

## US Marines arrive in Sweden for drills

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

U.S. Marines crossed the Norwegian border into Sweden on Tuesday to join one of Scandinavia's largest military drills in decades, involving troops from more than a dozen countries.

Swedish Brig. Gen. Stefan Andersson announced on Twitter the arrival of the Marines as part of the Aurora 23 exercise, which is focused on countering a large-scale attack on the prospective NATO member.

"Aurora 23 will be the largest national exercise of its kind in more than 25 years," the Swedish military said.

Some 26,000 troops from 14 countries are

taking part in maneuvers on land, at sea and in the air. Service members from the U.S., Britain and Germany are among those taking part. It wasn't announced Tuesday which U.S. units were taking part.

The drills come amid Sweden's ongoing push to join NATO, which earlier this month welcomed neighboring Finland as the security pact's 31st member.

The historic decision was brought on by last year's Russian invasion of Ukraine, which prompted the Nordic countries to seek NATO membership.

Initially, Sweden and Finland aimed to join the alliance simultaneously, but opposition from Turkey scuttled Stockholm's

hopes for a speedy accession.

The process has stalled over Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's allegations that Sweden has given refuge to Kurdish militants whom Ankara wants extradited.

Still, NATO officials say they're confident that the impasse will be resolved and that Sweden will soon join the alliance.

In the meantime, Aurora 23 reinforces the close partnership between Sweden and allied militaries even as full NATO membership remains elusive. The drills will be carried out on large swaths of Swedish territory until May 11, the Swedish military statement said.

## DOD balks at Biden's plan for offshore wind projects

*Bloomberg News*

The Pentagon is sounding alarms over Biden administration plans to advance offshore wind projects along the central Atlantic U.S. coast, warning that almost all of the new terrain eyed for development conflicts with military operations.

Maps shared with industry stakeholders and seen by Bloomberg News show vast red areas that the Navy and Air Force have deemed "highly problematic," covering prime real estate the Interior Department last year earmarked for leasing off the coasts of North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland and Delaware.

The Defense Department's concerns, which come on top of other conflicts identified by the U.S. Coast Guard, have spooked renewable power developers and U.S. East Coast states counting on mid-Atlantic wind farms to meet clean energy and climate goals.

The breadth of the Pentagon's opposition could imperil President Joe Biden's bid to install 30 gigawatts of offshore wind power — equivalent to 30 nuclear reactors — by the end of the decade, newly bolstered state goals for the development and planned manufacturing facilities in Maryland and Virginia tied to the nascent U.S. industry.

The clash represents the latest threat to the fledgling industry that is already grappling with supply chain challenges, inflation-

stoked prices and opposition from coastal communities.

The Interior Department's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management emphasized in an emailed statement that the U.S. "is well positioned to satisfy state and federal offshore wind goals as we develop the clean energy economy."

A senior Defense Department official stressed that the maps represent an initial stage of discussions with the ocean energy bureau and that the Pentagon is committed to finding ways to accommodate leasing in the region.

The Pentagon has identified challenges operating around wind turbines that would be installed into the seabed in Atlantic waters near many of its operations and facilities, including North Carolina's Dare County bombing range, used for training fighter jet crews, and a weapons station in Yorktown, Va. They are documented vividly on a map of Navy and Air Force concerns, dated Oct. 6, 2022, and circulated with industry and state stakeholders this month.

Four of six potential wind lease areas outlined by the ocean energy bureau last November are completely shaded red, including two deep-water parcels that might require floating turbines. The remaining two tracts, in yellow, are identified as requiring further study. The areas deemed highest priority by the Pentagon span a large portion of

potential lease areas off the Maryland and North Carolina coasts.

The Defense Department official said the representations were designed to pinpoint areas that present the most challenges — generally where the Pentagon would be unable to continue its mission as currently conducted in the space. The focus going forward is on finding ways to accommodate wind development, including by adjusting operations to allow the activity, the official said. That could take the form of shifting the location of military exercises and other steps — such as optimizing radar processing systems — to minimize interference from turbines.

The two tracts marked in yellow are the least problematic, with concerns the Pentagon views as solvable, the Defense Department official said.

Similar Defense Department concerns helped derail plans for offshore oil leasing in waters near Virginia's coast roughly a decade ago. And after the Pentagon warned the Interior Department against offshore wind leasing near the California coast in 2019, it took roughly three years to resolve the matter. The Interior Department had been on track to sell new offshore wind rights in the mid-Atlantic early next year — and significant delays could make it harder for developers to claim newly expanded tax credits for the multibillion-dollar ventures that can take years to permit and build.

# DOD to conduct review on classified access

By DOUG G. WARE  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has ordered a Pentagon review on how secret information is handled and managed by the military in the wake of the scandal involving leaks of classified information online.

Austin ordered the “comprehensive review” to assess possible changes in how secret materials are distributed and who has access to them, deputy Pentagon press secretary Sabrina Singh told reporters Monday.

“Within 45 days, [investigators] will provide the secretary with initial findings and recommendations to improve the department’s policies and procedures related to the protection of classified information,” Singh said during a Pentagon news briefing. “We will have more to say soon on more immediate actions that we will be taking.”

The review comes after batches of purportedly secret intelligence were leaked to social

media platforms online. At least one member of the Massachusetts Air National Guard — airman Jack Douglas Teixeira — has been charged in connection with the documents leak. He’s a member of the 102nd Intelligence Wing that is headquartered at Otis Air National Guard Base on Cape Cod.

The 102nd Intelligence Wing handles collection and analysis of intelligence gathered from all over the world.

Singh said repeatedly that the Pentagon is cooperating with the Justice Department on its criminal investigation into the leaks and defense officials are examining sensitive documents found online. No U.S. officials have said yet whether any of the leaked documents are authentic. Last week, one defense official told reporters that some of them appeared to have been “altered.”

Teixeira, 21, is an active member of the Air Force National Guard, which has created questions about jurisdiction for the case.

The Justice Department is leading the civil criminal investigation, but the Pentagon could also charge Teixeira at some point under the Uniform Code of Military Justice.

“In terms of jurisdiction, [it is] something we are working through,” Singh said.

The Pentagon hasn’t disclosed yet exactly how many purportedly secret documents have been found online. The initial batch found on Twitter and Telegram detailed various elements of the war in Ukraine, such as troop positions and weapons. Documents about U.S. intelligence gathering in other countries were found later on other social sites. Some of the documents had been online for several weeks.

Singh said Monday that the Pentagon’s internal review should clarify how many secret documents are involved and the scope of their impact.

Teixeira was arrested Thursday in Dighton, Mass., and made his first court appearance Fri-

day. According to federal prosecutors, he leaked the classified documents to a video game group on the social platform Discord. It wasn’t immediately clear, though, how all the documents ended up on various sites or whether anyone else might also be charged in the case. Teixeira is next scheduled to appear in court Wednesday for a detention hearing in Boston.

Information contained in some of the leaked materials included that dozens of “special forces” troops from NATO countries have been inside Ukraine, including 14 from the United States, according to news reports. At Monday’s briefing, Singh pushed back against that claim.

“We have publicly acknowledged previously that there is a small U.S. military footprint in Ukraine to provide mission-critical support to the U.S. Embassy [in Kyiv],” she said. “To be clear, there are no U.S. combat troops conducting combat operations in Ukraine.”

## Prosecutors: Guardsman applied for hitman job, got arrested

*The Charlotte (N.C.) Observer*

A Tennessee Air National Guardsman looking for a well-paying job to support his baby on the way eagerly applied for work as a hitman online, federal prosecutors said.

The aspiring assassin applied through a website called “Rent-A-Hitman,” according to officials who said it’s a parody platform.

When Josiah Ernesto Garcia, 21, of Nashville, didn’t hear back after submitting a resume, he sent a follow-up email explaining he wanted a job related to his military skills, court documents show.

Garcia was arrested by FBI agents on April 12, the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Middle District of Tennessee announced in an April 14 news release. He’s now facing murder-for-hire charges and up to 10 years in prison if he’s convicted, prosecutors said.

While looking for “contract mercenary

jobs,” Garcia found rentahitman.com and applied for work, prosecutors said.

The website, established in 2005, initially advertised a cybersecurity startup, according to officials. After the company failed, the site started receiving murder-for-hire related inquiries and the website’s administrator turned the platform into a parody site, prosecutors said.

On Feb. 16, Garcia submitted an inquiry expressing his interest in working as a hitman, the complaint says.

The website’s owner, using an alias, responded and asked Garcia to provide a resume, head shot and photo of his ID — so Garcia did, according to the complaint.

On March 16, the FBI directed the website’s owner to email Garcia saying a “field coordinator” would contact him soon, the complaint says.

When asked why he was interested in the hitman job, Garcia said since he was in the military, he was “doing that sort of work already,” the complaint shows.

On April 6, Garcia met the undercover agent at a restaurant and bar in Nashville where he asked if the hitman job was flexible as he worked one weekend per month in the Air National Guard and planned to attend college in 2024, the complaint says.

Ultimately, Garcia agreed to kill someone for \$5,000 and met with the undercover agent at a park on April 12, prosecutors said.

After Garcia was provided with fake information about a fictional target, he agreed to the plan and asked if he needed to show a photo of the dead body, according to prosecutors.

The FBI then arrested him and later found an AR style rifle during a search of his home, the release said.

# Putin, Zelenskyy meet with, rally troops

*Associated Press*

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian President Vladimir Putin visited command posts of his forces fighting in Ukraine for the second time in two months, officials said Tuesday, while Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy made his latest trip to positions near the front line.

The visits — on different days and in different provinces — sought to stiffen the resolve of soldiers as the war approaches its 14th month and as Kyiv readies a possible counteroffensive with Western-supplied weapons.

Kremlin video broadcast by Russian state television showed Putin arriving by helicopter at the command post of Russian forces in southern Ukraine's Kherson province and then flying to the headquarters of the Russian National Guard in Luhansk province, which is in the country's east. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the visits took place Monday.

Dressed in a dark suit, Putin attended briefings with his military brass in both of his stops. The locations of the military headquarters weren't disclosed, making it impossible to assess how close they were to the

front line. Nor was it possible to independently verify the authenticity of the video.

On Tuesday, Zelenskyy made his latest trip to visit units in Avdiivka, an eastern city in Donetsk province where fierce battles are taking place, his office said. He heard first-hand reports about fighting and handed out awards.

Zelenskyy's visits to areas feeling the brunt of Russia's full-scale invasion gathered pace last month as he shuttled across the country, often by train. As with Putin, the Ukrainian's wartime trips usually aren't publicized until after he's already left an area.

While official coverage of Putin's trip showed him in mostly formal and ceremonial settings, photographs issued by Zelenskyy's office showed the Ukrainian president taking selfies with soldiers, eating cake with them and drinking out of paper cups.

Russia's war in Ukraine has become largely deadlocked amid heavy fighting in the east, particularly around the Donetsk province city of Bakhmut, which for 8½ months has seen the longest and bloodiest battle so far.

Kherson, Luhansk, Donetsk and Zapo-

rizzhzhia provinces were annexed illegally by Russia in September, following local referendums that Ukraine and the West denounced as shams. Ukrainian presidential adviser Mykhailo Podolyak was scathing in his criticism of Putin's trip, accusing him of "degradation" and being the author of "mass murders" in the war.

Both then and now, large parts of Donetsk, Kherson and Zaporizhzhia, as well as some areas of Luhansk province, have remained under Ukrainian control. In November, Russian forces ceded territory in Kherson province, including the region's namesake capital.

The senior officers present at the meetings reflected which ones were currently in favor with Putin. Col. Gen. Mikhail Teplinsky, the chief of Russia's airborne troops, was among the top generals at the Kherson base.

Teplinsky, a career officer who rose from lieutenant to become chief of the elite military branch, is known for being popular with his troops. Last fall, however, he was temporarily relieved of his position amid a spat with the military brass. He was restored to the job this year.

## Navy's new ship is 4th to be dubbed Cleveland

*Stars and Stripes*

The Navy's newest — and last — Freedom-class littoral combat ship has come a step closer to fleet service, a bittersweet milestone for a collection of vessels once hailed for their potential. The future USS Cleveland, the fourth Navy ship to bear the name of the iconic Ohio city, was christened Saturday in Marinette, Wis., according to a post on the official Facebook page of the USS Cleveland Legacy Foundation.

The ship entered the Menominee River broadside, a launch method that also had its swan song Saturday at Fincantieri Marinette Marine, the Navy said in a statement a day before the ceremony.

Future launches there will use a system that lifts and lowers a ship vertically, according

to the statement.

Cleveland, the 16th Freedom-class vessel, is set to be delivered to the Navy in 2024 and commissioned later that year, according to information on the foundation's website.

Littoral combat ships are fast, nimble vessels prized for their abilities in coastal areas and the open ocean, but the Freedom variant quickly was beset by propulsion problems and other costly issues.

As a result, the Navy last year proposed mothballing nine Freedom-class ships well ahead of their end-of-service dates. Ultimately, five of the ships were saved.

Another variety of littoral combat ship, the Independence class, also has experienced problems including cracks in the hulls of at least six vessels.

## US, Australia biennial drills to be twice as large

**BY SETH ROBSON**

*Stars and Stripes*

The biennial military exercise by U.S. and Australian forces returns to pre-pandemic scale this year with more than twice the troops than took part two years ago, the Australian government announced recently.

Talisman Sabre is scheduled to draw approximately 30,000 personnel, close to the usual complement that last participated in 2019. The exercise continued in 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, but organizers reduced troop numbers to about 17,000.

This year's event will run from July 22 to Aug. 4, according to a Sunday statement by Australian Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles' office.

"Talisman Sabre is the lar-

gest bilateral combined training activity between the Australian Defence Force and United States military, reflecting the closeness of our Alliance," the statement said.

This year's exercise will be the largest in its geographic span and international involvement, Australian army Brig. Damian Hill, the exercise director, said in the statement.

Training is scheduled across the country in Queensland, Western Australia, the Northern Territory and New South Wales.

"This year's exercise will demonstrate our ability to receive large volumes of personnel and equipment into Australia from across the Indo-Pacific and stage, integrate and move them forward into the large exercise area," Hill said.



# 2 arrested at secret Chinese outpost in NYC

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Two men were arrested Monday on charges that they helped establish a secret police station in New York City on behalf of the Chinese government, and about three dozen officers with China's national police force were charged with using social media to harass dissidents inside the United States, authorities said Monday.

The cases are part of a series of Justice Department prosecutions in recent years aimed at disrupting Chinese government efforts to locate in America pro-democracy activists and others who are openly critical of Beijing's policies and to suppress speech.

One of three cases announced Monday concerns a local branch of the Chinese Ministry of Public Security that had operated inside an office building in Manhattan's Chinatown neighborhood before closing last fall amid an FBI investigation. The two men who were arrested were acting under the direction and control of a Chinese government official and deleted communication with that official from their phones after learning of the FBI's probe in an apparent effort to obstruct the inquiry, according to the Justice Department.

Though China is believed to be operating secretive police outposts in countries

around the globe, Justice Department officials said these arrests were the first of their kind anywhere in the world.

"This is a blatant violation of our national sovereignty," Michael Driscoll, the head of New York's FBI field office, said at a news conference announcing the cases.

The men, identified as "Harry" Lu Jianwang, 61, of the Bronx, and Chen Jinping, 59, of Manhattan, both U.S. citizens, were arrested at their homes Monday. A lawyer for Lu declined to comment. An email seeking comment was left with a lawyer for Chen.

At no point did the men register with the Justice Department as agents of a foreign government, U.S. law enforcement officials said. And though the secret police station did perform some basic services, such as helping Chinese citizens renew their Chinese driver's licenses, it also served a more "sinister" function, including helping the Chinese government locate a pro-democracy activist of Chinese descent living in California, officials said.

"New York City is home to New York's finest: the NYPD," said U.S. Attorney Breon Peace, the top federal prosecutor in Brooklyn, whose office brought the cases. "We don't need or want a secret police station in our great city."

# Federal appeals court throws out California city's ban on natural gas

Associated Press

BERKELEY, Calif. — A federal appeals court on Monday overturned Berkeley, Calif.'s first-in-the-nation ban on natural gas in new construction, agreeing with restaurant owners who argued the city bypassed federal energy regulations when it approved the ordinance.

The measure, which took effect in 2020 to cheers from environmentalists, was intended to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming.

With some exceptions, it banned new residential and commercial buildings from installing natural gas piping in favor of electrical lines.

A lawsuit by the California Restaurant Association claimed the regulation violated

federal law that gives the U.S. government authority to set energy-efficiency standards for appliances such as stoves, furnaces and water heaters.

The Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco rejected a lower court judge's decision two years ago that had upheld the Berkeley ordinance. In her 2021 decision, U.S. District Judge Yvonne Gonzalez Rogers said the city was not trying to regulate energy efficiency for appliances, only the fuel they used.

But Judge Patrick Bumatay wrote in the 3-0 Ninth Circuit ruling that a local ordinance that bans appliances such as gas stoves "impacts the quantity of energy" they consume, which is regulated by the federal government.

# Man charged in shooting of teen at wrong house

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — An 84-year-old white man in Kansas City, Mo., was charged Monday with first-degree assault for shooting a Black teen who mistakenly went to the man's home to pick up his younger brothers.

Prosecuting Attorney Zachary Thompson said at a news conference that there was a "racial component" Thursday night when Andrew Lester twice shot 16-year-old Ralph Yarl, who is recovering at home after being released from the hospital. But nothing in the charging documents says the shooting was racially motivated, Thompson clarified.

"We understand how frustrating this has been but I can assure you the criminal justice system is working and will continue to work," Thompson said.

The shooting outraged many in Kansas City and across the country. Civic and political leaders — including President Joe Biden — demanded justice. Some, including lawyers for Yarl, pressed the racial dimension of the case.

Yarl, an honor student and all-state band member, was supposed to pick up his two younger brothers when he approached the wrong house at roughly 10 p.m. Lester came to the door and shot Yarl in the forehead — then shot him again, in the right forearm.

No words were exchanged before the shooting, the probable cause statement said. But afterward, as Yarl got up to run, he heard Lester yell, "Don't come around here," the statement said.

Yarl ran to "multiple" homes asking for help before finding someone who would call the police, the statement said.

The Rev. Vernon Howard, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference of Greater Kansas City, called the shooting a "heinous and hate-filled crime." Vice President Kamala Harris wrote on Twitter that "No child should ever live in fear of being shot for ringing the wrong doorbell." The Missouri Senate held a moment of silence for Yarl on Monday.

The assault charge carries a penalty of up to life in prison. Lester also was charged with armed criminal action, which has a penalty range of three to 15 years. Lester was not charged with a hate crime. Thompson said Missouri's statute is considered a lesser felony than first-degree assault, and carries a less severe penalty.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

## Sheriff charged in machine gun scheme

**MD** FREDERICK — A Maryland sheriff repeatedly lied to federal authorities to help a local firearms dealer illegally obtain machine guns and rent them out to his customers, forming a partnership that was profitable and politically beneficial, according to a federal grand jury indictment.

Frederick County Sheriff Charles “Chuck” Jenkins pleaded not guilty to several charges, including conspiracy and making false statements to the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

Federal law generally prohibits its firearm dealers from importing machine guns unless they are being used as demonstration models for law enforcement agencies, which can legally purchase such weapons. But in order for dealers to use that exemption, the interested law enforcement agency must submit a letter to ATF requesting a sample of the machine gun they are considering purchasing.

According to the indictment, Jenkins wrote such letters on behalf of his co-defendant, Robert Krop, whose business The Machine Gun Nest offered machine guns for rent.

## David’s Bridal files for bankruptcy; orders safe

**PA** CONSHOCKEN — David’s Bridal has filed for bankruptcy protection, the second time for the chain in the past five years.

The announcement arrives days after the company, one of the largest sellers of wedding gowns and formal wear, said it

could eliminate more than 9,200 jobs across the United States.

Based in Conshohocken, Pa., the company has about 300 stores across dozens of states and employs more than 11,000 workers.

David’s Bridal is looking to sell the company, but its stores remain open and it’s fulfilling orders without delay. Its online platforms also remain available to help people with their wedding planning needs.

## 7 charged in ‘pit crew’ catalytic converter theft

**MA** BOSTON — Seven men who authorities said worked with the speed and efficiency of a “NASCAR pit crew” to steal catalytic converters from nearly 500 vehicles in Massachusetts and New Hampshire, resulting in losses estimated at \$2 million, were arrested, federal prosecutors said.

The men frequently targeted as many as 10 vehicles per night, and on one night stole from 26 vehicles, Rachael Rollins, the U.S. attorney for the District of Massachusetts, said at a news conference. The suspects worked like “a NASCAR pit crew” using “skill and speed” to jack up vehicles and cut out the catalytic converters, she said.

Five of the men are from Springfield, Mass., one is from Holyoke, and the alleged ringleader, Rafael Davila, 35, is from Agawam, authorities said.

## Researchers find two of three 1914 shipwrecks

**IL** CHICAGO — Michigan researchers have found the wreckage of two ships that disappeared into Lake Superior

in 1914 and hope the discovery will lead them to a third that sank at the same time, killing nearly 30 people aboard the trio of lumber-shipping vessels.

The Great Lakes Shipwreck Historical Society announced the discoveries after confirming details with other researchers.

The vessels owned by the Edward Hines Lumber Co. sank into the ice-cold lake on Nov. 18, 1914, when a storm swept through as they moved lumber from Baraga, Mich., to Tonawanda, N.Y. The steamship C.F. Curtis was towing the schooner barges Selden E. Marvin and Annie M. Peterson; all 28 people aboard were killed.

The society’s team found the wreck of the Curtis during the summer of 2021 and the Marvin a year later.

## State charges itself with harming protected land

**NJ** CLAYTON — New Jersey’s Department of Environmental Protection has charged itself with damaging habitat for threatened and endangered birds that it was supposed to protect. The work was designed to create habitat for one species of bird, but wound up destroying habitat for two others.

The department acknowledged it sent a violation notice and threatened penalties against its own Division of Fish and Wildlife regarding unauthorized work in February and March at the Glassboro Wildlife Management Area in Clayton, Gloucester County.

The work involved the clearing of vegetation and disturbance of soils on nearly three acres of what the state has called “exceptional resource value

freshwater wetlands.” Before the work was done, this land was considered suitable habitat for the barred owl, which is listed as a threatened species, and the red-shouldered hawk, an endangered species.

On its website, the department wrote that it sought to create 21 acres of habitat for the American woodcock, a member of the sandpiper family that uses its long, narrow beak to forage for earthworms in damp soil. But in doing so, the state destroyed mature oak and pine forests in and near wetlands, and filled in some wetlands, four conservation groups said in a letter to the department.

## Dawn Muslim call to prayer broadcast OK’d

**MN** MINNEAPOLIS — Minneapolis will allow broadcasts of the Muslim call to prayer at all hours, becoming the first major U.S. city to allow the announcement or “adhan” to be heard over speakers five times a day, year-round.

The Minneapolis City Council unanimously agreed to amend the city’s noise ordinance, which had prevented dawn and late evening calls at certain times of the year due to noise restrictions, the Minneapolis Star Tribune reported. The vote came during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan.

“The Constitution doesn’t sleep at night,” said Jaylani Hussein, executive director of the Minnesota chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, after the vote. He said the action in Minneapolis shows the world that a “nation founded on freedom of religion makes good on its promise.”

— From wire reports

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# When Elliott drives, all of NASCAR wins

Associated Press

NASCAR drivers don't need to be reminded what Chase Elliott's return to racing on Sunday at Martinsville Speedway means to those associated with the sport.

When Elliott is racing, everyone wins.

Voted NASCAR's most popular driver the past five seasons — a title inherited after Dale Earnhardt Jr.'s retirement — Elliott and his No. 9 Hendrick Motorsports car have become the face of the sport. When he's competing, more stock car racing fans are watching. And when he's not, fans seem to be tuning out in big numbers.

It's like stock racing's version of the Tiger Woods effect.

The dramatic drop in TV ratings in the six races Elliott missed after breaking his tibia in a snowboarding accident are indicative of the impact he has on the sport.

The percentage of television viewers dropped by 12.2% at Las Vegas, 15.1% at Phoenix, 14.5% at Atlanta, 16.1% at Austin, 41.8% at Richmond and 13.9% at Bristol compared to

last year's numbers, according to sportnaut.com. About 3.45 million people tuned into this year's spring race at Bristol Motor Speedway, down from slightly more than 4 million viewers in 2022.

"It impacts our TV ratings, I know that for sure," No. 4 Ford driver Kevin Harvick said of Elliott's absence. "There are more people who want to watch when Chase Elliott is here. And I think we're all thankful he's back.

"Whether you like somebody, don't like somebody, get along with somebody or don't, everybody has a piece of the puzzle that they fall into. And Chase, for us, is our biggest star and he's the guy who needs to be here every week for it all to make sense currently."

That's why NASCAR went to great lengths last week to promote Elliott's return to the track, quickly putting together a commercial after he announced last Wednesday he would race at Martinsville.

"Obviously he's the most popular driver. I mean you didn't see me get a TV commercial

when I came back," quipped Alex Bowman, driver of the No. 48 Chevrolet.

The TV ratings for the Martinsville race haven't been announced, but several drivers said there was a noticeable uptick in the excitement level at the half-mile, paperclip-shaped course with Elliott's return.

Elliott received the loudest ovation during introductions.

And while he wasn't much of a factor in the race, finishing in 10th place after a late-race push, it was clear he was thrilled to be back in his comfort zone after watching the last six weeks as a spectator.

"Really nice to be back and appreciate the warm welcome this weekend by everybody, so I appreciate that," Elliott said. "It definitely didn't go unnoticed."

Now the big question becomes if Elliott can race his way into the playoffs — something NASCAR frankly needs to keep drawing fans. He has plenty of chances left, including this weekend at Talladega Superspeedway, where he won last fall.

He was encouraged by his

ability to complete the 400-lap race on a surgically-repaired left leg that now has multiple screws holding it together. He views that as a positive sign moving forward.

"Yeah, it was pretty good, honestly," Elliott said. "It was about what I expected, so that's a good thing. It was warm. I've been sitting on the couch for six weeks, so I think that probably hurt me more than anything."

Teammate Kyle Larson, who won his first race at Martinsville on Sunday, was thrilled to have Elliott back. He believes it will help the entire Hendrick Motorsports team.

"He is very good at feeling his car, and I feel like he is pretty confident and usually the majority of the time right about the changes," Larson said. "I think when he can explain his car and say, 'Hey, this was better for us,' the crew chiefs on the other teams can really look at that change and look at how it might work on our cars and apply it to it. So he is definitely an asset for sure."

"He is one of the best drivers in the sport."

# QB Hurts getting one of richest deals in NFL history

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Jalen Hurts finished runner-up to Patrick Mahomes in AP NFL MVP voting and lost again to him when Mahomes' Kansas City Chiefs beat Hurts' Philadelphia Eagles in the Super Bowl.

But no QB is atop Hurts now — Philadelphia's franchise player is about to become the highest-paid player in average annual value in NFL history.

Hurts and the Eagles are set to sign one of the richest deals in NFL history, agreeing to a five-year, \$255 million extension, including \$179.3 million guaranteed, a person with knowledge of the situation told The Associated Press. The person spoke to

the AP on the condition of anonymity Monday because the deal had not been finalized at the time.

The Eagles announced later Monday on social media that "QB1 is here to stay."

"Keeping the main thing in Philly," they tweeted, referencing one of Hurts' mottos. "We've agreed to terms with Jalen Hurts on a 5-year extension through the 2028 season."

The 24-year-old Hurts was expected to receive \$51 million per season — topping Mahomes and Green Bay's Aaron Rodgers — and only Cleveland's Deshaun Watson (\$230M) and Arizona's Kyler Murray (\$189.5M) received more guaranteed

money in a single contract.

"Our job in this league is go out there and win football games and make money while doing it, and I'm glad the guys doing it the right way are getting the job security they deserve," Mahomes said Monday.

Those numbers could be topped soon depending on how the contract situation between the Baltimore Ravens and QB Lamar Jackson plays out. In a series of tweets, the star quarterback said he requested a trade as of March 2. On March 7, the Ravens put the nonexclusive franchise tag on Jackson and said they were still hopeful they could reach a long-term deal with him.

If Jackson does come back without a new deal, he could play this season on Baltimore's \$32.4 million franchise tag.

Los Angeles Chargers QB Justin Herbert and Cincinnati Bengals QB Joe Burrow could each look to Hurts' deal as a framework for their looming extensions.

The Eagles know where Hurts will be this season.

Hurts delivered a record performance in the Super Bowl, throwing for 304 yards and a touchdown, running for 70 yards and three scores, and adding a game-tying two-point conversion. Hurts and Mahomes were the first Black QBs to face off in a Super Bowl.



# Green ejected as Kings take 2-0 lead

Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — As the referees went to the replay monitor to determine whether Draymond Green should be ejected for his hard stomp, the Sacramento Kings took that time to regroup and make sure they didn't lose focus down the stretch.

De'Aaron Fox and crew took over from there and delivered the playoff newcomer Kings a 114-106 win Monday night, their second straight win over Golden State.

Fox scored 24 points and made a backbreaking three-pointer that has the defending NBA champions reeling.

"I think that brought us together," Fox said. "We huddled up and were like, 'We have to win this game.' Everybody thought he'd be ejected. When that happens, usually that team comes together and goes on a run. But we were able to negate that."

The Kings closed the game strong after Green was ejected for a flagrant foul against Domantas Sabonis. They became the first team to take a 2-0 series lead over the Warriors in the Stephen Curry era.

The Warriors will try to get back into the series when it

shifts to San Francisco for Game 3 on Thursday night.

"Got to embrace it," Curry said. "You do this for as long as we have ... we have to stay together and locked in."

The game got heated in the fourth quarter when Green stomped on Sabonis' chest with 7:03 to play.

With the Warriors pushing the ball up court and Sabonis on the ground, Green took a hard step right on Sabonis' chest.

"My leg got grabbed. Second time in two nights," said Green, referring to a play in Game 1 with Malik Monk. "Referees just watch it. I have to land my foot somewhere."

Sabonis was called for a technical foul for grabbing Green's leg and Green was given a flagrant-2 foul and an automatic ejection.

During the review, fans in Sacramento yelled derogatory chants toward Green, who egged them on by waving his hands, holding a hand to his ear calling for louder cheers and standing on a chair.

Sabonis finished the game but coach Mike Brown said he was undergoing X-rays afterward to make sure there wasn't damage to his ribs or lungs.

Now it will be up to the NBA to

determine whether Green will face a possible suspension.

"It'll be interesting to see what the NBA does after they review it," Brown said.

The Warriors fought back to tie the game before the Kings went on a 17-8 run to run away with it to the delight of the towel-waving crowd.

Fox's three-pointer made it 107-101 with 2:17 to play, and the Kings were in control from there. Davion Mitchell put it away with another three that made it 112-103 with 1:18 left.

"They played better than we did down the stretch," Golden State coach Steve Kerr said. "They played more physical than us tonight."

**76ers 96, Nets 84:** Joel Embiid pumped his fist in the air and exhorted the Philly crowd to get louder as Tobias Harris and Tyrese Maxey hit game-changing threes and stymied Brooklyn runs with clutch boards.

"It's as happy as I've ever seen him since I've been here with other guys making shots," third-year coach Doc Rivers said. "He was really celebrating his teammates tonight."

With good reason. For a franchise player who was raised in the organization to Trust the

Process, Embiid has finally come around to learning how to trust his teammates.

Maxey hit six three-pointers and scored 33 points, Embiid and Harris had 20 apiece, and the Philadelphia 76ers took a 2-0 lead in their Eastern Conference playoff series against the Brooklyn Nets.

Embiid, the two-time NBA scoring champion, was relatively quiet offensively, going 6-for-11 from the floor, but he did just about everything else. The MVP finalist had 19 rebounds, seven assists and three blocks.

"A lot of people think I just love scoring the basketball," Embiid said. "I don't think it's true. I enjoy winning."

Embiid's increased faith in his teammates is one reason the third-seeded Sixers expect a deep run in the playoffs.

"Better teammates help," Rivers said with a laugh. "Maturity and preparation. We work on it every day."

Harris had 12 rebounds. James Harden scored only eight points on 3-for-13 shooting for the Sixers after a sensational Game 1 effort.

Game 3 is Thursday in New York.

Cam Johnson led the Nets with 28 points.

## Grizzlies' Jackson voted defensive player of the year

Associated Press

Nobody blocked more shots per game, nor had better defensive numbers at the rim this season, than Memphis' Jaren Jackson Jr.

And voters noticed.

The Memphis big man was announced Monday night as the NBA's defensive player of the year, becoming the second player to win the award while wearing a Grizzlies uniform. He joins Marc Gasol in that club, after the Spaniard did it a decade ago.

Jackson led the league with 3.0 blocks per game this season, after finishing fifth in the defensive player of the year voting last season. He got 56 first-place votes and 391 voting points to finish ahead of runner-up Brook Lopez of the Milwaukee Bucks, who got 31 first-place votes and 309 points. Cleveland's Evan Mobley — in just his second NBA season — was third with eight first-place votes and 101 points.

"Team defense really helps us. It goes a long way," Jackson

said on the TNT broadcast that announced the award.

The shooting percentage that Jackson allowed at the rim — 46.9% — was the best in the league among those with at least 300 shots defended there, and was an obvious plus on Memphis' path to the No. 2 seed in the Western Conference playoffs.

"Hands down, no-brainer, JJ's definitely defensive player of the year," Memphis coach Taylor Jenkins said earlier this month.

Jenkins could get into all the analytics that he wants, but the simple eye test also tells the story. Jackson wasn't ready for the start of the season because his surgically repaired right foot needed more recovery time.

And Memphis was, well, not great on defense while waiting for Jackson to get ready.

"He missed the first (15) games of the year. We were really bad defensively," Jenkins said. "He comes back into the lineup and things turn the corner drastically."

# Kings edge Oilers in OT to take early series lead

Associated Press

EDMONTON, Alberta — Alex Iafallo scored in OT to lift the Los Angeles Kings to a 4-3 victory over the Edmonton Oilers to open their first-round playoff series Monday night.

Iafallo scored a power-play goal at 9:19 of OT by converting Victor Arvidsson's feed from behind the net.

"Alex is kind of our unsung hero," Kings head coach Todd McLellan said. "He cleans up. (Assistant coach) Trent Yawney always says he cleans up a lot of messes. Errors, mistakes for teammates, he seems to be the cleanup guy. But on the other side of it, he has the ability to score. He can go up and down the lineup, penalty kills, blocks shots."

Adrian Kempe scored twice and Anze Kopitar had a goal and three assists for Los Angeles, which held Oilers captain and NHL scoring leader Connor McDavid scoreless.

Kings goaltender Joonas Korpisalo made 38 saves for the win.

Leon Draisaitl countered with a pair of goals and Evan Bouchard also scored for the Oilers (50-23-9), who ranked second in the Pacific Division this season ahead of the third-seeded Kings (47-25-10).

Oilers starter Stuart Skinner stopped 31 shots in his NHL playoff debut.

Edmonton defenseman Vincent Desharnais was penalized in overtime for tripping Blake Lizotte, although Lizotte appeared to step on a broken stick on the ice and fall.

"My initial thought on the play was that the player stepped on the broken stick, but those are the things you know, that happen in the playoffs sometimes," Oilers head coach Jay Woodcroft said.

The Oilers almost ended it at 1:54 of OT, but officials ruled Ryan McLeod's shot from the blue line deflected off Derek Ryan's high stick.

The Oilers will try even the series in Wednesday's Game 2.

**Bruins 3, Panthers 1:** Brad Marchand scored his 50th career

playoff goal, David Pastrnak and Jake DeBrusk also scored, and the NHL-best Boston Bruins opened the playoffs by beating the Florida Panthers 3-1 on Monday night.

Linus Ullmark, a Vezina Trophy candidate who led the league in wins (40), goals-against average (1.89) and save percentage (.938), stopped 31 shots and Tyler Bertuzzi added two assists for Boston, which controlled the game even with captain Patrice Bergeron sitting out because of illness.

Matthew Tkachuk scored for the Panthers and Alex Lyon made 26 saves, but gave up Marchand's goal on a relatively easy shot.

**Wild 3, Stars 2 (2OT):** Ryan Hartman scored 12:20 into the second overtime, and visiting Minnesota beat Dallas in their playoff opener.

Hartman gathered the puck in front of the crease and got it past Jake Oettinger at around 1 a.m. local time, ending a more than four-hour game in which both 24-year-old goalies had

spectacular performances.

Filip Gustavsson stopped 52 shots for the Wild, including 12 in the third period and 17 in the first overtime. He started the opener ahead of three-time Stanley Cup winner Marc-André Fleury after the goalie tandem had split games throughout most of the season.

**Hurricanes 2, Islanders 1:** Sebastian Aho and Stefan Noesen scored power-play goals to help host Carolina open its first-round playoff series with the win.

Antti Raanta finished with 25 saves to lead a defensive effort that saw the Hurricanes turn away every chance the Islanders had with a man advantage.

Ryan Pulock beat Raanta early in the second period for the Islanders, a big goal coming moments after Carolina had taken a 2-0 lead on Noesen's score. But that ended up being the last time either team found the net, setting up a third-period grind to the final horn.

# Rangers blank Royals after deGrom leaves with injury

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Jacob deGrom exited with a sore right wrist after pitching four spotless innings, and two Texas Rangers relievers completed a one-hitter Monday night in a 4-0 victory over the Kansas City Royals.

The Rangers said deGrom was removed as a precaution. The two-time NL Cy Young Award winner struck out five and walked one, throwing 39 of his 58 pitches for strikes.

"I felt it a little bit warming up," deGrom said. "I thought it was going to loosen up and it actually tightened up a little bit as the game went on.

"We're playing it smart. Could I have kept going? Probably. But it was lingering and it got a little bit worse as the game went on. I just want to play it safe. We've got a long season ahead of us."

Josh Jung launched a three-run homer in the first inning and Marcus Semien

added a solo shot in the third. Dane Dunning (1-0) struck out five and walked none in 4 ⅓ innings of relief.

**Braves 2, Padres 0:** Atlanta left-hander Max Fried held sputtering San Diego in check for five innings in his return from the injured list, and the visiting Braves earned their seventh straight win.

Austin Riley hit a two-run homer for the Braves. Fried (1-0) allowed four hits in his first big league start since he strained his left hamstring on opening day. A.J. Minter pitched the ninth for his fourth save.

**Brewers 7, Mariners 3:** Milwaukee ace Corbin Burnes pitched 5 ⅓ innings before leaving with a left pectoral strain, and the visiting Brewers earned their fourth win in five games.

**Mets 8, Dodgers 6:** Daniel Vogelbach homered as visiting New York rallied for its fifth straight win.

**Astros 9, Blue Jays 2:** Jake Meyers hit a three-run homer in host Houston's sev-

en-run first inning.

**Reds 8, Rays 1:** TJ Friedl drove in four runs, and host Cincinnati beat Tampa Bay after Reds right-hander Hunter Greene departed with a leg injury.

**Angels 5, Red Sox 4:** Hunter Renfroe hit a three-run homer, and visiting Los Angeles avoided a four-game series sweep.

**Cubs 10, Athletics 1:** Patrick Wisdom hit two more homers and drove in four runs, leading Chicago to the road win.

**Pirates 14, Rockies 3:** Andrew McCutchen homered for visiting Pittsburgh, and Mark Mathias had a career-high four hits.

**Diamondbacks 6, Cardinals 3:** Pavin Smith hit his first career grand slam, sending visiting Arizona to the win.

**Marlins 4, Giants 3:** Jorge Soler hit a two-run homer in the seventh inning, leading host Miami to its fifth win in six games.