

Japan releases Alkonis to US from prison

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A Navy officer jailed in Japan over a car crash that killed two Japanese citizens has been transferred into U.S. custody and is being returned to the United States, his family said Thursday.

Lt. Ridge Alkonis had been serving a three-year prison sentence after pleading guilty to the negligent driving deaths of a woman and her son-in-law in May 2021. His family has said the crash was an accident, caused when he lost consciousness while returning from a trip to Mount Fuji, but Japanese prosecutors maintained that he fell asleep while drowsy and shirked a duty to pull over.

“After 507 days, Lt. Ridge Alkonis is on his way home to the United States. We are encouraged by Ridge’s transfer back to the United States but cannot celebrate until Ridge has been reunited with his family,” the family, based in Dana Point, Calif., said in a statement to The Associated Press, adding that it appreciated the U.S. government’s efforts to effect the transfer.

The Alkonis case had generated substantial publicity over the last year and a half, with his family rallying outside the White House to call for his release and his wife,

Brittany, meeting and embracing President Joe Biden, who raised the case during a May meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida.

It was unclear where in the U.S. Alkonis is heading or whether upon his arrival he might be required to spend additional time behind bars under the terms of his transfer from Japan.

“When the Biden Administration is presented with the complete set of facts and circumstances surrounding the case, we’re confident they will promptly recognize the absurdity of Ridge’s conviction,” the family said. “We trust that the (Department of Justice) will urgently wish to end this travesty of justice by immediately releasing Ridge, and we look forward to Ridge enjoying the holidays at home with his wife and children.”

A Justice Department spokesperson referred a request for comment to the Bureau of Prisons, which did not immediately respond to an email.

Alkonis is a specialist in underseas warfare and acoustic engineering who at the time of the crash had spent nearly seven years in Japan as a civilian volunteer and naval officer.

In the spring of 2021, after a period of land-based assignments, Alkonis, a Southern California native, was preparing for a deployment as a department head on the USS Benfold, a missile destroyer.

With the assignment looming, he set out for an excursion of Mount Fuji for hiking and sightseeing with his wife and children. They had climbed a portion of the mountain and were back in the car, heading to lunch and ice cream near the base of Mount Fuji, when, his family says, he suddenly lost consciousness after suffering acute mountain sickness.

He was so out of it, they say, that neither his daughter’s screams to wake up nor the impact of the collision roused him. His car veered into parked cars and pedestrians in a parking lot, striking the woman and her son-in-law, who both later died.

After the crash near Fujinomiya, Alkonis was arrested by Japanese authorities and was held for 26 days in solitary confinement at a police detention facility, was interrogated multiple times a day and was not given medical treatment or an evaluation, according to a statement of facts provided by a family spokesman.

NDAA, with 5.2% pay boost for troops, goes to Biden

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The House on Thursday passed a defense bill that authorizes a record \$886 billion in military spending, raises military pay and avoids controversial culture war issues that threatened to derail the legislation.

Lawmakers in the Republican-led chamber voted 310-118 to approve the 2024 National Defense Authorization Act. A coalition of Republicans and Democrats came together to pass the legislation, unlike an earlier vote this year when Republicans overcame near unanimous Democratic opposition to push through a version of the bill catering to far-right conservatives.

The final legislation, negotiated with the Democrat-led Senate, dropped the most divisive provisions, including proposals to

block the Pentagon’s abortion travel policy, ban coverage of medical treatment for transgender troops and gut programs that promote diversity and inclusion.

It now goes to President Joe Biden to be signed into law.

“I’ll be the first to admit, I’m disappointed we didn’t get all the priorities we wanted but you know what, the Senate is pretty disappointed they didn’t get the priorities they wanted either,” said Rep. Mike Rogers, R-Ala., chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. “It takes compromise to move legislation in a divided government and this bill is a good compromise. It’s laser-focused on deterring our adversaries, especially China.”

Congress still needs to pass an appropriations bill that would allocate the funding necessary to implement the policies out-

lined in the NDAA.

Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene, R-Ga., last week called the compromise bill “a total sell-out of conservative principles and a huge win for Democrats.” Rep. Chip Roy, R-Texas, urged lawmakers who are “pro-life, against racial division, against taxpayer transgender surgeries, against drag shows” to oppose “this swamp bill.”

Other lawmakers said they could not vote for the legislation because it included a four-month extension of a controversial foreign surveillance program. But the bill easily earned the two-thirds majority needed to pass.

Lawmakers from both parties lauded various quality-of-life improvements included in the legislation, including a 5.2% pay raise for troops — the largest in more than 20 years.

Military commanders patrol Iwakuni city

By JONATHAN SNYDER
Stars and Stripes

IWAKUNI CITY, Japan — American and Japanese commanders at a Marine base near Hiroshima recently took to the streets to demonstrate, they said, a shared commitment to keeping the peace in their communities.

The commander of Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Col. Richard Rusnok, patrolled nightlife areas popular with service members on Dec. 8 with Rear Adm. Takuhiro Hiragi, commander of Fleet Air Wing 31 of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force.

They were joined by Iwaku-

ni Mayor Yoshihiko Fukuda and officials from the Chugoku-Shikoku Defense Bureau and Yamaguchi prefecture.

Recent incidents involving U.S. citizens affiliated with the military — including drunken driving, car theft and assault — have raised concerns over further misconduct from the air station.

Japanese prosecutors on Nov. 24 indicted Lance Cpl. Manuel Gomez, 21, a motor vehicle operator, on charges he punched and injured an elderly Japanese woman earlier that month in Iwakuni. Another U.S. service member was reportedly involved in a fight

with a 67-year-old man following a break-in at a store in the city on Nov. 18.

“Any incidents that create any kind of friction between the American and Japanese community is anathema to our values,” Rusnok said at a post-patrol press briefing. “And we cooperate fully in any investigation with the appropriate authorities that are involved.”

This week, the commander of Marine forces in Japan ordered a liberty policy update following the rise in misconduct allegations.

The revamp, drafted Monday by Lt. Gen. James Bierman Jr., requires sergeants

and below to carry tiered liberty cards while enjoying free time off base. Corporals and below must have a liberty buddy with them if they plan to consume alcohol anywhere other than a U.S. military base.

The American and Japanese communities share similar values, Rusnok said at the briefing.

“We have the same desire in the end-state, which is a safe, secure community where we can raise our children, where we can conduct business and where we can share our cultures together in the ways that we do very effectively every day,” he said.

Marine killed in Calif. training accident remembered

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Sgt. Matthew K. Bylski, a 23-year-old Marine who died Wednesday in a rollover accident during training at Camp Pendleton, Calif., had nearly five years of service and was known for his willingness to help others.

“He was so compassionate. He was always upbeat and would do anything he could to bring you out of a bad situation and put you in a better mindset,” his brother Josh Bylski said in a

statement released by Hazel Park Schools in Michigan where the Marine graduated high school.

Bylski, who grew up in nearby Royal Oak, Mich., died as he was serving as the vehicle commander of an amphibious combat vehicle at Camp Pendleton, according to the Marine Corps base. A rollover accident occurred as the vehicle with 14 other Marines inside was on land.

One Marine remains at the hospital in good condition, the others have been treated and re-

leased, the service said Thursday. The accident remains under investigation.

Bylski was an amphibious combat vehicle crewman assigned to the Battalion Landing Team 1/5 of the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit.

“Words fail to express our sorrow at the tragic loss of Sgt. Bylski, an outstanding Marine and a leader within his platoon,” said Col. Sean Dynan, commanding officer of the 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit. “The MEU—the Marines who lived, trained, and

learned from Sgt. Bylski, mourn alongside his family and friends. The entire 15th MEU ‘Vanguard’ family is affected by his absence.”

Bylski enlisted in January 2019, shortly after his 2018 graduation from Hazel Park High School where he played baseball and football, according to the district. He is survived by his wife, Lexi, and his parents, Ken Bylski and Sandra Rogoff.

“He was a real special kid,” Ken Bylski said in a statement from the school.

Marine earns spot in ‘Jeopardy’ championship final

By MICHAEL SLAVIN
Stars and Stripes

Marine intelligence officer Capt. Tyler Vandenberg put his intellect on full display Wednesday, cruising past his opponents during a semifinal match of “Jeopardy.”

Vandenberg, who is based in Stuttgart, Germany, earned a spot in the popular game show’s

“Champions Wildcard” final stage by winning \$68,400 in two commanding victories.

Heading into the final Jeopardy round, Vandenberg held a \$7,800 lead when the “movie musical” category appeared.

Host Ken Jennings read the final answer: “Of the musicals to win an Oscar for best picture, one of the two with one-word titles

based on and named for literary characters.”

Vandenberg remained stoic while his answer, “What is Oliver!” was read from the screen. Only after his correct answer was shown did his smile appear, while revealing he wagered his entire sum of \$18,400, earning him \$36,800 on the day.

Vandenberg is no stranger to

the game show, having previously appeared as a first lieutenant in July 2021, when he went on to win \$41,400 as a two-day champion.

The winner of the group stage will receive a \$100,000 prize and advance to the show’s Tournament of Champions. The first final round of the group stage is slated for Friday and the second final round is Monday.

Pentagon outlines its recruiting challenges

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

The top challenge facing U.S. military recruiting efforts is a lack of awareness about the armed forces among U.S. youth and not “woke” policies, top Pentagon personnel officials told House lawmakers Wednesday.

Personnel policymakers for the Defense Department and the Army, Navy and Air Force insisted their top hurdles to reaching annual recruiting goals amounted to a messaging problem. Generation Z — people born in the mid-1990s through the early 2010s — have little familiarity with the military and lack understanding of the opportunities uniformed service could provide them, defense officials told the House Armed Services Committee’s military personnel subpanel.

“This combined with historically low unemployment, a strong private sector wage growth, concerns about the risks of military service, the [coronavirus pandemic’s] impact on school access [to recruiters] has all turned into a perfect storm — creating the most challenging recruiting environment for our high-tech service since the height of the dot-com boom, nearly a quarter of a century ago,” said Alex Wagner, the assistant secretary of the Air Force for manpower and reserve affairs.

Officials from the other services made similar assessments of recruiting now, which is generally considered the most difficult time to attract new troops since the introduction of the all-volunteer force 50 years ago. Last year the military services, excluding the Marine Corps and Space Force, missed their annual enlistment goals. The Army, which missed its goal by about 10,000

recruits, failed for a second straight year.

While Republicans on the subpanel agreed with the characterization offered by defense officials of the current recruiting environment, they also pointed their fingers at diversity, equality and inclusion initiatives brought by President Joe Biden’s administration.

The lawmakers claimed the DEI efforts drive otherwise interested people away from the military.

Rep. Jim Banks, R-Ind., the subpanel’s chairman, described those DEI efforts as Biden’s “pet project,” and argued they were harmful to the military’s primary goal of being lethal.

“Even now, when we can see that DEI has failed across the country, increasing division and hate, ignoring merit, and now fostering rampant anti-semitism, this administration still elevates social justice over our national security,” said Banks, a Navy veteran who served in Afghanistan. “And the result is a steep loss in institutional trust in the services and recruiting numbers at their lowest point in 50 years.”

Some Democrats and several of the Pentagon officials pushed back against the argument from Banks — and other Republican lawmakers — that DEI policies were partially to blame for recent recruiting woes. Rep. Chrissy Houlahan, D-Pa., accused the Republicans of grandstanding on the culture wars issue, when the military personnel subpanel could be focused on improving quality-of-life problems that continue to plague the armed forces, such as inferior housing and high rates of suicide and sexual assault and harassment, which she argued also impact recruiting.

Marines deploy food trucks on Okinawa in pilot project

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — Cpl. Jordan Kuzniak was among those lining up for lunch on a recent afternoon at the Chef Shack food truck outside the Foster Community Center.

The schedule for two food trucks in a pilot program to feed Marines outside their chow halls on Okinawa is confusing, said the air support operator with Marine Air Support Squadron 2. But she had visited the trucks at least five times over the past two months.

“I absolutely love it,” she said while ordering a spicy chicken bowl. “When it’s available, I take full advantage of it.”

The Mobile Feeding Pilot Program began Oct. 4 at Foster and has since spread to nearby Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, Gunnery Sgt. Raul Millan, subsistence chief for Marine Corps Installations Pacific, said at the community center on Nov. 29.

The program provides lunch

at no additional cost to enlisted Marines at two Marine Corps Community Services food trucks.

The initiative will soon be available across Okinawa and could eventually be adopted wherever Marines are stationed in the Indo-Pacific, Millan said.

“The more we can enhance the quality of life for Marines, the more likely we can retain them,” he said.

The program was developed this year by MCIPAC’s food service office in response to then-Commandant Gen. David Berger’s Talent Management 2030 retention initiative, Millan said. The initiative seeks to retain Marines by offering improved facilities along with additional services and options.

“We cannot lose a 12-year intelligence professional or artillery Marine because we could not provide access to pediatric care or a high quality chow hall,” Berger wrote in a March policy update.

S. Korea sends jets for nearing Chinese and Russian aircraft

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — Six Chinese and Russian military aircraft entered South Korea’s air identification zone Thursday, prompting Seoul to deploy fighter jets in response, according to the Ministry of National Defense.

The aircraft — two from China and four from Russia — were detected prior to entering South Korea’s zone in the Sea of Japan, or East Sea, between 11:53 a.m. and 12:10 p.m., the ministry said in a text message.

The identification zone is a buffer designated by some countries between international and national airspace in which approaching aircraft are ex-

pected to identify themselves.

The six aircraft did not violate South Korea’s airspace, but the nation’s air force deployed jets “to take tactical measures,” the ministry said.

No additional details on the aircraft were provided by the ministry.

The incident comes six months after four Chinese and four Russian aircraft crossed into South Korea’s identification zone to the south and east of the Korean Peninsula on June 6. South Korean jets responded.

The same day, two Chinese H-6s and two Russian Tu-95 bombers conducted a joint air drill near Japan, prompting Tokyo to scramble fighter jets, according to Kyodo News.

Israel vows to fight on despite backlash

Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Israel vowed to keep fighting in Gaza until it crushes Hamas after one of the deadliest single battles of the war for its soldiers, even as it faces mounting international calls for a cease-fire and unease on the part of its closest ally, the United States.

The ambush in Gaza City, one of the hardest hit areas of the war, showed Hamas' resilience and called into question whether Israel can defeat it without wiping out the entire territory. Support for Hamas has surged among Palestinians — in part because of the militant group's stiff resistance to a far more powerful foe — while the U.S. has expressed growing discomfort over civilian deaths.

U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan was visiting Israel on Thursday, days after President Joe Biden said that Israel was losing international support

because of its "indiscriminate bombing."

Israel has imposed a total siege on northern Gaza, including Gaza City, and has flattened much of it in what is already one of the 21st century's most devastating military campaigns.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has vowed to fight to the end, "even given the great pain and the international pressure," saying late Wednesday that "nothing will stop us."

The ambush took place Tuesday in the dense neighborhood of Shijaiyah, which was also the scene of a major battle during the 2014 war between Israel and Hamas. The dead included two high-ranking officers. A total of 116 soldiers have been killed in the ground offensive, which began Oct. 27.

Heavy fighting has raged for days in Shijaiyah and other areas in and around eastern Gaza City

that were encircled earlier in the war. Tens of thousands of people remain in the north despite repeated evacuation orders, saying they don't feel safe anywhere in Gaza or fear they may never return to their homes if they leave them.

The military released footage on Thursday from northern Gaza showing dozens of men with their hands above their heads walking in a straight line out of a damaged building. Four of the men could be seen carrying assault rifles over their heads and setting them down in the street, along with what appeared to be several ammunition magazines.

The military said the men had exited the Kamal Adwan Hospital after troops battled militants in a nearby building. It described all of them as suspected militants, without providing evidence.

The Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza said 70 medical

workers and patients were detained when Israeli forces raided the hospital earlier this week, including the hospital director. It was not immediately clear if the military and the Health Ministry were describing the same event.

Israel's air and ground assault, launched in response to Hamas' unprecedented attack into southern Israel on Oct. 7, has killed more than 18,600 Palestinians, according to the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza.

Nearly 1.9 million Palestinians have been driven from their homes, with most seeking refuge in the south, even as Israel has continued to strike what it says are militant targets in all parts of the territory. New evacuation orders issued as troops pushed into the southern city of Khan Younis this month have pushed U.N.-run shelters to the breaking point and forced people to set up tent camps in even less hospitable areas.

GOP-controlled House OKs Biden impeachment inquiry

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House on Wednesday authorized the impeachment inquiry into President Joe Biden, with every Republican rallying behind the politically charged process despite lingering concerns among some in the party that the investigation has yet to produce evidence of misconduct by the president.

The 221-212 party-line vote put the House Republican conference on record in support of an impeachment process that can lead to the ultimate penalty for a president: punishment for "high crimes and misdemeanors," which can lead to removal from office if convicted in a Senate trial.

Biden, in a rare statement about the impeachment effort, questioned the priorities of House Republicans in pursuing an inquiry against him and his family.

"Instead of doing anything to

help make Americans' lives better, they are focused on attacking me with lies," the president said following the vote.

Authorizing the monthslong inquiry ensures that the impeachment investigation extends well into 2024, when Biden will be running for reelection and seems likely to be squaring off against former President Donald Trump — who was twice impeached during his time in the White House.

The decision to hold a vote came as Speaker Mike Johnson and his team faced growing pressure to show progress in what has become a nearly yearlong probe centered around the business dealings of Biden's family members. While their investigation has raised ethical questions, no evidence has emerged that Biden acted corruptly or accepted bribes in his current role or previous office as vice president.

EU to open membership negotiations with Ukraine

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — The European Union decided Thursday to open accession negotiations with Ukraine, a stunning reversal for a country at war that had struggled to find the necessary backing for its membership aspirations and long faced obstinate opposition from Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban.

European Council President Charles Michel, who was chairing a Brussels summit of the EU's 27 leaders where the decision was made, called it "a clear signal of hope for their people and our continent."

Although the process between opening negotiations and Ukraine finally becoming a member could take many years, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy welcomed the agreement as "a victory for Ukraine. A victory for all of Europe."

"History is made by those who don't get tired of fighting for freedom," Zelenskyy said.

Orban said his opposition remained steadfast, but, with a unanimous decision required, he decided to let his right to oppose lapse because the 26 others were arguing so strongly in favor. An abstention from him was not enough to stop the decision from being adopted.

An EU official, who asked not to be identified because the summit negotiations were private, said Orban was "momentarily absent from the room in a pre-agreed and constructive manner" when the decision was made.

"Hungary's perspective is clear: Ukraine is not ready for us to begin negotiations on its EU membership. It's a completely illogical, irrational and improper decision" Orban said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Judge strikes down charter schools funding measure

KY FRANKFORT — A Kentucky law aimed at setting up a funding method for charter schools was struck down by a judge on Monday, dealing another setback for school choice advocates.

The decision could further energize efforts to put a ballot measure before Kentucky voters next year that would seek to overcome constitutional hurdles for school choice initiatives. Such a proposed constitutional amendment would have to clear the GOP-dominated legislature before reaching the statewide ballot.

In his ruling Monday, Franklin County Circuit Judge Phillip Shepherd said the 2022 law creating the funding stream for charter schools violated Kentucky's constitution. Such publicly funded charter schools would be operated by independent groups with fewer regulations than most public schools.

Kentucky Attorney General Daniel Cameron's office said it's reviewing the ruling to determine next steps.

Judge closes water case against former governor

MI DETROIT — A judge on Monday formally dismissed misdemeanor charges against former Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder in the Flint water scandal.

The dismissal was expected, weeks after the Michigan Supreme Court turned down a last-gasp appeal from state prosecutors and ended criminal cases against him and many others. Snyder, a Republican who left office in 2019, was

charged with willful neglect of duty.

Flint's water became tainted with lead after city managers appointed by Snyder began using the Flint River in 2014 to save money while a new pipeline to Lake Huron was built. The water wasn't treated to reduce its corrosive qualities, causing lead to break off from old pipes and contaminate the system for more than a year.

Family of man who died after stun gun used sue

AL MOBILE — The family of an Alabama man who died after police used a stun gun on him filed a wrongful death lawsuit on Monday against the city of Mobile.

The family of Jawan Dallas, 36, alleges that Mobile police used excessive force that led to his death. The lawsuit, filed in federal court in Mobile, names the city and two unnamed officers as defendants. It seeks \$36 million in damages.

Dallas, 36, died July 2 after he was shocked with a stun gun while police were trying to subdue him.

The district attorney announced last month that a grand jury cleared the officers of criminal wrongdoing and said Dallas died of underlying medical conditions that were exacerbated by drug use and the struggle with officers.

Ranked choice voting bill moves to public hearing

WI MADISON — A bipartisan bill that would dramatically change how Wisconsin residents choose congressional candidates by asking them to rank their top choices instead of voting for one

of two candidates is headed for its first public hearing.

The state Senate's election committee was set to take public comment on a proposal that would implement a ranked choice system known as final five.

The bill would implement a form of ranked choice voting in which all candidates for a U.S. House or Senate seat would appear together on a primary ballot regardless of their party, with the top five finishers advancing to the general election. Right now Republicans and Democrats run on separate ballots in partisan primaries.

Voters would rank the five primary winners in order of preference on general election ballots. If a candidate receives a majority of first-place votes, they win. If no one gets a majority, the candidate with the fewest votes is eliminated and anyone who had that person as their first choice instead has their vote go to their second ranked choice. That process continues until one candidate has a majority of votes.

AG rejects language for records access measure

AR LITTLE ROCK — Arkansas Attorney General Tim Griffin on Monday rejected the language for a proposed ballot measure that would make access to government records and meetings a right protected in the state's constitution.

Griffin rejected the language for the proposed Arkansas Government Transparency Amendment, which would also make it more difficult for lawmakers to narrow access to public meetings and records.

Griffin's approval is needed before the group behind the measure can begin collecting the 90,704 signatures needed to qualify for the ballot. Griffin cited "lack of clarity on key terms" as a reason for the rejection, saying terms like government transparency and public record are never defined in the proposal.

Arkansas Citizens for Transparency, the group behind the measure, said in a statement that Griffin was seeking a definition standard that other constitutional rights don't have.

SmileDirectClub closes after filing Chapter 11

NY NEW YORK — SmileDirectClub is shutting down — just months after the struggling teeth-straightening company filed for bankruptcy protection.

SmileDirectClub's aligner treatment through its telehealth platform is no longer available, the Nashville, Tenn., company said, while urging consumers to consult their local dentist for further treatment.

Customer orders that haven't shipped yet have been canceled and "Lifetime Smile Guarantee" no longer exists, the company said. SmileDirectClub apologized and said additional information about refund requests will arrive "once the bankruptcy process determines next steps." SmileDirectClub also said that Smile Pay customers are expected to continue to make payments, leading to further confusion and frustration online.

SmileDirectClub filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection at the end of September.

— From wire reports

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NBA suspends Warriors' Green indefinitely

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Golden State Warriors forward Draymond Green was suspended indefinitely by the NBA on Wednesday, less than 24 hours after he hit Phoenix Suns center Jusuf Nurkic in the face and received a Flagrant 2 foul and ejection.

The league said the penalty handed down by operations chief Joe Dumars begins immediately. This is already Green's second suspension this season.

"He will be required to meet certain league and team conditions before he returns to play," the league said.

The NBA noted that "this outcome takes into account Green's repeated history of unsportsmanlike acts."

The Warriors didn't have a statement Wednesday but said Green's suspension would be addressed at shootaround Thursday in Los Angeles ahead of a game against the Clippers.

The 33-year-old Green, part of four Warriors championships, was ejected for the 18th time in his career — most among active NBA players.

As the Warriors were in-bounding the ball near their own bench early in the third quarter in a 119-116 loss at Phoenix, Green and Nurkic were fighting for position near the baseline corner and the two tangled. Green appeared to slip slightly then pivoted around right into Nurkic with his right arm connecting with the big man's face.

Nurkic fell to the ground in-

stantly and stayed down briefly before getting up to remain in the game.

"That had nothing to do with basketball," Nurkic said. "I'm just out there trying to play basketball."

Green was suspended five games by the NBA for putting Minnesota's Rudy Gobert into a headlock during an altercation in November.

There is little precedent for an indefinite suspension. In 2010, then-Commissioner David Stern suspended Washington guard Gilbert Arenas indefinitely for bringing firearms into the team locker room. That was a precursor to what became a 50-game suspension for Arenas, after Stern said "his ongoing conduct ... led me to conclude that he is not current-

ly fit to take the court in an NBA game."

Last season during training camp, Green took a leave of absence from the 2022 NBA champions in what coach Steve Kerr called a "mutual decision" after the star forward violently punched then-teammate Jordan Poole in the face. Neither player was injured.

New Warriors general manager Mike Dunleavy said when he got the job after last season ended that he was committed to keeping Green, who then shortly after received a new \$100 million, four-year contract in late June. Kerr has always said he loves Green's fiery, push-the-limits style of play — but it will be interesting to see how both sides come through this latest discipline.

College athletes who transfer twice can now play immediately

Associated Press

CHARLESTON, W.Va. — College athletes who were denied the chance to play immediately after transferring a second time can return to competition — for now — after a federal judge issued a 14-day temporary restraining order Wednesday against the NCAA.

U.S. District Judge John Preston Bailey in northern West Virginia issued the order against the NCAA from enforcing the transfer rule. A lawsuit filed by West Virginia and six other states alleged the rule's waiver process violated federal antitrust law. The order clears the way for athletes to play during the two-week period and also ensures that schools won't be punished for allowing it.

The NCAA said in a statement it would comply with the order and notify schools.

The ruling comes while the transfer window is open for football and creates an opportunity for players who have already transferred using their so-called one-time exception for immediate eligibility to enter the portal again and be cleared to compete next season.

A hearing on the restraining order is scheduled for Dec. 27.

NCAA rules allow underclassmen to transfer once without having to sit out a year. But an additional transfer as an under-

graduate generally requires the NCAA to grant a waiver allowing the athlete to compete immediately. Without it, the athlete would have to sit out for a year at the new school.

Last January, the NCAA implemented stricter guidelines for granting those waivers on a case-by-case basis.

Bailey wrote that the transfer rule "is the exact kind of unreasonable restraint of trade within labor markets that the relevant antitrust laws prohibit" and that the plaintiffs "have a strong likelihood of success."

The states involved in seeking the restraining order were Colorado, Illinois, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Tennessee and West Virginia.

It wasn't immediately clear whether any of the affected players would try to compete during the 14-day window.

West Virginia basketball player RaeQuan Battle transferred this season from Montana State after previously playing at Washington and has been sitting out.

"I'm in the gym every single day with the team, with the blood, sweat and tears with them," Battle told the court Wednesday. "When the ball is thrown up and that tipoff starts, I'm not suited up. That's what hurts me the most."

Battle, who grew up on the Tulalip Indian Reservation in the state of Washington, has

said his mental health is a big reason why he came to West Virginia. Battle said he has lost "countless people" to drugs, alcohol and COVID-19.

After Battle visited West Virginia, he learned that now-coach Josh Eilert had lived on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota with his mother following his parents' divorce and felt a connection with the coach.

West Virginia's next game is Saturday in Springfield, Mass., against UMass.

"We are consulting with WVU's General Counsel along with outside counsel prior to making a determination on the eligibility status of any of our student-athletes," West Virginia athletics said in a statement. "We will discuss this with our student-athletes to make the best decision possible taking into consideration the potential consequences of our decision."

Battle has the opportunity to play in at least three games before the 14-day window ends.

"Welcome to the party," West Virginia forward Quinn Slazinski said on social media.

West Virginia Attorney General Patrick Morrissey said he's "looking forward to proving definitively" that multitransfer athletes should be able to play without a waiting period.

Russian athletes faced minimal drug tests

Associated Press

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. — Two of Russia's top swimmers have been drug tested by their country's anti-doping agency only twice apiece in 2023, part of a larger trend in the country that adds an extra layer of uncertainty to the IOC's decision to allow some Russian athletes to compete next year at the Paris Olympics.

The Russian Anti-Doping Agency lists on its website the number of tests it gives to individual athletes, in following a best practice it had long been urged to adapt. It has administered some 10,500 tests in 2023 — a number the IOC highlighted in a memorandum signed by key members of the Olympic movement at a summit last week that “emphasized that doping controls in Russia continue.”

Among those tests, only two each were given to defending 100 and 200-meter backstroke champion Evgeniy Rylov and 50-meter backstroke world-record holder Kliment Kolesnikov.

Another medal contender, Evgeniia Chikunova, has been tested three times by the agency. A pair of Russian silver medalists in fencing, Pavel Sukhov and Nikita Glazkov, have received only one test each in 2023. Five gymnasts who led the Russians to gold medals in the men's and women's team competitions have, com-

bined, been tested nine times.

All these athletes still have to qualify for the Paris Games, and a big part of that will include determining whether their sports — and the IOC — will allow them to compete.

Rylov, for instance, has said he would not sign a declaration stating he does not support the war in Ukraine, which is a requirement set by the IOC for athletes to compete. Gymnasts are in limbo due to differing postures taken by international and European governing organizations in that sport.

America's anti-doping chief, U.S. Anti-Doping Agency CEO Travis Tygart, worries about a level playing field in Paris.

“Things are not as they are being portrayed — to say that Russian athletes have been held to the same standards as other athletes is a slap in the face to clean athletes,” Tygart said.

Some of America's top athletes — such as Noah Lyles (7), Sha'Carri Richardson (6), Ryan Murphy (9) and Katie Ledecky (9) — have been tested double or triple the number of times as their potential Russian competitors. Simone Biles has been tested four times in 2023, which is more than any of Russia's top gymnasts.

Thorough testing of athletes by their national anti-doping agencies, especially

at times when they are not competing, is considered a cornerstone of an effective anti-doping system. At least three to five tests is the minimum standard to ensure effectiveness of an “athlete biological passport” — an advanced data set that tracks athletes' blood samples over time to detect doping.

The rigor of Russia's testing during a period in which its anti-doping agency has been deemed noncompliant with World Anti-Doping Agency rules has been a troubling issue in the near decade since Russia's state-sponsored scheme to dope athletes for the Sochi Olympics in 2014 was revealed.

Those questions persisted in the months heading into the Tokyo Olympics, when testing numbers decreased sharply across the globe because of restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Among the statistics shared by the IOC last week was that the International Testing Agency, which tests athletes from various countries in several sports, conducted “well over” 400 out-of-competition tests on Russians in 2023 — a number that would augment the 10,500 conducted by the country's own agency.

But based on an analysis by USADA, the ITA tests have limited reach in any country.

Carousel of fired NHL coaches takes toll on players

Associated Press

EDMONTON, Alberta — Craig Berube led the St. Louis Blues to a Stanley Cup in 2019. On Tuesday, he became the third NHL coach fired this season.

For players, that coaching carousel can complicate relationships on and off the ice.

Edmonton's Connor McDavid knows a bit about it. He has played for five coaches in his nine NHL seasons. Most recently, Jay Woodcroft was let go last month after a disastrous start.

“It's very hard,” McDavid, the Oilers captain, told The Canadian Press. “Professional sports — people sometimes forget the human side of it. There's a relationship there.

“These are people with families and it's hard.”

New York Rangers coach Gerard Gallant was let go in May. Rangers captain Jacob Trouba said those types of connections don't just go away.

“You build friendships in a way,” Trouba

said. “We go through a lot ups and downs. Going to the conference final with (Gallant in 2022), we have a lot of great memories. He's not someone out of your life and gone forever.”

Often, key moments are tied to the coach. “He was the coach when I was named captain. I'll always remember these things and it will always be a part of my career,” Trouba said. “That's not something you just push out the door and forget about.”

The Toronto Maple Leafs fired Kyle Dubas as general manager in May. Dubas played a key role in bringing John Tavares to Toronto in free agency.

Dubas was there when Tavares suffered a gruesome injury in the 2021 playoffs, keeping Tavares' family up-to-date in those anxious moments after he was stretchered off the ice.

“There's always going to be a strong relationship between him and myself and other guys he had a big influence on,” Tavares

said. “As time goes on, there's more appreciation, more understanding.”

Maple Leafs defenseman Morgan Rielly said he spoke with Dubas, who quickly joined the Pittsburgh Penguins as their president of hockey operations, following the change.

“I've probably felt that with him leaving more than I have in the past,” Rielly said. “Just part of the business.”

Seattle Kraken GM and Hall of Famer Ron Francis said players feel some guilt when a coach is fired.

“Didn't get the job done and that's what cost him his job,” he said. “Everybody goes into this knowing you can be traded or fired at any point.

“Nature of the beast.”

It doesn't make it any easier.

“Definitely takes a toll,” McDavid said. “But just makes you cherish those moments that you have with your teammates and your coaches all the more.”

49ers' Samuel overcomes 'awful' season

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — Deebo Samuel can be his own harshest critic, as evidenced by his description of his 2022 season for the San Francisco 49ers as “awful.”

No one would say that about the way Samuel has been playing of late this season as he has regained the form that made him one of the NFL's most dynamic playmakers in 2021 and has helped carry San Francisco to the top of the NFC standings.

“I think he's at the top of his game right now,” coach Kyle Shanahan said.

That's saying a lot considering how effective he was during his All-Pro 2021 season, when he had 77 catches for 1,405 yards and six touchdowns to go along with 59 carries for 365 yards and eight scores. His 1,770 yards from scrimmage that season have only been topped by Hall of Famer Jerry Rice in Niners history.

But an offseason contract dis-

pute led to Samuel coming into camp out of shape. He never fully recovered, leading to his negative portrayal of his 2022 performance when he had 864 yards from scrimmage and five TDs. Samuel said he was “sluggish” last season and vowed never to put that kind of performance on tape again.

“For him to say he was awful, c'mon now, that's probably a little much,” linebacker Fred Warner said. “But the level that he's playing at now is unbelievable. We need it from him. He's such a big-time game changer, playmaker for us. ... He's been doing an incredible job. I'm not surprised the way that he works and everything that he's earned. I'm really happy for him.”

Samuel had a big game early in Week 3 against the Giants before being slowed by injuries for a few weeks. His play picked up after San Francisco returned from a bye in Week 9 and he has been playing as well as ever the past few weeks.

“Since coming back from injury, I can see the level of play just getting better and better, week in and week out,” he said. “Just taking it a day at a time, to be the best me I can be for the team.”

Samuel had 138 yards from scrimmage and three TDs in a showdown win at Philadelphia two weeks ago and followed it up with 150 yards and two scores last week against Seattle.

He joined former Eagles running back Timmy Brown (1960) as the only players in NFL history with back-to-back games with at least 100 yards receiving and a TD run and catch. His 19 TD runs are the most for any wide receiver since at least 1960, with Samuel breaking Bobby Mitchell's record of 18 last week.

Samuel has 900 yards from scrimmage and nine TDs this season despite missing two full games and part of a third with injuries.

“I feel like he's just more intent with the little things,” quarterback Brock Purdy said. “Last

year was my first year with him, so I didn't really know a whole lot. I thought he balled last year. You get the ball in his hands and he still killed it. But he came back this year in great shape, looking good and then has given everything to this team. So, very proud of him. And obviously when you do get him the ball, he's the same old Deebo, makes plays.”

Notes: DT Arik Armstead (foot, knee), G Spencer Burford (knee), LB Oren Burks (knee), TE Ross Dwelley (ankle), LB Dre Greenlaw (hip, ankle), DT Javon Hargrave (hamstring), CB Ambry Thomas (personal matter), CB Charvarius Ward (groin), T Trent Williams (rest) all missed practice. ... RB Elijah Mitchell (knee) was limited. ... CB Jason Verrett took part in his first practice since signing to the practice squad earlier this week. Verrett was on San Francisco's roster from 2019-22, but played only one game the past two seasons because of injuries.

Oliver solidifies role as Bills' defensive anchor

Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — Ed Oliver still hasn't forgotten about the critics who questioned the Buffalo Bills for overspending when they offered the defensive tackle a four-year, \$68 million contract extension in June, nor the vow he made shortly after signing the deal.

“I feel like I'm going to outplay the contract, to be honest,” Oliver said at the time. “Just sit back and watch.”

Three months into the season, the fifth-year player has solidified his role and validated his paycheck by nearly becoming an every-down player in anchoring Buffalo's defensive front. Oliver leads Bills defensive linemen in having played 67% of this season's snaps, and he's given the pass rush an added dimension with his ability to pressure the pocket from the middle.

Oliver's 6½ sacks are already a career high, and tied for third in the NFL among interior linemen. And he's been just as formidable against the run in leading Buffalo's linemen with 43 tackles.

So, how do you like him now?

“When you get paid and people are saying, ‘Why you pay the guy?’ it kind of does something to you,” Oliver said Wednesday as Buffalo (7-6) prepared to host the Dallas Cowboys (10-3) on Sunday.

“I just internalized that and just used it to fuel the fire. I know I was a good player. I know I was one of the best players that came out of my draft class,” he added. “And so that's mainly been on my mind, and just go prove myself that I deserve to be talked about.”

Selected ninth overall in 2019 out of Houston, Oliver then proceeded to list the other first-round defensive tackles in his draft class, including the Jets' Quinnen Williams (chosen third), Miami's Christian Wilkins (13th), the Giants' Dexter Lawrence (17th) and Tennessee's Jeffery Simmons (19th).

“When you talk about them guys, you need to talk about me, too,” Oliver said.

The past knocks against Oliver focused mostly on his size — at 6-foot-1 and 287 pounds, he's comparatively on the smaller

end among NFL tackles — and inconsistencies.

Days before Oliver signed his extension, defensive line coach Eric Washington challenged Oliver to be better at anticipating plays by thinking rather than merely reacting.

On Monday, Washington praised the 26-year-old Oliver for his leadership qualities. A few weeks before that, the coach was crediting him for his consistency.

“From my vantage point, it's a person maturing, a person that's really knowing where to invest and how to invest, and investing with a certain level of attention to detail,” Washington said. “He's taken a pretty significant jump in my mind.”

Bills center Mitch Morse said Oliver has a knack for pushing the pocket by always moving toward the quarterback.

“He's not making a move that's going to be stagnant while moving forward,” Morse said. “His ability to go from lateral quickness to vertical quickness and then having the power on impact — it's just so fast.”