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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Military told to review fitness standards

BY MATTHEW ADAMS

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has ordered the secretaries of the military services to come up with a plan that distinguishes between combat-arms jobs and noncombat-arms jobs and develops physical standards that are “sex-neutral.”

“For far too long, we allowed standards to slip and different standards for men and women in combat arms [military occupational specialties],” Hegseth said Monday in a video posted on X. “That’s not acceptable. We need to have the same standard, male or female, in our combat roles.”

Hegseth, an Army National Guard veteran, came under fire before becoming defense secretary for saying women have a place in the military but not in ground-based combat jobs in special operations, artillery, in-

fantry and armor units.

“I’m straight up just saying we should not have women in combat roles,” he argued on a podcast in November. “It hasn’t made us more effective, hasn’t made us more lethal, has made fighting more complicated.”

Questions were raised by senators during his confirmation hearing in January. Hegseth denied he ever disparaged women and said his concern was with what he believes are slipping standards and gender quotas. He said he would conduct a review of the requirements for combat positions if he became defense secretary.

“In ways direct and indirect, overt and subtle, standards have been changed inside infantry training units, [Army] Ranger school, infantry battalions to ensure that commanders meet quotas to have a certain number of female officers or female enlisted,” he said at the time.

For certain combat roles, Hegseth wrote in the memo dated Sunday that it is “essential to identify” positions that require heightened entry-level and sustained physical fitness standards. Plans must address ground combat jobs, special operations forces and specialized occupations.

Hegseth marked the document with an asterisk and included a handwritten note that “no existing standard will be lowered in the process.”

He is ordering the military secretaries to submit their proposals to the undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness within 60 days of the memo. The secretaries of the services will provide an interim update on the development of their plans to the undersecretary within 30 days.

Full implementation of plans must occur within six months of submission, Hegseth wrote.

“This initiative aligns with my broader directive to maintain uncompromising and clear standards that ensure the continued dominance of our military,” the secretary added.

Hegseth issued another memo dated March 12 that stated the undersecretary for personnel must gather information on military standards “pertaining to physical fitness, body composition and grooming, which includes but is not limited to beards.”

Hegseth’s memo called for a review of how standards have changed and the impact of those shifts since Jan. 1, 2015. That year, then-Defense Secretary Ash Carter announced beginning in January 2016 that all combat roles would be open to women. The 2015 decision, resisted most by the Marine Corps, opened about 230,000 combat positions that were previously off-limits for women.

Joint Chiefs head nominee vows to stay nonpartisan

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Dan Caine, a retired Air Force lieutenant general, committed Tuesday to serving as a nonpartisan leader who would give unvarnished military advice and always “strive to do the right thing” if confirmed as the next chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Caine, 56, said he will “speak truth to power” as the country’s most senior military officer and principal military adviser to the president, defense secretary, National Security Council and Congress.

The role has been notoriously tumultuous under President Donald Trump.

Army Gen. Mark Milley, the now retired Joint Chiefs chairman, repeatedly clashed with Trump during his first term, and the most recent chairman, Air Force Gen. Charles “CQ” Brown, was fired by Trump

in February amid an effort to push out officers who support diversity, equity and inclusion in the ranks.

Caine told the Senate Armed Services Committee on Tuesday that he was willing to give military advice elected leaders might not want to hear and was willing to be fired for following the Constitution.

“Candor has gotten me here today and candor will continue to allow me to do my job moving forward,” he said during his confirmation hearing. “The president doesn’t have to accept the military advice or the secretary or the NSC, but we owe it to them for us to deliver that military advice.”

Caine acknowledged he was an unconventional nominee for the position and an unknown leader.

By law, the job is required to go to a four-star general or admiral who previously served as the vice chairman of the Joint

Chiefs or the top commander of a service branch or a combatant command.

The president, however, can waive those requirements if “necessary in the national interest.”

Trump has praised Caine as “an accomplished pilot, national security expert, successful entrepreneur and a ‘warfighter’ with significant interagency and special operations experience.”

The two first met in 2018, when Caine was serving as a deputy commander in the U.S. campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. Trump said he was impressed by Caine’s assessment that the fight could be ended in weeks rather than years.

“I said, ‘Why didn’t my other generals tell me that? Why didn’t they tell me that?’” Trump said at the Conservative Political Action Conference in 2019.

China launches large-scale air, naval exercise around Taiwan

Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan — The Chinese military announced large-scale drills in the waters and airspace around Taiwan on Tuesday that include an aircraft carrier battle group, as it again warned the self-ruled island democracy against seeking formal independence.

The joint exercises involve navy, air ground and rocket forces and are meant to be a “severe warning and forceful containment against Taiwan independence,” according to Shi Yi, a spokesperson for the People’s Liberation Army’s Eastern Theater Command. No operational name for the drills was announced nor previous notice given.

China considers Taiwan a part of its territory, to be brought under its control by force if necessary, while most Taiwanese favor their de-facto independence and democratic

status.

Any conflict could bring in the U.S., which maintains a series of alliances in the region and is legally bound to treat threats to Taiwan as a matter of “grave concern.”

Taiwan’s Presidential Office said on the social platform X that “China’s blatant military provocations not only threaten peace in the #Taiwan Strait but also undermine security in the entire region, as evidenced by drills near Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Korea, the Philippines & the SCS. We strongly condemn China’s escalatory behavior.”

The SCS refers to the South China Sea, the strategic waterway that China claims almost in its entirety. China’s navy also recently held drills near Australia and New Zealand for which it gave no warning, forcing the last-minute rerouting of commercial flights.

Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense said it had tracked 19 Chinese navy vessels in the waters surrounding the island in a 24-hour period from 6 a.m. Monday until 6 a.m. Tuesday.

It added that it had been tracking the movement of the Shandong aircraft carrier since Saturday and that its carrier group had entered into Taiwan’s air defense identification zone on Monday, a self-defined area tracked by the military.

China regularly dispatches military assets into the zone, which China does not recognize, but Taiwanese officials have recently warned that China could launch a sneak attack under the guise of military exercises.

China’s Xinhua News Agency said the Eastern Theater Command on Tuesday conducted “multi-subject drills in waters to the north, south and east of Taiwan Island.”

Marines to drill with ship-killing missile

BY SETH ROBSON

Stars and Stripes

The Marine Corps plans to deploy its Navy-Marine Expeditionary Ship Interdiction System to the Philippines for the first time during this month’s Balikatan exercise, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said on his recent stop in Manila.

Hegseth, who completed an Indo-Pacific tour of Guam, Japan and the Philippines on Sunday, announced the NMESIS deployment at a press conference Friday with Philippine Secretary of National Defense Gilberto Teodoro.

“We agreed that the United States will deploy additional ad-

vanced capabilities to the Philippines,” Hegseth said, according to a transcript on the Department of Defense website.

“This includes using the NMESIS anti-ship missile system and highly capable unmanned surface vehicles in exercise Balikatan,” he said.

The annual exercise — Balikatan is Tagalog for “shoulder to shoulder” — is to run from April 21 to May 9. The U.S. is sending 10,000 U.S. troops to participate alongside 6,000 service members from the Philippines, Australia and Japan.

The deployment of NMESIS and unmanned surface vehicles will “hasten the introduction of

the technologies” to the Philippine military, Teodoro said in the DOD transcript, which didn’t specify the type of unmanned vessels.

A Marine Corps video shows the 3rd Marine Littoral Regiment at Marine Corps Base Hawaii training with NMESIS ahead of Balikatan. The system arrived at the base in November, according to a news release by the regiment that month.

NMESIS is a key piece of hardware for littoral regiments, formed as part of the Marines’ Force Design plan to deploy small units onto the Pacific’s first island chain to take shots at Chinese warships in a conflict.

Houthi say they downed US drone

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Yemen’s Houthi rebels claimed Tuesday that they shot down another American MQ-9 Reaper drone, even as the U.S. kept up its campaign of intense airstrikes targeting the group.

The reported shootdown came as strikes hit around Sanaa, the country’s rebel-held capital, and Saada, a Houthi stronghold.

U.S. President Donald Trump issued a new warning to both the Houthis and their main benefactor, Iran, describing the group as having “been decimated” by the campaign of strikes that began March 15.

“Many of their Fighters and Leaders are no longer with us,” Trump wrote on his social media website Truth Social. “We hit them every day and night — Harder and harder. Their capabilities that threaten Shipping and the Region are rapidly being destroyed. Our attacks will continue until they are no longer a threat to Freedom of Navigation.”

He added: “The choice for the Houthis is clear: Stop shooting at U.S. ships, and we will stop shooting at you. Otherwise, we have only just begun, and the real pain is yet to come, for both the Houthis and their sponsors in Iran.”

The rebels claimed to have felled a drone in Marib governorate, home to oil and gas fields still under the control of allies to Yemen’s exiled central government. Footage released on social media showed flames in the night, with a Yemeni man claiming a drone had been shot down.

Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree, a Houthi military spokesman, separately claimed downing the MQ-9 drone in a video message.

Layoffs begin at federal health agencies

Associated Press

Employees across the massive Health and Human Services Department began receiving notices of dismissal on Tuesday in an overhaul ultimately expected to lay off up to 10,000 people.

At the National Institutes of Health, the world's leading health and medical agency, the layoffs occurred as its new director, Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, began his first day of work.

Health Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. announced a plan last week to remake the department, which, through its agencies, is responsible for tracking health trends and disease outbreaks, conducting and funding medical research and monitoring the safety of food and medicine, as well as administering health insurance programs for nearly half of the country.

The plan would consolidate

agencies that oversee billions of dollars for addiction services and community health centers under a new office called the Administration for a Healthy America.

The layoffs are expected to shrink HHS to 62,000 positions, lopping off nearly a quarter of its staff — 10,000 jobs through layoffs and another 10,000 workers who took early retirement and voluntary separation offers.

Two lines with hundreds of employees wrapped around the HHS headquarters building Tuesday morning. Workers waited in the chilly spring weather to be individually scanned in for access to the building. Some said they were waiting to find out if they still had jobs. Others gathered at local coffee shops and lunch spots after being turned away, finding out they had been eliminated after decades of ser-

vice.

One wondered aloud if it was a cruel April Fools' Day joke.

At NIH, the cuts included at least four directors of NIH's 27 institutes and centers who were put on administrative leave, and nearly entire communications staffs were terminated, according to an agency senior leader, speaking on the condition of anonymity to avoid retribution.

An email shows some senior-level employees of the Bethesda, Md., campus who were placed on leave were offered a possible transfer to the Indian Health Service in locations including Alaska and given until the end of Wednesday to respond.

At the FDA, dozens of staffers who regulate drugs and tobacco products received notices, including the entire office responsible for drafting new regulations for electronic cigarettes

and other tobacco products. The notices came as the FDA's tobacco chief was removed from his position. Elsewhere at the agency, more than a dozen press officers and communications supervisors were notified that their jobs would be eliminated.

Democratic Sen. Patty Murray of Washington predicted the cuts will have ramifications when natural disasters strike or infectious diseases, like the ongoing measles outbreak, spread.

"They may as well be renaming it the Department of Disease because their plan is putting lives in serious jeopardy," Murray said Friday.

Beyond layoffs at federal health agencies, cuts are beginning to happen at state and local health departments as a result of an HHS move last week to pull back more than \$1 billion in COVID-19-related money.

Senator to block picks for VA to protest job cut plan

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Arizona Sen. Ruben Gallego announced Tuesday he will block the confirmation of top leaders at the Department of Veterans Affairs, raising the stakes in Democrats' bid to get the Trump administration to back off plans to cut jobs from the sprawling agency that serves millions of military veterans.

Gallego, a Democrat and Marine Corps veteran, made the announcement just hours before the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs was scheduled to hear testimony from three nominees for the VA who are military veterans themselves. It marked a significant escalation in his effort to counter President Donald Trump's plans to slash federal agencies and a sharply partisan move on a committee that has often been marked by cooperation between Republicans and Demo-

crats.

The holds — a maneuver used on occasion in the Senate — mean that it is impossible for the chamber to move quickly to confirm the nominees and would potentially have to tie up hours or days of floor time to advance each nominee.

There are 13 Senate-confirmed positions at the VA, according to the Partnership for Public Service. Two of those — VA Secretary Doug Collins and deputy secretary Paul Lawrence — have already been confirmed. Trump has made nominations for five other positions, while six have not yet received a nominee.

Sen. Tommy Tuberville, an Alabama Republican, in 2023 put a hold on the promotions of hundreds of top military officers to protest Pentagon policy on abortions, but under pressure from his own party, eventually dropped most of his blockade.

Antisemitism task force to review Harvard's funding

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Harvard University has become the latest target in the Trump administration's approach to fight campus antisemitism, with the announcement of a new "comprehensive review" that could jeopardize billions of dollars for the Ivy League college.

A federal antisemitism task force is reviewing more than \$255 million in contracts between Harvard and the federal government to make sure the school is following civil rights laws, the administration announced Monday. The government also will examine \$8.7 billion in grant commitments to Harvard and its affiliates.

The same task force cut \$400 million from Columbia University and threatened to slash billions more if it refused a list of demands from President Donald Trump's administration. Columbia agreed to many of the changes last

month, drawing praise from some Jewish groups and condemnation from free speech groups, who see it as a stunning intrusion by the federal government.

Dozens of other universities have been put on notice by the Trump administration that they could face similar treatment over allegations of antisemitism. The federal government is a major provider of revenue for American universities through grants for scientific research.

Harvard President Alan Garber acknowledged that antisemitism exists even on his campus in Cambridge, Mass., but he said Harvard has done much to fight it.

Some of the nation's most prestigious colleges have faced extraordinary scrutiny from Republicans in Congress following a wave of pro-Palestinian protests that started at Columbia and spread across the country last year.

Trump sends more migrants to El Salvador

The Washington Post

The Trump administration has transferred 17 alleged gang members to El Salvador, the second such removal in two weeks, as the president pushes forward with his plan to send migrants to a notorious jail in Central America despite mounting concern over whether he can lawfully do so.

U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio said Monday that a military plane flew the alleged Tren de Aragua and MS-13 gang members to El Salvador on Sunday evening, in what he described as a “counterterrorism operation.”

The migrants included 10 Sal-

vadoran and seven Venezuelan men who were previously being held at the Guantánamo Bay Naval Station in Cuba, according to a White House official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the operation.

President Donald Trump’s administration faces mounting scrutiny of its decision to send migrants to El Salvador, where immigrant advocates say detainees have no access to either the U.S. or Salvadoran justice system and risk being tortured and jailed indefinitely.

Three planes carrying 238 Venezuelans and 23 Salvadorans were sent to El Salvador on March 15, despite a judge’s or-

der that those flights turn around or stay on the ground in the United States.

Relatives of several of the men on those planes have strongly denied that their family members are gang members.

The administration acknowledged in court that “many” do not have criminal records in the United States.

Three defense officials said they did not have an explanation for why the operation was referred to by a senior Pentagon official as a “counterterrorism mission.”

They expressed concern about portraying a law enforce-

ment mission as a military operation.

In the rush to deport, federal immigration enforcement officials have repeatedly enlisted the armed forces to accelerate the momentum, as they did with this latest transfer, though the previous flights to El Salvador were conducted on civilian aircraft.

The administration has struggled to deliver the deportation numbers it had promised supporters during the 2024 campaign for the presidency, and recent court decisions have blocked some of its more aggressive efforts to remove people from the country.

Germany sees deadlock in Ukraine peace efforts

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Germany’s chief diplomat on Tuesday described U.S. President Donald Trump’s efforts to secure a truce in the three-year war between Russia and Ukraine as deadlocked, while China’s foreign minister said that it was encouraging that the talks on finding a settlement are continuing.

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock, arriving in Kyiv for an unannounced visit, said that “due to the deadlock” between the U.S. and Russia on forging a ceasefire deal, Euro-

pean allies’ continued support for Ukraine in the war is “absolutely crucial.”

Trump on Sunday scolded Russian President Vladimir Putin and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, expressing frustration at the continued fighting in a war that he had pledged to swiftly stop.

Trump insisted progress was being made in the negotiations but said that he would consider imposing further sanctions to put pressure on Moscow and accused Zelenskyy of trying to back out of a deal with the U.S.

on access to Ukraine’s mineral resources.

Ukraine has conducted a first round of consultations with the U.S. on what he said was the latest version of the mineral deal, Ukrainian Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha said Tuesday.

Putin has effectively refused a U.S. proposal for an immediate and full 30-day halt in the fighting, despite Trump’s prod-

ding. Also, a partial ceasefire in the Black Sea that could allow safer shipments has fallen foul of conditions imposed by Kremlin ne-

gotiators.

Russia is holding out on a Black Sea deal in order to “stall efforts toward a general ceasefire and extract additional concessions from the West,” according to an assessment late Monday by the Institute for the Study of War, a Washington-based think tank.

Zelenskyy was blunt in his analysis of developments in an address late Sunday.

“Moscow blatantly makes a mockery of our partners’ efforts to advance a peace agenda,” he said.

Europe says that it ‘holds a lot of cards’ in trade war

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — A top European Union official warned the U.S. on Tuesday that the world’s biggest trade bloc “holds a lot of cards” when it comes to dealing with the Trump administration’s new tariffs and has a good plan to retaliate if forced to.

President Donald Trump has promised to roll out taxes on imports from other countries on Wednesday. He says they will

free the U.S. from reliance on foreign goods.

He’s vowed to impose “reciprocal” tariffs to match the duties that other countries charge on U.S. products, dubbing April 2 “Liberation Day.”

“Europe holds a lot of cards, from trade to technology to the size of our market. But this strength is also built on our readiness to take firm counter measures if necessary. All in-

struments are on the table,” European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen said, at a European Parliament session in Strasbourg, France.

The commission, the EU’s executive branch, negotiates trade deals on behalf of the bloc’s 27 member countries and manages trade disputes on their behalf.

The commission already intends to impose duties on U.S.

goods worth some \$28 billion in mid-April in response to Trump’s steel and aluminum tariffs. The EU duties will target steel and aluminum products but also textiles, home appliances and farm goods.

A lot remains unknown about how Trump’s levies will actually be implemented, notably the “reciprocal” tariffs, and the EU wants to assess their impact before taking retaliatory action.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Historic tree to be cut down at White House

DC WASHINGTON—A tree that's nearly two centuries old will be removed from the White House grounds because it's deteriorating, President Donald Trump said Sunday.

The southern magnolia stands near the curved portico on the south side of the building. It's where foreign leaders are often welcomed for ceremonial visits, and where the president departs to board the Marine One helicopter.

According to the National Park Service website, "folklore tells us" that President Andrew Jackson brought the tree's seeds from his home near Nashville, Tenn.

It was apparently planted in honor of his wife Rachel, who died shortly before he took office in 1829.

"The bad news is that everything must come to an end, and this tree is in terrible condition, a very dangerous safety hazard, at the White House Entrance, no less, and must now be removed," Trump wrote on Truth Social, his social media platform. "This process will take place next week, and will be replaced by another, very beautiful tree."

Bus driver fatally shoots 2 passengers, police say

FL MIAMI GARDENS—A bus driver fatally shot two passengers over the weekend in a Miami suburb but authorities were still sorting out the circumstances that led to the shooting, police said Monday.

The driver was arrested and questioned but has not yet been charged. An investigation is ongoing.

The shooting took place at around 3 a.m. Sunday as the two men were riding the bus in Miami Gardens, according to the city's police department.

Miami-Dade bus drivers are not allowed to be armed while on the job, according to Deborah Souverain, a spokesperson for the county's Transportation and Public Works Department.

The two men were pronounced dead after being air-lifted to Aventura Hospital just over 10 miles away. They haven't yet been identified.

National park site hit with chemicals, hate speech

CA SAN FRANCISCO—Authorities are investigating a break-in at a historic Nike missile site in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area outside San Francisco.

Sometime between the evening of March 15 and the morning of March 19, someone vandalized the SF-88 Nike Missile Site magazine in the Marin Headlands, which is known for its scenic views and hiking trails, according to the National Park Service.

The vandal or vandals spray-painted hate speech throughout the building and spilled gallons of hazardous chemicals, the park service said in a news release. It's unclear how many people were involved, but officials said whoever participated may have sustained chemical burns.

According to the park service, the SF-88 site was one of almost

300 Nike missile sites built by the U.S. Army during the Cold War and is the most fully restored one in the country.

Apparent explosion, fire injures about a dozen

MI DETROIT—About a dozen people have been injured, including six children, following an apparent explosion and fire Monday morning at a 2-story apartment building in Detroit.

The explosion was reported about 4 a.m., according to fire officials.

When firefighters arrived, some people were in windows of the building "kind of hanging off ready to jump," Fire Commissioner Chuck Simms told reporters, adding that they were rescued by firefighters. "Without their fast response and fast thinking this could have been a lot worse."

Three of those injured were in the same apartment and suffered critical burns, Simms said.

Man dies parachuting during a BASE jump

WA WENATCHEE—A man died in Washington state on Sunday when he was parachuting and struck a cliff after his chute failed to fully open.

The Chelan County Sheriff's office said the 47-year-old man from Entiat, Wash., died during a BASE jumping accident Sunday morning in the central part of the state.

BASE jumping is a high-risk activity involving parachuting from fixed objects such as cliffs, bridges or buildings.

The victim was in the process of jumping when his parachute failed to open, the sheriff's office said. Witnesses said he spun and collided with a rock wall. He fell about 650 feet to the ground and suffered fatal injuries. The man was pronounced dead on the scene.

Authorities investigate fire at GOP headquarters

NM ALBUQUERQUE—Federal authorities are investigating a fire early Sunday that damaged the entryway to the headquarters of the Republican Party of New Mexico in Albuquerque.

Agents working with local authorities recovered unspecified "incendiary materials" at the scene, said Bureau of Alcohol Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives spokesperson Cody Monday. He declined to say what the materials were or to share further details.

The fire follows numerous acts of vandalism in recent weeks directed against Tesla, the electric-car company whose owner, Elon Musk, has led Republican President Donald Trump's effort to slash the federal workforce. Several of those cases involved Molotov cocktails that were used to start fires at dealerships. U.S. Attorney General Pam Bondi has called it a "wave of domestic terrorism."

Attacks on property carrying the logo of Musk's electric-car company are cropping up across the U.S. and overseas. While no injuries have been reported, Tesla showrooms, vehicle lots, charging stations and privately owned cars have been targeted.

—From wire reports

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Bueckers leads UConn to 24th Final Four

Associated Press

SPOKANE, Wash. — Paige Bueckers and her UConn teammates didn't cut down the net after securing a trip to the Final Four, even though a ladder was set up and ready to go.

The reason was simple: The Huskies aren't done yet.

Bueckers carried UConn to its record 24th national semifinal in the women's NCAA Tournament, scoring 31 points Monday night in a 78-64 win over Southern California, which couldn't overcome the loss of injured star JuJu Watkins.

The Huskies (35-3) head to Tampa, Fla., to face overall No. 1 seed UCLA on Friday.

Freshman Sarah Strong added 22 points and 17 rebounds for second-seeded UConn, which has won a record 11 NCAA titles, all under coach Geno Auriemma. Their most recent championship was in 2016, the last of a run of four straight.

"We've got a whole lot of

heart, and a whole lot of toughness about us. And we play together as a team. We're super well-connected," Bueckers said.

"I feel like every team that I've played on, we've been super well-connected. But just the way we've been through so much adversity as individuals, as a team, how much it's brought us together, how much it's made us stronger."

Rayah Marshall scored 23 points and 15 rebounds for top-seeded USC (31-4), which lost to UConn in the Elite Eight last year when Watkins was a freshman.

Fans undoubtedly anticipated a rematch between Bueckers and Watkins when the brackets were announced, but the matchup lost some luster when the Trojans' star guard tore an ACL in the second round and needed surgery.

While USC got past Kansas State in the Sweet 16 without Watkins, it had a tougher challenge against the Huskies and

Bueckers, the likely No. 1 overall pick in next month's WNBA draft.

UConn led by 19 points in the third quarter, but the Trojans got within 51-46 going into the fourth. Bueckers and Azzi Fudd made consecutive 3-pointers that extended the Huskies' lead to 62-48.

Avery Howell's 3 closed the gap to 70-61 with 1:04 left, but USC got no closer.

After scoring just two points in the opening quarter, Bueckers had 11 points in the final period.

"None of it would happen without the team, and everything that goes into a performance," she said. "So just trying to lead with what the game is calling for, lead with what we need at that moment, at that time, whether it's passing, rebounding, scoring, just trying to do whatever it takes to win."

Bueckers, a senior, earned AP All-America honors and was the Big East player of the year for the third time. The on-

ly thing left for her to achieve is a national title after she and UConn were beaten in the Final Four last year by Caitlin Clark and Iowa.

She has averaged 35 points in her last three March Madness games, including career highs of 40 points and six 3-pointers in the Huskies' 82-59 rout of Oklahoma in the Sweet 16.

USC was seeking its first Final Four appearance since 1986 and first title since going back-to-back in 1983 and '84.

The Trojans led early before Strong made back-to-back jumpers for UConn to pull in front 12-11.

Bueckers didn't get her first basket until nine minutes into the game. With Bueckers off to a slow start, Strong took over, nailing a 3-pointer that gave the Huskies a 21-13 lead. Bueckers hit a 3 to give the Huskies a 39-25 lead at the half.

Another 3 by Bueckers gave UConn a 47-30 lead before USC responded with an 11-0 run.

Texas tops TCU to reach first Final Four since '03

Associated Press

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. — Rori Harmon put her hands on her knees and bowed her head as the clock wound down. The senior guard doesn't like crying, but she gave herself a moment to reflect on the past 10 months.

This time last year, Harmon was sidelined by a knee injury. She could only watch as Texas was eliminated in the Elite Eight of the women's NCAA Tournament.

It came full circle Monday night. Madison Booker scored 18 points, Harmon added 13 and the top-seeded Longhorns used stifling defense to reach the Final Four for the first time since 2003, beating Hailey Van Lith and second-seeded TCU 58-47.

"Just to see us get to the Final Four after recovering and com-

ing back from my ACL injury in 10 months," Harmon said, "I thought it was an amazing thing, and I was just really proud of myself in that moment."

Texas (35-3) will face defending champion South Carolina on Friday night in Tampa, Fla., for a spot in the national championship game.

The Longhorns won a regional final for the first time in four tries under coach Vic Schaefer, who previously made two Final Four trips with Mississippi State. Texas' 35 wins are one more than its only national title-winning squad had in 1986 under Jody Conradt, who was in the stands Monday night and led the Longhorns to their three previous Final Fours.

Van Lith scored 17 points for TCU (34-4) in her collegiate finale, but Texas neutralized the

Horned Frogs' star center, Sedona Prince, who had four points and nine rebounds before fouling out with 6:32 left.

Harmon guarded Van Lith most of the night.

"That to me is vintage Rori," Schaefer said. "She embraces the defensive challenge. She loves it. She eats it for breakfast."

TCU had never made it past the second round of March Madness, but Van Lith helped the Horned Frogs make program history while taking her third school to the Elite Eight.

Booker, Texas' offensive dynamo, scored 14 in the second half. Harmon had 11 in the first half.

Nothing came easy for the TCU's high-scoring trio of Van Lith, Prince and Madison Conner. Van Lith shot 3-for-15 from

the field. The 6-foot-7 Prince attempted only four shots, and Conner scored nine points.

Prince, whose career started with Texas in 2018, said the Longhorns' post players did a good job scouting her. But she also felt that Texas was in her head. She never played for the Longhorns, leaving the program for Oregon in 2019 after breaking her leg playing for USA Basketball.

"I thought that we had to win to prove it to them that they couldn't beat me," Prince said. "But being part of this program, being here and succeeding ... it doesn't matter."

Texas forced 21 turnovers and had nine steals and six blocks, but they didn't pull away until center Kyla Oldacre intercepted Van Lith's pass and went coast-to-coast early in the fourth quarter.

Kelly hits for cycle as Cubs rout Athletics

Associated Press

WEST SACRAMENTO, Calif. — Carson Kelly hit for the cycle and drove in five runs, Michael Busch hit a two-run homer on the way to a career-high four RBIs and the Chicago Cubs pounded the Athletics 18-3 on Monday night to spoil their first game in their new Northern California home.

Kelly became the first Cubs player to hit for the cycle in 32 years, ending the longest drought without a cycle by any team in the National League. He scored three times and walked twice.

"I've been in this same position before where I needed a triple for the cycle. If anybody's ever looked up my numbers, I have two triples, so odds are not in my favor, right?" said Kelly, 30. "I didn't get it done the first time. This time I'm like, oh, I'm just going to put a good at-bat together. Hit it, like, 'Oh yeah, pretty good.' Then I hit first and saw it ricochet and I was like, 'Oh boy, this is it right here, I gotta go.' That's probably the fastest you'll ever see me run."

Busch connected in the first inning and Dansby Swanson followed with a solo drive on a night the wind carried the ball over the fences just as Chicago manager Craig Counsell predicted on a blustery, cold night in California's capital region for an offensive show in the first major league game at Sutter Health Park.

The 18 runs allowed were the most by any team in a home opener in 100 years, per Sportradar. The St. Louis Browns allowed 21 to the Cleveland Indians in 1925.

Orioles 8, Red Sox 5: Tyler O'Neill had four hits in his home debut for Baltimore, and the host Orioles used two big offensive innings to beat Boston.

Baltimore scored four runs in the first and four more in the eighth in its home opener, and the Orioles' bullpen threw 4½ innings. Matt Bowman, Seran-

thony Domínguez (1-0), Keegan Akin and Yennier Cano blanked Boston in relief. Félix Bautista came on for the ninth to a big ovation — the big closer missed all of last season because of Tommy John surgery.

Bautista allowed two runs and had to face Alex Bregman as the tying run with two on. Bregman hit a game-ending pop.

White Sox 9, Twins 0: Martín Pérez (1-0) threw six hitless innings in a sparkling debut as host Chicago beat Minnesota.

Andrew Vaughn and Andrew Benintendi hit three-run homers in the first and second innings. Michael A. Taylor made it 9-0 with a two-run drive in the third against Twins starter Chris Paddock (0-1), sending the White Sox to an easy win after they lost two of three to start the season.

The Twins' only hits were singles by Willi Castro in the seventh against Mike Vasil and Ryan Jeffers in the eighth. They fell to 0-4 following a sweep at St. Louis, their worst start since the 2016 team dropped its first nine games.

Royals 11, Brewers 1: Kris Bubic struck out eight in six shutout innings in his first start in nearly two years, and Kansas City spoiled winless Milwaukee's home opener.

Maikel Garcia and Salvador Perez homered for the Royals. Jonathan India had three hits and drove in two runs one day after he was struck on the left side of his face by a 98.9-mph pitch from Cleveland's Emmanuel Clase.

Two-time defending NL Central champion Milwaukee is 0-4 for the first time since 2015, when it finished 68-94.

Reds 14, Rangers 3: Elly De La Cruz had a single, double and two homers for a career-high seven RBIs, Brady Singer pitched seven scoreless innings in his Cincinnati debut and the host Reds routed Texas.

Singer (1-0), who was ac-

quired in November from the Kansas City Royals, became the first Reds pitcher with seven-plus scoreless innings in a debut since Tom Seaver on June 18, 1977, against Montreal. The 28-year-old right-hander struck out eight, walked two and allowed one hit.

De La Cruz hit a three-run home run to center for a 6-0 lead in the second inning. It was his first homer of the season. He added a two-run shot in the seventh.

Phillies 6, Rockies 1: Edmundo Sosa ripped a two-out, go-ahead two-RBI double in the seventh inning and Kyle Schwarber followed with a mammoth homer to center field to rally Philadelphia to a win over Colorado.

Max Kepler and Nick Castellanos added back-to-back homers in the eighth in the Phillies' home opener.

Mets 10, Marlins 4: Pete Alonso hit a grand slam and visiting New York beat Miami.

Starling Marte, Luis Torrens and Brandon Nimmo also went deep for the Mets, who finished with 11 hits in the opener of a three-game series. Every starter in the lineup had at least one.

Rays 6, Pirates 1: Jake Mangum got two hits from each side of the plate to finish 4 for 4 in his second major league game, and host Tampa Bay beat Pittsburgh in its first game under the lights at Steinbrenner Field.

Mangum, 29, who made his big league debut on Sunday, got his first career hit in the third inning and then stole his first base. He finished with a double, three singles and two RBIs.

Blue Jays 5, Nationals 2: Andrés Giménez homered and scored three runs, Bowden Francis (1-0) pitched six innings to win his first start of the season and host Toronto beat Washington.

Giménez homered in the second inning, walked and scored in the fourth, was hit by a pitch in the sixth and doubled and

scored in the eighth.

Angels 5, Cardinals 4 (10): Kyren Paris hit a tying triple in the seventh inning, Nolan Schanuel gave visiting Los Angeles its first lead with a grounder in the 10th and the Angels held off St. Louis.

Mike Trout had two RBIs for the Angels, who scored three runs on sacrifice flies and went ahead in the 10th without a hit. After two walks loaded the bases, Schanuel sent a chopper to second baseman Brendan Donovan, whose throw home was late as Luis Rengifo scored for a 4-3 lead.

Giants 7, Astros 2: Wilmer Flores hit his third homer of the season and drove in four runs to lead visiting San Francisco over Houston.

Giants starter Jordan Hicks (1-0), who grew up in suburban Houston, allowed only a first-inning single and struck out six in six innings.

Padres 7, Guardians 2: Kyle Hart (1-0) earned his first big league win, Gavin Sheets had a pair of two-run doubles among his three hits and host San Diego beat Cleveland to start 5-0 for the first time in their 57-season history.

The Padres' previous best start was 4-0 in 1984, when they went to their first World Series.

Tigers 9, Mariners 6: Riley Greene homered and Javier Báez hit a two-run double in visiting Detroit's six-run first inning, helping the Tigers beat Seattle for their first victory of the season.

Báez, Dillon Dingler and Trey Sweeney each had three of Detroit's 18 hits. Kerry Carpenter had two hits and two RBIs.

Dodgers 6, Braves 1: Tyler Glasnow (1-0) tossed five shutout innings in his season debut, Teoscar Hernández hit a two-run homer and host Los Angeles beat Atlanta.

The defending champions are 6-0 for their best start since 1981, when they won the World Series. The Braves fell to 0-5.

Celtics 2 road wins away from season record

Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — Jayson Tatum had 25 points and 14 rebounds, Al Horford scored 26 points and the Boston Celtics swept a six-game road trip for the first time in franchise history with a 117-103 win over the Memphis Grizzlies on Monday night.

Victories at Utah, Portland, Sacramento, Phoenix, San Antonio and Memphis eclipsed the previous road win streak of five in February 1973. The run also helped Boston tie a franchise record with 32 road wins, accomplished in 1972-73 and 1974-75) and trailing Chicago (33, 1995-96) and Golden State (34, 2015-16).

"It's more about just playing consistent basketball," Celtics coach Joe Mazzulla said. "But I think each year you develop different kind of strengths, especially with the same team. And this year it just happened to be kind of our road mentality."

Kristaps Porzingis added 19 points as Boston won its ninth straight and closed out a 13-1 March.

Ja Morant scored 26 points, Santi Aldama 21 and Jaren Jackson Jr. added 20 points and 15 rebounds as the Grizzlies closed within seven points with

three minutes left but couldn't complete the comeback in losing for the sixth time in seven games.

Hornets 110, Jazz 106: Miles Bridges had 26 points, 10 rebounds and eight assists and host Charlotte defeated Utah to snap a five-game losing streak.

Mark Williams added 18 points and 13 rebounds for the Hornets, who held the Jazz to 41% shooting.

Keyonte George had 20 points and Brice Sensabaugh added 19 points on five 3-pointers for Utah. The Jazz (16-60) have lost six straight and have the league's worst record.

Lakers 104, Rockets 98: Luka Doncic had 20 points and nine assists, and Gabe Vincent added 20 points on six 3-pointers in host Los Angeles' victory over Houston.

LeBron James finished with 16 points and eight rebounds for the Lakers, who solidified their hold on fourth place in the Western Conference.

Dorian Finney-Smith scored a season-high 20 points and hit six 3-pointers while LA sent the second-place Rockets to only their second loss in 14 games.

Nets 113, Mavericks 109: Keon Johnson scored 24 points and visiting Brooklyn beat Dallas to win consecutive games for

the first time since the All-Star break.

D'Angelo Russell added 18 points and 11 assists for the Nets (25-51), who last won two in a row during a three-game winning streak from Feb. 7-12. Playing without leading scorer Cam Johnson, who has a back injury, Brooklyn rallied from a 10-point deficit midway through the fourth quarter with a 12-0 run.

Daniel Gafford scored 17 points in his first game since Feb. 10 for the Mavericks (37-39), who were trying to reach .500 for the first time since March 10.

Pacers 111, Kings 109: Aaron Nesmith scored 17 of his 24 points in the second half, Obi Toppin added 19 and host Indiana rallied from a 16-point deficit in the second half to beat Sacramento.

Tyrese Haliburton had 18 points and 11 assists against his former team for the Pacers. Jarese Walker scored 15 points.

DeMar DeRozan led the Kings with 31 points and eight assists. Former Indiana center Domantas Sabonis had 25 points and 16 rebounds.

Heat 120, Wizards 94: Bam Adebayo had 28 points and 12 rebounds, Tyler Herro added 27 points and visiting Miami rolled

past Washington for its fifth consecutive victory.

The Heat (34-41) became the third team in NBA history to immediately follow a losing streak of at least 10 games with a winning streak of at least five games.

Jordan Poole had 35 points in 29 minutes for the Wizards. Poole hit seven 3-pointers, raising his season total to 228 and eclipsing the franchise record of 223 by Bradley Beal in 2016-17. Tristan Vukcevic added 14 off the Washington bench.

Thunder 145, Bulls 117: Shai Gilgeous-Alexander had 27 points and 12 assists in just 27 minutes, and host Oklahoma City rolled over Chicago for its 10th straight victory.

Isaiah Joe came off the bench to make eight 3-pointers and lead the Thunder with 31 points. Jalen Williams scored 23 points for OKC, which led by 43 points and shot 53% from the field and 53.5% from 3-point range.

Clippers 96, Magic 87: Kawhi Leonard and Norman Powell each scored 21 points, Ivica Zubac added 18 points and 20 rebounds and visiting Los Angeles beat Orlando.

James Harden added 20 points and six steals for the Clippers, who won for the 11th time in 14 games.

Cotter, Bratt score for Devils in shootout win over Wild

Associated Press

NEWARK, N.J. — Paul Cotter and Jesper Bratt scored in the shootout, and the New Jersey Devils beat the Minnesota Wild 3-2 on Monday night for their third win in four games.

Luke Hughes and Nico Hischier scored in regulation for the Devils, who won their second straight against the Wild after a 5-2 win in Minnesota on Saturday. Jacob Markstrom had 27 saves.

Vinnie Hinostroza and Matt Boldy scored for the Wild, who lost for the fourth time in five contests. Filip Gustavsson made 26 saves.

In the tiebreaker, Cotter and Bratt scored

on New Jersey's first two attempts, and Boldy's shot on Minnesota's second attempt went off the crossbar to give the Devils the win.

Flames 3, Avalanche 2 (SO): Yegor Sharangovich scored the lone goal in a shootout and visiting Calgary rallied from two goals down to beat Colorado, snapping a seven-game skid against the Avalanche.

Trailing 2-0 in the third period, Ryan Lomberg and Adam Klapka scored in a 32-second span to tie the score with 8½ minutes left. It set up the winner by Sharangovich, who entered the game 0 for 4 in shootouts this season.

Stars 3, Kraken 1: Matt Duchene and

Wyatt Johnston scored early in the first, and Casey DeSmith made 35 saves as visiting Dallas beat Seattle.

The Stars have won six straight games. DeSmith has won eight of his last nine starts.

Flyers 2, Predators 1: Jamie Drysdale scored the tiebreaking goal, Ivan Fedotov stopped 28 shots and host Philadelphia beat Nashville for its third straight win under interim coach Brad Shaw.

Ryan Poehling also scored for the Flyers, and Travis Konecny and Matvei Michkov each had two assists to help Philadelphia remain perfect in three games since Shaw replaced the fired John Tortorella last Thursday.