

China eyes Taiwan Strait cargo checks

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

China plans to inspect cargo ships and other vessels during a three-day “special joint patrol” of the Taiwan Strait announced Wednesday ahead of the Taiwanese leader’s meeting with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy.

Beijing launched the special patrol just hours before McCarthy and Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen met, according to Chinese state media CCTV.com.

Taipei immediately protested the announcement, which it said includes “on-site inspections” of cargo ships. The island’s Ministry of Transportation and Communications advised shipping companies to refuse boarding or inspection and alert the Taiwanese coast guard.

During a press conference Wednesday at the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library & Museum in Simi Valley, Calif., Tsai and McCarthy lauded the U.S.-Taiwan relationship.

“The friendship between the people of Taiwan and America is a matter of profound

importance to the free world and it is critical to maintain economic freedom, peace and stability,” McCarthy said. “We will honor our obligations and reiterate our commitment to our shared values behind which all Americans are united.”

While the two carefully avoided mentioning Beijing’s aspirations of reunification, Tsai inched closer to the topic.

“It is no secret that today the peace that we have maintained and the democracy which we have worked hard to build are facing unprecedented challenges,” she said. “We once again find ourselves in a world where democracy is under threat and the urgency of keeping the beacon of freedom shining cannot be understated.”

Beijing considers self-governing Taiwan a breakaway province that must be reunited with the mainland, by force if necessary.

The meeting is likely to trigger a “show of resolve” from Beijing intended to discourage U.S. acknowledgement of Taiwanese independence, something that will feed a “vicious circle of reaction” between the U.S. and China, said Michael Swaine, senior re-

searcher for the bipartisan think-tank Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, in an email.

Beijing again protested the meeting, calling the “Taiwan question” the “core of China’s core interests and the first red line that must not be crossed in China-U.S. relations,” according to a Thursday statement from China’s Foreign Ministry.

China further promised to take “strong and resolute measures” to defend its sovereignty and territory and said Taiwanese independence and peace within the Taiwan Strait are “as irreconcilable as fire and water.”

The situation echoes former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi’s visit to Taipei in August, which China responded to with a weeklong military exercise around Taiwan that effectively blockaded the island and included live-fire drills and ballistic missile launches.

Since then, China has almost daily and without notice sent large numbers of aircraft and warships across the 110-mile-wide strait.

North Korea decries US, South military drills

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — North Korea’s state-run news agency on Thursday condemned the United States and South Korea for their largest-ever joint military drills and warned that they raised regional tensions to an “extremely critical phase.”

The “unprecedented” military drills last month targeted Pyongyang, which will respond “through offensive action,” according to a column on the Korean Central News Agency website. The author was identified as Choe Ju Hyon, a purported international security analyst.

The U.S. and South Korean

armed forces completed several large-scale drills throughout South Korea last month, including demonstrations on land, in the air and at sea. Presidents Joe Biden and Yoon Suk Yeol promised in May to increase the size and pace of the allies’ military exercises in response to continuing North Korean ballistic missile tests.

The two militaries most recently drilled on Wednesday with South Korean F-35A and U.S. F-35B Lightning II stealth fighters, F-16 Fighting Falcons and a B-52H Stratofortress bomber, according to a South Korean Ministry of National Defense news release the same day.

KCNA on Thursday de-

scribed the allies’ recent military maneuvers as bringing “dark clouds of a nuclear war” over the Korean Peninsula. U.S. and South Korean commanders consistently describe their drills as defensive preparations for a Northern attack.

On the ground, the U.S. and South Korean armies conducted Warrior Shield, the largest field exercise by the two countries in six years. The four-day exercise, which ended March 23, included live-fire artillery drills and roughly 1,200 troops at sites as close as 16 miles from the Demilitarized Zone separating the two Koreas.

At sea, thousands of U.S. sailors and Marines joined their South Korean counterparts for

the two-week Ssangyong Exercise, which featured more than 30 ships, 70 aircraft and roughly 50 amphibious assault vessels. Ssangyong included an amphibious landing staged by South Korean and U.S. Marines and the Navy’s Makin Island Amphibious Ready Group.

In a separate naval exercise Monday, the Nimitz Carrier Strike Group and South Korean destroyers were joined by Japan’s JS Umigiri destroyer to practice their defense against North Korean underwater and missile threats. The drills — the first of their kind in seven years — included maritime assistance scenarios, according to the Ministry of National Defense.

DOD detains guest in hotel training mix-up

Associated Press

BOSTON — Participants in a Department of Defense training exercise at a Boston hotel entered the wrong room Tuesday and mistakenly detained a guest instead of the person assigned the role of the person to be detained, according to the FBI.

The mistake happened about 10 p.m. with the Boston Division of the FBI helping the U.S. Department of Defense in conducting the Defense Department exercise.

The exercise was meant to simulate a situation that personnel might encounter during an actual incident.

"Based on inaccurate information, they were mistakenly sent to the wrong room and detained an individual, not the intended role player," an FBI said in a written statement. "Thankfully nobody was injured."

A Department of Defense official said the department apologizes to the person affected by the training exercise.

"The training was meant to enhance soldiers' skills to operate in realistic and unfamiliar environments.

The training team, unfortunately, entered the wrong room and detained an individual unaffiliated with the exercise," Lt. Col. Mike Burns of the U.S. Army Special Operations Command said in a statement.

"The Boston Police Department responded to the scene and confirmed that this was indeed a training exercise. The safety of civilians in vicinity of our training is always our number one concern. We are reviewing this serious incident with our partners and no further details will be released at this time," the statement added.

Burns declined to identify the person wrongly detained.

The FBI also called safety a priority for the agency and its law enforcement partners.

"We take these incidents very seriously," the FBI statement added. "The Boston Division is reviewing the incident with DOD for further action as deemed appropriate."

A spokesman for Delta Air Lines said the airline was looking to see if anyone from the airline might have been mistakenly caught up in it.

"We are looking into reports of an alleged incident in Boston that may involve Delta people," the spokesperson said in a written statement. "We have nothing further to share at this time other than to reaffirm our commitment to ensuring the safety and well-being of our people."

Senior NCO at Fort Polk charged with child porn

By ROSE L. THAYER

Stars and Stripes

A command sergeant major accused of distributing child pornography, adultery and sharing explicit photographs of himself while in uniform will face a court-martial next month at Fort Polk, La., according to court documents.

Command Sgt. Maj. Jeremy Compton, 44, served as the top enlisted soldier of the

46th Engineer Battalion at Fort Polk for two years before his arraignment on six counts of sexual misconduct Nov. 8.

Compton pleaded not guilty, according to online court records. He is charged with four counts of owning and distributing digital images of a minor, or what appears to be a minor, engaging in sexually explicit conduct, ac-

cording to Compton's charge sheet. Two of the charges are for incidents that occurred between Aug. 23, 2020, and Sept. 8, 2020, and two charges occurred between April 20, 2021, and June 21, 2021.

Compton, who is married, is accused of having sex with someone who was not his spouse in Little Rock, Ark., on or about May 1, 2021, according to the charge sheet.

The final charge against Compton alleges he distributed images of himself dressed in his military uniform exposing himself at least once between April 2, 2021, and April 30, 2021.

A court-martial with a jury panel is scheduled for May 30. Compton, who is not confined, is represented by two military attorneys, according to online court records.

Japanese army helicopter carrying 10 crashes in ocean

Associated Press

TOKYO — A missing Japanese army helicopter carrying 10 crew members is believed to have crashed into the sea off a southern island after objects appearing to be aircraft parts were spotted in the area, an official said Thursday.

The UH-60JA Black Hawk helicopter disappeared from radar on Thursday afternoon while on a reconnaissance mission north of Miyako island, the head of the Ground Self Defense Force, Yasunori Morishita, said at a news conference.

Debris believed to be aircraft parts

was spotted in the area, about 1,120 miles southwest of Tokyo, he said.

The government is aggressively building up its defense capability in southwestern Japan in response to China's increasingly assertive military activity in the region, including Taiwan.

Kyodo News said Japanese coast guard ships also found traces of oil that may be related to the missing helicopter, but officials declined to confirm the report.

Morishita said the helicopter was stationed at a key regional army base in

Kumamoto prefecture on the southern main island of Kyushu, and one of its 10 crew members is the division commander, Yuichi Sakamoto.

Morishita said the helicopter disappeared from radar earlier than previously thought.

NHK public television earlier said the helicopter disappeared from radar about an hour after it departed from Miyako island and about half an hour before its scheduled return.

Prime Minister Fumio Kishida said the Defense Ministry is investigating.

Trump's bravado now put to the test

Associated Press

NEW YORK — When Donald Trump stepped into a Manhattan courthouse Tuesday afternoon, his usual bravado was replaced with palpable anger and notable silence as the former president was reduced to a criminal defendant in custody.

By the time he returned to his Mar-a-Lago club hours later, he was ready to unleash.

"The only crime that I have committed is to fearlessly defend our nation from those who seek to destroy it," the first former president to be indicted told a crowd of hundreds of loyal supporters.

Trump made an unlikely transformation from reality television star to U.S. president by tapping into the grievance of Republican voters disillusioned with the political establishment. As he wages a comeback bid for the White House, Trump and his campaign hope his indictment will serve as a rallying cry that will galvanize the same voters. Already, he has raised millions of dollars off the news.

It's an approach that will test Trump's "all publicity is good publicity" adage as his decades-long history of bending the world to his will collides with cold legal reality.

Trump, the early frontrunner for the Republican presidential nomination, now faces the unprecedented prospect of mounting another campaign for the White House while simultaneously on trial for charges stemming from hush money payments to women during his 2016 campaign. He remains under investigation in Georgia and

Washington, raising the prospect of multiple trials in several jurisdictions, all unfolding as Republicans begin voting on their next nominee. In the meantime, Trump's rivals for the Republican presidential nomination are struggling to emerge from his ever-growing shadow, even as the proceedings raise serious questions about Trump's viability in a general election.

"A lot of times you have a candidate who's in trouble, you create a diversion," said Trump campaign pollster John McLaughlin. "They're indicting Trump, Trump consumes all the headlines and media coverage."

While most defendants would see an arrest as an indignity to be handled quietly, Trump — a man who has always craved the media spotlight — seized the PR opportunity, blasting out his itinerary and narrating a play-by-play on social media.

"Heading to Lower Manhattan, the Courthouse. Seems so SURREAL — WOW, they are going to ARREST ME. Can't believe this is happening in America. MAGA!" he wrote on Truth Social as his motorcade headed toward the courthouse, his every movement captured by news helicopters hovering overhead.

His campaign further hyped the appearance in fundraising solicitations. "My last email before my arrest," one read.

As he was behind closed doors at the courthouse being booked and fingerprinted, his campaign began advertising a "NEW ITEM" to donors: A t-shirt featuring a doc-

tored black-and-white "mug shot" of Trump, complete with an exaggerated height chart and the words, "NOT GUILTY."

In reality, Trump was not subjected to a mug shot Tuesday — one of several exceptions from normal operating procedure made for the former president — underscoring the contrast between the image he hoped to project and his actual appearance as he faced 34 felony counts of falsifying business records in the first degree.

After being caught off guard by the charges, Trump appeared unmistakably livid as he left Trump Tower Tuesday afternoon and arrived at the lower Manhattan courthouse. He was stone-faced and silent as he entered the courtroom alone, pushing the door open himself.

"What do you expect his reaction was?" Trump's lawyer Todd Blanche said outside the courthouse immediately following the appearance. "He's frustrated, he's upset. But I'll tell you what: He's motivated. And it's not going to stop him. It's not going to slow him down."

Before the proceeding, Trump declined to speak to assembled reporters, as had been expected.

"He is angry," Barbara Res, a longtime former employee who was a vice president at the Trump Organization, said of the former president after watching the proceedings. "He has a look on his face and I've seen that look. That look is, 'I'm going to kill you.'"

Pence won't appeal order compelling testimony

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A spokesman for Mike Pence said Wednesday that the former vice president will not appeal a judge's order compelling him to testify in the Justice Department's investigation into efforts by Donald Trump and his allies to overturn the results of the 2020 election.

The decision sets up a possible appearance by Pence in the coming weeks before a federal grand jury scrutinizing attempts by the former president and supporters before the riot at the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021, to undo Democrat Joe Biden's victory.

Multiple Trump administration officials have testified in that investigation, as well as in a separate inquiry examining Trump's possession of classified documents, but

Pence would be the highest-profile witness to answer questions before a grand jury. His closed-door testimony could offer investigators a firsthand account of Trump's state of mind in the pivotal weeks after he lost to Biden and further expose the rift in their relationship since the end of their administration.

The strain could grow as Pence approaches a likely 2024 run for the presidency and a challenge to Trump, who already is in the race for the Republican nomination.

After Pence was subpoenaed months ago by the Justice Department's special counsel, lawyers for Trump objected on executive privilege grounds. But a federal judge in Washington last week rejected those arguments, forcing Pence to testify.

U.S. District Judge James Boasberg did give Pence a win by accepting arguments from Pence's lawyers that, for constitutional reasons, he could not be questioned about his actions on Jan. 6. They had argued that because Pence was serving in his capacity as president of the Senate that day, he was protected from being forced to testify under the Constitution's "speech or debate" clause, which is intended to protect members of Congress from questioning about official legislative acts.

"Having vindicated that principle of the Constitution, Vice President Pence will not appeal the judge's ruling and will comply with the subpoena as required by law," Pence spokesman Devin O'Malley said in a statement Wednesday.

Bans on gender-affirming care signed

Associated Press/Report for America

INDIANAPOLIS — Republican governors in Indiana and Idaho have signed into law bills banning gender-affirming care for minors, making those states the latest to restrict transgender health care as Republican-led legislatures continue to curb LGBTQ+ rights this year.

Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb signed legislation Wednesday that will prohibit transgender youth from accessing medication or surgeries that aid in transition and mandate those currently taking medication to stop by the end of the year.

Idaho Gov. Brad Little had signed legislation Tuesday evening that criminalizes gender-affirming care for youth.

More than a dozen other states are considering bills that would prohibit transgender youth from accessing hormone therapies, puberty blockers and transition surgeries, even after the approval of parents and the advice of doctors. Other proposals target transgender

individuals' everyday life.

"Permanent gender-changing surgeries with lifelong impacts and medically prescribed preparation for such a transition should occur as an adult, not as a minor," Holcomb said in a statement about the Indiana bill.

The American Civil Liberties Union of Indiana filed a lawsuit rapidly after Holcomb signed the Indiana legislation — something the group had promised to do after Republican supermajorities advanced the ban this session. The American Civil Liberties Union of Idaho announced Wednesday it also planned to sue over that state's new law.

The Indiana ACLU filed the lawsuit on behalf of four transgender youth and an Indiana doctor who provides transgender medical treatment. It argues the ban violates the U.S. Constitution's equal protection guarantees as well as federal laws regarding essential medical services.

"The legislature did not ban the various

treatments that are outlined," said Ken Falk, the ACLU of Indiana legal director. "It only banned it for transgender persons."

Under the Indiana law that takes effect July 1, doctors who offer gender-affirming care to minors would be disciplined by a licensing board. And under the Idaho law set to go into effect next January, providing hormones, puberty blockers or other gender-affirming care to people under age 18 would be a felony crime.

Supporters of the legislation have contended the banned care is irreversible or carries side effects. They argue that only an adult — and not a minor's parent — can consent to the treatments.

Opponents say such care is vital and often life-saving for trans kids, and medical providers say most of the procedures are reversible and safe. Transgender medical treatments for children and teens have also been available in the U.S. for more than a decade and are endorsed by major medical associations.

Idaho's GOP governor signs 'abortion trafficking' bill

Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho — Idaho Gov. Brad Little signed a bill into law Wednesday that makes it illegal for an adult to help a minor get an abortion without parental consent.

The law is the first of its kind in the U.S. and creates a new crime of "abortion trafficking," barring adults from obtaining abortion pills for a minor or "recruiting, harboring or transporting the pregnant minor" without the consent of the minor's parent or guardian.

Anyone convicted of breaking the law will face two to five years in prison and could also be sued by the minor's parent or guardian. Parents who raped their child will not be able to sue, though the criminal penalties for anyone who helped the minor obtain an abortion will remain in effect.

To sidestep violating a constitutional right to travel between states, Idaho's law makes illegal only the in-state segment of a trip to an out-of-state abortion provider.

Opponents have promised a legal battle.

"Yet again, Idaho's governor disregarded constituents and signed HB 242 into law, creating the nation's first crime of so-called 'abortion trafficking.' This legislation is despicable, and we're going to do everything in our power to stop it," Idaho State Director for Planned Parenthood Alliance Advocates-West said Wednesday on Twitter.

Idaho is one of 13 states that already effectively ban abortion in all stages.

Kansas bans trans athletes from female school sports

Associated Press

TOPEKA, Kan. — Kansas is banning transgender athletes from girls' and women's sports from kindergarten through college, the first of several possible new laws restricting the rights of transgender people pushed through by Republican legislators over the wishes of the Democratic governor.

The Legislature on Wednesday overrode Gov. Laura Kelly's third veto in three years of a bill to ban transgender athletes, and came a day after state lawmakers passed a broad bathroom bill. Nineteen other states have imposed restrictions on transgender athletes, most recently Wyoming.

The Kansas law takes effect July 1 and is among several hundred proposals that Republican lawmakers across the U.S. have pursued this year to push back on LGBTQ rights. Kansas lawmakers who back the ban are also pursuing proposals to end gender-affirming care for minors and restrict restroom use.

The measure approved by Kansas lawmakers Tuesday would prevent transgender people from using public restrooms, locker rooms and other facilities associated with their gender identities, and bars them from changing their name or gender on their driver's licenses. Kelly is expected to veto that.

"It's a scary time to be raising a trans child in Kansas," said Cat Poland, a lifelong Kansas resident and mother of three who coordinates a Gay-Straight Alliance at her 13-year-old trans son's school about 40 miles northwest of Wichita. "We may face the very real threat of having to move, and it's heart-breaking."

The ban demonstrates the clout of religious conservatives, reflected in the 2022 platform of the Kansas Republican Party — "We believe God created man and woman" — and echoes many Republicans' beliefs that their constituents don't like any cultural shift toward acceptance.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Dairy Queen's missing giant spoon found

AZ PHOENIX — A giant red spoon that was stolen from an Arizona Dairy Queen and sparked a mystery on social media was found, and it's partly thanks to Pokémon GO.

Michael Foster, 52, was playing the outdoor mobile game when he spotted the 15-foot spoon. It was lying on the ground behind a fence that surrounds a Phoenix middle school baseball field, just 2 miles from the scene of the heist.

Detectives are continuing to search for the suspects who took the spoon, he added.

Man dies of 'cardiac event' after game brawl

VT ALBURGH — An autopsy has determined that a 60-year-old spectator who died after being involved in a brawl at a Vermont middle school basketball game in late January died of an acute cardiac event, state police said.

The investigation is ongoing, and police are working with county prosecutors to review the case and any potential charges for people involved in the fight, state police said.

Russell Giroux, of Alburgh, died Jan. 31 at Northwestern Medical Center in St. Albans over two hours after he was involved in the altercation among multiple spectators during a seventh- and eighth-grade boys basketball game between Alburgh Community Education Center and St. Albans City School, police said. The medical examiner determined that the cause of death was an "acute

cardiac event following altercation in an individual with coronary artery atherosclerosis," state police said.

Logger has close encounter with cow

ME FARMINGTON — A Maine jogger encountered an angry cow, and it was no joke.

The Farmington Police Department shared details of the encounter on April Fools' Day, a day after the actual encounter, and assured it was no prank.

The 43-year-old woman was preparing for a jog on the Whistle Stop Trail when she was charged by the cow, which had escaped from a farm. The cow lifted her off the ground with its horns, causing a cut that required stitches, before the jogger escaped, police said.

The owner was contacted and secured the cow along with a pig that had escaped.

Student accused of threatening official

NH CONCORD — A college student has been accused of making a threatening phone call to a member of Congress.

The Keene State College student is accused of making the cellphone call to the congressional office of a U.S. House member leaving a message on a voicemail saying, "if you keep on coming for the gays, we're gonna strike back," according to an FBI affidavit.

The message said, "We will kill you if that what it takes," and the caller left a name and number.

The representative was not

identified.

The student told investigators he did not actually plan to harm others or himself, does not own firearms and was "emotional and intoxicated" when he left the message, the affidavit said.

Judge blocks state's law against drag shows

TN NASHVILLE — A federal judge temporarily blocked Tennessee's first-in-the-nation law placing strict limits on drag shows just hours before it was set to go into effect, siding with a group that filed a lawsuit claiming the statute violates the First Amendment.

The decision comes after Memphis-based Friends of George's, an LGBTQ+ theater company, filed the federal lawsuit against Shelby County District Attorney Steve Mulroy and the state.

U.S. District Judge Thomas Parker wrote that the state has failed to make a compelling argument as to why Tennessee needed the new law, adding that the court also agrees the statute is likely vague and overly broad.

Native Scouts feted 67 years after Navy rescue

AK GAMBELL — Bruce Boolowon, then a lean 20-year-old, and a group of friends were hunting for murre eggs in a walrus skin boat on a remote Alaska island in the Bering Strait when they saw a crippled airplane flying low.

"Something was wrong," Boolowon, now 87, recalled of that day in 1955. "They came in and one engine was smoking."

A U.S. Navy P2V-5 Neptune

maritime patrol aircraft had been attacked at about 8,000 feet by two Soviet MiG-15 fighters roaring out of nearby Siberia. The plane's right engine was destroyed and the pilot was making a controlled crash landing.

Its 11 crewmen had injuries in varying degrees of severity, caused either by the bullets sprayed by the two jet fighters, shrapnel or the fireball that erupted when the Neptune landed wheels up on the tundra of St. Lawrence Island.

The guardsmen were honored with Alaska Heroism Medals, giving the Alaska Native men the recognition that wasn't available 67 years ago. Boolowon, then a corporal, is the sole survivor, and family members of the other 15 received the medals on their behalf.

Volunteer searcher finds tot safe in woods

MO TECUMSEH — A 2-year-old boy who followed his dog into the woods near his Missouri Ozarks home is safe, after one of the nearly 100 people searching for him heard a faint whimper and found the child just before the sunset.

KYTV-TV reported that Waylon Loftis was supposed to be napping at his family's home in Tecumseh, near Norfolk Lake. Instead, he made his way out of the house despite safety devices on the doors, Ozark County Sheriff Cass Martin said.

Among the scores of volunteers who joined in the search was Jonathan Belt, a veteran and now a paramedic, who headed to a wooded area.

— From wire reports

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NHL contenders thrive despite injuries

Associated Press

Mark Stone missing two months and counting after back surgery threatened to sink the Vegas Golden Knights. Instead, they've risen to the top of the Western Conference.

Losing Kirill Kaprizov for several weeks looked like a big blow to the Minnesota Wild. They've since moved into a tie for first place in the Central Division.

Similarly, in the East, the New York Islanders have more than compensated for the absence of Mathew Barzal and the Carolina Hurricanes have found their game since Andrei Svechnikov was ruled out for the remainder of the season with a torn ACL.

With the NHL playoffs on the horizon, those four contenders have not only survived but thrived after losing a star player to injury. They've done it thanks to a combination of savvy trade deadline acquisitions, good coaching and other players taking advantage of bigger opportunities.

"That's what makes hockey so great is teams have lost top players and continued to go about their jobs and win hockey games," Carolina general manager Don Waddell said. "Our sport's different than maybe some other sports. We emphasize it's a team game, it's a team sport and there's 20 other guys that are still going to try to get the job done."

Minnesota, Vegas, Carolina and New York have combined to go 45-22-12 since each team's significant injury.

In the Wild's case, the emergence of young winger Matt Boldy and strong goaltending have made up for not having Kaprizov, by far their leader in goals and assists and a legitimate MVP candidate. Boldy has 13 goals and five assists for 18 points in 12 games since Kaprizov went down.

"It's a good time for him to really get that hot and get those goals for us," forward Joel Eriksson Ek said.

Vegas has been used to inju-

ries in recent years, including several to goalies this season that have tested the organization's depth. It's impossible to replace Stone, a strong defensive winger who was on track for his eighth 20-goal season, but the Golden Knights used the All-Star break and their annual father's road trip to reset mentally and physically without him. They have won 20 of 33 games since.

"It was really good for us," first-year coach Bruce Cassidy said. "Timing was perfect. Some guys got a breather that were a little banged up as well. ... In general, it was a great time for us and it showed coming out of it."

Before the break, the Islanders made a move that ultimately ensured that Barzal getting injured wouldn't doom their chances of getting back in the playoffs. Veteran GM Lou Lomoriello pounced early by getting center Bo Horvat in a trade with Vancouver, and the 30-goal scorer has fit in just about as well as anyone could have ex-

pected.

"He's extremely strong, he's great on the puck, can score goals and make plays," captain Anders Lee said. "He's made a huge impact in the faceoff dot, on the power play and just up and down the ice. Just having a center like him, you don't find many guys like him around the league."

Of course, there aren't many teams like the Islanders, who pushed the then-defending champion Tampa Bay Lightning to seven games in the Eastern Conference finals in 2021 after losing Lee to a major knee injury. If anyone's built to withstand the loss of a top player, it's New York, thanks to depth down the middle and smart decisions all over the ice.

"We got four good centermen still. That helps," veteran forward Cal Clutterbuck said. "I think just generally the style of game that we play and the structure that we play with allows us to get through situations like that."

LIV and let live: Masters still about who wins jacket

Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Ga. — Masters Chairman Fred Ridley sat among 33 champions in green jackets at golf's most exclusive dinner. It was a time to celebrate Scottie Scheffler as the most recent winner, to share laughs, memories and even a few tears.

That's how it is every year at Augusta National.

"I would not have known that anything was going on in the world of professional golf other than the norm," Ridley said on the eve of a Masters unlike any other. "So I think — and I'm hopeful — that this week might get people thinking in a little bit different direction and things will change."

There's a full menu of activ-

ity at this Masters.

Tiger Woods returns for his 25th appearance with hopes his course knowledge can compensate for battered legs as he pursues another green jacket. Rory McIlroy gets another crack at the one major that keeps him from the career Grand Slam. No one has won the Masters back-to-back since Woods in 2002, and with Scheffler the No. 1 player in the world, he has an excellent chance.

The forecast is for the weather to turn nasty on the weekend. The real storm has been brewing for the last 10 months since the launch of LIV Golf and the 18 players at the Masters who defected to the rival league for its Saudi riches.

There have been accusations

that LIV Golf isn't serious competition with its 54-hole events, and even some name-calling — Fred Couples referred to Phil Mickelson as a "nut bag" — of LIV players for turning their backs on the tour that made them famous.

"Everyone thinks we suck now, so I want to play great," said Harold Varner III, an LIV player with "Golf Saudi" on his bag. Varner joined for the money. He makes no secret about that.

All that gets set aside on Thursday when the players — professional and amateur, PGA Tour loyalists and those with LIV — have one thing in common.

"We talk about all these issues in golf, but we are here this

week — these 88 players — and that's all that's on their mind is playing for that green jacket," Ridley said. "It's a great symbol of celebration of this game. And we're looking forward to seeing someone donning it on Sunday afternoon."

Normalcy is hard to find these days.

The PGA Tour and LIV Golf are involved in an antitrust lawsuit — a case management conference before a federal judge is scheduled for Friday afternoon, about the time Woods should be headed to Amen Corner.

A London-based arbitration panel will reportedly rule this week in favor of the European tour's ability to sanction LIV players.

Bucks, Nuggets wrap up NBA's No. 1 seeds

Associated Press

The road to the NBA Finals now goes through Milwaukee. The road out of the Western Conference goes through Denver, for the first time ever.

And the rest of the top half of the Eastern Conference playoff bracket is set as well.

The Bucks will have the No. 1 overall seed and home-court advantage for the entirety of their time in the NBA playoffs, after beating Chicago 105-92 on Wednesday night. Milwaukee is 58-22 this season; no other team can get to more than 57 wins.

"It's just a credit to the players," Bucks coach Mike Budenholzer said. "The players have really stepped up. I think they've embraced the challenge. Night in and night out in this league, it's hard. There's great opposition. ... To have the best record, it is something that matters. It is important."

The No. 1 seed in the West was decided Wednesday night as well. The Nuggets will have home-court throughout the West playoffs, after New Orleans beat Memphis in overtime — and took away the last bit of hope the Grizzlies had of catching the Nuggets for the top spot out West.

The Bucks are a No. 1 seed for the first time since 2020. Denver has never previously been a No. 1 seed.

Boston (55-25) will be the No. 2 seed in the East, clinching that Wednesday by topping Toronto. That locked Philadelphia (52-27) into the No. 3 seed and a likely first-round matchup with Brooklyn. The Nets (44-36) beat Detroit and now need only one more win or one Miami loss to wrap up the No. 6 seed.

Another first-round Eastern Conference matchup was set earlier this week; No. 4 Cleveland will meet No. 5 New York. They'll meet on either April 15 or 16 for Game 1, with the NBA playoffs opening that weekend.

Still unclear in the East is the order of the teams headed to the play-in tournament, which starts Tuesday.

Miami is the leader and currently in seventh, ahead of the three other play-in bound teams — Atlanta, Toronto and Chicago. The winner of the No. 7 vs. No. 8 game on Tuesday (as it stands now, the matchup there would be Atlanta at Miami) will draw Boston in Round 1; the other team to emerge from the East play-in tournament will open against the top-seeded Bucks.

Clinching a seed now gives some teams the chance to rest players before the playoffs start, and in many cases, that figures to be welcomed. The Bucks won without Giannis Antetokounmpo on Wednesday and with Khris Middleton —

who has battled injuries for much of the season — sidelined after eight minutes with a recurrence of knee pain.

"Now we get to take a breath," Budenholzer said. "I have no idea what we'll do Friday and Sunday."

Chicago will be on the road to open the play-in tournament; the Bulls are locked into No. 10 in the East and will visit whichever team finishes ninth — Toronto or Atlanta.

And when the playoffs start for the Bucks, they'll try to defy some recent trends. There hasn't been a No. 1 seed to win the East title since Cleveland in 2016, and no team with the best regular-season record has gone on to win the NBA Finals since Golden State in 2017.

"I think we're ready, well-prepared," Bucks guard Jrue Holiday said. "I think we've been through a lot ... really excited to be going into the post-season."

What's left

Most of the drama remains in the West, where Denver, Memphis, Sacramento and Phoenix have clinched playoff spots — and eight teams are still in the running for the six remaining playoff or play-in berths.

Defending champion Golden State, the Los Angeles Clippers, the Los Angeles Lakers, New Orleans and Minnesota can do

no worse than make the play-in tournament. Oklahoma City, Dallas and Utah are all vying for play-in berths.

As of Thursday morning, Golden State and the Clippers — both 42-38 — would be in the playoffs, while the Lakers, Pelicans, Timberwolves and Thunder would have the play-in spots. The Clippers beat the Lakers (41-39) on Wednesday night.

Dallas helped itself Wednesday by topping Sacramento 123-119. The Mavericks (38-42) remained 11th, but are tied with No. 10 Oklahoma City, both teams with two games left. Oklahoma City visits Utah on Thursday, Dallas plays host to Chicago on Friday, and then on Sunday the Thunder play host to Memphis while the Mavs entertain San Antonio.

"At this point in the season, it is what it is in terms of the reality of the standings," Mavs guard Kyrie Irving said. "We just have to take it one minute at a time."

New Orleans' win assured the Pelicans of no worse than a play-in berth.

"Is this crazy or what?" Pelicans broadcaster Joel Meyers mused after New Orleans' overtime win.

Out West, expect the crazy to continue all the way through the regular-season finales on Sunday.

Ohtani violates pitch clock on the mound, at the plate

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Shohei Ohtani was called for pitch clock violations on the mound and at the plate Wednesday, as the Los Angeles Angels' two-way star made more major league history.

Starting against the Seattle Mariners, Ohtani was hit with a violation in the top of the first inning while working against Cal Raleigh. Angels manager Phil Nevin said his right-hander was not trying to violate the rule by intentionally throwing a pitch before Raleigh was ready.

"Part of this rule, when we first put it in, there were some pitchers that were taking advantage of it and quick-pitching some hitters," Nevin said. "(Max) Scherzer did it in spring training, and they're just trying to get away from that. In no way is Shohei trying to do that. It's just his set position is a little different than most and I was trying to explain to (umpire) Pat (Hoberg) what he does."

Nevin said Hoberg told them that while the pitcher can throw whenever he wants once the clock is in the final 8 seconds, be-

fore that, the batter has to signal that he's ready in the box.

Ohtani was flagged again in the top of the sixth before his at-bat against Mariners reliever Matt Brash.

Ohtani became the first player to be called for clock violations as a pitcher and hitter, but said he understands the rules.

"I had a chance to talk to the umpires after the game, and it cleared things up," Ohtani said. "So I know what I need to do, and the adjustments I need to do. It should be fine."

Adesanya favored in rematch with Pereira

Associated Press

Israel Adesanya could've taken the easier path by fighting lesser opponents and building back his résumé after losing to Alex Pereira in November at UFC 281.

Adesanya didn't want to wait.

He will be back in the Octagon on Saturday for UFC 287 in Miami for a rematch for the middleweight championship.

Even though he is the challenger, the 33-year-old Adesanya is a minus-142 favorite, according to FanDuel Sportsbook. He was either unaware of the betting line or chose to ignore it, offering his own narrative of a comeback that he called "one of the greatest storylines in MMA history."

"Not many people get the opportunity to show how great they are, to rise to the occasion when all the odds are stacked against them, when people have counted them out," Adesanya said. "For me, this fight I feel

like the underdog. I feel like everyone's counting me out. They've forgot what I've done in this game. They've forgot who I am, and it's time to remind people how great I am."

Maybe one reason Adesanya (23-2) wants this fight against Pereira (7-1) so quickly was because he was beating the Brazilian 39-37 on all three scorecards entering the fifth and final round at Madison Square Garden in New York. Pereira could only win by knockout, and that's what he got 2:01 into the round.

That loss ended Adesanya's 12-match winning streak at middleweight, one short of Anderson Silva's record. It also stripped Adesanya of the belt he held since 2019.

"I know how I can beat this guy," Adesanya said. "I know every time I fight this guy I'm dominating him and beating him, and then he has this special ability to recover and put

his foot on the gas. So I have to find a way to take him out of the driver's seat, which I will."

Pereira has never lost to Adesanya, who was born in Nigeria but lives in New Zealand. Before the two met in November, Pereira defeated Adesanya twice in kickboxing.

Even in the most recent match, Pereira said he believed he had the upper hand despite trailing in points, and he proved that with the KO.

Pereira, 35, easily could have passed on Adesanya's rematch wish when considering which opponent he wanted for his first title defense.

"He was a dominant champion," Pereira said through an interpreter. "Maybe he could've done two or three (fights) before that, but he wanted to do it right away. I said, 'No problem.'"

Fifth-ranked welterweight contender Gilbert Burns (21-5)

will face No. 11 Jorge Masvidal (35-16) in the lead-up fight to the main event.

UFC President Dana White said he preferred Adesanya's desire for a quick rematch over a fighter choosing the more cautious route.

"This guy's a real fighter that wants to prove himself against the best, wants to be looked at as the best, wants to be looked at as one of the greatest of all time," White said. "What you want to do is create a legacy for yourself and prove to the world that not only are you the best in the world, but you're the greatest of all time. That's what everybody should be striving to do."

Pereira is giving Adesanya that chance, but said one rematch was enough. He didn't plan on creating the possibility for a UFC trilogy.

"I believe that me beating him this Saturday," Pereira said, "I will never face him again."

Women players have few pro basketball options

Associated Press

DALLAS — March Madness may have been the last time for fans to see many of the talented college women players compete.

Players' options for professional basketball careers are limited, whether in the U.S. or overseas — the jobs just aren't there.

"You can be a great college player and not make a WNBA roster," ESPN WNBA analyst LaChina Robinson said. "You're not only competing with players that are currently on roster, but also a ton of women's basketball players overseas that have been honing their skills and waiting for opportunity to break into the WNBA."

The numbers paint a challenging picture.

■ There are only 12 WNBA teams and 144 roster spots with most of those being filled by returning players.

■ Over the past six seasons, 64% of players drafted made WNBA rosters according to basketball website 'Beyond Women's Sports'. The high mark was 28 of the 36 draftees in 2019. The low was only 20 the year before.

Even if a player does get into the league, it's a battle for playing time.

Only 60% of players drafted got on the court to play minutes their first year since 2017 according to the basketball website 'Her Hoop Stats.' It's part of the reason why five of the first-round picks in 2021 are no longer in the league.

There has been talk of WNBA expansion, but nothing has come to fruition yet. Players often turn to playing professionally overseas, working on their games and looking for another shot to play at home.

Now those jobs are also at a

premium.

Brittney Griner's nine-month incarceration in Moscow along with the war with Ukraine has led to the elimination of dozens of potential jobs in Russia.

Griner is back in the WNBA after her nine-month legal fight in Russia, during which she was detained when customs officials said they found vape canisters with cannabis oil in her luggage, then later arrested before being released in a high-level prisoner exchange between the U.S. and Russia.

The lost jobs in Russia has a trickle down on openings in other countries as top players who once played there are looking elsewhere for work.

Longtime agent Brian Dyke said that there are fewer countries now that he can send players to. Besides Russia, China and Korea stopped signing foreign players a

few years ago because of the coronavirus. Neither has started again. That's roughly another three dozen jobs gone.

"In Korea, everyone used to get \$25,000 a month," Dyke said. "It's a huge loss not having those jobs as those are two of the biggest markets."

It all makes the path to a professional basketball career for women harder than ever.

The new name, image and likeness (NIL) opportunities women basketball players also have is playing into their decisions on turning pro.

"NIL definitely plays a major role," said South Carolina star Aliyah Boston, who decided to forgo her COVID year and enter the WNBA Draft as the likely No. 1 overall pick. "NIL is something that's a blessing. It gives you a head start on life before you need to get there."