

US grounds all Ospreys after crash

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The military announced late Wednesday it was grounding all of its Osprey V-22 helicopters, one week after eight Air Force Special Operations Command service members died in a crash off the coast of Japan.

The Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps took the extraordinary step of grounding hundreds of aircraft after a preliminary investigation of last week's crash indicated that a materiel failure — that something went wrong with the aircraft — and not a mistake by the crew led to the deaths.

The crash raised new questions about the safety of the Osprey, which has been involved in multiple fatal accidents over its relatively short time in service. Japan grounded its fleet of 14 Ospreys after the crash.

Lt. Gen. Tony Bauernfeind, head of Air Force Special Operations Command, directed the standdown “to mitigate risk while the investigation continues,” the command said in a statement. “Preliminary investigation information indicates a potential materiel failure caused the mishap, but the underlying cause of the failure is unknown at this time.”

In a separate notice, Naval Air Systems Command said it was grounding all Ospreys. The command is responsible for the Marine Corps and Navy variants of the aircraft.

The Air Force said it was unknown how long the aircraft would be grounded. It said the standdown was expected to remain in place until the investigation determined the cause of the Japan crash and made recommendations to allow the fleet

to return to operations.

In Japan, where U.S. military Ospreys had a non-fatal crash once and a number of incidents, the latest accident has rekindled safety concerns just as the Japanese government builds a new base for its fleet of Ospreys.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirokazu Matsuno told reporters in Tokyo the government has already formally requested that the U.S. military ensure the safety of Ospreys before their flights, but that Tokyo will seek further information from the U.S. side because it also affects the safety of Japan's own Osprey fleet.

The U.S.-made Osprey is a hybrid aircraft that takes off and lands like a helicopter but can rotate its propellers forward and cruise much faster, like an airplane, during flight.

Its unique design has been a

factor in multiple incidents. While the investigation into last week's crash has only just begun, it renewed attention on the aircraft's safety record, particularly on a mechanical problem with the clutch that has troubled the program for more than a decade. There also have been questions as to whether all parts of the Osprey have been manufactured according to safety specifications.

In August, the Marines found that a fatal 2022 Osprey crash was caused by a clutch failure, but the root cause was still unknown. In its report on the crash, the Marines forewarned that future incidents “are impossible to prevent” without improvements to flight control system software, drivetrain component material strength, and robust inspection requirements.

Navy spy plane passes over Taiwan Strait

By **ALEX WILSON**

Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — A U.S. Navy P-8A Poseidon flew through the Taiwan Strait on Wednesday, prompting China to scramble fighter jets to monitor its passage.

The maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft flew southwest from the East China Sea to the South China Sea around 12:30 p.m., as part of a routine transit, U.S. 7th Fleet spokeswoman Lt. j.g. Sarah Merrill said by email Thursday.

“U.S. Navy ships and aircraft routinely use the Taiwan Strait to transit between the two [seas] and have done so for many years,” she wrote.

The Poseidon's trip was not in response to any particular event, but such transits do “demonstrate the U.S. commitment to a stable, free and open Indo-Pacific, and confirm that the U.S. Navy flies, sails and operates anywhere international law allows,” Merrill added.

China, however, said the trip was “publicly hyped” and said it took steps to track the aircraft by organizing “fighter planes to monitor the passage” of the Poseidon, Chinese army Col. Shi Yi wrote Wednesday on an official Weibo social media account.

“Troops in the theater remain on high alert at all times and resolutely safeguard national sov-

ereignty and security as well as regional peace and stability,” the post said.

Beijing considers Taiwan, a functional democracy, as a breakaway province that must be reunified with the mainland, by force if necessary. China routinely criticizes U.S. operations in the strait.

Chinese forces hailed the aircraft, Merrill said, but all communications “were consistent with international norms and did not impact the operation.”

The U.S. regularly sends warships, typically destroyers, through the strait. Less frequently, aircraft such as the Poseidon fly through the 110-mile-wide waterway that separates

China from Taiwan.

The guided-missile destroyer USS Rafael Peralta, along with the Canadian patrol frigate HMCS Ottawa, made a trip through the strait on Nov. 2.

China on Nov. 30 said U.S. weapons sales to Taipei are “turning Taiwan into a weapons depot and a powder keg,” The Associated Press reported.

The U.S. maintains unofficial and nondiplomatic ties with Taiwan, while abiding by the One China policy. However, it is also bound by the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act stipulating it will provide enough defense weapons and support so that the island can maintain a “sufficient self-defense capability.”

IG report lists military health system issues

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. military community must navigate hurdles to access health care, both at home and abroad, according to a recent report from the Defense Department's Office of the Inspector General.

Among the issues plaguing the military health care system are long wait times for appointments, understaffed facilities and a general lack of access to care, all of which are contributing to complaints and concerns, the Nov. 29 report said.

It recommends that the Defense Health Agency, which oversees all military treatment facilities, conduct a survey of health care providers and patients and use the results to help develop and implement a plan to "bring those provider networks into compliance" with Defense Department requirements.

For its report, the IG collected

information from DHA, service audit agencies and inspectors general from the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps.

The results identified health care access issues in a variety of military communities, including Pearl Harbor, Hawaii; Lemoore, Calif.; Oak Harbor, Wash.; and Pensacola, Fla.

Smaller military treatment facilities "often only service active duty service members, and send all other beneficiaries, such as family members and retirees, to the TRICARE provider network," according to data provided by the attorneys general.

Additional data showed that some TRICARE networks "are not robust or adequate to meet this need and beneficiaries may have difficulty obtaining network care," the IG's report said.

Citing Naval Health Clinic Pearl Harbor in Hawaii as an example, the IG said the clinic accepts only active-duty service

members and offers only limited specialty care.

Other patients are turned away and sent to the TRICARE network at large; however, the network in Hawaii has limited facilities when compared to places such as San Diego.

Specialty services in Hawaii also have appointment wait times that exceed DOD's 28-day standard. Gastroenterology services, for example, take an average of 49 days and urology services can take an average of 67 days.

The IG also identified significant health care access issues for overseas military communities, specifically in Japan.

Problems there include the necessity of translation services, the lack of certain U.S. prescription medicines and the fact that medical services may not be available at all.

"Japanese medical facilities routinely and lawfully turn away patients when limited by medical

staff, translation support, or when advanced payment cannot be secured, resulting in denial of care," the report said.

U.S. insurance is often incompatible with Japan's medical system or not accepted by Japanese doctors, the report said. Upfront payment is often required, making health care "cost prohibitive for some civilians."

The issues aren't just an inconvenience, they're causing some DOD civilians to leave their jobs altogether.

Within a six-month period this year, at least eight Air Force civilian employees requested their tour in Japan be shortened due to health care access concerns, service officials told the IG. Another three declined job offers and two chose to relocate altogether.

A spokesperson for DHA, headquartered in Virginia, did not immediately respond to Stars and Stripes' request for comment Thursday.

At Senate hearing, a call to confirm promotions in '23

By DOUG G. WARE
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Leading members of the Senate Armed Services Committee said Wednesday that senators should not leave for the holiday break next week until all military nominations stalled in the upper chamber are confirmed.

The senators challenged their colleagues during a hearing of the committee's subpanel on personnel after Sen. Tommy Tuberville, R-Ala., blocked hundreds of nominations for 10 months to protest a Pentagon policy that reimburses troops who travel to receive reproductive care, such as abortions. The policy was put in place after many Republican states passed laws heavily restricting or banning the procedure.

Tuberville on Tuesday finally

agreed to lift his hold on about 425 promotions for officers of three-star rank or lower. His blockade continues, however, for about a dozen four-star generals.

"It was a grave mistake for one senator to hold our military promotion system hostage over his personal disagreement with the Department of Defense policy," said Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., the personnel subcommittee chairwoman.

"The Senate should not go home for the holidays until we confirm the remaining nominees," she added.

Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla., who has been supportive of Tuberville and his 10-month blockade, agreed.

"It's resolved except for the four-stars, and I hope what will happen is we'll go through this process quickly," he said.

The House and Senate are scheduled for a break that will start Dec. 15 and not end until January.

The hearing on Wednesday was held to examine the ongoing recruiting challenges for the service branches. For 2023, only the Marine Corps and Space Force met their small recruiting goals. The Army, Navy and Air Force, which sought to sign far more recruits, all failed to meet their targets for the year. The Air Force hoped to sign almost 27,000 active-duty recruits but came up about 2,700 short, Brig. Gen. Christopher Amrhein, commander of Air Force Recruiting Service, said a few weeks ago. The Army hoped for 65,000 recruits and missed by about 10,000, while the Navy aimed for almost 38,000 new active-duty sailors and mis-

sed by about 7,500.

Recruiting commanders told the committee there are various challenges in recruiting troops, including a disconnect between the military and younger Americans. The officers said they also face service-specific challenges.

"Educating the public about what our Navy does, both in conflict and in peacetime, would be helpful," said Rear Adm. Alexis Walker, who leads Navy Recruiting Command.

"Not everybody is fit to be a Marine," added Maj. Gen. William Bowers, who leads Marine Corps Recruiting Command. "We are not for everybody. We are looking for a select few young men and women of character who are attracted to the ethos and core values of being part of something bigger than themselves."

Strikes on southern Gaza raising fears

Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Israeli forces struck the southern Gaza town of Rafah twice, residents said Thursday, sowing fear in one of the last places where civilians have sought refuge after Israel widened its offensive against Hamas to areas already packed with displaced people.

United Nations officials say there are no safe places in Gaza. Heavy fighting in and around the southern city of Khan Younis has displaced tens of thousands of people and cut off most of Gaza from deliveries of food,

water and other vital aid. More than 80% of the territory's population has already fled their homes.

Two months into the war, the grinding offensive has set off renewed alarms internationally, with U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres using a rarely exercised power to warn the Security Council of an impending "humanitarian catastrophe" and urging members to demand a cease-fire.

The United States has called on Israel to limit civilian deaths and displacement, saying too

many Palestinians were killed when it obliterated much of Gaza City and the north. But the U.S. has also pledged unwavering support for Israel and appears likely to block any U.N. effort to halt the fighting.

Israel says it must crush Hamas' military capabilities and remove it from power following the Oct. 7 attack that ignited the war. Troops have pushed into Khan Younis, Gaza's second-largest city, which Israeli officials have portrayed as Hamas' center of gravity — something they previously said was in Ga-

za City and its Shifa Hospital.

Israel has ordered the evacuation of some two dozen southern neighborhoods, rather than the entire region as it did in the north, which the military says shows increased concern for civilians.

But the areas where Palestinians can seek safety are rapidly receding.

Israel's military says 87 of its soldiers have been killed in the Gaza ground offensive. It also says some 5,000 militants have been killed, without saying how it arrived at its count.

Biden open to deal as Ukraine aid falters in Senate

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — As Senate Republicans blocked the advance of tens of billions of dollars in military and economic assistance for Ukraine on Wednesday, President Joe Biden berated their tactics as "stunning" and dangerous. Yet he also signaled an openness to what GOP lawmakers ultimately want: border policy changes.

Biden at the White House warned of dire consequences for Kyiv — and a "gift" to Russia's Vladimir Putin — if Congress fails to pass a \$110 billion package of wartime funding for Ukraine and Israel as well as other national security priorities.

Hours later, Senate Republicans defiantly voted to stop the package from advancing, something that they had threatened to do all week.

"They're willing to literally kneecap Ukraine on the battlefield and damage our national security in the process," Biden said.

But even as he lashed Republicans for their stance, Biden stressed that he is willing to "make significant compromises on the border," if that's what it takes to get the package through Congress.

That statement has raised at least some hope that progress can be made in the days ahead as

the Senate grinds through negotiations on border security, one of the most fraught issues in American politics. Biden's remarks Wednesday were his clearest overture yet to Republicans and came at a critical time, with a path through Congress for the emergency funds rapidly disappearing and America's support for multiple allies in doubt.

The president's statement came hours after he huddled virtually with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy and leaders of the Group of Seven advanced democracies, which have staunchly supported Ukraine against Russia's invasion.

"We need to fix the broken border system. It is broken," Biden said, adding that he's "ready to change policy as well." He did not name specific policy proposals and accused Republicans of wanting a political issue more than bipartisan compromise.

Sen. James Lankford, the Oklahoma Republican who has been leading Senate negotiations over border policy, was encouraged by what he heard, saying it seemed like the president is "ready to be able to sit down and talk."

Senators of both parties acknowledged they will need to move quickly if a deal is to be struck.

UN: Russia intensifying attacks on energy facilities

Associated Press

UNITED NATIONS — Intensifying Russian attacks on Ukraine's energy facilities are worsening humanitarian conditions across the war-torn country, where heavy snow and freezing temperatures have already arrived, U.N. officials said Wednesday.

Assistant Secretary-General Miroslav Jenca told the U.N. Security Council that Russia's continuing daily attacks on Uk-

raine's critical civilian infrastructure have resulted in civilian casualties, and Moscow recently escalated its barrages in populated areas including the capital, Kyiv.

"All attacks against civilians and civilian infrastructure must stop immediately," he said. "They are prohibited under international humanitarian law and are simply unacceptable."

Jenca also raised the risks to all four of Ukraine's nuclear

power plants.

The Zaporizhzhia plant, which is Europe's largest, suffered its eighth complete off-site power outage since the invasion on Saturday, according to the International Atomic Energy Agency, Jenca said. And IAEA staff at the Khmelnytsky plant in western Ukraine reported hearing several explosions close by on Nov. 29.

Ramesh Rajasingham, the U.N. humanitarian coordinator,

told the council "the deaths, injuries and level of destruction of vital civilian infrastructure is staggering."

"Many people have been left without access to heat, electricity and water, particularly in the east and south," he said. "Amid freezing temperatures, this damage is particularly threatening the survival of the most vulnerable — among them the elderly and those with disabilities."

Haley on the defensive in 4th GOP debate

Associated Press

TUSCALOOSA, Ala. — Four Republican presidential candidates were given several opportunities Wednesday to criticize former President Donald Trump, who was absent from the debate again. But they mostly targeted each other, with former United Nations Ambassador Nikki Haley taking the brunt of the attacks as she gets more interest from donors and voters.

With just over a month before the 2024 primary calendar begins, the debate demonstrated how firm Trump's grip remains on the party.

But the focus on Haley reflected how other candidates perceive her as a threat to their chances of taking on Trump directly. Aside from former New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie,

most of the candidates have spent more time in debates going after each other than taking aim at Trump, reflecting the former president's popularity among Republicans and what many see as diminishing returns in attacking him.

The last scheduled debate before Iowa's GOP caucuses on Jan. 15 may have limited impact on the race, airing on a lesser-known television network, NewsNation, from a state Republican presidential candidates have carried since 1980.

Trump remains dominant in national and early-state polls. And after holding counterprogramming rallies during the first three debates, he didn't bother this time and instead went to a closed-door fundraiser. His campaign posted an ad during the debate focusing on

President Joe Biden as both parties head toward a potential rematch of the 2020 election Trump lost.

Christie repeatedly tore into Trump on Wednesday and challenged Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis to answer directly if he believed Trump was fit or unfit to be president again. The crowd at the University of Alabama booed him at one point as he attacked Trump.

"His conduct is unacceptable. He's unfit. And be careful of what you're going to get," warned Christie, who has been alone among leading Republicans in his focus on the race's clear front-runner.

The debate's brief focus on Trump was a reprieve for Haley, who spent most of the debate on the defensive.

DeSantis accused Haley of

backing down from media criticism and Biotech entrepreneur Vivek Ramaswamy suggested she was too close to corporate interests as she gets new attention from donors. He touted his own willingness to pick high-profile fights with his critics and went after Haley just moments into the debate, reflecting the rivalry between the two candidates reflected in dueling early-state television ads.

They also tussled over China, long an animating issue for conservatives worried about Beijing's influence. Later in the debate, Haley credited Trump for taking a hard line with Beijing on trade but said he was too passive on other fronts, including allowing China to capture American technology for its own military use and purchase American farmland.

Ex-Army officer killed parents, 4 others in trail across Texas

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — A Texas man killed his parents and four others and wounded two police officers in a daylong trail of violence stretching from San Antonio to Austin, authorities said Wednesday.

Shane James, 34, of San Antonio, was charged with two counts of capital murder after separate attacks in Austin and San Antonio that began Tuesday morning and ended with James crashing his car that evening during a police pursuit.

James has a history of mental health problems and a prior arrest on charges of

assaulting family members, authorities said.

His parents, Phyllis James, 55, and Shane James Sr. 56, were found dead in their home in the San Antonio area, Bexar County Sheriff Javier Salazar said at a news conference. Four more people were found dead in two homes in Austin, more than 80 miles away, officials said.

The Austin victims were not immediately identified. James would be charged with murder or capital murder in his parents' deaths as well, Salazar said.

A cyclist in Austin was also shot and

wounded, and two police officers were recovering from gunshots, including one who was shot in the leg outside of a high school, Austin interim Police Chief Robin Henderson said.

Henderson said it was unclear what, if any, relationship the man had to the victims in the Austin area.

James is a former U.S. Army infantry officer who served from February 2013 to August 2015, according to Lt. Col. Ruth Castro, Army spokesperson. He had no deployments and his last rank was first lieutenant.

VA: Nearly half of homeless female vets endured sexual abuse

BY LINDA F. HERSEY

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Nearly 45% of female veterans in homeless programs offered by the Department of Veterans Affairs in fiscal 2023 had documented histories of sexual trauma in the military.

The finding aligns with growing evidence that "sexual assaults and threatening sexual harassment" factor into a ris-

ing rate of homelessness among female veterans, according to Terrence Hayes, VA press secretary.

"Many [military sexual trauma] survivors struggle with readjustment issues and disruptions in core areas of functioning and well-being, including difficulties like homelessness," he said. "Experts point out that many [military sexual trauma] survivors suffer in si-

lence, feel alone in their experience, and have trouble coping."

Homelessness among female veterans rose by 10% from 2020 to 2022 as the overall number of veterans experiencing homelessness declined, according to the Department of Housing and Urban Development, which provides an annual report on homelessness to Congress.

"Women veterans deal with unique challenges such as having and caring for children, facing the risk of domestic violence, managing financial independence and ensuring employability. These factors can greatly affect their housing stability and increase the likelihood of homelessness," said Dr. Charles Weber, a psychiatrist and retired Army lieutenant colonel.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Airline settles female pilots' discrimination suit

CO DENVER — Frontier Airlines has settled a lawsuit filed by female pilots who accused the airline of discriminating against pregnant or breastfeeding employees.

In the agreement announced Tuesday, Frontier will let pilots pump breast milk in the cockpit during "noncritical phases" of flights. The Denver-based airline also agreed to let pilots who are breastfeeding reduce their flying time and treat pregnancy and breastfeeding the same as other medical conditions if they make pilots unable to fly.

The settlement was announced by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, which lodged charges against Frontier in 2018 after several pilots sued the airline.

Pastor gets 15 years for child exploitation attempt

WI GREEN BAY — A Wisconsin pastor accused of sexually exploiting children from Venezuela and Cuba was sentenced Monday to 15 years in a federal prison.

Cory Herthel, 40, pleaded guilty in August to one count of attempted sexual exploitation of a child.

The church where Herthel served, Seventh-Day Adventist Church in Green Bay, contacted the FBI in May to report that it had received information that Herthel was trading sexually explicit videos with a 15-year-old in Venezuela, according to court documents. Herthel acknowledged he met the child begging on the streets in Ecuador, kept in touch with him after

he and his mother returned to his native Venezuela, and exchanged sexually explicit videos with him, according to prosecutors and court documents.

Family sues Panera, says drink led to man's death

FL FLEMING ISLAND — The family of a 46-year-old Florida man has filed a wrongful death and negligence lawsuit against one of the biggest fast-casual restaurant chains in the U.S., claiming Panera Bread Co.'s caffeine-filled lemonade drink led to his death.

David Brown had high blood pressure and didn't drink energy drinks, but the lawsuit said he believed the Panera Charged Lemonade was safe since it was not advertised as an energy drink. It was offered in the same place as non-caffeinated or less-caffeinated drinks, according to the lawsuit filed Monday in Superior Court in Delaware, where Panera is registered.

The lawsuit states that on Oct. 9, Brown had the drink three times during a visit to the Panera location in Fleming Island, Fla. On his walk home, he suffered cardiac arrest and died a short time later.

Former pilot indicted on endangerment charges

OR PORTLAND — The former Alaska Airlines pilot accused of trying to cut the engines of a Horizon Air flight has been indicted on 84 endangerment charges, but is no longer charged with attempted murder, authorities said Tuesday.

The district attorney's office in Oregon's Multnomah County, home to Portland, announced the grand jury's indictment. Jo-

seph Emerson is to be arraigned on 83 charges of recklessly endangering another person — for each person who was on the plane — and one charge of endangering an aircraft.

Prosecutors have accused Emerson of trying to cut the engines on an Oct. 22 flight from Everett, Wash., to San Francisco while riding in the extra seat in the cockpit. The plane was diverted to Portland, where it landed safely.

According to charging documents, Emerson told Port of Portland police following his arrest that he had been struggling with depression and that he had taken psychedelic mushrooms about 48 hours before he attempted to cut the engines.

Emerson remains in custody.

Governor: Chants outside restaurant 'antisemitic'

PA PHILADELPHIA — Protesters marching in Philadelphia against the bombardment of Gaza chanted about genocide Sunday outside an Israeli-style restaurant, leading Democratic Gov. Josh Shapiro to call the demonstration "antisemitic."

In Philadelphia's Center City and University City neighborhoods, hundreds of people marched to criticize Israel's military actions in Gaza, The Philadelphia Inquirer reported. A video of demonstrators outside of Goldie Falafel depicted people chanting, "Goldie, Goldie, you can't hide, we charge you with genocide."

Shapiro said he told one of the restaurant's owners that he supported him and his staff.

Michael Solomonov is a prominent Israeli chef who has co-authored three cookbooks

and received several James Beard awards. He and Steve Cook, the co-owner, are Jewish.

In a statement, organizers of the protest, Philly Palestine Coalition, called for a boycott of the company's restaurants. They criticized Solomonov's role as a culinary ambassador to Israel, and his donation efforts.

US wants ships to anchor farther from pipelines

CA HUNTINGTON BEACH — Federal officials on Tuesday recommended increasing the distance from undersea pipelines that vessels are allowed to anchor in Southern California, citing a 2021 oil spill they said was caused by ships whose anchors were dragged across a pipeline after a storm.

The leak occurred in a ruptured pipeline owned by Houston-based Amplify Energy. National Transportation Safety Board officials concluded damage to the pipeline had been caused months earlier when a cold front brought high winds and seas to the Southern California coast, causing two container vessels that were anchored offshore to drag their anchors across the area where the pipeline was located.

The October 2021 spill of 25,000 gallons sent blobs of crude washing ashore in Huntington Beach and nearby communities, shuttered beaches and fisheries, coated birds with oil and threatened area wetlands. The Beijing and MSC Danit had displaced and damaged the pipeline in January 2021, while a strike from the Danit's anchor caused the eventual crude release, officials said.

— From wire reports

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Yankees acquire Soto in 7-player deal

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Juan Soto is headed to the New York Yankees in their first big move following the team's worst season in three decades.

They hope at least one more will follow.

New York acquired Soto and Gold Glove center fielder Trent Grisham in a blockbuster trade with the cost-cutting Padres on Wednesday night. San Diego received right-handed pitchers Michael King, Jhony Brito, Randy Vásquez and Drew Thorpe along with catcher Kyle Higashioka.

It was the second monster deal involving the 25-year-old Soto in less than two years. The three-time All-Star slugger has one season of team control left and is likely to get a salary around \$32 million after batting .275 with 35 homers, 109 RBIs and a .930 OPS in his only full season with the Padres.

San Diego obtained Soto from

Washington on Aug. 2, 2022, after he turned down a \$440 million, 15-year offer from the Nationals.

Padres general manager A.J. Preller said his team needed pitching and the swap gives San Diego young arms who will be with the franchise for several years.

"It's very difficult to make a deal where we're trading a player the caliber of Juan Soto, but if we did that we wanted to make sure we shored up a bunch of needs. We were able to get some depth, with quality," Preller said at a late-night news conference in Nashville, Tenn., where baseball's winter meetings were wrapping up. New York went 82-80 last season, narrowly avoiding its first losing record since 1992, and finished 29th among the 30 major league teams in batting average.

Soto joins a Yankees outfield that projects to have fellow All-

Star Aaron Judge in center and newly acquired Alex Verdugo in the other corner. Soto has a 1.274 OPS in nine career games in the Bronx.

"Soto and Judge are Gotham's new dynamic duo," agent Scott Boras said.

Yankees executives will travel to California to meet Monday with free agent Yoshinobu Yamamoto, a person familiar with the planning told The Associated Press, speaking on condition of anonymity because details were not announced. The 25-year-old right-hander was 16-6 with a 1.21 ERA this season for the Orix Buffaloes of Japan's Pacific League.

Soto, like Verdugo, adds a left-handed bat to a lineup that was righty heavy for several seasons. Yankees lefties had 55 homers and 171 RBIs last year while righties had 164 homers and 479 RBIs, an imbalance for a team that usually takes advantage of Yankee Stadium's short

porch in right.

"They were aggressive," Preller said. "They had a need and Juan is an incredible player and fit the need really well. When you have two teams that line up, and you have a team that's calling you consistently, you usually get a feel that this is something that has a chance to happen and hopefully it's a deal that works out for both sides."

San Diego appears to be slashing payroll by as much as \$50 million after flopping last season and missing the playoffs. The Padres also have a need for starting pitching after NL Cy Young Award winner Blake Snell, Michael Wacha and Seth Lugo became free agents.

Soto's relatively young age at free agency will be comparable to that of fellow Boras client Bryce Harper, who was 26 when he signed a \$330 million, 13-year contract with Philadelphia ahead of the 2019 season.

Mindset may be key for even Army-Navy matchup

The Annapolis Capital

Saturday's showdown is here.

Last week was about installing the game plan and preliminary preparation for the 124th Army-Navy Game. Game week is about dialing down on specific elements and getting players into the right mental mindset.

So, what is the right mindset, and how does one get his team to peak on the biggest stage?

"We just have to be the best version of ourselves. It doesn't take a miracle to win this game. It doesn't take playing outside of yourself," first-year Navy coach Brian Newberry said. "In fact, it's the opposite of that. It's about doing your job as best you possibly can and not letting the moment get to you.

"We don't have to get our guys up for this game. You just have to make sure they're level-head-

ed and are in a good place mentally going into the game."

This will be the fifth Army-Navy Game for Newberry but his first as leader of the program after he spent the previous four preparing the defense as the coordinator.

Speaking to the media Monday, Newberry acknowledged his game day assignment has changed dramatically. He must now worry about decisions such as whether to go for it on fourth down, calling timeouts and clock management.

"There was a certain amount of pressure I felt as a coordinator calling the plays and making sure I put our guys in the best possible position to be successful. It's a different kind of pressure now. I have to make sure we're on point in all three phases," he said. "It's no more im-

portant to me now than it was. I wanted to win this game just as badly as a coordinator as I do as a head coach. My approach and desire to win this game does not change at all."

This is the first time "America's Game" will be played in New England.

Gillette Stadium is home to the New England Patriots, whose legendary coach will not be an unbiased observer Saturday. Bill Belichick grew up around Navy football as his father was the longest-tenured assistant coach in program history.

Belichick has remained close to the Navy football program over the years. Newberry said this week that Belichick has agreed to address the Midshipmen after the team dinner Friday night.

"Coach Belichick has always been very supportive of the program," Newberry said. "It's great to have a guy like that to reach out to for advice and he's glad to give it."

Army and Navy come into the contest with 5-6 records and very similar offensive statistics. The Black Knights rank ninth nationally in rushing offense (208 yards per game) while Navy is 13th (200).

The two option practitioners rank 128th and 129th out of 130 Football Bowl Subdivision schools in passing offense — to no surprise.

Both teams have struggled to score points, with Navy standing 119th nationally (18.3 points) and Army not much better at 108th (20.8). The Black Knights and Midshipmen are also at the bottom of FBS in total offense.

LSU's Daniels voted AP player of year

Associated Press

BATON ROUGE, La. — LSU quarterback Jayden Daniels is The Associated Press college football player of the year, the school's second winner in the past five seasons.

Daniels received 35 of the 51 first-place votes and 130 total points from AP Top 25 poll voters. The Heisman Trophy finalist finished comfortably ahead of Washington quarterback Michael Penix, who was second with 15 first-place votes and 97 points.

Oregon QB Bo Nix was third, with Ohio State receiver Marvin Harrison fourth and Oklahoma State running back Ollie Gordon II fifth. Nix received the other first-place vote. USC quarterback Caleb Williams, the 2022 AP Player of the Year and last year's Heisman winner, did not receive votes this season.

Daniels, Penix, Nix and Harrison are the finalists for the Heisman, which will be presented in New York on Saturday. The winner of the AP award has differed from the

Heisman winner just twice in the past two decades.

The last LSU player to be named AP Player of the Year was Joe Burrow in 2019, when he also won the Heisman.

Daniels, a San Bernardino, Calif., native who transferred to LSU from Arizona State in 2022, has led the nation in total offense this season with 4,946 yards in 12 games (412.2 yards per game). He has passed for 3,812 yards, which ranks third nationally. His 40 TDs passing ties for first nationally with Nix, who has played in one more game than Daniels.

The 6-foot-4, 210-pound Daniels rushed for 1,134 yards and 10 TDs. His 50 touchdowns rushing and passing combined, along with a 2-point conversion on a passing play, has made him responsible for a nation-high 302 points.

As a youth athlete, his nickname was "Smooth," he said in an interview with The Associated Press, "because it looks like I'm not running fast or running hard ... but I'm moving faster than what most people think."

As productive as Daniels has been as a passer, his elusiveness and breakaway speed as a scrambler have distinguished him. During a 52-35 victory over Florida, Daniels became the first Football Bowl Subdivision QB to pass for more than 350 yards and rush for more than 200 in a game.

"His ability to run when things are not there is unique," LSU coach Brian Kelly said. "His speed, his durability, his toughness, puts him up there with the great ones."

Daniels rushed for touchdowns of 85 and 51 yards against Florida, and said the latter exemplified his instinctive approach to scrambling. He said he read a linebacker's eyes before darting behind him and then weaving his way to the end zone.

"It's just all instincts," Daniels said. "It's not something that I think about pre-snap."

A big and arguably late hit at Missouri briefly forced Daniels out of that game with a deep bruise in his ribs. He returned to lead LSU to a comeback victo-

ry, highlighted by his 35-yard scoring run. The rib injury bothered him for two more games.

"My pain tolerance is high," Daniels said. "I was able to go out there and deal with it."

LSU (9-3) was knocked out of contention for an SEC title when it lost to Alabama, a game in which Daniels spent most of the fourth quarter on the sideline with concussion symptoms after a penalized hit by linebacker Dallas Turner. Until that point, Alabama's defense had struggled to contain Daniels.

"That still burns me," Daniels said. "Obviously, we lost to a very good team, but I felt like it would have been a whole different story if I was in there."

Daniels said it's important to him to credit his team's role in any individual accolades he receives, from the offensive line to the running backs and his pass-catchers.

"Without them, I wouldn't be in a position like this where I was receiving any type of award," Daniels said. "That's my thing, is to make sure they feel a part of it."

Ravens come out of bye week in even better position

Associated Press

OWINGS MILLS, Md. — John Harbaugh admitted he was rooting against the Browns and Steelers last weekend. So in that sense, the Baltimore coach got his wish.

"Absolutely, you root against all the teams that are in your way," he said. "So that's what we did. We had a good day."

The Ravens had their bye last week, and they returned in an even better position than before. Pittsburgh's loss to lowly Arizona, and Cleveland's to the Los Angeles Rams, left Baltimore with a two-game lead atop the AFC North. Kansas City and Jacksonville — two teams competing with the Ravens for the top spot in the conference — lost

as well.

So if it wasn't obvious before, it is now: The Ravens (9-3) have quite an opportunity down the stretch, starting with this weekend's home game against the Rams.

"It comes with the same thing that we've been doing for the first 12 games," receiver Odell Beckham Jr. said. "Finding ways to win football games, finding ways to be elite."

The Ravens will be tested. After this game against Los Angeles (6-6), they finish the season against Jacksonville (8-4), San Francisco (9-3), Miami (9-3) and Pittsburgh (7-5).

Of course, two of those teams now have big health concerns at quarterback after Trevor Law-

rence of the Jaguars and Kenny Pickett of the Steelers sprained ankles.

It's been that kind of season in the NFL. Pickett's injury means Baltimore is currently the only team in the division with its No. 1 quarterback available at the moment. Ravens fans may not have much sympathy after losing star QB Lamar Jackson toward the end of each of the past two seasons.

"We don't want to see injuries happen in the league. We want everybody to go out there and give it their all, and when we play against teams, just have their best," Jackson said. "But it's part of the game. I went down last year, the year before. It happens in football."

Not only has Jackson been available all season, but the rest of the Ravens appear to be coming out of the bye week in pretty good shape.

Of the players on the 53-man roster, only receiver Rashod Bateman (illness) missed practice Wednesday. Defensive tackle Justin Madubuike (concussion) and linebacker Malik Harrison (groin) were limited.

Cornerback Marlon Humphrey (calf) was a full participant after missing two straight games. Tackle Ronnie Stanley (knee) wasn't listed on the injury report at all.

By the time they take the field against the Rams, Baltimore will have played only one game in the previous 23 days.

Blackhawks one of NHL's worst despite Bedard

Associated Press

Asked how he processes losing, Connor Bedard recalled one of his seasons with the Regina Pats — his junior hockey team in Canada.

He didn't have to look back very far. After all, the rookie center just turned 18 in July.

"I remember my 16-year in Reg, we didn't make playoffs and had a slow patch, kind of similar to what we've had right now just at the start of the year," he said. "It was pretty slow. We had a losing streak and stuff. It sucks. You never want to lose games.

"We know we're a better team than what our record shows. We just got to keep coming to the rink every day and being positive and trying to get better, and hopefully that shows in the win column."

While Bedard has lived up to the considerable hype he brought with him to Chicago, he can only do so much. The Black-

hawks still look like a team at the beginning of a rebuilding project, albeit with a budding offensive star and a handful of promising defensemen.

Chicago has dropped four straight and 10 of 12 overall after Tuesday night's 4-3 shootout loss to Nashville. It is off to a 7-16-1 start after it was 7-13-4 through its first 24 games last season.

"Every guy in here wants to do well," forward Nick Foligno said. "I think that's the hard part is we're not getting results."

The biggest problem for Chicago is its lack of scoring punch, even with Bedard in the fold. Heading into Wednesday's NHL slate, the Blackhawks ranked 30th in the league with 59 goals, and its power play was 29th at 10.7%. They have scored just six times during their current slide.

The Blackhawks tried to address their lines in the offseason, bringing in veteran forwards

Taylor Hall, Corey Perry and Foligno. But Hall is out with a season-ending knee injury and Perry was cut for violating team conduct policies.

Andreas Athanasiou, who had 20 goals and 20 assists for Chicago last season, is on injured reserve with a groin injury. Lukas Reichel, a first-round pick in the 2020 draft, is off to a disappointing start with two goals and four assists in 23 games.

"We've started out some games, we've had some good O-zone and sometimes a little bit too much on the outside," coach Luke Richardson said. "We want to make sure we're not just tossing pucks into the inside when we're not ready for it. I think we have to be a little more determined to get pucks to the net, and I think that starts at the back end shooting pucks more and a little quicker."

Of course, all is not lost for Chi-

cago. Not with Bedard looking every bit the player the Blackhawks thought he would be when they took him with the No. 1 overall pick in the draft.

Bedard leads all NHL rookies with a team-high 11 goals and 20 points. From his awareness, vision and playmaking ability to his unflappable demeanor in the face of enormous attention off the ice, he appears to be well on his way to becoming one of the league's biggest stars.

He has displays of frustration — like when he broke his stick and punched the back of the boards during a 5-1 loss at Detroit last week — but he seems to be able to move on quickly.

"We're competitive athletes and that's going to happen," he said. "But for sure, you don't want to show too much. It's something maybe the last few games I could get better at, but everyone has their moments."

Analysis: Spurs, Pistons have long road ahead in rebuilds

Associated Press

There was so much promise six weeks ago. San Antonio was reveling in the debut of Victor Wembanyama, the No. 1 pick who arrived with amazing fanfare. Detroit had a new coach in Monty Williams — just two years removed from taking Phoenix to the NBA Finals — and a roster featuring five top-five draft picks from the last five years.

The Spurs started 3-2 and had a 21-point lead in the third quarter of their sixth game. The Pistons started 2-1, the only thing keeping them from a 3-0 start was a missed straightaway jumper by Cade Cunningham at the buzzer of their opener in Miami. So much promise, for both teams.

And nothing since. Nothing.

As the inaugural NBA In-Season Tournament moves to the glitz and glamour of Las Vegas for its Final Four — capped Saturday by the awarding of a new trophy and the winning team's players splitting about \$8 million — the Spurs and Pistons are at the other end of the spectrum, already mired at the bottom of the league.

The Spurs have lost 15 in a row, just one away from a franchise worst amid a 3-17 start. The Pistons have lost 18 in a row, that

streak and their 2-19 record at this point both already the worst in franchise history.

For his part, Wembanyama isn't showing any signs of worry or frustration. The way he sees it, the Spurs are coming to work every day, doing their job and moving closer to figuring things out.

"Everybody knows where we're going," Wembanyama said. "Most of the people here have been through everything before. We're good. We're in good hands."

The Pistons are doing something that the NBA has never seen. Each of these 18 consecutive losses has come with Detroit having scored at least 100 points; no team has ever scored 100 points in at least 18 straight games and come away with exactly zero wins. The offense hasn't been the problem.

Lots of other things have. The Pistons just finished the second-worst November in NBA history, going 0-15. Only Philadelphia has been worse; the 76ers were 0-16 in November 2015, part of a 1-30 start to a season where they finished 10-72.

"We have to have people that honor the organization and the jersey by competing at a high level every night," Williams said after a loss last week, tapping his finger

firmly on the table where he was sitting for added emphasis. "Not talking about execution. Just competing."

The Pistons' reason for hope might be this: they don't get blown out too much. Of their 19 losses so far, 13 of them have come by 12 points or less.

The Spurs' reason for hope might be this: they have built big leads — they just lose them. They've lost games after leading by 10 points eight times already this season, lost four after leading by at least 18 points. It's typically just a three- or four-minute stretch where things go haywire.

"During those stretches," Spurs coach Gregg Popovich said, "either we don't score or our defense sucks."

Wembanyama's been dealing with a little bit of hip soreness, his first official NBA injury issue. A few days off thanks to the tournament's knockout round — no teams played Sunday, only the quarterfinalists for the tournament were playing Monday and Tuesday — might make him feel better. Either way, the break gives both the Spurs and Pistons a little time to practice, work on things and figure out what's missing.