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Leaner RIMPAC focuses on warfighting

BY WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii — The Rim of the Pacific maritime exercise that began Monday in Hawaii has been dramatically downsized during the coronavirus pandemic, but as a result it will be laser focused on warfighting.

“This year we will focus solely on warfighting in the maritime domain, to include anti-surface warfare, anti-submarine warfare and maritime interdiction operations, as well as some robust live-fire events,” said Vice Adm. Scott Conn, commander of U.S. Navy 3rd Fleet, in a video message released Monday in lieu of the pierside news conference normally held on opening day of the biennial exercise.

Previous exercises devoted sizeable portions to disaster relief and medical treatment and evacuation.

Navy ships and personnel from nine nations are joining the United States for the two-week exercise, which will be held entirely at sea in waters near the Hawaiian Islands. Participants include Australia, Brunei, Canada, France, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand, the Philippines and Singapore.

Twenty-two ships and about 5,300 personnel are involved in the exercise, which will be held entirely at sea due to concerns about the spread of the virus.

That is a substantial decrease from the 26 nations, 47 surface ships and five submarines that joined the drills two years ago.

With seven surface ships and one submarine joining the exercise, the U.S. has

‘RIMPAC represents a unique opportunity to strengthen relationships and build trust.’

Vice Adm. Scott Conn

commander of U.S. Navy 3rd Fleet

the most vessels attending. Among them are the USS Lake Erie, a guided-missile cruiser; the USS Dewey, a guided-missile destroyer; the USS Chung Hoon, an Aegis combat system-equipped destroyer; and the USS Essex, an amphibious assault ship.

Australia deployed four ships to the drills, including the destroyer HMAS Hobart, while neighboring New Zealand sent the HMNZS Manawanui, an offshore support vessel.

Japan and South Korea both have a pair of destroyers participating.

Notably absent from participation are any countries to the south of the U.S. Chile, Colombia, Mexico and Peru, all of which attended RIMPAC in 2018, are not participating. After joining the drills for the first time two years ago to great fanfare, Vietnam is also a no-show.

Conn spent the first half of his six-minute statement explaining the measures taken to combat the spread of the virus.

“I want to say up front that everything we are doing for RIMPAC had been carefully and deliberately planned to ensure everyone’s safety,” Conn said. “This con-

struct was developed to ensure the safety of the citizens of Hawaii and all the sailors embarked on the ships participating this year.”

Hawaii has experienced an upsurge in new daily coronavirus cases since mid-July, which has led state and local governments to partially reinstate bans on public gatherings. The state has had 5,215 confirmed cases of the virus and 40 deaths as of Monday, according to the Hawaii Department of Health.

Some Hawaiians had earlier this year urged Gov. David Ige to request the Navy cancel the exercise, which normally brings thousands of visitors and millions of extra dollars to Oahu’s hotels, restaurants and bars.

Conn briefly explained why the Navy went ahead with a shorter, smaller exercise.

“RIMPAC represents a unique opportunity to strengthen relationships and build trust,” Conn said. The time to forge key relationships and the capability of working together is not in the time of crisis, whether those are manmade or natural disasters, he said.

“We want to have those personal relationships and trust already well established,” he said. “That is why we made the calculated decision to proceed with RIMPAC 2020 — to demonstrate to ourselves and the world that our navies and our nations have the resolve to come together in times of crisis.”

Before the pandemic hit this spring, the Navy had expected 30 countries, 50 ships and submarines and 200 aircraft to participate in RIMPAC 2020.

Report says Iran paid Taliban to target US troops

Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — Iran paid Taliban fighters to target American and coalition troops in Afghanistan, CNN reported this week, citing U.S. intelligence officials.

Funding from a foreign government was linked to six attacks in Afghanistan last year, including a suicide bombing at Bagram Airfield in December, which killed

two civilians and injured more than 70, including four U.S. personnel, CNN wrote Monday on its website.

The network cited a Pentagon document that it said its journalists had reviewed.

“The name of the foreign government that made these payments remains classified but two sources familiar with the intelligence confirmed to CNN that it refers to

Iran,” it said.

The accusations follow similar claims made in June that Russia offered payments to Taliban militants in Afghanistan if they killed U.S. and other coalition troops.

Moscow has denied the claims.

The Pentagon declined to confirm or deny the CNN report about Iran, Agence France-Press reported.

Dems rally behind Biden at convention

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Michelle Obama delivered a passionate condemnation of President Donald Trump during the opening night of the Democratic National Convention, declaring him to be “in over his head” and warning that the nation’s mounting crises would only get worse if he’s reelected over Joe Biden.

“Donald Trump is the wrong president for our country,” she said. “He cannot meet this moment. He simply cannot be who we need him to be for us.”

The former first lady, one of the nation’s most respected women, was the headliner at the first presidential nominating convention of the coronavirus era. There was no central meeting place or cheering throng during the all-virtual affair Monday night. But it was an opportunity for Democrats — and some Republicans — to rally behind Biden, the party’s presidential nominee.

Bernie Sanders, the progressive Vermont senator who was Biden’s last standing rival during the primary, encouraged his loyal supporters to vote for the former vice president in November, arguing the nation can’t survive another four years of Trump. He notably backed Biden’s plan for tackling health care, one of their most substantive differences in the past. Sanders backs a Medicare for All plan while Biden has called for expanding the current “Obamacare” law.

But it was Michelle Obama, making her fourth convention appearance, who once again delivered an electrifying moment. Wearing a necklace that said “vote,” she tapped into her enduring popularity

among Black voters and college educated suburban women — voters Biden will need to show up in force.

She issued a stark warning to a country already navigating health and economic crises along with a reckoning on racism.

“If you think things possibly can’t get worse, trust me, they can and they will if we don’t make a change in this election,” she said as she issued a call to action for the coalition of young and diverse voters who twice sent her family to the White House.

Biden will formally accept the nomination Thursday near his home in Wilmington, Del. His running mate, California Sen. Kamala Harris, who is the first Black woman on a national ticket, will speak Wednesday night.

Leading up to that, Biden sought on opening night to demonstrate the broad ideological range of his supporters.

On the same night he was praised by Sanders, a self-described democratic socialist who championed a multitrillion-dollar universal health care plan, Biden also won backing from Ohio’s former Republican Gov. John Kasich, an anti-abortion conservative who spent decades fighting to cut government spending.

“My friends, I say to you, and to everyone who supported other candidates in this primary and to those who may have voted for Donald Trump in the last election: The future of our democracy is at stake. The future of our economy is at stake. The future of our planet is at stake,” Sanders said as he endorsed Biden’s health care plan.

Still, there were real questions about whether the prime-time event would ad-

equately energize the disparate factions Biden hopes to capture.

Republicans face a similar challenge next week.

Trump sought to undermine the Democrats’ big night by hosting a political rally in Wisconsin, where Biden’s party had originally planned this week’s convention. He called the Democrats’ event “a snooze” before it even began.

Monday’s speeches were framed by emotional appearances from average Americans touched by the crises that have exploded on Trump’s watch.

Philonise and Rodney Floyd led a moment of silence in honor of their brother, George Floyd, the Minnesota man whose death while in police custody sparked a national moment of awakening on racial injustice.

“George should be alive today,” Philonise Floyd said matter-of-factly.

Also speaking was Kristin Urquiza, an Arizona woman who lost her father to COVID-19, which has killed more than 170,000 people in the United States.

“My dad was a healthy 65-year-old,” she said. “His only preexisting condition was trusting Donald Trump, and for that, he paid with his life.”

The Monday speakers included plenty of Democratic politicians: Rep. Jim Clyburn of South Carolina, who is the highest ranking African American in Congress, New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer, Alabama Sen. Doug Jones, Nevada Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto and two former presidential contenders — Minnesota Sen. Amy Klobuchar and Sanders.

Trump brings law-and-order message to Midwest

Associated Press

MANKATO, Minn. — Declaring it’s “crunch time” for the upcoming election, President Donald Trump zeroed in on Midwest battleground states Monday with a law-and-order message to counter former Vice President Joe Biden’s show at the Democratic National Convention.

In Mankato, Minn., Trump stepped up his rhetoric against Biden, calling him a “puppet of left-wing extremists trying to erase our borders, eliminate

our police, indoctrinate our children, vilify our heroes, take away our energy.” Speaking to a crowd of several hundred supporters outside an aircraft hangar, Trump alleged that a Biden victory would “replace American freedom with left-wing fascism.”

“Fascists. They are fascists,” Trump continued, though fascism is a form of far-right nationalism. “Some of them, not all of them, but some of them. But they’re getting closer and closer. We have to win this

election. But the proud people of Minnesota will not let this happen.”

Trump on Monday also visited Wisconsin — the official host state of the entirely virtual Democratic National Convention — to launch a week of travel and political events aiming to blunt the customary polling “bounce” that a candidate gets during their convention week. The president trails in both public and private surveys less than three months before Election Day.

Earlier in the day, Trump stopped in Minneapolis to hold an event with small business owners whose stores were damaged from violent protests after the killing of George Floyd in police custody.

“I’m here to help you. We will bring back law and order to your community. We will bring it back, and we will bring it back immediately,” Trump told supporters on the airport tarmac. He did not venture to the scene of the protests or the memorial to Floyd in the city.

Chinese warship drills in South China Sea a day after USS Reagan held exercises

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — China reportedly held live-fire drills in the South China Sea a day after the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan conducted air defense exercises there over the weekend, according to published reports and the Navy.

China released a video of its corvette Huizhou, based in Hong Kong, firing deck guns and torpedoes on Sunday, according to the South China Morning Post. The training “focused on more than 10 subjects,” including main-gun firing, light weapons and helicopter landing, the Chinese military said on its website Monday.

The Ronald Reagan and its strike group steamed into the South China Sea on Friday for a round of flight operations, according to a Navy press release Monday. The carrier returned to the Philippine Sea the next day, according to Navy photographs available online.

The Reagan, on patrol since leaving Yokosuka Naval Base in June, had been in the Philippine Sea since late July, accord-

ing to a USNI report Monday.

The carrier ventured into the South China Sea twice in July for dual-carrier operations with the carrier USS Nimitz. That was the first time in eight years that two U.S. aircraft carriers had worked together in the South China Sea.

The U.S. disputes Chinese claims of sovereignty over the 1.4 million square miles of the South China Sea. The Navy and Air Force have stepped up their operations in the area this year in order, they said, to keep skies and sea lanes open.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on July 13 for the first time laid out the official U.S. stance rejecting China’s claims in the South China Sea.

Several other nations surrounding the sea also dispute China’s claims to dozens of islands and reefs within it, including the Philippines and Vietnam.

In a statement Friday, the Navy said its “operations in the South China Sea continue to demonstrate enduring U.S. commitment to allies and partners, and a cooperative approach to regional stability and freedom of the seas.”

Marines fix Okinawa quarantine food fail

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — Marines take their chow seriously, particularly while dining in quarantine when the menu may be the highlight of the day.

So, higher-ups acted quickly Monday when Marines of 1st Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment, at Camp Schwab, Okinawa, mistakenly received moldy sandwiches and prepackaged meals slated for disposal, according to a spokesman for Marine Corps Installations Pacific. The battalion Marines “identified unacceptable quality issues with prepackaged meals,” according to an email Tuesday from Marine spokesman Maj. Ken Kunze. The Marines recently arrived on the island and are in a mandatory 14-day quarantine. In addition to being moldy, the meals lacked protein, he wrote.

“These reports were taken very seriously and acted upon immediately by leadership at the battalion, 3rd Marine Division and Marine Corps Installations Pacific,” Kunze wrote.

According to its website, the

battalion, a rotational unit from the 2nd Marine Division at Camp Lejeune, N.C., is led by Lt. Col. Gabriel L. Diana, with Sgt. Maj. Michael Youngblood the senior enlisted Marine.

The meals were mistakenly served to the battalion, Kunze said. “This is not typical of the exceptional service that has been provided to Marines and families” in quarantine, he said.

Word of the subpar dining experience found its way onto Facebook, where some readers offered donations. Marine leadership “at all levels” was alerted, Kunze wrote.

They found meals for the battalion at another base starting Monday night, Kunze said in his email. The USO and Marine Corps Community Services are also providing additional snacks and meals, he wrote.

The food service officer-in-charge inspected all the remaining meals and “initiated training to increase the portions of protein in each sandwich,” Kunze wrote.

“Taking care of our own is fundamental to leadership in the Marine Corps,” he said.

US paid \$2M over 5 years to Afghans for civilian deaths

The Washington Post

The U.S. military has made about \$2 million in condolence payments to civilians in Afghanistan over the past five years, according to Pentagon data that sheds new light on how officials have sought to address the impact of unintended injury and death in America’s longest war.

The catalogue of “ex gratia payments,” which has not been made public previously, shows that the amount of condolence offerings has fluctuated in recent years, peaking in 2016 with nearly 300 payments totaling \$1.4 million. Individual

sums have varied dramatically, ranging from \$131 to \$40,000.

The tally obtained by The Washington Post, which also includes “battle damage” outlays and payments to families of local partner forces killed in the line of duty, provides a rare glimpse into the military’s uneven, typically opaque handling of the civilian toll of battlefield operations.

But activists said the military must do far more to mitigate civilian harm, calling on the Pentagon to standardize and increase amends payments under a more transparent system, even as the United States seeks to wind down nearly two

decades of counterinsurgent wars.

In recent years, operations have been conducted largely from the air, meaning that troops have little up-close interaction with adversaries — and the noncombatants who are sometimes caught in the crossfire.

Daniel Mahanty, director of the U.S. program for the Center for Civilians in Conflict (CIVIC), said the Pentagon has become more responsive but that “the process has been stymied by a lack of transparency or consistency and internal doubts about the value of the program.”

Those factors have made it “impossible to know where the military stands on providing condolence payments to survivors and victims, and making it nearly impossible to know how to pursue a claim,” Mahanty said.

The new data, which details payments from 2015 to 2018, comes as the Trump administration seeks to conclude the long campaign in Afghanistan with plans to withdraw additional troops ahead of hoped-for peace talks and reduce involvement in other areas that have dominated Pentagon officials’ attention since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks.

FDA warns of accuracy issue with virus test

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Potential accuracy issues with a widely used coronavirus test could lead to false results for patients, U.S. health officials warned.

The Food and Drug Administration issued the alert Monday to doctors and laboratory technicians using Thermo Fisher's TaqPath genetic test. Regulators said that issues related to laboratory equipment and software used to run the test could lead to inaccuracies. The agency advised technicians to follow updated instructions and software developed by the company to ensure accurate results.

The warning comes nearly a month after Connecticut public health officials first reported that at least 90 people had received false positive results for the coronavirus. Most of those receiving the false results were residents of nursing homes or assisted living facilities.

A spokeswoman for Thermo Fisher said the company was working with the FDA "to make sure that laboratory personnel understand the need for strict adherence to the instructions for use." She added that company data shows most users "follow our workflow properly and obtain accurate results."

Hawaii

HONOLULU — Many public school students across Hawaii started the new academic year remotely as coronavirus cases are surging on Oahu, where Honolulu is located.

The statewide teachers union led an effort to delay the first day for students by two weeks. At the union's urging, the Hawaii Department of Education later announced that most schools would start the first four weeks online.

The union is still concerned there are students on campuses this week.

Education officials said some students will be on campuses for things such as picking up learning materials and learning how to use technology for remote instruction.

Kansas

TOPEKA — Gov. Laura Kelly on Monday imposed a new ban on evictions and foreclosures on home mortgages in Kansas because one federal program to aid unemployed workers has expired, and she isn't sure that the state will participate in an alternative offered by President Donald Trump.

Kelly's order prevents landlords and lenders from initiating efforts to remove people from their apartments or homes if they can't pay their rent or make mortgage payments because of financial problems resulting from the coronavirus pandemic. Kelly's executive order took effect Monday and will remain until Sept. 15.

The governor said she might extend the order longer if Congress does not approve another coronavirus relief package. She also said she recognizes that her new order will burden landlords and home lenders, and her administration has started to look for ways to provide relief to them.

Louisiana

NEW ORLEANS — A federal judge in New Orleans refused Monday to block a state order closing bars to stop the spread of COVID-19, handing a defeat to 10 southeast Louisiana bar owners who had sued to stop the closure.

U.S. District Judge Martin Feldman said the closure order was legal under the broad powers a governor has under public health emergencies such as the current pandemic.

Feldman, a judge in the federal court system's Eastern District of Louisiana, ruled even as a hearing in a similar suit played out in the Western District. Democratic Gov. John Bel Edwards, who issued the order last month, was testifying in that lawsuit Monday afternoon, according to a Twitter post by an Edwards spokeswoman. The hearing was before U.S. District Judge Robert Summerhays in Lafayette, where 11 bar owners were fighting the closure order.

Maine

MILLINOCKET — Two dozen Maine residents tested positive for the coronavirus after a wedding reception in Millinocket — the state's first outbreak linked to a social gathering, officials said Monday.

Eighteen people who attended the Aug. 7 reception and six others who had close contact with attendees subsequently tested positive, according to the Maine Center for Disease Control.

All told, approximately 65 people attended the indoor event at the Big Moose Inn, said Maine CDC spokesman Robert Long.

The governor's executive orders put in place during the global pandemic limit indoor gatherings to 50 people if there's adequate space, while 100 people are allowed at outdoor events. Attendees should also follow physical distancing guidelines and wear masks while not eating.

North Carolina

North Carolina's flagship university canceled in-person classes for undergraduates just a week into the fall semester Monday as college campuses around the United States scramble to deal with coronavirus clusters linked in some cases to student housing, off-campus parties and packed bars.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill said it will switch to remote learning Wednesday and make arrangements for students who want to leave campus housing.

"We have emphasized that if we were faced with the need to change plans — take an off-ramp — we would not hesitate to do so, but we have not taken this decision lightly," it said in a statement after reporting 130 confirmed infections among students and an additional five among employees over the past week.

UNC said the clusters were discovered in dorms, a fraternity house and other student housing.

Nevada

LAS VEGAS — A Walmart in Mesquite and high-end retailer Nieman Marcus on the Las Vegas Strip were among 11 businesses statewide fined by inspectors for failure to comply with coronavirus pandemic mitigation measures including mask-wearing and social distancing, officials said Monday.

A tire shop in Fernley was the only northern Nevada business that made the list following about 700 initial workplace visits statewide, a Nevada Occupational Safety and Health statement said.

A Las Vegas pizza restaurant was fined about \$6,000 and a Boulder City bar was ordered to pay more than \$4,800, OSHA said. Other fines ranged from less than \$3,000 for a tire store in Las Vegas to more than \$12,600 for Walmart. Nieman Marcus was fined \$8,501.

New York

ALBANY — Indoor gyms in New York can reopen as soon as next week, Gov. Andrew Cuomo said Monday, if they meet public health requirements including inspections, mandatory mask wearing, a 33% occupancy limit and 6 feet between gym-goers.

All gyms that meet the state's health and safety standards can open by Aug. 24 or as late as Sept. 2 if local officials say they need more time for local inspections. County governments and the mayor of New York City can also decide to delay the start of indoor fitness classes beyond Sept. 2, Cuomo said.

The governor's announcement came just over five months after the state shuttered gyms and other businesses statewide in hopes of reducing the spread of the coronavirus.

Gym and fitness studio owners have been clamoring for their businesses to reopen as Cuomo has lifted restrictions on certain industries since mid-May. The Cuomo administration allowed bowling alleys to open with restrictions starting Monday, while dining is allowed outside New York City.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

School administrator dies after hornet attack

WI NEENAH — An administrator for the Neenah Joint School District has died from complications after being stung multiple times by a swarm of hornets earlier this month, according to district officials.

Andrew Thorson, 38, died Saturday after he was stung at his home Aug. 2, the school district said. Thorson was the district's deputy administrator for business services, a husband and a father of four daughters ranging in age from 2 to 11.

According to district officials, Thorson helped create a new financial management system, and produced a balanced budget each year of his tenure.

He also helped design the new Neenah High School, and was described by the district as a visionary behind the creation of the district's \$114.9 million referendum, which he helped pass in April, WBAY-TV reported.

Fugitive who fled via court bathroom caught

VT LYNDON — A fugitive who escaped from a Vermont courthouse through a bathroom window was caught by police a day later in a grocery store parking lot.

Travis Johnson, 33, was in police custody at the courthouse in St. Johnsbury for sentencing Friday when a Lyndonville police officer removed his handcuffs and allowed him to use the first-floor bathroom without supervision, the *Caledonian Record* reported. Johnson climbed out of the bathroom window and fled.

On Saturday, Lyndonville Police Chief Jack Harris, who was in his personal vehicle, spotted

Johnson in a car that was leaving the White Market Plaza Store in Lyndon, police said. Harris blocked the vehicle with his own and then took Johnson into custody at gunpoint, police said.

4 endangered zebras born at wildlife refuge

FL YULEE — Four endangered Grevy's zebra foals were recently born at a wildlife refuge in northeast Florida.

The zebras — three males and one female — were born in June and July, officials at White Oak Conservation said in a news release. They are being raised by their mothers. Neither the foals nor their mothers have names.

The foals likely won't be released into the wild since they are part of an "assurance program," which makes sure a genetically diverse and sustainable population of Grevy's zebras survive in case the species becomes extinct, said Brandon Speeg, the facility's director of conservation.

Official resigns after goat deal uncovered

AZ PHOENIX — An Arizona city official making \$107,000 a year resigned after an investigation found he used city workers for an outside job involving an attempt to secure irrigation water for farmers who paid him with a goat.

The investigation found that the possibility of cash down the road also was discussed by Frank Stevens, the now-former water resource portfolio manager for the city of Surprise, *The Arizona Republic* reported.

According to a report obtained by the newspaper through a public records re-

quest, a private investigator hired by Surprise found that Stevens had city workers prepare some of the organic farmers' eight acres of leased land for use as a demonstration site for a drip irrigation system that Stevens tried to get a company to provide as part of a proposed partnership with him.

The farmers hired Stevens as a consultant to help them get irrigation water from a property association, paying him with a goat for his work and agreeing to provide additional compensation if he was successful, according to the investigation.

Man helped change tire and then robbed driver

MO ST. LOUIS — After a man helped change a tire, police said he stole the stranded driver's money and cellphone at gunpoint.

A 28-year-old man and 27-year-old woman said a man who stopped to help them in St. Louis changed their tire.

Then the man asked to be paid for helping. When the driver pulled out his wallet, police said the other man pulled out a gun and took the victim's cash and cellphone.

No one was injured. No other details were released Sunday.

Endangered trout are thriving in remote lake

NV RENO — A half-century after being added to the endangered species list, Lahontan cutthroat trout are thriving with help from a Native American tribe at a remote lake in northern Nevada.

For nearly a decade, members of the Summit Lake Paiute Tribe and scientists at the Global Water Center at the University of Nevada, Reno have studied the robust Lahontan cutthroat trout population at

Summit Lake, a small high-desert lake into which water flows in but not out.

The lake ecosystem has little human impact and could be a model for recovery efforts in other lakes "that are less fortunate and that have lost their trout like the Walker and Tahoe," university researcher Sudeep Chandra told the *Reno Gazette Journal*.

The Lahontan cutthroat is Nevada's state fish and North America's largest freshwater native trout species. It was listed as endangered in 1970 and upgraded to threatened in 1975, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Historic plane lands to cap education program

NH MANCHESTER — An aviation museum at Manchester-Boston Regional Airport capped off a virtual education program with an in-person look at a plane that revolutionized the airline industry.

When the coronavirus pandemic shut down schools and museums, the Aviation Museum of New Hampshire used its flight simulator to bring kids on a virtual trip around the world in a Douglas DC-3, which helped the Allies win World War II.

"Every segment was a learning adventure in which we discussed the physics of flight, in which we discussed the culture and the history and the geography of the areas that we were flying over," said Jeffrey Rapsis, the museum's executive director.

WMUR-TV reported that the museum celebrated the end of the remote learning program Saturday by displaying one of the 21-passenger propeller planes. Hundreds turned out, wearing masks to get a close look.

From wire reports

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James: Postseason is never routine

Associated Press

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — LeBron James never took it for granted, no matter how routine it became.

He never counted on playing even one playoff game in a season, even long after it became viewed as a failure if he didn't play for a title. The NBA is hard. He only made it look easy.

And he said this postseason, his first in two years and the most unusual in league history, will be his most challenging yet.

"This is the toughest championship run for me personally, for the circumstances of just being in here," he said after he finished practice Monday in a Disney World convention center ballroom.

His Los Angeles Lakers cruised to the best record in the Western Conference, but there are no luxuries usually afforded the No. 1 seed. There's no celebrities sitting courtside at Staples Center to boost them. There's an opponent, the Portland Trail Blazers, who took advantage of a four-month break caused by the coronavirus pandemic to get healthy and arrive with a loaded roster that's far more talented than the average No. 8 seed.

The only sure thing this time around

might be James' mind.

"As far as me locking in on an opponent and individuals, that hasn't changed," James said. "What's different is this environment. I'm not home with my family. Not in my own bed. I'm not in our practice facility. I'm not preparing to be at Staples tomorrow with our fans. I'm not with a lot of things that's essential to my everyday regimen. So that's what's different. But as far as mentally, that's always going to be sharp."

So are his skills, of course. He averaged 25.3 points and led the NBA with 10.2 assists per game, but the Lakers needed much more than that.

They needed someone to help steer them through tragedy after Kobe Bryant, one of the franchise's icons, was killed in a helicopter crash in January. And they continue to count on his experience as they deal with the obstacles of what's potentially a three-month road trip.

"He's the best leader I've ever been around and just represents all the right things," Lakers coach Frank Vogel said. "Oozes class and we're just lucky to have him on our squad and leading our team."

James was in the postseason every year from 2006-18 and they weren't just cameos.

He never lost in the first round and didn't lose at all until the NBA Finals in the last eight years of that stretch, the first four in Miami and the last four in Cleveland.

But the first serious injury of his career, a groin injury sustained on Christmas 2018 in his first season in Los Angeles, doomed the Lakers. Their playoff hopes were long since gone when he shut it down for good at the end of March.

His return to the playoffs took longer than expected because of the season's suspension, with the usual mid-April start this time coming in mid-August. That makes it 26 months since James' last postseason game, back on June 8, 2018 in Cleveland, when the Warriors completed a sweep.

Still, his mind is on more than basketball.

He was one of the signers Monday of an open letter written by More Than A Vote, a coalition of Black athletes and artists whose mission is to "educate, energize and protect Black voters."

"We want change. We've asked for change in our communities and we want people in our communities to know if we want change, we have to make it ourselves," James said, wearing a hat reading "I am more than an athlete."

NBA roundup

Doncic nets 42 points in playoff debut but Mavs lose

Associated Press

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — Nobody had ever scored as much as Luka Doncic in an NBA playoff debut.

His evaluation of his historic performance?

"Terrible," he said.

Doncic is out for wins, not stats, and the Dallas Mavericks weren't good enough to get one in the opener of their series against the Los Angeles Clippers. They climbed back from a dismal start caused in part by Doncic's carelessness, but ended up losing 118-110 on Monday night.

So while his 42 points were the number that drew the most attention, Doncic was focused on another number in the box score.

"I should never have 11 turnovers," he said. "That's 11 more

possessions I can have. The thing about this game is I've got to be way better than that for sure."

Three of the turnovers came in the opening minutes, when the Clippers raced to a 10-0 lead. They seemed intent on banging the 21-year-old guard around whenever they could and it appeared early that Doncic might not be able to handle it.

But he kept picking himself up and in the end almost knocked the No. 2-seeded Clippers off.

"He's a fighter. He's always going to battle. He will never get discouraged," Mavericks coach Rick Carlisle said.

Raptors 134, Nets 110: Fred VanVleet scored 30 points and led Toronto's sizzling three-point attack as defending NBA champion Toronto beat

the Brooklyn Nets in the opening game of their first-round playoff series Monday.

VanVleet went 8-for-10 from three-point range and Toronto shot 22-for-44 from beyond the arc as a team as it maintained playoff intensity even without any fans attending postseason games at Disney's Wide World of Sports. The Raptors' 22 three-pointers matched a season high and set a franchise playoff record.

Nuggets 135, Jazz 125 (OT): Jamal Murray scored 10 of his 36 points in overtime on a day Donovan Mitchell erupted for a franchise playoff-record 57 points as Denver outlasted Utah in Game 1 of their first-round series.

Nikola Jokic finished with 29 points and 10 rebounds for the Nuggets. He had a chance to win it in regulation at the

buzzer, but his right-handed hook shot over the Jazz's Rudy Gobert was off the mark.

Celtics 109, 76ers 101: Jayson Tatum had career playoff highs of 32 points and 13 rebounds as Boston beat Philadelphia in Game 1 of their first-round Eastern Conference playoff series.

"Offensively, it doesn't feel like he's got 32 at the end of the night," Celtics coach Brad Stevens said. "He just plays the game within himself. He did a lot of good things tonight."

Jaylen Brown scored 15 of his 29 points in the fourth quarter and Kemba Walker added 19 points for Boston.

Joel Embiid had 26 points and 16 rebounds and Josh Richardson and Alec Burks each added 18 points for the 76ers.

Seager brothers, in 1st meeting, both homer

Los Angeles Times

LOS ANGELES — The two brothers emerged from their dugouts at 6:15 p.m. Monday, met halfway, and chatted as the Dodger Stadium grounds crew finished the preparations for their first big-league game against each other.

Corey and Kyle Seager posed for a few photos, smiled wide, and embraced before returning to their respective sides for the upcoming clash. The Los Angeles Dodgers versus the Seattle Mariners. On one side, Corey, the youngest of the three Seager brothers and Dodgers shortstop. On the other, Kyle,

the oldest sibling and Mariners third baseman.

The result was an 11-9 victory for the Dodgers, extending their winning streak to six games, and an unforgettable night for the Seagers.

Both brothers homered, becoming the first siblings to hit home runs in the same game since Felipe and Cesar Crespo homered for the San Diego Padres and San Francisco Giants in June 2001. Corey Seager went 2-for-4 with a home run, a walk, and three RBIs. Kyle Seager finished 3-for-4 with a home run, a walk, and a stolen base.

The Seager family dreamed of this day for years. It just didn't happen when or how they envisioned. It took until Corey's sixth major-league season, when cardboard cutouts, not their parents and other family members, populated the stands for a game played during a pandemic.

"Everyone would love to be here," Kyle Seager, 32 and in his 10th major-league campaign, said before the game. "It's kind of unfortunate with all this."

Kyle Seager batted fourth for Seattle and was instrumental in the Mariners scoring two

runs with two outs in the first inning off Dodgers starter Ross Stripling. With a runner at second base, the elder Seager lined a ball to left field that bounced off AJ Pollock.

The error allowed Kyle Lewis to score and Kyle Seager to reach second safely.

Corey Seager hit second for Los Angeles and got a first-hand look at Mookie Betts clubbing a leadoff home run to slice Seattle's lead in half.

It was Betts' 21st career leadoff home run and first as a Dodger. He's hit his nine home runs off right-handed pitchers.

MLB roundup

Swanson's clutch homer leads Braves past Nats

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Dansby Swanson hit a two-out, two-run homer in the bottom of the ninth inning to cap a four-run rally that gave the Atlanta Braves a stunning 7-6 victory over the Washington Nationals on Monday night.

With the Braves trailing 6-3 against Nationals closer Daniel Hudson (1-2), Adam Duvall made it close by hitting a two-run shot that just cleared the wall in left field. Johan Camargo followed with a single, but Hudson retired the next two hitters to put the Braves down to their final out.

Swanson drove one over the wall in right-center for the game winner.

Cardinals 3-4, Cubs 1-5: David Bote hit a three-run homer in his team's four-run sixth inning, and Chicago beat St. Louis for a doubleheader split.

With two outs and runners on the corners, Bote put Chicago ahead to stay with a massive drive to center field off Tyler Webb (0-1) for his second career pinch-hit homer.

Chicago was still searching for its first hit before Willson

Contreras doubled home Javier Baez earlier in the inning, setting the stage for Bote's third homer of the season.

St. Louis wasted a big performance by Brad Miller, who homered twice and drove in three runs. Miller also had a big swing in Game 1, hitting a tiebreaking two-run double in the seventh in the Cardinals' 3-1 victory.

Twins 4, Royals 1: Nelson Cruz homered twice, continuing his climb up the all-time leaderboard, and host Minnesota beat Kansas City.

Devin Smeltzer (2-0) picked up the win in relief of opener Matt Wisler for the Twins. Smeltzer allowed one hit in 2.2 innings while striking out three batters. Minnesota won three of four games in the series after being swept in Kansas City last week.

Yankees 6, Red Sox 3: Luke Voit homered twice, Aroldis Chapman returned from the COVID-19 injured list to pitch the ninth inning and host New York beat Boston for the 10th straight game.

The Yankees capped a four-game sweep and are on their best run against the Red Sox

since winning a franchise-best 12 consecutive games in 1952-53 — a stretch when Boston star Ted Williams was serving in the Korean War.

Angels 7, Giants 6: Tommy La Stella hit a two-run homer in the ninth inning, and host Los Angeles snapped its four-game losing streak with a victory over San Francisco.

Mike Trout hit his 10th homer and Albert Pujols had a tiebreaking two-run double, but the Angels still fell behind in the sixth inning. They didn't rally until David Fletcher got a one-out single in the ninth and La Stella knocked the ball off the video board above the right field fence for his first career walk-off homer.

White Sox 7, Tigers 2: Tim Anderson hit a pair of home runs, including his second to lead off the game against starter Matthew Boyd in six days, and host Chicago coasted past Detroit. The White Sox became the first team in major league history to open two games in one season with back-to-back home runs off the same pitcher, according to STATS.

Diamondbacks 4, Athletics 3: David Peralta slapped a

bases-loaded single through the right side of the infield with one out in the ninth inning to push host Arizona past Oakland.

The Diamondbacks won their fifth straight game and are above .500 for the first time this season.

Padres 14, Rangers 4: Fernando Tatis Jr. homered twice, including a grand slam on a 3-0 count for his major league-leading 11th of the season, and San Diego routed host Texas to stop a five-game losing skid.

Tatis had a career-high seven RBIs. Zach Davies (3-2) allowed three runs with six strikeouts.

Mets 11, Marlins 4: Robinson Cano and Pete Alonso hit two homers apiece to help New York win at Miami and snap a three-game losing streak.

Blue Jays 7, Orioles 2: Hyun Jin Ryu pitched six innings of four-hit ball, Randal Grichuk homered and drove in four runs and Toronto won at Baltimore.

Astros 2, Rockies 1: Carlos Correa drove in two runs with a double to back up a strong start by rookie Brandon Bielak, and host Houston beat Colorado to win its fifth straight.

Goalies turning in top performances

Associated Press

Nearly 20 years ago, Kevin Weekes and goaltending coach Sudarshan Maharaj rented some ice time at a Toronto arena with a Chinese food buffet above them and worked on the fundamentals of the position.

It took Weekes' game to a new level and he was reminded of the extra work as he watches these unusual NHL playoffs. Goaltenders are putting on a clinic in the crease, combining for a .922 save percentage through 66 games, up from .910 in the regular season and .916 in the playoffs last year.

"It's as if they've had the opportunity to go to goalie school right before playoffs start," said Weekes, an NHL goalie for 11 seasons who is now an NHL Network analyst. "I've heard several guys tell me that they feel like their focus is even sharper."

The improvement can be traced to a combination of things: Goalies had time to recuperate after the season was called off in March. They were able to practice on fundamentals before the playoffs began. And they are playing in empty arenas without distractions, with all due respect to the lights and music from the NHL production staffs in Toronto and Edmonton, Alberta.

Little if any ability to sharpen specialized skills while quarantined threatened to put goalies at a disadvantage when the season resumed with 24 teams in the playoffs — and eight of them facing elimination right away. Suddenly, every save mattered after months of not being able to put on gear, let alone face live shots.

"It was really tough," Dallas goaltender Anton Khudobin said.

NHL roundup

Lightning take 3-1 series lead over the Blue Jackets

Associated Press

TORONTO — Andrei Vasilevskiy had 28 saves and the Tampa Bay Lightning beat the Columbus Blue Jackets 2-1 on Monday to take a 3-1 lead in their Eastern Conference playoff series.

Barclay Goodrow and Yanni Gourde each had a goal and an assist as the Lightning pushed the Blue Jackets to the verge of elimination after being swept by Columbus in the first round of the 2019 playoffs.

"Every game has been a battle, and I don't expect any different going forward," said Tampa Bay center Blake Coleman, who assisted on Goodrow's score. "They're not going to be a team that lays over for us. Being up 3-1 is great, but it doesn't mean anything if you don't take care of business."

Cam Atkinson scored for the Blue Jackets, and Joonas Korpisalo had 20 saves.

Bruins 4, Hurricanes 3: At Toronto, Jake DeBrusk scored twice in his team's dominat-

ing third period to help Boston rally and take a 3-1 lead in its first-round playoff series.

Brad Marchand and Connor Clifton also scored in the third, helping the Bruins erase a 2-0 deficit entering the period. It was a stunning turnaround — complete with Boston taking a 16-2 edge in shots on goal in those final 20 minutes.

Blues 3, Canucks 1: At Edmonton, Alberta, Ryan O'Reilly had two goals and an assist as St. Louis evened the first-round playoff series.

Alex Pietrangelo also scored for the Blues and added an assist. Jake Allen made 22 saves.

Avalanche 7, Coyotes 1: At Edmonton, Alberta, Nazem Kadri had two goals and an assist, Philipp Grubauer stopped 14 shots, and Colorado took a 3-1 lead in the first-round playoff series.

The Avalanche jumped on Arizona after losing 4-2 in Game 3, scoring three first-period goals, two by Kadri on the power play.

COVID-19, not championships, topic at SEC practices

Associated Press

Southeastern Conference teams opened preseason camp Monday with the precarious status of the season largely overshadowing even the annual ambitions of Alabama and Georgia.

Questions like how will LSU fare without quarterback Joe Burrow took a backseat to uncertainty. Quarterback battles seem fairly inconsequential with COVID-19 threatening the season — and teams' depth charts.

"The teams that handle this the best and the players that are the safest, those teams are going to win a lot of games," first-year Mississippi coach Lane Kiffin said.

The SEC, winner of 10 football national championships

since 2006, is just hoping to have a season and play out the league-only schedule starting Sept. 26. It's an open question of how a national champion will even be crowned, with the Pac-12 and Big Ten opting not to play this fall.

Masks and social distancing are hot topics even with LSU trying to repeat as national champion without its Heisman Trophy-winning quarterback and Alabama aiming for another national championship run after failing to make the playoff last season.

Safety protocols have been the norm around football buildings, with frequent testing and temperature checks and a largely bubble-like existence. But now students are returning, creating troublesome scenes on some campuses, including

Alabama.

SEC coaches and officials have sounded the alarm in efforts to save the season.

Alabama athletic director Greg Byrne Tweeted a photo Sunday showing dozens of people, many not wearing face masks, bunched together waiting to get into a popular bar in Tuscaloosa on the day sororities accepted new members.

"Who wants college sports this fall?? Obviously not these people!!" Byrne said in a tweet, urging people to wear masks.

But those are the challenges SEC teams face with it becoming harder for players to remain in their virtual protective bubble.

Auburn, for instance, had 33 positive tests among players over the summer, according to coach Gus Malzahn. A high

number of players in quarantine either for positive tests or contact with those who have the virus could derail a team's fortunes faster than any injury wave.

It has Malzahn talking about the importance of not just second-teamers but third-teamers.

"It's going to be a telling time right now with all the students coming back to the campus," the Tigers coach said. "What we've just told our guys is let's control us. Most of our classes are going to be online for all our players, so we're just doing everything we can to really stay self-isolated to protect our players so we have a good chance of playing the season."

Some players around the country have opted to sit out the season.