

China drills near Taiwan, sends warning

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

Dozens of Chinese aircraft and numerous warships approached Taiwan on Monday as Beijing continued its drills around the island following last week's meeting between Taiwan's president and the U.S. House speaker.

After Monday's exercises, China declared the drills had ended and it is "ready to fight."

"The theater's troops are ready to fight at all times and can fight at any time to resolutely smash any form of 'Taiwan independence' and foreign interference attempts," China's military said.

During the third day of exercises, Taiwan's military monitored the Taiwan Strait as 70 Chinese aircraft and 11 ships approached the island around 6 a.m. Monday, Taiwan's Defense Ministry announced on Twitter. The ministry said 35 aircraft crossed the strait's median line in the southwest and southeast.

The numbers repeated Chinese military activity Sunday evening, when 71 aircraft and nine ships were spotted near Taiwan, with 45 aircraft crossing the median line, according to Sunday tweets from the Taiwan defense ministry.

Beijing on Saturday announced the three-day series of drills around Taiwan, dubbed Joint Sword, which it called a "serious warning against the 'Taiwan independence' separatist forces colluding with external forces and provocations," according to China's Defense Ministry.

The announcement didn't specifically mention Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen meeting Thursday with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy in California, where the two lauded U.S.-Taiwan relations. But the exercises followed days of warnings from China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs that Beijing would "take resolute measures to safeguard

our sovereignty and territorial integrity."

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

Chinese forces on Saturday carried out "simulated joint precision strikes against key targets" on and around Taiwan and "continued to maintain the momentum of encircling the island," China's Eastern Theater Command said from its official Weibo account.

A video from the same account showed Chinese bombers flying over the strait on "combat readiness patrols" and "land strike missions" on Saturday as well.

Tsai on Saturday hosted a delegation led by U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul in Taipei, where Tsai doubled down on her commitment to build a partnership with Washington.

"We will continue to work with

the US and other like-minded countries to jointly defend the values of freedom and democracy," she said Saturday in a news release.

Outside of military exercises, China has also taken other measures in response to Tsai and McCarthy's meeting. Beijing on Friday imposed a travel ban and sanctions against the Hudson Institute, the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library and their top executives for providing a platform for "Tsai Ing-wen's 'Taiwan independence' separatist activities in the U.S.," China's Foreign Ministry announced that day.

The Chinese coast guard also launched a three-day "special joint patrol" of the Taiwan Strait on Wednesday that included "on-site inspections" of cargo ships, just hours before McCarthy and Tsai were scheduled to meet.

Taiwan has repeatedly protested China's response to Tsai's meetings with U.S. politicians.

Navy warship cruises near contested islands as China drills

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

A U.S. Navy warship on Monday cruised near a chain of islands claimed by China, Taiwan and other countries, coinciding with the third day of Chinese exercises around Taiwan in the wake of meetings between Taiwan's president and U.S. officials.

The guided-missile destroyer USS Milius conducted a freedom-of-navigation operation near Mischief Reef in the Spratly Islands, a group of about 100 islands between Vietnam and the Philippines, to uphold the "rights, freedoms and lawful uses of the sea," the U.S. 7th Fleet said in a Monday email.

The Navy routinely sends war-

ships near the Spratlys and the Paracel Islands in the South China Sea to protest "excessive maritime claims" and "unlawful" restrictions, such as permission or advanced notice for "innocent passage" through territorial waters.

The entire Spratly chain is claimed by China, Vietnam and Taiwan; portions of the chain are claimed by the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei. The Spratlys are about 960 miles south of Taiwan.

Two days before the Milius' operation, Beijing launched a series of exercises around Taiwan to protest Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen's visit with House Speaker Kevin McCarthy on

Thursday and U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Michael McCaul on Saturday. The freedom-of-navigation operation, however, was not a response to China's actions, according to 7th Fleet spokesman Lt. j.g. Luka Bakic.

"These operations demonstrate that the United States will fly, sail, and operate wherever international law allows — regardless of the location of excessive maritime claims and regardless of current events," he said in a Monday email to Stars and Stripes.

Bakic didn't specify if the Milius interacted with Chinese or other foreign military forces during the operation but said "U.S. Navy

vessels and aircraft routinely interact with foreign warships and aircraft while operating throughout the region."

About 45 islands in the Spratlys are occupied by small military outposts from China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam, according to the CIA World Factbook website.

During the operation, the Milius sailed within 12 nautical miles of Mischief Reef, one of several islands China has modified and built military infrastructure on in the past decade. Under international law, Bakic said, features like Mischief Reef are not part of a territorial sea because "in their naturally formed state" they are submerged during high tide.

Texas governor seeking to pardon Army sergeant

The Washington Post

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott said Saturday he seeks to pardon an Army sergeant convicted of murdering a legally armed 28-year-old during the 2020 Black Lives Matter protest in Austin, while also chiding the prosecutor's office that secured the conviction.

"Texas has one of the strongest 'Stand your ground' laws of self-defense that cannot be nullified by a jury or progressive district attorney," Abbott said on Twitter.

Texas law requires that its Board of Pardons and Paroles make recommendations on pardons, which the governor may approve; the governor can also request the board to consider a pardon.

"I have made that request and instructed the board to expedite its review. I look forward to approving the Board's pardon as soon as it hits my desk," Abbott tweeted. "Additionally, I have already prioritized reining in rogue District Attorneys, and the Texas Legislature is working on laws to achieve that goal."

A Texas jury convicted Sgt. Daniel Perry, 37, of murder on Friday for fatally shooting Garrett Foster in July 2020, during nationwide protests against police violence. Both

Perry and Foster are White men.

The case hinged on whether Perry killed Foster, who carried an AK-47, in self-defense.

Perry — who was stationed at Fort Hood in 2020 — was working for a ride-sharing company on the night he sped onto a city street full of protesters, *The Washington Post* previously reported. The protesters were crossing a street in downtown Austin and Perry laid on the horn of his vehicle.

Foster had an AK-47 strapped to his chest when he approached Perry's side window. Open carry is legal in Texas.

In video of the incident, shots rang out and protesters screamed and scattered. Perry drove off, and Foster was taken to the hospital and later pronounced dead.

Perry later turned himself in and told police that he had fired five shots from his handgun because Foster pointed his own weapon at him, *The Post* reported.

He faces life in prison and awaits sentencing, scheduled for Tuesday. If granted, a pardon would free Perry of a prison sentence, but it does not guarantee the offense will be removed from his criminal record, according to Texas's clemency process.

Navy still looking into accident on research vessel

BY ALISON BATH

Stars and Stripes

Navy investigators are still determining how more than a dozen workers were injured three weeks ago in an accident involving a Navy-owned research vessel in dry dock in Scotland.

The Motor Vessel *Petrel* slipped off its holdings at the Port of Leith on March 22 and came to rest on its side at an angle of about 45 degrees.

A team led by the Naval Facilities Engineering and Expeditionary Warfare Center is on site and evaluating the situation, James Stossel, a spokesman for the Port Hueneme, Calif.-based command, said in a statement Friday.

He added that 14 workers were injured. News outlets including the BBC had reported as many as 33 people were hurt, some seriously.

Stossel didn't specify the damage to the vessel, citing the ongoing investigation. He also couldn't provide more details about the team or its mission except to say Navy personnel and contract experts worldwide were involved.

The Navy purchased *Petrel* in September 2022 for \$12.4 million to support the service's efforts in maritime security, Stossel said. It was undergoing maintenance and preparations to meet Navy requirements, he said.

The ship was commissioned by philanthropist and Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen, according to the vessel's Facebook page.

In a tweet at the time of the accident, Edinburgh city councilor for Leith Adam McVey said the ship had been knocked off its supports by high winds. But the BBC said in a March 23 report that winds were an unlikely cause.

Stossel didn't say specifically how the Navy plans to use *Petrel*, but earlier this year the British military took delivery of the first of two similar ships designed to help protect undersea cables and pipelines from sabotage, *Defense News* reported Jan. 20.

Petrel previously was used primarily for underwater research and exploration, focusing on locating shipwrecks and exploring the underwater ecosystem, according to its Facebook page.

Russian attacks in Ukraine carry on amid Easter pleas for peace

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Weekend shelling by Russian forces killed at least seven civilians, Ukrainian officials reported Sunday as Pope Francis and Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby used their traditional Easter messages to highlight the war in Ukraine and other conflicts around the world.

While Russia continued to concentrate on seizing all of Ukraine's industrial east, two other provinces — Kharkiv in the northeast and Zaporizhzhia in the southeast — came under missile, rocket and artillery fire, the Ukrainian military reported. The governor of the Kherson region, Oleksandr Prokudin, said two communities there were hit by bombs from warplanes late Sunday, but he

did not immediately report any casualties.

Kharkiv governor Oleh Syniehubov said two men died Sunday in shelling in Kupiansk.

The city remained under attack later Sunday as Russian forces targeted residential areas, Syniehubov said.

Shelling also killed two people overnight, one of them a child, in the city of Zaporizhzhia, the capital of that province, City Council Secretary Anatoliy Kurtev said.

Between Saturday and Sunday mornings, Russian forces launched 40 airstrikes, four missile strikes and 58 attacks from multiple-rocket launchers on various parts of Ukraine, the General Staff of the Ukrainian armed forces reported.

Council to vote on restoring ousted lawmaker

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — One of the two Black Democrats who were thrown out of the Tennessee House last week appeared likely to get his seat back Monday, just days after the GOP exacted retribution against the lawmakers who protested for more gun control.

Nashville's Metro Council could return Justin Jones to the Legislature immediately when it votes to fill the vacant position on an interim basis.

Jones and another Black lawmaker were expelled by the Republican supermajority for

their role in a gun-control protest on the House floor in the aftermath of a deadly school shooting in Nashville.

The other expelled representative, Justin Pearson, could be reappointed Wednesday at a meeting of the Shelby County Commission in his district.

The expulsions on Thursday made Tennessee a new front in the battle for the future of American democracy and propelled the ousted lawmakers into the national spotlight.

Members of the Nashville council have said publicly that they want to send Jones back to

the Capitol. The vote will happen as state lawmakers hold their first floor sessions since the expulsion votes.

Special elections for the seats will take place in the coming months. Jones and Pearson have said they want to be reappointed and plan to run in the special elections.

Republican House Speaker Cameron Sexton's spokesperson, Doug Kufner, indicated that whoever ends up being appointed to the vacancies by the Nashville and Shelby County governments "will be seated as representatives as the constitu-

tion requires."

Jones and Pearson quickly drew prominent supporters. President Joe Biden spoke with them, and Vice President Kamala Harris visited them in Nashville. A third Democrat targeted for expulsion, Rep. Gloria Johnson, of Knoxville, also attracted national attention.

Johnson, who is white, was spared expulsion by a single vote. Republican lawmakers justified splitting their votes by saying Johnson had less of a role in the protest — she didn't speak into the megaphone, for example.

At least 4 killed, 9 hurt in Kentucky bank shooting

Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — A shooter at a bank in downtown Louisville killed at least four people — including two friends of the governor — and wounded at least nine others Monday, police said. The suspect was also among the dead.

Police in Louisville arrived as gunshots were still being fired inside Old National Bank and exchanged fire with the shooter, Louisville Metro Police Department Deputy Chief Paul Humphrey said at a news conference. It wasn't clear whether the shooter killed himself or was shot by officers.

"We believe this is a lone gunman involved in this that did have a connection to the bank. We're trying to establish what that connection was to the business, but it appears he was a previous employee," Humphrey said.

The shooting was the 15th mass killing in the country this year. Nine people, including two police officers, were treated for injuries, University of Louisville Hospital spokeswoman Heather Fountaine said in an email.

One of the officers was in crit-

ical condition, she said. At least three patients had been discharged.

An emotional Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear said he lost friends in the shooting in the building on East Main Street near the Louisville Slugger Field and Waterfront Park.

"This is awful," he said. "I have a very close friend who didn't make it today. And I have another close friend who didn't, either. And one who's at the hospital that I hope is going to make it through."

Beshear spoke as the investigation in Louisville continued and police searched for a motive. Crime scene investigators could be seen marking and photographing numerous bullet holes in the windows near the bank's front door.

A man who fled the building during the shooting told WHAS-TV that the shooter opened fire with a long rifle in a conference room in the back of the building on the first floor.

"Whoever was next to me got shot — blood is on me from it," he told the news station, pointing to his shirt. He said he fled to a break room and shut the door.

Next abortion battles may be in states with clashing laws

Associated Press

Abortion is banned in Idaho at all stages of pregnancy, but the governor on Wednesday signed another law making it illegal to provide help within the state's boundaries to minors seeking an abortion without parental consent.

The new law is obviously aimed at abortions obtained in other states, but it's written to criminalize in-state behavior leading to the out-of-state procedure — a clear nod to the uncertainty surrounding efforts by lawmakers in at least half a dozen states to extend their influence outside their borders when it comes to abortion law.

At the same time, Democrat-controlled states are advancing and adopting laws and executive orders intended to shield their residents against civil lawsuits and criminal investigations related to providing abortions for women from states where there are bans.

But there is no legal precedent giving good guidance about whether states can influence their residents getting abortions outside their borders.

"If red states pass laws saying, 'We can go after people for X, Y

and Z,' and blue states say, 'You can't,' we're in uncharted territory," said Mary Ziegler, a legal historian at the University of California, Davis School of Law.

Arguments about the laws could be rooted in key clauses of the U.S. Constitution that could contradict each other in this case. One clause requires states to respect the laws of other states while another recognizes the right to travel among states and a third restricts the ability of states to impair interstate commerce.

In his concurring opinion in last year's ruling overturning Roe, Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh contemplated whether states could restrict their residents from getting abortions in other states: "In my view, the answer is no based on the constitutional right to interstate travel," he wrote.

Andrea Miller, president of the National Institute for Reproductive Health, which supports abortion rights, said the validity of interstate laws is unclear.

"The hope would be this would be seen as an extreme overreach," she said, "but one would have thought that overturning Roe v. Wade would have been an extreme overreach too."

Divided nation debates decisions on abortion pill

The Washington Post

The stakes were high — a federal judge in Texas, known for his antiabortion views, was presiding over a lawsuit seeking to undo government approval of a key abortion drug and block access to the medication in every state.

The Democratic attorney general in Washington state, Bob Ferguson, launched a counter move, suing the federal government to increase access to the same abortion drug.

The legal maneuvering played out in dramatic fashion Friday evening: Less than an hour after U.S. District Judge Matthew J. Kacsmaryk, a nominee of President Donald Trump, blocked approval of the abortion drug mifepristone by the Food and Drug Administration, U.S. District Judge Thomas O. Rice, who was nominated by President Barack Obama, ordered the FDA to preserve “the status quo” and retain access to the medication in 17 states and the District of Columbia.

The remarkable one-two punch set up an extraordinary legal clash that will almost certainly be decided by the polarized U.S. Supreme Court.

It provides a real-time window into how liberals are trying to counter a flood of conservative litigation in a federal judiciary reshaped by Trump, and how the political right is using single-judge court districts to advance a deeply conservative agenda.

The conservative groups that sued the FDA in Texas cherry-picked Kacsmaryk, a lifelong antiabortion advocate who is the sole judge in his Amarillo, Texas, district, to hear their case. And the coalition of Demo-

cratic state attorneys general responded by taking the rare step of suing the Democratic Biden administration to demand fewer FDA restrictions on access to the abortion pill in their states.

“Part of the reasoning for my decision to file a decision here in Washington state is because I could not leave the fate of women’s reproductive rights in Washington in the hands of a single judge in Texas appointed by Donald Trump whose views on reproductive freedom are well known and unfortunate,” Ferguson said in an interview Friday night.

“I felt this was coming,” he said of Kacsmaryk’s order. “I am not surprised by either ruling.”

Lawrence Gostin, a professor of global health law at Georgetown University who has lobbied for the Biden administration to protect access to abortion, said he found both lawsuits problematic, because he believes they undermine the FDA’s authority to assess and approve medications.

He expressed particular concern about the Texas case, which sought to upend approval to a drug that has been on the market for more than two decades — and is one of two medications used in combination to terminate pregnancies.

But he said both decisions could politicize the FDA and have far reaching implications beyond mifepristone.

“Partisans are weaponizing the public courts system, and the victim is science and public health,” Gostin said. “This is crazy and crazier. I disagree with both decisions, but I think that the Texas decision is far more radical and far more extensive.”

Iowa to take pause in paying for rape victims’ abortions

Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa — The Iowa Attorney General’s Office has paused its practice of paying for emergency contraception — and in rare cases, abortions — for victims of sexual assault, a move that drew criticism from some victim advocates. Federal regulations and state law require Iowa to pay many of the expenses for sexual assault victims who seek medical help, such as the costs of forensic exams and treatment for sexually transmitted infections. Under the previous attorney general, Democrat Tom Miller, Iowa’s victim compensation fund also paid for Plan B, the so-called morning after pill.

A spokeswoman for Republican Attorney General Brenna Bird, who defeated Miller’s bid for an 11th term in November, told the Des Moines Register that those payments are now on hold as part of a review of victim services.

“As a part of her top-down, bottom-up audit of victim assistance, Attorney General Bird is carefully evaluating whether this is an appropriate use of public funds,” Bird press secretary Alyssa Brouillet said in a statement. “Until that review is complete, payment of these pending claims will be delayed.”

Victim advocates were caught off guard by the pause. Ruth Richardson, CEO of Planned Parenthood North Central States, said in a statement that the move was “deplorable and reprehensible.”

Bird’s decision comes as access to the most commonly used method of abortion in the U.S. plunged into uncertainty following conflicting court rulings on Friday over the legality of the abortion medication mifepristone. For now, the drug the Food and Drug Administration approved in 2000 appeared to remain at least immediately available in the wake of separate rulings issued in quick succession.

Baltimore mayor calls for curfew after 2 teens shot

Associated Press

BALTIMORE — The mayor of Baltimore called for a summer curfew after two teenagers were shot while police were attempting to break up a large crowd of minors.

A 14-year-old and a 16-year-old were shot and wounded as police attempted to break up fights among a crowd of more than 200 teenagers gathered at the city’s Inner Harbor area around 9 p.m. Sunday, WBAL-TV

reported.

One of the victims was in critical condition and the other was stable, WBAL reported.

Two suspects were arrested, police said, including one with a loaded gun who matched a description of the shooter and another who was found with a loaded gun in a police garage, WBAL reported. Following the shooting, Baltimore Mayor Brandon

Scott announced his intention to implement a 9 p.m. curfew for anyone 14 years and younger and 10 p.m. for those younger than 17 during the forthcoming summer months, WJZ-TV reported.

“I want everyone to hear me and hear me clearly,” Scott said. “We are going back to the old days. We will be enforcing a youth curfew as we move into the latter spring and summer months.”

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

House passes permitless concealed carrying bill

AR LITTLE ROCK — A permit would not be required to carry a concealed handgun in Arkansas under a bill lawmakers sent Thursday to Republican Gov. Sarah Huckabee Sanders, which supporters have said is meant to clear up a decade-old disagreement about the state's gun laws.

Sanders' office said she plans to sign the measure.

Both gun rights and gun control advocates already widely considered Arkansas to be one of more than two dozen states that doesn't require a concealed carry permit. That's followed a 2013 change to the state's gun laws which prompted differing interpretations on how it's affected the state's concealed carry requirements.

The bill was approved Thursday with no debate in the House, but opponents have questioned the impact the legislation would have on a 2017 law that allows concealed handguns in certain locations, including the state Capitol, if someone undergoes additional training and gets an "enhanced" permit.

Panel OKs West Coast salmon fishing ban

CA SAN DIEGO — A federal regulatory group voted Thursday to officially close king salmon fishing season along much of the West Coast after near-record low numbers of the fish, also known as chinook, returned to California's rivers last year.

The Pacific Fishery Management Council approved the closure of the 2023 season for all

commercial and most recreational chinook fishing along the coast from Cape Falcon in northern Oregon to the California-Mexico border. Limited recreational salmon fishing will be allowed off southern Oregon in the fall.

Biologists have said the chinook salmon population has declined dramatically after years of drought. Many in the fishing industry have said Trump-era rules that allowed more water to be diverted from the Sacramento River Basin to agriculture caused even more harm.

Prison guard fired for anti-Muslim meme rehired

CT HARTFORD — A Connecticut prison guard who was fired in 2021, several years after posting what the state determined to be an anti-Muslim meme on Facebook, has been reinstated to his job.

An arbitrator ruled in February that Anthony Marlak's termination was an excessive response by the state Department of Correction and reduced the punishment to a 25-day suspension. He also ruled Marlak must be compensated for lost pay and benefits.

Marlak, who served as a correctional officer for 14 years, told The Associated Press on Thursday that he returned to his job at the Garner Correctional Institution in March.

The Connecticut chapter of the Council on American Islamic Relations, the country's largest Muslim advocacy organization, had called for Marlak's firing two years ago. The group cited a meme he posted on Facebook in 2017, which it said depicted five apparently Muslim men hanging from nooses with the caption "Islamic Wind Chimes."

Marlak, an Air Force veteran, has acknowledged that he posted the meme but said the caption read "ISIS Wind Chimes" and was meant to target the extremist Islamic State group and not Muslims in general.

8 rescued at Panhandle beach amid rip currents

FL PENSACOLA — Eight people were rescued Thursday at a Florida Panhandle beach as weather forecasters predicted a high chance for rip currents in the area, officials said.

Escambia County Fire Rescue responded to Johnson Beach in Perdido Key twice, the Pensacola News Journal reported. The area is on the Gulf of Mexico just southwest of Pensacola.

Rescue workers pulled three adults and four children from the water shortly before 2 p.m., officials said. Two children and one adult were taken by LifeFlight to a nearby hospital, and another child was taken by ambulance. About two hours later, rescue workers responded to another call about a person in distress in the water. Officials said that person was helped out of the water by another beachgoer and then taken by LifeFlight to an area hospital.

Schools chief quits over cell tower controversy

MI WYANDOTTE — The superintendent of a Detroit-area school district has resigned amid protests over 5G wireless phone antennas near a school playground.

There was applause Wednesday when the Wyandotte school board accepted the resignation of Catherine Cost, who had served

for nearly 10 years.

For weeks, some parents have vigorously objected to having the T-Mobile technology so close to kids at Washington Elementary School, citing health concerns. The district agreed to lease space on a chimney, though T-Mobile hasn't activated the antennas yet.

Cost had repeatedly defended the agreement and said it would cost millions of dollars to break the contract.

T-Mobile recently said it would not use the technology until the school year ends in June. The company also said radio-frequency emissions would be below federal limits for public exposure.

Man trapped by snow, ice saved from waterfall

NH CONWAY — A man fell into a river at a popular waterfall site and was trapped by ice and snow for 45 minutes before he was rescued, a New Hampshire fire chief said.

The man, who fell from the Sabadaya Falls along the Kancamagus Highway, was suffering from hypothermia and was unable to hold a rope or pull himself out on Thursday, Conway Fire Chief Stephen Solomon said in a news release. He was also in danger of the current pulling him under the ice.

Two rescue swimmers from the Conway Fire Swift Water Rescue Team jumped in the water and kept him from going under. A rope system was used to pull him and the rescuers out.

Bystanders also "played a vital role in both keeping this person alive while the swift water rescue team responded and pulling him out when everything was in place," Solomon said.

— From wire reports

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Rahm rallies to win Masters by 4 shots

Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Ga. — Jon Rahm kept hearing how he was destined to win this Masters because so many Spanish stars were aligned in his favor.

Sunday was the birthdate of Seve Ballesteros, his idol and inspiration for playing. This year was the 40-year anniversary of the second Masters title Ballesteros won. If that wasn't enough, caddie Adam Hayes was assigned white coveralls with No. 49 — April 9.

"I was told a lot of things about why this could be the year," Rahm said, looking smart as ever in his new green jacket. "And I just didn't want to buy into it too much."

His golf was far more valuable than any historical coincidence.

Rahm turned the longest day

into his sweetest victory Sunday. The 30-hole marathon finish started with him trailing by four and ended with a walk up to the 18th green that nearly reduced him to tears, and gave him another major that affirmed him as No. 1 in the world.

He closed with a 3-under 69 to pull away from mistake-prone Brooks Koepka. He won by four shots over Koepka and 52-year-old Phil Mickelson, who matched the low score of the tournament with a 65 and became the oldest runner-up in Masters history.

"We all dream of things like this as players, and you try to visualize what it's going to be like and what it's going to feel like," Rahm said. "Never thought I was going to cry by winning a golf tournament, but I got very

close on that 18th hole.

"And a lot of it because of what it means to me, and to Spanish golf," he said. "It's Spain's 10th major, fourth player to win the Masters. It's pretty incredible."

It was Mickelson who declared Rahm would be among golf's biggest stars even before the Spaniard turned pro in 2016. Rahm now has a green jacket to go along with his U.S. Open title he won in 2021 at Torrey Pines.

"It was obvious to me at a very young age that he was one of the best players in the world even while he was in college," said Mickelson, whose younger brother was Rahm's college coach at Arizona State. "To see him on this stage is not surprising for anybody."

Rahm made up two shots on Koepka over the final 12 holes

of the rain-delayed third round and started the final round two shots behind. He seized on Koepka's collapse and then surged so far ahead that Mickelson's amazing closing round — it matched the three-time Masters champion's best final round ever at Augusta National — was never going to be enough.

The finish was vintage Rahm. He pulled his drive into the pine trees and it ricocheted out, short of where the fairway starts. No problem. He hit 4-iron toward the green and lofted a pitch to 3 feet to end his round with only one bogey.

"An unusual par, very much a Seve par, a testament to him, and I know he was pulling for me today," said Rahm, who finished at 12-under 276. "And it was a great Sunday."

NBA's Western Conference seeds go down to final day

Associated Press

Golden State is in the playoffs. LeBron James is heading to the play-in tournament. And the Minnesota Timberwolves lost Rudy Gobert to a fight with a teammate, then won a battle to improve their playoff hopes.

The final day of the NBA season was predictably wild — with tons of unpredictable elements as well.

It took until the 1,230th and last game of the year went final for the Western Conference playoff and play-in bracket to finally be set, highlighted by the Los Angeles Clippers and defending champion Golden State Warriors getting a few days off knowing that they're officially in the postseason.

The Clippers beat Phoenix to clinch the No. 5 seed — and a first-round matchup with Phoenix. Golden State had its highest-scoring game in almost 33 years on its way to routing Portland 157-101 and clinching the

No. 6 seed, giving the Warriors an automatic berth in the playoffs and a first-round matchup with Sacramento.

Golden State led by as many as 59 in that game, the largest lead by any team all season.

"We're playing Sacramento, obviously. They're a great team, they've had an amazing season and it's going to take everything to beat them four times — especially starting on the road," Warriors guard Stephen Curry said. "But we love the opportunity in front of us."

James and the No. 7 — for now — Los Angeles Lakers will get two chances to get into the playoffs, starting with Tuesday's play-in game against No. 8 Minnesota. If the Lakers lose that game, they'll get another chance Friday against the winner of Wednesday's game between No. 9 New Orleans and No. 10 Oklahoma City.

"For us, it's just good that we don't have to travel," James said after the Lakers ended

their regular season with a home win over Utah. "We've traveled a lot lately. It's good that we get to stay here, but we shouldn't get comfortable. We have to stay on edge."

The Lakers-Timberwolves winner gets No. 2 Memphis in Round 1; the winner of Friday's West play-in game will start the playoffs next Sunday at No. 1 Denver.

No team in the West has had a better record since the All-Star break than the Lakers, who went 16-7 down the stretch — even with James sidelined for about half of that run by injury.

Minnesota locked up the No. 8 seed (and two chances at the playoffs) by holding off New Orleans 113-108.

It was the last game to finish in the league this season, though for Gobert, it ended early. He threw a punch at Kyle Anderson — his teammate — after heated words during a first-half timeout, didn't return

to the game, and Minnesota also lost Jaden McDaniels to a right hand injury after he appeared to punch a wall.

"We made the decision to send Rudy Gobert home after the incident in the second quarter," Timberwolves President Tim Connelly said in a post-game statement. "His behavior on the bench was unacceptable and we will continue handling the situation internally."

There appeared to be progress on that front quickly, with Wolves veteran Mike Conley suggesting that the team is ready to move forward.

"We're going to need all of us," Conley said.

Gobert chimed in Sunday night as well, tweeting: "Emotions got the best of me today. I should not have reacted the way i did regardless of what was said. I wanna apologize to the fans, the organisation and particularly to Kyle, who is someone that i truly love and respect as a teammate."

Pastrnak helps Bruins break wins record

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — David Pastrnak posed with the puck he used to score his 60th goal of the season in front of the whiteboard in the locker room that had “63 WINS” written in blue marker.

It's not the Boston Bruins' biggest goal, but they now own the NHL single-season wins record thanks to their best player putting on a show.

Pastrnak recorded a hat trick to reach 60 for the first time in his career, leading the Bruins to their 63rd victory of the season, 5-3 at the Philadelphia Flyers on Sunday night. The win snapped a tie with the 1995-96 Detroit Red Wings and 2018-19 Tampa Bay Lightning.

“It's been a lot of fun, I'm not going to lie,” Pastrnak said after his fourth four-point game this season. “It's been enjoyable, especially the group we have here. We obviously knew the stakes, and it's definitely special to hit it in a game like this. Made history today in the biggest league in hockey.”

Hats rained down from the many Bruins fans in attendance after Pastrnak scored his third of the game early in the third period. The crowd chanted “We want the Cup!” in the final minutes, then showered players with cheers at the final horn.

“It's hard to win in this league and there's a reason why this record is at 62 because not many teams can get there, so it's a special honor,” said goaltender Jeremy Swayman, who made 34 saves. “These guys in this room are more than deserving.”

The Bruins have won six in a row and reached 131 points, one back of the record held by the 1976-77 Montreal Canadiens that has stood for nearly five decades, and with two games left against opponents well out of the playoff race. The Canadiens 46 years ago played in an era without overtime when games ended in a tie, and the Red Wings set the initial wins record before the shootout that has given the Boston four more.

When the playoffs begin in a

little more than a week, the Bruins will have home-ice advantage throughout in pursuit of the franchise's first Stanley Cup championship since 2011.

Boston's top two centers, Patrice Bergeron and David Krejci, were out, along with No. 1 defenseman Charlie McAvoy, forward Taylor Hall, key trade deadline pickup Dmitry Orlov and All-Star goaltender Linus Ullmark.

Even with a lineup chock full of players from the AHL's Providence Bruins, Boston relied on a familiar recipe to set the wins record. Beyond Pastrnak's goals, Charlie Coyle and Pavel Zacha scored and the Bruins extended their streak of consecutive penalties killed to 38.

“They had some people out, but still that's a really good hockey team,” Flyers coach John Tortorella said.

The Bruins also kept up what first-year coach Jim Montgomery called their “signature calling” of closing out games. After allowing a goal to Owen Tippett

midway through the third period, the Bruins locked things down as they have so many times before, improving to 46-1-2 when leading at the second intermission.

Pastrnak joined MVP favorite Connor McDavid as a 60-goal scorer, making this the first season with two players reaching that mark since Mario Lemieux and Jaromir Jagr in 1995-96. The Czech winger had 48 games when the pandemic ended the 2019-20 season, so that gave him the belief he could put together a season like this.

“I know what kind of player I am in this league right now,” Pastrnak said. “I knew I could do it. That helps with your mindset.”

Wade Allison and Joel Farabee also scored for the Flyers, who lost their seventh in a row late in another lost season. Felix Sandstrom made a few big stops among his 29 saves, but that wasn't enough to slow down the Bruins in their pursuit of a spot in the record books.

MacKinnon, Avs rally for OT win, move atop Central

Associated Press

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Nathan MacKinnon scored his second power-play goal of the game with 44.3 seconds left on the clock in overtime, and the Colorado Avalanche rallied for a 5-4 win over the Anaheim Ducks on Sunday night.

Mikko Rantanen had two goals and two assists, and J.T. Compher also scored to help Colorado move two points ahead of Dallas atop the Central Division. The Stars hold the potential tiebreaker with more regulation wins, which made MacKinnon's one-timer from the left circle in the extra period that much more important.

“Well, it's a good spot to be in with three games left or whatever, but there's still work to be done because we've seen the

standings flip-flop all year long,” Avalanche coach Jared Bednar said.

Pavel Francouz made 19 saves in his first start in nearly two months. He had not played since Feb. 7 because of a lower-body injury.

Frank Vatrano had two goals, Adam Henrique and Brett Leason also scored, and the Ducks picked up a second point in two nights to give up ground in the race for the NHL's worst record and the best odds to win the draft lottery. Lukas Dostal allowed five goals on 46 shots.

“Our guys are full of fire,” Ducks coach Dallas Eakins said. “They're working hard for each other, and they're trying to support each other, and they're competitive people.”

Colorado squandered a two-

goal lead in the second period before rallying back from a two-goal deficit in the third. Rantanen reached 100 points on the season when he cut it to 4-3 on the power play midway through the period, and MacKinnon's one-timer with the man advantage tied it up 4-4 with 4:32 remaining.

“If you're drawing penalties, you have your top five guys on the ice at one time and they can start feeling it. Eventually, I think, skilled players and talented players are going to find a way to break through,” Bednar said.

Anaheim scored twice in a 2:07 span of the third, going in front 3-2 on Vatrano's wrist shot through traffic at 5:18 and making it 4-2 when Leason scored off the rush.

That seemed like it might be

enough to punish the Avalanche, but Colorado's power play eventually was able to make up for a wasteful start. It failed to cash in on two lengthy 5-on-3 looks and a double minor against Derek Grant for high sticking in the first period.

The Avalanche ended up 3-for-8 on the power play.

“Their power play is deadly,” Eakins said. “They've got some really super high-end talent. ... You give them that many cracks on a power play, they're gonna get you sooner or later.”

Colorado won its 10th straight road game, their longest run since leaving Quebec after the 1994-95 season. Five of those wins have come in California, with the Avalanche having racked up 11 consecutive wins in the Golden State.

Rays at 9-0, best MLB start since 2003

Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — The Tampa Bay Rays are putting together one of the best starts ever.

The Rays routed the Oakland Athletics 11-0 Sunday to improve to 9-0 as Drew Rasmussen combined on a one-hitter and Brandon Lowe hit a grand slam. Tampa Bay is the first team to win its first nine games since the 2003 Kansas City Royals.

"Essentially, everything is going exactly the way that we want to," Lowe said. "This is incredible baseball that we're playing."

Tampa Bay has outscored opponents 75-18, scoring the most runs in the big leagues and allowing the fewest.

"It just opens things up," Rasmussen said of the Rays' offense. "The way they're going right now, it's unbelievable."

The Rays have won every game by four or more runs, trailing only a 13-game run by the 1884 St. Louis Maroons of the Union Association as the longest at a season's start. The streak is the longest at any point of a season since 10 by the 1939 New York Yankees.

Blue Jays 12, Angels 11 (10): Tim Lincecum retired Shohei Ohtani with the bases loaded for the final out, and visiting Toronto got five RBIs apiece from Matt

Chapman and No. 9 hitter Kevin Kiermaier.

Chapman, who leads the majors with a .475 batting average, hit a grand slam in the sixth. Kiermaier doubled home the tiebreaking run against Carlos Estevez (0-1) in the 10th for the Blue Jays, who overcame a 6-0 deficit and wasted a 10-6 lead.

Ohtani hit one of Los Angeles' four homers, but he grounded out to end it as Toronto took two of three in the series and finished 6-4 on its season-opening trip.

Padres 10, Braves 2: Nelson Cruz hit a three-run homer and drove in six runs, and visiting San Diego earned its third consecutive victory for the second time this season.

Seth Lugo (2-0) pitched six effective innings for San Diego, and Ha-Seong Kim hit a two-run homer. Manny Machado finished with three hits.

Yankees 5, Orioles 3: Aaron Judge homered twice and Nestor Cortes (2-0) allowed two runs and four hits in 5½ innings after umpires forced him to blot out a marking on his glove.

Judge hit solo homers in the third inning off Tyler Wells (0-1) and the eighth off Logan Gillaspie for his 28th multihomer game and first this season. Judge is batting .364 and has

four homers in nine games after hitting his fourth in the 17th game last year en route to an American League-record 62.

Pirates 1, White Sox 0: Shortstop Oneil Cruz fractured his left ankle in a home-plate collision with catcher Seby Zavala in the sixth inning, which dampened a narrow win by host Pittsburgh.

Johan Oviedo (1-0) allowed five hits — all singles — and struck out five in 6½ innings as Pittsburgh won for the fifth time in six games.

Red Sox 4, Tigers 1: Triston Casas homered and hit an RBI double as visiting Boston finished a three-game sweep, outscoring Detroit 24-9.

Kutter Crawford (1-1) allowed one run and five hits in five innings and Kenley Jansen pitched the ninth for his second save. Detroit loaded the bases with one out, but Zach McKinstry flied out and Akil Baddoo struck out.

Reds 6, Phillies 4: Jake Fraley hit a bases-clearing double in the ninth off Seranthony Domínguez (0-1) to overcome a 4-3 deficit as visiting Cincinnati avoided a three-game sweep.

Rangers 8, Cubs 2: No. 9 hitter Bubba Thompson had a triple, double and two RBIs as visiting Texas stopped a two-game

slide.

Brewers 6, Cardinals 1: Willy Adames went 3-for-4 with a homer, double and three RBIs for host Milwaukee.

Marlins 7, Mets 2: Bryan De La Cruz homered and drove in four runs, and visiting Miami stole five bases.

Guardians 7, Mariners 6 (12): José Ramírez slid past catcher Cal Raleigh's tag to score the winning run in the 12th inning for host Cleveland on Josh Bell's grounder to second baseman Kolten Wong off Penn Murfee (1-2).

Giants 3, Royals 1: Michael Conforto hit a two-run homer off Ryan Yarbrough (0-1) to cap a three-run rally in the eighth for host San Francisco.

Rockies 7, Nationals 6: Elías Díaz had three hits, including his first home run this season and Jurickson Profar hit his first home run with host Colorado.

Diamondbacks 11, Dodgers 6: Josh Rojas had his second straight three-hit game, Pavin Smith drove in three runs and host Arizona got 16 hits.

Astros 5, Twins 1: Chas McCormick had four RBIs and Hunter Brown (1-1) allowed an unearned run and two hits in seven innings, combining on a two-hitter as visiting Houston salvaged the series finale.

Bell edges Reddick in NASCAR Bristol dirt race

Associated Press

It didn't take long for Christopher Bell to figure out Bristol Motor Speedway's dirt surface was ready made for drivers with dirt experience.

And it was the perfect layout for Bell to win his fifth NASCAR Cup Series race there Sunday night.

"It was a very tough surface to get a hold of and should've rewarded guys that kind of knew what to expect and how to get the car around the race track, which I think it did," Bell said.

Bell held on through a restart eight laps from the end and held off another who grew up racing on dirt in Tyler Reddick.

Bell was a whiz-kid dirt racing sensation growing up — he won three Chili Bowl Nationals driving midget cars on dirt — and that experience helped the Joe Gibbs Racing driver to his fifth victory in the NASCAR Cup Series.

The first two years of Bristol dirt racing, NASCAR champs Joey Logano and Kyle Busch both won despite having less expansive dirt experience than many of their colleagues.

That changed this year as organizers gave racers more of a dirt feel than ever before, Bell said.

"This place is so much fun, whether it's dirt or concrete," Bell said.

Reddick was second for a second straight

season, followed by Austin Dillon, Ricky Stenhouse Jr. and Chase Briscoe.

Bell's last challenge came after defending race winner Busch spun with 15 laps left. Bell took off on the restart and widened his lead over Reddick.

Reddick, who won the second stage, was closing in on the last lap when the 16th and final caution came out, instantly ending the race and sending Bell's team into hysterics.

"Man, I just can't get over how long those laps feel," Bell said.

Reddick also enjoyed the intensity down the stretch. "I thought I had a little bit more," he said. "I was at the edge, but I wasn't quite there in the last couple of laps."