

Reservists still waiting for housing money

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — The U.S. Army continues to defy an order by its highest review board to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars in denied housing benefits to a contingent of reservists, lawyers for the soldiers said, sending the 4-year-old dispute back to federal court for resolution.

“The Army willfully chose to disregard these governing provisions, thus elevating its conduct to the level of gross negligence,” Patrick Hughes, an attorney representing the seven plaintiffs, wrote in U.S. Court of Federal Claims filings this month.

It’s a new development in a case that one year ago appeared to have been resolved. The Army Board of Corrections determined in August 2021 that the service broke federal law in denying dual housing allowances to reservists temporarily sent to Germany.

Hughes said that his seven clients should have been paid a combined total of about \$500,000.

At issue is a contention by Army finance officials that reservists who mobilize from the U.S. for assignments abroad aren’t entitled to a basic housing allowance for their American residence and an overseas housing allowance if the Army fails to provide on-post accommodations.

Reservists typically must take an extended leave of absence from their civilian jobs to deploy overseas, but their rent and mortgage bills back home don’t get stopped.

The review board deemed the Army’s argument an erroneous interpretation of the law that led to “unjust actions” against reservists. They were subjected to criminal fraud probes, denied promotions and put in-

to debt as the service sought to recoup hundreds of thousands of dollars in allowances that had been paid.

The board ordered the Army to repay the seven soldiers no later than October 2021. It also imposed other corrective steps, such as deletion of all negative findings, letters of reprimand and files stored in Army criminal databases related to the cases.

But Hughes said in the new court filings that only one of the seven reservists in the case has received reimbursement.

In addition, the Army hasn’t confirmed in writing that his clients’ records were wiped clean of negative findings, Hughes said.

Since the review board’s ruling, several other reservists have filed suit, and the various claims were consolidated into one case.

Hundreds of possibly thousands of reservists have been denied proper housing benefits because of the Army’s faulty interpretation of the federal Joint Travel Regulation, according to Hughes.

Furthermore, government attorneys changed their argument from the original contention that dual allowances are prohibited. Now, the Army concedes that it may pay unmarried reservists a dual allowance but isn’t required to do so.

Government attorneys also contend that the Defense Finance and Accounting Service ruled that the Army can’t pay dual allowances for reservists with family members.

For years, reservists were paid the dual allowances, but in 2016, Army finance officials in Europe abruptly changed their interpretation of the Joint Travel Regulation.

As a result, reservists were permitted only one allowance from that point on. And the

change was applied retroactively, so Army finance officials began targeting those who had received dual payments.

The affected soldiers contend that the effort was an illegal scheme by Army finance officials aimed at finding savings at the expense of reservists.

The Defense Finance and Accounting Service has asserted that it may only pay reserve members with dependents in the same fashion as active-duty members, through a family separation basic allowance for housing overseas.

That separation allowance, however, can’t be paid if a reservist’s family member spends more than 90 days in the same area where the reservist has been mobilized, government attorneys argue.

DFAS determined six of the plaintiffs with dependents could be eligible for relief as intended by the Army board’s decision under the family separation allowance, government attorneys said.

But to do that, DFAS would need to know where family members were during the reservists’ mobilization, which the Army board did not address.

The reservists counter that the government’s argument conflates rules that apply to active-duty personnel with those for reservists.

While active-duty soldiers are sent on permanent duty station assignments with household goods moves, reservists are generally mobilized on temporary assignments that don’t allow for the relocation of property and family members.

Now, it is up to the federal court to render a decision or set a date for oral arguments to be heard.

Air Force Special Operations grounds fleet of Ospreys

By JOSEPH DITZLER
Stars and Stripes

The Air Force Special Operations Command has grounded its fleet of CV-22 Ospreys over a mechanical problem that first surfaced in 2017, according to a command spokeswoman.

Special operations commander Lt. Gen. Jim Slife ordered a safety stand-down Tuesday, citing four in-flight incidents, including two in the past six weeks, according to a statement

emailed Thursday to Stars and Stripes by Lt. Col. Rebecca Heyse.

The command identified a problem with “hard clutch engagement during flight,” according to Heyse’s statement.

“In the coming days, the AFSOC staff will work with the Joint Program Office and industry partners to fully understand this issue and develop risk control measures to mitigate the likelihood of catastrophic outcomes,” her

statement reads. “Ultimately, the goal is to determine a viable long term materiel solution.”

Heyse did not say how long the stand-down may last.

The clutch inside a gearbox that connects one of the CV-22’s two Rolls-Royce Liberty AE1107C engines to the propeller rotor is slipping for an unknown reason, Heyse told Breaking Defense, which first reported the stand-down on Wednesday.

GOP blasts Biden for chaotic Afghan exit

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Biden administration was at fault for the chaotic withdrawal of U.S. troops from Afghanistan last year that stranded Afghan allies and forced veterans groups to assist with a haphazard evacuation effort, according to a report published Wednesday by House Republicans.

The report, produced by Republican members of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, accuses the White House and State Department of failing to plan for the Taliban's swift takeover of the country, ignoring the recommendations of Pentagon officials who wanted to maintain a small force on the ground and botching a rushed evacuation.

The last American troops departed Afghanistan on Aug. 30, 2021, following a tumultuous mass airlift of nearly 130,000 U.S. citizens and Afghans vulnerable to retribution from the Taliban. Army Gen. Mark Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and other top military advisers told lawmakers last year that they would have preferred to maintain a U.S. force of 2,500 in the country.

"Following the evacuation debacle, the committee minority believes America's standing in the world has been degraded, the U.S. is less safe than it was before and those Afghans most at-risk of Taliban reprisals remain trapped in Afghanistan," the report states.

Republicans said they interviewed people who were on the ground in Afghanistan's capital city of Kabul, reviewed hundreds of situational reports and internal memos, and took fact-finding trips to Pakistan, the United Arab Emirates and Qatar.

They said they were unable to complete a thorough investigation due to stonewalling from the State Department and named 34 current and former officials who are likely to be subpoenaed if Republicans win control of the House in the midterm elections in November.

Ned Price, the State Department's spokesman, said Monday that Congress members and staff received more than 150 briefings on the withdrawal, the status of Afghan women and girls, relocation operations, counterterrorism, talks with the Taliban and other issues.

"We consistently stayed until we had ex-

hausted all of their questions from both Republicans and Democrats on the committee," he said.

Price said the report overlooked, ignored, misrepresented and got several facts wrong, namely that the administration of President Joe Biden could have reneged on the 2020 Doha peace agreement between the U.S. and the Taliban.

"When this administration came into office, we inherited an agreement that the last administration had negotiated just about a year [earlier]," Price said. "As we said at the time, it wasn't an agreement that we precisely would have negotiated, but it's one that we inherited."

The report offers a detailed account of the end of a 20-year offensive in Afghanistan that killed 2,300 U.S. military personnel, wounded another 20,000 and cost almost \$1 trillion, according to Defense Department estimates. More than 775,000 American troops served in the war.

The report also blames poor decision-making for the war's last casualties, the 13 service members and 170 Afghans killed in a suicide bombing at Kabul's airport during the last days of evacuation. Republicans contend those lives could have been spared if the U.S. agreed to manage security of Kabul as the Taliban had proposed.

"The chaos at the gates and the Taliban's inability to control the perimeter meant that U.S. military personnel were closely packed together as they sought to screen would-be evacuees, placing them in a more vulnerable situation that was exploited by the bomber, contributing to the high number of casualties," the report states.

Marine Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, then-commander of U.S. Central Command, has repeatedly dismissed the Taliban's offer as insincere and said the U.S. did not have the resources to undertake such a mission.

Securing the Kabul airport alone proved to be a struggle as thousands flocked to U.S. aircraft to escape the Taliban, some clinging to landing gear and falling to their deaths. Republicans criticized U.S. officials for urging desperate Afghans to make their way to the airport even though it was at full capacity and entry gates were closed.

The report states only 36 consular officers from the State Department were on the ground to screen more than 124,000 evacuees, amounting to "roughly one consular

officer for every 3,444 evacuees."

The slow processing led staffers and advisers for senior officials such as Vice President Kamala Harris, first lady Jill Biden, and an unnamed member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to reach out to outside veterans groups for help, according to the report. Jake Sullivan, the national security adviser, and other officials directly contacted military officers in Kabul to request aid for specific at-risk Afghans, one military officer told Republican committee members.

"The fact that high-level members of the administration felt the need to go to a volunteer organization and tactical-level commanders on the ground as opposed to utilizing the State Department's or other government entities' formal internal processes and chains of command underscores how critical outside groups became to the evacuation effort, even with thousands of U.S. military personnel on the ground," the report states.

Republicans said veterans groups and other volunteers developed their own procedures to speed up the evacuation, creating special signs with distinct symbols and phrases, code words and other visual signals to allow American service members to pluck select evacuees out of the teeming crowds.

The volunteer groups also stepped in to clothe, feed and shelter tens of thousands of Afghans left behind. Many of the volunteers were veterans who drained their 401k retirement plans, quit or took leave from their jobs to fund the operation of a safe house network, according to the report.

Republicans said they are particularly concerned about a "significant" number of Afghan commandos and other special forces who remained behind and are in danger of being recruited by foreign adversaries. They charged that the Biden administration has yet to put a plan in place to prioritize their evacuation and said some have crossed into Iran as a result.

"These commandos are trained, highly trained, on how we do signals intelligence, how we do human intelligence, how we operate," Rep. Michael Waltz, R-Fla., said in the report. "We know that the Taliban are hunting them down. They are seeking to force them through coercion to hand over that information so that they can use it and they can understand how we operate."

Mainor now leads Navy arm in Indo-Pacific

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — Gusts of wind and rain lashed the aft deck of the destroyer USS Benfold as command of the Navy's largest destroyer squadron passed Thursday to its deputy commodore.

Capt. Walter Mainor relieved Capt. Chase Sargeant as commanding officer of Destroyer Squadron 15 during a ceremony aboard the Benfold.

As Task Force 71, the squadron is the 7th Fleet's main battle arm. As part of the Ronald Reagan Carrier Strike Group, the warships provide the USS Ronald Reagan with seagoing escorts.

As squadron commander, Mainor has at his direction eight destroyers armed with the guided-missile Aegis Combat System.

The individual ships make frequent freedom-of-navigation patrols around contested island chains in the South China Sea and transits of the Taiwan Strait. Both operations show U.S. resistance to maritime claims in the area, particularly by China.

China concluded a week of naval and air force exercises around Taiwan on Aug. 11, a response to a U.S. congressional visit to Taiwan. Beijing also reasserted in an Aug. 10 white paper its willingness to reclaim Taiwan by force.

With tempers on both sides of the strait still warm, 7th Fleet commander Vice Adm. Karl Thomas laid out for Mainor his responsibility.

"I think it's safe to say that our rules-based international order is now significantly threatened,"

Thomas said during the ceremony. "What you do now matters, you can give our president the ability to deter the aggressors and ensure a free and open world — never forget that."

The squadron command element has 58 officers and sailors; the eight ships have approximately 300 crew members. Mainor will be responsible for all surface operations between the International Date Line and the central Indian Ocean.

Sargeant, of Lakeland, Fla., took command in February 2021. Under his leadership, ships in the squadron made more than 20 freedom-of-navigation operations and 25 passes through the Taiwan Strait.

"I would put this small, motley crew of dedicated service warriors up against any staff, anywh-

ere in any navy," he said during the ceremony.

Mainor, a native of Alabama, was deputy commodore, the squadron second-in-command, just as Sargeant was before he took command. During the ceremony, Mainor thanked Sargeant for his service as his commanding officer.

"Chase, your leadership and passion for this [area of responsibility] is unparalleled and this theater is better for it," he said. "Not only did you further enhance the capabilities and tactics of DESRON 15, but you've also built and led a new task force. It's been a pleasure to work alongside you."

Sargeant's next assignment will take him to the Chief of Naval Operations' plans and policies office in Washington, D.C.

Navy wife convicted of defrauding VA of \$170K

By ALEXANDER RIEDEL
Stars and Stripes

A Maryland woman who joined a family scheme that defrauded the Department of Veterans Affairs of at least \$1 million was convicted of federal charges and now faces up to 15 years in prison.

Mary Francis Biggs, 65, was found guilty Monday of conspiracy to commit fraud and theft of government property. The jury concluded that Biggs had colluded with her daughter Angela Farr, a Navy veteran, to obtain \$170,000 in disability benefits in her husband's name. Biggs and Farr fabricated dozens of documents and submitted fraudulent medical claims to the VA requesting disability benefits on behalf of the Navy veteran, who is Farr's father. Farr pleaded guilty in March to organizing the conspiracy with her ex-husband, Army veteran Michael Vincent Pace. All told, Farr bilked the government out of more than \$475,000.

As part of the conspiracy, Biggs

and Farr claimed that the unidentified Navy veteran was "home-bound and required full-time assistance for basic tasks such as eating, bathing, and dressing," according to court documents.

It's unclear when or how much he learned about the fraud.

Based on the fake paperwork, the VA assessed a 100% service-connected disability and allotted Biggs' husband a special monthly stipend. Meanwhile, he was employed as a Navy civilian supervising a logistics unit of 25 people.

Biggs first swindled the VA into declaring her as her husband's financial fiduciary in 2017 after submitting fraudulent evidence to show that he couldn't manage his own finances because of the severity of his alleged disabilities, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office statement. As his trustee, Biggs then collected his VA payments and spent the money on daily living expenses, cruise vacations and a kitchen renovation, according to prosecutors.

China decries planned US-Taiwan trade talks

Associated Press

HUALIEN, Taiwan — The U.S. government will hold trade talks with Taiwan in a sign of support for the island democracy that China claims as its own territory, prompting Beijing to warn Thursday it will take action if necessary to "safeguard its sovereignty."

The announcement of trade talks comes after Beijing fired missiles into the sea to intimidate Taiwan after U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi this month became the highest-ranking American official to visit the island in 25 years.

Chinese President Xi Jinping's government criticized the planned talks as a violation of its stance that Taiwan has no right to foreign relations. It warned Washington not to encourage the island to try to make its de facto independence permanent, a step Beijing says would lead to war.

"China firmly opposes this," Ministry of Commerce spokesperson Shu Jueting said. She called on Washington to "fully re-

spect China's core interests."

Also Thursday, Taiwan's military held a drill with missiles and cannons simulating a response to a Chinese missile attack.

Taiwan and China split in 1949 after a civil war and have no official relations but are bound by billions of dollars of trade and investment. The island never has been part of the People's Republic of China, but the ruling Communist Party says it is obliged to unite, by force if necessary.

President Joe Biden's coordinator for the Indo-Pacific region, Kurt Campbell, said last week that trade talks would "deepen our ties with Taiwan" but stressed policy wasn't changing. The United States has no diplomatic relations with Taiwan, its ninth-largest trading partner, but maintains extensive informal ties.

Taiwan's Foreign Ministry expressed "high welcome" for the talks, which it said will lead to a "new page" in U.S. relations.

Trump CFO pleads guilty in tax evasion case

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A top executive at former President Donald Trump's family business pleaded guilty Thursday to evading taxes in a deal that could potentially make him a star witness against the company at a trial this fall.

Trump Organization CFO Allen Weisselberg pleaded guilty to all 15 of the charges he faced in the case.

In a low, somewhat hoarse voice, he admitted taking in over \$1.7 million worth of untaxed perks — including school tuition for his grandchildren, free rent for a Manhattan apartment and lease payments for a luxury car — and explicitly keeping some of the plums off

the books.

Judge Juan Manuel Merchan agreed to sentence Weisselberg to five months in New York City's Rikers Island jail complex, although he will be eligible for release much earlier if he behaves well behind bars. The judge said Weisselberg will have to pay nearly \$2 million in taxes, penalties and interest and complete five years of probation.

The plea bargain also requires Weisselberg to testify truthfully as a prosecution witness when the Trump Organization goes on trial in October on related charges. The company is accused of helping Weisselberg and other executives avoid income taxes by failing to re-

port their full compensation accurately to the government. Trump himself is not charged in the case.

Weisselberg said nothing as he left court, offering no reply when a journalist asked whether he had any message for Trump.

Weisselberg's lawyer Nicholas Gravante Jr. said his client pleaded guilty "to put an end to this case and the yearslong legal and personal nightmares it has caused for him and his family."

"We are glad to have this behind him," the lawyer added.

Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg said in a statement that Weisselberg's plea "directly implicates the Trump Organization in a wide range of crim-

inal activity and requires Weisselberg to provide invaluable testimony in the upcoming trial against the corporation."

"We look forward to proving our case in court against the Trump Organization," he added.

Weisselberg's sentencing won't happen until after the trial of the Trump Organization, which is facing tax fraud charges punishable by a fine of double the amount of unpaid taxes, or \$250,000, whichever is larger.

Trump has decried the New York investigations as a "political witch hunt" and has said his company's actions were standard practice in the real estate business and in no way a crime.

Giuliani says he 'satisfied' obligation with Ga. probe

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Rudy Giuliani said Wednesday that he had "satisfied his obligation" after facing hours of questioning Wednesday before a special grand jury in Atlanta as a target of an investigation into attempts by former President Donald Trump and others to overturn his 2020 election defeat in Georgia.

In an interview with The Associated Press, Giuliani said Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis ended his appearance by saying he had "satisfied his obligation under the subpoena."

"So I was very happy that I satisfied my obligation," he said.

Speaking upon his return to New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport, Giuliani didn't provide any additional details about his appearance or testimony, including the type of questions he was asked. He was pushed through the terminal in a wheelchair alongside his lawyer, Bob Costello.

Giuliani's attorneys tried to delay his appearance before the special grand jury, saying he was unable to fly due to heart stent surgery in early July. On Wednesday, Giuliani said "my plane ride was OK," noting that it was his first since the procedure.

Costello said the session, which lasted from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. with a half-hour lunch, "went very well. No disputes." Costello did not immediately address whether Giuliani answered questions or declined.

"Everyone was a lady or gentleman. Professional," he wrote in a text message, adding that Willis came out to greet Giuliani and his lawyers at the end.

The investigation by the Democratic prosecutor has brought heightened scrutiny to the desperate and ultimately failed efforts to overturn Joe Biden's 2020 election win. It's one of several investigations into Trump's actions in office as he lays the groundwork for another run at the White House in 2024.

Witnesses: Duo was eager to kidnap Mich. governor

Associated Press

Two men charged with conspiring to kidnap Michigan Gov. Gretchen Whitmer in 2020 were very eager to move forward and fully onboard with the plan, two key witnesses testified Wednesday.

The witnesses, Ty Garbin and Kaleb Franks, are vital for the government's case because they, too, were arrested but pleaded guilty and agreed to cooperate.

Garbin and Franks downplayed the influence of two FBI informants who trained with the group. They didn't know their real roles at the time but said they couldn't recall the operatives proposing that Whitmer should be kidnapped.

"Not that I saw, no," Garbin told jurors in federal court in Grand Rapids, Mich.

Adam Fox and Barry Croft Jr. are on trial for a second time on conspiracy charges. A jury in April was unable to reach a unanimous verdict but acquitted two other men in-

involved.

Tension between two defense lawyers and the judge emerged when the lawyers were each limited to 25 minutes to cross-examine Franks. With the jury gone for the day, Joshua Blanchard said the cap was unconstitutional, particularly because Fox and Croft face possible life sentences if convicted and there were no restrictions on prosecutors.

"This isn't dragging on," Blanchard said at the end of the trial's seventh day.

"The court has been interjecting in the defense case," he added. "It has not been interjecting in the government's case. And it's creating a perception, I think, among the jurors that the court has a preference for how this case ends."

U.S. District Judge Robert Jonker defended his decision, saying there was no need for certain questions to be "teed up over and over again." He complained about the trial's pace last week.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Gator hunting starts with expanded time, weapons

FL ORLANDO — Florida's alligator hunting season began this week with new rules expanding the time and weapons that can be used.

The new rules expanded alligator hunting to 24 hours a day, instead of the previous 17 hours a day, primarily at night and early morning, that had been allowed.

Additionally, hunters now will be allowed to use pneumatic air-bows attached to a restraining line to hunt the alligators. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission says the pneumatic air-bows are easier to use for people with mobility challenges and young people.

Cops: Ring moved \$22M in catalytic converters

OR PORTLAND — Police in suburban Portland said they arrested a crime ring leader responsible for trafficking more than 44,000 catalytic converters stolen from vehicles on the West Coast since 2021.

Detectives said they identified Brennan Doyle, 32, as the leader of the operation and searched his Lake Oswego home, along with seven other properties. The detectives seized over 3,000 catalytic converters, hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash, a high-end car and jewelry, Oregon Public Broadcasting reported.

Doyle and his associates are accused of stealing catalytic converters from vehicles along the West Coast, Beaverton police spokesperson Matt Hen-

derson said.

The street value of the parts stolen and trafficked was estimated to be over \$22 million.

At least 12 other people face charges in connection within the operation, police said.

Monkey business behind 911 call from zoo

CA SAN LUIS OBISPO — The San Luis Obispo County Sheriff's Office believes it was a little Capuchin monkey that called 911 from a zoo recently.

The call disconnected and dispatchers tried to call and text back but there was no response, so deputies were sent to investigate, the office said in a social media post.

The address turned out to be the Zoo to You near Paso Robles, but the deputies found that no one there made the call.

They finally deduced that a Capuchin monkey named Route had apparently picked up the zoo's cellphone, which was in a golf cart used to move about the property.

Alligator kills woman in 2nd attack of summer

SC BLUFFTON — A woman in South Carolina was killed by an alligator earlier this week — the second such attack this year, authorities said.

The woman's body was discovered at the edge of the water near a pond in a gated community in the town of Bluffton by a resident, who told deputies that the reptile appeared to be guarding the body, The Island Packet quoted Beaufort County Sheriff's Maj. Angela Viens as saying.

Information about the size of the alligator and whether it would be euthanized or relocated was not immediately available.

On June 24, the Horry County Police Department said an alligator dragged a man into a pond. Prior to those attacks, authorities said, the state had not recorded any in two years.

Man on vacation dies in fall from drawbridge

WI MILWAUKEE — A Rhode Island man vacationing in Milwaukee fell to his death after a drawbridge was raised while he was walking across it.

Richard Dujardin, 77, of Providence, R.I., was crossing the Kilbourn Avenue Bridge with his wife, according to a Milwaukee County Medical Examiner's Office report.

Rosemarie Dujardin made it across the bridge, but her husband was about halfway across when it began to open. He grabbed onto a side rail as the bridge sections rose to a 90-degree angle, but he lost his grip and fell about 70 feet to the pavement below, the report states.

Rosemarie Dujardin told investigators that her husband was hard of hearing and wore glasses. The medical examiner's report said he was looking at an iPad while walking.

Man jailed after sound causes airport panic

NV LAS VEGAS — A California man jailed in Las Vegas on suspicion of causing a loud noise that sparked panic and travel delays at Harry Reid International Air-

port had been arrested at the airport less than 24 hours earlier for allegedly causing a disturbance near a ticket counter, a police official said.

The sharp sound — apparently mistaken for gunfire — caused passengers to abandon security lines. More loud noises reverberated through Terminal 1 as metal posts were knocked over in the chaos, Las Vegas police Officer Larry Hadfield said.

Stefan Mathias Hutchison's alleged role in causing the sound was not immediately described. Hutchison, 33, of Carmichael, Calif., had been arrested earlier on misdemeanor misconduct and resisting an officer charges, and freed without bail.

Police boat comes to rescue of stranded groom

MA BOSTON — Officers with the Boston Police Department's harbor patrol unit are used to helping boaters in distress, but last weekend Officer Joe Matthews came to the rescue of a groom in danger of missing his own wedding.

Patrick Mahoney was scheduled to get married on Thompson Island in the middle of Boston Harbor, but the boat that was supposed to ferry him to the island where his bride-to-be was already waiting broke down, police said in a post on their website. The groomsmen, the photographer, DJ, and floral arrangements were also stuck on the mainland.

Enter Matthews, who transported more than a dozen people to the island on his police boat so Mahoney's marriage to Hannah Crawford could go on as scheduled.

— From wire reports

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Browns QB Watson to miss 11 games

Associated Press

BEREA, Ohio — Deshaun Watson has reached a settlement with the NFL and will serve an 11-game unpaid suspension and pay a \$5 million fine rather than risk missing his first season as quarterback of the Cleveland Browns following accusations of sexual misconduct.

Watson was accused of sexual assault and harassment by two dozen women while he played for the Houston Texans. The league had sought to ban him for at least one year for violating its personal conduct policy.

As part of the settlement, which concludes the disciplinary process, Watson will also undergo a professional evaluation by behavioral experts and will follow their treatment program, the NFL said in a statement.

"I'm grateful that the disciplinary process has ended and extremely appreciative of the tremendous support I have received throughout my short

time with the Browns organization. I apologize once again for any pain this situation has caused. I take accountability for the decisions I made," Watson said in a statement released through the team. "My focus going forward is on working to become the best version of myself on and off the field and supporting my teammates however possible while I'm away from the team."

Asked later if he thinks the settlement is fair, Watson said: "I'm going to keep my opinion to myself."

The settlement ends months of posturing between Watson's legal team, the NFL and NFL Players Association.

As part of the settlement, Watson may return for the Browns' game on Dec. 4 in Houston.

"As we have previously conveyed, Deshaun and his representatives have abided by the NFL and NFLPA structure awaiting a final decision and we have respected the process,"

team owners Dee and Jimmy Haslam said in a statement. "Now that a decision on discipline has been reached, we understand this is a real opportunity to create meaningful change and we are committed to investing in programs in Northeast Ohio that will educate our youth regarding awareness, understanding, and most importantly, prevention of sexual misconduct and the many underlying causes of such behavior."

On Aug. 1, the three-time Pro Bowler was suspended six games by Sue L. Robinson, a former federal judge jointly appointed by the league and union to act as an independent disciplinary officer.

Robinson found the 26-year-old Watson violated the league's personal conduct policy after reviewing an investigation into his actions and called his behavior "egregious" and "predatory."

Believing the suspension was too light, the league appealed and pushed Watson's case back

to Goodell, who had handled all player discipline in the past. The league previously pushed for an indefinite suspension and hefty fine.

Goodell appointed former New Jersey Attorney General Peter C. Harvey to hear the appeal. Harvey is an attorney who was previously involved in the NFL's decision to suspend Cowboys running back Ezekiel Elliott for six games during the 2017 season for domestic violence allegations.

Per the 2020 collective bargaining agreement, Harvey's decision would have constituted "full, final and complete disposition of the dispute."

At the owners' meetings this month, Goodell said the league's pursuit of a yearlong ban was warranted following its investigation and Robinson's findings.

"She reinforced the evidence," Goodell said. "There were multiple violations that were egregious, and it was predatory behavior."

Chargers sign James to a 4-year, \$76.5M extension

Associated Press

COSTA MESA, Calif. — Los Angeles Chargers fans on Wednesday finally got to see what they had been hoping for three weeks into training camp — a smiling Derwin James running out to the field in his powder blue jersey, helmets and shoulder pads.

James took part in his first practice after signing a four-year, \$76.5 million contract extension, making him the NFL's highest-paid safety.

"This wasn't like every other big contract that gets signed, because you know what he had to go through in order to make it to this point in his career," coach Brandon Staley said. "He overcame a lot to earn this contract, and he earned every cent of it.

He was a big, big leader for us to day out there."

The deal includes \$42 million in guaranteed salary. James did not participate in the first three weeks of practice and took part only in walkthroughs as the two sides worked on an extension.

"I'm feeling amazing," said James after the Chargers completed the first day of joint practices with the Dallas Cowboys. There was never a doubt in my mind (the deal would get done). I just tried to do what I could as a player to come out here every day and get better in the ways that I could."

James' deal eclipses the four-year, \$72.98 million extension Pittsburgh's Minkah Fitzpatrick signed in June. That included \$36 million in guaranteed salary.

James took part in individual drills but none of the 7-on-7 or full-team drills against the Cowboys. Staley said James wouldn't take part in team work until next week.

Los Angeles has spent nearly \$112 million in guaranteed salaries since the end of last season to improve a defense that was 23rd overall and near the bottom in key categories, including run defense, third-down conversions and points allowed after halftime.

James — the defensive signal-caller in the huddle — will be counted on as the leader of a unit that made significant upgrades over the offseason. The Chargers signed cornerback J.C. Jackson, defensive linemen Sebastian Jones-Day, Austin John-

son and Morgan Fox and edge rusher Kyle Van Noy, along with trading for linebacker Khalil Mack.

Staley on Tuesday stressed the importance of James, saying he is more than a safety and is a complete defensive back. Staley also called James "the heartbeat of our defense."

James — the 17th overall pick in the 2018 draft — didn't participate in full-speed drills during the offseason program after having shoulder surgery once last season ended. He is cleared to go now that the contract issues are resolved.

James was an All-Pro selection as a rookie before being derailed the next two seasons because of injuries during training camp.

LeBron, Lakers agree to 2-year extension

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — LeBron James has agreed to a two-year, \$97.1 million contract extension through the 2024-25 season with the Los Angeles Lakers, his agent announced Wednesday.

Klutch Sports CEO Rich Paul said the league-maximum deal makes James the highest-paid player in NBA history. His new deal includes a player option that would keep the second-leading scorer in NBA history with the Lakers past his 40th birthday in December 2024.

James, 37, is headed into the final year of his most recent contract with the Lakers, who

signed the four-time NBA MVP and four-time league champion in July 2018. The new deal means the 18-time All-Star will make \$46.7 million this season.

James and the Lakers hope to be in contention for another title if James and Anthony Davis can return at full health after an injury-plagued 2021-22 ended without a playoff appearance.

James' new deal syncs with Davis' most recent extension with the Lakers, allowing both to leave the Lakers or negotiate new deals in 2024. Both are represented by Klutch.

James' recommitment to the Lakers also silences persistent

talk of his possible departure as a free agent or in a trade. James hasn't appeared to be going anywhere on social media or in his public appearances, and he praised the hiring of new Lakers coach Darvin Ham.

James has missed significant time due to injury in three of his four years with the Lakers. He was largely healthy in the elongated 2019-20 season when the Lakers won the franchise's 17th NBA title in the Florida bubble, and he has been every bit the dominant player of his prime when at full strength in the ensuing two years.

Although his contract status

inspired plenty of offseason chatter, James seemed unlikely to relocate after spending the past four seasons of his 19-year career with the storied Lakers. His family is settled in Los Angeles, where his eldest son, Bronny, is a 17-year-old senior and college basketball prospect playing at Sierra Canyon High School in Chatsworth.

James has occasionally said he intends to play on the same team with Bronny when his son reaches the NBA. Plenty of obstacles remain between the younger James and the NBA, but he could be draft-eligible in summer 2024.

Liberty stun defending champ Sky in WNBA playoff opener

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Sabrina Ionescu had 22 points, seven rebounds and six assists, Natasha Howard also scored 22 points and the seventh-seeded New York Liberty beat the defending champion Chicago Sky 98-91 on Wednesday night in the opening game of the WNBA playoffs.

New York scored the final 13 points of the fourth quarter as Chicago missed 10 of its last 11 shots. Ionescu made a three-pointer and a jumper from the free-throw line during the run, and Marine Johannes highlighted the spurt with an over-the-shoulder pass to Howard.

"We've been in this situation all year and early on we were losing these games," Ionescu said. "But we found out what it takes to win and we showed that tonight. We gotta do it again."

New York, which won its first playoff game since Sept. 23, 2015, will play Game 2 of the best-of-three series at Chicago on Saturday.

Betnijah Laney added 17 points and Stefanie Dolson scored 13 points for New York, which set a franchise scoring record in the playoffs. Dolson, a center, made 3 of 4 three-pointers to help the Liberty go 11-for-25 from distance.

Kahleah Copper led the second-seeded Sky with 21 points. Allie Quigley scored 18 points, Candace Parker had 17 points, 10 rebounds and five assists, and Courtney Vandersloot added 13 points and 10 assists.

Aces 79, Mercury 63: Kelsey Plum had 22 points, Chelsea Gray scored nine of her 17 points in the fourth quarter and top-seeded Las Vegas beat short-handed Phoenix in Game 1 of their best-of-three series.

The Aces created some separation with a five-point possession midway through the fourth quarter for a 60-51 lead. Gray was fouled on a drive to the basket and the officials upgraded it to a flagrant on Megan Gustafson. Gray made both free throws and followed with a three-pointer.

Gray made it 66-55 after spinning her defender in the lane and making a jumper from the free-throw line as Las Vegas took control.

Jackie Young added 16 points for Las Vegas, which hosts Phoenix on Saturday in Game 2 of the best-of-three series. A'ja Wilson had eight points and 12 rebounds and Kiah Stokes had eight points and 13 boards.

No. 8 seed Phoenix was without stars Diana Taurasi (quad) and Skylar Diggins-Smith (personal reasons), and the Mercury lost another starter in the third quarter. Shey Peddy needed to be carried off the floor with 2:03 remaining in the third after a non-contact injury. Peddy's teammates were visibly emotional as Peddy went to the locker room with a towel covering her face.

Diamond DeShields had 18 points and eight rebounds for Phoenix. Brianna Turner grabbed 16 rebounds and Gustafson scored 12 points.

Big Ten lands \$7 billion deal for TV rights

Associated Press

The Big Ten's new \$7 billion media rights deal will string the conference's top football games across three major networks each week, creating an NFL-style television schedule on Saturdays.

The Big Ten announced Thursday it has reached seven-year agreements with Fox, CBS and NBC to share the rights to the conference's football and basketball games.

The deals go into effect in 2023, expire in 2030 and eventually will allow the conference's soon-to-be 16 member universities to share more than \$1 billion per year, a person familiar with the terms told The Associated Press.

The person spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity because Big Ten and network officials were not disclosing financial details publicly, but the deal is believed to be the richest ever on an annual basis for a college sports property. The large increase in revenue to the conference won't kick in until the third year of the deal and gradually will increase over the final five years.

"I think what it does, it affords us the opportunity to make sure that we can continually do the things we need to do to take care of our student-athletes, to fortify our institutions, to build our programs," Big Ten Commissioner Kevin Warren told the AP.

Valdez pitches Astros past White Sox

Associated Press

CHICAGO — The Houston Astros got back in the win column after blowing late leads in consecutive losses — not exactly shocking considering they own the best record in the American League.

Framber Valdez threw seven solid innings, Yordan Alvarez drove in a run and scored one, and Houston beat the White Sox 3-2 on Wednesday night, ending Chicago's five-game winning streak.

The AL West-leading Astros hung on after squandering eighth-inning leads in the first two games of the series. The White Sox trail AL Central-leading Cleveland by two games.

"We got the victory," manager Dusty Baker said. "We stopped the losing streak."

Yankees 8, Rays 7 (10): Josh Donaldson hit a walk-off grand slam in the 10th inning as the clock struck midnight, and struggling New York salvaged a win over visiting Tampa Bay Rays to avoid a three-game sweep.

Gleyber Torres singled leading off the 10th off Jalen Beeks (2-2) and Anthony Rizzo walked before Donaldson lifted a one-strike, 97 mph fastball to the short porch in right field.

Mets 9, Braves 7: Brett Baty homered in his first time up in the big leagues, Starling Marte went deep twice and visiting New York snapped Atlanta's eight-game winning streak.

The NL East-leading Mets jumped to a 6-1 lead and barely made it stand up to push their advantage over the Braves back to 4½ games.

Blue Jays 6, Orioles 1: George Springer broke a scoreless tie with a pinch-hit RBI single in the seventh inning, and host Toronto beat Baltimore behind a stellar effort by Ross Stripling.

Springer's liner to center was career hit No. 1,000, and the Blue Jays poured it on from there. Santiago Espinal followed Springer with a two-run double, and Alejandro Kirk capped their six-run seventh with another two-run double.

Mariners 11, Angels 7: Cal Raleigh homered twice, Eugenio Suárez and Jesse Winker each hit a two-run shot, and Seattle completed a three-game sweep at Los Angeles.

Shohei Ohtani had a two-run homer, a triple, two singles and four RBIs for the Angels.

Twins 4, Royals 0: Emilio Pagán pitched two scoreless innings after Tyler Mahle departed with right shoulder fatigue, and host Minnesota completed a three-game sweep.

Jose Miranda hit a two-run homer for the Twins, who are fighting with Cleveland and the Chicago White Sox for control of the crowded AL Central.

Reds 1, Phillies 0: Jose Barrero hit a game-ending RBI single off Seranthony Dominguez with two out in the ninth inning, sending host Cincinnati to the win.

Albert Almora Jr. helped set up Barrero's winning hit with a one-out walk.

Padres 10, Marlins 3: Jake Cronenworth hit a grand slam in the first inning, Ha-Seong Kim also drove in four runs and San Diego avoided a three-game sweep at Miami.

Cronenworth's two-out blast against Pablo López (7-8) was his 12th homer this season and second career grand slam.

Dodgers 2, Brewers 1: Tony Gonsolin pitched seven scoreless innings for his 15th victory, Austin Barnes and Max Muncy homered, and Los Angeles won at Milwaukee.

Gonsolin (15-1) matched the Astros' Justin Verlander for the major league lead in wins.

Cubs 3, Nationals 2: Yan Gomes hit a tie-breaking single in the seventh inning, lifting Chicago to a win at Washington.

Red Sox 8, Pirates 3: Christian Arroyo had three hits and three RBIs, Alex Verdugo reached base five times and 42-year-old Rich Hill won for the first time in nearly two months in Boston's victory at Pittsburgh.

Guardians 8, Tigers 4: All-Star José Ramírez blooped a go-ahead, two-run double as host Cleveland scored six runs with two outs in the eighth inning, rallying to beat Detroit.

Cardinals 5, Rockies 1: Jordan Montgomery picked up his third win in as many starts with host St. Louis, and Nolan Gorman drove in three runs in a victory over Colorado.

Athletics 7, Rangers 2: Sean Murphy had his second two-homer game and rookie Shea Langeliers hit his first major league home run in his second game with Oakland in a win at Texas.

Diamondbacks 3, Giants 2: Pinch-hitter Jake McCarthy hit a go-ahead two-run single in the eighth, and Arizona rallied to win at San Francisco.

Daniels out as Rangers president after 17 years

Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Texas — Jon Daniels was the general manager of the Texas Rangers for their only two World Series appearances more than a decade ago. His 17 years leading the club ended with a string of bad seasons.

Daniels was relieved of his duties as president of baseball operations Wednesday, when team owner Ray Davis informed him that his contract wouldn't be renewed at the end of this season. Davis said he had been contemplating the move for several months.

"Bottom line is we're not good, and we haven't been good for six years," Davis said. "To be competitive going forward, I felt that we needed to make a change."

The dismissal of Daniels came two days after manager Chris Woodward was fired in his fourth season. It also occurred less than nine months after the Rangers committed more than a half-billion dollars to free agent infielders Corey Seager and Marcus Semien, and starting pitcher Jon Gray.

Daniels was the youngest GM in the majors when he got the job

with the Rangers at age 28 in October 2005. He added the title of president of baseball operations in 2013, and held both roles until Chris Young was brought in as the team's general manager in December 2020.

"Somewhere along the way, this baseball fan from Queens got an opportunity to help lead a Major League Baseball franchise in Texas," Daniels said in a statement released Wednesday night. "It's been an unbelievable experience."

Young now assumes oversight of all aspects of the team's base-

ball operations department. The former big league pitcher was a senior vice president for Major League Baseball before joining the Texas front office.

Young was expected to speak to reporters on Thursday, and then go with the team on its trip to Minnesota this weekend to talk with players. The Rangers went to the World Series in 2010 and 2011, then won AL West titles again in 2015 and 2016. They have since slipped into a rebuilding phase and the longest streak of consecutive losing seasons since moving to Texas a half-century ago.