

Russia tries to storm Mariupol plant

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian forces in Ukraine tried to storm a steel plant housing soldiers and civilians in the southern city of Mariupol on Saturday while attempting to crush the last corner of resistance in a location of high symbolic and strategic value to Moscow, Ukrainian officials said.

The reported assault on the eve of Orthodox Easter came after the Kremlin claimed its military had seized all of Mariupol except for the Azovstal plant and as Russia's military pounded other cities and towns in southern and eastern Ukraine. Officials reported that Russia fired at least six cruise missiles at the Black Sea port city of Odesa, killing six people.

The fate of the Ukrainians holed up in the sprawling seaside steel mill wasn't immediately clear; earlier Saturday, a Ukrainian military unit released a video reportedly taken two days earlier in which women and children holed up underground, some for as long as two months, said they longed to see the sun.

"We want to see peaceful skies, we want to breathe in fresh air," one woman in the video said. "You have simply no idea what it means for us to simply eat, drink some sweetened tea. For us, it is already happi-

ness."

As the battle for shattered Mariupol ground on, Russia claimed it had taken control of several villages elsewhere in the eastern Donbas region and destroyed 11 Ukrainian military targets overnight, including three artillery warehouses.

Associated Press journalists also observed shelling in residential areas of Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, and in Sloviansk, a town in northern Donbas. The AP witnessed two soldiers arriving at the town's hospital, one of them fatally wounded, while a small group of people gathered outside a church where a priest prayed and sprinkled them with water on Holy Saturday.

While British officials said the Russians hadn't gained significant new ground, Ukrainian officials announced a nationwide curfew ahead of Easter Sunday, a sign of the war's disruption and threat to the entire country.

Mariupol, a part of the industrial region in eastern Ukraine known as the Donbas, has been a key Russian objective since the Feb. 24 invasion began and has taken on outsized importance in the war. Completing its capture would give Russia its biggest victory yet, after a nearly two-month siege reduced much of the city to a smoking ruin and killed

an estimated 20,000 people there.

Occupying Mariupol would deprive the Ukrainians of a vital port, free up Russian troops to fight elsewhere and allow Russia to create a land corridor with the Crimean Peninsula, which Moscow seized from Ukraine in 2014.

An advisor to Ukraine's presidential office, Oleksiy Arestovich, said during a Saturday briefing that Russian forces had resumed air strikes on the Azovstal plant and were trying to storm it. A direct attempt to take the plant would represent a reversal from an order Russian President Vladimir Putin gave two days earlier.

Russian Defense Minister Sergei Shoigu reported to Putin on Thursday that the whole of Mariupol, with the exception of Azovstal, had been "liberated" by the Russians. At the time, Putin ordered him not to send Russian troops into the plant but instead to block off the facility, an apparent attempt to starve out the Ukrainians and force them to surrender.

Ukrainian officials have estimated that about 2,000 of their troops are inside the plant along with the civilians sheltering in the facility's underground tunnels. Arestovich said the Ukrainian forces were trying to counter the new attacks.

Mask mandates returning to college campuses in US

Associated Press

The final weeks of the college school year have been disrupted yet again by COVID-19 as universities bring back mask mandates, switch to online classes and scale back large gatherings in response to upticks in coronavirus infections.

Colleges in Washington, D.C., New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Texas have reimposed a range of virus measures, with Howard University moving to remote learning amid a surge in cases in the nation's capital.

This is the third straight academic year that has been upended by COVID-19, meaning soon-to-be seniors have yet to experience a normal college year.

"I feel like last summer it was everyone was

like, 'Oh, this is it. We're nearing the tail end,' " recalled Nina Heller, a junior at American University in Washington D.C., where administrators brought back a mask mandate about a month after lifting it. "And then that didn't quite happen, and now we're here at summer again, and there's kind of no end."

Mandates were shed widely in the wake of spring break as case numbers dropped following a winter surge fueled by the omicron variant. But several Northeast cities have seen a rise in cases and hospitalizations in recent weeks, as the BA.2 subvariant of the omicron variant continues to rapidly spread throughout the U.S.

"As much as we would like to move on and think that the pandemic is over, and I think we all would like that to happen at this point, it's

wishful thinking," said Anita Barkin, co-chair of a COVID-19 task force for the American College Health Association. "The pandemic is still with us."

COVID-19 had eased so much at Williams College that the private liberal arts school in Massachusetts allowed professors to decide whether to require masks in their classes earlier this month. But just days later, with cases rising, it reinstated an indoor mask mandate, which was even stricter than what had been in place before.

"I think students are really feeling like people they know are dropping like flies," said junior Kitt Urdang, who's had a half-dozen friends test positive in recent days. "There's definitely been a lot more uncertainty than there's been on campus since COVID hit."

Evidence withheld in Navy bribery trial

The San Diego Union-Tribune

SAN DIEGO — The trial of five former naval officers charged with taking bribes from the military contractor known as “Fat Leonard” abruptly ground to a halt last week with accusations that prosecutors withheld exculpatory evidence that casts doubt on an alleged sexual tryst between a prostitute and one of the defendants.

Prosecutors admitted in court Thursday that they messed up: Federal investigators interviewed the prostitute in question last month but did not write up a timely report on the interview.

Defense attorneys contend prosecutors committed a much more egregious offense by violating the Brady Rule, which requires exculpatory evidence in the government’s possession to be turned over to the defense — a transgression that one lawyer said “undermines the integrity of the whole case.”

The controversy could change the course of the trial, now in its eighth week. On Monday, the prosecution team and the Naval Criminal Investigative Service agents who conducted the interview will be under scrutiny as the judge holds a separate evidentiary hearing — outside the presence of the jury — to get to the bottom of the issue and determine how it may affect the case going forward.

“It is so totally disturbing,” U.S. District Judge Janis Sammartino told the prosecution team.

Sex with prostitutes is among the key

bribes that Leonard Glenn Francis — nicknamed for his girth — is alleged to have plied U.S. Navy officers with in return for their military intelligence and official influence. Francis’ Singapore-based husbanding company serviced visiting Navy ships in ports across Southeast Asia for years, and he counted on the loyalty of strategically placed Navy officers to help line his pockets with millions in contract dollars.

The government’s 78-page indictment is chock full of allegations of naval officers — including the five on trial — embarking on corrupt escapades on Francis’ dime, from high-priced hotel suites to lavish dinners to parties with prostitutes.

The allegation at issue here is against former Capt. David Lausman, who in 2007 was commanding officer of the 7th Fleet’s command ship, the Blue Ridge, and later the aircraft carrier George Washington.

Prosecutors have said that he received the services of a tall prostitute named “Ina” at Francis’ expense in May 2008 at the Makati Shangri-La hotel in Manila, Philippines.

But when Lausman’s private investigator in late February tracked down the sex worker — her name correctly spelled “Ynah” — she denied having sex with Lausman, according to a motion filed late Wednesday by one of his defense attorneys, Laura Schaefer.

Ynah told the investigator that while Francis had hired her to entertain and have

sex with a man known as “Too Tall” — Lausman’s nickname — that he did not want to and went to bed early, Schaefer said. Ynah said she asked if she could still go to his room with him, so she would still get paid, and he agreed; she slept on the couch and he in his bed, Schaefer said.

Ynah said she later lied to Francis, telling him that she and Lausman had had sex, to ensure she got paid, Schaefer said.

NCIS agents made contact with Ynah two weeks later — once the trial had already begun — and she told them a similar, but vaguer, story over the phone and in text messages, according to agents. She didn’t identify who the man was or give a date or location of the party, according to the agents’ summary.

Ynah later contacted Lausman’s investigator to say that she had talked to government agents.

However, the agents did not disclose the March 8 interview, or write a report about it, until Wednesday night — more than a month later — when the defense brought it up the judge in a motion.

The motion seeks to prohibit testimony from former Cmdr. Stephen Shedd, who has already pleaded guilty to bribery. He was expected to tell jurors that he saw Lausman leave the party in the hotel’s presidential suite with Ynah, that she spent the night in his hotel room, and that Lausman adamantly denied the next morning having sex with her, defense attorneys say.

Missing Guardsman tried to help migrant in river

Associated Press

EAGLE PASS, Texas — A Texas National Guard member was missing Friday after going into the river along the U.S.-Mexico border to help a migrant who was struggling to swim across, according to a local sheriff.

A woman trying to cross the Rio Grande from Mexico made it about halfway to the other side when she appeared to begin going under the water, Maverick County Sheriff Tom Schmerber said. The rescue attempt happened near Eagle Pass at a section of the river known for strong currents.

“He jumped in the river,” Schmerber

said. “They never saw him come out.”

He said the Guard member, who has not been identified, took off his jacket and left his radio before going into the water. The woman made it across and was placed in the custody of Border Patrol, said Schmerber, whose department was involved early in the search.

The Guard member was assigned to Republican Gov. Greg Abbott’s sprawling border security mission, known as Operation Lone Star, which has deployed thousands of Guard members across Texas’ 1,200-mile southern border since launching last year.

Migrant rescues are common in the river

along the Texas border, and the attempted crossings are also sometimes deadly. Schmerber said the bodies of as many as two migrants a week are sometimes found along his county’s section of the river.

Schmerber, a former Border Patrol officer, said Guard members do not usually enter the water to attempt rescues and this was the first incident he could recall. He estimated the portion of the river where the attempted rescue occurred was roughly 70 to 80 yards wide.

“That river is very dangerous. It’s strong currents,” Schmerber said. “It’s risky to cross the river like that.”

Crews tackling 9 wildfires in Southwest

Associated Press

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. — More than 1,600 firefighters were battling nine different large fires in Arizona and New Mexico that have destroyed dozens of homes and burned more than 100 square miles in the blazes.

Fires also were burning in Colorado, where new evacuations were ordered Friday west of Colorado Springs. But there were no immediate reports of structures lost.

With no air support or crews working directly on the fire lines, there was explosive growth in

the size and number of new small fires in the U.S. Southwest on Friday.

Firefighters working to keep more homes from burning on the edge of a mountain town in northern Arizona were helped by snow, scattered showers and cooler temperatures early Friday. But the favorable weather did not last. While sustained winds were forecast to ease a bit, more gusts were expected to batter parts of Arizona and all of New Mexico through the weekend.

The fire danger in the Denver

area on Friday was the highest it had been in over a decade, according to the National Weather Service, because of unseasonable temperatures in the 80s combined with strong winds and very dry conditions.

At one of the biggest fires near Flagstaff, Ariz., where 30 homes and numerous other buildings have been destroyed, authorities said they had used sirens and alarms Thursday night to warn residents to flee evacuation areas but howling winds muffled the alarms.

By Friday, afternoon winds

were gusting up to 75 mph in northern New Mexico near the Colorado line. A wall of smoke stretched from wilderness just east of Santa Fe about 50 miles to the northeast where ranchers and other rural inhabitants were abruptly told to leave by law enforcement.

Another wind-whipped fire in northeastern New Mexico also was forcing evacuations. The town of Cimarron and the headquarters of the Philmont Scout Ranch, owned and operated by the Boy Scouts of America, were preparing to flee if necessary.

Official: Meadows was given Jan. 6 intel reports

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A former White House official told the House committee investigating the Capitol riot that President Donald Trump's chief of staff, Mark Meadows, had been advised of intelligence reports showing the potential for violence, according to just-released transcripts.

Cassidy Hutchinson, a special assistant in the Trump White House, told the committee "there were concerns brought forward" to Meadows before the storming of the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, but it was unclear what Meadows did

with that information.

"I just remember Mr. Ornato coming in and saying that we had intel reports saying that there could potentially be violence on the 6th," Hutchinson said, presumably referencing Anthony Ornato, a senior Secret Service official. "And Mr. Meadows said: 'All right. Let's talk about it.'"

The exact nature of what Meadows was told is not clear from Hutchinson's testimony. Though law enforcement had been bracing for potential violence on Jan. 6, officials had not properly accounted for the pros-

pect that a violent mob would attack the Capitol.

The filing late Friday is the latest in a long legal fight over the extent to which Meadows, whose proximity to Trump has made him a key target of House Democrats, can be forced to cooperate with the committee's investigation. Meadows has handed over thousands of text messages, but he has refused to sit for an interview, has argued that he is immune from having to testify by virtue of his White House positions and has sued the committee.

The filing seeks a court ruling

in the committee's favor that Meadows has no valid basis to refuse to testify. It says the committee has refined the scope of its request to focus on seven specific topics, including testimony about communication with Congress before Jan. 6, 2021; White House plans to replace the leadership of Justice Department so the department could pursue Trump's bogus claims of election fraud; and efforts to create alternate, or fake, slates of state electors who could change the outcome of the vote of the 2020 election that Democrat Joe Biden won.

DeSantis signs bill dissolving Disney government

Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis signed a bill on Friday to dissolve the private government Walt Disney World controls on its property in the state, punishing the entertainment giant for opposing a new law that critics call "Don't Say Gay."

The move is expected to have huge tax implications for Disney and further sour the relationship between the Republican-led government and a major political player whose theme parks have transformed Orlando into one of the world's most popular tourist destinations.

For DeSantis, the attack on Disney is the

latest front in a culture war waged over policies involving race, gender and the coronavirus, battles he has harnessed to make himself one of the most popular Republicans in the country and a likely 2024 presidential candidate.

The law would eliminate the Reedy Creek Improvement District, as the 55-year-old Disney government is known, as well as a handful of other similar districts by June 2023. The measure does allow for the districts to be reestablished, leaving an avenue to renegotiate the future of the deal that allows the company to provide services such as zoning, fire protection, utilities and infrastructure.

DeSantis said Friday that the company would end up paying more taxes than it currently does and that the law isn't expected to cause tax increases for residents around Disney. He gave no additional details.

The dispute began with Disney's criticism of a new law barring instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in kindergarten through third grade as well as instruction that is not "age appropriate or developmentally appropriate." DeSantis and his fellow Republicans have defended the law as reasonable, saying that parents, not teachers, should be discussing such topics with children.

Beijing on alert after COVID cases in school

Associated Press

BEIJING — Beijing is on alert after 10 middle school students tested positive for COVID-19, in what city officials said was an initial round of testing.

City officials suspended classes in the school for a week following the positive test results on Friday. The Chinese capital also reported four other confirmed cases that day that were counted separately.

Mainland China reported 24,326 new community-transmitted infections on Saturday, with the vast majority of them asymptomatic cases in Shanghai, where enforcement of a strict “zero-COVID” strate-

gy has drawn global attention.

China has doubled down on the approach even in face of the highly transmissible omicron variant. The zero-COVID policy warded off many deaths and widespread outbreaks when faced with less transmissible variants through mass testing and strict lockdowns where people could not leave their homes.

But recent developments in Shanghai have led some to question whether the strategy is worth the tradeoffs. Many residents in the city have struggled to get adequate food supplies during a lockdown this month, while some were also unable to get drugs or

medical attention. Some elderly people died after an outbreak at an hospital led medical staff to be quarantined.

The country is now facing its worst outbreak since the beginning of the pandemic in the central city of Wuhan.

Local media reported that in Beijing’s Chaoyang district, the government ordered the suspension of in-person after-school activities and classes. The city government is now conducting a round of mass testing to look for more cases.

In Shanghai, city officials reported 12 new deaths Saturday, all elderly patients with underlying illnesses.

Russian mercenaries are Putin’s ‘coercive tool’ in Africa

Associated Press

DAKAR, Senegal — When abuses were reported in recent weeks in Mali — fake graves designed to discredit French forces; a massacre of some 300 people, mostly civilians — all evidence pointed to the shadowy mercenaries of Russia’s Wagner Group.

Even before these feared professional soldiers joined the assault on Ukraine, Russia had deployed them to under-the-radar military operations across at least half a dozen African countries. Their aim: to further President Vladimir Putin’s global ambitions, and to undermine democracy.

The Wagner Group passes itself off as a private military contractor and the Kremlin denies any connection to it or even, sometimes, that it exists.

But Wagner’s commitment to Russian interests has become apparent in Ukraine, where its fighters, seen wearing the group’s chilling white skull emblem, are among the Russian forces currently attacking eastern Ukraine.

In sub-Saharan Africa, Wagner has gained substantial footholds for Russia in Central African Republic, Sudan and Mali. Wagner’s role in those countries goes way beyond the cover story of merely providing

a security service, experts say.

“They essentially run the Central African Republic,” and are a growing force in Mali, Gen. Stephen Townsend, the commander of U.S. armed forces in Africa, told a Senate hearing last month.

The United States identifies Wagner’s financier as Yevgeny Prigozhin, an oligarch who is close to the Russian president and sometimes is called “Putin’s chef” for his flashy restaurants favored by the Russian leader. He was charged by the U.S. government with trying to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election, and the Wagner Group is the subject of U.S. and European Union sanctions.

Russia’s game plan for Africa, where it has applied its influence as far north as Libya and as far south as Mozambique, is straightforward in some ways, say analysts. It seeks alliances with regimes or juntas shunned by the West or facing insurgencies and internal challenges to their rule.

The African leaders get recognition from the Kremlin and military muscle from Wagner. They pay for it by giving Russia prime access to their oil, gas, gold, diamonds and valuable minerals.

Russia also gains positions on a strategically important conti-

nent.

But there’s another objective of Russia’s “hybrid war” in Africa, said Joseph Siegle, director of research at the Africa Center for Strategic Studies.

Siegle said Russia is also waging an ideological battle, using Wagner as a “coercive tool” to undermine Western ideas of democracy and turn countries toward Moscow. Putin wants to challenge the international democratic order “because Russia can’t compete very well in that order,” Siegle said.

“If democracy is held up as the ultimate aspirational governance model, then that is constraining for Russia,” Siegle said.

Rather, Wagner promotes Russian interests with soldiers and guns, but also through propaganda and disinformation, as Prigozhin has done for Putin before.

In Central African Republic, Wagner fighters ride around the capital Bangui in unmarked military vehicles and guard the country’s gold and diamond mines. They have helped to hold off armed rebel groups and to keep President Faustin-Archange Touadera in power, but their reach goes much further. Russian national Valery Zakharov is Touadera’s national security advisor but also a “key

figure” in Wagner’s command structure, according to European Union documents accusing the mercenary group of serious human rights violations.

A statue erected last year in Bangui depicts Russian soldiers standing side by side to protect a woman and her children. Russia is cast as the country’s savior and pro-Russia marches have been held in support of the war in Ukraine and to criticize former security partner France — though several protesters said they are paid.

“A Central African adage says that when someone helps you, you have to reciprocate. This is why we have mobilized as one to support Russia,” said Didacien Kossimatchi, an official in Touadera’s political party. “Russia has absolved us of the unacceptable domination of the West.”

Kossimatchi said Russia was “acting in self-defense” in Ukraine.

Such support from African countries is a strategic success for Russia. When the United Nations voted on a resolution condemning the invasion of Ukraine, 17 of the 35 countries that abstained from the vote — nearly half — were African. Several other African nations did not register a vote.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man bites, stabs police dog, authorities say

CA FAIRFIELD — A man allegedly bit and stabbed a police dog in Northern California as officers tried to take him into custody, authorities said.

The man appeared to be under the influence of drugs, according to Fairfield police. The dog, named Cort, was taken to a veterinary hospital for treatment and is recovering at home with its handler.

Officers were initially called to an elderly victim's home on a report of burglary, the police department said in a Facebook post. When police and the K9 dog went inside the house, the dog "contacted" the man, 44; the man then allegedly bit the dog in the face and stabbed the animal on its left side with a knife, police said.

The man was booked into the Solano County Jail on suspicion of carjacking, burglary, harming a police dog and obstructing or resisting a public officer. He also faces a parole violation, online jail records show.

Man shoots performer at haunted house

SC MYRTLE BEACH, S.C. — A performer who scared a group at a South Carolina haunted house was shot by a man who said he thought he was grabbing a prop gun as part of the experience, police said.

The employee at the Zombie Experience at the Hollywood Wax Museum Haunted House in Myrtle Beach was hit in the shoulder and survived, authorities said.

The man told investigators the group fell to the ground after the performer scared them and he felt a gun hit his foot, Myrtle Beach Police said in a statement on Facebook. The man thought the gun was not real and fired twice, police said.

So far, the man has been charged with contributing to the delinquency of a minor because he gave the gun to a 15-year-old after firing it even through he was told it was real, authorities said. Police said they are still trying to determine where the gun came from.

Man cleared of 2007 assault, kidnapping

MI DETROIT — A man who has been in prison for 15 years for kidnapping and sexual assault didn't commit the crimes, a Detroit-area prosecutor said.

In 2007, Terance Calhoun, now 35, pleaded no contest to kidnapping and other charges and was sentenced to at least 17 years in prison, the Wayne County prosecutor's office said. Calhoun was identified by two teen victims after a sketch was posted at a Detroit liquor store.

"New evidence has resulted in the identification of another man," the prosecutor's office said.

Calhoun could be eligible for \$50,000 from the state for every year spent in prison as a result of his wrongful conviction.

Docket: 'Easter Santa Bunny' as prosecutor

IA DES MOINES — A check of Iowa's online court system shows a unique name for the prosecutor in hun-

dreds of cases: The Easter Bunny.

The Iowa Capital Dispatch reported that on April 4, online docket sheets for hundreds of Polk County cases were revised to indicate the prosecution had been transferred from an assistant county attorney to "Easter Santa Bunny."

Bret Lucas, an assistant county attorney, said the situation stems from a recent realignment of cases within the county attorney's office. Some cases were "transferred" to the Easter Bunny until all the work on the digital case transfer could be finished.

Lucas said it appears that the Judicial Branch and the information technology department decided to use the fake placeholder name.

Deputies: Bride, caterer served pot-laced food

FL LONGWOOD — A 42-year-old bride and her 31-year-old caterer are accused of serving food laced with marijuana to unsuspecting guests at a wedding reception.

The women were arrested following an investigation by the Seminole County Sheriff's Office, according to court records. Both women were charged with tampering, culpable negligence and delivery of marijuana.

Investigators said in an arrest affidavit that guests began feeling ill during the Feb. 19 event at a clubhouse in Longwood, which is near Orlando. The report says 30 to 40 people attended the event.

Several people who said they felt "stoned" were taken to the hospital for treatment. The ar-

rest report says several tested positive for THC, the psychoactive compound in marijuana.

Teen charged in assault during shooter drill

IN HAMMOND — A youth is facing rape charges for allegedly assaulting a classmate during a school active shooter drill.

The 17-year-old Hammond Morton High School student was charged as an adult with rape, criminal confinement and sexual battery and arrested.

Police were called to the school on Nov. 12, where the 16-year-old victim was crying, court documents say. She told police she was in band class with the older teen when the drill was announced and the class was told to go to a darkened instrument storage room.

Two electrocuted while making wood art

WI ROZELLVILLE — Two people found dead in Marathon County earlier this month were accidentally electrocuted, according to sheriff's officials.

Tanya Rodriguez, 44, and James Carolfi, 52, were electrocuted while they were creating art using a method called fractal wood burning, Sheriff's Deputy Chad Billeb said. The process uses high-voltage electricity to create designs in wood that has gained popularity on social media sites.

Officials said the equipment used for fractal burning caused the electrocutions and started a fire in the garage where the two were found April 6.

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Booker-less Suns overtake Pelicans

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Chris Paul came through in a big way when the Phoenix Suns needed him most.

Paul scored 19 of his 28 points in the fourth quarter and the Suns overcame Devin Booker's absence to beat the New Orleans Pelicans 114-111 on Friday night in Game 3 of the first-round series.

Deandre Ayton added 28 points and 17 rebounds to help the top-seeded Suns take a 2-1 series lead. Paul scored 15 of Phoenix's first 23 points of the final quarter. He also had 14 assists.

"He's just one of those players that plays the right way," Suns coach Monty Williams said. "He understands the 'when' and 'how' to create for himself and others. The leadership qualities that you guys don't see in the timeouts is just as impressive as what he does on the floor."

In the first three quarters, Paul fulfilled his characteristic

role as a facilitator. He had 12 assists, and he had taken just eight shots, making only three.

After New Orleans took its final lead, 93-92, with 5:37 left on Jose Alvarado's spinning layup, Paul connected on three consecutive mid-range jumpers — from 14, 12 and 15 feet — as Phoenix took control, 98-93. Paul hit another lane jumper and made four free throws in the final 1:32 to ice the game.

"It's a big win for us," Paul said, citing Booker's absence. "We knew it was going to be by committee. When you come into this arena, we knew it would be tough, but everybody just pitched in tonight."

JaVale McGee, whose 7-for-8 shooting was facilitated by Paul's passing mastery, said he continues to be amazed by the 36-year-old point guard.

"It's amazing just seeing the concentration, the focus and just the brains he has and the vision he has," McGee said. "He reads a play, and the defense will switch, and he's always

analyzing. He's listening to calls that other players are calling."

Booker strained his right hamstring Tuesday night after scoring 31 first-half points in a 125-114 home loss. He sat on the bench during Game 3.

Mikal Bridges had 17 points for the Suns. Backup center center JaVale McGee scored 15 points on 7-for-8 shooting as the Suns hurt the Pelicans inside.

Brandon Ingram led New Orleans with 34 points. CJ McCollum had 30.

"They attacked the open areas and got good looks, especially for Ayton," Ingram said. "In the beginning of the game, CP did a good job getting to his spots."

Game 4 is Sunday night in New Orleans.

"It's a long series," New Orleans coach Willie Green said. "We've just got to continue to stay with it; continue to wear them down. We can't turn the ball over. We have to make sure we get back in transition."

Jose Alvarado kept the Pelicans

in it in the fourth with seven consecutive points, but Paul answered with five straight points and an assist to tie it at 90 with 6:32 left. Paul then had eight consecutive points for a 98-93 lead.

The Suns took their biggest lead, 66-53, early in the third quarter, but New Orleans used a 12-0 run over the next 2:43 to pull to 66-63. McCollum was the catalyst with a three-pointer and a layup, and New Orleans pulled to 81-79 entering the fourth quarter on the strength of a 31-22 third-period run.

McCollum's 16-foot jumper with 5:13 left in the first half tied it at 43, but while the ball was in the air, Pelicans forward Jaxson Hayes barreled into Jae Crowder, who was standing on the baseline near the basket. Hayes' shoulder-to-chest foul was reviewed and earned him a Flagrant 2 foul and an ejection.

That dustup sparked a 16-5 Phoenix run to close the half, and the Suns led 59-48 at intermission.

Young's late floater lifts Hawks over Heat

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Trae Young struggled in the first two games of the playoffs.

Didn't really matter.

With Game 3 on the line and the season hanging in the balance, the Atlanta Hawks wanted the ball in his hands.

Young delivered, hitting a floater in the lane with 4.4 seconds left that gave the Hawks a 111-110 victory over top-seeded Miami on Friday night after Atlanta overcame a 16-point deficit in the second half.

The Hawks cut the Heat's series lead to 2-1.

"I didn't have any doubts," Young said. "I was able to get to the basket and get my floater."

Jimmy Butler missed a jumper with 12.6 seconds left that

could've given the Heat a three-point cushion. The Hawks grabbed the rebound and got the ball in Young's hands, passing up the chance to call a timeout.

"No way I was calling a timeout there," Hawks coach Nate McMillan said. "We got the rebound down by one with the ball in Trae's hands. That's a great chance to get in transition."

Miami had one more chance to win it, but Butler missed again on an off-balance three at the buzzer with De'Andre Hunter in his face to give the Hawks a burst of hope in the best-of-seven series.

"The plan was get free, shoot it and make it," Butler said. "I didn't do it. I'll make the next one."

Game 4 is Sunday night in At-

lanta.

P.J. Tucker led a 21-0 run in the third quarter that pushed the Heat to an 84-68 lead and seemingly on cruise control to a 3-0 lead. But Young and the Hawks didn't let them get away.

The Heat also were dealing with an injury to point guard Kyle Lowry, who went out in the third quarter with a hamstring problem and did not return. He'll undergo tests Saturday to determine the severity of the injury.

"I love that guy as our point guard," Butler said. "If he's with us, yippee ki-yay. If he's not, someone will step in and do his job. We've got enough guys in that room to make up for him."

After being held to eight points in Miami's Game 1 blo-

wout and committing a career-worst 10 turnovers in Game 2, Young looked more like himself on his home court. He had 24 points despite another stout defensive effort by the Heat, and turned it over just three times. And, of course, Young hit the shot that really mattered at the end.

"He's the head of the snake," teammate Delon Wright said.

Bogdan Bogdanovic added 18 points, Hunter 17 and three others scored in double figures to take some of the pressure off the star guard.

Coming off a 45-point effort in Game 3, the best playoff game of his career, Butler was held to 20 in this one and missed a prime opportunity to put Miami on the cusp of a sweep.

Even without Middleton, Bucks beat Bulls

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Reeling coming off a loss and with one of their best players sidelined, the Milwaukee Bucks delivered just the sort of performance they needed.

The defending NBA champions raced out to a big lead, making quick work of the Chicago Bulls.

Grayson Allen made five three-pointers and scored 22 points and Milwaukee dominated Chicago 111-81 on Friday night to take a 2-1 lead in the first-round playoff series without the injured Khris Middleton.

Giannis Antetokounmpo added 18 points. Bobby Portis started with Middleton out and finished with 18 points and 16 rebounds despite pain in his right eye from a hit in Game 2. And the Bucks made it look easy, handing the Bulls the most lopsided home playoff loss in franchise history.

Coming off two shaky performances in Milwaukee, the

Bucks quieted a raucous crowd watching Chicago's first playoff game at the United Center in five years. They led by 24 in the second quarter and remained in control the rest of the way.

Middleton is expected to miss the rest of the series after spraining his left knee in Wednesday night's loss.

Game 4 is Sunday in Chicago. Without him, Allen said his own mindset didn't necessarily change, though the rhythm was different.

Antetokounmpo scored all but two of his points after the first quarter. The two-time MVP finished with nine assists and seven rebounds.

Holiday added 16 points to help the Bucks beat the Bulls for the 18th time in 20 games.

Bulls struggle

Nikola Vucevic led Chicago with 19 points. Zach LaVine had 15 and DeMar DeRozan finished with just 11 with the Bucks crowding him after setting a career playoff high with 41 in Game 2.

"We didn't have that same competitiveness that we had the first two games we had in Milwaukee," LaVine said. "We took a punch the first game. When we went down 0-9, we responded right away. We didn't respond the right way (on Friday). We need to look at the film and figure out how we can do a better job of matching force with force."

Early surge

Milwaukee had it going right from the start, racing out to a 60-41 halftime lead even with Middleton sidelined.

Allen helped squash the "Let's go Bulls!" chants, nailing four threes and scoring 14 in the half. That had to make it even tougher for fans still upset about his hard foul that resulted in a broken wrist for Alex Caruso during a game in Milwaukee in January. They showered him with boos but couldn't throw him off his game.

Antetokounmpo started a 13-0 run early in the second quarter with a 19-footer and

dunk. And Allen finished it with a driving layup that bumped the lead to 46-22.

Tip-ins

Bucks: Milwaukee's biggest playoff win was by 50 at home against San Francisco in 1971. And the Bucks' widest margin on the road was by 36 at Philadelphia in 1970. ... G George Hill (abdominal strain) missed his fourth game in a row, and coach Mike Budenholzer said he doesn't appear close to returning. ... Milwaukee has won 12 of 13 at the United Center dating to the 2016-17 season

Bulls: Chicago's most lopsided playoff loss was 115-78 at Miami in Game 2 of the 2013 conference semis. ... The Bulls have not won a home playoff game since beating Cleveland in Game 3 of the 2015 Eastern Conference semifinals. Chicago lost that series in six games. ... Assistant coaches Chris Fleming and Damian Cotter were back with the team after missing the first two games because of COVID-19.

Oilers beat Avalanche to wrap up playoff spot

Associated Press

EDMONTON, Alberta — Evander Kane had three goals and an assist, Connor McDavid had three assists and the Edmonton Oilers clinched a playoff berth with a 6-3 victory over the Colorado Avalanche on Friday night.

Evan Bouchard, Kailer Yamamoto and Kris Russell also scored for the Oilers, who have won four in a row and improved to 12-0-1 in their last 13 games on home ice. Mike Smith had 34 saves.

Valeri Nichushkin had two goals and Nathan MacKinnon also scored for the Western Conference-leading Avalanche. Darcy Kuemper finished with 21 saves. Colorado has dropped three in a row

and lost for just the second time this season when leading after the first period.

Wild 6, Kraken 3: Kirill Kaprizov had a goal and three assists to become the first player in franchise history with at least 100 points in a season, and host Minnesota established four franchise records and tied another in beating Seattle.

Joel Eriksson Ek had two goals and an assist, Mats Zuccarello, Ryan Hartman and Nicolas Deslauriers also scored, and Kevin Fiala had a team-record five assists for Minnesota, which also established all-time bests with its 50th win and 107 points.

Marc-Andre Fleury overcame an early gaffe and had

25 saves to improve to 7-1-0 since being acquired from Chicago at the trade deadline.

Daniel Sprong and Yanni Gourde scored early for Seattle, which saw its season-high three game-winning streak end. Philipp Grubauer finished with 29 saves. Matty Beniers also scored for the Kraken to become the first rookie to begin his NHL career with points in five consecutive games since New Jersey's Ty Smith Jan. 14-24, 2021.

Senators 2, Blue Jackets 1 (SO): Tim Stutzle scored in the shootout to lift Ottawa to its second straight road win.

Brady Tkachuk also scored and Filip Gustavsson stopped 33 shots for the Senators in his first career shootout win.

Jack Roslovic had Columbus' goal and Elvis Merzlikins had 25 saves in the Blue Jackets' fourth straight loss (0-3-1).

Capitals 2, Coyotes 0: Connor Sheary scored in the first period and Vitek Vanecek got his fourth shutout of the season as visiting Washington got its seventh win in nine games.

John Carlson scored his 16th into an empty net with 25 seconds remaining. Vanecek stopped 19 shots for his seventh career shutout and 20th win of the season. The Caps pulled even with Pittsburgh for third place in the Metropolitan Division with 99 points.

Karel Vejmelka had 27 saves for the Coyotes, who have lost nine straight (0-8-1).

Judge homers twice, Yanks top Guardians

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Aaron Judge hit a pair of opposite-field home runs and threw out a runner from center field, leading the New York Yankees over Cleveland 4-1 Friday night in the first trip to the Bronx by the re-named Guardians.

Reliever Michael King helped keep New York ahead by striking out eight in three innings, fanning his last seven batters.

Judge put the Yankees ahead in the third inning against Eli Morgan (1-1) when he followed a two-out walk to DJ LeMahieu with a drive into the right-field seats. Judge added a solo shot in the fifth.

Braves 3, Marlins 0: Kyle Wright had a career-high 11 strikeouts in six dominant innings, Matt Olson doubled in two runs and host Atlanta beat Miami.

Cardinals 4, Reds 2: Paul Goldschmidt helped slow down rookie fireballer Hunter Greene, Steven Matz pitched one-run ball over five innings and St. Louis stretched host Cincinnati's skid to 10 games.

Phillies 4, Brewers 2: Alec Bohm hit a

go-ahead, two-run single in the eighth inning, Bryce Harper got two key hits and Philadelphia stopped visiting Milwaukee's four-game winning streak.

Giants 7, Nationals 1: Austin Slater smacked a three-run homer as part of a seven-run second inning against Patrick Corbin, and San Francisco cruised past host Washington.

Mets 6, Diamondbacks 5 (10): Starling Marte legged out an RBI single — confirmed by a video review — in the 10th inning that lifted visiting New York over Arizona.

Dodgers 6, Padres 1: Mookie Betts hit two home runs and Max Muncy homered and had three RBIs as Los Angeles beat host San Diego for the 10th straight time.

Twins 2, White Sox 1: Chicago short-stop Tim Anderson and first baseman José Abreu each made throwing errors on the same sloppy play, allowing visiting Minnesota to score the go-ahead run in the eighth inning.

Blue Jays 4, Astros 3: Matt Chapman doubled home Vladimir Guerrero Jr. with

two outs in the ninth inning and Toronto beat host Houston.

Red Sox 4, Rays 3: At St. Petersburg, Fla., Xander Bogaerts had three hits and scored twice in the first five innings and Boston beat Tampa Bay.

Orioles 5, Angels 3: Robinson Chirinos drove in three runs and Bruce Zimmermann pitched five-hit ball into the seventh inning as visiting Baltimore beat Los Angeles.

Pirates 4, Cubs 2: Roberto Perez homered and drove in three runs, Michael Chavis broke a tie with a fourth-inning blast, and Pittsburgh beat host Chicago.

Rangers 8, Athletics 1: Glenn Otto earned his first major league win, outpitching former high school classmate Adam Oller and leading visiting Texas over Oakland.

Mariners 4, Royals 1: Rookie Julio Rodríguez lined a bases-loaded, two-run double, Jarrod Kelenic followed with a two-run triple on the next pitch and host Seattle beat Kansas City.

With expansion on hold, CFP looks to stay unchanged

Associated Press

INGLEWOOD, Calif. — As college football tries to navigate unprecedented upheaval, the status quo holds with the College Football Playoff that crowns its national champion.

The playoff is likely to stick with the current four-team format through the end of its contract. It has no plans to engage players on name, image and likeness rights. And its leaders do not expect the Rose Bowl will be dislodged from its traditional early afternoon time slot on New Year's Day should expansion happen.

Bill Hancock, executive director of the CFP, said he does not believe major changes are coming any time soon after a proposal to expand to a 12-team playoff was abandoned in February.

"We knew it was a long shot to expand in this 12-year contract because everybody had a veto. But we thought we would take a look at it and make an effort. So now we're going to be focused on a new format starting in '26-'27, whatever that may be. But in the meantime, we have four more years of this, what's really been a great event," Hancock said at an event marking the countdown to the 2023 national championship game.

The plan introduced in June 2021 would

have featured the six highest-ranked conference champions and six at-large teams chosen by a selection committee. But it quickly became clear getting the unanimous support needed to change the current contract would be difficult.

There were doubts if 12 teams was the right number, if Power Five conference champions should be guaranteed spots in the field, and if it made financial sense to expand without waiting for an open bidding process in a competitive landscape for broadcast and streaming rights, all against the backdrop of the July 2021 announcement that Texas and Oklahoma would leave the Big 12 to join the Southeastern Conference.

Hancock does not believe the decisions of the Longhorns and Sooners played a significant role in scuttling the proposal.

"I didn't hear any talk about that in the meetings of the commissioners. We all knew it happened, of course, but I can't speculate about how important that was in the process," Hancock said. "I will say this, I think, but for the pandemic, we would have an expanded field now. If we had been able to get this done in the summer of 2019, 2020, I think we'd have an expansion before the end of the contract."

Realignment wasn't the only shakeup to the sport. Another is the newfound ability of college players and high school recruits to profit on their visibility.

Given the increased number of players choosing to sit out bowl games to avoid injury ahead of the NFL Draft, the prospect of organizers paying players to ensure participation has been floated as a potential avenue to protect ticket sales, sponsorships and ratings.

Hancock said the CFP will not pursue that route.

"There was some talk at bowls about it, but none of it came to fruition," he said. "I think the jury's out. Jury's out on everything about NIL."

As for the Granddaddy of Them All, its hold on a prime viewing window on Jan. 1 would not have been changed by expansion.

"We didn't really get that far, but the working group proposal was for every bowl to have two quarterfinals and then a semifinal, so you have a three-year cycle. And I thought that one made a lot of sense," Hancock said. "But we didn't get far enough to be talking turkey with any bowls or conferences about the actual format."