

Navy plan to buy fewer ships draws fire

By **MATTHEW ADAMS**
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A Navy plan to retire ships, buy fewer new ones and delay some shipbuilding drew sharp words from House lawmakers during a hearing Wednesday to examine the service's budget proposal for 2025.

"China remains... the pacing threat. In a China scenario, the Navy remains our cornerstone of our military's ability to project power," said Rep. Ken Calvert, R-Calif., chairman of the House Appropriations Committee's defense subpanel. "I am concerned the Navy is falling behind."

The Navy and Marines budget for fiscal 2025 unveiled last month totals \$257.6 billion. Though a slight increase from the previous year, the proposal includes fewer purchases of Virginia-class attack submarines and F-35 Lightning II fighter jets. It also plans for long-term projects such as a second Columbia-class, ballistic-missile submarine and two

more Ford-class aircraft carriers.

Yet the Navy also seeks to get rid of 19 ships, including 10 before reaching their expected service life, a move Congress has been reluctant to support in recent years.

"The Navy continues to retire ships faster than it builds them. And I'm troubled by the Navy's request to decommission 10 ships before the end of their service life," Calvert said.

The budget hearing followed an announcement last week from the service that four of its critical shipbuilding plans are years behind schedule. The delays, from one to three years each depending on the program, come as the Navy and Pentagon pour billions of dollars into modernizing and upgrading shipyards to build and repair ships more quickly and keep pace with China's growing military.

The first Columbia-class submarine is projected to be between 12 and 16 months late. The fourth and fifth blocks, or

more modernized versions, of the Virginia-class submarines are 36 and 24 months late. The first Constellation-class frigate is approximately 36 months behind schedule.

The third Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carrier, the USS Enterprise, is approximately 18 to 26 months late.

Delays range from issues related to acquisition and contract strategy, the supply chain and having enough skilled workers.

"We cannot continue to divest ships without investing adequately in ship construction. I'm particularly troubled by the Navy's recent report," said Rep. Tom Cole, R-Okla., chairman of the House Appropriations Committee. "These four programs ... are vital to counter China in the Pacific."

Cole said he believes the Navy budget is "too low" but recognizes Congress is under constraints forged last year under the Fiscal Responsibility Act. The law capped the Defense Department budget for 2025 at \$849.5 billion, a roughly 1% cut

to the department's 2024 spending plan when adjusted for inflation.

He said shipbuilding is key. "We can give you a lot of money but you clearly don't have the capacity to produce as quickly as we would like to," Cole said.

Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro, who testified about the service's budget at the hearing, explained the approach that he introduced in the fall calls for a "whole-of-government effort" to build a comprehensive U.S. and allied maritime power in commercial and naval abilities. Del Toro said commercial shipbuilding has been "devastated" in the country since the 1980s.

"We stopped actually incentivizing and subsidizing the commercial shipbuilding industry. And it's because of that, that our shipyards went down from 30 to eight today that basically work with the Navy," the secretary said. "And that's a real challenge."

This leads to the problem of ships costing more to build in the U.S., he said.

Army secretary says recruiting efforts looking up

By **COREY DICKSTEIN**
Stars and Stripes

Army Secretary Christine Wormuth told House lawmakers on Wednesday that her service is "feeling a lot better" about recruiting this year after missing its goal for new soldiers for two consecutive years.

"I don't want to be overconfident," the Army's top civilian told members of the House's defense appropriations subpanel while testifying alongside Gen. Randy George, the Army's chief of staff. "But I think we both feel

that we have a good shot at making that goal this year, which I think would be very, very important."

That goal, she added, is to ship 55,000 new recruits to Army basic training by Sept. 30, the end of fiscal 2024, and fill its delayed-entry coffers with another 5,000 recruits who would move to initial entrance training later. Meeting that basic recruiting goal would match the Army's enlistment efforts from fiscal 2023, when it sent about 55,000 recruits to initial mili-

tary training, falling about 10,000 short of its goal of 65,000. But that was an improvement from fiscal 2022, when the Army shipped fewer than 45,000 new recruits to basic training, falling 15,000 short of its goal.

Pentagon officials have noted in recent years that the military recruiting environment is among the worst in U.S. history. Only about 23% of Americans between the ages of 17 to 24 qualify for military service, fewer than previous generations, according to Defense De-

partment data. Among them, only about 9% has shown interest in the military, the data shows.

To counter the problem, the Army has launched myriad new recruiting programs aimed at beefing up and professionalizing its recruiting force. Wormuth said Wednesday that the service has begun one of those newer efforts to build a corps of permanent enlisted and warrant officer recruiters in lieu of soldiers temporarily taking recruiting assignments.

Court-martial begins in espionage case

Sailor assigned to Yokosuka-based destroyer accused of sharing missile system information

By ALEX WILSON

Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — A court-martial for a chief petty officer accused of espionage began this week at Naval Station San Diego, a Navy spokesman said.

Chief Petty Officer Bryce Steven Pedicini is standing trial on charges he passed classified information to an unidentified foreign government.

The fire controlman was assigned to the Yokosuka-based guided-missile destroyer USS Higgins at the time of the alleged espionage.

Prosecutor Leah O'Brien in court said Pedicini was motivated by financial gain to sell military secrets over the internet to a stranger, and his financial challenges made him a "perfect target," according to a KGTV Channel 10 News report Thursday.

The case began when a woman posing as a Japanese researcher contacted Pedicini on Facebook, inviting him to write research papers, O'Brien said, according to KGTV.

The woman eventually convinced Pedicini to send classified information on a ballistic missile system and documents that outlined Chinese and Russian threats, O'Brien said. Pedicini first received \$50 for filling out a survey and \$1,000 for the initial documents, the prosecutor said, according to KGTV.

The court-martial began Tuesday and is scheduled to run through April 19, Naval Surface Forces Pacific spokesman Cmdr. Arlo Abrahamson said by email Wednesday morning.

Pedicini opted for a trial with a judge without a jury, Abrahamson said. He declined further comment.

Pedicini is accused of hand-

ing off at least seven pieces of national defense information to an unidentified foreign national between November 2022 and February 2023 near Hampton Roads, Va., according to his charge sheet.

Seven pieces of information were identified as documents with titles such as "Article 1112" or "1223 Updates," but they allegedly contained information related to national defense.

Hampton Roads is home to major military installations and commands, including Naval Station Norfolk, Norfolk Naval Shipyard and Langley Air Force Base.

Authorities allege Pedicini also attempted to hand over photographs of a computer screen connected to the Defense Department's network used to transmit classified information.

The Navy said that attempt took place at Yokosuka in May.

Pedicini had reason to believe those documents and pictures "would be used to the injury of the United States and to the advantage of a foreign nation," according to the charge sheet.

The document refers to the recipient or recipients only as a "citizen and employee of a foreign government."

As a fire controlman, Pedicini would have worked with "everything from radars, fire control systems and computer systems to the Navy's most advanced missile system, Aegis," which is used aboard guided-missile destroyers and cruisers, according to the Navy's description of the job.

Pedicini enlisted in January 2008 and served aboard the guided-missile destroyers USS Curtis Wilbur and USS McFaul, according to a biography provided by Abrahamson.

Marines take aim at Navy on social media over photo

By ALEX WILSON

Stars and Stripes

The Marine Corps schooled the Navy over social media Wednesday after the sea service uploaded a photo of an officer firing an improperly configured rifle.

The Navy posted to its official Instagram account a now-deleted photo of Cmdr. Cameron Yaste, skipper of the guided-missile destroyer USS John S. McCain, holding a rifle and looking through a scope that was clearly mounted backward.

The weapon's foregrip was also mounted strangely, positioned closer to the gun's center than its barrel.

"From engaging in practice gun shoots, conducting main-

"Even Hollywood gets this right. We are doomed."

X user @matthewdmarsden

tenance, testing fuel purity and participating in sea and anchor details, the #USNavy is always ready to serve and protect," the post said.

Social media users quickly jumped at the chance to poke fun at the error.

"Dear U.S. Navy. The scope is on backwards," wrote X user @travisakers. "This is why we have Marines on ships."

The Marine Corps appeared to take its own dig at the Navy, sharing a photo on its social media accounts of a Marine firing a weapon

aboard the amphibious assault ship USS Boxer. The caption read: "Clear Sight Picture."

On his official X account, Rep. Mike Collins, R-Ga., posted a picture of a pistol with its barrel and grip on backward. The caption read: "Navy's newly issued sidearm."

Others noted that even action movies rarely make such errors.

"Even Hollywood gets this right," wrote X user @matthewdmarsden. "We are doomed."

Though the Navy ultimately deleted the post, X users continue to share screenshots.

"Thank you for pointing out our rifle scope error in the

previous post," the Navy later wrote on various social media accounts. "Picture has been removed until EMI [extra military instruction] is completed."

The Navy defines EMI as "instruction in a phase of military duty in which an individual is deficient, and is intended for and directed toward the correction of that deficiency."

The John S. McCain was operating in the U.S. 7th Fleet's operations area when the photo was taken. The command referred questions to the Navy's Chief Information Officer, who did not immediately respond to an emailed request for comment early Thursday.

Powerful storms batter US Southeast

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Powerful storms rumbled over parts of the U.S. Southeast early Thursday, prompting a few tornado warnings, causing flash flooding, and delaying the start of one of the world's biggest sporting events, in Georgia.

The storm system, which has already been blamed for at least one death in Mississippi, demolished buildings and flooded streets in the New Orleans area on Wednesday. It continued to spawn flash flood and tornado

warnings in Florida, Georgia and South Carolina on Thursday.

More than 100,000 customers lacked power early Thursday nationwide. That included more than 30,000 in Georgia, where the bad weather was ongoing, according to PowerOutage.us.

Now, forecasters say parts of Ohio, Kentucky and West Virginia will be near the bull's-eye of a new area of concern Thursday. Those areas could see some tornadoes, damaging winds and large hail, according to the latest outlooks from the Storm Predic-

tion Center.

In Augusta, Ga., the start of the Masters golf tournament was delayed, tournament officials announced. Forecasters predict wind gusts as high as 45 mph.

"Those wind speeds could easily knock down branches here and there," said Brad Carlberg, a National Weather Service forecaster. "Just be aware of the weather and gusts, especially if you are near trees, because a branch could fall down at any time."

Torrential rains early Thurs-

day made roads impassable in Valdosta, Ga., an emergency manager reported. In Tallahassee, Fla., storms toppled trees and caused significant street flooding, the weather service said.

Damage has been reported from Texas to the Florida Panhandle.

A tornado struck Slidell, about 30 miles northeast of New Orleans, on Wednesday. It ripped roofs off buildings and partially collapsed others in and around the city of about 28,000.

OJ Simpson, football star acquitted of murder, dies

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — O.J. Simpson, the decorated football superstar and Hollywood actor who was acquitted of charges he killed his former wife and her friend but later found liable in a separate civil trial, has died. He was 76.

The family announced on Simpson's official X account — formerly Twitter — that Simpson died Wednesday after battling prostate cancer. Simpson's attorney confirmed to TMZ he died in Las Vegas.

Simpson earned fame, fortune and adulation through football and show business, but his legacy was forever changed by the June 1994 knife slayings of his ex-wife, Nicole Brown Simp-

son, and her friend Ronald Goldman in Los Angeles.

Live TV coverage of his arrest after a famous slow-speed chase marked a stunning fall from grace for the sports hero.

He had seemed to transcend racial barriers as the star Trojans tailback for college football's powerful University of Southern California in the late 1960s, as a rental car ad pitchman rushing through airports in the late 1970s, and as the husband of a blonde and blue-eyed high school homecoming queen in the 1980s.

"I'm not Black, I'm O.J.," he liked to tell friends.

The public was mesmerized by his "trial of the century" on live TV. His case sparked de-

bates on race, gender, domestic abuse, celebrity justice and police misconduct.

A criminal court jury found him not guilty of murder in 1995, but a separate civil trial jury found him liable in 1997 for the deaths and ordered him to pay \$33.5 million to family members of Brown and Goldman.

A decade later, still shadowed by the California wrongful death judgment, Simpson led five men he barely knew into a confrontation with two sports memorabilia dealers in a cramped Las Vegas hotel room. Two men with Simpson had guns. A jury convicted Simpson of armed robbery and other felonies.

Imprisoned at age 61, he

served nine years in a remote northern Nevada prison, including a stint as a gym janitor. He was not contrite when he was released on parole in October 2017. The parole board heard him insist yet again that he was only trying to retrieve sports memorabilia and family heirlooms stolen from him after his criminal trial in Los Angeles.

"I've basically spent a conflict-free life, you know," Simpson, whose parole ended in late 2021, said.

Public fascination with Simpson never faded. Many debated if he had been punished in Las Vegas for his acquittal in Los Angeles. In 2016, he was the subject of both an FX miniseries and five-part ESPN documentary.

Trump says Arizona's abortion ban is too restrictive

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution

ATLANTA — Former President Donald Trump said that a 160-year-old Arizona law that bans nearly all abortions is too restrictive, and he called on Republicans to "very quickly" overhaul the measure after he arrived Wednesday for a private fundraiser in Atlanta.

But Trump stopped short of

elaborating about what level of abortion restrictions he would support even as he defended the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to overturn Roe v. Wade and grant states new authority to limit access to the procedure.

His remarks came a day after the Arizona Supreme Court upheld an 1864 anti-abortion

law, ensuring that reproductive rights will remain front and center in the critical battleground state and emboldening President Joe Biden and other Democrats who say the issue will energize their supporters.

"It'll be straightened out. And as you know, it's all about states' rights," Trump told reporters. "It'll be straightened

out, and I'm sure that the governor and everybody else are going to bring it back into reason and that'll be taken care of very quickly."

The presumptive GOP nominee is trying to navigate tricky political territory by refusing to take a stance on a national ban while saying abortion rights should be left to the states.

New rule requires background checks by US gun dealers

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Thousands more firearms dealers across the United States will have to run background checks on buyers when selling at gun shows or other places outside brick-and-mortar stores, according to a Biden administration rule that will soon go into effect.

The rule aims to close a loophole that has allowed tens of thousands of guns to be sold every year by unlicensed dealers who don't perform background checks to ensure the potential buyer is not legally prohibited from having a firearm.

It's the administration's latest effort to combat gun violence. But in a contentious election year, it's also an effort to show voters — especially younger ones for whom gun violence deeply resonates — that the White House is trying to stop the deaths.

"This is going to keep guns out of the hands of domestic abusers and felons," President Joe Biden said in a statement. "And my administration is go-

ing to continue to do everything we possibly can to save lives. Congress needs to finish the job and pass universal background checks legislation now."

The rule, which was finalized this week, makes clear that anyone who sells firearms predominantly to earn a profit must be federally licensed and conduct background checks, regardless of whether they are selling on the internet, at a gun show or at a brick-and-mortar store, Attorney General Merrick Garland told reporters.

Biden has made curtailing gun violence a major part of his administration and reelection campaign, creating the White House Office of Gun Violence Prevention overseen by Vice President Kamala Harris. Biden also has urged Congress to ban so-called assault weapons — something Democrats shied from even just a few years ago.

But the rule is certain to prompt criticism from gun rights advocates who believe the Democratic president has been unfairly and unlawfully targeting gun owners.

Parliament approves law to boost draft in Ukraine

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine's parliament passed a controversial law Thursday that will govern how the country recruits new soldiers to replenish depleted forces who are increasingly struggling to fend off Russian troops.

Two years after Russia's full-scale invasion captured nearly a quarter of the country, the stakes could not be higher for Kyiv. After a string of victories in the first year of the war, fortunes have turned for the Ukrainian military, which is dug in, outgunned and outnumbered. Troops are beset by shortages in soldiers and ammunition, as well as doubts about the supply of Western aid.

Lawmakers dragged their feet for months over the new law, and it is expected to be unpopular. It comes about a week after Ukraine lowered the draft-eligible age for men from 27 to 25.

The law will become effective a month after President Volodymyr Zelenskyy signs it — and it was not clear when he would. It took him months to sign the law reducing conscription age.

It was passed Thursday against a backdrop of an escalating Russian campaign that has devastated Ukraine's energy infrastructure in recent weeks. Authorities said Russian

overnight missile and drone attacks again struck infrastructure and power facilities across several regions and destroyed the Trypilska thermal power plant, the largest power-generating facility in Kyiv region.

With Russia increasingly seizing the initiative, the law came in response to a request from Ukraine's military, which wants to mobilize up to 500,000 more troops, Zelenskyy said in December.

Incumbent army chief Oleksandr Syrskyy and Zelenskyy have since revised that figure down because soldiers can be rotated from the rear. But officials haven't said how many are needed.

The law — which was watered down from its original form — will make it easier to identify every draft-eligible man in the country, where even in war many have dodged conscription by avoiding contact with authorities.

But it's unclear that Ukraine, with its ongoing ammunition shortages, has the ability to arm large numbers of recruits without a fresh injection of aid.

Thursday's vote came after the parliamentary defense committee removed a key provision from the bill that would rotate out troops who served 36 months of combat.

Instagram blurs nudity to protect teens, fight sextortion

Associated Press

LONDON — Instagram said it's deploying new tools to protect young people and combat sexual extortion, including a feature that will automatically blur nudity in direct messages.

The social media platform said in a blog post Thursday that it's testing out the features as part of its campaign to fight sexual scams and other forms of "image abuse," and to make it tougher for criminals to con-

tact teens.

Sexual extortion, or sextortion, involves persuading a person to send explicit photos online and then threatening to make the images public unless the victim pays money or engages in sexual favors. Recent high-profile cases include two Nigerian brothers who pleaded guilty to sexually extorting teen boys and young men in Michigan, including one who took his own life, and a Virginia

sheriff's deputy who sexually extorted and kidnapped a 15-year-old girl.

Instagram and other social media companies have faced growing criticism for not doing enough to protect young people. Mark Zuckerberg, the CEO of Instagram's owner Meta Platforms, apologized to the parents of victims of such abuse during a Senate hearing earlier this year.

Meta also owns Facebook

and WhatsApp but the nudity blur feature won't be added to messages sent on those platforms.

Instagram said scammers often use direct messages to ask for "intimate images."

To counter this, it will soon start testing out a nudity protection feature for direct messages that blurs any images with nudity "and encourages people to think twice before sending nude images."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Lawmakers OK plan to rebuild Preakness' home

MD ANNAPOLIS — Maryland lawmakers approved a plan to rebuild Baltimore's storied but antiquated Pimlico Race Course and transfer the track to state control in the waning hours of the state's legislative session on Monday.

The measure would use \$400 million in state bonds to rebuild the home of the second jewel of horse racing's Triple Crown, the Preakness Stakes.

The legislation also calls for transferring Pimlico from the Stronach Group, which is the owner of Pimlico and nearby Laurel Park, to a newly formed nonprofit that would operate under the state. The 105-32 vote in the Maryland House sends the bill to Gov. Wes Moore, who has expressed support for it.

The state has been wrestling with what to do to restore the old racetrack for decades. Aptly nicknamed Old Hilltop, the track opened in 1870. It's where Man o' War, Seabiscuit, Secretariat and many others pranced to the winner's circle.

Mountain goat stuck under bridge is rescued

MO KANSAS CITY — A mountain goat that may have been stolen from a farm two months ago and somehow got stuck under a Kansas City bridge has survived a rocky rescue effort.

Firefighters were called Monday after people spotted the animal — believed to be a missing goat named Chug — hopping around on the pillars that support the bridge, high above the ground below. The

Kansas City Star reported.

Hoping to lower it down to waiting rescuers, a bystander managed to get a rope around the goat's neck, said Tori Fugate, of the KC Pet Project, a nonprofit that handles animal control for the city and operates shelters.

But Fugate said the goat wound up hanging from its neck, not moving, leaving rescuers worried it had died. When the goat began to buck, rescuers cut the rope, and a veterinarian sedated it so it could be taken to a shelter for care.

The mountain goat had been adopted recently and had escaped. An X-ray appeared to show the goat suffered no broken bones, she said.

Ex-regulator, charged in bribery scheme, dies

OH COLUMBUS — A former top utility regulator awaiting trial on charges he took millions in bribes in conjunction with the largest corruption scandal in Ohio's history died by suicide on Tuesday, a spokesperson for the Franklin County Coroner's Office said.

Sam Randazzo, 74, the one-time chair of the Public Utilities Commission of Ohio, faced the prospect of spending the rest of his life in prison if convicted of the dozens of criminal charges he faced in simultaneous federal and state investigations. He had pleaded not guilty to all of them, most notably the allegation that he accepted a \$4.3 million bribe from Akron-based FirstEnergy Corp. in exchange for regulatory favors.

A spokesperson for the county coroner's office said Randazzo was found unresponsive at a

building he owned in Columbus at just before noon.

Randazzo resigned his regulatory post in November 2020 after FBI agents searched his Columbus townhome and FirstEnergy revealed in security filings what it said were bribery payments of \$4.3 million for his future help at the commission a month before Republican Gov. Mike DeWine nominated him as Ohio's top utility regulator.

Bill requires viewing fetal development video

TN NASHVILLE — Tennessee would become the latest state to require public school students to watch a video on fetal development produced by an anti-abortion group, or something comparable, under legislation that is headed to Republican Gov. Bill Lee's desk.

The GOP-dominated Senate passed the legislation last week, with the five Democrats in attendance and one Republican voting to oppose.

The bill mirrors similar proposals in Iowa, Kentucky, Missouri and West Virginia. All have been backed by Live Action, an anti-abortion organization. North Dakota was the first state to adopt the idea last year.

Official: Biden could miss state deadline for ballot

AL MONTGOMERY — President Joe Biden could be left off the ballot in Alabama, the state's elections chief said Tuesday, because the state's certification deadline comes several days before the Democratic Party's convention.

Alabama Secretary of State Wes Allen, a Republican, made the statement Tuesday, a day af-

ter a similar concern was raised in Ohio.

Allen sent a letter to Alabama Democratic Party Chairman Randy Kelley saying that the state's Aug. 15 certification deadline is four days before the Democratic National Convention is set to begin. Allen indicated that Biden's name will not appear on the ballot unless the deadline is met.

Kelley said Tuesday night that he contacted the DNC about the matter to see what could be done. An option could be for the party to send in a provisional certification.

Teaching Hmong, Asian American histories added

WI MADISON — Gov. Tony Evers on Thursday signed into law a bipartisan bill requiring Wisconsin schools to teach Asian American and Hmong American histories.

Evers signed the bill at an elementary school in Wausau, which is home to about 4,700 Hmong. That is 12% of the city's residents, making Wausau the highest per-capita Hmong population in the state and country, according to the Hmong American Center.

Persecuted as an ethnic minority in their ancestral lands in China, the Hmong fled first to the mountains of Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. There, tens of thousands fought for the United States in the Vietnam War. When Communist regimes swept the region, they escaped to refugee camps in neighboring Thailand and, starting in the mid-1970s, resettled largely in California farm country, Minneapolis and central Wisconsin.

— From wire reports

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Penguins battle way into playoff mix

Associated Press

Sidney Crosby insists he's not a scoreboard watcher.

Not publicly anyway.

Maybe it's because the Pittsburgh Penguins' longtime captain is too occupied with his team to worry about anyone else. Or maybe it's because Crosby never had much reason to check during Pittsburgh's run to 16 straight playoff berths between 2007 and 2022.

Or maybe it's simply because Crosby doesn't have to check his phone to figure out where the Penguins stand. The evidence is on the countless video-boards that greet players inside PPG Paints Arena.

"When I come to the rink, it's on everywhere," Crosby said with a smile. "So it's hard to miss it."

So is his team's sudden — and unexpected — late-season push.

Two weeks ago the Penguins were nine points out of the sec-

ond wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference. Fourteen days and 12 out of a possible 14 points later, Pittsburgh took the ice Thursday against Detroit tied with the Red Wings for ninth in the East, just one point back of Washington with four games remaining.

Headly territory for a team that looked as if it was going through the motions in the aftermath of the trade that sent Stanley Cup-winning forward Jake Guentzel to Carolina. The night the move was made, the Penguins were in a daze while getting drilled 6-0 by Washington. The cloud lingered.

"You acknowledge it and you try to push it down, you try not to think about it, but it affects everybody," goaltender Alex Nedeljkovic said.

Seven losses over their next nine games followed. It wasn't until Guentzel's return in a Hurricanes uniform that the Penguins appeared to wake up.

A 4-1 win over Carolina in which Pittsburgh skated with a purpose and discipline that's been elusive over the previous five months provided a reminder to the guys in the room that the Penguins could still hang with the league's best when they're not sulking or making the kinds of mistakes that let multi-goal leads evaporate, a common theme during their first 70ish games.

That confidence has surged in lockstep with the emergence of Nedeljkovic. Signed in the offseason to serve as the backup to Tristan Jarry, Nedeljkovic has become a fixture in the lineup during the most important time of the season.

Not that he wants to talk about it. Nedeljkovic, who is 6-0-2 in his past eight starts, shrugs when asked about his impact. Instead, he points to what's going on in front of him.

"We haven't given up a lot of odd-man rushes," Nedeljkovic

said. "We haven't given up a ton of grade-A chances. We've done a good job of keeping things to the outside and then when it matters in the last five, six minutes of the game we've really buckled down."

That hasn't been the case most of the season. The Penguins have been tied going into the third period 16 times this season. They've only won nine of those games, the killer instinct that used to be their trademark during the stretch between 2008-17, when the franchise captured three Stanley Cups and reached the Final in another, lacking.

The reality is, it's been that way for a while. Pittsburgh hasn't won a playoff series since the second round in 2018. The Penguins missed the postseason for the first time in 17 years last spring and they've spent most of this season looking very much like the NHL's oldest team that they are.

Salt Lake City prepares for possible Coyotes move

Associated Press

Preparations are being made behind the scenes and in the public eye in case an NHL team is in Salt Lake City sooner than later, perhaps as early as this fall.

After prospective owner Ryan Smith earlier this week solicited suggestions for a team name, word emerged Wednesday that the league has been working on contingency plans in case the Arizona Coyotes move this summer.

The NHL has been working on two schedule drafts for next season in case the team is in Arizona or playing under a different name in Utah, according to a person familiar with the planning. The person spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because no decisions have been made.

The schedule for next season is usually released in late June, after the Stanley Cup is handed out, around the draft and before free agency opens July 1. Commissioner Gary Bettman, when asked last month about the schedule and the possible contingency plans, said only, "We still have some time."

While the NHL, Coyotes and Smith Entertainment Group declined comment on the dual-schedule report, other machinations are underway to prepare for possible relocation. According to multiple published reports, the league sent a memo to owners updating them on the situation while cautioning there are moving parts and nothing is done.

If a sale to Smith happens soon, it would come after months of speculation after the owner of

the NBA's Utah Jazz announced in January not only his interest in having an NHL club in Salt Lake City but the ability to make that happen immediately.

Smith's group asked at the time for the initiation of an expansion process, something multiple groups in Atlanta are also eager for.

The timing, while preparations are underway for Salt Lake City to host the 2034 Winter Olympics, coincided with continued uncertainty surrounding the Coyotes, who are playing a second season in a 5,000-seat arena and are still looking for a long-term home.

NHL Players' Association executive director Marty Walsh has repeatedly expressed frustration over the Coyotes' current situation as the second tenant in a building on Arizona State's

campus in Tempe. Bettman has said owner Alex Meruelo is working on it.

"It's hard work, and he's committed to it," Bettman told The Associated Press last month. "I think people are craving certainty. And we are, too, but this isn't a 60-minute game where the light goes on and the game's over."

The Coyotes last week said they're committed to winning an auction for a plot of land in Phoenix that would house a 17,000-seat arena and entertainment district. The Arizona State Land Department set the auction for June 27 with a starting bid of \$68.5 million.

An arena already exists in downtown Salt Lake City, and the Jazz ownership plan calls for using the Delta Center as a temporary home until a new building is constructed.

Scheffler aims for 2nd title in 3 years

Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Ga. — Scottie Scheffler is not, by nature, a selfish person. It's not how he was raised, nor how he chooses to live his life, and if that ever were to change, he knows he can rely on his wife, Meredith, to bring him back to center.

The problem is that Scheffler plays a selfish sport.

"You're out there by yourself," he explained, "and when you're at the peak of your game, you know, people need stuff from you a lot of the time, and you have to be selfish with your time. And it's not easy to say no, but you have to learn how."

Nobody is peaking higher these days.

Two years after winning the Masters, Scheffler is back at Augusta National this week, still the world's No. 1 player and perhaps hotter than ever. The 27-year-old from Dallas has been in the top 10 in seven of eight starts this year, including his back-to-back wins at the Arnold Palmer Invitational and the Players Championship, where

he became the first to ever defend his title.

In his last start, two weeks ago at the Houston Open, his modern-era record of 28 consecutive rounds under par finally ended with an even-par 70 in the second round, and Scheffler wound up one shot off a playoff in second place.

So it's not surprising that there are heavy demands on Scheffler's time these days.

He is asked to speak at various functions. Children lining the ropes beg for his autograph. (Adults do, too.) He's had Netflix crews filming him for its docuseries, "Full Swing," and the list goes on.

"You have to learn how to say no to certain people," he said, "because ultimately, when you come out to a golf tournament, you're here to compete, and you're here to do your best. And you can't really get caught up in all the stuff that's going around you."

Make no mistake: Scheffler's almost placid demeanor masks an intense desire to win. That

was evident after he played a practice round with Nick Dunlap, who earlier this year became the first player since Phil Mickelson in 1991 to win a PGA Tour event as an amateur, and Scheffler was asked whether he had any insights to pass along.

"No, he's too good," Scheffler replied with a smile. "I don't want to give him any of my secrets."

Scheffler was kidding, of course, because — as we've established — he was not raised to be a selfish person. His parents, Scott and Diane, provided that foundation, just as they made sure that golf was never the most important thing in his life.

"My parents pushed more education and being kind to people on me," Scheffler said. "Sometimes you see a lot of parents who really want their kid to become really, really good at something, and they think that's what is going to bring them joy. But becoming a really good golfer may bring you a little bit of momentary joy, but it doesn't sustain it for very long."

In fact, Scheffler said that winning a tournament "makes me happy for about five minutes."

"The way I was raised, golf wasn't really a huge deal in my house. It was just something that I always loved to do," he said. "I had a very supportive family in doing so. I have three sisters, and I'm sure they went to way more golf tournaments than they would have hoped to when I was growing up. But just had a great support system at home. And I feel like I've said it a bunch, golf is not just — it's something that I do. It's not my life, you know?"

He happens to be really good at it, though.

That's why Scheffler is the 4-1 favorite to win this week, according to FanDuel Sportsbook, the most overwhelming favorite to win the Masters since Tiger Woods more than a decade ago. In fact, Scheffler is such a heavy favorite that some sportsbooks are giving bettors the opportunity to wager on him or the entire rest of the field.

McIlroy set to take another shot at career Grand Slam

Associated Press

AUGUSTA, Ga. — Rory McIlroy made that familiar turn off Washington Road and onto Magnolia Lane a year ago, the one that seems to suck in those fortunate enough to make it back in time, and felt as certain as ever that it was his time to win the Masters.

After all, McIlroy had been playing well. His confidence was soaring. He had a belief in himself that was more than just a hunch.

More like a premonition.

Yet by Friday afternoon, when storms would fell three towering Georgia pines and cause the second round to push into the weekend, all those positive vibes had disappeared. After opening with an even-par 72, and still believing he was oh-so-close to stringing it all together, McIlroy shot a second-round 77 and missed the cut.

His wait to win the green jacket, and complete the career Grand Slam, had stretched to a full decade.

"No question, he'll do it at some point. He's just — Rory's too talented, too good,"

said Tiger Woods, who along with Gene Sarazen, Ben Hogan, Jack Nicklaus and Gary Player are the only players to have completed the modern slam.

"He's going to be playing this event for a very long time," Woods added. "He'll get it done. It's just a matter of when."

Might be this week.

Much like last year, McIlroy drove down Magnolia Lane on Tuesday feeling good about his game. He had played well at PGA National and Bay Hill earlier this year, finished in the top 20 at The Players Championship and recently spent time in Las Vegas with renowned coach Butch Harmon, which paid dividends with a third-place finish last week at the Texas Open.

That's not an event McIlroy typically plays before the Masters, but it was part of a plan put in place months ago. The idea was to play more often earlier in the year, getting his game sharp not only for Augusta National but the rest of the majors as well.

"This is my 16th start in the Masters, so I

feel like I've done it quite a few different ways," McIlroy explained, "and I guess just trying to bring a little bit of normalcy into what I sort of try to do week in, week out. I play 25 weeks a year, and there's no point in doing anything different this week compared to other weeks, I guess."

Even if the Masters is a week unlike any other.

Rather than arriving early and laboring through practice rounds, McIlroy instead popped into Augusta National last week for a two-day scouting trip before heading to Texas. In fact, he skipped Monday's practice round altogether — even Woods played nine that day — and was planning to play just nine holes by himself on Tuesday and Wednesday.

"I feel like I've already got most of my prep work done. So it's just about going out there and being relaxed and being in the right frame of mind," McIlroy said, "and the more I can do that, the more I'll be able to execute on the golf course."

Salt Lake City one of few eager for Olympics

Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY — The International Olympic Committee was effusive Wednesday in its support for a decadeslong effort to bring back the Winter Games to Utah's capital city in 2034.

Unlike so many other past hosts that have decided bringing back the Games isn't worth the time, money or hassle, Salt Lake City remains one of the few places where Olympic fever still burns strong. Olympic officials praised the city for preserving facilities and public enthusiasm as they kicked off their final visit ahead of a formal announcement expected this July.

Reminders of the 2002 Winter Games are nestled throughout the city, from a towering cauldron overlooking the valley to an Olympic emblem stamped on manhole covers downtown. Leaving the airport, a can't-miss arch amid snow-capped mountains shows visitors they're entering an Olympic city.

Those remnants are part of a long-term strategy Utah leaders launched on the heels of their first Olympics to remind residents that the Games are part of the fabric of their city, and that being a host city is a point of pride.

Olympic officials said they were greeted with such excitement Wednesday that it felt like the 2002 Winter Games never ended.

In the decades since Salt Lake City first opened its nearby slopes to the world's top winter athletes, the pool of potential hosts has shrunk dramatically. The sporting spectacular is a notorious money pit, and climate change has curtailed the number of sites capable of hosting.

Even though Salt Lake City got caught in a bribery scandal that nearly derailed the 2002 Winter Olympics, it has worked

its way back into the good graces of an Olympic committee increasingly reliant on passionate communities as its options dwindle. The city is now a prime candidate if officials eventually form a permanent rotation of host cities, Olympic Games Executive Director Christophe Dubi told reporters.

"We are in an environment here where we look for opportunities more than concerns," Dubi said. "For the next 10 years, we're not so much looking at what is challenging, but what are the opportunities to work together."

Analysis: Foreign players once again dominate NBA

Associated Press

The voting hasn't taken place yet, though it's fairly obvious that Denver's Nikola Jokic will be the NBA's MVP this season and therefore extend the record streak to six consecutive years in which a foreign-born player wins that trophy.

That's not the only international trend that will be continuing in award season.

Unless New York's Jalen Brunson averages at least 101 points per game this week, which seems unlikely, the scoring champion will be Dallas' Luka Doncic. Sacramento's Domantas Sabonis will win the rebounding title over Minnesota's Rudy Gobert, barring some big change in the numbers. Gobert could win defensive player of the year again. San Antonio's Victor Wembanyama will be the blocked-shots champion, plus is a lock for rookie of the year.

Jokic is from Serbia. Doncic is from Slovenia. Sabonis was born in the United States, but hails from a Lithuanian family and represents that country in international play. Wembanyama and Gobert are from France, which will play host to an Olympics now less than four months away. Milwaukee's Giannis Antetokounmpo (Greece) and Oklahoma City's Shai Gilgeous-Alexander (Canada) seem certain to be All-NBA picks, probably first-team ones. And it must be noted that Cameroon-born Joel Embiid, who is now an American citizen and likely a U.S. Olympian this summer, was on pace for a scoring title and MVP honors before injuries derailed those quests.

This is not a new thing, of course. Jokic and Antetokounmpo already have NBA titles and MVP trophies. It's only a matter of time before Doncic gets an MVP award. The only U.S.-born player to make first-team All-NBA last season was Boston's Jayson Tatum, and that'll probably be the case again this season even with Embiid ineligible for such an award because of the new NBA rules surrounding participation and a 65-game minimum required for consideration.

"Obviously, all great candidates," Embiid said of the top MVP candidates — the likes of Jokic, Gilgeous-Alexander, Doncic and Antetokounmpo. "They all deserve to win. It's just unfortunate that only one person has to win."

James Harden was the last U.S.-born player to win MVP, and that was in 2018. International players have gotten 456 of a possible 503 first-place MVP votes since (there are 100 voters, and there was an extra "fan vote" in three of those years). That's 91% of first-place nods going to international players in that span, and don't expect this year to be any different. Every first-place vote in 2022 and 2023 went to an international player.

And with the playoffs fast approaching, those international names are going to be in the brightest part of the spotlight once again. Jokic and the Nuggets have a title to defend. Antetokounmpo and the Bucks have a chance to shake off a frankly disappointing second half of the regular season. Doncic and the Mavericks are back in the playoffs

after last season's collapse. Gilgeous-Alexander and the Thunder are going to have home-court in Round 1; not bad for a franchise that some likely figured was still in rebuilding mode entering the year. Orlando has the inside track on a top-four seed in the Eastern Conference, and Franz Wagner — one of the reasons Germany won the Basketball World Cup last summer — is a big part of the Magic surge.

"Players in this league — not referring to All-Stars but overall now — represent 45 countries and are roughly 30% of this league, and a number that's continuing to grow, including, of course, some of the very best players, MVP-quality players in this league," Commissioner Adam Silver said at the All-Star break.

Silver told CNN a couple of weeks ago that the league is kicking around new ideas to try to fix the All-Star Game, and one of the notions is again the concept of a U.S. vs. The World game. He wants a competitive game; players listened to those pleas and still played absolutely no defense in this year's game at Indianapolis, where the 200-point mark by a team got crossed for the first time. So it's time for a new idea, and playing into the depth of the international star roster is a solid one.

"Look at the magnitude of the pool of international players coming into this league," Silver said. "Look at the amount of basketball that's being played on a global basis ... it's remarkable to watch what these guys now physically are able to do on the floor."