

SACEUR seeks boost in eastern forces

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

STUTT GART, Germany — The top U.S. military commander in Europe wants to reinforce NATO's eastern flank with multinational battlegroups in Romania and Bulgaria because of concerns about Russia's moves around Ukraine.

Gen. Tod Wolters, who serves as NATO's supreme allied commander and head of U.S. European Command, delivered the proposal to allied military chiefs during a recent video call, German news weekly Der Spiegel reported earlier this month.

Citing information it had obtained about the plan, Der Spiegel said Wolters wants contingents in the two Black Sea countries

that resemble those already established in the Baltic states and Poland.

The 1,500-member battlegroups are designed to function as a trip-wire deterrent force to potential Russian aggression.

When asked Thursday, NATO didn't directly address Wolters' proposal, which was reported Dec. 18.

Adding battlegroups in Romania and Bulgaria would be in line with more recent efforts by NATO to bolster its position around the Black Sea, a strategic waterway where Russia has been increasingly assertive.

Still, it remains unclear how Wolters' plan for battlegroups in those countries will be received by alliance states.

Within NATO, there is often tension be-

tween members in the east, eager for allied reinforcements and a larger U.S. military presence, and western European counterparts, like Germany, that are wary of provoking Russia.

Wolters also called on allies to use satellites and other sensors to monitor for threats in the east and share findings immediately with the alliance, Der Spiegel reported.

The United States and fellow NATO countries have said they are prepared to reinforce eastern allies should Russia launch a new invasion of Ukraine.

For its part, Russia is now demanding a wide range of security assurances related to Ukraine, including a pledge that Kyiv will never be admitted to the alliance.

Hundreds of Afghans denied humanitarian entry to US

Associated Press

BOSTON — Haseena Niazi had pinned her hopes of getting her fiancé out of Afghanistan on a rarely used immigration provision.

The 24-year-old Massachusetts resident was almost certain his application for humanitarian parole would get approved by the U.S. government, considering the evidence he provided on the threats from the Taliban he received while working on women's health issues at a hospital near Kabul.

But this month, the request was summarily denied, leaving the couple reeling after months of anxiety.

"He had everything they

wanted," said Niazi, a green card holder originally from Afghanistan. "It doesn't make any sense why they'd reject it. It's like a bad dream. I still can't believe it."

Federal immigration officials have issued denial letters to hundreds of Afghans seeking temporary entry into the country for humanitarian reasons in recent weeks, to the dismay of Afghans and their supporters. By doing so, immigrant advocates have said, the Biden administration has failed to honor its promise to help Afghans who were left behind after the U.S. military withdrew from the country in August and the Taliban took control.

"It was a huge disappointment," said Caitlin Rowe, a Texas attorney who said that she recently received five denials, including one for an Afghan police officer who helped train U.S. troops and was beaten by the Taliban. "These are vulnerable people who genuinely thought there was hope, and I don't think

there was."

Since the U.S. withdrawal, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services has received more than 35,000 applications for humanitarian parole, of which it has denied about 470 and conditionally approved more than 140, Victoria Palmer, an agency spokesperson, said this week.

The little-known program, which doesn't provide a path to lawful permanent residence in the country, typically receives fewer than 2,000 requests annually from all nationalities, of which USCIS approves an average of about 500, she said.

Palmer also stressed humanitarian parole is generally reserved for extreme emergencies and not intended to replace the refugee admissions process, "which is the typical pathway for individuals outside of the United States who have fled their country of origin and are seeking protection."

The U.S. government, meanwhile, continues to help vulner-

able Afghans, evacuating more than 900 American citizens and residents and another 2,200 Afghans since the military withdrawal.

Many of them, however, had been whisked out of Afghanistan before the U.S. left. USCIS is now tasked with this new wave of humanitarian parole applications and has ramped up staffing to consider them.

The agency said in a statement that requests are reviewed on an individual basis, with consideration given to immediate relatives of Americans and Afghans airlifted out.

And while USCIS stressed that parole shouldn't replace refugee processing, immigrant advocates have argued that isn't a viable option for Afghans stuck in their country due to a disability or hiding from the Taliban. Even those able to get out of Afghanistan, they've said, may be forced to wait years in refugee camps, which isn't something many can afford to do.

Note to readers

Stripes Lite will not publish on Friday and Saturday, Dec. 31-Jan. 1. The next edition will be sent on Sunday, Jan. 2, 2022.

Military must audit missing persons policies

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Each military service branch must conduct a review of how it handles missing persons reports as part of the 2022 National Defense Authorization Act. The call for the review stems from missing soldier cases and deaths that occurred at Fort Hood, Texas, in 2020 and exposed faults in existing policy.

Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas, said he introduced the legislation to prevent future tragedies “by requiring updates to military installation security procedures and by focusing on stronger partnerships between installations and law enforcement.”

The legislation, which was

signed into law by President Joe Biden on Monday, puts the reviews down at the local base level where the picture and need is most clear, according to the senator’s office.

“We must defend the brave men and women who put their lives on the line for our safety at home and abroad,” Cornyn said in a statement. “As a parent and the son of a veteran, I’m grateful to my colleagues and the administration for partnering with me in protecting our nation’s servicemembers.”

The statement cited the deaths of Spc. Vanessa Guillen and Sgt. Elder Fernandes as examples that show the need for improvement. Both soldiers

were reported missing out of Fort Hood and later found dead.

Guillen, 20, went missing from Fort Hood on April 22, 2020, while working in an arms room. Her remains were found more than two months later alongside a river about 30 miles from the base. Investigators determined she was killed by a fellow soldier who later killed himself.

Fernandes, 23, was found dead Aug. 25, 2020, in Temple, Texas, after a weeklong search for him. Records from Army Criminal Investigation Division revealed Fernandes had been missing for 48 hours before anyone contacted investigators.

They were just two of 35 sol-

diers who died while assigned to Fort Hood in 2020. Of those soldiers, five died by homicide and 12 died by suicide. It’s unclear how many of those soldiers were also considered missing before they died.

For its part, the Army has already undergone an in-depth review and made changes to the way it handles reports of missing soldiers. It announced in December 2020 that it created a new category for soldiers who do not show up for duty. Instead of immediately being classified AWOL, they are classified as “absent-unknown,” and commanders must launch an immediate effort to find the missing soldier.

Navy files objections to order it drain fuel tanks

Associated Press

HONOLULU — The Navy on Wednesday filed objections to the conclusion by a Hawaii state official that it should be required to remove fuel from tanks it owns near Pearl Harbor.

State Department of Health Deputy Director Marian Tsuji now has 30 days to consider the Navy’s complaints before making a final decision on the matter.

At issue is whether the Navy should be required, as ordered by Gov. David Ige earlier this month, to drain fuel from the tanks.

The Navy argued it shouldn’t. That prompted two days of hearings presided over by David D. Day, a deputy attorney general. After those hearings, Day on Monday recommended that the governor’s order be followed.

The governor issued his order after the Navy disclosed that fuel from a World War II-era fuel

storage facility at Red Hill had contaminated one of its drinking water wells and sickened hundreds in military housing.

The Navy has a legal right to its filing, said David Henkin, a lawyer for Earthjustice, which represented the Sierra Club of Hawaii in the case.

“But it also has a moral obligation to acknowledge the reality that every day it fights this emergency order is another day that Oahu’s principle source of drinking water remains at risk for catastrophic and irreversible contamination,” Henkin said in a statement.

The Navy’s filing Wednesday said Day used an “overbroad” interpretation of the Department of Health’s emergency authority to regulate underground fuel storage tanks. The filing argued the current situation with the tanks did not pose an “imminent” threat to human health and the environment.

Navy seizes \$4M worth of heroin in Arabian Sea

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — United States navy vessels seized 849 pounds of heroin in the Arabian Sea worth some \$4 million, in a major bust by the international maritime operation in the region, officials said Thursday.

The USS Tempest and USS Typhoon seized the drugs hidden aboard a stateless fishing vessel plying Mideast waters, the international task force said in a statement. The seizure took place on Monday.

The Navy said the fishing vessel likely came from Iran. All nine crew members identified themselves as Iranian nationals, according to Cmdr. Timothy Hawkins, a spokesperson for the U.S. Navy’s Mideast-based 5th Fleet.

He did not elaborate on who manufactured the drugs or their ultimate destination.

As the task force ramps up

regional patrols, it has confiscated illegal drugs worth over \$193 million during operations at sea this year — more than the amount of drugs seized in the last four years combined, its statement said.

Heroin is trafficked to the Middle East and even Europe by land from Iran and Afghanistan through well-worn land routes in the Balkans, Southern Caucasus mountains or Saudi Arabia, according to last year’s U.N. Global Synthetic Drugs Assessment. Smugglers from Iran have increasingly taken to sea to bring heroin into South Asia, the report added, with Iranian and Pakistani sailors often arrested near Sri Lanka.

Iran’s porous 1,195-mile-long eastern border with Afghanistan, the world’s largest producer of opium, has turned it into a key transit country for the illicit drug trade.

Study: Rapid tests may be less effective for omicron

The Washington Post

As the coronavirus spawns a record-breaking wave of infections, new research suggests that rapid tests widely used to identify potential COVID-19 cases might be less effective at identifying illness caused by the swiftly spreading omicron variant.

The finding is the latest complication for anyone trying to strike a common-sense balance between being vigilant and returning to normalcy as the country approaches the third year of the pandemic.

The research, issued Tuesday by the Food and Drug Administration and produced by the National Institutes of Health, said the rapid antigen tests — which have been in high demand and often hard to find this holiday season — “do detect the omicron variant but may have reduced sensitivity.”

Although rapid tests showed reduced sensitivity to omicron compared with earlier variants in a lab study, the real-world implications are not clear, said Bruce Tromberg, director of NIH’s National Institute of Biomedical Imaging and Bioengineering and lead of RADx Tech, the joint FDA and NIH effort to speed up development of diagnostics.

President Joe Biden has promised to

distribute 500 million rapid tests to the American public. People should still use these tests regularly, Tromberg said, because although they may be less sensitive than originally thought, they remain a highly effective tool for combating an extremely contagious virus.

“The diminished sensitivity from the [lab experiments] pales in comparison” with the increased transmissibility of omicron, Tromberg said. “Even with reduced performance, it will still pick up infections and it will help individuals get treatment sooner.”

The FDA said it has always known antigen tests overall are less sensitive than the PCR molecular tests, which are typically performed in a lab and have about 98% accuracy. If people have symptoms consistent with COVID-19 and get a negative rapid test result, the agency recommends a follow-up PCR test.

The news on the rapid tests came in a busy week of updates, revisions and recalculations. On Monday, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued new guidance that lowered the isolation recommendations for people infected with the coronavirus, and who are asymptomatic or showing improvement in symptoms, from 10 days to five.

Record number of guns found in airports in 2021 amid travel slump

Los Angeles Times

Even as air travel languished below pre-pandemic levels, the number of travelers attempting to pass through airport security checkpoints with firearms in 2021 reached its highest point since the Transportation Security Administration began tracking it 20 years ago, the agency said Wednesday.

The TSA has stopped travelers carrying more than 5,700 firearms at airports since the beginning of 2021, far surpassing the previous record of 4,432 firearms in 2019, according to TSA spokesperson R. Carter Langston. A final tally will be announced next month. About 85% of the firearms found in 2021 were loaded, Langston said.

The surge in gun discoveries comes even though travel demand remains about 25%

below the pre-pandemic pace of 2019, according to the U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics.

The increase is probably tied to a jump in overall U.S. gun sales since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, said Langston, who cited a July 2020 report by the Brookings Institute, a Washington think tank.

Violators face fines of up to \$13,910 per violation per person, depending on the number of previous offenses and whether the firearm was loaded at the time.

The airports with the greatest number of uncovered firearms this year are Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport, Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport and George Bush Intercontinental Airport in Houston, according to the TSA.

US jobless claims dip down to 198K

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits fell below 200,000, more evidence that the job market remains strong in the aftermath of last year’s coronavirus recession.

Jobless claims dropped by 8,000 to 198,000, the Labor Department reported Thursday. The four-week average, which smooths out week-to-week volatility, fell to just above 199,000, the lowest level since October 1969.

The numbers suggest that the fast-spreading omicron variant has yet to trigger a wave of layoffs.

Altogether, 1.7 million Americans were collecting traditional unemployment aid the week that ended Dec. 18. That was the lowest since March 2020, just as the pandemic was starting to slam the U.S. economy, and down by 140,000 from the week before.

The weekly claims numbers, a proxy for layoffs, have fallen steadily most of the year. Employers are reluctant to let workers go at a time when it’s so tough to find replacements. The United States had a near-record 11 million job openings in October, and 4.2 million Americans quit their jobs — just off September’s record 4.4 million — because there are so many opportunities.

The job market has bounced back from last year’s brief but intense coronavirus recession. When COVID hit, governments ordered lockdowns, consumers hunkered down at home and many businesses closed or cut back hours. Employers slashed more than 22 million jobs in March and April 2020, and the unemployment rate rocketed to 14.8%.

But massive government spending — and eventually the rollout of vaccines — brought the economy back. Employers have added 18.5 million jobs since April 2020, still leaving the U.S. still 3.9 million jobs short of what it had before the pandemic. The December jobs report, out next week, is expected to show that the economy generated another 374,000 jobs this month.

The unemployment rate has fallen to 4.2%, close to what economists consider full employment.

“The overall picture painted by these data points to a rapid pace of job growth,” said Joshua Shapiro, chief U.S. economist at the consulting firm Maria Fiorini Ramirez Inc. Hiring would have been even stronger “had businesses been able to hire as many workers as they wished.”

Maxwell convicted in Epstein sex abuse case

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The British socialite Ghislaine Maxwell was convicted Wednesday of luring teenage girls to be sexually abused by the American millionaire Jeffrey Epstein.

The verdict capped a monthlong trial featuring sordid accounts of the sexual exploitation of girls as young as 14, told by four women who described being abused as teens in the 1990s and early 2000s at Epstein's palatial homes in Florida, New York and New Mexico.

Jurors deliberated for five full days before finding Maxwell guilty of five of six counts. With the maximum prison terms for each charge ranging from five to 40 years in prison, Maxwell faces the likelihood of years behind bars — an outcome long sought by women who spent years fighting in civil courts to hold her accountable for her role in recruiting and grooming Epstein's teenage victims and sometimes join-

ing in the sexual abuse.

As the verdict was read, Maxwell was largely stoic behind a black mask. Afterward, she could be seen pouring herself water as one of her attorneys patted her back. She stood with her hands folded as the jury filed out, and glanced at her siblings — faithfully in attendance each day of the trial — as she herself was led from the courtroom. She did not hug her lawyers on the way out, a marked change from previous days during which Maxwell and her team were often physically affectionate with one another.

One of her victims, Annie Farmer, said she was grateful the jury recognized Maxwell's "pattern of predatory behavior."

"She has caused hurt to many more women than the few of us who had the chance to testify in the courtroom," she said in a prepared statement. "I hope that this verdict brings solace to all who need it and demonstrates that no one is above the law. Even

those with great power and privilege will be held accountable when they sexually abuse and exploit the young."

U.S. Attorney Damian Williams praised the victims who testified against Maxwell after experiencing what he called "one of the worst crimes imaginable."

"I want to commend the bravery of the girls — now grown women — who stepped out of the shadows and into the courtroom. Their courage and willingness to face their abuser made this case, and today's result, possible," he said in a statement.

No sentencing date was set.

The defense had insisted Maxwell was a victim of a vindictive prosecution devised to deliver justice to women deprived of their main villain when Epstein killed himself while awaiting trial in 2019.

Her brother, Kevin Maxwell, said the family believes she will be vindicated on appeal. "We firmly believe in our sister's innocence," he said in a written statement.

Another round of snow before thaw-out in Northwest

Associated Press

SEATTLE — A thaw-out is coming for frozen Seattle and Portland, Ore., but not before another round of snow that could compound problems for a region more accustomed to winter rain than arctic blasts.

More snow and rain fell on California on Wednesday, causing travel disruptions on mountain routes and raising the risk of debris flows from wildfire burn scars.

And in Nevada, the governor plans to declare a state of emergency due to snow and storm conditions affecting travel in the Lake Tahoe area of northern Nevada.

Forecasters said parts of western Washington could see up to 3 inches of snow Thursday and northwestern Oregon could

see a similar amount.

The normally temperate part of the Pacific Northwest has shivered with temperatures hitting the single digits in some areas this week after extreme cold air from Canada's Fraser River Valley blew in on Sunday.

Snow and ice has forced closures and travel delays, made travel treacherous in some parts and prompted people to take shelter in emergency warming centers.

The weather and the pandemic have forced the cancellation of nearly 1,300 flights into and out of Seattle-Tacoma International Airport since Sunday. The situation has been acute in Alaska, where hundreds of passengers, many from coastal villages, have been stranded in the town of Be-

thel because of bad weather and ill-equipped airports.

Temperatures could rise above freezing in Seattle on Thursday and be even warmer in Portland, before airflow from the Pacific blows in on the weekend and causes the mercury to rise to more seasonable highs in the 40s Fahrenheit.

State officials in Oregon have declared an emergency. In Multnomah County — home to Portland — about a half dozen weather shelters were open this week. A similar number of shelters were opened in Seattle's King County, which also declared an emergency.

Seattle leaders said city shelters will remain open through the new year.

Nevada casinos go 9 months with \$1B in house winnings

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Nevada casinos set a record in November, reporting a ninth straight month of \$1 billion or more in house winnings, gambling regulators said Wednesday, providing another sign that business in the nation's tourist-dependent gambling mecca has returned to pre-pandemic levels.

The \$1.32 billion in casino winnings re-

ported statewide last month was up from \$1.22 billion in October, and almost reached the record \$1.36 billion figure set last July, the Nevada Gaming Control Board reported.

The streak beat the previous record of eight consecutive months set before the Great Recession, from October 2006 to May 2007, board senior analyst Michael Lawton said.

Nevada sports betting also set records — reaping a record \$72 million in November on sports wagers totaling \$1.1 billion.

Lawton said the previous record was \$61.8 million in sports bets won by casinos in November 2020, and he noted sports books took in more than \$1 billion in wagers in consecutive months for the first time. Most sports wagers were made with mobile betting apps.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Men, women rob lost hitchhiker of gas money

SD SIOUX FALLS — Police in Sioux Falls are searching for two men and a woman who robbed a lost hitchhiker.

The Argus Leader reported the 20-year-old hitchhiker was walking along Interstate 29 in Sioux Falls on Tuesday when the men and the woman pulled up and offered him a ride. Police said the hitchhiker agreed to pay them gas money if they'd take him to Brookings. One of the men pulled out a pistol and asked for all his money. The hitchhiker turned over an undisclosed amount of cash before the group left him stranded in the city.

Police said the hitchhiker couldn't tell them where he was driven because he was unfamiliar with the area.

2 men die in avalanche while snowmobiling

MT COOKE CITY — Two Minnesota men died in an avalanche while snowmobiling north of Yellowstone National Park, where about 3 feet of snow had fallen over the past week, the Gallatin National Forest Avalanche Center said.

A group of eight snowmobilers was near Scotch Bonnet Mountain north of Cooke City Monday. One man got stuck on the southeast slope and another man was trying to help dig him out when the avalanche happened, Park County Undersheriff Clay Herbst said Tuesday.

The avalanche brought down snow about 5 feet deep and 300 feet wide, burying the two rid-

ers, the avalanche center said.

The victims were Jesse Thelen, 43, of Paynesville, Minn., and Carl Thelen, 40, from St. Martin, Minn., Park County Coroner Al Jenkins told The Livingston Enterprise.

Firefighter rappels into icy river to save woman

IA WATERLOO — A woman is alive after being pulled from an icy Iowa river by a rappelling firefighter.

The Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier reported that it isn't known how the woman ended up in the Cedar River in Waterloo. A passerby called 911 around 7:35 p.m. Monday after hearing her yelling from under the Park Avenue Bridge.

Firefighters tossed her a rope with a loop, which kept her in place and prevented her from floating over the dam only yards away. Firefighter Chris Roth then used a second line to rappel into the river while another crew launched a rescue boat. Roth helped the woman into the boat, which ferried her to a waiting ambulance.

New possum species named after professor

WI OSHKOSH — Mammal experts have named a new species of possum after the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh professor who discovered it.

UW-Oshkosh biology professor Greg Adler was working on research near the Panama Canal in 2001 when he found a mouse possum with a longer tail than usual and a brownish rather than the common salmon-colored belly, Oshkosh Northwest-

ern Media reported.

He sent the animal to the American Museum of Natural History and forgot about it until this year, when he received an email from museum curator Robert Voss. He said the possum was a new species and it had been named *Marmosa adleri*, Latin for "Adler's mouse opossum."

Paramedics help rescue owl likely hit by car

SC MYRTLE BEACH — Two paramedics rescued a wounded owl that was likely hit by a car, officials said Tuesday.

Horry County Fire Rescue said on Twitter that a crew from Fire Station 4 answered an animal rescue call Monday afternoon and found the owl. The fire department said the bird had been reportedly hit by a car and then flew into a tree.

The paramedics were able to get the owl out of the tree and handed it off to the Carolina Wildlife Rehabilitation Center.

Nail salon pays \$1.75M to woman who lost leg

FL TAMPA — A Florida woman whose leg had to be amputated because of an infection after a pedicure has reached a \$1.75 million settlement with the nail salon, her attorney said.

An employee at Tammy's Nails 2 in Tampa cut Clara Shellman's foot during a pedicure in September 2018, the Tampa Bay Times reported. The cut became infected and spread quickly, partly because Shellman had severe peripheral arterial disease, a circulatory

condition that causes narrowed blood vessels to reduce blood flow to the limbs.

Shellman, 55, lost her home after being burdened by medical expenses from the amputation, the newspaper quoted her lawyer, Paul Fulmer, as saying. She needed help caring for herself and now is living with relatives, Fulmer said.

According to the lawsuit filed in May 2020, the salon worker used tools and equipment that were so dirty they posed a danger to customers, a claim the business initially denied. Tammy's Nails 2 said in an answer to the lawsuit, filed a month later, that Shellman was at fault because she didn't immediately seek medical care or "take reasonable efforts to prevent the development of infection."

Tenant gets \$35K after dispute over dog

NH NASHUA — A company that owns and operates offices and apartment complexes in Massachusetts and New Hampshire agreed to pay \$35,000 to a tenant in Nashua who was denied permission to keep an emotional support dog, federal prosecutors say.

The John J. Flatley Co. was accused of violating the Fair Housing Act by refusing to accommodate the tenant's disabilities of anxiety and depression, acting U.S. Attorney John Farley said Tuesday.

Without admitting liability, the company agreed to pay the tenant \$35,000, enact reasonable accommodation policies for its New Hampshire residential properties and complete training about the housing act.

— From wire reports

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Did Tide give Michigan model vs. Georgia?

Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — Georgia's defense was nearly invincible for three months, allowing less than a touchdown per game.

Then came the Southeastern Conference championship game against Alabama, where the Crimson Tide seemingly cracked the code on the Bulldogs' stingy D in a 41-24 victory.

As No. 2 Michigan prepares to face No. 3 Georgia in the College Football Playoff semifinal at the Orange Bowl on Friday night, how much of Alabama's plan can be replicated by the Wolverines?

"It's hard to say blueprint because if it only happens one game in a year it obviously didn't work too well for too many other people," Michigan offensive coordinator Josh Gattis said Monday. "But you know, it does give you a little bit of confidence."

Good teams have bad games, but Georgia's defensive melt-

down against Alabama was a special kind of outlier.

Since 2000, only four teams have held their opponents below 10 points per game for an entire season: Alabama in 2011 (8.15); USC in 2008 (9.0); Miami in 2001 (9.36); and TCU in 2000 (9.64).

Georgia has a chance to become the fifth, entering the playoff having allowed 9.5 points per game.

None of those previous four teams allowed more than 27 points in a regular-season game. The 41 points the team allowed to the Crimson Tide represents a third of the Bulldogs' season total of 124.

Going back to 2009, no defense that has led the nation in yards per play — which Georgia currently does at 4.01 — has had a worse single game than the 7.66 ypp the Bulldogs allowed to Alabama.

Only Texas in 2009 (7.29 against Texas A&M) and Alabama in 2011 (7.41 to Georgia Southern) have led the country

in yards per play allowed and had a game in which they permitted more than 7.0 yards per play.

Georgia defensive coordinator Dan Lanning, who is working two jobs these days as he prepares to take over as Oregon head coach, said one poor performance didn't send the Bulldogs scrambling back to the drawing board.

"I think you have to approach it like any game that we have had this season where you go back and you try to be analytical, regardless of the result," Lanning said. "We take a deep dive every single game when we're successful, we take a deep dive when we're not."

Georgia wasn't about to share any schematic tweaks it may have made over the past month to shore up a defense that generated no sacks and allowed Alabama receivers to run free.

Mostly, the Bulldogs talked about getting back to basics: Tracking the ball in the air,

tackling in space, getting multiple defenders to a ball carrier and communicating.

"It's just the little things that make a big difference when it comes to the games. A lot of people might not think so, but we think so and that's why we're really focused on that," Georgia safety Lewis Cine said.

The Wolverines have run the ball more (548 attempts) than any playoff team behind an offensive line that won the Joe Moore Award as the best in the nation. Third-team All-American Hassan Haskins is a 6-foot-1, 220-pounder who has run for 1,288 yards and 20 touchdowns.

Georgia might find Michigan's approach refreshing compared with Alabama's. The Bulldogs' front seven is anchored by three massive tacklers, including All-American Jordan Davis.

"It's gonna be a train wreck inside," Gattis said. "Two smash-mouth teams going against each other."

Special 'Sauce': Bearcats' top CB faces biggest test

Associated Press

Ahmad "Sauce" Gardner was considered the ultimate project when he joined Cincinnati's 2019 signing class.

He weighed just 160 pounds, was the No. 163 cornerback prospect in the 247Sports Composite rankings and No. 11 overall in the Bearcats' 14-man recruiting class. Coach Luke Fickell figured it would take a couple years for him to start contributing.

"He proved us completely wrong," Fickell said.

Gardner goes into the College Football Playoff semifinal against Alabama on Friday as one of the most feared corners in the nation. If the junior from Detroit decides to declare for the 2022 NFL Draft, analysts have him pegged to become the

first Cincinnati player taken in the first round since 1971.

Since he emerged as that scrawny freshman, he's packed 40 more pounds onto his 6-foot-3 frame and along with Coby Bryant, forms the best cornerback tandem in the Bowl Subdivision.

The matchup of All-Americans in Gardner and Crimson Tide receiver Jameson Williams is one of the most anticipated in the Cotton Bowl in Arlington, Texas. Throwing to Williams will be Heisman Trophy winner Bryce Young, who also must contend with the Jim Thorpe Award winner in Bryant.

"They have two very strong corners on the outside," Young said. "It's something that ... pops when you turn the film

on. Those guys have been really consistent all year, which is hard at a position like that. Those guys are ball hogs, they always have an eye for the football, always around the ball."

Gardner hasn't been around the ball as much as Bryant. That's because quarterbacks try to avoid throwing Gardner's way.

In his 448 snaps in coverage, the receiver he's assigned has been targeted only 36 times, according to Pro Football Focus. Gardner has allowed just 17 receptions in 13 games, none having gone for more than 17 yards and none inside the Bearcats' 20-yard line.

Most remarkable: He's never given up a touchdown in 1,090 career snaps in coverage.

With Gardner all but shut-

ting down his side of the field, he was able to record three sacks in blitzing situations and Bryant was put in position to put up impressive numbers.

Bryant's man was targeted 70 times, according to PFF, and he intercepted three passes and broke up 11. His 14 passes defended ranked ninth nationally.

"It is sort of amazing they are the dynamic duo, and they feed off each other so much, because when you look out there on the football field, they're 53½ yards apart," Cincinnati defensive coordinator Mike Tressel said. "One's on one sideline and one's on the other. Both great football players, both great football IQ, but they really balance each other out in terms of personality."

Ohtani wins AP's Male Athlete of the Year

Associated Press

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Most of the time in professional sports, it's easy to think it's all been done before.

With so many fine-tuned athletes constantly pushing each other to the peak of human potential, we can experience unprecedented demonstrations of sporting brilliance every week of our lives. But it's truly rare to witness anything that isn't fundamentally just a better, more prolific version of something we've already seen.

That's why Shohei Ohtani's astonishing redefinition of modern baseball captured the world's attention so vividly in 2021 — and that's why the Los Angeles Angels' two-way superstar is the winner of The Associated Press' Male Athlete of the Year award.

The unanimous American League MVP put together a season with no comparison in the past century of his sport. Almost no one had been an everyday two-way player for many decades — and nobody has been both one of baseball's top power hitters and one

of its best starting pitchers since Babe Ruth starred at the plate and on the mound for the Boston Red Sox in 1919.

"He's doing something we haven't seen in our lifetimes, but he's also doing it at the very highest level of hitting and pitching," Angels manager Joe Maddon said late in the regular season. "He's doing more than other players, but he's also doing it better than almost everybody else on that field, and those are the greatest players in the game, his contemporaries. He's playing their game, but he's also playing a different game."

Ohtani hit 46 homers and drove in 100 runs with a .965 OPS while playing in 126 games as the AL's best designated hitter, as evidenced by his Silver Slugger award. He finished third in the majors in homers after leading the sport for much of the season.

Ohtani also started 23 games on the mound, going 9-2 with a 3.18 ERA and 156 strikeouts over 130⅓ innings as his team's ace and one of the AL's top right-handers.

He has a 100-mph fastball, but his splitter might be the best pitch in baseball, with movement that resembles a ball rolling off the edge of a table.

The 6-foot-4 star also was among the fastest baserunners in the majors while stealing 26 bases and scoring 103 runs. He even led the league with eight triples — and he also played a little outfield when asked.

Any one of these achievements would be impressive for a 27-year-old hitting his prime in his fourth season since moving from Japan to the major leagues. Doing it all at the same time is something that almost nobody who's currently alive had ever seen.

Mike Trout, Ohtani's three-time AL MVP teammate, called Ohtani's season "nothing short of electric."

"At times, I felt like I was back in Little League," Trout added. "To watch a player throw eight innings, hit a home run, steal a base and then go play right field was incredible."

Parker voted AP Female Athlete of Year for 2nd time

Associated Press

Candace Parker wrestled with the decision to make a huge change in her life and leave Los Angeles — where she had played her entire WNBA career — and head home to Chicago.

In the end, the appeal of a homecoming was too much for Parker to ignore, and it couldn't have worked out better.

The 35-year-old Parker staved off Father Time to help the Chicago Sky win the franchise's first WNBA championship and capped off 2021 by being named The Associated Press' Female Athlete of the Year for a second time.

"There was something about going to where you started playing the game," Parker said. "It's exciting to play in front of the people who first saw me pick up a basketball. To win at home, I'm just now recognizing it a little bit. How special that really is. Something that is top on my list."

It's a list that keeps the working mom and basketball analyst for TNT pretty busy. Parker is finally

beginning to appreciate bringing a title to her hometown in the twilight of her career.

As the final seconds ticked off the clock in the WNBA Finals, Parker sprinted to the corner of the court where she hugged family and friends, celebrating becoming one of the rare elite athletes to return home and win a championship.

It was a long-shot ending not many saw coming when Parker made the move. Winning it all seemed an even more remote possibility at the start of the WNBA season when the Sky lost seven of their first nine games. Parker was sidelined with an ankle injury, but when she returned, Chicago started winning and earned a No. 6 seed in the playoffs.

"I'm really thankful for those who made my journey and the people who supported me making it as smooth as possible. My daughter, my wife, my immediate family, we rolled with it. We wanted it," she said. "Things are going to get hard, but stick with it."

It is an approach to life that made Parker second-guess her decision.

Parker was concerned that she would be viewed as a quitter by leaving Los Angeles. This despite being named the AP award winner her rookie year with the Sparks in 2008, when she was honored as the WNBA's MVP and top rookie. She also guided the Sparks to the championship in 2016 and is one of 14 players to have won a college, WNBA and Olympic title. She played college ball at Tennessee, where she won two titles.

"I'm a big believer when you start something you finish it. When you say something, you do it. I'm not perfect, as I do say stuff and don't follow through," said Parker, a two-time Olympic gold medalist. "My parents taught me don't quit. I wanted to finish my career in LA, but I also finished my contract, I committed to that amount of time. I didn't ask to be traded. The better opportunity for me and my family was to go back home."

The 13 years since her first AP athlete of the year honor ties Parker with Babe Didrikson Zaharias for the longest time between winning in the 80-year history of the award. The award was voted on by a panel of sports editors. Parker received 11 first-place votes, edging out swimmer Katie Ledecky and gymnast Simone Biles.

"You couldn't write a better story than the one of Candace Parker bringing the WNBA championship to her hometown in her first season with the Chicago Sky," WNBA Commissioner Cathy Engelbert said. "On top of her accomplishments on the court and in the studio, she has continued to be a leader and role model to many, including working moms around the world. The WNBA is proud to have players like Candace who continually raise the bar and elevate the game and our league to the highest level."

Parker is the only WNBA player to win the AP Female Athlete of the Year award.

Brighter days should be on their way for league

Associated Press

The Utah Jazz lead the NBA in a handful of categories. Most three-pointers, just like they did last season. Most points per game. Most rebounds per game.

They're also last in use of the word "protocols."

It's not accurate — yet — to say every team in the NBA has had a coronavirus problem this season. No Jazz player has been on the league's health and safety protocols list this season, making Utah the only team yet to lose a player to a virus-related issue.

That's particularly impressive considering what's happening. Right now, 27 of the league's 30 teams are currently waiting for at least one player to come off the list, with some of those teams waiting for way more than one player to be cleared.

"I don't feel any particular pride," Jazz coach Quin Snyder said when asked about being the last team standing in the protocols race. "I think we've been fortunate. We've tried to be smart about a lot of things. A lot of teams have done that, just in terms of raising a level of awareness. I think we've been fortunate. I also think it's kind of a knock-on-wood situation on some level.

He doesn't really think the run of luck will last. Snyder knows it's an "inevitability" that the Jazz will join the rest of the NBA. The numbers around the league indicate that day is coming sooner than later.

December 2021 was a difficult month for the NBA, by any measure, probably its most difficult since March 2020. That was when the decision to shut down the league happened on the night that Jazz center Rudy Gobert became the first player to test positive for COVID-19.

More than 500 players took the floor this month, a record for any month in league history. Almost every team in the NBA has been dealing with a virus-related issue in recent days, with 119 players known to be in the protocols by Wednesday evening. That figure, which changes often as players test in and out, does not include coaches, staff and others in the protocols — including referees.

The NBA said Wednesday night that referee Justin Van Dyne had entered protocols, leaving the league with a two-man crew to work the game between Phoenix and Oklahoma City. Plus, the the list of postponed games grew to 10 after the NBA postponed

Wednesday's game between Miami and San Antonio after a combination of injuries and positive COVID-19 tests left the Heat unable to meet the requirement of eight available players.

The NBA had no choice but to basically allow teams unlimited hardship contract slots, agreeing not to have the emergency call-ups count against a team's salary cap or luxury tax numbers.

But just like any new year should, January will likely bring newfound optimism.

The league now has a shorter return-to-play plan in place for those who have tested positive. It's reasonable to think the percentage of players who have received booster shots — 65% was the last known figure — will rise soon, especially because every team was ordered by the NBA to have an event to make them available to players, staff and family members by Friday.

"We all want to get this all behind us," said Portland assistant Scott Brooks, who will coach the Trail Blazers while head coach Chauncey Billups is in protocols.

Brooks pointed to the silver lining he sees right now — the opportunities that the roster expansion has created for G League players and others to get into the NBA.

A great example of the newfound chances comes from Indiana and newly signed Keifer Sykes.

An undersized 6-foot guard, Sykes wasn't heavily recruited before enrolling at Green Bay to play college ball. Had Summer League stints with Cleveland, Golden State, Denver and Indiana. He went to training camp with the Pacers and San Antonio, played for a couple of G League teams in the U.S. and has worn jerseys for pro teams in South Korea, Turkey, Italy, China, Greece and Australia.

And now, finally, he's in the NBA.

Sykes got the call from the Pacers on Sunday night. The first person he told was his mother, who wanted to scream in delight.

"Don't scream yet. I've got to pass the COVID test," Sykes told her.

He passed. Mom can scream now.

"Happy for him," Pacers coach Rick Carlisle said. "This is a great opportunity for him. This is his first official NBA stint and he's been an opportunist in his career. And I know he'll do well with it."

Isolation time cut in NHL, but not in Canada

Associated Press

The NHL is following other leagues and U.S. government guidance by cutting COVID-19 isolation times for players and personnel to five days under certain conditions and where it is allowed by local laws.

The change went into effect Wednesday and applies only in the United States because of stricter pandemic regulations in Canada. The league has 25 teams based in the U.S. and seven in Canada; earlier this week, the NHL postponed nine games in Canada because of attendance limits imposed by provincial governments.

The league and NHL Players' Association agreed to the updated protocols, which apply for the next two weeks before they are reviewed.

"While the changes apply on a league-wide basis, all personnel will still have to comply with the applicable health and safety regulations in their jurisdictions, including the federal and provincial COVID health and safety mandates in Canada, which may be more restrictive than the protocol," the NHL and NHLPA said in a joint statement.

Players, coaches and staff who tested positive for the coronavirus can return after five days if symptoms are gone or resolving themselves with a negative PCR test or two negative rapid test results taken more than two hours apart.

"I think that's a good step," Nashville Predators forward Filip Forsberg said on a video call. "Obviously testing will still be a regular thing, I'm sure, and that's something that we dealt with all last year, so we're used to that. But I think that's the way to do it as long as we can keep everything in the way it's been, which has been pretty safe to me."

The 10-day isolation requirement remains in Canada. The NBA and NFL previously reduced isolation to six and five days, respectively, after the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention issued new guidance.

Hockey players this week had expressed a desire for shorter isolation times. Daily testing and enhanced protocols, including mask-wearing at team facilities unless on the ice for games or practices, are in effect through at least Jan. 7.

"We've had a bunch of guys on our team also with basically zero symptoms," Forsberg said. "I can only imagine how frustrating it's been for those guys sitting there perfectly healthy and can't be back out on the ice."