

SPORTS

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WNBA

Griner opened up during trip home

WASHINGTON — WNBA star Brittney Griner didn't want any alone time as soon as she boarded a U.S. government plane that would bring her home.

"I have been in prison for 10 months now, listening to Russian. I want to talk," Griner said, according to Roger Carstens, the special presidential envoy for hostage affairs, who helped secure the basketball star's release and bring her back to the U.S. last week.

She then asked Carstens, referring to others on the plane: "But, first of all, who are these guys?"

"And she moved right past me and went to every member on that crew, looked them in the eyes, shook their hands and asked about them, got their names, making a personal connection with them," Carstens recalled in an interview on CNN's "State of the Union." "It was really amazing."

Ultimately, Griner spent about 12 hours of an 18-hour flight talking with others on the plane, Carstens said. The two-time Olympic gold medalist and Phoenix Mercury pro basketball star spoke about her time in the Russian penal colony and her months in captivity, Carstens recalled, although he declined to go into specific details.

"I was left with the impression this is an intelligent, passionate, compassionate, humble, interesting person, a patriotic person," Carstens said. "But above all, authentic. I hate the fact that I had to meet her in this manner, but I actually felt blessed having had a chance to get to know her."

Although Griner is undergoing a full medical and mental evaluation, Carstens said she appeared "full of energy, looked fantastic."

Griner, who also played pro basketball in Russia, was arrested at Moscow's Sheremetyevo Airport in February after Russian authorities said she was carrying vape canisters with cannabis oil. The U.S. State Department declared Griner to be "wrongfully detained" — a charge that Russia has sharply rejected.

President Joe Biden announced on Thursday that the U.S. had secured Griner's release. In exchange, the administration offered Russia the release of notorious arms dealer Viktor Bout, who had been serving a 25-year sentence on charges that he conspired to sell tens of millions of dollars in weapons that U.S. officials said were to be used against Americans.

But the U.S. was unable to secure the freedom of Paul Whelan, who has been held in Russia for nearly four years. Administration officials have stressed repeatedly that they are still working to release Whelan, whom Russian officials have jailed on espionage charges that both his family and the U.S. government say are baseless.

Carstens, the U.S. government's top hostage negotiator, said "there's always cards" to play in securing an offer for Whelan and said he spoke with the jailed American on Friday.

—Associated Press

College football commentary



Mark Ylen/AP

Oregon State head coach Jonathan Smith congratulates Oregon State offensive lineman Jake Levensgood after the team scored during the first half against Washington State on Oct. 15.

HEAVILY INVESTED

With new contract in hand, what magic might Jonathan Smith perform next at Oregon State?

BY BILL ORAM •The Oregonian

Where does Jonathan Smith go from here?

If you're a wise guy, you'd say: "The ATM."

But now that Oregon State has invested roughly another million dollars a year in their football coach through 2028, it's time to ask just how far the campus legend can take this thing.

He has already pulled off one of the best coaching jobs in school history. Not just with a 9-3 regular season that earned OSU a trip to the Las Vegas Bowl, but also with the five-year resurrection of Beavers football since the former quarterback returned in 2018.

The Beavers lost 10 games in Smith's first season. With a win over Florida on Saturday, they would win 10 for just the third time in program history.

Yeah, in these times, that's worth a \$30.6 million investment.

OSU made Smith the fifth highest-paid coach in the Pac-12 and it still feels like a bargain.

A turnaround like that in college football usually means the coach has one foot out the door toward a bigger program with greater resources and more cachet. Another coach might look at the history of the program, and the growing influence of donor collectives in NIL, and ride a nine-win season with a win over Oregon right out the door.

Not Smith. He doesn't see this

season as mission accomplished. But that doesn't mean other programs won't inquire.

Oregon State's football coach strikes me as someone who is less concerned about having something to prove and more focused on what he's trying to build.

I don't think he was a threat to leave anyway, but consider Oregon State's latest pay bump a brushback pitch to prospective suitors just the same.

The Beavers are committed. Smith is, too.

So where does this partnership lead?

In Mike Riley's second stint at Oregon State, the Beavers reached a bowl game eight times in 12 years. Riley won at least eight games six times. With the exception of the unmatched 2000 Fiesta Bowl run under Dennis Erickson, Riley's tenure — which was consistently competent with an occasional breakthrough 10-win season — is the gold standard at Oregon State.

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NFL COMMENTARY

Seahawks' once-magical season takes another turn for the worse

BY LARRY STONE

The Seattle Times

Remember the warm glow of unexpected overachievement by the Seahawks?

Remember the stirring revival of a once-porous defense that at midseason turned itself into something at least resembling a formidable unit?

Remember when the Seahawks seemed to be teeming with magic and good karma, headed on an inexorable path to a playoff berth no one could have imagined at the start of the season?

Well, the Seahawks' story line, once filled with feel-good redemption plotlines, has taken an abrupt turn for the worse, or even the perverse. The rags-to-riches, underdog-rising tale that captivated the NFL for a long stretch is becoming a distant memory.



Gregory Bull/AP

Carolina Panthers running back Raheem Blackshear (20) leaps into the end zone for a touchdown against Seattle Seahawks safety Ryan Neal (26) during the second half Sunday in Seattle.

Heartwarming has turned into heartburn.

And now that once-probable playoff berth is hanging by a thin thread after Sunday's 30-24 loss to the Carolina

Panthers, the latest in a line of seemingly underwhelming opponents that have systematically exploited every Seahawks weakness.

See **Seahawks** / A7

SOCCER

Messi, Modric carry Argentina, Croatia into World Cup semis

BY STEVE DOUGLAS

Associated Press

DOHA, Qatar — Tears are flowing from soccer's biggest superstars as they make emotional exits from what might be their last World Cup.

First it was Neymar. Then it was Cristiano Ronaldo. Could Lionel Messi be next?

Momentum is building behind Messi's push to cap his career with the biggest prize in the game. The 35-year-old Argentina playmaker has carried his team to the semifinals, almost in the same way Diego Maradona — the man with whom Messi is so often compared — led the South

American nation to its second and most recent World Cup title in 1986.

Now in Argentina's way is Croatia, a country with a population of 4 million which is establishing a reputation as the most stubborn and durable of opponents while also boasting one of soccer's most graceful players in Luka Modric.

The teams go head to head at Lusail Stadium — also the venue for Sunday's final — in a meeting between the last two runners-up at the tournament: Argentina in 2014 and Croatia in 2018.

See **World Cup** / A6