

(WASHINGTON, DC)

SEEKING TO COMFORT AMERICANS BOUND TOGETHER BY A YEAR OF SUFFERING BUT ALSO BY “HOPE AND THE POSSIBILITIES,” PRESIDENT BIDEN MADE A CASE TO THE NATION THURSDAY NIGHT THAT IT COULD SOON PUT THE WORST OF THE PANDEMIC BEHIND IT AND PROMISED THAT ALL ADULTS WOULD BE ELIGIBLE FOR THE VACCINE BY MAY 1.

DURING A 24-MINUTE SPEECH FROM THE EAST ROOM, MR. BIDEN LACED HIS SOMBER SCRIPT WITH REFERENCES TO HEMINGWAY AND PERSONAL RUMINATIONS ON LOSS AS HE REFLECTED ON A “COLLECTIVE SUFFERING, A COLLECTIVE SACRIFICE, A YEAR FILLED WITH THE LOSS OF LIFE, AND THE LOSS OF LIVING, FOR ALL OF US.”

SPEAKING ON THE ANNIVERSARY OF THE WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION DECLARING A PANDEMIC AND THE MOMENT AT WHICH THE VIRUS BEGAN TIGHTENING ITS GRIP, THE PRESIDENT OFFERED A TURNING POINT OF SORTS AFTER ONE OF THE DARKEST YEARS IN RECENT HISTORY, ONE THAT WOULD LEAD TO MORE THAN HALF A MILLION DEATHS IN THE COUNTRY, THE LOSS OF MILLIONS OF JOBS AND DISRUPTIONS TO NEARLY EVERY ASPECT OF SOCIETY AND POLITICS.

WITH THE STIMULUS BILL ABOUT TO GIVE THE ECONOMY A KICK, THE PACE OF VACCINATIONS INCREASING AND DEATH RATES DOWN, MR. BIDEN SAID AMERICANS WERE ON TRACK TO RETURN TO A SEMBLANCE OF NORMAL LIFE BY JULY 4 AS LONG AS THEY TOOK THE CHANCE TO GET VACCINATED AND DID NOT PREMATURELY ABANDON MASK WEARING, SOCIAL DISTANCING AND OTHER MEASURES TO CONTAIN THE VIRUS. IN PUTTING A DATE, HOWEVER CAUTIOUSLY, ON THE CALENDAR, MR. BIDEN ALSO OFFERED SOMETHING INTANGIBLE: HOPE FOR A SUMMER WITH BARBECUES, FAMILY GATHERINGS AND HUGS FOR GRANDPARENTS.

“JULY 4TH WITH YOUR LOVED ONES IS THE GOAL,” HE SAID.

MR. BIDEN DID NOT MENTION HIS PREDECESSOR, DONALD J. TRUMP, BUT HIS ADDRESS DREW SHARP CONTRASTS TO HIM, REPEATEDLY CITING THE NEED TO TELL THE AMERICAN PEOPLE THE TRUTH, APPEALING FOR UNITY, CELEBRATING THE ACCOMPLISHMENTS OF SCIENCE AND CALLING FOR CONTINUED VIGILANCE AGAINST A VIRUS THAT HE SAID COULD STILL COME ROARING BACK.

“JUST AS WE WERE EMERGING FROM A DARK WINTER INTO A HOPEFUL SPRING AND SUMMER IS NOT THE TIME TO NOT STICK WITH THE RULES,” MR. BIDEN SAID. “THIS IS NOT THE TIME TO LET UP.”

(BRUSSELS)

BUDAPEST AND WARSAW FOLLOWED THROUGH THURSDAY ON A PROMISE TO MOUNT A LEGAL CHALLENGE TO A NEW SCHEME THAT LINKS EU FUNDING TO RESPECT FOR THE RULE OF LAW.

LATE LAST YEAR THE COUNCIL OF THE EU AND EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT SEALED A COMPROMISE THAT ALLOWS FOR MONEY TO BE CUT IN CASES WHERE RULE-OF-LAW VIOLATIONS AFFECT OR SERIOUSLY RISK AFFECTING THE BLOC'S FINANCIAL INTERESTS. UNDER THE NEW MECHANISM, WHICH CAME INTO FORCE IN JANUARY, FUNDING CAN BE SLASHED IF A QUALIFIED MAJORITY OF MEMBER COUNTRIES SIGN OFF ON A RECOMMENDATION BY THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION. THE FUNDING AFFECTED COULD BE FROM THE EU'S LONG-TERM BUDGET OR PANDEMIC RECOVERY FUND.

BUT HUNGARY AND POLAND — WHICH HAVE LONG OPPOSED THE MECHANISM — STILL HOPE THAT IT WILL NEVER BE USED. ON THURSDAY, THE TWO COUNTRIES FORMALLY LODGED ACTION BEFORE THE COURT OF JUSTICE OF THE EU IN AN EFFORT TO CHALLENGE THE MECHANISM'S LEGALITY.

"THE LEFT WENT TOO FAR WHEN IT LAUNCHED AN ATTACK ON HUNGARY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE PANDEMIC," HUNGARIAN JUSTICE MINISTER JUDIT VARGA WROTE IN A FACEBOOK POST. "WE REPELLED THIS ATTACK AND MANAGED TO DEFEND HUNGARIAN INTERESTS CONCERNING THE EU BUDGET. HOWEVER, WHAT IS UNLAWFUL CANNOT BE LEFT WITHOUT A WORD," SHE SAID.

POLAND AND HUNGARY HAVE ARGUED THAT THE NEW MEASURE IS TARGETED AT THEM, AS EU INSTITUTIONS HAVE ACCUSED BOTH GOVERNMENTS OF BACKSLIDING ON DEMOCRATIC STANDARDS AND THE RULE OF LAW. BUDAPEST AND WARSAW HAVE DENIED THOSE ACCUSATIONS. BUT PROPONENTS OF THE NEW MEASURE, SUCH AS THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION AND A MAJORITY OF MEPS, SAY THAT COUNTRIES RECEIVING EU CASH MUST ALSO RESPECT EU VALUES. THEY SAY THAT IF POLAND AND HUNGARY ARE RESPECTING THOSE VALUES, THEY HAVE NOTHING TO FEAR FROM THE SCHEME.

THE LEGAL CHALLENGE COMES AS THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT ON THURSDAY DEBATED THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE MECHANISM, WITH MEPS URGING THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION TO MOVE QUICKLY TO CUT FUNDING.

(BEIJING)

LINKEDIN HAS STOPPED ALLOWING PEOPLE IN CHINA TO SIGN UP FOR NEW MEMBER ACCOUNTS WHILE IT WORKS TO ENSURE ITS SERVICE IN THE COUNTRY REMAINS IN COMPLIANCE WITH LOCAL LAW, THE COMPANY SAID THIS WEEK, WITHOUT SPECIFYING WHAT PROMPTED THE MOVE. A COMPANY REPRESENTATIVE DECLINED TO COMMENT FURTHER.

UNLIKE OTHER GLOBAL INTERNET MAINSTAYS SUCH AS FACEBOOK AND GOOGLE, LINKEDIN OFFERS A VERSION OF ITS SERVICE IN CHINA, WHICH IT IS ABLE TO DO BY HEWING CLOSELY TO THE AUTHORITARIAN GOVERNMENT'S TIGHT CONTROLS ON CYBERSPACE.

IT CENSORS ITS CHINESE USERS IN LINE WITH OFFICIAL MANDATES. IT LIMITS CERTAIN TOOLS, SUCH AS THE ABILITY TO CREATE OR JOIN GROUPS. IT HAS GIVEN PARTIAL OWNERSHIP OF ITS CHINESE OPERATION TO LOCAL INVESTORS.

IN 2017, THE COMPANY BLOCKED INDIVIDUALS, BUT NOT COMPANIES, FROM ADVERTISING JOB OPENINGS ON ITS SITE IN CHINA AFTER IT FELL AFOUL OF GOVERNMENT RULES REQUIRING IT TO VERIFY THE IDENTITIES OF THE PEOPLE WHO POST JOB LISTINGS.

THE BACKDROP TO THE SUSPENSION OF NEW USER REGISTRATIONS IS NOT CLEAR. THE GOVERNMENT HAS PREVIOUSLY BLOCKED INTERNET SERVICES THAT IT BELIEVES TO BE BREAKING THE LAW. IN 2019, MICROSOFT'S BING SEARCH ENGINE WAS BRIEFLY INACCESSIBLE IN CHINA FOR UNCLEAR REASONS. MICROSOFT ALSO OWNS LINKEDIN.

(MYAING, MYANMAR)

BLOODSHED CONTINUES IN MYANMAR AFTER ANOTHER VIOLENT DAY THURSDAY SAW AT LEAST 12 PEOPLE KILLED BY THE RULING JUNTA, ACCORDING TO A WATCHDOG GROUP, PROMPTING A TOP UN OFFICIAL TO SAY THE CRACKDOWN ON PEACEFUL PROTESTS IS "LIKELY MEETING THE LEGAL THRESHOLD FOR CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY."

IN THE SMALL, CENTRAL TOWN OF MYAING, POLICE SHOT INTO A CROWD OF UNARMED PEOPLE, KILLING AT LEAST EIGHT, ACCORDING TO ADVOCACY GROUP ASSISTANCE ASSOCIATION FOR POLITICAL PRISONERS (AAPP). IMAGES POSTED ON SOCIAL MEDIA SHOWED THE TOWN'S ROADS STREAKED WITH BLOOD AND BODIES LYING CRUMPLED AND LIFELESS IN THE STREET.

THE SHOOTINGS IN TINY MYAING ARE FURTHER EVIDENCE THE MILITARY JUNTA, WHICH SEIZED POWER IN A COUP ON FEBRUARY 1, IS ATTEMPTING TO CRUSH PEACEFUL OPPOSITION TO ITS ENFORCED RULE IN EVERY CORNER OF MYANMAR, NOT JUST THE BIG TOWNS AND CITIES.

IN THE BIGGEST CITY, YANGON, THURSDAY, PROTESTER CHIT MIN THU WAS KILLED IN NORTH DAGON AREA, ACCORDING TO REUTERS. HIS WIFE, AYE MYAT THU, TOLD THE NEWS AGENCY HE HAD INSISTED ON JOINING THE PROTESTS DESPITE HER APPEALS FOR HIM TO STAY HOME FOR THE SAKE OF THEIR SON.

"HE SAID IT'S WORTH DYING FOR," SHE SAID. "HE IS WORRIED ABOUT PEOPLE NOT JOINING THE PROTEST. IF SO, DEMOCRACY WILL NOT RETURN TO THE COUNTRY."

AT LEAST 80 PEOPLE HAVE BEEN KILLED SINCE THE MILITARY INVALIDATED THE RESULTS OF THE COUNTRY'S DEMOCRATIC ELECTION, THE UNITED NATIONS HUMAN RIGHTS OFFICE SAID, AND HUNDREDS MORE INJURED. AT LEAST FOUR OF THE DEATHS IN RECENT DAYS WERE INDIVIDUALS ARRESTED AND DETAINED BY THE JUNTA, INCLUDING TWO OFFICIALS WITH THE OUSTED NATIONAL LEAGUE FOR DEMOCRACY (NLD) PARTY. ALL FOUR DIED IN CUSTODY, ACCORDING TO THE OFFICE OF THE UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS.

MORE THAN 2,000 PEOPLE HAVE BEEN ARBITRARILY DETAINED SINCE THE COUP, ACCORDING TO AAPP, MANY OF THEM KEPT OUT OF CONTACT FROM FAMILY AND FRIENDS, THEIR CONDITION OR WHEREABOUTS UNKNOWN.

(ALBANY)

NEW YORK STATE LAWMAKERS ON THURSDAY OPENED AN IMPEACHMENT INQUIRY INTO GOV. ANDREW M. CUOMO, THE SUREST SIGN YET THAT THE GOVERNOR WAS SEEING HIS PARTY TURN AGAINST HIM AMID GROWING SCRUTINY OF A RECENT SERIES OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT ACCUSATIONS.

AFTER A THREE-HOUR EMERGENCY MEETING, THE STATE ASSEMBLY ANNOUNCED THAT IT WOULD GIVE ITS JUDICIARY COMMITTEE BROAD JURISDICTION TO INVESTIGATE ALLEGATIONS OF MISCONDUCT AGAINST MR. CUOMO, INCLUDING THE SEXUAL HARASSMENT CLAIMS AND HIS ADMINISTRATION'S HANDLING OF VIRUS-RELATED DEATHS OF NURSING HOME PATIENTS. THE DECISION SET THE STAGE FOR WHAT COULD BE THE STATE'S FIRST IMPEACHMENT EFFORT IN MORE THAN A CENTURY.

"THE REPORTS OF ACCUSATIONS CONCERNING THE GOVERNOR ARE SERIOUS," THE ASSEMBLY SPEAKER, CARL E. HEASTIE, A DEMOCRAT, SAID IN A STATEMENT, ADDING THAT THE "IMPEACHMENT INVESTIGATION" WILL ENCOMPASS INTERVIEWING WITNESSES, SUBPOENAING DOCUMENTS AND EVALUATING EVIDENCE.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT CAME ON THE SAME DAY THAT 59 DEMOCRATS IN THE STATE LEGISLATURE — ABOUT 40 PERCENT OF THE PARTY'S MEMBERS IN THE ASSEMBLY AND THE SENATE — SIGNED ON TO A STATEMENT DEMANDING THAT MR. CUOMO IMMEDIATELY RESIGN IN THE WAKE OF ALLEGATIONS FROM WOMEN, INCLUDING CURRENT AND FORMER AIDES, WHO HAVE ACCUSED HIM OF HARASSMENT OR INAPPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR.

HOURS LATER, THE POLICE IN ALBANY, N.Y., CONFIRMED THAT THEY HAD BEEN NOTIFIED OF ONE SUCH ACCUSATION BY THE NEW YORK STATE POLICE, AN INCIDENT AT THE EXECUTIVE MANSION THAT WAS CHARACTERIZED AS SOMETHING THAT MIGHT HAVE RISEN "TO THE LEVEL OF A CRIME." THE MOVE FOLLOWED THE PUBLICATION OF AN ARTICLE IN THE TIMES UNION OF ALBANY ON WEDNESDAY THAT DETAILED CLAIMS LEVELLED BY AN UNIDENTIFIED AIDE TO THE GOVERNOR, WHO ACCUSED MR. CUOMO OF GROPPING HER AT THE GOVERNOR'S MANSION, WHERE HE LIVES, LATE LAST YEAR.

THE RAPID-FIRE DEVELOPMENTS UNDERSCORED HOW MR. CUOMO'S ONCE IRONCLAD GRIP ON ALBANY WAS FAST WEAKENING AND LEFT VETERAN LAWMAKERS WONDERING ALOUD HOW HE COULD CONTINUE TO EFFECTIVELY GOVERN. MR. CUOMO, A THIRD-TERM DEMOCRAT, HAS APOLOGIZED FOR WORKPLACE REMARKS THAT HE SAID MAY HAVE HURT OR OFFENDED WOMEN BUT HAS ALSO DENIED EVER TOUCHING ANYONE INAPPROPRIATELY AND HAS URGED NEW YORKERS TO AWAIT THE RESULTS OF AN INQUIRY BY THE STATE ATTORNEY GENERAL BEFORE PASSING JUDGMENT. HIS OFFICE DID NOT RESPOND TO A REQUEST FOR COMMENT ON THURSDAY.

(LEXINGTON, KY)

CHICKENS GOT LOOSE IN LEXINGTON TUESDAY MORNING WHEN A TRACTOR-TRAILER CARRYING ABOUT 6,000 OF THEM STRUCK A RAILWAY OVERPASS ON NORTH BROADWAY, ACCORDING TO POLICE AND LEXINGTON-FAYETTE ANIMAL CARE AND CONTROL.

THE ACCIDENT HAPPENED NEAR NEW CIRCLE ROAD, WITH THE TRACTOR-TRAILER HITTING AN R.J. CORMAN BRIDGE, POLICE SAID.

THE TRUCK HIT THE BRIDGE A LITTLE AFTER 1 A.M., POLICE LT. DANIEL TRUEX SAID, AND NORTH BROADWAY WAS CLOSED FOR HOURS AS A RESULT. A PORTION OF THE ROAD REOPENED AROUND 4:10 A.M., AND IT COMPLETELY REOPENED ABOUT 25 MINUTES LATER, HE SAID.

R.J. CORMAN WAS NOTIFIED OF THE COLLISION, TRUEX SAID. OFFICIALS FROM R.J. CORMAN INSPECTED THE BRIDGE AS A PRECAUTION, ACCORDING TO WKYT-TV.

NONE OF THE CHICKENS WERE KILLED IN THE ACCIDENT, ACCORDING TO OFFICER AARON EVANS FROM LEXINGTON ANIMAL CARE AND CONTROL. SIX OFFICERS FROM ANIMAL CARE AND CONTROL RESPONDED TO TRY TO ROUND UP THE CHICKENS, EVANS SAID.

“THEY WERE ABLE TO ACTUALLY ROUND UP 100 CHICKENS THAT WEREN’T CONTAINED,” EVANS SAID.

THE DRIVER DIDN’T SUFFER ANY INJURIES AND ISN’T EXPECTED TO FACE ANY CHARGES, TRUEX SAID.

(LEXINGTON, KY)

THE KENTUCKY WILDCATS' LOST SEASON CAME TO A CRASHING END ON THURSDAY AFTERNOON WITH A 74-73 LOSS TO MISSISSIPPI STATE IN THE OPENING ROUND OF THE SEC TOURNAMENT IN NASHVILLE.

THE WILDCATS CLOSED THE YEAR AT 9-16 OVERALL, THE FIRST TIME A KENTUCKY TEAM HAS FAILED TO REACH DOUBLE FIGURES IN WINS SINCE THE 1926-27 TEAM FINISHED 3-13. IT'S ALSO KENTUCKY'S FIRST LOSING SEASON SINCE EDDIE SUTTON'S 1988-89 TEAM FINISHED AT 13-19.

KENTUCKY TRAILED BY 14 POINTS AT THE HALF (44-30) BEFORE FRESHMAN DONTAIE ALLEN CAUGHT FIRE, SCORING A TEAM-HIGH 23 POINTS ON 6-OF-13 FROM THREE-POINT RANGE. DAVION MINTZ FINISHED WITH 16 POINTS AND OLIVIER SARR AND KEION BROOKS ADDED 14 AND 10 POINTS, RESPECTIVELY.

TRAILING 55-45 IN THE SECOND HALF, ALLEN HIT BACK-TO-BACK THREE POINTERS AS THE WILDCATS CUT THE LEAD TO 55-48 WITH 14:22 REMAINING. A MISSISSIPPI STATE TURNOVER RESULTED IN AN ALLEY-OOP DUNK FROM TERRENCE CLARKE TO JACKSON IN TRANSITION FOLLOWED BY AN ALLEN FLOATER BEFORE THE FORMER PENDLETON COUNTY STAR NAILED HIS FIFTH THREE-POINTER TO CUT THE LEAD TO 62-60 WITH 8:47 REMAINING.

BROOKS CONNECTED ON TWO FREE THROWS TO TIE THE GAME AT 62-ALL AND ANOTHER ALLEN THREE GAVE KENTUCKY ITS FIRST LEAD OF THE GAME AT 65-64 WITH 6:20 LEFT. A MINTZ THREE-POINTER EXTENDED THE LEAD TO 71-66 BEFORE THE BULLDOGS HIT BACK-TO-BACK THREE OF THEIR OWN TO RETAKE THE LEAD AT 72-71 AT THE 2:19 MARK.

OLIVIER SARR SCORED IN THE PAINT AT THE ONE MINUTE MARK BEFORE THE BULLDOGS HIT TWO FREE THROWS WITH 7.1 SECONDS REMAINING TO CLOSE OUT THE SCORING. ALLEN'S THREE-POINT ATTEMPT AT THE BUZZER WAS OFF THE MARK TO END KENTUCKY'S SEASON.

THURSDAY'S LOSS WAS THE FIRST FOR UK COACH JOHN CALIPARI IN 16 MEETINGS AGAINST MISSISSIPPI STATE.

(HOLLYWOOD)

PEPE LE PEW GETTING SHELVED AT WARNER BROS. HAS GENERATED WIDESPREAD CONTROVERSY ON SOCIAL MEDIA IN RECENT DAYS, AND MANY PEOPLE ON TWITTER ARE ARGUING THAT IF THE LOONEY TUNES SKUNK IS CANCELED, THEN MISS PIGGY SHOULD BE NEXT. THE NEWS OF PEPE GETTING THE BOOT FOLLOWS A RECENT NEW YORK TIMES OP-ED CRITICIZING THE CHARACTER FOR NORMALIZING RAPE CULTURE ALONG WITH THE REVELATION THAT PEPE HAD BEEN COMPLETELY CUT FROM THE UPCOMING SEQUEL SPACE JAM: A NEW LEGACY.

ONLINE, PEPE'S APPARENT FIRING HAS GENERATED NONSTOP CHATTER FROM PEOPLE ON SOCIAL MEDIA OFFERING MIXED OPINIONS. CRITICIZING WARNER BROS. FOR CANCELING THE CARTOON CHARACTER, SOME PEOPLE ON TWITTER SAY MISS PIGGY SHOULD ALSO BE BOOTED FROM THE MUPPETS IN THE INTEREST OF FAIRNESS, BASED ON HER HISTORY OF "SEXUAL HARASSMENT" AND "DOMESTIC VIOLENCE" TOWARD KERMIT THE FROG AND OTHERS IN VARIOUS ITERATIONS OF THE MUPPET SHOW.

"OK! I'M HOLDING MISS PIGGY ACCOUNTABLE SINCE WE'RE GOING DOWN THIS ROUTE," READS ONE TWEET. "EXCESSIVE VIOLENCE TOWARDS GUESTS AND A VARIETY OF MUPPETS PLUS VARIOUS EXAMPLES OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT TOWARD KERMIT THE FROG."

ALONG WITH PEPE LE PEW'S REMOVAL FROM SPACE JAM 2, WORD IS THERE ARE NO PLANS TO BRING BACK PEPE LE PEW FOR ANY OTHER LOONEY TUNES PROJECTS AT WARNER BROS. LINDA JONES, THE DAUGHTER OF PEPE LE PEW CREATOR CHUCK JONES, HAS DECRIED THE DECISION TO CANCEL THE CARTOON SKUNK, ARGUING THAT THE CHARACTER WAS ONLY MEANT TO ENTERTAIN AND MAKE PEOPLE LAUGH. HER IDEA WAS FOR WARNER BROS. TO BRING PEPE BACK WITH A NEW GIMMICK, PERHAPS BY REBRANDING HIM AS A PERPETUAL JOB-SEEKER WHO KEEPS GETTING REJECTED FOR WORK.

IN ANY CASE, SEVERAL OTHER ANIMATED CHARACTERS HAVE ALSO COME UNDER SCRUTINY UNDER THE TRENDING HASHTAG #CANCELACARTOONCHARACTER, THOUGH THEY MOSTLY SEEM TO BE IN JEST. ONE POPULAR TWEET SUGGESTS ANGELICA FROM RUGRATS, SAYING THE SPOILED CHILD WAS "BASICALLY A KAREN BEFORE IT HAD A NAME." ANOTHER ACCUSES CLIFFORD THE BIG RED DOG OF USING STEROIDS AND PROFITING FROM HIS ILLEGAL DRUG USE. MEANWHILE, MULTIPLE TWEETS HAVE ACCUSED DALE GRIBBLE OF KING OF THE HILL OF LIKELY STORMING THE CAPITOL BUILDING IN JANUARY.

(AMERICA IN A PANDEMIC)

IN 2020, THE CORONAVIRUS PANDEMIC ALL BUT SHUTTERED RECREATIONAL SPORTS AND LEISURE ACTIVITIES. FITNESS CENTERS AND YOGA STUDIOS CLOSED AS DID MOVIE THEATERS, MUSEUMS AND CONCERT HALLS. GAMES AS ROUTINE AS CHECKERS AT A LOCAL PARK OR PICKUP BASKETBALL IN ALMOST ANY SETTING WERE PROHIBITED. EVEN PLAYING IN ULTIMATE FRISBEE LEAGUES BECAME FRAUGHT WITH RISK.

AND YET, GOLF AND TENNIS, WHICH HAVE STRUGGLED TO RECRUIT NEW PARTICIPANTS IN RECENT YEARS, FLOURISHED AS IDLE ATHLETES SOUGHT TO PLAY OUTSIDE, AT A SAFE DISTANCE, WITH SOME TWEAKS TO ACCOMMODATE NEW HEALTH GUIDELINES. WHILE MORE THAN HALF OF TENNIS AND GOLF FACILITIES IN THE UNITED STATES WERE PADLOCKED IN MARCH AND APRIL BECAUSE OF THE CORONAVIRUS, FROM JUNE TO DECEMBER IN 2020 GOLF ROUNDS NATIONWIDE SURGED BY 75 MILLION AS COMPARED TO THE SAME PERIOD IN 2019, A GAIN OF 27 PERCENT.

DATA FROM THE PHYSICAL ACTIVITY COUNCIL'S RECENT PARTICIPATION REPORT, WHICH MONITORS ACTIVITY IN MORE THAN 100 SPORTS AND ACTIVITIES, SHOWED TENNIS PARTICIPATION ROSE 22 PERCENT IN 2020, WITH 21.6 MILLION AMERICANS SAYING THEY PLAYED THE SPORT AT LEAST ONCE. THAT INCLUDED NEARLY 3 MILLION NEW PLAYERS AND 3.8 MILLION AMERICANS WHO RETURNED TO THE SPORT AFTER A SIGNIFICANT HIATUS, A 40 PERCENT INCREASE FROM THE PREVIOUS YEAR.

TENNIS COURTS AND GOLF COURSES HAVE BEEN PACKED WITH THE PEOPLE THE LEADERS OF THOSE SPORTS HAVE TRIED TO REACH FOR YEARS — BEGINNERS AND NOVICES WHOSE NUMBERS HAD BEEN THINNING AT ALARMING RATES. THE NEWCOMERS FLOCKED TO THOSE SPORTS IN LARGE PART BECAUSE OF THEIR ACCESSIBILITY. FOR DECADES, LOCAL SCHOOL SYSTEMS AND MUNICIPAL PARKS DEPARTMENTS HAVE BUILT THOUSANDS OF TENNIS COURTS ACROSS THE COUNTRY THAT ARE FREE TO USE AND EASILY LOCATED. WHILE GOLF IS OFTEN PERCEIVED AS EXPENSIVE AND EXCLUSIVE, IN FACT, 75 PERCENT OF AMERICAN GOLF COURSES ARE OPEN TO THE PUBLIC WITH THE AVERAGE COST OF A NINE-HOLE ROUND ABOUT \$22.

(LONDON)

THE ARTIST MIKE WINKELMANN, ALSO KNOWN AS BEEPLE, HAS JUST SOLD AN NFT AT A RECORD-BREAKING \$69.3 MILLION, THE THIRD-HIGHEST PRICE ACHIEVED BY A LIVING ARTIST. THE SALE, AT CHRISTIE'S, FOR THE PURELY DIGITAL WORK WAS THE STRONGEST INDICATION YET THAT NFTS, OR "NONFUNGIBLE TOKENS," HAVE TAKEN THE ART MARKET BY STORM, MAKING THE LEAP FROM SPECIALIST WEBSITES TO PREMIER AUCTION HOUSES. BEEPLE, A NEWCOMER TO THE FINE-ART WORLD WHO FIRST HEARD ABOUT NFTS FIVE MONTHS AGO, IS THE MOST HIGH-PROFILE ARTIST TO PROFIT OFF THE HUGE BOOM IN SALES OF THESE MUCH HYPED BUT POORLY UNDERSTOOD COMMODITIES.

IF YOU'VE HEARD ABOUT THEM AND WANT TO KNOW WHAT THE FUSS IS ABOUT, HERE'S A PRIMER.

WHAT IS A "NONFUNGIBLE TOKEN," OR NFT?

AN NFT IS AN ASSET VERIFIED USING BLOCKCHAIN TECHNOLOGY, IN WHICH A NETWORK OF COMPUTERS RECORDS TRANSACTIONS AND GIVES BUYERS PROOF OF AUTHENTICITY AND OWNERSHIP. THE CURRENT BOOM IS MOSTLY FOR DIGITAL ASSETS, INCLUDING IMAGES, GIFS, SONGS OR VIDEOS. MOST IMPORTANTLY, NFTS MAKE DIGITAL ARTWORKS UNIQUE, AND THEREFORE SELLABLE.

NOW, ARTISTS, MUSICIANS, INFLUENCERS AND SPORTS FRANCHISES ARE USING NFTS TO MONETIZE DIGITAL GOODS THAT HAVE PREVIOUSLY BEEN CHEAP OR FREE. THE TECHNOLOGY ALSO RESPONDS TO THE ART WORLD'S NEED FOR AUTHENTICATION AND PROVENANCE IN AN INCREASINGLY DIGITAL WORLD, PERMANENTLY LINKING A DIGITAL FILE TO ITS CREATOR. WINKELMANN SOLD THE ARTWORK HIMSELF THROUGH CHRISTIE'S.

THE TECHNOLOGY FOR NFTS HAS BEEN AROUND SINCE THE MID-2010S BUT HIT THE MAINSTREAM IN LATE 2017 WITH CRYPTOKITTIES, A SITE THAT ALLOWED PEOPLE TO BUY AND "BREED" LIMITED-EDITION DIGITAL CATS WITH CRYPTOCURRENCY.

NOW, WITH THE VALUE OF CRYPTOCURRENCIES REACHING RECORD HIGHS, SOME OF THE SAME INVESTORS WHO SPECULATE ON THEM ARE BUYING AND TRADING NFTS, OFTEN FOR EYE-POPPING PRICES.

(LOCAL WEATHER FORECAST)

SATURDAY

MOSTLY CLOUDY, WITH A HIGH NEAR 57. NORTHEAST WIND AROUND 6 MPH.

SATURDAY NIGHT

A 20 PERCENT CHANCE OF SHOWERS AFTER 1AM. MOSTLY CLOUDY, WITH A LOW AROUND 43. EAST WIND AROUND 6 MPH.

SUNDAY

A 50 PERCENT CHANCE OF SHOWERS. CLOUDY, WITH A HIGH NEAR 51. EAST WIND 6 TO 9 MPH. NEW PRECIPITATION AMOUNTS OF LESS THAN A TENTH OF AN INCH POSSIBLE.

SUNDAY NIGHT

A 40 PERCENT CHANCE OF SHOWERS, MAINLY AFTER 1AM. CLOUDY, WITH A LOW AROUND 43.

MONDAY

SHOWERS LIKELY. CLOUDY, WITH A HIGH NEAR 56. CHANCE OF PRECIPITATION IS 70%.

COMMERCIAL TOPIC:

TWO NEW BEN AND JERRY'S FLAVORS ANNOUNCED.

THE QUIRKY ICE-CREAM MAKERS' SALUTE TO THE PANDEMIC SURVIVORS

VANILLA ICE-O-LATION: A CIRCLE OF PLAIN VANILLA ICE CREAM SURROUNDED BY A THICK FUDGE LAYER.

COUCH POTATO CHIP: BELGIAN CHOCOLATE ICE CREAM SPRINKLED WITH LARGE POTATO CHIP BITES

FOR SALE IN GROCERS' FREEZERS AND AT BEN AND JERRY'S SHOPS ACROSS AMERICA AS OF MARCH 15.