

## Variant disrupts Americans' holiday plans

*Associated Press*

Dave Fravel and his wife invited several relatives to their Cape Cod home for Christmas to share food, gifts and the togetherness they've longed for during the lonely days of the pandemic. They were also looking forward to a holiday sightseeing trip to New York City.

But the coronavirus spoiled all those plans. With cases surging in their state of Massachusetts and the super-infectious omicron variant racing around the world, they feared spreading the virus even before Fravel's 18-year-old son, Colin, came down with COVID-19.

Rich England has been there before. In the summer, when the delta variant was surging, he said no to a Christmastime vacation with his parents and sister's family to London and Scotland. But he, his wife and 2-year-old daughter

are keeping plans for a four-day trip from their home in Alexandria, Va., to Miami on Dec. 31.

"The safest thing to do would be to say 'OMG, we have to cancel,'" he said. "But there's a lot of letters in the Greek alphabet — there's going to be variants after omicron. You can't just respond to every single variant by shutting down."

For the second year in a row, the ever-morphing virus presents would-be revelers with a difficult choice: cancel holiday gatherings and trips or figure out ways to forge ahead as safely as possible. Many health experts are begging people not to let down their guard.

World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus put it starkly this week when he said that "an event canceled is better than a life canceled." But pandemic fatigue is real. And while travel restrictions

in some places have forced cancellations, many governments have been reluctant to order more lockdowns, leaving decisions about who to see and where to go in the hands of individuals.

Complicating matters is the mystery that surrounds omicron. Scientists now know it spreads fast — perhaps up to three times faster than the delta variant. It also seems to be better at evading vaccines, although boosters rev up protection, particularly against hospitalization and death.

But a crucial question remains: Does omicron cause less severe illness than delta? In the U.S., infections average around 149,000 a day, and officials announced this week that omicron dethroned delta as the dominant variant.

Fravel and his wife, Sue Malomo, who are both software developers and have six children between them, are worried about

omicron and delta.

Fravel, 51, said they nixed their trip to New York City because "the thought of being in those big crowds didn't seem to make a whole lot of sense." Neither did having lots of people at their house. Typically, 20 to 25 people filter through between Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. But this year, only the kids will come and not all at the same time.

England, an energy lobbyist, also weighed his options — and decided a trip could be made. He and his wife both got booster shots, which reassures him, though his daughter is too young for the vaccine.

"We picked Miami in part because we would be able to eat exclusively outdoors and then spend time on the beach and at the pool," he said. But even he is still hedging: As of Tuesday evening, they were "80/20 going."

## In 2 new studies, omicron appears to be milder variant

*Associated Press*

Two new British studies provide some early hints that the omicron variant of the coronavirus may be milder than the delta version.

Scientists stress that even if the findings of these early studies hold up, any reductions in severity need to be weighed against the fact omicron spreads much faster than delta and is more able to evade vaccines. Sheer numbers of infections could still overwhelm hospitals.

Still, the new studies released Wednesday seem to bolster earlier research that suggests omicron may not be as harmful as the delta variant, said Manuel Ascano Jr., a Vanderbilt University biochemist who studies viruses.

"Cautious optimism is perhaps the best way to look at this," he said.

An analysis from the Imperial College London COVID-19 response team estimated hospitalization risks for omicron cases in England, finding people infected with the variant are around 20% less likely to go to the hospital at all than those infected with the delta variant, and 40% less likely to be hospitalized for a night or more.

That analysis included all cases of COVID-19 confirmed by PCR

tests in England in the first half of December in which the variant could be identified: 56,000 cases of omicron and 269,000 cases of delta.

A separate study out of Scotland, by scientists at the University of Edinburgh and other experts, suggested the risk of hospitalization was two-thirds less with omicron than delta. But that study pointed out that the nearly 24,000 omicron cases in Scotland were predominantly among younger adults ages 20-39. Younger people are much less likely to develop severe cases of COVID-19.

"This national investigation is one of the first to show that Omicron is less likely to result in COVID-19 hospitalization than Delta," researchers wrote. While the findings are early observations,

"they are encouraging," the authors wrote.

The findings have not yet been reviewed by other experts, the gold standard in scientific research.

Ascano noted the studies have limitations. For example, the findings are specific to a certain point in time during a quickly changing situation in the United Kingdom and other countries may not fare the same way.

Matthew Binnicker, director of clinical virology at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn., said that in the Scottish study, the percentage of younger people was almost twice as high for the omicron group compared with the delta group, and that "could have biased the conclusions to less severe outcomes caused by omicron."

### Note to readers

Stripes Lite will not publish on Friday and Saturday, Dec. 24-25. The next Stripes Lite will be sent on Sunday, Dec. 26.

# Putin urges West to act fast on security requests

*Associated Press*

MOSCOW — Russian President Vladimir Putin urged the West on Thursday to move quickly to meet Russia's demand for security guarantees precluding NATO's expansion to Ukraine and the deployment of the military alliance's weapons there.

During a marathon annual news conference, the Russian leader welcomed talks with the U.S. that are set to start in Geneva next month, but warned the discussion focused on Moscow's demand needs to produce quick results.

"We want to ensure our security," Putin said. "We put it straight: there must be no further expansion of NATO eastward."

Last week, Moscow submitted draft security documents demanding NATO deny membership to Ukraine and other former Soviet countries and roll back the alliance's military deployments in Central and Eastern Europe.

A key principle of the NATO alliance is that membership is open to any qualifying coun-

try. The U.S. and its allies have said they won't give Russia the kind of guarantee on Ukraine that Putin wants.

Moscow presented its demand amid soaring tensions over a Russian troop buildup near Ukraine that has stoked fears of a possible invasion. President Joe Biden warned Putin in a conference call earlier this month that Russia will face "severe consequences" if it attacks Ukraine.

During his news conference, Putin accused the West of trying to make Ukraine "anti-Russia, constantly beefed up with modern weapons and brainwashing the population."

He said Russia can't keep living in constant anticipation of looming security threats posed by possible deployment of Western weapons in Ukraine.

He argued that Western weapons could encourage hawkish forces in Ukraine to attempt to regain control over Russia-backed separatist regions by force.

# US to expand its Afghan aid to help ease crisis

*The Washington Post*

The Treasury Department on Wednesday issued new licenses to loosen sanctions restrictions on assistance to Afghanistan, following a wave of appeals from aid organizations, lawmakers and others to prevent economic collapse and mass starvation.

The licenses expand the definition of allowed humanitarian assistance to education, including salary payments to teachers, and permit a broader use of U.S. funds received by aid organizations working inside the country.

The United Nations and international financial institutions have warned that prohibitions of economic dealings with the Taliban, and the freezing of Afghanistan's \$10 billion in foreign reserves — most of it held in the United States — have brought the country to the brink of disaster.

The Biden administration, joined by much of the world, has said that the militant government that took over the country in August cannot be recognized unless it ensures the human and civil rights of all Afghans, including minorities and women, and breaks ties with terrorist organizations such as al-Qaida.

But the abrupt cessation of foreign-aid funding that provided 40% of all government revenue and more than 75% of all public spending has brought most banking and commerce to a halt and left many without jobs or working without paychecks amid a prolonged drought, the ravages of the coronavirus pandemic and the onset of Afghanistan's harsh winter.

Last week, dozens of U.S. lawmakers and former top U.S. military and diplomatic officials who served in Afghanistan joined the United Nations and humanitarian organizations in appealing for changes in administration policy.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken told reporters Tuesday that the administration is "looking intensely at ways to put more liquidity into the Afghan economy, to get more money into people's pockets, and doing that with international institutions, with other countries and partners, trying to put in place the right mechanisms to do that in a way that doesn't directly benefit the Taliban but does go directly to the people."

# DOD cuts stateside cost-of-living allowance for thousands in 2022

By COREY DICKSTEIN

*Stars and Stripes*

Thousands of U.S. troops will lose a monthly cost-of-living stipend beginning Jan. 1 because fewer locations across the lower 48 states qualified as excessively expensive living areas, according to a Pentagon announcement Wednesday.

The Defense Department will pay out about \$8.5 million to some 6,000 service members living in six metro areas and 20 non-metropolitan counties within the Continental United States in 2022, the Pentagon said Wednesday. Some 48,000 service members will drop from receiving the supplement after 15 metro areas and 21 non-metropolitan counties were removed from the list of qualifying locations.

The Pentagon, by law, relies on a contractor to provide cost data for each of its military housing areas, which is compared to the na-

tional average, DOD said in its announcement. Areas qualify for the cost-of-living-adjustment subsidy if non-housing costs are determined to be at least 8% higher than the national average.

Categories that determine cost data include transportation, goods and services, federal income taxes, sales taxes and miscellaneous expenses, according to the Pentagon. Data is also adjusted based on access to commissaries and military exchange stores.

The metro areas that qualified for the COLA supplement next year are New York City, Long Island and Staten Island in New York; Nantucket, Mass.; Boulder, Colo.; and San Francisco. New York City's 6% COLA payment will be the largest in 2022, dropping from 7% this year. Long Island and San Francisco were the next highest, with troops in those locations set to receive a 3% adjustment next year.

# Navy seizes Iran arms likely going to Yemen

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — The U.S. Navy said it seized a large cache of assault rifles and ammunition being smuggled by a fishing ship from Iran likely bound for war-ravaged Yemen.

U.S. Navy patrol ships discovered the weapons aboard what the Navy described as a stateless fishing vessel in an operation that began Monday in the northern reaches of the Arabian Sea off Oman and Pakistan. Sailors boarded the vessel and found 1,400 Kalashnikov-style rifles and 226,600 rounds of ammunition, as well as five Yemeni crew members.

It's just the latest interdiction amid the grinding war in Yemen that pits Iran-backed Houthi rebels against a Saudi-led military coalition. Western nations and U.N. experts have repeatedly accused Iran of smuggling illicit weapons and technology into Yemen over the years, fueling the civil war and enabling the Houthis to fire missiles and drones into neighboring Saudi Arabia.

Iran has denied arming the Houthis despite evidence to the contrary.

In an unusually pointed move, the statement late Wednesday from the Navy's Bahrain-based 5th Fleet blamed Iran for send-

ing the weapons, saying the boat was sailing along a route "historically used to traffic weapons unlawfully to the Houthis in Yemen."

"The direct or indirect supply, sale or transfer of weapons to the Houthis violates U.N. Security Council Resolutions and U.S. sanctions," the statement added.

Iran's mission to the United Nations did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the interception.

U.S. Navy patrol ships transferred the confiscated weapons to the guided-missile destroyer USS O'Kane before sinking the fishing vessel because of the

"hazard" it posed to commercial shipping. It said the Yemeni crew would be repatriated.

American seizures of arms bound for Yemen's war, typically Kalashnikov rifles, machine guns and rocket-propelled grenade launchers, began in 2016 and have continued intermittently. Yemen is awash with small arms that have been smuggled into poorly controlled ports over years of conflict.

The Navy's 5th Fleet said it has confiscated some 8,700 illicit weapons so far this year across the 2.5 million-square-mile area it patrols, including the strategically important Red Sea and the Persian Gulf.

## USFJ resumes pre-travel COVID tests for personnel

By **MATTHEW M. BURKE**  
AND **MARI HIGA**  
*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — U.S. Forces Japan re-imposed a testing requirement for personnel heading to Japan on Thursday after the country's foreign minister admonished the U.S. military for breaching its border protection measures.

Japanese Foreign Minister Yoshimasa Hayashi expressed "deep regret" to USFJ commander Lt. Gen. Ricky Rupp that a unit of Marines was not tested for COVID-19 before it arrived on Okinawa aboard a U.S. government flight.

The newly arrived Marines were quarantined at Camp Hansen but permitted base access for five days before being tested, Hayashi said at a Wednesday news conference in Tokyo.

Marine Corps Installations Pacific on Dec. 17 said "multiple" Marines in the group had tested positive for COVID-19, the coronavirus respiratory disease. By Thursday, that cluster had grown to 227, up from 180 on Monday, Chief Cabinet Secreta-

ry Hirokazu Matsuno said at a news conference that morning.

USFJ said the Hansen cases have prompted U.S. officials to "pre-arrival testing for all SOFA members within 72 hours of flights departing for Japan," according to a statement emailed to Stars and Stripes by spokeswoman Yukiko Date.

USFJ acknowledged Hayashi's complaint but said it followed guidance from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Defense Department and Indo-Pacific Command when it discontinued pre-departure testing in September.

So far, neither the Marines nor Japanese authorities have said the Hansen Marines have contracted the coronavirus' highly transmissible omicron variant.

Ten local cases of omicron, however, all with connections to the Marine Corps, have been reported by Okinawa officials since Friday. The Public Health Department reported four omicron cases on Thursday, along with 21 other coronavirus infections.

## 3 Marines accused of trying to smuggle pot into Japan

By **MATTHEW M. BURKE**  
AND **MARI HIGA**  
*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — Three Okinawa-based Marines were indicted last month in Japanese courts for allegedly attempting to smuggle cannabis into the country through the mail.

Cpl. Deshane Fox and Lance Cpl. Alfred Johnson were formally charged Nov. 9 in Naha District Court on suspicion of violating Japan's Cannabis Control Act, a spokeswoman from the Naha District Public Prosecutors Office told Stars and Stripes by phone Wednesday.

A third Marine, Cpl. Nicholas Garner, in a separate case was indicted Nov. 25 on two counts of violating the control act, the spokeswoman added Thursday.

In the case against Fox, the spokeswoman said customs officials intercepted a parcel with just over a quarter-pound of marijuana and about 4½ grams, less than 1/5th of an ounce, of cannabis liquid that was sent April 14 from California by uni-

dentified people

The package was intercepted April 21 when it arrived at the Camp Kinser post office, she said.

"They did not succeed in what they tried to do," the spokeswoman said. Some government officials in Japan customarily speak to the media on condition of anonymity.

On June 7, a package addressed to Garner that contained 2 liters, or a half-gallon, of cannabis liquid and nearly a quarter-pound of cannabis arrived at Camp Foster, the spokeswoman said. It is unclear when that parcel was intercepted and by whom.

The package was sent from Nevada on May 26 by unidentified individuals, the spokeswoman said.

Garner had a small amount of cannabis flower and liquid on him when security forces confronted him June 3 at his residence on Foster, the spokeswoman said. He was indicted on two counts of violating Japan's Cannabis Control Act and one count of violating customs law.



# McConnell courts Manchin to join GOP

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Mitch McConnell is done with subtleties. The Senate Republican leader is putting his party's courtship of Joe Manchin on full public display after the West Virginia Democrat's fractious split with the White House over the president's big social and environmental spending package.

McConnell says Manchin "feels like a man alone" and if he were to switch parties, "he would be joining a lot of folks who have similar views on a whole range of issues."

Whether Manchin is open to McConnell's appeal — he has consistently said he still sees himself as a Democrat — is uncertain. But it is clear that if he were to switch, it would funda-

mentally alter the balance of power in Washington as well as seriously threaten Joe Biden's legislative prospects for the rest of his presidency.

McConnell dangled the prospect of Manchin retaining his prized Energy Committee chairmanship during an interview Wednesday and played up the West Virginian's growing distance from Democrats in his opposition to Biden's package.

A flip by Manchin would give Republicans control of the Senate and effectively end any chance of Democrats being able to get legislation or nominations through on party-line votes.

The rift escalated after Manchin said over the weekend that he couldn't vote for the social spending package that Democrats have pitched as their top

domestic priority going into next year's elections.

"I cannot vote to continue with this piece of legislation. I just can't. I've tried everything humanly possible. I can't get there," Manchin told "Fox News Sunday."

That prompted a sharply worded response from White House press secretary Jen Psaki, who said Manchin had "in person" given Biden a written proposal that was "the same size and scope" as a framework for the bill that Democrats rallied behind in October — and that he had agreed to continue talks.

"We will continue to press him to see if he will reverse his position yet again, to honor his prior commitments and be true to his word," Psaki said.

The White House had basical-

ly called Manchin "a liar," McConnell said in a radio appearance on the Hugh Hewitt Show.

"It was astonishing. Usually when you've got a member who is a little bit out of sync with everybody else, you give them a lot of love. They did exactly the opposite," McConnell said.

West Virginia is still coal country, and Manchin is chairman of the Senate Committee on Energy and Natural Resources. If he were to switch parties, McConnell and the Republicans could choose a new chairman.

"That's something we have talked to him about," McConnell said. "Obviously, I'm sure he enjoyed being a chair of the committee. It's important to West Virginia, and all of those things are things we have discussed."

## Border agency to clean up wall construction sites

Associated Press

PHOENIX — U.S. Customs and Border Protection has been authorized to start cleaning up construction sites and close small gaps in the southern border wall nearly a year after President Joe Biden took office and ordered building to stop.

Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas said in a statement this week that wall building projects begun by the Defense Department within the Border Patrol's sectors in California, Arizona

and parts of Texas will be turned over to his agency so any safety and environmental concerns can be addressed.

Work will include installing drainage systems to prevent flooding, erosion control and slope stabilization, construction and improvement of access roads and removal of building materials that will no longer be used.

It was unclear when cleanup and any remediation work will begin. CBP will also close any small gaps that remain

open from prior construction and finish work on incomplete gates, including inoperable storm gates that need to open during the rainy season.

Mayorkas said the Biden administration is still calling on Congress to cancel any remaining border wall funding left over from former President Donald Trump's time in office and instead fund technology and other kinds of border security measures it considers more effective.

## McDonald's rationing begins as Japan struck by fry shortage

By ALEX WILSON  
Stars and Stripes

Bad weather and global supply chain disruptions are leaving McDonald's restaurants in Japan a few fries short of a large combo, though restaurants on U.S. military bases are, so far, unaffected.

McDonald's Japan is limiting diners throughout the country to small orders of fries from Friday through Dec. 30, according to an announcement

Tuesday from the company.

McDonald's managers at Yokosuka Naval Base and Naval Air Facility Atsugi told Stars and Stripes that the shortages haven't reached their restaurants yet.

Fries may be in short supply there soon, however, Minako Takamune, general manager at the Yokosuka McDonald's, said by phone Thursday.

"Hopefully, we're not going to be [limiting purchases], but

it may happen in a few days," Takamune said. "If we have lots of customers, it might happen; but if there's not a lot of customers, we can continue to serve medium and large sizes."

Large-scale floods near the Canadian port of Vancouver — a transit point for shipping services — and disruptions in the supply chain caused by the coronavirus pandemic are behind the potato shortage, ac-

cording to McDonald's Japan.

The company said it is limiting fry orders for the week so customers can still enjoy them despite the shortage.

A shift manager at the Atsugi McDonald's, Nana Oda, said the restaurant has no immediate plans to limit fry orders.

"We have a lot of french fries, so we don't have any limitations," she said by phone Thursday.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### Backfiring car causes scare at movie theater

**FL** DAVIE — The sound of a car backfiring near a South Florida movie theater led police to evacuate moviegoers following multiple reports of an active shooter, authorities said.

The incident happened Sunday night at the Cinemax movie theater in Davie.

Davie police later told news outlets that a passing vehicle's engine likely backfired, prompting the scare.

Police officers went theater-to-theater inside the complex and found no signs of a shooter, officials said.

### Squirrels force park to reduce holiday lights

**MN** ST. PAUL — A troop of fat, hungry squirrels has put the kibosh on a downtown St. Paul park's holiday lights display.

Friends of Mears Park had to forgo the usual display this year because squirrels chewed through the lights' wires last year and the vendor refused to put up with the headache and cost again this year, the St. Paul Pioneer Press reported Tuesday.

The wires, it turns out, were coated with polylactic acid, a derivative of corn sugar, an appealing appetizer for squirrels spoiled by park visitors who won't stop feeding them, said Ann LaBore, co-chair of the friends group.

Instead of the traditional display, the friends group is using a projector to create a kaleidoscope of snowflakes and base lights that bathe the trees in

green and blue.

### Patrol apologizes for late alert to phones

**NE** OMAHA — The Nebraska State Patrol apologized Wednesday for sending a late-night emergency test alert to cellphones around the state, waking people up after they had gone to bed.

The alert triggered a loud, jarring alarm on cellphones shortly after 11 p.m. Tuesday, drawing complaints on social media.

The patrol said it was conducting a required monthly test of the state's Emergency Alert System, which is conducted on the third Tuesday of every month. The tests are only supposed to activate the system on broadcast media, going out to households with televisions that are turned on. The patrol said the state's Wireless Emergency Alert system was inadvertently activated as well during Tuesday's test.

### Rare Steller's sea eagle seen far way from home

**MA** TAUNTON RIVER — A long way from its home in Asia, a rare Steller's sea eagle was spotted by 200 bird watchers around Taunton River on Monday.

The eagle is reportedly the same one that went off course a year ago and has been spotted in Alaska and Canada by bird watchers across North America, The Boston Globe reported on Tuesday.

Flocks of bird watchers in the Northeast said they traveled hours to the river to catch a glimpse of the eagle. Steller's sea eagles, native to Russia, China, Korea and Japan, have wing-

spans of up to 8 feet and weigh between 13 to 20 pounds.

Andrew Vitz, the state's ornithologist, said the bird most likely arrived in North America after it got caught in a weather-related storm. The state has no plans to capture or tag the bird, he said.

### FBI investigates ATM explosion at bank

**WA** CENTRALIA — The FBI and the Washington State Patrol bomb squad are investigating an ATM explosion on Sunday morning, according to the Centralia Police Department.

The ATM exploded at the First Security Bank at 604 S. Tower Ave around 6:40 a.m., police said. The explosion was caused by an "unknown improvised explosive device" that two unidentified suspects used to gain entry into the ATM, KING-5 reported.

Following the explosion, the suspects emptied the contents of the ATM and fled the area, police said.

### Woman admits to over \$1M in pandemic fraud

**AL** MOBILE — An Alabama woman pleaded guilty to charges of helping prepare dozens of fraudulent applications for federal pandemic relief funds involving more than \$1 million, news outlets reported.

Corine Campbell, of Saraland, who pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit wire fraud, was accused of helping with more than 50 bogus applications for money through the government's Paycheck Protection Program. The case began when a man who claimed to have a

landscaping service sought and received almost \$21,000 in assistance money even though he was in prison during the time covered by the application, documents showed. Another man who claimed to have a janitorial service received money based on an application.

According to Campbell's plea agreement, she forged credit union statements showing the two men had the exact same account balances.

### Ex-deputy charged with throwing scalding water

**CA** SANTA ANA — A former Orange County sheriff's deputy is accused of throwing scalding water on a mentally ill inmate who didn't receive medical treatment for his burns for more than six hours, the county district attorney's office announced Monday.

Guadalupe Ortiz, 47, was charged with felony counts of assault or battery by a public officer and battery with serious bodily injury and could face up to four years in prison if convicted, the DA's office said in a statement. Ortiz allegedly filled a cup from a hot water dispenser on April 1 and poured it on the hands of an inmate who had refused to take his hands out of a hatch door in his cell at the sheriff's Intake Release Center in Santa Ana, prosecutors said.

The man suffered first- and second-degree burns but wasn't treated for about 6 ½ hours until another deputy making a standard security check noticed that his arm was red and peeling, authorities said.

Ortiz was fired last week, the DA's office said.

— From wire reports

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# Talley's last-second field goal lifts Army

Associated Press

FORT WORTH, Texas — Cole Talley kicked a 41-yard field goal as time expired and Army rallied to beat Missouri 24-22 in the Armed Forces Bowl on Wednesday night.

After the Tigers took a 22-21 lead on a touchdown with 1:11 to play, third-string quarterback Jabari Laws led the Black Knights (9-4) downfield to the Missouri 24-yard line, setting up Talley's game-winner.

Talley, who went to high school about 60 miles east of Fort Worth in Rockwall, Texas, said he was thinking about the brotherhood of Army football players when he went out for the final kick.

"I'd do anything for them, and they'd do anything for me," said Talley, who missed his on-

ly two previous attempts this season from beyond 40 yards — including a 43-yard try in the first quarter.

"We trust Cole," coach Jeff Monken said. "What a great way for the team to end the season and these seniors to end their careers."

One of those seniors was Laws, who was the Black Knights' starting quarterback in 2019 before a knee injury sidelined him. He didn't play at all last season following a second surgery.

"I feel like I'm in a movie right now," said Laws, who was 2-for-4 passing on the final drive.

Army backup quarterback Tyhier Tyler came on after starter Christian Anderson injured an ankle late in the third

quarter and threw a 14-yard touchdown pass to Brandon Walters to give the Black Knights their first lead, 21-16. Anderson and JaKobi Buchanan scored on TD runs of 22 and 10 yards, respectively, for Army.

Redshirt freshman quarterback Brady Cook threw a 6-yard touchdown pass to Keke Chism with 71 seconds left to put Missouri (6-7) ahead, but his two-point conversion pass sailed over the head of an open Dawson Downing in the end zone. Cook also ran for a 30-yard score in his first collegiate start.

"I did some good things," Cook said. "Missed the throw when it mattered most."

The Tigers played without second-team All-America run-

ning back Tyler Badie, who was held out by coach Eliah Drinkwitz in advance of the NFL Draft. Starting quarterback Connor Bazalak was sidelined because of a leg injury.

Cook completed 27 of 34 passes for 238 yards and ran for 53 more.

Buchanan led the Black Knights in rushing with 68 yards on 21 carries. Elijah Young was Missouri's top rusher with 75 yards on 13 carries.

In the second half, Missouri was stopped on downs at the Army 43 and lost a fumble by Downing at Army's 48.

"Obviously in the second half the turnover was huge," Drinkwitz said. "Disappointed for our team, especially our seniors. Just a difficult way to lose the game."

## College Football Playoff semifinals won't be made up

Associated Press

If a team is unavailable to play in College Football Playoff semifinals on New Year's Eve because of COVID-19 issues, the game will be forfeited and the available team will advance to the championship.

With COVID-19 cases spiking across the country due to the omicron variant, the CFP announced Wednesday contingency plans for the semifinals and national championship game, which is scheduled for Jan. 10 in Indianapolis but could be delayed as much as four days.

No. 1 Alabama is scheduled to face No. 4 Cincinnati in the Cotton Bowl in one Dec. 31 semifinal and No. 2 Michigan is set to play No. 3 Georgia in the Orange Bowl in the nightcap of the CFP doubleheader.

Not long before the CFP announced its contingency plans, Alabama announced offensive coordinator Bill O'Brien and offensive line coach Doug Marrone had tested positive for

COVID-19 and were isolating with mild symptoms.

Also, No. 23 Texas A&M became the first team to drop out of a bowl game, citing COVID-19 issues and season-ending injuries as the reasons it would not have enough available players for the Gator Bowl against No. 20 Wake Forest on Dec. 31.

As college basketball faced a wave of cancellations and postponements due to the omicron surge over the last week, it seemed only a matter of time before it impacted bowl season.

"As we prepare for the Playoff, it's wise and necessary to put into place additional precautions to protect those who will play and coach the games," College Football Playoff Executive Director Bill Hancock said in a statement. "These policies will better protect our students and staffs while providing clarity in the event worst-case scenarios result."

The contingency plans were agreed to by the CFP manage-

ment committee, comprised of the 10 FBS conference commissioners and Notre Dame's athletic director.

The CFP said each school will be responsible for determining whether it has a sufficient number of available players.

While there will be no rescheduling of either semifinal, the championship game could be delayed until as late as Jan. 14.

If a team cannot play in the title game, the available team will be declared national champion. If neither team has enough available players by Jan. 14, the championship will be considered vacated.

For the semifinals, if both teams scheduled to play each other are unavailable, that game shall be declared a no contest and the winner of the other semifinal will be declared national champion.

If three semifinal teams are unavailable to play on Dec. 31, the team that is able to play

will be declared national champion.

Semifinals participants were scheduled to arrive at their bowl sites as soon as Christmas Day and no later than Dec. 26.

Now all bowl activities will be optional and the teams are permitted to arrive at their sites as late as Dec. 29.

The CFP said organizers for the Fiesta Bowl (No. 5 Notre Dame against No. 9 Oklahoma State, Jan. 1) and Peach Bowl (No. 11 Michigan State vs. No. 13 Pitt, Dec. 30) will attempt to identify potential makeup dates, if necessary, within a week of the scheduled game.

Earlier this week, Alabama coach Nick Saban said more than 90% of his team was vaccinated with a booster shot, and players were being allowed to go home for a few days before the defending national champion Tide travel to Dallas on Dec. 26.

At Michigan, the plan was for all the players to get booster shots as a team on Wednesday.



# Celtics end Cavaliers' win streak at 6

Associated Press

BOSTON — Jaylen Brown scored 34 points and the Boston Celtics beat depleted Cleveland 111-101 on Wednesday night to end the Cavaliers' winning streak at six.

Robert Williams III added a career-high 21 points along with 11 rebounds and seven assists, and Jayson Tatum had 18 points.

"Tonight was taking advantage of the coverage," Boston coach Ime Udoka said about Brown. "He had some big guys on him."

It was Brown's second straight game with 30 points or more.

"It's one of the better days I've had since I've been back," said Brown, who has been out twice with a bothersome right hamstring, including five games this month.

Darius Garland led Cleveland with 28 points, and Kevin Love had 18. The Cavaliers were missing starters Isaac Okoro, Evan Mobley and Jarrett Allen and five other players in the NBA's health and safety protocol.

Also short-handed, Boston signed 40-year-old Joe Johnson to a 10-day contract Wednesday. The crowd chanted "We Want Joe! We Want Joe!" and broke into a loud cheer when he got off the bench and came into the game.

He got a huge ovation when he hit a fall-

away jumper in the final minute.

Brown remembered idolizing Johnson as a kid.

"A lot of memories," said Brown of watching Johnson play for the Hawks when he was growing up in Atlanta. "A lot of (playoff) runs. In Atlanta, I got to go to a lot of those games."

Down 23 points, the Cavaliers cut it to 10 at 85-75 on Garland's basket — the first of the final quarter — but Williams had a steal and breakaway dunk that sparked the crowd and started an 8-0 spree.

"Just to keep playing," Garland said about the team's situation. "It's next-man-up mentality,"

**Bucks 126, Rockets 106:** Jrue Holiday scored 24 points, Khris Middleton added 23 in his return from injury and host Milwaukee beat Houston to snap a two-game skid.

Middleton missed three games because of a hyperextended left knee. The two-time All-Star played 28 minutes and had six assists.

The Bucks were missing two-time MVP Giannis Antetokounmpo for a fourth straight game as he remains in the NBA's health and safety protocols along with teammates Bobby Portis and Donte DiVincenzo.

Christian Wood led the Rockets with 20

points and 11 rebounds.

**Thunder 108, Nuggets 94:** Shai Gilgeous-Alexander had his second career triple-double with 27 points, 11 rebounds and 12 assists to help host Oklahoma City beat Denver.

Darius Bazley had 17 points and 11 rebounds, Lu Dort had 15 points and rookie Jeremiah Robinson-Earl added 14 points and nine rebounds for the Thunder.

Nikola Jokic had 13 points, seven rebounds and three assists for the Nuggets.

**Clippers 105, Kings 89:** Eric Bledsoe scored 19 points and visiting Los Angeles held off Sacramento.

Paul George had 17 points, and Serge Ibaka added a season-high 17, including three dunks and 12 points in the fourth quarter, to help the Clippers end a three-game losing streak.

Tyrese Haliburton had 22 points and a career-high 13 assists for Sacramento.

**Magic 104, Hawks 98:** Franz Wagner scored 25 points, Robin Lopez had 10 points and a career-high 11 assists and visiting Orlando beat Atlanta.

Cam Reddish finished with a season-high 36 points, and John Collins had 23 points and 11 rebounds for the Hawks. They have lost seven straight at home.

## NBA postpones 2 more games amid rising virus cases

Associated Press

The list of players currently dealing with the NBA's health and safety protocols climbed toward 100 on Wednesday, as uncertainty continued to mount about the availability of some of the league's biggest names for the Christmas quintupleheader.

Another two games were called off, pushing the total virus-related postponements so far this season to nine. And Dallas star Luka Doncic was added to the protocols list, a strong indicator that he may not be able to play when the Mavericks face Utah as part of the NBA's five-game Christmas lineup.

"It's unpredictable, right? You just don't know," Los Angeles Lakers forward Carmelo Anthony said. "What we're dealing with, it's bigger than basketball. It's bigger than

that."

Wednesday's Toronto at Chicago game was postponed, as was Thursday's Brooklyn at Portland game. The NBA said neither the Raptors nor the Nets have enough eligible players; by league rule, teams must have at least eight healthy players in uniform for a game to go forward.

Through Wednesday evening, based on team injury reports or similar disclosures, there were 96 players from 22 teams dealing with a virus-related issue. It is important to note that players can enter and exit that list quickly in some cases, some teams do not release updated numbers except when mandated by league rule, and not everyone on the list has tested positive for COVID-19.

"This seems like it's changing

by the hour," Atlanta coach Nate McMillan said.

The Nets have had each of their last three games postponed — and that means the earliest they would play again is Saturday, when they're scheduled to visit the Lakers in the fourth game on the Christmas slate.

Brooklyn has what is believed to be a league-high 10 players in the health and safety protocols, a list that includes Kevin Durant, James Harden and — even though he has yet to play this season — Kyrie Irving.

Atlanta listed six players as being in the protocols on Wednesday, including guard Trae Young. Milwaukee's Giannis Antetokounmpo, the reigning NBA Finals MVP, also remained listed as out for the Bucks' game on Thursday at

Dallas.

Teams are being allowed to sign players to replace those sidelined by positive tests, and at least 40 such hardship contracts — which won't count against a team's salary cap or luxury tax numbers — have been executed in the last few days. Among those signed: Joe Johnson, who was still 19 when drafted by the Boston Celtics in 2001 and now, as a 40-year-old, is a member of the Celtics once again.

The NBA has no plans to pause the season, Commissioner Adam Silver said earlier this week in an interview with ESPN. But the league told teams earlier this week that it would prioritize the ABC national game slots on Christmas if games are postponed that day.

# Tennessee hands No. 6 Arizona first loss

Associated Press

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — John Fulkerson had 24 points and 10 rebounds, and No. 19 Tennessee overpowered No. 6 Arizona early and held on for a 77-73 win Wednesday night, giving the Wildcats their first loss.

Santiago Vescovi had 15 points, Josiah-Jordan James added 12 and Justin Powell scored 11 for the Volunteers (9-2).

Benedict Mathurin had 14 of his 28 points in the first half. He was the only Arizona (11-1) starter to score in the first 20 minutes as Tennessee took a 34-21 lead. Kerr Kriisa scored 11 points for Arizona.

Tennessee hit seven of its first 11 shots and opened with a 16-2 advantage in the first five minutes. It took the Wildcats until the first four minutes of the second half to get back in the game. Arizona hit 7 of 9 shots to start the second half to cut the Vols' lead to 44-40.

**No. 2 Duke 76, Virginia Tech 65:** Paolo Banchemo had 23 points and the host Blue Devils shot 62% after halftime to beat the Hokies in their Atlantic Coast Conference opener.

Banchemo scored 17 points in that dominant second half, fueled by the move to a smaller lineup around the versatile 6-foot-10 star freshman. That

helped Duke (11-1, 1-0 ACC) erase an eight-point deficit early in the second half while slowing Keve Aluma after his big first-half performance.

Wendell Moore Jr. added 18 points for Duke, which has won four straight.

**No. 12 Auburn 71, Murray State 58:** Wendell Green Jr. and Jabari Smith both had double-doubles and the host Tigers beat the Racers for their eighth straight win.

Auburn (11-1) held Murray State to 28 points below its season average and out-rebounded the Racers 48-33.

**No. 13 Houston 80, Texas State 47:** Josh Carlton scored a season-high 20 points, Tyler Edwards added 14 and the host Cougars defeated the Bobcats.

Marcus Sasser had 13 points and Jamal Sheard finished with 12 points and 10 assists for Houston (11-2).

**No. 16 Texas 68, Alabama State 48:** Dylan Disu scored 14 points and made three blocks and the host Longhorns pulled away in the second half to defeat the Hornets.

Marcus Carr scored 13 for Texas, Andrew Jones had 12 and Timmy Allen produced 10 points, seven rebounds and four assists.

**No. 17 LSU 95, Lipscomb 60:** Darius Days scored 21 points and the host Tigers

stayed unbeaten with a win over the Bisons.

Xavier Pinson scored a season-high 17 points for LSU (12-0), which never trailed. Eric Gaines had a career-high 13 points, Brandon Murray also had 13, Efton Reid had 12 and Mwani Wilkinson scored a season-high 11.

**No. 20 Kentucky 95, Western Kentucky 60:** Kellan Grady made six three-pointers and scored a season-high 23 points, Oscar Tshiebwe grabbed a Rupp Arena-record 28 rebounds and the host Wildcats used an 18-2 second-half run to blow out the Hilltoppers.

TyTy Washington Jr. added 20 points and Jacob Toppin scored 12 as Kentucky (9-2) routed its second consecutive substitute opponent.

**No. 25 Texas Tech 78, Eastern Washington 46:** Kevin Obanor had 11 points, seven rebounds and four assists without a turnover, helping the host Red Raiders beat the Eagles.

Adonis Arms and Bryson Williams each had 12 points for Texas Tech (9-2), which rebounded from a loss Saturday to fourth-ranked Gonzaga. Kevin McCullar had 10 points and five assists.

**South Carolina 105, Army 75:** Devin Carter and Chico Carter combined for 42 points and the host Gamecocks scored

a season high in defeating the Black Knights.

Devin Carter was 8-for-13 shooting in scoring a career-high 22 points. Chico Carter, unrelated to Devin, shot 7-for-13 and made his three three-point attempts for 20 points. Erik Stevenson added 13 points and Jacobi Wright 11 for the Gamecocks (9-3), who shot 59%, making 8 of 13 three-point tries.

Josh Caldwell scored 18 points on 8-for-15 shooting and Jalen Rucker and Chris Mann added 12 each for the Black Knights (6-6). Army shot 40% and made 9 of 18 from the arc but gave up 29 points off turnovers and was outscored by 20 in the paint. The Black Knights had eight shots blocked.

**Towson 69, Navy 52:** Nicolas Timberlake had 24 points as the visiting Tigers topped the Midshipmen.

Timberlake hit 9 of 12 shots, including 5-for-6 on three-pointers.

Charles Thompson had 10 points, eight rebounds and five blocks for Towson (9-4). Cam Holden added eight rebounds, and Terry Nolan Jr. had eight assists.

Jaylen Walker had 13 points for the Midshipmen (7-4). Greg Summers added 12 points and 10 rebounds. Richard Njoku had 10 rebounds.

## Sources: NFL considered cancellations due to COVID

Associated Press

With a surge of COVID-19 cases threatening to disrupt the NFL season last week, the league discussed canceling games for the first time since the pandemic began.

In talks with the NFL Players Association, canceling games involving Washington, Cleveland and the Los Angeles Rams was considered because of coronavirus outbreaks on each team. Instead, the games

were moved from the weekend to Monday and Tuesday.

NFLPA President JC Tretter, a center for the Browns, said the NFL wanted to cancel those games — players would not have been paid in that scenario, according to the league's COVID-19 protocols agreement with the union last season. But two player reps with knowledge of the discussions said canceling the games was never the No. 1 plan. Both reps

spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to discuss the conversations.

NFL spokesman Brian McCarthy said on Wednesday: "Our goal has been to play the season as scheduled in a safe, responsible way."

Speaking on a conference call with reporters, Tretter stressed the union's opposition to any cancellations.

"So the NFL's position last

week was that those three games were going to be canceled," Tretter said Wednesday. "They weren't going to be played, and if they weren't played then nobody on either team was going to be paid. That's obviously an issue for us as a union. Over 18% of our player population was at risk of not getting paid last week. Our position was we need to make sure all games are played in order for our guys to get paid."