

## Navy testing unmanned boats, aircraft

By J.P. LAWRENCE  
*Stars and Stripes*

MANAMA, Bahrain — Unmanned boats with onboard aerial drones ready to launch sailed through the waters off Bahrain on Thursday, carrying with them the Navy's vision of a 100-vessel unmanned surface fleet in the Middle East by the end of next summer.

A three-week training event dubbed Digital Horizon, which started last week, features 15 types of unmanned systems, 10 of which are new to the Navy in the region, service officials said.

"This is a notable influx of new systems that 5th Fleet hasn't worked with before, especially at one time," Cmdr. Timothy Hawkins, Naval Forces Central Command and 5th Fleet spokesman, said Thursday. "This event, we haven't done something like this yet, but we've been building up to it."

The Navy aims to rely more on unmanned vessels aided by artificial intelligence to help patrol Middle East waterways through which much of the world's trade transits.

A naval unit known as Task Force 59 was created last year to focus on integrating drones and AI into 5th Fleet operations. Unmanned systems can operate for long

stretches on their own as they gather information.

As boats with observers approached the drones out at sea Wednesday, the vessels' artificial intelligence alerted contractors and sailors at Task Force 59's robotics operations center at NSA Bahrain.

Some of the drone boats can identify objects in the water and spot suspicious behavior. This capability allows humans to focus on priority threats, Navy Capt. Michael Brasseur, commodore of Task Force 59, said Thursday.

"What we want to do ultimately is expand further how far we can see," Brasseur said. "And we want to leverage machine learning and AI to reduce the cognitive load on the watch-standers."

Over the past year, Task Force 59 operated unmanned surface ships in the Middle East for more than 25,000 hours, a Naval Forces Central Command statement said last week.

Some of the vessels known as Saildrone Explorers have operated at sea for as long as 220 consecutive days, the NAVCENT statement said.

Iran seized those drones on separate occasions in August and September.

In both instances, Iranian sailors released

them as U.S. warships neared, the Navy said.

Iran has gained prominence for its own unmanned technology, specifically the aerial drones it is supplying to Russia for use in the war in Ukraine.

The Digital Horizon exercise includes three aerial drones that will be tested in the Middle East for the first time.

Aerovel's Flexrotor and Shield AI's V-BAT each have vertical takeoff and landing systems. The other is tethered on a cable and can operate in harsh environments, a Navy statement said.

One aquatic drone being tested, the Ocean Aero Triton, can operate for eight days at a time as a submarine and three months as a surface vessel.

The Triton's sail rotated up and down Thursday as the company representative demonstrated how the drone can go underwater within minutes if it detects a threat.

The 10 new drone systems in the exercise were selected from 100 companies that applied, Navy officials said.

Of the 100 unmanned surface vessels the task force wants sailing around the Middle East by next summer, the U.S. will contribute 20, while regional allies will contribute the rest, Navy officials said.

## 9 sailors injured after fire breaks out on USS Lincoln

By DOUG G. WARE  
*Stars and Stripes*

Nine sailors were recovering from injuries on Wednesday after a fire broke out aboard a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier off the West Coast, Navy officials said.

The Nimitz-class USS Abraham Lincoln was performing "routine operations" on Tuesday roughly 30 miles off the Southern California coast when the blaze began, according to a statement from the Navy's 3rd Fleet. The Navy did not say precisely where the Lincoln was lo-

cated off California at the time.

"The fire was quickly identified and extinguished through the crew's firefighting efforts," the 3rd Fleet said.

"Nine sailors aboard are reported to have suffered minor injuries and have been treated aboard the ship."

A spokesman for the 3rd Fleet said six of the injured sailors showed signs of dehydration.

Officials said the cause of the blaze is not yet known, but they noted it didn't force the Lincoln to return to port.

## 2 Navy ships nearly collide in waters of San Diego Bay

By DOUG G. WARE  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Navy has initiated an investigation of a near collision between two ships that occurred in the waters off San Diego, service officials said Wednesday.

The USS Momsen and USS Harpers Ferry were moving in opposite directions in San Diego Bay on Tuesday when they came close to colliding, officials said.

The vessels were able to maneuver past each other safely and neither ship was damaged, a Navy spokesperson said.

No related injuries were reported.

"The incident is under investigation," a spokesperson for the 3rd Fleet said.

A webcam in the bay captured the near miss and the video was posted online.

The USS Momsen is an Arleigh Burke-class, guided-missile destroyer based in San Diego that entered service in 2003, while the USS Harpers Ferry is a dock-landing ship based near Seattle that's been in service with the Navy since the mid-1990s.

# Most troops in Japan given later curfew

By ALEX WILSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

Liberty policies for U.S. service members in Japan ages 20 and older are about to become a little more generous, according to changes announced Thursday by U.S. Forces Japan.

New policies that take effect Monday will permit individual commands to shift their curfews from rank-based to age-based, USFJ spokesman Maj. Thomas Barger told Stars and Stripes by email Thursday. The standard 1 a.m. to 5 a.m. curfew in place since March 2020 that applies to enlisted service members of E-5 and below will apply instead to members ages 19 and younger, he said.

Eligible service members may have another drink in that extra hour. The changes move the deadline for consuming alcohol off-base from midnight to 1 a.m., according to Barger.

Service members in Japan are currently prohibited from consuming alcohol anywhere but their residence, hotel or other quarters between midnight and 5 a.m. The same condi-

tions will apply under the 1 a.m. deadline.

The changes significantly relax restrictions on sailors ages 20 and older, but installation and unit commanders may impose more stringent restrictions “as deemed necessary in order to maintain good order, discipline and unit readiness,” Barger said.

“The current update is part of leadership’s ongoing review of the order’s necessity and provisions therein to allow for more individuals to experience the local communities they work and live in while maintaining relevant liberty safeguards,” he wrote in the email.

The new policy accounts for the host nation’s cultural standards and a U.S. military force that has, on average, grown older, according to Barger. Service members ranked E-6 and lower are an average 25.6 years old, while E-4s and below are an average 22.6, according to a 2021 Defense Department report.

“This update better serves our military personnel while recognizing a shift in demographics to older, more mature, junior enlist-

ed members now serving in the U.S. military,” Barger said. “Japanese society traditionally recognizes those 20 years and older as adults, therefore bringing the USFJ policy in line with local culture and norms.”

A third change eliminates the requirement for a “liberty buddy” for some service members. Under that system, military personnel below E-5 were required to be accompanied on liberty by another approved individual, such as another service member or a family member, between 10 p.m. and 5 a.m.

The new policy does away with the buddy requirement entirely, a decision influenced by the military’s built-in culture of camaraderie, Barger said.

“A buddy/wingman concept is engrained in our military culture, therefore administratively mandating a nationwide policy was deemed not relevant nor necessary to maintain military readiness,” he wrote in the email. “We always have and will continue encouraging our personnel to look out for each other.”

## US government report: Pandemic, war delay pledge to arm Taiwan

By SETH ROBSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

The war in Ukraine is holding up already backlogged U.S. efforts to arm Taiwan, according to a recent U.S. government report.

Delays in delivery of weapons such as F-16 fighter jets, Stinger air-defense missiles and Paladin self-propelled howitzer artillery to Taiwan were noted in the November report to Congress by the U.S.-China Economic and Security Review Commission.

“The diversion of existing stocks of weapons and munitions to Ukraine and pandemic-related supply-chain issues have exacerbated a sizable backlog in the delivery of weapons already approved for sale to Taiwan, undermining the island’s readiness,” the commission said in its report.

More than 400 individual sales of U.S. equipment or technical assistance to Taiwan were pending, according to testimony by Deputy Secretary of State Wendy Sherman to the House Foreign Affairs Committee in April. Sherman’s remarks do not specify whether those sales happened within the past few years, according to the November report.

The backlog of weapons deliveries was

over \$14 billion in December 2021 and is now \$18.7 billion, according to congressional officials and others familiar with the matter cited in a Wall Street Journal report Sunday.

The prospect of a naval blockade by China means getting weapons to Taiwan during any future conflict would be far more challenging than sending arms to Ukraine.

National Security Council spokesman John Kirby, in a press briefing Monday, declined to comment on the backlog.

The U.S. is constantly balancing its own weapons inventories, those of allies and partners and people who purchase arms as well as the Ukrainian armed forces, Kirby said.

“And it’s a balancing act,” he said. “And we’re in constant touch with, again, allies and partners about their readiness needs, because many of them are reliant on U.S. systems. And, of course, you know, that includes Taiwan.”

Norah Huang, director for international relations at the Prospect Foundation, a security and foreign affairs think tank in Taipei, said in an email Wednesday that the U.S. and Taiwan have been in discussions about joint manufacturing of weapons.

## Stealth fighter damaged after Okinawa landing

By MATTHEW M. BURKE  
AND KEISHI KOJA

*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — A Marine Corps stealth fighter was damaged Thursday following a precautionary landing at an Okinawa air base, a Marine official said Thursday evening.

A suspected electrical problem prompted the pilot to land the F-35B Lightning II, assigned to VMFA-121 at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan, at Kadena Air Base without incident at approximately 1:40 p.m., 1st Marine Aircraft Wing spokesman Maj. Rob Martins wrote in a statement to Stars and Stripes. Kadena Air Base is home to the Air Force’s 18th Wing.

While the fifth-generation fighter was being towed on the flight line, the front landing gear malfunctioned and the aircraft’s nose dropped onto the ground, Martins said. He said the incident caused no injuries.

It is unclear how much damage was done to the fighter, Martins said in his email. He said a “detailed investigation” will be conducted.

# At White House, Biden, Macron discuss climate, Ukraine, China

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Presidents Joe Biden and Emmanuel Macron sat down Thursday for the centerpiece talks of a pomp-filled French state visit, with the two leaders eager to talk through the war in Ukraine, concerns about China's increasing assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific and European dismay over aspects of Biden's signature climate law.

Biden was to honor Macron with the first state dinner of his presidency on Thursday evening, but first the two leaders met in the Oval Office to discuss difficult issues that they face.

At the top of the agenda is the 9-month-old war in Ukraine in which Biden and Macron face headwinds as they try to maintain unity in the U.S. and Europe to keep economic and military aid flowing to Kyiv as it tries to repel Russian forces.

"The choices we make today and the years ahead will determine the course of our world for decades to come," Biden said at an arrival ceremony.

Macron at the start of the face-to-face meeting acknowledged the "challenging times" in Ukraine and called on the two nations to better "synchronize our actions" on climate.

In Washington, Republicans are set to take control of the House, where GOP leader Kevin McCarthy has said his party's lawmakers will not write a "blank check" for Ukraine. Across the Atlantic, Macron's efforts to keep Europe united will

be tested by the mounting costs of supporting Ukraine in the war and as Europe battles rising energy prices that threaten to derail the post-pandemic economic recovery.

Macron at the arrival ceremony stressed a need for the U.S. and France to keep the West united as the war continues.

"Our two nations are sisters in the fight for freedom," Macron declared.

Amid the talk of maintaining unity, differences on trade were shadowing the visit.

Macron has made clear that he and other European leaders are concerned about the incentives in a climate-related law that favor American-made climate technology, including electric vehicles.

He criticized the legislation, known as the Inflation Reduction Act, during a luncheon Wednesday with U.S. lawmakers and again during a speech at the French Embassy. Macron said that while the Biden administration's efforts to curb climate change should be applauded, the subsidies would be an enormous setback for European companies.

"The choices that have been made ... are choices that will fragment the West," Macron said.

He said the legislation "creates such differences between the United States of America and Europe that all those who work in many companies (in the U.S.), they will just think, 'We don't make investments any more on the other side of the Atlantic.'"

## Applications for jobless benefits fall

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for unemployment benefits came back down last week, hovering near levels suggesting the U.S. labor market has been largely unaffected by the Federal Reserve's aggressive interest rate hikes.

Applications for jobless aid fell to 225,000 for the week ending Nov. 26, a decline of 16,000 from the previous week's 241,000, the Labor Department reported Thursday. The four-week moving average of claims, which evens out week-to-week swings, inched up by 1,750 to 227,000.

Applications for unemployment benefits are a proxy for layoffs, and viewed with other employment data, shows that American workers are enjoying extraordinary job security at the moment, despite an economy with some glaring weaknesses.

In spite of persistent inflation and rapidly rising interest rates, U.S. employers added 261,000 jobs last month and are creating an average of nearly 407,000 a month this year.

That pace would make 2022 the second-best year for hiring — after 2021 — in government records going back to 1940. There are nearly two job openings for every unemployed American. The unemployment rate is 3.7%, a couple of ticks above a half-century low.

The government issues its November jobs report on Friday.

New weekly applications for unemployment benefits have been extremely low early this year — staying below 200,000 for much of February, March and April.

They began to tick up in late spring and hit 261,000 in mid-July before trending lower again.

## Inflation gauge slows down but still high at 6%

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A measure of inflation that is closely monitored by the Federal Reserve eased but remained at an elevated level in October, likely reinforcing the Fed's intent to keep raising interest rates to cool the economy and slow the rise of prices.

Thursday's report from the Commerce Department showed that prices rose 6% in October from a year earlier. That was down from 6.3% year-over-year increase in September. Excluding volatile food and energy prices, so-called core inflation over the previous 12 months was 5%, less than the 5.2% annual increase in Sep-

tember.

Responding to the worst inflation bout since the early 1980s, the Fed has raised its benchmark rate six times since March, and its past four hikes have each been by a hefty three-quarters of a point. The central bank is hoping to engineer the difficult task of bringing inflation down to its 2% annual target without causing a recession in the process.

On Wednesday, Fed Chair Jerome Powell said in a speech that the central bank could slow its rate hikes to a half-point increase when it next meets in two weeks — a message that sent cheers through the financial markets. Yet at the same time,

Powell made clear that the policymakers intend to keep their key rate, which affects many consumer and business loans, at a high level for a prolonged period.

The Fed's series of aggressive rate increases have made borrowing costs sharply more expensive across the economy. The housing market, in particular, has been hammered by a doubling of mortgage rates from a year ago: Sales of previously occupied homes have dropped for nine straight months. Many economists expect the United States to fall into a recession next year as the effects of those costlier loan rates take root.



# Russian shelling cuts off Kherson power again

*Associated Press*

KHERSON, Ukraine — Russian shelling cut off power in much of the recently liberated Ukrainian city of Kherson on Thursday, just days after it was restored amid Moscow's ongoing drive to destroy key civilian infrastructure as freezing weather sets in.

In Kyiv, Mayor Vitali Klitschko warned the capital's millions of residents that they should stock up on water and preserved food to see them through a winter that could prove even more miserable if more energy infrastructure is damaged.

He also urged people to con-

sider leaving the city to stay with friends or family elsewhere, if possible.

"Trying months lie ahead. The enemy still possesses substantial resources," Ukrainian Defense Minister Oleksiy Reznikov said. He added, however, that "signs are accumulating that (Russia) needs a pause at all costs."

Ukraine has faced a blistering onslaught of Russian artillery fire and drone attacks since early October.

The shelling has been especially intense in Kherson since Russian forces withdrew and Ukraine's army reclaimed the southern city almost three

weeks ago.

Ukraine's presidential office said Thursday that at least two civilians were killed and six others wounded nationwide by the latest Russian shelling. In Kherson, a 70-year-old woman was killed in her apartment and a 64-year-old man was wounded on the street. A 15-year-old boy died when a hospital in the northeastern Sumy region town of Bilopillia was hit, the presidential office said.

Local authorities said about two-thirds of Kherson had electricity as of Thursday night. Some residents congregated at the train station or at

government-supported tents that provided heating, food, drinks and electricity to charge cellphones.

In the eastern Dnipropetrovsk region, Russian forces fired "from evening till morning" at Ukrainian-held towns facing the Russian occupied Zaporizhzhia Nuclear Power Plant across the Dnieper River, the regional governor said Thursday.

Elsewhere in eastern Ukraine, Russian forces continued their attempts to encircle the Donetsk region city of Bakhmut, focusing on several villages around it and trying to cut a key highway.

## China eases coronavirus measures amid protests

*Associated Press*

BEIJING — More Chinese cities eased anti-virus restrictions and police patrolled their streets Thursday as the government tried to defuse public anger over some of the world's most stringent COVID measures and head off more protests.

Following weekend demonstrations at which some crowds made the politically explosive demand that leader Xi Jinping resign, the streets of major cities have been quiet in the face of a crackdown that has been largely out of sight.

Guangzhou in the south, Shijiazhuang in the north, Chengdu in the southwest and other major cities announced they were easing testing requirements and controls on movement. In some areas, markets and bus service reopened. A newspaper reported Beijing, the capital, has begun allowing

some people with the virus to isolate at home, avoiding crowded quarantine centers that have prompted complaints. The government didn't immediately respond to a request for confirmation.

But many of the rules that brought people into the streets of Shanghai, Beijing and at least six other cities remain in force. The death of former leader Jiang Zemin this week could provide another opportunity for crowds to gather and potentially protest.

The announcements easing restrictions didn't mention last weekend's protests of the human cost of anti-virus measures that confine millions of people to their homes. But the timing and publicity suggested Xi's government was trying to mollify public anger.

While experts have said Beijing's poli-

cies are unsustainable, they have also warned it can't relax controls that keep most travelers out of China until tens of millions of older people are vaccinated. They said that means "zero COVID" might stay in place for as much as another year.

With a heavy police presence, there was no indication of protests Thursday. Notes on social media complained people were being stopped at random for police to check smartphones, possibly looking for prohibited apps such as Twitter, in what they said was a violation of China's Constitution.

"I am especially afraid of becoming the 'Xinjiang model' and being searched on the excuse of walking around," said a posting signed Qi Xiaojin on the popular Sina Weibo platform, referring to the northwestern region where Uyghur and other Muslim minorities are under intense surveillance.

## Viewers flock to watch glowing lava ooze from Hawaii volcano

*Associated Press*

KAILUA-KONA, Hawaii — The world's largest volcano oozed rivers of glowing lava Wednesday, drawing thousands of awestruck viewers who jammed a Hawaii highway that could soon be covered by the flow.

Mauna Loa awoke from its 38-year slumber Sunday, causing

volcanic ash and debris to drift down from the sky. A main highway linking towns on the east and west coasts of the Big Island became an impromptu viewing point, with thousands of cars jamming the highway near Volcanoes National Park.

Anne Andersen left her overnight shift as a nurse to see the spectacle Wednesday, afraid that

the road would soon be closed.

"It's Mother Nature showing us her face," she said, as the volcano belched gas on the horizon. "It's pretty exciting."

Gordon Brown, a visitor from Loomis, Calif., could see the bright orange lava from the bedroom of his rental house. So he headed out for a close-up view with his wife.

"We just wanted ... to come see this as close as we could get. And it is so bright, it just blows my mind," Brown said.

The lava was tumbling slowly down the slope and was about 6 miles from the highway known as Saddle Road. It was not clear when, or if, it would cover the road, which runs through old lava flows.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

## Officials alarmed by rap video recorded in prison

**MI** LENOX TOWNSHIP — A rap video titled “In Dis Cell” appears to be too authentic: It was made inside a Michigan prison, despite a ban on wireless phones.

Two prisoners in the video have been placed in segregation at the Macomb prison in suburban Detroit, Corrections Department spokesman Chris Gautz said Tuesday.

The video, posted on YouTube, shows the men, the inside of their cell and prison staff in a corridor. The men appear to have two phones.

Gautz told the Detroit Free Press it’s “incredibly dangerous” to have wireless phones inside a prison “especially with the capability of getting onto the internet.” He said they could be used to arrange escapes or harass crime witnesses. Smuggling phones, cameras or drugs into prison is a crime.

## New unit probes 23 deaths involving police

**MD** ANNAPOLIS — A unit in the Maryland attorney general’s office investigated 23 fatalities involving police in its first year and so far none of the investigations have resulted in officers being charged, the office said Tuesday.

The unit completed reports on 13 cases in the first year, according to the report. In that time, local prosecutors have made decisions not to prosecute in 11 cases. While the law empowers the Independent Investigations Division to probe the cases and provide facts to local

prosecutors, prosecutors decide whether to bring charges.

The unit was created last year by the Maryland General Assembly to “investigate all alleged or potential police-involved deaths of civilians” throughout the state. It was part of a package of police reform laws approved after the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis and the nationwide protests that followed.

## US approves counties’ disaster declaration

**WV** CHARLESTON — President Joe Biden has approved a federal disaster declaration for two southern West Virginia counties hit by severe storms over the summer.

The White House announced the president’s approval Tuesday for federal assistance for communities hit by storms in McDowell County on July 12 and 13, and in Fayette County on Aug. 14 and 15. Heavy rains damaged homes, bridges and roads in both counties.

In Fayette County, flooding washed out a public service district’s sewage collection system serving the Mount Olive Correctional Center.

## \$10M settlement in heat death of teenage athlete

**GA** ATLANTA — The parents of a Georgia high school basketball player who collapsed while practicing outdoors in sweltering heat and later died announced Tuesday that they have agreed to a \$10 million settlement with the school district.

As part of the settlement, the

Clayton County school system agreed to rename the gymnasium at Elite Scholars Academy for Imani Bell, who was a 16-year-old junior at the school when she died.

Imani collapsed on Aug. 13, 2019, after running up the football stadium steps during required conditioning drills for the girls’ basketball team, her family said in the wrongful death lawsuit filed against administrators at the school. The temperature was in the high 90s Fahrenheit at the time and the area was under a heat advisory.

Imani died later that day from heat-related cardiac arrest and kidney failure, the lawsuit said. An autopsy done by the Georgia Bureau of Investigation found that she had no preexisting conditions and her death was due solely to heatstroke caused by strenuous physical exertion in extreme temperatures, the family’s lawyers said.

## Naturopath sentenced over fake vaccine cards

**CA** SAN FRANCISCO — A naturopathic doctor who sold fake COVID-19 immunization treatments and fraudulent vaccination cards during the height of the coronavirus pandemic was sentenced in California on Tuesday to nearly three years in prison, federal prosecutors said.

Juli A. Mazi pleaded guilty last April in federal court in San Francisco to one count of wire fraud and one count of false statements related to health care matters.

The case is the first federal criminal fraud prosecution related to fraudulent Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

vaccination cards for COVID-19, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. In August, U.S. District Judge Charles R. Breyer denied Mazi’s motion to withdraw her plea agreement after she had challenged the laws that led to her prosecution.

She provided fake CDC vaccination cards for COVID-19 to at least 200 people with instructions on how to complete the cards to make them look like they had received a Moderna vaccine, federal prosecutors said. She also sold homeopathic pellets she fraudulently claimed would provide “lifelong immunity to COVID-19.”

## Man pleads guilty to lewd behavior on flight

**MA** BOSTON — A 76-year-old man accused of performing lewd acts and touching a 21-year-old woman’s leg without her consent on a Boston-bound flight earlier this year has pleaded guilty, federal prosecutors said.

The Bonita Springs, Fla., man faces up to 90 days in prison at sentencing scheduled for March in Boston federal court, according to a statement Tuesday from the U.S. attorney’s office in Massachusetts.

The man and the victim were on a flight from Newark, N.J., to Boston on April 8 when the defendant exposed himself, inappropriately touched himself and later on just before landing put his hand on the thigh of the 21-year-old woman seated next to him, prosecutors said.

The woman recorded a 24-second video and alerted a nearby passenger, authorities said.

— From wire reports

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# US trip to knockout round a big step

*Associated Press*

DOHA, Qatar — American soccer hopes to be ascendant, to challenge the NFL, Major League Baseball and the NBA in the competition for the U.S. market share.

Reaching the final 16 with Tuesday's 1-0 win over Iran was another step for a team whose success is measured in television viewers and buzz along with final scores.

"I don't know the final numbers, but I'm sure there was a lot of people watching," U.S. coach Gregg Berhalter said. "You see how resilient this group is. You see how unified this group is. You see what type of energy and output they put into every single game. And then along the way, there's some pretty good soccer. That's the American spirit, the way this group plays, and I think people will appreciate that, especially back home."

The Americans opened with a 1-1 draw with Wales that was seen by 11.7 million on English- and Spanish-language U.S. broadcasts and followed with a 0-0 tie against England that was viewed by 19.98 million on

Black Friday, when schools were off and many offices closed.

President Joe Biden took note of the victory over Iran when speaking in Bay City, Mich.

"They did it! God love 'em," Biden said.

A victory on Saturday against the Netherlands would put the U.S. in the quarterfinals for the first time since 2002. The status of Christian Pulisic is uncertain after he bruised his pelvis crashing into the goalkeeper while scoring against Iran. The U.S. Soccer Federation did not make Pulisic available to media on Wednesday but posted a video of him dribbling a ball.

Pulisic hopes to play Saturday. He said he was going to consult with the medical staff in the hope of joining Thursday's training session.

"I will do everything in my power to work with this medical team and make sure I can play," he said.

"We may be the underdog," said Brenden Aaronson, who replaced Pulisic at the start of the second half. "The Dutch are a world power and they've been

that for many, many tournaments. So I think for us, it's just going in there with no fear and playing the way we have been this entire tournament. And I think good things will come out of it."

Matt Turner, the first U.S. goalkeeper with consecutive World Cup shutouts since 1930, was overcome with emotion at the final whistle. Turner thought back to how the U.S. performance in 2010 helped convert him to soccer.

He was a high school baseball player who played soccer full time, then switched emphasis. Turner's journey took him to a Major League Soccer debut in 2018, a transfer to Arsenal last summer and now success on soccer's biggest stage.

"This is just an unbelievable experience for me, given my story," he said. "Almost everything is a carbon copy of the feelings that I felt as a fan in 2010. And to be able to have a say in the result that gets us through to the next round is huge — it was just very emotional for a lot of reasons for me."

The American lineup against

Iran was the youngest of any team at this year's tournament and the youngest for the Americans since 1990, averaging 24 years, 321 days. Iran coach Carlos Queiroz, a former U.S. Soccer Federation adviser, praised their pace, which forced his team to adjust.

"When we play a team with Ferraris who need space to accelerate, the best way to play against them is to close the highways so they can't gain speed," he said.

A daunting task against the Dutch is ahead: The U.S. has five losses and six draws in 11 World Cup matches against European opponents since upsetting Portugal 3-2 in a 2002 opener.

"It's a great opportunity but it's not something that we're going into it thinking it's an honor. We deserve to be in the position we're in and we want to keep going," Berhalter said. "So for us, it's about how we recover from this game and prepare to play against a very good Dutch, very well coached, ton of quality all over the field, and we have to come up with an idea of how to beat them."

## Riley's remarkable turnaround at USC paying off big

*Associated Press*

LOS ANGELES — When Lincoln Riley took over Southern California's four-win football program one year ago this week, the coach stood on the top rim of the Coliseum and boldly declared his Trojans should be competing for championships right away.

Riley chuckled Tuesday when he was reminded of that exhilarating time in his life after his shocking departure from Oklahoma, but he has no interest in gloating about just how right he turned out to be.

"I feel a lot right now like I did then," Riley said. "When you do

sit back for a second and think about where we were a year ago, and some of the things that have transpired for this team and the program during that time, it's fun to think about. But it's just not the time and place right now."

Riley has delivered on his declaration with a swiftness that even surprises some of the players who have turned USC (11-1, 8-1 Pac-12) into the nation's fourth-ranked team with a chance at both the Pac-12 title and a College Football Playoff berth. The Trojans even won both of their biggest rivalry matchups against UCLA and Notre Dame in the past two

weeks, reclaiming the Victory Bell and the Jeweled Shillelagh.

It's a stunning correction to a miserable decade-plus for the West Coast's marquee program, which has won just one conference crown since 2008 and has never played in the CFP, which began in 2014.

USC will be in Las Vegas on Friday night for the Pac-12 title game against No. 12 Utah, the only team to beat Riley's Trojans this season. One more payback victory in a year dubbed "a revenge tour" by star USC defensive end Tuli Tuipulotu would punctuate this season with an exclamation point, even if it isn't

over yet.

"It is a crazy story, but I think we knew that we had to turn everything around, and we've been working ever since Lincoln Riley came in," said Tuipulotu, the FBS leader with 12½ sacks. "We knew it was going to happen if we kept working."

Riley and Heisman Trophy favorite Caleb Williams are the faces of this turnaround as two former Sooners who moved to California and immediately hit it big. But the coach and his players have all said this flashy transformation happened because of 12 months of hard work and a fierce commitment to team-building.



# McDavid on familiar path to be the best

Associated Press

As he approached his 500th regular-season NHL game on Wednesday, Connor McDavid marveled at how Sidney Crosby has maintained a high level of play for more than twice that long.

"Just the longevity of it," the Edmonton Oilers captain said. "You look at a guy like Sid, who I think has changed his game a little bit here and there a few times over, it's so incredible to see."

And familiar. McDavid is a much different player 500-plus games into his career than he was seven years ago when he made his debut. He is arguably the best player in the world after following a Crosby-like blueprint of isolating individual weaknesses and turning them into strengths.

"I'd like to think I'm a more responsible player, probably not as reckless as I was at 18 years old," said McDavid, who will turn 26 in January. "I play

the game a little bit different, but you have to adapt in the NHL otherwise you don't go very far."

Only five players in league history have put up more points through 500 games than McDavid's 724 and the list does not include Crosby, Alex Ovechkin and other elite players.

He again leads the NHL in points a quarter of the way through the season with 41 in 23 games, and McDavid's next trick could be scoring 50 goals in a season for the first time. Before training camp, he said that would be nice but pale in comparison to team success.

"Numbers, really, at this point, I've kind of been there and done that," McDavid said. "I've won my Art Rosses and Hart trophies and that stuff's all kind of a moot point."

McDavid has won the Art Ross Trophy as the league's leading scorer four times and Hart as MVP twice. The furthest

he and the Oilers have advanced in the playoffs was last season, when they reached the Western Conference finals before losing to the eventual Stanley Cup champion Colorado Avalanche.

Edmonton needs more than just McDavid and longtime running mate Leon Draisaitl to make another deep run. But if the storied franchise is going to hang a sixth Cup banner from the rafters, McDavid's evolution will be a big reason for it.

After winning just 41.2% of his faceoffs in his rookie year, McDavid has steadily improved in the circle to the point he's now in the top 25 players in the league in that category. He had 89 giveaways in 2018-19 and has not approached that number since. And he has become a serviceable penalty killer.

"I think there is evolving his personal game," coach Jay Woodcroft said. "I see a 200-foot player, I see a lot of defensive details in his game and I see

someone who has adapted offensively. He doesn't just resort to doing the same thing day in and day out, year in and year out."

All that after entering the NHL with the pressure of not only being the top pick in the 2015 draft, but called hockey's "Next One" as a generational talent expected to follow in Crosby's skate tracks.

McDavid was immediately the face of the franchise and soon after the youngest captain in NHL history at 19 years, 266 days old. He credits now-retired winger Matt Hendricks for helping him evolve as a leader, another area of his development.

"I don't think he gets enough credit on the leadership side of things," Woodcroft said. "For Connor, it's not just about setting an example, it's also holding the team to a certain standard and holding people accountable to that standard."

## Chiefs' Mahomes turns to Bengals after son's birth

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Chiefs quarterback Patrick Mahomes showed up bright-eyed and energetic for practice on Wednesday.

Perhaps the adrenaline was still flowing from the birth of his baby boy.

Or his wife was handling all the late-night diaper changes.

"Brittany is a champ," said Mahomes, who along with his wife welcomed Patrick "Bronze" Mahomes III on Monday night, and gave 1-year-old daughter Sterling a little brother. "Everything went great and everything went smooth."

Mahomes said the addition to the family — his father, Pat Mahomes Sr., and many other family members happened to be in town for the birth — won't affect his preparation for one of the marquee games on the Chiefs' remaining schedule.

They're headed to Cincinnati on Sunday for a rematch of the AFC championship game, when Kansas City jumped out to a 21-3 lead and still led 21-10 at halftime before its offense collapsed and the Bengals rallied for a 27-24 victory.

It's a game that has stuck with everyone in the Chiefs locker room for the past 11 months.

"I think you have to keep it in perspective. It's a brand-new season," Mahomes said. "But any time a team beats you before, you want to beat them, especially when they beat you in a game like they did to go to the Super Bowl."

Mahomes acknowledged that his play went downhill in the second half that night, his fundamentals going awry as the lead shrank and the pressure mounted.

It's something he worked on throughout the offseason, and weekly during the season, and those finely tuned fundamentals have put him in the conversation for a second MVP award.

He leads the league in passing by a wide margin — Mahomes has thrown for 3,585 yards while the Bills' Josh Allen is next with 3,183. Ditto for touchdowns with Mahomes throwing 29 to Allen's 23. He's throwing for more yards per game (325.9) than any point in his career, his yards-per-attempt is the highest in three years, and Mahomes is completing better than two-thirds of his throws for a third consecutive season, all despite an inju-

ry-riddled wide receiver group.

It helps that Travis Kelce is having a similar stupendous season. The three-time All-Pro tight end already has 12 touchdown receptions, which is tied with the entire rosters of the Browns, Texans and Rams and more than seven other teams.

"A quarterback like him, he's a special guy, man. Those don't come around very often," Chiefs wide receiver JuJu Smith-Schuster said. "You look at Tom Brady — Tom played with how many receivers? And you can't name them all? Same thing with Pat, man. He threw to 10 different guys (last week against the Rams) and was just making plays."

Smith-Schuster has missed time with a concussion and was out of practice Wednesday with an illness. Mecole Hardman is on injured reserve with an abdominal injury and Kadarius Toney is still out with a hamstring issue.

Yet with Mahomes under center, the Chiefs offense keeps on humming. It has eclipsed 400 yards seven times this season, and five straight, which is tied for the longest streak in franchise history.

# Early NBA MVP race has crowded candidate field

*Associated Press*

DENVER — Nikola Jokic may just be putting together his best season.

It still may not be enough to get the Denver Nuggets' big man a third straight NBA MVP.

Chalk that up to MVP fatigue. Or to the glaringly good numbers of a crowded field of early candidates, including Luka Doncic, Giannis Antetokounmpo, Jayson Tatum and Stephen Curry.

Jokic isn't having to shoulder as much of the load with the return this season of fellow Nuggets stars Jamal Murray and Michael Porter Jr. He's also taken his unselfish play to another level, which may not do him any favors in the MVP race, but it sure does help the Nuggets.

That's just fine with coach Michael Malone. He'll gladly take this version of the player nicknamed "Joker," the one averaging a career-best 8.8 assists to go with 23 points and 9.8 rebounds through the first quarter of the season.

"I don't worry about the MVP buzz," said Malone, whose team moved to 13-7 after a 129-113 win over Houston on Monday night where Jokic had 32 points, 12 rebounds and eight assists.

"If we continue to win, Nikola is going to be in the MVP conversation because of the fact that he impacts the game on so many different levels."

Last season, Jokic put up 27.1 points, 13.8 rebounds and 7.9 assists because that was the best way for Denver to win. The Nuggets didn't have Murray (knee) and barely had Porter (back).

These days, Jokic lets the game dictate which stat category he dominates. Sometimes, it's through his pinpoint passes. Others, with his deft shooting touch.

To illustrate: He took nine shots and had 14 assists in a win at Oklahoma City on Nov. 3. Twenty days later, and back at Oklahoma City, he erupted for 39 points in another win.

Jokic is trying to join the company of Larry Bird, Wilt Chamberlain and Bill Russell as players who've each won the MVP award in three straight seasons. But Jokic is well down the odds list of early favorites.

Antetokounmpo and Doncic are both the favorites at +280, according to FanDuel Sportsbook. Behind Tatum, Curry, Joel Embiid, Donovan Mitchell, Ja Morant and tied with Kevin Durant, is Jokic (+2700).

Nuggets point guard Ish Smith, who's crossed paths with former league MVPs Russell Westbrook and Durant during his 13-team excursion, has a theory of why Jokic is not a front-runner.

"People like to see something different. He's a two-time MVP, so obviously people are advocating for Luka, he's playing at a high level. Giannis, too," Smith said. "Sometimes people like the new 'It,' the new thing."

Much like Jokic last season, Doncic needs to produce in a big way for the Mavericks to succeed. He is averaging 33.1 points, 8.7 rebounds and 8.4 assists.

Antetokounmpo, a two-time MVP winner, is on pace for his highest scoring average (30.9). Curry, another two-time winner, continues to shoot lights out from everywhere — 52.2% from the floor, 44.1% from three-point range and 91.1% from the free-throw line. Then there's Tatum, who's averaging more than 30 points a game as his Celtics have won a league-best 17 games.

The Nuggets don't mind the throwback play of Jokic, who has the most triple-doubles of any center in NBA history.

"He's such a dominant

force," Smith said. "He's pretty special."

Unassuming, too. Smith caught a glimpse of that when a few of the Nuggets attended a Los Angeles Dodgers-Padres game while in San Diego for training camp. There was Jokic, just walking around like any ordinary baseball fan.

That's just his personality. Don't forget: He accepted the MVP trophy last season from his horse stable in Sombor, Serbia.

"He's not flashy. I love it," Smith said of Jokic, the second-round pick in the 2014 draft. "I don't think I've ever been around a superstar like that."

Malone doesn't have any plans to talk with Jokic about being more aggressive. There's no need for it.

"I trust Nikola," Malone said. "He's proven over eight years that he's going to make the right play time and time again. ... He knows how to play the game. He knows when he needs to be aggressive and score for us."

"The beauty of having a player with his unselfishness and IQ is just trusting him to make the right play over and over and over again. As a back-to-back MVP, he's done that better than most."

## Brutal slate for Gonzaga continues with No. 6 Baylor

*Associated Press*

Gonzaga coach Mark Few always builds an ambitious nonconference schedule, helping not only harden his team for March but also to balance the Bulldogs' weaker West Coast Conference slate when it comes to the NCAA selection committee.

They've taken their lumps already this season, losing to second-ranked Texas and fifth-ranked Purdue to fall out of the top 10 for the first time since February 2018. But the No. 14 Bulldogs also have marquee wins over No. 19 Kentucky and No. 20 Michigan State, the latter played on the USS Abraham Lincoln at North Island Naval Air Station in California.

Next up in the meatgrinder: No. 6 Bay-

lor on Friday night at the Sanford Pentagon in Sioux Falls, S.D.

Oh, and it just happens to be a rematch of the 2021 national title game won by the Bears in a rout.

"Every time I see Baylor playing," Bulldogs guard Julian Strawther said, "I just kind of think to that national championship game. For sure excited to get out there and play against a great team on a neutral site. Those are the games that all great players want: two top teams, a bunch of great players. I'm super excited for it."

It's not as if the Bears, who face Marquette on Tuesday night, will have had an easy road to South Dakota, either. They lost to third-ranked Virginia in Las Vegas

before knocking off No. 21 UCLA in the Continental Tire Main Event.

"(Baylor) is one of the most amazing stories in sports, from where it was — how low it could be, which is apathy plus all the stuff that happened there," said Few, who has grown close to Bears coach Scott Drew over the years.

"He's just such a positive person and force and that's what his program is like," Few said. "They really got, not a system but they recruit to what works at Baylor. Their perimeter players in the national championship game were terrific, the ones they have now are terrific. They have size inside. They've really got that thing going."