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left scale

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right scale

35

20,000

30

17,500

25

15,000

20

12,500

15

10,000

2022



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Pioneer Natural Resources	PXD	4.31%
Marathon Petroleum	MPC	4.11%
Phillips 66	PSX	3.31%
Williams Companies	WMB	3.30%
Kinder Morgan	KMI	3.23%

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# UP & DOWN WALL STREET

## The Countdown to The Next Recession Already Has Begun

**F**ake it 'til you make it might work in Silicon Valley. It's a less practical strategy for the Federal Reserve, which looks ready to compound one mistake with another.

The Fed is behind the curve on inflation; the core personal-consumption-expenditure deflator rose 4.9% in December on an annualized basis, more than double the 2% inflation target. Now the Fed is ready to raise interest rates, probably in March, after assuming rising prices would be transitory.

The central bank's statement on Wednesday contained few surprises, but then Fed Chairman Jerome Powell started talking. At first, he offered a fairly balanced outlook of the risks, with inflation on one side and the threat to growth from Omicron on the other, with the risks tilting a touch more toward the former than the latter.

But the more he spoke, the more hawkish he sounded. He didn't dismiss the possibility of a half-point rate increase and suggested that the Fed could raise rates far more quickly than the four increases the market had priced in. By the end of the day, the Dow Jones Industrial Average had turned a 518-point gain into a 130-point drop, and investors were pricing in more than four rate hikes.

By Friday, however, the overall averages conveyed little of that volatility. The Dow finished up 460.10 points, or 1.3%. The Nasdaq Composite ended the week little changed as blockbuster earnings from **Apple** (ticker: AAPL) and **Microsoft** (MSFT) helped it



By Ben Levisohn

make back what had been a 4.9% loss. Only the Russell 2000, which officially entered a bear market on Thursday, finished the week lower, by 1%.

Massive reversals were the norm, and the market went from simply oversold to "super oversold," according to Doug Ramsey, chief investment officer of the Leuthold Group. "When there's this kind of selling intensity, there's usually another shoe to drop," he says.

But even when the market bounces—and it will bounce—investors have to know that the clock is counting down to recession and the end of the bull market. The clock, in this case, is the yield curve, and an inverted one is the one truly reliable recession signal.

An inversion occurs when longer-term rates, which are typically higher than short-term ones, sink below their short-end counterparts. That's not just a signal that a recession is coming—it also helps create the conditions for one by making lending unprofitable for banks, which borrow short and lend long. Ultimately, the lack of credit causes a recession, though it usually takes months to occur.

The yield curve is flattening quickly. On Friday, the two-year Treasury yield closed at 1.17%, while the 10-year closed at 1.779%, putting the gap between them at 0.61 of a percentage point. On Dec. 31, that gap was 1.069 points. Since 1955, the yield curve has flattened about 0.8 of a point a year during the first year of a tightening cycle, which would mean the curve would invert sometime in the first half of 2023, says Jim Reid, global head of credit strategy at Deutsche Bank.

Recessions usually follow in eight to 19 months, which would put the next one in the middle of 2024. If the current market follows the historical path, the current upheaval, though painful, should simply mark a tantrum in risk markets that will pass. "The playbook is consistent with history," he says.

But much will depend on how seri-



Will Jerome Powell have the guts to do what it takes to defeat inflation? Some on Wall Street are doubtful.

The yield curve is flattening quickly, and an inverted yield curve is the one truly reliable recession signal. Expect one 8 to 19 months post-inversion.

ous Powell is about raising rates to tackle inflation and the path of economic growth. David Rosenberg, founder of Rosenberg Research and former chief North American economist at Merrill Lynch, takes Powell at his word. Rosenberg expects the Fed to lift rates aggressively, only to find that the economy is growing at a much slower pace than it thinks. He isn't wrong about the economy, which looks set to slow during the first quarter of 2022, thanks, at least in part, to the Omicron variant of Covid-19.

Rosenberg, however, worries that more than just the virus is responsible for the economy's weaker growth and that it's "late cycle," meaning the Fed is starting its rate increases too late. If he's correct, the Fed will tighten the economy right into a recession.

"Inflation will be killed by the Fed," Rosenberg says. "Given the nature of this inflation, which is far more related to supply constraints than booming demand, it is going to create a renewed recession." Again, if he's right, the volatility we're seeing now is just the beginning of a bear market.

Richard Bernstein, chief executive officer of Richard Bernstein Advisors and Rosenberg's former colleague at Merrill Lynch, agrees that the Fed is too late. But he also believes inflation is real, and that the Fed won't have the guts to do what it will take to defeat it—tighten the economy into recession. "Recession [is] the only way to successfully fight inflation," he says. "They don't have the backbone to do that."

Like Rosenberg, Bernstein believes the economy is late cycle, but it might just take longer to play out. That means owning sectors like industrials and energy, and adding some consumer staples for ballast.

Because as painful as the current drop has been, it's the next one that will really hurt.

**H**ome may be where the heart is, but no one should fall in love with home-builder stocks right now.

Builders have gotten walloped in January, and like just about everything else, it can be blamed on the Federal Reserve. The SPDR S&P Homebuild-

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## Up & Down Wall Street (continued)

ers exchange-traded fund (XHB) started the year sitting near its all-time high. But the minutes from the Fed's December meeting, released on Jan. 5, revealed a far more hawkish tone than the market had expected. The market sank, and so did housing stocks, with the Homebuilders ETF dropping more than 14% through Jan. 21.

That a more aggressive Fed would hurt builders shouldn't come as a surprise. Higher federal-funds rates mean higher home-loan rates, all else being equal, and that's what's been happening: The average rate on a 30-year mortgage has risen to 3.55% from 3.11% at the end of December, according to Freddie Mac. And higher rates should slow home sales, as they'll put homeownership out of reach for some prospective buyers. Housing activity has been slowing, with single-family home starts dropping in all but one of the past seven tightening cycles, according to UBS data.

Housing activity, however, already looked set to slow, with or without the Fed. Pending home sales fell 3.8% in December from November, according to the National Association of Retailers, which blamed the drop on a lack of homes for sale. But there's also a good chance that higher prices—they rose 18.8% in November year over year, according to the S&P CoreLogic Case-Shiller Home Price Indices—are giving some buyers second thoughts or simply pushing a new home out of their price range, explains Peter Boockvar, chief investment officer at Bleakley Advisory Group. "The NAR is blaming the lack of inventory, but we can't discount also the spike in home prices that, in turn, dis-suspects some possible buyers," he writes.

Then, Fed Chairman Powell had to go and try to convince financial markets of his inflation-fighting credibility. The fed-funds futures market now reflects a 66% chance of six rate hikes in 2022, up from 13% just a month ago. Four rate hikes are nearly a given. And let's get one thing straight: Tightening cycles are historically pretty lousy for housing stocks. During the last seven hiking cycles, housing stocks outperformed twice, managed to finish higher but underperformed once, and fell four times, according to UBS data.

Yes, housing stocks already reflect a lot of this pain. UBS analyst John Lovallo notes that the average home-builder stock traded at just seven times 2023 earnings on Jan. 19, suggesting that the market has already adjusted to the possibility of Fed rate increases and slower home sales. Yet Lovallo contends that there's enough pent-up demand to keep sales going, which could cause mul-

tiples to grow by 50% and more than offset declines in earnings estimates. "Builder stocks could spring this spring," he writes.

Valuing home builders off earnings, however, may not be so au courant anymore. Traditionally, they've been valued on price-to-book ratios, and BofA Securities analyst Rafe Jadrosich switched back to that metric from price/earnings in a Jan. 27 report, arguing that most home builders had profit margins that were "unsustainable." As a result, the price that investors will be willing to pay in the future will probably be based on the return on equity of the home builder, with stocks that have better returns earning higher valuations.

Jadrosich downgraded **Toll Brothers** (TOL), known for its upscale homes, to Underperform from Buy, citing, in part, its higher price-to-book ratio, relative to its ROE and the fact that as rates rise, homeowners might simply choose not to move up. He cut **Lennar** (LEN) to Neutral from Buy, because it trades at 1.3 times P/B, a level reserved for companies with higher ROEs. He upgraded **KB Home** (KBH) to Buy from Neutral, based on its low P/B, relative to its ROE, and left his Buy intact on **D.R. Horton** (DHI), citing its asset-light model and focus on entry-level housing.

"We continue to have a constructive view on the underlying drivers for new homes and renovation demand," Jadrosich explains. "However, we see a more challenging setup for stock outperformance, with rising interest rates and a potential earnings peak in 2022."

Still, his price targets suggest further gains in all four stocks. That may prove optimistic. Part of the problem is the massive rally that home builders have staged over the past three years. The **SPDR S&P Homebuilders ETF** has returned 170%, including reinvested dividends, from the beginning of 2019 through 2021, easily outperforming the **SPDR S&P 500** ETF's (SPY) 100% return over the same period.

Perhaps most concerning is that D.R. Horton, Lennar, Toll Brothers, and **M.D.C. Holdings** (MDC) all looked las if they were about to break out, according to 22V Research technical analyst John Roque, but failed to do so, something that often leads to bigger breakdowns. Their 40-week moving averages are also starting to roll over, as is relative performance to the S&P 500 index. For Roque, the conclusion is obvious.

"In short, these four stocks should be sold," he writes. "Shorted, if you can." At least until the Fed has a change of heart. ■

# STREETWISE

## Thinking of Buying The Dips in Peloton, Netflix? Some Tips

**O**ne bank says to use the recent growth-stock selloff to buy shares of **Alpha-beta**. Another says **Ama-zon.com** and Facebook owner **Meta Platforms**. A third is going in a different direction and picking all three. I haven't seen calls this bold since my barber decided to put his index fund on dividend reinvestment.

How about some herd-defying recommendations on assets that have suffered much bigger spills? I spoke with one analyst who downgraded **Netflix** (ticker: NFLX) to the equivalent of Sell, even though its shares have already been Peloton-ed, and another who decided that it's time to buy, well, **Peloton Interactive** (PTON)—just the thought of which gives me a saddle ache.

I was interested more in what led to these opinion changes than in the recommendations themselves—unless, of course, they work out, in which case I knew it all along.

Start with Peloton. I own one, apparently. If you add the time my wife spends on it to the time I spend on it, you end up with my wife's time. But Peloton users I've spoken with are generally fans.

"I am a little bit obsessed with it," says a colleague who bought hers during the pandemic. "I have my favorite instructors, but then I also have a tier above that where I'm convinced that they're my friends."

Customer churn is fairly low at 8% a year, and users seem more enthusi-



By Jack Hough

astic about their machines than before the pandemic, huffing through an average of 16 rides a month.

But clearly, bikes were an easier sell when gyms were shut down. In November, Peloton slashed its revenue guidance for its fiscal year running through June. Now, the company says it's looking into cost cuts and production curbs. Its next quarterly report is scheduled for Feb. 8.

The shares, which topped \$150 early last year, have been trading below \$25. Stifel analyst Scott Devitt recently upgraded them to Buy.

What brought him around was calculating that the lifetime value of a Peloton customer is \$4,500 in gross profit, and that the market was valuing each at about \$3,000. He calls that a good starting point, even if Peloton only replaces the customers who leave.

And he sees long-term growth as a more likely outcome—considering that there are nearly 100 million gym members in Peloton's markets and that it has fewer than three million subscribers.

A connected-fitness rival called

iFIT Health & Fitness, formerly NordicTrack, would seem to have an edge, given its fuller menu of machines.

But Devitt says Peloton has a chance at becoming the **Apple** (AAPL) of the industry. He says opportunities like Peloton's current stock price are rarely clean. The company handled its manufacturing bottlenecks poorly. It created confusion on pricing, lowering the cost of its original bike and then adding shipping and setup fees. Management also made big share sales before the price plummeted, although Devitt sees that as a straightforward matter of concentrated investors taking profits.

**P**eloton recently traded at two times this year's projected revenue. Netflix trades at just over five times. That stock fell by half between November and this past week, to less than \$360. Hedge fund manager Bill Ackman made a big share purchase, and the price bounced. It's around \$384.

Macquarie Research analyst Tim Nollen cut his rating to Underperform from Neutral after seeing the company's latest quarterly report, which drove shares 21% lower in a day. There was a small miss on fourth-quarter subscriber growth and a huge disappointment on guidance for the same for the first quarter.

But Nollen says it wasn't just the jarring slowdown in subscriber growth that soured him on the stock. It was the margins. Guidance there went from healthy growth to a decline.

That's largely a function of spending on content. In the past, when Net-

Distant consensus estimates from analysts have Netflix generating mighty free cash flow several years from now. We'll see.

flix splurged on shows, subscriptions rose so quickly that margins expanded, Nollen says. No longer.

The market seems crowded. "They should bundle all the streaming services together and call it cable," the comic Jim Gaffigan recently tweeted. I pay for eight services and watch only three.

In my defense, I'm too busy to watch during the week and too lazy to cancel on the weekend, plus the pandemic has made spending my main recreation. The point is, I'll get around to cutting services at some point, and I suspect there are others.

What can Netflix do to reaccelerate subscriber growth? It can cut prices, as it has done in India, but the streaming market there is even more crowded than in the U.S., and prices are much lower. It can introduce a lower-price tier with advertising, which on some other platforms generates the same or higher revenue as higher-price tiers.

But that won't happen soon, not least because starting up an ad business is "not a simple undertaking," Nollen says.

Netflix had a bumper year for free cash flow in 2020, but that was because spending dropped when studio production shut down, while subscribers poured in. Last year, free cash flow turned negative again. This year's consensus is positive, but falling.

Netflix is a 25-year-old company that first started streaming 15 years ago. A start-up burning cash while subscriptions race higher is one thing. But if the first-quarter outlook is any indication of growth, investors will want to see more cash.

Distant consensus estimates have Netflix generating mighty free cash flow several years from now. We'll see.

Nollen says there will be a price at which Netflix is attractive again, and that it might even be attractive already, but that some of its early advantages have been upended. With "broken" growth stocks, he notes, "it can take them a while to get back into investors' favor." ■



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# REVIEW

**34,725.47**  
Dow Industrials: +460.10

**535.76**  
Dow Global Index: -6.68

**1.78**  
10-year Treasury Note: +0.03



A VARIETY OF VIEWS

## How Low Can Bitcoin Go?

Tighter monetary policies are weighing on speculative assets like crypto. Bitcoin crashed from \$43,000 to \$33,000 in four days and lost 23% of its value. On Jan. 28, the cryptocurrency was at \$37,700, down nearly 50% from its all-time high, reached in November.

Has the plunge gone too far? Bitcoin's relative strength index implies that the token is oversold, indicating it's ripe for a bounce. Key support levels, such as its 200- and 50-day moving averages, have long been breached, indicating further downside ahead. Some analysts see a floor at \$33,000, though \$29,800 is also credible; Bitcoin fell that low in July, then rallied to nearly \$70,000. "A lot of investors would back up the truck and open their checkbooks at prices around \$29,000," says Sean Farrell, head of digital asset strategy at Fundstrat Global.

Mike McGlone, senior commodity strategist at Bloomberg, says Bitcoin isn't far from the 50% discount to its 200-day moving average that marked low points in 2018 and 2020. He notes that \$30,000 is a "key support," and that institutional holders have swooped in at that price. "I would see the tide rising at that level," he says, expecting Bitcoin to eventually rally to \$100,000.

Wilfred Daye, head of Securitize Capital, a digital-asset marketplace, also sees support at \$30,000. But if Bitcoin falls further, its next stop could be \$27,000. That's generally the breakeven price for Bitcoin miners, who receive new coins for processing transactions. What happens if Bitcoin drops that far? "That's a very scary thought," he says, since it could usher in another "crypto winter," a long stretch of deeply depressed prices. —Daren Fonda

### THE NUMBERS

**40**

Number of the largest 100 company pensions funded at 100% or more in 2021, the highest since 2007

**27 K**

Average number of comments per day on Reddit's WallStreetBets main page in November, down from 47,000 a year earlier

**\$7 B**

McKinsey estimate of financings for electric air-mobility companies in 2021, more than twice that of the previous 10 years

**790 K**

OPEC+'s average oil-barrels-per-day shortfall of production goals

To get Numbers by Barron's daily, sign up wherever you listen to podcasts or at [Barrons.com/podcasts](https://Barrons.com/podcasts)

### Whiplashed

Stocks fell as the week began, but soared at lunchtime, with indexes posting gains at the close. But a rising VIX ruled the markets. Bitcoin fell beneath \$33,000, then rallied. Eager dip buyers got crushed as stocks plunged, putting indexes in correction territory. Stocks rose as the Federal Reserve met, then sold off, then furiously rallied on Friday. On the week, the Dow industrials miraculously ended up 1.3%, to 34,725.47; the S&P 500 rose 0.8%, to 4431.85; and even the Nasdaq Composite eked out a gain—0.01%—to 13,770.57.

### Fed Day

Fed Chairman Jerome Powell took a hawkish stance after the rate-setting meeting, saying that there was room to raise rates "without threatening labor markets" and that rates could rise at the March meeting. U.S. growth in 2021 came in at 5.7%, inflation at 5.8%.

### The Earnings Parade

IBM posted its best sales growth in a decade on its cloud business, Boeing took a write-off but had its first positive cash flow since 2019, and General Electric had a decent quarter with some supply-chain bumps. Johnson & Johnson earnings rose on its Covid-19 vaccine, 3M on its N-95 masks, and American Express on upbeat revenue projections. Tesla had a record quarter, but warned of supply constraints. Apple just kept rolling despite chip issues.

### Breyer Out, Battle Begins

Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer, 83, said he was retiring, ushering in another confirmation war. President Joe Biden said he would name the first Black woman to the court.

### Girding for Russia

The United Kingdom claimed that Russia had tapped a pro-Russian Ukrainian to lead a puppet government, the U.S. placed 8,500 troops on "high alert," and both countries told embassy families to exit. The U.S. and Europe talked sanctions, including kicking Russia out of Swift, the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Tele-

### HE SAID:

**"When there's this kind of selling intensity, there's usually another shoe to drop."**

Leuthold Group's chief investment officer, Douglas Ramsey



communication. The U.S. asked Qatar, a major liquefied-natural-gas exporter, to help if Russia cut off European energy. By week's end, Russia thawed slightly.

### Annals of Deal Making

Nelson Peltz's Trian Partners took a stake in Unilever, after its failed bid to buy GlaxoSmithKline's and Pfizer's consumer-health businesses. Unilever then announced that 1,500 managers would be cut and the company would be restructured into five units...Blackwells Capital took a stake in Peloton Interactive, and urged the ouster of CEO John Foley and a sale of the once-hot pandemic stock...Engine Capital supported a \$9 billion Starboard Value bid to buy Kohl's...Bill Ackman's Pershing Square bought a \$1.1 billion stake in Netflix...The Wall Street Journal reported that Meta Platforms was winding down its Diem crypto project...Bloomberg reported that Nvidia was quietly preparing to drop its regulatory-challenged acquisition of SoftBank Group's Arm...Marcelo Claure, chief operating officer of SoftBank and formerly CEO of Sprint, quit the firm, reportedly in a dispute over pay.

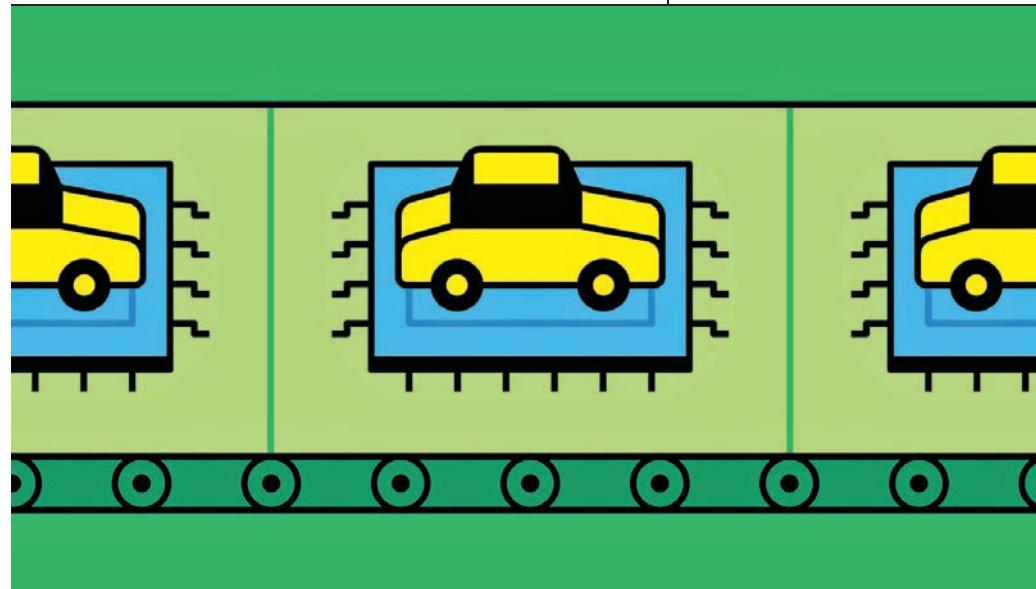
# PREVIEW

## Friday

remaining unchanged at 3.9%.

The Labor Department releases the jobs report for January. The economy is expected to add 150,000 positions after a gain of 199,000 in December. The unemployment rate is seen

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SIGNS OF IMPROVEMENT

## A Read on Cars and Chips

**TE Connectivity** isn't a household name. But it is a bellwether, and right now its earnings show an industrial and auto economy in recovery mode, as chip shortages ease.

TE makes sensors and connectors found in machines and devices with electrical elements, from cars to medical equipment. The company announced solid quarterly earnings this past week of \$1.72 per share, \$1.76 adjusted for one-time charges. That's up 20%, year over year, and ahead of Wall Street's consensus, though the stock fell. Revenue of \$3.8 billion—up 8%—also topped analysts' \$3.7 billion. Free cash flow fell short, however. CEO Terrence Curtin tells *Barron's* that a strong demand outlook forced TE to build inventory. That's actually good news.

Auto sales account for about 40% of TE's revenue. TE expected quarterly global light-vehicle production of some 18 million units; it came closer to 19 million, adding about \$100 million to sales. Chip woes meant production in 2021 ran some eight million units below underlying demand.

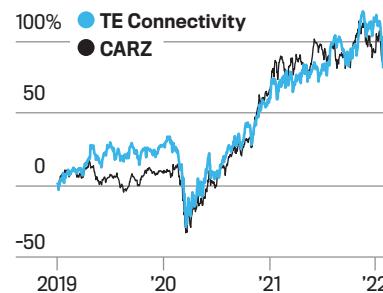
With ample chip supply, quarterly production could amount to 21 million to 23 million vehicles. Curtin doesn't see that happening this quarter, but he does believe it can reach 20 million to 21 million. TE orders reflected that pickup: \$4.3 billion in the quarter, up 10% from the prior quarter; 7% year over year. With orders outpacing sales by \$500 million, TE's backlog grew.

Headwinds remain. "Supply-chain and inflation got a little worse," he says. "Some of that is due to Omicron, some is capacity constraints, given growth rates we're seeing...[some is] our customers not getting all the parts they need for their products." —Nicholas Jasinski and Al Root

### In Sync

TE Connectivity shares track a popular ETF investing in auto makers and parts suppliers.

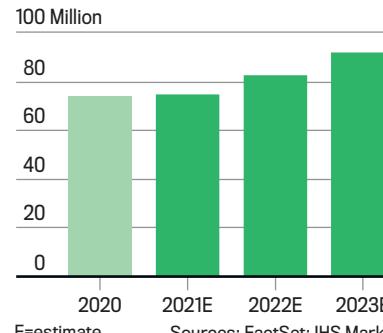
#### TE Connectivity Stock and First Trust S-Network Future Vehicles & Tech ETF, 2019 to 2022, YTD



### On the Road Again

Global vehicle production fell with the pandemic, then struggled with chip shortages. But expectations are rising.

#### Global Light-Vehicle Production, 2020 to 2023



## Monday 1/31

L3Harris Technologies, NXP Semiconductors, Otis Worldwide, and Trane Technologies report quarterly results.

**The Institute for Supply Management** releases its Chicago Purchasing Manager Index for January. The consensus estimate is for a 60.2 reading, about three points less than the December figure.

## Tuesday 2/1

Advanced Micro Devices, Alphabet, Chubb, Electronic Arts, Equity Residential, Exxon Mobil, Franklin Resources, General Motors, Gilead Sciences, PayPal Holdings, PulteGroup, Starbucks, and United Parcel Service report earnings.

**The Bureau of Labor Statistics** releases the Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey. Expectations are that there were 10.1 million job openings on December's last business day, a half-million less than in November. Openings now outnumber the unemployed.

**The ISM** releases its Manufacturing Purchasing Managers' Index for January. Economists forecast a 58 reading, about level with December's.

## Wednesday 2/2

AbbVie, AmerisourceBergen, Boston Scientific, D.R. Horton, Emerson Electric, Humana, Johnson Controls International, Marathon Petroleum, McKesson, Meta Platforms, Metlife, Novartis, Novo Nordisk, Old Dominion Freight Line, Qualcomm, Sony Group, T-Mobile US, Thermo Fisher Scientific, and Waste Management report quarterly results.

**ADP** releases its National Employment Report for January. Private-sector employment is seen increasing by 215,000 jobs, after 807,000 were added in December.

## Thursday 2/3

Activision Blizzard, Allstate, Amazon.com, Becton Dickinson, Biogen, Cardinal Health, Cigna, Clorox, ConocoPhillips, Cummins, Eli Lilly, Estée Lauder, Ford Motor, Fortinet, Hershey, Honeywell International, Illinois Tool Works, Intercontinental Exchange, Merck, Ralph Lauren, Shell, and Snap release earnings.

**The European Central Bank** announces its monetary-policy decision. The ECB is widely expected to keep its key short-term interest rates unchanged at negative 0.5%. Christine Lagarde, president of the ECB, has said it's unlikely to raise rates this year.

**ISM** releases its Services Purchasing Managers' Index for January. Consensus estimate is for a 58.9 reading, about three points less than in December.

## Friday 2/4

Air Products & Chemicals, Aon, Bristol Myers Squibb, Cboe Global Markets, Eaton, Hartford Financial Services Group, Prudential Financial, Regeneron Pharmaceuticals, and Sanofi hold conference calls to discuss quarterly results.

### Coming Earnings

	Consensus Estimate	Year ago
M		
AGNC Investment (Q4)	\$3.03	\$2.58
T		
Alphabet (Q4)	27.80	22.30
Exxon Mobil (Q4)	1.89	0.03
General Motors (Q4)	1.13	1.93
Gilead Sciences (Q4)	1.56	2.19
Stanley Black & Decker (Q4)	2.05	3.29
Waters (Q4)	3.48	3.65

More Earnings on Page 66.

### Consensus Estimate

Day	Consensus Est	Last Period
T	December JOLTS Job Openings	10,250,000
TH	December Factory Orders	-0.35%
F	January Nonfarm Payrolls	162,500
	January Unemployment Rate	3.9%

Unless otherwise indicated, times are Eastern. a=Advanced; f-Final; p=Preliminary; r-Revised  
Source: FactSet

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# Volatility Playbook: How to Invest in 2022

Stocks have had their worst January since 2008, but the selloff has played out according to script—and it's creating buying opportunities

By NICHOLAS JASINSKI

The 2022 market was always going to be a tug of war between earnings and interest rates. Corporate profit growth fueled by the re-opening has come up against contracting valuations and expectations of tighter monetary policy. While the battle has led to a chaotic period for stocks, the past few weeks have played out logically and according to script. Financial markets are entering their next chapter, and investors are finally rushing to adapt.

"If the Fed really wants to fight inflation, that means higher long-term interest rates and long-duration assets will not work," says Richard Bernstein, CEO and chief investment officer of Richard Bernstein Advisors, a global macro investment manager with about \$16 billion in assets. "The problem is that everyone came into the year long long-duration assets."

Long-duration assets, including many growth stocks and long-term bonds, are particularly sensitive to changes in interest rates. As rates rise, the present value of future cash flows declines, lowering today's prices.

The S&P 500 index is down 7% this year. (Friday's late-day rally helped stocks avoid a fourth-straight week of declines.) Losses in the tech-heavy Nasdaq Composite are even greater, while the small-cap Russell 2000 is in a bear market. For many investors, the selloff feels unfamiliar—there hasn't been a 10% correction in the S&P 500 since March 2020, and the index had just one 5% pullback in all of 2021.

But 2022 could actually be closer to normal, with the recent low-volatility conditions more the exception. Since the S&P 500 was created in 1957, the index has averaged about one 10% decline and more than three 5% declines every year, according to Dow

Jones Market Data. The good news is that selloffs create opportunities, and 2022's is unlikely to be different.

Jack Ablin, CIO at Cresset Capital, calls January's drop a "garden variety technical correction," as opposed to a more pernicious cyclical downturn or systemic problem facing the market. Stocks aren't falling because analysts are lowering profit forecasts en masse, or because economists are predicting a recession on the horizon. Instead, the correction has taken place because of how richly the market is valued.

"Valuations may have gotten out of whack, and now we're experiencing a revaluation of the market because interest rates are going up," says Ablin, whose firm manages about \$22 billion. "It's like ripping a Band-Aid off."

On Wednesday, Federal Reserve Chairman Jerome Powell made it clear that it's not the central bank's job to put a floor under the market—the so-called Fed put. He remarked that asset prices remain "somewhat elevated," and noted that households had plenty of savings and could withstand further declines before the situation begins to be a meaningful problem for the U.S. economy.

The Fed is set to begin lifting its target interest-rate range from near zero as soon as March, with bond-market pricing suggesting a total of five quarter-point increases in 2022. Back in October, the market had priced in just one hike. That shift in expectations has been felt in Treasuries, where yields have risen, and in high-multiple stocks and other particularly pricey assets.

Buzzy technology stocks trading for eye-watering multiples of future expected revenues, unprofitable initial public offerings, special purpose acquisition company mergers, meme stocks, and cryptocurrencies are among the biggest losers this year. Meanwhile, the 10-year Treasury



note's yield has risen by 0.28 of a percentage point in 2022, to 1.78%, as its price has declined.

Credit markets and many overseas stock indexes have held up much better than the S&P 500 and Nasdaq, and the price of gold is down, confirming that the recent scare isn't about a general flight to safety.

"Fundamentals, generally speaking, remain quite stable and in good shape," says Dubravko Lakos-Bujas, J.P. Morgan's chief U.S. equity strategist. "It's really a question of multiples."

In fact, the early 2022 selloff has fallen neatly along valuation lines. Through Wednesday, S&P 500 stocks

with low price/earnings ratios had outperformed those with high multiples by 11.5 percentage points since the start of 2022, according to Patrick Palfrey, co-head of quantitative research at Credit Suisse.

The same dynamic is true across sectors. That pattern should hold up as interest rates and bond yields continue to rise this year. Other defensive stock characteristics—think low leverage or high returns on equity—have been less of a factor.

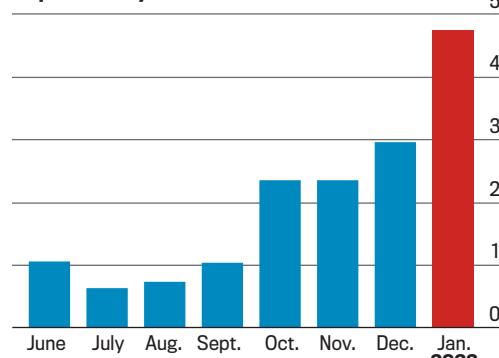
"The valuation gap between the expensive and cheaper stocks is still very high, relative to history," Palfrey says. "There's a fair amount of oppor-



## Great Expectations

Bond-market pricing now implies as many as five rate increases in 2022. As higher rates have been priced in, expected volatility—measured by the VIX—has soared.

**Number of quarter-point rate increases expected by Dec. 2022**



Sources: Bloomberg; FactSet

**Cboe Volatility Index, Year to Date**

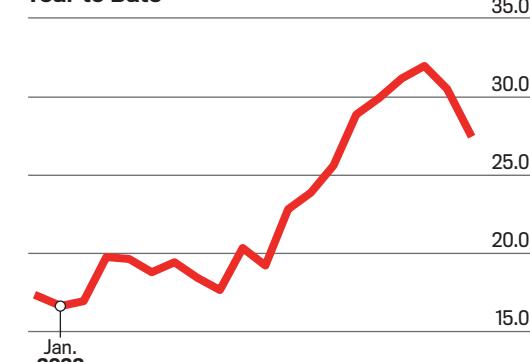


Illustration by Pete Ryan

tunity for cheap companies to continue outperforming from here."

One way in which 2022 might differ is that traditionally cheap sectors are getting even cheaper because of postpandemic, reopening patterns. That's as pricier growth stocks face tough comparisons to a strong 2021.

Energy stocks are expected to grow earnings per share by 45% this year, with industrials up by 39%. Technology, meanwhile, is seen increasing EPS by just 9%.

It's another sign that the economy isn't the problem.

"A hawkish Fed and interest-rate increases don't necessarily equate to the end of the bull market, as long as economic growth remains strong," says Nuveen CIO Saira Malik.

Malik, who also manages the \$139 billion College Retirement Equities fund, favors companies that can control their own fate in an inflationary environment and growing economy. Energy stocks are one option. They offer commodity exposure that should insulate them against inflation while benefiting from a global economic reopening. Malik points to **Pioneer Natural Resources** (ticker: PXD) and **Valero Energy** (VLO), in particular.

Malik also likes some established front-office software companies whose stocks have been punished. Those include **Salesforce.com** (CRM), which is down 28% since mid-November, and **HubSpot** (HUBS), off 46%. Unlike stay-at-home pandemic winners, Salesforce and HubSpot should benefit from a return to the office and increased corporate spending.

Given inflation uncertainty, volatile markets, and a rising-rate environment, Cresset's Ablin recommends a similar quality bent, with a focus on dividend-paying shares. He likes **Abbott Laboratories** (ABT), **Johnson & Johnson** (JNJ), **3M** (MMM), **Caterpillar** (CAT), **Automatic Data Processing** (ADP), and **McDonald's** (MCD).

In the near term, some of the big losers in January—technology stocks, biotechs, and small-caps—could see a rebound, says Lakos-Bujas, but not because uncertainty around inflation and Fed policy are going away. Rather, the market just looks to be in oversold territory.

Investor sentiment—based on the Investor Sentiment Survey from the American Association of Individual Investors, along with the Hulbert Stock Newsletter Sentiment Index—is at its most bearish level since the

## MORE ON THE MARKET

- **Can Moderna bounce back?** Page 12
- **20 picks from the Roundtable** Page 14
- **Meme trading's darkest hour** Page 24
- **How to play tech now** Page 29
- **Pinning hopes on earnings** Page 35

March 2020 selloff. Those are contrarian indicators, with history suggesting positive market returns going forward when they've reached similar levels. It recalls the Warren Buffett adage about being fearful when others are greedy, and greedy when others are fearful.

Valuations are now relatively undemanding, as well. The S&P 500 closed the week with a forward price/earnings ratio of 20.1 times. That's only one point higher than the index's valuation at the end of 2019, before the Covid-19 pandemic hit, and before **Tesla** (TSLA) joined the S&P 500.

Even traders have gotten more defensive, with the S&P 500 put-to-call ratio spiking since the start of the year. That's a sign investors are looking to hedge their market exposure, according to Michael Green, a portfolio manager and chief strategist at Simplify Asset Management, which offers several exchange-traded funds with options-based strategies. The firm's largest ETF is the **Simplify US Equity PLUS Downside Convexity** (SPD), which aims to protect returns during volatile drawdowns.

If the past week felt particularly turbulent, that's because market volatility can breed more volatility, Green observes. As demand rises for put options—which increase in value as the price of a security falls—options writers often add to the selling pressure. In order to hedge their market exposure and limit risk, they may short the same stocks they've sold puts on. That has contributed to the massive swings seen in recent days, and it works in both directions.

For investors, the volatility is painful, but selling out now would be a mistake. Instead, investors should use the selloff to rebalance their portfolios.

"When you see incredible volatility, that's when you need to be maximally dispassionate," Bernstein says. "Volatility tells you that leadership is changing in the market."

Growth stocks won't be the leaders in the next phase—bad news for tech and good news for more sleepy corners of the market. And over the past weeks, investors have finally woken up to that idea—seemingly all at once. ■

*"History shows that it doesn't pay to try to time the stock market, but there are times when risk levels have increased to a point where it is wise to have a safety net – like dividends."*

- Jim Cullen, Chairman & CEO

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# Moderna Struggles With Growing Pains

Its stock has slid as the upstart faces challenges from the vaccine old guard. Bet on it for the long term. Its huge cash pile should help.

By JOSH NATHAN-KAZIS

In 2019, four pharmaceutical giants shared virtually all of the \$33 billion worth of vaccine revenue earned worldwide.

**Moderna** (ticker: MRNA), meanwhile, had just 830 employees and no product sales.

The pandemic has upended the vaccine business. Moderna has sold or contracted to sell \$36 billion worth of its Covid-19 vaccine since the start of 2021. Now, as the pandemic begins to ease, the vaccine heavyweights, led by **Sanofi** (SNY) and **Pfizer** (PFE), are ready to reclaim their turf.

Moderna shares, which rose more than 1,100% between the start of 2020 and the middle of 2021, are sliding. Today, Moderna's market value is \$134 billion less than it was in August.

The stock is down 41% in January alone. If the disruption of the vaccine market caused by Covid-19 outlasts the pandemic, its shares are cheap for a company that delivered 800 million doses last year. Investors, however,

should be ready to ride out a transition to a postpandemic world that could take a number of years to play out.

Moderna's shares were below \$15 when Barron's highlighted the company in a cover story in August 2019, and at \$168 when we recommended the stock in April 2021. Shares rose to almost \$500 in early August, but are back down to a recent \$150.

The case we made in April, that Moderna's odds of repeating its Covid-19 vaccine success are good, still holds, with a caveat: A gap in infrastructure, personnel, relationships, and organizational maturity between Moderna and the vaccine incumbents will pose hurdles over the next several years. If it can use its huge pile of cash

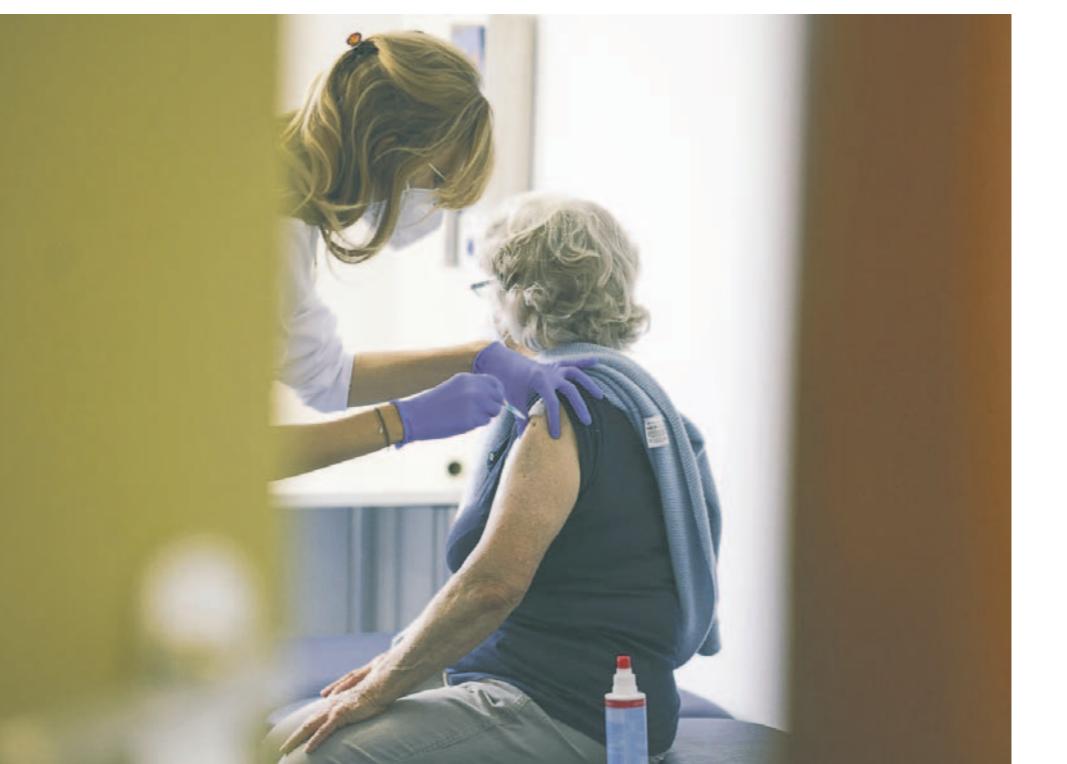
to grow up, Moderna can be an attractive long-term play.

"We are still probably culturally like the biotech that fought its way into existence," Moderna's president, Dr. Stephen Hoge, tells *Barron's*. "I think there's some maturing that we are all going to have to do as we become clearly an enduring company."

The market for vaccines is different than it is for other drugs. Vaccines are largely commoditized, which means that manufacturers compete on price for mostly government buyers. On the U.S. private market, adult influenza vaccines generally cost around \$18. Even vaccines that face little competition are inexpensive relative to other branded pharmaceuticals.

To avoid commoditization, Moderna plans to sell a premium combination vaccine that protects against Covid-19, the flu, and, eventually, other respiratory viruses.

Yet the big vaccine players are already edging into Moderna's turf. Whenever global regulators approve an mRNA-based flu vaccine, it's likely Moderna won't have the only one. Sanofi and Pfizer are testing their own



mRNA-based flu vaccines.

Early data on Moderna's flu vaccine, meanwhile, has been uninspiring. In an interim readout from a Phase 1 trial, a majority of participants ages 18 to 49 reported reactions like fatigue and muscle aches, which present a serious barrier when competing against approved flu vaccines with milder reactions.

Actually selling the shots is hard. Despite having what might be the best Covid-19 vaccine in the world, Moderna has already seen its market share slip. It isn't clear if Moderna has the infrastructure to compete with the big vaccine makers. That's a case that Sanofi's CEO, Paul Hudson, makes.

"You don't need a big infrastructure

if you're negotiating in a pandemic, where everybody's calling you and asking, 'Can we order some?'" Hudson recently told *Barron's*. "When you're in a competitive world across 100-plus countries, you need experts on the ground to do [monitoring for adverse effects], local regulatory. You need a lot of things that you don't need in a pandemic."

Moderna now has nearly 3,000 employees and says it has staff in the 10 most important countries. That's a quick ramp-up, but it's well short of the 15,000 people employed by Sanofi's vaccines division alone. Sanofi has a presence in 90 countries, and manufacturing sites in 32.

"We don't have the gift of 175 years of revenue and 100,000 employees," Hoge acknowledges. He argues, though, that Moderna's work during the pandemic built relationships with buyers that will help long after.

Moderna also has plenty of cash. Wall Street analysts estimate that the company will have \$27.4 billion by the end of this year, according to FactSet. That enormous bankroll constitutes the best case for Moderna. With that cash, perhaps it can bulk itself up quickly enough to compete on a level with Pfizer and Sanofi.

Other challenges await. In December, a federal appeals court sided against Moderna on a patent issue. That sets the stage for a possible legal

## Vaccine Heavyweights

Moderna faces down Big Pharma giants in the post-pandemic vaccine market.

Company / Ticker	Recent Price	52-Wk Change	Market Value (bil)	2022E P/E	2019 vaccine sales (bil)
<b>Moderna</b> / MRNA	\$154.96	2.0%	\$62.9	5.6	None
<b>BioNTech</b> / BNTX	160.70	51.2	39.0	4.3	None
<b>Pfizer</b> / PFE	53.01	42.1	297.5	8.2	\$6.5
<b>Sanofi</b> / SNY	51.32	4.4	129.7	12.5	6.4
<b>Merck</b> / MRK	79.14	3.4	200.0	10.9	8.0
<b>GlaxoSmithKline</b> / GSK	44.15	12.5	111.1	13.9	9.3

E=estimate. Sources: Bloomberg; company reports

battle involving Moderna and **Arbutus Biopharma** (ABUS), which holds the patents, and **Rovant Sciences** (ROIV), which has licensed them. The companies won't discuss possible future litigation. SVB Leerink analyst Dr. Mani Foroohar has estimated that any settlement Moderna might reach would likely include a "single-digit royalty on vaccine sales." A 3% royalty, he wrote, would cost Moderna about \$330 million plus a share of royalties through 2029.

A bigger issue is a dispute last year between Moderna and the National Institutes of Health over credit for inventing the genetic sequence used in its Covid-19 vaccine, which resulted in the NIH director publicly threatening legal action.

Moderna has since backed down, but the spat wasn't great for a company whose customers are generally government entities. "Taking actions that sour one's relations with governments, potentially, or create the appearance that one is not playing by the same rules as others, is generally bad for one's brand value with governments," Foroohar says.

Hoge says he regrets "the way this has been politicized, and the way the story has played out." He portrays the dispute as a technical disagreement that Moderna thought it had time to work out privately with NIH. "I think there's almost naiveté to the way we approached some of these things," he says. "If we had hundreds of people in PR and government affairs, they would have said no, no, no, we need to be careful about these things."

Two years ago, no one outside of biotech had heard of Moderna. Now, it is the most famous biotech in history.

Every day, Hoge says, "we are humbled by, oh we're on a big stage now. And we're still kind of the gawky kid who made good, but like you can point out our flaws because we've got them. We are not polished."

How long will it take for that gawky kid to grow up? Foroohar isn't optimistic: "It is, in our view, the Shakespearean flaw in Moderna's current management and operational structure. It's repairable, of course. One can build infrastructure, one can change leadership, one can alter one's approach. But thus far Moderna has shown no intent to do so."

Other challenges await. In December, a federal appeals court sided against Moderna on a patent issue. That sets the stage for a possible legal

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“

Ardagh Metal Packaging and Hillman are two quality companies.”

Meryl Witmer



2022 BARRON'S ROUNDTABLE WEEK 3

# TWENTY BARGAINS TO BUY NOW

From Palo Alto to Peru, Meryl Witmer, William Priest, Rupal J. Bhansali, and Scott Black find plenty of stocks to like in increasingly challenging markets.

STORY BY LAUREN R. RUBLIN  
ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALVVINO

Fed be nimble, Fed be quick. The quicker, the better, in fact. Hike interest rates, shrink your balance sheet, and let's be done with it all before the stock market sinks even further. The market's recent selloff began in late December, and has gathered considerable steam since the annual *Barron's* Roundtable took place on Jan. 10 on Zoom. The Federal Reserve's pivot toward more restrictive monetary policy helps explain why most of the Roundtable panelists see losses mounting

in the year's first half, although the group generally is more sanguine about the second-half outlook. It also explains why these 10 razor-sharp investors expect 2022 to be a much better year for stockpickers than index investors.

Our concluding 2022 Roundtable installment features the recommendations of four such pros: Meryl Witmer, of Eagle Capital Partners; William Priest, of Epoch Investment Partners; Rupal J. Bhansali, of Ariel Investments; and Scott Black, of Delphi Management. Even if you don't cotton to some of their particular picks, it's hard not to admire—or learn from—their research and financial analysis of the companies whose stocks they fancy.

Many of these shares joined the market's rout in the past three weeks, presumably making them even better buys now than in early January. In the edited conversation that follows, our final four panelists crunch the numbers on 20 prospective winners.

#### Meryl, where are you finding good values now?

**Meryl Witmer:** My first pick is **Dollar Tree** [ticker: DLTR]. It has 225 million shares, and the stock is trading at \$140. The market cap is about \$31 billion, and the company has \$2.5 billion in net debt. Dollar Tree operates the Dollar Tree and Family Dollar stores. It has done a terrific job with the Dollar Tree stores, and a subpar but improving job with Family Dollar. It has done a poor job with capital allocation, having overpaid for Family

Dollar in 2015, and was slow-footed more recently in buying back shares, given its pristine balance sheet. The company did a great job of paying down debt after the Family Dollar acquisition. I congratulate them for that.

Dollar Tree is under pressure from an activist investment firm, Mantle Ridge, which has proposed a full slate of directors and wants the board to consider Richard Dreiling in a leadership role. Dreiling was CEO of **Dollar General** [DG] from 2008 to 2015. That stock quadrupled during the time he was CEO, after going public at the end of 2009. I consider him one of the finest retail executives. He was able to improve Dollar General's sales per store from \$1.16 million to \$1.6 million, and Ebit [earnings before interest and taxes] from \$31,000, or a 2.7% margin, to \$150,000, a 9.4% margin. This came from an improvement in supply-chain merchandizing and the culture.

I am not sure how the activist situation will play out, but my preference would be for Dreiling to take the executive chairman role and fix Family Dollar. The Dollar Tree merchandisers are extraordinary; it is really at Family Dollar where he could make a difference. Hopefully, this all happens amicably. Otherwise, we'll see how shareholders vote.

Dollar Tree has raised prices on most items at the Dollar Tree stores from a dollar to \$1.25, and is rolling out items priced at \$3 and \$5 at many stores. The combination of shipping costs and wage and product inflation pushed the company to do this.

**Dollarama** [DOL.Canda] in Canada moved in this direction in 2009, and its stock did well. It has operating income margins of more than 20%. This should happen in the Dollar Tree segment, also, and lift earnings to more than \$11 a share, growing to \$13 a share if the company executes this properly and shrinks the share count. If Mantle Ridge is successful, I can see earnings approaching \$15 a share in 2024. My earnings-multiple range is 16 to 20 times, which results in a target price range of \$200 to \$300 a share sometime in early 2024.

#### What will happen if the activists fail?

**Witmer:** It's a win-win, because increasing the price of most items to \$1.25 will lift margins. But Dreiling would add huge value at Family Dollar. When he was at Dollar General, he tried to buy Family Dollar, but Dollar Tree outbid him.

My next pick, **Sylvamo** [SLVM], was spun out of **International Paper** [IP] in October. It has about 44 million shares outstanding and a stock price of \$29.75, for a market cap of \$1.3 billion. Net debt is about \$1.4 billion. International Paper could have been kinder when it spun out Sylvamo, but Sylvamo can handle the debt and pay it down.

Sylvamo produces uncoated free-sheet paper, or UFS, used to make copy paper and envelopes, and used in commercial printing. It also produces pulp for tissue and specialty paper, and coated paperboard for liquid packaging. It has operations in Latin America, North America, and Europe.

We think Sylvamo is a free-cash-flow machine. UFS is a much better business than people perceive. The company has only sparse coverage among securities analysts, which sets up the opportunity. We became familiar with UFS when we owned **Packaging Corp. of America** [PKG], which owns some UFS mills. While demand in North America may be declining long run, the industry structure is good. High-cost mills get converted to containerboard mills or are closed, keeping supply and demand in balance. In North America, Sylvamo has the lowest-cost mill. The other big player, Domtar, was acquired by Paper Excellence in Canada, which is converting UFS mills to containerboard.

In Latin America, Sylvamo is the largest UFS producer, with a 34% share. It owns forest plantations near

## 2022 Roundtable Panelists



**Todd Ahlsten**

CIO and lead portfolio manager,  
Parnassus Core Equity fund  
Parnassus Investments  
San Francisco



**Rupal J. Bhansali**

CIO and portfolio manager  
International & Global Equities  
Ariel Investments  
New York



**Scott Black**

Founder and president  
Delphi Management  
Boston



**Abby Joseph Cohen**

Professor of Business  
Graduate School of Business  
Columbia University  
New York



**Sonal Desai**

CIO and portfolio manager  
Franklin Templeton Fixed Income  
San Mateo, Calif.



**Henry Ellenbogen**

CIO and managing partner  
Durable Capital Partners  
Chevy Chase, Md.



**Mario Gabelli**

Chairman and CEO  
Gamco Investors  
Greenwich, Conn.



**David Giroux**

CIO, T. Rowe Price Investment  
Management and portfolio manager,  
Capital Appreciation fund  
T. Rowe Price, Baltimore



**William Priest**

Executive chairman and co-CIO  
Epoch Investment Partners  
New York



**Meryl Witmer**

General partner  
Eagle Capital Partners  
New York

Previous spread: (Reference) Courtesy of Ardaghi (6); Alamy (2); This page, from top to bottom: Photographs by Karen Santos, Rick Vukelich, Mary Beth Koeth (3), Guerin Blask, Stephen Voss

its mills for a low-cost source of fiber. About 70% of this paper is sold in 26 countries in Latin America, and the rest is exported, mainly to Europe. Demand for UFS is expected to grow in Latin America, and as this occurs, all things being equal, Sylvamo will export less and make more money selling locally. In Europe, Sylvamo has a great mill in Russia, on the border with Finland, and a good mill in France.

While Sylvamo saw decreasing demand during the pandemic, demand is so strong now that it and the industry are running full-out, increasing prices and passing along cost increases. We see normalized Ebitda [earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization] in the \$600 million to \$700 million range, and capital expenditures are about \$140 million. Picking the midpoint of our Ebitda range, and after \$140 million of depreciation, we see operating income of about \$510 million next year, interest expense of about \$60 million, and taxes of 30%, for normalized earnings of \$7 a share. Over the next couple of years, the catalysts for a higher stock price are paying down a lot of debt, proving how good the business is, and paying a large dividend.

Sylvamo has a fantastic management team. Insiders have purchased shares, and I can see a dividend of more than \$3 a share in a couple of years from a company earning over \$7 a share and trading at more than \$50 a share.

#### What else are you recommending?

**Witmer:** My next three picks I've recommended in the past. The first, **Ardagh Metal Packaging** [AMBP], is an aluminum can manufacturer. We really like it, especially at this lower price of \$8.66 a share, compared with \$10 at the time of the midyear Roundtable. It traded down as sales growth slowed for hard seltzer, which is about 5% of the business, and as raw material prices increased. But demand for cans continues from a broad range of customers in sparkling waters, energy drinks, and soft drinks, and the shift away from plastic to aluminum for environmental reasons continues.

The company has contracts for its incremental capacity coming on-stream over the next three years, and is targeting discretionary free cash flow in 2024 of \$800 million, or \$1.18 a share, on 684 million shares. That share count assumes full dilution from 60 million warrants, which strike in five tranches at prices from \$13 to



**We think Raytheon could trade for \$120 or so in a year, and \$135 in two years."**

**William Priest**

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\$19.50. If the stock doesn't achieve those prices, the warrants won't be earned, and there will be fewer shares outstanding. So, earnings per share could be higher if the warrants aren't earned, and this mechanism offers some EPS protection on the downside.

We also still like **Hillman Solutions** [HLMN], which faced more headwinds than I anticipated with the port situation, and also experienced a lag time in passing through increased raw material costs, which affected margins. Hillman supplies fasteners and hardware for construction and is the dominant supplier of keys and key-cutting machines. The company called in warrants at year end, bringing down a possible incremental 24.7 million shares of dilution to 6.3 million shares.

Hillman has a great management team that is working through cost increases. The company has increased its inventory levels, which comes at a cost of less debt pay-down, but as supply chains normalize in 2023, that investment should turn back to cash and be used to reduce debt. Hillman has gained some new customers and is working through the issues that Covid-19 has thrown in its way. All this has delayed by a year the progress I thought Hillman would make. I still see them earning about 90 cents a share of after-tax free cash flow, but in 2023, not 2022.

**Henry Ellenbogen:** Meryl, how do you think about these companies' decisions to go public through SPACs [special purpose acquisition companies]? SPACs have been significantly worse performers than IPOs [initial public offerings] over any period of time.

**Witmer:** Ardagh has a savvy management team, and what they did made a lot of sense. This was a good way for the parent company, Ardagh Group, to spin off the can division. Hillman also has an excellent management team. Some SPACs have done well over the years. Ardagh Metal Packaging and Hillman are two quality companies with good market share and competitive advantages.

My last pick is **Holcim** [HOLN-Switzerland], which makes cement, concrete, and roofing materials. I recommended it last year at 52.80 Swiss francs [\$56.40], and we received CHF2 as a dividend. Today, the stock is CHF48. Holcim has an extraordinary management team that is making smart acquisitions. The company generates lots of cash,

which we estimate will be over CHF6 a share annually in the next few years. It has a 4% dividend yield. We think it is a leader in its industry in environmentally forward thinking, and at some point, the stock should have outsize returns as the value it creates gets recognized.

#### Thanks, Meryl. Let's turn to Bill.

**William Priest:** Last year's winners were concentrated among relatively few stocks. This year, we expect much more market volatility as fiscal- and monetary-stimulus effects wear off and interest rates rise, with the Fed ceasing its accommodating stance. My first pick is **Raytheon Technologies** [RTX], formed in 2020 from the merger of Raytheon and United Technologies. The resulting company is the pre-eminent supplier of commercial aerospace parts and systems, and one of three major suppliers of jet engines for both defense and commercial aerospace applications. It is one of the five prime defense contractors in the U.S.

Commercial aerospace historically has been an attractive business, with air traffic growing roughly 5% annually, and contracting in only a few years over the past 30 years, at least until the pandemic. In 2021, Raytheon's operating-income mix was roughly 90% defense and 10% commercial aerospace, but that will change rapidly. The split will be roughly 50-50 in the 2025 time frame, as commercial aerospace recovers.

The defense side of the ledger provides ballast against exogenous events through its market-share positioning. It is a mid-single digit grower in cybersecurity, hypersonics, and radar, as well as foreign defense sales. The real driver of future value creation will come from the commercial aerospace operation. That will be a result of the recovery in air travel as the world learns to live with Covid in a more dynamic way. We expect Raytheon's earnings to compound by roughly 20% a year from 2021 through 2023, and maybe 15% from 2021 through 2025, with commercial aerospace contributing roughly 90% of that earnings change.

The stock currently trades for \$90. We think Raytheon could trade for \$120 or so in a year, and \$135 in two years. Annual free-cash conversion is roughly 90% to 100%. The company uses its cash flow mainly for reinvestment, as well as significant cash returns to shareholders through dividend pay-

ments and buybacks. They committed to returning \$20 billion to shareholders in the four years since the merger. We think the stock is reasonably priced, but the caveat is you need some recovery in commercial aerospace.

#### What else do you like?

##### Priest: **Vertex Pharmaceuticals**

[VRTX] has a \$57 billion market cap and a good runway for growth for the next five-plus years. It has an interesting product pipeline and is reasonably valued at about a 5% cash-flow yield. Vertex's primary market is cystic fibrosis, a rare lung disease; it accounts for almost all of the company's \$7 billion of revenue. We don't see credible competitive threats on the market. Its leading drug, Trikafta, is patent-protected through 2037, and the core cystic fibrosis franchise should deliver peak sales of \$8 billion to \$10 billion in the next five years. A super-Trikafta version is in development that could extend the patent life into the 2040s. The next iteration also has the benefit of enhanced economics, as the royalty obligation would decrease from low-double digits to low-single digits, which would materially improve margins. At \$220, Vertex shares represent a free option on the company's pipeline. Vertex has \$6 billion of net cash, and \$3 billion of annual free cash flow.

Vertex has a joint venture with **Crispr Therapeutics** [CRSP] to develop a gene therapy to treat sickle cell anemia and beta thalassemia, both blood disorders. The program is showing good clinical progress and could be a \$1 billion to \$2 billion sales opportunity. They are on track to submit the drug to the Food and Drug Administration for approval by the end of this year. Other products in the pipeline, to treat diabetes and kidney disease, could represent a billion-dollar opportunity.

During 2021, Vertex announced a \$1.5 billion share-repurchase authorization, effective through 2022. A lot of biotech companies like to sit on their cash in the hope of finding the next blockbuster, which often doesn't happen. We like that Vertex is accelerating its buyback program. There has been insider buying, too, with the CEO purchasing 10,000 shares on the open market in August. Vertex could earn \$14 a share this year and \$15 in 2023. Our target price is in the high \$200s.

My next stock is **Sony Group**



We think  
[T-Mobile  
US] is the  
single best  
play in 5G,  
the next  
generation  
of wireless  
connec-  
tivity."

**William  
Priest**

[6758.Japan], a global entertainment company with a good foundation in technology. Game and network services are about 30% of sales and roughly 32% of operating profits. Music is 10% of sales and 18% of operating profits, and the film business is roughly 8% of sales, 8% of operating profits. Electronic profits and solutions is 21% of sales and 13% of operating profits, but we think it can get a lot better. Imaging and sensing solutions is 10% of sales and 14% of operating profits, and finally, financial services is 19% of sales and 15% of operating profits.

#### What is the bullish case?

**Priest:** Sony's transformation from a legacy consumer-electronics company to more of a creative entertainment company has been under way for several years, and the stock has done well. Under the leadership of Chairman and CEO Kenichiro Yoshida, Sony has restructured its more mature cyclical business portfolio and shifted its focus to IP [intellectual property]-driven businesses with strong recurring revenue. It has leadership positions in games, music, and image sensors. These businesses operate in duopoly or oligopoly markets, so they have pricing power. We think Sony can continue to deliver more predictable and sustainable free cash flow than in the past. The management team is one of the best around. We expect Sony to earn 632 yen [\$5.53] a share in the fiscal year ending in March. The stock is trading at JPY14,540, which implies a multiple of 23 times earnings. We see 25% to 30% upside in the shares.

[Editor's note: Following the Round-table, Sony shares fell 12.8% in reaction to **Microsoft's** [MSFT] proposed acquisition of **Activision Blizzard** [ATVI]. Here is Priest's assessment: There is no near-term earnings risk to Sony from this deal, if consummated, and the time to close should allow Sony's management to assess and form its strategic response.]

We also like **ON Semiconductor** [ON]. Data is the new oil. Wars will be fought over who controls data, and the semiconductor industry is at the heart of the argument. ON Semi focuses on power management and sensing. It manufactures a broad range of products, including many mixed-signal chips. The company has been undergoing a transformation that began with the hiring of former Cypress Semiconductor CEO Hassane El-Khoury and



**“**  
One of the leading Chinese companies aligned with the government's common prosperity agenda is Baidu.”  
**Rupal J. Bhansali**

other Cypress executives. The new team is shifting ON Semi's focus to more higher-value, higher-margin products. The early progress is visible, and we think it will be successful over time, leading to higher profit margins and an acceleration of free cash flow. ON could generate about \$2.50 a share of free cash flow in 2021. That could double over the next four years. We see the stock trading at 20 times free cash flow in two to three years, or around \$110 a share, significantly above the current price of \$64.

#### What is your next pick?

**Priest: Coca-Cola Europacific Partners** [CCEP] was formed last year when **Coca-Cola's** [KO] European partners bought Coke's Australian bottling company, Coca-Cola Amatil, which services Australia, New Zealand, and Indonesia. They are going to bring better management prac-

tices to the Amatil business. We think CCEP will simplify its portfolio, improve revenue growth, and boost profit margins. Inflation could be a headwind for 2022, but it is manageable. The management team is excellent and has focused for years on generating free cash flow and allocating among the five choices: pay a dividend, buy back stock, pay down debt, make an acquisition, or reinvest in the business. We expect leverage to come down to over three times by the end of this year or in 2023. The shares are trading at a roughly 6% to 7% free cash flow yield.

Now we come to my favorite stock, **T-Mobile US** [TMUS]. I recommended it last January, and again in July. It clicked, and then it went clunk. T-Mobile provides wireless communications and services. We think it is the single best play in 5G, the next generation of wireless connectivity. It is

capable of delivering data rates as high as a gigabit per second, 20 times faster than current networks. But 5G is about a lot more than speed. It drastically increases the number of the simultaneous devices that can be managed on a wireless network. It opens lots of possibilities for wearables, machine-to-machine communications, and the Internet of Things, or IoT.

The merger of T-Mobile and Sprint in April 2020 gave the new T-Mobile scale to compete better with **AT&T** [T] and **Verizon Communications** [VZ] and, most important, a surfeit of spectrum. The biggest opportunity for T-Mobile will be the transition from providing solely mobile connections to becoming an edge platform for developers, with the cloud acting as an extension for edge computing and storage. New use cases include private networks, ultra-reliable and low latency communications, enhanced

mobile broadband, and massive machine-type connectivity. These developments shift the revenue opportunity from one resembling a zero-sum calculation of the existing incumbents to exciting growth opportunities as AI transitions from the cloud to the edge. The wind of opportunity just started to blow toward the edge in consumer and enterprise technology. T-Mobile is well positioned to capitalize on this change. Unlike in prior 'G' transitions, the unit mobile economics of T-Mobile's 5G network are superior to all its competitors'. Free cash flow could comfortably rise to \$18 billion over the next three years. We think the stock will sell somewhere north of \$175.

#### What caused the clunk in the stock?

**Priest:** It went from \$100 a share to \$150, and in the past six months fell back to the \$100 area. There are two possible risks that could have been at play over the recent past. One is the deflationary effects from a deceleration in subscriber additions that could imply a price war for additional subscribers, and the other is the risk that cable-company business strategies could lead to a drain on the wireless profit pool for all competitors.

Thanks, Bill. Rupal, you're next. Where in the world should investors shop now?

**Rupal J. Bhansali:** I'm a committed contrarian. I literally wrote the book on nonconsensus investing. My four recommendations are outside the U.S., which is a crowded trade. The lonely trade is international markets. Three of my four stock picks are in emerging markets, which should tell you where I see opportunity now. These stocks are highly out of favor, misunderstood, and mispriced. My picks also come with very high dividend yields because I expect dividends to be a much bigger source of total returns for investors in the foreseeable future, relative to share-price appreciation.

Given renewed inflation, there is a view that one should buy companies with pricing power. The problem with that thesis is that a lot of those companies' stock prices are grossly overvalued, so all you've done is swap inflation risk for valuation risk. My nonconsensus idea is to buy companies that can grow earnings without needing to raise prices, despite the current inflationary environment.

**Direct Line Insurance Group**

(Reference) Dreamstime.com (2); Alamy (1)

[DLG.UK], the leading United Kingdom property and casualty insurer, can grow earnings by improving productivity and agility, rather than raising prices. This sounds counterintuitive in a mature industry like auto insurance, but remember that **Costco Wholesale** [COST] grows earnings in food retailing, a very mature industry. Direct Line undertook a major IT [information technology] overhaul in the past few years and digitized its processes to improve customer service, cost competitiveness, and market segmentation. The business has an attractive 15% return on equity, while the stock trades for only 10 times 2022 estimated earnings per share, and the dividend yield is an eye-popping 8%.

#### A dividend yield of that magnitude often spells trouble.

**Bhansali:** Direct Line is paying the dividend with cash flow, not borrowed money. The company is so free-cash-flow generative that it is augmenting its dividend with share buybacks that are highly accretive at current valuations. Earnings growth is in the single digits, which may be too slow for some investors. I don't mind slow growth, as long as it's solid growth. Between Brexit and the Covid pandemic, the U.K. stock market has underperformed a lot, as has the sterling. If the market multiple or the currency goes up, or both, U.S. investors can make better total returns than can be found at home.

**Witmer:** Was earnings growth in the same range in the past several years? **Bhansali:** Direct Line's earnings have been moribund since 2014, due to missteps in its core business. A new CEO came aboard in mid-2019 and is fundamentally transforming the company. The IT investments were hurting earnings, but are mostly behind them now. As they grow earnings, the stock should rerate.

**Todd Ahlsten:** How do you think about the impact of climate change and weather events on the P&C business? **Bhansali:** Losses from catastrophic weather events typically fall on reinsurers, not primarily insurers such as Direct Line, so I am not too concerned about the impact of climate change on my thesis.

My next stock pick is **Credicorp** [BAP], the largest financial holding company in Peru. It has a 30% market share across many categories, including commercial and retail lending, microfinance, investment banking, deposits, insurance, and asset management fees. Far less comes from the low-ROE

The beauty of investing in emerging markets is that a company can dominate in so many business segments that you're not dependent on any one business unit for the stock to work out.

Credicorp has also invested heavily in fintech, and it now hosts the largest digital customer base. Credicorp's earnings are likely to get a big boost from rising interest rates and improving loan demand. Peru is one of the world's leading copper exporters, and copper prices have been robust. This will have a trickle-down effect in the economy and on loan growth. Insurance profits should improve because Covid mortality rates will drop this year.

Despite Credicorp's great franchise and market position, the stock fell sharply in the middle of last year because emerging markets were hardest hit by Covid, and an election brought a leftist president to power, albeit by a slim margin.

We believe he is unlikely to complete his term; his poll ratings have fallen dramatically. But the entire Peruvian stock market sold off, and Credicorp is one of the leading stocks in Peru. We think the bad news has been priced in.

#### So where to from here?

**Bhansali:** Consensus earnings estimates for Credicorp dramatically underestimate the earnings rebound that will occur in 2022. You can own what I would call the Bank of America equivalent in Peru for nine times this year's expected earnings and a 4% projected dividend yield. Normalized return on equity is about 15% to 16%, notably higher than the 10% to 11% you get in developed markets, and the stock trades at a discount to its global peers.

My next pick is based in Brazil, another country with a lot of political risk, and one that did a poor job of handling Covid. Therefore, the Brazilian stock market has taken it on the chin. **BB Seguridade Participações** [BB-SEY] is the insurance arm of Brazil's leading bank, **Banco do Brasil** [BBAS3.Brazil]. The bank has an unrivaled retail distribution network of 3,977 branches, not just in the major cities, but also in less-penetrated rural regions. Because BB Seguridade is a subsidiary of Banco do Brasil, which still owns 65%, it has access to this branch network at no cost to itself. It is a low-risk/high-return business. The bulk of the earnings come from the high-return-on-equity insurance broking segment and asset-management fees. Far less comes from the low-ROE

business of underwriting insurance. Covid hurt BB Seguridade's profits because of higher mortality costs, lower interest rates, and the mismatch of inflation indexes. Also, investment returns were compressed because inflation increased, but interest rates didn't, as we have seen in many markets. But all that is changing because Brazil's central bank, like Peru's, is raising interest rates now, while Covid-induced higher mortality costs are abating. The reversal of all these things will enable BB Seguridade to post record earnings in 2022. Return on equity is estimated at 60%, and the stock trades for barely eight times earnings.

Despite Credicorp's great franchise and market position, the stock fell sharply in the middle of last year because emerging markets were hardest hit by Covid, and an election brought a leftist president to power, albeit by a slim margin. We believe he is unlikely to complete his term; his poll ratings have fallen dramatically. But the entire Peruvian stock market sold off, and Credicorp is one of the leading stocks in Peru. We think the bad news has been priced in.

And here's the kicker: It sports a 9% projected dividend yield for 2022. Again, there is a tendency to think that such a high dividend yield is a head fake, but that isn't the case for the reasons I described. Plus, the majority shareholder, Banco do Brasil, needs the dividend upstreamed to it, so the high dividend payout is very likely.

#### Good point. What is your fourth pick?

**Bhansali:** My fourth pick is in the country least-favored by U.S. investors, and one of the few that had a bear market last year: China. We are all familiar with the regulatory risk that emerged in China in the internet sector. In my view, it is increasingly priced into the stock market, whereas regulatory risk in the U.S. isn't priced in.

One of the leading Chinese companies aligned with the government's common prosperity agenda is **Baidu** [BIDU]. Being aligned with the government can bring opportunities. I recommended Baidu in the midyear Roundtable. The stock had already corrected sharply, falling from \$350 to \$180, and now it is about \$150.

It offers great value. Baidu operates the leading internet search engine in China, with a 70% market share, not unlike Google in the U.S. Baidu enjoys attractive profit margins and cash flows in its core search business. It is reinvesting its cash in new areas like online video streaming and autonomous driving through its Apollo initiative, to leverage all of its capabilities in AI. While these investments could be attractive in the long run, they are cash-burning and dilutive to margins in the short run. But we think Baidu is successfully positioned. It is applying proven playbooks in Western markets in the context of the Chinese market.

Baidu sells for a midteens multiple of earnings, excluding its net cash. Much of the Chinese government's crackdown was directed at consumer-facing businesses. Baidu, on the other hand, is transforming itself into a B2B [business to business] model, putting up data centers and offering AI as a service, enterprise cloud, and autonomous driving. People misunderstand the company, just as they misunderstood Microsoft years ago. A B2B business model takes longer to fructify, but it has a more enduring and sustainable payoff. That is what I expect to happen to Baidu, as investors realize that it has become a B2B business with a high moat around its capabilities.

**Ellenbogen:** The search business has an element of B2C [business to consumer]. Can you talk more about their relationship with the Chinese government?

**Bhansali:** The common prosperity agenda of the Chinese government is very clear. The government is basically saying that China's mega internet companies have benefited from the meteoric rise in living standards in China and the economic prosperity the government created, but they aren't giving back to society. Baidu, however, has done what the government wants these other companies to do—namely, reinvest in the economy. Baidu is spending a lot of money in areas such as AI where China wants to become a leader, so the company is viewed as a national champion, as opposed to a villain.

**Thank you, Rupal. Scott, what are your favorite stocks?**

**Scott Black:** We look for companies in growing industries, where a rising tide can lift all boats. We like companies with a high return on equity, rising earnings, and strong free cash flow, trading at low absolute price/earnings multiples, no exceptions. Two of my five picks this year are in commodities; the wind is at their back.

**Ichor Holdings** [ICHR], based in Fremont, Calif., is a leader in the design, engineering, and manufacturing of fluid delivery subsystems for the semiconductor capital-equipment industry. Their two biggest customers are **LAM Research** [LRCX] and **Applied Materials** [AMAT], accounting for 52% and 35% of revenue, respectively. Wafer spend is being driven up by demand from **Intel** [INTC],

**Rupal J. Bhansali**



**Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing** [TSM], and **Samsung Electronics** [005930.Korea]. In 2021, it totaled about \$85 billion, and the forecast for this year is \$93 billion to \$95 billion. Ichor specializes in chemical vapor deposition in wafer etch. That business is growing nicely, and should be about \$32 billion for 2021, going up to \$35 billion this year worldwide.

I build my own income statements. I'll take you through the numbers. Revenue could rise 15% this year, to \$1.27 billion, including an acquisition. Wall Street's consensus estimate is \$1.28 billion. We estimate operating income of \$146 million and interest expense of \$10 million, so that's pretax income of \$136 million. Taxed at 12%, that's \$120 million of net income. Divide by 29 million fully diluted shares, and we get an earnings-per-share estimate of \$4.14. The Street is at \$4.15. Return on equity, pro forma, is about 21%. As for the balance sheet, Ichor has \$2.17 a share of net cash, but after the acquisition closes, it will have a net debt-to-equity ratio of 0.27.

Ichor has grown the top line by 23% a year for the past seven years, while the industry has grown by 16%. The company manufactures in the U.S., Malaysia, Singapore, Korea, and Mexico. In many markets, its factories are near its customers', so there is no supply-chain disruption. LAM and Applied Materials are growing revenue at 15% to 20% this year, and both have tended to outsource more of their sub-assembly in recent years.

#### Tell us about Ichor's stock.

The stock trades for about \$44 a share, or 10.1 times this year's expected earnings. Ichor should continue to benefit from the semiconductor industry's growth.

**Hercules Capital** [HTGC] is a business-development company based in Palo Alto. The stock should appeal to people looking for yield. Hercules specializes in growth capital for ventures in technology and life sciences. Drug discovery is about 32% of their portfolio; internet services, 18%; and software, about 27%. The stock trades for \$17.03 a share, and there are 116.2 million fully diluted shares, for a market cap of \$1.98 billion. The dividend is \$1.32 a share, for a yield of 7.75%.

Hercules is expected to earn \$1.27 a share for 2021. The portfolio is \$2.51 billion. They grew it about 6.7%, year over year, on a net basis for the first nine months of last year. Fee income

last year likely totaled \$280 million. We expect Hercules to earn \$1.45 this year. The Street estimate is \$1.39. Return on equity is about 12.5%, higher than most BDCs. The stock trades for 11.7 times earnings, and the price to net asset value is 1.47 times. The company has 71 equity positions that are worth \$204 million, and 91 investees. The sweet spot for loans is about \$30 million.

Hercules has grown net fee income in the past five years by 11.9% per annum, and total assets by 15.7%. Its cumulative loan-loss ratio since inception in 2005 is only three basis points [0.03% of the portfolio]. It has had only \$65 million in write-downs over 16 years. It has excess cash of about \$1.57 a share on the balance sheet, which it plans to reduce to 70 cents to a dollar, which means it either is going to pay a second special dividend this year, or bump up regular dividends.

This is a serendipitous way to play growth and technology. We can't do what Henry Ellenbogen does. He buys growth companies. As a value investor, we need a surrogate way of playing growth, which is too expensive for us. **Priest: New Mountain Finance** [NMFC] is another BDC that has done a nice job. The partners also invest in the company's debt.

**Black:** We own a couple of others, but not New Mountain. **Golub Capital BDC** [GBDC] is well run, but doesn't have a lot of growth. They are hard-nosed about adding to the portfolio. We also own **TriplePoint Venture Growth** [TPVG] in Menlo Park, Calif.

Mario probably knows my next stock well: **Nexstar Media Group** [NXST], an owner of television stations. It trades for \$155 and has a market cap of \$6.5 billion. The dividend is \$2.80 a share, for a yield of 1.8%. Nexstar was expected to generate \$4.64 billion in revenue in 2021, and about \$17.47 in earnings per share. Political advertising was negligible last year, accounting for about \$40 million in company revenue. In 2020, with races for the House of Representatives, Senate, state governors, and the presidency, it was well over \$500 million. Core ad revenue accounted for about 37%, or \$1.72 billion of revenue, in 2021.

Retransmission, or fees cable companies and digital platforms pay local TV stations, was about \$2.83 billion. The company thinks core ad revenue could grow by mid-single digits this year.

Interestingly, one of the hottest areas in some markets is sports gambling, which will enhance core ad-

## 2022 Roundtable Picks, Week 3



**Rupal Bhansali**

Company / Ticker	Price 1/7/22
Direct Line Ins. Group / DLG.UK	GBP290.60
Credicorp / BAP	\$134.12
BB Seguridade Participacoes / BBSEY	3.54
Baidu / BIDU	153.33



**Scott Black**

Company / Ticker	Price 1/7/22
Ichor Holdings / ICHR	\$44.05
Hercules Capital / HTGC	17.03
Nexstar Media Group / NXST	155.33
Civitas Resources / CIVI	55.15
Mosaic / MOS	40.18



**William Priest**

Company / Ticker	Price 1/7/22
Raytheon Technologies / RTX	\$90.44
Vertex Pharmaceuticals / VRTX	221.85
Sony Group / 6758.Japan	JPY14,540
ON Semiconductor / ON	\$64.56
Coca-Cola Europacific Partners / CCEP	57.83
T-Mobile US / TMUS	109.74



**Meryl Witmer**

Company / Ticker	Price 1/7/22
Dollar Tree / DLTR	\$140.96
Sylvamo / SLVM	29.74
Ardagh Metal Packaging / AMBP	8.66
Hillman Solutions / HLMN	9.95
Holcim / HOLN.Switzerland	CHF48.36

revenue growth, bringing the total to \$1.8 billion. Retransmission revenue is growing at 8% to 12%; I factored in 10% growth, bringing total retransmission revenue to \$3.1 billion. Assuming their share of political advertising is 12% to 15% in the U.S., or \$500 million this year, that gives you \$5.44 billion in total revenue. After backing out estimated expenses, we get \$390 million in incremental operating income over 2021's, which works out to \$25.25 in earnings per share for 2022.

By the way, most television companies see earnings go down in a nonpolitical year, so it is remarkable that Nexstar's earnings went up slightly. Mario probably knows my next stock well: **Nexstar Media Group** [NXST], an owner of television stations. It trades for \$155 and has a market cap of \$6.5 billion. The dividend is \$2.80 a share, for a yield of 1.8%. Nexstar was expected to generate \$4.64 billion in revenue in 2021, and about \$17.47 in earnings per share. Political advertising was negligible last year, accounting for about \$40 million in company revenue. In 2020, with races for the House of Representatives, Senate, state governors, and the presidency, it was well over \$500 million. Core ad revenue accounted for about 37%, or \$1.72 billion of revenue, in 2021.

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Interestingly, one of the hottest areas in some markets is sports gambling, which will enhance core ad-

\$28 a barrel, bringing NGL revenue to \$406 million. Combined, the company could have about \$2.3 billion in revenue in 2022. Adding up cash expenses and DD&A [depreciation, depletion, and amortization], we get total expenses of \$1.198 billion. Pretax profits could be \$1.13 billion, and earnings, \$822 million, or \$9.58 a share. Our estimate is below the Street's, at \$10 a share. The stock is \$55, and the P/E is 5.7. We estimate discretionary cash flow of \$16.21 a share, so the price-to-discretionary cash ratio is 3.3 times.

#### Why is the stock so cheap?

**Black:** It was a roll-up of four companies, and isn't well followed. From a breakup standpoint, Civitas could be worth \$128 a share. The reserve life is about 10½ years. For 2022, it has hedged the price of 34% of its oil production, and 44% of its gas output.

Lastly, the farm economy had an outstanding year. Todd [Ahlsten] talked about **Deere** [DE, in the first Roundtable issue], and Mario picked **CNH Industrial** [CNHI]. My pick is **Mosaic** [MOS], the largest fertilizer company in the U.S. The stock trades for \$40, and the market cap is \$15.1 billion. The dividend is 45 cents, and the yield is 1.12%. Mosaic has a 34% market share in North American potash production [potash is a key ingredient in fertilizer]. To build our earnings model, we have to estimate tonnage and pricing for potash and fertilizer. Doing so gets us to \$14.85 billion in 2022 revenue. From there, we get \$3.67 billion in operating income and about \$2.62 billion in net income, or \$6.90 a share. The stock is selling for 5.7 times 2022 earnings. My estimated return on equity is 22.6%. The net-debt-to-equity ratio is about 0.30. Management told us they intend to keep \$500 million of cash on the balance sheet. It is a buffer through all market cycles. We project that free cash in 2022 will be about \$2.5 billion.

China has banned phosphate exports, which limits oversupply. Mosaic's internal inventory was down 26%, year over year. In India, the potash inventory is down 59%, year over year, and Belarus, which exports about 15% of the world's potash, is blocked from doing so because of its immigration fight with the European Union. U.S. farm income was about \$230 billion last year, the best year since 2012, which is another plus.

**Thank you, Scott, and everyone.** ■



# TAKING

# STOCK OF MEME

One year after it started,  
the Reddit-fueled trading  
boom is losing steam.

Our reporter goes looking for answers.

STORY BY CARLETON ENGLISH

ILLUSTRATIONS BY PETE RYAN



**T**HE WORLD HAS seen plenty of investment manias over the past 200 years, but January 2021 brought something truly unique—the meme-stock trade.

Just a year ago, an influx of new retail traders, many flush with cash from federal stimulus payments and emboldened by free and easy-to-use trading platforms such as **Robinhood Markets** (ticker: HOOD), bid up shares of several heavily shorted stocks, including **GameStop** (GME) and **AMC Entertainment Holdings** (AMC), to astronomical levels. These new investors formed virtual communities on social-media sites such as a Reddit, where they discussed not only the urge to strike it rich but also to take down “the man”—namely, hedge funds that had bet against the stocks in question.

The meme-stock traders’ targets were peculiar, to say the least. There was GameStop, an ailing bricks-and-mortar retailer of videogames that had been losing money and struggling to develop a strategy for the digital age; AMC, whose movie theaters had been shuttered by the pandemic; and BlackBerry, whose once-ubiquitous cellphones had all but disappeared. In short, little about the meme-stock trade made sense to fundamental investors—but then, the same could be said last year about many other speculative assets, from cryptocurrencies to nonfungible tokens to blank-check companies, all of which benefited from ultralow interest rates and the tsunami of money unleashed to forestall a Covid-sparked economic implosion.

With emergency funding now ending, inflation rising, and the Federal Reserve preparing to lift rates, the prices of many of these stocks have been sinking, and bigger losses could follow. Still, writing off the meme-stock phenomenon as one of the easy-money era’s curiosities would miss the bigger picture: Digital tools, from trading apps to Reddit chat rooms, have amplified the power of individual investors in ways that Wall Street has only begun to understand. Even though the meme trade is fading, the technology that can turn anyone into a trader will remain, waiting to be harnessed once again to wreak havoc on the market.

The meme-stock explosion was ill-suited to the standard tools of journalism. The data to quantify the impact of these traders on the market was sparse. Experts pontificated but seemed to have few real answers.

Analysts threw up their hands and walked away.

**IT WAS TIME** for some first-hand experience. And so, with my editors’ encouragement, I signed up for a Robinhood account in October and funded it with \$250.

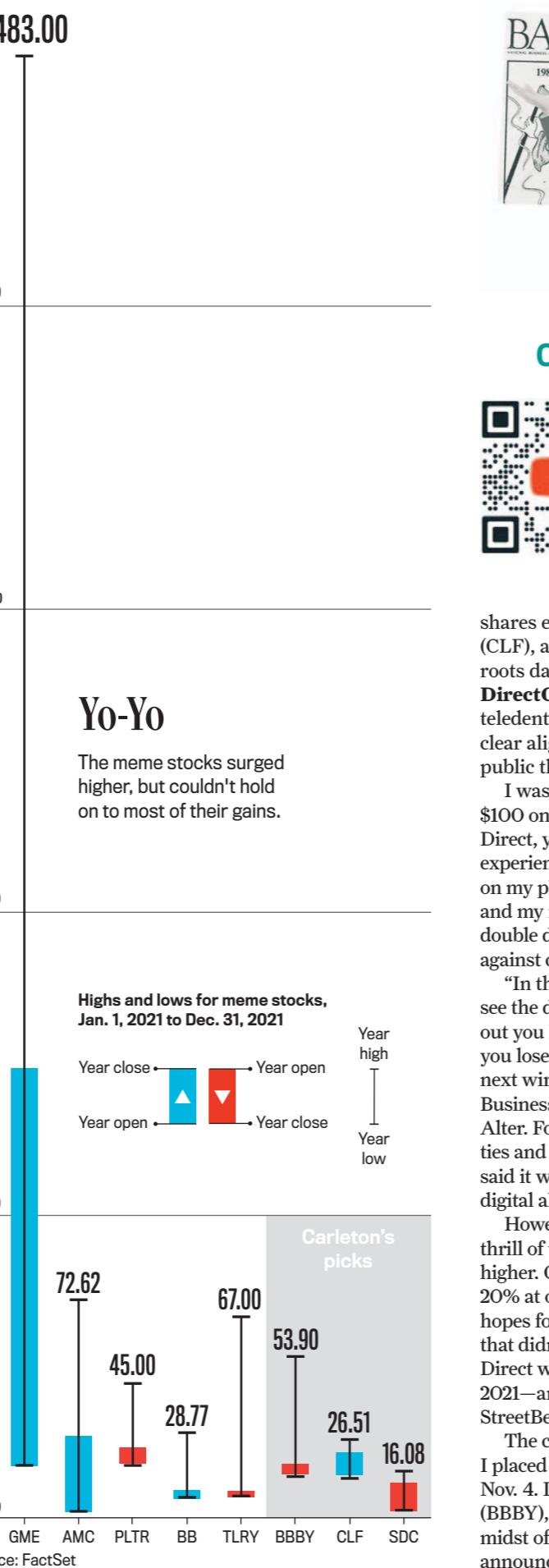
This proved to be more complicated than it sounds. *Barron's* prohibits reporters from holding individual stocks and from actively trading equities or options. Plans were made, permissions obtained, and it was agreed that all of my gains, if there were any, would go to the Dow Jones News Fund. And into the fray I went.

Or what was left of it.

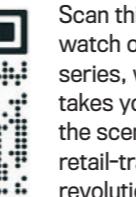
It’s hard to overstate the rush of retail traders into the stock market a year ago. Retail trading volume surged to about nine million average daily trades at **Charles Schwab** (SCHW) and TD Ameritrade in February 2021, according to S&P Global Market Intelligence, up from just over three million a year earlier. Those dollars specifically targeted heavily shorted stocks—including GameStop, where short interest was 142%, and AMC, where short interest was 60% in early January 2021, according to S3 Partners data. Meme traders weren’t satisfied with just taking the opposite side of trades. They also targeted the short sellers on social media. Melvin Capital Management, a multibillion-dollar hedge fund that was heavily shorting GameStop, was singled out for investor ire. Amid swelling losses from covering its money-losing short, the fund had to accept a \$2.75 billion bailout from hedge funds Point72 Asset Management and Citadel.

By the time I got involved this past October, most of that fuel seemed to be gone. WallStreetBets, while boasting more than 11 million members, had become more protective and required approval from a moderator to participate—approval I did not receive. As a Reddit newbie, I was able to lurk on WallStreetBets but could not post. Meanwhile, the percentage of the market that had been sold short in GameStop had dwindled to just 12%, meaning there were few shorts left to squeeze. Without short sellers, meme stocks like AMC and GameStop settled into trading ranges that made them seem boring to everyone except true believers.

Like many, I wanted to find new winners that would soar to ridiculous heights and capture the euphoria of the initial meme trade. I bought five



### Unboxed With Carleton English



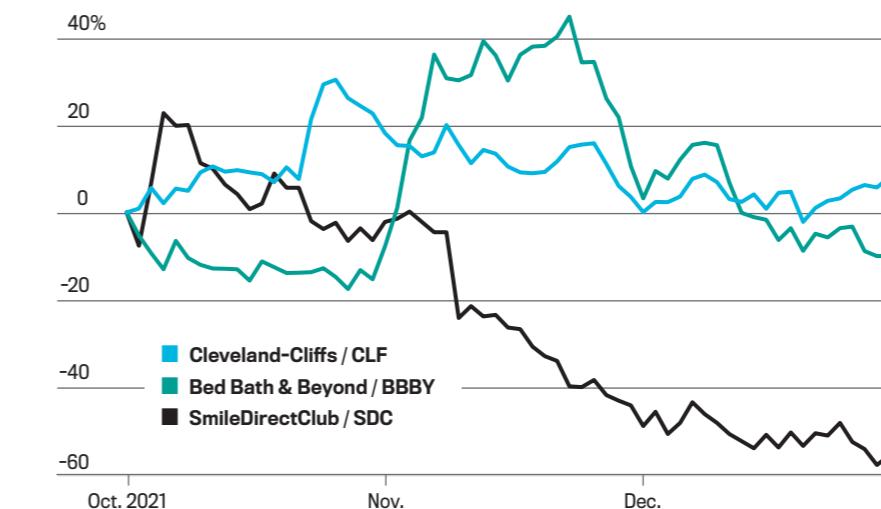
Scan this code to watch our video series, which takes you behind the scenes of the retail-trading revolution.

### Yo-Yo

The meme stocks surged higher, but couldn’t hold on to most of their gains.

## The Thrill of the Chase

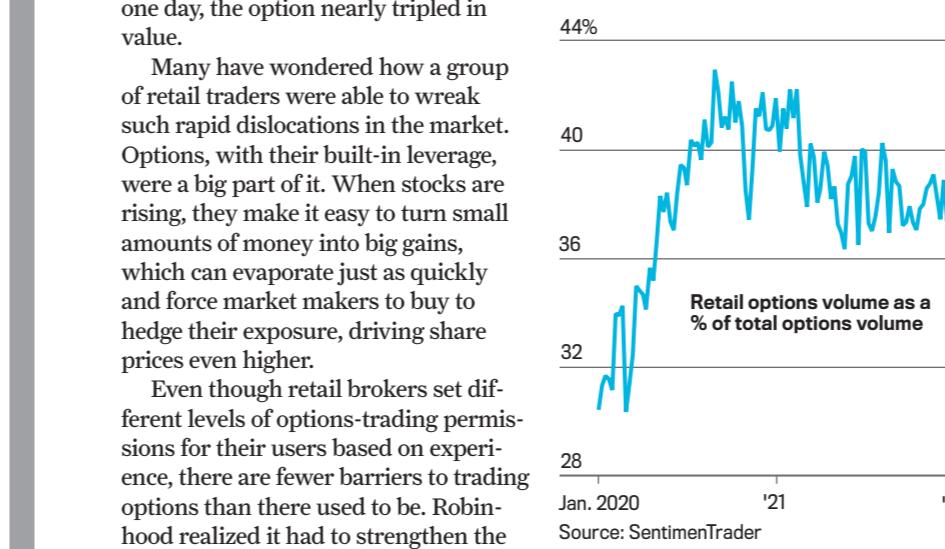
Cleveland-Cliffs, Bed Bath & Beyond, and SmileDirectClub were WallStreetBets favorites, but never reached the heights of the original meme stocks.



Source: Factset

## Join the Club

Retail traders have become a larger percentage of the options market.



Source: SentimenTrader

accounting for 39% of the volume, according to data from SentimenTrader. And I, with my contract of Bed Bath and Beyond shares, was among them.

Then, on Black Friday, the BBBY option expired—worthless. The exuberance that drove shares up in early November dissipated as news of the Omicron variant sank retail stocks.

I found it easy to qualify for options trading. Options levels, particularly for GameStop and AMC, leaped. Total equity options volume hit 78.3 million contracts in the first week of November 2021, up from 45.8 million during the same week in 2020, with small traders

My foray into meme trading ended soon after that. I lost roughly \$84 of the \$250 I started with in the Robinhood

account, due to my failed bet on Bed Bath & Beyond, which cost \$63, and the 56% plunge in SmileDirectClub from my first purchase. I got the thrill of the trade, but not the intoxicating sensation of being part of the crowd pushing shares higher, thumbing my nose at Wall Street along the way.

From the looks of it, the meme trade is now on life support. Federal Reserve plans to raise interest rates have made markets less buoyant, weakening the potential for the kind of gains that drive retail traders. Yes, the gang still gathers at WallStreetBets to exchange ideas, but they’ve become just one more tool to be monetized by Wall Street. They aren’t going away, but their power to move markets seems to have for now.

“Though U.S. retail stock trading has declined since the first quarter of 2021, the public remains more active in the market than they were prior to the pandemic,” says S&P Global’s Thomas Mason. “We expect this overall heightened level of retail engagement to persist, though sudden rallies in single stock names now seem less likely.”

Still, the impact could be long-lasting for companies caught up in the meme mania. AMC was quick to use its meme status to raise capital, shoring up its balance sheet with a billion dollars in two stock offerings, and managed to not only survive the pandemic but also position itself to thrive—if people return to the movies. And GameStop raised \$1.7 billion in two offerings, and with Ryan Cohen, co-founder of Chewy (CHWY) as chairman, it bought itself time to figure out how to make money as sales of physical videogames dwindle. That’s good for the businesses, even if it doesn’t necessarily make for lucrative long-term investments.

Even if 2021’s meme-trade phenomenon truly fades, the ripples will continue to be felt. Never before has trading been so readily available to so many people—just a few taps on an iPhone and someone can make an investment—and never before has it been so simple to share information, albeit of varying quality, online. People will continue to harness the power of the digital world in the hopes of reaping financial gain, whether through NFTs, crypto, or something that hasn’t been invented yet.

I can’t predict what the next mania will be, but whatever it is, it’s likely to be digital in nature. Quick, easy, with a thrill up the back of the neck. ■

# When the Retail Hordes Invaded Wall Street

The meme-stock insurgency isn’t the first time retail investors upset Wall Street’s cart.

Everyone wanted a piece of the Roaring ‘20s bull market, and they got it buying stocks on margin with 10% down. As so-called brokers’ loans surged, the Federal Reserve raised rates in August 1929 to cool speculation. It didn’t work. On Oct. 21, according to the Trader column, margin debt was nearing a record set in March 1926, which had been followed by a drastic public liquidation.

That was nothing like the liquidation that started Oct. 24, Black Thursday. From 305.85 on that date, the Dow tumbled to 41.22 on July 8, 1932. The 1929 high wasn’t regained until 1954.

Stocks had “recaptured something of their old-time glamor” by the ‘60s, but newcomers weren’t speculating this time. Through mutual funds and “investment clubs,” they bought blue chips like **Johnson & Johnson**, **Eastman Kodak**, **Sears**, and **IBM**—and held them. Wildly high valuations resulted for these companies, dubbed the Nifty Fifty, which after tanking became the “Dirty Thirty.”

The dot-com bubble’s “day traders” were organized armies of split-second market timers. “The goal: to ride stocks up a quarter-, half-, or full point—and quickly punch out of the position with a profit,” we wrote. Sound tricky? There were also commissions. “I gained \$25,000 in trading profits, but paid commission fees of \$100,000,” one trader told us. Then the bubble really burst. —Kenneth G. Pringle

# This Electric Components Supplier Is Powering Up

Reasons to own Wesco International shares include a retooled power grid, a promising acquisition, and a bargain price.

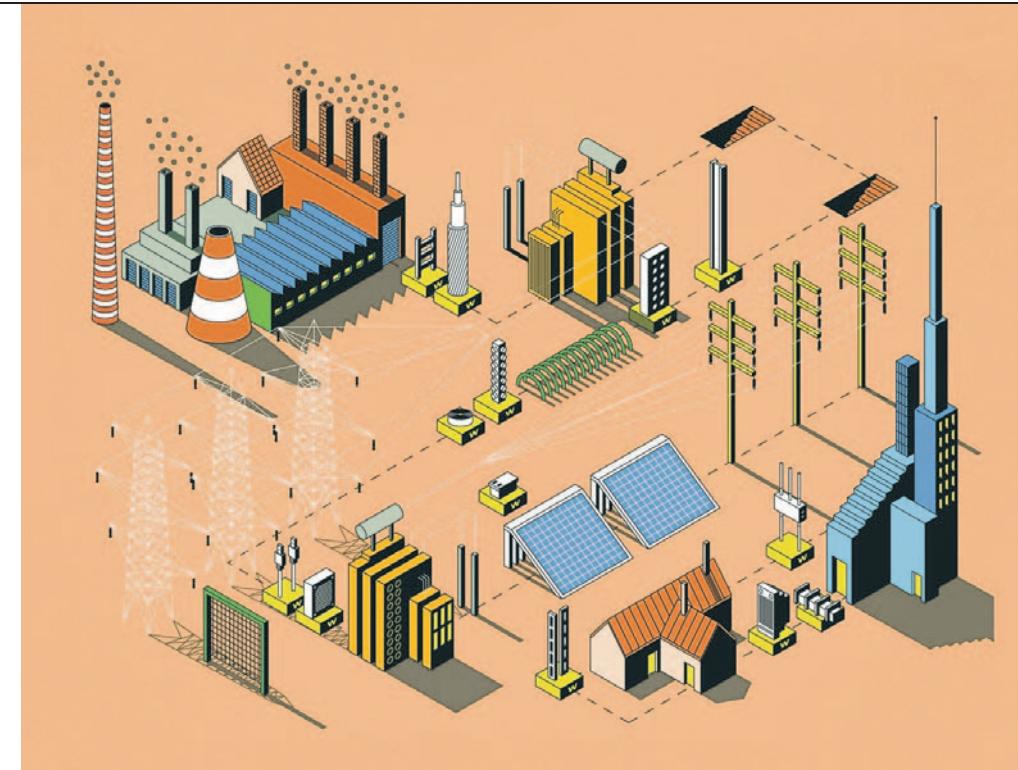
By AL ROOT

**D**emand for cloud computing, power from renewable sources, and electric vehicles, along with more extreme weather events, mean that electrical infrastructure will need extensive investment for years to come. That's just one of many reasons to hold shares of **Wesco International**.

Wesco (ticker: WCC) distributes electrical and communications products. It has 800 locations, 18,000 employees, 30,000 suppliers, 125,000 customers, and 1.5 million products. The Pittsburgh-based company is estimated to have generated about \$18 billion in sales in 2021 and is expected to have about \$18.9 billion in 2022. It has a roughly 15% share of the U.S. electrical-distribution market. The relatively fragmented nature of such markets gives larger, well-capitalized companies, such as Wesco, a chance to grow by gobbling up smaller, regional players—or by taking market share from them.

Wesco stock, at a recent \$119, is down 10% this year, having been punished along with many other small-cap shares. The Russell 2000 index, which covers small-caps, is down 12%. The drop, while painful for shareholders, also provides an attractive entry point.

Recent declines feel more like a stock-market phenomenon than a problem specific to Wesco or its rivals.



**"We've raised our cost synergy targets through the end of 2023 twice since the merger closed."**

CEO John Engel

Secular electricity trends look positive. Power generation, transmission, and demand are all undergoing significant change. Investors can extrapolate what it all means from a few data points. Utility giant **NextEra Energy** (NEE) estimates that completely decarbonizing the U.S. economy by 2050 will require up to \$4 trillion in investment, or roughly \$140 billion a year.

Utilities already maintain and replace power-generating equipment. The Edison Electric Institute estimates that total U.S. spending by investor-owned electric utilities will average about \$140 billion annually for the next few years, up from an average of \$120 billion over the past few. And Wood Mackenzie projects that tens of billions will be spent each year on distributed energy resources, including battery backup power and solar installations.

There is some overlap and nuance, but the total picture means better growth than in the past for the markets that Wesco serves.

Along with the secular tailwinds, Wesco has a cyclical one. The U.S. industrial economy is growing quickly. The Institute for Supply Management Purchasing Managers' Index, or PMI, is at about 59. The PMI has averaged almost 61 over the past 12 months, compared with about 52 over the past 40 years. It's rarely been this good for manufacturers, and more manufacturing means more sales for distributors,

including Wesco—though concerns about slowing economic growth could dampen sales in the near term.

Wesco bought another electronics distributor, Anixter International, in mid-2020. As integration continues, it keeps finding new ways to squeeze out costs, boosting profit margins.

"We've raised our cost synergy targets through the end of 2023 twice since the merger closed," said Wesco CEO John Engel at a November conference. Wesco originally expected to cut some \$200 million in combined costs when it merged with Anixter. Annualized cost savings should be closer to \$300 million, with another \$100 million still to be realized by 2023. Man-

agement also envisioned roughly \$200 million in cross-selling synergies from the deal, as Anixter and Wesco didn't have a lot of customer overlap.

One negative: The merger raised Wesco's net debt to about \$5.3 billion from \$1.5 billion; that figure was \$4.4 billion at the end of September. But the company expects to pay down some of it in coming quarters, targeting a debt-to-Ebitda ratio of 2 to 3.5 times, down from a current 4. (Ebitda stands for earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization.)

High debt can be a risk for any company, but it can also benefit shareholders. Today, Wesco's enterprise value—the sum of its debt and its \$6 billion market capitalization—is about \$11 billion, including preferred shares. As free cash flow is used to pay down obligations, there's a shift of value from debt to equity. Wesco is expected to generate about \$2 billion in free cash flow over the next three years.

Inflation is another risk, but it isn't such a big deal for distribution businesses. "They don't make anything," notes RBC Capital Markets analyst Deane Dray. Distributors essentially buy and sell products, earning a spread. Some degree of inflation can actually benefit them, as inventory becomes a little more valuable over time.

Inventory-inflation arbitrage isn't a reason to hold the stock for the long run, but the stability of distribution business models is. Wesco hasn't produced a loss, on an adjusted basis, in any of the past 40 quarters.

Dray calls Wesco one of his top picks for 2022 because of its trifecta of secular, cyclical, and company-specific tailwinds. His target price for the stock is \$158. That works out to roughly 13.6 times his 2022 Wesco earnings estimate of about \$11.60 a share.

That isn't a big valuation multiple for many companies. But Wesco has changed hands at an average price/earnings ratio of roughly 12 times over the past few years. That was before the merger, before the potential growth in electricity-related spending, and before the S&P 500 started trading for 20 times estimated 2022 earnings.

If the shares fetch 14 to 15 times earnings, they could hit \$170 in 2022, about 43% above their recent \$119. And with sales expected to grow at an average annual rate around 3% and bottom-line earnings at nearly 13%, multiple expansion is certainly on the table. ■

## Wesco International

Electrical-equipment distributor

Headquarters:	Pittsburgh
Recent Price:	\$119.17
52-Wk Change:	56.8%
Market Value (bil):	\$6.0
2022E Sales (bil):	\$18.9
2022E Net Income (mil):	\$576
2022E EPS:	\$10.82
2022E P/E:	11.0
Dividend Yield:	None

E=Estimate



Source: FactSet

# TECH TRADER

## After the Crash: How To Buy Tech Stocks as Rates Begin to Rise

**T**ech stocks finally showed a little fight last week, aided by an impressive batch of earnings reports. But the sector remains battered. The Nasdaq Composite is down 16% over the past two months—and beneath the surface, the damage is considerably worse. Among Nasdaq stocks with market caps over \$1 billion, one-quarter are down 30% or more since mid-November. More than 60 Nasdaq stocks are down 50%-plus, including familiar names like Overstock, Affirm, Robinhood, DocuSign, and Etsy.

While stock prices are a lot lower, they are hardly de-risked. As the Federal Reserve made clear last week, rate increases are coming, likely by March. Higher rates are bad for the kind of high-multiple growth stocks that led the market over the past two years.

Consider it your mantra: Lower-priced stocks aren't the same as cheap stocks. **Zoom Video Communications** (ticker: ZM) is down almost 70% from its 52-week high—but it still trades for 10 times expected sales for the current year and more than 30 times projected earnings. Cheaper, not cheap. **Shopify** (SHOP) shares have been cut in half, but still trade at more than 18 times current year sales, and 108 times earnings. Cheaper, but not remotely cheap. **Etsy** (ETSY), down 53% from its highs, trades for eight times sales and close to 50 times earnings. Cheaper, sure. Cheap? Still no.

During the pandemic, companies like Zoom and **DocuSign** (DOCU) kept the economy on track. The Federal



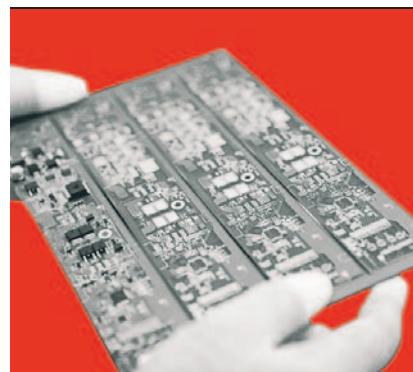
By Eric J. Savitz

Reserve provided unprecedented stimulus, pushing rates down and creating a favorable environment for growth stocks. The venture-capital sector responded by cranking out a record number of initial public offerings and special-purpose acquisition companies.

But those days are over, says David Readerman, who runs Endurance Capital, a San Francisco-based tech hedge fund. Readerman says stock appreciation in 2022 will require earnings growth that exceeds multiple compression. Valuations, he says, "will come in hard." He says we'll know the bottom for valuations when private-equity tech acquisitions pick up. He isn't seeing that yet.

In the meantime, Readerman advises investors to look for companies returning capital to shareholders either through dividends, share buybacks, or M&A exits. Focusing on growth is problematic, he says, because "what the market will pay for growth is under serious review."

Here are a few ways to play a new world for tech stocks:



What the market pays for growth "is under serious review," says David Readerman, a San Francisco-based hedge fund manager.

**Bet on the cloud:** The best thing to happen to the cloud last week unfolded on the **Microsoft** (MSFT) earnings call. The stock initially sagged 5% on December-quarter numbers. The company's cloud business met but didn't exceed expectations, and 46% growth in Azure cloud revenue left some investors disappointed. But on the call, CFO Amy Hood said Azure's growth will accelerate in the March quarter—and just like that, the stock reversed course.

Hood restored the market's faith in the cloud. I'm not sure why there were any doubts. The digital-transformation trend, with businesses shifting operations to the cloud, continues apace—and it's arguably just getting going. You could see hints of the same trends in results last week from cloud-software firm **ServiceNow** (NOW) and enterprise disk-drive maker **Seagate** (STX). We'll get more cloud data points next week when **Amazon.com** (AMZN) and **Alphabet** (GOOGL) report results, but the pattern is clear.

**Arista Networks** (ANET) and **Ciena** (CIEN) are direct bets on capital spending in the cloud. But if you want to keep things simple, you can simply buy Microsoft, Amazon, and Alphabet, all discounted from recent highs.

**Own chip stocks:** The fact that chips are in short supply is hardly a secret, and manufacturers are rushing to build new capacity. Still, the projects will take years to pay off. On a "Barron's Live" call last week, Paul Meeks, portfolio manager at Independent Solutions Wealth Management, told me he's waiting for some of the dust to settle on interest rates, while preparing to jump on chip stocks. He likes

**Micron Technology** (MU) and **Qualcomm** (QCOM), as well as chip-equipment providers like **Applied Materials** (AMAT), **ASML** (ASML), and **Lam Research** (LRCX). There's also a strong long-term case for contract chip manufacturers, notably **Taiwan Semiconductor** (TSM) and **GlobalFoundries** (GF).

**Go old school:** As I outlined in a recent *Barron's* cover story, **IBM** (IBM) is making progress on its turnaround plan. IBM's recent earnings report was confirmation—revenue jumped 8.6%, the best result in a decade. The stock remains a bargain, trading for just over one times sales and 13 times this year's estimated profits, while sporting a dividend yield of nearly 5%. Meanwhile, the two leading U.S. PC makers—**HP Inc.** (HPQ) and **Dell Technologies** (DELL)—saw soaring demand during the pandemic. Both are buying back stock, and their stocks still look cheap. PCs are one pandemic trend unlikely to reverse. Microsoft reported 25% revenue growth from Windows software it sold for new PCs in the latest quarter.

**Finally, a quick follow-up:** A week ago, I made the case that it was too late to sell **Netflix** (NFLX), after the stock suffered a sharp decline on a disappointing first-quarter outlook. I suggested intrepid investors might want to start nibbling. And someone did: Pershing Square fund manager Bill Ackman snapped up \$1 billion worth of Netflix shares this past week. Ackman said that he's a big believer in CEO Reed Hastings and the company's long-term future. Netflix is one tech stock that may now be cheap enough. ■

As tech stocks sold off, there were a few silver linings: Microsoft restored the market's faith in the cloud, while IBM reminded investors there was still value in a legacy business. Next up? Earnings from Amazon.com and Alphabet.

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# FUNDS

## Invest With the Tiger, But Don't Get mauled

**C**hina ushers in the Year of the Tiger this week, an auspicious sign. The tiger symbolizes strength and, according to Chinese folk tales, the power to ward off disaster.

That's a welcome sign as investors begin to wade back into Chinese stocks after a tumultuous year that saw Beijing unleash a wave of regulation that upended the property and internet sectors, and implement strict Covid restrictions that dampened consumer spending. Net flows into Chinese stocks—including onshore domestic A-shares and H-shares—have been positive for the past four weeks, according to EPFR Global.

Cheap valuations—the MSCI China index trades near 12 times expected 2022 earnings—is certainly one draw. There are still risks, however: China's economy is slowing, the country's move to reduce its carbon footprint led to factory shutdowns last year, and, more recently, pandemic-related restrictions have curtailed consumer spending and worsened supply-chain shortages.

But paradoxically, bad economic news could mean good news for investors: Policy makers are determined to keep the slowdown from causing any political instability in the lead-up to President Xi Jinping's bid for a historic third term in the fall. That doesn't mean China's regulatory drive is over, but the desire for stability lowers the odds that any new measures will be as harsh as last year's. It also bolsters the chances for market-friendly stimulus measures, like the recent cut in benchmark lending rates by the People's Bank of China last week. The divergence in policy from that of the Federal Reserve, which is poised to raise rates



By Reshma  
Kapadia

and reel in stimulus, should offer Chinese markets some support. Indeed, the **iShares MSCI China** exchange-traded fund (ticker: MCHI) is down just 0.25% this year, compared with the S&P 500's nearly 10% decline.

Despite a lengthy list of concerns, the world's second-largest economy has enough going for it that many investors and corporations say the benefits outweigh the cost of sitting China out.

**Alibaba Group Holding** (BABA) and **Tencent Holdings** (700.Hong Kong) have long dominated portfolios, but the best opportunity is with companies that are more in line with Beijing's policy priorities, which include decarbonizing its economy, bolstering its technological capabilities, reducing its reliance on foreign suppliers, and tackling wealth inequality. Many of those companies are better represented in China's onshore, or A-shares market. The MSCI A-Shares China index, which includes companies that trade in Shenzhen and Shanghai, gained 3.5% in 2021, and was home to a third of the 50 best-performing stocks in the MSCI All-Country World index, according to Goldman Sachs.

Geopolitical concerns have prompt-

ed most money managers to swap U.S.-listed Chinese companies for their Hong Kong-listed shares over the past year as the Securities and Exchange Commission moved toward starting its three-year clock for delisting companies that don't comply with U.S. auditing rules. Alibaba, **JD.com** (JD), and **NetEase** (NTES) are among the companies that already have listed closer to home, and analysts expect the bulk of the biggest and most widely held U.S.-listed Chinese companies to follow suit. All this points to the importance of investing via shares traded in China.

For U.S. retail investors, that means mutual funds are the way to go—though not necessarily funds that invest exclusively in A-shares, which can be very volatile, says Morningstar's William Rocco. Opt for funds that can go wherever the best opportunities arise within China, like **Matthews China** (MCHFX), which has returned an average of 13% annually over the past five years.

Matthews China has increased its A-share allocation to 44%, up from 37% at the beginning of 2021, but co-manager Andrew Mattock says those prices are getting lofty. More recently, he has taken a more balanced approach, adding Hong Kong-listed shares, which have been beaten down in the past year. That includes some of the most profitable and dominant internet companies, as well as financials, such as exchanges, brokerages, and banks, that benefit from Beijing's efforts to reform its capital markets.

Two diversified emerging markets funds stand out for their heftier allo-

cation to Chinese companies, and offer strong track records and relatively low expense ratios. **BlackRock Emerging Markets** (MDDCX), a high-conviction strategy fund run out of a Hong Kong with 8% of its assets in A-shares, has averaged a three-year annual return of 11%. **BNY Mellon Global Emerging Markets** (DGEAX), which has increased its allocation to China to 35%, averaged a three-year annual return of 17%.

BNY Mellon Global Emerging Markets co-manager Ian Smith is less worried about near-term valuations because he favors "compounds," well-run businesses in industries with plenty of growth ahead. One prevalent theme is "upgrade China," for instance, enterprise software-as-service companies that are helping corporate China digitize operations.

Also attractive: companies tied to China's energy transition, which include renewables and the software firms needed to upgrade the country's power grids. Many of these are found in the A-shares market, which accounts for roughly 14% of the assets—one of the highest allocations among diversified emerging market funds, according to Morningstar.

While the battered internet-platform companies look very reasonable in terms of valuations, Smith and his team are still skeptical, especially as regulation could chip away competitive advantages as new rivals encroach and a weaker economy slows consumer spending. "What we want to focus on now," he says, "is how they can adapt to the new era." ■

### Flexible Funds

To tap the next leg of opportunity in China, investors may want to find a fund manager that can hunt among Chinese companies on the mainland and beyond. Here are three with strong track records, low costs, and sizable A-shares exposure to consider.

Fund / Ticker	AUM (mil)	RETURNS		Expense Ratio	Comment
		1-Year	3-Year		
<b>BlackRock Emerging Markets</b> / MDDCX	\$4,800	-8.12%	11.0%	1.12%	Roughly a third of high-conviction strategy is invested in China, with 8% in A-shares
<b>Matthews China</b> / MCHFX	1300	-22.2	13.0	1.09	Run by a veteran Asia investor; roughly 44% of portfolio in A-shares
<b>BNY Mellon Global Emerging Mkts</b> / DGEAX	531	-15.6	17.0	1.25	35% of assets in China, favors compounds with long-term growth ahead

Source: Morningstar

The right approach for U.S. investors looking to invest in China is to stick with mutual funds that can go wherever the best opportunities arise.

# THE ECONOMY

The central bank bought the equivalent of the entire new-home market in 2021 with its mortgage-bond buying, plus an additional 36%.

## The Housing Market Is Fed's Frankenstein. It Won't Tame Easily.

**T**he Federal Reserve wants to slowly and quietly extricate itself from the U.S. housing market. That may be wishful thinking.

For perspective on the Fed's influence over the housing market since it launched its emergency bond-buying program two years ago, consider this point by Richard Farr, chief market strategist at Merion Capital Group. Some 762,000 new homes were sold at an average price of \$453,700 in 2021, meaning that the Fed—looking just at its \$40 billion-a-month in mortgage-backed securities purchases—bought the equivalent of the entire new-home market last year, plus an extra 36%.

How the central bank handles housing—set ablaze by the pandemic's push of people to suburbs and exurbs chronically short on inventory as Fed intervention torpedoed mortgage rates—will determine whether the Fed can realistically and sufficiently cool inflation without throwing the U.S. economy into a recession and markets into deeper corrections.

The specter of higher interest rates is already lifting mortgage rates. But a handful of quarter-point hikes from zero probably won't be enough to adequately cool housing, which represents about 40% of the consumer price index.

First, there is the reality that the Fed owns about a third of the Treasury and mortgage markets, and long-term rates won't really rise—even when it starts lifting the fed-funds rate—until it shrinks its own footprint. Second, tailwinds, including a tight labor market



By Lisa Beilfuss

and favorable home-buying demographics alongside record-low inventory of existing homes for sale and record-low vacancy rates for renters, portend ongoing housing-market strength despite rising rates, says Torsten Sløk, chief economist at Apollo Global Management.

Then there is the amount of investor money chasing single-family homes. "Mountains and mountains of capital have been raised to invest in U.S. housing, and three or four rate increases aren't going to stop that," says Rick Palacios, director of research at John Burns Real Estate Consulting. Sure, home-price appreciation will slow from 2021's torrid pace. But Palacios says there are no signs on the ground of

easing supply-chain issues or waning demand; he still sees 9% home-price growth this year—more than double the pace that Sløk says is sustainable. Rents, which lag behind home prices by about a year, should rise 5% nationwide in 2022, with many markets seeing twice that rate, Palacios says.

This all suggests that the Fed's balance sheet is going to be the more meaningful policy tool, though a much more complicated, opaque, and unpredictable device that central bankers would prefer to play down. When Fed Chairman Jerome Powell spoke after the latest policy meeting, he left investors with more questions than answers over how quantitative tightening, or the reversal of pandemic-driven quantitative easing, will work.

There is an "element of uncertainty around the balance sheet," Powell said, which has doubled since the start of the pandemic and represents 40% of U.S. gross domestic product. "I think we have a much better sense, frankly, of how rate increases affect financial conditions and, hence, economic conditions. [The] balance sheet is still a relatively new thing for the markets and for us, so we're less certain about that," said Powell. "We will look to have that just running in the background."

The problem with trying to let the

balance sheet shrink in the background is that it won't. If the Fed tries to reduce its portfolio the way it wants to, by letting bonds roll off as they mature and adjusting the amount of proceeds that get reinvested, Sløk says it would take about five years to fully purge MBS. The logic: mortgage prepayments—often done via refinancing—will markedly slow as rates rise. If balance-sheet normalization is going to represent the real tightening this time, and if the broader economy's path depends on cooling the housing market, do we have five years?

This is where overly aggressive QT—or even outright asset sales—becomes a legitimate concern and a similarly unattractive option. Joseph Wang, previously a senior trader on the Fed's open markets desk, says it's hard to fine-tune quantitative tightening and that no one really knows how it's going to play out. But we do know one thing. Wang says that if the Fed wants to speed up a very slow exit from the mortgage market, it is going to have to sell assets.

Analysts say there would be buyers, such as banks, but it's not that simple and the transition may be violent. There's the sheer quantity of mortgage-backed securities on the Fed's balance sheet, and there is the fact that QT is meant to drain liquidity, meaning that would-be buyers will have less cash and thus represent dwindling demand just as supply soars.

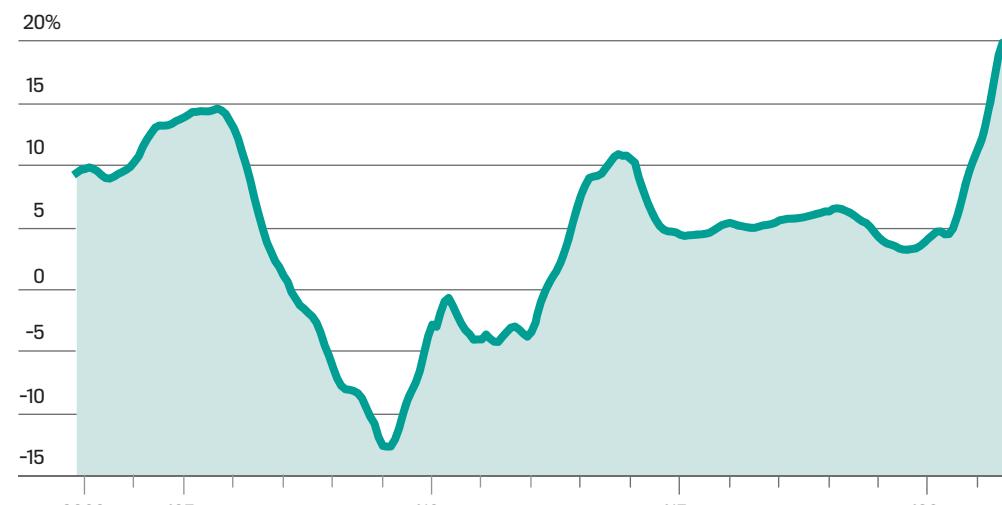
As housing goes, so goes the economy. The sector makes up nearly a fifth of GDP, and more people own their homes than have substantial stock market exposure, making the so-called wealth effect deeply connected to real estate. The Fed must try to micromanage psychology in the housing market, Sløk says, adding that engineering a soft landing for the economy starts with doing so for housing.

It is a tall task, and one that seems a bit Frankensteinian. The central bank staved off a downturn that could have been far worse than the quick recession and correction we saw in 2020. But nothing is without consequence, and investors are about to find out just how much the Fed doesn't know about what it has created. ■

### Homing In on Housing

How the Fed handles housing will determine how the economy weathers tighter monetary policy.

#### S&P / Case Shiller U.S. Home Price Index Year-Over-Year Change



Source: Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis

# INCOME INVESTING

## Here's a Status Update On 14 Paused Payouts

**A**lthough there are some large U.S. companies whose dividends remain suspended since the early days of the pandemic, plenty of others have resumed their quarterly distributions—in some cases to above levels before Covid became a household word.

For this column, *Barron's*, with the help of S&P Dow Jones Indices, compiled a list of 14 S&P 500 index companies that suspended their dividends in the first half of 2020 but have since restored them. Dividend suspensions were more prevalent than cuts among S&P 500 companies as they scrambled to preserve capital amid the pandemic-induced lockdowns. In March, April, and May of 2020, for example, 40 S&P 500 companies suspended their payouts, more than double the 19 that announced dividend cuts, according to S&P Dow Jones Indices.

In compiling this list, *Barron's* eschewed those firms that were S&P 500 members at the time but that have subsequently been removed from the index. That includes retailer **Kohl's** (ticker: KSS), which nearly a year ago resumed paying a quarterly dividend after suspending it.

Of the 14 companies on the list, six have boosted their dividends to above what they were paying out in early 2020, six remain below their prepandemic levels, and two are unchanged.

"It's definitely a sign of health when you are increasing the dividend or restoring it," says Michael Liss, senior portfolio manager at American Century Investments. "A lot of companies have just been very cautious."

Still, a company's dividend reinstatement at any level could augur



By Lawrence C.  
Strauss

well for future stock performance, though it varies and hinges on each firm's business and outlook.

"Companies reinstating their dividends are poised for above-market dividend growth as they inch back to their historical payout ratios," says Chris Senyek, chief investment strategist at Wolfe Research. A common definition of a payout ratio is the percentage of earnings that gets paid out in dividends. "Our research has found that dividend-paying stocks with high dividend growth outperform the broader dividend universe, historically."

Even for those companies whose dividends are above where they were

in early 2020, those restorations didn't necessarily happen at once.

Take restaurant operator **Darden Restaurants** (DRI), which suspended its quarterly dividend in March 2020. It resumed paying it that November at 30 cents a share, down from 88 cents previously. But it has since boosted the quarterly disbursement several times, most recently to \$1.10 a share. The stock yields 3%.

**Estée Lauder** (EL) has put through several quarterly dividend increases, as well, the last one in November to 60 cents a share from 53 cents. The company restored its dividend in August 2020 at 48 cents a share, the same as it was before the pandemic. The stock yields 0.8%.

Mining company **Freeport-McMoRan** (FCX) is now paying out 7.5 cents a share in dividends each quarter, up from five cents before it was halted. It yields 0.8%, as well.

**Marathon Oil** (MRO), which along with many companies in the oil patch was battered by the pandemic, initially ceased paying a dividend in May 2020.

However, the company declared a quarterly disbursement of three cents a share that October, compared with five cents previously. The company has steadily increased its quarterly payout since then, most recently to seven cents a share. The stock yields 1.1%.

**HCA Healthcare** (HCA), which operates hospitals and other health-care facilities, brought back its dividend in the first quarter of 2021. It recently declared a quarterly dividend of 56 cents a share, compared with 43 cents in early 2020. Its stock yields 0.9%. Similarly, retailer **TJX Cos.** (TJX) has been paying a quarterly disbursement of 26 cents a share, up from 23 cents prepandemic. It yields 1.5%.

Six of these companies haven't returned their dividends to prepandemic levels, however. Senyek of Wolfe Research blames the pandemic. "Our sense is that companies were cautious in the level of reinstating dividends given uncertainty around Covid," he says.

**Ford Motor** (F) relaunched its quarterly payout last fall at 10 cents a share, five cents below where it had been before the pandemic. Its stock yields 2%. And **Kimco Realty** (KIM), a real estate investment trust, is paying a quarterly dividend of 17 cents a share, above the 10 cents when it was resumed in September of last year but below the prepandemic distribution of 28 cents a share. The stock yields 2.8%.

Meanwhile, retailer **Bath & Body Works** (BBWI), formerly L Brands, is paying 15 cents a share quarterly, half of its previous level. The stock yields 1.1%. It's important to keep in mind, however, that **Victoria's Secret** (VSCO) was spun off last August to L Brands shareholders. Victoria's Secret hasn't paid a dividend.

Other companies that haven't brought their quarterly dividends back to prepandemic levels are **Molson Coors Beverage** (TAP), **Tapestry** (TPR), and **Weyerhaeuser** (WY), which did, however, pay a special dividend of 50 cents a share in October.

For patient investors, these dividends should be restored to their previous levels, and then some. "Just as business renormalizes," says Senyek, "so too should dividend payout ratios." ■

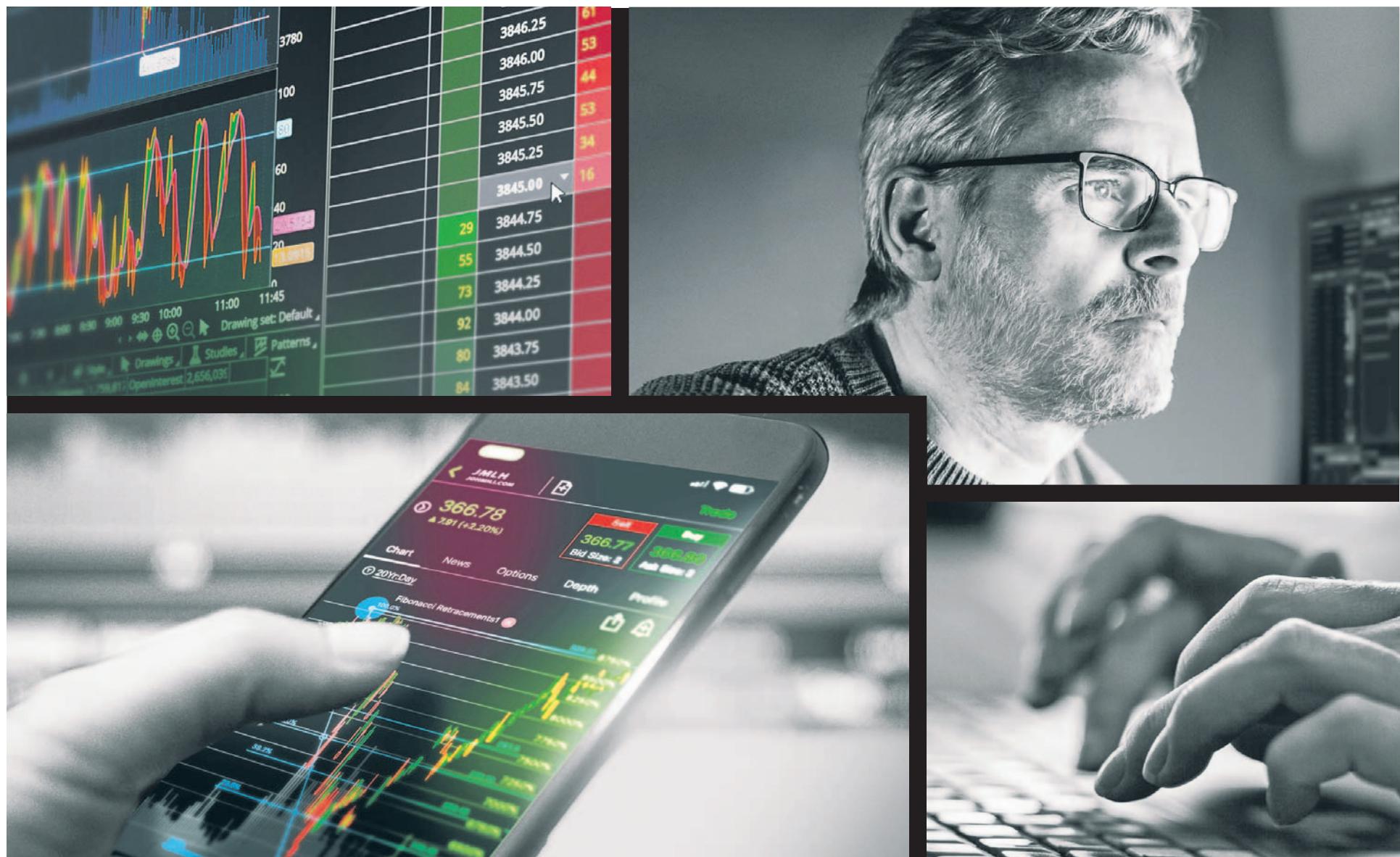
### Recovering Dividends

After suspending their dividends early in the pandemic, these S&P 500 companies have resumed payouts.

Company / Ticker	1-Year Return	Quarterly Dividend Per Share Before Suspension	Most Recent Quarterly Dividend Per Share
<b>Bath &amp; Body Works</b> / BBWI	55.0%	\$0.30	\$0.15
<b>Darden Restaurants</b> / DRI	15.0	0.88	1.10
<b>Estee Lauder</b> / EL	22.0	0.48	0.60
<b>Ford Motor</b> / F	78.0	0.15	0.10
<b>Freeport-McMoRan</b> / FCX	32.0	0.05	0.075
<b>HCA Healthcare</b> / HCA	47.0	0.43	0.56
<b>Kimco Realty</b> / KIM	47.0	0.28	0.17
<b>Molson Coors Beverage</b> / TAP	0.0	0.57	0.34
<b>Marathon Oil</b> / MRO	128.0	0.05	0.07
<b>PVH</b> / PVH	-1.0	0.0375	0.0375
<b>TJX Cos.</b> / TJX	5.0	0.23	0.26
<b>Tapestry</b> / TPR	13.0	0.3375	0.25
<b>Universal Health Services</b> / UHS	2.0	0.20	0.20
<b>Weyerhaeuser</b> / WY	21.0	0.34	0.17

Note: returns as of Jan. 24.

Sources: FactSet; Bloomberg



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# MARKET WEEK



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Dow Jones Industrials

**34,725.47**

52-wk: +15.82% YTD: -4.44% Wkly: +1.34%

S&amp;P 500

**4431.85**

52-wk: +19.32% YTD: -7.01% Wkly: +0.77%

Nasdaq Composite

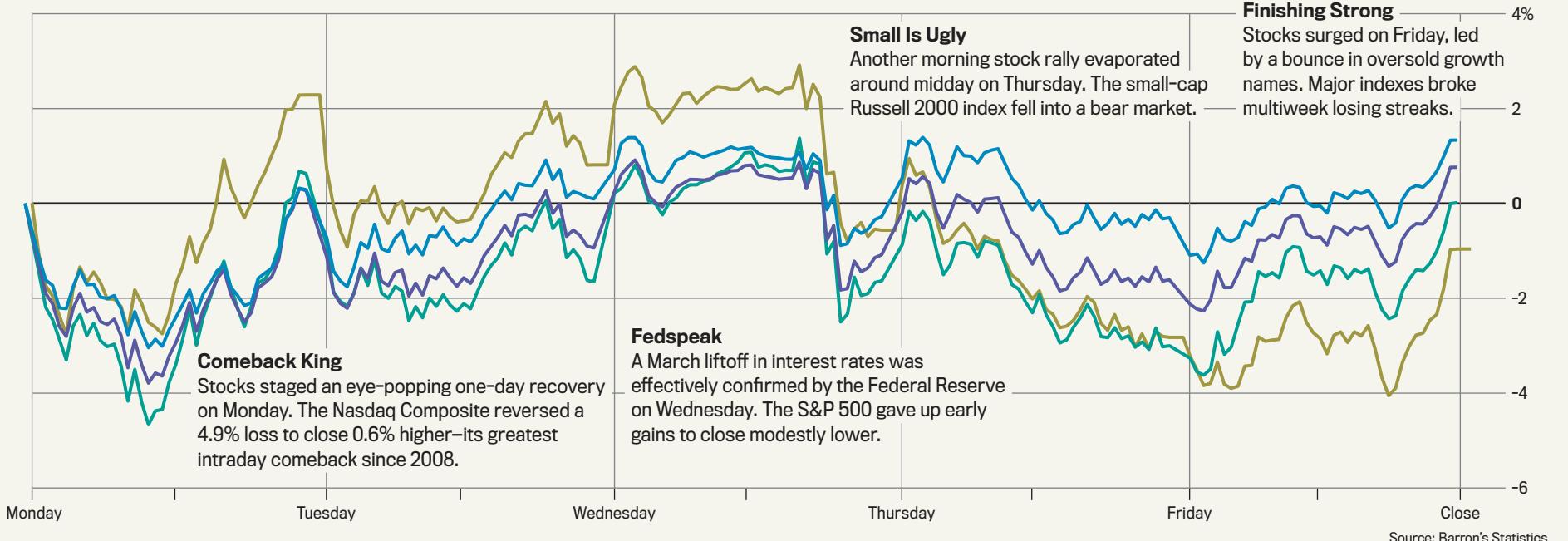
**13,770.57**

52-wk: +5.35% YTD: -11.98% Wkly: +0.01%

Russell 2000

**1968.51**

52-wk: -5.07% YTD: -12.33% Wkly: -0.98%



## THE TRADER

### This Is What an Earnings Slowdown Looks Like

**S**top me if you've heard this one before: Company beats profit and sales estimates, stock falls. That's become all too typical for many stocks in January as companies report fourth-quarter results—and it doesn't look set to change this earnings season. Fear not. All is not lost for stocks in 2022.

It's been a rocky, painful time for investors hoping that earnings could drive stocks higher. Even the rallies are stomach-churning. The S&P 500 rose 0.8% this past week after a late Friday rally that sent the index up 3.2% from its daily low. The Dow Jones Industrial Average rose 1.3% for the week, and the Nasdaq Composite was flat.



By Al Root

The Federal Reserve got much of the blame, but earnings didn't help. This past Tuesday, **General Electric** (ticker: GE) reported better-than-expected fourth-quarter numbers, but dropped 6% in response. The next day, **Tesla** (TSLA) reported better-than-expected results, too, and its shares were hammered, falling 12%. (For more on Tesla, see below.)

The broader data paint the same picture. By Friday, almost 170 companies in the S&P 500 had reported quarterly numbers. Some 77% have beaten analyst earnings estimates, while 68% have topped sales forecasts. That hasn't been good enough. So far this earnings season, the average stock price move is down 1.2% in response to earnings. In the third

quarter, the average reaction to earnings was up 0.1%.

The number of companies beating Wall Street estimates isn't the problem. Brian Rauscher, Fundstrat's head of global portfolio strategy, calls the fourth-quarter performance data normal. The problem, he points out, is the magnitude of the earnings "beat."

So far, fourth-quarter earnings have come in about 5% better than expected. Not bad, but earnings for S&P companies came in about 9% better than expected in the third quarter of 2021, about 17% better in the second quarter, and about 21% better in the first quarter of last year. The trend is down.

The magnitude of earnings beats is, admittedly, more important for trad-



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ers than investors. Earnings growth, however, shows the same pattern. So far for the fourth quarter, earnings have grown by about 30% year over year, down from 39% during the third quarter and up 50% during the first quarter. Second-quarter 2021 earnings were up a ridiculous 100%. What's more, for the first quarter of 2022, earnings for S&P 500 companies are expected to grow by an average of just 6%.

Earnings estimates are also falling because of weaker-than-hoped-for guidance. That puts pressure on coming earnings growth, too. Estimates for GE's first-quarter earnings went to 43 cents a share from 57 cents a share after the company gave guidance RBC analyst Deane Dray called "noisy." First-quarter earnings estimates for the entire S&P 500 have dipped by about 1% over the past few days, as earnings reports roll in. Earnings-growth deceleration is a big problem for the stock market. In fact, it's probably a bigger problem than even inflation.

Of course, inflation might be the cause of decelerating earnings growth and hazy 2022 outlooks. Still, Rauscher isn't worried about inflation derailing the entire year for stocks. He's in the transitory inflation camp. "I'm not reading the Jolts data the way [Fed Chairman] Powell has communicated it," he says.

Jolts is short for the Bureau of Labor Statistics' "job openings and labor turnover survey." It's become a popular report because the number is sky high, up 57% year over year in November, indicating that the labor market is tight. High Jolts is something the Fed has cited as a reason for raising interest rates to combat inflation. Rauscher, however, points out that Covid skews everything. Vaccine mandates, along with associated firings for not getting vaccinated and Omicron-related absenteeism, all combine to skew Jolts data.

Things can get better from here. For companies, that means lower costs related

to turnover and training. Lower costs will eventually turn into better earnings growth. Things, however, won't get better immediately, which is why Rauscher expects a bumpy first quarter for stocks. "If someone is super-aggressive...and has the ability to do some hedging or some tactical [trading], go for it," he adds.

But that's a risky strategy. For less-aggressive investors, he suggests making a list of their favorite highest-quality stocks and thinking about a price they would have to hit to add them to a portfolio.

That way, at least you can realize some gain from all this pain.

### Buy Tesla Over Ford or GM

What the heck just happened to Tesla stock?

Its shares got hammered this past week after the company reported better-than-expected fourth-quarter earnings Wednesday evening. The reaction to record profits and an earnings beat left investors as well as analysts dazed and confused.

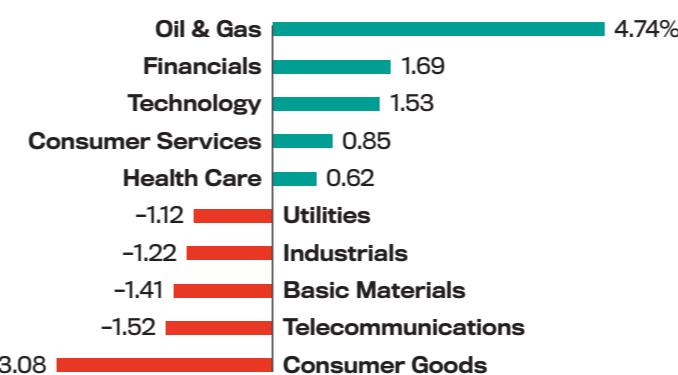
Yes, the numbers were really that good. Tesla reported \$2.54 in adjusted per-share earnings for the fourth quarter of 2021, topping Wall Street projections for about \$2.36 a share. It was the electric-vehicle maker's fourth consecutive quarterly earnings beat. What's more, CEO Elon Musk said on the company's earnings conference call that growth would be "comfortably above 50%" for 2022.

The result was a 12% stock drop. Shares rose 2.1% Friday, closing at \$846.35, to end the week down 10.3%. It's the third-worst reaction to any Tesla quarter over the past 11 years. The other two made more sense because portions of the reported results missed analyst expectations.

That makes the fourth-quarter reaction the worst to a beat in Tesla's history. So what gives? "I don't really know," responded one analyst when asked. It's an honest take, but it isn't an uninformed one. Earnings, vehicle-delivery targets, and ana-

### Industry Action

Performance of the Dow Jones U.S. Industrials, ranked by weekly percent change.\*



Source: S&P Dow Jones Indices

lyst price targets all rose after earnings were reported. That usually helps stocks, but investors dumped Tesla shares even as the Street told them things were getting better.

Others felt comfortable speculating about the reasons for the market's reaction. "No Cybertruck, no Semi, no MiniCar, no Robotaxis," posited Roth Capital Partners analyst Craig Irwin, referring to Musk's statement on the conference call that Tesla would bring no new models to market in 2022. Instead, Musk said the "fundamental focus of Tesla this year is scaling output," as the company brings two new plants online, one in Texas and one in Germany.

More production means more sales, but

there could also be some concern that Tesla can't just sell Model 3 and Model Y vehicles forever with more EV competition coming. Tesla's Cybertruck, for instance, will arrive about a year after **Ford Motor's** (F) all-electric F-150 Lightning. Still, Cybertruck timing hasn't really changed. And the Mini-car, a lower-priced EV that will open up new segments of the automotive market for Tesla, was a long shot for Musk to announce on the fourth-quarter call.

Chip shortages, which added to costs and constrained production, were also an issue. Tesla unit volumes grew almost 90% in 2021, but Musk said on the conference call that the company is still affected by the availability of semiconductors.

This coming week brings earnings reports from Ford and **General Motors** (GM), and investors will be watching for how they navigate the chip shortages. GM is due to report on Feb. 1, and Wall Street expects \$2.4 billion in operating profit for the fourth quarter. But that won't matter as much as guidance for the coming year. The Street is looking for about \$13.6 billion in 2022 operating profit, up about \$200 million from \$13.4 billion expected for 2021. The risk of missing even that

weak outlook looks real based on analysts' numbers. Operating profit estimates for GM have been coming down in recent weeks from \$13.9 billion in December. Any guidance lower than that could send shares down.

Ford is due to report earnings on Feb. 3. Wall Street expects \$2.7 billion in operating profit for the fourth quarter. Analysts project \$12 billion in operating profit for all of 2022, up from \$10.8 billion expected for 2021. As with GM, the 2022 figure will matter most. Unlike GM, however, Ford's 2022 estimates haven't been coming down. The \$12 billion figure is the highest consensus number yet.

There could be some risk to Ford stock, though it has been the best performer of the bunch. Ford shares are up about 16% over the past three months. GM stock has fallen about 7% and Tesla stock has dropped about 21%, while the S&P 500 is down 4% over the same span.

With that as the setup, Tesla stock, surprisingly, looks like the best bet over the coming months, as chip supplies and 2022 outlooks work themselves out. That conclusion would surprise a value investor, who probably won't trade Tesla stock anyway.

Still, Tesla shares now trade for about 83 times estimated 2022 earnings. That's a high multiple, but Tesla grows the fastest of the bunch by a long shot. What's more, Tesla's price/earnings multiple is down about 23% from recent averages, as estimates have gone up while the stock price has gone down.

Ford and GM shares trade for 10.6 and 7.4 times estimated 2022 earnings, respectively—far less expensive than Tesla, but with less growth forecast. Those P/E ratios haven't changed much over the past couple of years.

That may be the most stable thing about the auto market these days. ■

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# EUROPEAN TRADER

## British Airways Owner Looks Set to Take Off

By Callum Keown

**I**t has been a difficult start to the year for airlines all over the world as the disruptions from the Omicron variant have started to hit earnings.

For investors navigating an airline sector looking to recover from the pandemic, the flight path of **International Consolidated Airlines Group** (ticker: IAG) has been particularly tumultuous in recent months, but it suggests the stock has room to grow.

Shares in the British Airways owner surged 25% in the space of 10 days in September after the White House confirmed that it would lift travel restrictions on the United Kingdom and continental Europe, signaling the return of trans-Atlantic travel from November. But the recovery failed to take hold as the Omicron variant entered the fray. IAG remains 21% below its high of early October.

Deutsche Bank analyst Jaime Rowbotham has a Buy rating on the stock with a target price of 2.20 pounds sterling (\$2.96), implying 49% upside. The company has yet to see the benefit of the reopening of the trans-Atlantic corridor, he says.

Citi analysts, led by Sathish Sivakumar, see the company as "the most solvent and sensible way" to play the North Atlantic recovery over the next 12 months.

The long-haul sector isn't the same as it was prepandemic, with Norwegian Air and Thomas Cook both exiting the market since. The pair accounted for 11% of seats in the U.K.-U.S. market in 2019, Sivakumar says, and IAG would be the main beneficiary of their exits.

IAG's lack of exposure to the corporate travel market—just 13% of group revenue—is another reason to like the stock, the Citi analysts say, particularly as business travel looks set to recover more slowly. Sivakumar has a target price of £2.20 and a Buy rating, as well.

The company, which also owns Span-

ish carrier Iberia, Irish airline Aer Lingus, and low-cost airlines Vueling and Level, is expected to post revenue of £15.9 billion for 2022, according to FactSet.

That would be a significant improvement on revenue of £6.8 billion in 2020, and the estimated £7.04 billion in 2021, but still some way below 2019's £21.9 billion.

Analysts covering the stock are pretty bullish, with an average target price of £1.98, implying a 34% upside to Monday's closing price, according to FactSet.

There is still the Omicron impact to consider. In November, just days before the emergence of the variant, CEO Luis Gallego said he expected North Atlantic routes to reach full capacity by summer 2022, with bookings already close to 100% of 2019 levels.

Rowbotham says he expects that outlook for trans-Atlantic travel to "remain broadly intact," when the company reports fourth quarter earnings on Feb. 25.

That is not to say IAG won't feel any impact. Of the major U.S. airlines reporting so far, **Delta Air Lines** (DAL), **United Airlines Holdings** (UAL), and **American Airlines Group** (AAL) each see revenue in the first quarter falling more than 20% from 2019 levels, largely due to Omicron. But they all offered optimism over the months ahead, particularly headed into the summer.

When it comes to IAG, though, Liberum analyst Gerald Khoo noted that renewed travel restrictions "have not yet impacted key long-haul routes" and added that he remained optimistic that summer 2022 could still offer a more normal travel environment.

He said long-term structural winners have typically seen accelerated gains following periods of industry turmoil. IAG is one such winner, "with an efficient cost base and a balance sheet unburdened by state aid."

As travelers return, IAG's stock could have a longer runway for gains. ■

# EMERGING MARKETS

## Looking for Bargains In the Tech Wreckage

By Craig Mellow

**I**f you're inclined to buy the dip in U.S. tech shares, you might consider the crater in emerging market tech stocks.

The **Emerging Markets Internet and Ecommerce** exchange-traded fund (ticker: EMQQ) is down more than half from a peak last February. There should be some bargains in that wreckage.

"A lot of quality stocks have been thrown out with the bathwater," says Adam Montanaro, investment director for emerging market equities at abrdn.

But which ones? A near-consensus pick among emerging markets managers is **Tencent Holdings** (T00.Hong Kong), China's social-media and gaming giant. Its shares have slid by a third over the past year. The company has been "much more aligned with the Chinese state" than many peers, Montanaro says, embracing restrictions on gaming by minors. It is also aligning itself with investors by selling chunks of its massive noncore holdings and returning the cash.

"Not much has changed with Tencent's business model. All that's happened is the stock has rerated," says Charlie Dutton, a fund manager for Asia Pacific at Ninety One.

Opinion is more divided on Chinese megacap rival **Alibaba Group Holding** (BABA). The shares are cheap enough, off 60% since founder Jack Ma picked a fight with Beijing's state bankers in late 2020. Political clouds still hang low, though.

Alibaba's financial arm, Ant Group, is very publicly suspected of bribing officials in its home province of Hangzhou. Ant's prospects, which drove Alibaba's growth forecasts in better days, grow ever dimmer, says Jason Hsu, chief investment officer at Rayliant Global Advisors. "Fintech was the internet companies' big secret weapon," he says. "It does not appear to be in the cards now."

Two non-Chinese internet super-

stocks, **MercadoLibre** (MELI) in Latin America and **Sea** (SE) in Southeast Asia, stayed aloft longer, then crashed more abruptly. MercadoLibre, which is down by half from a September peak, looks like the better rebound prospect. "We really like MercadoLibre," says Damian Bird, head of the emerging market growth team at Polen Capital. "It's cash-flow positive, and is taking market share from businesses that aren't."

Tom Masi, co-manager of the emerging wealth strategy at GW&K Investment Management, doesn't like MercadoLibre. The company's e-commerce is thriving on commissions of up to 20%, which will contract as it faces more competition from heavyweights like **Wal-Mart de Mexico** (WALMEX.Mexico), he predicts. "Our problem with MercadoLibre is an unsustainable take rate," he says.

Sea, whose shares have collapsed by two-thirds since November, has a more acute problem: profits receding beyond the horizon as costs of capital rise. "It's hard to see when exactly that business achieves cash-flow break-even," says Ninety One's Dutton. "Maybe 2023, maybe 2025."

These investors have their own picks beyond the marquee emerging market tech names. Masi is bullish on **Baidu** (BIDU), the Chinese search engine looking for a second act in artificial intelligence and autonomous driving. "You're buying the core business at the current price," he says. Abrdn's Montanaro likes Chinese business-software provider **Yonyou Network Technology** (600588.China) and Russian employment site **Headhunter Group** (HHR).

Managers are paddling through at least two crosscurrents: Emerging markets may be underinvested after massively lagging behind the U.S. in 2021. And many of yesteryear's hot tech companies may never make it into the black.

Choose carefully, but don't brush past the opportunity. ■

# THE STRIKING PRICE

## A Short-Term Trade for The Long-Term Investor

By Steven M. Sears

Federal Reserve meetings come and go, but time and volatility last forever.

Investors should be mindful of that fact and consider using short-term volatility to advance long-term goals, rather than obsessing over what is right in front of them.

The options market enables anyone who wants to use what we have long called "time arbitrage" to take advantage of short-term weakness in stocks in the pursuit of long-term investment objectives.

By selling put options, which tend to increase in value when stock prices are weak, you can get the options market to pay you to be a long-term investor. (Puts give buyers the right to sell an underlying stock at a specified price within a set period.)

Consider the recent activity in the stock and options markets. Options volatility surged, and many stock prices tumbled, in anticipation that the conclusion of Wednesday's meeting of the Federal Open Market Committee could signal the end of the great, historic bull market.

As was largely expected, the Fed signaled once more that the March meeting could mark the first in a series of rate hikes, essentially ending decades of low rates that have propelled stock prices to record highs.

Stock prices were extremely erratic into the meeting, and even after, vexing many investors. The Cboe Volatility Index, or VIX, has almost doubled since the start of the year, rising from about 17 in early January to about 32 as the stock market weakened, though it has since settled at almost 28.

Still, the VIX's current level is significantly higher than its long-term average of 19. Options premiums are now inflated with meaningful fear premiums that investors may be able to use to their ultimate advantage.

You can pick almost any stock in this strategy, but we tend to favor well-run, blue-chip companies with demonstrated staying power and good management.

teams. Those attributes tend to spawn worthy long-term holdings—even if their prices whip about from time to time.

Consider **Morgan Stanley** (ticker: MS), one of the world's top investment firms. The company just reported better-than-expected earnings, and it is well-positioned to thrive amid the volatility that will probably accompany the Fed's normalization of monetary policy. Moreover, banks often profit from rising interest rates and financial market volatility. The bank, like its peers, faces rising compensation expenses, but even that is likely to be short-lived.

With Morgan Stanley stock at \$101.80, long-term investors could sell the March \$97.50 put for about \$3.

The sale of a cash-secured put obligates investors to deposit the money they need to buy the stock in a cash account with their broker. The strategy then lets them position to buy the stock at a lower price, or to keep the options premium should the stock advance. The trade can be done in a margin account, but be sure you have enough money available to finance the transaction.

If Morgan Stanley stock is above the \$97.50 strike price at expiration, you can keep the options premium. Should the stock be at or below the \$97.50 strike price, investors are obligated to buy the stock or to adjust the position in the options market to avoid assignment.

The great risk to the strategy is that the stock plummets far below the put strike price. Only consider the cash-secured put sale if you are willing to buy the stock at a discounted price.

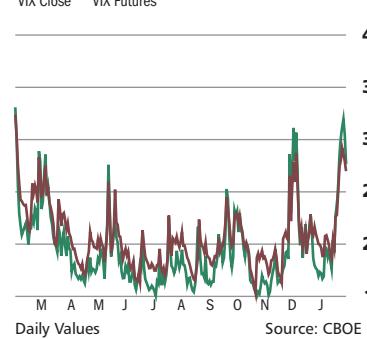
During the past 52 weeks, Morgan Stanley stock has ranged from \$66.85 to \$106.47. It has barely budged this year, though it rose 43% in 2021, sharply outperforming the S&P 500 index's return. ■

Steven M. Sears is the president and chief operating officer of Options Solutions, a specialized asset-management firm. Neither he nor the firm has a position in the options or underlying securities mentioned in this column.

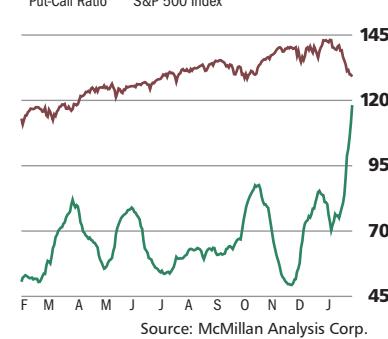
By selling puts, which tend to increase in value when stocks are weak, you can get the options market to pay you to be a long-term investor.

### Equity Options

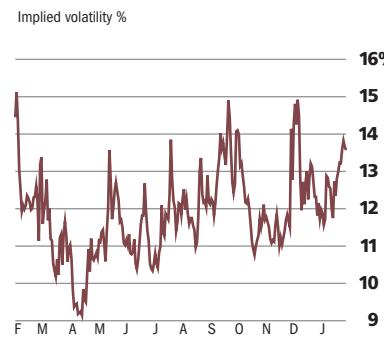
#### CBOE VOLATILITY INDEX



#### THE EQUITY-ONLY PUT-CALL RATIO



#### SPX SKEW



#### NDX SKEW



Skew indicates whether the options market expects a stock-market advance or decline. It measures the difference of implied volatility of puts and calls that are 10% out-of-the-money and expire in three months. Higher readings are bearish.

#### Week's Most Active

Company	Symbol	Tot Vol	Calls	Puts	Avg Tot Vol	IV %ile	Ratio
Exterran Corp.	EXTN	12625	5510	7115	420	9	30.1
Diana Shipping	DSX	28266	28163	103	972	25	29.1
Multiplan Corp.	MPLN	42182	42013	169	1780	81	23.7
Taboola.com	TBLA	13703	13574	129	644	96	21.3
Moneygram Inc.	MGI	158746	141098	17648	9024	43	17.6
Janus International	JBI	3689	2650	1039	288	92	12.8
Galapagos NV	GLPG	8217	6328	1889	648	89	12.7
Radian Group	RDN	15198	13023	2175	1272	57	11.9
Scientific Games	SGMS	28100	21525	6575	2404	34	11.7
Ballantyne Strong	BTN	2031	1988	43	196	25	10.4
Curiosity Stream	CURI	19490	2666	16824	1916	51	10.2
Allscripts Healthcare Solutions	MDRX	3555	2078	1477	364	27	9.8
Bally's Intl.	BALY	8782	2538	6244	904	12	9.7
Ardis Pharmaceuticals	ARDS	9750	9019	731	1044	100	9.3
Navient Corp.	NAVI	14077	2589	11488	1704	67	8.3
Hall Of Fame Resorts	HOFV	51600	50517	1083	6968	30	7.4
Logitech Int'l	LOGI	67699	13360	54339	9752	86	6.9
Invesco Sr. Lending ETF	BKLN	120319	5300	115019	18400	47	6.5
Citrix Systems	CTXS	60536	53080	7456	9516	98	6.4
Exela Technologies	XELA	173044	166256	6788	29924	45	5.8

This table of the most active options this week, as compared to **average** weekly activity—not just raw volume. The idea is that the unusually heavy trading in these options might be a predictor of corporate activity—takeovers, earnings surprises, earnings pre-announcements, biotech FDA hearings or drug trial result announcements, and so forth. Dividend arbitrage has been eliminated. In short, this list attempts to identify where heavy speculation is taking place. These options are likely to be expensive in comparison to their usual pricing levels. Furthermore, many of these situations may be rumor-driven. Most rumors do not prove to be true, so one should be aware of these increased risks if trading in these names.

Ratio is the Tot Vol divided by Avg Tot Vol. IV %ile is how expensive the options are on a scale from 0 to 100.

Source: McMillan Analysis

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## COMMODITIES

# Oil Prices Could Reach \$100 a Barrel This Year

By Myra P. Saefong

**T**alk of \$100-a-barrel oil has intensified in recent days, but triple-digit prices may pose a disadvantage for major oil-producing nations that are set to meet next week to decide the best course of action on production levels.

"It isn't in OPEC+'s best interest to see prices go through \$90 [a barrel] this year and move higher," says Bob Ryan, chief commodity and energy strategist at BCA Research. "The potential for demand destruction is high at these levels, especially if the [U.S. dollar] remains strong," he adds, as local currency costs will become "prohibitive," especially in emerging market economies.

BCA Research expects Brent oil to average \$80 this year and \$81 in 2023, but "demand destruction," either from high prices or widespread Omicron-induced lockdowns, is the biggest risk to that forecast, Ryan says. OPEC+, which refers to the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and its allies, would need to increase production, and U.S. shale-oil output would have to climb to keep prices from finding a new "equilibrium" above \$90.

Front-month U.S. benchmark West Texas Intermediate crude settled at a more than seven-year high on Jan. 26, at \$87.35 a barrel. Global benchmark Brent settled at \$90.03 on Jan. 28, its highest since October 2014. That year also marked the last time prices topped \$100.

Oil prices at \$100 are a "distinct possibility this year, driven by both strong demand and minimal gains on the supply side," says Bill Fitzpatrick, managing director and portfolio manager at Logan Capital. While OPEC would love to see oil hover at \$80 to \$100, prices above the top end of that range will probably see demand destruction, with consumers forced to reduce consumption, and that is the last thing OPEC wants, he says.

Fitzpatrick says OPEC+ is expected to

stick to its current agreement to raise monthly production by 400,000 barrels at the Feb. 2 meeting in order to "increase revenues, while putting only minimal pressure on oil prices." However, OPEC+ should "consider holding off on the production hikes...to be better positioned in the event oil prices spike higher," he says.

BCA's Ryan believes that OPEC+ faces three key problems, the biggest being that there are only four members—Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates, and Kuwait—with the capacity to increase production and sustain it.

There is also no assurance that the Omicron variant of the coronavirus will be relatively mild, and the Federal Reserve signaled that interest rates will start to rise in March, which adds uncertainty to what happens to the U.S. dollar—and dollar-denominated oil prices.

Meanwhile, the Russia-Ukraine stand-off is important to oil because if Russia cuts off natural-gas exports to Europe, that may "force more gas-to-oil substitution," says Ryan, and if Russia invades Ukraine and the West imposes more oil-related sanctions, oil production could take a hit.

For now, OPEC+ members that are able to raise output may agree to "pick up the slack" of other states and lift production enough to bring prices closer to BCA Research's 2022 \$80 forecast average for Brent, Ryan says. That forecast is contingent on Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the U.A.E., and Kuwait raising output by an average of roughly 3.34 million barrels a day this year, and 2.76 million barrels a day next year, he says.

Still, BCA Research has noted for some time that there is a lack of capital expenditure going into oil and natural-gas production globally, Ryan says. If policies aren't developed to encourage needed production increases over the next decade or two, these excursions to \$90 or \$100 will become more frequent, and price levels will move higher in an "increasingly volatile fashion." ■

# INSIDE SCOOP

## Oracle Director Bought Stock as the Market Fell

By ED LIN

**O**racle stock beat the market last year, and as the market slumped this year, director Charles "Wick" Moorman bought up shares of the software giant.

Barron's was bullish on Oracle (ticker: ORCL) last year, as the company saw increased adoption of cloud-based versions of its database and application software. Oracle also experienced strong growth for Oracle Cloud, an emerging rival to Amazon.com's (AMZN) Amazon Web Services and Microsoft's (MSFT) Azure. Oracle stock slipped in December on investor concerns over the company's planned acquisition of healthcare information-technology firm Cerner (CERN), but it ended 2021 with a 35%

surge, topping the 27% rise in the **S&P 500 index**. This year, however, shares slipped as tech stocks fell.

Moorman paid \$1.3 million on Jan. 20 for 15,000 Oracle shares, an average per share price of \$83.76 each. According to a filing with the Securities and Exchange Commission, Moorman made the purchases through trusts that now own 47,454 shares. He owns another 22,975 Oracle shares in a personal account.

Oracle didn't respond to a request to make Moorman available for comment on his stock purchase. An Oracle director since May 2018, Moorman is a former CEO of both Amtrak and Norfolk Southern (NSC).

In March 2020, Moorman made his largest acquisition of Oracle shares, paying \$1.4 million for 30,000 shares, at an average price of \$47.47. His January open-market stock purchase is his largest transaction since then. ■

## Activist Holdings

### Bally's (BALY)

**Standard General** disclosed a 21% interest in the casino-and-lodging operator, equal to 11,424,849 shares. On Jan. 25, Standard General proposed to buy the remaining outstanding Bally's shares that it doesn't already own for \$38 each. The all-cash deal values Bally's at approximately \$2.1 billion.

Standard General expects the deal to move swiftly, as founding partner Soohyung Kim serves as chairman of Bally's. He was for-

merly chairman of Twin River Worldwide Holdings, which rebranded as Bally's in November 2020 after it acquired the Bally's brand from Caesars Entertainment (CZR) the prior month.

### Exterran (EXTN)

**Chai Trust Company**, the family office of Sam Zell, reported a 24.6% interest in the energy-infrastructure-services company. On Jan. 24, Calgary-based Enerflex (ENRFF) announced that it will merge with Exterran through an all-stock deal that places the combined company's enterprise value at \$1.5 billion. In connection with the proposal, Enerflex and Chai

These disclosures are from 13Ds filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission. 13Ds are filed within 10 days of an entity's attaining more than 5% in any class of a company's securities. Subsequent changes in holdings or intentions must be reported in amended filings. This material is from Jan. 20 through Jan. 26, 2022. Source: **InsiderScore, a Verity company.**

Trust entered into a voting agreement where Chai Trust will vote all of its 8,157,415 Exterran shares in favor of the merger.

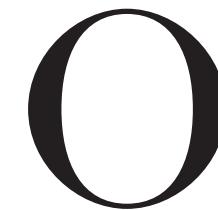
### Canadian National Railway (CNI)

TCI Fund disclosed a position of 36,699,825 shares in the railway giant, equal to 5.2% of the outstanding stock. TCI Fund and Canadian National Railway entered into a letter agreement on Jan. 25 that calls for Canadian National to appoint two independent directors to its board by the day of the 2022 annual shareholder meeting. In return, TCI Fund will withdraw its request for a special meeting and abide by customary standstill and voting provisions.

## POWER PLAY

# Ackman's Long View On Netflix

By CARLETON ENGLISH



ne pandemic play that has been laid low could be ready for a comeback. That's the assertion of activist investor Bill Ackman, whose Pershing Square scooped up 3.1 million shares of Netflix and became a top-20 shareholder in the streaming giant.

While investors and analysts bailed on Netflix (ticker: NFLX) stock earlier this month after the company disclosed weaker-than-expected subscriber figures, Ackman bought shares, finding much of the Street to be shortsighted.

So far, the investment appears to be working. Netflix stock has climbed 5% since Ackman's made the stake public late on Wednesday. The shares are still down 37%, year to date. "Many of our best investments have emerged when other investors...discard great companies at prices that look extraordinarily attractive," Ackman wrote in a letter to investors.

Netflix didn't respond to a request for comment.

It has been four years since Ackman last ran a proxy fight; he now seems to prefer engaging behind the scenes with companies. His \$1 billion investment appears passive for now—he cited Netflix's improving cash flows as a reason to be bullish on shares. Pershing began research on the company while making an investment in Universal Music Group in 2021.

"We believed the opportunity to invest in Netflix at current prices offered a more compelling risk/reward and likely greater, long-term profits for the funds," wrote Ackman. ■

## Original Filings

### Amarin (AMRN)

**Sarissa Capital Management** reported a fresh stake in the cardiovascular-focused biopharmaceutical of 24 million American depositary receipts, or 6.6% of the outstanding shares. That amount includes 7.15 million Amarin ADRs bought from Nov. 26, 2021, through Jan. 24, 2022, at per share prices ranging from \$2.93 to \$3.69. No reason was given for the investment other than that Sarissa viewed Dublin-based Amarin as "significantly undervalued."

## Increases in Holdings

### Landec (LNDC)

**Wynnefield Capital Management** increased its holding in the health and wellness company to 3,533,287 shares, exclusive of shares underlying restricted stock units. On Jan. 12 and Jan. 13, Wynnefield Capital bought a total of 387,400 Landec shares at prices ranging from \$10.41 to \$10.43 apiece. Wynnefield Capital now owns a 12% interest in Landec. Managing Director Nelson Obus has served on Landec's board since 2018.

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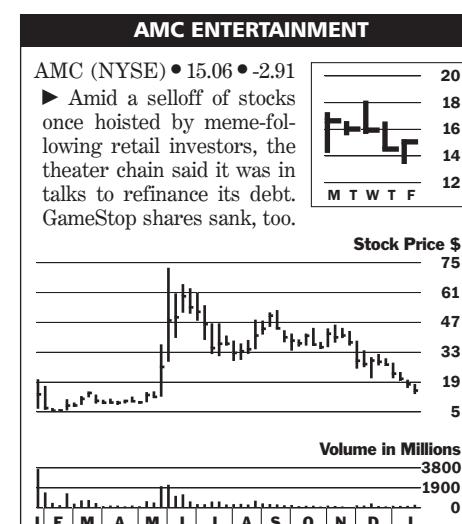
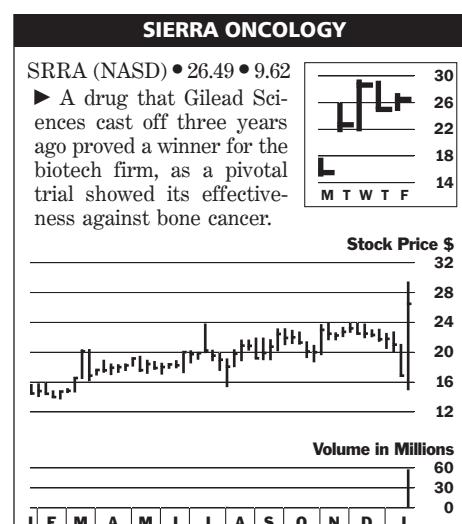
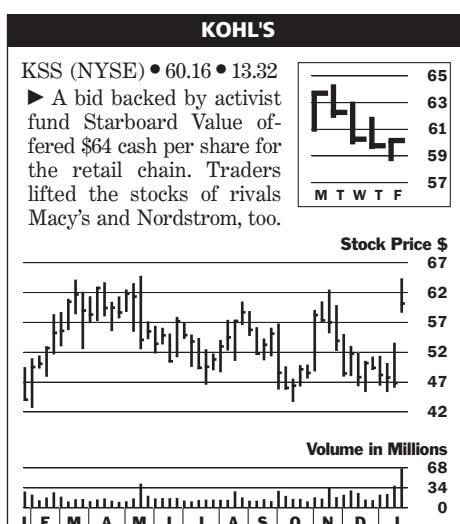
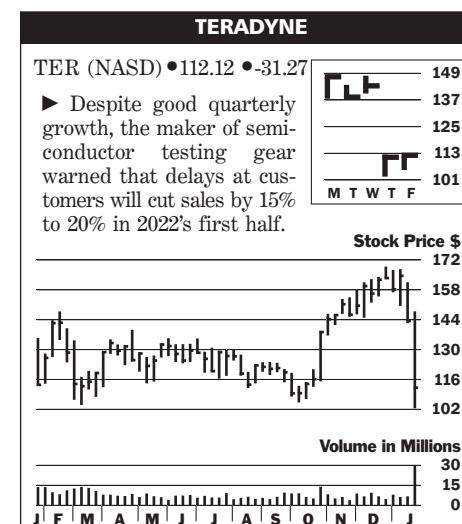
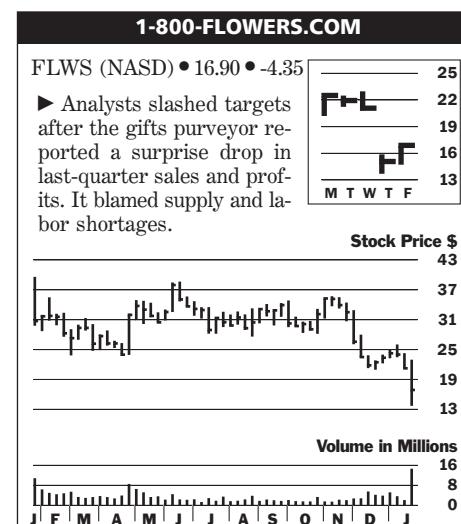
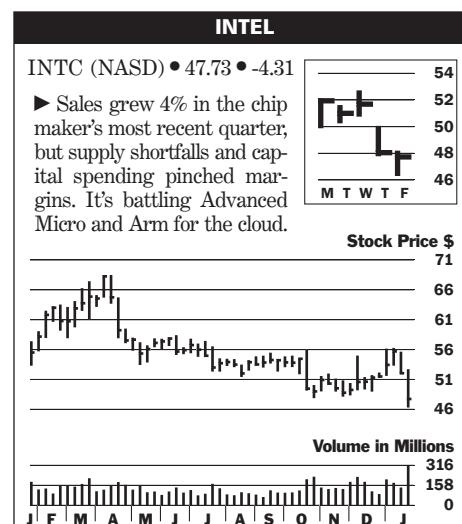
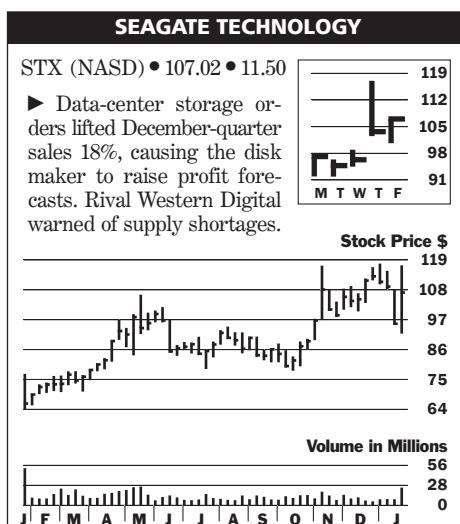
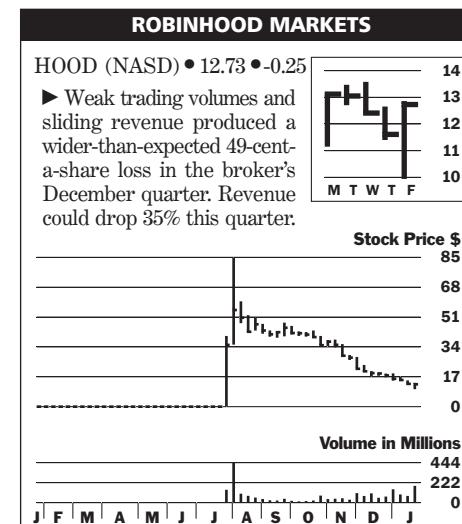
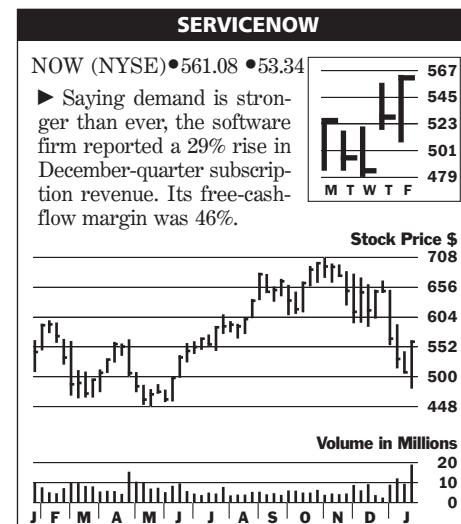
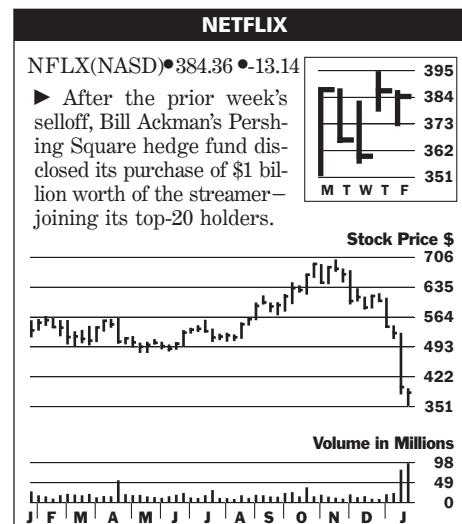
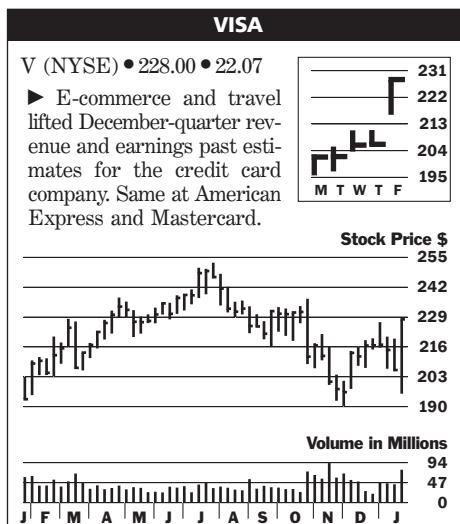
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# Charting the Market

A graphic look at selected stock activity for the week ended January 28, 2022 ■ Edited by Bill Alpert



The charts record the net change in share price, the high, low and closing trades, and share volume for companies with noteworthy stock activity last week. In addition, the graphs depict last week's daily price activity in detail. The dotted line on some graphs denotes the stock's 200-day moving average; lack of a moving average means the shares have traded for less than that time period.



# Research Reports

## How Analysts Size Up Companies

These reports, excerpted and edited by Barron's, were issued recently by investment and research firms. The reports are a sampling of analysts' thinking; they should not be considered the views or recommendations of Barron's. Some of the reports' issuers have provided, or hope to provide, investment-banking or other services to the companies being analyzed.

### Danaher • DHR-NYSE

**Buy** • Price \$266.77 on Jan. 26  
by Edward Jones

Danaher has a strong and diverse group of businesses in the life sciences, diagnostics, and environmental markets. Spending on healthcare research is robust, and Danaher gained market share during the pandemic due to its scale, diverse product lineup, and expertise. We believe that strategic acquisitions will add to earnings growth. The shares are attractively valued. Danaher trades at 25.8 times our 2022 EPS estimate, which is below peers' average of 27.7. Danaher deserves to trade at a premium, due to its growth potential and strong management team. The stock has outperformed the Health Care Index and the overall market over the past five years, driven by better-than-expected earnings growth.

### 3M • MMM-NYSE

**Market Perform** • Price \$173 on Jan. 24  
by William Blair

During 2021, 3M worked through extensive headwinds from delayed pricing benefits, significant supply-chain and logistics disruption, and rising legal costs from three primary product liability litigations. The liability litigations, for PFAS [chemicals that allegedly harmed the environment], Combat Arms earplugs, and industrial respirators, all need to be resolved before 3M's underlying value can be fairly reflected in its share price.

The company is confident that pricing will exceed cost inflation throughout 2022. However, supply-chain disruption could extend into the second quarter for some of its businesses, such as automotive, electronics, and elective healthcare procedures. Regarding litigation, 2021 was a challenging start for the bellwether trials for 3M's Combat Arms Earplugs lawsuits. The company was vindicated in five of 10 early trials in 2021, but where damages have been awarded, they have been

steadily rising. The company plans to appeal cases that it didn't win. Operating headwinds seem likely to dissipate as 2022 progresses, but the litigation challenges could rise.

### Verizon Communications • VZ-NYSE

**Buy** • Price \$52.96 on Jan. 24  
by BofA Global Research

We maintain our Buy rating. Our price objective of \$64 a share is based on a 0.6 times relative price/earnings multiple to the SPX (down from 0.8), implying a 12 times (was 13 times) 2022 multiple. Verizon reported 2021 adjusted EPS of \$5.39 (or \$5.50, excluding 11 cents of acquisition-related intangible amortization). The 2022 [consensus] estimate is \$5.40-\$5.55 (BofA at \$5.51). This excludes 17-19 cents of acquisition-related intangible amortization, but includes 5 cents of additional depreciation for accelerated C-band [5G] deployment.

### Charter Communications

• CHTR-Nasdaq

**Buy** • Price \$555 on Jan. 26  
by Benchmark

We maintain our Buy rating, but are lowering our price target to \$900 from \$925 because of market conditions. In early August, we substantially moderated [our estimate of] broadband growth through 2025, although we were admittedly naive on market hypersensitivity to any slowdown, even though management maintains that the 2021 softness was more attributable to transient Covid and economic issues than to heightened competition.

Even an extreme inflation breakout or competitive scenario in which pricing power degenerates a permanent 3%, relative to costs, would generate a fair value for the stock around \$590, still above yesterday's closing price. We regard a stall-out in broadband pricing power as a much more dire risk than unit slowdown, although pricing should be supported by about 25%-plus annual consumption growth and improving functionality from new Wi-Fi iterations.

### Bankwell Financial • BWFG-Nasdaq

**Outperform/Moderate Risk** • Price \$32.88  
on Jan. 26  
by Boenning & Scattergood

Bankwell reported fourth-quarter EPS of 99 cents, versus our estimate of 89 cents and the consensus 87 cents. The upside was driven by [improvements] in net interest income and operating expenses, partially offset by [lower] fee revenue.

The net interest margin increased by four basis points, to 3.43%, due to lower funding costs. We expect further NIM expansion in the first quarter. Loans (ex-PPP) rose by \$50 million. The deposit mix improved with non-interest-bearing accounts up to 19%. Fee revenue of \$825,000, however, was short of our

\$1.2 million estimate. Our target price on the stock: \$35.

### Qualtrics International • XM-Nasdaq

**Outperform** • Price \$24.01 on Jan. 26  
by Evercore ISI

Qualtrics reported strong fourth-quarter results to cap off 2021. Looking ahead to fiscal year 2022, Qualtrics' organic subscription revenue-growth guidance of around 26% looks conservative. And the continued growth in its international business (now at 29% of the total) points to the broader market opportunity in front of Qualtrics, one of the most attractive risk/reward stories in high-growth software. Our price target is \$40.

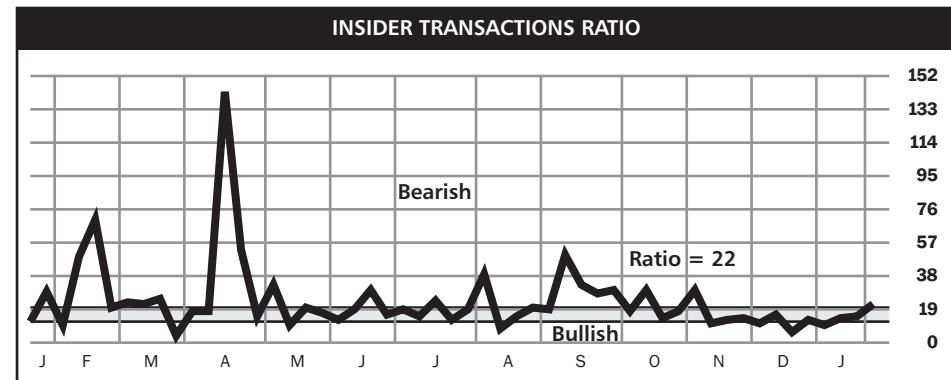
## INSIDER TRANSACTIONS: Recent Filings

### Purchases

Company / Symbol	Insiders	Shares	\$ Val (000's)
Theseus Pharmaceuticals THRX	1	158,417	1,579
Oracle ORCL	1	15,000	1,256
Voxx International VOXX	1	107,139	1,098
Ascendant Digital Acquisition MKTW	1	175,810	1,045
Everquote EVER	1	67,144	991
Luminar Technologies LAZR	1	65,000	893
Independence Contract Drilling ICD	1	180,000	577
American Campus Communities ACC	1	10,000	520
Sensei Biotherapeutics SNSE	1	87,654	434
Nsts Bancorp NSTS	2	35,000	363
Calamp CAMP	2	37,500	201
Liqtech International LIQT	1	36,189	193
Accelerate Diagnostics AXDX	1	41,912	165
Phillips 66 Partners PSXP	2	3,253	145
Limoneira LMNR	1	8,791	132
New York City Reit NYC	2	10,460	124
Playstudios MYPY	1	26,000	123
Bittnile NILE	1	135,000	119
Entera Bio ENTX	5	42,800	113
Piedmont Lithium PLL	1	2,500	109

An insider is any officer, director or owner of 10% or more of a class of a company's securities. In most cases, an insider must report any trade to the SEC within two business days. The tables highlight companies that filed with the SEC through last Wednesday. The tables do not include pension-plan or employee stock-option activity, trades by beneficial owners of 10% or more, trades under \$2 per share or trades under 100 shares. The "Purchases" column includes only open-market and private purchases; the "Sales" column includes only open-market and private sales, and excludes trades preceded by option exercise in the 12 months prior to the reported event.

Source: Thomson Reuters



Ratio of Insiders Sales to Buys. Readings under 12:1 are Bullish. Those over 20:1 are Bearish.

The total top 20 sales and buys are 219,126,565 and 10,178,408 respectively;

Source: Thomson Reuters















































# Market Laboratory

## Top 5 Insider Purchases by Company in 2022

Company	Symbol	Number of Insiders	Number of Shares	\$ Value	Avg. Price
Enter Bio Limited	ENTX	9	73,832	199,769	\$ 2.71
Bridgebio Pharma	BBIO	7	158,311	2,274,550	\$ 14.37
Newtek Business Services	NEWT	7	5,880	161,640	\$ 27.49
Simon Property	SPG	7	1,467	235,123	\$ 160.28
Bed Bath & Beyond	BBBY	6	46,862	656,650	\$ 14.01

## Top 5 Insider Sales by Company in 2022

Company	Symbol	Number of Insiders	Number of Shares	\$ Value	Avg. Price
Tradeweb Markets	TW	12	527,146	49,184,738	\$ 93.30
Salesforce.Com	CRM	11	67,364	15,326,309	\$ 227.51
Amc Entertainment	AMC	8	646,560	14,667,910	\$ 22.69
Accenture Plc.	ACN	6	20,201	7,139,717	\$ 353.43
Cloudflare	NET	6	407,135	45,352,898	\$ 111.40

## STOCK SPLITS/DIVIDENDS

Company Name-Ticker Symbol (Exchange)	Amount	Record Date	Ex-Dividend Date	Payment Date
NONE				

## SPECIAL DIVIDENDS

Company Name-Ticker Symbol (Exchange)	Amount	Record Date	Ex-Dividend Date	Payment Date
PCTEL-PCTI (Nasdaq)	0.05	2-08	2-07	2-15
Peoples Bancorp of NC-PEBK (Nasdaq)	0.15	2-04	2-03	2-16
Randolph Bancorp-RNDB (Nasdaq)	2.15	2-08	2-07	2-22
Synchrony Financial-SYF (NYSE)	0.22	2-10	2-09	2-17

## DIVIDEND PAYMENT REDUCTIONS

Company Name-Ticker Symbol (Exchange)	Adjusted Yield	Period	To	From	% Decrease	Record Date	Ex-Div Date	Payment Date
PCTEL-PCTI (Nasdaq)	4.2	0	.055	.22	-75.0 %	2-08	2-07	2-15

## DIVIDEND PAYMENT BOOSTS

Company Name-Ticker Symbol (Exchange)	Adjusted Yield	Period	To	From	% Increase	Record Date	Ex-Div Date	Payment Date
Absolute Software-ABST (Nasdaq)	3.4	Q	.0642	.06386	0.5 %	2-11	2-10	2-25
Alliant Energy-LNT (Nasdaq)	2.7	Q	.4275	.4025	6.2	1-31	1-28	2-15
Anthem-ANTM (NYSE)	1.2	Q	1.28	1.13	13.3	3-10	3-09	3-25
Archer Daniels Midland-ADM (NYSE)	2.0	Q	.40	.37	8.1	2-08	2-07	3-01
Banner-BANR (Nasdaq)	2.8	Q	.44	.41	7.3	2-03	2-02	2-14
Blueknight Energy-BKEP (Nasdaq)	4.7	Q	.0425	.04	6.3	2-07	2-04	2-14
Cadence Bank-CADE (NYSE)	2.8	Q	.22	.20	10.0	3-15	3-14	4-01
Cambridge Bancorp-CATC (NCM)	2.7	Q	.64	.61	4.9	2-10	2-09	2-24
Capital Product Partners-CPLP (Nasdaq)	2.6	Q	.15	.10	50.0	2-03	2-02	2-10
Central Pacific Financial-CPF (NYSE)	3.5	Q	.26	.25	4.0	2-28	2-25	3-15
Colony Bankcorp-CBAN (Nasdaq)	2.5	Q	.1075	.1025	4.9	2-04	2-03	2-18
Consolidated Edison-ED (NYSE)	3.8	Q	.79	.775	1.9	2-16	2-15	3-15
Crane Co-CR (NYSE)	1.7	Q	.47	.43	9.3	2-28	2-25	3-09
Delek Logistics Partners-DKL (NYSE)	8.7	Q	.975	.95	2.6	2-01	1-31	2-08
Dorchester Minerals-DMLP (Nasdaq)	6.5	Q	.639287	.507608	25.9	1-31	1-28	2-10
Enterprise Fincl Services-EFSC (Nasdaq)	1.6	Q	.21	.20	5.0	3-15	3-14	3-31
First Bancshares-FBMS (Nasdaq)	1.8	Q	.17	.16	6.3	2-10	2-09	2-25
Franklin Electric-FELE (Nasdaq)	0.8	Q	.195	.175	11.4	2-03	2-02	2-17
Global Partners-GLP (NYSE)	8.6	Q	.585	.575	1.7	2-08	2-07	2-14
Graham Holdings-GHC (NYSE)	1.1	Q	1.58	1.51	4.6	2-03	2-02	2-17
Halliburton-HAL (NYSE)	0.6	Q	.12	.045	166.7	3-02	3-01	3-23
Hess Midstream-HESM (NYSE)	7.0	Q	.5167	.5104	1.2	2-03	2-02	2-14
Home BancShares-HOMB (NYSE)	2.8	Q	.165	.14	17.9	2-16	2-15	3-09
Independent Bank Michigan-IBCP (Nasdaq)	3.5	Q	.22	.21	4.8	2-04	2-03	2-15
JB Hunt Transport-JBHT (Nasdaq)	0.8	Q	.40	.30	33.3	2-04	2-03	2-18
Kimberly-Clark-KMB (NYSE)	3.4	Q	1.16	1.14	1.8	3-04	3-03	4-04
Levi Strauss-LEVI (NYSE)	1.4	Q	.10	.08	25.0	2-09	2-08	2-24
MarketAxess Holdings-MKTX (Nasdaq)	0.9	Q	.70	.66	6.1	2-09	2-08	2-23
National Bank Holdings-NBCH (NYSE)	2.0	Q	.23	.22	4.5	2-25	2-24	3-15
NextEra Energy Partners-NEP (NYSE)	3.5	Q	.7075	.685	3.3	2-04	2-03	2-14
Norfolk Southern-NSC (NYSE)	1.5	Q	1.24	1.09	13.8	2-04	2-03	2-21
NRG Energy-NRG (NYSE)	3.5	Q	.35	.325	7.7	2-01	1-31	2-15
Oak Valley Bancorp-OVLY (NCM)	1.7	S	.15	.145	3.4	1-31	1-28	2-11
Park National-PRK (NYSE AMER)	3.0	Q	1.04	1.03	1.0	2-18	2-17	3-10
Penske Automotive-PAG (NYSE)	1.8	Q	.47	.46	2.2	2-10	2-09	3-01
Premier Financial-PFC (Nasdaq)	4.2	Q	.30	.28	7.1	2-11	2-10	2-18
RBB Bancorp-RBB (Nasdaq)	2.1	Q	.14	.13	7.7	1-31	1-28	2-01
SB Financial Group-SBFG (NCM)	2.2	Q	.115	.109524	5.0	2-11	2-10	2-25
Schneider National-SNDR (NYSE)	1.3	Q	.08	.07	14.3	3-11	3-10	4-08
Shutterstock-STSK (NYSE)	0.9	Q	.24	.21	14.3	3-03	3-02	3-17
Sierra Bancorp-BSRR (Nasdaq)	3.4	Q	.23	.22	4.5	1-31	1-28	2-14
South Plains Financial-SPFI (Nasdaq)	1.5	Q	.11	.09	22.2	1-31	1-28	2-14
Targa Resources-TRGP (NYSE)	2.4	Q	.35	.10	250.0	1-31	1-28	2-15
Timberland Bancorp-TSBK (Nasdaq)	3.0	Q	.22	.21	4.8	2-11	2-10	2-25
United Bancshares-UBOH (Nasdaq)	2.6	Q	.21	.20	5.0	2-28	2-25	3-15
Washington Federal-WAFD (Nasdaq)	2.7	Q	.24	.23	4.3	2-04	2-03	2-18
Wells Fargo-WFC (NYSE)	1.5	Q	.25	.20	25.0	2-04	2-03	3-01
Western New England Bncp-WNEB (Nasdaq)	2.6	Q	.06	.05	20.0	2-09	2-08	2-23

## BARRON'S

## WEEK'S DIVIDEND PAYMENT

This list includes payouts on common stocks.

### NYSE

#### Monday (January 31)

#### Tuesday (February 1)

#### Wednesday (February 2)

#### Thursday (February 3)

#### Friday (February 4)

#### Saturday (February 5)

#### Sunday (February 6)

#### Monday (February 7)

#### Tuesday (February 8)

#### Wednesday (February 9)

#### Thursday (February 10)

#### Friday (February 11)

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#### Monday (March 25)

#### Tuesday (March 26)

#### Wednesday (March 27)

#### Thursday (March 28)

#### Friday (March 29)

#### Saturday (March 30)

#### Sunday (March 31)

#### Monday (April 1)

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# OTHER VOICES

## The Old Economy Gets Revenge

*By Robert Robotti, Douglas Meehan, and Michael van Biema*

**A**mong purported investing axioms with enormous pull on capital flows in recent years are the ideas that low inflation and interest rates are sustainable, and that stock-picking doesn't work. Both would seem to signal the extinction of a substantial set of fundamentally driven investment approaches.

But these axioms are suspect. The myopia of linear thinking has resulted in a broad misalignment of risk and return that is poised for change. Appreciating this requires recognition that the post-global-financial-crisis investment environment has been anomalous and is unsustainable.

The Federal Reserve signaled on Wednesday that it will soon be ready to begin raising rates. It has not meaningfully done so since the 2008 crisis. A frantic quest for yield has pushed investors into longer-duration assets, such as growth stocks, driving multiples to dangerous levels. Even fundamental investors bought in. These businesses are secular growers, collecting eyeballs, clicks, and subscriptions regardless of low broader economic growth. Their growth seems unstoppable, and therefore these investments appear to be safe and attractive. In capital markets, growth is its own reward; profits can come later, or so it's assumed. But that view has driven valuations to levels that make fundamental sense only if that growth is actually sustainable.

**"Even if China increases exports, U.S. manufacturers are competitive, low-cost, low-carbon providers."**



Investors have become comfortable applying lower discount rates in valuing companies, and valuations predicated on substantial future growth are highly sensitive to the rates used. Discount rates take their lead from yields on "risk free" investments, i.e., Treasuries. Enduring low rates have therefore enabled investors' rationalizations of high valuations.

But arguably, low rates persisted because they failed to drive growth and, crucially, inflation. Markets appear perplexed now that inflation has arrived. It may not dissipate even when supply-chain disruptions end. One key is China.

Declining rates made sense after taming the hyperinflation of the

U.S. energy prices remain cheap. That confers a huge advantage to energy-intensive American industrial businesses.

bound to eventually wane. This trend is clear in the prices that Chinese producers are paying for inputs, with the producer price index up 10.3% year over year in December.

At the center are soaring Chinese energy costs, driven by increased demand in China and elsewhere. China has become the world's largest carbon emitter, a problem that its government intends to combat by building out clean-energy power sources, among other strategies. But that itself will require massive amounts of energy, which in China means burning more expensive coal. Narrowing China's wealth gap will require a continuous infrastructure buildup, requiring enormous quantities of broadband cable, steel, and cement. So, China will consume more of the materials it produces, and fewer Chinese goods will reach our shores to affect our producers' prices and margins. It's difficult to see how curing the pandemic-induced supply-chain ills will suddenly restore China's deflationary influence.

The capital-market implications are significant. Today's interest rates seem to imply that inflation is transitory. A sub-2% 10-year Treasury yield is senseless if long-term inflation will run at 2% or more. If inflation persists beyond supply-chain disruptions, interest rates will rise. What happens to asset valuations when you shift their underlying foundations?

When rates rise, investors with significant exposure to longer-duration assets—growth stocks—should worry. If they do, they will probably pull some of that capital from those richly valued growers. They wouldn't have to rotate much out of a handful of trillion-dollar stocks and into other opportunities to make a significant difference.

China's economic miracle depended on its ability to produce goods for overseas consumers at lower cost, largely due to cheap labor. Increased Chinese exports of low-cost goods effectively deflated global prices, preventing global inflation from taking hold, despite low rates. But China-induced deflation was

gardless of growth. Such opportunities sell for low multiples of near-term cash flows, not just cash flows expected sometime in the future. They are shorter-duration assets, so rising rates shouldn't affect them as dramatically as they affect investments reliant on distant-future growth. So, lower-multiple stocks are defensive under conditions in which rates are more likely to rise than fall; in other words, if substantial inflation persists. Many are selling at substantial discounts and should make for lucrative long-term opportunities.

There exists a particularly attractive subset of these cheap businesses that we believe will probably benefit from a new economic order characterized by growing demand for the limited supply of physical goods they produce: well-run, well-capitalized U.S. businesses with operating leverage, producing physical goods in high demand—such as specialty chemicals, steel, and building materials—enjoying competitive advantages from sustainably low costs (despite inflation) and limited supply. That is, we predict a revenge of "old economy" businesses, long left for dead but in fact producing materials of paramount importance.

Even an advanced service economy such as the U.S. depends on physical goods, and select producers will benefit disproportionately and, we believe, represent tremendous investment opportunities. The long-awaited infrastructure law earmarks \$1.2 trillion for physical construction projects requiring physical inputs, such as steel, cement, coatings, wire, and equipment. Additional demand will come from ramping auto production after its chip-shortage-induced decline, and increasing demand for renewable power. Wind and solar farms require chips, installation equipment, steel, epoxies, and chemicals.

This all recommends investing in U.S.-based industrials and materials producers. If China, reversing a four-decade trend, is now poised to export inflation, and if demand for physical goods is growing, the operating leverage of these businesses will kick in, resulting in substantial, sustainable, and growing free cash flows.

Still, buying a broad basket of statistically cheap producers could have suboptimal results, saddling portfolios with many investments deserving their low valuations.

Finding those companies with the strongest competitive positions, best operations, and greatest capital allocation opportunities that are managed by skilled, savvy capital allocators with proven records of shareholder value creation is critical to maximizing this opportunity. This suggests that experienced, disciplined, fundamental stockpickers will have a tremendous advantage. ■

Even if China increases exports, U.S. manufacturers are competitive, low-cost, low-carbon providers. This may seem odd, but points to a key element of our thesis that U.S. producers of physical goods benefit from a world with sustained inflation: Whereas energy costs have skyrocketed in China and elsewhere, U.S. energy prices remain cheap. That confers a huge advantage to

energy-intensive American industrial businesses.

The chloralkaline industry further illustrates this. It produces two commodities: chlorine (used to manufacture intermediates for plastics production and end-products like PVC) and caustic soda (for detergent production and with critical industrial applications). Energy constitutes a whopping 80% of the variable costs of the chloralkaline process, making U.S. producers by far the lowest-cost developed-market source, with costs far below those of Chinese peers.

Most will doubtless find the prospect of investing in chlorine and caustic soda production as alluring as investing in record stores or photo film. Something so rudimentary as industrial chemicals would seem to be highly cyclical and therefore absurdly unattractive.

Relevant facts suggest otherwise. The chloralkaline market has consolidated to three players addressing roughly 70% of demand. Moreover, they've become leaner and more rational, focusing on returns, not on outproducing their peers. They now produce to match demand, replacing the time-honored practice of going full-bore to leverage costs over increased production. This nimble approach places power in the hands of these producers at just the right time and in a sustainable, nontransitory way.

William Lyon  
On Barrons.com

**Tech-Heavy Funds**

**To the Editor:** Regarding "Here Are Barron's Top-Performing Sustainable Funds" (Jan. 21), ESG tends to mean tech-heavy funds. The Silicon Valley companies, and outposts such as Austin, Texas, tend to score highly on MSCI's environmental and social categories. But they sometimes get dinged on governance because of liberal stock option grants and CEO compensation.

In short, many (perhaps most) ESG funds are going to be overweight tech. This is how they've beaten the market since they've had their day in the sun. It will be interesting if the tech stumble persists and investors start making their dough in the oil patch instead of the cloud.

Michael Dunn  
On Barrons.com

**Microsoft's Big Deal**

**To the Editor:** Of course this would be huge for Microsoft and Activision Blizzard if the deal goes through, but the market's right in estimating the chances of this getting done at 60% ("Microsoft's Activision

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## Looking Ahead To 2023-25

### To the Editor:

There were several high price/earnings stocks mentioned in "Roundtable, Part 2" (Cover Story, Jan. 21). In an environment of near-term slowing growth, higher taxes, inflation, Federal Reserve tightening, and greater competition as growth slows, it was telling that each stockpicker talked about 2023-25 earnings and multiples, and stayed away from 2022 in general. Of the many unknowns and difficulty in accurately forecasting, two stand out from the crowd—P/E ratios and earnings growth. Buyer beware.

Rodger Bats  
On Barrons.com

Merger Is History's Biggest Tech Deal. The Stocks to Play It," Jan. 21). This is more like an Nvidia/ARM Holdings deal, in that Activision games are available to multiple platforms. It's hard to see how the government will let one platform run by a big tech company gobble it up. Microsoft will do well regardless—Satya Nadella is the very best CEO in the tech world today.

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William Lyon  
On Barrons.com

### Money-Supply Numbers

#### To the Editor:

Robert Heller hit the nail on the head in "A Grim History Repeats at the Fed" (Other Voices, Jan. 21). I remember the inflation of the 1970s and '80s. In the early '70s, my economics classes at Oklahoma State University used Milton Friedman's texts. His definition of inflation was "too much money chasing too few goods." We have both of these today.

From the mid-'70s to the mid-'90s, the business news always reported the M1 and M2 money-supply numbers because of their importance in controlling inflation.

We need to start paying attention to them again and bring to light what is going on and the dire consequences that may result.

David East  
Grove, Okla.

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