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UpComing Events

Wednesday, Feb. 9

Large group music contest in Aberdeen
LifeTouch picture re-take day at Elementary School

Thursday, Feb. 10

Basketball Double Header at Milbank. 4 p.m.: Girls JV at elementary gym, Boys C game at Armory; 5 p.m.: Girls C game at elementary gym, Boys JV at Armory. 6:15 p.m.: Girls Varsity at HS Gym, 7:45 p.m. Boys Varsity at HS Gym.

Friday, Feb. 11

Rushmore Challenge Debate at Harrisburg

Saturday, Feb. 12

9 a.m.: State Junior High Wrestling at Pierre
Basketball Doubleheader with Mobridge-Pollock in Groton. Girls JV at 1 p.m. followed by Boys JV, Girls Varsity and Boys Varsity

Rushmore Challenge Debate at Harrisburg

Monday, Feb. 14

GBB at Flandreau Indian - JV at 5 p.m. followed by varsity

School Board Meeting, 7 p.m.

Tuesday, Feb. 15

Boys Basketball at Sisseton
C game at 5 p.m. in the Practice Gym; JV at 5 p.m. in the varsity gym followed by Varsity game
Junior High Boys Basketball hosts Tiospa Zina. 7th Grade at 5:30 p.m. followed by 8th grade game.

City Council meeting, 7 p.m.

Wednesday, Feb. 16

Band Trip to Orlando, Fla.



-Bob Goddard

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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Groton Area COVID-19 Report

Groton Area School District
Active COVID-19 Cases
Updated February 8, 2022; 1:56 PM

**Groton Area is
COVID-19 FREE!**

J	K	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	1	1	S	T
K	G										0	1	2	t	o
														a	a
														f	i
														f	i
0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Change	0	0	0	0	-1	0	-1	0	-1	-1	-1	0	0	0	-4

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Three hit double digits as Lady Tigers beat Tiospa Zina

Groton Area's girls basketball team posted a 58-28 win over Tiospa Zina in action played Tuesday in Groton. The Tigers led at the quarterstops at 22-4, 31-13 and 42-21.

Three players hit double figures for the Tigers with Alyssa Thaler leading the way with 15 points while Sydney Leicht had 14 and Gracie Traphagen 10.

Alexia Quinn led the Wambdi with 14 points followed by Kennadee Bissonette with nine, Latice Rodlund four and Maya Deutsch added a free throw.

Groton Area made 19 of 41 field goals for 46 percent, four of 18 three-pointers for 22 percent, eight of 13 free throws for 62 percent, had 38 rebounds, 10 turnovers, 11 assists, 12 steals and 13 team fouls.

The Wambdi made 10 of 37 in field goals for 27 percent, five of 17 from the line for 29 percent, had 12 team fouls and 13 turnovers.

Groton Area is now 9-7 and the Wambdi are 2-17.

Alyssa Thaler - 15 points, 2 rebounds, 1 assist, 1 steal.

Sydney Leicht - 14 points, 7 rebounds, 2 assists, 3 steals, 1 foul.

Gracie Traphagen - 10 points, 9 rebounds, 1 steal, 5 fouls.

Allyssa Locke - 7 points, 4 rebounds, 2 assists, 2 steals, 2 fouls.

Brooke Gengerke - 4 points, 4 rebounds, 2 assists, 2 steals, 1 foul.

Jaedyn Penning - 4 points, 3 rebounds, 1 assist, 1 steal.

Kennedy Hansen - 2 points, 2 rebounds, 1 steal.

Laila Roberts - 2 points.

Aspen Johnson - 2 rebounds, 1 foul.

Jerica Locke - 4 rebounds, 3 assists, 1 steal, 3 fouls.

Elizabeth Fliehs - 1 rebound.

Groton Area won the junior varsity game, 47-7. Faith Traphage had 12 points, Jerica Locke 9, Laila Roberts 5, Mia Crank 5, Brooklyn Hansen 4, Jaedyn Penning 4, Kennedy Hansen 4, Rylee Dunker 2, Elizabeth Fliehs 2.

Harmony Rodlund had 3 points for Tiospa Zina with Latice Rodlund having 2, Hannah Ziegler 1, Talia Robertson 1.

Both games were broadcast live on GDILIVE.COM. The junior varsity game was sponsored by Shane and Laura Clark. The varsity was sponsored by Groton Ford, Dacotah Bank, Bary Keith at Harr Motors, John Sieh Agency and Allied Climate Professionals with Kevin Nehls.

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#513 in a series

Covid-19 Update: by Marie Miller

New-case declines are real and steep; they're also occurring pretty much all across the country. The only territories with increases have tiny populations which has made their figures volatile throughout the pandemic. The only two states with increases have larger, but still small populations, which may be showing the same sorts of effects. Everyone else—52 of the 56 I'm tracking—show declines, and all of those are double-digit declines at that. At midday today, our seven-day new-case average was down to 303,946, and the total number of US cases has now passed 76 million and reached 76,358,490. You'll see that history below. Hospitalizations are also dropping quite fast, leaving us at 123,160 today.

January 9 – 60 million – 2 days

January 10 – 61 million – 1 day

January 11 – 62 million – 1 day

January 12 – 63 million – 1 day

January 13 – 64 million – 1 day

January 14 – 65 million – 1 day

January 17 – 66 million – 3 days

January 18 – 67 million – 1 day

January 19 – 68 million – 1 day

January 20 – 69 million – 1 day

January 21 – 70 million – 1 day

January 24 – 71 million – 3 days

January 25 – 72 million – 1 day

January 27 – 73 million – 2 days

January 29 – 74 million – 1 day

February 1 – 75 million – 3 days

February 4 – 76 million – 3 days –

Deaths, as we've discussed many times before, are a lagging indicator. They go up later after a surge begins and they decrease later after the surge is passing. We're in that second kind of lag right now with continuing increases to a seven-day average at midday today of 2597, which is a 21 percent increase over 14 days. This means I'm writing words I could not have thought when this began I'd ever write: We've passed 900,000 deaths in this pandemic just about two years after the first one. The thing that makes this so difficult to bear is that a huge share of those which have occurred in the past 10 or so months were preventable. There were around 300,000 total US deaths when the vaccines first became available. There have been 600,000 deaths since. We know they were not all preventable, but a big chunk of them—I would guess most of them—were. Since when do we stand around watching a few hundred thousand of us die in a year when we know exactly how to stop that? We're doing it now. Here's where we've been:

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

900,000 – February 4 – 50 days

We are marking the world having reached the 300 million-case milestone this week. It was just over two years ago when this whole thing started, and it took a year to hit 100 million. Seven months later, we were at 200 million, and it took just five more months to get to 300 million. There have been 5.5 million deaths along the way; the US is third-highest among all the world's nations in per capita death rate. Of course, these are the reported numbers; the real ones will never be known, but they are certainly higher.

Last time we talked, I explained why it's been so difficult to get Medicare to cover home tests, and the next morning the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services announced they'll be able to begin covering them within a few weeks—same deal as for everyone else at the rate of up to eight tests per month per household member when purchased at eligible retailers. I don't like to brag, but I'll just say if I'd realized my power, I would've brought the matter up sooner. (I'm working on a further wish list, so stay tuned for that.) Their statement says they have "identified a pathway that will expand access to free over-the-

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counter testing for Medicare beneficiaries." I don't know what that pathway is, and I'm not sure yet how it will all work; but it does look like folks will not be charged up front, but rather can essentially pick up free tests at some retailers. I'll let you know when I get more detail.

The CDC's Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices met on Friday to discuss Moderna's Biological License Application for its vaccine. The Committee did, as expected, recommend licensing the vaccine for use in adults, voting 13-0 in favor of the recommendation, and later in the day, the CDC Director, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, endorsed their recommendation. That was the final step in this approval, and the vaccine may now be marketed for use as a two-dose series in adults under the brand name, SpikeVax. The boosters are still, for now, under emergency use authorization (EUA).

The CDC has also clarified and modified its recommendations for vaccination for immunocompromised people. They've shortened the time interval between the third dose and the fourth booster dose from five months to three months for those who've received a third dose of either of the mRNA vaccines available, and they have also made an attempt to bring clarity to pharmacies and other vaccination centers just which populations qualify for the fourth dose. This is an attempt to resolve the difficulty some people have had convincing the vaccination sites to give a fourth dose. They have also added guidance for people whose initial vaccination was with the Janssen/Johnson & Johnson vaccine. The current recommendation is for a second dose with an mRNA vaccine at least 28 days after that first dose and a third booster dose at least two months after the second. The booster can be an mRNA vaccine or another dose of Janssen/Johnson & Johnson. They have also added language to permit doctors caring for people who are compromised to order yet another dose "based on clinical judgment when the benefits of vaccination with a different schedule or dosage are deemed to outweigh the potential and unknown risks." So this goes further than any earlier guidance.

Now, let's talk sewage. Fun topic, and one we've discussed before—more than once. The first time was in my Update #60 posted April 23, 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3534441259905588>. Then it came up again in my Update #81 posted May 14, 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3593396484010065>, my Update #178 posted August 9, 2020, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/3884805034869207>, and finally in my Update #494 posted December 10, 2021, at <https://www.facebook.com/marie.schwabmiller/posts/5399400026743026>.

We actually have two sewage stories. The first is pretty much a continuation of the ones I've linked above. What we know is that 40 to 80 percent of infected people shed viral RNA in their feces, even when they have no symptoms, and it happens early in infection so serves as a good early warning system of a coming wave. Wastewater shows increases four to six days before we see a rise in actual cases or hospitalizations, and it can detect infection at the level of one infected person in 100,000. The beauty of these systems is that they are not dependent on availability of health care or on how many people get tested; they don't even need anyone to get tested at all. The CDC established a surveillance system back in September 2020. Right now, they have set up around 400 testing sites in 37 states and two territories, 255 of which are now reporting, that are checking wastewater; some can sequence the viral RNA found which can be helpful in identifying variants. There is a push to get more sites in more states testing and more of those testing to report with a goal to have over 500 sites reporting. This can help officials to target clinical testing to particular locations and get resources to hospitals in target zones. This science is still in its early days, but it's been tested to excellent effect in some large urban areas and holds great promise for the future. As of this past week, the CDC is making these data available more generally on its Covid-19 data tracker on its website. More data collection and testing sites are being added over the next few weeks and months with a goal to have most states, territories, and tribal communities involved. The idea is to spot outbreaks before they are clinically evident. This is not a perfect system, but within the context of the other parameters being sampled should provide another layer of safety in attempts to manage this pandemic in the US. There is a plan to expand this kind of work to other pathogens so that even after this pandemic has passed, there will still be value in wastewater surveillance.

The other sewage story is about something we're finding in the sewage. A research team that has been analyzing samples from New York City has noticed something which has been turning up for a year or so:

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viral nucleic acid fragments with a new and unique set of mutations never reported together before, not even in the databases that track new variants worldwide. They later turned up in one California sewer shed as well. They have some mutations in common with or at least in the same locations as those on the Omicron variant, mutations that may have some immune escape capability. These so-called cryptic lineages don't seem to be doing anything in particular—not turning up in patients, not circulating, not increasing. They don't seem to pose any real competitive threat to whichever variant has been dominant at various times; they're just there. A report on these lineages was published Thursday in the journal *Nature*.

What no one seems to know is where they came from. There are several possibilities. Maybe they're from infected people who just don't happen to have had their specimens sequenced. That doesn't seem super-likely because they keep turning up at the same few wastewater facilities in a fairly small area of New York City, not spreading out at all—which would be pretty surprising given the pattern of transmission for this virus. One of the researchers has suggested they could be coming from people in long-term care facilities in just a few parts of the City. What with the weakened immune responses in that population, this might explain why they're not spreading out, but all this represents is just speculation at this point because there is no particular evidence to support it. We also want to note that since they've been seen for a year in sewage, it seems unlikely they haven't appeared in sequenced virus samples from even one patient.

Another possibility is that it is coming from animals. It would likely have to be particular populations with limited territories since we are not seeing evidence of spread to other parts of the cities. This hypothesis has some support from the fact that early last summer the proportion of these cryptic lineages increased in wastewater at a time when human infections were at very low levels. Because we know this virus can infect a number of animal species, the team took a look at other genetic material in the wastewater samples, trying to identify an animal whose RNA showed up in the samples in a pattern that fit what they were seeing from the cryptic lineages. They found material from dogs, cats, and rats. While the original wild-type virus is unable to infect rats, there are variants which can; so rats are at least a viable possibility. Scientists have been working with US Department of Agriculture scientists to find some indication of this virus in samples from local rats, but that hasn't yielded any signals yet. So maybe it's some other animal or something entirely different we haven't identified yet.

So this is still a mystery, but one of the scientists has developed a technique that amplifies only non-Omicron sequences, which will be helpful in weeding through the huge amount of Omicron genetic material found in wastewater for these rather more obscure lineages. With this procedure, they can search in other states for more examples, which might provide some clarity. This is a wait-and-see situation.

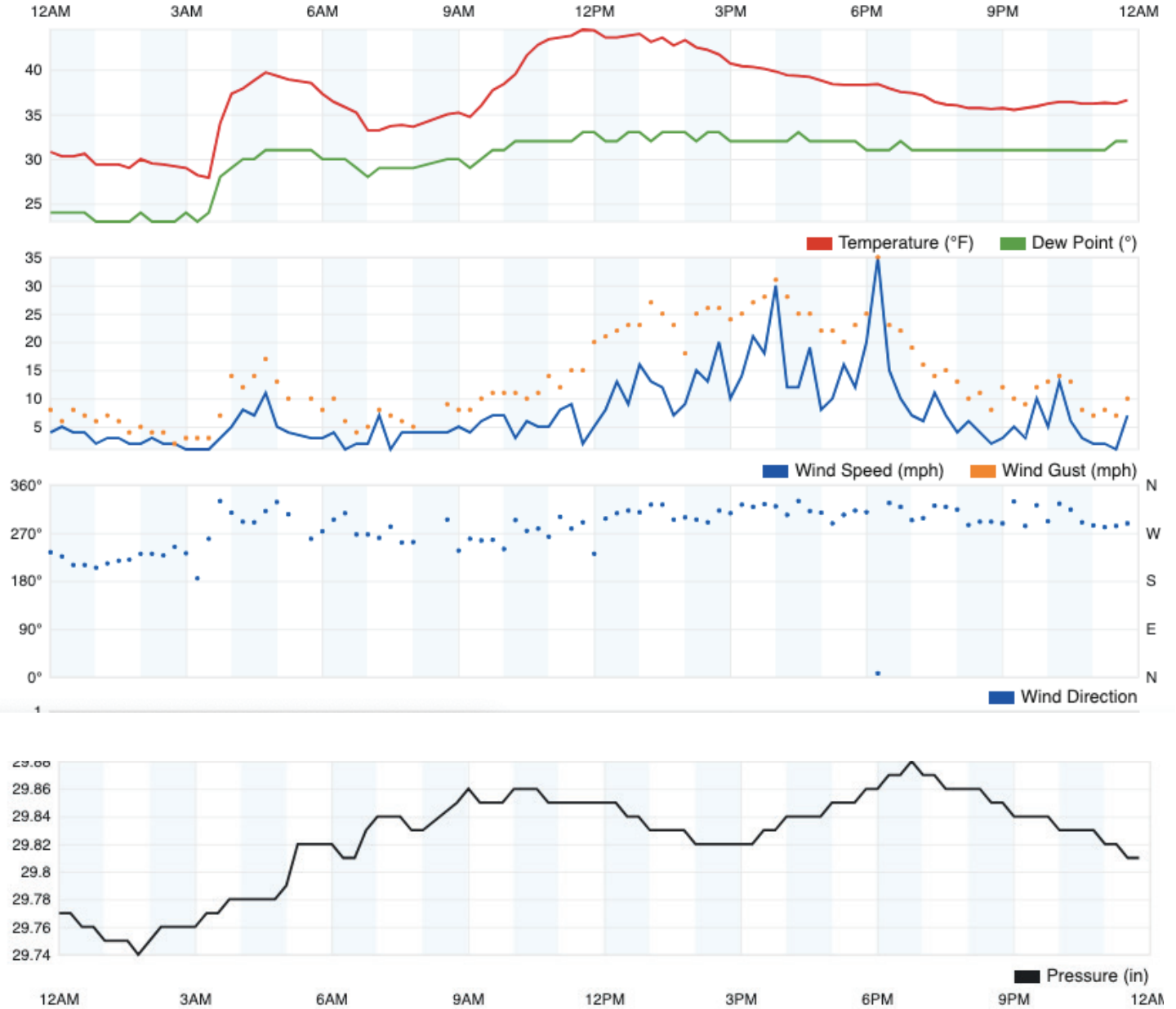
There's a new therapeutic making its way along the pipeline; it won't be available too soon, but is a promising line of inquiry. You may recall that the entry point to cells for SARS-CoV-2 is host ACE2 receptor at cell surfaces; the viral spike (S) protein binds to ACE2, which effects its invasion of the host cell. This new therapy is a molecular decoy for ACE2, a slightly-modified version of the real thing that binds the virus more tightly than the original. That means it fools the virus into thinking it's a cell ACE2, and the virus binds to it then can't get loose again. You add enough of the decoy, and it's going to tie up all of the spikes, leaving them unavailable for cell-binding. In humanized mouse models, IV infusions of the decoy prevent lung damage and death; the hope is that it can at some point be delivered by inhalation; there's also a thought it will be able to be used along with other therapies as needed. It has been tested against variants and tends to show tighter binding to them than it did to the wild-type virus. It has not yet been tested against Omicron, so that remains to be done. There is a lot of territory between here and an EUA, but it's worth tracking. I'll keep my eye on this one.

And that's all I have for you today. I am hoping these slower news days mean a longer trend is underway because in this pandemic, it's certainly been true that no news tends to be good news. Take care, and we'll talk again.

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Yesterday's Groton Weather Graphs

















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Today	Tonight	Thursday	Thursday Night	Friday
				
Mostly Cloudy and Breezy	Mostly Cloudy	Wintry Mix and Breezy	Slight Chance Rain then Chance Rain/Snow	Blustery. Slight Chance Snow then Partly Sunny
High: 34 °F ↓	Low: 15 °F	High: 43 °F	Low: 16 °F	High: 30 °F

WED		THU		FRI		SAT		SUN		MON		TUE	
													
NW22G35 25%	S14	80% SW21G35	30% NW18G35	25% N26G40	N20G30	S14G25	SW10G25	15% N20G35	N14G25	SE16G30	SE17G30	15% NW18G30	
Forecast 33°	Forecast 17°	Forecast 44°	Forecast 31°	Forecast 31°	Forecast -1°	Forecast 21°	Forecast 18°	Forecast 30°	Forecast 11°	Forecast 29°	Forecast 25°	Forecast 37°	Forecast 18°
Departure +6°	Departure +13°	Departure +17°	Departure +27°	Departure +4°	Departure -6°	Departure -7°	Departure +13°	Departure +2°	Departure +6°	Departure +1°	Departure +19°	Departure +9°	Departure +12°
Record 53°	Record -27°	Record 58°	Record -35°	Record 62°	Record -36°	Record 60°	Record -34°	Record 57°	Record -30°	Record 65°	Record -35°	Record 56°	Record -40°

7 Day Forecast - Aberdeen

WED		THU		FRI		SAT		SUN		MON		TUE	
													
NW20G35 15%	SW10	35% W20G35	20% NW22G35	35% N26G40	N20	SW11G25	W10	NW22G40	N16G20	SE18G30	SE18	NW20G30	
Forecast 44°	Forecast 22°	Forecast 58°	Forecast 36°	Forecast 36°	Forecast 9°	Forecast 35°	Forecast 25°	Forecast 43°	Forecast 19°	Forecast 46°	Forecast 30°	Forecast 44°	Forecast 22°
Departure +12°	Departure +11°	Departure +26°	Departure +25°	Departure +4°	Departure -2°	Departure +2°	Departure +13°	Departure +10°	Departure +7°	Departure +13°	Departure +18°	Departure +10°	Departure +10°
Record 73°	Record -21°	Record 64°	Record -26°	Record 66°	Record -28°	Record 68°	Record -16°	Record 72°	Record -24°	Record 61°	Record -24°	Record 65°	Record -32°

7 Day Forecast - Pierre

 National Weather Service Aberdeen, SD  Updated: 2/9/2022 5:35 AM Central

There could be some showers of rain or snow west river by this afternoon into this evening. On Thursday, more precipitation, mostly of the snow variety, is possible mainly north and east in the region, with generally less than an inch of snow accumulation potential out over the Prairie Coteau region over into western Minnesota. After a day of near to above normal temperatures today, much above normal temperatures are expected on Thursday, before the next strong blast of arctic cold air sweeps in late Thursday night into Friday.

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Today in Weather History

February 9, 1899: Extreme cold blanketed most locations east of the Rocky Mountains during the first half of February. For South Dakota, the minimum temperature was the lowest experienced for many years, at least, and probably since its settlement. The week ending the 13th of February, the Weather Bureau stated: "With respect to temperature, this week is probably the most remarkable in the history of the Weather Bureau, over the greater part of the country east of the Rocky Mountains a large number of stations reporting the lowest temperatures recorded since their establishment. Over the whole region, extending from the eastern Rocky Mountain slope to the Atlantic coast and from the Gulf to the Great Lakes, the average daily deficiency exceeded 20 degrees. It ranged from 30 degrees to 35 degrees over an extensive area embracing the central valleys and portions of the Lake Region."

In South Dakota, the cold weather that culminated in the extremes began on January 26th and continued with little abatement over most of the state until February 12th. During the first twelve days of February, the Weather Bureau stations' daily average temperatures ranged from zero to 27 degrees below zero.

Some low-temperature readings from February 8th through the 12th include:

-29 in Spearfish on the 11th	-39 in Mitchell on the 11th
-30 in Yankton on the 11th	-39 in Pierre on the 12th
-34 in Milbank on the 9th	-39 in Wessington Springs on the 9th
-34 in Rapid City on the 11th	-40 in DeSmet on the 10th
-35 in Aberdeen on the 8th and 12th	-40 in Highmore on the 12th
-36 in Chamberlain on the 9th	-42 in Gann Valley on the 8th
-36 in Waubay on the 8th	-40 in Redfield on the 9th
-37 in Ipswich on the 8th	-42 Sioux Falls on the 9th
-38 in Watertown on the 11th	
-39 in Mellette on the 11th	

February 9, 1994: Widespread record cold occurred across central, north-central, and northeast South Dakota as well as west-central Minnesota. Record lows were set at Aberdeen, Mobridge, Pierre, Sisseton, Timber Lake, and Wheaton, with overnight lows in the 30s below to 40s below zero across the entire area. Aberdeen fell to 45 degrees below zero or one degree off the record low of 46 degrees below zero. Mobridge dropped to 38 degrees below zero, and Pierre fell to 35 degrees below zero. Watertown came just one degree short of their daytime record, with 35 degrees below zero.

1870: President Ulysses S. Grant signed a law "to provide for taking meteorological observations at the military stations in the interior of the continent." A petition submitted by Increase A Lapham to Congressman Halbert E Paine in December 1869 began this process.

1899: One of the most significant cold outbreaks to ever impact the United States occurred early to mid-February. From the 8th-11th, the statewide average temperature across Iowa was 14.6 degrees below zero, making it the coldest four-day stretch on record in the state. On the 8th, Sioux City experienced its coldest day on record, with a daily average temperature of 24 degrees below zero. Then on the 11th, they reached their second-coldest temperature on record with a low of minus 31. Overall the coldest readings were obtained on the morning of the 9th when reported low temperatures included -21 at Keokuk, -23 at Des Moines, -33 at New Hampton, -35 at Le Mars, -38 at Estherville, and -40 at Sibley. The cold across the middle of the country was so extreme and persistent that ice floes down the Mississippi River into the deep south, emerging into the Gulf of Mexico near New Orleans on February 17th. This has happened only one other time: February 13, 1784. The temperature dropped to 63 degrees below zero at Norway House, Manitoba, Canada setting the province's low-temperature record.

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FROM BEGINNING TO END

Sitting across the desk from me were two heart-broken parents. They had followed the suggestions and recommendations of other parents on the best methods to raise children in a Christ-honoring home. However, their son had recently entered a recovery program for his addiction.

"How did this happen?" the father asked. I had been asked this question many times, and each time I attempted to answer the question, it became more difficult. After a moment's pause, I tried, to the best of my ability, to explain that in the process of addiction the early experiences seemed to solve problems for people. After the initial experiment with drugs, what once was a problem solver became a problem creator and the "fun" or pleasure once associated with the drug vanished with the joy.

Then I told them the fable of a honeybee that discovered a large jar of honey with no lid on it. The bee decided to enjoy the sweet nectar without the amount of work it normally took to get the "joy of sweetness." As it reveled in the honey, its wings slowly became glued together, and there it was - dying. The promise of pleasure ended up in the grip of death.

A Psalmist warned us of this process: "I am laid low in the dust," he wrote. Another way to interpret it is "I am glued to the things of earth." But he found an escape route: "Preserve my life according to Your Word."

Stuck in sin? Struggling with an addiction? Release is ours through Christ!

Prayer: Please, Father, enable us to see the path to happiness goes through Your Son into eternal life! Protect us from seeking substitutes or replacements. In Jesus' Name, Amen.

Scripture For Today: I am laid low in the dust; preserve my life according to your word. Psalm 119:25

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2022 Community Events

- 01/30/2022 84th Carnival of Silver Skates 2pm & 6:30pm (Last Sunday of January)
01/30/2022 Groton Robotics Pancake Feed, 10am – 1pm, Groton Community Center, 109 N 3rd St, Groton,
04/09/2022 Lions Club Easter Egg Hunt 10am Sharp at the City Park (Saturday a week before Easter)
04/09/2022 Dueling Pianos Baseball Fundraiser at the Legion Post #39 6-11:30pm
04/23/2022 Firemen's Spring Social at the Fire Station 7pm-12:30am (Same Saturday as GHS Prom)
04/24/2022 Princess Prom 4:30-8pm (Sunday after GHS Prom)
05/07/2022 Lions Club Spring Citywide Rummage Sales 8am-3pm (1st Saturday in May)
St John's Lutheran Church VBS 9-11am
05/30/2022 Legion Post #39 Memorial Day Services (Memorial Day)
Transit Fundraiser at the Community Center 4-7pm (Thursday Mid-June)
06/17/2022 SDSU Alumni & Friends Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 12pm Start
06/18/2022 Groton Triathlon
Ladies Invitational at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration 10am Start
07/04/2022 Firecracker Couples Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Registration, 10am Start
(4th of July)
07/10/2022 Lions Club Summer Fest/Car Show at the City Park 9am-4pm (Sunday Mid-July)
Legion Auxiliary #39 Salad Buffet & Dessert Bar 11am-1pm at the Groton Legion
Baseball Tourney
07/21/2022 Pro Am Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course
Ferney Open Golf Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 9am Start
How can we... "Love Groton"? United Methodist Church 9:30am
Moonlight Swim at the Swimming Pool 9-11pm for 9th grade to age 20
Golf Fundraiser Lunch at Olive Grove Golf Course 11a-1pm
08/05/2022 Wine on Nine at Olive Grove Golf Course 6pm
08/12/2022 GHS Basketball Golf Tournament
United Methodist Church VBS 5-8pm
Groton Firemen Summer Splash Day 4-5pm GHS Parking Lot
09/10/2022 Lions Club Fall Citywide Rummage Sale 8am-3pm (1st Saturday after Labor Day)
6th Annual Doggie Day at the Swimming Pool 3:30-5pm
09/11/2022 Couples Sunflower Tourney at Olive Grove Golf Course 12pm
Groton Airport Fly-In/Drive-In, Groton Municipal Airport
10/14/2022 Lake Region Marching Band Festival 10am (2nd Friday in October)
10/01/2022 Pumpkin Fest at the City Park 10am-3pm
10/31/2022 Downtown Trick or Treat 4-6pm (working day on or closest to Halloween)
10/31/2022 United Methodist Church Trunk or Treat 5:30-7pm
11/12/2022 Legion Post #39 Turkey Party 6:30pm (Saturday closest to Veteran's Day)
11/24/2022 Community Thanksgiving at the Community Center 11:30am-1pm (Thanksgiving)
12/03/2022 Tour of Homes & Holiday Party at Olive Grove Golf Course
Santa Claus Day at Professional Management Services 9am-12pm

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Subscription Form

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News from the  Associated Press

Tuesday's Scores

The Associated Press

BOYS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Christian 61, Ipswich 47

Belle Fourche 64, Rapid City Christian 54

Burke 58, Bon Homme 48

Canistota 62, Menno 29

Canton 64, Centerville 48

Castlewood 63, Florence/Henry 50

Chamberlain 59, Crow Creek 17

Chester 65, Oldham-Ramona/Rutland 36

Dakota Valley 79, Vermillion 57

DeSmet 46, Flandreau 32

Dell Rapids 80, Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 68

Deubrook 46, Great Plains Lutheran 31

Garretson 59, Beresford 27

Groton Area 68, North Central Co-Op 21

Hamlin 56, Clark/Willow Lake 54

Hanson 77, Freeman 19

Herreid/Selby Area 54, Sully Buttes 48

Highmore-Harrold 47, Hitchcock-Tulare 42

Hot Springs 61, Douglas 56

Huron 53, Pierre 52

Kingsley-Pierson, Iowa 47, Elk Point-Jefferson 37

Lyman 64, Kimball/White Lake 35

Madison 56, McCook Central/Montrose 44

Milbank 67, Sisseton 42

Mitchell 69, Aberdeen Central 62

North Central, Neb. 49, Colome 41

Oelrichs 59, Newell 28

Parkston 69, Scotland 40

Platte-Geddes 57, Todd County 52

Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 71, Iroquois/Doland 38

Sioux Falls Jefferson 64, Watertown 55

Sioux Falls O'Gorman 68, Sioux Falls Lincoln 60

Sioux Falls Roosevelt 66, Brookings 40

Sioux Falls Washington 54, Brandon Valley 29

Sioux Valley 64, Deuel 35

Spearfish 57, Sturgis Brown 36

St. Thomas More 67, Custer 50

Viborg-Hurley 68, Parker 66

Wagner 69, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 57

Warner 50, Redfield 27

Waubay/Summit 67, Estelline/Hendricks 57

Waverly-South Shore 59, Lake Preston 17

Wilmot 62, Colman-Egan 54

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Winner 78, St. Francis Indian 35
Wynot, Neb. 58, Irene-Wakonda 45

GIRLS PREP BASKETBALL=

Aberdeen Christian 58, Ipswich 24
Aberdeen Roncalli 47, Britton-Hecla 6
Andes Central/Dakota Christian 65, Marty Indian 27
Belle Fourche 42, Rapid City Christian 37
Bison 53, Lead-Deadwood 35
Centerville 69, Canton 60
Corsica/Stickney 63, Kimball/White Lake 24
Dakota Valley 61, Vermillion 41
DeSmet 76, Flandreau 67, OT
Dell Rapids St. Mary 66, Baltic 61
Estelline/Hendricks 54, Waubay/Summit 27
Florence/Henry 44, Castlewood 42
Garretson 65, Beresford 33
Hamlin 76, Clark/Willow Lake 41
Hanson 78, Freeman 51
Harrisburg 44, Tea Area 42
Highmore-Harrold 39, Hitchcock-Tulare 23
Hill City 44, Douglas 24
Howard 54, Canistota 35
Irene-Wakonda 38, Wynot, Neb. 35
James Valley Christian 52, Mitchell Christian 27
Jones County 53, Philip 38
Keokuk, Iowa 70, Canton 47
Kingsley-Pierson, Iowa 47, Elk Point-Jefferson 37
Miller 52, Stanley County 39
Mobridge-Pollock 69, Timber Lake 35
Mt. Vernon/Plankinton 63, Dell Rapids 33
Newell 72, Oelrichs 23
North Central, Neb. 66, Colome 14
Parkston 44, Scotland 43
Pierre 55, Huron 39
Potter County 60, Faulkton 54
Redfield 42, Warner 39
Sanborn Central/Woonsocket 63, Iroquois/Doland 23
Sioux Falls Christian 71, Tri-Valley 39
Sioux Falls Jefferson 51, Watertown 42
Sioux Falls O'Gorman 54, Sioux Falls Lincoln 31
Sioux Falls Washington 52, Brandon Valley 39
Sioux Valley 60, Deuel 27
Sisseton 65, Milbank 54
Spearfish 82, Sturgis Brown 51
Viborg-Hurley 46, Parker 31
Wagner 56, Tripp-Delmont/Armour 22
Webster 62, Northwestern 53
West Central 81, McCook Central/Montrose 27
Winner 72, Todd County 33

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

SD Lottery

By The Associated Press undefined

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — These South Dakota lotteries were drawn Tuesday:

Mega Millions

01-17-20-52-54, Mega Ball: 2, Megaplier: 3

(one, seventeen, twenty, fifty-two, fifty-four; Mega Ball: two; Megaplier: three)

Estimated jackpot: \$31 million

Powerball

Estimated jackpot: \$158 million

South Dakota GOP senators reject trans student bathroom ban

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — Republicans on a South Dakota Senate committee Tuesday rejected a bill that would have banned transgender students from using school restrooms that match their gender identity.

All but one senator on the seven-member Senate Judiciary committee, comprised of all Republicans, voted to reject the bill, arguing that determining trans students' bathroom access was a policy best left to local school boards.

"I ran for the South Dakota Senate not a school board," said Republican Sen. Michael Rohl, arguing against the Legislature's stepping into the issue.

The hearing was a continuation of a school board debate in Vermillion after the district in November established a policy that allows students to use restrooms that correspond with their "consistently asserted gender."

For parents of trans students, such as Mike Phelan, the Vermillion policy was a relief. He told the Senate committee that it allowed his daughter to fit in among her peers rather than face awkward situations each time she needed to use the bathroom. She had avoided eating and drinking water to avoid having to use school bathrooms.

"She eats and drinks normally and she is happy when I pick her up," he said of the new policy. "In her own words: 'This made me feel like I really belong in school.'"

But the bill's proponents argued that the new policy would endanger students, creating an excuse for sexual predators to enter school bathrooms.

That argument was dismissed as fearmongering.

"This policy has nothing to do with sexual abuse or giving access to predators," said Shane Nordyke, a member of the Vermillion school board, adding that those who make such arguments "are either misinformed or disingenuous."

Transgender youth and their access to school sports, bathrooms or gender-affirming treatments has become a perennial topic in the Legislature as some Republican lawmakers try to push that their gender identity be rejected in favor of the biological sex on their birth certificate. Gov. Kristi Noem last week signed a bill to bar trans girls and college-age women from playing on sports teams that match their gender identity.

"Biology matters," said Republican Rep. Fred Deutsch, who sponsored the bill. "Boys are boys, and girls are girls and it's impossible to change, physiologically impossible."

The committee's rejection was a major setback for the bathroom proposal, but it could still be revived with support from one-third of the Senate.

Republican Sen. Marsha Symens, who sponsored the bill in the Senate, said she would assess what kind of support the bill may have left.

South Dakota GOP senators back Noem's vaccine exemption bill

By STEPHEN GROVES Associated Press

PIERRE, S.D. (AP) — A proposal from South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem to allow employees to gain exemptions from their employer's COVID-19 vaccine mandates gained the support of Republicans on a Senate committee Tuesday, clearing a crucial legislative hurdle.

All eight Republican senators on the Senate Commerce and Energy committee voted in favor of the bill after an aide of the Republican governor cast the proposal as a "reasonable solution" that sought a middle ground between doctors urging vaccines and groups opposed to mandates altogether.

The committee's lone Democrat opposed the bill, which next faces a vote in the full Senate before it can proceed to the House.

The bill would allow employees to receive an exemption to an employer's vaccine requirement by citing either a medical exemption certified by a medical professional, any religious grounds for refusal or a test showing antibodies against COVID-19 in the last six months.

Noem, as well as several Republicans on the committee, have expressed resistance to telling businesses how to operate as they faced pressure to counteract employers' vaccine mandates.

"It's about right on the tipping point for me as far as I personally would go," said Republican Sen. Lee Schoenbeck, adding that vaccine mandates have become a "politically charged topic, unfortunately."

The proposal comes as South Dakota's rate of 59% of people fully vaccinated lags behind the nationwide rate of 64%. A recent surge of infections left 312 people hospitalized with COVID-19 Tuesday, but that was a decline from last month when the number topped 400 — the highest rate in over a year.

Katie Hruska, the governor's general counsel, noted that the bill is not meant to discourage shots and that Noem herself has been vaccinated.

"COVID vaccination should be a choice and is not one that the government needs to make for us," she told lawmakers during a hearing that drew a standing-room-only audience.

President Joe Biden's administration pushed last year to boost the nation's COVID-19 vaccination rate and slow the spread of the coronavirus through mandates for employment. But the U.S. Supreme Court has stopped that effort.

However, Biden's requirement for millions of health care workers, issued through Medicare and Medicaid providers, has remained. Noem's proposal also carves out an exemption for those health care providers, as well as National Guard troops.

The state's largest group representing doctors, South Dakota State Medical Association, opposed the bill, arguing that it would enact another set of exemptions to the ones that are already carved out for school vaccinations.

"How easy would it be to cross out COVID-19 in the title and all of a sudden, you blow up our current exemption," said Dean Krogman, representing the medical association.

Noem is pushing for the proposal to take immediate effect if it passes, but that would take a two-thirds majority vote from both the House and Senate. If the bill gains only a simple majority in either chamber, it would not take effect until July 1. The bill also has a clause that would cause it to expire on June 30, 2023.

Waste oil ignited explosion and fire at Miller high school

MILLER, S.D. (AP) — The cause of an explosion and fire at the school campus in Miller has been determined, according to fire officials.

Fire Chief Steve Resel says some equipment being used in the high school's agriculture shop ignited a barrel of waste oil on Feb. 2.

Students and staff have not been allowed to return to the school building, which also houses the elementary and junior high schools. No one was injured in the explosion and fire. Students were evacuated to nearby churches.

The explosion ignited a fire in the ceiling and while the roof is still intact, fire officials say it's unstable. Sometime within the next two weeks, students in the elementary, middle and high schools will resume

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their classes at nearby churches. Resel says this will allow for the necessary cleanup of fire and smoke damage at the school.

It hasn't been determined how long the cleanup will take or when students will return to the building, Aberdeen News reported.

Teen sentenced to 40 years in prison for 2018 fatal shooting

RAPID CITY, S.D. (AP) — An 18-year-old Rapid City man has been sentenced to 40 years in state prison for a fatal shooting in 2018.

A judge Monday sentenced Ronald Black Cloud in the death of 43-year-old Nathan Graham. Black Cloud was found guilty last October of second-degree murder for shooting Graham in the head, the Rapid City Journal reported.

Black Cloud was sentenced under a set of rules that prohibit minors from being sent to prison for life without a chance of parole. He was 14 when the crime was committed.

According to Pennington County State's Attorney Mark Vargo, Black Cloud cannot be given a life sentence without parole due to a series of U.S. Supreme Court rulings that indicated how minors charged as adults can be sentenced. South Dakota state law has changed to align with these rulings.

Black Cloud will receive about 3 1/2 years of credit for time he has spent in the county jail.

Ross Johnson, who told Black Cloud to shoot Graham, was sentenced to 20 years in prison in last June after pleading guilty to aggravated assault and being an accessory to second-degree murder.

Finishing touch: 16 years later, Jacobellis gets her gold

By EDDIE PELLIS and PAT GRAHAM AP Sports Writers

ZHANGJIAKOU, China (AP) — When bad things happen at the Olympics, no one ever lets it go.

Nobody's learned that lesson the hard way more than Lindsey Jacobellis.

A full 16 years and a world removed from the day the American snowboardcross racer gave away the gold medal with a showboat move near the finish line, Jacobellis rode hard to the end and won it.

Instead of a blank stare and a look of shocked disbelief after taking silver in Italy, Jacobellis clenched her fists and pumped them to celebrate gold in China. She smiled wide and placed her hands over her heart. The victory Wednesday marked a remarkable climb back up an Olympic mountain that Jacobellis, now 36 and a seasoned veteran in this game, had every reason to detest.

Or leave behind.

"Some days, I really don't like it," she said. "Some days, it's very stressful and aggravating and there's anxiety through the roof. But when it all comes all together, it really makes it worth it."

It only felt fitting that Jacobellis, a five-time Olympian who has been humbled aplenty at the Games, made a breakthrough for a U.S. team that, until she showed up, could not seem to get anything right. Hours before her win, over on the Alpine course, Mikaela Shiffrin skidded out in the slalom to make her 0 for 2 at the Olympics. That opened the door for Jacobellis to flip the script and make some history, too.

She won America's first gold medal of the Beijing Olympics. She became the oldest U.S. woman to win a gold in Winter Games history. Also, the 16 years marked the longest gap between medals for any U.S. woman at the Winter Olympics.

Shiffrin's struggles aren't the only troubles the U.S. has had. Earlier in the week, two defending snowboard champions, Red Gerard and Jamie Anderson, failed to medal in slopestyle. Anderson took to social media and conceded her "mental health and clarity just hasn't been on par."

Jacobellis made her mistake when she was 20, back in a time when the mental health of Olympians wasn't much on the minds of media or anyone in the sports space.

On that day in Italy, she was far in the clear in the gold-medal race, but she bent her legs up and grabbed her board and gave a flashy little twist toward the grandstand. A method grab. It was a showy move saved for winning runs in a game where style trumps almost everything.

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But Jacobellis fell.

A hot-dogger and a showoff, some critics labeled her. Got what she deserved, others said.

The woman who had come into those Olympics as the quintessential star-in-the-making left as something else. Every four years when the Games returned, the story was reheated and retold. Jacobellis made one final over those three Olympics. Never got back on the podium.

"I so vividly remember her little method off the jump and watching that gold medal slip out her fingers," Aussie rider Belle Brockhoff said. "She's copped so much (expletive) from the media and everything. For her to keep coming at it and not giving up is pretty inspirational."

The Olympics are only a small part of the game for snowboard racers. Since 2007, Jacobellis has amassed 23 World Cup victories and 45 podiums and has become a towering presence in her sport. Not surprisingly, this was a popular victory with the riders.

"She was already an example when I was young," said the silver medalist, 27-year-old Chloe Trespeuch of France. "I'm so happy for her. Even if my goal was also the gold, she really deserved it. She has been here for a very long time."

In snowboardcross, riders race in packs of four down 15 football fields' worth of curves, "rollers" and jumps. Speed is important. Strategy and patience come in handy, too. In her final two races, Jacobellis got out to an early lead and held it — easier said than done in a sport where riders use the contours of the course to change speeds and slingshot past the leaders.

Jacobellis approached the final jump — where things unraveled in Italy — crouched low to the ground and racing hard all the way. She stayed in her crouch past the finish line. She was not thinking about Turin.

"I definitely have put 2006 in the past," Jacobellis said. "And I've done a lot of soul searching to realize that that one doesn't define me as an athlete."

So, instead of the "Lindsey Leap," Jacobellis might now be known for hanging in there long enough to rewrite her story. It is now the story of a great comeback.

One lesson she wants athletes younger than her to take from her experience is "if you've made it to this stage, you're a winner. And look at what you've learned from the experience, and take that with you later in life."

And what should the rest of the world take from a tale like hers?

"Don't count the old girl out," she said.

Shiffrin shaken by 'letdown' of 2 exits in 2 Olympic races

By HOWARD FENDRICH AP National Writer

BEIJING (AP) — The first question posed to Mikaela Shiffrin as she met with reporters after her second consecutive quick exit from an Alpine skiing race at the Beijing Games was short, simple and to the point: What happened?

The complicated, thought-out, talked-out answers that followed entailed little analysis of her actual performance on skis — which lasted all of five seconds before things went awry in Wednesday's first run of the two-leg slalom, about half as long as the American stayed on course in Monday's first run of the two-leg giant slalom — and, in the end, boiled down to this: Shiffrin herself was not exactly sure what brought her to this point or where she goes from here.

"I've never been in this position before," the two-time Olympic gold medalist said, tears dampening her cheeks, "and I don't know how to handle it."

What the shaken Shiffrin was certain of: "It feels like a really big letdown."

The 26-year-old from Colorado, who won the slalom at the 2014 Sochi Games and the giant slalom at the 2018 Pyeongchang Games, was the seventh racer out of the starting hut Wednesday on a course set by her coach, Mike Day.

She began losing her balance and teetering out of control just four seconds and four gates in, swerving too far as she veered to her right. The neon yellow handle of her right ski pole scraped along the snow as she ended up way wide of the fifth gate.

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Shiffrin went over to the side of the course, clicked out of her skis and plopped herself down on the ground, shaking her head, then resting it on her arms atop her bent knees. That will be the lasting image of this day — back in the U.S., NBC's coverage lingered on that shot of Shiffrin, drawing anger on social media from some viewers — and, perhaps, of these Olympics for someone who arrived in China as one of the biggest stars of any Winter Games sport.

"GS and slalom, those were my biggest focuses," she said. "So it really feels like a lot of work for nothing."

Other racers said the top was not particularly slippery or difficult. Indeed, reigning slalom world champion Katharina Liensberger of Austria — who took the silver behind Wednesday's gold medalist Petra Vlhova of Slovakia — called it "a really easy course."

Vlhova, Shiffrin's top World Cup rival this season, soared from eighth place after the opening run to the victory with a combined time of 1 minute, 44.98 seconds. She claimed Slovakia's first Olympic Alpine medal ever.

In the closest Shiffrin came to offering an explanation for what went awry, she said was trying to attack too much.

"I was pushing," she said, "and maybe it was past my limit."

Shiffrin arrived with plans to enter all five individual races at the Yanqing Alpine Skiing Center, and another gold would make her only the second woman to win at least one from Alpine at three Olympics in a row.

So far, though, Shiffrin is 0 for 2.

It is not stunning that she hasn't won a medal, let alone a gold this week. As Shiffrin so often reminds everyone, anything can happen on any given day. What is truly surprising is that she has been so off her game, so immediately, in each of her two trips along the course known as the Ice River.

"It's really sad. It's never fun to go out," said Swedish skier Anna Swenn Larsson, 11th in the first run. "I know the feeling."

Shiffrin's next opportunity to compete could come Friday in the super-G, although she made it sound as if she might consider skipping that one, saying: "It would be a pleasure to ski. But I also have some teammates who are really fast, and we have the athletes who can fill the spaces. So if I'm going to ski out on the fifth gate, like, what's the point?"

She never has competed in a super-G at an Olympics but did win it at the 2019 world championships.

What also is noteworthy about all of this is that Shiffrin is known for being so consistently sound on the slopes, like a metronome that never misses a beat. She might be slower than other athletes on a given day, sure — no one is perfect — but what she so rarely does is flub a maneuver in such a manner as to not even make it all the way down the hill. The "Did Not Finish" on Monday was her first in a giant slalom since Jan. 23, 2018.

Her 47 career World Cup wins in the slalom are more than anyone else has won in any single event.

"My entire career has taught me to trust in my skiing if it's good skiing and that's all that I have to rely on. ... Of course the pressure is high, but that didn't feel like the biggest issue today," she said. "So it's not the end of the world, and it's so stupid to care this much, but I feel that I have to question a lot now."

Shiffrin has shared much about her innermost thoughts over the past several months, via social media and traditional media. She discussed the ways in which she empathized when athletes at the Tokyo Olympics such as gymnast Simone Biles and swimmer Caeleb Dressel shared their feelings about pressure and expectations.

And Shiffrin has been open about the difficult task of carrying on after the accidental death of her father, Jeff, in February 2020.

"Right now, I would really like to call him, so that doesn't make it easier," Shiffrin said Monday, pausing between words, her voice shaking.

Then, with a laugh, she continued: "And he would probably tell me to just get over it. But he's not here to say that. So on top of everything else, I'm pretty angry at him, too."

BEIJING DIARY: Testing positive at the no-COVID Olympics

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By JOHN LEICESTER Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — The phone call comes in the early afternoon, six hours or so after the mandatory morning test. The number is immediately recognizable because it's so strange: a U.S. dialing code when the Chinese health official on the line is, in fact, calling from Beijing and bearing bad news.

"Sorry to bother," he says.

Uh-oh.

"Your test this morning was positive."

Sigh.

Again?

Like laundering with gasoline or hiking naked, traveling three weeks after a bout of COVID-19 to cover the Winter Olympics in China for The Associated Press is proving to have been not the brightest of ideas. Because here the coronavirus is Public Enemy No. 1 — hunted, tracked, isolated and zapped with nonsense rigor and militaristic zeal.

Lurking at the back of my throat are infinitesimal remnants of virus DNA that hitched along for the ride, and which the Olympic testers in top-to-toe hazmat suits are annoyingly adept at digging out with their cotton swabs.

"Say 'Ahhh,'" they say.

And that's how I ended up back here, in Isolation Room 2. For the second time in four days.

The cubicle, part of a Lego-like clump of nondescript pre-fabs outside the main Olympic press center, is roughly the size of a double bed but less welcoming.

There's a small electric heater to take the sting out of the cold seeping through the thin white metal walls. I switch it on.

There is a table and a chair. I shove them next to the electric socket, so I can power up my laptop and stay connected via Wi-Fi to the Olympic world that I can see, but am temporarily no longer welcome in, through two slit windows in the door.

Some passersby wave. Most don't even notice the person inside, confined until the result of another test determines his fate.

A positive could mean a swift transfer by ambulance to an isolation "hotel" for an indefinite stay. That's an unappetizing prospect given the complaints about lack of comfort and inedible food from quarantined athletes who've endured them. There were 32 athletes in isolation as of Tuesday this week, with 50 others having been discharged.

The ambulance is parked outside the cubicle, ready to go.

So all fingers and toes are crossed for a negative that would trigger a return to the relative freedom of the "Closed Loop." That touchy-feely moniker is actually a ring-fence of stringent restrictions sealing off the Winter Games — behind high walls, police patrols and thickets of security cameras — from the rest of China and its people who, understandably, want potential virus-carriers kept firmly at bay.

In France, where I'm based, the coronavirus no longer inspires the same levels of fear for many that it did in the pandemic's early days. The vast majority of French adults are vaccinated. There have been multiple waves, the most recent being the fast-spreading omicron variant. It swept through so many homes that more people are feeling that the worst may now be behind them. Even the kiss to both cheeks, the traditional French greeting that had become repellent to many, has made a comeback of sorts. France has lost more than 133,000 lives to the virus and counted more than 20 million infections.

Vaccination rates are high in China, too. But the ruling Communist Party has pursued a "zero-tolerance" strategy to keep COVID-19 infections low since cases overwhelmed hospitals in the pandemic's initial epicenter, the Chinese city of Wuhan. That means most people in China have never been exposed to the virus. And they don't want Olympic visitors to endanger them.

Popping my masked face briefly out of the cubicle, I ask a passing police officer if he would kindly snap a photo of me inside. He reels back when he sees the blue sign marked "Isolation Room 2" by the door. Stupid of me, really. The words spoken that same morning by Dr. Brian McCloskey, who heads an Olympic panel of medical experts overseeing the games' COVID-19 protocols, should have given me pause.

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"We never relax about coronavirus," he said at a press conference.

Only her eyes visible in a full-body hazmat suit, a tester enters the cubicle to take an oral swab. She spreads a yellow plastic bag on the floor. Swab taken, she inserts the cotton bud with my sample into a tube for later testing. The sealed tube goes into a sealed plastic bag marked "BIOHAZARD." The bag goes into a screw-top plastic canister. It then goes into a double-clamped cooler box.

The extraneous remnants of the swab stick and the wrapping it came in go into the yellow bag. She sprays it 16 times with disinfectant and scrunches it up into a tight ball that she seals with a plastic tie. It then goes into another plastic bag also sprayed, eight times, that she compresses and ties again.

At the Beijing Olympics, the key to freedom is a number: 35. That's the organizers' positive-negative threshold. The number is a measure of how closely their testing machines have to hone in on a sample before detecting virus particles. A reading below 35 triggers a positive, requiring quarantine in an isolation facility.

Since landing, I've yo-yoed above and below the red line, negative in some tests, positive in others and, at least once, just "uncertain." Hence the two spells in the isolation chamber and others in my hotel room, waiting for results of follow-ups.

I'm far from alone. By Day 5, there have been more than 1 million tests, and 398 confirmed positives.

McCloskey says medical literature has documented cases of people testing positive as long as 109 days after an infection. His medical panel's job is to distinguish such cases from people who are newly infected and could contaminate others. They look at their patterns of tests over days or weeks, to determine whether the mouth swabs have just picked up dead remnants of virus from a previous infection or spotted a new and active case.

My phone rings again. The testing official with the strange number is on the line.

Negative, he says. Free to go.

He saved the best news for last.

To cheer me up after my in-and-out of isolation first days, he'd called my hotel to ask whether it would be possible to cook me a special dinner.

Spicy pork with scallions, and dumplings, he announced proudly. I'd previously told him when we had had a mutual gripe about food at the Olympics that they were my favorite Chinese dishes.

They were delivered to my room that night. The man wore protective overalls and visor. But my faith in humanity was restored.

Olympics Live: Germany's Geiger wins gold in Nordic combined

BEIJING (AP) — The Latest on the Beijing Winter Olympics:

Germany's Vinzenz Geiger has won a men's Nordic combined gold, rallying from a 1-minute, 26-second deficit to cross the finish line first in a 10K cross-country race after ranking 11th in ski jumping earlier in the day.

Joergen Graabak of Norway earned silver Wednesday night and Lukas Greiderer of Austria took bronze.

Japan's Ryota Yamamoto jumped 108 meters (354 feet) and had 133 points in the first part of event, giving him a 38-second lead over the pack, but he faded from contention halfway through the cross-country race.

In the sport that forces athletes to have ski jumping and cross-country skiing skills, the athlete who jumps the farthest and impresses judges the most gets to start the cross-country portion with a lead. The rest of the field follows, in order of their finish in ski jumping. The first to cross the finish line wins gold.

It's the only Olympic sport where only men compete.

China's Ren Ziwei, Sjinkie Knegt of the Netherlands and Charles Hamelin of Canada are among the top qualifiers through to the semifinals of the men's 1,500 meters at short track speedskating.

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Liu Shaolin Sandor and his brother Liu Shaoang of Hungary also moved on in the first of three rounds that will culminate with the final later Wednesday.

John-Henry Krueger of Hungary, South Korean teammates Hwang Daeheon, Park Janghyuk and Lee Juneseo, and Pascal Dion of Canada also advanced.

South Korea has won gold three of five times since the 1,500 debuted at the 2002 Olympics.

Americans Andrew Heo and Ryan Pivrotto were eliminated.

The Russian ice hockey team has started its defense of the Olympic men's gold medal with a 1-0 win over Switzerland in Beijing.

It wasn't the convincing start to the tournament the Russians may have hoped for as they were outshot 33-30 by a Swiss team not expected to contend for a medal.

The Russians, playing as the Russian Olympic Committee, had a slice of good fortune for the only goal.

A shot from former Edmonton Oilers forward Anton Slepyshev took a double bounce off Swiss goaltender Reto Berra's pad and Enzo Corvi's leg on its way into the goal with 2.7 seconds left of the first period.

Fabrice Herzog could have sent the game to overtime when he hit the frame of the goal late in the third period. Russian goaltender Ivan Fedotov had 33 saves for the shutout on his Olympic debut.

The winners in the team figure skating competition at the Beijing Olympics still have not received their medals two days later because of what the IOC says are "legal issues."

The ceremony to award gold to Russia, silver to the United States silver and bronze to Japan was not held as scheduled Tuesday.

Reporters asked the Kremlin about it amid speculation that gold medals won by six Russian skaters could be at risk.

"Let's, for the sake of understanding, wait for some explanations either from our sports officials or from the IOC," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said.

The IOC has not provided more information about the legal issues.

If any athlete and team were disqualified or had their results nullified, an appeal would likely follow, which could further delay the medals presentation.

The Court of Arbitration for Sport has set up an office in Beijing to hear urgent cases during the Winter Games.

Canada placed fourth Monday and would be in line to be upgraded to the podium if another team were disqualified.

Finland men's hockey forward Marko Anttila has returned to the team after being released from an isolation hotel at the Beijing Olympics. Coach Jukka Jalonen expects goaltender Jussi Olkinuora to be out later today.

Anttila had been in isolation for six days because he tested positive for COVID-19. Olkinuora was taken to isolation Monday.

"Of course it was disappointing for me, but otherwise it was just boring," Anttila said after practice. "Of course it's frustrating, and I feel good physically and all those things. But I think it's history, hopefully, now and I can get my (virus numbers at) the right level."

Anttila says he first tested positive for the coronavirus a little over three weeks ago. The 36-year-old had no symptoms after testing positive upon arrival in Beijing or during any of his time in isolation.

Getting back into hockey shape is the bigger concern with Finland's first game scheduled for tomorrow against Slovakia.

"Of course the feeling is not that good on the ice right now, but physically I'm OK," Anttila said. "I get workouts there and all those things, so it's not a problem."

Japan's Ryota Yamamoto jumped 108 meters (354 feet) and had 133 points in the first part of the Nordic combined event at the Beijing Olympics.

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That gives him a 38-second lead in the 10K cross-country race that will take place later Wednesday.

Lukas Greiderer of Germany will start second, followed closely by Germans Julian Schmid and Johannes Rydzek. Top-ranked Johannes Lampater of Austria will be 1 minute, 4 seconds behind Yamamoto, as will Japan's Sora Yachi.

The athlete who jumps the farthest and impresses judges the most gets to start the cross-country portion of the Nordic combined with a lead. The rest of the field follows, in order of the finish in ski jumping. The first to cross the finish line wins gold.

Four of the top seven Nordic combined athletes, including second-ranked Jarl Magnus Riiber of Norway, recently tested positive for COVID-19 and did not compete on the normal hill. They can potentially make a comeback on the large hill Tuesday and in the team competition next week.

Nordic combined has been part of the Winter Olympics since the first one in 1924. It's the only Olympic sport without gender equity, as only men compete.

Lindsey Jacobellis captured America's first gold medal of the Olympics on Wednesday, riding hard to the line in her snowboardcross final a full 16 years after a mistake cost her the title.

The 36-year-old racer was in her fifth Olympics and captured the first U.S. win of what has been an otherwise dismal Games for the U.S.

The victory came after America's top racer, skier Mikaela Shiffrin, skidded out and failed to finish the first run of the slalom, making her 0-for-2 in Beijing.

Up until Wednesday, Jacobellis was best known for taking a massive lead into the final jump at the 2006 Turin Games, but tweaking her board as she road over the crest, then falling and settling for silver.

This time, she rode hard all the way to the line, beating France's Chloe Trespeuch, then covering her heart with her hands as she slowed. Canada's Meryeta Odine won the bronze.

Petra Vlhova added an Olympic gold medal to her growing list of achievements, winning the women's slalom at the Beijing Games.

It was Slovakia's first Olympic medal in Alpine skiing. Mikaela Shiffrin again failed to finish the race.

Vlhova, who has already clinched the World Cup title in the discipline, was only eighth fastest after the first run down the Ice River course. But she made it up for an unofficial combined time of 1 minute, 44.98 seconds.

Katharina Liensberger of Austria was 0.08 seconds slower than Vlhova over the two legs for second. Wendy Holdener of Switzerland was third, 0.12 behind Vlhova.

After falling on his first attempt, snowboarder Shaun White hammered down a pressure-packed halfpipe qualifying run to make it through to the medal round of his fifth and final Olympics.

The three-time gold medalist fell on his signature trick on his first run -- the Double McTwist 1260 -- and was mired in 19th place.

After a 50-minute wait following his fall, White returned to the top of the pipe and nailed the same run he'd tried before.

Each rider got two tries and only their best score counted. The top 12 advanced to Friday's final. White ended up in fourth.

He stomped every landing and yell out a "Yeahhhh" at the bottom. He qualified behind two-time silver medalist Ayumu Hirano, 2018 bronze medalist Scotty James and Hirano's Japanese teammate, Ruka Hirano.

The medal ceremony for the team figure skating competition at the Beijing Olympics has been delayed because of an ongoing legal issue that could affect medalists, the IOC said.

The ceremony to award the Russian team the gold medals, the United States silver and Japan bronze was not held as scheduled Tuesday.

International Olympic Committee spokesman Mark Adams said the reason was a "legal consultation"

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required with the governing body of skating. Details of the case were not specified.

In a one-line statement, the International Skating Union also cited ongoing legal talks.

If any athlete and team were disqualified, an appeal would likely follow to the Court of Arbitration for Sport. Canada placed fourth and would be in line to be upgraded.

Norway's Birk Ruud won gold in the Olympics' first men's freestyle skiing big air event, re-emerging as a leader in the extreme sport after losing his father to cancer and injuring his knee.

A day after Eileen Gu's gold medal temporarily broke Chinese social media site Weibo, the men put on another impressive show at Big Air Shougang — a shuttered steel mill that now hosts the world's only permanent big air jump.

Ruud has two Winter X Games big air gold medals and four world cup wins, but only one since 2019. The 21-year-old's father, Øivind, died of cancer last April, and Ruud has said the loss pulled his mind away from competitive skiing.

Ruud's final score of 187.75 was well clear of American silver medalist Colby Stevenson's 183. Swedish veteran Henrik Harlaut took bronze at 181.

Defending Olympic champion snowboarder Chloe Kim cruised through the halfpipe on her first run.

She scored 87.75, good enough for the top spot in women's qualifying Wednesday at Genting Snow Park.

The 21-year-old from California turned it up a notch in run No. 2, but fell on her switch backside 720. She raised her hand as if to say, "Oh well." She playfully stuck out her tongue while waiting for her score.

Mitsuki Ono of Japan was second in qualifying. This a day after appearing to be bothered by a hip ailment in training and in some discomfort. Cai Xuetong of China had the third-best score in qualifying, with Queralt Castellet of Spain also in the mix.

The biggest surprise was the performance of American Maddie Mastro, who finished just outside of the top-12 that advanced to Thursday's final. She was in the last spot but was bumped out by one of the final riders, Elizabeth Hosking of Canada.

Lena Dürr is leading the women's slalom at the Beijing Games after two-time Olympic champion Mikaela Shiffrin saw another race end early.

Shiffrin skidded out of control about five seconds into the opening run of Wednesday's slalom. The 26-year-old American also fell early in the first run of Monday's giant slalom.

Dürr led from the start as she was first down the course known as the Ice River. The German skier posted a time of 52.17 seconds, 0.03 quicker than Michelle Gisin of Switzerland.

Giant slalom gold medalist Sara Hector of Sweden is 0.12 behind Dürr.

Dürr's highest individual finish at a major championship is 11th at the worlds in 2019. She has never won a World Cup slalom race.

The 30-year-old is likely to head into the second run in the lead with only lower-ranked skiers remaining.

Two-time Olympic champion Mikaela Shiffrin has missed a gate early in the first run of the slalom at the Beijing Games and is out of the event.

Just like in her first event of these Olympics, the giant slalom, the American racer was done for the day within a matter of seconds.

After Wednesday's mistake in the slalom, which she won at the 2014 Sochi Games, Shiffrin sat on the side of the hill and bowed her head.

The 26-year-old Shiffrin is trying to become the first Alpine ski racer from the United States to win three Olympic golds across a career.

She has said she hoped to enter all five individual events at Yanqing Alpine Skiing Center.

Defending Olympic downhill champion Sofia Goggia is on the Beijing slopes and training after crashing

and injuring her left knee and leg last month.

The Italian arrived late to China after she sprained her left knee, partially tore a cruciate ligament and had a "minor fracture" of the fibula bone in her leg. She also had some tendon damage after the crash in a World Cup super-G in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy, on Jan. 23.

Goggia has won the last eight World Cup downhill races that she completed.

Goggia arrived in China on Monday and was checked out by the Italian team's medical staff. She then did three runs of giant slalom and three runs of super-G training on Tuesday and was doing more of the same on Wednesday.

The team says she has not decided yet if she will race the super-G on Friday but she is planning on taking part in the first of three downhill training sessions on Saturday. The downhill race is scheduled for Tuesday.

Mexican skater is a rare Latin American at Winter Olympics

By SALLY HO Associated Press

BEIJING (AP) — They said he should play soccer. They said figure skating was for girls. They said winter sports made no sense in temperate Guadalajara.

But none of those naysayers deterred Mexican figure skater Donovan Carrillo, the rare Latin American athlete at the Winter Games, who has now become an even more rare Beijing Olympics success story — however relative — from that part of the globe.

Carrillo had a career-best performance in the marquee sport of the Winter Games on Tuesday at Capital Indoor Stadium, featuring a well-executed quad toe loop and difficult triple axel.

That allows him to advance to the longer free skate competition on Thursday — a first for Mexico, which hadn't had an Olympic skater in three decades. It instantly made Carrillo the most successful Mexican figure skater in history.

"For me to have the opportunity to be one of the few Latin American athletes here at the Olympics, it's really something that motivates me to do my best and to inspire more kids in Latin America and in my country to try to practice winter sports," Carrillo said. "I used to talk this dream with people. They were always laughing or telling me that it was impossible for a Mexican to qualify."

In Beijing, Carrillo is one of 33 athletes from nine Latin teams: Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru and Puerto Rico. There's another 10 athletes from four other Caribbean teams, including Virgin Islands, Haiti, Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago. None have ever medaled at the Winter Games.

Brazil — typically a Summer Games powerhouse — claims the most athletes but the 10 Winter competitors in Beijing are a fraction of their 302 that competed in the Tokyo Games last year.

Among the four athletes on the Mexico team, Carrillo is the only one who stayed in Mexico to nurture his talents, which he insists on doing. Two others have Mexican heritage but train in the U.S. and Canada, while a third — Sarah Schleper — joined the Mexico team after marrying a Mexican and retiring from the U.S. ski team.

Carrillo's stronger-than-expected figure skating short program on Tuesday was steeped in national pride. His music was set to Santana, his father's favorite band. Carrillo's blade covers displayed the green, white and red colors of the Mexican flag. He wore a sparkly black and gold costume that was custom-made by Mexican fashion designer Edgar Lozano, who offered it to the skater for free.

"It's something that I always try to do with my performance, to involve the Mexican culture," Carrillo said. "Carlos Santana is Mexican. I always try to take on different artists that could help me and motivate me to represent my country."

The 22-year-old is originally from Guadalajara but moved with his coach to León when he was 13 because his hometown rink shut down. He dreamt of Olympic glory and idolized Spain's Javier Fernandez, who took bronze at the 2018 Winter Games in Pyeongchang to become the first Spanish figure skater to medal.

Brenda Eisey, a sports history professor at Hofstra University, said win or lose, Carrillo's debut at the Olympics can only be a good thing for Mexico and the rest of Latin America in terms of winter sports

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engagement. Mexico does not have a national professional sports league or competitive collegiate system for any winter sports. The Winter Games are also not a geopolitical priority for its government.

"The fact is they would have to go on the European circuit to be able to qualify. The process to get to the Olympics is more of a challenge than people realize, particularly because there's not a huge culture necessarily within Latin America that is clamoring for this," Elsey said.

Even at the popular ski resorts in Chile and Argentina, Elsey said the mountain snow sports are so cost-prohibitive that it's effectively reserved for western tourists and locals with European roots who are already familiar with skiing.

The lack of a Latin American presence at the Winter Games is surely an issue the International Olympic Committee has taken note of. Elsey said winter sports themselves are rooted in Nordic traditions, which is also why Africa, Middle East and Southeast Asia are not well-represented.

"They would love to expand the market to increase the amount of money in marketing and broadcast rights," Elsey said. "The IOC wants to be relevant to everyone."

Back at home, it may take another televised round of skating for Carrillo to really break through soccer-crazed Mexico's sports coverage, though national newspapers were plastered with photographs of a wide-smiling Carrillo on Tuesday.

Mexicans quickly got behind the young figure skater, expressing their pride and support on social media, though he's not exactly a household name – yet.

Hours after his debut, Anette Tapia admitted she hadn't been following the Olympics either but had seen something about Carrillo beforehand.

"He has a refreshing essence," said the 26-year-old designer. "He has a lot of motivation."

Figure skating is uncommon in Mexico and there are no Olympic-sized rinks in the entire country. Ice rinks are usually limited to attractions inside shopping centers.

In fact, it was on a small rink at the Plaza Mayor mall in the central state of Guanajuato where Carrillo trained in the run-up to the Olympics. His side hustle to afford this very expensive sport includes teaching ice skating lessons there.

Carrillo laments how he is snapped back to reality during his training: when people ask him to turn off his blaring music, when he has to practice his dazzling maneuvers while dodging kids and families on the ice for fun, and especially when he has to share half the rink with hockey players.

"The dream of every coach in Mexico is to have the right infrastructure, to keep the skaters training in the country...(so) that they don't have to go out in order to improve," said Gregorio Núñez, Carrillo's coach for the past 14 years. "In our country, it's very hard to have the infrastructure to practice winter sports."

Carrillo said a cultural barrier also exists, as macho attitudes disapprove of male skaters in particular.

"Sometimes people think that the artistic sports are only for women, so that's something I had to fight when I was a kid because many people at school told me 'Oh you're a girl,' and they sometimes even think that to practice an artistic sport, it's going to affect your (sexual) preferences as a person. I never thought that," Carrillo said. "I think that's one of the reasons of why we don't have many male skaters in my country."

Carrillo is proud to make history when he takes the ice for Mexico in the men's finals on Thursday, though he's under no delusion that he's actually competitive with powerhouses likely gold medalist Nathan Chen from the U.S. team.

The Mexican skater is not deterred by this in the least. He's already eyeing another run in Milan-Cortina in 2026, and sees Beijing as a good experience for his future aspirations. He knows simply that his very existence at the Olympic rink here is an achievement for his country.

"I had a great time on the ice," an elated Carrillo said. "I didn't want it to end. I wanted to keep skating and living the Olympic dream."

Column: Shiffrin's disappointment stirs lessons from Biles

By PAUL NEWBERRY AP Sports Columnist

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BEIJING (AP) — When Mikaela Shiffrin careened off the course, another expected gold medal slipping away before she hardly got started, the announcers from NBC let her have it.

“One of the bigger shockers in Olympic alpine skiing history,” play-by-play man Dan Hicks bellowed.

“Almost a rookie mistake,” analyst Ted Ligety, a two-time gold medalist himself, chimed in harshly.

The cameras honed in on Shiffrin, who clicked out of her skies and plopped down on the artificial snow — head bowed, arms resting on bent knees — as she tried to process another unimaginable outcome in the first run of the slalom.

NBC seemed determined to document every single one of Shiffrin’s tears, to the point of failing to even show the next few skiers that took to the treacherous course known as Ice River.

In a different era, AKA before last summer, this sort of coverage would have been accepted, almost expected.

But times have changed since Simone Biles bared her mental-health issues to the world at the Tokyo Games, and other athletes have followed her lead.

In that emerging context, it wasn’t surprising at all for social media to quickly turn its wrath on the network that had banked so much of its coverage on Shiffrin being one of the biggest stars.

“Some really shameful coverage by NBC of Michaela Schiffrin,” one person tweeted. “Just pure trauma porn for their ratings instead of treating her like a human.”

“NBC NEEDS TO STOP TORTURING MIKAELA SCHIFFRIN!!” another viewer posted.

All of which raises some interesting dilemmas:

Is it still OK to criticize a much-hyped athlete who fails to meet expectations at a huge event such as the Winter Olympics?

How long should we linger on their disappointment before it looks more like ambulance chasing than legitimate coverage?

These are the sort of questions that journalists have long grappled with, but Biles’ ordeal in Tokyo — where the world’s greatest gymnast dropped out of one event after another, not feeling she was mentally prepared to compete — has added a whole new layer to the discussion.

Athletes from tennis star Naomi Osaka to NFL receiver Calvin Ridley to swimming powerhouse Caeleb Dressel have openly addressed their fragile mental states and the emotional toll it takes to compete at the highest levels.

But journalists, whether we work for a network that pays billions to televise the Olympics or represent an athlete’s hometown newspaper, have a job to do.

We must tell the story openly, honestly, without the glare of stars in our eyes.

In fairness to NBC, the network surely would’ve been accused of coddling one of its most valued Olympics assets if the coverage had quickly cut away after Shiffrin tumbling out of the slalom after just a few seconds — a result even more shocking because she did pretty much the very same thing in her first event of these Games, the giant slalom.

Shiffrin was certainly gracious, honest and revealing in her interview with NBC, just as she was during a long, tedious journey through the mixed zone, where the rest of the world’s media was gathered.

“Pretty much everything makes me second-guess the last 15 years,” Shiffrin told NBC’s Todd Lewis. “Everything I thought I knew about my own skiing and slalom and racing mentality.”

She was the first to concede that these Winter Games have not in any way gone as she had hoped and planned. NBC’s coverage, even if teetered on exploitive, in no way changes that reality.

“It feels like a really big letdown,” the two-time Olympic gold medalist said, her cheeks moist with tears.

No matter how much pressure we in the media put on athletes, most will tell you it’s nowhere near the amount of pressure that they put on themselves.

Shiffrin was feeling that burden before she ever climbed the mountain, knowing that it was essentially gold-or-bust for a skier who had become about as automatic as the tides.

Yet at these Olympics, in her two best events, she’s managed to stay on the course for a total of less than 20 seconds.

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"It really feels like a lot of work for nothing," she said, her words oozing with heartbreak. In retrospect, Shiffrin was not in the best place mentally or physically coming into Beijing. She's still reeling from the death of her father, Jeff, who passed away two years ago from a severe head injury after an accident at the family's Colorado home. Not to mention, her training was hampered by a back problem in October and November, which was followed by a bout with COVID-19 in late December. Still, no one expected this. Least of all, Shiffrin. "I've never been in this position before," she said, "and I don't know how to handle it." Those are lessons she'll have to learn in the days and weeks and lifetime to come. In the meantime, those of us who document these journeys for the rest of the world must look into ways we can do our jobs with more compassion and empathy, without scrimping on the painful parts of the story. Shiffrin won't be the last athlete to fall. We can't catch them, but perhaps we can make the landing a little less painful.

Shaq, Usher and Mayer shows all highlight Super Bowl week

By JONATHAN LANDRUM Jr. AP Entertainment Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Shaquille O'Neal will return to the city where he helped the Los Angeles Lakers win three straight championships.

This time, O'Neal — who moonlights as DJ Diesel — will host his carnival-themed event "Shaq's Fun House" on Friday night in Los Angeles ahead of the Super Bowl this weekend. His upcoming event — which features performances by Lil Wayne, Zedd and Diplo — will be held in-person after it was held virtually last year due to COVID-19 concerns.

O'Neal said he wants to bring "Fun House" back with a splash. The event will take place at the spacious Shrine Auditorium and Expo Hall, where several attractions will be built, including a human claw machine, Ferris wheel and 80-foot slide.

"Coming off of last year, where we retooled 'Fun House' to be a streaming virtual event, I think fans are even more excited to get back out there and celebrate," O'Neal said. "We won't disappoint them."

Along with O'Neal's event, the days leading up to the big game between the Los Angeles Rams and Cincinnati Bengals will include concerts from some of the biggest music stars in the world, including Justin Bieber, Miley Cyrus, Lil Baby, Blake Shelton and Usher.

Here's a look at some of the events during a busy Super Bowl week:

MAYER'S SMALL STAGE

John Mayer will have a more intimate setting at SiriusXM and Pandora's Small Stage Series. The Grammy winner will headline the concert at the Hollywood Palladium on Wednesday evening.

The concert will be hosted by Andy Cohen, who will have a sit-down interview with Mayer to discuss his music and upcoming tour. Mayer will perform songs from his latest album, "Sob Rock."

Scott Greenstein, president and CCO at SiriusXM, said he believes Mayer's concert will be another indication that shows can be fun and safe at the same time. So far during the pandemic, Small Stages — which launched in August 2021 — has had some success with past performances by Alicia Keys, Ed Sheeran, Coldplay, H.E.R., Brandi Carlile and J. Cole.

"While this has been a rocky two years, I don't think people will forget what they like," Greenstein said. "You feel a little safer and better about it and you can enjoy yourself — that'll be a win for me."

CHAIRMAN'S PARTY

Once the NFL Honors wrap up, many will flow into an exclusive and star-studded afterparty highlighted by a performance from Usher.

On Thursday night, the eight-time Grammy winner will hit the BET Network stage inside SoFi Stadium at The Canyons, an open-air location within the stadium's footprint. Many of the guests — Hollywood celebrities, NFL Hall of Famers and team owners — will have an early look at the site of Super Bowl 56.

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During the event, DirecTV will award a community organization a \$25,000 grant award. Two other organizations, which focus on empowering youth through storytelling, will receive \$5,000 each.

BUD LIGHT MUSIC FEST

Halsey and Machine Gun Kelly will co-headline the first night of the Bud Light Super Bowl Music Fest on Thursday night. The three-night festival will celebrate its third year of existence at newly named Crypto.com Arena.

The follow-up night includes performances by Blake Shelton, Gwen Stefani and Mickey Guyton, who will sing the national anthem before Sunday's big game. Green Day and Miley Cyrus will close out the festival on Saturday night.

HOMECOMING WEEKEND

Justin Bieber is expected to perform at the Homecoming Weekend pop up bash. The two-night event will kick off with Bieber on Friday night with a special deejay set by Marshmello at the Pacific Design Center in the heart of West Hollywood. On Saturday night, Drake will perform as a special guest. The invite-only event will host around 1,500 guests each night.

GOSPEL CELEBRATION

CeCe Winans, CeeLo Green, Natalie Grant and Lecrae are some of the musical performers who will grace the stage at the Super Bowl Gospel Celebration.

Chloe Bailey of R&B duo Chloe x Halle, Mali Music and Regina Belle will also take part in the Saturday evening event. It will air on Bounce TV and stream on Amazon Prime Video.

NFL Hall of Famer Deion Sanders will be honored with the Lifetime of Inspiration Award. Sanders, who is currently the head football coach at Jackson State University, is a two-time Super Bowl champion.

Comedian DC Young Fly and inspirational figure Sarah Jakes Roberts will host the event, where the theme is "Catch the Light." Organizers want to highlight NFL players and their faith with uplifting "songs of joy."

Expected guests include Russell Wilson, Myles Garrett, Cam Jordan, Kirk Cousins and Stefon Diggs.

MORE, MORE, MORE

On Saturday night, Meek Mill along with Diplo and Gunna will perform at the Big Game Weekend Edition. Jack Harlow, Kygo and Frank Walker will headline the Sports Illustrated party the same night.

The Chainsmokers and Lil Baby will kick off the first night of the DIRECTV/Maxim party on Friday. The following night will feature Tiesto with 50 Cent as host.

Musk helping restore Tongan internet; virus outbreak growing

By NICK PERRY and DAVID RISING Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand (AP) — Entrepreneur Elon Musk is helping reconnect Tonga to the internet after a volcanic eruption and tsunami cut off the South Pacific nation more than three weeks ago, according to officials, while repairs on an undersea cable are proving more difficult than first thought.

The tsunami severed the sole fiber-optic cable that connects Tonga to the rest of the world and most people remain without reliable connections.

Three people were confirmed killed in the Jan. 15 eruption of the massive undersea volcano and the resulting tsunami, and several small settlements in outlying islands were wiped out and a thick layer of volcanic ash that blanketed the main island tainted much of the drinking water.

Tonga had avoided the COVID-19 pandemic for more than two years, but it is now in the midst of an outbreak with new infections growing rapidly after the virus was apparently brought in by foreign military crews aboard ships and planes delivering critical aid after the volcanic eruption.

With many displaced people in the aftermath of the eruption, an already fragile health care system and the isolation of the islands, the outbreak is a particular cause for concern, said Katie Greenwood, the head of delegation in the Pacific for the International Red Cross.

"Resourcing community health and primary health facilities, especially in remote locations, is extremely challenging," she told The Associated Press. "COVID most certainly presents a threat to these systems and to vulnerable people who may not access the level of care required."

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Many Tongans are now in lockdown with their communications severely restricted due to the severed undersea cable.

But with Musk's involvement, there was hope that better connectivity would be restored soon.

A top official in neighboring Fiji tweeted that a team from Musk's SpaceX company was in Fiji establishing a station that would help reconnect Tonga through SpaceX satellites.

SpaceX runs a network of nearly 2,000 low-orbit satellites called Starlink, which provides internet service to remote places around the world.

Fiji Attorney-General Aiyaz Sayed-Khaiyum tweeted about the SpaceX work, saying the volcano's shock-wave had "shattered Tonga's internet connection, adding days of gut-wrenching uncertainty to disaster assessments."

A spokeswoman for Sayed-Khaiyum said Wednesday she was waiting for more information about the Starlink project before providing further details. SpaceX did not respond to requests for comment.

Musk had earlier shown interest in Tonga's plight. Less than a week after the eruption, he asked on Twitter: "Could people from Tonga let us know if it is important for SpaceX to send over Starlink terminals?"

New Zealand politician Dr. Shane Reti wrote to Musk asking him to help provide a Starlink connection. After the reports from Fiji emerged, Reti tweeted: "Very pleased. Elon Musk providing satellite to Tonga."

Meanwhile Samiuela Fonua, the chairperson at Tonga Cable Ltd., the state-owned company that owns the crucial undersea cable, told the AP that repairs to the cable might not be completed until the end of next week.

Fonua said the good news was that the crew aboard the repair ship CS Reliance had managed to locate both ends of the damaged cable. The bad news, he said, was the damage was extensive and his company didn't have enough cable aboard the ship to replace a mangled section of more than 80 kilometers (50 miles).

Fonua said there was extra cable aboard the Reliance that was owned by other companies, and Tonga Cable was hoping to secure agreements with those companies to use it.

A U.N. team has provided small satellites and other telecommunications support to boost connectivity and communications, said spokesperson Stephane Dujarric, and more equipment was on the way.

Dujarric said that UNICEF had sent 15,000 rapid test kits and that the World Health Organization was sending 5,000 PCR tests to help with the outbreak.

The outbreak started after two Tongan dockworkers tested positive for the virus last week. Despite efforts to stop the virus from spreading, the number of cases has been growing and Prime Minister Siaosi Sovaleni said Wednesday that infections more than doubled overnight, with 19 new cases.

That brings the total to 35 cases overall in the nation of 105,000 — 34 in the current outbreak and one from last October, when a missionary tested positive after returning from Africa via New Zealand.

Health Minister Saia Piukala said several of the new cases reported Tuesday included people who went out to drink kava, a popular intoxicating drink made from the root of a local plant, with a friend who was infected.

"It is prohibited for kava clubs to operate at this time," Piukala reminded Tongans, according to the Matangi Tonga online news portal.

With communications restricted due to the severed undersea cable, Sovaleni addressed Tongans on Wednesday over the radio to update them on the outbreak.

Tonga had been doing well with its vaccinations before the current outbreak, but now that the virus has reached the country, thousands have been turning out for shots, according to the Health Ministry.

On Monday, 2,185 people received booster shots, 140 people got their first doses and 281 received second doses, Matangi Tonga reported.

Overall, 97% of the eligible population, aged 12 and up, have received at least one dose and 88% have received a second. At least 67% of Tonga's total population is now fully vaccinated, according to the Health Ministry.

Sweden ends COVID-19 testing as pandemic restrictions lifted

By DAVID KEYTON Associated Press

STOCKHOLM (AP) — Sweden has halted wide-scale testing for COVID-19 even among people showing symptoms of an infection, putting an end to the mobile city-square tent sites, drive-in swab centers and home-delivered tests that became ubiquitous during the pandemic and provided essential data for tracking its spread.

The move puts the Scandinavian nation at odds with most of Europe, but some experts say it could become the norm as costly testing yields fewer benefits with the easily transmissible but milder omicron variant and as governments begin to consider treating COVID-19 like they do other endemic illnesses.

“We have reached a point where the cost and relevance of the testing is no longer justifiable,” Swedish Public Health Agency chief Karin Tegmark Wisell told the national broadcast SVT this week.

“If we were to have extensive testing adapted to everyone who has COVID-19, that would mean half a billion kronor a week (about \$55 million) and 2 billion a month (\$220 million),” Tegmark Wisell added.

Starting Wednesday, only health care and elderly care workers and the most vulnerable will be entitled to free PCR testing if they are symptomatic, while the rest of the population will simply be asked to stay home if they show symptoms that could be COVID-19.

Antigen tests are readily available for purchase in supermarkets and pharmacies, but those results aren't reported to health authorities. Private health care providers can also perform tests and offer certificates for international travel, but the cost won't be reimbursed by the state or health insurance.

High vaccination rates in Sweden are creating optimism among health officials and a late 2020 study released Tuesday showing antibodies present in 85% of samples.

Dr. Bharat Pankhania, a senior clinical lecturer at the University of Exeter Medical School in Britain, said that with a substantial percentage of people vaccinated, “an informed, educated and knowledgeable population” can be trusted to isolate if they show symptoms without the need for “wholesale testing that is not going to be value for money.”

“Sweden is leading the way, and other nations will inevitably follow,” Pankhania said. “We don't need extensive testing for the sake of testing, but we must look nevertheless in sensitive settings such as hospitals, nursing homes and other sensitive places where there are very vulnerable people.”

In 2021, the region of Stockholm alone spent the equivalent of more than \$320 million on PCR tests, money the government says could be better spent elsewhere.

For most of the pandemic, Sweden stood out among European nations for its comparatively hands-off response. It never went into lockdown or closed businesses, largely relying instead on individual responsibility to control infections. While coronavirus deaths were high compared with other Nordic countries, they were lower than many other places in Europe that did implement lockdowns.

Also Wednesday, the country scrapped as of midnight its limits on how many people may gather at events or in restaurants, vaccine certificates can no longer be required and reduced operating hours have been canceled for bars and eateries.

Announcing the reopening last week, Prime Minister Magdalena Andersson said that “the pandemic is not over but has entered a totally new phase,” and while infection rates have risen, it is not overly burdening hospitals.

That tracks with what's been happening in countries across Europe recently as authorities relax coronavirus restrictions that have dominated the continent for the past two years.

Yet testing remains widespread on the continent, even for people showing no symptoms. Schoolchildren and teachers in Greece, for example, are required to test twice a week, and many countries still require a COVID-19 passport or a negative test to enter restaurants, cinemas and other indoor venues.

In Britain, instead of dropping all testing requirements, authorities are relying on testing, in addition to vaccination, to help enable people to return to normal life. Even as it relaxed most of the remaining COVID-19 restrictions in late January, the government said testing remained a “vital tool” for exiting the pandemic and said infected people could end their isolation after just five days with two negative results

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on rapid tests over two consecutive days.

The government has also made rapid tests freely available, including via home delivery, and encouraged people to test themselves before potentially risky gatherings, hoping that knowing their status will curb COVID-19 transmission.

Some providers of private COVID-19 lab tests have seen a steep fall lately in the numbers of people seeking tests since British authorities dropped the requirement for vaccinated travelers to provide a negative test upon entering the country.

"We're seeing fewer people with COVID and so fewer people are getting tested," said Quinton Fivelman, chief scientific officer of London Medical Laboratory, "which is obviously a good sign even though that means less demand in that market."

As vaccination rates increase across Europe and millions of people continue to recover from winter omicron infections, it could be a similar lack of demand for testing that leads to them being phased out, rather than government policy.

Denmark said Monday that the number of PCR tests will drop from 500,000 per day to 200,000 to "match the current stage of epidemic development," and all of Denmark's free government-funded test capacity is to close by March 6.

"Vaccines and easy access to tests have been our Danish super-weapons throughout the epidemic," Danish Health Minister Magnus Heunicke said last month, adding that "this has been positively reflected in the number of (hospital) admissions and now allows us to scale down our large testing capacity."

Ukraine projects calm over Russia fears despite US rhetoric

By INNA VARENYTSIA, LORI HINNANT and ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

ADIIVKA, Ukraine (AP) — In the trenches of eastern Ukraine, across the lines from some of the 100,000 Russian troops amassed north and east of the country, Ivan Skuratovskiy's calm verges on numbness — even after a sniper's bullet recently killed one of the 50 or so men under his command.

It is the sort of thing that has happened from time to time over the eight years he's been deployed up and down the 250-mile (400-kilometer) front line — a soldier in a war he never imagined when he enlisted in 2013. He grieves, but death and conflict have become an inescapable part of his life.

"The war has put pressure on me and broken my soul," said Skuratovskiy, 30. "I'm becoming more cold-hearted, some would say dead-hearted. I have a tough sense of humor. It's a protective reaction to extreme situations."

U.S. officials say the threat of a Russian invasion in Ukraine is more serious than others that have come and gone during nearly a decade of trench warfare. The White House national security advisor warned that an all-out invasion could happen any day, and President Joe Biden said "it would be wise" for Americans other than essential diplomats to leave Ukraine and ordered the deployment of 1,700 troops to neighboring Poland.

But even as the rhetoric out of Washington ramps up, a sense of calm prevails in the Eastern European nation among soldiers and citizens alike, from relatives of those in the trenches on up to President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, who campaigned on a promise of ending the drawn-out conflict and has repeatedly called for diplomacy to carry the day.

"We are defending our country and are on our own territory. Our patience can have an impact on provocations, when we don't respond to provocations but behave with great dignity," Zelenskyy said Tuesday in an appearance with French President Emmanuel Macron.

While waves of Ukrainians fled their homes during 2014 fighting that saw Russia annex the Crimean Peninsula and back separatists in the eastern province of Donbas, so far people are staying put in the areas closest to the Russian troop movements.

The calm expressed by Zelenskyy and others owes in part, perhaps, to the fact that they have little control over the situation before them.

Ukraine is vastly overmatched by Russia not only in troop numbers but in arms and equipment, such

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as the fighter jets poised nearby and the naval ships maneuvering off the coast. Nothing NATO countries have provided to Ukraine — from anti-tank weapons sent by Britain to the 5,000 helmets that came from Germany — comes close to evening the scales.

American officials have said explicitly that no U.S. troops will fight in Ukraine.

Macron, for his part, spoke Tuesday not of a looming possible invasion but of a tense standoff that could go on for “weeks and months to come.”

U.S. officials believe the danger is much more immediate — and haven’t been shy about sounding the alarm.

“Our effort is to ensure we’re informing the American public and the global community of the seriousness of this threat,” White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said last week when asked about the difference in tone between Washington and Kyiv. “I can’t speak to the motivation or the reasoning for the comments of Ukrainian leadership.”

The two governments share the same motivation, averting an invasion, but may see themselves as speaking to different audiences.

The White House believes that spotlighting concerns about possible military action will dissuade the Kremlin from following through on it, according to a senior administration official who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations.

Biden and his advisers have calculated that publicly airing those concerns, as well as intelligence details, helps make the case to European allies for sanctions in the event that Russian President Vladimir Putin orders a further invasion of Ukraine, the official said.

Zelenskyy, meanwhile, is balancing military concerns against fears that alarming rhetoric could wreck Ukraine’s economy with hardly a shot fired.

The dueling messaging stems from differing assessments by the two countries as to Russia’s intentions, said Daniel Fried, who advised the George W. Bush administration on former Soviet nations and served as ambassador to Poland.

“Zelenskyy looks to be thinking about a longer term,” he said. “He seems to be worried about the effect of a prolonged crisis on the Ukrainian economy. And he may feel that Putin is less likely to invade than he is to try to use the threat of invasion to grind down the Ukrainian economy” and scare away foreign investors.

“So he wants to portray a sense of, ‘We can get through this,’” Fried said.

Zelenskyy’s administration is also keenly aware that Ukrainian public opinion is divided on how to handle the situation, especially when it comes to concessions toward pro-Russia separatists in the east.

Memories are still raw: Yuri Maskirenko, one of those forced to leave Crimea after the occupation, said he thinks Ukraine shouldn’t negotiate with Russia over the status of Donbas or else “people will come out into the streets and this will not lead to anything good.”

From his front-line vantage point, Skuratovskyi, who recently reupped with the army for another two years, agrees with a diplomacy-focused approach and said he sees no armed solution to the standoff.

“ Weapons won’t solve any problem here,” Skuratovskyi said.

He talks regularly by video call from his current post in the town of Adiiivka, Donbas province, with his wife, Maryna, on the other side of the country in the seaside city of Mykolaiv, near Moldova. Maryna said her worst moment came in 2014 when an explosion went off while he was on the line with her. Sometimes she has thought he might not make it home alive.

But while she and friends in Mykolaiv talk about the possibility of war, none of them are panicked. She yearns for the conflict to end and to finally be able to make a home with her husband, who has been deployed for nearly his entire adult life.

“Vanya would tell me if something was going to happen,” she said, using an affectionate nickname for her husband. “Since he doesn’t, I’m calm about the situation.”

Workers clean Apollo 16 spaceship ahead of 50th anniversary

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By JAY REEVES Associated Press

HUNTSVILLE, Ala. (AP) — The Apollo 16 capsule is dusty all these decades after it carried three astronauts to the moon. Cobwebs cling to the spacecraft. Business cards, a pencil, money, a spoon and even a tube of lip balm litter the floor of the giant case that protects the space antique in a museum.

The COVID-19 pandemic meant a break in the normal routine of cleaning the ship's display at the U.S. Space and Rocket Center, located near NASA's Marshall Space Flight Center. But workers are sprucing up the spacecraft for the 50th anniversary of its April 1972 flight.

Delicately using microfiber towels, extension poles, brushes, dust-catching wands and vacuums, a crew recently cleaned the 6.5-ton, nearly 11-foot-tall capsule and wiped down its glass enclosure, located beneath a massive Saturn V rocket suspended from the ceiling. They removed dozens of items that people had stuck through cracks in the case.

Aside from overseeing the cleaning, consulting curator Ed Stewart taught museum staff how to maintain the capsule, which is on loan from the Smithsonian Institution and has been displayed in the "rocket city" of Huntsville since the 1970s.

Brushing dust off the side of the capsule while dressed in protective clothing, Stewart said the command module was in "pretty good shape" considering its age and how long it had been since the last cleaning about three years ago.

"I'm pleased to see that there's not ... heavy layers of dust. I've not seen a lot of insect debris or anything like that, so I take that as a very positive sign," he said.

Richard Hoover, a retired NASA astrobiologist who serves as a docent at the museum, remembered a time decades ago when visitors could touch the spacecraft. Some even picked off pieces of the charred heat shield that protected the ship from burning up while reentering Earth's atmosphere, he said.

"This is really quite a travesty because they don't realize that this is a tremendously important piece of space history," he said.

Conservation procedures changed as preservationists realized that a ship built to withstand the rigors of space travel didn't hold up well under the constant touch of tourists, Stewart said. That's why the case surrounding the capsule is sealed.

"Making it last for 1,000 years was not on the engineer's list of requirements for developing these to get the astronauts to the moon and back safely," he said.

Perched atop columns, the capsule — nicknamed "Casper" during the flight — is tilted so visitors can look inside the open hatch and see controls and the metal-framed seats where astronauts Ken Mattingly, John Young and Charlie Duke rode to the moon and back.

Duke, who walked on the moon with Young while Mattingly piloted the capsule, is expected to attend a celebration this spring marking the 50th anniversary of the flight's liftoff on April 16, 1972.

The capsule was cleaned and any potentially hazardous materials were removed after the flight, but reminders of its trip to the moon remain inside. Leaning through the hatch to check for dust, Stewart pointed to a few dark spots over his head.

"That's the crew's fingerprints and handprints on there," he said.

Workers plan to further seal the capsule's case so visitors won't be able to deposit anything inside, but they were careful not to do too much to Apollo 16 itself. While it would be easy enough to scrub down the spaceship with elbow grease, doing so would destroy the patina that links it to history, Stewart said.

"You don't want to lose any of that, because that is all part of the saga of the mission. If you clean it, it's gone. It's that extra texture of history that just sort of is lost to the ether if you make a mistake," he said.

New COVID wave batters Afghanistan's crumbling health care

By KATHY GANNON Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan (AP) — Only five hospitals in Afghanistan still offer COVID-19 treatment, with 33 others having been forced to close in recent months for lack of doctors, medicines and even heat. This comes as the economically devastated nation is hit by a steep rise in the number of reported coronavirus cases.

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At Kabul's only COVID-19 treatment hospital, staff can only heat the building at night because of lack of fuel, even as winter temperatures drop below freezing during the day. Patients are bundled under heavy blankets. Its director, Dr. Mohammed Gul Liwal, said they need everything from oxygen to medicine supplies.

The facility, called the Afghan Japan Communicable Disease Hospital, has 100 beds. The COVID-19 ward is almost always full as the virus rages. Before late January, the hospital was getting one or two new coronavirus patients a day. In the past two weeks, 10 to 12 new patients have been admitted daily, Liwal said.

"The situation is worsening day by day," said Liwal, speaking inside a chilly conference room. Since the Taliban takeover almost six months ago, hospital employees have received only one month's salary, in December.

Afghanistan's health care system, which survived for nearly two decades almost entirely on international donor funding, has been devastated since the Taliban returned to power in August following the chaotic end to the 20-year U.S.-led intervention. Afghanistan's economy crashed after nearly \$10 billion in assets abroad were frozen and financial aid to the government was largely halted.

The health system collapse has only worsened the humanitarian crisis in the country. Roughly 90% of the population has fallen below the poverty level, and with families barely able to afford food, at least a million children are threatened with starvation.

The omicron variant is hitting Afghanistan hard, Liwal said, but he admits it is just a guess because the country is still waiting for kits that test specifically for the variant. They were supposed to arrive before the end of last month, said Public Health Ministry spokesman Dr. Javid Hazhir. The World Health Organization now says Afghanistan will get the kits by the end of February.

The organization says that between Jan. 30 and Feb. 5, public laboratories in Afghanistan tested 8,496 samples, of which nearly half, were positive for COVID-19. Those numbers translate into a 47.4% positivity rate, the world health body said.

As of Tuesday, the WHO recorded 7,442 deaths and close to 167,000 infections since the start of the pandemic almost two years ago. In the absence of large-scale testing, these relatively low figures are believed to be a result of extreme under-reporting.

Meanwhile, the new Taliban administration says it is trying to push vaccines on a skeptical population that often sees them as dangerous.

With 3.2 million vaccine doses in stock, Hazhir said the administration has launched a campaign through mosques, clerics and mobile vaccine clinics to get more people vaccinated. Currently barely 27% of Afghanistan's 38 million people have been vaccinated, most with the single-dose Johnson and Johnson vaccine.

Getting Afghans to follow even a minimum of safety protocols, like mask wearing and social distancing, has been near impossible, Liwal said. For many struggling to feed their families, COVID-19 ranks low on their list of fears, he said. The Public Health Ministry has run awareness campaigns about the value of masks and social distancing, but most people aren't listening.

Even in the Afghan Japan hospital, where signs warn people that mask wearing is mandatory, most people in the dimly lit halls were without masks. In the intensive care unit, where half of the 10 patients in the ward were on ventilators, doctors and attendants wore only surgical masks and gowns for protection as they moved from bed to bed.

The head of the unit, Dr. Naeemullah, said he needs more ventilators and, even more urgently, he needs doctors trained on using ventilators. He is overstretched and rarely paid, but feels duty-bound to serve his patients. Liwal said several doctors have left Afghanistan.

Most of the hospital's 200 employees come to work regularly despite months without pay.

In December, a U.S.-based charity affiliated with Johns Hopkins University provided two months funding, which gave the hospital staff their December salary and a promise of another paycheck in January. The public health ministry is now in negotiations with the WHO to take over the cost of running the hospital through June, said Liwal.

Liwal said other Kabul hospitals used to be able to take some patients, but now no longer have the resources. With a lack of funds and staff leaving, 33 facilities offering COVID-19 treatment nationwide have

shut down, he said.

The Afghan Japan hospital's only microbiologist, Dr. Faridullah Qazizada, earned less than \$1,000 a month before the Taliban took power. He has received only one month's salary since August, he said. He says his equipment and facilities are barely adequate.

"The whole health system has been destroyed," he said.

Working conditions for Border Patrol getting more attention

By BEN FOX Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A strained Border Patrol is getting increased attention from the Biden administration after tense meetings between senior officials and the rank-and-file while the agency deals with one of the largest spikes in migration along the U.S.-Mexico border in decades.

Department of Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, who oversees the Border Patrol, laid out 19 ways to address working conditions after frosty receptions by agents, said Chris Magnus, the new commissioner of Customs and Border Protection.

Mayorkas also issued a memo vowing to push for more prosecutions of people accused of assaulting CBP personnel in the course of their duties, an issue raised at a recent meeting in Laredo, Texas, and elsewhere, Magnus said Tuesday.

"That's something that agents in the field want to hear because assaults are on the uptick," Magnus told The Associated Press. "We are not just seeing folks who are fleeing to the U.S. to get away from conditions. We are seeing smugglers, members of cartels, and drug organizations that are actively engaged in doing harm."

Efforts to deal with working conditions for agents come as President Joe Biden has been criticized across the political spectrum over immigration. He has sought to reverse many hardcore policies of his predecessor but has come under fire over the situation at the border that could cause trouble for Democrats in the midterm elections.

CBP encountered migrants from all over the world about 1.7 million times along the U.S.-Mexico border last year. The total, among the highest in decades, is inflated by repeated apprehensions of people who were turned away, without being given a chance to seek asylum, under a public health order issued at the start of the pandemic.

Immigration advocates have condemned the administration for not repealing the public health order, known as Title 42, while critics, including many Border Patrol agents, say a Biden policy of allowing children and families to stay in the country and pursue asylum has encouraged irregular migration.

Magnus said the agents, and the administration, are just trying to manage a complicated situation.

"We're seeing folks that are encountering political conditions and violence, unsafe conditions to live and work, at unprecedented levels," the former police chief of Tucson, Arizona, said in an interview, the first since he was sworn in Friday. "We've seen, for example, in places, earthquakes or other environmental conditions. We're seeing unprecedented levels of poverty. All of these are things that are in many ways, you know, pushing migrants again at high levels to this country."

The administration has sought to address the cause of migration, including by increasing aid to Central America and re-starting a visa program that was ended under President Donald Trump. It has also sought assistance from other countries, including Mexico, to do more to stop or take in migrants.

As the overall numbers have increased, and the administration has decided to allow many families to stay and seek asylum in a process that can take years, some Border Patrol agents have grown disenchanted as they spend their shifts processing and transporting people, not out in the field.

That frustration boiled over in Laredo as agents met late last month with Mayorkas and Border Patrol Chief Raul Ortiz, who acknowledged morale was at an "all-time low," according to a leaked video published by the Washington Examiner. One agent complained about "doing nothing" except releasing people into the United States, referring to the practice of allowing migrants to remain free while their cases wind through immigration court.

At another meeting, in Yuma, Arizona, Mayorkas told agents he understood that apprehending families

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and children “is not what you signed up to do” and that their jobs were becoming more challenging amid an influx of Cubans, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans, according to video published by the conservative website Townhall. One of the agents turned his back on the secretary.

Magnus has heard similar concerns raised in meetings. “I think it has been difficult for many of them who spent most of their careers or anticipated that their careers would be largely working in the field, on the border,” he said.

The commissioner declined to specify the 19 areas where Mayorkas “wants to see improvement,” because they have not been publicly released. But another official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss an internal document, said they include expanding the role of a new class of civilian employees to add tasks such as transporting migrants to medical facilities so agents can return to other duties.

Another point calls for faster decisions on asylum cases at the border. Agents have expressed frustration that asylum-seekers are freed in the U.S., often for years, while their claims make their way through an system backlogged with about 1.6 million cases.

Magnus said he hopes to expand mental health services for agents and provide additional resources to help them and their families cope with a stressful job that requires them to move often.

“There is never one simple solution to addressing morale at any organization, but I absolutely appreciate the very challenging conditions that the men and women of the Border Patrol and CBP in general have been have been working under,” he said.

EXPLAINER: How to claim child tax credit \$ on your taxes

By FATIMA HUSSEIN Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Millions of Americans who have never filed a tax return will need to do so this year in order to claim what’s coming to them under the enhanced child tax credit.

Previously, only people who earned enough money to owe income taxes could qualify for the full credit.

But as part of the \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package, President Joe Biden expanded the program, increasing the payments to up to \$3,600 annually for each child aged 5 or under and \$3,000 for those who are ages 6 to 17.

The monthly payments have amounted to \$300 for each child 5 and younger and \$250 for those between 5 and 17.

The government began to send the payments out — an overall \$93 billion — on a monthly basis starting last July. Now, there are an additional six months’ worth of payments waiting to be claimed. And some families haven’t collected any of the benefits they’re due yet. In all, an estimated \$193 billion is yet to be claimed.

The only way to receive that money is to file a tax return.

Some questions and answers about who’s eligible for the credit and how to get it:

WHO GETS THE CHILD TAX CREDIT?

More than 36 million families received the advanced payments in December alone, which marked the last month that advanced monthly payments were sent to households. Families qualify for the full credit if their 2021 adjusted gross income was at or below \$150,000 for married couples filing a joint return, or \$75,000 for single-filer parents.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I QUALIFY AND WHAT IF I DON’T OWE TAXES?

Whether or not a family owes tax money or has filed taxes before, they will need to file a return to get all or the rest of their money.

Eligible families who didn’t receive any advance child tax credit payments during 2021 can still claim the full amount of the child tax credit on their federal tax return. Those families who are unsure of whether they’ve received payments, or potentially received paper checks that went uncashed, can visit the Child Tax Credit Update Portal, to see how much of the credit they should have received.

Additionally, families who received payments should have received a “Letter 6419, 2021 advance CTC” notice, which includes information on the amount of advance payments families have received and tax information for filing purposes.

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However, the IRS has said that some people may have received incorrect information on their forms. The portal can help people who want to confirm the correct amount they should have received. Despite any inconsistencies in documentation, the IRS advises that taxpayers should keep the letter, and any other IRS communications about advance payments, with their tax records.

WHAT IS THE BEST WAY TO FILE?

The IRS urges individuals to file their taxes electronically to process forms quicker, and provides links on the agency website to free filing sites like GetYourRefund.org, which helps families earning less than about \$66,000 a year file their taxes for free. The organization partners with IRS-certified Volunteer Income Tax Assistance, and provides free help in English and Spanish. Another option is MyFreeTaxes.com, which provides virtual assistance to people who make \$58,000 or less to file their federal and state taxes for free. That service is offered through the United Way.

The IRS also has a tool to help individuals identify other free file sites that offer tax filing help.

WHAT IF I LIVE OUTSIDE THE 50 STATES?

While the coronavirus relief package included child tax credit benefits for residents of Puerto Rico, they were not eligible to receive the advance monthly payments. Instead, Puerto Rican residents can receive the full amount of child tax credit that they are eligible for by filing a federal income tax return this year. Additionally, residents of American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, Guam or the U.S. Virgin Islands may be eligible for the full child tax credit payments, but they will need to contact their local U.S. territory tax agency.

WHO CAN HELP ME SORT THIS OUT?

The IRS has launched a website, called ChildTaxCredit.gov, which lists criteria that filers must meet in order to receive the full credit. Additionally, the federal agency will begin offering walk-in assistance with IRS volunteers in limited locations for individuals who need help filing their taxes, beginning Feb. 12.

Thirty-five tax assistance centers around the country will be open from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. on the second Saturday of the next four months.

The tax filing deadline is April 18.

Can you get long COVID after an infection with omicron?

By LAURA UNGAR AP Science Writer

Can you get long COVID after an infection with omicron?

It's too early to know for sure, but many doctors believe it's possible to have long-term effects from the omicron variant of the virus.

Long COVID is usually diagnosed many weeks after a bout with COVID-19. Any long-lasting effects typically appear about 90 days after symptoms of the initial infection go away, Maria Van Kerkhove of the World Health Organization said this week.

Overall, some estimates suggest more than a third of COVID-19 survivors will develop some symptoms of long COVID. Symptoms include fatigue, brain fog, shortness of breath, anxiety and other problems. The lingering illness is more likely if you've been hospitalized with COVID-19, but research shows it can happen even after a mild infection.

Omicron began its race around the world late last year. The variant generally causes milder illness than the delta version of the coronavirus, but has still overwhelmed hospitals.

Van Kerkhove said she hasn't seen any research indicating that the portion of COVID-19 survivors who get long COVID will change with the omicron variant.

Dr. Linda Geng of Stanford University, who co-directs one of the many clinics specializing in long COVID, said that though she can't say for sure, a new wave of patients is likely.

"We have to be very cautious and very careful and prepared," Geng said.

In the meantime, scientists are racing to figure out what's behind the mysterious condition. Some theories? It may be an autoimmune disorder. Tiny microclots may be causing the disabling symptoms. Or perhaps latent viruses in the body have been reactivated.

Scientists are also looking at whether vaccines could be part of the answer. A Yale University team is studying the possibility that vaccination might reduce long COVID symptoms. And two other studies offer early evidence that being vaccinated before getting COVID-19 could help prevent the lingering illness or at least reduce its severity.

McConnell rebukes RNC, calls Jan. 6 'violent insurrection'

By MARY CLARE JALONICK Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Senate Republican Leader Mitch McConnell is criticizing the Republican National Committee for censuring two House GOP lawmakers investigating the "violent insurrection" on Jan. 6, 2021, saying it's not the party's job to police the views of lawmakers.

As former President Donald Trump has downplayed the attack by his supporters last year — the worst attack against the Capitol in two centuries — the RNC last week took a voice vote to approve censuring Reps. Liz Cheney of Wyoming and Adam Kinzinger of Illinois at the party's winter meeting in Salt Lake City. The two Republicans sit on a Democrat-led House committee that is aggressively investigating the siege and has subpoenaed many in the former president's inner circle.

The RNC resolution censuring Cheney and Kinzinger accused the House panel of leading a "persecution of ordinary citizens engaged in legitimate political discourse" — words that drew outrage from Democrats and firm pushback from several GOP senators. The rioters who broke into the Capitol through windows and doors brutally beat law enforcement officers and interrupted the certification of President Joe Biden's victory over Trump.

"It was a violent insurrection for the purpose of trying to prevent the peaceful transfer of power after a legitimately certified election from one administration to the next," McConnell said Tuesday. He said he still has confidence in RNC Chair Ronna McDaniel, but "the issue is whether or not the RNC should be sort of singling out members of our party who may have different views than the majority. That's not the job of the RNC."

The dispute is the latest tug of war within the party over issues that McConnell and others see as politically beneficial and would prefer to talk about in an election year — inflation, for example — versus the discourse over the insurrection and Trump's election lies.

The rioters who broke in to the Capitol were repeating Trump's false claims of widespread voter fraud and a stolen win, even after election officials and courts across the country repeatedly dismissed those claims. McConnell and his closest allies have said for months that they want to look forward to November 2022, when they have a chance of taking back the Senate, and not back to January 2021.

Republican Sen. John Cornyn of Texas said Monday that the RNC has said it wants the party to be unified, "and that was not a unifying action." Alabama Sen. Richard Shelby said he believes the GOP should be a "big tent." Republican Sens. Lindsey Graham of South Carolina and Mitt Romney of Utah both contacted McDaniel to discuss the censure.

Romney, who is McDaniel's uncle, told reporters that it "could not have been a more inappropriate" message from the party.

"Anything that my party does that comes across as being stupid is not going to help us," he said.

Maine Sen. Susan Collins said the rioters who "broke windows and breached the Capitol were not engaged in legitimate political discourse, and to say otherwise is absurd."

Collins said the GOP started out the year with an advantage on issues that could decide the election, but "every moment that is spent re-litigating a lost election or defending those who have been convicted of criminal behavior moves us further away from the goal of victory this fall."

The censure was approved last week after an RNC subcommittee watered down a resolution that had recommended expelling the pair from the party. McDaniel denied that the "legitimate political discourse" wording in the censure resolution was referring to the violent attack on the Capitol and said it had to do with other actions taken by the House committee investigating the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection. But the resolution drew no such distinction.

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Cheney said Monday that she had been receiving a “tremendous amount of support” in the wake of the censure vote. “I think every American who watched the video of that attack and who watched that attack unfold knows that it was really shameful to suggest that that what happened that day might be legitimate political discourse,” she said.

McConnell has maintained his strong criticism of Trump over the insurrection, though he voted to acquit the former president after the House voted to impeach him one week after the attack. In a speech after that vote, McConnell said “there is no question that President Trump is practically and morally responsible for provoking the events of that day,” and that “a mob was assaulting the Capitol in his name. These criminals were carrying his banners, hanging his flags, and screaming their loyalty to him.”

His use of the word “insurrection” — the act of rising up against established authority — is significant. Many in his party have insisted that it was not an insurrection, downplaying the attack or trying to portray it as a peaceful protest.

Still, the GOP leader doesn’t often mention Jan. 6 and did not participate in remembrance ceremonies on the anniversary of the attack last month. He has emphasized to his conference that they should focus on the future and issues that will help them win back the Senate.

Similarly, former Vice President Mike Pence has mostly avoided talking about the insurrection, even though he was in the building as it happened and some rioters were calling for his death. But on Friday, he addressed Trump’s repeated criticism that he could have “overturned” the election in his ceremonial role overseeing the electoral count.

“President Trump is wrong,” Pence said to a gathering of the conservative Federalist Society. “I had no right to overturn the election.”

While few Republicans openly defended the RNC’s move, several said it was the party’s prerogative to take the vote.

“The RNC has any right to take any action and the position that I have is that you’re ultimately held accountable to voters in your district,” said New York Rep. Elise Stefanik, the No. 3 Republican in the House. “We’re going to hear the feedback and the views of voters pretty quickly here this year.”

Texas Sen. Ted Cruz said Cheney and Kinzinger’s role on the Jan. 6 panel is “not helpful.” Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo., who along with Cruz led objections to the certification of Biden’s victory on Jan. 6, said it is a distraction to have Republicans in Washington like McConnell “bashing other Republicans.”

“If you come to the state of Missouri and talk to Republicans, people who are going to be voting in our primary, they probably agree with what the RNC did,” Hawley said.

High court’s Alabama ruling sparks alarm over voting rights

By LISA MASCARO and FARNOUSH AMIRI Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The Supreme Court’s decision to halt efforts to create a second mostly Black congressional district in Alabama for the 2022 election sparked fresh warnings that the court is becoming too politicized, eroding the Voting Rights Act and reviving the need for Congress to intervene.

The Supreme Court’s conservative majority put on hold a lower court ruling that Alabama must draw new congressional districts to increase Black voting power. Civil rights groups had argued that the state, with its “sordid record” of racial discrimination, drew new maps by “packing” Black voters into one single district and “cracking” Black voters from Alabama’s six other districts in ways that dilute their electoral power. Black voters are 26% of Alabama’s electorate.

In its 5-4 decision Monday, the Supreme Court said it would review the case in full, a future legal showdown in the months to come that voting advocates fear could further gut the protections in the landmark Civil Rights-era law.

It’s “the latest example of the Supreme Court hacking away at the protections of the voting rights act of 1965,” Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., chairman of the Judiciary Committee, said Tuesday. “Congress must act. We must restore the Voting Rights Act.”

The outcome all but ensures Alabama will continue to send mostly white Republicans to Washington

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after this fall's midterm elections and applies new pressure on Congress to shore up voter protections after a broader elections bill collapsed last month. And the decision shows the growing power of the high court's conservative majority as President Joe Biden is under his own pressures to name a liberal nominee to replace retiring Justice Stephen Breyer.

Rep. Terri Sewell, the only Black representative from Alabama, said the court's decision underscores the need for Congress to pass her bill, the John R. Lewis Voting Rights Advancement Act, to update and ensure the law's historic protections.

"Black Alabamians deserve nothing less," Sewell said in a statement.

The case out of Alabama is one of the most important legal tests of the new congressional maps stemming from the 2020 census count. It comes in the aftermath of court decisions that have widely been viewed as chiseling away at race-based protections of the Voting Rights Act.

Alabama and other states with a known history of voting rights violations were no longer under federal oversight, or "preclearance," from the Justice Department for changes to their election practices after the court, in its 2013 *Shelby v. Holder* decision, struck down the bill's formula as outdated.

As states nationwide adjust their congressional districts to fit population and demographic data, Alabama's Republican-led Legislature drew up new maps last fall that were immediately challenged by civil rights groups on behalf of Black voters in the state.

Late last month, a three-judge lower court, which includes two judges appointed by former President Donald Trump, had ruled that the state had probably violated the federal Voting Rights Act by diluting the political power of Black voters. This finding was rooted, in part, in the fact that the state did not create a second district in which Black voters made up a majority, or close to it.

Given that more than one person in four in Alabama is Black, the plaintiffs had argued the single Black district is far less than one person, one vote.

"Black voters have less opportunity than other Alabamians to elect candidates of their choice to Congress," the three-judge panel wrote in the 225-page ruling.

The lower court gave the Alabama legislature until Friday to come up with a remedial plan.

Late Monday, the Supreme Court, after an appeal from Alabama, issued a stay. Justices Brett Kavanaugh and Samuel Alito, part of the conservative majority, said the lower court's order for a new map came too close to the 2022 election. Alabama's Republican and Democratic primaries are being held May 24.

Chief Justice John Roberts joined his three more liberal colleagues in dissent.

"It's just a really disturbing ruling," said Sen. Cory Booker, D-N.J., a member of the Judiciary Committee, who called the Supreme Court's decision "a setback to racial equity, to ideals of one person, one vote."

Rep. Joyce Beatty, D-Ohio, and the chair of the Congressional Black Caucus, said the decision "hits at the guts of voting rights." She told *The Associated Press*: "We're afraid of what will happen from Alabama to Texas to Florida and even to the great state of Ohio."

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said the court decision exposes the need for Congress to legislate to protect voting rights. The erosion of those rights is "exactly what the Voting Rights Act is in place to prevent."

Critics went beyond assailing the decision at hand to assert that the court has become political.

"I know the court likes to say it's not partisan, that it's apolitical, but this seems to be a very political decision," said Democratic Sen. Chris Van Hollen of Maryland. Rep. Hakeem Jeffries, D-N.Y., tweeted that the court majority has "zero legitimacy."

Rep. Barbara Lee, D-Calif., tweeted that the court's action was "Jim Crow 2.0."

Alabama Republicans welcomed the court's decision. "It is great news," said Rep. Mo Brooks who is running for the GOP nomination for Senate. He called the lower court ruling an effort to "usurp" the decisions made by the state's legislature.

The justices will at some later date decide whether the map produced by the state violates the voting rights law, a case that could call into question "decades of this Court's precedent" about Section 2 of the act, Justice Elena Kagan wrote in dissent. Section 2 prohibits racial and other discrimination in voting

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procedures.

Voting advocates see the arguments ahead as a showdown over voting rights they say are being slowly but methodically altered by the Roberts court.

The Supreme Court in the Shelby decision did away with the preclearance formula under Section 5 of the Voting Rights Act. And last summer, the conservative majority in *Bronvich vs. the Democratic National Committee* upheld voting limits in an Arizona case concerning early ballots that a lower court had found discriminatory under Section 2.

With the Alabama case, the court is wading further into Section 2 limits over redistricting maps.

"It's concerning," said Davin Rosborough, a senior staff attorney at the ACLU voting rights project.

Alabama Democratic Party Chairman Chris England, who is a member of the Alabama Legislature from Tuscaloosa, said he fears the Supreme Court's action will reverberate and embolden other GOP-controlled states.

"If this was the epicenter of the earthquake, the tremors are going to be felt in state legislatures, city councils and county commissions — all of which are currently going through some form of redistricting right now," said England.

EXPLAINER: All those flips and twists on Olympic halfpipe

By EDDIE PELLIS AP National Writer

ZHANGJIAKOU, China (AP) — Australian snowboarder Scotty James calls the process of perfecting his signature trick on the halfpipe akin to a right-handed person "trying to write a thesis with your left hand."

Impossible? No. Extremely difficult? Yes.

That goes for pretty much any trick that might be good for a medal on the Olympic halfpipe. The women's final is Thursday and the men's final is Friday.

Chloe Kim made it through Wednesday's qualifying round and is a heavy favorite to capture her second straight gold medal in the women's event. Three-time champion Shaun White, competing in his last contest, is an underdog.

That's in large part because James and a stable of Japanese riders, including two-time silver medalist Ayumu Hirano, have a jump that, only a year ago, seemed like little more than a dream, even for the best of the best.

A look at that trick, along with a few other key things to know before they start flipping for medals on the halfpipe:

TRIPLE CORK: This has been the game-changer in men's halfpipe this winter. The ironic part is that White started working on it in 2013 but abandoned it because he felt it was too dangerous and the risk wasn't worth the reward.

A rider gathers speed up the side of the halfpipe and makes what are essentially three head-over-heels spins while twisting above the pipe.

"With the tricks that have preceded this one, there's usually a way of getting out of it if it goes wrong," American Taylor Gold said. "With this one, there's really no way of getting out of it."

Hirano has landed the trick twice in competition this season, only to fall on his next jump. The halfpipe final is a three-run contest and only the best score counts. It's common for competitors to put down "safety runs" at the start — a run with their 'B-plus' material that can deliver a potentially meet-winning score — then bring out the big guns at the end, only if they need them.

James has also been working on a triple and White says he's "not going to take it off the table." But there are other tricks that could also make a difference.

SWITCH BACKSIDE DOUBLE CORK 1260: One thing that makes it tough for the average fan to appreciate the difficulty of some snowboard tricks is that, unlike, say, in skiing, it's often hard to tell if a rider is going forward or backward.

The starting point on James' signature trick is that he is riding "switch," or backward, which means leading with his right foot. And flipping backward, too. For the first part of this trick, riders can't really see

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the landing area they're trying to hit.

At the last Olympics, where James took the bronze medal, he was convinced the trick didn't get enough love from the judges. He said he's noticed this season that "switch," or backward, riding seems to be getting more credit.

THE 1440: The number put in front of a spin is equal to the total number of degrees of rotation the rider puts in. It's a combination of head-over-heels flips and sideways twists.

Iouri Podlodtchikov, the "I-Pod," won the 2014 Olympics with the YOLO — "You Only Live Once" — a first-of-its-kind trick with 1440 degrees of rotation. In 2018, White and Hirano both landed back-to-back 1440s — one riding forward, the other riding backward. It was the first time White had landed two like that, and he edged out Hirano for his third gold medal.

CHLOE'S GOAL: Kim separates herself by being able to sky higher than any of the other women in the halfpipe. She capped off her victory at the last Olympics with back-to-back 1080-degree spins — a combination no woman had ever landed in a halfpipe.

She has been very secretive about her plans for this year, but she offered a small hint as to what might be coming in Thursday's final. Spoiler alert: The holy grail of riding is to be able to execute tricks in all four directions — forward front flip, forward back flip, backward front flip (called a "cab" jump) and backward back flip (See above on James).

"That's the way I want to push snowboarding is by really encouraging people to be a good all-around snowboarder and be able to spin all four ways," Kim said. "That's my goal. I'm working on it and I'm really excited to show you guys."

MADDIE'S TAKE: If Kim were to have an off day, then American Maddie Mastro might have been the one to scoop up the gold. She's been working on a frontside, double-cork 1080, an insanely difficult trick that involves two head-over-heels flips with one full twist. But Mastro finished 13th in qualifying and failed to advance to the final.

Still, maybe we'll see it: Kim has had this trick in her bag, too, but nobody has landed it in a competition.

FOR PURISTS: American Taylor Gold is a longshot, in part because he's more invested in the style of snowboarding than massive tricks. This doesn't always win medals, but it does win the hearts of snowboard purists.

So, watch Gold perform his double Michalchuk 1080 — a trick named after Canadian snowboarder Michael Michalchuk but also known as a "Chuck Taylor," an homage to the throwback Converse sneakers.

It's a double backflip off the back wall with one horizontal spin mixed in. When Gold is on, he grabs the board with both hands. It will not look as spectacular as some of the tricks on the halfpipe. But ask any rider who knows: They'll tell you it's a beauty.

Emhoff whisked from Black history event after bomb threat

By DARLENE SUPERVILLE Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Doug Emhoff, the husband of Vice President Kamala Harris, was whisked out of an event Tuesday at a Washington high school by Secret Service agents following a bomb threat.

Emhoff was at Dunbar High School to help commemorate Black History Month and was in the school's museum for a few minutes when a member of his security detail approached him saying, "We have to go." Emhoff was hustled out into his waiting motorcade and whisked away.

An overhead announcement then instructed students and teachers to "evacuate the building."

District of Columbia Public Schools spokesperson Enrique Gutierrez, who was at Dunbar for Emhoff's appearance, said there had been a bomb threat.

The U.S. Secret Service said in a statement later Tuesday that "at this time there is no information to indicate the threat was directed toward our protectee," meaning Emhoff.

"This afternoon, the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) responded to a bomb threat at Dunbar High School," Gutierrez said afterward in a formal emailed statement. "All students and visitors were safely evacuated in accordance with DC Public Schools protocols and given the time of the incident, students

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were then dismissed for the school day.”

Emhoff spokesperson Katie Peters said the school had alerted the Secret Service about what she said was a “security incident or a report of a potential security incident.”

“U.S. Secret Service was made aware of a security threat at a school where the @SecondGentleman was meeting with students and faculty,” Peters added in a later tweet. “Mr. Emhoff is safe and the school has been evacuated. We are grateful to Secret Service and D.C. Police for their work.”

The threat came in a phone call to the front desk announcing there was a bomb inside and giving people 10 minutes to leave, Executive Assistant Police Chief Ashan Benedict said. The information was passed along to the Secret Service, prompting Emhoff to be moved out of the area, he said.

Police used bomb technicians and dogs to search the building and concluded there was no threat, Benedict said. Based on a preliminary investigation, it does not appear that the threat is related to a series of threats made to historically Black colleges in the U.S., Benedict said.

After evacuating the building, students, teachers and other staff gathered outside on the high school football field. Students were sent home since it was close to their regular dismissal time and it would have taken several hours for security officials to clear the building, principal Nadine Smith said.

Peters said Emhoff’s event likely would be rescheduled.

Macron: Putin told him Russia won’t escalate Ukraine crisis

By SYLVIE CORBET and DASHA LITVINOVA Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine (AP) — French President Emmanuel Macron said Tuesday that Russian President Vladimir Putin told him that Moscow would not further escalate the Ukraine crisis.

Macron also said it would take time to find a diplomatic solution to the rising tensions, which represent the biggest security crisis between Russia and the West since the Cold War.

His remarks on a visit to Kyiv came as the Kremlin denied reports that he and Putin struck a deal on de-escalating the crisis. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said that “in the current situation, Moscow and Paris can’t be reaching any deals.”

Macron met with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy amid mounting fears of a Russian invasion. Moscow has massed over 100,000 troops near Ukraine’s borders, but insists it has no plans to attack.

The Kremlin wants guarantees from the West that NATO will not accept Ukraine and other former Soviet nations as members, that it halt weapon deployments there and roll back its forces from Eastern Europe — demands the U.S. and NATO reject as nonstarters.

At a news conference after meeting Zelenskyy, Macron said Putin told him during their more than five-hour session Monday that “he won’t be initiating an escalation. I think it is important.”

According to the French president, Putin also said there won’t be any Russian “permanent (military) base” or “deployment” in Belarus, where Russia had sent a large number of troops for war games.

Peskov said withdrawing Russian troops from Belarus after the maneuvers was the plan all along.

Zelenskyy said he would welcome concrete steps from Putin for de-escalation, adding he didn’t “trust words in general.”

Macron also sought to temper expectations.

“Let’s not be naive,” he said. “Since the beginning of the crisis, France hasn’t been inclined to exaggerate, but at the same time, I don’t believe this crisis can be settled in a few hours, through discussions”

Zelenskyy called his talks with Macron “very fruitful.”

“We have a common view with President Macron on threats and challenges to the security of Ukraine, of the whole of Europe, of the world in general,” Zelenskyy said.

He said France was giving 1.2 billion euros (\$1.3 billion) in financial aid to Ukraine and helping restore infrastructure in the war-ravaged east of the country.

Western leaders in recent weeks have engaged in high-level talks, and more are planned against the backdrop of military drills in Russia and Belarus. On Tuesday, the Russian Defense Ministry said that six amphibious landing ships were moving from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea for exercises and two

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Tu-22M3 long-range nuclear capable bombers flew another patrol over Belarus.

Macron said he had not expected Putin to make any "gestures" Monday, saying his objective was to "prevent an escalation and open new perspectives. ... That objective is met."

Macron said Putin "set a collective trap" by initiating the exchange of documents with the U.S. Moscow submitted its demands to Washington in the form of draft agreements that were made public, and insisted on a written response, which was then leaked.

"In the history of diplomacy, there was never a crisis that has been settled by exchanges of letters which are to be made public afterward," he said, adding that's why he decided to go to Moscow for direct talks.

Macron later flew to Berlin, where he briefed Polish President Andrzej Duda and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz, who said their stance was unified, with a joint goal "to prevent a war in Europe."

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres was pleased to see the high level of diplomatic activity, spokesman Stephane Dujarric said. "The secretary-general could not be clearer in the need to increase diplomatic activity to avoid any sort of escalation," Dujarric said.

Putin said after Monday's meeting that the U.S. and NATO ignored Moscow's demands, but signaled readiness to continue talking. He also reiterated a warning that NATO membership for Ukraine could trigger a war between Russia and the alliance should Kyiv try to retake the Crimean Peninsula, which Moscow annexed in 2014.

NATO, U.S. and European leaders reject the demands that they say challenge NATO's core principles, like shutting the door to Ukraine or other countries that might seek membership; but they have offered to discuss other Russian security concerns in Europe.

U.S. President Joe Biden has said any prospect of Ukraine entering NATO "in the near term is not very likely," but he and other alliance members and NATO itself refuse to rule out Ukraine's future entry.

Biden met Monday with Scholz, who also will travel to Kyiv and Moscow on Feb. 14-15. They threatened Russia with grave consequences if it invaded, and Biden vowed that the Nord Stream 2 Russia-to-Germany gas pipeline, which has been completed but is not yet operating, will be blocked. Such a move would hurt Russia economically but also cause energy supply problems for Germany.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, in an article in the Times of London, also urged allies to finalize heavy economic sanctions that would take effect if Russia crosses into Ukraine. He said the U.K. is ready to bolster NATO forces in Latvia and Estonia as he prepared to meet the Lithuanian prime minister in London to show support for the Baltic nations.

Johnson said he was considering dispatching RAF Typhoon fighters and Royal Navy warships to southeastern Europe. Britain said Monday it is sending 350 troops to Poland to bolster NATO's eastern flank. It already has sent anti-tank weapons to Ukraine.

More than 100 U.S. military personnel arrived in Romania ahead of a deployment of about 1,000 NATO troops expected in the country in the coming days, Romania's Defense Minister Vasile Dincu said.

U.S. officials have said that about 1,000 alliance troops will be sent from Germany to Romania, a NATO member since 2004. Romania borders Ukraine to the north. About 1,700 U.S. soldiers from the 82nd Airborne are also going to Poland.

U.S. officials have portrayed the threat of an invasion of Ukraine as imminent — warnings Moscow has scoffed at, accusing Washington of fueling tensions.

Russia and Ukraine have been locked in a bitter conflict since 2014, when Ukraine's Kremlin-friendly president was ousted, Moscow annexed Crimea and then backed a separatist insurgency in the east of the country. The fighting between Russia-backed rebels and Ukrainian forces has killed over 14,000 people.

In 2015, France and Germany helped broker a peace deal, known as the Minsk agreements, that ended large-scale hostilities but failed to bring a political settlement of the conflict. The Kremlin has repeatedly accused Kyiv of sabotaging the deal, and Ukrainian officials in recent weeks said that implementing it would hurt Ukraine.

After meeting Macron, Putin said without elaboration that some of the French president's proposals could serve as a basis for a settlement of the separatist conflict, adding that they agreed to speak by phone

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after Macron's visit to Kyiv.

Peskov said such a call would take place "in the nearest future."

Macron said both Putin and Zelenskyy confirmed they were willing to implement the Minsk agreements — "the only path allowing to build peace ... and find a sustainable political solution."

Macron also said the presidential advisers of France, Germany, Russia and Ukraine will meet Thursday in Berlin on the next steps. "It will take time to get results," he said.

Zelenskyy was mum on where Ukraine stands on implementing the Minsk agreements and whether he assured Macron that Kyiv is committed to do so, saying only that his country views Thursday's meeting "very positively" and hoped for a subsequent meeting by the four leaders.

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, visiting the front line in eastern Ukraine's Donbas region, said she wanted "to get an impression of what it means that we still have war in the middle of Europe."

Germany has given Ukraine about 1.8 billion euros in aid since 2014, part of which is helping those displaced by fighting.

House OKs bill easing budget strains on Postal Service

By ALAN FRAM Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Congress would lift onerous budget requirements that have helped push the Postal Service deeply into debt and would require it to continue delivering mail six days per week under bipartisan legislation the House approved Tuesday.

The election-year bill, coming at a time of widespread complaints about slower mail service, would also require the Postal Service to display online how efficiently it delivers mail to communities.

The Postal Service is supposed to sustain itself with postage sales and other services, but has suffered 14 straight years of losses. The reasons include growing workers' compensation and benefit costs plus steady declines in mail volume, even as it delivers to 1 million additional locations every year.

Postal Service officials have said without congressional action, it would run out of cash by 2024, a frequent warning from the service. It has estimated it will lose \$160 billion over the coming decade.

Those pressures have brought the two parties together for a measure aimed at helping the Postal Service, its employees, businesses that use it and disgruntled voters who rely on it for delivery of prescription drugs, checks and other packages. Tuesday's vote was 342-92, a rare show of partisan agreement, with all Democrats and most Republicans backing it.

Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., chairwoman of the House Oversight and Reform Committee, said the Postal Service "provides service to every American, no matter where they live, binding us together in a way no other organization does."

Rep. James Comer of Kentucky, that committee's top Republican, said "the days of letters alone driving Postal Service revenue are not coming back." The bill, he said, will "help it succeed into the 21st century."

Sen. Gary Peters, D-Mich., chairman of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, said he expects his chamber to "move quickly" on the measure. Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said he's planning a vote before a recess that starts after next week. The bill has 14 GOP sponsors and, with strong Democratic support expected, seems on track to gain the 60 votes most bills need for Senate passage.

Over the years, some lawmakers have wanted to impose tougher requirements for faster service by the Postal Service, while others have favored privatizing some services. The compromise omits controversial proposals.

There has been talk over the years of reducing deliveries to five days per week, which could save more than \$1 billion annually, according to the Government Accountability Office, the accounting agency of Congress. That idea has proven politically toxic and has not been pursued.

The bill would also require the Postal Service to set up an online "dashboard" that would be searchable by zip code to show how long it takes to deliver letters and packages.

The measure is supported by President Joe Biden, the Postal Service, postal worker unions, industries

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that use the service and others.

Postmaster General Louis DeJoy said the bill would help "provide the American people with the delivery service they expect and deserve." Mark Dimondstein, president of the American Postal Workers Union, called the bill "outstanding" in an interview.

One of the bill's few critics was Rep. Darrell Issa, R-Calif., who said its changes fell short.

"It has failed to make a profit, it has failed the American people, and everyone who has a mailbox knows it," he said.

The bill would end a requirement that the Postal Service finance, in advance, health care benefits for current and retired workers for the next 75 years. That obligation, which private companies and federal agencies do not face, was imposed in 2006. That ended up being the year that the Postal Service's mail volume peaked and its financial fortunes steadily worsened.

The Postal Service hasn't made those payments since 2012. Overall it faces unpaid obligations of \$63 billion, according to its most recent annual report. The bill forgives much of that debt.

Instead of those obligations, the Postal Service would pay current retirees' actual health care costs that aren't covered by Medicare, the federal health insurance program for older people.

The legislation would also require future Postal Service retirees to enroll in Medicare, which only about 3 in 4 do now. The shift would save the Postal Service money by having Medicare cover much of its costs.

Proponents say the changes would save tens of billions of dollars over the next decade.

Criticism of the Postal Service peaked in 2020, when President Donald Trump appointed DeJoy as postmaster general and Democrats accused him of slowing service to undermine the election. DeJoy, a major GOP donor, has proposed a 10-year plan to stabilize the service's finances with steps like additional mail slowdowns, cutting some offices' hours and perhaps higher rates.

The Postal Service had a successful 2021 holiday season, delivering 97% of shipments on time during two weeks in December, according to ShipMatrix, which analyzes shipping package data. In 2020 more than a third of first-class mail was late by Christmas Day.

The Postal Service hit its peak of mail volume in 2006, when it delivered 213 billion pieces of mail. Last year that figure was 129 billion, according to Postal Service figures.

Since the Postal Service has its own finance system, it is not counted as part of the federal budget. The nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office said the bill would save the government \$1 billion over the next 10 years.

That is largely because retirees' prescription drug expenses under Medicare would be covered by required discounts from pharmaceutical makers.

Money for nothing: Cities' crypto push draws fans, critics

By THALIA BEATY undefined

NEW YORK (AP) — A small group of cryptocurrency enthusiasts has an offer that they're hoping U.S. cities can't refuse.

The group City Coins is asking Miami and New York to accept the equivalent of millions of dollars in a new cryptocurrency, and at least some of the money is real: Last week, Miami Mayor Francis Suarez announced that City Coins had transferred \$5.25 million to the city.

The dizzying proposal has leaders in other cities, like Philadelphia and Dearborn, Michigan, clamoring to get in on a deal they hope might patch budgets, similar to how some cities and states had hoped lotteries or legalized gambling would be a solution to financial problems.

That hype also benefits people who get in early on the new currencies, which is part of what fuels arguments that cryptocurrency startups too closely resemble pyramid schemes.

When Suarez announced in November that his city would partner with the group, one of its leaders, Patrick Stanley, told news outlet and cryptocurrency price index company CoinDesk TV that Suarez "just turned his city into an oil producing country that gives Bitcoin yield to its citizens, like that is incredible."

That hasn't happened and there are a lot of hurdles to clear, both legal and technological, before it could.

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For starters, the value of cryptocurrencies can fluctuate dramatically. The popular cryptocurrency Bitcoin lost close to half its value between November and the end of January, falling from a peak of \$67,500 to just above \$35,000; it has since bounced back a bit to around \$43,000. The anonymity of cryptocurrencies also makes them popular with criminals. Scams are also plentiful in the world of cryptocurrency trading.

The group's proposal expands on the blockchain technology that supports Bitcoin and other cryptocurrencies. People who want to support the city of Miami can invest in Miami Coin (as can anyone else); part of their investment is then funneled to the city. The rest is divided up among other investors in Miami Coin. The way the system is designed favors people who make bigger investments and those who get in early.

If it goes according to plan, prices of the new cryptocurrency go up and the city gets free money.

Participants in the City Coins project hope that Miami residents will eventually be able to hold their identification, pay taxes or vote using the blockchain technology Miami Coin is built on -- thereby increasing the coins' value. The contract that City Coins signed with Miami does not mention any of these possibilities.

The proposed arrangement is unusual from an economic development perspective as well, in part because City Coins says it is not a company but rather a kind of collective. Its website does not list any employees or contact information besides a link to the messaging app Discord. It is registered in Delaware as a nonprofit organization. Online records show it is not registered in Florida.

Reached on Discord, community lead Andre Serrano estimated that the number of people involved in City Coins numbers between 10,000-15,000, though he's basing that on City Coins' Twitter followers and the people who have joined the Discord chat.

In a statement, Suarez said the city cannot legally hold cryptocurrencies. So for now, he said, "City Coins acts as a custodian of Miami's rewards until they are converted into dollars and formally gifted to the city," which the first \$5.25 million was on Feb. 2.

For scale, the city of Miami's operating budget adopted in October was more than \$1.3 billion.

"We have a lot of ideas for how we can spend the money and we fully intend to listen to the community's input as to how to deploy the funds," Suarez said in a statement, suggesting education was a priority.

To John Forrer, a research professor at George Washington's public policy school, the unprecedented arrangement presents potential pitfalls for any municipality that signs up.

"There is so much uncertainty and it's so brand new, are you sure you've investigated all of the risks and that you have a way of handling them whatever they are?" he said, adding it's important the city can hold the outside party accountable if needed.

In the contract City Coins signed with the Miami, Stanley is listed as the point of contact with an address at a Los Angeles strip mall. He has appeared alongside Suarez in interviews about Miami Coin where he is identified as the community lead for City Coins. He did not reply to questions about the structure and organization of City Coins. In public statements, Stanley has said he formerly worked with Stacks, the cryptocurrency ecosystem that City Coins is built on.

Liat Shetret, director of regulatory affairs and compliance policy at the risk analysis firm Solidus Labs, said cities may want to consider blockchain technology to increase financial transparency. But she's worried that politicians are hawking cryptocurrencies as an attention-getting gimmick without preparing their cities for dealing with new problems such as money laundering.

The nature of the blockchain means that while it's possible to see which accounts own Miami Coin or are mining it, the real identities of those people are not publicly visible. Currency exchanges ask for basics such as names, addresses and Social Security numbers; it's unclear how much identifying information the coin creators collect. Participants do not need to be residents of Miami.

Neither Suarez's office, Stanley nor the Stacks Foundation replied to questions as to whether any of them had access to the personal information of Miami Coin participants or if they had concerns about the anonymity of the people involved.

"Keeping bad actors off of these platforms is crucial," Shetret said.

While New York's mayor, Eric Adams, has also been a booster of cryptocurrencies, his administration has not yet signed onto the project, despite celebrating the launch of a New York City Coin in November.

Adams' office did not reply to questions about whether the mayor was considering accepting any funds

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from City Coins.

New York residents can't currently buy the New York coin because the lone exchange offering it isn't licensed in the state. "We're optimistic that it'll be approved by midyear," said Larissa Bundziak, a spokesperson for the exchange Okcoin, which started offering the New York coin — to non-New Yorkers — on Jan. 26.

Last week, some City Coins participants expressed disappointment with how the experiment is going so far and argued in a chat room on the Discord app about whether the group should launch cryptocurrencies in new cities or wait for the value of the coins in Miami and New York to prove themselves more.

"Getting a city to claim free money is easy," one participant wrote. "It takes more than that to actually provide value," so that in the long term, there are good reasons for people to participate. ___ Associated Press writer Randall Chase in Dover, Delaware, contributed to this report.

'Power of the Dog' tops Oscar noms with 12; 'Dune' nabs 10

By JAKE COYLE AP Film Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — After a pandemic year that hobbled movie theaters and saw streaming services make new inroads into Hollywood, the Academy Awards put its strongest support Tuesday behind two films made with big-screen grandeur that were also streamed into homes: Jane Campion's gothic western "The Power of the Dog" and Denis Villeneuve's sci-fi epic "Dune."

Netflix's "The Power of the Dog" led nominations to the 94th Academy Awards with 12 nods, including best picture, best director and recognition for all of its top actors: Benedict Cumberbatch, Kirsten Dunst, Jesse Plemons and Kodi Smit-McPhee.

Campion, a nominee for 1993's "The Piano," became the first woman to ever be nominated twice for best director. Last year, Chloé Zhao became just the second woman to ever win the award. Campion's director of photography, Ari Wegner, also became the second woman ever nominated for best cinematography.

"Dune" followed closely behind with 10 nominations spread out largely in the technical categories that rewarded the gargantuan craft of Villeneuve's adaptation of Frank Herbert's 1965 novel, yet unexpectedly bypassed Villeneuve's direction. The Warner Bros. release debuted simultaneously in theaters and — against the strenuous objections of its director — on HBO Max.

With "The Power of the Dog" and "Dune," the nominees for best picture were: "Belfast," "CODA," "Don't Look Up," "Drive My Car," "Licorice Pizza," "King Richard," "Nightmare Alley" and "West Side Story."

No streaming service has ever won best picture, but half of the 10 nominees were released by streamers. This year, the odds may be better than ever that Netflix — which led all studios with 27 nominations — or another service will finally break through.

Apple TV+ notched its first best-picture nomination with the deaf drama "CODA," which also made history as supporting-actor nominee Troy Kotsur became only the second deaf actor ever nominated. (His "CODA" co-star Marlee Matlin was the first.) Netflix backed "The Power of the Dog" and Adam McKay's apocalyptic comedy "Don't Look Up." And both "King Richard" and "Dune" launched on HBO Max. Even the academy for the first time ruled out hard-copy DVD screeners for its members, who instead could watch submissions on the academy's streaming platform.

In pulling from films released in myriad ways, the Oscar nominations reflected the tumult of a movie year that began with many theaters shuttered and ended with Sony Pictures' "Spider-Man: No Way Home" smashing box-office records. While some had urged the Oscars to embrace its most popular blockbusters and return some populism to the awards, Spidey ultimately landed only a single nomination, for visual effects.

A largely virtual awards season added some unpredictability to the nominations. The Oscars, set for March 27, are later than usual. A return to their usual venue, the Dolby Theatre, is planned.

And there were surprises all around. Lady Gaga, star of "House of Gucci," was overlooked in the uber-competitive best actress category. Nominated instead were Jessica Chastain ("The Eyes of Tammy Faye"), Olivia Colman ("The Lost Daughter"), Penélope Cruz ("Parallel Mothers"), Nicole Kidman ("Being the Ricardos") and Kristen Stewart for "Spencer" — whose hopes for her first Oscar nomination were set back

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after she was snubbed by the Screen Actors Guild.

"Drive My Car," Japanese director Ryusuke Hamaguchi's masterful three-hour drama, scored major nominations including best picture, best director and best adapted screenplay. The academy, which in 2020 made Bong Joon Ho's Korean thriller "Parasite" the best picture winner, has drifted overseas in recent years, as more international members have been added to help diversify the organization.

Other underdogs celebrated, too. The small, remote Himalayan country Bhutan received its first Oscar nomination in its first-ever submission: "Lunana: A Yak in the Classroom," for best international film.

In many ways, the nominations kept one foot in Hollywood's past and one in its future. Steven Spielberg, whose "West Side Story" landed seven nominations, became the first filmmaker nominated for best director in six different decades. His 11 best picture nominations are the most ever. Another remake that harkened back to another era of the movie industry, Guillermo del Toro's carnival noir "Nightmare Alley," fared better than expected, scoring a best picture nomination over streaming titles like Netflix's "tick, tick ... Boom!" and Amazon's "Being the Ricardos." No release is more old-school than Paul Thomas Anderson's "Licorice Pizza," nominated for Anderson's direction and screenplay. It has slowly expanded in theaters over the last 10 weeks.

Will Smith, who plays the father of Venus and Serena Williams in "King Richard," notched his third Oscar nomination. Also up for best actor are Cumberbatch, Andrew Garfield ("tick, tick ... Boom!") Javier Bardem ("Being the Ricardos") and Denzel Washington ("The Tragedy of Macbeth"). Washington, a seven-time best-actor nominee, remains the most-nominated Black man ever.

Dunst and Plemons, who have two children together, shared their first nominations.

"I knew I'd have so much more joy if we were both nominated," Dunst, who had once predicted "a lot of shrimps" for "The Power of the Dog," said by phone Tuesday. "It's like a storybook, like a fairytale. It feels very special. I thought, it would be really cute if they did that. I felt like a grandma about it.

The other couple celebrating Tuesday was Bardem and Cruz, whom Dunst granted are "definitely the sexier couple."

"We're pretty fun, though," she added.

Along with Dunst, the nominees for best supporting actress were a trio of first-timers — Jessie Buckley ("The Lost Daughter"), Aunjanue Ellis ("King Richard") and Ariana DeBose, in the "West Side Story" role Rita Moreno won for 1962 — and one veteran: Judi Dench. She earned her eighth Oscar nod for her performance in Kenneth Branagh's black-and-white family drama "Belfast."

"Belfast," which Branagh based on his own childhood, received seven nominations, including best director for Branagh and best supporting actor for Dench's "Belfast" husband, Ciarán Hinds. The film was one of the first shot in Britain after lockdown in 2021.

"We spent hundreds of thousands of pounds on COVID protection," said Branagh. "We relished the opportunity to do this so much. Nobody knew then if there was even going to be a film industry when we were done."

"Ricardos" co-star J.K. Simmons rounded out the best supporting actor category that saw Kotsur make history.

"I feel a bit lighter. This chip is off my shoulder," Kotsur said Tuesday through an interpreter. "It's like a step forward for everyone."

With \$400 million in worldwide ticket sales, "Dune" is the biggest box-office hit in the best-picture race, but McKay's "Don't Look Up" could make the case for being the most-watched nominee. Netflix counts it as its second-most popular movie ever with some 359,790,000 hours watched, according to the company.

"No Time to Die," one of the most successful blockbusters of the pandemic but still a possible money-loser for MGM, came away with three nominations including the sixth Bond theme nominated for best song. The Billie Eilish title-track will have to best Lin-Manuel Miranda's blockbuster "Encanto" soundtrack and its best-song nominee "Dos Oruguitas." Beyoncé also scored her first Oscar nomination for "Be Alive," from "King Richard."

"Encanto" also landed in the best animated feature category which is especially competitive this year.

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The other nominees are Pixar's "Luca," Netflix's "The Mitchells vs. the Machines," Disney's "Raya and the Last Dragon" and "Flee," the first documentary ever nominated in the category. The Danish animated documentary by Jonas Poher Rasmussen, about an Afghan migrant sharing his story for the first time, was also nominated for best documentary and best international film.

Also nominated for best documentary were "Attica," "Ascension," "Writing With Fire" and the category favorite, "Summer of Soul (Or... When the Revolution Could Not Be Televised)." Questlove's documentary chronicles the 1969 Harlem Culture Festival and its long-buried legacy.

"My only intention with this film was to restore history," said Questlove.

Joining "Flee," "Drive My Car" and "Lunana" in the best international film category were Paolo Sorrentino's "The Hand of God" (Italy) and Joachim Trier's Norwegian thirtysomething drama "The Worst Person in the World," which also earned a best original screenplay nomination.

The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences will hope Tuesday's nominees can help lift its ABC telecast, which last year featured a socially distanced ceremony at Los Angeles' Union Station. Ratings plummeted to an all-time low of 9.85 million viewers.

This year, the academy has yet to map out plans for its show, except that it will include a host for the first time since 2018.

Super Bowl 56: A viewer's guide to get you through Sunday

By JOE REEDY AP Sports Writer

The Super Bowl between the Los Angeles Rams and Cincinnati Bengals on Sunday at SoFi Stadium in Inglewood, California, will as usual be the biggest day of sports broadcasting in the United States. But this year might be the biggest of them all since this is the first time the country's biggest sporting event is happening at the same time as the Winter Olympics, one of the biggest events in the world.

Here are some things to know about the game as well as Super Bowl-related programming on other networks:

WHICH NETWORK HAS THIS YEAR'S SUPER BOWL?

This marks the 20th Super Bowl broadcast for NBC, which is second among all networks. CBS leads with 21 followed by NBC, Fox (9) and ABC (7).

Of the seven previous Super Bowls held in Los Angeles, NBC has aired four, including the last one in 1993 when Dallas beat Buffalo. CBS and NBC both aired the first Super Bowl, which was at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum.

HOW DID NBC GET THIS YEAR'S GAME?

CBS originally had the game this year under the league's rotation between CBS, NBC and FOX, but NBC and CBS agreed in 2019 to trade spots. CBS carried last year's Super Bowl from Tampa instead of NBC. CBS didn't want to compete against the Olympics while NBC could market two major events to advertisers.

WHAT IS NBC'S SCHEDULE FOR SUNDAY?

All times are Eastern:

8 a.m.: 2022 Winter Olympics

Noon: NFL Films "Road to the Super Bowl"

1 p.m.: Super Bowl Pregame Show

6:30 p.m.: Super Bowl kickoff

10:45 p.m. : Winter Olympics Primetime

12 a.m.: Late Local News (West coast will remain with Olympics)

12:30 a.m.: Winter Olympics Prime Plus

WHO ARE THE ANNOUNCERS FOR NBC?

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Al Michaels and Cris Collinsworth team up for their fourth Super Bowl. Michaels is handling the play by play for the 11th time, which ties him with the late Pat Summerall. This is Michaels' fifth Super Bowl for NBC after his first six were with ABC. Collinsworth, who played eight seasons for the Bengals and appeared in both of their previous Super Bowl trips, will be an analyst for the fifth time. His first was with Fox for the 2005 game between Philadelphia and New England.

Rules analyst Terry McAulay, who refereed three Super Bowls, and sideline reporter Kathryn Tappen are Super Bowl TV rookies. Sideline reporter Michele Tafoya is doing her fifth Super Bowl in what is her final appearance for NBC.

HOW MANY CAMERAS WILL NBC USE FOR THE SUPER BOWL?

Executive producer Fred Gaudelli didn't want to give exact numbers, but NBC had a total of 106 for its last Super Bowl four years ago in Minneapolis. CBS had 120 last year in Tampa. For the first Super Bowl at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum in 1967, NBC had 11 cameras.

Gaudelli did say that "in terms of cameras that shoot the game, that actually shoot the field and the play and the players — we'll probably have 40 cameras." All those cameras will be recorded and can be used for replay.

NBC will also be debuting a brand-new graphic look, a new score bug, as well as utilizing a lot of virtual reality and augmented reality graphics.

Gaudelli and director Drew Esocoff are working their seventh Super Bowl together and fifth on NBC. Their first two were with ABC.

THE OLYMPICS HOST IS ALSO DOING THE SUPER BOWL PREGAME SHOW?

Yes. Mike Tirico is doing double duty. He left Beijing on Monday night to fly to Stamford, Connecticut, to host Olympics coverage Wednesday and Thursday before going to Los Angeles on Friday through Sunday.

Tirico will host the Super Bowl pregame and postgame presentation of the Vince Lombardi Trophy before going to a set outside SoFi Stadium to host Sunday night's Olympics coverage.

WHAT IF I ONLY WANT TO WATCH THE HALFTIME SHOW?

The first half of a normal NFL game usually takes 90 minutes, but if there are a lot of running plays, it could be done in 1 hour, 10 minutes.

With kickoff at 6:30 p.m. EST, it would probably be a good idea to tune in around 7:40 p.m. so you don't miss Dr. Dre, Snoop Dogg, Eminem, Mary J. Blige, and Kendrick Lamar.

HOW CAN I WATCH THE GAME IF I AM A CORD CUTTER?

NBC's Peacock streaming service will have the game for OTT devices and services, smart TVs and mobile devices. It will also be available for free on the NFL website/apps as well as Yahoo Sports. DirecTV Stream, Sling TV, Hulu with Live TV, YouTube TV and fuboTV also have NBC.

WHO HAS THE SPANISH LANGUAGE BROADCAST?

Telemundo will be the first Spanish-language broadcast network to air the Super Bowl. The pregame show begins at 5 p.m. EST with Miguel Gurwitz, Ana Jurka, Karim Mendiburu and special guest Rolando Cantu, a former Arizona Cardinals offensive lineman. The game will be called by Carlos Mauricio Ramirez with Jorge Andres providing analysis.

WILL THE GAME BE ON RADIO?

Sirius XM Satellite Radio will have four channels dedicated to the game — the Westwood One national feed, a Spanish-language channel and the Rams and Bengals broadcasts.

Hospitals begin to limp out of the latest COVID-19 surge

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By HEATHER HOLLINGSWORTH and DAVE KOLPACK Associated Press

As omicron numbers drop at Denver Health, Dr. Anuj Mehta is reminded of the scene in the 1980 comedy "The Blues Brothers" when John Belushi and Dan Aykroyd pile out of a battered car after a police chase. Suddenly, all the doors pop off the hinges, the front wheels fall off and smoke pours from the engine.

"And that's my fear," said Mehta, a pulmonary and critical care physician. "I'm worried that as soon as we stop, everything's just going to fall apart."

Across the U.S., the number of people in the hospital with COVID-19 has tumbled more than 28% over the past three weeks to about 105,000 on average, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But the ebbing of the omicron surge has left in its wake postponed surgeries, exhausted staff members and uncertainty over whether this is the last big wave or whether another one lies ahead.

"What we want to see is that the omicron surge continues to decrease, that we don't see another variant of concern emerge, that we start to come out of the other side of this," said Dr. Chris Beyrer, an epidemiologist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

But he added: "We've been proven wrong twice already, with delta and omicron. So that adds to people's anxiety and uncertainty and sense of like 'When does this end?'"

Another reason for anxiety: COVID-19 hospitalizations aren't even all that low. They are at a level seen in January 2021, amid last winter's surge.

Hospitals limped through the omicron surge with workforces that already were depleted after many staff members quit the profession. The remaining health care workers got sick in droves. In some hospitals, office staff was assigned to help make beds.

Now, many hospitals are still in crisis mode, as they work to reschedule people whose hip replacements and even cancer and brain surgeries were put off during the omicron crisis to free up bed space and nurses to care for COVID-19 patients.

Even in North Dakota, which has consistently ranked near the top in the number of COVID-19 cases relative to the population, hospitals have seen a dramatic drop in virus patients. However, executives at Dakotas-based Sanford Health said their hospitals are still full.

"We've been running hard for a couple years here now, but I am not sure that I sense relief," said Dr. Doug Griffin, a vice president and medical officer for Sanford in Fargo, North Dakota. "Most of our caregivers are giving care to other patients. We still have some very, very sick people coming in for all sorts of reasons."

At the Cleveland Clinic's 13 Ohio hospitals, the number of patients with COVID-19 has fallen to 280, down from an all-time pandemic high of around 1,200. Surgeries began to be delayed at the end of December, and the situation is just now returning to normal, said Dr. Raed Dweik, head of the system's respiratory institute.

The hope, he said, is that this is the last big surge and that the hospitals can begin to catch up.

"We've had our hopes dashed before that. 'Oh, this is the end of the pandemic and this virus,'" he said. "Every time we we say something like this, it's kind of laughed at us, and it comes back with a new variant."

Dr. Craig Spencer, a New York City emergency room physician, tweeted a week ago: "Just worked 12 hours in the ER on a busy Monday and didn't have a single Covid patient. Not one. This ain't over. But it's a helluva lot better than even just a few weeks ago."

Spencer said Tuesday that he had another COVID-free shift during the overnight hours Friday and Saturday.

"I am getting a somewhat random sample, of course, but just compared to a month ago, it's a complete sea change, which is great," he said.

Mary Turner, who is president of the Minnesota Nurses Association and works as a COVID-19 ICU nurse, said patient numbers remain high because "of all the other people who didn't go to their appointments or their follow-ups who are coming in with all the other conditions."

If there is any relief, Turner said, it's being able to walk into a patient's room without having to wear full protective gear.

"It's like heaven" to walk in and just don a pair of gloves, she said.

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At the eight-hospital Beaumont Health system in Michigan, the number of COVID-19 patients fell to 250 on Tuesday, down from last month's omicron peak of 851.

Dr. Justin Skrzyński, an internal medicine physician who runs a COVID-19 floor at Beaumont Health's hospital in Royal Oak, said patient care is about 90% back to normal and he finds reason for optimism, noting that the combination of vaccinations and immunity from infections should provide some protection.

But he noted: "I think there needs to be a lot of awareness of how much a lot of health care has degenerated."

He said nurses subjected to abuse from patients have left the profession in large numbers. Costs have risen.

"Right now, there's so much that we're doing to prop up the health care system financially," he said, noting the billions of dollars that the federal stimulus package provided to help hospitals deal with the pandemic. "Unfortunately, once the dust settles, I think all these things are going to come due."

Joe Rogan dispute shows Spotify limits of being hands off

By DAVID BAUDER AP Media Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — Like Facebook and Twitter, Spotify is learning the limits of deflecting responsibility for what is said on its platform.

Podcasting has sprouted as an industry with few standards about policing offensive or misleading content. That has left Spotify trying to figure out how to keep podcaster Joe Rogan's millions of devoted fans happy without further alienating artists and listeners angry about him amplifying vaccine skeptics and using racial slurs.

Spotify wants to be viewed as a technology platform that has limited liability for the material that others create and stream through its service — a position shared by many social-media companies. But experts say that is difficult to defend after Spotify reportedly spent \$100 million to become the sole distributor of "The Joe Rogan Experience."

"They are acting like they should get treated as a platform -- when they are acting like a media company," said Jennifer Grygiel, a Syracuse University communications professor and an expert on social media. "You can't have it every way you want."

In an effort to expand scrutiny beyond musicians and listeners, folk-rock singer Neil Young urged Spotify employees late Monday to quit "before it eats up your soul." Last week, Young pulled his music from Spotify after a group of doctors called out Rogan for his interview of a man who has spread COVID-19 misinformation.

After musician India.Arie revealed last week on Instagram that Rogan had repeatedly used the N-word, he apologized, and Spotify pulled dozens of past episodes from circulation. But Spotify's CEO, Daniel Ek, has said that silencing him is not the answer.

Besides, Ek said in a letter to employees late Sunday, Spotify is not the publisher of "The Joe Rogan Experience."

"But perception due to our exclusive license implies otherwise," Ek said. "So I've been wrestling with how this perception squares with our values."

As it does with music streaming, Spotify dominates podcasting. It has 44% of all podcast user market share — Apple, Amazon and Google are each less than half its size, according to Midia Research.

Podcast platforms have long struggled to moderate the shows broadcast on them. They have not followed the steps of other tech companies like Facebook or Twitter that attempt to detect, fact-check and label misleading or false information.

Meta, which owns Facebook, has enlisted the help of journalists, academics, thousands of contract employees and AI technology to detect misinformation. Even then, misinformation around politics and COVID-19 find big audiences in Facebook groups, on WhatsApp messages and Instagram.

Major podcast companies have largely escaped scrutiny about misinformation. Instead, they have taken down individual podcasts that get bad press for violating stated policies or spreading conspiracy theories.

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That has resulted in a messy patchwork of shows that have been banned on some tech platforms but are readily available elsewhere.

Conspiracy theorist Alex Jones is banned from Apple, Spotify, YouTube and Facebook — but not Google Podcasts.

Spotify, YouTube and Twitter kicked off Steve Bannon after he suggested Dr. Anthony Fauci should be beheaded. But you can still hear Bannon on Apple Podcasts.

Podcasts are difficult to moderate, said Valerie Wirtschafter, a data analyst at the Brookings Institute who has researched misinformation on the popular ones. They can run anywhere from 20 minutes to hours, and there are millions of episodes about everything from serial killers to cooking to politics.

“That is an unwieldy world,” Wirtschafter said.

Spotify has said that it takes down podcasts that violate its policies against hate speech and break laws. The company publicly revealed its guidelines for the first time following questions raised by Young’s action, and said it would add content advisories regarding COVID-19.

When companies start paying content creators, as Spotify does with Rogan and as other platforms do with other high-profile influencers, that can change the game. Facebook last summer announced a \$1 billion fund for creators, wading further into “media company” territory even as it tries to shed that moniker.

Spotify “had to make a decision that other social media companies are well acquainted with,” said Jared Schroeder, a First Amendment scholar and associate professor at Southern Methodist University. “They were drawn into the war. I don’t know if there’s any going back for them.”

Rogan has particular appeal to conservative listeners, but by no means exclusively so. He endorsed Bernie Sanders for president. Like another popular media figure, Fox News’ Tucker Carlson, he often portrays himself as someone who is simply asking uncomfortable questions — and he’s most upsetting to people who don’t listen to him regularly.

Spotify is caught between artists and customers upset enough by Rogan’s language to quit the service, and the many fans who would claim him as a victim of “cancel culture” if the company were to make the expensive decision to cut him loose.

“Ultimately, this comes down to the issue of political polarization and how the big tech is caught up in the country’s culture wars,” said Weiai Xu, a communication professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.

Spotify risks sending a chilling message to other podcasters that the company won’t have their back if it backs away from Rogan, besides putting a severe dent in its business plan.

“If Spotify ends up having to backtrack on Joe Rogan there’s a risk it’ll be seen as backtracking on podcasts,” said Mark Mulligan, managing director of Midia Research.

Spotify’s Ek said it could take months to know the impact of the controversy on the company. The market research firm Forrester polled people on Feb. 1 and found that most Spotify users had no intention of cancelling their subscription, but there were many who considered it.

Super Bowl’s return provides boost to hard-hit LA businesses

By ALEX VEIGA AP Business Writer

LOS ANGELES (AP) — The return of the Super Bowl to the L.A. area after a nearly 30-year absence is already a big victory for local small business owners like Kyndra McCrary.

Her catering company got hired to provide food for performers working the Super Bowl, and for an NFL business networking event last week.

The jobs are a financial shot in the arm for McCrary, whose business is still working its way back to its pre-pandemic normal. Beyond this weekend, McCrary says she’s hoping that the Super Bowl work will lead to bigger and better jobs.

“I think there will be a lasting impact because people who will get to try our food will remember us,” said McCrary, 40.

The Super Bowl can inject millions of dollars into a local economy, benefiting businesses beyond those

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hired to help stage the event.

An analysis paid for by the Los Angeles Sports & Entertainment Commission projected Sunday's game will generate between \$234 million and \$477 million for the region's economy. That includes up to \$22 million in tax revenue and between 2,200 to 4,700 new jobs, according to the report by Micronomics, an economic research and consulting firm.

Many of the projected new jobs are expected to be in the event-production and hospitality sectors — areas of the local economy among the hardest hit by the pandemic. More than half are expected to be positions in hotels, restaurants and transportation, among others, the analysis found.

"A lot of the recovery that's yet to take place is still in service and tourism-related industries," said Shannon Sedgwick, director of research at the nonprofit Los Angeles County Economic Development. "Having an event like the Super Bowl come to the region and bringing back individuals, with their visitor spending is only going to have a positive economic benefit for the region."

Los Angeles County, home to roughly 10 million people, lost almost 773,000 jobs between March and April 2020, the early weeks of the pandemic. The region's unemployment rate surged from a pre-pandemic 4.5% to 18.8% by May 2020.

Hiring has picked up in the months since, as pandemic lockdowns eased. As of December 2021, the county's unemployment rate was 6.2%.

"We're moving closer to what we were, but we're not there yet," Sedgwick said.

The L.A. area has hosted the Super Bowl seven times, beginning with Super Bowl I in 1967 between the Green Bay Packers and Kansas City Chiefs. Most of the games have been held at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena, including the most recent one, the Dallas Cowboys' 52-17 rout of the Buffalo Bills in 1993's Super Bowl XXVII. This week's game between the Cincinnati Bengals and the Los Angeles Rams is taking place in SoFi Stadium, which opened in September 2020 in Inglewood.

Much of the L.A. region's economy has changed in the decades since it last played Super Bowl host. The area has shifted gradually from a manufacturing-oriented economy to one geared toward providing services, including those that cater to tourism.

Service industries, including health care, retail, transportation and financial activities, account for 89% of L.A. County's economy, Sedgwick said. Out of that, roughly 11% is made up of leisure and hospitality, the category that includes restaurants and bars.

In the early days of the pandemic, McCrary saw jobs catering on TV and film sets all but disappear as productions shut down. Jobs catering weddings and other big events also vanished, as did the need for many companies to provide meals for their once-packed corporate offices.

"Once the pandemic started, (business) didn't just slow down, it became nonexistent," McCrary said. "Every single event canceled."

Over time, things started to pick up slowly. She estimates her business, in terms of revenue and jobs, is about 40% back to normal.

She has about five employees now, about half as many as she had before the pandemic. But she will have about 14 people working for her during her game-day gig providing meals all day for the "talent" at an NFL tailgate party.

McCrary landed the Super Bowl job through an NFL program called Business Connect. It invites companies with certified minority, woman, veteran, lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender ownership to apply and potentially get hired to provide their services for the many events surrounding the game.

Some 225 businesses, including 26 in Inglewood, have participated in this year's program, which offers 18 months of professional development workshops aimed at preparing business owners to apply for Super Bowl jobs, including catering, janitorial services, lighting and security.

The program tries to cap the number of businesses that participate so that a majority of them have a good chance of getting a contract, said B.J. Waymer, an NFL consultant.

Allan DallaTorre's production event and design firm was one of the local businesses that participated in the program.

Before the pandemic, the 44-year old's business regularly worked small movie premieres, fundraisers and

other events. But much of that dried up after the pandemic hit and, until recently, has been slow to return. Last week, he provided lighting for a Business Connect networking gathering, and he's waiting to hear back about possibly working two Super Bowl parties.

"Just the networking that I've had with other vendors, we've been able to network and refer each other business," DallaTorre said. "Every little bit helps us."

Retired pope asks pardon for abuse, but admits no wrongdoing

By NICOLE WINFIELD Associated Press

ROME (AP) — Retired Pope Benedict XVI asked forgiveness Tuesday for any "grievous faults" in his handling of clergy sex abuse cases, but denied any personal or specific wrongdoing after an independent report criticized his actions in four cases while he was archbishop of Munich, Germany.

Benedict's lack of a personal apology or admission of guilt immediately riled sex abuse survivors, who said his response reflected the Catholic hierarchy's "permanent" refusal to accept responsibility for the rape and sodomy of children by priests.

Benedict, 94, was responding to a Jan. 20 report from a German law firm that had been commissioned by the German Catholic Church to look into how cases of sexual abuse were handled in the Munich archdiocese between 1945 and 2019. Benedict, the former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, headed the archdiocese from 1977 to 1982.

The report faulted Benedict's handling of four cases during his time as archbishop, accusing him of misconduct for having failed to restrict the ministry of the four priests even after they had been convicted criminally. The report also faulted his predecessors and successors, estimating there had been at least 497 abuse victims over the decades and at least 235 suspected perpetrators.

The Vatican on Tuesday released a letter that Benedict wrote to respond to the allegations, alongside a more technical reply from his lawyers who had provided an initial 82-page response to the law firm about his nearly five-year tenure in Munich.

The conclusion of Benedict's lawyers was resolute: "As an archbishop, Cardinal Ratzinger was not involved in any cover-up of acts of abuse," they wrote. They criticized the report's authors for misinterpreting their submission, and asserted that they provided no evidence that Benedict was aware of the criminal history of any of the four priests.

Benedict's response was more nuanced and spiritual, though he went on at length to thank his legal team before even addressing the allegations or the abuse victims.

"I have had great responsibilities in the Catholic Church," Benedict said. "All the greater is my pain for the abuses and the errors that occurred in those different places during the time of my mandate."

Benedict issued what he called a "confession," though he didn't confess to any specific fault. He recalled that daily Mass begins with believers confessing their sins and asking forgiveness even for "grievous faults." Benedict noted that in his meetings with abuse victims while he was pope, "I have seen firsthand the effects of a most grievous fault.

"And I have come to understand that we ourselves are drawn into this grievous fault whenever we neglect it or fail to confront it with the necessary decisiveness and responsibility, as too often happened and continues to happen," he wrote. "As in those meetings, once again I can only express to all the victims of sexual abuse my profound shame, my deep sorrow and my heartfelt request for forgiveness."

His response drew swift criticism from Eckiger Tisch, a group representing German clergy abuse survivors, who said it fit into the church's "permanent relativizing on matters of abuse — wrongdoing and mistakes took place, but no one takes concrete responsibility."

Benedict "can't bring himself simply to state that he is sorry not to have done more to protect the children entrusted to his church," the group said.

The retired pope's response will likely complicate efforts by German bishops to try to re-establish credibility with the faithful, whose demands for accountability have only increased after decades of abuse and cover-up.

The head of the German bishops conference, Limburg Bishop Georg Baetzing, had previously said that

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Benedict needed to respond to the report by distancing himself from his lawyers and advisers. "He must talk, and he must override his advisers and essentially say the simple sentence: 'I incurred guilt, I made mistakes and I apologize to those affected,'" Baetzing said.

But in a tweet Tuesday, Baetzing only noted that Benedict had responded.

"I am grateful to him for that and he deserves respect for it," Baetzing wrote. The tweet didn't address the substance of Benedict's response.

The law firm report identified four cases in which Ratzinger was accused of misconduct in failing to act against abusers.

Two cases involved priests who offended while Ratzinger was archbishop and were punished by the German legal system but were kept in pastoral work without any limits on their ministry. A third case involved a cleric who was convicted by a court outside Germany but was put into service in Munich. The fourth case involved a convicted pedophile priest who was allowed to transfer to Munich in 1980, and was later put into ministry. In 1986, that priest received a suspended sentence for molesting a boy.

Benedict's team had earlier clarified an initial "error" in their submission to the law firm that had insisted Ratzinger was not present at the 1980 meeting in which the priest's transfer to Munich was discussed. Ratzinger was there, but the priest's return to ministry was not discussed, they said.

Benedict said he was deeply hurt that the "oversight" about his presence at the 1980 meeting had been used to "cast doubt on my truthfulness, and even to label me a liar." But he said he had been heartened by the support he had received.

"I am particularly grateful for the confidence, support and prayer that Pope Francis personally expressed to me," he said.

The Vatican had already strongly defended Benedict's record after the law firm report, recalling that Benedict was the first pope to meet with victims of abuse, that he had issued strong norms to punish priests who raped children and had directed the church to pursue a path of humility in seeking forgiveness for the crimes of its clerics.

The Vatican's defense, however, focused primarily on Benedict's tenure as head of the Holy See's doctrine office and his eight-year papacy.

Benedict reflected on his legacy in his letter.

"Quite soon, I shall find myself before the final judge of my life," he wrote. "Even though, as I look back on my long life, I can have great reason for fear and trembling, I am nonetheless of good cheer. For I trust firmly that the Lord is not only the just judge, but also the friend and brother who himself has already suffered for my shortcomings."

Benedict's response also rang hollow outside of Germany, with the U.S.-based survivor's advocacy group, SNAP, accusing him of "repeating words of apology that have fallen on deaf ears for decades."

And Mitchell Garabedian, the Boston attorney of "Spotlight" fame who has represented hundreds of abuse victims, said Benedict's words re-victimized and insulted survivors.

"He's a leader setting a poor example morally, and in the process he is encouraging further cover-up of clergy sexual abuse," he said.

But Pope Francis' top adviser on preventing abuse, Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley, found in Benedict's letter sincere "contrition for what has been lacking in his stewardship."

"Benedict's acknowledgement of the irreparable harm caused by sexual abuse in the church and of his own failings to do everything to prevent such harm is a challenge to all those who hold positions of leadership in the church," O'Malley said. "We must do better."

Red flags trailed ex-UCLA lecturer across elite universities

By STEFANIE DAZIO Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — A trail of red flags about his behavior toward women followed Matthew Harris on an academic journey that took him to three of the nation's most prestigious universities — Duke, Cornell and then the University of California, Los Angeles.

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Former graduate classmates at Duke and Cornell, where he studied before becoming a postdoctoral fellow at UCLA in recent years, described him as inappropriate and creepy, with obsessive behaviors like sending excessive emails and text messages to some women that became harassment and, in at least one case, sexual harassment. Another said she changed her morning routine at Duke for weeks after Harris learned her schedule and texted her messages like, "I'm here, where are you?"

Last week, a SWAT team in Colorado arrested Harris after he allegedly emailed an 800-page document and posted videos threatening violence against dozens of people at UCLA, prompting the school to cancel in-person classes for a day. The so-called manifesto contained numerous racist threats and used the words "bomb," "kill" and "shoot" more than 12,000 times.

Wearing a green jail jumpsuit with his wrists handcuffed, Harris did not speak Tuesday during his brief appearance in federal court in Denver. Another hearing is scheduled for Feb. 23 and a judge ordered him to remain in federal custody without bail.

Assistant Federal Public Defender Jennifer Beck told the judge Harris is looking to hire private counsel. Beck did not immediately return a request for additional comment.

In online class reviews, interviews and emails obtained by The Associated Press, current and former students at all three universities alleged negligence by the schools for letting Harris slide previously, despite his concerning conduct.

"I have no idea how this guy is still teaching," one of his UCLA students wrote in October 2020 in an anonymous class review.

Two former Duke students, who spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity because they fear for their safety, said that while they did not report Harris to university officials at the time, his behavior was well known within the small philosophy program and they did not feel they would have been supported by faculty if they'd come forward.

Taken together in the years since major mass shootings at Columbine High School, Virginia Tech and elsewhere, the students' allegations at three top-tier colleges raise questions about the line between uncomfortable and actionable behavior, a university's duty to encourage the reporting of it, and an institution's obligation to prevent it from occurring at another school.

The students' descriptions of years of alarming behavior prompts another question: What, if anything, did the universities do to get Harris help?

A graduate student at Duke as he completed his Ph.D. in 2019, Harris also attended Cornell for a year before UCLA hired him as a postdoctoral fellow and lecturer — a distinguished posting — until he was put on "investigatory leave" last March after allegedly sending pornographic and violent content to his students.

"Clearly Duke should not have passed him to us, and Duke and Cornell should not have passed him to UCLA," said Adriene Takaoka, a Cornell philosophy graduate student whose time overlapped with Harris'. "We're just lucky that no one's been physically hurt. Certainly people have been psychologically damaged."

The former Duke students described their initial interactions with Harris as largely collegial, but with strange undertones that grew over the years.

"There would just be this feeling of 'um, I feel uncomfortable' or 'that was creepy,'" another said. "By the time I left the program, I wanted absolutely nothing to do with him."

But Andrew Janiak, a Duke philosophy professor and former chair of the department who served on Harris' dissertation committee, said he never had any indication of such behavior, describing him as "very shy, very reticent, never aggressive. I never saw him even raise his voice."

Janiak received the first reports of harassment in late March, after Harris had left Duke. Emails show Janiak immediately contacted UCLA.

Duke and Cornell declined to comment to AP and did not answer a list of detailed questions sent via email, such as whether any official reports were made about Harris while he attended their institutions and if there were none, what that says about their culture of reporting.

The signs were there, like bread crumbs scattered across the three schools.

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The morning routine incident at Duke. A house party at Cornell where he tried to rope a relative stranger into a discussion about his mental health. Negative online reviews of his UCLA lectures. Maniacal laughter that disrupted classes. Odd interactions with women he'd approach out of the blue on campus. A campaign of incessant text messages and emails that caused several students to cut off contact with him.

"No one would look at that kid and say, 'Oh, he's fine,'" said Brian Van Brunt, an expert on campus violence and mental health and former president of the National Association for Behavioral Intervention and Threat Assessment. "Typically someone like this didn't just appear out of nowhere."

In recent years, most colleges and universities have formed behavioral intervention and threat assessment teams in response to school shootings, meant to flag concerning behavior and get help before conduct escalates.

Emails and court documents show UCLA's behavioral intervention team was involved, but possibly not until as late as March 30, 2021, when Harris' behavior really began to escalate.

That spring, Harris began sending bizarre and disturbing emails to his former classmates and current UCLA students. The emails to the UCLA students allegedly included pornographic and violent content sent to women in his research group, prompting the university to put him on "investigatory leave."

Bill Kisliuk, UCLA's director of media relations, said in an email that people at the university "brought concerns" to its Title IX office last year, which "worked with the individuals to address the concerns." He declined to comment further, citing privacy. The university announced Monday that it was creating a task force "to conduct a comprehensive review" of its protocols for assessing potential threats.

The messages to Harris' former Duke classmates, however, had links to his YouTube channel that included a video titled "Dead White Professors (Duke University remix)." Despite evidence he was in North Carolina at the time, the university appeared unwilling to bar him from campus, emails show.

In April, his mother reached out to a professor at University of California, Irvine, saying her son in January had threatened in emails to "hunt" and kill the woman. The professor had briefly met Harris in 2013 while they were both at Duke and he reached out when he moved to LA in 2020, sending emails and text messages that would turn aggressive and obsessive.

"I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I did nothing and someone got hurt," Harris' mother wrote.

Those messages prompted the UC system to obtain a workplace violence restraining order against him, which barred him from all UC campuses. UCLA police also sought a Gun Violence Emergency Protective Order.

In November — months after he'd been involuntarily committed to a mental health facility and, his mother later told the FBI, diagnosed with schizophrenia — Harris tried to buy a gun but was denied because of those orders.

Now, his former classmates wonder: How did Harris even get hired at UCLA?

His dissertation — despite an alarming dedication posted online — would have been approved unanimously by a four-person committee. Janiak said he wrote Harris a letter of recommendation but declined to discuss it.

"Everyone wants to re-read the past and try to figure out, 'was he secretly crazy,'" the professor said, but there was nothing "that would make me think, 'boy, this person's in trouble.'"

Janiak said students reported other complaints to him while he was chair of the department, but no one came forward about Harris until last March.

The onus is on the incoming institution to ask targeted questions about an applicant beyond their academic credentials, according to Saunie Schuster, a lawyer who advises colleges and co-founded the Association of Title IX Administrators.

While schools typically cannot mention unproven accusations for fear of a lawsuit, Schuster said, they can do a background check that includes phone interviews with classmates, supervisors and students. It's not clear whether UCLA officials conducted such a background check or interviews; the university did not answer AP's questions regarding whether it reached out Duke or Cornell during the hiring process.

Schuster said a background search would've allowed questions to be posed to former employers like,

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"Would you hire this individual to work directly with you?"

"Has this individual demonstrated any conduct that you've observed that would give you concerns?"

For Harris' former classmates, the answer is clear: Yes.

Money on the table: child credit \$ available via tax returns

By JOSH BOAK Associated Press

The Biden administration wants families with children to know that there is roughly \$193 billion waiting for them — all they need to do is file their taxes to claim it.

That estimated total is what remains of the expanded child tax credit, and the administration is concerned that some of those most in need of the assistance may be the least likely to get what is due to them.

President Joe Biden increased the payments and expanded who was eligible as part of his coronavirus relief package. While most families already received half of the credit as monthly payments last year, they'll lose out on the remaining balance unless they file their taxes.

Vice President Kamala Harris, Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen and White House senior adviser Gene Sperling held a virtual event Tuesday to encourage people to send their tax forms to the IRS, including those whose incomes are so low that they might not have traditionally filed.

Harris said that families should go to childtaxcredit.gov to check their eligibility. The tax filing deadline is April 18.

"The truth is there are people across our nation who work hard every day and still struggle to get by and it should not be this way in our country," Harris said. "You still need to file your taxes. That is the only way to receive the second half of what you are owed."

The public push is occurring at a critical juncture for both the U.S. economy and the child tax credit program. Inflation is running at a nearly 40-year high, meaning that the additional money from the credit will help offset the costs of food, gasoline and other goods as the U.S. is still emerging from the pandemic. But efforts to renew the expanded credits for another year have been blocked in the Senate, making it important for advocates to demonstrate how the credits have reduced child poverty by an estimated 40%.

Yellen said research suggests that the payments are among the most promising policies for combating poverty, highlighting recent research to suggest that the money was linked to higher brain activity in the babies of poor mothers.

"There is very little equivocation that these policies lift up the lives of millions of people, and, in so doing, lift up the country," Yellen said.

Several lawmakers and nonprofits are taking part in the outreach, and there are plans to hold events in all 50 states and Puerto Rico during the tax filing season. Yellen noted that nonprofits are often better at reaching out to poorer populations.

As part of the \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package, Biden increased the child tax credits to \$3,600 annually for each child aged 5 or under and \$3,000 for those who are ages 6 to 17. The government began to send the payments out on a monthly basis starting last July, meaning that there are six months worth of payments waiting to be claimed by people filing their taxes.

The administration estimates that roughly 58 million households would qualify for the credit, which average \$3,300 and could be used to offset an existing tax bill or be paid out as a refund.

Workers without children could also get additional help this tax season if they file. The relief package nearly tripled the earned income tax credit for workers without dependent children, meaning that 17 million people could receive credits worth \$1,500.

The expanded child tax credits were seen as slashing child poverty to the lowest levels on record. A recent analysis by researchers at Washington University in St. Louis and Appalachian State University found no evidence that the monthly payments caused parents to stop working. But critics say that making the credits larger and fully refundable — which ensures that poorer families qualify for the entire benefit — leads to fewer people taking jobs that pay and creates a drag on the economy.

Biden pushed to continue the expanded child tax for another year as part of his "Build Back Better"

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agenda. But in an evenly split Senate, West Virginia Democrat Joe Manchin opposed the expanded credit out of concerns that its price tag could increase the deficit and worsen inflation.

Several factors contribute to NBC's lower Olympic ratings

By JOE REEDY AP Sports Writer

NBC's Mike Tirico began Friday's Winter Olympics opening ceremony by saying, "just over six months ago in Tokyo, we said we were about to embark on an Olympics unlike any other. Now we're about to top that."

In the case of ratings, though, topping that has meant producing record lows.

Through the first four nights of competition, NBC is on track for the lowest-rated Winter Games in history. Friday night's coverage on NBC, USA Network and Peacock averaged 12.8 million viewers, significantly down from the 27.8 million average in Pyeongchang four years ago.

Thursday night's audience of 8 million marks the smallest primetime Olympics audience on record, surpassing the 9 million that tuned in for the closing ceremony of the Tokyo Games.

NBC saw a steady increase in viewers Saturday and Sunday night, but the ratings are down more than half compared to Pyeongchang. Preliminary figures from Saturday show 13.6 million, and 13.7 million from Sunday.

The numbers are stark but not a surprise. Strained relations between the United States and China due to economic and human rights issues, another Olympics held during the COVID-19 pandemic, and a lack of buzz coming into the Games have been significant factors.

"There are a whole range of subliminal factors that are negatives when it comes to an event in China," said Neal Pilson, the former president of CBS Sports who now runs his own sports television consulting company. "It just adds to the obvious issues, and it leads to the American public being not as interested in the Games this year."

The 2018 Pyeongchang Games marked the first time since 2006 that no night averaged at least 30 million viewers. Last year's Tokyo Olympics averaged above 20 million only one of 17 nights, and produced the nine smallest Summer Games primetime audiences going back to 1992.

Tokyo also marked the first time the preceding Winter Games averaged a higher audience. Beijing also marks the first time since 1992 that two Olympics are taking place only six months apart.

"The sky is definitely not falling. Yes, we have run into a bunch of bad factors that have made it harder for us. But most importantly, we had a realistic view on the audiences we were going to deliver, and we are delivering what we promised to the marketing community," NBCUniversal Television Chairman Mark Lazarus said. "But our trend line is pretty good. Our ratings have gone up the last three days. We are feeling that America is finding the Olympics."

Tokyo's primetime viewership decreased 47% compared to Rio de Janeiro in 2016. If NBC can keep that decline at the same range when measuring the audience from four years ago, they should consider that a victory.

But even though the numbers look bleak, not everything is dire at NBC. The primetime coverage remains the most watched event on network television and won all four nights significantly. And when comparing 2018 to 2022, none of the shows popular four years ago that are still on the air have larger audiences.

Another example of how many TV ratings have cratered is the Oscars. The awards show averaged 43.7 million viewers in 2014, dropped to 23.6 million four years later, and averaged only 10.6 million last year.

NBC should be the top network all 17 nights of the Beijing Games, which benefits advertisers.

"The ability to attract such a massive audience over the course of a 17-18 day stretch is unbelievably powerful," NBC Sports Chairman Pete Bevacqua said by telephone from Beijing. "I think anybody in our business would love to be in that position to have these powers of the Olympic Games. It still has the ability to really aggregate an audience like nothing else can."

In a release Monday night, NBC said that even though the average amount of ads it has aired is 33% lower compared to other broadcast networks, the Olympic coverage has delivered 241% more views than the second most-viewed show.

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While television viewers are down, streaming continues to see massive increases. The first four days topped 1 billion streaming minutes, marking the fastest ever for a Winter Games. That puts NBC and Peacock on pace to surpass the total of 2.17 billion minutes from Pyeongchang by the end of this week.

The record for any Olympics was 4.48 billion minutes from the Tokyo Games. The 2014 Winter Games in Sochi, Russia, totaled 420 million minutes.

Peacock has become the centralized place for all of NBC's Olympic coverage, with navigation across the streaming platform easier.

"I think we have improved it exponentially over where we were with Tokyo," Bevacqua said. "That took time, and there were things we had to put in place to be able to put ourselves in that position."

NBC is also hoping the next three Olympics can help ratings rebound. The 2024 Summer Games are in Paris, followed by Milan-Cortina (2026 Winter) and Los Angeles (2028 Summer).

While some have criticized NBC for broadcasting from Beijing, the host city was not set in 2014 when the network reached a \$7.75 billion deal with the International Olympic Committee for rights through 2032. Lazarus pointed out that the other finalist was Almaty in Kazakhstan, a country that has its own record of human rights abuses and was in the middle of a significant internal conflict.

"When a marketer or fan watches the telecasts, they're not supporting China or any political agenda that China has," he said. "They're supporting the U.S. athletes."

EXPLAINER: What's Russia's Nord Stream 2 pipeline to Europe?

By DAVID McHUGH AP Business Writer

FRANKFURT, Germany (AP) — U.S. President Joe Biden has threatened to block the Nord Stream 2 natural gas pipeline if Russia invades Ukraine.

The undersea pipeline directly links Russian gas to Europe via Germany and is complete but not yet operating. It has become a major target as Western governments try to deter a Russian attack on its neighbor.

In the past, it has been a source of tension between the U.S., which opposed the project, and Germany. Chancellor Olaf Scholz said all options were on the table but avoided mentioning Nord Stream 2 specifically at a news conference with Biden in Washington.

If Russian tanks roll into Ukraine, "there will be no longer a Nord Stream 2," Biden said Monday. Scholz stressed the need to keep some ambiguity about sanctions to press Russia to deescalate.

Here are key things to understand about the pipeline:

WHAT IS NORD STREAM 2?

A 1,230-kilometer-long (764-mile-long) natural gas pipeline under the Baltic Sea, running from Russia to Germany's Baltic coast.

It would double the capacity of an earlier Nord Stream pipeline to 110 billion cubic meters of gas a year and sidesteps Ukraine and Poland, which would lose transit fees. They also said the project would increase Russia's leverage over Europe.

The pipeline has been filled with gas but is not operating yet pending approval by Germany's utility regulators and the European Commission.

WHY DOES RUSSIA WANT THE PIPELINE?

State-owned producer Gazprom says it will meet Europe's growing need for affordable natural gas and complement existing pipelines through Belarus and Ukraine.

Europe imports most of its gas and gets around 40% from Russia. Nord Stream 2 would offer an alternative to Ukraine's aging system, lower costs by saving transit fees paid to Ukraine and Poland, and avoid episodes like brief 2006 and 2009 gas cutoffs over price and payment disputes between Russia and Ukraine.

WHY IS BIDEN AGAINST IT?

The U.S., European NATO allies such as Poland, and Ukraine have opposed the project going back before the Biden administration. They said it gives Russia the possibility of using gas as a geopolitical weapon.

Biden waived sanctions against the pipeline's operator when it was almost complete in return for an agreement from Germany to take action against Russia if it used gas as a weapon or attacks Ukraine. But

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the U.S. still thinks Nord Stream 2 is a bad idea.

Meanwhile, Scholz, who took the helm in Germany in December, backed the project as Angela Merkel's finance minister, and his Social Democratic Party supported it.

While he has avoided referring to Nord Stream 2 specifically, Scholz says Russia would face "severe consequences" and that sanctions must be ready ahead of time.

HOW WOULD BIDEN BLOCK NORD STREAM 2?

The U.S. could impose heavy financial sanctions — penalizing anyone or any company that does business involving the pipeline, effectively scaring away banks and businesses and making it impossible for the pipeline to operate.

Biden hasn't said if that's the route he might pursue. Asked Monday how the U.S. would stop something that's under German control, Biden only said, "I promise you, we'll be able to do it." Scholz added, "You can be sure that there won't be any measures in which we have a differing approach. We will act together jointly."

In Congress, Republicans and Democrats — in a rare bit of agreement — have long objected to Nord Stream for the leverage it gives Russia over Europe. They have been split for months on whether to impose sanctions on Nord Stream 2 now or only if Russia invades. Bill backers have refused to say what compromise they might be working on.

In Germany, the approval process has been presented as strictly a legal decision, not a political one, raising questions about what mechanism could be used if there's a Russian attack. In Europe, sanctions against Russia over its seizure of Ukraine's Crimea peninsula in 2014 were agreed at the European Union level.

WILL NORD STREAM 2 HELP EUROPE'S NATURAL GAS CRISIS?

Not immediately or directly. Since regulators won't approve it for months, the pipeline cannot help meet heating and electricity needs this winter as the continent faces a gas shortage. Gazprom could, if it chose, send more gas through existing pipelines.

The winter crunch has continued to feed concerns about Russia and gas. Russian President Vladimir Putin has said the shortage underlines the need for quick Nord Stream 2 approval. Russia held back from short-term gas sales — even though it fulfilled long-term contracts with European customers — and failed to fill its underground storage in Europe.

Some analysts say Russia had to fill its own winter reserves first, and Gazprom has stressed its role as a reliable long-term supplier. Whatever the motivation, Putin's comments did little to relieve concerns that Russia is inclined to use gas for political leverage.

IS RUSSIA THE BOSS ON GAS?

That's oversimplifying. While Europe needs Russian gas, Gazprom also relies on the European market for sales to support Russian government budgets. And the European Union has been able to force Gazprom to comply with many of its anti-monopoly rules in recent years.

That interdependence is why many think Russia won't cut off gas to Europe even if the conflict over Ukraine escalates, and Russian officials have underlined they have no intention to do that.

Opioid fight needs new strategy, Cabinet leadership: report

By RICARDO ALONSO-ZALDIVAR Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — The U.S. needs a nimble, multipronged strategy and Cabinet-level leadership to counter its festering overdose epidemic, a bipartisan congressional commission advises.

With vastly powerful synthetic drugs like fentanyl driving record overdose deaths, the scourge of opioids awaits after the COVID-19 pandemic finally recedes, a shift that public health experts expect in the months ahead.

"This is one of our most pressing national security, law enforcement and public health challenges, and we must do more as a nation and a government to protect our most precious resource — American lives," the Commission on Combating Synthetic Opioid Trafficking said in a 70-page report released Tuesday.

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The report envisions a dynamic strategy. It would rely on law enforcement and diplomacy to shut down sources of chemicals used to make synthetic opioids. It would offer treatment and support for people who become addicted, creating pathways that can lead back to productive lives. And it would invest in research to better understand addiction's grip on the human brain and to develop treatments for opioid use disorder.

The global coronavirus pandemic has overshadowed the American opioid epidemic for the last two years, but recent news that overdose deaths surpassed 100,000 in one year caught the public's attention. Politically, federal legislation to address the opioid crisis won support across the partisan divide during both the Obama and Trump administrations.

Rep. David Trone, D-Md., a co-chair of the panel that produced the report, said he believes that support is still there, and that the issue appeals to Biden's pragmatic side. "The president has been crystal clear," Trone said. "These are two major issues in America: addiction and mental health." Trone's counterpart was Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark.

The U.S. government has been waging a losing "war on drugs" for decades.

The stakes are much higher now with the widespread availability of fentanyl, a synthetic painkiller 80 to 100 times more powerful than morphine. It can be baked into illicit pills made to look like prescription painkillers or anti-anxiety medicines. The chemical raw materials are produced mainly in China. Criminal networks in Mexico control the production and shipment to the U.S.

Federal anti-drug strategy traditionally emphasized law enforcement and long prison sentences. But that came to be seen as tainted by racial bias and counter-productive because drug use is treatable. The value of treatment has recently gained recognition with anti-addiction medicines in wide use alongside older strategies like support groups.

The report endorsed both law enforcement and treatment, working in sync with one another.

"Through its work, the commission came to recognize the impossibility of reducing the availability of illegal synthetic opioids through efforts focused on supply alone," the report said.

"Real progress can come only by pairing illicit synthetic opioid supply disruption with decreasing the domestic U.S. demand for these drugs," it added.

The report recommends what it calls five "pillars" for government action:

- Elevating the White House Office of National Drug Control Policy to act as the nerve center for far-flung federal efforts, and restoring Cabinet rank to its director.
- Disrupting the supply of drugs through better coordinated law enforcement actions.
- Reducing the demand for illicit drugs through treatment and by efforts to mitigate the harm to people addicted. Treatment programs should follow science-based "best practices."
- Using diplomacy to enlist help from other governments in cutting off the supply of chemicals that criminal networks use to manufacture fentanyl.
- Developing surveillance and data analysis tools to spot new trends in illicit drug use before they morph into major problems for society.

Participating as non-voting members in the commission's work were high-level executive branch officials, including representatives from law enforcement, the departments of State, Treasury and Homeland Security, the intelligence community, and the White House. Administration officials said Biden has already issued two executive orders to counter fentanyl trafficking and called on Congress to pass his \$41 billion request to address the overdose epidemic.

In prepared statements, Republican commission members stressed the law enforcement response. "We must redouble our efforts to secure the border against illegal trafficking by targeting Mexican cartels flooding our streets with illicit opioids and force China's hand to crackdown on their pharmaceutical industry supplying cartels with the base compounds used to manufacture synthetic opioids," said Rep. Fred Upton, R-Mich.

Trone said it's going to take cooperation from both political parties. "We have to take this toxic atmosphere in Washington and move past it," he said. "Because 100,000 people, that's husbands, sisters, mothers, fathers. As a country, we are better than that."

31M Americans to bet on Super Bowl, gambling group estimates

By WAYNE PARRY Associated Press

ATLANTIC CITY, N.J. (AP) — A record 31.5 million Americans plan to bet on this year's Super Bowl, according to estimates released Tuesday by the gambling industry's national trade group.

The American Gaming Association forecasts that over \$7.6 billion will be wagered on pro football's championship game set for Sunday.

Both the amount of people planning to bet (up 35% from last year) and the estimated amount of money being bet (up 78% from last year) are new records.

Bettors include people making casual wagers with friends or relatives, entries into office pools, wagers with licensed sportsbooks, and bets placed with illegal bookmakers.

"Americans have never been more interested in legal sports wagering," said Bill Miller, the group's president and CEO. "The growth of legal options across the country not only protects fans and the integrity of games and bets, but also puts illegal operators on notice that their time is limited."

When the Los Angeles Rams and Cincinnati Bengals begin the game Sunday evening in the Rams home stadium, 30 states plus Washington D.C. will offer legal gambling.

Since last year's game, 45 million additional people will be able to bet on the Super Bowl because their states have legalized sports betting over the past year: Arizona, Connecticut, Louisiana, Maryland, North Carolina, North Dakota, South Dakota, Washington, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

The association predicted that:

— 18.2 million American adults will place traditional sports wagers online, at a retail sportsbook or with a bookie, up 78% from 2021.

— 18.5 million plan to bet casually with friends or as part of a pool or squares contest, up 23%. The association said there is some overlap among those two groups.

— 76% say it is important for themselves to bet through a legal operator, up 11% from last year.

— 55% plan to bet on the Rams, with 45% backing the Bengals. That contradicts data from numerous individual legal sportsbooks that shows more bets and total money being wagered on Cincinnati thus far.

FanDuel, the official odds provider for The Associated Press, says 59% of spread bets are on Cincinnati to cover the 4-point spread as an underdog. Among moneyline bets that do not involve a points spread, 76% of bets predict the Bengals will win the game outright. Other sportsbooks report similar breakdowns on bets received thus far.

The Super Bowl is also one of the most perilous times of year for people with a gambling problem.

Harry Levant, a public health advocate from Philadelphia and a recovering gambling addict, is an official with the group Stop Predatory Gambling. He said the ongoing wave of sports betting advertising, and numerous incentives to get people to bet, is reminiscent of the tobacco industry's efforts to get people to smoke and continue to do so.

He said legal sports betting is increasing a public health crisis in America involving problem gambling.

"One out of two people struggling with a gambling problem contemplates suicide, and one out of five will attempt suicide," he said. "I am one of those one out of five."

Levant said the rapid rise of in-game betting feeds into a compulsive gambler's desire for more and faster opportunities to bet.

"No longer is gambling limited to who's going to win the game," he said. "Now gambling is on every play. Keep them gambling, keep chasing action."

There is a national help line for people with a gambling problem, or who think they might have one: 1-800-GAMBLER.

EXPLAINER: What in the world is the Olympic Truce?

By MALLIKA SEN Associated Press

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BEIJING (AP) — “Observe your commitment to this Olympic Truce,” International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach beseeched the international community at the opening ceremony of the 2022 Winter Olympic Games in Beijing. “Give peace a chance.”

Whether echoing John Lennon or not, it’s a plea that has been issued time and time again to little avail — an apparent exercise in futility. As the Games unfold against the backdrop of heightened tensions between Russia and the West over Ukraine, even Bach himself had palpably distanced the IOC from the Olympic Truce in the runup to the opening ceremony.

“We can only appeal: ‘Please respect your own commitment,’” he said at a Feb. 3 press conference where he labelled the U.N. resolution merely a “highly symbolic act.” “We can only go so far and say: ‘Please do not touch the Games.’”

Every two years, the host country of the upcoming Olympics introduces a U.N. resolution that other member states can co-sponsor. The truce is intended to secure safe passage for athletes during the Games and, in the long term, promote the idea of working toward world peace.

A U.N. resolution upholding the Olympic Truce has been passed 15 times. The continuous renewal each Olympics is based in the idealism that undergirds the modern Games and perhaps international law in general: It’s aspirational.

Just what is the Olympic Truce? And what role does it have to play on the rickety stage of international affairs?

HOW LONG DOES THE TRUCE LAST?

Nearly two months. It begins seven days before the start of each Olympic Games and ends seven days after the conclusion of the Paralympics. The Beijing Olympics began Feb. 4 and the Paralympics conclude March 13.

WHEN DID THE TRUCE BEGIN?

The modern Olympic Truce was first established in 1993, for the 1994 Lillehammer Winter Olympics. But its roots are ancient and grounded in the concept of “*ekecheiria*,” dating back to the ninth century B.C., when Greek city-states were otherwise ceaselessly at war with one another (though they didn’t necessarily do a good job adhering to the pact, either).

Baron Pierre de Coubertin founded the modern Olympics in 1896 with the ideal of building a harmonious future, but contemporary formalization wouldn’t come until the post-Cold War era, when athletes from the dissolving Yugoslavia needed to participate. In the interim, some Olympics were cancelled entirely.

WHAT ABOUT ALL THE FIGHTING SINCE 1993?

There’s been some sort of ongoing hot conflict during every modern Olympics. Despite that, no country would cop to intentionally breaking the Truce, says J. Simon Rofe, a reader in diplomatic studies at the University of London’s SOAS and an expert in sports diplomacy.

Basically, it comes down to semantics and mental gymnastics. Instead of “openly flouting the Olympic Truce, they may say it doesn’t apply. They may say, ‘This isn’t what it’s meant for,’” Rofe says. “But no one’s just gone: ‘Not today, thank you.’”

WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES FOR BREAKING THE TRUCE?

There really aren’t any. At most, an aggressor takes a hit in the court of public opinion, but that typically matters little.

“If we are getting in the middle of tensions, disputes and confrontations of the political powers then we are putting the Games at risk,” Bach plainly told reporters at a Beijing press conference.

NO CONSEQUENCE? THEN WHAT’S THE POINT?

While the Truce itself doesn’t establish lasting peace, Charlotte Ku, an international law expert and professor at the Texas A&M University School of Law, notes that the Olympics are a prime venue for informal talks as heads of state and government (from non-boycotting nations, that is) gather in Beijing: “So to that extent, there might be an opportunity to resolve things or at least find a framework for further conversation.”

Plus, Rofe adds, there’s nothing wrong with some ambition.

“I think the Olympic Truce serves a valuable purpose providing a model of behavior in international af-

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fairs, and gives opportunity to what sport can achieve," he says.

HAS RUSSIA AGREED TO THE TRUCE?

Yes, quite enthusiastically.

Russia was one of the 173 countries to co-sponsor the resolution for Beijing 2022 and Stepan Kuzmenkov, representative of the Russian Mission to the United Nations, exhorted everyone to hold true to the Truce. But he also took pains to note that the collective punishment of athletes was unacceptable. Russia is not competing in these Games as Russia; its athletes are under the banner of the Russian Olympic Committee because of doping sanctions.

COULD RUSSIA BREAK THE TRUCE?

The answer to this question is largely dependent on who is evaluating violations. In Russia's estimation, it has never broken the Truce — even in 2008 and 2014 — because it viewed the into South Ossetia and then Crimea as settling domestic matters. The Olympic Truce is established by the United Nations, which does not have jurisdiction in domestic disputes.

(Of course, Georgia, Ukraine and most of the international community don't see matters the same way.)

An invasion of Ukraine, which the United States contends is imminent and Russia strenuously denies, would mar the sanctity of the Olympics, delivering a blow to the host country, with whom Russia has drawn ever closer in recent years. Even if an invasion happened, it's possible Putin would wait until the Games' conclusion so as not to embarrass Chinese President Xi Jinping.

WHY DIDN'T THE UNITED STATES CO-SPONSOR THIS YEAR'S TRUCE RESOLUTION?

The U.S. joined the U.N. consensus adopting the resolution but was not among the 173 (of 192) members that co-sponsored it. That marked a change from the Tokyo Olympics, when the U.S. did co-sponsor that resolution. In its explanation, the U.S. Mission to the U.N. took issue with parts of the China-introduced resolution. that it deemed not "inter-governmentally agreed language."

Those paragraphs pertained to Beijing's vision for the Olympics — inspiring youth and promoting enthusiasm for winter sports, social progress and world peace — and a commitment to delivering "Olympic Games that are green, inclusive, open and clean," in line with the U.S. Sustainable Development Goals. It's likely, Ku says, that the U.S. just didn't want to give China any cover.

U.S. allies in the Indo-Pacific "Quad" alliance — Japan, Australia and India — also did not co-sponsor, but other allies like France and Germany did sign on.

WHAT ABOUT THE UNITED STATES' OWN HISTORY WITH THE OLYMPIC TRUCE?

The U.S. has had its own share of apparent violations of the Truce — wars in the Middle East, namely. In 1998, the IOC implored the U.S. not to violate the spirit of the Truce by engaging in military action against Iraq.

"Not to my knowledge is any of the decision-making or thinking that the president and his senior policy leaders are undertaking affected by sporting events," then-White House spokesperson Mike McCurry retorted.

In the wake of the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, however, it was the IOC and U.N. that bent for a U.S. retaliatory military campaign in Afghanistan. As the host country for the 2002 Winter Olympics, the United States introduced a Truce resolution that did not call for the cessation of hostilities in a departure from precedent. The IOC's then-director general, François Carrard, said the body had to be "realistic" and was "not expecting anything else" beyond the safe passage for athletes.

WHAT'S THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE IOC AND THE UNITED NATIONS?

The IOC and the U.N. are separate entities but often partners. The IOC has permanent observer status at the United Nations and the U.N. flag has flown at competition sites since the 1998 Nagano Winter Games. 1998. The two organizations profess to espouse similar goals, and the U.N. has affirmed sports as a key enabler of its sustainable development goals.

Note, the IOC actually has more national committees than the U.N. has members.

Olympics Live: Germany's Geisenberger is 3-time luge champ

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BEIJING (AP) — The Latest on the Beijing Winter Olympics:

Natalie Geisenberger is the first three-time Olympic champion in women's luge.

The German great won the gold medal Tuesday at the Beijing Games, her third consecutive title. Germany's Anna Berreiter was second and Tatiana Ivanova of the Russian Olympic Committee was third.

Berreiter was a half-second back of Geisenberger. Ivanova was a full second back. In luge, those time gaps are massive.

That speaks to how dominant Geisenberger was. No woman in luge history has more Olympic golds, or world championship golds, or World Cup race victories than Geisenberger.

Italy has won the gold medal in mixed doubles curling, completing a near-perfect Olympics.

The 8-5 win over Norway on Tuesday at the Ice Cube capped a dominant performance for Amos Mosaner and Stefania Constantini. The Italians were undefeated in the round-robin and then advanced to the gold medal match with an 8-1 victory over Sweden.

Kristin Skaslien and Magnus Nedregotten will take a silver medal back to Norway four years after claiming bronze in Pyeongchang. Sweden won the bronze medal by beating Britain 9-3.

Norway's Johannes Hoesflot Klaebo is still the fastest man on the cross-country skiing sprint course, while Sweden's Jonna Sundling nabbed gold in the women's race.

Klaebo defended his Olympic sprint title at the Beijing Games on Tuesday, leading the final for the entire race and punching the air when he crossed the finish line with a time of 2 minutes, 58.06 seconds. Frederico Pellegrino of Italy took silver, .26 seconds behind. Russian skier Alexander Terenteva earned bronze, 1.31 behind.

In the women's sprint, Sundling went into the final wearing bib No. 1 after qualifying with the fastest time and carried that momentum to the finish line. She won the race in 3:09.68, finishing 2.88 seconds ahead of teammate Maja Dahlqvist. Jessie Diggins of the United States took bronze, 3.16 seconds behind.

Sundling is a first-time Olympian but has two world championship sprint titles, and team sprint titles with Dahlqvist.

Kjeld Nuis of the Netherlands has become the first speedskater since 1994 to successfully defend his Olympic title in the men's 1,500 meters, edging countryman Thomas Krol at the Beijing Games.

Krol, the reigning world champion, broke the 20-year-old Olympic record in his race Tuesday. Nuis went even faster in the very next pair, crossing the line with a blistering time of 1 minute, 43.21 seconds.

There were still three pairs to go, but no one came close to the Dutch duo. Nuis took his country's third gold in four events at these Games, while Krol's runner-up finish of 1:43.55 gave the Netherlands a total of six medals in a competition that is shaping up as another rout for the Big Orange Machine.

The bronze went to South Korea's Kim Minseok, who was more than a second behind the winner in 1:44.24.

Nuis became the first repeat 1,500 champion since Norway's Johann Olav Koss won his second straight gold at the 1994 Lillehammer Games. The only other back-to-back champions were Clas Thunberg of Finland in 1924 and 1928, and Yevgeny Grishin of the Soviet Union in 1956-1960.

The Americans again came up short of their first individual Olympic speedskating medal since 2010. World Cup leader Joey Mantia got off to a strong start but couldn't hold his pace through a race that requires both speed and endurance. He wound up sixth in 1:45.26.

Quentin Fillon Maillet of France has won decisively in the 20-kilometer individual biathlon, adding a gold medal to the silver he won in the mixed relay over the weekend.

Fillon Maillet has dominated the biathlon world lately. He's had 10 World Cup podium finishes this season. Half of those were wins.

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Now he's also an Olympic champion.

He missed two of 20 targets Tuesday and finished the course in 48 minutes, 47.4 seconds. Anton Smol-ski of Belarus shot clean, hitting all 20 of his targets but coming in 14.8 seconds behind the Frenchman.

Defending individual Olympic champion Johannes Thingnes Boe of Norway also missed two targets and took the bronze medal.

Andrew Blaser is quickly learning about the perks that come with being an Olympian.

He's got tons of new free gear.

He's getting an invitation to the White House.

And his favorite singer took notice of him on social media.

The U.S. skeleton athlete and Olympic rookie already has something to celebrate at the Beijing Games. His favorite singer-songwriter — the actress and Grammy winner Sara Bareilles — gave him a shoutout on Instagram on Tuesday.

Blaser shot his shot on Monday, tagging Bareilles on Instagram and telling her "you are my favorite musician... will you watch me in the Olympics?" And he got his reply a few hours later, when Bareilles told him "I am rooting for you."

He was beaming all the way through his training runs on Tuesday.

"Greatest thing that ever happened to me," he said. "I listen to her every day when I'm warming up."

Top-seeded Ester Ledecka of the Czech Republic has defended her Olympic snowboard parallel giant slalom title. She will now switch over to ski racing to try and defend her super-G crown.

Four years ago in South Korea, Ledecka became the first competitor to win gold in two different sports at the same Winter Games. She has a chance to repeat the feat in China.

Ledecka beat Daniela Ulbing of Austria for gold along the side-by-side course at Genting Snow Park. Gloria Kotnik of Slovenia earned the bronze.

Benjamin Karl of Austria held off Tim Mastnak of Slovenia for gold in the men's race. Russian athlete Vic Wild picked up the bronze.

Sweden won the bronze medal in mixed doubles curling, bouncing back from a semifinal blowout to dominate Britain 9-3 in six ends in the third-place game.

One day after losing 9-1 to Italy, Almida de Val and Oskar Eriksson picked up four points in the second end, stole three in the third and took single points in the fourth and fifth despite lacking the last-rock advantage called the hammer.

Jennifer Dodds of Britain made an easy draw to collect two points in the sixth end, then partner Bruce Mouat immediately bumped fists with the Swedes to concede the match with two ends to play.

De Val and Eriksson hugged and the handful of Swedes in the mostly empty Ice Cube broke into a cheer. It is the fifth straight time Sweden has reached the Olympic curling podium, including a gold in women's and a silver in men's four years ago in Pyeongchang.

Italy, which went unbeaten in the round robin, and reigning bronze medalist Norway play for the gold later Tuesday night.

South Korea's Olympic team leader has suggested bias by judges kept the country's short-track skaters out of the men's 1,000-meter final.

The South Korean team called a news conference Tuesday, one day after judges disqualified its skaters from each semifinal in Beijing. They included world record holder Hwang Dae-heon, who won his semifinal, then was disqualified for causing contact with a rival.

The judges' rulings meant the final included three Chinese skaters and two brothers who have a Chinese father and skate for Hungary.

South Korean team official Yoon Hong-geun says "sport needs to guarantee fair play in order for the entire human race to gain hopes, dreams and courage."

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In the rough-and-tumble of Olympic short-track racing, South Korea is a traditional power. South Korean skaters won three of eight gold medals at home in the 2018 Winter Games in Pyeongchang.

Yoon apologized to the Korean public for Monday's results asking "for your forgiveness that I haven't fulfilled the dreams, hopes and wishes of 50 million Korean people."

Nathan Chen has set the world record during his short program at the Beijing Olympics, scoring 113.97 points to break the previous mark set by longtime rival Yuzuru Hanyu and putting himself in position to win his long-sought gold medal.

The third skater from the end, Chen opened with a perfect quad flip, breezed through the triple axel that sometimes gives him problems and drilled a quad lutz-triple toe loop that by itself scored more than 21 points.

His total was more than five points head of Yuma Kagiyama, who sits in second place, and nearly 20 points ahead of Hanyu, the two-time Olympic champion who bailed on his opening quad attempt during a calamitous short program.

All that's left for Chen, whose poor short program four years ago cost him a medal opportunity in Pyeongchang, is to hold onto his lead through Thursday's free skate at historical Capital Indoor Stadium.

Another Russian women's hockey player has tested positive for the coronavirus after playing against Canada.

Russian Olympic Committee team coach Evgeny Bobariko tells state news agency RIA Novosti that Polina Bolgareva tested positive.

The forward played against Canada in a game Monday which was delayed because of virus concerns on both teams before the Russians and Canadians agreed to start the game in masks. The Canadians kept their masks on and won 6-1.

The Russians removed theirs at the start of the third period.

Bobariko says the team found out about the positive test after arriving back at the Olympic village following the game.

Russia has eight players unavailable in Beijing because of the virus and another player was left in Moscow after a positive test. Bobariko says "I don't know how it's happening."

American-born figure skater Zhu Yi, who gave up her U.S. citizenship to compete for China at the Beijing Winter Olympics, has faced abuse on Chinese social media after crashing into a wall in the team event.

Twitter-like Sina Weibo said it had suspended 93 accounts and deleted 300 abusive posts about the Olympian. She was born in California to Chinese parents and won a U.S. national novice title as Beverly Zhu. Messages mocked her for falling while others criticized her for not being fluent in Chinese.

She has also faced criticism from conservative political figures in the United States because of her change of sporting allegiance.

"I am relieved because (there is) a lot of pressure and people are expecting a lot," Zhu said after competing Monday. "Honestly, I've trained really hard and I think the main thing is coping mentally."

Zhu finished last in the short program and China placed fifth in the competition, which was won by Russia, with the U.S. taking silver and Japan bronze.

China's official Xinhua News Agency offered its support in a tweet, saying: "For young skaters of China, they need time and tolerance to play better in the future. Don't cry, Zhu Yi. We are with you."

Beijing Olympic organizers say there are 32 athletes in isolation facilities after they tested positive for the coronavirus and they're spending an average of seven days in isolation.

Brian McCloskey, chairman of the expert medical panel for the Beijing Games, says as many people will be let out of isolation as possible, but only when it's safe. He says 50 athletes have been discharged from isolation and that the vast majority of athletes in isolation are well and do not require any medical treatment.

The disclosure came after complaints by athletes and teams about inedible food, dirty rooms and a lack

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of training equipment and internet access. Organizers have acknowledged that isolation is already a difficult situation for athletes and say they are working to quickly address any problems.

McCloskey noted that people who were infected can continue testing positive intermittently for a long time, even if they're not contagious. But he said previously infected people might also be testing positive because they were re-infected, and are able to spread the virus.

Mexican figure skater Donovan Carrillo is advancing to the next round of competition at the Beijing Olympics, a first for the country.

The 22-year-old, who was born and raised in Mexico, is the first male skater from his country to compete at the Olympics in 30 years.

He had a solid performance in his Olympic debut, set to music by Santana. He earned a career-best score of 79.69.

Carrillo will skate again in the free skate event on Thursday against powerhouses like American Nathan Chen and Japan's Yuzuru Hanyu.

He said he was most excited to pull off a quad toe loop at the start of his performance, and is already thinking about his own growth ahead of the Milan-Cortina Olympics in 2026.

Two-time Olympic figure skating champion Yuzuru Hanyu bailed out of the opening quad salchow of his short program at the Beijing Games, a massive mistake that could make an easier path to gold for American rival Nathan Chen.

Hanyu was just seconds into his program when he set up for the first of two quads in his program. But he never came close to trying the four-revolution salchow, landing to an audible gasp from the small crowd inside Capital Indoor Stadium.

The missed element has a base score of 9.70 points, meaning he lost all of them. He earned 95.15 for second among those that had performed, though Chen and the rest of the medal contenders were still to come.

The 27-year-old Hanyu, one of the biggest sports stars in Japan, is trying to become the first man to win three straight figure skating gold medals since Gillis Grafstrom of Sweden in 1928.

Defending champion Matthias Mayer of Austria is in first place in the men's super-G at the Beijing Games and is on the brink of capturing a third Olympic gold medal with only lower-ranked skiers remaining.

Ryan Cochran-Siegle of the United States is 0.04 seconds behind in second and World Cup super-G leader Aleksander Aamodt Kilde of Norway is 0.42 behind in third.

Mayer broke Norway's 16-year grip on the men's Olympic super-G title when he won in 2018. That was four years after winning the downhill in Sochi.

The 31-year-old Mayer also claimed bronze in the men's downhill on Monday.

Marco Odermatt of Switzerland was among the favorites but he lost control of his skis on a turn and skied out. Odermatt was slower than Kilde at the final checkpoint before he went out.

Kilde leads this season's super-G standings over Odermatt.

The International Ski Federation says five jumpers were disqualified from the mixed team competition at the Beijing Olympics because their jumpsuits were too big and offered an aerodynamic advantage.

FIS says no one filed an official protest after the jumpsuits were inspected during the competition.

German silver medalist Katharina Althaus and Japanese star Sara Takanashi were among the five women whose suits violated rules in the Olympic debut of an event that featured two women and two men on each team.

Slovenia won gold on Monday night while Russia and Canada earned silver and bronze in surprises as four nations expected to contend for medals were hurt by the disqualifications.

FIS says the suits that violated rules were produced exclusively for the Olympics and were not tested

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in advance, an opportunity that just a few nations took advantage of before arriving in Beijing.

Norway had two jumpers, Silje Opseth and Anna Odine Stroem, with jumpsuits that didn't pass inspection. Austria's Daniela Iraschko Stolz was also disqualified.

Chinese tennis player Peng Shuai sat with International Olympic Committee President Thomas Bach and watched American-born Chinese freeskier Eileen Gu win gold at the women's big air event Tuesday.

Peng appeared a day after delivering a controlled interview in Beijing that touched on sexual assault allegations she made against a former high-ranking member of China's ruling Communist Party.

Her answers — delivered in front of a Chinese Olympic official — left unanswered questions about her well-being and what exactly happened.

Bach said he and Peng spoke with athletes at the Big Air Shougang venue for about 30 minutes, and the pair was seen together in the stands.

Bach said Peng told him that she was going into quarantine later Tuesday and planned to exit the closed Olympic coronavirus bubble.

NBC says comedian Leslie Jones is free to give her commentary about the Olympics on social media after a misunderstanding with some of her posts.

NBC spokesman Greg Hughes said Monday night that some of Jones' videos featuring Olympic footage were blocked because of a "third-party error."

"We have resolved the situation. She is free to do her social media posts as she has done in the past," Hughes told The Associated Press. "She is a super fan of the Olympics and we are super fans of her."

Some of Jones' posts were blocked because of increased policing of recorded video displayed on social media platforms. In 2014, NBC agreed to a \$7.75 billion deal with the International Olympic Committee for rights through 2032.

Jones took to social media Monday morning saying that she might give up live tweeting the Beijing Games.

"I love the athletes and they love me doing it. And I know y'all love it. But now it's just gotten too hard. And no one is fighting for or with me. Soooo I guess I'll leave it to the professionals," Jones wrote on Twitter and Instagram.

The U.S. ski team says American skier Nina O'Brien has sustained a compound fracture of her left tibia and fibula after falling toward the end of the women's giant slalom at the Beijing Games.

Monday's race had to be delayed for about 15 minutes when O'Brien slid across the finish line at the end of her second run. She was screaming in pain after stumbling through the last gate as her skis crossed in front of her.

O'Brien was taken to hospital in Yanqing for "an initial stabilization procedure" and the team says she will return to the U.S. for further evaluation and care.

The 24-year-old O'Brien had been sixth fastest after the opening run.

American-born Eileen Gu of China cranked out the first 1620 of her career on her final jump, stunning France's Tess Ledeux and earning the first of what she hopes will be three gold medals in women's free-style big air.

Nicknamed the "Snow Princess," Gu is among the biggest local names at the Beijing Games. She's a medal favorite in big air, slopestyle and halfpipe. Her first stab at gold came down to the last round.

Ledeux is the only other woman to ever land a 1620 -- 4 1/2 spins -- in competition, and she stomped one out with a slight wobble on the landing in Round 1.

Gu hinted after qualifying Monday that she might be able to match Ledeux. With everything on the line, she did.

The 18-year-old from San Francisco shrieked when she landed the jump, then dropped to her knees when her score of 94.50 was announced.

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Ledeux tried to improve on her second run in Round 3, coming into the jump backward for a switch 1440. She was shaky on the landing, though, clearing the way for Gu's gold.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki wore a Team USA pin and brought a Team USA water bottle to the daily White House briefing.

She noted that the administration did not send a diplomatic delegation to the Olympics because of the "ongoing genocide and crimes against humanity in Xinjiang and other human rights abuses."

"At the same time, we wanted to note that Team USA has our full support. We're behind them. We're watching from home. We want to thank them and their families for everything they've sacrificed over the course of time."

Psaki described herself as a "Olympics-obsessed person," and she mentioned figure skater Nathan Chen — "we're going to watch him" — snowboarder Chloe Kim and skier Mikaela Shiffrin, who fell in her first event, the giant slalom, and was disqualified, but expects to compete in additional races.

A second Finland men's hockey player has been taken to an isolation hotel after testing positive for the coronavirus in Beijing.

Goaltender Jussi Olkinuora has joined forward Marko Anttila in isolation. The Finnish Olympic Committee confirmed Olkinuora was taken Monday and that Anttila remains there.

A spokesman for the Finnish Olympic Committee says Olkinuora and Anttila recovered from COVID-19 last month and tested negative to travel to Beijing. Neither Olkinuora nor Anttila have reported any symptoms.

The Finnish Olympic Committee is unsure when either player could be released. The team plays its first game Thursday.

Today in History

By The Associated Press undefined

Today in History

Today is Wednesday, Feb. 9, the 40th day of 2022. There are 325 days left in the year.

Today's Highlights in History:

On Feb. 9, 1971, a magnitude 6.6 earthquake in California's San Fernando Valley claimed 65 lives. The crew of Apollo 14 returned to Earth after man's third landing on the moon.

On this date:

In 1825, the House of Representatives elected John Quincy Adams president after no candidate received a majority of electoral votes.

In 1942, the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff held its first formal meeting to coordinate military strategy during World War II.

In 1943, the World War II battle of Guadalcanal in the southwest Pacific ended with an Allied victory over Japanese forces.

In 1950, in a speech in Wheeling, West Virginia, Republican Sen. Joseph McCarthy of Wisconsin charged that the State Department was riddled with Communists.

In 1962, an agreement was signed to make Jamaica an independent nation within the British Commonwealth later in the year.

In 1963, the Boeing 727 went on its first-ever flight as it took off from Renton, Washington.

In 1964, the Beatles made their first live American television appearance on "The Ed Sullivan Show," broadcast from New York on CBS. The G.I. Joe action figure was introduced at the American International Toy Fair in New York.

In 1984, Soviet leader Yuri V. Andropov, 69, died 15 months after succeeding Leonid Brezhnev; he was followed by Konstantin U. Chernenko (chehr-NYEN'-koh).

In 1986, during its latest visit to the solar system, Halley's Comet came closest to the sun (its next return will be in 2061).

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In 2002, Britain's Princess Margaret, sister of Queen Elizabeth II, died in London at age 71.

In 2009, New York Yankees third baseman Alex Rodriguez admitted to taking performance-enhancing drugs, telling ESPN he'd used banned substances while with the Texas Rangers for three years.

In 2020, "Parasite," from South Korea, won the best picture Oscar, becoming the first foreign-language film to take home the biggest honor in film.

Ten years ago: President Barack Obama freed 10 states from some of the toughest requirements of the No Child Left Behind education law. The Pentagon formally opened thousands of jobs to women in units that were closer to the front lines than ever before. Former skiing champion Jill Kinmont Boothe, who became a painter and a teacher after she was paralyzed during a race and was the subject of a book and two Hollywood films, died in Carson City, Nevada, at 75.

Five years ago: A federal appeals court refused to reinstate President Donald Trump's ban on travelers from seven predominantly Muslim nations, unanimously rejecting the administration's claim of presidential authority, questioning its motives and concluding that the order was unlikely to survive legal challenges. Trump reaffirmed America's long-standing "one China" policy in a phone call with Chinese President Xi Jinping, potentially alleviating concerns about a major shift in Washington's relations with Beijing.

One year ago: The Senate moved ahead with a second impeachment trial of former President Donald Trump, rejecting arguments that the chamber could not proceed because Trump was no longer in office. House prosecutors opened the trial with graphic video of the Jan. 6 insurrection at the U.S. Capitol and Trump's own calls for a rally crowd to march to the iconic building and "fight like hell" against his reelection defeat; Trump's lawyers insisted that his remarks were protected by the First Amendment. A team of international and Chinese scientists looking for the origins of COVID-19 said it most likely appeared in humans after jumping from an animal. Federal safety officials blamed the January 2020 helicopter crash that killed former NBA star Kobe Bryant and eight others on the pilot's decision to fly into clouds, where he became disoriented. Chick Corea, a jazz pianist who'd pushed the boundaries of the genre, died of cancer at 79.

Today's Birthdays: Actor Janet Suzman is 83. Nobel Prize-winning author J.M. Coetzee is 82. Actor-politician Sheila James Kuehl (kyool) (TV: "The Many Loves of Dobie Gillis") is 81. Singer-songwriter Carole King is 80. Actor Joe Pesci is 79. Singer Barbara Lewis is 79. Author Alice Walker is 78. Actor Mia Farrow is 77. Former Sen. Jim Webb, D-Va., is 76. Singer Joe Ely is 75. Actor Judith Light is 73. Actor Charles Shaughnessy is 67. Actor Ed Amatrudo is 66. Former Virginia Gov. Terry McAuliffe is 65. Jazz musician Steve Wilson is 61. Country singer Travis Tritt is 59. Actor Julie Warner is 57. Country singer Danni Leigh is 52. Actor Sharon Case is 51. Actor Jason George is 50. Actor Amber Valletta is 48. Actor-producer Charlie Day is 46. Rock singer Chad Wolf (Carolina Liar) is 46. Actor A.J. Buckley is 45. Rock musician Richard On (O.A.R.) is 43. Actor Ziyi (zee yee) Zhang is 43. Olympic silver and bronze medal figure skater Irina Slutskaya is 43. Actor Tom Hiddleston is 41. Actor David Gallagher is 37. Actor Michael B. Jordan is 35. Actor Rose Leslie is 35. Actor Camille Winbush is 32. Actor Jimmy Bennett is 26. Actor Evan Roe (TV: "Madam Secretary") is 22.