

Austin aims to reduce risk to civilians

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A year after U.S. forces killed seven children and three adults in an airstrike in Afghanistan, the Pentagon unveiled an action plan Thursday aimed at reducing civilian casualties during American military operations.

Among other things, the 36-page plan directs changes at all levels of military planning, training and war-fighting doctrine to include measures to mitigate civilian casualties.

“The protection of civilians is a strategic priority as well as a moral imperative,” Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said in the document. “Our efforts to mitigate and respond to civilian harm directly reflect our values and also directly contribute to achieving mission success.”

Austin, a retired four-star general who commanded troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, ordered the new plan in January after the Pentagon acknowledged that an Aug. 29, 2021, airstrike during the U.S. evacuation from Kabul had not struck Islamic State-Khorasan terrorists but rather an innocent family in the capital.

A report by the Defense Department In-

spector General found that limited communications and “confirmation bias” led to the fatal strike. The report found no evidence of criminal negligence.

Confirmation bias happens when a person interprets a series of intelligence reports or other information in a way that supports one’s assumptions without considering alternate theories.

The Aug. 29 airstrike occurred three days after a suicide bomber killed 13 American service members and an estimated 170 Afghans crowded around the Abbey Gate at Kabul’s Hamid Karzai International Airport. The U.S. airstrike was launched after erroneous reports that extremists were on the verge of carrying out another suicide bombing.

“The plan incorporates lessons learned from recently completed studies ... that have resulted in civilian casualties,” a senior defense official said Thursday. “While it’s meant to be forward looking, we’re very much informed by the lessons of those studies and the previous incidences.”

The plan calls for the Pentagon to develop a “civilian protection center of excellence” that is “really intended to be a hub and a facilitator for the DOD-wide analysis, learn-

ing and training related to civilian harm,” said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

It also establishes guidance for addressing harm to civilians when it occurs, laying out how the military can understand the impacts of such cases and “how we respond more comprehensively,” the official said.

The plan also directs the DOD to develop standardized civilian harm operational reporting requirements and ways to manage such data. While the official called this the “less glamorous piece” of the plan, it is also one of the most important.

“A number of the studies [concluded that] the lack of a centralized approach across the department has hurt us,” the official said. “The action plan envisions a centralized enterprise-wide data management platform that would handle all of these [reports] and really be the foundation that allows greater collection, sharing and analysis.”

The center of excellence, which will become fully operational in 2025, also will lead efforts to build civilian harm mitigation knowledge into exercises, training and professional military exercises, according to the report. The curriculum will include lessons learned from previous operations.

Fears of leak increase near Ukrainian nuclear plant

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Authorities began distributing iodine tablets to residents near Ukraine’s Zaporizhzhia nuclear power plant Friday in case of a radiation leak, amid mounting fears that the fighting around the complex could trigger a catastrophe.

The move came a day after the plant was temporarily knocked offline because of what officials said was fire damage to a transmission line. The incident heightened dread of a nuclear disaster in a country still haunted by the 1986 explosion at Chernobyl.

Continued shelling was reported in the area overnight, and satellite images from Planet Labs showed fires burning around the complex — Europe’s biggest nuclear plant — over the last several days.

Iodine tablets, which help block the ab-

sorption of radioactive iodine by the thyroid gland in a nuclear accident, were issued in the Ukrainian-controlled city of Zaporizhzhia, about 30 miles from the plant.

The U.N.’s atomic energy agency has been trying to send a team in to inspect and help secure the plant. Officials said preparations for the trip were underway, but it remained unclear when it might take place.

The Zaporizhzhia plant has been occupied by Russian forces and run by Ukrainian workers since the early days of the 6-month-old war. The two sides have repeatedly accused each other of shelling the site.

In Thursday’s incident, Ukraine and Russia blamed one another for the transmission-line damage that knocked the plant off the power grid.

Exactly what went wrong was not clear, but Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelen-

sky said the plant’s emergency backup diesel generators had to be activated to supply electricity to operate the complex.

The plant requires power to run the reactors’ vital cooling systems. A loss of cooling could lead to a nuclear meltdown.

Ukrenergo, Ukraine’s transmission system operator, reported Friday that two damaged main lines supplying the plant with electricity had resumed operation, ensuring a stable power supply.

The country’s nuclear power agency, Energoatom, said the plant had been reconnected to the grid and was producing electricity “for Ukraine’s needs.”

Russia-installed officials in the Zaporizhzhia region, however, said that the plant was supplying electricity only to Russia-controlled areas of the country and not the rest of Ukraine.

DOJ releases affidavit in Trump search

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Fourteen of the 15 boxes recovered from former President Donald Trump's Florida estate early this year contained documents with classification markings, including at the top secret level, according to an FBI affidavit released Friday explaining the justification for this month's search of the property.

The 32-page affidavit, even in its heavily redacted form, offers the most detailed description to date of the government records being stored at Trump's Mar-a-Lago property long after he left the White House and reveals the gravity of the government's concerns that the documents were there illegally.

"The government is conducting a criminal investigation concerning the improper removal and storage of classified information in unauthorized spaces, as well as the unlawful concealment or removal of govern-

ment records," an FBI agent wrote on the first page of the affidavit in seeking a judge's permission for a warrant to search the property.

The affidavit does not provide new details about the 11 sets of classified records recovered during the Aug. 8 search at Mar-a-Lago but instead concerns a separate batch of 15 boxes that the National Archives and Records Administration retrieved from the home in January.

In those boxes, according to the affidavit, officials located 184 documents bearing classification markings, including 25 documents marked as top secret. Agents who inspected the boxes found markings related to information provided by confidential human sources as well as information related to the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act.

Taken together, the affidavit reveals additional details about an ongoing criminal investigation that has brought fresh legal peril

for Trump just as he lays the groundwork for another presidential run. It also shows in stark detail the volume of sensitive government documents that were stored at Mar-a-Lago instead of being turned over to the National Archives.

The FBI submitted the affidavit, or sworn statement, to a judge so it could obtain the warrant to search Trump's property.

Documents previously made public show the FBI retrieved from the property 11 sets of classified documents, including information marked at the top secret level. They also show that federal agents are investigating potential violations of three federal laws, including one that governs gathering, transmitting or losing defense information under the Espionage Act.

The other statutes address the concealment, mutilation or removal of records and the destruction, alteration or falsification of records in federal investigations.

Taiwan: Russia, China disrupting world order

Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan — Taiwan's leader on Friday said China and Russia are "disrupting and threatening the world order" through Beijing's recent large-scale military exercises near the island and Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.

President Tsai Ing-wen was speaking during a meeting in Taipei with U.S. Sen. Marsha Blackburn, who is on the second visit by members of Congress since House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's trip earlier this month. That visit prompted China to launch the exercises that saw it fire numerous missiles and send dozens of warplanes and ships to virtually surround the island, including across the center line in the Taiwan Strait that has long been a buffer between the sides.

China claims Taiwan as its

own territory to be brought under its control by force if necessary. Beijing has also boosted relations with Russia and is seen as tacitly supporting its attack on Ukraine.

"These developments demonstrate how authoritarian countries are disrupting and threatening the world order," Tsai said.

Blackburn, a Republican from Tennessee, reaffirmed shared values between the two governments and said she "looked forward to continuing to support Taiwan as they push forward as an independent nation."

Taiwanese Foreign Minister Joseph Wu told reporters Friday that "China's motivation is to destroy the Taiwan Straits' status quo, and after this they want to cut down on Taiwan's defensive space."

\$286 million in fraudulent pandemic loans recovered

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Secret Service said Friday that it has recovered \$286 million in fraudulently obtained pandemic loans and is returning the money to the Small Business Administration.

The Secret Service said an investigation initiated by its Orlando office found that alleged conspirators submitted Economic Injury Disaster Loan applications by using fake or stolen employment and personal information and used an online bank, Green Dot, to conceal and move their criminal proceeds.

The agency worked with Green Dot to identify roughly 15,000 accounts and seize \$286 million connected to the accounts.

"This forfeiture effort and those to come are a direct and necessary response to the unprecedented size and scope of

pandemic relief fraud," said Kevin Chambers, director for COVID-19 fraud enforcement at the Justice Department.

Billions have been fraudulently claimed through various pandemic relief programs — including Paycheck Protection Program loans, unemployment insurance and others that were rolled out during the pandemic.

In March, the Government Accountability Office reported that while agencies were able to distribute COVID-19 relief funds quickly, "the tradeoff was that they did not have systems in place to prevent and identify payment errors and fraud" due in part to "financial management weaknesses."

The GAO has recommended several measures for agencies to prevent pandemic program fraud in the future, including better reporting on their fraud risk management efforts.

3 more GOP states enact abortion ban 'trigger laws'

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Three more Republican-led states banned almost all abortions this week as yet another slate of laws severely limiting the procedure took effect following the U.S. Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.

To date, 13 states have passed so-called trigger laws that were designed to outlaw most abortions if the high court threw out the constitutional right to end a pregnancy. The majority of those states began enforcing their bans soon after the June 24 decision, but Idaho, Tennessee and Texas had to wait 30 days beyond when the justices entered the judgment, which happened several weeks after the ruling was announced.

That deadline was up Thursday. A fourth state, North Dakota, had its trigger ban blocked Thursday by a judge who is weighing an abortion clinic's legal challenge on grounds that it violates the state constitution.

The change will not be dramatic. All of these states except North Dakota already had anti-abortion laws in place that largely blocked patients from the procedure. And the majority of the clinics that provided

abortions in those areas have either stopped offering those services or moved to other states where abortion remains legal.

Texas, the country's second-largest state, has banned most abortions once fetal cardiac activity has been detected, which can be as early as six weeks into pregnancy, before many women know they're pregnant. The ban has been in place for almost a year, since courts refused to stop the law last September.

Much like Texas' current ban, the trigger law does not include exceptions for rape or incest. Instead it has a loophole if a woman's life or health is in danger.

Over in Tennessee, just two of the six clinics that provide abortions continued to offer the service after *Roe* was overturned. They did so even as Tennessee enacted a "heartbeat law" similar to the one passed in Texas. Under both the new trigger law and the previous heartbeat law, doctors who violate the law risk felony convictions and up to 15 years in prison.

In Idaho, the federal government argued that Medicaid-funded hospitals must provide "stabilizing treatment" to patients experiencing medical emergencies despite its trigger law.

Rainfall floods buildings, roads in Deep South

Associated Press

PEARL, Miss. — Large fans hummed noisily Thursday to try to dry out the carpet at The Exchange Church, a day after storms rapidly dumped several inches of rain and pushed water into the one-story brick building in central Mississippi.

Bryant May is lead pastor of the Southern Baptist congregation in the Jackson suburb of Pearl. He said it was the second time in four years the church flooded. The church will conduct online services this weekend, and May said he hopes the building will be in working order soon after that.

"The good news in it is that we have a little bit of experience — that's good news/bad news — so we have a little bit of a game plan on how to attack it," May said Thursday.

Weather radar showed heavy rainfall Thursday in parts of Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama and in the Florida panhandle.

Several flash flood warnings were issued, and the Mississippi Department of Transportation reported water covering highways Thursday from the central part of the state down to the Gulf Coast. Flowing water washed away part of a state highway in rural Newton County, between Jackson and Meridian.

The National Weather Service predicted the Pearl River near Jackson, Miss., will crest early next week at nearly the level it reached during flooding in 2020. Emergency officials said residents in low-lying areas near the river should prepare for the possibility of evacuating in the next several days.

After Wednesday's deluge caused creeks to overflow, law enforcement officers carried toddlers out of a flooded day care center in Florence, Miss., south of Jackson. The Rankin County Sheriff's Department posted video on Facebook of deputies walking through brown, knee-deep water to take children to an elevated truck.

Rankin County sheriff's deputies also helped move over 40 residents out of a flooded nursing home Wednesday in Brandon.

In Alabama, vehicles traveling along flooded roads created boat-like wakes on low-lying Dauphin Island, but police said the water was not deep enough Thursday morning to pose a major threat. Flooding was likely across southwestern Alabama through nightfall, forecasters said, and Mississippi temporarily closed a welcome station on because of flooding.

Washington state plans to phase out gas vehicles following California

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Washington Gov. Jay Inslee said his state will follow California and prohibit the sale of new gas-powered vehicles by 2035.

The specific regulations for Washington state are yet to be created and the public will have the chance to weigh in, *The Seattle Times* reported.

"This is a critical milestone in our climate fight. Washington set in law a goal for all new car sales to be zero emissions by 2030 and we're ready to adopt California's regs by end of this year," Inslee said Wednesday on Twitter.

Transportation-related emissions account for more than 40% of greenhouse gas emissions in Washington.

California's policy passed Wednesday requires 100% of new sales of passenger cars,

trucks and SUVs to be powered by electricity or hydrogen by 2035, with one-fifth allowed to be plug-in hybrids. It doesn't ban the use of gas-powered cars or the sale of used cars.

In 2020, Washington lawmakers passed a law directing the state Department of Ecology to adopt California's emissions standards as they're rolled out.

Washington lawmakers this year also set a goal of phasing out sales of new internal combustion-powered cars by 2030.

A state council, previously set up by Inslee to plan for the future of electric vehicles, held its first meeting in July, at which members discussed building a network of fast-charging stations on state highways, said Anna Lising, senior climate adviser to Inslee. The effort will be helped by \$71 million from the federal government.

Consumer prices increase 6.3% in July

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Inflation eased last month as energy prices tumbled, raising hopes that a surge in prices increases may have peaked.

According to a Commerce Department report Friday that is closely watched by the Federal Reserve, consumer prices rose 6.3% in July from that of a year earlier after posting an annual increase of 6.8% in June, the biggest jump since 1982. Energy prices made the difference in July: They dropped last month after surging in June.

So-called core inflation, which excludes

volatile food and energy prices, rose 4.6% last month from that of a year earlier after rising 4.8% in June. The drop — along with a reduction in the Labor Department's consumer price index last month — suggests that inflationary pressures may be starting to ease.

On a monthly basis, consumer prices actually fell 0.1% from June to July; core inflation blipped up 0.1%, the Commerce Department reported.

Inflation started rising sharply in the spring of 2021 as the economy rebounded with surprising speed from the short but

devastating coronavirus recession a year earlier. Surging customer orders overwhelmed factories, ports and freightyards, leading to delays, shortages and higher prices. Inflation is a worldwide problem, especially since the Russian invasion of Ukraine drove up global food and energy prices.

The Fed was slow to respond to rising inflation, thinking it the temporary result of supply chain bottlenecks. But as prices continued to climb, the U.S. central bank moved aggressively, hiking its benchmark interest rate four times since March.

EPA designates 'forever chemicals' as hazardous

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Environmental Protection Agency is designating some toxic industrial compounds used in cookware, carpets and firefighting foams as hazardous substances under the so-called Superfund law.

The designation means that releases of long-lasting chemicals known as PFOA and PFOS that meet or exceed a certain quantity would have to be reported to federal, state or tribal officials. The requirement would increase understanding of the extent and locations of the contamination and help communities avoid or reduce contact, the EPA

said.

PFOA and PFOS have been voluntarily phased out by U.S. manufacturers but are still in limited use and remain in the environment because they do not degrade over time. The compounds are part of a larger cluster of "forever chemicals" known as PFAS that have been used in consumer products and industry since the 1940s.

PFAS is short for per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, which are used in nonstick frying pans, water-repellent sports gear, stain-resistant rugs, cosmetics and countless other consumer products.

The chemicals can accumulate and persist

in the human body for long periods of time, and evidence from animal and human studies indicates that exposure to PFOA or PFOS may lead to cancer or other health problems.

"Communities have suffered far too long from exposure to these forever chemicals," EPA Administrator Michael Regan said in a statement Friday. "The action announced today will improve transparency and advance EPA's aggressive efforts to confront this pollution."

Under the proposed rule, "EPA will both help protect communities from PFAS pollution and seek to hold polluters accountable for their actions," Regan said.

Report: Calif. homicides, violent crime rose in 2021

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Homicides in California increased again last year — as did other violent crimes — amid rising frustration as the state's top Democrats are seeking to keep their jobs in upcoming elections.

The state Department of Justice released its annual crime reports Thursday, showing upticks in violent crime and property crime rates in 2021 even as the total arrest rate decreased.

Californians across the state have been deluged with headlines about rising crime in recent months, from rampant car break-ins and drug use in San Francisco's troubled Tenderloin district to street racing and illegal takeovers across a new \$588-million bridge in Los Angeles.

California Gov. Gavin Newsom and Attorney General Rob Bonta are among the Democrats facing challengers in Novem-

ber and are struggling to explain how their policies are keeping the state safe. San Francisco's progressive district attorney was ousted from his post in June, and his counterpart in LA just survived a second recall attempt.

Thursday's reports came two months after Bonta's department wrongly made public the personal information of perhaps hundreds of thousands of gun owners in state-operated databases. The state's criminal justice data portal was offline for weeks in the aftermath and only relaunched Thursday after the 2021 reports were released.

There were 2,361 homicides in California last year, surpassing 2020's figure by more than 150 deaths, according to the reports. While the number remains far below the historic high — 4,095 homicides in 1993 — last year was the deadliest year since 2007.

The state's violent crime rate increased from 437 per 100,000 people in 2020 to 466.2 per 100,000 in 2021. The property crime rate ticked up 3% in 2021 after hitting a historic low in 2020.

Meanwhile, the total arrest rate decreased — from 2,812.3 per 100,000 people in 2020 to 2,606.3 per 100,000 in 2021 — as part of a downward trend since 2004.

Bonta's office also released a report showing a continued drop in arrests of juveniles, which have plummeted in recent years — from nearly 63,000 in 2016 to fewer than 20,000 last year.

A final report outlined police use of force, though changes in reporting prevent ready comparisons to previous years. Last year 660 civilians were involved in such incidents that resulted in the discharge of a firearm or a use of force that brought serious injury or death.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man admits smuggling over 1,700 animals

CA LOS ANGELES — A California man who smuggled more than 1,700 wild animals into the United States, including 60 reptiles hidden in his clothing, pleaded guilty Wednesday to federal charges.

Jose Manuel Perez, 30, of Oxnard, entered pleas to two counts of smuggling and a charge of wildlife trafficking.

Prosecutors said that from 2016 to this February, Perez and his accomplices used social media to arrange to smuggle animals from Mexico and Hong Kong. Most were reptiles and included Yucatan box turtles, Mexican box turtles, baby crocodiles and Mexican beaded lizards, according to a statement from the U.S. Department of Justice.

1 dead, paramedic hurt in ambulance fire

HI HONOLULU — A patient died and a paramedic was critically injured after an ambulance caught fire outside a hospital in Hawaii, emergency officials said.

“We had an ambulance tonight for reasons we don’t understand catch on fire, possibly explode, prior to entering the hospital,” said Dr. Jim Ireland, the emergency services director. “We’re all just very concerned about our team and the patient that lost their life.”

The patient died in the back of the ambulance outside Adventist Castle Health in Kailua on Wednesday night, while the paramedic with him, an eight-year veteran, was left in critical condition, Ireland said.

Football season ended amid hazing probe

PA MIDDLETOWN — A Pennsylvania school district has announced it’s canceling its high school’s football season after obtaining a video that allegedly showed hazing among team members.

The Middletown Area School District had announced an investigation into what it called a “disturbing and upsetting” Aug. 11 cellphone video showing hazing. The head football coach resigned within days of the video surfacing and Lower Swatara Township police were contacted, officials said.

Superintendent Chelton Hunter said Wednesday in a letter to parents that additional video surfaced and indicated “this hazing was much more widespread, and involved many more students” than was previously known.

The cellphone video showed “a group of students restraining two of their teammates and using a muscle therapy gun and another piece of athletic equipment” to poke their buttock areas, the superintendent said.

Bids for signed portrait already top \$30,000

NE OMAHA — Billionaire Warren Buffett is auctioning off a high-tech signed portrait of himself to raise money for one of his favorite charities, and the bidding has already topped \$30,000.

The portrait of Buffett created by Motiva Art features a grid of letters over the picture that light up to spell out several of the legendary investor’s famous

quotes. The eBay auction of this artwork probably won’t rival the \$19 million someone paid earlier this year for a private lunch with Buffett, but it’s still likely to attract big bidders among the Berkshire Hathaway CEO’s devoted followers.

The auction is set to wrap up on Buffett’s 92nd birthday on Aug. 30. The proceeds from the art auction will go to Girls Inc. of Omaha, which provides educational, cultural and recreational programs for young women in Buffett’s hometown.

Nurse charged with murder in patient death

KY LEXINGTON — A Kentucky nurse was arrested Tuesday on a murder charge in the death of a patient, police said.

Eyvette Hunter, 52, was indicted in the death of James Morris, 97, the Lexington Police Department said in a statement.

Hunter, who was a nurse at Baptist Health Lexington, “intentionally performed actions of medical maltreatment” on April 30 and Morris died days later “as a direct result of those actions,” the statement said.

Baptist Health said the hospital fired Hunter on April 30 and reported her to the Kentucky Board of Nursing.

An order suspending Hunter’s nursing license on Monday said she is accused of administering a drug to a patient without a doctor’s order.

Swastika Mountain is getting a new name

OR PORTLAND — The name of a mountain south of Eugene will soon be

changed. The Oregon Geographic Names Board said Swastika Mountain, which refers to a symbol of the German Nazi Party, will be changed, KOIN-TV reported.

A final decision on the new name for the mountain outside Cottage Grove will be made in December. So far, two name change proposals — Umpqua Mountain and Mount Halo — have been submitted to the name board.

The mountain is more than 4,000 feet tall and is located in the Umpqua National Forest.

Pizza chain to pay \$400K over charges

WA SEATTLE — The Seattle-based pizza chain Zeeks will pay delivery drivers about \$409,000 after allegedly failing to disclose how much of its delivery charge was paid to drivers.

The settlement was announced Wednesday, The Seattle Times reported. In 2019, the company agreed to pay about \$285,000 to 257 drivers over the same issue.

Service charges are common at Seattle restaurants with some going to employees in lieu of tips and others kept by the employer. Companies are required to disclose on menus and receipts what percentage of the charge is paid directly to employees serving customers. If the company doesn’t make clear that it retains a portion, the charge must be paid to employees serving customers.

Without the disclosure, customers could assume the service charge goes to employees and tip less.

— From Associated Press

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Jags QB Lawrence ready to step up

Associated Press

FLOWERY BRANCH, Ga. — The Jacksonville Jaguars and Atlanta Falcons are expected to emphasize the competitions for the final roster spots in Saturday's final preseason game for both teams.

That means Jaguars quarterback Trevor Lawrence, like most starters, is expected to be an observer in his return to his home state. Lawrence expressed confidence in his play and the Jaguars' offense as the 2021 No. 1 overall draft pick prepares for his second season.

"I really like where I'm at," Lawrence said Wednesday. "As far as offense goes, I feel really comfortable. I'm feeling more and more confident each day and feel really good with where I'm at with all the receivers, tight ends, running backs, protection."

The Jags and Falcons had their second joint practice Thursday.

Jaguars coach Doug Pederson said most starters won't play Saturday. That includes the team's top two quarterbacks. Backup

C.J. Beathard (groin) is not expected to play, leaving two long shots to make the roster — Jake Luton and E.J. Perry — to handle the snaps.

Falcons coach Arthur Smith hasn't revealed plans for his starters. There likely will be extended playing time for rookie backup quarterback Desmond Ridder. Veteran Marcus Mariota is set to open the season as the starter.

Mariota, the No. 2 overall pick in the 2015 draft, hasn't started a regular-season game since 2019. He is looking to revive his career in his reunion with Smith, his former offensive coordinator with the Tennessee Titans.

Lawrence, from Cartersville, Ga., hasn't had an opportunity to play an NFL game in Atlanta. He completed 23 of 42 passes for 228 yards with one touchdown and one interception in a 21-14 home loss to the Falcons on Nov. 28 last season.

The loss to the Falcons was one of many low points in Lawrence's rookie season. He led the NFL with 17 interceptions and threw

only 12 TD passes. He also was hurt by nine fumbles and 32 sacks.

The Jaguars finished 3-14 with Lawrence and are 0-3 this preseason. Even so, Lawrence could be poised for a big season with the Jaguars' new leadership of Pederson and offensive coordinator Press Taylor.

Lawrence said Pederson and Taylor are "very conversational" in the way they involve the quarterbacks in planning.

"I think it's always, they see something a certain way, but they're always picking our brains and seeing what we like because at the end of the day ... we're the guys that are out there playing, so if we don't like something a certain way, we're not going to do it that way," Lawrence said. "So it's always a conversation."

Taylor said Lawrence has adjusted well to the new staff.

"We're exactly where we would like to be with Trevor at this point and time," Taylor said.

Against the odds, Steelers QB Rudolph remains upbeat

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — The longest tenured quarterback on the Pittsburgh Steelers' roster might not be the team's longest tenured quarterback for long.

Mason Rudolph has spent the past five months saying the right things. That he welcomes the competition with Mitch Trubisky and Kenny Pickett. That he is fine with having to show he is capable of being an NFL starter, not by default — as it was in 2019 — but by choice. That he is confident if he shows what he can do, everything will work out one way or the other.

Even now, with camp winding down and with Rudolph increasingly looking like the odd man out of a three-man derby that's kind of never really felt like a three-man derby, he's trying to remain upbeat.

"I wouldn't have it any other way," Rudolph said Thursday. "You always have to prove yourself. Everybody's got to prove themselves. That's the nature of the league."

The Steelers felt comfortable enough with Rudolph that they extended his contract through 2022 last summer, giving him a shot at taking over after Ben Roethlisberger's retirement. Yet that didn't stop them from signing Trubisky minutes into free agency in March or selecting Pickett with the 20th overall pick in the draft.

The team has a far greater investment in the new arrivals than Rudolph. Trubisky has spent the vast majority of his time working with the starters since organized team activities began in May. Pickett has been embraced by fans won over by his surprisingly super senior season at Pitt last fall, when he led the Panthers to the Atlantic Coast Conference title.

While head coach Mike Tomlin has been pathologically vague when assessing the quarterback competition heading into Sunday's preseason finale against Detroit, by all appearances it's going to come down to Trubisky and Pickett, with Pickett virtually assured of getting a shot at being "The Guy" at some point regardless of how Trubisky fares.

That leaves Rudolph seemingly playing for a roster spot — be it in Pittsburgh or elsewhere — this weekend.

There's a very real chance that the snaps Rudolph gets on Sunday, however many there are, could be his last in Pittsburgh.

Rudolph stressed he believes he's played well during training camp, and the numbers tend to back it up. He's completed 26 of 36 passes for 220 yards and two touchdowns without an interception and deftly led the Steelers to a pair of fourth-quarter scores last week against Jacksonville.

The problem for Rudolph is that by the

time he entered the game, Pickett had already presented a pretty compelling case he may be ready sooner rather than later. Rudolph's savvy play was seemingly an afterthought.

Maybe it's fitting. In a way, that's been Rudolph's lot almost since the Steelers picked him in the third round of the 2018 draft. Tomlin and former general manager Kevin Colbert said at the time they had graded Rudolph out as a first-rounder. He struggled to play like it in 2019, when he was thrust into the starter's role after Roethlisberger shredded his right elbow in Week 2.

Rudolph endured the indignity of getting benched in favor of undrafted rookie free agent Devlin "Duck" Hodges, getting whacked with his own helmet by Cleveland's Myles Garrett in an ugly brawl in November, then being forced to fend off allegations by Garrett that he'd made a racist comment.

Asked if he felt like the competition this summer has seemed as wide-open as Tomlin would like to portray it, the cool veneer of the player who admits he's his own biggest critic cracked just a bit while trying to come up with the politically correct answer.

He repeated the phrase "I think, you know" several times before settling on, "I'm going to keep competing til they tell me I can't."

Goldschmidt's 2 HRs lift Cards over Cubs

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Paul Goldschmidt slugged his 32nd and 33rd homers and had five RBIs and Corey Dickerson set a franchise record for consecutive hits in the St. Louis Cardinals' 8-3 win over the Chicago Cubs on Thursday.

Goldschmidt, Dickerson and Tommy Edman collected three hits apiece as the NL Central-leading Cardinals won for the 10th time in 12 games and concluded a 6-2 trip. The Cardinals collected 16 hits even without slugger Nolan Arenado, who returned to St. Louis to attend the birth of his first child.

St. Louis starter Dakota Hudson (7-6) pitched a season-high seven innings of five-hit ball.

Phillies 4, Reds 0: Aaron Nola (9-10) struck out 11 and allowed just five hits in his second career nine-inning shutout as host Philadelphia closed out a four-game sweep of Cincinnati.

Edmundo Sosa had three RBIs, and Kyle Schwarber hit his NL-leading 35th homer of the season.

Mariners 3, Guardians 1: Mitch Haniger hit a three-run home run in the first inning to account for all of his team's offense and Marco Gonzales (9-12) tossed six strong innings in host Seattle's win over Cleveland.

Haniger stayed hot at the plate, taking Cleveland starter Triston McKenzie (9-10) deep to left-center field just three batters into the game.

Mets 3, Rockies 1: Jacob deGrom (3-1) struck out nine over six innings of one-run ball to lead host New York over Colorado.

Pete Alonso hit his 31st homer off the advertising signage in left field during a three-run third. The Mets increased their NL East lead over the idle Atlanta Braves to two games.

Yankees 13, Athletics 4: Giancarlo Stanton returned from the injured list and hit a two-run single to go with a bases-loaded walk, Josh Donaldson doubled twice and drove in three runs, and visiting New York pounded Oakland.

A's reliever Joel Payamps was helped off the field in the eighth after a comebacker by pinch-hitter Kyle Higashioka struck his leg. Oakland infielder Sheldon Neuse entered to pitch for his second appearance on the mound this season.

Orioles 4, White Sox 3 (11): Kyle Stowers hit his first major league homer to tie the game with his team down to its last strike, and host Baltimore went on to beat Chicago in 11 innings.

Anthony Santander won it with an RBI single, but it was Stowers who saved it for Baltimore in the ninth. The 24-year-old outfielder, playing in his seventh career game, sent an 0-2 pitch from Liam Hendriks over the wall in right-center field.

Rays 8, Angels 3: Drew Rasmussen (9-4) won his third consecutive start, Manuel Margot got four hits and host Tampa Bay beat Los Angeles to complete a four-game sweep.

Isaac Paredes hit a two-run homer during a five-run third for Tampa Bay, which has won

11 of 13 and holds the top AL wild-card spot.

Astros 6, Twins 3: Trey Mancini homered for a second straight game, a three-run shot that led host Houston to a three-game sweep of slumping Minnesota.

Mancini, who hit a two-run homer Wednesday, has six home runs and 16 RBIs in 18 games since being traded from the Orioles.

Blue Jays 6, Red Sox 5 (10): Automatic runner Cavan Biggio slid under the tag to score the go-ahead run in the 10th inning, and Toronto beat Boston to complete a three-game sweep and earn its eighth straight win at Fenway Park.

The Red Sox had a runner on third with nobody out in the eighth and loaded the bases with no outs in the ninth, both times failing to score. In the 10th, Biggio took third on a groundout and then rushed home on George Springer's grounder to short, with the throw from Xander Bogaerts coming in too high.

Bills punter Araiza accused of gang rape in civil suit

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Matt Araiza, the "Punt God" who led San Diego State to a record-setting season before being drafted by the Buffalo Bills, and two of his former Aztecs teammates were accused in a civil lawsuit Thursday of gang-raping a teenager at an off-campus party last fall.

The lawsuit, filed in San Diego County Superior Court, accuses Araiza, Xavier Leonard and Nowlin "Pa'a" Ewaliko of gang-raping a then-17-year-old girl at a Halloween party at a home where Araiza had been living.

The plaintiff, now 18, is identified in the complaint as "Jane Doe" because she was underage at the time.

No arrests have been made and San Diego Police have not publicly identified any suspects.

Leonard is listed on San Diego State's roster as a redshirt freshman offensive lineman from Arlington, Texas. Ewaliko is not listed on this year's roster, but was on the 2021 roster as a defensive lineman from Seattle.

The lawsuit states that the teen had been drinking with friends when they decided to go to the party on Oct. 17 and she was "observably intoxicated upon arrival." She became separated from her friends and was approached by Araiza who offered her a drink, according to the lawsuit. She believes the drink "not only contained alco-

hol, but other intoxicating substances," the complaint said.

She told Araiza, who was 21 at the time, that she was a high school senior, according to the lawsuit. She alleges he then led her to a side yard where he asked her to perform oral sex and then had sex with her before taking her to a bedroom in the home. There were at least three other men in the room, including Leonard and Ewaliko, according to the complaint. The lawsuit states that Araiza threw the teen onto the bed and she went in and out of consciousness while she was being raped. It added, "but she does remember some moments from the horrific gang rape."

After an hour-and-a-half, the teen "stumbled out of the room

bloody and crying," according to the complaint. Her nose, belly button, and ear piercings had been pulled out.

She immediately told her friends about the rape and the next day reported it to police and underwent a rape exam, according to the lawsuit. Officers coached her on calling Araiza, which she did 10 days later as detectives recorded it, according to the complaint.

During the call, Araiza confirmed having sex with her, the lawsuit states, but when she asked him "And did we have actual sex?" he responded "This is Matt Araiza. I don't remember anything that happened that night" and hung up.

The Los Angeles Times first reported the lawsuit.

Scheffler shoots 65 in Tour Championship

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Masters champion Scottie Scheffler might have had a roller coaster of an opening round Thursday at the Tour Championship if only he had been paying attention to the scoreboards.

Scheffler started with a two-shot lead as the No. 1 seed in the FedEx Cup. He led by six shots on the front nine. Then his lead was down to two. When he finished with three straight birdies for a 5-under 65, he was five strokes ahead of Xander Schauffele.

"I didn't know any of that," Scheffler said. "I was just trying to go out and shoot a good number."

Rory McIlroy's day at East Lake was far more wild. And he knew it.

A two-time FedEx Cup champion, McIlroy started six shots behind. He teed off in a downpour and hooked his tee shot over the fence and out-of-

bounds. He reloaded and found a bunker. He missed a 6-foot putt and took triple bogey, and just like that was nine shots behind.

Then he went rough-to-rough to make bogey on the next hole. McIlroy had only one par on the front nine and remarkably salvaged a 67.

"Not the best way to start," McIlroy said. "The golf course is really gettable, so I knew there was a lot of holes out there that you could birdie. I knew my game was good. It was just one of those things. Not the ideal way to start, but proud of how I bounced back from that."

Equally impressive was British Open champion Cameron Smith, playing for the first time since the opening FedEx Cup playoffs event because of a hip injury that gets aggravated in soft conditions. East Lake wasn't quite a real lake, but overnight rain and the down-

pour made for a good walk spoiled.

He still managed a 67 and joined McIlroy at eight shots back. They were a curious attraction because McIlroy has been the biggest voice for the PGA Tour and its battle with Saudi-funded LIV Golf, and reports indicate Smith will be the next to go.

Inside the ropes, it's golf.

"Business as usual," McIlroy said. "Cam and I get on really well — always have done. Again, I keep saying no matter what decisions are made or what choices are made by anyone, it doesn't make them a bad person. Does it make me disagree with them? Of course it does. But I disagree with a lot of people that I like and love."

And so began the final leg in the chase for the FedEx Cup and the \$18 million prize.

U.S. Open champion Matt Fitzpatrick finished with an ea-

gle for a bogey-free 64 and was six shots behind — he matched the best round of the soggy day and gained only one shot on Scheffler — while Joaquin Niemann (64) and defending champion Patrick Cantlay (70) were another shot behind.

Schauffele is dangerous as ever, and his record at East Lake is astounding for someone who has never left Atlanta in possession of a trophy. This was his 21st round in the Tour Championship, and his 19th round under par. The other two were even-par 70s.

He had the low 72-hole score in 2020 but started too far behind to catch Dustin Johnson.

"It's a weird event," Schauffele said. "We do this once a year, and it's one of the bigger events for us to do it. Because of those things, you just have to try your best to stay in the present and not get ahead of it. Tuck your head and play your best golf."

Dream's Howard landslide pick as WNBA rookie of year

From wire reports

ATLANTA — Atlanta Dream guard Rhyné Howard was an overwhelming choice as WNBA rookie of the year on Thursday.

The versatile 6-foot-2 Howard received 53 of 56 votes to become only the second Atlanta player to win the award. Angel McCoughtry was the 2009 choice as the league's top rookie.

Howard also was a near unanimous choice as The Associated Press WNBA rookie of the year after averaging 16.2 points, 4.5 rebounds, 2.8 assists and 1.5 steals this season.

Howard, who played at Kentucky, was the No. 1 pick in the WNBA Draft. She led all rookies in points, assists, steals and minutes per game.

Among all players, Howard ranked 11th in scoring. Her 85 three-pointers ranked third in the league, while setting a league record for rookies.

Timberwolves' Prince arrested

MIAMI — Minnesota Timberwolves for-

ward Taurean Prince was arrested at Miami International Airport on Thursday on a fugitive warrant that was issued in Texas, officials said.

He was being held Thursday night by the Miami-Dade County Corrections Department. Jail records did not show bond information, or the specifics of the charge or charges he is facing in Texas.

In a statement, the Timberwolves said team officials are "aware of the alleged report regarding Taurean Prince and are in the process of gathering more information."

Prince agreed to a two-year, \$16 million extension with the Timberwolves this summer. He has averaged 10.5 points per game in his first six NBA seasons, spending time with Atlanta, Brooklyn, Cleveland and now Minnesota.

Foreman accused of rape in '70s

NEW YORK — Two women have sued George Foreman for rape when they were teens, claiming the former boxing champion groomed them in the 1970s while they were as young as 10.

The women, who were not named in the lawsuits, claim they met Foreman as children, when their fathers were working for him, according to The Hollywood Reporter. Foreman allegedly groomed them for years, graphically telling one of them how to masturbate in a call when she was 13 or 14.

That woman claims that Foreman raped her several times in 1976, including once at a San Francisco hotel.

The other woman claims that Foreman threatened to fire her father if she didn't strip for him when she was 15. He raped her repeatedly until she was 16, according to the lawsuit, filed Wednesday in Los Angeles.

Foreman, 73, denied the allegations in a statement to the New York Daily News Thursday.

"Over the past six months, two women have been trying to extort millions of dollars each from me and my family. They are falsely claiming that I sexually abused them over 45 years ago in the 1970s. I adamantly and categorically deny these allegations," he said.