

High Marine, Army turnover in cyber fields

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

More stringent service obligations are needed to ensure that Army and Marine cyber specialists don't bolt for big private-sector paydays immediately after receiving high-priced training at taxpayer expense, according to a government watchdog agency.

While the Navy and Air Force have instituted three-year service obligations to protect their investment, the Corps and the Army are falling short, the Government Accountability Office said in a report this month.

The report comes amid struggles to keep crucial cyber units fully manned, even as cyberwarfare and network protection have become a top priority for a Defense Department whose tech-savvy adversaries include China and Russia.

"DOD faces increasing competition from the private sector looking to recruit top cyber talent," the GAO said.

The Army and Marine Corps have the added challenge of trying to retain special-

ists without giving them clear-cut service obligations.

The Marines struggled the most with staffing gaps. That's the difference between the number of personnel authorized and the number of personnel staffed.

While most Navy, Army and Air Force cyber career fields were staffed at 80% or higher, four of the six such career fields in the Marine Corps were below 80% of authorized levels in fiscal year 2021.

The Marines also are the only branch without any service obligations after cyber training, which is often over a year long and costs the military hundreds of thousands of dollars per person.

Marine Corps officials told the GAO that the service's cyber office has requested authority to institute a 54-month active-duty service obligation requirement for personnel in these areas.

However, a Marine official told the GAO that there had been no indication whether the request would be approved and implemented.

Meanwhile, Army Cyber Command offi-

cials said that because of bureaucratic confusion, personnel offices lacked relevant information needed to calculate and implement service obligations for various Army cyber courses.

"As a result, officials stated that it is a challenge to hold personnel to general service obligations when they attend (critical cyber) training," the GAO said.

Army Cyber Command officials said some officers who attended a yearlong course costing hundreds of thousands of dollars left the military soon after completing certification, the GAO said.

The officials said they are working to revise regulations to clearly define a 36-month service obligation for certain training. The services have taken other steps to try to mitigate the turnover problem, such as retention bonuses, which tallied \$160 million in all between 2017 and 2021.

"However, officials have acknowledged that while the military services offer retention bonuses and special pays, they continue to experience challenges retaining qualified cyber personnel," the GAO said.

Russian missiles blast key Ukraine infrastructure

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian missiles hit Ukraine Thursday in the biggest wave of strikes in weeks, damaging power stations and other critical infrastructure during freezing winter weather.

Russia fired 69 missiles at energy facilities and Ukrainian forces shot down 54, Ukrainian military chief Gen. Valerii Zaluzhnyi said. Local officials said attacks killed at least two people around Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city. The strikes also wounded at least six people across the country, although the toll of the attacks was growing as officials assessed the day's events.

Russia dispatched explosive drones to selected regions overnight before broadening the barrage with air and sea-based missiles, the Ukrainian air force said. Air-raid sirens rang out across the country, and the military activated air-defense systems in Kyiv, the regional administration said.

Russia has attacked Ukrainian power and

water supplies almost weekly since October while its ground forces struggle to hold ground and advance. Mayor Vitali Klitschko warned of power outages in the capital, asking people to stockpile water and charge their electronic devices. Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba called the attacks "senseless barbarism."

"There can be no 'neutrality' in the face of such mass war crimes. Pretending to be 'neutral' equals taking Russia's side," Kuleba tweeted.

After more than 10 months of fighting, Russia and Ukraine are locked in a grinding battle of attrition. The Ukrainian military has reclaimed swaths of Russian-occupied territory in the country's northeast and south and continues to resist persistent Russian attempts to seize all of the industrial Donbas region in the east.

At the same time, Moscow has targeted Ukrainian power facilities and other key infrastructure in a bid to weaken the country's

resolve and force it to negotiate on Russian terms. The time between strikes has increased in recent weeks, though, leading some commentators to theorize Russia is trying to ration its missile supply.

The Ukrainian military has reported success in shooting down incoming Russian missiles and explosive drones in earlier attacks but many cities have gone without heat, internet and electricity for hours or days at a time.

Ukrainian Prime Minister Denys Shmyhal said a number of energy facilities were damaged during what he said was the 10th such large-scale attack on his country.

"Russia is trying to deprive Ukrainians of light before the New Year," Shmyhal wrote in a Telegram post.

About 90% of Lviv was without electricity, Mayor Andriy Sadovyi wrote on Telegram. Trams and trolley buses were not working, and residents might experience water interruptions, he said.

Some F-35 jets grounded after crash at Texas base

By **DOUG G. WARE**
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A small number of F-35 fighter jets have temporarily been barred from flight after a pilot crashed one of the planes this month while testing it at a joint base in North Texas, officials said Wednesday.

The F-35B was going through testing before delivery to the Marine Corps when it encountered trouble while hovering over a runway at Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base Fort Worth in Texas on Dec. 15.

The fifth-generation fighter jet slowly fell toward the ground and bounced off the tarmac before the pilot ejected. The plane ultimately came to rest just off the runway and appeared to be mostly intact.

As the crash is being investigated by Naval Air Systems Command, the F-35 Joint Program Office — the military office that oversees life-cycle management of all three U.S. F-35 variants — said it has issued a directive to keep some of the technologically advanced aircraft on the ground.

“[We] recommend restrictions on a small number of aircraft, which have been evaluated to be of higher risk, from flight operations and until procedures can be developed for their return to flight,” the Joint Program Office said to Stars and Stripes.

The F-35B, the variant involved in the crash, is Lockheed Martin’s variant for the Marine Corps and is the only version that can take off and land vertically and hover stationary above the ground. Because of its ability to hover, the plane is equipped with an automatic pilot ejector seat.

Military officials have not concluded why the plane went down, but they have said the pilot was an Air Force major who was testing the F-35B before delivery to the Marine Corps. The pilot was not seriously hurt.

The Joint Program Office did not specify which F-35s were grounded or why they’re considered to be at greater risk.

“The affected aircraft have been identified, and the JPO will work with the military services and international partners to ensure understanding of the risks,” the office added.

“This is a preliminary assessment of the risk, and actions are in work that we believe will lead to a refinement of this assessment. The safety of flight crews is the JPO’s primary concern.”

Pentagon says no alien life found on Earth

The Washington Post

A new office at the Pentagon is scrutinizing hundreds of reports of unidentified objects in air, sea, space and beyond, senior U.S. defense officials said recently, and while it has discovered no signs of alien life, the search is set to expand.

The issue has taken on increasing seriousness as a bipartisan group of lawmakers presses the Defense Department to investigate instances of unidentified phenomena and disclose publicly what they learn. Established in July, the All-domain Anomaly Resolution Office is evaluating recent reports and soon could evaluate accounts that date back decades, officials said.

The Pentagon’s top intelligence official, Ronald Moultrie, told reporters during a recent briefing, the first to discuss the office and its ongoing work, that, “At this time ... we have nothing” to affirm the existence of space aliens.

The proliferation of drones, including those operated by foreign adversaries and amateur hobbyists, account for many of the reports, officials said.

The U.S. government employs sophisticated sensors around the globe to collect data, and the office analyzes it for relevant information, they said, declining to elaborate.

While most of the reports the Pentagon investigates are about aerial objects, defense officials are increasingly concerned about unusual activity below the surface of the ocean, in space and on land. For that reason, the Pentagon now uses the term unidentified anomalous phenomena, or UAP, rather than previous descriptions such as “unidentified flying object.”

Moultrie said that, “Unidentified phenomena in all domains ... pose potential threats to personal security and operational security, and they deserve our urgent attention.”

The research is likely to expand next year. Congress wrote a provision into the next defense policy bill, which is awaiting President Joe Biden’s signature, that requires the Defense Department to complete a “historical record report” about detailing unidentified phenomena observed and documented by the United States.

US, partners launch hundreds of operations against ISIS militants

By **J.P. LAWRENCE**
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. military and partner forces launched hundreds of operations against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria in 2022, Central Command said Thursday, as attacks by the militants grew more brazen at the outset of the year.

No U.S. troops were killed or injured in any of the 313 declared operations this year, CENTCOM said.

The operations included raids on militants such as ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, who killed himself, as well as fighting to contain a prison attack in northern Syria.

ISIS attacks against the Syrian regime dropped in 2021, as fighters withdrew to

more remote parts of central Syria, according to International Crisis Group, a multinational think tank.

Others moved into Iraq or northeastern Syria and concentrated their forces where U.S. and partner forces operate. In January, ISIS militants overran al-Sinaa prison in the Syrian city of Hassakeh as part of an attempted prison break. The ensuing 10-day battle led to the deaths of more than 420 ISIS militants and 120 members of the U.S.-allied Syrian Democratic Forces, the CENTCOM statement said Thursday.

Some 191 of anti-ISIS operations took place in Iraq, where U.S. troops officially act only in an advisory role, and 122 took place in Syria, a number that included 14 unilateral U.S. missions, the statement said.

Southwest cancels another 2,300 flights

Associated Press

DALLAS — Southwest Airlines continued to slash about two-thirds of its daily schedule, canceling another 2,350 flights Thursday, though most of the planes that flew arrived on time.

Southwest is struggling to recover after being overwhelmed by a winter storm that left hundreds of pilots and flight attendants stranded out of position to operate flights.

The airline said it expected normal operations to return Friday.

Other airlines are back to full strength. Delta, American and United together canceled around 30 flights by late morning, according to tracker FlightAware.

Southwest's cancellations amounted to 58% of its schedule, slightly better than in previous days. The Dallas carrier accounted for more than 95% of all canceled flights in the United States on Thursday.

About the only good news for Southwest passengers was that 98% of flights that took off man-

aged to land within 15 minutes of schedule, meeting the government's definition of an on-time arrival.

Southwest has acknowledged that it has inadequate and outdated technology that can leave flight crews out of position when bad weather strikes.

The airline has declined requests to make executives available for comment and did not provide an update about operations on its website. Its main public outreach has been to post video state-

ments by CEO Robert Jordan and its chief commercial officer.

The federal government is investigating what happened at Southwest, which has canceled more than 13,000 flights since its meltdown began on Dec. 22.

Southwest added a page to its website specifically for stranded travelers, but thousands of customers were unable to reach the airline. It wasn't just customers, either — pilots and flight attendants reported being on hold for hours.

Storm brings flooding, deaths to Northwest

AP/Report for America

PORTLAND, Ore. — A winter storm that brought powerful wind gusts to Oregon on Tuesday caused at least two fatal car accidents that left four people dead, preliminary police investigations have found. Weather conditions also appeared to have contributed to a third fatal crash that killed one person and injured another, police said.

Three people were killed, including a 4-year-old girl, when severe weather caused a large tree to fall on their pickup truck as they were driving on U.S. 26 about 15 miles east of the coastline, Oregon State Police said in a news release.

Further east on U.S. 26 on Mount Hood, a motorist was killed when a large tree fell on the cab of the commercial truck

he was driving because of snow and strong winds, causing it to lose control and leave the highway, state police said. The 53-year-old driver, who was alone in the truck, was pronounced dead at the scene.

Another person died when a tree fell and struck a pickup they were riding in as a passenger on Interstate 84 near Cascade Locks in the Columbia River Gorge, the agency said. The driver was injured and taken to a hospital. The weather appears to have contributed to the tree falling, said state police spokesperson Captain Kyle Kennedy.

Tuesday's storm system also brought massive waves, high tides and flooding to the region. Wave heights reached 30 feet along the Oregon coast, the National Weather Service said.

Buffalo roads open as search for blizzard victims continues

Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Roads reopened Thursday in storm-besieged Buffalo as authorities continued searching for people who may have died or are stuck and suffering after last week's blizzard.

The driving ban in New York's second-most-populous city was lifted just after midnight Thursday, Mayor Byron Brown announced.

"Significant progress has been made" on snow removal, he said at a news conference late Wednesday. Suburban roads, major highways and Buffalo Niagara International Airport had already reopened.

Still, Brown urged residents not to drive if they didn't have to.

More than three dozen deaths have been reported in western New York from the

blizzard that raged across much of the country, with Buffalo in its crosshairs on Friday and Saturday.

The National Guard was going door to door to check on people who lost power, and authorities faced the possibility of finding more victims as snow melted amid increasingly mild weather. Buffalo police and officers from other law enforcement agencies also searched for victims, sometimes using officers' personal snowmobiles, trucks and other equipment.

With the death toll already surpassing that of the area's notorious Blizzard of 1977, local officials faced questions about the response to last week's storm. They insisted that they prepared but that the weather was extraordinary, even for a region prone to powerful winter storms.

Storm dumps heavy snow in northern Arizona, rain in desert

Associated Press

FLAGSTAFF, Ariz. — A winter storm dumped several inches of snow in Arizona's high country and rain in the deserts, with more precipitation on the way through the new year.

Communities near Flagstaff received as much as a foot of

snow by midday Wednesday before the storm moved east and out of the state. Travel was slow on major roadways and local streets, with some sections shut down at least temporarily.

Power outages were also reported earlier in the day, but

much of the service had been stored by Wednesday afternoon.

Meanwhile in Phoenix, residents woke up to heavy rain that subsided to intermittent light showers by mid-day.

The National Weather Service in Phoenix forecasts most-

ly clear skies for the rest of the day with some clouds moving in by nightfall.

Scattered rain and snow are expected across Arizona through Saturday before another big storm hits the state on New Year's Day, the National Weather Service said.

Applications for unemployment aid rise

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of people seeking unemployment aid rose only slightly last week with the labor market remaining strong despite the Federal Reserve's efforts to cool the economy and hiring.

Applications for unemployment benefits for the week ending Dec. 24 climbed 9,000 to 225,000, the Labor Department reported Thursday. The four-week moving average of applications, which smooths out some of

the week-to-week swings, slipped just 250 to 221,000.

Unemployment benefit applications are a proxy for layoffs, and are being closely monitored by economists as the Fed has rapidly raised interest rates in an effort to cool job growth and inflation. Should the Fed's rate hikes cause a recession, as many economists fear, a jump in layoffs and unemployment claims would be an early sign.

So far, the level of jobless claims remains quite low, evidence that Americans are en-

joying a high degree of job security. In the coming weeks, thousands of workers with temporary jobs during the winter holidays will lose work and apply for jobless aid.

The Fed is seeking to slow job growth and the pace of wage increases as part of its efforts to battle inflation. The central bank has hiked rates seven times this year, which has made it more expensive for consumers to take out mortgage and auto loans, and raised borrowing rates for credit cards.

New York's Santos investigated for lies about past

Associated Press

NEW YORK — U.S. Rep.-elect George Santos of New York was under investigation by Long Island prosecutors on Wednesday after revelations surfaced that the now-embattled Republican lied about his heritage, education and professional pedigree as he campaigned for office.

Despite intensifying doubt about his fitness to hold federal office, Santos has shown no signs of stepping aside — even as he publicly admitted to a long list of lies.

Nassau County District Attorney Anne T. Donnelly, a Republican, said the fabrications and inconsistencies were “nothing short of stunning.”

“The residents of Nassau County and other parts of the third district must have an honest and accountable representative in Congress,” she said. “If a crime was committed in this county, we will prosecute it.”

Santos' campaign did not immediately respond to a request for comment Wednesday.

day.

He is scheduled to be sworn in next Tuesday, when the U.S. House reconvenes. If he assumes office, he could face investigations by the House Committee on Ethics and the Justice Department.

Santos suggested he does not plan to step aside in a Twitter post Wednesday about a visit to the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy earlier in the day.

“In Congress, I look forward to working alongside them to fully utilize this amazing resource we have in our own backyard in #NY03,” the tweet said.

The Republican has admitted to lying about having Jewish ancestry, a Wall Street pedigree and a college degree, but he has yet to address other lingering questions — including the source of what appears to be a quickly amassed fortune despite recent financial problems, including evictions and owing thousands in back rent.

Fellow Long Island Republican, Rep.-

elect Nick Lalota, said he was troubled by the revelations.

“I believe a full investigation by the House Ethics Committee and, if necessary, law enforcement, is required,” Lalota said Tuesday.

The New York attorney general's office has already said it's looking into issues that have come to light.

A spokesperson for the Nassau County DA's office, Brendan Brosh, said Wednesday: “We are looking into the matter.” The scope of the investigation was not immediately clear.

Other Republicans castigated Santos but stopped short of asking him to step aside.

“Congressman-Elect George Santos has broken the public trust by making serious misstatements regarding his background, experience and education, among other issues,” said Joseph G. Cairo, chair of the Nassau County Republican Committee, which is within the 3rd Congressional District.

Lack of info on China's COVID-19 surge stirs concern

Associated Press

BEIJING — Moves by several countries to mandate COVID-19 tests for passengers arriving from China reflect global concern that new variants could emerge in its ongoing outbreak — and that the government may not inform the rest of the world quickly enough.

There have been no reports of new variants to date, but China has been accused of not being forthcoming about the virus since it first surfaced in the country in late 2019. The worry is that it may not be sharing data now on any signs of evolving strains that could spark fresh outbreaks elsewhere.

The U.S., Japan, India, South Korea, Taiwan and Italy have announced testing requirements for passengers from China. The U.S. cited both the surge in infections and what it said was a lack of information, including genomic sequencing of the virus strains in the country.

“Right now the pandemic situation in China is not transparent,” Wang Pi-Sheng, the head of Taiwan's epidemic command center, said. “We have a very limited grasp on its information, and it's not very accurate.”

The island will start testing everyone arriving from China on Jan. 1, ahead of the

expected return of about 30,000 Taiwanese for the Lunar New Year holiday later in the month. The new Japanese rules, which restrict flights from mainland China, Hong Kong and Macao to designated airports beginning Friday, are already disrupting holiday travel plans.

World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has said the body needs more information on the severity of the outbreak in China, particularly on hospital and ICU admissions, “in order to make a comprehensive risk assessment of the situation on the ground.”

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Rescuers in kayaks reach pilot after crash

MD EDGEWATER — Rescuers used kayaks to reach the pilot of a small airplane that crashed into an icy creek near a Maryland airport and began to sink, state police said.

Witnesses told police that moments after the Piper Cherokee took off from Lee Airport in Edgewater on Monday, they heard it sputter and crash into Beards Creek, Maryland State Police said in a news release. An Anne Arundel County police officer who heard the call and two people nearby jumped into action, using kayaks on the frozen creek, police said.

John Gelinne Sr., a retired naval officer, said he thought the plane would hit his home before it crashed in the creek, news outlets reported.

"We saw the bottom of the aircraft, very close, and then it skipped and then went in the water right there," he said.

Gelinne and his son, John Gelinne Jr., a Marine, grabbed kayaks and used shovels to skim across the ice to the pilot, whom authorities identified as Steve Couchman.

Couchman, 71, of Frederick, was standing on the wing as the plane sank and stayed afloat by hanging on to a kayak, police said.

State Troopers to get 22% raises next year

NE OMAHA — Nebraska State Troopers will get the biggest pay raises they've seen in 20 years next year when their pay jumps 22% under a new contract.

Incoming Gov. Jim Pillen announced the deal with the union that represents state troopers Wednesday. The deal takes effect in July.

The base pay for new hires will increase \$5.43 an hour to \$30 per hour, and pay for specialty assignments will also be increased. The contract also includes a 5% raise in 2024.

The head of the State Patrol Col. John Bolduc said "this agreement sets NSP up to recruit the next generation of troopers."

Driver sees DUI charge after hitting deputy

NV RENO — A Washoe County sheriff's deputy was hospitalized after being hit by a drunk driver in Reno.

Authorities say the incident happened while the deputy was conducting a traffic stop shortly before 1 a.m. Monday.

The deputy was standing outside the patrol vehicle with the lights flashing. In addition, a Reno police car was behind the deputy's. That's when a driver of a truck struck the deputy's vehicle and then the deputy. Authorities say the driver did not stop and continued driving.

Nevada State Police troopers found the driver and found signs of driving under the influence. The driver was arrested for DUI above the legal limit resulting in substantial bodily harm and duties of a driver approaching a traffic incident.

Passengers evacuated after ferry engine fire

NY NEW YORK — Emergency personnel evacuated nearly 900 pas-

sengers from a Staten Island Ferry vessel following a fire in the ship's engine room.

The New York City Fire Department said units responded to a report of a fire in the mechanical room of a ship in upper New York Bay, WNBC-TV reported.

Five people were reported injured, three of them requiring hospital treatment, WNBC-TV said.

Deputy Assistant Fire Chief Frank Leeb said during a news conference there were about 870 people on the vessel, the Sandy Ground, with an additional 16 crew members.

said.

Zoo pandas Ya Ya, Le Le to return to China

TN MEMPHIS — The Memphis Zoo says its giant pandas will be heading back to China within the next few months.

The zoo says 22-year-old Ya Ya and 24-year-old Le Le will return after two decades in Memphis under a giant panda loan agreement that is ending with the Chinese Association of Zoological Gardens.

The zoo says the pandas were key to research and conservation projects and helped people experience some Chinese culture.

"It has been a wonderful 20 years fostering this relationship with Ya Ya, Le Le, and the Chinese Association of Zoological Gardens and we look forward to continuing this partnership in the future," the zoo said in a statement.

The advocacy group In Defense of Animals applauded the return of the animals, saying

they had been suffering in the zoo setting. Zoo officials have said the pandas are healthy and well taken care of, with as much as they want to eat.

Waitress gets \$1,000 tip for Christmas

WI MADISON — A Wisconsin waitress got a Christmas morning surprise from a customer — a \$1,000 tip.

Callie Blue, 29, was waiting tables at Gus's Diner in Sun Prairie, just outside Madison, at 6 a.m. Sunday when she started chatting with one of the few customers in the restaurant at that hour, the Wisconsin State Journal reported. He left her a \$1,000 tip.

The customer was Michael Johnson, president and CEO of the Boys & Girls Clubs of Dane County. He told the newspaper he was looking for people in need as part of the club's Pay It Forward campaign. Two donors had given about \$5,000 for tip money.

He said his Christmas Day schedule was booked with families he planned to help starting at 7:30 a.m. so he searched the internet for restaurants open at 6 a.m. and learned about Gus's Diner. He had also received an email about Blue and wanted to measure her customer service skills and demeanor.

He was impressed enough to pull \$1,000 from the \$5,000 tip money. He said about 12 servers got big tips but Blue got the biggest one because it was Christmas morning and she was the last recipient.

Blue called the tip amazing and said she'll use it to help feed her four horses.

— From Associated Press

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TCU-Michigan: Speed against power

Associated Press

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Asked to consider what previous opponents were similar to Michigan, TCU's defensive players and coordinator mention Kansas State a lot.

A bigger Kansas State.

"We see that they have a pretty huge O-line," Horned Frogs linebacker Dee Winters said Tuesday.

As for the Wolverines, they don't have much experience to draw upon when it comes to facing a defense like TCU's that uses three down linemen and three safeties.

"This is all new to us," Michigan offensive tackle Ryan Hayes said.

No. 2 Michigan brings its smashmouth ways into the College Football Playoff semifinal on Saturday to face No. 3 TCU. It's tempting to boil the Fiesta Bowl matchup down to Big Ten power vs. Big 12 speed, especially when the Wolverines have the ball.

Tempting, but not entirely ac-

curate.

"I think maybe it's an oversimplification," Michigan co-offensive coordinator Matt Weiss said.

For the second straight season, Michigan won the Joe Moore Award given to the best offensive line in the country.

This season's group might be even better than last year's, which added center Oluwatimi to a veteran group. The Virginia transfer won the Outland Trophy (best interior lineman) and Rimington Trophy (top center) this season.

Oluwatimi, tackles Hayes and Karsen Barnhart, and guards Zak Zinter and Trevor Keegan average 308 pounds, but what makes them different from even the best Big 12 lines is they also are long and rangy.

The 6-foot-3 Oluwatimi is the only one of five starters under 6-5.

Offensive line coach Sherone Moore is also Michigan's co-offensive coordinator now, handling play-calling duties

with Weiss. The two were promoted after Josh Gattis left for Miami following last season's playoff appearance by the Wolverines that ended in an Orange Bowl semifinal loss to Georgia.

"I think (Moore) does a really good job of knowing what our strengths are," Hayes said. "It's great having him in our room. We get extra intricate detail of why are we doing this as a whole offense. He kind of lets us know what the whole offense is doing and that helps us."

Adding to all that beef up front, Michigan loves its big personnel packages. The Wolverines will regularly use two, three, even the occasional four-tight end formation.

It is an offense Michigan coach Jim Harbaugh's mentor, Bo Schembechler, would be proud of.

"It's going to be quite a bit different from what we've gotten to see week in and week out," TCU defensive coordinator Joe Gillespie said. "But I also feel like there's some differences

that we'll bring to the table as well."

The 3-3-5 defense TCU plays was born as a counter-measure to spread offenses that proliferated college football — especially the Big 12 — in the 2000s and 2010s.

Those offenses often abandon the tight end position altogether, instead going with four or five wide receivers.

Ohio State dabbles in the 3-3-5, but for the most part Michigan didn't see much of it this season.

"So, it's really hard to watch the tape and say, 'OK, this will definitely work, but this won't,'" Weiss said about game planning for TCU.

The Horned Frogs are not exactly undersized up front on defense. Nose guards Damonic Williams and Tymon Mitchell both weigh in north of 315 pounds. But usually only one of them is on the field at a time. All three of TCU's starting linebackers are listed at 230 pounds or more.

Georgia uses RB depth with eye on title repeat

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Georgia coach Kirby Smart's plan for a deep running back corps was based on more than making it through a 12-game regular season.

Smart wanted his backs to be fresh for the College Football Playoff. The No. 1 Bulldogs will take a group of four running backs, led by Kenny McIntosh, into the Peach Bowl semifinal against No. 4 Ohio State on Saturday.

McIntosh has started 12 games for Georgia (13-0) and leads the Bulldogs with 709 rushing yards and 10 touchdowns. At times, however, it's difficult to distinguish the senior's hold on the No. 1 role because Daijun Edwards is a close second, with 681 yards and eight

touchdowns.

Kendall Milton and Branson Robinson have combined for more than 800 rushing yards and eight scores. That depth gives the defending national champion Bulldogs a strong running complement to quarterback Stetson Bennett's passing game.

The depth and balance at running back and other skill positions is Georgia's answer to Ohio State's high-scoring offense led by quarterback C.J. Stroud.

Smart says his plan at running back is about "health and necessity" and is based on an examination of Southeastern Conference offenses.

"Throughout our conference we've done studies, and very

few backs have made it through the entire year with a large burden," Smart said. "They tend to get injured. ... We try to build it where three to four backs can contribute and play."

Georgia's best chance at making a run for another national title may be provided by its depth at running back and other skill positions.

"We don't want to get into this part of the season and not have depth," Smart said. "That's what the rotation provides us."

Ohio State linebacker Tommy Eichenberg said the Georgia running backs boast similar skills and strengths.

"Some are faster than others, but I'd say overall they're all great running backs," Eichenberg said.

Georgia has taken a similar approach at other skill positions.

Starters also are bracketed with "OR" designations on Georgia's depth chart at wide receiver and even at tight end, where starter Brock Bowers was the John Mackey Award winner as the nation's top player at the position. Massive Darnell Washington (6-7, 265) and freshman Oscar Delp provide good reason to consider two-tight end sets.

"Kind of a friendly competition," Bowers said when asked about the depth at the position.

Bowers then paused.

"I don't know about friendly, but it's a mutual competition between everyone competing for spots," he said.

Ledecky named AP Female Athlete of Year again

Associated Press

A change of scenery worked out just fine for Katie Ledecky.

Shifting coasts and coaches after last summer's Tokyo Olympics, the American swimmer turned in another stellar performance at the world championships, set a pair of world records and capped 2022 as The Associated Press Female Athlete of the Year, selected by a panel of 40 sports writers and editors from news outlets across the country.

Ledecky, who previously won the award in 2017, edged out American track star Sydney McLaughlin in balloting announced Wednesday.

The two tied in total points, but Ledecky got the nod based on 10 first-place votes to McLaughlin's nine. Basketball standout A'ja Wilson finished third.

"I know so many great athletes have won this honor," Ledecky said. "I'm really happy — happy with how my year went, and also excited about the future."

Ledecky, who won her first Olympic gold medal in 2012 at age 15, has managed to stay on top in female freestyle swimming's longest pool events for the better part of a decade.

She has held the long-course world record in both the 800- and 1,500-meter free since 2013, rarely facing a serious challenge in either of those grueling races.

At this year's world aquatics championships in Budapest, Hungary, Ledecky touched first in the 800 by more than 10 seconds and won the 1,500 by nearly 15 seconds. She also claimed gold in the 400 free and was part of the winning U.S. team in the

4x200 free relay.

Before 2022 was done, Ledecky added two more world records to her ledger. She set short-course marks in both the 800 and 1,500 a week apart — even though she rarely competes in the 25-meter pool.

But the real enjoyment for Ledecky comes when no one is cheering her on, when it's just her and her coaches and teammates, putting in the long, lonely hours of training.

"I might be one of the few swimmers who loves the training even more than the racing," she said. "Don't get me wrong, I love the racing, too. But I truly enjoy going to practice every day. I'm excited when I go to bed for practice in the morning."

Last year, after an Olympic performance that was a slight disappointment by her lofty standards, Ledecky left coach

Greg Meehan and the Stanford University team where she had competed and trained while earning a psychology degree.

Her top priority was getting closer to her family in the Washington, D.C., area. She was intrigued by the program that Anthony Nesty, a rising star in the coaching ranks, had built at the University of Florida.

One of Nesty's freestylers, Bobby Finke, surprisingly swept gold in the men's 800 and 1,500 free at Tokyo. Another, Kieran Smith, captured an unexpected bronze.

So, Ledecky moved nearly 2,800 miles from Palo Alto, Calif., to Gainesville, Fla.

"It's been a lot of fun every day," she said. "This is the right place for me to be at this point in my career. I'm training really well and learning a lot along the way."

Griner saga in Russia AP's top sports story of 2022

Associated Press

The return of Brittney Griner to the United States in a dramatic prisoner swap with Russia marked the culmination of a 10-month ordeal that captivated world attention, a saga that landed at the intersection of sports, politics, race and gender identity — and wartime diplomacy.

Griner had for years been known to fans of women's basketball — college player of the year, a two-time Olympic gold medalist and WNBA All-Star who dominated her sport. But her arrest on drug-related charges at a Moscow airport in February elevated her profile in ways neither she nor her supporters would have ever hoped for, making her by far the most high-profile American to be jailed abroad — and her saga the AP Sports Story of the Year.

Her case not only brought unprecedented public attention to the dozens of Americans wrongfully detained by foreign governments, but it also emerged as a major inflection point in U.S.-Russia diplomacy at a time of deteriorating relations prompted by Moscow's war against Ukraine.

"I think her celebrity and the coinciding with the time of the invasion of Ukraine, those two points together is what made her

case national news, international news, but also I think it made it feel much more fraught than a lot of the earlier cases of Americans being detained in Russia," Kimberly St. Julian-Varnon, a Russian historian and doctoral student at the University of Pennsylvania, said in an interview days before Griner was freed.

After months of strained negotiations, and an extraordinarily rare public revelation by the Biden administration that it had made a "substantial proposal" to get home Griner and another detained American, Paul Whelan, the case resolved Dec. 8 with a prisoner swap in which the WNBA star was exchanged in the United Arab Emirates for Russian arms dealer Viktor Bout.

"It feels so good to be home! The last 10 months have been a battle at every turn," Griner posted on Instagram. "I dug deep to keep my faith and it was the love from so many of you that helped keep me going. From the bottom of my heart, thank you to everyone for your help."

The deal drew criticism from some prominent Republicans, who lamented that the U.S. had not gotten Whelan home and who complained that the administration had given up a convicted felon as notorious as Bout.

Administration officials, for their part, conceded that such prisoner swaps can carry a heavy price but also said it was unacceptable for Griner to remain locked up and that the deal that they reached was the only one that could secure her release.

Now that she's back in the U.S., Griner plans to be out of the public spotlight for a while to spend time with her wife. No longer just a generational women's basketball player, Griner is standing at a much larger crossroads.

She said in a statement that she plans to play this season for the Phoenix Mercury.

"I look forward to being able to say 'thank you' to those of you who advocated, wrote and posted for me in person soon," Griner said.

Off the court, the Griners do plan to continue to be advocates for the release of other wrongly detained Americans like Whelan.

"President Biden, you brought me home and I know you are committed to bringing Paul Whelan and all Americans home, too. I will use my platform to do whatever I can to help you," Griner said. "I also encourage everyone that played a part in bringing me home to continue their efforts to bring all Americans home. Every family deserves to be whole."

Uncertainty only certainty around NBA

Associated Press

DENVER — There was a time when an NBA team had some sense of how things were shaping up by Christmas. Even if just a glimmer of its place in the overall landscape.

Then the Boston Celtics made a run to the 2022 NBA Finals after being under .500 about this time last year.

Nobody is feeling too cozy this winter in the injury-riddled NBA.

"I don't know if you can make any sense of anything nowadays," Nuggets coach Michael Malone said.

Going into Thursday's games, Boston sat atop the Eastern Conference while Denver and New Orleans were tied in the West. But both races could simply depend on who heals the fastest or who can stay the healthiest.

The reigning NBA champion Golden State Warriors are missing Stephen Curry (shoulder), the Los Angeles Lakers are without Anthony Davis (foot) and the Minnesota Timberwolves are minus Karl-Anthony Towns (calf).

The Phoenix Suns will be without Devin Booker for at least four weeks after he re-aggravated his groin Sunday, and Domantas Sabonis is day-to-day with a hand injury as the Sacramento Kings try to make the playoffs for the first time since 2005-06.

Meanwhile, Jayson Tatum has the Celtics

humming along, and Nuggets big man Nikola Jokic is threatening to join Bill Russell, Wilt Chamberlain and Larry Bird as the only players to win three consecutive MVP awards.

Despite those two playing some of the best basketball in the NBA, injuries have led to some early season chaos.

Four teams are within four games of the first-place Celtics in the East, and six clubs are within 4 games of the co-leaders in the West.

"The talent and skill levels may change because of injuries," Suns coach Monty Williams said. "But playing with a great level of competition should never change for any team."

It worked for the Celtics, who at this time a year ago — Dec. 26, 2021 — were 16-17 and sitting ninth in the East. But the holiday wasn't a good barometer, as they went 35-14 the rest of the way to earn the No. 2 seed and advance to the finals. They're surging again this season behind Tatum, who has emerged as an MVP favorite as he tries to unseat Jokic.

"One game at a time and not looking too far ahead," Malone said with roughly 40% of the season complete. "Just trying to get better every single day."

Healthier, too.

That's the case with the Nuggets, who are steadily seeing Jamal Murray's explosive-

ness return as he makes his way back from an ACL injury. Michael Porter Jr. has recovered from a heel ailment that kept him out for a month.

The Warriors are minus Curry for at least two more weeks. Towns could be back for Minnesota in the not-so-distant future. Booker has missed six of the past nine games for the Suns, who were already without Cameron Payne (foot) and Cameron Johnson (knee). Booker reaggravated the injury early in a 128-125 overtime loss at Denver on Christmas Night.

"It's tough," teammate Chris Paul said. "We've got to hold the fort down until he's ready."

Sort of flying under the radar these days are the Los Angeles Clippers, a team that's rounding back into elite form. They're taking a cautious approach with Kawhi Leonard (knee), who scored 28 points in a loss at Philadelphia last Friday.

Don't overlook the play of Shake Milton, who has given the 76ers a nice boost off the bench. Jerami Grant has been a welcome addition in Portland, averaging 21.8 points per game to give a big hand to Damian Lillard. Zion Williamson has been doing Zion Williamson-type things — before recently entering the NBA's COVID-19 health and safety protocols — for the Pelicans, who climbed into the West tie by winning four straight.

Raiders bench QB Carr, Stidham to start last 2 games

Associated Press

HENDERSON, Nev. — Las Vegas Raiders quarterback Derek Carr has missed only three games in nine years, all because of injury.

Now, for the first time, he won't play because of what coach Josh McDaniels said Wednesday were offensive performance reasons.

McDaniels will not only start Jarrett Stidham the final two weeks, including Sunday's home game against the San Francisco 49ers, but Carr will be inactive. Practice squad quarterback Chase Garbers will be the backup.

The Raiders (6-9) have lost two of the past three games to all but fall out of the playoff race just a year after making the postseason.

Carr has not completed more than 55% of his passes in any of the past four games, and

he has thrown seven interceptions and six touchdown passes in that span.

Including three games with the Raiders this season, Stidham has completed 32 of 61 passes for 342 yards with two touchdowns and four interceptions. He has never started.

"I don't think anybody feels like we've done enough offensively certainly in a couple of these games," McDaniels said. "We couldn't put enough points on the board, so I don't think anybody's really happy with what we've done."

Wide receiver Davante Adams, who also played with Carr at Fresno State, helped orchestrate a trade from the Green Bay Packers in March largely because he wanted to play with him.

"I don't think anybody was excited about it in here," Adams said of Carr's benching. "I wouldn't be here right now if he wasn't

here. I think everybody knows how I feel about him. ... Obviously, I support my guy."

Adams said his focus is on the final two games rather than what his options might look like after the season.

Carr was not at the Raiders' facility.

"You've got to kind of take the emotions out of it and realize the only thing that can be productive is support Jarrett going forward," tight end Darren Waller said. "The guys are excited about him being able to get an opportunity, so we're rallying around him and letting him know we believe in him."

By not playing Carr, the Raiders eliminate the possibility of a serious injury affecting his contract status. The club has until Feb. 15 to release or trade Carr or he would receive \$33 million for 2023. A serious injury would guarantee that money plus another \$7.5 million for 2024.