

Trail Blazers look to shut down Kobe Bryant and the Lakers. NBA, 3, 11-12C

By Robert Hanahiro, USA TODAY

Fri-Mon, December 22-25, 2000

Nation takes long holiday break

- ▶ USA TODAY writers share best, worst travel tales, 1D
- ▶ The Rockettes kick up off-season interest, 1B
- ▶ In Nazareth, the real first century lives again, 13A

- ▶ Last chance for Jets, Rams, Dolphins, Steelers, Packers, Lions, Colts ■ NFL Preview, 1, 2, 5-6C

Newsline

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■ Nasdaq, Dow regain ground

Dow Jones industrial average rises 168.36 points to 10,487.29; Nasdaq index gains 7.34 points to 2,340.12; 30-year Treasury bond yield rises to 5.41%. 1, 4B

▶ USA TODAY Internet 100 rises 0.92 to 86.38.

▶ Japan's Nikkei average is down 2 points to 13,421 early today. Hong Kong's Hang Seng index rises 95 points to 14,755.

Silicon Valley firms cut power use

Power shortages in California have high tech firms cutting back on electricity, some by 10%. 1B

▶ West's energy crisis shows vulnerability. 9A

Clinton weighs holiday clemencies

Advocates are urging President Clinton to commute sentences of low-level drug offenders who critics say are serving overly harsh prison terms. 3A.



Rooting: Eagles fans Daniel Mease, 11, and Joe Fiumara enjoy game at Veterans Stadium in Philadelphia.

Why the NFL rules

Popularity soars for the violent certainty of 'contact' ballet

By Larry Weisman
USA TODAY

Cover story

Picture the National Football League slapping on an oversized foam finger and chanting, "We're No. 1." It's not so far-fetched an image. With the other major sports — baseball, basketball and hockey — lagging in appeal, with leisure time at a premium and the entertainment dollar sliced ever thinner, the NFL doesn't just rule. It's the sovereign, the monarch, the king.

Attendance? Headed for another record, with a million fans a week spinning the turnstiles at stadiums everywhere. Merchandising? About \$2.7 billion in retail doodads, shirts, jackets and hats, some \$700 million ahead of its nearest competitor, television. Though no sports ratings are as strong as they once were, including the NFL's, it's not even fair to compare NFL ratings with those of other sports, so vast is the gulf.

Laden with lore and tradition, based around hand-to-hand struggle, elemental and brutal in its finality, football loses little of that coliseum atmosphere when viewed — as it most often is — from the sofa. It's tactical at times, terrifying in its intensity but neatly confined to a three-hour Sunday window, just 17 times a year.

NFL tops TV ratings

The Super Bowl has dominated network TV ratings the last 10 years, only twice relinquishing the title for second place. No. 1-rated programs, by year:

Year	Top program	Household*
2000	SF XXXIV	43.6
1999	SF XXXIII	40.0
1998	SF XXXII	43.6
1997	SF XXXI	42.0
1996	SF XXX	44.0
1995	SF XXIX	38.4
1994	Olympics	45.7
1993	Cher	42.3
1992	SF XXVI	37.1
1991	SF XXV	38.0
1990	SF XXIV	35.9

*Projected, in millions.
Source: Nielsen Media Research

glibly says, "In some ways, it's the thinking man's game. It's contact ballet."

It's dramatic, and the season peaks with winter's onset. Winning brightens the shortened days; losers brood in the gloom until their heroes' next kickoff.

The game, it's said, comes down to blocking and tackling. Success in the competitive sports arena derives from marketing and selling. The NFL's brand of football has become equal parts of both — a brand and football. As its teams prepare for the final regular-season games, the conglomerate itself moves boldly toward Super Bowl XXXV on Jan. 28 in Tampa.

No single American sports event is bigger than the NFL's championship game. Among the top 100 all-time TV audiences are 29 Super Bowls (18 in the top 25). The Academy Awards tops out at 38th. Baseball's best finish is 56th.

This weekend, in another example of the league's competitive parity, seven teams will vie for the three playoff berths remaining. Four of the six division titles also will be determined.

"I'd go on welfare before I'd give up my tickets," says New Orleans Saints fan Scott Wedler, who parts with \$4,000 annually for four club seats that entitle him to a premier view of a team that has never, in its 34-year history, won a playoff game.

Please see COVER STORY next page ▶

Surplus soars despite slump

Budget Office forecast could supply tax cuts, prescription benefits

By Jonathan Weisman
USA TODAY

WASHINGTON — Congressional forecasters have a huge Christmas bonus — a \$6 trillion surplus estimate that could mean tax cuts, prescription drug benefits and a national-debt pay-down.

The Congressional Budget Office's 10-year surplus estimate, though still preliminary, appears likely to come in at \$1.4 trillion higher than the \$4.6 trillion estimate released over the summer, according to Democratic and Republican aides on Capitol Hill.

"Every year you go, it gets bigger and bigger," Rep. Robert Matsui, D-Calif., said. "I think there will be a sizeable tax cut, just because of the size of this surplus."

The new forecast, due out in early February, seems surprising as the stock market is sagging and economic growth has slowed. The economy expanded at a less-than-sterling 2.2% this summer, according to revised government figures released Thursday. The NASDAQ has lost half its value since March.

However, congressional forecasters are looking at the long term, a 10-year window in which they already assume that at least one recession will occur. Indeed, the main reason the surplus will be revised upward is because congressional economists are adopting a slightly more rosy long-term growth estimate than earlier this year. In July, the economy was expected to grow an average of 2.7% from 2001-2010. Now, congressional forecasters expect it to grow at a rate closer to 3% from 2002-2011.

The forecasts are still not complete, but preliminary figures indicate that the federal surplus, not counting Social Security revenue, could reach from \$2.5 trillion to \$3.5 trillion from 2002-2011, up from \$2.2 trillion forecast in July.

The estimated Social Security surplus — the amount by which tax payments exceed benefits — would rise from \$2.4 trillion to between \$2.5 trillion and \$3 trillion over that period.

If Congress spent the entire non-Social Security surplus on tax cuts and new government programs, the available federal debt could still be paid off before the end of Bush's first term with the Social Security surplus alone, budget crunchers say.

Sleepers warn that just as the surplus numbers have swung up so dramatically this year, they could come crashing downward. The Congressional Budget Office already might be dramatically underestimating the amount of money Congress will spend over the next 10 years, says Robert Greenstein of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. And the government still faces a budget crunch when the baby boomers begin to retire just beyond the budget office's 10-year window, draining the Social Security trust fund.

But even some Democrats who have maintained that the government cannot afford large tax cuts now say that can change. However, they do not see wide support for Bush's proposed tax cut of \$1.3 trillion.

Russia's Putin observes Hanukkah

Russian President Vladimir Putin, right, lights candle marking Jewish celebration of Hanukkah in Moscow Thursday. Russian Rabbi Berl Lazar looks on. Such commemorations were banned under Communism.

The other most dangerous terrorist

U.S. officials say Imad Mughniyah, head of the terrorist arm of Hezbollah, might be responsible for more killings than Osama bin Laden, 14A.

■ Money: Dividends on the block

With AT&T leading the way, cutting the dividend is the latest hot trend in Corporate America. 1B.

■ Sports: Interview with Venus Williams

The Wimbledon and Olympic champion talks about tennis, superstardom and her new \$40 million endorsement deal with Reebok. 1, 14C.

■ Life: Golden Globe contenders

Director Steven Soderbergh picks up two Golden Globe nominations, for *Erin Brockovich* and *Traffic*. Julia Roberts gets a best actress nod. 1E.

No USA TODAY on Christmas day

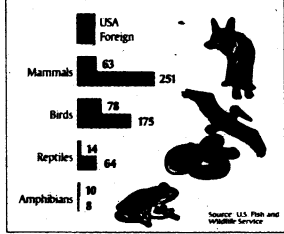
Beginning Tuesday in Life: people to watch in 2001.

By William F. Nicholson

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Endangered animals here, abroad



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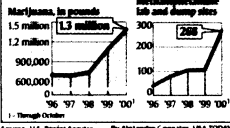
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Drug danger lurks in U.S. forests

Pot growers in woods linked with international traffickers

By Kevin Johnson
USA TODAY

Drugs seizures in the national forests



WASHINGTON — Drug seizures on federal forestlands from California to Appalachia are reaching near-record levels this year, and U.S. authorities increasingly are worried about the dangers posed to tourists by renegade marijuana growers protecting their turf.

Through October, marijuana seizures on forestlands were up by nearly 30% from last year, according to new U.S. Forest Service reports, a haul representing more than 1.3 million pounds of the plant. Authorities set the street value of the pot as high as \$3,000 per pound.

Forestry officials say they fear that those growing marijuana in public forests are increasingly establishing links with international drug traffickers. The officials say they have seen signs that the renegade operations are using violence, or the threat of it, to protect their crops.

In California, where more than 500,000 pounds have been seized this year, agents have found "farms" protected around the clock by armed

guards. Earlier this year, a man and his 8-year-old son were critically wounded in northern California while tracking deer across a large marijuana garden in the El Dorado National Forest.

"The risks to the public and our employees in California alone are frightening," says Kim Thorsen, the service's deputy director of enforcement. In the Daniel Boone National Forest, in eastern Kentucky, supervisory law enforcement officer Harold Sizemore said marijuana seizures and arrests are at their highest levels in 10 years.

Authorities have seized more than 200,000 plants in the Boone forest so far this year, up nearly 5% from 1999. "We busted one family — a father

and five kids in April — who were doing more business than a Wendy's hamburger stand."

Marijuana isn't the only crop being grown illegally in the USA's forests. Seizures of methamphetamine operations are up 150% this year, reports show. Those seizures have included working laboratories and related chemical dumps that threaten forestlands' water sources.

Methamphetamine seizures have been concentrated in the Mark Twain National Forest in Missouri, where drug producers have found a combination of deep cover and proximity to interstate highways.

Remote areas of the national forests always have been attractive to illegal drug operations, but authorities say they have not seen drug activity like this in perhaps 20 years.

Bill Wisley, the Forest Service's director of law enforcement, says traffickers are seeking increased cover as law enforcement efforts have intensified in U.S. cities and suburbs.

The Forest Service has asked Congress for an additional \$10 million in its 2002 budget for more drug agents and equipment.