

## EUCOM raises threat level for Ukraine

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

STUTTGART, Germany — U.S. European Command has raised its threat level over worries that Russia is massing forces around eastern Ukraine, where the Pentagon says tensions have escalated in recent weeks.

“We’re discussing our concerns about this increase in tensions and cease-fire violations and regional tensions with NATO allies,” Pentagon spokesman John Kirby told reporters Wednesday.

The situation in Ukraine prompted Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley on the same day to connect with his counterparts in both Russia and Ukraine, in an attempt to de-escalate a situation that has prompted fears within Ukraine of a looming Russian offensive.

Gen. Tod Wolters in the past week raised EUCOM’s watch level for Ukraine from possible crisis to potential imminent crisis — the highest level, The New York Times reported Wednesday. EUCOM declined to comment on the threat level change, but said it is monitoring events in Ukraine carefully.

Kirby said changes in so-called “WATCHCON” levels express a “combatant commander’s concern about a potential threat and the ability to provide future warnings.”

“So by setting a WATCHCON, basically the commander is better able to identify and track the threat and alert decision makers to emerging concerns,” Kirby said, without discussing EUCOM’s current level.

Since Moscow’s 2014 military intervention in Ukraine, there have been steady

clashes between Russian-backed separatists in the country’s east and government forces. On social media in recent weeks, scores of videos have shown Russian convoys of tanks and other combat vehicles apparently heading toward Ukraine.

Michael Kofman, a security analyst with expertise on Russia, said it isn’t clear what Moscow has planned.

“Regarding force movements around Ukraine. No strong evidence that an attack is imminent, but force movements are indicative that something is up outside of regular exercises, or normal troop rotation,” Kofman said in a Twitter post. “Russian intentions (are) unclear.”

Kirby did not offer an assessment on the apparent military buildup, but blamed Moscow for recent violations of a July 2020 cease-fire deal in Ukraine.

## Tech-savvy Marine excited to help modernize Corps

By MATTHEW M. BURKE  
*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP KINSER, Okinawa —The buzz among Malik Pugh’s fellow Marines finally caught the attention of his platoon commander in the 3rd Marine Logistics Group during a routine inspection back in August.

Warrant Officer Joseph Kimmel said he harbored some trepidation about then-Lance Cpl. Pugh’s living quarters after hearing whispers about what he would find there.

“When I make it to his room, all I see is tech and electronics everywhere,” Kimmel said in a March 18 email to Stars and Stripes.

Kimmel found an array of electronics, computer monitors, whirring servers, neon lights, 3D printers and a work bench full of gadgets and tools, including a partially built humanoid robot.

The Marine Corps also took

notice of Pugh, who was recently promoted meritoriously to corporal.

Pugh sees numerous opportunities where his expertise can benefit the Marine Corps, from 3D-printed covers to protect gear from the elements to custom tools and even reconnaissance drones to assist ground troops by making them more aware of their surroundings.

The III Marine Expeditionary Force on Okinawa has shown a willingness in recent years to integrate the ideas of tech savvy Marines, through unit leadership and by hosting invention competitions.

“He is extremely intelligent and technically savvy,” Kimmel said. “He has a very bright future.”

Pugh, a digital wideband technician in Communications Company, Combat Logistics Regiment 37, has a lifelong affiliation with electromechanics.

A self-described military brat who bounced around a lot as a child, Pugh finally settled outside St. Louis in a small town called Fairview Heights, Ill., he said on a sunny February afternoon outside the warehouse where he works.

From “Bob the Builder” toys and Legos, Pugh graduated to tinkering with whatever electronics he could find around the house.

“It’s been like that since I was a kid,” he said. “I can’t think of a time when I didn’t want to build something.”

After high school, Pugh found himself rudderless. He tried college and worked two jobs, but he felt redundant and unaccomplished, he said. In 2019, he joined the Marine Corps. Today he’s responsible for setting up a complement of ground terminals for satellite communications.

The humanoid robot he calls

Project Alita, after the 2019 action film “Alita: Battle Angel,” sits atop his work bench, minus a head.

“That one’s going to be a fun one,” he said.

The first step for Alita will be walking and navigating the room, Pugh said. Then he hopes it will identify objects and people it sees frequently, building a profile for each person and varying its reactions depending on its familiarity with them.

Alita will be self-sufficient and able to charge itself on its own, Pugh said.

Kimmel said Marines like Pugh are a sign of the times.

“Growing up with more advanced technology is an advantage that younger Marines have over those of us that are a little more seasoned,” Kimmel said. “Each new Marine that I have seen come in after me has been a little bit smarter than the previous.”

# US military struggling to maintain its edge

*The Washington Post*

EVERETT, Wash. — As they conduct bombing and surveillance missions around the globe, today's U.S. military pilots rely on aerial refueling aircraft built as early as 1957, when the Soviet Union dominated American security fears, the average home cost \$12,000 and "I Love Lucy" was debuting new episodes.

The cost of keeping those aging jets in the air has grown sharply while the military awaits a next-generation refueling plane whose rollout has been repeatedly delayed by design and production issues.

The Air Force's two-decade effort to field a 21st century tanker, one of several premier air systems whose development has been beset with problems, is emblematic of the challenges Pentagon leaders face in seeking to maintain the U.S. military's shrinking edge over its chief competitor, China.

The United States, once the world's undisputed military superpower, has been struggling for years to efficiently update its arsenal and field new technology in cutting-edge areas such as hypersonics and artificial intelligence, at a time when some senior officials warn that China could be within five years of surpassing the U.S. military.

Experts point to myriad problems with the U.S. system, including a slow, calcified budgeting process, unwieldy congressional requirements and the Pentagon's inability to effectively piggyback on private-sector advances in digital know-how.

"It's like the Pentagon is finding itself staring in the rearview mirror in the face of oncoming traffic," said Mackenzie Eaglen, a defense analyst at the American Enterprise Institute.

As the Biden administration

formulates its defense priorities, it must confront an increasingly urgent question: How will the U.S. stay ahead of an authoritarian competitor that is able to marshal industry and espionage to leapfrog decades of military technology?

Since taking office, leaders in the Biden administration, like their predecessors under President Donald Trump, have identified China as the top threat to U.S. security. They have also voiced concerns about America's eroding edge as Beijing showcases its exponential growth in satellites, ballistic missiles, bombers, fighter aircraft, submarines and naval vessels.

In his inaugural overseas trip, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin stressed the importance of Asian alliances to meet China's military rise.

"Our goal is to make sure we have the capabilities and the operational plans and concepts to offer credible deterrence to China or anybody else who would want to take on the U.S.," Austin told reporters traveling with him to Japan and South Korea in March.

Officials acknowledge the challenges are formidable. Only in February did the military begin using Boeing's KC-46 tanker, developed to replace the 1950s-era KC-135, on a limited basis. After a decade of development, and 20 years since the Pentagon first launched efforts to field a new tanker, the plane has still not been deemed ready for combat. A leading general recently described it as a "lemon."

Even more well known is Lockheed Martin's F-35, the stealth fighter whose two decades of development have been plagued by setbacks and mechanical problems. The plane, which costs between \$77 mil-

lion and \$100 million apiece, has yet to hit full-rate production. The chairman of the House Armed Services Committee called it a "rathole."

The military is also racing to keep up with advances by China and Russia in hypersonic weapons, which travel at five times the speed of sound or faster. Although Beijing has already fielded a hypersonic glide vehicle, the DF-17, the U.S. is just scaling up its research funding and prototyping.

A recent report by a government-backed commission on AI, which the Pentagon hopes to use to analyze imagery and data and, potentially, in combat, cited a dearth of needed skills among government personnel.

It warned that the U.S. has a finite window to up its game against China, which already uses AI in a vast domestic surveillance network and has staked out a goal of AI primacy by 2030.

"The scope for action remains, but America's room for maneuver is shrinking," said the commission, which includes former Google CEO Eric Schmidt.

The challenges are just as urgent in other digital areas. The Pentagon may be forced to abandon a yearslong attempt to create a \$10 billion cloud infrastructure because of legal challenges, a problem that has plagued other acquisition efforts. Experts say officials have underestimated the importance of software and underinvested in digital security.

The U.S. was once capable of quickly fielding cutting-edge military equipment. Following World War II, it developed the formidable B-52 bomber in record speed, building and improving on 13 versions of the aircraft in just over a decade.

But the pace of military inno-

vation slowed in the 1960s with the advent of a centralized procurement system that prioritized performance and predictability over speed. That didn't matter much back then, because the Soviet Union was not moving fast either, as Bill Greenwalt, who worked on acquisition reform as a staffer to the late Sen. John McCain, described in a new research paper.

Today, it typically takes more than a decade to develop and field new weapons systems, Greenwalt found, which sometimes means technology is out of date by the time it becomes operational.

Part of the problem is a planning and funding process that typically requires two years before a new weaponry or technology program can be included in the budget. This leads to what insiders call the "Valley of Death," the long lag time between when a company prototypes a new technology and when the Pentagon fully funds it. That is particularly hard on smaller companies, contributing to the dominance of a handful of large "defense prime" firms.

In addition, navigating the labyrinthine military procurement system requires specialized knowledge and resources — which many smaller firms don't have.

Will Roper, who sought to accelerate Air Force innovation as the service's top acquisition official during the Trump administration, said that unlike during the Cold War, the bulk of U.S. research and development funding now takes place in the private sector, not in government.

"So by not being able to tap commercial innovation, the military is losing out on most of its opportunities," he said.

# Jobless claims at 719K as layoffs increase

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits rose by 61,000 last week to 719,000, signaling that many employers are still cutting jobs even as more businesses reopen, vaccines are increasingly administered and federal aid spreads through the economy.

The Labor Department said Thursday that the number of claims increased from 684,000 the week before. Though the pace of applications has dropped sharply since early this year, they remain high by historical standards: Before the pandemic flattened the economy a year ago, jobless claims typically ran below 220,000 a week.

All told, 3.8 million people were collecting traditional state benefits during the week ending March 20. If you include federal programs that are meant to help the unemployed through the health crisis, 18.2 million people were receiving some type of jobless aid in the week that ended March 13. That's down from 19.7 million in the previous week.

Economists monitor weekly applications for unemployment aid for early signs of where the job market is headed. Applications generally reflect the rate of layoffs, which normally fall steadily as a job market strengthens. During the pandemic, though, the numbers have become less reliable as states have struggled with application back-

logs and allegations of fraud have clouded the actual volume of job cuts.

Still, measures of the overall economy show clear improvement from the collapse last spring, with the rising number of vaccinations encouraging people to return to airports, shopping centers, restaurants and bars. The number of new confirmed virus cases has dropped from an average of about 250,000 a day in early January to below 70,000, though it has begun to rise again in recent days.

Last month, consumer confidence reached a post-pandemic peak. And the \$1,400 checks in President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion economic relief plan have sharply lifted consumer spend-

ing, according to Bank of America's tracking of its debit and credit cards. Spending jumped 23% in the third week of March compared with pre-pandemic levels, the bank said.

And even with the pace of layoffs still relatively high, hiring has begun to accelerate. In February, employers added a robust 379,000 jobs across the country. Last month, they are believed to have added even more: According to the data firm FactSet, economists expect the March jobs report being released Friday to show that the economy added a sizable 614,000 jobs and that the unemployment rate fell from 6.2% to 6%. Less than a year ago, the jobless rate had hit 14.8%.

## COVID-19 pushed total US deaths beyond 3.3M in 2020

Associated Press

The COVID-19 pandemic pushed total U.S. deaths last year beyond 3.3 million, the nation's highest annual death toll, the government reported Wednesday.

The coronavirus caused approximately 375,000 deaths, and was the third-leading cause of death in 2020, after heart disease and cancer. COVID-19 deaths in the United States now top 550,000 since the start of the pandemic.

COVID-19 displaced suicide as one of the top 10 causes of death, according to the report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"The data should serve again as a catalyst for each of us to continue to do our part to drive down cases and reduce the spread of COVID-19 and get people vaccinated as quickly as possible," CDC Director Dr. Rochelle Walensky said Wednesday.

The U.S. death toll increases most years, but last year's death rate was up nearly 16% compared to the previous year. That's the largest one-year leap since 1918, when U.S. soldier deaths in World War I and the flu pandemic pushed deaths up 46% compared with 1917.

Death rates last year overall were highest among Black people and American Indian

and Alaska Native people. The COVID-19 death rate was highest among Hispanic people.

Preliminary data in December suggested 2020 would be an especially deadly year and the CDC's new report showed it was even worse than anticipated. The new numbers are still considered preliminary and are based on an analysis of death certificates.

Typically, analyzing death certificates takes about 11 months. But the CDC sped up the timeline, the report said, to address "the pressing need for updated, quality data during the global COVID-19 pandemic."

In a separate report, the CDC responded to concerns about deaths being misattributed to COVID-19. The agency took a close look at death certificates, finding that most that listed COVID-19 also named other contributing problems. They included conditions such as diabetes, known to increase the danger of severe disease, or conditions such as pneumonia that occurred in the chain of events leading to the deaths.

Only about 5% of the death certificates listed only COVID-19, and that was more frequently the case when the person died at home.

The CDC said its review confirms the accuracy of the death count for COVID-19.

## Marine based on Okinawa honored for saving woman

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE

*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — An Okinawa-based Marine who rescued a local woman from a dark, busy roadway earlier this year has received a medal for his actions.

Marine Sgt. Jovany Gutierrez, 27, a military police officer and the driver for III Marine Expeditionary Force commander Lt. Gen. H. Stacy Clardy, was awarded the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal during a ceremony at Camp Courtney on March 12, according to a Marine statement shortly after the ceremony.

Gutierrez, of Albuquerque, N.M., was on his way to work around 5 a.m. Jan. 6 when he spotted a young Japanese woman in his headlights, he recalled during an interview March 24 at Camp Courtney. He drove past carefully but then saw her collapse in the road behind him.

Gutierrez pulled his car around, placing it between her and the oncoming traffic on the poorly lit roadway. He waved down another Marine who was able to help. They placed the woman in the recovery position and waited for paramedics, who had been called by another driver, to arrive. Gutierrez said the paramedics told him the woman would be fine.



# Body cam shows Floyd struggle, takedown

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — George Floyd's struggle with three police officers trying to arrest him, seen on body-camera video, included Floyd's panicky cries of "I'm sorry, I'm sorry" and "I'm claustrophobic!" as the officers tried to push Floyd into the back of a police SUV.

At one point, Floyd bucks forward, throwing his upper body out of the car. Officers eventually give up, and Floyd thanks them — and then is taken to the ground, facedown and handcuffed. Officer Derek Chauvin's knee pins his neck, another officer's knee holds his back and a third officer holds his legs, with the officers talking calmly about whether he might be on drugs.

"He wouldn't get out of the car. He just wasn't following instructions," Officer Thomas Lane was recorded saying. Lane also asked twice if the officers should roll

Floyd on his side, and later said he thinks Floyd is passing out. Another officer checked Floyd's wrist for a pulse and said he couldn't find one.

The officers' video was part of a mountain of footage and witness testimony Wednesday in Chauvin's trial on murder and manslaughter charges in Floyd's death, showing how his alleged attempt to pass a phony \$20 bill at a neighborhood market last May escalated into tragedy one video-documented step at a time.

A security-camera scene of people joking around inside the store soon gave way to the sight of officers pulling Floyd, who was Black, from his SUV at gunpoint. The extended body-camera footage gave jurors the fullest view yet.

When Floyd was finally taken away by paramedics, Charles McMillian, a 61-year-old bystander who recognized Chauvin from the neighborhood, told the officer he

didn't respect what Chauvin had done.

"That's one person's opinion," Chauvin could be heard responding. "We gotta control this guy 'cause he's a sizable guy... and it looks like he's probably on something."

Floyd was 6-foot-4 and 223 pounds, according to the autopsy, which also found fentanyl and methamphetamine in his system. Chauvin's lawyer said the officer is 5-foot-9 and 140 pounds.

Chauvin, 45, who is white, is charged with murder and manslaughter, accused of killing the 46-year-old Floyd by kneeling on Floyd's neck for 9 minutes, 29 seconds, as he lay face-down in handcuffs.

The defense has argued Chauvin did what he was trained to do and Floyd's death was not caused by the officer's knee, as prosecutors contend, but by Floyd's illegal drug use, heart disease, high blood pressure and the adrenaline flowing through his body.

## Police: Gunman knew victims in Calif. attack

Associated Press

ORANGE, Calif. — Southern California police said Thursday the gunman who killed four people and wounded a fifth at an office complex knew all the victims either through business or personally.

Orange police Lt. Jennifer Amat also revealed that the gunman had chained gates to the complex closed, forcing officers who responded Wednesday to engage him from outside. Police withheld the identities of the dead but said one was a 9-year-old boy. The others were a man and two women.

The gunman was also wounded and hospitalized. When officers arrived, shots were ringing out at the building that includes a mobile home brokerage.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom in a tweet called the killings "horrifying and heartbreaking."

"Our hearts are with the families impacted by this terrible tragedy tonight," he said.

Amat had no information about what may have prompted the attack. She said the shooting happened on both levels of the building.

Signs outside indicated a handful of businesses are located there — including an insurance office, a financial consulting firm, a legal services business and a phone repair store.

People gathered outside the building after the shooting hoping to get word about loved ones.

Paul Tovar told KTLA-TV that his brother owns a business in the building, Unified Homes, a mobile home broker.

"He's not answering his phone, neither's my niece," Tovar said. "I'm pretty scared and worried ... right now I'm just praying really hard."

Charlie Espinoza also was outside the building and told The Orange County Register that he could not reach his fiancée, who works for a medical billing company.

## 2 major Georgia corporate leaders slam voting bill

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Some of Georgia's most prominent corporate leaders on Wednesday began to more forcefully criticize the state's sweeping new election law, acknowledging concerns of civil rights activists and Black business executives who say the measure targets non-white voters and threatens the democratic process.

The chief executives of Delta Air Lines and Coca-Cola pivoted from earlier, more equivocal statements and called the law "unacceptable," opening an unusual rift with Republican leaders who championed the legislation and typically enjoy a cozy relationship with the state's business community.

The business lobby in Georgia, home to 18 Fortune 500 companies, wields significant clout in state politics. Civil rights activists blamed influential executives for not helping spike the new law that's become a focal point in the nationwide, partisan fight over voting rights,

and there is rising pressure nationally on corporate titans to defend voting rights more explicitly and oppose Republican efforts in states that could follow Georgia's lead. Delta's and Coca-Cola's latest declarations could push Georgia's other marquee brands, including UPS and Home Depot, to take a stronger stand.

"Delta's statement finally tells the truth — even if it's late," said Nsé Ufot of the New Georgia Project, which has launched an ad campaign targeting major corporations.

After Republican Gov. Brian Kemp signed the new law last week, Delta issued a statement promoting parts of the law such as expanded weekend voting, but said "we understand concerns remain over other provisions ... and there continues to be work ahead in this important effort."

Speaking later on CNBC, Coca-Cola chief executive James Quincey called the legislation a "step backward."

# Migrants being freed without court notice

*Associated Press*

MISSION, Texas — Overwhelmed and underprepared, U.S. authorities are releasing migrant families on the Mexican border without notices to appear in immigration court or sometimes without any paperwork at all — time-saving moves that have left some migrants confused.

The rapid releases ease pressure on the Border Patrol and its badly overcrowded holding facilities but shifts work to Immigration and Customs and Enforcement, the agency that enforces immigration laws within the United States. Families are released with booking records; only parents are photographed and fingerprinted.

The Border Patrol began the unusual practice last week in Texas' Rio Grande Valley, which has seen the biggest increase in the number of migrant families and unac-

panied minors crossing the border. Last week, the agency added instructions to report to an ICE office within 60 days to adults' booking documents.

But some got no documents at all, including dozens at Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church in the Texas border city of Mission, where about 100 migrants released by U.S. authorities had been arriving each night to sleep on mats in classrooms in a shuttered elementary school.

Customs and Border Protection, which oversees the Border Patrol, said it stopped issuing court notices in some cases because preparing even one of the documents often takes hours. Migrants undergo background checks and are tested for COVID-19.

The agency did not answer questions about how many migrants have been released without court notices or without doc-

uments at all.

Sister Norma Pimentel, executive director of Catholic Charities of Rio Grande Valley, knows of 10 to 15 families released without any paperwork since last week, an issue that has cropped up before when there are large increases in new arrivals.

Migrants will be issued notices to appear in court at their 60-day check-ins with ICE, according to a U.S. official with direct knowledge of the plans who spoke on condition of anonymity because the plans have not been made public. It is unclear how widespread the practice has been, but it is very common in Rio Grande Valley, the busiest corridor for illegal crossings.

Preparing a court appearance notice can take an hour to 90 minutes, said Chris Cabrera, spokesman for the National Border Patrol Council, a union that represents agents.

## NM moves to legalize cannabis as NY signs new law

*The Washington Post*

Capping off a momentous week for legal cannabis, state legislators in New Mexico on Wednesday voted to allow recreational use of the drug — a vote that came hours after New York's governor signed a bill legalizing marijuana.

New Mexico's Cannabis Regulation Act will eliminate criminal penalties for possession and use of marijuana for adults over 21 years old beginning in 2022 and create a framework for licensing sellers and taxing drug sales at up to 20%.

New Mexico Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham,

D, who called the special session 10 days after the state legislature failed to pass the bill during its regular session, is expected to swiftly sign it.

"This is a significant victory for New Mexico and my signing pen is ready," she said in a tweet late Wednesday.

The move sets up New Mexico to join 15 other states that have fully decriminalized the drug and came on the same day that Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam, D, asked state legislators to speed up his state's legalization to allow adults to start using the drug as early as July.

State-level support for decriminalizing the

drug has been growing since California became the first to legalize medical marijuana in 1996. In 2012, Colorado and Washington state pioneered laws to legalize recreational use of the drug.

Many states have also been motivated by calls for social justice measures to undo some of the damage done by harsh criminalization laws that disproportionately sent minorities to prison for nonviolent drug crimes. The New Mexico bill included a measure allowing people with a criminal record for possessing the drug for personal use to expunge past convictions.

## China convicts 7 Hong Kong pro-democracy advocates

*Associated Press*

HONG KONG — Seven of Hong Kong's leading pro-democracy advocates, including a media tycoon and an 82-year-old veteran of the movement, were convicted Thursday for organizing and participating in a march during massive anti-government protests in 2019 that triggered a crackdown

on dissent.

Jimmy Lai, the owner of the outspoken Apple Daily tabloid, Martin Lee, the octogenarian founder of the city's Democratic Party, and five former pro-democracy lawmakers were found guilty in a ruling handed down by a district judge. They face up to five years in prison.

According to the ruling, six of the seven defendants, including Lee and Lai, carried a banner that criticized police and called for reforms as they left Victoria Park on Aug. 18, 2019, and led a procession through the center of the city. The other defendant, Margaret Yee, joined them on the way and helped carry the banner.

STARS AND STRIPES®

Single source convenience, reliably independent. Visit [www.stripes.com](http://www.stripes.com).

Reporting  
World, National  
and Military News

# Final Four becomes high-seeded affair

*Associated Press*

INDIANAPOLIS — Gonzaga's countdown to perfection has ticked to two.

The Bulldogs are back in the Final Four, two wins from becoming the first undefeated team since the 1976 Indiana Hoosiers.

And, after all those upsets, the March Madness apex in the Hoosier State will be a high-seeded affair.

Gonzaga is a No. 1 seed. So is Baylor. Houston, a 2. UCLA is an 11, but it's also the all-time leader in national championships.

There also will be a trip down Southwest Conference memory lane.

But the Zags will be the team to beat.

Gonzaga (30-0) has been an offensive juggernaut rarely seen in college basketball. Fast-moving and free-flowing, the ultraefficient Zags have steamrolled everyone in their way, winning a Division I-record 27 straight games by double digits.

An 85-56 dismantling of Southern California in the Elite Eight stretched their winning streak to 34 games over two seasons and put them back in the Final Four for the second time in the past four NCAA Tournaments. Gonzaga came up short

in a loss to North Carolina in the 2017 national title game, but has its sights set on finishing it off this time — and grabbing a piece of history.

"Everyone wants us to keep moving forward, but that's not how we roll," Gonzaga coach Mark Few said. "This is a heck of an accomplishment. We're going to take it and savor it for what it is. That doesn't lessen our desire to win this game, the next game or win two more games."

The next one won't be easy. Mick Cronin will make sure of that.

The former Cincinnati coach has returned UCLA to relevance after a couple of mediocre seasons. In two years at Westwood, he's added a level of toughness that's helped them go from the First Four to the Final Four after losing their last four games entering the NCAA Tournament.

UCLA (22-9) has grinded out five wins in the NCAA tourney, including No. 2 seed Alabama and a 51-49 takedown of top-seeded Michigan in the Elite Eight. The Bruins are in the Final Four for the first time since 2008 and play the kind of game that might be able to slow the Gonzaga machine.

"Obviously, I knew the expect-

tations. It's pretty clear at UCLA," Cronin said. "I understood it and I wanted it."

The Texas half of the draw will have a Southwest feel.

Baylor and Houston were both members of the Southwest Conference, which splintered in 1996. The Bears were there when the league started, circa 1914. The Cougars made the move from independent to SWC status in 1975.

The latest versions of the two programs are nearly identical: long, athletic, quick, breath-squeezing defense.

Baylor went on a long rebuild to finally get here.

The Bears were embroiled in one of the darkest scandals in college basketball history, when Patrick Dennehy was murdered by teammate Carlton Dotson in 2003. Coach Dave Bliss then resigned after it was revealed he encouraged players to lie about Dennehy to cover up NCAA violations.

In stepped coach Scott Drew.

Drew took the Baylor job after serving a one-year stint succeeding his father, Homer, at Valparaiso, and he went through some extra-lean years early on in Waco.

He's since molded the program into a national powerhouse.

The Bears (26-2) were unstoppable this season before a COVID-19 pause slowed their roll, but they've been back to their dominating ways in March.

After twice failing at the regional final under Drew, Baylor beat Arkansas in the Elite Eight to reach the Final Four for the first time since 1950 — when the bracket was eight teams and the City College of New York Beavers won the national championship.

Kelvin Sampson has made a similar imprint on Houston.

The Cougars had lost the luster from the Phi Slama Jama days, reaching the NCAA Tournament once in 22 years before Sampson was hired in 2014.

Sampson gradually built Houston back up, taking it to the NCAA Tournament's second round in 2018, the Sweet 16 the next year. The fleet-footed Cougars (28-3) were dominating this season and grinded down their first four NCAA Tournament opponents to reach their first Final Four since losing in the 1984 national championship game.

The run has come in Indiana, home of the NCAA and where Sampson's career nearly ended. He was forced out at Indiana in 2008 due to NCAA sanctions.

## North Carolina's Williams retiring after 33-year career

*Associated Press*

North Carolina announced Thursday that Hall of Fame basketball coach Roy Williams is retiring after a 33-year career that includes three national championships.

The decision comes two weeks after the 70-year-old Williams closed his 18th season with the Tar Heels after a highly successful run at Kansas. In all, Williams won 903 games in a career that included those three titles, all with the Tar Heels, in 2005, 2009 and 2017.

North Carolina scheduled a campus news conference for Thursday afternoon on the Smith Center court bearing his name.

The Tar Heels lost to Wisconsin in the first round of the NCAA Tournament in his final game, which was Williams' only first-round loss in 30 tournaments.

"It's been a difficult year, but everybody's had the problems with COVID that we've had," an emotional Williams said after the game. "It's been a hard year to push and pull, push and pull every other day to try to get something

done. But how can you be any luckier than Roy Williams is coaching basketball?"

Williams spent 10 seasons at his alma mater as an assistant coach to late mentor Dean Smith before leaving to take over the Jayhawks program in 1988. He spent 15 seasons there, taking Kansas to four Final Fours and two national title games.

Williams' time as an assistant included the North Carolina's run to the 1982 NCAA championship for Smith's first title, a game that memorably featured a freshman

named Michael Jordan making the go-ahead jumper late to beat Georgetown.

"Roy Williams is and always will be a Carolina basketball legend," Jordan said in a statement through his business manager. "His great success on the court is truly matched by the impact he had on the lives of the players he coached — including me. I'm proud of the way he carried on the tradition of Coach Smith's program, always putting his players first."



# Arizona women crash party of mainstays

Associated Press

Arizona has been having fun and playing good basketball, all the way to its first women's NCAA Final Four. The Wildcats will now play the team that has been there more than any other.

The Wildcats (20-5), in their fifth season with Adia Barnes coaching her alma mater, play their first national semifinal game Friday night against UConn (28-1). The 11-time national champions are making their 13th consecutive Final Four appearance and 21st overall for coach Geno Auriemma.

"They're a confident team because it's charted territory. It's uncharted for us. This is something they're used to," Barnes said. "I think for us there's no pressure. No one expects Arizona to win a championship. No one expected Arizona to be in the Elite 8, Sweet 16, Final Four. We don't have anything to lose. We can play loose, free, because we don't have the pressure."

Barnes will also be part of another first, along with South Carolina coach Dawn Staley. It will be the first Final Four with two teams coached by Black women.

"So many black coaches out there don't get the opportunity.

When (athletic directors) don't see it, they don't see it," Staley said. "And they're going to see it on (the) biggest stage Friday night."

The Gamecocks (26-4), the 2017 national champions, play No. 1 overall seed Stanford (29-2) in the first game Friday night in the Alamodome, where UConn beat the Cardinal for the 2010 title the only other time the Final Four was played in San Antonio.

Stanford's first Final Four since 2017 is its 14th overall, trailing only UConn and Tennessee's 18.

Barnes was a player on the Wildcats' only other Sweet 16 team, her senior season in 1998 when she was the Pac-12 player of the year. Now she becomes the sixth coach to take her alma mater to the Final Four. Arizona hadn't even been in the women's NCAA Tournament since 2005, though it would have made it last year with a 24-7 record before the tourney was canceled because of the pandemic.

While the Huskies have been regulars in the Final Four, this group doesn't have too much experience — and UConn hasn't won a national title since four in a row from 2013-16. The

Huskies advanced this time with a 69-67 win in the River Walk Region final over Baylor, which won the national title in the last NCAA tourney two years ago.

"It's a lot to digest, but right now you can only think about this particular one. You don't necessarily are thinking the other 12. We have 10 kids on our team that have not been to one Final Four," Auriemma said. "And so that to me is what the excitement is all about. Those 10 kids have never been to one and they're getting an opportunity to go to their very first."

There will be a matchup of standout guards with UConn freshman phenom and first-team All-American Paige Bueckers (22.5 points, 6.5 rebounds a game) and Wildcats second-team All-American Aari McDonald (25.3 ppg, 6.8 rpg), who is coming off consecutive 30-point games.

McDonald was looking at Facebook on Sunday, the day before No. 3 seed Arizona's win over Indiana in the Mercardo Region final, when the 5-foot-6 guard saw her post from exactly a year earlier. McDonald said then that she was coming back for her senior season for just such an opportunity.

"It's just crazy how things come full circle," McDonald said. "You make goals, to see yourself and your team achieve them like this, it's crazy. I'm just so excited."

With Cardinal third-team All-American guard Kiana Williams getting to play the NCAA tourney in her hometown, Stanford overcame a 12-point half-time deficit to beat 2018 Final Four team Louisville 78-63 for the final spot. The Cardinal are in their 34th consecutive women's NCAA Tournament, with Tara VanDerveer in her record 35th overall as a coach.

South Carolina, which has now made it to three of six Final Fours and won the last title decided in Texas four years ago in Dallas, likely would have been the No. 1 overall seed last year had been there been an NCAA tourney. The Gamecocks went 32-1 last season, spent the final 10 weeks at No. 1 and Staley was the AP coach of the year, but they didn't get a chance to win another title because of the pandemic.

South Carolina is back after a dominating 62-34 win over Texas and first-year coach Vic Schaefer. Top-seeded South Carolina blocked 14 shots in the Hemisfair Region final.

## Source: Lindor, Mets agree to \$341M, 10-year deal

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Francisco Lindor and the New York Mets have agreed to a \$341 million, 10-year deal, keeping the All-Star shortstop in Queens for the long haul after acquiring him from Cleveland in the offseason, according to a person familiar with the agreement.

The person spoke to The Associated Press on Wednesday night on condition of anonymity because the deal hadn't been announced.

Lindor was eligible for free agency after this season and

said this spring he wouldn't negotiate with the Mets on a long-term contract after opening day. Less than 24 hours before New York was supposed to start its season Thursday night in Washington, an agreement was reached.

The 27-year-old Lindor has two Gold Gloves and made four All-Star teams in six seasons with the Indians, hitting .285 with an average of 29 homers, 86 RBIs and 21 stolen bases per 162 games.

He was the prized pickup in new owner Steve Cohen's first

offseason, acquired from Cleveland along with right-hander Carlos Carrasco for infielders Amed Rosario, Andrés Giménez and two minor leaguers. New York added Lindor knowing he could walk after the 2021 season, but the team said it would try to negotiate a long-term pact.

MLB Network was first to report on the agreement.

Lindor will retain his \$22.3 million salary for 2021 before the contract kicks in for 2022.

The deal will be the largest ever for a shortstop, passing Fernando Tatis Jr.'s \$340 million,

14-year contract with San Diego signed in February. Only Mike Trout's \$426.5 million, 12-year deal with the Los Angeles Angels and Mookie Betts' \$365 million, 12-year contract with the Los Angeles Dodgers are worth more. Betts' deal includes \$115 million in deferred payments through 2044.

Lindor's deal is also by far the largest payout ever from the Mets, surpassing contracts for third baseman David Wright (\$138 million), pitchers Jacob deGrom (\$137.5 million) and Johan Santana (\$137.5 million).

# Bucks top Lakers, Drummond hurts toe

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Andre Drummond left his Lakers debut with a bruised right toe, and Jrue Holiday scored 28 points in the Milwaukee Bucks' 112-97 victory over Los Angeles on Wednesday night.

Giannis Antetokounmpo had 25 points and 10 rebounds, and Khriston Middleton added 17 points and eight assists as the Bucks snapped their three-game losing streak with a workmanlike victory over the depleted defending NBA champions, who are still without LeBron James and Anthony Davis.

Drummond scored four points in 14 minutes before limping off the court early in the third quarter after trying to play without the toenail on his big right toe. The nail was completely ripped off in the first quarter when Bucks center Brook Lopez stepped on Drummond's foot, but Drummond said he didn't notice the extent of the injury until halftime, even though it was "very, very painful."

"To have this happen to me in the first game is kind of deflating for me, but my head is high," said Drummond, who hadn't played in a game for Cleveland since Feb. 12. "I'm going to take it game by game and come back better than ever."

X-rays were negative on the Lakers' new center, but the bruise adds another injury problem to the Lakers' list ahead of a tough

schedule in April. James missed his sixth straight game for Los Angeles with a sprained right ankle, and Davis missed his 20th consecutive game with a right calf injury.

**Jazz 111, Grizzlies 107:** Mike Conley scored 13 of his 26 points in the fourth quarter, Jordan Clarkson added 24 points and Utah won at Memphis for its seventh straight victory.

**Nets 120, Rockets 108:** Kyrie Irving had 31 points and a season-high 12 assists, and host Brooklyn overcame the loss of James Harden to beat Houston and move into first place in the Eastern Conference.

Harden sat out the fourth quarter against his former team with right hamstring tightness, finishing with 17 points, eight rebounds and six assists.

**Mavericks 113, Celtics 108:** Luka Dončić had 36 points and eight rebounds and Dallas held on to win at Boston.

Jalen Brunson added 21 points, including two late free throws, and Kristaps Porzingis finished with 19 points to help the Mavericks win their second straight.

**Trail Blazers 124, Pistons 10:** Damian Lillard had 33 points and nine assists and Portland won at Detroit.

CJ McCollum added 24 points and Carmelo Anthony and Robert Covington each scored 16 in the Trail Blazers' fourth

straight win.

**Heat 92, Pacers 87:** Duncan Robinson and Jimmy Butler helped Miami rally from a 13-point first-half deficit by spurring a decisive eight-point fourth-quarter run for a win at Indiana.

Robinson finished with 20 points and Butler added 18 as the Heat avoided getting swept in the three-game season series with the Pacers. Miami has won two straight since ending a four-game losing streak.

**Thunder 113, Raptors 103:** Svi Mykhailiuk scored 10 of his season-high 22 points in the fourth quarter, and Oklahoma City rallied to beat visiting Toronto.

Mykhailiuk made 9 of 14 shots and had a career-high nine rebounds.

**Timberwolves 102, Knicks 101:** Anthony Edwards scored 11 of his 24 points over the final eight minutes, leading a fierce rally by host Minnesota for a victory over former coach Tom Thibodeau and New York.

**Spurs 120, Kings 106:** DeMar DeRozan scored 26 points and host San Antonio snapped Sacramento's five-game winning streak.

**Suns 121, Bulls 116:** Devin Booker scored a season-high 45 points, Chris Paul added 19 points and 14 assists, and host Phoenix held on to beat Chicago.

# Sabres beat Flyers, stop slide at 18

Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Linus Ullmark stopped 31 shots and the Buffalo Sabres snapped an 18-game skid — the NHL's longest in 17 years — with a 6-1 win over the Philadelphia Flyers on Wednesday night.

Defenseman Rasmus Dahlin was the first off the bench as the final horn sounded and led a line of Sabres players high-fiving Ullmark in an arena without fans.

It was the first win for Buffalo since a 4-1 victory at New Jersey on Feb. 23, and ended an 0-15-3 streak. The slump was tied for the league's 14th longest, and worst since the Pittsburgh Penguins had a 0-17-1 stretch during the 2003-04 season.

Steven Fogarty scored his first career goal and added an assist, and defenseman Brandon Montour sealed the win by scoring short-handed goals 37 seconds apart, the first into an empty net.

Ivan Provorov scored for Philadelphia in the second period. Brian Elliott allowed four goals on 16 shots before he was replaced by Alex Lyon.

**Avalanche 9, Coyotes 3:** Joonas Donskoi scored three times during Colorado's five-goal first period in a win over visiting Arizona.

The team invited frontline and health-care workers, first responders, players' families and employees into Ball Arena. The last time the Avs played in

front of a home crowd was on March 11, 2020 — just before the league halted the season due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Andre Burakovsky and Pierre-Edouard Bellemare also scored in a wild first period that included Coyotes goals by Michael Bunting and Oliver Ekman-Larsson.

**Kings 4, Golden Knights 2:** Lias Andersson scored in his first game back after missing more than a month, helping Los Angeles win on the road to stop a three-game skid.

Andreas Athanasiou, Jaret Anderson-Dolan and Alex Iafallo also scored for the Kings, and Cal Petersen improved to 4-1-0 against Vegas after stopping 40 shots. Peterson has both of Los

Angeles' wins over the Golden Knights this season.

William Karlsson and Shea Theodore scored for Vegas. Marc-Andre Fleury made 26 saves.

**Sharks 4, Wild 2:** Rudolfs Balcers and Ryan Donato scored in the second period, and host San Jose completed a two-game sweep of Minnesota.

The Sharks followed a shootout win on Monday with another strong performance against a team they are chasing in the standings.

**Maple Leafs 3, Jets 1:** Auston Matthews scored his NHL-leading 24th goal for Toronto, and goaltender Jack Campbell stayed unbeaten this season with a win at Winnipeg.