

Navy sending replacements to Essex

The San Diego Union-Tribune

SAN DIEGO — So many sailors fell ill with COVID-19 on board the amphibious assault ship USS Essex during its recent stint at sea that the Navy had to send fresh troops to the ship to help man key watch stations, a member of the crew told *The San Diego Union-Tribune*.

Naval Surface Forces Pacific, headquartered in San Diego, declined to comment on how many sailors on board the Essex were affected by the outbreak but confirmed some of what the sailor, who asked to remain anonymous, told the newspaper.

“Personnel assigned to the Essex Amphibious Ready Group (ARG)/5th Marine Regiment have tested positive for Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19),” said Cmdr. Nicole Schwegman, a Navy spokeswoman, in a statement. “Sometimes, in order to meet manning and training requirements, we cross deck Sailors, operationally hold prospective losses, utilize reservists, or divert prospective gain Sailors to higher pri-

ority units.”

Many of the sailors affected by the outbreak work in the ship’s engineering department, the sailor said. The replacement sailors — many of them assigned to the USS Bonhomme Richard, which was devastated by fire in July and is scheduled to be scrapped — were brought aboard via a U.S. Navy hovercraft, commonly called an LCAC.

The Essex left San Diego early in December with a contingent of Marines from 1st Battalion, 5th Marines out of Camp Pendleton for Operation Steel Knight/Dawn Blitz, an annual training exercise.

Officials with the 1st Marine Division did not immediately respond to a request for comment, but one Marine official, not authorized to comment publicly, said a small number of Marines from 1/5 were also affected by the outbreak.

The Essex returned to San Diego Monday.

While the Navy, and every branch of the

military, have not released region-specific coronavirus numbers since the pandemic’s earliest days, sporadic reports of outbreaks on ships and among local personnel illustrate the challenges of maintaining operations as the number of virus cases in the community soar.

In a November message to the fleet, the Navy said that virus rates among the sailors “are generally the same as the rates of infection in the local area.” The latest published Navy numbers show 1,281 sailors Navy-wide tested positive for the coronavirus this week. Almost 7,700 sailors have tested positive for the virus since the beginning of November, which is about 40% of the Navy’s total number of cases since the start of the pandemic.

One in six active-duty Navy sailors is based in San Diego County, according to a 2019 study. Applying that ratio to the service’s total active cases suggests about 500 San Diego sailors could be positive for COVID-19.

Ship launches troop withdrawal from Somalia

JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany—A U.S. warship and an aircraft have launched an operation to pull U.S. forces out of Somalia, the military said this week as it carries out a Pentagon directive to move hundreds of troops to other locations.

The USS Hershel “Woody” Williams, an expeditionary sea base that normally carries a contingent of crisis-response Marines, and an AC-130W Stinger II plane are supporting the troop movement, the military said in a statement Thursday.

U.S. Africa Command, citing security concerns, declined to say Friday how many troops have already been moved or when the withdrawal will be completed.

AFRICOM did say that roughly 700 troops will be repositioned to neighboring countries to carry out cross-border oper-

ations against al-Shabab, an al-Qaida-aligned terrorist group. While AFRICOM didn’t name the countries, Djibouti and Kenya are likely destinations given that the U.S. maintains military bases in both nations.

A limited troop presence will remain on the ground in Somalia while some forces also could be reassigned to other regions or to the U.S., AFRICOM said.

AFRICOM’s Joint Task Force — Quartz, which is leading the mission, dubbed Operation Octave Quartz, said the AC-130W Stinger II is able to provide close air support and air interdiction.

“Close air support missions include troops in contact, convoy escort and point air defense,” the task force said in a statement.

The USS Hershel “Woody” Williams, which is assigned to AFRICOM and is

based out of Souda Bay in Crete, is a relatively new asset in Europe. In October, the military announced that the vessel would support AFRICOM missions, as well as those in Europe as needed.

The 784-foot-long ship features a four-spot flight deck that helicopters can use. There is also living space for a crew complement of about 250.

American troops in Somalia are tasked with conducting counterterrorism operations and train, advise and assist Somali forces, primarily in their fight against al-Shabab.

The militant group has operated for more than a decade and aims to topple the U.S.-supported government in the country. The U.S. also conducts frequent airstrikes against terrorist targets, which are expected to continue even as U.S. forces withdraw.

Stopping wall construction could save \$2.6B

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The U.S. government would save about \$2.6 billion if President-elect Joe Biden halts construction on the border wall project on his first day in office, according to U.S. Army Corps of Engineers estimates reviewed by The Washington Post.

Biden told reporters this summer that he would not build “another foot” of the border barriers that became a symbol of the Trump presidency and one of the most expensive federal infrastructure projects in U.S. history. But the financial implications of a decision to stop work — including the costs to the government it may incur — have not been publicly disclosed.

U.S. Army Corps commanders met with members of the Biden transition team last week to discuss the border wall project, corps spokeswoman Raini Brunson said. She declined to comment on the estimates reviewed by The Post, referring additional questions to the president-elect’s office.

Biden’s transition team did not immediately respond to a request for comment Wednesday.

The Trump administration obtained about \$15 billion for the barrier project, enough to complete 738 miles of new fencing, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection. About one-third of the \$15 billion was provided by Congress through the standard appropriations

process; Trump took the rest from Department of Defense counternarcotics programs and military construction accounts.

The U.S. Army Corps estimates show that there will be about \$3.3 billion in unused funds in the project’s accounts on Jan. 21. Army Corps officials have had meetings in recent weeks about how to end the contracts and about what can be done legally and when.

While the Biden administration will have the ability to terminate or modify contracts with the construction firms building the barrier, those companies will be able to bill the government for “demobilization” fees that cover the withdrawal of crews, materials and equip-

ment from the border. Those fees are projected to add up to about \$700 million, according to the estimates.

The Army Corps also priced out a third option that would not add more linear miles to the barrier but allow companies to complete the roads, sensors and other “attributes” that are part of the contracts. CBP officials have long insisted that the barrier is part of a “system” that includes powerful detection technology and roads that allow patrol agents to respond faster to incursions.

The Biden administration has not said whether it would consider completing those elements of the project, or bring everything to a screeching halt.

Iran begins construction on site at nuclear facility

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Iran has begun construction on a site at its underground nuclear facility at Fordo amid tensions with the U.S. over its atomic program, satellite photos obtained Friday by The Associated Press show.

Iran has not publicly acknowledged any new construction at Fordo, whose discovery by the West in 2009 came in an earlier round of brinkmanship before world powers struck the 2015 nuclear deal with Tehran.

While the purpose of the building remains unclear, any work at Fordo likely will trigger new concern in the waning days of the Trump administration before the inauguration of President-elect Joe Biden. Already, Iran is building at its Natanz nuclear facility after a mysterious explosion in July there that Tehran described as a sabotage attack.

“Any changes at this site will

be carefully watched as a sign of where Iran’s nuclear program is headed,” said Jeffrey Lewis, an expert at the James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies at the Middlebury Institute of International Studies, who studies Iran.

Iran’s mission to the United Nations did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The International Atomic Energy Agency, whose inspectors are in Iran as part of the nuclear deal, also did not immediately respond to a request for comment. The IAEA as of yet has not publicly disclosed if Iran informed it of any construction at Fordo.

Construction on the Fordo site began in late September. The construction site sits northwest of Fordo’s underground facility, built deep inside a mountain to protect it from potential airstrikes. The site is near other support and research-and-development buildings at Fordo.

Native American picked as interior secretary

Associated Press

President-elect Joe Biden selected New Mexico Rep. Deb Haaland as his nominee for interior secretary on Thursday, a historic pick that would make her the first Native American to lead the powerful federal agency that has wielded influence over the nation’s tribes for generations.

Tribal leaders and activists around the country, along with many Democratic figures, cheered Haaland’s selection after urging Biden for weeks to choose her to lead the Department of Interior. They stood behind her candidacy even when concerns that Democrats might risk their majority in the House if Haaland yielded her seat in Congress appeared to threaten her nomination.

With Haaland’s nomination, Indigenous people will for the first time in their lifetimes see a Native American at the table

where the highest decisions are made — and so will everyone else, said OJ Semans, a Rosebud Sioux vote activist who was in Georgia on Thursday helping get out the Native vote for two Senate runoffs. “It’s made people aware that Indians still exist,” he said.

Haaland, 60, is a member of the Pueblo of Laguna and, as she likes to say, a 35th-generation resident of New Mexico. The role of interior secretary would put her in charge of an agency that has tremendous sway not only over the nearly 600 federally recognized tribes, but also over much of the nation’s vast public lands, waterways, wildlife, national parks and mineral wealth.

Haaland tweeted after the news was made public that “growing up in my mother’s Pueblo household made me fierce.

“I’ll be fierce for all of us, our planet, and all of our protected land,” she pledged.

Virus bill holdup may mean weekend work

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — It's a hurry up and wait moment on Capitol Hill as congressional negotiators on a must-pass, almost \$1 trillion COVID-19 economic relief package struggled through a handful of remaining snags. The holdups mean a weekend session now appears virtually certain, and a top lawmaker warned that a government shutdown this weekend can't be ruled out.

All sides appeared hopeful that the wrangling wouldn't derail the legislation. After being bogged down for much of the day, negotiators reported behind-the-scenes progress Thursday night.

The central elements of a hard-fought compromise appeared in place: more than \$300 billion in aid to businesses; a \$300-per-

week bonus federal jobless benefit and renewal of soon-to-expire state benefits; \$600 direct payments to individuals; vaccine distribution funds and money for renters, schools, the Postal Service and people needing food aid. But a temporary funding bill runs out Friday at midnight, and the Senate's No. 2 Republican, Sen. John Thune, said if there isn't a deal by then, some Republicans might block a temporary funding bill — causing a low-impact partial weekend shutdown — as a means to keep the pressure on. Lawmakers were told to expect to be in session and voting this weekend.

"We must not slide into treating these talks like routine negotiations to be conducted at Congress' routine pace," Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said.

"The Senate is not going anywhere until we have COVID relief out the door."

The hangups involved an effort by GOP conservatives to curb emergency lending programs by the Treasury Department and the Federal Reserve, a Democratic demand to eliminate local government matching requirements for COVID-19-related disaster grants and myriad smaller disagreements over non-pandemic add-ons, lawmakers and aides said.

The delays weren't unusual for legislation of this size and importance, but lawmakers are eager to leave Washington for the holidays and are getting antsy. The pending bill is the first significant legislative response to the pandemic since the CARES Act passed in March.

Record snowfall blankets portions of Northeastern US

Associated Press

GLENVILLE, N.Y. — The Northeast's first whopper snowstorm of the season buried parts of upstate New York under more than 3 feet of snow, broke records in cities and towns across the region, and left plow drivers struggling to clear the roads as snow piled up at more than 4 inches per hour.

"It was a very difficult, fast storm and it dropped an unbelievable amount of snow," Tom Coppola, highway superintendent in charge of maintaining 100 miles of roads in the Albany suburb of Glenville, said Thursday. "It's to the point where we're having trouble pushing it with our plows."

The storm dropped 30 inches on Glenville between 1 a.m. and 6 a.m. Thursday, leaving

a silent scene of snow-clad trees, buried cars and laden roofs when the sun finally peeked through at noon.

"If you do not have to be on the roads, please don't travel," said New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo, who declared a state of emergency for 18 counties. He said there were more than 9,000 power outages, 600 accidents and two fatalities by midmorning Thursday.

In New Rochelle in Westchester County, where a foot of snow was recorded, the roof of a Mavis Discount Tire store partially caved in but no injuries were reported, according to CBSN New York.

In Broome County, where the regional center of Binghamton got a record 42 inches

of snow, County Executive Jason Garnar said snow fell at a rate of 4 to 5 inches per hour. "This is the fastest rate of snowfall I've ever encountered," he said.

In Ithaca, it took Fred Cullin, 23, more than an hour and a half to dig out of his steep, lakeside driveway that was packed with nearly 3 feet of snow piled up by plows.

"It was pretty crazy," Cullin said. "Shoveling uphill, on ice, was definitely interesting."

Much of Pennsylvania saw accumulations in the double digits.

Boston had more than 9 inches of snow early Thursday morning, breaking the previous record for the date of 6.4 inches in 2013.

Sony yanks Cyberpunk 2077 following public outcry

Bloomberg

Sony has removed CD Projekt SA's Cyberpunk 2077 from its PlayStation Store and is offering full refunds, taking unusual steps to appease customers furious about bugs plaguing one of the year's most highly anticipated gaming blockbusters.

The radical move to pull the game "till further notice" came after the console version of Cyberpunk 2077 debuted Dec. 10, following several delays, to reviews calling out problems and an online outcry from players frustrated with its poor performance.

CD Projekt shares dropped as much as

20% in Warsaw at the start of Friday's trading, erasing this year's gains.

Warsaw-based developer CD Projekt — best known for 2015's *The Witcher 3*, part of a franchise that was turned into a successful Netflix series — has offered refunds to any disappointed players, but Sony is going a step further by entirely removing the game from its store. Cyberpunk features Hollywood star Keanu Reeves as an in-game character and has used the actor as its most visible ambassador in the buildup to its release.

CD Projekt, whose shares have plunged 40% since Dec. 4, confirmed Sony's deci-

sion in a regulatory statement. The studio said it was "working hard" to bring its game back to the PlayStation store and that it had discussions with Sony regarding a full refund for all gamers seeking one.

It said that "all copies, whether digital or physical, will continue to receive support and updates" to help fix the game's teething problems. Its shares traded 15% lower at 261.8 zloty at 10:43 a.m. in Warsaw.

Trigon analyst Kacper Kopron said that Sony's decision is one of "worst scenarios" for the company as PlayStation represents two-thirds of the console market.

States say vaccine allotments cut for next week

Associated Press

O'FALLON, Mo. — Several states say they have been told to expect far fewer doses of the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine in its second week of distribution, prompting worries about potential delays in shots for health care workers and long-term care residents.

But senior Trump administration officials on Thursday downplayed the risk of delays, citing a confusion over semantics, while Pfizer said its production levels have not changed.

The first U.S. doses were administered Monday, and already this week, hundreds of thousands of people, mostly health care workers, have been vaccinated. The pace is expected to increase next week, assuming Moderna gets federal authorization for its vaccine.

Efforts to help ward off the coronavirus come amid a staggering death toll that surpassed 300,000 on Monday. Johns Hopkins University says about 2,400 people are dying daily in the U.S., which is averaging more than 210,000 cases per day.

In recent days, governors and health leaders in more than a dozen states have said the federal government has told them that next week's shipment of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine will be less than originally projected.

Little explanation was offered, leaving many state officials perplexed.

"This is disruptive and frustrating," Washington Gov. Jay Inslee, a Democrat, wrote on Twitter on Thursday after learning from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that the state's allocation would be cut by 40%. "We need accurate, predictable numbers to plan and ensure on-the-ground success."

California

LOS ANGELES — Hospitals across California have all but

run out of intensive care beds for COVID-19 patients, ambulances are backing up outside emergency rooms, and tents for triaging the sick are going up as the nation's most populous state emerges as the latest epicenter of the U.S. outbreak.

On Thursday, California reported a staggering 52,000 new cases in a single day — equal to what the entire U.S. was averaging in mid-October — and a one-day record of 379 deaths. More than 16,000 people are in the hospital with the coronavirus across the state, more than triple the number a month ago.

"I've seen more deaths in the last nine months in my ICU than I have in my entire 20-year career," said Amy Arlund, a nurse at Kaiser Permanente Fresno Medical Center.

Intensive care unit capacity is at less than 1% in many California counties, and morgue space is also running out, in what is increasingly resembling the disaster last spring in New York City.

Georgia

ATLANTA — Gov. Brian Kemp says the state of Georgia will keep paying for extra nurses to assist hospitals, nursing homes and other health care facilities that have struggled to find staff and keep up with demand because of the coronavirus pandemic.

The Republican governor made the announcement Thursday during a news conference at Grady Memorial Hospital in Atlanta where Public Health Commissioner Kathleen Toomey and an intensive care unit nurse received a coronavirus vaccine in an attempt to demonstrate that it's safe and effective.

Kemp said Georgia will commit as much as \$70 million to pay staffing agencies that are providing extra nurses through March. Georgia is on track to spend \$250 million on the program this year. The state has spent federal coronavirus aid on

the program so far. Kemp said he hopes the federal government will free up more money to cover the costs, but spokesman Cody Hall said Georgia would use state money if no federal money is available.

Hospitals and nursing homes have struggled with staffing, as some employees are infected or quarantined, and they haven't been able to easily hire more people to address surging demand.

Maryland

ANNAPOLIS — Maryland Gov. Larry Hogan on Thursday urged state residents to stay home for the holidays to help stop the spread of COVID-19, and also announced a new \$180 million relief package to help businesses and people affected by the pandemic.

The governor issued an emergency order to limit travel to essential purposes only.

"Our message today is simple: You are safer at home for the holidays this year," the Republican governor said at a news conference. "Making difficult sacrifices during these next few weeks will absolutely help keep your family, loved ones and your fellow Marylanders safe. It will help our hospitals keep up with the demand and it will save lives."

Hogan said residents who travel out of state should get a negative COVID-19 test before returning or quarantine for 10 days. He said the same applies to people from other states who travel to Maryland. Law enforcement won't track travelers' compliance, Hogan said.

Nevada

CARSON CITY — In Nevada, which has more coronavirus hospitalizations per capita than any other state, the most visible sign of the surge is the overflow unit that one Reno hospital has set up in its parking garage to treat patients.

But far from the state's pop-

ulation centers, rural hospitals — some with as few as four beds — are also filling with patients. The virus is forcing them to convert sleep-study rooms into intensive care units and, at times, make wrenching decisions as capacity runs low and patient transfers turn increasingly difficult.

"At many of our rural hospitals we don't have a parking garage that we can convert into extra space," Battle Mountain General Hospital CEO Jason Bleak recently told a state task force, adding that rural hospitals have less room for error when staff members fall sick or when capacity nears the brink.

Banner Churchill Community Hospital in Fallon serves a 5,000-square mile area in rural Nevada. Its emergency room often treats rodeo and motocross injuries, but at one point this month, 60% of its patients were dealing with COVID-19.

Louisiana

BATON ROUGE — The number of people in Louisiana hospitalized with COVID-19 on Thursday reached heights exceeding the state's summer surge of the coronavirus, a sobering statistic that mutes some of the excitement surrounding this week's first virus vaccinations.

Dr. Catherine O'Neal, an infectious disease expert at Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center, said the Baton Rouge hospital admitted the largest number of COVID-19 patients over 24 hours than it's seen in a similar period since July.

Louisiana's health department reported 1,602 patients hospitalized across the state with the COVID-19 disease caused by the coronavirus as the state grapples with its third surge in cases since the pandemic began. More than 6,600 people in the state have died from COVID-19 since March, according to state data.

Police: Man armed with chain saw robs eatery

ME WESTBROOK — A Maine man has been charged with robbing a fast-food restaurant while wielding a chain saw.

Police were summoned Tuesday afternoon after receiving reports of someone with a chain saw inside a McDonald's in Westbrook. The assailant went behind the counter while revving the chain saw and took some food and a drink, police said.

Alice Sweet, 26, of Portland, was captured by Westbrook police after fleeing, according to Police Capt. Steve Goldberg.

Sweet allegedly used the chain saw to damage two cars in the parking lot, police said, but there were no injuries.

Law addresses hate symbols on state land

NY ALBANY — The sale or display of Confederate flags, swastikas and other "symbols of hate" on state property is banned in New York under a law signed by Gov. Andrew Cuomo despite concerns it may violate free speech protection under the U.S. Constitution.

"This country faces a pervasive, growing attitude of intolerance and hate — what I have referred to in the body politic as an American cancer," Cuomo said in his bill-signing memo on Tuesday.

"By limiting the display and sale of the Confederate flag, Nazi swastika and other symbols of hatred from being displayed or sold on state property, including the state fairgrounds, this bill will help safeguard New Yorkers from the fear-instilling effects of these abhor-

rent symbols," he said.

Exceptions are made for images used in books, museum services or materials used for educational or historical purposes.

The display of Confederate flags has come under fire as part of the national reckoning over racial injustice. The rebel flag has been used by Ku Klux Klan groups and is widely condemned as racist.

Truck driver accused of not clearing off ice

NH LONDONDERRY — A box truck driver has been accused of not clearing snow and ice from his roof that dislodged and struck a car driver on Route 102, police in Londonderry said.

Richard Leiter, 60, of Derry, faces charges of vehicular assault and reckless conduct, both misdemeanors, and a negligent driving violation in the Dec. 9 crash. He was arrested Wednesday.

The ice and snow went through a car windshield. The driver, Michael Conry, 22, of Londonderry, suffered serious, but non-life-threatening injuries to his face and eyes, police said. He underwent surgery to remove pieces of glass from his eyes.

A New Hampshire law known as "Jessica's Law" requires drivers to remove snow and ice from the roof of their vehicles before driving on public roads.

Woman arrested for animal cruelty

CT HAMDEN — A Connecticut woman has been arrested after authorities found three dead animals in her home and seized more than two

dozen cats along with dogs, squirrels and an owl, police said Wednesday.

Hamden police said Donna Scirocco turned herself in Tuesday because of an arrest warrant charging her with six counts of animal cruelty. She posted a \$5,000 bond and was ordered to appear in court Feb. 5.

Animal control officials executed a search warrant at Scirocco's home on Oct. 26 after neighbors complained about a stench and rats running around the neighborhood, police Capt. Ronald Smith said.

Police said they found 26 cats, six dogs, two caged squirrels and a blind owl. There were also two large rats in the home, officials said. Authorities also found two dead cats and a dead woodchuck. Health officials condemned the property, Smith said.

Coast Guard rescues 2 stranded duck hunters

NJ BRIGANTINE — The Coast Guard used a helicopter to rescue two duck hunters who became stranded in southern New Jersey.

The hunters got off their boat to hunt on an island near Little Egg Inlet in Brigantine on Tuesday, the Coast Guard said. But the hunters were unable to recover their boat and shallow water prevented a towing company from reaching them. The Coast Guard said the hunters had only one bottle of water, no food and cellphones with little charge left as the temperature neared freezing.

The helicopter crew hoisted the hunters to safety and took them to Air Station Atlantic City.

"This case could have had a much different result," said Da-

vid Umberger, command duty officer at the Coast Guard Sector Delaware Bay Command Center. "The water is an unpredictable place and a potentially fatal place for the unprepared, especially given the freezing water temperatures this time of year."

One-time Lee mansion removed from logo

VA ARLINGTON — Arlington County is changing its logo to remove a stylized version of its namesake mansion because of its ties to Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee.

The county announced Wednesday that its County Board voted unanimously to adopt a new logo. The current one depicts the pillars of Arlington House, a mansion overlooking the Potomac River that was Lee's home before the Civil War.

The home's history dates back to George Washington's adopted son, George Washington Parke Custis. Lee married into the Custis family and took over management of the plantation and its slaves.

County officials say they want a logo that better reflects the county's values. A new logo will be chosen after a citizen-input process.

The change comes as Confederate names and symbols are removed from schools, roads and parks across the South.

It also comes shortly after northern Virginia congressional members introduced legislation to end the official designation of Arlington House, a National Park Service site surrounded by Arlington National Cemetery — as a "Robert E. Lee Memorial."

— From wire reports

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QBs center stage for ACC championship

Associated Press

CLEMSON, S.C. — Clemson quarterback Trevor Lawrence, wearing a mask and standing on the sideline, watched his Notre Dame counterpart Ian Book rally the Fighting Irish to a dramatic victory last month.

Lawrence is expected to play a major role in what happens in the rematch when the second-ranked Fighting Irish (10-0, 9-0 ACC; No. 2 CFP) take on No. 4 Clemson (9-1, 8-1; No. 3 CFP) in the ACC championship game on Saturday in Charlotte, North Carolina.

Sidelined with COVID-19, Lawrence was a spectator in Notre Dame's 47-40 double-overtime victory in November — Clemson's lone loss this season. Lawrence traveled with the team to Indiana and gave advice to his backup, freshman DJ Uiagalelei, throughout the game.

It gave Lawrence a perspective of the game he usually doesn't have and it left him very impressed with Book's play.

"In big games like that, a quarterback has to play well to win and he played great," Lawrence said. "He extended plays really well, made some big throws. I've got a lot of respect for him."

It was a huge game, and there may be even more on the line this time.

Lawrence will look to lead the Tigers to a sixth consecutive league championship

game — an unprecedented feat in the Power Five era. Fans should expect him to lead the way with his calm demeanor, strong arm and knack for making big plays at the most important times.

Notre Dame coach Brian Kelly said his team has heard too often about Lawrence's absence in that first game; he's eager to face a healthy Lawrence.

"We recognize (Lawrence) is a great football player, and to have him on the field certainly is what you want in the championship game," Kelly said.

Especially with Book on the other side. He is a savvy, fifth-year player who is 30-3 as a starter in his Notre Dame career — the second highest winning percentage in college to Lawrence's 33-1 mark.

Book passed on the NFL last season for a final year with the Irish and has made the most of that decision, leading his team to the brink of their second College Football Playoff appearance in three seasons.

He's thrown for 2,382 yards and 15 touchdowns against two interceptions. Book has also rushed for 465 yards and eight TDs in the Fighting Irish's second 10-0 start in three seasons. Book and Notre Dame were 12-0 in 2018 before the perfect season ended with a thud, a 30-3 loss in the Cotton Bowl against Clemson and Lawrence. The Tigers went on to win the national cham-

pionship.

Book wants to add a national title of his own to his college legacy, a quest that could include an ACC title.

"If you hear my name, that is what you think of," Book said of not winning a championship. "We still have to go do that, so that's what I want."

Lawrence knows how it feels to hold that trophy. He also knows the disappointment of coming up short. Last year, Clemson lost 42-25 to LSU in what was Lawrence's poorest college showing. Lawrence has used it as motivation for wanting to play amid the coronavirus pandemic and not opting out to protect his future as the expected No. 1 overall pick in the upcoming NFL draft.

Clemson coach Dabo Swinney said it is difficult to list all of Lawrence's superlatives because it would "take all day and half of the next."

But there are couple that stand out:

— Lawrence is second in the ACC with 2,483 yards and 20 touchdowns, despite playing three fewer games (two out with COVID-19, the other a canceled contest at Florida State due to the virus).

— He leads the league in completion percentage, continually playing at high level amid questions about his NFL future, his illness and issues include social and racial injustice.

Cincinnati, Tulsa to finally meet in AAC title game

Associated Press

CINCINNATI — After four previous attempts, Cincinnati and Tulsa are finally going to play each other, and this time it's for the American Athletic Conference championship.

No. 6 Cincinnati (8-0, 6-0 AAC, CFP No. 9) will make its second straight appearance in the conference title game Saturday at Nippert Stadium, while it will be the first time ever for No. 20 Tulsa (6-1, 6-0, CFP No. 23).

Tulsa and Cincinnati were scheduled to play on Oct. 17, but the game was moved to Dec. 5 due to COVID-19 cases in the Bearcats program. The game was moved back to Dec. 4 for television, then rescheduled again for Dec. 12, before being canceled altogether last week due to more COVID issues at Cincinnati.

Cincinnati hasn't played in a month. The Bearcats once had hopes of easing into the College Football Playoff, but they'll likely have to be satisfied with an undefeated sea-

son and a choice bowl game if they can win Saturday.

"This entire season has been such a whirlwind," Cincinnati coach Luke Fickell said. "We wanted to get a season in and an opportunity to play for a championship."

If this game is canceled, the Bearcats would be crowned AAC champion for New Year's Six bowl consideration because they are the higher-ranked team.

"I think all of our team now, for the most part, is back off of the protocols for a lot of things," Fickell said. "Hopefully, by (game time) we'll be in good shape with just about everybody."

Tulsa has won six straight games since losing 16-7 to then-No. 11 Oklahoma State in the season-opener.

Tulsa head coach Philip Montgomery, who led his team to the conference championship game following three straight losing seasons, said the players are eager to finally face the unbeaten Bearcats.

"Our team has done a really good job of staying focused and putting our concentration on what we can control," Montgomery said. "We've got to understand that we are playing for a championship."

No respect: Despite not playing a game, Cincinnati dropped from No. 7 to No. 9 in the College Football Playoff rankings over the past two weeks. Fickell said his team's primary goal has always been to win an AAC title because that's something they can control, but he's not immune to the playoff hype. "I can't lie and say I don't care about it," he said. "We use it in recruiting. There are a lot of things that rise or drop my blood pressure. That's not one of them."

For the trophy case: Cincinnati had 17 players earn all-AAC honors this season, including quarterback Desmond Ridder, who was named offensive player of the year. Fickell was named coach of the year. The 17 all-conference selections are the most in the AAC this year.

Humble start leads to huge season for Cyclones, Campbell

Associated Press

Jay Chapman earned his bachelor's and master's degree from Iowa State, was a member of the marching band and has attended all but one home football game since 1986.

The president of the Cyclone Gridiron Club booster group has seen a lot of losing. Some good players came through and there were some notable upsets. Still, in the 30 years prior to 2016, five coaches combined for only eight seasons of .500 or better.

"Six wins," Chapman said, "was about as good as it got."

And then along came Matt Campbell.

The 41-year-old Ohio native is seen as nothing short of a miracle worker by the Cyclone faithful. At a school that hasn't claimed even a share of a football conference title since 1912, Campbell, in his fifth year, has led Iowa State to the Big 12 championship game for the first time.

The Cyclones, who at No. 8 have their highest ranking ever in the AP Top 25, play No. 12 Oklahoma on Saturday at AT&T Stadium in Arlington, Texas.

"Man, is this what you envisioned or saw?" Campbell said, repeating a question. "I'll be really honest. Early on we were trying to show that we could compete."

Iowa State (8-2, 8-1 Big 12) finished the regular season alone in first place and in October beat the Sooners (7-2, 6-2) in Ames, Iowa, for the first time since 1960.

Naturally, the Cyclones are underdogs this week, which bothers them not in the least.

The most recent federal col-

lege athletics spending reports showed Campbell's program spent only about two-thirds the amount of Oklahoma's Big 12-high \$43.4 million football budget in 2018-19.

In his four full recruiting classes, Campbell has signed a grand total of four four-star prospects and no five-stars, according to 247Sports composite rankings. Oklahoma has signed 57 four-stars and four five-stars over the same span.

"I just think it's more proof that when you've got people who are aligned toward a vision, when you have people who are in it for the right reason and you have people willing to put their ego aside and continue to grow, that's the beauty of the sport of football," Campbell said. "It is still a team sport."

"There are great examples in the history of college football of that occurring," he added. "It just so happens it hadn't happened yet in Ames, Iowa. I think that's something that has been enjoyable."

Campbell's mantra of building personal relationships with his players, emphasizing development and getting the most out of limited resources is the product of his being the son of a high school football coach and going through the powerhouse Division III Mount Union program as a player and young coach.

Coaching stops at Mount Union and Bowling Green preceded his first head coaching job at Toledo, where he had been an assistant for three years. The Rockets went to four bowls with Campbell in charge for all or part of five seasons.

No. 3 Buckeyes out to hush skeptics with Big Ten title

Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — A group of university administrators on a Zoom call decided Ohio State would play in the Big Ten championship game. Now the No. 3 Buckeyes are eager to show that not only are they the dominant team in the conference, but they also unequivocally deserve a spot in the College Football Playoff.

They do that by winning big Saturday.

Ohio State (5-0, CFP No. 4) can collect a fourth straight conference title by beating No. 15 Northwestern, but the Buckeyes are seeking style points — a good thumping of the Wildcats on national TV — to firm up their place in the national rankings.

In other words, they are motivated to dominate.

"Oh, we've definitely got something to prove," All-American cornerback Shaun Wade said Tuesday. "Like I've been telling a lot of my teammates, we got to blow them out. We have to come to play and show the world what we can do."

Because of COVID-19 issues, Ohio State was left with just five regular-season games, one short of the threshold to play in the championship game set by the conference before the start of the pandemic-delayed season. Conference administrators last week voted to change the rule so the Buckeyes, who had already clinched the Big Ten East, could compete for the title and be better positioned to play for a national crown.

That came at the expense of Indiana, which at 6-1 had enough games in but had lost to Ohio State 42-35 on Nov. 21. Social media heated up with criticism aimed at the Buckeyes,

whose body of work isn't as comprehensive as other top teams.

Let the people talk, said Ohio State's Justin Fields, who on Tuesday was named Big Ten Offensive Player of the Year and Quarterback of the Year.

"We're one of the top four teams in the country for sure, and I think we control our destiny," Fields said. "If we go out there on Saturday and handle business like we're supposed to, we should be where we want to be."

Tight end Jeremy Ruckert acknowledged the Buckeyes need to win and look impressive doing it to leave no doubt they belong in the playoff.

"It's pretty important," he said. "I mean we try not to think about it as much, but what it comes down to is that every other (contending) school has more games than us. ... We try and just put the best game out there on film and really dominate."

Northwestern coach Pat Fitzgerald is a believer in Ohio State, no matter how many games it played. "If I had a vote," he said, "I'd vote them No. 2. I think they're a complete football team, all three phases."

Buckeyes coach Ryan Day insisted he just wants to win the game — he doesn't care by how many points or how it looks to others. He said he hates the idea that style points matter.

"It goes against everything we've been brought up with," Day said. "I don't think there's any other sport in the world where anything other than winning matters. So it's very unique. If you win by one point every week in the NFL, you'd win the Super Bowl. But college football is different, and this year it's even more strange."

Herbert leads Chargers over Raiders

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Justin Herbert's brilliant rookie season is now a record-setting campaign.

Herbert scored on 1-yard plunge to give the Los Angeles Chargers a 30-27 overtime victory over the Las Vegas Raiders on Thursday night.

"It was pretty crazy," said Herbert, who set an NFL rookie record with his seventh 300-yard game and has 27 passing scores on the year, tying Baker Mayfield (2018) for the most by a rookie in NFL history. "I kind of waited to see the replay and guys didn't really know what had happened. So I got up and started shaking hands and kind of saw the game was over."

The Chargers (5-9) snapped a nine-game losing streak against their AFC West counterparts, and snapped a three-game skid against the Raiders. Las Vegas (7-7) lost quarterback Derek Carr to a left groin injury in the first quarter. It has lost four of five, all but killing its playoff chances.

Moments after Daniel Carlson's 23-yard field goal on the Raiders' first possession put Las Vegas ahead 27-24, Herbert found wideout Jalen Guyton streaking by cornerback Keisean Nixon for a 53-yard reception

to set up the winning score.

Los Angeles improved to 1-2 in overtime games, while all four of its games against division foes have come down to the final play.

Herbert, who targeted nine receivers and completed at least one pass with seven, was 22 for 32 with 314 yards and two touchdowns.

"I've seen a lot of growth over the past couple weeks," Chargers coach Anthony Lynn said. "He's doing it with young receivers on the field and spreading the ball around."

With five receptions for 65 yards and a touchdown, Los Angeles' Hunter Henry now has a career-high 60 receptions on the year, third-highest among tight ends this season.

The Chargers got revenge from the first meeting on Nov. 8, when Herbert's apparent TD pass to Donald Parham was overturned by replay to end the game.

For the Raiders, the storyline quickly changed from must-win to stay alive in the playoff hunt, to how to win with backup Marcus Mariota seeing his first action as a Raider, while setting up a showdown of former University of Oregon quarterbacks.

"It was a pretty crazy experience," Herb-

ert said. "I grew up watching Marcus. He was my favorite player. To see him on the field and play against him was really cool. It's everything I've ever wanted."

Just four days after firing defensive coordinator Paul Guenther, plus missing four starters on defense, and having their offensive coordinator Greg Olson sidelined after testing positive for COVID-19, the Raiders lost Carr when he came up lame on a third-down scramble near the goal line in the first quarter. Carr immediately went to the locker room and did not return.

Mariota was poised in his return from the first snap.

In his first drive, he was 3-for-3 for 70 yards and a perfectly placed over-the-top pass to Darren Waller. Mariota also scrambled for 11 yards for a first down.

"When it comes down to it, I think it's part of your job to be prepared," Mariota said. "Just try to give these guys a chance to win and unfortunately we came up a little short."

The sixth-year pro finished 17-for-28 for 226 yards with one TD and one interception. He also rushed for 88 yards on nine carries, including a touchdown.

TOP 25 ROUNDUP

Jayhawks edge Red Raiders in conference opener

Associated Press

LUBBOCK, Texas — Ochai Agbaji got wide open again to take an inbound pass and made the go-ahead layup with 13 seconds left to extend a three-decade streak for No. 5 Kansas.

Agbaji finished with 23 points, the last coming after the inbound pass from Marcus Garrett, in a 58-57 win over No. 14 Texas Tech on Thursday night, giving the Jayhawks a victory in their conference opener for the 30th season in a row.

"We ran a play to get Ochai open and he was actually open initially, but the defender was jumping over the ball where I couldn't get it to him (for a lob). ... I was able to look around, and Ochai was still open," Garrett said.

"Unbelievable play," coach Bill Self said. "If we were going to win the game it was fitting that Ochai made the play to win the game because that was probably as efficient a game maybe that anybody has played for us in a long time against a team that really guarded, and their emphasis was to guard him."

Agbaji was 8 of 11 from the field, including four made three-pointers, with only one turnover in 34 minutes.

"I think what happens with Kansas, there's lot of screening going on underneath the basket," Texas Tech coach Chris Beard said. "You've got to find a way to switch under and force people to hit jump shots to beat you, not layups."

Texas Tech (6-2, 0-1) had one more opportunity after a timeout with 6.2 seconds left. But Terrence Shannon Jr., who had 20 points and nine rebounds, had his mid-range jumper blocked by Jalen Wilson to end the game.

Garrett had 10 points, 10 rebounds and four assists for Kansas, which has never lost a Big 12 opener, and last lost a conference opener during the 1990-91 season in the old Big Eight Conference. The Jayhawks have won 18 of those 30 openers on the road.

"We've got a lot of numbers like that ... 18 in a row on the road, that's something that I don't know if anybody in America can say they have a stat like that," Self said.

Mac McClung led Texas Tech with a season-high 21 points, the third 20-point game for the transfer from Georgetown. But he finished 5 of 16 shooting and had only two free throws in the final 18 minutes.

No. 9 Creighton 94, St. John's 76: Marcus Zegarowski scored 20 points, shooting 6-for-7 from three-point range, and the visiting Bluejays cruised past the Red Storm.

Denzel Mahoney had 16 points and freshman center Ryan Kalkbrenner added 15 off the bench to help Creighton (5-2, 1-1 Big East) bounce back from a home loss to Marquette in its conference opener Monday night.