

Taliban complete northeast Afghan blitz

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — The Taliban seized three more provincial capitals in Afghanistan and a local army headquarters, completing their blitz across the country's northeast and pressing their offensive elsewhere, officials said Wednesday. The insurgents now control some two-thirds of the nation as the United States and NATO finalize their withdrawal after a decadeslong war there.

The fall of the capitals of Badakhshan and Baghlan provinces to the northeast and Farah province to the west put increasing pressure on the country's central government to stem the tide of the advance, even as it lost a major base in Kunduz. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani rushed to Balkh province, already surrounded by Taliban-held territory, to seek help in pushing back the insurgents from warlords linked to allegations of atrocities and corruption. He also replaced his army chief of staff.

While the capital of Kabul itself has not yet been directly threatened in the advance, the stunning speed of the offensive raises questions of how long the Afghan government can maintain control of its countryside. The multiple fronts of the battle have stretched

the government's special operations forces — while regular troops have often fled the battlefield — and the violence has pushed thousands of civilians to seek safety in the capital.

The U.S. military, which plans to complete its withdrawal by the end of the month, has conducted some airstrikes but has largely avoided involving itself in the ground campaign. The Afghan government and military did not respond to repeated requests for comment about the losses.

The success of the Taliban offensive also calls into question whether they'd ever rejoin long-stalled peace talks in Qatar aimed at moving Afghanistan toward an inclusive interim administration as the West hoped.

Humayoon Shahidzada, a lawmaker from the western province of Farah, confirmed Wednesday to The Associated Press that his province's capital of the same name fell. Neighboring Nimroz province was overrun in recent days after a weeklong campaign by the Taliban.

In Farah, Taliban fighters dragged the shoeless, bloody corpse of one Afghan security force member through the street, shouting: "God is great!" Taliban fighters carrying M-16 rifles and driving Humvees and

Ford pickup trucks donated by the Americans rolled through the streets of the capital.

"The situation is under control in the city, our mujahedeen are patrolling in the city," one Taliban fighter who did not give his name said, referring to his fellow insurgents as "holy warriors."

The crackle of automatic weapon fire continued throughout the day in Farah.

Hujatullah Kheradmand, a lawmaker from Badakhshan, said the Taliban had seized his province's capital, Faizabad. An Afghan official, who spoke on condition of anonymity to speak about an unacknowledged loss, said Baghlan's capital, Polikhumri, also fell.

The insurgents earlier captured six other provincial capitals in the country in less than a week.

On Wednesday, the headquarters of the Afghan National Army's 217th Corps at Kunduz airport fell to the Taliban, according to Ghulam Rabani Rabani, a provincial council member in Kunduz, and lawmaker Shah Khan Sherzad. The insurgents posted video online they said showed surrendering troops.

The corps is one of seven across the army and its loss represents a major setback.

Air Force updates dress-and-appearance standards

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

Male airmen will be allowed to tattoo their scalps and grow their hair half an inch longer under an update to Air Force dress-and-appearance standards taking effect in October.

The service is also doing away with some restrictions that micromanage specific behavior while in uniform — such as putting hands in pockets or talking on a cellphone while walking.

The updates come after testing and feedback from airmen and reviews by the 2020 Air Force Uniform Board, the service said in a news release Tuesday.

More than 30 recommendations from the board were approved for implementation in the field, according to the release.

"During this most recent review we ap-

proved several updates fully aligned with our Air Force standards and culture that maintain our focus on warfighting while providing options to meet many of the needs of our Airmen," Lt. Gen. Brian Kelly, Air Force deputy chief of staff for manpower, personnel and services, said in the release.

Some of the changes to be updated this fall in Air Force Instruction 36-2903, Dress and Appearance of Air Force Personnel, are:

■ Bulk hair standards for men will increase from 2 inches to 2.5 inches.

■ Men will be authorized for cosmetic tattooing on the scalp.

■ The size of hair accessories for women will increase from 1 inch to 2 inches.

■ Hosiery will be optional for women with any combination of dress uniform.

■ Transparent piercing spacers will be allowed.

■ Wing commanders may authorize the local wear of approved morale patches on Fridays or during special events.

The Air Force last loosened its tattoo policy in 2017 with the goal of opening the door to more young recruits who likely came with more body art.

At that time, the service eliminated the "25%-coverage rule," which limited the size of tattoos on the chest, back, arms and legs, but tattoos on the neck, face and scalp remained prohibited.

In other revisions set for October, the board has recommended removing certain restrictive language mandating specific behavior, the intent being to "entrust commanders and Airmen to understand and adopt proper behavior based on their situation and circumstances," the news release said.

US: 'No hostile intent' in drills with S. Korea

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS — The State Department said upcoming, computer-simulated military drills with South Korea are “purely defensive in nature,” after the North Korean regime lambasted the event again Wednesday.

The United States and South Korea are holding a four-day preliminary crisis management session before kicking off the command-post training Aug. 16 to 26. The exercise is expected to focus on computer simulations rather than a field exercise by combat troops.

“The United States harbors no hostile intent toward [North Korea],” State Department spokesman Ned Price told reporters Tuesday in Washington. “We remain committed to the security of [South Korea] and our combined defense posture in accord-

ance with our ironclad U.S.-[South Korea] alliance.”

Price said the U.S. backed inter-Korean talks would “continue to work with our [South Korean] partners toward that end.”

Pyongyang regularly rails against joint military exercises, claiming they are preparation for an invasion. The two Koreas remain technically at war after their 1950-53 conflict ended in an armistice instead of a peace treaty.

The exercise is an “unfavorable prelude further beclouding the future of the inter-Korean relations,” said Kim Yong Chol, a senior North Korean official.

“Now that they made their clear option known to the whole world, defying the opportunity, we will have to make clearer” North Korea’s view of the issue, he said in a statement through the state-run Korean Central News Agency

Some South Korean lawmakers questioned the timing of the drills, which come two weeks after the North restored communication lines with Seoul. The lines are one of the few ways the countries can relay daily diplomatic messages.

The lines, which were suspended for a year, were reopened to promote “mutual trust” and “reconciliation,” KCNA said in a statement at the time.

North Korea, however, stopped answering Seoul’s calls Tuesday after South Korea announced the exercise will go ahead as planned.

The same day, Kim Yo Jong — North Korean leader Kim Jong Un’s sister and a senior official of ruling Workers’ Party — accused the U.S. and South Korea of “further accelerating the [unstable] situation” on the Korean Peninsula, according to KCNA.

Navy awards contracts for barracks on Guam

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Navy awarded two contracts totaling \$579.5 million to a Guam-based construction company to build five multistory barracks and a fire station at the new Marine Corps base in Guam.

Core Tech-HDCC-Kajima LLC, of Tamuning, Guam, won the contracts on Aug. 5, according to a news release that day from Naval Facility Engineering Systems Command Pacific.

The government of Japan is paying for the construction as part of an agreement with the United States to relocate some Marine Corps aviation assets from Okinawa.

The first contract is a \$546 million, firm fixed-price contract for five multistory bachelor enlisted quarters complexes. The second contract, \$33.5 million for the fire station, is also a fixed-price contract.

“It is exciting to see all the pro-

gress and extensive efforts being made to ensure efficient, safe and responsible construction,” said Camp Blaz’s commander, Marine Col. Christopher Bopp, in the release. “I look forward to continuing the buildup while working and collaborating with our joint and regional partners.”

The base is expected to accommodate 5,000 members of the III Marine Expeditionary Force who are set to move in over the next five years from Okinawa.

Only 1,300 Marines will be permanently stationed at Camp Blaz, with another 3,700 coming as a rotational force in the same way a Marine Air-Ground Task Force deploys to Australia’s Northern Territory to train each summer.

The five barracks are the first of eight planned on Camp Blaz over the next few years. Each barrack includes a six-story tower with 300 rooms, a community core building, an outdoor laundry area and a utility building.

Group cites chemical concerns at Chesapeake Bay military sites

Associated Press

ANNAPOLIS, Md. — The groundwater of at least nine military installations near the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland and Virginia is contaminated with high levels of toxic fluorinated “forever chemicals,” according to a report Wednesday by an environmental group that cites Department of Defense records.

The Environmental Working Group’s report focuses on installations along the bay and concerns about contamination mostly from chemicals in firefighting foam containing PFAS, or perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances. They are known as “forever chemicals” because they do not break down in the environment.

The group says it’s the first time an analysis of the concerns has been conducted publicly at military sites across the nation’s largest estuary, whose large watershed includes the six states of Maryland, Virginia, Delaware,

Pennsylvania, West Virginia and New York. The bay is also troubled by pollution from nitrogen fertilizer runoff and other pollutants.

The EWG report noted that records show PFAS may be present in groundwater at several other installations near the bay, where the DOD has not tested to confirm the presence of chemicals.

For years, the military used a film-forming foam in training to fight aircraft fires on flight lines. The DOD no longer uses foam with the chemicals for firefighting training, unless it can be contained.

“I think the real take home here is the DOD has been very slow to identify those places where PFAS is present and threatening crabs and oysters, and has been very slow to clean up these legacy plumes of PFAS pollution that continue to threaten our crabs and oysters,” said Scott Faber, senior vice president for government affairs for EWG.

Some troops can seek vaccine exemptions

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Troops can apply for an exemption to the pending coronavirus vaccine mandate for certain health conditions or religious reasons, but others will face punishment for refusing the shots, chief Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said Tuesday.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on Monday announced he would add the coronavirus vaccine to the Defense Department's list of required immunizations by mid-September, after which all service members without valid exemptions will be required to receive the shots or face expulsion from the military. Though the vaccine remains under the Food and Drug Administration's emergency-use authorization as it completes the final phases of clinical trials, Austin said he will seek President Joe Biden's approval to make the vaccine mandatory

next month if it still hasn't received full federal approval.

Some service members have expressed concern about taking a shot still under the FDA's emergency-use authorization, but Kirby said that is not a lawful reason to decline the shot once it's mandatory.

"If it's treated like any lawful order, there could be administrative and disciplinary repercussions for failing to obey the order," he said. "The secretary's expectation is that commanders are going to treat the administration of that vaccine with ... professionalism, skill and compassion."

New York attorney Anthony Kuhn, who specializes in military law, said his office has received "hundreds" of calls from troops concerned about the mandate. He said he believes a case challenging the mandate once issued will ultimately be brought to the Supreme Court.

"We know from back when the

anthrax vaccines were mandated in the '90s that some individuals were actually court-martialed and imprisoned over refusing to take that vaccination, so we expect that that's going to happen," Kuhn said. "We hope that the commanders are going to have some empathy and at least just administratively separate the individuals, but we understand that some commanders don't really think that way."

Still, Kirby said: "Commanders have a range of tools short of using the [courts] available to them to try to help individuals make the right decisions" without issuing punishments.

"Every individual who has reservations about taking the vaccine for whatever reason is properly counseled about the safety and the efficacy of the vaccines and the health risks for not taking it, as well as counseled about the readiness impact of not taking it — the impact that individual

would be having on his or her teammates," he said.

Troops with health conditions that are incompatible with the vaccine, however, can work with their doctors to receive an exemption to the mandate, according to Kirby. Additionally, troops with religious beliefs that prohibit the use of vaccines can seek exemption under the Defense Department's Religious Liberty in the Military Services instruction.

To apply for religious accommodations, service members must submit a written request to their supervisor using the process set by their service branch, according to the DOD instruction.

About 1,044,924 service members are fully vaccinated, and another 237,082 have had at least one vaccine dose, according to the latest Pentagon data issued Aug. 4. Approximately 213,000 service members have contracted the coronavirus since the pandemic started, 28 of whom died.

Hospitals need more nurses as COVID-19 worsens in US

Associated Press

The rapidly escalating surge in COVID-19 infections across the United States has caused a shortage of nurses and other front-line staff in virus hot spots that can no longer keep up with the flood of unvaccinated patients and are losing workers to burnout and lucrative out-of-state temporary gigs.

Florida, Arkansas, Louisiana and Oregon all have more people hospitalized with COVID-19 than at any other point in the pandemic, and nursing staffs are badly strained.

In Florida, virus cases have filled so many hospital beds that ambulance services and fire departments are straining to respond to emergencies. Some patients wait inside ambulances for up to an hour before hospitals in St. Petersburg can admit them —

a process that usually takes about 15 minutes, Pinellas County Administrator Barry Burton said.

One person who suffered a heart attack was bounced from six hospitals before finding an emergency room in New Orleans that could take him in, said Joe Kanter, Louisiana's chief public health officer.

"It's a real dire situation," Kanter said. "There's just not enough qualified staff in the state right now to care for all these patients."

Michelle Thomas, a registered nurse and a manager of the emergency department at a Tucson, Ariz., hospital, resigned three weeks ago after hitting a wall.

"There was never a time that we could just kind of take a breath," Thomas said Tuesday. "I hit that point ... I can't do this anymore. I'm so just tapped out."

Dixie Fire threatens more land in Sierra Nevada area

Associated Press

GREENVILLE, Calif. — California's largest single wildfire in recorded history kept pushing through forestlands Tuesday as fire crews tried to protect rural communities from flames that have destroyed hundreds of homes.

Clear skies over parts of the month-old Dixie Fire have allowed aircraft to rejoin nearly 6,000 firefighters in the attack this week.

"Whether or not we can fly depends very much on where the smoke is. There's still some areas where it's just too smoky," fire spokesman Edwin Zuniga said.

Heavy smoke reduced visibility on the fire's west end while the east end saw renewed action as afternoon winds took hold, fire officials said.

Burning through bone-dry

trees, brush and grass, the fire by Tuesday had destroyed more than 1,000 buildings, including nearly 550 homes. But the reports are "definitely subject to change" because assessment teams still can't get into many areas to count what burned, Zuniga said.

Gov. Gavin Newsom on Tuesday declared a state of emergency for northern Shasta, Trinity and Tehama counties. The declaration frees up state resources to help fight fires in those counties and give assistance to residents affected by the blazes.

The Dixie Fire, named for the road where it started, also threatened 14,000 buildings in more than a dozen small mountain and rural communities in the northern Sierra Nevada. Crews have cut thousands of acres of new fire lines aimed at preventing the fire from spreading.

Senate OKs Dems' \$3.5T budget in win for Biden

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Democrats pushed a \$3.5 trillion framework for bolstering family services, health and environment programs through the Senate early Wednesday, advancing President Joe Biden's expansive vision for reshaping federal priorities just hours after handing him a companion triumph on a hefty infrastructure package.

Lawmakers approved Democrats' budget resolution on a party-line 50-49 vote, a crucial step for a president and party set on training the government's fiscal might on assisting families, creating jobs and fighting climate change. Higher taxes on the wealthy and corporations would pay for much of it. Passage came despite an avalanche of Republican amendments intended to make their rivals pay a price in next year's elections for control of Congress.

House leaders announced their chamber will return from summer recess in two weeks to vote on the fiscal blueprint, which contemplates disbursing the \$3.5 trillion over the next decade. Final congressional approval, which seems certain, would protect a subsequent bill actually enacting the outline's detailed spending and tax changes from a Republican filibuster in the 50-50 Senate, delays that would otherwise kill it.

Even so, passing that follow-up legislation will be dicey with party moderates wary of the massive \$3.5 trillion price tag vying with progressives demanding aggressive action. The party controls the House with just three votes to spare, while the evenly di-

vided Senate is theirs only due to Vice President Kamala Harris' tie-breaking vote. Solid GOP opposition seems guaranteed.

Senate Budget Committee Chairman Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., once a progressive voice in Congress' wilderness and now a national figure wielding legislative clout, said the measure would help children, families, the elderly and working people — and more.

"It will also, I hope, restore the faith of the American people in the belief that we can have a government that works for all of us, and not just the few," he said.

Republicans argued that Democrats' proposals would waste money, raise economy-wounding taxes, fuel inflation and codify far-left dictates that would harm Americans.

The Senate turned to the budget hours after it approved the other big chunk of Biden's objectives, a compromise \$1 trillion bundle of transportation, water, broadband and other infrastructure projects. That measure, passed 69-30 with Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., among the 19 Republicans backing it, also needs House approval.

The budget blueprint envisions creating new programs including tuition-free pre-kindergarten and community college, paid family leave and a Civilian Climate Corps whose workers would tackle environmental projects. Millions of immigrants in the U.S. illegally would have a new chance for citizenship, and there would be financial incentives for states to adopt more labor-friendly laws.

Spotlight is on Hochul after Cuomo resigns

Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. — Kathy Hochul, a western New York Democrat unfamiliar to many people in the state even after six years as its lieutenant governor, was set to begin reintroducing herself to the public Wednesday as she prepared to take the reins of power after Gov. Andrew Cuomo announced he would resign from office.

Hochul, 62, in two weeks will become the state's first female governor, following a remarkable transition period in which Cuomo has said he will stay on and work to ease her into a job that he dominated over his three terms in office.

She stayed out of public sight Tuesday but said in a statement that she was "prepared to lead." Hochul planned to hold her first news conference Wednesday afternoon at the State Capitol.

Cuomo, 63, announced Tuesday that he would step down rather than face a likely impeachment trial over allegations that he sexually harassed at least 11 women, including one who accused him of groping her breast.

Cuomo has continued to deny that he touched anyone inappropriately.

A seasoned veteran of retail politics, Hochul shares some of Cuomo's centrist politics, but is a stylistic contrast with a governor famous for his love of steam-rolling opponents and holding grudges. She's well-liked by colleagues, who say voters shouldn't confuse her quiet approach under Cuomo with a lack of confidence or competence.

Dems renew push on elections bill that GOP vows to block

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Democrats are renewing their push to enact their marquee voting bill, pledging to make it the first order of business when the Senate returns in the fall even though they don't have a clear strategy for overcoming steadfast Republican opposition.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer announced early Wednesday his plan for floor action in September on the bill, known as the For the People Act, which Democrats have tried to pass for months. The measure,

blocked by Republicans from debate in June, would affect virtually every aspect of the electoral process, curbing the influence of big money in politics, limiting the partisan considerations in the drawing of congressional districts and expanding options for voting.

Democrats acknowledge that their latest effort is doomed to fail — and that's the point. They are looking to show that Republicans will not waver in their opposition to voting and election legislation, which Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-

Ky., has called "a solution looking for a problem."

That could help make a case to moderate Democrats that there is little chance of making headway on this key issue for the party unless changes are made to Senate rules that require 60 votes to overcome a filibuster.

Democratic leaders have said the voting legislation would serve as a powerful counterbalance to a wave of new restrictive voting laws approved in Republican-controlled states after the 2020 election.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Smokestack removed, molasses scent endures

ME PORTLAND — A brick smokestack that pumped out molasses-scented steam for decades in Portland is coming down.

The nearly 150-foot smokestack long has been a symbol of the B&M baked beans factory, but it hasn't been used for more than 20 years. The Portland Press Herald reported that the smokestack is expected to come down by the end of the month.

Burnham & Morrill Co. opened in Portland in 1867 as a food cannery to package meat, vegetables and fish. It began making baked beans in the 1920s, and is now owned by B&G Foods.

The trademark smell of molasses from the cooking beans now emerges from an exhaust stack on the other side of the factory.

Group sues for right to carry guns at state fair

MN ST. PAUL — A gun owners' group has sued the Minnesota State Fair and Ramsey County, demanding that permit holders be allowed to carry handguns on the fairgrounds during the Great Minnesota Get-Together.

The lawsuit filed by the Minnesota Gun Owners Caucus in Ramsey County District Court argues that the State Fair's ban on weapons violates the Second Amendment right to keep and bear arms.

The lawsuit asks the court to order that Minnesotans who have valid carry permits be allowed to carry pistols at the fair, and that the sheriff's office,

which will provide law enforcement at this year's fair, be prohibited from enforcing the ban.

The Minnesota State Fair opens Aug. 26 and runs through Labor Day.

Two hurt while wrestling over gun inside church

AL MOBILE — A gun went off in an Alabama church as a man tried to disarm a woman, wounding them both, police said.

Linda Walker entered the sanctuary of Amity Baptist Church in Mobile with a gun after services ended, Officer Katrina H. Frazier told al.com.

Walker, 58, aimed the weapon at the unidentified man and another person, Frazier said. When the man tried to take the gun away, it went off, sending a bullet through Walker's right arm and into the man's right leg, Frazier said. Both were taken to hospitals with injuries that were not believed to be life-threatening.

Evel Knievel Museum reportedly moving

KS TOPEKA — It appears the Evel Knievel Museum will be jumping from Topeka to Las Vegas.

A Las Vegas newspaper reported the museum dedicated to the career of Robert Craig Knievel, who became known for his death-defying stunts and tricks on motorbikes, will move to the Las Vegas Arts District.

Amanda Beach, the museum's marketing director in Topeka, said the report was "a bit premature" but the deal is "imminent."

If the deal is finalized, the To-

peka team would install and operate the museum in Las Vegas. The move is not going to happen immediately and could take a couple of years, The Topeka Capital-Journal reported.

State tracks bacterial infections back to pool

MS JACKSON — A swimming pool and splash pad near Mississippi's capital city have been closed after the state health department said it found several cases of a bacterial infection associated with the facility.

The Mississippi State Department of Health said that it continues to investigate the E. coli infections found in connection with use of the swimming pool and splashpad at the Jellystone Park Camp Resort-Yogi on the Lake in Pelahatchie.

The agency said it has tracked infections to July 30 and Aug. 1, but believes additional exposures could have happened before the pool and splashpad were closed.

Birds allowed to be fed again after moratorium

IN INDIANAPOLIS — State officials have lifted a moratorium on feeding birds in 76 Indiana counties as an investigation continues into how songbirds are dying.

But people in Allen, Carroll, Clark, Floyd, Hamilton, Hancock, Hendricks, Johnson, Lake, Marion, Monroe, Morgan, Porter, St. Joseph, Tippecanoe and Whitley counties still should not feed birds, the Indiana Department of Natural Resources said.

The U.S. Geological Survey,

which oversees responses to some natural hazards and risks, recommended that people temporarily take down bird feeders and clean out bird baths to reduce places that birds could closely congregate and potentially spread disease.

Bear cub strolls aisles at supermarket, leaves

CA LOS ANGELES — Shoppers were startled recently to see a bear cub browsing the offerings at a Los Angeles supermarket.

Video aired by CBS 2 shows the small bear strolling the aisles at the Ralphs store in the Porter Ranch area of the San Fernando Valley. After sniffing around inside, the bear eventually walked out the front doors.

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife found the 120-pound animal hiding under a trailer at a construction site behind a nearby Walmart.

The bear was tranquilized and released into the Angeles National Forest, the department said.

Big baby: Zoo's newborn giraffe stands 6 feet tall

MA MENDON — The Southwick Zoo's newest addition is a pretty big baby.

Dolly the giraffe was born about two weeks ago, and at 6 feet tall and 150 pounds, she's the largest of her species ever to be born in the history of the Mendon zoo.

The zoo says Dolly is being fed with a bottle because her mother was unable to produce her own milk.

— From wire reports

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With 3 races left, Larson, Hamlin tied

Associated Press

WATKINS GLEN, N.Y. — It took five wins by Kyle Larson to catch the most consistent driver in NASCAR's Cup Series this season, but he finally did it.

Now, it's a sprint to finish first in the driver points standings with three races left in the regular season. Larson and Denny Hamlin are tied with 917 points.

"I think for him and I both, we've been mentally there for a while now," Larson said after his series-leading fifth win on Sunday at Watkins Glen. "And, yes, I think come playoff time, we'll just keep doing what we've been doing and, hopefully, we'll find ourselves in the final four."

Hamlin gained the points lead after the second race of the season at the Daytona road course and his consistency allowed him to extend it before Larson got hot in the spring and began pecking away.

After 23 races, both drivers have 16 top 10s and 12 top 5s,

and Larson also has a series-best 12 stage wins to five for Hamlin. The 29-year-old Larson had a six-race stretch starting at Darlington in early May that included three wins and three runner-up finishes in the No. 5 Chevrolet for Hendrick Motorsports, which has won 11 races this season. He closed the gap to two points after the second race at Pocono in late June.

Hamlin then rallied to build his lead back to 13 points heading to Watkins Glen, and Larson's victory there finally erased all of it.

Last year Hamlin won seven races in his No. 11 Toyota for Joe Gibbs Racing. This year, he's yet to taste victory.

"I feel like we're good. We're really good," Hamlin said. "We just keep going back and forth each race on kind of who's better. But he's obviously got the wins and racking up the bonus points."

The next stop on the schedule

is Sunday on the road course at Indianapolis, then Michigan and the Daytona oval to end the regular season. Hamlin, a solid road racer, has a win at Watkins Glen and one second-place finish at Sonoma six years ago that was nearly a victory until Tony Stewart bumped him into the wall on the last turn of the race.

Larson also won at Sonoma in June, and in both of his road course wins he held off teammate Chase Elliott, who has seven road wins, third all-time.

"I've been good at road courses, but I just didn't know," Larson said. "I was always like a seventh- to a 10th-place guy when it came to the race. But now I think that I'm in a great race car (and) I'm able to run that aggressive pace the whole time, and my car stays with me."

Indy will be a mystery for most. NASCAR switched from the famed 2.5-mile oval to a 14-turn, 2.439-mile layout that's

flat as a pancake. The Xfinity Series first raced there last year, but this will be the Cup debut.

"I haven't made a single lap there on a simulator or anything, and I'm not going to get the chance to do that this week," Larson said. "I honestly don't even have the corners memorized yet. There's nothing that I can take to there, but once I get laps and in practice maybe there's some corners that will be similar, but we'll just have to wait and see."

Still, Larson is relishing the moment.

"It's fun racing him (Hamlin), and I look forward to the next few weeks and really even into the playoffs," Larson said. "I'm glad there's a fun little regular-season point battle. I feel like in years past it's kind of been a blowout come the last race of the points. To be tied with three races left is pretty cool."

Hall of Fame goaltender Esposito dies at 78

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Tony Esposito made an immediate mark on the Chicago Blackhawks and a lasting impression on the NHL.

Esposito, the pioneering Hall of Famer who spent almost his entire 16-year career with the Blackhawks, died following a brief battle with pancreatic cancer, the team announced Tuesday. He was 78.

Esposito debuted with Montreal during the 1968-69 season and appeared in 13 games. He was then left unprotected with the Canadiens deep in goalies and taken by the Blackhawks in an intraleague draft for \$25,000, an investment that paid immediate dividends for a team that was coming off a last-place finish in its division.

Esposito helped lead the Blackhawks to first place, showcasing his butterfly style to post a 2.17 goals-against average and 15 shutouts, still a modern record for an NHL goalie. He won the Calder Trophy as the NHL's rookie of the year as well as the Vezina Trophy given to the top goaltender. He also won the Vezina in 1972 and 1974.

"Tony was one of the most important and popular figures in the history of the franchise as we near its 100th anniversary," Blackhawks chairman Rocky Wirtz said. "Four generations of our family — my grandfather Arthur, my father Bill, my son Danny and I — were blessed by his work ethic as a Hall of Fame goalie, but more importantly, by his mere presence and spirit."

The Esposito family called him a "Hall of Fame husband, father, and grandfather."

"Chicago felt like home from the time Tony first arrived in 1969, thanks to the Wirtz family and those 18,000 Blackhawks fans who treated him like family every night at the Stadium, win or lose or tie," the family said in a statement.

Esposito was from Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, just across the St. Mary's River from Michigan's Upper Peninsula, and he helped Michigan Tech to an NCAA championship in 1965. His older brother, Phil, was a star in his own right, a Hall of Fame center who played 18 seasons in the NHL.

The younger Esposito's first NHL start

was Dec. 5, 1968, against Boston — and his brother. Phil Esposito scored twice on his younger brother, but Tony made 33 saves and the game ended 2-2.

Commissioner Gary Bettman called him "a beloved member of the hockey family."

"It was Esposito's style, charisma and heart that endeared him most to hockey fans not only in Chicago but across the NHL," Bettman said. "The hockey world will miss him greatly."

Esposito helped lead Chicago to the playoffs in 14 seasons. The Blackhawks reached the Stanley Cup Final in 1971 and 1973, losing each time to his former team, Montreal.

He is Chicago's career leader with 418 wins and 74 shutouts. His overall record of 423-306-151 ranks 10th in league history. He was inducted into the Hall of Fame in 1988, joining his brother. And in 2017, he was selected by the league as one of the "100 Greatest Players in NHL History."

The Blackhawks retired Esposito's No. 35 on Nov. 20, 1988, and paid tribute to him again on March 19, 2008.

Healthy Mixon wants to lead Bengals

Associated Press

CINCINNATI — Joe Mixon's imagination is soaring right along with his confidence.

The Cincinnati Bengals' top running back has rebounded from a foot injury that sidelined him for the final 10 games of the 2020 season. He looks healthy and strong early in training camp.

And Mixon is so enthusiastic about the team's potential that he's floating a nickname for himself and the other featured offensive players, including quarterback Joe Burrow and receivers Tyler Boyd, Tee Higgins and Ja'Marr Chase.

He sees them as touchdown-scoring wonders known far and wide as the Fabulous Five.

"I was thinking about the Fantastic Four, with me, Ja'Marr, Tee and (Boyd)," the 25-year-old Mixon said. "But I can't forget about my dog Joey B, so I had to throw the Fabulous Five in there."

Don't start printing up the T-shirts just yet. Burrow is still struggling to get his bearings after major knee surgery last December. Chase, the fifth overall pick in this year's draft, has yet to play a down in the NFL. And Cincinnati's offensive line, which

will have a big say in how fabulous the five get to be, is still a work in progress.

But there is the potential for explosiveness, and Mixon sees himself being the tip of the spear again.

"That's five people that are real big-play guys, home-run guys," he said. "Everybody got to touch the ball but at the same time, I know I'm going to put the load on my back and take the initiative of carrying the team. It's always going to start up front and with me and how physical that I'm coming and playing the game. I'm going to set the tone."

A second-round draft pick in 2017, Mixon piled up more than 1,100 yards rushing in both 2018 and 2019 even as the Bengals and their offensive line flailed. Last season he had one notable game — 151 yards and two touchdowns in a 33-25 win over Jacksonville on Oct. 4 — before going down with the right foot injury two weeks later in Indianapolis.

He tried to make it back, but with the Bengals securely stowed in the AFC North basement, coaches told him to shut it down and focus on getting ready for 2021.

"Last year was definitely tough," Mixon said. "It sucked because I couldn't be there for my team. They needed me, I needed

them. I was definitely in a bad state."

Mixon, a two-down back through his four-year career with the Bengals, is also about to get more responsibility.

Cincinnati released reliable third-down back Giovani Bernard, so coaches will expect Mixon to be in the game on third down to catch passes or provide protection for Burrow, who was beaten up and finally injured seriously by pass rushers the Bengals couldn't seem to stop last season.

"Joe (Mixon) has a really unique ability because he's so big and fast and strong," offensive coordinator Brian Callahan said.

"He also catches the ball well, so there's a place for him in the pass game," Callahan said. "The third part of playing running back besides running and catching is protection. They're a huge part of protection on third down. Joe has grown and improved in that area, really through his career. It'll be asked of him a bunch this year to be able to do that."

Mixon couldn't be happier with the return of Frank Pollack as the offensive line coach/run-game coordinator. Pollack was the O-line coach in 2018 when Mixon led the AFC in rushing with 1,168 yards.

Pump the brakes: Patience key to Wilson's growth

Associated Press

FLORHAM PARK, N.J. — Practice completions and touchdowns—or the lack thereof—are far from the most important measuring sticks in Zach Wilson's development.

Two weeks into training camp, the New York Jets are tracking the rookie quarterback's overall progress. And staying patient.

Even if some fans and media want to see more. Like, right now.

"The reality is the result, especially in training camp, is a much bigger deal for you guys than it is us," coach Robert Saleh said Tuesday. "It really is."

Wilson is the new face of the franchise — along with his coach — and the No. 2 overall pick came to the Jets knowing the Big Apple spotlight would shine brightly on him.

That means every throw, even in practice, will be dissected ad nauseam. And Wilson's flashes of playmaking ability will be overstated — and then overshadowed by overreactions on sports talk radio and websites when he struggles, with some frantically trying to determine whether he'll be a bust.

Yes, just nine practices into his NFL career.

"His process is exactly where we want it to be, his study habits are exactly where we want it to be, his demeanor on the practice field is exactly where we want it to be," Saleh insisted. "But the result is ... that's a pacifier to make people happy. He's going in the direction that he needs to go. He's got the right mindset."

"He's doing everything that he needs to do and when it clicks it clicks."

In other words, the man who has made "All Gas, No Brake" the team's mantra is imploring those observers from outside the facility to pump the brakes.

Wilson has had some nice moments during training camp, but he has also made the mistakes and misfires typical of a young quarterback learning life in the pros. He has been mostly up and down since shining in his first practice of camp — after missing the team's first two sessions while having his contract worked out.

A shaky performance in front of several thousand fans in the team's scrimmage at MetLife Stadium last Saturday night had Wilson acknowledging that he was "not great" — and some panicking that perhaps the Jets picked the wrong guy.

It's a mostly knee-jerk reaction from fans — and some

media alike — who have seen a revolving door of once-promising quarterbacks come through the franchise and fizzle, seemingly for decades. They understandably want to see a flash of brilliance that becomes a consistent norm for a Jets quarterback.

On Monday, Saleh warned things are "going to get worse before it gets better" for Wilson and any other rookie quarterback starting out. But he also is impressed by how Wilson has handled things.

"He's awesome," Saleh said. "He asks questions, he's in the D-coordinator's office asking questions about scheme and he's an absolute sponge learning from mistakes. He's trying stuff. A lot of stuff you see is he's testing what he can and can't get away with, which I think is awesome."

Baylor put on probation for 4 years

Associated Press

The NCAA infractions committee said Wednesday that its yearslong investigation into the Baylor sexual assault scandal would result in four years probation and other sanctions, though the “unacceptable” behavior at the heart of the case did not violate NCAA rules.

The NCAA ruling came more than five years after the scandal broke at the world’s largest Baptist university, leading to the firing of successful football coach Art Briles, and the later departures of athletic director Ian McCaw and school president Ken Starr.

In its ruling, the NCAA said the allegations centered on conduct never before presented to the Committee on Infractions, “namely, that Baylor shielded football student-athletes from the institution’s disciplinary process and failed to report allegations of abhorrent misconduct by football student-athletes, including instances of sexual and interpersonal violence.”

The panel said Baylor admitted to moral and ethical failings in its handling of sexual violence on campus, but argued “that those failings, however egregious, did not constitute violations of NCAA legislation.”

“Ultimately, and with tremendous reluc-

tance, this panel agrees,” the ruling said.

The NCAA said the case that led to penalties involved Level II and III impermissible benefits and drug testing violations in Baylor’s football program, and Level II violations involving the institution’s student host program.

Along with the four years probation and a \$5,000 fine, Baylor will face recruiting restrictions during the 2021-22 academic year. There could also be a vacation of all records in which athletes competed while ineligible, which came during a time when Baylor won two Big 12 titles and had four 10-win seasons in a span of five years.

Dodgers put damper on Phillies’ 8-game win streak

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Max Scherzer and Aaron Nola had a pitchers’ duel ruined by rain, and Corey Seager and Max Muncy homered as the Los Angeles Dodgers ended Philadelphia’s eight-game winning streak, beating the Phillies 5-0 on Tuesday night.

Scherzer and Nola combined for 13 strikeouts over a combined 7½ innings in a scoreless matchup before heavy rain delayed the game in the bottom of the fourth inning for 1 hour, 44 minutes. Neither star pitcher returned when the game resumed.

The gripping performances ended in a whimper and Philadelphia fans booed when reliever J.D. Hammer (1-1) headed to the bullpen to warm up at the end of the delay.

Giants 8, Diamondbacks 7: LaMonte Wade Jr. scored the winning run with two outs in the ninth inning when first baseman Christian Walker failed to handle Kris Bryant’s sharp grounder, and host San Francisco beat Arizona.

The Giants won their third straight and fifth in six games, doing it the hard way after going up 5-0 in the fifth.

Rangers 5, Mariners 4 (10): Isiah Kiner-Falefa and Yonny

Hernandez hit RBI singles in the 10th inning, and Texas snapped a 14-game road losing streak.

The Rangers rallied twice to snap their six-game losing streak, taking a 3-2 lead in the ninth on rookie Adolis García’s 25th home run before a near-disastrous ninth by reliever Spencer Patton.

The Mariners have lost five of six.

Padres 6, Marlins 5: Austin Nola hit a go-ahead single in the seventh inning and host San Diego sent Miami to its fifth straight loss.

Nola had two hits and two RBIs. He extended his hitting streak to a career-best nine games.

Braves 3, Reds 2: Adam Duvall hit a two-run homer, Stephen Vogt’s bases-loaded walk in the sixth forced in the go-ahead run and host Atlanta beat Cincinnati in a matchup of second-place teams.

Drew Smyly (8-3) recovered after allowing a two-run home run to Aristides Aquino in the second inning to win his sixth straight decision. Smyly allowed two runs on only two hits and two walks and seven strikeouts in six innings.

Twins 4, White Sox 3: Wil- lians Astudillo hit a go-ahead,

two-run homer in the sixth inning off Dallas Keuchel, and host Minnesota stopped Chicago’s win streak at four games.

Rays 8, Red Sox 4: Tampa Bay’s Francisco Mejía singled with the bases loaded in the ninth and Boston’s Hunter Renfro made a costly error on the play, helping the visiting Rays extend their lead in the AL East to five games.

Cardinals 4, Pirates 1: Tommy Edman and Paul DeJong homered early, J.A. Happ combined with a trio of relievers on a one-hitter and St. Louis won at skidding Pittsburgh.

Royals 8, Yankees 4: Salvador Perez homered twice to set a career high with 29 this season, and Kansas City rallied to beat visiting New York.

Brewers 4-6, Cubs 2-3: Luis Urías had two hits during a six-run fifth-inning rally as Milwaukee completed a doubleheader sweep at Chicago.

The nightcap was delayed for an hour and 29 minutes because of rain with one out in the top of the third, which limited starter Aaron Ashby to two scoreless innings. The Brewers then used six pitchers to complete the final five innings. Miguel Sanchez (1-0) threw one pitch to get the final out in the fourth inning for the win.

In the opener, Freddy Peralta pitched effectively into the sixth inning and Avisail García smacked a go-ahead two-run homer. Willy Adames and Lorenzo Cain also went deep.

Angels 6-0, Blue Jays 3-4: Vladimir Guerrero Jr. hit an early RBI single and Toronto earned a doubleheader split at Los Angeles. Justin Upton and Phil Gosselin each had two hits and two RBIs to help the Angels win the opener.

Athletics 4, Indians 3 (10): Jed Lowrie hit an RBI double in the 10th inning and Oakland extended its winning streak to five games with a win at Cleveland.

Astros 5, Rockies 0: Jake Odorizzi and four relievers combined on a five-hit shutout, Taylor Jones had a two-run double and host Houston snapped Colorado’s four-game winning streak.

Tigers 9, Orioles 4: Willi Castro doubled, tripled and drove in three runs, and visiting Detroit dealt Baltimore its sixth straight loss in a game that included a scary collision between two Tigers outfielders.

Nationals 3, Mets 1, susp.: The series opener between the Washington and New York was suspended in the top of the second inning in New York night because of rain.