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DOGE official takes a leadership role at USAID, an agency Musk's team has helped dismantle

By **MATT BROWN and ELLEN KNICKMEYER**
Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — A senior official at Elon Musk's Department of Government Efficiency is taking a leadership role at the U.S. Agency for International Development, according to an email obtained by The Associated Press, giving DOGE a top job at an agency that it has helped to dismantle. Jeremy Lewin, who has played a central role in DOGE's government-cutting efforts at USAID and other federal agencies, becomes at least the second DOGE lieutenant to be appointed to a top job at an agency during the Trump administration, further formalizing the work of Musk's associates in the federal government. The integral role that DOGE teams have played in the administration's push to dramatically reduce the size of the government has been divisive among the public and lawmakers. Musk has faced heavy blowback from some and support from others for his chainsaw-

wielding approach to laying off workers and slashing programs. Pete Marocco, a Trump administration political appointee who was serving as deputy head of USAID, disclosed the change in an email Tuesday to State Department staff. It comes after Marocco and DOGE oversaw the gutting of 83% of USAID contracts, shifting the remaining programs under the State Department. Marocco said in his email that he will serve as the State Department's director of foreign assistance. State Department spokeswoman Tammy Bruce on Wednesday confirmed his appointment. She told reporters it was "an indispensable role in aligning all U.S. government foreign assistance with the president's priorities." Marocco wrote that Secretary of State Marco Rubio will "effective immediately" designate Lewin as deputy administrator for policy and programs at USAID and as chief operating officer. The move comes as multiple proposals circulate among



Pete Marocco, a political appointee focused on gutting USAID, departs after briefing the House Foreign Affairs Committee behind closed doors, on Capitol Hill in Washington, Wednesday, March 5, 2025.

Associated Press

State Department and USAID officials on what foreign assistance programs to save and how to carry them out as the Trump administration works to scrap the aid and development agency. Marocco's email was sent the same day a federal judge ruled that Musk and DOGE likely lacked constitutional authority to help the Trump administration shut down State Department and USAID foreign assistance, fire staffers and terminate humanitarian and

development contracts. In a ruling Tuesday, U.S. District Judge Theodore Chuang in Maryland indefinitely blocked DOGE from making further cuts to the agency. The ruling came in a lawsuit filed by USAID employees and contractors, who argued that Musk and DOGE are wielding power that the Constitution reserves only for those who win elections or are confirmed by the Senate. Their lawyers said the ruling "effectively halts or

reverses" many of the steps taken to dismantle the agency. The lawsuit was aimed specifically at DOGE, and the ruling suggested that similar moves from designated officials at USAID would not necessarily run afoul of the Constitution in the same way. In February, the Treasury Department designated another worker associated with DOGE, Tom Krause, to perform the functions of an assistant secretary at the agency. That came after Democratic lawmakers and others expressed alarm at DOGE's access to Treasury's payment systems. In this week's actions, Rubio also designated Kenneth Jackson as administrator for management and resources who will also serve as the agency's chief financial officer, according to Marocco's email. President Donald Trump also recently appointed Jackson as acting president of the U.S. Institute for Peace, a government think tank meant to promote conflict resolution. □

U.S. births rose last year, but experts don't see it as a trend

By **MIKE STOBBE**
AP Medical Writer

NEW YORK (AP) — U.S. births rose slightly last year, but experts don't see it as evidence of reversing a long-term decline. A little over 3.6 million births were reported for 2024,

according to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention preliminary data. That's 22,250 more than the final tally of 2023 U.S. births, which was released Tuesday. The 2024 total is likely to grow at least a little when

the numbers are finalized, but another set of preliminary data shows overall birth rates rose only for one group of people: Hispanic women. The rise less than 1% may just be a small fluctuation in the middle of a broader trend, said Hans-Peter Kohler, a University of Pennsylvania sociologist who studies family demographics. "I'd be hesitant to read much into the 2023-24 increase, and certainly not as an indication of a reversal of the trend towards lower or declining U.S. fertility," Kohler said, adding that more analysis is needed to understand any changes that happened in birth patterns last year. U.S. births and birth rates have been falling for years. They dropped most

years after the 2008-09 recession, aside from a 2014 uptick. They also dropped in 2020, the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic, then rose for two straight years after that, an increase experts partly attributed to pregnancies put off amid the pandemic. A 2% drop in 2023 put U.S. births at fewer than 3.6 million, the lowest one-year tally since 1979. Vermont had the lowest birth rate that year, and Utah had the highest, according to Tuesday's 86-page report on 2023 birth data. The report, based on a review of all the birth certificates filed that year, shows the average age of mothers at first birth has continued to rise, hitting 27 1/2 years. It was 21 1/2 in the early 1970s, before begin-

ning a steady climb. Birth rates have long been falling for teenagers and younger women, but were rising for women in their 30s and 40s a reflection of women pursuing education and careers before trying to start families, experts say. But in 2023, birth rates fell for women in almost all age groups, include women in their early 40s. Preliminary birth rate data for 2024 shows a continued decrease among teenagers and women in their early 20s. But it also showed increases for women in their late 20s, due entirely to a rise in births to Hispanic women. Increases also were seen for women in their 30s, due to rises among Hispanic and white women, and those in their 40s, due to rises among white women. □



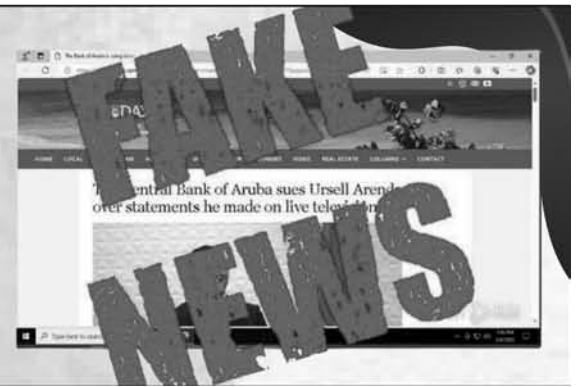
A pregnant woman stands for a portrait in Dallas, Thursday, May 18, 2023.

Associated Press

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Maine found in violation of Title IX over transgender athletes after Trump clashed with governor

By COLLIN BINKLEY
AP Education Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) —

Maine's education office is being ordered to ban transgender athletes from girls' and women's sports or face federal prosecution, an escalation in President Donald Trump's threats to pull federal money from states and schools over transgender athletes.

The U.S. Education Department on Wednesday said an investigation concluded Maine's education office violated the Title IX antidiscrimination law by allowing transgender girls to compete on girls' sports teams and use girls' facilities. It's giving Maine 10 days to comply with a list of demands or face Justice Department prosecution.

"If Maine does not swiftly and completely come into compliance with Title IX, we will initiate the process to limit MDOE's access to fed-



President Donald Trump walks down the stairs of Air Force One upon his arrival at Joint Base Andrews, Md., Monday, March 17, 2025.

Associated Press

eral funding," Craig Trainor, acting assistant secretary for civil rights, said in a statement.

The federal investigation

into Maine's Department of Education was opened Feb. 21, just hours after Trump and the state's Democratic governor, Janet

Mills, clashed over the issue at a meeting of governors at the White House. During the heated exchange, Mills told the Republican

president, "We'll see you in court."

Messages to Mills' office and the state's education department were not immediately answered.

It's an astonishing turnaround for a civil rights investigation at the Education Department, which often takes months or years to resolve cases. The Trump administration has pushed harder and faster to punish alleged violators, in some cases drawing accusations that it's bypassing due process procedures required by law.

The proposed resolution would require Maine's schools to forbid transgender girls from participating in any sports program or using any locker room or bathroom designated for girls. It would also force the state to accept the Trump administration's definition of sex as male or female only. □

Pentagon reviews plans to cut troops handling migrants at Guantánamo by as much as half

By LOLITA C. BALDOR

Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Military officials are reviewing plans that would cut the number of U.S. troops deployed to the Guantánamo Bay naval base in Cuba to handle detained migrants by as much as half, because there are no detainees there now and the program has stumbled during legal challenges, The Associated Press has learned. U.S. officials said the military's Southern Command was asked to give Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth a plan that would outline how many troops are actually needed and what additional space may be required if more de-

tainees are sent there.

That plan, said officials, is expected to recommend that a number of the troops be sent home and one official said the decision could chop the 900 troops there now in half. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because the decisions are not yet finalized. Southern Command is preparing options that would address the fact that there have been no migrants transferred to the base since early March, but the administration has warned that future "high-threat" detainees may be sent to the base.

U.S. authorities have transferred at least 290 detainees

to Guantánamo since February. But on March 11, the 40 people still housed there were flown off the base to Louisiana.

The base is best known for housing foreigners associated with the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, but it has a separate facility used for decades to hold migrants intercepted trying to reach the U.S. by sea. That use had been expanded recently to include some of the migrants swept up in President Donald Trump's broader campaign to secure the southern border. Trump has said he will send the worst criminal migrants to Guantánamo Bay, but civil rights attorneys say

many detainees transferred there don't have a criminal record and that the admin-

istration has exceeded its authority in violation of U.S. immigration law. □



In this Aug. 29, 2021, file photo reviewed by U.S. military officials, a flag flies at half-staff as seen from Camp Justice in Guantánamo Bay Naval Base, Cuba.

Associated Press

Minnesota jury convicts alleged ringleader of massive pandemic food fraud scheme on all counts

MINNEAPOLIS (AP) — A jury found the alleged ringleader of a massive pandemic fraud case in Minnesota guilty on all counts Wednesday for her role in a scheme that federal prosecutors say stole \$250 million from a program meant to feed children in need.

Aimee Bock, the founder of Feeding Our Future, the group that prosecutors say was at the heart of the plot, was one of 70 defendants charged in the overall case, said to be one of the country's largest frauds against COVID-19 relief programs.

The Minnesota case has also drawn attention for an attempt to bribe a juror in an earlier trial and witness tampering in Bock's trial, which began last month. Thirty-seven defendants have already pleaded guilty, while five were convicted in a group of defendants who were tried last year.

The jury also convicted a co-defendant, Salim Ahmed Said, the owner of the now-defunct Safari Restaurant in Minneapolis.

Bock and Said were charged with multiple counts involving conspiracy, wire fraud and bribery. Said was also charged with money laundering. Bock allegedly pocketed nearly



Aimee Bock, founder and executive director of the nonprofit organization Feeding Our Future, arrives at the Minneapolis federal courthouse with her attorney, Ken Udoibok, right, on Wednesday, March 19, 2025, in Minneapolis, Minn.

Associated Press

\$2 million, while Said was accused of taking around \$5 million. They both maintained their innocence and testified at trial.

In closing arguments, prosecutors said the evidence showed that Bock and Said exploited the chaos of the early days of the pandemic by submitting falsified paperwork to enrich themselves and failed to provide anywhere near as many meals to needy children as they claimed.

Defense attorneys did not

dispute that there was massive fraud but insisted that their clients were not responsible for it.

Bock's attorney said she was deceived by dishonest people and tried to cut them off whenever she suspected fraud. Said's attorney blamed his client's business partner.

Federal prosecutors alleged that the conspiracy revolved around Feeding Our Future and another small nonprofit that were approved as sponsors of

the Federal Child Nutrition Program before the pandemic.

They dramatically grew as the pandemic took hold, and Feeding Our Future went from receiving and disbursing \$3.4 million in federal funds in 2019 to nearly \$200 million in 2021. Food sites it sponsored falsely claimed to be serving thousands of children daily, prosecutors allege. Besides fraudulently obtaining and disbursing more than \$240 million in feder-

al funds, prosecutors say, Bock and other Feeding Our Future employees solicited and received bribes and kickbacks from other participants connected with the scheme.

The defendants are being tried in several groups. The first trial was marred by an alleged attempt by some defendants and people linked with them to bribe a juror with a bag of \$120,000 in cash. That juror went straight to police. That led to tighter security for Bock's trial and additional precautions ordered by U.S. District Judge Nancy Brasel.

Despite all that, an allegation of witness tampering surfaced midway through the proceedings. A defendant scheduled for trial in August approached a government witness who was due to testify against Bock and Said and asked to speak with him in a courthouse bathroom. That witness declined and instead told his lawyer, who informed prosecutors.

That defendant, Abdinasir Abshir, 32, of Lakeville, soon agreed to plead guilty to a wire fraud charge and to have his tampering attempt factored into a longer sentencing recommendation, which isn't binding on the judge. □

Technician says Florida thrill ride operator ignored his safety concerns before teen's fatal fall



ICON Park attractions, The Wheel, left, Orlando SlingShot, middle, and Orlando FreeFall, right, are shown in Orlando, Fla., on Thursday, March 24, 2022.

Associated Press

By MIKE SCHNEIDER

Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. (AP) — A maintenance technician alleged on Wednesday that he raised safety issues with the operators of a central Florida amusement ride before a 14-year-old boy fell to his death, but his concerns were never addressed.

Austin Campbell-Alexander said in the state whistleblower lawsuit that the Orlando Free Fall ride at Icon Park had sensors which were modified to accommodate people whose height or weight were outside safety limits. He also alleged that overheated cylinders prevented seats from securing properly and that the drop ride's metal structure had cracks in its joints. Campbell-Alexander also said he and his colleagues weren't given any training on ride maintenance or patron safety.

"He brought these concerns to his manager and the owner of the ride, and basically they didn't do what they should have done," Greg Schmitz, one of his attorneys, said in a phone interview.

A spokeswoman for the ride operators didn't immediately respond to an emailed inquiry.

Tyre Sampson fell 70 feet (21 meters) to his death on March 24, 2022. A football standout who stood 6 foot, 2 inches tall (1.9 meters) and weighed 380 pounds (172 kilograms), he was visiting Orlando on spring break from the St. Louis area.

Sampson went with friends to the amusement park on International Drive in the heart of the region's tourism district, and they rode the Orlando Free Fall, which placed 30 riders in seats attached to a tower. □

The EU wants to break its security dependency on the U.S. and buy more European weapons

By **LORNE COOK**
Associated Press

BRUSSELS (AP) — The European Union on Wednesday announced a new drive to break its security dependency on the United States, with a focus on buying more defense equipment in Europe.

The EU's executive branch unveiled its "Readiness 2030" security strategy with the threat of Russian aggression at the forefront of concerns. NATO intelligence estimates suggest that Russia could be capable of launching an attack in Europe again in three to five years.

Last month, the Trump administration signaled that U.S. security priorities lay elsewhere on its own borders and in Asia and that Europeans would have to fend for themselves and Ukraine in the future. That was as Europe's biggest land war in decades entered its fourth year.

Under the strategy, member countries will be urged to buy much of their military equipment in Europe, working mostly with European suppliers in some cases with EU help to cut prices and speed up orders. They should only purchase equipment from abroad when costs, performance or supply delays make it



European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, left, speaks with European Union foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas during the weekly College of Commissioners meeting at EU headquarters in Brussels, Wednesday, March 19, 2025.

Associated Press

preferable.

In recent years, the 27 EU nations have placed about two-thirds of their orders with U.S. defense companies. To qualify for new loans, they would have to buy at least 65% of equipment from suppliers in the EU, Norway or Ukraine.

"The security architecture that we relied on can no longer be taken for granted," European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said.

"We must buy more Euro-

pean. Because that means strengthening the European defense, technological and industrial base. That means stimulating innovation. And that means creating an EU-wide market for defense equipment," she added.

The strategy resembles the RepowerEU scheme that the commission proposed in 2022 to wean the bloc off Russian natural gas after President Vladimir Putin ordered his forces into Ukraine and used energy

as a weapon to try to undermine EU support for Kyiv. That strategy saw the EU's dependence on Russian gas imports fall from 45% in 2021 to 15% in 2023.

The new blueprint was unveiled on the eve of a summit of EU government leaders. At emergency talks on March 6, they signed off on proposals to ease budget restrictions and create a 150-billion-euro (\$164 billion) loan plan for defense projects.

Defense firms in the U.S.,

U.K., and Turkey would be excluded from the loan plan unless those governments sign security agreements with the EU.

France has pushed the "buy European" approach, but countries like Poland and the Netherlands want to buy U.S. equipment.

EU nations are also encouraged to boost security ties with NATO allies that are not members of the EU, including Britain, Canada, Norway, Australia, Japan, South Korea and India.

The strategy notes that while the United States remains a key Western ally, it has been clear "that it believes it is over-committed in Europe and needs to rebalance, reducing its historical role as a primary security guarantor."

Andrius Kubilius, the EU's recently appointed and first-ever defense commissioner, warned that "450 million European Union citizens should not have to depend on 340 million Americans to defend ourselves."

Spending priorities for joint purchase would be air and missile defense systems, artillery, ammunition, drones, equipment for use in cyber and electronic warfare, and "strategic enablers" like air-to-air refueling and land border security installations. □

Rights group says Pakistan steps up pressure on Afghans to return home where they risk persecution

By **MUNIR AHMED**
Associated Press

ISLAMABAD (AP) — A leading rights group said on Wednesday that Pakistan's authorities have intensified pressure on Afghan refugees to go back to neighboring Afghanistan, where they risk persecution by the Taliban and face dire economic conditions.

"Pakistani officials should immediately stop coercing Afghans to return home and give those facing expulsion the opportunity to seek protection," said Elaine Pearson, Asia director at New York-

based Human Rights Watch. "The Taliban authorities in Afghanistan should prevent any reprisals against returning Afghans and reverse their abusive policies against women and girls," she said.

Pakistan set a March 31 deadline for the deportation of all foreigners living illegally in the country. Most of them are Afghans.

The HRW appeal came a month after the Afghan Embassy in Islamabad said that Pakistan has stepped up arrests of Afghan citizens in Islamabad and nearby

Rawalpindi for forced expulsion.

However, Pakistan has dismissed the allegation by Kabul, saying that the authorities were only trying to facilitate conditions for the swift return of Afghans to their home country.

More than 500,000 Afghans who fled the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in 2021 have been living without papers in Pakistan, thousands of them waiting for resettlement in the United States and elsewhere.

There are also around 1.45 million Afghan refugees, reg-

istered with the U.N. refugee agency, most of whom fled during the 1979-1989 Soviet occupation of their country. Last July, Pakistan extended

the stay of refugees registered with UNHCR until June, saying they won't be arrested or deported at least until the extension expires. □



Taliban fighters stand near the closed Torkham border with Pakistan, where Pakistani and Afghan forces exchanged fire overnight, in Torkham, Afghanistan, Monday, March 3, 2025.

Associated Press

Russia and Ukraine swap hundreds of prisoners in one of the war's largest exchanges

By **HANNA ARHIROVA**
Associated Press
CHERNIHIV REGION, Ukraine

(AP) — Russia and Ukraine said Wednesday they had each swapped 175 prisoners in one of the largest exchanges since the Russian full-scale invasion started three years ago.

"We are bringing back soldiers, sergeants, and officers — warriors who fought for our freedom in the ranks of the Armed Forces, the Navy, the National Guard, the Territorial Defense Forces, and the Border Guard Service," said Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

The Ukrainian leader said Tuesday that releasing all prisoners of war as well as captured civilians would be an important step toward peace and could help build trust between the two countries. He has repeatedly called for an "all-for-all" prisoner exchange.

This comes as ongoing discussions about a temporary ceasefire that may pause the war continue.

Warm reunions
Shortly after the exchange took place near the north-



Ukrainian servicemen react after returning from captivity during a POWs exchange between Russia and Ukraine, in Ukraine, Wednesday, March 19, 2025.

ern border of the two warring countries, dozens of anxious families rushed to a hospital in Ukraine's Chernihiv region set to receive the released prisoners.

Among them was 28-year-old Aliona Skuibida who has been campaigning for nearly three years for the return of her fiancé, Andrii

Orel, captured in April 2022 during the brutal battle for Mariupol, which eventually fell to Russian forces.

Skuibida, a member of the Marine Corps Strength Association, said they were to marry as soon as he returned from the battlefield but he fell into Russian hands instead. "Captivity is not a

way to survive," she said, adding that many soldiers return from Russian captivity bearing signs of torture. But on Wednesday, Skuibida was ready to celebrate Orel's return with blue and yellow balloons and a cake. "His birthday was the day before," she said.

Several buses then pulled

into the hospital grounds. As frail and visibly exhausted soldiers poured out of the vehicles, their faces lit up. Some smiled, showing lost teeth.

"Until I saw our flag, I couldn't believe I was home," said 46-year-old Oleksandr Savov. "And then I kissed it." Next to him stood his daughter, Anastasiia Savova, 25, who hadn't heard from her father in nearly three years. She faithfully wrote him letters while he was held captive that went unanswered.

"All I want now is peace, a bowl of borsch, a chance to wash, and to lie down in a clean bed," Oleksandr Savov said. He believes he lost about 20 kilograms (about 44 pounds) during his imprisonment since May, saying conditions were "cold and damp," with poor nutrition and no medical care. Savov, 46, showed an Associated Press reporter his hands covered in a red rash.

As families reunited, there were others still missing. Some moved through the crowd, carrying photos of their missing relatives, desperately asking released POWs if they had seen them. □

Associated Press

Mexico's attorney general cites irregularities in investigation of alleged cartel killing site

Associated Press
MEXICO CITY (AP) — Mex-

ico's attorney general on Wednesday reported irregularities in an investigation by state authorities into an alleged cartel killing site and training camp at a ranch in the western state of Jalisco where people searching for relatives found hundreds of articles of clothing and other personal effects.

The ranch in the town of Teuchitlan, outside Guadalajara, was found by authorities in September 2024. Six months later, a so-called search collective found charred bone fragments and personal items, raising questions about the original investigation by the Jalisco State Prosecutor's Office.

Attorney General Alejan-

dro Gertz Manero, whose office took over the investigation last week, said that investigators in Jalisco failed to register evidence

and fingerprints and process vehicles found at the ranch, three of which were later stolen.

He said local authorities

didn't investigate the ownership of the ranch and failed to scientifically analyze locations at the ranch to understand if they were used as crematoriums. Investigators did not arrest local officials who have been linked to activities at the ranch, he said.

Gertz Manero said federal prosecutors were also not alerted about the site, as is standard procedure, and cast blame on the state prosecutor's office despite the National Guard carrying out an operation at the site carried out last year. There is still not enough information to confirm if the ranch was used to cremate bodies or train cartel members, he added.

The Jalisco Search Warriors group last week shared images that shocked many in

a country that's long accustomed to stark news of cartel warfare, forced disappearances and government corruption. The images and videos showed dozens of shoes, piles of clothing and what appeared to be human bone fragments. Such collectives have long risked their lives to seek answers about what has happened to Mexico's 120,000 disappeared people in the face of rampant impunity. Vigils took place over the weekend for the victims of the alleged site.

On Monday, a video was circulated showing masked and heavily armed men who read a statement identifying themselves as the Jalisco New Generation cartel and questioning the motivations of the searchers. □



This photo released by the Jalisco State Attorney General's Office shows investigators classifying objects found at the Izaguirre Ranch, where skeletal remains were discovered, in the municipality of Teuchitlan, Mexico, Tuesday, March 11, 2025.

Associated Press

Aruba's Bocas: home to the rarest fossil reefs on the planet!

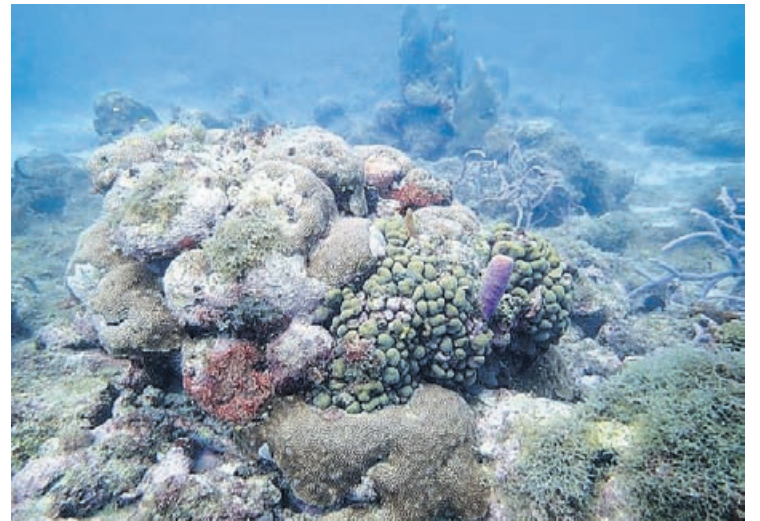
(Oranjestad)—If you've been to the northern coast of Aruba already, you've probably noticed how the ground differs entirely from the sandy beaches on the southern part of the island. These hard surfaces, with sharp bumps and holes are actually fossilized coral reefs, of which its growth and changes can be traced back to the last glacial period.

On May 30 2023, geoscientists, Dr. Patrick Boyden

from the Marum research faculty at the University of Bremen, Prof. dr. Alessio Rovere from the Ca' Foscari University of Venice and Prof. dr. Gianfranco Scicchitano, from the University of Bari Aldo Moro, presented their research on these fossilized coral reefs at the University of Aruba. Their focus for their research included studying the health and formation patterns of these coral reefs, and to investigate how these reefs have responded and can

respond to fluctuating sea levels or extreme weather, like hurricanes and tsunamis.

Through underwater and land surveillance, and 3D models of the reefs, they were able to narrow down when these formations started to take place. They were also able to track the fluctuation of sea levels during the past hundred or even thousands of years, and the effects that this fluctuation has had on the



coral reefs of the windward side of Aruba.

reefs have formed.

These findings can certainly put things into perspective. The ground on which we have walked many times in the northern part of the island hold such rich history, history that dates back to a time that most of us cannot even imagine. As the scientists themselves have pointed out, these fossilized reefs on the windward side are truly an incredible and rare remnant of geological history, as they provide a clear view of how these

This research is also important for the future of coral reefs on the island. By studying rising sea levels and climate impact on these coral reefs, we are able to take concrete action in protecting and preserving our coral reefs. So, if you are ever visiting one of the bocas or driving along the northern part of the island, please be conscious to help protect our natural historical remnant. Oh, and wear (coral-friendly) sunscreen! ☐

Dining in? Try making a local favorite How to make "funchi hasa"

(Oranjestad)—A night in can be just as fun as a night out on the town, especially if you got the right snacks to munch on. One of the most famous Aruban snacks or appetizers is "funchi hasa" (fried polenta sticks). A super easy meal that adults and children will both enjoy. Here's how to make it!

Before we start, get to know the basics

So what is funchi hasa? Funchi, or Aruban polenta, is a popular side dish for local dishes, like soups, stews and fried fish. Made from a corn flour, water and butter mixture, this appetizer is traditionally eaten alongside a warm meal. However, locals also like to fry sticks of funchi for a quick and filling snack.

Ingredients (measured by heart)

1. Polenta flour*
2. Water
3. Butter
4. Salt to taste

Directions

Bring water to a boil in a medium-sized sauce pan. Add in some salt and butter to taste in the boiling water and let this dissolve and melt. Then, gradually add the flour while stirring with a wooden spoon. The mixture will start to begin to harden pretty fast, so be careful not to add too much. At this phase of cooking, you want a goopy thick mixture, but thin enough so you can continue to stir to get all the lumps out.

After reaching a semi-firm, yet flexible texture, grab a baking pan or any large, deep plate, and pour the mixture in. Be sure that this plate is wet or greased so that the mixture does not stick to the bottom. Let this cool completely while it firms up for the last time. Once it's cooled you can enjoy it as is, topped with some butter or shredded cheese. Or, you can take it to another level of deliciousness.

When your funchi is firm enough, cut it into strips (size is up to you). Heat up some oil in a pan and fry those babies up! After frying, you can top it with some cheese or enjoy it with your favorite



dipping sauce.

Note: We recommend the FUNCHI FRESKU polenta flour brand that is sold in all supermarkets on the island. You can also use yellow corn flour from the brand PAN. ☐

Photo credit of fried funchi sticks: Jacqueline Felida on Pinterest.



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Don't miss out on L'Avenue's Early Bird Special!



(Oranjestad)—Up to grab an early dinner after a day of shopping or cruising? Take advantage of L'Avenue's Early Bird Special, and experience their innovative twist of traditional Belgian cuisine!

Located in a cozy nook at The Cove Mall—a short walking distance from the Holiday Inn and Paseo Herencia, this Belgian and French bistro offers a delicious and rich menu available through lunch and dinner from 11am to

10pm. Enjoy your lunch and/or dinner in a cool, air-conditioned interior area of the restaurant, accompanied by the warm lights and chic design that emphasizes the restaurant's laid-back, yet sophisticated ambience.

Lunch includes a variety of sandwiches—with a healthy selection of bread options—if you're going for a light meal, but just like their dinner selection, also includes steak, chicken, fish, and even mussels and rabbit if you're craving a bit more of L'Avenue's exquisite menu. And let's not forget their wide selection of Belgian beer and European wine to complete the tasty experience!

But that's not all! L'Avenue is offering their guests their Early Bird Special, available every day from 4pm to 7pm. Enjoy this affordable and



delectable 3-course meal special at a comfortable price of \$29.50 per guest, which includes a selection of their fine in-house wine.

L'Avenue honors and takes



pride in serving the traditional Belgian and French flavors, but does not shy away from offering a flexible menu for their guests' needs. That's right, L'Avenue also offers to cater for their guests' dietary restrictions, making sure that each guest gets well taken care of!

More information

L'Avenue is situated at The Cove Mall in Palm Beach and is open every day from 11am to 10pm for lunch and dinner. To book a reservation or ask for more information, please contact their phone line at +297 6996400, send an e-mail info@lavenuearuba.com, or visit their website at lavenuearuba.com □



ORANJESTAD — You are back and we would like to portrait you! By inviting you to send us your favorite vacation picture while enjoying our Happy Island.

Aruba to me

Complete the sentence: Aruba to me is Send your picture with that text (including your name and where you are from) to: news@arubatoday.com and we will publish your vacation memory. Isn't that a special way to keep your best moments alive? Please do note: By submitting photos, text or any other materials, you give permission to The Aruba Today Newspaper, Caribbean Speed Printers and any of its affiliated companies to use said materials, as well as names, likeness, etc. for promotional purposes without compensation. Last but not least: check out our website, Instagram and Facebook page! Thank you for supporting our free newspaper, we strive to make you a happy reader every day again. For today we received a lovely message from Lisa M. Kress.

She wrote to us saying: "Aruba to me is an annual 'family reunion' of the friendships we have made over the years with people from all over the world since becoming timeshare owners at Casa del Mar over 30 years ago. Each year, the group evolves and grows at our home away from home. And each of the four weeks we are here is filled with different friends as vacations begin and end. Di Berman (Cape Cod, MA) the organizer of our annual week 9 beach friends photo, lovingly knitted 22 Aruba flag scarves at home and brought them to Aruba for us to wear for this year's photo. It turned out that there were not enough scarves because almost everyone Di invited to share in this happy occasion actually showed up!" Thank you for sending us this wonderful message sharing what Aruba means to you with us and our readers! □

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Aruba Tourism Authority honored loyal visitors at Casa del Mar Beach Resort!

The Aruba Tourism Authority recently had the great pleasure of recognizing Goodwill Ambassadors and Distinguished Visitors of Aruba. The honorees were respectively honored with a certificate for their years of visits, loyalty, and love for the island of Aruba.

The honorary certification is presented on behalf of the Minister of Tourism as a token of appreciation and to say "Masha Danki" to guests who have visited Aruba 10, 20, or 35 years or more consecutively.

The three levels of honor are as follows:

Distinguished Visitor (10>years consecutively visiting Aruba)

Goodwill Ambassador (20>years consecutively visiting Aruba)

Emerald Ambassador (35>years consecutively visiting Aruba)

The honorees were:

Goodwill Ambassadors

Mr. Micheal Barone and Mrs. Dinise Barone from Avon, Massachusetts, United States.

Distinguished Visitors

Family McCarthy from Pembroke, Massachusetts, United States.



Ms. Keyttin Silva representing the Aruba Tourism Authority, and staff members of Casa del Mar Beach Resort bestowed the certificate upon the honorees, presented them with gifts, and thanked them for choosing Aruba as their favorite vacation destination, as their home away from home.

The top reasons for returning to Aruba provided by the honorees were:

- Aruba's friendly people and safety.

- Aruba's beach and sun and sand.
- Aruba's beautiful water.
- The love for the Aruban people.
- Great place to spend quality time with family
- Aruba's great food.

On behalf of the Aruba Tourism Authority, we would like to express our sincere gratitude and appreciation to the honorees for their continued visits to the "One Happy Island". ☐

Enjoy one of the best views on Aruba at the top of the Hooiberg Hill



(Oranjestad)—If you are a regular hiker, or maybe want to spice up your morning work out session, then you might enjoy one of the most popular climbing sites on the island: The Hooiberg Hill. Accompanied with a 600-step staircase, this hill overlooks a great part of the island, the Caribbean sea, and sometimes even the Santa Anna mountain located in the coastal state of Falcon in Venezuela, providing one of the best views you can get on Aruba.



located at the center district of the island, Santa Cruz, the Hooiberg Hill is the second highest point on the island at 165 meters above sea level (or about 540 feet above sea level). The highest point is Jamanota Hill at 189 meters (620 feet), located in the Arikok National Park.

The staircase that run on the side of the hill was first built in 1951, when Mr. Eduardo Tromp constructed it. At that time, the staircase consisted of 900 steps. Over time, as the steps faced erosion, the government decided to renovate these stairs in 1991. This new project delivered the newer staircase with only 587 steps. However, don't be fooled—it may still be a work out to get on top. In addition, there is now a gazebo placed



halfway up the stair for a little rest. The view at this resting stop is also a sight to see.

The best time to climb the hill would be early in the morning or right before sunset, as it may not be as hot. However, the hill is of course open all day, every day. ☐

Visit the natural bridges of Aruba!



(Oranjestad)—After you've visited the Alto Vista Church, the Bushiribana Gold Mill Ruins and the mini natural pool that is located right next to it, you're next up around the northern coast line must be the Natural Bridge. Once the largest natural bridge in the Caribbean, this bridge has been a tourist attraction for many years.

The bridge was formed during thousands of years, cut and crafted by the wild waves that crash into the coral stone walls of the coast. Before its collapse, this bridge measured 30 meters in length and 7 meters in height, making it the biggest natural bridge in the Caribbean at the time. For

many years, this site was also a frequently visited beach, as the bridge had a small opening through which the water would flow into the tiny beach.

Unfortunately in 2005, the bridge collapsed, and the little beach dried up. Despite this, this site remained a tourist attraction, with many visitors walking along the coral cliffs of the bridge to see the spectacular view of the northern coastline and the Caribbean Sea. Visitors can also still visit the souvenir shop on the left of the bridge entrance.

While the natural bridge no longer is functional, there is now a smaller natural bridge very close. This bridge is often called the "Baby Bridge" or "Daughter Bridge". □



Visit the historic museum at Fort Zoutman!

(Oranjestad)—Located in the middle of downtown Oranjestad, situated right next to the government building "Cocolishi", is one of the oldest buildings of Aruba: Fort Zoutman. First constructed in 1796, this site has been used (or left unused) in many ways and have survived eras of war and attempted dismantling.

When anyone refers to Fort Zoutman, they are actually referring to two separate buildings that, over the

years, have been merged: the fort and the tower. That's right, the iconic 5-story, squared tower was not part of the original structure of the fort, and is actually called "Willem III Toren". Constructed in 1867, this tower was named after the then-reigning king of The Netherlands, Willem III. Willem III Toren was originally a light tower, but after a request from Lieutenant Governor Jan Helenus in 1866, it also became a bell tower.

The fort itself was originally constructed to protect the commerce bay of Paardenbaai from pirates and other disreputable characters roaming the Caribbean Sea. Unlike the Willem III Toren, Fort Zoutman had a more tumultuous past, including the on-and-off reception of unwanted members of the English military several times (The Netherlands was at constant war with England back in the colonial era). Over the years, both the fort and the tower had func-



tioned as different government center points, including a tax and stamps office. For some time these two

buildings also housed a police precinct and jail, and even experienced abandonment until the Cultural Center Aruba Foundation (CCA) petitioned for its renovation in 1964, turning the site into the Historic Museum it currently is.

Despite its small size, The Historic Museum guards a rich depository of the commercial, military and social history of Oranjestad, offering a glance into how the social culture of the town came to be. If you are interested in history and want to learn more about Aruba, then Fort Zoutman should definitely be included into your itinerary.

The museum is open Monday to Friday from 9am-6pm, and Saturday from 10am-2pm.

Source: The Old Fort of Aruba by Jan Hartog.



Lessons from our elders: Plants and fruits for medicinal use

(Oranjestad)—Though western medicine is now widely used for common illnesses and to keep our bodies healthy and happy, it is still very common in every household in Aruba (and around the world) to have staple home remedies that is passed on through generations. Here are some tips that our elders have passed on to us over the years.



Pineapple

Pineapple has more uses than topping it on your



Christmas ham. According to elders, the skin of a pineapple is great to use to refresh your body. Clean the skin thoroughly and make tea or warapa* with it. It is said that this tea can also be drank after an operation on the ovaries or uterus. This gets rid of irritation and inflammation.

When the fruit is unripe and green, this can be used to stimulate menstruation flow in women. This also stimulates the passing kidney stones. When ripe, the fruit can be used for poisoning in the gut and can help treat rheumat-

ic diseases, like arthritis.

However, breastfeeding women who cannot produce much milk are advised not to consume too pineapple, and people with acid reflux are recommended to not consume any pineapple at all.

Arrowroot

Arrowroot is native to tropical America and can be sold as a powder or whole. It is said that you can take arrowroot powder and make a "shalup" (porridge) for stomach pain or when you're feeling weak. You can make it with milk too, but it is advised to best use just water. You can also add prunes for a bit of sweetness. Arrowroot shalup is also good to treat an unhealthy gut or for diarrhea.

To make arrowroot shalup, boil a bit of water and add one tablespoon of arrowroot



powder and stir continuously until you reach porridge consistency. If you make a shalup with milk, add a pinch of salt. Raw arrowroot powder can be used to powder babies.

Eggplant/Aubergine

Eggplants, or aubergines, are easy to find in supermarkets around the world and can be grown all year round on the island. Related to potato and tomato, eggplants are good to calm nerves. It can also be used to lower blood pressure, by steeping its leaves in boiled water and drinking it. You can also

make eggplant juice to help purify your blood. However, do make sure to drink slowly; let it mix with your spit and then swallow.

Eggplant kataplan* can also be used to treat skin tumors, abscesses and hemorrhoids. Eggplant kataplan can also be used externally to treat arthritis.

***warapa: term referring to a water and sugar solution, a.k.a simple syrup.**

***kataplan: porridge-like mixture used externally for wounds or parts of the body that are painful or swollen.**

Aruba's neighborhoods; the meaning behind their names

Just like any other country, Aruba has unique and beautifully named neighborhoods that all form a part of its culture and development. Many of these names have a historical background and meaning that teaches us about the island and its rich culture every day.

With this series, we want to take you on a journey of discovery, where you'll learn not only the beautiful names but the history behind it that gives it life and meaning.

Anabui/Tierra Del Sol

This neighborhood can be seen on Van Raders map and Werbata as Anna Boei. Anna Boei is a name of which there isn't much information about its origin.

The best historians were able to deduce is that this name came to be because of a miscommunication between Van Spengler and the natives who were living on the island. In the Arawak/Taino language one can find the word



Anaiboa, which consists of Ana meaning flower or the best and Iboa; the juice of a cassava, which together would mean "the best juice of a cassava".

If one assumes that the actual word heard was Ana-boio instead, consisting of Ana meaning the best and Boio (bohio); house, the iteration of Anabui would mean "the best house." This

is the origin that has been more or less speculated and assumed for the word Anabui and it's meaning.

During the second world war and later, this area was used as a terrain for training of shooting by militia and later on Korps Mariniers (the marines of Aruba). By the end of the previous century a large part of Anabui was developed to have luxurious villas and a golf course, which lead to it getting the name Tierra Del Sol, Spanish for Land of the Sun. The name is not an official name, but the name of the development project that took place. It is hoped that

the original and 'old' name of Anabui is never lost and now it will be remembered by both locals and tourists.

Angochi

This name can be seen on the Werbata map with little and cursive letters. It is the unofficial name for the area given by a tenant to the land that was rented to him.

The biggest probability that historians believe is that it comes from native descent, during the time in the 19th century where Mestizos still lived on Aruba. The name can't really be explain and according to books on its history seems to be more of a sign of corruption.

However, it seems to come from combining A(n), which is a generalizing prefix and Goeiza, which means 'the spirit of a living man'. Angochi remains more of a guess.

This neighborhood's abbreviation is; An.



CROSSWORD

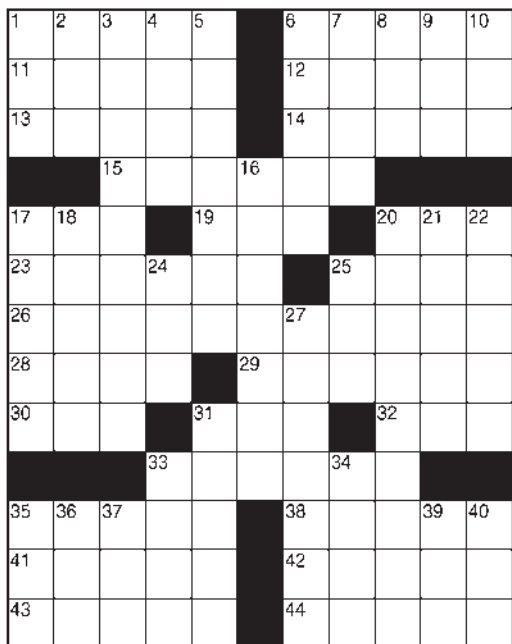
By THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 44 Mean
1 Put in office
6 Sudden attack
11 Stylishly quaint
12 Supple
13 Party prep
14 Elizabeth of "Wanda-Vision"
15 Commercial
17 — Mahal
19 Swiss peak
20 Femur's upper end
23 Maine national park
25 TV explorer
26 They pass from parents to children
28 On the house
29 Instigate
30 "Sure thing!"
31 Was victorious
32 "My word!"
33 Musical shaker
35 Almanac section
38 Lose it
41 Citation
42 Musical drama
43 Spirited horse

DOWN

- 1 Hosp. sections
2 Spike of film
3 "At Last" singer
4 Engine gunk
5 Schooner feature
6 Short fly ball
7 Bouncy tune
8 — a boy!
9 English article
10 Buddhism branch
16 Represent, in sports
17 Chewy candy
18 Without — in the world
20 Half of a team's schedule
21 Peace goddess
22 Fake gems
24 Game cube
25 Block up
27 Nine-sided shape
31 Grew in volume
33 Parcel (out)
34 Nightclub of song
35 Mensa entry numbers
36 Bolt's partner
37 Buck's mate
39 Skill
40 Calendar box



3-21

AXYDLBAAXR
is LONGFELLOW

One letter stands for another. In this sample, A is used for the three L's, X for the two O's, etc. Single letters, apostrophes, the length and formation of the words are all hints. Each day the code letters are different.

3-21

CRYPTOQUOTE

BNLRAHLRB AGR NWVJ DSJ AN
ERA TVNBFP R HB KJ
STTRQAHWE AGSA JNF'VV
WRZRP ERA HA. — MNGW
LSPO EPRRW

Cryptoquote: AND THAT'S THE
THING ABOUT PEOPLE WHO MEAN EVERYTHING
THEY SAY. THEY THINK EVERYONE ELSE
DOES TOO. — KHALED HOSSEINI

Cruise ship Schedule: March 15 - 21 2025

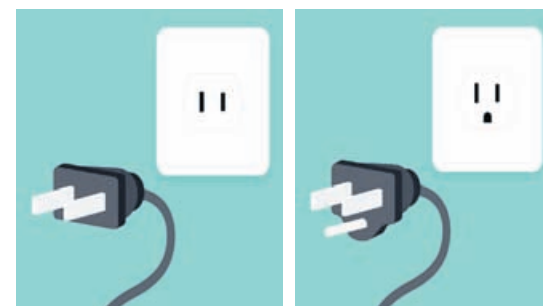
			ARR	DEPT	BERTH	
SAT	15	EMERALD PRINCESS	09.00	22.00	B	1
		EXPLORER OF THE SEAS	16.30	****	C	1
		STAR PRIDE	06.00	18.00	F	1
SUN	16	EXPLORER OF THE SEAS - Dept.	****	17.00	C	-
		SILVER MOON	08.00	23.00	B	1
MON	17	AIDAPERLA	08.00	18.00	B	1
		RESILIENT LADY	09.00	23.59	C	1
		NORWEGIAN GEM	07.00	17.00	I	1
TUE	18	MSC DIVINA	08.00	22.00	B	1
		CARNIVAL HORIZON	09.00	23.00	C	1
		NORWEGIAN VIVA	13.00	21.00	I	1
WED	19	CELEBRITY REFLECTION	10.30	23.00	C	1
THU	20	WIND STAR	10.00	23.00	G	1
		ROTTERDAM	08.00	17.00	C	1
FRI	21	NORWEGIAN JEWEL	11.30	20.30	C	1

Helpful tips for your stay on Aruba

(Oranjestad)—When traveling to another country, especially for the first time, it is always better to be over-prepared than under-prepared. That is why we have a list of basicbut important information that we think may come in handy to Aruba's visitors.

Electrical power

Aruba generally operates on 110V to 127V supply voltage and 60Hz. There are also three types of outlets used on the island: type A with two flat prongs; type B with two flat and one grounding prong, and on occasion, type F with two round prong and two earth clips on the side. However, Type A is most commonly found in homes and establishments.



Drinking water

The water that flows through the sinks of every house, hotels and other establishments is distilled and perfectly safe to drink. Aruba's drinking water exceeds WHO's international standards for water quality, so there is no need to buy bottled water from the store.



Supermarket hours

Supermarket hours may vary depending on where you are staying on the island. Generally though, most supermarkets are open from 8am to 9 or 10pm, Monday through Saturday. On Sundays, supermarkets generally close earlier; mostly around 2pm.



Safety

Since February 2024, Aruba has been categorized as the safest country in the Caribbean by The Telegraph, and many tourist that visit have often told us how they feel safe to explore the island or walk around at night. However, rare incidents do occurs, so keep yourself and your belongings safe.



Classifieds

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Noord	527 3200
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ARUBA TODAY NEWS



The Doobie Brothers in 2025: A tour, a new album and a date with Songwriters Hall of Fame

By MARK KENNEDY
AP Entertainment Writer
NEW YORK (AP) — Just cue up the first song from the new album by The Doobie Brothers and you'll hear something unusual: harmony, in a new way. It's not just that soulful blast from Michael McDonald, marking his first time recording with the band in 45 years. Listen and you'll also hear founding member Pat Simmons and original vocalist Tom Johnston. "Walk This Road" with the always-welcome addition of Mavis Staples is a horn-and-slide-guitar slice of bluesy, wailing rock that's also a celebration of a band that has endured changes and re-formed with members now in their 70s.

"Somehow, here we are," says McDonald. "We've been friends throughout the years. Our kids have all grown up together and our kids have kind of kept us in contact even at times when we might have dropped off the radar for each other."

Lots of Doobie activity
 The Doobie Brothers, who formed in 1970 and initially broke up in 1982, have a packed 2025 planned: A European tour that leads to a North American one, the strong new album and



Members of the Doobie Brothers, from left, Tom Johnston, John McFee, Michael McDonald and Pat Simmons pose for a portrait in Los Angeles on Aug. 17, 2021.

Associated Press

inclusion in the Songwriters Hall of Fame.

"I don't think any of us ever even really thought we'd still be on stage at this age doing this, much less together," says McDonald. "That we're still able to express ourselves artistically is something that's not lost on us."

The North American tour kicks off in Detroit on Aug. 4 and heads to such cities as New York, Boston, Chicago, Milwaukee, Cincinnati, St. Louis, Minneapolis and Toronto. The opening

act will be The Coral Reefer Band.

"Walk This Road" features 10 new songs sung by McDonald, Simmons and Johnston, who collaborated on writing the tracks and play on each other's tunes. Longtime collaborator John McFee also returned for the project.

The album, out June 6, has something for everyone — honky-tonk, driving country, flirty Southern pop, moody folk and melodic rock. There are songs about New Orleans and Hawaii.

Angels make the lyrics on two songs.

"One of the strengths of our live show was the fact that you couldn't get bored with any one style of music because everything was kind of a different bag," says McDonald, who officially reunited with the band on tour in 2019. "We like to do that. You know, I think this album is hopefully no different in that respect."

John Shanks, who produced the band's 2021 album "Liberté," returned for "Walk This Road," lend-

ing them his Los Angeles studio, with a writing room upstairs and a recording booth downstairs where each songwriter took turns cutting tracks.

"The band, I think, presents all of us with an opportunity to do things that we might not do just as individual songwriters," says McDonald.

Inside the album
 While the Doobies have never been a concept band, the album explores seizing the moments, reflects on paths taken and coming to grips with the past.

"This is a snapshot in time of where the band is and where the writers are," says Johnston. "We didn't consciously sit down and say, 'Well, we're going to try and do this.'"

One track, "Learn to Let Go," is an unrequited love song that's about letting go of things that hold you back, while "Speed of Pain" is about how the worst things in life can become the best.

"In many cases, it's just a situation where you have to lose it all. I can't tell you how many people I've met over the years who have told me that going to jail was the best thing that ever happened to them," says McDonald. □

Burrow, Cousins and Goff will be featured on 2nd season of Netflix's 'Quarterback' series



Cincinnati Bengals quarterback Joe Burrow (9) looks to throw during the first half of an NFL football game against the Pittsburgh Steelers Saturday, Jan. 4, 2025, in Pittsburgh.

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Cincinnati's Joe Burrow, Atlanta's Kirk Cousins and Detroit's Jared Goff will be featured on the second season of Netflix's "Quarterback" series. The streamer announced the series will debut in July with a promotional video released on Wednesday.

"Quarterback" debuted in 2023 and was one of Netflix's top-streamed series. Last year, NFL Films, Omaha Productions and 2PM Productions had the series "Receiver," following five wide receivers and quarterbacks throughout the 2023 season.

Burrow, Cousins and Goff had their 2024 season chronicled on and off the field. Burrow led the league with 4,918 passing yards and 43 touchdowns, but had his house broken into in December while the Bengals were in Dallas facing the Cowboys in a Monday night game. Cincinnati

ended the season on a five-game winning streak and finished 9-8, but missed the playoffs.

Cousins, who also was on the first season of "Quarterback," signed a four-year, \$180 million contract last March with the Atlanta Falcons that included \$100 million guaranteed.

Cousins, however, was benched as rookie Michael Penix started the final three games. Atlanta finished 8-9 and missed the playoffs after leading the NFC South late in the season.

Goff was a finalist for AP NFL Most Valuable player after he led Detroit to consecutive division titles and the No. 1 seed in the NFC for the first time in franchise history with a 15-2 record.

Goff passed for 4,629 yards and 37 touchdowns, but the Lions were eliminated in the divisional round by Washington. □

Men's March Madness by the numbers: No. 16 seeds are 2-154. So, yes, we're saying there's a chance

By **ERIC OLSON**
AP Sports Writer

The first two days of the NCAA Tournament are for the little guys.

Teams from under-the-radar conferences that have rarely, if ever, experienced March Madness get to test themselves against the nation's elite. We're looking at you, Alabama State. You too, Lipscomb, and SIU Edwardsville.

The 16 vs. 1 matchups usually devolve into blowouts. Occasionally, the No. 16 seed hangs in there for a while and fades away.

The No. 16 almost never wins the key word being "almost."

One of the great moments in tournament lore happened in 2018 when Maryland-Baltimore County knocked out No. 1 overall seed Virginia 74-54 for the first-ever victory in 136 attempts for a No. 16. The Retrievers lost 50-43 to Kansas State in the second round and haven't been back. It happened again in 2023, when Fairleigh Dickinson won a First Four game against Texas Southern and then took down No. 1 seed Purdue 63-58. The Knights then lost 78-70 to a Florida Atlantic team that made its own improbable run all the way to the Final Four. Take heed Alabama State, Norfolk State, SIUE and American or Mount St.



High Point players and fans react after being assigned their spot during a watch party for the NCAA college basketball tournament in High Point, N.C., Sunday, March 16, 2025.

Associated Press

Mary's: No. 16s are 2-154 all-time.

So, yes, we're saying there's a chance. A look at March Madness by the numbers:

3 Triple doubles by Yale's Bez Mbeng, most in the nation.

4 Schools making their first tournament appearances SIU-Edwardsville, Omaha, High Point and UC San Diego.

6 Houston appearances in the Final Four, most by a team that has never won the championship. 6-0

Drake's best-in-the-nation record as a wagering underdog. The 11th-seeded Bulldogs are 6.5-point underdogs against Missouri, according to BetMGM Sportsbook.

7 St. John's four losses have been by a combined seven points, the smallest margin in Division I this season and second-fewest by any team in the past 10 seasons, according to ESPN Research.

11 UCLA national championships, most all-time.

12

Tamar Bates' missed free throws on 183 attempts in two seasons at Missouri. His 93.4% accuracy (171 of 183) is best nationally among players with at least 160 attempts over that span.

14 Southeastern Conference teams in the tournament, most ever from a single league. The previous record was held by the Big East, which had 11 of its 16 teams in the 2011 field.

15 Consecutive victories by UC San Diego, the longest active win streak entering the tournament.

21.8

Scoring average of Memphis standout PJ Haggerty, highest among players in the tournament.

27

Michigan State's consecutive tournament appearances, which the NCAA recognizes as the longest active streak. Kansas is in its 35th straight tournament, but it vacated its 2018 Final Four run as part of its sanctions for recruiting violations.

31.8%

Free-throw success rate of Wofford center Kyle Filewich, who in February began shooting underhand style at the line after missing 17 in a row.

79.8

Duke players' average height in inches, according to college basketball metrics guru Ken Pomeroy's formula. That makes the Blue Devils the tallest team in the tournament at 6-foot-6 and some change.

101

Dunks by Creighton's Ryan Kalkbrenner, the only player in the country with at least 100, according to statistician Bart Torvik.

1939

Year of the first NCAA Division I men's basketball tournament. There were eight teams, and Oregon beat Ohio State for the championship. □

Scottie Scheffler to serve a similar Masters dinner with a twist. Ravioli is on the menu

By **DOUG FERGUSON**
AP Golf Writer

Scottie Scheffler added a few wrinkles to the menu for the Masters Club dinner he will host for past champions. And yes, there will be ravioli.

Ravioli is to blame for Scheffler still trying to reach full strength in his right hand. Glass punctured his palm when he used a wine glass to cut ravioli he was making for Christmas dinner, requiring surgery that kept him out of golf for a month.

He is serving cheeseburger sliders and fire-cracker shrimp again as appetizers, along with a choice of ribeye or redfish for the main course. He added Texas-style chili from the recipe of Randy Smith, his long-time swing coach. As for the ravioli?

That's listed as "Papa Scheff's Meatball and Ravioli Bites." That was a specialty of his father, Scott Scheffler, when Scottie was growing up. "Any time he made them, we were all jacked up about it," Scheffler said Wednesday during a conference call for the Masters. "Thought it would be fun to put them on the menu this year. And the raviolis were a nice touch, as well." Scheffler won't be making them, so all is well. Now it's a matter of getting the pieces together as he goes after a third Masters green jacket on April 10-13. The Masters champion lost out on his typical start to the season by missing The Sentry at Kapalua and The American Express in the California desert while waiting for his hand to heal. □



Scottie Scheffler lines up his shot on the second green during the final round of The Players Championship golf tournament Sunday, March 16, 2025, in Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla.

Associated Press

Banning the tush push and changes to playoff seeding are among proposed NFL rule changes

By **JOSH DUBOW**
AP Pro Football Writer

The Green Bay Packers have formally proposed a rule change to ban the tush push and the Detroit Lions proposed that playoff seeding be done based on record instead of automatically placing division winners in the top four spots. Teams made several other proposals released Wednesday that will be added to additional ones made by the competition committee to be considered at the league meetings later this month, including a change to the overtime rule and the so-called legal tampering period in free agency. Any rule change must be



Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Jalen Hurts (1) is pushed over the goal line by teammates to a touchdown against the Kansas City Chiefs during the first half of the NFL Super Bowl 59 football game, Sunday, Feb. 9, 2025, in New Orleans.

Associated Press

approved by 24 out of 32 team owners. Packers general manager Brian Gutekunst said last month at the scouting combine that his team wanted to ban the tush push, which is a modified quarterback sneak where two or three teammates line up behind the quarterback and push him forward to help him try to gain the yardage necessary for a first down or touchdown. Philadelphia has used the play successfully behind Jalen Hurts for the past three seasons in short-yardage situations, including during a 40-22 victory over the Kansas City Chiefs in Super Bowl 59. Other teams have tried to use it as well but without the success of the Eagles. The proposed rule states that no offensive player may "immediately at the snap, push or throw his body against a teammate, who was lined up directly behind the snapper and received the snap, to aid him in an attempt to gain yardage." Doing so would result in a 10-yard penalty. The playoff change proposal by the Lions would have led to significant changes last season when Minnesota had to go on the road for a wild-card game against the Rams despite winning four more games than Los Angeles in the regular season. The Vikings would have hosted a game as the third seed under the proposal. The Chargers also went on the road as a wild-card team against division-winning Houston despite having one additional win. Under the proposed rule, the first tiebreaker among tied teams would be based on winning the division. The Eagles proposed a change in overtime rules to align it more like the playoffs when each team is guaranteed an opportunity to score. The proposal would extend regular-season overtime from 10 minutes to 15 and the game wouldn't end if the team that got the ball first scored a touchdown. □



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