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Ukrainians claim hit as Russian ship burns

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

The flagship of Russia's Black Sea Fleet suffered a catastrophic fire and explosion that Ukraine said Thursday was the result of a missile attack.

A fire and subsequent munitions blast seriously damaged the guided-missile cruiser Moskva, causing the crew to evacuate, the Russian Defense Ministry said, as cited by Russian news agency RIA.

Maksym Marchenko, governor of the Odesa region of Ukraine, said that two Ukrainian missiles caused the fire and explosion late Wednesday.

Russian officials contradicted Ukraine's claims, instead blaming the fire on a "localized" source, without providing details.

The cruiser's missiles were not damaged by the fire and experts were working on towing the ship to port to investigate the cause, Russian officials told RIA.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby told CNN that the United States wasn't able to confirm whether the explosion was caused by a missile.

"We assess that the ship is

able to make its own way, and it is doing that; it's heading more toward, now, we think the east. We think it's probably going to be putting in at Sevastopol for repairs," Kirby told CNN.

Loss of the 11,490-ton ship is a serious blow to the Russian navy's prestige and national pride. It also comes as the navy is reportedly preparing to support ground forces for a new offensive in eastern Ukraine.

Throughout the war, Russian navy ships have launched cruise missiles, enforced a blockade in the northern Black Sea and supported small-scale amphibious assaults.

Moskva was reported to be one of two ships involved in the takeover of Snake Island in the opening days of the full-scale invasion in late February.

A Ukrainian guard at the Black Sea outcropping near the Danube delta, called Zmiinyi Island in Ukrainian, famously said "Go f— yourself" when the Russians demanded the unit's surrender.

All the guards on Snake Island were originally thought to have been killed, but it was later determined that Russia had captured them. They were released

in a prisoner swap in late March, according to news reports.

Analysts using satellite imagery have reported the Moskva's presence in the northern Black Sea, which includes Snake Island, throughout the war.

"It has been confirmed that the missile cruiser 'Moscow' today went exactly where it was sent by our border guards on Snake Island," Marchenko said in a Wednesday post to his account on the social media platform Telegram. "Neptune missiles guarding the Black Sea caused very serious damage to the Russian ship."

If that proves true, the destruction of the Moskva would be the second successful Ukrainian attack on a Russian ship in the past month.

Open-source intelligence analysts on Twitter reported March 24 that a Russian Alligator-class landing ship, likely the Saratov, in port at Berdyansk on the Sea of Azov had caught fire, potentially because of a strike by a Ukrainian missile.

Neptune anti-ship missiles recently were developed by Ukraine, based on an earlier Soviet design, The Associated Press reported Thursday. The mis-

siles are truck-mounted and have a strike range of up to 175 miles, according to the report.

The system, some analysts said Thursday, could be a game changer for Ukraine in its effort to defend its coastline, potentially making it possible for ground troops protecting Odesa to detach and fight in eastern Ukraine.

"If the Moskva and Saratov incidents were the result of Ukrainian strikes, we can now safely say that Ukraine has the means to attack and disrupt an amphibious landing near Odessa," tweeted Frederik Van Lokeren, a former Belgian navy officer and naval analyst studying the Russian navy.

The Moskva was put into operation in 1983, receiving its current name in 1996, the Russian News Agency Tass reported Thursday. In 2018-2020, it underwent significant repairs and modernization, RIA said.

It is the lead ship of Project 1164 Atlant and is armed with 16 Yakhont cruise missile launchers, an AK-130 artillery system and an S-300F Fort anti-aircraft missile system, among other defense and artillery systems, according to RIA.

Biden OKs another \$800M in military aid to Ukraine

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The United States will send another \$800 million in weapons that includes artillery, helicopters and armored vehicles to Ukraine as its forces prepare for a new Russian attack in the country's eastern region, President Joe Biden announced Wednesday.

"This new package of assistance will contain many of the highly effective weapons systems we have already provided and

new capabilities tailored to the wider assault we expect Russia to launch in eastern Ukraine," Biden said in a prepared statement.

Those additional weapons will include 300 Switchblade drones, 11 Mi-17 helicopters, 18 155mm howitzers, 200 M113 armored personnel carriers and 100 armored Humvees, according to the Pentagon.

"The steady supply of weapons the United States and its allies and partners have provided to Ukraine has been critical in

sustaining its fight against the Russian invasion," Biden said. "It has helped ensure that Putin failed in his initial war aims to conquer and control Ukraine. We cannot rest now."

The new aid comes as Russia has been adding helicopters, artillery and troops to infantry units that recently left the capital of Kyiv and Chernihiv in northern Ukraine "for what we continue to believe is going to be a renewed push" to the Donbas, a senior U.S. defense official said Wednesday.

Police search subway suspect's videos

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Frank James posted dozens of videos ranting about race, violence and his struggles with mental illness. One stands out for its relative calm: a silent shot of a packed New York City subway car in which he raises his finger to point out passengers, one by one.

Even as police arrested James on Wednesday in the Brooklyn subway shooting that left 10 wounded, they still sought a motive from a flood of details on the 62-year-old Black man's life: an erratic work history. Arrests for a string of mostly low-level crimes. A storage locker with more ammo. And hours of rambling, bigoted, profanity-laced videos on his YouTube channel that point to a deep, simmering anger.

"This nation was born in violence, it's kept alive by violence or the threat thereof and it's going to die a violent death," says James in a video where he takes on the moniker "Prophet of Doom."

After a 30-hour manhunt, James was arrested without incident after a tipster — thought by police to be James himself — said he could be found near a McDonald's on Manhattan's Lower East Side. Mayor Eric Adams triumphantly proclaimed "We got him!" Police said their top priority was getting the suspect, now charged with a federal terrorism offense, off the streets as they investigate their biggest unanswered question: Why?

A prime trove of evidence, they said, is his YouTube videos. He seems to have opinions about

nearly everything — racism in America, New York City's new mayor, the state of mental health services, 9/11, Russia's invasion of Ukraine and Black women.

A federal criminal complaint cited one in which James ranted about too many homeless people on the subway and put the blame on New York City's mayor.

"What are you doing, brother?" he said in the video posted March 27. "Every car I went to was loaded with homeless people. It was so bad, I couldn't even stand."

James then railed about the treatment of Black people in an April 6 video cited in the complaint, saying, "And so the message to me is: I should have gotten a gun, and just started shooting."

In a video posted a day before the attack, James criticizes crime

against Black people and says things would only change if certain people were "stomped, kicked and tortured" out of their "comfort zone."

Surveillance cameras spotted James entering the subway system turnstiles Tuesday morning, dressed in a yellow hard hat and orange working jacket with reflective tape.

Police say fellow riders heard him say only "oops" as he set off one smoke grenade in a crowded subway car as it rolled into a station. He then set off a second smoke grenade and started firing, police said. In the smoke and chaos that ensued, police say James made his getaway by slipping into a train that pulled in across the platform and exited after the first stop.

Musk offers to buy remaining Twitter shares for over \$43B

Associated Press

Tesla CEO Elon Musk is offering to buy Twitter, saying the social media platform he has criticized for not living up to free speech principles needs to be transformed as a private company.

Twitter Inc. said in a regulatory filing on Thursday that Musk, currently the company's biggest shareholder, has proposed buying the remaining shares of Twitter that he doesn't already own at \$54.20 per share, an offer worth more than \$43 billion.

Musk called that price his best and final offer, although he provided no details on financing. The offer is non-binding and subject to financing and other conditions.

"I invested in Twitter as I believe in its potential to be the platform for free speech around the globe, and I believe free speech is a societal imperative for a functioning democracy," Musk said in

the filing. "However, since making my investment, I now realize the company will neither thrive nor serve this societal imperative in its current form. Twitter needs to be transformed as a private company."

Analyst Daniel Ives of Wedbush said in a client note that he believes "this soap opera will end with Musk owning Twitter after this aggressive hostile takeover of the company." He thinks it would be hard for any other bidders or consortium to come forward and said Twitter's board will likely be forced to accept Musk's offer or start a process to sell the company.

Musk revealed in regulatory filings over recent weeks that he'd been buying shares in almost daily batches starting Jan. 31, ending up with a stake of about 9%. Only Vanguard Group's suite of mutual funds and ETFs controls more Twitter shares.

Air Force allows 35 days of TDY for fertility treatment

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN

Stars and Stripes

Airmen and guardians struggling to conceive are now afforded extra time off to undergo fertility treatments at a military hospital, under a revised Air Force policy adopted earlier this month.

Male and female service members participating in a fertility treatment program can take up to 35 days of permissive temporary duty, which can be divided into separate trips if approved by a medical provider. It's the first time the Air Force has authorized permissive TDY for fertility treatment. The benefit allows military members to travel at no cost to the government while conserving earned leave days.

The Air Force's women's initiative team championed the new policy, a service statement said. Members of the team said the change is significant for everyone

dealing with infertility.

"I have had several members struggle with fertility issues and can attest to the rippling effects it has across the military," said U.S. Space Force Chief Master Sgt. Martha Burkhead, the women's team lead for the initiative.

The six military medical centers where service members may seek infertility treatments are: Tripler Army Medical Center in Hawaii; Walter Reed National Medical Center, Bethesda, Md.; Womack Army Medical Center, Fayetteville, N.C.; San Antonio Military Medical Center, Texas; Madigan Army Medical Center, Tacoma, Wash.; and Naval Medical Center San Diego, Calif.

Other updates include permission for commanders to authorize up to 30 days of convalescent leave for sexual assault victims to receive support or allow time for recovery.

Severe storms hit central, southern US

Associated Press

RISON, Ark. — A 20-year-old Arkansas woman was killed when a tree fell on her home as severe storms swept through the state and a possible tornado ripped roofs off homes in Alabama, officials said.

The woman's death occurred Wednesday as part of a multiday severe weather outbreak that caused tornadoes, powerful winds and huge hail in parts of the central and southern United States.

A possible tornado tore roofs off homes in a public housing community and peppered cars with debris Wednesday night in rural Greene County, Ala., located about 90 miles southwest of Birmingham. Billy Hicks, who lives in the area, told WBMA-TV he was lying down when he

heard a rush of wind that lasted only a few seconds.

"I jumped up and put my clothes on, put my shoes on when everything was over with. I come to the side door and looked across the street. I knew that something had hit all these houses," said Hicks, who got in his car to go check on neighbors.

Authorities swarmed the area but didn't find anyone who was hurt, said Zac Bolding of Greene County Emergency Medical Services.

"Most of the people we talked to as we were doing a house-to-house search explained that they were in their bathroom or an interior hallway, so they were listening to those warnings and without that I think we would have been looking at a

much different situation," he said.

In Arkansas, the woman died when a tree toppled on her home in Rison shortly after 4:30 p.m. Wednesday, pinning her to the couch, said Stephen McClellan, Cleveland County's emergency management coordinator. Rison is about 55 miles south of Little Rock.

A day earlier, 23 people were injured in the central Texas town of Salado. The National Weather Service in Fort Worth said Wednesday that the twister was rated an EF3 with peak wind speeds of 165 mph.

Tornadoes were also reported Tuesday in parts of Iowa and Minnesota. And a blizzard struck North Dakota this week, closing the state Capitol, schools, government offices and interstates.

US jobless claims rise, remain near half-century low

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of people seeking unemployment benefits ticked up last week but remained at a historically low level, reflecting a robust U.S. labor market with near record-high job openings and few layoffs.

Jobless claims rose by 18,000 to 185,000, the Labor Department said Thursday, after nearly touching the lowest level since 1968 in the previous week. The four-week average of claims, which levels out week-to-week ups and downs, edged up from 170,000

to 172,000.

Two years after the coronavirus pandemic sent the economy into a brief but devastating recession, American workers are enjoying extraordinary job security. Weekly applications for unemployment aid, a proxy for layoffs, have remained consistently below the pre-pandemic level of 225,000.

Last year, employers added a record 6.7 million jobs, and they've added an average of 560,000 more each month so far in 2022. The unemployment rate, which soared to 14.7% in April 2020 in the depths of the CO-

VID-19 recession, is now just 3.6%, barely above the lowest point in 50 years. And there is a record proportion of 1.7 job openings for every unemployed American.

The resilience of the job market and the overall U.S. economy is striking in light of a still-destructive pandemic, the economic consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine and the highest consumer inflation in 40 years.

Fewer than 1.48 million Americans were collecting traditional unemployment benefits in the week of April 2.

Destructive wildfires rage in New Mexico, Colorado

Associated Press

Firefighters scouted the drought-stricken mountainsides around a New Mexico village as they looked for opportunities to slow a wind-driven wildfire that a day earlier had burned at least 150 homes and other structures while displacing thousands of residents and forcing the evacuation of two schools.

Homes were among the structures that had burned, but officials on Wednesday did not have a count of how many were destroyed in the blaze that torched at least 6.4 square miles of forest, brush and grass on the east side of the community of Ruidoso, said Laura Rabon, spokesperson for the Lincoln National Forest.

Rabon announced emergency evacuations of a more densely populated area dur-

ing a briefing Wednesday afternoon as the fire jumped a road where crews were trying to hold the line. She told people to get in their cars and go.

New Mexico State Police released a statement late Wednesday saying two people have been found dead in a residence. Their identities will not be released until the Office of the Medical Examiner can positively identify them.

Strong winds prevented forced a suspension of the aerial attack on the flames and kept authorities from getting a better estimate of how large the fire has grown. But some planes returned to the air as winds subsided late in the day, and seven airtankers and two helicopters have now been assigned to the fire, Forest Service officials said Wednesday evening.

While the cause of the blaze was under investigation, fire officials and forecasters warned Wednesday that persistent dry and windy conditions had prompted red flag warnings for a wide swath that included almost all of New Mexico, half of Texas and parts of Colorado and the Midwest.

Five new large fires were reported Tuesday, and nearly 1,600 wildland firefighters and support personnel were assigned to large fires in the southwestern, southern and Rocky Mountain areas, according to the National Interagency Fire Center.

In Ruidoso, officials declared a state of emergency and said school classes were canceled Wednesday as the village — about 140 miles northeast of El Paso, Texas — coped with power outages due to down power lines.

Majority with tear of Achilles tendon can skip surgery

Associated Press

LONDON — It's a weekend warrior's nightmare. You're playing hoops in the driveway and go up for a layup. You land and hear a pop: you've torn your Achilles tendon. Do you have surgery or hope it heals with just a cast and rehab? New research says both options led to similar outcomes about a year later.

The Achilles tendon, which connects the muscles in the back of the calf to the heel bone, is the most commonly torn tendon in the body. Most tears are due to trauma or accident while playing sports; men are much more prone to the injury than women.

In the biggest-ever study investigating which treatment is best, scientists in Norway tracked 526 patients — mostly men with an average age of 39 — who ripped their Achilles tendon. They either had minimally invasive surgery, a standard surgery or non-surgical treatment, a brace to immobilize the affected foot and physical therapy. All patients got rehab therapy and were told to avoid risky activities for six months.

There were only slight differences in how everyone had recovered about a year later. There were more people who re-injured their Achilles tendon among those who didn't have surgery — 6.2% versus 0.6% of those who had an operation. And there were more nerve injuries reported in those who had surgery. About 5% of those who had the minimally invasive surgery reported nerve injuries afterward, compared to 2.8% of those who had the standard surgery and 0.6% of those who skipped surgery. The study was published online Wednesday in the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

"For the average person who is not a high-performance athlete, there is no need to have surgery," said Dr. Matthew Costa, a professor of orthopedic trauma surgery at the University of Oxford and not part of the study. Costas said the only benefit to an operation might be to avoid the chance of a repeat injury, but said the chances of that were similar to the risk of a standard complication from surgery, like a wound infection.

Dr. Stale Myhrvold, the study's lead author, said that for people to successfully skip surgery, patients need to have their affected foot in a brace early — within the first three days.

"Most acute Achilles tendon ruptures in adults can be treated non-operatively," he said in an email.

Truck inspections will remain at Texas border

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — Texas Gov. Greg Abbott on Wednesday defied intensifying pressure over his new border policy that has gridlocked trucks entering the United States and shut down some of the world's busiest trade bridges as the Mexican government, businesses and even some allies urge him to relent.

The two-term Republican governor, who has ordered that commercial trucks from Mexico undergo extra inspections as part of a fight with President Joe Biden's administration over immigration, refused to fully reverse course as traffic remains snarled.

The standoff has stoked warnings by trade groups and experts that U.S. grocery shoppers could soon notice shortages on shelves and higher prices unless the normal flow of trucks resumes.

Abbott announced Wednesday that he would stop inspections at one bridge in Laredo after reaching an agreement with the governor of neighboring Nuevo Leon in Mexico. But some of the most dramatic truck backups and bridge closures have occurred elsewhere along Texas' 1,200-mile border.

"I understand the concerns that busi-

nesses have trying to move product across the border," Abbott said during a visit to Laredo. "But I also know well the frustration of my fellow Texans and my fellow Americans caused by the Biden administration not securing our border."

Abbott said inbound commercial trucks elsewhere will continue to undergo thorough inspections by state troopers until leaders of Mexico's three other neighboring states reach agreements with Texas over security. He did not spell out what those measures must entail.

Nuevo Leon Gov. Samuel García joined Abbott in Laredo, where backups on the Colombia Solidarity Bridge have stretched for three hours or longer. Garcia said Nuevo Leon would begin checkpoints to assure Abbott they "would not have any trouble."

Abbott said he was hopeful other Mexican states would soon follow and said those states had been in contact with his office. On Tuesday, the governors of Coahuila and Tamaulipas had sent a letter to Abbott calling the inspections overzealous.

"This policy will ultimately increase consumer costs in an already record 40-year inflated market — holding the border hostage is not the answer," the letter read.

Cuba Gooding Jr. pleads guilty to forcible touching incidents

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Actor Cuba Gooding Jr. pleaded guilty Wednesday to forcibly kissing a worker at a New York nightclub in 2018 in a deal that is likely to keep him out of jail.

Gooding also publicly apologized for the first time to two other women who accused him of similar behavior in separate encounters, calling himself a "celebrity figure" who meant no harm.

His admissions were part of a plea deal that came nearly three years after the Oscar-winning "Jerry Maguire" star was arrested in the case that saw several delays as his lawyers sought to get charges reduced or dismissed.

"I apologize for making anybody ever

feel inappropriately touched," he said. "I am a celebrity figure. I come into contact with people. I never want them to feel slighted or uncomfortable in any way."

Gooding, 54, accused of violating three different women at various Manhattan night spots in 2018 and 2019, pleaded guilty to just one of the allegations. He told the judge he "kissed the waitress on her lips" without consent at the LAVO New York club.

The deal lets Gooding avoid any possibility of jail time if he continues "alcohol and behavior modification" counseling for six months. After that, he can withdraw the misdemeanor plea and instead plead guilty to a lesser violation of harassment.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man gets 2 years for motorized golf cart thefts

ND FARGO — A Florida man linked to dozens of motorized golf cart thefts in the Upper Midwest was sentenced Tuesday to two years in federal prison.

The FBI began investigating Nathan Rodney Nelson in July 2019 after the Cass County Sheriff's Office in Fargo, N.D., asked for help in solving a series of golf cart thefts starting in 2017 in the Dakotas, Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Nelson, a former Minnesota resident living in Apollo Beach, Fla., was eventually arrested in June 2020 while he was allegedly trying to steal golf carts from a dealer in Donalsonville, Ga. He also was carrying pre-printed serial number labels and burglary tools, according to court documents.

Investigators say he stole at least 63 golf carts in seven states, worth at least \$283,500.

Nelson would typically steal carts in pairs from rural Midwestern golf courses, usually at night. He sold many of the carts under the alias Mason Weber, at a cost of about \$2,500 each, court documents show.

Ghost guns seized as 7 men arrested in probe

CA RIVERSIDE — Seven Southern California men were arrested on suspicion of firearms and drug offenses as part of a federal investigation that recovered 30 weapons including so-called ghost guns, authorities said.

The suspects, ages 22 to 40, face a multitude of charges in-

cluding engaging in the business of dealing in firearms without a license and narcotics distribution, the Los Angeles Times reported Tuesday.

Among those arrested in Riverside and San Bernardino counties was a 27-year-old man who was in possession of 14 firearms, according to the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives. The majority of the weapons were ghost guns, privately made firearms without serial numbers, officials said.

Police: Man arrested in intimidation of attorney

SC COLUMBIA — Police in South Carolina have arrested a man who allegedly sent dozens of threats to Black civil rights attorney and former state lawmaker Bakari Sellers.

Grant Edward Olson Jr., of Asheville, N.C., is also accused of intimidating Sellers for exercising his civil rights as an attorney, television commentator and lobbyist, authorities said. Olson, 48, was arrested last week.

Arrest warrants show Olson sent dozens of messages to Sellers on Instagram that included racial slurs, indications that Olson was armed and mentioned the killings of African Americans. Police said Olson admitted to sending the messages earlier this year.

Sellers thanked the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division for the arrest.

"This isn't just about me," Sellers said in a statement. "I have a wife, a teenage bonus daughter and twin three-year-

olds and I take any threat against them very seriously. They shouldn't be subject to threats and intimidation like this. No one should. This isn't political debate. This isn't the 'new normal.' It's a crime, pure and simple."

Police: 1 dead after teens in armor shot each other

FL BELLEVIEW — A Florida teen was fatally wounded while he and a friend took turns wearing body armor and shooting each other, police said.

Christopher Leroy Broad, 15, died April 3 after being rushed to a hospital, according to police in Belleview, about 60 miles northwest of Orlando.

Following the teen's death, investigators determined that Broad and a 17-year-old had been taking turns shooting at each other while wearing a vest that contained a form of body armor, a police news release said. The 17-year-old shot at Broad while he was wearing the vest, and Broad was hit, officials said.

The 17-year-old was arrested last week and he has been charged as an adult with aggravated manslaughter of a child with a firearm.

Police didn't say what kind of gun was being used or who owned it.

Man dies after jumping from bus on freeway

AZ PHOENIX — A man who was fatally struck by several cars Tuesday morning on a freeway north of Phoenix had just jumped out the window of a moving bus,

authorities said..

Arizona Department of Public Safety officials said the man reportedly was acting irrationally on a Greyhound bus about 5:30 a.m. They said the man opened the emergency hatch on one of the windows and jumped out, landing on the roadway near Sunset Point in the Black Canyon City area some 44 miles north of Phoenix.

DPS officials said several vehicles hit the man, who died at the scene. The man's name, age and hometown weren't immediately released.

Governor: Superman Building to be rescued

RI PROVIDENCE — After years of neglect, the most recognizable feature on the Providence skyline, the Superman Building, will be rescued.

Rhode Island's governor announced Tuesday that the building's owner is planning to turn the vacant landmark into an apartment building with offices and shops, with help from state and city funding.

Officially known as the Industrial Trust Building, at around 430 feet, it is the tallest building in Rhode Island. It has been vacant for nearly a decade.

Gov. Dan McKee said the \$220 million redevelopment project will reinvigorate downtown Providence and bring the Superman Building "back to life." Opened in 1928, it resembles the Daily Planet headquarters in the old "Adventures of Superman" TV show.

— From wire reports

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McCollum powers Pelicans past Spurs

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — CJ McCollum got New Orleans going early and Brandon Ingram took over late to send the Pelicans to Los Angeles for a chance at the final playoff spot.

McCollum scored 27 of his 32 points in the first half to carry the young Pelicans to a 113-103 win over the San Antonio Spurs on Wednesday night. New Orleans will face the LA Clippers on Friday night for the eighth playoff seed.

“He was great,” Pelicans coach Willie Green said of McCollum. “He set the tone early. He understood the moment, and it sort of calmed the rest of the guys down. We just got the ball to him and he made play after play, score after score, and then the rest of the guys that just started to feed off CJ.”

Playing in his 57th playoff game, McCollum displayed a calming presence to his younger teammates. Rookies Herb Jones, José Alvarado and Trey Murphy played large chunks of the fourth quarter.

“I was just trying to be locked in and aggressive early,” McCollum said. “The playoffs is a lot of antics, a lot of momentum plays, a lot of back and forth. You’ve got to be stable and mentally locked in to withstand a certain level of (chaos). ... There’s

going to be a lot of winning in our future.”

McCollum wasn’t alone. Ingram shook foul trouble to add 27 points and center Jonas Valanciunas added 22 points and 14 rebounds as New Orleans’ stars delivered under pressure of the Pelicans’ first postseason game since 2018.

“The three best players for New Orleans all played great, and if that happens, you’re going to lose,” Spurs coach Gregg Popovich said of his team’s inability to contain McCollum, Ingram and Valanciunas. “We stayed in it and got back in it, but then we made the same mistakes as we did in the first three quarters — nonphysical defense.”

“We’re just playing for each other,” Valanciunas said of combining for 81 points with McCollum and Ingram. “When things struggle, we need somebody to slow the game down, which (CJ) does. Next step is on Friday.”

Popovich said his young team, which averages 25 years in age, learned a lesson the hard way.

“It’s the playoffs, and you’ve got to be into people,” Popovich said. “The grunt is important. Ingram scored two in a row right in the middle of the lane with no one even touching him. It’s a great lesson for our guys.”

New Orleans, which finished ninth in the West after starting the season 3-16, will play at the Clippers with the winner facing the top-seeded Phoenix Suns in the first round. The Pelicans beat Los Angeles in three of four meetings this season.

New Orleans seemed headed to a rout, leading 96-75, with 10:39 left, but 10th-seeded San Antonio used a 16-1 run over the next 5:25 to cut it to 97-91. The Pelicans missed seven consecutive shots during the run.

Ingram hit a pair of soft jumpers in the lane and Valanciunas added a short jumper to put New Orleans back on top, 103-91.

Devin Vassell led the Spurs with 23 points. Dejounte Murray had 16 points, but he went just 5-for-19 from the floor while being shadowed by New Orleans rookie defensive stopper Herb Jones.

“You have to take the good and bad and learn from it,” Murray said. “We had guys not shoot well, starting with myself. They were physical. I ain’t making no excuses.”

After Ingram went to the bench with three fouls 5:17 before halftime, McCollum carried the Pelicans offensively. In a 14-4 run over the final 3:36 of the half, McCollum made two three-pointers and pierced the San Antonio defense for two finger-roll layups on strong drives into the lane as New Orleans built a 61-50 lead.

Young leads Hawks to rout of Charlotte

Associated Press

ATLANTA — For one night, at least, the Atlanta Hawks looked like the team that made a stunning run to the Eastern Conference finals last summer.

Trae Young bounced back from a sluggish start to score 24 points and De’Andre Hunter led a third-quarter surge Wednesday that carried the Hawks to a 132-103 rout of the Charlotte Hornets in a play-in game.

“We’re definitely confident right now,” Hunter said. “But we’ve got a lot more work to do. We’re not satisfied yet.”

Atlanta was a bit of a disappointment during the regular season, finishing ninth in the East after its surprising playoff success in 2021.

It still must win one more play-in game just to make the playoffs, heading to Cleveland to face the Cavaliers on Friday night. The winner claims the No. 8 seed in the East and will face the top-seeded Miami Heat in the opening round of the playoffs.

The season is over for the Hornets, who

were overwhelmed in the 9-10 play-in game for the second year in a row and haven’t made the playoffs since 2016.

Still, Charlotte coach James Borrego called it another step forward for a rebuilding team.

“A lot of good things have happened for this franchise based on where we’re at today compared to where we were two or three years ago,” he said.

Miles Bridges was ejected in the fourth quarter and could be facing additional punishment from the league office after he appeared to strike a young fan with his mouthpiece.

All five Hawks starters scored in double figures, as did Bogdan Bogdanovic off the bench. It was Hunter who came up big in the decisive third period, bursting out with 16 points after being held to three in the first half.

“I think I’m a big part of this team,” Hunter said. “Me being aggressive, scoring and defending, helps this team a lot.”

Hunter finished with 22 points, while Danilo Gallinari added 18 and Clint Capela 15. Kevin Huerter and Bogdanovic chipped in with 13 apiece.

The Hornets closed the regular season strong and felt like they had a good chance to win a couple of play-in games on the road. But those hopes came crashing down against their I-85 rival.

LaMelo Ball led Charlotte with 26 points on 7-for-25 shooting.

The Hornets should’ve known what kind of night it would be on its way to State Farm Arena.

Their chartered bus was blocked by a freight train that stopped on a crossing near the downtown sports complex. The bus had to turn around and take a different route to the arena, delaying Charlotte’s arrival for pregame warmups.

It didn’t get much better once the game tipped off.

Ramírez, Miller lead Guardians past Reds for 4th straight win

Associated Press

CINCINNATI — José Ramírez homered, doubled and drove in three runs, Owen Miller hit two home runs and the Cleveland Guardians beat the Cincinnati Reds 7-3 Wednesday for their fourth straight win.

Rookie Steven Kwan went 0-for-4, but drew a bases-loaded walk in the second inning that put Cleveland ahead to stay as it completed a two-game sweep.

“That’s why he’s hitting second,” Guardians manager Terry Francona said. “We think he’s a pretty good hitter.”

Kwan is 10-for-19 and has reached base in 19 of 29 plate appearances since making his major league debut on opening day. The 24-year-old outfielder had seen 128 pitches this season and taken 42 swings without a miss before he couldn’t check his swing on a 2-1 offering in the fourth inning from Nick Lodolo, who made his major league debut.

Blue Jays 6, Yankees 4: Vladimir Guerrero Jr. shook off a bloody gash on his right ring finger to hit three home runs, including two off Gerrit Cole, and Toronto won at New York.

George Springer hit a tiebreaking single in the seventh, and the Blue Jays held off the Yankees despite homers from Anthony Rizzo, Aaron Judge and Gleyber Torres — and a fly in the eighth by pinch-hitter Giancarlo Stanton that was caught on the warning track.

Guerrero homered off Cole in the first inning, had his hand accidentally spiked on a play at first base in the second, then hammered a two-run shot against Cole in the third. He doubled in the sixth and launched a 443-foot leadoff homer in the eighth.

Mets 9, Phillies 6: Pete Alonso drove in five runs with a homer and two doubles, Max Scherzer settled in after working out of an early jam and New York won at Philadelphia.

Alonso drilled a three-run homer and Brandon Nimmo hit a solo shot in support of Scherzer (2-0), who allowed one run and five hits with seven strikeouts in five innings. All nine batters who started the game for the Mets reached base at least once.

Nationals 3, Braves 1: Josiah Gray allowed one hit in five scoreless innings, and Washington beat Max Fried and Atlanta, taking two of three games in the series and dropping the World Series champions to 3-4 on their opening homestand.

Gray (1-1) struck out five, walked three and also hit a batter. Tanner Rainey earned his second save.

Pirates 6, Cubs 2: Ben Gamel hit a three-run homer in the first inning, Ke'Bryan

Hayes went 4-for-4 a day after getting a \$70 million, eight-year contract and host Pittsburgh beat Chicago.

Kevin Newman hit a two-run triple in the third for the Pirates, who went 3-for-7 with runners in scoring position, a day after going 0-for-10.

Red Sox 9, Tigers 7: Jackie Bradley, Kiké Hernández and Rafael Devers hit consecutive RBI doubles in the fourth inning to chase former teammate Eduardo Rodríguez, and Boston held on to win at Detroit.

Nathan Eovaldi (1-0) gave up solo homers to Jonathan Schoop and Akil Baddoo and allowed two runs, four hits and a walk over five innings. Hansel Robles earned the save.

Diamondbacks 3, Astros 2 (10): Ketel Marte had the game-ending sacrifice fly in the 10th inning after Seth Beer tied it with a single as host Arizona rallied to beat Houston and snapped a four-game skid despite leaving 14 runners on base.

The game was full of missed opportunities for both teams — tied at 1-all through nine innings — until each scratched across runs in the 10th.

Giants 2, Padres 1: Logan Webb pitched four-hit ball over eight innings and Luke Williams doubled home the only runs he needed as host San Francisco edged San Diego.

Webb (1-0) allowed one run and retired 22 of the final 24 hitters he faced, striking out seven and walking none. Camilo Doval picked up his first save.

White Sox 6, Mariners 4: Tim Anderson homered and drove in three runs in the rain, and banged-up Chicago beat Robbie Ray and visiting Seattle.

Eloy Jiménez and Luis Robert also connected, helping Chicago to its fourth straight win since falling at Detroit on opening day. Dallas Keuchel (1-0) pitched five innings of three-run ball in his first start of the year. Liam Hendriks earned the save.

Athletics 4, Rays 2: Frankie Montas pitched neatly into the seventh inning, Sean Murphy hit a three-run homer and Oakland won at Tampa Bay.

Montas (1-1) allowed two runs and five hits over 6⅓ innings, striking out six, as the A’s defeated Tampa Bay for the second time in three days. Oakland’s third reliever, Lou Trivino, earned his first save.

Brewers 4, Orioles 2: Kolten Wong tripled in the tiebreaking run in the ninth inning, and visiting Milwaukee squeezed past Baltimore after blowing a two-run lead in the eighth.

Kershaw gets pulled from perfect game

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Clayton Kershaw was in prime form — call it perfect — in his season debut for the Los Angeles Dodgers, leaving no concern about his health after facing no resistance from the Minnesota Twins.

When the time came for manager Dave Roberts to relieve him, Kershaw didn’t put up a fight, either.

Kershaw took a perfect game through seven innings for the Dodgers until he was pulled after 80 pitches, dominating the Twins with 13 strikeouts in 21 batters during a 7-0 victory on Wednesday.

“Those are selfish goals. We’re trying to win. That’s really all we’re here for,” Kershaw said.

Roberts consulted with Kershaw after the sixth, and the three-time NL Cy Young Award winner told him his preference: one more inning with an 85-pitch limit.

“I would have loved to have stayed, but bigger things, man, bigger things,” Kershaw said.

So on a gray, windy, 38-degree afternoon at Target Field, Alex Vesia entered for the eighth to boos from the blue-clad Los Angeles fans in the crowd of 17,101. Vesia gave up Minnesota’s first and only hit, a one-out single by Gary Sánchez.

Cody Bellinger, Gavin Lux and Austin Barnes hit back-to-back-to-back home runs in the eighth against reliever Dereck Rodríguez, who made his Twins debut. Chris Paddock had a rough first start with Minnesota. He lasted four innings, with six hits and three runs allowed.

Re-signed with the Dodgers for \$17 million this year after missing more than two months in 2021 with inflammation in his left forearm, Kershaw was slotted fifth in the rotation out of the gate. That unusual assignment was to give his arm more time to build up strength in light of the limited spring training schedule.

“Blame it on the lockout. Blame it on me not picking up a baseball until January,” said Kershaw, who threw a no-hitter against Colorado on June 18, 2014. “My slider was horrible the last two innings. It didn’t have the bite. It was time.”

MacKinnon's hat trick leads Avs' rout

Associated Press

DENVER — Nathan MacKinnon had three goals and two assists, Nicolas Aube-Kubel scored twice in a dominant first period and the Colorado Avalanche set a franchise record with their 53rd win by routing the Los Angeles Kings 9-3 on Wednesday night.

Valeri Nichushkin added two goals, Cale Makar had a goal and three assists, Andre Burakovsky also scored and Darcy Kuemper made 29 saves for the Avalanche, who led 4-0 before the game was 11 minutes old.

Colorado won its seventh straight and improved to 53-14-6, besting the 2013-14 and 2000-01 teams for most victories. The Avalanche also moved two points ahead of Florida for the best record in the NHL and are a franchise-best 29-4-3 at home.

"The crowd was chanting before the anthem even started," coach Jared Bednar said. "You

can feel that when you go on the bench as a coach, as a player, that they're into it and they were going to be energized. And we wanted to make sure we came out and played a really good game after having a couple of off games in Winnipeg and Edmonton.

"I think our guys feel that and that's why our record is so good at home."

Adrian Kempe, Alex Iafallo and Phillip Danault scored for the Kings, who have dropped four of five. Jonathan Quick allowed three goals on 10 shots before he was pulled while starting on consecutive nights for the first time in over four years. Cal Petersen allowed six more goals on 25 shots.

LA remained in a playoff spot in third place in the Pacific Division, but sits only three points ahead of Vegas, which has two games in hand.

"Definitely not the performance you want tonight, espe-

cially at this time of year," Kings captain Anze Kopitar said. "But we've got to look at this one and correct stuff and make sure this is not going to repeat, because it is crunch time for our team."

The schedule did LA no favors. It won in Chicago 5-2 on Tuesday night and got into Denver early Wednesday to play at altitude while the Avalanche had been off since Saturday.

Rangers 4, Flyers 0: Kaapo Kakko scored a pair of goals and Alexandar Georgiev made 28 saves to lead New York to a win at Philadelphia.

Artemi Panarin and Andrew Copp also scored for the Rangers, who have won four of five. Barclay Goodrow and Jacob Trouba each had two assists.

New York remained in second place in the Metropolitan Division, two points behind idle Carolina. The Hurricanes skated to a 4-2 win over the Ran-

gers in New York on Tuesday night.

The Flyers have been outscored 18-5 while losing three in a row. Philadelphia entered 15th of 16 teams in the Eastern Conference and was playing without several key regulars.

Blue Jackets 5, Canadiens 1: Jack Roslovic scored twice, Patrik Laine had a goal and two assists and host Columbus beat Montreal for its second straight win and a three-game season sweep of the Canadiens.

Cole Sillinger and Emil Bemstrom each added a goal and an assist, and Gus Nyquist and Jakub Voracek both had two assists for the Blue Jackets. Elvis Merzlikins stopped 20 shots on his 28th birthday to help lead Columbus over Montreal for the seventh time in eight home meetings.

Ryan Poehling scored the Canadiens' lone goal and Sam Montembeault stopped 26 shots in the team's third straight loss.

Saban: Current state of college football not 'sustainable'

Associated Press

TUSCALOOSA, Ala. — Nick Saban's willingness to adapt and often be a catalyst for change in college football, both on the field and off, has propelled Alabama to six national championships in 13 seasons.

The 70-year-old coach is confident his program will continue to thrive during this new era of college athletics, with players having more opportunities to earn money than ever before and more power to determine where they play.

But the current state of college football has Saban concerned.

"I don't think what we're doing right now is a sustainable model," Saban told The Associated Press in a recent interview.

That's a common theme

among coaches these days, with Clemson's Dabo Swinney and Southern California's Lincoln Riley among the most prominent who have echoed Saban's sentiments. The combination of empowered athletes and easily accessible paydays is changing the way coaches go about their business.

The uncertainty comes with the NCAA in a weakened state following last year's Supreme Court loss and in the midst of a dramatic restructuring. Schools and the NCAA itself would prefer federal legislation to regulate how athletes are compensated for their names, images and likenesses, but when that might come and in what form is unknown.

That has led to concerns about vast sums of money flowing in and around college athlet-

ics, including brazen entities called collectives put together by well-heeled donors whose donations have traditionally funded everything from lavish facilities to multimillion-dollar buyouts of fired coaches.

"The concept of name, image and likeness was for players to be able to use their name, image and likeness to create opportunities for themselves. That's what it was," Saban said. "So last year on our team, our guys probably made as much or more than anybody in the country."

Paying a player to attend a particular school is still a violation of NCAA rules, but NIL deals have quickly become intertwined with recruiting — both high school prospects and the growing number of college transfers.

"But that creates a situation where you can basically buy players," Saban said. "You can do it in recruiting. I mean, if that's what we want college football to be, I don't know. And you can also get players to get in the transfer portal to see if they can get more someplace else than they can get at your place."

Swinney told ESPN major college football needs a "complete blowup" that might result in something that looks more like professional football.

"I think you'll have 40 or 50 teams and a commissioner and here are the rules," he said.

Saban said he is not against the shift toward players being compensated and given more freedom to switch teams.

"We now have an NFL model with no contracts, but everybody has free agency," said Saban.