

War in Ukraine looms over NATO at 75

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

Ukraine's foreign minister warned Thursday that without more support his country was at risk of destruction, putting a damper on an otherwise festive mood at NATO headquarters as members marked the alliance's 75th anniversary.

Dmytro Kuleba, in Brussels to meet with top allied officials, said Ukraine urgently needs more air defense systems, including American-made Patriot interceptors.

"I came here against the background of continued, unprecedented missile and drone attacks of Russia against Ukraine ... which fits the Russian strategy to eliminate Ukraine from the map," Kuleba said.

The comments from Ukraine's top diplomat coincided with the anniversary of NATO's founding on April 4, 1949. At the alliance's headquarters Thursday, foreign

ministers and NATO commanders gathered for a wreath-laying ceremony.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg marked the moment, saying allies were "more united than ever" and that Russia's attacks on Ukraine, both in 2014 and 2022, have galvanized the alliance.

"Since then, we have undertaken the biggest reinforcement of our collective defense in generations," he said.

Moments later, Kuleba, flanked by Stoltenberg, congratulated the alliance before turning to events in Ukraine and the need for Patriot missiles.

"I don't want to spoil the party," Kuleba said. "My main message today will be Patriots, because saving Ukrainian lives, saving Ukrainian economy, saving Ukrainian cities depends on the availability of Patriots and other air defense systems."

In March, Ukraine was hit with

94 Russian ballistic missiles, he said. The Patriot is the only system able to intercept such weapons, he added. On top of that, Russia has deployed other missiles and carried out thousands of drone strikes in recent days, Kuleba said.

Kuleba's visit to NATO comes as the alliance is looking for a more reliable system for getting arms into Ukraine. On Wednesday, allies agreed to move forward with a proposal that calls for making NATO the planning hub for arming Ukraine.

If put into action, it likely would overtake the U.S.-led Ukraine Defense Contract Group, also known as the Ramstein Group because of its meetings at the U.S. Air Force hub in Germany.

It's not clear whether the U.S. is on board with the idea. White House spokesman John Kirby on Wednesday said the group, led by Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, has been effective in bringing to-

gether more than 50 countries.

"We're going to continue to lead and convene it. And we know that our leadership of that contact group is valued, it's important," he said.

The alliance also is considering a new \$100 billion fund over five years to better support Ukraine.

The ideas are part of an effort to add more predictability to an aid program that has run into political opposition in parts of the alliance, most notably in the United States. In Washington, partisan political disputes over how to support Ukraine stand in the way of a budget deal to deliver more arms.

The political impasse in the U.S. has forced Ukraine to ration artillery.

Stoltenberg on Thursday said allies continue to work on "a more robust and predictable framework" to support Ukraine.

"This matters for Ukraine, but it matters also for the whole of NATO, for our security," he said.

Houthis may be running low on weapons as attacks ebb

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Houthi rebels in Yemen may be running through their supplies of drone swarms and anti-ship ballistic missiles as the pace of their attacks has slowed a bit, the top U.S. Air Force commander for the Middle East said Wednesday.

Lt. Gen. Alexis Grynkeiwich, who heads U.S. Air Forces Central, said that the persistent American retaliatory strikes on the Iran-backed militia group have "certainly affected their behavior. Their pace of operations is not what it was."

The Houthis have been conducting near daily attacks on commercial and military ships in

the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, launching drones and missiles from rebel-held areas of Yemen. The attacks—which are often unsuccessful but at times have struck the ships—have disrupted a crucial shipping route.

In response, the U.S. and allies have been forced to increase their military ship presence along the waterway, and on several occasions have launched wider retaliatory strikes on ammunition, weapons and other facilities.

Grynkeiwich said it's difficult to know exactly how much the Houthis' weapons supplies have been eroded by the U.S. strikes, because officials didn't have a detailed intelligence assessment of

their capabilities before the attacks began.

"The challenge for us is understanding what the denominator was at the beginning. In other words, what did they have on hand to start with? We obviously know how much we have struck and we have assessments of how successful those strikes were," he said. "The other complicating factor is Iranian resupply."

He said the U.S. believes the Houthis had dozens of anti-ship ballistic missiles when they started, and they've launched dozens. So understanding how much Iran is able to restock the group is key.

The Houthis have defended their campaign as an effort to

pressure Israel to end its war on Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

Speaking to reporters, Grynkeiwich said the Houthis are more independent and more difficult for Iran to control than other Tehran-backed militias in Iraq and Syria. Those groups have largely paused attacks on U.S. forces at bases in Iraq and Syria since February, when the U.S. launched a retaliatory assault against the groups and sites connected to Iran's Revolutionary Guard.

U.S. officials have said they believe pressure from Iran was part of the reason for the pause. But Grynkeiwich said the Houthis are "not quite as responsive" to Iranian direction.

Deadly Russian drone strikes Kharkiv

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian forces fired drones at two apartment buildings and a power plant in Ukraine's second-largest city, killing four people, local authorities said Thursday, as the Kremlin's forces apparently set in motion their strategy for the coming months of war by escalating the bombardment of civilian areas.

Shahed drones smashed into two apartment buildings in Kharkiv, near the Russian border, which has frequently been targeted during more than two years of war. Other drones targeted the power grid.

The Kremlin's forces in recent months have stepped up their aerial barrages of Ukraine, hitting urban areas. The approximately 620-mile front line is largely deadlocked, but Kyiv officials said Moscow's troops have recently been probing for Ukrainian weaknesses on the front line ahead of an expected large-scale Russian offensive in the summer.

An Associated Press video of the Kharkiv attack shows firefighters battling blazing houses in the dark when the roar of an approaching second drone grows louder. The drone explodes nearby, sending up an orange fireball, and rescue

workers with flashlights dash to help their injured colleagues lying on the ground amid embers and debris.

"Where are ambulances?" shouts one first responder as they carry away the injured on fire blankets.

The Russian strikes hit a multistory building in Kharkiv twice in quick succession, killing three first responders, local authorities said. Six people were wounded at that location. Another 14-story building was hit by a drone, killing a 69-year-old woman.

Ukrainian officials have previously accused Russia of targeting rescue workers by hit-

ting residential buildings with two consecutive missiles — the first one to draw crews to the scene and the second one to wound or kill them.

The tactic is called a "double tap" in military jargon. Russians used the same method in Syria's civil war.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy called the strikes that killed first responders in Kharkiv a "despicable and cynical attack" and renewed his plea for more air defense systems from the West.

"Strengthening Ukraine's air defense capabilities directly translates into saving lives," he wrote on X.

Navy vet lawmaker proposes renaming airport after Trump

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A Navy veteran is leading an effort in the House to strip the name of former Secretary of State John Foster Dulles from the main international airport in the nation's capital and replace it with former President Donald Trump.

Rep. Guy Reschenthaler, R-Pa., said he introduced legislation to rename Washington Dulles International Airport to Donald J. Trump International Airport because "our nation has never been greater than under the leadership" of Trump.

"As millions of domestic and international travelers fly through the airport, there is no better symbol of freedom, prosperity and strength than hearing 'Welcome to Trump International Airport' as they land on American soil," he said.

Reschenthaler was elected to the House in 2018 and previously served in the U.S. Navy Judge Advocate General Corps, deploying to Iraq in 2009. He prosecuted nearly 100 terrorists in Iraq and helped successfully defend a Navy SEAL accused of covering up the mistreatment of an al-Qaida terrorist in U.S. custody, according to his congressional website.

Other veterans in the House are backing Reschenthaler's bill, including Republican Mike Waltz of Florida, a former Green Beret; Republican Troy Nehls of Texas, an Army Reserve veteran; and Republican Barry Moore of Alabama, a veteran of the Alabama National Guard and Reserve.

Lawmakers last proposed changing the name of Dulles airport in 1990, when former Sen. Bob Dole, R-Kan., suggested renaming it after former President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who "helped save the world from tyranny" in World War II.

Eisenhower's aviation adviser chose to name the airport after John Foster Dulles, an influential figure during the early stages of the Cold War who advocated for an aggressive stance against communism. Dulles died three years before the airport opened in 1962.

The push to swap Dulles for Trump is unlikely to gain traction in the Democrat-controlled Senate and was met with ridicule by Democrats in the Republican-led House.

Rep. Jennifer Wexton, D-Va., described the bill as "another in a long list of instances where extreme House Republicans have shown how unserious [and] delusional they are."

Following delays, Boxer finally goes off to Indo-Pacific

The San Diego Union-Tribune

SAN DIEGO — The USS Boxer, one of the Navy's key "mini-carriers," has left San Diego for the Indo-Pacific following a series of costly engineering problems a Navy probe said could have been avoided.

The 843-foot amphibious assault ship, which carries a mix of aircraft, deployed on Monday for the first time in five years. Such ships more commonly deploy every year or two, if they're not undergoing extended maintenance.

The Boxer had experienced three significant engineering failures that a Navy review obtained by KPBS found were caused, at least in part, by cost-cutting, under-skilled workers, complacency and poor leadership.

The delays caused deep concern in the Navy because the Boxer was needed to help maintain an American presence in the Indo-Pacific, where China has threatened to invade Taiwan.

Now that the ship is underway, the Boxer will serve as the flagship of an Amphibious Ready Group that includes Camp Pendleton's 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit.

Major storm bears down on northeast US

Associated Press

A major spring storm brought heavy snow, rain and high winds to the Northeast late Wednesday and Thursday, causing more than 680,000 power outages across the region with the majority in Maine and New Hampshire. A woman was reported killed by a falling tree in a New York City suburb.

Two feet of snow is possible in parts of northern New England by Thursday evening, and wind gusts are predicted to hit 50 to 60 mph in coastal areas as well as inland, according to the National Weather Service.

Trees and power lines were reported down across the region. More southern areas were hit mostly with rain, caus-

ing flooding in some locations.

Chris Legro, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Maine, said it was the biggest April nor'easter to hit the region since 2020. He said he had to take some detours on the way into his office Thursday morning because of downed power lines.

"It's definitely going to be one that people remember for a little while," Legro said.

Late Wednesday afternoon, a tree fell on a vehicle in the Westchester County, N.Y., hamlet of Armonk, killing a woman who was the only person inside, police said.

Heavy snow made travel treacherous in northern parts of New England and New York. A crash shut down Interstate

95 northbound near Lewiston, Maine, on Thursday morning.

Dozens of flights at airports in the region were canceled or delayed. Many schools and government offices were closed in northern areas.

State government was shut down in Maine, where a special commission investigating the October mass shooting in Lewiston had to postpone a scheduled hearing.

"We recommend that you stay off the roads if you can, but if you must travel during the storm, be sure to give plow trucks, utility crews, and emergency first responders plenty of room as they work to keep us safe," said Maine Gov. Janet Mills.

Utilities in northern New

England said they were prepared for the storm, but power restoration could still be lengthy.

"Weather conditions are going to be hazardous on Thursday, and we ask everyone to use caution on the roads," said Jon Breed, spokesperson for Central Maine Power.

Whipping winds and driving rain battered Boston. Staff at the New England Aquarium there did a sweep of the roof to make sure nothing could blow into the sea lion habitat, which is partially exposed to the outdoors.

Meanwhile, cleanup work continued in several states wracked by tornadoes and other severe weather blamed for at least three deaths.

Jobless aid claims rise to highest level in 2 months

Associated Press

The number of Americans applying for jobless benefits rose to their highest level in two months last week, but layoffs remain at historically low levels as the labor market continues to chug along despite elevated interest rates.

The Labor Department reported Thursday that filings for unemployment claims for the week ending March 30 climbed by 9,000 to 221,000 from the pre-

vious week's 212,000.

The four-week average of claims, which evens out some of the weekly volatility, rose modestly to 214,250, an increase of 2,750 from the previous week.

In total, 1.79 million Americans were collecting jobless benefits during the week that ended March 23, a decline of 19,000 from the previous week.

Weekly unemployment claims are considered a proxy for the number of U.S. layoffs in

a given week and a sign of where the job market is headed. They have remained at historically low levels since the pandemic purge of millions of jobs in the spring of 2020.

The Federal Reserve raised its benchmark borrowing rate 11 times beginning in March 2022 in an effort to bring down the four-decade high inflation that took hold after the economy roared back from the COVID-19 recession of 2020. Part of the

Fed's goal was to loosen the labor market and cool wage growth, which it believes contributed to persistently high inflation.

Many economists thought the rapid rate hikes could potentially tip the country into recession, but jobs have remained plentiful and the economy has held up better than expected thanks to strong consumer spending.

In February, U.S. employers added a surprising 275,000 jobs.

Ford delays production of new electric pickup truck

Associated Press

DETROIT — With U.S. electric vehicle sales starting to slow, Ford Motor Co. says it will delay rolling out new electric pickup trucks and a new large electric SUV as it adds gas-electric hybrids to its model lineup.

The Dearborn, Mich., company said Thursday that a much ballyhooed new electric pickup to be built at a new fac-

tory in Tennessee will be delayed by a year until 2026.

The big electric SUV, with three rows of seats, will be delayed by two years until 2027 at the company's factory in Oakville, Ontario, near Toronto.

The retreat comes as U.S. electric vehicle sales growth slowed to 2.7% in the first quarter of the year, far below the 47% increase that fueled record sales and a 7.6% market share

last year. Sales of new vehicles overall grew nearly 5%, and the EV market share declined to 7.1%.

Hybrid sales, however, grew 45% from January through March, while plug-in hybrids, which can go a short distance on battery power before a gas-electric system kicks in, grew 34% according to Motorintelligence.com.

Ford also said it "expects to

offer" hybrid versions of all its gasoline passenger vehicles by the end of the decade in North America.

Industry analysts say most early technology adopters and people who want to cut emissions have already purchased EVs. Automakers now have to convince skeptical mainstream buyers to go electric, but those customers fear limited range and a lack of charging stations.

New job rule may counteract Trump workforce promises

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The government's chief human resources agency issued a new rule on Thursday making it harder to fire thousands of federal employees, hoping to head off former President Donald Trump's promises to radically remake the workforce along ideological lines if he wins back the White House in November.

The Office of Personnel Management regulations will bar career civil servants from being reclassified as political appointees or as other at-will workers, who are more easily dismissed from their jobs.

It comes in response to Schedule F, an executive order Trump issued in 2020 that sought to allow for reclassifying tens of thousands of the 2.2 million federal employees and thus reduce their job security protections.

President Joe Biden nullified Schedule F upon taking office.

But if Trump, a Republican, were to revive it during a second administration, he could dramatically increase the around 4,000 federal employees who are considered political appointees and typically change with each new president.

In a statement issued Thursday, Biden, a Democrat, called the rule a "step toward combating corruption and partisan interference to ensure civil servants are able to focus on the most important task at hand: delivering for the American people."

The potential effects of the change are wide-reaching since the number of federal employees who might have been affected by Schedule F is unclear. The National Treasury Employee Union used freedom of information requests to obtain documents suggesting that workers like office managers and specialists in human resources and cybersecurity

might have been among those subject to reclassification.

The new rule moves to counter a future Schedule F order by spelling out procedural requirements for reclassifying federal employees and clarifying that civil service protections accrued by employees can't be taken away, regardless of job type. It also makes clear that policymaking classifications apply to non-career, political appointments.

"It will now be much harder for any president to arbitrarily remove the nonpartisan professionals who staff our federal agencies just to make room for hand-picked partisan loyalists," National Treasury Employees Union President Doreen Greenwald said in a statement.

Good government groups and liberal think tanks and activists have cheered the rule. They viewed cementing federal worker protections as a top priority.

Delay denied for Trump's money trial

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A judge on Wednesday rejected Donald Trump's bid to delay his April 15 hush money criminal trial until the Supreme Court rules on presidential immunity claims he raised in another of his criminal cases — spurning another of the former president's ploys to put off the historic trial. Several more are pending.

Manhattan Judge Juan M. Merchan declared the request untimely, ruling that Trump's lawyers had "myriad opportunities" to raise the immunity issue before they finally did so last month, well after a deadline for pretrial motions had already passed.

The timing of the defense's March 7 filing "raises real questions about the sincerity and actual purpose of the motion," Merchan wrote in a six-page decision.

Lawyers for Trump, the presumptive Republican nominee, had asked Merchan to adjourn the New York trial indefinitely until Trump's immunity claim in his Washington, D.C., election interference case is resolved.

Trump has contended he is immune from prosecution for conduct alleged to involve official acts during his tenure in office. His lawyers have not raised that as a defense in the hush-money case, but they argued that some evidence — including Trump's social media posts about former lawyer Michael Cohen — is from his time as president and should be excluded from the trial because of his immunity protections.

The Supreme Court is scheduled to hear arguments April 25 — about a week-and-a-half after the start of jury selection in the hush-money case.

Biden draws more protests than Trump as election season begins to ramp up

Associated Press

NEW YORK — When Donald Trump first ran for the White House eight years ago, protesters filled the streets.

His inflammatory rhetoric and often dehumanizing descriptions of immigrants spurred thousands to demonstrate outside his rallies. By this time in 2016, protesters regularly interrupted his speeches, sparking clashes and foreshadowing Trump's habit of encouraging violence against those he casts as his enemies.

"Knock the crap out of them, would you?" Trump once said as he egged on the crowd to go af-

ter protesters on their own — even promising to pay their legal bills.

No longer.

As he runs again with an agenda that is arguably more extreme than his two previous campaigns, mass protests at Trump rallies and appearances are a thing of the past. When Trump returned to New York last week for a hearing in one of his criminal cases, just a smattering of detractors turned up outside the courthouse. During a Midwestern swing Tuesday, Trump was interrupted briefly by a protest in Green Bay, but otherwise encountered mini-

mal opposition.

In a twist, it's now President Joe Biden who is facing a sustained protest movement, largely by those furious over the administration's support for Israel in its war against Hamas. During his first major rally of the year, Biden's 22-minute speech was interrupted no less than a dozen times by detractors calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. Protesters repeatedly disrupted his fundraiser last week with former presidents Barack Obama and Bill Clinton at New York's Radio City Music Hall, as hundreds more demonstrated outside.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Archaeological site found on Air Force base land

NM HOLLOMAN AIR FORCE BASE — An archaeological site that might shed more light on New Mexico's ancient history has been discovered recently within the boundaries of Holloman Air Force Base.

Base officials said geomorphologists and members of the 49th Civil Engineer Squadron environmental flight uncovered a campsite that's about 8,200 years old and belonged to some of the state's first settlers.

Matthew Cuba, the squadron's cultural resource manager, said the formation of the white sand dunes buried the site with windblown silt protecting the archaeological remains.

He said digs at the site have turned up about 70 items ranging from flake stones to a rare example of an early ground stone.

2 catfish farms settle suit alleging unequal pay

MS JACKSON — Two Mississippi catfish farms have settled a lawsuit alleging that they brought workers from Mexico to the U.S. and paid them significantly more than they previously paid local Black farmworkers for the same type of labor, plaintiffs' attorneys said Tuesday.

Southern Migrant Legal Services and Mississippi Center for Justice sued Jerry Nobile, his son Will Nobile and their farms in August on behalf of 14 Black farmworkers. The federal lawsuit said the Black workers were "systematically underpaid and denied job opportunities for years in favor of non-

Black foreign workers" at Nobile Fish Farms, which also raise corn and soybeans.

The plaintiffs' attorneys said the lawsuit concluded on "mutually agreeable terms" under a confidential settlement.

Court records show the lawsuit against Nobile Fish Farms was settled in February.

Voters reject stadium tax for Royals and Chiefs

MO KANSAS CITY — The future of the Royals and Chiefs in Kansas City was thrown into question Tuesday when residents of Jackson County resoundingly voted down a sales tax measure that would have helped to fund a new downtown ballpark along with major renovations to Arrowhead Stadium.

Royals owner John Sherman and Chiefs president Mark Donovan acknowledged long before the final tally that the initiative would fail. More than 58% of voters ultimately rejected the plan, which would have replaced an existing three-eighths of a cent sales tax that has been paying for the upkeep of Truman Sports Complex — the home for more than 50 years to Kauffman and Arrowhead stadiums — with a similar tax that would have been in place for the next 40 years.

The Royals, who had pledged at least \$1 billion from ownership for their project, wanted to use their share of the tax revenue to help fund a \$2 billion-plus ballpark district. The Super Bowl champion Chiefs, who had committed \$300 million in private money, would have used their share as part of an \$800 million overhaul of Arrowhead Stadium.

Former officer sentenced for scheme to help mayor

NY NEW YORK — A former police officer who prosecutors say was the ringleader of a campaign donations scheme to help New York City Mayor Eric Adams during his winning 2021 run was sentenced Tuesday, authorities said.

Dwyane Montgomery was ordered to perform 200 hours of community service and was prohibited from hosting political fundraisers or soliciting contributions on behalf of any campaign for a year, Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg's office confirmed.

The 64-year-old former NYPD deputy inspector agreed to the sentence when he pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor conspiracy charge in February.

Montgomery was among six people charged with conspiracy, attempted grand larceny and making false statements in relation to the campaign donations plot. The indictment did not implicate Adams.

Man admits stealing, trying to sell luxury items

CA LOS ANGELES — A Southern California man on Tuesday admitted stealing nearly \$2 million worth of jewelry, clothing and accessories from guests at a Beverly Hills hotel, then traveling to Florida to sell the stolen goods, federal prosecutors said.

Jobson Marangoni De Castro, 38, pleaded guilty to one count of interstate transportation of stolen property, a felony that carries a maximum sentence of 10 years in federal prison, the U.S. Attorney's Office said in a

statement.

De Castro tricked a hotel employee into giving him a key to the victims' room and stole all their suitcases while they were at dinner, prosecutors said.

Investigators said De Castro then traveled to Miami, where he messaged a potential buyer on social media, saying he wanted to sell a diamond necklace and luxury watch but he did not have papers for them because he had found them in a box belonging to his late mother. The next day, the buyer wired \$50,000 for the jewelry, which De Castro brought to the buyer's Miami store, investigators said.

The jewelry matched the description of the items stolen in Beverly Hills, and De Castro was arrested, according to court documents.

Tropicana Las Vegas closes after 67 years

NV LAS VEGAS — In the 1971 film "Diamonds are Forever," James Bond stays in a swanky suite at the Tropicana Las Vegas.

"I hear that the Hotel Tropicana is quite comfortable," Agent 007 says.

It was the Tropicana's heyday, a frequent haunt of the legendary Rat Pack, while its past under the mob cemented its place in Vegas lore.

But after welcoming guests for 67 years, the Las Vegas Strip's third-oldest casino shut its doors for good on Tuesday.

Demolition is slated for October to make room for a \$1.5 billion Major League Baseball stadium — part of the city's latest rebrand as a hub for sports entertainment.

— From wire reports

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Women's semis have compelling stories

Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. — Caitlin Clark and Iowa are back in the Final Four again. So are Dawn Staley and undefeated South Carolina.

The women's basketball world will descend on Cleveland for the national semifinals on Friday and the championship game two days later.

Clark willed her team to its second consecutive trip to the Final Four, scoring 41 points to beat defending champion LSU 94-87 on Monday night. The Tigers knocked out the Hawkeyes last year in the title game. Now the Hawkeyes are two wins away from their first national championship.

"That's obviously our goal. That's where we want to be," Clark said. "But you've got to win one at a time. There's still two more there to get. That's what makes the Final Four so fun. Anybody can take it. Anybody can win it."

Next up for Iowa is UConn, the team that knocked them out of the tournament in Clark's freshman season. The Huskies beat Southern California 80-73 in the other regional final on Monday night.

Staley's team will face North Carolina State, which is making its first appearance in the Final Four since 1998.

A lot of attention will be on Clark, which Staley doesn't mind, because it means her unbeaten team is flying a bit under the radar. It's the second consecutive year that South Carolina has reached the Final Four undefeated and the fourth in a row the team has advanced at least this far.

Most of the talk this season has focused on star players across the country like Clark, USC's JuJu Watkins, UConn's Paige Bueckers and Notre Dame's Hannah Hidalgo.

The Gamecocks, who have an entire new starting five this year, aren't built around just one player. They have taken a back seat as far as attention goes.

"I like it. I really do. Like go ahead, take the spotlight, put it somewhere else," Staley said. "Let this team continue to thrive in the space that they're given. Hopefully at the end of the day, next week this time, I'm hoping that we give a lot of people a lot to talk about."

Like South Carolina, there wasn't much expectation for the Wolfpack to make the Final Four. They were unranked coming into the start of the season, making N.C. State the first unranked team in the preseason poll to reach the Final Four since Washington did it in 2016. Wins over UConn and Col-

orado before December gave notice that the Wolfpack really were a good team.

N.C. State was one win away from reaching the national semifinals two years ago before losing to UConn in double overtime in the Elite Eight.

"I think of Kay Yow — 34 years at N.C. State and took this program to a Final Four in '98," Wolfpack coach Wes Moore said.

"I think of the players two years ago that were a double-overtime game away from being in this exact spot. So I think of them. And then I think of these players, again, overcoming all the doubts and questions and just — Final Four, y'all."

Moore knows his team has a tall task ahead against the Gamecocks.

"They're a great, great team. Obviously, the best team in the country. But you're not playing a four-out-of-seven series. You're playing one game, OK?" he said. "So we've just got to find a way to win one game against them, and it's going to be a big challenge."

UConn is back in the Final Four after seeing its 14-year run end last season in a loss to Ohio State. Now the Huskies will have to figure out a way to slow down Clark, who has been nearly unstoppable the last two years.

Beating reigning men's champ UConn won't be easy task

Associated Press

The 2024 version of March Madness has apexed with a trio of streak busters in the desert.

N.C. State is in the Final Four for the first time since Jim Valvano ran around trying to find someone to hug after the 1983 national championship. Purdue and big man Zach Edey will make their first Final Four appearance since Joe Barry Carroll dominated the paint in 1980.

Alabama? Never been.

An angry pack of Huskies awaits in the Valley of the Sun.

Dominating on its way to a fifth national championship a year ago, UConn has looked even more unbeatable so far in its run to become the first repeat champion since Florida in 2006-07.

"Our defense is elite. Our offense is elite. We rebound the

ball," coach Dan Hurley said. "These guys play every possession like it's the end of the world."

With 7-foot-2 Donovan Clingan in the middle and talent across the roster, UConn won its first four NCAA Tournament games by an average of 27.7 points. The Huskies made Illinois look like a JV team in the Elite Eight, reeling off 30 straight points in a 77-52 victory to become the first reigning champion to reach the Final Four since Florida's consecutive titles.

Knocking off UConn will be a monumental task in Glendale, Ariz., starting with Alabama in the semifinals Saturday.

"His (Hurley's) formula is working out pretty well," Alabama coach Nate Oats said. "I'm going to have to figure out that

formula myself here soon."

Playing fast and letting 3s fly from all over, Alabama led the nation in scoring during the regular season and has kept up the pace in March. Led by heady, gritty point guard Mark Sears, the Crimson Tide scored at least 89 points in three of four NCAA Tournament games, including 109 in the opener against Charleston.

Alabama reached its first Final Four by making 16 3s in an 89-82 win over Clemson.

On the other side, Purdue has college basketball's most unstoppable force in Edey.

Edey has been nearly ungaurdable, becoming the first player since Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (then known as Lew Alcindor) in 1968 to have at least 50 points and 35 rebounds while shooting 65% from the field the first two

games of an NCAA Tournament.

"Zach's got a competitive fight to him. He doesn't back down," Purdue coach Matt Painter said. "When you have that elite physical size and you have that competitive spirit with it, with some skill, it's pretty dangerous. He's pretty hard to handle."

So is N.C. State's DJ Burns Jr.

The 6-9, 275-pounder has a big-sized game and a personality to go with it. He's the focal point of the Wolfpack offense, and opponents have yet to find a way to stop him.

Burns has great footwork, a soft touch and vision to find the open man nearly every time. Combined with the team's other DJ, Arizona State transfer DJ Horne, N.C. State won five games in five days just to get into the NCAA Tournament.

Yankees relish hot start after down year

Associated Press

PHOENIX — One year after a rare mediocre season tested patience in the Bronx, the New York Yankees are relishing a fast start.

The scariest part for opponents? A slugger-filled lineup that includes Juan Soto, Aaron Judge, Giancarlo Stanton, Anthony Rizzo and Alex Verdugo isn't even that hot.

New York wrapped up an impressive season-opening road trip with a 6-5 win over the Arizona Diamondbacks, bolting to a 6-1 start. Even more encouraging for the Yankees, those wins came against the Houston Astros and Diamondbacks, clubs expected to be playoff contenders.

"The guys are fired up and rightfully so," manager Aaron Boone said. "I'm sure the Bronx will be popping on Friday."

New York has an off day before its home opener against the Toronto Blue Jays on Friday.

Judge hit his first homer of the season in Wednesday's win, giving the Yankees a 2-1 lead with a two-run, opposite-field shot that landed in the Chase Field pool beyond the right-center wall. In the 11th, his double into the right-center gap put the Yankees ahead 6-4.

"You just got to keep swinging," Judge said. "It's early in the season, got to get your at-bats. Keep swinging at good pitches and if you don't get good pitches, take your walk and let the guys behind you do their job."

The five-time All-Star entered 3 for 24 with one RBI, his fewest hits ever through six games. He hasn't been alone with his middling start — Stanton is batting .150 with 11 strikeouts in 20 at-bats, Rizzo is hitting .222 and Verdugo .160.

Soto's been the best of the bunch with a .345 average but has just two extra-base hits, low by his standards.

Now that Judge appears to be heating up, the rest may follow.

"I told him I wanted him to go visit the pool at some point in this road trip," Boone said. "Glad he checked that box. Had a really good at-bat in the 11th to give us that insurance run. He's getting there."

"With Aaron, it's a matter of time."

Verdugo — acquired in a trade from the Red Sox during the offseason — hit his first Yankees homer Wednesday. The 27-year-old jumped all over an elevated fastball from Kevin Ginkel, launching a no-doubt, two-run shot deep into the right-field seats.

As Verdugo rounded the bases, his teammates were barking at him like a dog, which is the one of the team's current celebrations. The outfielder said he loved it.

"Everyone in here knows we're talented, knows what we can do," Verdugo said. "You've

just got to go out there every day and have that dog mentality. It's not always going to come easy. You've got to sometimes fight. We've been doing a really good job of that during this run."

The Yankees have also been good on the mound, despite missing ace Gerrit Cole. Led by Carlos Rodon, Nestor Cortes, Clarke Schmidt, Luis Gil and Marcus Stroman, the pitching staff came into Wednesday's game with a 2.72 ERA, which ranks fourth in the big leagues.

New York went 82-80 last season, missing the playoffs and nearly finishing below .500 for the first time since 1992. This season's first week might be a signal that 2023 was an aberration.

"It's pretty nice," Soto said. "I won't say it makes it easier, but we have the record on our side. With a huge start, it's great for confidence as we go up to New York."

Health will be vital for Knicks, 76ers to return to East finals

Associated Press

Even in defeat, Jalen Brunson and the New York Knicks put on an entertaining show these last few days.

The question now is whether the banged-up team can really be a factor in the postseason title chase — because it's been a while.

New York has not made the conference finals since 2000, one of the longest droughts in the NBA. The Knicks did win their first-round playoff series last year, but they'll need to take another step before Madison Square Garden can host the kinds of massive postseason scenes that were common there a quarter-century ago.

Sunday night was a preview of what that could look like as New York fought Oklahoma City to the wire. Brunson's layup put the Knicks up with 4.1 seconds left, only for Shai Gilgeous-Alexander to answer from the corner, giving the Thunder a 113-112 victory.

A performance like that makes the Knicks look like contenders, but their health is a major concern. Julius Randle (dislocated right shoulder) hasn't played since late January. OG Anunoby (right el-

bow injury) hasn't played in more than two weeks — New York is 15-2 in games he's appeared in since the Knicks acquired him from Toronto.

Mitchell Robinson returned from a 3½-month absence for the game against Toronto last week, but he did not play against Oklahoma City because of a sprained left ankle.

"We always feel that if we defend and we rebound and we keep our turnovers down, no matter where we are, no matter who we have, if we do those three things it'll put us in position to win," coach Tom Thibodeau said.

Only a couple of current teams have gone longer without reaching the conference finals than the Knicks. Washington hasn't been since 1979, and Charlotte has never made it. New Orleans hasn't advanced that far, either, although that team's entire existence in Louisiana is actually younger than the Knicks' drought.

Another team in the East has fallen short for almost as long as New York: The Philadelphia 76ers haven't made it to the conference finals since Allen Iverson took them

to the NBA Finals in 2001.

Joel Embiid has won an MVP with Philadelphia, and the 76ers have been seeded in the top three in the East playoffs four times in the past six years, but they haven't made it past Round 2.

Embiid is working his way back from knee surgery, and Philadelphia would be in the play-in tournament if the season ended now. So the 76ers face a daunting path if they're finally going to return to the NBA's final four.

Philadelphia has been close recently, losing in Game 7 of the second round last year, in 2021 and in 2019.

For the Knicks, last season's elimination in Game 6 of the second round equaled the furthest they've advanced since that 2000 season. They've been up against it lately with so many players hurt, but that hasn't affected them too much in the standings.

"We understood when we had injuries to Julius and OG and Mitchell, you're not going to replace those guys individually, but we can do it collectively as a team," Thibodeau said. "So that's what we've done all season."

Stars streaking toward NHL postseason

Associated Press

DALLAS — Dallas Stars coach Pete DeBoer went into this season a little worried about the potential hangover effect on his team after the long postseason run that ended with a loss last May in the sixth game of the Western Conference finals.

With six games left before the playoffs begin again, DeBoer is feeling pretty good about his team.

The Stars have won a franchise-record eight games in a row, Jake Oettinger has posted shutouts in the past two, and they are on top of the Western Conference standings with 105 points, one behind the New York Rangers for the most in the NHL. They are playing their best hockey of the season.

"This is the right time," DeBoer said after the Stars beat Edmonton 5-0 on Wednesday night. "Forget the wins and the winning streak, I like the detail in our game. I like how we're playing for the most part, so that's a good thing. Everyone

wants to be doing that this time of year, and the wins are a by-product of that."

Dallas already has seven 20-goal scorers, and captain Jamie Benn is one shy of making it a franchise-record eight after scoring his 19th against the Oilers.

Wyatt Johnston, the 20-year-old in his second full season, became the first Stars player to reach 30 this season when he scored coming out of the penalty box as part of their four goals in a span of less than seven minutes in the second period.

"The team's at a really good place," Johnston said.

"We're just trying to focus like on the little habits, the little details, trying to focus for the playoffs," forward Radek Faksa said. "We have lots to play for. We already clinched a spot. We want to win the conference ... so we have a great spot for the playoffs."

Faksa, part of their fourth line, put the Stars ahead of Edmonton with his goal only 2:08

into the game. He also had two assists, on Johnston's goal and when Sam Steele closed out the scoring. There were 10 Dallas players who tallied points.

"I think our depth has carried us," DeBoer said. "It was 12 months ago, and everyone was describing us as a one-line team."

The Stars last week clinched a third consecutive postseason berth, their longest streak since five in a row through the 2008 playoffs, when they also lost in the conference finals. That was also the end of being in the playoffs 12 of their first 14 seasons after moving from Minnesota to Dallas in the summer of 1993, and included their Stanley Cup title in 1999.

Dallas last year lost Game 6 of the Western Conference finals at home to Vegas, which went on to win the Stanley Cup. That was after the Stars opened the playoffs with a six-game series against Minnesota and then survived a seven-game series against Seattle.

As for their eight-game winning streak now, there had been six other times in franchise history when the Stars had won seven games without extending that.

They were back home against Edmonton after each of their previous four games had been on the road. Overall, they have won their past seven road games, and play their last regular-season games away from home against Chicago and Colorado this weekend before finishing with a four-game homestand.

Oettinger hasn't allowed a goal in 7½ periods, about 152 minutes. He stopped 35 shots against an Edmonton team filled with top scorers that went 0-for-4 on the power play.

"It's awesome. He gives us a lot of confidence, and he's been so good all year," Johnston said about the goalie. "It feels pretty good when you have him back there. And, I mean, it's pretty hard to lose games when he's not letting up any goals."

More players agree PGA-LIV division isn't ideal for golf

Associated Press

DORAL, Fla. — Rory McIlroy and Bryson DeChambeau will be the in the same place next week, when they head to Augusta National for the Masters.

They're saying the same things this week, albeit a golf world apart.

Sounding an alarm going into the year's first major, McIlroy and DeChambeau were among players from both the PGA Tour and LIV Golf League on Wednesday speaking out — perhaps a bit more forcefully than before — on a need for the game to somehow reunite or risk further eroding its fan base.

"If you look at the TV ratings of the PGA Tour this year, they're down 20% across the board. That's a fifth. That's big," McIlroy said. "I would say the

numbers on LIV aren't great either in terms of the people tuning in. I just think with the fighting and everything that's went on over the past couple years, people are just getting really fatigued of it and it's turning people off men's professional golf. And that's not a good thing for anyone."

DeChambeau was a bit more succinct: "It's up to the guys up top to figure it out and figure it out quickly, because we can't keep going this direction. It's not sustainable, for sure."

Between the Valero Open in San Antonio and the LIV Golf League's stop this weekend near Miami, there are 43 golfers — 30 from the PGA Tour, 13 from LIV — playing one last time before heading to the season's first major. And the ma-

jors are one of the few places where players from the PGA Tour and LIV still play head-to-head, because of the divide that has fractured golf for the last couple years.

That means at the majors, and events like the Ryder Cup, the big names are all in one place. Otherwise, they're not, and they haven't been since LIV started luring players away — reigning Masters champion Jon Rahm, Dustin Johnson, Phil Mickelson, Brooks Koepka, Sergio Garcia, Bubba Watson, DeChambeau and many more among them.

There have been talks about patching together the game again for months, going back at least to the agreement that the PGA Tour struck last June with the Public Investment Fund —

Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund — in a deal that was supposed to be completed by the end of last year. It still isn't done, the tour has since come out with an equity program for players, and the divide continues.

"I think there's room for both. It's as simple as that," Rahm said. "I think we have the opportunity to end up with an even better product for the spectators and the fans of the game, a little bit more variety doesn't really hurt anybody. So, I think, properly done, we can end up with a much better product that can take golf to the next level worldwide, and I'm hoping that's what ends up happening."

LIV's ratings have been dismal at best, according to Nielsen TV data from February.