



SAN QUENTIN SkunkWorks, a nonprofit made up of inmates and prison reform advocates, held a chess tournament in March. Photographs by ROBERT GAUTHIER Los Angeles Times

Can chess and toilet paper change state’s prison culture?

California is reimagining life in lockups, starting with San Quentin

By Hannah Wiley

SAN QUENTIN — To someone living outside these dank walls, the changes might seem small. A sergeant greets a prisoner with “good morning” rather than barking an order. Guards start calling the prisoners “residents.” They shake hands, exchange jokes. The toilet paper locker gets replenished when it’s empty. The men don’t have to ask. At California’s oldest and most infamous state prison, a monumental shift is underway through an experiment dubbed the California Model, an effort Gov. Gavin Newsom announced in March 2023 to reimagine prison life, starting at San Quentin. The changes are modeled after prison operations in Norway and other



ALONG with chess matches, San Quentin is hosting kickball tournaments and flag football games.

Scandinavian countries, where incarceration is considered less a tool for punishment than an opportunity for recovery and rehabilitation. Newsom said he envisions a prison system that doesn’t just confine lawbreakers but better prepares them for reintegrating into communities after their release. That means expanding job training and substance-use treatment, but also replacing a prison culture built on hierarchy and fear with opportunities for connection and normalized social interactions. It will take years and hundreds of millions of dollars to fully implement the California Model at San Quentin. And whether there’s support for expanding the approach across the [See Prison, A10]

Party’s difficult choices, Biden or no Biden

Democrats need to act now to unite on a candidate and refocus message on beating Trump, experts say.

By KEVIN RECTOR

Cornell Belcher, a prominent pollster who worked for the Democratic National Committee and both Obama campaigns, wishes the party’s leaders would shut up about President Biden’s poll numbers. “There’s too much talk about polling right now,” Belcher said. “As a pollster, it’s driving me out of my ... mind that people are trying to drive whatever narrative they want by using polling.” In recent days, Biden has faced mounting calls to drop out of the race from members of his party. Many have pointed to worsening poll numbers for the 81-year-old incumbent since a disastrous debate performance last month. Some fear that questions about the president’s mental acuity will doom down-ballot candidates too. But with Biden repeatedly insisting that he is not stepping aside, Belcher said, Democrats harping on his slipping support were hurting, not helping, their cause. “Over the last three weeks, Democrats have done more damage to our ability to win in November than what Donald Trump and Republicans have been able to do,” Belcher said. “They have to stop [the] circular firing squad that they’re currently in, because it’s a death spiral.” While calls from Congress members and major donors for Biden to step aside have dominated headlines in recent days, plenty of other Democratic loyalists [See Democrats, A9]

Inside a secretive investigation into ex-sheriff’s critics

Villanueva probe into inspector general was based largely on unfounded allegations, documents show.

By ALENE TCHEKMEKYAN AND KERI BLAKINGER

A multi-year criminal investigation under former Los Angeles County Sheriff Alex Villanueva into the agency’s inspector general — a probe that a legal advisor for the county called “not legally viable” — was based largely on unfounded accusations that state and federal prosecutors repeatedly turned down, documents reviewed by The Times show. Villanueva long used the case to try to discredit the

county watchdog, regularly referring to Inspector General Max Huntsman as a “felony suspect” and asking county officials to remove him from the job at least twice. At one point, Villanueva cited the probe as part of the justification to lock Huntsman out of department databases. But in May, prosecutors with the state Department of Justice quietly notified the Sheriff’s Department in a memo that they would not file criminal charges in the investigation launched in 2019. The department has never fully explained the allegations against Huntsman and four other people named as suspects. But an 80-page Sheriff’s Department report recently reviewed by The Times — part of a more than 300-page in- [See Investigation, A8]

Musk leaves L.A. aerospace future up in air

CEO’s post about moving SpaceX to Texas could deal a blow to sector

By LAURENCE DARMIENTO

When Elon Musk decided to start a rocket company two decades ago, he headed down Interstate 5 and the 405 and didn’t stop until he reached the South Bay, the center of the region’s aerospace industry, hard hit by a drop in defense spending after the Cold War. There, the Silicon Valley entrepreneur, flush with cash from the sale of PayPal, founded Space Exploration Technologies in 2002 and defied skeptics, building his startup into a \$210-billion gi-



ONE EXPERT predicts that other aerospace firms will try to hire SpaceX staff who don’t want to move. GENARO MOLINA Los Angeles Times

ant and fueling a revitalization of the shrunken industry. Last week, the Hawthorne company’s future in the region was thrown into doubt when Musk posted on X that he planned to move SpaceX’s headquarters to the outskirts of Brownsville, Texas, where it is developing its massive Starship rocket for planned trips to the moon and, someday, Mars. It’s unclear what the fallout will be locally. SpaceX hasn’t commented on how many jobs will be affected by the relocation. [See SpaceX, A12]

Israel strikes at Houthis in Yemen
Attacks appear to be the first on Yemeni soil since Israel-Hamas war began and threaten to open a new front. **WORLD, A3**

Pedestrian mall at a crossroads
Santa Monica’s Third Street Promenade has stalled amid safety concerns and a new retail landscape. **BUSINESS, A13**

Quirky pizza box puzzles the people
“Enjoy your delicious moments,” two incongruous chefs command those who indulge. Stay weird. **CALIFORNIA, B1**

Weather
Sunny and warm. L.A. Basin: 89/67. **B10**

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