption could have negative impacts on global GDP and inflation, according to the OECD, an international organization focused on economic policy.

Grieco said the strait's closure is the strongest indicator that Iran is still a threat. And while the U.S. may have decimated large portions of Iran's naval fleet, the biggest threat to maritime shipping is

coming from Iran's missiles and drones, especially those launched from small, fast-attack boats.

Iran meanwhile continued to carry out attacks against Israel and its neighboring nations on Thursday. Kuwaiti officials said they were intercepting drones and missiles. In the United Arab Emirates, two people were killed and three others injured by shrapnel from a ballistic missile interception, according to officials in Abu Dhabi.

White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt on Wednesday announced that a summit between Trump and Chinese President Xi Jinping has been rescheduled for May. Trump had postponed the meeting after launching the war, which brought fresh strains to U.S.-China ties. Iran is a major trading partner for China, the world's largest crude importer.

MILITARY

# Airmen face off in video game tournament

BY JEREMY STILLWAGNER  
*Stars and Stripes*

YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan — Airmen from as far as Alaska traveled to this airlift hub in western Tokyo this week for the second annual Pacific Air Forces Esports Championship.

The airmen go head-to-head in the base Enlisted Club through Saturday in Call of Duty Black Ops 7 and Rocket League. Four teams — 28 players from Japan, South Korea, Alaska and Pacific Islands — are participating.

The four-day competition was organized by Air Force Gaming.

The winning teams for each game will receive a trophy and represent PACAF at the Air Force Gaming world championship later this year.

“In addition to a trophy, the winning teams are getting custom controllers and they’re also getting an amazing permissive TDY to go to the States for a passion that they love,” Tech. Sgt. Chad Ellis, an Air Force Gaming ambassador based at Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, told Stars and Stripes at the event Thursday.

Gaming competitions are commonly held online and on military bases worldwide.

“Some of our less popular games like Marvel Rivals, Magic the Gathering or Super Smash Brothers are usually held in an online environment,” Tech. Sgt. Jermaine Harris, a gaming ambassador from



An Air Force Gaming team representing Alaska competes in Rocket League at Enlisted Club on Yokota Air Base, Japan, on Thursday.

Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, said at the event Thursday. “Then once a year, we finally get to get all the sweats in one location for the championship.”

“Sweats” is a slang term for players who are highly competitive

and often prioritize winning and optimal strategies over casual play.

Over the years, gaming has only grown in popularity and spurred each branch of the U.S. military to assemble gaming programs. Most are geared toward boosting morale

and camaraderie among troops.

The Army and Navy took a different approach and assembled dedicated esports teams that are managed by their respective recruiting commands. Gamers are treated like other military sports



Winners of the second annual Pacific Air Forces Esports Championship at Yokota Air Base, Japan, will receive these custom controllers, among other prizes.

teams and are often accompanied by recruiters to show prospective recruits the opportunities available to them in the military.

While gaming competitions and esports teams are more recent developments, it’s not the first time the military has used video games for recruiting purposes.

The Army created an in-house game development studio to produce the America’s Army video game series between 2002 and 2015, according to Army news releases. The intention was to give players a realistic depiction of Army training and combat operations, hopefully inspiring them to pursue a military career.

The studio stopped supporting the America’s Army franchise in 2022 and has since been tasked with creating interactive training programs, according to the IGN gaming news website on Feb. 9 that year.

## Defense Department student is a rising star in Japan’s tennis world

BY RYAN M. BREEDEN  
*Stars and Stripes*

A 9-year-old girl from Misawa Air Base aims to compete in Japan’s nationwide amateur tennis tournament this summer after claiming the Aomori prefecture championship in her age group last year.

Frances Guerra, a third-grade student at Sollars Elementary, a Defense Department school at Misawa, picked up a racket at age 5 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Today, she is ranked No. 1 in the Aomori prefecture, No. 21 in the Tohoku region and No. 188 nationally in the under-12 girls-single category, according to the Japan Tennis Association’s website.

“I like tennis because I can play against the big kids,” she wrote in an email Monday to Stars and Stripes. “It doesn’t matter how old you are if you work hard.”

She is scheduled to compete at the regional Tohoku Tournament in Sendai city on Saturday and Sunday. A victory would position her to qualify for the National Junior Tennis Championships, part of the Japan National Tennis tournament,

scheduled May 14-17 in Kashiwa city, Chiba prefecture.

“[Guerra] came in first place overwhelmingly in Aomori’s U12 tournament, where 24 players participated. She won convincingly with just 9 years,” Makoto Tsuburai, Guerra’s coach at the Hachinohe Royal Tennis Club, said by phone Wednesday.

“With the right coaching and with her appropriate attitude, she can go even higher,” he said.

Guerra joined the Hachinohe club about a year ago, according to Tsuburai.

“My first impression was that she has a very careful and skillful way of hitting the ball compared to other third-graders,” he said. “What stands out is her movement; she never gives up in rallies and exchanges — this is definitely a requirement to be able to compete in both Tohoku and nationwide.”

Guerra has won three out of four tournaments she has played so far in Japan. Her only loss was in the Hachinohe Open, her father, Navy Senior Chief Petty Officer Robert Guerra, said in the email.

“She did all the qualifying and winning when she was 8,” he wrote. “The Tohoku tournament will be the first one she will be playing as a 9-year-old.”

Sollars’ principal, Hank LeFebre, called the young player “a fantastic ambassador” for the school in a statement emailed Wednesday to Stars and Stripes by Department of Defense Education Activity-Pacific spokeswoman Miranda Ferguson.

“[Guerra] really makes all of us at Sollars Elementary proud,” LeFebre said. “She’s not only an impressive tennis player, but she carries herself with such kindness and determination. ... We’re all cheering her on as she heads into the Tohoku Opening.”

Guerra says she wants to be a professional tennis player when she gets older.

“I want to win. I want to be the best that I can be,” she wrote. “It would be nice to qualify for the Nationals and see what I can do.”



Frances Guerra and her tennis coach, Makoto Tsubura.

Robert Guerra

Stars and Stripes reporter Keishi Koja contributed to this report.

MILITARY

# Gas prices climb on US bases in Pacific

By **SETH ROBSON**  
*Stars and Stripes*

**YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan** — The price for a gallon of premium gas on U.S. military bases in South Korea and Guam will jump above \$5 a gallon this weekend amid continued fighting in the Middle East.

Crude oil traded above \$92 on Thursday, down from \$119 on March 9, according to the Wall Street Journal.

A pricelist released that day by the Army and Air Force Exchange Service shows more pain at the pump in store starting Saturday.

Exchange customers in South Korea will pay \$5.029 a gallon for premium, up from \$4.779. On Guam, they will pay \$5.059 for premium, up from \$4.809.

A gallon of regular will cross the \$4 threshold at AAFES stations across South Korea from \$3.809 to \$4.049. On Guam, it jumps from \$3.839 to \$4.079.

The same gallon of regular is holding relatively steady elsewhere across the Pacific.

A Misawa Air Base in northeastern Japan, drivers pay will continue to pay \$4.539; at Camp Zama, outside Tokyo, it's staying at \$4.059; and on Okinawa, it will re-



SETH ROBSON/Stars and Stripes

**Prices at the pump are higher at AAFES stations than off base in Japan.**

main \$4.499.

At Yokota Air Base, in western Tokyo, a small increase will push regular from \$4.009 to \$4.019 a gallon.

AAFES customers across Japan will pay \$4.999 a gallon for premium, up from \$4.749.

Diesel prices are already above \$5 a gallon across the Pacific. In South Korea, diesel is going from \$5.159 to \$5.459 a gallon. On main-island Japan, diesel will rise from \$5.129 to \$5.429 a gallon, while the price will hold steady on Okinawa at \$5.579.

Prices at the pump are higher at AAFES stations than off base in

Japan, where the Japanese government recently began subsidizing fuel.

A Japanese service station near Yokota Air Base sold regular for 157 yen a liter or about \$3.71 a gallon on Thursday. Premium sold for 168 yen a liter or \$3.97 a gallon and diesel sold for 142 yen a liter or \$3.37 a gallon.

The exchange sets overseas pump prices based on the Department of Energy's weekly average for each grade of gasoline in the continental United States, plus the unique, incremental costs the exchange incurs in each overseas market.

These costs include labor, excess depreciation and other unique expenses associated with providing gasoline to authorized drivers overseas, according to AAFES.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, gasoline prices at U.S. bases in Japan doubled in two years.

In March 2020, just as the World Health Organization declared the coronavirus pandemic, a gallon of regular cost about \$2.30 but by May 2022 the price at AAFES pumps in the Pacific had topped \$4.50 a gallon with premium selling for well over \$5 a gallon.

# Sailor stable after injury on USS Abraham Lincoln

By **ALISON BATH**  
*Stars and Stripes*

A U.S. sailor aboard the USS Abraham Lincoln was injured Wednesday during flight operations on the aircraft carrier in the Arabian Sea, according to the Navy.

The sailor is in stable condition and was transported off the ship for additional medical care, U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. 5th Fleet said in a statement Thursday.

The Navy did not say how the sailor was injured or what type of injury they suffered.

The noncombat-related injury was not life-threatening, according to the statement.

The circumstances of the incident are being investigated, NAVCENT/5th Fleet said in the statement.

The incident marks the fourth sailor reported injured aboard an aircraft carrier in recent weeks as Navy ships in the Middle East support Operation Epic Fury, the ongoing U.S.-Israeli campaign against Iran.

A March 12 fire aboard USS Gerald R. Ford injured three sailors as the aircraft carrier operated

in the Red Sea.

Two of the sailors subsequently returned to duty, while the third was reported in stable condition last week after being flown off the ship for treatment.

On Monday, the Navy announced that Ford had left the Middle East, arriving at U.S. Naval Support Activity Souda Bay on the Greek island of Crete for maintenance and repairs.

Officials have offered no details on the cause of the fire, saying that it remains under official investigation.

The blaze originated in Ford's main laundry area, destroying about 100 beds in a berthing area and displacing about 600 sailors.

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# Japan to deploy missile launchers to island administered by Tokyo

By **BRIAN McELHINEY**  
AND **KEISHI KOJA**  
*Stars and Stripes*

Japan this summer will deploy equipment to support surface-to-ship missile exercises from its easternmost island that are slated to begin as soon as next year, according to the Ministry of Defense.

The Ground Self-Defense Force plans to send a launcher for its Type-12 missile, an unspecified number of Scan Eagle II drones and a network electronic warfare system to Minamitorishima sometime between June and July, a spokesman for Japan's Ground Staff said by phone Wednesday.

He did not say when the missiles themselves would be deployed.

Soldiers will use inert, or nonexplosive, training missiles on target vessels 32 feet to 328 feet west of the island, the Ground Staff said in July 2024.

The Defense Ministry is preparing firing positions and roads at

Minamitorishima for the drills, which are expected to begin after April 2027, ministry spokesman Kimihito Aguin said during a news conference Tuesday in Tokyo.

The ministry is working to "confirm that the size, slope and ground conditions of the deployment area for the firing positions and fire control systems are secured according to regulations, thereby confirming that the various pieces of equipment can be operated safely and reliably," he said.

Ministry officials explained the deployment to the mayor of Ogasawara village on Tuesday, a village spokesman said by phone Wednesday.

Ogasawara village consists of more than 30 islands administered by Tokyo. This includes inhabited Chichijima and Hahajima, as well as Iwo Jima, also called Iwo To, and Minamitorishima, which houses facilities for the Japan Meteorological Agency and

Maritime Self-Defense Force.

No civilians live on Minamitorishima.

The high-speed, truck-mounted Type-12 missile has a range of 62 miles; an upgraded version increases that range to about 620 miles.

No upgraded missiles will deploy to Minamitorishima, the Ground Staff spokesman said Wednesday.

The upgraded version of the Type-12 will deploy to Camp Ken-gun on Kyushu on March 31, according to the ministry. Another Type-12 unit is expected to deploy to Japan's Camp Fuji, about 3 miles north of the Marine Corps' Combined Arms Training Center Camp Fuji, for training by March 2028.

The Type-12 and Tomahawk missiles Japan agreed to purchase from the United States in 2023 are elements of a counterstrike capability unveiled in 2022 as part of the nation's national defense strategy.

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NATION

# Instagram, YouTube found liable in addiction lawsuit

By SONJA SHARP  
Los Angeles Times

LOS ANGELES — After a grueling seven weeks of court proceedings and more than 40 hours of tense deliberations across nine days in one of the country's most closely watched civil trials, jurors handed down a landmark decision in Los Angeles Superior Court on Wednesday, finding Instagram and YouTube responsible for the suffering of a Chico woman who charged the platforms were built to addict young users.

Kaley G.M., the 20-year-old plaintiff, arrived in court just before 10 a.m. wearing the same rose-colored maxi dress she'd donned to testify in February. She remained stoic as the verdict, the \$3 million damages award and the decision warranting punitive damages were read out. A companion fought back tears, her chin quivering. Several observers wept silently despite Judge Carolyn B. Kuhl's repeated warning not to respond.

"We need to have no reaction to



FREDERIC J. BROWN/TNS

Laura Marquez-Garrett, attorney for Social Media Victims Law Center, gathers with family members of victims as they react to news that the jury found Meta and YouTube liable in the social media addiction trial, outside the Los Angeles Superior Court on Wednesday.

the jury's verdict — no crying out, no reactions, no disturbance," Kuhl warned. "If there is we will have to have you removed from the courtroom, and we sure don't want to have to do that."

Attorneys for Snapchat and TikTok also appeared in court Wednesday morning to hear the decision. The two platforms settled with Kaley out of court for undisclosed sums before the trial.

"We respectfully disagree with the verdict and are evaluating our legal options," a spokesperson for Instagram's parent company Meta said.

The verdict arrived less than 24 hours after a New Mexico jury found Meta liable for \$375 million in damages related to Attorney General Raúl Torres' claim it turned Instagram into a "breeding ground" for child predators — a decision the platform has vowed to appeal.

The Los Angeles jury took much longer to deliberate. On Friday, jurors preempted their pizza lunch break to ask Kuhl whether all of them should weigh in on damages, or only those who'd agreed on liability. On Monday they told Kuhl they were struggling to agree about one of the defendants.

Kuhl told the jury to keep trying. Kaley said she first got hooked on YouTube and Instagram in grade school. Jurors were charged with determining whether the companies acted negligently in designing their products and

failed to warn her of the dangers.

Their verdict will echo through thousands of other pending lawsuits, reshaping the legal landscape for some of the world's most powerful companies. Experts say the payout will likely set the bar for future awards.

It comes on the heels of a Delaware court decision clearing Meta's insurers of responsibility for damages incurred from "several thousand lawsuits regarding the harm its platforms allegedly cause children" — a ruling that could leave it and other tech titans on the hook for untold future millions.

Kaley's test case was chosen from among scores of suits currently consolidated in California state court. Hundreds more are moving together through the federal system, where the first trial is set for June in San Francisco.

Collectively, the suits seek to prove that harm flowed not from user content but from the design and operation of the platforms themselves.

# Court backs Trump administration's immigrant detention policy

By SARAH NELSON  
AND CHRISTOPHER MAGAN  
Star Tribune

A federal appeals court has sided with the Trump administration's stance that immigrants who came to the U.S. illegally are ineligible for bond hearings.

In a 2-1 ruling, the panel of judges in the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals on Wednesday determined the U.S. government correctly interpreted federal law in

arguing immigration officers can lock up a person in deportation proceedings without a chance for a bond hearing.

The ruling applies to district courts in Minnesota, Arkansas, Iowa, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota and South Dakota.

"We find that the district court erred in holding that the Government could not detain (the immigrant) without bond," wrote judges Steven Grasch and Bobby Shep-

herd in upholding the policy.

The appeal stems from the case of Joaquin Herrera Avila, who was detained without bond in Minneapolis last summer by the Department of Homeland Security. Herrera Avila, a Mexican national who first came to the U.S. in 2006, later filed a habeas petition seeking his release from custody. He was released on a \$7,500 bond after U.S. District Judge John Tunheim granted his petition in Octo-

ber, which the U.S. government later appealed.

"This is an unfortunate decision," said David Wilson, Herrera Avila's attorney. "It is hard to reconcile how so many district court judges can take one view and two judges at the circuit level can ignore the wisdom of over 100 judges."

Attorney General Pam Bondi praised the ruling as a "massive court victory against activist judg-

es and for President Trump's law and order agenda" in a post on X.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security ushered in its mandatory detention policy last year to boost the number of detained immigrants. The shift marked a departure from 30 years of court precedent which allowed people in immigration proceedings to post bond if they have no criminal record, are not considered dangerous and are not a flight risk.

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## NATION

# DOJ to pay ex-Trump adviser Michael Flynn

By ZOE TILLMAN  
Bloomberg News

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Justice Department has reached a financial settlement with Michael Flynn, a conservative activist and former official in the first Trump administration who sought millions of dollars from the government for what he alleged was a wrongful prosecution effort.

Lawyers for the government and for Flynn notified a federal judge in Florida on Wednesday that they had reached an agreement and that it would involve the payment of “settlement funds,” but didn’t disclose the amount or any other terms.

The settlement marks a complete reversal by the Justice Department, which had successfully fought Flynn’s case in the past. The Trump administration has faced scrutiny for how officials are handling demands for payouts from its political allies as well as the president himself.

“Nothing can fully compensate for the hell that my family and I have endured over these many years — the relentless attacks, the destruction of reputations, the financial ruin and the profound personal toll inflicted upon us all,” Flynn said in a statement issued by his lawyer, Jesse Binnall. “No amount of money or formal resolution can erase the pain caused



DUSTIN FRANZ/TNS

**Michael Flynn, national security adviser to President Donald Trump during his first term, speaks at a campaign event for U.S. Senate candidate Josh Mandel on April 21, 2022, in Brunswick, Ohio.**

by a prosecution that should never have been brought.”

The Justice Department in a statement described the settlement as an “important step in redressing” the “historic injustice” of former Justice Department special counsel Robert Mueller’s investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 election and, separately, whether there was a connection to Trump’s campaign.

The U.S. government and federal employees are generally im-

mune from being sued for official conduct, but there are exceptions for allegations of personal injuries or property damage. Individuals have to file claims with an agency and wait at least six months before they can file a lawsuit, which is the process that Flynn followed.

Flynn briefly served as Trump’s first national security adviser. In a 2023 lawsuit for \$50 million, he alleged he was the victim of a politically motivated probe and prosecution by Mueller’s team.

## Postal Service to hike prices as war drives up fuel costs

By CAILEY LAPARA  
Bloomberg News

The U.S. Postal Service plans to raise prices to offset rising transportation expenses including the cost of fuel, a sign that the beleaguered mail carrier is feeling the strain of higher oil prices as the war in Iran continues.

The USPS will increase prices by 8% on some packages until mid-January of next year, the USPS said in a statement Wednesday.

The change will apply to its Priority Mail, Priority Mail Express, USPS Ground Advantage and Parcel Select offerings. Other products such as First-Class Stamps won’t be affected, it said.

If approved by a USPS oversight body, the increase will take effect on April 26.

The plan highlights how soaring oil and fuel prices stoked by the

war in Iran are reverberating across the global economy. The rapid gains have stoked concern about the impact to consumers and companies alike.

As heavy users of fuel, transportation companies are particularly exposed to fuel price changes.

United Airlines Holdings Inc. Chief Executive Officer Scott Kirby recently warned that airfares may need to rise 20% in light of surging jet fuel prices.

The postal service is also facing a dire financial situation of its own, with Postmaster General David Steiner telling lawmakers earlier this month that the agency could run out of cash in less than a year.

He has hired restructuring firm Alvarez & Marsal for recommendations to improve the organization’s finances.

Although temporary, the in-

crease will act as a bridge to “a permanent mechanism” to adjust prices to reflect market conditions. The change will help the USPS fulfill its obligation to service every address in the country “in a more financially sustainable manner going forward,” the agency said.

Steiner earlier this month said that the USPS might need to implement a fuel surcharge if the cost of diesel stays high.

While private carriers like United Parcel Service Inc. and FedEx Corp. commonly use surcharges to offset higher fuel costs, the postal service has not done so in its recent history.

“Every single day, we drive the equivalent of 13 trips to the moon and back,” Steiner said in a March 4 interview with Bloomberg News. “You have to be concerned about oil prices.”

## Wreckage moved off LaGuardia runway

By THOMAS TRACY  
New York Daily News

NEW YORK — Crews have removed the mangled wreckage of the Air Canada jet that crashed into a Port Authority fire rescue truck as the probe into what sparked the fatal collision continued Thursday.

Port Authority officials confirm the debris from the plane and the fire truck have been removed from runway four, which is expected to reopen on Friday.

“With the removal of the plane and truck, we are reviewing the condition of the runway to ensure it meets FAA regulations and can be reopened safely,” the Port Authority said in a statement. “We are working to have it operational no later than Friday morning.”

As of Thursday morning, all but four of the passengers injured in

the blistering crash had been released from the hospital, officials said.

Air Canada pilot Antoine Forest and first officer Mackenzie Gunther died after their jet — inbound from Montreal with 72 passengers and two other crew members aboard — smashed into the airport firetruck about 11:30 p.m.

The impact left what NTSB Chairwoman Jennifer Homendy called “a tremendous amount of debris” on the runway that needed to be combed through by investigators.

The NTSB is investigating all facets of the crash, including the possibility that a tower operator gave the emergency vehicle permission to cross the runway without realizing that the Air Canada plane was landing there, Homendy said.

## Airport wait times worst in history after 480 TSA officers leave

By MYLES MILLER  
Bloomberg News

The Transportation Security Administration warned that airport security is under severe strain as a weeklong Department of Homeland Security funding shutdown drives staffing shortages, long wait times and mounting disruptions across the United States.

“This has led to the highest wait times in TSA history, with some wait times greater than 4.5 hours,” Acting Administrator Ha Nguyen McNeill told lawmakers Wednesday, adding the agency has already lost more than 480 transportation security officers during the funding lapse.

Airports that have been significantly hit include those in Atlanta, Houston and New York. Lines have snaked through terminals, baggage claims and even outside in some cases, going viral on social media where frustrated passengers griped about the waits and the potential of missed flights.

Early Wednesday morning, videos posted to X showed long lines at LaGuardia Airport in New York City winding through the facility. Typically wait times are posted on LaGuardia’s website, but due to the rapidly-changing situation, updates have been suspended.

Lawmakers from both parties used a House Homeland Security Committee hearing to press McNeill on the operational impact of the shutdown and the agency’s response. Republicans said the funding lapse is weakening na-

tional security and straining front-line personnel, while Democrats challenged the administration’s reliance on Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents to support airport operations.

The airport staffing crunch is worsening as the funding lapse continues. “We did see spikes in attrition,” McNeill said, noting the agency is closely tracking losses as employees leave or call out after missing paychecks.

At some major airports, as many as 40% to 50% of officers have called out on certain days, forcing TSA to consolidate screening lanes and scale back operations as lines stretch for hours.

The shutdown, now about 40 days after funding lapsed on Feb. 14, remains deadlocked in Washington amid disputes over immigration enforcement policy.

Senate Republicans rejected a bid from Democrats to end the partial shutdown. Democrats have pushed for reforms that would scale-back immigration operations in the wake of several violent incidents. Majority Leader John Thune said the proposal was a list of nine demands including stopping officers from using masks and starting to use judicial warrants.

“It’s not even close to being real,” Thune said.

McNeill said ICE personnel are assisting at airports with “non-specialized screening functions” to help manage long lines and allow TSA officers to focus on core security duties.

# AMERICAN ROUNDUP

## Trial starts for accused MS-13 gang leaders

**NV** LAS VEGAS — A federal trial began Monday for a group of men whom prosecutors have linked to 11 killings and accused of being officials in the MS-13 gang.

Prosecutors have said the defendants would be subject to removal proceedings if they were released from custody.

Jose Luis Reynaldo Reyes-Castillo, David Arturo Perez-Manchame and Joel Vargas-Escobar face counts including murder, RICO conspiracy and possessing a firearm during a crime.

The Justice Department has asserted the defendants were part of MS-13's command structure in Las Vegas and California and "exercised significant leadership roles in the organization's operations."

## Woman pleads guilty to theft in student aid scam

**MI** DETROIT — A Detroit woman pleaded guilty to collecting more than \$2.5 million through a federal student aid scam at Wayne County Community College.

Federal prosecutors allege the 48-year-old woman conducted a decade-long operation to steal money from the Department of Education by creating applications in more than 80 people's names. The woman obtained the high school diplomas on their behalf, submitted student aid applications on their behalf and completed online course work at the community college to create the appearance of academic progress and extend their eligibility for aid across multiple semesters, according to the Detroit Free Press.

The woman paid the students a portion of the aid money for the use of their identity, according to FOX 2. The woman agreed to pay the \$2.5 million in restitution money.

## Judge: Town panel cannot oust controversial mayor

**FL** MIAMI — Commissioners in a Broward County town wanted to vote on removing their controversial mayor from office, but a judge ruled this week that they cannot.

Broward Judge Shari Africk-Olefson ruled on Tuesday that it is illegal for town commissioners in Pembroke Park to hold a vote at a commission meeting to remove Mayor Geoffrey Jacobs, who has been accused of breaking town charter rules. Instead, town officials must bring the matter to court.

Pembroke Park, a small town south of Hollywood, has been embroiled in controversy for months over questions about where Jacobs actually lives — Pembroke Park or Fort Pierce.

The town charter states that commissioners and the mayor



MATT ROURKE/AP

## World record at stake. Cheesesteak.

**Volunteers assemble cheesesteaks in a Guinness World Record attempt on National Cheesesteak Day at Philadelphia International Airport, on Tuesday, in Philadelphia. Organizers said they achieved a new Guinness World Record for the longest line of cheesesteak sandwiches, with 1,291 lined up inside a departure hall. The display far surpassed the previous benchmark of 500 sandwiches. After the record was certified, volunteers handed out the sandwiches to travelers, airport workers and Transportation Security Administration staff.**

must live within town limits.

## Salt mine works overtime to meet winter road needs

**OH** CLEVELAND — Below Cleveland, in a subterranean world many surface dwellers don't know exists, miners extract a crucial winter mineral — salt.

The Whiskey Island salt mine, owned by food giant Cargill, helps supply road salt across the Northeast and Great Lakes, where a colder, snowier-than-usual winter has driven demand. Many municipalities exhausted supplies that typically last through spring, said Cargill spokesperson Emily Tangeman.

"Our teams have been working overtime since September to support customers across the snowbelt," Tangeman said, noting that early, persistent winter weather boosted demand across the industry.

The mine beneath Lake Erie, one of the world's largest, produces 3 million to 4 million tons annually.

## State senate eyes limit to personal tech in schools

**MD** BALTIMORE — The Maryland Senate passed a bill unanimously last Friday that would require every local

board of education to implement a policy significantly restricting student use of personal cellphones, laptops, smart watches and other devices, and a ban on student social media use during the school day by the 2027-28 school year.

The bill, which has been criticized by multiple boards of education, now moves to the House of Delegates.

Under the Maryland Phone-Free Schools Act, students would have to put away any personal devices for the entire school day, including class time, passing periods, lunch and recess. The bans would not apply to devices that are school-issued, needed for individualized education programs, or to address health issues.

## Lawmaker wants official designation for surf spots

**CA** SACRAMENTO — A Southern California lawmaker hopes to create a new designation for the state's iconic wave breaks through the creation of "surfing reserves."

Excepting perhaps Hawaii, California's coastline is home to more world-famous waves than any state. Breaks dot the coast, from renowned Malibu and San Diego beaches to the monstrous Mavericks big wave spot near Half Moon Bay to dozens of lesser-known

waves (including some consciously kept secret by local surfers) running from the Mexico to Oregon borders.

Assembly member Jacqui Irwin, D-Thousand Oaks, seeks to officially recognize popular breaks, particularly as they face threats from rising seas, coastal erosion and pollution. She's introduced a bill that would create a process for local governments to designate treasured breaks as "surfing reserves" with the California Ocean Protection Council — a conservation body the Legislature created in the 1970s.

## Council probes education budget for cost savings

**NY** NEW YORK — The New York City Council on Monday challenged Chancellor Kamar Samuels to find savings in the Department of Education's \$38 billion proposed budget — the largest of all city agencies.

Mayor Zohran Mamdani in January ordered the school system, like the rest of local government, to appoint a "chief savings officer" tasked with making their department more efficient.

The education budget in a typical year is about a third of the city's total financial plan, which has historically failed to account for actual spending. To right that wrong and still balance the bud-

get, school officials said their submission included a "wide range of options," such as adjusting noninstructional programs or cutting duplicative spending.

One of the areas where school officials hope to bring down costs is private special education spending by serving more students with disabilities inside the public school system. Those costs are reflected more accurately in Mamdani's proposed budget plan than they were in years past.

## Council passes bill barring city from ICE aid

**MD** BALTIMORE — The Baltimore City Council unanimously passed a bill Monday to prevent city cooperation with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

The Safe Spaces and Community bill, introduced in February, prevents city entities from entering into agreements for detaining people based on civil immigration charges, enforcing federal immigration laws, using city resources to assist in enforcing federal immigration law, or allowing ICE agents to enter nonpublic spaces.

Baltimore Police officers will be prohibited from helping with ICE operations or arresting individuals based on immigration status.

## WEEKEND: VIDEO GAMES

## Suda's new game doesn't hit the mark

Designer's style evident in *Romeo Is a Dead Man* but story, levels not up to par

BY GIESON CACHO  
The Mercury News

**Y**ou can't talk about Goichi Suda without mentioning Travis Touchdown, the protagonist of the *No More Heroes* series. The bombastic otaku has always been "the representative character of Grasshopper Manufacture, like a mascot in a way," according to the video game developer.

But after nearly 20 years of working on Travis stories, Suda wanted a new project. In a conversation through an interpreter, he said he wanted to develop a new character, one that could possibly overtake Travis. That's how he settled on Romeo Stargazer from *Romeo Is a Dead Man*, a new work and his foray into science fiction.

### Adapting a grand vision

It's a game that started as an ambitious project.

"The original plan was to have this game mostly take place in this town of Deadford, but through a handful of different time periods," he said. "We got to a certain point in development where we were like, 'OK, wait a second, if we continue on like this, and we make this game we originally set out to make, we're going to be like several tens of millions of yen over-budget.'"

To actually finish the game with the resources it had, the team had to reshape the project. That effort takes players through eight chapters, as players step into the shoes of Romeo, a deputy in the town of Deadford. He falls in love with an amnesiac named Juliet, but unfortunately dies while investigating a peculiar incident. Then his genius interdimensional grandfather, Benjamin, resurrects him. Their whole relationship echoes that of Rick and Morty. Although Romeo is alive, he has changed and is outfitted with cybernetics.

He joins the FBI space-time countermeasures division and lives aboard a ship called the *Last Night*. The division's job is to apprehend or defeat criminals who mess with the fabric of the universe, and that nearly always sends it to Deadford at different points in its history. Romeo's goal is to find the Juliet from his dimension, a mysterious character who is more than she seems.

### Grasshopper's best ideas

*Romeo Is a Dead Man* carries over distinct hallmarks of Suda's style, including retro-inspired flourishes and mixed media storytelling. It's also incredibly strange, like all of his works, and involves several layers of conspiracies.

What's clear, though, is that the gameplay is an amalgam of the best ideas from Grasshopper's past, along with new touches. The combat's foundation echoes the action-forward hack-and-slash style of Suda's other works.

As Romeo, players come armed with up to eight weapons that they will use to de-



GRASSHOPPER MANUFACTURE/TNS photos

**Romeo Stargazer is the star of *Romeo Is a Dead Man*. The deputy, recently resurrected from the dead, now works for the FBI space-time countermeasures division, working to apprehend or defeat criminals who mess with the fabric of the universe. His personal goal is to find Juliet, his love from his own dimension.**



**Chapter 5: Atonement has one of the best stories and level designs — an asylum — in *Romeo Is a Dead Man*. Other stages, however, are more frustrating.**

feat swarms of enemies in each dimensional rift. Players can acquire four melee weapons — a katana, a spear, knuckles and a heavy sword — and four firearms — a pistol, a machine gun, a shotgun and a rocket launcher. They can all be upgraded, but in the campaign, ranged weapons are more useful because of their distinct functionalities that target specific enemies' weaknesses. The blades are fine, but players will gravitate toward one style and power it up for the rest of the campaign.

### Adding depth

The more notable twist in combat is that players have Pokémon-like allies called Bastards that they can summon in battle.

They can only be used for a limited time but can provide valuable firepower, healing or other benefits. Players find these Bastards as seeds, grow them and harvest the creatures about the ship. They can also fuse them together to make more powerful ones. Unfortunately, it's an onerous process that can take a while as players sit through harvesting animations and plan out the best combinations.

While in combat, Romeo also has food items that offer stat boosts; he also has a way to permanently upgrade his health and other traits through a convoluted minigame called *DeadGear CannonBall*. Players use Emerald Flowcions to play the diversion to make him more powerful.

### Level design and story problems

That's a solid base, but the level design and narrative is where *Romeo Is a Dead Man* falters. The campaign has some great stages such as Chapter 5: Atonement, in which Romeo explores an asylum. It has horror elements, stealth situations and a comprehensible story. Meanwhile, others can be frustrating, requiring players to navigate the subspace and figure out how these labyrinthine and abstract areas connect to the real interdimensional worlds. It can lead players to wander, backtrack and puzzle over how to navigate the strange realm.

The pattern with subspaces is that the more of them players encounter, the more complex the stage is. That tends to happen more at the end of the narrative. *Romeo Is a Dead Man*'s best levels have a good balance of these confusing spaces and the real-world counterparts.

The other issue is that the premise of the campaign is simple, but it devolves and grows stranger toward the end. It gets so weird that players may lose the plot. That's a symptom of Suda and his team condensing their grand vision into a smaller experience. The saving grace for the title is the fantastic music, which is worth listening to on its own.

As of now, Romeo isn't quite the hero that Travis Touchdown is. The FBI agent will need more personality and better adventures before he can measure up to Suda's best hero.

Platforms: PC, PlayStation 5, Xbox Series X/S

Online: [romeo-is-a-dead-man.grasshopper.co.jp/en](http://romeo-is-a-dead-man.grasshopper.co.jp/en)

## WEEKEND: GADGETS &amp; TECHNOLOGY

# Macs for everyone

Apple's newest laptop Neo priced lower for casual users

By JIM ROSSMAN  
Tribune News Service

Apple has introduced a new low-cost laptop called the MacBook Neo.

I know Apple laptop and “low cost” usually don’t go together. Apple has never been a company known for inexpensive hardware.

Previously, Apple’s lowest-price laptop was the MacBook Air (starting at \$1,099), but the new \$599 Neo is a full \$500 cheaper.

**So, why is the Neo so cheap and who is the target market?**

The MacBook Neo has a 13-inch screen that’s the same LED panel used in the MacBook Air. It has a similar aluminum body with a Magic keyboard, but there is no backlighting on the keys.

Also, the multitouch trackpad is not haptic. It has a physical button underneath the trackpad that clicks.

Neo uses the same A18 Pro CPU used in the iPhone 16 Pro, instead of the usual Apple Silicon M processors.

But in real use, the A18 Pro specs out slightly faster than the M1, and it has no problem running macOS 26. It gets 16



APPLE/TNS

**Apple's new cheap MacBook Neo starts at \$599 and includes a 13-inch screen, Magic keyboard, multitouch trackpad (no haptics) and the same processor as iPhone 16 Pro's.**

hours of life from its battery.

Connectivity includes 2 USB-C ports, one USB-C 3.0 and one USB-C 2.0. The faster USB port can connect to a single 4K external monitor. It also has a headphone jack and side-firing stereo speakers. It has a 1080P FaceTime camera and comes in two configurations.

Both Neo models have 8 gigabytes of RAM. The \$599 model has 256GB of storage. The second model costs \$699, but you get a storage bump up to 512GB and get a TouchID fingerprint reader on the keyboard.

The Neo comes in four colors — silver, blush (pink), citrus (yellow/green) and Indigo (dark blue) and the keys are color matched to the body color.

**Who should be looking to buy the Neo?**

Casual users and students. The Neo is going to be hugely popular on high school

and college campuses. The Neo is the perfect choice for people who just need a laptop for the basics — internet surfing, email, online shopping, watching Netflix, casual gaming and all types of student activities like writing papers, creating spreadsheets and making presentations.

The Neo would be perfect for my wife (a preschool music teacher) or my mom.

If you’re worried at all that you might need more storage or more RAM, or if you make your living with a computer, you should be looking to buy a MacBook Air or MacBook Pro.

Lastly, if you are a college student, parent of a college student or a faculty or staff at any level school, you qualify for Apple’s education discount that drops the price of the Neo down to \$499. That education price is available online or even in Apple retail stores.

## Report: More consumers opting to stream with ads

By CERY S DAVIES  
Los Angeles Times

When video streaming platforms were first launched, they were marketed as an affordable way to watch your favorite movies without the interruption of an ad break.

But, over the years, as subscription fees hit highs of nearly \$25 a month and cheaper ad-supported tiers were introduced, more consumers are willing to pay less in exchange for more ads, according to Deloitte’s 2026 digital media trends report.

The global consulting firm surveyed more than 3,500 U.S. consumers and found that the average subscribing household has remained consistent year-over-year, spending an average of \$69 a month on streaming video services. But around 60% of consumers said they would cancel their preferred streamer if the prices increased by \$5.

Even though spending on subscriptions has remained steady, the report shows that two-thirds of streaming subscribers are now opting for ads, marking a 20% increase from 2024.

Last year, Disney, Netflix, HBO Max and Apple TV raised prices. Premium subscriptions to these services range from \$12.99 for Apple TV to \$24.99 for Netflix.

Michael Smith, a professor of information technology and public policy at Carnegie Mellon University, said these price hikes are all guided by data, as “streaming



DREAMSTIME/TNS

**In 2025, Disney, Netflix, HBO Max and Apple TV all raised prices. Premium subscriptions range from \$12.99 for Apple TV to \$24.99 for Netflix.**

platforms can observe in real time how consumers respond to price changes.”

“One thing that deserves to be said is in a world of limited data, a lot of pricing decisions were made by gut feel. That’s not the world we live in today,” Smith said in a statement.

He added that “the ad-supported tier is sufficiently profitable on its own” and can “cover any lost paid subscribers, while also bringing in new subscribers who weren’t willing to start with the paid [premium] tier.”

As more watchers opt for cheaper ad tiers, there’s an increasing sense of price sensitivity — while companies continue to maintain a dual revenue stream from both subscription fees and advertising revenue.

Streaming platforms have reached a point of growth where enticing new subscribers isn’t a top priority. They need to hold their audience’s attention.

Jennifer Hessler, a professor of cinematic arts, said streamers are focused on how “to make their stuff discoverable and win the word-of-mouth war.”

“Ad-tier subscribers tend to be people who are less loyal, who might subscribe to Peacock because they want to watch ‘The Traitors,’ then when that’s over, they’ll cancel their subscription. Then they’ll go subscribe to Netflix because they want to watch the new ‘America’s Next Top Model’ docuseries,” Hessler said. “It’s a matter of winning the discovery battle, so that people jump on your streaming site.”

Competition among streaming platforms has become about turning these casual viewers into loyal fans. So, many industry players are looking toward emerging artificial intelligence technologies to help flip that switch.

“As some consumers plan to spend less on streaming services, passionate fans have the potential to become even more valuable, investing time, money and energy across platforms,” Doug Van Dyke, Deloitte’s vice chair, said in a statement. “AI can be harnessed to understand what fans care about, anticipate what they want next, and bring together content, community and commerce in ways that feel personal.”

## Magsafe case helps ensure your earbuds won’t get lost

By GREGG ELLMAN  
Tribune News Service

One accessory that’s the first of its kind, at least that I’ve seen, is MagSafe earbuds. Meet Komutr, the world’s first MagSafe earbuds that turn your earbuds and smartphone into a single unit.

The newly launched true wireless earbuds (\$99; a 5% off coupon is also currently available) are designed to deliver premium sound and a storage/charging case that won’t be lost, and they delivered on both. Komutr’s thin (0.47-inch) snap-on MagSafe case is always accessible because it’s attached to the back of your compatible smartphone. Non-MagSafe phones can use the included adhesive metal ring for the magnetic connection.

Now, if you lose your smartphone while the MagSafe earbuds are attached, that’s another story, but there is a backup for that as well. If you’re using an iPhone, it works with the Apple Find My app to locate its whereabouts. The Find My feature is also built into the earbuds storage case.

Each earbud magnetically attaches to the inside of the case when you place it there for storage and/or charging. So not only is the case secured, but the earbuds are as well. Each earbud yields about seven hours of listening per charge.

You can also use the MagSafe charging case as a kickstand for hands-free use. While the charging case is attached to your phone, it will not work as a portable battery to recharge the smartphone, although that would be a great feature. The case delivers about 50 hours of playtime total for the earbuds. You can charge the Komutr case wirelessly or via USB-C.

The case and the earbuds are IP54 weather-rated for protection against splashes, light rain and dust. On-ear touch controls work well for play/pause, volume, answering calls and turning active noise cancellation on or off.

Each true wireless earbud features high-fidelity drivers for clear audio, which can be customized via the companion app. The app also allows for customization of the controls.

Online: [komutr.io/products/komutr-magsafe-earbuds](https://komutr.io/products/komutr-magsafe-earbuds)



Komutr

**Never lose your Komutr earbuds with its slim MagSafe charging and storage case. It attaches to the back of your phone.**

## WEEKEND: MOVIE REVIEWS



WARNER BROS. PICTURES/TNS

Zazie Beetz stars as Asia, a young woman trying to survive long enough to rescue her younger sister, Maria (Myha'la), from a cult of elite satanists in "They Will Kill You."

# A bonkers horror comedy

'Kill Bill' riff 'They Will Kill You' has satanists, fights, quest for vengeance

BY KATIE WALSH  
Tribune News Service

One's tolerance for hyperviolent giggle-fests might vary depending on which way the wind blows, but if you only have time for one movie in theaters about a cult of elite satanists hunting down a pair of sisters, you might as well make it Kirill Sokolov's cheerfully gonzo "Kill Bill" riff "They Will Kill You," starring Zazie Beetz.

It's of course purely coincidental that two films with such similar premises — "Ready or Not 2: Here I Come" and "They Will Kill You" — are in theaters at the same time, but secret elitist cults with a taste for young women have been on the brain for years now. In Sokolov's "They Will Kill You," written with Alex Litvak, that premise is combined with a Tarantino-esque taste for kung fu movies and nonlinear storytelling, as well as a "John Wick"-style quest for vengeance.

That may sound too derivative for some, but Sokolov, known for his outlandish Russian-language action comedies "Why Don't You Just Die!" and "No Looking Back," brings a truly wacky sensibility to his first English-language feature.

It's also a visual feast, with a dynamic camera interacting with fight choreography that is truly its own beast. Cinematographer Isaac Bauman's camera never stops moving, as an independent narrator telling a different story than the one starring our heroine.

Beetz stars as Asia, a young woman who turns up on the stoop of a high-end Manhattan apartment building, the Virgil, answering an ad for a maid job. But both she and the stern house manager, Lily (Patricia Arquette), are hiding something from each other. Asia hasn't been brought in as a servant, but as an offering, a human sacrifice, to be hunted by the wealthy residents of the Virgil, and Asia hasn't made her way there to work, but to find and rescue her younger sister, Maria (Myha'la).

Their backstory is fleshed out in flashbacks, but all you need to know is that Asia, who honed her combat skills in prison, has one goal that is dia-

metrically opposed to the goal of the bloodthirsty rich folks in cloaks and pig masks, and they'll have to fight it out until dawn.

"They Will Kill You" is both irreverent, and reverential to its references, and cartoonishly violent in increasingly surreal ways, but it also maintains the emotional core at the center, which is Asia's blind big sister protectiveness over Maria, powered by the guilt she feels over not being there for her. It's a simple, but primal character motivation that Beetz sells with a wild-eyed ferocity.

Beetz delivers a terrifically animated physical performance. Her fight training is top-notch, but the way she chaotically scrambles and swings her weapons — from samurai swords to sawed-off shotguns to flaming axes — gives her quality of movement a sense of authentic panic and sheer reflexes.

She and the rest of the cast, which includes Tom Felton and Heather Graham, engage in a delightful dance with the camera in each fight scene, as it hits the ground, chases them down and shakes the foundations of the building.

While Sokolov and Litvak's script is thematically simplified, it incorporates a few nods to racial and class solidarity throughout that are refreshing to see addressed, even if some of the nuances go unexamined. But Sokolov and Litvak leave these few real-world thematic threads dangling as they have bigger fish to fry — or pigs to roast.

It's the more bonkers elements that make this movie sing anyway, and that grinning, ghoulish sensibility proves to be Sokolov's auteurist signature. It's clear that he takes inspiration from some of the best genre films and filmmakers of the 20th century, from kung fu, to Westerns, to exploitation films, and has filtered it through the ironically post-modern lens of the '90s bad boy movie nerd directors. But his willingness to get really weird with it — paired with a terrific sense of visual storytelling — makes him one to watch, and makes "They Will Kill You" more entertaining than it initially seems.

"They Will Kill You" is rated R for strong bloody violence, gore, language and brief sexual content/nudity. Running time: 94 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.

# 'Eternity' is a breezy rom-com about afterlife

BY ADAM GRAHAM  
The Detroit News

In "Eternity," a sweet, breezy romantic comedy set in the afterlife, a woman must choose between lust and love, passion and stability.

These are the big questions Joan (Elizabeth Olsen) faces when she shows up at death's door. (This isn't a spoiler; it's the premise of the movie.)

The movie treats the path to forever like a busy convention hall floor, where the recently deceased are asked to choose the themed fate they will enter into for the rest of their lives. Is it an endless ski vacation, a quiet beach, or a museum with no closing hours, ever?

The possibilities are endless, but the dearly departed can only choose one and are then forced to live with that decision forever.

The bigger question, and the one that "Eternity" concerns itself with, is who Joan will spend that time with.

Is it her first husband Luke (Callum Turner), the dashing pilot she married when she was young, who died while fighting in the Korean War? Or is it Larry (Miles Teller), her slightly bumbling, somewhat aloof second husband, to whom she was married for 65 years, and with whom she built her entire life?

Lust or love, passion or stability? She can only choose one. So what's it going to be? And who's it going to be?

There's a throwback sensibility to "Eternity" that propels it forward, and it favorably recalls Albert Brooks' 1991 afterlife vision "Defending Your Life."

It helps that it's an original adult comedy that takes on some big issues while never clobbering viewers over the head with them;

it's lightweight but not without heft, an assured tone co-writer and director David Freyne sets early and locks in with his actors.

There's also a charming affability to its execution. Teller, who usually plays cocky, overconfident characters, is cast against type as Larry, and he plays up his character's schlubbiness, even if that's not his usual mode.

It's not a total fit — perhaps Andy Samberg could have been more of a self-deprecating comic and romantic foil — but it's fun to watch Teller let his guard down on screen.

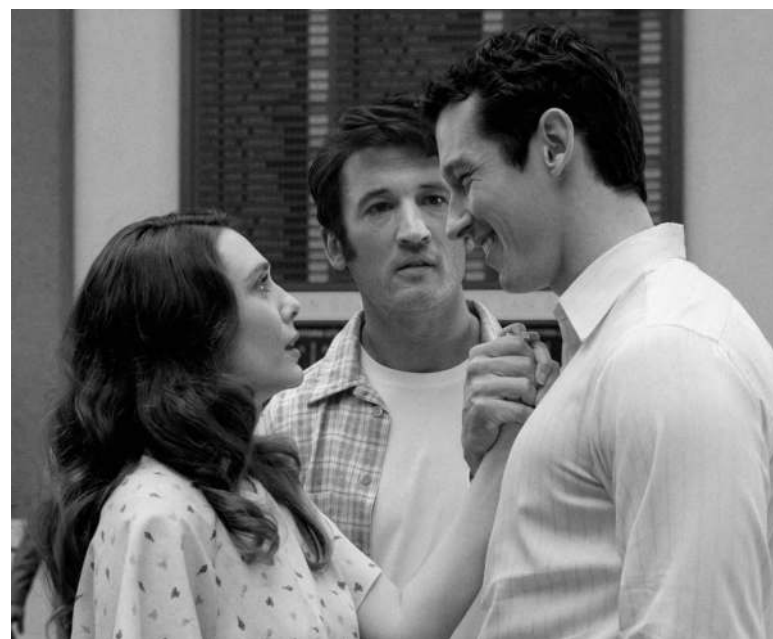
Turner, who is engaged to pop star Dua Lipa in real life, gets to play handsome, smooth and eternally young — in "Eternity's" vision of the afterlife, characters are forever the age they're at when they're the most happy — even if the script stacks the deck against his character in order to fit its narrative.

Joan's path is perhaps clear to viewers before it's clear to herself, but Olsen does a solid job of volleying the balls that are sent her character's way.

Oscar winner Da'Vine Joy Randolph is a delightful presence as Anna, an "afterlife coordinator" whose job it is to help guide Larry to happiness, and who winds up becoming a cheerleader for Larry and Joan to end up together, this time for good.

"Eternity's" greatest strength is its sense of world-building, and the way it eases viewers into its version of life after death. It's a comedy that makes light of the end of our lives, and it's a warm-hearted movie for anyone who's ever been in love more than once.

"Eternity" is rated PG-13 for sexual content and some strong language. Running time: 114 minutes. Now playing at select on-base theaters.



A24/TNS

Joan (Elizabeth Olsen) must decide who to spend the afterlife with, her second husband Larry (Miles Teller, center), or first husband Luke (Callum Turner), in "Eternity."

## WEEKEND: MOVIES

## Final film frontier

Here are 8 epic flicks about finding oneself lost in outer space that came before 'Project Hail Mary'

By JOSH ROTTENBERG  
*Los Angeles Times*

Space isn't a forgiving place to be stuck. There's no air, no pulling over for directions and no margin for error. When something goes wrong, you're left with whatever you have on hand for however long you can make it last.

That fear drives the new hit science-fiction epic "Project Hail Mary," with Ryan Gosling as Ryland Grace, a middle school science teacher who wakes up alone on a spacecraft light-years from Earth with no memory of how he got there. Gradually he realizes he's been sent on a mission to figure out why the sun is dimming and how to stop it. What begins in isolation turns into something closer to a buddy movie, as Grace ends up working with an alien he names Rocky, another traveler trying to solve the same problem.

The film, directed by Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, comes from sci-fi author Andy Weir, whose earlier, similarly survival-themed breakthrough novel "The Martian" was adapted by director Ridley Scott in 2015. That movie put Matt Damon alone on Mars and made the act of thinking through one life-or-death problem after another the engine of the story.

Put someone out in space long enough, and the story can go in many directions. Sometimes it's about survival. Sometimes it turns inward. Sometimes it gets more horrific or even darkly comic. Here are eight of our favorite movies about people lost or stranded in space. Watch them somewhere with plenty of oxygen.

### '2001: A Space Odyssey' (1968)

Stanley Kubrick's landmark mind-melter begins as a mission to Jupiter and ends somewhere much harder to define. Once the ship's computer, HAL 9000, turns on the crew, astronaut Dave Bowman is left alone, moving through a vessel that no longer feels entirely under human control, HAL's calm voice still speaking as if nothing is wrong. Widely regarded as one of the greatest films ever made and looking even more prescient in the age of AI, "2001" strips away the usual markers of a survival story and becomes something colder and more disorienting, less about escape than about drifting beyond anything familiar.

### 'Solaris' (1972)

Adapted from Polish author Stanisław Lem's novel, Russian director Andrei Tarkovsky's slow, hypnotic "Solaris" follows a psychologist sent to a remote space station where the crew is already beginning to unravel. The planet they are studying has a life and mind of its own. It brings figures from their past into physical form, including the psychologist's dead wife, Hari (Natalya Bondarchuk), who reappears in his quarters as if she has never

been gone. When he tries to eject her into space, she simply reappears, leaving the crew unsure whether they're being studied, judged or driven toward madness. Long seen as a philosophical counterpoint to "2001," the film turns isolation inward, where the danger isn't running out of resources but being unable to escape yourself.

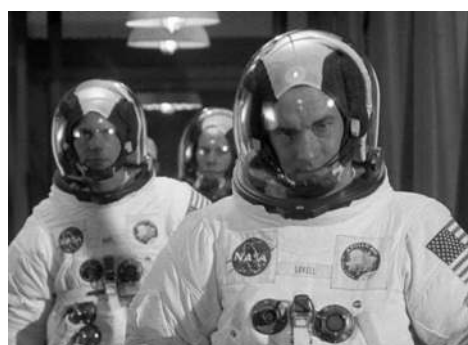
### 'Silent Running' (1972)

The directorial debut of visual effects pioneer Douglas Trumbull, known for his work on "2001," "Close Encounters of the Third Kind" and "Blade Runner," "Silent Running" imagines a future where the last forests on Earth survive only in domed gardens drifting through space. Bruce Dern plays their caretaker, a man who refuses the order to destroy them and is left alone on the ship, tending the plants and teaching his small drone companions to help him. The film was a modest success when released but later became a cult favorite, in large part due to Dern's offbeat performance and the handmade quality of its world. Mournful and a little strange, it uses space as a vehicle to explore what it means to hold on to something when everything else is gone.



20TH CENTURY FOX/TNS

From left: Yaphet Kotto, Sigourney Weaver and Ian Holm in the 1979 movie "Alien."



UNIVERSAL PICTURES/TNS

Bill Paxton (left), Kevin Bacon and Tom Hanks starred in the 1995's "Apollo 13."

### 'Dark Star' (1974)

Made on a shoestring budget and expanded from a student film, director John Carpenter's feature debut imagines space travel as something closer to a dead-end job. The crew drifts through a long, low-priority mission, killing time, playing pranks and arguing — including with one of the ship's self-aware bombs, which has to be talked out of detonating after it starts questioning its own existence. "Dark Star" plays its premise for laughs, complete with a beach-ball alien that bounces chaotically and dangerously through the ship. But its humor is rooted in that hazy 1970s sense of drift, when boredom and isolation start to blur together and nothing feels especially urgent, even when it probably should.

### 'Alien' (1979)

As its tagline put it, "In space, no one can hear you scream." Ridley Scott's sci-fi horror classic, which won the Academy Award for visual effects and spawned an enduring franchise, turns the commercial towing vessel Nostromo — essentially a tug-hauling cargo ship — into something claustrophobic and unforgiving. After the crew answers a distress signal and brings an alien life form back with them, their vessel becomes a trap, its corridors narrowing as the creature moves through the shadows. What starts as a parasite turns into something far more lethal, emerging in stages the crew can't anticipate — including one of the most famous and shocking scenes in movie history. As Ellen Ri-

pley, Sigourney Weaver meets the threat with grit and nerve in a situation where there is nowhere to go and no help coming, a performance that helped define the modern action heroine.

### 'Apollo 13' (1995)

Based on the real, ill-fated 1970 lunar mission, Ron Howard's "Apollo 13" turns a failed trip to the moon into a slow-building fight to get home. After an onboard explosion cripples the spacecraft, Jim Lovell (Tom Hanks) and his crew are left working through a chain of problems with limited oxygen, power and time. The film lives in its details — frost creeping along the walls, carbon dioxide levels rising, improvised fixes worked out step by step — as each small success only leads to the next crisis.

### 'Moon' (2009)

Director Duncan Jones' low-budget debut keeps its focus tightly contained. Sam Rockwell plays a lone worker nearing the end of a three-year stint on a lunar base, his days shaped by routine and the steady voice of the station's AI. When that routine begins to slip — after a crash on the lunar surface and the discovery of another version of himself — his grip on reality starts to go with it. With only Rockwell on screen for most of its running time, "Moon" makes being stranded in space feel less like a physical problem than a psychological one.

### 'Gravity' (2013)

Alfonso Cuarón's immersive survival thriller drops its characters into disaster almost immediately. After a catastrophic debris strike destroys their shuttle during a spacewalk, Sandra Bullock's astronaut is left untethered, spinning silently against the vastness of space, while George Clooney's veteran astronaut tries to guide her from a distance. The film is built as much on sensation as on story: You feel the scramble to grab hold of something before it's too late, the awareness that even a small mistake can carry you out of reach. "Gravity" reduces the experience of being lost in space to visceral things like breath and movement and the simple act of staying oriented.

## WEEKEND: TELEVISION

## Q&amp;A

# 'Every day, it could fall apart'

Creators of 'Jury Duty Presents: Company Retreat' discuss upping the ante for their new reality-comedy hoax series

BY MALIA MENDEZ  
Los Angeles Times

The creators of "Jury Duty" performed nothing short of a miracle when, a few short years ago, they successfully pitched and produced a reality-comedy hoax series that featured virtually zero marketable qualities — no guaranteed longevity, no intellectual property-driven content, no low-budget structure. In fact, the project, whose premise depended on sustaining a false reality for one unknowing star, inherently risked self-destruction.

"It's one of the only television shows that has ever been greenlit, that there's a very real prospect of it actually not reaching the end," co-creator Lee Eisenberg said.

Eisenberg and his team breathed a massive sigh of relief when Ronald Gladden, the everyman at the center of "Jury Duty," made it to the courtroom mockumentary's scripted final reveal: There was no trial, all of his fellow "jurors" were actually actors and the documentary Gladden believed was being filmed about the judicial process was actually a "Truman Show"-style TV experiment. (Don't worry, Gladden's \$100,000 cash prize cushioned the blow of James Marsden's betrayal.)

Then they struck lightning again.

"Jury Duty Presents: Company Retreat," which premiered last week with three episodes, takes the original show's staged reality premise to a new setting: a family-owned hot sauce company's annual retreat.

Following an unwitting temp worker as he attempts to hold this splintering small business together, the new installment offers all the belly laughs of "Jury Duty" — Eisenberg and his co-creator Gene Stupnitsky's writing credits on a pair of cult-favorite "The Office" episodes, "Dinner Party" and "Scott's Tots," help explain the top-tier comedy — but ups the ante with a set 10 times the size of its predecessor, a shuttered courthouse and an ensemble cast charged with playing convincing longtime co-workers.

"We really wanted it to feel more cinematic, and then alongside that, we had to

create so many backstories," Eisenberg said. "People had to know each other's histories. They needed to know who got promoted instead of this person and what someone does on the weekends, whereas in 'Jury Duty,' you're meeting a bunch of strangers. So it was a different type of lift."

With so much left to chance and improvisation, "every day, it could fall apart," Eisenberg said.

But that's also why it's exciting for producer Todd Schulman, who said that after working on these highly improvised shows, "It feels like cheating if both actors know what they're gonna say in a scene."

Below, Eisenberg and Schulman answer some of the biggest questions surrounding "Company Retreat":

**Why is this season not like 'Jury Duty' as we remember it?**

The obvious answer to this question would be that, were the "Jury Duty" creators to repeat the courtroom premise, their "hero" would be far more likely to clock the ruse. But Schulman said inventing a new scenario wasn't so much about protecting their gambit as it was about inventing something new — and raising the stakes.

"We just felt like creatively, we had explored that terrain already," Schulman said. "It was more exciting, the idea of taking this same kind of conceit of a real person in a sitcom-like environment, and putting it in other worlds."

**Who is the 'hero,' the person who is not in on the ruse?**

Those who were charmed by Gladden in "Jury Duty" are sure to fall for the hero of "Company Retreat," Anthony Norman of Nashville.

Norman, who was 25 years old during filming, was one of 10,000 people who applied to what they believed was a documentary project about a small business. Choosing a hero from a sample that large is "truly an art, not a science," Schulman said, but Norman, like Gladden, possessed an "incredible decency and humanity that really makes you just root for them."

"You could just tell there was a warmth to him and a real comfort in his own



Prime Video

In "Jury Duty Presents: Company Retreat," Anthony, right, thinks he's been hired as a temp worker for Rockin' Grandma's hot sauce company. But in reality, his new co-workers are actors. Also shown Dougie Jr. (Alex Bonifer) and Doug (Jerry Hauck).

shoes," Schulman said. "He knew who he was, and he wasn't going to be rattled or thrown off his game in any way by the stuff we were going to put him through."

Eisenberg and Schulman agreed that sharing too much about Norman before people could watch the show would spoil all the delightful surprises he delivers. But Eisenberg did say that his loyalty to Rockin' Grandma's and its employees was astonishing: "You can't script anything like that."

**How did they land on a company retreat as the new premise?**

Early into talks of a second season, Eisenberg said producers and writers were kicking around a number of ideas that offered an environment akin to a sequestered jury trial, plus potential for storybook drama. The one idea that kept bubbling up, he said, was a corporate retreat.

"Creatively, we really liked this idea of David versus Goliath," the producer said. "We kept talking about these tropes from '80s movies of slobs versus snobs," and how it mirrored the mom-and-pop shop versus big business dynamic.

At the same time, the "Company Retreat" team wanted the show to feel "like it existed within the 'Jury Duty' world," but

they also "wanted it to feel like its own thing," Eisenberg said.

**Why use a hot sauce company in the show?**

Eisenberg said that the production team always wanted to focus on a consumer-facing brand, ideally a family-owned one, to develop that "David versus Goliath" narrative that grounds the show.

Plus, the writers loved the phenomenon of hot sauce companies having such absurd names — think "Slap Ya Mama."

**How was Norman different from Gladden as a hero?**

Norman was tasked with far more responsibility than Gladden had been, Eisenberg added, and yet he rose to every challenge they primed him for.

At times, he beat the narrative to the jump, making decisions the producers anticipated would come far later than they did.

"Does he have a script that I'm not seeing?" Eisenberg recalled thinking on set.

Additionally, although he declined to specify how, Schulman said that they took measures to ensure Norman had never seen "Jury Duty."

"We just lucked out," he said about the budding star.

**"We really wanted it to feel more cinematic, and then alongside that, we had to create so many backstories. People had to know each other's histories. They needed to know who got promoted instead of this person and what someone does on the weekends, whereas in 'Jury Duty,' you're meeting a bunch of strangers. So it was a different type of lift."**

"Jury Duty" and "Jury Duty Presents: Company Retreat" co-creator Lee Eisenberg

## WEEKEND: MUSIC



# Best music for 'Stayin' Alive' on the road

New study says driving while listening to Taylor Swift's No. 1 hits can be dangerous because of their tempo

BY HOWARD COHEN  
Miami Herald

Can the music you listen to in the car increase your risk for crashing?

It's all about tempo, according to a study released by California attorneys group Sweet James, based on research from Australia's Bond University. And Taylor Swift may not be good for your driving, according to the research.

Here's what the study found:

## How music's pace affects listeners

Researchers, using data from the National Sleep Foundation, AAA, National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and SongBPM, made the following determinations:

**Slow tempo.** Below 80 beats per minute (BPM). At this speed, music can help drivers spot danger and reduce anxiety. These are good things. But sluggish songs may cause drowsiness or "over-calmness" on long drives and worsen attention levels.

**Medium tempo.** Between 85 and 110 BPM. Aim for this "sweet spot" for long-distance driving, researchers said. Music at this pace can improve a driver's level of alertness and reduce fatigue without causing overstimulation.

**Fast tempo.** Above 120 BPM. Fast-tempo music keeps drivers alert and can relieve fatigue, but it can also backfire over time. Zippy songs can increase mental strain, cause distraction, overstimulate and lead to risky driving behavior.

Too slow and you risk drowsy driving. A 2024 study by the AAA Foundation for Traffic Safety estimated that about 18% of all fatal crashes in the United States between 2017 and 2021 involved a drowsy driver.

But putting the pedal to the (heavy) metal can cause drivers to become overstimulated and lead to risky moves like speeding and running red lights and stop signs.

Kenny Loggins' "Top Gun" tune "Danger Zone" is 157 BPM. Even Tom Cruise may not be able to compensate.

## Songs deemed safer

Songs like AC/DC's "Back in Black" fall on the safe side. We were surprised by that one, too, but music measuring sites such as BPM Supreme clocks the Australian hard rockers' enduring 1980 classic at 92 BPM. That's well under easy listening superstar Neil Diamond's "Song Sung Blue" that slips in just under the wire at 110 BPM.

The Bee Gees find all of their hits from the 1977 movie "Saturday Night Fever" in this safest list: "Night Fever" at 109 BPM. "More Than a Woman" at 106 BPM. "How Deep Is Your Love," 105 BPM. "Stayin' Alive," 104 BPM.

Queen's "We Will Rock You" stomps at 81 BPM. That's fine. Toto blesses the rains down in "Africa" at 92 BPM, according to Song BPM. OK, too. These websites list beats per minute for thousands of popular songs.

Other medium tempo tunes in the safer 85-110 range include:

- "ABC," Jackson Five. 95 BPM
- "Ain't No Mountain High Enough," Diana Ross. 97 BPM
- "Rock Your Body," Justin Timberlake. 100 BPM
- "You're So Vain," Carly Simon. 106 BPM
- "Tití me preguntó," Bad Bunny. 107 BPM
- "Think," Aretha Franklin. 110 BPM

## Songs deemed too slow

These songs are under 80 BPM, in the range researchers say can yield drowsiness over time.

- "At Last," Etta James. 60 BPM
- "Desperado," Eagles. 60 BPM. Conversely, Linda Ronstadt's "Desperado" cover from the same early-'70s era is too fast for prolonged driving at 119 BPM, according to SongBPM.
- "Turn the Page," Metallica's cover of the Bob Seger oldie. 60 BPM
- "Lose Control," Teddy Swims. 72 BPM
- "What Was I Made For," Billie Eilish's "Barbie" theme. 75 BPM
- "Every Breath You Take," The Police. 79 BPM

## Songs deemed too fast (over 120 BPM)

Songs with these perky tempos can reduce fatigue but lead to dangerous driving, according to the study.

- "I'm Every Woman," Whitney Houston. 120 BPM. Chaka Khan's original is a slightly better bet at 114 BPM
- "You Give Love a Bad Name," Bon Jovi. 123 BPM
- "Damn I Love Miami," Pitbull & Lil Jon. 124 BPM
- "Aperture," from Harry Styles' new album. 128 BPM
- "Don't Go Breaking My Heart," Elton John & Kiki Dee. 130 BPM
- "Thunderstruck," AC/DC. 136 BPM
- "(Don't Fear) The Reaper," Blue Öyster Cult. 142 BPM
- "Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go," Wham! 163 BPM
- "Sweet Home Alabama," Lynyrd Skynyrd. 196 BPM

## How recent Billboard Top 10 fared

Researchers concluded that seven of the Top 10 hits on a recent March 2026 Billboard Hot 100 chart sit above 120 BPM or dangerously close to the threshold.

- No. 1: "I Just Might," Bruno Mars. 103 BPM. Safe.
- No. 2: "Choosin' Texas," Ella Langley. 112 BPM. Safe.
- No. 3: "Man I Need," Olivia Dean. 119 BPM. Borderline.
- No. 4: "Risk It All," Bruno Mars. 171 BPM. The most dangerous current smash. How can that be? "Risk It All," a bolero ballad, is about 86 BPM (per BPM Supreme). Some sites list 171 BPM because automated tools sometimes "double" the tempo by counting fast rhythmic subdivisions instead of the slower beat most listeners feel. That's why Fleetwood Mac's "Landslide" shows up as 74 BPM (too slow) and 159 BPM (too fast) on different sites.
- No. 5: "Ordinary," Alex Warren. 112 BPM. Safe.
- No. 6: "Opalite," Taylor Swift. 125 BPM. Dangerous.
- No. 7: "Stateside," PinkPantheress ft. Zara Larsson. 123 BPM. Dangerous.
- No. 8: "Golden," HUNTR/X. 103 BPM. Safe.
- No. 9: "The Fate of Ophelia," Taylor Swift. 124 BPM. Dangerous.
- No. 10: "Back to Friends," sombr. 93 BPM. Safe.

## WEEKEND: TRAVEL

## Hilltop highs in Lyon

Smartly situated Lyon — just south of Burgundy, north of Provence, east of the Alps, and centered on a peninsula at the convergence of two major rivers — has long been a major hub of French culture and a foodie mecca. But its enjoyable cityscape is refreshingly untouristy, despite its classy shops, worthwhile museums, renowned cuisine and a romantic old town of cobbled alleys and pastel Renaissance mansions. Just two hours from Paris by train, Lyon makes an easy one- or two-night stopover.

Lyon's sights are concentrated in three areas: historic Vieux Lyon (the old town, on the bank of the Saône River); the Presqu'île (the peninsula between the Saône and the Rhône); and Fourvière Hill, with its white Notre-Dame Basilica glimmering above the city.

I recommend starting your first Lyon sightseeing day with a funicular ride up Fourvière Hill — where the city was founded as “Lugdunum” by the Romans in 43 BC. From the Fourvière terrace, you can take in a commanding view of Lyon's old town, with its Renaissance roofs sporting uniform chimneys, and the Presqu'île's elegant 19th-century architecture.

The hill's landmark is the gleaming Notre-Dame Basilica, built in the late 1800s. Inside this ornate Neo-Byzantine building, everything is covered with elaborate, glittering mosaics that tell stories of the Virgin Mary. Next to the basilica, a chapel that predates the church by 500 years is capped by a glorious gold statue.

A short walk from the basilica is the fine

Lugdunum Gallo-Roman Museum, built on the hillside, with views of two Roman theaters. In the museum you'll see Roman artifacts, including coins, tools, jugs and a tablet inscribed with a speech given by Emperor Claudius in AD 48. Outside the museum are two theaters: A big one built under the reign of Emperor Augustus (still used today for concerts), and a smaller one with acoustics ideal for speeches and songs.



Rick Steves

Back down the hill, Vieux Lyon offers the best concentration of well-preserved Renaissance buildings in France — vestiges of Lyon's Golden Age when it was the center of Europe's silk industry. Pedestrian-friendly lanes — punctuated with picturesque squares and courtyards — are made for ambling, window-shopping and café lingering. You'll still find local silk here: On Rue du Boeuf, silk purveyor Brochier Soieries displays silkworms at work and a “computerized” weaving loom that recalls the early Industrial Revolution.

After an exploration of Vieux Lyon, poke around the city's fun assortment of museums. In a Renaissance mansion named for a wealthy merchant family, the Gadagne Museums offer two very different exhibits: one on serious city history, the other on puppetry. The Museum of Fine Arts, in a former abbey on the Presqu'île, has an impressive collection, ranging from Egyptian antiquities to



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Try some traditional cuisine in one of Lyon's “bouchons” — cozy, character-filled bistros.

Impressionist paintings, and its inner courtyard is a pleasant place to take a peaceful break from city streets.

On the east bank of the Rhône, the Resistance and Deportation History Center explains the clever strategies Lyon's Resistance members used to fight the Nazis during World War II, and the Lumière Museum is dedicated to the Lumière brothers' pivotal contribution to film. Nearby, Les Halles food market is a food festival — crammed with butchers, fishmongers, pastry specialists, cheese shops and colorful produce stands.

Dining is one of the premier attractions in Lyon and, compared to Paris, the prices are great. Lyon's characteristic *bouchons* are small bistros that evolved from

the time when Mama would feed the silk workers after a long day. The lively pedestrian streets of Vieux Lyon and Rue Mercière on the Presqu'île are *bouchon* bazaars, worth strolling even if you dine elsewhere. Though food quality may be better away from these popular restaurant rows, you can't beat the atmosphere.

After dinner, I like to go for a stroll to savor the city's famous illuminations. While Paris may call itself the “City of Light,” Lyon is a leader in urban lighting design and hosts conventions on the topic. Each night, more than 200 buildings, sites and public spaces are gloriously floodlit.

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## Easter markets, solemn processions precede upcoming holy day

From colorful markets to solemn religious processions, there's plenty to do in the run-up to Easter across Europe.

## Markets

**Austria:** Vienna is home to many Easter markets, including one with an exceptionally pretty backdrop: the Schönbrunn Palace. In addition to stalls selling handicrafts and décor, there's a special zone where younger kids will find amusements such as a maze, carousel, Ferris wheel and mini-golf course. The Easter Market on the



Karen Bradbury

Freyung Square, centered around a tower crafted of 40,000 painted eggs, offers a more old-fashioned flair. Here, visitors can sample tastes of the season from roasted lamb to sweet breads as young ones are entertained by puppet shows and creative workshops. Schönbrunn's market is open from 10 a.m.-7 p.m. daily through April 19. Online: [ostermarkt-schoenbrunn.at](http://ostermarkt-schoenbrunn.at)

**Czech Republic:** Prague is awash in Easter markets, known locally as Velikonoční trhy, with the two largest taking place at the Old Town and Wenceslas squares. From dozens of festively decorated wooden huts, vendors offer their brightly painted eggs, wicker baskets, whips adorned with ribbons and other seasonal décor. Music and folkloric performances are offered on a stage, and a specially erected observation bridge allows visitors to enjoy a bird's-eye view. At times, craftsmen will be on site to demonstrate their skills. Foods to sample on site range from giant spit-roasted hams to sweet dumplings, perhaps washed down with mead or a hot apple punch. The Old Town market is open through April 12. Online: [tinyurl.com/bducfdbh](http://tinyurl.com/bducfdbh)

**France:** With its canals, overflowing window boxes and half-timbered houses, Alsace's charming city of Colmar is worth a visit anytime, but never more so than near Easter, when two markets, one at the Place des Dominicains



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Flowers decorate an arch April 10, 2025, at the Easter market in the old town square in Prague, Czech Republic.

and the other at the Place de l'Ancienne Douane, do a lively trade in plants, beauty products, jewelry, toys, tableware, ceramics, local specialties such as fine wines, charcuterie, cheeses and not least Lamala, a traditional cake in a lamb-shaped mold. The markets run 10 a.m.-7 p.m. daily from April 2-26. Online: [tinyurl.com/29tcxzey](http://tinyurl.com/29tcxzey)

**Germany:** The Nuremberg Easter Market can trace its history as far back as 1424, when a market known as the “Häferlesmarkt” saw a lively trade in pottery and ceramics. Nowadays, mugs and jugs are joined by textiles, floral arrangements, handicrafts made of natural materials such as wicker and straw, and plenty of prettily decorated eggs. The market's some 100 stalls await visitors 10 a.m.-7 p.m. daily through April 6. Online: [tinyurl.com/ye2aj89b](http://tinyurl.com/ye2aj89b)

High above the town of St. Goarshausen, the Loreley plateau hosts major concerts throughout the summer season and from April 4-6, a Knight's Tournament and

Easter Market. In addition to the jousting tournaments that take place daily, visitors can take in live music and theater. Jesters, maidens and other costumed characters wander among the 60 stands selling jewelry, leatherware and more. Entry costs 15 euros for adults (10 euros for those who turn up in convincing costumes) and 8 euros for school-age children. Online: [tinyurl.com/2s3jh5b8](http://tinyurl.com/2s3jh5b8)

## Italy's unique traditions

Florence celebrates Easter Sunday with a literal bang, as the Scoppio del Carro, a ritual dating back some nine centuries, once again unfolds. Crowds gather round the Piazza del Duomo to watch the arrival of an elaborate, three-stories-high wagon pulled by a pair of white oxen draped in garlands and accompanied by costumed drummers, flag throwers and civil and church officials. Inside the cathedral, the Archbishop sets a dove-shaped rocket alight, which flies down a wire to collide with the wagon, which has been rigged with fireworks. The ritual gets underway at 10 a.m. Online: [tinyurl.com/2uwvhv6d](http://tinyurl.com/2uwvhv6d)

The city of Trapani on the west coast of Sicily marks Good Friday with a procession that begins at 2 p.m. and ends a full day later. In this ritual known as the Mysteries of Trapani, 20 centuries-old statues representing the Passion and Death of Christ are adorned with floral arrangements and silver finery and placed atop wooden bases. Teams of 10 men carry these sculptures throughout the city streets. Online: [tinyurl.com/272s3faw](http://tinyurl.com/272s3faw)

## Belgium's Easter parade

Herve, a town near Liège, in Belgium's Walloon Region, always celebrates Easter Mondays in a big way. This year's parade's lineup includes folk groups, musical ensembles, brass bands, effigies of giants, three equestrian groups and decorated wagons. The procession sets off from Place Albert at 2:30 p.m. on April 6. Access to the town center costs 4 euros. Online: [cavalcadeherve.be](http://cavalcadeherve.be)

## WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS



WERNER BAUM/Picture Alliance

Fans of 1.FC Kaiserslautern celebrate in the Westkurve at Fritz Walter Stadium at the end of FCK's 4-0 victory over VfL Wolfsburg on May 2, 1998. This photo is part of the collection "Fussballfieber. Derbys im Südwesten" at the Historical Museum of the Palatinate in Speyer, Germany. The exhibition ends May 3.

# Catch soccer fever at museum in Speyer

Exhibition focuses on rivalries among clubs in Rheinland-Pfalz, Baden region

BY MATT WAGNER  
Stars and Stripes

**C**runching tackles, scraps and high-tension moments, big-time goals and celebrations — these moments draw people to soccer.

So, it makes sense the exhibition "Fussballfieber. Derbys im Südwesten" ("Soccer Fever. Derbies in the Southwest) at the Historical Museum of the Palatinate begins with such scenes projected on the walls of the first room. The museum is in Speyer, Germany, about 50 miles east of Kaiserslautern and 76 miles northwest of Stuttgart.

It's easy to get sucked into watching the highlights of rivalry matches among the big clubs in the Rheinland-Pfalz and just across the Rhine River.

Yet the exhibition — in a city known for its pretzel festival and UNESCO World Heritage site cathedral — is so, so much more.

I am a sports history nerd. I can't recall stats from memory, but I own 12 books on the socio-political and historical relevance of soccer around the world.

Among those books are "Tor! The Story of German Football" by Uli Hesse and "Das Reboot" by Raphael Honigstein, so I have a decent amount of knowledge of the sport in this country.

Still, the opportunity to learn about soccer in a more hyperlocal sense greatly intrigued me.

And the exhibition delivered — for the most part.

It focuses on the current professional teams in Rheinland-Pfalz, 1.FC Kaiserslautern and 1.FC Mainz 05, and the Baden region, SV Waldhof Mannheim 07, Karlsruher SC and TSG 1899 Hoffenheim.

Including Hoffenheim is a choice, considering the general German soccer fan's unfavorable view of the team — particularly the way it skirts the 50-plus-1 rule regarding club ownership. The regulation stipulates 50% plus one share of the voting shares in the commercial companies that operate most clubs' professional football teams remain in the hands of club members.

The exhibition explains the origins of the FCK-Mannheim rivalry, which stems from Mannheim crossing the

## On the QT

**Address:** Historical Museum of the Palatinate, Domplatz 4, 67346 Speyer, Germany

**Hours:** 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays plus German holidays

**Prices:** Ticket prices for the exhibition range from 3 euros for kids 6 years old to students up to 27 years old to 8 euros for adults Tuesday through Friday and 4 to 9 euros on weekends and holidays. Also, tickets to see everything in the museum start at 11 euros for kids 3 years old to students up to 27 years old to 20 euros for adults on Tuesdays through Fridays and 13 to 22 euros on weekends and holidays.

**Information:** Phone: +49 6232 13250; online: [museum.speyer.de](http://museum.speyer.de)

Matt Wagner

Rhine to use the Südwest Stadium in Ludwigshafen — where the Red Devils themselves played when the Fritz Walter Stadium was under construction — in the 1980s.

Südwest Stadium was also my gateway to learning about some clubs not known outside of their municipalities or German soccer events prior to 1990.

Two teams from the Pfalz, SV Alsenborn and FK 03 Pirmasens, and another from just outside, VfR Wormatia 08 Worms, in the past almost earned promotion to the Bundesliga, German soccer's top tier. They all played at the Südwest Stadium during those promotion pushes.

Alsenborn's history is particularly interesting, considering it's the village club of Enkenbach-Alsenborn from just outside of Kaiserslautern. The club now plays in the eighth-tier Bezirksliga Westpfalz, near the bottom of the German soccer pyramid.

The exhibition highlighted many players and not just Kaiserslautern hero Fritz Walter, although they had numerous items of his, like a couch from his home in the 1970s.

Multiple winners' medals were on display: a 2014 World Cup gold in the case for the career-leading World Cup goal scorer and former FCK player Miroslav Klose, the Torjägerkanone trophy Stefan Kuntz won in the 1993-1994 season as the Bundesliga's top goal scorer and the



ELISA KULBE/GDKE

Stefan Kuntz's 1993-1994 Torjägerkanone as the Bundesliga's top goal scorer and his European championship medals as a player (1996) and as an Under-21 coach (2017) are also on display.

Golden Girl honor bestowed upon Speyer local Jule Brand as the U-21 European Player of the Year in 2022.

Speaking of women's soccer, I especially appreciated that section. I perhaps learned the most there, such as that the first German women's champion was TuS Wörrstadt in 1974. Fifteen miles southwest of Mainz, the club's roster boasted of Bärbel Wohlleben, the "female Franz Beckenbauer" who became the first woman to win "Goal of the Month" from German media.

While many of the displays had English translations, most were in German, including the audio and video displays. That's unfortunate because it has the radio call of the 1954 World Cup-winning goal and a fascinating video on Wohlleben and the sexism she and her fellow players faced in the 1970s, but it's all in German.

Still, sports crosses language barriers. You don't need to know German to appreciate what "Fussballfieber. Derbys im Südwesten" has to offer.

Just don't wait too long: The exhibition ends May 3.

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## WEEKEND: FOOD &amp; DINING

## Defying cultural stereotypes at El Parche

Colombian food fares better at hybrid eatery than German dishes

BY LARA KORTE  
Stars and Stripes

When Chantal Hill and her mom, Jenny Gerena, decided to open a Colombian-German restaurant in a little village outside of Kaiserslautern, they didn't expect it to be quite so popular.

But in the six weeks since El Parche's opening, they said they're already struggling to keep up with demand from customers flocking to them for homemade empanadas, arroz con pollo and bandeja típica.

"It surprised me but I'm happy," Hill said when I stopped by the restaurant on a recent Saturday afternoon before the dinner rush. "We haven't really done very much promoting. It's been more word-of-mouth."

El Parche — Colombian slang for a gathering or hangout — was originally envisioned as a German-Colombian joint. The co-owners thought they would attract more diners if they could also offer traditional German fare. But by the second week, the schnitzel and goulash they were cooking up every day was going largely untouched.

"Every German I expected to order a German dish, but they've just been ordering Colombian dishes, and they love them," Hill told me. "I've not had one German say, 'I don't like this.'"

My friend and I decided to stop by on a Friday evening to get a taste of the South American cuisine.

My first thought upon entering the restaurant — which had a spacious layout and large bar — was that I was glad we called ahead to make a reservation. The place was hopping. Nearly every table was filled, and as we took our seats, we could hear Spanish, German and English conversations flowing throughout the restaurant.

Gerena, who gets in early every day to make the food fresh, told me she's very intentional about making sure customers are getting an authentic Colombian experience. The dishes are made fresh every day, never frozen, and they even ship some ingredients directly from Colombia — like triguisar, a popular seasoning mix made of cumin, pepper and other spices.

To start, my dining companion and I ordered chips and aji (a spicy dip made of tomatoes and herbs), an empanada and a passionfruit margarita to share.



Chantal Hill, left, Jenny Gerena, center, and family members pose in front of El Parche in Reichenbach-Steegen, Germany. Mother-daughter duo Gerena and Hill have been struggling to keep up with demand.

I feel strongly that the mark of a good restaurant is homemade chips, and El Parche did not disappoint. They were hand-cut, perfectly crispy and paired well with the cool zing of the aji. Even after our main dishes arrived, we found ourselves continuing to reach for the chips throughout the meal.

A single empanada was hearty enough for both of us to share as an appetizer. The savory corn pastry dough was stuffed full of well-seasoned shredded beef and potato and steaming hot.

We both loved the frozen margarita, which seems to be a rarity around K-Town. Hill told me they also offer a variety of traditional Colombian drinks, like

Aguila and Club Colombia beers, and popular fruit-flavored sodas.

She also pointed out their bottles of Colombian spirits, like Aguardiente Antioqueño — an anise-flavored liqueur — and Ron Viejo de Caldas rum.

For our mains, my friend ordered arroz con pollo (chicken and rice), which was seasoned with the aforementioned triguisar and served with hard-boiled eggs and a side of plantains.

I ordered the bandeja típica, a traditional Colombian dish served on a large platter (bandeja) and heaped with generous portions of food.

Spoiler alert: I could not finish it all. But I did enjoy the rice, beans, shredded beef, fried egg

and plantains, as well as the fried pork belly and sausage — which is also imported from Colombia, Hill said.

We left with full bellies, a box of leftovers and a vow to return. Hill and Gerena said they're still going to keep some German items on the menu, but are also looking to hire more help to keep up with the demand for Colombian food. Some of their friends are even scouting out spots for a second restaurant.

"I had somebody send me locations already in K-Town and Ramstein," Hill told me. "I just said, 'Relax; we need to get this one going.'"

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LARA KORTE/Stars and Stripes

The handmade empanadas at El Parche are made with shredded beef and potato.



LARA KORTE/Stars and Stripes

The arroz con pollo, or chicken with rice, is seasoned with Colombian triguisar and served with fried plantains.



LARA KORTE/Stars and Stripes

The bandeja típica, a traditional Colombian platter, is served with crispy pork belly, shredded beef and chorizo at El Parche.



### El Parche, Colombian & German Restaurant

Location: Hauptstrasse 83 66879 Reichenbach-Steegen

Hours: Thursday through Saturday, 5 p.m. to 9 p.m.; Sunday, 11:30 a.m. to 8 p.m.

Cost: Cash only. Entrees 13 euros to 20 euros. Empanadas 3.50 euros apiece, or five for 16 euros or 10 for 30 euros.

Phone: +49 6385 4150090  
Online: [instagram.com/elparche.colombian](https://www.instagram.com/elparche.colombian)

Lara Korte

## WEEKEND: QUICK TRIPS



PHOTOS BY SETH ROBSON/Stars and Stripes

The pagoda at Rurikoji in Yamaguchi has been rated one of Japan's three most stunning five-storied pagodas. The others are in Nara and Kyoto.

# Pagoda offers peaceful retreat

Japanese landmark in Yamaguchi a striking contrast to busy atmosphere of a US military base

BY SETH ROBSON  
Stars and Stripes

**K**ozan Park, a popular tourist stop in Yamaguchi, the Kyoto of the West, is a welcome break from Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, also in Yamaguchi prefecture, Japan.

The air station is a bustling place full of uniformed service members and screaming fighter jets overhead.

At Kozan Park, tourists meander along paths beside a peaceful pond and take photographs of a five-story pagoda that's nearly 600 years old.

The landmark, designated a national treasure, is rated one of Japan's three most stunning five-storied pagodas alongside similar structures in Nara and Kyoto.

The pagoda, built in 1442 during the Muromachi period, was under renovation until December. Craftsmen installed new cedar-bark shingles on the structure, which is more than 100 feet tall.

The roof restoration happens every 70 years, said Atsuyuki Watanabe, a construction manager overseeing the project, during my recent visit.

The workers use traditional materials during the restoration, Watanabe said, as he held up a wooden shingle beside the pagoda. The shingles are attached with wooden pins, rather than nails.

The pagoda was built by Ouchi Morimi, a feudal lord from the clan who ruled what is now Yamaguchi prefecture from the mid-14th century to the mid-16th century, according to the Japan Tourism Agency.

Inside the pagoda is a bronze statue of



Tourism specialist Matsui Kuniaki explains some of the history of Kozan Park in Yamaguchi, Japan, on Oct. 23.



A statue of Ouchi Hiroyo stands in Kozan Park. The military leader founded a town, modeled on Kyoto, that became Yamaguchi.

Ouchi Morimi's older brother Yoshihiro, a powerful military commander, and a wooden statue of the Amida Buddha.

Kozan Park, near central Yamaguchi, includes statues of historical figures along with

## On the QT

**Directions:** Kozan Park is 1½ miles from Yamaguchi Station and can be reached on foot or by bicycle rented at the station (300 yen for two hours or 700 yen for a day).

**Times:** Always open.

**Costs:** Free admission.

**Food:** There are no restaurants in the park but a convenience store across the road sells ice cream and other treats.

Seth Robson

cherry blossoms, plum trees, azaleas and hydrangeas among manicured hedges.

The park is the site of Rurikoji, a Soto Zen temple that includes wooden buildings surrounded by nature. A park museum includes scale models of famous pagodas from around Japan, according to the Japan National Tourism organization.

Kozan Park also features the burial site of members of the Mori family, who ruled the region during the Edo Period, from 1603 to 1867.

Also in the park stands Chinryutei, a tea house where Saigo Takamori, a historical figure who helped usher in the Meiji period, and his co-conspirators pretended to practice the tea ceremony while planning to overthrow the Edo Shogunate, according to the tourism agency.

"The move led to the Meiji Restoration and the end of Japan's feudal age in 1868," the agency states.

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## Experience travel still a driving force in 2026

The travel experiences segment, which includes everything from tours to museum visits, is expected to outpace every other major travel segment through 2029, according to data from Arival and Phocuswright, TravelPulse's sister company.

The two travel data experts joined forces to release the comprehensive Outlook for Travel Experiences 2019-2029, which analyzes the segment from pre-pandemic onward to future expectations.

According to the report, the experiences sector generated \$271 billion in 2025, and is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 8 percent from 2023 through 2029, to generate \$342 billion.

The research shows that 2 in 3 travelers say experiences, ranging from visiting museums or cultural sites to engaging in wellness activities, play a major role in choosing which destination to visit. In fact, it's the third-largest segment of travel, behind flights and accommodations.

The report, which analyzed more than 1 million online experience listings and interviewed more than 5,000 operators, issued a survey of 2,000 U.S. and European-based travelers and included secondary research, found that, while the majority of travel — including flights and accommodations — is booked online, the experiences segment is uniquely less online.

"For years, experiences were called travel's 'last untapped opportunity,' but this report marks a turning point," said Douglas Quinby, CEO and co-founder of Arival. "The sector has not only recovered — it is now the fastest-growing segment of travel, reshaping how people choose where to go and what to do. Travelers are prioritizing experiences like never before, and that shift is powering a global market that's expanding at remarkable speed."

Just 33 percent of gross bookings for experiences took place online last year. Compared to the broader travel industry bookings at 64 percent, that's a markedly lower number.

While digitization is happening, the difference is due to the size of these experience businesses — and likely, their uniquely in-person nature.

Three in four of these businesses are small or micro businesses, locals who capitalize on showing tourists their favorite parts of a destination. These could be local tour operators, hiking guide companies or other small businesses. One-third of these operators are also not using an online booking system.

— Lacey Pfalz  
TravelPulse

## WEEKEND: FOOD &amp; DINING



The mainstay confections at Shirohige's Cream Puff Shop in Tokyo are renditions in pastry of a popular anime character from Studio Ghibli.

# Totoro-shaped treats in Tokyo

Cream puff shop's irresistible bites should charm fans of Studio Ghibli

By GISELLE PINARD  
For Stars and Stripes

In a hidden corner of Tokyo's Setagaya ward, a shop selling cream puffs inspired by Studio Ghibli's 1988 film "My Neighbor Totoro" begs for discovery.

Shirohige's Cream Puff Shop, a quaint bakery in a small residential neighborhood, sells several varieties of treats. The most popular are shaped like Totoro, a popular Studio Ghibli character that combines a cat and an owl as a forest spirit. Totoro watches over two young girls who move nearby while their mother suffers from a serious illness.

The bakery is in a converted home, now a café filled with Totoro and other Studio Ghibli memorabilia.

Customers can pick up an order of premade desserts at the first-floor service counter or climb upstairs to the cottage-inspired dining area and order desserts and drinks using the QR code at each table.

If you come with friends, keep in mind that the bakery and dining area are small; seating for 12 to 14 people is available.

Shirohige's irresistible cream puffs come in four flavors based on a seasonally rotating menu.

Some flavors are available only during specific times, such as matcha cream from April to June

and raspberry cream cheese from October to December. Others, like custard and chocolate, are available year-round.

Other flavors have their seasons. January through March is for caramel banana cream, January through June is strawberry cream and July through September is blueberry yogurt cream.

I ordered a latte and chocolate puff, and my friend a simple ginger ale and strawberry puff. The latte was palatable, but the espresso was not very strong, like most Japanese lattes.

The cream puffs are built from a simple choux pastry with an airy filling. We found the flavors light and not too sweet. The strawberry filling, made with local Japanese strawberries, was my favorite.

Arrive in early morning when the puffs are freshest, though there will likely be a longer line to enter. I may return to try new flavors.

The cream puffs get you in the store, but the other desserts will keep you there.

A box of four Totoro cookies in plain, raspberry, cocoa or coffee and hazelnut sells for 600 yen, or about \$3.78. A box of nine, with all of the above flavors plus cinnamon, orange, purple sweet potato, kinako and matcha, will set you back 1,600 yen.

Don't overlook the chestnut



PHOTOS BY GISELLE PINARD/For Stars and Stripes

Shirohige's Cream Puff Shop in Tokyo is popular with fans of the anime film "My Neighbor Totoro."



## Shirohige's Cream Puff Shop

**Location:** 5-3-1, 1F, Setagaya, Tokyo 155-0033

**Hours:** Open 10:30 a.m. to 6 p.m., daily, except Tuesdays.

**Prices:** 500 yen per cream puff.

**Dress:** Casual

**Directions:** From the west exit of Setagaya-Daita Station, make two right turns and follow the walking path until it forks. Take the left fork past Tolo Coffee and Bakery through the residential area greenery.

**Information:** Online: shiro-hige.net

Giselle Pinard

tart cake and strawberry shortcake, both available for pre-sale at 6,000 yen with an optional edible nameplate.



Totoro-shaped pastries and cold coffee drinks pair well together.

## WEEKEND: HEALTH &amp; FITNESS

# Therapeutic ketamine grows in popularity

Anesthetic used to treat depression being praised for its quick effects

By ANYA SOSTEK  
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

In a cozy room at New Directions Mental Health in O'Hara, Penn., patients show up with warm blankets or soft pillows they bring from home. They dim the lights or use a provided northern lights-like projector to set the mood as they settle in for ketamine therapy, a rapidly growing treatment for stubborn depression.

"We've seen it do wonders for our patients in a really quick time frame," said Ryan Wakim, New Directions' chief medical officer.

Ketamine was developed as an anesthetic in the early 1960s, used for both humans and animals during medical procedures. Around 25 years ago, researchers started investigating its potential to help depression, administering the drug through IVs to do so.

Providers such as Wakim set up clinics to allow patients to use ketamine intravenously, driven by research showing its effectiveness almost immediately after use.

In 2019, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration approved a form of ketamine called esketamine as a nasal spray.

In that form, the drug is easier to administer and more likely to be covered by insurance. And, after a slow start, esketamine is catching on through a combination of research, regulatory changes and even hype from social media and reality shows.

Johnson & Johnson, the maker of the esketamine drug Spravato, said that the drug's sales surpassed \$1 billion in 2024 and grew more than 50% in both 2024 and 2025.

At New Directions Mental Health, the practice built two "Spravato rooms" when it remodeled its O'Hara location in 2024. The demand is such that both rooms are frequently in use, and the clinic will soon expand from offering four days of ketamine therapy per week to five.

Esketamine is approved for patients with treatment-resistant depression, meaning that they have tried two different antidepressants without relief from their symptoms. About 30-50% of those with depression fall into that category. In January 2025, the FDA approved esketamine as a stand-alone therapy, so that it no longer has to be used in conjunction with an oral antidepressant.

It is regulated as a controlled substance, and must be tracked through the federal Risk Evaluation and Mitigation Strategy, or REMS, system.

For treatment, patients arrive at a clinic and self-administer the nasal spray, similar to Flonase. They may go into a dreamlike state, and must be monitored for side effects such as nausea, high blood pressure and disassociation. They generally stay in the clinic for monitoring for about two hours, and need to have a ride home, similar to an outpatient anesthesia procedure.

Typically, patients start on esketamine twice a week, and then drop to once a week or once a month. It can be used in conjunction with talk therapy or oral antidepressants, or just on its own.

And its effects can be nearly immediate.

"Its real differentiation with other antidepressants is its very rapid onset of effects," said Steve Forman, medical director for the AHN Center for Psychiatric Neuromodulation. "You get prescribed Prozac, and it can take weeks and weeks to take effect. With ketamine or esketamine, you can see it in those two hours, and that's a big separation between that and other forms."

One study in 2024 gave three IV ketamine infusions over 11 days to 74 patients with severe depression. Just over half of the participants achieved complete remission of depression, and an additional 15% had some response.

Another recent study compared esketamine and IV ketamine over a treatment period of four to five weeks, finding that esketamine reduced depression scores by about 40%, and IV ketamine reduced symptoms by about 49%.

Since Spravato was approved in 2019, esketamine has



iStock

**In ketamine-assisted psychotherapy, the drug is administered as an IV drip, an intramuscular injection, under-the-tongue lozenges or a compounded nasal spray.**

become increasingly popular versus IV ketamine, though both are still used.

Because of the ease of administering Spravato, Wakim has closed the IV ketamine clinic that he used to operate in Monroeville, Penn.

"We've completely moved on at this point," he said. "Spravato is FDA approved, in many respects it's safer and less complicated and it's covered basically ubiquitously. For us, it just made more sense."

At the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, doctors use both IV ketamine and esketamine, depending on the circumstances.

Allegheny Health Network does not currently use either form of ketamine for psychiatric treatment, though Forman has experience with it from his time working at the Veterans Affairs Pittsburgh hospital, where he saw some impressive results.

"I was always kind of skeptical when I heard that this happens, and people get better in two hours," he said. "I had a patient who was referred to us, and their clinicians were thinking that this patient was state-hospital bound. A year later, doing esketamine, that patient was doing spectacularly well — it was astonishing."

For some patients, the downside of ketamine can be the side effects, or simply that it doesn't work as they hoped. For the industry as a whole, there is concern about rapid growth of a drug that is also used and abused recreationally.

The death of "Friends" star Matthew Perry from a ketamine overdose in 2023 brought scrutiny to ketamine use. Perry was using ketamine therapeutically in supervised settings but was also buying it and injecting it in much larger doses, leading to his overdose.

"It can be a drug of abuse," said Marie Anne Gebara, medical director for ketamine services at The Center for Interventional Psychiatry at UPMC Western Psychiatric Hospital. "There is concern, and that's something we counsel our patients about before starting the treatment in terms of the risk and benefit discussion. We look at certain criteria in terms of substance use to see if someone is appropriate or not."

While Spravato use is tracked and regulated, IV ketamine use has fewer safeguards, because it is not FDA approved as a depression treatment and is being used off label.

Ketamine therapy is also spreading on social media and



KFF HEALTH NEWS/TNS

in popular culture. One episode of the Hulu reality show "The Secret Lives of Mormon Wives" shows an IV ketamine session in the context of marriage therapy. Celebrities such as Kristen Bell, Michael Phelps and Ryan Reynolds have said that they found ketamine therapy helpful.

For Gebara at UPMC, part of counseling patients is balancing the hype that they may have heard versus that fact that ketamine is not necessarily a miracle cure.

"Compared to some of the other treatments we offer, also for treatment-resistant depression, there definitely seems to be more interest from the patients who are coming to us to receive ketamine," she said. "Just because it's talked about doesn't mean that this is the treatment that will fix everyone's depression — we do need to set realistic expectations."

Wakim said that ketamine therapy was once thought of as a last resort, for patients where nothing else has worked. Now, he said, it's often part of a standard treatment course.

"We really think about it early in the treatment plan, even if they are not yet a candidate," he said, noting that many of the patients at New Directions have already tried one antidepressant prescribed by a primary care physician before making an appointment with a psychiatrist there. "For us, almost everyone who walks in the door is a candidate."

For Wakim, Spravato can be a far superior treatment to oral antidepressants. The nasal spray works faster, often with fewer side effects, he said, and doesn't depend on daily compliance.

"Depression is a life-threatening condition, and we have an opportunity to impact that much more quickly," he said. "When I first saw what these treatments could do, I couldn't unsee it."

## WEEKEND: LIFESTYLE

# Nuclear-level task doesn't trouble teen

Ambitious student banishes boredom by building fusion device by age 12

BY MIRIAM FAUZIA

The Dallas Morning News

**D**uring the pandemic lockdown, while much of the world stalled, Aidan McMillan decided to build something. At 8 years old, he wasn't interested in assembling Legos or constructing a tree house. He wanted to do science.

"My dad asked me, 'What's a cool project you want to do so you're not sitting at home bored?'" said Aidan, now 13. "I was a very nerdy 8-year-old ... I think I wanted to either do an electron microscope or nuclear fusion."

Neither option sounds like something a kid would do. But over the next four years, Aidan, a student at Dallas Independent School District, taught himself physics and coding to build a device that he says can produce nuclear fusion — the same process that powers stars, including the sun. What began as a way to stay busy may now earn him a spot in Guinness World Records as the youngest person to achieve nuclear fusion.

## From e-book to makerspace

Not many people attempt nuclear fusion on their own. But there is a small global community of enthusiasts who do, often by building home versions of a Farnsworth fusion reactor, or fusor. That device was developed in the 1960s and uses high voltage and a vacuum chamber to conduct nuclear fusion. This phenomenon occurs when two tiny atoms slam together to become one bigger atom. In the process, they emit a burst of energy.

"The fact that this community exists pushes back on the notion that this is an ivory tower pursuit," said Carl Willis, a professor of nuclear engineering at the University of New Mexico and one of Aidan's specialist witnesses for his Guinness World Records attempt. Every Guinness record needs to be verified by at least two independent witnesses.

Willis said hobbyists explore nuclear science across a wide spectrum, from building small particle accelerators to doing nuclear reactions. "It isn't out of the realm of individuals to be able to do these things," he added.

But how does an 8-year-old know where to start? Aidan began by teaching himself nuclear science from a 400-page e-book. He would have Google open on one computer screen and the book open on another, he said. "I'm Googling like three-fourths of the words in this book, and just kind of figuring it out."

After two years of self-study on top of his regular schoolwork, Aidan and his father, Mark, got help building the fusor at the Dallas Makerspace in Carrollton, Texas. There, they met members of the organization's scientific committee, including Russell Crow, a retired laser engineer.

Crow, as the Dallas Makerspace's safety officer, was game to mentor Aidan, showing him the ropes and keeping a close eye on safety issues. A fusor comes with real hazards, no matter who's building it. Potentially lethal issues are high voltages, dangerous ultraviolet and X-ray radiation and a high-vacuum apparatus that can implode if improperly handled.

"I gave him guidance here and there whenever he needed it," Crow said. Since Aidan was too young to run the machine tools for building the device, "I would get him to show me his specifications, and then I



ELIAS VALVERDE II, DALLAS MORNING NEWS/TNS

**Aidan McMillan, 13, stands next to his nuclear fusor at Launchpad Incubator on Feb. 20 in Dallas.**

would machine it for him."

But Aidan mostly built the fusor himself. His father sourced some parts for it online and borrowed others from the Dallas Makerspace, where someone had built a fusor before him. In total, building the device cost around \$20,000. The work took place at the Dallas Makerspace until last May, when Aidan's parents helped open another makerspace in West Dallas geared toward children. Called Launchpad Incubator, it currently serves about eight students after school, during weekends and over school breaks and aims to eventually accommodate up to 40 kids. Launchpad leases the building from a nonprofit and has put about \$100,000 toward it for renovations.

## Skills over world record

It was late 2024, Crow said, when Aidan first achieved nuclear fusion. He reached the milestone around 1 a.m., shortly before his 12th birthday.

"Everybody was so fired up about it," Crow said. "We did it over and over again the next few weeks."

The process worked like this: Aidan hit a button that released a small amount of a kind of hydrogen gas called deuterium inside the fusor's vacuum chamber. He then switched on a high-voltage current that ran through the gas, causing it to become plasma. That, in turn, stripped electrons from the atoms, leaving positively charged particles. The electric field then pulled those charged particles toward the center of the chamber at high speeds of 750 cycles per second (or 90,000 revolutions per minute), crashing them together.

The achievement could have gone unnoticed by the public — and Aidan would have been fine with that. But he decided to pursue a place in Guinness World Records, he said, to bring attention to the makerspace his parents created and to show what a space like it can do for kids interested in science.

"A lot of people don't have the means to do these projects," Aidan said. "The idea behind the space is to help kids to do whatever they want to do and also have peers who are at the same level of 'out there.'"

Staying laser-focused on one project was difficult, but Aidan was motivated to keep going. "I spent a year trying to do nuclear fusion, and I'm not gonna let my past self down," he said. "To be honest, it's less about the fact that I did nuclear fusion and more about the fact that I learned a lot of skills."

Aidan completed his Guinness World Records attempt in December, when he was 12. He plans to submit the documentation for recognition this spring. The current title holder for the world's youngest person to achieve nuclear fusion is Jackson Oswald, a Tennessee who achieved nuclear fusion in 2018, hours before his 13th birthday, according to Guinness World Records.

## THE MEAT AND POTATOES OF LIFE

Lisa Smith Molinari



## Military-friendly colleges help tame monetary beasts

This time of year, high school seniors open their mailboxes very carefully. Be it an email inbox or a curbside postbox, they cock their heads back as if protecting their faces from flying shrapnel. With one eye shut and trembling hands, they open new mail, fearing they'll be maimed.

What, pray tell, is this vicious beast from which seniors flinch? College decision letters, of course.

Even though college admissions teams try to hide messages among flowery phraseology, college rejection letters can leave recipients feeling mortally wounded.

On the other hand, college acceptance letters mimic instant shots of adrenaline, causing recipients to jump, dance, giggle, pant and faint with happiness before they've had a chance to notice the massive tuition bills.

All high school seniors applying to colleges are subject to these emotional extremes; however, for many military brats and their parents, there's an additional beast lurking beyond those college acceptances — finances.

Unless you've won the lottery, paying for college is a concern. Additionally, there are military issues that affect college finances such as proving residency, qualifying for discounts and aid and tapping into federal benefits.

To fund our three children at private colleges, one might think my husband and I worked night shifts at 7-Eleven and moved into a cardboard box under an overpass to get by. Not so. Instead, our family used a combination of my Navy husband's military-related benefits, school financial aid, scholarship grants, private loans and federal student loan funding. We applied for everything under the sun, including our base Spouses Club scholarships, Military Officers Association of America student loans and grants, DECA-Fisher House scholarships and local Rotary Club scholarships.

It's a lot for the typical busy military family to manage, but with patience, prompt filing, hard work and good record keeping, it's doable, especially if the colleges you are considering are supportive of military veterans and dependents.

These schools are referred to as being "veteran friendly" or "military friendly," but both terms refer to colleges and universities that put extra resources in place to help military veterans and other military-connected students. Our three children went to colleges that were very military friendly, which helped when we needed assistance with tuition bills paid with several sources of funding. The schools had special military offices on campus, where staff were dedicated to handling GI Bill and Yellow Ribbon benefits as well as other aid, loans and scholarships for military-connected students.

MilitaryTimes.com publishes an annual "Best for Vets" list of colleges using survey data analyzing military student success metrics, the range of military-specific resources, the level of financial assistance offered to military students and other factors. The list contains 357 U.S. colleges, each with specific information about military programs, statistics and services.

MilitaryFriendly.com also maintains an extensive list of post-secondary schools rated for military friendliness.

Even Ivy League schools have tried to become military friendly. For example, Brown University banished ROTC during Vietnam War protests, and didn't invite it back until 2016, establishing the "Office of Military Affiliated Students" and offering veteran scholarship funding.

However, the Ivies' efforts may have come too late. On Feb. 27, Secretary of War Pete Hegseth ordered a ban on Pentagon-funded military students from attending many top-ranked schools beginning 2026-2027, including Brown, Harvard, MIT, Princeton, Columbia and Yale due to "anti-American resentment and military disdain."

This college decision season, you may approach your mailbox with caution, but as long as you focus on military-friendly colleges, you'll have reinforcements to slay the beast.

Read more at [themeatandpotatoesoflife.com](http://themeatandpotatoesoflife.com) and in Lisa's book, "The Meat and Potatoes of Life: My True Lit Com." Email: [meatandpotatoesoflife@gmail.com](mailto:meatandpotatoesoflife@gmail.com)

# WEEKEND: CROSSWORD AND COMICS

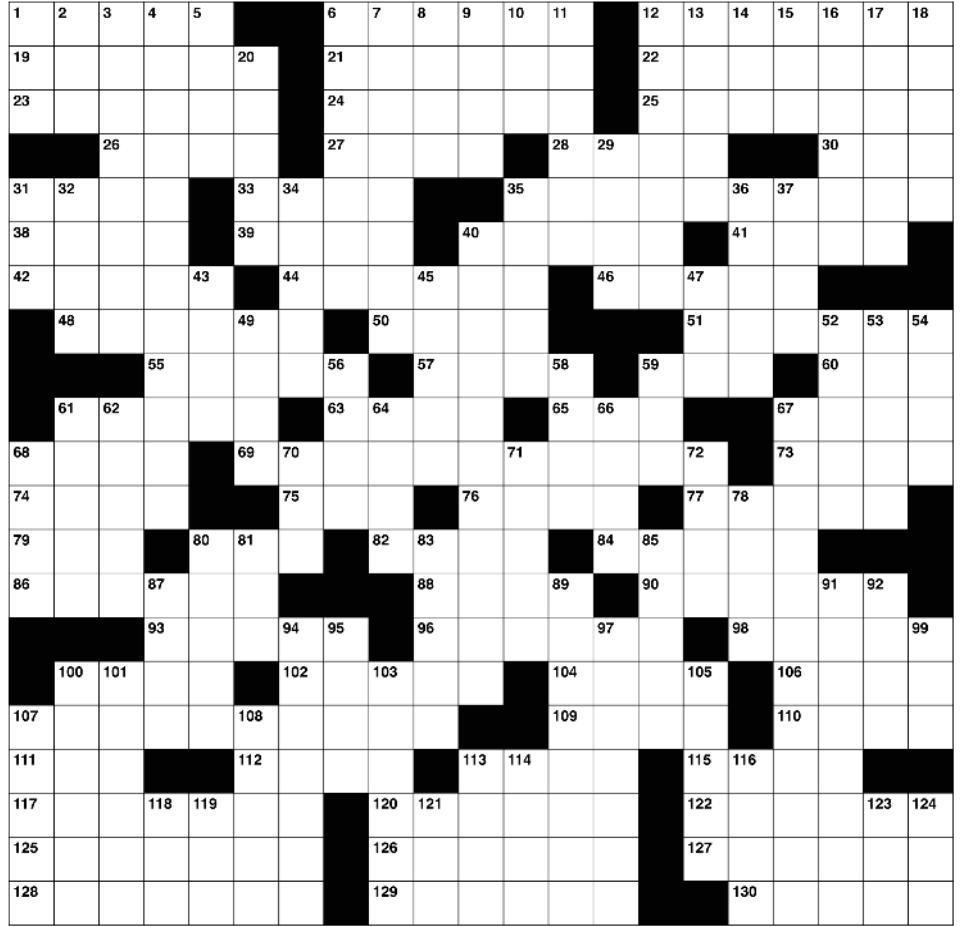
## NEW YORK TIMES CROSSWORD

### HISTORY COURSE

BY MIRANDA KANY / EDITED BY WILL SHORTZ

Miranda Kany is a chef and caterer in Philadelphia. This is her fourth crossword and first Sunday for The Times. Its food-related theme might be predictable given Miranda's line of work. But the theme has two more layers, explained by an astonishingly fortuitous crossing at 69-Across and 40-Down. The crossword gods were smiling while Miranda was making this. — W.S.

- ACROSS**
- 1 Dwelling
  - 6 One of two elected magistrates to the ancient cursus honorum
  - 12 Plagiarized
  - 19 Notion that's difficult to dispel
  - 21 Roll on, as time
  - 22 One large head, shredded, with the outer leaves discarded
  - 23 Record label for the Beastie Boys and Public Enemy
  - 24 Stockholder's portion
  - 25 Handled vessel in a museum
  - 26 1977 Robin Cook medical thriller
  - 27 Bon \_\_\_\_\_ ("Skinny Love" band)
  - 28 Brand of canned beans
  - 30 Greedy sort
  - 31 Soon, to Shakespeare
  - 33 Lying about
  - 35 2 tbsp., for acidity
  - 38 Ian who portrayed Bilbo Baggins
  - 39 \_\_\_\_\_ Jones, bobsledder and hurdler who has competed in both the Winter and Summer Olympics
  - 40 Mushroom prized by chefs
  - 41 Psychologist Solomon
  - 42 Lair
  - 44 Do something perfectly
  - 46 Easily duped
  - 48 \_\_\_\_\_ Lupin, gentleman thief of literature
  - 50 Peepers keepers?
  - 51 One clove, crushed
  - 55 Chaucer collection
  - 57 5/8 or 2/14
  - 59 One might be noble
  - 60 "Foucault's Pendulum" author
  - 61 Drummer with the coffee table book "Another Day in the Life"
  - 63 All-star pitcher Hersheiser
  - 65 Sch. whose team name is a poisonous nut
  - 67 The Bard of \_\_\_\_\_
  - 68 Thanksgiving is always on the fourth one in Nov.
  - 69 Infamous warning for 126-Across ... and for solvers, when filling in seven squares in this puzzle?
  - 73 Creature to take a gander at on Haleakala?
  - 74 Lacking adornment
  - 75 Digressive remark
  - 76 Tabby talk
  - 77 Rushes
  - 79 \_\_\_\_\_ Lanka
  - 80 "Daughter," in Hebrew
  - 82 Harvest
  - 84 Hole on a belt
  - 86 Ground, black, to taste
  - 88 Chop, mince, grate, etc.
  - 90 Holiday harmonies
  - 93 Cute, woolly farm animals
  - 96 Period of glaciation
  - 98 Title role for both Patti LuPone and Madonna
  - 100 Uncle Remus title
  - 102 Tree from which turpentine may be derived
  - 104 Hullabaloo
  - 106 Word before stick or after Scotland
  - 107 One cup, seasoned and lightly toasted until crispy
  - 109 "The kissing disease"
  - 110 Some savanna groups
  - 111 "\_\_\_\_\_ for Ricochet" (Sue Grafton mystery)
  - 112 Got ready to drive?
  - 113 Commoner
  - 115 Human rights lawyer Clooney
  - 117 Ones changing the narrative?
  - 120 Chillaxing
  - 122 Word on a protest sign
  - 125 One, coddled or raw; add an extra for a richer flavor
  - 126 This puzzle's subject, in two very different ways
  - 127 Samurai sword
  - 128 Kind of overload
  - 129 Stile coins that have gone out of style
  - 130 Contemptuously laughed at
  - 6 Soupçon feature
  - 7 ½ cup, slowly drizzled and whisked to form an emulsion
  - 8 Area with pews
  - 9 Certain silk spinner
  - 10 Onetime org. for Jimmy Carter and J.F.K.
  - 11 Bean counter's book
  - 12 Its box is yellow and green, with many colors in between
  - 13 \_\_\_\_\_ Empire
  - 14 Rapsallion
  - 15 Curmudgeon's exclamation
  - 16 "Sully" or "Spartacus"
  - 17 Add value to
  - 18 Rejuvenate digitally
  - 20 The first one was sent in 1971
  - 29 A calf born with two heads, some say
  - 31 Satisfied sigh
  - 32 "Haven't a clue"
  - 34 Gift recipient
  - 35 "\_\_\_\_\_ luck!"
  - 36 Cups o' joe
  - 37 The "U" of UX
  - 40 George Eliot masterpiece ... or a punny hint to seven squares in this puzzle
  - 43 Eye drop?
  - 45 "What am I, chopped \_\_\_\_\_?"
  - 47 Swiatek who has won the U.S. Open, French Open and Wimbledon
  - 49 Workers' rights org.
  - 52 Army Corps of Engineers project
  - 53 Pictures on a screen
  - 54 Alternative to a cup
  - 56 Scatters, as seeds
  - 58 Start of a pirate-y pillaging song
  - 59 Tour leader
  - 61 Go halvesies, say
  - 62 Flower with a cup-shaped bloom
  - 64 Las Vegas football player
  - 66 In stitches
  - 67 2 tbsp., for a briny flavor
  - 68 Baking meas.
  - 70 Make a fast not last?
  - 71 Conical dwelling
  - 72 Mlle. in Madrid
  - 78 One of a hundred for Pooh and friends
  - 80 Part of a Santa Claus costume
  - 81 Adjustable feature of an office chair, maybe
  - 83 "Pharsalia" and the "Aeneid"
  - 85 Poseidon's domain
  - 87 Entreaty
  - 89 ½ cup, freshly grated
  - 91 1997 Jim Carrey comedy
  - 92 Big step
  - 94 Alternative to X
  - 95 Kemo \_\_\_\_\_
  - 97 Peanuts
  - 99 Expensive Super Bowl features
  - 100 One way to cross the Rubicon
  - 101 Step down
  - 103 Black out, in a way
  - 105 "The Fountainhead" protagonist
  - 107 Longtime Saints QB Drew
  - 108 "Refreshing" web shortcut
  - 113 Open before December 25?
  - 114 Operate on with light
  - 116 Olden honeyed drink
  - 118 Expressions of appreciation, in texts
  - 119 Tic-tac-toe win
  - 121 "The \_\_\_\_\_ of Pooh"
  - 123 Slyly disparaging
  - 124 Bit

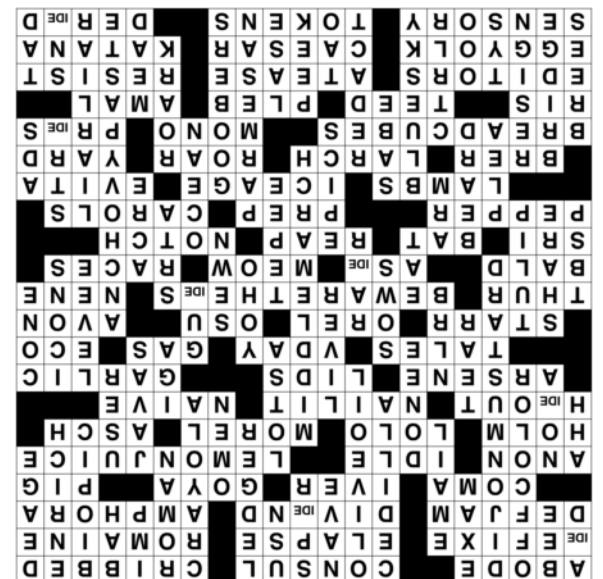


## GUNSTON STREET



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

## RESULTS FOR ABOVE PUZZLE



**STARS AND STRIPES**

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# FACES/PUZZLES

## Taylor Frankie Paul to get full 'Bachelorette' pay

Taylor Frankie Paul will receive her full salary for "The Bachelorette," despite ABC's decision to cancel her season in the wake of a video showing the reality star engaged in domestic violence, along with new allegations of abuse.

The "Secret Lives of Mormon Wives" breakout, 31, will still get the low-to-mid six-figure payday from producer Warner Bros. Discovery because her contract was for services rendered, and Paul completed filming the 22nd season, insiders told TMZ.

Paul was in the midst of the press tour for the show, which should have premiered last Sunday on ABC, when the network announced March 19 that the show would not make it to air.

That decision was made hours after TMZ published a video from early 2023, in which Paul could be seen putting her on-off boyfriend Dakota Mortensen in a headlock before hurling metal barstools at him. One of those chairs hit her daughter Indy, then 5.

Paul was arrested for and charged in the incident, ultimately pleading guilty to aggravated assault. Charges of felony domestic violence in the presence of a child, as well as misdemeanor child abuse and criminal mischief, were then dropped.

Insiders told TMZ that ABC honchos hadn't seen the video until the public did, despite Paul often speaking about her arrest.

## Woman pleads not guilty in Rihanna incident

A Florida woman pleaded not guilty Wednesday to charges that she sprayed bullets at Rihanna's West LA house earlier this month while the pop star was home with her husband and children.

Ivana Ortiz, 35, was charged with attempted murder and nine counts of assault following the March 8 incident. Police say Ortiz raked Rihanna's property with an assault rifle, striking an Airstream trailer on the property, the singer's home and a neighbor's home. No one was hit.

## Other news

■ **Chip Taylor**, the songwriter behind the Troggs' rock hit "Wild Thing" and actor Angelina Jolie's uncle, died Monday in hospice care, according to Taylor's long-time friend, producer Billy Vera. He was 86. Taylor, born James Wesley Voight in Yonkers, N.Y., in 1940, was actor Jon Voight's brother, but built a formidable music career outside of his famous sibling's shadow. As a teen guitarist, he joined the band Town & Country Brothers, which toured with Neil Sedaka. His songwriting submissions to RCA Records impressed artist Chet Atkins, who championed his tunes in the country music scene.

## Eugene Sheffer Crossword

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

### ACROSS

- 1 Mil. group
- 4 Pump up the volume
- 7 The "R" in RAF
- 12 Have bills
- 13 Standard
- 14 Not hidden
- 15 — Tin Tin
- 16 Long-tailed birds
- 18 Follower (Suff.)
- 19 Drooping
- 20 — seeds (smoothie additions)
- 22 Brit's restroom
- 23 Actress Kate
- 27 Dove's call
- 29 Research aids
- 31 Caper
- 34 From Dublin
- 35 Monk's music
- 37 Tofu source
- 38 Punch
- 39 Geological period
- 41 Chop —
- 45 Golf clubs
- 47 Grier of "The L Word"
- 48 Lawsuit parties
- 52 Computer key
- 53 Chocolate syrup brand
- 54 Quarterback Marino
- 55 PBS funder
- 56 Terrific
- 57 Utter fool
- 58 License to drill?

### DOWN

- 1 Column style
- 2 "If only!"
- 3 Starbucks size
- 4 PC programs
- 5 Hawaiian "thank you"
- 6 "Please" in Tuscany
- 7 Optimistic
- 8 Eggs
- 9 Longing
- 10 Illustrations
- 11 USN officers
- 17 Awestruck
- 21 Getting 100 on
- 23 "The Bells of St. —"
- 24 Blackbird
- 25 ACLU concerns
- 26 Cigar residue
- 28 Halloween mo.
- 30 Brazilian city

- 31 Rm. coolers
- 32 Stanley Cup org.
- 33 Greek cross
- 36 Antitoxins
- 37 Bearded seasonal hirees
- 40 Olympian — Rousey, bronze medal winner in judo
- 42 Tip over
- 43 Allayed
- 44 Community gym sites
- 45 "Young Frankenstein" role
- 46 Taxpayer IDs
- 48 Scale abbr.
- 49 Chit
- 50 Recipe abbr.
- 51 Rink surface

### Answer to Previous Puzzle

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

### 3-27

### CRYPTOQUIP

I N P M S C S X O S Y C P Y R V N S  
 S X O Z M Z V A W , V N S O A J R N P Y R  
 D S M M A I C S O M Z W S C , " P ' T  
 O A T P Y R C A I Y I P V N V N S D M J ."  
**Yesterday's Cryptoquip:** WHAT WAS THE FUNNY FISH SHOP OWNER ALWAYS ENCOURAGING FOLKS TO DO? "PICK A COD, ANY COD!"

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: R equals G

## Eugene Sheffer Crossword

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

### ACROSS

- 1 Cat's coat
- 4 NYPD ranks
- 8 Lingerie fabric
- 12 Pig-poke link
- 13 Lotion additive
- 14 "Superfood" berry
- 15 Use a shovel
- 16 Heal
- 17 Touse
- 18 Rent and utilities, to a business owner
- 21 "Of course"
- 22 Soup legume
- 23 "Haystacks" painter
- 26 "The Bells" writer
- 27 eBay offer
- 30 Bakery buys
- 31 Silent assent
- 32 "Casual" singer Chappell
- 33 Noshed
- 34 Chips go-with
- 35 Giant insurer
- 36 Gear tooth
- 37 Mex. neighbor
- 38 Powerful tennis shot
- 45 Medal recipient
- 46 Uncivil
- 47 "Evita" narrator
- 48 Rainbow
- 49 Mid-month date
- 50 Old space station

- 51 Erstwhile acorns
- 52 Broadcasts
- 53 Clean air org.

### DOWN

- 1 Rover's pal
- 2 Brown or Yale (Abbr.)
- 3 Fury
- 4 Potpourri bag
- 5 Adhesives
- 6 — Bora (Afghan region)
- 7 Bean container
- 8 Pago Pago's place
- 9 Hosp. areas
- 10 Endure
- 11 Smooch
- 19 Deli loaves
- 20 Middling grade
- 23 CEO's degree, often
- 24 "Shoo!"
- 25 Compass dir.
- 26 Mom's mate
- 27 Droid
- 28 Author Fleming
- 29 Genetic stuff
- 31 Lagos locale
- 32 500 sheets
- 34 Homer's holler
- 35 Size up
- 36 Angry
- 37 Milk dispenser
- 38 Wheeling's river
- 39 Designer Wang
- 40 Actor Estrada
- 41 BMW rival
- 42 Summit
- 43 Model in a bottle
- 44 Olympian queen

### Answer to Previous Puzzle

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

### 3-28

### CRYPTOQUIP

R B C R T F B C G B I G T N P H M B K  
 A H H I L W K O H M R T G D G X B K S O  
 B C G B L S K M N X H M L K F H S  
 B G A W H P , A N B R B D K W M H M .  
**Yesterday's Cryptoquip:** WHILE DESCENDING THE ESCALATOR, THE COUGHING FELLOW DECLARED, "I'M COMING DOWN WITH THE FLU."

Today's Cryptoquip Clue: C equals H

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# The West cannot rearm on borrowed parts: Independent drone supply chains are vital

BY OLEKSII KOLESNYK

In mid-March, Gulf states faced repeated waves of missile and drone attacks, with Saudi Arabia alone intercepting nearly 100 drones in a single day. To counter this attack, the country expended an estimated \$300 million in interceptor missiles to defeat an attack that likely cost 10 times less to assemble. This is not a marginal imbalance — it is a structural one that exposes a fundamental shift in the economics of modern warfare.

Each interceptor missile — whether a Patriot PAC-3 or THAAD — costs between \$3 million and \$12 million. The Iranian Shahed-136 drone can cost approximately \$50,000. The resulting cost ratio, reaching 10:1 to 20:1 in favor of the attacker, illustrates a dynamic that no traditional defense model can absorb sustainably. In Ukraine, we learned this lesson through four years of drone warfare, while the Gulf is now learning it in weeks. The rest of the world may have a short window before the next conflict reinforces it again.

What we are witnessing is not simply the emergence of a new class of weapons, but the arrival of a new economic model of conflict in which expendable systems overwhelm highly sophisticated but scarce defensive platforms. Under these conditions, even record defense spending cannot deliver security if it reinforces outdated assumptions.

## Reinvent the rearmament boom

Global military spending reached approximately \$2.7 trillion in 2024, the fastest growth since the Cold War. The United States alone has crossed the \$1 trillion defense budget threshold, and NATO members are now targeting 5% of GDP by 2035. Yet beneath these headline figures lies a critical misalignment between spending priorities and the evolving character of warfare.

Much of today's investment continues to flow into legacy systems designed for a different era. The F-35 program took roughly 25 years to reach production. Tomahawk missiles — of which the United States has reportedly used around 400 in the current Iran conflict — take years to replenish. These are high-performance, high-cost systems built for precision warfare against peer militaries.

But today's threats are defined by scale, not precision. Iran's drone campaign in the Gulf has demonstrated that strategic effect can be achieved through volume rather than technological superiority. Relatively inexpensive drones, deployed in large numbers, can saturate even the most advanced air defense networks, while the attacking side remains confident in full protection. The result is a mismatch: governments are buying yesterday's war at tomorrow's prices.

## Fast-track procurement

The core problem is not just what governments are buying — it is how they are buying it. Western procurement systems are misaligned with the tempo of drone warfare. At the Munich Security Conference, the contradiction was clear: defense companies hesitate to invest in new production capacity without long-term demand, while

governments remain locked in short-term, crisis-driven purchasing cycles. This tension prevents scale and keeps defense reactive rather than strategic.

If governments are serious about adapting to this new reality, four reforms are essential. The first is extending wartime procurement authorities into peacetime for drone and counter-drone systems, allowing for accelerated acquisition timelines. Ukraine's centralized, digitized procurement has demonstrated how quickly systems can be fielded when bureaucratic barriers are reduced. Similarly, the United Kingdom's ability to complete a drone procurement cycle in just 19 days shows that speed is achievable when treated as a priority.

The second reform involves shifting from episodic batch purchases to continuous production contracts that provide manufacturers with predictable demand. Buying 100,000 drones in a single order may address an immediate need, but it does not build sustainable industrial capacity. Manufacturers need predictable demand to justify investment in production lines. Rearmament built on episodic orders will always struggle to scale effectively.

Third, governments must establish regulatory fast lanes for technologies already proven in combat. Systems perfected under real battlefield conditions — particularly in Ukraine — should not face prolonged certification processes in allied countries. Today, more than 10 European and Middle Eastern nations are seeking Ukrainian expertise in drone defense, highlighting both the urgency of the demand and the inefficiencies of current regulatory frameworks.

Finally, recent U.S. efforts to accelerate defense contracting should serve as a model for broader reform. The January 2026 Executive Order on "Prioritizing the Warfighter in Defense Contracting" acknowledges the need for speed, accountability and performance in procurement processes, and these principles should now be applied consistently across allied nations.

## The supply chain imperative

Even if procurement is fixed, another problem remains: supply chains. Today, many of the critical components used in drone systems — motors, flight controllers and batteries — are dominated by Chinese manufacturers, creating a strategic vulnerability. A defense strategy that relies on adversary-controlled supply chains is inherently fragile, particularly in times of crisis when access to these components may be restricted.

Europe has begun to address this issue through measures such as the SAFE regulation, which limits non-European components in tactical drones, but the gap remains significant, with less than 30% of drones used by European Union member states produced domestically. Closing this gap will require a comprehensive restructuring of the industrial base. The issue is not simply whether systems are designed in the United States or Europe but assembled in China — it is whether allied nations are actually building out the component manufacturing base required to sustain independent production at scale.

This transformation must begin with vertical integration, ensuring that allied nations control the production process from

critical components to final assembly. It must also recognize Ukraine as both a model and a partner, given its rapid development of a battle-tested drone industrial ecosystem under extreme wartime conditions. Rather than treating this expertise as temporary, it should be integrated into broader allied production networks.

Consolidation and unification of allied efforts is equally essential. The integration of Iranian, Russian and North Korean drone and missile supply chains — achieved rapidly and under sanctions pressure — should serve as a cautionary marker for what adversaries can accomplish when Western nations remain fragmented in their industrial response.

Equally important is adopting distributed manufacturing models that enhance resilience by spreading production across locations. Iran's ability to sustain drone output despite targeted strikes on its facilities illustrates the effectiveness of this approach, reducing vulnerability and ensuring continuity. Allied nations should adopt similar strategies through licensed production and cooperative industrial frameworks.

This also means planning now — leveraging existing infrastructure while investing in new facilities. Building peacetime drone component production without accounting for the risk of destruction in conflict is not planning; it is negligence. Resilient industrial capacity must be designed to absorb disruption and continue operating under wartime conditions.

Finally, industrial policy must actively support this transition by creating favorable conditions for investment and production. Europe's Readiness Roadmap 2030 signals a broader recognition of the need for coordinated action, but the challenge now is implementation at scale and speed.

## The window to act is now

The Iran-Gulf conflict should not be viewed as an isolated event, but as a preview of the future of warfare. Early indications suggest that prolonged engagements could strain global air defense supplies, highlighting the current limits. Even the most advanced militaries cannot sustain a defense model that relies on scarce, high-cost interceptors against an abundant and inexpensive threat.

The lesson is clear. The global rearmament boom will fail to deliver security if it prioritizes complexity over scalability, if procurement systems remain slow and fragmented, and if supply chains remain dependent on external actors. Ukraine has learned these lessons — though not fully — through four years of sustained conflict, and the Gulf is confronting them now. The rest of the world still has a choice: adapt in advance or to be forced to adapt under pressure.

After years on the front line of the world's first large-scale drone war, one conclusion stands out: it is impossible to defend against mass with scarcity. Independent drone supply chains are not just industrial policy — they are a prerequisite for survival.

Oleksii Kolesnyk is CEO and founder of Reactive Drone, a leading Ukrainian manufacturer behind Kazhan ("Baba Yaga") and Shmavic drones. Since the start of the war with Russia, Reactive Drone has been supplying the Ukrainian armed forces.

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# SCOREBOARD

## DEALS

### Wednesday's transactions

#### BASEBALL Major League Baseball American League

**BALTIMORE ORIOLES** — Designated RHP Jackson Kowar and INF/OF Bryan Ramos for assignment. Sent INF José Barrero, C Sam Huff, RHP Albert Suárez, INF Luis Vázquez and INF/OF Weston Wilson to Norfolk (IL).

**BOSTON RED SOX** — Placed 1B Triston Casas and INF Anthony Seigler on the 15-day IL and RHP Kutter Crawford and LHP Patrick Sandoval on the 15-day IL, retroactive to March 22.

**CHICAGO WHITE SOX** — Placed INF Brooks Baldwin and C Kyle Teel on the 10-day IL and RHPs Prelander Berroa, Drew Thorpe and Mike Vasil on the 15-day IL. Designated C Corey Lee and INF Curtis Mead for assignment.

**CLEVELAND GUARDIANS** — Placed RHPs Andrew Walters and Hunter Gaddis on the 15-day IL and OF George Valera on the 10-day IL, retroactive to March 22. Designated OF Johnathan Rodríguez for assignment. Selected the contract of 1B Rhys Hoskins from Columbus (IL).

**DETROIT TIGERS** — Selected INF Kevin McGonigle from Erie. Designated RHP Dylan Smith for assignment. Optioned RHP Brennan Hanifee to Toledo (IL). Placed RHP Sawyer Gipson-Long and LHP Bailey Horn on the 15-day IL and INF Trey Sweeney on the 10-day IL, retroactive to March 22.

**HOUSTON ASTROS** — Selected the contracts of RHP Christian Roa and C Christian Vázquez from Sugar Land (PCL). Placed OF Zach Dezenzo on the 10-day IL. Placed RHPs Ronel Blanco, Enyel De Los Santos, Nate Pearson and Hayden Wesneski and LHPs Josh Hader and Bennett Sousa on the 15-day IL. Placed LHP Brandon Walter on the 60-day IL. Designated C César Salazar for assignment. Optioned OF Zach Cole to Sugar Land.

**KANSAS CITY ROYALS** — Placed RHP James McArthur on the 15-day IL, retroactive to March 22. Selected the contract of RHP Eli Morgan from Omaha.

**LOS ANGELES ANGELS** — Selected the contracts of 3B Jeimer Candelario and 2B Adam Frazier from Salt Lake (PCL).

**MINNESOTA TWINS** — Selected the contract of RHP Cody Laweryson from St. Paul (IL). Placed RHPs Travis Adams and David Festa on the 15-day IL, retroactive to March 22.

**NEW YORK YANKEES** — Placed RHP Gerrit Cole and LHP Carlos Rodón on the 15-day IL. Placed INF Anthony Volpe on the 10-day IL. Optioned RHP Luis Gil to Scranton/Wilkes-Barre (IL). Signed OF Randal Grichuk to a contract and selected him to the active roster.

**SEATTLE MARINERS** — Optioned RHP Alex Hoppe to Tacoma (PCL).

**TAMPA BAY RAYS** — Placed INFs Gavin Lux and Taylor Walls on the 10-day IL, RHPs Ryan Pepiot and Edwin Uceta on the 15-day IL and RHP Steven Wilson on the 60-day IL. Selected the contract of LHP Cam Booser and optioned him to Durham (IL).

**TEXAS RANGERS** — Selected the contract of OF Andrew McCutchen from Round Rock (PCL). Placed LHP Cody Bradford and INF Cody Freeman on the 15-day IL and 10-day IL, respectively, retroactive to March 22. Designated OF Dairon Blanco for assignment.

#### National League

**ARIZONA DIAMONDBACKS** — Selected the contracts of RHPs Jonathan Loaisiga and Joe Ross and INF Ildemaro Vargas from Reno (PCL). Optioned LHP Brandy Garcia to Reno. Designated RHP Grant Holman for assignment. Placed C Adrian Del Castillo, INF Tyler Locklear and OF Lourdes Gurriel Jr. on the 10-day IL, retroactive to March 22. Placed RHP Merrill Kelly on the 15-day IL, retroactive to March 24. Placed RHP Cristian Mena and LHP Blake Walston on the 60-day IL.

**ATLANTA BRAVES** — Placed RHPs Spen-

cer Strider, Daysbel Hernández and Hurston Waldrep and LHP Danny Young on the 15-day IL. Designated 2B Brett Wisely for assignment.

**CHICAGO CUBS** — Selected the contracts of INF Scott Kingery and OF Michael Conforto from Iowa (IL). Placed OF Seiya Suzuki on the 10-day IL and RHP Porter Hodge and LHP Jordan Wicks on the 15-day IL, retroactive to March 22. Placed LHP Justin Steele on the 60-day IL. Designated RHP Jack Neely for assignment.

**CINCINNATI REDS** — Recalled RHP Jose Franco from Louisville (IL). Placed LHPs Caleb Ferguson and Nick Lodolo on the 15-day IL, retroactive to March 22 and March 23.

**COLORADO ROCKIES** — Selected the contracts of 1B TJ Ruml and C Brett Sullivan from Albuquerque (PCL). Optioned RHP Seth Halvorsen to Albuquerque. Designated RHP Keegan Thompson for assignment.

**MILWAUKEE BREWERS** — Optioned RHP Easton McGee to Nashville (IL). Placed OF Steward Berroa on the 10-day IL and RHPs Quinn Priester and Craig Yoho and LHP Rob Zastryzny on the 15-day IL, retroactive to March 22. Placed OF Akil Baddoo on the 60-day IL.

**NEW YORK METS** — Placed LHP A.J. Minter on the 15-day IL, retroactive to March 22. Designated INF Vidal Bruján, LHP Bryan Hudson and C Ben Rortvedt for assignment.

**PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES** — Selected the contracts of OF Crawford and INF Christian Cairo and optioned Cairo to Lehigh Valley (IL). Designated C Garrett Stubbs for assignment. Placed RHPs Orion Kerkering, Max Lazar and Zack Wheeler on the 15-day IL, retroactive to March 22.

**ST. LOUIS CARDINALS** — Selected the contract of SS JJ Wetherholt from Memphis (IL). Placed RHP Hunter Dobbs on the 15-day IL, retroactive to March 2.

**SAN FRANCISCO GIANTS** — Selected OF Jared Oliva and RHP Caleb Kilian from Sacramento (PCL). Placed LHP Sam Hentges and RHP Joel Peguero on the 15-day IL, retroactive to March 22. Placed LHP Reiver Sanmartin on the 60-day IL. Designated OF Luis Matos for assignment. Sent RHP Michael Fulmer to Sacramento. Released C Eric Haase.

#### BASKETBALL National Basketball Association

**BOSTON CELTICS** — Signed C Charles Basssey to a 10-day contract.

**BROOKLYN NETS** — Signed G Malachi Smith to a 10-day contract.

**GOLDEN STATE WARRIORS** — Signed C Omer Yurtseven to a 10-day contract.

#### FOOTBALL National Football League

**CINCINNATI BENGALS** — Re-signed QB Joe Flacco to a one-year contract.

**DETROIT LIONS** — Signed G Ben Bartch to a contract.

**LOS ANGELES RAMS** — Re-signed RB Ronnie Rivers to a contract.

#### HOCKEY National Hockey League

**BUFFALO SABRES** — Reinstated D Connor Timmins from injured reserve.

**EDMONTON OILERS** — Sent F James Hamblin to Bakersfield (AHL).

**SEATTLE KRAKEN** — Recalled F Oscar Fisker Molgaard from Coachella Valley (AHL). Sent F Jani Nyman to Coachella Valley.

**TORONTO MAPLELEAFS** — Sent G Dennis Hildeby to Toronto (AHL).

#### SOCCER Major League Soccer

**COLORADO RAPIDS** — Acquired D Loïc Williams from Granada CF and signed him to a multi-year contract.

#### COLLEGE

**BUTLER** — Hired Ronald Nored as men's basketball coach.

**NORTH CAROLINA** — Fired men's basketball coach Hubert Davis.

## PRO SOCCER

### NWSL

	W	L	T	Pts	GF	GA
Angel City	2	0	0	6	7	1
Houston	2	0	0	6	4	0
San Diego	2	1	0	6	5	3
Seattle	2	1	0	6	5	3
Portland	2	1	0	6	4	3
Orlando	1	1	1	4	5	3
Denver FC	1	1	1	4	4	3
North Carolina	1	0	1	4	2	1
Gotham FC	1	1	1	4	1	2
Bay FC	1	1	0	3	3	4
Kansas City	1	2	0	3	3	6
Chicago	1	2	0	3	2	8
Washington	0	1	2	2	3	4
Louisville	0	1	1	1	3	4
Utah Royals FC	0	2	1	1	3	5
Boston FC	0	2	0	0	3	4

**Note:** Three points for victory, one point for tie.

### Wednesday, March 25

Denver Summit FC 2, Gotham FC 0  
Utah Royals FC 1, Washington 1, tie  
Orlando 3, Chicago 0  
Seattle 3, Kansas City 0  
San Diego 3, Portland 1

### Friday, March 27

Houston at Angel City

### Saturday, March 28

Utah Royals FC at Boston Legacy FC  
Washington at Denver Summit FC  
Kansas City at Portland  
Louisville at Seattle  
Bay FC at North Carolina  
Chicago at San Diego

### Sunday, March 29

Orlando at Gotham FC

### Friday, April 3

San Diego at Boston Legacy FC  
Angel City at Orlando  
Louisville at Houston  
Chicago at Utah Royals FC

### MLS

#### Eastern Conference

	W	L	T	Pts	GF	GA
Nashville	4	0	1	13	13	2
NYC FC	3	1	1	10	13	6
Inter Miami CF	3	1	1	10	9	8
Charlotte FC	2	1	2	8	10	6
Chicago	2	2	1	7	7	5
D.C. United	2	2	1	7	4	4
Toronto FC	2	2	1	7	6	8
New York	2	2	1	7	5	11
Cincinnati	2	3	0	6	7	11
Atlanta	1	3	1	4	5	8
New England	1	3	0	3	8	9
CF Montréal	1	4	0	3	7	14
Orlando City	1	4	0	3	5	17
Columbus	0	3	2	2	5	8
Philadelphia	0	5	0	0	3	9

#### Western Conference

	W	L	T	Pts	GF	GA
LAFC	4	0	1	13	8	0
Vancouver	4	1	0	12	14	2
San Jose	4	1	0	12	7	1
San Diego FC	3	0	2	11	13	5
Seattle	3	1	1	10	5	2
Real Salt Lake	3	1	1	10	9	7
Colorado	3	2	0	9	11	7
FC Dallas	2	1	2	8	10	9
Houston	2	2	0	6	8	9
LA Galaxy	1	2	2	5	7	8
Austin FC	1	2	2	5	5	7
Minn. United	1	2	2	5	4	11
St. Louis City	1	3	1	4	4	7
Portland	1	3	1	4	7	12
Sporting KC	1	3	1	4	5	11

**Note:** Three points for victory, one point for tie.

### Saturday, April 4

Colorado at Toronto FC  
CF Montréal at New England  
Sporting Kansas City at Real Salt Lake  
Columbus at Atlanta  
Philadelphia at Charlotte FC  
FC Dallas at D.C. United  
Austin FC at Miami  
St. Louis City at New York City FC  
Cincinnati at New York  
Nashville at Chicago  
Seattle at Houston  
Orlando City at Los Angeles FC  
Minnesota at LA Galaxy  
San Diego FC at San Jose  
Portland at Vancouver



FRANK GUNN, THE CANADIAN PRESS/AP

Detroit Pistons guard Cade Cunningham celebrates a slam dunk during the second half in Toronto on March 15. The 65-game threshold rule may affect his All-NBA selection moving forward.

# Silver: League will fix tanking before next season starts

By TIM REYNOLDS

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Tanking is going to be addressed. The 65-game rule might remain.

NBA Commissioner Adam Silver insisted Wednesday that the league will change its draft process and address its tanking problem before the start of next season. And he pointed to the league's player participation policy — citing the effect it has had on load management — as proof of how the league can make effective fixes.

The league's board of governors discussed tanking — the issue of teams trying not to win in order to enhance their odds of landing the best possible draft pick — at its two-day meeting that ended Wednesday. No votes were taken and no fingers were pointed at any specific teams, Silver said.

Silver said the league has been working on the most recent tanking issues for months — and noted the NBA has addressed the problem countless times over the years, including with several changes to the draft and lottery process.

"I would say it seemed unanimous in the room that we needed to make a change, and we need to make a change for next season," Silver said at a news conference, wrapping up the two-day session with owners. "Exactly what that change is, we're continuing to work on. ... I think there's also unanimous agreement that we need to make this change in advance of the draft and free agency this year, so all the teams understand the rules of the road going into next year."

The next step, Silver said, will likely be a special board meeting in May to get something done. The league's general managers have discussed the matter multiple times, and numerous teams have

offered some sort of suggestion about how to fix the issue.

"I will say I really like where the league is right now. I'm sorry to have to talk about tanking because it takes away from the incredible competition we're seeing from roughly 20 teams in the league right now, going into a wide-open playoffs, so many different teams," Silver said. "It's really exciting basketball. ... Of course, the opposite of that is when there's a sense that both teams aren't out there trying to kill themselves to win a game. As I said, we have to fix that problem."

Silver also responded to the National Basketball Players Association's statement Tuesday calling for change to the 65-game rule for major individual awards.

The NBPA, through collective bargaining, agreed to that rule as part of the current agreement between the league and its players. It pointed to the case of Detroit star Cade Cunningham, who would almost certainly be an All-NBA selection this season but may fall short of qualifying because of the 65-game threshold.

"We always knew when there's a line you draw that somebody's going to fall on the other side of that line and it may feel unfair in that particular instance," Silver said. "Let's see what happens at the end of this year. By the way, Cade Cunningham, he's an incredible player. I'm sorry that he's injured and can't wait to see him back on the floor."

"But having said that, we also have to remember that to the extent that one player is no longer eligible, some other player will then be All-NBA and will slot into that spot. I'm not ready to stand here saying, I don't think it's working. I think it is working."

## TENNIS

### Miami Open

Wednesday

Purse: \$9,415,725

Surface: Hardcourt outdoor

Seeding in parentheses

#### Men's Singles Quarterfinals

Jiri Lehecka (21), Czechia, def. Martin Landaluce, Spain, 7-6 (1), 7-5  
Arthur Fils (28), France, def. Tommy Paul (22), United States, 6-7 (3), 7-6 (4), 7-6 (6)

#### Women's Singles Quarterfinals

Elena Rybakina (3), Kazakhstan, def. Jessica Pegula (5), United States, 2-6, 6-3, 6-4  
Aryna Sabalenka (1), Belarus, def. Hailey Baptiste, United States, 6-4, 6-4

#### Men's Doubles Round of 16

Edouard Roger-Vasselin, France, and Hugo Nys (8), Monaco, def. Kevin Kraewitz, Germany, and Neil Oberleitner, Austria, 6-2, 6-4

Mate Pavic, Croatia, and Marcelo Arevalo (5), El Salvador, def. Fabien Reboul and Sadio Doumbia, France, 6-4, 6-4

Nikola Mektic, Croatia, and Austin Krajicek, United States, def. Rafael Matos and Orlando Luz, Brazil, 7-5, 6-4

John-Patrick Smith, Australia, and Sander Arends, Netherlands, def. Lloyd Glasspool and Julian Cash (2), Britain, 6-7 (3), 6-2, 10-4

#### Men's Doubles Quarterfinals

Simone Bolelli and Andrea Vavassori (7), Italy, def. Christian Harrison, United States, and Neal Skupski (3), Britain, 7-5, 5-7, 10-6

#### Women's Doubles Quarterfinals

Sara Errani and Jasmine Paolini (1), Italy, def. Asia Muhammad, United States, and Erin Routliffe (6), New Zealand, 6-3, 6-1

Zhang Shuai, China, and Elise Mertens (4), Belgium, def. Jessica Pegula, United States, and Storm Hunter, Australia, 2-6, 6-3, 14-12

#### AP SPOTLIGHT

### March 27

**1939** — Oregon beats Ohio State 46-33 in the NCAA's first national basketball tournament.

**1960** — The Boston Celtics score a then NBA Finals record 76 points in the first half a 140-122 win over the St. Louis Hawks. Tom Heinsohn (24), Bill Sharman (23), Frank Ramsey (22) and Bob Cousy (20)

each score 20-or-more points to win the series opener.

**1971** — UCLA beats Villanova 68-62 for its fifth NCAA basketball title.

**1983** — Larry Holmes wins a unanimous 12-round decision over Lucien Rodriguez to retain his world heavyweight title in his hometown of Scranton, Pa.

**2011** — Jamie Skeen scores 26 points as

No. 11 Virginia Commonwealth delivers the biggest upset of the NCAA tournament, a 71-61 win over No. 1 seed Kansas in the Southwest Regional final.

**2014** — The 76ers tie the NBA record for futility with their 26th straight loss, falling 120-98 to the Houston Rockets. Philadelphia matches the 2010-11 Cleveland Cavaliers for the NBA's worst skid.

## NBA

# Wembanyama aims for MVP award

BY TIM REYNOLDS

Associated Press

MIAMI — Victor Wembanyama is making it clear: He wants to win the NBA's MVP award this season.

The San Antonio star — moments after his team officially clinched its first Southwest Division title in nine seasons — detailed some elements of his MVP case on Monday night after the red-hot Spurs beat the Miami Heat 136-111 for their 22nd win in their last 24 games.

"I have thought about it," Wembanyama said. "I think right now there is a debate. There should be, even though I think I should lead the race. I'm trying to make sure that at the end of the season, there's no debate."

Wembanyama backed up his stance with 19 points, 15 rebounds and seven blocks as San Antonio built an early lead and coasted to a 123-98 victory over the Memphis Grizzlies on Wednesday night.

With their seventh straight victory, the Spurs moved within two games of Oklahoma City for the top spot in the Western Conference as the Boston Celtics stopped the Thunder's 12-game winning streak with a 119-109 victory.

Wembanyama is averaging 24.2 points, 11.2 rebounds, 3.0 assists and 3.1 blocked shots per game. Only six players have finished a season with such numbers — Kareem Abdul-Jabbar did it five times, Hakeem Olajuwon did it twice, while Shaquille O'Neal, Patrick Ewing and David Robinson all did it once. The sixth player on that list? That would be Wembanyama, who did all that last season as well, albeit in only 46 games.

The reigning MVP, Shai Gilgeous-Alexander of OKC, is the



BRANDON DILL/AP

**San Antonio forward Victor Wembanyama, left, handles the ball against Grizzlies guard Javon Small in the first half Wednesday in Memphis, Tenn. The Spurs beat the Grizzlies 123-98.**

overwhelming favorite to win the trophy again according to BetMGM Sportsbook. Next on the BetMGM list: the Los Angeles Lakers' Luka Doncic.

Wembanyama is next, with the third-best odds as of Monday, one spot ahead of Denver's Nikola Jokic. Everyone else would be considered a significant long shot for the award at this point, though the NBA's 65-game rule for major award eligibility — like MVP — could become a factor. Jokic can miss only one more game, for example, before he falls off the ballot and Wembanyama can miss no more than three more contests.

Wembanyama, who won rookie of the year two years ago and was

generally considered a lock for defensive player of the year last season until he had to be shut down while dealing with deep vein thrombosis, has a three-part campaign pitch.

"My first one would be that defense is 50% of the game and that it is undervalued so far in the MVP race. I believe I'm the most impactful player defensively in the league," Wembanyama said. "Second argument would be that we almost swept OKC in the season, and we dominated them three times with their real team. ... The third argument would be that offense impact is not just points."

It should not surprise anyone that San Antonio also believes

Wembanyama is more than just an MVP contender.

"I think he's close," Spurs coach Mitch Johnson said. "All those guys you named are deserving; a couple of them already have that award. And I'm very biased. I get to see one of those guys every single night. I get to see him on the practice court. I get to see what he does in the morning. I get to see what does right now after the game. So I understand my opinion and outlook and perspective is very different than almost everyone else."

"But he affects as much of the game in every single way — on the court, on both ends, with and without the ball, what the other team tries to do, plan for, scheme, adjust to, on both sides of the basketball, in my very ignorant opinion, as much as any other player I've ever seen. Take that for whatever it's worth."

San Antonio is 55-18 going into its Saturday matchup with the Milwaukee Bucks. It will almost certainly be the No. 1 or No. 2 seed in the Western Conference. It'll have home court in Round 1 of the playoffs, Round 2 if it gets there and almost certainly would have it in the NBA Finals if it gets that far. There are a lot of reasons for that, but the biggest reason — literally, given that Wembanyama is 7-foot-4 — is a 22-year-old face of the franchise who has wowed the Spurs every day with his maturity and work ethic.

The MVPs are almost certainly coming at some point. Wembanyama doesn't want to keep waiting.

"Right now, it is still reasonable that there is a debate," Wembanyama said. "But as I said, my goal is to make sure there's no debate anymore at the end of the season."

## 76ers' George scores 28 after drug suspension ends

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Paul George returned to the 76ers' lineup following a 25-game suspension for a failed drug test and scored 28 points Wednesday night in Philadelphia's 157-137 win over Chicago.

Playing for the first time since Jan. 29 due to a violation of the NBA's drug policy, he missed 8 of 10 field goals in the opening half and had five points, but scored 23 points in the second half.

"I felt pretty explosive, pretty strong," George said. "I felt good."

George was cheered throughout, especially after converting on three consecutive possessions early in the fourth quarter.

"That was bringing back classic moments in my scoring bag, where I can be explosive as a scorer and put points up quick," he said. "That's just me in the flow."



MATT SLOCUM/AP

**The 76ers' Paul George celebrates a three-point shot during the second half against the Chicago Bulls on Wednesday in Philadelphia.**

George finished 11 of 22 from the field and 6 of 13 from long range.

"I think he just needed to get the feel back a little bit," Sixers coach Nick Nurse said.

Philadelphia went 13-12 in his

absence and began the day at 39-33 and in seventh place in the Eastern Conference.

George was suspended in late January for violating the terms of the NBA's anti-drug program.

## Scoreboard

### Eastern Conference

	W	L	Pct	GB
x-Detroit	52	20	.722	—
Boston	48	24	.667	4
New York	48	25	.658	4½
Cleveland	45	28	.616	7½
Atlanta	41	32	.562	11½
Toronto	40	32	.556	12
Philadelphia	40	33	.548	12½
Miami	39	34	.534	13½
Charlotte	38	34	.528	14
Orlando	38	34	.528	14
Milwaukee	29	43	.403	23
Chicago	29	43	.403	23
Washington	17	55	.236	35
Brooklyn	17	56	.233	35½
Indiana	16	57	.219	36½

### Western Conference

	W	L	Pct	GB
Oklahoma City	57	16	.781	—
San Antonio	55	18	.753	2
L.A. Lakers	47	26	.644	10
Denver	46	28	.622	11½
Minnesota	45	28	.616	12
Houston	43	29	.597	13½
Phoenix	40	33	.548	17
L.A. Clippers	37	36	.507	20
Portland	37	37	.500	20½
Golden State	35	38	.479	22
New Orleans	25	48	.342	32
Memphis	24	48	.333	32½
Dallas	23	50	.315	34
Utah	21	52	.288	36
Sacramento	19	54	.260	38

x-clinched playoff spot

### Tuesday's games

Charlotte 134, Sacramento 90  
New York 121, New Orleans 116  
Cleveland 136, Orlando 131  
Denver 125, Phoenix 123

### Wednesday's games

Philadelphia 157, Chicago 137  
L.A. Lakers 137, Indiana 130  
Atlanta 130, Detroit 129, OT  
Miami 120, Cleveland 103  
Boston 119, Oklahoma City 109  
San Antonio 123, Memphis 98  
Washington 133, Utah 110  
Minnesota 110, Houston 108, OT  
Portland 130, Milwaukee 99  
Denver 142, Dallas 135  
Golden State 109, Brooklyn 106  
L.A. Clippers 119, Toronto 94

### Thursday's games

New Orleans at Detroit  
New York at Charlotte  
Sacramento at Orlando

### Friday's games

L.A. Clippers at Indiana  
Atlanta at Boston  
Miami at Cleveland  
Chicago at Oklahoma City  
Houston at Memphis  
New Orleans at Toronto  
Utah at Denver  
Dallas at Portland  
Washington at Golden State  
Brooklyn at L.A. Lakers

### Saturday's games

San Antonio at Milwaukee  
Detroit at Minnesota  
Philadelphia at Charlotte  
Sacramento at Atlanta  
Chicago at Memphis  
Utah at Phoenix

### Sunday's games

L.A. Clippers at Milwaukee  
Miami at Indiana  
Sacramento at Brooklyn  
Washington at Portland  
Orlando at Toronto  
Boston at Charlotte  
Houston at New Orleans  
New York at Oklahoma City  
Golden State at Denver

### Scoring leaders

#### Through Wednesday

	G	FG	FT	PTS	AVG
Doncic, LAL	61	662	482	2048	33.6
Gil.-Alex., OKC	61	665	487	1922	31.5
Edwards, MIN	58	585	340	1710	29.5
Maxey, PHI	61	616	333	1767	29.0
Brown, BOS	65	671	389	1856	28.6
Mitchell, CLE	64	628	338	1808	28.3
Leonard, LAC	57	559	345	1614	28.3
Jokic, DEN	58	576	359	1614	27.8
Brunson, NY	67	622	330	1756	26.2
Durant, HOU	69	635	360	1793	26.0
Booker, PHO	57	476	395	1452	25.5
Murray, DEN	69	608	323	1756	25.4
Cunningham, DET	61	532	310	1497	24.5
Porter, BKN	52	444	195	1259	24.2
Wembanyama, SA	58	484	324	1404	24.2

# NHL

## Scoreboard

Eastern Conference							
Atlantic Division							
GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA	
Buffalo	72	44	20	8	96	254	211
Tampa Bay	70	44	21	5	93	257	195
Montreal	70	39	21	10	88	249	230
Boston	72	40	24	8	88	240	224
Ottawa	71	38	24	9	85	239	216
Detroit	71	38	25	8	84	207	211
Toronto	73	31	29	13	75	229	255
Florida	70	35	32	3	73	211	233
Metropolitan Division							
GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA	
Carolina	71	45	20	6	96	252	211
Columbus	71	38	22	11	87	231	217
Pittsburgh	71	35	20	16	86	243	225
N.Y. Islanders	72	40	27	5	85	209	206
Philadelphia	70	34	24	12	80	204	214
Washington	72	35	28	9	79	220	211
New Jersey	70	36	32	2	74	193	213
N.Y. Rangers	72	28	35	9	65	202	230
Western Conference							
Central Division							
GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA	
x-Colorado	70	47	13	10	104	263	177
x-Dallas	71	43	17	11	97	244	196
Minnesota	72	40	20	12	92	236	208
Utah	72	37	29	6	80	225	203
Nashville	71	34	28	9	77	215	235
Winnipeg	71	30	29	12	72	203	220
St. Louis	70	29	30	11	69	184	225
Chicago	71	27	31	13	67	187	228
Pacific Division							
GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA	
Anaheim	71	40	27	4	84	240	245
Edmonton	72	35	28	9	79	250	246
Vegas	72	32	26	14	78	225	225
Los Angeles	71	28	25	18	74	189	216
Seattle	70	31	29	10	72	200	218
San Jose	69	32	31	6	70	211	249
Calgary	71	30	34	7	67	180	219
Vancouver	70	21	41	8	50	182	262

**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.  
 x-clinched playoff spot  
 y-clinched division  
 z-clinched conference

**Tuesday's games**  
 Chicago 4, N.Y. Islanders 3  
 Columbus 3, Philadelphia 2  
 Ottawa 3, Detroit 2  
 Montreal 5, Carolina 2  
 Florida 5, Seattle 4, SO  
 Toronto 4, Boston 2  
 Colorado 6, Pittsburgh 2  
 Tampa Bay 6, Minnesota 3  
 Winnipeg 4, Vegas 1  
 New Jersey 6, Dallas 4  
 Nashville 6, San Jose 3  
 St. Louis 3, Washington 0  
 Calgary 3, Los Angeles 2, SO  
 Edmonton 5, Utah 2  
 Anaheim 5, Vancouver 3

**Wednesday's games**  
 Toronto 4, N.Y. Rangers 3  
 Boston 4, Buffalo 3, OT

**Thursday's games**  
 Chicago at Philadelphia  
 Columbus at Montreal  
 Dallas at N.Y. Islanders  
 Minnesota at Florida  
 Pittsburgh at Ottawa  
 Seattle at Tampa Bay  
 Colorado at Winnipeg  
 New Jersey at Nashville  
 San Jose at St. Louis  
 Anaheim at Calgary  
 Washington at Utah  
 Edmonton at Vegas  
 Los Angeles at Vancouver

**Friday's games**  
 Chicago at N.Y. Rangers  
 Detroit at Buffalo

**Saturday's games**  
 Florida at N.Y. Islanders  
 Ottawa at Tampa Bay  
 Anaheim at Edmonton  
 Dallas at Pittsburgh  
 Minnesota at Boston  
 New Jersey at Carolina  
 San Jose at Columbus  
 Seattle at Buffalo  
 Montreal at Nashville  
 Toronto at St. Louis  
 Winnipeg at Colorado  
 Philadelphia at Detroit  
 Utah at Los Angeles  
 Vancouver at Calgary  
 Washington at Vegas

**Sunday's games**  
 Florida at N.Y. Rangers  
 Boston at Columbus  
 Montreal at Carolina  
 Nashville at Tampa Bay  
 Chicago at New Jersey  
 Dallas at Philadelphia

# East teams tussle for playoff spots

BY STEPHEN WHYNO  
*Associated Press*

NEW YORK — Connor McDavid called the Pacific Division path to the playoffs “a bit of a pillow fight right now.”

The same race down the stretch in the NHL’s Eastern Conference is anything but.

No team has clinched a berth, and only three — Carolina, Tampa Bay and Buffalo — are strong bets to get in. That means five spots up for grabs among seven contenders who just keep winning to up the ante on each other.

Montreal, Columbus, Pittsburgh, Boston, Ottawa, Detroit and the New York Islanders have combined to go 54-29-17 since play resumed following the Olympic break, a points percentage of .617. Two of them are guaranteed to miss the playoffs and could tie or break the record for the most standings points of any team that failed to qualify.

“It just heightens the urgency mentally,” Senators forward Lars Eller said.

“There’s no cushion, and every game it’s a fight for your life just staying in the race.”

Eller and his teammates have gone 10-2-2 out of the break to take over the conference’s second and final wild-card position with 85 points and 11 games remaining. The Islanders also at 85 points have slipped out of the top eight in the East after losing three of four but still have more than Anaheim, atop the Pacific with 84, with Edmonton at 79 and Vegas at 78 points comfortably in the field.

## Beastly East

There’s nothing comfortable about the stretch run in the East, where even a brief slide can make a big difference.

“It’s up to us to get the job done — it’s up to us to get the wins ourselves,” Islanders center Bo Horvat said.

“You’re always watching what other teams are doing, but at the same time, we can’t rely on other teams losing in order for you to get in. You want to win to get in.”

The traditional line to get in has for a long time been 94 points. Since 16 teams began qualifying in 1979-80, just four teams have reached 96 and missed: the Bruins in 2014-15, the Panthers in 2017-18, the Canadiens in 2018-19 and the Flames last season. Those left out this time could pass that mark.

New York’s Jean-Gabriel Pageau noticed the standings tightening up in the fall, when it was obvious this wasn’t a normal pace.

“After 15, 20 games, you could see that it was tight and it stayed tight the whole way,” Pageau said. “I think it kept everyone, every team on their toes and I thought it’s brought some good hockey from every team.”



KARL B DEBLAKER/AP

Pittsburgh’s Sidney Crosby, left, battles for control of the puck with Carolina Hurricanes’ Sebastian Aho and Jacob Slavin in Raleigh, N.C., on March 18. Pittsburgh is third in the Metropolitan Division points but are among the seven teams in the Eastern Conference with between 84 and 88 points.



JEFFREY T. BARNES/AP

Boston Bruins defenseman Hampus Lindholm (27) and Buffalo Sabres center Noah Ostlund (86) battle for position during the first period on Wednesday in Buffalo, N.Y. Buffalo, at 96 points, is on the verge of ending the league’s longest active playoff drought.

## Scoreboard watching

A veteran of more than 1,300 regular-season NHL games and 101 more over 10 playoff runs, Ottawa’s Claude Giroux acknowledges he does a lot of scoreboard watching this time of year.

“It’s hard not to,” Giroux said. “I mean, I do. I’m not going to lie. I feel like every team is winning all the time. But at the end of the day it, doesn’t matter.”

His coach, Travis Green, does the same, even as he preaches to players the sports cliché that they can only control what they can control.

“We all watch,” Green said. “We do it every night. It’s an exciting time of the season right now. Some nights I put it on, and if good things are happening, I keep it on. And if not, I change the channel.”

Islanders coach Patrick Roy, a Hall of Fame goaltender now in his second job running an NHL bench, is trying to keep his team’s focus on the road ahead. He’s fully aware of the pitfalls in it, from judging opponents to projecting where everyone will end up.

“It’s a huge mistake (if you) try to analyze,” Roy said.

“I think we all get guilty at some point to look at the schedule: ‘Oh,

they have a tough schedule. Oh, they have this.’ I feel like there’s no tough and there’s no easy schedule. You have to play your games, and you have to worry about what you have to do, not worry about who’s playing next, who does what. Just worry about ourselves.”

## Unlikely runs

This season has shown the improbable is possible.

The Sabres are on the verge of ending the league’s longest active playoff drought despite losing 18 of their first 28 games. They moved from last in the conference on Dec. 13, a couple of days before general manager Kevyn Adams was fired and replaced by Jarmo Kekalainen, to first in the Atlantic Division on March 8.

The Blue Jackets were last in the East on Jan. 12 when they changed coaches from Dean Evason to Rick Bowness and have since gone 19-3-4 to climb to second in the Metropolitan Division. The Senators were languishing near the basement in mid-January before going 15-3-2 since beginning their run on Jan. 25 to get back into the picture.

It’s not over yet, and it could come down to the final games on April 14 and 15. The West wraps on April 16, and the playoffs begin on April 18.

“It’s just everybody being on the same page and everybody working hard for that goal at the end,” Ottawa’s Tim Stützle said. “It’s been fun. It’s been a lot of fun just grinding back with this group. It’s a pleasure to be able to play in this position.”

## MLB



ERIC CHRISTIAN SMITH/AP

After being ejected from the game, Astros manager Joe Espada argues with third base umpire Mike Muchlinski during the sixth inning against the Seattle Mariners on Sept. 20 in Houston.

## Robot umpires unlikely to keep managers from arguing, getting ejected

BY RONALD BLUM  
Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Kevin Cash isn't worried that manager ejections will become a relic of baseball's past just because robot umpires have arrived to settle some debates.

"You only get two challenges, right? That can come up in the first inning," the Rays manager said.

Manager tantrums at umpires have long delighted fans: the Yankees' Billy Martin kicking and throwing dirt on Dale Scott in 1988, the Reds' Lou Piniella heaving first base into right field in anger at Dutch Rennert in 1990 and the Orioles' Earl Weaver going face to face with Bill Haller in 1980, each profanely calling the other a liar.

But Major League Baseball has given managers less to gripe about in the past two decades. Video reviews began for home run calls in August 2008 and were widely expanded to many decisions for the 2014 season. The Automated Ball-Strike System starts this year to allow challenges to human strike zone calls, dubbed robot umpires.

"Manager ejections have been down for a while now because of the replay system," said Hall of Famer Jim Leyland, a three-time Manager of the Year tossed 73 times over 22 seasons. "I really like the ABS. I think it's going to be great for the game."

Last year, 61.5% of ejections among players, managers and coaches (99 of 161) were related to ball/strike calls, according to MLB, up slightly from 60.3% (114 of 189) in 2024. The figure included what MLB counted as inappropriate comments and conduct, and throwing equipment in protest.

"I'm in favor of anything that allows our technology to play in this game," Cash said. "We have so

much of it. Why not use it?"

Each team gets two challenges per game, and a club keeps its challenge if successful. A team out of challenges gets an additional one in each extra inning.

"You're going to take out the argument of balls and strikes initially," Twins manager Derek Shelton said. "I think the challenge is going to be after the challenges go away, how managers are and what they do? But I do think that there is going to be probably less general complaining about balls and strikes in the early going."

Aaron Boone of the Yankees has led or tied for the most ejections in four straight seasons, and his nine in 2022 were the most since the Braves' Bobby Cox was tossed 10 times in 2007.

Cox was thrown out a record 162 times, followed by John McGraw (121), Leo Durocher (100), Weaver (96), Tony La Russa (93) and Bruce Bochy (89).

Cincinnati's Terry Francona, starting his 25th season in a big league dugout, leads active managers with 54. Boone, beginning his ninth season, is second with 46.

Boone is less concerned over whether his dugout dissents will dwindle and more focused on keeping his players locked in if a challenge goes against them. If an umpire calls strike three to strand the bases loaded and the pitcher pumps a fist and bounds off the mound, how will the pitcher quickly regain composure if ABS reverses the call and forces a 3-2 offering?

"It's a whole new thing that pitchers have never dealt with. That's an emotional thing you've got to deal with," Boone said. "That's something we've already addressed, same with the hitters to a lesser degree: that reset. How do you clear the mechanism?"

# ABS will create new winners, losers at plate and on mound

BY RONALD BLUM  
Associated Press

DUNEDIN, Fla. — Kevin Gausman got 709 called strikes over the past decade on pitches out of the strike zone, tied for the third-highest total in the major leagues.

"I would have thought maybe I was top 20 maybe but top five is kind of kind of crazy," the Toronto Blue Jays right-hander said. "I guess the book is kind of still out. We'll see what happens and how we have to adjust."

There will be winners and losers under the Automated Ball-Strike System, which made its regular-season debut Wednesday night when the New York Yankees faced the Giants in San Francisco. Using Hawk-Eye technology, 12 cameras measure whether a pitch crosses the strike zone with accuracy of about one-sixth of an inch.

Kyle Hendricks led the majors with 777 called strikes over the past decade on pitches that should have been balls, according to MLB Statcast. He was followed by Aaron Nola (747), Gausman and Zach Davies (709 each), Kyle Gibson (697), Patrick Corbin (694), Marcus Stroman (671), Zack Greinke (667), Martín Pérez (647) and Kyle Freeland (631).

"I guess that's a good thing because you make balls look like strikes," Nola said. "There's going to be some maybe good and bad to it, but I think the good parts and the big situations and big games, I that's going to help out a lot. We've seen over the years our side lose games on a bad call."

Conversely, Corbin topped the major leagues on balls that should have been called strikes with 470. He was followed by Chris Sale

(461), Nola (460), Carlos Rodón (450), Yu Darvish (442), Sonny Gray (439), José Berríos (438), Steven Matz (436), and Jon Gray and Justin Verlander (435 apiece).

"All umpires always had like — they give a little bit here, they're a little tight there. You know this as a hitter and a pitcher," said Verlander, a three-time Cy Young Award winner back with the Detroit Tigers for the start of his 21st big league season. "But it's all because of the way they set up and they see certain areas better than others. And now I think they're put in a situation where they have to call this like theoretical zone, instead of creating their own strike zone that they're probably much more consistent at."

Mookie Betts led batters on called strikes that should have been balls at 714.

"He knows the strike zone as well as anyone, and it does seem that he gets the short end of a lot of calls," Los Angeles Dodgers manager Dave Roberts said. "He's a guy I certainly would trust to challenge a call."

Betts was followed by Eugenio Suárez (684), José Ramírez (657), Paul Goldschmidt (656), Aaron Judge (653), Marcus Semien (631), Xander Bogaerts (625), Alex Bregman (603) and Christian Yelich (594).

"When we didn't have a challenge system, you just try to do the best you could and understand that there's stuff that's out of your control," Goldschmidt said. "Definitely the guys that are a little bit more patient are always going to have that. We just understand that's kind of the nature of it."

Giancarlo Stanton had 440 called strikes on pitches out of the strike zone and 351 balls on pitches that should have been strikes.

"The challenge, you could change the whole game right there," the Yankees designated hitter said. "If you overturn one call, it could grow 15, 20 more pitches on a pitcher."

Carlos Santana received the most balls that should have been called strikes with 636. He was followed by Mike Trout (612), Suárez (558), Ramírez (554), George Springer (539), Andrew McCutchen (513), Cody Bellinger (487), Freddie Freeman (471), and Ryan McMahon (466).

Statcast has been calculating based on the rule book strike zone at the front of home plate and using a batter's stance. Starting this year, it will compute with the ABS strike zone measured at the middle of the plate and based on a batter's height.

Teams tried to prepare players by using ABS for batting practice and having the scoreboard signal ball/strike decisions.

A 1-1 pitch can often swing a plate appearance. Nola saw ABS in use last August when he made three injury rehabilitation starts at Triple-A Lehigh Valley.

"We're just going to have to see what the umpires do," he said, "if they're really going to be that tight as they were down there."

Statcast showed 1.6% of pitches out of the zone were called strikes last year, down from 2.1% in 2024 and the most accurate since 4.2% when tracking started in 2008.

Only 2.1% of pitches in the zone were ruled balls, up slightly from 1.7% in 2024 but well below 4.3% in 2008.



JEFF ROBERSON/AP

The Automated Ball-Strike System will allow for batters and pitchers to call for an immediate review of a pitch on the edge of the strike zone. Teams will get two appeals per game but will retain their challenge if successful.

MLB

Scoreboard

American League				
East Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
New York	1	0	01.000	—
Toronto	0	0	0.000	½
Boston	0	0	0.000	½
Tampa Bay	0	0	0.000	½
Baltimore	0	0	0.000	½
Central Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Cleveland	0	0	0.000	—
Detroit	0	0	0.000	—
Kansas City	0	0	0.000	—
Minnesota	0	0	0.000	—
Chicago	0	0	0.000	—
West Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Seattle	0	0	0.000	—
Houston	0	0	0.000	—
Texas	0	0	0.000	—
Athletics	0	0	0.000	—
Los Angeles	0	0	0.000	—
National League				
East Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Philadelphia	0	0	0.000	—
New York	0	0	0.000	—
Miami	0	0	0.000	—
Atlanta	0	0	0.000	—
Washington	0	0	0.000	—
Central Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Milwaukee	0	0	0.000	—
Chicago	0	0	0.000	—
Cincinnati	0	0	0.000	—
St. Louis	0	0	0.000	—
Pittsburgh	0	0	0.000	—
West Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
Los Angeles	0	0	0.000	—
San Diego	0	0	0.000	—
San Francisco	0	0	0.000	—
Arizona	0	0	0.000	—
Colorado	0	1	0.000	½

**Wednesday's game**  
 N.Y. Yankees 7, San Francisco 0

**Thursday's games**  
 Pittsburgh (Skenes) at N.Y. Mets (Peralta)  
 Chicago White Sox (Smith) at Milwaukee (Misorowski)  
 Washington (Cavalli) at Chicago Cubs (Boyd)  
 Minnesota (Ryan) at Baltimore (Rogers)  
 Boston (Crochet) at Cincinnati (Abbott)  
 Detroit (Skubal) at San Diego (Pivetta)  
 L.A. Angels (Soriano) at Houston (Brown)  
 Texas (Eovaldi) at Philadelphia (Sánchez)  
 Tampa Bay (Rasmussen) at St. Louis (Liberatore)  
 Arizona (Gallen) at L.A. Dodgers (Yamamoto)  
 Cleveland (Bibee) at Seattle (Gilbert)

**Friday's games**  
 N.Y. Yankees (Schlitter) at San Francisco (Ray)  
 Athletics (Severino) at Toronto (Gausman)  
 Colorado (Freeland) at Miami (Alcantara)  
 Kansas City (Ragans) at Atlanta (Sale)  
 L.A. Angels (Kikuchi) at Houston (Burrows)  
 Detroit (Valdez) at San Diego (King)  
 Cleveland (Williams) at Seattle (Kirby)  
 Arizona (Nelson) at L.A. Dodgers (Sheehan)

**Saturday's games**  
 Tampa Bay at St. Louis  
 Washington at Chicago Cubs  
 Athletics at Blue Jays  
 Texas at Philadelphia  
 Minnesota at Baltimore  
 Boston at Cincinnati  
 Pittsburgh at N.Y. Mets  
 Colorado at Miami  
 L.A. Angels at Houston  
 Chicago White Sox at Milwaukee  
 Kansas City at Atlanta  
 N.Y. Yankees at San Francisco  
 Detroit at San Diego  
 Arizona at L.A. Dodgers  
 Cleveland at Seattle

**Sunday's games**  
 Texas at Philadelphia  
 Minnesota at Baltimore  
 Kansas City at Atlanta  
 Athletics at Toronto  
 Boston at Cincinnati  
 Pittsburgh at N.Y. Mets  
 Colorado at Miami  
 L.A. Angels at Houston  
 Chicago White Sox at Milwaukee  
 Tampa Bay at St. Louis  
 Washington at Chicago Cubs  
 Cleveland at Seattle

# Fried, Yankees shut out Giants

BY JANIE MCCAULEY  
 Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Aaron Judge went hitless on opening day for the first time and struck out four times for the first time since September 2024, but the New York Yankees still produced plenty of offense and beat San Francisco 7-0 Wednesday night in the debut of Giants manager Tony Vitello as the major league season began.

José Caballero drove in the go-ahead run with an RBI single in a five-run second and also lost the first challenge taken to the newly implemented Automated Ball-Strike System, unsuccessfully appealing a strike by Logan Webb in the fourth.

Max Fried (1-0) allowed two hits in 6⅓ innings to become just the fifth New York pitcher since 1969 with at least 6⅓ shutout innings on opening day, joining Catfish Hunter (1977), Ron Guidry (1980), Rick Rhoden (1988) and David Cone (1996). The Yankees won an opener with a shutout on the road for the first time since 1967.

Webb (0-1) started the fourth inning with a 90.7 mph sinker on the upper, inner corner that was called a strike by Bill Miller, a major league umpire since 1997. Caballero tapped his helmet, and the 12 Hawk-Eye cameras of the ABS upheld Miller's decision in a graphic shown on the Oracle Park scoreboard.



JEFF CHIU/AP

Yankees pitcher Max Fried throws against the Giants during the sixth inning in San Francisco on Wednesday. Fried threw 6⅓ shutout innings as New York won the season opener 7-0.

Caballero singled in the second and Ryan McMahon followed with a two-run single before Austin Wells' single prompted a mound visit for Webb. Trent Grisham hit a two-run triple and was checked by medical staff after a hard slide into third.

Judge was booed before the game and during each at-bat as he

began his 11th big league season. The California native had been pursued by San Francisco during free agency in 2022, but he ultimately chose New York's \$360 million, nine-year contract offer.

Webb, a 15-game winner last season making his fifth opening day start, was tagged for six earned runs — seven in all — and

nine hits over five innings.

The 47-year-old Vitello became the first MLB manager to jump from college to the major leagues after coaching the University of Tennessee.

The teams resume the series Friday afternoon, with RHP Cam Schlichter starting for the Yankees opposite Giants lefty Robbie Ray.

## Top rookies highlighted by power pitching, speed

BY JAY COHEN  
 Associated Press

CHICAGO — Nick Kurtz and Drake Baldwin made a smooth transition to the major leagues last season. Kurtz was rewarded with the AL Rookie of the Year award, and Baldwin took home the NL honor.

Here is a closer look at a group of rookies looking to have a similar impact this year:

**Blue Jays pitcher Trey Yesavage**

Yesavage, a 6-foot-4 right-hander with an unusual arm slot, helped Toronto reach the World Series in 2025. He went 3-1 with a 3.58 ERA in six postseason appearances, striking out 39 and walking 11 in 27⅓ innings. Yesavage began last season at Class A Dunedin and posted a 5-1 record with a 3.12 ERA over four minor league stops before making his Blue Jays debut Sept. 15. He will open the season on the injured list because of impingement of his throwing shoulder.



Yesavage

**Cardinals infielder JJ Wetherholt**

St. Louis is working on a rare rebuild for the franchise, and Wetherholt's development is worth watching in terms of how long it might last. The 23-year-old infielder played college ball for West Virginia before he was selected by the Cardinals with the No. 7 pick in the 2024 amateur draft. He batted .306 with 17 homers, 59 RBIs and 23 steals over two minor league stops last year, finishing the season with Triple-A Memphis.

**Mets pitcher Nolan McLean**

McLean was terrific in his first stint with New York last year, going 5-1 with a 2.06 ERA in eight

starts. The 6-foot-2 right-hander, a third-round pick in the 2023 amateur draft out of Oklahoma State University, also struck out 57 in 48 innings, falling just two innings shy of an official rookie season. He is expected to be a key member of the Mets' rotation this season as they try to rebound from a tough finish last year.

**Tigers infielder Kevin McGonigle**

The 21-year-old McGonigle was taken by Detroit with the No. 37 pick in the 2023 amateur draft. The shortstop batted .305 with 19 homers, 80 RBIs and 10 steals in 88 games over three minor league stops last year. His performance earned him a spot on the opening day roster for a Tigers team looking to contend for the AL Central title.

**Orioles catcher Samuel Basallo**

Baltimore has quite the catching tandem with Adley Rutschman and Basallo, who made his major league debut in August. Basallo batted just .165 with four homers in 31 games with the Orioles, but he hit .270 with 23 homers and 67 RBIs in 76 games with Triple-A Norfolk. Rutschman remains the No. 1 catcher, but the 21-year-old Basallo will also see time at first base and designated hitter.

**Reds infielder Sal Stewart**

Stewart, 22, made his major league debut Sept. 1 after hitting .315 with 10 homers and 36 RBIs in 38 games with Triple-A Louisville. The sweet-swinging Miami native batted .255 with five homers and eight RBIs in 18 games with Cincinnati. He can play second and third base, but first base and DH figure to be his primary

spots this year with the Reds.

**Guardians outfielder Chase DeLauter**

DeLauter has been one of Cleveland's top prospects since he was the 16th overall pick in the 2022 amateur draft. But he was slowed by injuries the past two seasons, including core muscle and right wrist surgeries last year. He made his major league debut in Game 2 of the Guardians' AL Wild Card Series against Detroit on Oct. 1.

**Astros pitcher Tatsuya Imai**

The Japanese right-hander agreed to a \$54 million, three-year contract with Houston in January. Imai moves into the Astros' rotation after going 10-5 with a 1.92 ERA last season for the Pacific League's Seibu Lions, striking out 178 in 163⅓ innings. The three-time All-Star in Japan was 58-45 with a 3.15 ERA in eight seasons with Seibu.

**Phillies outfielder Justin Crawford**

Crawford, 22, takes over in center field for Philadelphia in his first big league opportunity. The speedy Crawford, a first-round pick in the 2022 amateur draft, hit .334 with seven homers and 47 RBIs in 112 games for Triple-A Lehigh Valley last year. He also had 46 steals and a .411 on-base percentage.

**White Sox infielder Munetaka Murakami**

The rebuilding project on Chicago's South Side got an unexpected boost when Murakami signed a \$34 million, two-year contract with the White Sox in December. The 26-year-old slugger was the MVP of Japan's Central League in 2021 and '22. He batted .273 with 22 homers and 47 RBIs last season, when he was limited to 56 games because of an oblique injury.

## NCAA WOMEN'S TOURNAMENT

# Battle, Braun rewarded for sticking with Gophers

By DAVE CAMPBELL  
Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — When Amaya Battle's last-second jump shot swished through the net to give Minnesota the lead in the second round of the NCAA Tournament, the largest crowd for the Gophers at Williams Arena in more than two years let out maybe the loudest roar yet.

The atmosphere was raucous all afternoon, as Mara Braun fueled further with her game-tying 3-pointer about a minute earlier against Mississippi. Their decision to stay home — and maintain that commitment — never felt better than on Sunday when they advanced to the Sweet 16.

"It just goes to show if you really want to do something, find people who want to do it with you and stick to it," Battle said. "Shoutout to my teammates, because this is the best year of basketball I have ever played."

Minnesota (24-8), the No. 4 seed in the region, will play No. 1 seed UCLA (33-1) in Sacramento, California, on Friday night. The Bruins have won 27 straight games, including a 76-58 victory over the Gophers on Jan. 14.

Battle and Braun were the headliners among four recruits then-coach Lindsay Whalen and her staff signed for the 2022-23 season, an all-Minnesota class that was the highest-ranked in program history, pegged the 10th-best nationally by ESPN. Their path to the NCAA regional semifinals, the first such appearance for the program in 21 years, has been anything but smooth.

After the Gophers went 11-19 in that first season for Battle, Braun, Mallory Heyer and Nia Holloway, Whalen was fired. Her successor, Dawn Plitzuweit, persuaded them all to stay. Another Minnesota native, Sophie Hart, transferred from N.C. State to join them.

The Gophers improved under Plitzuweit, but getting over the hump proved to be a challenge in the Big Ten. Braun missed a big chunk of her sophomore year to a foot injury that popped up again last season, limiting her to five games while allowing her to take a medical redshirt year. Heyer opted to transfer to Oregon prior to this season. Holloway, whose freshman year was spent rehabilitating from a torn ACL, was in the rotation in 2023-24 but has not had a meaningful on-court role since.

Earlier this season, the Gophers blew a nine-point lead with less than a minute left in double overtime against Maryland and lost. Braun was struggling to find her shot.

But the group found its stride with a nine-game winning streak highlighted by a win at Iowa and against Ohio State. Braun found her stride down the stretch of the regular season and carried that into the NCAA Tournament, scoring 33 points on 7-for-10 shooting from 3-point range with nine rebounds and three steals in two games.

Whalen, who's now an assistant with the WNBA's Minnesota Lynx, was in attendance on Sunday for the atmosphere that rivaled those when she played for the Gophers and led them to their only Final Four appearance in 2004. Whalen has continued to stay connected to those players she once recruited and is also friendly with Plitzuweit.

"We have so much respect for her. She's still rooting us on every single day. We both get texts from her all the time," Braun said as she sat next to Battle at the podium for their postgame interview on Sunday. "She paved the way for us, honestly, and when we came here, we wanted to do what she had done and bring the hype back to Minnesota. I think we're doing that, and a lot of it does go to her."

Braun has another season to look forward to. Battle, who passed Whalen last month for second place on the program's all-time assists list, does not. But all of the 1,527 points, 768 rebounds and 595 assists she has collected over her four-year career — TCU's Olivia Miles, a second team Associated Press All-American, is the only active player with more in each category — aren't nearly as meaningful as the time she's spent with her team in her home state.

"We've been blessed with a ton of joy. You can see that when we play and practice. I think that's our superpower. That's what gets us through," Battle said. "They're really my best friends."

Michigan guard Mila Holloway, left, blocks North Carolina State guard Zamareya Jones' drive during the second half in the second round of the NCAA tournament on Sunday in Ann Arbor, Mich.



AL GOLDIS/AP

Michigan guard Mila Holloway, left, blocks North Carolina State guard Zamareya Jones' drive during the second half in the second round of the NCAA tournament on Sunday in Ann Arbor, Mich.

## Michigan's Holloway has made her point

By LARRY LAGE  
Associated Press

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — Michigan's Mila Holloway is making a name for herself in March Madness.

Olivia Olson and Syla Swords get a lot of attention and accolades, and rightfully so, but Holloway is showing she is also a potential star in women's college basketball.

Her teammates say she's the best point guard in the country.

And, she agrees.

"I can't really say anybody else," Holloway said.

Holloway will get at least one more opportunity in the NCAA Tournament to show what she can do.

"She's just a special player, and you put her alongside those other really special players, and we got a chance to create something special," coach Kim Barnes Arico said.

The second-seeded Wolverines will face third-seeded Louisville on Saturday in the Sweet 16. The winner will play top-seeded Texas or fifth-seeded Kentucky on Monday in the Fort Worth Regional final with a spot in the Final Four at stake.

Michigan hasn't made it past the Elite Eight in program history, but the maize and blue have never had a team as talented as the current squad that has an impressive sophomore class led by Olson, Swords and Holloway.

Olson is a third-team Associated Press All-America player and a first-team All-Big Ten honoree. Swords, who represented Canada at the 2024 Summer Olympics, was also first-team All-Big Ten.

"They definitely deserve everything that does come their way," Holloway said. "They're the hardest workers I know."

Holloway did earn honorable mention recognition in the conference, ranking behind 25 Big Ten players on the first, second and third team. That seems to underestimate the impact she has at both ends of the court during the best regular season in Michigan history that led to the program's best seeding in the the NCAA Tournament.

"She's the best point guard in the country," Olson said.

Second-team AP All-America players Hannah Hidalgo of Notre Dame, TCU's Olivia Miles and Ohio State's Jaloni Cambridge are widely recognized as the top point guards in the country.

Holloway has a chance to be part of the conversation if she can help the Wolverines reach the Final Four for the first time, a tough task with the Cardinals up next and potentially the top-seeded Longhorns awaiting in their home state.

Even if Holloway has to match up with the best players in women's basketball, she will be prepared after growing up competing against her brother, Aden, Alabama's second-leading scorer going into its Sweet 16 matchup with Michigan on Friday night. Aden Holloway was suspended indefinitely after being arrested on a felony drug charge earlier this month.

In 1-on-1 games, he never took it easy on his little sister.

"We didn't keep score, but we played all the time," she said. "Playing bully ball, and everything."

Holloway, who is from Charlotte, North Carolina, does just about everything for the Wolverines.

She is the primary ball handler for one of the highest-scoring teams in the country, averaging 4.8 assists. She scores on 3-pointers — including a career-high five in the first round against Holy Cross — mid-range jumpers and layups to average 12.6 points.

In the first round, Holloway led the team with 20 points and followed that up by leading the team in rebounds (nine), assists (six) and scored 13 points in the second round against N.C. State.

"She's shooting 40% from 3 and has made the second most on the team," Wolfpack coach Wes Moore said. "And then with her quickness and ability to get to the rim, that's a tough matchup. So I think start there. She's one of the top in the category of steals, so she makes plays on defense and gets them going in transition."



MICHAEL CONROY/AP

Minnesota guard Amaya Battle grabs a loose ball over Ohio State guard Kennedy Cambridge in the first half of a quarterfinals game in the Big Ten Conference tournament on March 6 in Indianapolis. Battle has amassed 1,527 points, 768 rebounds and 595 assists, all with the Gophers.

# NCAA WOMEN'S TOURNAMENT



GEORGE WALKER IV/AP

Vanderbilt guard Mikayla Blakes plays during the first half in the second round of the NCAA college tournament against Illinois on Monday in Nashville, Tenn.

## Vanderbilt thriving with balance that supports superstar Blakes

By TERESA M. WALKER  
Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — AP All-American Mikayla Blakes gets a lot of the attention at Vanderbilt as the nation's leading scorer.

But the Commodores are going to their first Sweet 16 since 2009 because they have so many others helping the Southeastern Conference's player of the year.

There's the freshman point guard who is a whirling dervish on the court and plays Robin to Blakes' Batman. There's the 6-foot-2 graduate forward who stuck around after missing last season with a blood clot issue. And then there's the 3-point shooter in her third year at Vanderbilt after transferring in from in-state rival Tennessee.

It's coach Shea Ralph's best team yet in her fifth season at Vanderbilt (29-4).

"We are a team, a really, really good team with great pieces," Ralph said. "Everybody has value. Everybody has a role that they play that's really important for us to win big games."

Blakes brings the scoring, averaging 27.1 points a game this season and an even better 30.5 clip in SEC play. She also just missed a triple-double in the second round with 25 points, nine assists, 10 rebounds and four steals.

"She is a facilitator," said senior Justine Pissott, the 3-point shooter who started her college career at Tennessee. "She rebounds the ball. She's just a great player all around. It's really important when she finds everybody — there's not one person she doesn't miss on the court, and when she misses them, she'll get them the next time."

Vanderbilt earned a No. 2 seed in the women's NCAA Tournament with four starters averaging

double figures.

SEC freshman of the year Aubrey Galvan, generously listed at 5-foot-6, whips passes to teammates, spins in the lane for layups and knocks down big 3s. She's second in scoring to Blakes with 13.2 points a game and has a season-high of 30 points.

Ralph said they work to put together a team that complements each other and ignored the idea that Galvan was too small to compete in the SEC.

"What we saw from her, along with the intangible qualities — chip on her shoulder, competitiveness, love for basketball she has — was that she was going to be just fine," Ralph said.

Galvan also led all freshmen in assists and ranked fourth nationally with 81 steals. Blakes said it took all summer and lots of yelling for the Commodores to get on the same page with Galvan. Post players especially had to learn to always be ready for a pass.

"If you're not looking at her, you're going to get hit in the head with a ball, and it's happened a lot of times," Blakes said. "Every time she has the ball, she's looking to pass."

Sacha Washington is the graduate student who has been with Ralph every step of this journey, returning after a blood clot in her right calf cost her the 2024-25 season. Now she plays her first Sweet 16 on Friday against No. 6 seed Notre Dame (24-10).

The SEC's active leader in career rebounds grabs 7.9 of them a game and tied the program mark in an NCAA Tournament game with 17 in the first round.

Tears flowed Monday night when Washington checked out with a couple minutes left with hugs all around.

"Really you never know when you're going to be done playing," Washington said. "I've been healthy this whole season. So words can't even explain, but I'm very grateful to be here and I'm very happy."

Ralph appreciates Washington sticking with her in this transfer portal and NIL era.

"That kid has really, really, really poured her heart and soul into this program, and we would not be where we are without her," Ralph said.

A McDonald's All-American who played her first season at Tennessee, Pissott was struggling after the loss of a grandfather. She credited Ralph and Vanderbilt with picking her up when she didn't know how. The senior who shoots 40% beyond the arc scored a career-best 11.2 points a game this season.

"I may not have scored a lot, I may not have done a lot," an emotional Pissott said. "But I tried to be a leader for everybody around me, and I hope that they have noticed that."

Ralph had to replace four starters, so she brought in a pair of transfers in graduate Ndjakalenga Mwenentanda from Texas and junior Aalyah Del Rosario from LSU. Ralph noted Mwenentanda bet on Vanderbilt after going to a Final Four last year, believing the Commodores would do something special.

Now they're off to Fort Worth and the 1 Region with No. 1 seed UConn looming on the other side of the bracket. Ralph just wants her Commodores playing their roles as designed as they chase a championship.

"Nothing has to change," Ralph said. "It doesn't matter who we play."

## SEC shows strength with 6 still playing

By DOUG FEINBERG  
Associated Press

The Sweet 16 will have a definite SEC feel with six teams advancing from that conference to the second weekend of March Madness.

Top seeds South Carolina and Texas cruised into the regional semifinals of the women's NCAA Tournament and are joined by No. 2 seeds Vanderbilt and LSU, No. 4 Oklahoma and No. 5 Kentucky.

"I think it's a great sign for the conference. You can't really control if it's spread out or not," Vanderbilt coach Shea Ralph said. "But you know how we feel about the SEC conference. It's the best conference in the country. If you want to win a championship, you're going to have to come through us, so it's not a surprise to me that we're seeing that many teams in. We'll see. Hopefully we'll continue to be one of them."

Both of the 1 seeds will have all-SEC matchups, with the Gamecocks facing the Sooners — the lone team to beat them in the regular season during conference play.

"Our league prepares us for this level of play," South Carolina coach Dawn Staley said. "There isn't an opponent out there that we don't feel like we're prepared for because of what we have been challenged with in the regular season and in the SEC Tournament."

It's not only SEC teams that had a good first weekend in the NCAA Tournament. UConn remains the lone unbeaten in women's college basketball. The Huskies have won 52 straight games, including a dominant 53-point win over Syracuse in the second round. UConn has reached the Sweet 16 in 32 consecutive years.

UConn will face North Carolina in the Sweet 16. The Tar Heels are one of five ACC teams still playing. The biggest surprise of the group is Virginia. The Cavaliers

reached the regional semifinals for the first time in 26 years and became the first team to play in the First Four and get this far. They needed double overtime to knock off Iowa and advance.

The SEC isn't the only conference that will have teams facing each other in the Sweet 16. Minnesota, back in the Sweet 16 for the first time since 2005, will play Big Ten foe UCLA.

### Elite guard matchup

Vanderbilt and Notre Dame will square off in the regional semifinals in a matchup of two of the best guards in the country with Mikayla Blakes and Hannah Hidalgo trying to lead their teams to the Elite Eight. They are both dynamic scorers who can also find teammates for open baskets.

Hidalgo is a defensive whiz, leading the country in steals.

### Star power

All five of the AP first-team All-Americans are still playing, with UConn teammates Sarah Strong and Azzi Fudd leading the way. Texas' Madison Booker put on an offensive clinic with a 40-point effort in the second round of the tournament. Fudd had 34 points in the rout of Syracuse. Lauren Betts led UCLA back to the Sweet 16, and Blakes has Vanderbilt in new territory.

### Offensive juggernaut

LSU broke the NCAA record with a 16th game this season scoring more than 100 points. The Tigers face third-seeded Duke in a rematch of their ACC/SEC challenge game that LSU won. The Tigers had scored over 100 points in each of their first eight games before beating Duke 93-77 on Dec. 4.

This is a different Duke team, though, as the Blue Devils won 23 of their next 25 games after that defeat.



ERIC GAY/AP

Texas forward Madison Booker, right, drives against Oregon guard Sofia Bell during the second half in the second round of the NCAA college tournament on March 22 in Austin, Texas.

## NCAA TOURNAMENT

## Pitino back on top, still enjoying the ride

By GREG BEACHAM  
Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — When Dylan Darling drove the lane and beat the buzzer with a thrilling layup last Sunday to send St. John's to its first Sweet 16 of the 21st century, Rick Pitino did not celebrate in the moment.

While his players exploded off the bench and tackled Darling in front of the Red Storm band at Viejas Arena, an expressionless Pitino touched the lapel of his sharp suit and stoically walked the other way, alongside the crushed Kansas team, to shake hands with Bill Self, his fellow Hall of Fame coach.

Pitino's muted response in an impossibly dramatic NCAA Tournament moment went viral. It was a reaction rooted in a half-century of experience in a job where the pain of loss is almost always stronger than the pleasure of victory, and Pitino's empathy for the Jayhawks and Self was praised.

Yet as Pitino will tell anybody who asks, he's still having the time of his life this season with St. John's (30-6), which is headed to Washington to take on top-seeded Duke in the East Region semifinals.

Pitino celebrated that unforgettable win over Kansas, but he did it minutes later with his players — and he was already looking forward to all the big moments yet to come.

"I'm so jubilant," Pitino said. "So happy for the fellas. We've



MARCIO JOSE SANCHEZ/AP

St. John's coach Rick Pitino has led his team into a Sweet 16 matchup with overall No. 1 Duke on Friday in Washington.

taken another step now, so it's just awesome. Proud of our guys. And now it's just starting. The fun is just starting."

The 73-year-old Pitino knows he is closer to the end than the start of an epic coaching career, but it's also far from over. And there are still so many horizons ahead.

No coach has ever led four different schools to a Final Four, but St. John's is two victories away — starting Friday against Duke, a No. 1 overall seed that looked slightly shaky last weekend.

Pitino's non-reaction to Darling's game-winner was rooted in empathy, but also memory. Pitino was the losing coach when the Blue Devils' Christian Laettner hit his unforgettable jumper to beat Kentucky in the 1992 tournament.

That memory still stings, but Pitino is also looking forward with gratitude and humor.

"I'm hoping we can get Duke at the buzzer next," he said with a grin. "To make up for that Christian Laettner shot."

After 915 NCAA victories, two national championships and some truly dismal lows, Pitino is once again firmly atop his profession with another remarkable job at St. John's, a historic basketball school with no recent history of major success. The Johnnies have won 60 games in the past two seasons, a mark only topped in school history by coach Lou Carnesecca, Chris Mullin and Mark Jackson from 1984-86.

Three years after Pitino returned to college basketball's big time, his team has won back-to-

back Big East titles — regular-season and tournament both times — and earned St. John's first three NCAA Tournament victories in a quarter-century.

But the milestones seem secondary to the ride for Pitino these days.

Indeed, Pitino appears to be enjoying every minute of his latest season with a team in the spotlight. He still lights up at the subjects of tactics and teaching, and he still wears suits on the sidelines.

Pitino's name and reputation still mean something to the current generation of players, which is a remarkable achievement in itself.

"Even now, seeing him every day, I'm like, 'I'm really playing for Coach Pitino!'" said forward Dillon Mitchell, who joined St. John's this season after stops at Texas and Cincinnati. "You hear so much about him, but being with him every day and learning under him, it's the best experience I've ever had."

This native New Yorker's famed charisma remains vibrant as well.

A week after Pitino celebrated the Red Storm's Big East Tournament title with a beer on the interview podium, he stepped onto the dais in San Diego and deadpanned: "It's very important that I put my beer in a Bodyarmor cup" — teasing the Tournament organizers' infamously fanatical determination to keep all non-sponsors'

beverage brands off their television program.

And when he disagreed with the premise of a media question about St. John's and star Zuby Ejiofor being disrespected by the Tournament committee and All-America voters last week, Pitino feistily delivered a funny, thoughtful dissection of the somebody-didn't-believe-in-us motivational mentality that permeates every level of sports these days.

"You guys are so off base with that comment of, 'We're going to play harder because we were (disrespected),' Pitino said while wearing a broad smile. "We're going to play harder because we're a 5 seed in San Diego? Overlooking the ocean? We're not going to play any harder than any game this season. So please get off that, because it makes no sense."

Pitino has seen all of this before, and his decades of experiences exist alongside the present in his mind. When he was asked where the Kansas victory ranks in his long career, his mind flashed to the early 1980s.

"It just makes me go down memory lane," Pitino said. "I remember being so excited playing in front of 150 people at Boston University and going to the NCAA. The gym was empty, but we were so excited, and they carried me off the court on their shoulders. There was nobody there to cheer but the players. ... This was the final for me, to get St. John's to the next level. And we're not done yet."

## Miles, Suarez form dynamic duo

By STEPHEN HAWKINS  
Associated Press

FORT WORTH, Texas — Marta Suarez wanted the opportunity for a deep run during March Madness in her final college season before turning pro.

The 6-foot-3 forward from Spain was already talking to TCU last year when she found out that Olivia Miles was coming to finish her college career with the Horned Frogs, who had just ended a record 34-win season with their first Elite Eight appearance.

"I'm asking who's going to be playing with me," Suarez said. "The moment that they said Olivia Miles ... that kind of sold me to it."

With playmaking point guard Miles and Suarez headlining another transfer-dominated roster for third-year coach Mark Campbell, TCU won the Big 12 regular season again. The third-seeded Frogs (31-5) are now in the Sweet 16 for the second year in a row after never before getting that far, and play 10th-seed Virginia on Saturday in Sacramento, Calif.

"We understand that it's way bigger than us. But it starts with us," Miles said. "We personally

bring it on our own, and then we bring it together and then the team follows. And I think that's where we've grown in our leadership, realizing that it ultimately does start and end with us."

Miles went in the transfer portal after 101 games in four seasons at Notre Dame instead of the WNBA draft last year when the 5-foot-10 guard was a projected lottery pick. Suarez started 66 games the past two seasons at California after first playing at Tennessee.

At TCU together, the gritty competitors have created quite a bond on and off the court with each other and teammates in a short time. Their genuine connection is evident when Miles makes sharp passes to Suarez for open shots, or their fun-loving and affectionate interactions during interview sessions.

"You can see the bond that they have, and it's super special. ... They are special people, special humans," said junior guard Donovan Hunter, one of the two TCU returning players who also played in last year's NCAA tourney.

Those comments drew "aww!" from both Miles and Suarez sitting next to her.

"The most fun and the better persons we are off the court is going to translate on the court," Suarez said. "So we were very intentional with that and then, you know, sometimes you get a little lucky and we have personalities that do match."

Miles and Suarez were unanimous picks by league coaches for the All-Big 12 team. Miles, the Big 12 player and newcomer of the year, averages 19.4 points, 7.2 rebounds and 6.6 assists per game, with Suarez at 16.8 points and 7.4 rebounds.

"The thing that's so special about that team is that they have a Batman and a Robin, and you don't know which is Batman and which is Robin on any given night," Baylor coach Nicki Collen said after TCU clinched the Big 12 title with a win over the Bears in the regular-season finale March 1.

In December, they became only the second set of NCAA Division I teammates with triple-doubles in the same game. That was the third triple-double in a row for Miles, who got her sixth this season in the Frogs' NCAA Tournament opener.

## Scoreboard

## Men's tournament

EAST REGIONAL  
At Washington  
Regional Semifinals  
Friday, March 27

Duke vs. St. John's, AFN-Sports, 12 a.m. Saturday CET, 8 a.m. Saturday JKT  
UConn vs. Michigan St., AFN-Sports 2:30 a.m. Saturday CET, 10:30 a.m. Saturday JKT

Regional Championship  
Sunday, March 29

Duke-St. John's winner vs. UConn-Michigan St. winner

SOUTH REGIONAL  
At Houston  
Regional Semifinals  
Thursday, March 26

Nebraska vs. Iowa  
Houston vs. Illinois

Regional Championship  
Saturday, March 28

Nebraska-Iowa winner vs. Houston-Illinois winner

MIDWEST REGIONAL  
At Chicago  
Regional Semifinals  
Friday, March 27

Michigan vs. Alabama, AFN-Sports2, 12:30 a.m. Saturday CET, 8:30 a.m. Saturday JKT  
Iowa St. vs. Tennessee, AFN-Sports2, 3 a.m. Saturday CET, 11 a.m. Saturday JKT

Regional Championship  
Sunday, March 29

Michigan-Alabama winner vs. Iowa St.-Tennessee winner

WEST REGIONAL  
At San Jose, Calif.  
Regional Semifinals  
Thursday, March 26

Arizona vs. Arkansas  
Purdue vs. Texas

Regional Championship  
Saturday, March 28

Arizona-Arkansas winner vs. Purdue-Texas winner

## Women's tournament

Fort Worth 3  
At Fort Worth, Texas  
Regional Semifinals  
Saturday, March 28

Texas vs. Kentucky, AFN-Atlantic, 8 p.m. Saturday CET, 4 a.m. Sunday JKT  
Michigan vs. Louisville, AFN-Atlantic, 5:30 p.m. Saturday CET, 1:30 a.m. Sunday JKT

Regional Championship  
Monday, March 30

Texas-Kentucky winner vs. Michigan-Louisville winner

Sacramento 2  
At Sacramento, Calif.  
Regional Semifinals  
Friday, March 27

UCLA vs. Minnesota  
LSU vs. Duke

Regional Championship  
Sunday, March 29

UCLA-Minnesota winner vs. LSU-Duke winner

Sacramento 4  
At Sacramento, Calif.  
Regional Semifinals  
Saturday, March 28

South Carolina vs. Oklahoma, AFN-Atlantic, 10 p.m. Saturday CET, 6 a.m. Sunday JKT  
Virginia vs. TCU, AFN-Atlantic, 12:30 a.m. Sunday CET, 8:30 a.m. Sunday JKT

Regional Championship  
Monday, March 30

South Carolina-Oklahoma winner vs. TCU-Virginia winner

Fort Worth 1  
At Fort Worth, Texas  
Regional Semifinals  
Friday, March 27

UConn vs. North Carolina, AFN-Sports, 10 p.m. Friday CET, 6 a.m. Saturday JKT  
Vanderbilt vs. Notre Dame, AFN-Sports, 7:30 p.m. Friday CET, 3:30 a.m. Saturday JKT

Regional Championship  
Sunday, March 29

UConn-North Carolina winner vs. Vanderbilt-Notre Dame winner

# NCAA MEN'S TOURNAMENT



MATT SLOCUM/AP

UConn coach Dan Hurley celebrates with Braylon Mullins, center right, during the first half against UCLA in the second round of the NCAA Tournament on March 22 in Philadelphia.

## UConn's Hurley hoping for another St. John's rematch

By DAN GELSTON  
Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — The warning comes from about every coach, every player each March — heck, in any sport as the stakes are raised as the games carry more gravitas — don't look too far ahead.

Worry about the next practice, the next game, not what could happen down the road.

Then there's Dan Hurley.

The two-time national champion UConn coach seems to be reinforcing his classic brash ways by sharing his focus for Friday's Sweet 16 game in the NCAA Tournament against Michigan State with the prospects of an Elite Eight matchup against St. John's.

Just like any East Coast fan or gambler who filled out a bracket this season, Hurley can't help but follow the lines in the East Regional and see what a Huskies win against Tom Izzo's team could get them — a rematch in Washington with the two-time reigning Big East season and tournament champion Red Storm.

Coach Rick Pitino has the tougher task between Hurley and his Big East rivals — at least on paper — in getting St. John's past top-seeded Duke.

Hurley, though, has a plea — the fanbases need to rally together for one night and root for their rivals so there is a chance for a fourth game this season between the schools, this time with a spot in the Final Four at stake.

"It will be a live building. It's probably a little bit early, but obviously, I think we've got to sup-

port each other," Hurley said. "It's pretty brutal on Twitter, I think, and socials between our fan bases, but I think we have to try to come together Friday night against our opponent so we can have a blood-bath on Sunday."

Hurley noted "it stinks a little bit" that two conference teams are set to potentially play in the regional final rather than in a Final Four.

St. John's took two of the three meetings this season, the second being a 20-point win in the Big East Tournament title game. The Feb. 25 blowout loss at UConn stands as the Red Storm's lone setback since standing at 9-5 as of Jan. 3, with them beating Northern Iowa and Kansas in the tournament.

The Huskies started 22-1 but closed the regular season on a 7-4 stretch, a pedestrian record for a program that won consecutive national championships in 2023 and 2024. UConn rebounded with wins over Furman and UCLA in first- and second-round games last weekend in Philadelphia to reach its 17th Sweet 16.

(The Huskies beat Michigan State in an exhibition game in late October.)

Maybe it was playing in the East Coast that stirred up questions and comments about a St. John's-UConn showdown before it could even happen. Duke is a comfortable 6½-point favorite to beat the fifth-seeded Red Storm while the Huskies are just 1½-point favorites to beat Michigan State, per BetMGM Sportsbook.

If both Big East teams win, look

out, the home of the Wizards and Capitals could look and sound a bit like Madison Square Garden in conference tourney time.

"I think it speaks to the quality of what us and St. John's are this year," Hurley said. "I think they're a great team. I think we're a great team. I think it was much needed."

Winning two games in the Tournament were much needed for UConn a year after it was bounced by Florida in the second round.

The Gators would win the national championship, yet there's no repeat this season after they were bounced by Iowa.

The Huskies are back in their proper spot among college basketball's hierarchy.

They can thank Tarris Reed Jr. and Alex Karaban for getting them back to the Sweet 16.

Reed had 31 points and 27 rebounds, the kind of sensational stat line not seen in the Tournament in nearly 60 years, in the opener against Furman. Karaban scored a career-high 27 points in the second round against UCLA.

Karaban is a fourth-year senior in a career spent all at UConn — a rarity in today's instant transfer, greater riches game — and a third national title would rank him with the players of John Wooden's Bruins heyday in the rarified air of players with three rings.

"I think he can just take us wherever we need to go," Huskies guard Braylon Mullins said. "We all have the confidence with him and he's our leader. We all look up to him. He holds the standard with this program."

## Big: Power-conference teams may sacrifice size advantage for more focus on 3-pointers

FROM PAGE 40

College basketball often mimics the NBA, and the Warriors' run of three titles in four years by virtue of Curry and crew's 3-point shooting trickled down.

Wanting to maximize those extra points, college teams started spreading the floor — sometimes with all five players outside the lane — in search of the best shot from the arc. Villanova perfected the style while winning two championships under Jay Wright and Baylor used a similar tactic to win the 2021 title.

But spreading the floor and relying on 3-pointers negates some of the size advantage power-conference programs have over midmajors. One cold shooting night or the opposing team getting hot and that's it in the one-loss-and-done Tournament — as college basketball fans have seen with the rash of March Madness upsets the past few years.

Working inside-out creates a dilemma for opposing defenses: play the big man straight up or double team, opening up the perimeter game?

"That was kind of the wave for a couple years, teams that sold themselves as playing a 'pro-style' offense and spread out, but when you play that way, you allow a lot of volatility to enter the equation," Florida coach Todd Golden said. "When you have the oppor-

tunity to recruit bigger, stronger, faster athletes and play a style that allows you to raise your floor with high two-point field goal percentage and get on the glass, that just gives you a better chance to be consistently successful."

The proof is in the teams still left standing.

Midwest No. 1 seed Michigan has 7-foot-3 Aday Mara roaming the paint. West No. 1 seed Arizona likes to get the ball to 7-2 Motiejus Krivas early in games and force teams to make a decision. Illinois has the biggest team in the country, anchored by 7-foot twins Tomislav and Zvonimir Ivisic.

UConn won consecutive national championships with 7-2 Donovan Clingan drawing attention inside and Purdue coach Matt Painter rode the massive shoulders of 7-3, 305-pound center Zach Edey into the 2024 national title game.

"I think the big men are resurging again," Izzo said. "Give Matt Painter and that monster (Edey) credit for that."

Now Izzo has to face another monster, grizzly bear, or whatever you want to call him.

Reed joined Wake Forest's Tim Duncan as the only players to have 40 points and 40 rebounds through two games of the Tournament, so stopping him will be priority No. 1 for Izzo on Friday if the Spartans want to reach the Elite Eight.



JEFFREY T. BARNES/AP

At 7-foot-3, Michigan center Aday Mara is an imposing presence for the Midwest top-seeded Wolverines.

## SPORTS



## Starting strong

Yankees open season with shutout win against Giants » **MLB, Page 35**



MATT ROURKE/AP

UConn's Tarris Reed Jr. goes up for a shot against UCLA during the first half in the second round of the NCAA Tournament on March 22 in Philadelphia. Reed had 41 points and 40 rebounds in the first two games.

## NCAA MEN'S TOURNAMENT

# Going big

## Teams with dominant size eager to utilize advantage

BY JOHN MARSHALL  
Associated Press

**U**Conn has shooters and slashers, its offense an array of moving parts all in sync.

The central cog is big man Tarris Reed Jr.

The 6-foot-11, 265-pound senior has been punishing opposing teams at a record rate, giving the Huskies a huge inside advantage that they're more than happy to exploit as they climb through the NCAA Tournament bracket.

"This guy's a total monster and today he was a real grizzly bear," UConn coach Dan Hurley said after Reed opened the tournament with 31 points and 27 rebounds against Furman.

The Tournament is down to a Sweet 16 void of mid-majors for the second straight season.

NIL and the transfer portal have played significant roles in the recent downturn in March Madness upsets.

Being a bully has also helped.

One of the biggest advantages power-conference programs have over mid-majors is their heft, and they've been throwing it around a lot more.

Power conferences have gone 27-4 against mid-majors in this year's bracket, outscoring them by an average of 7.7 points in the paint. Florida had the largest margin inside, punishing Prairie View A&M by a whopping 64-10 in the paint for a 114-55 win — the second-largest margin of victory in NCAA Tournament history.

Arkansas also scored 64 paint points in its opening 97-78 victory over Hawaii.

Power programs have grabbed 9.3 more rebounds per game against mid-majors, topped by Illinois' 48-25 advantage in its 105-70 blowout of Penn.

The bigger programs are also averaging 12.1 offensive rebounds and 13.1 second-chance points against mid-majors. The Fighting Illini had 29 second-chance points on 20 offensive rebounds against the Quakers, and Arizona converted 16 offensive rebounds into 22 second-chance points in its blowout win over Long Island.

In other words, the Sweet 16 got big.

"I do think you're seeing more of it," Michigan State coach Tom Izzo said. "I think the trend will go back to what it's supposed to be, and that's a balance between inside and outside."

The perimeter game had been the way to go, thanks to the success of Stephen Curry and Golden State.

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# George scores 28 in return, 76ers top Bulls » **NBA, Page 32**

