

US Navy not backing away from Taiwan

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

ABOARD THE USS RONALD REAGAN, Philippine Sea — The U.S. 7th Fleet will send more aircraft and warships past Taiwan in the coming weeks, a response to China's military exercises that have surrounded the island starting Thursday, according to the White House.

The Ronald Reagan Carrier Strike Group will also remain in the region to "monitor the situation" as Beijing continues its exercises in the wake of U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's mid-week stop in Taiwan, national security spokesman John Kirby said at a White House press conference Thursday.

China that day began a series of air force and naval exercises, including 11 ballistic missiles fired toward Taiwan, five of which came down in Japan's economic exclusion zone east of the island democracy.

"We condemn these actions, which are irresponsible and at odds with our longstanding goal of maintaining peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait and in the region," Kirby said. "China has chosen to overreact and use the speaker's visit as a pretext to in-

crease provocative military activity in and around the Taiwan Strait."

The 7th Fleet will send more ships and planes through the Taiwan Strait in coming weeks, "consistent, again, with our longstanding approach to defending freedom of the seas and international law," Kirby said.

"We will not seek, nor do we want, a crisis," he said. "At the same time, we will not be deterred from operating in the seas and the skies of the Western Pacific, consistent with international law, as we have for decades, supporting Taiwan and defending a free and open Indo-Pacific."

The 7th Fleet has sent an average of one destroyer a month through the strait so far this year.

Aboard the USS Ronald Reagan on Friday, the strike group commander said the Navy will not back away from its normal operations in the Western Pacific despite heightened tensions with any prospective rival in the region.

The Navy will not be "dissuaded, bullied or forced" by potential rivals like China, Russia or North Korea into abandoning its mission to maintain open seas in the Indo-

Pacific region, said Rear Adm. Michael Donnelly at a news conference on the carrier.

The Ronald Reagan this week steamed through the area south of Taiwan and into the Philippine Sea to about 300 miles south of its homeport, Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan.

Donnelly did not mention activity around Taiwan specifically or Pelosi's stop there Wednesday before she continued on to South Korea and Japan with a congressional delegation. China regards the island as a renegade province that must one day be reclaimed.

"Whether there's an increase — or increased perception — of activity by belligerent or coercive nations in the region, the mission of the U.S. Navy has not changed, nor is our posture or presence here in the Indo-Pacific," he said.

Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force Vice Adm. Tatsuya Fukuda told reporters aboard the Ronald Reagan that the U.S.-Japan alliance, and the relationship between their navies, is critical to the security of Japan and the wider region.

Russia naval strategy aims to challenge US supremacy

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

An ambitious new Russian maritime strategy introduced this week aims to challenge the global reach of the U.S. Navy, but it remains to be seen whether the plan is more than Moscow's standard bravado, analysts say.

The 55-page document, signed by Russian President Vladimir Putin on Sunday during the country's Navy Day celebrations, updates Russia's maritime strategy as the Kremlin wages war in Ukraine after a full-scale invasion that began Feb. 24.

Moscow wants to push back on what it sees as Western efforts to limit Russian access to the world's oceans and transportation lanes in an effort to establish U.S. naval supremacy.

The doctrine also specifies that NATO expansion toward Russia's borders is unacceptable, according to a report Sunday by Rus-

sian news agency Tass.

This week, the U.S. Senate voted to ratify NATO membership for Finland and Sweden, which responded to Russia's unprovoked invasion by relinquishing decades of neutrality and asking to join the alliance.

In a series of tweets Monday about the strategy, Samuel Bendett, an adjunct senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, said it also prioritizes environmental research, development of a secure information system in the Arctic and better technologies to develop weapons systems, among other goals.

Russia's latest maritime doctrine is not fundamentally different from earlier versions, Bendett tweeted. Russia also wants to increase activity in the Indian Ocean to better relations with India, Iran, Iraq and Saudi Arabia, Bendett noted.

"There are still questions if Russia has the resources for such an expansive commit-

ment given the ongoing war in Ukraine and the resources needed to sustain it," Bendett tweeted.

Analysts point out that Russia's fleet consists mostly of smaller ships that are out-matched by the U.S. blue water fleet, which includes 11 aircraft carriers and 92 cruisers and destroyers, among other ships.

The U.S. also maintains some 50 attack submarines, 14 ballistic missile submarines and four cruise missile submarines, according to data at USO.org.

However, Russia's small but capable nuclear submarine fleet does pose a threat that could be used against the U.S., analysts have said.

Russia has about 210 ships, of which about 55 are fully functional blue water ships and submarines, Wolfgang Puszta, a senior analyst at the Austrian Institute for European and Security Policy, said Monday on the al-Jazeera television program "Inside Story."

3 more ships with grain depart Ukraine

Associated Press

ISTANBUL — Three more ships carrying thousands of tons of corn left Ukrainian ports Friday, in the latest sign that a negotiated deal to export grain trapped since Russia invaded Ukraine nearly six months ago is slowly moving forward.

The ships bound for Ireland, the United Kingdom and Turkey follow the first grain shipment to pass through the Black Sea since the start of the war. The passage of that vessel heading for Lebanon earlier this week was the first under the breakthrough deal brokered by Turkey and the United Nations with Russia and Ukraine.

The Black Sea region is dubbed the world's breadbasket, with Ukraine and Russia key global suppliers of wheat, corn,

barley and sunflower oil that millions of impoverished people in Africa, the Middle East and parts of Asia rely on for survival.

While the shipments have raised hopes of easing a global food crisis, much of the grain that Ukraine is trying to export is used for animal feed, not for people to eat, experts say.

The three ships left Friday with over 58,000 tons of corn, but that is still a fraction of the 20 million tons of grains that Ukraine says are trapped in the country's silos and ports and that must be shipped out to make space for this year's harvest.

There is an expectation that Ukraine could produce 30% to 40% less grain over the coming next 12 months due to the war, though other estimates put that figure at

70%.

The Turkish-flagged Polarnet, carrying 12,000 tons of corn, left the Chornomorsk port destined for Karasu, Turkey. The Panama-flagged Navi Star left Odesa's port for Ireland with 33,000 tons of corn. The Maltese-flagged Rojen left Chornomorsk for the United Kingdom carrying over 13,000 tons of corn, the U.N. said.

It added that the Joint Coordination Center — run by officials from Ukraine, Russia, Turkey and the U.N. overseeing the deal signed in Istanbul last month — authorized the three ships and inspected a ship headed for Ukraine. The Barbados-flagged Fulmar S was inspected in Istanbul and is headed for the Chornomorsk port.

US, Russia to discuss swap of prisoners

Bloomberg News

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said Friday they're willing to pursue talks on a prisoner exchange involving WNBA star Brittney Griner and another jailed American.

The two top diplomats spoke separately on the sidelines of a meeting of foreign ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, a day after a Moscow court sentenced Griner to nine years in prison on drug charges. They didn't meet or speak in person during the

conference. President Joe Biden called Griner's punishment "unacceptable" and said the White House would work tirelessly in pursuit of her release.

"There is a special channel agreed upon by the presidents," Lavrov told a news conference. "Whatever is said publicly, that channel is still open."

Blinken indicated the U.S. will continue its efforts to negotiate a deal for the release of Griner, a two-time Olympic Gold medalist, and former U.S. Marine Paul Whelan, who was jailed in Russia in 2020 on spying charges he denies.

"We put forward, as you know, a substantial proposal that Russia should engage with us on," Blinken said. "What Foreign Minister Lavrov said this morning and said publicly is that they are prepared to engage through channels we've established to do just that and we'll be pursuing."

Last month, the Biden administration proposed swapping Griner and Whelan for Viktor Bout, a Russian arms dealer known as the "merchant of death" who was sentenced to 25 years in 2012, and a second Russian also held in a U.S. jail, according to a person with knowledge of the matter.

Airman charged in April attack at US base in Syria

By CAITLIN DOORBOS

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — An airman has been charged with six crimes in connection with an explosives attack in April that wounded four service members on a U.S. military base in Syria, the Air Force said Thursday.

Tech. Sgt. David D. Dezwaan Jr. faces charges of aggravated assault, dereliction of duty, destroying military property, reckless endangerment, access of a government computer with an unauthorized purpose and obtaining classified information in the alleged insider attack, Air Force spo-

keswoman Ann Stefanek said.

The charges stem from an investigation into an April 7 bombing that took place at the base known as Green Village, which is east of the Euphrates River in Syria and adjacent to major oil fields.

Four U.S. troops received "minor" injuries that included "possible traumatic brain injuries," U.S. officials said at the time.

Dezwaan was arrested June 16 when his commander made the decision to place him in pretrial confinement after reviewing the results of an investigation by the

Army Criminal Investigation Division and the Air Force Office of Special Investigations, Stefanek said at the time.

Though indirect fire was initially blamed for the incident, investigators later found evidence that suggested someone had deliberately placed explosive material in an ammunition storage room and a shower area, according to an April 15 statement by Combined Joint Task Force — Operation Inherent Resolve.

Dezwaan's preliminary hearing is scheduled for Aug. 23 at Hill Air Force Base in Utah, Stefanek said.

Unemployment drops to 3.5% as 528K jobs added

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — America's hiring boom continued last month as employers added a surprising 528,000 jobs despite raging inflation and rising anxiety about a recession.

July's hiring was up from 398,000 in June. The unemployment rate slipped to 3.5%.

The U.S. economy shrank in the first two quarters of 2022 — an informal definition of recession. But most economists believe the strong jobs market has kept the economy from slipping into a downturn.

The American job market has repeatedly defied skeptics this year. Economists had expected only 250,000 new jobs this month.

There are, of course, political implications in the numbers being released Friday: Rising prices and the risk of recession are likely to weigh on voters in November's midterm elections as President Joe Biden's Democrats seek to maintain control of Congress.

The economic backdrop is troubling: Gross domestic product — the broadest measure of economic output — fell in both the first and second quarters; consecutive GDP drops is one definition of a recession. And inflation is roaring at a 40-year high.

The resiliency of the current labor mar-

ket, especially the low jobless rate — is the biggest reason most economists don't believe a downturn has started yet, though they increasingly fear that one is on the way.

Recession is not an American problem alone.

In the United Kingdom, the Bank of England on Thursday projected that the world's fifth-largest economy would slide into recession by the end of the year.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said the administration expects the pace of hiring to fall further in the coming months because the unemployment rate is already near historic lows and fewer potential workers are available.

A slower pace of hiring and reduced levels of wage growth could also suggest that inflationary pressures are easing, but it has the White House attempting to convince the American public that less growth is a positive at a moment when Republican lawmakers are saying a recession has already started; they cite the drop in GDP over the first half of the year.

"We're expecting it to be closer to 150,000 jobs per month," Jean-Pierre said at Thursday's briefing. "This kind of job growth is consistent with the lower level of unemployment numbers that we've been seeing."

Jury orders Alex Jones to pay Sandy Hook parents over \$4M

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — A Texas jury Thursday ordered conspiracy theorist Alex Jones to pay more than \$4 million — significantly less than the \$150 million being sought — in compensatory damages to the parents of a 6-year-old boy killed in the Sandy Hook massacre, marking the first time the Infowars host has been held financially liable for repeatedly claiming the deadliest school shooting in U.S. history was a hoax.

The Austin jury must still decide how much the Infowars host should pay in punitive damages to Neil Heslin and Scarlett Lewis, whose son Jesse Lewis was among the 20 children and six educators who were killed in the 2012 attack in Newtown, Conn.

The parents had sought at least \$150 million in compensation for defamation and intentional infliction of emotional distress. Jones' attorney asked the jury to limit damages to \$8 — one dollar for each of the compensation charges they considered — and Jones himself said any award over \$2 million "would sink us."

It likely won't be the last judgment against Jones — who was not in the courtroom — over his claims that the attack was staged in the interests of increasing gun controls. A Connecticut judge has ruled against him in a similar lawsuit brought by other victims' families and an FBI agent who worked on the case. He also faces another trial in Austin.

Cops charged in raid that killed Breonna Taylor

Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — The federal government filed civil rights charges Thursday against four Louisville police officers over the drug raid that led to the death of Breonna Taylor, a Black woman whose fatal shooting helped fuel the racial justice protests that rocked the nation in 2020.

The charges — most of which stem from the faulty drug warrant used to search Taylor's home — are an effort to hold law enforcement accountable for the killing of the 26-year-old medical worker. One of the officers was acquitted of state charges earlier this year.

"Breonna Taylor should be alive today," Attorney General Merrick Garland said in announcing the charges, which include unlawful conspiracy, use of force and obstruction of justice.

The charges named former officers Joshua Jaynes and Brett Hankison, along with current officers Kelly Goodlett and Sgt. Kyle Meany. Louisville police said they are seeking to fire Goodlett and Meany.

Hankison was the only officer charged Thursday who was on the scene the night of the killing.

Taylor was shot to death by officers who knocked down her door while executing a search warrant. Taylor's boyfriend fired a shot that hit one of the officers as they came through the door, and they returned fire, striking Taylor multiple times.

Hankison, Jaynes and Meany had initial appearances Thursday in federal court before Magistrate Judge Regina Edwards, who set their bonds at \$50,000 each, according to a court clerk official. The three men face a maximum sentence of life in prison for the civil rights charges.

Goodlett has pleaded guilty to a charge of conspiracy, Taylor family attorney Ben Crump said Thursday, though records on her court proceedings were sealed. Goodlett faces up to five years in prison.

Local activists and members of Taylor's family celebrated the charges and thanked federal officials. Supporters gathered in a downtown park and chanted: "Say her name, Breonna Taylor!"

"This is a day when Black women saw equal justice in America," Crump said.

Taylor's mother, Tamika Palmer, said she has waited nearly 2 ½ years for police to be held accountable.

"Today's overdue, but it still hurts," she said.

Sinema OKs economic package changes

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Senate Democrats have agreed to eleventh-hour changes to their marquee economic legislation, they announced late Thursday, clearing the major impediment to pushing one of President Joe Biden's paramount election-year priorities through the chamber in coming days.

Sen. Kyrsten Sinema, D-Ariz., a centrist seen as the pivotal vote in the 50-50 chamber, said in a statement that she had agreed to revamping some of the measure's tax and energy provisions and was ready to "move forward" on the bill.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., said he believed his party's energy, environment, health and tax com-

promise "will receive the support of the entire" Democratic membership of the chamber. His party needs unanimity and Vice President Kamala Harris' tiebreaking vote to move the measure through the Senate over certain solid opposition from Republicans, who say the plan's tax boosts and spending would worsen inflation and damage the economy.

The announcement came as a surprise, with some expecting talks between Schumer and the mercurial Sinema to drag on for days longer without guarantee of success. Schumer said he wanted the Senate to begin voting on the legislation Saturday, after which it would begin its summer recess. Passage by the House, which Democrats control narrowly, could come

when that chamber returns briefly to Washington next week.

Democrats revealed few details of their compromise, and other hurdles remained. Still, final congressional approval would complete an astounding resurrection of Biden's wide-ranging domestic goals, though in more modest form.

Democratic infighting had embarrassed Biden and forced him to pare down a far larger and more ambitious \$3.5 trillion, 10-year version, and then a \$2 trillion alternative, leaving the effort all but dead. Instead, Schumer and Sen. Joe Manchin, the conservative maverick Democrat from West Virginia who derailed Biden's earlier efforts, unexpectedly negotiated the slimmer package two weeks ago.

Clean water becomes needed commodity in flood-ravaged Ky.

Associated Press

HINDMAN, Ky. — National Guard soldiers rushed to distribute bottled water to flood-ravaged eastern Kentucky as forecasters warned of more rain coming to the region.

In the days since historic flooding swamped the Appalachian region, the availability of water surfaced as a big concern for victims after the floodwaters badly damaged water systems. As donations poured into the region, water was a main priority, along with cleaning supplies.

"We're going to deliver water until these counties and areas beg us to stop delivering water," Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear said Thursday. "As hot as it is, with as many systems that are out, we want a mountain of water there."

National Guard soldiers have delivered more than 11,600 cases of water, the governor said, as intense heat and humidity added to the misery as people continued shoveling out from the wreckage left by flooding that struck in the middle of the night a week ago.

In Knott County, Kirsten Gomez said she's going through about five cases of water daily — for drinking and for cleaning mud-caked possessions that can be salvaged.

Her doublewide trailer was badly damaged by floodwaters from nearby Troublesome Creek. She was reconnected to the local water system Wednesday, but the wa-

ter was so "murky looking" that her family was only using it to wash themselves, she said.

Volunteers are driving through the area multiple times a day, dropping off cases of water and other essentials, she said.

Water service has been restored to many people in the region, the governor said. But about 13,500 service connections remained without water and another 41,000 service connections have boiled water advisories, Beshear said. Work is continuing on heavily damaged water systems, but other systems were "wiped out," the governor said Wednesday. In some areas, it could take weeks or even months to repair water systems, he said.

Water crews from across the state are assisting in the repairs, Beshear said.

Kentucky's bourbon distillers also stepped up by sending tankers and totes of water — usually reserved for spirits — into the flood-ravaged region, said Eric Gregory, president of the Kentucky Distillers' Association. Gregory said his group was working with state emergency officials to prioritize areas and coordinate deliveries.

"When Kentucky hurts, we hurt," Gregory said. "We're all in this together and it's our obligation as a signature industry to step up and do whatever we can for our fellow Kentuckians."

Beshear said a special legislative session will likely be needed to craft a relief package for the region.

Washington town evacuated, homes burned in wildfire

Associated Press

LIND, Wash. — A small town in Washington state was evacuated due to a fast-moving fire that burned a half-dozen homes, as crews in California made progress against the state's deadliest and largest wildfire of the year.

In Washington, the Adams County Sheriff's Office said on Facebook early Thursday afternoon that residents of Lind needed to flee due to the encroaching flames.

"At this time all residents of the town of Lind need to evacuate immediately," the sheriff's office said in the post.

Later Thursday, Sheriff Dale Wagner said six homes had burned as well as eight other structures. With the help of state and local resources, Wagner said the fire was starting to calm down and by 8 p.m. all evacuation orders had been lifted.

"They will be fighting it through the night to make sure it doesn't flare up anymore or get worse," he said, adding that firefighters were dealing with high heat and windy conditions.

He said one firefighter suffered smoke inhalation and was flown to Spokane for treatment.

The State Fire Marshal's office said the blaze had burned through about 3.9 square miles. Homes, infrastructure and crops were threatened. The cause of the fire was under investigation.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Woman admits COVID loan fraud scheme

WV CHARLESTON — A West Virginia woman has admitted accepting more than \$42,000 in paycheck protection loans under a federal COVID-19 assistance program for businesses that were not engaged in substantial activity.

Alexis Ransom, 24, of Logan, pleaded guilty Wednesday to wire fraud in federal court in Charleston.

Ransom obtained three loans that were guaranteed by the Small Business Administration under the CARES Act, which provided emergency financial assistance to Americans hit by the economic impact caused by the pandemic. The SBA would forgive the loans if the borrower established that the proceeds were used for payroll, rent or other approved expenses.

Ransom admitted she falsely stated that her two businesses were established in 2019 and had substantial income.

She obtained two paycheck protection loans of \$14,000 each for Renae's Fashion Consulting LLC and a \$14,375 loan for Momma & Me Boutique, court records showed.

Library considers new logo color scheme

MT MISSOULA — The commission that oversees the Montana State Library decided Wednesday to consider a different color scheme for its new logo after one commissioner argued the original design brought to mind a rainbow LGBTQ pride flag.

A subcommittee was appoint-

ed to develop alternatives after the first logo — which featured a prism emitting four colors — was rejected on a 4-3 vote last month.

Tammy Hall, of Bozeman, had criticized the colors during a June hearing and suggested the scheme be toned down to shades of blue, black and gray.

Last month, she said her vote in opposition to the logo had nothing to do with the colors and that she thought the logo should be evaluated as part of the state government's rebranding effort.

1 dead in Legionnaires' disease outbreak

CA NAPA — A Legionnaires' disease outbreak in California's wine country has caused one death and nearly a dozen hospitalizations since mid-July, and public health officials have found one possible source of the bacteria that causes the illness, authorities said Wednesday.

High levels of Legionella bacteria were found in a water sample taken from a cooling tower at Embassy Suites Napa Valley, although none of those who were sickened had visited or stayed at the hotel, according to a Napa County statement.

Recreational marijuana ballot measure rejected

AR LITTLE ROCK — The State Board of Election Commissioners on Wednesday blocked a proposal to legalize recreational marijuana from appearing on Arkansas' ballot this fall.

The panel rejected the popular name and ballot title for the

proposed constitutional amendment that supporters hoped to put on the November ballot. Supporters submitted more than enough valid signatures from registered voters to qualify, but the proposal still needed approval from the board to appear on the ballot.

Arkansas voters in 2016 approved a constitutional amendment legalizing medical marijuana.

The proposed amendment would allow people age 21 and older to possess up to an ounce of cannabis and would allow state-licensed dispensaries to sell recreational marijuana.

An attorney for Responsible Growth Arkansas, the group backing the proposal, said it would appeal to the state Supreme Court.

Sea turtles crawl to new nesting record

GA SAVANNAH — Rare sea turtles that spend summers laying eggs on Southern beaches have crawled to a new state record in Georgia.

The Georgia Department of Natural Resources said Wednesday that more than 3,960 loggerhead sea turtle nests have been counted since May along the Georgia coast.

That's 10 more nests than the previous state record set in 2019, and the number will likely grow. The nesting season typically continues through August.

Giant loggerhead sea turtles are protected as a threatened species under the federal Endangered Species Act. Every summer they crawl onto beaches from Florida to the Carolinas to lay their eggs. An army of volunteers in each state works to

record each nest and protect it from predators.

Ex-teacher gets 30 years for enticing kids

MO SPRINGFIELD — A former southwest Missouri high school teacher has been sentenced to 30 years in federal prison for enticing children nationwide to send him sexually suggestive images and then threatening to distribute them.

Brandon Lane McCullough, 31, of Branson, was sentenced Tuesday.

He pleaded guilty in August 2021 to three counts of the sexual exploitation of a minor and two counts of coercing and enticing a minor to engage in illicit sexual activity.

After serving 30 years without parole, he will be on lifetime supervised release. He was also ordered to pay \$204,199 in restitution to one of his victims, the Springfield News-Leader reported.

At the time of the crimes, McCullough was a business teacher at Cassville High School, 60 miles southwest of Springfield, Mo.

Federal officials said he posed as a teenager online to entice young victims across the country to send him explicit images.

He would then threaten to share the images on social media unless they sent him more explicit images and videos, they said.

So far, 11 victims have been identified but many more have not been identified, U.S. Attorney Teresa Moore said in a statement.

— From Associated Press

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Steelers' Watt focused on Super Bowl

Associated Press

LATROBE, Pa. — There are moments on the football field when T.J. Watt goes blank. The roar of the crowd drifts away. All but one of the other 21 players on the field, too.

In those moments, it's just Watt and the guy with the ball. The NFL's reigning Defensive Player of the Year can't tell when those moments will arrive. The Pittsburgh Steelers outside linebacker sheepishly can't provide you with too many details once they do.

Which explains why Watt could only offer a small smile when asked about his run-in with rookie wide receiver Calvin Austin III — all 5-foot-9 and 162 pounds of him — during a chippy practice Tuesday. Austin had taken a little pop pass from quarterback Mitch Trubisky and attempted to turn the corner.

Watt's corner. It didn't go well. Not for Austin anyway.

Watt split two blockers and proceeded to drive Austin into the turf at Chuck Noll Field. Only he wasn't done. Watt stood up and then proceeded to walk over the top of Austin while flexing, a flash of Watt at his alpha dog zenith.

Was it necessary? No. But ...

"Sometimes you black out and you're just trying to have fun, get people involved," Watt said.

Those blackouts have become more frequent as Watt evolved from "J.J.'s little brother" to one of the best pass rushers of his generation. He signed one of the richest defensive contracts in NFL history before the 2021 season, then repaid that investment by tying a league record with 22½ sacks and easily topping the voting as the

best defender in football.

It was, by nearly every metric, a historic season. Every metric but one. The one Watt knows — beyond the sacks and the splash plays and the unique brand of havoc he creates nearly every weekend in the fall — he will ultimately be measured by, not by how many pages of the team's record book he writes.

"We've got to win a Super Bowl," Watt, 27, said Wednesday.

Something his team hasn't particularly come close to since he arrived in the 2017 draft. The Steelers haven't won a playoff game during Watt's tenure, the latest setback an ultimately lopsided loss to Kansas City in January, a game that began with Watt returning a fumble on a botched trick play 26 yards for a touchdown to give Pittsburgh a lead that eventually vanished under an avalanche of mistakes by a defense that looked worn out.

The blowout marked the final game of quarterback Ben Roethlisberger's Hall of Fame career. It also signaled an identity shift of sorts for a team whose fortunes for most of the decade relied heavily on Roethlisberger's right arm.

Not in 2022. The offense figures to be a work in progress with free-agent signee Trubisky facing the daunting task of trying to replace a franchise icon. Pittsburgh's best chance at contending in a potentially loaded AFC North will require the defense as a whole to re-discover the swagger that was hard to come by at times last fall.

It's a swagger Watt and defensive end Cam Heyward — two of the three longest-tenured players on the roster — have been trying to imbue during the opening days of

practice. The two veterans have served as the tip of the spear in a handful of dust-ups that remain a training camp fixture, jawing — and sometimes more than jawing — at the offensive players in white jerseys during practice.

For Watt, the occasional post-play flex is his way of leading by example, a signal to younger players that it's OK to enjoy doing your job.

"It's very tough to make a play (so) when you make one, you've got to celebrate," he said.

A self-professed football nerd who grew up in perhaps the NFL's first family of football nerdiness, the rigors of camp are something to be enjoyed, not endured. He missed the physicality of it last year when he skipped the full-contact portion of practices, a business decision he made to protect his health until he and the Steelers ironed out a new deal.

Watt is well-versed in Steelers lore. He knows he's the next link in a chain of great Pittsburgh linebackers that goes back half a century. Many of the legends whose company he is trying to keep have multiple championship rings.

Watt is still searching for his first. He knows he can hardly do it alone, one of the many reasons the formerly reticent pass-rushing prodigy is more visible — and more audible.

"In order to really help guys out and be a leader, you have to be very comfortable with who you are in this defense, in the locker room, everything," he said. "I'm very comfortable. I feel like I have so much more to give to the game."

Attorney urges NFL to 'do the right thing' with Watson

Associated Press

HOUSTON — A lawyer representing two dozen women who have accused Deshaun Watson of sexual assault or harassment said NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell has a chance to "do the right thing" now that the league has appealed a six-game suspension for the Cleveland Browns quarterback.

"Every victim of sexual assault is watching Roger Goodell and the NFL right now. ... Mr. Goodell, what will you do? It's never too late to do the right thing," attorney Tony Buzbee, who represents the women who sued Watson over their allegations, said Thursday. "That's what these women and those watching are expecting."

The NFL has sought to keep Watson off the field in 2022 and appealed an independent disciplinary officer's decision that fell short of the league's recommended penalty.

The appeal gives Goodell or a designee the authority to increase Watson's penalty. On Thursday, Goodell named former New Jersey Attorney General Peter C. Harvey as his designee to hear the appeal. Buzbee spoke before the league made the announcement.

Afterward, he told CBS: "I've said and will say: Bravo to the NFL. It's never too late to do the right thing."

The NFL is seeking an indefinite suspension of at least one year plus a significant

fine, a person familiar with the filing told The Associated Press on Wednesday.

Former federal judge Sue L. Robinson issued her ruling Monday. She concluded Watson violated the league's personal conduct policy after being accused by the women of sexual misconduct during massage treatments while he played for Houston.

Watson, who was with the Texans for four seasons before sitting out last season and then being traded to Cleveland in March, recently settled 23 of 24 lawsuits filed by the women. Two grand juries in Texas declined to indict Watson on criminal complaints brought by 10 of the women.

Watson has denied any wrongdoing.

Raiders whip Jaguars in Hall of Fame Game

Associated Press

CANTON, Ohio — The Las Vegas Raiders gave coach Josh McDaniels a successful homecoming in his debut on their sideline.

Josh Jacobs, rookie Zamir White and Austin Walter ran well on a rain-soaked field and the Raiders routed Jacksonville 27-11 in the Hall of Fame game Thursday night, spoiling coach Doug Pederson's first game with the Jaguars.

McDaniels grew up in this historic football town and played for his father, Thom McDaniels, at Canton McKinley High School on this field at Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium, known as Fawcett Stadium during his time as varsity quarterback and kicker.

"It was a unique opportunity, very grateful that I had it," McDaniels said. "It's the first time I've been to this Hall of Fame game in 22 years. To have an opportunity to do that with him here, my family and people

who helped me along the way, it was a special night for them. I really savored it."

Derek Carr and Davante Adams warmed up but they didn't get a chance to play their first game together since Fresno State. Carr, the three-time Pro Bowl quarterback, and Adams, the All-Pro receiver acquired in a blockbuster trade with Green Bay, were among many starters who sat out for both teams.

Jacksonville's Trevor Lawrence wore a backward cap on the sideline while third-string quarterback Jake Luton started.

The NFL's first preseason game began 40 minutes late due to severe weather that forced fans to seek shelter.

As expected, things got sloppy after the opening kickoff.

Top pick Travon Walker committed a roughing-the-passer penalty on Raiders backup QB Jarrett Stidham on the first play from scrimmage. Walker later

registered a sack.

The highlight of the game didn't count. Jacksonville's Willie Johnson returned a punt 88 yards for a score on the final play of the third quarter but the play was nullified by a holding penalty.

The 46-year-old McDaniels begins his second stint as an NFL head coach after winning six Super Bowls as an assistant under Bill Belichick with the New England Patriots. McDaniels was 11-17 with Denver in 2009-10.

Pederson also begins his second turn as an NFL head coach after sitting out 2021. He guided the Philadelphia Eagles to the franchise's first Super Bowl victory and three playoff appearances in five seasons from 2016-20.

Pederson has already changed the culture in Jacksonville following a disastrous 2021 season under Urban Meyer, who lasted only 11 months. He's tasked with trying to turn one of

the league's worst organizations into a winner. The Jaguars have had one winning season in the last 14 years.

"You want a place where everybody enjoys coming to work and they enjoy the environment, the people, understanding we're going to put in the hard work," Pederson said. "You can't substitute for hard work and preparation as you strive for a championship and these guys have bought in."

Daniel Carlson connected on field goals of 32 and 55 yards to give the Raiders a 6-0 lead in the first quarter. Ameer Abdullah scored on an 8-yard run in the second quarter and Stidham scrambled 12 yards for a touchdown to make it 20-0 late in the first half.

Down 27-3, the Jaguars found the end zone when Kyle Slotter tossed a 5-yard TD pass to Nathan Cottrell late in the fourth quarter. Cottrell ran up the middle for the two-point conversion.

Judge shortens road to decide NFL discrimination suit

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A judge on Thursday made it likely she'll rule in weeks rather than months whether NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell gets to decide the merits of racial discrimination claims made by Black coaches against the league and its teams, saying an effort to gather more evidence seems like "an impermissible fishing expedition."

U.S. District Judge Valerie Caproni said in a written ruling that lawyers for coaches Brian Flores, Steve Wilks and Ray Horton cannot gather additional evidence from defendants to support their arguments that the lawsuit in Manhattan federal court should remain in court rather than be sent to arbitration.

Her ruling makes it likely

that a decision on whether to move the case to arbitration or let it remain in Manhattan federal court will be decided in weeks rather than months.

"Because Plaintiffs should know whether they entered into any other contracts or agreements that would affect their agreement to arbitrate, the Court can only assume that they are attempting to embark on an impermissible fishing expedition," Caproni wrote.

Still, the judge said lawyers for the coaches may well be able to argue that the proposed arbitrator is so biased against them that the motion to compel arbitration should not be granted, but they do not need discovery to do so. In legal cases, "discovery" references evidence such as emails and text messages that lawyers try to get from

their opponents to strengthen their arguments.

Flores, who was fired in January as head coach of the Miami Dolphins and is now an assistant coach with the Pittsburgh Steelers, filed the lawsuit in February, saying the league was "rife with racism" even as it publicly condemns it. The other coaches later joined the lawsuit, which sought unspecified damages and class-action status.

The NFL and six of its teams maintain the lawsuit is "without merit" and is required to go to arbitration, where Goodell would be the arbitrator, according to the terms laid out in employment contracts and the NFL's constitution.

Caproni wrote that courts have not historically allowed lawyers to gather evidence pri-

or to deciding whether a case is required to go to arbitration.

"An agreement to arbitrate is binding on the parties unless the agreement is invalid under state contract law," she wrote. "Thus, on a motion to compel arbitration, the Court's analysis is generally limited to determining whether there is a valid agreement to arbitrate, whether one party has failed to perform its duties under that agreement, and whether the agreement, properly interpreted, encompasses the dispute at hand."

Attorneys Douglas H. Wigdor and John Elefterakis, representing Flores, said in a statement that they are "confident that we will defeat the efforts of the NFL to move this matter into a private and confidential arbitration behind closed doors."

Dodgers win despite losing Kershaw

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Clayton Kershaw left his start with low back pain and the Los Angeles Dodgers went on to beat the San Francisco Giants 5-3 on Thursday to complete a four-game sweep.

Kershaw appeared to feel discomfort while he was warming up before the bottom of the fifth inning. The three-time NL Cy Young Award winner winced and pointed to his dugout, and then walked off the field gingerly with a trainer.

Mookie Betts and Trea Turner homered for Los Angeles, which completed its first four-game sweep in San Francisco since 1977. The majors-leading Dodgers have won eight straight games against the Giants, matching the longest streak in Los Angeles history.

Chris Martin (2-0) got the win, and Craig Kimbrel earned his 20th save.

J.D. Davis hit his first home run with the Giants. Jakob Junis (4-3) allowed three runs in 3⅓ innings.

Athletics 8, Angels 7: Los Angeles tied a major league record with seven solo homers, in-

cluding two by Shohei Ohtani, but still lost to visiting Oakland.

Rockies 7, Padres 3: Ryan McMahon hit a three-run homer off Joe Musgrove (8-5) and drove in five runs for visiting Colorado, which beat Juan Soto and San Diego to avoid a five-game sweep.

Astros 6, Guardians 0: Justin Verlander pitched six scoreless innings for his MLB-leading 15th victory, Chas McCormick and Martin Maldonado each homered and had three RBIs, and AL West-leading Houston beat host Cleveland.

Mets 6, Braves 4: Deadline acquisition Tyler Naquin homered twice in his home debut, Edwin Diaz locked down his first two-inning save as a pro and host New York beat Atlanta to open a pivotal five-game series between the NL East rivals.

Pirates 5, Brewers 4 (10): Bryan Reynolds raced home on a wild pitch with one out in the 10th inning, helping host Pittsburgh complete a three-game sweep.

Reynolds tied it earlier in the inning when he hit a ground-rule double down the right-field line off Matt Bush (2-2). Rey-

nolds moved to third on a fly to right field by Ke'Bryan Hayes and raced home when a pitch from Bush slipped by catcher Victor Caratini to give the Pirates their third comeback win over first-place Milwaukee in as many days.

Cardinals 4-7, Cubs 3-2: Newly acquired José Quintana won in his debut with his new team, Tyler O'Neill and Nolan Arenado homered and host St. Louis beat Chicago to complete a doubleheader sweep.

The Cardinals won the opener as Lars Nootbaar hit a tying sacrifice fly in the seventh inning and a game-ending RBI single in the ninth.

Rays 7, Tigers 2: Brandon Lowe had a two-run home run among his three hits and drove in three runs as visiting Tampa Bay beat Detroit.

Randy Arozarena had four hits for Tampa Bay, which won back-to-back games for the first time since the All-Star break.

Phillies 5, Nationals 4: Noah Syndergaard won his Phillies debut despite giving up four runs, Alec Bohm hit a three-run home run and host Philadelphia won a rain-shortened, five-in-

ning game over Washington.

Blue Jays 9, Twins 3: Vladimir Guerrero Jr. hit a three-run homer, Teoscar Hernández homered for the second consecutive day and visiting Toronto cruised past Minnesota.

Rangers 3, White Sox 2: Meibrys Vilorio had a tiebreaking pinch-hit single in the seventh inning and host Texas beat Chicago to become the first team since 1986 to have two of its first-round picks make their big league debuts as starters in the same game.

Left-hander Cole Ragans, who twice had Tommy John surgery after being the Rangers' first-round pick in 2016, allowed one unearned run over five innings in his debut. Bubba Thompson, the team's first pick in 2017, was 1-for-3 with a bunt single in his first big league game after being called up earlier in the day to play left field and bat ninth.

Royals 7, Red Sox 3: Salvador Perez hit a line drive, three-run homer run to break open a close game and finished with four RBIs, leading host Kansas City over Boston.

Flames, Huberdeau agree to \$84M, 8-year extension

Associated Press

CALGARY, Alberta — The Calgary Flames and recently acquired forward Jonathan Huberdeau have agreed to an \$84 million, eight-year contract extension.

Huberdeau, 29, came to Calgary from the Florida Panthers with defenseman MacKenzie Weegar, forward Cole Schwindt and a conditional 2025 first-round pick last month for star forward Matthew Tkachuk.

Huberdeau finished last season with 30 goals and 85 assists for 115 points. His point total had him tied for second in the NHL, while his 85 assists were a

league best.

Cabrera uncertain about playing in 2023

DETROIT — Miguel Cabrera says he may end his likely Hall of Fame career at the end of this season.

The 39-year-old Detroit Tigers star mused on the subject Thursday amid a slump through the dog days of summer. Cabrera joined the 3,000-hit/500-homer club earlier in the season, and was hitting .308 as recently as July 8.

Plagued by lower-body problems that have been a constant

issue in recent seasons, he was hitting .132 with three extra-base hits in his last 20 games entering Thursday's action.

"You've got to understand your body, I understand mine and my place on this team," he said before the Tigers hosted the Tampa Bay Rays on Thursday. "I've got to talk to my agent, the GM, I've got to talk to everybody to see the plan for next year."

"Right now, we don't know. We're focused on today."

In other baseball news:

■ Major League Baseball plans to return to London next year for the first time since

2019.

The league announced Thursday that the St. Louis Cardinals and Chicago Cubs will play a two-game series on June 24-25, 2023, at London Stadium. The NL Central rivals were supposed to play in London in 2020, but the games were canceled because of the coronavirus pandemic.

MLB last played in London in 2019, when the New York Yankees swept a two-game set against the Boston Red Sox in June at London Stadium. Those were also MLB's first regular-season games played in Europe.