

US still battling delta variant of virus

Associated Press

While all eyes are on the new and little-understood omicron variant that is popping up around the country, the delta form of the coronavirus isn't finished wreaking havoc in the U.S., swamping hospitals with record numbers of patients in the Midwest and New England.

"Omicron is a spark that's on the horizon. Delta variant is the fire that's here today," said Dr. Nirav Shah, director of the state Center for Disease Control and Prevention in Maine, where an unprecedented 334 people were in the hospital with COVID-19 as of midweek.

The U.S. recorded its first confirmed omicron infection on Wednesday, in a Californian who had been to South Africa, where the variant was first identified a week ago. Several more cases were reported Thursday—five in the New York City area and one each in Minnesota, Hawaii and Colorado—under circumstances suggesting the variant has begun spreading within the U.S.

But there is much that is unknown about omicron, including whether it is more contagious than previous versions, makes people sicker, thwarts the vaccine or more easily breaks through the immunity that people get from a bout of COVID-19. World health au-

thorities have yet to link any deaths to omicron.

For now, the extra-contagious delta variant accounts for practically all cases in the U.S. and continues to inflict misery at a time when many hospitals are struggling with nurse shortages and a backlog of patients undergoing procedures that had been put off early in the pandemic.

The fear is that omicron will foist even more patients, and perhaps sicker ones, onto hospitals.

"For me, it's really just, I can't imagine," said Dr. Natasha Bhuyan, a family physician in Phoenix, which has also been hit hard. "Are we going to see another surge in cases that's even higher than what we're seeing now? What will that do to our health system? What will that do to our hospitals?"

Two years into the outbreak, COVID-19 has killed over 780,000 Americans, and deaths are running at about 900 per day.

COVID-19 cases and deaths in the U.S. have dropped by about half since the delta peak in August and September, but at about 86,000 new infections per day, the numbers are still high, especially heading into the holidays, when people travel and gather with family.

With the onset of cold weather sending

more people indoors, hospitals are feeling the strain.

"Delta is not subsiding," said Dr. Andre Kalil, an infectious-disease physician at the University of Nebraska Medical Center. Nebraska on Tuesday reported 555 people in the hospital with COVID-19—the highest number since last December, when the vaccine rollout was just beginning.

Vermont on Thursday recorded its highest daily number of COVID-19 cases at 604, two days after the hospital caseload hit a pandemic-high of 84. New Hampshire, once an early vaccination leader, is now second only to Michigan in the most new cases per capita over the past two weeks.

In Minnesota, which ranks third in new cases per capita, the Pentagon sent medical teams last month to two major hospitals to relieve doctors and nurses, and another team is set to arrive Friday.

"This fourth wave, I can pretty clearly state, has hit Minnesota harder than any of the previous ones," said Dr. Timothy Johnson, president of the Minnesota chapter of the American College of Emergency Physicians.

Military teams have also been into Michigan, where hospitals are grappling with more COVID-19 patients than at any other time during the pandemic.

Navy identifies and isolates tainted well on Hawaii

BY WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii — The Navy on Hawaii has identified the well contaminated with petroleum products that prompted outcry from thousands of military households and left them without a water supply, the deputy commander of the Pacific Fleet said Thursday.

Two tests done by the Navy since Sunday confirmed that the Red Hill well appeared to be contaminated, Rear Adm. Blake Converse, head of the crisis action team tackling the water problem, said during a Facebook livestream.

"The Red Hill well was isolated on Sunday, and it's remained isolated since then," he said.

The Navy and Hawaii Department of Public Health began testing tap water and well heads Sunday after residents among roughly 7,000 military households on the Navy water supply complained of a foul odor and oily sheen.

In its test done Wednesday, the health department Wednesday found traces of petroleum in tap water at Red Hill Elementary School, which lies a couple of miles outside Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam but uses Navy water.

Converse said a sample taken Sunday by the Navy "identified trace amounts of very volatile hydrocarbons" that are normally associated with jet fuel or gasoline.

"The second [Navy] test that was done just today, which was a new test we just re-

ceived on island that tests volatile hydrocarbons or petroleum gaseous products," he said.

He said the samples from the Red Hill well "found clear indications of petroleum products" just above the water line.

Both Navy tests provide "pretty clear indications" of volatile petroleum products in the well, Converse said, "and we've determined that that is the likely source of the contamination of our water distribution across the Navy system."

With the wells already isolated, the task now is to restore potable water to purity levels approved by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency through flushing and testing of the system aside from the Red Hill well, Converse said.

Racism plagues US military academies

Associated Press

Eight years after he graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Geoffrey Easterling remains astonished by the Confederate history still memorialized on the storied academy's campus — the 6-foot-tall painting of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee in the library, the barracks dormitory named for Lee and the Lee Gate on Lee Road.

As a Black student at the Army academy, he remembers feeling “devastated” when a classmate pointed out the slave also depicted in the Lee painting. “How did the only Black person who got on a wall in this entire humongous school — how is it a slave?” he recalls thinking.

As a diversity admissions officer, he later traveled the country recruiting students to West Point from underrepresented communities. “It was so hard to tell people like, ‘Yeah, you can trust the military,’ and then their kids Google and go ‘Why is there a barracks named after Lee?’” he said.

The nation's military academies provide a key pipeline into the leadership of the armed services and, for the better part of the last decade, they have welcomed more racially diverse students each year. But beyond blanket anti-discrimination policies, these federally funded institutions volunteer little about how they screen for extremist or hateful behavior, or address the racial slights that some graduates of color say they faced daily.

Although racism in the general military population has been spotlighted, less attention has been paid to the premiere institutions that produce a significant portion of the services' officer corps — the academies of the U.S. Army, the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Air Force, the U.S. Coast

Guard and U.S. Merchant Marine.

Some graduates of color from the nation's top military schools who endured what they describe as a hostile environment are left questioning the military maxim that all service members wearing the same uniform are equal.

That includes Carlton Shelley II, who was recruited to play football for West Point from his Sarasota, Fla., high school and entered the academy in 2009. On the field, he described the team as “a brotherhood,” where his skin color didn't matter. But off the field, he said, he and other Black classmates too often were treated like the stereotype of the angry Black man.

“I was repeatedly in trouble or being corrected for infractions that were not actually infractions,” he said. “It was a very deliberate choice to dig and to push on certain individuals compared with other cadets — white cadets.”

Some students of color have pointed to what they see as systemic discrimination at the academies by creating Instagram accounts — “Black at USAFA” and “Black at USNA” — to relate their personal experiences.

“I was walking with a classmate and we were both speaking Spanish when a white, male upperclassman turned around and said ‘Speak English, this is America,’” a 2020 Air Force Academy graduate wrote in one post.

In response to the AP's findings, a spokesman for the Department of Defense, Maj. Charlie Dietz, said the academies make it a policy to offer equal opportunities regardless of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, gender identity or sexual orientation. He said the DOD

formed a team in April to advance progress on diversity, equity and inclusion across the entire department, including the academies.

The latest annual defense spending bill mandated that the Defense Department survey all its military properties for references or symbols that potentially commemorate the Confederacy, including at West Point, which the commission overseeing the work picked as its first site to visit earlier this year. But the deadline to act on any recommendations is still more than two years away.

Following the murder of George Floyd in 2020, which sparked global protests, a group of West Point alums released a 40-page letter urging the academy to address “major failures” in combating intolerance and racism, adding “we hold fast to the hope that our Alma Mater will take the necessary steps to champion the values it espouses.”

An appendix offered anonymous testimonials gathered last year from West Point cadets about incidents they said went unaddressed by school officials.

“I had a racist roommate that would call me the n-word and spit on me,” one cadet wrote. “I told the 4th Regimental Tactical Officer about it, and they did nothing.”

Shelley acknowledges West Point has become more racially diverse, but said the academy has significant work to do to retain and support students of color. In his class, he estimated about 35 Black students graduated — “some crazy low number,” he said. “And we started with a lot more.”

West Point did not respond to repeated requests for comment, beyond reiterating the importance of diversity to its admis-

sions process.

The academies are a growing pathway to officer status for Black cadets, 2019 data from the Under Secretary of Defense shows, with about 13% of Black active-duty officers commissioned through the five institutions, compared to 19% of white active-duty officers.

Most students who enroll — about 60-70% — are nominated by U.S. senators or representatives from their home states as part of a system created in the 1840s to build a geographically diverse officer corps. But today, the country's changed demographics mean the system gives disproportionate influence to rural congressional districts that tend to be whiter.

Only 6% of nominations to the Army, Air Force and Naval academies made by the current members of Congress went to Black candidates, even though 15% of the population aged 18 to 24 is Black, according to a March report by the Connecticut Veterans' Legal Center. Eight percent of congressional nominations went to Hispanic students, though they make up 22% of young adults, the report said.

The diversity of nominations has improved slightly in the past 25 years, but the report noted that 49 Congress members did not nominate a single Black student while in office and 31 nominated no Hispanic candidates.

Curtis Harris said he was awarded one of just three nominations to West Point out of more than 300 applications to his congressman. Now, he helps review applications for a New York Congressman and visits schools to encourage young candidates of diverse backgrounds to apply.

Diversifying West Point is “not going to happen by itself,” he said.

US employers added 210K jobs in November

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — America's employers slowed the pace of their hiring in November, adding 210,000 jobs, the fewest in nearly a year.

Friday's report from the Labor Department also showed that the unemployment rate fell sharply to 4.2% from 4.6%. That is a historically low level though still above the pre-pandemic jobless rate of 3.5%.

Overall, the November jobs figures point to an economic recovery that looks resilient though under threat from a spike in inflation, shortages of workers and supplies and the potential impact of the omicron variant of the coronavirus.

Little is definitively known about the variant, and widespread business shutdowns are considered unlikely. Still, omicron could discourage some Americans from traveling, shopping and eating out in the coming months and potentially slow the economy.

For now, though, Americans are spending freely, and the economy is forecast to expand at a 7% annual rate in the final three months of the year, a big rebound from the 2.1% pace in the previous quarter, when the delta variant hobbled growth.

Beneath the headline figures on hiring and unemployment, though, lurks a potentially even more consequential question: Are more people who lost jobs to the pandemic recession finally coming off the sidelines to look for work again? Many more job-seekers are needed to help companies fill their open jobs and sustain the economy's growth.

Even as the jobless rate has steadily declined this year, the proportion of Americans who are working or looking for work has barely budged. A shortage of job-seekers tends to limit hiring and force companies to pay more to attract and keep employees. Higher pay can help sustain spending and growth. But it can also feed inflation if businesses raise prices to offset their higher labor costs, which they often do.

One result is that there are now 4.7 million fewer people with jobs than there were before the pandemic. Yet only about 1.7 million of them are actively looking for work and are classified as unemployed. The remaining 3 million are no longer job-hunting and so aren't counted as unemployed. The government classifies people as unemployed only if they're actively seeking work.

Senate passes stopgap funding, avoids shutdown

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Senate has passed a stopgap spending bill that avoids a short-term shutdown and funds the federal government through Feb. 18 after leaders defused a partisan standoff over federal vaccine mandates. The measure now goes to President Joe Biden to be signed into law.

Earlier Thursday, congressional leaders announced they had finally reached an agreement to keep the government running for 11 more weeks, generally at current spending levels, while adding \$7 billion to aid Afghanistan evacuees.

Once the House voted to approve the measure, senators soon announced an agreement that would allow them to vote on it quickly.

"I am glad that in the end, cooler heads prevailed. The government will stay open and I thank the members of this chamber for walking us back from the brink of an avoidable, needless and costly shutdown," said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y.

The Senate approved the measure by a vote of 69-28.

The Democratic-led House passed the measure by a 221-212 vote. The Republican

leadership urged members to vote no; the lone GOP vote for the bill came from Illinois Rep. Adam Kinzinger.

Lawmakers bemoaned the short-term fix and blamed the opposing party for the lack of progress on this year's spending bills. Rep. Rosa DeLauro, chair of the House Appropriations Committee, said the measure would, however, allow for negotiations on a package covering the full budget year through September.

"Make no mistake, a vote against this continuing resolution is a vote to shut government down," DeLauro said during the House debate.

Before the votes, Biden said he had spoken with Senate leaders and he played down fears of a shutdown.

"There is a plan in place unless somebody decides to be totally erratic, and I don't think that will happen," Biden said.

Some Republicans opposed to Biden's vaccine rules wanted Congress to take a hard stand against the mandated shots for workers at larger businesses, even if that meant shutting down federal offices over the weekend by blocking a request that would expedite a final vote on the spending bill.

Suspect's parents charged in Michigan high school shooting

Associated Press

PONTIAC, Mich. — A prosecutor in Michigan filed involuntary manslaughter charges Friday against the parents of a boy who is accused of killing four students at Oxford High School, after saying earlier that their actions went "far beyond negligence."

Jennifer and James Crumbley were charged with four counts of involuntary manslaughter. Under Michigan law, an involuntary manslaughter charge can be pursued if prosecutors believe someone contributed to a situation where the chance of harm or death was high. If convicted, they could face up to 15 years in prison.

"The parents were the only individuals in the position to know the access to weapons," Oakland County prosecutor Karen McDo-

nald said Thursday. The gun "seems to have been just freely available to that individual."

Ethan Crumbley, 15, has been charged as an adult with two dozen crimes, including murder, attempted murder and terrorism, for the shooting Tuesday at Oxford High School in Oakland County, roughly 30 miles north of Detroit. Four students were killed and seven more people were injured. Three were in hospitals in stable condition Friday.

The semi-automatic gun was purchased legally by Crumbley's father last week, according to investigators.

There's no Michigan law that requires gun owners keep weapons locked away from children. McDonald, however, suggested there's more to build a case on.

Putin seeks US guarantees for border

Associated Press

MOSCOW — The Kremlin said Friday that President Vladimir Putin will seek binding guarantees precluding NATO's expansion to Ukraine during a planned call with U.S. President Joe Biden, while the Ukrainian defense minister warned that Russia could invade his country next month.

Tensions between Russia and the West have escalated in recent weeks, with Ukraine, the U.S. and other Western allies increasingly concerned that a Russian troop buildup near the Ukrainian border could signal Moscow's intention to invade.

The U.S. has threatened the Kremlin with the toughest sanctions yet if it launches an attack, while Russia has warned that any presence of NATO troops and weapons on

Ukrainian soil would cross a "red line."

Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksii Reznikov told lawmakers Friday that the number of Russian troops near Ukraine and in Russian-annexed Crimea is estimated at 94,300, warning that a "large-scale escalation" is possible in January.

Amid the mounting tensions, Putin's foreign affairs adviser Yuri Ushakov told reporters Friday that arrangements have been made for a Putin-Biden call in the coming days, adding that the date will be announced after Moscow and Washington finalize details.

On Thursday, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken met face-to-face with his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov in Stockholm to demand that Russia pulls back

troops from the border with Ukraine.

Lavrov retorted that the West was "playing with fire" by denying Russia a say in any further NATO expansion into countries of the former Soviet Union.

Ukraine has pushed to join the alliance, which holds out the promise of membership but hasn't set a timeline.

Ushakov noted that during the call with Biden Putin will raise his demand for a document that would exclude any NATO moves further east.

The Kremlin aide said that Russia long has pushed for such arrangements, emphasizing that they have become particularly acute amid the latest buildup of tension, adding that "it simply can't continue like that."

Taliban prohibits forced marriages of women

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — The Taliban decreed Friday that they are banning the forced marriage of women in the war-torn country, in what appears to be a move to address criteria that developed nations consider a precondition to recognize their government and restore aid.

The move announced by Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhунzada came as poverty is surging in Afghanistan, following the religious militia's takeover in August that pushed out U.S. and international forces and led foreign governments to halt funds that had been a mainstay of the economy.

"Both (women and men) should be

equal," said the decree, adding that "no one can force women to marry by coercion or pressure." Women's rights improved markedly over the past two decades of international presence in Afghanistan, but are seen as under threat with the return of the Taliban, whose earlier rule in the 1990s saw them virtually cloistered.

Forced marriages have become more commonplace in the poor, conservative country, as the internally displaced marry off their young daughters in exchange for a bride-price that can be used to pay debts and feed their families.

Women in Afghanistan for decades were treated like property — as an exchange to-

ken for blood money or ending disputes or tribal feuds. The Taliban now state they are against the practice. They also said a widow will now be allowed to re-marry 17 weeks after her husband's death, choosing her new husband freely.

Longstanding tribal traditions have held it customary for a widow to marry one of her husband's brothers or relatives in the event of his death.

The Taliban leadership says it has ordered Afghan courts to treat women fairly, especially widows seeking inheritance as next of kin. The group also says it has asked government ministers to spread awareness of women's rights across the population.

China, US tussle over Biden's democracy summit

Associated Press

BEIJING — China and the United States are tussling over President Joe Biden's upcoming democracy summit, which the ruling Communist Party sees as a challenge to its authoritarian ways.

The party maintains China has its own form of democracy and was expected to issue a report titled "China: Democracy that Works" on Saturday, five days before the opening of Biden's two-day virtual meeting with about 110 other governments.

The White House pushed back Thursday against Chinese criticism of Biden's "Summit for Democracy," after a senior Chinese

official said that it divides countries and points fingers at others.

White House Press Secretary Jen Psaki said that the participants would discuss how to work together to stand up for democracy around the world.

"That's nothing we're going to apologize for," she said.

She was responding to opening remarks by Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Le Yucheng at an expert forum on the topic held by the government for foreign journalists in Beijing.

"It claims it's doing this for democracy," Le said, without naming the United States.

"But this is in fact the very opposite of democracy. It will do no good to global solidarity, no good to cooperation and no good to development."

Biden has made a competition between democracies and autocracies such as Russia and China a central theme of his presidency, saying democracies must prove they can deliver. Neither Russia nor China are invited to his summit.

The U.S. also angered China by including Taiwan in the summit. China claims the self-governing island as part of its territory and objects to it having any contact on its own with foreign governments.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man pleads guilty to his role in romance scam

MO ST. LOUIS — A St. Louis County man has pleaded guilty to helping Nigerian romance scammers bilk women in 25 states out of hundreds of thousands of dollars in cash and electronics.

The St. Louis Post-Dispatch reports that Bonmene Sibe, 43, of Jennings pleaded guilty Wednesday to a federal conspiracy charge. He was one of three people indicted last year. All three have now pleaded guilty.

One of them, Ovuoke Frank Ofikoro, said in his July guilty plea that co-conspirators in Nigeria and the U.S. stole the identities of U.S. military officers or created fictitious officers' identities before tricking women into sending cash or electronics.

Ofikoro said Sibe's role was to find people who would open post office boxes and send the cash and electronics. His plea says victims lost between \$550,000 and \$1,500,000.

Police fatally shoot armed man firing guns

IL BUFFALO GROVE — Suburban Chicago police officers fatally shot an armed man early Thursday after he refused to comply with officers' orders as he walked toward them while firing two handguns, police said.

Buffalo Grove police said the man in his 20s called 911 and when officers arrived about 12:30 a.m. he had two handguns he was firing in the air as he walked toward the officers in a vacant parking lot.

Buffalo Grove Deputy Police Chief Mike Szos said officers or-

dered the man to stop and, when he continued toward them, the officers opened fire, striking him. The officers began providing the man with first aid but he was pronounced dead at the scene, police said.

Helo crew rescues man who fell into canyon

CA THOUSAND OAKS, Calif. — A helicopter crew rescued a man who tumbled down a steep Southern California hillside after his car ended up teetering on the ledge, authorities said.

After stopping his car just short of the slope, the man got out, lost his balance and fell about 200 feet into Bell Canyon, the Ventura County Star reported. The man didn't appear to have life-threatening injuries, officials said. He was taken to a hospital to be checked out.

Authorities didn't immediately say how the motorist ended up off the road at the edge of the canyon.

Man accused of killing black bear and cub

FL SEBRING — A Florida man is accused of fatally shooting a black bear and one of her cubs, officials said.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission said in a news release Tuesday that the 43-year-old man shot the bears in the Sun 'n Lake community in Sebring on Oct. 26.

He faces four charges, wildlife officials said. The state attorney's office is prosecuting the case.

Biologists with the agency were able to trap one uninjured bear cub in the community and

release it in a more suitable habitat, officials said. They saw another cub in the area but were not able to capture it.

Charter school leaders allegedly stole money

TN NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Former officials at a Memphis charter school stole hundreds of thousands of dollars over several years, according to the Tennessee comptroller's office and the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation.

Investigators said Wednesday that former executive director Corey Johnson, former finance director Robert Williams and former nutritional services director Michael Jones misappropriated funds while working at Memphis Academy of Health Sciences charter school between July 2015 and February 2021.

Officials allege Johnson stole at least \$337,955.13 on personal purchases including Las Vegas trips, NBA tickets and a hot tub.

All three men have been fired.

Partnership aims to recruit poll workers

KY FRANKFORT — Kentucky's secretary of state has teamed up with an organization to promote efforts to recruit poll workers and register young people to vote.

Secretary of State Michael Adams announced the partnership with the Kentucky YMCA Youth Association on Wednesday.

"We can't have an election without election workers," Adams said. "Our base of volunteer poll workers is aging out,

and this partnership will help us find new ones as we prepare for the 2022 elections."

Beth Malcom, CEO and president of Kentucky YMCA Youth Association, said the partnership will increase "teen civic activity" across the state while giving students more opportunities to be involved with state government.

Besides recruiting poll workers, the secretary of state's office and the Kentucky YMCA Youth Association will hold high school voter registration drives and conduct voter education training.

3 arrested over fentanyl-laced pot

VT BRATTLEBORO — Three people have been arrested in Brattleboro in connection with marijuana laced with the powerful opioid fentanyl, police said.

Last month, Brattleboro police responded to a report of an overdose and revived the patient using CPR and the opioid-overdose antidote naloxene.

The person told police that they had smoked marijuana and had not taken any opioids. Officers tested the patient's marijuana and found it contained fentanyl, prompting them to warn the public.

Police searched a residence in Brattleboro on Tuesday and said they found several containers of what they believed to be marijuana laced with fentanyl, the Brattleboro Reformer reported. The marijuana was sent to a lab for testing, police said in the statement. Three people were arrested for possession of fentanyl.

— From Associated Press

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Pitre stuck with Baylor after scandal

Associated Press

Jalen Pitre stuck with his longtime commitment to Baylor while every other recruit bailed in the wake of a horrendous scandal.

He was in a class all by himself when coach Matt Rhule was hired in December 2016, six months after Art Briles was fired. Under an interim coach, the Bears had ended their regular season on a six-game losing streak and Pitre was the only recruit still verbally committed to Baylor.

"I feel like I was a little overlooked, but I was very thankful for Baylor giving me a shot," Pitre said this week. "With that gratitude, I was sold on coming here and doing what I needed to do to become the man that I could be, and growing on and off the field. ... It's crazy to look back and see how far I've come."

The Big 12's defensive player of the year, as named Thursday after being voted on by league

coaches, Pitre is among several players from that spring 2017 signing class now playing key roles for the ninth-ranked Bears (10-2). They were expected to play Saturday against fifth-ranked and College Football Playoff hopeful Oklahoma State (11-1) in their second Big 12 championship game in three seasons.

"I have a lot of respect, a lot of love for them," second-year Baylor coach Dave Aranda said. "To see the growth in them has been one of my biggest and best takeaways."

That 2017 class was the last in college football without a December signing period, so Rhule and his new staff had a little extra time to put things together.

Abram Smith is the Big 12's second-leading rusher with 1,366 yards, do-everything back Trestan Ebner averages 133.8 all-purpose yards a game and R.J. Sneed has 43 receptions. Terrel Bernard is Baylor's top

tackler (76 with 10 of those for losses). Pitre plays a hybrid line-backer-defensive back position, with 63 tackles and the only Football Bowl Subdivision player with at least three forced fumbles, three fumble recoveries and two interceptions.

"It's been a journey, man. We've been through a lot together. We spend more time together than with our families, so it's been fun," Bernard said. "It's been a great experience. Every single one of them have become my brothers and have become lifelong friends. It's an experience I'll never trade for anything."

There was the 1-11 season in Rhule's debut, then improving to 7-6 the next season. They won 11 games and made the Big 12 title game and Sugar Bowl in 2019 before the coach left for the NFL.

Aranda was coming off a national title as LSU's defensive coordinator when he arrived at

Baylor and the pandemic wiped out spring practice. The Bears stumbled to 2-7 last year, and now have another shot at a Big 12 title.

"A roller coaster, man. Up and down. It's just a credit to all the guys who came in with me. They stuck it out. We fought," Ebner said. "That's what makes it so much better. ... We always figured it out."

Pitre was all-in long before anybody else in that first signing class for Rhule.

And Baylor stuck with Pitre even after he had an ACL injury as a junior before he had six interceptions as a senior.

"I'm very grateful, like with all the experiences that I've had and how far God has brought me," Pitre said. "Because if in 2015 somebody would have told me that I would be in this spot where I am, and I would have done the things that I've done it, it would have been kind of hard for me to believe."

Dallas does in New Orleans with defense

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Dallas defensive coordinator Dan Quinn had to step in for Mike McCarthy as acting head coach and enjoyed the sideline view as the unit he normally oversees lifted the Cowboys out of their recent swoon with a slew of big plays.

CeeDee Lamb had 122 yards from scrimmage, Tony Pollard ripped off a 58-yard touchdown run and the Dallas defense produced a drive-stalling sack and three interceptions in the fourth quarter of a 27-17 victory over the New Orleans Saints on Thursday night.

The Cowboys (8-4) intercepted Saints quarterback Taysom Hill four times in all — three times in the final 6:32 of the game, including defensive tackle Carlos Watkins' pick-6 on a screen pass that made it 27-10 with 2:52 left.

"I finally got to see his emotion and expressions down on the sidelines," Dallas rookie outside linebacker Micah Parsons said of Quinn, a former Atlanta head coach who normally calls defensive plays from a booth with Dallas. "It was good to see a

smile on his face and it was good to see another win on the board."

McCarthy and five assistants didn't make the trip because of positive COVID-19 tests.

"I love doing hard things with a group of people and this was one of those moments," a gratified Quinn said. "We wanted to make sure Mike and all the guys that we missed, that we got their back. Honestly, that was the only thing I was nervous about. I didn't want to let them down."

The Saints (5-7) gave the dual-threat Hill his first start this season in hopes he could help New Orleans snap a four-game skid. He was effective in spurts, passing for 264 yards and two touchdowns — and running for 101 yards — while playing through an early injury to the middle finger of his throwing hand.

"He played with a lot of heart, a lot of guts," Saints coach Sean Payton said.

But Hill's turnovers proved too much to overcome as the Saints — winners of the NFC South the previous four seasons — lost a fifth straight game for the first time since 2005, the season before Payton took over in

New Orleans.

"It's very frustrating. It's unfamiliar territory for us," Hill said. "This is my fifth year and I haven't experienced anything like this since I've been a Saint."

Dak Prescott passed for 238 yards and a 1-yard touchdown to Michael Gallup.

Prescott was intercepted by Marshon Lattimore in the middle of the fourth quarter, but the Cowboys canceled out that turnover when Jourdan Lewis hit Hill's arm as he released the ball and Damontae Kazee intercepted.

That was the first of Dallas' three late interceptions. The Saints' next drive stalled on a pick by Trevon Diggs, his league-leading ninth. And Watkins' interception came on the drive after that.

"When the ball was in the air, our guys went and got it," said Parsons, whose 10th sack of the season also ended a Saints threat early in the fourth quarter. "We tried our best to contain them. I mean, he was getting outside the pocket and we were finding ways to slow him down and getting the ball back."

Blackhawks outlast Caps in shootout

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Marc-Andre Fleury stopped Alex Ovechkin in the shootout after Seth Jones tied it midway through the third period and the Chicago Blackhawks rallied past the Washington Capitals 4-3 Thursday night.

Patrick Kane scored the shootout winner, and Fleury got some assistance from his goalposts to help Chicago win for the third time in five games. The Blackhawks have won seven of 10 games since Derek King took over as interim coach when Jeremy Colliton was fired.

The Capitals lost by blowing a lead for the second time in two games. They coughed up a 4-1 lead and fell in regulation at Florida on Tuesday.

Washington will take the point from reaching overtime but fell to 0-7 in games this season that went past regulation. This was the Capitals' first shootout of the season.

Stars 3, Blue Jackets 2: Jason Robertson scored 68 seconds in and added the go-ahead

goal late in the second period as streaking Dallas beat visiting Columbus.

It was the Stars' sixth consecutive win and seventh straight at home. They have outscored their opponents 21-7 during the winning streak.

Senators 3, Hurricanes 2: Alex Formenton scored twice and Josh Norris broke a tie 19 seconds after visiting Ottawa lost the lead in its win over Carolina.

Norris pushed in a rebound with 5:54 left and the Senators hung on for their league-low fifth victory of the season.

Panthers 7, Sabres 4: Anton Lundell scored twice, including the go-ahead goal, and host Florida came back from three down for the second straight game to beat Buffalo.

Aaron Ekblad had two goals and an assist, Lucas Carlsson scored his first NHL goal and added an assist, and Sam Reinhart scored and had three assists for the Panthers. Jonathan Huberdeau also had a goal and three assists.

Lightning 4, Blues 2: Victor

Hedman had two goals and an assist, and host Tampa Bay beat St. Louis.

Tampa Bay also got goals from Ondrej Palat and Anthony Cirelli, and Andrei Vasilevskiy made 26 saves.

Bruins 2, Predators 0: Jeremy Swayman made 42 saves, Jake DeBrusk and Brandon Carlo scored, and visiting Boston beat Nashville.

Swayman's shutout was his first of the season and third of the rookie's NHL career. After stopping 26 shots over the first two periods, Swayman was heavily tested in the third. Among his best saves in the final frame came when he denied Matt Duchene from the slot with the Predators on a power play.

Sharks 2, Islanders 1: Erik Karlsson scored 39 seconds into overtime to hand host New York its ninth straight loss.

Nick Bonino also scored and Timo Meier had two assists for the Sharks, who have won three straight and five of six. Adin Hill made 24 saves.

Wild 5, Devils 2: Kirill Kapri-

zov had two goals and an assist as host Minnesota kept rolling with a win against New Jersey.

Ryan Hartman had a goal and two assists, and Rem Pitlick and Dmitry Kulikov also scored for Minnesota, which has won five games in a row and is the NHL's highest-scoring team since Nov. 2 with 64 goals in 15 games.

Avalanche 4, Canadiens 1: Cale Makar scored to put his team ahead to stay late in the second period, Valeri Nichushkin had a goal and an assist, and visiting Colorado beat Montreal.

Andre Borkovsky and Gabriel Landeskog also scored for the Avalanche, who bounced back from an ugly 8-3 loss at Toronto a night earlier.

Flames 3, Kings 2: Andrew Mangiapane and Milan Lucic scored on the power play, and Calgary won its fourth straight road game.

Matthew Tkachuk had a goal, Jacob Markstrom made 40 saves and the Flames improved to a league-leading 10-2-2 on the road.

MLB removes player images from its website

Associated Press

Those looking for a photo of Mike Trout or highlights of Atlanta's Game 6 win over Houston in the World Series won't find them on Major League Baseball's official website.

Shortly after the sport's first work stoppage in 26 years began Thursday at 12:01 a.m., MLB removed all current player photos and highlights off MLB.com. Major League Baseball said in an email to The Associated Press that "every action we are taking is at the advice of legal counsel per the National Labor Relations Act."

By removing players names, images or likenesses, owners hope to avoid running afoul of

federal labor laws or the insinuation that any uses would be for commercial or promotional purposes to make money during a labor dispute.

Player photos have been replaced with generic silhouettes, while the headline queues have been filled with features about retired players or historic videos.

The scrubbing goes beyond that. The Los Angeles Angels announced their promotional schedule last month, including a bobblehead commemorating Shohei Ohtani's AL MVP season on April 8. The schedule now lists only a "historic season bobblehead" on that date.

On MLB Network, experts focused Thursday on the upcoming

reveal of the Era Committees' Hall of Fame selections, with clips of long-retired stars Gil Hodges and Tony Oliva but no highlights from any 2021 games.

In Philadelphia, a banner celebrating Bryce Harper winning the NL MVP was taken down at Citizens Bank Ballpark.

Union head Tony Clark and Bruce Meyer, the players' chief lawyer, said that MLB scrubbed images on their own, and that they had no input.

Players, like New York Mets pitcher Taijuan Walker, have taken things one step further and removed images from their own Twitter profiles.

Jeff Katz, the chief product and strategy officer for FanAI, said

leagues do not have an offseason when it comes to promotion, especially in the age of social media. FanAI tracks how fans are watching sports and consumer spending.

"It will be difficult for MLB to do sponsored posts because they can't share video clips or highlights. The impact on them is likely to be worse than other leagues because the NBA and others that have embraced social media have a healthy amount of content shared outside the league," Katz said.

The challenges are even greater considering some fans still have not been back to ballparks for the two seasons since the COVID-19 pandemic started.

James cleared to return after false positive

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — LeBron James has been cleared to return to the Los Angeles Lakers after missing one game under the NBA's health and safety protocols.

The league said Thursday that James is not positive for COVID-19 despite a series of tests that produced conflicting results earlier this week. Additional testing cleared James to play when the Lakers hosted the Los Angeles Clippers on Friday night.

James got an initial positive test from a sample collected Monday. The sample was retested twice, producing one posi-

tive and one negative result. James underwent additional testing Tuesday, but those tests returned one negative result and one clinically inconclusive result, according to the league.

James subsequently had two negative PCR tests conducted more than 24 hours apart, meeting the criteria necessary to return to play.

James said earlier in the season that he is vaccinated. A clear positive test likely would have kept James away for 10 days or more.

James has missed 12 of the Lakers' 23 games this season, with 10 due to injuries. He also missed one game while serving

the first suspension of his 19-year NBA career for an altercation with Detroit's Isaiah Stewart.

James is the third-leading scorer in NBA history with 35,651 points. He is averaging 25.8 points, 6.8 assists and 5.2 rebounds in his 11 games this season.

The Lakers are 5-7 without James and 7-4 with him. They began Thursday in sixth place in the Western Conference despite their thoroughly overhauled roster around James and Anthony Davis, along with significant injury problems for several expected regulars.

At least 17 players have en-

tered the NBA's health and safety protocols since the start of the season. Philadelphia's Joel Embiid and Milwaukee's Khris Middleton are among the big names who have missed significant playing time while dealing with the coronavirus.

The Lakers' first meeting of the season Friday with their Staples Center rivals was moved off ESPN earlier in the week in the expected absence of both James and injured Kawhi Leonard, who hasn't played this season. Both Los Angeles teams have been hovering near the .500 mark after beginning the year with championship aspirations.

Grizzlies rout Thunder, set record for win margin

Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — The Memphis Grizzlies broke the NBA record for margin of victory Thursday night, beating the Oklahoma City Thunder 152-79.

The 73-point spread easily topped the previous mark, which was Cleveland's 68-point win over Miami. The Cavaliers beat the Heat 148-80 on Dec. 17, 1991.

Memphis used 12 players and nine of them reached double figures in scoring, with Jaren Jackson Jr.'s 27 points leading the way for the Grizzlies. Memphis was without its best player, injured guard Ja Morant.

It was 72-36 at halftime and the Grizzlies just kept adding to the lead, eventually pulling ahead by as many as 78 points.

The Grizzlies set a franchise record for shooting, making 62.5% of their shots. De'Anthony Melton scored 19 points, Santi Aldama had 18 and John Konchar added 17 for the Grizzlies — and none of those three players even started.

Suns 114, Pistons 103: Cam Johnson and Cameron Payne both scored 19 points to lead host Phoenix past Detroit for its franchise-record 18th consecutive victory.

Johnson and Payne sparked a stellar effort from the Suns bench, which finished with 48 points. Deandre Ayton had 17 points and 12 rebounds as Phoenix improved to 19-3 this season.

Phoenix won despite not having leading scorer Devin Booker for the first time this

season. The two-time All-Star injured his left hamstring in the second quarter of Tuesday's game against Golden State.

Jerami Grant had 34 points for the Pistons, who fell to 2-10 on the road.

Raptors 97, Bucks 93: Fred VanVleet scored 29 points, Pascal Siakam had 20 and Toronto took advantage of Giannis Antetokounmpo's absence to stop visiting Milwaukee's eight-game winning streak.

Antetokounmpo was out because of soreness in his right calf, a day after he scored 40 points as the Bucks beat Charlotte 127-125. The two-time NBA MVP sat out for the first time since Nov. 12, when he missed an overtime loss at Boston because of a sprained right ankle.

Scottie Barnes scored 13 points as the Raptors won for the first time in four games and snapped a five-game home losing streak, their longest since January 2011.

Jrue Holiday scored 26 points and Khris Middleton had 22 for the Bucks, who lost for the first time since a Nov. 14 defeat at Atlanta.

Bulls 119, Knicks 115: DeMar DeRozan scored 34 points, Zach LaVine and Nikola Vucevic each added 27, and Chicago held off host New York.

Those three were the only Bulls players to score in the fourth quarter, but it was just enough after the Knicks had erased a 21-point deficit to take the lead.

DeRozan scored 18 points in the fourth, including the Bulls' final six. LaVine had

given Chicago the lead by making two free throws with 53 seconds left after the game was tied at 111.

Julius Randle had 30 points, 12 rebounds and six assists, but missed two free throws and had a turnover that led to LaVine's free throws. The Knicks (11-11) fell to .500 for the first time this season after starting 5-1.

New York was without starting forward RJ Barrett because of illness along with center Nerlens Noel because of a sore right knee. Then the Knicks lost another center when Taj Gibson was ejected in the first quarter.

Spurs 114, Trail Blazers 83: Bryn Forbes had 18 points off the bench and visiting San Antonio extended its winning streak to a season-high three games with a victory over shorthanded Portland.

Doug McDermott added 16 points and Dejounte Murray had 15 points and 13 assists for the Spurs.

The loss snapped a 10-game home winning streak for the Blazers. Portland was led by CJ McCollum and Norman Powell with 16 points each. Powell had missed the last two games with a bruised right quadriceps.

The Blazers were without All-Star guard Damian Lillard, who is out with lower abdominal tendinopathy. Portland announced on Wednesday that Lillard will miss 10 days before being re-evaluated.

Anfernee Simons started in Lillard's place but left in the first quarter after rolling his right ankle and did not return.