

Trump pardons Blackwater contractors

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump on Tuesday pardoned four former government contractors convicted in a 2007 massacre in Baghdad that left more than a dozen Iraqi civilians dead and caused an international uproar over the use of private security guards in a war zone.

Supporters of the former contractors at Blackwater Worldwide had lobbied for the pardons, arguing that the men had been excessively punished in an investigation and prosecution they said was tainted. All four were serving lengthy prison sentences.

“Paul Slough and his colleagues didn’t deserve to spend one minute in prison,” said Brian Heberlig, a lawyer for one of the four pardoned defendants. “I am overwhelmed with emotion at this fantastic news.”

The pardons, issued in the final days of Trump’s single term, reflect Trump’s apparent willingness to give the benefit of the doubt to American service members and contractors when it comes to acts of vio-

lence in war zones against civilians. Last November, he pardoned a former Green Beret who was set to stand trial next year in the killing of a suspected Afghan bomb-maker and a former Army lieutenant convicted of murder for ordering his men to fire upon three Afghans.

The Blackwater case has taken a complicated path since the killings at Baghdad’s Nisoor Square in September 2007, when the men, former veterans working as contractors for the State Department, opened fire at the crowded traffic circle.

Prosecutors asserted the heavily armed Blackwater convoy launched an unprovoked attack using sniper fire, machine guns and grenade launchers. Defense lawyers argued their clients returned fire after being ambushed by Iraqi insurgents.

They were convicted in 2014 after a monthslong trial in Washington’s federal court, and each man defiantly asserted his innocence at a sentencing hearing the following year.

“I feel utterly betrayed by the same gov-

ernment I served honorably,” Slough told the court in a hearing packed by nearly 100 friends and relatives of the guards.

Slough and two others, Evan Liberty and Dustin Heard, were sentenced to 30 years in prison, though after a federal appeals court ordered them to be re-sentenced, they were each given substantially shorter punishments. A fourth, Nicholas Slatten, whom prosecutors blamed for igniting the firefight, was sentenced to life in prison.

A federal appeals court later overturned Slatten’s first-degree murder conviction, but the Justice Department tried him again and secured another life sentence last year.

The trial was held years after a first indictment against the men was dismissed when a judge ruled that the Justice Department had withheld evidence from a grand jury and violated the guards’ constitutional rights.

Blackwater contractors were notorious in Baghdad at the time and frequently accused of firing shots at the slightest pretext, including to clear their way in traffic.

Navy rejects China’s US warship claim

By **SETH ROBSON**

Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Navy has knocked back a Chinese claim that their forces chased a U.S. warship from disputed waters in the South China Sea.

China’s state-run Global Times newspaper reported Tuesday the nation’s naval and aerial forces had “expelled” the guided-missile destroyer USS John S. McCain that day from waters near the Spratly Islands. The paper cited Senior Col. Tian Junli, a spokesperson at the Chinese military’s Southern Theater Command, as its source.

“The US action was a serious violation of China’s sovereignty and security, and it gravely disrupted peace and stability in the South China Sea, which China is resolutely against,” the paper reported, citing Tian.

The Navy on Wednesday described the claim as false.

“USS John S. McCain was not ‘expelled’ from any nation’s territory,” 7th Fleet spokesman Lt. Joe Keiley said in an email. “USS John S. McCain conducted this [freedom of navigation operation] in accordance with international law and then continued on to conduct normal operations in international waters.”

Six nations, including the Philippines, China, Vietnam and Taiwan, assert sovereignty over all or part of the chain of more than 100 small, uninhabited islands and reefs rich with fishing grounds and potential oil and gas deposits.

Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines and China have created outposts or bases there, according to the CIA World Factbook. China, which claims authority over most of the South China Sea, built bases capable of accommodating fighter jets and other advanced weaponry.

The McCain’s operation near the is-

lands reflects the Navy’s commitment to uphold freedom of navigation and lawful uses of the sea as a principle, Keiley said. “The United States will continue to fly, sail and operate wherever international law allows, as USS John S. McCain did here,” he said.

The Chinese claims about the warship are the latest in a long string of Chinese actions to misrepresent lawful U.S. maritime operations and assert excessive and illegitimate maritime claims at the expense of Southeast Asian neighbors in the South China Sea, Keiley said.

The Chinese behavior stands in contrast to the United States’ adherence to international law and vision for a free and open Indo-Pacific region, he said.

“All nations, large and small, should be secure in their sovereignty, free from coercion, and able to pursue economic growth consistent with accepted international rules and norms,” he said.

Marine helps save toddler in Calif. car fire

By **CHAD GARLAND**
Stars and Stripes

Gunnery Sgt. Kyle Wetter was driving home from base earlier this month when fire burst out under the car in front of him, after it ran over a gas can that had fallen off a truck.

The Marine's quick actions as flames engulfed the vehicle would help save the life of an 18-month-old child on Dec. 7 in Fallbrook, Calif., a town on the back side of Camp Pendleton, north of San Diego.

After the car's driver, Anthony Hurly, slammed on the brakes and pulled over, Wetter did the same, jumping out of his vehicle armed with a fire extinguisher, a Marine Corps statement said this week.

Both the driver and his wife

were out of the vehicle by the time Wetter arrived, and he initially thought everyone was safe, he said in a video the service released Tuesday. But his extinguisher would be no match for the growing blaze.

"At this point, there was vegetation that was also burning adjacent to the vehicle," Capt. John Choi, a spokesman for the North County Fire Protection District, said in the video. "Gunnery Sgt. Wetter came in and made contact with the wife ... and she said, 'My baby's in the back.'"

Wetter saw Hurly run to the passenger side of the vehicle to try to get the child out of the car seat, so he jumped into the back seat to assist. Hurly couldn't dislodge the seat from its base and when Wetter tried to unbuckle

the seatbelt, he had no luck.

"At that point is when I used my pocket knife to cut the car seat belt that was holding the baby seat into the car," he said. "I grabbed as many belongings as I could from the car for the family as I was going out of the vehicle."

He then moved away from the car, which he said was completely engulfed in flames.

Wetter, an NCO in charge of the formal marksmanship training center at Camp Pendleton, credited his infantry training with conditioning him to quickly respond to the situation.

"His actions embody honor, courage, commitment," Choi said. "It took tremendous courage to go into a burning vehicle to aid this family and I truly believe if Gunnery Sgt. Wetter

didn't do his actions that day that we would have a different outcome for this child and the family."

But Wetter doesn't think he's special by any means, he said in the video. "I was just the person behind them that decided they want to help someone else."

Wetter is a new father of triplets, San Diego's KSWB Fox affiliate reported last week. He told the local station that he hoped someone would do the same for his wife and children if they were in a similar situation.

Still, his help for the Hurly family will not soon be forgotten.

"I am forever grateful," Hurly was quoted saying in the Marine Corps statement. "He came at a time of need for my family."

Afghan official: Bombing, shooting attacks kill 3

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — Separate bombing and shooting attacks in Afghanistan's capital left at least three people dead Wednesday, including the head of an independent elections watchdog, officials said.

The attacks are the latest amid relentless violence in the country even as Taliban and Afghan government negotiators hold talks in Qatar, trying to hammer out a peace deal that could put an end to decades of war.

Unknown gunmen shot and killed Mohammad Yousuf Rasheed, executive director of the non-governmental Free and Fair Election Forum of Afghanistan, said Ferdaws Faramarz, spokesman for Kabul's police chief.

The attack took place during Rasheed's morning commute to FEFA's office in Kabul, he said. Rasheed's driver later died in a hospital from his wounds, Faramarz said.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, the U.S.'s acting ambassador, and many social media users condemned the attack on Rasheed.

Ghani in a statement said Rasheed had spent many years working to institutionalize democracy and transparency in the electoral process.

"By carrying out such attacks, the enemies can not push back the current Afghanistan, which has achieved recent progress and achievements with the tireless efforts and sacrifices of the people," he said.

In a separate attack in the capital Wednesday, a police vehicle was targeted by a sticky bomb in the eastern part of the city. The blast killed one police officer and wounded two others, according to Faramarz.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for either attack, but Islamic State has claimed responsibility for multiple attacks in Kabul in recent months.

NCIS probes disappearance of base worker on Okinawa

By **MATTHEW M. BURKE**
AND **AYA ICHIHASHI**
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — The Naval Criminal Investigative Service is involved in the search for a Navy civilian employee on Okinawa who went missing last week from a seaside tourist spot.

Japanese police believe the man, an American in his 30s, likely fell from the cliff at Cape Zampa and drowned in the sea, a Kadema police station spokesman said Tuesday. No suspicious charges have appeared on the man's credit cards, the spokesman said.

The Navy declined to identify the man or where he worked; Japanese authorities said he is in Japan under the status of forces agreement that governs U.S. personnel affiliated with the U.S. military.

He went missing from the site on the island's west coast sometime before 6:20 p.m. Dec. 15, when the Japan Coast Guard was

called, a coast guard spokesman said last week.

The missing man's car was found in the parking lot and a fishing pole and backpack were discovered atop one of Zampa's towering cliffs, the spokesman said.

Kadema police and Nirai emergency responders searched the area where the man went missing, which is marked by jagged, seaside cliffs, walking trails and a 100-foot-tall lighthouse, the police spokesman said previously. The Japan Coast Guard searched by air and sea, their spokesman said.

The coast guard called off its search Dec. 17, a Navy spokesman said Tuesday.

However, the Naval Criminal Investigative Service is still on the case. The Navy cited the active investigation and the "circumstances of the disappearance" in declining to name the man.

Virus changes Christmas celebrations all over

From staff and wire reports

Few holiday seasons around the world will look normal this year.

All most people wanted for Christmas after this year of pandemic uncertainty and chaos was some cheer and togetherness. Instead, many are heading into a season of isolation, grieving lost loved ones, worried about their jobs or confronting the fear of a new potentially more contagious virus variant.

In Iraq and Syria, troops will be treated to Christmas turkey and other treats, but the meals will be take-out, said Col. Wayne Marotto, a spokesman for U.S.-led Operation Inherent Resolve. The deployed troops are continuing to practice social distancing and wear masks, he said.

In Germany, home to tens of thousands of U.S. service members and their families, coronavirus infections and deaths remained low in the early months of the pandemic compared to neighboring countries. New daily cases have risen, however, from

an average of about 2,000 per day at the beginning of October to about 25,000 per day over the past week. Germany has responded with an increasingly restrictive lockdown that has shuttered nonessential businesses and limits most gatherings to five adults.

Residents of London and surrounding areas can't see people outside their households. Peruvians won't be allowed to drive their cars over Christmas and New Year's to discourage visits even with nearby family and friends. South Africans won't be able to go to the beach on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day or New Year's Day.

People the world over are facing wrenching decisions — to see isolated elderly relatives despite the risk or to miss one of the potentially few Christmases left in the hopes of spending the holiday together next year.

The United States has not issued nationwide travel restrictions, leaving that decision to state governments, but a federal

agency is advising people to stay home.

Michelle Dallaire, 50, an attorney in Idlewild, Mich., said this would be her first Christmas away from her father, who lives in northern Virginia. They've always gotten together with family for the holidays but decided it wasn't worth the risk this year.

"It's sad, but better than never seeing him again," said Dallaire, who has health issues that also make her particularly vulnerable to the virus.

In Brazil, which has the world's second-highest virus death toll after the U.S., Francisco Paulo made a similar decision to skip a visit to his elderly mother in Sao Jose do Belmonte, in Pernambuco state. The 53-year-old doorman will work the holiday instead at a building in Sao Paulo.

"Now I'm hoping to drive there (to Pernambuco) in May, and crossing my fingers that she'll be vaccinated by then," Paulo said. "It isn't a happy Christmas, but at least I'm healthy and so are all the people I love."

US layoffs stay elevated as 803K seek jobless aid

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits fell by 89,000 last week to a still-elevated 803,000, evidence that the job market remains under stress nine months after the coronavirus outbreak sent the U.S. economy into recession and caused millions of layoffs.

The latest figure, released Wednesday by the Labor Department, shows that many employers are still cutting jobs as the pandemic tightens business restrictions and leads many consumers to stay home. Before the virus struck, jobless claims typically numbered around 225,000 a week before shooting up to 6.9 million in early spring when the virus — and efforts to contain it — flattened the economy. The pace of layoffs has since declined but remains historically high in the face of the resurgence of COVID-19 cases.

"The fact that more than nine months into the crisis, initial claims are still running at such a high level is, in absolute terms, bad news," Joshua Shapiro, chief U.S. economist at the economic consulting firm Ma-

ria Fiorini Ramirez Inc., wrote in a research note. "With the pandemic again worsening, it is likely that claims will remain quite elevated for some time to come."

The total number of people who are receiving traditional state unemployment benefits fell to 5.3 million for the week that ended Dec. 12 from a week earlier. That figure had peaked in early May at nearly 23 million. The steady decline since then means that some unemployed Americans are finding work and no longer receiving aid. But it also indicates that many of the unemployed have used up their state benefits, which typically expire after six months.

A tentative economic recovery from the springtime collapse has been faltering in the face of a resurgence of COVID-19 cases: an average of more than 200,000 confirmed cases a day, up from fewer than 35,000 in early September. Hiring in November slowed for a fifth straight month, with employers adding the fewest jobs since April. Nearly 10 million of the 22 million people who lost jobs when the pandemic hit in the spring are still unemployed.

Feds sue Walmart over opioid crisis

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Justice Department sued Walmart on Tuesday, accusing it of fueling the nation's opioid crisis by pressuring its pharmacies to fill even potentially suspicious prescriptions for the powerful painkillers.

The civil complaint filed points to the role Walmart's pharmacies may have played in the crisis by filling opioid prescriptions and Walmart's own responsibility for the allegedly illegal distribution of controlled substances to the pharmacies at the height of the opioid crisis. Walmart operates more than 5,000 pharmacies in its stores around the country.

The Justice Department alleges that Walmart violated federal law by filling thousands of prescriptions for controlled substances that its pharmacists "knew were invalid," said Jeffrey Clark, the acting assistant attorney general in charge of the Justice Department's civil division.

Walmart fought back in an emailed statement to The Associated Press, saying that the Justice Department's investigation is "tainted by historical ethics violations." It said the "lawsuit invents a legal theory that unlawfully forces pharmacists to come between patients and their doctors, and is riddled with factual inaccuracies and cherry-picked documents taken out of context."

Trump pardons 15, commutes 5 sentences

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump has pardoned 15 people, including a pair of congressional Republicans who were strong and early supporters, a 2016 campaign official ensnared in the Russia probe and former government contractors convicted in a 2007 massacre in Baghdad.

Trump's actions in his final weeks in office show a president who is wielding his executive power to reward loyalists and others who he believes have been wronged by a legal system he sees as biased against him and his allies. On Tuesday, Trump issued the pardons — not an unusual act for an outgoing president — even as he refused to publicly acknowledge his election loss to Democrat Joe Biden, who will be sworn in on Jan. 20.

Trump is likely to issue more pardons before then. He and his allies have discussed a

range of other possibilities, including members of Trump's family and his personal attorney, Rudy Giuliani.

Those pardoned on Tuesday included former Republican Reps. Duncan Hunter of California and Chris Collins of New York, two of the earliest GOP lawmakers to back Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. Trump also commuted the sentences of five people, including former Rep. Steve Stockman of Texas.

Collins, the first member of Congress to endorse Trump to be president, was sentenced to two years and two months in federal prison after admitting he helped his son and others dodge \$800,000 in stock market losses when he learned that a drug trial by a small pharmaceutical company had failed.

Hunter was sentenced to 11 months in prison after pleading guilty to stealing campaign funds and spending the money on ev-

erything from outings with friends to his daughter's birthday party.

White House press secretary Kayleigh McEnany said the pardons for Hunter and Collins were granted after "the request of many members of Congress." She noted that Hunter served the nation in the U.S. Marines and saw combat in both Iraq and Afghanistan.

Trump also announced pardons for two people entangled in special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigation. One was for 2016 campaign adviser George Papadopoulos, who pleaded guilty to lying to the FBI about a conversation in which he learned that Russia had dirt on Trump's Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton. The president also pardoned Alex van der Zwaan, a Dutch lawyer who was sentenced to 30 days in prison for lying to investigators during the Mueller probe.

Trump threatens COVID relief, Pelosi urges action

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump has threatened to torpedo Congress' massive COVID-19 relief and year-end package, upending a hard-fought compromise in the midst of a raging pandemic and deep economic uncertainty by demanding changes fellow Republicans have opposed.

Trump assailed the bipartisan \$900 billion bill and broader government funding package in a video he tweeted out Tuesday night and suggested he may not sign the legislation. That revives threats of a federal government shutdown. He called on lawmakers to increase direct payments for most Americans from \$600 to \$2,000 for in-

dividuals and \$4,000 for couples.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi urged Trump in a Wednesday tweet to "sign the bill to keep government open!"

Pelosi wrote in a letter to colleagues "the entire country knows that it is urgent for the President to sign this bill."

The final text of the more than 5,000-page bill was still being prepared by Congress and was not expected to be sent to the White House for Trump's signature before Thursday or Friday, an aide said.

Following Trump's threat, Pelosi all but dared his Republican allies in Congress to meet the demand for far higher direct payments. She said she would offer the propos-

al for a vote on Thursday. But it would be offered under a procedure that allows just one lawmaker to block a vote and during a so-called pro forma session, with few lawmakers expected to attend.

Republicans complain Trump's proposal costs too much, but have not said if they will block it.

Railing against a range of provisions in the broader year-end funding package, including for foreign aid, Trump in his video message told lawmakers to "get rid of the wasteful and unnecessary items from this legislation and to send me a suitable bill."

Trump did not specifically vow to veto the bill.

Isolation of UK eases; backlog could remain for days

Associated Press

CALAIS, France — Goods and passengers from Britain began arriving on French shores Wednesday following a two-day blockade imposed because of a new variant of the coronavirus that had isolated the U.K. and raised fears of food shortages. But officials warned the backlog would take days to work through.

A deal struck the day before that allows truckers and travelers with a negative virus test to cross the Channel into France brought some relief, but many warned the

chaos was a precursor to what Britain may face if it doesn't come to a trade agreement with the European Union before it leaves the bloc's economic embrace on Dec. 31.

Associated Press reporters saw a ferry from Britain pulling into the French port of Calais before dawn Wednesday, and rail operator Eurotunnel said trains carrying freight and car passengers were allowed to cross to the continent beneath the English Channel again. But gridlock persisted and tempers flared at England's port of Dover, where stranded truckers and travelers

were desperate to get home for Christmas. Some truck drivers could be seen scuffling with police.

Nations around the world began barring people from Britain over the weekend after Prime Minister Boris Johnson announced that scientists said a new version of the virus whipping around London and England's southeast may be more contagious. The announcement added to anxieties at a time when Europe has been walloped by soaring new virus infections and deaths.

Parachuting Santa is freed from power lines

CA RIO LINDA — Santa found himself a little more tied up than usual this time of year.

A Northern California man impersonating Santa Claus and flying on a powered parachute was rescued after he became entangled in power lines, authorities said.

The incident happened shortly after the man took off near a school in Rio Linda to deliver candy canes to children in his community. He flew into a maze of power lines and wound up suspended in them, a Federal Aviation Administration spokesman told KCRA-TV.

The man, who wasn't identified, was not injured.

Woman finds apparent COVID test in package

IL CHICAGO — An Illinois woman who ordered flags for her grandmother's garden got a surprise when the package arrived — someone's apparent COVID-19 test specimen.

Andrea Ellis was wrapping Christmas gifts at her aunt's house in East Moline, in northwestern Illinois, when she opened a padded envelope containing the flags she ordered weeks ago from Kohl's department store, according to The Quad City Times.

"I pulled out the packing slip and then noticed something deeper inside the envelope and pulled that out. It was a biohazard bag containing someone's COVID-19 test specimen."

Ellis called the police, who referred the issue to the county health department, according to East Moline police Chief Jeff Ramsey.

Cat who lived at a museum killed by dog

MD ANNAPOLIS — A beloved cat that lived at the Annapolis Maritime Museum in Maryland was killed by a dog.

Miss Pearl was adopted from the Baltimore Animal Rescue and Care Shelter. Its "working cats program" places felines who aren't suited for indoor living in workplaces to help control rodent problems. The museum had a mice problem.

Security camera footage showed that Miss Pearl was killed by a collared dog who wandered onto the museum property unattended.

2 accused of trying to smuggle contraband

MS RAYMOND — Two detention officers in Mississippi were accused of attempting to smuggle drugs and cellphones into a jail.

Hinds County Sheriff's Department Capt. Tyree Jones told The Clarion Ledger that Keirra Clark and Patricia Sandifer were arrested after the items were found during a routine search at the Raymond Detention Center.

Both were charged with introduction of contraband and placed on administrative leave without pay, he said.

Deputies: Hallucinating man shoots up home

NC MOORESVILLE — A North Carolina man who deputies said fired a shotgun in his home while hallucinating on drugs about an imaginary burglary was charged with child abuse.

That's because John-Michael Scott Coppola's newborn child was at the Mooresville home when Coppola began firing "into the walls" of the residence earlier this month, the Iredell County Sheriff's Office said on its Facebook page.

When deputies arrived at the home, they said Coppola and the child's mother, Kaylee Brianna Wilhelm, "both appeared to be impaired by some substance." Those substances were later found out to be meth and marijuana, the statement said. Wilhelm, 22, was also arrested for child abuse.

Father, son accused of defrauding high school

WI MILWAUKEE — Two former employees of a Roman Catholic high school in Wisconsin were charged with defrauding the school of hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The Journal Sentinel reported Kevin Heaney, 67, of Wild Rose, and his son, Bryan Heaney, 40, were accused of setting up companies to charge the Catholic Memorial High School in Waukesha for work that the school had already employed them to do.

According to a criminal complaint, the elder Heaney was employed at Catholic Memorial High School as director of the school's IT department. The younger Heaney worked at the school as his father's assistant.

A routine audit at the school in 2019 revealed invoices of three suspicious businesses.

Officers: Man tried to grab deputy as he fled

GA CANTON — A Georgia man was jailed

after officials said he tried to grab the arm of a sheriff's deputy as he sped off from a traffic stop.

The Cherokee County Sheriff's Office said a deputy had pulled a man over in Canton when the deputy asked the man to get out of his car. Instead, the man grabbed the deputy's arm and started driving away. The deputy got unhooked after about 30 feet and wasn't injured.

The driver got away, but officials later got a tip and arrested Elmer Pence, 43, in Fairmount. Pence is charged with aggravated assault on an officer, fleeing and eluding law enforcement, reckless driving, obstruction, giving false information, driving with an expired license tag and driving with a suspended license.

Teens join together to save kids from pond

NJ ATLANTIC HIGHLANDS — A group of teenage boys is being credited for saving two young children from an icy pond they plunged into while sledding in New Jersey.

Stephanie Irlbeck and Rich Heid told reporters that they were at Beacon Hill Country Club in Atlantic Highlands watching 8-year-old Olivia and 4-year-old R.J. go down the hill on an inflatable sled.

They said the youngsters hit a patch of ice and careened off course, then plummeted through the ice. Irlbeck said she started screaming and five teenage boys apparently heard her and ran over. One jumped in and the rest formed a human chain to bring the kids safely to shore.

— From The Associated Press

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Every bowl a blessing in tough year

Associated Press

Well, if you're among those who have ever argued there are too many bowl games, I hope you're happy.

This long season through a pandemic has whittled the bowl lineup from the 43 games that were originally scheduled to fewer than 30. That's a lot less college football and there is no reason to be happy about it.

Most of us will miss the Bahamas Bowl, with its track around the field. And the Guaranteed Rate Bowl, whatever that is and wherever it was to be played.

It is understandable why so many teams were not keen on keeping this slog of a season going. Those that decided to suit up one more time deserve a round of applause.

This season, this year, has been anything but ordinary, but bowl season is still great and there is a good reason to watch each and every one of the games:

Saturday, Dec. 26

Lendingtree Bowl (Mobile, Ala.): Western Kentucky (plus 4½) vs. Georgia State

Why watch? A lot of people are

really interested in what's going on in the state of Georgia these days. This is more fun.

Pick: Western Kentucky 23-21.

Tuesday, Dec. 29

Alamo Bowl (San Antonio): No. 20 Texas vs. Colorado (plus 12)

Why watch? If you want to watch a Pac-12 team this bowl season, this is one of two opportunities.

Pick: Texas 35-27.

Wednesday, Dec. 30

Cotton Bowl (Arlington, Texas): No. 8 Oklahoma (plus 3) vs. No. 10 Florida

Why watch? The Big 12 team is the one with the pretty good defense. Crazy, right?

Pick: Oklahoma 35-31.

Thursday, Dec. 31

Armed Forces Bowl (Fort Worth, Texas): No. 22 Tulsa (minus 2) vs. Mississippi State.

Why watch? Tulsa LB Zaven Collins is a possible NFL first-rounder and the only player in the country with at least four interceptions and four sacks.

Pick: Tulsa 27-20.

Liberty Bowl (Memphis, Tenn.): Army (plus 7½) vs. West

Virginia

Why watch? Patriotism.

Pick: West Virginia 13-7.

Friday, Jan. 1

Peach Bowl (Atlanta): No. 6 Cincinnati vs. No. 11 Georgia (minus 6½)

Why watch? Bearcats get the opportunity to score a victory for all those disrespected Group of Five teams. These Bulldogs, with J.T. Daniels at quarterback, might be looking to set the tone for next season.

Pick: Georgia 27-20.

Citrus Bowl (Orlando, Fla.): No. 15 Northwestern vs. Auburn (plus 3½)

Why watch? Northwestern is trying to extend a three-game bowl winning streak. Not a big deal for many schools, but the Wildcats won their first bowl game in 2012 and have won four of five since.

Pick: Northwestern 23-20.

College Football Playoff Semifinal (Arlington, Texas): No. 1 Alabama (minus 19½) vs. No. 4 Notre Dame

Why watch? The last time the Crimson Tide played the Fighting Irish in a big postseason

game it ended 42-14. Can it get any worse than that?

Pick: Alabama 45-21.

Sugar Bowl (New Orleans): No. 2 Clemson vs. No. 3 Ohio State (plus 7½)

Why watch? A rematch of last season's thrilling semifinal and the likely last college game for Clemson QB Trevor Lawrence and Ohio State QB Justin Fields.

Pick: Clemson 31-28.

Saturday, Jan. 2

Fiesta Bowl (Glendale, Ariz.): No. 12 Iowa State vs. No. 25 Oregon (plus 4)

Why watch? Oregon DE Kayvon Thibodeaux was a monster in the Pac-12 championship game against Southern Cal and will be one of the best defensive players in the country in 2021.

Pick: Oregon 27-24.

Orange Bowl (Miami Gardens, Fla.): No. 5 Texas A&M (minus 7) vs. No. 14 North Carolina

Why watch? Notre Dame's 31-17 victory against the Tar Heels helped keep the Aggies out of the playoff. Think Texas A&M would like to top that?

Pick: Texas A&M 35-24.

BOWLS ROUNDUP

Wilson, Cougars cruise past UCF in Boca Raton Bowl

Associated Press

BOCA RATON, Fla. — The NFL will have to wait for BYU's Zach Wilson — for a few days, at least.

Wilson threw for 425 yards with three touchdown passes and two rushing scores as No. 13 BYU routed UCF 49-23 in the Boca Raton Bowl on Tuesday night.

Wilson, considered a top prospect, completed 26 of 34 passes in what might be his final college game.

"I don't know yet," Wilson said when asked about his plans. "I'm probably going to enjoy the Christmas break and discuss with coaches, discuss with my family and figure out what's best."

The Cougars (11-1) led 35-10 at halftime and finished with 655 yards of offense to U

CF's 411.

Tyler Allgeier carried 19 times for 177 yards and a score. Isaac Rex had five catches for 96 yards and two touchdowns as BYU earned its first victory in nine games it has played in the Sunshine State.

Dillon Gabriel was 21-for-45 for 217 yards and two TDs for the Knights (6-4). He had a stretch of nine straight incompletions bridging the second and third quarters.

Nevada 38, Tulane 27: At Boise, Idaho, Carson Strong threw for 271 yards and five touchdowns, Devonte Lee and Toa Taua each rushed for over 100 yards, and the Wolf Pack defense recorded eight sacks for the first time in 17 years on the way to a victory in the Famous Idaho Potato Bowl.

Nevada (7-2) finished 2020 the same way

it started the year — by playing in the same bowl game, which the Wolf Pack lost 30-21 to Ohio on Jan. 3.

That game was also the last time Nevada coach Jay Norvell saw his father, Merritt Norvell, in person before the coronavirus pandemic reached the U.S. and prevented them from seeing each other. Merritt died in October.

Nevada was coming off a loss in its regular-season finale to San Jose State, which cost the Wolf Pack a spot in the Mountain West title game.

Cameron Carroll rushed for 120 yards — more than half on a meaningless late touchdown — for Tulane (6-6), which was one of 19 schools to play 11 regular-season games amid the pandemic.

Steelers in midst of historic collapse

Associated Press

The Pittsburgh Steelers have gone from dreams of matching the perfect 1972 Miami Dolphins to searching for another win.

After winning their first 11 games for the first time in franchise history, the Steelers were upset at home two weeks ago against Washington. That was followed by a loss at fellow AFC contender Buffalo before a humbling 27-17 defeat to last-place Cincinnati on Monday night.

The last team to start 11-0 and then lose three straight was the 1969 Rams in a 14-game season. The losing skid carried over to the playoffs with a 23-20 loss to Minnesota, a fate the Steelers would obviously like to avoid.

Pittsburgh would prefer to follow the path of the 2009 Saints, who won their first 13 games before losing the final three in the regular season. They recovered to win three in a row in the playoffs for the only

Super Bowl title in franchise history.

With the loss in Week 13 to a Washington team that was 4-7 at the time and then this past week to a Cincinnati team that was 2-10-1, the Steelers became the first team in NFL history to lose multiple games when entering with at least 11 wins and playing a team with four or fewer.

The late-season collapse has opened the door for Cleveland to have a chance at winning the division. If the Browns beat the Jets on Sunday and the Steelers lose to Indianapolis, the Week 17 showdown in Cleveland will be for the division title. The Browns last won a division title in 1989, the longest current drought in the league.

No matter who wins the AFC North, the champion will be a team that missed the playoffs last season. Every year since 1977, with the exception of the strike-shortened 1982 season that had no divisions, has featured a division winner that

missed the playoffs the previous season.

On the other end of the spectrum is the New York Jets, who lost their first 13 games before stunning the Los Angeles Rams, who came into the game with a 9-4 record, with a 23-20 victory.

It marked just the third time a team 0-13 or worse broke through for its first win against a team with a winning record. The Colts (0-13) beat Tennessee (7-6) in 2011 and the Raiders (0-13) beat the Patriots (9-3-1) in 1962.

Road warriors: With two weeks to play, home teams still have a losing record this season at 111-112-1. With many stadiums having no fans because of the coronavirus and others just having small crowds, the advantage of playing at home has been nearly nonexistent.

The last time a season finished with home teams having a losing record came in 1968, when home teams in the NFL went 49-59-4 (.454) and in the

AFL, home teams went 34-35-1 (.493).

Keeping it: From Kyler Murray to Lamar Jackson to the recent emergence of Jalen Hurts and the return to the field of Marcus Mariota, quarterbacks are having more success than ever running the ball.

Quarterbacks have rushed for 8,114 yards and 111 touchdowns this season with two weeks to play, the most in a season on record in NFL history. The previous high came in 2018 when QBs had 8,086 yards rushing and the TD mark had been 80, set last season.

Jackson leads the way with 828 yards rushing and seven TDs with Murray having 741 yards and 11 touchdowns. Murray has a record nine games this season with both a passing and rushing touchdown, and with 26 TD passes has joined Cam Newton in his 2015 MVP season as the only player to throw for at least 25 TDs and run for at least 10 in the same season.

Auburn hires Boise State's Harsin as new football coach

Associated Press

Auburn has hired Boise State's Bryan Harsin as its head coach, luring him away from his alma mater and into the powerful Southeastern Conference.

Auburn announced the hiring Tuesday evening. The 44-year-old Harsin is 69-19 with three Mountain West titles in seven seasons at Boise State, but the SEC affords greater chances for playoff berths.

The Auburn job is also sure to bring a major pay raise, though contract details for Harsin weren't immediately available.

In other college football news:

■ The University of Florida's football team received a year of probation and football coach Dan Mullen was sanctioned Tuesday after the school and the NCAA agreed to resolve an in-

fractions case involving impermissible contact with recruits last year.

None of the infractions was deemed Level I, the most serious, but the NCAA said the head coach did not promote an atmosphere of compliance. It did not name Mullen, who has been Florida's coach since 2018.

Many of the penalties, including reduced evaluation days and number of permissible phone calls to recruits, were implemented earlier this year.

■ The Gasparilla Bowl in Tampa, Fla., was canceled Tuesday after South Carolina withdrew because of COVID-19 issues within the program.

■ Arizona is hiring New England Patriots assistant Jedd Fisch as its head coach, a person with knowledge of the situation

told The Associated Press on Wednesday. Fisch, 44, is filling the vacancy created when Arizona fired Kevin Sumlin earlier this month after the Wildcats finished the season winless.

Gators' Johnson released from hospital

Florida Gators forward Keyontae Johnson was released from the hospital on Monday, the latest step in the rapid recovery of the basketball star following his scary on-court collapse Dec. 12 at Florida State.

NHL tightens its coronavirus protocols

NHL coaches are required to wear masks behind the bench, owners are barred from having face-to-face meetings with players, and teams can travel with no

more than 50 people. Those are among the coronavirus-related protocols the NHL released Tuesday in preparing to open the 2021 season on Jan. 13.

Syndergaard signs 1-year deal with Mets

The New York Mets and Noah Syndergaard agreed to a \$9.7 million, one-year contract Tuesday for next season, when the injured right-hander hopes to return from Tommy John surgery.

Pierce, Collins lead new Hall of Fame nominees

Boston Celtics star Paul Pierce and longtime player, coach and broadcaster Doug Collins lead the first-time nominees announced Tuesday for the Naismith Memorial Basketball Hall of Fame Class of 2021.

NBA ROUNDUP

Clippers beat Lakers on opening night

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — After the Los Angeles Lakers got their championship rings, the Los Angeles Clippers gave a performance that showed this retooled team is determined to contend for its own jewelry several months from now.

Paul George scored 26 of his 33 points in the second half, Kawhi Leonard added 26 points and the Los Angeles Clippers rallied past the Los Angeles Lakers on the NBA champions' ring ceremony night for a 116-109 victory Tuesday.

George went 13 of 18 with five three-pointers in an outstanding first game since agreeing to add four years and \$190 million to his contract with the Clippers, who never trailed in the latest meeting of Southern California's two NBA powerhouses. The Clip-

pers beat the Lakers in the season opener for the second straight year while winning coach Tyronn Lue's debut.

The Clippers stayed in their locker room while the Lakers received their rings, but they emerged with purpose and determined play — from their two superstars in particular.

"Our focus was on us," Lue said. "The Lakers, they deserved that ring. They had a great year, and you can't take nothing away from them. Our focus wasn't really on the Lakers. They were the best team last year, so congratulations to them again, but now we're moving on."

LeBron James scored 22 points and Anthony Davis had 18 for the Lakers just 72 days after they finished off the Miami Heat in the NBA bubble. James said he turned his

ankle "pretty good" in the second half, leading him to play just 28 minutes.

"I'm happy today is over with and we can focus on the season, but it's just a lot to process," James said. "It felt weird having a basketball game today."

Nets 125, Warriors 99: Kevin Durant shook off 18 months of rust and finished with 22 points in 25 minutes, Kyrie Irving was even better and host Brooklyn kicked off the Steve Nash era with a win over Golden State in the NBA's season opener.

Durant was competing in his first official game since rupturing his Achilles tendon while playing for the Warriors in Game 5 of the 2019 NBA Finals.

Irving led the Nets with 26 points and Caris LeVert scored 20 as Brooklyn led by as many as 38 points.

TOP 25 BASKETBALL ROUNDUP

Braun's six threes lifts No. 3 Kansas past No. 7 WKU

Associated Press

LAWRENCE, Kan. — Christian Braun hit six three-pointers and had 22 points, Jalen Wilson hit four threes and scored 17, and No. 3 Kansas shrugged off a mid-game malaise before cruising past seventh-ranked West Virginia 79-65 on Tuesday night.

Marcus Garrett finished with 15 points, Ochai Agbaji had 11 points and 10 rebounds, and David McCormack added 10 points and 11 boards as the Jayhawks (8-1, 2-0 Big 12) won their fifth straight against the Mountaineers (6-2, 1-1).

Kansas trailed by a point at halftime before Braun and Wilson heated up in the second half, carrying the Jayhawks to their eighth consecutive victory overall.

No. 1 Gonzaga 95, Northwestern State 78: Drew Timme had 25 points and nine rebounds as the host Zags held off a late challenge to beat the Demons for the second night in a row.

Jalen Suggs added 19 points and Corey Kispert had 18 for Gonzaga (6-0), which owns the nation's longest home winning streak at 41 games.

No. 4 Iowa 70, Purdue 55: Luka Garza scored 22 points, Joe Wieskamp added 17

and the host Hawkeyes beat the Boilermakers.

Garza, who came into the game leading the nation in scoring at 29.3 points per game, scored 10 of the first 16 points for Iowa (7-1, 1-0 Big Ten), which was coming off a 99-88 loss to No. 1 Gonzaga on Saturday.

No. 6 Houston 76, Temple 50: Quentin Grimes had 22 points and seven rebounds, Justin Gorham had 14 points and 12 boards and the host Cougars beat the Owls in the American Athletic Conference opener for both teams.

Grimes scored at least 20 points for the third straight game as Houston shot 48%, including 10-for-26 on three-pointers. Reggie Chaney had 13 points and Tramon Mark scored 12 for the Cougars (6-0).

No. 9 Wisconsin 67, Nebraska 53: Brad Davison had 15 points and a career-high seven assists, and the host Badgers overcame a dreadful start to beat the Cornhuskers in the Big Ten opener for both teams.

Micah Potter added 10 points and 11 rebounds and sparked a key 16-0 run in the second half. Fifth-year senior Aleem Ford celebrated his 24th birthday with 13 points and eight rebounds to help Wisconsin (7-1)

earn its ninth straight conference victory and 15th straight home win. Dalano Banton scored 15 points, Teddy Allen had 11 and Trey McGowens added 10 for Nebraska (4-4).

No. 14 Missouri 54, Bradley 53: Jeremiah Tilmon's three-point play with a second left lifted the host Tigers. Down eight with under four minutes to go, Missouri (6-0) went on a 6-0 run in the final 1:33 to spoil the Braves' upset bid.

No. 15 Texas Tech 69, Oklahoma 67: Terrence Shannon Jr. scored 21 points and Marcus Santos-Silva had 18 to help the Red Raiders win on the road against the Sooners. Mac McClung added 16 points for Tech (7-2, 1-1 Big 12), which was coming off a one-point home loss to Kansas.

No. 16 Virginia 76, William & Mary 40: Trey Murphy III scored seven of his 15 points during a 13-0 first-half run and the host Cavaliers returned from a long coronavirus-related pause to beat the Tribe.

North Carolina State 79, No. 17 North Carolina 76: Devon Daniels scored eight straight points in the second half and finished with 21 to help the host Wolfpack beat the Tar Heels.