



MATT BROWN Getty Images
ANGELS STARTER Tyler Skaggs, pictured before a 2016 game against Boston, died from a fentanyl overdose on July 1, 2019. Years later, the team's communications director, who provided the synthetic opioid to Skaggs, was convicted of federal charges.

COLUMN ONE

How Angels pitcher spent his final days before fatal overdose

Tyler Skaggs cracked jokes, wore a cowboy outfit for Texas and often texted his wife. One night, he stopped replying

By David Wharton and Nathan Fenno

Not many victims of the opioid crisis in America make national headlines. Tyler Skaggs was different. The 27-year-old was a professional athlete, a pitcher for the Angels, wealthy and famous. On a trip with the team, he was found in his hotel room. He had choked on his own vomit after consuming a mix of alcohol, oxycodone and fentanyl. His death on July 1, 2019, sent shock waves through the sports world. A highly publicized criminal investigation not only revealed that Skaggs had secretly used pain-

killers for years, but also led to the arrest of a team employee who provided him with tainted, black market pills. Five years later, The Times has pored over hundreds of pages of court documents and cellphone records to reconstruct Skaggs' final hours. Playing cards with teammates on a three-hour flight. Teasing rookies on the bus. Trading affectionate texts with his wife until late at night. Even the most ordinary details tell an important story, offering an intimate look at an epidemic that has ravaged the country.

[See Skaggs, A10]

Money for their dream babies vanishes

Expectant parents learn that funds put in escrow for surrogate moms is inaccessible and probably gone.

By MATT HAMILTON

They scrimped, and they saved. Some asked family and friends to pitch in. Others took out loans for tens of thousands of dollars. Their goal was twofold: To raise the small fortune necessary to pay for a surrogate. And to realize a dream previously impossible — having a child of their own. Hundreds of people across California, the U.S. and around the globe put their money, sometimes \$50,000 or more, into the hands of a Texas-based escrow company so the funds could be held in trust and doled out to a surrogate for healthcare costs, insurance and compensation. But last month, expectant parents and their surrogates learned the money they had set aside at Houston-based Surrogacy Escrow Account Management is inaccessible and likely gone. “We want answers,” said Chris Kettmann of Fair Oaks, Calif., a suburb of Sacramento. “Is there recourse to get the money back? If not, what can we do?” Kettmann, 33, said he and his wife had about \$45,000 in their escrow account, money owed to their surrogate, who is pregnant with their baby boy and due in October. “We don’t know enough to say what happened,” he said. “We just know there’s something crazy going on.” Police in Houston have opened a wide-reaching investigation. Christina Garza, a spokeswoman for the FBI’s Houston field office, confirmed last week that the agency also is investigating Surrogacy Escrow Account Management. The FBI has developed a public portal for SEAM clients to report their account information and how much money they believe they are owed. Garza, however, cautioned that the inquiry was in its early stages and said, “We’re trying to compile as much information as possible.” A married same-sex couple in Washington, D.C., says they are out \$55,000. A Los Feliz couple said they demanded their \$40,111 be returned and believe it is gone. Arielle Mitton, an L.A. native who recently moved to Bellingham, Wash., can recite the amount that she and her husband are missing down to the cent: \$37,721.44. [See Surrogates, A5]

High interest rates hitting Californians harder

They cause greater pain because housing, gas and many other things are more costly than in other states.

By DON LEE AND ANDREA CHANG

By the numbers, the overall U.S. economy may look good, but down at the street level the view is a lot grimmer and grittier. The surge in interest rates imposed by the Federal Reserve to slow

inflation has closed like an acrid cloud over would-be homeowners, car buyers, growing families, and businesses new and old, large and small. It has meant missing opportunities, settling for less — and waiting and waiting and waiting. It’s not that the average American is underwater. It’s that many feel that they’re struggling more than they anticipated and feel more constricted. In the American dream, if you work hard, things are supposed to get better. Fairly or not, that may be a big part of why so many voters have expressed unhappiness with President

Biden’s handling of the economy. The cost of borrowing, whether for mortgages, credit cards or car loans, is the highest in more than two decades. And that is weighing especially hard on people in California, where housing, gas and many other things are more expensive than in most other states. California’s economy also relies more on interest rate-sensitive sectors such as real estate and high tech, which helps explain why the state has been lagging behind in job growth and its unemployment rate is the highest [See Interest rates, A6]



ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times
GRITZ N WAFFLEZ owner Jurni Rayne would have expanded sooner if interest rates had been lower.

Financial literacy a must for high schoolers

California will make course in pocketbook economics a requirement

By HOWARD BLUME

California students will have to complete a course in pocketbook economics — balancing a checkbook, managing credit cards, avoiding scams — to graduate from high school under a bill that will become law, state lawmakers announced

last week. “We need to help Californians prepare for their financial futures as early as possible,” Gov. Gavin Newsom said in a statement. “Saving for the future, making investments and spending wisely are lifelong skills that young adults need to learn before they start their careers, not after.”

This bill — which has drawn criticism from those concerned about another requirement on crammed academic schedules — orders school districts and charter schools to offer a one-semester course in personal finance. To meet the requirement, the class cannot be combined with any other course beginning in the 2027-

28 school year. Students graduating in 2031 will have to pass the class. The agreement among state lawmakers avoids a ballot-box verdict by voters. Backers of the new requirement had gathered enough signatures to place the proposal, dubbed the California [See Finance, A6]

Group investigating federal workers

American Accountability Foundation vetting those it suspects could resist Trump. **PERSPECTIVES, A2**

Handful of laws kick in Monday

Among the legislation: “junk” fees, iPhone fixes and date-rape testing kits. **CALIFORNIA, B1**

Weather

Partly sunny. L.A. Basin: 86/64. **B6**

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‘The Bear’ actor savors moment

Liza Colón-Zayas’ acting chops stand out as Tina’s story is told. **ENTERTAINMENT, E1**

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