

Marines halt fitness tests as virus surges

BY STEVE BEYNON
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Marine Corps has suspended combat fitness tests for the rest of the year due to the spikes of coronavirus cases across the country.

“All Marines who have not yet conducted the Combat Fitness Test will not do so this year due to the current nationwide #COVID19 environment,” the service’s official Twitter account posted Friday.

As of now, testing is suspended through the rest of 2020 and will resume in January, according to a memo from the Marine Corps.

There are exceptions in which some Marines might have to conduct a test ahead of shipping to a school, such as

Sniper School or Officer Candidate School. Testing has also not paused for boot camp. Current fitness test failures must still conduct another assessment for a passing score.

“Although the CFT has been suspended for CY 2020, Marines are required to maintain physical fitness, body composition and military appearance standards at all times,” according to a memo from the Marine Corps.

The move from the Corps follows other branches that have paused testing much earlier in the pandemic.

The Army suspended fitness tests counting on a soldier’s record in the spring, despite this being the year that the service would kick off its new fitness test. Units are allowed to conduct the Army Combat Fitness Test, but it

will not count officially. It is unclear when the Army will resume tests for official records.

The Air Force suspended fitness tests, but the service plans to resume them on Jan. 1. Some base commanders, however, have postponed them until spring. The Navy is planning to resume fitness assessments in March.

As of Friday, more than 14,331,200 people in the United States have been infected with the coronavirus and at least 277,600 have died, according to data from The New York Times.

Conditions have worsened with winter approaching. During the past week, there has been an average of 180,327 cases per day, an increase of 8% from the average of two weeks ago.

Inoculations voluntary for troops until FDA approval

BY JOSEPH DITZLER
Stars and Stripes

U.S. service members may have to volunteer for coronavirus vaccines as they become available under emergency or early use guidelines set by the Food and Drug Administration, according to the Defense Department.

At least three vaccines are better than 90% effective against COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the coronavirus, according to news accounts. The U.S. military is planning to distribute two vaccines that are pending FDA approval.

Vaccines could become available soon. The FDA takes up a request Thursday for emergency use of the vaccine developed by Pfizer-BioNTech, according to the FDA docket online. The United Kingdom last week approved its use on a temporary, emergency basis, the first country to do so.

Moderna has also applied for permission to field its vaccine on an emergency use basis. An FDA committee meets on

that application Dec. 17.

Vaccines available on a trial basis will probably be administered first to volunteers, according to a Defense Department statement given to Stars and Stripes on Thursday by Yokota Air Base in western Tokyo.

The Defense Department expects quantities will be “limited initially and distributed on a rolling delivery basis as more vaccines become available,” according to the email from base spokesman Lt. Stuart Thrift. Inoculations will be voluntary until the vaccines are approved by the FDA, according to his statement.

Anyone who requests the vaccine will be required to give informed consent, meaning they must confer with their doctor to receive it, according to a Nov. 26 report by Military.com. The report quoted Col. Jessica Spitler, 30th Medical Group commander, who spoke at a town hall on Nov. 6.

Inoculations may be voluntary for as

long as two years, Military.com quoted Spitler as saying.

On Wednesday, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday said military health providers and first responders will be at the head of the line when vaccines become available for the military.

Gilday, speaking before a Senate Armed Services Committee subpanel, said DOD’s vaccines are going to every military medical facility in the United States, as well as locations overseas.

Locations in the U.S. will get the Pfizer vaccine, which has to be kept at -94 degrees Fahrenheit and is good for five days after being thawed, he said.

Overseas installations will get the Moderna vaccine, which is good for 30 days with standard refrigeration at 35.6 to 46.4 degrees Fahrenheit.

Health care professionals and then emergency and safety personnel at installations will have priority, which could include DOD civilians and contractors, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Some Air Force bases postpone fitness tests

By JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

While the Air Force as a whole still plans to resume fitness assessments Jan. 1, some base commanders have postponed them until spring amid a record-breaking wave of coronavirus infections in the United States.

"I know that our airmen are stressed. I know that they're tired," said Col. Tyler Schaff, commander of the 316th Wing and Joint Base Andrews, Md., one of three bases last week to announce a fitness testing delay until April 1.

"This is not for people to quit working out or delay working out," Schaff said. "What I'm offering, this is something they need not worry about as they go through the holidays."

The Air Force has delayed the resumption of fitness testing three times since March. In September, it announced it would postpone them until Jan. 1, and that the tests wouldn't include abdominal circumference, height and weight measurements.

The service at the time said installation commanders could delay assessments past the start of the year, based on guidance from local public health officials, state health restrictions and fitness center closures.

"I have the authority to push this down for three months, so I took the opportunity to do that," Schaff said at a Facebook town hall meeting Wednesday.

Schaff said he struggled with the decision, and mentioned the challenge of being

able to consistently conduct fitness testing outdoors in winter as a factor.

The base is also "heavily involved" in the presidential inauguration, and that, combined with preparing for the coronavirus vaccine means "we are having to work so much harder to do our mission," he said.

Col. Michael Zuhlsdorf, the 11th Wing commander at neighboring Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling in Washington, has issued similar guidance, Schaff said.

Scott Air Force Base, Ill., also announced it would postpone fitness testing until April, a memo signed Dec. 1 by base commander Col. Jeremiah Heathman and posted on the installation's website said.

"This decision is based off guidance provided by public health officials and state and local restrictions currently in place," the document said.

When asked if the Air Force would further delay testing across the service, Capt. Leah Brading said, "Our goal is to continue to minimize close contact among personnel during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and ensure units and personnel are fully ready to resume physical fitness testing when the time comes."

Among other Pentagon services, the Navy announced last month that it would delay the start of fitness tests until March.

The Army said in June that individual scores for the new Army Combat Fitness Test would not count against soldiers until March 2022.

Ex-USMC worker sentenced for selling pot on Okinawa

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
AND AYA ICHIHASHI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — A former U.S. government employee for the Marine Corps on Okinawa must serve more than four years in a Japanese prison for selling marijuana on the island.

Charles Yecla, 40, a civilian who worked for Marine Corps Installations Pacific at the time of his arrest last year, was sentenced Dec. 1 in Naha District Court to four years and four months in prison, the Okinawa Times reported Wednesday.

He was also fined the equivalent of \$9,600.

Yecla pleaded guilty Nov. 24, the first day of his trial, according to the report.

He was one of three American civilians employed by the Marines arrested between August and October 2019 for violating Japan's Cannabis Control Act.

He was accused of buying marijuana through the mail, growing it and selling it to the others.

His teenage son was also arrested as part of the police sting; information on the disposition of his case was unavailable from Japanese authorities.

Yecla "spread marijuana's evil influence far and wide," Chief Justice Hironobu Ono said at the sentencing, the Okinawa Times report said. "His behavior deserves the sentence."

Marine Corps Installations Pacific spokesman 1st Lt. Tim Hayes confirmed Yecla's employment but declined to provide further information Friday via email, citing the Privacy Act.

Marines, Army, Air Force tally over 30 new virus cases in Japan

By JOSEPH DITZLER
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — The U.S. military in Japan confirmed 45 new coronavirus cases over the weekend and Monday, including 27 infections at Marine Corps bases on Okinawa.

Late Monday, Kadena Air Base on Okinawa reported that four people tested positive, including three members of the same family with symptoms of COVID-19, the respiratory disease caused by the virus, according to a base Facebook post.

One of those people is associated with Kadena High School, and the school on Monday night canceled eight classes on Tues-

day, according to an announcement on the school Facebook page by Principal Christopher R. Kwiatek.

The fourth individual was already in quarantine because a family member had become infected, according to the base.

On Sunday, Kadena reported a patient connected with another school on base, Kadena Elementary. That person was already in quarantine after a family member tested positive Thursday, according to the base.

In total, Kadena reported nine new coronavirus patients between Friday night and Monday night.

U.S. Army Japan reported that nine peo-

ple tested positive for the virus between Wednesday and Friday, five of them already in quarantine on Okinawa as close contacts of another individual with the virus, according to an Army press release Monday.

Marine Corps Installations Pacific posted Facebook updates Friday through Sunday reporting 21 new cases at Camps Schwab, Hansen and Foster and Marine Corps Air Station Futenma.

On Monday, the Corps added another six infections: four at Foster and one each at Hansen, Schwab and MCAS Futenma, according to a Facebook post.

Marines and Japanese soldiers train together

By **SETH ROBSON**
Stars and Stripes

One thousand Marines and Japanese soldiers will practice airborne assaults to capture “key maritime terrain” during a two-week exercise that kicked off Monday on Japan’s main island.

Five hundred members of the 3rd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment, out of Camp Lejeune, N.C., are working with 400 troops from the Japan Ground Self-Defense Force’s 30th Infantry Regiment, their commander, Lt. Col. Neil Berry, said in a telephone interview Sunday from Camp Fuji, outside Tokyo.

The Forest Light exercise — which includes about 100 Marines from the 1st Marine Aircraft Wing and six MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotors attached to Marine Medium Tilt-

rotor Squadron 265 — is going on at the Soumagahara and Sekiyama training areas in Gunma and Niigata prefecture, according to a Marine Corps statement Monday.

The troops will conduct air assaults in the Ospreys and Japanese CH-47 helicopters, according to the Marine battalion’s operations officer, Maj. Joshua White, also on the phone call.

The training follows last month’s Keen Sword exercise that involved members of the Okinawa-based III Marine Expeditionary Force working with Japan’s Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade, a force modeled after the U.S. Marines and charged with defending outer islands, some of which are claimed by China.

Forest Light concludes Dec. 17, according to the Marine Corps’ statement.

Survivors remember Pearl Harbor at home

Associated Press

HONOLULU — Navy sailor Mickey Ganitch was getting ready to play in a Pearl Harbor football game as the sun came up on Dec. 7, 1941. Instead, he spent the morning — still wearing his football padding and brown team shirt — scanning the sky as Japanese planes rained bombs on the U.S. Pacific Fleet.

Seventy-nine years later, the coronavirus pandemic is preventing Ganitch and other survivors from attending an annual ceremony remembering those killed in the attack that launched the United States into World War II. The 101-year-old has attended most years since the mid-2000s but will have to observe the moment from California this year because of the health risks.

“That’s the way it goes. You got to ride with the tide,” Ganitch said in a telephone interview from his home in San Leandro, Calif.

Nearly eight decades ago, Ganitch’s USS Pennsylvania football team was scheduled to face off against the USS Arizona team. The pigskin showdown never happened.

The aerial assault began at 7:55 a.m., and Ganitch scrambled from the ship’s living compartment to his battle station about 70 feet above the main deck. His job was to serve as a lookout and report “anything that was suspicious.”

He saw a plane coming over the top of a nearby building. Sailors trained the ship’s guns on the aircraft and shot it down.

Altogether, more than 2,300 U.S. troops died in the attack.

They’re why Ganitch likes returning to Pearl Harbor for the annual remembrance ceremony on Dec. 7.

“We’re respecting them by being there, and showing up and honoring them. Cause they’re really the heroes,” Ganitch said.

But the health risks to the aging survivors of the attack and other World War II veterans mean none of them will gather at Pearl Harbor this year.

The National Park Service and Navy, which jointly host the event, also closed the ceremony to the public. The gathering, featuring a moment of silence, a flyover in missing man formation and a speech by the commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, was

VMI removes Jackson statue

Associated Press

LEXINGTON, Va. — The Virginia Military Institute removed a prominent statue of Confederate Gen. Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson on Monday, an effort initiated this fall after allegations of systemic racism roiled the school.

Around 9:45 a.m., a crane plucked the statue, which some cadets were required to salute until several years ago, off its base and slowly hoisted it away at the public military college in Lexington. A small crowd gathered amid snow flurries to look on.

VMI’s board voted to remove the statue in late October after The Washington Post published a story that described an “atmosphere of hostility and cultural insensitivity” at VMI. The piece detailed incidents such as lynching threats and a white professor reminiscing in class about her father’s Ku Klux Klan membership.

Founded in 1839, VMI says it is the oldest state-supported military college in the U.S.

The Post’s story also led to the ouster of VMI’s superintendent, retired Army Gen. J.H. Binford Peay III, and prompted state officials to commit to hiring an outside firm to investigate the students’ allegations.

The statue had been a subject of controversy for years, but the school had committed to keeping it in place in front of VMI’s

historic barracks as recently as July. VMI said it will be relocated to a nearby Civil War museum at a battlefield where dozens of VMI cadets were killed or wounded.

Amid a wave of Confederate monument removals around the country in the wake of George Floyd’s killing in Minneapolis, some VMI students and graduates called for the statue’s removal.

Peay said at the time that the school would change some of its long-standing traditions, such as relocating an oath ceremony from the Civil War battlefield. But he said it would not remove the statue of Jackson, who owned enslaved people, or rethink the names of buildings honoring Confederate leaders.

“Unlike many communities who are grappling with icons of the past, VMI has direct ties to many of the historical figures that are the subject of the current unrest. Stonewall Jackson was a professor at VMI, a West Point graduate who served in combat in the Mexican War, a military genius, a staunch Christian, and yes, a Confederate General,” Peay wrote in July.

Since Peay’s departure, VMI announced Cedric Wins, a retired U.S. Army major general, will serve as its interim superintendent. Wins will be the first Black leader to serve in that role.

Trump hurries federal execution pace

Associated Press

CHICAGO — As Donald Trump's presidency winds down, his administration is ratcheting up the pace of federal executions despite a surge of coronavirus cases in prisons, announcing plans for five starting Thursday and concluding just days before the Jan. 20 inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden.

If the five go off as planned, it will make 13 executions since July when the Republican administration resumed putting inmates to death after a 17-year hiatus and will cement Trump's legacy as the most prolific execution president in over 130 years. He'll leave office having executed about a quarter of all federal death-row prisoners, despite waning support for capital punishment among both Democrats and Republicans.

In a recent interview with The Associat-

ed Press, Attorney General William Barr defended the extension of executions into the post-election period, saying he'll likely schedule more before he departs the Justice Department. A Biden administration, he said, should keep it up.

"I think the way to stop the death penalty is to repeal the death penalty," Barr said. "But if you ask juries to impose and juries impose it, then it should be carried out."

The plan breaks a tradition of lame-duck presidents deferring to incoming presidents on policy about which they differ so starkly, said Robert Durham, director of the non-partisan Death Penalty Information Center. Biden, a Democrat, is a death penalty foe, and his spokesman told the AP that he'd work to end the death penalty when he is in office.

"It's hard to understand why anybody at this stage of a presidency feels compelled to

kill this many people ... especially when the American public voted for someone else to replace you and that person has said he opposes the death penalty," Durham said. "This is a complete historical aberration."

Not since the waning days of Grover Cleveland's presidency in the late 1800s has the U.S. government executed federal inmates during a presidential transition, Durham said. Cleveland's was also the last presidency during which the number of civilians executed federally was in the double digits in a year, with 14 executed in 1896.

Anti-death penalty groups want Biden to lobby harder for a halt to the flurry of pre-inaugural executions, though Biden can't do much to stop them, especially considering Trump won't even concede he lost the election and is spreading baseless claims of voting fraud.

SpaceX launches second ship with ISS supplies

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — SpaceX launched a newer, bigger version of its Dragon supply ship to the International Space Station on Sunday, marking the first time the company has two capsules in orbit at the same time.

The Dragon — packed with Christmas treats and presents — should reach the space station on Monday, joining the Dragon that delivered four astronauts last month.

"Dragons everywhere you look," said Kenny Todd, NASA's deputy space station

program manager.

The 6,400-pound shipment includes billions of microbes and crushed asteroid samples for a biomining study, a new medical device to provide rapid blood test results for astronauts in space, and a privately owned and operated chamber to move experiments as big as refrigerators outside the orbiting lab. Forty mice also are flying for bone and eye studies, two areas of weaknesses for astronauts during long space stays.

Todd said all this research is "the ultimate Christmas present" for NASA astro-

naut Kate Rubins, a virus hunter who performed the first DNA sequencing in space a few years ago.

As for more personal presents for the four Americans, two Russians and one Japanese on board, "I don't like to get out in front of Santa Claus. I fear it might mess up my own Christmas," Todd said late last week. "Let's see what happens when they open the hatch ... I'm optimistic."

For the astronauts' Christmas feast, the Dragon is carrying roasted turkey, cornbread dressing, cranberry sauce, shortbread cookies and tubes of icing.

Powerful winter storm slams into New England

The Washington Post

A powerful nor'easter socked New England on Saturday into Sunday, bringing strong winds, heavy inland snowfall and a slug of heavy rain near the coastline. The system, which explosively intensified into a meteorological "bomb," left at least a foot of snow in spots, with reports of thundersnow amid the most intense snowfall. More than a quarter-million electricity customers in the Northeast were left without power by Sunday, the second widespread weather-induced power outage in the region in a week.

While snowfall amounts in Massachu-

setts fell short of what was forecast, a bull's-eye of 12.5 inches was measured in Paxton, Mass., just to the northwest of Worcester. Worcester airport, located at 1,000 feet in elevation, recorded 9.6 inches. Similar amounts were observed in northeast Connecticut, with 10 inches reported out of Union.

Meanwhile, strong winds near the coast of southern New England approached 70 mph in spots, particularly on outer Cape Cod and the Islands. Dennis, Mass., gusted to 68 mph, and both Aquinnah on Martha's Vineyard and Siasconset on Nantucket to 61 mph. Gusty winds were also hammering

coastal Maine, with the combination of high winds and heavy, wet snow leading to widespread power outages.

As of 9:45 a.m. Eastern time on Sunday, 212,000 customers were without power in Maine alone, nearly a quarter of the state, while heavy snow was still falling. Nearly 60,000 customers were without power in New Hampshire, where heavy snow fell Saturday and Saturday night. Some parts of Maine have received more than a foot of snow, with totals of up to a foot and a half in the forecast before the storm moves into the Canadian Maritimes.

Library employee accused of burning conservative books

TN CHATTANOOGA — A Chattanooga Public Library employee who has helped organize protests against police brutality was placed on leave after he was accused of burning library books by conservative authors.

Library spokeswoman Christina Sacco told the Chattanooga Times Free Press that library services coordinator Cameron Williams has been placed on administrative leave for the next five business days while the library investigates the allegations.

In a video posted briefly on Instagram, Williams burns copies of conservative commentator Ann Coulter's "How to Talk to a Liberal (If You Must)" and President Donald Trump's "Crippled America" in an outdoor fire, spraying each with lighter fluid. "FDT," a Trump protest song by YG and Nipsey Hussle, plays in the background.

Climber rescued from volcanic crevice

OR PORTLAND — A mountain climber was rescued and will survive after falling into a volcanic crevice near the summit of Mount Hood.

Caroline Sundbaum, of Portland, injured her shoulder in the fall but was able to tie herself to a rope that was lowered to her by another climber who witnessed her fall.

The crevice — called a fumarole — emits steam and volcanic gases on Mt. Hood, which is an active volcano.

The 32-year-old Sundbaum fell about 15 feet into the fumarole.

Sundbaum's two climbing companions were ahead of her when she paused to rest and sit on her backpack. Another climber saw her and then noticed she was gone minutes later and there was a hole in the snow where she had been, according to a statement

Nabbed for street racing, man blasts 'Bad Boys'

FL NAPLES — Florida authorities said that when two young men were pulled over for street racing, one of the drivers blasted the song "Bad Boys," the opening theme to the TV show "Cops."

The Collier County Sheriff's Office said Oscar Llera Iturralde, 19, and Jose Ramirez-Sanchez, 20, were arrested and charged with racing on a public highway. A third man, Joel Aguilar Hernandez, 20, was charged with riding as a passenger in a race

competition.

The deputies followed the cars, which began speeding after a traffic light turned green, going as fast as 95 miles per hour.

18-year-olds charged with assaulting couple at mall

NC WINSTON-SALEM — Two 18-year-olds have been charged with attacking a man and woman at a North Carolina shopping mall, police said.

Brandon Denard Crosby and Tynaysha Jada Davis, both from Winston-Salem, were arrested and charged with assault, news outlets reported.

Winston-Salem police said a man and woman were thrown to the ground and beaten in a parking lot at Hanes Mall. The victims were identified as LaTina Nicole Melton, 34, and Vincent Antonio Pearsall, 41.

Police said Melton and Pearsall went to the mall to pick up Pearsall's daughter, who said she was being threatened by a group of teenagers.

Melton and Pearsall argued with the teens when they arrived and were later attacked, police said. Melton's purse was also stolen.

Man accused of multiple attempted abductions

PA ARDMORE — Bail was set at \$1 million for a man suspected of trying to abduct women on three occasions in Pennsylvania and New Jersey.

Police arrested Kent Powe, 58, on attempted kidnapping, robbery and other charges stemming from an incident on Nov. 4 in Lower Merion Township, Pa.

Police believe Powe also is connected with two attempted kidnappings that occurred in Cherry Hill, N.J., last month.

The women were not injured, police said.

Feds offer reward for info on 2 Monk seal deaths

HI HONOLULU — Federal wildlife officials are offering up to \$20,000 for information regarding the deaths of two Hawaiian monk seals that occurred within two months of each other.

The first monk seal, a juvenile male identified as RL52, was found dead in September. The second seal, a juvenile female, was found dead in November, the Honolulu Star-Advertiser reported.

The Hawaiian monk seal is listed as endangered and is protected under the Endangered Species Act of 1973 from being killed, harmed, trapped, captured or ha-

ressed.

Fugitive found and arrested 35 years later

FL OCALA — A man who fled a drug conspiracy charge in Nebraska 35 years ago has been arrested in Florida, where he was living under a false identity, authorities said.

Howard D. Farley Jr., 72, was arrested at his north Florida home, according to court records. He faces a passport charge in Ocala federal court and up to 10 years in prison.

According to a criminal complaint, Farley applied for a passport in February using the name, birth date and Social Security number of a person who had died as an infant in 1955.

In 1985, Farley and 73 others were indicted by a federal grand jury in Nebraska. Prosecutors identified Farley as the "drug kingpin" of the Southern Line.

Tiny village to be built for homeless women

SC SPARTANBURG — A South Carolina church is moving forward with plans to create a village of tiny homes to help homeless women.

First Baptist Spartanburg plans to transform land on the city's Northside into transitional housing for single homeless women, WYFF-TV reported.

"They in, our opinion, are the most easily victimized of the population on the street," said Steve Wise, Minister of Ministries for First Spartanburg Baptist.

First Baptist Spartanburg's goal is to build 20 tiny homes. The church said each woman in the program would get their own.

Wallaroo rescued from river after chase

IL PERU — Police in Peru are no strangers to chases — unless what they're after hops away on two legs.

Officers in the city about 95 miles southwest of Chicago were joined by firefighters and even residents in a two-hour pursuit of a runaway wallaroo that bounded through yards and along streets and roads.

Native to Australia, wallaroos are larger than wallabies and smaller than kangaroos. This bloke — named Wally — got away from his owner in LaSalle County.

Wally eventually made his way into a river. They used a net to fish Wally from the frigid water and into their boat before taking him to shore.

From The Associated Press

Plenty of ugly to go around in NFL

Associated Press

For those teams pleading “Cut us a break” in this weird and unprecedentedly unpredictable year, that was a fair ask. Until now.

At this point of the NFL season, as we head into the final quarter of the schedule, the mea culpas have run their course. There’s simply too much bad, worse and truly ugly football to excuse any longer.

Certainly the winless, hapless and possibly hopeless Jets punctuated that on Sunday with their latest debacle. The Jaguars perhaps made what’s left of their believers hold the faith into overtime before folding. The Chargers didn’t even get out of the first period in their worst performance since, well, maybe when they called Balboa Stadium home.

Philly has flopped (phlopped?) so badly there are calls for coach Doug Pederson’s job; hey, Eagles fans, the guy won the Super Bowl three seasons back. But yes, that offense is unsightly.

Even some of the mediocrities, and there are many in 2020, can be downright hideous. See Chicago’s six-game slide that, by all indications, could reach 10. It’s loss Sunday was to the Lions, who spoiled many a Thanksgiving meal in Detroit by their performance on the holiday.

Two more tailenders, Dallas and Washington, still haven’t played their Week 13 games. The unattractiveness just might be enhanced by the end of the Cowboys’ visit to

Baltimore on Tuesday night.

Chargers coach Anthony Lynn summed it up after a 45-0 no-show against New England.

“That was one of the worst football games I’ve ever been a part of in my 30 years in the National Football League as a player and a coach. That was unacceptable and embarrassing,” Lynn said.

Sort of what America has seen from far too many teams, all of which deserved a pass because of the way the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted, well, everything. At this point, 12 games in, however, soccer’s process of relegation for the worst offenders — exemplified by action Sunday — seems like a wise approach.

Start with the Jaguars, who deserve credit for extending to the limit many opponents, all of whom are better than they are. Yet every week — including the overtime defeat at Minnesota in which they blew a lead, made an impressive comeback, then committed the game-losing mistakes in OT — things go wrong. Jacksonville is 1-11, all of the losses coming since an opening victory.

“There’s a point where there’s no moral victories,” veteran linebacker Joe Schobert said. “In football, you either win or you lost ... to be a good football team, you have to win those close games.”

Or play close ones at least. The Chargers would seem to have enough talent (Joey Bosa, Keenan Allen, Austin Ekeler when healthy, rookie QB Justin Herbert and quite

a few others) not to be 3-9. On Sunday, they made the so-so Patriots look like the prime Tom Brady version in a 45-0 fiasco.

Instead, the Chargers appear to be regressing. Lynn kept repeating “unacceptable.” We concur.

Then there is incredible ineptitude, spelled J-E-T-S. On the brink of what pretty much everyone in the Big Apple believed was unreachable — a win — they reached truly ugly instead. Ultimate ugly.

After stopping Las Vegas deep in Jets territory, they needed a first down to end their team-record 11-game slide. Playing not to lose — hey, guys, it almost never works — they got ultra-conservative and had to punt after the Raiders used their timeouts.

But the Jets still were in position to pull off the victory. So defensive coordinator Gregg Williams blitzed quarterback Derek Carr, leaving a rookie cornerback in single coverage on Henry Ruggs III.

And 46 yards later, Ruggs was in the end zone. With 5 seconds remaining.

“We just played the call that the coaches called,” Jets safety Marcus Maye said of Williams’ call. “We’ve got to execute, but you’ve got to help us out at the same time and be in a better call at that spot.”

The curious call cost Williams his job. The Jets fired him on Monday.

It doesn’t get much uglier than that. Then again, the Jaguars, Chargers and Jets, not to mention the other league weaklings, have four more weeks to drop the standards.

Mayfield throws 4 first-half TDs in defeat of Titans

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Baker Mayfield and the Cleveland Browns can do more than just run the ball, and the NFL’s longest active playoff drought is moving closer to an end after 18 seasons.

They just need to finish what they start a bit better.

Mayfield threw for a season-high 334 yards with all four of his touchdown passes in the first half, and the Browns scored the first 17 points before holding on to win their fourth straight, 41-35 over the Tennessee Titans on Sunday.

With both chasing AFC playoff berths, the Browns looked like the team leading a division — they are second in the AFC North behind the unbeaten Pittsburgh Steelers — as they improved to 9-3 for the first time since

1994. Cleveland has only won nine games in a season three times in its expansion era, which began in 1999.

“I think people know we are a good team now when we play well, and that’s what we did today,” Browns running back Nick Chubb said.

The Titans (8-4) came in leading the AFC South and left tied after the Colts beat Houston 26-20, though Tennessee still has the better division record. The Titans fell apart after a bad fourth-down spot on their opening drive. NFL rushing leader Derrick Henry lost his first fumble this season on the next drive.

“Things kind of snowballed,” Titans coach Mike Vrabel said.

Mayfield kept the Browns from needing the NFL’s top rushing offense in what had

been expected to be a run-game showdown against the Titans and Henry. The Browns had their best-scoring half ever, leading 38-7 at halftime, topping the 35 points scored in the second half at Cincinnati in 2004. The Titans made it interesting, outscoring the Browns 28-3 in the second half.

Kenny Vaccaro picked up a fumble by Mayfield on fourth-and-1 and ran it 53 yards with 48 seconds left. Ryan Tannehill hit Cam Batson for an 8-yard TD pass with 28 seconds to go, but Andy Janovich recovered the onside kick to seal the victory.

“Obviously if I hold onto the damn football, it’s not going to be close — or as close as it should have been,” Mayfield said.

Mayfield became the first Browns quarterback to throw four TDs in the first half since Hall of Famer Otto Graham in 1951.

Rams win, move into tie atop NFC West

Associated Press

GLENDALE, Ariz. — Jared Goff first shook off his coach's criticism and then led his team to the top of the NFC West.

The Rams' fifth-year quarterback bounced back from last week's tough outing with one of his best games of the season, completing 37 of 47 passes for 351 yards and a touchdown in a 38-28 win over the Arizona Cardinals on Sunday.

"I responded exactly how I expected to," Goff said. "I have been through a lot of bad things in my football career before and I have consistently responded and this was no different. I just had to keep my head down and keep working."

Los Angeles (8-4) has won three of four and is tied for the division lead with the Seahawks, who lost to the New York Giants 17-12.

The Rams had a 24-14 lead early in the fourth and looked like they were going to pull away until Nsimba Webster fumbled on a punt return. The Cardinals recovered at the LA 15-yard line and quickly turned the mistake into a touchdown on Kenyan Drake's 4-yard run that pulled Arizona within 24-21.

Los Angeles responded on its next drive, and the offense quickly moved downfield. Darrell Henderson sliced through Arizona's defense untouched for a 38-yard TD

run that pushed it to 31-21. Goff was steady in the fourth, just as he was throughout the game, making big throws and avoiding mistakes.

Rams coach Sean McVay was critical of Goff after he threw two interceptions in a 23-20 loss to the 49ers last weekend, but he never lost confidence in his quarterback. For his part, Goff took his coach's comments in stride, saying he was "a big boy" and that McVay was correct.

Instead of getting mad, Goff got better. McVay had nothing but praise on Sunday.

"He took great care of the football, distributed, got a lot of guys involved," McVay said. "We were efficient on third down. It was tough sledding running the football but we did get enough."

The Cardinals (6-6) have lost three straight and four of their past five. Second-year Arizona quarterback Kyler Murray had an inconsistent game, completing 21 of 39 passes for 173 yards and three touchdowns. He also lost a fumble midway through the fourth and threw a pick-6 to LA's Troy Hill, who ran it back 35 yards for a 38-21 lead.

The Rams also had a big advantage in time of possession, keeping the ball about 39 minutes to Arizona's 21.

"They got it going and kept our defense on the field a lot of plays and I think as the game

went on, it wore on those guys," Arizona coach Kliff Kingsbury said. "We have to be better, more efficient offensively and not keep those guys on the field so much."

Arizona opened the game with a 59-yard touchdown pass from Murray to tight end Dan Arnold, who didn't have a defensive player within 15 yards of him while making the catch.

The Rams were distracted by triple-teamed DeAndre Hopkins, which led to Arnold being wide open, and he was able to jog into the end zone.

Los Angeles' defense, which has been among the NFL's best this season, tightened in a hurry. The Cardinals didn't get another first down until late in the second quarter, and Murray finished the first half 3-of-12 passing for 73 yards.

"You're going to go through slumps, you're going to have times when you're not as sharp as you like to be," Kingsbury said. "I still believe we have a high-level offense that can score a lot of points, make a lot of first downs. We just weren't very sharp today."

The Rams rallied for a 14-7 halftime lead. They tied it early in the second quarter on a 9-yard touchdown run by rookie Cam Akers and pulled away when Goff hit Tyler Higbee for a 1-yard touchdown with 51 seconds left before halftime.

Colts' defense holds off Texans

Associated Press

HOUSTON — With their offense sputtering in the second half Sunday, the Indianapolis Colts turned to their defense to seal a win over the Houston Texans.

Philip Rivers threw two touchdown passes in the first half and the defense dominated after that, lifting the Colts to the 26-20 victory.

The Texans had a chance to take the lead with about 90 seconds left. They were at the Indianapolis 2 when Deshaun Watson fumbled a low snap and Anthony Walker pounced on it to secure the victory.

"It was crazy," Colts coach Frank Reich said. "Obviously, that's why it's a 60-minute game and you're never surprised by things that happen in this league ... we got a good break there. We made the break. They dropped the ball and we went and got it."

Watson took responsibility for the miscue even though the snap wasn't great.

"I should have just caught the ball," he

said. "I know it was a little low and hot, but for me I take pride in catching every snap regardless of where it is and how fast it is."

Indianapolis (8-4) led 24-20 at the break after Rivers threw TD passes of 21 and 39 yards. The offense didn't score after that, but the defense held Houston (4-8) scoreless in the second half and Justin Houston added a safety with a sack of Watson in the end zone.

The safety was Indy's third this season and the fourth of Houston's career, tying him for the most in NFL history. Houston had three sacks, three QB hits and forced a fumble.

With Sunday's shutout in the second half, the Colts are allowing an average of 7.33 points in the second half of games this season. Watson threw for 341 yards and ran for a score in the first half. But he did not have a touchdown pass for the first time this season and threw an interception after not being picked off in the last six games.

Giants' defense stops Seahawks

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Laughed at and mocked for being on top of the worst division in the NFL, the New York Giants now have an impressive win to validate their spot as NFC East leaders.

Alfred Morris scored a pair of third-quarter touchdowns, the New York defense shut down Russell Wilson and one of the top offenses in the league, and the Giants stunned the Seattle Seahawks 17-12 on Sunday.

Double-digit underdogs, the Giants (5-7) handed Seattle its first home loss of the season, sent the NFC West race into some mayhem, and kept their spot on top of the NFC East for another week. Following its 0-5 start, New York has won five of its past seven, the last four in a row. New York had been close in losses to Tampa Bay and the Rams, but picked the perfect time to get its first victory over a team with a winning record.

No. 16 USC rolls past Washington State

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Kedon Slovis and Amon-Ra St. Brown kept grinding in practice while No. 16 Southern California waited two weeks and then two more days to get back on the field.

When the Trojans and Washington State finally got the green light Sunday night, Slovis and St. Brown roared right through it for a record-setting start to a blowout win.

St. Brown caught four touchdown passes from Slovis in a spectacular first quarter, and unbeaten USC cruised to a 38-13 victory over the Cougars.

Slovis threw five touchdown passes in the first half before finishing with 287 yards as the Trojans (4-0) returned from a prolonged absence caused by a COVID-19 outbreak with a dominant performance on both sides of the ball against the Cougars (1-2), who also hadn't played since Nov. 14.

St. Brown made college football history with touchdowns on every one of his four

catches in the opening quarter, including two dazzling grabs made with backward dives on difficult throws by Slovis. Along with tying Robert Woods' USC record for TD catches in a game, the junior receiver tied the FBS record for touchdowns scored in any quarter and joined Duke's Corey Thomas in 1997 as the only players in FBS history with four touchdown catches in a quarter.

"We don't like being away from football for so long, but I think the days away helped us get our legs back underneath us," St. Brown said. "We had some linemen out, but we had a lot of time to get our throws in. It wasn't too bad for (the skill-position players)."

With precise execution and big-play excellence against a depleted Washington State secondary curiously playing man-to-man coverage against one of the best receiver groups in the country, the Trojans grabbed a 35-0 lead midway through the

second quarter with just 214 yards of offense.

Talanoa Hufanga and Olaijah Griffin had interceptions in the first half for USC, which dominated a game moved back two nights to allow the Trojans to clear enough players from coronavirus protocol to play.

Tyler Vaughns caught the fifth TD pass by Slovis, who tied the school record held by Mark Sanchez, Matt Barkley and Cody Kessler.

Slovis recaptured the accuracy that characterized his impressive freshman year, and the sophomore's throws also had the tight spirals that were missing earlier this season in his shaky start.

"Offensively, I felt like we had a lot to prove in this game," said Slovis, who completed 18 straight passes into the third quarter.

Freshman Jayden De Laura passed for 134 yards, threw two interceptions and lost a fumble for the Cougars.

College basketball roundup

No. 12 Villanova hands No. 17 Texas its first defeat

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — Jeremiah Robinson-Earl and Justin Moore each scored 19 points and No. 12 Villanova held on late to beat No. 17 Texas 68-64 Sunday, handing the Longhorns their first loss after a strong start.

Collin Gillespie made four free throws over the final 15 seconds to secure the victory for the Wildcats (4-1). Jermaine Samuels, who sat out practice this week because of a sprained pinky on his right hand, collected a game-high 12 rebounds.

Courtney Ramey and Matt Coleman III each scored 17 points to pace the Longhorns (4-1). Texas had won the Maui Invitational in the program's best start in six years under coach Shaka Smart.

No. 8 Michigan State 79, Western Michigan 61: Joey Hauser had a career-high 24 points and grabbed 10 rebounds, leading the host Spartans past the Broncos.

Michigan State (5-0) seemed flat for a second straight game at home after beating No. 6 Duke with an inspired effort on the road. They led Western Michigan (0-2) by just two points midway through the second half and trailed for six-plus minutes in the game.

The Broncos played for the first time since Nov. 25, returning to competition after its program and another team had CO-

VID-19 issues.

Aaron Henry finished with 12 points and five assists, while Rocket Watts had 10 points and six assists.

Titus Wright led Western Michigan with 16 points and 10 rebounds.

No. 11 West Virginia 80, Georgetown 71: Miles McBride scored 17 points, Derek Culver had 14 and the visiting Mountaineers finished fast to beat the Hoyas in the first meeting between the former Big East rivals since 2014.

Culver, the leading scorer and rebounder for West Virginia (4-1), was limited to just 18 minutes because of foul trouble. Emmitt Matthews had 13 points and Taz Sherman added 12 as the Mountaineers bounced back from a loss to top-ranked Gonzaga.

Jahvon Blair led Georgetown (1-2) with 19 points while Jamorko Pickett added 11.

No. 17 Texas Tech 81, Grambling State 40: Kyler Edwards had 13 points and 11 rebounds, leading five players scoring in double figures as the host Red Raiders Tech overcame a sluggish start.

Texas Tech (4-1) never trailed after Edwards made a three-pointer only 17 seconds into the game, but it then missed 12 of their next 13 shots. The Red Raiders also had a nearly five-minute stretch later in the first half when they missed five shots in a row

and had four turnovers.

Mac McClung, Terrence Shannon Jr. and freshman Nimari Burnett each had 12 points for Texas Tech, while Jamarius Burton had 10.

Cameron Christon scored 11 points, and was the only player in double figures for the Tigers (1-3).

Georgia Tech 79, No. 20 Kentucky 62: Moses Wright scored 21 points, Kyle Sturdivant added 15 and the host Yellow Jackets recovered from a poor start to the season to deal the Wildcats their third straight loss.

Georgia Tech (1-2) won with defense, recording 15 steals that led to a dominant 33-4 advantage in points off turnovers.

Bubba Parham had 17 points and the Yellow Jackets outscored Kentucky 36-20 in the paint.

Freshman Terrence Clarke had 22 points for the Wildcats (1-3). B.J. Boston, who had 11 points, was Kentucky's only other scorer in double figures.

Army 63, La Salle 59: Aaron Duhart came off the bench to tally 12 points to lift the host Black Knights.

Lonnie Grayson also had 12 points for Army (4-1) and Jalen Rucker added 10, including the clinching free throws with two seconds to play. Jack Clark had 18 points and nine rebounds for the Explorers (0-3).