

Ukraine nuke plant faces renewed threats

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia and Ukraine are trading fresh accusations over renewed threats to Europe's largest nuclear plant that has been caught up in the war, with Moscow alleging Ukraine was behind drone attacks on the facility that were witnessed by U.N. inspectors and Kyiv accusing Russia of disinformation tactics.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Monday called the drone attacks on the Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant in Russian-occupied southern Ukraine "a very dangerous provocation."

"This is a very dangerous practice that has very bad, neg-

ative consequences in the future," Peskov said.

The U.N.'s atomic watchdog agency on Sunday confirmed drone strikes on one of the plant's six reactors, which caused one casualty, but did not attribute responsibility to either side.

The Associated Press was unable to verify either side's claims in the area of heavy fighting where independent journalists are not allowed to enter.

An official at Energoatom, Ukraine's atomic energy company, blamed Russia for the attacks, saying they were "a provocation" orchestrated to malign Ukraine.

The official spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak on the record.

The plant has repeatedly been caught in the crossfire since Russia launched its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and seized the facility shortly after. The International Atomic Energy Agency, a U.N. body, has frequently expressed alarm about the plant amid fears of a potential nuclear catastrophe.

The strikes did not compromise the nuclear facility, which the Kremlin's forces have been occupying and running in southern Ukraine since shortly

after the war began more than two years ago, the IAEA said. The plant's six reactors have been shut down for months, and IAEA inspectors are stationed at the site.

The IAEA team did not observe structural damage to the "systems, structures and components" important to the nuclear safety of the plant, it said. They reported superficial scorching to the top of a reactor dome.

The damage "has not compromised nuclear safety, but this is a serious incident (with the) potential to undermine (the) integrity of the reactor's containment system," the IAEA said on X.

Palestinians return after Israeli exit from town

Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — Streams of Palestinians filed into the southern Gaza city of Khan Younis on Monday to salvage what they could from the vast destruction left in the wake of Israel's offensive, a day after the Israeli military announced it was withdrawing troops from the area.

Many came back to the Gaza Strip's second-largest city to find their former hometown unrecognizable. With scores of buildings destroyed or damaged, piles of rubble now sit where apartments and businesses once did. Streets have been bulldozed. Schools and hospitals were damaged by the fighting.

Israel sent troops to Khan Younis in December, part of its blistering ground offensive that came in response to a Ha-

mas-led attack on Oct. 7 into southern Israel. Israeli authorities say 1,200 people, mostly civilians, were killed and roughly 250 people taken hostage.

The war, now in its seventh month, has killed more than 32,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, according to local health authorities, displaced most of the territory's 2.3 million people and left vast swaths of the beleaguered Gaza Strip uninhabitable.

"Many areas, especially the city center, have become unfit for life," said Mahmoud Abdel-Ghani, who fled Khan Younis in December when Israel began its ground invasion of the city. "I found that my house and my neighbors' houses turned to rubble."

Israel's withdrawal of troops from Khan Younis signaled the end of a key phase in its war

against Hamas and brought Israeli troop levels in the tiny coastal enclave to one of the lowest since the war began.

Israel said the city was a major Hamas stronghold and says its operation over the past few months killed thousands of militants and inflicted heavy damage to a vast network of tunnels used by Hamas to move weapons and fighters. It also claimed to have found evidence that hostages were held in the city. With no military presence in the city, Hamas could seek to regroup there as it has in other areas where the military has scaled back forces.

The latest Israeli withdrawal also cleared the way for some Palestinians to make their way back to the area to comb through the mountains of debris to try to hold on to any possessions that remained.

Najwa Ayyash, who also was

displaced from Khan Younis, said she was unable to reach her family's third-floor apartment because the stairs were gone. Her brother climbed his way up through the destruction and pulled down some possessions, including lighter clothes for her children.

Bassel Abu Nasser, a Khan Younis resident who fled after an airstrike hit his home in January, said much of the city turned into rubble.

"There is no sense of life there," the 37-year-old father of two children said. "They left nothing there."

The military exodus from Khan Younis comes ahead of an expected Israeli offensive in Rafah, Gaza's southernmost city where hundreds of thousands have fled fighting elsewhere to seek shelter and which Israel says is Hamas' last major stronghold.

US, 3 key allies drill in South China Sea

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

The United States and three allies sent five warships and two aircraft to the South China Sea on Sunday, a move meant to discourage Beijing and others from using force and coercion in the region, according to one security expert.

Forces from the U.S., Australia, Japan and the Philippines rendezvoused in the Philippines' exclusive economic zone for a "maritime cooperative activity," with drills in communication, division tactics and formation training, said U.S. 7th Fleet spokesman Lt. Luka Bakic.

It allowed the crews to strengthen their "doctrines, tactics, techniques and procedures," he told Stars and Stripes by email Monday. He did not elaborate on exactly where the drills took place in the South China Sea.

In response, China held its own "joint naval and air combat patrol" in the area on Sunday, the

country's Southern Theater Command said in a Sunday post to the social media website Weibo.

Two Chinese navy ships came as close as about 7 miles from the area where the four-power exercise occurred, according to a post Monday on X by Philippine network ABS-CBN News. It cited Armed Forces of the Philippines chief Gen. Romeo Brawner Jr. as the source.

Bakic did not specify whether the U.S. or its allies interacted with Chinese forces, except to say U.S. forces "routinely interact with foreign warships and aircraft" in the region.

"All interactions with foreign military forces were consistent with international norms," he wrote.

A Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force spokesman by phone Monday said he was aware of reports about Chinese ships patrolling the area that day, but he declined further comment.

The four nations' defense chiefs said the exercise upholds international rights to freedom of navigation, according to a Defense Department news release Friday.

The drills also demonstrated "active presence, solidarity and coordination among U.S. allies in East Asia and the Indo-Pacific," said Ja Ian Chong, associate professor of political science at the National University of Singapore.

"They aim to discourage [China] and any other actor, including North Korea and Russia from challenging the prevailing order through force or coercion," he told Stars and Stripes by email Monday.

While there's friction between the U.S. and China, they've managed to avoid "uncontrolled escalation," Chong said.

"So long as this mutual understanding holds, there could be some hope for a basic level of stability," he added.

The littoral combat ship USS Mobile and a U.S. Navy P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft joined the Australian frigate HMAS Warramunga, an Australian air force P-8A Poseidon, the Japanese destroyer JS Akebono, and the Philippine frigate BRP Antonio Luna and patrol ship BRP Valentin Diaz for the exercise, according to the Maritime Self-Defense spokesman. Some Japanese government spokespeople may speak to the media only on condition of anonymity.

No official statement on the exercise directly mentioned China, an intentional move "designed to keep the rhetoric restrained," said Carlyle Thayer, an emeritus professor at the University of New South Wales at the Australian Defence Force Academy.

The exercise's message "was clearly aimed at Beijing," he told Stars and Stripes by email Monday.

US, Philippines set to hone combat skills in new drills

Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines — The U.S. Army is introducing a joint battlefield training in the Philippines to improve combat readiness including by ensuring adequate supply of ammunition and other needs in difficult conditions in tropical jungles and on scattered islands, a U.S. general said.

The Biden administration has been strengthening an arc of military alliances in the Indo-Pacific to better counter China, including in any future confrontation over Taiwan. The U.S. moves dovetail with Philippine efforts to shore up its territorial defenses amid disputes with China in the South China Sea and ability to respond to fre-

quent natural disasters.

About 2,000 U.S. and Philippine army forces will join the dayslong combat drills backed by helicopters and artillery fire against armed adversaries in a jungle setting in the northern Philippines in June, Maj. Gen. Marcus Evans, commanding general of the U.S. Army's 25th Infantry Division, said Sunday.

The combat training will be held in the Philippines for the first time at Manila's request. It's not clear whether the long-time treaty allies would decide to turn the maneuvers into an annual exercise, Evans said.

The drills from June 1 to 10 come at the conclusion of two larger back-to-back exercises between the allied forces.

Leader of EU mission seeks more ships to repel Houthis

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — The commander of a European Union naval mission in the Red Sea wants to significantly increase its size to better defend against possible attacks by Houthi rebels based in Yemen, as just four warships are patrolling an area twice the size of the 27-nation bloc.

The EU mission — dubbed Aspid, from the Greek for "shield" — has escorted 68 ships and repelled 11 attacks since it was established less than two months ago. It only defends civilian vessels and does not take part in any military strikes. The southern part of the Red Sea is deemed a high-risk zone.

"Just a single transit of one of our ships between the two larger

distances to the area might take about 10 days, and also to cross the high-risk area takes almost two days," Greek navy Rear Admiral Vasilios Gryparis, the commander of the mission, told reporters.

He said the high-risk zone "has seen multiple attacks in the past months" ranging from threats and intimidation to "complex attacks" using "shore, air and sea-based assets, drones and ballistic missiles." No one has been hurt.

Nineteen of the 27 EU nations are involved in the mission but only four frigates are patrolling.

Iran-backed Houthi rebels, which control much of Yemen's north and west, launched a campaign of drone and missile attacks on shipping in the Red Sea in November.

Trump: Abortion rights up to the states

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Former President Donald Trump says he believes abortion should be left to the states in a video released Monday outlining his position after months of speculation.

“Many people have asked me what my position is on abortion and abortion rights,” Trump said in the video posted on his Truth Social site. “My view is now that we have abortion where everybody wanted it from a legal standpoint, the states will determine by vote or legislation or perhaps both. And whatever they decide must be the law of the land — in this case, the law of the

state.”

He declined to lay out a timeline for when he believes abortion should be banned.

He went on to describe the current legal landscape, in which different states have different restrictions following the U.S. Supreme Court decision ending *Roe v. Wade*.

“Many states will be different. Many will have a different number of weeks or some will have more conservative than others and that’s what they will be,” he said. “At the end of the day it’s all about will of the people.”

Trump, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee,

had written on his social media site Sunday night that he planned to issue a statement on “abortion and abortion rights” after he sidestepped questions about when in a pregnancy he believes the line should be drawn.

Republican-led states have ushered in a wave of new restrictions following the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022. Democrats believe the fight over abortion rights helps them at the polls and have outperformed expectations in elections since.

“You must follow your heart on this issue,” Trump said in his message. “But remember, you must also win elections to restore

our culture and, in fact, to save our country, which is currently and very sadly a nation in decline.”

Trump had long argued that the Supreme Court’s decision overturning *Roe* gave those who oppose abortion rights “tremendous power to negotiate.”

He said he wanted to use that leverage to strike a deal that he hoped would “make both sides happy” and bring the country “together” — even though the issue is one of the most contentious in American politics, with opponents viewing abortion as murder and proponents seeing it as a fundamental women’s right.

Republican warns of pro-Russia messages in party

The Washington Post

Rep. Michael R. Turner (R-Ohio), who chairs the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, said Sunday that it was “absolutely true” that some Republican members of Congress were repeating Russian propaganda about the invasion of Ukraine instigated by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Turner did not specify which members he was referring to, but he said he agreed with House Foreign Affairs Committee Chair Michael McCaul (R-Tex.), who said in an interview with Puck News last week that Rus-

sian propaganda had “infected a good chunk of my party’s base” and suggested that conservative media was to blame.

When asked on Sunday, Turner said he agreed with McCaul’s sentiments.

“We see directly coming from Russia attempts to mask communications that are anti-Ukraine and pro-Russia messages — some of which we even hear being uttered on the House floor,” Turner said on CNN’s “State of the Union.”

The pro-Russia messaging, Turner said, has made it harder for Ukraine’s supporters in the

GOP to frame the conflict as “an authoritarian-versus-democracy battle.” “Ukraine needs our help and assistance now, and this is a very critical time for the U.S. Congress to step up and provide that aid,” Turner added.

Billions of dollars in badly needed military funding for Ukraine has stalled in Congress for months, amid growing opposition from Republicans, and particular vehemence from the GOP’s right flank. Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene (R-Ga.), who has proposed forging a “peace treaty with Russia” in lieu of supporting Ukraine, has vowed to re-

move House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-La.) should he move forward with a vote on an aid package.

When Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky in December traveled to Washington to try to secure a breakthrough for additional U.S. military aid, Greene said she was opposed.

Greene wrote on X, “Why doesn’t anyone in Washington talk about a peace treaty with Russia?? A deal with Putin promising he will not continue any further invasions. Answer: Washington wants war, not peace.”

Biden to unveil new plan to ease student debt burden

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden is traveling to Wisconsin to announce details of a new plan to ease student loan debt for more than 30 million borrowers, a trip that follows primary voting in the Midwest battleground that highlighted weaknesses for the Democratic president and Donald Trump, his Republican challenger.

Biden was making the an-

nouncement Monday in Madison, the state’s liberal capital and home of the University of Wisconsin’s flagship campus. He was speaking at a nearby technical college.

A new federal rule paving the way for student debt relief is unlikely to be issued by the time the president speaks, but he will highlight a plan the Department of Education has been working on since the U.S.

Supreme Court last year foiled his first attempt to forgive hundreds of billions of dollars in student loan debt.

Immediately after the court said Biden needed Congress to approve his original plan, the president called the decision a “mistake” announced that Education Secretary Miguel Cardona would undertake a new process using his authority under the Higher Education

Act to waive or compromise student loan debt in specific cases.

A fresh announcement on student loan relief, an important issue for younger voters, could help energize parts of Biden’s political coalition that have become disillusioned by his job performance. These are people whose support the president will need to defeat Trump in November.

Vatican blasts gender surgery as violation of human dignity

Associated Press

VATICAN CITY — The Vatican on Monday declared gender-affirming surgery and surrogacy as grave violations of human dignity, putting them on par with abortion and euthanasia as practices that reject God's plan for human life.

The Vatican's doctrine office issued "Infinite Dignity," a 20-page declaration that has been in the works for five years. After substantial revision in recent months, it was approved March 25 by Pope Francis, who ordered its publication.

In its most eagerly anticipated section, the Vatican repeated its rejection of "gender theory," or the idea that one's gender can be changed.

It said God created man and woman as biologically different, separate beings, and said people must not tinker with that plan or try to "make oneself God."

"It follows that any sex-

change intervention, as a rule, risks threatening the unique dignity the person has received from the moment of conception," the document said.

It distinguished between gender-affirming surgeries, which it rejected, and "genital abnormalities" that are present at birth or that develop later. Those abnormalities can be "resolved" with the help of health care professionals, it said.

The document's existence, rumored since 2019, was confirmed in recent weeks by the new prefect of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, Argentine Cardinal Víctor Manuel Fernández, a close Francis confidant.

He had cast it as something of a nod to conservatives after he authored a more explosive document approving blessings for same-sex couples that sparked criticism from conservative bishops around the world, especially in Africa.

And yet, the document takes pointed aim at countries — including many in Africa — that criminalize homosexuality. It echoed Francis' assertion in a 2023 interview with The Associated Press that "being homosexual is not a crime," making the assertion now part of the Vatican's doctrinal teaching.

The new document denounces "as contrary to human dignity the fact that, in some places, not a few people are imprisoned, tortured, and even deprived of the good of life solely because of their sexual orientation."

The document is something of a repackaging of previously articulated Vatican positions, read now through the prism of human dignity. It restates well-known Catholic doctrine opposing abortion and euthanasia, and adds to the list some of Francis' main concerns as pope: the threats to dignity posed by poverty, war, human trafficking and forced migration.

Majors gets probation for assault

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Actor Jonathan Majors was sentenced to probation and ordered to complete a yearlong counseling program but avoided jail time Monday for assaulting his ex-girlfriend in a high-profile case that derailed the once-promising star's career.

The 34-year-old star of "Creed III" and other films had faced up to a year behind bars after he was convicted of misdemeanor assault by a Manhattan jury in December.

Judge Michael Gaffey also ordered Majors to complete an in-person batterer's intervention program. He also has to continue with his mental health therapy.

Following the guilty verdict, Majors was immediately dropped by Marvel Studios, which had cast him as Kang the Conqueror, a role envisioned as the main villain in the entertainment empire's movies and television shows for years to come.

The conviction stemmed from an altercation last March in which Majors' then-girlfriend Grace Jabbari accused him of attacking her in the backseat of a chauffeured car, saying he hit her head with his open hand, twisted her arm behind her back and squeezed her middle finger until it fractured.

During a victim impact statement Monday, Jabbari said the incident left her with extreme emotional and physical pain.

Majors claimed the 31-year-old British dancer was the aggressor, flying into a jealous rage after reading a text message from another woman on his phone. He maintained he was only trying to regain his phone and get away from Jabbari safely.

After the sentencing, Majors did not comment as he left the courtroom.

Results subpar from FDA accelerated approval program for cancer drugs

Associated Press

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration's accelerated approval program is meant to give patients early access to promising drugs. But how often do these drugs actually improve or extend patients lives?

In a new study, researchers found that most cancer drugs granted accelerated approval do not demonstrate such benefits within five years.

"Five years after the initial accelerated approval, you should have a definitive answer," said Dr. Ezekiel Emanuel, a cancer specialist and bioethicist at the University of Pennsylvania who was not in-

involved in the research. "Thousands of people are getting those drugs. That seems a mistake if we don't know whether they work or not."

The program was created in 1992 to speed access to HIV drugs. Today, 85% of accelerated approvals go to cancer drugs.

It allows the FDA to grant early approval to drugs that show promising initial results for treating debilitating or fatal diseases. In exchange, drug companies are expected to do rigorous testing and produce better evidence before gaining full approval.

Patients get access to drugs earlier, but the tradeoff means

some of the medications don't pan out.

It's up to the FDA or the drugmaker to withdraw disappointing drugs, and sometimes the FDA has decided that less definitive evidence is good enough for a full approval.

The new study found that between 2013 and 2017, there were 46 cancer drugs granted accelerated approval.

Of those, 63% were converted to regular approval even though only 43% demonstrated a clinical benefit in confirmatory trials.

The research was published in the Journal of the American Medical Association.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Hot air balloon pilot was on drugs during crash

AZ PHOENIX — A hot air balloon pilot had an elevated level of an anesthetic in his system at the time of a January crash that killed four people in southern Arizona, according to a newly released autopsy report.

Toxicology tests showed Cornelius van der Walt had a high amount of ketamine in his blood when the balloon plummeted about 2,000 feet to the desert floor, the report from the Pinal County Medical Examiner's Office said.

While more clinics in recent years have offered ketamine as a treatment for pain, depression, anxiety and other conditions, the report noted there was no known ketamine prescription issued to van der Walt. First responders did not use it while trying to resuscitate him, the report said.

It is unclear if ketamine was a factor in the fatal crash.

Officer who alleged racial discrimination settles

HI HONOLULU — A county in Hawaii has agreed to pay \$350,000 to settle a lawsuit that accused the police chief of discriminating against a captain for being Japanese American, including one instance when the chief squinted his eyes, bowed repeatedly and said he couldn't trust Japanese people.

In the 2021 lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court in Honolulu against the Kauai Police Department and county, Paul Applegate, who is part Japanese, alleged that Chief Todd Raybuck mocked Asians on multi-

ple occasions.

According to settlement terms provided by Kauai County, Applegate will receive about \$45,000 in back wages, about \$181,000 in general damages and about \$124,000 in legal fees. Now acting assistant chief of the Investigative Services Bureau, Applegate, who is in his 50s, also agreed to retire from the department.

Small plane clips 2 cars as it lands on highway

NC MONCURE — A small plane experiencing engine problems struck two vehicles as it landed on a highway near a North Carolina airport, but no injuries were reported, authorities said.

The single-engine Lancair 360 with only the pilot on board landed near Raleigh Executive Jetport at Sanford-Lee County Airport in Sanford after experiencing engine problems, the Federal Aviation Administration said in a statement. The FAA will investigate.

The plane was traveling from Lynchburg, Va., to Ocean Isle Beach, N.C., according to FlightAware.

Moncure Fire Department Chief Robert Shi said the plane hit two vehicles as it landed on U.S. Route 1, but only one sustained minor damage, WTVD-TV reported. The pilot was not injured, Shi said.

City settles with 2 women forced to remove hijabs

NY NEW YORK — New York City has agreed to pay \$17.5 million to settle a lawsuit filed by two Muslim women who were forced to remove their head coverings to be photographed after they were

arrested.

The class-action lawsuit was filed in 2018 by Jamilla Clark and Arwa Aziz, two Muslim women who said they felt shamed and exposed when they were forced to remove their hijabs after they were arrested.

"When they forced me to take off my hijab, I felt as if I were naked. I'm not sure if words can capture how exposed and violated I felt," Clark said in a statement. "I'm so proud today to have played a part in getting justice for thousands of New Yorkers."

Clark was arrested on Jan. 9, 2017, and Aziz was arrested on Aug. 30, 2017.

The lawsuit said police officers threatened to prosecute Clark, who was sobbing after being arrested for violating a bogus protective order filed by her abusive former husband, if she did not remove her head covering.

The lawsuit said Aziz, who also had been arrested because of a bogus protective order, felt broken when her picture was taken where a dozen male police officers and more than 30 male inmates could see her.

Beloved giraffe put down after severe foot injury

SD SIOUX FALLS — A beloved giraffe at a zoo in South Dakota has died.

The Great Plains Zoo and Butterfly House & Aquarium in Sioux Falls announced the death of Chioke, an 18-year-old reticulated giraffe. He died March 28.

"Following a severe fracture in his front left foot, Animal Care and Veterinary leaders made the difficult, but responsi-

ble, decision to humanely euthanize him," the zoo said in a news release.

Chioke, born in Busch Gardens in Tampa, Fla., came to the zoo in 2007. He grew to nearly 15 feet tall and sired three offspring, who went on to other zoos.

Zoo staff visited the giraffe to say goodbye, feeding him apple biscuits, a favorite of his.

"We remember Chioke as a gentle, curious, mischievous giraffe who was always up for feedings and interacting with his keepers and guests," the zoo said. "'Chioke' means 'gift from God,' and he certainly was."

1st livestock kill confirmed after wolves' reintroduction

CO DENVER — A wolf has killed a calf in Colorado, wildlife officials said, confirming the first livestock kill after 10 of the predators were controversially reintroduced in December to the agrievement of the state's rural residents.

Colorado Parks and Wildlife confirmed after an investigation that the wounds of the calf killed, and nearby wolf tracks, were consistent with a wolf kill, what they refer to as a "depredation."

The calf's owner can be compensated by the state for the animal's market value, up to \$15,000. Still, ranchers argue it's just not enough.

"The incident, which resulted in the loss of livestock, underscores the ongoing challenges faced by ranchers in managing conflicts between livestock and wildlife," Tatum Swink, spokesperson for Colorado Cattleman's Association said in a statement.

— From wire reports

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South Carolina completes perfect season

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Kamilla Cardoso delivered once again for Dawn Staley and South Carolina.

A perfect finish. A dynasty. A team too big for Caitlin Clark and Iowa this time around.

Cardoso had 15 points and a career-high 17 rebounds, and South Carolina completed its perfect season with an 87-75 victory over Clark and the Hawkeyes in the NCAA championship game on Sunday.

With Staley directing a relentless attack from the sideline, the Gamecocks (38-0) became the 10th Division I team to go through a season without a loss. And they accomplished the feat after they lost all five starters from last season's team that lost to Clark's squad in the national semifinals.

"When young people lock in and have a belief, and have a trust, and their parents have that same trust, this is what can happen," Staley said. "They made history. They etched their names in the history books."

Clark did all she could to lead the Hawkeyes to their first championship. She scored 30 points, including a championship-record 18 in the first quarter. She rewrote the record book at Iowa (34-5), finishing as the career leading scorer in NCAA Division I history with 3,951 points.

She hopes her legacy isn't defined by falling short in two NCAA championship games, but more by the millions of new fans she helped bring into the game and the countless young girls and boys that she inspired.

"I think the biggest thing is it's really hard to win these things, I think I know that better than most people by now, to be so close twice really hurts," Clark said.

As the final buzzer sounded, a stoic Clark walked off the court, through the confetti, and into the tunnel heading to the locker room.

"I personally want to thank Caitlin Clark for lifting up our sport. She carried a heavy load for our sport," Staley said. "She's going to lift that league (WNBA) up as well. Caitlin Clark if you're out there you're one of the GOATs of our game. We appreciate you."

South Carolina has won three titles in the last eight years, including two of the past three, to lay claim to being the latest dynasty in women's basketball. Staley became the fifth coach to win at least three national championships, joining Geno Auriemma, Pat Summitt, Kim Mulkey and Tara VanDerveer.

The Gamecocks, who have won 109 of their last 112 games, became the first team since UConn in 2016 to go undefeated.

South Carolina had a couple of scares during the season, but found a way to win.

With most of the team returning next year, Staley's team is in a good position to keep this run going.

"This team, we're going to be good. Coach Staley, we have the best coach, what, in the country, in the nation, in the whole wide world?" Raven Johnson said. "It's not telling what she's going to add to the pieces that's already here. I just say be on the lookout."

Tessa Johnson led South Carolina with 19 points. Cardoso, the Final Four's Most Outstanding Player, also blocked three shots.

"Kamilla Cardoso was not going to let us lose a game in the NCAA Tournament," Staley said. "She played through an injury, she played like one of the top picks in the WNBA Draft, and her teammates did something that no teammates have done for somebody who went to the WNBA in our program. They sent her off as a national champion. So this is history for us."

Led by the 6-foot-7 Cardoso and Ashlyn Watkins, South Carolina enjoyed a 51-29 rebounding advantage. It also finished with 30 second-chance points.

The Gamecocks also showed off their impressive depth. Tessa Johnson helped the team to a 37-0 difference in points by reserves.

Byron leads Hendrick to top spots at Martinsville

Associated Press

William Byron said he had nightmares coming to Martinsville Speedway this weekend, remembering his last visit when he struggled to a 13th-place finish.

He not only overcame those fears, he put a cherry on top of the weekend when Hendrick Motorsports celebrated the anniversary of its first win 40 years ago by picking up No. 305.

"It was one of the worst experiences as a team, but one of the best experiences to realize the resilience that our team has. And I think that that showed today," Byron said of last October's penultimate race of the season.

This Sunday was different.

Electing to stay out on old tires for the two-lap overtime finish, Byron won for the third time this season in eight races and led an historic 1-2-3 finish for Hendrick.

"It's awesome and it's way bigger than me," Byron said.

Byron took the lead with 73 laps to go and held on after a second straight race ended in overtime, outrunning teammates Kyle Larson and Chase Elliott for the win.

Byron, the first of the contenders to pit under a green flag with 104 laps to go, moved to the front 31 laps later and was never threatened after getting the jump at the start of overtime. It was his second victory on the 0.526-mile, paper-clip shaped oval.

"It was a great call. It didn't get us the track position right away, but we had a little bit more heat in our tires," Byron said of the call to pit, which ultimately gave him the lead. "So, seemed like I fired off a little bit faster than those guys and was able to get ahead of them."

He stayed out when John Hunter Nemechek crashed in turn three with three laps to go, as did Elliott and Larson, running second and third, and they produced the first 1-2-3 finish for any team in Martinsville's long history hosting stock car races.

Larson rallied to finish second, Elliott third, Bubba Wallace fourth and Ryan Blaney, last fall's winner here, fifth. The fourth Hendrick driver,

Alex Bowman, finished eighth.

"This is a huge win for the organization," four-time Hendrick series champion Jeff Gordon, now the vice chairman of the organization, said.

The race featured long green flag runs, with two of the five cautions pre-planned at the end of stages one and two. There were 13 lead changes among eight drivers.

The victory was the 29th for Hendrick at NASCAR's smallest, oldest track, a record for an organization at any venue. The Hendrick organization hosted more than 1,000 current and former employees for the race, but the owner was not able to attend, having recently undergone knee replacement surgery.

Pirates get wild walk-off on O's error

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Baltimore Orioles shortstop Gunnar Henderson made a diving stop near second base on Edward Oliveras' grounder in a try for a game-ending double play, then threw wildly past first for an error as two runs scored and gave the Pittsburgh Pirates a 3-2 victory on Sunday.

With the wild win, the Pirates improved to 8-2 for the first time since 2018.

"I usually make that play 99 times out of 100, and it just so happens that the throw got away from me right there," Henderson said. "That was pretty unfortunate."

Baltimore led 2-1 when the Pirates loaded the bases on Yennier Cano (1-1) on singles by Ke'Bryan Hayes and Jack Suwinski followed by Connor Joe's walk.

Rowdy Tellez hit a soft grounder to first baseman Ryan Mountcastle, and umpire Dan Iassogna ruled Hayes beat his throw home only for the call to be changed to a forceout in a video review.

Oliveras hit a sharp grounder up the middle that Henderson gloved with a spectacular dive, and his momentum carried him into second. He tagged the base with his glove as Tellez went into the base standing up, and Henderson hooked his throw around

the runner and to the outfield of Mountcastle as Suwinski and Joe scored.

Athletics 7, Tigers 1: Zack Gelfof had four hits, including a three-run homer, and drove in four runs to help visiting Oakland beat Detroit.

Mets 3, Reds 1: Francisco Lindor hit a home run and ended an 0-for-24 skid as visiting New York beat Cincinnati.

Sean Manaea (1-0) had another strong outing for the Mets. He lowered his earned-run average to 0.82 after allowing one run and three hits in five innings. He walked two and struck out six.

Royals 5, White Sox 3: MJ Melendez hit his third home run of the series, a two-run drive in a three-run seventh inning as host Kansas City rallied to beat Chicago for a four-game sweep.

Chicago ended a 19-inning scoreless streak in the fourth and led 3-0 in the fifth before Hunter Renfroe's two-run homer off starter Garrett Crochet.

Braves 5, Diamondbacks 2: Michael Harris II hit a go-ahead homer in the fourth inning, left-hander Chris Sale gave his team's rotation a boost in his first home start, and host Atlanta beat Arizona to cap a three-game sweep of the Diamondbacks.

Sale (1-0), acquired from the Boston Red Sox in an offseason trade for Vaughn Grissom, al-

lowed two runs on four hits with no walks in 5½ innings.

Astros 3, Rangers 1: Right-hander Ronel Blanco followed his no-hitter with one-hit ball over six scoreless innings, and visiting Houston beat Texas.

Six nights after throwing a no-hitter at home against Toronto in his first start of the season, Blanco held the World Series champs without a hit until Adolis García grounded a clean single up the middle with two outs in the sixth. Blanco (2-0) then retired Evan Carter on an inning-ending fly ball and was done after 90 pitches.

Nationals 3, Phillies 2: MacKenzie Gore pitched five-hit ball into the sixth inning, and host Washington beat Philadelphia to avoid a series sweep.

Lane Thomas stole three bases and scored the go-ahead run as Washington stopped a three-game slide.

Yankees 8, Blue Jays 3: Giancarlo Stanton hit a loud, tiebreaking grand slam in the third inning and host New York beat Toronto for its eighth win in 10 games to start the season.

Stanton gave the Yankees a 5-1 lead with a 417-foot drive off Bowden Francis (0-2) that clanked against the facing of an advertisement below the second deck in left field.

Brewers 12, Mariners 4: Wil-

liam Contreras hit two home runs, Willy Adames also homered and host Milwaukee pounded Seattle.

Contreras finished with four hits and five RBIs.

Marlins 10, Cardinals 3: Visiting Miami ended its team-record nine-game losing streak starting the season when Jazz Chisholm Jr. and Nick Gordon hit three-run homers in a six-run first inning that lifted it over St. Louis.

Miami had been the first team to start 0-9 since Atlanta and Minnesota in 2016.

Rays 3, Rockies 2: Ryan Pepiot struck out a career-high 11 batters in six shutout innings, and visiting Tampa Bay held on to beat Colorado.

Giants 3, Padres 2: Matt Chapman drove in two runs, including a go-ahead single in the eighth inning that led host San Francisco over San Diego for its first series win this season.

Red Sox 12, Angels 2: Reese McGuire drove in five runs, Tyler O'Neill hit his third home run of the series and visiting Boston finished off an opening 10-game trip with a victory over Los Angeles.

Cubs 8, Dodgers 1: Cody Bellinger homered against his former team, Shota Imanaga threw four shutout innings in a rain-shortened start and host Chicago beat Los Angeles.

Bhatia earns Masters spot in playoff; Korda still rolling

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — Akshay Bhatia nearly celebrated too soon Sunday, hurting his left shoulder while pumping his arms on a 12-foot birdie to force a playoff. He recovered to make birdie on the first extra hole and win the Texas Open over hard-luck Denny McCarthy to earn a trip to the Masters.

McCarthy was six shots behind going to the back nine when he birdied eight of the

nine holes — including the last seven — making a 12-foot birdie for a 9-under 63. Bhatia had to make his birdie putt from the same range to have a chance.

He made it for a 67, raising his arms to shake them in his clutch moment. And that's when he felt his shoulder — which he says has given him trouble before — pop out of its socket.

Bhatia hit his tee shot and laid up with a 5-iron on the par-5 18th in the playoff.

McCarthy chunked a wedge so badly that he immediately hung his head. The ball came up some 20 yards short into the middle of a creek.

Bhatia holed it to win for the second time on the PGA Tour.

Korda first since 2008 to win 4 straight starts

LAS VEGAS — Nelly Korda won the T-Mobile Match Play to become the first LPGA Tour player in 16 years to win four

straight starts, taking four of the first seven holes and going on to beat Leona Maguire 4 and 3 at Shadow Creek.

Lorena Ochoa in 2008 was the last player to win four consecutive starts. Korda, the world's top-ranked player, will try to tie the record of five — set by Nancy Lopez in 1978 and matched by Annika Sorenstam in 2004-05 — in two weeks at the season's first major, The Chevron Championship.

Rockets eliminated from playoff contention

Associated Press

DALLAS — Kyrie Irving scored a season-high 48 points, Dante Exum forced overtime with a buzzer-beating 3-pointer and the Dallas Mavericks rallied from 22 points down for a 147-136 win over the Houston Rockets on Sunday.

Luka Doncic had 37 points, 12 assists and nine rebounds as the Mavericks took another step toward the fifth seed in the Western Conference playoffs.

Dillon Brooks scored a season-high 29 points, and Fred VanVleet had 24 points and 12 assists for the Rockets, who were eliminated from postseason contention after not trailing until the final three minutes of regulation.

Pacers 117, Heat 115: Myles Turner finished with 22 points and 13 rebounds, T.J. McConnell added 22 points and host Indiana hung on to strengthen its playoff prospects with a victory over Miami.

The Pacers have won four of five to take a 1½-game lead over the Heat for the Eastern Conference's sixth and final guaranteed playoff spot.

Thunder 121, Hornets 118: Josh Giddey had 20 points, 13 assists and 13 rebounds for his 11th career triple-double, Isaiah Joe

had two key 3-pointers in the final 1:30 and visiting Oklahoma City beat Charlotte to snap a three-game losing streak.

The Thunder are now one game back of first place in the Western Conference behind Minnesota and Denver.

Magic 113, Bulls 98: Paolo Banchero scored 24 points, Jalen Suggs added 19 and host Orlando kept up a playoff push that could land it as high as second in the Eastern Conference with a win over Chicago.

The Magic (46-32) moved into at least a tie for third place in the East by completing a four-game sweep of the Bulls. The Bulls, locked into the bottom half of the Eastern Conference play-in bracket with four games left to play, shot 50.7% from the field but had 21 turnovers.

Pelicans 113, Suns 105: C.J. McCollum scored 31 points, Zion Williamson had 29 and visiting New Orleans beat Phoenix, leaving the teams tied for the sixth and final guaranteed Western Conference playoff spot.

Both teams are 46-32 with four games remaining, two games behind fifth-place Dallas. The Suns own the tiebreaker, having won

the season series 2-1.

Knicks 122, Bucks 109: Jalen Brunson scored 43 points and visiting New York surged in the second half to hand Milwaukee its fourth consecutive loss.

The Bucks are facing their longest losing streak of the season and also have dropped six of their last seven. Milwaukee is a game ahead of the Knicks and Orlando Magic in the race for the Eastern Conference's No. 2 playoff seed behind the Boston Celtics.

Kings 107, Nets 77: Domantas Sabonis had 18 points and 20 rebounds to extend his streak of double-doubles to 61 games, and visiting Sacramento routed Brooklyn.

De'Aaron Fox scored 20 points for the Kings, who improved to 45-33 and stopped a two-game slide that had dropped them into ninth in the Western Conference.

Timberwolves 127, Lakers 117: Naz Reid hit six 3-pointers while scoring 31 points, and visiting Minnesota capitalized on LeBron James' absence and Anthony Davis' early exit with an eye injury for a victory over Los Angeles.

Anthony Edwards added 26 points for the Timberwolves, who moved even with Denver atop the Western Conference at 54-24 with

their seventh win in nine games. Minnesota didn't waste its golden opportunity to beat the surging Lakers, who played most of the night without their two superstars.

Clippers 120, Cavaliers 118: Paul George scored 23 of his 39 points in the fourth quarter, James Harden added 22 and host Los Angeles rallied to beat Cleveland for its 50th victory.

Celtics 124, Trail Blazers 107: Jaylen Brown scored 26 points and reached 10,000 in his NBA career, leading NBA-leading Boston past visiting Portland for its 13th straight home victory.

76ers 133, Spurs 126 (2OT): Tyrese Maxey had a career-high 52 points and injury-depleted Philadelphia overcame Victor Wembanyama and host San Antonio in double overtime for its fifth straight victory.

Warriors 118, Jazz 110: Klay Thompson scored 32 points and host Golden State ran away from Utah early on the way to a win.

Raptors 130, Wizards 122: Immanuel Quickley had a season-high 31 points and 13 assists, RJ Barrett scored 22 points, and host Toronto handed slumping Washington its franchise-worst 64th loss of the season.

Rangers beat Canadiens, tie franchise record for wins

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Mika Zibanejad had two goals and an assist, Artemi Panarin had a goal and three assists, and the New York Rangers beat the Montreal Canadiens 5-2.

Chris Kreider and Alexis Lafreniere also scored, and Igor Shesterkin had 26 saves to get the Rangers their 53rd win to tie a team record set in 2014-15. New York has won eight of its last nine games and 13 of the last 16 at home.

The Rangers have 110 points to lead Boston by three points for the most in the NHL. New York is also five points up on Carolina for first in the Metropolitan Division. All three teams have four games remaining.

"Mika and Kreider played with really good energy tonight," said Rangers coach Peter Laviolette, who plugged in the versatile Jimmy Vesey on right wing with Kreider and Zibanejad. "Their line was effective."

Red Wings 3, Sabres 1: Lucas Raymond, Patrick Kane and Dylan Larkin all scored in the first period and Alex Lyon made 37 saves as host Detroit beat Buffalo.

The win gives Detroit 84 points, moving it past the idle Penguins and Flyers into the second wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference.

Wild 4, Blackhawks 0: Kirill Kaprizov had two goals and an assist, rookie Jesper Wallstedt made 24 saves in posting his first NHL shutout and visiting Minnesota beat Chicago.

The victory keeps Minnesota's slim playoff hopes alive. It has 83 points with five games remaining. Vegas and Nashville, the top two wild-card teams in the Western Conference, entered Sunday with 92 points.

Predators 3, Devils 2 (SO): Ryan O'Reilly scored the deciding shootout goal to lift visiting Nashville over New Jersey.

The Devils, who recorded a franchise-best

112 points last season, have lost four of their last five and are currently on the outside of a wild-card playoff berth in the Eastern Conference with just four games remaining.

Senators 3, Capitals 2 (OT): Charlie Lindgren allowed three goals on 21 shots, the last by Jake Sanderson in overtime and Washington lost a sixth consecutive game, a defeat to visiting Ottawa that's another blow to its playoff hopes.

Blues 6, Ducks 5 (SO): Jordan Krou scored in the shootout and visiting St. Louis beat Anaheim to protect its slim playoff hopes.

Hurricanes 3, Blue Jackets 0: Frederik Andersen made 23 saves for his third shutout in his past seven games and host Carolina scored two first-period goals in its regular-season home finale to beat Columbus.

Coyotes 5, Sharks 2: Lawson Crouse, Nick Schmaltz and Clayton Keller each had a goal and assist, and visiting Arizona beat San Jose.