

# STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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## Omicron spreads pessimism over New Year's

*Associated Press*

BRUSSELS — After struggling with the coronavirus for far too long, the world understands all too well Belgium's word of the year, "knaldrang!" — the urge to party, the need to let loose. Yet as New Year celebrations approach, the omicron variant is casting more gloom.

Monday was a case in point, with several governments considering more restrictions to add to a patchwork of measures and lockdowns already in place around Europe.

The French government and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson were assessing the latest data and the need to counter the record numbers of COVID-19 infections with more measures to keep people apart at a time when they so dearly want to be together.

But with indications that om-

icron might be a milder variant despite its massive transmissibility, politicians were caught in a bind whether to further spoil yet another party or play safe to make sure health care systems don't collapse.

Further complicating matters was the lack of full data over the Christmas weekend, making the chronicling of the rise of omicron more difficult.

In Belgium, people faced their first real test with several new measures on Monday. Shopping was reduced to maximum two adults, possibly with kids in tow, and movie theaters and concert halls closed at a time when countless families are on vacation together.

The calls to close theaters and arts centers came in for especially heavy criticism.

"We need it also for our mental health. It is the only way for

people to live experiences, to tell stories. It is of paramount importance for us to be open in these complicated and complex times," said Michael De Kok, the artistic director of the Flemish Royal Theatre.

Even communal celebrations like New Year's fireworks, that would usually see thousands thronging Brussels for the best views, are off. Nightclubs are already closed and restaurants and bars need to shut doors at 11 p.m.

In the United Kingdom, there are similar creeping moves. Scotland will close its nightclubs Monday after Northern Ireland and Wales already did so Sunday, though they remain open in England. Prime Minister Boris Johnson, who has resisted ordering new restrictions but hasn't ruled them out, is expected to be

briefed Monday on the latest data on the spread of omicron.

Even that staple of British holiday celebrations, the steady stream of English Premier League games, is under threat. The league has already called off 15 soccer matches in 2 1/2 weeks and more could well be upcoming.

U.K. daily infection numbers reached a new high of 122,186 on Friday, but there were no figures over the long Christmas weekend.

France has tallied over 100,000 virus infections in a single day for the first time in the pandemic and COVID-19 hospitalizations have doubled over the past month. President Emmanuel Macron's government is holding emergency meetings Monday to discuss the next steps in tackling the virus.

## Navy to offer booster shots for ship hit by virus outbreak

*The Washington Post*

U.S. Navy commanders whose ship is hobbled by a coronavirus outbreak are consulting with military medical personnel about providing vaccine boosters to the crew, an official said Sunday, as senior Defense Department leaders assess how the USS Milwaukee can resume its deployment amid a global spike in infections fueled by the highly transmissible omicron variant.

The Milwaukee, with a crew of 105 plus a detachment of Coast Guard personnel and an aviation unit, remains idle at Naval Station Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, where it stopped to refuel Dec. 20. It had been at sea less than a week. The Navy has not disclosed how many of the ship's personnel have tested positive for the virus, saying only that some exhibited mild symptoms and measures were taken to isolate those infected.

Booster shots would be offered on a voluntary basis, said Cmdr. Kate Meadows, a spo-

keswoman for U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command. Commanders have also implemented a strict indoor-outdoor mask mandate, hoping to prevent further spread.

The challenge facing Navy leaders is complicated by a relentless political debate surrounding President Joe Biden's vaccination strategy for military personnel and other federal workers. Defense Department officials have ordered all U.S. troops to receive a baseline regimen but thus far have wavered on the question of requiring boosters, even as the administration's top public health experts have warned that an extra dose is necessary to counter the threat posed by omicron.

"While we recommend boosters, they are not mandatory for the crew," Meadows said in an email. "The ship has not received any boosters (to date) while in port, but they are coordinating with the [military hospital at Guantánamo Bay] on when boosters could be administered to those personnel who are in-

terested in receiving one."

Military officials have not determined whether omicron — which has demonstrated an ability to evade coronavirus vaccines, leading to a surge in breakthrough cases — is responsible for the Milwaukee's outbreak. In announcing the ship would remain at Guantánamo, Meadows said on Friday that the crew was "100 percent immunized," and she touted the coronavirus vaccines' effectiveness for warding off serious illness. No one on the ship has required hospitalization, Meadows said, confirming a report Sunday by The New York Times.

The Milwaukee left its home station in Mayport, Fla., on Dec. 14 for the start of a months-long counternarcotics mission in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific. It is unclear how the virus outbreak may affect those plans and what Navy officials can do to prevent a similar incident once the ship gets back underway.

# Holiday sales up despite supply issues, virus

Associated Press

Holiday sales rose at the fastest pace in 17 years, even as shoppers grappled with higher prices, product shortages and a raging new COVID-19 variant in the last few weeks of the season, according to one spending measure.

Mastercard SpendingPulse, which tracks all kinds of payments including cash and debit cards, reported Sunday that holiday sales had risen 8.5% from a year earlier. Mastercard SpendingPulse had expected an 8.8% increase.

The results, which covered Nov. 1 through Dec. 24, were fueled by purchases of clothing and jewelry.

Holiday sales were up 10.7%

compared with the pre-pandemic 2019 holiday period.

By category, clothing rose 47%, jewelry 32% and electronics 16%. Online sales were up 11% from a year ago and 61% from 2019. Department stores registered a 21% increase over 2020.

After omicron hit, some consumers stayed home and shifted their spending to e-commerce — but sales stayed strong.

A broader picture will be revealed next month when the National Retail Federation, the nation's largest retail trade group, comes out with its combined two-month results in mid-January. The results will be based on an analysis of the November and December sales figures from the Commerce Department. Analy-

sts will also be dissecting the fourth-quarter financial results from different retailers that are slated to be released in February.

Overall, analysts had expected a strong holiday season, fueled by early shopping that started in October in anticipation of a product shortage. Consumers were also determined to celebrate the holidays after a muted one a year ago. Still, November saw a slowdown in retail sales, in part because of the early shopping. And omicron, which has fast become the dominant version of the virus in the United States, has now spoiled holiday plans for many Americans who have had to cancel gatherings last minute.

The National Retail Federation said early in December that holiday sales were on track to beat its already record-breaking forecasts for an increase of 8.5% to 10.5% compared to the year-ago period. Holiday sales increased 8.2% in 2020 when shoppers, locked down during the early part of the pandemic, splurged on pajamas and home goods, mostly online.

The group expects that online and other non-store sales, which are included in the total, will increase between 11% and 15%. The numbers exclude automobile dealers, gasoline stations and restaurants. Holiday sales have averaged gains of 4.4% over the past five years, according to the group.

## Whitmer kidnap plot defense looks to dismiss indictment

Associated Press

GRAND RAPIDS, Mich. — Defense attorneys want to dismiss the indictment against five men accused of plotting to kidnap Gov. Gretchen Whitmer because of what they described as “egregious overreaching” by federal agents and informants, according to a court filing.

In the 20-page motion, which was filed Saturday night, defense attorneys alleged FBI agents and federal prosecutors invented a conspiracy and entrapped people who could face up to life in prison. They're asking U.S. District Judge Robert Jonker to dismiss the conspiracy charge, which would effectively knock down the federal government's case and other connected charges, according to The Detroit News.

The request comes after developments and claims about the government's team, including the conviction of Richard

Trask, an FBI special agent who was arrested on a domestic violence charge and later fired and convicted of a misdemeanor.

“Essentially, the evidence here demonstrates egregious overreaching by the government's agents, and by the informants those agents handled,” defense attorneys wrote. “When the government was faced with evidence showing that the defendants had no interest in a kidnapping plot, it refused to accept failure and continued to push its plan.”

Five people are charged with kidnapping conspiracy and face a trial March 8 in Grand Rapids. They have pleaded not guilty and claim to be victims of entrapment.

Federal prosecutors have argued the men were not entrapped. The government alleged they were upset over coronavirus restrictions when they conspired to kidnap Whitmer.

## Biden signs bills over forced labor in China, ALS research

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden signed a bill into law Thursday to block imports from China's Xinjiang region unless businesses can prove the items were made without forced labor, the latest in a series of intensifying U.S. penalties against the Asian power for alleged abuses.

The measure had to overcome some initial hesitation from the White House, as well as corporate opposition, to win final passage last week in the Senate, following earlier House passage. Biden also signed a separate bill Thursday funding research into a cure for Lou Gehrig's disease.

“Today, I signed the bipartisan Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act,” Biden said on Twitter, along with a photo of him as he signed the legislative text at his desk in the Oval Office. “The United States will continue to use every tool at our

disposal to ensure supply chains are free from the use of forced labor—including from Xinjiang and other parts of China.”

It requires U.S. government agencies to expand their monitoring of the use of forced labor by China's ethnic minorities. Crucially, it creates a presumption that goods coming from Xinjiang are made with forced labor. Businesses will have to prove that forced labor, including by workers transferred from Xinjiang, was not used in manufacturing the product before it will be allowed into the U.S.

Meanwhile, the Accelerating Access to Critical Therapies for ALS Act will funnel \$100 million annually between 2022 and 2026 into research into Lou Gehrig's disease and similar diseases. It will also create grant programs and provide early access to promising treatments for patients who aren't accepted into clinical trials.

# Major storm dumps snow on Calif., highways closed

Associated Press

COLFAX, Calif. — A major Christmas weekend storm caused whiteout conditions and closed key highways amid blowing snow in the mountains of Northern California and Nevada, with forecasters warning that travel in the Sierra Nevada could be difficult for several days.

Authorities near Reno said three people were injured in a 20-car pileup on Interstate 395, where drivers described limited visibility on Sunday. Further west, a 70-mile stretch of Interstate 80 was shut until at least Monday from Colfax, Calif., through the Lake Tahoe region to the Nevada state line.

The California Department of Transportation also closed many other roads while warning of slippery conditions for motorists.

“Expect major travel delays on all roads,” the National Weather Service office in Reno, Nev., said Sunday on Twitter. “Today is the type of day to just stay home if you can. More snow is on the way too!”

The weather service issued a winter storm warning for greater Lake Tahoe until 1 a.m. Tuesday because of possible “widespread whiteout conditions” and wind gusts that could top 45 mph.

Turbulent weather stretched from San Diego to Seattle. More than a foot of snow was reported near Port Angeles on Washington state's Puget Sound. Portland, Ore., received a dusting, but the city was expect-

ed to get another 2.5 inches by Monday morning, according to the weather service.

In California, rockslides caused by heavy rain closed more than 40 miles of coastal Highway 1 in the Big Sur region south of the San Francisco Bay Area. There was no estimate for the reopening of the scenic stretch that is frequently shut after wet weather.

The latest in a series of blustery storms hit Southern California with heavy rain and wind that flooded streets and knocked down power lines late Saturday. Powerful gusts toppled trees, damaged carports and blew a track-and-field shed from a Goleta high school into a front yard two blocks away, according to the Santa Barbara County Fire Department. No injuries were reported.

More than 1.8 inches of rain fell over 24 hours in Santa Barbara County's San Marcos pass, while Rocky Butte in San Luis Obispo County recorded 1.61 inches, the weather service said.

Los Angeles International Airport said a “storm-related electrical issue” forced a partial closure of Terminal 5, causing post-Christmas passengers to divert to other terminals for certain services.

“Cancellations and delays are possible, so it will be important to check your flight status today if flying through Terminal 5,” LAX tweeted.

In the San Bernardino Mountains east of Los Angeles, crews were repairing a section of State Route 18 that washed down a hillside after heavy rain late Thursday.

# African recruits ease drop in US Catholic clergy

Associated Press

WEEDOWE, Alabama — The Rev. Athanasius Chidi Abanulo — using skills honed in his African homeland to minister effectively in rural Alabama— determines just how long he can stretch out his Sunday homilies based on who is sitting in the pews.

Seven minutes is the sweet spot for the mostly white and retired parishioners who attend the English-language Mass at Immaculate Conception Catholic Church in the small town of Wedowee. “If you go beyond that, you lose the attention of the people,” he said.

For the Spanish-language Mass an hour later, the Nigerian-born priest — one of numerous African clergy serving in the U.S. — knows he can quadruple his teaching time. “The more you preach, the better for them,” he said.

As he moves from one American post to the next, Abanulo has learned how to tailor his ministry to the culture of the communities he is serving while infusing some of the spirit of his homeland into the universal rhythms of the Mass.

During his 18 years in the U.S., Abanulo has filled various chaplain and pastor roles across the country, epitomizing an ongoing trend in the American Catholic church. As fewer American-born men and women enter seminaries and convents, U.S. dioceses and Catholic institutions have turned to international recruitment to fill their vacancies.

The Diocese of Birmingham, where Abanulo leads two parishes, has widened its search for clergy to places with burgeoning religious vocations like Nigeria and Cameroon, said Birmingham Bishop Steven Raica.

“They have been an enormous help to us to be able to provide the breadth and scope of ministry that we have available to us,” he said.

It's different in the U.S. where the Catholic church faces significant hurdles in recruiting home-grown clergy following decades of declining church attendance and the damaging effects of widespread clergy sex abuse scandals.

From 1970 to 2020, the number of priests in the U.S. dropped by 60%, according to data from the Georgetown center. This has left more than 3,500 parishes without a resident pastor.

# Missouri woman charged with killing her boyfriend with sword

Associated Press

CAPE GIRARDEAU, Mo. — A Missouri woman has been charged with killing her boyfriend with a sword on Christmas Eve.

Cape Girardeau Police said Brittany Wilson, 32, was found outside the home she shared with her boyfriend Friday night with blood on her clothing, and a sword was lying in the front yard. Cape Girardeau is in southeast Missouri about 115 miles south of St. Louis.

KFVS television reported that a woman had called police shortly after 11 p.m. Friday to report that she had killed her boyfriend

with a sword.

After officers arrested Wilson, they went inside the home and found her boyfriend, Harrison Stephen Foster, 34, dead with several fresh stab wounds.

Wilson told police she and Foster had taken methamphetamine earlier in the day. She also told investigators that she believed Foster had several other entities living in his body, and she was setting him free by stabbing him.

Wilson was being held Sunday in lieu of a \$2 million bond.

She has been charged with first-degree murder and armed criminal action.

# Virus, weather cause more canceled flights

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Flight cancellations that disrupted holiday travel stretched into Monday, with major U.S. airlines each canceling dozens of flights.

Staffers calling out sick because of COVID-19, particularly since the emergence of the omicron variant, have left airlines short in recent days. According to FlightAware, which

tracks flight cancellations, airlines have canceled roughly 4,000 flights to, from or inside the United States since Friday.

Delta, United, JetBlue and American have all said the coronavirus was causing staffing problems, and European and Australian airlines also canceled holiday-season flights because staff were infected, but weather and other factors

played a role as well.

Winter weather in the Pacific Northwest led to nearly 250 flight cancellations to or from Seattle on Sunday, said Alaska Airlines, and the airline expects more than 100 flight cancellations Monday. But it said that crew calling out sick because of COVID-19 is no longer a factor.

United said it canceled 115 flights Monday, out of more

than 4,000 scheduled, due to crews out with COVID-19.

Flight delays and cancellations tied to staffing shortages have been a consistent problem this year. Airlines encouraged workers to quit in 2020 when air travel collapsed, and were caught short-staffed this year as air travel rebounded faster than almost anyone had expected.

## Iran insists on crude exports promise as nuke talks resume

Associated Press

VIENNA — Negotiators from Iran and five world powers resumed negotiations Monday on restoring Tehran's tattered 2015 nuclear deal, with Iran insisting that the U.S. and its allies promise to allow it to export its crude oil.

The latest round of talks in Vienna opened 10 days after negotiations were adjourned for the Iranian negotiator to return home for consultations. The previous round, the first after a more than five-month gap caused by the arrival of a new hard-line government in Iran, was marked by tensions over new Iranian demands.

Tehran's landmark accord with world powers — Britain, France, Germany, the U.S., Russia and China — granted the nation sanctions relief in exchange for curbs on its nuclear program.

But in 2018, then-President Donald Trump withdrew America from the deal and imposed sweeping sanctions on Iran, including its oil sector — the lifeline of its economy. Iran's crude exports plummeted and international oil companies scrapped deals with Tehran, weakening its economy. The other signatories struggled to keep the agreement alive. The U.S. has participated only indirectly in this year's talks to restore the deal, which President Joe Biden has signaled he wants to rejoin.

Speaking in Tehran ahead of the talks' resumption, Foreign

Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian said Iran wants the upcoming round of talks to focus on its sanctions-hit oil industry. The aim is to get to the "point where Iranian oil is being sold easily and without any barriers and its money arrives in Iran's bank accounts," he said.

Amirabdollahian said Iran wanted to "be able to enjoy full economic concessions under the nuclear deal."

"Guarantee and verification (of the removal of sanctions) are among topics that we have focused on," he said.

The new, conservative administration of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi has repeatedly demanded the removal of all economic sanctions before Iran reins in its nuclear advances.

Separately on Monday, Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh said it would be "intolerable" for the West to demand anything from Tehran beyond compliance with the original deal. Iran has steadily abandoned all of the accord's limits since the American withdrawal and is now enriching uranium to 60% purity — a short, technical step from weapons-grade levels. It spins ever-more advanced centrifuges also barred by the deal.

Iran insists that its nuclear program is peaceful. But the country's significant nuclear steps have alarmed regional foes like Israel and world powers.

## Platoon leader retrained after a recall on holiday

By CHAD GARLAND

*Stars and Stripes*

The Army had a Grinch in its ranks this year, a platoon leader who recalled a whole unit for a morning formation Christmas Eve after one soldier got busted on a DUI charge, officials said.

The soldiers in the platoon at Fort Bragg, N.C., were ordered to show up in uniform for a formation at 9 a.m., even if they were on leave. But the commander showed up in civilian attire and did paperwork while they were made to wait, said a post on the popular Facebook page U.S. Army WTF Moments, which appears to have first revealed the incident.

The original post included a screenshot of text messages apparently sent after 1 a.m. on Friday, which was a federal holiday, and said the incident involved a platoon in the 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 82nd Airborne Division. "Because nothing says #soldiersfirst like calling people in from leave who had nothing to do with a situation," the post said, referring to Army initiatives aimed at focusing more on taking care of people and curbing toxic behaviors.

In a comment on the 82nd Airborne Division's official Facebook page in response to the post, an official said that the recall was unwarranted and an "error in judgment."

The regiment's 2nd Battalion commander counseled both the 1st Platoon leader and the Alpha Company commander to stress "the importance of protecting their soldiers' valuable time off with family" and to ensure the mistake didn't happen again, division spokesman Lt. Col. Brett Lea told Stars and Stripes.

After an initial formation, they remained in the company area for about 45 minutes before being released, he said.

Three of the 34 paratroopers recalled from the local area were on leave, Lea said Monday in an emailed response to a query.

When the three soldiers who were on leave return to duty, they'll get to pick an extra day off, he said. The others will get Wednesday off.

The platoon involved is part of the division's Immediate Response Battalion 1, the division said on Facebook. It's one of three battalions in its immediate response force, which is supposed to be capable of deploying in a crisis anywhere in the world within 18 hours. The text message shared on the site warned soldiers that they would face penalties under the Uniform Code of Military Justice for failing to show up without a valid excuse.

Fort Bragg's XVIII Airborne Corps said in comments on the original post that the platoon leader "has been retrained."

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### Surfer killed in apparent shark attack off coast

**CA** MORRO BAY — A surfer was killed in an apparent shark attack on Christmas Eve off the central coast of California, authorities said.

The male surfer was pulled from the water north of Morro Rock around 10:45 a.m., Morro Bay police said on Twitter on Friday. He was not responsive after being brought to land.

The surfer's identity was not immediately released and officials ordered people to stay out of the water for 24 hours.

Morro Bay Harbor Director Eric Endersby told The San Luis Obispo Tribune that a female surfer nearby saw him face-down and got him out of the water. He was pronounced dead at the scene.

### Man arrested after 2 deputies dragged by car

**NC** WINSTON-SALEM — A North Carolina man was arrested on multiple charges Saturday after he dragged two deputies with his car while he attempted to flee from a traffic stop, according to a sheriff's office.

Deputies with the Forsyth County Sheriff's Office stopped a car for speeding on northbound U.S. 52 at around 1 a.m. Saturday, a news release said. The deputies called a K-9 team for backup.

When the K-9 team arrived, the driver of the stopped car jumped back in and tried to get away. The dog and both deputies tried to stop the car, but the deputies were dragged for an undetermined distance before they were thrown from the car. The

dog remained inside the car until the driver crashed, the news release said.

Charges filed against Ricky Wallace Simon, 28, of Rural Hall, include assault with a deadly weapon used on a law enforcement officer to inflict serious injury and possession of a firearm by a felon.

### Hundreds of parakeets left at animal shelter

**MI** ROMEO — An animal shelter in Michigan has been inundated with hundreds of parakeets.

The Detroit Animal Welfare Group in Romeo said in a Facebook post that the small, colorful birds were dropped off Thursday night, The Detroit News reported.

The group's director, Kelley LeBonty, told the Detroit Free Press that the son of an animal hoarder had called to say he was coming to surrender 60 to 80 parakeets from his father's house. But he showed up Thursday with about 497 parakeets in his truck.

Shelter officials said they reached out to bird rescue organizations for help. Temporary housing for the parakeets was found and food was donated for the birds.

### Clerk allegedly cashed woman's lottery ticket

**MN** NEW ULM — Prosecutors have charged a New Ulm man with lottery fraud after he allegedly told a woman she'd won \$25 and pocketed her actual \$1,000 prize.

The Mankato Free Press reported that 56-year-old Dwayne Smith was charged Friday in Brown County District Court.

According to court documents, Smith was working as a clerk at a gas station Saturday when the woman showed him her lottery ticket after a self-service lottery machine told her to "see state lottery office."

Smith told her she'd won \$25 and gave her \$25. Station surveillance video shows him put the ticket in his pocket, according to a court complaint. Surveillance video at a regional lottery office allegedly shows him redeeming the ticket for \$1,000.

### Suspect arrested for killing bear with arrow

**NM** ALBUQUERQUE — A suspect has been arrested in the shooting of a bear with a bow and arrow near Taos in October.

The Albuquerque Journal reported Friday that a man was charged in Taos Magistrate Court with unlawful killing of big game by shooting from the road and failing to tag the bear, both misdemeanors. Bears are a protected species in New Mexico, but bear hunting was allowed in that area at the time of killing, officials said previously.

But the newspaper reported that court documents state a Taos area man shot the bear in a tree with a bow and arrow, then shot it a second time after a bystander told him to "shoot it again" so it wouldn't suffer.

### Vandalism threatening last runs of old subways

**NY** NEW YORK — The celebratory last runs of vintage New York City subway cars could be in jeopardy because of vandalism.

The Metropolitan Transporta-

tion Authority announced recently that it would run one train of the 1960s-era R-32 cars on four successive Sundays beginning Dec. 19 before they are put on display at the New York Transit Museum in Brooklyn.

The New York Daily News reported Saturday that transit workers said someone kicked in one of the cars' seats, which are irreplaceable, during the first run and that the remaining runs could be canceled.

"If at any time, for any reason the train crew deems it necessary to take the train out of service, they will do so immediately and all future retirement runs of the R32s will be canceled," New York Transit Museum director Concetta Bencivenga wrote in an email last week, according to the Daily News.

### Business owners leave big tip for servers

**NM** ALBUQUERQUE — Two servers at an Albuquerque restaurant recently got a big surprise when a group of business owners left a \$5,555 tip.

It was the idea of Battle Tested Business, a local entrepreneurship, business and leadership organization.

Founder Ramon Casaus told Albuquerque television station KOB-TV that he and his colleagues are always looking for creative and meaningful ways to invest back into businesses and the people who keep them going.

"We said, well, what if we all went to dinner and tip out \$505 each?" Casaus said.

They called it "The 505 Diner" in reference to Albuquerque's area code.

— From wire reports

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# Fickell has led Bearcats to CFP summit

*Associated Press*

The University of Cincinnati has played football for more than a century in the long shadow of Ohio State.

After all these years, little brother is making some big noise.

For Cincinnati (13-0), playing in the under-the-radar American Athletic Conference, everything fell into place in 2021. The Bearcats landed as the No. 4 seed in the College Football Playoff, crashing what has been the domain of college football's blue bloods, the first school outside a Power Five conference to do so.

Meanwhile, back in Columbus, Ohio State fans are still working through the grief of last month's disastrous loss to Michigan, which to many was worse than being shut out of the playoff for the first time in three seasons.

Cincinnati scaled the CFP mountain and can see the top from there.

Now fifth-year coach Luke Fickell has to figure out how to keep the Bearcats up there as the program prepares to transition to a Power Five conference — the Big 12 — in the next few years.

"When I came here, a mindset of mine was, 'I hope someday, that we could become a rival to my alma mater,'" said Fickell, who played for the Buckeyes and was on their coaching staff for 16 years.

"I mean that, all of the sudden, maybe they look at you and recognize that they have to battle against us," he said. "Whether we play them on the football field or not, a lot

of the other opportunities are in recruiting. That's where we continue to want to be — and that's not just the Ohio State stuff. That's being a top-10 program."

Cincinnati has a well-earned national reputation as a basketball school. But it could never compete with the tradition, fan base, facilities and recruiting advantage of the juggernaut Buckeyes.

It has, however, had enough football success in the past two decades to become a mid-major stop on the coaching ladder for the likes of Mark Dantonio, Brian Kelly, Butch Jones and presumably Fickell, though he has spurned opportunities to leave.

Urban Meyer, the former Ohio State coach, suggested the trajectory of the Bearcats program could depend on how they show against No. 1 Alabama on New Year's Eve with 25 million people watching on TV.

"It can be that double-edged sword," Meyer said. A competitive game boosts the profile of the program; a blowout looks bad and raises doubts about whether the team belonged.

"There is a lot of responsibility at Cincinnati to go perform well," said Meyer, who was fired as the Jacksonville Jaguars coach last week. "It is great for them."

Curiously enough, the Bearcats and Buckeyes, 100 miles apart, have never been football rivals. They've played each other just 17 times, with Cincinnati winning twice — in 1896 and 1897. The last time they met was in 2019, when Ohio State sent Fickell

and the Bearcats back to the bus with 42-0 loss. The schools once went nearly 70 years without a gridiron clash.

Cincinnati football fandom is regional, closer to Ohio's six Mid-American Conference schools than Ohio State, which a few years ago tried unsuccessfully to trademark the word "The" as in "The Ohio State University."

Century-old Nippert Stadium on the UC campus has undergone some major renovations in recent years but still seats only around 40,000. (That's smaller than any in the current Big 12.)

Fickell built his 2021 team around seniors and transfers who will be gone next season, including quarterback Desmond Ridder, running back Jerome Ford (an Alabama transfer) and most defensive starters. Sustaining the success will be challenging, but Fickell has prioritized recruiting and building for the future.

"They've got a top-five team — they're a ways away from having a top-five program, and that's what Ohio State is," said Jim Kelly, a former Bearcats player and radio analyst for more than 30 years.

Buckeyes fans will keep an eye on the Cincinnati game before settling in to watch No. 7 Ohio State's consolation game, a Rose Bowl matchup with No. 10 Utah on New Year's Day.

Things get more interesting if the Bearcats beat two-touchdown favorite Alabama, and No. 2 Michigan takes down No. 3 Georgia.

## COVID woes lead Canes to withdraw from Sun Bowl

*Miami Herald*

The University of Miami pulled out of the Tony the Tiger Sun Bowl on Sunday night because of COVID-19 — about four hours after scheduled opponent Washington State had arrived in El Paso, Texas, for what was to be the Dec. 31 bowl game.

The Sun Bowl became the fifth bowl to have at least one team withdraw because of how the virus affected their rosters.

The Hurricanes end 2021 at 7-5 overall and 5-3 in the Atlantic Coast Conference.

"We are extremely disappointed that our football team will be unable to participate," Miami

deputy athletic director/chief operating officer Jennifer Strawley said in a statement, "but due to the number of COVID-19 cases impacting our roster we do not have enough healthy student-athletes to safely compete, and the health and safety of our student-athletes will always be our top priority."

Sun Bowl football committee chairman John Folmer said that bowl officials were informed of the decision in a conference call with Miami and ACC officials.

"The [COVID-19] tests came back and it wasn't good," Folmer said. "It's overwhelming when they call you and tell you this hap-

pened after Washington State had just arrived and we're thinking everything is great.

"Not fun. Such a shock. I watched our executive director in tears. It's the most upsetting thing that's ever happened to us. It's an ugly disease."

Miami originally was supposed to arrive in El Paso on Sunday night. But the Hurricanes had moved back their intended arrival until Thursday, the day before the bowl. A source told the Herald that the Hurricanes had only two players available for at least one position on the offensive line, and that the line was dwindling.

Positive COVID-19 tests rose to double-digit figures last Wednesday, and from there the situation got worse. Players were allowed to go home for Christmas and were to return by Monday.

"It is disappointing news that the University of Miami is unable to participate in the 2021 Tony the Tiger Sun Bowl," Washington State athletic director Pat Chun said in a release. "We will work with the Pac-12 Conference and the Sun Bowl Association to hopefully find a replacement opponent for the game."

Washington State finished its regular season 7-5 and 6-3 in the Pac-12.

# Chiefs rout Steelers, clinch AFC West

*Associated Press*

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — The chances that the Kansas City Chiefs would spend Sunday night celebrating their record sixth straight AFC West title seemed slim last week when Tyreek Hill and Travis Kelce headlined an outbreak of COVID-19 within the team.

Turns out the NFL's hottest team was just fine.

Patrick Mahomes was masterful in throwing for 258 yards and three touchdowns, Byron Pringle and a cast of fill-ins rose to the occasion, and the defense dominated the Pittsburgh Steelers in a 36-10 drubbing at Arrowhead Stadium.

"This is the type of week where it's so great to have an experienced coach like Andy Reid, somebody who is so steady — somebody who has seen virtually everything that the NFL can throw at them," Chiefs chairman Clark Hunt said. "This was a different challenge, but his preparation is so thorough that they were able to get the guys who were able ready to play."

Kansas City (11-4) remained a game ahead of Tennessee for first place overall in the AFC with their eighth straight win. That would be the conference's lone first-round bye and home-field advantage throughout the AFC playoffs.

Clyde Edwards-Helaire had a touchdown run for the Chiefs before leaving early in the second half with a collarbone injury. Darrel Williams and Derrick Gore carried the load the rest of the way, Williams running for 55 yards and Gore adding 43 yards on the ground and three catches for 61 yards.

"The guys all played together, which I don't think you can avoid talking about," Reid said. "The way they supported each other when there was a problem, when something didn't work — everybody just hung together."

Meanwhile, the Steelers (7-7-1) continued to fall apart down the stretch. They became the first team in NFL history to trail by at least 23 points at halftime in three straight road games. They have failed to score a touchdown in the first half of five straight games for the first time since 1940.

Already on the playoff bubble, Pittsburgh dropped further behind the Cincinnati Bengals (9-6) in the AFC North.

"We didn't do enough in any phase to give ourselves a chance," Steelers coach Mike Tomlin said. "This is a collective, players and coaches, man. We own this. Now we have to get singularly focused on our two remaining division games."

Ben Roethlisberger threw for 159 yards with a late fourth-quarter touchdown for

Pittsburgh, along with throwing an interception and losing a fumble. Najee Harris added 93 yards rushing, but most of that came with the game out of reach.

Kansas City was crushed by a COVID-19 outbreak early in the week — at one point it had 13 players on the active roster and three on the practice squad test positive. They managed to get Hill and several others cleared in time for kickoff, but Kelce was among three starters unable to test out of protocols Sunday morning.

After watching the Chargers improbably lose to the Texans earlier Sunday, the Chiefs — who began the season 3-4 — knew they merely had to beat inconsistent and offensively challenged Pittsburgh to wrap up another division title. They made it look easy on both sides of the ball.

Kansas City went 73 yards on its opening possession with Edwards-Helaire bouncing off Robert Spillane for a score. Pringle scored his first TD after Roethlisberger was picked off on a flea-flicker. Mecole Hardman hauled in a touchdown throw from Mahomes, and fill-in kicker Elliott Fry hit a 44-yard field goal for a 23-0 halftime lead.

"It was us just filling those voids and those places and those spots on the field," Hardman said, "and doing the best we can."

## Burrow's 525 yards, 4 TDs give Bengals division lead

*Associated Press*

CINCINNATI — Joe Burrow's franchise record-breaking 525-yard passing performance clearly meant something to the Cincinnati Bengals, who continued calling deep throws for him late in the fourth quarter with a 20-point lead against division rival Baltimore until the mark was secured.

Only three QBs in NFL history have thrown for more yards in a game. But Burrow was more interested in what the final score — 41-21 over the Baltimore Ravens — meant for his team, which took over first place in the AFC North with two games left.

"We're right where we want to be," Burrow said. "We knew we had a chance to be in this position in training camp. We knew the kind of team we had. You

couldn't ask for a better situation right now. We control our destiny. Win these next two games, and we've got the division locked."

Burrow, who snapped Boomer Esiason's team record of 522 yards, was 37-for-46 with two touchdown passes to Tee Higgins and one each to Tyler Boyd and Joe Mixon as the Bengals swept the Ravens for the first time since 2015. Cincinnati won 41-17 at Baltimore on Oct. 24.

Burrow's 500-yard passing day was the 24th in the NFL and the first this season, and he became the 20th QB to reach the half-century mark. Only Norm Van Brocklin (554 yards), Warren Moon (527) and Matt Schaub (527) have thrown for more. Burrow couldn't remember if he had thrown for that many yards

at any level.

"Maybe. Not sure. Probably. I threw for a ton of yards in high school, so who knows," said Burrow, speaking after the game while wearing a Santa hat and a red T-shirt advertising the fictional Krusty Krab restaurant from his favorite TV show, "SpongeBob SquarePants."

"I probably did. I really don't think about the yards too much," he said. "I'm just as happy about throwing for (148) yards against the Raiders and going out and winning the game. So whatever it takes to win the game. Today it took throwing for 525 yards and being smart with the football."

The Bengals are having their best season since 2015, when they last reached the playoffs and were eliminated by the Pittsburgh Steelers in a wild-

card game.

Higgins had 12 receptions for a career-high 194 yards. Ja'Marr Chase caught seven for 125 yards, and Boyd had three catches for 85 yards.

"He's making really good decisions, and then the ball was coming out quick when we needed to," Cincinnati coach Zac Taylor said of Burrow.

With Lamar Jackson out with an ankle injury and backup Tyler Huntley on the COVID-19 list, Josh Johnson — signed as a free agent 10 days ago — started at quarterback for the Ravens (8-7). His 4-yard pass to Rashod Bateman put Baltimore up 10-7 in the first quarter, but the Ravens — especially their injury-ravaged secondary — couldn't keep up with Burrow and the Bengals.

# Embiid and 76ers roll past Wizards, move above .500

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Joel Embiid had 36 points and 13 rebounds and a spat with Montrezl Harrell, Tobias Harris added 23 points and the Philadelphia 76ers beat the Washington Wizards 117-96 on Sunday night.

Philadelphia improved to 17-16 after dropping four of its last five.

Spencer Dinwiddie led Washington with 17 points. The Wizards are also 17-16.

With 3:04 left in the third, Harrell fouled Embiid, and the two exchanged words. Both were assessed technical fouls, and Embiid made the two free throws.

“He flopped,” Embiid said. “I don’t think he made a play on the ball, and we got tangled.”

Thirty seconds later, Harrell pushed Embiid, yelled at him, and was given his second technical and ejected. Harrell, who didn’t immediately leave the court, was finally escorted off the floor and left shaking his head while Embiid waved him goodbye.

**Cavaliers 144, Raptors 99:** Kevin Love and Darius Garland scored 22 points apiece and host Cleveland tied its franchise record with 46 points in the third quarter to rout COVID-19 depleted Toronto.

Lauri Markkanen added 20 points and Garland had eight assists for the Cavs, who were led by 47 points twice late in the fourth. They won their fifth in a row at home and made 22 three-pointers in a team-record 52 attempts.

**Heat 93, Magic 83:** Jimmy Butler return-

ed from a bruised tailbone to score 17 points and grab 11 rebounds, Caleb Martin added 17 points and host Miami beat Orlando.

Butler had missed 12 of the Heat’s last 13 games because of the injury. Martin had missed Miami’s last seven games because of a stint in the NBA’s health and safety protocols.

**Bulls 113, Pacers 105:** Zach LaVine scored 32 points in his return from the NBA’s health and safety protocols, DeMar DeRozan added 24 and host Chicago beat Indiana.

Nikola Vucevic had 16 points and 15 rebounds, The Bulls improved to 20-10 with their third straight victory. Assistant coach Chris Fleming directed the team with head coach Billy Donovan entering protocols Friday.

**Nuggets 103, Clippers 100:** Nikola Jokic had 26 points and 22 rebounds, rallying Denver to a win at Los Angeles after the Nuggets blew a 17-point lead.

**Grizzlies 127, Kings 102:** Desmond Bane scored 28 points and visiting Memphis beat Sacramento for the second time in 10 days.

**Spurs 144, Pistons 109:** Keldon Johnson scored 27 points and host San Antonio had its highest-scoring game of the season to beat short-handed Detroit, extending the NBA-worst Pistons’ road skid to 10.

**Thunder 117, Pelicans 112:** Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 31 points, rookie Aaron Wiggins added a career-high 24 and host Oklahoma City beat New Orleans.

# NBA virus cases rising, expanded testing starts up

Associated Press

The way Miami’s Caleb Martin sees things, he’s lucky.

He just missed seven games while completing the NBA’s health and safety protocols related to the coronavirus, the worst of his symptoms being a couple days of fatigue. And when looking at the still-rising numbers of positive tests around the league right now, Martin offered a stark assessment.

“It almost seems it’s inevitable,” Martin said.

The numbers in the NBA indeed keep getting higher and may continue that way for the foreseeable future. Expanded testing, agreed to earlier this month, went into place Sunday for players who have yet to receive their booster shots. The new testing plan is expected to remain in place until Jan. 8, after weeks of urging by the league and the National Basketball Players Association for players to get boosted.

By early Sunday evening, the numbers of players known to be in the protocols was up to 116 — and probably slightly higher, considering some teams had yet to update injury reports. Numbers can fluctuate quickly as players test in and out.

“I think any logical person would worry how far is this going to go, and there’s a couple teams that have quite a few people in the protocols. ... You don’t know where it’s going to go,” San Antonio coach Gregg Popovich said.

# Taxi squads return to limit further NHL disruptions

Associated Press

The NHL is emerging from an extended holiday break with taxi squads and other roster revisions, a move made to guard against more disruptions to the season amid more players and coaches going into COVID-19 protocol Sunday.

Each team will be allowed to have a taxi squad of up to six players and to make emergency recalls from the minors if COVID-19 absences would cause anyone to play without a full lineup. Taxi squads, which were used during the shortened 2021 season, are set to be in effect un-

til at least the All-Star break in early February.

Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly confirmed the new roster rules in an email to The Associated Press, and the NHL announced the changes Sunday night. The league also postponed three additional games — Columbus at Chicago on Tuesday night and Pittsburgh at Toronto, and Boston at Ottawa on Wednesday night.

“Any relief is welcome, believe me,” said Florida Panthers general manager Bill Zito, who is eager to see how the flexibility might help. “It’s tough. What

if all your goalies get it? What are you going to do? We’ve been through, as a management team, any number of scenarios surrounding the ‘what-ifs’ — or maybe we’re kidding ourselves and we should be thinking about the ‘whens,’ as far as who gets it and when.”

Under the new provisions, any team shy of having 12 forwards, six defensemen and two goaltenders available can bring up a player from the American Hockey League without playing a game with fewer than the usual 18 skaters. Emergency recalls can also be made of players with

salary-cap hits of up to \$1 million, an increase from the previous \$850,000 limit.

Players on the taxi squad will count as being in the minors for cap purposes. They can be there for a maximum of 20 days.

The goal of the changes is to keep the NHL season going after 67 games have already been postponed for coronavirus-related reasons. All 14 games initially scheduled for Monday previously were postponed to allow for analyzing of COVID-19 tests taken Sunday by players, coaches and staff upon returning to team facilities.