

FACES

‘The American Society of Magical Negroes’ uses satire to talk race
Page 11



EUROPE

Putin extends rule in preordained Russian election
Page 5

NCAA TOURNAMENT

North Carolina, UConn, Purdue and Houston earned No. 1 seeding
Page 24



North Korea launches 3 short-range missiles off eastern coast >> Page 3

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US military still in Niger despite junta declaration

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — About 1,000 U.S. military personnel remain in Niger two days after the ruling junta announced that it wanted those forces out of the country in connection with an ongoing diplomatic dispute. U.S. Africa Command on Monday confirmed that American forces are still in Niger, most of whom are concentrated at a drone base on the outskirts of the Sahara Desert city of Agadez. A separate contingent is at a similar site in Niamey, the capital, AFRICOM said.

It's unclear how long the U.S. troops will be able to remain in the country, AFRICOM's hub for counterterrorism missions across western Africa.

The situation puts at risk AFRICOM's Agadez drone site, known as Air Base 201, which the Pentagon spent more than \$100 million developing.

On Saturday, Niger's military junta announced that it was severing military ties with the United States and revoking a pact that allowed the American troops to be based in the country.

Junta spokesman Col. Amadou Abdramane, announced the move on national television. The decision came days after a visit to Niger by AFRICOM's Gen. Michael Langley and U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Molly Phee.

Abdramane accused the U.S. delegation of not following diplomatic protocols and denounced what he called "the condescending attitude" of its members.

Insa Garba Saidou, a local activist who assists Niger's military rulers with their communications,

SEE NIGER ON PAGE 4



J.P. LAWRENCE/Stars and Stripes

Air Force Senior Airman Sierra Olivarez stacks boxes of water onto a pallet, Saturday, that would later be airdropped into the Gaza Strip. Olivarez is one of more than 80 volunteers at Al Udeid Air Base, Qatar, who signed up to help with the delivery of rations and water.

Working nonstop on Gaza aid

Largest US base in Mideast has been moving to get items ready for airdrops

By J.P. LAWRENCE
Stars and Stripes

AL UDEID AIR BASE, Qatar — Work has been going on around the clock since the beginning of this month at the largest U.S. base in the Middle East as soldiers and airmen scurry to assemble aid pallets for airdrop to Palestinians in the Gaza Strip.

On the Al Udeid flightline Saturday, service members loaded two Air Force C-17 Globemaster III cargo planes with more than 28,800 military rations and 34,500 bottles of water.

The planes took off from the base the follow-

RELATED

UN: ‘Famine is imminent’ in northern Gaza as Israel raids main hospital again
Page 12

ing day, on their way to the U.S. military's 13th airdrop of aid into northern Gaza, a U.S. Central Command statement said Sunday.

Brig. Gen. Sean Davis, head of the Army's

13th Armored Corps Sustainment Command, said the provision of aid by various means could end up resembling a very different operation — the Berlin Airlift.

For 15 months between June 1948 and September 1949, that operation delivered more than 2.3 million tons of cargo to Berlin residents after the Soviet Union imposed a blockade.

"The entire base has mobilized for this," Davis said Sunday.

SEE AID ON PAGE 4

BUSINESS/WEATHER

Uber pays \$178 million to end legal dispute

Associated Press

SYDNEY—Global rideshare giant Uber will pay \$178 million to settle a long-running dispute with Australian taxi and hire car drivers who lost out when the company entered the Australian market.

A class action against Uber had been expected to go to trial in the Supreme Court of Victoria on Monday, but Maurice Blackburn Lawyers—representing 8,000 taxi and hire car drivers—said the case will be dropped because Uber agreed to the financial settlement.

Maurice Blackburn principal lawyer Michael Donnelly said that drivers and car owners suffered financial losses due to Uber's aggressive entry into the market in 2012 and that the company consistently attempted to avoid compensating them.

An Uber statement described the complaints of the taxi industry as "legacy issues" and said ride-share regulations did not exist anywhere in the world when the company started more than a decade ago.

"The rise of ridesharing has grown Australia's overall point-to-point transport industry, bringing with it greater choice and improved experiences for consumers, as well as new earnings opportunities for hundreds of thousands of Australian workers," the statement said.

"Since 2018, Uber has made significant contributions into various state-level taxi compensation schemes, and with today's proposed settlement, we put these legacy issues firmly in our past."

EXCHANGE RATES

Military rates		
Euro costs (March 19)	\$1.06	
British pound (March 19)	\$1.24	
Japanese yen (March 19)	145.00	
South Korean won (March 19)	1299.00	
Commercial rates		
Bahrain (Dinar)	0.3769	
Britain (Pound)	1.27344	
Canada (Dollar)	1.3548	
China (Yuan)	7.1982	
Denmark (Krone)	6.8481	
Egypt (Pound)	47.1109	
Euro	0.9183	
Hong Kong (Dollar)	7.8195	
Hungary (Forint)	362.84	
Israel (Shekel)	3.6498	
Japan (Yen)	149.22	
Kuwait (Dinar)	0.3073	
Norway (Krone)	10.6212	
Philippines (Peso)	55.68	
Poland (Zloty)	3.97	
Saudi Arabia (Riyal)	3.7503	
Singapore (Dollar)	1.3384	
South Korea (Won)	1335.11	
Switzerland (Franc)	0.8848	
Thailand (Baht)	35.97	
Turkey (NewLira)	32.3013	

(Military exchange rates are those available to customers at military banking facilities in the country of issuance for Japan, South Korea, Germany, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom. For nonlocal currency exchange rates (i.e., purchasing British pounds in Germany), check with your local military banking facility. Commercial rates are interbank rates provided for reference when buying currency. All figures are foreign currencies to one dollar, except for the British pound, which is represented in dollars-to-pound, and the euro, which is dollars-to-euro.)

INTEREST RATES		
Prime rate	8.50	
Interest Rates Discount rate	6.00	
Federal funds market rate	5.33	
3-month bill	5.39	
30-year bond	4.43	

WEATHER OUTLOOK



TODAY
IN STRIPES

American Roundup	10
Classified	12
Comics	15
Crossword	15
Faces	11
Opinion	14
Sports	16-24

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PACIFIC

N. Korea launches 3 missiles off eastern coast

Weapons fly 185 miles, splash into sea days after end of Freedom Shield

**By DAVID CHOI
AND HANA KUSUMOTO**
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — North Korea fired three short-range ballistic missiles off its eastern coast Monday morning, according to Japanese and South Korean authorities.

The weapons were launched between 7:44 a.m. and 8:22 a.m. from Sangwon county in North Hwanghae province, the South's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a text message to reporters. They flew more than 185 miles before splashing down in the Sea of Japan, also known as the East Sea.

A news release from Japan's Ministry of Defense said North Korea fired three ballistic missiles to a maximum altitude of 30 miles and all three fell outside Japan's exclusive economic zone.

The South Korean military has strengthened its surveillance capabilities in preparation for additional launches and will work closely with U.S. and Japanese authorities to analyze them, the Joint Chiefs said.

The Japanese Coast Guard issued an alert Monday morning about a possible ballistic missile launch and advised ships in Japanese waters to avoid fallen objects but to report anything found.

Tokyo "strongly protested and strongly condemned" North Korea's actions, the defense ministry said.

"Actions by North Korea, including its repeated launches of ballistic missiles, threaten the peace and security of Japan, the region, and the international community," the release said. "Furthermore, such ballistic missile launches violate relevant [U.N.] Security Council resolutions and are a serious issue concerning the national safety."

North Korea's last ballistic-missile launch, a solid-fuel intermediate-range weapon on Jan. 14, flew around 620 miles before falling into the Sea of Japan. The communist regime fired 24 ballistic missiles, five of them intercontinental range, last year.

From Jan. 5-7, Pyongyang fired around 350 artillery shells toward its southern maritime border, according to South Korea's military. The North also launched several cruise missiles over a 10-day span starting Jan. 24.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken arrived in South Korea on Sunday to attend the Summit for



KCNA

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un observes marksmanship training on March 6. Officials in Japan and South Korea said North Korea fired three short-range ballistic missiles Monday.

Democracy in Seoul and meet with South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol and Foreign Minister Cho Tae-yul on Monday, according to a news release from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

During his meeting with Yoon, Blinken reiterated that Washington will stand with Seoul and develop a "firm response to North Korean provocations," according to a news release from the South Korean presidential office.

Monday's launch comes four days after U.S. and South Korean troops wrapped up their 11-day Freedom Shield exercise. The militaries described the large-scale training held throughout South Korea as defensive in nature; however, North Korea's state-run media labeled it a rehearsal for an invasion.

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Expert: North Korea's ballistic missile tests more a show of force

By SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — Ballistic missile launches by North Korea, like the three Monday, are meant to deter the United States with the supreme goal of keeping the country's communist rulers in power, an expert on the reclusive regime told reporters Monday.

Pyongyang fired three short-range ballistic missiles that splashed down in the Sea of Japan that morning, hours before Keio University professor Atsuhito Isozaki, an expert in North Korean politics, briefed reporters during a webinar presented by the Foreign Press Center Japan in Tokyo.

The latest launches are among 180 missiles fired by North Korea since Kim Jong Un inherited power in 2011, Isozaki said.

"Which means that these are within the high-level aim of bolstering their military capability and deterrence vis-à-vis the U.S. ... and that's part of their supreme goal of perpetuating the regime," he said.

Pyongyang is continuing to experiment, test, train and conduct



Isozaki

military drills as part of that effort, Isozaki said.

"The overwhelming, important goal is to strengthen deterrence but there are secondary effects," he said. "It may be possible to use these (missile tests) as cards for diplomacy."

Missile launches also bolster the North Korean people's morale and strengthen Kim's authority, Isozaki said, adding that the North is among only nine nations with nuclear weapons and only six with intercontinental ballistic missiles.

"This is sufficient for North Korea to raise national morale," he said.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 — a nuclear power attacking a smaller, non-nuclear neighbor — demonstrated for the North Korean regime that nuclear weapons are essential to its survival, Isozaki said.

Predicting Japan's response to an accidental North Korean mis-

sile strike is beyond his expertise, Isozaki said.

But Japan would likely act rapidly in concert with its ally the United States, he said.

In recent years, the North has moved away from a policy of reunification with South Korea, he said.

Kim in January ordered an end to the formal goal of reunifying the two Koreas and named the South his country's "principal enemy" and the nation "most hostile" to Pyongyang.

The North has shut down agencies working with South Korea and stopped using words such as "unification" or referring to "80 million compatriots" from both countries in its statements, Isozaki said.

Pyongyang now says "North-South relations are no longer a kinship or homogeneous relationship but have completely become a relationship between two hostile countries, two belligerents at war," he said.

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8 airmen at Kadena accused of smuggling synthetic drugs

**By HANA KUSUMOTO
AND JONATHAN SNYDER**
Stars and Stripes

Eight service members at Kadena Air Base may face charges of importing illegal drugs into Japan by mail over the past year.

Japanese investigators on Wednesday recommended drug smuggling charges against three men and five women, all in their 20s, to the Naha District Public Prosecutors Office, an office spokesman said by phone Monday.

He declined to identify the eight individuals or provide updates on decisions to prosecute them.

Each airman is suspected of ordering 10 to 30 grams of a so-called designer drug, MDMB-4en-PINACA, from illegal drugs sales websites and having it delivered to Okinawa starting in May, the spokesman said.

The drugs were in liquid form and packaged in canisters used for vaping.

MDMB-4en-PINACA is a synthetic drug created to have similar effect as tetrahydrocannabinol, the psychoactive ingredient in marijuana.

Okinawa Regional Customs discovered the drugs and reported them to the Okinawa Narcotics Control office, whose agents joined the Air Force Office of Special Investigations on all eight cases, the prosecutors' spokesman said.

The narcotics control office provided information about the drug sales websites to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, according to an Okinawa Times report on Friday.

"We can confirm that the 18th Security Forces Squadron and the Air Force Office of Special Investigations coordinate closely with Japanese law enforcement on any case involving violations of Japanese law," a spokeswoman for Kadena's 18th Wing, Master Sgt. Natasha Stannard, said by email Monday. "The Air Force takes Japanese customs laws seriously and any Airmen found to have committed criminal acts will be held accountable for their actions."

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MILITARY

US attempts to stop Yemen arms smuggling

Initiative seeks to map routes used by Tehran, acknowledges Houthi security challenge

By DAN LAMOTHE AND MISSY RYAN
The Washington Post

The Biden administration is expanding efforts to surveil and intercept Iranian weapons being smuggled to Yemen, where Houthi militants have staged a deadly campaign of violence against commercial shipping that has proved resilient to six weeks of military strikes, said U.S. officials familiar with the matter.

The initiative seeks to map seafaring routes used by Tehran and stop the arms shipments while in

transit, an acknowledgment that the Houthis are likely to pose a significant security challenge for the foreseeable future. It is part of a broader strategy that also includes sanctions and diplomatic pressure, but faces constraint as essential military resources are in short supply.

A senior U.S. defense official described the evolving mission as “a renewed effort to try to better understand what those water routes look like.” Like others interviewed for this report, the official spoke on the condition of ano-

nymity to describe sensitive military activity. The work requires considerable collaboration with the U.S. intelligence community, the official said.

A second senior defense official characterized the effort as “very vigorous,” saying Washington also is exploring how partner nations can expand their focus on disrupting Iranian arms smuggling to help offset a limited inventory of U.S. drones and other surveillance assets that are central to the process. The official declined to identify which nations are in-

involved in those conversations, but said all governments affected economically by the Houthi attacks should do more.

“It’s definitely a challenge in an area as large as the one we are describing to identify all of these craft,” this person said. “But we are devoting significant resources to identifying, tracking and — where we have the ability — interdicting. And what we are finding is significant.”

The Houthis, who rose from a ragtag band of rebels to functioning now as the de facto govern-

ment overseeing much of Yemen, fall under Iran’s regional network of proxy forces opposed to Israel and the U.S. military presence in the Middle East. The group’s leaders have characterized its actions in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden as a demonstration of solidarity with Hamas fighters battling Israeli forces in Gaza, yet often its targeting has appeared indiscriminate — it once even fired on a ship hauling grain to Yemen, where conflict has left millions in hunger, according to aid organizations.

Aid: Nearly 30,000 military rations on the way to Gaza Strip

FROM PAGE 1

So far, the U.S. and Jordanian air forces have dropped 318,912 meals and 144,000 bottles of water, according to Central Command statements since March 2.

Pallets from Al Udeid are filled with Meals, Ready to Eat rations, which have about 1,300 calories each and include an entree, snacks and a heater.

The rations come from other U.S. bases in the region and do not contain pork, in accordance with Islamic dietary rules, Air Force officials said.

The war that began Oct. 7, after a Hamas terrorist attack killed 1,200 people in Israel, has created an acute crisis for Gaza residents.

Airdrops alone don’t provide sufficient supplies, aid organizations argue. The air routes are part of a larger undertaking that includes a sea route and efforts to send aid by land, which is seen as the fastest, most efficient method, Davis said.

The sea route refers to plans to deliver aid via a temporary pier, which U.S. officials say could provide as many as 2 million meals a day.

The land route, Davis said, could involve the U.S. providing food to contractors who bring the aid into Gaza. Should the sea and land routes ramp up, the air bridge can wind down, he added.

Earlier this month, the U.S.,



PHOTOS BY J.P. LAWRENCE/Stars and Stripes

Army Sgt. Robert Alvarado of the 165th Quartermaster Company prepares a bundle of humanitarian aid at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar on Saturday by inspecting the parachutes attached to each pallet.

along with nations in the Persian Gulf and Europe, began a surge of aid into Gaza, where almost 2.2 million people are in urgent need of humanitarian relief, according to the United Nations and nonprofit relief groups.

Military food inspectors at the base check the condition of the rations, which are then prepared for airdrop by soldiers with the help of some 80 Air Force volunteers on base.

The pallets of food plus a parachute weigh 1,200 pounds, and the

ones carrying water bottles weigh more than a ton. Soldiers attaching parachutes on top of each pallet said they are aware of the damage these pallets could do if the rigging malfunctions.

“We do everything in our power to ensure these bundles go down to the ground safely,” said Army Staff Sgt. Jacob Engstrom, a parachute rigger from the 165th Quartermaster Company.

One parachute malfunctioned March 8, killing five Palestinians and wounding several others,



Soldiers at Al Udeid Air Base, Qatar, load a U.S. Air Force C-17 Globemaster III with a bundle of humanitarian aid on Saturday.

CNN reported. A CENTCOM statement said that the errant airdrop wasn’t a U.S. operation.

Soldiers at Al Udeid said they use a different kind of parachute than the one shown in the video of the fatal airdrop.

These low-velocity parachutes are 64 feet in diameter and come down relatively slowly, at 28.4 feet per second or less, Engstrom said. Each pallet also has an inch-thick layer of cardboard to blunt the force of the fall, he said.

The drops are monitored through drone feeds and evaluated for issues with the landing, mil-

itary officials said. The post-drop assessments and videos show that the pallets are surrounded as soon as they hit the ground, Davis added.

“These people are starving, and they need this food,” he said, showing a photo of a Palestinian girl holding an MRE, a screenshot from a newscast that he had in his wallet.

“It’s an honor to get it to them and alleviate any human suffering that we can.”

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Niger: About 1K US troops remain despite junta wanting them out

FROM PAGE 1

criticized U.S. efforts to force the junta to pick between strategic partners.

“The American bases and civilian personnel cannot stay on Nigerien soil any longer,” he told The Associated Press.

Once a key partner in counterterrorism efforts across the Sahel,

Niger has soured on the U.S. presence in the aftermath of a July coup that overthrew the democratically elected president. Since then, American military operations in the country have been curtailed in accordance with U.S. rules that restrict cooperation with military juntas. The tensions between Washington and Niamey

also have raised the prospect of Russian acquisition of a foothold in the region. In Senate testimony earlier this month, Langley said that Moscow is making aggressive moves in Africa and that a number of countries were “at the tipping point of actually being captured by the Russian Federation.”

He said Russian operatives

have taken advantage of unrest stretching across much of western Africa, which has seen a series of coups in recent years. With the Americans sidelined in those countries, a door has opened for Russia to increase its presence.

Part of Russia’s attraction to Africa relates to “power projection capabilities” and access to

natural resources that are vital to military industrial development, Langley said.

“I think at an accelerated pace, the Russian Federation is really trying to take over central Africa as well as the Sahel,” he testified.

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EUROPE

Putin wins preordained Russian election

Victory follows harshest crackdown on free speech since Soviet times

Associated Press

President Vladimir Putin sealed his control over Russia for six more years on Monday with a highly orchestrated landslide in an election that followed the harshest crackdown on the opposition and free speech since Soviet times.

While the result was never in doubt, Russians attempted to defy the inevitable outcome, heeding a call to protest Putin's repression at home and his war in Ukraine by showing up at polling stations at noon on Sunday. But from the earliest returns, it was clear Putin would extend his nearly quarter-century rule with a fifth term.

With nearly all the precincts counted Monday, election officials said Putin had secured a record number of votes — an unsurprising development underlining the Russian leader's total control of the country's political system.

Putin has led Russia as president or prime minister since December 1999, a tenure marked by international military aggression and an increasing intolerance for dissent. At the end of his fifth term, Putin would be the longest-serving Russian leader since Catherine the Great, who ruled during the 18th century.

As early results came in, Putin hailed them as an indication of "trust" and "hope" in him — while critics saw them as another reflection of the preordained nature of the election.

"Of course, we have lots of tasks ahead. But I want to make it clear for everyone: When we were consolidated, no one has ever managed to frighten us, to suppress our will and our self-conscience. They failed in the past and they

will fail in the future," he said at a meeting with his campaign staff after polls closed.

Any public criticism of Putin or his war in Ukraine has been stifled. Independent media have been crippled. His fiercest political foe, Alexei Navalny, died in an Arctic prison last month, and other critics are either in jail or in exile.

Beyond the fact that voters had virtually no choice, independent monitoring of the election was extremely limited.

Russia's Central Election Commission said Monday that with nearly 100% of precincts counted, Putin got 87% of the vote. Central Election Commission chief Ella Pamfilova said that nearly 76 million voters cast their ballots for Putin, his highest vote tally ever.

Western leaders have denounced the election as a sham, while President Volodymyr Zelenskyy particularly criticized voting in Ukrainian areas that Russia has illegally annexed, saying "everything Russia does on the occupied territory of Ukraine is a crime."

France's Foreign Ministry said "the conditions for a free, pluralist and democratic election were not met," while paying tribute to "the courage of many Russian citizens who peacefully show their opposition."

Chinese President Xi Jinping and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un quickly congratulated Putin, along with some Central and South American leaders and presidents of nations that have historic and close current ties to Russia, such as Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.



ALEXANDER ZEMLIANICHENKO/AP

Russian President Vladimir Putin speaks on a visit to his campaign headquarters after a presidential election in Moscow early Monday.

In the tightly controlled environment, Navalny's associates urged those unhappy with Putin or the war to go to the polls at noon on Sunday — and lines outside a number of polling stations both inside Russia and at its embassies around the world appeared to swell at that time.

Among those heeding call was Yulia Navalnaya, Navalny's widow, who spent more than five hours in the line at the Russian Embassy in Berlin. She told reporters that she wrote her late husband's name on her ballot.

Asked whether she had a message for Putin, Navalnaya replied: "Please stop asking for messages from me or from somebody for Mr. Putin. There could be no negotiations and nothing with Mr. Putin, because he's a killer, he's a gangster."

A voter in Moscow, who identified himself only as Vadim, said he hoped for change, but added that "unfortunately, it's unlikely." Like

others, he didn't give his full name because of security concerns.

Meanwhile, supporters of Navalny streamed to his grave in Moscow, some bringing ballots with his name written on them.

Putin brushed off the effectiveness of the apparent protest and rejected Western criticism of the vote as he tried to turn the tables on the West, charging that the four criminal cases against U.S. Republican candidate Donald Trump were a use of the judiciary for political aims and describing denigrating democracy in the U.S. as a "catastrophe."

"The whole world is laughing at it," he said.

Putin referenced Navalny by name for the first time in years at the news conference, declaring that he was ready to release him in a swap for unidentified inmates in Western custody just days before the opposition leader's death.

Some people told the AP that they were happy to vote for Putin

— unsurprising in a country where state TV airs a drumbeat of praise for the Russian leader and voicing any other opinion is risky.

Dmitry Sergienko, who cast his ballot in Moscow, said, "I am happy with everything and want everything to continue as it is now."

Voting took place over three days at polling stations across the vast country, in illegally annexed regions of Ukraine and online.

Several people were arrested, including in Moscow and St. Petersburg, after they tried to start fires or set off explosives at polling stations while others were detained for throwing green antiseptic or ink into ballot boxes.

Stanislav Andreychuk, co-chair of the Golos independent election watchdog, said Russians were searched when entering polling stations, there were attempts to check filled-out ballots before they were cast, and one report said police demanded a ballot box be opened to remove a ballot.

With election over, Putin aims to create a buffer zone in Ukraine

Associated Press

Russian President Vladimir Putin said after extending his rule in an election that had stifled opposition that Moscow will not relent in its invasion of Ukraine and plans to create a buffer zone along the border to help protect against long-range Ukrainian strikes and cross-border raids.

The Kremlin's forces have recently made battlefield progress as Kyiv's troops struggle with a severe shortage of artillery shells and exhausted front-line units after more than two years of war. The front line stretches over 620 miles across eastern and southern Ukraine.

Advances have been slow and

costly, and Ukraine has increasingly used its long-range firepower to hit oil refineries and depots deep inside Russia. Also, groups claiming to be Ukraine-based Russian opponents of the Kremlin have launched cross-border incursions.

"We will be forced at some point, when we consider it necessary, to create a certain 'sanitary zone' on the territories controlled by the (Ukrainian government)," Putin said late Sunday.

This "security zone," Putin said, "would be quite difficult to penetrate using the foreign-made strike assets at the enemy's disposal."

He spoke at a news conference

after the release of election returns that showed him securing a fifth six-year term by a landslide in an election devoid of any real opposition following his relentless crackdown on dissent.

Monday marks the 10th anniversary of Russia's seizure of Ukraine's Crimea Peninsula, which set the stage for Russia to invade its neighbor in February 2022. However, Putin has been vague about his goals in Ukraine since that full-scale invasion floundered.

Putin also again warned the West against deploying troops to Ukraine. A possible conflict between Russia and NATO would put the world "a step away" from

World War III, he said.

French President Emmanuel Macron recently said that sending Western troops into Ukraine should not be ruled out — though he said the current situation does not require it.

Commenting on the prospects for peace talks with Kyiv, Putin reaffirmed that Russia remains open to negotiations but won't be lured into a truce that will allow Ukraine to reararm.

However, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy has apparently shut the door on such talks, saying Putin should be brought to trial at the International Criminal Court in The Hague, which last year issued an arrest war-

rant for Putin for war crime charges.

With crucial U.S. aid being held up in Washington, U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham arrived in Kyiv on Monday, the U.S. Embassy said. Ukraine desperately needs the around \$48 billion that the package of support would provide, especially artillery shells and air defense systems.

Ukraine's air force said it intercepted 17 out of 22 Shahed drones launched by Russia over various regions of the country overnight. Russia also fired five S-300/S-400 missiles at the Kharkiv region and two Kh-59 at the Sumy region, both in northeastern Ukraine, it said.

NATION

US flies group of Americans fleeing Haiti to Miami

Associated Press

MIAMI—A charter flight carrying dozens of U.S. citizens fleeing spiraling gang violence in Haiti landed Sunday in Miami, U.S. State Department officials said.

More than 30 U.S. citizens were on the government-chartered flight, officials said in a statement. It arrived in the Miami International Airport after the U.S. Embassy in Port-au-Prince earlier this month urged U.S. citizens to leave “as soon as possible” as chaos grips Haiti.

Passenger Avlot Quessa, who lives in Boston, traveled from the center of the country to board the charter flight after going to Haiti last month for what was supposed to be a weeklong trip to visit his mother.

“It’s just terrible... The suffering, you can only imagine,” Quessa told the Miami Herald of the nearby Caribbean nation. “Haiti is my homeland and it’s very stressful to see the homeland going through this act of violence, destruction ... and they are our neighbors.”

Haiti’s main airport in Port-au-Prince remains closed following gang attacks that have raged through Haiti in recent weeks, pushing many people to the brink of famine. Government and aid agencies this weekend reported looting of aid supplies as the situation wors-

ened.

The State Department announced Saturday that it would offer limited charter flights for American citizens from the less chaotic northern city of Cap-Haïtien. Officials said they could not provide ground transportation to Cap-Haïtien and that U.S. citizens should consider the charter flights “only if you think you can reach Cap-Haïtien airport safely.”

“We encourage U.S. citizens still in Haiti who seek to depart to contact the Department of State using the crisis intake form on our website if they have not already done so,” the agency said.

People taking the U.S. government-coordinated flights must sign a promissory bill agreeing to reimburse the government.

Another passenger on Sunday’s flight, Marie Lucie St. Fleur, 69, of West Palm Beach, said she feels most at home in Haiti and it pains her to see what her homeland is enduring.

“I don’t feel well at all. I would like to live in my country and I can’t,” she said while sitting in a wheelchair.

Monday, gangs attacked two upscale neighborhoods in Haiti’s capital, looting homes in Laboule and Thomassin before sunrise and leaving at least a dozen people dead.



BENJAMIN FANJOY / AP

The area around a bus stop near Muni’s West Portal Station is fenced off after a sport utility vehicle crashed into the stop, killing multiple people and injuring others on Saturday.

3 killed, infant in critical condition after SUV hits Calif. bus shelter

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Three people were killed and an infant was hospitalized in critical condition after an SUV crashed into a bus shelter in San Francisco, authorities said Sunday.

Two victims, including a child, died at the scene of the crash Saturday afternoon in the city’s West Portal neighborhood, police said. Three others were taken to hospitals.

The third victim, a woman, later died at a hospital, police said.

The infant was being treated for life-threatening injuries, police said.

The driver of the white Mercedes SUV was among those hospitalized, according to the San Francisco Chronicle.

The San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency said Saturday it was investigating the cause of the crash in collaboration

with the San Francisco Police Department.

San Francisco Mayor London Breed said on X, formerly Twitter, that she had visited the scene of the collision on Saturday. She called it “heartbreaking.”

Residents left flowers at a growing memorial where the crash occurred, the Chronicle reported. The advocacy group Walk San Francisco planned a vigil Monday evening at the site.

Idaho considers ban on using public funds for gender-affirming care

Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho — Idaho lawmakers are expected to vote this week on a bill that would ban the use of any public funds for gender-affirming care, including for state employees using work health insurance and for adults covered by Medicaid.

The legislation already passed the House and only needs to clear the majority Republican Senate before it is sent to Gov. Brad Little’s desk, where it would likely be signed into law. The Republican governor has said repeatedly he does not believe public funds should be used for gender-affirming care.

If the legislation is enacted, Idaho would become at least the 10th state to ban Medicaid funding for gender-affirming care for people of all ages, according to the advocacy and information organization Movement Advancement Project. The laws are part of an ongoing national battle over the rights of LGBTQ+ Americans.

The legislation has passed the House and only needs to clear the majority Republican Senate before it is sent to the governor.

Opponents to the Idaho bill say it almost certainly will lead to a lawsuit in federal court. The state has already been sued multiple times over attempts to deny gender-affirming care to transgender residents and so far has not had much success defending the lawsuits.

In one case, the state was ordered to provide a transgender inmate with gender-transition surgery, and the inmate was later awarded roughly \$2.5 million in legal fees.

Last year a federal judge barred Idaho from enforcing its newly enacted ban on gender-affirming medical care for minors until a lawsuit brought by transgender youth and their families is resolved. A different federal judge denied the state’s motion to dismiss a separate lawsuit filed by

adults in 2022 who said Medicaid officials wrongly denied coverage for their medically necessary gender-affirming treatment.

“This bill violates the 14th Amendment equal protections clause” and the federal Medicaid Act, Boise attorney Howard Belodoff told lawmakers during a hearing on Thursday.

Belodoff represents the transgender adults who sued the state over what they said were discriminatory Medicaid policies excluding coverage for genital reconstruction surgery.

“You cannot distinguish between providing care on the basis of diagnosis, type of illness or condition,” Belodoff said. “That’s exactly what this bill does: it violates the Medicaid Act.”

One of the bill’s sponsors, Republican Rep. Bruce Skaug, said

those lawsuits prompted creation of the bill.

“This is a taxpayer protection bill in my view,” Skaug said, suggesting that without it the state could end up paying millions for gender-affirming care. Roughly 70% of Idaho’s Medicaid program is federally funded.

Some who testified against the bill suggested it could have a far larger reach than intended by eliminating gender-affirming care for even privately insured residents living in rural areas with only state-funded medical centers.

Isaac Craghtten, an Idaho Department of Correction employee, noted that many correctional employees work 12- to 16-hour shifts, which can require taking some prescribed medications like hormone therapy while on the job.

But the legislation bars the use of any state property, facility or building for providing surgical operations or medical interventions, which could mean em-

ployees would be subject to criminal penalties for taking their own legally prescribed medication while in a break room, Craghtten said.

The punishment for violating the law would include fines ranging from \$300 to \$10,000 and imprisonment between one and 14 years.

At least 23 states including Idaho have passed laws banning gender-affirming care for minors. Some states also have considered policies that experts say would make it more difficult for transgender adults to receive care, such as eliminating telehealth options or requiring repeated psychological examinations for continued gender-affirming treatment.

Major medical groups, including the American Medical Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics, oppose gender-affirming care bans and have endorsed such care, saying it is safe when administered properly.

NATION

Border security impasse raises shutdown risk

By JACOB BOGAGE
The Washington Post

A dispute over border security funding threatens to force a shutdown of vast swaths of the federal government in less than a week, as Congress and the White House struggled Sunday to reach a deal on long-term spending legislation.

Funding for roughly 70% of the federal government — including the departments of Defense, State and Homeland Security as well as the IRS and Transportation Security Administration — will expire Saturday just after midnight unless Congress acts before then.

A prolonged shutdown could have cascading effects on the government and economy. Two-thirds of IRS employees would face furloughs at the height of tax filing season. The roughly 1.3 million active-duty U.S. service members would remain on the job without pay. So would airport security officers, many of whom called in sick in protest during a previous shutdown, sparking nationwide travel delays.

As recently as Friday, congressional negotiators were nearing an agreement to complete a spending bill for all those agencies, with the goal of voting on it as soon as Thursday. (Congress has already passed separate legislation funding the other 30% of the government.) But disagreements over immigration at the U.S.-Mexico border — an issue that has derailed legislation throughout this Congress and emerged as a key fault line between the parties in the November elections — stymied the talks, according to multiple people involved in the con-

versations, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss private negotiations.

Amid rising tension, negotiators for House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., over the weekend appealed to the White House — rather than congressional Democrats — to engage in spending talks, revealing the fraught nature of the conversations. The two sides had expected to release text of the bills Sunday afternoon, but as large divisions persisted, that looked very unlikely, said a person with knowledge of the talks.

GOP negotiators were prepared to offer the Department of Homeland Security roughly the same level of funding for the rest of the 2024 fiscal year, which ends Sept. 30, as the department received in fiscal 2023, plus some extra money for immigration enforcement, multiple people said. But due to inflation, that would represent a significant funding cut in real terms.

The White House rejected that proposal, the people said, saying even that amount of money would put the department at a dangerous shortfall.

“Republicans have always said we will provide all the resources necessary for enforcement, but not a blank check to simply ‘manage’ people into the country and bail out sanctuary cities,” a senior GOP aide said Sunday. “... House Republicans have repeatedly urged the White House for weeks to engage with congressional Democrats to help address the seriousness of the situation to little avail.”

The talks that continued Sunday afternoon, according to three peo-



ERIC GAY/AP

Migrants are taken into custody by officials at the Texas-Mexico border, Jan. 3, in Eagle Pass, Texas. The deadlock on a border security funding decision in Congress has increased the risk of a federal government shutdown.

ple with knowledge of the situation, focused on where appropriators hoped to direct funding for border security: The White House wanted to preserve funding for detention facilities to house unauthorized migrants, while congressional Republicans were looking to send more money to Border Patrol agents to prevent migrants from crossing into the United States, possibly by shifting funds from detention to border enforcement.

One administration official characterized the negotiations Sunday afternoon as an effort to prevent “chaos” at the border, which could ensue if Congress moves funding between different border security programs.

White House representatives did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, part of the Department of Homeland Security, is already running short of money even under its current budget. Last month, it drafted plans to release thousands of immigrants and slash its capacity to hold detainees as it faced rapidly dwindling funding. More hospitable weather in the spring and summer could draw more border crossings, officials say, straining the agency’s finances even further.

Border issues have complicated other funding measures, as well. President Joe Biden, Johnson and Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., also remain at an impasse in conversations about U.S. spending to support Ukraine, talks that have gone awry over attempts to link the money to border security.

Biden’s campaign has \$155M for ‘24 run

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden’s campaign has amassed \$155 million in cash on hand for the 2024 election, far exceeding the in-hand total for his Republican opponent, Donald Trump.

The president raised \$53 million alone last month, which was the strongest grassroots fundraising month since the campaign launched, according to campaign officials. Among those efforts was a contest for supporters to attend a fundraiser on March 28 in New York with Biden, Barack Obama and Bill Clinton that raised \$4 million last month.

“The enthusiasm we’re picking up as we go around the country is real,” Biden said in a radio interview with WNOV 860 in Wisconsin last week. “We’ve raised a whole lot of money. We have 1.5 million donors, including 500,000 are brand new, they’re small donors; 97% of the donations under \$200.”

Both Biden and Trump clinched their party nominations last week, setting up a 2024 rematch.

Trump’s February figures have not been released. By the end of January, his two major committees had just \$36.6 million in cash on hand, and those committees collectively spent more than they took in that month. A major driver of those costs was millions of dollars in legal fees from Trump’s myriad court cases. The figures are only a partial snapshot of the Trump operation’s finances because other branches won’t have to disclose numbers until April.

Biden’s cash on hand total is the highest amassed by any Democratic candidate in history during this point in the campaign, the campaign said.

Biden signs executive order to push women’s health study

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden signed an executive order Monday aimed at advancing the study of women’s health in part by strengthening data collection and providing easier and better funding opportunities for biomedical research.

Women’s health has long been underfunded and understudied. It wasn’t until the 1990s that the federal government mandated women be included in federally funded medical research; for most of medical history, though, scientific study was based almost entirely

on men.

“We still know too little about how to effectively prevent, diagnose and treat a wide array of health conditions in women,” said Dr. Carolyn Mazure, the head of the White House initiative on women’s health.

Today, research often fails to properly track differences between women and men, and does not represent women equally particularly for illnesses more common to them — which Biden suggested his order would help change.

“To state the obvious, women

are half the population and underrepresented across the board. But not in my administration,” the president said, drawing raucous applause at a White House reception marking Women’s History Month.

Biden said he’s long been a believer in the “power of research” to help save lives and get high-quality health care to the people who need it. But the executive order also checks off a political box, too, during an election year when women will be crucial to his reelection efforts. First lady Jill Biden is leading both the effort to or-

ganize and mobilize female voters and the White House Initiative on Women’s Health Research.

The announcement comes as the ripple effects spread from the Supreme Court’s decision that overturned federal abortion rights, touching on medical issues for women who never intended to end their pregnancies. In Alabama, for example, the future of IVF was thrown into question statewide after a judge’s ruling.

Women were a critical part of the coalition that elected Biden in 2020, giving him 55% of their vote, according to AP VoteCast. Black

women and suburban women were pillars of Biden’s coalition while Trump had a modest advantage among white women and a much wider share of white women without college degrees, according to the AP survey of more than 110,000 voters in that year’s election.

The National Institutes of Health is also launching a new effort around menopause and the treatment of menopausal symptoms that will identify research gaps and work to close them, said White House adviser Jennifer Klein.

NATION

Clarity sought on states' abortion restrictions

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — In Republican-led states across the U.S., conservative legislators are refusing to reevaluate abortion bans — even as doctors and patients insist the laws' exceptions are dangerously unclear, resulting in denied treatment to some pregnant women in need.

Instead, GOP leaders accuse abortion rights advocates of deliberately spreading misinformation and doctors of intentionally denying services in an effort to undercut the bans and make a political point. At the same time, however, some states are taking steps that they say will provide more clarity about when abortions can be legally performed.

The Republican-controlled South Dakota Legislature wants to create a video in which medical experts — and the state's attorneys — would explain to doctors and patients when abortions can be legally performed. The measure was passed last month and is now awaiting the signature of Republican Gov. Kristi Noem, who has indicated she will sign it.

The first-in-the-nation idea is wholeheartedly supported by SBA Pro-Life, one of the country's largest anti-abortion groups, which says the video will help to combat "confusion caused by the abortion industry."

"South Dakota is showing the rest of the nation how to protect women's lives from the misinformation surrounding abortion laws," said the organization's public affairs director in South Dakota, Kelsey Pritchard.

Oklahoma and Kentucky are also taking steps to clarify their abor-



JACK DURA/AP

South Dakota Republican state Rep. Taylor Rehfeldt enters the House of Representatives in the state Capitol, in Pierre, last month. Rehfeldt, a nurse anesthetist, says physicians have told her they are confused about when exactly they could provide a woman with an abortion under the state's "save the life of the mother" exception.

tion bans, though in both states the attorneys general, not physicians, are the ones dictating the terms.

In Oklahoma, the attorney general sent out a memo in 2022 informing prosecutors and police that doctors should have "substantial leeway" to provide certain abortions. Last year, the office added that patients don't have to be "septic, bleeding profusely, or otherwise close to death" — but reiterated a past warning that doctors should be prosecuted if there's evidence they violated the law by providing an abortion when a woman's life wasn't actually in danger.

Kentucky's attorney general has stated that miscarriages and ectopic pregnancies — when a fertilized egg grows outside the uterus — are both exempted from the state's abortion ban, but has been silent on the majority of other preg-

nancy complications that physicians and patients have pointed out.

Since the U.S. Supreme Court overturned the constitutional right to abortion in 2022, states have been free to enact their own restrictions. South Dakota is among the 14 that ban abortion at all stages of pregnancy. The law does allow an abortion exception to save the life of the mother, but like similar statutes in other states, it does not clearly define which pregnancy complications are considered life-threatening.

State Republican Rep. Taylor Rehfeldt, a nurse anesthetist, said she decided to propose the informational video after hearing from physicians about the ongoing confusion. She said the video offered the best solution because any attempt to tweak the abortion ban it-

self would provoke strong disagreement among her GOP colleagues.

It remains to be seen how much help the video will be to patients and doctors, however. It's not expected to specifically list pregnancy complications that would legally qualify women for abortions, and it's unclear if it will contain a legal disclaimer warning that anyone who watches the video may still face potential criminal charges.

"It's not going to deal with hard calls," said Greer Donley, an associate professor at the University of Pittsburgh School of Law who is an expert on abortion law. "They actually don't want to deal with the hard calls because their movement is not sure ... how those hard calls should be resolved."

South Dakota Republican state Sen. Erin Tobin, one of the measure's proponents, acknowledged to a Senate panel last month that the video will not contain specific examples.

"That's the problem with health care, is that there are so many different circumstances, that you have to allow doctors discretion," Tobin said.

As some states mull how to clarify — without weakening — their abortion bans, abortion rights advocates in several states continue to challenge the bans with lawsuits.

Twenty Texas women denied abortions are suing the state seeking clarification, while advocates filed a lawsuit in Tennessee arguing that the state ban's vaguely defined exceptions put pregnant women's lives at risk.

Tennessee Attorney General Jonathan Skrmetti pushed back. He argued that it wasn't the law, perse,

that is harming women but rather "other factors like doctors' independent choices not to provide permissible abortions."

The lawsuit is ongoing, with attorneys expected to make their arguments before a three-judge panel next month on whether the state ban should be temporarily blocked as the legal battle continues or if the case should be dismissed entirely.

In Texas, a pregnant woman whose fetus had a fatal condition went straight to the state supreme court last year to request an exemption from the Lone Star State's strict ban. The court denied Katie Cox's request — forcing her to go out of state to get an abortion — but did urge the Texas Medical Board to issue guidance to doctors on how to interpret the law.

"While the judiciary cannot compel executive branch entities to do their part, it is obvious that the legal process works more smoothly when they do," the justices wrote.

And yet, the medical board, comprising 19 members appointed by the governor, has so far not offered any sort of guidance.

Republican Gov. Greg Abbott is a vocal abortion opponent.

Frustrated with the board's inaction, Amy and Steven Bresnen, a couple who are lawyers and lobbyists, filed a petition in January asking it to clarify what circumstances qualify as medical exceptions to the state's abortion ban. The board is expected to meet later this month and will likely address the petition, Steven Bresnen said.

"Nobody has put them on the spit to make them make a formal decision," he said. "If they decline to, they have to explain why."

High court weighs federal officials' role in regulating divisive posts

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — In a busy term that could set standards for free speech in the digital age, the Supreme Court on Monday is taking up a dispute between Republican-led states and the Biden administration over how far the federal government can go to combat controversial social media posts on topics including COVID-19 and election security.

The justices are hearing arguments in a lawsuit filed by Louisiana, Missouri and other parties accusing officials in the Democratic administration of leaning on the social media platforms to unconstitutionally squelch conservative points of view. Lower courts have sided with the states, but the Supreme Court blocked those rulings while it considers the issue.

The high court is in the midst of a term heavy with social media issues. On Friday, the court laid out

standards for when public officials can block their social media followers. Less than a month ago, the court heard arguments over Republican-passed laws in Florida and Texas that prohibit large social media companies from taking down posts because of the views they express.

The cases over state laws and the one being argued Monday are variations on the same theme, complaints that the platforms are censoring conservative viewpoints.

The states argue that White House communications staffers, the surgeon general, the FBI and the U.S. cybersecurity agency are among those who coerced changes in online content on Facebook, X (formerly Twitter) and other media platforms.

"It's a very, very threatening thing when the federal government uses the power and authority of the government to block people from

exercising their freedom of speech," Louisiana Attorney General Liz Murrill said in a video her office posted online.

The administration responds that none of the actions the states complain about come close to problematic coercion. The states "still have not identified any instance in which any government official sought to coerce a platform's editorial decisions with a threat of adverse government action," wrote Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar, the administration's top Supreme Court lawyer. Prelogar wrote that states also can't "point to any evidence that the government ever imposed any sanction when the platforms declined to moderate content the government had flagged — as routinely occurred."

The companies themselves are not involved in the case.

Free speech advocates say the court should use the case to draw an

appropriate line between the government's acceptable use of the bully pulpit and coercive threats to free speech.

"The government has no authority to threaten platforms into censoring protected speech, but it must have the ability to participate in public discourse so that it can effectively govern and inform the public of its views," Alex Abdo, litigation director of the Knight First Amendment Institute at Columbia University, said in a statement.

A panel of three judges on the New Orleans-based 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals had ruled earlier that the Biden administration had probably brought unconstitutional pressure on the media platforms. The appellate panel said officials cannot attempt to "coerce or significantly encourage" changes in online content. The panel had previously narrowed a more sweeping order from a federal judge, who

wanted to include even more government officials and prohibit mere encouragement of content changes.

A divided Supreme Court put the 5th Circuit ruling on hold in October, when it agreed to take up the case.

Justices Samuel Alito, Neil Gorsuch and Clarence Thomas would have rejected the emergency appeal from the Biden administration.

Alito wrote in dissent in October: "At this time in the history of our country, what the Court has done, I fear, will be seen by some as giving the Government a green light to use heavy-handed tactics to skew the presentation of views on the medium that increasingly dominates the dissemination of news. That is most unfortunate."

A decision in *Murthy v. Missouri*, 23-411, is expected by early summer.

NATION

Taking on the ruffest cases

NY's animal trauma center aids those in need of special care

BY THALIA BEATY
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Waddling in with lime-green booties on his front paws, Harrison, a beloved seven-year-old French bulldog, is a familiar sight at the Schwarzman Animal Medical Center in New York City.

“Between myself and surgery, the neurology team, the internal medicine team, the dentistry team — so Harrison has a large crew here taking care of him,” said Dr. Daniel Spector, senior veterinarian during a visit in March. He added the rehab team to the list later.

Harrison doesn't have an overall diagnosis beyond being a French bulldog — an increasingly popular breed prone to health problems. His human, Manhattan resident Grace Kim, said they come to AMC for “top notch” care, the coordination between teams, and the ability to get referrals in-house for something like a dental procedure, which brought them in recently.

Located on Manhattan's east side, the animal hospital and its more than 130 veterinarians logged nearly 60,000 patient visits in 2023, as one of a handful of centers across the country equipped to manage the most complicated medical cases, which clinics with fewer resources cannot handle.

While most patients pay out of pocket, AMC offers multiple initiatives to cover charity care, especially for rescue animals and working dogs. In 2022, the hospital donated \$4.4 million in care through very specific programs like the Kiki White Umbrella Cockatoo Avian Fund and the Honey Bunny and ROU German Shepherd Fund, which help families with limited financial means to care for their birds, rabbits and German Shepherds, and broader programs like the Buddy Fund, which supports animals with cancer.

The price of veterinary services has increased in recent years because of inflation, but also because of advances in care.

AMC is certified at the Veterinary Committee on Trauma's highest level, reflecting the resources the hospital has on site, from a blood bank to anesthesiologists, as well as its around-the-clock staffing.

The same day Harrison visited the surgical suite, Lynx was brought in by a rescue group. The short-haired cat from Brooklyn had a groin wound no other clinic had been able to heal for many months.

“We get to take extraordinary care of rescue animals,” Spector said.

The veterinary staff take Lynx out of her carrier and turn her over to get a view of the wound, holding her to snap a photo as they debated how to proceed. No one was scratched. No voices raised — not even Lynx's.

Downstairs in an office off the waiting room that is lined with tile mosaics and wooden molding carved with animal shapes, Spector told Jennie Anne Simson, of Brooklyn Animal Action, that he planned to remove the wound entirely, “lifting” the infection out. Simson had applied for funding from AMC and the hospital confirmed one of its charitable funds would cover the \$5,500 that Lynx's treatment will cost.

The hospital, which as a non-profit provides training to veterinarians in specialized care, has raised more than \$100 million since 2019 to expand and entirely reconstruct its facility, including the newly opened surgical suite.

“What that means is that we've been able to do this complete expansion and renovation without taking out a mortgage,” said Helen Irving, president and CEO of AMC. “Which means that as a nonprofit, all of our money that we do make from operations can directly go back into caring for the



Jacinda Ramos, left, comforts Peanut, her domestic short-haired cat, as Lauren Reeves, a member of the surgical team, draws blood in the surgery prep room at the Schwarzman Animal Medical Center.



PHOTOS BY MARY ALTAFFER/AP

Senior veterinarian Dr. Daniel Spector, right, and surgical team member Allison Elkowitz examine Harrison, a French bulldog, in the surgery prep room at the Schwarzman Animal Medical Center, on March 8, in New York.

“We get to take extraordinary care of rescue animals.”

Dr. Daniel Spector
senior veterinarian

animals.”

Donors to the renovation include Elaine and Kenneth Langone, the billionaire co-founder of Home Depot, who have long had dogs, with a preference for golden retrievers — and some cats.

“At the moment, we have a dog that's in cancer care. He's one of our rescues,” said Elaine Langone, who is vice chair of the board of trustees for AMC. “Without them, he would not be here.”

She said the AMC is just one of the organizations they are fortunate enough to give to — in this case out of love and respect for the many animals they've lived with. The Langones have also given ma-



Members of the surgical team draw blood from Aris, a Rottweiler mix seeing eye dog, in the surgery prep room at the Schwarzman Animal Medical Center.

jor gifts to Kenneth's alma maters, including hundreds of millions of dollars to New York University's medical and business schools and tens of millions to Bucknell University. Kenneth Langone also served on the boards of both institutions.

While more pet owners have insurance now, most veterinary care is paid for out-of-pocket, meaning that access to even basic care, much less complex care, is out of reach for many households, said Dr. Emily McCobb, associate clinical professor at Cummings School of Veterinary Medicine at Tufts University.

“The cost of care because of all the technology innovation just continues to increase. The costs are real,” said McCobb. “And it can cost thousands of dollars to obtain even something like a dental cleaning. It's not affordable for most people.”

That means that up and down the spectrum of care, from the smallest clinics to the most ad-

vanced hospitals, veterinarians work to develop multiple options for an animal's family, said Dr. Kelly Hall, executive director of VetCOT and an associate professor at Colorado State University.

Pointing to research demonstrating the power of human-animal bonds, she asked, “I have story after story of clients where an animal has literally saved their life, for various reasons. So, how do you put a value on that contribution?”

Irving, the CEO of AMC, points to the hospital's charity programs as one of its responses to the lack of affordable care, while also urging pet owners to pay attention to their animals and stay up to date on basic care.

At the end of his visit, Harrison was cleared for the dental operation he needs, which AMC estimated would cost around \$3,000. Kim, his owner, thanked Spector, praising AMC for its extensive coordination. And she gave thanks for her pet insurance.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Ex-cop pleads guilty after making man lick urine

MS JACKSON — A former Mississippi police officer pleaded guilty to a federal misdemeanor charge after authorities said he forced a man he had arrested to lick urine off the floor of a jail cell.

Michael Christian Green, 26, lost his job as a Pearl Police Department patrol officer in late December, four days after security cameras showed the violent encounter in Pearl, a suburb of the capital city of Jackson.

Security footage in the police department showed that once the man was in a holding cell, he knocked on the cell door and tried to tell Green that he needed to urinate, according to the court document. After waiting for some time, the man went to the back of the cell and urinated in a corner, the document said.

The man who was arrested is identified in the court document only by his initials, B.E. The security camera footage showed Green telling B.E. that he would beat him with a phone.

Green took the man back into the cell and told him to get on the ground and “suck it up,” then used his phone to take videos of B.E. while the man got on the ground and licked his own urine, the document said.

Truck driver charged for deadly ‘super fog’ pileup

LA RESERVE — A Louisiana truck driver has been charged with negligent homicide for his role in a fiery highway pileup that left eight dead last year after a “super fog” of marsh fire smoke and dense fog snared more than 160 vehicles, authorities said.

On Oct. 23, Ronald Britt was operating a truck at unsafe speeds on Interstate 55 west of New Orleans when he slammed into the back of a car that had stopped in the left lane behind several other vehicles involved in minor crashes, Louisiana State Police said in a statement. That collision killed James Fleming, 60, and seriously injured his wife.

Britt, a 61-year-old commercial truck driver from Lafayette, was arrested on multiple charges, including negligent homicide, negligent injuring, reckless operation and other traffic-related offenses, state police said.

State looks to make ‘shaka’ official gesture

HI KANE OHE — A pinky and thumb extended with the remaining fingers curled down: That’s the “shaka” in Hawaii.

The gesture is sometimes known outside the islands as the “hang loose” sign associated with surf culture, but it was a fixture of daily life in the islands long before it caught on in California, Brazil and beyond. People in Hawaii



ALAN WARREN, THE (OWENSBORO, Ky.) MESSENGER-INQUIRER/AP

Powerful demonstration

Jamison Boswell, electronic technician for Owensboro Municipal Utilities, demonstrates on the “Power Town,” model how to be safe around power lines as he talks with fifth-graders Jaxon Sampson and Kham Lian, right, during Career Day at Newton Parrish Elementary School, on Friday, in Owensboro, Ky.

have a variety of shaka styles and use it to convey a range of warm-hearted sentiments, from hi and bye to thanks and aloha, among other meanings.

Now, a pair of bills in the state Legislature would make the shaka the state’s official gesture and recognize Hawaii as its birthplace.

Sen. Glenn Wakai, who introduced the Senate version, said he can’t imagine the measure meeting any opposition and expects it to “sail through.”

Seat belt saved life on Boeing 737 jet blowout

WA SEATTLE — More passengers who were aboard an Alaska Airlines Boeing 737 jet when part of its fuselage blew out in January are suing — including one who says his life was saved by a seat belt.

The latest lawsuit, representing seven passengers, was filed in Washington’s King County Superior Court against Boeing, Alaska Airlines, Spirit AeroSystems and 10 people listed as John Does.

Cuong Tran, of Upland, Calif., was sitting in the row behind where the side of the aircraft tore away and left a door-sized hole on Alaska Airlines Flight 1282, according to a news release from attorney Timothy A. Loranger. Loranger, who filed the lawsuit, said air rushed out of the hole, pulling

on Tran and others nearby.

The suction tore Tran’s shoes and socks from his feet and he felt his body lift off his seat, the news release said, adding that Tran’s foot was hurt when it was jerked into the seat structure in front.

The lawsuit seeks punitive, compensatory and general damages for alleged negligence, product construction/manufacturing defect liability and failing in its duty to protect passengers from harm.

Officer suspended after hitting someone off duty

CT MERIDEN — A Connecticut police officer was suspended for five days and arrested on assault charges after punching a motorist during an altercation while off duty in December.

Dash cam video obtained by WTIC-TV, FOX 61, following a freedom of information request, showed Meriden police Cpl. Allen Ganter punching the motorist, Thomas Brocuglio, in the face through his driver’s side window after the two argued over why Ganter wasn’t turning right at a red light.

Ganter is seen waving his badge and arguing there is no right turn on red at the intersection in Rocky Hill, even though there is no sign indicating that.

Ganter threatens to write a ticket. Brocuglio, who had honked his horn at Ganter, accuses the officer of having been distracted on his phone and asks for his badge number, just before the punch is thrown.

Tenderloin district lawsuit seeks drug-free streets

CA SAN FRANCISCO — Two hotels and several residents of San Francisco’s troubled Tenderloin district sued the city, alleging it is using the neighborhood as a containment zone for rampant illegal drug use and other vices, making residents terrified to leave their homes and businesses unable to recruit staff.

Plaintiffs do not seek monetary damages, according to the complaint filed in federal court. Instead, they want officials to clear sidewalks of illegal drug dealers and fentanyl users, violent behavior and tent encampments and to treat the Tenderloin as it would any other neighborhood where crime is not tolerated.

They said city officials have allowed such behavior to flourish in the area — and not spill into other neighborhoods — by refusing to keep sidewalks clear for people using walkers or wheelchairs and failing to ban sidewalk vending, among other acts of omission.

“They demand an end to the

rampant illegal street vending, and from the squalor and misery that exists throughout their neighborhood because the city has decided that people in the throes of addiction can live and die on the Tenderloin’s streets,” said Matt Davis, one of the attorneys, in a prepared statement.

Governor set to pardon pot possession charges

MA BOSTON — Massachusetts Gov. Maura Healey said she would issue pardons for tens of thousands of people convicted of misdemeanor marijuana charges going back decades in the latest example of a state ambitiously seeking to forgive low-level drug offenders.

If approved, the pardons will apply to all adult Massachusetts state court misdemeanor convictions before Tuesday for possession of marijuana or “Class D substance.” Most people will not need to take any action to have their criminal records updated, according to the Democrat and former state attorney general.

Healey described the pardons as the most sweeping by a governor since President Joe Biden pardoned federal marijuana possession convictions and called on governors to follow suit.

FACES

NAACP Awards honor Usher, ‘Color Purple’

By JONATHAN LANDRUM JR.
Associated Press

Usher was named entertainer of the year at the 55th annual NAACP Awards on March 16, which highlighted works by entertainers and writers of color.

After Usher accepted his award at the Shrine Auditorium in Los Angeles, the superstar R&B singer spoke about being thankful about the journey of his successful career that has lasted three decades.

He reeled off several of his recent big moments including his sold-out residency in Las Vegas, getting married, releasing his ninth studio album “Coming Home” and his Super Bowl half-time performance.

Usher beat out Colman Domingo, Fantasia Barrino, Halle Bailey and Keke Palmer.

“This is for you, you, my number ones,” the singer said as the audience repeated his words back to him. The final words of his speech were recited lyrics from his popular song “Superstar” from his 2024 album “Confessions,” which has sold more than 10 million units in the U.S.

Earlier in the ceremony, Usher was honored with the President’s Award for the singer’s public service achievements through his New Look Foundation.

Queen Latifah hosted the

awards ceremony, which was broadcast live on BET.

“The Color Purple” was awarded best motion picture. The musical film featured a star-studded cast including Barrino, Taraji P. Henson, Domingo, H.E.R., Danielle Brooks, Corey Hawkins and Bailey.

Barrino, who starred as Celie in the film, won for best actress in a motion picture.

New Edition was inducted into the NAACP Image Awards Hall of Fame. The induction is bestowed on individuals who are viewed as pioneers in their respective fields and whose influence shaped their profession.

“We stand here in brotherhood,” said Michael Bivins, with his group members arrayed behind him. The Grammy-nominated group includes Bobby Brown, Johnny Gill, Ralph Tresvant, Ronnie DeVoe and Ricky Bell.

Damson Idris won best actor in a drama television series for his role in “Snowfall.”

Henson and Domingo took home best supporting roles in “The Color Purple.”

Domingo also won best actor in a motion picture for his role in “Rustin.”



Usher



Focus Features

Justice Smith and David Alan Grier star in “The American Society of Magical Negroes.”

Speaking through satire

Film ‘The American Society of Magical Negroes’ addresses race relations

By CHRISTOPHER A. DANIEL
The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

In 2003, Kobi Libii was visiting Atlanta for the first time to compete in a debate tournament at Ebenezer Baptist Church. It was a moment that deeply influenced his career.

The Indiana native said he stood at the podium where Martin Luther King Jr. preached four decades earlier and delivered his debate speech. The experienced made him realize he could use his voice to fully embrace and celebrate his ethnic identity.

Two decades after Libbi’s debate speech, he’s now written, produced and directed his first feature film, “The American Society of Magical Negroes,” now in theaters nationwide.

A romantic comedy mixed with satire, the film follows a young artist who gets recruited by a secret organization whose mission is to help make white people’s lives easier.

It also explores the concept that failing to address race relations in order to protect white people from discomfort doesn’t benefit anyone.

The movie, which stars Justice Smith, David Alan Grier, An-Li Bogan, Aisha Hinds and Nicole Byer, made its world premiere at this year’s Sundance Film Festival in January.

Libii, whose father is Black and mother is white, told The Atlanta Journal-Constitution he used humor and social commentary on racial stereotypes, combined with warm color palettes and dissolving visual effects, to re-imagine his own life throughout the film’s 105-minute run time.

“It’s a film about my relationship to whiteness,” Libii, 44, said, adding that it specifically addressed his attempts at appeasing the maternal side of his family.

“Even though my experience with the world is Black via the privilege that comes with looking [light] the way that I do, I wanted to acknowledge it as part of the main character’s and my own proximity to one side of my heritage.”

The film’s provocative title comes from a term

coined by filmmaker Spike Lee to describe Black characters in movies and books who are treated as secondary, and only exist to please and serve white characters.

Libii, who studied theater at Yale, started writing the idea in 2018 for what he thought was a skit. “When I started fleshing this out, I realized I was writing about something much bigger and much deeper, and it needed a bigger canvas,” he said.

A former cast member of Comedy Central’s news parody series “The Opposition with Jordan Klepper,” Libii was accepted into the Sundance Institute Screenwriting and Director’s Lab in 2019, where he workshopped the first draft of his screenplay and started filming parts of the story.

Smith, a queer actor who plays main character Aren, spent a month with Libbi at the Sundance Labs helping to mold the main character’s feelings about his own biracial origins. Smith was also raised by a Black father and Italian/French Canadian mother.

“Kobi and I grew up very similarly,” said Smith, who grew up in Orange County, Calif. “I knew this character and his journey of making yourself small to fit in, and having to liberate yourself from this expectation of being put in your place.”

Smith added that portraying Aren forced him to recognize his own continuing struggles with instinctively coddling people.

“The film touches on these really poignant conversations and topics, but it’s funny,” Smith said. “I still find myself in the name of people pleasing making space for people who are actively disrespecting me.”

Libii and Smith said they hope “The American Society of Magical Negroes” persuades Black moviegoers to not carry shame or guilt in being their full, authentic selves.



Libii

‘Kung Fu Panda 4’ retains No. 1 spot at the box office

Associated Press

“Kung Fu Panda 4” stayed at the top of the North American box office in its second weekend in theaters. The Universal and DreamWorks Animation movie earned \$30 million in ticket sales, according to studio estimates Sunday.

The franchise featuring the voice of Jack Black is responsible for more than \$1.9 billion at the box office since it launched in 2008 and spawned several animated series, shorts, video games and a holiday special. The fourth installment, playing in 4,067 locations in North America, has already made \$107.7 million domestically.

Several new movies launched over the weekend, including Lionsgate’s Mark Wahlberg dog movie “Arthur the King,” Focus Features’ comedic satire “The American Society of Magical Negroes” and A24’s Kristen Stewart-led bodybuilding thriller “Love Lies Bleeding.”

But the charts still belonged to the franchises, including “Dune: Part Two,” which came in a very close second in its third weekend,

with \$29.1 million. That’s down only 37% from last weekend. It has now made \$205.3 million domestically and almost \$500 million worldwide.

“Arthur the King” did the best of the newcomers, landing in third place with \$7.5 million. The movie is based on the true story of an adventure racer who befriends a stray dog on a perilous 435-mile trek in the Dominican Republic. Simu Liu plays one of Wahlberg’s teammates.

“Love Lies Bleeding” is a pulpy ‘80s-set Western thriller about an isolated gym manager (Stewart) and a bodybuilder (Katy O’Brian) passing through town. It made \$2.5 million in its debut.

“The American Society of Magical Negroes” made an estimated \$1.3 million. The movie, written and directed by Kobi Libii, is a satire about a secret society of Black people dedicated to making white lives easier. Justice Smith and David Alan Grier star.

In the first weekend following the Oscars, “Poor Things” added \$2.3 million globally, bumping its total to \$112.6 million.

“It’s a film about my relationship to whiteness.”

Kobi Libii

writer, producer and director of “The American Society of Magical Negroes”

MIDEAST

UN: ‘Famine is imminent’ in Gaza’s north; Israel again attacks hospital

Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — The U.N. food agency said Monday that “famine is imminent” in northern Gaza, where 70% of the remaining population is experiencing catastrophic hunger, and that a further escalation of the war could push around half of Gaza’s total population to the brink of starvation.

The alarming report came as Israel faces mounting pressure from even its closest allies to streamline the entry of aid into the Gaza Strip and open more crossings. The European Union’s top diplomat said the impending famine was “entirely man-made” as “starvation is used as a weapon of war.”

Israeli forces meanwhile launched another raid on the Gaza Strip’s largest hospital early Monday, saying Hamas militants had regrouped there and had fired on them from inside the compound, where Palestinian officials say tens of thousands of people have been sheltering. The military said it killed a Ha-

mas commander who was armed and hiding inside the medical center, and that one of its own soldiers was killed in the operation.

The army last raided Shifa Hospital in November after claiming that Hamas maintained an elaborate command center within and beneath the facility. The military revealed a tunnel leading to some underground rooms, as well as weapons it said were found inside the hospital. But the evidence fell short of the earlier claims, and critics accused the army of recklessly endangering the lives of civilians.

The World Food Program on Monday released the latest findings of its Integrated Food Security Phase Classification, or IPC, an international process for estimating the scale of hunger crises. It says virtually everyone in Gaza is struggling to get enough food, and that around 677,000 people — nearly a third of the population of 2.3 million — are experiencing the highest level of catastrophic hunger. That includes

around 210,000 people in the north.

It warned that if Israel broadens its offensive to the packed southern city of Rafah, as Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has repeatedly vowed, the fighting could drive over a million people — half of Gaza’s population — into catastrophic hunger.

“This is the largest number of people facing imminent famine in the world today, and it has only taken five months to occur,” said Matthew Hollingworth, the acting World Food Program country director for the Palestinian territories.

“It’s still possible to turn this around but there has to be a ceasefire and there has to be massive amounts of food aid to flow consistently, and people need to have access to clean water and health care,” he said.

Northern Gaza, including Gaza City, was the first target of the invasion and entire neighborhoods have been obliterated. It is now the epicenter of Gaza’s humanitarian ca-



MOHAMMED HAJAR/AP

Palestinians rush to collect the humanitarian aid airdropped into Gaza City, Gaza Strip, on Sunday. The U.N. food agency said Monday that “famine is imminent” in war-torn northern Gaza, where 70% of the remaining population is experiencing catastrophic hunger.

tastrophe, with many residents reduced to eating animal feed. At least 20 people, mostly children, have died from malnutrition and dehydration in the north, the Health Ministry said earlier this month.

Airdrops by the U.S. and other nations continue, while deliveries on a new sea route have begun, but aid groups say it’s essential that Israel open up more land routes and ease restrictions. The WFP report said

airdrops account for a “negligible share” of aid compared with what is brought in on trucks.

Israeli authorities say they place no limits on the entry of aid and accuse U.N. bodies of failing to distribute it in a timely manner. Aid groups say distribution is impossible in much of Gaza because of ongoing hostilities, the difficulty of coordinating with the military and the breakdown of law and order.

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HEALTH

‘Havana syndrome’ probe finds no sign of brain injuries

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — An array of advanced tests found no brain injuries or degeneration among U.S. diplomats and other government employees who suffer mysterious health problems once dubbed “Havana syndrome,” researchers reported Monday.

The National Institutes of Health’s nearly five-year study offers no explanation for symptoms including headaches, balance problems and difficulties with thinking and sleep that were first reported in Cuba in 2016 and later by hundreds of American personnel in multiple countries.

But it did contradict some earlier findings that raised the specter of brain injuries in people experiencing what the State Department now



ISMAEL FRANCISCO/AP

The U.S. Embassy in Havana.

calls “anomalous health incidents.” “These individuals have real symptoms and are going through a very tough time,” said Dr. Leighton Chan, NIH’s chief of rehabilitation

medicine, who helped lead the research. “They can be quite profound, disabling and difficult to treat.”

Yet sophisticated MRI scans detected no significant differences in brain volume, structure or white matter — signs of injury or degeneration — when Havana syndrome patients were compared to healthy government workers with similar jobs, including some in the same embassy. Nor were there significant differences in cognitive and other tests, according to findings published in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

While that couldn’t rule out some transient injury when symptoms began, researchers said it’s good news that they couldn’t spot long-term markers on brain scans that

are typical after trauma or stroke.

That “should be some reassurance for patients,” said study co-author Louis French, a neuropsychologist at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center who treats Havana syndrome. “It allows us to focus on the here and now, to getting people back to where they should be.”

A subset, about 28%, of Havana syndrome cases were diagnosed with a balance problem called persistent postural-perceptual dizziness, or PPPD. Linked to inner-ear problems as well as severe stress, it results when certain brain networks show no injury but don’t communicate properly. French called it a “maladaptive response,” much like how people who’ve slouched to alleviate back pain can have posture

trouble even after the pain is gone.

The Havana syndrome participants reported more fatigue, post-traumatic stress symptoms and depression.

The findings are the latest in an effort to unravel a mystery that began when personnel at the U.S. Embassy in Cuba began seeking medical care for hearing loss and ear-ringing after reporting sudden weird noises.

Early on, there was concern that Russia or another country may have used some form of directed energy to attack Americans. But last year, U.S. intelligence agencies said there was no sign a foreign adversary was involved and that most cases appeared to have different causes, from undiagnosed illnesses to environmental factors.

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OPINION

Why Biden’s appeals to democracy aren’t working

By JASON WILLOCK
The Washington Post

The Biden administration’s escalating spat with Israel over its war with Hamas in Gaza, now joined by Sen. Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., has included media leaks, pointed intelligence assessments and diplomatic dressing-downs. But perhaps the most telling piece was Vice President Kamala Harris’ admonition last week not to “conflate the Israeli government with the Israeli people.”

As the Israeli journalist Amit Segal observes, “There is a significant disparity between Israel’s leadership and its citizens — but it’s the opposite of what people in Washington assume.” The policies of Israel’s war Cabinet are restrained relative to public opinion. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s foreign-policy instincts are moderate by Israeli standards. If “the Israeli people” somehow controlled the war in Gaza directly, it might be even more devastating. So Harris’ remark reflects a misapprehension of Israeli democracy. But more than that, it highlights how promoting democracy is a weak foundation for U.S. foreign policy in the first place.

President Joe Biden has made a global contest between “democracy and autocracy” central to his presidency. That pitch has failed to keep Congress united in support of aiding Ukraine against Russia’s invasion. The main deficiency is obvious: Many Americans wonder what the form of government in a faraway country has to do with their own lives.

Republicans are responsible for holding up aid to Ukraine. But Biden has accelerated partisan polarization over the war by casting it as an extension of U.S. domestic politics, with Ukraine’s fight against Russia parallel to the Democrats’ fight against former President Donald Trump’s GOP. Portraying Republicans as part of the authoritarian menace you want to defeat abroad is obviously not a formula for winning their support on a foreign policy priority.

An overemphasis on democracy can be self-undermining, as the political philosopher Emily B. Finley argued in her 2022 book, “The Ideology of Democratism.” When democracy yields a controversial outcome, there can be a tendency to assume that democracy itself was corrupted — that the problem is not a difference of opinion among citizens, but that nefarious forces prevented the true will of the people from emerging. One classic example is the liberal attribution of Trump’s 2016 election victory to disinformation or foreign interference.

Harris’ statement betrayed a similar tendency. The Biden administration is displeased with the behavior of Israel’s leadership, so it signaled that Israel’s elected leadership is not actually a democratic reflection of its people. But if Segal is right about Israel’s warlike public opinion, that’s misdirection. The Israeli conduct that angers the Biden administration is democratically representative.

There’s nothing wrong with trying to change a democratic country’s behavior. One benefit of American alliances is that they enable Washington to influence democratic allies to comport with U.S. interests. The Biden administration can lean on Israel as it wishes. But if it has to construct the fiction that it is leaning only on Israel’s leaders, not trying to overrule its people — because the latter would violate the sanctity of democracy — it is bound to miscalculate about what it can achieve.

Blocking a country’s collective democratic will takes more political muscle than persuading a single unrepresentative leader to change course. Biden’s remark that an Israeli invasion of Rafah “is a red line,” for example, will go unheeded if — as it appears — the Israeli public overwhelmingly wants its military to finish the job against Hamas. Biden could end up diminishing U.S. authority and his own political standing by appearing to resist an Israeli action that happens anyway.

Other than Israel, of course, America’s Mideast allies are autocracies. It might have been more accurate for Harris to warn against con-

flating the governments of countries such as Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia with their people. Yet far from trying to open the gap between those governments and their populations, as Harris did with Israel, U.S. policy is to shore up moderate Arab regimes to check Iran and Islamist radicalism.

Indeed, a Saudi-Israeli diplomatic agreement seems to be the linchpin of the Biden administration’s ideal Middle East settlement after the Israel-Gaza war. That rapprochement would be driven by the monarchy in Riyadh, not democratic forces in the Arab street.

It’s hardly a new discovery that popular opinion can, under certain circumstances, radicalize rather than moderate a state’s foreign policy. One politician in revolutionary France warned that democratizing foreign policy could lead France to “be at war with every nation that we consider unjust, or which will not accept our system.”

That brings us back to Hamas, the entity that started this war with its Oct. 7 massacre of Israelis. The Biden administration made headlines after Harris’ remarks by releasing an intelligence assessment saying that Netanyahu’s leadership “may be in jeopardy.” But the striking line in the assessment was not the assertion that Netanyahu’s popularity is eroding among Israelis but that Hamas enjoys “broad popular support” among Palestinians. Hamas won a Palestinian election in 2006 and, if the American spies are right, can still claim a kind of democratic legitimacy even after bringing ruin on its people.

Democracy is an attractive theme with a long tradition in U.S. foreign policy. But appeals to democracy won’t arrest the GOP’s turn toward noninvolvement when it comes to Ukraine, and they offer no framework for mitigating Middle East violence. Hardheaded statecraft has to come first to protect the United States’ global interests.

Jason Willock is a Washington Post columnist focusing on law, politics and foreign policy.

What shining a light on school district actions teaches

By JONATHAN BUTCHER
The Heritage Foundation

Indiana Attorney General Todd Rokita has become the latest policymaker shining sunlight on school district actions, and with good reason. Nationwide, school administrators are discovering they might be responsible for eye-popping court settlements if they hide K-12 activities from parents.

Consider what happened last summer in California. The Spreckles Union School District settled with a mother who filed suit because educators “socially transitioned” her daughter, who wanted to assume a different so-called gender. District personnel allowed the girl to use the boys’ bathroom and addressed the student by masculine pronouns, all without the parent’s knowledge.

District officials settled with the mother for \$100,000. Parents have filed similar suits in Michigan, Colorado and Texas over gender-related instruction or activities and parent involvement.

Rokita’s office has created an online portal that should protect families and taxpayers from school districts’ secretive policies. Families can submit examples to this site of educational material that other parents may not know children are being presented with in their classrooms.

Already, the portal has a link to one district’s “gender support plan” that instructs educators not to inform parents when their child wants to assume a different gender. A parent has posted an email explaining that her daughters do not want to change clothes with a boy in the girls’ locker rooms. According to the email, the school principal told the students the boy only had to say he was a girl in order to gain access to the facilities.

Other submissions are worthy of healthy debate between parents and teachers about the age-appropriateness of materials. One report objected to John Steinbeck’s “Of Mice and Men,” Elie Wiesel’s classic Holocaust chronicle “Night,” and “1984” by George Orwell. While these books have mature themes, educators and parents are responsible for deciding if, how and when to ask students to read books with heavy subjects.

They could very well choose other materials, but students will be worse off if topics such as poverty and the American Dream, the Holocaust, and the threats from totalitarianism are left out (or replaced with books on “gender” or critical race theory). Rokita’s project is appropriately elevating conversations about the importance of school content.

Rokita’s office says the new website, called “Eyes on Education,” is meant to be a “transparency portal to empower parents to

further engage in their children’s education by providing a platform to submit and view potentially inappropriate materials in their schools.” The attorney general said in a news release, “Our kids need to focus on fundamental educational building blocks, NOT ideology that divides kids from their parents and normal society.”

In North Carolina, Lt. Gov. Mark Robinson created a similar online reporting site for parents, and a task force he assembled released a report on the submissions in 2021. The task force not only found that parents were frustrated by classroom content based on “gender” and with racial bias, but so, too, were teachers. One educator near retirement said they can no longer “trust the values being taught” in classrooms. Another said she was afraid to speak out about the political slant of course content for fear of being fired.

Educators in Indiana — and beyond — should thank Rokita. School personnel are better off if parents know and can comment on what students are being taught before a court forces educators to be more transparent. And as the Spreckles Union School District can attest, it’s certainly less costly.

Jonathan Butcher is the Will Skillman Fellow in Education at The Heritage Foundation.

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Food City 500 NASCAR Cup Series Sunday At Bristol Motor Speedway Bristol, Tenn. Lap length: 0.53 miles (Start position in parentheses) 1. (3) Denny Hamlin, Toyota, 500 laps, 44 points. 2. (11) Martin Truex Jr, Toyota, 500, 44. 3. (17) Brad Keselowski, Ford, 500, 50. 4. (29) Alex Bowman, Chevrolet, 500, 33. 5. (10) Kyle Larson, Chevrolet, 500, 44. 6. (26) John H. Nemechek, Toyota, 499, 44. 7. (34) Chris Buescher, Ford, 499, 38. 8. (5) Chase Elliott, Chevrolet, 499, 29. 9. (19) Ty Gibbs, Toyota, 499, 48. 10. (12) Christopher Bell, Toyota, 499, 36. 11. (7) Michael McDowell, Ford, 499, 26. 12. (2) Josh Berry, Ford, 499, 26. 13. (6) Chase Briscoe, Ford, 498, 24. 14. (25) Ryan Preece, Ford, 498, 26. 15. (36) Ross Chastain, Chevrolet, 498, 22. 16. (1) Ryan Blaney, Ford, 498, 26. 17. (32) Justin Haley, Ford, 498, 20. 18. (28) Daniel Suárez, Chevrolet, 498, 19. 19. (3) Kaz Grala, Ford, 498, 18. 20. (15) Erik Jones, Toyota, 498, 17. 21. (18) Corey LaJoie, Chevrolet, 498, 16. 22. (4) Joey Logano, Ford, 498, 23. 23. (30) AJ Allmendinger, Chevrolet, 498, 0. 24. (31) Austin Dillon, Chevrolet, 498, 13. 25. (14) Kyle Busch, Chevrolet, 498, 12. 26. (24) Todd Gilliland, Ford, 497, 11. 27. (35) Carson Hocevar, Chevrolet, 497, 10. 28. (20) Daniel Hemric, Chevrolet, 496, 9. 29. (9) Bubba Wallace, Toyota, 496, 10. 30. (23) Tyler Reddick, Toyota, 495, 7. 31. (21) Austin Cindric, Ford, 495, 6. 32. (13) Harrison Burton, Ford, 495, 5. 33. (27) Ricky Stenhouse Jr, Chevrolet, 495, 4. 34. (22) Noah Gragson, Ford, 494, 3. 35. (8) William Byron, Chevrolet, 492, 2. 36. (16) Zane Smith, Chevrolet, engine, 192, 1.
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Race Statistics Average Speed of Race Winner: 79.678 mph. Time of Race: 3 hours, 20 minutes, 41 seconds. Margin of Victory: 1.083 seconds. Caution Flags: 9 for 98 laps. Lead Changes: 54 among 16 drivers. Lap Leaders: R.Blaney 0-2; J.Berry 3-20; D.Hamlin 21-25; C.Elliott 26; T.Reddick 27-30; B.Wallace 31-40; J.Berry 41-47; B.Wallace 48-52; D.Hamlin 53-60; C.Elliott 61-64; R.Blaney 65-68; K.Busch 69-73; R.Blaney 74; D.Hamlin 75-82; R.Blaney 83-88; D.Hamlin 89-119; T.Gibbs 120-130; R.Blaney 131; K.Larson 132-140; T.Gibbs 141-145; M.Truex 146-149; T.Gibbs 150-153; K.Larson 154-156; T.Gibbs 157-158; D.Hamlin 159-162; K.Larson 163-165; D.Hamlin 166; K.Larson 167-170; T.Gibbs 171-181; M.Truex 182; C.Buescher 183-199; C.Bell 200-223; M.Truex 224-235; C.Lajoie 236-239; C.Bell 240-243; J.Logano 244-248; T.Gibbs 249-256; M.Truex 257; T.Gibbs 258-284; M.Truex 285-317; D.Hamlin 318-322; T.Gibbs 323-364; D.Hamlin 365-372; M.Truex 373; D.Hamlin 374-379; C.Bell 380; D.Hamlin 381-398; T.Gibbs 399-425; D.Hamlin 426-447; M.Truex 448; B.Keselowski 449; A.Bowman 450-452; D.Hamlin 453-482; M.Truex 483; D.Hamlin 484-500

Leaders Summary (Driver, Times Led, Laps Led): D.Hamlin, 13 times for 163 laps; T.Gibbs, 9 times for 137 laps; M.Truex, 8 times for 54 laps; C.Bell, 3 times for 29 laps; J.Berry, 2 times for 25 laps; K.Larson, 4 times for 19 laps; C.Buescher, 1 time for 17 laps; B.Wallace, 2 times for 15 laps; R.Blaney, 5 times for 14 laps; C.Elliott, 2 times for 5 laps; J.Logano, 1 time for 5 laps; K.Busch, 1 time for 5 laps; C.Lajoie, 1 time for 4 laps; T.Reddick, 1 time for 4 laps; A.Bowman, 1 time for 3 laps; B.Keselowski, 1 time for 1 lap.
Wins: K.Larson, 1; D.Hamlin, 1; C.Bell, 1; W.Byron, 1; D.Suárez, 1.
Top 16 in Points: 1. K.Larson, 185; 2. M.Truex, 185; 3. T.Gibbs, 178; 4. R.Blaney, 177; 5. D.Hamlin, 173; 6. C.Elliott, 152; 7. R.Chastain, 151; 8. C.Bell, 138; 9. T.Reddick, 137; 10. W.Byron, 136; 11. D.Suárez, 133; 12. A.Bowman, 132; 13. B.Keselowski, 125; 14. C.Buescher, 124; 15. J.Nemechek, 124; 16. K.Busch, 122.

GOLF

The Players Championship Sunday At TPC Sawgrass Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla. Purse: \$25 million Yardage: 7,275; Par: 72 Final Round Scottie Scheffler, \$4,500,000 Wyndham Clark, \$1,891,667 Brian Harman, \$1,891,667 X. Schauffele, \$1,891,667 Matt Fitzpatrick, \$1,025,000 Si Woo Kim, \$875,000 Hideki Matsuyama, \$875,000 Ludvig Aberg, \$781,250 Maverick McNealy, \$706,250 Sahith Theegala, \$706,250 Joel Dahmen, \$606,250 T. Montgomery, \$606,250 C. Bezuidenhout, \$489,583 Corey Connors, \$489,583 Nate Lashley, \$489,583 Doug Ghim, \$406,250 Sam Ryder, \$406,250 Sepp Straka, \$406,250	67-69-68-64—268 -20 65-65-70-69—269 -19 72-65-64-68—269 -19 65-69-65-70—269 -19 66-69-68-69—272 -16 70-71-68-64—273 -15 69-69-68-67—273 -15 67-73-67-67—274 -14 67-68-68-72—275 -13 70-67-67-71—275 -13 74-67-67-68—276 -12 68-70-68-70—276 -12 69-70-68-70—277 -11 68-68-73-68—277 -11 68-70-67-72—277 -11 71-70-66-71—278 -10 70-69-70-69—278 -10 68-70-70-70—278 -10
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PRO SOCCER

MLS Eastern Conference	W	L	T	Pts	GF	GA
Inter Miami CF	3	1	1	10	13	5
Columbus	3	0	1	10	7	2
Cincinnati	2	0	2	8	4	2
CF Montréal	2	1	1	7	8	7
Toronto FC	2	1	1	7	3	2
New York	2	1	1	7	4	5
Atlanta	2	1	0	6	6	2
Nashville	1	0	3	6	5	4
D.C. United	1	1	2	5	6	6
Chicago	1	2	1	4	8	9
Charlotte FC	1	2	1	4	3	4
NYCFC	1	3	0	3	3	6
Philadelphia	0	0	3	3	5	5
Orlando City	0	3	1	1	2	10
New England	0	4	0	0	3	10
Western Conference	W	L	T	Pts	GF	GA
Minnesota	3	0	1	10	8	4
Vancouver	2	0	1	7	6	2
Portland	2	1	1	7	8	5
LA Galaxy	1	0	3	6	9	7
St Louis City	1	0	3	6	8	6
Sporting KC	1	0	3	6	4	3
Colorado	1	1	2	5	5	7
Real Salt Lake	1	2	1	4	5	5
Houston	1	1	1	4	3	3
LAFC	1	2	1	4	2	6
FC Dallas	1	3	0	3	5	8
Austin FC	0	1	3	3	5	6
Seattle	0	1	2	2	2	3
San Jose	0	4	0	0	3	9

Note: Three points for victory, one point for tie.

Saturday, March 16 Chicago 4, CF Montréal 3 Miami 3, D.C. United 1 Colorado 1, Seattle 1, tie Columbus 3, New York 0 New York City FC 2, Toronto FC 1 Philadelphia 2, Austin FC 2, tie Vancouver 3, FC Dallas 1 Houston 1, Portland 0 Sporting Kansas City 2, San Jose 1 Minnesota 2, Los Angeles FC 0 Nashville 2, Charlotte FC 1 St Louis City 3, LA Galaxy 3, tie

Sunday, March 17 Cincinnati 2, New England 1 Atlanta 2, Orlando City 0

Saturday, March 23 Chicago at New England Miami at New York Real Salt Lake at Vancouver Columbus at Charlotte FC New York City FC at Cincinnati Austin FC at Orlando City Atlanta at Toronto FC LA Galaxy at Sporting Kansas City D.C. United at St Louis City Houston at Colorado Nashville at Los Angeles FC Philadelphia at Portland Seattle at San Jose

NWSL	W	L	T	Pts	GF	GA
North Carolina	1	0	0	3	5	1
Chicago	1	0	0	3	2	0
Kansas City	1	0	0	3	5	4
Bay FC	1	0	0	3	1	0
OL Reign	1	0	0	3	1	0
Orlando	0	0	1	1	2	2
Louisville	0	0	1	1	2	2
Gotham FC	0	0	0	0	0	0
San Diego	0	0	0	0	0	0
Portland	0	1	0	0	4	5
Angel City	0	1	0	0	0	1
Washington	0	1	0	0	0	1
Utah Royals FC	0	1	0	0	0	2
Houston	0	1	0	0	1	5

Note: Three points for victory, one point for tie.

Saturday, March 16 Kansas City 5, Portland 4 Orlando 2, Louisville 2, tie North Carolina 5, Houston 1 Chicago 2, Utah Royals FC 0
Sunday, March 17 OL Reign 1, Washington 0 Bay FC 1, Angel City 0
Friday, March 22 Angel City at Orlando North Carolina at Utah Royals FC
Saturday, March 23 OL Reign at Chicago Bay FC at Washington Louisville at Houston Kansas City at San Diego
Sunday, March 24 Gotham FC at Portland

DEALS

Sunday's transactions BASEBALL Major League Baseball American League CHICAGO WHITE SOX — Optioned LHP Jared Shuster to Charlotte (IL). NEW YORK YANKEES — Optioned OF Everson Pereira to Scranton Wilkes/Barre (IL). OAKLAND ATHLETICS — Optioned C Tyler Soderstrom to Las Vegas (PCL). Reassigned INFs Armando Alvarez and Max Muncy and OF Daz Cameron and Max Schuemann to minor league camp. National League ATLANTA BRAVES — Agreed to terms with RHP Tyree Thompson on a minor league contract. CHICAGO CUBS — Optioned RHP Keegan Thompson and INF Matt Mervis to Iowa (IL). PHILADELPHIA PHILLIES — Agreed to terms with RHP Efrain Contreras on a minor league contract. PITTSBURGH PIRATES — Optioned RHP Kyle Nicolas to Indianapolis (IL). WASHINGTON NATIONALS — Optioned RHP Jackson Rutledge to Rochester (IL). FOOTBALL National Football League CHICAGO BEARS — Waived T Roy Mbaeteka. SEATTLE SEAHAWKS — Signed OLB Jerome Baker. HOCKEY National Hockey League FLORIDA PANTHERS — Reassigned G Evan Cormier to Florida (ECHL). MINNESOTA WILD — Reassigned F Vladislav Firstov to Iowa (AHL). OTTAWA SENATORS — Loaned D Maxence Guernette to Belleville (AHL). VEGAS GOLDEN KNIGHTS — Activated D Alec Martinez off injured reserve.
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TENNIS

BNP Paribas Open Sunday At Indian Wells Tennis Garden Indian Wells, Calif. Purse: \$9,495,555 Surface: Hardcourt outdoor Seedings in parentheses Men's Singles Championship Carlos Alcaraz (2), Spain, def. Daniil Medvedev (4), Russia, 7-6 (5), 6-1. Women's Singles Championship Iga Swiatek (1), Poland, def. Maria Sak-kari (9), Greece, 6-4, 6-0.
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PRO HOCKEY

PWHL	GP	W	L	OW	OL	Pts	GF	GA
Toronto	17	9	5	3	0	33	45	35
Minnesota	18	8	4	3	3	33	44	33
Montreal	18	7	5	3	3	30	42	42
Boston	17	4	7	4	2	22	35	43
Ottawa	17	5	6	0	6	21	42	47
New York	16	2	7	4	3	17	36	44

Teams awarded three (3) points for a regulation win, two (2) points for an overtime or shootout win, one (1) point for an overtime or shootout loss, and zero (0) points for a regulation time loss.

Saturday's games Minnesota 5, New York 1 Boston 2, Ottawa 1, SO Sunday's game Toronto 2, Montreal 1 Wednesday's games Ottawa at New York Boston at Toronto Saturday, March 23 Toronto at Ottawa Sunday, March 24 Montreal at Minnesota
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AP SPORTLIGHT

March 19 1966 — Texas Western, starting five Black players, wins the NCAA basketball championship with a 72-65 upset of all-white Kentucky. 1972 — The Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women holds its first basketball championship and Immaculata beats West Chester State 52-48. 1972 — The Los Angeles Lakers beat the Golden State Warriors 162-99 for the most lopsided victory in NBA history. 2006 — Tennessee's Candace Parker is the first woman to dunk in an NCAA tournament game, jamming one-handed on a breakaway 6:12 into the second-seeded Lady Vols' 102-54 victory against an Army team that was making its NCAA tournament debut. 2011 — Duke gives coach Mike Krzyzewski his 900th career victory, and the Blue Devils advance to the round of 16 for the 12th time in 14 years.

COLLEGE BASKETBALL

Sunday's men's scores TOURNAMENT American Athletic Championship UAB 85, Temple 69 Atlantic 10 Championship Duquesne 57, VCU 51 Big Ten Championship Illinois 93, Wisconsin 87 Ivy League Championship Yale 62, Brown 61 Southeastern Championship Auburn 86, Florida 67 NCAA Tournament glance FIRST FOUR Tuesday, March 19 At Dayton, Ohio Howard (18-16) vs. Wagner (16-15) Virginia (23-10) vs. Colorado St. (24-10) Wednesday, March 20 Montana St. (17-17) vs. Grambling St. (20-14) Boise St. (22-10) vs. Colorado (24-10) EAST REGIONAL First Round Friday, March 22 At Brooklyn, N.Y. UConn (31-3) vs. Stetson (22-12) FAU (25-8) vs. Northwestern (21-11) At Spokane, Wash. San Diego St. (24-10) vs. UAB (23-11) Auburn (27-7) vs. Yale (22-9) Thursday, March 21 At Omaha, Neb. BYU (23-10) vs. Duquesne (24-11) Illinois (26-8) vs. Morehead St. (26-8) Washington St. (24-9) vs. Drake (28-6) Iowa St. (27-7) vs. S. Dakota St. (22-12) SOUTH REGIONAL First Round Friday, March 22 At Memphis, Tenn. Houston (30-4) vs. Longwood (21-13) Nebraska (23-10) vs. Texas A&M (20-14) At Brooklyn, N.Y. Wisconsin (22-13) vs. James Madison (31-3) Duke (24-8) vs. Vermont (28-6) At Indianapolis Florida (24-11) vs. Boise St.-Colorado winner Marquette (25-9) vs. W. Kentucky (22-11) Thursday, March 21 At Pittsburgh Texas Tech (23-10) vs. NC State (22-14) Kentucky (23-9) vs. Oakland (23-11) MIDWEST REGIONAL First Round Friday, March 22 At Indianapolis Purdue (29-4) vs. Montana St.-Grambling St. winner Utah St. (27-6) vs. TCU (21-12) Thursday, March 21 At Salt Lake City Gonzaga (25-7) vs. McNeese St. (30-3) Kansas (22-10) vs. Samford (29-5) At Pittsburgh South Carolina (26-7) vs. Oregon (23-11) Creighton (23-9) vs. Akron (24-10) At Charlotte, N.C. Texas (20-12) vs. Virginia-Colorado St. winner Tennessee (24-8) vs. St. Peter's (19-13) WEST REGIONAL First Round Thursday, March 21 At Charlotte, N.C. North Carolina (27-7) vs. Howard-Wagner winner Mississippi St. (21-13) vs. Michigan St. (19-14) At Salt Lake City Dayton (24-7) vs. Nevada (26-7) Arizona (25-8) vs. Long Beach St. (21-14) Friday, March 22 At Spokane, Wash. Saint Mary's (Cal.) (26-7) vs. Grand Canyon (29-4) Alabama (21-11) vs. Coll. of Charleston (27-7) At Memphis, Tenn. Clemson (21-11) vs. New Mexico (26-9) Baylor (23-10) vs. Colgate (25-9) NIT Glance First Round Tuesday, March 19 At Baton Rouge, La. LSU (17-15) vs. North Texas (18-14) At Orlando, Fla. UCF (17-15) vs. South Florida (24-7) At Indianapolis Butler (18-14) vs. Minnesota (18-14) At Athens, Ga. Georgia (17-16) vs. Xavier (16-17) At Providence, R.I. Providence (21-13) vs. Boston College (19-15) At Iowa City, Iowa Iowa (18-14) vs. Kansas St. (19-14) At Blacksburg, Va.

Virginia Tech (18-14) vs. Richmond (23-9) At Salt Lake City Utah (19-14) vs. UC Irvine (24-9) At Columbus, Ohio Ohio St. (20-13) vs. Cornell (22-7) Wednesday, March 20 At Newark, N.J. Seton Hall (20-12) vs. Saint Joseph's (21-13) At Bryn Mawr, Pa. Villanova (18-15) vs. VCU (22-13) At Terre Haute, Ind. Indiana St. (28-6) vs. SMU (20-12) At Winston-Salem, N.C. Wake Forest (20-13) vs. Appalachian St. (27-6) At Peoria, Ill. Bradley (22-11) vs. Loyola Chicago (23-9) At Princeton, N.J. Princeton (20-14) vs. UNLV (19-12) At Cincinnati, Ohio Cincinnati (20-14) vs. San Francisco (23-10) College Basketball Invitational First Round Saturday, March 23 Arkansas St. (18-16) vs. Bethune-Cookman (17-16) UC San Diego Tritons (21-11) vs. Chicago St. (12-18) Seattle (19-14) vs. Delaware St. (15-18) Sunday, March 24 N. Colorado (19-13) vs. Cleveland St. (20-14) Montana (23-11) vs. Presbyterian (14-18) Fairfield (22-12) vs. UALR (21-12) Quinnipiac (24-9) vs. Evansville (16-17) Sunday's women's scores TOURNAMENT Coastal Championship Drexel 68, Stony Brook 60 Missouri Valley Championship Drake 76, Missouri St. 75 Northeast Championship Sacred Heart 69, Le Moyne 48 Patriot League Championship Holy Cross 61, Boston U. 55 Women's NCAA Tournament FIRST FOUR Thursday, March 21 At Hartford, Conn. Arizona (17-15) vs. Auburn (20-11), TBA At Iowa City, Iowa Holy Cross (20-12) vs. UT Martin (16-16), TBA Wednesday, March 20 At Blacksburg, Va. Columbia (23-6) vs. Vanderbilt (22-9), TBA At Columbia, S.C. Presbyterian (20-14) vs. Sacred Heart (24-9) Women's Basketball Invitational First Round Thursday, March 21 At Pullman, Wash. Washington St. (18-14) vs. Lamar (24-6) At Harrisonburg, Va. James Madison (23-11) vs. Stony Brook (27-4) At Bryn Mawr, Pa. Villanova (18-12) vs. VCU (26-5) At University Park, Pa. Penn St. (19-12) vs. George Mason (23-7) At Santa Clara, Calif. Santa Clara (24-8) vs. BYU (16-16) At Champaign, Ill. Illinois (14-15) vs. Missouri St. (23-9) At Charlottesville, Va. Virginia (15-15) vs. High Point (20-11) At Muncie, Ind. Ball St. (28-5) vs. Belmont (25-8) At Gainesville, Fla. Florida (16-15) vs. St. John's (17-14) At Tulsa, Okla. Tulsa (23-9) vs. Arkansas (18-14) At Philadelphia Saint Joseph's (26-5) vs. Seton Hall (17-14) At Fort Worth, Texas TCU (20-11) vs. North Texas (23-8) At Toledo, Ohio Toledo (26-5) vs. Cleveland St. (29-5) At Seattle Washington (16-14) vs. Georgetown (22-11) At Berkeley, Calif. California (18-14) vs. Hawaii (20-10) At Starkville, Miss. Mississippi St. (21-11) vs. Georgia Tech (17-15)

AUTO RACING/GOLF

Hamlin wins 4th NASCAR race at Bristol

BY MARK LONG
Associated Press

BRISTOL, Tenn. — Denny Hamlin won the NASCAR Cup Series race at Bristol Motor Speedway on Sunday, passing Joe Gibbs Racing teammate Martin Truex Jr. in the final laps for his fourth victory at the famed short track.

Hamlin also won at NASCAR's bullring last September.

This one was much different. Tire issues hampered most everyone all afternoon as only five cars finished on the lead lap — the first time that has happened in the Cup Series in 20 years. The Gibbs cars were the class of the field.

"My favorite racetrack!" Hamlin exclaimed over his radio while taking the checkered flag. "We got another."

He was booed — no surprise considering Hamlin has become arguably the series' biggest villain — as he stood atop his No. 11 Toyota following a smoky burnout.

It was Hamlin's 52nd career win and locks him into the playoffs. Brad Keselowski finished third in a Ford, Alex Bowman was fourth in a Chevrolet and Bowman's Hendrick Motorsports teammate Kyle Larson rounded out the top five.

"It was weird," Larson said. "I accidentally finished fifth. I'll take it. I hope I never have to run another race like that again."

The other two Gibbs cars — driven by Ty Gibbs and Christopher Bell — finished ninth and



WADE PAYNE/AP

Denny Hamlin celebrates winning a NASCAR Cup Series race Sunday in Bristol, Tenn.

10th, respectively.

The race was chaotic from the start, with cars burning through tires at such an alarming rate that NASCAR issued each team an extra set. That gave them 11 sets total, including the one used in qualifying.

It made for four hours of tire management that gave control to drivers and crew chiefs. It also led to the most lead changes (54) in

NASCAR's short-track history, breaking the previous mark of 40 set in 1991 at Bristol.

JGR handled it better than the rest of the field.

"Our Toyotas are really working well right now," Truex said.

NASCAR returned Bristol to "normal" for the first time in four years for the spring race. The track added red clay each of the last three years. Reviews were

mixed, and as the novelty wore off, sub-par racing inside the high-banked oval overshadowed any excitement that came with the series running on dirt for the first time since 1970.

In an effort to improve the racing and make sure the track had two equal lanes, workers put down a resin-based traction compound through the turns. It was far from perfect.

Goodyear responds

Goodyear felt the need to make a rare statement during the race. Greg Stucker, the tire manufacturer's director of racing, said a test at Bristol Motor Speedway last year was intended to find a setup that led to more tire wear.

But he called Sunday's outcome "too drastic."

The rubber that was supposed to leave tires and adhere to the racing grooves came off in chunks that looked like shredded cheese. Those loose pieces called "marbles" create a slippery situation around the 0.533-mile track.

Part of the culprit may have been the call to put down a new and different traction compound.

"Now we're trying to understand what's different," Stucker said. "Why is the racetrack behaving differently this weekend than what it did a year ago? It's the same package. It's the same tire combination."

"Obviously, the difference is resin was place on the lower groove instead of the (previous substance). Yet I still think the racetrack should be taking rubber as it did last fall; it took rubber immediately during that race."

Up next

The series moves to its first road track of the season, with a Sunday race at Circuit of the Americas in Austin, Texas. Tyler Reddick won the 2023 race there.

Scheffler goes back-to-back in Players Championship

BY DOUG FERGUSON
Associated Press

PONTE VEDRA BEACH, Fla. — The roar could be heard from a half-mile away just 16 minutes after the final group set out Sunday in the final round of The Players Championship. It was loud enough to indicate something special had happened. The question was more "what" than "who."

Moments later, Scottie Scheffler's name appeared on the leaderboard, and he was on his way, adding another layer to his legend as the best in golf.

His 8-under 64 tied the Players Championship record for best Sunday score by a winner. His five-shot comeback matched another tournament record. And he now stands alone as the only back-to-back champion in 50 years of the PGA Tour's premier championship.

"It's tough enough to win one Players," said Scheffler, who was coming off a five-shot victory last week at Bay Hill. "So to have it back-to-back is extremely special. Yeah, really thankful."

For those trying to beat him, it was no surprise, even with Scheffler starting five shots behind.



MARTA LAVANDIER/AP

Scottie Scheffler hits out of the sand during the final round of The Players Championship tournament Sunday in Ponte Vedra Beach, Fla.

fler starting five shots behind.

"Just another week," Xander Schauffele said when he saw that Scheffler had joined the chase.

Wyndham Clark didn't see a leaderboard until No. 11 and Scheffler was tied for the lead.

"And I kind of chuckled and I said, 'Yeah, of course.' I mean, he's the best player in the world," Clark said.

Scheffler holed out for eagle from the fourth fairway — that

was the enormous cheer — had four birdies in a five-hole stretch around the turn and had so much control of his game that he played the final 31 holes on the scary TPC Sawgrass without a bogey.

It added to a one-shot victory that came down to the very last putt.

Schauffele, Clark and Brian Harman all had a chance to force a playoff with a birdie on the daunting 18th hole at the TPC Sawgrass.

Clark had the last shot, a putt just inside 18 feet that dipped into the cup on the left side and came out on the right side, leaving him stunned as he placed his hand over his mouth.

"I don't know how that putt doesn't go in," Clark said. "Even when it kind of lipped, I thought it would lip in. I'm pretty gutted it didn't go in."

Schauffele missed an eagle putt from 25 feet on the par-5 16th and a birdie putt from 6 feet on the island-green 17th. His approach from the pine straw on the 18th went long and his chances were gone. Harman missed a birdie putt on the 18th from about 18 feet.

They tied for second and each earned just short of \$1.9 million from the \$25 million purse, the largest in golf.

Scheffler finished at 20-under 268 and picked up \$4.5 million for his ninth win worldwide, pushing him over \$50 million for his career. And to think it was only two years and one month ago that he was still searching for his first win.

This was no ordinary week.

Scheffler felt a sharp pain in his

neck early in the second round that required treatment as he played three holes. He said he might have withdrawn except that he was in the mix and hates to walk away from a fight.

He was eight shots behind late Saturday when he finished with three straight birdies to at least give himself hope.

"Then today I woke up feeling fairly close to normal," Scheffler said, still wearing a few strips of black kinesiology tape on his neck. "I went out there and had a good round of golf."

He is understated in speech only. The golf is simply sublime.

Scheffler delivered a masterpiece on the Players Stadium Course, where so much can go round without warning. His 64 matched the low round by a Players champion, last done by Davis Love III in 2003. He tied Justin Leonard (1998) with the five-shot comeback.

"I'm a pretty competitive guy, and I didn't want to give up in the tournament," Scheffler said. "I did what I could to hang around until my neck got better. Today it felt really good."

NBA

ROUNDUP

Portis, Lillard lead Bucks over Suns

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Damian Lillard had 31 points and 16 assists and Bobby Portis had 31 points and 10 rebounds to lead Milwaukee past the Phoenix Suns 140-129 on Sunday, as the Bucks hit 24 3-pointers to win without star Giannis Antetokounmpo.

Antetokounmpo, averaging 30.8 points and 11.2 rebounds, was out with left hamstring soreness. He missed just his fourth game of the season and first since March 4, when he was out with Achilles tendinitis.

“It’s not an injury, we were just concerned a little bit,” Bucks coach Doc Rivers said. “Plus, when you look at the schedule, you have one, two, three, four, five days off. We planted it in him and he had to do it. We’re happy that he decided to do it.”

Phoenix trailed 109-94 after three quarters, but closed within 122-115 on a lay-in by Bradley Beal with 6:17 left. Lillard’s 3-pointer from the top left put Milwaukee up 134-120 with 3:18 remaining.

“I just wanted to come out and be in attack mode,” said Lillard, who became the first Bucks player in history to have a 30-point, 15-assist game. “I didn’t really think to myself I’m going to have to score a bunch of points. I just knew I had to be a problem for the defense.”

Khris Middleton added 22 points for Milwaukee in his first game back after missing 16 games with a sprained left ankle. The Bucks finished 24 of 41 from 3-point range, with Portis and Malik Beasley hitting five apiece.

Beal had 28 points, Grayson Allen had 25 points and Devin Booker scored 23 for the Suns.

Mavericks 107, Nuggets 105: Kyrie Irving hit a running left-handed shot at the buzzer, capping a wild final 26 seconds and giving host Dallas a victory over Denver.

The Nuggets rallied from 13 points down midway through the fourth quarter and went ahead on



MORRY GASH/AP

The Milwaukee Bucks’ Bobby Portis tries to get past the Phoenix Suns’ Eric Gordon during the second half Sunday in Milwaukee. Portis scored 31 points with 10 rebounds as the Bucks won 140-129.

Jamal Murray’s tiebreaking 3-pointer with 26 seconds remaining.

Luka Doncic answered almost immediately on the inbounds pass after a timeout, hitting from several feet behind the arc for a 105-105 tie.

After Murray missed an elbow jumper in the final seconds, Dallas called timeout. The right-handed Irving took the inbounds pass, dribbled with his left hand as Nikola Jokic pursued and hit the shot from about 20 feet.

Celtics 130, Wizards 104: Sam Hauser had career highs of 30 points and 10 3-pointers to help short-handed Boston beat host Washington.

Jayson Tatum also scored 30 points with six 3-pointers as the NBA-leading Celtics hit 24 shots from beyond the arc in a game in which they never trailed despite missing three starters.

In the first of back-to-back games — with a game against Detroit on Monday — Derrick White (left hand sprain) and Jaylen Brown (right ankle sprain) joined Kristaps Porzingis (right hamstring strain) among the ranks of injured Boston players.

Magic 111, Raptors 96: Paolo Banchero scored 29 points and host Orlando pulled away from Toronto, handing the Raptors their seventh straight loss.

Franz Wagner had 22 points, nine rebounds and five assists for Orlando, and his brother, Moritz, scored 14 points. The Magic improved to 8-2 in their last 10 games.

Heat 104, Pistons 101: Bam Adebayo made a 3-pointer at the buzzer to lift visiting Miami to a win over Detroit.

Cade Cunningham missed a 3-pointer for Detroit with 9 seconds left and Terry Rozier sprinted up the court with the rebound. He

couldn’t get to the basket, so he tossed the ball to Adebayo, who made his third 3-pointer in the last three games.

Hawks 110, Clippers 93: Dejounte Murray scored 21 points, De’Andre Hunter added 20 and visiting Atlanta beat Los Angeles to snap a three-game losing streak.

Jalen Johnson had 18 points and 12 rebounds, and Clint Capela added 15 points and 13 rebounds for the Hawks.

Spurs 122, Nets 115 (OT): Victor Wembanyama had 33 points and 16 rebounds as host San Antonio overcame 31 points by Cam Thomas and beat Brooklyn in overtime.

Wembanyama added seven assists and seven blocks while collecting his 36th double-double in 60 games. The 7-foot-4 rookie center has five games of at least 20 points, 10 rebounds, five blocks and five assists.

Scoreboard

Eastern Conference

Atlantic Division				
	W	L	Pct	GB
x-Boston	53	14	.791	—
New York	40	27	.597	13
Philadelphia	37	30	.552	16
Brooklyn	26	42	.382	27½
Toronto	23	45	.338	30½

Southeast Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Orlando	40	28	.588	—
Miami	37	30	.552	2½
Atlanta	30	37	.448	9½
Charlotte	17	51	.250	23
Washington	11	57	.162	29

Central Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Milwaukee	44	24	.647	—
Cleveland	42	25	.627	1½
Indiana	38	30	.559	6
Chicago	33	35	.485	11
Detroit	12	55	.179	31½

Western Conference

Southwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
New Orleans	41	26	.612	—
Dallas	39	29	.574	2½
Houston	32	35	.478	9
Memphis	23	45	.338	18½
San Antonio	15	53	.221	26½

Northwest Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
Oklahoma City	47	20	.701	—
Denver	47	21	.691	½
Minnesota	46	21	.687	1
Utah	29	38	.433	18
Portland	19	48	.284	28

Pacific Division

	W	L	Pct	GB
L.A. Clippers	42	25	.627	—
Sacramento	38	28	.576	3½
Phoenix	39	29	.574	3½
Golden State	35	31	.530	6½
L.A. Lakers	36	32	.529	6½

x-clinched playoff spot

Sunday’s games

Milwaukee 140, Phoenix 129
Dallas 107, Denver 105
Boston 130, Washington 104
Orlando 111, Toronto 96
Miami 104, Detroit 101
Atlanta 110, L.A. Clippers 93
San Antonio 122, Brooklyn 115, OT

Monday’s games

Cleveland at Indiana
Detroit at Boston
Miami at Philadelphia
Portland at Chicago
Minnesota at Utah
Memphis at Sacramento
New York at Golden State
Atlanta at L.A. Lakers

Tuesday’s games

Charlotte at Orlando
Houston at Washington
New Orleans at Brooklyn
Dallas at San Antonio
Denver at Minnesota

Wembanyama, Spurs headed to France next season

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — Victor Wembanyama sounds like he expects to be playing an NBA game — or two, perhaps — in his native France next season.

San Antonio coach Gregg Popovich confirmed Sunday night that the Spurs are heading to Paris next season, something that former Spurs guard Tony Parker revealed to French reporters several weeks ago.

“We’re going there,” Popovich said. The comment about Paris came after San Antonio topped Brooklyn in Austin, Texas, in what was a home game for the Spurs.

Added Wembanyama, the French star and overwhelming favorite to win the NBA’s rookie of the year honor this season: “I’m



Wembanyama

looking forward to it very much.”

The NBA hasn’t announced which teams will be playing in Paris next season; it has long been expected that San Antonio and Indiana would be the teams selected. At the All-Star Game last month, Commissioner Adam Silver said Wembanyama “would very much like to see” the Spurs playing in France next season.

“I can say that we will be back playing a regular-season game again in Paris,” Silver said last month. “There’s some discussions ongoing about which arena we will play in.

Stay tuned in terms of the Spurs playing in Paris.”

Also unclear: if it’ll be a one- or two-game trip for the Spurs.

Parker said at this year’s NBA Paris Game between Brooklyn and Cleveland that he expects the league to play two games in France next season. Wembanyama appeared to make reference to that possibility as well when asked on Sunday night about the prospect of playing in France with the Spurs.

“Obviously, it’s going to be probably the game or the games where it’s going to be very important for me because of course it’s me coming back (to) where I come from,” Wembanyama said. “It might be in my city

or around the city. It’s going to be very special.”

The NBA has played three regular season games in Paris since 2020, all of them taking place in January. The league hasn’t revealed when it’ll announce the slate of international games for next season. Silver has said that Mexico City — which has played host to 13 regular-season games over the years, 10 of those coming since 2017 — is expected back on the NBA slate for 2024-25 as well.

“The chances are very high,” Silver told reporters in Mexico City earlier this season.

Wembanyama is also expected to play several games in France this summer, representing his country in the Paris Olympics.

MLB

KEY DATES

Special stops in South Korea, Mexico, Britain and Alabama

By JAY COHEN
Associated Press

Beginning with its ninth international opener, Major League Baseball is traveling all over the world in 2024.

Here are some dates to remember for the upcoming season:

Seoul Series: March 20. Los Angeles Dodgers at San Diego Padres: Shohei Ohtani makes his Dodgers debut in Seoul, South Korea, against Manny Machado and the Padres. Ohtani signed a record \$700 million, 10-year deal with LA in free agency. The two-way star is focusing on DH duties this season while he recovers from a right elbow injury. San Diego traded Juan Soto to the New York Yankees in December, but the Padres still have Machado and Xander Bogaerts in their dangerous lineup.

Opening Day: March 28. Chicago Cubs at Texas Rangers: The Rangers get another opportunity to celebrate the franchise's first World Series championship before they begin their title defense against Cody Bellinger and the Chicago Cubs on opening day. Corey Seager is back for Texas after playing a starring role in October, winning the World Series MVP award for the second time. The Cubs should be in the mix for the NL Central title after they brought back the sweet-swinging Bellinger on an \$80 million, three-year contract.

Mexico City Series: April 27. Houston Astros at Colorado Rockies: Big league baseball returns to Estadio Alfredo Harp Helú in Mexico City after the Padres swept a two-game set against the Giants in the Mexican capital last year. This time, it's Jose Altuve and the Astros taking on Kris Bryant and the Rockies. Houston is looking for another October run after signing closer Josh Hader to a \$95 million, five-year contract in free agency. A healthy season for Bryant, who appeared in just 122 games over the previous two years, could provide a big lift for Colorado.

Craig Counsell's Return: May 27. Chicago Cubs at Milwaukee Brewers: Craig Counsell manages his first game in Milwaukee since he was hired by Chicago in November in a surprise move. The 53-year-old Counsell grew up in Milwaukee and finished his playing career with the Brewers before becoming the team's winningest manager, going 707-625 in nine seasons. Counsell's new job adds another element to the rivalry between the NL Central teams, separated by about 90 miles.

World Series Rematch: May 28. Arizona Diamondbacks at Texas Rangers: It's a rematch of the 2023 World Series, won by Texas in five games. Arizona won't be sneaking up on anyone this time around, not after Corbin Carroll, Ketel Marte and company went on a memorable October run. The Diamondbacks strengthened their rotation in December, finalizing an \$80 million, four-year deal with Eduardo Rodriguez.



GODOFREDO A. VASQUEZ/AP

Corey Seager and the Rangers get another opportunity to celebrate the franchise's first World Series championship before they begin their title defense against the Chicago Cubs on opening day.

The Rangers should have a strong lineup once again, and pitchers Max Scherzer and Jacob deGrom are expected back at some point this summer.

London Series: June 8. Philadelphia Phillies at New York Mets: Bryce Harper and the Phillies face Pete Alonso and the Mets in the opener of a two-game series at London Stadium in the British capital. Harper is taking over as Philadelphia's full-time first baseman after beginning his big league career as an outfielder. The two-time NL MVP hit .293 with 21 homers last year in his fifth season with the Phillies. Alonso, who blasted 46 homers in 2023, is eligible for free agency after this season.

Negro Leagues Tribute Game: June 20. San Francisco Giants at St. Louis Cardinals: The Giants play the Cardinals in a Negro Leagues tribute game at Rickwood Field in Birmingham, Ala. The 10,800-seat stadium, opened in 1910, is the oldest professional ballpark in the United States and a National Historic Site. The stadium was home to the Birmingham Black Barons from 1924-60. The game will honor Hall of Famer Willie Mays, an Alabama native.

All-Star Game: July 16. Globe Life Field — the majors' newest ballpark and the home of the Rangers — hosts the 94th edition of the All-Star Game. Texas also hosted the Midsummer Classic when the National League posted a 3-2 victory in 1995 at The Ballpark in Arlington. Globe Life Field opened in 2020, hosting a neutral-site World Series that same year during the COVID-19 pandemic.

NL East Showdown: Aug. 20. Philadelphia Phillies at Atlanta Braves: Ronald Acuña Jr. and Atlanta open a six-game homestand with the first of three games against Kyle Schwarber and Philadelphia. Acuña is the reigning NL MVP after powering the Braves to their sixth consecutive NL East title, a full 14 games ahead of the second-place Phillies. But Philadelphia eliminated Atlanta in four games in their NL Division Series. The offseason acquisition of left-hander Chris Sale could help the Braves return to the World Series for the first time since they won it all in 2021.

Freeway Series: Sept. 4. Los Angeles Dodgers at Los Angeles Angels: Dodgers left-hander Clayton Kershaw is just 56 strikeouts shy of 3,000 for his career. The three-time Cy Young Award winner is expected to return this summer after he had shoulder surgery in November, so his pursuit of the milestone could come down to the final days of the season. Mike Trout and the Angels are moving on after Ohtani departed in free agency.

AL East On The Line?: Sept. 26. Baltimore Orioles at New York Yankees: Adley Rutschman and Baltimore play the finale of their 13-game season series against Aaron Judge and New York. The Orioles went 7-6 against the Yankees last year on their way to the AL East title. They bolstered their chance for a repeat performance when they acquired right-hander Corbin Burnes in a trade with Milwaukee on Feb. 1. Judge and the Yankees are looking to rebound after they went 82-80 last season.



LEE JIN-MAN/AP

The Dodgers' Shohei Ohtani will be used primarily as a DH this season, but there's a chance he'll play in the field. He will not pitch.

Ohtani will begin throwing program, might play in field

By STEPHEN WADE
Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — Shohei Ohtani may be more than just a designated hitter this season, after all.

Los Angeles Dodgers manager Dave Roberts said Monday that Ohtani — ruled out this year as a pitcher after his second surgery on his right elbow — will soon start a throwing program that might allow him to play in the field this season.

“Shohei this year is primarily going to be the designated hitter,” Roberts said. “Once we get back to the States, he is going to start his throwing program, which he hasn’t started yet. We’ll see how that progression goes. If his arm is healthy enough, we’ll have that conversation in the field. I do know he’s not going to pitch this year.”

It’s the first sign that Ohtani may do more than just DH after signing a \$700 million, 10-year contract with the Dodgers. Of course, when he might play in the field is unclear — or if it happens at all.

Ohtani and the Dodgers open the MLB season Wednesday in Seoul in a two-game series against the San Diego Padres, the first MLB games in South Korea. Ohtani has been the focus of everything, including bringing his wife

with him after announcing last month he had married.

Ohtani’s Japanese friend Yu Darvish will start for the Padres on Wednesday, facing Ohtani for the first time in a regulation game.

Darvish was a star for Japan’s Nippon-Ham Fighters until he left for the majors after his 2011 season. The new star who stepped in for Hokkaido — in 2013 — was none other than Ohtani.

The two have been friends and were teammates last year when Japan defeated the United States in the final of the World Baseball Classic.

But they have not faced each other. That will end Wednesday.

“Darvish is somebody I’ve always looked up to,” Ohtani said this week. “He’s someone I really respect as a pitcher.”

“I had a chance to work out with him this past offseason,” Ohtani added. “He is a good friend of mine. I haven’t faced him up to this point, so I’m very excited to be able to face him finally.”

Darvish, who is 103-85 in MLB career, has been overshadowed by Ohtani. But this offers him a chance to take center stage.

“Of course, we have trained together in the past, but this time I will be facing him as an opponent,” Darvish said. “So I will analyze him thoroughly, and I want to face him as a batter without adding too much personal feeling.”

If his arm is healthy enough, we’ll have that conversation in the field.

Dave Roberts
Dodgers manager

NHL/TENNIS

NHL ROUNDUP

Rangers hand Isles 4th straight loss

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Jonny Brodzinski scored the go-ahead goal in the second period and the New York Rangers defeated the New York Islanders 5-2 on Sunday.

Mika Zibanejad, Will Cuyll, Kaapo Kakko and Alexis Lafreniere also scored for the Rangers, who have won five of six. Igor Shesterkin finished with 25 saves.

“Our team is deep right now,” Rangers forward Vincent Trocheck said. “We are getting contributions up and down the lineup. Even when lines aren’t scoring, they are contributing in other ways. Getting the momentum, keeping the puck in the O-zone. If we can continue to do that, I like our chances against anybody.”

Bo Horvat scored twice, Ilya Sorokin made 26 saves, but the Islanders lost their fourth consecutive game.

The Rangers scored three times in the second period to erase a one-goal deficit and take a 3-2 lead.

“I saw a team that played better than us today,” Islanders coach Patrick Roy said. “They managed the puck much better than what we did. They were very fast on transition. I thought they had more energy than us. ... They (Rangers) did what they had to do and that’s why they’re first in our division.”

Hurricanes 7, Senators 2: Dmitry Orlov recorded four points and visiting Carolina scored four goals in the third period to beat Ottawa.

Orlov had two goals and two assists. Evgeny Kuznetsov, Seth Jarvis, Jalen Chatfield, Jake Guentzel and Brendan Lemieux also scored for Carolina. Sebastian Aho chipped in with three assists. Frederik Andersen made 30 saves.

Thomas Chabot and Tim Stutzle scored for the Senators, who had their three-game win streak halted.



SETH WENIG/AP

New York Rangers goaltender Igor Shesterkin defends during the second period against the New York Islanders on Sunday in New York. Shesterkin finished with 25 saves in the Rangers’ 5-2 victory.

Anton Forsberg stopped 31 shots.

Golden Knights 3, Devils 1: Jack Eichel scored his 21st goal of the season and host Vegas beat New Jersey.

After the Devils took a 1-0 lead 38 seconds into the third period, the Golden Knights scored the next two goals.

Maneuvering his way through the neutral zone and finding open ice at the top of the slot, Eichel finally beat New Jersey goalie Jake Allen with his seventh shot of the game to the delight of an announced sold-out crowd of 18,234.

Penguins 6, Red Wings 3: Sidney Crosby matched Wayne Gretzky for seventh-most goals with a single franchise in NHL history, and host Pittsburgh beat Detroit.

Crosby, Lars Eller, Reilly Smith

and Valtteri Puustinen each had a goal and an assist for the Penguins, who won for the second time in three games following a four-game losing streak. Michael Bunting and Drew O’Connor also scored.

Crosby’s 583rd career goal, his first in 12 games and No. 33 on the season, helped Pittsburgh keep its playoff hopes alive after dealing star winger Jake Guentzel at the trade deadline.

Jets 6, Blue Jackets 1: Tyler Toffoli scored twice and added an assist, leading visiting Winnipeg past Columbus.

Nikolaj Ehlers had a goal and an assist, and Kyle Connor, Logan Stanley and Vladislav Namestnikov also scored. Sean Monahan added two assists and Connor Hellebuyck stopped 30 shots for the

Jets, who pulled even with the Dallas Stars and Colorado Avalanche atop the Central Division.

Blackhawks 5, Sharks 2: Ryan Donato, Kevin Korchinski and Joey Anderson scored in a 1:23 span of the third period, and host Chicago beat San Jose.

Philipp Kurashev and Connor Bedard also scored for the Blackhawks, who have won four of their last six games. Petr Mrazek finished with 24 saves.

Blues 4, Ducks 2: Robert Thomas scored two power-play goals in the third period, and host St. Louis beat Anaheim for its fourth consecutive victory.

Jake Neighbours also scored a power-play goal in the third for the Blues. Kevin Hayes scored in the second, and Pavel Buchnevich had three assists.

NHL scoreboard

Eastern Conference									
Atlantic Division									
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA		
Boston	69	40	14	15	95	231	190		
Florida	68	45	19	4	94	224	165		
Toronto	66	38	19	9	85	241	208		
Tampa Bay	67	36	25	6	78	235	225		
Detroit	68	34	28	6	74	232	229		
Buffalo	68	32	31	5	69	201	202		
Montreal	67	25	31	11	61	186	236		
Ottawa	66	28	34	4	60	211	233		
Metropolitan Division									
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA		
N.Y. Rangers	68	45	19	4	94	229	185		
Carolina	68	42	20	6	90	232	184		
Philadelphia	68	34	26	8	76	202	208		
Washington	66	32	25	9	73	176	206		
N.Y. Islanders	67	29	23	15	73	202	222		
Pittsburgh	67	30	28	9	69	197	199		
New Jersey	68	32	32	4	68	220	236		
Columbus	68	23	34	11	57	199	246		
Western Conference									
Central Division									
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA		
Winnipeg	67	43	19	5	91	210	158		
Colorado	68	43	20	5	91	254	204		
Dallas	69	41	19	9	91	251	210		
Nashville	68	39	25	4	82	219	204		
St. Louis	68	36	29	3	75	194	205		
Minnesota	68	33	27	8	74	212	219		
Arizona	68	28	35	5	61	201	224		
Chicago	68	19	44	5	43	150	242		
Pacific Division									
	GP	W	L	OT	Pts	GF	GA		
Vancouver	68	42	18	8	92	238	184		
Edmonton	65	40	21	4	84	231	185		
Los Angeles	67	34	22	11	79	204	178		
Vegas	67	36	24	7	79	216	200		
Calgary	67	33	29	5	71	211	215		
Seattle	66	28	26	12	68	180	190		
Anaheim	68	23	42	3	49	171	248		
San Jose	67	16	44	7	39	148	268		

Note: Two points for a win, one point for overtime loss. Top three teams in each division and two wild cards per conference advance to playoffs.

Sunday's games

N.Y. Rangers 5, N.Y. Islanders 2
Vegas 3, New Jersey 1
Carolina 7, Ottawa 2
Chicago 5, San Jose 2
Winnipeg 6, Columbus 1
Pittsburgh 6, Detroit 3
St. Louis 4, Anaheim 2

Monday's games

Washington at Calgary
Buffalo at Seattle

Tuesday's games

Columbus at Detroit
Ottawa at Boston
Pittsburgh at New Jersey
Toronto at Philadelphia
Winnipeg at N.Y. Rangers
Carolina at N.Y. Islanders
Colorado at St. Louis
San Jose at Nashville
Montreal at Edmonton
Buffalo at Vancouver
Chicago at Los Angeles
Minnesota at Anaheim
Tampa Bay at Vegas

Alcaraz, Swiatek win Indian Wells championships

Associated Press

INDIAN WELLS, Calif. — Carlos Alcaraz arrived at Indian Wells full of doubt about his twisted right ankle. He’s leaving as a two-time champion.

He defeated Daniil Medvedev 7-6 (5), 6-1 for the second straight year in the BNP Paribas Open final Sunday, earning his first title since winning Wimbledon last year.

Iga Swiatek beat Maria Sakkari 6-4, 6-0 in just over an hour to win the women’s title, with Swiatek losing just 21 games in six matches during the 12-day tournament — an average of 3.5 games per match.

Alcaraz sprained his ankle at the Rio Open in late February. His



Alcaraz

Swiatek

first practice at Indian Wells lasted 30 minutes without any movement. His first practice with his fellow pros “was really tough for me,” he said in a Tennis Channel interview.

Alcaraz outlasted Jannik Sinner in a three-set semifinal after needing three sets to get out of his second-round match.

“After every match I was feeling better,” Alcaraz said. “I was getting more confident after every match. Winning a Master 1000 again, a really important tournament to win, gives you motivation to keep going.”

Alcaraz became the first man to defend his Indian Wells title since Novak Djokovic won three in a row from 2014-16. He beat Medvedev 6-3, 6-2 last year in the Southern California desert.

“It’s definitely your court, you like it here,” Medvedev told Alcaraz during the victory ceremony. “Hopefully you can one day let me play a little bit better here.”

Medvedev led 3-0 in the first set

while Alcaraz had eight unforced errors over those games. The Spaniard won three games in a row to tie it, 3-3.

The players held serve the rest of the set, with Alcaraz serving a love game to get into the tiebreaker. He led 3-0 and 5-2 before Medvedev tied it 5-5. Alcaraz won the next two points to close it out.

For the match, Alcaraz hit 25 winners and had 26 unforced errors, while Medvedev had 11 winners and 23 unforced errors.

Swiatek improved to 20-2 this year, with her wins leading the WTA Tour.

It was a repeat of the 2022 final, in which Swiatek beat Sakkari 6-4,

6-1. Sakkari hasn’t defeated the Polish star since 2021.

Swiatek raced to a 3-0 lead in the opening set. Sakkari recovered to win three straight games, including a break of Swiatek. She served a love game to tie it, 4-4. Swiatek lost just two points on her serve the rest of the set, wrapping it up with a forehand winner in the corner.

Alcaraz and Swiatek earned \$1.1 million each for their wins. That’s less than the \$1.26 million the women’s and men’s champions received in 2023. This year more prize money was allocated to the earlier rounds, reducing the champions’ prize money by nearly 13%.

WOMEN’S NCAA TOURNAMENT

Gamecocks No. 1 for 4th straight year

Iowa, USC, Texas are other top seeds; Tennessee in again

By DOUG FEINBERG
Associated Press

Dawn Staley and South Carolina could see some familiar faces on their path to trying to finish off an undefeated season.

The Gamecocks, who are the No. 1 overall seed in the women’s NCAA Tournament, are looking to become the 10th women’s basketball team to go unbeaten for an entire season.

They had a chance last season before falling just short against Caitlin Clark and Iowa in the Final Four. The Hawkeyes received the other No. 1 seed in the Albany Regional. The two teams wouldn’t potentially face off until the national championship game this time. Iowa is a one-seed for the first time since 1992.

USC and star freshman JuJu Watkins earned the Trojans’ first No. 1 seed since 1986 as the top choice in a Portland Regional. Texas earned the fourth No. 1 seed, its first since 2004, and will play Drexel in the other Portland Regional opener. There was debate whether Texas or Stanford would get the fourth No. 1 seed.

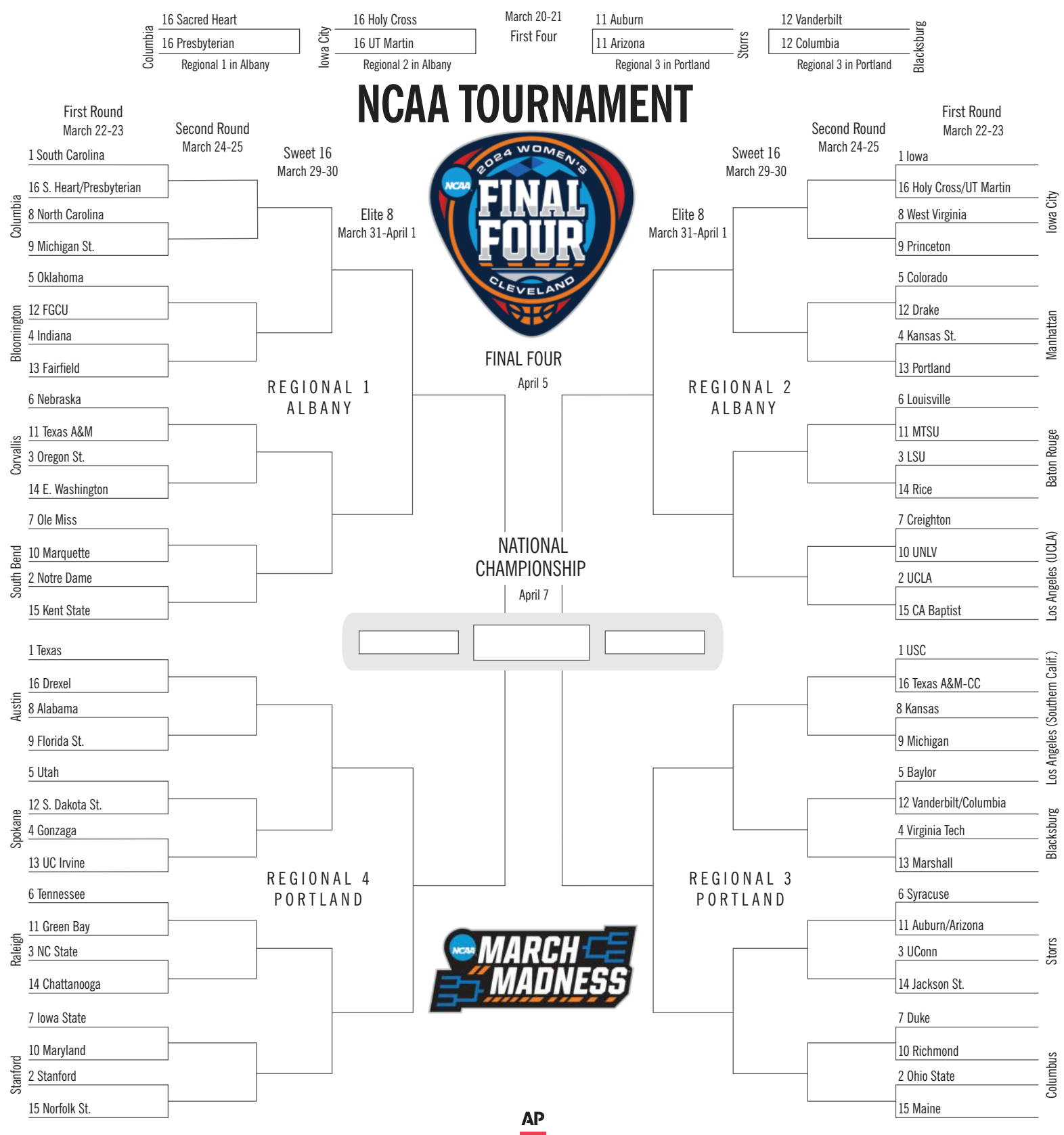
“To say we talked about it more than once was an understatement,” said NCAA selection committee Chair Lisa Peterson. “What it came down to was Texas had to play three tournament teams to get to the (Big 12) championship.”

South Carolina coach Dawn Staley’s squad has been challenged a few times this year, including needing a buzzer-beating 3-pointer from Kamilla Cardoso to win the semifinals of the SEC Tournament over Tennessee, but has always pulled through. The Gamecocks, who are a No. 1 seed for the fourth consecutive year, will play the winner of Sacred Heart and Presbyterian in the first round of the tournament.

“I always feel good to be the No. 1 overall seed and to be undefeated,” Staley said. “I’m excited because we get a chance to know what our path is to win the national championship and, all great teams, a lot of familiar faces that are in our region. But we have to take it one game at a time and that’s what we’ll do on Friday.”

Cardoso will miss the opening game after getting ejected for fighting in the SEC title game. The Gamecocks would have her back for a potential second-round matchup against either North Carolina or Michigan State. South Carolina beat the Tar Heels earlier in the season.

“Fortunately for us, it’s some-



one we played without for four games this season,” Staley said. “We know we’re a better basketball team when Kamilla Cardoso is in the lineup.”

Joining the Gamecocks in the Albany Region are No. 2 seed Notre Dame, third-seeded Oregon State and fourth-seeded Indiana. South Carolina opened up its season against the Irish, routing them in Paris.

Clark, who became the NCAA’s all-time leading scorer this year, is trying to win her first title. The Hawkeyes open up against the winner of Holy Cross and UT Martin. Last year she posted the first 40-point triple-double in men’s or women’s tournament history.

Joining the Hawkeyes in their region are No. 2 UCLA, defending champion and third-seeded LSU and fourth-seeded Kansas State. The Tigers beat the Hawkeyes for the championship last year.

The other top teams in USC’s bracket are Ohio State, UConn and Virginia Tech. The Huskies were the last team to go undefeated in a season, running through the 2015-16 season.

Texas could have to contend with No. 2 Stanford, No. 3 North Carolina State and fourth-seeded Gonzaga.

The NCAA changed its format last season and is having two regional sites for the Sweet 16 and Elite Eight rounds. Albany, N.Y., hosts one and Portland, Ore., the other. Once again the top four teams in each region will host the opening two rounds.

The tournament begins Wednesday with two First Four games. The full madness starts with 16 games Friday and 16 more the next day. The Final Four will be played in Cleveland this year for the first time since 2007. The national semifinals are April 5, with the championship game two days later.

Tennessee continued its streak of appearing in all 42 NCAA Tournaments. On the other end, Presbyterian, California Baptist, Columbia and Texas A&M-Corpus Christi are all making their first appearance.

The Lions were one of the last four teams in the field. Just outside the field of 68 were Penn State, Washington State, Miami and Villanova.

“There were seven or eight schools we talked about,” Peterson said of the final few spots. “That conversation lasted over two days.”

The Atlantic Coast Conference and Southeastern Conference both have eight teams in the field. The Big Ten, Pac-12 and Big 12 each have seven. The Big East has three teams. The West Coast Conference and Ivy League each have two. It’s the second time that the Ivy League has gotten an at-large bid.

MEN'S NCAA TOURNAMENT

Early: Selection committee made some head-scratching choices

FROM PAGE 24

teams on the so-called bubble.

“It was one of the most difficult that I’ve been involved in,” Charles McClelland, the chairman of the selection committee, said of the process that had everyone up until 2:30 a.m. the night before. “And I talked to some of the staff that’s been in that room for the last 20 years, and they said this is probably the most difficult selection process that they’ve been a part of.”

It showed in a bracket that had its share of head-scratchers:

- Two of the last four teams in — Boise State and Colorado State — weren’t even considered on the bubble by most bracketologists.
- “A little surprised to be honest,” Boise State coach Leon Rice said of his team’s No. 10 seed.
- Some of the teams left out — St. John’s and Oklahoma — were thought to be safely in as late as Saturday. St. John’s decided not to even play in the NIT.
- “How is St. John’s so far off the cutline?” said UConn coach Dan Hurley, who was surprised only three Big East teams made it.
- Florida Atlantic and Texas A&M were considered bubble teams but ended up with 8 and 9 seeds, respectively.

All of this could be fodder for the growing conversation about expanding the bracket to 76, maybe 80 teams. Under that scenario, bubble teams like Pittsburgh, Seton Hall and even Indiana State would almost certainly be in.

The tournament starts Tuesday with two First Four games, including a matchup between Virginia and Colorado State. The 32 first-round games take place Thursday and Friday. The Final Four is set for April 6-8 in Glendale, Ariz.

UConn the favorite

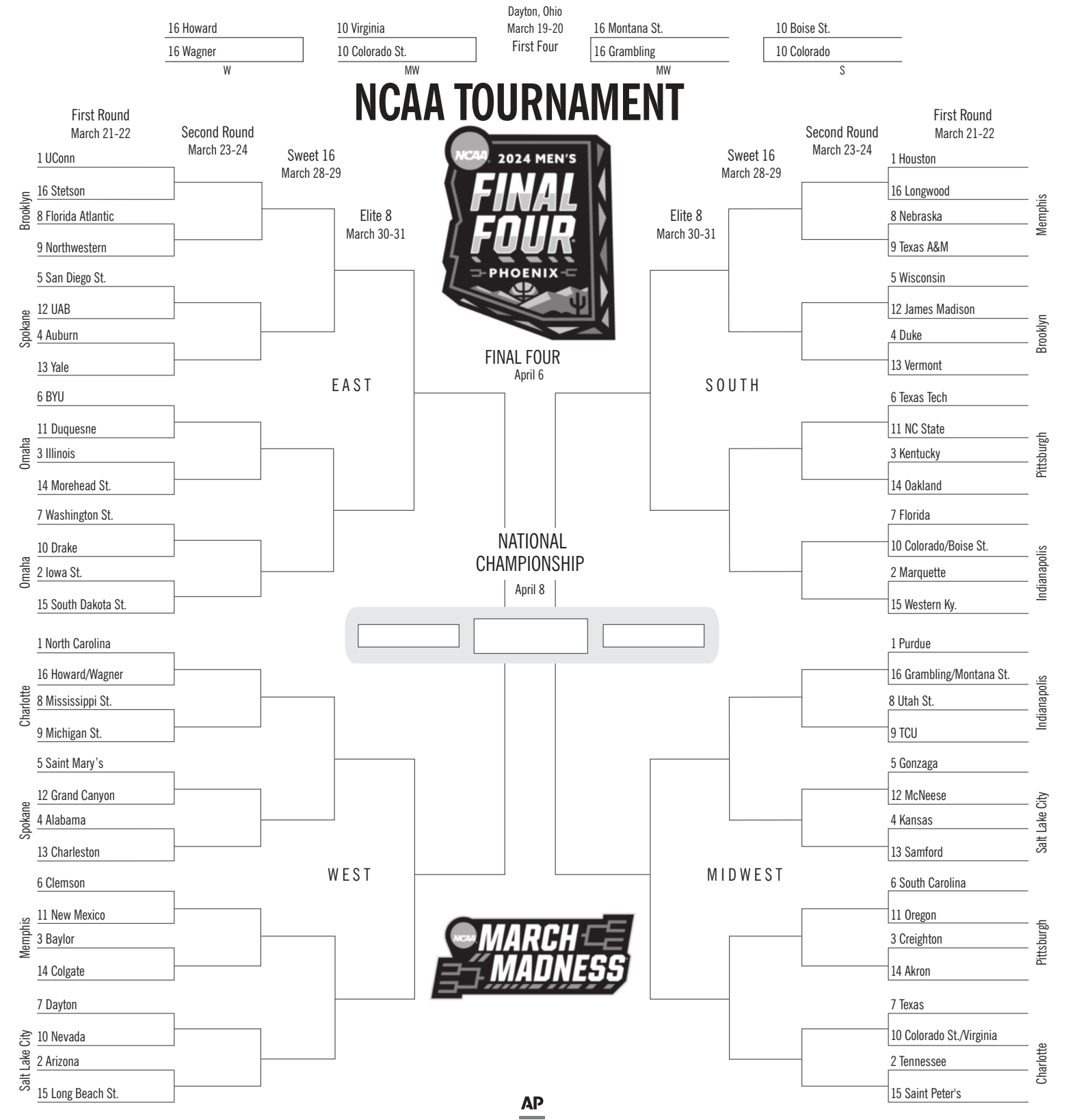
UConn, which opens Friday against Stetson, is the favorite according to FanDuel Sportsbook and is trying to become the first repeat champion since Florida in 2006-07. The Huskies (31-3) are on a seven-game winning streak and are tied with James Madison for most wins in the nation.

For all its excellence this season, UConn ended up in an East region with two of last year’s Final Four teams (San Diego State and Florida Atlantic) along with Iowa State, which is coming off a 69-41 victory over Houston and was thought, for a minute, to be top-seed material.

“If we’re able to get to our identity ... and then we play harder than you, we keep ourselves from being vulnerable that way,” Hurley said.

Bragging rights

Both the SEC and Big 12 placed eight teams in the field, while the Big Ten and Mountain West each



had six.

Speaking of pride: Michigan State extended its nation-leading streak to 26 consecutive years in the tournament. The ninth-seeded Spartans will play Mississippi State on Thursday, the same day No. 5 seed Gonzaga plays No. 12 McNeese State. In February, the Zags were considered a bubble team, but a stretch of nine wins in 10 games changed that, and coach Mark Few’s team made the field for the 25th consecutive year.

Injury worries

Injury-riddled Kansas comes in as a 4 seed, set to play Samford, after two of its best players, Hunter Dickinson and Kevin McCullar Jr., sat out the Jayhawks’ 20-point loss in their Big 12 Tournament opener.

Florida is a 7 seed, and will play

the winner of the Boise State-Colo-
rado play-in game, but the Gators suffered a big blow when big man Micah Handlogten broke his leg early in the SEC title game.

Small fry

The Ivy League is sending Yale, a 13 seed that needed a furious late comeback and a buzzer-beating basket against Brown to win the title and set up a game Friday against No. 4 Auburn. Saint Peter’s is back in the tournament, two years after making an unlikely run to the Elite Eight as a No. 15. This year, the Peacocks are 15 seeds again, opening against Tennessee in the Midwest.

Should Tennessee advance, coach Rick Barnes could face his former school, No. 7 Texas, which opens against the Virginia-Colo-
rado State winner.

Meanwhile, Duquesne, the surprise winner of the Atlantic-10, is back in the tournament for the first time since 1977. A game against No. 6 BYU awaits.

Job security

Back in 1999, head coach Dan Monson and assistant Mark Few led Gonzaga on a surprise run all the way to the Elite Eight. Monson now coaches Long Beach State and, just last week, was relieved of his duties pending the end of the season. Funny enough, Monson’s team went on a run and won the Big West to get a ticket to the tournament. The 15th-seeded Beach open Thursday against No. 2 Arizona.

“As Mark Few said in a text, why don’t we have a run in the first year and one in the last,” Monson said after his job-extending win.



MEN'S NCAA TOURNAMENT



JOE PUETZ/AP

Drake's Darnell Brodie, left, defends against Indiana State's Robbie Avila during the first half of the championship game in the Missouri Valley Conference tournament March 10 in St. Louis.

Indiana State leads big Selection Sunday snubs

By PETE IACOBELLI
Associated Press

The only time Indiana State won more games was when Larry Bird was part of a national runner-up team in 1979. The Sycamores won't even get a chance to play in the NCAA Tournament this time.

Even with 28 wins and goggle-wearing big man Robbie Avila among a lineup with all five starters averaging double-figure scoring, the Sycamores were snubbed Sunday by the NCAA selection committee. Three 20-win teams from the Big East Conference — Providence, Seton Hall and St. John's — were also left out of the 68-team field.

The selection committee said Oklahoma, Seton Hall, Indiana State and Pittsburgh were the first four teams left out.

Committee chairman Charles McClelland, commissioner of the Southwestern Athletic Conference, said five bids were stolen during the conference tournaments by unexpected champions. He said one of those was going to go to Indiana State, which lost to Drake in the Missouri Valley Conference Tournament to land squarely back on the bubble.

"Under normal circumstances with those additional bids, they

would have been in ... but when you start splitting hairs you have to look at something, you have to find something and that's ultimately why they were not in the field," McClelland said.

While the Big 12 got a conference-record eight teams in the field, Oklahoma (20-12) got left out even though it didn't lose outside Quad 1 games. The SEC-bound Sooners did lose nine of their last 14 games after a 15-3 start.

"I am devastated for these young men who were left out of the NCAA Tournament, despite having a resume and metrics worthy of being in the field," Oklahoma coach Porter Moser said in a statement. "At a later time, I will have more to say about our body of work and the selection process."

The Sooners declined an invitation to play in the National Invitation Tournament, with St. John's and Pittsburgh also saying they would not participate.

Indiana State (28-6) will be in the NIT as a No. 1 seed. The Sycamores are among the nation's high-scoring teams at 84.4 points a game, bolstered by their school-record 373 made 3-pointers.

Sycamores coach Josh Schertz said he felt like the MVC was trending as a league that would get multiple NCAA bids, and thought his

team did enough based on its NET ranking of 28.

"So it's beyond disappointing," Schertz said. "We've got to get up tomorrow and get ready for what's next."

Pittsburgh (22-11) won 12 of its last 16 games, a stretch that began with a win at Duke. The early losses by the Panthers included one at home to Missouri, which went 0-18 in Southeastern Conference play.

"I am incredibly proud of the performance, development, and fight of our team," Pittsburgh coach Jeff Capel said in a statement. "We ultimately fell short of our goal of reaching the NCAA tournament, despite ranking favorably in the computers, performing well in conference play with a fourth-place finish and an ACC tournament semifinal appearance, and playing our best basketball over the last eight weeks of the season."

Had St. John's gotten in, it would have been the sixth school coach Rick Pitino had taken to the NCAA Tournament. The Red Storm won't even play in the NIT.

"After thorough consideration of all that goes into postseason participation, we believe at this time it is best for our team and basketball program to prepare for next season," Pitino said.

NBA prospects on display likely won't get drafted early

By STEVE MEGARGEE
Associated Press

Anyone watching the NCAA Tournament exclusively to get a closer look at the top prospects in the upcoming NBA draft is in for a disappointment.

Only one of the top five players in last year's draft came directly from college, as the Charlotte Hornets took Alabama's Brandon Miller with the second overall pick. There are similar forecasts for this year's draft, with international players such as Zaccharie Risacher and Alex Sarr atop most projections.

Even so, there are some players in the 68-team field who should hear their names called on draft night, even if they aren't necessarily among the first handful of picks. Here's a rundown of some of the most notable pro prospects seeking to make their impact on March Madness.

There's one notable name missing from this list: Purdue center Zach Edey.

In a previous era, Edey's status as a 7-foot-4 center and likely two-time consensus national player of the year would make him a sure top-10 pick. But he's a big man who stays right around the basket much more often than today's NBA centers, as evidenced by the fact he has attempted just two 3-point shots in his entire college career.

Stephon Castle, UConn: Castle struggled with a knee injury early in his freshman season but came on strong late in the regular season while showcasing the upside that made him a top-10 recruit.

Castle had 21 points against St. John's and Seton Hall and had a 20-point performance against Providence. He averages 10.8 points and has been named Big East freshman of the week a record 11 times. His 3-point shot needs work, but the 6-foot-6 guard has shown enough this season to merit a first-round selection if he opts to enter the draft.

Rob Dillingham, Kentucky: Dillingham's speed and ability to provide instant offense should translate to the next level. The 6-3 freshman averages 15.4 points and has made nearly 45% of his 3-point attempts. His 35-point performance in a loss to Tennessee serves notice to his long-term potential. He had 27 points and seven assists in Kentucky's SEC Tournament loss to Texas A&M.

Kyle Filipowski, Duke: Filipowski was regarded as a likely first-round pick if he had chosen to enter last year's draft, but the 7-footer instead decided to return for a sophomore season in which he has collected 17.1 points and 8.2 rebounds per game. He has made himself a better prospect by improving his overall and 3-point shooting percentages over his freshman performance.

Dalton Knecht, Tennessee: Knecht has made the greatest impact of any college basketball transfer this season. After beginning his career at Northeastern (Colorado) Junior College and playing two seasons at Northern Colorado, this 6-foot-6 guard has compiled 21.1 points per game as a fifth-year senior at Tennessee. There will be questions about whether Knecht can defend at the NBA level. He will also be 23 at the time of the draft, making him older than most prospects.

Ja'Kobe Walter, Baylor: This top-10 recruit is considered a quality NBA prospect because of his scoring ability. The 6-5 guard has backed that up in his freshman season by scoring 14.2 points per game. Although Walter is shooting below 40%, his profile suggests he can improve in that area.

Cody Williams, Colorado: Williams, the younger brother of Oklahoma City Thunder forward Jalen Williams, was a top-10 recruit when he signed with Colorado. The 6-8 forward hasn't put up overwhelming statistics his freshman year at Colorado, but he's making over 55% of his shots and 40% of his 3-point attempts while playing exceptional defense. It wouldn't be a surprise if Williams is the first college player drafted this year.



TIMOTHY D. EASLEY/AP

Kentucky's Rob Dillingham, left, and Tennessee's Dalton Knecht are among the marquee names in this year's NCAA men's tournament.

SPORTS



Maybe more than just DH
Ohtani to begin throwing, could play in field for LA this year » **MLB, Page 19**



NCAA TOURNAMENT

Madness starts early

UConn guard Tristen Newton reacts after scoring in a Big East tournament semifinal against St. John's on March 15 in New York. UConn, the only one of the four No. 1 seeds to win its conference tournament, is trying to become the first repeat national champion since Florida in 2006-07.

UConn, Houston, Purdue and North Carolina get No. 1 seeds in a men's field full of surprises

By EDDIE PELLIS
Associated Press

Even before the brackets came out Sunday, March Madness was a muddled mess. About the closest thing to a sure thing: UConn.

The defending champion Huskies earned the top seed in the NCAA Tournament, joined by Houston, Purdue and North Carolina as No. 1 seeds in a bracket that started going haywire even before the pairings were announced.

Of those top teams, only UConn heads into the tournament coming off a victory. The others lost in their conference tournaments, although those were hardly the only sur-

■ **Men's and women's brackets on Pages 21-22**

prises during the final weekend of hoops before the sport's main event takes center stage.

Unexpected titles placed teams like Oregon, North Carolina State and even Duquesne, none of whom were projected to make the tournament, into the field of 68 via the automatic bids that go to conference champions. The teams they beat gobbled up a handful of the 34 at-large bids, thus shrinking the number of spots available to

SEE EARLY ON PAGE 22



- Indiana State, trio of 20-win teams from Big East among biggest snubs **Page 23**
- Several NBA prospects in tourney, but none likely to go early in draft **Page 23**
- Staley's South Carolina women earn their 4th consecutive top seed **Page 21**

Hamlin surges to 4th career win at Bristol » Auto racing, Page 17

