

Marines start probe into disaster that killed 9

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The Marine Corps has launched a new investigation into an amphibious task force at the center of a disaster at sea last year that killed nine U.S. troops, service officials said, opening the possibility for additional discipline for officers involved.

A board of officers will review the formation of the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit, of Camp Pendleton, Calif., with Lt. Gen. Carl Mundy serving as board president, the service said in a statement.

“The investigation will inquire into the formation of the 15th MEU; training and material readiness impacting the formation of the 15th MEU; and higher headquarters oversight of the 15th MEU,” the service said. “The goal is to ensure the Marine Corps is doing everything possible to prevent this

type of mishap from happening again.”

The new investigation follows an outcry from the relatives of some of the service members killed in the disaster, in which an armored vehicle designed to carry Marines from Navy ships to shore rapidly took on water and sank on July 30 during a training exercise off the coast of California. The families have questioned why no general was held responsible after the initial investigation found numerous failures by Marine officers, including a lack of safety boats, slipshod maintenance, gaps in required training and complacency.

“Why are these men allowed to be in control of people’s lives period anymore?” Christiana Sweetwood of Danville, Va., whose son was among those killed, said in an interview last week. “No more. That’s the an-

gry part of me speaking. Are these generals getting off and these lower-level guys taking the blame?”

Several officers have been removed from their job or disciplined, including Col. Christopher Bronzi, the commanding officer of the 15th MEU, and Lt. Col. Michael Regner, who commanded 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, a unit of more than 1,000 troops that reported to Bronzi and was a part of his task force.

But the investigation released on March 26 raised the possibility that others also may be culpable. They include Maj. Gen. Robert Castellvi, the former commanding general of 1st Marine Division, who oversaw the training of the Marines in the platoon of amphibious assault vehicles involved.

Lt. Gen. Steven Rudder, the commanding general of Marine Corps Forces Pacific, found that

Castellvi “bears some responsibility” because the Marines involved did not receive a required assessment known as a Marine Corps Combat Readiness Evaluation before they were reassigned to the 15th MEU.

Rudder opted not to discipline Castellvi, noting that the Marines involved already had been transferred under Bronzi. Castellvi is now the service’s inspector general.

The investigation also cited the former commander of 3rd Assault Amphibian Battalion. The commander, who was not named in the report the service released, did not ensure that the Marines involved in the AAV platoon received the required combat readiness evaluation and that the vehicles were fully operational before they were assigned to the 15th MEU to prepare for a deployment, the investigation found.

Sailor who shot 2 was assigned to Md. medical research center

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A Navy corpsman who shot and wounded two sailors before he was killed by police on a nearby Army base was a laboratory technician assigned to a Naval medical research center on the Maryland base, according to his service record and a military official.

Fantahun Girma Woldesenbet, 38, and the two men he shot Tuesday were all assigned to Fort Detrick in Frederick, authorities have said.

One of the wounded sailors was released from a Baltimore hospital Tuesday afternoon, while the other was in critical condition, military officials said on the Navy’s Twitter account.

The Navy says it is sending a

“Special Psychiatric Rapid Intervention Team” to Fort Detrick to offer mental health services to people on the base.

Authorities haven’t disclosed a possible motive for the shooting.

“We’re still trying to sort through stacks of paper ... to figure out exactly what the motive would be,” Frederick Police Lt. Andrew Alcorn said Tuesday.

Woldesenbet was a hospital corpsman third class who worked as a lab technician in the Naval Medical Research Center’s Biological Defense Research Directorate at Fort Detrick, Navy Cmdr. Denver Applehans, a spokesman for the Navy’s Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, said Wednesday. The Naval Medical Research Center’s headquarters

are in Silver Spring, Md.

Woldesenbet’s service record says he enlisted in September 2012 and reported to his most recent position in August 2019. In between, he served at military facilities in San Antonio; Camp Lejeune, N.C.; Corpus Christi, Texas; Bremerton, Wash.; and Portsmouth, Va.

The shooting took place at a warehouse rented by the research directorate to store research supplies and equipment. The warehouse is in the Riverside Tech Park, an office park several miles from the Army base. The warehouse is not staffed on a regular basis and is leased by a military contractor, Applehans said.

Woldesenbet shot the sailors with a rifle, police and military of-

ficials said.

He then drove to the base, where gate guards who had been given advance notice told him to pull over for a search. But Woldesenbet immediately sped off, making it about a half-mile into the installation before he was stopped at a parking lot by the base’s police force. When he pulled out a weapon, the police shot and killed him, Fort Detrick’s Brig. Gen. Michael J. Talley said.

Fort Detrick is home to the military’s flagship biological defense laboratory and several federal civilian biodefense labs. About 10,000 military personnel and civilians work on the base, which encompasses about 1,300 acres in the city of Frederick.

US warns of China's threat to Taiwan

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The American military is warning that China is probably accelerating its timetable for capturing control of Taiwan, the island democracy that has been the chief source of tension between Washington and Beijing for decades and is widely seen as the most likely trigger for a potentially catastrophic U.S.-China war.

The worry about Taiwan comes as China wields new strength from years of military buildup. It has become more aggressive with Taiwan and more assertive in sovereignty disputes in the South China Sea. Beijing also has become more confrontational with Washington; senior Chinese officials traded sharp and unusually public barbs with Secretary of State Antony Blinken in talks in Alaska last month.

A military move against Taiwan, however, would be a test of U.S. support for the island that Beijing views as a breakaway province. For the Biden administration, it could present the choice of abandoning a friendly, democratic entity or risking what could become an all-out war over a cause that is not on the radar of most Americans. The United States has long pledged to help Taiwan defend itself, but it has deliberately left unclear how far it would go in response to a Chinese attack.

This accumulation of concerns meshes with the administration's view that China is a frontline challenge for the United States and that more must be done soon — militarily, diplomatically and by other means — to deter Beijing as it seeks to supplant the United States as the predominant power in Asia. Some American military leaders see Taiwan as potentially the most immediate flashpoint.

"We have indications that the risks are actually going up," Adm. Philip Davidson, the most senior U.S. military commander in the Asia-Pacific region, told a Senate panel last month, referring to a Chinese military move on Taiwan.

"The threat is manifest during this decade — in fact, in the next six years," Davidson said.

Days later, Davidson's expected successor, Adm. John Aquilino, declined to back up the six-year timeframe but told senators at his confirmation hearing: "My opinion is, this problem is much closer to us than most think."

Biden administration officials have spoken less pointedly but stress the intention to

deepen ties with Taiwan, eliciting warnings from Beijing against outsider interference in what it considers a domestic matter.

On Wednesday, Taiwanese Foreign Minister Joseph Wu said the military threat against his country is increasing, and while he said it was not yet "particularly alarming," the Chinese military in the last couple of years has been conducting what he called "real combat-type" exercises closer to the island.

"We are willing to defend ourselves, that's without any question," Wu told reporters. "We will fight a war if we need to fight a war, and if we need to defend ourselves to the very last day, then we will defend ourselves to the very last day."

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin calls China the "pacing threat" for the United States, and the military services are adjusting accordingly. The Marine Corps, for example, is reshaping itself with China and Russia in mind after two decades of ground-focused combat against extremists in the Middle East.

Hardly an aspect of China's military modernization has failed to rile the U.S. military. Adm. Charles Richard, who as head of U.S. Strategic Command is responsible for U.S. nuclear forces, wrote in a recent essay that China is on track to be a "strategic peer" of the United States. He said China's nuclear weapons stockpile is expected to double "if not triple or quadruple" in the next 10 years, although that goes beyond the Pentagon's official view that the stockpile will "at least double" in that period.

Taiwan, however, is seen as the most pressing problem.

U.S. officials have noted People's Liberation Army actions that seem designed to rattle Taiwan. For example, Chinese aerial incursions, including flying around the island, are a near-daily occurrence, serving to advertise the threat, wear down Taiwanese pilots and aircraft and learn more about Taiwan's capabilities.

Chinese officials have scoffed at Davidson's Taiwan comments. A Ministry of Defense spokesman, Col. Ren Guoqiang, urged Washington to "abandon zero-peace thinking" and do more to build mutual trust and stability. He said that "attempts by outside forces to use Taiwan to seek to restrain China, or the use by Taiwan independence forces to use military means to achieve independence, are all dead ends."

The implications of a Chinese military move against Taiwan and its 23 million people are so profound and potentially grave that Beijing and Washington have long managed a fragile middle ground — Taiwanese political autonomy that precludes control by Beijing but stops short of formal independence.

Predictions of when China might decide to try to compel Taiwan to reunite with the mainland have long varied, and there is no uniform view in the United States. Larry Diamond, a senior fellow at Stanford University's Hoover Institution, said last week he doubts Chinese leaders are ready to force the issue.

"I don't think it's coming soon," he said.

The Trump administration made a series of moves to demonstrate a stronger commitment to Taiwan, including sending a Cabinet member to Taipei last year, making him the highest-level U.S. official to visit the island since formal diplomatic relations were severed in 1979 in deference to China.

The Biden administration says it wants to cooperate with China where possible but has voiced its objections to a wide range of Chinese actions.

Last week, the U.S. ambassador to the Pacific island nation of Palau, John Hennessey-Niland, became the first serving U.S. ambassador to visit Taiwan since Washington cut ties with Taipei in favor of Beijing.

China is a frequent target of criticism in Congress. Concerns about countering its growing military might are reflected in passage of the Pacific Deterrence Initiative, funded at \$2.2 billion for 2021.

Davidson wants it to support, among other initiatives, establishing a better air defense system to protect the U.S. territory of Guam from Chinese missiles and preserving U.S. military dominance in the region.

Rep. Adam Smith, a Washington Democrat and chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, is skeptical of the military's fixation on dominance.

"Given the way the world works now, having one country be dominant is just hopelessly unrealistic," he said in a recent online forum sponsored by Meridian, a nonpartisan diplomacy center.

He said the U.S. military can maintain sufficient strength, in partnership with allies, to send the message: "China, don't invade Taiwan because the price you're going to pay for that isn't worth it."

Nearly half of new US virus cases are in just 5 states

Associated Press

Nearly half of new coronavirus infections nationwide are in just five states — a situation that is putting pressure on the federal government to consider changing how it distributes vaccines by sending more doses to hot spots.

New York, Michigan, Florida, Pennsylvania and New Jersey together reported 44% of the nation's new COVID-19 infections, or nearly 197,500 new cases, in the latest available seven-day period, according to state health agency data compiled by Johns Hopkins University. Total U.S. infections during the same week numbered more than 452,000.

The heavy concentration of new cases in states that account for 22% of the U.S. population has prompted some experts and elected officials to call for President Joe Biden's administration to ship additional vaccine doses to those places. So far, the White House has shown no signs of shifting from its policy of dividing vaccine doses among states based on population.

Sending extra doses to plac-

es where infection numbers are climbing makes sense, said Dr. Elvin H. Geng, a professor in infectious diseases at Washington University in St. Louis. But it's also complicated. States that are more successfully controlling the virus might see less vaccine as a result.

The spike in cases has been especially pronounced in Michigan, where the seven-day average of daily new infections reached 6,719 cases Sunday — more than double what it was two weeks earlier. Only New York reported higher case numbers. And California and Texas, which have vastly larger populations than Michigan, are reporting less than half its number of daily infections.

New virus variants are clearly one of the drivers in the increase, said Dr. Kirsten Bibbins-Domingo, chair of the department of epidemiology and biostatistics at the University of California at San Francisco. Failure to suppress the rise in cases will lead to more people getting sick and dying, she said, and drive increases in other parts of the country.

Ruling gives Democrats path to bypass filibuster

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — With a powerful new tool, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer has fresh options for potentially advancing President Joe Biden's infrastructure package and other priorities past Republican obstruction in the 50-50 split Senate.

Republicans still pledge to do all they can to halt Biden, but an official parliamentarian's opinion this week is a potential game-changer. It unleashes multiple options for Democrats to advance parts of Biden's agenda — including immigration and Medicare legislation — with 51 votes in the 100-member Senate rather than the 60 typically needed to move major legislation past filibuster threats.

There has been talk of trying to change the filibuster rules, but that would be a very heavy political lift in the divided and tradition-devoted Senate.

The White House was heartened by the parliamentarian's ruling but isn't giving up on support from some Republicans, despite their strong opposition to paying for much of the infrastructure plan with a corporate tax increase. The president, said press secretary Jen Psaki, "continues to believe ... that there is a bipartisan path forward."

However, it is clear that the deep partisan polarization in Washington has led to a new

era in legislating. The seasoned policy wonks on Capitol Hill are digging deep into the procedural toolbox to find ways around the gridlock that typically leaves Congress at a standstill.

Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell chided Biden for partisanship, and declared Tuesday that his side would not be supporting the \$2.3 trillion infrastructure package that Biden wants to pay for with the tax hike on corporations.

"For a president who ran as a bipartisan, I haven't seen that yet," McConnell told reporters in Kentucky.

McConnell said Biden is a "terrific person I know him well, I like him. We've been friends for years. A moderate he has not been."

While congressional Democrats had already planned on resorting to "budget reconciliation," a special, budget-linked procedure with a 51-vote threshold to pass parts of Biden's \$2.3 trillion infrastructure package, the parliamentarian's ruling opens the door to using it on certain other priorities.

Talks are swirling around an immigration overhaul that could provide a pathway to citizenship for some. There is also discussion about using the process to lower the Medicare retirement age from 65 to 60 and other agenda items.

Ark. lawmakers enact ban on trans youth treatment

Associated Press

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. — Arkansas lawmakers Tuesday made the state the first to ban gender confirming treatments and surgery for transgender youth, enacting the prohibition over the governor's objections.

The Republican-controlled House and Senate voted to override GOP Gov. Asa Hutchinson's veto of the measure, which prohibits doctors from providing gender

confirming hormone treatment, puberty blockers or surgery to anyone under 18 years old, or from referring them to other providers for the treatment.

Opponents of the measure have vowed to sue to block the ban before it takes effect this summer.

Hutchinson vetoed the bill Monday following pleas from pediatricians, social workers and the parents of transgender

youth who said the measure would harm a community already at risk for depression and suicide. The ban was opposed by several medical and child welfare groups, including the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Another bill advanced by a House committee earlier Tuesday would prevent schools from requiring teachers to refer to students by their preferred pronouns or titles.

Officers line up to reject Chauvin's actions

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — The parade of Minneapolis police officers rejecting a former officer's actions in restraining George Floyd continued at his murder trial, including a use-of-force instructor who said officers were coached to "stay away from the neck when possible."

Lt. Johnny Mercil on Tuesday became the latest member of the Minneapolis force to take the stand as part of an effort by prosecutors to dismantle the argument that Derek Chauvin was doing what he was trained to do when he put his knee on George Floyd's neck last May.

Several experienced officers, including the police chief himself, have testified that Floyd should not have been kept pinned to the pavement for close to 9½ minutes by prosecutors' reckoning as the Black man lay face down, his hands cuffed behind his back.

According to testimony and

records submitted Tuesday, Chauvin took a 40-hour course in 2016 on how to recognize people in crisis — including those suffering mental problems or the effects of drug use — and how to use de-escalation techniques to calm them down.

Sgt. Ker Yang, the Minneapolis police official in charge of crisis-intervention training, said officers are taught to "slow things down and reevaluate and reassess."

Records show Chauvin also underwent training in the use of force in 2018. Mercil said those who attended were taught that the sanctity of life is a cornerstone of departmental policy and that officers must use the least amount of force required to get a suspect to comply.

Under cross-examination by Chauvin attorney Eric Nelson, Mercil testified that officers are trained in some situations to use their knee across a suspect's back or shoulder and employ

their body weight to maintain control.

But Mercil added: "We tell officers to stay away from the neck when possible."

Nelson has argued that the now-fired white officer "did exactly what he had been trained to do over his 19-year career," and he has suggested that the illegal drugs in Floyd's system and his underlying health conditions are what killed him, not Chauvin's knee.

In fact, Nelson sought to point out moments in the video footage when he said Chauvin's knee did not appear to be on Floyd's neck.

Nelson showed Mercil several images taken from officers' body-camera videos, asking after each one whether it showed Chauvin's knee appearing to rest more on Floyd's back, shoulder or shoulder blades than directly on Floyd's neck. Mercil often agreed.

Nelson acknowledged the images were difficult to make out.

They were taken at different moments during Floyd's arrest, starting about four minutes after he was first pinned to the ground, according to time stamps on the images.

In other testimony, Jody Stiger, a Los Angeles Police Department sergeant serving as a prosecution use-of-force expert, said officers were justified in using force while Floyd was resisting their efforts to put him in a squad car. But once he was on the ground and stopped resisting, "at that point the officers ... should have slowed down or stopped their force as well."

Stiger said that after reviewing video of the arrest, "my opinion was that the force was excessive."

Chauvin, 45, is charged with murder and manslaughter in Floyd's death May 25. Floyd, 46, was arrested outside a neighborhood market after being accused of trying to pass a counterfeit \$20 bill.

San Francisco suspends plan to rename schools

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — America's founding fathers got a reprieve Tuesday in San Francisco, when the city's scandal-plagued school board formally suspended a plan to rename 44 schools as part of a racial reckoning that critics said went too far.

The city's Board of Education, which convened on Zoom, voted unanimously to reverse its much-criticized decision to strip the names of a third of San Francisco's public schools, which it said honored figures linked to racism, sexism and other injustices. Among them were schools named for presidents Abraham Lincoln, George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, writer Robert Louis Stevenson and Revolutionary War hero Paul Revere. A school named for longtime Sen. Dianne Feinstein was on the list as well.

Tuesday's 6-0 decision means that the school board is rescinding its vote from January and will revisit the matter after all students have returned full time to in-person learning. It sets no specific timetable.

Parents, students and elected officials blasted the board for some of its targets — and its timing. The decision in late January came while all of San Francisco's public classrooms were closed because of coronavirus restrictions. They still are. Mayor London Breed, among others, called it "offensive and completely unacceptable" for the board to focus on changing school names rather than getting children back into classrooms.

The renaming process was led by a committee created in 2018 to study the names of district schools amid a national reckoning on racial injustice.

Study: Drought-breaking rains rarer in US West

Associated Press

BILLINGS, Mont. — Rainstorms grew more erratic and droughts much longer across most of the U.S. West over the past half-century as climate change warmed the planet, according to a sweeping government study released Tuesday that concludes the situation is worsening.

The most dramatic changes were recorded in the desert Southwest, where the average dry period between rainstorms grew from about 30 days in the 1970s to 45 days between storms now, said Joel Biederman, a research hydrologist with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Southwest Watershed Research Center in Tucson, Ariz.

The consequences of the intense dry periods that pummeled

areas of the West in recent years were severe — more intense and dangerous wildfires, parched croplands and not enough vegetation to support livestock and wildlife. And the problem appears to be accelerating, with rainstorms becoming increasingly unpredictable, and more areas showing longer intervals between storms since the turn of the century compared to prior decades, the study concludes.

The study comes with almost two-thirds of the contiguous U.S. beset by abnormally dry conditions. Warm temperatures forecast for the next several months could make it the worst spring drought in almost a decade, affecting roughly 74 million people across the U.S., the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Family sues after man dies in eating contest

CA FRESNO — The son of a California man who choked to death during an amateur taco eating contest at a minor league baseball game is suing the event's organizers for negligence.

The lawsuit for Marshall Hutchings, 18, alleges his father, Dana Hutchings, was not made aware of the risks and danger involved in an eating competition, the Fresno Bee reported.

The 41-year-old died after choking on tacos while competing in the contest during a Fresno Grizzlies game on Aug. 13, 2019. Participants competed to devour as many tacos as possible during a certain amount of time.

The suit names Fresno Sports and Events, the owner of the Grizzlies.

Cat spent days in tree, rescued after big plunge

IN EVANSVILLE — A cat that spent days stuck in a tree in southwestern Indiana is back on solid ground after surviving a dramatic plunge when a tree service company cut the limb it had been clinging to because the feline was beyond its rescuer's reach.

When someone mentioned the cat's dayslong plight at the High Score Saloon, the bar's owners, Jared Neible and Clint Hoskins, pledged \$200 for a tree service to rescue the animal from the tree, the Evansville Courier & Press reported.

A worker for DJ's Tree Service was raised in a bucket truck into the tree, but the cat

was too tired and scared to move, so he used a saw to cut the limb the cat was on. The cat plunged about 70 feet, but appeared fine afterward.

Shark replica stirs debate in beach town

AL GULF SHORES — One store in this Gulf Coast beach town has a giant, purple octopus draped across its roof, and the main entrance at another resembles the toothy mouth of a giant shark that customers can walk through.

But plans to install a realistic, 27-foot-long shark replica outside another store in an area that's being spruced up for redevelopment are stirring debate, with some wondering whether such a display just steps away from the surf would be too scary.

A proposal to hang a giant shark model outside an Alvin's Island store near Beach Boulevard in Gulf Shores, a prime tourist town on the Alabama coast, is drawing questions among members of the panel that would have to OK the plan, AL.com reported.

The commission is considering whether the shark would run afoul of regulations covering "novelty architecture" in Gulf Shores.

Man rescued from freezing sinkhole

CO DENVER — A man is recovering after he fell 30 feet into a water- and ice-filled sinkhole in the central Colorado mountain town of Leadville.

The Denver Post reported firefighter Alex Conlin with

Leadville/Lake County Fire Rescue rappelled into the hole to rescue the man, whose name and age were not released.

Conlin used a ladder that was placed across the top of the hole as a support to lower himself and attach a safety line to the man so he wouldn't sink into the water. The man was taken to a nearby airport, where a helicopter flew him to a hospital.

Cow causes traffic jam on interstate highway

GA ATLANTA — A loose cow was blamed for a traffic jam on an Atlanta area highway.

Police in Dunwoody, a suburb about 15 miles north of Atlanta, say officers responded to a cow running on Interstate 285. It had apparently fallen out of a livestock trailer.

Michael Gerbick told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution the cow surprised him as he headed to work at a Volvo dealership.

"Traffic was moving a little. Cars were slowly getting by. Then all the sudden this cow comes running around the corner with a gentleman chasing him," Gerbick said.

Police say they were able to capture the cow with help from someone with a rope.

State bans motorized watercraft from lake

MT COLUMBIA FALLS — State wildlife commissioners have banned motorized watercraft from a lake near Glacier National Park in northwestern Montana at the request of residents worried about growing pressures from people moving into the area.

Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks commissioners voted unanimously for the ban, The Hungry Horse News reported.

It covers Tepee Lake, a shallow, 43-acre water body several miles from the North Fork Flathead River near the U.S.-Canada border. The lake hosts a family of loons and is publicly accessible.

Property owners around the lake had petitioned the commission to make the rule change, saying it was "inevitable a neighbor or visitor will eventually put a motorboat or jet ski on the lake" that could displace the loons, disturbing the quiet of the lake and harm its water quality.

Driver topped 115 mph before crashing

ME FALMOUTH — A Maine man sped away from a deputy at speeds topping 115 mph on Interstate 95 before the car crashed and flipped, officials said.

Abdiaziz Dahir, 28, of Portland, was charged with driving to endanger, operating after suspension and giving a false name to an officer, said Naldo Gagnon, chief deputy at the Cumberland County Sheriff's Office.

Dahir, who was ejected when he crashed, was not identified until after he was being treated at Maine Medical Center, Gagnon said.

A loaded firearm was discovered among the debris alongside the road, he said.

One passenger managed to slip out of the car during an initial traffic stop before the car sped away; a second passenger was uninjured, officials said.

— From wire reports

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Normalcy back with Masters in April

Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Ga. — The record score at Augusta National wasn't all that set Dustin Johnson apart from other Masters champions.

No one else ever won the Masters and then didn't play in another tournament the rest of the year. No other Masters champion was allowed to keep his green jacket for only five months before it was time to try to win it again.

Then again, no one ever played the Masters in November.

Postponed last year because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Masters is back to being that annual rite of spring — the first major of the year, not the last one — and so much about the 85th edition that begins April 8 feels almost normal.

Gone are the autumn hues of gold, orange and red in the trees, the brown leaves mixed in with the pine straw on the ground. Augusta National is blazing with pink and red and

purple azaleas, accented by the white blooms of dogwood.

Inside the ropes — yes, there are ropes — is a course expected to play fast, firm and scary.

“I think it will be back to feeling like a normal Masters,” Johnson said. “I’m definitely looking forward to that.”

Along with the spring colors, the volume returns, though not to the same decibel. Augusta National had no choice but to keep the spectators away in November because of the pandemic, just like the other majors last year. The only witnesses to a master-class performance by Johnson were media, staff, club members and families.

It will be 144 days from when Tiger Woods helped Johnson into his green jacket until Johnson tees off in the opening round in his bid to join Woods, Nick Faldo and Jack Nicklaus as the only repeat winners at Augusta.

Woods, such a huge part of the Masters landscape, won't be around for this one. He suffered career-threatening injuries to

his right leg and foot from his SUV running off the road along the coastal suburbs of Los Angeles on Feb. 23. It will be the fourth time in the last eight years that injuries have kept the five-time Masters champ from playing.

Augusta National has not said how many badges have been sold, only that they will be limited. Fans have slowly returned to golf in the last few months, with estimates of about 10,000 or more at places like Bay Hill and the TPC Sawgrass, enough to line the fairways to watch the marquee players.

That was missing at the last Masters.

“Without the patrons, it just wasn't the same,” Jordan Spieth said. “Whatever percentage it will be, patrons that are there will make it feel like normal, even it's not at full capacity. I'm looking more forward to this one than I was maybe in November. But the Masters is the Masters. They give out a jacket at the end of it and it's a dream-

come-true situation.

“It doesn't matter when it's played and who's there,” he said. “It's you against the golf course and the field.”

Neither stood much of a chance in November against Johnson.

The No. 1 player in the world, whose career had been defined as much by the majors he didn't win as the one he did, pulled away on the back nine for a five-shot victory. He finished at 20-under 268, the lowest score in tournament history. It was one of several records that were set in soft conditions, inevitable because the rye grass had not taken full root and the summer Bermuda had yet to go entirely dormant.

There were 65 rounds in the 60s. There were 187 rounds at par or better for the week. Both were records.

“DJ, I think, would have won whether it was like it was in November or April,” Justin Thomas said. “He played far and away better than anyone else.”

Westwood, at 47, still seeking his Masters moment

Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Ga. — Lee Westwood made his Masters debut in 1997 and went out for a Saturday night shopping excursion when he realized that he would play the final round the following day with Jack Nicklaus.

He bought a photo — the iconic image of Nicklaus raising his putter as he watched his birdie putt drop to give him a lead that he never relinquished on the 71st hole of the 1986 tournament — and asked the six-time Masters winner to sign it after their round, while Tiger Woods was running away from the field on the way to his first Masters win.

Nicklaus obliged. “Lee, enjoyed our round, best wishes,

Jack Nicklaus,” he wrote. Westwood still has the picture and still looks to it every now and then for inspiration.

Nicklaus won the 1986 Masters at 46, with his son as his caddie. Westwood sees the parallels in his plan for this week — when he'll try to win the Masters at 47 with his son as his caddie. He has finished second in major championships three times, two of those coming at Augusta National, but the former world No. 1 player is still seeking that first major triumph.

“I maybe don't play as well, as often, anymore,” Westwood said. “But when I do play well, I tend to contend.”

He has proven that this year. Back-to-back second-place

finishes last month at The Players Championship and Bay Hill showed everyone — himself, probably most importantly — that he can still contend. He has been thinking about the Masters for weeks, came in for a couple of practice rounds between Bay Hill and The Honda Classic and believes he's done all he can to prepare.

“He's munching it pretty good out there,” said 1991 Masters winner Ian Woosnam, who played a practice round with Westwood earlier this week. “He seems to be really in control of his game. Just said to him, ‘Just be patient.’”

Patience is a virtue that comes with waiting forever for that major breakthrough.

Westwood has won 44 times around the world, has been part of seven Ryder Cup wins and likely will play in that event again later this year and has won nearly \$70 million in prize money. But he is 0-for-84 in majors, landing him among those dubbed the “best player to never win a major.”

Yet there are reasons for optimism: the two second-places last month, the fact that he has made the cut in his last 13 appearances at the Masters and that he's held the lead at Augusta National in past appearances after the first, second and third rounds.

“It just is validation, really, that I'm still good enough at my age to be out here and contending,” Westwood said.

Soto lifts Nats over Braves in 9th inning

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Juan Soto drove in the winning run with a single on a 3-0 pitch in the bottom of the ninth inning Tuesday, lifting the coronavirus-depleted Washington Nationals to a 6-5 comeback victory over the Atlanta Braves after waiting five days to start their season.

Lefty reliever Will Smith (0-1) entered for the ninth and promptly gave up a single to new leadoff hitter Victor Robles, and then hit Trea Turner with a pitch. That brought up Soto, the 2020 NL batting champion, and he delivered a line drive to center field.

Ronald Acuña Jr., Freddie Freeman and Dansby Swanson homered against Washington ace Max Scherzer. Acuña drove Scherzer's first pitch of the game deep to left-center, and led off the third with his second homer.

Turner hit a two-run shot for the Nationals. Daniel Hudson (1-0) got the win.

Because of a COVID-19 outbreak — four players tested positive;

seven were forced into quarantine after potentially being exposed — Washington's first four scheduled games were scrapped.

Dodgers 5, Athletics 1: Los Angeles ace Clayton Kershaw struck out eight in seven smooth innings to send host Oakland to its worst start in more than a century.

At 0-6, the A's have matched the poorest start in franchise history. The 1916 Philadelphia Athletics also began the season with six consecutive losses.

Yankees 7, Orioles 2: Gerrit Cole struck out 13 and walked none in seven scoreless innings in his most dominant start since joining host New York.

Cole (1-0) allowed four hits, three of them singles, in the type of performance that showed why the Yankees made him baseball's highest-paid pitcher in December 2019 with a \$324 million, nine-year contract.

Red Sox 6, Rays 5 (12): Randy Arozarena got twisted around in deep right field on J.D. Martinez's two-run double with

two outs in the 12th inning that lifted host Boston over Tampa Bay.

Mets 8, Phillies 4: Marcus Stroman tossed six sharp innings in his first start after sitting out last year due to COVID-19 concerns, and Dominic Smith and Pete Alonso each hit a two-run homer, lifting visiting New York to the win.

Padres 3, Giants 1: Victor Caratini hit a tiebreaking two-run homer for host San Diego, and Yu Darvish pitched six strong innings.

Astros 4, Angels 2: Carlos Correa hit a tiebreaking two-run homer in the ninth inning, lifting visiting Houston to the victory.

Reds 14, Pirates 1: Tyler Naquin homered twice and drove in a career-high seven runs, leading host Cincinnati to its fourth straight victory.

Cardinals 4, Marlins 2: Yadier Molina hit a tiebreaking sacrifice fly off former batterymate Sandy Alcantara, capping visiting St. Louis' three-run rally in the sixth inning.

Brewers 4, Cubs 0: Freddy

Peralta pitched five sharp innings, Travis Shaw hit a three-run homer and visiting Milwaukee stopped a three-game slide.

Rangers 7, Blue Jays 4: Nate Lowe homered twice for host Texas and padded his franchise record for RBIs to start the season with four more.

Tigers 4, Twins 3 (10): Akil Baddoo added another big hit in this charmed start to his big league career, lining an RBI single in the 10th inning for host Detroit.

White Sox 10, Mariners 4: Jose Abreu hammered a grand slam into the second deck for his 200th career home run, Luis Robert and Zack Collins both went deep for the first time this season and visiting Chicago beat Seattle.

Diamondbacks 10, Rockies 8 (13): Stephen Vogt homered and hit a go-ahead single in the 13th inning as visiting Arizona overcame Ryan McMahan's three home runs, beating Colorado in a game delayed about 50 minutes at the start by snow flurries.

Single site might be new model for NCAA Tournament

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — The NCAA used the single-site concept for its marquee championship out of necessity.

Now it could become part of the tournament's future.

A day after crowning a national champion for the first time since 2019, NCAA senior vice president of basketball Dan Gavitt told reporters that the successful men's college basketball tournament held primarily in Indianapolis and exclusively in Indiana could create a late-round model for future tourneys.

"If it's the desire of the committee and the membership to consider something along these lines for the future, I think we would give it

significant consideration," he said Tuesday on a video call. "I would hesitate to say, though, I don't think a 68-team single site, short of another pandemic, would be something we would have great interest in. However, once you get down to a fewer amount of teams, say the Sweet 16 and on, having teams in the same location may provide some opportunities the membership, coaches and all would want to consider for the future."

Whatever happens, it won't be anytime soon — at least not by choice.

The NCAA has already awarded preliminary round games through 2026 and intends to play those games as scheduled, something it

couldn't do this year because of the COVID-19 pandemic that forced everyone to rethink how they could safely host games a year after the tournament was scrapped.

Players, coaches and staff members were tested daily for the coronavirus throughout the three-week event. Seating capacity was capped at 25% in the six playing venues. Fans were required to wear masks and those in the closest contact with teams, deemed Tier 1 personnel, essentially lived in an NCAA version of a bubble.

By almost any measure, the protocols worked.

Gavitt said there were 15 positive tests among the 28,311 conducted. The 66 games

drew 173,592 fans, including nearly 8,000 Monday for the championship game.

Sure, there were obstacles. But ultimately what mattered most was that only one game, UCLA-VCU, was canceled and Baylor won the title in a city that is likely to find itself at the center of future tourneys, too, and as the NCAA's top backup option.

Or perhaps as a single-site city again.

"Knowing what we were able to pull off here in such a short amount of time, I think gives me and the NCAA staff incredible confidence that we have minimally an incredible backup plan if we're presented with a challenge and have to shift," Gavitt said.

Embiid scores 35, helps 76ers top Celtics

Associated Press

BOSTON — Doc Rivers said his star big man Joel Embiid had a few words for him as he walked off the TD Garden court on Tuesday night.

"I'm back," Embiid told the 76ers coach.

"I noticed," Rivers replied.

In just his second game back after being sidelined by a bruised bone in his left knee, Embiid scored 35 points and Philadelphia rolled to a 106-96 win over the Boston Celtics on Tuesday night.

Danny Green added 17 points as the 76ers posted their third straight victory over the Celtics to sweep the season series for the first time since the 2000-2001 season.

Embiid went 16-for-20 at the foul line and grabbed six rebounds. He missed 10 games with the injury.

"I'm not all the way there, but tonight is a big step," Embiid said.

It's also a small bit of revenge for Philadelphia, which was swept by Boston in the first round of the playoffs last season.

"It's not just about what happened in the playoffs, every

single year you want to win this matchup," Embiid said.

Philadelphia led by 21 in the second half of the opener of a four-game trip. It has won three of four overall.

Warriors 122, Bucks 121: Kelly Oubre Jr. converted a pair of free throws with 7.7 seconds left to give host Golden State the lead, and Milwaukee missed at the end.

Stephen Curry made a three-pointer with 1:06 to play on the way to 41 points with five three-pointers as his team worked until the final buzzer to snap a three-game losing streak.

Khris Middleton scored 28 points as Milwaukee again missed injured big man Giannis Antetokounmpo.

Clippers 113, Trail Blazers 116: Paul George scored 36 points and host Los Angeles rode a franchise-best 47-point first quarter to a victory over Portland.

Kawhi Leonard added 29 points, 12 rebounds and seven assists as the Clippers followed an 18-point rout of the defending champion Lakers two days before with another impressive performance.

George shot 11-for-18 and made six three-pointers.

Hawks 123, Pelicans 107: Trae Young scored 30 points and helped lead a third-quarter three-point barrage as surging Atlanta beat Zion Williamson and visiting New Orleans.

The Hawks sank each of their 11 three-point attempts in the third, including four from Bogdan Bogdanovic, who had 21 points. Atlanta made 20 of 31 threes overall.

Young also had 12 assists. He made three threes in the third as the Hawks surged to a 107-90 lead.

Williamson led the Pelicans with 34 points.

Nuggets 134, Pistons 119: Nikola Jokic scored 27 points in 27 minutes and host Denver spoiled the return of Jerami Grant and Mason Plumlee by shellacking Detroit.

Jokic also dished out 11 assists, his 83rd career double-digit assist game, two more than Wilt Chamberlain had in his Hall of Fame career.

Plumlee and Grant helped the Nuggets make a deep run in the bubble last season.

Lakers 110, Raptors 101: Los Angeles built a 34-point

lead in the first 20 minutes and cruised past host Toronto.

Talen Horton-Tucker led seven Lakers in double figures with 17 points. Markieff Morris scored 15 before leaving the game with five fouls in the third quarter.

Grizzlies 124, Heat 112: Dillon Brooks scored 28 points on 10-for-16 shooting and visiting Memphis ended another Miami winning streak.

Jonas Valanciunas had 20 points for the Grizzlies, who won their third straight.

Jimmy Butler scored 28 points for the Heat, who had won their past four. Three weeks ago, Memphis stalled another Miami winning streak at five.

Bulls 113, Pacers 97: Nikola Vucevic took advantage of Indiana's missing big men by posting 32 points and 17 rebounds in visiting Chicago's win.

Chicago has won two straight since snapping a six-game losing streak and moved within one game of the Pacers for the No. 9 spot in the Eastern Conference. Vucevic also had five assists while going 14-for-29 from the field.

Nelson's third-period goal lifts Isles over Capitals

Associated Press

UNIONDALE, N.Y. — Brock Nelson scored with just under seven minutes left and Semyon Varlamov made 29 saves as the New York Islanders edged Washington 1-0 on Tuesday night to pull even with the Capitals for first place in the East Division.

Varlamov and Vitek Vanecek matched each other save for save for more than 50 minutes before Nelson scored his team-leading 14th goal assisted by defenseman Ryan Pulock at 13:05 of the third period.

Varlamov earned his fourth shutout this season and the 31st

of his career. It was the first time he blanked his former Capitals team in a regular-season game.

New York improved to 16-1-2 at Nassau Coliseum, remaining the only team in the NHL with just one regulation loss at home.

The Islanders are 11-4-4 in games decided by a single goal, including a 6-4 record in regulation.

Sabres 5, Devils 3: Defenseman Rasmus Dahlin scored and set up the winning goal by Casey Mittelstadt as visiting Buffalo snapped a 10-game road winless streak with a win over New Jersey.

Rangers 8, Penguins 4: Artemi Panarin had a goal and three assists, Adam Fox had a goal and two assists and host New York beat Pittsburgh.

Ducks 5, Sharks 1: David Backes and Nicolas Deslauriers each had a goal and an assist, and visiting Anaheim stopped San Jose's four-game winning streak.

Hurricanes 5, Panthers 2: Vincent Trocheck scored a pair of power-play goals against his former team, Jordan Staal also scored twice and host Carolina rallied past Florida.

Blue Jackets 4, Lightning 2: Zac Dalpe scored for the first

time in 4 ½ years, Joonas Korpi-salo made 36 saves and host Columbus beat Tampa Bay.

Bruins 4, Flyers 2: Patrice Bergeron recorded a hat trick and reached 900 career points, and Brad Marchand's short-handed goal led visiting Boston past Philadelphia.

Predators 3, Red Wings 2 (SO): Ryan Johansen and Roman Josi scored in the shootout to lift visiting Nashville over Detroit.

Blackhawks 4, Stars 2: Kirby Dach, Dominik Kubalik and Alex DeBrincat scored, Patrick Kane had a goal and an assist, and host Chicago beat Dallas.