

US Navy turns back 13 ships in blockade

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Navy has forced 13 ships to turn around in the Strait of Hormuz as it enforces a naval blockade against Iran that is proceeding as planned, according to the Pentagon's latest public assessment.

At a news briefing Thursday, Gen. Dan Caine, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said 13 ships made the "wise decision" to turn back rather than attempt to breach the blockade.

"As of this morning, U.S. Central Command has not been required to board any particular ships," Caine said alongside Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and Adm. Brad Cooper, the commander of U.S. Central Command.

The comments provided the latest details of a U.S.-Iranian maritime standoff in one of the world's most important waterways.

On Wednesday, Central Command said a U.S. Navy destroyer turned back an Iran-flagged cargo ship in the Gulf of

Oman.

USS Spruance redirected the cargo vessel Tuesday after it left the Strait of Hormuz transiting along the Iranian coastline, CENTCOM said in a post to its official X account Wednesday.

The ship headed back to Iran, according to the post, which did not identify the ship involved. No vessels connected to Iran have penetrated the U.S. blockade east of the strait since it began Monday, CENTCOM said.

Ship watchers cast doubt on that claim Thursday, saying satellite images suggested that several tankers, including those connected to Iran, China and India, have made it past the U.S. barricade and were in Iran.

In addition, other sanctions-compliant tankers were headed to Iraq with their location responders turned off, one ship watcher posted Thursday on X.

Meanwhile, as many as 20 ships — a combination of tankers, cargo ships and other vessels — had transited the strait in the first 24 or so hours following the U.S. blockade, The New

York Times reported Wednesday, citing an unidentified U.S. official.

It remained unclear whether the commercial transits indicated that shipowners and captains were more confident in traveling the vital waterway as the U.S. works to wrest control away from Iran.

On Saturday, at least one U.S. destroyer transited the strait, a critical oil pipeline, as part of a broader effort to clear Iranian sea mines from the area.

The Navy also is rushing minesweepers to the Persian Gulf. At least one of them, the littoral combat ship USS Canberra, was in the region on Monday.

The U.S. blockade includes the Gulf of Oman and the Arabian Sea east of the Strait of Hormuz, encompassing the entirety of the Iranian coast. It isn't limited to ports and oil terminals, CENTCOM said in a notice to mariners earlier this week.

The action follows a breakdown in U.S.-Iran talks over the

weekend aimed at ending hostilities in the Persian Gulf and getting Iran to forfeit its nuclear materials.

On Wednesday, President Donald Trump turned up the pressure on Iran, sanctioning more than two dozen individuals, companies and ships associated with the country's illicit oil transportation network, the Treasury Department said in a statement.

The sanctions target the Iranian and Russian petroleum sales organization controlled by Mohammad Hossein Shamkhani, who has deep connections to the Iranian regime, the Treasury Department said.

Shamkhani is the son of senior Iranian security official Ali Shamkhani, who was killed Feb. 28 in the joint U.S.-Israel attack on Iran that started the war, Al Jazeera reported.

Spruance is part of the Abraham Lincoln Carrier Strike Group, which has been operating in the Arabian Sea. At least 10 other destroyers are in the Middle East.

Ceasefire set in Lebanon as US, Iran mull longer truce

Bloomberg

President Donald Trump said Israel and Lebanon have agreed to a 10-day ceasefire, a move that offers to ease tensions more broadly in the region while the U.S. and Iran are in discussions to extend their own truce ahead of its expiration next week.

Trump announced the Israel-Lebanon truce in a social media post on Thursday, noting that it would begin at 5 p.m. New York time. He also directed Vice President JD Vance and Secretary of State Marco Rubio and

Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Dan Caine to "to work with Israel and Lebanon to achieve a Lasting PEACE."

Israel has kept up its fighting against Iranian proxy Hezbollah in southern Lebanon, a military campaign that has threatened to derail the separate ceasefire with Iran.

Trump's announcement on Thursday made no mention of Hezbollah.

Separately, Pakistan's army chief, Asim Munir, traveled to Iran this week as his nation

seeks to mediate a longer truce between Washington and Tehran.

Pakistan hosted high-level talks between U.S. and Iranian officials last weekend — discussions that failed to yield a breakthrough amid the six-week war. Munir was greeted by Iran's Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi.

The U.S. and Iran are considering a two-week ceasefire extension, according to a person familiar with the matter, who asked not to be identified dis-

cussing sensitive matters. Neither side wants to resume fighting, said another person familiar with the discussions.

Comments from both Iranian and U.S. officials on Thursday suggest the sides remain far apart on key issues, but the ceasefire with Lebanon could provide fresh momentum. Iran's Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, who took part in the Pakistan talks, had earlier said a permanent ceasefire must cover the fighting in Lebanon.

Two US Navy minesweepers depart Asia

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

Two U.S. Navy minesweepers based in Japan have been tracked heading toward the Middle East as the United States prepares for mine-clearing operations in the Strait of Hormuz.

The USS Chief and USS Pioneer, Avenger-class mine countermeasure ships homeported at Sasebo Naval Base, departed Singapore on April 10 and were moving northwest through the Strait of Malacca, according to ship-tracking data from MarineTraffic.org.

The vessels had arrived in Singapore two days earlier, according to ship-spotting site WarshipCam.net.

Their destination has not

been officially disclosed, but their course aligns with recent statements from U.S. Central Command about preparations to clear naval mines in the strategically vital waterway.

“Today, we began the process of establishing a new passage and we will share this safe pathway with the maritime industry soon to encourage the free flow of commerce,” Adm. Brad Cooper, CENTCOM’s commander, said in an April 11 news release.

CENTCOM said additional assets, including underwater drones, are expected to support the effort. The littoral combat ship USS Tulsa, which also has mine countermeasure capabilities, passed through the Strait of Malacca on April 2.

The Chief and Pioneer, commissioned in 1994 and 1992, respectively, are among four Avenger-class ships based in Sasebo. The vessels are designed with wooden hulls coated in fiberglass to reduce their magnetic signature and are equipped with sonar, remote detonators and other systems to detect and neutralize mines, according to the Naval Surface Force Atlantic website.

Both the Pentagon and U.S. 7th Fleet — responsible for the ships while they’re in the Western Pacific — declined to comment Thursday, citing operational security concerns. CENTCOM did not respond to an email requesting comment.

The Strait of Hormuz remains a critical chokepoint for

global commerce and a focal point in tensions between the United States and Iran.

The day after announcing the mine-removal operation, CENTCOM began a blockade of “all maritime traffic entering and exiting Iranian ports,” according to a news release Monday.

“The blockade will be enforced impartially against vessels of all nations entering or departing Iranian ports and coastal areas, including all Iranian ports on the Arabian Gulf and Gulf of Oman,” the command said in a Sunday release.

Since then, 10 vessels have been turned around, with no ships breaking through, CENTCOM announced Wednesday on X.

Houston kicks off first Fleet Week held in Texas

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

HOUSTON — As soon as Marine Corps Sgt. Ashleigh Lozano heard the Navy was planning a Fleet Week for her hometown, she knew she had to find a way to be there.

“It’s history in the making, and to be home to show off my uniform, serving my country, and being in my city with pride, it was something I definitely wanted to be a part of,” she said Wednesday morning while standing on the flight deck of the USS Kearsarge as the amphibious assault ship made its way through Galveston Bay and into the Port of Houston.

She is one of more than 1,000 sailors, Marines and Coast Guard members participating in the first Fleet Week for a Texas city.

Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Daryl Caudle said the

state may be more Army- and Air Force-centric, but he is ready to show the city’s 2.3 million residents what the sea services are all about.

“There are young adults out there, I think in middle school and certainly in high school who are thinking about service already. They’ve got that on their minds,” Caudle said. “I want to take the mystique out of that. I want them to meet the sailors, engage with them and understand they could do that, too.”

Originally scheduled for November 2025, the Navy and Houston decided to reschedule the event when the government shutdown occurred to make sure both parties could maximize participation.

Activities kicked off Wednesday morning with a parade of ships featuring the Kearsarge and the USS St. Louis accompanied by a flyover.

USS Nimitz and Chilean military hold joint drills

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

USS Nimitz held joint maritime training exercises with the military of Chile this week as the carrier continued its move to a new homeport at Naval Station Norfolk in Virginia.

The Nimitz has been participating in the multinational Southern Seas 2026 exercises, hosting military leaders from Panama and El Salvador aboard the ship and conducting live-fire training with the Ecuadorian Navy. Some of the training has included the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer USS Gridley.

The joint exercise this week came as new Chilean President José Antonio Kast opened the Feria Internacional del Aire y del Espacio 2026 in Santiago, the largest aerospace and defense exhibition in La-

tin America.

“The U.S. participation will showcase a diverse set of capabilities, including C-130 Hercules and MQ-9 Reaper aircraft from the Texas Air National Guard, the U.S. Air Force Academy Wings of Blue parachute team and the F-35 Lightning II Demonstration Team, with additional support from the U.S. Navy with a P-8 Poseidon,” according to a statement from U.S. Southern Command.

The exhibition included an in-flight demonstration by a Chilean Air Force KC-135 that refueled two U.S. Air Force F-35A Lightning II fighters.

The Nimitz is scheduled to conduct additional exercises with Latin American militaries after transiting from the Pacific to the Atlantic at the tip of South America, then proceeding north to Norfolk.

US probes oil trades made before pivots

Bloomberg News

The top U.S. derivatives regulator is investigating a series of suspiciously well-timed trades in the oil futures market ahead of recent policy pivots by President Donald Trump related to the war in Iran, according to people familiar with the matter.

The Commodity Futures Trading Commission is leading the probe into trading of oil futures contracts on platforms belonging to CME Group Inc. and Intercontinental Exchange Inc., said the people, who asked not to be identified as the information is private. Both exchanges were asked to hand over data, the people said.

The CFTC is looking into at least two instances over a period of about two weeks where trading volumes surged shortly before major announcements, the people said. Data requested from the exchanges include the so-called Tag 50 identifications of the entities behind the trades, the people said.

Recent examples where oil trading volumes spiked at key moments in the past few weeks have raised concerns about potential

misuse of material nonpublic information tied to Trump's shifting stance on the war in Iran. Historic disruption to Middle Eastern oil flows sent oil soaring at the start of the conflict. Prices whipsawed in subsequent weeks on speculation over when tanker traffic might resume through the Strait of Hormuz.

The CFTC and Intercontinental Exchange declined to comment on the investigation. A White House spokesperson referred comment to the CFTC.

"We vigorously surveil our markets and work closely with the CFTC to oversee trading activity," CME said in a statement. "Importantly, any review of market behavior must include all venues, including prediction markets like Polymarket and Kalshi that list related products with little to no visibility."

Kalshi declined to comment while Polymarket didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

As scrutiny of the well-timed trades has intensified, two Democratic senators have urged the CFTC to examine potential irregu-

larities. The White House circulated an internal memo last month cautioning staff against trading on sensitive information in financial markets and rapidly expanding event-based betting platforms.

"These suspicious oil trades look like an appalling example of insiders rigging the market," Democratic Sen. Elizabeth Warren said in a statement Wednesday. The probe "is a start, but CFTC and the SEC should do their job and investigate anything that looks like insider trading by Trump Administration officials."

On March 23, oil and stocks futures worth billions of dollars were traded 15 minutes before Trump said previously threatened strikes on Iranian energy infrastructure would be delayed. The president's comments in a Truth Social post sent crude prices plummeting and equities soaring.

A similar pattern was observed ahead of Trump's April 7 announcement of a two-week ceasefire with Iran. Futures activity increased in the hours before the news, which caused both oil and gas prices to plunge.

Live Nation illegally monopolized events, overcharged fans jury says

Bloomberg News

Live Nation Entertainment, the largest U.S. concert promoter and ticket seller, illegally monopolized the live events industry and overcharged fans, a New York federal jury concluded Wednesday.

Following a six-week trial, the jury found in favor of a coalition of 33 states and Washington, D.C., who sued the company, handing a massive victory on all their antitrust claims after the U.S. Justice Department bowed out of the case with a settlement after the first week.

The jury of seven women and two men found that Live Nation illegally monopolized the market for ticketing services, concert ticketing and the use of amphitheaters that are a popular venue for outdoor concerts. Live Nation also illegally tied the use of company-owned venues to its concert promotion services, the jury said.

Live Nation's monopoly led concertgoers to overpay by \$1.72 per ticket, the jury found. U.S. District Judge Arun Subramanian, who oversaw the trial, will consider that finding in calculating how much Live Nation must pay for its illegal conduct and how to remedy the monopoly. The states want as much as \$700 million and may seek additional penalties for

violations of state antitrust laws. Some also have said they want Live Nation to sell Ticketmaster, its ticketing arm.

"This is a historic and resounding victory for artists, fans, and the venues that support them," said California Attorney General Rob Bonta said in a statement. "In the face of dwindling antitrust enforcement by the Trump Administration, this verdict shows just how far states can go to protect our residents from big corporations that are using their power to illegally raise prices and rip-off Americans."

Live Nation is likely to appeal the verdict and any remedy order issued by the judge.

"We're obviously disappointed," Dan Wall, a lawyer for Live Nation, said after the verdict. "The game is not over by any means."

Shares of rival ticket brokers jumped on the news, with StubHub climbing as much as 5% and Vivid Seats rising as much as 9.1%.

"This was a massive win for the state AGs and an historic miss for the DOJ," said Roger Alford, an antitrust professor at Notre Dame Law School who until last summer was the Trump administration's No. 2 antitrust official. "The DOJ had the talent, the material, and the audience. It just lacked leadership with the courage to step on stage."

Trump stokes controversy with AI Jesus image

New York Daily News

President Donald Trump on Wednesday posted a controversial AI-generated image of himself and Jesus Christ just a day after he yanked a meme that appeared to depict him as the holy man amid widespread criticism.

Trump re-posted an image depicting Jesus blessing him, which was posted by a Republican candidate for a Boston congressional seat.

"God might be playing his Trump card," Daniel Kelly, the candidate who uses the X handle @Irish4Trump, wrote in a caption, adding "I was never a very religious man."

Trump made no secret of his approval of the new meme and message.

"The radical LEFT LUNATICS may not like this, but I think it's quite nice," Trump wrote on his social media site.

The fresh controversy comes two days after Trump posted then deleted an image depicting himself as Jesus healing the sick, which many devout Christians, including some of his staunch supporters, slammed as blasphemous. Trump claimed that he believed that image was simply portraying him as "a doctor" or showing support for the Red Cross.

Russian attack on Ukrainian cities kills at least 15

Bloomberg News

Russia carried out one of the largest attacks on Ukraine so far this year, killing at least 15 people and injuring dozens in an overnight onslaught of missiles and drones targeting Kyiv and other major cities.

Ukraine's Air Defense said Russia launched more than 40 ballistic and cruise missiles as well as more than 650 drones of various types, calling it one of the toughest attacks of the year to date. Dnipro, Odesa, Kharkiv and Zaporizhzhia were hit along

with the capital.

Children were among those killed in the barrage, with mostly residential areas damaged, according to the State Emergency Service and local authorities. In Kyiv, police and medics who came to help the injured were also hurt in follow-up strikes, Ukraine's Prosecutor's General Office said on Telegram.

Russia regularly uses so-called double-tap strikes that seek to target medical crews and other rescue workers re-

sponding to initial attacks.

"Operational headquarters have been deployed on the ground in all affected cities," Ukrainian Deputy Prime Minister Oleksiy Kuleba said in a message on Telegram. "Rescuers, municipal services, doctors and all responsible services are working, providing assistance to people and recording the damage."

Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiba said the attacks showed it's "immoral, counterproductive, and dangerous" to delay sanc-

tions against Russia or aid for Ukraine.

"Any day of further inaction on critical decisions sends wrong signals and encourages the aggressor to continue, prolong, and expand the war," Sybiba said in a post on X.

Russia's Black Sea coast came under attack overnight, with several residential buildings in Tuapse damaged and two children killed, according to Krasnodar region's authorities. Debris fell on the territory of enterprises in the port area.

Ex-Marine faces extradition for military aid to China

By **SETH ROBSON**
Stars and Stripes

The United States can extradite a former Marine Corps fighter pilot accused of providing China with military training, an Australian court has ruled.

Daniel Duggan, an Australian citizen, was arrested in the state of New South Wales in 2022 at the U.S. government's request.

His detention followed reports that dozens of British pilots were recruited to teach the Chinese military how to defeat western warplanes and helicopters.

The former Harrier "jump jet" pilot is accused of conspiracy to unlawfully export defense services to China, conspiracy to launder money and violations of the arms control act, according to Thursday's decision by Justice James Stellios in the Federal Court of Australia.

The maximum penalty for the charges is 65 years imprisonment, according to the judgment.

Duggan, who denies the charges, has been held in a maximum-security prison during the legal challenge, The Australian newspaper reported Thursday.

The Australian government is aware of the court's decision, according to a statement Thursday from Australian Attorney-Gen-

eral Michelle Rowland's office.

"Duggan will remain in extradition custody in Australia until his surrender to the United States of America," the statement said.

Duggan served as a Harrier pilot from April 1989 to September 2002 with a deployment to Kuwait in 1999, according to the Marine Corps.

The father of six renounced his U.S. citizenship more than a decade ago and has been a permanent Australian resident since 2002, The Australian reported at the time of his initial arrest.

The allegations against him stem from work that he did with the Test Flying Academy of South Africa between 2010 and 2012, according to the newspaper.

A legal clerk for Duggan, Lynn Stocker, spoke outside the court on Thursday, the newspaper reported that day.

"Now it is a decision for the Prime Minister whether he wants to send an Australian citizen who has already been in prison for three and a half years into the hands of the Trump administration who has taken a close interest in this matter," she said, according to the report.

Colombia moves to kill Escobar's 'cocaine hippos'

Miami Herald

Colombia will euthanize dozens of invasive hippos descended from animals once owned by drug lord Pablo Escobar, in a controversial move underscoring the growing environmental and public safety risks posed by the species decades after their introduction to the South American country.

Environment Minister Irene Vélez said authorities have approved a plan to cull up to 80 animals from a population that has spread across river systems in the Magdalena basin.

Officials warn that without decisive action, the number of hippos — estimated at about 170 today — could rise to as many as 500 by the end of the decade, intensifying damage to ecosystems and nearby communities.

"If we don't do this, we will not be able to control the population," Vélez said, describing the measure as necessary to preserve Colombia's biodiversity and prevent further harm to native species.

The so-called "cocaine hippos" trace their origins to the 1980s, when Escobar imported four animals to his sprawling Hacienda Nápoles estate. After his death in 1993, the hippos es-

caped captivity and began reproducing in the wild.

Without any natural predators in Colombia, their numbers have expanded rapidly, spreading far beyond the ranch they originally lived on and into rivers and wetlands.

Scientists say the animals pose a unique ecological threat. Their size and feeding habits disrupt riverbanks and vegetation, while their waste alters water chemistry, reducing oxygen levels and increasing nutrient loads.

These changes can kill fish and aquatic plants and threaten species such as manatees, otters and turtles that depend on stable ecosystems.

The hippos have also increasingly come into contact with humans.

Authorities report incidents in which the animals have damaged crops, caused traffic accidents and attacked boats or people, raising concerns among rural communities.

For more than a decade, Colombian governments have explored alternatives to killing them, including sterilization and relocation. But both strategies have proven costly and logistically difficult.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Doctor indicted after wrong organ removed

AL MUSCLE SHOALS — A Florida doctor has been indicted on criminal charges in the operating room death of an Alabama man.

Dr. Thomas Shaknovsky, 44, is charged with second-degree manslaughter in the August 2024 death of 70-year-old William Bryan of Muscle Shoals.

On Aug. 21, 2024, during what was scheduled to be a laparoscopic splenectomy, Shaknovsky removed Bryan's liver instead of his spleen, resulting in catastrophic blood loss and the patient's death on the operating table, according to the Walton County Sheriff's Office.

The following month, Florida moved to suspend Shaknovsky's medical license and released a 21-page emergency order.

The order detailed how Shaknovsky allegedly caused Bryan's death and made a similar error with another patient.

The Office of the State Attorney for the First Judicial Circuit announced that a Walton County grand jury on Monday returned the criminal indictment against Shaknovsky.

Shaknovsky's 21-page suspension order in 2024 accused the physician of "repeated egregious surgical errors" and "egregious conduct of fabricating medical records."

Doctor gets 11 years for sexually abusing patients

CA LOS ANGELES — A former UCLA gynecologist pleaded guilty Tuesday to sexually abusing five of his patients during examinations, and the once-renowned cancer

expert was sentenced to 11 years in state prison.

James Heaps, 70, pleaded guilty to 13 felonies, including multiple counts of sexual penetration of an unconscious person, and must register as a sex offender for life.

The plea came after a three-justice panel of the California 2nd District Court of Appeal overturned his conviction for sexual abuse of two patients with three counts of sexual battery by fraud and two counts of sexual penetration of an unconscious person. The court determined that the trial judge failed to inform his lawyers that some of the jurors raised questions about the English proficiency of one of the panel members and ordered a retrial.

Heaps has been in state prison since 2022, and agreed to plead guilty to charges involving not only the two women he was previously convicted of abusing, but also three women whose allegations the prior jury hung on during deliberations. At a second trial, Heaps faced the prospect of more charges and a potential conviction with a longer sentence.

Deputy District Attorney Dnette Meyers said Tuesday's plea means Heaps will be eligible for parole in 2028 with time served.

'Baby Jessica' from 1987 well rescue arrested

TX MIDLAND — The woman who was known as "Baby Jessica" while the world watched her being rescued from a well in 1987 was reportedly arrested following a domestic disturbance in Texas.

The Saturday night incident occurred in Midland, which is

also where Jessica McClure Morales was trapped 22-feet underground for nearly 60 hours when she was a baby.

Now 40, Morales is charged with assault causing bodily injury involving family violence. She was taken into custody by the Midland County Sheriff's Office on Saturday night, according to Texas station KXAN.

Morales was 18 months old when she fell through an 8-inch opening in her aunt's yard nearly 39 years ago. Emergency crews raced to rescue her with news crews covering their efforts. She claims to have no memory of the event.

Texas outlet KTRK said she suffered a cut to her head, and later lost a toe to infection after being pulled to safety.

Morales told People magazine in 2017 that she was married, had two children and was working as a special education teacher's aide in a Texas elementary school. She blamed a 2008 stock market collapse for wiping-out a \$1.2 million trust that was established for her by well-wishers who followed her rescue.

Governor backs Turning Point program in schools

ID BOISE — Idaho officials are encouraging high school students to start or join chapters of a conservative group that has in the past advocated for political candidates including President Donald Trump and has called to mobilize the country's most "spirited, anti-woke warriors."

Last week, Gov. Brad Little signed a proclamation that affirmed the state's commitment to upholding the principles of the First Amendment in public

schools and praised Turning Point USA for providing opportunities for young people to participate in the free exchange of ideas.

The proclamation comes after a gunman last year shot and killed Turning Point USA founder Charlie Kirk while he was speaking at Utah Valley University. After his death, people across the country held memorials for him, while others who spoke out against Kirk were fired from their jobs or faced other consequences.

After Kirk's death, Trump released a message calling for Americans to "commit themselves" to Kirk's values.

Worker who shot at customers gets 16 years

SC COLUMBIA — A Bojangles worker who served up hot lead bullets from his Taurus handgun at the drive-in window to two customers who had only wanted fried chicken has been sentenced to 16 years in South Carolina state prison.

Donte Simpson, 18, who fired his gun 17 times at two customers before and after he jumped out of a Bojangles drive-in window, was sentenced in Lexington County criminal court by Judge Debra McCaslin.

McCaslin pronounced the sentence after Simpson, of West Columbia, pleaded guilty in her court late last week, the 11th Judicial Circuit solicitor's office said in a news release. Deputy Solicitor Rhonda Patterson prosecuted the case.

Evidence against Simpson included video that captured the event and the 17 shell casings from his handgun.

— From wire reports

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Warriors evoke golden era in comeback win

Associated Press

INGLEWOOD, Calif. — Stephen Curry hit seven 3-pointers while scoring 35 points, holding every fan at Intuit Dome in his thrall with another dazzling display of his unmatched shooting skill.

In the fourth quarter of an elimination game, Draymond Green bodied up to Kawhi Leonard and utterly shut down one of the greatest scorers of their generation.

Curry and Green have already done it all and won it all during their 14 years and four championships together. The Golden State Warriors' visit to the Los Angeles Clippers on Wednesday night was merely a play-in game for the right to travel to Phoenix after a trying regular season that ended with Golden State sitting eight games below .500 and in 10th place in the Western Conference.

And yet both the style and substance of this 126-121 comeback victory indelibly evoked the brilliance of the Warriors' golden era.

The few remaining men who have been around for the whole ride were thrilled to travel back in time.

"For one night, we're us. We're champions again," coach Steve Kerr said. "And I know that may sound crazy to everybody out there. It's a play-in game. I don't care. Just absolutely beautiful to watch."

Curry put it even more simply: "That's what you live for right there."

Golden State overcame a 13-point deficit in the fourth quarter behind Curry, who scored 27 points in a dominant second half. While he took care of the offense, Green took the defensive lead with a smothering effort against Leonard, who couldn't score in the fourth quarter until the Clippers were cooked.

The Warriors also got stellar contributions from two newcomers. Kristaps Porzingis had 20 points, five rebounds and five assists with an exciting series of big plays — and 39-year-old Al Horford shocked the entire arena when he hit four 3-pointers in the fourth quarter of just his third game since missing a month with a strained right calf.

Curry broke a tie with his final 3-pointer, falling into the front

row of Clippers fans while the ball pierced the net with 50 seconds left. The superstar was playing just his fifth game since returning from a 27-game absence with a knee injury, and he demonstrated exactly why he rejected any notion that he should shut himself down for the summer.

"This is what you work all year for, all summer, offseason," Curry said. "We're not guaranteed a (playoff) series yet, but these nights make everything worth it, because you feel the anxiety of having to perform when the lights are bright, do-or-die game. ... Considering how our season has gone, all the injuries and all that, for us to play the way we did tonight was special."

Green didn't score in the fourth quarter, but the Warriors credited their defensive stopper for stifling Leonard, whose play for Toronto in the 2019 NBA Finals is still painful in the minds of Golden State fans.

With Green hounding his every move, Leonard got only two shots in the fourth quarter. Leonard finished with 21 points while having a fraction of his usual impact on

Clippers games.

Leonard called Green a "Hall of Fame defender. It was hard to even get shots up."

Green thought the Warriors could be a title contender going into this season, but it didn't happen. Jimmy Butler went down for the season in January, Moses Moody was sidelined in March, and Golden State finished the regular season on a 5-15 skid to its worst record in a full regular season since 2012.

But after knocking off Los Angeles, Golden State is one win away from making the playoffs anyway. Even for the Warriors who have already won everything, the chance to do the improbable is irresistible.

"I know we're not satisfied," Curry said. "We want to go to Phoenix and guarantee a playoff series against OKC. That's the next goal, but for us to lock in on just 48 minutes, figure out how to get a win, knowing that the game was not going to be perfect, we were all pretty committed to that. The eight guys that got on the floor all had a part in making it happen."

After boost from Embiid, Maxey carries 76ers into playoffs

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Tyrese Maxey and his 76ers teammates sent feelers out to Joel Embiid about the recovering All-Star center attending the play-in game.

Embiid had been absent since his emergency appendectomy last week and the Sixers thought it would lift his spirits if he was part of their playoff push. Unsure of his answer hours ahead of tipoff Wednesday night against Orlando, Embiid surprised his teammates by walking into the locker room about an hour before the game.

He provided an emotional boost to Maxey and the Sixers just by showing up.

"I gave him a big hug," Maxey said. "I was glad to see him."

Maxey took over in the fourth quarter, much the way Embiid did in so many crucial games over the years.

Maxey scored 31 points, and V.J. Edgecombe added 19 points and 11 rebounds in the Sixers' 109-97 win over the Magic that gave Philadelphia the No. 7 seed in the Eastern Conference playoffs.

The Sixers begin their first-round series Sunday at Boston.

Maxey, named an All-Star starter for the first time in his career, scored seven straight points late in the fourth to help the Sixers put away the Magic.

"It was just me deciding I wanted to be aggressive," Maxey said. "I had some really good looks that I missed early in the third, that I made in the first half. So I was just

really confident I was going to make some shots."

Maxey — the Sixers' career 3-point leader — hit three 3s and made 11 of 25 shots as the Sixers made the playoffs a year after they went 24-58.

"He's been doing a bit of that lately as far as understanding we need kind of his greatness at the right time," coach Nick Nurse said.

The Sixers had leaned on Embiid's greatness over the years — but also came to understand that playing without the oft-injured former MVP is part of the deal in Philadelphia.

The team hasn't given a timetable for Embiid's return from his appendectomy. The two-time scoring champion sat in on a video

session Wednesday and watched the game from the bench.

Maxey is going to need to excel for the Sixers to have a shot against the Celtics.

Sixers fans chanted "We want Boston!" in the waning moments, but it might be best to pay heed to series history — the 76ers have lost their last six playoff series against the Celtics.

Philadelphia last topped Boston in a series in 1982. That's a worry for the next practice.

Maxey walked off the court to a roaring crowd — including Allen Iverson — and teammates swarmed him to show their appreciation.

"I promised some guys we were going to get in the playoffs," Maxey said.

Stars finish regular season with SO win

Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Wyatt Johnston scored the decisive shootout goal and the Dallas Stars posted their third consecutive 50-win season with a 4-3 victory over the Buffalo Sabres on Wednesday night in the regular-season finale for both teams.

Justin Hryckowian and Esa Lindell each had a goal and assist, and Mavrik Bourque also scored for the Stars. Dallas finished 50-20-12 in reaching 50 wins for the seventh time in franchise history.

Jake Oettinger stopped 21 shots and two of Buffalo's four shootout opportunities.

Zach Benson had a goal and assist and Josh Norris and Alex Tuch — with his 200th career goal — scored for Buffalo. Colten Ellis made 25 saves, then allowed three goals on Dallas' four shootout attempts.

Blackhawks 5, Sharks 2: Defenseman Louis Crevier scored twice in the final period, Ryan Greene and Nick Lardis also added third period goals, and host

Chicago rallied in their season finale to beat San Jose.

Crevier, with the first multi-goal game of his career, tied the game at 2 by converting a backhand pass from Connor Bedard 3:51 into the period, then added an insurance goal on a 60-foot slapshot midway through the period.

Greene scored his 12th of the season between Crevier's goals, beating Sharks goaltender Yaroslav Askarov from the slot at 8:35.

San Jose's Mario Ferraro opened the scoring with a wrist shot that deflected off the left skate of Chicago defenseman Ethan Del Mastro 8:09 into the first period.

Golden Knights 4, Kraken 1: Mitch Marner broke a third-period tie and host Vegas won the Pacific Division for the fifth time in their nine-year history, beating Seattle to close the regular season.

Two points ahead of Edmonton entering the night, Vegas needed

only a point to win the Pacific and set up a first-round series against Utah. Edmonton will finish play Thursday night at home against Vancouver.

The Golden Knights finished 39-26-17, going 7-0-1 since John Tortorella took over as coach for the fired Bruce Cassidy.

The Kraken have lost two straight to fall to 34-36-11 with a game left Thursday night at Colorado.

Rangers 4, Lightning 2: Tye Kartye scored two goals and had an assist as visiting New York beat Tampa Bay in the regular-season finale for both teams.

Gabe Perreault and Mika Zibanejad — on the power play — also scored for New York, which snapped a three-game losing streak, while Dylan Garand made 29 saves in his first start since March 27. Zibanejad also had an assist.

Oliver Bjorkstrand and Corey Perry scored for the playoff-bound Lightning, who rested several key players.

Panthers 8, Red Wings 1:

Mike Benning got his first two NHL goals, Wilmer Skoog, Mikulas Hovorka and Ludvig Jansson all got their first NHL points, and host Florida closed out their injury-plagued season by routing Detroit.

Luke Kunin had two goals for Florida, while Vinnie Hinostroza, Cole Schwindt, Cole Reinhardt and A.J. Greer all also scored for the Panthers. Skoog, Marek Alscher and Matthew Tkachuk — playing for the first time since he and his wife welcomed their first child earlier this week — each finished with two assists.

Senators 3, Maple Leafs 1: Drake Batherson and Warren Foegel scored power-play goals and host Ottawa — resting six players for the playoffs — beat Toronto in the regular-season finale for both teams.

Ottawa finished 44-27-11 to take the final wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference. It will open its first-round series against Carolina on the road.

LIV chief affirms league will go on despite funding concerns

Associated Press

LIV Golf CEO Scott O'Neil sought to quell speculation about the league's financial future Wednesday evening with a memo to his staff that said the 2026 season will continue as planned without interruption and "at full throttle."

The memo, a copy of which was sent to The Associated Press, followed a long day of reports suggesting Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund was on the verge of cutting its financial backing of the upstart league.

The newsletter Money in Sport reported in February that LIV Golf had already spent \$5.3 billion and was projected to surpass \$6 billion by the end of the year.

"While the media landscape is often filled with speculation, our reality is defined by the work we do on the grass. We are

heading into the heart of our 2026 schedule with the full energy of an organization that is bigger, louder and more influential than ever before," O'Neil said.

Left unclear was how long the funding would last for LIV Golf, which launched in June 2022 by paying roughly \$1 billion in signing bonuses to some of the PGA Tour's biggest names, such as Bryson DeChambeau, Brooks Koepka, Phil Mickelson, Dustin Johnson and Jon Rahm.

Prize money for individuals and the 13 teams was raised to \$30 million this year.

Questions about LIV's future funding were raised as the Public Investment Fund of Saudi Arabia revealed a new five-year investment strategy.

"The 2026-30 strategy marks a natural evolution as PIF

moves from a period of rapid growth and acceleration to a new phase of sustained value creation, with a strengthened focus on maximizing impact, raising the efficiency of investments and applying the highest standards of governance, transparency and institutional excellence," the PIF said in a release.

The plan was developed before the U.S.-Israel war against Iran. Yasir Al-Rumayyan, the PIF governor behind LIV Golf, told the London-based Financial Times, "Of course the war would add more pressure to reposition some priorities."

LIV players at Chapultepec Golf Club for LIV Golf Mexico that started Thursday did not have answers as speculation ran rampant throughout the day.

One player said Al-Rumayyan met with players the first

week of March in Hong Kong and said funding for LIV was set through 2032. The player spoke on condition of anonymity because the meeting was private. The player also said O'Neil arrived in Mexico City on Wednesday and was set to meet with the players.

LIV Golf promoted the Mexico event Wednesday evening on social media with the message, "Slow news day? We are ON."

LIV has played five events this year, in Saudi Arabia, Australia, Hong Kong, Singapore and South Africa. It celebrated an inspirational victory at its biggest event in Australia when Anthony Kim won after the American had been away for 12 years while battling drug and alcohol addiction.

DeChambeau won the last two events in playoffs.

Stewart's 3-run shots lead Reds over Giants

Associated Press

CINCINNATI — Sal Stewart hit a pair of three-run home runs for a career-high six RBIs, Eugenio Suarez and Elly De La Cruz also homered, and the Cincinnati Reds beat the San Francisco Giants 8-3 on Wednesday night.

The 22-year-old Stewart has 12 career homers, the most by a Cincinnati batter through his first 36 games since Aristedes Aquino hit 15 in 2018-19.

Rookie Rhett Lowder (2-1) allowed three runs in 6⅓ innings for the Reds.

Former Red Tyler Mahle (0-3) started for San Francisco and allowed eight runs with five walks and four homers in four innings, raising his ERA from 4.30 to 7.23.

Diamondbacks 8, Orioles 5 (10): Adrian Del Castillo hit a two-run home run in the 10th inning and drove in five to lead visiting Arizona over Baltimore.

After Geraldo Perdomo advanced automatic runner Corbin Carroll to third on a sacrifice to open the 10th, Del Castillo lashed a 2-0 fastball from Tyler Wells (0-1) into the bleachers in center for his first home run of the season. Nolan Arenado's single later in the inning drove in an insurance run.

Jeremiah Jackson homered and drove in three for the Orioles, who lost consecutive games for the first time since a three-game sweep at Pittsburgh from April 3-5.

Cardinals 5, Guardians 3: Nathan Church had three hits, Alec Burleson had two RBIs and Jordan Walker extended his hitting streak to 11 games as host St. Louis beat Cleveland.

Dustin May (2-2) allowed one run on six hits and a walk and had four strikeouts in six innings, and Riley O'Brien pitched a perfect ninth to earn his fifth save and help the Cardinals win their second straight game.

Slade Cecconi allowed one run on three hits but surren-

dered a career-high five walks and threw 87 pitches in four innings for the Guardians, who lost consecutive games for the first time this season.

Red Sox 9, Twins 5: Trevor Story homered and drove in five runs to lead visiting Boston over Minnesota.

Connelly Early (1-0) gave up one run, two hits and two walks with five strikeouts over six innings, the longest of his eight major league starts.

Austin Martin had two hits, including a home run. Ryan Kreidler hit a three-run homer in the ninth inning for the Twins, who lost for just the second time in 10 games.

Pirates 2, Nationals 0: Carmen Mlodzinski allowed two hits over a career-high six innings and host Pittsburgh beat Washington.

Mlodzinski (1-0) took over for opener Mason Montgomery in the second and struck out five against two walks to lower his ERA to 1.77. Dennis Santana worked the ninth for his second save.

Ryan O'Hearn had three hits for the Pirates, who have won 10 of 14. Marcell Ozuna and Nick Gonzales had first-inning RBI singles against Jake Irvin (1-2), and it proved to be enough as four pitchers combined for Pittsburgh's second shutout in less than a week.

Cubs 11, Phillies 2: Nico Hoerner drove in a career-high five runs, Shota Imanaga (1-1) struck out 11 in six strong innings and visiting Chicago routed Philadelphia.

Dansby Swanson homered and Matt Shaw had three doubles and a pair of RBIs for the Cubs, who pounded out 15 hits to take the rubber match of the three-game set.

Tigers 2, Royals 1: Wenceel Pérez hit a go-ahead homer in the eighth inning and host Detroit won its fifth straight game, beating Kansas City.

Neither starter was involved in the decision despite strong

outings. The Tigers' Jack Flaherty allowed one run and two hits in six innings with seven strikeouts and three walks. The Royals' Seth Lugo gave up one run and five hits with seven strikeouts and no walks in 6⅓ innings.

Braves 6, Marlins 3: Bryce Elder (2-1) pitched scoreless ball into the sixth inning, three Atlanta players homered and the host Braves won another series with a victory over Miami.

Ozzie Albies, Austin Riley and Matt Olson went deep for first-place Atlanta, which took two of three from the Marlins for its fifth series win.

Yankees 5, Angels 4: José Caballero laced a two-run double in the bottom of the ninth inning that gave host New York a victory over Los Angeles, moments after it botched an infield popup in a costly misplay.

With the Angels up 5-4 in the ninth, Jazz Chisholm Jr. popped up to the left side with one out and nobody on. But shortstop Zach Neto and ex-Yankees third baseman Oswald Peraza miscommunicated, and the ball dropped right between them on the infield dirt for a gift single. Austin Wells then walked before Caballero's double.

Brewers 2, Blue Jays 1: William Contreras hit the only ball out of the infield during a two-run rally in the eighth inning as host Milwaukee snapped a six-game skid with a victory over Toronto.

Toronto wasted a brilliant performance from Dylan Cease, who struck out six and allowed two hits and three walks in six shutout innings.

Rays 8, White Sox 3: Junior Caminero, Jake Fraley and Jonny DeLuca homered, and visiting Tampa Bay pounded Chicago for its fifth straight win.

The start of the game was delayed a few minutes after a singer leading the "Jackie Robinson Day" festivities collapsed. The White Sox said Gerald Chaney, a longtime anthem performer,

was alert before being taken to the hospital after he collapsed while performing "Lift Every Voice and Sing."

Astros 3, Rockies 1: Yordan Alvarez hit his seventh home run of the season and Spencer Arrighetti struck out 10 in six strong innings to lead host Houston over Colorado.

The Astros have won two straight following an eight-game skid. The Rockies have lost six in a row after winning their previous four.

Dodgers 8, Mets 2: Shohei Ohtani (2-0) pitched one-run ball over six innings and struck out 10 in the first game in which he did not also bat since 2021, and host Los Angeles routed New York for its seventh straight defeat.

Dalton Rushing, who replaced Ohtani as designated hitter, hit his first career grand slam off Mets closer Devin Williams in the eighth. Kyle Tucker added a two-out solo shot — his first at home as a Dodger — off Austin Warren, making it 8-1.

Athletics 6, Rangers 5: Shea Langeliers hit the longest homer in the majors this season and Jacob Wilson also had a two-run shot to help the host Athletics beat Texas.

Lawrence Butler hit a leadoff single before Cole Winn replaced Jalen Beeks (1-1) with two outs in the sixth and Langeliers hit a towering 467-foot home run — the majors' longest — that gave the A's a 4-2 lead.

Padres 7, Mariners 6: Jackson Merrill hit a walk-off, two-run double to cap host San Diego's five-run ninth inning and the Padres beat Seattle for their seventh win in a row.

Andrés Muñoz (2-2) came on to start the ninth and loaded the bases before Fernando Tatis Jr. hit a pinch-hit sacrifice fly. Luis Campusano and Ramón Laureano followed with two-out RBI singles that made it 6-5. Jose A. Ferrer replaced Muñoz and five pitches later Merrill hit a line drive to left field that ended it.