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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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NATO membership bid nears Finnish line

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Finland's flag will be raised for the first time at NATO headquarters Tuesday in Brussels, where leaders will welcome the Nordic country as the alliance's newest member.

"It will be a good day for Finland's security, for Nordic security and for NATO as a whole," the organization's secretary-general, Jens Stoltenberg, told reporters on the eve of a meeting of allied foreign ministers.

Finland will be welcomed into the U.S.-led security pact as NATO's 31st member. The country's entrance also means that NATO's border with Russia will more than double, Stoltenberg said.

For NATO, Finnish accession means the addition of a country that never went through the post-Cold War demilitarization that many other European states experienced.

The result is a country with a strong mil-

itary force equipped with modern weapons systems that will eventually include F-35 fighters, Stoltenberg said.

"They have trained and built a large army over many years," he said.

Throughout the Cold War, Finland and Sweden, which also is seeking NATO membership, resisted the idea of becoming part of NATO, opting instead for military neutrality.

But Russia's invasion of Ukraine on Feb. 24, 2022, changed the security calculation for both countries.

Sweden's membership has run into resistance from Turkey, which has blocked its entry over what Turkey says are Kurdish militants residing in the Nordic country.

In Brussels, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken will lead a U.S. delegation at NATO that is expected to be focused on ways the alliance can further assist Ukraine in its war against Russia.

"We do not know when this war will end,

but when it does, we will need to put in place arrangements so that Ukraine can deter future aggression and history does not repeat itself," Stoltenberg said. "We cannot allow Russia to continue to chip away at European security."

Collectively, allies have delivered some \$70 billion in military aid to Ukraine, with modern battle tanks among the latest form of weaponry to arrive on the battlefield.

"This can make a real difference on the front lines and allow the Ukrainian forces to liberate more territory," Stoltenberg said.

Meanwhile, allies also will address China's growing alignment with Russia, the NATO chief said.

Pacific region countries including Japan, South Korea and Australia will join the talks in Brussels.

"The consequences of Russia's war against Ukraine are global, and what is happening in Europe today could happen in east Asia tomorrow," he said.

Philippines names 4 new bases for US rotational forces

Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines — The Philippine government on Monday identified four new local military camps, including some across a sea border from Taiwan, where rotational batches of American forces with their weapons would be allowed to stay indefinitely despite strong objections from China.

President Ferdinand Marcos Jr.'s administration announced in February his approval of an expanded U.S. military presence in the country by allowing American forces to station in the four additional Philippine military bases under the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement between the long-time treaty allies.

The move would boost his country's coastal defense, Marcos said. It dovetails with the Bi-

den administration's effort to strengthen an arc of military alliances in the Indo-Pacific to better counter China.

The new sites identified by Marcos' office include a Philippine navy base in Santa Ana town and an international airport in Lal-lo town, both in northern Cagayan province. Those two locations have infuriated Chinese officials because they would provide U.S. forces with a staging ground close to southern China and Taiwan, the self-ruled island Beijing claims as its own.

The two other military areas are in northern Isabela province and on a local navy camp on Balabac island in the western province of Palawan.

Palawan faces the South China Sea, a key passage for global trade that Beijing claims vir-

tually in its entirety and where it has taken increasingly aggressive actions that have threatened smaller claimant states, including the Philippines.

China and the Philippines, along with Vietnam, Malaysia, Brunei and Taiwan, have been locked in increasingly tense territorial disputes over South China Sea. Washington lays no claims to the strategic waters but has deployed warships and fighter and surveillance aircraft for patrols that it says promote freedom of navigation and the rule of law, angering Beijing.

"That's a trade route, that's where more or less \$3 trillion worth of trade passes. Our responsibility in collectively securing that is huge," Carlito Galvez, who heads the Philippine Defense Department, said.

The four new military sites

where American would gain access were "suitable and mutually beneficial" and would "boost the disaster response of the country" as springboard for humanitarian and relief work during emergencies, Marcos's office said.

In a closed doors meeting in Manila with their Philippine counterparts last month, however, a Chinese Foreign Ministry delegation expressed its strong opposition to an expanded U.S. military presence in the Philippines and warned of its repercussions to regional peace and stability, Philippine officials said.

The Department of National Defense in Manila said the U.S. military presence was not a re-establishment of U.S. military bases in the Philippines, as opponents have asserted.

Navy prioritizing mental health needs

Associated Press

NAVAL STATION NORFOLK, Va. — On Navy ships docked at this vast base, hundreds of sailors in below-deck mazes of windowless passageways perform intense, often monotonous manual labor. It's necessary work before a ship deploys, but hard to adjust to for many already challenged by the stresses plaguing young adults nationwide.

Growing mental health distress in the ranks carries such grave implications that the U.S. chief of naval operations, Adm. Michael Gilday, answered "suicides" when asked earlier this year what in the security environment kept him up at night.

One recently embraced prevention strategy is to deploy chaplains as regular members of the crew on more ships. The goal is for the clergy to connect with sailors, believers and non-believers alike, in complete confidentiality.

"That makes us accessible as a relief valve," said Capt. David Thames last month. Thames is an Episcopal priest who's responsible for chaplains for the Navy's surface fleet in the Atlantic, covering dozens of ships from the East Coast to Bahrain.

The families of two young men who killed themselves in Norfolk said chaplains could be effective to facilitate access to mental health care. But they also insist on accountability and a chain of command committed to eliminating bullying and engaging younger generations.

"A chaplain could help, but it wouldn't matter if you don't empower them," said Patrick Caserta, a former Navy recruiter whose son, Brandon, 21, killed himself in 2018.

Mental health problems, especially among enlisted men under 29, mirror concerns in schools and colleges, exacerbated by the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic.

But chaplains, civilian counselors, families of suicide victims, and sailors from commodores to the newly enlisted say these struggles pose unique challenges and security implications in the military, where suicides took the lives of 519 service members in 2021, per the latest Department of Defense data.

"Mental health permeates every aspect of our operations," Capt. Blair Guy, commodore for one of the destroyer squadrons based in Norfolk, said via email.

His squadron's lead chaplain, Lt. Cmdr.

Madison Carter, is working on recruiting three new chaplains, who are both naval officers and clergy from various denominations. The Baptist pastor said most of his talks with sailors involve not faith but life struggles that can make them feel unfulfilled and lose focus.

Sailors can carry the routine angst of young adults, from political polarization to breakups to broken homes, which some enlist to escape. Onboard, disconnected from their real and virtual networks — most communications are off-limits at sea for security — they lack the usual coping mechanisms, said Jochebed Swilley, a civilian social worker on the USS Bataan, an amphibious assault ship.

"Eighteen to 21-year-olds don't know life without smartphones," said Kayla Arestivo, a counselor and advocate whose nonprofit helps service members and veterans near Norfolk. "If you remove a sense of connection, mental health plummets."

Chief Legalman Florian Morrison, who's served on the Bataan for more than two years, said faith is what helped him "re-center" after losing three shipmates to suicide.

"It can be overwhelming ... if you feel alone and you've nobody to reach out to," Morrison said in the chapel set up in the ship's bow. "A streamlined pathway to mental health would help."

Even docked, ships are far from stress-free, as sailors constantly navigate steep ladderwells and pressurized, hulking doors under the glare of fluorescent lights and the constant hum of machinery.

Space is so tight and regimented that a challenge across the fleet is where to squeeze in offices for new chaplains, said Cmdr. Hunter Washburn, commanding officer of the destroyer USS Gravelly.

A Navy chaplain's role is akin to a life coach, helping young sailors find their footing as adults in an environment that looks far more different from the civilian world than it did in previous generations.

"A lot haven't found that grounding yet. They're looking," said Lt. Greg Johnson, a Baptist chaplain who joined the Bataan in December.

Clergy need to engage with people of different or no faith who might be initially turned off by the cross or other religious symbols on their uniforms.

"I want the people who can be uncomfor-

table and still be the bearers of God's presence," Carter said.

Sailors call them "deck-plating chaps" — chaplains striking up a conversation with their shipmates in the mess decks or during night watches, in addition to keeping an open-door policy at all hours.

Lt. Cmdr. Nathan Rice, a Pentecostal chaplain serving a destroyer squadron at Norfolk, estimates he did 7,000 hours of counseling over 12 years. Long lines of sailors waiting to talk often formed outside his door.

"They're grinding on a ship or serving food on a mess line, that's not what they expected. So we help to find their meaning and purpose," Rice said. "When their life is not going the way they think it should be going, I'll be blunt and ask, 'Why haven't you killed yourself?'"

Focusing on the answers — the "anchors" to the sailors' will to survive — has helped Rice talk some down from the ledge, including a corpsman who, while discussing suicide dreams, suddenly cocked his weapon and told Rice, "I could do it right now."

Lt. Cmdr. Ben Garrett has also diffused several suicide situations in the more than a decade he's been a Catholic chaplain, for the past eight months on the Bataan, which when underway carries 1,000 sailors, 1,600 Marines and three other chaplains. But last fall, he officiated the memorial for a suicide victim.

"There were sailors in the rafters," he recalled. "It affects the whole crew."

Most profoundly, suicide impacts surviving families. Kody Decker was 22 and a new father when he killed himself at a maintenance facility in Norfolk, where he was transferred after struggling with depression on the Bataan, according to his father, Robert Decker. He's not sure if talking to a chaplain would have made a difference with Kody, though speedy implementation of the Brandon Act might have. The bill, named after the Casertas' son, aims to improve the process for mental health evaluations for service members.

But Decker hasn't given up on either the Navy or God.

"My whole fight is about not having other families like us," he said as a tear rolled down his cheek. "I pray to God every night, for help, for healing, for strength. I'm not a quitter. But it's hard."

Bomb at cafe kills Russian military blogger

Associated Press

Russian authorities blamed Ukrainian intelligence agencies Monday for orchestrating a bombing at a St. Petersburg cafe that killed a Russian military blogger who fervently supported Moscow's invasion of Ukraine, and they arrested a suspect in the attack.

Ukrainian authorities did not directly respond to the accusation, but President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that he doesn't think about events in Russia, and a senior official earlier described the bombing as part of Russia's internal turmoil.

Vladlen Tatarsky, 40, was

killed Sunday as he led a discussion at the cafe on the banks of the Neva River in the historic heart of Russia's second-largest city, officials said. Tatarsky, who had filed regular reports from the front lines in Ukraine, was the pen name for Maxim Fomin. He had accumulated more than 560,000 followers on his Telegram messaging app channel.

Over 30 people were wounded in the blast, and 10 of them were in grave condition, authorities said.

Investigators said they believe the bomb was hidden in a bust of Tatarsky that was given to him just before the explosion. A video showed him making jokes about

the bust and putting it on a table next to him.

Russian authorities announced the arrest of Darya Trepova, a 26-year-old St. Petersburg resident who was seen on video presenting Tatarsky with the bust. Last year, Trepova was detained by police for taking part in rallies against the war in Ukraine, which began in February 2022.

The Interior Ministry released a brief video showing Trepova telling a police officer that she brought the statuette that exploded to the cafe. When asked who gave it to her, she said she would explain it later.

According to Russian media

reports, Trepova told investigators she was asked to deliver the bust, but didn't know what was inside it.

The National Anti-Terrorist Committee, which coordinates counterterrorism operations, said the bombing was "planned by Ukrainian special services," noting Trepova was an "active supporter" of imprisoned Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny, the Kremlin's fiercest foe who had exposed official corruption and organized massive antigovernment protests, is serving a nine-year fraud sentence that he has denounced as a political vendetta.

Marine's adoption of Afghan war orphan voided by judge

Associated Press

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Va. — In a highly unusual ruling, a state court judge on Thursday voided a U.S. Marine's adoption of an Afghan war orphan, more than a year after he took the little girl away from the Afghan couple raising her. But her future remains uncertain.

For now, the child will stay with Marine Maj. Joshua Mast and his wife, Stephanie, under a temporary custody order they obtained before the adoption. The Masts will have to re-prove to the court that they should be granted a permanent adoption.

Despite the uncertainty, the ruling was welcomed by the Afghan couple, who had been identified by the Afghan government as the child's relatives in February 2020 and raised her for 18 months. They dropped to their knees in prayer outside the courthouse.

The Masts quickly left the courthouse after Thursday's hearing, flanked by their attorneys. The parties are forbidden from commenting by a gag order.

An Associated Press investigation in October revealed how Mast became determined to rescue the baby and bring her home

as an act of Christian faith. But until now, the adoption order has remained in place.

"There's never, ever been a case like this," said Judge Claude V. Worrell Jr. on Thursday.

The girl, who will turn 4 this summer, was an infant when she was found injured in the rubble after a U.S.-Afghan military raid in 2019. She spent more than five months in a U.S. military hospital before the Afghan government and International Committee of the Red Cross determined she had living relatives, and united her with them. Unbeknownst to them, Mast learned about the baby while she was hospitalized, and decided that he and his wife should be her parents. The Masts told Virginia Circuit Court Judge Richard Moore that she was the daughter of transient terrorists who died in the fight, and thus a stateless orphan. Moore granted him the adoption.

After the U.S. military withdrew and Afghanistan fell to the Taliban in 2021, the Masts helped the couple evacuate to the U.S. Once they arrived, Mast used the adoption order to take the child, and the Afghan couple have not seen her since.

April Fools' pranks include balloon sighting, new medal

BY KELLY AGEE

Stars and Stripes

With a collective sense of humor unlike any other institution, the U.S. military brings its "A" game on April 1.

Reports of another balloon overflight, recognition for a popular Marine Corps satirist and a new medal for those who "almost joined" the military posed the internet question, "Is this for real?"

In a report headlined "See Something, Say Something," Joint Base Lewis-McChord, near Tacoma, Wash., said Saturday it received calls about a large balloon-like aircraft floating over neighboring counties at a relatively low 10,000 feet.

The base alerted local authorities and dispatched military helicopters to investigate the unidentified flying object. Readers hooked by the otherwise dry but alarming account of another airspace intrusion found the payoff in the last paragraphs. Challenged to identify themselves by military pilots, the balloon occupants responded: "There's no place like home. There's no place like home," on repeat.

"Terminal Lance," a popular

comic strip that satirizes life as a non-rate in the U.S. Marine Corps, announced on its website that its creator, Maximilian Uriarte, was designated Lance Corporal of the Marine Corps by Commandant Gen. David Berger at a Saturday ceremony.

Nearly 400 noncommissioned officers stood in formation at Uriarte's request for the seven-hour ceremony, according to the Terminal Lance report.

Leadership University, a Department of Defense collaboration of experts and leaders that provides career tools to the military and their families, announced a new medal Saturday for non-military members.

"Senior Defense Department officials are bracing for criticism after they announced plans to create a new medal — one that doesn't require service in any of the nation's branches of the armed forces," said a post on the university's official Facebook page. "The medal will formally recognize the desire many young Americans have to serve, even if they never actually signed up."

The post ended with: "And have a great April Fools' Day."

Trump faces setbacks in other probes

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Former President Donald Trump is facing the most urgent legal challenge of his life this week in New York, where he's set to be arraigned Tuesday on charges arising from hush money payments during his 2016 campaign.

But as much of the attention will be on the courthouse in lower Manhattan, investigations from Atlanta to Washington will press forward, underscoring the broad range of peril he confronts as he seeks to reclaim the presidency.

The vulnerability Trump faces in Washington alone has become clear over the past month, as judges in a succession of sealed rulings have turned aside the Trump team's efforts to block grand jury testimony — including from his own lawyer and his former vice president — from witnesses who were, or still are, close to him and who could conceivably offer direct insight into key events.

The rulings directing advisers and aides to testify don't suggest the Justice Department

is close to bringing criminal charges, nor do they guarantee prosecutors can secure testimony valuable to a potential prosecution. But they're nonetheless a key, closed-door win for the government as it investigates whether classified documents were criminally mishandled at Trump's Florida home and the possible obstruction of that probe, as well as efforts by Trump and his allies to undo the results of the 2020 presidential election.

"I do think when you're talking about an attempted insurrection and the kinds of issues that we're talking about there, there's going to be a lot of arguments on DOJ's side" to get the testimony, said Randall Eliason, a former federal prosecutor and a George Washington University law professor.

Meanwhile, the district attorney in Atlanta is continuing to investigate attempts by Trump and his allies to undo his election loss in Georgia. A special grand jury in February said it believed "one or more witnesses" committed perjury and urged local prosecutors to bring charges.

The former president never testified before the special grand jury, meaning he is not among those who could have perjured themselves. But the report doesn't foreclose the possibility of other charges, and the case still poses particular challenges for Trump, in part because his actions in Georgia were so public.

Overall, the number of sealed disputes over the scope of grand jury testimony is unusual but perhaps befitting for hugely consequential probes like one concerning a former president. It also stands in contrast to the last special counsel investigation involving Trump, when he was president and when Robert Mueller and his team of prosecutors sought to determine whether Trump's 2016 campaign had colluded with Russia to tip the election.

In that probe, a lawyer inside the White House, Ty Cobb, facilitated voluntary interviews of White House staff — without subpoenas — in hopes that cooperation would hasten the investigation toward conclusion.

Va. teacher shot by 6-year-old files \$40M lawsuit

Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. — A first-grade Virginia teacher who was shot and seriously wounded by her 6-year-old student filed a lawsuit Monday seeking \$40 million in damages from school officials, accusing them of gross negligence for allegedly ignoring multiple warnings on the day of the shooting that the boy had a gun and was in a "violent mood."

Abby Zwerner, a 25-year-old

teacher at Richneck Elementary School in Newport News, Va., was shot in the hand and chest on Jan. 6 as she sat at a reading table in her classroom. She spent nearly two weeks in the hospital and has had four surgeries since the shooting.

The shooting rattled the military shipbuilding community and sent shock waves around the country, with many wondering how a child so young could get access to a gun and shoot his

teacher.

The lawsuit names the Newport News School Board and several school district officials, including former Superintendent George Parker III, as defendants.

Michelle Price, a spokesperson for the school board, Lisa Surles-Law, chair of the school board, and other board members did not immediately respond to emails seeking comment on the lawsuit. The former

superintendent did not immediately return a message seeking comment.

No one, including the boy's family, has been charged in the shooting. The superintendent was fired by the school board after the shooting, while the assistant principal resigned. The principal was reassigned to another job within the school district. The board also voted to install metal detectors in every school in the district.

Twitter pulls verification check mark from NYT account

Associated Press

Twitter has removed the verification check mark on the main account of The New York Times, one of CEO Elon Musk's most despised news organizations.

The removal comes as many of Twitter's high-profile users are bracing for the loss of the blue check marks that helped

verify their identity and distinguish them from impostors on the social media platform.

Musk, who owns Twitter, set a deadline of Saturday for verified users to buy a premium Twitter subscription or lose the checks on their profiles. The Times said in a story Thursday that it would not pay Twitter for verification of its institutional

accounts.

Early Sunday, Musk tweeted that the Times' check mark would be removed. He later posted disparaging remarks about the newspaper, which has aggressively reported on Twitter and on flaws with partially automated driving systems at Tesla, the electric car company, which he also runs.

Twitter did not answer emailed questions Sunday about the removal of The New York Times check mark.

The costs of keeping the check marks ranges from \$8 a month for individual web users to a starting price of \$1,000 monthly to verify an organization, plus \$50 monthly for each affiliate or employee account.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Governor signs medical marijuana bill into law

KY FRANKFORT — Medical marijuana advocates achieved a long-sought victory Thursday, when Kentucky lawmakers gave final passage to a measure to legalize access to medical cannabis for people suffering from a defined list of debilitating illnesses.

In the waning hours of this year's legislative session, the Republican-dominated House voted 66-33 to send the measure to Democratic Gov. Andy Beshear. The governor quickly responded he was "thankful this progress has been made" and said he would sign the bill. He did so Friday.

Supporters pushed the bill over the finish line after years of setbacks, when other versions to open Kentucky to legal medical cannabis died. Medical cannabis is legal in at least 37 states.

Kentuckians with qualified medical conditions will have to wait to gain access to medical cannabis. Senate Bill 47 specifies the medical marijuana program won't take effect until the start of 2025, to allow time for state health officials to draft regulations to oversee the program.

Jury awards nearly \$5M in police chase crash

IL CHICAGO — A Cook County jury awarded nearly \$5 million Wednesday to the family of an 84-year-old retired teacher who was killed when a police cruiser crashed into a police van and careened into a car in which she was a passenger.

The jury awarded \$4.75 million to the estate of Verona Gunn

and \$180,000 to be divided among three people in the car with her when the collision happened, for their physical injuries and emotional suffering, the plaintiffs' attorneys said in a statement. The verdict is one of the highest in the state of Illinois for the death of someone in their 80s, it added.

Gunn was being driven home after a family cookout when the crash occurred on May 25, 2019, and she died hours later on an operating table. Her daughter, a family friend in the passenger seat and the friend's 9-year-old grandchild next to Gunn in the back were injured, as were 10 police officers.

State parishes among top for population loss

LA BATON ROUGE — Four of Louisiana's parishes were among the top 10 counties in the United States with the largest percentage of population loss in 2022, according to a report released Thursday by the U.S. Census Bureau.

All of the ranked parishes are in southeast Louisiana and surround the state's most populous city, New Orleans.

The county in the U.S. with the largest percent decline in population from 2021 to 2022 was Lassen County, Calif., which saw a 6% decline. The county was closely followed by St. John the Baptist Parish in Louisiana, which saw a population decrease of nearly 2,200 people or 5.1%.

The third and fourth spots on the list were also occupied by Louisiana parishes — Terrebonne Parish with a 3.9% decrease and Plaquemines Parish, which saw a 3.3% decline.

Experts have attributed the

decline to the COVID-19 pandemic and devastating hurricanes that exacerbated the long-term downward trend, The Times-Picayune/The New Orleans Advocate reported.

Boeing's 1st astronaut flight to space delayed

FL CAPE CANAVERAL — Boeing's first launch of astronauts has been delayed again, this time until July.

NASA announced the latest postponement Wednesday, saying more time is needed to certify and test the Starliner capsule's parachute system before the spacecraft blasts off with two test pilots. Additional software testing is also underway. Boeing already was running years behind schedule when it had to repeat its test flight without a crew to the International Space Station because of software and other problems. The first was in 2019 and the second in 2022.

Liftoff is currently targeted for no earlier than July 21 from Cape Canaveral Space Force Station. The Starliner capsule will ride atop United Launch Alliance's Atlas V rocket.

Governor vetoes bill limiting trans pronouns

ND BISMARCK — North Dakota's Republican governor vetoed a bill that would generally prohibit public school teachers and staff from referring to transgender students by pronouns other than those reflecting the sex assigned to them at birth.

The state Senate voted 37-9 to override the veto Thursday afternoon, just hours after Gov. Doug Burgum's office announced his

decision.

The House must still vote on the override, The Bismarck Tribune reported. The House approved the bill 60-32 in February, three votes short of the two-thirds majority needed to override the veto.

If the bill became law, public school teachers and employees would be barred from using a transgender student's preferred pronoun unless they have permission from the student's parents as well as a school administrator. The bill would also prohibit government agencies from requiring employees to use a transgender colleague's preferred pronoun.

Dairy Queen hunting for stolen red spoon statue

AZ PHOENIX — The owners of a Dairy Queen in Phoenix remain perplexed — and slightly amused — as to why someone would steal the giant red spoon that adorned their restaurant.

Puja Kalra and her husband, Raman Kalra, said the spoon-snatching occurred sometime between late Friday and early Saturday. The 15-foot-tall spoon stood against the side of the building with the handle nestled in an opening of a roof parapet. Their surveillance camera caught two people appearing to manipulate the screws that held the spoon to a base and then taking off on a "small motorbike."

Sgt. Brian Bower confirmed officers were called and are investigating.

Getting another spoon made, delivered and then installed would cost over \$7,000, Raman Kalra said.

— From wire reports

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Mulkey leads LSU to first national title

Associated Press

DALLAS — Kim Mulkey returned home to Louisiana wanting to bring LSU its first basketball championship. The Hall of Fame coach did just that in only her second year at the school.

Her Tigers used a record offensive performance to beat Caitlin Clark and Iowa 102-85 on Sunday and win the first basketball title, men's or women's, in school history.

"I turn around and look at the Final Four banners (in the home arena), nowhere did it say national champion," Mulkey said. "That's what I came

home to do."

The victory made Mulkey the first women's coach to win national titles at different schools. She won three at Baylor before leaving for LSU two years ago.

"Coaches coach a lifetime and this is the fourth time I've been blessed," Mulkey said. "Never in the history of LSU basketball, men or women, has (anybody) ever played for a championship."

The feisty and flamboyantly dressed Mulkey, who wore a sparkly, golden, tiger-striped outfit, now has the third-most national titles behind Geno Auriemma's 11 and Pat Summitt's

eight. Mulkey has never lost in a championship game.

"My tears are tears of joy," she said. "I'm so happy for everybody back home in Louisiana."

Clark, The Associated Press national player of the year, couldn't lead the Hawkeyes to their first national title despite one of the greatest individual performances in NCAA Tournament history. The junior finished with 30 points. She scored 40 in the semifinals to knock out unbeaten South Carolina one game after she had the first 40-point triple-double in NCAA history in the Elite Eight.

The dazzling guard set the NCAA record for points in a tournament, passing the 177 that Sheryl Swoopes scored in 1993 en route to leading Texas Tech to the title. Clark ended her tournament with 191.

The 102 points broke the previous high for a championship game, surpassing the 97 that Texas scored against Southern California in 1986.

"So much for preaching defense and rebounding," Mulkey said, laughing.

Jasmine Carson scored 22 points, Alexis Morris added 21 and Angel Reese had 15 points and 10 rebounds for LSU (34-2).

Hawks outlast reeling Mavericks in overtime

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Trae Young made two free throws with 1.8 seconds remaining in overtime to give Atlanta the lead, and the Hawks beat the Dallas Mavericks 132-130 on Sunday night to keep pace in the Eastern Conference play-in race.

Young was fouled by Kyrie Irving, who scored 41 points, with the game tied at 130 on what Young said was "kind of a lucky play for us and unlucky for them."

Young said he accidentally stepped on the foot of Mavericks guard Josh Green before crashing into Irving. "I just got in Kyrie's way," Young said.

Following Young's free throws, Luke Doncic, who scored 22 points, missed a last-second three-pointer.

The Hawks (39-39) moved back into eighth place in the play-in race. Toronto and Chicago put pressure on the Hawks with wins before Atlanta's game. The Hawks have the tiebreaker advantage over Toronto.

The Hawks are only one ahead of the 10th-place Bulls for the final play-in spot in the Eastern Conference and play at

Chicago on Tuesday night.

Dallas (37-42) remained 11th in the Western Conference, one spot out of the play-in.

Bucks 117, 76ers 104: Giannis Antetokounmpo had 33 points, 14 rebounds and six assists and host Milwaukee beat Philadelphia to move a step closer to the top playoff seed in the Eastern Conference.

The Bucks have a two-game lead over Boston with four games left. Boston won the season series with Milwaukee and has the tiebreaker. The 76ers are third in the East.

Nicks 118, Wizards 109: Jalen Brunson and Quentin Grimes each scored 27 points and host New York beat Washington to wrap up a playoff berth.

Lakers 134, Rockets 109: Anthony Davis scored 40 points, LeBron James had 18 points, 11 assists and 10 rebounds to tie Jason Kidd for fourth place with his 107th triple-double and visiting Los Angeles beat Houston.

The Lakers (40-38) moved two games over .500 and into a tie for seventh with New Orleans in the Western Conference with four games to go.

Los Angeles has won six of its last seven games and owns the tiebreaker over the Pelicans.

Suns 128, Thunder 118: Kevin Durant scored 35 points and visiting Phoenix held off Oklahoma City for its fifth straight victory.

Nets 111, Jazz 110: Mikal Bridges had 30 points and seven rebounds, helping host Brooklyn beat Utah to move closer to clinching a playoff berth in the Eastern Conference.

Nuggets 112, Warriors 110: Jamal Murray scored 26 points and blocked Klay Thompson's three-point attempt in the final seconds, and host Denver held off Golden State.

Spurs 142, Kings 134 (OT): Doug McDermott scored 22 of his 30 points in the fourth quarter and overtime and visiting San Antonio denied Sacramento a chance at clinching the Pacific Division.

Raptors 128, Hornets 108: Pascal Siakam scored 36 points, Fred VanVleet added 20 points and a career-high 20 assists and visiting Toronto beat undermanned Charlotte to secure a spot in the NBA play-in tournament.

O.G. Anunoby added 23

points for the Raptors, who clinched after Brooklyn beat Utah.

Trail Blazers 107, Timberwolves 105: Shaedon Sharpe scored 27 points, Kevin Knox II added 19 points and short-handed Portland beat playoff-hopeful Minnesota.

Cavaliers 115, Pacers 105: All-Star Donovan Mitchell scored 40 points, Evan Mobley had 14 points and 16 rebounds and playoff-bound Cleveland beat visiting Indiana.

Darius Garland added 20 points and six assists for the Cavaliers, which reduced their magic number to one for clinching home-court advantage in the first round of the playoffs. Cleveland won for the 31st time in 40 games at home.

Bulls 128, Grizzlies 107: Zach LaVine scored 36 points, DeMar DeRozan added 31 and host Chicago beat Memphis, overcoming Ja Morant's triple-double.

Magic 128, Pistons 102: Paolo Banchero and Wendell Carter Jr. had 14 points and nine rebounds each before sitting out the fourth quarter in host Orlando's victory over Detroit.

Larson keeps Hendrick, Chevy in driver's seat

Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. — Kyle Larson spent the week watching videos of his 10-win, 2021 championship season, he said, “to remind myself that I used to be good.”

He still is. Larson pulled away on a restart with 14 laps to go and easily won the NASCAR Cup Series race at Richmond Raceway on Sunday.

“I just really wanted to look at old tape of myself and see where my mindset was and to see my confidence,” Larson said after his 20th career victory in NASCAR’s top series.

Larson started the final green flag run with Hendrick Motorsports teammate Josh Berry to his outside and beat Berry into the first turn. Berry, who is filling in for the injured Chase Elliott, held on for second, followed by Ross Chastain, Chris-

topher Bell and Kevin Harvick.

It’s the third victory of the season for the four-car Hendrick team and came less than a week after a 100-point penalty against each driver for using an illegal part was overturned by a NASCAR appeals panel. It also came with a fill-in crew chief in Kevin Meendering because the appeals panel upheld the four-race suspensions of all four team crew chiefs.

“I was just happy to fill a gap and help those guys out in a tough situation,” Meendering said. “This is a testament to all the hard work by those guys on that team and to Hendrick Motorsports,”

Chevrolet took the top three spots and has now won five of the seven races this season.

All the Hendrick cars except for Berry ran in contention all race, with William Byron, the

only two-time winner this season, leading a race-high 117 laps and running fourth for a restart with 21 laps to go. The field bunched up heading into Turn 1, and Bell hit his left rear quarter panel, sending Byron spinning into the wall. He finished 24th.

“It looked like the 1 (Chastain) was inside the 20 (Bell) and the 20 overcooked the corner, had the fronts locked up and nailed us in the left rear,” Byron said. “It is what it is. I had a great race car.”

Bell said he was trying to keep Chastain at bay.

“I tried to protect from him going to the inside and he still made it three-wide there at the last minute and there wasn’t enough room,” he said.

The cars never got on the track on Saturday because of rain, leading NASCAR to give

them an extra set of tires, and even then teams pitted for lightly used scuffs for the final green flag run. That paid off big for Berry and Michael McDowell, who stayed on the track during the previous green flag stop, then got the caution that made it pay off.

“Everybody on the team made some great calls,” Berry said. “I’m so glad they tried something different there at the end to just get us up front.”

McDowell turned it into a sixth-place finish. Todd Gilliland, the third driver who stayed on the track, turned in a 15th-place finish.

“Our car was really good on the long run and I think we were gonna be 15th or 16th, so you might as well go for it and see if you can’t come up with something good and it worked out,” McDowell said.

Newgarden holds off O’Ward for 2nd straight Texas win

Associated Press

FORT WORTH, Texas — Josef Newgarden and Pato O’Ward swapped the lead over and over, each driver refusing to give an inch at Texas Motor Speedway.

With two laps to go to reach victory lane, they even touched wheels.

“We’re going wheel to wheel like 226 miles an hour or something,” O’Ward said. “It’s pretty insane, I have to say.”

Their thrilling race came to an abrupt end when Romain Grosjean crashed with one lap remaining, moments after Newgarden had surged ahead of O’Ward. Newgarden crossed the finish line under caution for a second consecutive victory at Texas, the third of his career.

“We had a great car. I don’t know what else to say other than our car was fast,” Newgarden said while wearing Texas’ traditional celebratory cowboy hat presented to the winner. “I don’t know if it fits right. I apologize to any cowboys that would make fun of my fit.”

Newgarden and O’Ward were so dominant Sunday — they combined to lead 214 of the 250 laps — that at one point in the race, they were the only two drivers on the lead lap. They frantically swapped the

lead over the final third of the race, and neither showed any inclination to lift off the gas in the fight for the win.

There were periods of white-knuckle pack racing, three-wide passes and jaw-dropping bravery, as drivers were unafraid of Texas’ high speeds. IndyCar on Saturday used the entire field to specifically run a second high line around the 1.5-mile speedway in an effort to create a passing lane.

The result was 482 passes for position — nearly 200 more than in last year’s race. The 26 lead changes was the most at Texas since 2001, a span of 26 IndyCar races.

Newgarden credited the spirited racing to seven-time NASCAR champion Jimmie Johnson, who last year made his IndyCar debut on an oval at Texas and finished sixth. Johnson won a NASCAR-record seven Cup races at Texas.

“I think it’s the Jimmie Johnson effect,” Newgarden said. “We were here last year, people were like, ‘This Jimmie guy, look at him, he can do it.’ I think Jimmie Johnson basically gave everybody confidence this weekend.”

The chance for one final thrilling lap ended when Grosjean crashed while run-

ning fifth as the leaders took the white flag. Newgarden led a race-high 123 of the 250 laps in his Chevrolet for Team Penske. And it was a solid bounce back from last month’s season opener, when Newgarden’s engine caught on fire on the downtown streets of St. Petersburg, Fla.

“We are playing a little bit of catch-up. Got a long way to go,” Newgarden said. “We are on the board. We were not on the board leaving St. Pete. We’re on the board now.”

O’Ward, in a Chevy for Arrow McLaren, opened the new IndyCar season with back-to-back second-place finishes. He nearly won the opener at St. Petersburg until an engine blip allowed him to be passed by Marcus Ericsson for the victory.

O’Ward, who led 91 laps on Sunday and used three-wide moves to stay at the front, is IndyCar’s new points leader.

“It’s been a hell of a start to the year,” O’Ward said.

Alex Palou finished third for Chip Ganassi Racing and was followed by David Malukas of Dale Coyne Racing and Ganassi driver Scott Dixon in a pack of Honda-powered drivers.

Bruins top Blues in SO for 60th win

Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — Charlie Coyle scored the game-winning shootout goal as the Boston Bruins recovered from blowing a 3-0 lead to beat the St. Louis Blues 4-3 for their 60th win of the season.

“It is special,” Bruins center Brad Marchand said about reaching 60 wins. “At the end of the day, I think we’ve done a really good job at kind of staying in the moment. But when the year

is over, and I guess the careers are all over and we kind of look back, it’s pretty special to be part of a group like this and to break records. So it is something that we try not to get caught up in.”

Linus Ullmark made 35 saves and stopped all three St. Louis shootout attempts to lead Boston to its third straight win.

“We wind up on top because of our great goaltender,” Boston

coach Jim Montgomery said. “He was fantastic tonight. And as soon as we scored, Charlie scored, I’m like, you know what, he’s not letting one in. You could just see it through his cage.”

Jake DeBrusk, Tyler Bertuzzi and Oskar Steen all scored in regulation for Boston.

Jordan Kyrour scored a pair of goals, and Torey Krug also scored for St. Louis.

“It was an exciting game,

back-and-forth game,” Kyrour said. “It felt like a playoff game, so it’s all good.”

Jordan Binnington made 28 saves for St. Louis, which lost its second straight game and was eliminated from the playoffs for the first time since 2018.

“It’s very disappointing,” Blues coach Craig Berube said. “This organization and what’s expected of everybody, we’re not very happy for sure.”

Stanton’s blast leads Yankees in win over Giants

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Every once in a while, Giancarlo Stanton hits a ball so hard and so far that Yankees manager Aaron Boone almost is puzzled it was humanly possible.

Stanton smashed a titanic home run to center field, Aaron Judge also went deep and Jhony Brito won his brilliant major league debut as New York beat the San Francisco Giants 6-0 on Sunday.

“Yeah, G is weird. Every time he comes in after one of those, I just tell him, ‘You’re weird. You’re different,’” Boone said.

Kyle Higashioka also homered off Ross Stripling, who served up all three long balls in his first start for San Francisco, and the Yankees took two of three in the initial series of the season.

Brito (1-0) yielded two hits — one a bunt single — in five impressive innings after needing 27 pitches to get through the first. He struck out six and walked one, showcasing a polished changeup.

Rangers 2, Phillies 1: Marcus Semien drove in the go-ahead run with an RBI single in the fifth inning, Josh Jung homered and host Texas completed a season-opening series sweep of defending NL champion Philadelphia.

Martin Perez (1-0) allowed

one run and eight hits in 5½ innings to win his season debut as the Rangers got off to their first 3-0 start since 2011 — when they won their second straight AL pennant.

Red Sox 9, Orioles 5: Adam Duvall had three more hits, including two doubles and a two-run single to break a fifth-inning tie against visiting Baltimore.

Duvall collected his sixth extra-base hit of the season. He’s the first player in franchise history with six in his first three games with the team.

Mets 5, Marlins 1: Kodai Senga struck out eight in his major league debut, wearing a glove with an image of a ghost and a pitchfork in reference to his “ghost forkball.”

The 30-year-old right-hander allowed one run, three hits and three walks in 5½ innings for visiting New York.

Nationals 4, Braves 1: MacKenzie Gore allowed one run and three hits across 5½ innings in his regular-season debut for host Washington.

Gore (1-0), a 24-year-old left-hander who was the No. 3 overall pick in the 2017 draft, didn’t allow a hit until there were two outs in the fourth.

Rays 5, Tigers 1: Jeffrey Springs (1-0) was pulled after six hitless innings, Riley Greene got Detroit’s first hit with an infield single off Colin Poche in

the seventh and host Tampa Bay completed an opening three-game sweep.

Springs struck out a career-high 12 and matched his high of six innings.

Reds 3, Pirates 1: Graham Ashcraft (0-1) allowed one run and four hits in seven innings, giving up Brian Reynolds’ homer.

Jason Vosler and TJ Friedl hit solo home runs for host Cincinnati.

Twins 7, Royals 4: Joey Gallo homered twice to back Joe Ryan (1-0), who gave up one run and three hits in six innings as visiting Minnesota swept its opening series for the first time since 2017, also against Kansas City.

Gallo hit a solo homer in the sixth and a three-run drive in the seventh for his 16th multi-homer game.

Cardinals 9, Blue Jays 4: Nolan Gorman hit a pair of two-run homers in his second career multihomer game, including a drive in a three-homer first that included long balls from Brendan Donovan and Alec Burleson off Chris Bassitt (0-1). Donovan also had two doubles as host St. Louis banged out 16 hits.

Brewers 9, Cubs 5: Jesse Winker had two hits and three RBIs in visiting Milwaukee’s win over Chicago, including a key two-run single in a five-run sixth inning.

Christian Yelich, Garrett Mitchell and Brice Turang also had two hits apiece.

White Sox 6, Astros 3: Luis Robert Jr. and Yoán Moncada homered, and Mike Clevinger (1-0) allowed three hits in five shutout innings as visiting Chicago beat Houston.

Angels 6, Athletics 0: Rookie Logan O’Hoppe hit his first big league homer with a three-run drive in the fourth to break up a scoreless game, Mike Trout had a two-run shot the next inning and Shohei Ohtani connected one pitch later to lift visiting Los Angeles over Oakland.

Tyler Anderson allowed four hits, struck out four and walked two in six scoreless innings.

Guardians 6, Mariners 5 (10): José Ramírez scored on a bases-loaded error by catcher Cal Raleigh to put visiting Cleveland ahead in the 10th of the major leagues’ first extra-inning game this season.

Diamondbacks 2, Dodgers 1: Jake McCarthy drove in the tiebreaking run with a bunt single in the ninth inning to overcome Noah Syndergaard’s solid first start for host Los Angeles.

Padres 3, Rockies 1: Xander Bogaerts hit a two-run homer, Trent Grisham hit a solo drive and Seth Lugo (1-0) allowed one run and four hits over seven strong innings in his first start for host San Diego.