

Sex assault numbers up for most services

Associated Press

WASHINGTON—The number of reported sexual assaults across the military inched up by about 1% last year, as a sharp decline in Army numbers offset large increases in the other three services, U.S. officials told The Associated Press.

The small overall uptick is significantly less than the 13% jump the Defense Department saw in 2021, but it's overshadowed by the fact the Air Force, the Navy and the Marine Corps all had more reports last year than the previous year, according to the two U.S. officials.

Because the Army is much larger than the other three services, its 9% drop in reported sexual assaults last year drove the overall military increase down. That large decrease comes a year after Army leaders saw a nearly 26% jump in reports involving soldiers — the largest increase for that service since 2013.

The officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the Pentagon's report on the cases had not yet been publicly released, said the Air Force saw the largest increase in reported assaults during the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, at 13%, while the Navy had a 9% jump and the Marine Corps went up by about 4%. The Pentagon report

is expected to be released Thursday.

Overall, there were more than 8,942 reports of sexual assaults involving service members during the 2022 fiscal year, a slight increase over the 8,866 the year before.

The Pentagon and the military services have come under increasing criticism and pressure from members of Congress to reduce sexual assaults and harassment in the military. The services have long struggled to come up with programs to prevent sexual assaults and to encourage reporting, including a number of new initiatives over the past year.

Defense officials have long argued that an increase in reported assaults is a positive trend because so many people are reluctant to report them, both in the military and in society as a whole. Greater reporting, they have said, shows there is more confidence in the reporting system, greater comfort with the support for victims and a growing number of offenders who are being held accountable.

It's unclear whether the latest increase in reports represents a growing problem or if those who said they were assaulted were just more willing to come forward.

While the military has made inroads in

making it easier and safer for service members to come forward, it has had far less success reducing the assaults, which have increased nearly every year since 2006. And Army leaders, as an example, have acknowledged that issues such as sexual assaults, suicides and other problems have an impact on recruiting.

Army officials were alarmed as they saw the growing numbers last year and began trying to implement new programs, and by late fall they said some changes were starting to work.

They said one change involved a training program that soldiers get when they report to their first duty station. It is rolled out right away, and it has soldiers acting out dangerous situations and emphasizes training on how to respond. All of the services have been struggling with recruiting.

The Army officials also said they were beefing up evaluation programs that grade unit leaders, including randomly picking peers and others to do the assessments.

According to officials, the number of Air Force sexual assault reports increased from 1,701 in 2021 to 1,928 last year, while the Navy went from 1,883 to 2,052, the Marine Corps went from 1,201 to 1,244 and the Army decreased from 4,081 to 3,718.

US, Philippines practice air assaults on small islands

By SETH ROBSON

Stars and Stripes

SAN ANTONIO, Philippines — U.S. soldiers and Marines and Filipino troops demonstrated an air assault on three islands guarding a key strait near Taiwan, sending a message to China that America is ready to defend its ally's sea territory, according to the force's commander.

Hawaii-based troops dropped onto the islands of Fuga, Calayan and Basco, north of the Philippines' main island of Luzon, between April 21 and Monday, U.S. Army spokesman Maj.

Jeff Tolbert told Stars and Stripes on Wednesday. They are assigned to Company A, 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division and the 3rd Marine Littoral Regiment.

The air assault drills, which included Filipino troops, were part of the allies' annual Balikatan exercise that concludes on Friday. Described by the U.S. military as the largest-ever version of the exercise, this year's drills involve 17,000 troops from both countries.

America is prepared to help the Philippines defend its sea territory, Maj. Gen. Joseph

Ryan, commander of 25th ID, which took part in the air assault on Basco, said Wednesday.

"I think these island air assaults were a great demonstration of that," he said.

Troops staged for the air assaults at Fort Magsaysay, north of Manila, Tolbert said. The fort is one of nine military installations where American forces may operate under the 2014 Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement.

A force of 200 U.S. and Filipino troops flew to the USS Miguel Keith, an expeditionary mobile base, off Luzon and

boarded MV-22 Osprey aircraft of Marine Medium Tiltrotor Squadron 268, also based in Hawaii, for the drills, Tolbert said.

A High Mobility Artillery Rocket System, or HIMARS, landed at Calayan in an Army landing craft and went through mission procedures without firing, he said. At Basco, the weapon was brought into port but not offloaded.

The islands where the Balikatan air assault demonstration took place are just south of the 70-mile-wide Bashi Channel between the Philippines and Taiwan.

US: Iran's navy seizes oil tanker in Gulf of Oman

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Iran's navy seized a Marshall Islands-flagged oil tanker in the Gulf of Oman on Thursday amid wider tensions over Tehran's nuclear program, the latest such capture in a waterway crucial for global energy supplies.

The U.S. Navy's Mideast-based 5th Fleet identified the vessel as the *Advantage Sweet*. Satellite tracking data for the vessel from MarineTraffic.com showed it in the Gulf of Oman just north of Oman's capital, Muscat, on Thursday afternoon. It had just come from Kuwait and listed its destination as Houston, Texas.

The *Advantage Sweet* issued a distress call at 1:15 p.m. while in international waters as Iran seized the vessel, the Navy said.

"Iran's actions are contrary to international law and disruptive to regional security and stability," the 5th Fleet said in a statement. "Iran should immediately release the oil tanker."

The Navy initially said Iran's paramilitary Revolutionary Guard seized the vessel, but an American naval aircraft later confirmed that Iran's navy captured the ship, 5th Fleet spokesman Cmdr. Timothy Hawkins told The Associated Press.

Iran's state-run IRNA news

agency said the seizure came after an "unknown ship collided with an Iranian vessel last night in the Persian Gulf, causing several Iranian crew members to go missing and get injured." It did not identify the other ship involved in the alleged collision.

The *Advantage Sweet* had been in the Persian Gulf on Wednesday, but its track showed no unusual behavior as it transited through the Strait of Hormuz, through which a fifth of all oil traded passes. Iran has made allegations in other seizures that later fell apart as it became clear Tehran was trying to leverage the capture as a chip to negotiate with

foreign nations.

Iran's "harassing activity within the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman is commensurate with an established pattern of behavior that has seen Iran target vessels as a result of ongoing disputes," maritime security firm Dryad Global said.

The 5th Fleet said the Iranian seizure was at least the fifth commercial vessel taken by Tehran in the last two years.

"Iran's continued harassment of vessels and interference with navigational rights in regional waters are a threat to maritime security and the global economy," it added.

US nuclear-powered sub visits Iceland for 1st time

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

A nuclear-powered U.S. Navy submarine briefly visited Iceland this week, after the NATO ally approved such visits for the first time amid increased Russian underwater activity in the North Atlantic.

The Los Angeles-class submarine USS *San Juan* stopped for supplies and personnel in waters off Iceland's west coast on Wednesday, U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa/U.S. 6th Fleet said in a statement the same day.

The submarine visit came as the top U.S. military officer in Europe told Congress on Wednesday that much of Russia's military, notably its undersea force, had not been degraded as a result of the war in Ukraine.

"Their (submarine) patrols into the Atlantic and throughout the Atlantic are at a high level most of the time ... at a

higher level than we've seen in years," Army Gen. Christopher Cavoli told the House Armed Services Committee.

Last week, Iceland announced it will allow U.S. submarines to occasionally visit, with the assurance that the country and its territorial waters will remain free of nuclear weapons.

The visits would help strengthen surveillance and response capabilities by allied countries, "which ensures better situational awareness and increases the safety of underwater infrastructure such as submarine cables in the waters around Iceland," the Icelandic Foreign Ministry said in an April 18 statement.

San Juan does not carry nuclear weapons. It's armed with Tomahawk missiles and MK-48 torpedoes, according to Navy.mil. It has a crew of about 143 and is homeported in Groton, Conn.

Ex-Pentagon officials' work for other countries probed

BY DOUG G. WARE
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Four of the Pentagon's top lawyers were grilled Wednesday by senators over concerns about how often the Defense Department is allowing former employees to work for foreign governments, and whether that endangers national security.

"A former Navy SEAL earned \$258,000 a year as a special operations adviser for Saudi Arabia. A [former] Air Force colonel received \$300,000 a year to work for a Russian-owned satellite company," said Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass. "They are purchasing favors, influence and a good name for themselves in Washington, whether that's in America's national security interests or not."

Warren's comment was part of a Senate Armed Services Committee subpanel hearing on public integrity and whether existing anti-corruption laws are sufficient.

The committee noted a recent

Washington Post investigation that found the Defense Department is approving 95% of requests from retired military members or civilian officials to work for foreign governments. Some of the former defense officials are going to work at companies in other countries and some of the Pentagon's approvals allow them to go to countries with questionable human rights records.

Warren, the chairwoman of the committee's subpanel on personnel, said the report shows an "ugly underbelly" at the Pentagon.

The Pentagon and State Department conduct background and security checks on all applicants before giving the approvals, but there's no way to monitor their activities once they go to work in other countries, the Post investigation noted.

"The standard is — would approving the employment be [harmful] to the national security interests of the United States," Navy General Counsel John Coffey said.

VA, Dems decry spending cuts in GOP bill

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A bill to raise the debt ceiling narrowly passed the Republican-led House on Wednesday despite protests from veterans and their allies on Capitol Hill who say the legislation will drastically slash health care for former service members.

The House voted 217-215 in favor of the “Limit, Save, Grow” Act about an hour after veterans joined House Democrats to speak out against the controversial bill in front of the Capitol building. The legislation freezes spending at last year’s amounts for a decade in exchange for raising the nation’s borrowing limit into next year.

While the bill does not specifically mention cuts to veterans programs, they presumably would fall under the cap on nondefense spending and be subject to the Appropriations Committee’s budget knife.

The Department of Veterans Affairs projected the bill would reduce its budget by 22% and immediately rescind \$2 billion in funding to support veterans. Some lawmakers said Wednesday that the proposal will result in 30 million fewer veteran outpatient visits and

significantly increase the backlog for benefit claims.

“It’s cruel and it hurts our heroes,” said Rep. Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif.

The bill is destined to fail in the Democrat-controlled Senate but Republicans hope to use it to boost their negotiating power as the U.S. approaches a default on its debt as soon as the summer.

Rep. Mark Takano, of California, the top Democrat on the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee, said Republicans were reviving the same tactics that stalled last year’s passage of the PACT Act, which expanded VA health care and benefits for veterans exposed to burn pits and other toxins.

“They are holding veterans benefits hostage by again pointing to their concerns about fiscal responsibility. They fancy themselves to be fiscally responsible,” he said. “But ultimately, they’re seeking to balance the budget on the backs of veterans no matter what the consequences.”

More than 20 veterans service organizations sent a letter to Congress on Tuesday urging lawmakers to vote against the legislation unless it included protections for VA funding. The VA estimated it would lose 81,000 jobs

across the Veterans Health Administration and 6,000 staff in the Veterans Benefits Administration if the bill becomes law.

The spending cuts would affect housing support for 50,000 veterans, prevent the construction of health care facilities, delay the opening of five new national cemeteries that serve veterans and deprive veterans of mental health, substance use and other health services.

Veterans in Texas, California and Florida would be hardest hit by the potential reduction in outpatient appointments, according to an analysis by Democratic staff on the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee.

Rep. Rosa DeLauro, of Connecticut, the top Democrat on the House Appropriations Committee, said Republicans on Tuesday night refused to listen to veteran concerns as they worked on the bill for hours in the House Rules Committee.

“Given the look on their faces, I believe I was the one to inform them of the immediate \$2 billion rescission that robs veterans of timely access to health care services,” she said. “I do not think they know what is in their own bill.”

US economy’s 1.1% growth rate a sign of slowdown

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. economy slowed sharply from January through March, decelerating to just a 1.1% annual pace as higher interest rates hammered the housing market and businesses reduced their inventories.

Thursday’s estimate from the Commerce Department showed that the nation’s gross domestic product — the broadest gauge of economic output — weakened after growing 3.2% from July through September and

2.6% from October through December.

But consumer spending, which accounts for about 70% of U.S. economic activity, remained resilient, growing at a 3.7% annual pace, the fastest such rate in nearly two years. Spending on goods, in particular, was solid: It rose at its fastest pace since the second quarter of 2021.

Economists had been expecting overall GDP to grow at a 1.9% pace in the January-March quarter. Behind much of the quarter’s slowdown was a sharp reduction in

business inventories, which subtracted roughly 2.3 percentage points from overall growth. Companies typically slash their inventories when they anticipate a coming economic downturn.

The economy’s slowdown reflects the impact of the Federal Reserve’s aggressive drive to tame inflation, with nine interest rate hikes over the past year. The surge in borrowing costs is expected to send the economy into a recession sometime this year.

Jobless claims fall again amid strong labor market

Associated Press

Applications for unemployment benefits in the U.S. fell last week as the labor market continues to show strength despite some weakness in other parts of the economy.

The number of Americans filing for jobless claims for the week ending April 22 fell by 16,000 to 230,000, the Labor Department reported Thursday.

The four-week moving average of claims, which flattens some of the week-to-week

volatility, fell by 6,000 to 236,000. At the start of the year, weekly claims were running around 200,000 and they have gradually moved higher.

Overall, 1.86 million people were collecting unemployment benefits the week that ended April 15, 3,000 fewer than the previous week.

The weekly claims numbers are a proxy for layoffs, and continue to show that American workers are enjoying unusual job se-

curity despite rising interest rates, economic uncertainty and fears of a looming recession.

The U.S. job market has remained healthy in spite of other weak spots in the broader economy. The unemployment rate came in at 3.5% last month, a tick above January’s half-century low 3.4%. Employers added 236,000 jobs in March, down from 472,000 in January and 326,000 in February, but still strong by historic standards.

Along the Mississippi, sandbags and exit plans

Associated Press

DES MOINES, Iowa — Some residents along the swelling Upper Mississippi River evacuated their homes this week while others scrambled Wednesday to stack sandbags in preparation for what forecasters say could be near-record flooding caused by the rapid melting of a huge snow-pack in northern Minnesota.

A small number of people had to leave their homes in Wisconsin as the river kept rising. In the small riverfront community of Buffalo, Iowa, residents — wary of the devastating floods of 2019 — were stockpiling sandbags as they braced for flooding this weekend and early next week.

In the city of Campbell, located on an island in the Mississippi and Black rivers near La Crosse, Wis., Fire Chief Nate Melby said some residents had to use canoes to reach their homes.

Melby estimated a half-dozen people have decided to evacuate after the rising waters forced emergency workers to cut power and gas to their homes. Emergency officials have not issued mandatory evacuation orders, though, he said.

“We’re putting up a good fight,” Melby said. “We’re hanging in there.”

Amy Werner, who lives on the northern tip of French Island, has been using six pumps to remove river water from a crawl space. Werner said it’s been a 24-hour-a-day battle, with friends and her parents taking turns monitoring the pumps during the nights. She estimated the pumps are removing 25,000 to 30,000 gallons of water per hour.

“It’s pretty stressful,” Werner said. “It’s bubbling up from the ground. I’ve been living my life by every hour for about 10 days

now, and it’s not over yet. (But) so far we’re holding our own.”

The Mississippi was expected to be especially high along parts of Wisconsin and to crest Wednesday or early Thursday in La Crosse, a city of about 50,000 people.

In Iowa, forecasts predict the river will reach the third-highest level ever recorded when it crests Saturday about 160 miles to the south in Davenport.

About 60 miles downriver from La Crosse at Prairie du Chien, the Mississippi was a little more than 6 feet above flood stage Wednesday morning. The water was expected to continue rising each day until Saturday, when it’s expected to crest at just under 25 feet. The record high was 25 feet, 3 inches in April 1965.

Video footage shot by WKBT-TV on Tuesday showed water at

least a foot deep covering city streets and yards.

Crawford County Emergency Management Specialist Marc Myhre said that some families have evacuated and are staying with other family members, but as of Tuesday officials hadn’t issued mandatory evacuation orders.

In Iowa, improved floodwalls and other temporary measures should prevent significant problems, but crews were constantly monitoring the river, officials in the cities of Dubuque, Davenport and Burlington said. Forecasts call for only a chance of light showers later in the week.

Davenport workers set up temporary sand-filled barriers to protect downtown. In 2019, barriers failed and allowed water to rush into parts of downtown, but officials said this time the barrier will be much deeper and higher.

Appeals court rejects Trump’s bid to block Pence testimony

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A federal appeals court on Wednesday night moved former Vice President Mike Pence closer to appearing before a grand jury investigating efforts to undo the results of the 2020 presidential election, rejecting a bid by lawyers for former President Donald Trump to block the testimony.

It was not immediately clear what day Pence might appear before the grand jury, which for months has been investigating the events preceding the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol and efforts by Trump and his allies to subvert the election outcome. But Pence’s testimony, coming as he inches toward a likely entrance in the 2024 presidential race, would be a milestone moment in the investigation and would likely give prosecutors a key first-person account as they press forward with their inquiry.

The order from the three-judge

panel of the U.S. Court of Appeals of the District of Columbia Circuit was sealed and none of the parties are mentioned by name in online court records. But the appeal in the sealed case was filed just days after a lower-court judge had directed Pence to testify over objections from the Trump team.

A lawyer for Pence and a spokesman for Trump did not immediately return emails seeking comment, and a spokesman for the Justice Department special counsel leading the investigation declined to comment.

Pence was subpoenaed to testify earlier this year, but lawyers for Trump objected, citing executive privilege concerns. A judge in March refused to block Pence’s appearance, though he did side with the former vice president’s constitutional claims that he could not be forced to answer questions related to his role as presiding over the Senate’s certification of votes on Jan. 6.

DeSantis: Disney lawsuit just politically motivated

Associated Press

JERUSALEM — Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis on Thursday shrugged off Disney’s lawsuit against him as politically motivated, and said that it was time for the iconic company to stop enjoying favorable treatment in his state.

Disney sued DeSantis on Wednesday over the Republican’s appointment of a board of supervisors in its self-governed theme park district, alleging the governor waged a “targeted campaign of government retaliation” after the company opposed a law critics call, “Don’t Say Gay.” The legal filing is the latest salvo in a more than year-old feud between Disney and DeSantis that has engulfed the governor in criticism as he prepares to launch an expected 2024 presidential bid.

“They’re upset because they’re having to live by the

same rules as everybody else. They don’t want to pay the same taxes as everybody else and they want to be able to control things without proper oversight,” DeSantis said during a visit to Israel. “The days of putting one company on a pedestal with no accountability are over in the state of Florida.”

DeSantis was speaking on the third leg of an international trip meant to burnish his foreign policy credentials ahead of a potential campaign for the Republican presidential nomination as a key rival to former President Donald Trump.

DeSantis has dived headlong into the fray with Disney, a major driver of tourism and a font for employment in Florida, as business leaders and White House rivals have bashed his stance as a rejection of the small-government tenets of conservatism.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Clinic owner charged with practicing without license

CA LOS ANGELES — A Los Angeles man has been accused of falsely claiming to be a doctor and practicing medicine on thousands of people, offering treatment for serious medical conditions including cancer, prosecutors said.

Stephan Gevorkian, 44, faces five felony counts of practicing medicine without a certification, the Los Angeles County District Attorney's Office said in a statement Monday.

Gevorkian owns and operates Pathways Medical in North Hollywood. The clinic conducts blood tests and offers treatment for conditions including cancer and viral infections, prosecutors said.

His arrest came after an undercover investigator received a consultation last November during which Gevorkian failed to accurately address abnormal levels of a hormone that could indicate a serious medical condition, the DA's statement said.

Woman sentenced in virtual currency scheme

NH CONCORD — The founder of a satanic church who lost a run for sheriff in 2020 as a Republican was sentenced in U.S. District Court to 18 months in prison Tuesday for operating an unlicensed money transmitting business.

Aria DiMezzo, of Keene, a 35-year-old self-described satanist, was also ordered to pay a fine of \$5,000 and to forfeit more than \$14,000 along with 1.93 bitcoins, currently worth about \$55,000.

Between June 2020 and Janu-

ary 2021, DiMezzo charged a fee to exchange mostly U.S. dollars for bitcoin or other virtual currency, recruiting customers on websites, according to investigators. They said customers sent her money through bank accounts in her name and in the name of an organization she created, the Reformed Satanic Church.

DiMezzo sold more than \$3 million worth of virtual currency, did not register her operation as a money transmitting business and failed to comply with required regulations, according to prosecutors.

Bill proposes funds for armed school 'sentinels'

TX AUSTIN — Texas schools could offer stipends of up to \$25,000 to staff members who add the role of armed campus "sentinels" to their regular duties under a proposal advanced Tuesday by state lawmakers in response to the Uvalde classroom attack last year.

With U.S. mass shootings on a record pace so far in 2023, there have been new calls among some lawmakers for more armed personnel in schools. Also on Tuesday, Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., proposed an \$80 million federal program to fund armed officers in all U.S. schools.

Texas already lets teachers carry guns under a voluntary program that requires firearm lessons but has drawn relatively few takers. Under the new proposal, armed personnel must also train in identifying students with mental health issues.

The legislation, which overwhelmingly passed the Texas House with bipartisan support,

now goes to the Senate, where its prospects are uncertain.

New gun law already faces court challenge

WA OLYMPIA — Washington Gov. Jay Inslee signed a trio of bills meant to address gun violence Tuesday, one banning the sale of certain semi-automatic rifles, one imposing a 10-day waiting period on firearms purchases and one clearing the way for lawsuits against gun makers or sellers in certain cases.

A crowd of gun-control activists and Democratic lawmakers broke into cheers as Inslee signed the measures, which he said would not solve all gun violence but would save lives.

The sales ban, which took effect immediately, drew a quick legal challenge from the Second Amendment Foundation, based in Bellevue, Wash.; and the Firearms Policy Coalition, based in Sacramento, Calif. The groups sued in U.S. District Court in Tacoma, Wash., on Tuesday, saying the law violates the constitutional right to keep and bear arms.

Pot shots: Lawmakers tackle illicit weed shops

NY ALBANY — New York Gov. Kathy Hochul and legislative leaders were looking at ways to crack down on illicit pot shops threatening the state's fledgling legal market for recreational marijuana as part of negotiations on the overdue budget.

Hochul, a Democrat, told reporters at the state Capitol on Tuesday that she expected the budget negotiations to wrap up soon. It was due April 1.

Hundreds of unauthorized pot shops have opened in New York City — competing with legal dispensaries whose products are heavily taxed. The illicit stores and trucks have been multiplying even as New York slowly works to get its legal market established.

Hochul said she wants to give state tax officials and the Office of Cannabis Management enforcement tools to shut down or fine illegal pot shops, a proposal outlined in a bill she unveiled last month.

State first to pass 'right to repair' for farmers

CO DENVER — Democratic Gov. Jared Polis signed a bill Tuesday making Colorado the first state to ensure farmers can fix their own tractors and combines with a "right to repair" law — which compels manufacturers to provide the necessary manuals, tools, parts and software.

Colorado took the lead on the issue following a nationwide outcry from farmers that manufacturers such as John Deere blocked them from making fixes and forced them to wait precious days for an official serviceman to arrive — waits that imperiled profits.

Lawmakers in at least 10 other states have introduced similar legislation.

Manufacturers and dealerships raised concerns that providing tools and information to farmers would allow equipment owners to illegally crank up the horsepower and bypass emissions controls — putting operator safety and the environment at risk.

— From wire reports

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Sweeper pitch taking over isn't actually new

Associated Press

Bob Melvin was talking about the improvement of Padres reliever Steven Wilson, when the San Diego skipper dropped in some cool-kid lingo that's making the rounds in Major League Baseball these days.

"The sweeper's ended up being a really big pitch for him," Melvin said.

A few seconds later, Melvin was asked a simple question: What exactly is a sweeper?

Busted.

"I don't know," Melvin said, laughing. "It's new-age baseball talk. A slider's probably got a little more depth and the sweeper probably comes across a little more. I've made that joke, too. I still write it down as a slider."

Move over slider, curve, slurve and screwball, there's a new (ish) breaking ball that's all the rage in MLB: the sweeper. Angels superstar Shohei Ohtani uses it, as does Padres starter

Yu Darvish, Yankees lefty Nestor Cortes and dozens of other pitchers.

To be truthful, it's not really a new pitch, but a new term to describe a certain type of breaking ball that's been around a long time. And it's one fans are surely noticing more this season, after MLB's Statcast created a new classification for the pitch — meaning the "sweeper" is showing up on broadcasts and scoreboards just like "curveball" and "slider."

Melvin, 61, might joke that he doesn't understand the "new-age baseball talk," but the veteran manager has a pretty good grasp of what makes a good sweeper. Its main movement is side-to-side, and it doesn't plunge downward like the normal slider or curveball.

Ohtani's sweeper is considered one of the best in today's game, with a good one producing around 20 inches of horizontal movement. But there are

dozens of hurlers experimenting with the pitch, including Mets reliever Adam Ottavino.

Ottavino, 37, is one of the O.G.'s in the current sweeper world, throwing a variation of the pitch for the better part of 15 years.

He grew up in New York City idolizing breaking-ball pitchers like David Cone and Orlando Hernandez on the Yankees, and wanted to have his own big bender. The right-hander already had a conventional curveball, but because the ball would first rise out of his hand before dropping, it was easier for hitters to differentiate it from his other pitches.

"Some of the hitters I roomed with in the minors said if it didn't do that, maybe it would be more effective," Ottavino said. "So I tried to keep it low, changing the break from up to down to more right to left."

Ottavino also credited former Giants reliever Sergio Romo for

his sweeper, saying it provided some inspiration.

"I tried to make it as big as I could and I think I stumbled on to something there," Ottavino said. "Now you see a lot more people doing it."

Ottavino's description of the sweeper is a good example of why it's such a coveted pitch. Sometimes, big breaking balls are easier for hitters to detect, so a tighter spin that looks more like a fastball is useful. Pitchers also have more advanced tools than ever to help them fine-tune the angle of the break on their pitches, including high-speed cameras that can measure the amount of spin and the axis of rotation for each pitch.

Wilson said the analytics he's seen indicate there's more swing-and-miss with the slider, but the sweeper produces more soft contact.

"It's a little bit risk vs. reward," Wilson said. "But I think it works for me."

Career farmhand Maggi gets into MLB game after 13 years

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — After 13 years in the minor leagues, Drew Maggi was greeted with a standing ovation when he made his major league debut for the Pittsburgh Pirates on Wednesday night.

Maggi, 33, who played 1,154 games in the minors, pinch-hit for five-time All-Star Andrew McCutchen in the eighth inning with the Pirates ahead by seven runs. Maggi saw four pitches from Alex Vesia, striking out on a slider, in an at-bat that included a pitch-clock violation by the rookie batter.

"It's the best strikeout I ever had," Maggi said with a smile after the Pirates beat the Los Angeles Dodgers 8-1.

After making 4,494 plate appearances in the minors, Maggi was called up from Double-A Altoona on Sunday when outfielder Bryan Reynolds was placed on the bereavement list. Manager Derek Shelton didn't find a spot to use Maggi during his first two games in Pittsburgh and Maggi was fearful of a repeat of 2019, when he was called up by Minnesota for a few

days but did not appear in a game.

Shelton, who was the Twins' bench coach then, was thrilled he was able to get Maggi in.

"That was cool. That was really cool," Shelton said. "I mean to be able to, as long as I've known him, to be able to be the person that was telling him (to pinch-hit) was just really cool."

"This is it. This is the moment," Maggi recalled thinking.

With fans chanting his name and teammates eagerly watching from the dugout rail, Maggi fouled off a fastball deep down the left-field line and fell behind 0-2 on the clock violation as the crowd of 12,152 booed home plate umpire Jeff Nelson.

After fouling another fastball to the right side, Maggi took a high-and-outside fastball before swinging over a pitch in the dirt. He ran to first, where catcher Austin Wynn's throw to Freddie Freeman easily beat him for the out.

Maggi said he never had any regrets for spending more than a decade in the

minors. He admitted, however, that Wednesday's at-bat made all those years of chasing his dream worth it.

"I love baseball," Maggi said. "I was grinding for 13 years but I was doing what I loved. The ultimate goal is the big leagues. Just kind of getting here, my name is in history. I put on a big league uniform, and I shared the field with the world's greatest players."

Maggi spent a few moments after the game visiting with family along the box seat railing. The magnitude of the moment hit him once he saw his parents, who had made the trip from Phoenix, and other family members.

"There were a lot of 'I love you. We're proud of you. You did it!'" Maggi said. "I saw my dad crying. I don't think I ever saw him cry before. All those years, I wondered what I would say to my parents if that moment ever were to come. They've been right there with me. Hearing those words made it all worthwhile. I know the last 13 years have not been wasted."

Butler rallies Heat to oust top-seeded Bucks

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Jimmy Butler was an extraordinary playmaker while leading the Miami Heat to one of the most stunning first-round playoff upsets in NBA history.

It turns out he also was a heck of a play caller.

Butler scored 42 points and the Heat staged a second straight stunning fourth-quarter rally before winning 128-126 in overtime on Wednesday night in Game 5 to eliminate the top-seeded Milwaukee Bucks.

"We're a resilient group," Butler said. "We stick together through everything."

The Heat advanced to a second-round series with the fifth-seeded New York Knicks, who completed their 4-1 series win over the Cleveland Cavaliers earlier Wednesday. Game 1 is Sunday in New York.

Miami, which had to win a play-in game with Chicago just to get to the first round, became the sixth No. 8 seed to beat a No. 1 seed. The last time it happened

was in 2012, when a Philadelphia 76ers team featuring current Bucks guard Jrue Holiday capitalized on Derrick Rose's knee injury to beat the top-seeded Chicago Bulls.

Two nights after outscoring the Bucks 30-13 in the final six minutes of a 119-115 victory in Miami, the Heat came back from a 16-point, fourth-quarter deficit and tied the game on Butler's layup with half a second left in regulation.

The Heat trailed 118-116 with 2.1 seconds left and called a timeout when coach Erik Spoelstra drew up a play. Butler didn't like what he saw and spoke up about it. Spoelstra then changed his mind and set up the tying play, which had Gabe Vincent throwing an inbounds pass to Butler, who was waiting underneath the basket to force overtime.

"We've practiced variations of that play with a bunch of different guys," Spoelstra said. "I was going to do a different version of it. He just said, 'No, let me be that

guy.' I just said, 'OK, but what if we can't get that pass.' He said, 'I'll get it. Don't worry about it.'"

Butler delivered, as he did this entire series. He averaged 37.6 points, including a 56-point effort in Game 4.

"He's desperate and urgent and maniacal and sometimes psychotic about the will to try to win," Spoelstra said. "He'll make everybody in the building feel it. That's why he is us and we are him. That's the way we operate as well."

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Bam Adebayo put the Heat ahead for good by dunking in a putback of Butler's missed driving layup attempt with 4:44 left in overtime. The Bucks trailed 128-126 and had the ball in the closing seconds, but the clock ran out before Grayson Allen could take a shot as he drove to

the basket.

The Bucks had timeouts available but didn't use them in the closing seconds of overtime. Bucks coach Mike Budenholzer said he didn't regret not using a timeout in that situation. He did regret not calling a timeout with half a second left in regulation after Butler's basket.

Adebayo had 20 points, 10 rebounds and 10 assists. Gabe Vincent added 22 points.

Giannis Antetokounmpo had 38 points and 20 rebounds for the Bucks, though he shot just 10 of 23 on free-throw attempts. Khris Middleton added 33 points.

Asked after the game if a first-round playoff exit made this season a failure, Antetokounmpo took issue with the question.

"There's no failure in sports," Antetokounmpo said. "There's good days, bad days. Some days you're able to be successful. Some days you're not. Some days it's your turn. Some days it's not your turn. That's what sports is about. You don't always win."

Knicks dominate Cavaliers to reach second round

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Once he and his teammates were done finishing off the Cavs, Jalen Brunson slipped on a T-shirt with a photo of former Knicks All-Star John Starks on the front screaming while hanging from the rim.

Before looking ahead, New York remembered its past — the good and the bad.

For only second time in 23 years, the Knicks are moving on in the NBA playoffs.

Brunson scored 23 points, RJ Barrett added 21 and New York showed its toughness and depth while downing the Cleveland Cavaliers 106-95 in Game 5 on Wednesday night to advance to the second round for the first time since 2013.

The Knicks easily controlled a series that was more one-sided than expected, even after Julius Randle aggravated his left ankle injury and missed the second half.

The series victory had extra meaning for Brunson, whose father, Rick, played point guard for the Knicks from 1999-2001.

"I thought about that today. It's a really

cool experience, knowing that my Dad played here," Brunson said. "He didn't lead that team, but he was on that team that got to the Finals. It's special and the connection with my Dad and everything, it's all full circle. It's really special."

Fifth-seeded New York will now meet the Miami Heat, who stunned the top-seeded Milwaukee Bucks in the first round. The Knicks and Heat have plenty of postseason history, but haven't met since 2012. They'll open on Sunday in New York.

Warriors 123, Kings 116: Stephen Curry scored 31 points, Draymond Green had his highest-scoring game in more than five years and Golden State won the first road game of its series against Sacramento to take a 3-2 lead.

Green had 21 points and seven assists in his first game back in Sacramento since getting ejected and later suspended for stepping on Domantas Sabonis' chest in a Game 2 loss.

Golden State now can try to wrap up the

series with a fourth straight win at home on Friday night.

Klay Thompson added 25 points, Andrew Wiggins had 20 and Kevon Looney matched his career high with 22 rebounds.

Grizzlies 116, Lakers 99: Desmond Bane had 33 points and 10 rebounds, Ja Morant added 31 points and 10 boards, and host Memphis staved off elimination, forcing its first-round Western Conference series back to Los Angeles.

Jaren Jackson Jr., the NBA Defensive Player of the Year, had 18 points and 10 rebounds for the No. 2 seed Grizzlies, who cut the seventh-seeded Lakers' series lead to 3-2. Game 6 is Friday night.

LeBron James started 1-for-7 from the field but finished with 15 points and 10 rebounds, a modest follow-up after the 38-year-old played 45 minutes in Monday night's overtime win in Los Angeles and became the oldest player in NBA history to post at least 20 points and 20 rebounds in a playoff game.

Panthers survive, beat Bruins in OT

Associated Press

BOSTON — The Florida Panthers watched Bruins forward Brad Marchand skate in alone on goalie Sergei Bobrovsky, with the seconds ticking away in the third period of a 3-3 game.

If Marchand scores, Florida's season is over.

"I knew it wasn't going in," Panthers coach Paul Maurice said, before admitting that he was lying. "You can't know that it wasn't going in, so I'm full of (it) when I just said that to you.

"But I don't feel like we've had a whole lot of advantage in this series, in the karma of the

game," Maurice said after Bobrovsky's save with 1 second left sent the game into overtime, where Matthew Tkachuk won it. "I just felt that we had stored enough karma that that shot wouldn't go in."

Tkachuk scored six minutes into overtime, and Bobrovsky stopped 44 shots to help the Panthers beat the Bruins 4-3 on Wednesday night and force their first-round playoff series back to Florida for a sixth game.

One game after Bruins goalie Linus Ullmark tried to fight Tkachuk, the Panthers forward took advantage of Ullmark's

sloppy puck play behind the net to cut Boston's lead in the best-of-seven series to 3-2.

"A little bit of pinball and it somehow got right on my stick. I made sure to put it home," Tkachuk said. "Bob made a hell of a save, otherwise our season's over. ... Things happen fast in playoffs."

Game 6 is Friday night in Sunrise, Fla.

Kraken 3, Avalanche 2: Tye Kartye scored in his NHL debut and visiting Seattle moved a win away from clinching their first playoff series after beating the reigning Stanley Cup champion

Colorado Avalanche.

The Kraken take a 3-2 lead in the first-round series back home to Seattle, where they can advance Friday night in front of their raucous home fans.

Yanni Gourde and Morgan Geekie added goals for the Kraken, who've scored first in all five games. Philipp Grubauer stopped 26 shots against his former team.

Nathan MacKinnon had a goal and Evan Rodrigues added another to make it 3-2 with 3:37 remaining, but the Avs couldn't tie it up. Alexandar Georgiev had 26 stops for Colorado.

Purdy's success might open door for other Day 3 QBs

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — Jake Haener bristles when asked about the obvious comparison to fellow experienced but undersized quarterback Brock Purdy.

"I just feel like Brock is different. I'm different. There's different things that we do in our games," said Haener, the former Fresno State star. "Brock did a lot of really good things. Super happy for him and his family. But at the same time, I'm on my own mission, on my own train and trying to do something for a franchise that believes in me."

Purdy's presence hovers over this year's draft class after the overlooked quarterback who got tabbed with the "Mr. Irrelevant" moniker after being drafted with the final pick last year developed into a gem who won his first seven starts and helped the San Francisco 49ers make it to the NFC championship game.

Purdy's surprising performance as a rookie could open the door for more teams to be willing to take a late-round chance in this year's draft on other successful college quarterbacks who might lack the

elite size or arm strength.

"I can totally appreciate that," said Haener, who is projected as an early Day 3 draft pick. "People can go measure the things that the big, tall, strong guys who throw the ball great, throw it out of the stadium. But at the end of the day, you got to go win football games and you got to put the ball where it's supposed to be and you got to make the right decisions and you got to protect the football. Brock does all those things really well and at a really high level."

Purdy nearly didn't get the chance to prove that after being repeatedly passed over in the draft last year before the 49ers took him with the final pick.

The Niners had been impressed with Purdy but were hesitant to draft him because they had 2021 first-rounder Trey Lance slated to be the starter and had given Nate Sudfeld \$2 million in guaranteed money to be the backup.

"We weren't going to spend a fifth-round pick on him because it was going to be tough for him to beat out Sudfeld," coach Kyle Shanahan said. "We probably weren't going to keep three

guys. We spent our seventh-round pick on him because he was by far the best guy available. Then he played at a high level and we didn't want to lose him so we kept him on our team and we kept three quarterbacks."

Purdy beat out Sudfeld and made the roster behind Lance and Jimmy Garoppolo, who made a surprise return after no team wanted to trade for him.

Then after Lance and Garoppolo went down with injuries, Purdy stepped in and led the Niners to wins in the final five regular season games. He followed that with two playoff wins before suffering a serious elbow injury in the NFC title game loss to Philadelphia.

Now the Niners are planning to have Purdy as the starter in 2023 — assuming he recovers from elbow surgery — with a salary of less than \$900,000.

"Those late-round guys are like lottery tickets to me, and Brock Purdy was a great example of that," said ESPN draft analyst Jordan Reid. "We've seen guys in years past that have gone on to be those Day 3 players they have turned into starters and even if they don't turn into a starter for you, they

end up turning into assets, too. You never know what they could turn into."

Teams had shied away in recent years from taking a late-round flyer on quarterbacks as fewer teams kept three on the roster after the NFL eliminated the game-day roster exemption for an emergency third quarterback.

In the first nine drafts after former sixth-round pick Tom Brady won his first Super Bowl following the 2002 season, there were an average of seven QBs taken in the final three rounds of the draft.

That has dropped off significantly in the past 12 drafts, with an average of just more than four QBs getting taken each year in the fifth, sixth or seventh rounds.

Reid sees that changing this year, projecting seven quarterbacks getting drafted in the final three rounds.

"I think we're going to see a record number be selected just so you can have that QB 3 as insurance or you could end up having a Brock Purdy type of situation where you end up hitting on a late-round player," he said.