

## Navy secretary ousted after infighting

*Bloomberg News*

WASHINGTON — Navy Secretary John Phelan was fired after clashing with top leaders at the Pentagon, including over administration efforts to revive U.S. shipbuilding, according to people familiar with the matter, making him the latest high-profile Pentagon departure amid the war in Iran.

Phelan was pushed out after butting heads with Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth and Deputy Defense Secretary Stephen Feinberg over President Donald Trump's focus on what the administration has dubbed a new U.S. "Golden Fleet," according to the people, who asked not to be identified discussing private conversations. A White House official said Trump and Hegseth agreed new leadership was needed over the Navy.

Pentagon spokesman Sean Parnell said in a post on X that Phelan was stepping down "effective immediately" without giving a reason for his depart-

ure. Parnell said Undersecretary Hung Cao would be the replacement for now.

Phelan didn't respond to requests for comment Wednesday evening.

The abrupt dismissal comes as the Navy is helping oversee a blockade of the Strait of Hormuz, one of its biggest operations in decades. However, Phelan, as the service's civilian leader, didn't have direct oversight over the Navy's operations near the Strait of Hormuz and his departure isn't expected to affect operations.

The change comes one day after the Pentagon released its \$1.5 trillion budget proposal. The Navy would get \$377.5 billion to pay for everything from more ballistic missile submarines to new military housing projects.

At the top of the wish list are two new kinds of ships — a BBG (X), the first "Trump-class" guided-missile battleship; and the FFX, the first of a new type of

frigate based on a Coast Guard cutter design.

The battleship is at the center of Trump's "Golden Fleet" plan, which also includes the new frigate to be modeled on a modified Coast Guard National Security Cutter. It replaces the planned Constellation-class frigate that was scuttled by Phelan late last year.

Trump has made shipbuilding a focus of his second term, vowing to build commercial and military ships "very fast, very soon" to keep pace with China's growing naval fleet and challenge its dominance in the commercial shipbuilding market.

Phelan's departure also comes as the U.S. Navy has imposed a blockade of Iranian ports and is targeting ships linked to Tehran around the world as the ceasefire in the Iran war continues.

Phelan had not served in the military or had a civilian leadership role in the service before Trump nominated him for sec-

retary in late 2024.

Phelan's only connection to the military was through an advisory role for the Spirit of America, a nonprofit that works with troops and diplomats to deliver assistance to communities affected by conflict.

He was a major donor to Trump's 2024 reelection campaign and said during his confirmation hearing in February 2025 that Trump often texted him in the middle of the night to complain about rusty warships.

Phelan also committed during his confirmation to passing a department-wide audit and growing the Navy's enlisted ranks.

He was confirmed to the post in March 2025.

Since Trump's return to office, a slate of the most senior military officers has been removed or retired.

Earlier this month, Hegseth asked Army Chief of Staff Randy George to step down, and he fired two other Army generals.

## US military halts third oil tanker in Iranian blockade

**BY LARA KORTE**

*Stars and Stripes*

U.S. forces have stopped and boarded another sanctioned, stateless oil tanker in the Indian Ocean, the Pentagon announced Thursday, making it the third vessel the military has halted as part of its blockade on Iranian ports.

The Pentagon shared video of U.S. troops boarding the M/T Majestic X, which it said was transporting oil from Iran.

The action was part of a broader U.S. effort to cut off resources and supplies to Iran, which has put a virtual

chokehold on the vital Strait of Hormuz.

U.S. officials said they will continue to block vessels attempting to enter or exit Iranian ports as part of the blockade, even those traveling outside of the Middle East.

"International waters cannot be used as a shield by sanctioned actors," the Pentagon said on X. "The Department of War will continue to deny illicit actors and their vessels freedom of maneuver in the maritime domain."

The military boarded a similar ship, the M/T Tifani, on Tuesday, as it was leaving the

Persian Gulf area. U.S. forces on Sunday also disabled a cargo vessel, M/V Touska, as it transited the northern Arabian Sea toward an Iranian port.

Iran, meanwhile, continues to target commercial shipping. The paramilitary Revolutionary Guard fired on three commercial ships, detaining at least two, Iranian state media reported.

In a post Thursday to Truth Social, Trump said he has ordered the U.S. Navy to "shoot and kill any boat" that is putting mines in the waters of the Strait of Hormuz.

"Additionally, our mine 'sweepers' are clearing the Strait right now. I am hereby ordering that activity to continue, but at a tripled up level!" Trump said.

The Washington Post on Wednesday reported that the Pentagon has informed Congress that it could take up to six months for the U.S. military to fully clear the strait of mines laid by Iran. And any such operation, the report said, is unlikely to be carried out until the war ends.

It is not clear how many, if any, mines are in the vital waterway.

# US working to clear out mines in strait

By ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

NAPLES, Italy — Nearly two months into the war in the Middle East, the U.S. has yet to break Iran's grip on the Strait of Hormuz — and, increasingly, the world economy.

That's due in part to concerns of shipping companies and insurers about Iranian sea mines lurking in the critical waterway, through which 20% of the world's daily consumption of oil and petroleum products usually flows.

While it's uncertain how many of the explosive devices Iran has placed in the strait, the impression of a minefield is enough to keep ships away, said Sal Mercogliano, an adjunct professor at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy.

"The problem is that if there's a fear of a mine, which exists right now, you've got to prove that there" aren't any mines, Mercogliano said in an X post Monday that included an interview with an Australian news station. "That requires extensive mine sweep operations."

That effort likely won't take

place until after the war, members of the House Armed Services Committee learned Tuesday in a classified briefing with a senior Pentagon official, The Washington Post reported.

Committee members also were told that it could take as long as six months to fully clear the strait of an estimated 20 or more mines, according to the Post report, which cited three anonymous officials.

Pentagon spokesman Sean Parnell acknowledged that the disclosure was made in a briefing but said the information was inaccurate, the paper said.

U.S. Central Command said Monday that it couldn't discuss specifics about mines in the Strait of Hormuz or efforts to clear them, citing operational security.

On Thursday, President Donald Trump threatened that Iranian vessels attempting to lay mines in the strait would come under U.S. fire.

"Additionally, our mine 'sweepers' are clearing the Strait right now," Trump said in a Truth Social post. "I am here-by ordering that activity to con-

tinue, but at a tripled up level!"

The U.S. has three littoral combat ships based in Bahrain that are capable of clearing mines, but only one, USS Canberra, appeared to be in the Arabian Sea this week.

The status of USS Tulsa and USS Santa Barbara was unclear Thursday, as was the location of two Avenger-class minesweepers reportedly sent to the Middle East.

Earlier this month, at least one Navy destroyer safely transited the strait in what CENTCOM then described as part of a mine-clearing mission.

That effort could reassure shipowners that the waterway was safe, Mercogliano and other analysts said, but stronger evidence is needed.

"That's just the danger of mine warfare in that one can never take for granted that mines are not present unless cleared," said Steven Wills, an analyst with the Center for Maritime Strategy at the Navy League of the United States.

Since the war began Feb. 28, there have been no reported attacks on ships in the strait involv-

ing sea mines, although vessels have come under Iranian fire.

There have been 34 confirmed incidents since March 1 involving commercial ships and offshore infrastructure in the Persian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz and Gulf of Oman, the Joint Maritime Information Center said Tuesday.

There were six transits through the strait on Sunday and 16 on Monday, according to the center's report, which noted that the historical average was about 138 ships daily.

Mines also have been reported in the strait, it said.

At the center of concerns over the safety of passage are insurers, whose risk assessments can essentially determine whether ships can move at all.

"This contest is taking place in the minds of (insurance marketplace) Lloyd's of London," said James Holmes, chair of the maritime strategy program at the Naval War College in Newport, R.I. "If insurers don't have the confidence to insure a voyage, shipping will stay put or take the route close to Iranian shores" as required by Iran.

## US, Iran tensions build as negotiations remain stalled

*Bloomberg News*

U.S. and Iran tensions grew over the Strait of Hormuz with both sides maintaining their blockades of the critical waterway, creating an uneasy standoff with no new peace talks on the horizon.

President Donald Trump on Thursday ordered the U.S. Navy to shoot any boat putting mines in the strait, while the military said it intercepted two oil supertankers that tried to evade its effort to prevent passage to and from Iran's ports. U.S. forces boarded a "sanctioned stateless vessel" trans-

porting oil from Iran in the Indian Ocean overnight, the Pentagon said.

Tehran attacked at least three vessels on Wednesday, helping to ensure the key transit point for oil and gas flows remains effectively shut for an eighth straight week.

The incidents came after Trump indefinitely extended a ceasefire with Iran on Tuesday, saying he's awaiting a response from Tehran before talks can resume about a formal peace deal.

Iran has said it will not take part in negotiations while a U.S. naval blockade on its ports is in

place, and Iran state TV cited the foreign ministry as saying its armed forces are ready to respond to further threats.

White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said Trump wants Iran to agree to hand over its stocks of highly-enriched uranium, which the Islamic Republic has so far refused to do.

The U.S. and Israel started the conflict by bombing Iran in late February, arguing that Tehran could enrich that material further and try to build an atomic bomb.

Trump reiterated his argument that Iran isn't pushing for

peace due to infighting among its leaders, saying on social media there's a battle ongoing between hardline and moderate factions.

In the meantime, "no ship can enter or leave without the approval of the United States Navy," he said, referring to Hormuz. "It is 'Sealed up Tight,' until such time as Iran is able to make a DEAL!"

Iran's President Masoud Pezeshkian said on Wednesday that Iran welcomes talks, but that the "blockade and threats are main obstacles to genuine negotiations."

# Ukraine asks Turkey to seek talks with Russia

*Bloomberg News*

Ukraine has asked Turkey to help arrange a summit meeting between President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and Russian leader Vladimir Putin in a renewed effort to end the war, Foreign Minister Andrii Sybiha said in Kyiv.

“We have addressed the Turks directly. But if another capital — other than Moscow and Belarus — organizes such a meeting, we will attend,” Sybiha told reporters at a briefing Tuesday. “We are also advocating for a meeting now to inject new momentum into the Zelenskyy-Putin diplomatic track.”

With Russia’s full-scale inva-

sion in its fifth year and U.S.-brokered negotiations stalled since the Middle East conflict erupted, Ukraine is seeking alternative ways to revive the diplomatic track. Kyiv has long seen Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan as a mediator able to engage with Putin, and Istanbul has hosted past talks between Russian and Ukrainian officials.

The Turkish Presidency didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment.

Zelenskyy has repeatedly said he’s willing to meet Putin if it helps advance a peace deal and that almost any country could host the talks.

The Russian president has previously ruled out a meeting before an agreement on ending the war has been reached for the two leaders to sign.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment.

Istanbul hosted the first direct talks between Russian and Ukrainian officials in more than three years in May last year. It was also the venue for negotiations that led to the Black Sea grain deal in 2022 brokered with Turkey and the United Nations to unblock Ukrainian agricultural exports. Peace talks within weeks of the February 2022 full-scale invasion also

took place in Istanbul.

The pace of recent U.S.-led negotiations has slowed as President Donald Trump’s administration has focused on the war with Iran in the Middle East. Ukraine has invited the top U.S. negotiators Jared Kushner and Steve Witkoff to visit Kyiv for the first time after multiple trips to Moscow, though a meeting hasn’t yet been confirmed by Washington.

While Ukraine cites some progress in the talks, including prisoner swaps, and Zelenskyy’s top aide Kyrylo Budanov has said the end of the war may be nearing, negotiations have made little visible headway.

## Navy to put advanced version of Patriot on ships

BY GARY WARNER  
*Stars and Stripes*

The land-based Patriot air defense system would be used on ships for the first time under a contract signed this week, the Navy said Wednesday.

Lockheed Martin will provide Patriot Advanced Capacity-3 Missile Segment Enhancement interceptors to be integrated with the Navy’s Aegis Combat System aboard ships.

The Aegis system can track dozens of incoming threats and is used by the Navy’s Arleigh Burke-class destroyers and other Navy ships for combating missile and drone attacks.

Demand for missile interceptors of all kinds has surged since the United States and Israel attacked Iran last summer and more widely during Operation Epic Fury, which began Feb. 28.

Lockheed has long pushed for a ship-based Patriot system for the Navy, saying the PAC-3s give a ship a better defense against hypersonic missiles that can maneuver toward targets, unlike ballistic missiles.

“This integration further ex-

pands the capability of Aegis to engage missile threats at multiple layers,” Chandra Marshall, a Lockheed vice president, said in a statement.

The Patriot system is used by the Army and 16 partner countries, according to Lockheed. The Navy pact is the first time the missile will be used at sea. The Navy did not say when the system would begin service on ships.

The Navy’s 2027 defense budget, released Tuesday, requests a total of \$1.7 billion for 405 PAC-3 missiles and components. Each PAC-3 costs about \$4 million.

The Defense Department recently agreed to a seven-year \$4.7 billion pact with Lockheed to increase PAC-3 production from 600 per year to 2,000 by 2030.

The PAC-3 uses a kinetic “hit-to-kill” system — often called “bullet-to-bullet” — in which the interceptor slams into the target at high speed. Other air defense systems explode with proximity to the incoming missile.

## Judge blocks certification of Va. redistricting referendum

*The Virginian-Pilot*

NORFOLK, Va. — A Virginia judge issued an order Wednesday that blocks the certification of Tuesday’s special election on congressional redistricting, where voters narrowly approved the redrawing of maps to give Democrats the advantage in the midterm elections.

Tazewell County Circuit Judge Jack Hurley ruled in favor of Republicans who filed the lawsuit. He found the referendum was illegal on several counts, declaring state lawmakers did not follow the required process to get the referendum on the ballot and taking issue with language used for the ballot question.

The ruling can be seen as a victory for Republicans who had been holding out hope that the multiple legal challenges against the measure would prevail in their favor.

Virginia Democrats, however, vowed to appeal the ruling shortly after it was issued. Attorney General Jay Jones said his office is filing an appeal immediately.

“As I said last night, Virginia voters have spoken, and an activist judge should not have veto power over the People’s vote,” Jones said in a statement. “We look forward to defending the outcome of last night’s election in court.”

Republicans have several pending lawsuits challenging the validity of the referendum process. Wednesday’s ruling was in the case of Republican National Committee v. Virginia Department of Elections Commissioner Steven Koski. In March, the Virginia Supreme Court rejected a temporary restraining order in the case, sending it back to Tazewell Circuit Court for the final order, which was issued Wednesday. But the Virginia Supreme Court is expected to have the final say.

The court order issued Wednesday effectively blocks any actions to implement the newly adopted maps, including updating and altering election districts and voter registration records as well as using the maps in subsequent congressional and general elections.

# DOJ moves to reclassify medical marijuana

masslive.com

The Trump administration took a major step toward changing the federal status of marijuana on Thursday.

The Justice Department and Drug Enforcement Administration announced in a statement that they are officially moving medical cannabis and FDA-approved treatments into a more research-friendly legal category.

Following a December 2025 executive order by President Donald Trump, federal officials an-

nounced that these products are being moved to Schedule III of the Controlled Substances Act.

The move effectively reclassifies medical marijuana from a high-risk Schedule I substance to a category that includes prescription medications such as Tylenol with codeine.

According to Marijuana Moment, rescheduling the drug won't make it federally legal, but it does strip away Schedule I research barriers and eliminates 280E, a restrictive Internal Revenue Service tax code that has

long prevented legal marijuana businesses from taking federal tax deductions.

Acting Attorney General Todd Blanche said the decision "recognizes the longstanding regulation of medical marijuana by state governments and the need for a common-sense approach to this reality."

Blanche added, "This rescheduling action allows for research on the safety and efficacy of this substance, ultimately providing patients with better care and doctors with more reliable informa-

tion."

In addition to the immediate reclassification of medical products, the DEA is speeding up the process to potentially move all marijuana out of the Schedule I category.

The agency said it is scrapping the Biden administration's previous hearing schedules on the matter to speed up the process.

A new, expedited administrative hearing is set to begin June 29. This hearing will determine whether all marijuana should be moved out of Schedule I.

## Shareholders back Warner Bros.' \$111B Paramount takeover

Los Angeles Times

Paramount Skydance's proposed takeover of Warner Bros. Discovery cleared a major hurdle Thursday as Warner stockholders overwhelmingly embraced the \$111 billion deal.

Approval was expected. Paramount Chairman David Ellison's proposal would pay Warner investors \$31 a share — four times the price of the company's stock a year ago. Warner Bros. officials did not disclose the precise vote count during the nine-minute special shareholder meeting beyond saying the merger "received sufficient votes and has overwhelmingly passed."

Paramount offered the generous premium to compete with, and ultimately triumph over, Netflix, which withdrew from the auction in late February after Ellison's father, Oracle billionaire Larry Ellison, agreed to guarantee the financing of his son's deal.

The merger would create a new Hollywood behemoth by giving Paramount, which owns CBS and the Melrose Avenue film studio, such valuable assets

as HBO, HBO Max, CNN, TBS, Food Network and Warner Bros.' film and television studios in Burbank. Warner controls beloved TV shows, franchises and movies, including "Casablanca," Harry Potter, D.C. Comics, "Game of Thrones," "Euphoria," "The Pitt" and "Rooster."

"Shareholder approval marks another important milestone towards completing our acquisition of Warner Bros. Discovery, building on our successful equity and debt syndications and progress across regulatory approvals," Paramount said Thursday in a statement. "We look forward to closing the transaction in the coming months and realizing the creation of a next-generation media and entertainment company that better serves both the creative community and consumers."

Paramount now must secure regulatory approvals in the U.S. and abroad. Ellison, who was poised to honor President Donald Trump with a dinner Thursday evening in Washington, hopes to complete the deal by late summer.

## Senate adopts budget resolution to unlock immigration funds

CQ-Roll Call

WASHINGTON—The Senate adopted a GOP-written budget resolution early Thursday morning that marks a critical first step toward providing roughly \$70 billion for immigration enforcement for the remainder of President Donald Trump's term.

After a marathon "vote-a-rama" on amendments that stretched through the night, the Senate voted 50-48 for a budget blueprint laying the groundwork to pass a filibuster-proof budget reconciliation bill for immigration enforcement funding. That bill could bypass Democratic opposition and help end a record-breaking partial shutdown of the Department of Homeland Security.

Republican Sens. Rand Paul of Kentucky and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska voted against the budget plan, as did all Democrats who were present. Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, was absent, recovering from surgery to remove gallstones. Sen. Mark Warner, D-Va., whose daughter recently died, was also away from the Capitol.

The fiscal 2026 budget resolu-

tion calls on the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee and the Judiciary Committee to write reconciliation legislation by May 15 that would provide up to \$70 billion. It calls on the House Homeland Security and Judiciary panels to do the same. Once the budget resolution is adopted in both chambers, the detailed work on a reconciliation bill could begin.

The final vote came a little after 3:30 a.m. Thursday after a slew of attempts, mostly by Democrats, to broaden the scope of a reconciliation package in the run-up to the November midterm elections.

The first out of the gate, shortly after 9:30 p.m. Wednesday, was an amendment by Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., seeking to lower out-of-pocket health care costs.

He said his amendment and similar ones from other Democrats were designed to show a contrast between a Democratic fight to lower costs and a Republican drive to fund "two rogue agencies that have no restraint": Immigration and Customs Enforcement and the Border Patrol.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### Rheumatologist faces 81 sex assault charges

**MA** BOSTON — A doctor who practiced at Brigham and Women's Hospital faces 81 sexual assault charges, including rape, indecent assault and battery, and assault with intent to rape.

Suffolk County District Attorney Kevin Hayden announced Dr. Derrick Todd's grand jury indictment Tuesday, describing the case as unprecedented.

The alleged crimes occurred between 2017 and 2023 and included 22 victims — women patients age 17 to 56 — who went either to Brigham and Women's in Boston or Faulkner Hospital in Jamaica Plain for care.

The patients who went to see Todd, a rheumatologist, had complicated, serious conditions and extreme pain, Hayden said.

### Another city votes to only fly former state flag

**MN** MINNEAPOLIS — A majority of Elk River residents wanted the former Minnesota state flag to be the one displayed on city-owned properties, and on Monday the City Council obliged by passing a resolution making it so.

The unanimous vote on April 20 means the Minnesota state flag from 1983 to 2023 will be the representative flag of the state of Minnesota “now or in the future,” at buildings or properties in Elk River when a state flag is displayed.

The far northwestern metro city is the latest to bring back the previous flag that was retired as the state's official flag in May 2024. The new flag features a dark blue, state-shaped outline containing a white eight-

pointed North Star on the left with a solid light-blue field on the right, which is meant to represent water.

A State Emblem Redesign Commission adopted the new design. It replaced the old state flag, which featured the state seal on a blue field, which included imagery deemed offensive by many Native American tribes. In recent months, Champlin, Zumbrota, North Branch, Detroit Lakes, Pine Island, Crosslake, Babbitt and Wadena have voted to stop waving the new flag.

### Brothers plead guilty to paying mayor in scheme

**IL** CHICAGO — The stepsons of a deceased mob-connected businessman have pleaded guilty to participating in a red-light camera kickback scheme that funneled thousands in cash payments to the then-mayor of Oakbrook Terrace, Ill., in exchange for a lucrative cut of ticket proceeds.

James Colucci, 56, of Lisle, Ill., and Joseph Colucci, 51, of Mokena, Ill., each pleaded guilty in U.S. District Court last Friday to one count of conspiracy to defraud the United States, court records show.

The guilty pleas mark the latest — and perhaps the last — convictions stemming from a sweeping federal investigation into bribes and kickbacks involving red-light cameras installed by SafeSpeed LLC. They also scuttled a trial that would have featured the testimony of former Oakbrook Terrace Mayor Tony Ragucci, who admitted to starting the kickback scheme with the Colucci brothers' stepfather, Dennis Colucci, a onetime associate of notorious

Outfit hit man Harry Aleman.

Ragucci was expected to testify about accepting envelopes filled with cash from Dennis Colucci in his office and later from the brothers court records show.

Ragucci also met frequently with SafeSpeed co-founder Omar Maani, who began secretly cooperating with the FBI and recorded a July 2018 meeting where Ragucci asked for additional cash each time he re-upped the village's contract with the camera company, according to a prosecution filing.

### 'Spot 'em, scare 'em' used to shoo egrets, herons

**TX** FORT WORTH — Every few minutes, the quiet of a muggy spring evening in the Park Glen neighborhood in far north Fort Worth was broken by the clanging of pots, pans, air horns and other noisemakers as residents looked skyward at unwanted guests.

These residents have gathered every night for the past few weeks to scare away migratory egrets and herons that seem to like the suburbs. The birds, federally protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, have become yearly headaches for neighborhoods around the Metroplex as the birds flock to residential areas to nest.

In 2025, egrets descended on trees overlooking Park Glen resident Kelly Rybarczyk's yard. Her yard was covered in thick, smelly bird poop. Her dog had to be tested for bird flu after getting a respiratory infection.

Videos taken by Rybarczyk in 2025 and shared with the Star-Telegram show birds sitting in a tree and calling at each other,

with poop, feathers and dead birds lining the ground below. Roughly 400 egrets nested in north Fort Worth last year, according to the city.

Between roughly January and March, egrets will begin to appear as they stake out a nest for the season. Once the egrets nest, they become federally protected.

Before that, though, residents are allowed — and encouraged by the city of Fort Worth — to deter them from landing in the trees. That's where the pots and pans — and Rybarczyk's tool of choice, a reusable air horn — come into play. The goal, as a neighborhood group started by resident Rick Sharon calls it, is to “spot 'em and scare 'em.”

### Police to charge adults who encouraged fight

**NC** CHARLOTTE — Adults who encouraged the “delinquent behavior” that led to a mass shooting are going to be charged with a crime, North Carolina investigators say.

Winston-Salem Police Chief William H. Penn Jr. made the announcement Tuesday, one day after seven people were shot during a “planned fight” at a city park. Two of teens died, and five others have injuries ranging from minor to critical, police said.

Investigators have identified all the suspects involved, but have not released their identities.

“There are no other suspects being sought,” Penn said in a video posted Tuesday on Facebook. “In addition, there will be charges for the adults who stood by during this fight.”

— From wire reports

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# Thunder defeat Suns, taking 2-0 lead

*Associated Press*

OKLAHOMA CITY — Shai Gilgeous-Alexander had 37 points and nine assists, and the Oklahoma City Thunder defeated the Phoenix Suns 120-107 on Wednesday night to take a 2-0 lead in their first-round Western Conference playoff series.

Gilgeous-Alexander scored 25 points in the series-opening win on Sunday, going 5-for-18 from the field. He bounced back in Game 2 with 13-for-25 shooting after being presented the NBA Clutch Player of the Year trophy before the game.

Chet Holmgren and Jalen Williams each added 19 points for Oklahoma City, though Williams left the game in the third quarter with a left hamstring injury and did not return. He missed a contested layup, took a few steps, then clutched his leg.

Williams, an All-Star in 2024-25, missed 30 games this season with a right hamstring injury after missing the first 19 games of the season following surgery on his right wrist. He averaged 23.6 points, 5.0 rebounds and 3.7 assists in

last year's NBA Finals win over the Indiana Pacers. He was a third-team All-NBA selection and second-team All-Defense.

Thunder coach Mark Daigneault did not clarify Williams' status after the game.

Phoenix hosts Game 3 on Saturday.

"Any assumption about time missed is this hypothetical at this point, so I'm not going to comment on that," Daigneault said.

"I thought he was playing great, obviously," Daigneault said. "He was on the gas, he had great force, got really good shots, got some good shots for his teammates."

If Williams is unable to play or his time is limited, Ajay Mitchell likely would step in. Mitchell played sparingly during last year's title run, but the second-year guard from Belgium averaged 13.6 points and 3.6 assists this season.

Dillon Brooks led the Suns with 30 points before fouling out in the fourth quarter. Devin Booker scored 22 points and Jalen Green added 21 for Phoenix.

The Thunder led 65-57 at halftime.

Williams made his first six field goals and had 19 points at the break, while Gilgeous-Alexander had 17 points on 7-for-13 shooting.

The action picked up early in the second half as Brooks and Oklahoma City's Lu Dort — both members of Canada's national team — got double technical fouls after a brief skirmish following a made free throw.

Holmgren started the second half hot.

He scored eight points in just over four minutes to help the Thunder go up 77-63 and force a Phoenix timeout. Oklahoma City extended the lead to 100-77 at the end of the third quarter.

Oklahoma City pushed the lead to 26 points early in the fourth quarter before Phoenix made a final push.

Booker made a pull-up jumper and was fouled. He missed the free throw, but he rebounded and made a mid-range jumper to cut Oklahoma City's lead to 110-97 with five minutes to play. The Suns got no closer than 10 points.

Five higher-seeded teams had lost home games in the first week of the playoffs before Wednesday.

## Pistons bully Magic, ending long home playoff losing streak

*Associated Press*

DETROIT — Ben Wallace and Rick Mahorn, like proud uncles, watched the Detroit Pistons pound the Orlando Magic in the paint and meet them at the rim in a 98-83 win that tied their first-round series at a game apiece.

"I'm sure they appreciated it," Pistons power forward Isaiah Stewart said.

Wallace, a four-time NBA Defensive Player of the Year, and Mahorn, an enforcer for the Bad Boys, helped the Pistons win a lot of games that looked like Wednesday night's slugfest.

Stewart had two blocks, including one that denied Paolo Banchero a dunk.

"I'm willing to lay my body on the line to make those plays for the energy," Stewart said.

Top-seeded Detroit held eighth-seeded Orlando to 33% shooting and season lows in points and field goals. The Pistons forced 19 turnovers and blocked 11 shots.

"When we play defense at the level we're capable of, it triggers everything for us,"

Pistons coach J.B. Bickerstaff said.

"We can be an elite defensive team, a disruptive defense. It's Pistons basketball. That's what it looks like.

"We had one off night and it came at a bad time."

In Game 1, the Pistons had a sluggish start in each half and allowed the Magic to make almost half their shots. All five Orlando starters scored at least 16 points in a 112-101 win.

The Pistons were the aggressors in Game 2, blocking seven shots in the opening 12 minutes to tie a franchise playoff record for blocks in a quarter.

In the third, they went on a 30-3 run and outscored the Magic 38-16.

Detroit coasted in the fourth quarter, winning a playoff game for the first time at Little Caesars Arena. The Pistons ended an NBA-record, 11-game home losing streak in the playoffs that dates to 2008, when the franchise played at The Palace of Auburn Hills.

"Obviously, we've heard it," Tobias Har-

ris said after scoring 16 points, blocking two shots and making two steals.

The Magic, a little reluctantly, gave the Pistons some credit for their defense.

"They did a heck of a job of reaching, grabbing and holding," Orlando coach Jamahl Mosley said.

"They protected that paint and our ability to get downhill."

Jalen Suggs scored 19 and Banchero had 18 for the Magic. They combined to make just 14 of 35 shots.

"They met us at the rim a few times, and they brought the intensity on defense," Banchero said.

"But we got good looks, and nobody really had a great night shooting the ball."

Cade Cunningham had 27 points, 11 assists and six rebounds to lead the Pistons.

Jalen Duren and Ausar Thompson had 11 each, and Duncan Robertson and Stewart each scored 10.

Robinson made three much-needed 3-pointers for a team that struggles with outside shooting.

# Vladar fights off injury in Flyers' win

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Dan Vladar skated away behind the net, hunched over as he gripped his right arm in pain after the Penguins crashed into him in the crease.

For a few frightful moments, nothing else mattered for the Flyers.

Not the 2-0 first-round series lead. Not the 3-1 Game 3 lead in the third period in front of 19,937 full-throated and orange-coated Philadelphia fans.

Because without Vladar, voted the Bobby Clarke team MVP and journeyman turned Olympian, the Flyers would be in a world of hurt.

They still could be in trouble yet this NHL playoffs.

Buoyed by cheers of "Vladdy! Vladdy!" he shook off his injury Wednesday night much in the same way Vladar has turned away Pittsburgh with relative ease through the first three game of this Eastern Conference series.

Vladar can get a few extra days off to rest whatever ails him

if Philadelphia builds off its 5-2 win in Game 3 and completes the sweep Saturday. He did not talk to the media after the game because he was receiving treatment.

"He's been our best player all year," defenseman Nick Seeler said. "And he was great tonight."

Vladar followed his first shutout of the season (with 27 saves) in Game 2 with another stellar outing and 28 saves in Game 3.

Yet the potential of injury looms ahead of a possible sweep.

Vladar didn't use his right arm in the celebration line — and the Flyers had plenty to celebrate in their first home playoff win since 2016 — leaving his Game 4 status in doubt.

"He's banged up," Philadelphia coach Rick Tocchet said. "We'll see how he is tomorrow. I don't know at this moment how bad it is."

That could be a glimmer of good news for the Penguins. A two-time NHL MVP and three-time Stanley Cup champion, Sidney Crosby has yet to score a goal in the series.

The Flyers could turn to backup Samuel Ersson, who had a solid finish to an otherwise injury-plagued and inconsistent season. They have the luxury of a 3-0 lead and two full days off before they have to make a decision on playing Vladar, who won 29 games with a 2.42 goals-against-average this season.

Vladar was one of three goalies chosen to play for Czechia at the Milan Cortina Olympics.

In his first season with Philadelphia, he settled one of the more unsettled positions for the franchise since Hall of Famer Bernie Parent backstopped consecutive Stanley Cup championships in 1974 and 1975.

Stuart Skinner, who played a crucial role in consecutive Stanley Cup Final appearances with Edmonton, has been the anti-Vladar with a 3.08 goals-against average and a .873 save percentage through three games.

Could Pittsburgh turn to Arturs Silovs in Game 4?

Probably not. Yet Skinner — who heard derisive "Skinner! Skinner!" chants that echoed

long after Rasmus Ristolainen made it 2-1 — said he believed the Penguins could still rally to win the series.

Skinner was on the Oilers team down 3-0 that forced a Game 7 in 2024 against Stanley Cup champion Florida.

"I feel like when you go down 3-0, what really helped me in my experience was it kind of just frees you up," Skinner said. "You don't really have anything to lose. And we're in a spot where we don't have anything to lose, and they do. If we catch them a couple times, just talking about momentum, you can change momentum and when that happens, things can go in your favor."

Should the Flyers play without Vladar, that could be the break Pittsburgh needs to get back into the series.

Trevor Zegras, Ristolainen and Nick Seeler scored three goals against Skinner on four shots in the second period — proof Philadelphia has the offensive arsenal to win without Vladar, if needed.

## Stars win Game 3 over Wild on Johnston's 2OT deflection

Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. — Wyatt Johnston scored on a power-play deflection at 12:10 of the second overtime to give the Dallas Stars a 4-3 victory over the Minnesota Wild early Thursday for a 2-1 lead in the first-round series.

Matt Duchene tied it for Dallas on a power play midway through the third period, seconds after his backcheck on Matt Boldy averted a short-handed goal that would've put Minnesota up by two.

After the Wild failed to convert two overtime power plays, finishing 1 for 7 with the man advantage, the Stars took advantage of their opportunity after Danila Yurov's delay-of-

game penalty. Miro Heiskanen's shot was knocked in by Johnston for his third goal in three games — and his sixth winning goal in four career postseasons.

"It's kind of a little blurry, but just trying to get to the net and just trying to get my stick on the puck," said Johnston, who had a career-high 45 goals during the regular season.

Minnesota goalie Jesper Wallstedt polished off the first Dallas power play by snapping his glove around Mikko Rantanen's shot and smothering Esa Lindell's bad-angle attempt. Johnston then spoiled a brilliant 32-save performance by Wallstedt with his deflection.

"We definitely played well

enough to win," Wallstedt said. "It's small margins. It's a 'D' shot that double tips and hits twice and goes over my shoulder. Yeah, it's bounces, but that's what it is."

**Ducks 6, Oilers 4:** Cutter Gauthier broke a tie off a rebound with 4:52 left and visiting Anaheim beat Edmonton in Game 2 to even the first-round series, with Oilers star Connor McDavid slowed by an apparent leg injury.

McDavid appeared to catch an edge early in the second period after getting tangled up with teammate Mattias Ekholm and the Ducks' Ian Moore. McDavid briefly left the game before returning, playing just over 24 minutes.

Game 3 is Friday night in Anaheim. Edmonton opened the series Monday night with a 4-3 victory.

Gauthier put the Ducks back in front after Josh Samanski — making his playoff debut — tied it at 4 with 6:09 to go. Ryan Poehling put it away with an empty-netter with 1:10 left, his second goal of the game. He scored short-handed in the second.

Gauthier also scored on a first-period power play and set up Alex Killorn's second-period goal on a man advantage. Killorn added two assists.

Jacob Trouba added a goal, fellow defenseman Jackson LaCombe had three assists and Lukas Dostal stopped 33 shots.

# Astros' Alvarez hits MLB-leading 11th HR

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Yordan Alvarez hit his major league-leading 11th home run and Peter Lambert pitched six scoreless innings, leading the Houston Astros to a 2-0 victory over the Cleveland Guardians on Wednesday.

Alvarez's two-run shot in the first inning off Tanner Bibee (0-3) helped the Astros win two of three in the series. Before coming to Cleveland, Houston started 1-9 on the road and dropped eight straight away games.

Lambert (1-1) held the Guardians to three hits in just his second start of 2026. The right-hander began the season at Triple-A Sugar Land before being brought up when the Astros endured a slew of injuries to their starting staff.

Lambert worked out of a two-on jam in the fourth by striking out Cleveland star José Ramírez and Kyle Manzardo. He fanned eight.

Four Houston relievers completed the combined five-hitter, with Enyel De Los Santos getting the final four outs for his third save.

Alvarez has been among baseball's hottest hitters. He went 3 for 4, extended his hitting streak to nine games and his on-base streak to 18 and homered for the fourth time in six games.

**Cubs 7, Phillies 2:** Michael Busch and Seiya Suzuki homered to help host Chicago beat slumping Philadelphia for its eighth consecutive win.

Pete Crow-Armstrong had three hits and two RBIs for the Cubs, and Alex Bregman also collected three hits. Matthew Boyd made a successful return from a biceps injury, pitching 4 $\frac{2}{3}$  innings of two-run ball in his first big league start since April 1.

Chicago has outscored its opponents 58-20 during the franchise's longest win streak since it also won eight in a row from

July 21-29, 2023. It's the longest such streak for the club within the month of April since an 11-game run in 1970.

The Phillies dropped their eighth straight game in their longest skid since they lost nine in a row in September 2018. They played without J.T. Realmuto after the catcher was placed on the 10-day injured list because of back spasms.

**Braves 8, Nationals 6:** Michael Harris II homered twice, Drake Baldwin and Matt Olson also went deep, and visiting Atlanta rallied from a three-run deficit to beat Washington for its seventh win in eight games.

Harris had his seventh multi-homer game and third against the Nationals. He started the comeback from a 4-1 deficit with a two-run homer off Zack Littell (0-3) in a three-run second that included Ronald Acuña Jr.'s tying sacrifice fly. Harris then homered for a 5-4 lead in the third.

Washington closed on homers by Joey Wiemer and James Wood in the sixth off Martín Pérez, who had been slated to start Thursday. Wood leads the NL with nine homers, and Wiemer had the first pinch-hit home run of his big league career.

Dylan Lee (1-0) pitched a perfect seventh and Robert Suarez worked around a leadoff single in an eight-pitch ninth for his second save.

**Pirates 8, Rangers 4:** Oneil Cruz had the hardest-hit homer in the majors this season, a three-run shot off the top of the right-field foul pole in the ninth inning that powered visiting Pittsburgh over Texas.

The Pirates took a 5-4 lead in the ninth when Nick Gonzales broke for the plate on pinch-hitter Jake Mangum's one-out chopper to third base off Cole Winn (1-1). Josh Jung's throw home pulled catcher Kyle Higashioka into foul territory, and Higashioka could not make the tag.

Cruz followed with his 116.9

mph liner that bounced off the top of the foul pole and into the stands. It was the second hardest-hit ball in the history of Globe Life Field, which opened in 2020.

**Tigers 5, Brewers 2:** Casey Mize struck out seven and allowed one run in six innings, Spencer Torkelson hit his first homer of the season and host Detroit defeated Milwaukee.

Mize (2-1) extended his strong start to the season, allowing just three hits. The 28-year-old right-hander who was the first pick in the 2018 MLB draft has a 2.51 ERA in five starts this season.

Kenley Jansen worked out of a bases-loaded jam for his sixth save of the year as the Tigers snapped a two-game skid.

**Yankees 4, Red Sox 1:** Max Fried allowed three hits over eight scoreless innings, and visiting New York extended its winning streak to a season-high five with a win over Boston.

Amed Rosario hit a three-run, first-inning homer and had four RBIs for the Yankees.

Fried (3-1) struck out nine and walked two, and New York came within one out of a third straight shutout victory for the first time since 1962.

**Rays 6, Reds 1:** Nick Martinez dominated his former team for eight innings, helping visiting Tampa Bay avoid a series sweep with a win over Cincinnati.

Martinez (1-1), who signed a one-year, \$13 million deal with the Rays this offseason, allowed one run while striking out five a day after the Reds battered Tampa Bay for 12 runs.

The win snapped a three-game losing streak for the Rays. Cincinnati suffered its first loss in its last six games.

**Mets 3, Twins 2:** Mark Vientos blooped a tiebreaking single in the eighth inning and host New York snapped its 12-game losing streak, beating Minnesota after getting one superstar back only to see another exit

with a similar injury.

Juan Soto went 1 for 3 with a single and a walk in his return from a strained right calf, but shortstop Francisco Lindor was removed with left calf tightness after laboring around the bases while scoring from first on Francisco Alvarez's go-ahead double in the fourth.

**Angels 7, Blue Jays 3:** Mike Trout homered, Nolan Schanuel homered and hit a three-run double and José Soriano worked five shutout innings as host Los Angeles beat Toronto to avoid a series sweep.

Trout's eighth homer of the season was a 428-foot solo shot in the bottom of the fifth. That hit tied the 34-year-old Trout with the late Garret Anderson for the Angels' franchise record of 796 extra-base hits. Anderson died last week of an acute necrotizing pancreatitis at the age of 53.

**Marlins 4, Cardinals 1:** Janson Junk and five relievers combined on a three-hitter to lead host Miami past St. Louis.

Agustín Ramírez singled twice and drove in a run, and Javier Sanoja had three hits for the Marlins.

**Orioles 8, Royals 6:** Coby Mayo hit his second three-run homer in as many days during a six-run sixth inning, and visiting Baltimore beat Kansas City to take two of three.

The two homers by Mayo at Kauffman Stadium were his first of the season, and he more than doubled his RBI total to 10. Both were well over the wall in left field, with the latest a 452-foot shot into the bleachers above the fountains.

**Mariners 5, Athletics 4:** Josh Naylor hit a game-ending single, Cal Raleigh homered for the third time in as many games and host Seattle beat the Athletics to avoid a three-game sweep.

The A's seven-game road winning streak was snapped, while the Mariners won for just the third time in nine games.