

## Dozens killed as Israel expands offensive

*Associated Press*

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — Israeli forces bombarded cities, towns and refugee camps across Gaza overnight and into Thursday, killing dozens of people in a widening air and ground offensive against Hamas that has forced thousands more to flee from homes and shelters in recent days.

The war has already killed over 20,000 Palestinians and driven around 85% of the population of 2.3 million from their homes. Much of northern Gaza has been leveled, and it has been largely depopulated and isolated from the rest of the territory for weeks.

Many fear a similar fate awaits the south as Israel expands its offensive to most of the tiny enclave.

Israel has vowed to dismantle Hamas — which is still putting up stiff resistance, even in the north — and bring back more than 100 hostages still held by

the militants after their Oct. 7 attack into southern Israel, in which some 1,200 people, mostly civilians, were killed.

Israeli officials have brushed off international calls for a cease-fire — saying it would amount to a victory for Hamas.

The United States — while providing crucial support for the offensive — has urged Israel to take greater measures to spare civilians and allow in more aid.

But humanitarian workers say the amount of food, fuel and medical supplies entering is still far below what is needed, and 1 in 4 Palestinians in Gaza are starving, according to U.N. officials.

### Northern strikes

An Israeli airstrike on a home in the northern town of Beit Lahiyeh — one of the first targets of the ground invasion that began in October — buried at least 21 people, including women and

children, according to a family member.

Bassel Kheir al-Din, a journalist with a local TV station, said the strike flattened his family house and severely damaged three neighboring homes.

He said 12 members of his family — including three children aged 2, 7 and 8 — were buried and presumed dead, and that nine neighbors were missing.

In central Gaza, Israeli warplanes and artillery pounded the built-up Bureij and Nuseirat refugee camps, leveling buildings, residents said. Israel said this week it would expand its ground offensive into central Gaza, and typically launches waves of airstrikes and shelling before troops and tanks move in.

A hospital in the nearby town of Deir al-Balah received the bodies of 25 people killed overnight, including five children and seven women, hospital rec-

ords showed on Thursday. Non-stop explosions could be heard throughout the night in the town — where hundreds of thousands of people have sought shelter, with many spending cold nights sleeping on sidewalks.

“It was another night of killing and massacres,” said Saeed Moustafa, a resident of the Nuseirat camp.

He said people were still crying out from the rubble of a house hit by an airstrike on Wednesday.

“We are unable to get them out. We hear their screams but we don’t have equipment,” he said.

Farther south, in Khan Younis, the Palestinian Red Crescent said a strike near its Al-Amal Hospital killed at least 10 people and wounded another 12. Much of the population has left, but many are sheltering near Al-Amal and another hospital, hoping they will be spared from the bombardment.

## Official approves runway permits on Okinawa

**BY MARI HIGA**  
*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — A Japanese Cabinet minister on Thursday approved the design changes holding up construction on a Marine Corps runway at Camp Schwab, three days after the Okinawa governor ignored a court order to approve the changes himself.

Japanese Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism Tetsuo Saito gave the Okinawa Defense Bureau the go-ahead to start landfill work on Oura Bay, permission Gov. Denny Tamaki repeatedly refused to give for 3½ years.

The approval letter was hand-

ed that morning to the Okinawa Defense Bureau, a spokesman for the ministry’s Water and Disaster Management Bureau told Stars and Stripes by phone Thursday.

A starting date to commence work at the site is not set yet, since “it is necessary to observe the weather,” a spokesman for the Okinawa Defense Bureau said by phone Thursday. The bureau represents the Ministry of Defense in the prefecture.

The bureau posted its comment on its website Thursday.

“We will continue to provide detailed explanations to the local residents and steadily carry out the Henoko relocation work

in order to realize the full return of Futenma Air Base as soon as possible, while giving due consideration to the natural environment and the living environment of the residents,” the message stated.

Some government officials in Japan may speak to the media only on condition of anonymity.

The runway being built on reclaimed land in Oura Bay in the rural Henoko area of Okinawa is a planned replacement for Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in urban, densely populated Ginowan.

Tamaki on Wednesday appealed the case again to Japan’s Supreme Court, he said in a

statement posted that day on the prefecture’s website.

The court in September ruled against him on nearly the same question.

In his statement, Tamaki criticized the most recent legal opinion from Fukuoka High Court that handed Saito authority to approve permits for the construction changes over Tamaki’s head.

That Dec. 20 ruling, Tamaki said, by allowing new base construction is biased toward the national government’s interests and overlooks the true public interests that are the essence of local autonomy and the Okinawan people’s will.

## Illegal crossings still high at US-Mexico border as Texas changes its tactics

*Associated Press*

EAGLE PASS, Texas—Before settling in New York City like thousands of other migrants this year, Abdoul, a 32-year-old from West Africa, took an unexpected detour: Weeks in a remote Texas jail on local trespassing charges after crossing the U.S.-Mexico border.

“I spent a lot of hours without sleeping, sitting on the floor,” said Abdoul, a political activist who fled Mauritania, fearing persecution. He spoke on the condition that his last name not be published for fear of jeopardizing his request for asylum.

Starting in March, Texas will allow police to arrest migrants who enter the state illegally and give local judges the authority to order them out of the country. The new law comes two years after Texas launched a smaller-scale operation to arrest migrants for trespassing. But although that operation was also intended to stem illegal crossings, there is little indication that it has done so.

The results raise questions about the impact arrests have on deterring immigration as Texas readies to give police even broader powers to apprehend migrants on charges of illegal entry. Civil rights organizations have already sued to stop the new law signed by Republican Gov. Greg Abbott, calling it an unconstitutional overreach that encroaches on the U.S. government’s immigration authority.

Since 2021, Texas authorities have arrested nearly 10,000 migrants on misdemeanor trespassing charges under what Abbott has called an “arrest and jail” operation: Border landowners enter agreements with the state authorizing trespassing arrests, clearing the way for law enforcement to apprehend migrants who enter

the U.S. through those properties.

The arrests have drawn constitutional challenges in courts, including claims of due process violations.

Abbott had predicted the trespassing arrests would produce swift results. “When people start learning about this, they’re going to stop coming across the Texas border,” he told Fox News in July 2021, when Texas-Mexico border crossings reached 1.2 million that fiscal year.

That number has ticked up even higher over the past fiscal year, topping 1.5 million.

“They’re still coming through here,” said Sheriff Tom Schmerber of Maverick County, where Abdoul crossed the border and was quickly arrested in July.

Abbott suggested this month Texas may soon phase out the trespassing arrests as it moves forward with illegal entry charges that can be enforced most anywhere in the state.

The mission is visible in Maverick County, where many of the arrests have taken place. Patrol cars are parked every few miles along the two-lane roads leading to the border city of Eagle Pass.

Abdoul was arrested in the city’s Shelby Park. Officers standing nearby asked him a few questions and took him into custody.

It’s unknown how many of those arrested on the border for trespassing remain in the U.S., were deported, were allowed to stay to seek asylum, or had their cases dismissed. But Kristen Etter, an attorney who said her legal organization has represented more than 3,000 migrants on the trespassing charges, said the majority of their clients were allowed to stay and seek asylum.

“If anything, rather than being a deterrent, it is attracting more people,” she said.

## US sending Ukraine \$250M in weaponry

**BY DOUG G. WARE**

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The United States is sending Ukraine a new military aid package to help bolster the country’s air defenses and provide other needed items during the winter months, officials said Wednesday.

The new security package is worth \$250 million and includes rockets for National Advanced Surface-to-Air Missile Systems, or NASAMS; and tube-launched, optically tracked, wire-guided missiles, the Pentagon said. Also included in the package are more stinger missiles, anti-armor systems, 15 million rounds of small-arms ammunition, various spare parts and medical equipment.

“This package includes additional air defense capabilities, artillery ammunition, anti-tank weapons and other equipment to help Ukraine counter Russia’s war of aggression,” the Defense

Department said in a statement.

The equipment will be taken from military stocks and sent to Ukraine on an emergency basis, meaning the Pentagon ultimately will have to replace the hardware. The items should reach Ukraine within a few weeks.

The new aid package, which could be the last one of 2023, comes as Congress works toward passing full government funding for 2024 and debates President Joe Biden’s \$100 billion supplemental funding request that would authorize more aid for Ukraine — as well as Israel, which has been engaged in a new conflict with militant group Hamas for almost 12 weeks. The Pentagon is quickly running out of aid money for Ukraine that was authorized for this year.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, the United States has provided nearly \$45 billion in military aid to Kyiv.

## Kim to bolster war footing to repel US-led actions

*Associated Press*

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un called for bolstered war readiness to repel what he said were unprecedented U.S.-led confrontational moves, state media reported Thursday, as rival South Korea vowed a stern retaliation against any provocations by the North.

Kim’s comments, which came during a key meeting tasked with setting state objectives for 2024, indicated North Korea will likely continue weapons tests to modernize its nuclear arsenal.

During Wednesday’s second-

day session of the ruling party’s plenary meeting, Kim set forth unspecified tasks for the military and the munitions industry to “further accelerate the war preparations” in the face of “(anti-North Korea) confrontation moves by the U.S. and its vassal forces unprecedented in history,” the official Korean Central News Agency said.

The Workers’ Party meeting is expected to last several days. Experts say North Korea is expected to come up with pledges and steps to strengthen its nuclear attack capability and expand cooperation with Russia and China.

# Colo. GOP appeals Trump ballot ban case

Associated Press

DENVER — The Colorado Republican Party on Wednesday appealed that state's supreme court decision that found former President Donald Trump is ineligible for the presidency, the potential first step to a showdown at the nation's highest court over the meaning of a 155-year-old constitutional provision that bans from office those who "engaged in insurrection."

The first impact of the appeal is to extend the stay of the 4-3 ruling from Colorado's highest court, which put its decision on pause until Jan. 4, the day before the state's primary ballots are due at the printer, or until an appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court is finished. Trump him-

self has said he still plans to appeal the ruling to the nation's highest court as well.

The U.S. Supreme Court has never ruled on Section 3 of the 14th Amendment, which was added after the Civil War to prevent former Confederates from returning to government. It says that anyone who swore an oath to "support" the constitution and then "engaged in insurrection" against it cannot hold government office.

The Colorado high court ruled that applies to Trump in the wake of his role in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol, intended to stop the certification of President Joe Biden's victory in the 2020 presidential election.

It was the first time in history

that the provision was used to block a presidential contender's campaign.

"The Colorado Supreme Court has removed the leading Republican candidate from the primary and general ballots, fundamentally changing the course of American democracy," the party's attorneys wrote. The filing was posted on the website of a group run by Jay Sekulow, a former attorney for Trump representing the Colorado Republican Party.

The attorneys added: "Unless the Colorado Supreme Court's decision is overturned, any voter will have the power to sue to disqualify any political candidate, in Colorado or in any other jurisdiction that follows its lead.

This will not only distort the 2024 presidential election but will also mire courts henceforth in political controversies over nebulous accusations of insurrection."

The U.S. Supreme Court is expected to take the case, either after the Colorado GOP's appeal or Trump's own appeal. If Trump ends up off the ballot in Colorado, it would have minimal effect on his campaign because he doesn't need the state, which he lost by 13 percentage points in 2020, to win the Electoral College in the presidential election.

But it could open the door to courts or election officials striking him from the ballot in other must-win states.

## Pro-Palestinian rally blocks airport roads in NY and LA

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Pro-Palestinian protesters briefly blocked entrance roads to airports in New York and Los Angeles on Wednesday, snarling traffic as U.S. airlines contended with a rush of holiday travel.

The demonstrations stopped cars on the outskirts of New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport, where some travelers set off on foot to bypass the jammed roadway, as well as Los Angeles International Airport. A total of 62 people were arrested during the two protests, police said.

In New York, activists locked arms and held banners demanding an end to the Israel-Hamas war and expanded rights for Palestinians, bringing traffic to a standstill on the Van Wyck Expressway leading up to the airport for about 20 minutes.

Twenty-six people in the protest were arrested for disorderly conduct and impeding vehicular traffic, and the Port Au-

thority of New York and New Jersey dispatched two buses to help travelers caught in the backup reach the airport, agency spokesperson Steve Burns said.

Around the same time as the New York protest, a major thoroughfare leading to the Los Angeles airport was shut down by another group of pro-Palestinian protesters, who dragged traffic cones, trash bins, scooters and debris into the lanes, according to news helicopter footage.

In a statement, the Los Angeles Police Department accused protesters of throwing a police officer to the ground and "attacking uninvolved passersbys in their vehicles," without providing further details about either incident.

A spokesperson for the LAPD said 35 people were arrested for rioting and one person was arrested for battery of a police officer. No officers were injured, according to the spokesperson.

## Boebert switches districts, avoiding another rematch

Associated Press

DENVER — Republican Rep. Lauren Boebert announced Wednesday she is switching congressional districts, avoiding a likely rematch against a Democrat who has far outraised her and following an embarrassing moment of groping and vaping that shook even loyal supporters.

In a Facebook video Wednesday evening, Boebert announced she would enter the crowded Republican primary in retiring Rep. Ken Buck's seat in the eastern side of the state, leaving the more competitive 3rd District seat she barely won last year — and which she was in peril of losing next year as some in her party have soured on her controversial style.

Boebert implied in the video that her departure from the district would help Republicans retain the seat, saying, "I will not allow dark money that is directed at destroying me personally to steal this seat. It's not fair

to the 3rd District and the conservatives there who have fought so hard for our victories."

"The Aspen donors, George Soros and Hollywood actors that are trying to buy this seat, well they can go pound sand," she said.

Boebert called it "a fresh start," acknowledging the rough year following a divorce with her husband and video of her misbehaving with a date at a performance of the musical "Beetlejuice" in Denver. The scandal in September rocked some of her faithful supporters, who saw it as a transgression of conservative, Christian values and for which Boebert apologized at events throughout her district.

She already faced a primary challenge in her district, as well as a general election face-off with Democrat Adam Frisch. A rematch was expected, with Frisch raising at least \$7.7 million to Boebert's \$2.4 million.

# Study: Social media platforms made \$11B from kids last year

Associated Press

Social media companies collectively made over \$11 billion in U.S. advertising revenue from minors last year, according to a study from the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health published Wednesday.

The researchers say the findings show a need for government regulation of social media since the companies that stand to make money from children have failed to meaningfully self-regulate.

They note such regulations, as well as greater transparency from tech companies, could help alleviate harms to youth mental health and curtail potentially harmful advertising practices that target children and adolescents.

To come up with the revenue figure, the researchers estimated the number of users under 18 on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, TikTok, X (formerly Twit-

ter) and YouTube in 2022 based on population data from the U.S. Census and survey data from Common Sense Media and Pew Research. They then used data from research firm eMarketer, now called Insider Intelligence, and Qustodio, a parental control app, to estimate each platform's U.S. ad revenue in 2022 and the time children spent per day on each platform. After that, the researchers said they built a simulation model using the data to estimate how much ad revenue the platforms earned from minors in the U.S.

Researchers and lawmakers have long focused on the negative effects stemming from social media platforms, whose personally-tailored algorithms can drive children towards excessive use. This year, lawmakers in states like New York and Utah introduced or passed legislation that would curb social media use among kids, citing

harms to youth mental health and other concerns.

Meta, which owns Instagram and Facebook, is also being sued by dozens of states for allegedly contributing to the mental health crisis.

"Although social media platforms may claim that they can self-regulate their practices to reduce the harms to young people, they have yet to do so, and our study suggests they have overwhelming financial incentives to continue to delay taking meaningful steps to protect children," said Bryn Austin, a professor in the Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences at Harvard and a senior author on the study.

Social media platforms are not the first to advertise to children, and parents and experts have long expressed concerns about marketing to kids online, on television and even in schools.

# Alibaba facing US suit over plush toys

Associated Press

A judge in New York has ruled that Alibaba must face a lawsuit by a U.S. toymaker alleging that the Chinese e-commerce giant's online platforms were used to sell counterfeit Squishmallows.

Judge Jesse Furman of the Southern District Court of New York refused Alibaba's request to dismiss the case filed by Kelly Toys Holdings, which makes the popular plush toys.

Kelly Toys is owned by Jazwares, a toy company whose parent company Alleghany Corp. is controlled by billionaire Warren Buffett's Berkshire Hathaway.

There was no immediate comment by Alibaba, China's biggest e-commerce company.

Among other things, Alibaba based its motion to dismiss on how it was named in the lawsuit as Alibaba.com instead of its formal corporate name.

In its complaint, Kelly Toys said sales of faked Squishmallows by merchants using Alibaba sites continued despite earlier lawsuits demanding they be stopped.

The company had earlier filed the case to stop about 90 e-commerce companies from selling counterfeit versions of the toys. Alibaba was named as a defendant in March.

"Kelly Toys alleges that, notwithstanding that awareness, infringing listings — including some by the Merchant Defendants — have continued to proliferate on the Alibaba platforms," Furman wrote.

He said the court held that the claims were plausible, so the motion to dismiss them was denied.

# NJ towns will have brothers as mayors

Associated Press

GIBBSTOWN, N.J. — Two neighboring New Jersey towns may feel even closer next year when they're governed by two brothers.

John Giovannitti, 61, will be sworn in Jan. 2 as mayor of Paulsboro, one day before newly-reelected younger brother Vince Giovannitti, 57, is sworn in to a second term as mayor of Gibbstown.

Paulsboro, with a population of 6,300, stretches from Route 130 to the Delaware River, across from Philadelphia International Airport. Gibbstown, with just under 4,000 people in Greenwich Township, is connected to its larger neighbor through the main corridor, Broad Street.

The Paulsboro brothers describe becoming mayors as a "happy coincidence" but also a natural next step after decades serving their communities. They told The Philadelphia Inquirer that being siblings aids the necessary collaboration of mayors of neighboring towns that share certain services.

"We can say things to one another," Vince said, acknowledging that he might be more reserved in dealings with someone else. John says constantly seeing each other at family functions also helps.

Gibbstown and Paulsboro, described by John as "classic American small towns," have families and church and civic groups that span municipal lines. Vince calls them "really

one big community" and John adds that he does not know if there are many other communities that are "so intermingled."

The brothers, both Democrats, said they have never lived anywhere else.

"The roots are deep ... " Vince said. "Your friends are here; your family is here."

The Gibbstown mayor's salary is \$12,314 with a three-year term. Paulsboro's mayor has a four-year term and is paid between \$7,000 and \$9,100.

John also works as Paulsboro High School's assistant principal and athletic director and Vince was a special-education teacher and guidance counselor in the district before retiring in 2021.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### New Year's Eve weddings may hit record this year

**NV** LAS VEGAS — For better or for worse, a wave of couples saying “I do” in Las Vegas on New Year's Eve could set a record for the city's busiest wedding day ever.

That's because 12/31/23 is known in the massive Las Vegas wedding industry as a “specialty date,” thanks to the repeating 1-2-3 1-2-3 pattern, the Las Vegas Review-Journal reported.

The icing on the cake? This specialty date falls on a holiday famous for blowout celebrations.

“It's a double whammy,” said Melody Willis-Williams, president of Vegas Weddings, which operates multiple venues. “Anytime you get these specialty dates, they're always hugely popular. But tie that in with New Year's Eve and it's a showstopper.”

The number to beat on New Year's Eve is 4,492 — the single-day record for marriages in Las Vegas set on July 7, 2007.

### Failed swatting attempted at Rep. Greene's home

**GA** ROME — Republican Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene was the target of a swatting attempt at her Georgia residence on Christmas morning, the congresswoman and local police said, marking the latest instance of someone calling in a fake emergency to draw armed officers or SWAT teams to her home.

The Rome Police Department quickly verified that the call was a hoax and did not send officers to the house, department spokesperson Kelly Mad-

den said.

“I was just swatted. This is like the 8th time. On Christmas with my family here. My local police are the GREATEST and shouldn't have to deal with this,” Greene wrote in a post on X.

A man in New York called the Georgia suicide hotline claiming that he had shot his girlfriend at Greene's home and was going to kill himself next, Madden said.

### Lawmaker has no plans to resign after making slurs

**ND** BISMARCK — A North Dakota Republican lawmaker has no plans to immediately resign, despite party leaders' calls for him to step down after he railed against police with profane, homophobic and anti-migrant language during a recent traffic stop that ended in his arrest on a charge of drunken driving.

In a statement Wednesday, Republican state Rep. Nico Rios, of Williston, said he is “seriously mulling all aspects” of his future.

“As I weigh my future in the legislature, I am going to spend the next few months addressing my issues with alcoholism and getting the help I need,” he said in a statement. “Any decision I make going forward will be made with a sober mind and deliberative clarity. To do so, I will be prioritizing breaking my chemical dependency on alcohol, improving the interpersonal relations I have strained, and listening to our community.”

Rios also said he takes responsibility for his “disgusting actions” during the Dec. 15 traf-

fic stop, and apologized “to those I have hurt and disappointed,” including law enforcement officers.

Rios' statement comes a day after Republican House Majority Leader Mike Lefor and state party officials publicly called on him to resign.

### Man stuck in truck saved after spotted by passersby

**IN** PORTAGE — A man who had been trapped for days in his crashed pickup truck was rescued Tuesday after two fishermen spotted the wreckage, Indiana State Police said.

Two men were scouting fishing locations when they found the man in his badly damaged vehicle, Sgt. Glen Fifield told local news outlets.

“They touched the body, and the person turned their head and started talking to them. So, that got a little rise out of them,” Fifield said.

The driver told the men he had been trapped since Dec. 20. The pickup had wrecked along Interstate 94 near Portage below an underpass where it could not be seen from the highway above.

The man, in his 20s, was airlifted to a hospital in South Bend for treatment of life-threatening injuries, Fifield said.

### Man pleads guilty to bank robbery in his hometown

**MS** JACKSON — A man faces up to 20 years in prison after he pleaded guilty to robbing a bank in his hometown in Mississippi.

Curtis Lee Williams, 21, robbed the BankPlus branch in Durant while wearing sunglasses, a wig, and no shoes, accord-

ing to court documents and statements made in court during his plea hearing.

Within hours of the robbery, a \$50 bait bill from the bank was used to buy three firearms from a pawn shop in Kosciusko, about 18 miles east of Durant, U.S. Attorney Todd W. Gee and Jeremicha Fomby, special agent in charge of the FBI's Jackson office, said in a news release. Williams was arrested later that day after a traffic stop in Durant, they said.

### White couple who burned cross to be investigated

**SC** CONWAY — The FBI is investigating a white South Carolina couple for racial discrimination after they set a cross on fire in their yard facing toward their Black neighbors' home.

Federal civil rights investigators searched the white couple's home in Conway, according to FBI spokesperson Kevin Wheeler. The retired Black couple also recorded video of the cross being burned on Thanksgiving weekend and described days of repeated threats from their neighbors. Worden Evander Butler, 28, and Alexis Paige Hartnett, 27, were arrested on state charges of harassment and later released on bond.

The cross wasn't on fire by the time local police officers arrived, but was still “facing and in full view of the victims' home,” according to a Horry County Police Department report. Shawn and Monica Williams, the Black neighbors, told WMBF-TV that the burning cross was about 8 feet from their fence.

— From wire reports

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and Military News

# Ohtani gets AP top male athlete award again

Associated Press

Before Shohei Ohtani stepped into the bright lights of Hollywood and signed the most lucrative contract in professional sports history, baseball's two-way superstar put together yet another season of unparalleled brilliance from Tokyo to Anaheim.

What can this singular talent possibly do next? The Los Angeles Dodgers are eagerly paying \$700 million to see for themselves.

But what Ohtani already did in 2023 — both for the Los Angeles Angels and for Japan's team in the World Baseball Classic — is the reason he was selected as The Associated Press' Male Athlete of the Year for the second time in three years.

"Shohei is arguably the most talented player who's ever played this game," said Andrew Friedman, the Dodgers' president of baseball operations, after signing Ohtani to a 10-year contract last week.

Ohtani edged Inter Miami superstar Lionel Messi and tennis great Novak Djokovic for the AP honor in voting by a panel of sports media professionals.

Ohtani received 20 of 87 votes, while Messi and Djokovic got 16 apiece. Nikola Jokic, the Denver Nuggets' NBA Finals MVP, got

12 votes.

After winning his first AP Male Athlete of the Year award in 2021, Ohtani has joined an impressive list of two-time winners of the honor, which was first handed out in 1931.

Multiple-time winners include Don Budge, Byron Nelson, Carl Lewis, Joe Montana, Michael Jordan, Michael Phelps and four-time honorees Tiger Woods and Lance Armstrong. Four-time winner LeBron James is another generational superstar who chose Los Angeles as a free agent, while two-time honoree Sandy Koufax remains one of the greatest players to wear Dodger Blue.

Ohtani has upended decades of conventional wisdom during his six years in the majors, even surpassing most achievements of Babe Ruth while playing in an infinitely more difficult era. Ohtani has toppled barriers that stood for a century with peerless skills, confidence and hard work.

Ohtani unanimously won the AL MVP award in 2021, and he repeated the feat in 2023 after finishing second in 2022 to Yankees slugger Aaron Judge, last year's AP Male Athlete of the Year.

This year began with Ohtani's dazzling MVP performance for

Japan's championship team in the World Baseball Classic — complete with a clinching strikeout of Angels teammate Mike Trout. He then turned in his third consecutive spectacular season both on the mound and at the plate in Anaheim despite an early end after he injured his pitching elbow in August.

Ohtani led the AL with 44 homers, 78 extra-base hits, 325 total bases and a 1.066 OPS as the Halos' designated hitter. He also held hitters to an AL-best .184 batting average while ranking second in the league with 11.39 strikeouts per nine innings and third with a 3.14 ERA at the time of his injury.

"There's nobody like him, and there's nothing that you would say he can't do," former Angels manager Phil Nevin said late in the season. "Anything is possible with Sho. I don't know who else you could say that about in baseball history."

Ohtani left Japan in late 2017 to pursue his dreams at his sport's highest level, and his exploits are followed in microscopic detail by his fans in his homeland. When he got his first chance to play for Japan in the World Baseball Classic last spring, Ohtani seized the moment with both hands.

Ohtani was outstanding in Ja-

pan's games in Tokyo and Miami, batting .435 with four doubles and a homer despite getting walked 10 times. He also pitched 9 $\frac{2}{3}$  innings, with 11 strikeouts and a 1.86 ERA.

The championship game ended in storybook fashion with Ohtani striking out Trout, the three-time AL MVP and Ohtani's longtime Angels teammate, for the final out in Japan's victory over the United States.

Ohtani then turned in another outstanding, unique season with the Angels before he hurt his elbow and eventually had a second surgery that will almost certainly prevent him from pitching in 2024, just as he missed nearly all of 2019 and 2020 as a pitcher.

His injury history did nothing to suppress his free-agent value, partly because Ohtani can remain one of the majors' best hitters while he waits to see if his pitching elbow will heal again.

"One of the many things we've come to appreciate over the years about Shohei is watching him never take a pitch off, no matter the score of the game," Friedman said. "I've seen him in games where his team is up big or down big, grinding each pitch late in an at-bat — hustling, doing everything he can to leg out an infield hit late in a game."

## Some big states still resistant to legalized sports betting's rise

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Legalized sports betting continued its expansion this year while also factoring into scandals in college athletics and suspensions in the NFL for players who violated the league's gambling policy.

Six states either passed legislation to legalize sports wagering or allowed sportsbooks to begin accepting bets. Another state, Florida, relaunched sports betting after a two-year legal battle ended when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in October in the casinos' favor.

Still on the sidelines, however, are the nation's two most populous states — California and Texas. Sports betting proponents will hope to make progress against significant headwinds in both states in 2024.

There was no apparent movement in California this year to legalize sports betting after two competing measures, including one backed financially by Native American tribes, went down in flames in 2022 at the ballot box.

Baird Fogel, a California attorney who works with the sports betting industry, said the key is getting the full support of the tribes.

"Remember, the tribes don't need this," Fogel said. "They can wait forever. That's the trick here, what everybody needs to get their heads around. You've got to proactively come to them with an idea of how to get their support because without their support, this is going nowhere."

In Texas, any push for casino gambling is a

matter of playing a potentially yearslong game.

Proponents have poured millions into political action committees and campaign donations. Casino magnate Miriam Adelson, who in November entered into an agreement to buy the NBA's Dallas Mavericks, donated \$1 million to Republican Gov. Greg Abbott's 2022 campaign.

Gaming measures have slowly picked up support, but a spending wave has yet to deliver a Texas-sized jackpot in a Legislature where resistance to legalizing casinos still runs deep. The Texas Republican Party passed a resolution that showed renewed opposition to casino gambling among party activists.

# Biles named AP top female athlete for 3rd time

*Associated Press*

There were jitters, of course. Considering all that happened, how could there not be?

When Simone Biles walked onto the floor at a suburban Chicago arena in late July for her first gymnastics competition in two years, she knew plenty of people were wondering how it was going to go.

"I thought that too, don't worry," Biles said with a laugh.

By the end of one rotation, the most decorated gymnast of all time realized she was back in her safe space. By the end of August, she was a national champion. Again. By October, she was a world champion. Again.

And by December, she was The Associated Press' Female Athlete of the Year.

Yes, again.

Her triumphant return that included her record eighth U.S. national championship and a sixth world all-around gold made Biles the sixth woman to claim the AP honor for a third time. The 26-year-old seven-time Olympic medalist was followed by Iowa basketball star Caitlin Clark and Ballon d'Or winner Aitana Bonmati of the World Cup champion Spanish soccer team in voting by a panel of sports media professionals.

And to think, she wasn't really sure what awaited her on that summer night in front of a packed arena that supported her at every turn, a response she said she didn't anticipate.

Hard to blame her.

The last time Biles had saluted the judges, she was earning a bronze medal on the balance beam at the end of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, the end of a tumultuous two weeks where her decision to pull out of multiple finals due to "the twisties" (think mid-air vertigo) dragged the sometimes uncomfortable conversation about athletes and their mental health into the white-hot spotlight only the Games provide.

Though she drew near-universal acclaim for her courage to put her safety first, a quick check of her mentions on social media showed not everyone agreed.

She took a two-year hiatus in the aftermath, going into what she called a "protective shell." She dove deeper into therapy while eyeing a return on her terms.

Still, that didn't stop self-doubt from creeping in. Only this time, instead of letting the anxiety gnaw at her confidence, she accepted its presence, took a deep breath and put on the kind of show that is hers and hers alone.

"I did a lot better than I thought I would do," Biles said.

Same as it ever was.

Biles previously won the AP honor in 2016 and 2019, times in her life she now barely recognizes.

She was still a teenager following her star-making performance at the Rio Olympics. Still living at home with her parents. Her world still revolved around the spaceship of a gym her fam-

ily built in the Houston suburbs.

Thinking about it, she can't help but shake her head a little bit. Biles remembers thinking she only had time to practice and —if she was lucky—get her nails done.

It's not that way anymore. She's made it a point to make sure the sport she's redefined no longer defines her.

Biles married Green Bay Packers safety Jonathan Owens in the spring. Her time is split between getting to Packers games when her schedule allows, working with her corporate partners and poring over the details of the house she and her husband are building.

Part of her evolution is organic. Part of it is intentional. For too long, she let herself get too caught up in the outcome of every turn, every flip, every twist, every practice in a discipline where perfection is literally unattainable.

"Whenever I was 19, it was the end of the world if I had bad days," she said. "Now I'm like, 'It's OK, it's just gymnastics and I'll come back tomorrow and we'll get it started again.'"

Biles isn't kidding when said she's trying to take more of a "one day at a time" approach, not easy for someone who admits she has a habit of "best case/worst case-ing" every little thing. She didn't really get serious about returning until late spring when coach Cecile Landi suggested over margaritas that maybe it was time to give the

world a peek at what Biles had been working on.

Her response was somewhere along the lines of "sure, OK" even though there was a part of her that felt she might not ever be ready.

"I didn't know what I was expecting," said Biles, who credited the people she has surrounded herself with for believing in her when she was still grappling with her belief in herself. "People were like, 'No, we've seen you in training, this is what was supposed to happen.'"

And what was supposed to happen quickly became what has almost always happened since Biles began taking the norms of her sport and bending them to her will.

It wasn't just that she won but how she did it. Her intricate and gravity-defying tumbling has become more precise. A full decade into her elite career, her routines for all four events are still packed with remarkable difficulty.

Nowhere is that difficulty more apparent than on vault, where she became the first woman to perform a Yurchenko double-pike in international competition. The move — a breathtaking combination of power and more than a little guts — is now the fifth element to carry her name in the sport's code of points.

She doesn't have to do it to win. She does it anyway, because, as she put it a few years ago, she can.

# Shiffrin masters tough course for 92nd career victory

*Associated Press*

LIENZ, Austria — When Mikaela Shiffrin can coast through the second run and still win the race, her rivals know the American has rediscovered her best skiing in giant slalom.

Seeking her first win of the season in the discipline, Shiffrin held on to a big first-run lead to triumph in a women's World Cup GS amid tough course conditions Thursday.

It was Shiffrin's 22nd career win in GS and 92nd overall — both are World Cup records.

"It's really amazing to have some good training days last week, and come here and show some of my top skiing now," Shiffrin said. "For sure, I managed the second run a little bit more, but it felt like good skiing."

Shiffrin lost most of her first-leg advantage as she skied a rather conservative final run, posting only the 17th fastest time. But it

was enough to beat Federica Brignone by 0.38 seconds, a result that sent the Italian to the top of the discipline standings.

"The second run was great skiing with a little bit more space," said Shiffrin, who lost 1.25 seconds on Brignone in that final run. "Federica, a few more gates and she would have probably taken it. So that's the next thing to learn for the coming races: you have to push in the second run."

# Morant's return has gotten Grizzlies rolling

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Ja Morant's return to NBA play has the Memphis Grizzlies facing a new set of questions.

Namely, could they have reasonably expected their All-Star guard to be so productive, so soon?

Or, did they suspect that having Morant back in the lineup would make winning—and contending—look so achievable for a club that managed just six victories in its first 25 games?

"You have a player like that, he makes everybody better, from our top guys to our role-playing guys," Grizzlies shooting guard Desmond Bane said. "So you can't overestimate how good he is and how much impact he has."

Morant has averaged 28.8 points through his first four games since returning from an NBA suspension that stemmed from his antics with guns on social media. Memphis has won all four of those games to improve to 10-19, leaving them just 4½ games out of a Western Conference play-in spot with 53 games to play.

"I don't really look at where we're at in the standings right now with all these games left," Memphis coach Taylor Jenkins

said. "I'm just focused on all the momentum that we've built up over the last week or so."

There's no denying that momentum, or who's primarily responsible for it.

Hours before his 31-point performance in a 116-115 overtime victory in New Orleans on Tuesday night, Morant had been named Western Conference Player of the Week — for his first week back on the court.

"It's awesome that he got recognized for his stellar play, for the team's stellar play over the past week," Jenkins said. "But he didn't come back focused on trying to win Player of the Week. He just wanted to be back out there with his teammates and compete in the game that he loves."

"Obviously I think he's been having tons of fun throughout this process, as difficult as it was when he was sidelined for 25 games," Jenkins added. "But then you saw the joy that he was playing with that first game back ... and we expect nothing less."

Given the reason for his suspension, however, Morant's choice of celebratory dance moves after an alley-oop dunk in overtime in New Orleans has led to some criticism of him on so-

cial media. While facing his father, who was sitting courtside, a smiling Morant executed a move which vaguely resembled firing guns and holding a bazooka over his shoulder.

A performing artist from New Orleans who goes by the stage name Subtweet Shawn posted on social media that the dance is his creation and has nothing to do with guns.

Morant has not commented on the significance of the dance move after the dunk, and the Grizzlies did not appear bothered by it, posting clips on social media.

In his first game back on Dec. 19, also played in New Orleans, Morant scored 34 points, capped by a game-winning basket as time expired. He scored 20 in a home victory over Indiana and then had 30 points and 11 assists in a victory at Atlanta.

"The biggest thing is that he brings a level of confidence to their team that they were waiting for and a swagger to the team," said Pelicans coach Willie Green, whose club won in Memphis back in October, when Morant's suspension was just beginning.

"That's what makes them dangerous, is now that they have their leader, best player, on the

floor, they're playing much more confident," Green continued. "They're a better defensive team. They're getting in the paint and they're attacking. He allows everybody to kind of get to their rightful spots on the floor, so that makes them better."

Jenkins sought to ease Morant's return by telling him to focus on enjoying the game and not letting wins or losses define the success of his return to the club from the outset.

"He and I talked about, you know, there should be no undue burden about you going out there to have to do this or that or the other to get us some wins," Jenkins recalled.

Jenkins advised his best player to, "Just go out there, play your brand of basketball, be Ja and the rest will follow — and that's what's happened."

"I'm just really going out there and just trying to be Ja as much as possible, doing whatever I can," Morant said. "Sometimes it's scoring, sometimes it's facilitating."

"I pretty much just take what the defense gives me but stay aggressive at the same time," he added. "If it's 30, it's 30, but if I have 8 and we win, I'm cool with that, too."

## Virginia Tech tops No. 23 Tulane in Military Bowl

Associated Press

ANNAPOLIS, Md. — As long as he could hold onto the ball and keep his footing on a slippery day, Kyron Drones found plenty of room to run.

Drones rushed for 176 yards and a touchdown and also threw for two TDs as Virginia Tech withstood a second-half downpour to beat No. 23 Tulane 41-20 in the Military Bowl on Wednesday.

Drones fumbled three times in the wet weather, but the Hokies (7-6) only lost one of them. The sophomore quarterback

passed for just 91 yards, but he and Bhayshul Tuten were tough to stop on the ground.

"It was tough conditions. You can't really simulate it like that," Virginia Tech coach Brent Pry said. "They had the same weather we did. Both teams had to deal with it."

Tuten finished with 136 yards and two touchdowns on 18 carries to help Virginia Tech snap a four-game losing streak in bowls.

"Any time we've had success this year, really, we've been able to run the ball," Pry said.

"That's who we need to be. That's who we want to be."

Tulane (11-3) was without star quarterback Michael Pratt. Both Kai Horton and Justin Ibieta played in his place, but Ibieta was carted off in the second quarter with an apparent leg injury. Makhi Hughes rushed for 88 yards.

An unforced fumble by Drones gave the Green Wave an early lead when Tyler Grubbs scooped up the ball and returned it 21 yards for a touchdown.

"It was the first drive of the

game and we still had a long way to go," Drones said. "It was a next-play mentality."

After a muffed punt gave Virginia Tech the ball at the Tulane 11, Drones ran for a TD on the first play to put the Hokies up 10-7.

Drones also lost the ball on that run, but he was ruled to have reached the end zone first.

Tulane had first-and-goal from the 1 when Horton was hit by Pheldarius Payne as he tried to hand off the ball. The Hokies recovered that fumble to stave off a great scoring opportunity.