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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Ukraine pushes NATO allies to rush weapons

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba arrived Thursday at NATO headquarters with three items on his agenda to consolidate his country's defenses against Russia's full-scale invasion.

"It is weapons, weapons, weapons," Kuleba said in Brussels, where allies gathered for emergency meetings.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his counterparts took up the issue of how to get more weaponry into Ukraine as the war, which began Feb. 24, enters a new phase.

"I think the deal Ukraine is offering is fair," Kuleba said. "You give us weapons. We sacrifice our lives. And the war is contained in Ukraine."

Blinken, speaking to reporters after the talks, said that allies have been providing the weapons and systems that Ukrainian troops can use most effectively "to push back against Russian

aggression."

"We are not going to let anything stand in the way of getting Ukrainians what they, and what we, believe can be effective. We are looking across the board right now," Blinken said.

But Kuleba said that the question isn't whether more weapons will arrive — it's whether allies will provide them in time as Ukraine prepares for a new Russian offensive in the east.

"Either you help us now, and I am speaking of days, not weeks, or your help will come too late," said Kuleba, who said the battle for the eastern Donbas region would be of a scale unseen since World War II.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg has warned that Moscow's recent withdrawal of forces from around the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv marks a shift in strategy rather than de-escalation.

Now, Russian forces are re-supplying and regrouping in Belarus. After failing to capture

Kyiv, Russia is expected to re-focus on Ukraine's east, with the aim of establishing a land bridge between Donbas and the occupied Crimean Peninsula.

Kuleba said Ukrainian forces can resist, but only if they are better armed. Stoltenberg expressed confidence Thursday that allies are prepared to do more.

"I am certain that we will address the need for more air defense systems, anti-tank weapons, lighter but also heavier weapons and many different types of support to Ukraine," said Stoltenberg, flanked by Kuleba at NATO headquarters, prior to the start of talks Thursday.

Details, however, about what weapons would be committed by allies and when were not disclosed after discussions.

Allies also discussed additional sanctions on Moscow in response to allegations that Russian forces have targeted civilians and committed war crimes in regions that were previously

occupied.

Since the Russia-Ukraine war began, the United States has committed \$1.7 billion worth of weaponry and other items to support Ukrainian forces.

Javelin anti-tank systems and Stinger missiles are among the arms the U.S. has supplied. Others pegged for delivery include Switchblade tactical drones and Puma drones for surveillance.

Numerous other allies have sent weapons as well. Still, Ukraine says some NATO members, Germany in particular, have been too cautious and too slow in delivering arms.

"While Berlin has time, Kyiv doesn't," Kuleba said.

He credited Germany for reversing its previous position of not providing lethal weaponry to his country in the wake of Russia's invasion, but he said Berlin is still too restrictive on what it is willing to send.

"It is clear that Germany can do more given its reserves and capacity," Kuleba said.

US: N. Korea may launch nuclear test on holiday

By SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

North Korea has ignored U.S. offers for talks and may be preparing a nuclear test to celebrate the birth of the nation's founder, according to the U.S. State Department.

Pyongyang could test a nuclear weapon April 15, when the North will mark the 110th birthday of late leader Kim Il Sung, the U.S. Special Representative for North Korea Policy, Sung Kim, told reporters Wednesday.

"I don't want to speculate too much, but I think it could be another missile launch. It could be a nuclear test," he said, according to a Thursday report by The Korea Times.

North Korea has conducted six known nuclear weapons tests since 2006, the most recent on Sept. 3, 2017. There was a pause in

tests during the administration of former President Donald Trump, who held three summits with the North's current leader, Kim Jong Un.

North Korea has conducted a series of missile tests so far this year and fired an intercontinental ballistic missile on March 24 that landed in Japan's exclusive economic zone, outside its territorial waters.

It also appeared to have launched a construction project at Punggye-ri, a nuclear-testing facility dismantled during inter-Korean negotiations in 2018, according to satellite images seen by U.S.-based analysts.

"The construction and repair work indicate that North Korea has made some decision about the status of the test site," Jeffrey Lewis, director of the center's East Asia Nonprolifer-

ation Program, and Dave Schmerler, a senior research associate, wrote in a report last month. "One possibility is that North Korea plans to bring the test site back to a state of readiness to resume nuclear explosive testing."

The North hasn't responded to Washington's offers to restart denuclearization talks, Sung Kim said, according to an Agence France-Presse report Thursday.

"We have not received any response from Pyongyang, which is very disappointing, because we have sent several messages, both public and private, inviting them to a dialogue without any conditions," he said. "Instead, they have initiated a series of missile tests that recently culminated in at least three ICBM launches. These actions pose a serious threat to regional stability."

Biden nominates Fagan to lead Coast Guard

BY ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Adm. Linda L. Fagan has been nominated to serve as commandant of the Coast Guard, which would make her the first woman to lead a service branch of the armed forces, according to the White House.

The appointment made by President Joe Biden on Tuesday hinges on confirmation by the Senate.

“Her leadership and integrity are second to none,” Biden said in a statement. “If confirmed, Adm. Fagan will be the first woman in history to serve as commandant and the first female service chief.”

Fagan has served as the vice commandant since June and would replace Adm. Karl Schultz as the service’s top officer. She also was the first woman to take that job and the first to reach four stars in the Coast Guard. Schultz will retire following a command-change ceremony during the summer, the service said.

“Admiral Fagan is a tremendous leader, trailblazer, and respected public servant who will lead the Coast Guard across its critical

missions with honor,” said Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, the department that oversees the Coast Guard.

A 1985 Coast Guard Academy graduate, her tenure in the Coast Guard has earned her the service’s first-ever Gold Ancient Trident, as the officer with the longest service record in the marine safety field.

Fagan has served on all seven continents, according to her Coast Guard biography. Her command experience includes leading the Pacific Area, Coast Guard Defense Force West and First Coast Guard District. She has more than 15 years as a marine inspector and conducted sea duty aboard the USCGC Polar Star, the service’s heavy polar icebreaker.

“Within the Coast Guard and across the Department of Homeland Security, Admiral Fagan is admired as a role model of the utmost integrity, and her historic nomination is sure to inspire the next generation of women who are considering careers in military service,” Mayorkas said.

Sen. Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., chairwoman of the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, which oversees

Coast Guard nominations, said Fagan is an “outstanding choice.”

“Upon confirmation, she will become the first woman and mother to lead any branch of the armed forces. This nomination proves the value of enacting laws that provide family leave, child care, and health care access to support talented women in the Coast Guard who have dual roles as service members and parents. Adm. Fagan’s nomination will inspire generations of American women to strive to serve at the highest level in the armed forces,” Cantwell said.

To replace Fagan as vice commandant, she selected and Biden nominated Vice Adm. Steven D. Poulin, the service said. Poulin now serves as the commander of the Coast Guard Atlantic Area and is responsible for all Coast Guard missions from the Rocky Mountains to the Arabian Gulf.

Pending confirmation, Poulin is expected to relieve Fagan as vice commandant during a change-of-watch ceremony planned for May 24. A ceremony for Fagan to replace Schultz is scheduled for June 1. The ceremonies will be in Washington, according to the Coast Guard.

Army chief loses star and job, but no proof of racism found in probe

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

The Army’s former deputy chief of staff for logistics, who was suspended earlier this year amid a toxic command climate probe, has been demoted to major general and removed from his Army staff position, the service said Wednesday.

An Army inspector general report concluded now-Maj. Gen. Duane Gamble “displayed counterproductive leadership behaviors at times,” but it did not substantiate allegations of racial discrimination, said Cynthia O. Smith, an Army spokeswoman.

Gamble has been reassigned as a special assistant to Lt. Gen. Walter Piatt, the Army’s staff director, and his retirement is pending, Smith said.

“The preponderance of credible evidence determined that [former] Lt. Gen. Gamble did not discriminate based on race, and that most of his actions had a positive impact on the organization,” Smith said of the IG’s findings. “Additionally, command climate

surveys identified a majority of [former] Lt. Gen. Gamble’s subordinates were satisfied with his leadership.”

Gamble was first reported to the Army inspector general in 2020 on allegations that he fostered a toxic command climate, routinely made racist statements and favored white subordinates over Black ones, a senior Army official told Stars and Stripes in February when Gamble — who is white — was suspended from his job as the Army’s deputy chief of staff for logistics, known as the G-4. Gamble’s troubles were first revealed by the online military news outlet Task & Purpose, which reported multiple incidents in which Gamble made racist statements, citing unnamed officials with direct knowledge of those occurrences.

Gamble, a 37-year veteran of the Army, will be permanently replaced by incoming G-4 Maj. Gen. Charles Hamilton, who will be promoted to lieutenant general and assume G-4 duties, Smith said. Hamilton was confirmed for the new position in February.

2 Marine battalion leaders fired due to loss of confidence

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

The commander and command sergeant major of a Hawaii-based Marine Corps battalion were relieved last week due to a loss of confidence in their leadership, the service said Wednesday.

Lt. Col. Benjamin Wagner, commander of 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marine Regiment, was fired on March 31, along with the battalion’s top enlisted leader, Sgt. Maj. Jayson Clifton, a Marine Corps spokesman, Maj. Kurt Stahl, said in an email to Stars and Stripes on Wednesday.

Maj. Gen. Jay Barger, commander of 3rd Marine Division, relieved the pair “due to a loss of trust and confidence in their abilities to continue leading in their assigned duties,” Stahl said.

The move followed an inspector general’s investigation that was prompted by anonymous complaints, said Stahl, who provided no further details on the nature of that investigation.

Senators call for shift in focus to Russian defeat

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The military's top brass said Thursday that an ideal outcome of Russia's invasion of Ukraine would be maintaining Ukraine's sovereignty and weakening Russia, frustrating senators who want Russia's resounding defeat to be at the forefront of U.S. strategy.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that they are focused on supplying weaponry and intelligence to Ukraine, deterring Russia and supporting NATO and humanitarian efforts.

But their refusal to use the words "win" and "victory" riled lawmakers who see the retreat of Russian troops from the suburbs of Ukraine's capital as an opportunity for Ukraine to not just hold off Russia's mightier forces, but win the war.

"The shift we need to do now is to strategically think about victory," said Sen. Dan Sullivan, R-Alaska, a former Marine. "Doesn't it make sense to have our No. 1 objective to be imposing a strategic defeat on [Russian President Vladimir] Putin? I think that's the source of frustration for a lot of senators — we're not hearing that language."

Milley said the White House has made clear that the United States must impose severe costs on Russia and not let Putin win. Austin outlined a "desired result" that would include Ukraine preserving its sovereignty and its ability to defend itself, and for Russia to become a global pariah with a weakened military.

"We can see those things starting to happen," Austin said.

Sen. Tom Cotton, R-Ark., asked Austin whether the words "win" and "victory" had been purged from his vocabulary.

"Certainly not," the defense secretary replied.

The military leaders predicted a long and fierce battle over Ukraine's southern and eastern regions in the coming weeks as Russia seeks to seize control of the contested Donbas territory and build a land bridge to the annexed Crimean Peninsula. They cautioned that the rest of Ukraine remains a battle zone.

"There's no telling what Putin will do next," Austin said.

Texas governor orders boosted border security

BY ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott on Wednesday ordered the state's National Guard to begin building mass detention areas along the border with Mexico and form boat blockades in the Rio Grande out of concern that changing federal policies will increase illegal crossings into Texas.

"Texas will be taking its own unprecedented actions this month to do what no state in America has ever done in the history of this country to better secure our state, as well as our nation," Abbott said during a news conference from the border town Weslaco.

The new measures are part of several additions that Abbott announced for his border security mission, known as Operation Lone Star, that will also order other state agencies to search commercial vehicles crossing into Texas from Mexico and charter buses to deliver legally processed migrants who volunteer for the trip to the steps of the U.S. Capitol.

Abbott said the actions are in response to President Joe Biden's decision to end a pandemic-driven border policy known as Title 42. The public health policy allowed federal Border Patrol agents to send migrants back across the border quickly because of concerns they would spread the coronavirus.

The policy is scheduled to end May 23,

and Abbott said the federal government is preparing for up to 18,000 illegal immigrants crossing per day.

Newly appointed Maj. Gen. Thomas Suelzer, commander of the Texas Military Department, joined Abbott during his announcement.

The day before, Suelzer told state senators that he was looking at how to use boats and contractors to lower the cost of the mission and reduce the number of troops deployed at the border. He said it would be Texas National Guard engineers, not contractors, building detainment areas out of coiled barbed wire capable of holding large groups of people.

Troops will also partner with Texas Department of Public Safety and Parks and Wildlife to "form a boat blockade" on the Rio Grande meant to keep people from crossing the water from Mexico into the state.

"Lastly, our civil disturbance capabilities will be in full force to have a nonlethal means of blocking people from entering the state," Suelzer said. "So if you're a caravan organizer, and you think you're going to overwhelm ... a port of entry, we'll be there waiting for you."

Areas that can expect to see this activity include the Rio Grande Valley, Eagle Pass, Del Rio, Laredo and Zapata, he said.

US Navy ship assists in drug bust off Africa coast valued at \$350M

Stars and Stripes

American service members aboard the USS Hershel "Woody" Williams recently helped seize an estimated \$350 million in suspected cocaine from a fishing vessel sailing near the island country of Cape Verde, U.S. Africa Command announced Thursday.

Seven people were arrested and about 13,228 pounds of suspected cocaine was seized in the April 1 bust, during which the Brazilian-flagged vessel was boarded and inspected, Africa Command said in a statement.

U.S. sailors, Coast Guardsmen and Marines boarded the vessel under the jurisdic-

tion of Cape Verde and in support of law enforcement agents from the country, according to the statement.

Cape Verde is a chain of islands in the Atlantic Ocean about 400 miles west of Dakar, Senegal.

"Illicit activity in the maritime undermines the economic development of the entire African continent," Rear Adm. Anthony Carullo, director of operations for U.S. Naval Forces Africa, said in the statement. "This successful interdiction sends a clear message that the countries of West Africa are poised to enhance their national and regional prosperity by intercepting and prosecuting illegal activity."

WHO: Virus cases, deaths continue to fall

Associated Press

GENEVA — The number of coronavirus cases reported around the world has dropped for a second consecutive week and confirmed COVID-19 deaths also fell last week, according to a World Health Organization report issued Wednesday.

In its latest pandemic report, the WHO said 9 million cases were reported, a 16% weekly decline, along with more than 26,000 new deaths from COVID-19. The U.N. health agency said confirmed coronavirus infections were down in all regions of

the world.

It warned, however, that the reported numbers carry considerable uncertainty because many countries have stopped widespread testing for the coronavirus, meaning many cases are likely going undetected.

WHO said it was also tracking an omicron variant that is a recombination of two versions: BA.1 and BA.2, which was first detected in Britain in January. WHO said early estimates suggest the recombined omicron could be about 10% more transmissible than previous mutations, but further

evidence is needed.

The agency has continued to warn countries not to drop their COVID-19 protocols too quickly and predicted that future variants could spread easily if surveillance and testing systems are shelved.

Last week, the United Kingdom said COVID-19 had hit record levels across the country, with government statistics estimating that about 1 in 13 people were infected. Those figures came on the same day the British government abandoned its free testing program.

US experts wrestling with how to update vaccines

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — More than two years into the COVID-19 pandemic, U.S. health officials are beginning to grapple with how to keep the vaccines updated to best protect Americans from the ever-changing coronavirus.

On Wednesday, a panel of vaccine advisers to the Food and Drug Administration spent hours debating key questions for revamping the shots and conducting future booster campaigns. They didn't reach any firm conclusions.

The questions facing the experts included: How often to update the vaccines against new

strains, how effective they should be to warrant approval and whether updates should be coordinated with global health authorities.

Last week, the FDA authorized a fourth dose of the Pfizer or Moderna vaccines for anyone 50 or older and for some younger people with severely weakened immune systems. It's an effort to get ahead of another possible surge.

But the FDA's vaccine chief Dr. Peter Marks acknowledged at the meeting that "we simply can't be boosting people as frequently as we are." He called the latest booster update a "stopgap" measure to protect vulnerable Americans while regulators decide

whether and how to tweak the current vaccines.

Marks cautioned that waning vaccine protection, new variants and colder weather in the fall could raise the risk of more surges.

"Our goal here is to stay ahead of future variants and outbreaks and ensure we do our best to reduce the toll of disease and death due to COVID-19," said Marks, adding that he expects more meetings of the vaccine panel in coming months.

"We've never been here before. We're all working together to do the best we can and it's very complex," said Oveta Fuller of the University of Michigan's Medical School.

Army vet pleads guilty for role in theft of equipment

BY ROSE L. THAYER

Stars and Stripes

An Army veteran and former contractor at Fort Hood pleaded guilty for her part in the theft of about \$2.1 million worth of Army gear from the central Texas base, according to federal court records.

Jessica Elaintrell Smith, 29, accepted a plea agreement Tuesday for one of two federal charges pending against her in the U.S. District Court Southern District of Texas for working with others to steal Army equipment out of storage containers at Fort Hood between March and June 2021, according to court records.

The theft included three laser range finders, 57 thermal scopes, four night-vision scopes and 10 night-vision goggles. She will be sentenced June 28.

Another former Army veteran and contractor, Brandon Dominic Brown, faces the same charges and has a jury trial set for June in Corpus Christi.

A third person involved in the case, Nathan Nicols, pleaded guilty to helping steal the equipment and then listing the items for sale on eBay. Authorities found the stolen Army equipment in Nicols' home when they searched it in July. He will be sentenced June 21.

On June 17, 2021, soldiers at Fort Hood reported to the Army Criminal Investigation Division that 17 large cargo containers had been found with their locks cut from them and a formal inventory showed about \$2.1 million worth of gear missing.

Investigators found the stolen gear for sale online about a week later and traced it to Nicols in Corpus Christi, according to court records. Text messages on Nicols' phone linked the crime back to Smith.

Smith, who in 2014 pleaded guilty to theft in Bell County while serving in the Army at Fort Hood, worked as a contractor on the base at the time the Army gear was stolen in 2021. Surveillance footage showed Smith

entered Fort Hood on June 16, the night most of the items were stolen, at 8:23 p.m. and 9:04 p.m., according to court records.

Brown, who was discharged from the Army in 2019, was seen on the footage the same night at 9:19 p.m. and 12:18 a.m. His contractor position at Fort Hood would have given him access to the area where the items were stolen, according to court records.

Smith, who worked as a unit supply specialist for the Army, was first convicted of theft in June 2014, according to Bell County court records. She was sentenced to 10 years of probation.

The Army deployed Smith to Afghanistan the same month and she returned in November 2014, according to her service record. She served six years, leaving the Army in 2016 as a specialist. During that time, she earned multiple awards, including the Army Good Conduct Medal and two Army Commendation Medals.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police: Math homework in getaway car leads to arrest

NV LAS VEGAS — An 18-year-old man arrested in a home-invasion robbery in which a Las Vegas woman was killed left his high school homework in the getaway car, police said.

Math homework bearing Kamari Oliver's name was found in a backpack in the vehicle after the victim's boyfriend saw several robbers leaving the home and rammed their vehicle with his own into a nearby wall on March 25, according to a newly released police report.

The getaway car's occupants ran from the scene and Oliver was arrested March 28 after he arrived at a high school, police said. The school's name was redacted from the report and Clark County School District officials declined Monday to provide information about Oliver, the Las Vegas Review-Journal reported.

The report said the boyfriend of the slain woman, Natalie Manduley, 24, was known for selling high-end jewelry on Instagram. Manduley was killed in a shootout with the robbers, police said.

Tiny teeth lead scientists to discover shark species

SC COLUMBIA — A team of scientists from South Carolina and Alabama has discovered a new shark species that lived nearly 30 million years ago thanks to the discovery of the animal's teeth that are so small one could fit on the tip of a pencil.

The shark was likely less than 2 feet long and was named *Scyliorhinus weemsi* after geologist

and paleontologist Dr. Robert Weems of the United States Geological Survey.

"There are approximately 15 living members of this genus in the world's oceans today, but their ancestry extends back to the time of the dinosaurs," said scientist Jun Ebersole of McWane Science Center in Birmingham, Ala., in a statement.

The microscopic teeth of the newly discovered shark species were found in Summerville, some 30 miles from the ocean. Back then, the area was under 300 feet of water.

Driver strikes 8 cruisers, injures officers in chase

CT WATERBURY — A woman in a Hummer crashed into eight police cruisers and injured seven officers during a long, destructive car chase Sunday in Connecticut, authorities said.

The driver was captured after she wrecked the large SUV in Monroe, about 25 miles away from where the pursuit began in Waterbury. Hannah Casperson, 25, of Brookfield, was wanted in connection with dozens of car break-ins and other thefts, officials said. She was taken to a hospital with injuries that were serious but not life-threatening, including a broken femur, police said Monday.

Police got information that she was parked next a building in Waterbury and approached the Hummer. Casperson then sped away from an officer who was on foot and crashed into his cruiser and later another, police said.

The chase went into Monroe, where police said Casperson did a U-turn and crashed into six police cruisers that were pursuing

her. After hitting the last cruiser, the Hummer flipped over and struck a utility pole, police said. Casperson then tried to flee on foot, but was quickly arrested, officials said.

Six officers were taken to a hospital and later discharged, police said. Another injured officer did not need treatment, officials said.

FBI: Pornography suspect recorded 100-plus kids

IL CHICAGO — A man facing child pornography charges is suspected of recording videos of more than 100 children between the ages of 5 and 17 at YMCAs in Chicago and Niles, the FBI said Tuesday.

Michael Porter, 55, of Chicago, is accused of recording the videos between 2006 and 2020 in locker rooms and bathroom and shower stalls at two YMCAs in Chicago and one in Niles, the Chicago Sun-Times reported.

Porter sometimes would leave a recording device in his gym bag and place the gym bag where it could capture children showering or in a locker area, the FBI said. He would also make recordings from bathroom or shower stalls.

The new details were released eight months after Porter was charged in federal court with using minors to engage in sexually explicit conduct and surreptitiously recording them. The FBI said it is trying to identify victims who were recorded.

Park fundraiser offers entry pass good for 2172

MT BILLINGS — As Yellowstone National Park celebrates its 150th anniversary year, the park's fundraising arm is seeking

\$1,500 donations in exchange for an annual entry pass that can be used by carloads of the donor's descendants to visit the park in 150 years.

Yellowstone Forever will use the money raised through the sale of "Inheritance Passes" to support park projects like trail improvements, education, native fish conservation and scientific studies.

"It is our way of celebrating 150 years of Yellowstone National Park and to help preserve the park for the next 150 years," Lisa Diekmann, president and CEO of Yellowstone Forever, told The Billings Gazette.

The Inheritance Passes will be annual passes valid for entry into Yellowstone in 2172. Donors will also receive a pass to enter Yellowstone that is good for a year after its first use, said Wendie Carr, chief marketing officer for Yellowstone Forever.

Missing hiker's body found with dog by his side

CA LOS ANGELES — A hiker who was missing for more than two weeks was found dead in Griffith Park with his dog by his side, authorities said.

Oscar Alejandro Hernandez, 29, was reported missing on March 16. His body was found March 31 in a remote area of the sprawling urban park. His dog, King, was alive but emaciated. He apparently hadn't left Hernandez's side for two weeks, a relative told KNBC-TV.

Hernandez was last seen near the park merry-go-round's hiking trails, according to a missing person flyer posted by his family. There was no immediate word on the cause of his death.

— From wire reports

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Woods tees off after terrible wreck

Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Ga. — Tiger Woods is back. Walking with the slightest hint of a limp after a devastating car wreck that could've cost him his right leg, Woods sent the Masters patrons into an uproar Thursday with his first birdie of the tournament.

After five straight pars — he just missed a birdie at the tough No. 5 hole when a 15-foot putt lipped out — Woods delivered a vintage tee shot at the par-3 sixth.

The ball climbed up a ridge on the green and stopped 2 feet short of the flag, leaving Woods with nothing more than a tap-in to push his score to 1-under.

That was good enough to put him on the leaderboard, right behind co-leaders Harry Higgs and Talor Gooch.

Yep, there was a long way to go. Still, it felt as if Woods was already a winner.

This was his first truly competitive tournament since a car wreck in February 2021 damaged his right leg so badly doctors told

him that amputation was an option.

Wearing a pink shirt and black pants, Woods was greeted by thunderous applause when his name was announced to a huge gallery surrounding the first tee.

Woods failed to make solid contact with his first shot: a 264-yard drive that faded behind a bunker on the right side of the fairway. His approach rolled off the front of the green, but he sank a 10-foot putt to save par, bringing another huge roar from the patrons.

Woods walked slowly, knowing that he faced four tough days on an extremely hilly course if he manages to make the cut.

His career was in jeopardy after the car wreck left him confined to a hospital bed for three months. Woods was out of the public eye until last November, when he posted a video of him swinging a club with a simple message, "Making progress."

His lone tournament in the 508 days since he last competed was an event in

December in which he rode in a cart and was paired with his 13-year-old son, Charlie.

Despite the long layoff and the obvious physical limitations with screws and rods still holding the bones in place in his right leg, Woods said he still thinks he can win his sixth green jacket.

At 46, he would be the oldest Masters champion by three weeks over Jack Nicklaus.

The biggest question is how Woods holds up over 18 holes for four straight days.

"I can hit it just fine. I don't have any qualms about what I can do physically from a golf standpoint," Woods said Tuesday. "Walking is the hard part. This is normally not an easy walk to begin with. Now given the conditions that my leg is in, it gets even more difficult.

"Seventy-two holes is ... going to be a tough challenge," he added. "And a challenge that I'm up for."

From green jacket to prison, Cabrera's fall unlike any other

Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Ga. — His picture is still on the wall of champions in the press building at Augusta National, sandwiched between Trevor Immelman and Phil Mickelson. His chair at the champion's dinner Tuesday night was empty, though, and if there was an invite to play the Masters this year, no one saw it.

As the Masters unfolds this week, Angel Cabrera sits in an Argentine prison. He's serving two years for domestic abuse, and there's a chance he could face an even longer sentence.

The glory of 2009 never seemed so far away.

"A lot of kids grow up without a role model and make some bad decisions, their anger within them takes over," said Charlie Epps, a Houston golf pro who has a father-son relationship with Cabrera. "But it doesn't justify doing the wrong thing."

Cabrera was an unlikely champion to begin with, a street urchin who grew up without parents and never had a formal education. A huge crowd greeted him when he flew home after winning the 2007 U.S. Open and there was a parade in his honor.

Then he became a two-time major champion — and the first South American to win a green jacket — by winning a three-way Masters playoff in 2009. His future in golf

seemed unlimited.

But what was once a feel-good story has now gone bad, and no one can predict when Cabrera will be free, much less play golf again.

Meanwhile, Epps watches Cabrera's vacant house in Houston and wonders how it all went wrong.

"I saw a lot of it in his golf, he was a perfectionist early on and had a temper," Epps said. "He never had a sports psychologist or anything like that and he grew up with a chip on his shoulder. Once he got it under control, he became a champion."

While the details of Cabrera's case remain somewhat murky, he was charged with gender violence with a former partner and could face additional time for allegedly threatening the woman by phone after being charged. Prosecutors are also looking at allegations from two other women, including the mother of his children, and his lawyer says there's a chance he could be charged with more crimes.

What is clear is that Cabrera — who was arrested in Brazil in January 2021 after prosecutors issued an international warrant for not attending his first trial — was convicted in July 2021 of assaulting, threatening and harassing Cecilia Torres Mana, his partner between 2016 and 2018. He is not scheduled to be released from prison until

next January at the earliest, despite his pleas of innocence.

"There was no crime," his lawyer, Carlos Hairabedian told The Associated Press via phone from Argentina on Wednesday, alleging the charges were brought "out of spite and resentment." Hairabedian claimed that in the reported cases "the common denominator is that there was no physical violence but an exchange of high-sounding words."

Cabrera's rise in the golf world wasn't exactly meteoric, though it seemed like it at the time. Abandoned by his parents, he became a caddie at the age of 8 to earn enough money to eat and it wasn't long before he took up the game himself.

Epps was living in Argentina at the time and Cabrera caddied for some of his friends, leading the two to begin a relationship with Epps serving as an instructor and father figure to the young player. They reconnected after Cabrera turned pro, with the work leading to his breakthrough win at the 2007 U.S. Open.

"He really wanted to get better and he saw everybody had a coach so he asked me to help him," Epps said. "He's a quality golfer, a quality ball striker. He's really athletic and could have been a soccer player, or even a linebacker if he grew up around football."

Durant paces Nets' win over Knicks

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Kevin Durant had 32 points, 11 assists and 10 rebounds, leading the Brooklyn Nets back from 21 points down to a 110-98 victory over the New York Knicks on Wednesday night that strengthened their chances of the best spot possible next week in the Eastern Conference play-in tournament.

After watching the Nets come back from 28 down when he was hurt in their last visit to Madison Square Garden, Durant scored 23 points in the second half to fuel this comeback that pulled Brooklyn within a game of Cleveland for seventh place in the East.

Durant hasn't lost a game against New York in nine years and the stakes are even bigger now since he and Kyrie Irving showed up in Brooklyn in 2019.

"We know how much Knicks fans don't like us, especially now this era of the Nets, with us not choosing the Knicks, me and Kyrie. So it definitely adds something to the rivalry," Durant said.

The Nets host the Cavaliers on Friday night. If they win that and then beat Indiana on Sunday in their regular-season finale, they would finish seventh and need to win one game in two chances at home in the play-in to qualify for the postseason.

Irving added 24 points, eight rebounds and seven assists for the Nets, who swept the four-game season series and beat the Knicks for the seventh straight time, their longest winning streak in the local rivalry since tak-

ing a franchise-record 11 in a row from 1984-86.

It appeared it would go the Knicks' way most of the night, and they were still ahead by 18 with under four minutes left in the third quarter. But Brooklyn cut it to 10 by the end of the period, then opened the fourth with a 15-2 spurt to storm into the lead.

The Knicks recovered to go back ahead by three, but Durant scored eight straight Brooklyn points, including the tiebreaking jumper that made it 98-96 with 4:15 to play. The Nets followed with 3-pointers by Irving, Seth Curry and Patty Mills to break it open. Curry and Mills each scored 15 points.

Alec Burks scored 24 points, and RJ Barrett had 23 for the Knicks, who were in control after a 19-0 run spanning the first and second quarters.

Celtics 117, Bulls 94: Jaylen Brown scored 25 points, Al Horford added 17 on 7-for-7 shooting and Boston rolled at Chicago for its 50th victory.

The Celtics have won three in a row and are 27-6 since Jan. 22. They can wrap up the second spot in the Eastern Conference playoffs Thursday night with a victory at Milwaukee.

Jayson Tatum scored 16 points for Boston. He was 5-for-18 from the field, making only one of eight from three-point range.

Mavericks 131, Pistons 113: Luka Dončić had 26 points, 14 assists and eight assists and Dallas won at Detroit to reach 50 victo-

ries for the first time in seven years.

The Mavericks are 20 games above .500 for the first time since 2011, when they won the NBA title.

Jalen Brunson added 24 points for Dallas, The Mavs have won five of six.

Clippers 113, Suns 109: Norman Powell scored 24 points after being out two months, Paul George added 19 points in three quarters to go over 15,000 in his career and host Los Angeles held off NBA-leading Phoenix.

With nothing at stake, the Suns rested All-Star guards Devin Booker and Chris Paul and fellow starters Deandre Ayton and Jae Crowder on the second night of a back-to-back. They had already set a franchise record for wins in a season with 63 by eliminating the Lakers from playoff contention Tuesday.

Jazz 137, Thunder 101: Bojan Bogdanović scored 27 points, Rudy Gobert added 20 points and 10 rebounds and host Utah beat Oklahoma City.

Jordan Clarkson had 18 points and a season-high 10 assists, and Hassan Whiteside added 15 points, 11 rebounds and five blocks to help the Jazz win their fifth straight home game.

Hawks 118, Wizards 103: Trae Young scored 16 of his 30 points in the third period to help host Atlanta stretch its lead against Washington.

Kristaps Porzingis led the Wizards with 26 points and 18 rebounds.

Silver says NBA won't move All-Star Game from Utah

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The NBA plans to keep its next All-Star Game in Salt Lake City, despite its opposition to Utah's ban on transgender youth athletes playing on girls teams.

The Utah Jazz are set to host the event next February but there was speculation the NBA could take it away because of what the team called "discriminatory legislation."

But Commissioner Adam Silver said Wednesday the event will stay put as planned.

"There was no discussion over the past two days about moving the All-Star Game from Salt Lake City, and we do not an-

ticipate moving the game," Silver said.

The NBA pulled the 2017 All-Star Game out of Charlotte because of its opposition to a North Carolina law known as HB2 that limited anti-discrimination protections for lesbian, gay and transgender people. The game was played in New Orleans but returned to Charlotte in 2019.

Silver said the circumstances are different this time, adding that the league didn't want to be in a position where it risked having to keep moving its events as similar laws were becoming more common. When Utah's GOP lawmakers pushed through their ban last month, it

joined 11 other states with similar legislation.

"In the case of HB2 in North Carolina, I think it was our collective view, we working with the Hornets, that we could have an impact on that legislation," Silver said. "I think in the case of what's happening in Utah right now, that bill is established.

"At least our initial view, working with the Utah Jazz, is that we're going to have to find a way to work in that environment and create an inclusive environment for our game, rather than take the position that we have somehow an independent ability to change the minds of the voters of Utah in this."

Play-in tournament

Now in its third season, the play-in tournament seems likely to return. Teams who finish in the Nos. 7-10 spots in each conference will play next week for the Nos. 7 and 8 seeds, and the league believes it has made the latter stages of the regular season more competitive with clubs either trying to get into it, or rise above it and qualify automatically in the top six spots.

"We're pleased with it," Silver said. "There may be a need to tweak it additionally. We'll see how it goes this year, but I think it's going to become a fixture in this league."

Carlson leads Capitals past Lightning

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — John Carlson scored twice and added two assists for a four-point game, Alex Ovechkin reached 1,400 career points with his 43rd goal of the season and the Washington Capitals beat the Tampa Bay Lightning 4-3 on Wednesday night to snap their skid at two.

Martin Fehervary also scored for Washington, which sent the Lightning to a third consecutive loss. Ilya Samsonov made 25 saves in his first home start since allowing three goals on 10 shots and getting the hook after the first intermission Feb. 28 against Toronto.

Nikita Kucherov, Nicholas Paul and Ross Colton had goals for Tampa Bay.

Red Wings 3, Jets 1: Sam Gagner scored twice to top 500 career points, and visiting Detroit beat Winnipeg.

Michael Rasmussen had the tiebreaking goal at 9:11 of the third period for Detroit, Dylan

Larkin had two assists and Thomas Greiss finished with 32 saves. Red Wings coach Jeff Blashill got his 200th victory.

Detroit won for the second straight night after beating Boston 5-3 on Tuesday.

Mark Scheifele scored for Winnipeg, which has lost three straight. Connor Hellebuyck made 32 saves.

Blues 4, Kraken 1: Ville Husso made 27 saves, and Robert Thomas, Justin Faulk, Jordan Kyrou and Ryan O'Reilly each scored to help host St. Louis top Seattle.

The Blues have won three in a row and recorded a point in each of their last six games. They also have a point in 11 of their last 14 contests and improved to 15-3-3 against the Pacific Division.

Husso, who has supplanted Jordan Binnington as the Blues' top netminder, stopped the first 17 shots to record his third win over the Kraken this season. Husso is 13-2-1 at home this sea-

son.

Jordan Eberle scored for Seattle, which has lost three of four and was coming off a win Sunday against Dallas. Chris Driedger made 32 saves.

Canucks 5, Golden Knights 1: Elias Pettersson scored twice and had two assists to help visiting Vancouver snap Vegas' five-game winning streak.

The victory gave the Canucks' slim playoff hopes a boost as they chase a Western Conference wild card. Both the Golden Knights and Canucks are on the outside looking in, with Vancouver in desperation mode. Vegas (82 points) is one point behind eighth-place Dallas, while the Canucks (76) are seven back of the Stars.

Bo Horvat, Brad Richardson and Tanner Pearson also scored for Vancouver. Thatcher Demko was excellent in stifling what had been a red-hot Golden Knights offense by stopping 33 shots.

Jack Eichel scored the lone

goal for Vegas, and Robin Lehner made 26 saves.

Flames 4, Ducks 2: Michael Stone got his first goal of the season and an assist in his 500th NHL game, and Elias Lindholm scored his 36th goal in visiting Calgary's victory over Anaheim.

Tyler Toffoli also scored and Johnny Gaudreau got his 96th point on a sharp assist for the Pacific Division-leading Flames, who have won two straight after their first three-game losing streak since January. Jacob Markstrom made 26 saves, and Matthew Tkachuk added an empty-net goal with 35 seconds left.

Trevor Zegras and Adam Henrique scored for the Ducks, who have lost 13 of 14 games since March 6. Anthony Stolarz stopped 24 shots. Ducks captain Ryan Getzlaf was a scratch with a lower-body injury in the first game since he announced his decision to retire at the end of the season.

At 46, Harvick still has plenty of gas left in the tank

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Kevin Harvick, by all measurable statistics, is a fading star trying to keep pace in a NASCAR that now seems more suited for younger drivers.

He's 46 years old, after all, and in his 22nd full NASCAR season. Harvick went winless all of last year — he actually hasn't won since late in the 2020 season — and his 9-year-old son has his own thriving racing career.

A slow start to the season hasn't helped.

It's been NASCAR's younger drivers who have been fastest to adapt to the new Next Gen car, with Harvick among the veterans still trying to figure it out. He and Stewart-Haas Racing finally hit on some-

ing last week at Richmond to score their best finish through the first seven races; Harvick ran second to Denny Hamlin.

The Hamlin win snapped a 12-race streak dating to last season of race winners aged 30 or younger, and the 1-2 finish with Harvick showed that NASCAR's veterans still have plenty in the tank. As he heads to Martinsville Speedway for a Saturday night race at the Virginia short track, Harvick warned not to count out the No. 4 team: Harvick is committed to SHR, NASCAR and winning a second Cup Series championship.

"I like where I race. I like Stewart-Haas Racing. I like the atmosphere. I like the people," Harvick said. "That's really the biggest reason that I

like to do it, especially this year. You're with a group of people where you're constantly problem solving. You're trying to fix it faster than everybody else and come to something that is better than everybody else so you can win races.

"I like the core group of guys that I started here with. That's why they all came here, and I guess I would feel like I'm abandoning them if I didn't go a couple more years. For me, I still enjoy that challenge. I enjoy where this series is, and learning about the new car is not a bad thing to do as you go forward into the future and do something different."

Harvick is in his ninth season driving the No. 4 Ford for SHR, the team that led him to

his only Cup title in its 2014 debut season. He's an annual title contender, though, and went door-to-door with Hamlin all of 2020 in what was shaping up to be an epic title battle.

Although Harvick won nine races that season, he was eliminated from the title-deciding race the week before the championship. Last season was off across the board for SHR, and even though he was winless, Harvick still finished fifth in the final Cup standings.

At 0.526 miles, Martinsville is the shortest track on the schedule and its tight corners and limited 12 degrees of banking lends to a physical race. It's also NASCAR's oldest speedway and entrenched in the sport's history.