

Military virus vaccine mandate scrapped

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Lawmakers in Congress agreed Tuesday night to scrap the military's coronavirus vaccine mandate in an \$847 billion compromise defense policy bill that also boosts pay for troops.

The agreement, hammered out during months of bicameral negotiations, adds \$45 billion to the fiscal 2023 budget request from the White House for defense programs, and notably rebukes the administration's stance on coronavirus vaccinations for service members.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin enacted the vaccine mandate in August 2021 and remains strongly supportive of the policy. National Security Council spokesman John Kirby told reporters this week that Austin and President Joe Biden opposed repealing the requirement, calling it "a health and readiness issue for the force."

Still, lawmakers moved to end mandatory shots after fervent lobbying by Republicans, who blamed the requirement for exacerbating the military's recruiting and retention woes.

Though 98% of active-duty service members are vaccinated against the coronavirus, some 8,000 have been dismissed for refusing to get the shot, according to the Defense Department.

"We are pleased that the final confe-

renced bill includes language mirroring our... efforts to protect troops from being fired due to Biden's COVID vaccine mandate without fair appeal and to the harm of service readiness," 11 Republican senators said in a statement.

The provision to end the vaccine mandate is rolled into the mammoth 2023 National Defense Authorization Act, which outlines defense priorities for the fiscal year that began Oct. 1.

The House is set to take up the bill this week, followed by a vote in the Senate. If approved, the legislation will move to the White House for Biden's signature.

Lawmakers in the House and Senate negotiated a \$45 billion overall increase to the bill to account for inflation and additional expenses, matching the budget hike proposed by the Senate Armed Services Committee in a vote in June.

The House signed off on a smaller boost — \$37 billion — later in the summer.

"This year's agreement continues the armed services committees' 62-year tradition of working together to support our troops and strengthen America's national security," the committees' leaders said in a statement on Tuesday night.

A 4.6% pay increase for troops and the Defense Department's civilian employees is included in the final version of the legislation, marking the largest department-wide

raise in 20 years. It would take effect Jan. 1.

Other provisions for troops include wider eligibility for the military's Basic Needs Allowance for low-income service members, a new pilot program to reimburse families for child care costs related to a permanent change of station, extra aid for children with severe disabilities, and more flexibility in housing allowances for high-cost areas.

Congress also wants the Pentagon to report on the rate of suicide in the military since Sept. 11, 2001, breaking down rates by occupation specialty, service and grade. Service members stationed in Alaska, a focal point of the military's suicide crisis, would get special duty pay for cold-weather climate conditions and airfare reimbursement for trips home, according to the bill.

The legislation authorizes the number of troops for each service — 452,000 for the Army, 354,000 for the Navy, 325,344 for the Air Force, 177,000 for the Marine Corps and 8,600 for the Space Force.

A provision requiring women to register for the draft, which was featured in the Senate Armed Services Committee's version of the bill, was nixed. Lawmakers in both chambers had included the measure in a draft of the 2022 annual defense authorization bill before scrapping it.

The legislation also bolsters support for Ukraine as it nears a year of fighting Russia's invasion.

Navy accepting lower-scoring recruits to meet goals

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

The Navy is now accepting recruits who score in the lowest-qualifying range on an entrance exam to bolster enlistment numbers as service leaders grapple with a complicated job market throughout the United States, a service official said Tuesday.

The Navy will accept up to 7,540 high school graduates in fiscal 2023 who score in the 10th to 30th percentile among their peers on the mandatory Armed Forces Qualification Test, according to a policy memorandum signed by Rear Adm. Alexis Walker that went into effect Monday.

It is the lowest range from which the Pentagon allows services to enlist recruits, known as Category IV. By accepting prospective sailors who score in that range, the service hopes to meet its goal of enlisting 37,700 active-duty enlisted sailors in fiscal 2023, an increase of 4,300 from last year, said Cmdr. David Benham, a spokesman for Navy Recruiting Command.

"As we continue to navigate a challenging recruiting environment, changing the AFQT requirement removes a potential barrier to enlistment, allowing us to widen the pool of potential recruits and creating opportunities for personnel who wish to

serve," Benham wrote Tuesday in an email.

The Navy made its fiscal 2022 recruiting goal, enlisting 42 more recruits than its target of 33,400, Benham said.

It came amid an overall shortfall for the Pentagon's active-duty recruiting efforts, driven largely by the Army missing its 2022 goal by some 15,000 recruits.

Officials have pointed to myriad reasons for the tough recruiting environment — blaming factors related to the coronavirus pandemic, a low unemployment rate in the United States, and a historically low percentage of young Americans who qualify for or have interest in military service.

US accuses Iran of blinding 2 Navy ships

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

An Iranian patrol boat on Monday flashed its spotlight at the bridges of two Navy ships in the Strait of Hormuz, which U.S. military officials said blinded the crews and created an “unsafe and unprofessional” incident, according to a U.S. Central Command statement.

A patrol boat of the Revolutionary Guard’s navy approached the USS Lewis B. Puller, an expeditionary sea base platform ship, and the USS The Sullivans guided-missile destroyer Monday evening as the U.S. ships conducted a routine transit in international waters, according to the CENTCOM statement issued Tuesday. That’s when the patrol boat flashed its spotlight at

the bridges of both ships.

The Revolutionary Guard navy boat then crossed in front of the two ships within about 150 yards, which CENTCOM described as “dangerously close — especially at night.” The Revolutionary Guard navy is an elite military unit in Iran that is closely tied to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei.

“This dangerous action in international waters is indicative of Iran’s destabilizing activity across the Middle East,” Army Col. Joe Buccino, a CENTCOM spokesman, said in the statement.

Buccino said the American ships were able to escape the incident without further escalation after issuing an audible warning and using nonlethal lasers. He said the Iranian boat’s actions violated international

maritime standards and risked “miscalculation and collision.”

Interactions between U.S. Navy ships and Iranian navy vessels are fairly routine in the Strait of Hormuz, which links the Persian Gulf with the Sea of Oman between Oman and Iran. U.S. military officials have long accused the Revolutionary Guard’s navy vessels of conducting unsafe and unprofessional maneuvers when interacting with American ships.

CENTCOM officials in recent years have labeled Iran the largest threat to U.S. troops and American interests in the Middle East. U.S. officials have long accused Iran and the militias that it controls in Iraq and Syria of targeting U.S. troops and working to undermine American allies in the region.

2023 food allowance for troops set to increase

By DOUG G. WARE
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The U.S. military is upping the amount of money that troops get every month to buy food, and the increase is the largest in two decades.

The monthly food allowance for active-duty troops will rise by 11%, according to the Defense Finance and Accounting Service. Most enlisted service members will receive almost \$453 monthly, and officers will get about \$312.

The increase, the largest since 2001, will take effect Jan. 1.

Most enlisted personnel will get roughly an extra \$45 per month, and officers about \$31. The class of enlisted service members known as BAS II will see an increase from about \$814 to about \$905. BAS II troops are those assigned permanently to single government quarters that do not provide sufficient food.

The allowance bump comes at a time of higher, but slowing,

inflation in the United States that has resulted in more expensive necessities for families, such as food and gasoline. The Labor and Commerce departments have said the ongoing inflationary arc is mainly the result of the pandemic.

Russia’s war in Ukraine also has affected world energy markets and global supply chain problems have made certain products harder to buy.

The Defense Department has said the allowance is intended only to offset food costs for service members, not members of their family. Consequently, some military households are still struggling to pay for food. According to a Pentagon study earlier this year, almost 25% of active-duty troops had faced some degree of food insecurity during 2021.

Sgt. Maj. of the Army Michael Grinston said, in those cases, families can sign up for other federal assistance, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP.

Russia deploys Bastion missile system near Japan

By SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — Russia has deployed more coastal defense missiles near disputed islands north of Japan, according to Russian and Japanese officials.

Bastion missile systems, with a range of more than 300 miles, were deployed on the island of Paramushir in the northern Kuril Islands, Russia’s Ministry of Defence announced Monday, Japan’s Yomiuri newspaper reported the following day.

“The Russian military is accelerating its activities in the Far East, including areas surrounding Japan, as it continues its invasion in Ukraine,” Japan’s Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno said, according to a transcript of a news conference Tuesday. “The Japanese government will continue to keep close watch of such activities by Russia.”

Russia has established a military camp on Paramushir, a volcanic island in the Kurils just south of the Kamchatka Penin-

sula, allowing for year-round service, accommodation, recreation and food for personnel, Russian officials said, according to the Yomiuri.

A year ago, Russia deployed Bastion systems to Matua. Matua, a volcanic island nearly 7 miles long north of Japan’s Hokkaido prefecture, is not one of four Russian-occupied islands in the group claimed by Japan.

Bastion is a mobile launch system carrying supersonic anti-ship Yakhont missiles designed to overcome shipborne air-defense systems, according to Rosobornexport, a Russian arms supplier.

The latest missile deployment fits with a broader trend of Russian deployments in recent years, according to James Brown, an international affairs expert at Temple University’s Japan campus.

“The purpose is to secure Russian control over the Sea of Okhotsk, which is important as a bastion for Russian nuclear submarines,” he said.

Dem Warnock wins Ga. runoff against Walker

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Democratic Sen. Raphael Warnock defeated Republican challenger Herschel Walker in a Georgia runoff election Tuesday, ensuring Democrats an outright majority in the Senate for the rest of President Joe Biden's current term and capping an underwhelming midterm cycle for the GOP in the last major vote of the year.

With Warnock's second runoff victory in as many years, Democrats will have a 51-49 Senate majority, gaining a seat from the current 50-50 split with John Fetterman's victory in Pennsylvania. There will be a divided government, however, with Republicans having narrowly flipped House control.

"After a hard-fought campaign — or, should I say, campaigns — it is my honor to utter the four most powerful words

ever spoken in a democracy: The people have spoken," Warnock, 53, told jubilant supporters who packed a downtown Atlanta hotel ballroom.

"I often say that a vote is a kind of prayer for the world we desire for ourselves and for our children," declared Warnock, a Baptist pastor and his state's first Black senator. "Georgia, you have been praying with your lips and your legs, your hands and your feet, your heads and your hearts. You have put in the hard work, and here we are standing together."

In last month's election, Warnock led Walker by 37,000 votes out of almost 4 million cast but fell short of the 50% threshold needed to avoid a runoff.

The senator appeared to be headed for a wider final margin in Tuesday's runoff, with Walker, a football legend at the University of Georgia and in the NFL, unable

to overcome a bevy of damaging allegations, including claims that he paid for two former girlfriends' abortions despite supporting a national ban on the procedure.

"The numbers look like they're not going to add up," Walker, an ally and friend of former President Donald Trump, told supporters late Tuesday at the College Football Hall of Fame in downtown Atlanta. "There's no excuses in life, and I'm not going to make any excuses now because we put up one heck of a fight."

Democrats' Georgia victory solidifies the state's place as a Deep South battleground two years after Warnock and fellow Georgia Democrat Jon Ossoff won 2021 runoffs that gave the party Senate control just months after Biden became the first Democratic presidential candidate in 30 years to win Georgia.

Blinken: US did not enable Kyiv to strike Russia

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The United States has not encouraged or enabled Ukraine to carry out attacks inside Russia, Secretary of State Antony Blinken said, after drone strikes targeted Russian military airfields this week.

"We have neither encouraged nor enabled the Ukrainians to strike inside of Russia," Blinken told reporters at an event with Australian ministers in Washington on Tuesday, emphasizing that the United States has provided equipment to Kyiv for defensive purposes only. He also noted that Ukrainian civilians are coming under attack regularly by Russian forces, as is Ukrainian's energy grid as the winter sets in.

"The important thing is to understand what Ukrainians are living through every day with the ongoing Russian aggression against their country," he continued, "and our determination to make sure that they have in their hands, along with many other partners around the world, the equipment that they need to defend themselves."

Blinken's clarification of Washington's position comes amid frenzied interest in three separate attacks that struck Russian territory — two of which were hundreds of miles from the Ukrainian border — highlighting vulnerabilities in the country's defenses, and suggesting a new boldness on the part of Ukraine's military.

The Kremlin has said Kyiv is responsible for the drone strikes at the Engels-2 base in the Saratov region and the Dyagilevo base in the Ryazan region on Monday, and an airfield in the city of Kursk on Tuesday. Monday's attacks, Russian state-owned news agencies said, killed at least three people and injured several more.

Ukrainian officials have not officially claimed responsibility for the strikes, though they have appeared to celebrate them. A senior Ukrainian official, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss the sensitive operation, told The Washington Post on Tuesday that all three attacks were carried out by Ukrainian drones.

Troop rotations in Australia set to increase for stability

By DOUG G. WARE

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin said Tuesday that the U.S. military will increase its troop rotations in Australia to help bolster security in the Indo-Pacific amid growing Chinese influence in the region.

Austin made the announcement during a joint news conference that included Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Australian defense minister Richard Marles and Australian foreign affairs minister Penny Wong.

"We committed ourselves to deepen our cooperation in both diplomacy and defense," Austin said. "The United States and Australia share a vision of [an Indo-Pacific] region where the countries can determine their own futures."

Marles added: "We feel there is a very strong alignment between our two governments right now."

The enhanced rotations are intended to provide more security for allies in the Indo-Pacific, which has emerged as an area of concern among Western countries in recent

years because of expanding Chinese influence in their region. The Pentagon's National Defense Strategy and China Military Power Report recently outlined various threats in the Indo-Pacific, particularly where China and Taiwan are involved.

Beijing considers Taiwan a breakaway territory and has said China would like to see a "reunification." Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February, which is based on a similar belief in Moscow, only caused more concern among Western leaders that China might someday try to take Taiwan by force.

Trump Organization found guilty of tax fraud

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Donald Trump's company was convicted of tax fraud Tuesday for helping executives dodge taxes on extravagant perks such as Manhattan apartments and luxury cars, a repudiation of financial practices at the former president's business as he mounts another run for the White House.

A jury found two corporate entities at the Trump Organization guilty on all 17 counts, including charges of conspiracy and falsifying business records. Trump himself was not on trial. The verdict in state court in New York came after about 10 hours of deliberations over two days.

The conviction was validation for New York authorities who have said their three-year investigation into Trump and his businesses is continuing. The probe, which began as an inquiry into hush-money payments made on Trump's behalf, later morphed into an examination of the company's asset valuation and pay practices.

The company faces a fine of up to \$1.6 million. Sentencing is scheduled for Jan. 13. The defense said it will appeal.

"A former president's companies now stand convicted of crimes. That is consequential," Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg said outside the courtroom. "It underscores that in Manhattan we have one

standard of justice for all."

Trump, a Republican who launched his 2024 campaign last month during the trial, blasted the verdict as a part of a Democrat-led "MANHATTAN WITCH HUNT!"

"This case is unprecedented and involved no monetary gain to these two Corporations," Trump said in a statement.

The Manhattan case against the Trump Organization was built largely around testimony from the company's former finance chief, Allen Weisselberg, who previously pleaded guilty to charges that he manipulated the company's books to illegally reduce his taxes on \$1.7 million in fringe benefits. He testified in exchange for a

promised five-month jail sentence.

In some ways it's a limited victory for prosecutors, however.

No one, save for Weisselberg, is going to prison. No one is putting a padlock on Trump Tower or forcing the company out of business. And a potential \$1.6 million fine is a rounding error on the budget of an enterprise that boasts billions of dollars in assets.

Still, the Trump Organization may now run into some trouble getting loans and making deals, and New York City could have more leverage to try to end the company's contract managing a city-owned golf course in the Bronx.

Jan. 6 committee set to issue criminal referrals

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House committee investigating the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol will make criminal referrals to the Justice Department as it wraps up its probe and looks to publish a final report by the end of the year, the panel's chairman said Tuesday.

Rep. Bennie Thompson, D-Miss., told reporters that the committee has decided to issue the referrals recommending criminal prosecution, but did not disclose who the targets will be or if former President Donald Trump will be among them.

"At this point, there'll be a separate document coming from me to DOJ," Thompson told reporters at the Capitol.

"The Committee has determined that referrals to outside entities should be considered as a final part of its work," a spokesperson for the select committee told The Associated Press. "The committee will make decisions about specifics in the days ahead."

The decision to issue referrals is not unexpected. Rep. Liz Cheney, R-Wyo., the vice chair of the committee, has for months been hinting at sending the Justice Department criminal referrals based on the extensive evidence the nine-member panel has gathered since it was formed in July 2021.

While Congress can send criminal referrals to the Justice Department — marking a symbolic act — it is ultimately up to federal prosecutors whether to pursue charges. The potential charges the committee has been hinting against Trump include conspiracy to defraud the United States and obstruction of an official proceeding of Congress.

Over the course of its investigation, the committee has referred several members of Trump's inner circle to the agency for refusing to comply with congressional subpoenas. So far only one contempt of Congress charge, against Steven Bannon, has turned into an indictment.

Polygamous leader had 20 wives, many of them minors

Associated Press

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. — The leader of a small polygamous group near the Arizona-Utah border had taken at least 20 wives, most of them minors, and punished followers who did not treat him as a prophet, newly filed federal court documents allege.

Samuel Bateman was a former member of the Fundamentalist Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, or FLDS, until he left to start his own small offshoot group. He was supported financially by male followers who also gave up their own wives and children to be Bateman's wives, according to an FBI affidavit.

The document filed Friday provides new insight into what investigators have found in a case that first became public in August. It accompanied charges of kidnapping and impeding a foreseeable prosecution against three of Bateman's wives — Naomi Bistline, Donnae Barlow and Moretta Rose Johnson.

Bistline and Barlow were scheduled to appear in federal magistrate court in Flagstaff on Wednesday. Johnson is awaiting extradition from Washington state.

The women are accused of seizing eight of Bateman's children from Arizona state custody and fleeing with them. The children were found last week hundreds of miles away in Spokane, Wash.

Bateman was arrested in August when someone spotted small fingers in the gap of a trailer he was hauling through Flagstaff. He posted bond but was arrested again and charged with obstructing justice in a federal investigation into whether children were being transported across state lines for sexual activity.

Court records allege that Bateman, 46, engaged in child sex trafficking and polygamy, but none of his current charges relate to those allegations. Polygamy is illegal in Arizona but was decriminalized in Utah in 2020.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Driver gets \$553 ticket for snow on windshield

WA BREMERTON — A Washington State Patrol trooper issued a \$533 ticket to a driver after the person drove more than 5 miles with their vehicle and windshield almost completely covered in snow.

Trooper Heather Weatherwax said the State Patrol received a report about the person driving erratically along SR 16 south of Bremerton. When pulled over, the driver reportedly told the trooper that their windshield wipers weren't working, Weatherwax said.

The driver received the \$553 ticket for second-degree negligent driving.

Truck crashes into store; 5 people injured

ME ELLSWORTH — A driver crashed his pickup into a store in Ellsworth, sending five people to the hospital with non-life-threatening injuries, police said.

The 80-year-old man was trying to park the truck when it went through the Dollar Tree building, WABI-TV reported.

The driver was not injured. The crash does not appear to be alcohol-related or because of a medical emergency. Police are investigating whether the crash was caused by human error or a mechanical malfunction.

Sheriff: Deputy fatally shot deputy in accident

FL PALM BAY — A deputy mistakenly shot and killed his roommate, who was also a deputy, as the two

took a break from playing an online game with friends while they were off duty, a Florida sheriff said.

Brevard County Sheriff Wayne Ivey called the shooting “an extremely dumb and totally avoidable accident” in a video on social media in which he announced that Deputy Andrew Lawson, 23, was charged with manslaughter. Deputy Austin Walsh, 23, died at the scene in their apartment.

The roommates had taken a break from playing the game when Lawson took out a gun he believed he had unloaded and “jokingly” pointed it at Walsh, the sheriff said. A round fired and hit Walsh.

Official: 2 killed in blast at welding business

VA VIRGINIA BEACH — Two people were killed when a storage tank exploded at a Virginia welding business, a fire official said.

Firefighters responded to Neptune Welding on Virginia Beach Boulevard, news outlets reported.

A fuel storage tank exploded, igniting the fire, Virginia Beach Fire Department Capt. James Ingledue said.

Investigators determined that the blaze was accidental.

Board: Moorhead THC gummies too strong

MN ST. PAUL — The Minnesota Board of Pharmacy sued a Moorhead-based manufacturer of THC-laced gummies, saying the company's candies contain far stronger doses of the chemical that gives marijuana its high

than state law allows.

The lawsuit alleged that Northland Vapor Co. and its stores in Moorhead and Bemidji violate Minnesota's new law allowing low-potency edible and drinkable cannabinoids. Those products must not contain more than 5 milligrams of hemp-derived THC in a single serving or more than 50 milligrams per package. But investigators found candies with 20 times the legal dose and packages containing 50 times the limit, it alleges.

Plane returns to airport after hitting coyote

NC RALEIGH — An airplane departing from Raleigh-Durham International Airport returned to the airport shortly after takeoff when the flight crew reported striking a coyote on the runway.

Southwest Airlines Flight No. 1221 had been on its way to Chicago Midway International Airport but returned to the North Carolina airport for an inspection, according to the Federal Aviation Administration.

The flight crew had alerted the air traffic control tower of a potential wildlife strike during takeoff. Upon landing, the aircraft taxied to a nearby gate for a maintenance review, Southwest Airlines spokesperson Alyssa Foster said in a statement to The Associated Press.

Police: 180 dogs, cats removed from home

NJ BRICK — Authorities said 180 dogs and cats were removed from a New Jersey home where officials said the animals were being kept in

“horrible and inhumane conditions.”

Brick Township police said officers found stacks of animal crates containing dogs and cats, but because of the conditions “the officers were forced to exit and requested that a hazmat team respond.”

Police said rescuers in hazmat gear began removing the animals, a process that took about 10 hours. Police said 135 dogs and 45 cats were removed.

Two of the dogs were dead when they were taken from the home, police said.

Two animal cruelty arrests were made and a child endangerment charge is also pending since a 16-year-old was living in the residence, police said.

Food, other issues lead to prison hunger strike

NV RENO — At least two dozen people are on hunger strike over conditions at a maximum-security prison in rural eastern Nevada, prison officials and an advocacy organization said.

The strike was launched by people incarcerated at Ely State Prison who are fed up over what they say are inadequate food portions and shortages in the prison commissary, among other grievances, said Jodi Hocking, executive director of the prisoners' rights group Return Strong. She said they're also protesting long-standing problems at correctional facilities across the state.

The corrections department statement said it was auditing food portion sizes at all facilities and reviewing its contract with Aramark.

— From wire reports

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Judge staying with Yanks on 9-year, \$360M deal

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Aaron Judge has issued his ruling: Court remains in session in the Bronx.

Judge is staying with the New York Yankees on a \$360 million, nine-year contract, according to a person familiar with baseball's biggest free agent deal ever.

The person spoke to The Associated Press on Wednesday on condition of anonymity because the AL MVP's contract had not been announced.

Judge, who hit an American League record 62 homers last season, will earn \$40 million per year, the highest average annual payout for a position player. The contract trails only Mike Trout's \$426.5 million deal with the Los

Angeles Angels and Mookie Betts' \$365 million pact with the Los Angeles Dodgers for biggest in baseball history. Trout and Betts were already under contract when they signed those deals.

The Yankees made a long-term offer to Judge before last season that was worth \$213.5 million over seven years from 2023-29. But the outfielder turned it down in the hours before opening day in April.

The 6-foot-7 Judge bet on himself — and won.

Judge surpassed Roger Maris' AL home run mark to power New York to an AL East title. He also tied for the major league lead with 131 RBIs and just mis-

sed a Triple Crown with a .311 batting average.

New York was swept by Houston in the AL Championship Series, but Judge became the first AL MVP for the Yankees since Alex Rodriguez in 2007.

By rejecting the Yankees' pre-season offer, Judge gained \$146.5 million and an extra two guaranteed seasons. The Northern California native also visited with the San Francisco Giants last month, and there were likely more teams monitoring the market for the slugger who turns 31 in April.

Judge's status held up at least some of New York's offseason plans — given the size of the contract — but general manager

Brian Cashman made it clear his team would wait patiently while Judge contemplated his options.

In the end, that approach worked.

"So we'll wait, we'll wait for this process to play out," Cashman said Monday at baseball's winter meetings in San Diego. "And that means staying active in the conversations and negotiations."

The average annual value of Judge's deal trails only New York Mets pitchers Max Scherzer and Justin Verlander, at \$43.3 million. Verlander's deal hasn't been announced, but a person familiar with it told the AP he would earn \$86.7 million over two years.

Bellinger, Walker, Bell, more agree to deals

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Baseball's winter meetings continued to keep the hot stove burning, as Cody Bellinger, Taijuan Walker, Josh Bell, Mitch Haniger, Tommy Kahnle and Andrew Heaney all found new homes Tuesday. Negotiations continued for some of the top free agents, including shortstops Carlos Correa, Xander Bogaerts and Dansby Swanson, along with catcher Willson Contreras and left-hander Carlos Rodón.

"This marketplace is very aggressive, particularly aggressive for elite players," super agent Scott Boras said.

St. Louis president John Mozeliak and manager Oliver Marmol recently spent time with Contreras and his representatives. The NL Central champions have an opening behind the plate after Yadier Molina retired.

"This is a guy that loves to win, who wakes up thinking about it, goes to sleep thinking about it," Marmol said of Contreras, who began his big league career with the Cubs. "And we've seen quite a bit across the way."

Walker's \$72 million, four-year contract with Philadelphia was the team's second major free agent deal at the winter meetings after it reeled in shortstop Trea Turner on Monday with a \$300 million, 11-year contract.

A person familiar with the negotiations confirmed the Walker move to the AP on condition of anonymity because it was

pending a physical.

The 30-year-old Walker went 12-5 with a 3.49 ERA in 29 starts this season for the New York Mets, one of Philadelphia's NL East rivals. The Phillies made it to the World Series this year before losing to the Houston Astros.

Bell agreed to a \$33 million, two-year contract with Cleveland, and Bellinger, another Boras client, reached a \$17.5 million, one-year deal with the Chicago Cubs. Haniger got a \$43.5 million, three-year deal with San Francisco.

Bell played for Washington and San Diego last season, batting .266 with 17 homers and 71 RBIs in 156 games.

Cleveland is coming off a surprising 2022 season, going 92-70 and winning the AL Central for the first time since 2018. The addition of Bell gives the Guardians more power for their lineup after they hit just 127 homers this year — the second-lowest total in the majors.

The switch-hitting Bell is also expected to benefit from restrictions on defensive positioning coming to the game next year.

A person familiar with the negotiations confirmed the Bell contract on condition of anonymity because the deal was pending a review of medical records.

Bellinger, the 2019 NL MVP, was cut by the Los Angeles Dodgers on Nov. 18 after the 27-year-old outfielder hit just .210 with 19 homers, 150 strikeouts and a .654 OPS in

144 games.

"Got a track record of a lot of success and dynamic defense," Cubs manager David Ross said. "I remember when he first got in the league — first base, smooth hands, dynamic center fielder, great outfielder. Hadn't had the success he had early on, but definitely a lot of potential for a great player."

Bellinger figures to play center field for the Cubs, but could see some time at first base. He had a \$17 million contract this season and likely would have received a slight raise in arbitration.

The 31-year-old Haniger dipped to 11 home runs and 34 RBIs in 57 games for Seattle last season, a year after the former All-Star outfielder had 39 homers and 100 RBIs for the Mariners.

"The interest was mutual, which is kind of what you need to make these deals," said Farhan Zaidi, the president of baseball operations for San Francisco.

The 33-year-old Kahnle is going back to the New York Yankees on an \$11.5 million, two-year contract, and the 31-year-old Heaney agreed to a \$25 million, two-year deal with the Texas Rangers.

Kahnle and Heaney each pitched for the Dodgers this year. Kahnle, who played for New York for 2½ seasons beginning in 2017, posted a 2.84 ERA in 13 relief appearances. Heaney went 4-4 with a 3.10 ERA in 16 games, 14 starts.

Injury-plagued Rams get QB Mayfield off waivers

Associated Press

THOUSAND OAKS, Calif. — The Los Angeles Rams claimed quarterback Baker Mayfield off waivers Tuesday, adding the former No. 1 pick to their options behind injured Matthew Stafford for the rest of the season.

Mayfield, the 2017 Heisman Trophy winner and former Cleveland Browns starter, was released by the Panthers on Monday at his request after seven disappointing games with Carolina.

The struggling Rams host the Las Vegas Raiders on Thursday night, and it's unclear whether Mayfield could be ready to participate for a team already down to backup quarterbacks John Wolford — who has been battling a neck injury and other ailments — and Bryce Perkins.

"My gosh, you'd probably

know as much as I would on that right now," offensive coordinator Liam Coen told reporters when asked if Mayfield might play Thursday. "I couldn't tell you. I haven't spoken to him. I've only heard great things about him, his professional nature in Carolina and some of the things that went on there."

Coach Sean McVay wasn't scheduled to speak to reporters Tuesday after he acquired a quarterback whose talents greatly intrigued him coming out of college, but both of his coordinators praised the acquisition.

"I've got a lot of respect for him," Rams defensive coordinator Raheem Morris said. "This guy was a very good football player. Brought Cleveland from pretty much the ashes. This game is sometimes thankless.

We get a chance to acquire guys who've got nothing to lose and something to prove is always awesome."

After league-wide speculation about Mayfield joining the contending San Francisco 49ers or Baltimore Ravens, Mayfield instead will attempt to help the injury-plagued Rams (3-9). Los Angeles has lost six straight games during what's shaping up as the worst season in NFL history for a defending Super Bowl champion.

The Rams have almost no reason to tank the remaining season because their first-round pick belongs to Detroit, and they clearly need help at quarterback. Stafford is almost certainly out for the season with a bruised spinal cord, and Wolford and Perkins have been fairly ineffective while combining

to start three of the past four games, all losses. Wolford passed for 178 yards with no touchdowns in last Sunday's loss to Seattle.

But it's unclear how much help Mayfield can provide: He had a dismal season with the Panthers, who acquired him for a fifth-round pick in July after the Browns' acquisition of Deshaun Watson ended his up-and-down tenure in Cleveland, where he was a four-year starter and engineered the end of the franchise's 18-year playoff drought in 2020.

Mayfield won the first-string job in training camp with Carolina, but went 1-5 as a starter while throwing six touchdown passes and six interceptions. He was outplayed in recent weeks by both Sam Darnold and P.J. Walker.

Shannon shines in OT as No. 17 Illinois upsets No. 2 Texas

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Terrence Shannon Jr. scored 12 of his 16 points in overtime, including the tiebreaking three-pointer with 3:34 remaining, and No. 17 Illinois rallied to hand second-ranked Texas its first loss of the season, 85-78 on Tuesday night in the Jimmy V Classic.

Jayden Epps added 11 points, including the final five points of regulation — a three-pointer with 35 seconds left and two tying free throws with eight seconds remaining. Epps then blocked Marcus Carr's jumper in the lane just before the buzzer to force overtime in an entertaining showdown at Madison Square Garden.

Matthew Mayer, who faced Texas several times at Baylor, tied a career high with 21 points as he made his first seven shots and finished 8-for-10.

Shannon, who missed eight of nine shots in regulation, took over in the extra period to help Illinois (7-2) beat a ranked foe for the second time this season. He opened overtime with a jumper after Carr was called for traveling and then hit an open three from the right wing over Brock Cunningham for a 73-70 lead.

"I was telling my teammates way to keep us in it, they were just great," Shannon said.

"I just kept telling them, like praising them, 'Man, good job, you're keeping us in it, you're all playing great. I got you and I'm going to come through for you eventually,' and that's what I kept telling them in overtime."

Shannon converted a reverse layup and finished a three-point play to make it 77-70 with 2:16 left. Carr hit two free throws to get Texas within one with 1:28 remaining.

Jayden Epps made a layup, RJ Melendez sank two free throws to put Illinois ahead by five, and Shannon made two free throws with 27.7 seconds left.

"They were all under control," Illinois coach Brad Underwood said. "They were all poised."

No. 1 Houston 76, North Florida 42: Javier Francis scored 14 points, star Marcus Sasser had 12 points in the first eight minutes before leaving with a cut over his eye, and the host Cougars coasted past North Florida.

Sasser, who entered the game averaging 17.5 points, made two three-pointers early but got hit in the face and left with a cut that required stitches.

No. 9 Arkansas 65, UNC Greensboro 58: Standout freshman Nick Smith Jr. scored 22 points in just his third game as host Arkansas overcame a sluggish offen-

sive showing to beat North Carolina-Greensboro.

Makhi Mitchell had 13 points and 14 rebounds for Arkansas, Davis had 10 points and 10 boards, and Black scored 11 points.

No. 3 Virginia 55, James Madison 50: Kihei Clark scored 17 points, Jayden Gardner had 14 points and eight rebounds, and host Virginia managed to beat its feisty in-state rival.

No. 12 Baylor 80, Tarleton State 57: Freshman Keyonte George scored 22 points, redshirt freshman Langston Love added 20 and the host Bears beat Tarleton State.

Wisconsin 64, No. 13 Maryland 59: Chucky Hepburn scored 13 points and Steven Crowl added 12 as the host Badgers handed the Terps their first loss under coach Kevin Willard.

No. 15 Duke 74, Iowa 62: Jeremy Roach tied a career high with 22 points and the Blue Devils led virtually the entire way in the Jimmy V Classic at Madison Square Garden.

No. 24 TCU 78, Jackson State 51: Jakobe Coles scored a career-high 21 points, Damion Baugh had 15 points, six rebounds and five assists, and host TCU won its fifth straight.

Jets top Panthers, ex-coach Maurice

Associated Press

WINNIPEG, Manitoba — Kyle Connor had two goals and an assist as the Jets spoiled Paul Maurice's return to Winnipeg with a 5-2 victory over the Florida Panthers on Tuesday night.

Mark Scheifele had a pair of power-play goals and Adam Lowry added an empty-net goal for the Jets. Pierre-Luc Dubois finished with three assists. Connor Hellebuyck stopped 38 of 40 shots as Winnipeg improved to 10-3-0 at home.

Zac Dalpe and Carter Verhaeghe scored for Florida. Spencer Knight made 12 saves on 15 shots before being replaced by Sergei Bobrovsky early in the second. Bobrovsky stopped 16 of 17 shots.

The game marked Maurice's return to Winnipeg, where he spent parts of nine seasons coaching the Jets before leaving abruptly midway through last season. The 55-year-old Maurice signed on as Florida's bench boss in June.

The 13,426 fans at Canada Life Centre stood and cheered as Maurice and assistant Jamie Kompon, who was also his assistant coach in Winnipeg, were recognized on the big screen.

"It's a special place for Jamie and I, isn't it? We really appreciated it," Maurice said. "It was good on the bench, it was good in the stands. That was very classy, as they always are."

Red Wings 4, Lightning 2: Ville Husso made 28 of his 44 saves in the third period and visiting Detroit beat Tampa Bay.

The Red Wings got goals from Michael Rasmussen, Jonatan Berggren, Adam Erne

and David Perron.

Steven Stamkos and Brayden Point scored, and Andrei Vasilevskiy stopped 22 shots for the Lightning.

Penguins 4, Blue Jackets 1: Sidney Crosby had two goals, Bryan Rust scored for a second straight game and host Pittsburgh beat Columbus to run its winning streak to three games.

Tristan Jarry gave up a goal to Johnny Gaudreau a minute into the game but settled down quickly. Jarry finished with 38 saves to improve to 5-0 against Columbus.

The 35-year-old Crosby's 15 goals are nearly half the 31 he managed last season, and he is on pace for 47 goals. He hasn't topped 35 goals in a season since leading the league with 44 in 2016-17.

Maple Leafs 4, Stars 0: Matt Murray made a season-high 44 saves and Mitch Marner extended his Toronto-record point streak to 20 games with an early assist in a win over host Dallas.

John Tavares, Auston Matthews, Rasmus Sandin and Alexander Kerfoot scored for the surging Maple Leafs, who are 9-0-3 in their last 12 games.

Dallas went 0-for-7 on the power play, including a four-minute double minor and a 5-on-3 for 1:38.

Ducks 4, Hurricanes 3 (OT): Ryan Strome scored at 1:56 of overtime and host Anaheim beat Carolina to stop a six-game losing streak.

Strome put a shot past goaltender Pyotr Kochetkov after getting a pass from Cam Fowler. Six of the Ducks' seven wins this season have come in overtime or a shootout.

Canadiens 4, Kraken 2: Cole Caufield and Josh Anderson scored in a seven-second span in the second period, and visiting Montreal snapped a two-game skid with a win over Seattle.

Canadiens rookie Johnathan Kovacevic and Seattle rookie Shane Wright scored their first NHL goals in the game.

Devils 3, Blackhawks 0: Defenseman Dougie Hamilton had a goal and two assists, Vitek Vanecsek made 24 saves for his second shutout and NHL-leading host New Jersey defeated Chicago.

Nico Hischier and Jesper Bratt also scored and Jack Hughes had two outstanding assists for the Devils, who are a league-best 21-4-1, despite losing their first two games. Hughes has a six-game point streak with six goals and four assists.

Kings 5, Senators 2: Viktor Arvidsson scored twice to lead visiting Los Angeles over Ottawa.

Matt Roy, Mikey Anderson and Kevin Fiala also scored, and Anze Kopitar finished with three assists for the Kings, who kicked off a six-game trip. Pheonix Copley made 31 saves in his first appearance for the Kings.

Drake Batherson and Thomas Chabot each scored on a power play for Ottawa.

Blues 7, Islanders 4: Noel Acciari and Colton Parayko scored 13 seconds apart in the third period and visiting St. Louis defeated New York.

Acciari finished with two goals, Josh Leivo had a goal and an assist and Thomas Greiss made 36 saves and the Blues snapped a five-game skid in the finale of a three-game northeastern road trip.

Mitchell's 43 lead Cavs in James' only return home

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Donovan Mitchell scored a season-high 43 points and Jarrett Allen returned from injury to add 24, leading the Cleveland Cavaliers to a 116-102 win on Tuesday night over the Los Angeles Lakers in LeBron James' only visit home this season.

With Anthony Davis missing the final three quarters because of illness, the Cavs improved to an NBA-leading 11-1 on their floor, their best start at home since 2015-16, when James led them to a championship.

Mitchell, who has Cleveland fans dreaming of another title run, took over in the second half and scored 29 points with the kind

of performance James did routinely during his 11 seasons for the Cavs.

With Cleveland leading by 12 in the fourth, Mitchell buried a three-pointer from the left wing to finish the Lakers. After dropping the shot, the All-Star guard strutted around the Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse floor nodding his head as James helplessly watched.

James finished with 21 points and 17 rebounds, losing for just the third time in 20 games against the Cavs.

Mavericks 116, Nuggets 115: Dorian Finney-Smith hit a go-ahead three-pointer with 17.3 seconds left and visiting Dallas rallied after squandering a late lead to beat

Denver.

Nikola Jokic had a chance to tie the game with 12 seconds remaining, but missed the first of two free throws. Spencer Dinwiddie hit both free throws to help seal the win for the Mavericks.

Luka Doncic recorded his 52nd career triple-double with 22 points, 12 assists and 10 rebounds.

Jokic had 19 points, eight assists and eight rebounds for the Nuggets.

Pistons 116, Heat 96: Bojan Bogdanovic scored 28 of his 31 points in the second half, Alec Burks added 18 and visiting Detroit ran away in the final two quarters to beat Miami.