

## US, Israel agree fight will take months

*Associated Press*

RAMALLAH, West Bank — The U.S. and Israel have discussed a timetable for scaling back intense combat operations in the war against Hamas, even though they agree the overall fight will take months, an envoy said Friday, amid growing American unease about the mounting death toll in Gaza.

U.S. national security adviser Jake Sullivan also met with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to discuss the besieged enclave's postwar future, which, according to a senior U.S. official, could include bringing back Palestinian security forces driven from their jobs in Gaza by Hamas in its 2007 takeover.

American and Israeli officials have been vague in public about how Gaza will be run if Israel achieves its goal of ending Hamas control — and the idea, floated as one of several, appeared to be the first time Washington offered some detail on its vision for security arrangements in the enclave.

Any role for Palestinian se-

curity forces in Gaza is bound to elicit strong opposition from Israel, which seeks to maintain an open-ended security presence there and says it won't allow a postwar foothold for the Abbas-led Palestinian Authority, which administers parts of the Israeli-occupied West Bank but is deeply unpopular with Palestinians.

In meetings with Israeli leaders on Thursday and Friday, Sullivan discussed a timetable for winding down the intense combat phase of the war.

Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant told Sullivan that it would take months to destroy Hamas, but did not say whether his estimate referred to the current phase of heavy airstrikes and ground battles.

Sullivan said Friday that "there is no contradiction between saying the fight is going to take months and also saying that different phases will take place at different times over those months, including the transition from the high-intensity operations to more targeted operations."

He said he discussed a timeline with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Israel's War Cabinet, and that such conversations would continue during an upcoming visit by U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.

The offensive, triggered by the unprecedented Oct. 7 Hamas attack on Israel, has flattened much of northern Gaza and driven 80% of Gaza's population of 2.3 million from their homes. Displaced people have squeezed into shelters mainly in the south in a spiraling humanitarian crisis.

U.S. President Joe Biden's administration has expressed unease over Israel's failure to reduce civilian casualties and its plans for the future of Gaza, but the White House continues to offer wholehearted support for Israel with weapons shipments and diplomatic backing.

"I want them to be focused on how to save civilian lives," Biden said Thursday when asked if he wants Israel to scale down its operations by the end of the month. "Not stop going after

Hamas, but be more careful."

A deadly Hamas ambush on Israeli troops in Gaza City this week showed the group's resilience and called into question whether Israel can defeat it without wiping out the entire territory.

Israel's air and ground assault over the past 10 weeks has killed more than 18,700 Palestinians, according to the Health Ministry in Hamas-run Gaza. Thousands more are missing and feared dead beneath the rubble.

The ministry does not differentiate between civilian and combatant deaths. Its latest count did not specify how many were women and minors, but they have consistently made up around two-thirds of the dead in previous tallies.

On Friday morning, communications services, which telecommunications provider PalTel said Thursday were cut due to ongoing fighting, still appeared to be down across Gaza.

Israeli airstrikes and tank shelling continued overnight and into Friday.

## Houthi rebels strike two container ships in Red Sea

*Associated Press*

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — A ballistic missile fired by Yemen's Houthi rebels slammed into a cargo ship Friday in the Red Sea near the strategic Bab el-Mandeb Strait, following another attack only hours earlier that struck a separate vessel, authorities said.

The missile attack on the MSC Palatium III and the earlier assault on the Al Jasrah escalate a maritime campaign by the Iranian-backed Houthis. The attacks also endanger ships travel-

ing through a vital corridor for cargo and energy shipments for both Europe and Asia from the Suez Canal out to the Indian Ocean.

The Houthis say their attacks aim to end the pounding Israeli air-and-ground offensive targeting the Gaza Strip amid that country's war on Hamas. However, the links to the ships targeted in the rebel assaults have grown more tenuous as the attacks continue.

"The Yemeni armed forces confirm they will continue to

prevent all ships heading to Israeli ports from navigating in the (Red Sea) until they bring in the food and medicine that our steadfast brothers in the Gaza Strip need," the Houthi military spokesman, Brig. Gen. Yahya Saree, said in a statement claiming responsibility for Friday's attacks.

Meanwhile, hijackers, likely from Somalia, separately seized a Bulgarian ship in the Arabian Sea.

A U.S. defense official and the private intelligence firm Am-

brey said the MSC Palatium III, a Liberian-flagged container ship, caught fire after the strike. It wasn't immediately clear if anyone on board had been hurt.

Two missiles were fired in the attack, likely trying to hit the Al Jasrah, the U.S. official said. One went wide and splashed down in the water, the other slammed into the Palatium, the official said.

The Palatium turned around after the attack and was now trying to head south, tracking data analyzed by The Associated Press showed.

# Costs threaten USAF ballistic missiles

*Bloomberg News*

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Air Force's new intercontinental ballistic missile program is at risk of blowing past its initial \$96 billion cost estimate by so much that the overruns may trigger a review on whether to terminate the project.

By one estimate, each of the ICBMs and related expenses, such as silo construction, may cost as much as 50% more than the current estimate of \$118 million in 2020 dollars not adjusted for inflation. In theory, that could bring the cost for the 659 missiles planned to almost \$117 billion.

The Sentinel project, developed and managed by Northrop Grumman Corp., is meant to replace 1970s-era Minuteman III missiles as part of a modernization of all three legs of the air-land-sea triad of nuclear weapons, in part to counter China's expanding arsenal.

Although that initiative has substantial support in Congress, rising costs could trigger provisions of a 41-year-old law de-

signed to warn lawmakers of troubled projects and force the Pentagon to formally reaffirm the program's rationale or face its termination.

This week, the Air Force's acquisition officials started a review after the Sentinel program office at Hill Air Force Base in Utah submitted a "Program Deviation Report" to Air Force headquarters. "New information has emerged about factors that are driving changes to important aspects of the program, from the cost of materials and labor for the design and timeframe needed to build the launch facilities," Andrew Hunter, the Air Force's acquisition chief, said in a statement to Bloomberg News.

"We're in a different world now than when program costs and schedules were originally set as a baseline" in August 2020, Hunter said. "Revisiting our assessments ensures senior leaders are equipped with updated information required to make decisions," he said.

Although the Sentinel program is seen as a key deterrent

against China, any major delay or cost increase may embolden arms control advocates such as Democratic Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts who have pressed for its termination in favor of extending the life of Minuteman III missiles.

The question is whether the Sentinel program will exceed its original cost benchmarks beyond thresholds established in a 1982 law named after former Sen. Sam Nunn and former Rep. David McCurdy. It requires the Pentagon to inform Congress and extensively justify any program when costs exceed the original estimate by 15%, 25% or as much as 50% depending on the categories measured — in this case as reflected in the cost of an ICBM.

The Air Force review will take about 45 days before a determination is made as to whether the ICBM program exceeds the law's cost thresholds, the service said in a statement.

If the Air Force and Pentagon conclude the new cost numbers will exceed the law's thresholds,

the service must inform Congress and conduct a major assessment as to whether the program should survive or face termination. To continue, the Pentagon would probably have to request more funds to cover the projected cost increase — triggering a major new debate.

One of the biggest challenges is the mammoth cost of construction and materials transportation to convert 450 Cold War-era Minuteman III missile launch facilities and 24 launch centers for Sentinel installation. This task, "estimated to last nearly 10 years, will be a lengthy and complicated process involving real estate purchases, construction, deconstruction, removal and installation of equipment and nuclear certification," the Senate Armed Services Committee said in its fiscal 2024 budget report.

Additionally, the project will require installing more than 7,500 miles of underground fiber cable connecting silos constructed across U.S. missile wings, spanning five states.

## Orbán warns he can halt Ukraine's EU accession bid

*Associated Press*

BUDAPEST, Hungary — Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán said Friday his country will have plenty of opportunities in the future to interrupt Ukraine's process of joining the European Union, the day after the right-wing leader's stunning turnaround allowed an EU summit to move forward on bringing the war-torn country into the bloc.

Orbán had spent weeks vigorously declaring that his country would not consent to the EU beginning talks with Ukraine on its eventual membership, arguing such a decision would be

catastrophic and that Kyiv was unprepared to begin the process.

But in a dramatic reversal in Brussels on Thursday, Orbán left the room where the leaders of the EU's 27 member nations were debating the measure and allowed a unanimous vote of 26 to approve the start of accession talks for Kyiv.

In an interview Friday with Hungarian state radio, Orbán said that EU leaders told him he would "lose nothing" by dropping his veto since he'd have chances in the future to block Ukraine's accession if he chose to — something he vowed to do

if it appeared Hungary's interests were at risk.

"Their decisive argument was that Hungary loses nothing, given that the final word on Ukraine's membership has to be given by the national parliaments, 27 parliaments, including the Hungarian one," Orbán said.

"I made it clear that we will not hesitate for a moment if the financial and economic consequences of this bad decision will be paid by the Hungarians. Those who made this decision should be the ones who pay," he said. "If necessary, we will slam the brakes."

The decision by EU leaders to move forward on Ukraine's membership — a process that could take many years — was met with jubilation in Kyiv, with President Volodymyr Zelenskyy welcoming the agreement as "a victory for Ukraine. A victory for all of Europe."

But the results of Thursday's summit were mixed as Orbán blocked a \$54-billion package of financial aid that Ukraine desperately needs to stay afloat, a major blow to Zelenskyy after he failed this week to persuade U.S. lawmakers to approve an additional \$61 billion for his war effort.

# Sports fan Trump hits fights, big games

Associated Press

NEW YORK — After Donald Trump attended South Carolina's annual Palmetto Bowl, video of the crowd chanting "We want Trump!" as the former president arrived at Williams-Brice Stadium spread across conservative social media.

It was much the same two weeks earlier when the Republican front-runner attended an Ultimate Fighting Championship event in New York, fist-bumping and waving to the crowd as he entered Madison Square Garden like he was one of the fighters, with an entourage that included the musician Kid Rock, UFC president Dana White and former Fox News host Tucker Carlson.

While Trump has spent less time campaigning in early-voting states than many of his Republican primary rivals, his campaign has been filling his schedule with appearances at

major sporting events including Saturday's UFC fight in Las Vegas. Videos of his appearances routinely rack up hundreds of thousands of views across social media, particularly on non-political outlets, including popular online sports channels and fan sites. And they are far easier and cheaper to produce than campaign rallies.

It's a strategy that, aides say, puts him in front of potential voters who may not closely follow politics or engage with traditional news sources. And it is part of a broader effort to expand Trump's appeal with young people and minority voters, particularly Latino and Black men, that the campaign hopes to win over in greater numbers after gains in 2020. UFC's fanbase in particular is overwhelmingly male.

Aides stress Trump is a genuine sports fan who frequented fights and games long before he ran for the White House and

would be attending even if he weren't running. He is a particular aficionado of boxing and other combat sports. During a summer appearance on the "UFC Unfiltered" podcast, Trump recalled his favorite fights from decades ago, blow by blow.

In the 1980s, he befriended boxing legends like Mike Tyson and promoter Don King as he hosted high-profile fights at his Atlantic City casinos and became so involved with professional wrestling that he starred in WrestleMania 23's "Battle of the Billionaires." And for a time, he owned the New Jersey Generals, a professional football team that played in the NFL-rival United States Football League.

In recent years, he has become particularly tied to mixed martial arts and its machismo. He is close personal friends with White, UFC's founder, who

spoke at the Republican National Conventions in 2016 and 2020 and credits Trump for saving the sport by hosting fights when others shunned it as too violent.

Campaign staff often tune into fights late at night aboard Trump's private plane as he returns to Palm Beach, Fla., following events, streaming fights on ESPN+ or DAZN.

Trump has also drawn support from the sport's stars, including Colby Covington, who will be fighting Leon Edwards Saturday for UFC's welterweight title. Covington said this week that organizers overruled his request to have Trump walk him to the octagon. But Trump may still get a role if he wins.

"He's going to wrap that belt around me," Covington told reporters on Thursday, wearing a suit jacket signed by Trump that featured the former president's mug shot on the back. "It's going to be a spectacle."

## Americans say 2024 vote will be pivotal for democracy

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — In a politically polarized nation, Americans seem to agree on one issue underlying the 2024 elections — a worry over the state of democracy and how the outcome of the presidential contest will affect its future.

They just disagree over who poses the threat.

A poll from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research found that 62% of adults say democracy in the U.S. could be at risk depending on who wins next fall. Majorities of Democrats (72%) and Republicans (55%) feel the same way, but for different reasons.

President Joe Biden has attempted to paint a dystopian future if GOP front-runner and former President Donald Trump returns to the White House after promising to seek

retribution against opponents and declining to rule out that he would abuse the powers of the office. The former president has tried to flip the narrative lately, saying the election subversion and documents cases against him show Biden has weaponized the federal government to prosecute a political opponent. He has called Biden the "destroyer of American democracy."

"I think from the side of the left, it's pretty obvious that they're concerned about electing a president who is avowedly authoritarian, someone who clearly wants to reduce checks and balances within the government to strengthen the presidency and to do so in ways that give the executive branch kind of an unprecedented reach across the population and sectors of the government," said Michael Albertus, political sci-

ence professor at the University of Chicago.

"From the right, the Republicans think about government overreach, big government, threats to freedom and mandates to act in a certain way or adopt certain policies," he said.

Against that backdrop, the poll found that about half of U.S. adults, 51%, say democracy is working "not too well" or "not well at all."

The poll asked about the importance of the coming presidential election for 12 issues and found that the percentage who said the outcome will be very or extremely important to the future of democracy in the U.S. (67%) ranked behind only the economy (75%). It was about equal to the percentage who said that about government spending (67%) and immigration (66%).

Tony Motes, a retired fire-

fighter who lives in Monroe, Ga., cited a number of reasons he believes "we're not living in a complete democracy." That includes what he sees as a deterioration of rights, including parental rights, thieves and other criminals not being held accountable and a lack of secure borders.

The 59-year-old Republican also said the various criminal cases being brought against Trump undermine the country's democratic traditions.

"They're trying to keep him from running because they know he's going to win," he said.

The poll's findings continue a trend of Americans' lackluster views about how democracy is functioning. They also believe the country's governing system is not working well to reflect their interests on issues ranging from immigration to abortion to the economy.

# Prince Harry hails hacking lawsuit win

*Associated Press*

LONDON — Prince Harry won his historic phone hacking lawsuit Friday against the publisher of the Daily Mirror and was awarded over \$180,000 in the first of several lawsuits against British tabloids to go to trial in his battles with the press.

Justice Timothy Fancourt in the High Court found phone hacking was “widespread and habitual” at Mirror Group Newspapers over many years and private investigators “were an integral part of the system” to gather information unlawfully on Harry and his associates. He said executives at the papers were aware of the practice and

covered it up.

Fancourt found the newspapers had invaded the Duke of Sussex’s privacy by using unlawful information gathering to produce 15 of the 33 newspaper articles examined at trial as a representative sampling from nearly 150 Harry cited.

Harry said the ruling was “vindicating and affirming” and should serve as a warning to other news media that used similar practices, an overt reference to two tabloid publishers that face upcoming trials in lawsuits that make nearly identical allegations.

“Today is a great day for truth, as well as accountability,” Har-

ry said in a statement read by his lawyer. “I’ve been told that slaying dragons will get you burned. But in light of today’s victory and the importance of doing what is needed for a free and honest press, it is a worthwhile price to pay. The mission continues.”

Fancourt awarded the duke damages for the distress he suffered and a further sum for aggravated damages to “reflect the particular hurt and sense of outrage” over the fact that two directors at Trinity Mirror knew about the activity and didn’t stop it.

“Instead of doing so, they turned a blind eye to what was

going on and positively concealed it,” Fancourt said. “Had the illegal conduct been stopped, the misuse of the duke’s private information would have ended much sooner.”

Harry, the estranged younger son of King Charles III, had sought \$560,000 as part of a crusade against the British media that bucked his family’s longstanding aversion to litigation and made him the first senior member of the royal family to testify in court in over a century.

Mirror Group welcomed the judgment for providing the “necessary clarity to move forward from events that took place many years ago.”

## Black child, 10, sentenced to probation and book report for urinating in public

*AP/Report for America*

JACKSON, Miss. — A 10-year-old Black child who urinated in a parking lot must serve three months’ probation and write a two-page book report on the late NBA star Kobe Bryant, a Mississippi judge has ordered.

Tate County Youth Court Judge Rusty Harlow handed down the sentence Tuesday after the child’s lawyer reached an agreement with a special prosecutor. The prosecution threatened to upgrade the charge of “child in need of supervision” to a more serious charge of disorderly conduct if the boy’s family took the case to trial, said Carlos Moore, the child’s attorney.

“I thought any sensible judge would dismiss the charge completely. It’s just asinine,” Moore said. “There were failures in the criminal justice system all the way around.”

Moore said he doesn’t believe a white child would have been arrested under similar circumstances, and he couldn’t find a

similar instance of a child receiving a similar sentence for the same offense.

“I don’t think there is a male in America who has not discreetly urinated in public,” Moore said.

The child’s mother has said her son urinated behind her vehicle while she was visiting a lawyer’s office in Senatobia, Miss., on Aug. 10. Police officers in the town of about 8,100 residents, 40 miles south of Memphis, Tenn., saw the child urinating and arrested him. Officers put him in a squad car and took him to the police station.

Senatobia Police Chief Richard Chandler said the child was not handcuffed, but his mother said he was put in a jail cell, according to NBCNews.com.

Days after the episode, Chandler said the officers violated their training on how to deal with children. He said one of the officers who took part in the arrest was “no longer employed,” and other officers would be disciplined. He didn’t specify

whether the former officer was fired or quit, or what type of discipline the others would face.

Chandler did not immediately respond to a voicemail message Thursday. Reached by phone, a staffer for Paige Williams, the Tate County Youth Court prosecutor appointed to handle the case, said the attorney could not comment on cases involving juveniles.

Rashad Robinson, president of the civil rights organization Color Of Change, said the decision to charge the child didn’t make sense.

“Nothing about this case from the decisions by the police, the prosecutor, and the judge makes us safer or is a good use of taxpayer resources,” Robinson said in a statement.

He said there is a “long and unforgivable history in Mississippi and across the country” of a “two-tiered justice system” that offers one path for Black children and another for white.

It was initially unclear whether prosecutors would take up the case.

## Solar flare knocks out radio signals

*Associated Press*

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — A NASA telescope has captured the biggest solar flare in years, which temporarily knocked out radio communication on Earth.

The sun spit out the huge flare on Thursday, resulting in two hours of radio interference in parts of the U.S. and other sunlit parts of the world. Scientists said it was the biggest flare since 2017.

Multiple pilots reported communication disruptions, with the impact felt across the country, said the government’s Space Weather Prediction Center. Scientists are now monitoring this sunspot region and analyzing for a possible outburst of plasma from the sun, also known as a coronal mass ejection, directed at Earth.

NASA’s Solar Dynamics Observatory caught the action in extreme ultraviolet light, recording the powerful surge of energy as a huge, bright flash.

# Raiders score 63 in rout of Chargers

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — Four days was all the Las Vegas Raiders had to recover from their worst performance of the season.

They made the most of their time.

The Raiders turned in their best performance of the season Thursday night, responding to Sunday's 3-0 loss to Minnesota by scoring 42 points by halftime, not letting the Los Angeles Chargers cross midfield until the third quarter and rolling to a record-setting 63-21 victory.

"We were kicking (butt)," said Raiders cornerback Jack Jones, who returned an interception for a touchdown.

The Raiders set a franchise scoring record, topping the team's 59-14 victory at Denver on Oct. 24, 2010. It was the most points allowed by the Chargers, who gave up 57 to the St. Louis Rams on Oct. 1, 2000.

"We knew at halftime what the record was," Las Vegas interim coach Antonio Pierce said. "We want to be aggressive regardless of what the score was. If we had 21 or 10, we were going to be aggressive. That was our mindset."

The Raiders led 42-0 at halftime, three points shy of the NFL record for halftime that was set in 2009 when New England led Tennessee 45-0. The 42-point margin has been

matched two other times — by Green Bay over Chicago in 2014 and the Packers over Tampa Bay in 1983. Las Vegas also broke its previous record for a half, which was 38 against the Broncos in that 2010 game.

The halftime deficit was the biggest in Chargers history. They trailed the Patriots 31-0 in 1997.

"We got our (butts) kicked," Los Angeles running back Austin Ekeler said. "That's all I got for you."

It was a stunning turnaround for the Raiders (6-8), who gave up only a field goal Sunday against Minnesota but still lost, amassing 202 yards. Las Vegas had 283 yards by halftime against the Chargers (5-9). The Raiders led 63-7 before two late touchdowns for LA.

"It shows the resilience we have as a group," said Raiders wide receiver Davante Adams, who caught eight passes for 101 yards and a TD, his first 100-yard game since Week 3 against Pittsburgh. "You can easily let something like that get in your head and throw off the rest of the season. To bounce back in just a short amount of time in front of you, that's the type of response we're going to need."

Aidan O'Connell threw all four of his touchdown passes in the first half, and he finished with 248 yards passing.

Las Vegas' defense scored second-half touchdowns on a fumble recovery and interception, the first time the Raiders scored two defensive TDs since 2006 against the Steelers.

Los Angeles quarterback Easton Stick, making his first start in place of the injured Justin Herbert, completed 23 of 32 passes for 257 yards, with three touchdowns and an interception.

The heat figures to be turned up on Chargers coach Brandon Staley after his team got blown out by a team that was on a three-game losing streak. Los Angeles has lost five of six.

The Chargers were sloppy, turning the ball over three times in the first half. Each led to a Raiders touchdown.

"We just didn't have a good game tonight," Staley said. "We didn't have it from the beginning to the end. It's just one of those games where nothing went right for us. We got a good group of guys, but it was just one of those games where all three phases, the worst thing happened to us tonight. It's a reflection of all of us."

Las Vegas was comfortable enough to run three successive gadget plays at one point in the second quarter. Wide receiver Jakobi Meyers completed a pass to Adams, receiver Tre Tucker was given the ball on a

running play and then Brandon Bolden scored on a 26-yard run out of the wildcat formation. It was his first touchdown since late in the 2021 season.

To open the second half, Meyers hooked up with Adams again, this time on a 3-yard touchdown pass for a 49-0 lead.

Maybe Myers is going after O'Connell's job?

"Hey, he better be on it because I'm coming," Meyers said, jokingly.

Los Angeles finally broke through on its next possession when Stick found Joshua Palmer for a 79-yard touchdown. That was the first time the Chargers made it past the 50.

## Injuries

**Chargers:** WR Keenan Allen (heel) did not play. LB Kenneth Murray Jr. (shoulder) went out in the second quarter, but returned. CB Essang Bassey left with a concussion and C/G Will Clapp with a knee injury.

**Raiders:** RB Josh Jacobs (quadriceps), LT Kolton Miller (shoulder) and C Andre James (ankle) did not play. LB Divine Deablo suffered an ankle injury.

## Up next

**Chargers:** Host Buffalo on Dec. 23.

**Raiders:** At AFC West rival Kansas City on Christmas Day.

## Game makes history with NFL's 1st all-Black officiating crew

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — For the first time in NFL history, an all-Black officiating crew worked the game between the Los An-

geles Chargers and Las Vegas Raiders — on the field and in the replay booth.

Also for the first time, three women worked the game

Thursday night, one on the field and two in the booth. Maia Chaka was the line judge, Artenzia Young-Seigler the replay official and Desiree Abrams the re-

play assistant.

Ronald Torbert, who began as an NFL official in 2010, was the referee.

Las Vegas won 63-21

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# Analysis: NFL playoff race shows parity

Associated Press

The NFL playoff race defines parity.

Thirty teams entered Week 15 still alive for a Super Bowl run. Of course, several of those teams had astronomical odds and a few more know they're not going anywhere. But, it's been five years since only two teams were mathematically eliminated this late in the season.

Close scores and competitive games don't always translate into quality football — just ask Tom Brady — but the NFL takes pride in balance.

They've sure got it in 2023.

There are 24 teams in or within one game of a playoff spot. Seven of eight division races are within two games, including four that are within one or tied.

Eleven AFC teams have a winning record. Since the 1970 merger, that's only happened three times previously through 14 weeks.

Five NFC teams that are 6-7 are tied for the final wild-card spot. Three 6-7 teams are tied for the top spot in the NFC South.

Three teams that opened the season 1-5 are within one game

of a playoff spot. Only four teams in the Super Bowl era have made the playoffs after starting 1-5.

"I'm sure we've seen it like this either in the NFC or the AFC, but I can't recall having been a part of it," said Broncos coach Sean Payton, whose team has gone from 1-5 to 7-6 and one game behind Kansas City in the AFC West.

"Obviously, we're a game out in our division, and that's how we're looking at it. We kind of talked about this last week. This next quarter poll is going to obviously define a lot for a lot of teams, and fortunately, we're one of those teams. We just have to focus on the next job. It is unusual. I think it probably comes up a little more than we think and moves around from the NFC to the AFC. It makes it exciting for the fans, and certainly for TV."

Five teams who missed the postseason in 2022 are currently in a playoff position: Cleveland, Detroit, Green Bay, Indianapolis and Pittsburgh. Since 1990, at least four teams have qualified for the playoffs in every season a year after missing

the postseason.

Overall, 72% of games (149 of 208) were within one score (eight points) in the fourth quarter — the third-most through Week 14 in NFL history.

A total of 55% of games (115 of 208) were decided by eight points or fewer. That's also the third-most games through Week 14 in NFL history.

All this adds up for an exciting finish and a hectic race for the playoffs. It also means there could be quite a few mediocre teams playing in the postseason.

After first-place teams went 2-6 last week, the race for the No. 1 seed in both conferences opened up.

The Ravens (10-3) lead the way in the AFC but they've got a difficult schedule the rest of the way. The Dolphins (9-4), Chiefs (8-5), Jaguars (8-5) and Browns (8-5) are also competing for the top spot.

In the NFC, the fight for the No. 1 seed is a three-way race between the 49ers, Cowboys and Eagles. All three teams are 10-3. The Lions (9-4) are right behind them but have played poor football recently.

Securing a first-round bye

and home-field advantage throughout the playoffs hasn't been the only path to the Super Bowl. In 2021, both No. 4 seeds made it. In 2020, a No. 5 seed won the Super Bowl.

The wild-card picture is jumbled and will likely come down to the final week.

Only the Panthers (1-12) and Patriots (3-10) have been eliminated. The Cardinals (3-10) and Commanders (4-9) need more than a miracle. Everyone else has a shot ranging from a minuscule percentage to a strong chance to play meaningful games in January.

"The next four weeks are going to be a round-robin tournament," said Buccaneers coach Todd Bowles, whose team won the division at 8-9 last year and is leading it at 6-7 now. "It's the playoffs for everybody right now. We've got to show up and do the right things we can to win the game. We're all banged up, we're all fighting for spots, and we're trying to get ours in there. ... I don't really care where we play at, as long as we get in."

Plenty of coaches feel the same way. They just want to have a chance, even a slim one.

## Ohtani dodges questions about Tommy John surgery

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES—Shohei Ohtani opened his first news conference with the Los Angeles Dodgers by dodging questions about whether he had a second Tommy John surgery.

"At the time of the announcement, we didn't know which way we were going to go. That's why I never said what type of procedure was going to be done," Ohtani said through a translator Thursday during his introduction after receiving a record \$700 million, 10-year contract.

It was Ohtani's first time speaking with the media since Aug. 9, two weeks before a

pitching injury that required surgery with Dodgers head team physician Dr. Neal ElAttrache on Sept. 19 and will keep him off the mound until 2025. Ohtani had Tommy John surgery performed by ElAttrache on Oct. 1, 2018.

"I'm not obviously an expert in the medical field, but it was a procedure," Ohtani said. "I'm not sure what it's called. I know it was completely different from my first time, so I don't know what you want to call it. You could probably talk to my doctor about that."

Ohtani refused to say what other teams he negotiated with before the agreement with the

Dodgers last weekend.

"Free agency is still going on and I don't really want to mess with their plans and I don't want to say anything wrong, so I don't want to really talk about what talks I had with other organizations," he said through translator Ippei Mizuhara.

Ohtani did, however, reveal the name of his dog, seen on his lap when he appeared on MLB Network for the announcement of his second MVP award on Nov. 16. The dog has the American name "Decoy" and a Japanese name, "Dekopin" or "Decopin" depending on the transliteration.

Ohtani wore a navy business

suit with a white shirt and blue tie, took off the jacket and put on a Dodgers home jersey with No. 17 and then the blue cap with the interlocking L&A while receiving polite applause. He took off the cap before speaking.

"One thing that really stands out in my head," he said, "when I had the meeting with the Dodgers, the ownership group, they said when they looked back at the last 10 years, even though they made the playoffs every single year, won one World Series ring, they considered that a failure. And when I heard that, I knew they were all about winning, and that's exactly how I feel."

# Tatum, Celtics stay unbeaten at home

Associated Press

BOSTON — Jayson Tatum scored 27 points, Jaylen Brown had 22 and the Boston Celtics beat the Cleveland Cavaliers 116-107 on Thursday night, improving to 12-0 at home.

Facing the Cavaliers for the second consecutive game at TD Garden after a victory on Tuesday, Boston won for the sixth time in seven games overall.

Kristaps Porzingis added 18 points, Jrue Holiday had 15 and Derrick White 14 for the Celtics, who have the best record in the Eastern Conference. Tatum added 11 rebounds, and all five starters scored in double figures.

Donovan Mitchell paced Cleveland with 31 points, Caris LeVert finished with 26 and Darius Garland had 19. The Cavaliers have lost three straight.

**Clippers 121, Warriors 113:** James Harden scored his 25,000th career point while racking up 28 points, 15 assists and seven rebounds, and Kawhi Leonard added 27 points and eight rebounds in host Los Angeles' victory over Golden State.

Norman Powell scored 10 of his 21 points in the fourth quarter for the Clippers, who overcame Paul George's first injury absence of the season for their 11th win in 14 games.

Klay Thompson scored a season-high 30 while hitting eight 3-pointers for Golden State, which has lost 12 of 16 overall.

Stephen Curry scored 17 points on 5-of-17 shooting as the Warriors began another potentially lengthy stint without Draymond Green, who is indefinitely suspended after smacking Phoenix's Jusuf Nurkic in the face on Tuesday.

**Nuggets 124, Nets 101:** Nikola Jokic became the first NBA player with at least 10 triple-doubles in seven straight seasons as host Denver beat Brooklyn for their third consecutive win.

Jokic had 26 points, 15 rebounds and 10 assists in his 115th career triple-double during the regular season. Denver also was bolstered by the return of Jamal Murray, who missed Tuesday's game at Chicago with ankle soreness. He scored 16 points, and Peyton Watson added 18 for the defending champion Nuggets.

Spencer Dinwiddie led the Nets with 17 points and Cam Thomas had 13.

Up by 13 at halftime, the Nuggets scored 38 points in the third quarter with Jokic putting the finishing touches on the surge by driving for a layup in the waning seconds of the period.

**Bulls 124, Heat 116:** Coby White scored 26 points, Ayo Dosunmu scored 24 off the bench and visiting Chicago ran out to a huge lead before hanging on to beat Miami.

Nikola Vucevic finished with 24 points, 12 rebounds and sev-

en assists for the Bulls, while DeMar DeRozan scored 23 for Chicago.

The Bulls started the game on a 33-8 run and never trailed.

Chicago's 25-point lead in the first quarter was the second-largest such edge in the NBA this season — Boston led Washington by 26 — and the Bulls' biggest edge in the opening period of a game since they led Golden State 35-8 on a jumper by Michael Jordan on Jan. 31, 1997.

Jaime Jaquez Jr. scored 22 for Miami. Jimmy Butler scored 20, Kyle Lowry and Caleb Martin each had 17, and Kevin Love had 16 for the Heat.

**Timberwolves 119, Mavericks 101:** Naz Reid scored 19 of his season-high 27 points in the first half, Karl-Anthony Towns had 21 points and a season-high 17 rebounds, and visiting Minnesota shook off an early 15-point deficit to beat Dallas.

The Wolves avoided their first losing streak of the season and matched Boston for the NBA's best record.

Luka Doncic had 39 points and 13 rebounds for the Mavericks, whose four-game winning streak ended.

Anthony Edwards, the Wolves' leading scorer, returned to the lineup after missing three of the previous five games with a right hip pointer. Averaging 24.4 points coming in, he scored nine.

**Jazz 122, Trail Blazers 114:**

Collin Sexton scored 27 points, Simone Fontecchio had 24 and visiting Utah beat Portland.

Talen Horton-Tucker added 23 points for the short-handed Jazz, who were without All-Star forward Lauri Markkanen, as well as John Collins, Jordan Clarkson and Keyonte George.

Fontecchio shot 7 of 8 from the field, including 5 for 5 from 3-point range.

Rookie guard Scoot HENDERSON had a career-high 23 points and 10 assists to lead the Trail Blazers. Rookie forward Toumani Camara also set a career best with 18 points, and Portland got 14 points and nine rebounds from Deandre Ayton.

**Kings 128, Thunder 123:** De'Aaron Fox scored 41 points and host Sacramento beat Shai Gilgeous-Alexander and Oklahoma City.

The Thunder wasted a stellar performance by Gilgeous-Alexander, who finished with 43 points, nine assists and six rebounds.

Domantas Sabonis had 18 points and 16 rebounds for Sacramento in the opener of a six-game homestand. Malik Monk also scored 18 points, and Keon Ellis had a career-high 17 points.

The Kings led by 14 midway through the fourth quarter, but the Thunder cut the deficit to two with a 13-2 run.

The Thunder had won four of five entering the game.

## Warriors stand by suspended star Draymond Green

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — The Golden State Warriors believe Draymond Green needs serious help to stop the increasingly frequent outbursts in his long history of unsportsmanlike behavior.

Coach Steve Kerr and general manager Mike Dunleavy Jr. are hopeful Green's indefinite suspension for hitting Phoenix center Jusuf Nurkic in the face will provide the time and motivation for their star forward to

make real progress on the mental and emotional challenges that led him to this grim point in a decorated career.

"To me, this is about more than basketball," Kerr said Thursday night before the Warriors' 121-113 loss to the Clippers. "It's about helping Draymond. I think it's an opportunity for Draymond to step away and to make a change in his approach, in his life, and that's not an easy thing to do."

Dunleavy and Kerr both said the team is

satisfied with the NBA's latest punishment for Green, the four-time NBA champion who was indefinitely banned Wednesday. The suspension was the sixth of Green's career and his fourth in 2023.

Dunleavy said the Warriors will "help" Green during his absence, but didn't specify the nature of that aid. Kerr said Green will get counseling from professionals outside the team to identify the reasons behind his escalating series of physical outbursts.

# Stamkos scores 4 goals in Lightning win

Associated Press

EDMONTON, Alberta — Steven Stamkos scored four goals for the first time in his NHL career, Andrei Vasilevskiy made 53 saves and the Tampa Bay Lightning beat Edmonton 7-4 on Thursday night to end the Oilers' winning streak at eight.

Nikita Kucherov had a goal and two assists to push his NHL-leading points total to 50. Tyler Motte and Anthony Cirelli also scored to help Tampa Bay improve to 14-12-5 with its fourth victory in six games.

Darnell Nurse, Connor McDavid, Zach Hyman and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins scored for Edmonton. The Oilers fell to 13-13-1, falling a victory short of matching the longest winning streak in franchise history.

Tampa Bay started quickly with a power-play goal 1:07 into the opening period when Stamkos fired a snapshot past Stuart Skinner. It was Stamkos' 200th career power-play goal, making him the 20th player in NHL history to hit the benchmark.

Stamkos tied it 3-3 early in the third, batting a rebound out of the air and bouncing it past Skinner. The Lightning captain made it 5-3 on a shot that went off the post and in for his 12th NHL hat trick, then added his 14th of the season into an empty net.

**Blue Jackets 6, Maple Leafs 5 (OT):** Kent Johnson scored his second goal of the game at 3:26 of overtime to give visiting Columbus the victory after Toronto overcame a five-goal deficit in the third period.

Patrik Laine, Justin Darnforth, Yegor Chinakhov and Johnny Gaudreau also scored for Columbus and Elvis Merzlikins made 43 saves.

Auston Matthews scored Toronto's final two goals to break a tie for the NHL lead with 23. William Nylander, Mitch Marner and Jake McCabe also scored and Ilya Samsonov stopped 29 shots to help Toronto run its points streak to eight at 5-0-3.

Matthews scored on a one-timer from Nylander that trickled in with 1:15 remaining, then netted another with 44.4 seconds left on a one-timer from Nylander. Johnson wired home a wrist shot in the extra period.

**Blues 4, Senators 2:** Robert Thomas had two goals and an assist and host St. Louis won in interim coach Drew Bannister's NHL coaching debut, beating Ottawa to end a four-game losing streak.

Bannister was moved up from the Blues' American Hockey League affiliate in Springfield, Mass., after Craig Berube was fired Tuesday.

Pavel Buchnevich added a goal and an assist, Brandon Saad also scored and Justin Faulk had a two assists. Jordan Binnington made 32 saves.

Dominik Kubalik and Mathieu Joseph scored for Ottawa and Joonas Korpi scored 26 saves. The Senators have dropped three of four.

**Canucks 4, Panthers 0:** Thatcher Demko made 36 saves after Vancouver added former star goalie Roberto Luongo to its

Ring of Honor in a pregame ceremony and the Canucks beat visiting Florida for their fourth straight victory.

Demko had his third shutout of the season and sixth in the NHL. Dakota Joshua scored twice, Brock Boeser had his 22nd and Andrei Kuzmenko added a goal. Vancouver improved to 20-9-1, going 4-1-0 on a five-game homestand.

Sergei Bobrovsky made 13 saves for Florida in the first two periods, and Anthony Stolarz stopped the lone shot he faced in the third. The Panthers dropped to 17-10-2, also falling 4-0 at Seattle on Tuesday night.

Luongo, now part of Florida's front office, spent parts of eight seasons with Vancouver.

**Kraken 7, Blackhawks 1:** Kailer Yamamoto scored twice in the first period, Oliver Bjorkstrand had a goal and two assists and host Seattle shut down Chicago and rookie sensation Connor Bedard.

The Kraken won consecutive games for just the third time this season and the first time without needing overtime. Seattle snapped an eight-game losing streak with a 4-0 victory over Florida on Tuesday night and followed up by overpowering the Blackhawks.

Bjorkstrand, Tye Kartye and Eeli Tolvanen scored during the three-goal second period, and Jared McCann and Pierre-Edouard Bellemare scored 21 seconds apart early in the third period. Joey Daccord followed up his first career shutout by stopping 21 of 22 shots.

Taylor Raddysh scored for Chicago.

**Hurricanes 2, Red Wings 1:** Jordan Staal broke a tie midway through the second period and Carolina held off Detroit.

Jack Drury also scored for Carolina and Pyotr Kochetkov made 25 saves. The Hurricanes finished a six-game trip with consecutive victories after dropping the first four.

Michael Rasmussen scored for Detroit in the second period for his 100th career point. Ville Husso stopped 36 shots for the Red Wings. They have lost four of five.

**Wild 3, Flames 2 (SO):** Mats Zuccarello and Matt Boldy scored in the shootout and host Minnesota beat Calgary to improve to 6-2 since John Hynes took over as coach for the fired Dean Evason.

Boldy and Marco Rossi scored in regulation and Filip Gustavsson stopped 36 shots.

Yegor Sharangovich and Blake Coleman scored for Calgary. The Flames are 1-5-1 in their past seven.

**Flyers 4, Capitals 3 (SO):** Bobby Brink scored the deciding goal in the shootout and also connected in regulation in Philadelphia's victory over visiting Washington.

Sean Couturier also scored in the shootout for Philadelphia. Owen Tippett and Joel Farabee scored in regulation and Samuel Ersson made 27 saves.

Dylan Strome and Tom Wilson each had a goal and an assist for Washington. Connor McMichael also scored.

## Wild say they took 'appropriate steps' after 2 investigations

Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. — The Minnesota Wild recently concluded two investigations into their code of conduct, and the organization said Thursday night it took "appropriate steps" to address the matters that were brought to its attention.

The Athletic reported that Bill Guerin was the focus of an investigation following a complaint by an employee who accused the team's president of hockey operations and general manager of verbal abuse. The Athletic's report was based on anonymous sourcing, and the

team statement made no mention of Guerin.

NHL Deputy Commissioner Bill Daly said in an email to the Star Tribune that the league was satisfied with how the Wild handled the situation. The Wild said they would have no further comment.

Minnesota improved to 11-12-4 with a 3-2 shootout victory over Calgary on Thursday night. It fired coach Dean Evason on Nov. 27 and replaced him with John Hynes. Assistant GM Chris O'Hearn left the organization this week by mutual agreement with the Wild.