

## Russia rejects conditions for talks

*Associated Press*

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia said Friday that Western demands it should pull out completely from Ukraine as part of any future talks to end the war effectively rule out any such negotiations, as Russian strikes continued and a Ukrainian official set his country's battle losses at up to 13,000 troops.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov reiterated that Russian President Vladimir Putin remains open to talks but the Western demand that Moscow first withdraw its troops from Ukraine is unacceptable.

Peskov's comments came as Putin spoke on the phone Friday morning with German Chancellor Olaf Scholz. Scholz's office said he made clear to Putin "that there must be a diplomatic solution as quickly as possible, which includes a withdrawal of Russian troops."

On Thursday, U.S. President Joe Biden also indicated he would be willing to talk with Putin if he demonstrated that he

seriously wanted to end the invasion and pull out of Ukraine.

A statement issued by the Kremlin after the phone call with Scholz said Putin again blamed the West for encouraging Ukraine to prolong the war by supplying it with weapons.

Putin also said recent crippling Russian strikes on Ukraine's infrastructure were "forced and inevitable" after Ukraine allegedly bombed a key bridge to the Crimean peninsula — which Russia seized from Ukraine in 2014 — and energy facilities.

Russian forces have been bombarding Ukraine's critical infrastructure since October, leaving millions without electricity amid cold winter weather. Scholz's office said that in the phone conversation with Putin he "condemned in particular the Russian air attacks on civilian infrastructure" in Ukraine and said Germany was committed to continuing to help Ukraine defend itself.

Russian forces kept up rocket

attacks on infrastructure and airstrikes against Ukrainian troop positions along the contact line, the Ukrainian general staff said Friday, adding that Moscow's military push has focused on a dozen towns including Bakhmut and Avdiivka — key Russian targets in the embattled east.

A top adviser to Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy, citing military chiefs, said that since Russia invaded on Feb. 24, 10,000 to 13,000 Ukrainian soldiers have been killed in action. It was a rare comment on Ukraine's military casualties and far below estimates from Western leaders.

"We have official figures from the general staff, we have official figures from the top command, and they amount to between 10,000 and 12,500-13,000 killed," the adviser, Mykhailo Podolyak, said late Thursday on Channel 24 TV. He also said civilian casualties were "significant."

The Ukrainian military has

not confirmed such figures and it was a rare instance of a Ukrainian official providing such a count. The last dates back to late August, when the head of the armed forces said nearly 9,000 military personnel had been killed. In June, Podolyak said up to 200 soldiers were dying each day in some of the most intense fighting up to that point.

On Wednesday, Ursula von der Leyen, the president of the European Union's executive Commission, said 100,000 Ukrainian troops had been killed, before her office corrected her comments — calling them inaccurate and saying that the figure referred to both dead and injured.

Zelenskyy's office reported on Friday that at least three civilians were killed and 16 wounded in Ukraine in the past 24 hours. Kyrylo Tymoshenko, the office's deputy head, said on Telegram that Russian forces had attacked nine southeastern regions with heavy artillery, rockets and aircraft.

## US ready to unveil 1st new bomber of 21st century

**DOUG G. WARE**

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin will unveil on Friday the first new American bomber of the 21st century — the B-21 Raider, a long-range stealth aircraft that's been in the works for more than a decade.

"The B-21 is the most advanced military aircraft ever built and is a product of pioneering innovation and technological excellence," Doug Young, sector vice president and gener-

al manager for Northrop Aerospace Systems, said.

The B-21 is the result of the Air Force's Long-Range Strike Bomber program and is able to fly intercontinentally and drop conventional and thermonuclear weapons. Started in 2009, the aim of the program was to produce a more technologically advanced strategic bomber to replace the B-52 Stratofortress and the B-1 Lancer — bombers that were introduced in the 1950s and 1970s, respectively.

The B-21 is the Pentagon's

second stealth bomber in history after the B-2 Spirit, which entered service in the late 1990s.

The Raider will feature highly advanced systems — most of which remain classified — and is built with open architecture, which will allow "rapid upgradeability" for future technologies. It's also being described as a "digital bomber," which means it'll use "agile" software platforms and digital engineering tools, officials said.

At least six B-21 Raiders are in production so far and the first

is expected to fly within the next several months. Originally, the Air Force said it expected the first flight in mid-2022, but that was pushed back to sometime in 2023. However, Air Force officials have said the new bomber remains on schedule and under budget.

Each B-21 Raider should cost about \$700 million, military officials said, and the first bombers are expected to enter service in the next four or five years. The Air Force is expected to order more than 100.

# Biden wants SC as 1st primary state

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden said Thursday that Democrats should give up “restrictive” caucuses and prioritize diversity at the start of their presidential primary calendar — dealing a major blow to Iowa’s decadeslong status as the state that leads off the process.

In a letter to the rule-making arm of the Democratic National Committee, Biden did not mention specific states he’d like to see go first. But he has told Democrats he wants South Carolina moved to the first position, according to three people familiar with his recommendation who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations.

The president’s direction comes as the DNC rules committee gathered in Washington

on Friday to vote on shaking up the presidential primary calendar starting in 2024. Members now expect to approve new rules putting South Carolina first, followed by New Hampshire and Nevada on the same day a week later.

Georgia and Michigan would move into the top five as new early states, and each would hold primaries in subsequent weeks, committee members say. The two battlegrounds were critical to Biden’s 2020 victory over then-President Donald Trump, who had won both states in his 2016 White House campaign.

Much of the rest of the country would vote as part of Super Tuesday soon afterward.

Such changes are set to come after years of calls from many top Democrats for the voting

calendar to better reflect the party’s deeply diverse base than mostly white Iowa, which holds the country’s first caucus, and New Hampshire, which holds the first primary. The new calendar would still have to be approved by the full DNC in a vote likely to come early next year, but the DNC will almost certainly heed the rule-making panel’s recommendations.

The proposed order of the early states was first reported by The Washington Post.

“For decades, Black voters in particular have been the backbone of the Democratic Party but have been pushed to the back of the early primary process,” Biden wrote in a letter on personal stationery that did not carry the White House seal. “We rely on these voters in elections but have not recognized

their importance in our nominating calendar.”

He said caucuses were “restrictive and anti-worker” because they require voters “to spend significant amounts of time” on one night gathering to choose candidates in person, “disadvantaging hourly workers and anyone who does not have the flexibility to go to a set location at a set time.”

The changes could be implemented as soon as 2024 but would be rendered largely meaningless until 2028 if Biden opts to seek a second term. The president has said for months that he intends to run again, and White House aides and Biden allies have begun staffing and structural discussions for his likely 2024 bid while refraining from overt steps while the president weighs a final decision.

## Arizona county certifies vote after judge’s order

*Associated Press*

PHOENIX — A rural Arizona county certified its midterm election results on Thursday, following the orders of a judge who ruled that Republican supervisors broke the law when they refused to sign off on the vote count by this week’s deadline.

Two Republicans on Cochise County’s three-member board of supervisors balked for weeks about certifying the election, even as the deadline passed on Monday.

They did not cite any problems with the election results. Rather, they say they weren’t satisfied that the machines used to tabulate ballots were properly certified for use in elections, though state and federal elec-

tion officials have said they were.

Secretary of State Katie Hobbs filed suit Monday, asking a judge to force the supervisors to certify the election, a process formally known as a canvass.

At the end of a hearing Thursday, Judge Casey McGinley ordered the supervisors to convene within 90 minutes and to approve the election canvass by the end of the day.

“I am not ashamed of anything I did,” said Supervisor Peggy Judd, one of the two Republicans who twice blocked certification. “And today I feel I must, because of a court ruling and because of my own health and situations that are going on in our life, I feel like I must follow what the judge did today.”

## Bidens entertain over 330 at their first state dinner

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — The first White House state dinner of President Joe Biden’s administration drew big names Thursday from fashion, entertainment, politics and business who turned out to help celebrate French President Emmanuel Macron and the return of large social events after the pandemic.

There were kisses all around as the Bidens stepped out on the North Portico to welcome the Macrons — Jill Biden in an off-the-shoulder navy Oscar de la Renta gown, Brigitte Macron in a high-necked ivory one by Louis Vuitton.

Other guests trickled in via a side entrance: Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards, followed not

long after by Gov. John Carney, from Biden’s home state of Delaware.

Julia Louis-Dreyfus whizzed by the press, pausing only to say that, yes, she’d been to a state dinner before and it was all “very exciting.” Late-night TV host Stephen Colbert said nothing.

Shoe designer Christian Louboutin — wearing a crystal bolo tie — said “I have no idea” when asked how many women might be wearing his red-soled shoes for the night. Vogue editor Anna Wintour also was among the 338 names on the guest list.

Others attending: “Good Morning America” anchor Robin Roberts, actor Jennifer Garner, singer John Legend and his wife Chrissy Teigen and Navajo Nation President Jonathan Nez.

# High court to rule on student loan cancellation plan

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court agreed Thursday to decide whether the Biden administration can broadly cancel student loans, keeping the program blocked for now but signaling a final answer by early summer.

That's about two months before the newly extended pause on repayments is set to expire.

The administration had wanted a court order that would have allowed the program to take effect even as court challenges proceed. The justices didn't do that, but agreed to the administration's fallback, setting arguments for late February or early March over whether the program is legal.

President Joe Biden's plan promises \$10,000 in federal student debt forgiveness to those with incomes of less than \$125,000, or households earning less than \$250,000. Pell Grant recipients, who typically demonstrate more financial need, are eligible for an additional \$10,000 in relief.

The Congressional Budget Office has said the program will cost about \$400 billion over the next three decades.

More than 26 million people already applied for the relief, with 16 million approved, but the Education Department stopped processing applications last month after a federal judge in Texas struck down the plan.

The administration said it was pleased the nation's highest court had intervened, and Biden said on Twitter that the White House will keep fighting for the loan plan.

"Republican officials are throwing up roadblocks in order to prevent middle-class families from getting the student debt relief they need," he said in a tweet.

The Texas case is one of two in which federal judges have forbidden the administration from implementing the loan cancellations.

In a separate lawsuit filed by six states, a three-judge panel of the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in St. Louis also put the plan on hold, and that case is before the Supreme Court.

The moratorium had been slated to expire Jan. 1, a date that Biden set before his debt cancellation plan stalled in the face of legal challenges from conservative opponents.

The new expiration date is 60 days after the legal issue has been settled, but no later than the end of August.

Conservative attorneys, Republican lawmakers and business-oriented groups have asserted that Biden overstepped his authority in taking such sweeping action without the assent of Congress. They called it an unfair government giveaway for relatively affluent people at the expense of taxpayers who didn't pursue higher education.

Missouri Attorney General Eric Schmitt, a Republican, said in a statement following the high-court order that the Biden plan "would saddle Americans who didn't take out loans or already paid theirs off with even more economic woes." Missouri is one of the six states that sued to block the plan, along with Arkansas, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska and South Carolina.

## Court halts Mar-a-Lago special master review

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A unanimous federal appeals court on Thursday ended an independent review of documents seized from former President Donald Trump's Florida estate, removing a hurdle the Justice Department said had delayed its criminal investigation into the retention of top-secret government information.

The decision by the three-judge panel represents a significant win for federal prosecutors, clearing the way for them to use as part of their investigation the entire tranche of documents seized during an Aug. 8 FBI search of Mar-a-Lago.

It also amounts to a sharp repudiation of arguments by Trump's lawyers, who for months had said that the former president was entitled to have a so-called "special master" conduct a neutral review of the thousands of documents taken from the property.

The ruling from the Atlanta-based U.S. Court of Appeals for

the 11th Circuit had been expected given the skeptical questions the judges directed at a Trump lawyer during arguments last week, and because two of the three judges on the panel had already ruled in favor of the Justice Department in an earlier dispute over the special master.

The decision was a unanimous opinion from the panel of Republican appointees, including two who were selected by Trump.

In it, the court rejected each argument by Trump and his attorneys for why a special master was necessary, including his claims that various seized records were protected by attorney-client privilege or executive privilege.

"It is indeed extraordinary for a warrant to be executed at the home of a former president — but not in a way that affects our legal analysis or otherwise gives the judiciary license to interfere in an ongoing investigation," the judges wrote.

## Prosecutor: Trump knew of exec's tax fraud scheme

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Donald Trump "knew exactly what was going on" with top Trump Organization executives who schemed for years to dodge taxes on company-paid perks, a prosecutor said Thursday, challenging defense claims that the former president was unaware of the plot at the heart of the company's tax fraud case.

Manhattan prosecutor Joshua Steinglass lobbed the bombshell allegation during closing arguments. He promised to share more details when he resumed on Friday, buoyed by the judge's decision to grant prose-

cutors permission to veer into territory that had been considered off-limits because Trump is not on trial.

The tax fraud case is the only trial to arise from the three-year investigation of Trump and his business practices by the Manhattan district attorney's office.

Judge Juan Manuel Merchan, overruling a defense objection after the jury had left court, said the company's lawyers opened the door by asserting in their closing arguments that Trump was ignorant of the scheme, hatched by his longtime finance chief just steps from his Trump Tower office.



# Rail strike averted as Biden inks bill enforcing agreement

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden signed a bill Friday to avert a freight rail strike that he said could have plunged the U.S. into a recession.

At the White House, Biden signed a measure passed Thursday by the Senate and Wednesday by the House. It binds rail companies and workers to a proposed settlement that was reached between the railroads and union leaders in September but rejected by some of the union workers.

The president, for decades a vocal labor ally, called it the “right thing to do” given the risks to an economy that is battling high inflation.

“The bill I’m about to sign ends a difficult rail dispute and helps our nation avoid what without a doubt would have been an economic catastrophe at a very bad time in the calendar,” said Biden, adding that his team helped negotiate a “good product, but we still have more work to do in my view.”

Members in four of the 12 unions involved had rejected

the proposed contract as lacking sufficient paid sick leave. Biden acknowledged the shortcoming as he said he would continue to push for that benefit for every U.S. worker.

“I’ve supported paid sick leave for a long time,” he said. “I’m going to continue that fight until we succeed.”

Rejection of the settlement had created the risk of a strike beginning Dec. 9, jeopardizing key shipments during the holiday season. Biden and Congress staved off a work stoppage by imposing the agreement on the rail companies and workers.

A freight rail strike also would have a big potential impact on passenger rail since Amtrak and many commuter railroads rely on tracks owned by the freight railroads.

The president said that a strike would have sunk the U.S. economy, causing roughly 765,000 job losses by rupturing supply chains. Basic goods, food and the chemicals needed to ensure clean drinking water and make gasoline could have gone undelivered.

Rising prices already have many Americans afraid of a downturn, but the job market has been steady. The government reported Friday that employers added 263,000 jobs in November as the unemployment rate held at 3.7%. Still, the increases in wages raised concerns among many economists that high inflation could persist in ways that could force aggressive actions by the Federal Reserve to bring down prices.

Though Biden is a union ally, he said the rail order was necessary to prevent a strike. The administration helped broker deals between the railroads and union leaders in September, but four of the unions rejected the deals. Eight others approved five-year deals and all 12 are getting back pay for their workers for the 24% raises that are retroactive to 2020.

But the absence of a meaningful increase in paid sick leave and other quality-of-life issues was a key concern for many union members whose votes were required for the settlement.

## Eruption brings boom in tourism

Associated Press

HILO, Hawaii — The spectacle of incandescent lava spewing from Hawaii’s Mauna Loa has drawn thousands of visitors and is turning into a tourism boon for this Big Island town near the world’s largest volcano.

Some hotels in and around Hilo are becoming fully booked in what is normally a slower time of the year for business. Helicopter tours of Mauna Loa, which began erupting Sunday after being quiet for 38 years, are also in high demand by tourists and journalists.

“We’re sold out until after Christmas,” said Marian Somalinog, who staffs the front desk at the Castle Hilo Hawaiian Hotel.

She attributed the increase to people wanting to watch the rivers of bright orange molten rock gush from Mauna Loa, a shield volcano whose name means “Long Mountain” in Hawaiian. The glow from the eruption can be seen in the distance from parts of the hotel.

This time of year is normally a slow season for Hawaii’s travel industry, falling between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

But this week thousands of cars have created traffic jams on Route 200, known as the Saddle Road, which connects the cities of Hilo on the east side of Hawaii Island and Kailua-Kona on the west side.

Volcanic flows pose a potential future threat to that main artery but are currently still several miles away and not a danger to any communities. That means onlookers can take in the spectacle while exposing themselves to little danger. Tourists and locals are in the crowds, many snapping photos and taking selfies.

Somalinog hasn’t bothered to join them, however.

“The traffic is crazy,” she said. “It’s not worth it.”

## Ye Twitter account suspended over swastika

Associated Press

Twitter has suspended rapper Ye after he tweeted a picture of a swastika merged with the Star of David.

Twitter CEO Elon Musk confirmed the suspension by replying to Ye’s post of an unflattering photo of Musk. Ye called it his “final tweet.”

“I tried my best. Despite that, he again violated our rule against incitement to violence. Account will be suspended,” Musk tweeted.

Ye, formerly known as Kanye West, has made a series of antisemitic comments in recent

weeks. On Thursday, Ye praised Hitler in an interview with conspiracy theorist Alex Jones.

Ye’s remarks have led to his suspension from social media platforms, his talent agency dropping him and companies like Adidas cutting ties with him.

The sportswear manufacturer has also launched an investigation into his conduct.

Musk, meanwhile, is under pressure to clean up Twitter after changes he made following his purchase of the platform resulted in what watchdog groups

say is a rise in racist, antisemitic and other toxic speech. A top European Union official warned Musk this week that Twitter needs to do a lot more to protect users from hate speech, misinformation and other harmful content ahead of tough new rules requiring tech companies to better police their platforms, under threat of big fines or even a ban in the 27-nation bloc.

Ye had offered to buy right-wing-leaning social media site Parler in October, but the company said this week that the deal has fallen through.

# Hiring strong, complicating inflation fight

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The nation's employers kept hiring briskly in November despite high inflation and a slow-growing economy — a sign of resilience in the face of the Federal Reserve's aggressive interest rate hikes.

The economy added 263,000 jobs, while the unemployment rate stayed 3.7%, still near a 53-year low, the Labor Department said Friday.

November's job growth dipped only slightly from October's 284,000 gain.

All year, as inflation has surged and the Fed has imposed ever-higher borrowing rates, America's labor market has defied skeptics, repeatedly adding

hundreds of thousands of jobs.

With not enough people available to fill jobs, businesses are having to offer higher pay to attract and keep workers. In November, average hourly pay jumped 5.1% compared with a year ago, a robust increase that is welcome news for workers but one that makes the Fed's efforts to curb inflation potentially more difficult. On a month-to-month basis, wages jumped 0.6% in November, breaking a streak of smaller gains that had suggested that pay growth might be cooling.

The strength of the hiring and pay gains raised immediate concerns that the Fed may now have to keep interest rates high even longer than many had as-

sumed. The stock market reacted with alarm, with the Dow Jones Industrial Average sinking nearly 200 points in mid-morning trading Friday.

"This will be a reminder to the Fed and to the markets that the job on inflation is not done," said Blerina Uruci, chief U.S. economist at brokerage T. Rowe Price. "They really need wage pressures to be on a more sustained downward path. So that certainly calls for interest rates to remain higher for longer."

The report painted a picture of a job market in which the supply of available workers is falling just when many companies are still desperate to hire to meet customer demand. The proportion of Americans who

either have a job or are looking for one declined for a second straight month, to 62.1%. Before the pandemic, that figure was 63.4%; the drop since then translates into about 3 million people.

Since the pandemic, many older workers have taken early retirement. In addition, several hundred thousand working-age people have died from COVID-19.

And many families have struggled to find or afford child care, leaving some adults unable to return to work.

This week, Fed Chair Jerome Powell stressed in a speech that jobs and wages were growing too fast for the central bank to quickly slow inflation.

## Sierra snow hits Tahoe; more coming

Associated Press

RENO, Nev. — The first of back-to-back winter storms brought one foot of snow and an avalanche warning to the Sierra Nevada on Thursday, closing schools at Lake Tahoe and intermittently shutting down interstate traffic west of Reno.

A winter storm warning remained in effect through 4 a.m. Friday from Mammoth Lakes south of Yosemite National Park to about 200 miles north of Lake Tahoe. A new storm watch follows Friday night through the weekend, with as much as 3 feet of snow possible at the highest elevations by Sunday, the National

Weather Service said.

Multiple spinouts and a jackknifed semitrailer on Interstate 80 west of Reno forced various closures throughout the day. Travel had resumed in both directions Thursday night but the California Highway Patrol warned the roads were slick.

Mount Rose Ski Tahoe reported about a foot of snow at the top of the resort southwest of Reno and at least 8 inches was reported 80 miles north of Reno at Susanville, Calif., where 6 inches fell in just over two hours.

At Lake Tahoe, all schools were closed Thursday on the north shore at Incline

Village and at South Lake Tahoe, Calif.

The Sierra Avalanche Center in Truckee issued a backcountry avalanche warning through Friday for the Central Sierra Nevada, including the Tahoe area.

"Feet of new snow and strong winds will overload an already weak snowpack and result in very dangerous avalanche conditions in the mountains," the center said.

The storm out of the Pacific Ocean roared ashore in Northern California early Thursday, bringing heavy rain that snarled the morning commute and prompted flood advisories in the San Francisco Bay Area.

## Students appear to OD on cannabis edibles

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Ten Los Angeles students appear to have overdosed on cannabis edibles Thursday at their middle school in the San Fernando Valley, officials said.

The students, between 12 and 15 years old, were in mild to moderate distress at Van Nuys Middle School around 10:30 a.m., according to the Los Angeles Fire Department. Seven of them were taken to pediatric medical centers.

LAFD Capt. Erik Scott said the overdoses were possibly from edible cannabis products and investigators are trying to determine whether all 10 students got the substances from the same source.

Christopher Angel, 12, told the Los Angeles Times that three people in his class were affected.

"They were acting weird, tired, high," he said.

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# Allen throws for 2 TDs, Bills beat Patriots

Associated Press

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — The Buffalo Bills had done everything this season, except earn a victory in their division.

They're hoping their first will be the one that helps put them back on the path to winning it again.

Josh Allen threw two touchdown passes and the Bills beat the New England Patriots 24-10 on Thursday night for their first AFC East win of the season.

Devin Singletary had a 1-yard touchdown run to help the Bills (9-3) win their third straight and take a half-game lead in the division over Miami. Buffalo had been 0-2 against division foes.

"We know these games that are coming up, they matter," Allen said. "The ones in December and January, they matter. We've got to find ways to go win some football games."

Allen became the first player in NFL history with three seasons of 25 passing TDs and five

rushing scores.

Including the playoffs last season, the Bills have won their last three meetings with New England (6-6).

Allen went 22 of 33 for 223 yards, consistently buying time in the pocket and finding soft spots in the Patriots' zone. The Bills have struggled at times in the red zone, but went 3 for 3 on Thursday.

Despite playing without top pass rusher Von Miller, who suffered a knee injury in a Thanksgiving win over Detroit, Buffalo's defense held the Patriots to three points over the final three quarters.

New England has lost two straight since posting a season-best three-game win streak.

"There's a lot of things we need to do better," Patriots coach Bill Belichick said.

A week after putting together his most complete effort of the season, New England's Mac Jones was flustered and unsure for most of the night. He fin-

ished 22 of 36 for 195 yards and a touchdown. The Patriots were 3 of 12 on third down and 0 for 1 in the red zone.

"We want to win. And we're not doing that," Patriots center David Andrews said. "We've got to find ways to win. Whatever that is."

Bills linebacker Tremaine Edmunds said the plan was to make Mac Jones beat them with his arm.

"We just knew we had to make them one dimensional, whatever that was," said Edmunds, who had six tackles. "Our focus is ahead, not looking back."

The Bills started slowly on offense, settling for a field goal on their first possession.

Trailing 7-3, Allen went to work during Buffalo's next two opportunities.

He led his team 82 yards in nine plays, ending the drive with an 8-yard touchdown pass to Stefon Diggs on the first play of the second quarter.

Following a Patriots punt, Allen capped a 14-play, 56-drive by eluding the Patriots' pass rush and tiptoeing along the sideline before throwing across his body for an 8-yard TD pass to Gabe Davis.

The Patriots came in banged up on their offensive line and got creative to get their first points of the night.

After going three-and-out on their opening drive, New England inserted speedy cornerback and return man Marcus Jones for his first offensive snap of the season.

He made the most of it, catching a quick screen from Jones, finding a seam and sprinting through Buffalo's secondary for a 48-yard touchdown.

That was about the only highlight for the Patriots.

They punted on three straight possessions, then failed to get anything out of Allen's fumble after Nick Folk hit the crossbar on a 48-yard field goal attempt with 10 seconds left in the half.

## Browns' Watson only talks football after suspension

Associated Press

BEREA, Ohio — Deshaun Watson didn't address the accusations or reasons behind his time away from the Browns. No discussion. No reflection.

On the verge of his first regular-season game in nearly two years, Watson stayed clear of more controversy.

Cleveland's new starting quarterback refused to address non-football questions on Thursday in his first comments since returning from an 11-game NFL suspension over sexual misconduct allegations.

Speaking to the media for the first time since his agreement with the league was announced in August, Watson declined to discuss his ban or the reasons for it. He has been accused by more than two dozen women of sexual harassment and assault

during massage therapy sessions.

On Sunday, the 27-year-old will make his long-delayed debut for the Browns in Houston, where he began his career, rose to stardom and where his alleged off-field misconduct happened.

Watson, who was reinstated Monday, opened with a brief statement thanking trainers, teammates and Cleveland fans for their support. He said he had been advised by his "legal and clinical teams" to only address "football questions."

"I'm focusing on football," he said. "My main focus is locked in on the game plan and trying to execute and make sure that I'm keeping the standard up for the Cleveland Browns so we can try to win."

Watson agreed to the lengthy

suspension, a \$5 million fine and to undergo professional counseling and therapy after an independent arbitrator ruled that he violated the league's personal conduct policy.

Watson has settled 23 civil lawsuits brought by the women, while two others, including one filed in October, are pending.

The three-time Pro Bowler, who signed a five-year, \$230 million contract with the Browns in March, wouldn't say what he learned during his punishment or if the league-mandated counseling helped.

"I respect your question," Watson said inside Cleveland's indoor field house. "I understand. But that's more in that phase of clinical and legal stuff and I've been advised to stay away from that and keep that personal."

Watson's return to the field Sunday will be his first game in 700 days. In addition to facing former teammates and fans who once cheered for him, some of the women who sued him over the allegations are expected to attend, according to their attorney.

Watson insists he isn't concerned about a potentially negative reaction and hostile environment inside NRG Stadium.

"I'm focusing on just being the starting quarterback and executing the game plan," he said. "That's my main focus. I'm not worried about the atmosphere. I have to go in and execute the game plan."

Instead, Watson is holding on to "great memories" with the Texans, who drafted the former Clemson star in 2017 and made him their franchise QB.



# College Football Playoff expanding to 12

Associated Press

Over the past 25 years, college football's postseason format for crowning a national champion has grown from two teams to four and now, starting in 2024, to 12.

For a sport that started in 1869 and spent most of the 20th century using bowls and polls to determine who was No. 1, evolution has hit warp speed, racing from Bowl Championship Series to College Football Playoff 2.0.

"The times change, things change," CFP Executive Director Bill Hancock said. "Things have moved pretty quickly relative to the last 153 years."

The CFP announced Thursday it will expand to a 12-team event in two years, completing an 18-month process that was fraught with delays and disagreements.

It is a momentous step that will bring in billions of dollars in television revenue and change the very fabric of the postseason.

The announcement came a day after the Rose Bowl agreed to amend its contract for the 2024 and 2025 seasons, the last hurdle CFP officials needed cleared to triple the size of what is now a four-team format.

"I never gave up," Hancock said.

Expansion is expected to pro-

duce about \$450 million in additional gross revenue for the conferences and schools that participate. The CFP's current 12-year contract with ESPN runs through the 2025-26 season. CFP officials have said they would like to explore having multiple broadcast partners in the next cycle.

The idea of major college football holding a playoff dates back decades and the Championship Subdivision has had one since 1978. The late Penn State coach Joe Paterno pined for one in the 1970s. Former Big Eight Commissioner Chuck Nienas proposed one in the late 1980s.

The creation of the BCS in the late 1990s was the first step toward a real playoff, Hancock said.

"The BCS for the first time gave an opportunity to decide a national champion on the field every year, not just at the whims of the bowl pairings," Hancock said.

The BCS used polls and computer rankings to ensure a 1 vs. 2 bowl game from 1998-2013, but at times produced questionable matchups that left fans unsatisfied.

"We had congressmen and senators getting involved in the selection process. There was a general unhappiness with the fact that somebody was always

third on the outside looking in," former Big 12 Commissioner Bob Bowlsby said.

Former Big Ten Commissioner Jim Delany was a playoff opponent — or at least skeptic — for years, but even he grew weary of defending the BCS.

"Everybody threw confetti when (the BCS) happened, but within three years it was getting killed," Delany said.

Delany and the late former Southeastern Conference Commissioner Mike Slive, a playoff advocate, were instrumental in creating the current four-team format.

The CFP debuted in 2014 with a 12-year contract, but less than halfway through it became apparent that fear of missing out had grown exponentially from the BCS days.

Bowlsby recalled Delany lamenting about how much more difficult it was to stomach being fifth in the selection committee's CFP rankings than it was being third in the BCS standings.

"It's hard being the one left out and you're drawing conclusions based on very thin evidence a lot of the time," Bowlsby said.

Delany compared the latest expansion of the playoff to NCAA men's basketball tournament expansion from 1975-85, when the field doubled from 32

to 64 teams. Much like the CFP now, that expansion wasn't so much about making sure a potential champion wasn't left out.

It was about increasing participation.

"It made it a truly national event," Delany said.

The latest plan to expand the playoff was unveiled in June 2021, but conference commissioners could not come to the unanimous consensus needed to push it forward. Expansion for the 2024 season was pronounced dead back in February.

"Getting from four to 12 didn't have to be this difficult," said Bowlsby, who was part of the four-person working group that spent more than two years developing the 12-team plan.

University presidents and chancellors who oversee the CFP stepped in and revived the process over the summer. They approved the original plan for use by 2026, and directed the commissioners to try to expand by 2024.

No longer haggling over the format, the commissioners needed to work through when and where the games will be played and whether bowl partners and championship game host cities could accommodate a change in schedule for 2024 and 2025.

## Logano celebrates 2nd NASCAR Cup title, eyes 3rd

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Joey Logano has a simple target for the future even as he celebrates his 2022 NASCAR Cup championship.

Add another.

Logano this season joined Kyle Busch as the only active NASCAR drivers with multiple Cup series titles, adding to the first Cup championship he won in 2018. Being the only active driver with three Cup titles

would be even sweeter.

"That's where my head is at right is, 'Let's go get another one,'" Logano said Thursday before he was feted at NASCAR's annual awards ceremony.

Logano, at 32, was already the oldest of the four drivers in the championship finale. Credit — or blame — the new Next Gen car for evening out competition to where the Cup Series had 19 different winners, with five

first-timers and two drivers making their first appearance in the championship race.

Logano won his second NASCAR championship by finishing first in a winner-take-all finale at Phoenix Raceway, giving Team Penske both the Cup and IndyCar titles in the same season for the first time in 31 tries.

Roger Penske, owner of Logano's No. 22 Ford, knows how hungry Logano is to win a third title. He's part of a roster that

includes Ryan Blaney and Austin Cindric, who both made the playoffs with Team Penske, and Harrison Burton in an affiliate Wood Brothers Racing car.

"We've got the same team, so we should," Penske said. "We should be able to compete now. A lot of great talent out there today. New talent, young talent. Teams and the cars brought us closer together. But I think we're someone you're going to have to beat in '23."

# Germany out despite win over Costa Rica

Associated Press

AL KHOR, Qatar — Back-to-back early exits at the World Cup have Germany coach Hansi Flick wanting to go back to basics.

The four-time champions were again eliminated from the group stage, four years after their embarrassing display as defending champions in Russia.

Something has to change, Flick said after a 4-2 victory over Costa Rica on Thursday that still wasn't enough to secure a spot in the round of 16.

"I believe for the future of German football we need to do things differently in training," said Flick, who took over as coach after last year's European Championship. "For years we are talking about new goalkeepers and wingbacks, but Germany was always able to defend well. We need the basics.

"For the future, for the next 10 years, it is very important to focus on the new generation of players."

It was only eight years ago that Germany won its fourth World Cup title, beating an Argentina team led by Lionel Messi in his prime in the final at the Maracana Stadium. With that victory, Germany became the only European team to win a World Cup in either North or South America.

In Qatar, it was an opening loss to Japan that set the stage for the disappointing finish. Germany was beaten 2-1 in that match last week, and followed it with a 1-1 draw against Spain.

That gave the Germans a chance in its last match at Al Bayt Stadium, and for a few minutes during the simultaneous final group matches on Thursday, it was enough. At halftime, for example, Germany was beating Costa Rica and Japan was losing to Spain — re-

sults that would have put the Germans into the round of 16.

It was Japan's 2-1 victory over the Spaniards that essentially cost the Germans a chance to play at least one more match.

Flick cited Spain as an example for his country to follow.

"Spain is very good in defense," he said, even though the 2010 World Cup champions ultimately lost to Japan at the Khalifa International Stadium in Doha. "It focuses on training young players. They know the tactics well."

It all started so well for Germany on Thursday with Serge Gnabry scoring a 10th-minute header and Spain taking an early lead against Japan.

Both matches were turned upside down in the second half.

Yeltsin Tejeda evened the score in the 58th minute and Juan Vargas scrambled another in the 70th, putting Costa Rica ahead 2-1 and all of a sudden on target to advance.

"There were a lot of individual mistakes and these are things that make me very angry," Flick said.

But Germany substitute Kai Havertz made it 2-2 in the 73rd minute and then restored Germany's lead in the 85th. Another substitute, Niclas Füllkrug, added the fourth.

Costa Rica had lost its opening game against Spain 7-0. The team then put on a much better display and beat Japan 1-0.

"We are not what we saw in our first game," Costa Rica coach Luis Fernando Suarez said. "We had to go back to what made us qualify for the World Cup."

■ **HISTORY MADE:** The match was also notable because French referee Stéphanie Frappart became the first woman to officiate a men's World Cup match.

# Japan beats Spain 2-1 as both teams advance

Associated Press

DOHA, Qatar — Same stadium. Same result. Similar shocking victory for Japan at the World Cup.

After beating Germany in the team's opener, Japan worked its way into the round of 16 of the World Cup on Thursday by defeating Spain 2-1 — the same score as last week.

Spain also advanced despite the loss, knocking Germany out of the tournament.

Japan scored twice early in the second half to come from behind and defeat another European powerhouse and make it to the knockout stage for the second straight World Cup. It's the first time Japan has advanced past the group stage in back-to-back tournaments.

"For Asia and for Japan, our victories over Spain and Germany, two of the top teams in the world, is something that gives us great confidence and we are

very pleased," Japan coach Hajime Moriyasu said.

Ao Tanaka scored the winning goal from close range early in the second half. It took about two minutes for video review officials to confirm the ball hadn't gone out of bounds before the goal at Khalifa International Stadium, where Japan had shocked Germany in its opener.

Players from both teams looked surprised when it was announced that the goal counted, and the Japanese started running toward their bench again to celebrate with their teammates.

"From my angle I think the ball was clearly half out, but more than that I could not see because of the speed," Tanaka said. "I was concentrating in scoring."

Japan finished at the top of Group E and will next face Croatia. Spain will take on Group F winner Morocco.

# US coach Berhalter to draw on Dutch lessons for Saturday

Associated Press

DOHA, Qatar — Gregg Berhalter knows plenty about Dutch soccer — he turned pro in the Netherlands 28 years ago.

He will look to draw on the lessons he learned there when he coaches the United States against Oranje on Saturday for a place in the quarterfinals of the World Cup in Qatar.

The Americans have not reached the quarterfinals since 2002. The U.S. was knocked out in the round of 16 in extra-time losses to Ghana in 2010 and Belgium in 2014, then failed to qualify for the 2018 tournament.

The United States has played the Netherlands five times previously, all in friendlies, losing at home in 1998 and at Amsterdam in 2004 and 2010. The U.S.

rallied for a 4-3 win at Amsterdam Arena in 2015 when Danny Williams equalized in the 88th minute and Bobby Wood scored 96 seconds later.

Berhalter isn't the only person in the U.S. camp with Dutch experience. Right back Sergiño Dest grew up in the Netherlands. A son of a Dutch mother and American father, who rose to prominence with Ajax, he opted to play for the U.S.

"It's going to be a pretty fun one, playing against the country I was born in," he said.

The U.S. opened its campaign in Qatar with draws against Wales and England, then beat Iran 1-0 on a goal by Christian Pulisic, who bruised his pelvis crashing into the goalkeeper. He hopes to play Saturday.