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UpComing Events

Monday, Dec. 20

Girls Basketball at Redfield. 7th grade game at 4 p.m. followed by 8th grade game. Junior Varsity at 6 p.m. followed by Varsity game.

Tuesday, Dec. 21

7 p.m.: City Council Meeting
Boys Basketball hosting Redfield. C game at 5 p.m. followed by JV and then varsity.

Wednesday, Dec. 22

St. John's Lutheran Christmas Program on GDIL-IVE.COM. 10:30 a.m. and Noon.

End of Second Quarter

1 p.m.: Elementary Christmas Concert

2 p.m.: Early dismissal for Christmas vacation

Monday, Dec. 27

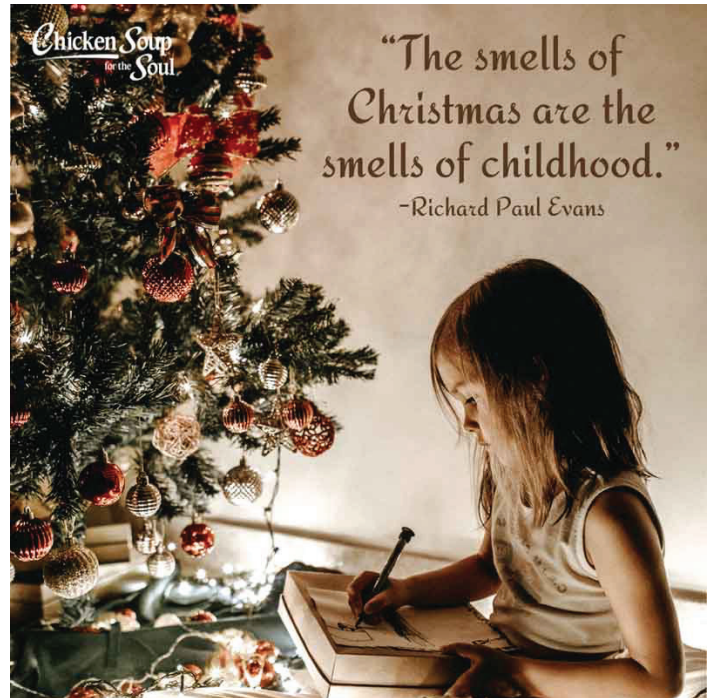
Boys Basketball at Jamestown College Classic, play at 6 p.m.

Thursday, Dec. 30

9:30 a.m.: Wrestling at Webster

Friday, Dec. 31

Girls Basketball at Webster. JV at noon followed by varsity



Monday, Jan. 4

School resumes
Basketball Double Header at Warner. Girls JV at 4 p.m. followed by Boys JV, Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity.

5 p.m.: Junior High Wrestling Tournament at Groton.

Thursday, Jan. 6

6 p.m.: Wrestling Tri-angular at Groton with Redfield and Webster

Friday, Jan. 7

Penguin Classic Debate on-line

5 p.m.: Junior High Wrestling at Milbank

Girls Basketball hosts Sisseton with JV at 6 p.m. and varsity to follow

Saturday, Jan. 8

Groton Robotics Tournament, 8 a.m. to 6 p.m.

Penguin Classic Debate on-line

Girls Basketball Classic at Redfield

Groton Daily Independent
PO Box 34, Groton SD 57445
Paul's Cell/Text: 605-397-7460

OPEN: Recycling Trailer in Groton

The recycling trailer is located west of the city shop. It takes cardboard, papers and aluminum cans.
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Seven wrestlers place at Cossack Avalanche Tournament

Seven wrestlers placed at the Sioux Valley Cossack Avalanche wrestling tournament held Saturday in Volga. With that, Groton Area placed fourth in a field of 19 teams.

Lane Krueger placed first at 285 pounds, Cole Bisbee placed second at 160 pounds, Korbin Kucker placed third at 152 pounds, Christian Ehresmann placed first at 145 pounds, Brevin Fliehs placed third at 138 pounds, Pierce Kettering placed fourth at 132 pounds, and Porter Johnson placed fourth at 113 pounds.

Kingsbury County placed first with 198 points followed by Sioux Valley with 151, Deuel 142, Groton Area 135.5, Flandreau 109, West Central 76, Mitchell 54, Spearfish 42, Hamlin 41.5, Ortonville MN 40, Tai-Valley 38.5, Brookings 38, Yankton 37, Sioux Falls Roosevelt 30.5, Sioux Falls Lincoln 28.5, Viborg-Hurley 28, Sioux Falls Jefferson 17, Lennox 7 and Dell Rapids 0.

106B: Walker Zoellner (7-6) placed 2nd.

Champ. Round 1 - Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) 7-6 received a bye () (Bye)

Quarterfinal - Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) 7-6 won by fall over Joshua David (Sioux Falls Jefferson) 2-2 (Fall 0:40)

Semifinal - Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) 7-6 won by fall over Jett Yaggie (Yankton) 2-2 (Fall 1:56)

1st Place Match - Cody Zell (Kingsbury County) 5-4 won by decision over Walker Zoellner (Groton Area) 7-6 (Dec 4-1)

106B: Liza Krueger (0-2)

Champ. Round 1 - Liza Krueger (Groton Area) 0-2 received a bye () (Bye)

Quarterfinal - Jett Yaggie (Yankton) 2-2 won by fall over Liza Krueger (Groton Area) 0-2 (Fall 0:41)

Cons. Round 2 - Michael Zoller (Spearfish) 2-2 won by fall over Liza Krueger (Groton Area) 0-2 (Fall 0:22)

113: Porter Johnson (4-7) placed 4th and scored 13.0 team points.

Champ. Round 1 - Porter Johnson (Groton Area) 4-7 received a bye () (Bye)

Quarterfinal - Porter Johnson (Groton Area) 4-7 won by fall over Teagen Bittinger (Lennox) 2-2 (Fall 4:43)

Semifinal - Greyson Nielsen (Kingsbury County) 5-1 won by major decision over Porter Johnson (Groton Area) 4-7 (MD 10-2)

Cons. Semi - Porter Johnson (Groton Area) 4-7 won by fall over Ryker Gauger (Deuel) 4-10 (Fall 4:05)

3rd Place Match - Dubhlaonn Vermeulen (Sioux Valley) 7-7 won by fall over Porter Johnson (Groton Area) 4-7 (Fall 2:36)

126: Isiah Sepaniak (2-8)

Champ. Round 1 - Dylan Christenson (Flandreau) 7-9 won by fall over Isiah Sepaniak (Groton Area) 2-8 (Fall 1:10)

Cons. Round 1 - Blake Jennings (Kingsbury County) 2-3 won by fall over Isiah Sepaniak (Groton Area) 2-8 (Fall 0:48)

132: Pierce Kettering (10-6) placed 4th and scored 17.0 team points.

Champ. Round 1 - Pierce Kettering (Groton Area) 10-6 won by fall over Justin Klein (Flandreau) 7-7 (Fall 4:36)

Quarterfinal - Lane Holland (Kingsbury County) 5-5 won by decision over Pierce Kettering (Groton Area) 10-6 (Dec 6-2)

Cons. Round 2 - Pierce Kettering (Groton Area) 10-6 won by fall over Ethan Johnson (Kingsbury County) 6-3 (Fall 4:41)

Cons. Round 3 - Pierce Kettering (Groton Area) 10-6 won by fall over Tate Everson (Hamlin) 6-11 (Fall 2:04)

Cons. Semi - Pierce Kettering (Groton Area) 10-6 won by fall over Shayce Platt (Yankton) 5-2 (Fall 2:15)

3rd Place Match - Lane Holland (Kingsbury County) 5-5 won by fall over Pierce Kettering (Groton Area) 10-6 (Fall 3:59)

138: Brevin Fliehs (10-5) placed 3rd and scored 14.0 team points.

Champ. Round 1 - Brevin Fliehs (Groton Area) 10-5 received a bye () (Bye)

Quarterfinal - Brevin Fliehs (Groton Area) 10-5 won by decision over Luke Steffensen (Kingsbury County)

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7-7 (Dec 5-4)

Semifinal - Brock Gisselbeck (Hamlin) 9-5 won by fall over Brevin Fliehs (Groton Area) 10-5 (Fall 5:09)

Cons. Semi - Brevin Fliehs (Groton Area) 10-5 won by fall over Kellan Odell (Mitchell) 3-2 (Fall 2:24)

3rd Place Match - Brevin Fliehs (Groton Area) 10-5 won by decision over Luke Steffensen (Kingsbury County) 7-7 (Dec 7-6)

145: Christian Ehresmann (8-2) placed 1st and scored 25.5 team points.

Champ. Round 1 - Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) 8-2 won by fall over Tucker Adkins (Deuel) 3-10 (Fall 1:43)

Quarterfinal - Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) 8-2 won by tech fall over Jesus Mendoza (Tri-Valley) 0-2 (TF-1.5 3:11 (18-2))

Semifinal - Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) 8-2 won by fall over Jacob Ellingson (Spearfish) 5-4 (Fall 0:51)

1st Place Match - Christian Ehresmann (Groton Area) 8-2 won by decision over Skylar Trygstad (Sioux Valley) 14-2 (Dec 12-6)

152: Korbin Kucker (6-7) placed 3rd and scored 18.0 team points.

Champ. Round 1 - Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) 6-7 received a bye () (Bye)

Quarterfinal - Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) 6-7 won by fall over Evan Wilson (Spearfish) 3-4 (Fall 3:00)

Semifinal - Tathan Headrick (Flandreau) 9-3 won by fall over Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) 6-7 (Fall 1:49)

Cons. Semi - Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) 6-7 won by fall over Javier Mendoza (Tri-Valley) 3-6 (Fall 1:58)

3rd Place Match - Korbin Kucker (Groton Area) 6-7 won by fall over Evan Wilson (Spearfish) 3-4 (Fall 4:22)

160: Cole Bisbee (10-4) placed 2nd and scored 22.0 team points.

Champ. Round 1 - Cole Bisbee (Groton Area) 10-4 won by fall over Breyten Johnson (Kingsbury County) 3-4 (Fall 1:58)

Quarterfinal - Cole Bisbee (Groton Area) 10-4 won by fall over Noah Gruenstein (Mitchell) 0-2 (Fall 1:13)

Semifinal - Cole Bisbee (Groton Area) 10-4 won by disqualification over Karter Headrick (Flandreau) 9-7 (DQ)

1st Place Match - Russell Sheets (Sioux Valley) 14-3 won by fall over Cole Bisbee (Groton Area) 10-4 (Fall 2:33)

285: Lane Krueger (8-2) placed 1st and scored 26.0 team points.

Champ. Round 1 - Lane Krueger (Groton Area) 8-2 received a bye () (Bye)

Quarterfinal - Lane Krueger (Groton Area) 8-2 won by fall over Justin Person (West Central) 0-2 (Fall 2:45)

Semifinal - Lane Krueger (Groton Area) 8-2 won by fall over Braeden Stadler (Brookings) 2-2 (Fall 0:24)

1st Place Match - Lane Krueger (Groton Area) 8-2 won by fall over Braden Petersen (Sioux Falls Lincoln) 6-3 (Fall 1:55)

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United Methodist Church

Groton and Conde

Sunday, December 19, 2021

Conde Worship 9:00 AM
Sunday School Christmas Practice 10:00 AM
Groton Worship with SS Christmas Program during 11:00 AM

Monday, December 20, 2021

Pastor Brandon Christmas Study 7:00 PM

Tuesday, December 21, 2021

Conde Ad Council 5:00 PM

Conde Advent Study 7:00 PM

Friday, December 24, 2021

Conde Christmas Eve Service 5:00 PM

Groton Christmas Eve (white) 7:00 PM

Sunday, December 26, 2021

Newsletter Items Due
No In-Person Worship
Conde Worship Online with Conference 9:00 AM
NO Sunday School 10:00 AM
Groton Worship Online with Conference 11:00 AM

Emmanuel Lutheran Church

Groton

Sunday, Dec. 19

9am Worship/Communion/
Sunday School Christmas program
10:15 Grace Alone Study
3pm Avantara (Choir to serve)
7:00pm Choir practice

Monday, Dec. 20

6:30am Bible Study

Friday, Dec. 24

7 p.m.: Christmas Eve Service

Sunday, Dec. 26

9am Worship/Communion

St. Elizabeth Ann Seton &

St. Joseph Catholic

Groton and Turton

Weekend Mass Schedule

Saturday 4:30pm Groton
Sunday 8:30am Groton & 11:00am Turton

Weekday

Tues 5:00pm Turton, W-F 8:30am Groton
Sat 10am Newman Center

Confessions:

Sat. 3:45-4:15pm & Sun. 7:45am to 8:15am (G)
Sun. 10:30-10:45am (T)

St. John's Lutheran Church

Groton

Sunday, Dec. 19

8 a.m.: Bible Study
9 a.m.: St. John's worship with communion
10 a.m.: Sunday School
11 a.m.: Zion worship with communion

Monday, Dec. 20

7:30 p.m.: Christian Literature Circle

Tuesday, Dec. 21

9 a.m.: Quilting

Wednesday, Dec. 22

3:45 p.m.: Confirmation

Friday, Dec. 24

5 p.m.: Christmas Eve Program

Saturday, Dec. 25

9 a.m.: Christmas Day Service at Zion Lutheran

Sunday, Dec. 26

8 a.m.: Bible Study
9 .m.: St. John's Worship
11 a.m.: Zion Lutheran Worship

To submit your monthly or weekly church calendar, email to
news@grotonsd.net

Boys hoop team presses past Sioux Falls Lutheran Eagles

The Groton Area boys basketball team traveled to Sioux Falls Lutheran on Saturday for the Eagles first ever varsity game. Sioux Falls Lutheran is a three-year old school, playing junior varsity games the first two years and now entering the varsity level this year.

Groton Area led at the quarter stops at 24-5, 48-15 and 67-15 en route to a 78-23 win.

Lane Tietz led the Tigers with 19 points, one rebound, one assist and three steals. Kaden Kurtz had 12 points, three assists and two steals. Jayden Zak had 10 points, three assists and two steals. Wyatt Hearnen had 10 points, six rebounds and one steal. Tate Larson had seven points, seven rebounds, two assists and one steal. Cade Larson had four points, one rebound, two assists and one steal. Jacob Zak had three points, one rebound, one assist and three steals. Cole Simon had three points, two rebounds and two assists. Teylor Diegel had three points, one rebound, one assist and six steals. Braxton Imrie had three points and one rebound. Logan Ringgenberg had two points, four rebounds and two assists. Dillon Abeln had two points, two rebounds and one assist. Colby Dunker had two rebounds. Holden Sippel had one rebound and Tyson Parrow had one steal.

Groton Area made 25 of 37 field goals for 68 percent, made six of 18 three-pointers for 33 percent, had 33 rebounds, nine turnovers, 18 assists, 20 steals and 12 team fouls.

Ethan Olson led the Eagles with 10 points while Daniel Pinn had five, Kaden Roben and Jordy Martinez each had three points and Grant Prouty had two points. Sioux Falls Lutheran made eight of 35 field goals for 23 percent, was three of nine from the line for 33 percent, had 19 turnovers and 16 team fouls.

Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 58-8. Turner Thompson led the Tigers with 11 points followed by Blake Pauli with eight, Logan Ringgenberg and Tyson Parrow with seven each, Holden Sippel had six, Colby Dunker five, Cade Larson four, Dillon Abeln and Teylor Diegel each had three points and Braxton Imrie and Cole Simon each had two points.

The varsity game was broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM, sponsored by Doug and Wanda Hamilton, Dacotah Bank, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, Allied Climate Professionals with Kevin Nehls, Groton Ford and the John Sieh Agency. The junior varsity game was also broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM with a private sponsor.

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#496 in a series Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

As of midday today, we were up to 50,646,933 total cases in the US. Our seven-day new-case average is up to 125,480, substantially increased from where it was at the time of our last talk a few days ago. Hospitalizations are increased too to 68,569.

We saw this coming, but I can confirm that we did pass 800,000 deaths in the US this week. I think sometimes when the number is this big, it's easy to just see the number and sort of look past its meaning. But 800,000 is more people than live in North Dakota or Seattle. It's almost as many as live in San Francisco. Picture wiping that population off the map. This is a lot of empty chairs around holiday tables next week. At any rate, we're now at a seven-day average of 1291 and total of 803,964. Here's the history:

First death – February 6, 2020
100,000 – May 27 – 111 days
200,000 – September 23 – 119 days
300,000 – December 14 – 82 days
400,000 – January 19 – 36 days
500,000 – February 22 – 34 days
600,000 – June 16 – 114 days
700,000 – October 1 – 107 days
800,000 – December 15 – 46 days

I've been paying attention to influenza cases lately too. They're on the rise. That's no real surprise; this is the time of year when they are expected to increase. Some experts think masking in many school systems is holding case numbers down somewhat in localities where they're still doing that; this could help to blunt the impact of the virus on our already-strained health care system. There is still plenty of reason to be concerned about how we're going to absorb surges in two respiratory viruses in the next few weeks when we're already in such bad shape. A piece of bad news is that this season's influenza vaccine doesn't look to be a particularly good match for the strains circulating. This is a thing that happens because this virus mutates very quickly and the vaccines take a good six months to produce. That means producers are making an educated guess half a year in advance of the season as to which strains to include in the vaccine, and sometimes they get it wrong. This is one such year. Now the good news is that, while this means the vaccine's not going to be highly effective in preventing infections, the T cell response to the vaccine will still limit severity. It's likely vaccination will reduce severe disease, hospitalization, and death rates. That story should sound familiar about now: It is precisely what we've been saying about Covid-19 vaccines for weeks now. Bottom line: the vaccine can still keep you out of the hospital and the cemetery. If you haven't had your flu vaccine, it's not too late yet, but it's getting there.

The Omicron variant has now been reported in 77 countries around the globe, and in the look-what's-coming category, the UK is on fire. They are recording record numbers of daily new cases—higher than at any previous point in the pandemic, and they expect this to become the dominant variant early next year. Wednesday's number was one-third higher than Tuesday's. Mark your calendars for three weeks from Wednesday; if the historical pattern holds, we'll be in their kind of trouble on that date.

We have more not-great college news: more universities shutting down. Princeton University, Middlebury College, Bowie State University, and New York University have all moved their finals online and told students to go home. A fair number of institutions have announced they will begin the spring semester remotely, and many are now requiring boosters to return to campus.

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Tuesday was the anniversary of the first US vaccination for Covid-19, a triumph of science and focused resource allocation. That was the shining achievement of the Trump administration. To recognize the milestone, CNN pulled together a precis of what's happened since, and I thought you might be interested in the high points.

-So far, 485 million doses of vaccine have been administered in the US.

-We now have 202 million Americans, 60.9 percent of us, fully vaccinated. That's 87 percent of senior citizens, but only 60 percent of under-25s. There are still 73 million people, 23.4 percent of the eligible, who haven't received a dose. Only 35 percent of pregnant people are vaccinated despite the evidence that pregnancy is an important risk factor for severe disease, especially from Delta, and that the vaccine is safe during pregnancy. States range widely from Vermont with 75 percent vaccinated to Mississippi, Alabama, Wyoming, and Idaho all under 50 percent. None of them is close to enough.

-Two million doses are going into arms per day at present. We peaked in mid-April around 3.4 million. Currently, half the doses are boosters. Only 16.7 percent of eligible children under 12 have received at least one dose; about 10 percent are fully vaccinated.

-Worldwide, 8.5 billion doses of vaccine have been administered, most of those in well-resourced countries. Just 47 percent of the world's population is fully vaccinated. In high-income countries, 65 percent of people have received at least one dose whereas that number is 8.35 percent in low-income countries.

-Over 50 million cases have been reported in the US; 271 million have been reported worldwide. No one thinks this captures all of the real cases or that we ever will.

-800,000 people have died so far in this pandemic in the US, half a million of those since that first vaccination; 5.3 million have died worldwide. We discussed last time we talked that this includes one percent of all old people and closer to two percent of over-75s; a half-million of the dead were 65 or older. People of color have been twice as likely to die as White people. The states with most of the dying per capita are Mississippi, Alabama, New Jersey, Louisiana, Arizona, and Oklahoma, all with more than 300 deaths per 100,000 residents. States and territories on the other end of things with under 100 deaths per 100,000 are the Northern Mariana Islands, Vermont, Hawaii, the US Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico. Looks like living on an island is a great Covid-19 protection plan. Again, no one believes this is all of the deaths—CDC estimates the real number is 32 percent higher, so closer to 1.1 million; but here there's a chance we'll some day have a better handle on this. I expect excess deaths analysis will provide a fuller picture as time goes on. It is important to remember that most deaths occurring after May or so were preventable.

Quite a picture, isn't it?

On the other hand, the Commonwealth Fund, a philanthropic organization dedicated to research on health care issues, issued a report on Tuesday updating an ongoing project to show the impact of vaccination through the end of last month. This very sophisticated analysis accounts for vaccine effectiveness; the pace of vaccinations; timeline and characteristics of the D614G, Alpha, Delta, and Iota variants; and changes in behavior.

The findings are that, in the absence of vaccination, "daily deaths from COVID-19 could have jumped to as high as 21,000 per day—nearly 5.2 times the level of the record peak of more than 4,000 deaths per day recorded in January 2021." Gulp! They also estimate that without vaccination, deaths would have been 3.2 times higher—1.1 million deaths in addition to the 800,000 we've seen—and we'd have had more than 10.3 million additional hospitalizations—4.3 times the actual number. As bad as things have been in real life, I can't even imagine the destruction those kinds of numbers would have wrought. The report estimates nearly 36 million additional cases, most of them in late summer and early fall as Delta rampaged through the population. They also point out, "Our findings highlight the ongoing tragedy of preventable death and hospitalization occurring among unvaccinated Americans." Tough to see when we know what to do about it.

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I wasn't thrilled to read that only 55 percent of nursing home residents—and under 40 percent in some states—in the US have received booster shots. This is pretty terrifying given many of them are close to a year past their second dose and what we've learned about Omicron. It will show up in nursing homes if it hasn't already done so, and if anyone's likely to become severely ill, this population would be the ones. This doesn't appear to be an access problem, so I'm not sure what's operating there. There's a push on to remedy this.

Some other not-so-great vaccine news comes from the Pfizer/BioNTech clinical trials in children under 5. While those 6 months to 2 years are showing a promising response to the dosage used, this was not true in the 2- to 4-year-olds whose responses fell short of what has been seen in older children and adults. As a result, the trial has been adjusted to include a third dose. If that works, then we should know in a few months and an application for an extension of the emergency use authorization (EUA) to these younger children would likely be submitted in the second quarter of 2022. The companies are also testing third doses as boosters in children from 5 to 17 years.

Also on the topic of vaccines, early lab studies of the Moderna vaccine against the Omicron variant are coming in. As expected, this one looks pretty much the way the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine looks—significantly lowered efficacy against infection, but hanging in there relatively well against severe disease, hospitalization, and death. Here too, boosters pick that protection up quite a lot, which highlights once again the importance of fully-vaccinated people getting boosters if they're six months past their second dose.

I've had a lot of questions on how the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine looks against Omicron. The answer is still that we don't know; however studies are expected to yield results next month. We should note here that folks who received that vaccine as their initial vaccination at least two months ago were already being urged to get boosted, so no need to wait for lab tests to make the move.

In more vaccine news, the CDC has changed its vaccine guidance; they now recommend choosing one of the two mRNA vaccines, either the one from Moderna or the one from Pfizer/BioNTech, over the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson due to the potential for a serious blood clotting disorder. This very rare complication, thrombosis with thrombocytopenia syndrome (TTS) can be very severe and has caused nine reported deaths in the US, so it's an important concern. For the record, however, the incidence is still very small (about 12.5 cases per million doses), which is why the vaccine has not been withdrawn from the market, and the availability of this vaccine as an alternative for those with severe allergic reactions to mRNA vaccine components is important. We should also remember that the risk of blood clots is far smaller than the risks attendant on Covid-19, so if the only vaccine available to me was this one, I'd definitely get it rather than remain unprotected. That said, if you can receive one of the others, that would be the better choice according to the CDC.

The WHO held a meeting on Wednesday to talk about Omicron, and that group received a summary of recent research which should provide some hope with respect to the efficacy of vaccination against the variant. I was unable to identify and access much of the work, but working from a summary of the meeting, I can say that there is a fair-sized group of studies now which all seem to show that vaccination has a reasonable protective effect against the worst outcomes of infection and that boosters in particular are protective. So while there are likely going to be breakthroughs, vaccinated-and-boosted people look to have a substantially lowered risk for severe disease, hospitalization, and death. There has also been work with T cells showing that these may be what are responsible for the continuing protection against bad outcomes; these do not appear to be diminished really at all against Omicron.

I've read a preprint, that is, not peer-reviewed, paper from Massachusetts General Hospital and MIT describing research done with mRNA boosters and the Omicron variant. The team used a pseudovirus in

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their work, something we discussed briefly a couple of weeks ago; a pseudovirus is a nonreplicating virus with the SARS-CoV-2 genome engineered into it. These are used because they are not infectious, which makes them far safer to work with than the real thing. There's nothing new and startling here—lowered viral neutralization against Omicron which is improved measurably by use of a booster dose. What they saw was spike (S) protein on Omicron which was better at getting into host cells than the S proteins of delta or wild-type virus; this really is the new and improved version, as much as "4-fold more infectious than wild type and 2-fold more infectious than Delta." There are two things I'd call notable in their conclusions: (1) "However, individuals boosted with mRNA vaccines exhibited potent neutralization of Omicron only 4-6-fold lower than wild type, suggesting that boosters enhance the cross-reactivity of neutralizing antibody responses," and (2) "In addition, we find Omicron pseudovirus is more infectious than any other variant tested."

So we're becoming ever more sure Omicron is more transmissible than any earlier variant; additionally, we may be getting closer to understanding why that is. I read preliminary findings, still under peer-review, from a research group at the LKS Faculty of Medicine at The University of Hong Kong which explored this question. The way they did this was by using tissue cultures of human bronchial tissue (from the tubes that carry air into the lungs) and lung tissue in the laboratory and wild-type, as well as Delta and Omicron variants of SARS-CoV-2. I'll say up front that tissue cultures in a lab are not real bronchi and lungs in living persons; but if we're careful not to overinterpret our findings, these kinds of studies can provide important insights. And so this one has.

Findings included that Omicron infects and multiplies in bronchial tissue at 70 times the rate Delta did, but much slower than either of the other two versions of the virus and 10 times slower than the wild-type. One immunologist said it looks like the variant is more focused on the bronchi than on the lungs. The rapid replication in bronchial tissue may help to explain increased infectiousness, and slower replication in lung tissue presents some tantalizing support for the idea that Omicron infections may be less damaging to the lungs, that is, cause less severe disease. Now here's where that warning about overinterpreting the findings comes in: We're not inside a host with immune responses in these studies. But this is the way we move forward, cautiously, a step at a time, and it is interesting.

Another issue to consider regarding this new variant is the status of our monoclonal antibody treatments. You will recall that these are lab-made highly-purified antibodies administered to the exposed or infected person to prevent severe disease. There are several such treatments available currently in the US, but most of them look in tests like they're going to be less effective against the spike mutations seen in this variant. There is one that still looks very good; it is Vir Biotechnology and GlaxoSmithKline's sotrovimab. This one's given as an infusion, and there isn't a huge supply. Federal health authorities have decided to stop shipments of this drug for now, reserving it for when Omicron is more prevalent and it may be the only monoclonal which is effective. They've stepped up shipments of the others for now, so the overall supply should be OK in the short term. This strikes me as a smart strategy. Meanwhile, sotrovimab supplies are expected to be around 400,000 doses by early next month. Let's hope that's enough. I am viewing this as good reason to stay out of the way of this variant.

We'll note that Regeneron is working on new monoclonals updated to cover Omicron. They expect to be in trials early next year. Eli Lilly is preparing to do the same thing. AstraZeneca's long-acting monoclonal looks like it's going to be fine, at least based on some preliminary work that's been done. We'll keep watching for updates.

And that wraps things up just a week before Christmas. Please keep yourselves safe over the holiday. We'll talk again.

Northern State Falls to #20 St. Cloud State

Aberdeen, S.D. – The Northern State women’s basketball team dropped a hard fought game to #20 St. Cloud State, 66-50 in Wachs Arena to close out the year 2021. The Wolves were able to fight back within a point midway through the third quarter, but the Huskie defense proved to be too tough to complete the comeback.

THE QUICK DETAILS

Final Score: NSU 50, SCSU 66

Records: NSU 6-6 (3-4 NSIC), SCSU 8-2 (6-1 NSIC)

Attendance: 2017

HOW IT HAPPENED

- Northern State jumped out to an early 4-0 lead over St. Cloud State, with a layup by Laurie Rogers eight seconds into the game followed by another jumper by Haley Johnson
- In a back and forth first quarter which ended in a tie at 14, Rianna Fillipi and Kailee Oliverson each knocked down key 3-point baskets
- SCSU was able to use a 16-2 run in the second quarter to jump out to a 12 point advantage at 30-18, the Huskies would ultimately enter the halftime break with a 33-22 lead
- The Northern attack battled back in the early minutes of the third quarter, using a 14-5 run to claw back within one point at 38-37
- One point would be as close as NSU would get, the Huskies would out-score the Wolves 28-13 the remainder of the game and 19-8 in the fourth period
- The Wolves out-rebounded the Huskies 33-31 and the two teams were even at 24 a piece in points in the paint
- Northern State tied their season high of five made 3-pointers and shot a season best 71.4 percent from 3-point range on 5-7 shooting

NORTHERN STATE STATISTICAL STANDOUTS

Lexi Roe: 13 points, 7 rebounds, 1 assist 2-2 3-pointers

Rianna Fillipi: 11 points, 4 rebounds, 3 assists, 2 blocks

Kailee Oliverson: 9 points, 7 rebounds, 2 assists, 1 steal

UP NEXT

Northern State women’s basketball will return to action in 2022 with a home match-up against MSU Moorhead on January 2nd. The Wolves and the Dragons will tip-off at 6 p.m. in Wachs Arena.

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St. Cloud State edges Northern late

ABERDEEN, S.D. - The Northern State men's basketball program dropped a second straight nailbiter Saturday afternoon, falling 84-80 to St. Cloud State in NSIC North Division play at Wachs Arena. The loss comes on the heels of a 3-point setback against No. 17 Minnesota Duluth a day prior.

QUICK HITS

Final score: St. Cloud State 84, Northern State 80

Records: Northern State 9-6, 3-4 NSIC; St. Cloud State 7-6, 4-3 NSIC

Attendance: 2,017

HOW IT HAPPENED

For the second straight night, the Wolves played a see-saw battle with an NSIC North Division foe. Saturday's contest featured 11 ties and 10 lead changes, several of which came in the game's waning minutes.

After Jordan Belka tied the score at 79 with a pair of free throws at the 33-second mark, St. Cloud State's Anthony Roberts drove the lane and drew a foul on his lay-in with just 6 seconds remaining.

Up three with under 5 seconds to play, St. Cloud State chose to foul and send Sam Masten to the line. Masten made the first of his 2-shot opportunity, then intentionally missed the second. However, the Wolves were whistled for a foul on the ensuing rebound, sending the Huskies to the other end for two.

Roberts, at the line with a chance to ice the game, missed both free throws, but again, the Wolves couldn't capitalize as the Huskies were awarded the ball on the rebound with less than a second to play.

SCSU's Matthew Willert was able to secure the Huskies' victory with two free throws with 0.7 seconds remaining in the game.

STATISTICAL LEADERS

Jordan Belka: 21 points, 8 rebounds

Kaillab Walton-Blanden 15 points, 7 rebounds, 3 assists

Augustin Reede 14 points, 5 rebounds

Cole Bergan 9 points, 4 rebounds, 2 assists

UP NEXT


Northern State is off for the holiday break before returning to action Jan. 2 when the Wolves host Minnesota State Moorhead at Wachs Arena. Tip-off is set for 4 p.m.

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THE ILLUSTRATED BIBLE

Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit. EPHESIANS 2:19-22 



“The new church of Haarlem” by Johannes Cornelis Busé (1891-1974)

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by Healthy Exchanges

White Chocolate Cheesecake

If you're celebrating the New Year with a party, be sure to include this scrumptious cheesecake on the menu. It looks as festive as it tastes.

- 2 (8-ounce) packages fat-free cream cheese
- 1 (4-serving) package sugar-free instant white-chocolate pudding mix
- 2/3 cup nonfat dry milk powder
- 1 cup water
- 1 cup reduced-calorie whipped topping
- 1 (6 ounce) purchased chocolate pie crust
- 1/2 teaspoon almond extract
- 4 to 5 drops red food coloring
- 1 tablespoon slivered almonds
- 1 tablespoon mini chocolate chips
- 3 maraschino cherries, quartered

1. In a large bowl, stir cream cheese with a spoon until soft. Add dry pudding mix, dry milk powder and water. Mix well using wire whisk. Mix in 1/4 cup of the whipped topping. Spread mixture evenly into pie crust. Refrigerate while preparing topping.

2. In medium bowl, gently combine remaining 3/4 cup whipped topping, almond extract and food coloring. Evenly spread topping mixture over set filling. Sprinkle almonds, chocolate chips and cherry pieces evenly over top. Refrigerate at least 30 minutes. Serves 8.

* Each serving equals: About 206 calories, 6g fat, 11g protein, 27g carb., 641mg sodium, 1g fiber; Diabetic Exchanges: 1 1/2 Starch, 1 Meat, 1 Fat.

1. Is the book of Immanuel in the Old Testament or New Testament or neither?

2. Isaiah, who prophesied about the birth of Christ, lived about how many years prior? *50, 150, 400, 700*

3. Where does the Bible tell us that Jesus was born on Dec. 25? *Does not, Matthew 3:4, Mark 1:1, Luke 7:7*

4. From Luke 2:2, who was governor of Syria at the time of Jesus' birth? *Augustus, Barabbas, Cyrenius, Dalphon*

5. What priest was told he would not die until he saw the Savior? *Joazar, Matthias, Simeon, Elioneus*

6. Who informed Joseph that the baby's name was to be Jesus? *Herod, Pilate, Mary, An angel*

ANSWERS: 1) Neither; 2) 700; 3) Does not; 4) Cyrenius; 5) Simeon; 6) An angel

Sharpen your understanding of scripture with Wilson's Casey's latest book, "Test Your Bible Knowledge." Available in bookstores and online, it makes a great gift.

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Artist Spotlight:
Michael T. Gilbert

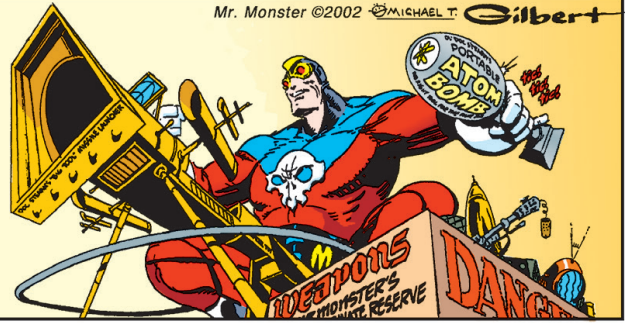


Today's Flash Gordon Sunday page features a ghastly gallery of Mongonian monsters... so who better to illustrate it than **Mr. Monster** creator **Michael T. Gilbert**?

Known for the versatility of his art and writing styles, Michael has worked on characters as diverse as **Batman, Elric and Donald Duck**.

In 1984 he breathed life into the ultimate monster-fighting hero, **Mr. Monster**.

Mr. Monster ©2002 MICHAEL T. Gilbert



FLASH GORDON

By JIM KEEFE
12-12
Artwork: MICHAEL T. GILBERT

FLASH DISCOVERS A HIDDEN CHAMBER IN LONAK'S QUARTERS.

IT APPEARS LONAK HAS BEEN DOING A LITTLE HUNTING.



BY TAO ...



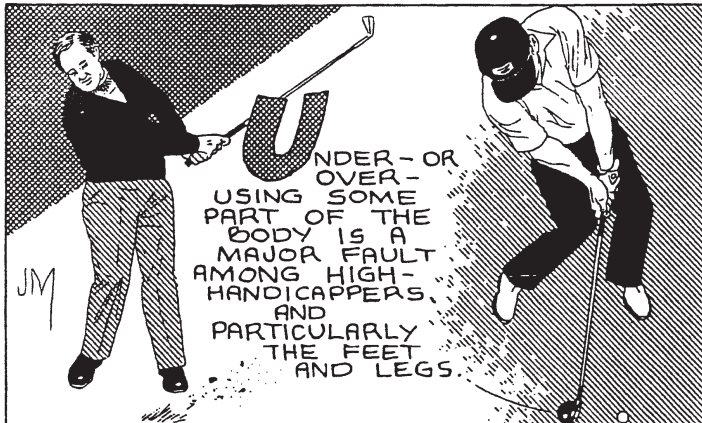
THE KRONTORS AREN'T ON A MINDLESS RAMPAGE, THEY'VE BEEN SEARCHING FOR SOMETHING...

THEIR KING!

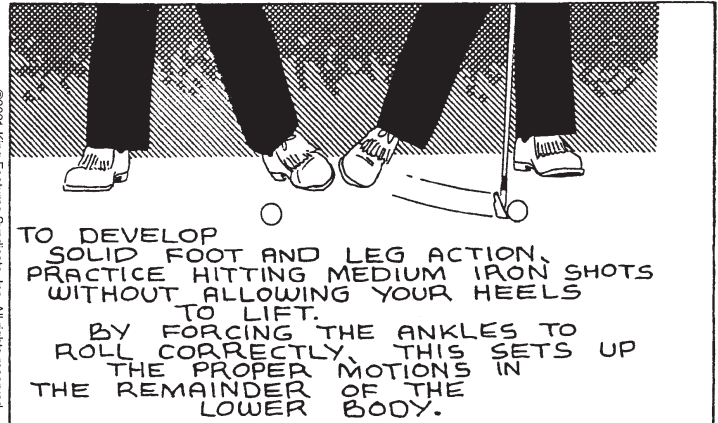
THE CROWN. IT WAS ... ATTACHED?

APPARENTLY ONCE YOU'RE THE RULER, THERE'S NO ABDICATING THE THRONE.

Play Better Golf with JACK NICKLAUS

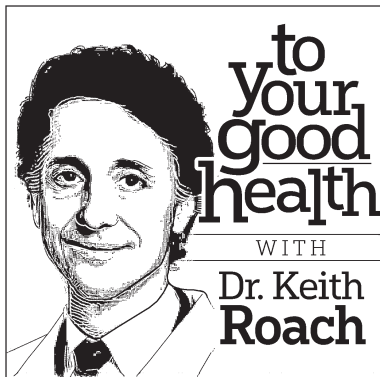


UNDER - OR OVER - USING SOME PART OF THE BODY IS A MAJOR FAULT AMONG HIGH-HANDICAPPERS, AND PARTICULARLY THE FEET AND LEGS.



TO DEVELOP SOLID FOOT AND LEG ACTION, PRACTICE HITTING MEDIUM IRON SHOTS WITHOUT ALLOWING YOUR HEELS TO LIFT. BY FORCING THE ANKLES TO ROLL CORRECTLY, THIS SETS UP THE PROPER MOTIONS IN THE REMAINDER OF THE LOWER BODY.

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Blood-Pressure Goal: How Low Should It Go?

DEAR DR. ROACH: My sister, 75, is taking only two drugs for the past three years, and they are both for high blood pressure. Now she finds that her blood pressure is 110/70 and wonders why she can't take less of her medications as an experiment. For instance, if she cut her pills in half and still has her blood pressure under 120/80, would there be any problem with this? -- R.I.

ANSWER: The optimum goal of blood pressure treatment is still not known; however, evidence is accumulating that it might be lower than the less than 140/less than 90 that is has typically been the target. At least

in higher-risk people with high blood pressure, a large trial found that a goal blood pressure of less than 120/less than 90 had better outcomes than the traditional goal. A more recent follow-up study showed that risk of dementia was also lower in the group that had the lower blood pressure.

Not everyone can tolerate a blood pressure that low: Side effects of medications can be problematic. But it's reasonable to aim at 120/80 or less.

In your sister's case, she is a little bit below that. It wouldn't be unreasonable if, after discussing with her doctor, she tried reducing the dose of one of the medications. If her blood pressure remains lower than 120/80, she could continue that lower dose. However, if she feels perfectly well on her current dose, there is not a reason to reduce the dose.

In either case, don't reduce the dose without a discussion, nor cut the pill in half without checking with the doctor or pharmacist. Some pills shouldn't be cut in half.

DEAR DR. ROACH: I am an 82-year-old woman in good health. I recently had lab work that showed my TSH level is 6.14. I was told that I would need thyroid medicine because eventually I would feel tired and cold all the time. I do not have either of these symptoms. I'm usually warm when others say they are cold. I wake up at 6:30 and am ready for the day. Do I have an underactive thyroid? I don't think so. -- R.K.

ANSWER: I don't think you have an underactive thyroid either.

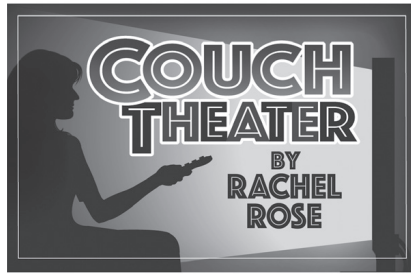
The thyroid stimulating hormone level is a measure of the pituitary hormone TSH, which stimulates the thyroid gland to release thyroid hormone (thyroxine, or T4). Many people, especially older women, have a high TSH level and normal thyroxine levels. There is some controversy about whether people in your situation need to be treated. Certainly, people with symptoms that are clearly from low thyroid benefit from treatment. There is also new evidence suggesting that younger people may benefit from treatment in order to reduce risk of heart disease. This effect was observed when TSH levels were higher than yours (above 7).

My personal practice is to not treat people with high TSH, normal thyroxine and no symptoms unless the TSH levels are above 10. Treating people under 65 with TSH above 7 might also make sense. Some of my colleagues will measure anti-thyroid antibodies, since people who have high levels of these antibodies are more likely to go on to develop symptomatic low thyroid levels.

Dr. Roach regrets that he is unable to answer individual questions, but will incorporate them in the column whenever possible. Readers may email questions to ToYourGoodHealth@med.cornell.edu.

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Being the Ricardos (R) — The long-awaited story of Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz as their iconic characters of Lucy and Ricky Ricardo has finally arrived. Not since Tom Cruise was cast as the vampire LeStat has there been so much quizzical buzz about casting, namely Nicole Kidman as Lucy. While the story focuses on a time when “I Love Lucy” was facing cancellation, interwoven is the effect of the McCarthyism of the time, rampant sexism, Ball’s desire for control and the relationship between Lucy and Desi (played by Javier Bardem). J.K. Simmons has received applause for his performance as neighbor Fred Mertz, but early reviews of both Kidman and the entire presentation are mixed. (Prime Video)

Don’t Look Up (R) — The plot for this dark comedy with a message is remarkably timely as NASA is planning on hitting an asteroid that’s coming too close to Earth for comfort. On screen, Leo DiCaprio and Jennifer Lawrence play low-level astronomers desperately trying to warn the government, the media and the world of impending doom and certain death via a giant comet, only to be met by indifference, laughs and disbelief. The rest of the cast is about as jam-packed with fellow Oscar nominees and winners as you can get, including Meryl Streep, Jonah Hill, Timothee Chalamet and Cate Blanchett, plus Matthew Perry, Ariana Grande and more. Premieres Dec. 24. (Netflix)

You Keep the Kids! (NR) — In this subtitled Spanish language comedy (AKA “Mama o Papa”), main characters Flora and Victor are parents of three kids. Upon deciding to divorce and each pursue their own dream career opportunities, they realize that neither of them considered remaining

the custodial parent of their brood. What follows is a weird game of the parents trying to convince their own children that they’d really prefer living with the other parent. It’s a bizarre battle stemming from the selfishness of adults trying to have it all for themselves. (HBOMax)

King Tut in Color (NR) — There was a time in the 1980s when scads of old black and white movies were being colorized thanks to advances in digital colorization. One set that had escaped color until now is the 1922 newsreel footage of the discovery of King Tut-ankhamun’s tomb. This 44-minute NatGeo documentary shows the excavation process of British archaeologist Howard Carter and his team as they unearth Tut’s tomb in the Valley of the Kings over 3,000 years after his death, in all of its golden glory. Premieres Dec. 24. (Disney+)



Prime Video

Nicole Kidman and Javier Bardem in “Being the Ricardos”

Reno 911! The Hunt for QAnon (NR) — All I can ask is, why hasn’t this special gotten to us sooner?! If anyone will fail at tracking down the leader of an anti-government faction, it’s this dysfunctional and easily distracted crew of the Reno Sheriff’s Department. While doing recon at a QAnon convention, the group gets stranded at sea, and then finds themselves stuck at none other than Jeffrey Epstein’s former island. Awkward! All the favorite characters return, including shorty-shorts-wearing Lieutenant Dangle (Thomas Lennon) and Deputy Clementine Johnson, played by Wendi McLendon-Covey. Premieres Dec. 23. (Paramount+)

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it didn't top the charts.

2. All of them. On "For You," Prince played over two dozen different instruments. He was 19 years old.
3. Eddy used a gigantic empty water storage tank when the recording studio didn't have an echo chamber. His song "Rebel-Rouser" was featured in the 1994 film "Forrest Gump" in the scene where Forrest runs from bullies and cuts across the football field.
4. "Whole Lotta Shakin Goin' On," by Jerry Lee Lewis, on Aug. 5, 1957.
5. "Cry to Me," by Solomon Burke in 1962. Burke's version was used in the 1987 film "Dirty Dancing" with Patrick Swayze. Take a listen to the version by unknown Anthony Alvarez on YouTube. In fact, check out his whole channel.

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1. Name the first group that had a No. 1 R&B hit with "Get Ready."
2. How many instruments did Prince play on his debut album in 1978?
3. How did Duane Eddy initially get that twang sound out of his guitar?
4. What was the first song played on "American Bandstand"?
5. Name the song that contains this lyric: "When you're all alone in your lonely room, And there's nothing but the smell of her perfume."

Answers

1. The Temptations, in 1966. Rare Earth released a cover in 1970, and although their version went gold,

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Just Like Cats & Dogs

by Dave T. Phipps



GRIN and BEAR IT



HOCUS-FOCUS

BY HENRY BOLTINOFF



Find at least six differences in details between panels.



Differences: 1. Fork is shorter. 2. Boots are different. 3. Hat is different. 4. Arm is showing. 5. Oven mitt is different. 6. Grill leg is removed.

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- To prevent candle wax from sticking to a candleholder, swipe the inside with a little olive oil. It'll do the trick!

- Make your own gift wrap from everyday items like newspaper (think color comics) and children's drawings, which can be glued together along the edges. For a really unique wrapping, try inexpensive fabric.

- Cookies are so fun to make (and to eat). To save some of your favorites for the new year, simply place dough balls on a cookie sheet and freeze. Pop into a freezer-safe bag, and you can have freshly baked cookies pretty much anytime! — JoAnn

- "I have two carafes that I use for my breakfast bar. I keep coffee in one, and the other holds milk or cream. On holiday nights, I prep the cream carafe and put it in the fridge. In the morning, while the first pot of coffee is brewing, I fill the coffee carafe with hot water and let it sit until the coffee is ready. It keeps the coffee hot longer. Then

guests can serve themselves some coffee while the next pot is brewing." — D.A. in Ohio

- "Wine: Nobody I know is wasting it. But if you're done before the bottle is, pour the leftover wine into ice-cube trays to save it. You can use it later in recipes or (my favorite) to chill a glass of wine!" — E. in Florida

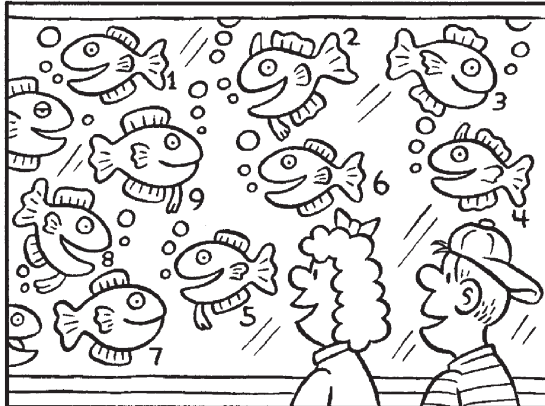
- A can opener's crevices can be cleaned by "opening" a length of waxed paper. Kitchen scissors can be sharpened by folding a piece of aluminum foil and cutting through it with the scissors.

Send your tips to Now Here's a Tip, 628 Virginia Drive, Orlando, FL 32803.

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SCHOOL'S OUT! Two of the fish in the above tank are exactly alike. See if you can find them before the bigger fish does. Answer: Numbers 1 and 6.

Junior Whirl

by Charles Barry Townsend

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
A		A			A	
P	A	P	A			A
	P			A	P	
E			P	P		P
			E	E	E	E
	E	E				

A SIMIAN STUMPER!

Can you fill in our puzzle grid? In each case we give you an "ape" and a hint to guide you through our jungle of incomplete words. Also, if you get them all correct, the middle letters, read across, will name a jungle animal.



- Highest points.
- North American Indian infant.
- Give one's OK.
- Measuring instrument.
- Small knife.
- Put into practice.
- Low protective wall.

Insert the answers in the grid top to bottom.

1. Apogees. 2. Papoose. 3. Applied. 4. Calliper. 5. Scalpel. 6. animal is "gorilla." 7. Paraper. The jungle



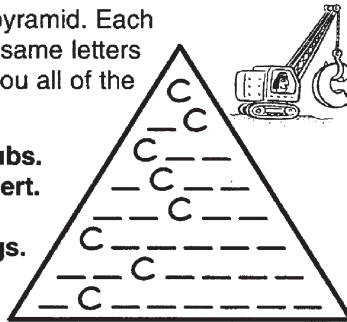
MANY WORDS! What six-letter word contains an additional six words within itself, without moving any of the letters around?

Herein -- he, her, here, ere, rein, in.

THE "C" PYRAMID! Pictured at right is a word pyramid. Each word, as you go down the pyramid, contains the same letters as the word above it plus a new letter. We give you all of the C's. Here are some hints from the top down.

- Musical tone (given).
- Master of ceremonies.
- Eccentric wheel.
- Fraudulent scheme.
- Medieval war clubs.
- Ships of the desert.
- To make still.
- Way to cook eggs.

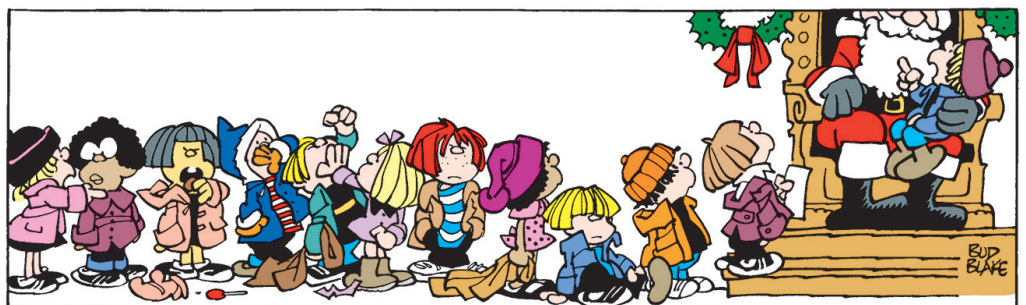
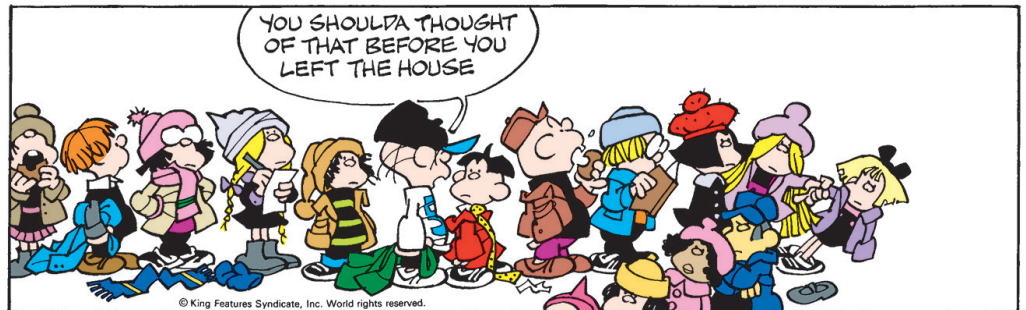
The words are c, mc, cam, scam, maces, camels, becalms, scramble.



Illustrated by David Coulson

TIGER

by BUD BLAKE



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King Crossword

ACROSS

- 1 Earring site
- 5 Smack
- 8 Blog entry
- 12 Regrettably
- 13 Fuss
- 14 "May It Be" singer
- 15 Dealer's foe
- 16 Moving-day rental
- 17 Aviation prefix
- 18 Energetic person
- 20 Galley supply
- 22 Strikers' queue
- 26 Manhandled
- 29 Chemical suffix
- 30 Hobbyist's abbr.
- 31 Rue the run
- 32 German conjunction
- 33 Lavish party
- 34 — Paulo
- 35 Fuel stat
- 36 Devil's domain
- 37 Playgoer's souvenir
- 40 Writer Quindlen
- 41 Short jacket
- 45 Gambling game
- 47 Jay follower
- 49 San —, Italy

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			

- 50 Help a crook
- 51 Hosp. sections
- 52 Author Sheehy
- 53 Striped fish
- 54 Perched
- 55 Deco artist
- 6 Greek mountain
- 7 Ad nauseam
- 8 Oyster's prize
- 9 Biased
- 10 Aleppo's land (Abbr.)
- 11 Eastern "way"
- 19 Central
- 21 Consumed
- 23 Monarchs
- 24 Evening, in an ad
- 25 Peepers
- 26 Bygone days
- 27 Exotic berry
- 28 "So what?"
- 32 Chimney pipes
- 33 Maker of ornate eggs
- 35 Gents
- 36 Coloration
- 38 Shoelace woes
- 39 Secret rendezvous
- 42 Dread
- 43 Send forth
- 44 Portrayal
- 45 "Terrif!"
- 46 Lawyers' gp.
- 48 Altar constellation

DOWN

- 1 Crow's-nest cry
- 2 Skin care brand
- 3 Hoedown site
- 4 Jailbreak participant
- 5 Mayhem

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— King Crossword —

Answers

Solution time: 25 mins.

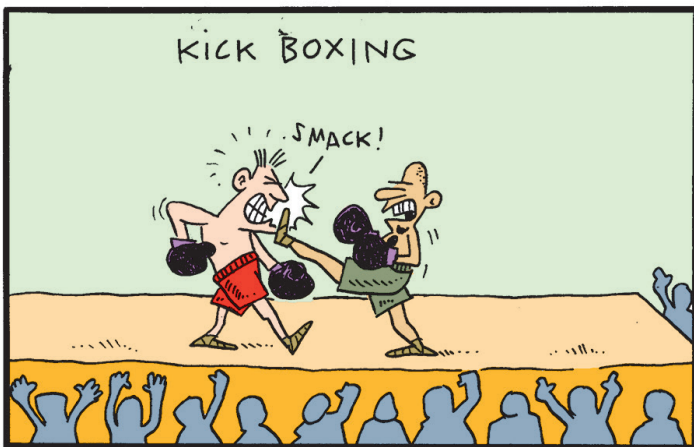
L	O	B	E		H	I	T		P	O	S	T
A	L	A	S		A	D	O		E	N	Y	A
N	A	R	C		V	A	N		A	E	R	O
D	Y	N	A	M	O		O	A	R	S		
			P	I	C	K	E	T	L	I	N	E
P	A	W	E	D		I	N	E		D	I	Y
A	C	H	E		U	N	D		F	E	T	E
S	A	O		M	P	G		H	A	D	E	S
T	I	C	K	E	T	S	T	U	B			
		A	N	N	A		R	E	E	F	E	R
F	A	R	O		K	A	Y		R	E	M	O
A	B	E	T		E	R	S		G	A	I	L
B	A	S	S		S	A	T		E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

LAFF - A - DAY

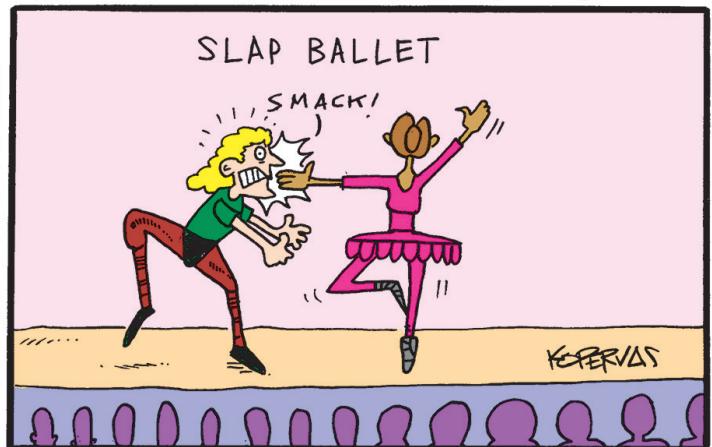


"I just don't feel it's necessary to say thank you for each instrument!"

Out on a Limb



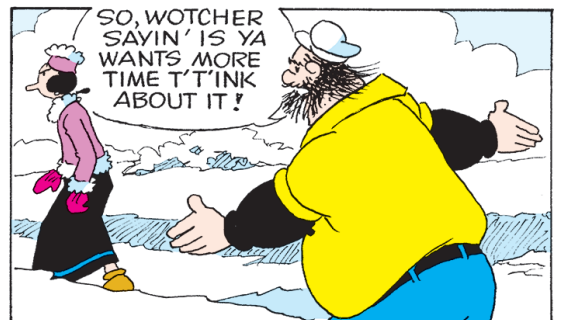
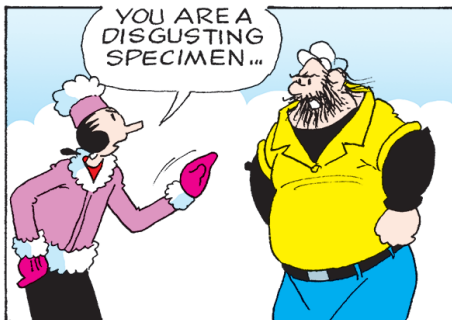
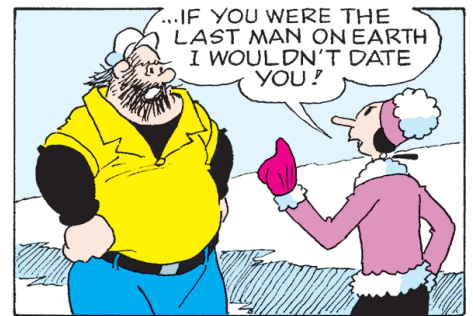
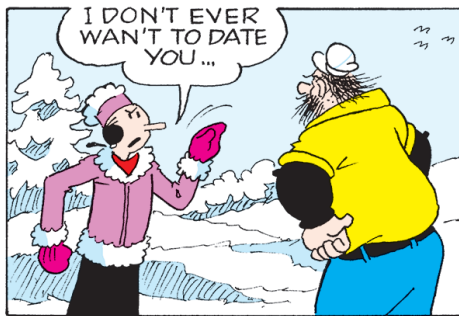
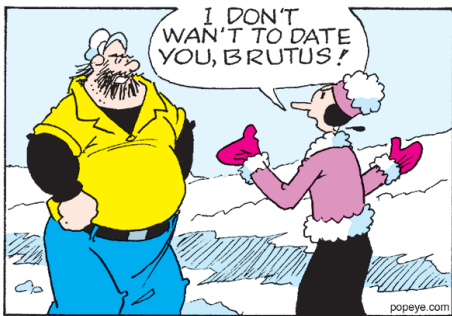
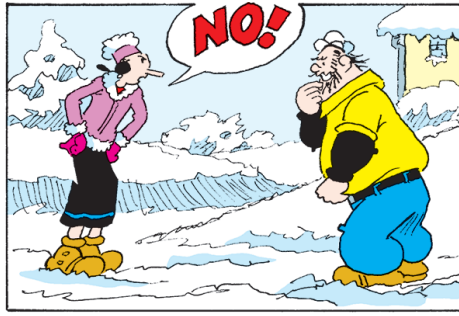
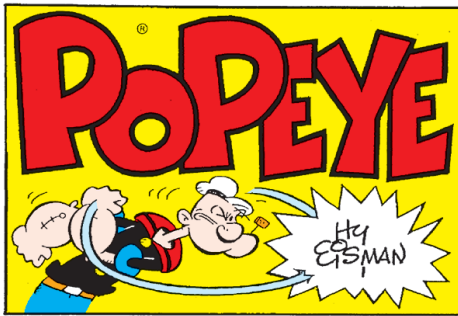
by Gary Kopervas



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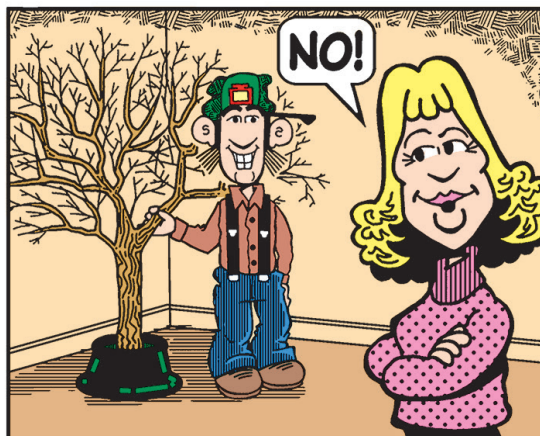
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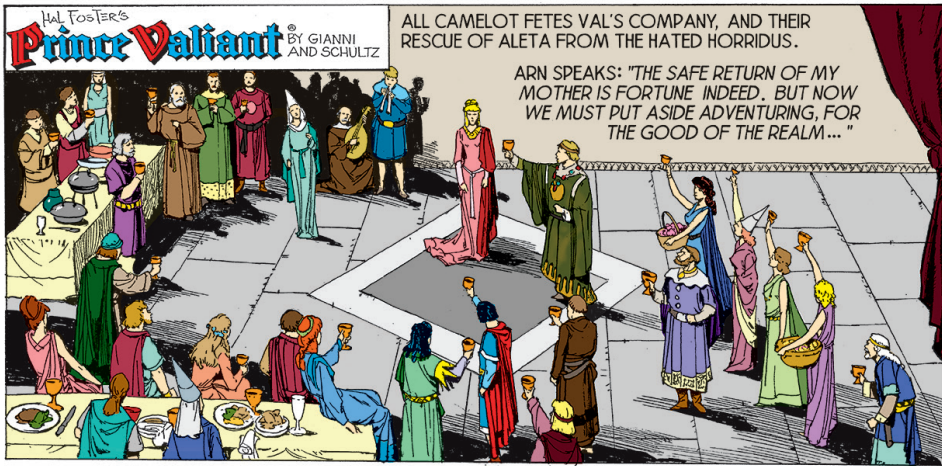
R.F.D.

by Mike Marland



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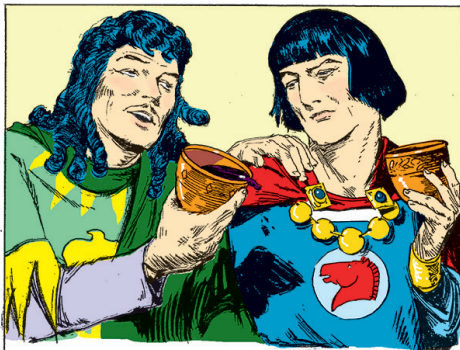
Hal Foster's **Prince Valiant** BY GIANNI AND SCHULTZ

ALL CAMELOT FETES VAL'S COMPANY, AND THEIR RESCUE OF ALETA FROM THE HATED HORRIDUS.

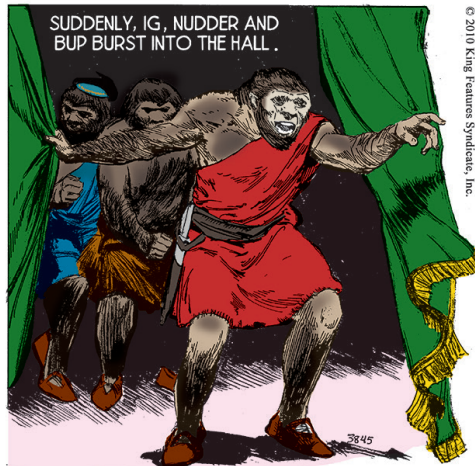
ARN SPEAKS: "THE SAFE RETURN OF MY MOTHER IS FORTUNE INDEED, BUT NOW WE MUST PUT ASIDE ADVENTURING, FOR THE GOOD OF THE REALM..."



THE COURT CHEERS, BUT VAL MOROSELY ASSUMES THE UNDERCURRENT OF DISAPPROVAL IS DIRECTED AT HIM. "THE GLORY DAYS," HE MUSES, "ARE OVER, AND JUST WHEN I FEEL STRONGER THAN I HAVE IN YEARS."



GAWAIN PICKS UP ON HIS OLD FRIEND'S TRAIN OF THOUGHT: "AH, YOUNG PRINCE - HERE'S TO A TIME WHEN OUR COLORFUL EXPLOITS LOOMED LARGE AND THRILLED LEGIONS OF..."



SUDDENLY, IG, NUDDER AND BUP BURST INTO THE HALL.

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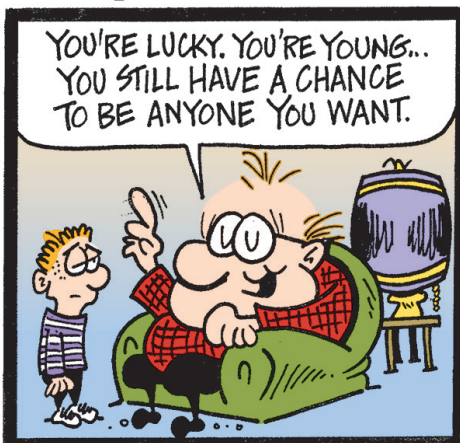
IG GRABS VAL IN A POWERFUL BEAR HUG! DOES THE BEAST MAN REALLY WISH TO RESUME THEIR ALTERCATION?

NEXT:
New horizons

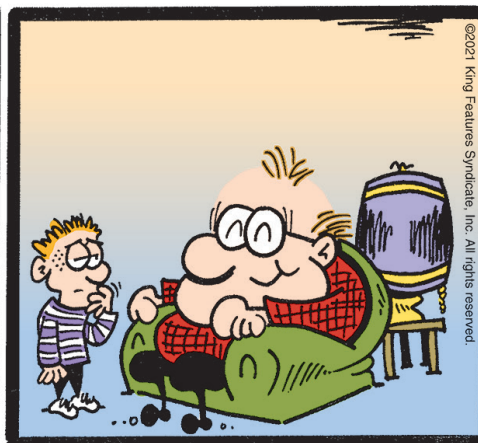


The Spats

by Jeff Pickering



YOU'RE LUCKY. YOU'RE YOUNG... YOU STILL HAVE A CHANCE TO BE ANYONE YOU WANT.



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ISN'T THAT CALLED IDENTITY THEFT?

PICKERING

SENIOR NEWS LINE

by Matilda Charles

AARP Survey: We Want to Grow Older at Home

We want to stay home as we age. That much is clear from a recent survey by AARP.

The 70-question survey touched on all types of topics about home and community preferences, with responses broken down by age. Here are some of the answers from seniors age 50 and older:

77% of us want to stay in our own homes as we age.

79% of us want to stay in our communities as we age.

33% of us know we will need modifications to our homes so we can stay in them and be safe as well as independent.

The number of households headed by seniors in the next 20 years is going to rise from 34 million to 48 million. We're going to want smart home devices and bathtub grab bars (and a full bath on the ground floor), as well as voice activated gadgets, wider

doorways and easy access through the front door.

We'll also want accessory dwelling units (known as ADUs), such as in-law apartments or additions, so others can be nearby but not living with us. (AARP and Lowe's have announced a collaboration to launch Lowe's Livable Home, which will include services and products to help us create and build what we need so we can stay in our homes. See its website at www.lowes.com.)

Safety also is on our minds, and over half of us would move to another area if it's safer. Nearly half would move if it lowered our expenses.

But we want a nice community, too, with bike trails and fast internet, ideally a small town where stores and services are nearby.

If you want to see the survey questions and compare your own answers, go to www.aarp.org and search for 2021 AARP Home and Community Preferences Survey.

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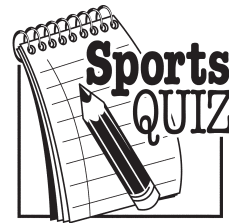
1. What team selected 17-year-old Jermaine O'Neal in the first round of the 1996 NBA Draft?

2. Name the ESPN game show that had contestants taking on statistician Howie Schwab in a showdown of sports trivia knowledge.

3. During the 2012 and '13 seasons, what Cincinnati Reds pitcher threw the 279th and 280th no-hitters in Major League Baseball history?

4. What legendary Dutch striker played for Manchester United (2001-06) and Real Madrid (2006-10), and scored 35 goals for the Netherlands national team from 1998-2011?

5. Name the Tennessee Titans wide receiver who scored the winning touchdown versus the Buffalo Bills in the "Music City Miracle" AFC wild-card playoff game in January 2000.



by Ryan A. Berenz

6. What World Golf Hall of Famer was the first Mexican golfer — either male or female — to achieve the world No. 1 rank?

7. What short-lived Marvel Comics series, first published in 1991, centered on an ex-NFL player who derived special crime-fighting powers from spilled chemicals and a nearly indestructible football uniform?

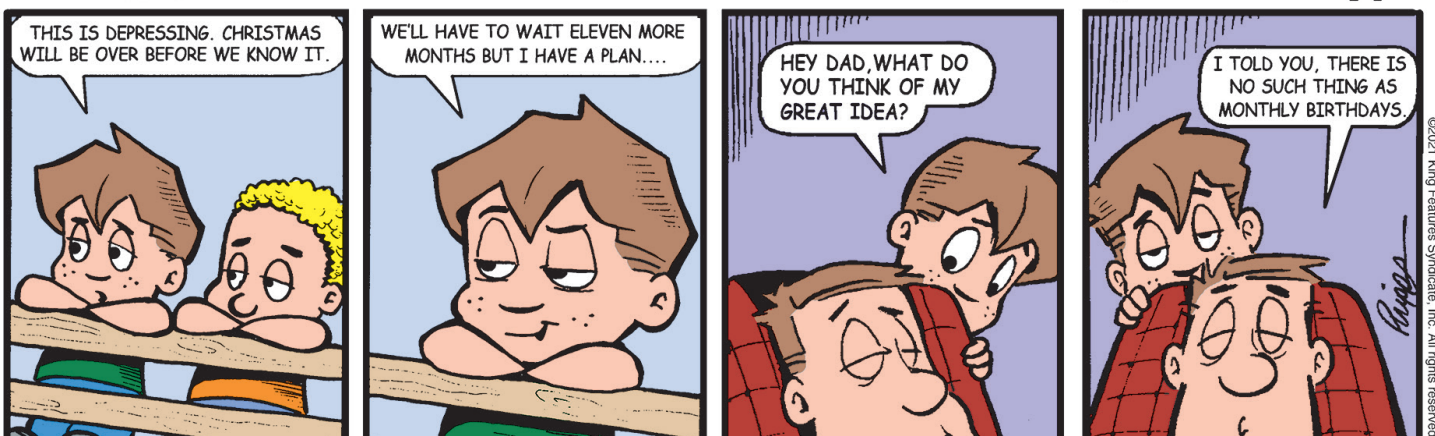
Answers

1. The Portland Trail Blazers.
2. "Stump the Schwab."
3. Homer Bailey.
4. Ruud van Nistelrooy.
5. Kevin Dyson.
6. Lorena Ochoa.
7. "NFL SuperPro."

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Amber Waves

by Dave T. Phipps



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Help Feed Hungry Pets This Holiday Season

DEAR PAW'S CORNER: Last year, pandemic lockdowns, job losses and financial instability caused many families, along with their pets, to experience food insecurity. Because groceries are a higher priority for families than pet food, many pets got less to eat or lived off table scraps, which can be unhealthy over the long term.

In 2020, local shelters, businesses and other groups came together to collect donations of food or money to purchase food and supplies for pets. These were a great help. However, we're not out of the woods yet. Rising prices due to inflation and supply chain issues, plus continued financial instability, means that many pets will go hungry

again this year. Can Paw's Corner readers rise to the occasion again this year and help neighbors and their pets to stay fed and healthy?
— *Shelter Volunteer in Wichita, Kansas*

DEAR VOLUNTEER: You've done just that, and I thank you! This holiday season, I know my readers will make the effort to help pets through donations of food, supplies and cash.

But maybe you're a new pet owner or have never donated before. Maybe you don't even have a pet right now, but want to help. There are so many choices out there. My advice is to pick just one way to help, because no contribution is too small. Pet food supplier Chewy has a great article on its website with ways to help: <https://be.chewy.com/pet-food-banks/>

Local shelters often do community outreach to help feed pets so owners can keep their pets and not surrender them. Contact the nearest pet shelter, either by email or phone, and ask what type of donations they need. Your contribution will go directly to that shelter, so you'll know the impact you're making.

Send your questions, comments or tips to ask@pawscorner.com.

Strange BUT TRUE

By Lucie Winborne

the Eastern Front ceased fire to listen.

* The Greek playwright Aeschylus was killed in 455 B.C. when an eagle, mistaking his bald head for a rock, dropped a tortoise on it. According to Pliny, Aeschylus was spending a lot of time in the open to avoid a prophecy that he would be killed by a falling object!

* Rats cannot vomit. Neither can horses.

* Soviet tenor Victor Ivanovich Nikitin had such an appealing voice that when he sang to his Soviet comrades during World War II, German troops on

* The human heart can squirt blood up to a distance of 30 feet.

* The American football huddle was invented in 1892 by Paul Hubbard, a quarterback from then all-deaf Gallaudet University, to stop the opposing team from reading their signs.

* A woman who was blinded in an accident developed multiple personalities -- some of which could see.

* An average raindrop falls at a speed of roughly 7 mph.

* When it comes to educating future billionaires, Harvard University holds the lead with an astonishing 29 billionaire alumni as of 2021.

* A town named Hell in Norway freezes over quite regularly.

* Do your lips get annoyingly dry in the winter? Better read the ingredients in that lip balm, as quite a few of them contain salicylic acid, which can exacerbate the problem and cause your lips to peel -- necessitating even more lip balm.

* The first plant to flower and produce seeds in space was *Arabidopsis thaliana*, grown in 1982 by the crew of the Soviet Salyut 7 on the International Space Station.

* It is illegal to step on money in Thailand because you would be insulting the king by treading on his picture.

Thought for the Day: "The only path wide enough for us all is love." -- Kamand Kojouri

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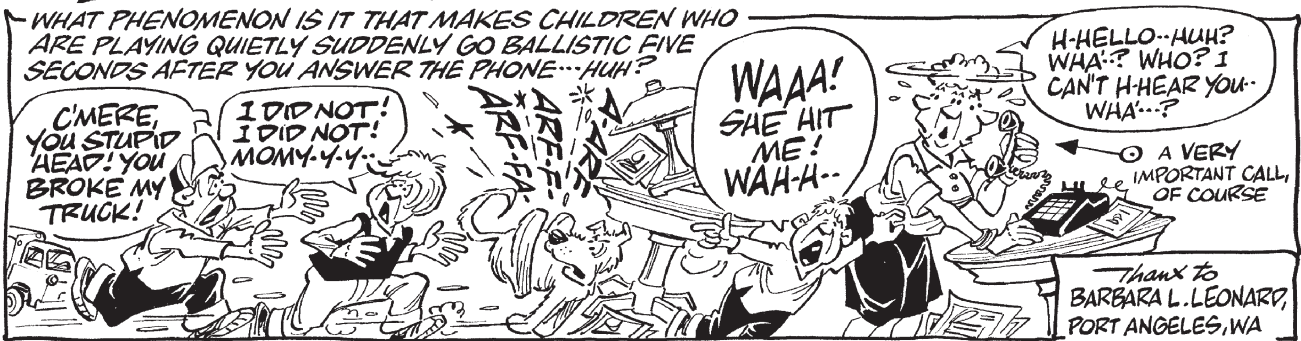
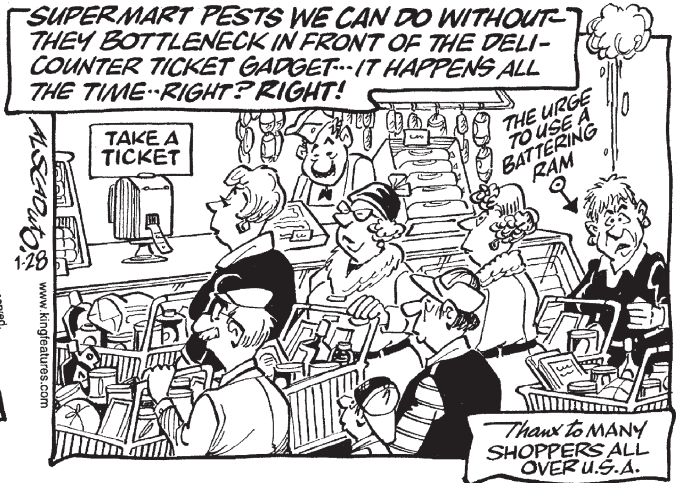
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THEY'LL DO IT EVERY TIME

RIGHT QUESTION,
WRONG ANSWER—



BY AL SCADUTO



A fresh snip from a **mint** plant in your garden can be used to granish plates, desserts or drinks. Cabbage and tomato plants are said to increase their yield if mint is grown nearby. Moths, ants and mice can be repelled by its scent. Mint plants can spread quickly if left unattended, so keep them cut back weekly during growing season.

— Brenda Weaver

Source: www.openpermaculture.com



by Freddy Groves

Boot-Camp for Veteran-Owned Businesses

Last summer, the Department of Veterans Affairs brought together 80 women veteran business owners for a six-month boot camp hosted by PenFed and the VA Office of Small and Disadvantaged Business Utilization (OSDBU). The goal: teach them how to grow their businesses.

The education they received was like a fast-tracked MBA with hands-on classes in product/market analysis, business development and more. At the end of the six months there was a pitch competition to win a grant for their business.

The Veteran Entrepreneur Investment Program (VEIP), in collaboration with PenFed, has much to offer veterans who already have a business up and running.

To learn more about PenFed, go to veip.penfedfoundation.org. Read about its various programs, especially the

Master's Program start-up fundraising accelerator. Application deadline for the Spring 2022 program is Jan. 30. The eight-week program is part of an intensive one-year Master's Program. Classes are open to veterans and their spouses who own businesses, and include fundraising coaching, mentor matching and investor deal day.

If you don't qualify for the Master's Program because you don't have the required number of years running your business or because you haven't even started your business, there is other help for you.

The Small Business Administration offers support, grants, low-interest loans and more to veteran owners of small businesses under the "Patriot Express" program. Search the VA website (va.gov) for small business. Look carefully at the eligibility requirements, such as that the business needs to be more than 51% veteran-owned. Look for information at the OSDBU website.

If your location to open a business is flexible, check the VEIP website (veip.penfedfoundation.org) for its list of top cities for veteran entrepreneurs. Find out which locations top the list in categories such as growing economy, support for veterans and ability to start a business. Don't miss the list of emerg-

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CONGRESSMAN
DUSTY JOHNSON
Representing **SOUTH DAKOTA** at large



NDA—What's In, What's Out—A Breakdown

Last week, the National Defense Authorization (NDA) for fiscal year 2022 passed the House with a 363-70 vote. This week it passed the Senate. The annual NDA includes strong policies for our military and wins for South Dakota's Ellsworth Air Force Base and the future of the B-21 bomber mission.

One of the biggest wins for the military is a pay raise for our troops. The holiday season is a great time to thank and honor our veterans for their sacrifice for our freedoms, and Congress approving this pay raise is just a small way to show our gratefulness for their service. I am truly thankful to all Americans who have chosen to serve our country.

Also included in final passage of the NDA is a provision that prohibits the Department of Defense from dishonorably discharging servicemembers that refuse the COVID-19 vaccine. Servicemembers may only receive an honorable discharge or a general discharge under honorable conditions. The NDA also includes provisions to hold the Biden Administration accountable for its withdrawal from Afghanistan.

The final NDA also included \$15 million for a South Dakota Guard Readiness Center in Sioux Falls and \$2.87 billion for B-21 development.

While Congress debated many provisions that I'm sure you heard about in the news, several of those hot topic issues did not make it into the final text of the bill. The "red flag" laws that would allow a judge to issue ex parte protective orders to prohibit firearm possession were not included. Many people were concerned about this policy, as was I, which is why I joined dozens of my Republican colleagues to request this proposal be removed from any final package.

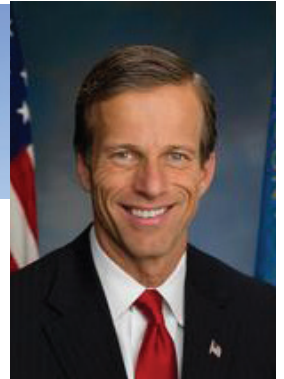
Congress also removed a proposal for women in the Selective Service, or the draft. America has not instituted a draft in over 50 years, and I think you'll see a push over the next year to do away with the Selective Service all together.

The final text of the NDA also did not include a requirement for defense contractors to pay a \$15 minimum wage. I believe in supporting our workers, but a federal one-size-fits-all approach is not the right answer. We need a proposal that can benefit workers and allow for states and local communities to be in charge while being mindful of any harmful secondary effects of changing wages.

While this was not a perfect bill, there were many provisions I was happy to see included. I have and will continue to support sustained and robust funding for the U.S. Armed Forces to ensure our men and women in uniform have the resources necessary to do their jobs.

###

John Thune
U.S. SENATOR - SOUTH DAKOTA



Home of the Raider

Providing for our nation's defense is one of our most serious responsibilities as members of Congress. The Constitution requires this solemn duty to ensure that our military is prepared to meet any threat, whether the danger comes from terrorism, rogue states, or major powers. And we have an obligation to ensure that our men and women in uniform have the resources they need to confront the threats we ask them to face.

With both China and Russia flexing their military power – China testing hypersonic missiles and continuing to threaten Taiwan and Russia massing troops on the Ukrainian border – it is critically important that we ensure our nation is prepared to defend itself and our vital national interests, whatever the threat might be.

Congress just passed the annual National Defense Authorization Act, or NDAA. While I'm frustrated that it took so long for the Democrat majority to bring this year's bill to the floor, I am happy that we did at least manage to secure a solid piece of legislation that boosts defense funding above the president's request, provides a pay raise for our all-volunteer force, and removed far-reaching policies sought by congressional Democrats. I was proud to vote yes on this year's NDAA, which also contained many significant wins for South Dakota.

Most notably, this year's NDAA contains the necessary funding authorization to continue essential preparation for the B-21 mission at Ellsworth Air Force Base. In June of this year, we learned that Ellsworth had officially been named Main Operating Base 1 for the future B-21 bomber – "Home of the Raider." This designation not only means that Ellsworth will be the first base to host the B-21 Raider, but that it will also host the formal training unit and the first operational squadron. Once operational, the B-21 Raider will be a critical part of our nation's long-range strike capabilities and nuclear deterrent well into the future.

I am incredibly proud that South Dakota and Ellsworth were chosen to serve as the first operating base for the B-21. When I first came to the Senate, the outlook for Ellsworth wasn't so rosy. I had barely arrived in the Senate when Ellsworth was placed on the Base Realignment and Closure, or BRAC, list. It was an all-hands effort by the congressional delegation and Ellsworth, state, and community leaders to make the case to the Bush administration and the BRAC Commission to remove Ellsworth from the closure list. We stood our ground and won the day. Ellsworth was removed from the BRAC list that August. And we got right to work on building up the base so that we would never again find ourselves in the same position.

I am committed to ensuring that Ellsworth has everything it needs for its new mission, so that it can continue to serve as one of our nation's essential military assets for decades to come. To that end, I worked to ensure that this year's NDAA contained not only full funding authorization for B-21 development, but full authorization for six equipment and support facilities that will be needed for the B-21 mission.

Next, Congress must formally appropriate these funds, and I will continue to do everything I can in Congress to work with federal, state, and community leaders to support the men and women at Ellsworth who are conducting the ongoing B-1 mission as we prepare for the arrival of the B-21. The future of Ellsworth Air Force Base is bright, and this NDAA authorizes an important down payment on this next chapter of Ellsworth's distinguished legacy.

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South Dakota Governor

Kristi Noem



South Dakota: *Under God, the People Rule*

That won't happen here

For generations, South Dakotans have held true to the values that make our state a special place to call home. I spend every day working to keep South Dakota a special place to live and strengthen it for the future. By doing so, South Dakota sets an example for the nation.

Because of our hard work, history, and values, South Dakota has become a popular destination for Americans looking to relocate their families. Tens of thousands have already made the move from across the country.

As we welcome new residents to our neighborhoods, we learn bits and pieces about the places where they have come from. Many have stories about deteriorating cities where respect for law and order has declined and violent crime has increased. Others talk about school systems that promote division and revisionist history instead of a true and honest accounting of history.

We reassure ourselves and our new friends by telling them, "That can't happen here."

Those may be very destructive words in a thriving society. As the saying goes, "complacency breeds contempt." We cannot take for granted the blessings of life in South Dakota.

Can it happen here? Yes, but not if we remain vigilant. The response we should all have is "that won't happen here." And then we need to take action to make that a reality.

We've seen the news coverage about other states shutting down churches, punishing students and faculty for praying in school, or taking away fairness for women in athletic events. That won't happen here.

This week, I announced two priority pieces of legislation: restoring protections for prayer in school and protecting girls' sports.

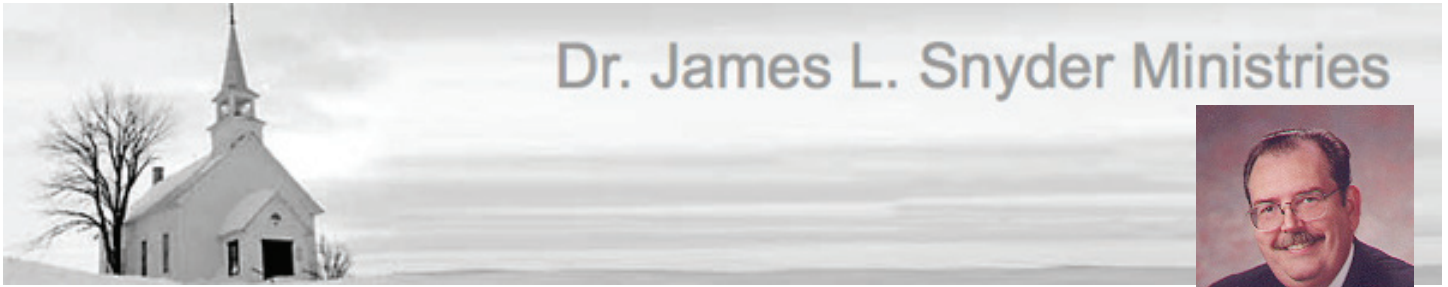
In this legislative session, I am calling on lawmakers to pass a bill allowing for a minute of silent reflection in schools. I believe every student deserves the opportunity to begin their day with a quick prayer. I know this will be a beneficial practice for students and teachers.

The bill allows for a student to pray during this time but does not force them to do so. Instead, the student is free to choose how to use this time to prepare themselves for a successful day of learning.

The second bill I unveiled this week will ensure that only female athletes, based on their biological sex, shall participate in any team sport or athletic event designated as being for females, women, or girls. This would apply to both K-12 schools and colleges.

Ronald Reagan made a great point when he called on Americans "to teach our children the values and the virtues handed down to us by our families, to have the courage to defend those values and the willingness to sacrifice for them."

It's not enough to say it cannot happen here. I am taking action every day to make sure bad policies do not find a home here in South Dakota. I hope you all will join me.



Dr. James L. Snyder Ministries



My Ongoing Grudge with Santa

I've had sort of a grudge with old Mr. Santa Claus. I was introduced to Santa Claus by my parents, who informed me that he was the one that brought all of my Christmas presents on Christmas day. And I believe my parents.

I remember on Christmas Eve we had to go to bed early to give Santa Claus time to deliver our presents under the tree. It was hard to sleep that early on Christmas Eve knowing that Santa was coming with Christmas presents. Finally, we did fall asleep only to wake up Christmas day with the tree filled with our Christmas presents.

I did not know the real identity of Santa Claus until many years later.

I was six years old when my parents first took me to see Santa Claus. I stood in the line and waited my turn to climb up on his lap and tell him what I wanted for Christmas. That first Christmas time, I told Santa that all I wanted for Christmas was a pony. Just a pony.

At the time, he told me that that was a good wish and he would see to it that I got my Christmas present when I needed it. I was so anxious when I jumped off his lap, I went over to my parents and told them Santa would get me a pony for Christmas.

Looking at me, my parents just smiled, patted my head, and said, "Okay, it's time to go home now."

That was two weeks before Christmas, and during those two weeks, I was ecstatic about that pony that was coming because my parents always told me Santa Claus never lies. So I can trust him as much as I can trust them. That turned out to be true.

That Christmas Eve, I could hardly go to bed. Once in bed, I could not keep my eyes shut thinking about that marvelous pony Santa would give me for my Christmas present. I kept thinking about the name I would use for that pony. I had half a dozen names; it just jingled through my mind.

This was going to be the best Christmas I would ever have.

I don't know how I did it, but I finally drifted off to sleep and dreamed about my Christmas pony.

When I awoke that Christmas morning, I was so excited, I could hardly get out of bed quick enough. So I ran downstairs to the Christmas tree, expecting to see my Christmas pony. When I didn't see it, I asked my parents where it was. All they could say was, "Well, we haven't seen it. Maybe it's just late."

Before we could open our presents, we had to go and have breakfast, and we tried to make that as fast

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as possible. Then after breakfast, we were able to go to the Christmas tree and open up our Christmas presents as a family.

I was a little depressed because my little Christmas pony was nowhere to be seen.

There was no explanation for that. All I could do was hope that maybe it would come true next year.

"Well, son," my father said to me as seriously as possible, "maybe your Christmas pony will come next year. So let's just hope for it."

That was a long year for me. So every month that went by, I thought about that Christmas pony.

Then, finally, December came into view. I began getting excited about my Christmas pony because this year was probably the year. Last year I was only six, but this year I was a full seven years old, old enough to take care of a Christmas pony.

Again, my parents took my siblings and me downtown to see Santa Claus. I stood in line with my brother and sister, anxiously waiting for the time to confront Mr. Santa Claus.

Then my turn came, and I walked up to Santa, sat on his lap, and began the conversation.

The first thing I said was, "Santa, the Christmas pony you promised last year never came. Why didn't it come?"

I didn't realize that this was a different person; I just thought it was Santa Claus. He looked at me and said, "Ho ho ho, I'm not sure why it didn't come, but I'll check into it and see if it got lost on the way down from the North Pole, ho ho ho."

Then I told him what I wanted for Christmas, and all I wanted was a Christmas pony. He assured me that he would check into this and make sure that my Christmas pony arrived on time this year. Then he said, "Just have faith, ho ho ho."

This continued for the next ten years, and to this day, I have never seen that Christmas pony. So I began to think that maybe that old Santa Claus was a fake.

As I thought about this, I remembered a verse of Scripture. "Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, If ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (John 8:31-32).

The only truth is what comes from God's word. I know this verse is often taken out of context, or only half of it is given. When I discovered the truth out of God's word, it sets me free from everything else in the world.

EARTHTALK ™

Dear EarthTalk: Is Amazon.com an environmental hero or villain?
-- J. West, Orange, CA

Not surprisingly, Amazon.com's environmental performance is a mixed bag. One charge often levied by critics is that Amazon's low pricing and expedited shipping encourages customers to spend more on more unnecessary stuff, further exacerbating our already rampant consumerism. Likewise, critics charge that the company's "Prime" service encourages customers to order single items that must be rush-shipped to them instead of combining multiple orders in bigger boxes, which would be more energy efficient.

Others criticize Amazon for introducing huge commercial operations into hundreds of otherwise residential and predominantly minority communities across the country. An analysis by Consumer Reports found that 69 percent of Amazon warehouses have more people of color living within a one-mile radius than the median neighborhood in their metro areas. Residents complain of increased air pollution from the preponderance of trucks and vans going to and fro, more dangerous walking and biking conditions for neighborhood kids, traffic congestions and significant upticks in noise.

In 2019 the company's carbon emissions were in the spotlight when hundreds of employees ("Amazon Employees for Climate Justice") called on corporate leadership to commit to net-zero pollution by 2030. For its part, Amazon reports it is moving quickly toward net zero carbon emissions. It won't practically be able to get there until 2040, but the company is aiming to run on 100 percent renewable energy by 2030.

Other green initiatives from the e-tailing juggernaut include a \$100 million investment in nature-based climate solutions like reforestation projects, a recent purchase of 100,000 fully electric delivery vehicles, and collaborations with manufacturers to improve and reduce packaging that has led to a 27 percent reduction in packaging weight and the elimination of 810,000 tons of packaging material since 2008.

Another area where the company garners green kudos is its leadership in cloud computing. Amazon's servers no doubt use a lot of electricity (much of which is derived from renewables nowadays), research suggests that companies who move their server infrastructure to cloud-based services—like industry leading Amazon Web Services—could save 87 percent on energy. The upshot is that as more and more companies ditch their own servers, energy consumption and carbon emissions can decline rapidly.

And let's not forget Amazon.com founder and former CEO Jeff Bezos' \$10 billion pledge to fund global warming resilience and mitigation efforts around the world over the next 10 years. So far, the so-called Bezos Earth Fund, while not officially tied to Amazon.com but built on Bezos' wealth stream from the company, has donated some \$947 million to various programs, organizations and research efforts working on climate and environmental justice issues—and the philanthropic giving has just started.



Despite efforts by Amazon.com to achieve net zero emissions, environmentalists still have plenty of beefs with the e-tailing juggernaut. Credit: Soumit, FlickrCC.

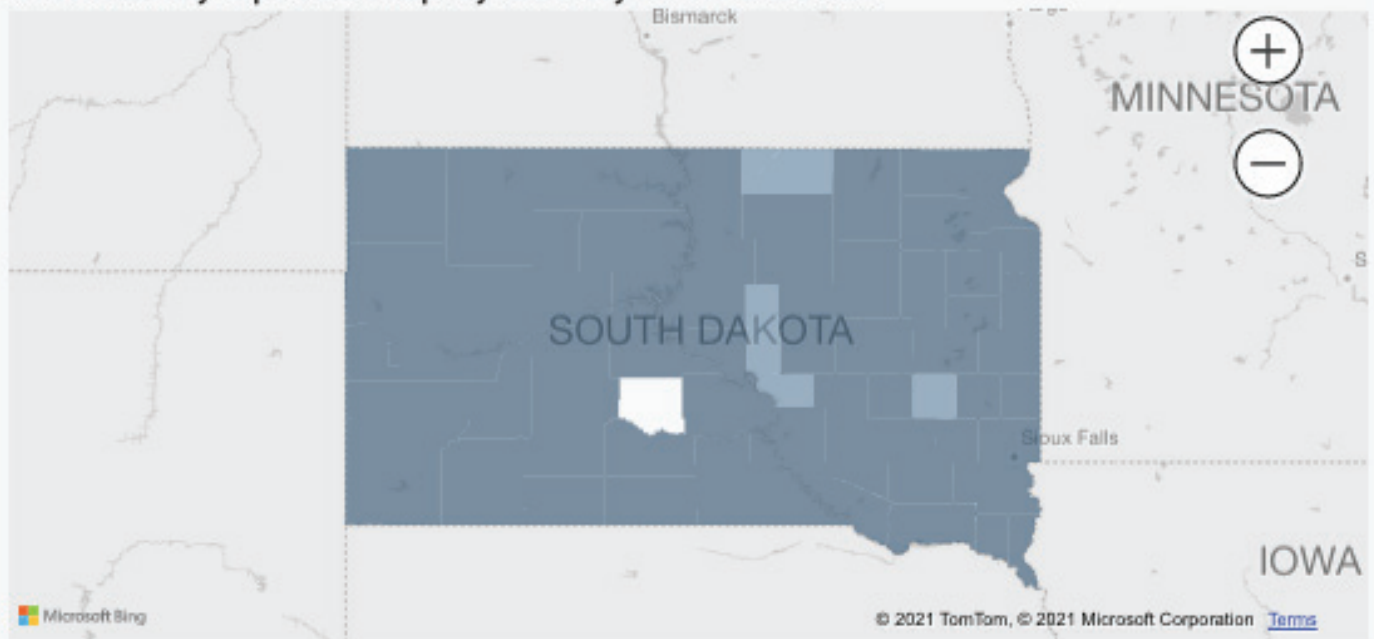
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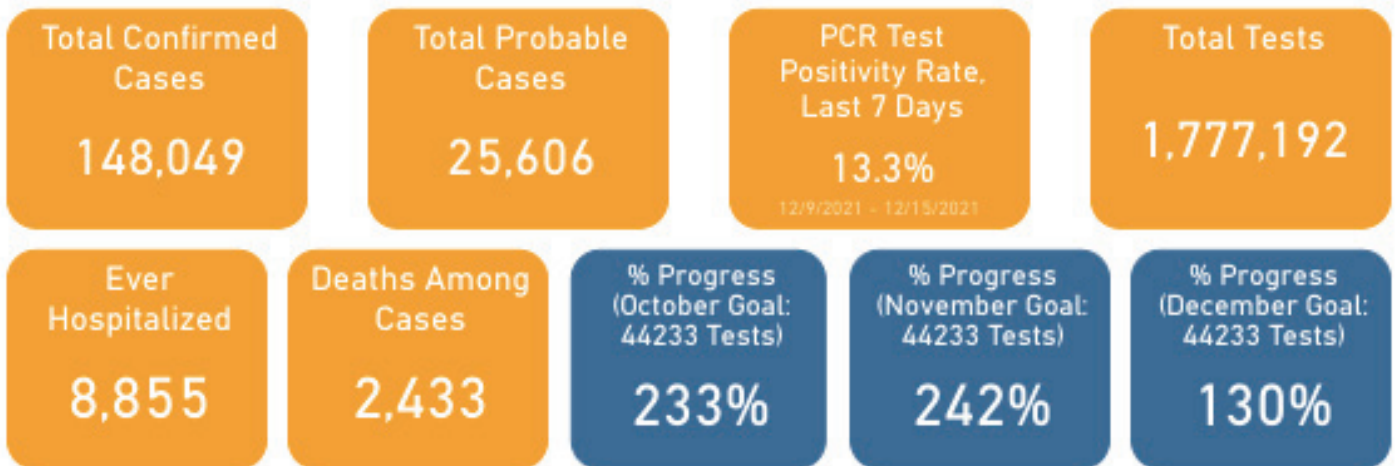
South Dakota COVID-19 Report



Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Hover over a county to see its details, or click county to update the orange boxes.



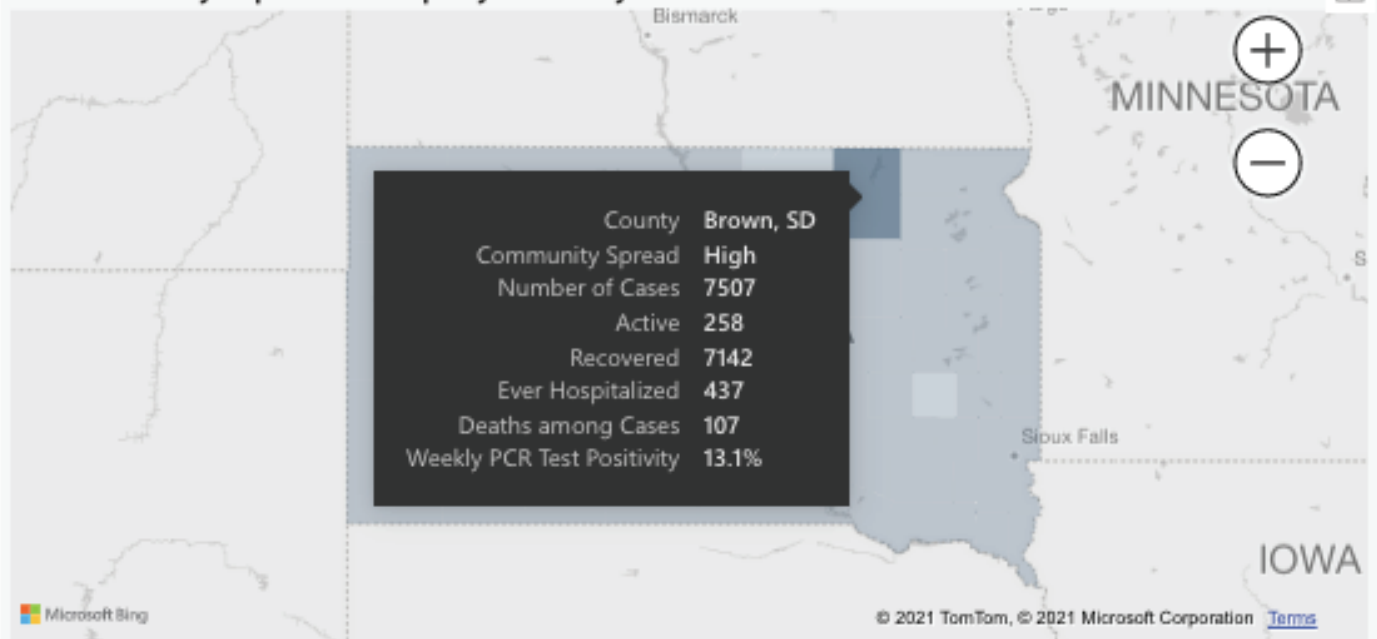
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Brown County COVID-19 Report

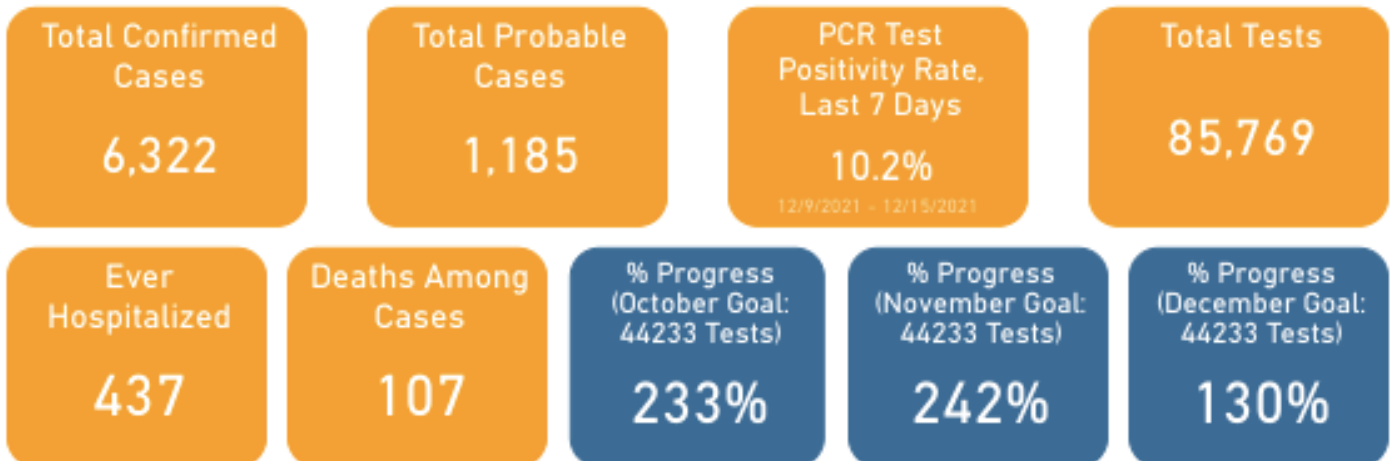


Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Community Spread ● Low ● Moderate ● Substantial ● High

Hover over a county to see its details, or click county to update the orange boxes.



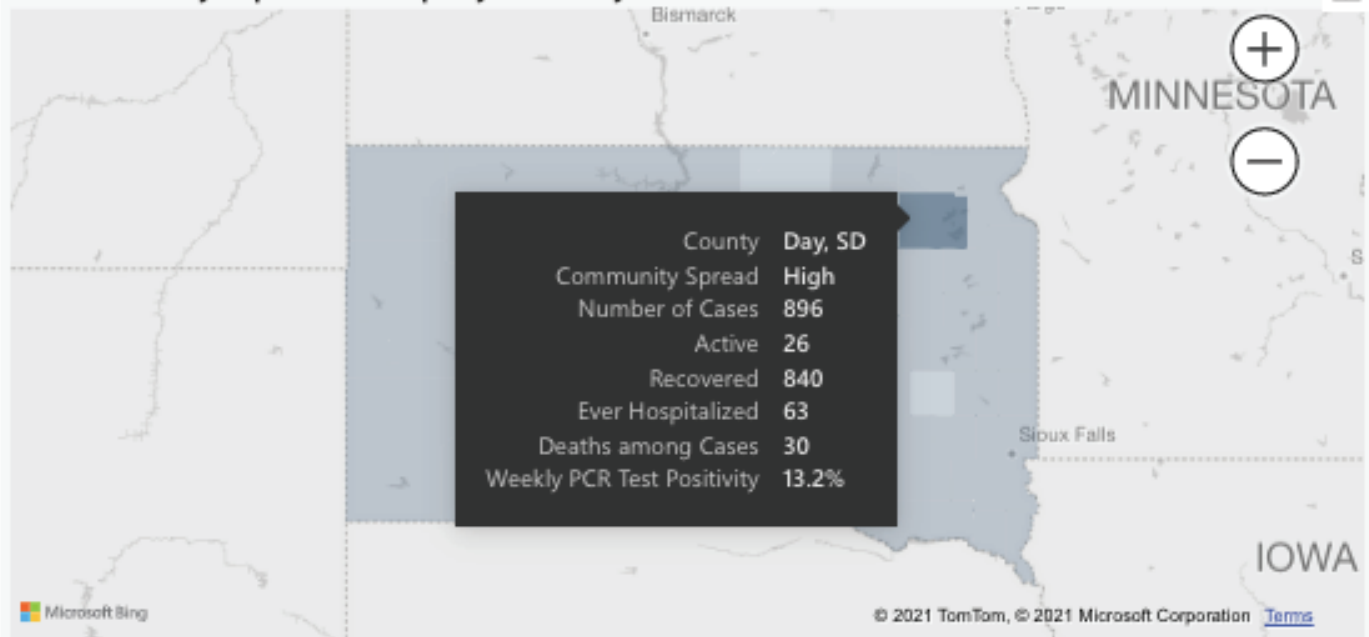
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Day County COVID-19 Report

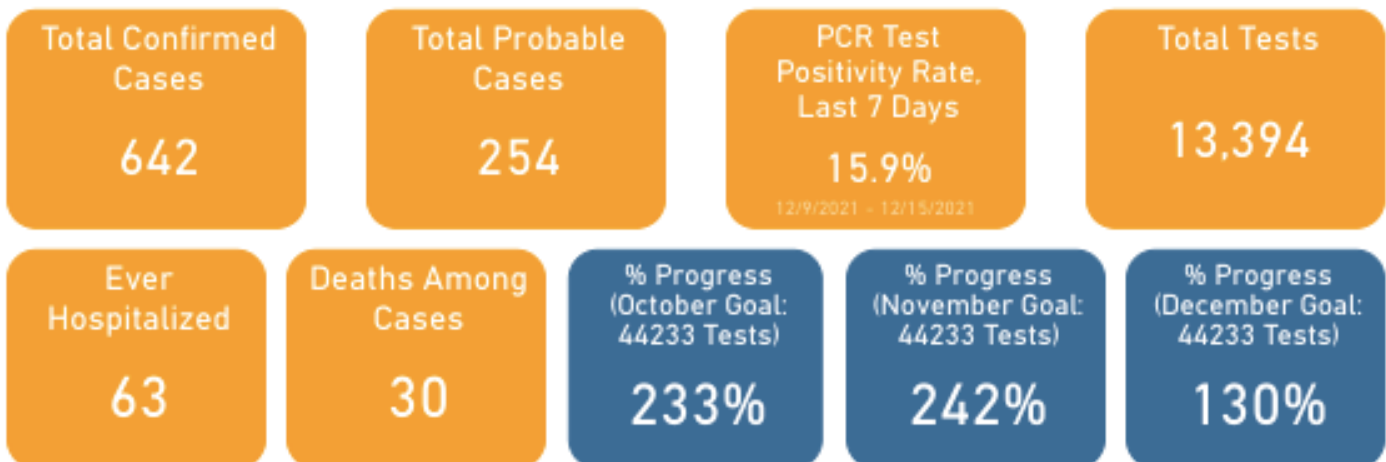


Community Spread Map by County of Residence



Community Spread: Low Moderate Substantial High

Hover over a county to see its details, or click county to update the orange boxes.



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COVID-19 IN SOUTH DAKOTA

Currently Hospitalized	-7	254
Deaths Among Cases	+35	2433
Active Cases		7335
Ever Hospitalized		8855
Recovered Cases		163887
Total Cases		173655

SEX OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Sex	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
Female	90762	1118
Male	82893	1315

VARIANT CASES OF COVID-19 IN SOUTH DAKOTA

COVID-19 Variant	# of Cases
Delta (B.1.617.2 & AY lineages)	1178
Alpha (B.1.1.7)	176
Gamma (P.1)	3
Beta (B.1.351)	2

AGE GROUP OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Age Range with Years	# of Cases	# of Deaths Among Cases
0-9 years	10402	0
10-19 years	21154	0
20-29 years	29527	11
30-39 years	28962	38
40-49 years	24247	62
50-59 years	23098	175
60-69 years	19394	364
70-79 years	10135	561
80+ years	6736	1222

RACE/ETHNICITY OF SOUTH DAKOTA COVID-19 CASES

Race/Ethnicity	# of Cases	% of Cases
Asian / Pacific Islander	2267	1%
Black	4096	2%
Hispanic	7193	4%
Native American	20821	12%
Other	1661	1%
Unknown	4502	3%
White	133115	77%

Groton Area School District

Active COVID-19 Cases

Updated December 17, 2021; 1:11 PM

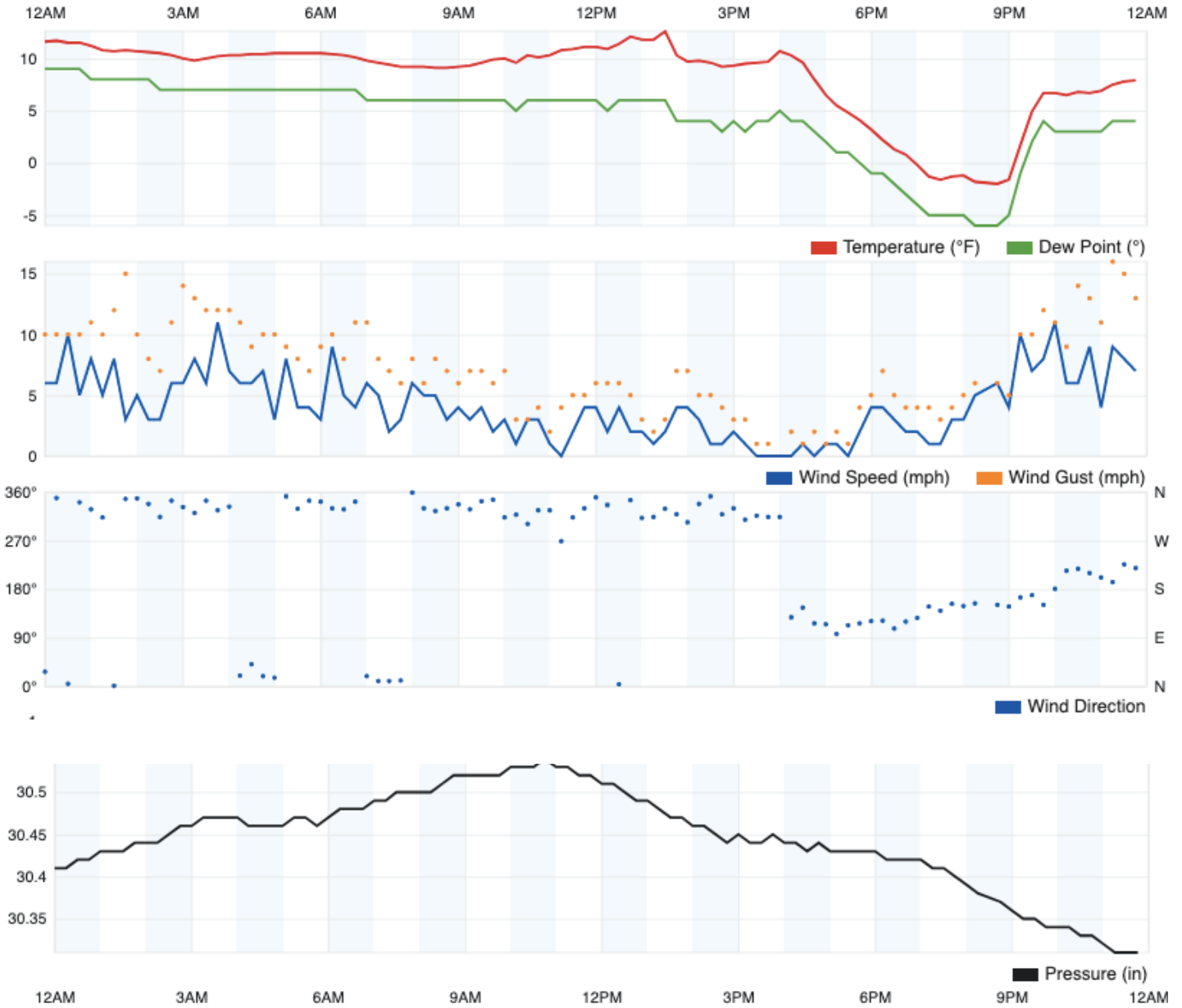
**Increase of 1
from last week**

J	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	1	1	S	T
K	G										0	1	2	t	o
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0	0	1	1	0	0	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	1	6

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs



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Today



Partly Sunny

High: 32 °F

Tonight



Mostly Cloudy

Low: 9 °F

Monday



Decreasing
Clouds

High: 15 °F

Monday
Night



Increasing
Clouds

Low: 5 °F

Tuesday



Mostly Sunny

High: 26 °F

The graphic features a large sign for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and National Weather Service (NWS) Aberdeen Weather Forecast Office. The sign is semi-transparent and displays the NOAA and NWS logos. To the right of the sign, the weather forecast is presented in large, bold text. The background shows a clear blue sky with a bright sun and a snowy landscape with bare trees and a white van.

Mild Today
Highs 28 to 44 F

Colder Monday
Highs 10 to 25 F

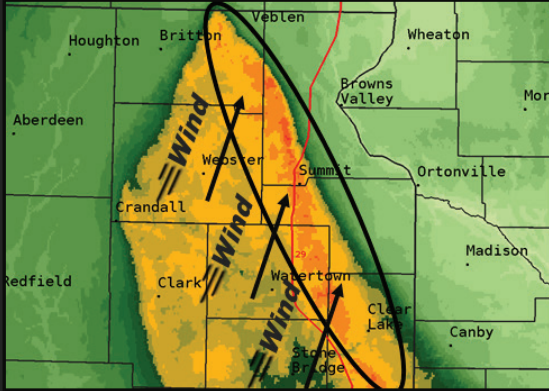
NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

www.weather.gov/abr
12/19/2021 4:17 AM

Temperatures will be 5 to 15 degrees above average today, a good 20 degrees warmer than yesterday. However, a cold front will move through this evening, leading to a return of below average temps for Monday. Mainly dry conditions expected meanwhile, through mid-week.

Blowing Snow Potential Sunday AM

Created at 11:10 PM - Saturday, December 18, 2021



What/Where?

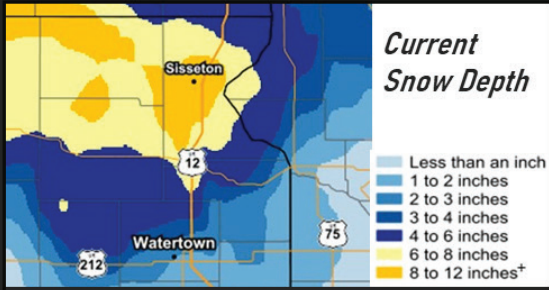
Breezy to windy conditions, especially in the oval on the map at left, combined with cold temperatures and plenty of fresh, fluffy snow cover will lead to **blowing snow and reduced visibilities** across portions of Marshall, Roberts, and Grant Counties.

When?

Mainly from 3am to 10am Sunday, Dec 19th

Impacts

Use caution while traveling, especially on I-29 north of Summit and other downslope wind-prone roads where snow exists.



NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE
OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

Locally windy conditions across fresh, fluffy snow early to mid-Sunday morning will lead to blowing snow and reduced visibilities across portions of the Prairie Coteau. Exercise caution if traveling!

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Today in Weather History

December 12, 1968: An intense blizzard visited most of South Dakota and Minnesota on the 12th and 13th of December. The storm began in the western part of South Dakota on the morning of the 12th then spread into the eastern part of the state and west central Minnesota by that afternoon, where it continued into the morning of the 13th. Freezing rain preceded snow, and in west central Minnesota, with thunder and lightning as well. Winds of over 50 mph caused blowing and drifting snow, which occasionally reduced visibilities to near zero. Gusts reached 70 mph in many places. Temperatures were falling to near zero during the day also resulted in dangerously low wind chills, particularly in Minnesota. The eastern half of South Dakota into west central Minnesota experienced the most severe blizzard conditions. Many schools were closed, and most other activities were greatly curtailed.

Automobile accidents were numerous across the area. Multiple utility lines were downed, and power and telephone outages were numerous due to the high winds. Power outages from less than an hour up to 12 hours were common across Minnesota. Snowfall ranged from around one inch in western South Dakota, to five inches in eastern South Dakota, to five to ten inches in west central Minnesota. One death in South Dakota was attributed to the storm when a man died of exposure to the cold near Allen in southwest South Dakota. In Minnesota, one man was found frozen to death near his car after it had run into the ditch several miles northwest of Boyd in Lac Qui Parle County. Another man was killed by a train when his vehicle became stalled on a railroad crossing at Hancock. 5 inches of snow fell at Watertown, Sisseton, and Webster with 6 inches at Clear Lake.

December 12, 1967: From December 12th through the 20th, Flagstaff, Arizona, a series of snowstorms buries Flagstaff with nearly 85 inches of snow.

1882 - Portland, OR, was drenched with 7.66 inches of rain, a record 24 hour total for that location. (12th-13th) (The Weather Channel)

1960 - The first of three Middle Atlantic snowstorms produced a foot of snow at Baltimore MD. A pre-winter blizzard struck the northeastern U.S. producing wind gusts as high as 51 mph, along with 16 inches of snow at Nantucket MA, and 20 inches at Newark NJ. (David Ludlum)

1969 - The worst tornado of record for western Washington State tracked south of Seattle, traveling five miles, from Des Moines to Kent. The tornado, 50 to 200 yards in width, began as a waterspout over Puget Sound. One person was injured and the tornado caused half a million dollars damage. (The Weather Channel)

1987 - While a developing winter storm began to spread snow across New Mexico into Colorado, high winds ushered unseasonably cold air into the southwestern states. Winds in California gusted to 60 mph in the Sacramento River Delta, and in the San Bernardino Valley. (The National Weather Summary)

1988 - Cold arctic air spread from the Great Lakes Region to the Appalachian Region. Twenty-five cities, mostly in the northeastern U.S., reported record low temperatures for the date. The low of 12 degrees below zero at Albany NY was their coldest reading of record for so early in the season. Saranac Lake NY was the cold spot in the nation with a low of 28 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary)

1989 - A winter storm produced snow from northern Mississippi to the Middle Atlantic Coast, with 10.5 inches reported at Powhatan VA. Heavy snow whitened the Black Hills of South Dakota, with 36 inches reported at Deer Mountain. Thirteen cities in the north central U.S., from Minnesota to Texas, reported record low temperatures for the date, including Duluth MN and Yankton SD with morning lows of 22 degrees below zero. (The National Weather Summary) (Storm Data)

1995 - A severe coastal storm is blamed for five deaths and loss of power to over one million people in Oregon and Washington. Winds at Sea Lion Caves near Florence topped out at 119 mph before problems developed with the anemometer. In Newport, a gust of 107 mph occurred downtown, while Astoria and Cape Blanco also had gusts of over 100 mph. Astoria's air pressure dropped as low as 28.53 inches, an all-time record (and comparable to the central pressure of a Category 2 hurricane!). Gusts in the Willamette Valley exceeded 60 mph.

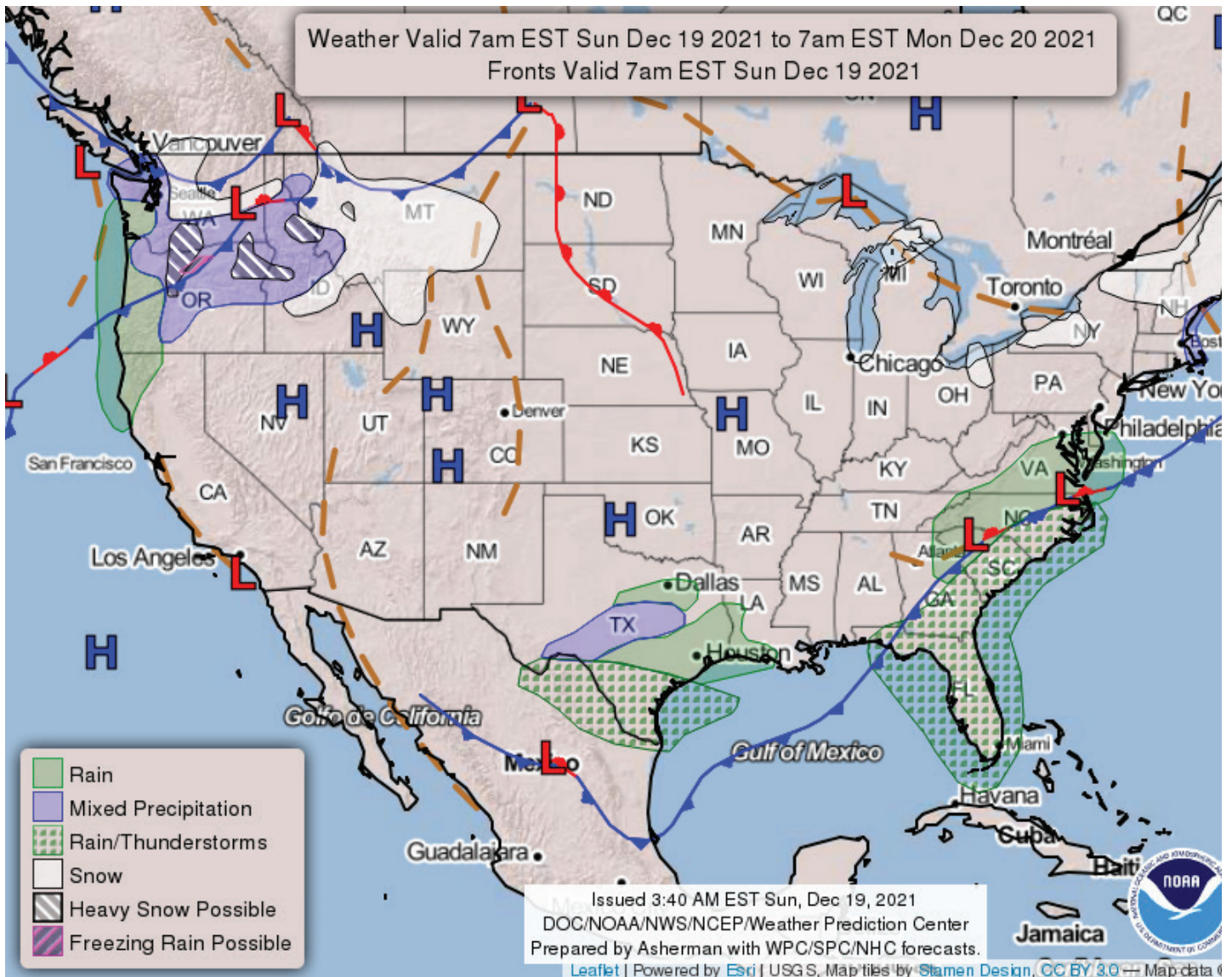
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Yesterday's Groton Weather Today's Info

High Temp: 13 °F at 1:30 PM
Low Temp: -2 °F at 8:26 PM
Wind: 16 mph at 11:10 PM
Precip: 0.36

Record High: 57° in 1893
Record Low: -29° in 1916
Average High: 27°F
Average Low: 7°F
Average Precip in Dec.: 0.36
Precip to date in Dec.: 0.47
Average Precip to date: 21.57
Precip Year to Date: 20.03
Sunset Tonight: 4:52:52 PM
Sunrise Tomorrow: 8:07:06 AM



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No Mistake

Walter came home from Sunday school with a question all over his face. "Mom," he asked, "did the shepherds have washing machines where they kept their sheep?"

"Shepherds? Washing machines?" After a moment she said, "No, darling, they did not have washing machines. Why do you ask?"

"Well, Mrs. Mathis was reading the story of the birth of Jesus and she said, 'While shepherds washed their socks that night...' and I didn't understand what was going on."

While we often think of the shepherds in the field that night, the glory that appeared with the angel and the fear that gripped them, we seldom connect the shepherds in that field with the Good Shepherd.

Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd" twice in John's Gospel. In those statements, he summarized all of the prophetic images of His role as prophet in the Old Testament. This declaration is a claim to His divinity as revealed in the Old Testament and focuses on His love, protection, and guidance of us – His lambs – in the New Testament.

But there is more. Not only is He our Shepherd but He chose to identify Himself as the "good shepherd" – and good is a term that carries with it nobility. It stands in sharp contrast to shepherds who were hired hands who worked and cared only for their own self-interests.

Prayer: We thank You, Lord, for loving us, for being our Good Shepherd and for laying down Your life for us. May we always follow You, our "Good Shepherd!" In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: Luke 2:8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

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2021 Community Events

- Cancelled** Legion Post #39 Spring Fundraiser (Sunday closest to St. Patrick's Day, every other year)
03/27/2021 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter Weekend)
04/10/2021 Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the American Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
04/24/2021 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/25/2021 Princess Prom (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/01/2021 Lions Club Spring City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
05/31/2021 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
6/7-9/2021 St. John's Lutheran Church VBS
06/17/2021 Groton Transit Fundraiser, 4-7 p.m.
06/18/2021 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
06/19/2021 U8 Baseball Tournament
06/19/2021 **Postponed to Aug. 28th:** Lions Crazy Golf Fest at Olive Grove Golf Course, Noon
06/26/2021 U10 Baseball Tournament
06/27/2021 U12 Baseball Tournament
07/04/2021 Firecracker Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
07/11/2021 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 10am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
07/22/2021 Pro-Am Golf Tournament at Olive Grove Golf Course
07/30/2021-08/03/2021 State "B" American Legion Baseball Tournament in Groton
08/06/2021 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course
08/13/2021 Groton Basketball Golf Tournament
Cancelled Lions Club Crazy Golf Fest 9am Olive Grove Golf Course
08/29/2021 Groton Firemen Summer Splash Day at GHS Parking Lot (4-5 p.m.)
09/11/2021 Lions Club Fall City-Wide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
09/12/2021 Sunflower Classic Golf Tournament at Olive Grove
09/18-19 Groton Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
10/08/2021 Lake Region Marching Band Festival (2nd Friday in October)
10/09/2021 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm (Saturday before Columbus Day)
10/29/2021 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm
10/29/2021 Groton United Methodist Trunk or Treat (Halloween)
11/13/2021 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/11/2021 Veteran's Day Program at the GHS Arena
11/21/2021 Groton Area Snow Queen Contest
11/25/2021 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
11/30/2021 James Valley Telecommunications Holiday Open House 10am-4pm
12/04/2021 Olive Grove Tour of Homes
12/11/2021 Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-Noon

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The Groton Independent Printed & Mailed Weekly Edition

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News from the  Associated Press

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) _ These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Saturday:

Dakota Cash

06-08-09-25-35

(six, eight, nine, twenty-five, thirty-five)

Estimated jackpot: \$20,000

Lotto America

15-25-31-45-46, Star Ball: 4, ASB: 3

(fifteen, twenty-five, thirty-one, forty-five, forty-six; Star Ball: four; ASB: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$5.17 million

Mega Millions

Estimated jackpot: \$171 million

Powerball

02-06-24-51-61, Powerball: 1, Power Play: 2

(two, six, twenty-four, fifty-one, sixty-one; Powerball: one; Power Play: two)

Estimated jackpot: \$353 million

Saturday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Central 64, Sturgis Brown 30

Burke 52, Stuart, Neb. 45

Colome 59, Cody-Kilgore, Neb. 40

Garretson 44, Tri-Valley 36

Groton 78, Sioux Falls Lutheran 23

Ipswich 61, Webster 53

Langford 51, Hitchcock-Tulare 46

McCook Central/Montrose 59, Bon Homme 49

Philip 73, Bison 30

Pierre 82, Spearfish 65

Potter County 42, Warner 40

Red Cloud 73, Lakota Tech 67

Sioux Falls Lutheran 78, Groton Area 23

Sioux Falls Roosevelt 57, Brandon Valley 42

South Border, N.D. 75, McIntosh 51

St. Thomas More 72, Scottsbluff, Neb. 50

Stanley County 57, Miller 47

Vermillion 53, Crofton, Neb. 20

Wessington Springs 55, Mitchell Christian 38

Foothills Classic=

Newcastle, Wyo. 60, Lead-Deadwood 43

Stateline Shootout=

Belle Fourche 46, Sundance, Wyo. 43, OT

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

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Alcester-Hudson 37, West Sioux, Iowa 32
Bon Homme 51, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 38
Colome 46, Cody-Kilgore, Neb. 44
DeSmet 52, Madison 29
Faith 45, New Underwood 38
Hitchcock-Tulare 32, Langford 24
Lake Preston 35, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 26
Parkston 51, Lennox 34
Sioux Falls Christian 66, Clark/Willow Lake 48
Stuart, Neb. 48, Burke 37
Stuart, Neb. 48, Burke/South Central 35
Vermillion 57, Windom, Minn. 27
Wall 51, Harding County 26
Warner 54, Potter County 31
Wessington Springs 51, Mitchell Christian 16
Stateline Shootout=
Belle Fourche 47, Sundance, Wyo. 24
Newcastle, Wyo. 66, Lead-Deadwood 23

Some high school basketball scores provided by Scorestream.com, <https://scorestream.com/>

Murray twins lead Iowa to 94-75 romp over Utah State

SIoux FALLS, S.D. (AP) — Sophomore Keegan Murray poured in a career-high 35 points and Iowa breezed to a 94-75 victory over Utah State in a neutral-site game at the Sanford Pentagon on Saturday night.

Murray knocked down 13 of 17 shots from the floor with two 3-pointers and seven rebounds for the Hawkeyes (8-3), who snapped a three-game losing streak. Murray came into the game second in the nation with a 22.2 scoring average — even after being held to a season-low nine points on 4-of-17 shooting in a loss to No. 17 Iowa State last time out.

Kris Murray — Keegan's twin brother — added 17 points off the bench for the Hawkeyes. Patrick McCaffery finished with 12 points, while Jordan Bohannon scored 11. Iowa shot 54.7% overall but just 30.8% from 3-point range. The Hawkeyes were 16 of 21 at the free-throw line and have now made 182 foul shots on the season. Their opponents have taken only 184 free throws.

Brandon Horvath paced the Aggies (8-4) with 18 points. Justin Bean finished with 17 points. Bean, who is second in the nation with seven double-doubles, was held to two rebounds after coming in with an 11.1 per game average.

Iowa leads the all-time series 3-1.

For more AP college basketball coverage: <https://apnews.com/hub/college-basketball> and http://twitter.com/AP_Top25

Montana St. wins first semifinal since '84, beats SDSU 31-17

By TOM STUBER Associated Press

BOZEMAN, Mont. (AP) — Montana State freshman quarterback Tommy Mellott accounted for four touchdowns to send the Bobcats to their first title game in 38 years with a 31-17 win over South Dakota State in a Football Championship Series semifinal game on Saturday.

Montana State (12-2) will make its first national championship appearance since 1984, facing North Dakota State in Frisco, Texas on Jan. 8. The Bison beat James Madison 20-14 on Friday night.

Mellott was 10-of-15 passing for 233 yards and threw two touchdown passes. He added 155 yards on the ground and two touchdowns on 34 carries.

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"He's a great player, runs the ball hard," South Dakota State linebacker Logan Backhaus said. "He makes the right reads and doesn't make mistakes."

The Bobcats scored first when Mellott hit Nate Stewart for a 64-yard score, but South Dakota State (11-4) bounced back to take a 14-10 lead when Pierre Strong Jr. rambled 44 yards for a touchdown and Chris Oladokun connected with Jadon Janke from the 13 for the lead.

Mellott ran for a 4-yard touchdown before SDSU's Cole Frahm kicked a 51-yard field goal to tie the game at 17 going into halftime.

Mellott became the Bobcats main ball carrier when Isaiah Ifanse was ruled out due to injury.

"We knew that our best running back was out," Mellott said. "It was just being detailed and that's what got us through it."

MSU's defense was riddled by Oladokun throughout the first half, but they held the Jackrabbits scoreless in the second. Mellott scored on a 3-yard plunge in the third quarter and found Lance McCutcheon from the 17 to cap the scoring with just over ten minutes to play.

Freshman Simeon Woodard intercepted Oladokun in the fourth quarter and MSU stopped the Jackrabbits twice on fourth down to finish the game.

"They made more plays than we did," South Dakota State coach John Stiegelmeier said. "They deserve to win that football game, so congrats to them."

Oladokun was 23-of-35 passing for 315 yards with a touchdown pass and interception. Strong finished with 94 yards rushing on 14 carries.

Mellott, nicknamed "Touchdown Tommy", was named the starting quarterback after the final regular season game. He has accounted for 11 touchdowns in MSU's three playoff games.

"That's a tough kid right there," Bobcats defensive end Daniel Hardy said. "Stepping up when his number was called and getting the job done. Not just getting the job done. Tommy's been balling."

Montana State also played their first semifinal game at home since 1984, the same year the Bobcats went on to beat Louisiana Tech 19-6 in the championship game.

More AP college football: <https://apnews.com/hub/college-football> and https://twitter.com/AP_Top25 Sign up for the AP's college football newsletter: <https://apnews.com/cfbtop25>

Leader of Planned Parenthood in upper Midwest stepping down

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The president of Planned Parenthood's affiliate in the upper Midwest announced Friday she is stepping down from her position next year.

Sarah Stoesz oversaw the organization for nearly 20 years and grew it into one of the largest Planned Parenthood affiliates in the country as it expanded from Minnesota and South Dakota to incorporate North Dakota, Iowa and Nebraska, the St. Paul Pioneer Press reported. The five-state organization provides health care to more than 100,000 patients each year.

Stoesz does not plan to step down until October while the organization searches for her replacement. Her departure comes as the Supreme Court weighs overturning Roe v. Wade — the 1973 Supreme Court ruling establishing a nationwide right to abortion.

"The non-judgmental care that Planned Parenthood provides is transformative for our patients and our communities," Stoesz said in a statement.

Typhoon deaths in Philippines top 100, mayors plead for food

By JIM GOMEZ Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines (AP) — The governor of an island province in the central Philippines said Sunday at least 72 people died in the devastation wrought by Typhoon Rai in more than half of the towns that managed to contact him, bringing the death toll in the strongest typhoon to batter the country this year to at least 146.

Gov. Arthur Yap of Bohol province said 10 others were missing and 13 injured, and suggested the fa-

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talities may still considerably increase with only 33 out of 48 mayors able to report back to him due to downed communications. Officials were trying to confirm a sizable number of deaths caused by landslides and extensive flooding elsewhere.

In statements posted on Facebook, Yap ordered mayors in his province of more than 1.2 million people to invoke their emergency powers to secure food packs for large numbers of people along with drinking water. Both have been urgently sought in several hard-hit towns.

After joining a military aerial survey of typhoon-ravaged towns, Yap said "it is very clear that the damage sustained by Bohol is great and all-encompassing."

He said the initial inspection did not cover four towns, where the typhoon blew in as it rampaged through central island provinces on Thursday and Friday. The government said about 780,000 people were affected, including more than 300,000 residents who had to evacuate their homes.

At least 64 other typhoon deaths were reported by the disaster-response agency, the national police and local officials. Most were hit by falling trees and collapsed walls, drowned in flash floods or were buried in landslides. Officials on Dinagat Islands, one of the southeastern provinces first pounded by the typhoon, separately reported 10 deaths just from a few towns, bringing the overall fatalities so far to 146.

President Rodrigo Duterte flew to the region Saturday and promised 2 billion pesos (\$40 million) in aid. He met officials in Maasin City in Southern Leyte province where he was born. Duterte's family later relocated to the southern city of Davao, where he served as a longtime mayor before rising to the presidency.

"The moment I was born into this world, I told my mother, 'Let's not stay here because this place is really prone to typhoons,'" Duterte told officials.

At its strongest, the typhoon packed sustained winds of 195 kilometers (121 miles) per hour and gusts of up to 270 kph (168 mph), making it one of the most powerful in recent years to hit the disaster-prone archipelago, which lies between the Pacific Ocean and the South China Sea.

Floodwaters rose rapidly in Bohol's riverside town of Loboc, where residents were trapped on their roofs and in trees. They were rescued by the coast guard the following day. On Dinagat Islands, an official said the roofs of nearly all the houses, including emergency shelters, were either damaged or blown away entirely.

At least 227 cities and towns lost electricity, which has since been restored in only 21 areas, officials said, adding that three regional airports were damaged, including two that remain closed.

The deaths and widespread damage left by the typhoon ahead of Christmas in the largely Roman Catholic nation brought back memories of the catastrophe inflicted by another typhoon, Haiyan, one of the most powerful on record. It hit many of the central provinces that were pummeled last week, leaving more than 6,300 people dead in November 2013.

About 20 storms and typhoons batter the Philippines each year. The archipelago also lies along the seismically active Pacific "Ring of Fire" region, making it one of the countries most susceptible to natural calamities.

Islamic world unites to aid desperately poor Afghanistan

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — The economic collapse of Afghanistan, already teetering dangerously on the edge, would have a "horrendous" impact on the region and the world, successive speakers warned Sunday at the start of a one-day summit of foreign ministers from dozens of Islamic countries.

The hastily called meeting of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation in Islamabad brought together dozens of foreign ministers with the special representatives on Afghanistan of major powers, including China, the U.S. and Russia.

The gathering also included the U.N. undersecretary general on humanitarian affairs as well as the president of the Islamic Development Bank Muhammad Sulaiman Al Jasser, who offered several concrete financing proposals. He said the IDB can manage trusts that could be used to move money into Afghanistan, jumpstart businesses and help salvage the deeply troubled economy.

The dire warnings called for the U.S. and other nations to ease sanctions, including the release upward

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of \$10 billion in frozen funds following the Taliban takeover of Kabul on Aug. 15.

Speakers also called for a quick opening of the country's banking system and collectively, with the United Nations and international banking institutions, assistance to Afghanistan. Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan directed his remarks to the U.S., urging Washington to drop preconditions to releasing desperately needed funds and restarting Afghanistan's banking systems.

Khan seemed to offer Taliban a pass on the limits on education for girls, urging the world to understand "cultural sensitivities" and saying human rights and women's rights meant different things in different countries. Still other speakers, including the OIC chairman Hussain Ibrahim Taha, emphasized the need for the protection of human rights, particularly those of women and girls.

The new Taliban rulers' acting Foreign Minister Amir Khan Muttaqi was in attendance in the grand hall of the Pakistani Parliament, where dozens of foreign ministers from many of the 57-nation OIC had gathered.

"This gathering is about the Afghan people," said Pakistani Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi, who warned that without immediate aid, Afghanistan was certain to collapse. He said it would have "horrendous consequences," not just in Afghan lives lost to starvation and disease, but would most certainly result in a mass exodus of Afghans. Chaos would spread, he predicted, and allow terrorism and the drug trade to flourish.

Martin Griffiths, the U.N. undersecretary for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief coordinator, warned that Afghanistan will not survive on donations alone. He urged donor countries to show flexibility, allowing their money to pay salaries of public sector workers and support "basic services such as health, education, electricity, livelihoods, to allow the people of Afghanistan some chance to get through this winter and some encouragement to remain home with their families."

Beyond that, Griffiths said, "we need constructive engagement with the de facto authorities to clarify what we expect from each other."

Afghanistan's teetering economy, he added, requires decisive and compassionate action, or "I fear that this fall will pull down the entire population."

Griffiths said families simply do not have the cash for everyday purchases like food and fuel as prices soar. The cost of fuel is up by around 40%, and most families spend 80% of their money just to buy food.

He rattled off a number of stark statistics.

"Universal poverty may reach 97% of the population of Afghanistan. That could be the next grim milestone," he warned. "Within a year, 30% of Afghanistan's GDP (gross domestic product) could be lost altogether, while male unemployment may double to 29%."

Next year the U.N. would be asking for \$4.5 billion in aid for Afghanistan - its single largest humanitarian aid request, he said.

In what appeared to be a message to the Taliban delegation, Qureshi and subsequent speakers, including Taha, emphasized the protection of human rights, particularly those of women and girls.

In an interview with The Associated Press last week, Muttaqi said that Afghanistan's new rulers were committed to the education of girls and women in the workforce.

Yet four months into Taliban rule, girls are not allowed to attend high school in most provinces and though women have returned to their jobs in much of the health care sector, many female civil servants have been barred from coming to work.

Meanwhile, Qureshi said he wanted to see the summit end with concrete solutions to help Afghanistan and its people. He called for the summit to pledge and channel aid to Afghanistan; increase investment bilaterally or through the OIC in education, health, technical and vocational skills; and to establish a group of experts from the OIC, the United Nations, the Islamic Development Bank and others to help Afghanistan "access legitimate banking services and ease the serious liquidity challenges of the Afghan people."

He also called for participants to focus on food security, invest in capacity building inside Afghanistan to fight terrorism and the burgeoning drug trafficking.

"Finally, engage with Afghan authorities to help meet the expectations of the international community, in particular regarding political and social inclusivity, respect for human rights, especially the rights of women

and girls and combating terrorism," he said,

Sudanese plan anti-coup protests on uprising anniversary

BY SAMY MAGDY Associated Press

CAIRO (AP) — Sudan's pro-democracy movement has planned mass protests Sunday against an October military takeover and a subsequent deal that reinstated Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok but sidelined the movement.

The demonstrations mark the third anniversary of the uprising that eventually forced the military removal of longtime autocrat Omar al-Bashir and his Islamist government in April 2019.

Sudan then followed a fragile path toward democracy and ruled by a joint military-civilian government. The October 25 coup has rattled the transition and led to relentless street protests.

Ahead of the demonstrations, Sudan's authorities tightened security in Khartoum and its twin city of Omdurman, barricading government and military buildings to prevent protesters from reaching the military's headquarters and the presidential palace.

The protests were called by the pro-democracy movement that led the uprising against al-Bashir and stuck a power-sharing deal with the generals in the months that followed his ouster.

Relations between the generals and the civilians in the transitional government were shaky and capped by the military's Oct. 25 takeover that removed Hamdok's government.

Hamdok was reinstated last month amid international pressure in a deal that calls for an independent technocratic Cabinet under military oversight led by him. The agreement included the release of government officials and politicians detained since the coup.

Talks are underway to agree on what Gen. Abdel-Fattah Burhan, head of the ruling Sovereign Council, described as a "new political charter" focused on establishing a broader consensus among all political forces and movements.

Hamdok, the premier, addressed the Sudanese late Saturday ahead of the protests. He said he stuck the Nov. 21 deal with the military mainly to prevent bloodshed, warning that the country could slide further into chaos amid uphill economic and security challenges.

"Today, we are facing a retreat in the path of our revolution that threatens the country's security and integrity," he said, adding that the deal was meant to preserve achievements his government made in the past two years, and to "protect our nation from sliding to a new international isolation."

He urged political parties and movement to agree on a "national charter" to complete the democratic transition and achieve peace with rebel groups.

The pro-democracy movement has insisted that power be handed over to a civilian government to lead the transition. Their relentless protests follow the slogan: "No negotiations, no compromise, no power-sharing" with the military.

Their continued protests since the coup have increased pressure on the military and Hamdok, who has yet to announce his Cabinet.

Security forces used violence, including firing live ammunition at protesters, in the past round of demonstrations, according to activists. At least 45 people were killed and hundreds wounded in protests triggered by the coup, according to a tally by a Sudanese medical group.

DJ David Guetta lauds Saudi reforms ahead of show in kingdom

By MALAK HARB Associated Press

ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates (AP) — Internationally known DJ David Guetta has made a home for himself in the Persian Gulf.

The French DJ is a resident of the United Arab Emirates, where he has performed multiple times — the latest being on the helipad at the landmark Burj Al Arab hotel, and was one of the first artists invited to perform in Saudi Arabia when the kingdom opened its doors to tourists and began allowing concerts and entertainment. Guetta is performing in Saudi Arabia again on Sunday.

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Guetta performed in Saudi Arabia's Formula-E in 2018 and then a year later at the MDLBeast music festival in the capital of Riyadh. Marketed as the region's biggest music event, the festival has drawn backlash for whitewashing Saudi Arabia's image. Celebrities and influencers came under scrutiny for promoting a country widely accused of human rights abuses. Guetta is making his second appearance at the festival on Sunday.

Speaking to The Associated Press ahead of his Saudi gig, Guetta defended his participation.

"I don't play for politicians, I play for people, and you know if I'm not able to, if I would need to be playing only in countries where I'm totally agreeing with the leaders," he said from the Louvre Abu Dhabi where he was recording a set for a streaming New Year's Eve show. that will be streaming on the night.

If he were restricted to certain countries for political reasons, Guetta added, "I would probably stay home."

MDLBeast Soundstorm's first edition featured performances by J Balvin, Steve Aoki and Guetta among others, while the 2021 edition has the likes of Tiesto, Martin Garrix, Guetta, and DJ Snake on the ticket. In 2019, Instagram and TikTok were afloat with pictures of celebrities, models, and influencers posing in different parts of Saudi Arabia.

The posts attracted controversy and human rights groups scrutinized celebrities for marketing the country without speaking about its human rights' record. Some celebrities later said they were paid to post about the event. Reports circulating on social media at the time claimed that some influencers and artists were paid high fees for the visits.

"I'm not saying what I'm saying because I was getting paid, I'm getting paid in any country, you know I can make money in Saudi, in America, in Europe, in Latin America," Guetta said.

"I want to be able to play for the people wherever I go. But then, should I not go to China maybe? Should I not go to America because sometime(s), you know, I don't always agree with certain wars that are happening?"

The music festival was one of the first events in Saudi Arabia where men and women were allowed to dance and mingle openly in public.

It was one of the most visible signs of change under crown prince Mohammed bin Salman in 2018. King Salman granted his son and heir, the crown prince, a free hand to usher in dramatic moves that have reshaped the country.

Allowing women to drive, bringing in musical concerts, opening movie theaters, easing restrictions on gender segregation, and reigning in the powers of the religious police have all been signature reforms of the young prince.

Because of the changes, "I was happy to be part of this," Guetta said. "Of course there's more things to be done to improve the country but I think they are opening and really going to the right direction."

For example, he added, "Four years ago women couldn't drive, and now they can come to a David Guetta concert and dance, you know it's a huge evolution."

Guetta says that people shouldn't have to wait for a country to have a perfect record before wanting to show support.

"My position is, ok, if young people want me to be there, I want to be there for them," he said.

With the sunlight dancing through the dome of the Louvre Abu Dhabi, and the cascading light and shadows creating an ethereal vibe on the waters around the museum, Guetta recorded his New Year's Eve DJ-set on Wednesday, to no audience.

The show was recorded on a floating stage in the water of the Louvre Abu Dhabi and will be streamed on Guetta's social media platforms at midnight on New Year's Eve. The show features more than 500 light fixtures and will include 20-meter-high flames (about 65 feet) that will shoot up into the sky.

Guetta said he made Arabic-inspired music especially for the event, including Arabic percussion and vocals.

"The site is one of the most beautiful things I've seen," he said.

Hong Kong votes for legislature with only loyalists approved

By ZEN SOO Associated Press

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HONG KONG (AP) — Hong Kong was voting Sunday in the first election since Beijing amended the laws to reduce the number of directly elected lawmakers and vet candidates to ensure that only those loyal to China can run.

The semi-autonomous territory was rocked by pro-democracy protests in 2014 and 2019, but they were crushed by security forces, followed by the imposition of a sweeping national security law that silenced most of the city's opposition activists and led others to flee abroad.

Low turnout was widely expected, and seven hours after voting began, some 839,563 registered voters, or 18.77%, had cast their ballots.

Warton Leung, who did not intend to vote in Sunday's election, said that the lack of choice in candidates dampened enthusiasm for voting.

"Although there is a chance to vote for pro-establishment and democracy candidates, there are few democratic choices, so Hong Kong people do not feel enthusiastic when it comes to voting," he said.

Others, such as Yu Wai-kwan, saw the election as a chance to vote for a better Hong Kong.

"I am voting to choose a new bunch of people to make Hong Kong a better place," Yu said. "I am a patriot, and I just hope for peace and quiet, and to have a good livelihood."

Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam visited a polling station Sunday morning and said she had "no particular expectation" about the turnout.

"I would say that the government has not set any target for voter turnout rate, not for this election, not for previous elections, because there is a combination of factors that will affect the voter turnout rate in any election," she said.

Three protesters from the League of Social Democrats staged a small demonstration across the street from the polling station, chanting "I want real universal suffrage."

Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Minister Erick Tsang warned that foreign forces may be attempting to undermine the elections after overseas activists urged a boycott of the vote. Under the new election laws, incitement to boycott and casting invalid votes can lead up to three years in jail and a 200,000 Hong Kong dollar (\$26,500) fine.

The latest survey by the Hong Kong Public Opinion Research Institute found that 39% of respondents indicated that they are unlikely to vote.

Some 4.4 million residents are eligible to vote. The elections were originally scheduled to take place in September last year, but were postponed with authorities citing public health risks due to the pandemic. The decision was opposed by the pro-democracy camp, which accused the government of using the outbreak to delay the vote.

Hong Kong's largest opposition party, the Democratic Party, fielded no candidates.

Heavy police presence surrounded polling stations Sunday. Police chief Raymond Siu said about 10,000 officers would be deployed to make sure the election proceeds smoothly.

To encourage the vote, authorities offered free public transport in an unprecedented move, and sent out reminder messages a day before the polls.

"Casting your vote for HK — our Home! LegCo Election is important to you and HK's future!" the message read, referring to the Legislative Council.

The rubber-stamp Chinese parliament in March passed a resolution to alter Hong Kong's election law that many saw as effectively ending the "one country, two systems" framework under which Hong Kong was to retain its separate legal, political and financial institutions for 50 years following the handover from Britain in 1997.

The assembly voted to give a pro-Beijing committee power to appoint more of Hong Kong's lawmakers, reducing the proportion of those directly elected, and ensure that only those truly loyal to Beijing are allowed to run for office.

The move expanded the size of the chamber from 70 to 90 seats, with members of the Election Committee, a strongly pro-Beijing body responsible for electing the chief executive, making up 40 of those. Another 30 seats are elected by business groupings known as "functional constituencies." The number of directly elected representatives was reduced from 35 to 20. Five seats elected from among district

councilors were abolished altogether.

AP news assistants Matthew Cheng and Janice Lo contributed to this report.

Hopes, fears in Finnish Christmas country as omicron looms

By JAMES BROOKS Associated Press

ROVANIEMI, Finland (AP) — Workers at Santa Claus Village, a holiday theme park on the edge of the Arctic Circle, chipped away at a frozen dome, using chisels to put the final touches on an ice restaurant-hotel filled with sculptures of snowmen, penguins and huskies.

The Christmas season is in full swing in Finnish Lapland, where venue operators happily report that visitors have returned in numbers approaching pre-pandemic levels. Tourists from elsewhere in Finland and abroad come to revel in the festive spirit at the sprawling theme park, take a reindeer or husky sleigh ride and if they're lucky, glimpse the Northern Lights.

How long the winter fun will last is uncertain as the omicron coronavirus variant leads to new travel restrictions, test requirements and quarantine measures.

"It is a worry, of course, because no one knows what's going to happen," Sanna Karkkainen, CEO of Visit Rovaniemi, the tourism board for the capital of Finnish Lapland. "There's always the worry that are we going to get cancellations."

The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns and travel restrictions hit the northern Finnish region's travel industry hard. Before the pandemic, about 60% of Rovaniemi's more than half-million annual visitors came from abroad, mostly from elsewhere in Europe and some Asian countries.

According to Visit Rovaniemi, just over 11,000 people visited the city last December, an 82% drop from the same month a year earlier. Having survived a wretched 2020, many businesses see this winter as a "turning point," Karkkainen said.

"They could not suffer another year, another Christmas, without customers, that's for sure," she added.

Winter is the busiest tourist season in Finnish Lapland, and Air France and Eurowings recently added new direct flights to Rovaniemi from Paris and Dusseldorf, respectively. Local businesses say demand was high this month as visitors made their way north, relieved to have gotten away after last year's lockdowns.

"I think the last week, last few days, have been busier than ever," Tuomas Palmgren, co-owner of Rovaniemi taxi service Santa Line, said.

Newlyweds Stefanie and Mauro Sammut decided to honeymoon in Finnish Lapland, a complete shift in temperatures from their native Malta. The couple said they feared the trip might get canceled right up until they boarded their flight.

"Once the plane took off, we said, 'OK, we're fine,'" laughed Mauro Sammut, as young children slid past the couple on sleighs at Santa Claus Village and families posed for photos next to a temperature gauge that read minus 14 degrees Celsius (6.8 degrees Fahrenheit).

SantaPark, a Lapland theme park built in an old air raid shelter, decided to close its doors in March 2020, and with the pandemic continuing to keep visitors away, only reopened this winter. The park's chief experience officer, Ilkka Lankinen, recalled the mental distress of not knowing when they might return.

"We missed last Christmas season totally," he said, standing in the park's "Elf School," where children can take a crash course on becoming one of Santa's trusty helpers. "We tried to have the hotel open, but we also gave up on that one. So, basically, SantaPark has been closed for two years."

Sisters Laura and Anne Marie Spencer of Dublin, Ireland, originally booked their Lapland getaway for December 2020. The pandemic forced them to push back the family trip by a year.

"It wasn't the only holiday that we had to rebook, but we were determined to get here," Anne Marie Spencer said.

There are currently no hugs with Father Christmas at Santa Claus Village — visitors are separated from Santa by a gingerbread cookie-shaped plexiglass screen. But returning tourists are a welcome sight for

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many, including a restaurant in central Rovaniemi that opened in August 2020.

"Most people thought we were completely crazy that we would even think about opening the restaurant in August when the situation was at its worst," Elisa Honkavuori, the co-owner of Gustav Kitchen and Bar, said.

The restaurant's chefs are now preparing their modern, Finnish-inspired dishes, such as rainbow trout and roasted potatoes with a caper butter sauce, to domestic and international guests. Yet Honkavuori worries the uncertainty and renewed restrictions that have arrived with the omicron variant will make people "feel that it's not nice to travel."

Restaurant patrons over age 16 have been required to show COVID certificates to enter Finland's eateries since Dec. 4. For now, individuals are eligible if they can prove they are fully vaccinated against the coronavirus, present a negative test result or show they recently recovered from COVID-19.

Starting Tuesday, however, Finland is reintroducing increased health screening on all travelers from outside the European Union or Europe's 26-nation Schengen Area, requiring all arriving passengers to show proof of a negative test taken within the previous 48 hours.

For Karkkainen and her tourist board colleagues, keeping up with new rules and what they might mean for business is a daily "puzzle," and one with no end in sight.

"You look at the latest updates" each day and wonder, "What's happening with the travelers?" she said. "It's been a really rough one and a half years, and the most surprising factor is that we don't know when it's really going to end."

Restaurants anxious as omicron, high food costs take toll

By DEE-ANN DURBIN, MAE ANDERSON and SYLVIA HUI Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — While restaurants in the U.S. and United Kingdom are open without restrictions and often bustling, they are entering their second winter of the coronavirus pandemic anxious about what's ahead: They're squeezed by labor shortages and skyrocketing food costs and the omicron variant is looming.

"I'm extremely worried. I've never felt like we were out of the woods," said Caroline Glover, chef and owner of the restaurant Annette in the Denver suburb of Aurora.

The rapid spread of omicron already is pummeling the industry in Britain and elsewhere, with restaurants, hotels and pubs reporting cancellations at the busiest and most lucrative time of year. Businesses urged the U.K. government to offer relief after officials warned people to think carefully about socializing. Scotland and Wales have pledged millions of pounds for businesses, adding pressure for Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government to do the same in England.

"It's pretty devastating. For private hires, bigger tables of say eight to 16 people, those have pretty much disappeared. These are the bread and butter for restaurants at Christmastime," said Jeff Galvin, co-owner of Galvin Restaurants, a group of five upmarket venues in London.

Many businesses said hundreds of festive corporate lunch bookings vanished almost overnight as infections began to soar and Johnson announced tighter restrictions, including mandatory mask-wearing in most indoor spaces, though restaurants are open as usual.

Glover in Colorado worries about renewed restrictions if infections climb. For now, business has returned, with her dining room back to full capacity — up from a cap of 50% last year — and four greenhouses outside booked far in advance.

Similarly, diners have returned and business is strong for Amy Brandwein, who owns the Italian restaurant Centrolina and a small cafe, Piccolina, in Washington. After her restaurants survived lockdowns with takeout and grocery offerings, "I could safely say we're back to 2019 levels," she said.

But staffing remains a challenge. In a recent survey of 3,000 U.S. restaurant operators, 77% said they didn't have enough workers to meet demand, according to the National Restaurant Association, an industry trade group.

Many restaurant workers started new careers or went back to school. Jada Sartor of Grand Rapids, Michigan, saw her wages rise from \$10 per hour to \$16 per hour this year as restaurants grew more des-

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perate for workers, but she recently quit her serving job because she couldn't find affordable child care. "The cost of living is just so high you can't afford to really live," she said.

Kristin Jonna, owner of restaurant and wine bar Vinology in Ann Arbor, Michigan, said she raised wages nearly 40% to attract and retain her staff of 35. It was a change that needed to happen in the service industry, she said. But she can't hike menu prices enough to compensate.

"Everyone knows that beef is more expensive, but high-end, highly skilled labor is expensive, too," Jonna said. "That is the very tricky part of our business right now."

Jonna said the restaurant is humming despite high COVID-19 caseloads in Michigan. She has fewer large events scheduled, but the customers who are coming in are spending more.

U.S. sales at restaurants and bars hit an estimated \$73.7 billion in November, up 37% from the same month last year, according to preliminary data from the U.S. Census Bureau. But that was partly due to higher menu prices as restaurants try to account for inflation.

Sara Lund, owner of Bodega and The Rest, a bar and restaurant in Salt Lake City, Utah, said her ingredient costs rose between 15% and 40% this year.

"The margins on food are never going to be astronomical, even in good times," she said. "But paying 40% more for protein? I can't pass that along to the customer."

Diners know restaurants are struggling, and many say they have resumed eating out to help their favorite local spots. Liz Cooper of Needham, Massachusetts, said she's comfortable dining indoors with her family of five, all of whom are vaccinated except for her 4-year-old daughter.

"If you like a restaurant and a small business you should get out there and support them," Cooper said. "They might have to close, and then you'll be heartbroken that you can't get your favorite chicken parm or cannoli."

Steve Geffen, who owns four Chicago-area restaurants, including Once Upon a Grill, said he removed 30% of the tables from his restaurants to ensure customers felt comfortable dining inside. So far, it's working.

"They don't mind waiting longer, knowing they're not sitting on top of everybody else," he said.

But Jeanne Busch in Forest Park, Illinois, is sticking with occasional takeout.

"I am definitely not comfortable maskless indoors in a crowd," Busch said. "As we head into winter and omicron continues its rampage, we expect mostly to be eating at home."

In Britain, omicron has already devastated restaurants and pubs. Patrick Dardis, who heads the Young's chain of some 220 pubs, said he hoped officials would come up with a financial relief plan soon. About 30% of the chain's bookings canceled last week.

"There are thousands of businesses — not just pubs — that could collapse in January if the current situation isn't partnered with proper financial support," he said.

UKHospitality, an industry trade group, urged tax relief, saying concerns about omicron have wiped out 2 billion pounds (\$2.6 billion) in sales this month.

Restaurants also are clamoring for government support in the U.S., where the Restaurant Revitalization Fund ran dry earlier this year after dispersing \$28.6 billion to 100,000 applicants.

Sean Kennedy, executive vice president for public policy at the National Restaurant Association, said the industry needs at least \$40 billion to fund the 200,000 applicants who didn't receive grants. So far, Congress hasn't taken action.

It's harder for restaurants to explain what's happening now that their dining rooms are full and they're not on lockdown, Kennedy said.

"They think that we're fully packed and crushing it, but the answer is, we are barely getting by," he said.

Lindsay Mescher, who opened the Greenhouse Cafe in Lebanon, Ohio, in 2019, is frustrated that she never received a promised government grant. She was approved in May, but demand was so high the fund was exhausted before she received any money.

She took out loans to keep her staff of eight employed while offering only carryout for the first 16 months of the pandemic. The cafe reopened to diners this year and had a busy summer and fall, but Mescher is still struggling. She used to pay \$165.77 for a case of 400 takeout salad bowls, for example; now they

cost \$246.75.

"The funds would have guaranteed survival for us," Mescher said. "It's extremely unfair that some restaurants got relief and some didn't."

Anderson reported from New York and Hui from London.

Iraq military: 2 rockets strike inside Green Zone

Associated Press undefined

BAGHDAD (AP) — Two rockets struck Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone, home to the U.S. embassy, causing property damage but no casualties, Iraq's military said early Sunday.

One rocket was destroyed by the embassy's C-RAM defense system. Another fell near a national monument, causing damage to two civilian vehicles, the statement said. An investigation was launched by Iraqi security forces.

Along with the U.S. embassy, the Green Zone houses other foreign diplomatic missions and Iraqi government buildings. The zone is a frequent target of rocket and drone attacks that American officials blame on Iran-backed Iraqi militia groups.

Iran-aligned groups have vowed revenge on the U.S. for a 2020 drone strike that killed Iranian general Qassem Soleimani and Iraqi militia commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. They have conditioned the end of attacks against the U.S. presence in Iraq on the exit of American troops from the country.

The U.S.-led coalition formally ended its combat mission supporting Iraqi forces in the ongoing fight against the Islamic State group this month. Some 2,500 troops will remain as the coalition shifts to an advisory mission to continue supporting Iraqi forces.

The rocket attacks, once near-daily occurrences, have slowed in recent months. In November, an explosive-laden drone targeted the residence of Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi in an assassination attempt.

Osaka arson suspect identified, buildings to be checked

By MARI YAMAGUCHI Associated Press

TOKYO (AP) — Japanese police on Sunday identified a 61-year-old man as a prime suspect behind a fire that engulfed a mental clinic in an eight-story building where he was a patient, killing 24 people who were trapped inside.

The government also announced plans to inspect tens of thousands of similar buildings nationwide. Authorities believe the massive death toll at the downtown Osaka building on Friday was largely because the fire made its only emergency stairway unusable.

Osaka police, which are investigating the case as arson and murder, identified the man as Morio Tanimoto. He is being treated in serious condition after he was rescued from the fire, police said. He has not been formally arrested or charged.

After verifying security cameras and searching his home, police said they suspect Tanimoto was responsible for setting fire to the mental clinic, an official at the prefectural police investigation department told The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media.

Kyodo News said Tanimoto was a retired metal worker. His former employer at the factory where he worked 2002-2010 described him as diligent and skilled. He quit without saying what he was up to, he said. Tanimoto trained at his father's sheet metal factory in Osaka after finishing high school, but left after his brother took over the business and kept changing jobs, Kyodo said.

Some of his neighbors interviewed by local media described him as a gray-haired man who used to bicycle and hardly spoke.

"Nishi Umeda clinic for the mind and body" was on the fourth floor of an eight-story building in Osaka's bustling business district of Kitashinchi, and was known for its support for mental health at work.

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Police searched Tanimoto's house on Saturday and found the clinic's patient card.

Authorities are investigating how the smoke filled the floor so quickly that the victims became trapped. The fire that burned just 25 square meters (270 square feet) of the floor near the reception was mostly extinguished within 30 minutes.

On Sunday, Internal Affairs and Communications Minister Yasushi Kaneko, who is also in charge of fire and disaster management, said he had instructed a nationwide inspection of about 30,000 commercial buildings with three or more floors but only one stairway.

Kaneko said many victims could not escape and died because the Osaka building's only stairway was not accessible due to the fire and they lost their way out. He said the ministry will set up a panel of experts to discuss safety measures.

Police quoted witnesses who saw a man walking into the clinic with a paper bag, which he put on the floor, right next to a heater by the reception desk, and kicked it. Liquid poured out, caught fire and the whole floor was in flames and smoke.

A security camera at the clinic captured the scene, in which the man is seen standing at the entrance as if blocking the way, NHK television said.

Witnesses and the investigation suggested that the victims gasped for air and struggled to find their way out of the clinic. Most were found to have collapsed while headed to the other end of the clinic, only to find no way out.

The clinic without an external stairway had several compartments for consultations and workshops along just one aisle, with the main counseling room on the far end of the floor. There was no prior violation of fire prevention codes at the building, officials said.

Two visitors who witnessed the beginning of the fire at the reception desk were able to run out.

Firefighters initially found 27 people in a state of cardiac arrest, including three who were resuscitated, officials said. A fourth survivor was brought down by an aerial ladder from a window on the sixth floor with a slight injury.

Some of the clinic's clients who spoke to Japanese media said the clinic was popular and was always crowded with up to 20 people waiting, especially on Fridays when special counselling and programs were available for those preparing to return to work after sick leave.

The clinic's psychiatrist, Kotaro Nishizawa, could not be reached since the fire.

Over the weekend, Osaka residents brought flowers, bottled water and canned drinks as offerings to the spirits of the departed outside the building.

The fire was a shocking reminder of the 2019 attack at the Kyoto Animation studio, where an attacker stormed into and set it on fire, killing 36 people and injuring more than 30 others. The incident shocked Japan and drew an outpouring of grief from anime fans worldwide. In 2001, an intentionally set blaze in Tokyo's Kabukicho entertainment district killed 44 people — the country's worst known case of arson in modern times.

Taylor helps Colts turn table on Patriots with 27-17 victory

By MICHAEL MAROT AP Sports Writer

INDIANAPOLIS (AP) — Jonathan Taylor understood the challenge long before he suited up Saturday night. He anticipated defensive mastermind Bill Belichick would stack the line of scrimmage and dare the Indianapolis Colts to beat them with the passing game as he's done to so many other opponents.

This time, Taylor turned the tables. The second-year running back rushed for 170 yards, including a 67-yard touchdown run with 2:01 left to seal Indy's 27-17 victory over New England.

"I think it just says we're a team that's going to come in and play 60 minutes, four quarters of hard football and we're not going to give up till the clock hits zero," Taylor said after logging 29 carries. "It was just all out effort."

Taylor's performance may have changed their season season, too. By winning for the fifth time in six games and snapping an eight-game losing streak against a bitter rival, Indy (8-6) solidified its playoff

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hopes with another crucial conference victory.

He's run for a score in 11 straight games, tying Hall of Famer Lenny Moore for the longest streak in franchise history.

Nobody inside the Colts locker room was surprised by his stat line — or the epic highlight of Taylor breaking through the line, eluding a tackle and sprinting to the front corner of the end zone..

"I almost called a pass there because I thought we needed a first down and I talked it over with Marcus Brady and said 'No, let's call one more pass,'" coach Frank Reich said referring to his offensive coordinator. "There's no way anybody's catching him."

For the Patriots (9-5), it marked the end of a seven-game winning streak and dropped them out of the No. 1 slot in the AFC playoff chase. And it was mostly of their own making.

A bevy of uncharacteristic mistakes put the Pats in a 20-0 hole and Taylor's long run made sure they couldn't come all the way back.

The game had a little bit of everything — drama, physical play, shouting matches, even a fight that led to the ejections of Patriots safety Kyle Dugger and Colts receiver Michael Pittman Jr.

But Indy won this one by stealing a page out of Belichick's playbook — using the ground game to chew up the clock and closing it out with a back-breaking play in the waning minutes. It was Indy's first win over New England since 2009.

"I've said it like five times, I can say it another five times," Belichick said. "We didn't do anything well enough to win tonight."

Taylor and the Colts had the upper hand from the start. They opened the second series with seven straight running plays before Taylor took a direct snap, handed off to Carson Wentz and then Wentz flipped the ball to Nyheim Hines for an 8-yard scoring pass and a 7-0 lead.

Matthew Adams followed that by blocking Jake Bailey's punt that E.J. Speed recovered in the end zone for a 14-0 lead — New England's largest deficit since a Week 3 loss to New Orleans. Two field goals made it 20-0 early in the third.

"It seems like they just had good force on the play," New England special teams star Matthew Slater said. "That's tough when you give up plays like that, it's going to be hard to win. We spotted a team 20 points at their place. Good luck trying to win. There's no excuse to play like that."

Rookie quarterback Mac Jones finally answered with a 12-yard TD pass to Hunter Henry and after Nick Folk's short field goal made it 20-10, Jones hooked up with Henry for a 7-yard scoring pass with 2:21 left.

Belichick opted to kick it deep and two plays later, Taylor closed it out.

INJURY REPORT

Patriots: Played without top rusher Damien Harris (hamstring) and lost linebacker Ja'Whaun Bentley (ankle) and receiver Nelson Agholor (head injury). Receiver N'Keal Harry needed help to get of the field late.

Colts: Center Ryan Kelly missed his second straight game after being activated off the reserve/COVID-19 list Tuesday. Reich explained Kelly was out because of a personal matter.

STAT PACK

Patriots: New England's NFL record streak of scoring in the first half of 99 consecutive games ended. .. The Patriots also failed to score 30 points against Indy for the first time in 10 games, leaving them in a tie with Kansas City, which did it nine straight times against Denver from 1964-68 in the AFL. ... Jones was 26 of 45 with 299 yards, two touchdowns and two interceptions in the first road loss of his career.

Colts: Speed became the first NFL player to record two touchdowns off blocked punts in one season since Ed Reed in 2003. Indy added two more totals to its league-leading total and now has at least one takeaway in 15 consecutive games. ... Wentz was 5 of 12 with 57 yards with one TD and one interception as the Colts rushed for 226 yards on 39 carries.

UP NEXT

Patriots: Host Buffalo next Sunday.

Colts: At Arizona next Saturday night.

More AP NFL: <https://apnews.com/hub/nfl> and <https://apnews.com/hub/pro-32> and <https://twitter.com/>

AP_NFL

Paul Rudd hosts 'SNL' sans audience, Charli XCX amid omicron

By MALLIKA SEN Associated Press

NEW YORK (AP) — People's Sexiest Man Alive of 2021 was indeed inducted into the vaunted Five-Timers Club on "Saturday Night Live," but the surging omicron variant of the coronavirus meant there was no live audience to see it happen. Instead, viewers at home saw new sketches taped earlier in the week, as well as highlights from years past.

The long-running sketch comedy show announced on social media Saturday afternoon that the night's episode, featuring "Ant-Man" star Paul Rudd as host, would tape without a live audience and with only limited cast and crew "due to the recent spike in the Omicron variant and out of an abundance of caution."

By the time 11:30 p.m. Eastern time rolled around, the entire cast — save for Kenan Thompson — and most of the crew had been sent home, too, Tom Hanks told viewers. Hanks opened the show, which forewent its usual cold open skit, to announce the departure from the show's planned Christmas episode. The episode was the NBC show's last of 2021.

Hanks was joined by former "SNL" stalwart Tina Fey, both sporting their Five-Timers jackets.

"As you know, I started the Five-Timers Club," Hanks said, addressing Fey.

"Like you started COVID," Fey retorted, alluding to the star's coronavirus diagnosis in March 2020.

Rudd was scheduled to return to Studio 8H as host for the fifth time — typically a milestone of much fanfare. Despite the show dispensing with its usual format, the pair announced that Rudd would still be inducted into the club and called Thompson, as the longest-tenured cast member, to do the honors.

"Congratulations on hosting the show four-and-a-half times," Thompson told Rudd.

British pop star Charli XCX had been scheduled to perform but announced Saturday afternoon on Twitter that she would not be allowed to perform.

"Due to the limited crew at tonight's taping of snl my musical performances will no longer be able to go ahead," she wrote. "I am devastated and heartbroken."

She then urged her fans to "look after yourselves out there and make sure you get vaccinated if you haven't already."

The show returned for its 47th year in September with 16 cast members and five featured players, a particularly crowded field. The size of the cast has allowed for atypical flexibility for its high-profile members, who can now take time off for other projects during the season.

The show said on social media that those who had won tickets to the night's show would receive more information soon.

This was far from the first time the Lorne Michaels-produced show has had to adapt to the coronavirus pandemic. The virus outbreak halted its 45th season for about a month, but "SNL" was back on the air by mid-April with a "quarantine version" of the show hosted by Hanks. The show returned to 30 Rockefeller Center for its 46th season after implementing COVID-19 protocols, but booted singer Morgan Wallen from that season's second episode for breaking rules. And just last month, an SNL performance on set by British singer Ed Sheeran was nearly derailed after he tested positive for COVID-19.

New York state reported Saturday that nearly 22,000 people had tested positive for COVID-19 on Friday — eclipsing the previous day's mark for the highest single-day total for new cases since testing became widely available. More than half the positive results were in the city. Omicron is expected to become the dominant coronavirus variant in many countries within weeks.

Other live shows in New York have been devastated anew by the recent coronavirus surge, with many Broadway stages forced to go dark because of outbreaks. Mayor Bill de Blasio this past week declared omicron "in full force" in New York, snuffing out holiday mainstays like the Rockettes Christmas show and threatening others yet — all portending another holiday season without much cheer.

Associated Press writer Bobby Caina Calvan contributed to this story.

Fear of extremes driving voters in Chile presidential runoff

By PATRICIA LUNA and JOSHUA GOODMAN Associated Press

SANTIAGO, Chile (AP) — Chileans are electing their next president Sunday following a polarizing campaign between a free-market firebrand likened to Donald Trump and a millennial former student protest leader who promises to attack nagging inequality in Latin America's most advanced economy.

José Antonio Kast, a lawmaker who has a history of defending Chile's past military dictatorship, finished ahead in the first round of voting last month but failed to secure a majority of votes. That set up a head-to-head runoff against Gabriel Boric, who trailed him by about two percentage points.

Whoever wins will be breaking precedent. Since the return of democracy three decades ago, no candidate leading after the first round has ever been defeated in the runoff. But no president has ever been elected without winning in the capital, Santiago, which Boric carried comfortably in the first round.

Opinion polls in recent days consistently showed an advantage for Boric, although sometimes within the margin of error, meaning the contest is likely to be decided by whichever candidate is able to energize his base while at the same time winning over the majority of voters who don't side with political extremes.

"Turnout will mean everything," said Robert Funk, a political scientist at the University of Chile.

The two candidates couldn't be more polar opposites.

Kast, 55, a devout Roman Catholic and father of nine, emerged from the far right fringe after having won less than 8% of the vote in 2017. He rose steadily in the polls this time with a divisive discourse emphasizing conservative family values and playing on Chileans' fears that a surge in migration — from Haiti and Venezuela — is driving crime.

A longtime lawmaker, he has a record of attacking Chile's LGBTQ community and advocating more restrictive abortion laws. He also accused outgoing President Sebastian Pinera, a fellow conservative, of betraying the economic legacy of Gen. Augusto Pinochet, the country's former military leader. Kast's brother, Miguel, was one of Pinochet's top advisers.

Boric, 35, would become Chile's youngest modern president. He was among several activists elected to Congress in 2014 after leading protests for higher quality education. If elected, he said, he will "bury" the neoliberal economic model left by Pinochet and raise taxes on the "super rich" to expand social services, fight inequality and boost protections of the environment.

In recent days, both candidates tried to veer toward the center.

"I'm not an extremist. ... I don't feel far right," Kast proclaimed in the final stretch even as he was dogged by revelations that his German-born father had been a card-carrying member of Adolf Hitler's Nazi party.

Meanwhile Boric, who is backed by a coalition of leftist parties that includes Chile's Communist Party, brought more centrist advisers onto his team and promised that any changes would be gradual and fiscally responsible.

"On both sides, people are voting out of fear," said Funk. "Neither side is particularly enthused with their candidate but they are voting out of fear that, if Kast wins, there will an authoritarian regression or because they fear Boric is too young, inexperienced and aligned with the communists."

Whoever wins is likely to have a slim mandate and be hemmed in by a divided congress.

In addition, the political rules could soon change because a newly elected convention is rewriting the country's Pinochet-era constitution. The convention — the nation's most powerful elected institution — could in theory call for new presidential elections when it concludes its work next year and if the new charter is ratified in a plebiscite.

Associated Press writer Patricia Luna reported in Santiago and AP writer Joshua Goodman reported from Miami.

Fire damages huge QVC distribution center in North Carolina

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ROCKY MOUNT, N.C. (AP) — A fire ripped through a distribution center in North Carolina for the QVC home-shopping television network early Saturday, causing extensive damage to the facility, officials said.

More than 300 employees were working at the facility near Rocky Mount when the fire was reported shortly after 2 a.m., The News & Observer reported. No injuries were immediately reported.

QVC representatives reported that all employees safely evacuated the warehouse and were accounted for except for one who hadn't contacted family yet, according to Edgecombe County Manager Eric Evans. Earlier Saturday, Evans had said all of the center's employees appeared to be accounted for.

QVC said in a subsequent statement that it was working with local authorities to confirm the safety of all employees and contractors at the site. It said it had close to 2,000 "team members" working at the complex, spread over three shifts.

Evans said a "main section" of the 1.2 million-square-foot (365,000-square-meter) facility appears to be destroyed. Crews from nearly 45 fire departments were still fighting the blaze more than 12 hours after it began.

"They're working very hard to try to protect the remainder of that building," Evans said. "Significant loss, but we're very hopeful that it's not a total loss and that they'll be able to rebuild here."

The cause of the fire remains under investigation, according to Evans.

QVC tweeted a statement about the fire on Saturday, saying, "We are currently focused on our team. As we work to understand the full impact of this incident, including any impact to shipping and delivery, we'll share further details."

QVC, Inc. is based in West Chester, Pennsylvania, and is a wholly owned subsidiary of Qurate Retail Inc.

The Rocky Mount Area Chamber of Commerce posted a Facebook message that said up to 2,500 families would be affected by the fire.

Hits 'keep coming': Hospitals struggle as COVID beds fill

By ED WHITE Associated Press

DETROIT (AP) — Hospitals across the country are struggling to cope with burnout among doctors, nurses and other workers, already buffeted by a crush of patients from the ongoing surge of the COVID-19 delta variant and now bracing for the fallout of another highly transmissible mutation.

Ohio became the latest state to summon the National Guard to help overwhelmed medical facilities. Experts in Nebraska warned that its hospitals soon may need to ration care. Medical officials in Kansas and Missouri are delaying surgeries, turning away transfers and desperately trying to hire traveling nurses, as cases double and triple in an eerie reminder of last year's holiday season.

"There is no medical school class that can prepare you for this level of death," said Dr. Jacqueline Pflaum-Carlson, an emergency medicine specialist at Henry Ford Health System in Detroit. "The hits just keep coming."

The national seven-day average of COVID-19 hospital admissions was 60,000 by Wednesday, far off last winter's peak but 50% higher than in early November, the government reported. The situation is more acute in cold-weather regions, where people are increasingly gathering inside and new infections are piling up.

New York state reported Saturday that slightly more than 21,900 people had tested positive for COVID-19 the day before, a new high since tests became widely available. Consequences of the latest surge have been swift in New York City: The Rockettes Christmas show was scratched for the season; some Broadway shows canceled performances because of outbreaks among cast members; and "Saturday Night Live" announced it was taping without a live audience and with only limited cast and crew.

"We are in a situation where we are now facing a very important delta surge and we are looking over our shoulder at an oncoming omicron surge," Dr. Anthony Fauci, chief medical adviser to President Joe Biden, said of the two COVID-19 variants.

At AdventHealth Shawnee Mission, a hospital near Kansas City, Missouri, chief medical officer Dr. Lisa Hays said the emergency department is experiencing backups sometimes lasting for days.

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"The beds are not the issue. It's the nurses to staff the beds. ... And it's all created by rising COVID numbers and burnout," Hays said. "Our nurses are burnt out."

Experts attribute most of the rise in cases and hospitalizations to infections among people who have not been inoculated against the coronavirus. The government says 61% of the U.S. population is fully vaccinated.

Dr. Steve Stites, chief medical officer at University of Kansas Health System in Kansas City, Kansas, said the "pandemic of the unvaccinated" continues to swamp the hospital and its workers.

"There's no place to go. Our staff are tired. We're going to run out of travelers," Stites said, referring to visiting health care workers, "and omicron is at our doorstep. This is a tornado warning to our community."

Ohio's National Guard deployment is one of the largest seen during the pandemic, with more than 1,000 members sent to beleaguered hospitals especially in the Akron, Canton and Cleveland areas.

As of Friday, 4,723 people in the state were hospitalized with the coronavirus, a number last seen about a year ago, Gov. Mike DeWine said. Some staffers were taking only short breaks before punching in for second shifts, he added.

Health systems elsewhere that are doing somewhat better are nervously eyeing the arrival of the omicron variant and girding themselves for the impact.

Nebraska officials said hospitals might have to put some care on hold to make room for COVID-19 patients. While case numbers are down from the state's pandemic peak, they could rebound rapidly, and bed availability remains tight because of patients with non-virus ailments.

"It may be likely that omicron will cause a giant surge, and honestly we can't handle that right now," said Dr. Angela Hewlett of Nebraska Medicine in Omaha.

At Los Angeles' Providence Holy Cross Medical Center, just 17 coronavirus patients were being treated there Friday, a small fraction of the hospital's worst stretch. Nurse manager Edgar Ramirez said his co-workers are weary but better prepared if a wave hits.

"The human factor of having that fear is always going to be there," Ramirez said. "I tell our crew, 'We have to talk through this. We have to express ourselves.' Otherwise it's going to tough."

Twin sisters Linda Calderon and Natalie Balli, 71, had planned to get vaccinated but delayed it until it was too late. Now they're on oxygen in the same room at Providence Holy Cross, their beds separated by just a few feet.

"We kept saying, 'we'll do it tomorrow.' But tomorrow never came," Calderon said as she watched her sister struggle to breathe. "We really regret not getting the shots, because if we did, we wouldn't be like this right now."

Pflaum-Carlson, the doctor at Detroit's Henry Ford Health, made a public plea for people to get the shots both for their benefit and for those toiling on the frontlines of care. Eighty percent of the roughly 500 COVID-19 patients at the system's five hospitals were unvaccinated,

"Have a little grace and consideration in how devastating things are right now," she said.

AP journalists Eugene Garcia and Jae Hong in Los Angeles, Heather Hollingsworth in Kansas City, Missouri, and Andrew Welsh-Huggins in Columbus, Ohio, contributed to this report.

UTFO's Kangol Kid dies after battle with cancer at 55

By Jonathan Landrum Associated Press

Kangol Kid, a member of the legendary hip-hop group UTFO, has died after a battle with colon cancer. He was 55.

The family of Kangol Kid — whose real name is Shaun Shiller Fequiere — said in a statement that he died peacefully around 3 a.m. Saturday at a hospital in Manhasset, New York. He was diagnosed with cancer in February.

Kid was known for often sporting the popular Kangol headwear and being a member of UTFO, which stands for Untouchable Force Organization. The four-member group was known for 1980s hits including "Roxanne, Roxanne" and "Ya Cold Wanna Be With Me."

Along with his hip-hop success, Kid became recognized for his efforts against breast cancer through the Mama Luke Foundation. Following his diagnosis, he had spoken publicly about the need for regular screening.

UK Brexit minister quits as new COVID rules spark anger

By DANICA KIRKA Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — A senior member of Prime Minister Boris Johnson's Cabinet resigned Saturday night, adding to a sense of disarray within a government that has faced rebellion from his own lawmakers and voters this week.

Brexit Minister David Frost said in a letter to Johnson that he was stepping down immediately after a newspaper reported that he had planned to leave the post next month.

Frost said the process of leaving the EU would be a long-term job. "That is why we agreed earlier this month that I would move on in January and hand over the baton to others to manage our future relationship with the EU," he said in his resignation letter.

However, the Mail on Sunday said earlier that he resigned because of growing disillusionment with Johnson's policies. The newspaper said Frost's decision was triggered by last week's introduction of new pandemic restrictions, including a requirement that people show proof of vaccination or a negative coronavirus test to enter nightclubs and other crowded venues.

And in his resignation letter, Frost said the UK needed to "learn to live with Covid. ... You took a brave decision in July, against considerable opposition, to open up the country again. Sadly it did not prove to be irreversible, as I wished, and believe you did too. I hope we can get back on track soon and not be tempted by the kind of coercive measures we have seen elsewhere."

The news follows a stunning defeat for Johnson's Conservative Party in a by-election Thursday in North Shropshire, a long-time party stronghold. Earlier this week, 99 Conservative lawmakers voted against so-called vaccine passports in the House of Commons, the biggest rebellion in Johnson's 2 1/2 years as prime minister.

Angela Rayner, deputy leader of the opposition Labour Party, said Johnson isn't up to the job as the omicron variant drives a spike in coronavirus infections.

"A government in total chaos right when the country faces an uncertain few weeks" Rayner tweeted. "We deserve better than this buffoonery."

Even some of Johnson's own party members piled on.

"The prime minister is running out of time and out of friends to deliver on the promises and discipline of a true Conservative government," tweeted Conservative lawmaker Andrew Bridgen. "Lord Frost has made it clear, 100 Conservative lawmakers have made it clear, but most importantly, so did the people of North Shropshire."

Frost led talks with the European Union as Johnson's government sought to re-negotiate terms of Britain's withdrawal from the bloc.

His resignation comes after the UK recently softened its stance in the talks with the EU over post-Brexit trade rules for Northern Ireland. The change of tone from Britain came as a surprise to many because it seemed at odds with the hardline position of the Brexit minister, who was nicknamed "Frosty the No Man."

Johnson's government is also under fire over reports that officials held Christmas parties last year when pandemic rules barred such gatherings.

Adding to his problems with the so-called partygate scandal, Johnson's choice to investigate the claims had to step aside after he also was tied to such parties.

Simon Case, the head of the civil service, stepped aside from the investigation after the Guido Fawkes website reported Friday that his department held two parties in December 2020.

The scandal erupted when a video surfaced showing a mock news conference at which some of Johnson's staff appeared to make light of a party that violated the pandemic rules. Until that time, the prime minister had steadfastly denied government officials had broken any lockdown rules.

The Times of London newspaper reported Saturday that one of the events held by Case's department, the Cabinet Office, was listed in digital calendars as "Christmas party!" and was organized by a member of Case's team.

The Cabinet Office said Friday that the event was a virtual quiz in which a small number of people who had been working together in the same office took part from their desks.

"The Cabinet Secretary played no part in the event but walked through the team's office on the way to his own office," the office said in a statement. "No outside guests or other staff were invited or present. This lasted for an hour and drinks and snacks were bought by those attending. He also spoke briefly to staff in the office before leaving."

Trademark tussle: Ole Miss objects to similar New Miss logo

By EMILY WAGSTER PETTUS Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. (AP) — James Meredith says he conquered white supremacy and created a new Mississippi 59 years ago when he became the first Black student to enroll in the University of Mississippi — a school whose longstanding nickname, Ole Miss, is rooted in plantation vernacular of the Confederacy.

Now, a person close to Meredith is selling "New Miss" merchandise and trying to trademark a logo with cursive script that is nearly identical to the university's Ole Miss logo. The university is fighting the trademark effort, arguing that the New Miss merchandise is "confusingly similar" to its ubiquitous brand.

Suzi Altman is a photographer who often follows Meredith to document his public appearances. She applied for the New Miss trademark in July 2020, soon after she sold the first T-shirts and other merchandise. Altman said she's using the brand to try to raise money for a museum that would preserve Meredith's legacy — a project that still has a long way to go. She said that as of mid-November, she still had not earned a profit on the merchandise.

Meredith was already a military veteran when he integrated the University of Mississippi in 1962 under a federal court order and amid resistance from a race-baiting governor. Federal marshals protected him as mob violence erupted under the oaks and magnolias on the Oxford campus.

A few years ago, one of his friends gave Meredith a baseball cap emblazoned with a logo that looked like the Ole Miss one but said "New Miss." That friend, the Rev. Robert West, said the phrase more accurately symbolized how Meredith had changed a state with a tarnished legacy of slavery and segregation.

"We were inspired by James' story," Altman told The Associated Press during a conversation about why she started selling New Miss items.

Altman's New Miss T-shirts, hats and flags use the same script as the Ole Miss logo that appears on football helmets, sports jerseys, marketing materials and all manner of merchandise licensed by the University of Mississippi. Many of her products also use the same colors as the university's: cardinal red, navy blue and powder blue.

Altman uses photos of Meredith on her New Miss Brand website. The backs of some baseball caps are embroidered with "James H. Meredith 1962."

The 88-year-old Meredith himself was elusive when asked whether he has given his blessing to Altman's business venture.

"I'm glad somebody wants to do something," he told the AP, before adding, "Everybody done made money on James Meredith except James Meredith."

Meredith is touring Mississippi on what he calls his last mission from God, urging people to abide by the Ten Commandments. Some days, he wears an Ole Miss baseball cap. Other days, he swaps that for one with a New Miss logo.

"I don't see no reason why the Ole Miss and the New Miss can't coexist," Meredith said.

The university doesn't see it that way. In a development first reported by the Clarion Ledger, the university said in its objection to Altman's trademark application that the New Miss items "are identical in some instances and confusingly similar in all instances" to Ole Miss merchandise.

In a filing Nov. 29, Altman's attorney denied that the New Miss logo is "confusingly similar" to the Ole

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Miss one and said that the New Miss logo is protected by the First Amendment and as a parody.

The university declined to make anyone available for an interview with the AP but said in a statement that it had tried unsuccessfully to resolve the issue with Altman.

"The University of Mississippi is affectionately known by our students, alumni and others across the country as Ole Miss, and identifies the university with the script Ole Miss logo," said the university's communications officer, Jim Zook. "The University has an obligation to protect its brand against confusingly similar marks."

The university says the Ole Miss nickname arose from a university yearbook contest in the late 1800s. The phrase "Ole Miss" had been used by enslaved people to refer to a plantation owner's wife.

The university's chancellor issued a report in 2014 on efforts to promote diversity on the mostly white campus in the state with the nation's highest percentage of Black residents. It said the university would continue calling itself Ole Miss but should consider limiting the nickname to the context of athletics and school spirit.

"Regardless of its origin, the vast majority of those associated with our university (have) a strong affection for 'Ole Miss' and do not associate its use with race in any way," the 2014 report said.

The university still uses Ole Miss for websites and email addresses, although some students and faculty object. The most popular people on campus, chosen in a student election, are Mr. and Miss Ole Miss.

Dee Rhymes, a 2021 University of Mississippi graduate, ran for Mr. Ole Miss in the fall of 2020 promising "Truth, Justice and the New Miss Way." Rhymes, who is Black, didn't win but said he wanted to inspire fellow students to think about a campus culture that could feel more equitable and compassionate. Altman has given him New Miss merchandise and he volunteers as a brand ambassador.

Rhymes said embracing New Miss over Ole Miss should not be controversial.

"New Miss is simply a new Mississippi or a new way of thinking — out with the old, in with the new," he said.

Altman said she has "no personal animosity" toward the university or the nickname Ole Miss.

"I don't care if they change their name. That's not my fight," she said. "We are all about a new Mississippi and changes that cut across the state."

The University of Mississippi has worked to distance itself from Confederate imagery during the past generation.

In 1997, the university effectively stopped sports fans from bringing Confederate battle flags to games. Sports teams are still called the Rebels, but in 2003 the university retired the Col. Reb sideline mascot. During the AP interview, Meredith wore shoes with a Col. Reb logo, saying he had conquered the colonel and could wear it if he wanted.

In 2006, the university dedicated a statue of Meredith on campus and in 2020, the school moved a Confederate soldier monument that had stood for more than a century in a central part of campus to somewhere more remote. The monument had been a rallying point for rioters when Meredith enrolled.

Meredith now has two grandchildren at the University of Mississippi. He said one of his most rewarding moments on the Oxford campus happened about a dozen years ago, when he saw young Black sorority pledges "marching across Ole Miss like they own the place."

"To me, that was the new Ole Miss," Meredith said with a smile.

Follow Emily Wagster Pettus on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/EWagsterPettus>.

Ransomware persists even as high-profile attacks have slowed

By ERIC TUCKER and ALAN SUDERMAN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — In the months since President Joe Biden warned Russia's Vladimir Putin that he needed to crack down on ransomware gangs in his country, there hasn't been a massive attack like the one last May that resulted in gasoline shortages. But that's small comfort to Ken Trzaska.

Trzaska is president of Lewis & Clark Community College, a small Illinois school that canceled classes for

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days after a ransomware attack last month that knocked critical computer systems offline.

"That first day," Trzaska said, "I think all of us were probably up 20-plus hours, just moving through the process, trying to get our arms around what happened."

Even if the United States isn't currently enduring large-scale, front-page ransomware attacks on par with ones earlier this year that targeted the global meat supply or kept millions of Americans from filling their gas tanks, the problem hasn't disappeared. In fact, the attack on Trzaska's college was part of a barrage of lower-profile episodes that have upended the businesses, governments, schools and hospitals that were hit.

The college's ordeal reflects the challenges the Biden administration faces in stamping out the threat — and its uneven progress in doing so since ransomware became an urgent national security problem last spring.

U.S. officials have recaptured some ransom payments, cracked down on abuses of cryptocurrency, and made some arrests. Spy agencies have launched attacks against ransomware groups and the U.S. has pushed federal, state and local governments, as well as private industries, to boost protections.

Yet six months after Biden's admonitions to Putin, it's hard to tell whether hackers have eased up because of U.S. pressure. Smaller-scale attacks continue, with ransomware criminals continuing to operate from Russia with seeming impunity. Administration officials have given conflicting assessments about whether Russia's behavior has changed since last summer. Further complicating matters, ransomware is no longer at the top of the U.S.-Russia agenda, with Washington focused on dissuading Putin from invading Ukraine.

The White House said in a statement that it was determined to "fight all ransomware" through its various tools but that the government's response depends on the severity of the attack.

"There are some that are law enforcement matters and others that are high impact, disruptive ransomware activity posing a direct national security threat that require other measures," the White House statement said.

Ransomware attacks — in which hackers lock up victims' data and demand exorbitant sums to return it — surfaced as a national security emergency for the administration after a May attack on Colonial Pipeline, which supplies nearly half the fuel consumed on the East Coast.

The attack prompted the company to halt operations, causing gas shortages for days, though it resumed service after paying more than \$4 million in ransom. Soon after came an attack on meat processor JBS, which paid an \$11 million ransom.

Biden met with Putin in June in Geneva, where he suggested critical infrastructure sectors should be "off limits" for ransomware and said the U.S. should know in six months to a year "whether we have a cybersecurity arrangement that begins to bring some order."

He reiterated the message in July, days after a major attack on a software company, Kaseya, that affected hundreds of businesses, and said he expected Russia to take action on cybercriminals when the U.S. provides enough information to do so.

Since then, there have been some notable attacks from groups believed to be based in Russia, including against Sinclair Broadcast Group and the National Rifle Association, but none of the same consequence or impact of those from last spring or summer.

One reason may be increased U.S. government scrutiny, or fear of it.

The Biden administration in September sanctioned a Russia-based virtual currency exchange that officials say helped ransomware gangs launder funds. Last month, the Justice Department unsealed charges against a suspected Ukrainian ransomware operator who was arrested in Poland, and has recovered millions of dollars in ransom payments. Gen. Paul Nakasone, the head of U.S. Cyber Command, told The New York Times his agency has begun offensive operations against ransomware groups. The White House says that "whole-of-government" effort will continue.

"I think the ransomware folks, the ones conducting them, are stepping back like, 'Hey, if we do that, that's going to get the United States government coming after us offensively,'" Kevin Powers, security strategy adviser for cyber risk firm CyberSaint, said of attacks against critical infrastructure.

U.S. officials, meanwhile, have shared a small number of names of suspected ransomware operators

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with Russian officials, who have said they have started investigating, according to two people familiar with the matter who were not authorized to speak publicly.

It's unclear what Russia will do with those names, though Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov insisted the countries have been having a useful dialogue and said "a working mechanism has been established and is actually functioning."

It's also hard to measure the impact of individual arrests on the overall threat. Even as the suspected ransomware hacker awaits extradition to the U.S. following his arrest in Poland, another who was indicted by federal prosecutors was later reported by a British tabloid to be living comfortably in Russia and driving luxury cars.

Some are skeptical about attributing any drop-off in high-profile attacks to U.S. efforts.

"It could have just been a fluke," said Dmitri Alperovitch, former chief technology officer of the cybersecurity firm CrowdStrike. He said asking Russia to crack down on large-scale attacks won't work because "it's way too granular of a request to calibrate criminal activity they don't even fully control."

Top American officials have given conflicting answers about ransomware trends since Biden's discussions with Putin. Some FBI and Justice Department officials say they've seen no change in Russian behavior. National Cyber Director Chris Inglis said there's been a discernible decrease in attacks but that it was too soon to say why.

It's hard to quantify the number of attacks given the lack of baseline information and uneven reporting from victims, though the absence of disruptive incidents is an important marker for a White House trying to focus its attention on the most significant national security risks and catastrophic breaches.

Victims of ransomware attacks in the past few months have included hospitals, small businesses, colleges like Howard University — which briefly took many of its systems offline after discovering a September attack — and Virginia's legislature.

The attack at Lewis & Clark, in Godfrey, Illinois, was discovered two days before Thanksgiving when the school's IT director detected suspicious activity and proactively took systems offline, said Trzaska, the president.

A ransom note from hackers demanded a payment, though Trzaska declined to reveal the sum or identify the culprits. Though many attacks come from hackers in Russia or Eastern Europe, some originate elsewhere.

With vital education systems affected, including email and the school's online learning platform, administrators canceled classes for days after the Thanksgiving break and communicated updates to students via social media and through a public alert system.

The college, which had backups on the majority of its servers, resumed operations this month.

The ordeal was daunting enough to inspire Trzaska and another college president who he says endured a similar experience to plan a cybersecurity panel.

"The stock quote from everyone," Trzaska said, "is not if it's going to happen but when it's going to happen."

Suderman reported from Richmond, Virginia. Associated Press writer Dasha Litvinova in Moscow contributed to this report.

In Missouri, Greitens' comeback bid has some in GOP on edge

By JIM SALTER Associated Press

ST. LOUIS (AP) — Former Missouri Gov. Eric Greitens is banking on Republican voters forgiving his past indiscretions when they choose a U.S. Senate nominee next August. Many in the GOP establishment are hoping they don't forget.

Greitens resigned as governor in 2018 amid an investigation of an extramarital affair with his St. Louis hairdresser allegedly involving bondage and blackmail and leading to criminal and legislative investigations. The allegation of a photo taken without the woman's consent for the purposes of blackmail led to a felony

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criminal charge, which was eventually dropped.

Now, he is among the frontrunners in a crowded field of Republican Senate candidates that includes U.S. House members Vicky Hartzler and Billy Long, Attorney General Eric Schmitt and the St. Louis lawyer who made headlines by pointing a gun at racial injustice protesters outside his home, Mark McCloskey.

Some Republican leaders worry that Greitens could win the GOP nomination but lose in the general election, ceding a crucial Senate seat in what should be a safely red state. Among them is Hartzler, citing one major demographic in particular.

"There's hardly any women in the state who will vote for him," she said in a phone interview.

John Hancock, a longtime Missouri Republican strategist, agreed.

"Certainly suburban women would be a concern, but I think the problems extend far beyond that," said Hancock, whose firm has done research for Hartzler's campaign.

It wouldn't be the first time Missouri women played a pivotal role in deciding a Senate race. In 2012, Democrat Claire McCaskill carried women voters by 22 percentage points in easily defeating the late Republican Todd Akin. The lopsided election followed a TV interview in which Akin, a staunch abortion opponent, said pregnancy in cases of "legitimate rape" was uncommon because women's bodies were able to prevent it.

Senate Republican leadership concurs that a Greitens primary victory would hand the seat to Democrats. But so far they've taken a hands-off approach, convinced Greitens' campaign will implode as he struggles to raise money and continues to be dogged by the scandal, according to two Republican strategists working on Senate races, who insisted on anonymity to discuss internal deliberations. That could change if Greitens candidacy gains steam, the strategists said.

On Thursday, Sen. Rick Scott, who heads the National Republican Senatorial Committee, told guest host Kurt Schlichter on Hugh Hewitt's radio show that there are "real concerns" that Greitens could lose to a Democrat, though he said he was confident Republican primary voters would choose someone else.

Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell said at a Thursday news conference that he hasn't made a decision yet about whether to get involved in any primaries because primary season is still in its infancy. But he said that may change if Republicans were "on the verge of nominating somebody who is unelectable."

Federal campaign finance filings show Greitens had about \$200,000 in his campaign account at the end of September, but was also about \$143,000 in debt. Separately, two pro-Greitens super PACs have emerged, which are financed by two Republican megadonors.

Missouri First Action, which has yet to disclose fundraising numbers, announced earlier this month that Home Depot CEO Bernie Marcus donated \$1 million. A separate pro-Greitens super PAC called Team PAC said it has raised \$2.5 million from Dick Uihlein, a billionaire shipping supply magnate.

So far, no other donors to those groups have emerged.

Republican voters in Missouri have shown a willingness to forgive — former President Donald Trump carried the state by 19 percentage points in 2016 despite being caught on video making lewd remarks about women and bragging about infidelity. He carried Missouri by 15 percentage points in 2020.

All of the Missouri GOP Senate candidates are courting Trump's endorsement. Greitens has the backing of several Trump insiders, including Michael Flynn and Rudy Giuliani. He appears regularly on Steve Bannon's podcast. Kimberly Guilfoyle, a Trump campaign adviser and the girlfriend of Donald Trump Jr., is the national chairwoman of Greitens' campaign, and Trump's pollster, Tony Fabrizio, is working for Greitens.

Hewitt, while interviewing Trump earlier this month, implored him not to endorse Greitens.

"That's a nightmare, Mr. President," Hewitt said. "We'll lose that seat."

"Well, that's an interesting opinion, that's true. He's right now leading by quite a bit," Trump said, apparently referencing early polling showing Greitens at or near the top among GOP contenders.

Hartzler, acknowledging Greitens is an early frontrunner, is taking direct aim at his character.

"I follow the rules," Hartzler said in her first TV ad, which launched in October. "I stay out of trouble. And when I need to see a hairdresser, I make an appointment."

For now, Greitens' other opponents are mostly ignoring his past. Long called it "old news."

"That's been out there," Long told The Associated Press in a phone interview. "Everybody's run that

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thing through the mill. I'll let other people talk about those issues. I want to talk about issues that matter to taxpayers and voters."

Greitens frequently appears on conservative TV networks, radio and podcasts but has largely avoided Missouri media and made few public appearances.

Greitens' campaign declined interview requests and didn't respond directly to emailed questions. But the campaign manager, Dylan Johnson, provided a statement on Saturday.

"Governor Greitens is the only America First candidate in this race who will fight for the people of Missouri, just like he has done as a Navy SEAL and as governor," Johnson said. "The political establishment and RINOs are frightened of losing their power to someone who would be a champion for the people."

Greitens, a charismatic former Navy SEAL officer and Rhodes scholar, was widely seen as a rising star in GOP politics after being elected governor in 2016. Then, in January 2018, news broke of an extramarital affair that occurred in 2015, before he was elected.

The woman said Greitens invited her to his home, where he blindfolded her, bound her and removed her clothes. He then allegedly took a photo.

"Don't even mention my name to anybody at all, because if you do, I'm going to take these pictures, and I'm going to put them everywhere I can," she quoted Greitens as saying.

She said the encounter left her crying, but admitted to a relationship that went on for several more months.

It was the alleged photo that resulted in a criminal charge of invasion of privacy. Greitens accused St. Louis Circuit Attorney Kim Gardner, a Democrat, of a political vendetta.

In short order, a Missouri House committee began investigating and found the woman's allegations credible, and Greitens faced a second felony charge in St. Louis, accused of providing his political fundraiser with the donor list of his veterans charity. Greitens had denied any criminal wrongdoing.

The blackmail charge was dropped in May 2018, three days into jury selection, when a judge ruled that Gardner would have to provide a statement under oath about her investigation at the request of Greitens' attorneys, who had repeatedly criticized her handling of the case.

The judge appointed Kansas City prosecutor Jean Peters Baker to review the case. A week after Greitens resigned in June 2018, Baker announced that she believed the woman's claim that Greitens took an unauthorized and compromising photo but that there wasn't enough evidence to merit a criminal charge.

The fundraising charge was dropped when Greitens resigned. Greitens and his wife, Sheena, divorced last year.

The former FBI agent Gardner hired to investigate Greitens in the invasion of privacy case, William Tisaby, was indicted in 2019 on six counts of perjury and one count of evidence tampering. The indictment accuses him of lying during a deposition in preparation for Greitens' trial and concealing notes taken during an interview with the former governor's accuser. His trial is scheduled for March.

Meanwhile, Missouri's chief disciplinary counsel has accused Gardner of concealing evidence that might have helped Greitens' case. She faces a disciplinary hearing in February. Gardner has denied any wrongdoing.

Greitens' political rebirth was seemingly fueled in February, when the Missouri Ethics Commission ruled on a campaign ethics investigation. The commission found "probable cause" that Greitens' campaign broke the law by not reporting that it cooperated with a PAC in 2016, and required payment of a \$38,000 fine. But it also "found no evidence of any wrongdoing on the part of Eric Greitens, individually."

Greitens said the ruling "fully exonerated" him.

AP Congressional Reporter Brian Slodysko contributed to this report.

How COVID-19 upended Blinken's diplomatic mission

By MATTHEW LEE AP Diplomatic Writer

HONOLULU, Hawaii (AP) — U.S. Air Force Special Air Mission 50601 departed from Joint Base Andrews on the night of Dec. 9 with an ambitious journey ahead — an eight-day, around-the-world trip with America's

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top diplomat, Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

But the diplomatic mission to Britain, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand would soon be upended by the global surge in coronavirus cases. At least three members of the traveling party tested positive for COVID-19 and forced the abrupt cancellation of the last stop and a frantic re-calculation of the remaining itinerary.

The Air Force confirmed on Saturday that at least two members of its crew on the plane had tested positive for COVID. That followed the State Department's announcement that a journalist among the traveling press corps had tested positive, which alarmed the rest of the party and resulted in the trip being cut short.

"Two U.S. Air Force aircrew members supporting the Secretary of State's international travel tested positive for COVID-19," Ann Stefanek, the chief of media operations for the Air Force, said in a statement. "Both aircrew members were fully vaccinated. Neither had come into close contact with the Secretary of State or senior staff."

She said one is asymptomatic, while the other is experiencing mild symptoms and that both are following host nation COVID protocols, which generally mandate a 10-day quarantine.

The first crew member, who was symptomatic, tested positive in Jakarta, after arriving in the Indonesian capital from Liverpool, England, where Blinken participated in a Group of Seven foreign ministers' meeting.

It was not immediately clear where the second crew member tested positive, but the journalist tested positive in Kuala Lumpur on Tuesday, according to the State Department, which has declined to comment on the Air Force cases.

The journalist's diagnosis in Malaysia set off a panic among the traveling party because of quarantine requirements for those testing positive at the next stop in Thailand.

Presented with a series of options to avoid the possibility of others testing positive, especially before the Christmas holiday, Blinken opted to curtail his trip. Instead of spending Wednesday night in Thailand and having meetings there the next day, Blinken made a brief stop at the airport in Bangkok to replace the infected crew members and did not leave his plane.

He then flew to Guam, an American territory in the Pacific, and then to Hawaii before returning to Washington early Friday morning.

The State Department says it has more than fulfilled the Centers for Disease Control guidance for COVID, by requiring every member of the traveling party to take daily COVID tests over the course of the trip and asking all of those on board the plane to take follow-up tests.

The department said Saturday that all official members of the traveling party had tested negative for the virus upon their return to Washington.

Associated Press writer Lolita C. Baldor contributed to this report.

Netherlands 'going into lockdown again' to curb omicron

By DANICA KIRKA and MIKE CORDER Associated Press

LONDON (AP) — Nations across Europe moved to reimpose tougher measures to stem a new wave of COVID-19 infections spurred by the highly transmissible omicron variant, with the Netherlands leading the way by imposing a nationwide lockdown.

All non-essential stores, bars and restaurants in the Netherlands will be closed until Jan. 14 starting Sunday, caretaker Prime Minister Mark Rutte said at a hastily arranged press conference Saturday night. Schools and universities will shut until Jan. 9, he said.

In what is surely to prove a major disappointment, the lockdown terms also rein in private holiday celebrations. Residents only will be permitted two visitors except for Christmas and New Year's, when four will be allowed, according to Rutte.

"The Netherlands is going into lockdown again from tomorrow," he said, adding that the move was "unavoidable because of the fifth wave caused by the omicron variant that is bearing down on us."

It wasn't just the Dutch seeking to slow the spread of omicron. Alarmed ministers in France, Cyprus and Austria tightened travel restrictions. Paris canceled its New Year's Eve fireworks. Denmark has closed

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theaters, concert halls, amusement parks and museums. Ireland imposed an 8 p.m. curfew on pubs and bars and limited attendance at indoor and outdoor events.

London Mayor Sadiq Khan underscored the official concern about the climbing cases and their potential to overwhelm the health care system by declaring a major incident Saturday, a move that allows local councils in Britain's capital to coordinate work more closely with emergency services.

Irish Prime Minister Micheál Martin captured the sense of the continent in an address to the nation, saying the new restrictions were needed to protect lives and livelihoods from the resurgent virus.

"None of this is easy," Martin said Friday night. "We are all exhausted with COVID and the restrictions it requires. The twists and turns, the disappointments and the frustrations take a heavy toll on everyone. But it is the reality that we are dealing with."

The World Health Organization reported Saturday that the omicron variant of the coronavirus has been detected in 89 countries, and COVID-19 cases involving the variant are doubling every 1.5 to 3 days in places with community transmission and not just infections acquired abroad.

Major questions about omicron remain unanswered, including how effective existing COVID-19 vaccines are against it and whether the variant produces severe illness in many infected individuals, WHO noted.

Yet omicron's "substantial growth advantage" over the delta variant means it is likely to soon overtake delta as the dominant form of the virus in countries where the new variant is spreading locally, the U.N. health agency said.

In the Netherlands, shoppers fearing the worst swarmed to commercial areas of Dutch cities earlier Saturday, thinking it might be their last chance to buy Christmas gifts.

Rotterdam municipality tweeted that it was "too busy in the center" of the port city and told people: "Don't come to the city." Amsterdam also warned that the city's main shopping street was busy and urged people to stick to coronavirus rules.

"I can hear the whole of the Netherlands sighing," Rutte said in his lockdown announcement. "All this, exactly one week before Christmas. Another Christmas that is completely different from what we want. Very bad news again for all those businesses and cultural institutions that rely on the holidays."

The head of the Dutch public health institute, Jaap van Dissel, described the shutdown as a preventative move that would "buy time" for more people to get booster vaccines and for the nation's health care system to prepare for a possible new surge in infections.

In the U.K., where confirmed daily cases soared to record numbers this week, the government has re-imposed a requirement for masks to be worn indoors and ordered people to show proof of vaccination or a recent negative coronavirus test when going to nightclubs and large events.

But the moves caused anger.

Critics of British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's latest coronavirus restrictions flooded Oxford Street, a popular London shopping area, on Saturday. The maskless protesters blew whistles, yelled "Freedom!" and told passersby to remove their face coverings.

Hundreds of people blocked traffic as they marched with signs bearing slogans such as "Vaccine passports kill our freedoms" and "Don't comply." Other signs had the faces of Johnson or U.K. Health Secretary Sajid Javid and read, "Give them the boot."

Scientists are warning the British government it needs to go further to prevent hospitals from being overwhelmed. Leaked minutes from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies suggested a ban on indoor mixing and hospitality, the BBC reported.

Britain and other nations are also accelerating the pace of booster shots after early data showed that two doses of vaccine were less effective against the omicron variant. Shopping centers, cathedrals and soccer stadiums in Britain have been converted into mass vaccination centers.

Omicron is now the dominant coronavirus variant in London, and efforts were stepped up to reach people who haven't yet been vaccinated or boosted.

The mayor said during a visit to a mass vaccination pop-up clinic at London soccer team Chelsea's stadium that public services ranging from ambulances to police calls could be impeded by the rapidly spreading

variant.

"The big issue we have is the number of Londoners who have this virus, and that's leading to big issues in relation to staff absences and the ability of our public services to run at the optimum levels," Khan told the BBC.

In France, the government announced that it will start giving the vaccine to children in the 5 to 11 age group beginning Wednesday.

Prime Minister Jean Castex said Friday that with the omicron variant spreading like "lightning," the government proposed requiring proof of vaccination from individuals entering restaurants, cafes and other public establishments. The action requires parliamentary approval.

Thousands of opponents of vaccine requirements and mask mandates protested Saturday in Hamburg, Berlin, Düsseldorf and other German cities. In Austria, local media reported the crowds swelled to tens of thousands.

Corder reported from The Hague, Netherlands. Courtney Bonnell in London; Emily Schultheis in Vienna; and Thomas Adamson in Paris, contributed to this report.

Follow AP's pandemic coverage at <https://apnews.com/hub/coronavirus-pandemic>

Tornadoes' toll: Family members mourn those they lost

By JOHN HANNA and SUDHIN THANAWALA Associated Press

Annistyn Rackley was an outgoing and energetic 9-year-old who didn't let a rare liver condition prevent her from the activities she loved: swimming, dancing and cheerleading, her great-aunt Sandra Hooker said.

The girl delighted in donning outfits and makeup for cheer competitions and would frequently do cartwheels and the splits in front of family members.

"I would just gasp because she could do the splits all the time, and she would just laugh," Hooker recalled. "She loved dancing."

Annistyn was among at least 92 people who were confirmed dead across multiple states after more than 40 tornadoes pummeled a wide area last weekend. The victims included grandmothers, veterans and in some cases, multiple members of a single family. On one street in Bowling Green, Kentucky, 12 people died — eight of them children. Seven of the 12 were members of one family. Their grief-stricken neighbors are surrounded by ruins that include countless children's toys.

The sudden bereavement has left loved ones reeling and clinging to memories. Katie Fields said she doesn't want her father, 60-year-old Carl Hogan, of Dawson Springs, Kentucky, remembered as "the guy who died in the tornado." Hogan loved to fish and loved his green Chevrolet truck, she said, and he was a fan of the TV show "Yellowstone." His four grandchildren "were his world," she said, and Hogan was a "fantastic" father.

"He was religious but it was a quiet, private faith," Fields said. "He was truly just a good man."

Hogan was "incredibly devoted" to his wife of 41 years, and he was looking forward to getting her back home following a stay in a hospital and nursing home that began in February, Fields said.

Elsewhere in Dawson Springs, Jason Cummins has been combing through the debris of the home his mother Marsha Hall and her sister Carole Grisham shared, keeping anything still intact — a key, a door-knob — that might remind him of them.

Hall, 72, and Grisham, 80, were referred to simply as "the sisters" around Dawson Springs, friend Jenny Beshear Sewell said. They were often in each other's company and had lived in the same home for years, according to Cummins.

"They really just took care of each other," said Cummins, 43. "It was always the two of them. They were best friends."

Cummins said he texted his aunt and mother "good morning" and told them he loved them every day. On the day of the storm, he added that they should "watch the weather." He was tracking the storm on

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Facebook that night and told Hall to get Grisham and go to the hallway.

"She said, 'I cleaned out the closet in case I need to get in there.'" Cummins recalled. "She said, 'I love you.' She texted each of my siblings and said she loved them."

Cummins said he texted later but didn't hear back. A tornado had wiped out the home.

Cummins said among the debris, he found his mom's purse with cash she had taken out of the bank to hand out at Christmas.

"I don't know how it's going to feel the day when I don't come up here and look for something," he said. "That's when I think it will hit me."

Annistyn, her parents and her two younger sisters took shelter Friday night in a windowless bathroom in their new home west of Caruthersville, Missouri. To prove they'd gotten to the family's "safe space," the girls' mom texted Hooker a photo of the three girls in and next to the bathtub — all of them smiling, Annistyn holding her favorite doll.

Fifteen minutes later, Hooker said, a tornado splintered the home, carrying the family members dozens of yards through the air into a field where first responders found them in mud. Annistyn died, and the others were injured.

Annistyn's parents learned when she was 2 months old that she had a rare liver disorder in which bile ducts don't develop properly, sometimes making it hard to fight off illness, according to Hooker. The two had become close over the past four years: Hooker offered the girl support during doctor's visits and blood draws.

She called Annistyn a "special angel."

Associated Press writer Jeffrey Collins contributed to this report.

EXPLAINER: Must employers follow Biden's vaccine mandates?

By DAVID A. LIEB and GEOFF MULVIHILL Associated Press

Tens of millions of workers across the U.S. are in limbo as federal courts have issued different rulings related to President Joe Biden's COVID-19 vaccine mandates for larger private companies, certain health care workers and federal government contractors.

A federal appeals court panel has allowed a vaccine requirement for employers with 100 or more workers, although Republican attorneys general, business associations and conservative groups have appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. A vaccine mandate for companies that have contracts with the federal government is on hold nationwide, while a separate mandate for health care employees who work for providers that receive federal Medicare or Medicaid funding has been blocked in half the states.

The courts are responding to lawsuits brought by Republican-led states, conservative groups and some businesses. They argue in part that the vaccine requirements infringe on states' rights to regulate public health matters. Numerous legal challenges are pending, some involving groups of states and others filed by states acting alone.

Separate Biden administration vaccine mandates for federal government employees and the military remain in effect, as do mask requirements for airline passengers and people using public transportation.

The legal cases concern whether the federal government can force employers to require vaccinations. Courts have generally been accepting of requirements that businesses and universities have put in place on their own — as well as those imposed by state and local governments.

More than four-fifths of adults nationwide already have received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine. But Biden contends his various workforce vaccine mandates are an important step to drive up vaccination rates and contain the virus outbreak, which has killed more than 800,000 people in the U.S.

Opponents have taken a three-tiered approach to challenging the requirements. In lawsuits, they contend the vaccine mandates were imposed without proper public comment, were not authorized by Congress and infringe on states' rights to regulate public health matters.

"The reasoning across the cases is basically the same, which is that these statutes don't give the president

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or the agency in question the authority to issue the mandates," said Gregory Magarian, a constitutional law professor at Washington University in St. Louis.

The Biden administration contends its rule-making authority is firm and supersedes any state policies prohibiting vaccine requirements. Recent experience shows that such mandates generally prompt people to get vaccinated: By the time a Biden requirement for federal workers to be vaccinated took effect in late November, 92% had received at least their first dose of the shot.

Following is a rundown of some of Biden's most sweeping vaccine requirements and the status of the legal fights over them.

LARGE BUSINESS MANDATE

What it would do: Under a rule published by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration on Nov. 5, businesses with 100 or more workers are to require employees to be vaccinated. If they are not, they would need to be tested weekly and wear masks while working, with exceptions for those who work alone or mostly outdoors. The rule was to go into effect Jan. 4. The requirement would affect businesses with a cumulative 84 million employees, and OSHA projected it could save 6,500 lives and prevent 250,000 hospitalizations over six months.

Who's challenging it: The requirement is being challenged by 27 Republican-led state governments, some conservative and business groups, and some individual businesses. The states mostly filed lawsuits in groups, though Indiana challenged it alone. Their arguments include that it's the job of states, not the federal government, to deal with public health measures. The Biden administration maintains that the measure is legal. Some labor unions also contested the rule, though not for the same reasons as the Republicans and business group. They say it doesn't go far enough to protect workers.

Where it stands: The OSHA rule is allowed to take effect, at least for now. On Dec. 17, a three-judge panel of the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals allowed the mandate, reversing a decision by a panel of judges in the New Orleans-based 5th circuit. The legal challenges originally were filed in various U.S. appeals courts. The cases subsequently were consolidated into the Cincinnati-based 6th circuit, which was selected at random.

What's next: Republican attorneys general, business associations and several conservative groups immediately appealed the 6th circuit ruling to the U.S. Supreme Court. In the meantime, OSHA announced that it would not issue citations before Jan. 10 for its vaccination mandate or before Feb. 9 for its testing requirement to give employers time to adjust.

HEALTH WORKER MANDATE

What it would do: Under a rule published by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid on Nov. 5, a wide range of health care providers that receive federal Medicare or Medicaid funding were to require workers to receive the first dose of a COVID-19 vaccine by Dec. 6 and be fully vaccinated by Jan. 4. The rule would affect more than 17 million workers in about 76,000 health care facilities and home health care providers.

Who's challenging it: The rule was challenged in four separate lawsuits filed by Republican-led states, mostly in groups. Florida and Texas mounted their own challenges. The states argued that there were no grounds for an emergency rule, that CMS had no clear legal authority to issue the mandate and that the rule infringes on states' responsibilities.

Where it stands: The rule is on hold nationally, but a ruling Dec. 15 gives it the possibility of moving ahead in about half the states. A Missouri-based federal judge issued a preliminary injunction Nov. 29 barring its enforcement in 10 states that had originally sued. The next day, a Louisiana-based federal judge issued a preliminary injunction barring enforcement in the rest of the states. But on Dec. 15, that was narrowed to the 14 suing in that court. And on Dec. 15, a federal judge in Texas granted an injunction that applies only to that state. After the decisions, there is a possibility the mandate could be enforced in 25 states where no injunction is in place. The Centers for Medicare & Medicaid have not said whether they will pursue that path.

What's next: The court rulings are being appealed by the Biden administration. On Dec. 16 the administration asked the Supreme Court to block the lower court orders that are keeping the mandate from

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going into effect in about half of the states. The case filed in Missouri is being considered by the St. Louis-based 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. The case filed in Louisiana, which was brought by a coalition of 14 states, is being considered by the 5th Circuit. So far, there's been no move to consolidate the challenges in a single court.

FEDERAL CONTRACTOR MANDATE

What would it do: Under an executive order issued by Biden on Sept. 9, contractors and subcontractors for the federal government are required to comply with workplace safety guidelines developed by a federal task force. That task force subsequently issued guidelines requiring that new, renewed or extended contracts include a clause requiring employees to be fully vaccinated Jan. 18. That meant those receiving a two-dose vaccine must get their second shot by Jan. 4. There are limited exceptions for medical or religious reasons. The requirements could apply to millions of employees.

Who's challenging it: The guidelines have been challenged through more than a dozen lawsuits, including seven brought by Republican-led states or coalitions of states. The arguments are similar to those against other vaccine mandates, asserting the Biden administration exceeded the procurement rule-making powers granted by Congress, infringed on states' responsibilities and didn't properly gather public comment.

Where it stands: The rule is on hold. A federal judge in Georgia issued a ruling Dec. 7 prohibiting enforcement of the requirement for contractors nationally. The ruling came a week after a judge in Kentucky barred enforcement of the requirement in Kentucky, Ohio and Tennessee.

What's next: Legal challenges pending in several other states could lead to additional rulings on requests for injunctions. The Kentucky or Georgia rulings also could be appealed.

A quick consolidation of the federal contractor lawsuits appears unlikely.

Experts: Potter missed chance to explain Taser-gun mix-up

By AMY FORLITI Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — The former Minnesota police officer who shot and killed Daunte Wright alternated between tears, statements of remorse and clipped, matter-of-fact answers as she testified at her trial on manslaughter charges in the death of the Black motorist.

But Kim Potter's testimony on Friday was notably scant on a key element of her defense — that she made a mistake when she drew her handgun instead of her Taser and killed Wright during a traffic stop last April in Brooklyn Center.

One legal expert who spoke to The Associated Press said the defense may have been intentionally vague on that point, but others said it appeared to be a missed opportunity for Potter to tell jurors how a mix-up might have occurred and what she was thinking — something jurors were likely waiting to hear.

"I didn't think they pulled enough out of Potter because we did not get into her mind," said Marsh Halberg, a Minneapolis defense attorney who is not connected to the case.

Under questioning from her attorney Earl Gray, Potter testified that as officers were struggling with Wright, she saw her supervisor, Sgt. Mychal Johnson, leaning into the car with "a look of fear in his face." As she cried on the stand, she went on to say: "I remember yelling, 'Taser, Taser, Taser,' and nothing happened, and then he told me I shot him." Body camera video recorded Wright saying, "Ah, he shot me" before the car took off.

"He got her to admit that she saw fear on Johnson's face, but didn't explore that further," said John Baker, a former defense attorney who is now teaching aspiring police officers at St. Cloud State University. "He should've gone much further and asked her to testify more on that," Baker said.

He added that Gray didn't have Potter explain the mistake, saying: "They didn't even address it."

Mike Brandt, another Minneapolis attorney watching the case, said breaking down the moments surrounding the shooting may have been effective, but the defense "made a tactical decision that it wasn't going to be necessary and leave it, perhaps, more vague if you will."

Brandt said the goal of putting Potter, who is white, on the stand was to humanize her for the jury, something he thinks was done successfully. Brandt said Gray did a good job of using Potter's words to

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paint a picture of a woman who was inspired to become an officer at an early age, who had no complaints against her and who didn't seek to move up the ranks because she liked working on the streets.

While the experts believed Potter's tears were genuine, they had mixed views on how her emotions might have played for the jury.

"It was almost gut-wrenching actually to watch, particularly on cross. Her facial expressions looked like she was actively reliving the trauma of the experience," said Rachel Moran, a professor at the University of St. Thomas School of Law.

Moran said it's hard not to believe that Potter is horrified and sorry for what she has done. But while some people might empathize with Potter, others might take issue with the fact that she needed comforting after the shooting when the focus should have been on Wright, Moran said.

Moran said the fact that her lawyers didn't get into Potter's mindset was "strange," saying she believes one of the first questions that should've been asked was whether Potter meant to shoot Wright.

Experts said Erin Eldridge, the prosecutor who questioned Potter, was generally strong in cross-examination.

Brandt said Potter came across as too defensive and slightly combative when she gave short answers to Eldridge, but he said Eldridge started looking like a "bully" when Potter began crying. Moran said Eldridge wasn't particularly aggressive, but kept "bulldozing" through her cross-examination, even as Potter had what Moran called a "visible breakdown." She said it's hard to say how that will play with the jury.

Moran also said that Potter's immediate reaction to the shooting, which is seen on the police videos, shows she knew she did something horribly wrong and did not intend to use her gun. She said Eldridge was strong in establishing that during her cross-examination.

Notably, Eldridge at one point got Potter to agree that she didn't plan to use deadly force — Potter's attorneys have been arguing that even if this wasn't a mistake, Potter would have been justified in using deadly force because she feared Johnson's life was in danger.

Baker said another highlight was when Eldridge walked Potter through the body camera video and showed Potter what she did.

"It was really damning when she got the video of the freeze frame of her with her hand on what appeared to be her weapon as she was still standing by and about to come in," Baker said. "I think she did a great job of impeaching her."

Baker said if the jurors had begun deliberating shortly after Potter's testimony, her emotional display might have had more of an effect. He said having the weekend between her testimony and closing arguments gives jurors some distance.

Legal experts said Potter's testimony wasn't as strong as they expected it to be.

Baker said the defense spent too much time on the justification for the traffic stop, and there wasn't enough focus on the moments when she pulled out her gun instead of her Taser. Baker said Potter didn't provide any explanation of what she did at that moment, something he called "problematic for the defense."

Halberg added on Friday: "I thought today was going to be the knockout punch. But that was not the case."

Find the AP's full coverage of the Daunte Wright case: <https://apnews.com/hub/death-of-daunte-wright>

OSHA vaccine mandate penalties to start Jan. 10

The Occupational Health and Safety Administration said Saturday that it would not issue citations tied to its coronavirus vaccination mandate before Jan. 10, so that companies have time to adjust to and implement the requirements.

The federal agency separately said there would be no citations of companies regarding its testing requirements before Feb. 9.

The announcement came after the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Sixth District in Cincinnati decided on Friday that the mandate for large employers could go forward, reversing a previous court decision made

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after 27 Republican-led states, conservative groups, business associations and some individual companies challenged the mandate.

OSHA said in a statement that it would not issue citations before the listed dates "so long as an employer is exercising reasonable, good faith efforts to come into compliance with the standard."

The mandate was previously slated to take effect Jan. 4.

The Biden administration's vaccine requirement applies to companies with 100 or more employees and covers about 84 million U.S. workers. Employees who are not fully vaccinated have to wear face masks and be subject to weekly COVID-19 tests. There are exceptions, including for those who work outdoors or only at home.

Administration officials estimate that the mandate will save 6,500 lives and prevent 250,000 hospitalizations over six months.

Biden marks anniversary of 1972 car crash that killed wife

GREENVILLE, Del. (AP) — President Joe Biden on Saturday commemorated the 49th anniversary of the car crash that killed his first wife and infant daughter, visiting their graves at the Saint Joseph on the Brandywine Roman Catholic Church.

Their deaths occurred just after Delaware voters elected Biden to the Senate in 1972 and the fatal car crash became a defining moment that has shaped his persona and career.

His sons Beau and Hunter, just under 4 and 3 at the time, were seriously injured but survived the crash. His wife Neilia and 13-month-old daughter Naomi died after their car was broadsided while they were en route to pick up a Christmas tree.

The tragedy haunted him at the start of his Senate career and has been a touchstone of his presidency, with Biden recently opening a speech in Minnesota by noting how two of that state's former senators helped him cope.

Biden married Jill Jacobs in 1977 and they added daughter Ashley to the family. Both joined him at the church Saturday, as did Hunter and his family among others. Beau died of brain cancer in 2015.

Sports returned in 2021, but not the way we remembered them

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

The fans came back, and even if their money was no good at arenas and stadiums, their credit cards and payment apps certainly were.

Though the sports we watch brought with them a façade of "back to normal" as the pandemic-altered 2021 came to a close, a new reality took root this year: Every game, every practice, every season is a positive test or outbreak away from being postponed or compromised or canceled.

Nobody can take any of this for granted anymore.

That's one of the many ways the COVID-19 pandemic carved away at the "old normal" in 2021, a year in which sports came back from the total shutdown the coronavirus triggered in 2020 — but not quite in the way we remembered.

Take March Madness. After being scrubbed in 2020, the college hoops extravaganza returned. But even the term "March Madness" lost a bit of its fun-loving insouciance when, thanks to a video posted on social media by Oregon's Sedona Prince, the inequities between the men's tournament, which used the moniker, and the women's, which did not, were spelled out in stark terms.

COVID-19 forced the NCAA to hold the entirety of both tournaments in one city — the men in Indianapolis, the women in San Antonio — and the ability of the players, and the media, to compare the events side by side, apples to apples, forced the NCAA to confront the ugly reality that, Title IX be damned, it does not treat the women as equals to the men.

That led to a gender-equity study that called for a number of changes — in how the NCAA budgets for the tournaments and, yes, in what it calls them. The "March Madness" brand now belongs to the women, too.

In another change with roots in the pandemic, the days of elite athletes being judged solely on the titles

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they win, the points they score or the medals they bring home appear numbered — if not gone for good.

The face of that movement was gymnast Simone Biles, who, like so many other Olympians, extended her training an additional 12 months, while also enduring a year more of scrutiny and pressure in the leadup to the delayed Tokyo Games.

Overwhelmed by it all, Biles stepped away in the middle of the gold-medal team competition, and in doing so, changed the conversation for the rest of the Olympics, and the rest of sports.

"We also have to focus on ourselves, because at the end of the day we're human, too," Biles said shortly after her withdrawal.

The words shouldn't have needed saying, but they did. Combined with similar expressions from tennis champion Naomi Osaka, they slapped an exclamation point on a long-under-the-radar discussion about athletes and mental health.

Not every change or gain or loss in the 2021 return to sports had to do with COVID-19.

Tiger Woods was in a scary one-car accident in February that could've spelled the end of his competitive playing days. His leg reconstructed after the crash, Woods, who turns 46 on New Year's Eve, conceded his days of being a week-to-week contender — or a contender at all — in top-level golf could be over.

After a jumbled year in horse racing, the calendar returned to normal in 2021, but the sport did not. Kentucky Derby winner Medina Spirit's victory was tainted by a drug scandal, then in December, the horse died during a training run — a tragic series of events that underscored the drug (and other) problems long embedded in that sport.

Elsewhere in the world of legalized sports gambling, the big-time American leagues all completely did away with the long-held charade that their games were being consumed simply for the fun of it.

As sports betting continued to grow and become legal in more states, it mushroomed into a \$150 billion business, by conservative estimates. Leagues such as the NFL, which for decades pretended gambling had no place in its game, went all-in and actively embraced some of the biggest sportsbooks as big-money sponsors.

That gave fans another way to engage in the games they love, while giving the leagues a new source of revenue and a new way to capture eyeballs. All good, it seems, especially given that the leagues, at least on the surface, have set aside the old worries about game-fixing, corruption and integrity that, for decades, made them reluctant to accept full-blown wagering.

And while legalized wagering is changing the experience of watching a game, COVID-19 is changing the experience of going to one.

The typical security check fans encounter upon entering most arenas now includes a request for proof of vaccine and/or a negative PCR test. Masks are required in some venues. Cash transactions and paper tickets are becoming things of the past. Contactless payments are in.

All this, of course, is assuming the game is even going on. The slow trickle of positive tests and team outbreaks that lightly but consistently disrupted the sports calendar through the spring and summer turned into a more steady stream as Christmas approached and the omicron variant of the virus spread.

Practices were canceled. Games were called off. Teams and leagues tried clamping down with more stringent vaccine and testing rules.

All was being done in hopes of keeping things moving along — keeping the fans happy, the players healthy, the revenue flowing and keeping on with "business as usual." But if nothing else, what the return to sports taught us all in 2021 is that no such thing exists anymore.

Nonbelievers across Africa risk freedom and family support

By KWASI GYAMFI ASIEDU The Associated Press

Muhammad Mubarak Bala was held incommunicado in police custody for so long — eight months — that his wife was sure he was dead.

"I couldn't eat. I couldn't sleep. The emotional torture was too much for me," Amina Ahmed told The Associated Press from her home in Abuja, the capital of Nigeria.

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More than a year passed before Bala, an ex-Muslim and president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria, would be charged. Bala is an outspoken atheist in a deeply religious country. His alleged crime: Posting blasphemous statements online.

Bala's lengthy detention and its traumatic effect on his young family illustrate the risks of being openly faithless in African countries where religious belief pervades social life and challenging such norms is taboo.

"It is generally accepted that to be African is to be religious," said David Ngong, a Cameroon-born professor of religion who researches African theology and culture at Stillman College in Alabama. "It requires a lot of courage" to opt out.

Atheists are among a growing global group who have no religious affiliation. Also known as "nones," they include agnostics and those who don't profess any religion. By 2050, the Pew Research Center estimates, there could be 1.3 billion nones worldwide — about the size of the global Roman Catholic population today.

According to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, 25 African nations — nearly half the continent's sovereign states — have statutes outlawing blasphemy, or offensive behavior against a deity or idea considered sacred.

Punishment can be severe. In Mauritania, for example, Muslims convicted of ridiculing or insulting God face a mandatory death sentence and those renouncing Islam have a three-day window to repent or face capital punishment.

The stiffest penalty in Nigeria's secular courts is a two-year prison sentence; in the country's Islamic courts, active in the majority Muslim north, it is death. Shariah law doesn't apply to non-Muslims without their consent.

Bala grew up Muslim but came out as an atheist in 2014. His family soon checked him into a psychiatric hospital, according to James Ibor, his attorney. Reemerging into public life, he became president of the Humanist Association of Nigeria two years ago and championed the nonreligious on social media.

Prosecutors in the northern state of Kano cited posts on Bala's popular Facebook account as evidence for charging him in June 2021 in secular court. He faces 10 charges, including alleged insults to Prophet Muhammad and "insulting the religion of Islam, its followers in Kano State, calculated to cause a breach of public peace," according to court documents provided to AP by Bala's legal team.

"Muslims are about to start fasting to the God that refused to eradicate their poverty despite the fact that they prayed 17 times every day," reads one of the posts cited in the complaint. "How I wish Allah exist (sic)."

Denied access to health care and kept in solitary confinement, Bala has been forced "to worship the Islamic way," according to Ibor, and faces a possible sentence of two years. Prosecutors allege Bala confessed to the charges while in custody; Ibor said Bala had no attorney present at the time.

"Mubarak has been honest with his statements," Ibor said. "We don't consider Mubarak's posts as inflammatory, as offensive or illegal."

Kano's attorney general, Musa Lawan, told the AP his agency couldn't be blamed for Bala's lengthy detention because it didn't take over prosecution of his case until a year after his arrest.

Nigeria's patchwork criminal justice and legal systems are notorious for lengthy pre-conviction detentions. Only 28% of prison inmates have been tried and convicted of a crime, according to the Nigerian Correctional Service.

Bala has already spent almost two-years in pre-trial detention - the maximum secular court sentence for blasphemy charges. Still, Lawan told the AP, "we will look for maximum sentence."

The faithless often keep a low profile even in African countries where laws against blasphemy and renouncing religion are not on the books or are rarely enforced, such as Malawi in southeast Africa.

"Most of them, they hold their views in hiding simply because they are afraid of social consequences" such as losing jobs or financial support from their parents, said Wonderful Mkhutche, president of the support group Humanists Malawi.

A former church deacon, Mkhutche began to question his Christian faith while pursuing a theology and religious studies degree. He continued to attend worship services for two years to keep up appearances,

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but stopped in 2013.

Earlier this year he self-published a book on humanism and politics in Malawi, arguing for the abandonment of government-sanctioned religious acts such as national prayers for good rains to help farmers. While his book attracted media attention, he said he is now forced to distribute it himself because many stores won't stock it.

Leo Igwe, who founded the Humanist Association of Nigeria and researches religion at the University of Cape Town, South Africa, agreed that nones pretending to be believers is common.

"Life is miserable," Igwe said. "They have to live always looking over their shoulders, and they are forced to live in a very dishonest way."

To counter the social isolation, Africa's nones have begun connecting on social media and building support communities, with active online humanist groups in Ghana, Liberia, South Africa, Uganda and Zambia, among others.

In Nairobi, a 21-year-old ex-Muslim woman found the Atheists in Kenya Society on Twitter. The government suspended the group's legal registration in 2016, saying its activities "generated great public concern which is prejudicial and incompatible with the peace, stability and good order of the republic." A judge reversed the suspension in 2018.

The woman, who spoke on condition she not be named due to fears she could be targeted for harassment, said the group, which meets online and in-person, provides her with a safe space to speak and feel less lonely.

But she remains closeted, fearful of violence from her conservative Kenyan-Somali family, trapped in what she called a "double life" where she maintains a semblance of adherence to the faith at home while removing her hijab when she goes to school.

"If I pray, I am faking it," the woman said.

In Nigeria, where Bala remains behind bars, there was widespread condemnation last year led by UNICEF and the head of the Auschwitz museum, after an Islamic court sentenced a 13-year-old boy to 10 years in prison for "disparaging language on Allah." The sentence was eventually overturned by the secular court.

After 600 days in detention, Ahmed hopes her husband of two years can come home soon, but thinks Nigeria could be a dangerous place to build their lives. She worries about the emotional effect on their son, who was born six weeks before Bala's arrest.

"He has a lovely son that barely knows him," she said during a recent visit to Bala's prison. "My neighbors are home, they are with their husbands and their children. I feel like, 'Why is mine not like them?'"

AP journalist Chinedu Asadu in Lagos, Nigeria, contributed to this report.

Associated Press religion coverage receives support from the Lilly Endowment through The Conversation U.S. The AP is solely responsible for this content.

Pope doubles down on quashing old Latin Mass with new limits

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Pope Francis doubled down Saturday on his efforts to quash the old Latin Mass, forbidding the celebration of some sacraments according to the ancient rite in his latest salvo against conservatives and traditionalists.

The Vatican's liturgy office issued a document that clarified some questions that arose after Francis in July reimposed restrictions on celebrating the old Latin Mass that Pope Benedict XVI had relaxed in 2007.

Francis said then that he was reversing his predecessor because Benedict's reform had become a source of division in the church and been exploited by Catholics opposed to the Second Vatican Council, the 1960s meetings that modernized the church and its liturgy.

The Vatican repeated that rationale on Saturday, saying the clarifications and new restrictions were necessary to preserve the unity of the church and its sacraments.

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"As pastors we must not lend ourselves to sterile polemics, capable only of creating division, in which the ritual itself is often exploited by ideological viewpoints," said the prefect of the Vatican's liturgy office, Archbishop Arthur Roche, in an introductory note to the world's bishops.

Francis' crackdown on the old Mass has outraged his conservative critics, many of whom have gone so far to accuse him of heresy and watering down Catholic doctrine with his focus on the environment, social justice and migrants. Francis says he preaches the Gospel and what Jesus taught, and has defended the restrictions by saying they actually reflect Benedict's original goal while curbing the way his 2007 concession had been exploited for ideological ends.

His July law required individual bishops to approve celebrations of the old Mass, also called the Tridentine Mass, and required newly ordained priests to receive explicit permission to celebrate it from their bishops, in consultation with the Vatican. Saturday's decree makes clear the Vatican must explicitly authorize new priests to celebrate the rite.

In addition, the new document Saturday imposes restrictions targeting the sacramental life of the church. It forbids using the ancient ritual for the sacraments of Confirmation and ordaining new priests, and will make it exceedingly difficult for traditionalists to access the sacraments of Baptism, Marriage and Anointing of the Sick according to the old rite.

This de facto prohibition arises because these sacraments can only be celebrated in so-called personal parishes that were already in existence and dedicated to traditionalist communities. There are exceedingly few of these parishes around the world, and Francis barred the creation of new ones.

"Roche Christmas Massacre," tweeted Rorate Caeli, a traditionalist blog that has been critical of Francis and his crackdown on the Tridentine rite.

"Benedict XVI had brought peace to the church. An end to the liturgical wars," the group said in a follow-up message to The Associated Press. "The current pope has chosen to reignite them. There is no logical reason for that. Just an underlying desire for division and violence."

Francis agreed to the publication of the document, which was signed by Roche, who is prefect of the Vatican's liturgy office.

It was written in the form of questions and answers, including some that get into minute details that make clear the Vatican's effort to minimize the spread of the old Mass: Parishes may not, for example, publicize the celebration of the old liturgy in parish bulletins or allow them to be celebrated at the same time as the so-called New Order Mass.

In a clear bid to dissuade seminarians from even learning the old rite, the new instruction urges seminary teachers to lead their charges "to an understanding and experience of the richness of the liturgical reform called for by the Second Vatican Council."

If a priest who is authorized to celebrate the old rite gets sick at the last minute, he can't be substituted with one who doesn't have prior approval. In addition, priests may not celebrate an old rite Mass and the New Order one on the same day.

Joseph Shaw, head of the Latin Mass Society of England and Wales, said the restrictions mean celebration of the old Latin Mass "will become extremely difficult" and the sacraments even more so.

"This would drastically reduce the number of celebrations, and cause great pastoral harm," he said in an email.

Senate confirms big slate of Biden ambassadors to end 2021

By KEVIN FREKING Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Senate confirmed more than 30 ambassadors and other Biden administration nominees early Saturday after Majority Leader Chuck Schumer agreed to schedule a vote on sanctions on the company behind the Nord Stream 2 pipeline that will deliver natural gas from Russia to Germany.

With many senators anxious to go home for the holidays, Schumer, D-N.Y., threatened to keep the Senate in for as long as it took to break a logjam on a broad array of diplomatic and national security nominees.

Rahm Emanuel, the former mayor of Chicago, was confirmed to serve as ambassador to Japan by a vote of 48-21. Nominees to be ambassadors to Spain, Vietnam and Somalia were among those confirmed by

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voice vote soon afterward. The votes came after an agreement was reached to hold a vote concerning Nord Stream 2 sanctions before Jan. 14.

The confirmation process has proved to be frustrating for new presidential administrations regardless of party. While gridlock isn't new, the struggle to staff administrations is getting worse.

Democrats have increasingly voiced concerns about holds that a few GOP senators placed on nominees to raise objections about foreign policy matters that had little to do with the nominee. The holds don't block a nominee from being confirmed, but they do require the Senate to undertake hours of debate that could be used on other priorities. As a result, positions requiring Senate confirmation can go unfilled for several months even when the nominations are approved in committee with the support of senators from both parties.

Biden administration officials acknowledge the president will end his year with significantly more ambassadorial vacancies than recent predecessors and that the slowdown of ambassadorial and other national security picks has already had an impact on U.S. relations overseas.

Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, held up dozens of nominees at the departments of State and Treasury over objections to the administration's waiving of sanctions targeting the Nord Stream AG firm overseeing the pipeline project. The administration said at the time that it opposed the project but viewed it as a fait accompli. It also said trying to stop it would harm relations with Germany.

Critics on the both sides of the aisle have raised concerns that the pipeline will threaten European energy security by increasing the continent's reliance on Russian gas and allowing Russia to exert political pressure on vulnerable Eastern and Central European nations, particularly Ukraine.

Earlier in the week, Schumer demanded that Cruz lift all of his holds on nominees at the two Cabinet departments as well as the U.S. Agency for International Development as part of any possible agreement on a Nord Stream 2 sanctions. Cruz said he was willing to lift holds on 16 nominees. The two sides were trading offers throughout the day Friday.

"I think there ought to be a reasonable middle ground solution," Cruz said.

While Democrats were intent on making progress on Biden's nominees, they also viewed it as too little and too late.

"Let's face it. There is little to celebrate when it comes to nominations in the Senate," said Sen. Bob Menendez, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Menendez, D-N.J., blamed some Republicans for "straining the system to the breaking point" and depriving Biden of a full team of national security positions, "leaving our nation weakened."

"Something's going to happen in one of these places and we will not be there to ultimately have someone to promote our interests and to protect ourselves," he said.

But Sen. Roy Blunt, R-Mo., said that some of the gridlock on nominations stems back to four years ago when Democrats, under Schumer's leadership, tried to prevent many of President Donald Trump's nominees from being confirmed in a timely manner.

"Sen. Schumer doesn't have anything close to clean hands here," Blunt said.

Eight Republicans ended up voting with a majority of Democrats to confirm Emanuel. Three Democrats voted against his confirmation: Sens. Ed Markey and Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts, and Sen. Jeff Merkley of Oregon.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Sunday, Dec. 19, the 353rd day of 2021. There are 12 days left in the year.

Today's Highlight in History:

On Dec. 19, 1998, President Bill Clinton was impeached by the Republican-controlled House for perjury and obstruction of justice. (Clinton was subsequently acquitted by the Senate.)

On this date:

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In 1777, during the American Revolutionary War, Gen. George Washington led his army of about 11,000 men to Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, to camp for the winter.

In 1813, British forces captured Fort Niagara during the War of 1812.

In 1907, 239 workers died in a coal mine explosion in Jacobs Creek, Pennsylvania.

In 1946, war broke out in Indochina as troops under Ho Chi Minh launched widespread attacks against the French.

In 1950, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower was named commander of the military forces of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization.

In 1960, fire broke out on the hangar deck of the nearly completed aircraft carrier USS Constellation at the New York Naval Shipyard; 50 civilian workers were killed.

In 1972, Apollo 17 splashed down in the Pacific, winding up the Apollo program of manned lunar landings.

In 1974, Nelson A. Rockefeller was sworn in as the 41st vice president of the United States in the U.S. Senate chamber by Chief Justice Warren Burger with President Gerald R. Ford looking on.

In 2001, the fires that had burned beneath the ruins of the World Trade Center in New York City for the previous three months were declared extinguished except for a few scattered hot spots.

In 2002, Secretary of State Colin Powell declared Iraq in "material breach" of a U.N. disarmament resolution.

In 2003, design plans were unveiled for the signature skyscraper — a 1,776-foot glass tower — at the site of the World Trade Center in New York City.

In 2008, citing imminent danger to the national economy, President George W. Bush ordered an emergency bailout of the U.S. auto industry.

Ten years ago: North Korea announced the death two days earlier of leader Kim Jong Il; North Koreans marched by the thousands to mourn their "Dear Leader" while state media proclaimed his youngest son, Kim Jong Un, a "Great Successor." Paroled American Lori Berenson, who had stirred international controversy after being convicted of aiding Peruvian guerrillas, left Lima on a flight to the United States for her first visit back home since her arrest in 1995.

Five years ago: A truck rammed into a crowded Christmas market in central Berlin, killing 12 people in an attack claimed by Islamic State. (The suspected attacker was killed in a police shootout four days later.) A Turkish policeman fatally shot Russian ambassador Andrei Karlov at a photo exhibit in Ankara. (The assailant was later killed in a police shootout.)

One year ago: Contradicting his secretary of state and other top officials, President Donald Trump suggested without evidence that China – not Russia – might have been behind a cyberespionage operation against the United States government; Trump also tried to downplay its impact. Millions of people in England learned they would have to cancel their Christmas get-togethers and holiday shopping trips; British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said holiday gatherings could not go ahead and non-essential shops would have to close in London and much of southern England as part of a higher level of coronavirus restrictions.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Elaine Joyce is 78. Actor Tim Reid is 77. Paleontologist Richard E. Leakey is 77. Musician John McEuen is 76. Singer Janie Fricke is 74. Jazz musician Lenny White is 72. Actor Mike Lookinland is 61. Actor Scott Cohen is 60. Actor Jennifer Beals is 58. Actor Robert MacNaughton is 55. Magician Criss Angel is 54. Rock musician Klaus Eichstadt (Ugly Kid Joe) is 54. Actor Ken Marino is 53. Actor Elvis Nolasco is 53. Actor Derek Webster is 53. Actor Kristy Swanson is 52. Model Tyson Beckford is 51. Actor Amy Locane is 50. Pro Football Hall of Famer Warren Sapp is 49. Actor Rosa Blasi is 49. Actor Alyssa Milano is 49. Actor Tara Summers is 42. Actor Jake Gyllenhaal (JIH'-lihn-hahl) is 41. Actor Marla Sokoloff is 41. Rapper Lady Sovereign is 36. Journalist Ronan Farrow is 34. Actor Nik Dodani is 28.