

## Biden outlines plan for Afghanistan

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden said Wednesday he will withdraw remaining U.S. troops from Afghanistan, declaring that the Sept. 11 attacks “cannot explain” why American forces should still be there 20 years after the deadliest terror assault on the United States.

His plan is to pull out all American forces — numbering 2,500 now — by this Sept. 11, the anniversary of the attacks, which were coordinated from Afghanistan.

The U.S. cannot continue to pour resources into an intractable war and expect different results, Biden said.

The drawdown would begin rather than conclude by May 1, which has been the deadline for full withdrawal under a peace agreement the Trump administration reached with the Taliban last year.

“It is time to end America’s longest war,” Biden said, but he added that the U.S. will “not conduct a hasty rush to the exit.”

“We cannot continue the cycle of extending or expanding our military presence in Afghanistan hoping to create the ideal con-

ditions for our withdrawal, expecting a different result,” Biden said. “I am now the fourth United States president to preside over an American troop presence in Afghanistan. Two Republicans. Two Democrats. I will not pass this responsibility to a fifth.”

The decision marks perhaps the most significant foreign policy decision for Biden in the early going of his presidency.

He’s long been skeptical about the U.S. presence in Afghanistan. As Barack Obama’s vice president, Biden was a lonely voice in the administration who advised the 44th president to tilt towards a smaller counterterrorism role in the country while military advisers were urging a troop buildup to counter Taliban gains. Biden has also made clear he wants to recalibrate U.S. foreign policy to face bigger challenges posed by China and Russia.

Withdrawing all U.S. troops comes with clear risks. It could boost the Taliban’s effort to claw back power and undo gains toward democracy and women’s rights made over the past two decades. It also opens Bi-

den to criticism, mostly Republicans and some Democrats, even though former President Donald Trump had also wanted a full withdrawal.

“This administration has decided to abandon U.S. efforts in Afghanistan which have helped keep radical Islamic terrorism in check,” said Senate Republican leader Mitch McConnell. “And bizarrely, they have decided to do so by September 11th.”

While Biden’s decision keeps U.S. forces in Afghanistan four months longer than initially planned, it sets a firm end to two decades of war that killed more than 2,200 U.S. troops, wounded 20,000, and cost as much as \$1 trillion.

Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani said he spoke on Wednesday with Biden ahead of the U.S. president’s speech.

“The Islamic Republic of Afghanistan respects the U.S. decision, and we will work with our U.S. partners to ensure a smooth transition,” Ghani said in a Twitter posting.

Biden consulted with allies, military leaders, lawmakers and Vice President Kamala Harris to help make his decision.

## US, allies seek strategy amid Putin’s Ukraine moves

**By JOHN VANDIVER**

*Stars and Stripes*

STUTTGART, Germany — Russia’s rapid military buildup in recent weeks has sparked fears that a large-scale invasion of Ukraine looms, but confusion over Moscow’s aim has the U.S. and its European allies grasping for a coherent strategy to avert a potential crisis.

U.S. military officials and security analysts say that the Russian military force assembled is as large as the one put together in 2014, when Moscow annexed Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula in a move that altered the security landscape in Europe.

Events in Ukraine have high stakes for the U.S. military. It was forced to recommit thousands of forces to the Continent over the past seven years due to concerns about a more assertive and expansionist

Russia.

“What we don’t know right now is President Putin’s ultimate intention for this particular period of time,” said retired Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, who was one of the chief architects of the military efforts to rebuild in Europe after 2014.

It’s unclear if Russian President Vladimir Putin is spoiling for a fight in Ukraine or bluffing to test the new Biden administration. Putin might also be trying to distract the Russian people from his political and economic problems, analysts say.

“The domestic situation in Russia is pretty grim,” Hodges said. “The classic Kremlin maneuver is to create distraction.”

The worst scenario — a new Russian offensive — remains possible but seems unlikely, Hodges and other security analysts say.

Along the line of contact — a 250-mile stretch in the east where Ukrainian and Russian-backed forces have squared off for several years — skirmishing could be inevitable, said Michael Kofman, a Russia expert with the Arlington, Va.-based CNA think tank.

“But I find at least a major war improbable,” Kofman said during an online discussion Tuesday hosted by the Center for the National Interest in Washington.

Unlike Russia’s stealthier move in 2014, Moscow has deployed forces on Ukraine’s periphery in a high-profile way, with images of convoys circulating on social media. The troops have poured in from all over Russia and force estimates range between 25,000 and 40,000 extra troops near Ukraine’s borders.

“The military balance is decidedly not in Ukraine’s favor,” Kofman said.

# Lawmaker: Defense strategy 'unrealistic'

BY SARAH CAMMARATA  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The chairman on the House Armed Services Committee said Tuesday that the United States must review its national defense policy, as lofty goals set by former President Donald Trump's administration in the 2018 National Defense Strategy are overly ambitious.

"The goals that [the National Defense Strategy] lays out are basically unachievable," Rep. Adam Smith, D-Wash., said at an event about the future of defense spending hosted by the Ronald Reagan Institute.

Smith argued the document's long list of aims — winning an "all-out" war with China, countering Russian aggression, bolstering the U.S. nuclear arsenal, and deterring North Korea — is not only extremely costly, but requires more military personnel to

achieve than the U.S. has now.

"We don't have the people to meet that many different needs, to fight that many battles at the same time ... we're sort of perpetually chasing our tail," he said.

Smith said, for example, combatant commanders frequently complain that requests they make for forces, whether that includes aircraft carriers, troops, drones or planes, go unfilled.

"We need to get back to a core principle of what is truly necessary and what is possible," the congressman said.

The Trump administration established the National Defense Strategy in 2018 to shift the military's focus from counterterrorism operations to "great-power competition," namely with China and Russia. But the strategy also includes a number of other objectives such as maintaining the balance of power in the Indo-Pacific

region, Europe, the Middle East and the Western Hemisphere, as well as promoting military modernization programs.

President Joe Biden unveiled a broad "interim national security strategy" on March 3 that will eventually lead to a revised national defense strategy. Smith said Tuesday that a new strategy should bolster partnerships, diplomacy and development.

"While I say that our current National Defense Strategy is too big, too ambitious and too unrealistic in terms of what our needs are, I also feel very strongly the U.S. must be actively engaged in the world to create a more peaceful and prosperous world," he said.

The U.S. military has been effective at providing security in some places, such as in South Korea, other parts of Asia and Europe, Smith said. However, the

lawmaker argued the U.S. relies too heavily on the military to provide international stability and armed forces should only be a part of that equation.

"We have become excessively reliant on the military as a deterrent tool ... Afghanistan is a great example," Smith said.

The U.S. has aimed to create a peaceful and stable government there, with respect to human rights, he said. However, during two decades of conflict, the U.S. military has not been able to achieve those goals, Smith said.

On how to counter China, Smith said instead of growing the U.S. military exponentially, the U.S. must build alliances "and have enough of a credible threat to bloody their nose."

He also added the U.S. could have a more "conservative" approach in dealing with Russia by strengthening alliances.

## Much anxiety in Afghan cities as US plans exit

BY PHILLIP WALTER  
WELLMAN  
AND J.P. LAWRENCE  
*Stars and Stripes*

KABUL, Afghanistan — The U.S. decision to withdraw all troops from Afghanistan by September met with fears in the capital that the Taliban will regain control and reverse most of the freedoms Afghans gained during America's longest war.

A withdrawal of U.S. and coalition forces by Sept. 11 — the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the terrorist attacks that ignited the war — will happen regardless of the security situation on the ground, a senior White House official told reporters Tuesday. But Pentagon analysts offer no hope that the Afghan government can defeat the Tali-

ban militarily. Instead the announcement will likely set off a rush by regional power brokers to set up their own private armies to defend their home turf — a pattern that emerged after the Taliban seized Kabul in 1996.

The pullout "increases the possibility of a regime that will have no respect for democratic values, human rights and justice," said Jamshid Mohammadi, a political science student at the American University of Afghanistan.

Nilofar Aziz, a politician from eastern Nangarhar province, said the pullout will mean the U.S. war will end in failure.

"By withdrawing like this, America wants to tell Afghans: 'Hey, we don't care what happens next,'" she said.

## GOP: Biden's withdrawal plan is 'dumber than dirt'

*The Washington Post*

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden's pledge to withdraw U.S. forces from Afghanistan by Sept. 11 prompted immediate backlash Tuesday from leading congressional Republicans, who decried his plans as "outrageous," "dumber than dirt," and "a disaster in the making."

"Precipitously withdrawing U.S. forces from Afghanistan is a grave mistake. It is a retreat in the face of an enemy," Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said on the Senate floor. "Foreign terrorists will not leave the United States alone simply because our politicians have grown tired of taking the fight to them."

The GOP's wholesale rejection of Biden's planned withdrawal illustrates the political risk con-

fronting the new administration as it seeks to bring the war to a close — even as many Democrats greeted the news with relief.

"It took us 10 years to find and kill Osama bin Laden. We stayed an additional 10 years to help train Afghan security forces and create conditions for a more stable future in that country," said Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va. "It is now time to bring our troops home."

Withdrawing from Afghanistan was one of the few subjects over which GOP leaders were willing to publicly criticize President Donald Trump, who set a May 1 deadline to remove all troops from the country.

"A full withdrawal from Afghanistan is dumber than dirt and devilishly dangerous," said Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C.

# F-35 test likely delayed until August 2022

*Bloomberg*

The stealthy F-35 jet may not complete its most critical stage of combat testing until about August 2022, the latest in a series of delays that has set America's most expensive weapons program back by years, Pentagon officials were told last month.

The rigorous testing in the \$398 billion program that was once planned for 2017 was most recently scheduled for December. But the Defense Department's F-35 program office has now projected the target date for the monthlong simulator testing as August 2022, according to a briefing chart used in a mid-March review.

The delay means lawmakers will likely find themselves authorizing the Pentagon to keep buying the next-generation fighters from Lockheed Martin

in fiscal 2022 and 2023 without having a complete picture of the aircraft's true capabilities. The Pentagon's current five-year plan calls for requesting 85 F-35s in the 2022 fiscal year that begins Oct. 1, up from 79 this year. That figure rises to 94 in fiscal 2023.

"We hope that the answer is delivered soon about the effectiveness of the F-35 and the justification for its billing as the 'premier' fighter aircraft of the world," Senate Armed Services Chairman Jack Reed, a Democrat from Rhode Island, said in February. "It's still in operational testing and evaluation, and once that's finished — and we hope it's finished promptly — then we can make a much more thorough assessment of the system."

The simulator testing is meant to determine how the

fighter will perform against the most advanced Russian and Chinese aircraft and air defenses. It's a key benchmark in a program that's been a work in progress for two decades.

In its presentation last month, the F-35 program office outlined a series of steps needed over the next 18 months to get the testing completed. That includes fixes to the simulator and numerous cross-checks to verify and validate that it matches the fighter jet's demonstrated flight performance. These steps would lead to a "test the test" event in March 2022 that would be assessed by a panel of experts certifying all the prior activity before authorizing a full-throttle exercise tentatively scheduled for August-September 2022.

That 64-sortie exercise will use a full replica of the F-35

cockpit rigged with combat sensors and electronics. Pilots from the Patuxent River Naval Air Station in Maryland will operate in a fully functioning simulator with a 360-degree view that depicts classified air and ground threats, and incorporates allied aircraft as well. Other pilots will fly simulators of Russian or Chinese aircraft while foreign air defense systems will be replicated.

After the test, it will take an additional two to three months to transfer and analyze the data and then draft a final report for delivery to Pentagon leaders and Congress. The report is mandated by law before a decision on whether to move into full-rate production — the most lucrative phase of the contract for Bethesda, Md.-based Lockheed — can be made.

## DOD won't disinter remains believed to be that of Medal of Honor recipient

**BY WYATT OLSON**  
*Stars and Stripes*

A family's decadeslong quest to recover the remains of World War II's first Medal of Honor recipient has bogged down in red tape after hopes of a quick disinterment were raised in January.

The family of 1st Lt. Alexander "Sandy" Nininger, who died in battle on the Bataan Peninsula in the Philippines on Jan. 12, 1942, has for years pressed the Defense Department to exhume an unknown grave in Manila they believe could hold his remains.

In January, Anthony Tata, who was then performing the duties of the undersecretary of defense for policy, directed the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency to make an exception to its policy and "expeditiously" exhume the remains for analysis.

But Nininger's 84-year-old nephew and closest next of kin, John Patterson, learned in late March that DPAA had recommended postponing disinterment of the gravesite, known as X-1130, a decision based on another DOD policy.

In documents emailed to Patterson on March 25, DPAA Director Kelly

McKeague cited a 2019 policy by the undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness requiring DNA samples to be collected from family members of at least half of all service members "potentially associated" with the grave before disinterment can be approved.

DPAA's "historical, anthropological, and dental analyses reduced the number of casualties believed to be buried in grave X 1130 to six," but the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory had only one family sample, or 16%, McKeague wrote.

DPAA, as did its precursors, maintains there is no evidence Nininger lies in X-1130.

"DPAA submitted a recommendation to the DoD approving official to not disinter grave X-1130 because we are unlikely to be able to make an identification," McKeague wrote in March.

An inquiry by Stars and Stripes on the case last week, however, prompted McKeague to email Patterson on Saturday with an update that two additional family samples had been obtained, meaning that the 50% threshold of DNA samples had been met.

## Joyride with ATV led to airman's death in Kuwait

**BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY**  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Speed and lack of protective gear during a "joyride" of a vehicle led to the rollover death in September of an Air Force reservist in Kuwait, according to an investigation released Tuesday.

Staff Sgt. Ronald J. Ouellette, 23, of Merrimack, N.H., died Sept. 14 when the all-terrain vehicle in which he was a passenger rolled and pinned him to the ground in a cargo yard near the flight line at Ali Al Salem Air Base.

An investigation into the accident found Ouellette and the driver, another Air Force staff sergeant, were not wearing seat belts, helmets, eye protection or long-sleeved shirts as required at the time of the accident.

The report, written by Air Force Brig. Gen. Max Stitzer, who presided over the Ground Accident Investigation Board that investigated the incident, also stated they were driving at a high rate of speed when the driver lost control while making a sharp turn that caused the vehicle to tip over, killing Ouellette.

# Iran: Nuke deal offers ‘not worth looking at’

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Iran’s supreme leader Wednesday dismissed initial offers at talks in Vienna to save Tehran’s tattered nuclear deal as “not worth looking at,” taking a hard-line approach after an attack on the country’s main nuclear enrichment site.

The comments by Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has final say on all matters of state in the Islamic Republic, come as informal talks in Vienna continue ahead of a planned formal round of negotiations.

The talks already have been

thrown into disarray by a week-end attack on Iran’s main Natanz nuclear enrichment site suspected to have been carried out by Israel. Tehran retaliated by announcing it would enrich uranium up to 60% — higher than it ever has before but still lower than weapons-grade levels of 90%.

“The offers they provide are usually arrogant and humiliating (and) are not worth looking at,” Khamenei, 81, said in an address marking the first day of the holy Muslim fasting month of Ramadan in Iran.

While saying he remained positive about Iran’s negotiators, he

criticized the U.S. and warned time could be running out.

“The talks shouldn’t become talks of attrition,” Khamenei said. “They shouldn’t be in a way that parties drag on and prolong the talks. This is harmful to the country.”

Speaking to his Cabinet, an impassioned Iranian President Hassan Rouhani said the first-generation IR-1 centrifuges that were damaged in Sunday’s attack would be replaced by advanced IR-6 centrifuges that enrich uranium much faster.

“You wanted to make our hands empty during the talks but

our hands are full,” Rouhani said.

Rouhani added: “60% enrichment is an answer to your evilness. ... We cut off both of your hands, one with IR-6 centrifuges and another one with 60%.”

Rouhani also accused Israel of being behind the Natanz attack.

“Apparently this is a crime by the Zionists. If the Zionists take an action against our nation, we will respond,” he said, without elaborating.

The talks in Vienna are aimed at finding a way for the U.S. to re-enter Tehran’s nuclear agreement with world powers and have Iran comply again with its limits.

## Europe troops’ vaccines could slow more amid J&J pause

By JENNIFER H. SVAN  
Stars and Stripes

KAISERSLAUTERN, Germany — The military’s already slow rollout of the coronavirus vaccine in Europe looked likely to stall further Wednesday after the Pentagon suspended use of the single-dose Johnson & Johnson vaccine amid reports that it may cause rare blood clots.

Army health clinics in Europe were expecting 30,000 doses to arrive over the next three weeks, half of them the Johnson & Johnson vaccine, said Gino Mattorano, a spokesman for Regional Health Command Europe.

“We won’t be administering any more Janssen vaccine until we receive more guidance on how to proceed,” Mattorano said Tuesday, using the name of J&J’s pharmaceutical companies, which developed the vaccine. He said it’s too early to say how the shipments will be affected.

The Food and Drug Administration and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Tuesday recommended a pause in the use of the Janssen vaccine while they investigate six cases of blood clots that occurred in the United States in people who had received the shot.

All six cases occurred in women between the ages of 18 and 48, and symptoms occurred 6 to 13 days after vaccination, the two health agencies said in a joint statement. With more than 6.8 million Johnson & Johnson shots administered in the U.S., the adverse effect is extremely rare, the statement said.

The health authorities’ announcement came hours after Army and Air Force officials said they expected an uptick in vaccine shipments to European medical clinics in the next few weeks.

The Air Force said they were expecting at least 7,500 doses of the Moderna and Johnson & Johnson vaccines per week over the next three weeks, about twice the usual amount, said 2nd Lt. Charis Bryan, a spokeswoman for U.S. Air Forces in Europe-Air Forces Africa. About 15% of the shipment was expected to be the J&J vaccine, Bryan said. Those vials were set to be distributed to remote locations where administering two doses over time is challenging, she said.

Planners at the Defense Health Agency are working “to mitigate any impacts” of not having the Johnson & Johnson vaccine available, she said.

## Pause limits vaccinations at military bases in Pacific

By JOSEPH DITZLER  
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — U.S. military bases in Japan and South Korea that scheduled clinics with the Johnson & Johnson one-shot vaccine either canceled their appointments or rearranged their calendars after the government halted the shot’s distribution.

The Defense Department ordered a temporary stop to inoculations with the Johnson & Johnson, or Janssen, vaccine following six cases, one fatal, in the United States of a type of blood clot deemed “rare and severe” by public health authorities.

At Misawa Air Base, 35th Fighter Wing commander Col. Jesse Friedel announced last week the first opportunity for people in the so-called tier two that includes the general population to get vaccinated. The base had received 1,900 doses of Johnson & Johnson, he said.

A good response followed Friedel’s announcement and expectations ran high among those waiting their turn for the shot, base spokesman Maj. Cody Chiles said Wednesday.

“A lot were hopeful, and excited for that opportunity,” he said.

Instead, the base pulled the plug on the event scheduled Friday at the officer’s club.

The overall pause may last only a few days, said Dr. Janet Woodcock, the acting FDA commissioner, during a virtual news conference Tuesday in Washington. A committee of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention meets Wednesday to review the six cases, the CDC and FDA said in a joint news release.

The U.S. military overseas administers the Moderna and Johnson & Johnson vaccines. Moderna is still available at U.S. bases in the Western Pacific, though the Johnson & Johnson pause has affected the overall distribution schedule in some places.

U.S. Forces Korea, which started vaccinating its general population April 8 with the one-shot Johnson & Johnson, announced Tuesday it would halt that distribution. USFK commander Army Gen. Robert Abrams on March 26 said the command had expected 11,900 doses by March 31.

Installations in Japan, where the Moderna vaccine is more prevalent, were more fortunate. With some exceptions, including Misawa, clinics were unchanged.

# Minn. officer to face manslaughter charge

*Associated Press*

BROOKLYN CENTER, Minn. — A Minnesota prosecutor said Wednesday that he will charge a white former suburban Minneapolis police officer with second-degree manslaughter for killing 20-year-old Black motorist Daunte Wright in a shooting that ignited days of unrest and clashes between protesters and police.

Former Brooklyn Center police officer Kim Potter will be charged Wednesday, three days after Wright was killed during a traffic stop, Washington County Attorney Pete Orput said. The charge carries a maximum penalty of 10 years in prison.

An attorney representing Potter did not immediately respond to messages from The As-

sociated Press.

The former police chief has said that Potter, a 26-year veteran and training officer, had intended to use her Taser on Wright but fired her handgun instead. Protesters and Wright's family members, however, say there's no excuse for the shooting, and it shows how the justice system is tilted against Blacks, noting Wright was stopped for expired car registration and ended up dead.

Potter, 48, resigned from the Brooklyn Center Police Department on Tuesday as did Police Chief Tim Gannon.

Gannon had released Potter's body camera video the day after Sunday's shooting. It showed her approaching Wright as he stood outside of his car as another officer was ar-

resting him for an outstanding warrant. The warrant was for his failure to appear in court on charges that he fled from officers and possessed a gun without a permit during an encounter with Minneapolis police in June. Police said he was pulled over for having expired registration tags.

As Wright struggles with police, Potter is hearing shouting "I'll Tase you! I'll Tase you! Taser! Taser! Taser!" before firing a single shot from her handgun.

Potter was an instructor with the Brooklyn Center police, according to the Minnesota Police and Peace Officers Association. She was training two other officers Sunday when they stopped Wright, the association's leader, Bill Peters, told the Star Tribune.

# IRS expects to start child tax credit payments in July

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — It's a strain, but the head of the IRS said Tuesday that he expects to meet the July 1 deadline in the new pandemic relief law for starting a groundbreaking tax program aimed at reducing child poverty. That means new advance monthly payments of as much as \$300 per child could begin flowing to lower-income families this summer.

In testimony at a Senate hearing, IRS Commissioner Charles Rettig said it will cost nearly \$400

million and require the hiring of 300 to 500 people to get the new monthly payment system and electronic portal in place for the child tax credit. "The IRS will be working hard to deliver this program quickly and efficiently," he said.

"We have to create a new structure," Rettig said, adding that the tax-collecting IRS is "not historically" a benefits agency. The IRS, which has suffered budget cuts over the past decade, has been further burdened by the pandem-

ic and the task of sending out hundreds of millions of economic stimulus payments in three rounds.

In embedding the expanded child tax credit in the \$1.9 trillion rescue legislation enacted last month, Democrats sought to provide support to families affected by the coronavirus pandemic and parents forced to cut down on work or give up jobs to take care of children after losing access to childcare. Democrats view the tax change as an opportunity to

address income inequality worsened by the pandemic. According to some academic estimates, it would reduce the number of children living in poverty in the United States by more than half.

It temporarily increases the existing child tax credit from a maximum \$2,000 a year per child to \$3,000 for each child aged 6 to 17 and \$3,600 for children under 6. The change will be in effect for a year under the rescue law; Democratic lawmakers have said they want to make it permanent.

# Coast Guard rescues 6 from capsized vessel off La.

*Associated Press*

GRAND ISLE, La. — Six people were pulled alive from the Gulf of Mexico after a commercial platform vessel capsized during a "microburst" of bad weather off the coast of Louisiana, the Coast Guard said Wednesday as a search continued for more survivors.

The U.S. Coast Guard Heartland said in a statement that it and several other vessels

responded to an area of the Gulf of Mexico south of Port Fourchon after the 129-foot Seacor Power overturned. A search plane also flew in to assist.

"There was a microburst of weather that came through the area at the time of the incident," Coast Guard Petty Officer 2nd Class Jonathan Lally said. "I don't know whether that was the cause, but what we can say is that inclement weather did hit the ar-

ea at the time."

A search by air and sea was ongoing Wednesday, he said.

The Seacor Power is a commercial lift vessel, designed to become an offshore platform by dropping three towering legs down to the sea floor. Hit by the storm, it flipped over, with one of the legs pointed awkwardly skyward as rescuers searched for the workers in rough seas.



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# Injuries hit NBA teams harder than virus

Associated Press

As teams gear up for the stretch run of the NBA regular season, it's injuries to key players — not just their unavailability due to COVID-19 — that is having the biggest effect on the playoff races in both conferences.

Still, preparing to play outside of the controlled atmosphere of last season's Florida bubble has helped teams brace for the unexpected.

When the NBA season tipped off in December, keeping players healthy as they traveled during the pandemic was the chief priority around the league. In the four months since then, virtually every team has made adjustments to its rotation because of league-wide health and safety protocols.

"With COVID and with the way the season has gone, everybody's missing games," 76ers center Joel Embiid said. "COVID has affected the whole league ... It's hard to kind of figure out when the team is at

their best."

Lately, it's been injuries and not the virus that has dictated how the season has gone.

That starts with the defending champion Lakers, who continue to be without team cornerstones LeBron James and Anthony Davis with no clear idea of when they will return.

Davis was averaging 22.5 points and 8.4 rebounds through 23 games when he strained his right calf Feb. 14 against Denver. He hasn't played since, a span of 25 games entering Monday. He is expected to get reevaluated this week.

James' sprained right ankle has kept him sidelined since March 21, and he could be three more weeks from returning. It stunted a 41-game start in which he was averaging 25.4 points and 7.9 assists and rebounds per game.

Another blow was dealt to Western Conference contender Denver, which learned Tuesday that its versatile point guard Jamal Murray would be

out indefinitely with a torn ACL in his left knee. Murray was injured late in a loss to Golden State Monday night. The Nuggets were looking to again be a legitimate threat a season after making the conference finals.

The story is just as fascinating in the topsy-turvy and increasingly tightening East, where almost every team in the playoff mix has players currently on — or just getting off — the injury report.

Philadelphia and Brooklyn began the week tied atop the conference at 36-17, with Milwaukee (33-20) three games back.

But things could certainly change in a hurry.

Milwaukee's Giannis Antetokounmpo missed his fifth straight game Sunday with a sore left knee and currently has no timetable for return.

The Nets seemed to be getting back to full strength earlier this month when Kevin Durant returned to action after a 23-game absence due to a

strained left hamstring. Then James Harden went down with a right hamstring April 5.

He's missed Brooklyn's last two games and was expected to miss at least 10 days recuperating. That could mean he won't be available for matchups this week when the Nets visited Philadelphia on Wednesday, host Charlotte on Friday and visit Miami on Sunday.

All three of those opponents are dealing with their own health issues.

Embiid proclaimed "I'm back" to 76ers coach Doc Rivers last week following a 35-point performance against Boston in only his second game back from a 10-game stint on the injury report because of a bone bruise in his left knee.

Fourth-place Atlanta is missing Trae Young (bruised left calf), Cam Reddish (sore right Achilles tendon) and Tony Snell (sprained right ankle). Miami is holding on to fifth, but lost Victor Oladipo to a right knee injury during its win over the Lakers on April 8.

## Durant scores 31, leads Nets past Timberwolves

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Kevin Durant scored 31 points on 11-for-15 shooting in his most productive performance in 2½ months, as the Brooklyn Nets blew out the Minnesota Timberwolves 127-97 on Tuesday afternoon.

The game was rescheduled from the previous night, in the aftermath of a fatal police shooting of a Black man in a nearby suburb. The Timberwolves held a moment of silence before tipoff for 20-year-old Daunte Wright, who was killed after a traffic stop.

Durant played 27 minutes in his third game back from a strained left hamstring that kept him out for 23 games. The Nets, missing James Harden, Kyrie Irving and LaMarcus Aldridge,

were in command from the jump and ahead by 23 points before the midpoint of the second quarter. They built their lead as big as 45 points early in the fourth quarter.

**Clippers 126, Pacers 115:** Paul George continued to dominate his former team by scoring 36 points, leading visiting Los Angeles past Indiana.

The Clippers have won six straight and 12 of 14 overall.

**Suns 106, Heat 86:** Deandre Ayton had 19 points and 13 rebounds, and host Phoenix got 65 points from its bench on the way to a victory over Miami.

Four bench players scored in double figures, including Cam Johnson (15 points), Cam Payne (14), Torrey Craig (14) and Dario Saric (13). That offset a fairly quiet night for the Suns' All-Star

backcourt of Devin Booker and Chris Paul.

**Hawks 107, Raptors 103:** At Tampa, Fla., Bogdan Bogdanovic scored 23 points, Clint Capela added 19 points and 21 rebounds, and Atlanta beat Toronto for its seventh win in eight games.

Kevin Huerter had 14 of his 17 points in the first half for Atlanta, and Brandon Goodwin added 18 points.

**Lakers 101, Hornets 93:** Kyle Kuzma scored 24 points, and visiting Los Angeles held on to beat a Charlotte team missing five of its top six scorers.

Dennis Schroder added 19 points and Andre Drummond chipped in with 12 rebounds for the Lakers, who closed out a seven-game road trip with a 4-3 record to remain in fifth place in

the Western Conference.

**Jazz 106, Thunder 96:** Bojan Bogdanovic scored 23 points, and Donovan Mitchell added 22 as host Utah beat struggling Oklahoma City.

Luguentz Dort scored a career-high 42 points and Moses Brown had 12 points and 15 rebounds for the Thunder, who have lost seven in a row and 10 of 11.

**Celtics 116, Trail Blazers 115:** Jayson Tatum scored 32 points, including a key three-pointer in the final moments, and visiting Boston held off Portland to extend its winning streak to four straight games.

Jaylen Brown added 24 points and Kemba Walker had 21 for Boston, winner of six of its last seven games.

# NFLPA calling for only virtual OTAs

*Associated Press*

ENGLEWOOD, Colo. — NFL players were locked out of team headquarters last offseason because of the coronavirus pandemic.

This year, their union wants them to boycott any in-person OTAs.

Members of the Broncos, Seahawks and Buccaneers said Tuesday they'll do just that.

"We find ourselves still in the midst of a pandemic with no comprehensive plan to keep players as safe as possible, yet teams are pressuring players to attend voluntary workouts," that begin next week, tweeted DeMaurice Smith, executive director of the NFL Players Association.

"The union has advised players that given the continued risk of exposure and the goal of a full 2021 NFL season, that they should not attend these voluntary workouts," Smith added. "It is every player's decision, but our advice is to continue to use an abundance of caution given the current envi-

ronment."

Members of the Broncos — who have had 22 players in their building this offseason — and the Seahawks — who had no COVID-19 cases last season — became the first to declare their intention to stay away from the in-person gatherings this spring.

NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy countered that "NFL team facilities are the safest places in our communities thanks to our comprehensive protocols that were developed in conjunction with the NFLPA and public health officials."

Except for one minicamp, the offseason programs are voluntary, although most players participate in them and many have contractual incentives to do so.

In a memo sent to all 32 teams Tuesday which was obtained by The Associated Press, Commissioner Roger Goodell said COVID-19 safety protocols will start to be relaxed as players and other team members get vaccinated.

"The prospect of relaxing Covid protocols in the NFL should help encourage players and staff to be vaccinated," Goodell wrote.

"Our primary focus at all times will remain the health and safety of everyone associated with the NFL," Goodell said in the memo, adding that "In light of expanded vaccine eligibility, it is appropriate now to take further steps to educate about and promote vaccine availability and acceptance within the NFL."

He said all clubs should use their stadium or training facility as "a vaccination site for club staff, players and eligible family members" either through a vaccination day or by making shots available "on a convenient and regular basis."

Goodell added that employees other than players need to get vaccinations "unless they have a bona fide medical or religious ground for not doing so" lest they be prohibited from interacting with players.

Last year, teams were forced

to do everything online until training camps opened in August.

NFL Players Association president and Cleveland center J.C. Tretter has been advocating for a repeat of last year's offseason, arguing that the adjustments caused by the coronavirus in 2020 showed the arduous offseason programs were unnecessary.

Tretter said during Super Bowl week that players across the league "felt both physically better and mentally sharper at the end of the season."

"The amount of hours at the facility were down, the amount of reps were down. And we've had this false reality that a ton of reps are necessary (even) as we watch our bodies break down by the end of the year every year," Tretter said.

"We saw that we can do things differently this year. And the level of play didn't go down. We still had maybe one of the most exciting seasons of all-time heading into an amazing playoffs."

# Bruins rebound, outlast Sabres in shootout

*Associated Press*

BOSTON — Charlie Coyle and Jake DeBrusk scored in Boston's two chances in the shootout and the Bruins, with newcomer Taylor Hall, rebounded for a 3-2 victory over the Buffalo Sabres on Tuesday night.

Craig Smith and David Krejci scored in regulation for Boston, which had lost its last two games but improved to 4-2-1 in its last seven.

Jeremy Swayman made 21 saves for the Bruins and stopped Buffalo's two shootout attempts.

Colin Miller and Rasmus Dahlin each had a goal in regulation for the Sabres, who had won three of their last four.

Dustin Tokarski made 32 saves.

**Rangers 3, Devils 0:** Igor Shesterkin made 27 saves for his first NHL shutout and New York won at New Jersey in the opener of a four-game series.

Mika Zibanejad and Artemi Panarin scored and Adam Fox had assists on both goals as the Rangers improved to 10-4-3 since March 13. Pavel Buchnevich scored into an empty net with 28 seconds to play for the 20,000th goal in franchise history.

**Flames 3, Maple Leafs 2 (OT):** Johnny Gaudreau scored 36 seconds into overtime and Calgary won at first-place Toronto.

Juuso Valimaki and Elias Lindholm also scored for the

Flames. Gaudreau and Lindholm each added an assist, and Jacob Markstrom stopped 24 shots. Calgary won its second straight to pull six points behind Montreal for the fourth and final playoff spot in the North Division.

**Panthers 3, Stars 2 (OT):** Frank Vatrano scored a power-play goal 3:09 into overtime to lead Florida to a win at Dallas.

Aleksander Barkov and Radko Gudas scored in regulation, and Chris Driedger made 24 saves for the Panthers, who snapped a three-game losing streak and matched Tampa Bay and Carolina with 58 points atop the Central Division.

**Capitals 6, Flyers 1:** Anthony Mantha had two points in his

Washington debut, Alex Ovechkin scored the 728th goal of his NHL career and the host Capitals got their third consecutive victory.

Mantha picked up an assist on Tom Wilson's goal in the first period, then showed off his shot in the second for his 12th of the season.

**Predators 7, Lightning 2:** Roman Josi had a goal and an assist against Tampa Bay in host Nashville's three-goal first period as the Predators got their fifth win in six games.

Josi also had an assist in the third. Viktor Arvidsson scored two goals and an assist, Rocco Grimaldi added a goal and an assist, and Tanner Jeannot and Mikael Granlund also scored.

# Red Sox top Twins in snowy Minn.

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Rafael Devers homered for the fourth straight game and the streaking Boston Red Sox beat the Minnesota Twins 4-2 on a snowy Tuesday in a series opener moved back following the fatal police shooting of a Black man in a nearby suburb.

Hunter Renfroe hit a solo homer and Bobby Dalbec added a pair of RBI doubles as Boston won its seventh in a row after losing its first three games of the season.

Monday's game was postponed due to safety and sensitivity concerns in the Twin Cities after the police shooting a day earlier of Daunte Wright during a traffic stop. The Twins held a moment of silence for Wright prior to Tuesday's game.

Snow flurries fell for most of the game and it was 33 degrees for the first pitch. That made for the third-coldest start at Target Field, the record being 27 degrees on April 7, 2018.

Adam Ottavino (1-0) earned the win with a scoreless inning of relief. Matt Barnes pitched a perfect ninth for his first save of the season.

**Dodgers 7, Rockies 0:** Mookie Betts homered and Trevor Bauer pitched seven innings of one-hit ball in both veterans' first home game in front of their new fans, propelling host Los Angeles over Colorado.

Corey Seager and Chris Taylor hit back-to-back homers in the first inning, while Max Muncy homered and drove in two runs for the defending World Series champions. The major league-leading Dodgers (9-2) remained unbeaten in Chavez Ravine this season with another dominant performance in their ninth victory in 10 games.

**Marlins 14, Braves 8:** Adam Duvall drove in seven runs against his former teammates with four hits, including two home runs, and visiting Miami beat Max Fried and Atlanta.

Duvall's two-run double during a four-run fourth inning gave the Marlins the lead. He hit his first homer of the game in the third inning and added a three-run shot in the seventh.

**Giants 7, Reds 6:** Wilmer Flores' tie-breaking sacrifice fly in the seventh held up in a strange, back-and-forth game that featured four two-run homers in the first inning alone, and host San Francisco beat Cincinnati.

Austin Slater put the Giants ahead on an RBI triple in the sixth following three home runs by San Francisco. That lead didn't last:

Giants shortstop Brandon Crawford and second baseman Tommy La Stella collided trying to chase down pinch-hitter Alex Blandino's fly in shallow center in the seventh, and the ball fell to the grass for a single as the Reds scored the tying run to make it 6-6.

The teams were tied at 4 after the first inning on a pair of two-run homers by each club. Joey Votto connected off former Reds right-hander Kevin Gausman for his second homer in two nights. Mike Moustakas then added his two-run homer, sending the drive into the water of McCovey Cove beyond the right field arcade to give Cincinnati a splash-hit homer for the second straight game.

**Indians 2, White Sox 0 (10):** AL Cy Young Award winner Shane Bieber pitched three-hit ball for nine innings while Lucas Giolito nearly matched him before Cleveland broke through in the 10th to win at Chicago.

Bieber (1-1) struck out 11 and has fanned 35 in his first three starts of the season for the second straight year.

**Cubs 3, Brewers 2:** Willson Contreras struck back after getting plunked again by Milwaukee, hitting a two-run homer in the eighth inning and enjoying his trip around the bases as Chicago rallied on the road.

Contreras, who has already been hit by a pitch from the Brewers three times this season, got his revenge when he hit a towering drive to left-center off Brent Suter (0-1).

**Tigers 8, Astros 2:** Wilson Ramos hit two home runs and Renato Núñez and rookie Akil Baddoo each homered for the second straight game as Detroit slugged its way to a second straight win at Houston.

Nomar Mazara also homered to give the Tigers a season-high five long balls.

**Blue Jays 7, Yankees 3:** Hyun Jin Ryu cruised into the seventh inning, Marcus Semien and Rowdy Tellez homered, and Toronto beat visiting New York.

Ryu (1-1) allowed only an unearned run over 6  $\frac{2}{3}$  innings, striking out seven and limiting the Yankees to four hits and a walk.

**Mariners 4-6, Orioles 3-7:** Kyle Seager hit an RBI double in the eighth and Seattle won its third extra-inning game in as many tries this season, beating Baltimore 4-3 in eight innings in the first game of a doubleheader.

Seager, who has reached base in nine of his last 10 plate appearances, laced a one-out double to center off Tanner Scott (0-1). That scored Mitch Haniger, who opened the

extra frame as the automatic runner on second base.

Ramón Urías hit a game-ending single with two outs in the seventh inning in the second game and Baltimore split the doubleheader with mistake-prone Seattle.

César Valdez (1-0) pitched a scoreless seventh for the Orioles, who had lost four in a row and six of seven. Seattle's three-game winning streak was halted.

**Mets 4-4, Phillies 3-0:** Pete Alonso and Jonathan Villar each hit an RBI single in the eighth inning to give host New York a 4-3 win over Philadelphia in the first game of their doubleheader.

Dominic Smith socked an early two-run homer for the Mets, who took the opener of a four-game series between NL East rivals in extra innings.

In the second game, the Mets won 4-0 in seven innings behind a big effort by starter Marcus Stroman. Back on the mound two days after an abbreviated start, Stroman tossed six spotless innings.

Villar doubled home a run off Phillies ace Aaron Nola (0-1) in the fourth, and Brandon Nimmo added a two-run single.

**Rangers 8, Rays 3:** Nick Solak and Charlie Culberson drove in three runs apiece, Kyle Gibson pitched seven strong innings and Texas won at Tampa Bay to end a season-high four-game losing streak.

Solak delivered the biggest blow in a four-run fourth-inning against Ryan Yarbrough (0-2), a double down the left-field line that cleared the bases.

**Athletics 7, Diamondbacks 5:** Jed Lowrie hit a tying, three-run homer in the seventh inning, Seth Brown had a solo shot in the next frame and Oakland rallied from a five-run deficit to win at Arizona.

The Diamondbacks' bullpen was sharp before unraveling in the seventh inning.

**Pirates 8, Padres 4:** Jacob Stallings had three hits and three RBIs, and host Pittsburgh chased Blake Snell in the first inning before beating San Diego.

The game lasted 4 hours, 7 minutes, and included 17 walks, seven hit batters and 27 runners left on base.

**Cardinals 14, Nationals 3:** Nolan Arenado, Paul Goldschmidt and Matt Carpenter all homered off Stephen Strasburg and St. Louis hammered visiting Washington.

**Royals 3, Angels 2:** Catcher Salvador Perez picked David Fletcher off third with the bases loaded for the final out in the ninth inning, helping host Kansas City beat Shohei Ohtani and Los Angeles.