

Getty Images

In an awkward joint appearance with Mayor Adams on Fox News yesterday, Trump border czar Tom Homan said if Hizzoner doesn't hold up his end of the deal to crack down on illegal immigrants wreaking havoc in the Big Apple, Homan will be "up his butt."

**PAGES 4-5**

# THE ODD COUPLE

**NYC mayor in surprising TV interview with Trump border czar — who vows to be 'up his butt' about migrant crime**

**ALSO: Homan calls Kat 'an embarrassment'**



# VALENTINES NUPS

## Couples ♥ New York as they wed at Crossroads

By KATHERINE DONLEVY and KHRISTINA NARIZHNAYA

It's the heart of New York. Couples gathered in Times Square on Valentine's Day Friday to cement their love before friends and tourists alike, with multiple pairs tying the knot at the Crossroads of the World. For the 17th year in a row, the city celebrated the holiday by arranging for the urban nuptials below the flashing screens of Times Square, in a shower of love and confetti that stopped harried New Yorkers long enough to take a peek.

### 'Cross' their hearts

Among the two pairs of lovebirds to be wed in the event organized by the Times Square Alliance were Ariadna Hazel and Mars Carbonell.

"This is where we first met, actually," said Carbonell. "We thought getting married in Times Square would be perfect. Not many can say they got married here at Times Square — the Crossroads of the World."

The newlyweds met in 2008, when they were assigned to work together on a billboard in the area. They dated for two years before Carbonell popped the question — but the couple waited another 14 before walking down the aisle at Duffy Square on Valentine's Day.

"Finally! Finally, finally!" Carbonell cheered as he showed off his wife. "And I'll never forget our anniversary."

Two couples also got engaged, including Neha Bellary and Ashish Karade, who traveled from upstate New York and Boston.

Bellary, 27, was caught off guard when Karade, 29, dropped to one knee as her name flashed across a massive billboard with the words: "Will you marry me?"

"It was not even planned to come [through here]. I'm very happy," Bellary said.

Karade brainstormed the proposal — arranged with the Alliance — weeks in advance under the guise of bringing his love to

New York "just for fun."

"I caught her by surprise, for sure — I lit her heart up like the city lights of New York!" Karade told The Post.

The pair have known one another since they were children, but their romance sparked eight years ago in college.

Meanwhile, as many as 100 other lovebirds tied the knot at City Hall Friday.



**SQUARE SPOUSES:** There's nothing like Valentine's Day in Times Square, where Ariadna Hazel and Mars Carbonell (above) got hitched. Kimberley and William Edwards (top r.) also married Friday under the bright lights, and Mitch Dudley proposed to Sabrina Johnson.



Stephen Yang (3)

## O, they're still in love



Instagram/Barack Obama

Former President Barack Obama kicked off Valentine's Day with a flirty message to wife Michelle — affirming she's still the one after more than three decades together.

"Thirty-two years together and you still take my breath away," he wrote in a post on X Friday, along with a selfie of the two beaming together (left). "Happy Valentine's Day, @MichelleObama."

Michelle Obama responded with a sweet post of her own. "If there's one person I can always count on, it's you, @BarackObama. You're my rock. Always have been. Always will be. Happy Valentine's Day, honey!" she wrote with a heart emoji and the same selfie.

The posts come amid unfounded rumors that the couple could be headed for divorce. *Deirdre Bardolf*

## He's Prince Charming

Prince William and Kate Middleton marked Valentine's Day by sharing a photo of them kissing in what's believed to be a first for the royal couple.

In the snap shared on Instagram Friday, the Prince and Princess of Wales sit by one another on a picnic blanket as the future king leans over to give her a kiss (right). They uploaded the pic with a red heart emoji. The photo was in the

duo's September 2024 video shared in celebration of Middleton's completion of chemotherapy.

Kate, 43, and William, 42, have been married since April 2011. The post is believed to be the first PDA picture shared by them on social media, as the royal family typically refrains from public displays of affection. *Nika Shakhnazarova*



princeandprincessofwales/Instagram

## Heat on AOC for webinar Advice to evade ICE

By VICTOR NAVA

President Trump's border czar Tom Homan on Friday clashed with Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) over a webinar she hosted advising migrants about how to handle an encounter with Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

"Let's pray that she is not 'educating' the next murderer of a young college nursing student on how to evade arrest by ICE," Homan told Fox News Digital on Friday.

"How many more young women have to be raped, murdered and burned alive until she wakes up?" Homan had first said on "The Ingraham Angle" that he had emailed the deputy attorney general asking whether the Ocasio-Cortez (inset) hosting of a "Know Your Rights with ICE" event on her Facebook page could count as an impediment to federal law enforcement.

"Is that impeding our law-enforcement efforts?" Homan said. "If so, what are we going to do about it? Is she crossing the line? So, I'm working with the Department of Justice and finding out. Where is that line that they cross?"



So maybe AOC is going to be in trouble now."

During the event, viewers were informed of how to deal with ICE search requests. Migrants were also warned of "ruses" they allege ICE agents employ to get people to comply with searches, while the hosts also touted "trends" in how ICE conducts its searches, which have ramped up in recent weeks under the Trump administration.

People were also recommended to record such searches and how to differentiate between different warrants ICE agents are likely to carry.

Ocasio-Cortez did not take part in the webinar but did upload tips to Instagram — via posters in both English and Spanish — and called on her followers to share the posters widely and study them.

On Thursday, Ocasio-Cortez took to X to mock Homan for suggesting she could be in trouble. "MaYbe sHE's goiNg to be in TroUble nOW," she posted.

"Maybe he can learn to read. The Constitution would be a good place to start," she said.

*Additional reporting by Michael Dorgan, Fox News*

## Rikers reopen is 'critical'

A former assistant chief at New York's Immigration and Customs Enforcement office heralded Mayor Adams' vow to reopen Rikers Island to the feds, saying it is a "critical" step in ensuring "the most egregious" illegal migrant criminals, including killers and rapists, are off the streets.

Adams promised to reopen the previously shuttered ICE office at Rikers after his latest meeting with President Trump's border czar Tom Homan Thursday, saying he is preparing an executive order to do so.

Former assistant field office director Scott Mechkowski recalled a "seamless" handoff of illegal migrants released from local custody when the immigration

agency was allowed into Rikers.

In 2014, ICE encountered an average of 3,200 illegal migrant criminals through the Rikers program, said Mechkowski, who previously ran the agency's fugitive operations program in the Big Apple.

"They would get booked into the jail and we would be able to identify them almost immediately, and once we could confirm that they were a person of interest, we would drop a detainer and the detainer was honored," he said. "The transition was very smooth. When they were getting released from Rikers, they notified us right there at the jail . . . and they just went from one custody to the next." Jennie Taer

# FOX AND

By CRAIG McCARTHY,  
VAUGHN GOLDEN  
and EMILY CRANE

Mayor Adams sat down Friday with border czar Tom Homan on Fox News — in an extraordinary scene that saw President Trump's appointee threaten to be up Hizzoner's "butt" if Adams fails to crack down on illegal immigration.

"If he doesn't come through, I'll be back in New York City and we won't be sitting on the couch, I'll be in his office, up his butt, saying, 'Where the hell is this agreement we came to?'" Homan said alongside Adams during the live "Fox & Friends" interview.

Seated close to Homan on a couch, Adams laughed loudly over the comments, before pointing back at Homan and saying, with a straight face, "And I want ICE to deliver."

"We're going to deliver for the safety of the people of this city."

The unusual bipartisan display came as Adams faces blowback from the left over his willingness to work with the White House on the border crisis — and accusations of engaging in a quid pro quo with the Trump administration to get the federal corruption case against him tossed.

The mayor appeared to overpromise on the extent of his compliance with Trump's anti-illegal immigration push. He said he wanted to loosen sanctuary-city laws to allow the NYPD to cooperate with ICE even on civil enforcement — only to quickly walk back the remarks.

### 'Cringeworthy TV'

The bizarre scene — involving the Democratic mayor of the nation's largest city chumming it up with a GOP official on a Trump-beloved morning TV program — struck elected officials and political operatives from across the spectrum.

"We are living through some very strange times," one city source said. "Waking up to the mayor and the ICE cowboy on 'Fox & Friends' was not on my 2025 bingo card."

Some critics described Adams' demeanor as that of a "hostage," with one even going as far as to say he "looked like a battered



## Eric 'butt' of Homan 'joke' amid vows to crack down

woman sitting beside her abuser at the police station — too afraid or unwilling to speak out."

"The entire country watched our mayor embarrass himself on national television, sitting there while Donald Trump's Cabinet tells him what to do," said one city Democratic lawmaker, who didn't want to be named.

"It was cringeworthy television and reminded me of a hostage situation," state Sen. Brad Hoylman-Sigal (D-Manhattan) told The Post.

State Conservative Party Chairman Gerald Kassar said Dems slamming Adams over the appearance should "calm down" and focus on the issues.

"The Democrats that are criticizing Adams are doing it

strictly for political reasons. They should spend a few more minutes talking to their neighbors and other citizens of the city that by a large majority believe the sanctuary city policy needs to be trashed," he said.

### Walking it back

During the approximately 20-minute sit-down on Fox News, Adams said that he had been pushing the City Council to tweak the law so cops can cooperate with the feds.

"What I asked the City Council to do is change the bill that was already in place and modify it . . . if you are committing a crime, then we should be able to collaborate with ICE — even on civil

# FRENEMIES



**SHAKING THINGS UP:** Border czar Tom Homan and Mayor Adams appear Friday on “Fox & Friends” to discuss efforts to increase the cooperation between the NYPD and ICE.

Getty Images

## Hochul ‘needs to be ousted’

President Trump’s border czar Tom Homan trashed Gov. Hochul as an “embarrassment” Friday — as he called for her to be ousted over New York’s sanctuary status amid a nationwide illegal migrant crackdown.

“Gov. Hochul is an embarrassment to the position she holds,” Homan raged during a joint sit-down with Mayor Adams on Fox News’ “Fox & Friends.” “Gov. Hochul, she needs to be removed.”

Homan laid into the governor over the state’s Green Light Law, which grants driver’s licenses to illegal immigrants but bans the DMV from providing the feds with personal information about immigration status.

“After someone is burned alive on a subway, she stands in front of TV cameras and says, ‘I think criminal aliens should be removed too,’” he said, referring to the death of a woman on a subway in December at the hands of an illegal migrant.

“But she’s got the Green Light Law,” Homan continued. “On one point, she’s saying, ‘Well, I think criminals should be removed, too.’ But then she locks us out of the DMV data.”

Hochul spokesman Avi Small took a swipe back at Homan, saying that “New York state works with federal immigration authorities to apprehend and deport serious criminals, something a border czar should know.”

*Vaughn Golden, Emily Crane*

## Got handle on gotaways

The number of illegal migrant “gotaways” who slip past border agents has plummeted more than 90% under President Trump’s show of force since reclaiming the White House less than a month ago.

Daily average gotaways — migrants who are detected crossing the border but elude apprehension — at the southern border dropped to just 132 at the beginning of February, down 93% from the average under former President Joe Biden, a Department of Homeland Security source told Fox News.

Gotaways include people spotted by agents, caught on camera or sensors or detected in another away.

*Jennie Taer*

enforcement if you have committed a crime,” he said.

Soon after, the mayor backtracked, saying in a statement to The Post that “there seems to be a misunderstanding.”

“I am not opening the door to civil immigration enforcement with the federal government,” he said. “I believe the federal government should pursue dangerous criminals ... as our city’s local laws have long stated only through criminal enforcement actions.”

He added, “Our laws can be strengthened, however, to more effectively go after those who are dangerous criminals who are here illegally. To not have that honest conversation would be irresponsible.”

City Hall refused to elaborate when asked what exact changes Adams was calling for after he misspoke.

“As with all things Adams, it’s hard to know quite what that is,” civil rights attorney Ron Kuby told The Post when asked about Adams’ sanctuary city comments.

“As long as Eric Adams is perceived to be doing Trump bidding Trump may continue to keep his criminal charges in abeyance.”

The NYPD issued a statement Friday insisting that it “does not engage in civil immigration enforcement, period.”

*Additional reporting by Priscilla DeGregory and Aneeta Bhole*

## Adams suing feds

Mayor Adams plans to file a lawsuit against the Trump administration next week after the feds secretly clawed back more than \$80 million in migrant funding from city coffers, according to a letter obtained by The Post.

Counsel for the Adams administration issued a letter to city Comptroller Brad Lander Friday stating the city’s Law Department is looking to take legal action by Feb. 21 to recoup the \$80.5 million Federal Emergency Management Agency

payments taken by the feds Tuesday.

The letter was sent just hours after Lander demanded the Adams administration either file a lawsuit or grant Lander permission to hire his own attorneys to bring a case against Trump and Department of Government Efficiency honcho Elon Musk.

“Given the gravity of the situation, we cannot afford to waste any more time,” said Lander, who is running against Adams in the June Dem primary

*Craig McCarthy, Anna Young*

# Exec-pay audit after Dem green spree

# Critics rip Kat ConEd whodunit



Susan Watts/Office of Governor Kathy Hochul

**NOT SO FAST:** Gov. Hochul ordered an audit at Con Edison after the utility's request to hike electric rates 11.4% and gas by 13.3%.

By CARL CAMPANILE

This is some real gaslighting.

Gov. Hochul has ordered an audit of executive pay at New York's utility companies after Con Edison proposed double-digit rate increases — but critics say her costly green-energy initiatives are to blame for driving up prices.

The Hochul-controlled Public Service Commission announced the action Thursday, amid outrage over Con Edison's request to jack up electric bills by 11.4% and send gas bills soaring 13.3% for its 3.6 million customers. ConEd's proposed rate hikes would cost inflation-weary New Yorkers \$1,848 more per year compared to five years ago if approved.

Hochul, who opposes the rate increases, said, "This audit will ensure that utility compensation structures are working for New Yorkers... We will hold utilities accountable and ensure their focus is where it should be: delivering reliable, affordable, and high-quality service."

But some said the stench of high gas prices is coming from inside the state house.

"What Con Ed proposed is outrageous. But a salary audit won't

move the needle on energy prices," Assembly Minority Leader Will Barclay (R-Pulaski) told The Post. "Albany Democrats have bent the knee to environmental extremists."

Hochul has led an anti-fossil fuel crusade, including proposing a "cap and invest" program that critics have said would drive up home-heating costs and gas prices by as much as 22 cents on the gallon. The plan, designed to supposedly curb carbon emissions and which has since been postponed, would force oil companies to pay \$75 billion to the state for greenhouse gases — a cost that would likely be passed onto customers.

## 'The real perpetrators'

The green gov and the Democrat-led Legislature have also banned gas stoves, furnaces and propane heating in new buildings and, in December, she extended the state's fracking ban by prohibiting a new technique to use carbon dioxide to extract natural gas harmlessly.

Skeptics also ripped Hochul's audit order as a phony attempt to look tough after her administration recently rubber-stamped the bigwigs' pricy pay packages.

"We've skipped the Bronco chase down the LA freeway and gone straight to the governor promising to find the real perpetrators behind real utility costs," Ken Girardin, director of research at the Empire Center, told The Post.

"When it comes to transmission costs for gas and electricity, arguably the biggest reason New Yorkers pay so much is because the legislature and the [Public Service Commission] have ordered utilities to stuff so much into those rates."

Barclay scoffed at PSC's review. "Go ahead and conduct an audit. She's rearranging the deck chairs

on the Titanic when we've already hit the iceberg known as the CLCPA," he added, referring to the state's controversial Climate Leadership & Community Protection Act, which aims to have zero emission power by 2040.

ConEd executives are living well, according to reports filed with the SEC and the PSC. Chairman and CEO Timothy Cawley has a total compensation package of \$9.59 million, including a \$1.3 million salary, \$2.14 million in incentives/bonus pay, and more than \$6 million in stock options plus deferred compensation.



**ANDREW CUOMO**  
Ex-gov's yet to declare run.

# SI Dems back Guo for mayor

The Staten Island Democratic Party formally backed Andrew Cuomo for mayor Thursday — even though the ex-governor hasn't declared he's running.

The executive committee of the borough's party called on Cuomo to launch a mayoral bid and join a crowded field of candidates looking to dethrone Mayor Adams in June's primary.

In explaining the usual move, Staten Island Democratic Party chair Laura Lo-Bianco Sword cited Adams' budding relationship with President Trump and reports that he is considering running as a Republican if he loses the primary.

"We made this decision in light of recent news that our current mayor sought the nomination of multiple Republican chairs, cut a deal that prioritized himself over 8 million New Yorkers, and essentially handed the keys to New York City to the President," Sword said in a statement.

"This is an affront... We believe Andrew Cuomo is the only proven leader with the track record... to both navigate attacks from Washington and properly address the issues of corruption and deteriorating quality of life."

Carl Campanile  
and David Propper

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### NEW YORK

■ Midday Nos. Fri.: 787  
■ Midday Win-4 Fri.: 6444  
■ Midday Take-5 Fri.:  
3, 5, 13, 18, 23  
■ Evening Nos. Fri.: 882  
■ Evening Win-4 Fri.: 7367  
■ Evening Take-5 Fri.:  
2, 7, 14, 33, 36  
■ Pick-10 Fri.: 7, 9, 10, 16,  
19, 20, 21, 32, 41, 45, 47, 48,  
49, 50, 51, 60, 62, 63, 71, 72  
■ Cash-4 Life Fri.: 8, 34,  
48, 52, 58; Cash Ball: 2

■ Mega Millions Fri.: 11,  
19, 31, 49, 56; Mega Ball:  
16; Megaplier: x3

### NEW JERSEY

Pick-3 Fri.: 932; Fireball: 5  
Pick-4 Fri.: 2233; Fireball: 5  
Cash-5 Xtra Fri.: 1, 13, 21, 27,  
34; Xtra: 2

### CONNECTICUT

Play-3 Fri.: 770; Wild: 6  
Play-4 Fri.: 7657; Wild: 7  
Cash-5 Fri.: 2, 20, 22, 27, 32  
Lucky for Life Fri.: 7, 11, 12,  
22, 34; Lucky Ball: 8

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# EAGLE GETS HIS 'LIX' IN VS. TAY

By MATT EHALT

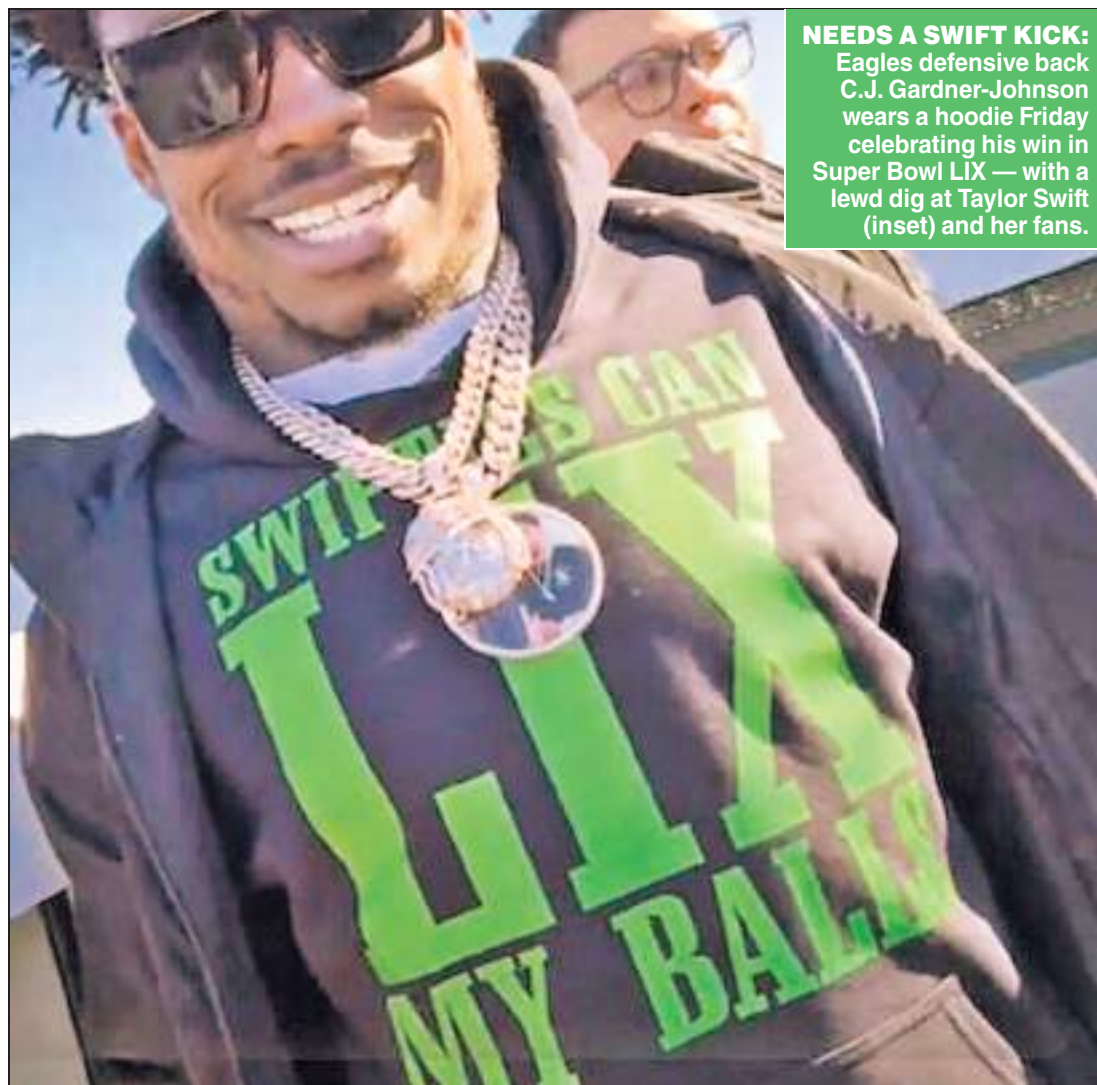
For Eagles star defensive back C.J. Gardner-Johnson, just crushing the Chiefs in Super Bowl LIX wasn't enough. He wanted to take down the Swifties, too.

And Friday in Philadelphia, as the Eagles celebrated with a championship parade, he did them dirty by wearing a vile hoodie that immediately went viral, the crude fashion statement boasting "Swifties can LIX my balls."

## Instagram insult

Gardner-Johnson started the feud Sunday when he posted to Instagram after the Eagles' 40-22 Super Bowl 2025 triumph a photo of him and Travis Kelce, the boyfriend of mega pop star Taylor Swift, in one another's face during the decisive football showdown.

The defensive back captioned the photo by stating that Kelce "should've stayed with that thick s-t," in reference to Kelce's previous relationship with Kayla Nicole.



**NEEDS A SWIFT KICK:** Eagles defensive back C.J. Gardner-Johnson wears a hoodie Friday celebrating his win in Super Bowl LIX — with a lewd dig at Taylor Swift (inset) and her fans.

Instagram/@ceedy\_ducef, Getty Images

## Champ escalates crude feud

Both Swift and Nicole attended Sunday's game, which featured Kelce having a horrible night with just four catches for 39 yards and Gardner-Johnson being credited with three total tackles.

## Futile Yelp attack

The Swifties were outraged by Gardner's post and responded by barraging his mother's Florida restaurant with negative reviews in an attempt to destroy her business.

The Yelp page for Kings Grill in Rockledge, Fla., had a note

stating, "This business is being monitored by Yelp's Support team for content related to media reports."

However, his mother, Delatron Johnson, told TMZ that the restaurant had closed Jan. 25.

"I have friends who were sending me the screenshots," Delatron said. "They were going, 'Oh my god, look at this!' And the first thing everyone said was, 'the Swifties have attacked.'"

"Yes, we've seen all the reviews. The joke is really on the Swifties . . . because Kings Grill is already closed," she said.

Finally on Friday, Gardner-

Johnson took his most vulgar shot at the fans of the superstar singer when he wore the "Swifties can LIX my balls" hoodie to the championship parade, as seen on an Instagram Live feed.

His latest trash talk is hardly a surprise to his mother, who knows exactly where he learned it.

"We've been dealing with this since he was a kid," she said.

"He talks the talk 'cause he can back it up," she told TMZ. "The same thing with his mother, I talk the talk because I can back it up."

mehalt@nypost.com

## 2 shot near victory parade

Two young women were shot by a man wearing an Eagles jersey after an argument broke out between them during the team's Super Bowl victory parade in Philadelphia Friday, according to The Philadelphia Inquirer.

Gunfire erupted near the Philadelphia Museum of

Art, about a block away from the end of the parade route, the Inquirer reported.

The women, who appeared to be in their 20s, got into a verbal clash with the gunman during the celebration but details about what caused the fight weren't immediately clear, Deputy Police Commis-

sioner Frank Vanore said.

Eagles coaches and players had given victory speeches on the steps of the venerable art house before the gunfire broke out.

Detectives were combing through video footage Friday to hunt down a suspect in a sea of Eagles jerseys as crowds dispersed.

The victims' status is unknown.

Last year, one woman was killed and 22 others were wounded by gunfire — including 11 children — near the Kansas City Chiefs' Super Bowl parade route on Feb. 14, 2024.

Natalie O'Neill and Kaydi Pelletier



**WINNERS:** Philadelphia police arrest a fan Friday at the Eagles' Super Bowl victory parade. Separately, two women were shot nearby.

Getty Images

# Zelensky sit-down



AFP via Getty Images

## Peace talks with VP

By DIANA GLEBOVA  
and STEVEN NELSON

Vice President J.D. Vance met face-to-face for the first time with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky on Friday, as they began negotiating peace between Kyiv and Russia.

The vice president said the conversation was “fruitful” and that he wants to “achieve a durable, lasting peace” in Europe — without revealing any specifics after having hinted at the use of economic and military interventions. “We want the killing to stop,” Vance affirmed.

Zelensky said he hoped “to speak more” with the vice president in the future about “how to stop” Russian President Vladimir Putin’s war machine.

“We want this very much,”

### Russian drone hits Chernobyl

An unmanned Russian drone struck the containment shell protecting the radioactive reactor at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant, causing significant damage, Ukraine claimed Friday morning.

The protective covering around Reactor 4 in 2016 — blocking radiation from the site of the 1986 nuclear disaster — sustained a large hole. Radiation levels have not risen, but Ukraine President Volodymyr Zelensky called it “a terrorist attack for the entire world.” *Nicholas McEntyre, Wires*

Ukraine’s leader added.

Vance was joined at the negotiating table by Secretary of State Marco Rubio and special envoy for Ukraine and Russia Keith Kellogg.

The talks seemed to ease some tensions between the two after the Ukrainian leader had labeled Vance “too radical” in an interview with *The New Yorker* in September.

Both President Trump and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth had already set parameters for the discussion earlier in the week, when they suggested it was unlikely Ukraine would return to its pre-2014 borders with Russia or become a member of NATO.

Vance had previously been critical of the US supplying further military and economic aid to Ukraine.

### US set to test ballistic missile

The US Air Force will launch an intercontinental ballistic missile in Southern California next week to test and flex the military’s readiness to use nuclear force.

The unarmed Minuteman III will be fired from Vandenberg Space Force Base, 150 miles northwest of LA, sometime between 11 p.m. Tuesday and 5 a.m. Wednesday, the Air Force said, calling it a routine launch to “provide confidence in the lethality and effectiveness of the nation’s nuclear deterrent.” *Patrick Reilly*

# ‘New sheriff’ at Munich

By DIANA GLEBOVA

Vice President J.D. Vance admonished European leaders in a Friday speech for no longer defending shared democratic values with the US, saying this “threat from within” poses the greatest danger to the security of the West.

In his first major address abroad, the vice president spurred officials at the Munich Security Conference to return to “the extraordinary blessings of liberty” that won them the Cold War, rather than crushing dissent, policing speech and infringing on religious freedoms.

Vance, 40, also vowed that any leaders willing to join him and President Trump in the task would find “a new sheriff in town” ready to “fight to defend your right to offer it in the public square.”

“The threat that I worry the most about vis-à-vis Europe is not Russia, it’s not China, it’s not any other external actor,” he told the officials gathered in Germany. “What I worry about is the threat from within, the retreat of Europe from some of its most fundamental values, values shared with the United States of America.”

### ‘Afraid of the voices’

European leaders applauded the vice president when he invoked their shared commitments but were less receptive to some of his more direct attacks on their nations’ laws around speech — including the ban on some populist lawmakers from taking the stage at the conference.

He also brushed off concerns from European leaders about tech billionaire Elon Musk engaging in their own political debates on the continent.

“If American democracy can survive 10 years of Greta Thunberg scolding, you can survive a few months of Elon Musk,” he said of the 22-year-old environmental activist from Sweden.

“I believe deeply that there is no security if you’re afraid of the voices, the opinions and the conscience that guide your very own people,” he said, adding there’s “nothing” Europe can do for the US if it is “afraid” of its citizens. “You cannot win a democratic mandate by cen-

# VANCE RIPS INTO EURO POLLS

soring your opponents or putting them in jail,” he added, in a nod to Trump’s 2024 victory.

Vance pointed in particular to the cancellation of a presidential election in Romania, the EU Commission agitating to shut down social-media posts deemed “hateful” as well as the persecution of Christians.

Adam Smith-Connor was fined £9,000 (about \$11,000) for praying in protest outside an abortion clinic in the UK, he fumed, while the Scottish government warned residents near another clinic similarly against

“even private prayer within their own homes.”

“The government urged readers to report any fellow citizens suspected guilty of thought-crime in Britain and across Europe,” Vance said. “Free speech, I fear, is in retreat.”

The vice president acknowledged that the US under former President Joe Biden had also fueled this democratic “crisis ... of our own making” by quelling COVID-19 dissent — while letting far worse actors gain a foothold through lax immigration policies.

## security confab



"In Washington, there's a new sheriff in town," he said. "Just as the Biden administration seemed desperate to silence people for speaking their minds, the Trump administration will do precisely the opposite, and I hope that we can work together on that."

### On mass migration

Vance also said there is "nothing more urgent" than countering the issue of mass migration that has come to Europe, which took on new urgency after an Afghan migrant drove through a crowded street in Munich on Thursday, injuring 30 people. "Almost one in five people living in this country moved here from abroad. That is, of course, an all-time high," he said. "It's a similar number, by the way, in the United States, also an all-time high. And we know the sit-

uation. It didn't materialize in a vacuum. It's a result of a series of conscious decisions made by politicians all over the continent and others across the world over the span of a decade. We saw the horrors wrought by these decisions yesterday in this very city," he said, referring to the attack.

"How many times must we suffer these appalling setbacks before we change course and take our shared civilization in a new direction?" he asked.

Vance singled out the Brexit movement for having been the only truly democratic response to European nations letting "open the floodgates to millions of illegal immigrants."

"Agree or disagree, they voted for it," he said. "And more and more, all over Europe, they're voting for political leaders who promise an end to out-of-control migration."

**BRENDAN O'NEILL**



**S**O it turns out that MEGA — "Make Europe Great Again" — is not just a slogan.

It's not just a wistful line on caps worn by people on my side of the pond who wish we had a Trump-like figure to stir up Euro-politics. No, it's really happening. And its gun-totin' chief is J.D. Vance.

Witness his glorious roasting of Europe's leaders at the Munich Security Conference.

It was a delicious spectacle — a self-made millennial Yank torching the grey-faced technocrats of my sad, knackered continent.

He didn't hold back. He eviscerated the assembled dignitaries for their failings on free speech, democracy and security. He lamented "the retreat of Europe from some of its most fundamental values" — words that will have resonated with millions of Europeans. I'm one of them.

It was on the freedom to speak that he made his most stinging comments.

"Across Europe, free speech, I fear, is in retreat," he told his startled audience.

He rattled off recent acts of outrageous censorship that would have made Stalin beam with pride.

He mentioned police raids in Germany on citizens "suspected of posting anti-feminist comments online." Criticizing feminism is a blasphemy in woke Germany.

He reminded us that just two weeks ago, a Christian activist in Sweden was convicted for burning copies of the Koran — despite the fact that his friend had just been murdered for doing the same.

### Britain battered

Vance looked righteously aghast that Sweden would do something as cruel as convict a man of the "speech crime" his buddy had just been slain for.

He rebuked my homeland, Britain, for its tragic "backslide away from conscience rights."

The "basic liberties of religious Britons" are being throttled, he said.

He gave the example of Christians being arrested for

# Calling out commissars

## Just what EU needs

"silently praying" near abortion clinics.

This really is happening. This once great nation that gave the world such game-changing freedom warriors as John Milton and John Stuart Mill now erects "buffer zones" around abortion clinics in which you can be nabbed by cops for praying in your own head. Never mind "thought crime" — Britain has "prayer crime." Little wonder that Vance said he is most "concerned" about "our very dear friends, the United Kingdom."

There's now Soviet-style censorship in Europe, he said. He chastised the EU's "commissars" — I literally whooped when he used that word — for censoring everything they don't like.

The Euro bureaucracy hides "behind ugly Soviet-era words like misinformation and disinformation" to silence those who simply have an "alternative viewpoint," he said.

Never a truer word. On every issue, from COVID to the gender ideology to mass immigration, what our overlords refer to as "misinformation" is usually just thinking that differs from their own.

Such stern policing of dissenting words is a menace to democracy, Vance said. "Dismissing people ... shutting people out of the political process" — this is the "most sure-fire way to destroy democracy."

Preach, J.D.

He had stiff words for those who accuse Elon Musk of interfering in European democracy. "Expressing opinions isn't election interference," he said. Then came his best line: "If American democracy can survive 10 years of Greta Thunberg's scolding, you guys can survive a few months of Elon Musk."

Game, set and match to the American.

Vance can't believe what has become of "the Cold War's winners." With the fall of the Berlin Wall, Europe was meant to enter a new era of liberty and possibility.

Yet now we're mimicking our old Soviet foes. You're censoring dissidents, shutting down media, and even canceling the results of democratic elections, he cried. His final message? Trust people. "We shouldn't be afraid of our people," he said, "even when they express views that disagree with their leaders."

### 'Blessings of liberty'

And there it was: that old belief that ordinary people can make a pretty good fist of their lives and don't need the machinery of state to push this way and that.

Vance's speech wasn't so much a breath of fresh air as a hurricane of good sense. It was a storm of reason that has left many in Europe wide-eyed and wanting more.

The liberal press is accusing him of "attacking Europe." He didn't attack us. He talked to us. He urged us to rediscover those "blessings of liberty." His speech was firm but it was kind. It was the pained plea of an old friend who's worried we have lost our way.

He has shown just how fresh and daring the new Trump administration is. Try to imagine Joe Biden doing what Vance did. It's impossible.

After hearing Vance, I'm wondering if that position of 51st state is still open. I know Canada doesn't want it, but some of us in Britain might be interested.

How about it, J.D. — take us, your "very dear friends," on your mission to restore the great virtues of the free West.

*Brendan O'Neill is chief political writer for the British online magazine spiked.*

# Calls to oust as allies mull support It's 'make or break' for mayor

By CRAIG McCARTHY,  
VAUGHN GOLDEN, LARRY  
CELONA and EMILY CRANE

It could be a make-or-break weekend for Mayor Adams as calls mount for him to resign and Gov. Hochul faces pressure to oust him for being beholden to President Trump after the Justice Department quashed his criminal case.

The pressure cooker situation comes in a week where Hizzoner has become increasingly isolated from once-loyal allies — with some turning against an embattled Adams and others wrestling with the choice to continue to back the second black leader of the Big Apple, sources said.

Hochul is said to have already started having behind-the-scenes conversations on booting Adams from City Hall, a source told The Post after the governor earlier confirmed she was consulting state officials about his future.

The Rev. Al Sharpton, too, was convening a meeting of top black elected officials in New York City and the state over the weekend to weigh their next move.

"Now he's damaged goods so [black leaders are] not going to spend political capital on him, but they are still torn because he's the second black mayor," one Democratic pundit said.

"It's a s--t show," said another.

## Calls to resign

Late Monday, Trump's DOJ ordered Manhattan federal prosecutors to drop the historic corruption charges against Adams — arguing, in part, that the case was politically motivated and that it impacted the mayor's ability to lead the city and to help enact the president's immigra-

tion agenda.

By Friday, those conversations had spilled out into public view — with even state Attorney General Letitia James telling reporters that there were "a number of discussions going on" about the mayor's future.

"I'm going to refrain from any comment until such time as we complete those discussions and determine the fate of the mayor of the city of New York," she said at an unrelated press conference.

On Thursday, Acting Manhattan US Attorney Danielle Sassoon resigned, saying she couldn't obey orders to drop the case against Adams in "good faith" — and accusing the DOJ and Adams in a scathing resignation letter of an illegal "quid pro quo" to help Trump's immigration agenda in exchange for the case being dropped.

Lt. Gov. Antonio Delgado led calls for Adams to step down late Thursday as he slung accusations that the mayor was deep in Trump's pocket.

"New York City deserves a Mayor accountable to the people, not beholden to the President. Mayor Adams should step down," Delgado fired off on X.

Delgado stopped short of calling on Hochul to exercise her obscure power to remove a sitting mayor, telling reporters Friday, "I think the first step is to call for resignation.

"His guilt or innocence at this point is really not the question," he said. "The question in my mind is: Is he in a position to serve the best interests of the city?"

City Hall was apparently taken aback by Delgado's fiery take, according to an insider.

The state Senate's No. 2 Democrat, Michael Gianaris, on Friday said that Adams "must step



**I am solely beholden to the 8.3 million New Yorkers that I represent and I will always put this city first.**

— Mayor Adams, facing calls to resign over his deal with President Trump's DOJ.

Paul Martinke

down or be removed."

"The last thing the people of New York want is for our city to turn into an annex of the Trump administration, yet that is exactly what is happening," the Queens pol said.

## 'Held hostage'

House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries (D-Brooklyn) argued Thursday that Adams was beholden to Trump, but stopped short of calling for him to resign.

"What is clear is that the White House made a decision to dismiss the criminal charges pending against Mayor Adams without prejudice," said the top Democrat in the House. "Translation: It is the intention of the Trump administration to keep the current mayor on a short leash."

Meanwhile, Sharpton suggested Trump was leveraging the dropped charges against Adams.

"It certainly sounds like President Trump is holding the Mayor

hostage," Sharpton said in a statement. "That is simply not fair to the City of New York . . . Because we have clearly crossed the Rubicon."

The outcry stands in stark contrast to when Adams was indicted in September and many — including Sharpton — fiercely rallied behind him.

Adams denied that he'd made any kind of deal with the feds.

"I never offered — nor did anyone offer on my behalf — any trade of my authority as your mayor for an end to my case. Never," he said in a statement Friday. "I am solely beholden to the 8.3 million New Yorkers that I represent and I will always put this city first. Now, we must put this difficult episode behind us so that trust can be restored."

Hochul wouldn't rule out removing Adams on Thursday, telling MSNBC that the allegations of a quid pro quo were "extremely concerning and serious."

Additional reporting by Aneeta Bhole and Carl Campanile

## Feds act to drop the case

Federal prosecutors moved Friday to toss the historic corruption case against Mayor Adams following a wave of resignations in protest of the Justice Department's orders for the case to be killed.

The motion to dismiss the case without prejudice marks the first formal step to halting Adams' criminal prosecution — and leaves the future of the case in the hands of a Biden-appointed federal judge.

It came days after the stunning directive by the DOJ that Manhattan federal prosecutors should drop the case because it was "politicized" and affecting Adams' ability to lead the city and to help enact President Trump's immigration enforcement agenda.

Acting Deputy Attorney General Emil Bove, who signed Friday's motion, ordered the Southern District of New York Monday to toss the case and characterized the prosecutors' "factual and legal theories" as "extremely aggressive."

He also said that the Adams prosecution was politically motivated retribution because he spoke against the Biden administration's border policies.

Ben Kochman, Craig McCarthy, Matt Troutman and Kyle Schnitzer

## Prosecutor #7 resigns

A seventh prosecutor resigned Friday rather than heed the Justice Department's order to toss Mayor Adams' criminal case — and suggested on his way out only a "fool" or "coward" would comply.

Hagan Scotten — an assistant US attorney in the Southern District of New York and the lead prosecutor on the case — said in a scathing resignation letter that dismissing the bribery, corruption and other charges against Adams was a "serious mistake."

Ben Kochman, With Wires

# FIRST 100 DAYS

## 'Titanic' waste at Joe's EPA



Tyler Daraden for NY Post

Ex-President Joe Biden's EPA parked \$20 billion at Citibank, *The Post* has learned, as part of the 2022 Inflation Reduction Act's Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund. But the awardees weren't announced until August 2024 and Citibank was not brought in until September — after Biden's disastrous June debate performance led him to withdraw from his re-election effort in July, mak-

ing for a very different race with Vice President Kamala Harris the Democratic nominee.

Zeldin's team is looking into whether former EPA employees are working at any of the grantees. Here Lee Zeldin tells *The Post's* Kelly Jane Torrance why it was "a high priority for me and my great team to get to the bottom of these questions as quickly as possible."

By LEE ZELDIN

**T**HIS was on our radar during the transition, when the video was posted online at the beginning of December of the Biden EPA political appointee admitting on camera they were "throwing gold bars off the Titanic."

To us, that very obviously meant the "gold bars" were tax dollars and "off the Titanic" meant they were wasting it — and they knew it.

That was causing a lot of sirens to go off. It was a frequent topic of conversation in my meetings with senators — we spoke about accountability of funding during my confirmation hearing. I committed during my hearing to making this a top priority as soon as I got in, and our team has been planning for what has been months now to be able to hit the ground running and jump all over this urgent situation the moment we came into office.

So this was an all-in, top-priority effort that has instantly been yielding very important results for the taxpayers — and we're just getting started.

This was a deliberate rush job meant to obligate all this funding with less oversight. In that video, the Biden EPA political appointee was talking multiple times about "throwing gold bars off the Titanic" and at one point also talks about how they are giving out billions of

dollars to these recipient NGOs with an eye toward getting themselves jobs at them — which added a whole other layer of massive concern.

As they were throwing gold bars off the Titanic, this \$20 billion pot was sent to a financial institution outside government, which was collecting interest.

The \$20 billion only goes to eight entities, and we want to know if any of those eight entities have any recently employed Biden administration officials and EPA employees.

### Getting the money back

But that's just the start of the questions, not the end of it. We also want to know the same question as it relates to all the ultimate recipients of all the funding that was rushed out the door pre-inauguration. That's where the biggest flag was raised in the video.

Every grant is equal. We're doing a review of everything and reviewing all the contractual agreements.

And we're going to explore every option that's available to us as it relates to every dollar the bank currently has: We are going to seek it to be returned to the EPA, and the first step is establishing control of those funds.

But we're going to walk and chew gum and continue our review — and in many, many other respects — simultaneously.

As far as exact dollar amounts of each of the eight pots, we want to know not just how much has been sent but also how much has been obligated and how much is currently available and not yet obligated.

These questions highlight one of the concerns with this scheme — these questions should all be instantly available and handy for us to have the answers on. They're not.

And there are many, many other questions that we have that we are going to get answered.

I want to highlight there's zero evidence whatsoever of anything being done improperly by the bank.

This was an arrangement the EPA sought out, working with the Biden Treasury Department to park \$20 billion outside of government and that deliberately resulted in less transparency, accountability and oversight.

And I committed to Congress and the American people during my confirmation hearing that I would do everything in my power if confirmed to ensure there wasn't any waste and abuse and I was going to get to the bottom of all of these funds. This is something that is of highest concern and priority for us.

We have very high confidence that this is just the tip of the iceberg.

# FEDS

## Pride of place: NYP in the WH



WASHINGTON — The *Post's* front page showing President Trump's Georgia mug shot was spotted Thursday on a wall just outside the Oval Office — indicating the 45th and 47th president isn't embarrassed by the snap and may even view it as motivation.

The framed newspaper is in the office of Trump's secretaries — between the Oval Office and the Cabinet Room — in a

space that often serves as an entrance for guests.

The surprising decoration was revealed during Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's (above left) visit, when the leaders were seated in front of the Oval Office's fireplace — with the door behind Trump left open.

The August 25, 2023, *Post* cover (inset) shows Trump giving a stern look as Fulton County authorities booked him

## Don orders on energy, vax

WASHINGTON — President Trump signed orders Friday creating a new council on US "energy dominance" and barring federal funding for schools and universities that require students to take COVID-19 vaccines.

"We have more energy than any other country, and now we're unleashing it," Trump said with five of his Cabinet secretaries arrayed behind the Resolute Desk in the Oval Office as he

signed the orders.

The president said one of his priorities would be approving a pending pipeline to New York.

The vaccine executive order, meanwhile, comes roughly five years after the novel coronavirus arrived in the US, killing more than 1 million Americans. Vaccines have become less effective at blocking COVID-19 transmission while newer variants of the virus have become less lethal over time.

Steven Nelson

# 'STAMP' OUT SODA?

## Mulling a ban on junk-food welfare

By STEVEN NELSON

WASHINGTON — Americans on food stamps may be banned from using them to buy “sugary drinks” and other junk food, Agriculture Secretary Brooke Rollins said Friday.

The newly appointed Cabinet official said she will work with Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. — and Elon Musk’s Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) — to prioritize food-stamp benefits for healthy food items.

“Will we ever take food out of a hungry child’s mouth? Of course not, this is the United States of America,” Rollins told reporters on the White House driveway.

“Truly, this program has grown so large, especially in the last administration. Under Biden, I think [the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program] grew almost 30% more than before. We really need to look at where that money is going, what it’s being spent on,” she said.

“I look forward to working with Bobby Kennedy as we figure out, ‘Do we have the healthiest choices?’ So when a taxpayer is putting money into SNAP, are we OK with us using their tax dollars to feed really bad food and sugary drinks to children who perhaps need something more nutritious?”

Rollins and Kennedy were both confirmed by the Senate Thursday and will serve on Pres-

ident Trump’s new 13-member Make America Healthy Again commission.

In fiscal 2023, 42.1 million people received SNAP benefits, according to USDA. The program’s cost was \$112.8 billion annually, with benefits averaging \$211.93 per month.

It’s unclear how the plan might work, though the idea already is under consideration in Congress. A bill from Rep. Josh Brecheen (R-Okla.) would restrict the use of SNAP benefits on “soft drinks, candy, ice cream, prepared desserts such as cakes, pies, cookies, or similar products.”

### ‘It’s not a handout’

A different and bipartisan bill sponsored by Brecheen and Sen. Cory Booker (D-NJ) would authorize a study of SNAP purchases to “add improving nutrition security and diet quality to Congress’ declaration of policy for SNAP.”

Rollins also said she would welcome “a business perspective” in particular from Musk’s DOGE team in making the best use of food stamp funding.

“[It] started with the idea that you’re going to help people — it’s not a handout, it’s a hand up — and then years later the programs are even bigger and more people on them. And are we really giving people a hand up or is it really a handout?” she said.

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AP Photo via Getty Images

on charges for challenging the 2020 election results.

Small wording at the bottom of the cover says, “Donald Trump glowers in the first mug shot ever taken of a former president after he was arrested on charges of trying to overturn the 2020 Georgia election.”

Trump’s decision to give the image a place of honor indicates he’s not ashamed of becoming the first-ever president

subjected to a mug shot.

The Fulton County case began to unravel when District Attorney Fani Willis, an elected Democrat, was exposed for having a secret relationship with attorney Nathan Wade, whom she hired to prosecute the then-ex-president.

Trump says the cases against him amounted to “lawfare” by Democrats to derail his political movement. *Steven Nelson*

## Bitter pill at NIH and CDC

The Trump administration reportedly was to have fired thousands of federal employees working in public health and science agencies Friday as part of its bid to shrink the size of government.

The latest cuts will affect about 5,200 employees working across agencies under the Department of Health and Human Services, including the National Institutes of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, according to STAT News.

The mass firing was to target recent hires on probationary status, which typically applies to workers of less than one year, the health and medicine outlet reported. The CDC alone would lose roughly 1,300 workers as a result of the purge.

It’s unclear how many NIH employees were to be fired.

Affected workers will be placed on paid leave for one month before their termination, according to STAT News. *Victor Nava*

## Defense ‘trims’

Pentagon officials are offering up lists of possible cuts in preparation for a massive overhaul of the Department of Defense by the new Department of Government Efficiency.

Members of DOGE, headed by Elon Musk, are expected to arrive at the DOD as early as this week to tackle its more than \$800 billion budget, The Wall Street Journal reported Friday.

The DOGE team is aiming to cut 8% from next year’s defense budget. *Deirdre Bardolf*

## Trump, Musk hunky-dory

President Trump and billionaire DOGE chief Elon Musk accused the media and pundits on Friday of trying to create tension between them in an effort to drive them apart.

“They want a divorce. They want you two to start hating each other,” Fox News host Sean Hannity told Trump and Musk in a clip from a lengthy interview that will air next week.

Trump, 78, agreed with the Fox News host and revealed that

Musk had already warned him about the media’s effort to sow discord. “Oh, I see it all the time,” the president said. “They tried it, then they stopped.”

Speaking directly to Musk, Trump indicated the public can see through what the media is trying to manufacture. “You know what I have learned, Elon? The people are smart. They get it,” the commander in chief said.

“Yeah. They do, actually,” the tech mogul said. *Victor Nava*

# Jersey Turnstrike

**This is an overdue victory for parental rights and against government overreach . . . It's been a long drawn-out waste of everyone's time.**

—Middletown BOE VP **Jacqueline Tobacco**



**HOT-BUTTON ISSUE:** Over 300 people, including protesters, flood the Middletown Board of Education meeting when it amended a trans student policy in 2023.



**KIRSTEN FLEMING**

## 3 schools nix trans rule

**S**CORE another win for parental rights and common sense.

Three New Jersey school districts were given the green light to drop a controversial transgender student policy after years of legal wrangling.

On Monday, state appellate court issued the ruling allowing Monmouth County districts Middletown, Manalapan-Englishtown and Marlboro to remove from their books the state's guidelines on how parents are notified if their child decides to transition.

The decision was welcomed by members of the Middletown school board. On Thursday night, they voted 7 to 1 to toss controversial policy 5756 in the dustbin — and simply deal with trans students and parental notification on a case-by-case basis. (Manalapan and Marlboro will both vote on the issue next week).

“This is an overdue victory for parental rights and against government overreach,” Middletown Board of Education Vice President Jacqueline Tobacco told *The Post*. “It’s been a long drawn-out waste of everyone’s time.”

Attorney Bruce Padula, who represents both Middletown and Manalapan-Englishtown, told *The Post* he “considers it a victory that [the districts] are now put in the same position as every other

school district in the state, that they can make the same policy decisions that they feel are best for their community.”

To recap, this convoluted and colossal waste of time: In 2019, Middletown adopted policy 5756 because they were told by Strauss Esmay, a third-party vendor tasked with interpreting policies for schools, that it was mandatory.

But as COVID-19 shutdowns ignited a powerful parental rights movement that upended school boards across the country, new administrations began to take stock of their priorities. That included approaches to trans students — a suddenly growing population.

### Loggerheads

In the spring of 2023, Middletown along with Manalapan-Englishtown and Marlboro all crafted similar amended policies in regard to transgender students. In the case of Middletown, parents would be told if their children were “socially transitioning” and formally wanted to change their gender identity, pronouns or name, use different bathrooms, or change the gender of teams they play on.

It made sense. After all, parents shouldn’t be shut out of major de-



isions in their children’s lives. Kids cannot even take an aspirin in school without permission from home.

But the state thought differently. Within 48 hours of passing the policies, State Attorney General Matthew Platkin filed lawsuits saying they were tantamount to out-

ing kids and increased the risk of suicide. The state asked a judge to issue an injunction, which was granted.

### ‘He should pay up’

The policy adopted by Middletown, where Gov. Phil Murphy (inset) lives, was “student-led” and compassionate, involving administrators discussing with the pupils about approaches to their parents before they were made. They simply wanted the parents to be aware and in the loop, especially with such a vulnerable population.

The state and the districts, which have 18,000 students between them, came to loggerheads in court.

Caterina Skalaski, a Middletown mother of three, told me at the time: “I do not, will not ever coparent with the government. If [Gov. Phil] Murphy wants to coparent then he should pay up and split some bills for my kids. He

wasn’t present in the delivery room when they were born.”

But there was a major wrinkle. During an initial hearing in a suit against a fourth district, Deputy AG James Michael told Judge Stuart Minkowitz that policy 5756 was not, in fact, mandatory. It was merely a guideline.

At the time, Tobacco called it a “bombshell.”

When that was revealed, over 30 school districts across the Garden State simply began to drop the controversial guidelines, without penalty.

However, Middletown, Marlboro and Manalapan/Englishtown were kept in purgatory, still bound by the injunction, which essentially sanctioned secrets between students and schools.

“If we had known it was non-mandatory we never would have amended it,” Tobacco said. “We were held hostage for 18 months being mandated to keep the policy in place while over 30 districts in the state were simply repealing it.” Sense has started to return.

And while this decision didn’t allow the districts to enact the policies that spurred the legal battles, Tobacco was happy with the outcome.

“We abolished it and we will continue to take care of students the way we do with every other situation,” she said, adding “we always just cared about the kids.”

## NYC has top spots for music

The Big Apple is still the biggest stage around.

The metro area was essentially named the City of Live Music — as it recorded a sweep of top spots on Billboard’s 2025 Top Music Venues list.

MetLife Stadium, Madison Square Garden, Forest Hills Stadium and the Brooklyn Paramount were named, respectively, the best stadium, arena, amphitheater and music club in the eastern United States.

Williamsburg’s famous Brooklyn Bowl was even named the region’s “Best Food and Music Pairing,” making the New York area the most honored on the list.

“New York is a beacon of live entertainment experience in the United States and around the world,” Larry Miller, the director of the music business program at NYU Steinhardt, told *The Post*.

The Big Apple took home five out of Billboard’s 28 categories — totaling about 18% of the awards.

“We’re lucky that we live in a market where, yes, you’re going to large venues where the biggest acts in the world can play, but you can also get a great experience along with your ticket and your opportunity to buy a \$100 sweatshirt,” Miller said. *Katherine Donlevy*

## Sunnier in Philadelphia

New Yorkers fed up with sky-high housing costs are setting their sights on a new, but not far away, destination: Philadelphia.

A report from listings portal StreetEasy reveals that the City of Brotherly Love, just 90 minutes from New York, officially surpassed Miami as the most popular out-of-state metro where New Yorkers are looking to move.

The median asking price for a home in Philadelphia sits at just \$256,000, with average rent hovering around \$1,700 — a steal compared to New York’s astronomical real estate market. *Mary K. Jacob*

ATTENTION PARENTS & HIGH SCHOOL JOURNALISTS  
IN THE NEW YORK AREA

**NEW YORK POST**

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# SHE CLIMBED FDNY LADDER

## First female deputy chief

By HANNAH FIERICK  
and NATALIE O'NEILL

She puts the “blaze” in trailblazer!

The first female FDNY deputy chief ever was promoted Friday, as top brass hailed her for “shattering the glass ceiling” in the male-dominated field.

Battalion Chief Michele Fitzsimmons — a 24-year veteran who joined the Bravest a few months before 9/11 — was named deputy chief of fire operations at a packed promotion ceremony in Queens.

“I hope that other women who are in the department now can see themselves rising through the ranks,” Fitzsimmons, 55, told reporters after the event at Queens College. “I also hope that young girls can see themselves as being firefighters.”

### ‘Sacrifice paid off’

Family support helped her pull off the impressive career climb, she said.

“All the sacrifice paid off and it’s made a big difference. I was able to break the glass ceiling thanks to the support of all my family,” she said.

An audience of hundreds roared with applause as she accepted the prestigious new job title on stage with a cheerful



**ROARING SUCCESS:** Michele Fitzsimmons (right) and wife Dianna Fitztola celebrate the honor.

smile.

Fitzsimmons began her career with the FDNY in May 2001, just four months before 9/11 — and six “probies” from her class were killed responding to the terrorist attacks.

“[I’m] thinking about the six guys from my class who didn’t get to have the full career that I did and the sacrifice that they made,” she said, according to an FDNY Instagram post. “I was given an opportunity they never had.”

Fitzsimmons comes from a long line of firefighters, including her great-grandfather, grandfather and sister.

At the event on Friday, Fire Commissioner Robert Tucker called her inspiring.

“You are showing women and girls everywhere what leadership looks like,” he said.

A total of 70 FDNY staffers were promoted at the ceremony, including four battalion chiefs, 16 captains and 18 lieutenants.

After the event, Fitzsimmons’ wife, Dianna Fitztola, said she’s thrilled the FDNY values “diversity.”

“It took me awhile to get used to what the FDNY stands for,” she said — adding she didn’t “grow up in a firefighting family” and isn’t from New York.

“But I cannot be more proud of how this group of people comes together to save lives [and] promote women who do the work,” she said.

Brigitte Steiner

## Meg-Harry big \$\$ to lefties

Meghan Markle and Prince Harry have funneled hundreds of thousands of dollars to controversial political operatives through their charity, according to documents reviewed by The Post.

The Duke and Duchess of Sussex have been spending big on high level Democratic Party-aligned sources, according to public records, including hiring a “disinformation expert” who worked at a company involved in every high-profile US election

since the ‘90s.

The move could further widen the divide between Harry and his family, after brother Prince William recently met with President Trump. King Charles is also said by the British press to have maintained a good relationship with Trump and the president has expressed his support for both.

The Archewell Foundation, the California-based non-profit started by Harry and Meghan in 2020, doled out

\$146,500 to Jiore Craig in 2023, an independent media strategist who has been called the Democrats’ “go-to” for “countering disinformation,” according to a report.

Trump has been dismissive of Harry and Meghan, recently saying he wouldn’t look into claims Harry lied on his application to live in the US.

“I’ll leave him alone. He’s got enough problems with his wife. She’s terrible,” he’s told The Post.

Isabel Vincent

# 'Trans slay' break

## Murder con hit with '12 rap, too

By JOE MARINO, JACK MORPHET  
and AMANDA WOODS

A maniac already serving time for murdering his ex-girlfriend was charged Friday in the cold-case murder of a well-known transgender performer — known as the “Puerto Rican Beyoncé” — who was found dead in a 2012 Brooklyn fire, cops and sources said.

Henry Pacheco, 44, was charged with murder, arson and petit larceny in connection to the May 12, 2012, death of Lorena Escalera, 25, who went by the stage name Lorena Xtravaganza, cops said.

### Blaze for cover

Early that morning, Pacheco called Escalera multiple times before trudging up to the victim's third-floor apartment on Furman Avenue near Bushwick Avenue, Assistant District Attorney Steven Bravo said during the alleged killer's Friday afternoon arraignment in Brooklyn Supreme Court.

“After about an hour the defendant was seen exiting the building as the fire began to take over the building,” Bravo said. “The origin of the fire was the bedroom where



Paul Martinke

**GRUESOME:** Henry Pacheco, already doing time for a 2019 murder, appears in Brooklyn court Friday to face charges in the cold case of slain trans performer Lorena Escalera (inset) seven years earlier.

the victim's body was found.”

Other residents managed to escape, but Escalera was found lifeless on her bed with burns on her body as first responders descended on her apartment, according to prosecutors and sources.

Investigators believe Pacheco murdered Escalera and then set

the apartment on fire to cover his tracks, sources said Friday.

Bravo confirmed that Escalera “was deceased before the fire started” and that she died by “homicidal violence.”

The fire marshal determined that the blaze began in Pacheco's bed and it “was not natural nor accidental,” the DA's office said.

Pacheco's exact relationship to Escalera was not immediately known.

Someone made a call on the victim's phone after her death, and that caller was known to Pacheco, but not to Escalera, Bravo said.

Those who knew Escalera called her the “Puerto Rican Beyoncé.”

“Every time she got on stage, no matter the place, the crowd used to enjoy her performance,” club manager Adolfo Diaz Estrada told The Post at the time.

### History of violence

Nearly five years after Escalera's murder, Pacheco allegedly murdered his ex-girlfriend Brooke Garcia, 27, inside an East Village apartment on Jan. 4, 2017, according to sources and a criminal complaint.

Loved ones told WABC at the time that Garcia, who had a young daughter, was staying with an aunt as she worked to get back on her feet.

“It was a horrible death,” her aunt told the network. “I don't know why somebody would do something like that. She didn't deserve it.”

Pacheco was sentenced to 20 years to life behind bars in connection to that murder.

Records show he had been locked up in the Wende Correctional Facility in upstate Alden since July 2019, and he is not eligible for parole until 2038, according to the records.

He was linked to Escalera's murder while held in the state lockup and transported to the Big Apple to face those charges, sources said.

Judge Jeffrey Gershuny ordered Pacheco held without bail in Escalera's murder.

Pacheco, who was handcuffed during the proceedings, said nothing but shook his head when detectives walked him out.

joe.marino@nypost.com



**ASHLEY ST. CLAIR**  
Mom of a 5-month-old.

## 'Musk is my baby daddy'

A conservative influencer claimed she gave birth to a child fathered by Elon Musk in a shocking public declaration on social media.

Author Ashley St. Clair, 31, alleged in an X post Friday night that she and Elon Musk share a 5-month-old child.

“Five months ago, I welcomed a new baby into the world. Elon Musk is the father,” read her statement, captioned “*Alea lacta est*,” Latin for “the die is cast.”

“I have not previously disclosed this to protect our child's privacy and safety, but in recent days it has become clear that tabloid media intends to do so, regardless of the harm it will cause,” St. Clair wrote.

“I intend to allow our child to grow in a normal and safe environment. For that reason, I ask that the media honor our child's privacy, and refrain from invasive reporting.”

Musk has not acknowledged St. Clair's claim. The Post has reached out to his lawyer. *Shane Galvin*

## Teen slain at Qns. McD's

A 14-year-old boy was stabbed to death at a Queens McDonald's after teenagers got into a brawl at the fast-food joint Friday afternoon, according to the NYPD.

The unidentified teen was stabbed multiple times in the abdomen after a fight broke out among a large group of teenagers at the McDonald's on Queens Boulevard in Sunnyside at around 3:30 p.m., cops said.

The boy was taken to Cornell Medical Center where he was declared dead. *Shane Galvin*

# Texas migrant-bus biz sues back at NYC

The Big Apple was whacked with a lawsuit this week over the alleged “political theater” of its failed \$700 million lawsuit against bus companies for hauling migrants from Texas to New York City.

Roadrunner Charters Inc. — one of the 17 bus businesses that Mayor Adams sued last year for shuttling

33,000 migrants to the Big Apple — fired back with its own suit Wednesday, claiming the mayor's case was “frivolous” and interfered with its business.

Roadrunner, which is based in Texas, is seeking unspecified damages from the city for the suit that “was no more than political theater” meant to distract

the public from the “inadequacies” of federal immigration policies, the court papers allege.

The mayor's suit from January 2024 sought to put the bus companies on the hook for the hundreds of millions of dollars it cost the city to take care of the migrants transported by the companies. But in July, a

Manhattan judge tossed out the city's suit, finding it unconstitutional, in part because it was based on a 19th century “pauper's statute” already found unconstitutional by the US Supreme Court decades ago.

The case forced Roadrunner in March to halt moving the migrants halfway across the country as it had been

doing since spring 2022 and threatened to run the company out of business by seeking the massive damages, Roadrunner's Manhattan federal court suit claims. The city violated Roadrunner's constitutional right to carry out interstate commerce and transportation, the complaint claims. *Priscilla DeGregory*

# SATURDAY NIGHT

## Show's history of lampooning NYC

By LAUREN SARNER

It's a New York state of mind. "Saturday Night Live" is one of New York City's most iconic shows — and as the sketch comedy celebrates 50 years on the air with two specials, it's the perfect time to look back at its best sketches mocking Manhattan.

"SNL" is celebrating its semicentennial with "SNL50: The Anniversary Special" (airing on Sunday night at 8 p.m. on NBC and Peacock) and "SNL50: The Homecoming Concert" (live from Radio City Music Hall on Peacock on Friday at 8 p.m.).

Here are the best moments when "SNL" took a bite out of The Big Apple.

### ■ "Only In New York"

In a Season 15 sketch in 1990, "SNL" did a parody of legendary Post columnist Cindy Adams and her husband, Joe Adams (right).

"They peed on me long ago. It was no mazel tov," Adams, now 91, wrote in a column reflecting on the sketch.

She added, "Since I still have that same Gucci jacket I wore when they urinated on me, maybe that's a small mazel-tov-let."

### ■ "New York City Council Campaign"

During an episode in the current Season 50, John Mulaney (right) stars as fake "City Council" candidate Harvey Epstein. "Is my name ideal? Of course not. I share a name with two of the most notorious sex perverts of all time," he says in the sketch, referring to Harvey Weinstein and Jeffrey Epstein.

### ■ "New York PSA"

The November 2020 sketch is mostly a serious PSA thanking the people of New York — and especially the frontline workers — for banding together during the COVID-19 pandemic.

However, it soon becomes clear that the same eccentric woman (played by Kate McKinnon) is dancing in the background as each cast member talks solemnly about the pandemic. Soon, their "PSA" devolves into them talking about her.

### ■ "Transit Workers"

In a sketch that originally aired in 1993 in Season 19, Tim Meadows plays a man taking the subway trying to find out if the D train is running. A transit worker gives a comically unintelligible announcement over the loudspeaker. The sketch then reveals that as the transit workers (played by Kevin Nealon and Ellen Cleghorne) step away from the speaker and talk to each other



normally, they still communicate in unintelligible mumbles.

### ■ "Weekend Update"

In a 2017 episode from Season 43, Pete Davidson joins Colin Hanks on "Weekend Update" to reveal why he's not going home to Staten Island for Thanksgiving. He also gives a shout-out to The Post. "I feel like my hometown doesn't really like me," he says, reminiscing about how he's made public comments disdaining the borough. He points out their local newspaper fawning over Hanks but not Davidson.

He then points out a 2016 article in The Post where reporter Dean Bascamini told him he'd be "sleeping with the fishes" if he kept publicly insulting Staten Island. "That's a death threat. In a newspaper!"

### ■ "Port Authority Duane Reade"

In Season 50, a Duane Reade cashier in Port Authority Bus Terminal (Mulaney) deals with two customers (Davidson and Andrew Dismukes), as Davidson's character asks to buy milk, and everyone else is aghast at his purchase. The back of the store opens to reveal a "family of possums" (Kenan Thompson and Ego Nwodim in possum costumes) singing about how the milk is from

them. Andy Samberg makes a cameo as "the dead bear that RFK dropped in Central Park."

The sketch takes aim at everything about the Port Authority environment, from the bus drivers to the stores and the security. There's even a nod to the Timothée Chalamet look-alike contest.

### ■ "Subway Churros"

In 2022, Dismukes plays a man who alarms his friends by buying a churro in a subway station. Thompson (below left) appears as a "mole person" cautioning about the risks ("an hour before you, a rat bit it too," he sings, and breaks into a mole-man song to the tune of Fiddler on the Roof's "If I Were A Rich Man").

### ■ "Subway Platform"

In Season 49, a man played by Devon Walker asks the head of an investment banking firm to consider him for a job while they're on a subway platform. Behind them in the train, commuters make a typical NYC ruckus — someone drops their pants, someone else gets into a fight — getting increasingly distracting in the background.

### ■ "Subway"

In a Season 13 sketch that aired in 1987, Phil Hartman plays a man begging for money on the subway claiming to be a Vietnam vet. After shaming everyone into giving him cash, he then keeps changing his story to garner more sympathy. First, he says he's actually an actor who needs money if anyone was moved by his "performance." Finally, after sweeping the subway car for money twice, he says he's not an actor, he's actually a "psychotic."

By MARA SIEGLER,  
SARA NATHAN  
and LAUREN SARNER

It's taken 50 years, but "Saturday Night Live" is finally ready for prime time.

The New York comedy institution, created by Lorne Michaels in 1975, will celebrate its first half-century with a starry, three-hour anniversary special Sunday night at 8 p.m. on NBC.

The city honored the milestone this week with subway ads and train announcements read by Kenan Thompson. And the event's cast, spanning every era of the famed sketch show's history, has been spotted all over town.

Thursday at the Comedy Cellar in the West Village, Steve Martin, who's hosted at Studio 8H 16 times, rehearsed what sounded like a monologue for "SNL50" while "Only Murders in the Building" co-star Martin Short did impressions. Comedian John Mulaney, who got his start as an "SNL" writer in 2008, joined in, too.

"It was all a surprise," a spy told Page Six, adding that none of the comics had been on the schedule and wound up popping up separately — and in groups — at the club known for its A-list drop-ins.

Those party crashers included other Not Ready for Prime Time Players like Chris Rock, David Spade, Colin Quinn, Leslie Jones and current cast member Marcello Hernandez. Also doing a set were Ray Romano, Aziz Ansari and Nate Bargatze. And the fame didn't stop at the stage. Sacha Baron Cohen and Woody Harrelson were in the crowd.

On the same day, the show got fans buzzing when it shared a photo on Instagram of stars such as Kate McKinnon and Seth Meyers huddled around a table for the read-through at 30 Rock — their old stomping grounds.

What's in that script — the iconic characters, surprise guests, who's behind the "Weekend Update" desk — is a total mystery.

But Michaels exclusively told The Post that audiences will get to see the show's illustrious alumni thrown together in unexpected ways.

"There's a lot of moving parts and a lot of people coming that go back 50 years," the 80-year-old TV legend said.

"There are these different generations coming together and working together. Pete [Da-



# ALL WEEK LONG



**LOTS OF LAUGHS:** As comedians going back five decades arrive in town for the 50th birthday of “Saturday Night Live,” some are practicing their skits at read-through (above) in preparation for the big show Sunday — that’s right, Sunday in prime time — to honor creator Lorne Michaels (bottom inset) and his TV institution.

## Comedy surprises & parties aplenty as ‘SNL’ turns 50



vidson] did a video with Laraine [Newman], and he wasn’t even born when she was on the show.” Newman, 72, was an original cast member who left in 1980.

And Davidson, 31, was a staple from 2014 to 2022.

“Movies aren’t as hard to grind,” Davidson said of the grind of his old job. “[SNL] is a relentless schedule. I have anxiety just being there this week. But I’ve been seeing a million people, and that’s great.”

The hilarious talent announced so far includes past “SNL” stars such as Adam Sandler, Amy Poehler, Andy Samberg, Chevy Chase, Chris Rock,

Eddie Murphy, Fred Armisen, Garrett Morris, Jane Curtin, Jason Sudeikis, Jimmy Fallon, McKinnon, Kristen Wiig, Maya Rudolph, Molly Shannon, Tina Fey, Tracy Morgan, Will Ferrell and Will Forte.

They’ll be yucking it up with celebs like Adam Driver, Ayo Edebiri, Bad Bunny, Dave Chappelle, Kim Kardashian, Miley Cyrus, Paul McCartney, Paul Simon, Pedro Pascal, Peyton Manning, Quinta Brunson, Robert De Niro, Sabrina Carpenter, Scarlett Johansson and Tom Hanks.

Longtime production designer Keith Raywood, who has worked on the show for 40 seasons, was tasked with the logistics.

“We [will] have about 450 people in the studio, which is essen-

tially about 200 people more than we would normally have,” he said. “Imagine all the people who have been on the show — those cast members and hosts. It’s a lot of people [there to see them]. And, those seats don’t normally exist.”

To accomplish that, they had to build down from the balcony.

“We continued the seating all the way down to the floor . . . like bleachers,” Raywood said.

Sunday night’s broadcast caps off several days of lead-up celebrations. NBC will air the very first episode of “SNL” from 1975, hosted by George Carlin, in the program’s usual Saturday 11:30 p.m. time slot. And Friday will be a huge Radio City Music Hall concert featuring past musical

guests like Lady Gaga and Chris Martin. Viewers will be treated to some songs on Sunday, too.

Michaels is most excited to unite five decades of comedy greats, young and old, that he spotted before anybody else.

“There’s a lot of the people from the first five years, and all these different generations,” he said.

“They have this one experience in common — that all looks the same and feels the same and the process is the same.”

Sounding like a “Weekend Update” anchor, the producer threw in a political zinger.

“We have 80-year-olds working with 20-year-olds, and you won’t find that anywhere else other than the US Senate,” he said.





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					2 people	\$85,372 - \$161,590
1 bedroom		\$2,890.00	103	→	1 person	\$99,086 - \$141,310
					2 people	\$99,086 - \$161,590
					3 people	\$99,086 - \$181,740
2 bedroom		\$3,590.00	66	→	2 people	\$123,086 - \$161,590
					3 people	\$123,086 - \$181,740
					4 people	\$123,086 - \$201,890
					5 people	\$123,086 - \$218,010

<sup>1</sup> Tenant responsible for electricity. Rent includes gas for cooking, heat, and hot water.

<sup>2</sup> Household size includes everyone who will live with you, including parents and children. Subject to occupancy criteria.

<sup>3</sup> Household earnings includes salary, hourly wages, tips, Social Security, child support, and other income. Income guidelines subject to change.

<sup>4</sup> Minimum income listed may not apply to applicants with Section 8 or other qualifying rental subsidies. Asset limits also apply.

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#### When is the Deadline?

Applications must be postmarked or submitted online no later than March 24, 2025. Late applications will not be considered.

#### What Happens After You Submit an Application?

After the deadline, applications are selected for review through a lottery process. If yours is selected and you appear to qualify, you will be invited to submit documents to continue the process of determining your eligibility. Applicants are usually contacted from 2 to 10 months after the application deadline. You will be asked to submit documents that verify your household size, identity of members of your household, and your household income.

**Español** Presente una solicitud en línea en <https://housingconnect.nyc.gov/PublicWeb/>. Para recibir una traducción de español de este anuncio y la solicitud impresa, envíe un sobre con la dirección a: **2-21 MALT DRIVE APARTMENTS, PO BOX 1543, NEW YORK, NY 10159** En el reverso del sobre, escriba en inglés la palabra "SPANISH." Las solicitudes se deben enviar en línea o con sello postal antes de 24 de marzo 2025.

**简体中文** 访问 <https://housingconnect.nyc.gov/PublicWeb/> 在线申请。如要获取本广告及书面申请表的简体中文版，请将您的回邮信封寄送至：**2-21 MALT DRIVE APARTMENTS, PO BOX 1543, NEW YORK, NY 10159**。信封背面请用英语注明"CHINESE"。必须在以下日期之前在线提交申请或邮寄书面申请 2025年3月24日

**Русский** Чтобы подать заявление через интернет, зайдите на сайт: <https://housingconnect.nyc.gov/PublicWeb/>. Для получения данного объявления и заявления на русском языке отправьте конверт с обратным адресом по адресу **2-21 MALT DRIVE APARTMENTS, PO BOX 1543, NEW YORK, NY 10159**. На задней стороне конверта напишите слово "RUSSIAN" на английском языке. Заявки должны быть поданы онлайн или отправлены по почте (согласно дате на почтовом штемпеле) не позднее 24 март 2025.

**한국어** <https://housingconnect.nyc.gov/PublicWeb/> 에서 온라인으로 신청하십시오. 이 광고문과 신청서에 대한 한국어 번역본을 받아보시려면 발송용 봉투를 **2-21 MALT DRIVE APARTMENTS, PO BOX 1543, NEW YORK, NY 10159** 으로 보내주세요. 봉투 뒷면에 "KOREAN" 이라고 영어로 적어주세요. 2025년 3월 24일 까지 온라인 신청서를 제출하거나 소인이 찍힌 신청서를 보내야 합니다.

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Mayor Eric Adams • HPD Commissioner Adolfo Carrión Jr.



# Calif. U. murder puzzler

A California college student was murdered inside an off-campus apartment building, and officials are hunting for a person of interest who jumped out a second-floor window to escape the crime scene.

Menghan Zhuang's body was found inside her unit at the Vistas condominium complex in the Newhall community of Santa Clarita just after 6:45 p.m. on Feb. 4, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Office said.

Zhuang, 23, a Chinese national living in the US on a student visa, was a senior studying at the California Institute for Arts in Valencia, approximately five miles from her home.

Zhuang's roommate discovered her unresponsive in their unit and called for help at 6:47 p.m. Officials found Zhuang suffering from several upper body injuries but wouldn't disclose the extent or type of injuries. She was pronounced dead at the scene.

Police say Zhuang had invited an unnamed "male companion" into her home the night before her death.

The man was captured on video footage escaping the building through Zhuang's second-story bedroom window hours before her body was discovered.

Nicholas McEntyre

## Grenell eyes run vs. Kam

President Trump's envoy for special missions Richard Grenell said Friday that he's considering running against Kamala Harris for California governor next year.

Grenell, 58, told reporters at the Munich Security Conference that he believes the former vice president is vulnerable.

"I believe that she has such baggage and hundreds of millions of dollars in educating the voters of how terrible she is, that it's a new day in California and that the Republican actually has a shot," Grenell said.

Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom is term-limited. Harris was elected statewide three times. Steven Nelson

# 'Cruel to many' on set: crew member 'SNAKE' LIVELY

By EILEEN RESLEN

Blake Lively was allegedly a mean girl on the set of "A Simple Favor" and is being accused of bringing one crew member to tears many times.

Barbara Szeman — who worked as an assistant director on the 2018 film, according to IMDb — appeared to call out the actress in a series of since-deleted comments on co-star Henry Golding's recent Instagram post about the movie's sequel, "Another Simple Favor," which is set to be released soon.

"I worked with you on the first one," she told the actor. "My experience with everyone was absolutely amazing, except for a certain someone who is the reason I quit being an AD."

"Guess who that person is..." Szeman cryptically added without naming Lively, 37, before concluding, "I wish you all the best with this though!"

The initial comment garnered a lot of attention, which Szeman said she wanted to "avoid," but she claimed she ultimately spoke out because the "Gossip Girl" alum was "cruel to many."

"I know I cried my way home many nights because you try so hard to please someone who is never pleased and puts you down constantly," Szeman went on.

"I can't believe it's actually getting back at her. Karma is real,"

she wrote, referring to Lively's ongoing legal battle with Justin Baldoni over their on- and off-set feuds while making "It Ends With Us."

On her Facebook, Szeman appeared to have some regrets over coming forward given that her remarks had blown up all over social media, writing, "Last time I leave a comment on an Instagram post."

### Bad reputation

A shocked friend then commented, "I didn't know this!!! I had heard from people that she was so nice and lovely to work with — apparently not," prompting Szeman to respond, "Maybe for them. Not for me lol."

The ill-timed comments come just as the "Age of Adeline" star is trying to clean up her reputation, given Baldoni's claims that she was a nightmare to work with on their 2024 flick.

The actor-director, 41, has



Everett Collection



**AWFULLY HARSH:** Blake Lively, while filming "A Simple Favor," was so difficult to work with that assistant director Barbara Szeman (left) said the actress was the reason why "I cried my way home many nights."

filed a \$400 million defamation and extortion lawsuit against his co-star, claiming she tarnished his name and affected his abil-

ity to make an income due to her allegations that he sexually harassed her.

Lively has filed her own lawsuit against Baldoni for alleged sexual harassment and retaliation, breach of contract, infliction of emotional distress, invasion of privacy and lost wages.

# Synagogue 'gun threat' bust at tunnel

A Utah man who allegedly threatened to shoot up New York City synagogues in a series of social-media posts was arrested as he tried to cross into Manhattan via the Lincoln Tunnel on Friday night, according to police and sources.

Luis Ramirez, 23, was taken into custody around 5:30 p.m. by Port Authority cops in New Jersey after au-

thorities were alerted to a rash of antisemitic posts he allegedly made on his X account, the NYPD and sources said. In one post, Ramirez cited Central Synagogue on Lexington Avenue in Midtown, police said.

The NYPD was made aware Ramirez (right) was traveling to the Big Apple from out of state and Port Authority police were able

to nab him before he made it to Manhattan, police said.

The UJA's Community Security Initiative flagged the threats and worked with law enforcement to notify synagogues across the city, sources said.

Ramirez, who has no criminal record, was allegedly found in possession of a firearm when he was stopped earlier on the road trip in

Kansas City, Mo., ABC News reported, citing police sources. He had no weapons in his car when he was stopped outside the Lincoln Tunnel on Friday, sources said.

Ramirez is being held at Hudson County Correctional Center in Kearny, NJ, sources said.

He is expected to be arraigned Saturday. Larry Cella and Anna Young



# Sally Brompton Daily Horoscope



**DISCOVER MORE ABOUT YOURSELF AND WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS AT SALLYBROMPTON.COM**

## **♈ AQUARIUS** (Jan. 21 - Feb. 19)

The fact that you are finding it hard to make up your mind about something suggests you must give it more time. There is no cosmic reason why you have to make a decision right now, so stop fretting and put it out of your head.

## **♓ PISCES** (Feb. 20-Mar. 20)

With mind planet Mercury now in your sign and the Sun joining it there next week the tide is clearly turning in your favor. Give yourself permission to get out and about and have fun this weekend, knowing that even better times are on their way.

## **♈ ARIES** (March 21-April 20)

Forget about any money worries you may be having and focus your attention on your family and your friends. It's people who matter most in this life, not dollars and cents, and if you put people first this weekend the material stuff will take care of itself.

## **♉ TAURUS** (April 21-May 21)

You need to be on the move over the next 48 hours, because it is while you are travelling and meeting people that new ideas will come into your mind and new opportunities to enjoy life will arrive. There is magic in motion.

## **♊ GEMINI** (May 22-June 21)

Mind planet Mercury may be your ruling planet but that does not mean everything you experience can be explained by logic and rational thinking. The message of the stars this weekend is that you should listen more to the mystical side of your mind.

## **♋ CANCER** (June 22-July 23)

If you are not much in the mood to be energetic this

weekend then why push yourself? This could be one of those occasions when by doing less in the short-term you will accomplish more in the long-term. Give it a try and see.

## **♌ LEO** (July 24-Aug. 23)

The fact is you need assistance and if you ask for it a flood of offers will come your way. You have done so many good things for other people in the past that they will jump at the opportunity to do something good for you now.

## **♍ VIRGO** (Aug. 24-Sept. 23)

If you begin a relationship over the next 48 hours it is of the utmost importance that you are honest about what you expect of it right from the start. If you say one thing now but do another thing later on it probably won't work out.

## **♎ LIBRA** (Sept. 24-Oct. 23)

Go out of your way to be nice to people this weekend - then the universe will go out of its way to be nice to you. When dealing with colleagues who are angry and aggressive at least try to understand them. They have their story too.

## **♏ SCORPIO** (Oct. 24-Nov. 22)

You may want to do everything for everyone but even with your immense reserves of energy and enthusiasm that won't be possible. Decide who would benefit most from your assistance and focus on them first and foremost. One good deed at a time.

## **♐ SAGITTARIUS** (Nov. 23 - Dec. 21)

You may not be emotional by nature but the intensity of

your reactions will catch you by surprise this weekend. That's because you have been storing up your feelings rather than finding ways to let them out. The dam has to burst sometime.

## **♑ CAPRICORN** (Dec. 22 - Jan. 20)

If you make a serious effort to patch up disputes with partners and loved ones over the next 48 hours it won't be long before you are on the same wavelength and marching towards your number one goal. You're still on the same team.

**BIRTHDAY SATURDAY**  
The cosmic powers will never confront you with challenges you are unable to handle and if you keep that fact in mind you will keep going and never give up. Your task for the year ahead is to toughen up and discover your deep inner strength.

## Post Weather Report

Saturday	Sunday
Today: Cloudy with afternoon snow, up to 1". High 34 to 40.	Tomorrow: Rain and a t-storm; breezy in the p.m. High 44 to 50.
Tonight: Rain and sleet this evening. Low 30 to 36.	Tomorrow night: Increasingly windy. Low 25 to 31.
Monday	Tuesday
Windy and colder. High 32 to 36.	Breezy and cold. High 27 to 33.
Evening: Clear and cold. Low 15 to 21.	Evening: Cold. Low 16 to 22.

### Almanac

YESTERDAY'S CONDITIONS AT CENTRAL PARK THROUGH 6PM

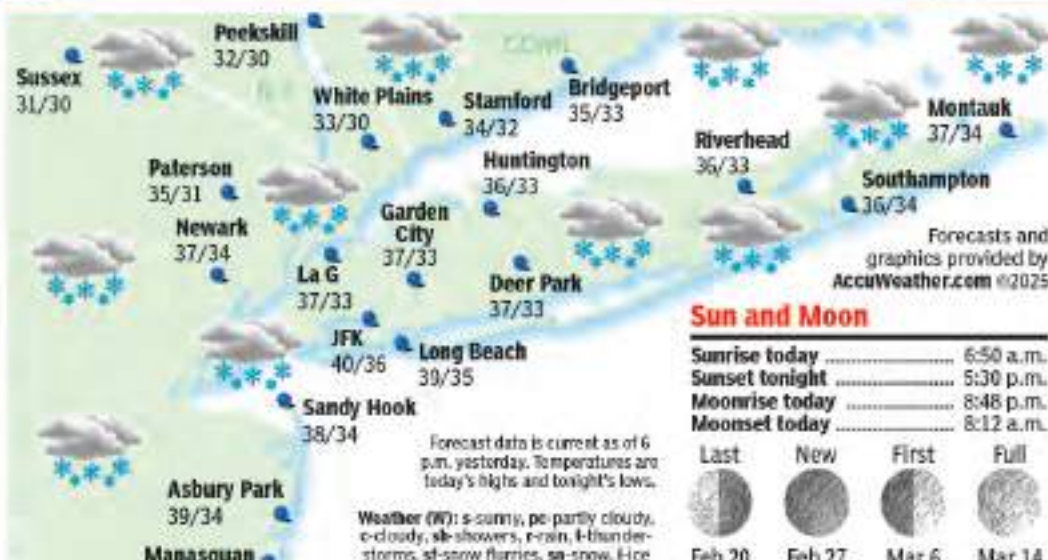
**Temperature**  
High: 36, Low: 30, Mean: 33

**Departure from Normal**  
Yesterday: -3 degrees

**Precipitation**  
Yesterday: 0.00", Month: 1.50", Year: 2.11", Normal year to date: 5.17"

**Heating Degree days yesterday** ..... 32  
**Total for the month (normal)** ..... 433 (426)  
**Total since July 1 (normal)** ..... 2861 (2992)  
**Last season to date** ..... 2596  
**Wind chill (at noon yest.)** ..... 24  
**UV Index (for Sat.)** ..... 1 (LOW)  
**Humidity (at noon)** ..... 29%

**SNOW**  
 Yesterday ..... 0.0"  
 Month to date (normal) ..... 6.2" (5.3")  
**AQI rating: (for Sat.)** ..... Moderate



### Sun and Moon

Sunrise today ..... 6:50 a.m.  
 Sunset tonight ..... 5:30 p.m.  
 Moonrise today ..... 8:48 p.m.  
 Moonset today ..... 8:12 a.m.

Last	New	First	Full
Feb 20	Feb 27	Mar 6	Mar 14

## AccuWeather Visit AccuWeather.com

New York Tides	TODAY	TOMORROW
High Tide for	1st 9:21a	2nd 9:59a
Coney Island	9:51p	10:30p
Fire Island	9:26a	10:04a
Hempstead	12:58a	1:24a
Huntington	1:08p	1:26a
Jones Inlet	1:08p	1:44p
Montauk Point	9:05a	9:43a
Port Washington	10:40a	11:24a
Sandy Hook	1:06a	1:25a
	9:55p	10:34p

Regional cities	TODAY	TOMORROW
Albany	28/27/sn	36/16/l
Danbury	33/30/sn	47/21/r
Glens Falls	24/21/sn	30/12/sn
Gr Barrington	29/25/sn	36/16/sn
Kingston	31/28/sn	38/18/r
Liberty	24/22/sn	37/12/sn
Monticello	25/22/sn	37/12/sn
Newburgh	32/29/sn	41/19/r
Poughkeepsie	32/29/sn	41/22/r
Saratoga Springs	25/23/sn	32/15/sn
Stroudsburg	32/29/sn	47/20/r
Torrington	30/26/sn	38/17/sn
Syracuse	31/28/sn	37/16/sn

World cities	TODAY	TOMORROW
Athens	61/53/pc	59/48/sh
Baghdad	67/35/pc	57/39/sh
Beijing	59/31/pc	48/25/s
Berlin	33/22/c	33/14/pc
Cairo	69/51/s	68/52/s
Dublin	47/43/r	46/43/c
Geneva	39/27/pc	47/30/c
Hong Kong	73/63/pc	78/64/s
Jerusalem	60/44/s	57/42/s
Kabul	48/30/s	48/30/s
London	42/35/c	42/33/c
Madrid	60/40/c	64/39/s
Mexico City	76/51/c	75/49/c
Montreal	15/9/sn	17/8/sn
Moscow	20/12/c	20/7/c
Paris	42/29/pc	46/31/pc
Rio de Janeiro	87/76/s	91/78/s
Rome	55/36/pc	58/38/c
Sydney	83/61/pc	73/61/s
Tokyo	58/41/s	60/45/r



# Flying Blind

## FAA's focus on race put air travel at great risk

**L**AST month's horrific plane crash that killed 67 at Washington's Reagan National Airport was a wake-up call for the millions of Americans who fly regularly.

We count on pilots and air-traffic controllers to keep us safe in the skies — but that trust is betrayed when the government inserts irrelevant and discriminatory considerations into its hiring policies.

Unfortunately, that happened. As President Donald Trump pointed out in the disaster's aftermath, the Federal Aviation Administration in 2014 replaced its well-established merit-based selection process for would-be air-traffic controllers with a new "Biographical Questionnaire."

Rather than focusing on a candidate's proven skill set or familiarity with the high-pressure de-



AFP via Getty Images

Disasters ahead? Race-based policies left air-traffic controllers short.

manding careers, but also missed an opportunity to bolster a workforce critical for public safety.

The agency also put more stress on qualified controllers, who have had to pick up the slack for colleagues who passed a test designed to satisfy racial motivations, not safety needs.

The FAA's initial misconduct occurred under President Barack Obama. The agency dropped the discriminatory test midway through President Donald Trump's first term.

But President Joe Biden made things worse for our clients: His administration fought our lawsuit tooth and nail, asserting the FAA was just trying to break down racial barriers.

Our clients know the truth: They are the victims of the government's misguided DEI efforts.

Even now, the federal government is contending that it can hold back over 14,000 critical documents, hoping not to shed more light on the FAA's actions.

We have filed a Freedom of Information Act request seeking FAA documents related to DEI in hiring and promotion, and for internal emails with terms like "whiteness" or "white privilege" — but were rejected, told that the issue represented no imminent threat to public safety.

Even after the Reagan Airport disaster, we've received nothing from the federal government.

After the crash, critics were quick to argue that Trump shouldn't have attributed the tragedy to DEI, arguing there is no rock-solid proof (as yet) that

a specific DEI measure led to the crash.

Former Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg hotly defended his record of diversity initiatives on social media.

But the onus is not on defenders of merit, skill and talent to prove this case; rather, the burden is with those who defend the discriminatory use of race in hiring to explain why their priorities did not lead to danger.

On that score, Trump's critics have utterly failed.

Particularly under Buttigieg, the FAA has never explained why thousands of capable controller candidates were left sitting on the sidelines, or how it will address significant staff shortages that leave entire regions chronically under-served.

By contrast, new Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy has pledged to tear out DEI within the FAA, root and branch — something Buttigieg never did.

One way Duffy could start is by ensuring that our clients are made whole, and that the FAA enters an agreement in court to never again use race in hiring, promotion, retention or training.

They say diversity is our strength. But in reality, achieving a distorted notion of "diversity" based on race has made our system weaker, and Americans more vulnerable.

*William E. Trachman, general counsel for Mountain States Legal Foundation, was deputy assistant secretary for civil rights at the Department of Education. Grady J. Block is an attorney for Mountain States Legal Foundation.*

**WILLIAM E. TRACHMAN  
& GRADY J. BLOCK**

mands of the job, this test asked questions designed to benefit certain racial groups.

While previously the FAA's entry tests favored candidates with years of rigorous aviation training in FAA-approved career technical schools, its new test measured factors with little bearing on actual job performance.

These changes were intended to reduce the percentage of Caucasian candidates in the hiring pool. The FAA discriminated against ATC applicants in violation of federal civil-rights laws.

We filed suit in 2015, and have certified a class action of nearly 1,000 people who would be ATCs today. Our clients were forced to find other careers — and today the FAA is seeing severe shortages of qualified controllers. The court case continues, 10 years later.

The injustice is as bitter as it is unnecessary.

Without enough qualified controllers on duty, the margin for error shrinks dramatically. Each controller must manage more flights with fewer backups, which compounds the stress and fatigue inherent in an already high-stakes profession.

By excluding more than 1,000 eminently qualified candidates, the FAA not only derailed prom-

# FAST TAKES

## From the left: Journalism's Not About 'Unity'

"'Building consensus' may be a politician's job, but it's not mine," thundered Racket News' Matt Taibbi in congressional testimony this week. He took aim at John Kerry, quoting the former climate envoy's speech before the World Economic Forum, when he complained that "it's really hard to govern" because 'people self-select where they go for their news.' "What's next"? Letting people "make up their own minds?" "Many Americans are in an uproar now because they learned about over \$400 million going to an organization called Internews," whose leader has spoken about journalism's aim to build unity around a set of ideas like the efficacy of the COVID-19 vaccine. But "the press doesn't exist to promote 'unity' or political goals." "That's propaganda, not journalism."

## Culture critic: Porn's Total Takeover

A Super Bowl ad for breast-cancer awareness featuring "up-close parade of gleamy-creamy jiggling breasts" proves that "the total pornification of culture is complete," frets Valerie Stivers at UnHerd. "Porn is unstoppable." Female readers are obsessed with "Romantasy, a genre that slips into graphic descriptions of penetrations and orgasms every few chapters." For young men, there's "rap music" in which "everything is sexualized, and none of it means a thing." "The logical endgame of the sexual revolution has been to turn sex into a recreational activity," which has ultimately resulted in "porn's tropes" being exported "into the mainstream." The consequences? "A loneliness epidemic," a "generation of oversexualized teens" who are "having less sex" and "an increasing prevalence of porn-addiction and erectile dysfunction" in young men.

## Foreign desk: Starmer's a Danger to the US

UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer's plan to hand Mauritius control of the Chagos Islands "would pose great strategic threats to the U.S.," warns Dominic Green at The Wall Street Journal. Chagos hosts a joint UK-US air and naval base so crucial is it called the "Footprint of Freedom." And "Mauritius is friendly with China," which could well use the opportunity to militarize the Chagos with surveillance tech and anti-aircraft weaponry. Starmer and the Labour Party "are waving a white flag on America's behalf" — "this is not how a friendly government behaves." The deal was a Joe Biden brainchild; it's also part of a "decolonization" plan foisted on the UK by an international court. President Trump should outright oppose it, and remind "Labour where Britain's interests lie."

## From the right: A Maestro of Corruption



Mike Madigan

National Review's Jeffrey Blehar grumbles that the recent conviction of Mike Madigan, once America's "longest-serving state legislative leader," comes "far too late for the people of Illinois who suffered under him for 40 years." "He was nominally just a humble legislator on a pittance of an official salary" — total "codswallop," since he "was also the name partner at his own private law firm, Madigan & Getzendanner, which just so happened to offer expensive tax-policy advice and 'lobbying' to clients." "For 40 years, Mike Madigan practically was Illinois politics — the man everything had to be run through"; "the nexus for bribery, fraud, and extortion is obvious." No, he didn't turn the "state of Illinois into one enormous pay-to-play Democratic governance scheme." But he "brought it to its apotheosis."

## Ed beat: Our Schools Have Failed

"When William graduated high school in 2024 in Clarksville, Tennessee, he couldn't read the words on his diploma," reports The Free Press' Frannie Block. "That's why William sued his school district." Now "a federal appeals court sided" with him. "William's teachers were aware of the problem, but they did nothing to solve it," and he got "high marks on his classwork throughout his entire four years of high school, even though teachers knew he was illiterate." Small wonder that "national standardized tests show that American kids' proficiency in reading and math is at the lowest level in thirty years" thanks to grade inflation. And good on this kid: His "lawsuit exposes how this phenomenon impacts some of our country's most vulnerable students."

— Compiled by The Post Editorial Board

## If They Oust Eric . . .

New York lefties are howling for Mayor Adams' blood, insisting he sold his soul to President Trump to avoid federal prosecution; it's a great way to distract from progressives' own lack of answers to the city's problem.

AOC, state Senate No. 2 Mike Gianaris, Public Advocate Jumaane Williams and the whole pack of Democratic mayoral wannabes all insist that only an imagined corrupt bargain can explain why the Justice Department ordered charges against Adams dropped, and why the mayor isn't fighting tooth-and-nail against ICE's efforts to catch and deport violent criminal "asylum seekers."

Never mind that Justice honchos are clear that 1) they see the decisions to investigate and prosecute Adams as the product of Team Biden's politicization of Justice, 2) continued prosecution now can only interfere with the feds' push to get those worst-of-the-worst illegal migrants off the streets and out of the country.

Yes, a pack of prosecutors resigned in protest over the order, furious that their work (and what they figured would be a career-boosting success) might go for nothing.

But look at why Gov. Hochul has only promised to *consider* removing Adams.

First, the "devil's bargain" claims are *merely* claims, and from Adams' political opponents; she really shouldn't sideline a democratically elected mayor who hasn't actually *done* anything off-color. Second, the public advocate would take over — and Williams is about as far left as they come.

Third, if Adams is effectively forced out of running for re-election, ex-Gov. Andrew Cuomo is all but guaranteed to enter the race and quickly lap the field.

## Help Deport the Migrant Monsters

Good on Mayor Adams for pledging cooperation with ICE to apprehend dangerous criminal migrants, but he should end the double-talk and commit to full cooperation on *civil* warrants. And Gov. Hochul needs to get real, too.

Friday morning, Adams said he wants to loosen sanctuary laws to let the NYPD work with ICE even on civil enforcement — only to walk it back after progs screamed, "explaining" he meant only when it comes to dangerous criminals.

For all the left's denials, the clash of various federal, state and city laws leaves *huge* gray areas around when locals must and can work with the feds; New Yorkers are best served by giving ICE all possible leeway when apprehending the most dangerous and criminal illegal immigrants.

Reopening Rikers Island to the feds is a *critical* first step in ensuring fast removal of migrant killers, rapists, gangbangers, etc.

Hochul, meanwhile should focus instead on assisting border czar Tom Homan. It's a federal crime to intentionally conceal, harbor or shield from detection a person who is in the United States unlawfully — and New York's Green Light law does just that, barring the Department of Motor Vehicles from re-

leasing driver info to the feds without a court order, subpoena or warrant from a judge. State law only guaranteed illegal immigrants' right to apply for a New York driver's license starting in December 2019; more than 50,000 got them the very first month.

That suggests a level of sophistication associated with organized crime; certainly, a license is a huge boon to hardened criminals — the very kind that Homan's agents are trying to track down, at real risk to their own lives and limbs.

Hochul should think back to 2007, when then-Gov. Eliot Spitzer sought to issue driver's licenses to "undocumented immigrants" — and Erie County Clerk Kathy Hochul vowed to arrest any illegal migrant who came to her office to get a license.

Spitzer's drive failed; only years later did the left's rise lead the state to start trying to "normalize" illegal immigration — with centrists like Hochul rushing to catch up.

But the excesses of the last four years have pushed public opinion firmly *against* tolerating mass illegal immigration.

Hochul, like Adams, needs to recognize that *no* sanctuary law can be allowed to shield violent criminals: Public safety must come first.

One more time: Adams won the top job in 2021 by promising to restore public safety and protect New Yorkers' quality of life. The voters may feel he hasn't done enough on either vow, but they *don't* want a progressive replacement who'll only set the city back even more on both fronts.

The lefties are in denial about Cuomo's appeal, as they can't stop believing their extreme views are wildly popular, no matter what the polls show. And while some progs may recall how the gov signed their criminal-justice "reforms" into law just a few years ago, they know darn well he'd be running firmly in Adams' lane now.

And Andrew is a *lot* less of a nice guy than Eric. Which should give pause to every other player thinking to knock Adams out, whether it's Manhattan DA Alvin Bragg (who *could* try to take up the Adams prosecution as a state case) or the unelected city Campaign Finance Board, which has yet to reverse its denial of more than \$4 million in public matching funds for the mayor's re-election fight.

**P**lus: For any non-lefty, warring with the White House has to be the *worst* waste of a mayor's time and energy, while friendship with Team Trump can only help the city.

All this, incidentally, will be on Al Sharpton's mind as he pow-wows with advisers and allies over where to stand on Adams — with the added wrinkle that the city's African-American communities have been among the hardest-hit by the illegal-migrant and crime crises, which the left only wants to prolong.

The progressive establishment can howl all it wants, but in the end the voters will have their way in the June 24 Democratic primary.

Remember when she said that congestion pricing was off the table indefinitely because it would present financial hardship to many New Yorkers? I knew that was a lie, and sure enough, after the election, congestion pricing came back with a vengeance.

•Gov. Hochul tried to stall President Trump and the feds by attempting to delay the election to replace UN Ambassador Elise Stefanik, but she risked positioning Albany as a renegade and New Yorkers as national pariahs ("Kat delays sabotage & plays dumb," Feb. 12).

Our nation's sovereignty and laws must be respected, defended and abided by — not dismissed, cherry-picked or exploited. This will likely be a defining moment for New York state and Kathy Hochul.

**Vincent Ruggiero**  
Scottsdale, Ariz.

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And so I quote, "Fool me once, shame on you; fool me twice, shame on me."  
**Martin Garfinkle**  
Staten Island

•Nothing says it better than Attorney General Pam Bondi announcing that the Justice Department is suing the state of New York for prioritizing illegal immigrants over American citizens.

Yes, the buck stops here. It's "America first" for now and hopefully forever. It's up to the voters to choose wisely and elect candidates who will best represent the states and guide effective policy.  
**JoAnn Lee Frank**  
Clearwater, Fla.

•Michael Goodwin is pretty much trying to educate Kathy Hochul; if she would only read his column about how to alienate progressive New York Democrats in Congress, she would be able to effectively run a state like New York ("Blunderwoman Kat no match against Trump," Post-Opinion, Michael Goodwin, Feb. 12).

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**THE ISSUE:** New York state and city's multifront power battles with the Trump administration.

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cause of her flip-flopping on congestion tolling, along with her incoherent political agenda.

Kathy, start listening to people like Trump.  
**Ron Zajicek**  
Cortlandt

•Border Czar Tom Homan is not happy with Mayor Eric Adams' foot-dragging ("Homan fed up with Adams' foot-drag," Feb. 13).

He should not be surprised. Adams is blowing smoke at Homan and the entire Trump administration. I hope they realize that the mayor is not backing up the deportation operation like he claims to be.

Eric Adams was in full favor of immigration when he was greeting all the illegal immigrants at the bus terminal two years ago. He did not turn back the \$59 million that was used to house illegal immigrants in hotels.  
**Gene O'Brien**  
Whitestone

•Donald Trump prides himself on making deals, always to his advantage ("Dropping a bomb in drop Eric case," Feb. 14).

Trump famously published a book about it. The president's recent meetings with Mayor Adams, who has maintained his innocence, resulted in a reprieve for the mayor.

Eric Adams is just a pawn in the game. The big picture here is Donald Trump's plan to turn New York from a blue state into a red state in 2028. I may be wrong, but I suspect Trump's next target will most likely be Gov. Hochul.

**Dick Mills**  
Bardonia

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# NY's Empty-School \$cam

**T**ROUBLING news keeps piling up for New York's public schools. Kids keep performing poorly on standardized tests, fueling a race to the exits by parents seeking better opportunities.

That's led to school enrollments well below capacity. Yet these schools remain open, draining dollars, without boosting achievement. For taxpayers, and parents seeking better schools, it's pure madness.

Take the just-released National Assessment of Educational Progress: It finds just 23% of eighth-graders in the city are proficient in math, and 29% in reading. Only a third of fourth-graders are proficient in math, and even fewer, 28%, in reading. Statewide, the best result was just 37% of fourth-graders proficient in math.

With such dismal results, it's not surprising that New York public schools are also losing students at some of the fastest rates in the nation. Data released by the National Center for Education Statistics show the state lost 5.9% of its students between the fall of 2019 and 2023, more than all but four other states.

It lost 3.6 percentage points more students than did neighboring Pennsylvania, for instance, and even 0.7 points more than California. Over 80% of New York school districts are still below their pre-pandemic enrollment levels.

Given New York's demographic trends, including fewer kindergarten enrollments and lower birth rates, student counts are unlikely to rebound in the years to come.

As such, lawmakers and taxpayers must closely monitor whether school districts are closing under-

capacity schools when necessary. New Reason Foundation research shows New York's public school districts closed fewer schools after the pandemic and only returned to their pre-COVID closure levels last school year.

Despite a loss of 215,000 students, only 104 traditional public schools were closed between the 2017-2018 and 2023-2024 school years. In 2024, New York closed just 16 schools statewide. The city closed none. Other states with far smaller populations closed nearly as many, and some even more.

Among the 15 states we examined, for example, Colorado (with

**CHRISTIAN BARNARD**

less than a third New York's population) closed 26 public schools in 2024, even though it lost a lower percentage of its students than New York. Iowa shuttered 12 schools last year, and South Dakota closed 11. So it's clear New York is not properly adjusting to its lower enrollment levels.

New York districts have been able to delay closures because the Legislature regularly approves massive spending increases. The latest federal data shows New York schools receive \$35,902 in per-student revenues — more than any other state.

Similarly, leading the nation's largest school districts, New York City schools receive \$44,790 per child.

The Empire Center reports state aid alone doubled from \$7,264 to

\$14,304 per pupil over the last 12 years. These large spending hikes make it easier for districts to avoid making tough decisions about school closures.

Lawmakers even maintained a "hold harmless" policy so school districts would not receive less funding than the prior year — even if they lost large numbers of kids.

Georgetown University's Economics Lab estimates districts with under-enrolled schools can save about 4% a year by closing one of every 15.

Research from Michigan State's Center for Local Government Finance suggests savings can be up to 15% of a district's spending per student for every closed school.

True, school closures are politically fraught. Shuttering schools often requires navigating through difficult bureaucratic processes and facing intense backlash from teacher unions and parents.

So it may be understandable that state and local leaders drag their feet to right-size under-enrolled schools.

Yet, as disruptive and politically difficult as it may be, delaying a school's closure is financially unsustainable when hundreds of thousands of students have been lost.

Instead of keeping significantly under-capacity schools afloat with billions of dollars in additional funding year after year, local and state leaders must restore some fiscal sanity to New York's public education system by consolidating under-enrolled public schools.

*Christian Barnard is assistant director of education reform at Reason Foundation.*

# MAKE GOV'T GREAT . . . PERMANENTLY

**P**RESIDENT Trump's Department of Government Efficiency is accomplishing in weeks what conservatives have been talking about for decades. Already, DOGE has cut close to \$1 billion in waste per day, dismantled the left-wing slush fund known formerly as USAID and is exposing the depths of the Deep State's corruption — most recently the millions of taxpayer dollars that FEMA has been sending to hotels in New York City to house illegal immigrants.

Elon Musk and his team of 20-something-year-old tech geniuses will continue to whip up outrage over Washington's monstrous misspending. But they can't defeat the Washington Leviathan all by themselves. Congressional Republicans must step up and root out corruption with the same urgency as the Trump administration.

The good news: Republican leadership on the Hill seems to be on the same page as DOGE and prepared to cut waste, fraud and abuse in upcoming fights. Now, it is time to deliver.

Permanently banning DEI from the federal government would be an excellent place to start.

During his first week, President Trump signed three executive orders to stop "affirmative action" in federal contracts, close federal agencies' corrupt DEI departments and cancel the Biden administration's discriminatory DEI practices.

Each of these orders represents a huge victory for the Constitution and the American people, but if Congress doesn't codify them into law, they could be reversed with the stroke of a pen.

DOGE has already canceled more than 100 DEI contracts that were costing Americans more than \$1 billion. To prevent future administrations from wasting tax-dollars on these discriminatory programs, Congress should move quickly to

**KEVIN ROBERTS**

taxpayer dollars to New York hotels housing illegal immigrants.

It also reverses a rule President Joe Biden introduced to protect in-subordinate employees from losing their status as civil servants.

Finally, Congress should eliminate the burdensome standards that federal regulations impose on everyday American families.

Today, the federal bureaucracy buries Americans under a mountain of obscure and onerous regulation. But it doesn't have to be this way.

By passing legislation like the REINS Act (Regulations from the Executive In Need of Scrutiny), Congress can reassert its Article I authority to control the regulatory process, move to streamline regulations and create a system in which

**There can be no more excuses. J**

consider the Dismantle DEI Act.

Reforming federal civil-service laws should be on the table, too.

On his first day in office, Trump made it a priority to "terminate remote work" and "require employees to return to work in-person at their respective duty stations on a full-time basis." On Tuesday, he signed an order requiring agencies to fire four employees for every one employee they hire.

Now, our elected representatives need to make sure the unelected federal bureaucracy never gets to sit at home for years on the taxpayer dime ever again. Moreover, Congress should make federal workers at-will employees with a performance-based system of pay, just as the rest of America's most effective businesses operate.

Government employees should be held accountable to standards of performance and to the Americans that pay their salaries, not protected by bureaucratic arrangements that incentivize poor performance.

To that end, Rep. Andy Ogles introduced the End the Deep State Act, making easier for Trump to remove workers who are intentionally undermining his goals — like those FEMA employees who just last week sent almost \$60 million in

regulations sunset regularly, thus lifting the burden on America's families and small businesses.

Each of these common-sense laws represents an easy win for Republican legislators.

Now it is on Congress — especially Speaker Mike Johnson and Senate Majority Leader John Thune — to make sure these basic reforms make it into federal law.

There can be no more excuses — especially for the many members who benefitted from Trump's leadership on the ticket and rode his coattails to victory.

There also can be no delay. The 2026 midterms will be hotly contested, and we cannot get tired of delivering to the American people the wins they deserve.

President Trump has called on us "to once again act with courage." With a Republican majority in both chambers, a 6-3 majority in the Supreme Court and the American people firmly behind their new president, Republican leadership has a green light to codify a slate of common-sense policy solutions that restore power to the American people.

It's time to get to work. *Kevin Roberts is the president of Heritage Action for America.*

# The Post Puzzle Page

## SCRABBLE GRAMS

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A <sub>1</sub>	I <sub>1</sub>	Y <sub>4</sub>	L <sub>1</sub>	C <sub>3</sub>	F <sub>4</sub>	R <sub>1</sub>	RACK 1
A <sub>1</sub>	A <sub>1</sub>	E <sub>1</sub>	E <sub>1</sub>	H <sub>4</sub>	R <sub>1</sub>	C <sub>3</sub>	1st Letter Double RACK 2
A <sub>1</sub>	I <sub>1</sub>	O <sub>1</sub>	P <sub>3</sub>	L <sub>1</sub>	T <sub>1</sub>	P <sub>3</sub>	RACK 3
A <sub>1</sub>	E <sub>1</sub>	I <sub>1</sub>	G <sub>2</sub>	P <sub>3</sub>	P <sub>3</sub>	B <sub>3</sub>	Triple Word Score RACK 4

PAR SCORE 150-160  
BEST SCORE 230

FOUR RACK TOTAL  
TIME LIMIT: 20 MIN

TODAY'S ANSWER

SCRABBLE GRAMS SOLUTION	RACK 1 = 65	RACK 2 = 63	RACK 3 = 10	RACK 4 = 92	TOTAL 230
Y	F	H	E	E	
I	C	O	P	P	
A	R	A	T	I	
L	A	P	G	P	
C	E	L	B	A	

**Directions:** Make a 2 to 7 letter word from the letters in each row. Add points of each word using scoring directions at right. 7 Letter words get 50 point bonus. "Blank" used as any letter have no point value. All the words are in the Official SCRABBLE players Dictionary, 4th Edition.

### Bridge

North dealer  
Both sides vulnerable

**NORTH**  
♠ K 10 5 2  
♥ A Q  
♦ K 8 3  
♣ Q 7 4 2

**WEST**  
♠ 7  
♥ 9 5 2  
♦ A Q 10 7 5 2  
♣ A J 8

**EAST**  
♠ 8 6  
♥ K 10 7 6 3  
♦ J  
♣ K 10 9 6 3

**SOUTH**  
♠ A Q J 9 4 3  
♥ J 8 4  
♦ 9 6 4  
♣ 5

North 1 ♣  
East Pass  
South 1 ♠  
West 2 ♦

North 4 ♠  
East All Pass  
South 3 ♠  
West Pass

Opening lead — ♥ 2

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Cy the Cynic is not one for nostalgia; he says that one day we'll be looking back on all this -- and rear-end the car in front of us.

I suspect that if today's declarer had it to do over again, he would play differently. When West led a heart against four spades, South finessed with dummy's queen. East took the king and led his jack of diamonds, and West took the ace and returned the queen. East ruffed dummy's king and led a club, and West won and cashed his ten of diamonds. Down two.

West surely has the ace of diamonds for his vulnerable two-level overcall, so South can count 10 winners. But West probably has a six-card diamond suit, so South should take the ace of hearts at Trick One, draw trumps and lead a second heart.

East wins and leads a diamond, and West takes the ace and leads the queen to force out the king, but South reaches his hand with a trump to discard dummy's last diamond on the jack of hearts. He loses one heart, one diamond and one club.

### Word Force

#### RELATIVE

From the word or phrase above, form **AT LEAST 29** five-letter words, without using more than one form of the same word. For example, drink or drank (not both).

**ANSWERS IN MONDAY'S POST**  
Yesterday's word:

**INNOVATE**

anion	nonet	ovine
atone	novae	tenon
inane	oaten	
naive	ovate	

### Wonderword

**How to play:** All the words listed below appear in the puzzle — horizontally, vertically, diagonally, even backward. Find them and **Circle their letters only. Do not circle the word.** The leftover letters spell the Wonderword.

IT'S SO TRANQUIL Solution: 9 letters

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

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Bath, Breathing, Candle, Composed, Controlled, Cool, Crochet, Doodle, Easy, Exercise, Family, Fishing, Game, Gentle, Grounded, Halcyon, Journal, Meditate, Mellow, Mild, Ocean, Oils, Outdoors, Peaciful, Private, Remove, Scents, Serenity, Silent, Sleep, Solace, Sounds, Still, Stretch, Togetherness, Unagitated, Untroubled, Wellness  
Yesterday's Answer: Every Day  
For **WONDERWORD** apps, books & more, visit [Wonderword.com](http://Wonderword.com), or call 1-855-232-2357.

## POSTSUDOKU

To solve a Su Doku, you must put a number from 1 to 9, in each empty box.

Each number must appear once in each horizontal row, as well as in each vertical column and in each of the 3-by-3 grids.

Impossible? Not once you get the hang of it. Tips and in depth strategies at

[www.SudokuWiki.org](http://www.SudokuWiki.org)



NYPOST.COM/GAMES  
Solutions on Page 34

© Syndicated Puzzles

Very Easy #6,825

		4	3	7		2		
	7	9				5		
					2		4	
	5		9	3			2	
4	3	1				9	5	6
	8			1	5		7	
	4		8					
		6					3	1
	3		4	9	8			

Difficult #6,615

						8	3		
		9		6	2	8			
2			5			1		9	
	5								
	4		1	2	6		3		
								1	
5	3				7				8
		8	6	4		5			
		6	3						

## Quick Crossword

Across

- Trap
- DOMS symptoms
- Icy
- Address on a business card
- Go toe-to-toe
- Engage in a numbers game?
- Spy-fi org.
- Low member of a quartet
- Out
- Frying medium
- Like art with hazy provenance, perhaps
- Pulitzer- and Tony-winning musical whose cast consists of Usher and his Thoughts
- Tactic that fails to deliver the goods
- Frying medium
- "Huzzah!"
- Ultra hi-
- Flair
- "How cute!"
- Home
- Soundproofing aids
- Does this sound like a joke to you?"
- Slowest competitive swimming style
- Strike for an umpire?
- Gadgets in Yondr pouches
- Basic font
- HS class for aspiring premeds, perhaps
- "That can be arranged"
- "I wanna try!"
- Mushroom variety
- Polish brand
- En
- Mate's response?
- Capitalize on

Down

- Joshua tree, e.g.
- Artistic displays at the Met
- Like a diet rich in phytonutrients
- Applaud
- Social media hashtag for nourishing one's inner neatnik
- Sparks of "Queer as Folk"
- Subj. for some refugees

1	2	3		4	5	6	7	8		9	10	11	12	13	
14				15						16					
17				18						19					
20			21					22	23						
24						25	26								
			27									28	29	30	
			31												
33						34			35	36				37	
38				39	40						42	43			
44						45	46								
						47								48	49
50	51	52									53				
54							55	56	57					58	
59														61	
62															64

- "Auld Lang Syne" opener
- Mysterious
- Warmwater fish
- Working hard
- Wrap after a spa treatment
- "Wednesday" werewolf
- Voiced
- Refusals
- Result of crunch time?
- Interweaves
- "Don't even try to pin the blame elsewhere"
- Female whales
- Know-
- Do for a while?
- Softball stat
- Roller on a golf course
- Word in some crunchy cereal names
- Vlogging equipment
- Maker of Perfect Pairings pies
- Cause of a bumpy ride
- Nice bit of cash?
- Drag queen Bianca Rio
- Charcuterie slice

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

**PREVIOUS PUZZLE ANSWER**  
(C) 2025 Tribune Media Services  
48 Doesn't spoil  
49 Polish brand  
50 Emollient  
51 Gray  
52 Turns down  
56 Capitol fig.  
57 Amigo

## BUSINESS BRIEFS

### Winning week

Stocks finished a week dominated by tariff news, inflation data and earnings higher after a mixed Friday in which the S&P 500 fell short of a new record. All three indexes rose for the week, led by the Nasdaq's 2.6% gain.

### Talk to Trump

Parties interested in buying the popular short-video app TikTok are talking directly with the White House, and not with Chinese owner ByteDance, Axios reported.

### Auto tariffs

President Trump kept alive his drumbeat of tariff threats, saying levies on autos would be coming as soon as April 2. Trump didn't specify which car imports would be affected.

### Speech fight

Ben & Jerry's accused parent Unilever of demanding its silence toward Trump, as it prepares to spin off the ice cream brand this year. Unilever didn't respond to a request for comment.

### AI aids \$cams

The rise of "pig butchering" scams and the increasing use of generative artificial intelligence likely lifted revenues from crypto scams to a record high in 2024. Chainalysis estimated revenue was at least \$9.9 billion.

Sources: Reuters, Dow Jones, AP

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## Woke-up call

If Disney is "The Happiest Place on Earth," you can't prove it by Robert Steffens (below left), who says in a suit that Bob Chapek (middle) and Isaac Perlmutter (right) balked at giving him a promotion because of his age and race.



AP, Getty Images

# 'Old white guy' suit in 'Goofy' DEI fight

By ALEXANDRA STEIGRAD

A former high-ranking Marvel executive claims ex-Disney CEO Bob Chapek refused to give him a promotion because he was just "another old white guy," according to a blockbuster lawsuit against the media giant.

Robert Steffens, who served as chief financial officer and then co-president of Marvel from 2015 to 2023, alleged that then-Marvel CEO Isaac Perlmutter told him in February 2022 that Chapek put the kibosh on his bid for the role of president of Disney consumer products, according to the suit filed in Los Angeles Superior Court on Tuesday.

Instead, the job was given to a woman of "am-

biguous ethnicity" after Perlmutter allegedly told Steffens that the company couldn't award the position to "another old white guy," the complaint said.

### Ousted in Fla. war

Chapek was ousted later in 2022 after getting the House of Mouse embroiled in a battle with Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis over the state's "Don't Say Gay" law — and replaced by Bob Iger.

Steffens' lawsuit claimed that the "woke" media giant was engaged in an "official effort to promote vice presidents based on their race and a memorandum that would have referred to employees with the racial signifier 'BI-POC' [black, indigenous

and people of color]."

Disney's actions were "willful, wanton, malicious, intentional, oppressive and despicable and were done in willful and conscious disregard of the rights, welfare and safety of [Steffens]," the lawsuit said.

Disney didn't respond to a request for comment.

Perlmutter was fired by Iger in March 2023. The Disney boss survived a proxy fight last year spearheaded by Perlmutter and activist investor Nelson Peltz.

The lawsuit comes as Disney ditches some of its diversity, equity and inclusion policies amid pressure from activist investors and the Trump administration's DEI crackdown.

# 'DEEP SEEK' PROBE

## Eyes of Tex. on CCP

By MIRANDA DEVINE

Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton launched an investigation into DeepSeek, the upstart Chinese artificial intelligence company that rocked Wall Street last month, alleging it violates his state's data-privacy laws.

The Republican AG (inset) said DeepSeek's "blatant allegiance to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP)" is extremely concerning, as it "appears to be no more than a proxy for the CCP to undermine

American AI dominance and steal the data of our citizens."

The controversial company is subject to Chinese laws, which mandate cooperation with government intelligence agencies and potentially compromise users' private data, Paxton said, adding that he notified DeepSeek that it is in violation of the Texas Data Privacy and Security Act.

He also ordered Google and Apple to hand over their in-house analysis of DeepSeek's AI chatbot app and all documentation the company was required to submit before appearing on their respective app stores.

"I'm announcing a thorough investigation and calling on Google and Apple to cooperate immediately by providing all relevant documents related to the Deep-

Seek app," Paxton told The Post. "The United States and Texas will continue to be at the forefront of global AI innovation, and any CCP-aligned company that tries to undermine that dominance by violating the rights of Texans and illegally undercutting American technology companies will face the full force of the law."

Last month, Paxton banned the AI assistant on all devices in his office due to national security concerns and the risks it would promote CCP propaganda and censorship.

This week Gov. Hochul and Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin followed suit and banned DeepSeek on all devices and networks in their states.

However, President Trump has been more sanguine about DeepSeek's emergence, saying it should push Silicon Valley to innovate.

"The release of DeepSeek AI from a Chinese company should be a wake-up call for our industries that we need to be laser-focused on competing to win because we have the greatest scientists in the world," Trump said last month when the low-cost chatbot launched.

Paxton has pursued aggressive litigation in the past, including investigating tech companies over privacy and safety concerns.



# Meta 'warns' staff dissenters

Meta is cracking down on internal dissent over CEO Mark Zuckerberg's overtures to President Trump — telling staffers that criticizing the billionaire or the company could hurt their performance evaluations, a report said.

The Facebook and Instagram parent, which has sought Trump's help in getting European authorities to ease its regulation of American companies, has been restricting dissent over the right-

ward shift of Zuckerberg (right) on its internal Workplace platform, sources told CNBC.

Employees who posted comments perceived as negative by management were warned that their remarks could be factored into performance evaluations, potentially affecting their job security, according to the report.

Meta recently implemented another round of layoffs, cutting approximately 5% of its 75,000

workforce, citing performance-based evaluations.

Meta workers who are disillusioned by Zuckerberg's pivot toward Trump are hesitant to quit due to concerns that prospective employers may perceive their departures as part of the tech company's efforts to cull "low performers," according to CNBC.

Meta declined to comment.

Ariel Zilber



# OpenAI nixes \$97B bid

OpenAI on Friday rejected a \$97.4 billion bid from a consortium led by billionaire Elon Musk for the ChatGPT maker, saying the startup is not for sale and that any future bid would be disingenuous.

The unsolicited approach is Musk's latest attempt to block the startup he co-founded with CEO Sam Altman — but later left — from becoming a for-profit firm, as it looks to secure more capital and stay ahead in the AI race.

"OpenAI is not for sale, and the board has unanimously rejected Mr. Musk's latest attempt to disrupt his competition. Any potential reorganization of OpenAI will strengthen our non-profit and its mission to ensure AGI benefits all of humanity," it said on X, quoting Chairman Bret Taylor on behalf of its board.

Musk's lawyer Marc Toberoff did not respond to a request for comment.

On Tuesday, Altman told news website Axios that OpenAI was not for sale. He had rebuffed the offer on Monday with a "no thank you" on X, prompting Musk to retort: "swindler."

The consortium, including Musk's AI startup xAI, would withdraw its bid for OpenAI's non-profit arm if it drops plans to become a for-profit entity, the billionaire's lawyers said in a court filing on Wednesday.

Reuters

# Push to put xAI at \$75B

Elon Musk's xAI is discussing raising \$10 billion, which could value the artificial intelligence startup at about \$75 billion, Bloomberg News reported Friday.

Existing investors, including Sequoia Capital, Andreessen Horowitz and Valor Equity Partners are in talks to participate in the transaction, the report said.

The billionaire's startup recently raised \$6 billion from investors at a valuation of \$40 billion, sources have said.

Musk launched xAI in 2023.

Reuters

# Banker 'OD accident'

## 'Drug paraphernalia' found in Dallas apt.

By JAMES FRANNEY

A 28-year-old Jefferies banker who died late last month is suspected to have been the victim of an accidental drug overdose, The Post has learned.

Carter McIntosh, a junior tech banker who previously had stints at Goldman Sachs and Moelis, was found dead by a friend at his Dallas apartment Jan. 27, according to a police report obtained by The Post.

The unidentified friend had last seen the young banker around 7 p.m. the previous Saturday, the report said. On Monday at 11:05 a.m., the friend gained access to his apartment for a "welfare check" with the help of building maintenance and found his body.

Five minutes later, Dallas Police officers arrived at McIntosh's apartment in the Bell Knox neighborhood, the report said. They found McIntosh's body un-



**Carter McIntosh, a 28-year-old junior tech banker at Jefferies who previously worked at Goldman Sachs, was found dead in his Dallas apartment on Jan. 27. Police discovered his body under a blanket on a couch, and drug paraphernalia was spotted at the scene. According to a Dallas police report, McIntosh's death was "an apparent accident."**

Getty Images

der a blanket on a couch in the living area. The report said McIntosh's death was "an apparent accident."

Police found "drug paraphernalia" at the scene. Investigators said they were probing a "possible over-

dose" and an alleged "history of illicit drug abuse."

"A black dish containing a white powdery substance, a plastic bag containing a white powdery substance, and a rolled up 100 dollar bill were

present in the kitchen area," the report to the medical examiner said.

"Multiple cans of Zimo brand nicotine pouches were also present," the report added.

Officers also cited an in-

terview with McIntosh's father, Scott, who said his son had been taking medication for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, more commonly known as ADHD.

He told police he was unaware of "any illicit drug abuse, alcohol abuse or smoking." McIntosh's father didn't respond to a request for comment.

The name of the drug found at the scene was redacted by the city's medical examiner, which is probing the cause of death. Authorities haven't yet identified the white substance they found at McIntosh's apartment, but Adderall is a commonly prescribed drug for those with ADHD.

The Wall Street Journal reported in December how financiers were grinding up and snorting the pills to keep up with their brutal working hours.

A Jefferies spokesman declined to comment.

# Gold chills retail sales Buffett boots bank stox

Retail sales dropped by the most in nearly two years in January, likely weighed down by frigid temperatures, wildfires and motor vehicle shortages, suggesting a sharp slowdown in economic growth early in the first quarter.

But the larger-than-expected and across-the-board decline in retail sales reported by the Commerce Department on Friday probably does not reflect a material shift in

consumer spending as it also followed four straight months of hefty increases.

A sharp upward revision to December's sales took some of the sting from the report.

Retail sales dropped 0.9% last month, the biggest decrease since March 2023. Economists had forecast retail sales, which are mostly goods and are not adjusted for inflation, dipping 0.1%. *Reuters*

Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway reduced its positions in several financial stocks in the fourth quarter, but didn't sell any Apple shares.

The Omaha, Neb., company continued to sell Bank of America, one of its biggest stockholdings, slashed its stake in Citigroup and unloaded part of its position in Capital One Financial, a regulatory filing made public after the market closed Friday said.

Berkshire unveiled a new position

in Constellation Brands, which sells Modelo and Corona beer in the US, worth \$1.2 billion at the end of December. It sold off its shares of Ulta Beauty.

Berkshire ended 2024 still holding 300 million shares of Apple. The stake, valued at \$75.1 billion on Dec. 31, remained the sprawling conglomerate's largest stockholding, followed by American Express and BofA. *Dow Jones*

# HEIRESS TO THE THRONE

## Watkins taking up mantle from Clark as hoops' new phenom

**NEXT IN LINE:** USC's JuJu Watkins, celebrating Thursday's win over Lauren Betts and previously undefeated No. 1 UCLA, has become college basketball's new sure-thing prospect just one year after Caitlin Clark departed for the WNBA. AP

IT FELT like it would be a while before a prospect of Caitlin Clark's caliber came around again.

In reality, it took less than a year.

If it were allowed, USC's JuJu Watkins would have WNBA teams tanking for her this upcoming season.

But rules don't allow women's college basketball players to enter the draft until the year they turn 22 or they are four years removed from high school.

That's a conversation for another day, however.

Watkins is not new to the spotlight. Her basketball celebrity has been high for a while. But Thursday's all-time performance in a 71-60 victory against No. 1 UCLA was a reminder of how dominant a two-way player she can be.

Watkins finished with 38 points, 11 rebounds, five assists and a career-high eight blocks — a stat line that hasn't been achieved in at least 20 years, according to ESPN.

"I didn't teach JuJu any of that," USC coach Lindsay Gottlieb told reporters after Watkins put on a master class of help defense against UCLA. "Just try to put her in situations to be her best self and she does most of that work."

Watkins tormented UCLA with effortless shotmaking and smooth playmaking. Her dogged defense and relentless effort frustrated the Bruins, especially 6-foot-7 Lauren Betts.

UCLA's depth, size and shooting that had overwhelmed its previous victims, including South Carolina, may have had the Trojans on the ropes at the end of the third quarter.

But Watkins played like the Trojans' season depended on it in the fourth.

At one point, Betts corralled a long rebound and held it above her head like an oldest sibling teasing the youngest. But Watkins jumped, swatted the ball loose and took off with it before finishing with a nasty Euro step for a one-point edge.

Later in the fourth, Watkins blocked Betts on one end before feeding Kiki Iriafen for a basket that put to rest any fear USC was going to fumble this lead.

Instead, the Trojans handed UCLA its first loss of the season.

Watkins said she doesn't feel the enormous burden of being one of the most highly touted college stars.

Neither did Clark when she was at Iowa. "Anything I can do to contribute, I'm going to do," Watkins said. "It's not really a calculated thing, it's just a feel for the game, and so I just kind of let my mind take over and make winning plays."

Watkins did plenty of that Thursday.

Watkins is only 19 and can't enter the WNBA draft until 2027, giving her ample time to refine her craft.

But when that time comes, Watkins has the potential to be a more tantalizing prospect than Clark was in 2024.

Watkins, at 6-2, is 2 inches taller than Clark, and her length and quickness is part of what makes her an elite defender. She also has intrinsic anticipation that makes her able to guard multiple positions.

Her 1.6 blocks per game this season is tied for the second-best mark among guards since at least the 1981-82 season, per Stathead.



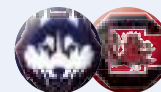
**Madeline Kenney**

Mad about Hoop

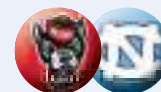
### BIG-GAME HUNTING

Here are three games you should know about this week:

■ **No. 7 Connecticut (23-3, 14-0 Big East) at No. 4 South Carolina (23-2, 11-1 SEC), Sunday, 1 p.m., ABC:** With Paige Bueckers and Azzi Fudd back, Connecticut entered this season with championship expectations. But the Huskies have hit a few snags, turning that belief into doubt. Connecticut has lost to three of the nation's best teams: USC, Notre Dame and Tennessee. With the Big East not being that tough of a conference, Sunday's game at South Carolina is the Huskies' last shot to prove they're the real deal. Does Connecticut have what it takes to go toe-to-toe with South Carolina?



■ **No. 10 N.C. State (20-4, 12-1 ACC) at No. 12 North Carolina (22-4, 10-3), Sunday, 2 p.m., ESPN:** N.C. State, a 2024 Final Four team, had a few early losses this season — to South Carolina, TCU and LSU — which made them dip out of the national rankings for a week in early December and had some questioning the Wolfpack's potential. But after opening the season 4-3, the Wolfpack have been solid and finding solutions to win games. Senior guard Aziaha James, who leads the team with 17.8 points per game, is a big part in why N.C. State has won 15 of its past 16 games. North Carolina leads the all-time series 33-18.



■ **No. 5 LSU (25-1, 10-1 SEC) at No. 3 Texas (25-2, 11-1), Sunday, 3 p.m., ESPN:** Texas coach Vic Schaefer hoped last month's loss at South Carolina would serve as a lesson for his team. The Longhorns have been on a tear since, beating teams by an average of 14.9 points. Madison Booker has averaged 20 points, 7.8 rebounds and three assists during this nine-game win streak, which includes Sunday's redemption victory against the Gamecocks. Meanwhile, LSU's lone loss this season was to South Carolina, but the Tigers have been dinged in the rankings because of their weak nonconference schedule.



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### AND-1

Cal is on its way to making its first NCAA Tournament appearance since 2019.

The Golden Bears have surprised some people this season, their first in the ACC. In a preseason poll, Cal was projected to finish 14th in the league, but the Golden Bears already picked up their 20th win this season, beating Boston College Thursday.

Cal is tied for seventh in the ACC with an 8-5 conference record.

### SEED PROJECTIONS

- 1: USC, Notre Dame, S. Carolina, Texas
- 2: UCLA, Connecticut, Kansas State, LSU
- 3: Duke, TCU, Tennessee, West Virginia
- 4: N. Carolina, Ole Miss, Oklahoma, Ohio St.

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Home Team Lineups		HOME		AWAY			
	TODAY February 15	SUN Feb. 16	MON Feb. 17	TUE Feb. 18	WED Feb. 19	THU Feb. 20	FRI Feb. 21
	NO GAME	NO GAME	NO GAME	NO GAME	NO GAME	NO GAME	(Exh.) T.B. 1:05 YES
	NO GAME	All-Star Game 8:00 TNT	NO GAME	NO GAME	NO GAME	Chic. 7:30 MSG WHSQ	Clev. 7:00 MSG ESPN WHSQ
	NO GAME	All-Star Game 8:00 TNT	NO GAME	NO GAME	NO GAME	Clev. 7:30 YES WFAN	NO GAME
	Next game: Sat., Feb. 22 Buffalo 5:30 MSG WHSQ- 880 AM						
	Next game: Sun., Feb 23 Dallas 7:30 MSGSN WRHU- 88.7 FM, WRCN- 103.9 FM						
	Next game: Sat., Feb. 22 Dallas 6:00 MSGSN						
	NO GAME	Creig. 3:00 FS1	NO GAME	NO GAME	DePaul 9:00 FS1	NO GAME	NO GAME
Saturday		Saturday					
	Preseason: San Diego FC 1 p.m.; TV- MY9			Preseason: Minnesota United 5 p.m.; TV- MY9			

## Auburn's the (No.) 1 to back in 'Bama battle

By DOUG KEZIRIAN

Iron Bowl showdowns featuring the nation's Top 2 teams are usually reserved for football, but their basketball programs take center stage on Saturday with ESPN's College Gameday in Tuscaloosa.

Alabama is a mere 1.5-point home favorite over Auburn with a high-scoring affair expected, given the Over/Under is 172.5. KenPom.com projects the top-ranked Tigers winning 88-87.

Both teams have answered numerous challenges this season, racking up 10-1 records in the nation's best conference. I fully expect a tight one that comes down to the wire, but I do think there is a scenario where No. 1 Auburn bogs down No. 2 Alabama's high-octane offense for stretches.

These schools own the nation's top two offenses, but the Tigers clearly have superior defensive numbers. Auburn ranks 16th in defensive efficiency, while the Tide rank 40th. However, the home crowd is often a difference-maker and

could outweigh the defensive gap, but I also think War Eagle catches a slight break with a 4 p.m. tipoff as opposed to later at night.

It is important to mention that sometimes road teams can play looser, and is worth reminding everyone that home teams do not win every game. For example, 'Bama's lone conference loss came at home to Ole Miss, while Auburn just lost at home to Florida.

I am backing Auburn because I think it will be able to muck it up long enough for Alabama's offense to sputter. Bruce Pearl understands the weaknesses of the Tide's analytically driven 3-point concepts, and I'll back the better defense. Plus, Under 172.5 would not surprise me.

My official plays in this section are 24-13 entering Friday's pick of UCLA -1.5 at Indiana. For more analysis, exclusive videos, betting news, in-game alerts and much more, please visit our page (onlyplayers.com/pluspost) solely dedicated to Post readers with a 50 percent discount.

## ODDS & ENDS

### 4 NATIONS FACE-OFF Odds to win championship

TEAM	ODDS
USA	+105
Canada	+140
Sweden	+650
Finland	25/1

### Name the finalists

MATCHUP	ODDS
USA vs. Canada	-175
USA vs. Sweden	+450
Canada vs. Sweden	+500
USA vs. Finland	+900
Canada vs. Finland	40/1
Sweden vs. Finland	100/1

### Saturday USA vs. Canada

PUCKLINE	ODDS
USA -1.5 goals	+220
Canada +11.5 goals	-275

TOTAL GOALS	ODDS
Over 6.5	+100
Under 6.5	-120

### FIRST GOAL SCORER

Player	ODDS
Nathan MacKinnon (Can.)	12/1
Auston Matthews (USA)	12/1
Jack Hughes (USA)	15/1
Connor McDavid (Can.)	16/1
Sam Reinhart (Can.)	16/1
Kyle Connor (USA)	16/1
Brayden Point (Can.)	18/1
Sidney Crosby (Can.)	18/1
Brady Tkachuk (USA)	20/1
Jack Eichel (USA)	22/1
Jake Guentzel (Can.)	22/1
Matt Boldy (USA)	22/1
Matthew Tkachuk (USA)	22/1
Mark Stone (Can.)	22/1
J.T. Miller (USA)	28/1
Brock Nelson (USA)	40/1
Vincent Trocheck (USA)	40/1
Adam Fox (USA)	45/1

### HAT TRICK (3+ GOALS)

Player	ODDS
Nathan MacKinnon (Can.)	100/1
Auston Matthews (USA)	100/1
Connor McDavid (Can.)	100/1
Jack Hughes (USA)	100/1
Sam Reinhart (Can.)	150/1
Sidney Crosby (Can.)	175/1
Kyle Connor (USA)	175/1
Brayden Point (Can.)	175/1

### 3-WAY RESULT (regulation time)

Result	ODDS
USA	+145
Canada	+145
Tie	+280

### TIME OF FIRST GOAL

Time	ODDS
00:01 to 08:59	-145
09:00 to 60:00	+100
No goal in regulation	50/1

### TEAM TO SCORE FIRST GOAL IN FIRST PERIOD

Team	ODDS
USA	+120
Canada	+120
No goal in first period	+400

## BET SMART

# Classic grid rivalry is taking it to court

By MICHAEL CALABRESE

They say there are two seasons in Alabama: Football season and the rest of the year. But if the colossal showdown in T-Town lives up to the hype on the hardwood, they may have to amend that first statement moving forward.

### Auburn at Alabama

No matter how you slice it, this is the biggest regular-season game in SEC history. The nation's top two teams will meet in an SEC game for the first time in the conference's illustrious 92-year history. The winner all but assures itself a top seed in the Big Dance next month, as well as the inside track to the regular-season crown.

Despite what the efficiency metrics may tell you, No. 2 Alabama has a higher ceiling when everything is clicking offensively. The Tide's reliance on the 3-point shot is a double-edged sword, but when those triples are falling, they're truly unbeatable.

Look no further than their most recent game, when they ran Texas off its home floor by burying 17-of-29 shots from downtown. That 103-point explosion was nothing new for Nate Oats. Believe it or not, that was the Crimson Tide's 28th 100-point game in his 5½ years in Tuscaloosa.

Now top-ranked Auburn is capable of running with Alabama. Bruce Pearl's squad has knocked off five ranked opponents in which they scored 83 or more points this season.

So if Alabama imposes its preferred pace — the Tide are second in adjusted tempo — that's not a death knell for the Tigers. If, however, Auburn is successful in slowing things down and grinding this game out in the half-court, that could spell major trouble for Alabama.

Auburn is elite at defending the rim (15th) and rarely allows open looks beyond the arc (30.4 percent, 30th). Teams can expose the Tigers in transition (1.01 points per possession, 162nd), but to generate fast break opportunities, generally, you need to create turnovers.

Pearl's team protects the rock better than just about any team in America (9.3, sixth)

and they're absolute demons on the offensive glass. That's why I'm skeptical that Alabama can push this game into the 90s, where it wants to play.

Oats is also in a tough spot on the personnel front because if he wants to play "five out" and bomb away from long range, that should limit how many minutes he can give to his traditional big Clifford Omoruyi.

The Rutgers transfer gives them valuable rim protection and rebounding support. If he isn't on the floor, Johni Broome, who can defend out to the 3-point line, could be in line for another monster stat line.

In the end, there are multiple paths to victory for Auburn stylistically, while Alabama has to follow a more narrow, 3-point dependent game script. For that reason, I'm on the short road 'dogs.

Recommendation: Auburn +1.5.

### Saint Joseph's at George Mason

Here are two trends to consider when betting Saint Joe's games: The team falls down early and then catches fire.

In their past three games, the Hawks fell behind in the first half to La Salle by seven, Saint Louis by 10 and Loyola Chicago by 14. They hammered La Salle and Saint Louis in the second halves, winning by 12 and 13 points, respectively, and they nearly dug out of their big hole against Loyola, falling by just three.

If Saint Joe's digs a familiar hole against George Mason, it'll be curtains.

The Patriots have one of the best mid-major defenses in the country (13th in KenPom).

Tony Skinn's defense never gives up good looks in the half-court (third in PPP), it's tough as a three-dollar steak on the defensive glass and it successfully slows games way down (323rd in tempo).

If the Hawks spot them an early lead, the Patriots are not giving it back. I would lay up to six with the class of the A-10.

Recommendation: George Mason -4.5.

Johni Broome



Imagn Images

# NUSS, THE PROCESS



By RYAN DUNLEAVY

Doug Nussmeier hasn't yet considered a future scenario in which he is coaching Super Bowl LIX MVP Jalen Hurts between possessions while simultaneously stealing glances at the field to make sure that Hurts' counterpart is doing everything that he was taught.

But the need for Nussmeier — Eagles quarterbacks coach and the proud father of a potential 2026 first-round draft pick — to find a balancing act for games pitting his son against the Eagles defense is quickly approaching.

LSU's Garrett Nussmeier stayed in school for his redshirt senior season rather than enter the 2025 NFL Draft, which makes him an option for any team that puts off finding its Quarterback of the Future for one year. The potentially Matthew Stafford-seeking Giants and Tyrod Taylor-led Jets both could fit that bill.

"He wasn't always the biggest. He wasn't always the fastest. He wasn't always the best. But he always has his mindset there," Doug Nussmeier told The Post. "I didn't get up in the morning saying, 'Hey, we are going to work on this, this and this today.' He would come to me and say, 'Dad, do you have some time today? Can we go throw?'"

"The biggest thing as a dad is his love of the game and his perseverance. It hasn't always been the easiest path. He's put his feet in the ground and had to fight. That's a great trait, not only in football but in life."

Garrett spent three seasons as LSU's backup — two after he was jumped on the depth chart by Jayden Daniels — but never looked for a shortcut in the NIL- and transfer-crazed NCAA. While Daniels was setting the NFL ablaze as



**FATHER-SON TIME:** LSU quarterback Garrett Nussmeier, son of Eagles quarterbacks coach Doug Nussmeier, figures to be one of the top passers available in the 2026 NFL Draft — perhaps even winding up on the Philadelphia-rival Giants.

Getty Images (2)

## Eagles QB coach may be one year away from facing son on NFL field

the 2024 Offensive Rookie of the Year, Nussmeier finally got his chance and, during a 9-4 season, accounted for more passing yards, completions, touchdowns and total offense than any first-year starter in LSU history.

Most NFL coaches claim to be game-planning — not watching college football — on Saturdays. Doug Nussmeier turned on the television. It was through a fan's (or father's) eye, not that of a coach or scout.

"I don't watch their tape. That's not my place. He has good coaches to do that," Nussmeier said, singling out LSU quarterbacks coach Joe Sloan. "Because I know the player, I might say something like, 'Here's a

couple things you might want to talk to Joe about.' It's some of the obvious things like, 'You know better than to take a sack on that play.' Or, 'You know you can't throw the ball late down the middle.'"

ESPN draft analyst Matt Miller said Nussmeier would have been about the No. 4 or No. 5 quarterback as an "incomplete prospect" in the 2025 class. The ceiling should be higher with another year of development.

"Gunslinger mentality with good touch, placement and velocity," Miller told The Post. "Inconsistent reading the field and makes some late decisions that are backbreakers. I think his lack of size and inexperience would have really cost

him when scouts dug in all the way on his tape."

Whereas Colorado head coach Deion Sanders is openly toying with causing a stink to prevent his son Shedeur from being drafted by certain teams in 2025, Doug wants Garrett to be in control of his football journey.

After the Eagles won the Super Bowl last Sunday, Garrett called his father "the definition of a winner" and said on social media "no one deserves this more than you."

"I wasn't making that decision for him," Nussmeier, the 1993 FCS Player of the Year, said of Garrett staying in school in 2025. "All I'm going to try to do is give you the information, try to point out some of the key things I think you should consider, and you should sit down in your own way and decide what you think is best for you. I'm very proud of the way he handled the process. He feels good about that decision. I'll always be a resource for him."

Giants receiver Malik Nabers and Garrett have a relationship dating to the youth football camp circuit, where they were on the same team against Sanders in the championship game.

The coach in Nussmeier has an idea what his peers will like about his son: The way he handles adversity.

"That's a big part of being successful at the position," he said. "The higher you go, the harder it is. Every day is not going to be great. You have to stay neutral. You have to realize that when you think you are on top, you are going to get brought down really quick. When you think you are on the bottom, put your nose down and fight your way and you'll be just fine."

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## Shedeur calls 'cap' on slip to 6th in mock

By BRYAN FONSECA

Shedeur Sanders is not feeling Field Yates' latest mock draft.

The star Colorado quarterback, who is expected to be one of the top picks in the 2025 NFL Draft, ignited controversy on social media this week after ESPN NFL analyst Yates projected him to fall to No. 6 overall.

Yates' projection, which may underestimate Sanders in the eyes of some, prompted a swift and pointed response from the young signal-caller.

"That's cap, bruh; I ain't going sixth," Sanders insisted in a video captured by brother Deion Sanders Jr. this week.

"That's why I don't be having TVs in my house," he added.

With his response, Sanders made it clear that he disagrees with the idea of him being the No. 6 pick — the spot the Raiders currently hold.

Sanders' retort directly challenges Yates' assessment of the top of the draft, which included having Miami quarterback Cam Ward going No. 3 to the fellow quarterback-needy Giants.

While Sanders has shown flashes of brilliance, the order of the quarterbacks going first and second hasn't been a universal line of thinking leading up to April's draft.

In January, Tom Pelissero of the NFL Network reported that Sanders wasn't seen as a first-rounder by some scouts.

Sanders, who finished eighth in Heisman Trophy voting in his final season with the Buffaloes, completed an FBS-leading 74 percent of his passes for 4,134 passing yards and 37 touchdowns for Colorado in 2024.



**SHEDEUR SANDERS**

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# NBA, union urge Stars to up the effort in ASG

By THOMAS GAMBIA-ELLIS

The NBA has put forth yet another format for All-Star weekend, along with a message to its players, in an effort to improve the often criticized event.

This season's All-Star Game will feature a tournament between four teams rather than the traditional two.

Three teams will be composed of NBA All-Stars, with the remaining team created by the annual Rising Stars challenge winner.

In addition to the new format, the NBA and the National Basketball Players Association will have a meeting with the players prior to Sunday's game, sending a message to put more effort into the games, per NBA insider Chris Haynes.

"The league, and the players union, will address the All-Star players on Sunday prior to the All-Star Game on the importance of competing and putting on a show for the fans," Haynes said.

Haynes then added, "Now I'm told that these are talks that go on routinely prior to an All-Star Game, but it's even more apparent now that with



**HELLO AGAIN:** NBA commissioner Adam Silver (left) shares a moment with former Knick and two-time All-Star Baron Davis before the All-Star celebrity game on Friday night. Getty Images

the changes to the All-Star format to multiple teams, and the heightened scrutiny of how players seem uninterested on All-Star Sundays, this message is expected to highly urge players to put out more of a fight for the consumer, and for business."

The All-Star Game has received widespread criticism over recent seasons, with fans often pointing to the lack of competitiveness from the players.

NBA commissioner Adam Silver last changed the All-Star Game format

in 2020 by adding the Elam ending, which ended the game based on the target score of 24 in the fourth quarter, with the first team reaching that being named the winner.

The Elam ending was deemed unsuccessful at improving the effort from the players, with the games remaining uncompetitive.

The 2025 NBA All-Star Game will be played on Sunday in San Francisco's Chase Center, and broadcast at 8 p.m. on TNT and TruTV.

## Shaq, TNT re-up for \$15M per year

By DAN MARTIN

Shaquille O'Neal has proven to be nearly as popular a broadcaster as he was a player, and it's paying off.

The Hall of Fame center has agreed to a new long-term contract to remain at TNT Sports, and he'll earn more than \$15 million per year, according to Front Office Sports.

The news comes as "Inside The NBA" heads to ESPN due to TNT no longer having the media rights to broadcast the NBA. But TNT will license the program to ESPN, as well as ABC, starting next season.

There had still been uncertainty about whether the four members of the program — Ernie Johnson and former NBA players Charles Barkley, Kenny Smith and O'Neal — would continue to be a part of it. But Barkley said he would stay with TNT for the rest of his 10-year contract, which has seven years remaining, and Johnson and

Smith both are expected to stay.

The O'Neal news comes just a day after he joked that the crew was "getting fired anyway" following an appearance by former NFL running back Marshawn Lynch, who used profanity on the show.



**SHAQUILLE O'NEAL**

O'Neal, 52, reportedly made nearly \$300 million over his 17-year NBA career, as well as plenty more from endorsements extending after his playing days. He now figures to be among the highest-paid broadcasters in the industry more than a decade after embarking on a career in it.

As for "Inside The NBA," it will still be produced by TNT going forward, from the same studio in Atlanta. The exact format of the show is yet to be determined, according to multiple outlets, and the show itself may be on a handful fewer times per season.

Now that it's affiliated with ESPN, the members of the show could be seen more than ever if the network asks that they make appearances on different programs.

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# 'ONE OF THE GREAT PLAYERS EVER'

## All-time Knick, shoo-in Hall of Famer Carmelo Anthony makes ballot debut

By STEFAN BONDY

SAN FRANCISCO — A formality was officialized Friday night, when Carmelo Anthony, arguably the greatest Knick since Patrick Ewing, was named a finalist for the Naismith Hall of Fame.

And as he took that step closer to the orange jacket on his first ballot, Anthony received a strong endorsement from the legendary executive who had to face the forward throughout his career.

"He's one of the great players, ever. Really," Pat Riley, the Miami Heat president, said in an interview with *The Post*. "A tough guard. Can shoot. Good size. Athletic. And carried a franchise in Denver for a long time, went to New York. Always a tough cover, so you had to game-plan for him every night. And had a great career."

"I think from the standpoint of what they call small forwards, he wasn't just that. He can play small forward, sure. He can play power forward. Back then, we were more positional. He could play the 2-guard. Today, he'd be playing 5. That's just the way the game has grown. But he deserves it. I hope he makes it."

Anthony is a shoo-in for the class of 2025, with the inductees enshrined April 5 in Springfield, Mass. He ranks No. 10 in the NBA in career points, ahead of Moses Malone and just behind Kevin Durant and Shaquille O'Neal. He's also a 10-time All-Star, including six appearances with the Knicks. The biggest hole in Melo's résumé is the lack of an NBA championship ring. Riley, a nine-time NBA champion in various roles, can't relate, but understands it shouldn't prohibit a Hall of Fame induction.

Anthony, after all, took on the burden of leading the Knicks when the franchise was in dark days, and had little help for most of his 6½ seasons.

"Welcome to the big time," Riley said. "So you have to accept it. You can't run away from it. So I think he always accepted that. It was probably frustrating for him at times because he didn't win in some of those years."

"When you're the face of the franchise, there's great expectations. And I think that's part of what the Hall of Fame is about. I think they take that into account. Doesn't make any difference. John Stockton, Karl Malone, Carmelo, Charles Barkley. They had the pressure on them all the time. And they're all Hall of Famers. Did they win the chip? No. But it didn't make any difference. They're being recognized for what they did in their careers."

Riley's team won the championship in Anthony's best season with the Knicks, in 2012-13, when the Mike Woodson-coached construction won 54 regular-season games while going 3-1 against the Heat. It was set up for a New York-Miami conference final, before the Knicks were upset in the second round by the Pacers.

Was Riley worried about facing the Knicks in those playoffs? Not really.

"When you get that far, in 2013, with LeBron and D-Wade and Chris Bosh and Shane Battier and Ray Allen — I'll take my chances," Riley said.

Melo's HOF candidacy is further boosted by his NCAA title with Syracuse and three Olympic gold medals. He was Team USA's all-time leading Olympic scorer until Durant broke the record last year.

"He was cut out to be a great international player," Jerry Colangelo, the former director of USA Basketball, told *The Post*. "The nuances of the international game, the 3-point distance is a little bit less. The pace of the game was perfect for him. And with his great skill of scoring, we went to

him a lot. He had the ability to shoot anytime he wanted to, because most of the time, he's going to score. He had a few games where, in my mind, he didn't miss any shots. Loved his competitiveness. He was great in our system. I think he made other people better. And he was committed all the way."

All the way to the Hall of Fame.

► Buck Williams, whose jersey is retired by the Nets, finally was named a finalist for the Hall of Fame, nearly 27 years after he retired.

The bruising power forward, a rebounding and defensive specialist, joined Anthony as one of four finalists as NBA players.

The others are Dwight Howard and Marques Johnson.

Among the nominees who weren't named finalists: Amar'e Stoudemire, World B Free, Robert Horry, Tom Chambers and Reggie Theus.

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## Castle MVP of Rising Stars

Associated Press

Spurs rookie Stephon Castle scored 12 points to lead Team C to a 25-14 come-from-behind victory over Team G-League in the Rising Stars final Friday and into the All-Star Game proper.

The Rising Stars competition kicked off All-Star weekend at Chase Center in San Francisco, home of the Golden State Warriors.

In a rapid-fire final in which the first team to score 25 points won, Team C — coached by Hall of Famer Chris Mullin — fell behind 12-8 but roared home for the victory.

Their reward will be a daunting clash in Sunday's All-Star Game — reformatted as a mini-tournament featuring two semifinals and a final all to be played to a target score of 40.

The Rising Stars champions — made up of standout players in their first and second seasons — will open Sunday against the All-Star team chosen by honorary coach Shaquille O'Neal that is stacked with superstars including LeBron James, Stephen Curry, Kevin Durant, Jayson Tatum, Jaylen Brown, Damian Lillard, Kyrie Irving and James Harden.

Castle, who was named the Rising Stars Most Valuable Player, was looking forward to the challenge.

"We all wanted to play on Sunday," said Castle, who also fed Jazz second-year guard Keyonte George for the game-winning 3-pointer.

"We all wanted to win. We were down early, but we came and fought back and won."

And he had a message for the league's marquee All-Stars.

"Just be ready for us," Castle said. "Don't count us out. We're here to win it."

**NEW YORK LEGEND:** Carmelo Anthony, who played parts of seven seasons with the Knicks in a stellar 19-year career, made his debut on the Pro Basketball Hall of Fame ballot Friday. The 10-time All-Star, who also is top 10 all time in points scored, is almost certain to be elected when the inductees are announced in April.

Anthony J. Causi





By ETHAN SEARS

MONTREAL — Sam Bennett has known Connor McDavid since they were little kids, playing minor hockey as linemates before the age of 10. He was on the other side of McDavid in last year's Stanley Cup Final, as the Oilers stormed back from a 3-0 deficit to force a Game 7, with McDavid eventually winning the Conn Smythe Trophy even after the Panthers took the series.

So when Bennett talks about what Saturday's USA-Canada matchup will mean to McDavid, who has not yet played in a best-on-best version of this rivalry, take him seriously.

"You can tell how badly he wants to win," Bennett said after Canada practiced Friday. "He came in the locker room after the win the other night [against Sweden], he was jacked up. He was probably the most jacked up out of anyone. Just shows how badly he loves winning. It's definitely an admirable trait he's got."

Stages like this are where legends get written. All McDavid has to do for a reminder is to look a few stalls over in Canada's locker room to Sidney Crosby, who scored the most famous goal of his decorated career in the 2010 Olympic final to take gold over Team USA.

McDavid was playing for the Toronto Marlies at the time, still young enough to be teammates with Bennett in the Greater Toronto Hockey League. The team watched together.

"I just remember it being so exciting to see that goal go in," McDavid said. "Every Canadian was excited."

Saturday's match between the two hockey heavyweights does not have the same stakes as an Olympic final. After both teams



## Face lift

### 4 Nations tourney a chance for McDavid to boost legacy on international stage

**DREAM ON:** Oilers star Connor McDavid called playing for Team Canada and getting to compete against Team USA at the 4 Nations Face-Off the kind of experience "you dream of."

Imagn Images

won their opening matches at the 4 Nations Face-Off, the winner is all but assured a spot in the final, but it's entirely possible — even likely — that there will be a rematch between these two teams with a trophy on the line next

Thursday in Boston.

Still, it is the first best-on-best match between Canada and the United States in over eight years, and it is taking place amid heightened tensions between the two countries, with the "Star

Spangled Banner" receiving boos north of the border.

"I think the feeling I have for this game," Bennett said, "is very similar to how I felt before Game 7. Just the buildup and how badly I want this."

For the defining player of his generation, this could be a defining game.

"It's big. It's exciting," McDavid said. "Playing the Americans in Montreal, best-on-best tournament. It's what you dream of."

## Canada bringing in Star reinforcement before USA clash

By MOLLIE WALKER

MONTREAL — Ahead of their highly anticipated matchup with the United States as part of the NHL's 4 Nations Face-Off on Saturday, Team Canada was granted permission to bring Stars defenseman Thomas Harley in amid uncertainty surrounding their blue line.

After Shea Theodore suffered an upper-body injury in Canada's opening win over Sweden and was ruled out for the remainder of the tournament, Cale

### 4 NATIONS NOTES

Makar missed practice Friday due to illness.

Canada head coach Jon Cooper said he was confident Makar would be ready to play Saturday night.

Since tournament rules indicate Theodore couldn't be replaced now that everything officially has begun, Team Canada had immediate conversations with the NHL and NHL Players Association about

reinforcements when the Golden Knights defenseman went down.

Travis Sanheim is expected to replace Theodore on the left of Drew Doughty.

While Travis Konecny filled in for Makar on defense next to Devon Toews during Friday's practice, the only situation where Harley would play is if Makar is unavailable.

Canada also switched up its bottom two forward lines, creating a unit of Lightning players with Brandon Hagel, Anthony

Cirelli and Brayden Point.

The fourth unit featured Brad Marchand, Seth Jarvis and Sam Bennett, who is expected to draw in for Konecny.

Cooper also declined to reveal his starting goalie, noting that he'd like to speak with his players before announcing. Jordan Binnington got the nod in the opener, but Adin Hill and Sam Montembeault are also options.

► Finland head coach **Antti Pennan** alluded to some possible lineup

changes after falling to Team USA 6-1 on Thursday.

Former Ranger **Kaapo Kakko** was the forward scratch for Finland, which means he would be an option if Pennan wished to switch things up.

"Could be, but tomorrow you will know about those," Pennan said. "Again, 6-1, I think you need to do something, but I know more exactly [Saturday], and those changes are public [Saturday]."

► Team USA head coach and Pittsburgh bench boss

**Mike Sullivan** will face his star player, **Sidney Crosby**, for the first time in the 4 Nations Face-Off on Saturday.

"Well, I think what stood out to me is probably the same thing that stood out to you and everybody else that watched, right?" Sullivan said. "He's a big-game player. I've witnessed it firsthand for a decade now. Sid tends to be at his best when the stakes are high. That's what I witnessed the other night. I would anticipate he'll be at his best against us."

# 4 NATIONS FACE-OFF

FEB. 12-20 ♦ MONTREAL, BOSTON

# AMERICA THE

## Crosby a mythical figure in Canada

**M**ONTREAL — The USA has 1980 and Miracle on Ice.

Canada has No. 87 and Mythical on Ice.

This is the most rarefied status to which Sidney Crosby has climbed.

“Crosby! Crosby! Crosby!” the adoring audience at Bell chanted when the center climbed over the boards just about 5:30 into overtime of Canada’s 4 Nations opener on Wednesday against Sweden.

“Crosby! Crosby! Crosby!” the adoring audience chanted again after No. 87 had triggered the rush on which Mitch Marner won it 4-3 for Canada in earning both his third assist and player-of-the-game designation.

The start-to-finish performance at age 37 and the response from the crowd reminded me of the quote from Joe DiMaggio that resonates most.

“I played my best every day,” the Clipper said. “You never know when someone might be seeing you play for the first time.”

That represents the ethos I am confident is represented by Crosby every single time he takes the ice, whether it is in San Jose for a mid-season Penguins-Sharks match or in Vancouver for an Olympic gold medal game.

Or whether here on Saturday, for the USA-Canada 4 Nations preliminary round matchup. On the global scale of hockey matters, this game seems so much bigger than when No. 87’s team will attempt to extend its 26-game winning streak in international competition with Crosby wearing the sweater.

“I think everyone has been talking about it,” the captain said following Team Canada’s practice on Friday. “I think it’s a hockey game you love to be a part of no matter what experience you’ve had in the past.

“Coming off a big win [in overtime against Sweden on Wednesday] with this group and hoping to keep building, that’s the way I’m approaching it. It’s a great opportunity, but I don’t try and measure it against anything.

“I’m really excited for the challenge that we have.”

Connor McDavid was zipping around the practice rink. Nathan MacKinnon was zinging along. Yet your eyes were always trained on Crosby.

It never gets old.

He never gets old.

Is it wrong to long for the day when Henrik Lundqvist squirted his water bottle at him?

This will be the seventh time that

Crosby goes up against the USA in international competition, the most famous of which took place at the 2010 Olympic Games in Vancouver, where he scored

at 7:40 in overtime to give Canada a 3-2 victory over the Americans in the gold medal game after Zach Parise had tied it at 19:35 of the third with the extra attacker.

This was the Golden Goal. This has been celebrated endlessly by the Canadian hockey community. This was also the game that began Canada’s 26-game winning streak with Crosby.

In fact, Crosby’s most recent defeat in a Team Canada uniform came in the preliminary round of the 2010 Olympics, when beaten by the USA 5-3, seven days before the gold medal confrontation.

No. 87’s first game against the USA came as a 16-year-old in the 2004 World Juniors, in which the Americans defeated Canada 4-3 in the gold medal game. That represented the Americans’ first gold in World Junior history. The Yanks have won six since, including the past two.

That was also the tournament and the game that propelled Team USA and Michigan goaltender Al Montoya into the No. 6 selection of the 2004 NHL draft, by the Rangers. Glen Sather, the GM at the

time, refused to present Montoya with the max entry-level bonus package, so Montoya returned to school for his senior season. The goaltender would play 168 games in the NHL, but not one for the Blueshirts.

The 2016 World Cup was a hybrid best-on-best. Under-23s were not allowed to play for either Canada or the USA. But Canada was packed. Steven Stamkos, John Tavares, Drew Doughty, Jonathan Toews, Joe Thornton, Patrice Bergeron, Claude Giroux and Shea Weber were on the roster.

The USA featured Patrick Kane, Ryan Suter, Ryan McDonagh and Parise. Team USA hierarchy constructed the team differently. This was a roster filled with hard-edged, physical players. Sheer skill was not the primary ingredient of that team.

Brandon Dubinsky had been selected to Team USA for the sole purpose of being the matchup center against Crosby, for whom he had been a particular nemesis. Dubinsky didn’t care who Crosby was. If a cross-check to the back of the neck was required, then a cross-check to the back of the neck would be delivered.

The USA had lost the first game of the tournament to Team Europe. The game against Canada was a must-win. Head coach John Tortorella scratched Dubinsky. You couldn’t make it up. Canada won the game 4-2, the USA went 0-3 in the tournament. Tortorella will be behind the USA bench Saturday, as an assistant coach. But of course.

That was eight years ago, and that was the last time Crosby has represented Canada. Let’s amend that. Crosby represents Canada every day. He represents his sport every day. There is no need or intention to turn this into hagiography, but Crosby represents the best of hockey and maybe the best of us.

He is in his 20th NHL season. His career won’t go on forever. But there is this, and there will be the 2026 Games in Italy.

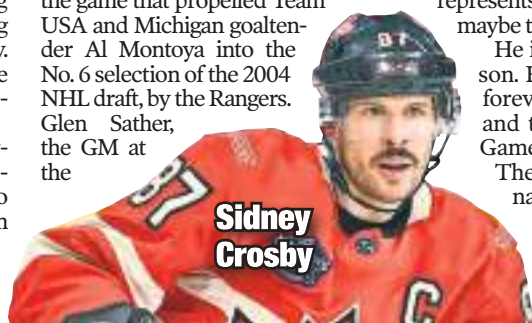
There is the USA and Canada on Saturday night in Montreal.

Mythical on Ice.

*larry.brooks@nypost.com*



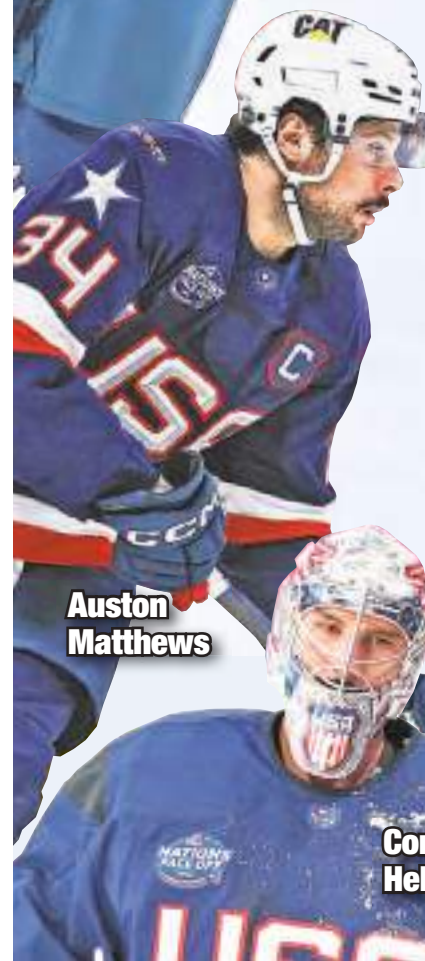
**Larry Brooks**



**Sidney Crosby**



**Matthew Tkachuk**



**Auston Matthews**



**Connor Hellebuyck**

# THE

**MONTREAL — Matthew Tkachuk put it best in his postgame interview with Sportsnet on Thursday night, when the Panthers star said he’s been waiting for Saturday’s match against Canada “for nine years.”**

**So has the rest of the hockey world. There is more than just a big-game feel for the renewal of hostilities between the U.S. and Canada on Bell Centre ice in prime time on Saturday. There is a Game 7 feel, a Stanley Cup feel, an event-of-the-year feel.**

**Nothing is bigger than Team USA and Canada in a best-on-best tournament, and it’s been nearly a decade since we last saw it. The Post’s Ethan Sawit breaks down the matchups:**

### GOALTENDING

Canada coach **Jon Cooper** declined to name his starter on Friday, saying he had yet to inform the goalies.



**EDGE**

There was no need to ask Team USA’s **Mike Sullivan** the same question.

The nature of a best-on-best tournament is such that every player on the ice is capable. But whether Cooper goes with **Jordan Binnington** for a second straight game or turns to **Adin Hill**, Team

USA has the upper hand in nets with two-time Vezina winner **Connor Hellebuyck**.



# BOOOO TIFUL

## MATCHUPS

### DEFENSE

Neither team's blue line looks the same as envisioned prior to the tournament. Team USA is without **Quinn Hughes**, who pulled out late due to injury, and switched its pairs midway through Thursday's win over Finland, moving **Adam Fox** alongside **Noah Hanifin** and **Jacob Slavin** with **Brock Faber**.

Canada, though, is near an out-and-out crisis after **Shea Theodore** suffered a tournament-ending injury in its win over Sweden and top D-man **Cale Makar** missed Friday's practice with illness. Cooper said he was confident Makar would play Saturday, but **Thomas Harley** — who did not make the original roster and thus is not allowed to practice or skate with the team — is on standby to join in case Canada goes down to five defensemen. **Travis Sanheim** will draw in for Theodore.

### FORWARDS

Putting **Brady** and **Matthew Tkachuk** on either side of **Jack Eichel** was an inspired — and possibly game-saving — choice from Sullivan on Thursday, but that being arguably Team USA's best trio underscores the stylistic clash here.

Canada has a clear and obvious advantage in terms of skill, with the likes of **Sidney Crosby**, **Nathan MacKinnon** and **Connor McDavid** making up half its top six, whereas the



EDGE

Americans will try to play a more physical game. That's not to say Team USA doesn't have skill or Team Canada can't handle physicality — this is best-on-best and everyone can do everything — just that there is a difference in how each team will try and set the tone.

It's hard to look at these forward groups, and how they played in each team's respective opener, and not conclude Canada has an advantage, however slight. The top-end talent is as good as it gets, and frankly showed up to a greater degree against Sweden than the **Jake Guentzel**, **Auston Matthews** and **Jack Hughes** line did against Finland.

### SPECIAL TEAMS

If there's a clear and obvious advantage for Team USA in terms of goaltending, then this is Canada's answer.

The Canadian top power-play unit of **Makar**, **Crosby**, **McDavid**, **MacKinnon** and **Sam Reinhart** is laughably talented and proved it can translate to the ice by scoring almost immediately on Canada's only power play of the game against Sweden. The main question there is whether any referee will

give Canada a call given the sort of advantage their power play has.

As for Team USA, **Matthew Tkachuk** scored a pair of power-play goals against Finland, but one was a harmless-looking shot that **Juuse Saros** should have stopped and the other was in garbage time. There were moments over 5:18 of power-play time where the units struggled to get set up, and while **Sullivan** can deploy two heavily talented groups on the man advantage, neither compares to what Canada has.

### COACHING

**Sullivan** has two Stanley Cup titles, and so does **Cooper**. Both have one assistant coach who's won a Cup (**John Tortorella** for the U.S., **Bruce Cassidy** for Canada) and staffs packed with familiar names. Picking one over the other here is silly.



EVEN

### PREDICTION

Canada's top-end talent and the home crowd give them a tightly fought win. **Canada 4, USA 2**

## Team USA embraces role as villains against hosts

By MOLLIE WALKER

MONTREAL — The only guarantee in this 4 Nations Face-off is the hostile atmosphere that will follow Team USA.

Skating out to boos, while Finland was met with cheers, in their opening game came as no surprise. But if you thought the Americans were the Bad Guys on Thursday, just wait until they take the ice Saturday night for the crème de la crème matchup of the tournament with Team Canada.

Animosity between the two largest countries on this side of the globe has been brewing, as threats of tariffs and suggestions of Canada sacrificing its sovereignty to become the 51st state have rumbled.

Politics always find a way into sports. Things that transcend hockey.

And the United States of America has its role.

"I'm excited to be playing the villain that night," **Brady Tkachuk**, who otherwise captains the Ottawa Senators, said with a grin after he and his brother, **Matthew**, combined for four goals and five points in Thursday's 6-1 win.

The one thing about the **Tkachuks**, everybody says, is they can drag a whole team into the fight.

**Matthew Tkachuk**, who ventured to the White House earlier this month to celebrate the Panthers' Stanley Cup victory, was short and concise when asked about the U.S. national anthem getting booed prior to Thursday's game.

"I didn't like it," he quipped. "And that's all I've got."

The Star Spangled Banner had been getting booed in Canada well before this tournament, which will host the final four games on the other side of the border in Boston.

Rangers forward **J.T. Miller** said it fired up his teammates more than anything Thursday night.

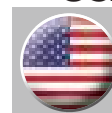
It should be easy to embrace a character they not only were expecting but have portrayed many times before.

Several players on Team USA have competed in World Junior Championships in Canada.

**Miller** was part of the seventh-place U.S. team that competed in the 2012 World Junior Championship in Calgary and Edmonton, while Blueshirts defenseman **Adam Fox** — along with **Charlie McAvoy** and **Jake Oettinger** — won gold at the 2017 World Junior Championships in Montreal and Toronto.

**Matt Boldy**, **Jake Sanderson** and **Brock**

### Saturday USA vs. CANADA



4 Nations Face-off  
in Montreal  
8 p.m.  
ABC



**Faber** captured gold in Edmonton during the 2021 World Junior Championship. **Faber** also finished in fifth with Team USA at the 2022 tournament.

**Jack Eichel**, **Noah Hanifin**, **Dylan Larkin**, **Auston Matthews** and **Zach Werenski** skated to fifth place for Team USA at the 2015 World Junior Championship in Montreal and Toronto.

"It was my first time playing in an NHL building in front of a sold-out crowd," **Larkin** recalled of competing inside Bell Centre during that tournament a decade ago. "It was intimidating. It really was. Skating out, I'll never forget, just the sea of red. The buzz in this rink. It was special. Now that you've played in some big games, played in front of some big crowds, you're a little more used to it."

"I think even [Saturday's game against Canada] is going to be the next level — something I just can't wait for."

The callous atmosphere is just a single layer to what is sure to be a lofty matchup for the Americans.

This is the kind of game, however, that's been just as much of a dream as their NHL careers.

Whether or not they want or like to play the villain is of no consequence — it's been chosen for them by the political landscape around them.

But how does that saying go?

Nice guys finish last.

"Our group of players are really excited to represent their nation and compete against a real good team," Team USA head coach **Mike Sullivan** said Friday. "Obviously this rivalry is well chronicled. It goes on and on. And I think it's an incredible privilege to participate in it."

"Our guys are excited to earn their way, and that's one of the conversations we've had with them from Day 1 since we've assembled here in Montreal, is that one of the greatest things about our sport is that nothing is inevitable. You've got to earn it every shift, you've got to earn it every game, you've got to earn it every year."

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# BREAKING UP IS HARD TO DO

By STEVE HELLING  
and RYAN DUNLEAVY

Aaron Rodgers wasn't ready for his Jets divorce.

Concerned that his career could end with a whimper, Rodgers, 41, aggressively urged the Jets to stick with him for another season or two over the course of multiple conversations last week, a well-placed source told The Post.

## EXCLUSIVE

When the Jets decided to move on anyway, Rodgers accepted his fate "like a man going to the gallows," the source said, and slipped into the darkness for a few days.

The writing already was on the wall by the time Rodgers, who was in New Jersey for an unrelated reason, was asked to come to the team's Florham Park facility for his first face-to-face meeting with the newly hired regime of general manager Darren Mougey and head coach Aaron Glenn.

Maybe he was not hiding out in an ayahuasca-laced cave — as he was before deciding to put off retirement and join the Jets in 2023 — but Rodgers turned off his phone for the first part of this week and stopped returning texts from his inner circle, the source said.

Rodgers remains upset over what would be an unbecoming end to his storied career, but he has issued a directive to put out feelers for the next phase of his life as he seeks opportunities similar to the one he once had hosting "Jeopardy!," the source said.

"People remember the way you go out, not everything you did along the way," the source said. "And if he goes out this way or as a backup quarterback somewhere else, that's not how he wanted to be. He wanted to go out on top. And he is saying that going out on top is an option he will no longer have."

Fairy-tale endings like those afforded to Peyton Manning, John Elway and Michael Strahan — and, to a lesser extent, Tom Brady —

## Rodgers told Jets he wanted to stay, fears career will end with whimper



**GREEN WITH ENVY:** Aaron Rodgers ended up playing just 18 games over two seasons for the Jets, but he reportedly was hoping to keep the relationship going for at least another year or two, according to a source. The team, however, appears adamant about moving on. Imagn Images (2)

are rare in the NFL. The closest Rodgers might get is throwing his milestone 500th career touchdown pass in his final of 18 games played for the Jets.

There was a limited market for Rodgers' services in 2023, with the Jets ultimately emerging as the only legitimate suitor to trade with the Packers. That was before he was on the wrong side of 40 with a surgically repaired Achilles (September 2023).

So, Rodgers' concerns that he might not be Plan A for any quarterback-needy team are justified.

Still, the NFL's quarterback carousel hasn't yet begun to spin, and the Giants, Steelers, Titans and Raiders already need to sign starters. The Rams — an ideal situation for Rodgers as a team built for Super Bowl contention and located near his California home — and Saints soon could join the search party.

Beggars can't be choosers, of course.

Never one to be caught unprepared, Rodgers already is looking to make a big step into the entertainment sphere, the source said. That suggests Rodgers might be leaning toward retirement rather than pursuing a 21st NFL season, if options to be on camera are presented.

Rodgers was a guest host on "Jeopardy!" for two weeks in April 2021. But that stint was before he became such a polarizing figure because of his various stances on the COVID-19 vaccine, political issues and ayahuasca.

Envisioning a Strahan-like career with credits that are not necessarily related to sports, Rodgers is hoping to parlay his easy charisma into the television space in a different way than Brady (Fox's lead NFL game analyst) or Eli and Peyton Manning (co-hosts of ESPN's "ManningCast").

A case could be made — and it sounds as if Rodgers made it —

that he is the Jets' best on-field option at quarterback. Especially if they want to field a winning team in 2025, as Mougey and Glenn suggested.

But they are moving forward with veteran journeyman Tyrod Taylor and uncertainty in what is considered a weak 2025 draft class after deciding Rodgers' passing yards (3,897) and touchdowns (28) — both the third-highest single-season totals in franchise history — aren't worth the hassle. Even more damning: Parting with Rodgers means \$49 million in dead salary cap space.

The Jets haven't officially released Rodgers, though they publicly shared their intentions with written statements thanking him for his time. Rodgers' remarks were noticeably absent from the news release.

But he made his voice heard to the Jets.

It got him nowhere.



# Yanks like Beeter better out of pen

By JOEL SHERMAN

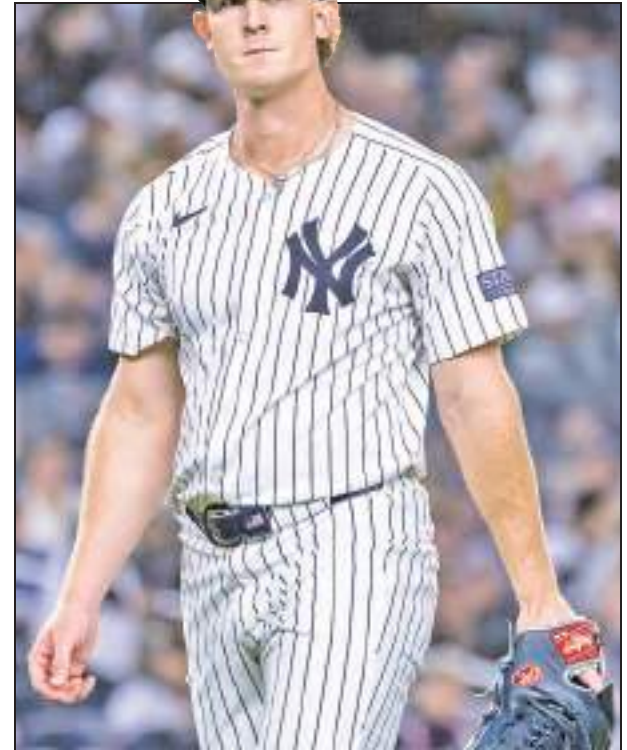
TAMPA — The Yankees knew when they obtained Clayton Beeter from the Dodgers for Joey Gallo at the 2022 trade deadline that his stuff ultimately might translate best as a reliever, not a starter.

At the outset of spring training 2025, they have decided that Beeter is, indeed, a reliever.

“As we got through last year, his fastball-slider mix is super powerful and is best suited for relief,” Yankees pitching coach Matt Blake said. “We decided to lean into the swing-and-miss of the fastball at the top of the zone and the slider at the bottom. We thought it might even play up in short bursts.”

In spring training last year, he was initially seen with Luis Gil and Will Warren as the main depth if something befell a major league starter. Gil ultimately got the nod when Gerrit Cole went down in March with an elbow injury.

Beeter did break camp with the Yankees and appeared in one game as a reliever before being optioned back to Triple-A, where he started. But he missed four months from



**THAT’S A RELIEF:** Clayton Beeter, a 26-year-old righty acquired in a 2022 trade, is being considered as a potential bullpen piece for the Yankees, with pitching coach Matt Blake saying his stuff is “best suited for relief.” *Corey Sipkin*

mid-May until mid-September with a shoulder ailment. He returned and pitched in two more games out of the pen for the Yankees late in the season.

The 26-year-old righty has two minor league options remaining, so without a few relief injuries, he is likely to begin the season in the Triple-A bullpen.

## Madrigal confident in SS ability

By MIKE PUMA

PORT ST. LUCIE — Nick Madrigal’s major league résumé doesn’t include activity at shortstop, but he’s confident he can handle the position.

The 27-year-old infielder — a former first-round draft pick by the White Sox — is expected to see action at shortstop in the exhibition season for the Mets as the team evaluates potential backup options for Francisco Lindor.

Madrigal played mostly third base (with action also at second) last year for the Cubs, and was signed by the Mets last month in part to provide a possible late-inning glove behind Mark Vientos.

But there is a strong possibility the Mets will carry only one backup infielder, and shortstop experience for that player would be a plus.

“I haven’t got that many games [at shortstop] over the last couple of years, but I feel comfortable over there,” said Madrigal,

who played the position at Oregon State. “I feel fully capable of doing it.”

Luisangel Acuña, Brett Baty and Jared Young are others in camp competing for a backup infield job. Ronny Mauricio, who is returning from surgery to repair the anterior cruciate ligament in his left knee, isn’t expected to be an option at the major league level to start the season.

### METS NOTES

► **Jett Williams** was drilled in the “fleshy area” of the right hand by **Blake Tidwell** during live batting practice and may have avoided the worst. Williams, the organization’s top position player prospect, said he wasn’t planning on X-rays and was “all good.” Williams will be receiving looks at second base, shortstop and center field this spring.

► **Jeff McNeil, Starling Marte** and **Tyrone Taylor** were among the position players who arrived Friday. The first official workout day for position players is Monday, following Saturday’s report date.

# BEST FOOT FORWARD

## Nimmo taking it step by step as he recovers from plantar fasciitis

By MIKE PUMA

PORT ST. LUCIE — Brandon Nimmo is taking the slow-and-steady-wins-the-race approach to his spring training buildup.

After abstaining from running for most of the offseason to allow his left foot a chance to heal from plantar fasciitis, the Mets outfielder said Friday that he is running at 91 percent as he continues his rehab.

The foot was an issue for Nimmo last year in the post-season, leading him to receive a platelet rich plasma (PRP) injection in the days after the Mets lost Game 6 of the NLCS to the Dodgers. Nimmo also has received physical therapy and is using orthotics as part of his rehab.

"We're in a really good spot," Nimmo said at Clover Park. "It's a good place to be. We're trending upwards. We're going to keep stacking good days on good days. What you want to do is just not push it too hard right now because it's trending in the right direction.

"We probably turned the corner in the last three or four weeks — it's happened just in time because they are having to pull back on me a little bit more, which is the way you want it."

Nimmo is wearing electronic devices during his workouts that measure his running against his top foot speed, allowing him to know he's at 91 percent.

For the past three seasons, Nimmo has eased into spring training by skipping the first week or two of the Grapefruit League. It's an approach he will continue this spring as he looks to stay healthy all season.

"It's been three years of playing 150-plus games plus play-offs, and if it's not broke, don't fix it," Nimmo said.

Nimmo not only is trying to return to full-strength running but also to ensure the plantar fasciitis isn't an issue later in the year.

"A lot is going to depend on cleat choice and taking care of my foot, making sure I get the soft tissue work done, keeping it strong and then doing the [physical therapy] work," Nimmo said. "There's definitely a chance it can come back, but our goal is to be working ahead of the schedule rather than be reactive to it so try to keep it from coming back."

Nimmo said he didn't know if he might receive occasional starts as the DH, allowing him to get off his feet. Nimmo last season shifted from center to a left field.

Last week, the Mets resigned Pete Alonso to a two-year contract worth \$54 million, bringing a level of comfort to Nimmo, who will be reunited with his teammate of the past six seasons.

"He and I have been together a long time, and anytime you add 30-40 homers to

your lineup, you have got to love that, especially with the lineup we have got going right now," Nimmo said. "I think he's going to have a lot of success hitting behind [Juan] Soto."

Nimmo admitted he was concerned the Mets might move on without Alonso as negotiations between the two sides lagged.

"I was just trying to hold out hope," Nimmo said. "It kind of seemed like that time had come and passed, and I was just like, 'I'd love to see you back,' and just kept telling him that."

Among the possibilities is that Nimmo could hit cleanup in the batting order behind Soto and Alonso, but that conversation with manager Carlos Mendoza has not occurred yet. Last season was Nimmo's worst offensively, as he produced a .727 OPS. Nimmo began the season in the leadoff spot but moved down in the lineup in May, with Francisco Lindor installed atop the batting order.

"[Mendoza] talked with me a lot last year about if I had any reservations hitting anywhere in the lineup," Nimmo said. "I told him it really doesn't matter to me. My at-bats are dictated by the situation in the game, and so he should feel comfortable putting me anywhere in the lineup that he wants."

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**MAKING PROGRESS:** Brandon Nimmo, who didn't run for most of the offseason because of plantar fasciitis, said he is running at 91 percent as he continues to rehab his left foot. Corey Sipkin



**P**ORT ST. LUCIE — The Clay Holmes rotation experiment is no experiment at all. It's a cold Mets calculation, yet another one I'm betting will work.

It's a calculation by Mets honcho David Stearns, his math-driven minions and new Mets starter Holmes himself — all fellows I wouldn't bet against.



**Jon Heyman**

I don't have Stearns' team of analytic heroes or, frankly, his Harvard degree. And I wasn't class valedictorian or a straight-A student like Holmes. I simply trust they're not just guessing that Holmes can somewhat seamlessly transition from relief to rotation, that they know what they're doing.

No doubt, it surely surprises many to see the ex-All-Star closer, all-around nice guy and son of a preacher — who was demoted to setup guy across town last year — get such a prime appointment now. It isn't only Stearns' computer and his computer guys who embraced this surprise storyline, but also the fine folks who run the Orioles and Red Sox, a couple of Yalies (Mike Elias and Craig Breslow, respectively). Those two also pursued and envisioned the longtime Yankee and division rival as a starter following three-plus years in The Bronx bullpen, where he produced a 30-save season and 2.69 ERA overall.

The Mets made a big bet for \$38 million over three years (with an opt-out after 2026). An Ivy degree doesn't guarantee every decision pays off, of course. But until further notice, I believe the odds stay in the Mets' favor.

Same goes for the brainy Holmes, and don't discount that



# Don't bet against Amazin's attempt to mold Clay into a starter

**TAKING A CHANCE:** David Stearns and the Mets are betting on Clay Holmes' arsenal and work ethic as they try to convert the former Yankees closer into a member of the rotation.

Corey Sipkin

valedictory honor merely because he prepped in Alabama, in tiny Slocumb, just west of the Florida panhandle, where he was first out of about 120 classmates. This guy is a worker, determined to make it happen here.

"It's always something I had in the back of my head. ... I knew I wanted to start, and this is where I wanted to be," Holmes said.

Stearns cited Holmes' arsenal, work ethic, command and commitment, calling the mix, "a good combination that could lead to success as a starting pitcher."

He's off to a nice start, too. Holmes' winter work put him

well ahead of regular starters, and he led off live batting practice sessions Wednesday with a three "up" performance, meaning he threw three simulated innings — three ups, get it — before the bulk of the team arrived.

"I feel like I'm in a great spot," Holmes said.

They say hitting a thrown baseball is the hardest thing to do in sports. But I think it might be surviving as a starting pitcher now, what with lineups deeper than ever and hitters more patient than ever. Unless you have Nolan Ryan's fastball and Sandy Koufax's curveball, to last beyond five

innings these days requires a full repertoire, which is why even back-end starters now make 10 times what Ryan made and 100 times what Koufax held out for (inflation is a factor, too).

Holmes is developing quite the pitch combo, and that drives this calculation. The man known for his 98-mph diving sinker somehow found a full slate of pitches while dabbling, experimenting and refining last year. He added a four-seam (straight) fastball and changeup in his final days as a Yankee, convincing him his ambition to start wasn't fanciful.

"I've always thought I had it in

me," Holmes said.

The changeup, aided by Yankees bullpen mates Luke Weaver and Tommy Kahnle, who practically throws nothing else, runs 86 to 88 mph, about 10 mph slower than the patented sinker, with just a little more movement. In that first session, the Mets saw lots of swings and misses.

"The changeup is real," Mets pitching coach Jeremy Hefner declared.

Holmes hasn't tested it in real game conditions yet, and they still wonder if it will behave more like a splitter. But in either case, they're confident it will be dynamic.

"It's something he's been working on ferociously," Hefner said. "It should be a good weapon."

Holmes had plenty of opportunities to continue in the bullpen, even for offers of \$40 million. The Jays, Angels and others understood that filling the pinstriped role once occupied by Mariano Rivera, the only perfect Hall candidate, wasn't the fairest test.

"He set a high bar," Holmes deadpanned about Rivera.

While Holmes ultimately chose a totally different path, he opted for some familiarity. He enjoyed living in Manhattan and will stay there. And he knew manager Carlos Mendoza and assistant pitching coach Desi Druschel from his Yankees tenure, and coach Glenn Sherlock and the team chef from his previous Pirates stint (he might like the chow).

The former Pirates bonus baby — he received a then-record \$1.2 million for the ninth round in a 2011 draft where Pittsburgh also nabbed Gerrit Cole, Josh Bell, Tyler Glasnow and Trea Turner, who opted for N.C. State — believes implicitly in the Mets' vaunted pitching lab.

The Mets showed last year they know what they're doing in the growing area of mound science. Luis Severino, also an ex-Yankee, had his best season in years, and Sean Manaea had his best season ever. Don't bet against Holmes doing the same.

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## Leaner Megill enters camp battling for roster spot ... again

By MIKE PUMA

**P**ORT ST. LUCIE — Tylor Megill looks much thinner than last season but insists he's lost only a few pounds.

"That's what everyone is saying, that I look skinnier, but I haven't lost weight," Megill said. "Maybe like five pounds. That's about it. I guess I just leaned out."

If there is a ritual of spring in Mets camp, it's Megill arriving without a guaranteed roster spot, as rotation depth. More often

than not, an injury to another starting pitcher has allowed Megill to break camp with the team.

This spring, he sits behind Kodai Senga, Sean Manaea, Frankie Montas, Clay Holmes, David Peterson and Griffin Canning in the apparent pecking order of a six-man rotation. Megill, who has a minor league option remaining, is taking the approach that even if he isn't with the team to begin the season, there should be plenty of opportunities for him.

"I am used to it, but it's not something I want to be doing," Megill said of bouncing between Triple-A Syracuse and the Mets. "I want to be starting every five days or six days in the big leagues, not the minor leagues. Obviously, in ways, it sucks being in Triple-A, but at the same time, you can't be down about it, can't pout about it. You still have to go about

your business and work, stay positive and help others around you. It's about you and your career, but at the same time, too, it's about trying to help others get better."



**TYLOR MEGILL**

Megill last season pitched to a 4.04 ERA in 16 appearances (15 of which were starts) for the Mets. His best work occurred over his final six starts for the team, after returning from Syracuse in August.

Over that stretch, he pitched to a 2.32 ERA.

"I threw a lot of strikes and started going deeper into games, which is good," Megill said. "It's always been my goal to go as deep as possible and try to figure that out at Triple-A. Obviously, it translated when I got back. The pitch count was way lower. Finishing up the fifth and then being able to go into the sixth and finish the sixth inning. That has always been my problem, the fifth and sixth innings. When I came back,

the fifth and sixth innings were completely different."

On Friday, he threw two innings of live batting practice and allowed a homer to Brett Baty.

Manager Carlos Mendoza said he's already spoken with Megill about the possibility he will begin the season with Syracuse.

"He is competing — that is what we told him," Mendoza said. "Make sure you get ready, and we'll see what happens. He is going to make a lot of starts for us."

By GREG JOYCE

TAMPA — Marcus Stroman claims he was not making a statement by skipping the first two days of workouts.

But the Yankees right-hander arrived at camp Friday with a clear message.

"I'm a starter," Stroman said 11 times during a 10-minute session with reporters Friday morning at Steinbrenner Field.

"I won't pitch in the bullpen."

Stroman's stance comes after an offseason in which the Yankees tried to trade him, though they have not yet found a taker. The veteran enters camp as the projected odd man out of the rotation, but it would take only one injury to change that equation.

Under the CBA rules, Stroman was not required to report to camp until Feb. 22, which he referred to multiple times.

"I don't think there was a need for me to be here in the last few days, given the climate," Stroman said. "I talked to [Aaron Boone]. We had a great conversation. Everything's honestly perfect and seamless. My relationship with the guys in the clubhouse hasn't changed. I feel great to be back, and I'm ready to roll."

"I know I can compete at any level, with any team. If I'm here, if I'm not here, my body's ready to roll. I'm ready to go out there and give 30-plus starts."

Neither Boone nor general manager Brian Cashman had an issue with Stroman's comments, indicating that they are in fact getting him ready to be a

# WISH UPON A START



## Veteran Stroman emphatically declares 11 times he's a starter

starter and cautioning that they won't have to make any roster decisions for nearly six weeks, which is an eternity in baseball.

"That's vintage Stro," Cashman said when asked about Stroman's insistence on being a starter. "He's a competitor. He's fought his way through pro ball to being a hell of a starter for quite some time. So as a competitor, he is a starter. And I agree with him: He is a starter. Let's just see how everything plays out."

"We'll obviously address anything we have to once we get into certain situations," Boone added. "But

right now, the focus is getting him ready to go."

As for why Friday was the right day for him to report?

"Just felt like today was a good day to come," Stroman said. "Valentine's Day, feel like the vibes are going to be proper. Everyone's happy on this day."

Stroman also said it has been a difficult offseason for him, disclosing that he lost his home in Malibu with the

fires in January. The 33-year-old's primary home is in the Tampa area, which is where he was before joining his teammates at camp on Friday.



Cashman said Stroman has not indicated that he

prefers to be traded, though the Yankees have tried to do so anyways. But Stroman's \$18 million salary — plus an \$18 million vesting option for 2026 that will trigger if he throws 140 innings this season — is likely making it more difficult for the Yankees to trade him.

Stroman largely has been durable in his career, which is of value, though in the past few seasons, his per-

formance has declined in the second half. He had a 3.15 ERA through his first 16 starts last year before posting a 5.97 ERA over his final 14 outings.

Still, Stroman insisted he is not worried about what will happen this spring. He spent his first morning back in the clubhouse catching up with teammates and staffers, then took the field for workouts.

"Everyone in that clubhouse I have nothing but love for, and they all know that," Stroman said. "This is part of the business that has nothing to do with my love for everybody in there."

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**ARMS RACE:** Despite arriving at camp with a smile on his face while sharing grip tips with newcomer Max Fried (inset) and a hug with Austin Wells (left), Marcus Stroman said he "is a starter" and would not entertain the possibility of pitching out of the bullpen.

## There's still plenty of time for Bombers' rotation drama to

TAMPA — When current rotation odd man out Marcus Stroman defiantly states he is a starter 11 times in 10 minutes after arriving for workouts later than all of his pitching Yankees teammates, well, that should just be catnip for your friendly columnist here at this bold tabloid.

Just hit F1 on your New York Post-issued laptop and the darn thing will write itself. Throw in one OFF THE MARC' back page to accentuate it and we got the kind of controversy brewing that all but yells move over Billy Martin and tell Reggie Jackson the news.

And maybe that is where we are heading. Perhaps as we get closer to 3:05 p.m. on March 27, with the Brewers in The Bronx for real games, Stroman will turn out to be the misbehav-

ing sixth starter in a five-starter rotation and clubhouse. I wouldn't bet against that unhappy camper angle eventually manifesting.

For now, though, I guess I will fail my audition for one of those shows where my first take is supposed to be a scream over substance. Because I think there is a better chance that Stroman either winds up a valuable 2025 Yankee or in a different team's rotation than as a large distraction to his current club.

Look, if I am wrong, I will gladly hit F1 on my laptop and unfurl the tsk-tsking. I am not above a "told you so." And if you have a search

engine, you can dig up my column from January 2024, written shortly after the Yankees signed Stroman to a two-year, \$37 million contract, where I did not exactly endorse the move. I wrote that a team that was shut out on the starters they wanted and a polarizing pitcher who did not find an expected market created "desperation plus desperation equals strange bedfellows."

Currently, however, I fall under the wisdom of the great philosopher Joe Torre and a story I have told before because it so resonates with me each time one of these issues emerges.



Joel Sherman

ance, the matter would solve itself. And, if not, he was paid to make that decision, but not until the right time.

He never had to make a decision. The Yankees, even en route to a title, hardly ever had four starters healthy, much less five.

Channeling his best Torre, Aaron Boone said of Stroman's statements that he is a starter, "Well, first of all, happy Valentine's Day. It's Feb. 14. So you're getting way ahead of this thing. We're getting him ready. We're building him up to be a starting pitcher. That's [a decision] so far out there. We'll obviously address anything we have to once we get into certain situations."

Look, if on one of these ubiquitous gambling apps, you could bet on Stroman, Gerrit Cole, Max Fried,



N.Y. Post: Charles Wenzelberg (3)

## work out before season

Luis Gil, Carlos Rodon and Clarke Schmidt all making it to the Brewers series healthy, which way would you go? And if the Yankees get to the final week of spring with all their veteran starters healthy, they could consider a six-man rotation for a bit. Or, if they like the depth of J.T. Brubaker, Carlos Carrasco, Will Warren and Allan Winans, then the Yankees could eat more than they are perhaps currently willing to of Stroman's \$18 million 2025 contract to try to trade him if, indeed, he sticks to his "I won't pitch in the bullpen" stance and causes disruption.

But it is a long way from here to there. In the short run, this was a minor discomfort with the Yankees initially not revealing that Stroman was not present for the first two workouts (by rule, the mandatory

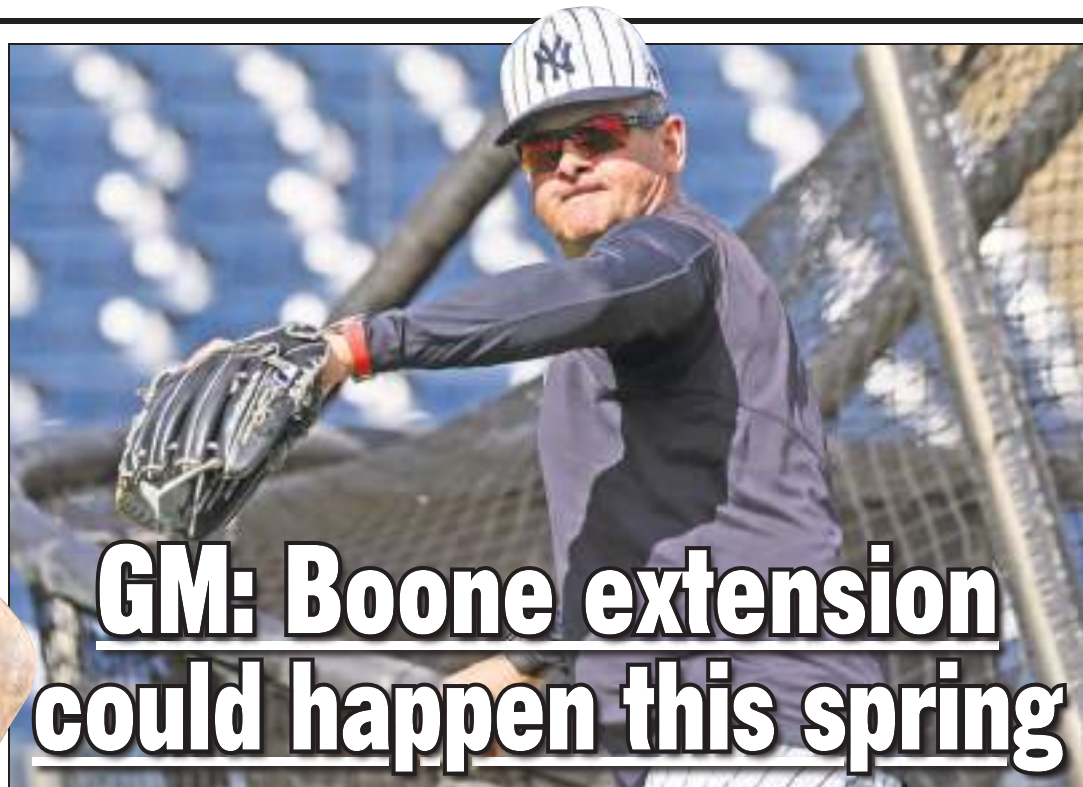
report date is Feb. 22). Stroman insists he physically is ready to be a full-time starter and that his relationships with Brian Cashman, Aaron Boone and his teammates are superb.

Nevertheless, Stroman, who turns 34 in May, is a proud veteran who loves to cast himself as an underdog (despite being a first-round pick out of Duke) and seems to gain motivation from having a chip on his shoulder. So, could something problematic blow into Yankees camp further from Valentine's Day and closer to, say, St. Patrick's Day? Sure.

For now, though, I side with the wise Torre over the juicy story.

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**More Yankees / P. 45**



N.Y. Post: Charles Wenzelberg (2); Jason Starnes

# GM: Boone extension could happen this spring

**SIGN OF THE TIMES:** General manager Brian Cashman (below, top to bottom) and Hal Steinbrenner are "intent" on making sure Aaron Boone is the Yankees skipper beyond the 2025 season.

By GREG JOYCE

BRADENTON, Fla. — Hal Steinbrenner typically prefers to let contracts play out instead of doing extensions ahead of time.

The Yankees appear willing to make an exception for Aaron Boone.

Brian Cashman said Friday that he and Steinbrenner have been working through talks with Boone regarding an extension, entering the final year of his contract, and added that he believes a deal could happen this spring.

"We picked up his option last year, but that's not our intent — our intent is to find an extension, so certainly I've been working through that, and Hal Steinbrenner has been working through that with Aaron Boone," Cashman said at the Grapefruit League media day at LECOM Park. "We're hopeful at some point, sooner than later, that we'll be able to officially cement something. But obviously, I haven't gotten there yet. Just give us time. Our main focus this whole winter has been on roster construction, and some of this other stuff, we're just getting to."

"But our intent is to make sure Aaron Boone is going to continue with the Yankees past the 2025 season."

The Yankees let Boone's first contract with the club play out before signing him to a new deal after the 2021 season. That contract came with a club option for 2025, which the Yankees picked up in November after falling short in the World Series, but now they are talking about making sure their partnership lasts longer than that.

Boone did not want to comment on the topic Friday but earlier in the week acknowledged that there

had been some talks about an extension.

"The reality is I'm so fired up to be here today and to get to work for this organization and for Hal that hopefully something does work out," Boone said Tuesday. "There's no other place I'd rather be and no other team I'd rather be doing it with. So we'll see."

The even-keeled Boone has the support of his clubhouse, with Aaron Judge among his biggest fans, despite often infuriating the fan base with his in-game decisions or constant public backing of his struggling players.

Cashman lauded Boone on Friday for his "temperament" and handling the highs and lows of managing in New York.

"I know if he wasn't the Yankee manager, it would be a feeding frenzy for him to be a manager that's coveted elsewhere," Cashman said. "Objectively, that's how we see it. We're hopeful we can find common ground to continue his leading our players from that dugout."

As for other topics covered in Cashman's State of the Yankees address during the first week of camp:

• The most obvious issue on the roster is third base, where DJ LeMahieu, Oswaldo Cabrera, Oswald Peraza and Jorbit Vivas are set to battle for the job, barring any external additions.

Cashman declined to say whether he needed to free up any salary (as in moving Marcus Stro-

man's contract) before making further additions to the roster, with the Yankees currently about \$4 million over the highest luxury tax threshold. But like Boone, Cashman voiced his hope that LeMahieu could rebound this spring if he is healthy, which has been an issue the past few years.

"Hopefully all that can get thrown out the door and we see a different version of DJ this spring



because ultimately, the one thing we haven't been in position to see is a DJ that's a healthy version," Cashman said. "He's going to be given an opportunity, he's healthy, and we'll compete. And then we'll see where it plays out, and it'll answer itself on its own."



• Cashman acknowledged that the Yankees were "bad" defensively last season, but he believes they should be better there this year with the imports of Cody Bellinger and Paul Goldschmidt. That is just one of the areas he believes they should improve in,

along with one obvious hole.

"I know it's a different roster — it's different in the fact that we're, on paper, more improved defensively, more athletic, maybe more balanced on the offensive side, more strikeouts coming into the [bullpen] than the previous year, deeper starting rotation than it was — all those things are positives," Cashman said. "Negative is we lost a generational talent in Juan Soto, and how do you overcome that? The pivot is certainly an effort in doing so."



Paramount via Everett

## STREAM IT OR SKIP IT

"**Better Man**" is a conceptual muddle that's a big swing and a whiff. Robbie Williams as a chimp is little more than a veneer that pushes the film toward satire, but leaves one uncertain of what to do with its earnestness.

**OUR CALL: SKIP IT**



## WHAT TO WATCH

"**The Z-Suite**" tackles generational differences from A to Z — or rather, from C-Suite to Gen Z. Fans of Lauren Graham will be thrilled to see the "**Gilmore Girls**" alum back in a comedic space alongside her hilarious on-screen sidekick played by Nico Santos.



# DECIDER

WHAT TO WATCH. WHEREVER YOU WATCH

# HERO'S JOURNEY

Johnny Lawrence gets the redemption he deserves in 'Cobra Kai'

By JOSH SOROKACH

**T**HE KARATE KID star Johnny Lawrence (William Zabka) is the quintessential '80s villain. You didn't attend high school with Johnny Lawrence, but everyone knows Johnny Lawrence. "**Die Hard**'s Hans Gruber

is unlikely to crash your company holiday party and Jason Voorhees isn't a threat unless you're having premarital sex near Camp Crystal Lake, but the specter of a dirt bike-driving badass in a cool red leather jacket karate-kicking you into the sand is a reliable adolescent nightmare.

From 1984 to 2018, Lawrence was pop culture shorthand for a bully who finally got his comeuppance. And then along came "**Cobra Kai**."

**\*\*Spoilers ahead for "Cobra Kai" Season 6\*\***

The final five episodes of Netflix's "**Karate Kid**" spinoff series

premiered Feb. 13 on the streamer. After six seasons and countless karate brawls, everyone receives their requisite happily ever afters, but "**Cobra Kai**'s ultimate champion is Lawrence.

The final showdown in "**The Karate Kid**" memorably concludes with Lawrence getting crane-kicked into second place at the All-Valley Under-18 karate tournament by Daniel LaRusso (Ralph Macchio). "**Cobra Kai**" picks up 34 years after that fateful kick. The pilot episode finds Lawrence at his nadir as he once again crosses paths with LaRusso, who's parlayed his All-Valley championships into a successful car dealership.

After 65 episodes of tumult, Lawrence and LaRusso ultimately join forces to enter their youth dojo into a global karate tournament called the Sekai Taikai. In the series finale, a tournament tie forces Lawrence back on the mat to compete in a winner-take-all bout



Netflix via Everett(2); Columbia Pictures via Everett

against renowned martial arts wrecking ball Sensei Wolf (Lewis Tan) in the same building where he lost to LaRusso in 1984.

In a franchise-altering moment, Lawrence rids himself of his past demons by defeating Wolf and winning the global karate championship.

"From the very beginning, we saw Johnny's arc going from the guy who wants a second chance at that fight he lost to getting that second chance at the end," "**Cobra Kai**" co-creator Hayden Schlossberg told Decider. "But it's his emotional journey along the way that makes that win fulfilling."

Lawrence's journey was a bumpy expedition. The character always strived to be a better person. "**The Karate Kid**" begins with Lawrence refusing a beer and referring to himself as an "ex-degenerate," and ends with Lawrence graciously accepting his loss.

"[Lawrence] didn't have a father in his life," "**Cobra Kai**" co-creator Josh Heald explained. "He had a stepfather who regarded him as a nuisance, and he had a sensei who



Above: William Zabka and Ralph Macchio in "**Cobra Kai**" Season 6. Left: William Zabka. Far left: Ralph Macchio and William Zabka in 1984's "**The Karate Kid**."

abandoned him in his moment of crisis."

In "**Cobra Kai**", Lawrence reconnects with his son Robby (Tanner Buchanan), becomes a father figure to star **Cobra Kai** pupil Miguel (Xolo Maridueña), falls in love, welcomes a daughter and finally ends his rivalry with LaRusso.

"The show is a metaphor for society as a whole," co-creator Jon Hurwitz said. "[LaRusso and Lawrence] are two people who hated each other because of opposite beliefs. Over the course of our series, they learn to walk in each other's shoes and actually learn about

each other's philosophies."

Without "**Cobra Kai**", Lawrence would've remained a pop culture punching bag. But the creators' obvious affection for "**The Karate Kid**" franchise and Zabka's portrayal of the character illustrates that humans are more than their worst moments.

Many shows come and go without much fanfare, but "**Cobra Kai**" will be remembered for achieving the near-impossible feat of retroactively enhancing its source material and gifting "**Karate Kid**" fans the Lawrence redemption story they never knew they needed.



Getty

## TRENDING NOW

**Jeremy Strong** has landed his latest TV gig. The "**Succession**" actor will star in Netflix's adaptation of Ira Levin's "**The Boys From Brazil**" novel, *Variety* reports. And there's another big name attached: Peter Morgan, "**The Crown**" creator, is writing and executive producing the show.

## WHAT'S NEW

### ON THE CW

"**The '90s Boy Band Boom**," a music documentary. (right).

### ON CNN

"**Have I Got News For You**," Season 2 of the news comedy.



Getty

### What's on Tonight



### DRAMA

**Forrest Gump:** 3 p.m. on VHL. Tom Hanks, Sally Field. The history of the U.S. from the 1950s to the '70s unfolds from the perspective of a man with an IQ of 75.



### ACTION

**Men in Black III:** 3:45 p.m. on TNT. Will Smith, Tommy Lee Jones. Agent J travels in time to M.I.B.'s early days in 1969 to stop an alien from executing his friend Agent K.



### ADVENTURE

**Marvel's The Avengers:** 4 p.m. on FX. Robert Downey Jr., Mark Ruffalo. Earth's mightiest heroes must come together and learn to fight as a team.

Evening	SP	C	F	6:30pm	7:00pm	7:30pm	8:00pm	8:30pm	9:00pm	9:30pm	10:00pm	10:30pm	11:00pm	11:30pm
2	WCBS	2	2	2	PGA Tour Golf Live.	CBS News New York	Inside Edition	Watson: Pilot (R)		48 Hours: Justice for Amie Harwick (R)	48 Hours: Justine's Voice		CBS News 11pm	(11:35) One Jets Drive
4	WNBC	4	4	4	NBC Nightly News	Paid Program	Poochie and Pang	Saturday Night Live: Ladies and Gentlemen... 50 Years of SNL Music: Stories of the groundbreaking musical performances, sketches and cameos. (R)			News 4 New York at 11	Saturday Night Live (R)		
5	WNYW	5	5	5	(6:00) 6 O'Clock News	AKC Good Dog TV	Hoops Tip-off Live.	College Basketball: Michigan State Spartans at Illinois Fighting Illini from State Farm Center. Live.		The 10 O'Clock News		LIV Golf: Adelaide - Final Round Taped.	Eyewitness News at 11	
7	WABC	7	7	7	ABC World News	Jeopardy! (R)	Wheel of Fortune (R)	Family Feud (R)	Family Feud (R)	Family Feud (R)	Family Feud (R)	Finally Caught: Samuels (R)	In Depth	Whacked-Out Sports
9	WWOR	9	9	9	(5:00) MLS Soccer Live.	Extra	Family Feud (R)	Family Feud (R)	Family Feud (R)	Family Feud (R)	Finally Caught: Samuels (R)	In Depth	Whacked-Out Sports	
11	WPIX	11	11	11	NASCAR Xfinity Series: Daytona: from Daytona International Speedway. Live.	Wild Cards: Con in 60 Seconds (R)	Wild Cards: Once A Con A Time in the West (R)	PIX11 News at Ten with Kaity Tong	Seinfeld: The Blood	Seinfeld: Junk Mail				
13	WNET	13	13	13	GZero World	Seaside Hotel: The World Has Now Hated (R)	Lark Rise to Candleford	Spaceballs (1987, Comedy) PG ★★★	Mel Brooks.	(10:42) Mel Brooks: The Genius Entertainer	Spaceballs (1987) ★★★			
21	WLIW	21	21	21	PBS News	Mack (R)	Firing (R)	Midsomer Murders	Midsomer	(9:35) Velvet: The Visitor (R)	Austin City Limits			
25	WNYE	25	25	25	Day's Work	Her B Idea	Build Ser	Jared Diamond's Third	To Be Announced	Day's Work	Profiles	GZero		
31	WPXN	31	3	531	(6:00) SVU	Law & Order: SVU	Law & Order: SVU	Law & Order: SVU	Law & Order: SVU	Law & Order: SVU	Law & Order: SVU			
41	WXTV	41	6	41	Noticiero	Tuya, mía... te la apuesto (2018)	Fútbol	Fútbol Liga MX: Toluca vs Chivas Rayadas de Guadalajara.						
47	WNJU	47	16	12	Noticias	Dateline NBC	Wrath of Man (2021, Thriller) Jason Statham. R ★★★	Noticiero	Noticias					
55	WLNY	55	10	10	Conners	Man	Man	NCIS: Hawai'i	The Equalizer	Judge Judy	In Touch	Women Of Wrestling		
A&E	46	46	181	(5:00) The Fate of the Furious (2017)	2 Fast 2 Furious (2003, Action) Paul Walker. PG-13 ★★★½	Fast Five (2011, Action) Vin Diesel. ★★★								
AMC	54	43	231	(5:30) My Cousin Vinny (1992, Comedy)	The Day After Tomorrow (2004, Drama) Dennis Quaid. PG-13 ★★★½	I Am Number Four (2011) Alex Pettyfer.								
BET	37	54	270	(4:30) The Bodyguard (1992, Romance)	Sparkle (2012, Drama) Jordyn Sparks. PG-13 ★★★½	The Bodyguard (1992) R								
BBCAM	71	101	189	(6:50) Africa: Kalahari (R)	Planet Earth: Asia	(9:11) Jack the Giant Slayer (2013, Adventure) Nicholas Hoult. ★★★½	Earth Asia							
BRAVO	18	44	185	(6:15) Summer House (R)	Overboard (1987, Comedy) Goldie Hawn. PG ★★★½	Overboard (1987, Comedy) Goldie Hawn. PG ★★★½								
CNBC	15	24	102	Greed	American Greed: Scams	American Greed: Scams	American Greed: Scams	American Greed: Scams	American Greed: Scams	American Greed: Scams				
CNN	78	25	100	Newsroom	CNN Newsroom	Real Time with	Have I Got News For You	History of the Sitcom (R)	Real Time with					
COM	45	50	190	Grown Ups	Grown Ups 2 (2013, Comedy) Adam Sandler. ★★	The Hangover Part II (2011, Comedy) Bradley Cooper. R ★★★	Family Guy							
DIS	49	31	250	Moon Girl	The Princess and the Frog (2009) G ★★★	Wizards (R)	Wizards (R)	Miraculous	Miraculous	Miraculous	Big City (R)	Big City (R)		
DSC	66	27	120	Expedition	Expedition X: Nazi Occult	Expedition X: Nazi Occult	Expedition X (R)	Expedition X (R)	Expedition X (R)					
E!	24	51	196	(6:00) European Vacation (1985) ★½	National Lampoon's Vacation (1983) Chevy Chase. R	National Lampoon's European Vacation (1985) ★½								
ESPN	28	36	70	(6:00) College Basketball Live.	College Basketball Live.	College Basketball: Kansas Jayhawks at Utah Utes.								
ESPN2	29	35	74	(6:00) College Basketball Live.	College Basketball Live.	College Basketball Live.								
FBN	43	106	117	(6:00) To Be Announced (R)	My Dream Car	My Dream Car	My Dream Car	My Dream Car						
FNC	44	26	118	(6:00) The Big Weekend Show	Life, Liberty & Levin	One Nation	Fox News Saturday Night	Gutfeld! (R)						
FOOD	50	97	164	Diners (R)	Diners (R)	Diners (R)	Diners (R)	Diners (R)	Diners (R)	Diners (R)	Diners (R)			
FREFRM	38	49	199	(6:45) Monsters, Inc. (2001, Comedy) John Goodman.	(8:50) Monsters University (2013, Comedy) Donald Anderson. G ★★★	Mulan (2020) Yifei Liu. ★★								
FS1	400	99	83	(6:00) College Basketball Taped.	American Rodeo Live.	ARCA Racing: Daytona Taped.								
FX	10	40	53	Avengers	Captain America: Civil War (2016, Action) Chris Evans. PG-13 ★★★	Black Panther: Wakanda Forever ★★★½								
HALL	191	240	It Was Always You (2021) Erin Krakow.	Return to Office (2025)	(10:01) An Unexpected Valentine (Romance)									
HGTV	64	98	165	Love It (R)	Hunters (R)	Hunters (R)	Hunters (R)	Hunters (R)	Hunters (R)	Hunters (R)				
HIST	40	47	128	UnXplained	The UnXplained (R)	(9:02) The UnXplained (R)	(10:05) The UnXplained	(11:05) The UnXplained						
ID	23	171	123	Til Death	Til Death Do Us Part (R)	(Bleep) Did I Marry? (R)	(Bleep) Did I Marry? (R)	(Bleep) Did I Marry? (R)	Fatal Vows	Fatal Vows				
LIFE	62	45	140	(6:00) Buried Alive & Survived (2024)	Trapped in the Spotlight (2025, Drama) NR	(10:03) Buying Back My Daughter (2023, Drama) NR								
MeTV	33	33	3	Stooges	Stooges	Stooges	SSSSSS (1973, Horror) Strother Martin. PG ★★★½	Teenagers from Outer Space (1959) ★						
MSG	27	87	78	Wom Bball	Women of the W	Dream Whisperer	MSG Shorts	MSG Shorts	MSG Shorts	MSG Shorts	The Bettor			
MSG Plus	48	88	80	(12:00) FanDuel Racing	ML Pickleball: Brooklyn Aces vs Frisco Pandas									
MSNBC	14	23	103	Capehart	Ayman	Ayman	Rachel Maddow (R)	Ayman (R)	The 11th Hour (R)					
MTV	20	53	210	Friends	Friends	Friends	Wedding Crashers (2005, Comedy) Owen Wilson. R ★★★	(10:45) Just Go With It (2011, Comedy)						
NATGEO	65	162	121	Smuggler	To Catch a Smuggler (R)	To Catch a Smuggler (R)	To Catch a Smuggler (R)	To Catch a Smuggler (R)	To Catch a Smuggler (R)					
NICK	6	121	252	SpongeBob	SpongeBob	SpongeBob	Friends	Friends	Friends	Friends				
OWN	173	180	145	Marriage	Marriage: Huntsville (R)	Marriage: Huntsville	Family or Fiance	Marriage: Huntsville (R)	Marriage: Huntsville (R)					
PARMT	36	56	54	Yellowstone: Back to Cali	(7:39) Yellowstone (R)	(8:42) Yellowstone (R)	Yellowstone: The Beating	(10:43) Yellowstone (R)	Yellowsto.					
SNY	26	60	77	He's Keith	College Hockey: Cornell Big Red at Yale Bulldogs. Live.	Mets Reprt	Three Teams, One City	Sports Live.	Sports Live.					
SYFY	17	48	180	(6:00) Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (2005, Fantasy) Daniel Radcliffe. ★★★½	(9:25) Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix (2007, Fantasy)									
TBS	8	39	52	Bang	Bang	Bang	Step Brothers (2008, Comedy) Will Ferrell. R ★★★	(10:02) Old School (2003, Comedy) Luke Wilson. ★★★						
TCM	82	41	230	Around the World in 80 Days (1956) ★★★½	True Grit (1969, Western) John Wayne. G ★★★	(10:15) Cat Ballou (1965, Comedy) Jane Fonda. ★★★								
TLC	52	28	139	Dr. Pimple	Dr. Pimple Popper (R)	My 600-lb Life: Supersized: Juan's Journey	My 600-lb Life: John and Lonnie (R)							
TNT	3	37	51	Basketball	AllStar Weekend Live.	2025 NBA All-Star Weekend: NBA All-Star Saturday Night Live.	All Elite Wrestling: Collision							
TVLAND	85	34	241	Mike	Mike	(7:35) Mike	Loves Ray.	Loves Raymond: Tissous	Loves Ray.	Loves Ray.	Seinfeld	Seinfeld		
USA	16	38	50	Hall Pass R	Pixels (2015, Comedy) Adam Sandler. PG-13 ★★	(9:15) Hall Pass (2011, Comedy) Owen Wilson, Jason Sudeikis. ★★★½	Pixels ★★							
VH1	19	52	217	(5:30) Snakes on a Plane (2006, Horror)	Django Unchained (2012, Western) Jamie Foxx. R ★★★	To Be Announced								
WE	59	42	149	(6:00) NCIS	NCIS: Safe Harbor	NCIS: Thirst	NCIS: Devil's Triangle	NCIS: Engaged (Part 1)	NCIS: Engaged (Part 2)					
YES	53	89	76	(6:00) Yankees Classic Replay.	College Basketball Replay.									
HBO	511	301	400	Flow (2024) PG	Waitress: The Musical (2023) Sara Bareilles.	(10:29) Real Time with (R)	C.B Strike							
MAX	531	371	420	Bill & Ted's Excellent Adventure (1989)	Menashe (2017) Menashe Lustig. ★★★½	(9:23) Hercules (2014, Action) PG-13 ★★★½	Gods of Egypt (2016) ★★★½							
MGM Plus	595	395	Valkyrie (2008, Thriller) Tom Cruise. ★★★	Challengers (2024, Drama) Zendaya. R	(10:15) The Lincoln Lawyer (2011, Crime) R ★★★									
PARSHO	551	321	365	(5:50) Jack Reacher (2012, Crime) ★★★	Gladiator (2000, Drama) Russell Crowe. R ★★★	(10:35) Drive Angry (2011, Action) R ★★								

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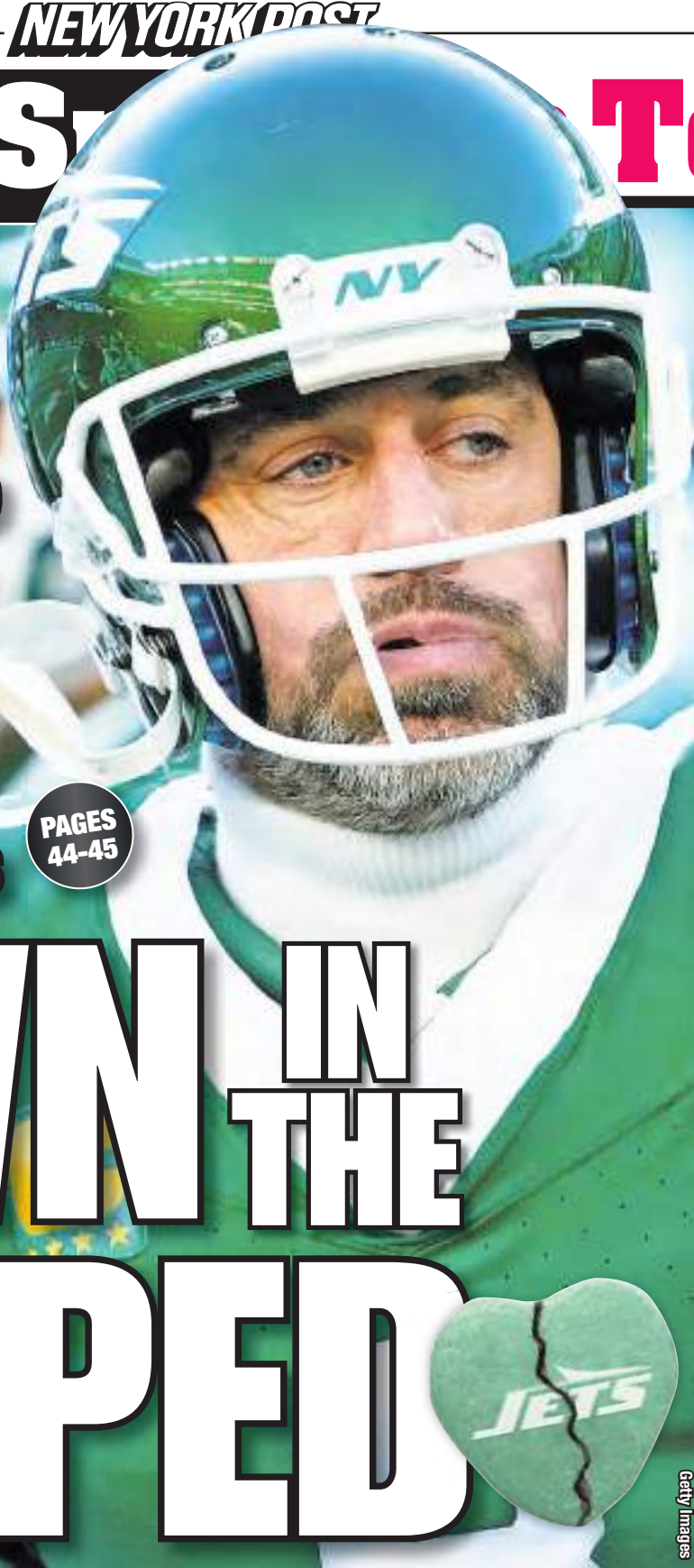
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- Worries legacy is now tarnished
- QB looking at H'wood prospects

PAGES 44-45

# DOWN IN THE DUMPED



## STRO'S HIGH HEAT

VET INSISTS HE'S STARTER, NOT RELIEVER

PAGES 48-49



## CASH FOR BOONE!

GM: AARON MAY GET EXTENSION THIS SPRING

PAGE 49



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