WASHINGTON — Faced with the herculean task of combating extremism in the ranks, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin directed all military leaders to gather with their units by the first week of April to discuss what it is, how and when to report it, and what it means to serve.

The extremism stand-down is taking place at bases around the world for all branches, and it’s getting mixed reviews. The Army, as the largest force, has the most people going through the training.

Some soldiers expressed frustration at “check-the-blocks” training led by military officials who were not prepared to answer complex questions about extremist activity. Others said the training was effective when skilled instructors led honest, open discussions.

Sgt. Maj. Viridiana Lavalle shares her role in ensuring extremism is not tolerated in the ranks March 15 in Hamond Conference Center at Fort Sill in Oklahoma. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has directed all military leaders to discuss extremism with their units.

Gillibrand says military needs major reform on sex assault

By Rose L. Thayer
Stars and Stripes

AUSTIN, Texas — Congress has provided the military more than $1 billion, enacted 249 legislative provisions and chartered panels, commissions and committees to address sexual assault in the military, yet the statistics from the past 15 years show little progress, Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., said Wednesday during a Senate hearing.

“Not one of these steps has reduced sexual assaults within the ranks. We are right where we were when we started, nothing has changed,” said Gillibrand, who is the chairwoman of the subpanel for military personnel on the Senate Armed Services Committee.

Senators on Wednesday focused on sexual assault in the military during the hearing, which had three panels featuring survivors of sexual assault and those who advocate on their behalf and those who study the problem for the government, nonprofits or for academic research.

“Nearly every secretary of defense since Dick Cheney” has promised to do better, yet the number of assaults have remained at about 20,000 almost every year that the Defense Department has.

Soldiers divided on stand-down kicking off DOD’s fight against extremism

By Sarah Cammarata
Stars and Stripes

Lawmakers voice concerns over the Pentagon’s lack of centralized extremism data through the training.

Some soldiers expressed frustration at “check-the-blocks” training led by military officials who were not prepared to answer complex questions about extremist activity. Others said the training was effective when skilled instructors led honest, open discussions.

Stars and Stripes interviewed soldiers who completed training, some who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

A staff sergeant at Fort Sam Houston in San Antonio, Texas, said the training needed more real discussion about extremism.

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Related

Civilian advocates, veterans join Pentagon commission on military sexual assault

SEE GILLIBRAND ON PAGE 6

SEE TRAINING ON PAGE 4
Stuck ship impedes global shipping

Associated Press
ISMAILIA, Egypt — A skyscraper-sized cargo ship wedged across Egypt’s Suez Canal further imperiled global shipping Thursday as at least 150 other vessels needing to pass through the crucial waterway idled waiting for the obstruction to clear, authorities said.

The Ever Given, a Panama-flagged ship that carries cargo between Asia and Europe, ran aground Tuesday in the narrow, man-made canal dividing continental Africa from the Sinai Peninsula. In the time since, efforts to free the ship using dredgers, digging and the aid of high tides have yet to push the container vessel aside — affecting billions of dollars’ worth of cargo.

In a sign of the global turmoil the blockage has caused, the ship’s Japanese owner even offered a written apology Thursday.

Company that operates the ship, said the Ever Given had been over-sided — affecting billions of dollars-worth of cargo.

Evergreen Marine Corp., a major Taiwan-based shipping company that operates the ship, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity as he wasn’t authorized to speak to journalists, said workers hoped to avoid offloading containers from the vessel as it would be a days-long effort to do so that could extend the closure.

Evergreen Marine Corp., a major Taiwan-based shipping company that operates the ship, said the Ever Given had been overcome by strong winds as it entered the canal, something Egyptian officials earlier said as well.

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The Egyptian canal authority official after halting for the night, an attempt to do so that could exceed the closure.

Authorities began work again to free the vessel Thursday morning as at least 150 other vessels idled waiting for the obstruction to clear, author-

said. The official, who spoke on condition of anonymity as he wasn’t authorized to speak to journalists, said workers hoped to avoid offloading containers from the vessel as it would be a days-long effort to do so that could extend the closure.

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N. Korea launches ballistic missiles, US and Japan say

By Seth Robson and Yoo Kyong Chang
Stars and Stripes

North Korea has fired two ballistic missiles into the sea off its eastern coast, according to reports from U.S., South Korean and Japanese officials Thursday morning.

South Korea’s Joint Chiefs of Staff announced the launch of a single “unidentified projectile” at 7:06 a.m. and a second at 7:25 a.m. They traveled about 280 miles, reaching an altitude of about 37 miles.

It was North Korea’s first launch of ballistic missiles since President Joe Biden took office. Analysts told The Associated Press they expect the North to test other fire armaments, including short-range missiles in the wake of a visit to Seoul by Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.

North Korea topped a list of issues they tackled during two days of talks with their South Korean counterparts.

The allies’ goals are clear, Blinken said: the denuclearization of North Korea, reducing the threat that country presents and “improving the lives of all Koreans, both North and South.”

North Korea’s latest test, which was announced by the White House, should encourage the Biden administration to maintain pressure on the Kim regime, said Lee Sung-min, a senior research fellow at the Sejong Institute.

“North Korea is a very predictable country,” he said. “There’s no new wrinkle in what they did.”

Asked if the tests affect diplomacy, the president laughed.

The latest missile launch is most likely a reaction to Biden’s downplaying of the weekend missile tests, Harry Kazianis, senior director of Korean studies at the Center for the National Interest, said in emailed comments Thursday.

The North, just like during the Trump administration, will react to even the slightest of what it feels are any sort of loss of face or disparaging comments coming out of Washington, he said.

MILITARY

DOD OKs request for housing migrant children at Texas bases

By Caitlin M. Kenney
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Joint Base San Antonio and Fort Bliss in Texas will soon house migrant children who were detained crossing the U.S.-Mexico border alone, the Pentagon announced Wednesday.

“The Department of Defense” will provide [Department of Health and Human Services] officials access to these locations immediately to begin initial actions to prepare for receiving unaccompanied migrant children as soon as preparations are complete,” John Kirby, the Pentagon’s chief spokesman, said in a statement.

The approval comes a day after the Pentagon announced the two bases had been requested by the Department of Health and Human Services to temporarily house the children. The U.S. border with Mexico has experienced record numbers in recent months, including unaccompanied children, since April due to violence, natural disasters, food insecurity, and poverty in Central America, according to a Department of Homeland Security statement issued March 13.

Children who are found by U.S. Border Patrol agents must be transferred to HHS within 72 hours, but more than 3,000 children have been held for longer and in unfit facilities, according to recent news reports. Kirby told reporters earlier Wednesday at the Pentagon that the HHS request for support at the bases would last until the end of the year. He would not say how many children HHS expects to house at each location.

Children sent to Joint Base San Antonio will stay in a vacant dormitory. Land at Fort Bliss will be used to build temporary housing facilities. The support is “on a fully reimbursable basis” and will “not negatively affect” military operations or readiness, according to the statement.

While Biden’s comments and chuckles were clearly not meant to trigger a reaction, the North Koreans will use any pretext that is offered to raise the ante — moving us closer and closer to the dark days of 2017,” he said.

In the months ahead, it’s likely the North Koreans will test bigger and more advanced missiles, he said.

“We should also expect a fiery response when the Biden North Korea policy is announced, which likely will be a pressure strategy to get the Kim regime to give up its nuclear weapons,” Kazianis said.

The stage is set for another round of North Korea-Intercontinental ballistic missile and potentially even nuclear testing — and another U.S.-North Korea showdown, he said.

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People watch a TV showing a file image of North Korea’s missile launch during a news program at the Suseo Railway Station in Seoul, South Korea, on Thursday.

CHARLIE REXAARD/AFP

By Seth Robson
Stars and Stripes

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While this would not be the first time that unaccompanied children have been housed at military installations, the coronavirus pandemic does add to health concerns among the children and base community, Kirby said.

The children will be under the care of HHS, including their supervision and meals, when they are at the bases. The Defense Department could help with contracting support to help expedite the process, Kirby said.

HHS also conducted a site survey Wednesday of Peterson Air Force Base, Colorado, the headquarters for U.S. Space Command, as an additional site to house children, Kirby said, but the results from the visit are still unknown.

HHS had looked at Fort Lee near Richmond, Va., as a site for the children. It was determined, however, that the infrastructure was not suitable for them and is no longer being considered, Kirby said.

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Training: One-day stand-down is start of prevention program

FROM PAGE 1

the majority of people were just [like, ‘This was kind of a waste of time,’] he said late last week.

The one-day stand-down is the start of the Defense Department’s renewed approach to preventing extremism.

The Pentagon chief directed the stand-down to address extremism in February in response to the Jan. 6 riot at the Capitol in Washington. Thirty-seven military veterans and active-duty service members have been charged for their involvement.

“This is just a step in what the secretary believes will be [a] very deliberate process to try and tackle this problem. … It might bring to light concerns and experience that he might not be aware of,” Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said in February.

The Defense Department provided loose guidelines on what form the stand-down should take, including discussions about prohibited activities, reporting extremist behavior, case studies and answers to common questions. Unit heads and supervisors could then tailor the training.

The Army’s message: “Extremist activity is inconsistent with military life and will not be tolerated,” according to the office of public affairs.

Active-duty members have until April 6 to complete the training, while reserve forces have an additional month to finish.

Ramón Colón-López, the senior enlisted adviser to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told reporters last week that the stand-down was delegated to the lowest levels of unit command because the majority of troops are at that level.

“ать the people that are actually affecting the mission, that’s where they live. For us here at the Pentagon, we’re far detached from that,” Colón-López said. “So we have to trust those commanders in the field to be able to fix their behavior.”

Inconsistent experiences

Colón-López described the training as a “conversation” with legal experts, military police and others.

Still, “death by PowerPoint” came up in conversations with members of the Army last week after their training. Outside experts were not always there to help facilitate the discussions, which left supervisors without subject matter expertise on their own.

A sergeant at Fort Sam Houston said his training was focused on Sexual Harassment/Assault Response and Prevention training, or SHARP, as well as Equal Opportunity training, which is designed to prohibit discrimination.

“It kind of felt like they were trying to pack in all of the mandated trainings in at once,” he said. “A lot of people were like, ‘What was the point of this?’”

A logistics officer at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri said his training did a good job of focusing on extremism, highlighting that a person from any background can be recruited or be active in an extremist organization. He said he was frustrated by how hard it is to identify red flags.

In front of 50 soldiers in an auditorium, the sergeant first class leading the training asked the group to point out the warning signs after each case study.

“That was the frustrating part because there really were no warning signs … They can hide it or lie to you,” he said.

The case studies, he said, were blatant examples of extremism, like a terrorist attack, which left less-obvious “gray areas” for officers to figure out on their own. He would have preferred a clear list of examples with action items, a sentiment that was shared by others.

The bulk of the training focused on the examples, defining extremism and reporting extremist behavior, and the rest was giving “proof that it exists,” he said.

Political, not partisan

In interviews, soldiers drew equivalencies between the Black Lives Matter racial protests last year and the storming of the Capitol on Jan. 6. They questioned the timing of the stand-down and asked why it wasn’t done last year, when protests occurred in Seattle, sparked by the murder of George Floyd.

Colón-López said last week that he was “concerned” over the number of troops who shared that view, from “every echelon.”

The answer, he said, is simple: “When the military was called upon to go ahead and support an effort, we did. We never got called for the law enforcement issue that was happening in Seattle.”

Christina Bembeneck, an U.S. Army War College fellow who has written about extremist theories and the military, said in an interview Monday that to ensure troops know the difference between the two events, it’s important to make them understand that while the military is not partisan, it is political.

“We follow the orders of the elected politicians in the government. … We are political. But we are not partisan. And that’s where I think we need to more clearly describe things” and talk about what partisan means, she said.

She said that having a rich discussion on what the First Amendment is, the intent of the individuals who were outside the Capitol and people who entered a government building unlawfully would be fruitful.

“You don’t have to have any type of partisan discussion on that,” she said, when you focus on the Constitution.

Success story

Tyler Santangelo, a sergeant in leadership school to become a staff sergeant at the Fort Sill Non-Commissioned Officer Academy in Oklahoma, said his nine-hour-long training was valuable, but training at the academy was different than it is for most units.

“I got lucky enough to where I did it at a noncommissioned officer academy where there [are] trained instructors who know how to lead open discussion.”

The training started with discussing how the soldiers define extremism and what it means under Army doctrine, and “how [extremism] counteracts our values,” Santangelo, 26, said in an interview last week.

Santangelo said that he and others thought the training would be a way to “weed out people on the right side of the political spectrum,” but that it opened his eyes to the types of extremism in the ranks.

Christina Bembeneck, an U.S. Army War College fellow, has ideas on ways to address extremism beyond the basics.

Media literacy should be incorporated into the training to equip soldiers with critical thinking skills to decode fact from fiction online, she said.

A bolstered civic education would also help, she said, so that troops better understand the military oath. However, the most important part of combating extremism for her is having a constant dialogue so soldiers can openly express their beliefs and views.

“It’s good to be in an environment where soldiers can ask the tough questions and leaders can think about it, research it, talk to outside sources and then come back and say, ‘All right, let’s talk more about this,’ ” she said. “This is just the start of this conversation.”

U.S. Army Master Sgtn. Yairick McFadden, executive officer to the NCO Leadership Center of Excellence commandant, kicks off an extremism stand-down training at the NCOLECo on Fort Bliss, Texas, last week.

Kevin Spence U.S. Army

Capt. Heath Kennedy, 1-409th Brigade Engineer Battalion Alpha Team Observer, Coach and Trainer officer in charge, leads a discussion on extremism earlier this month in Radcliff, Ky.
MILITARY

Lawmakers seek extremism data

BY SARAH CAMMARATA
Stars and Stripes
WASHINGTON — House lawmakers on Wednesday voiced concern over an absence of centralized Defense Department data on how many extremists there are in the military as Congress looks for ways to tackle the issue after the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol.

Data on extremism in the military “is indeed really poor. It is hard to have a conversation about this when we don’t have the data and when we don’t have the Department of Defense to talk through these issues,” Rep. Elissa Slotkin, D-Mich., said during a House Armed Services Committee hearing on the issue.

The witness panel for the hearing did not include Defense Department officials and was made up of experts from the Southern Poverty Law Center and the legal nonprofit First Liberty Institute, among others.

Slotkin said if the committee is discussing Defense Department action on extremism in the ranks, Pentagon officials should be given the “opportunity to talk about the breadth of the problem, once they’ve had a full chance to review it.”

During the hearing, lawmakers sparred over ways to get at the problem as extremism stand-downs take place at bases around the world for personnel at the direction of Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.

Military leaders must gather with department officials and was made part of good data.”

Cronin explained Defense Department services and agencies are not collecting centralized data to measure “allegations, disciplinary infractions, discharges, or reprimands related to extremism.” It is also unclear how many military members are identified as extremists and how many crimes they have committed.

“Military leaders like to say that you cannot fix what you cannot measure, and no serious plan can be built without defining the scope of the problem,” Cronin said.

Rep. Mike Gallagher, R-Wis., agreed.

“We seem to lack an agreed-upon baseline in fact from which we could even measure an increase or decrease in extremism,” he said.

Without clear data and without Defense Department witnesses to testify on the issue, Gallagher said: “I fear we’re left making somewhat wild suppositions based on our ideological priors, which is never a good place to be.”

Rep. Mike Rogers, of Alabama, the ranking Republican on the committee, said if “there’s better data to be had, then we should address that in the [National Defense Authorization Act],” the annual bill that sets Pentagon policy and spending priorities.

Cronin told lawmakers that one way to collect data is to use command climate surveys that are used to assess the readiness of a command. A question about extremism could be added to the assessment that service members take anonymously to get a better sense of the extent of the problem.

She also proposed creating a consistent discharge code that can be tracked. Congress should direct the services to provide them with a regular report that includes cases that are reported through the discharge process, as well as cases that naturally come up independent of that process.

During the hearing, lawmakers proposed creating a “gateway to Europe,” as transit and host nation.”

By next year, Army depots around Europe will house an armored Brigade Combat Team’s worth of equipment, as well as engineer, artillery, military police, logistical and medical capabilities, according to U.S. Army Europe and Africa.

Earlier this month, about 35 next-generation M109A7 Paladin Artillery Systems and M992A3 Field Artillery Ammunition Support Vehicles were put into storage at the Army’s Coleman Barracks in Mannheim, Germany.

Dutch to invest millions to expand US Army weapons depot in Europe

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes
STUTTGART, Germany — The Netherlands will spend more than $40 million to expand a U.S. Army weapons depot in the country, where gear is positioned for soldiers to draw from in a crisis, defense officials said.

“The planned improvements are necessary due to the fact that the U.S. wishes to expand and intensify its use of (the depot),” the Dutch Defense Ministry said in a statement Wednesday.

The funds will be used to renovate storage hangars at the site and improve infrastructure, including a rail connection adjacent to the site.

U.S. Army Europe and Africa has recently added numerous pre-positioned stock sites on the Continent. The pre-positioning program was developed as a way to add combat power that forces could quickly access in a crisis or during exercises, military officials said. Other stock locations are in Germany, Belgium, Italy and Poland.

The Dutch location in Eyselshoven, which opened in 2016, includes 450,000 square feet of warehouse space and 50,000 square feet of paved storage for heavy vehicles. Some 7,000 pieces of Army equipment are stored there, including 765 vehicles.

During a visit Wednesday to the site, Dutch Defense Minister Ank Bijleveld said the expansion project “not only contributes to bilateral relations between the U.S. and the Netherlands, but also to trans-Atlantic and Europe security.”

Expanding Eyselshoven will “improve military mobility in Europe and contribute to deterrence,” Bijleveld said. “It gives further meaning to our role as ‘gateway to Europe,’” as transit and host nation.”

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BY SARAH CAMMARATA
Stars and Stripes

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Stars and Stripes
**Vets, experts are part of sexual assault board**

By Caitlin M. Kenney

**WASHINGTON — Military veterans and experts on violence against women are among the 12 new members of the Pentagon’s Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military, the organization’s chairwoman announced Wednesday.**

“I think that these folks who we’re bringing in will be looking at this with fresh eyes,” Lynn Rosenthal said during the Pentagon meeting. The 12 members are split into four “lines of effort”: accountability, prevention, climate and culture, and victim care and support. The commission is made up mostly of women and slightly more than half of the members are veterans, according to Rosenthal.

They include military academy graduates, prosecutors, and victim advocates, according to member biographies on the Pentagon’s website regarding the commission.


The organization’s first meeting was held Wednesday and was attended by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin as well as Gen. Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. “Sexual assault and sexual harassment in our military remains a significant problem, but we are taking action,” Austin said in a series of tweets about the commission. “Their recommendations will be taken with the utmost gravity, and I look forward to reviewing them upon completion.”

The commission was formally announced Feb. 26 following an order from President Joe Biden to establish the organization to find solutions to sexual assault and sexual harassment in the military. Austin has tasked the top uniformed leaders for each of the Defense Department’s five military services to submit internal reviews of each service’s prevention policies and also asked the under-secretary of defense for personnel and readiness to find data and information on the latest initiatives for preventing violence.

At the same time the commission’s members were announced, the Senate Armed Services Committee was holding a hearing with military leaders. Austin emphasized that creating a “culture of prevention” was not enough and the Pentagon would continue to work with the Congress on legislation to help solve this problem. “They’re not going to just go to a rape crisis center when they’re in Afghanistan. They’re not like a college student, they can’t say, ‘Mom and Dad, come get me,’ ” she said. “They can be prosecuted if they just leave to make themselves safe.”

Meanwhile, Gillibrand said prosecution and conviction rates have been going down. In 2010, the military had a 24% conviction rate. In 2019, it dropped to 7%, which amounted to 264 cases, she said. In 2014, there were 422 cases with convictions. Retired Air Force Col. Don Christensen, president of Protect Our Defenders, further broke down those numbers in his testimony.

"If this act were to pass, command- ers would be just as responsible for their service members as they are today. They would just have an empowered toolbox. It’s paradoxical to leave this responsibility to commanders, but to take away a key element of authority and undermine good order and discipline and military readiness, even more true in a deployed environment which the legislation doesn’t account for," he said.

"Three percent of commanders have convening authority for felonies and above," Gillibrand said. "So your testimony is saying that 3% of commanders will have less tools in their toolbox. Is that not, therefore, saying that 97% of commanders will have the same tools they have today?"

Morris disagreed. "It’s not just a matter of preferring a case to trial. It’s a collaborative in developing impact on the case, from when it starts into the system," he said.

Lynn Rosenthal, chairwoman of the Department of Defense’s Independent Review Commission on Sexual Assault in the Military, speaks during a media briefing at the Pentagon, on Wednesday.
**Airstrikes pummel ISIS in Iraq as US preps for Baghdad talks**

By CHAD GARLAND

The U.S.-led coalition against the Islamic State has conducted more airstrikes in Iraq this month than it did all last year, destroying scores of enemy positions and killing dozens of terrorists.

Coalition jets carried out over 150 strikes against ISIS fighters in the mountains south of Mosul this month, U.S. and Iraqi military officials said earlier this week. An analysis of previous coalition strike data showed that 120 airstrike were carried out against ISIS in Iraq all of last year.

Including Iraqи air forces and army aviation operations, a total of 312 airstrikes have destroyed 120 enemy positions and killed 27 terrorists. Coalition jets carried out over 150 strikes against ISIS fighters in the mountains south of Mosul this month, U.S. and Iraqi military officials said earlier this week. An analysis of previous coalition strike data showed that 120 airstrike were carried out against ISIS in Iraq all of last year.

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Lawmaker urges vaccine required for US troops

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

President Joe Biden should make coronavirus vaccinations mandatory for American troops, a House lawmaker wrote in a letter sent Wednesday to the White House.

Rep. Jimmy Panetta, D-Calif., urged Biden to issue a waiver to allow the Pentagon to make coronavirus vaccinations mandatory for troops, about one-third of whom are declining the inoculations, according to Pentagon estimates.

The Defense Department cannot mandate service members receive any of the three coronavirus vaccines being provided to the American public because the Food and Drug Administration approved them on an emergency authorization.

Only the president has the power to override that regulation, Panetta said, asking Biden to issue a waiver as soon as possible.

“Vaccinating everyone eligible service member will improve readiness and have an immediate and positive impact on the communities in which they serve,” Panetta, a Navy veteran, wrote in the letter signed by six other House Democrats in which they serve, “Panetta, a Navy veteran, wrote in the letter signed by six other House Democrats.

“Requiring DOD to obtain informed consent prior to vaccination is not only harmful to our national security, but contrary to the best interests of service members, their families, communities, and colleagues.”

Reps. James McGovern, of Massachusetts; Sara Jacobs, of California; Cindy Axne, of Iowa; Marc Veasey, of Texas; Marilyn Strickland; of Washington; and Jahana Hayes, of Connecticut, also signed the letter.

Defense officials have acknowledged they have had difficulty convincing some troops to receive the shot, largely due to skepticism about the vaccines’ safety and efficacy. They have said at least some of that hesitancy is due to vaccine misinformation rampant on social media. Top Pentagon officials including Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin have repeatedly implored troops to take the vaccine as soon as they are eligible, insisting the shots are safe.

Other service members have declined the shots simply because they have the power to refuse it unlike other fully FDA-authorized inoculations required by the Defense Department, defense officials have concluded.

In his letter, Panetta, a veteran of the Afghanistan War and a House Armed Services Committee member, insisted the Defense Department would undoubtedly make the vaccine mandatory once it gains full authorization, and speeding that process up via a presidential waiver would “save lives.”

“The bureaucratic process of final approval of these vaccines will waste precious time in the department’s fight against this virus,” Panetta wrote. “The end result of mandatory vaccinations for members of the armed forces will almost certainly be the same.”

Adviser: Coronavirus rate among US military in Japan is below 1%

By JOSEPH DITZLER
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — The U.S. military in Japan and South Korea reported 14 new coronavirus patients as of 6 p.m. Thursday, some dating back nearly three weeks.

The winter coronavirus surge has tapered to a stubborn daily baseline of hundreds of fresh cases each day in both countries.

In Japan, however, the infection rate is just 0.02% for the approximately 107,000 U.S. troops, civilian employees, contractors and family members, the senior enlisted adviser for U.S. Forces Japan said Thursday on American Forces Network Radio.

U.S. installations do not uniformly publicize the number of active patients, but USFJ reported 35 on March 18. Public health measures like wearing masks and washing hands, along with distribution of vaccines, appear to help stem the virus’ spread.

“We’re not out of the woods yet,” Command Chief Master Sgt. Richard Winegardner said Thursday. “We’re close; we’re close. But we’re not out of the woods yet.”

Two U.S. bases in Japan reported five new coronavirus patients Wednesday evening and Thursday.

Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni on Thursday said one person tested positive and went immediately into quarantine after recently arriving in Japan.

Kadena Air Base on Okinawa had four people contract the coronavirus, according to a base Facebook post Wednesday. One individual fell ill with COVID-19 symptoms and self-isolated before testing positive. The second person tested positive after contact with a previously infected individual, and the third patient tested positive after a co-worker contracted the virus. The fourth person tested positive upon arriving in Japan.

South Korea reported 430 new infections Wednesday, according to the Korea Disease Control and Prevention Agency. Now, one-day case numbers there have ranged from 469 on March 17 to 346 on Tuesday, according to the World Health Organization.

Seoul reported 125 new cases Wednesday, according to the agency. Gyeonggi province, the home of Camp Humphreys and Osan Air Base, had 147.

Panetta

Stars and Stripes reporter Caitlin M. Kenney contributed to this report.

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Twitter: @CDicksteinDC

People visiting an observation point check out housing towers and other buildings at Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan, on March 19.

By Joseph Ditzler
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The number of people seeking unemployment benefits fell sharply last week to 684,000, the fewest since the pandemic erupted a year ago and a sign that the economy is improving.

Thursday’s report from the Labor Department showed that jobless claims fell from 781,000 the week before. It is the first time that weekly applications for jobless aid have fallen below 700,000 since mid-March of last year.

Across the country, economic activity slowed in February as severe winter weather caused sharp drops in home sales, retail spending and orders for heavy factory goods. Most economists, though, say they think the economy is now rebounding as the weather improves and additional support from the new $1.9 trillion federal rescue package kicks in.

There are still risks that could frustrate such hopes. The number of new daily coronavirus infections has leveled off, though hospitalizations and deaths continue to fall.
More than three months into the U.S. vaccination drive, many of the numbers paint an increasingly encouraging picture, with 70% of Americans 65 and older receiving at least one dose of the vaccine and COVID-19 deaths dipping below 1,000 a day on average for the first time since November.

Also, next couple states have thrown open vaccinations to all adults or are planning to do so in a matter of weeks. And the White House said 27 million doses of both the one-shot and two-shot vaccines will be distributed next week, more than three times the number when President Joe Biden took office two months ago.

Still, Dr. Anthony Fauci, the government’s top infectious disease expert, said Wednesday he isn’t ready to declare victory.

“I’m often asked, are we turning the corner?” Fauci said at a White House briefing. “My response is really more like we are at the corner. Whether or not we’re going to be turning that corner still remains to be seen.”

What’s giving Fauci pause, he said, is that new cases remain at a stubbornly high level, at more than 50,000 per day. The United States on Wednesday surpassed 36 million confirmed cases, according to data collected by Johns Hopkins University. The number of deaths now stands at more than 540,000.

Nonetheless, the outlook in the U.S. stands in stark contrast to the deteriorating situation in places like Brazil, which reported more than 5,000 new deaths in a single day for the first time Tuesday, and across Europe, where another wave of infections is leading to new lockdowns.

The gloom in Europe is compounded because the vaccine rollout on the Continent has been slowed by production delays and questions about the safety and effectiveness of AstraZeneca’s shot.

Public health experts in the U.S. are taking every opportunity to warn that relaxing social distancing and other preventive measures could easily lead to another surge.

Dr. Eric Topol, head of the Scripps Research Translational Institute, sees red flags in states lifting mask mandates, air travel and spring break crowds partying out of control in Florida.

“We’re getting closer to the exit ramp,” Topol said. “All we’re doing by having reopenings is jeopardizing our shot to get, finally, for the first time in the American pandemic, containment of the virus.”

Across the country are unmistakable signs of progress.

More than 43% of Americans 65 and older — the most vulnerable age group, accounting for an outsized share of the nation’s more than 540,000 coronavirus deaths — have been fully vaccinated, according to the CDC. The number of older adults showing up in emergency rooms with COVID-19 is down significantly. Vaccination overall have ramped up to 2.5 million to 3 million shots per day.

Deaths per day in the U.S. from COVID-19 have dropped to an average of 940, down from an all-time high of over 3,400 in mid-January.

Minnesota health officials on Monday reported no new deaths from COVID-19 for the first time in nearly a year. And in New Orleans, the Touro Infirmary hospital was not treating a single case for the first time since March 2020.

And Fauci cited two recent studies that show negligible levels of coronavirus infections among fully vaccinated health care workers in Texas and California.

“I emphasize how we need to hang in there for just a little while longer,” Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, said Wednesday. That’s because “the early data are really encouraging.”

Nationwide, new cases and the number of people hospitalized with COVID-19 have plummeted over the past two months, though Walensky remains concerned that such progress seemed to stall in the past couple of weeks. New cases are running at more than 53,000 a day on average, down from a peak of a quarter-million in early January.

That’s uncomfortably close to levels seen during the COVID-19 wave of last summer.

Biden has pushed for states to make all adults eligible to be vaccinated by May 1. At least a half-dozen states, including Texas, Arizona, Utah and Georgia, are opening up vaccinations to everyone over 16. At least 20 other states have pledged to do so in the next few weeks.

Microsoft, which employs more than 50,000 people at its global headquarters in suburban Seattle, has said it will start bringing back workers on March 29 and reopen installations that have been closed for nearly a year.

New York City’s 80,000 municipal employees, who have been working remotely during the pandemic, will return to their offices starting May 3.

Still, experts see reason to worry as more Americans start traveling and socializing again.

The number of daily travelers at U.S. airports has consistently topped 1 million over the past week and a half amid spring break at many colleges.

States such as Michigan and New Jersey are also seeing rising cases.

National numbers are an imperfect indicator. The favorable downward trend in some states can conceal an increase in case numbers in others, particularly smaller ones, said Ali Mokdad, professor of health metrics sciences at the University of Washington in Seattle.

The more contagious variant that originated in Britain has now also been identified in nearly every state, he said.

The Johnson & Johnson vaccine is 85% effective in preventing severe or critical cases of COVID-19 at least 28 days after vaccination, according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, which authorized the vaccine for emergency use in late February.

About 20,000 military and civilian personnel in CENTCOM, or about 35% of the eligible population, have completed vaccinations with either the Johnson & Johnson or Moderna vaccine, according to Lt. Col. Katren Roxberry said.

That includes 3,600 personnel in Afghanistan, 2,900 in Iraq and Syria, and 460 at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, Roxberry said in a statement.

“Troops and civilian personnel in Afghanistan first received the Johnson & Johnson vaccine March 15, NATO Resolute Support said. Inoculations with the two-shot Moderna vaccine began in mid-January.

Military and civilian DOD personnel are eligible for the vaccine, the statement said, in addition to coalition and military members working with or training under U.S. advisers. Troops will continue to wear masks and practice social distancing.

The initial batches of vaccine prioritized those supporting operations in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

“We expect to fully finish vaccinating those troops soon,” Roxberry said. Those in other parts of the defense department will have increased access when more than 5,000 doses arrive in Qatar before the end of March, she added.

Prior to the arrival of the latest batch of vaccines, the Qatar government offered 5,000 doses from their supply to troops at Al Udeid Air Base a few weeks ago out of “goodwill and generosity,” said Brig. Mohamed Al Nasr, security attaché for the Qatari Embassy.

U.S. military officials said they appreciated the gift but have enough doses of their own to vaccinate everyone in the region who wants it, Roxberry said in the statement.

The United States declined the vaccines despite shortages, delays and vaccine appointment cancellations at some bases in Europe in recent weeks.

More than 170,000 service members and about 90,000 combined family members, civilians and contractors have tested positive for the virus as of Wednesday, the Defense Department’s coronavirus website reported.
Under new law, VA required to offer vaccines to 24 million more people

Biden signed the Saves Lives Act, which passed through Congress unanimously. The bill removes legal barriers that prevented the VA from vaccinating veterans who aren’t enrolled in the department, as well as their spouses and caregivers.

The action expands the population that the VA is responsible for vaccinating from about 9 million to 33 million, VA Secretary Denis McDonough said. The department will need a greater supply of vaccines to reach the larger population, he said, equating to an increase of about 400,000 doses each week.

In addition to all veterans, spouses and caregivers, the new law also tasks the VA with vaccinating overseas veterans who rely on the Foreign Medical Program, as well as recipients of the VA’s CHAMPVA program. The CHAMPVA program serves spouses and children of veterans who are permanently and totally disabled due to a service-related disability.

Under the new law, “veteran” means any person who served in the armed forces and who was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable.
Biden doubles goal of COVID vaccines to 200 million doses

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden opened his first formal news conference Thursday with a nod toward the improving picture on battling the coronavirus, doubling his original goal by pledging that the nation will administer 200 million doses of COVID-19 vaccines by the end of his first 100 days in office.

The administration had met Biden’s initial goal of 100 million doses earlier this month — before even his 60th day in office — as the president pushes to defeat a pandemic that has killed more than 545,000 Americans and devastated the nation’s economy.

But while Biden had held off on holding his first news conference so he could use it to celebrate progress against the pandemic and passage of a giant COVID-19 relief package, he was certain to be pressed at the question-and-answer session about all sorts of other challenges that have cropped up along the way.

A pair of mass shootings, rising international tensions, early signs of intraparty divisions and increasing numbers of migrants crossing the southern border are all confronting a West Wing known for its message discipline. Biden had been the first chief executive in four decades to reach the end of his term without holding a formal news conference.

While seemingly ambitious, Biden’s vaccine goal amounts to a continuation of the existing pace of vaccinations through the end of next month. The U.S. is now averaging about 2.5 million doses per day. An even greater rate is possible. Over the next month, two of the bottlenecks to getting Americans vaccinated are set to be lifted as the U.S. supply of vaccines is on track to increase and states lift eligibility requirements to get shots.

The scene looked very different from what Americans are used to seeing for formal presidential news conferences. The president still stood behind a podium against a backdrop of flags. But due to the pandemic, only 30 socially distanced chairs for journalists were spread out in the expansive room. The White House limited attendance due to the virus, and aides will sanitize microphones before they are shuttled to the reporters called upon by Biden.

“It’s an opportunity for him to speak to the American people, obviously directly through the coverage, directly through all of you,” White House press secretary Jen Psaki told reporters aboard Air Force One on Tuesday. “And so I think he’s thinking about what he wants to say, what he wants to convey, where he can provide updates, and, you know, looking forward to the opportunity to engage with a free press.”

While Biden has been on pace to hold a formal session, which allows reporters to have an extended back-and-forth with the president on the issues of the day, Biden’s conservative critics have pointed to the delay to suggest that Biden was being shielded by his staff.

West Wing aides have dismissed the questions about a news conference as a Washington obsession, pointing to Biden’s high approval ratings while suggesting that the general public is not concerned about the event.
AMERICAN ROUNDUP

3 fishermen rescued after ice drifts away on lake
VT — Firefighters on Tuesday rescued three men trapped on ice that drifted out on Lake Champlain. The North Hero Volunteer Fire Department said the three men were fishing when the ice they were on drifted toward the Canadian border, WCAX-TV reported. They were on drifted toward the Canadian border, WCAX-TV reported. They were fishing when the ice they were on drifted toward the Canadian border, WCAX-TV reported. They were fishing when the ice they were on drifted toward the Canadian border, WCAX-TV reported. They were fishing when the ice they were on drifted toward the Canadian border, WCAX-TV reported.

Popcorn machine brings firefighters to Capitol
ND — A popcorn machine has been removed from the North Dakota Capitol after it twice triggered fire alarms that brought firefighters to the building this week and caused legislators to evacuate.

Man’s conviction follows attempt to eat evidence
NC — A Mexican police officer has been convicted on child pornography charges after authorities say he tried to swallow memory cards containing pornographic images when he was detained following a traffic stop.

A puncher’s chance
Three other cards were unatched, and they contained multiple images and videos of child pornography. He faces up to 20 years in prison when sentenced in June.

Fuel tanker catches on fire, shutting down I-70
MD — A stretch of Interstate 70 in Maryland was forced to shut down for several hours in both directions after a fuel truck caught fire.

The crash occurred Tuesday before 3 p.m. on eastbound I-70 near the Mount Airy exit.

Kitchen worker arrested after jail contraband probe
KS — A contract kitchen worker has been arrested on suspicion of bringing contraband into the Sedgwick County Jail, authorities said.

The Sedgwick County Sheriff’s Office said in a news release that it received information concerning the worker on Monday. Its investigation determined that probable cause existed to arrest Natalie Willys, 42, for one count each of possession of hallucinogenic drugs, trafficking contraband and possession of a controlled substance.

Contact employees go through a background check before they are allowed to work inside the detention facility.

The CENSUS

The approximate number of robberies authorities say members of a criminal ring committed. Federal prosecutors and FBI officials in Connecticut said Joseph Cartagena, Alexander Santiago and Douglas Noble, all of New York City, and Justin Herrera, formerly of Levittown, N.Y., stole millions of dollars of goods from businesses in multiple states. An indictment against them was unsealed Monday. Prosecutors said the men usually committed the crimes at night and often eluded police in high-speed car chases that had to be called off for safety reasons.

$150K for teen arrested by classmate’s dad
HI — The Honolulu City Council has approved a $150,000 settlement in a lawsuit that accused a police officer of improperly arresting a boy who had a personal dispute with his son.

The family’s federal lawsuit alleged that Officer Kirk Uemura had the teen arrested because the teen and the officer’s son were at odds and had fought after school in 2018. The American Civil Liberties Union of Hawaii and attorney Eric Seitz represented the family and announced the settlement Tuesday. Their lawsuit said Uemura was “motivated solely by a personal vengeance” in abusing his police power.

In a statement, the Honolulu Department of Corporation Counsel called the settlement a “reasonable resolution of the litigation” and said that the city’s “position in this case was that HPD’s current policies and standards of conduct were sufficient in providing direction to officers and addressing conflicts of interest in this particular situation.”

After the lawsuit was filed in October, police spokeswoman Michelle Yu said Uemura and his supervisor were disciplined, but she was unable to provide details. On Tuesday, Yu said Uemura is on full duty and that “disciplinary action is pending.”

Drag strip closes its gates after 63 years
IN — A northern Indiana drag strip has closed its gates after more than six decades of playing host to drag races.

The Osceola Dragway announced last Friday in a Facebook post that it will not be opening for the 2021 season and that “after 63 years, our gates will be permanent closed.” Track officials wrote that the decision to close the site “was not an easy one” but said the coronavirus pandemic had affected ongoing efforts that began in 2016 to sell the property, which is located a few miles west of Elkhart.

The International Hot Rod Association-sanctioned track had closed its gates after more than six decades of playing host to drag races.

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From wire reports

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By Fay Flam

Bloomberg Opinion

T he accelerating reopening of businesses in the U.S. doesn’t violate the science. End of story. Some individual scientists are warning of increased virus deaths associated with these choices, but there’s no science that can tell us precisely how to balance public health with other human needs. Some people want to minimize COVID-19 cases at all costs — but that’s a moral stance. It’s not “science.”

Yet as tension grows over governors’ decisions to reopen restaurants, gyms and other venues, U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention director Rochelle Walensky not only warned that the U.S. could see a surge in new cases, but also pleaded with Americans to continue with public health measures like masks, solitude and avoiding travel. This sort of public health advice conflates science, morality, values and partisan politics. We’ve seen too much of it in the past 12 months.

Risk communications consultant Peter Sandman made the distinction this way: “I am simply not interested in an epidemiologist’s opinion on whether schools should be reopened. I’m interested in an epidemiologist’s opinion on how much more mass movement of people will spread if schools are reopened. Whether schools should be reopened — that’s not their field. It bothers me when they try to pretend that it is.”

The unprecedented effort paid off. Likud’s first targets would likely be the former ally in the Arab Joint List, which includes the communist Balad party, and the Democratic Unionist Party, with an Arab on the Likud party list and even said there could be direct flights from Tel Aviv to Mecca if he were reelected.

The unprecedented effort paid off. Likud received significantly more votes in Arab towns such as Umm al-Fahm and Nazareth than it did last year, getting as much as 6% of the vote in the predominantly Bedouin town of Rahat. Coupled with a large decline in Arab voting overall, this means Likud’s share of the Arab vote, while still small, went up a lot. In Israel’s proportional representation system, that small rise is likely to be enough to give this centrist party a seat. “Now they’re only thousand to a hundred thousand different interventions,” he said. Those ran the gamut from closing national borders to removing basketball hoops. “You’ll never know if that one basketball rim was the culprit. You just won’t have enough data to tease that out.”

It’s fine to warn people that the crisis isn’t over, but we don’t know whether the new, more transmissible variants will cause a new wave. But we’re seeing a more dysfunctional relationship in which scientists suggest unenforceable rules and people get Called selfish for failing to follow them. It could be driving people toward indifference, fatigue, distrust and suspicion that rules are being imposed for trivial or self-interrogative motives.

Whatever the CDC says, Sandman says he suspects even many compliant Americans will go back to normal after vaccines are widely available. “All along, they have assumed that vaccines, if and when they became available, would replace this menu of burdensome non-pharmaceutical interventions with a much less burdensome pharmacological one: a shot, or maybe a couple of shots,” he says. “Now they’re told that after they’re vaccinated they should nonetheless keep taking most of the precautions they’ve been taking for a year already. That doesn’t just feel like a betrayal. It feels like an exercise in futility.”

There’s a lot science can tell us about rel.ative risks of returning to normal activities, and it’s important for the news media to keep people informed on any risks that might persist post-vaccine. But it’s time to stop disguising their preferred goals and trade-offs as “the science.”

Fay Flam is a Bloomberg Opinion columnist and host of the podcast “Follow the Science.”
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STARS and STRIPES

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**TOURNAMENT CHAMPIONSHIP**

**Men’s Singles**

**Wednesday**

**Quarterfinals**

1. Jiri Lehecka, Czech Republic, def. Vasek Pospisil, Canada, 6­3, 4­6, 6­3.
2. Alex de Minaur, Australia, def. Mackenzie Mcdonald, United States, 6­4, 6­3.
3. Alexei Popyrin, Australia, def. Bart Brammer, United States, 6­4, 7­6 (8–6).

**Semifinals**

1. Alex de Minaur, Australia, def. Jiri Lehecka, 6­4, 6­3.
2. Alexander Bublik, Russia, def. Alexei Popyrin, 6­2, 7­6 (7–5).

**Final**

Marton Fucsovics, Hungary, def. Alex de Minaur, Australia, 6­4, 6­3.

**Women’s Singles**

**Wednesday**

2. Iga Swiatek, Poland, def. Elise Mertens, Belgium, 6­2, 6–4.
3. Dinah Photo | Stars and Stripes | Friday, March 26, 2021

**COLLEGE BASKETBALL**

**Men’s**

At Frisco, Texas

Arizona vs. Stephen F. Austin — 63-55

St. Mary’s vs. Cal State Fullerton — 64-70

North Carolina vs. St. Peter’s — 87-68

Virginia vs. Ohio State — 85-74

Cincinnati vs. Western Kentucky — 71-64

**Women’s**

At Groves, Texas

Army vs. Rice — 66-52

Central Conn. St. vs. CCNY — 65-63

Valparaiso vs. Ole Miss — 55-80

**Tennis**

**Miami Open**

At Tennis Center at Crandon Park

**Tennis men’s singles**

Purse: $3,343,785

**Surface** Hard

**Location** Key Biscayne, Fla.

**Format** Pro

**Players**

Pierre-Hugues Herbert, France, def. Pedro Sousa, Portugal, 6­4, 6–3.
Lorenzo Sonego, Italy, def. Filip Krajinovic, Serbia, 7­6 (7­3), 6­4.
Nikola Medved, Croatia, def. Tseng Chieh­An, Taiwan, 4­6, 6­4, 6–2.
Taro Daniel, Japan, def. Alejandro Tabilo, Chile, 6­3, 6–2.
Alexander Wolf, France, def. Sam Querrey, United States, 6­3, 6–4.
Marc Giron, United States, def. Tom Paul, United States, 7­6 (9­7), 6–4.
Hugo Gaston, France, def. Dominik Koepfer, Germany, 7­5, 6–3, 6–2.
Jan-Lennard Struff, Germany, def. Pablo Carreno Busta, Spain, 6­4, 6–3.
Rafael Nadal, Spain, def. Kei Nishikori, Japan, 6–3, 7–6 (7–5).
Kamil Majchrzak, Poland, def. Carlos Alcaraz­Guevara, Spain, 6­7 (4–7), 6–1, 6–3.
Gregoire Barrere, France, def. Ivo Notarangelo, Italy, 6–2, 6–3.
Neel Patel, India, def. Alexei Popyrin, Australia, 6–4, 6–3.
Taro Daniel, Japan, def. Alejandro Tabilo, Chile, 6–3, 6–2.

**Tennis women’s singles**

Purse: $1,000,000

**Surface** Hard

**Location** Key Biscayne, Fla.

**Format** Pro

**Players**

Ons Jabeur, Tunisia, def. Christina Krunic, Serbia, 6–4, 6–7 (3–7), 6–2.
Adriana Maloova, Slovakia, def. Jana Cepelova, Slovakia, 6–0, 6–4.
Elise Mertens, Belgium, def. Elina Svitolina, Ukraine, 0–6, 6–4, 6–2.
Daria Kasatkina, Russia, def. Polona Hercog, Slovenia, 6–2, 6–4.
Daria Kasatkina, Russia, def. Leyla Musaeva, Azerbaijan, 6–4, 6–4.

**Other events**

**College baseball**

**Regional**

Women's World Invitational Baseball, 1991 Champion

**Regional**

Miami vs. LSU at Port Charlotte, Fla.

**Regional**

Minnesota vs. Boston at Fort Myers, Fla.

**Regional**

Tampa vs. Arizona at Surprise, Ariz.

**Regional**

Boston vs. Oregon at Sarasota, Fla.

**Regional**

San Francisco vs. Stony Brook at Port Charlotte, Fla.

**Regional**

Washington vs. N.Y. Mets at Port St. Lucie, Fla.

**Regional**

Miami vs. Houston at West Palm, Fla.

**Regional**

Michigan vs. Minnesota at Fort Myers, Fla.

**Regional**

Texas A&M at LSU at Baton Rouge, La.

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**Regional**

Texas A&M at LSU at Baton Rouge, La.
Mitchell paces Jazz’s rout of Nets

By MATTHEW COLES

Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY — Donovan Mitchell showed no mercy against a Brooklyn Nets team missing most of its stars.

“The biggest thing was trying to be aggressive, get down, make plays, get on the rim and finish,” Mitchell said. “That was just my mindset from the jump.”

Mitchell scored 27 points and the Utah Jazz routed the short-handed Nets 118-88 on Wednesday night.

The Jazz jumped to a 21-point lead in the first quarter against depleted Brooklyn, which never really threatened to make a competitive game.

“We talked about that the mental fortitude throughout the entire game to continue keep our foot on the pedal,” Mitchell said.

Bogdan Bogdanovic, who was mired in a 3-for-25 shooting slump from three-point range, made 6 of 3-point attempts and scored 18 for Utah, which has won four of five.

“It felt great to see shots go in,” Bogdanovic said.

This matchup between Eastern and Western Conference contenders lost some luster when the Nets’ James Harden was scratched due to a sore neck. He joined teammates Kevin Durant (left hamstring strain) and Kyrie Irving (personal reasons) on the injured list.

“We want to play against guys like KD, Kyrie, James Harden — that’s what competitiveness is … but we’re not gonna change how we play or our mindset because those guys aren’t in the game,” Mitchell said.

Alize Johnson, who was signed to a 10-day contract on Monday, had a career-high 23 points and 15 rebounds. Timothe Luwaw-Cabarrot added 14 for Brooklyn.

“That’s a great team. That’s the team with the best record in the league. We went out there severely undermanned. Most importantly, (our players) stuck together and played hard,” Brooklyn coach Steve Nash said.

Mitchell made five three-pointers in three quarters of action. He has increased his efficiency of late, averaging 32.5 points over his last four games.

Associated Press

Middleton powers Bucks past Celtics

MIWLUKE — Khris Middleton had 27 points and 13 rebounds and the Milwaukee Bucks held off the Boston Celtics 121-119 on Wednesday for their eighth consecutive victory.

Milwaukee led by 25, but only secured the win after a late turnover by the Celtics. Boston had multiple opportunities to tie the game or go in front the rest of the way.

After trailing 90-65 midway through the third quarter, the Celtics cut the margin to two on Jaylen Brown’s three-pointer with 1:32 left. Thess then drew an offensive foul on Giannis Antetokounmpo, and Boston had multiple opportunities to tie the game or go in front the rest of the way.

Marcus Smart missed a three-pointer with just over a minute left. Donte DiVincenzo blocked a shot attempt from Kemba Walker with about 35 seconds remaining. Brook Lopez blocked a Smart shot attempt from around the basket with 2.8 seconds left.

“Smart’s ensuing inbound pass was out of bounds, giving the Celtics one last opportunity. Smart found Theis all alone in front of his team’s bench, but the shot bounced off the rim as the buzzer sounded.

Antetokounmpo scored 13 points — his second-lowest total of the season.

“Magic 112, Suns 111: Evan Fournier scored the last of his 21 points on a driving layup over center Deandre Ayton with 6.4 seconds left and host Orlando beat Phoenix.

Suns star Devin Booker made two free throws with 36.6 seconds remaining and the loss ended the Suns’ road winning streak at seven, their longest since 2006-07.

Clippers 134, Spurs 101: Former San Antonio star Kawhi Leonard had 25 points against his old team and visiting Los Angeles never trailed.

Spurs fans still have not forgiven Leonard for his trade demand and subsequent departure to Toronto following his injury-riddled 2018 season. He was booed during pregame introductions and each time he touched the ball.

Raptors 135, Nuggets 111: Pascal Siakam scored 27 points and Toronto routed visiting Denver to end a nine-game losing streak.

Pacers 116, Pistons 111: Caris LeVert scored 25 points and Indiana beat Detroit to snap a six-game losing streak.

LeVert surpassed 20 points in seven starts with the Pacers since being acquired in a three-team trade.

Kings 110, Hawks 108: De’Aaron Fox scored 37 points, Tyrese Haliburton made two free throws with 36.6 seconds remaining and Sacramento beat visiting Atlanta.

Cavaliers 103, Bulls 94: Darius Garland had 22 points and nine assists, Jarrett Allen added 19 points and nine rebounds, and Cleveland won at Chicago without scoring leader Collin Sexton.

Hornets 122, Rockets 97: Terry Rozier scored 25 points, Devonte’ Graham added 21 and Charlotte won at Houston.

Grizzlies 116, Thunder 107: Dillon Brooks matched a season high with 25 points and Memphis won at Oklahoma City.

Mavericks 128, Timberwolves 108: Kristaps Porzingis had 29 points to help visiting Dallas rout Minnesota.
Penguins hand Sabres 15th consecutive loss

Associated Press

Sidney Crosby scored his 13th goal of the season, Tristan Jarry stopped 26 shots and the Pittsburgh Penguins pushed Buffalo’s winless streak to 15 games with a 5-2 victory Wednesday night.

Evgeni Malkin, Kris Letang, John Marino and Zach Aston-Reese scored also for the Penguins. The teams completed the two-game set Thursday night.

Sabres goalie Dustin Tokarski, making his first NHL start in more than five years with Carter Hutton out due to a lower-body injury, made 7 saves and kept Buffalo in it until late in the second period, when Marino and Aston-Reese scored just over 2 minutes apart.

“We’re a close group, a very resilient group,” Marino said. “We’ve had a lot of come-from-behind wins (like tonight). It says a lot about the guys in the room.”

The Sabres’ Rasmus Dahlin scored his second goal of the season and Victor Olofsson beat Jarry on a penalty shot in the third period.

Buffalo’s 15-game winless streak (0-13-2) is a record for futility since the shootout was introduced during the 2005-06 season, and the league’s longest stretch without a victory since Arizona went 15 games between wins from Feb. 21-March 21, 2001.

The Sabres completed the season and the league’s longest winless streak to 15 games with a more cuts in NFL

By Josh Dubow

Associated Press

If it seemed as if NFL teams have been shedding contracts nearly as fast as signing them in recent weeks that’s because it’s almost true.

With a shrinking salary cap in a sport with few contracts that are fully guaranteed, teams have spent the weeks leading up to free agency and the first few days of the new league year getting out of deals signed in recent years when there was more money available to spend.

Whether it was Kansas City getting rid of banged-up and expensive starting offensive tackles Mitchell Schwartz and Eric Fisher, the Raiders cutting ties with Lamar Jackson and Tyrell Williams after building their free-agent class around them, or Tennessee shedding starting defensive backs Adoree Jackson, Malcolm Butler and Kenny Vaccaro, veterans around the league have been sent to the chopping block.

In all, according to transactions data from SportRadar and contract information from Spotrac and Over The Cap, teams have released players with a combined total of approximately $800 million left on the deals they originally signed between the Super Bowl and the end of the first week of the league year. That figure excludes players who were on rookie or minimum-level deals.

The cuts have come after the salary cap was reduced from $208.2 million in 2020 to $182.5 million in 2021 in response to the reduced revenues resulting from mostly empty stadiums last year because of the coronavirus.

The bloodletting could have been even more severe had the league and the NFLPA not agreed topread those losses over multiple years.

“I think the unprecedented part being, for the first time in modern era, the cap decreases instead of increases,” Rams general manager Les Snead said. “But again, I think many people on this planet, not just us in NFL football, have had to make sacrifices, some probably harder than others over the past year.”

Cutting high-salaried players is nothing new in the NFL, where most free-agent contracts have teams often committing to paying lucrative signing bonuses and guaranteed money in the first couple of years of a deal and then deciding whether to keep the player or get rid of him to create salary cap room.

But the rate of it increased substantially this season because of the lowered cap with the total amount of contracts cut in the same time period equaling about $445 million in 2020 and $227 million in 2019.

One of the teams in a cutting mode was the Raiders. Coach Jon Gruden bragged in 2019 about the free-agent haul he brought in after trading away stars Khalil Mack and Amari Cooper instead of giving them big extensions.

He said at the owners meeting that year that the Raiders wouldn’t have been able to get players such as Antonio Brown, Trent Brown, Williams and Joyner without those deals.

Antonio Brown didn’t even last with the team until the opener that season because of run-ins with general manager Mike Mayock and frustration over the type of helmet the league made him wear.

The other three all were sent packing this offseason, with Trent Brown traded to New England as part of a 2022 pick swap with the Patriots, and Williams and Joyner cut this offseason with more than $38 million remaining on their contracts.

The Raiders also cut guard Richie Incognito and brought him back on a cheaper deal, and traded away starting offensive linemen Rodney Hudson and Gabe Jackson for mid-round picks when they refused to take pay cuts.
Maryland forward Nnimi Collins grabs a rebound during her team’s 100-64 rout of Alabama on Wednesday in San Antonio.

**Maryland routs Alabama**

**Associated Press**

SAN ANTONIO — Maryland and its offensive juggernaut are rolling fast and easy into the Sweet 16, getting 19 points from Angel Reese and overwhelming Alabama 100-64 on Wednesday.

The second-seeded Terrapins (27-2) came into the women’s NCAA Tournament with the nation’s highest-scoring offense and have yet to take their foot off the gas. The Terrapins are averaging 99 points in their two tournament wins after scoring 91.3 per game in the regular season.

Maryland hit the 100-point mark for the seventh time this season. The Terrapins also played aggressive, suffocating defense against the seventh-seeded Crimson Tide. Maryland advanced to play No. 6 Texas in the Hemisfair Region.

Jasmine Walker scored 22 points, Naira Sabally took over late and the sixth-seeded Ducks beat the No. 3 Bulldogs to advance to its fourth Sweet 16.

Maryland forward Nnimi Collins grabs a rebound during her team’s 100-64 rout of Alabama on Wednesday in San Antonio.

**Scoreboard**

**Alamo Region**

**Second Round**

Tuesday, March 23

Stanford 73, Oklahoma St. 62

Wednesday, March 24

Missouri 84, Wake Forest 69

Iowa State 62, Northwestern 53

Oregon 67, North Carolina 68

North Carolina 79, South Florida 67

**Regional Semifinals**

Sunday, March 28

Stanford vs. Arizona St.

Louisiana St. vs. Texas A&M

**Hemisfair Region**

**Second Round**

Tuesday, March 23

South Carolina 87, Oregon St. 42

Georgia Tech 83, Louisville 61

Texas A&M 84, Iowa St. 82

Iowa 86, Kentucky 72

Michigan 70, Tennessee 55

**Regional Semifinals**

Saturday, March 27

Baylor 90, Virginia Tech 48

UConn 86, Iowa 66

Baylor vs. Michigan

UConn vs. Iowa

**River Walk Region**

**Second Round**

Tuesday, March 23

Indiana 70, Belmont 48

NC State 79, South Florida 67

Wednesday, March 24

Michigan St. 84, Arizona St. 64

Arizona 53, BYU 46

Texas A&M 84, Oregon St. 62

**Regional Semifinals**

Saturday, March 27

NC State vs. Indiana

Texas A&M vs. Arizona

**Mercado Region**

**Second Round**

Tuesday, March 23

Arizona 73, Baylor vs. Michigan

**Regional Semifinals**

Saturday, March 27

North Carolina vs. LSU

Louisville vs. Oregon

**Roundup**

Maryland forward Nnimi Collins grabs a rebound during her team’s 100-64 rout of Alabama on Wednesday in San Antonio.

**Match Play offers plenty of emotion, surprise on 1st day**

By DOUG FERGUSON

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — Jon Rahm and Patrick Cantlay thrust their fists in celebration with birdies on the final hole to win in a kind of emotions typical for a final round. In the Dell Technologies Match Play, every day can feel like Sunday.

The opening round of group play Wednesday featured 16 of the 32 matches going to the finish line. Roey McIlroy suffering his worst loss in 10 years and some of the best moments belonging to newcomers to this fickle event.

That Starts with Antoine Rozner, the 28-year-old from Paris who only got into this World Golf Championship by winning the Qatar Masters two weeks ago with a 60-foot birdie putt on the final hole.

Clinging to a one-shot lead over U.S. Open champion Bryson DeChambeau, a tree blocking the 15 yards that separated him from the flag, Rozner hit a bold flop shot that settled 5 feet behind the hole. Finishing with a flair, the Frenchman holed the putt for a 2-up victory over DeChambeau.

“I think it’s one of those shots you’ve just got to go ahead and hit it,” Rozner said. “I turned out to hit that shot really well, went super high over the trees. Super happy that it was close because that put a lot of pressure on Bryson on the last chip. So yeah, very happy.”

Next up was Bob MacIntyre of Scotland, dropping two eagles over the final five holes in a 2-and-1 victory over Kevin Na. The second one was at the par-5 16th, where MacIntyre holed a bunker shot to seize control.

With the talent pool in golf as deep as it has ever been, it’s hard to call any match an upset.

That doesn’t mean players weren’t upset.

McIlroy was so discouraged after 13 holes that he declined to talk about his match for the second straight time in this event. The previous occasion was in 2019 when he lost to Tiger Woods in the knockout stage on the weekend.

This loss was to Ian Poulter, who so much right — a 7-iron to a dangerous pin to 8 feet on No. 9, a 4-iron from 247 yards to 7 feet for an eagle on the par-5 12th — that McIlroy couldn’t afford to tie or lose.

Ireland found the water on the hole with no water hazard at No. 5, his drive off the tee finishing all the way into the water.

Ireland putted to lose. And the match ended.

N. 13 when McIlroy’s eagle chip from behind the green went all the way into the water.

It was his biggest loss in Match Play since Ben Crane beat him, 8 and 7, in the second round of 2011.

Justin Thomas (2) joined DeChambeau (5) as the top seeds who lost their opening matches.

Collin Morikawa (4), Xander Schauffele (6), Patrick Reed (7) and Tyrrell Hatton (8) had to settle for ties.

Thomas fell down to Matt Kuchar on the front nine, too big a hole from which he could rally.

Coming off a victory in The Players Championship, he wound up losing to Kuchar on the 16th hole.

That doesn’t mean players would have been picking me this week,” said Kuchar, who has gone more than a year since his last top 10.

Kevin Kisner, the defending champion from 2019 — the Match Play was the third event to be canceled last year because of the COVID-19 pandemic — won his seventh straight match by beating Louis Oosthuzen.

Since the format switched to group play in 2016, Kisner is the only player to have lost his first match and gone on to win. So there’s hope for Thomas, DeChambeau and McIlroy. They still have a chance to win their group, with the 16 winners advancing to the knockout stage on the weekend.

Dustin Johnson, the top seed, lost momentum when he found the water on the par-5 12th and three-putted from 15 feet to lose the 13th. He finally closed out Adam Long on the 18th hole.

“Winning your first match definitely helps,” Johnson said. “But you’ve still got to go pretty much win all three matches if you want to advance.”

Justin Thomas reacts after missing his birdie putt on the 14th hole during a first-round match at the Dell Technologies Match Play Championship on Wednesday in Austin, Texas.
This year’s Sweet 16 is historic

Sum of seed numbers sets NCAA record

By Noah Trister
Associated Press

By at least one measure, this is the most chaotic Sweet 16 field to date. The seed numbers of the 16 remaining teams add up to 94, the highest total since the NCAA Tournament expanded in 1985. The previous record of 89 was set in 1986.

This year’s regional semifinals include 15th-seeded Oral Roberts, 12th-seeded Oregon State, 11th-seeded Loyola Marymount and 10th-seeded Texas. Three No. 1 seeds did make it through — Gonzaga, Michigan and Baylor. It’s the sixth straight Sweet 16 appearance for Gonzaga and the fourth for Michigan, the nation’s longest two active streaks.

Gonzaga coach Mark Few could appreciate how difficult it was to emerge from these first two rounds unscathed.

“When there are a lot of good teams out there,” Few said. “When you play them on the biggest stage, and it’s just one game, it’s not a seven-game series, anything can happen. And there’s a lot of great coaches out there. You give them enough time to game plan for stuff like this, they’re going to take away your strengths.”

Here are the other seasons with the highest seed totals in the Sweet 16:

1986 Sum of seeds: 89

In just the second year of the expanded 64-team tournament, the Sweet 16 included eighth-seeded Auburn, 11th-seeded LSU, 12th-seeded DePaul and 14th-seeded Cleveland State. LSU became the first 11 seed to reach the Final Four.

Seventh-seeded Navy, led by coach Ed Cooley, made it all the way to the regional finals.

1990 Sum of seeds: 88

Three double-digit seeds made this Sweet 16: 10th-seeded Texas, 11th-seeded Loyola Marymount and 12th-seeded Ball State. Loyola made it to the Elite Eight in the aftermath of star Hank Gathers’ death. The Lions scored a tournament-record 149 points in a second-round win over defending champion Michigan. They also allowed 131 — the second-highest total in tournament history — against UNLV in the regional final.

1999 Sum of seeds: 88

A record five double-digit seeds made it to this Sweet 16, including 12th-seeded Cornell, and ninth-seeded Northern Iowa got there, too, with a memorable upset of Kansas. Saint Mary’s made it as a 11 seed and Syracuse also made the Sweet 16 as an 11.

2000 Sum of seeds: 85

Top-seeded Virginia was eliminated by 16th-seeded UMBC, which then lost to ninth-seeded Kansas State with a Sweet 16 spot on the line. Another No. 1 seed went out when Xavier lost to Florida State in the second round. Loyola Chicago went to the Final Four as an 11 seed, and Syracuse, also made the Sweet 16 as an 11.

2018 Sum of seeds: 85

Top-seeded Virginia was eliminated by 16th-seeded UMBC, which then lost to ninth-seeded Kansas State with a Sweet 16 spot on the line. Another No. 1 seed went out when Xavier lost to Florida State in the second round. Loyola Chicago was there, as were three double-digit seeds.

Here are the other seasons with the highest number of seed numbers in the Sweet 16:

2009 Sum of seeds: 81

There were four double-digit seeds in this Sweet 16, including 11th-seeded Virginia Commonwealth, which ended up in the Final Four. VCU lost in the national semifinal to eighth-seeded Butler. The regional semifinals also included 10th-seeded Florida State, 11th-seeded Marquette and 12th-seeded Richmond.

Oregon State guard Ethan Thompson and head coach Wayne Tinkle celebrate beating Oklahoma State 80-70 in the second round.

Oral Roberts players celebrate after a victory over Florida in the second round of the NCAA Tournament. Oral Roberts won 81-78 to advance to the Sweet 16.

Oral Roberts 81, Florida 78

Sum of seeds: 88

A record five double-digit seeds made it to this Sweet 16, including 12th-seeded Cornell, and ninth-seeded Northern Iowa got there, too, with a memorable upset of Kansas. Saint Mary’s made it as a 11 seed and Syracuse also made the Sweet 16 as an 11.

2013 Sum of seeds: 81

This was the year Florida Gulf Coast became the first 15 seed to reach the regional semifinals. Joining FGCU were 12th-seeded Oregon and 13th-seeded La Salle — and ninth-seeded Wichita State made the Final Four.

2010 Sum of seeds: 80

The Ivy League made it to the Sweet 16 in this tournament with 12th-seeded Cornell, and ninth-seeded Northern Iowa got there, too, with a memorable upset of Kansas. Saint Mary’s made it as a 10 and Washington as an 11.

2011 Sum of seeds: 80

There were four double-digit seeds in this Sweet 16, including 11th-seeded Virginia Commonwealth, which ended up in the Final Four. VCU lost in the national semifinal to eighth-seeded Butler. The regional semifinals also included 10th-seeded Florida State, 11th-seeded Marquette and 12th-seeded Richmond.
More madness likely in Sweet 16

BY JOHN MARSHALL

INDIANAPOLIS — Your bracket is shot. We know it. Ours is, too.

A year after the NCAA Tournament was canceled, the madness returned with an opening weekend full of upsets.

No. 1 seed Illinois, gone. So is Ohio State. High seeds Texas and Virginia also are out, replaced by upstarts and mid-major noise-makers.

And we have Sister Jean, the 101-year-old nun who serves as team chaplain for Loyola Chicago. So good to have her back.

It was a wild opening ride to be sure and the tournament is all but guaranteed to have a few more unexpected twists and turns.

Here’s what to look for:

The regulars

Gonzaga — The Zags are the only team to reach the Sweet 16 in six consecutive seasons. They’re also four wins from competing for perfection, trying to become the first undefeated champion since Indiana 45 years ago.

Baylor — The big, bad ballhawking Bears appear to have found the form they had before a second COVID-19 pause.

Michigan — The Wolverines have looked like a No. 1 seed, even without Isaiah Livers.

Alabama — The Tide’s mauling of Maryland in the second round shows just how potent this team can be.

Houston — The Cougars sport that same swagger as the Phi Slamma Jamma teams back in the ’80s.

The upstarts

Loyola Chicago — Sister Jean and the lovable Ramblers are back in the Sweet 16 for the first time since that 2018 Final Four run. Seeing her on the sideline warms the heart. The Ramblers have some heart of their own.

Oral Roberts — The Golden Eagles aren’t Dunk City, but they are the first No. 15 seed to reach the Sweet 16 since Florida Gulf Coast became the first eight years ago.

Oregon State — The Beavers were picked to finish 12th in a conference with 12 teams. After two wins as a No. 12 seed, you’d be wise not to pick against these underdogs.

UCLA — Hard to call the all-time leader in national championships an upset, but the Bruins barely got into the bracket. With three wins and a trip to the Sweet 16, they proved they belong.

Arkansas — The Mass Bus has the Razorbacks charging into their first Sweet 16 appearance since 1996. Quite a job by coach Eric Musselman in two years.

Star players

Corey Kispert, Gonzaga — All-American playing like one to put the Zags four games from the first perfect season since 1976.

Evan Mobley, USC — The freshman has the length of a big man, the skills of a guard and the ability to dominate both ends of the floor.

Jared Butler, Baylor — The junior All-American stands out, even on a team oozing with talent.

Timme to get shuffled back.

That would be unfair to what he’s provided his team. In six games against teams from Power Five conferences this season — Kansas, Auburn, West Virginia, Iowa, Virginia, Oklahoma — Timme is averaging 24 points and 8.2 rebounds. Of that group, only Auburn didn’t make the tournament field.

And this is not a Gonzaga team with great interior depth aside from Timme and backup Anton Watson. Even without the guard-oriented lineup, the Bulldogs still averaged 50.5 points per game in the paint during the regular season, the most in the past 15 years. That was largely due to Timme.

The Bulldogs had 38 points in the paint against Norfolk State and another 34 against Oklahoma.

Watson has played well in both games, including 17 points against Norfolk State, and played 18 solid minutes off the bench against Oklahoma. He could be an important complementary piece for the Bulldogs the rest of the tournament.

“This team needs that desperately out of Anton. We’ve been asking and begging, yelling and doing whatever we got to do to try to get him more aggressive and more assertive in every phase of the game, quite frankly,” Gonzaga coach Mark Few said. “Shooting, driving, making shots, rebounding, defending the rim, all of those. Just kind of hustling.”

Gonzaga’s lack of depth on the front line may not matter in the round of 16 against Creighton. The Bluejays don’t have a player in their primary eight-man rotation taller than 6-foot-7.

And while Creighton will certainly be a challenge for the Bulldogs, it’s hard not to look ahead and what might loom in the region al final and a potential matchup against Southern California should both the Trojans and Zags advance.

The Trojans are led by 7-footer Evan Mobley, the Pac-12 player of the year, and his 6-foot-10 brother Isaiah. Would it be another formidable frontline for Timme and the Bulldogs to face?

There are a lot of good teams out there and when you play them on the biggest stage and it’s just one game, it’s not a seven-game series, anything can happen,” Few said.

ANALYSIS

FROM PAGE 24

Gonzaga’s Timme had best game of career against Oklahoma

By John Marshall

INDIANAPOLIS — There’s almost nothing he can’t do and nothing opponents can do when he gets it going.

Marcus Zagarowski, Creighton — Forgot some of the shooting woes he had at times during the regular season. This is the junior sharpshooter’s time to shine, and he’s leaning into it.

Buddy Boeheim, Syracuse — There’s a reason they call him Buddy Bucks. He’s been filling it up in Indy, too.

Rising stars

Max Abmas, Oral Roberts — High-volume scoring from this biomedical chemistry major has the Golden Eagles in the Sweet 16 for the first time since 1974.

Cameron Krutwig, Chicago Loyola — Remember that beefy, agile-footed, deft-passing big man during the 2018 Final Four run? Well, he’s back and he’s rockin’ a wispy mustache. The Krutschke plays the harmonica, too.

Quentin Grimes, Houston — Leaving Kansas worked out well for the high-scoring guard. It wasn’t a bad deal for coach Kelvin Sampson and his Cougars, either.

Chris Duarte, Oregon — Playing on the West Coast has limited his national visibility, but believe us, he was one of college basketball’s best guards long before this Ducks’ run.

Elston Thompson, Oregon State — He scores, dishes and rebounds. He’s a big reason the underdog Beavers have gotten this far.

Virginia guard Casey Morsell walks off the court after the team’s loss to Ohio in a first-round game in the NCAA men’s tournament on Saturday at Assembly Hall in Bloomington, Ind.
**SPORTS**

**NCAA TOURNAMENT**

Timme time

Bulldogs’ big man is key to Gonzaga’s bid for perfection

**By Tim Booth**
Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS

He was already enjoying a terrific season, and now Drew Timme is one of the stars of March after two games of the NCAA Tournament. His game? It’s pretty good, as evidenced by what he did in Gonzaga’s second-round victory over Oklahoma, helping keep the top-seeded Bulldogs unblemished in their quest for perfection.

His mustache? It might be even better than his game, even if his mom isn’t a huge fan of his latest facial hair experiment.

“After this game, I think she’ll be OK if I keep it,” Timme told CBS after beating the Sooners.

On a team filled with stars, all carrying the expectations of trying to complete the first undefeated championship season in 45 years, Timme could be the key for Gonzaga in making that happen.

He’s the big guy for the Bulldogs. The one who has to be respected by opponents, but also the player who can sometimes be left to feast at the offensive end because of all the other problems the Zags create.

Corey Kispert was deservedly a first-team AP All-American selection for Gonzaga. Jalen Suggs is likely to be the highest NBA Draft pick of the current crop of Zags.

But the Bulldogs don’t sit at 28-0, riding a 32-game winning streak, if it’s not for the inside presence Timme provides.

“We’ve talked a lot about kind of feeding off each other and make sure we get each other going on the floor,” Kispert said. “Drew’s put in the time and he’s an ultra, ultra

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