

Russia makes military missteps in Kyiv

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Kyiv was a Russian defeat for the ages. The fight started poorly for the invaders and went downhill from there.

When President Vladimir Putin launched his war on Feb. 24 after months of buildup on Ukraine's borders, he sent hundreds of helicopter-borne commandos — the best of the best of Russia's "spetsnaz" special forces soldiers — to assault and seize a lightly defended airfield on Kyiv's doorstep.

Other Russian forces struck elsewhere across Ukraine, including toward the eastern city of Kharkiv as well as in the contested Donbas region and along the Black Sea coast. But as the seat of national power, Kyiv was the main prize. Thus the thrust by elite airborne forces in the war's opening hours.

But Putin failed to achieve his goal of quickly crushing Ukraine's outgunned and outnumbered army. The Russians were ill-prepared for Ukrainian resistance, proved incapable of adjusting to setbacks, failed to effectively combine air and land operations, misjudged Ukraine's ability to defend its skies and bungled basic military functions like planning and executing the movement of supplies.

"That's a really bad combination if you

want to conquer a country," said Peter Mansoor, a retired Army colonel and professor of military history at Ohio State University.

For now at least, Putin's forces have shifted away from Kyiv, to eastern Ukraine. Ultimately, the Russian leader may achieve some of his objectives.

Yet his failure to seize Kyiv will be long remembered — for how it defied prewar expectations and exposed surprising weaknesses in a military thought to be one of the strongest in the world.

"It's stunning," said military historian Frederick Kagan of the Institute for the Study of War, who says he knows of no parallel to a major military power like Russia invading a country at the time of its choosing and failing so utterly.

On the first morning of the war, Russian Mi-8 assault helicopters soared south toward Kyiv on a mission to attack Hostomel airfield on the northwest outskirts of the capital. By capturing the airfield, also known as Antonov airport, the Russians planned to establish a base from which to fly in more troops and light armored vehicles within striking distance of the heart of the nation's largest city.

It didn't work that way. Several Russian helicopters were reported to be hit by mis-

siles even before they got to Hostomel, and once settled in at the airfield, they suffered heavy losses from artillery fire.

An effort to take control of a military airbase in Vasylykiv south of Kyiv also met stiff resistance and reportedly saw several Russian Il-76 heavy-lift transport planes carrying paratroopers downed by Ukrainian defenses.

Although the Russians eventually managed to control Hostomel airfield, the Ukrainians' fierce resistance in the capital region forced a rethinking of an invasion plan that was based on an expectation the Ukrainians would quickly fold, the West would dither and Russian forces would have an easy fight.

The Russians did make small and unsuccessful probes into the heart of Kyiv, and later they tried at great cost to encircle the capital by arcing farther west. Against enormous odds, the Ukrainians held their ground and fought back, stalling the Russians and put to effective use a wide array of Western arms, including Javelin portable anti-tank weapons, shoulder-fired Stinger anti-aircraft missiles and much more.

Last week, the Russians abandoned Hostomel airfield as part of a wholesale retreat into Belarus and Russia.

Milley says more US bases in Europe could be needed

By COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

The U.S. military's top general Tuesday endorsed building new permanent American bases in Eastern Europe to deter Russia, calling its invasion of Ukraine the most "historical turning point" in the Continent's security since World War II.

Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told lawmakers heightened American military "presence is always a good deterrent" against enemy aggression, telling them that he favored rotating more units in and out of Europe to a permanent boost of U.S. force strength on the Continent. His comments to the House Armed Services Committee come after Air Force Gen. Tod Wolters, the commander of all U.S. and NATO forces in Europe, told senators last week that

he suspected the United States could need to station more troops on the Continent.

"My advice would be to create permanent bases but don't permanently station [U.S. troops on them] so you get the effect of permanence by rotational forces cycling through permanent bases," Milley said during a hearing alongside Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin to examine the Pentagon's \$773 billion fiscal year 2023 budget request sent to Congress last week. "You get the effective, permanent presence of forces, but the actual individual soldier, sailor, airman, Marine is not permanently stationed there for two or three years."

NATO allies are "very, very willing" to build and pay for permanent U.S. bases along the alliance's eastern flank, Milley said. He told lawmakers countries including Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Poland and Romania have expressed

such interest — especially in the wake of Russia's brutal and ongoing invasion of Ukraine, which was launched Feb. 24.

The number of American troops in Europe more than doubled since Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered his forces into Ukraine. There are about 102,000 U.S. troops now on the Continent, according to the Pentagon. The new forces — including two armored brigade combat teams, an airborne infantry brigade and fighter jets all from the U.S. — arrived on temporary deployments to train with NATO partners and defend alliance territory.

The U.S. in recent years has regularly rotated one armored brigade with tanks, armored infantry vehicles and self-propelled howitzers to Europe, but defense officials have considered adding more firepower on the Continent.

Space Force announces training HQ options

BY ALEXANDER RIEDEL
Stars and Stripes

The Space Force is zeroing in on the final location for one of its all-new training headquarters.

The Defense Department's newest service is considering six bases for the Space Training and Readiness Command, or STARCOM, and will begin site surveys by May to determine the best location to host STARCOM headquarters, the Air Force said in a statement.

Under consideration are Vandenberg Space Force Base, Calif.; Buckley, Schriever and Peterson Space Force bases in Colorado; Patrick Space Force Base, Fla.; and Los Angeles Air Force Base, Calif., which is slated to be home to Space Systems Command and renamed as a

Space Force base.

"The assessment will be based on factors related to mission, infrastructure capacity, community support, environmental considerations and cost," the statement said Monday.

STARCOM operates its temporary headquarters in Colorado Springs, Colo., as it waits for a final location to be determined.

The Space Force organizational structure is leaner than its Air Force counterpart and comprises headquarters operations at the Pentagon; field commands, similar to the Air Force's major commands; Space "deltas," which function like Air Force wings; and squadrons.

Created in August 2021, STARCOM is one of three field

commands, along with Space Operations Command and Space Systems Command.

STARCOM is charged with preparing for combat operations in space. It also must test plans and equipment, and train guardians—the name for Space Force service members.

STARCOM has five subordinate deltas. Delta 1, currently operating at Vandenberg, provides initial skills and advanced training in joint space, cyberspace and intelligence operations.

As the service's wargaming organization, Delta 10 develops space doctrine and tactics.

Delta 11, the "Range and Aggressor" unit staffed with 100 active-duty guardians and airmen and located at Schriever, is

tasked with delivering "realistic, threat-informed" live and virtual training and operations tests, the service says. The delta's symbol features a red five-pointed star under a target sight.

Delta 12 will evaluate new capabilities and provide information on weapon system acquisition, while Delta 13 will deliver the service's education programs.

Delta 10 is slated to be based out of Patrick. Schriever and Kirtland Air Force Base, N.M., are competing to host Delta 11 and Delta 12, with a decision expected this year, service officials have said.

All locations under consideration place units either near existing Air Force space operations or space industry centers.

Texas barracks to be Americas' biggest 3D-printed buildings

BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

The Defense Department is building the largest 3D-printed structures in the Western Hemisphere, military officials said.

Construction of the three barracks expected to set the record began at Fort Bliss, Texas, on Wednesday and should finish within 10 months, DOD said in a statement.

Each building will be over 5,700 square feet and more "energy-efficient and resilient" than buildings made with traditional materials, the Defense Innovation Unit, a DOD organization working with the Army and contractors to complete the project, said in a separate statement.

"Constructing facilities using this cutting-edge technology saves labor costs, reduces planning time and increases the speed of construction of future facilities," Army Lt. Gen. Doug

Gabram, commander of U.S. Army Installation Management Command, was quoted in the DIU statement as saying.

The three barracks will provide temporary housing for visiting troops. They will be the first 3D-printed structures to comply with DOD's updated criteria for additive concrete construction, officials said.

The Pentagon selected ICON, a construction technology company based in Austin, Texas.

In August, a 3,800-square-foot barracks built with ICON's 3D printing was unveiled at Camp Swift, Texas, and was described by officials as being the largest 3D-printed structure in North America. Florida-based technology corporation Apis Cor built the world's largest 3D-printed building in the United Arab Emirates in 2019, according to Guinness World Records. The two-story Dubai Municipality building is 6,888 square feet.

Former Marine sentenced to 28 years for molesting child

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

A former Marine sergeant with two combat tours in Afghanistan must serve 28 years in prison for molesting a 3-year-old child, the U.S. Department of Justice said in a news release Monday.

Michael Hamby Jr., 30, was sentenced Monday by Judge John Houston under a plea deal in U.S. District Court for the Southern District of California that also requires 20 years of supervised release for sexually assaulting the child in October 2016.

Hamby, who had been stationed at bases in Okinawa and California, pleaded guilty to enticement of a minor, which carries a maximum sentence of life in prison.

"The record reflects Hamby also advertised the child as available to others and expressed an intent to engage in sexual games with two other children, ages 4

and 8," the news release said.

Hamby pleaded guilty in May 2021 in exchange for a sentence of no less than 20 years and no more than 29. A co-defendant in the case, Elijah Alexander Vazquez, was scheduled to be sentenced on Tuesday before the same judge.

Hamby admitted that while stationed at Camp Pendleton in October 2016 he engaged in sexual acts with the child, the DOJ news release said.

Hamby transferred to Camp Hansen on Okinawa the following year, where the Naval Criminal Investigative Service began investigating him.

Hamby was arrested on Okinawa on March 4, 2017, after an NCIS undercover agent responded to a posting the Marine had placed on craigslist.com with the title "young girls, incest, taboo," according to a report by the San Diego Union Tribune in September 2017.

Russia prepares new push; Ukraine gathers dead

Associated Press

ANDRIIVKA, Ukraine — Ukraine gathered its dead and collected evidence of Russian atrocities on the ruined outskirts of Kyiv, as the two sides geared up Wednesday for what could become a climactic battle by Moscow’s forces to seize the country’s industrial east.

As the United States and its Western allies moved to impose new sanctions against the Kremlin in retaliation for what they branded war crimes, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Russian forces were trying to push deep into Ukraine in the east, but the Ukrainian army was holding them back.

“The fate of our land and of our people is being decided. We know what we are fighting for. And we will do everything to win,” Zelenskyy said.

Ukrainian officials have stepped up calls for civilians to evacuate westward from towns near the front line ahead of the anticipated Russian offensive, and some essential services were being moved away. Local authorities in Sloviansk said postal and pension operations were clearing out and bank branches in town were shutting down.

A Western official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss intelligence, said it will take Russia as much as a

month to regroup for a major push on eastern Ukraine. Almost a quarter of its battalion tactical groups in the country have been rendered “non-combat-effective” and have either withdrawn or merged with other units, the official said.

In the scarred and silent streets of Bucha and other towns around Ukraine’s capital where Russian forces withdrew over the past several days, investigators sought to document what appeared to be widespread killings of civilians. Some had evidently been shot at close range, while others were found with their hands bound or their flesh burned.

At a cemetery in Bucha, workers began to load more than 60 bodies apparently collected over the past day into a grocery shipping truck for transport to a facility for further investigation. A few of the black body bags were not fully closed. A glimpse showed the bloodied face of a young adult. Another revealed a pair of white sneakers.

More bodies were yet to be collected in Bucha, days after the Russian retreat. The Associated Press saw two in a house in a silent neighborhood. From time to time, there was the muffled boom of workers clearing the town of mines and other unexploded ordnance.

China calls for Bucha killings probe, but assigns no blame

Associated Press

BEIJING — China on Wednesday said images of civilian deaths in the Ukrainian town of Bucha are “deeply disturbing,” but that no blame should be apportioned until all facts are known.

Emerging evidence of what appeared to be widespread civilian massacres in the wake of Russian withdrawals from the Kyiv areas may complicate Beijing’s attempts to guide public opinion over the conflict, in which China has refused to criticize Moscow.

China supports all initiatives and measures “conducive to alleviating the humanitarian crisis” in the country, and is “ready to continue to work together with the international community to prevent any harm to civilians,” Foreign Ministry spokesperson Zhao Lijian told reporters at a daily briefing.

“The truth and the cause of the incident must be verified,” Zhao said. “All parties should exercise restraint and avoid unfounded accusations before a

conclusion of the investigation is drawn.”

Zhao’s remarks echo those of China’s ambassador to the United Nations, Zhang Jun, who earlier called for an investigation, also describing the reports and images of civilian deaths in Bucha as “deeply disturbing.”

“The relevant circumstances and specific causes of the incident should be verified and established,” Zhang said in remarks to the Security Council on Tuesday, adding that, “before the full picture is clear, all sides should exercise restraint and avoid unfounded accusations.”

China has called for talks while refusing to criticize Russia. It opposes economic sanctions on Moscow and blames Washington and NATO for provoking the war and fueling the conflict by sending arms to Ukraine.

Zhao repeated China’s objections to sanctions, while accusing the United States of having manipulated the situation to “profit from the chaos and make a lot of money.”

US sending \$100M in Javelin anti-tank weapons to Ukraine

BY WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

The White House on Tuesday authorized another \$100 million in aid to Ukraine for more Javelin anti-armor weapons in its battle to repel the Russian invasion that began in late February.

The shoulder-fired Javelin automatically guides its projectile to the target, allowing the gunner to take cover immediately after firing and avoid being hit by counterfire.

Ukraine’s armed forces have an urgent need for more of these particular weapons, which “they have been using so effectively to defend their country,” Pentagon press secretary John Kirby said in a news release Tuesday evening announcing the aid.

The anti-tank weapons come on the heels of a \$300 million package of military aid for Ukraine announced by the Pentagon on Friday.

That batch included laser-guided rocket systems, Switchblade tactical drones that in some cases are capable of taking out armored vehicles, Puma

drones for surveillance and intelligence gathering, small and large caliber ammunition, night-vision devices, machine guns, communications equipment, medical supplies and other items.

With the addition of the newest aid, the United States has committed \$1.7 billion for the defense of Ukraine since Russia invaded the country Feb. 24.

“The United States, along with our Allies and partners, will continue to work closely with our Ukrainian partners to evaluate their specific requirements to ensure our assistance meets Ukraine’s highest priority needs as they courageously defend their country,” Kirby said in the news release.

Jointly developed by Lockheed Martin and Raytheon, the Javelin has a range of over 1.5 miles.

It is particularly effective against tank armor because the projectile contains two charges. The first explodes upon contact with the tank, which then sets off a second, more powerful armor-piercing blast.

South assesses damage after severe storms

Associated Press

PEMBROKE, Ga. — Southerners were clearing trees from roads and buildings as weather forecasters planned to survey damage from several possible tornadoes in Georgia and South Carolina, but said that effort could be interrupted by the potential for more storms Wednesday.

Tuesday's storms killed at least two people — one in Texas and another in Georgia — and left thousands of people without power across the South.

More than 7,000 customers in Texas and more than 5,000 in Georgia remained without power early Wednesday, according to PowerOutage.us, which tracks outages nationwide.

In southeast Georgia, a woman was found dead Tuesday

night amid the shredded wreckage of her mobile home in the unincorporated community of Ellabell, said Bryan County Coroner Bill Cox.

"It was just completely ripped to pieces," Cox said Wednesday. "It's like it exploded."

Cox said the dead woman's husband was taken to a hospital with injuries. He did not give her name, saying relatives were still being notified.

A motorist's cellphone video taken in Bryan County showed a large funnel cloud crossing Interstate 16 as drivers braked and pulled to the side of the roadway about 30 miles west of Savannah.

In the county seat of Pembroke, large sections of roof got torn off the courthouse and the entryway to a government

building across was demolished. Several people in nearby neighborhoods were injured as their homes were damaged, said Matthew Kent, a Bryan County government spokesperson.

In east Texas, W.M. Soloman, 71, died when storm winds toppled a tree onto his home in Whitehouse, about 100 miles southeast of Dallas, Whitehouse Mayor James Wansley said.

As the storms moved into South Carolina late Tuesday, debate was delayed for nearly an hour in the South Carolina legislature after the state House chamber was evacuated for a tornado warning for Columbia. The legislation being debated would require athletes to compete with the gender listed on their birth certificates.

In Alabama, the weather ser-

vice said it was sending survey teams to examine potential tornado damage in the Wetumpka area. Lightning struck a flea market in the northern Alabama community of Lacey's Spring, causing a fire that gutted the building, news outlets reported.

In Mississippi, fallen trees and limbs closed a stretch of highway for hours in Newton County.

Several tornadoes were expected across a large part of the South on Wednesday, the national Storm Prediction Center said.

"The atmosphere will be primed again for more severe storms as we go through Wednesday," said Jared Guyer, a forecaster at the Storm Prediction Center in Norman, Okla.

Okla. House approves bill to make abortion illegal

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — The Oklahoma House gave final legislative approval on Tuesday to a bill that would make performing an abortion a felony, punishable by up to 10 years in prison.

With little discussion and no debate, the Republican-controlled House voted 70-14 to send the bill to Republican Gov. Kevin Stitt, who has previously said he'd sign any anti-abortion bill that comes to his desk.

The bill is one of several anti-abortion measures still alive in Oklahoma's Legislature this year, part of a trend of GOP-led states passing aggressive anti-abortion legislation as the conservative U.S. Supreme Court is considering ratcheting back abortion rights that have been in place for nearly 50 years.

The Oklahoma bill, which passed the Senate last year, makes an exception only for an abortion performed to save the life of the mother, said GOP state

Rep. Jim Olsen, who sponsored the bill. Under the bill, a person convicted of performing an abortion would face up to 10 years in prison and a \$100,000 fine.

"The penalties are for the doctor, not for the woman," Olsen said.

The Oklahoma bill's passage came on the same day as more than 100 people attended a "Bans Off Oklahoma" rally outside the Capitol in support of abortion rights.

"These legislators have continued their relentless attacks on our freedoms," said Emily Wales, interim president and CEO of Planned Parenthood Great Plains Votes. "These restrictions ... are about shaming and stigmatizing people who need and deserve abortion access."

Wales said Planned Parenthood's abortion clinic in Oklahoma has seen an 800% increase in the number of women from Texas after that state passed its new anti-abortion law last year.

Proud Boys leader pleads not guilty to Jan. 6 charges

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Proud Boys leader Henry "Enrique" Tarrío pleaded not guilty on Tuesday to charges that he remotely led a plot to stop Congress' certification of Joe Biden's 2020 victory.

Though he wasn't at the Capitol during the Jan. 6, 2021, riot, prosecutors have said Tarrío organized encrypted chats with Proud Boys members in the weeks before the attack, had a 42-second phone call with another member of the group in the building during the insurrection and took credit for the chaos at the Capitol.

Police had arrested Tarrío in Washington two days before the riot and charged him with vandalizing a Black Lives Matter banner at a historic Black church during a protest in December 2020. The day before the Capitol was attacked, a judge ordered

Tarrío to stay out of Washington.

Tarrío's indictment said that instead of staying out of town, he met with Oath Keepers founder and leader Elmer "Stewart" Rhodes and others in an underground parking garage for about 30 minutes Jan. 5.

His lawyers have said the evidence against Tarrío was weak and relies mostly on text messages and social media.

A judge has postponed the May 18 trial for Tarrío and five others affiliated with the far-right group.

Prosecutors sought the postponement to give them more time to assess and share with opposing lawyers new information gathered in the investigation. Some defendants in the case agreed with the postponement request.

A new trial date is expected to be picked during an April 21 hearing.

Al-Qaida head dispels death rumors in new video

Associated Press

ISLAMABAD — A rare video has appeared of al-Qaida’s chief praising an Indian Muslim woman who in February defied a ban on hijab wearing, revealing the first proof in months that he is still alive.

Rumors of the death of Ayman al-Zawahri have persistently circulated, but in a video released Tuesday and translated by the SITE Intelligence Group, the reclusive al-Qaida chief praises Muskan Khan, who defied a ban on the wearing

of the hijab in schools in India’s southwestern state of Karnataka.

From Tuesday’s video there is no clear indication of the location of al-Zawahri. He is shown in a traditional white head scarf beside a poster praising “the no-

ble woman of India.”

It does raise the specter of al-Qaida having a presence in Afghanistan, however, and highlights concerns over the commitment of the ruling Taliban to fight terrorist groups and deny them space in Afghanistan.

Shanghai to let parents stay with infected kids

Associated Press

BEIJING — Following a public uproar, Shanghai is allowing at least some parents to stay with children infected with COVID-19, making an exception to a policy of isolating anyone who tests positive.

The announcement came as China’s largest city remained in lockdown and conducted more mass testing Wednesday following another jump in new cases.

A top city health official said at a news conference that parents can apply to stay with children with “special needs” and accompany them if they fully comprehend the health risks and sign an agreement.

The parents must wear masks, dine at a different time than their children, avoid sharing items

with them and strictly follow all regulations, said Wu Qianyu of the Shanghai Municipal Health Commission. She did not define what qualifies as “special needs.”

Her announcement followed Chinese state media reports a day earlier that an isolation site set up at the Shanghai New International Expo Center was accepting children with parents. The city has opened sprawling isolation centers for tens of thousands of people to isolate the growing number of positive cases.

Reports that parents were being separated from their infected children had sparked a wave of protest online last weekend, fueled by photos showing several children in each cot with no parents in sight.

Sarajevans mark anniversary of siege amid war in Ukraine

Associated Press

SARAJEVO, Bosnia-Herzegovina — Sarajevo was paying a subdued tribute this week to the resilience of its citizens who survived the longest military siege in modern history, and commemorating thousands of others who did not.

Many of the survivors said they found the 30th anniversary of the start of the siege of the Bosnian capital particularly hard, as they were marking it against the backdrop of what they described as similar suffering being inflicted on civilians in Ukraine by Russia’s occupying army.

Bosnian Serb forces, armed and backed by neighboring Serbia, laid siege to Sarajevo on April 6, 1992, during the bloody breakup of Yugoslavia. For the next 46 months, about 350,000 resi-

dents remained trapped in the city, subjected to daily shelling and sniper attacks and cut off from regular access to electricity, food, water, medicine and the outside world. They survived on limited humanitarian supplies provided by the United Nations, drank from wells and foraged for food.

“The world used to watch us suffer, and now we just watch (Ukrainians) suffer and there is nothing we can do to help them,” said Arijana Djideliija, a 52-year-old primary school teacher. “It is a very strange and difficult feeling,” she added.

More than 11,000 people, including over 1,000 children, were killed by snipers and mortars as they went about their daily lives in Sarajevo during the siege. Countless others were wounded.

German minister backs off ending mandatory virus isolation

Associated Press

BERLIN — Germany’s health minister has backed off a decision to end compulsory isolation for people who test positive for COVID-19, declaring that it was a mistake and sent the wrong signal.

Health Minister Karl Lauter-

bach said Monday that obligatory self-isolation, usually for 10 days — which can be cut to seven days with a negative test — would be scrapped May 1 and replaced with a strong recommendation to isolate for five days. Local health offices would still have ordered infected people in health facilities

to stay off work.

“I have withdrawn the proposal because the completely wrong impression would have arisen that either the pandemic is over or the virus has become significantly more harmless than was assumed in the past,” Lauterbach told reporters in Berlin.

Lauterbach said his aim was to lighten the burden on local health offices and that he will instead do so by lifting a requirement for the contacts of infected people to quarantine. He said he would propose keeping a compulsory five-day isolation period for individuals with COVID-19 in place.



Single source convenience, reliably independent. Visit www.stripes.com.

**Reporting
World, National
and Military News**

Friends Spieth, Thomas have same goal

Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Ga. — Jordan Spieth is a little frustrated he has just one green jacket. Justin Thomas is just as frustrated he has only won one major championship — and it didn't come with a green jacket.

If their motivations this week at the Masters are similar, it shouldn't come as much surprise. The two close friends have been chasing the same golf dreams since they were teenagers trying to beat each other in junior golf.

At the moment, Spieth holds the bragging rights. But it was Thomas who flew in the private jet with Tiger Woods last week to play a practice round at Augusta National to make sure all the boxes were checked in his quest to win a green jacket of his own.

And it was Thomas who teed off Monday for nine holes with Woods and Fred Couples that had fans screaming like it was Sunday afternoon with everything on the line.

"It was unbelievable. I think I honestly didn't think as much

of it until I saw it," Thomas said. "I had a couple buddies send me some pictures last night, and that's probably more people than have ever watched me play a round at Augusta National, and they weren't there to watch me."

That could change should Thomas overcome putting issues that have plagued him in six previous Masters appearances, the best of which had him finishing fourth in the only November tournament in Masters history. He ranked 10th in the field that year in putts per round, the only time he finished in the top 10 in that category on the tricky and very speedy greens.

He's also been up close and personal on the course with Woods, who knows every inch of it and how to play every shot he might encounter. He's the closest friend on the tour with Woods, who considers Thomas much like a little brother.

"I'm not necessarily asking him a lot of specifics about here," Thomas said. "When I'm asking him stuff at home,

I'm just — it's just like I would ask Jon Rahm a question or ask Jordan a question. I feel like Tiger's been a good person for me to do that. But, yeah, I guess I'm very fortunate in that regard."

Thomas wasn't specific, but the questions to Spieth probably revolved more around putting than they did sizing up a green jacket. Thomas has always admired Spieth's putting, which always seems to go up a level once he gets to the Masters.

"He's got the best speed of putter I think I've ever seen," Thomas said. "You look at all his putts, especially all of his midrange putts, every single one of them goes in with the exact same speed. They don't hit the back of the hole. They're probably going to go anywhere from 6 to 12 inches past the hole. I don't think people realize how hard that is and how good that is to consistently do that every single time."

That putting paid off in 2015, when Spieth needed only 27

putts a round to win the Masters, a year after finishing second in his Masters debut. He followed it the next year with another second-place finish that would have been better had he not imploded with balls into Rae's Creek on No. 12.

He's finished third or better in five of his eight Masters, a remarkable feat but one that left him wanting more.

"I've had so many close finishes and top finishes that I'm honestly a little frustrated at not having more than one, just given I think I finished in the top three like five or six times now out of eight starts," Spieth said. "So in that position enough, I would have liked ... I'd want to have a couple wins at least, just given you're in that position enough."

Spieth said he feels good about his chances to change that this week and, surprisingly enough, his putter isn't the reason. He's rebuilt his swing after struggling in recent years and believes he is striking — and shaping — the ball better than ever.

Matsuyama back at Masters, enjoys champion's perks

Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Ga. — The introduction differs slightly from tournament to tournament, though the general theme never changes.

"The defending Masters champion."

Those words, or some version of them, have been what Hideki Matsuyama has heard on the first tee of whatever tournament he's played over the last year. And last week at the Valero Texas Open, the words seemed to resonate differently — because that's when Matsuyama realized that his reign is about to end.

"It was a little sad," Matsuyama said.

There's one way to avoid that, of course: He just needs to successfully defend his Masters title, something nobody has done at Augusta National since Tiger Woods in 2002. Matsuyama, the first Japanese man to win a major championship, is hoping a balky neck that has been bothering him for a

few weeks is good enough on Thursday to give him a legitimate chance of winning the Masters again.

He went 6 under in a seven-hole stretch of the back nine in the third round last year to take command, then held on with a final-round 73 to beat Will Zalatoris by a shot. Matsuyama has won twice more since: the Zozo Championship in Japan in October, then the Sony Open in Hawaii in January.

"It's been a great year," Matsuyama said. "It's great to be back here at Augusta. I feel very proud and honored to be here as the defending champion. It's been a great year with wins at Zozo and Sony. Last couple of weeks, though, have been a struggle. Hopefully I can find my game and be a worthy defending champion."

That last part is the mystery. The neck has even him guessing.

The issue with the left side of his neck first presented itself during the second

round at Bay Hill last month. He got through that tournament, tying for 20th, and went to Texas last week pain-free and feeling good for a couple of days.

Then came Wednesday, it stiffened up again and Matsuyama eventually withdrew.

"I haven't really been able to hit a full shot, a 100% full shot in a long time, so that's still a question," Matsuyama said. "But I feel like the treatment I've been receiving is helping. I'm on the road to full recovery. ... I think by Thursday I'll be ready to play my best, hopefully."

Matsuyama first came to Augusta National as an amateur in 2011, getting to the Masters after winning what was then called the Asian Amateur and is now called the Asia-Pacific Amateur. It's a relatively new tournament, having been contested only 12 times and won by 10 men — three of whom are in this Masters field.

Baseball: Familiar faces in new places

Associated Press

Many familiar faces with impressive resumes are in new places following one of major league baseball's wildest free-agent frenzies.

Max Scherzer and Corey Seager got megadeals before the lockout. Freddie Freeman had to wait until spring training to get his lucrative contract. Trevor Story jumped leagues and changed positions. Nick Castellanos switched red pin-stripes.

Kris Bryant stayed in the NL West. Carlos Correa stayed in the American League.

Other stars ended up with new teams via trades. Matt Chapman went from the A's to the Blue Jays. The Mariners got outfielder Jesse Winker and third baseman Eugenio Suarez from the Reds. Oakland also traded Matt Olson, sending him to the Braves. The Yankees got Josh Donaldson from the Twins.

Fans may need to pull out their programs to go with those cold beers, hot dogs and Cracker Jack to keep track of who ended up where.

A look at some of the many moves:

Max Scherzer: The three-time Cy Young Award winner and eight-time All-Star re-

turned to the NL East, signing a \$130 million, three-year deal with the New York Mets. He's coming off a 15-4, 2.46 ERA season split between Washington and the Los Angeles Dodgers.

Corey Seager: The two-time All-Star shortstop and 2020 World Series MVP got the richest deal, a \$325 million, 10-year contract to leave the Dodgers for the Texas Rangers. He joined Gold Glove second baseman Marcus Semien in Texas. Semien, who hit 45 homers for Toronto last year, got a \$175 million, seven-year contract from the Rangers hours before Seager on Dec. 1.

Freddie Freeman: The 2020 NL MVP is out of Atlanta after helping the Braves win the World Series, heading back home to play for the Dodgers, who gave him a \$162 million, six-year contract. Freeman's decision to leave came after the Braves acquired first baseman Matt Olson from Oakland.

Trevor Story: A four-time All-Star shortstop in Colorado, Story signed a \$140 million, six-year contract with Boston to play second base. He joins shortstop Xander Bogaerts to form a powerful middle infield.

Kris Bryant: The Rockies signed the versatile 2016 NL

MVP, giving him a \$182 million, seven-year contract. Bryant was traded from the Cubs to the Giants last season after making his fourth All-Star game.

Robbie Ray: After winning the AL Cy Young Award in Toronto, the left-hander got a \$115 million, five-year contract from Seattle.

Carlos Correa: A two-time All-Star shortstop and the AL 2015 AL Rookie of the Year, Correa left Houston for Minnesota, getting a \$105.3 million, three-year contract. But Correa can opt out after the 2022 and 2023 seasons to become a free agent again.

Nick Castellanos: The 2021 All-Star outfielder got a \$100 million, five-year contract from the Phillies after a career season in Cincinnati. Castellanos joined slugger Kyle Schwarber, who received a \$79 million, four-year from Philadelphia.

Kenley Jansen: The longtime Dodgers closer and three-time All-Star with 350 career saves joined the defending champion Braves on a one-year, \$18 million deal.

Jorge Soler: The 2021 World Series MVP remained in the NL East, signing a three-year, \$36 million contract with the Marlins. Soler led the AL with 48 homers in 2019 for Kansas

City.

Nelson Cruz: The veteran designated hitter is back in the NL where he spent his first season in 2005 with Milwaukee. The Nationals gave the 41-year-old Cruz a \$12 million salary for this year, and the deal includes a \$16 million mutual option for 2023 with a \$3 million buyout.

Kevin Gausman: Third time was a charm for the Blue Jays, who signed Gausman away from San Francisco with a \$110 million, five-year contract. The right-hander had spurned free-agent offers from Toronto each of the previous two offseasons.

Starling Marte: The Mets gave Marte \$78 million for four years to be their center fielder. He led the majors in stolen bases last year with the Marlins and A's, but has been slowed this spring by an oblique injury. Their big splash before the lockout also included signing infielder Eduardo Escobar to a \$20 million, two-year deal and giving outfielder/first baseman Mark Canha \$26.5 million over two years with a club option.

Javier Báez: The two-time All-Star and Gold Glove-winning shortstop signed a \$140 million, six-year deal with Detroit before the lockout. He finished last season with the Mets after a trade from the Cubs.

Court: Watson must reveal history with massage therapists

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Cleveland Browns quarterback Deshaun Watson must say whether he had sex with 18 massage therapists who supported him last year following criminal complaints, a judge in Texas ruled Tuesday.

USA Today reported that Watson has 30 days to comply. He previously would not address his past with the therapists. Watson also has to provide other information about his massage history since

2019, including any language in his contract with the Texans about massages.

One of the NFL's top quarterbacks, Watson was traded last month from Houston to Cleveland.

He has been accused by 22 women of sexual misconduct during therapy sessions, many of which he arranged by contacting the therapists on social media in 2020 and 2021.

To this point, two grand juries have declined to indict Watson on 10 criminal com-

plaints filed to Houston police. He still faces the civil suits and has been giving depositions on those for several weeks.

As part of those civil lawsuits, the women's attorneys want Watson to answer written "requests for admission" about whether he had sex with the 18 therapists who backed him after the first lawsuits against him were filed in March 2021.

The plaintiffs' attorneys say the answers would demon-

strate a pattern and motives for setting up the massages.

In other NFL news:

■ Buffalo Bills receiver Stefon Diggs agreed to a four-year, \$96 million contract extension, a person with direct knowledge of the deal told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

The person spoke on the condition of anonymity because the contract has not yet been signed. The agreement was first reported by ESPN earlier in the day.

76ers top Pacers, pull even in Atlantic

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Joel Embiid had 45 points and 13 rebounds, and the Philadelphia 76ers made a franchise-record 17 three-pointers in the first half of a 131-122 victory over the Indiana Pacers on Tuesday night that moved them into a tie with Boston atop the Atlantic Division.

Embiid banked in a three-pointer at the first-quarter buzzer and shot 18-for-30 overall while moving into the NBA scoring lead with 30.4 points per game. He had 27 points and seven rebounds in the first half, helping Philadelphia take control with a 49-point second quarter that led to an 82-59 halftime lead.

"He's just incredible," Indiana guard T.J. McCollum said, referring to his former teammate in Philly. "He's putting his back to the basket and punishing guys and he's passing whenever he's doubled and he's stepping out and making threes. It's incredible to watch."

Buddy Hield scored 25 points and Tyrese Haliburton had 21 points, eight rebounds and five assists for the Pacers, who have lost a season-worst eight in a row.

Suns 121, Lakers 110: Devin Booker scored 32 points and host Phoenix won its franchise-record 63rd game of the season, beating a Los Angeles team minus LeBron James to eliminate the Lakers from the playoff race.

It was a tight game during the first half, but the Suns used a 29-9 run in the third quarter to create separation. The rest of the night was essentially a celebration for Phoenix, which danced and dunked their way past forlorn Los Angeles.

Playing without James for a second consecutive game because of a sprained ankle, the Lakers lost their seventh straight. Russell Westbrook scored 28 points while Anthony Davis added 21 points and 13 rebounds.

Nets 118, Rockets 105: Kyrie Irving scored 42 points and host Brooklyn beat Houston to improve its position in the race for play-in seeding.

Irving had 17 points in the fourth quarter. Kevin Durant added 18 points, Bruce Brown had 15 and Cam Thomas 13 for the Nets. Andre Drummond finished with 10 points and 11 rebounds.

Raptors 118, Hawks 108: Pascal Siakam had 31 points and 13 rebounds, Scottie Barnes added 19 points and 14 rebounds, and host Toronto clinched a playoff berth by beating Atlanta.

Jazz 121, Grizzlies 115 (OT): Rudy Gobert had 22 points and 21 rebounds, and host Utah clinched a playoff berth by beating Memphis in overtime.

Bucks 127, Bulls 106: Brook Lopez scored a season-high 28 points and Milwau-

kee overcame a rather quiet performance from Giannis Antetokounmpo to clinch its fourth straight Central Division championship with a victory at Chicago.

Pelicans 123, Kings 109: CJ McCollum and Jaxson Hayes each scored 23 points and New Orleans secured a spot in the Western Conference play-in tournament by winning at Sacramento.

Heat 144, Hornets 115: Tyler Herro scored 35 points off the bench and host Miami moved closer to clinching the No. 1 seed in the Eastern Conference playoffs with a victory over Charlotte.

Spurs 116, Nuggets 97: Devin Vassell and Keldon Johnson each scored 20 points to help San Antonio move closer to securing a spot in the play-in tournament by winning at Denver.

Magic 120, Cavaliers 115: Mo Bamba had 20 points and 12 rebounds, Ignas Brazdeikis scored 20 off the bench and host Orlando beat Cleveland to stop a six-game losing streak.

Wizards 132, Timberwolves 114: Kristaps Porzingis scored 25 points, including 12 in the third quarter, as Washington took control during a win at Minnesota.

Thunder 98, Trail Blazers 94: Jaylen Hoard had career highs of 24 points and 21 rebounds to help host Oklahoma City top Portland.

Avs down Penguins to reach playoffs, earn 50th win

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — The Colorado Avalanche clinched a playoff spot with the help of two goals from Nathan MacKinnon in a 6-4 win against the Pittsburgh Penguins on Tuesday night.

It's the fifth straight playoff berth for the Avs, who also became the first NHL team to 50 wins this season and have ripped off nine wins in 11 games.

MacKinnon scored his 23rd and 24th of the season, while J.T. Compher got his 14th of the year. Darren Helm, Josh Manson and Artturi Lehkonen also scored. Darcy Kuemper won his 33rd game and stopped 41 shots.

Sabres 4, Hurricanes 2: Victor Olofsson had a goal and an assist in the third period to lead host Buffalo past Carolina.

Jeff Skinner, Casey Mittelstadt and Dylan Cozens also scored for the Sabres, and Craig Anderson made 32 saves in the opening game of a home-and-home set with the Hurricanes.

Panthers 7, Maple Leafs 6 (OT): Jonathan Huberdeau scored his second goal of the game in overtime and also had three assists, helping host Florida overcome a four-goal deficit to beat Toronto.

Oilers 2, Sharks 1 (OT): Connor McDavid scored 31 seconds into overtime to extend his points streak to 14 games and Edmonton rallied to win at San Jose, its fifth straight victory.

Ryan Nugent-Hopkins tied it with a short-handed goal with 8:04 remaining in regulation before McDavid won it.

Predators 6, Wild 2: Ryan Johansen's first career hat trick led host Nashville over Minnesota.

Roman Josi and Philip Tomasino had a goal and two assists, Matt Duchene had a goal and an assist and Juuse Saros made 47 saves for the Predators, winners of three of four as they try to keep pace in the tight Western Conference playoff race. Filip Forsberg had three assists and Mattias Ekholm added two.

Blue Jackets 4, Flyers 2: Justin Danforth scored the go-ahead goal late in the third period, Elvis Merzlikins stopped 47 shots and Columbus won at Philadelphia to end a seven-game skid.

Sean Kuraly added an empty-netter for the Blue Jackets in the final seconds. Brendan Gaunce

and Carson Meyer also scored for Columbus.

Rangers 3, Devils 1: Artemi Panarin set up two first-period power-play goals for his 64th and 65th assists of the season and New York won at rival New Jersey.

Senators 6, Canadiens 3: Austin Watson scored twice and Ottawa had three goals in the third period to win at Montreal.

Stars 3, Islanders 2: Radek Faksa's shorthanded goal midway through the second period gave host Dallas a win over New York.

Red Wings 5, Bruins 3: Jakub Vrana had a goal and an assist, Alex Nedeljkovic made a season-high 47 saves and had an assist, and host Detroit defeated Boston.