

Colorado court bars Trump from ballot

Associated Press

DENVER — A divided Colorado Supreme Court on Tuesday declared former President Donald Trump ineligible for the White House under the U.S. Constitution’s insurrection clause and removed him from the state’s presidential primary ballot, setting up a likely showdown in the nation’s highest court to decide whether the front-runner for the GOP nomination can remain in the race.

The decision from a court whose justices were all appointed by Democratic governors marks the first time in history that Section 3 of the 14th Amendment has been used to disqualify a presidential candidate.

“A majority of the court holds that Trump is disqualified from holding the office of president under Section 3 of the 14th Amendment,” the court wrote in its 4-3 decision.

Colorado’s highest court overturned a ruling from a dis-

trict court judge who found that Trump incited an insurrection for his role in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the Capitol, but said he could not be barred from the ballot because it was unclear that the provision was intended to cover the presidency.

The court stayed its decision until Jan. 4, or until the U.S. Supreme Court rules on the case. Colorado officials say the issue must be settled by Jan. 5, the deadline for the state to print its presidential primary ballots.

“We do not reach these conclusions lightly,” wrote the court’s majority. “We are mindful of the magnitude and weight of the questions now before us. We are likewise mindful of our solemn duty to apply the law, without fear or favor, and without being swayed by public reaction to the decisions that the law mandates we reach.”

Trump’s attorneys had promised to appeal any disqualification immediately to the nation’s highest court, which has the fi-

nal say about constitutional matters.

Trump’s legal spokeswoman Alina Habba said in a statement Tuesday night: “This ruling, issued by the Colorado Supreme Court, attacks the very heart of this nation’s democracy. It will not stand, and we trust that the Supreme Court will reverse this unconstitutional order.”

Trump didn’t mention the decision during a rally Tuesday evening in Waterloo, Iowa, but his campaign sent out a fundraising email citing what it called a “tyrannical ruling.”

Republican National Committee chairwoman Ronna McDaniel labeled the decision “Election interference” and said the RNC’s legal team intends to help Trump fight the ruling.

Trump lost Colorado by 13 percentage points in 2020 and doesn’t need the state to win next year’s presidential election. But the danger for the for-

mer president is that more courts and election officials will follow Colorado’s lead and exclude Trump from must-win states.

Dozens of lawsuits have been filed nationally to disqualify Trump under Section 3, which was designed to keep former Confederates from returning to government after the Civil War. It bars from office anyone who swore an oath to “support” the Constitution and then “engaged in insurrection or rebellion” against it, and has been used only a handful of times since the decade after the Civil War.

“I think it may embolden other state courts or secretaries to act now that the bandage has been ripped off,” Derek Muller, a Notre Dame law professor who has closely followed the Section 3 cases, said after Tuesday’s ruling. “This is a major threat to Trump’s candidacy.”

The Colorado case is the first where the plaintiffs succeeded.

Senate ends promotion hold, confirms 4-star officers

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Senate on Tuesday confirmed the remaining military officers blocked from promotion by Sen. Tommy Tuberville, approving the nominations of 11 four-star generals and admirals.

The unanimous voice vote marked the end of an unsuccessful protest that the Alabama Republican began in February to force the Pentagon to rescind an abortion travel policy for service members lacking adequate access to reproductive health care.

Tuberville dropped his hold on more than 400 general and flag officers this month under mounting pressure from lawmakers and fears that the unusually long blockade was harming national security. He main-

tained a block on four-star nominees, however.

The continued holds meant the Senate would have to confirm each of the officers one by one, but Tuberville raised no objection when the Senate moved to approve the promotions in a block vote on Tuesday night.

“These 11 flag officers have now been approved, joining the rest of their colleagues who we approved a few weeks ago,” said Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., who had vowed to confirm the 11 officers this week. “That’s good news.”

The generals and admirals include Air Force Lt. Gen. Gregory Guillot to lead Northern Command; Air Force Lt. Gen. Timothy Hugh to head Cyber Command and Space Force; Lt. Gen. Stephen Whiting to

head U.S. Space Command; Vice Adm. Stephen Koehler to command the Navy’s Pacific Fleet and Lt. Gen. Kevin Schneider to command Pacific Air Forces.

Army Lt. Gen. James J. Mingus, Space Force Lt. Gen. Michael A. Guetlein, Navy Adm. James Kilby and Air Force Lt. Gen. James Slife will become their services’ second-highest ranking officers, while Air Force Gen. Kenneth Wilsbach will be head of Air Combat Command.

Vice Adm. William Houston will be director of the Naval Nuclear Propulsion Program.

Sen. Tom Carper, D-Del., on Tuesday night said he wanted to apologize to the hundreds of military families that were affected by Tuberville’s blockade, calling it a “sad chapter” in the Senate’s history.

Austin makes surprise visit to USS Ford

Associated Press

ABOARD THE USS GERALD R. FORD — U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin flew out to the USS Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier Wednesday to meet with the sailors he has ordered to remain at sea to prevent the Israel-Hamas war from spilling over into a deadlier regional conflict.

Austin was in the region to press Israel to shift its bombardment of Gaza to a more limited campaign and more quickly transition to address Palestinian civilians' dire humanitarian needs.

At the same time, the U.S. has been concerned that Israel will launch a similar military operation along its northern border with Lebanon to expel Hezbollah militants there, potentially opening a second front and widening the war.

At a news conference in Tel Aviv on Monday, Austin didn't say whether U.S. troops might be further extended to defend Israel if

its campaign expands into Lebanon, and Israeli Defense Minister Yoav Gallant seemed to tone down recent rhetoric that a northern front was imminent, deferring to diplomatic efforts first.

Still, that leaves incredible uncertainty for the Ford and its crew, which Austin ordered to the Eastern Mediterranean to be closer to Israel the day after Hamas militants stormed into southern Israel on Oct. 7. The aircraft carrier's more than 4,000 sailors and the accompanying warships were supposed to be home in early November.

Using the public address system of the Ford, which is sailing a few hundred miles off the coast of Israel, Austin thanked the sailors and their families for giving up spending the holidays together because of the mission.

"Sometimes our greatest achievements are the bad things we stop from happening," Austin told the crew. "In a moment of huge tension in the region, you all have been the linchpin of

preventing a wider regional conflict."

The defense secretary met with a group of sailors in the Ford's hangar bay to talk about the various dangers in the region that the carrier, the destroyers and cruisers deployed along with it have been watching.

He thanked them for keeping attention on cross-border fighting between Israel and Hezbollah, and later told reporters traveling with him that if Israel transitions away from major combat operations in Gaza, it could possibly ease some of the regional tension that has kept the Ford in place.

The Ford's commanding officer, Navy Capt. Rick Burgess, said one of the Ford's main contributions has been to stay close enough to Israel that it can send its aircraft in to provide support, if needed. While the Ford's fighter and surveillance aircraft are not contributing to the surveillance needs of Israel's operations in Gaza, other ships in its strike group are, Burgess said.

Court overrules Okinawa governor, hands Marine runway call to Tokyo

By **MATTHEW M. BURKE**
AND **MARI HIGA**
Stars and Stripes

NAHA, Okinawa — A Japanese court sided with Tokyo on Wednesday and wrested permitting approval for a Marine Corps runway at Camp Schwab away from Okinawa Gov. Denny Tamaki.

A three-judge panel from the Naha branch of the Fukuoka High Court gave Tamaki until Monday to approve permit changes pending since April 2020. The changes address reinforcement of a soft seabed in one of two construction zones.

If Tamaki does not sign off, Japanese Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism Tetsuo Saito has only to issue a notice to the governor before approving the permits himself, a spokesman from the ministry's Water and Disaster Management Bureau said by phone Wednesday.

Tamaki's continued refusal to approve permitting is causing significant public harm, Chief Judge Takashi Miura said from the bench.

Tamaki's "determination not to approve is clear and firm," Miura said. He acknowledged the difficulty in bringing the two par-

ties to an understanding.

The runway being built on reclaimed land in Oura Bay in the Henoko area of Okinawa may one day replace Marine Corps Air Station Futenma in urban Ginowan. That base, surrounded by homes and schools, is considered inherently dangerous by some Japanese officials.

Tamaki started a protracted legal battle in November 2021 when he refused to sign off on project changes requested by Okinawa Defense Bureau, which represents Japan's Defense Ministry on the island.

He argued that the soft seabed in the construction zone poses a hazard and that Tokyo had failed to consider the environmental impact on the endangered dugong, a cousin of the manatee protected by Japanese law.

Saito overturned Tamaki's decision in April 2022 as "illegal and unreasonable." Tamaki then filed and lost three lawsuits; Japan's Supreme Court in September ordered him to approve permitting.

Following the high court decision, Saito first recommended Tamaki grant the permits by Sept. 27 and then demanded he comply by Oct. 4. Tamaki refused both times, and Saito filed suit Oct. 4.

Navy petty officer with teddy bear arrested in sting

New York Daily News

A U.S. Navy petty officer was carrying a large teddy bear when he showed up at a Long Island train station for what he thought was a sexual encounter with a 13-year-old girl, the feds said Tuesday. But Douglas Engstrom's meet-up Friday turned out to be with an undercover FBI agent, and now he faces the possibility of 10 years to life in prison.

Engstrom, 36, a divorced father of two children from Hanover, Md., works as a data analyst at Fort Meade, law enforcement sources said.

He also went by "bleepbloop" on the social media app Whisper, where users post anonymous public messages and confessionals.

The FBI agent put out bait on the app on Dec. 6, with a post claiming she "no longer needed dental braces," according to a criminal complaint. Engstrom replied, and during their correspondence the agent said several times she was a 13-year-old girl in school, the complaint alleges. He expressed interest in having sex with her, the complaint alleges.

Engstrom was arraigned Monday on Long Island and ordered held without bond.

Hamas leader visits Cairo for talks on another cease-fire

Associated Press

DEIR AL-BALAH, Gaza Strip — Hamas' top leader traveled to Cairo on Wednesday for talks on the war in Gaza, part of a flurry of diplomacy aimed at securing another cease-fire and swap of hostages for Palestinian prisoners at a moment when Israel's offensive shows no signs of slowing.

Hamas militants have been putting up stiff resistance, even as the Israeli army claims to be making great progress in eradicating them. The visit to Cairo by its top leader, Ismail Haniyeh, came a day after Hamas fired rockets that set off air raid sirens in central Israel. It was a show of strength after a 10-week war that has devastated much of northern Gaza, killed nearly 20,000 Palestinians, and driven some 1.9 million — nearly 85% of the population — from their homes.

Israel has called on the rest of the world to blacklist Hamas as a terrorist organization, saying it must be removed from power in Gaza in the wake of its Oct. 7 rampage across southern Israel that triggered the war.

But the sides have recently

relaunched indirect talks, mediated by Egypt, Qatar and the United States.

The goal is to achieve another cease-fire and free more hostages Hamas took in its attack in exchange for Palestinians imprisoned by Israel.

Mobile phone and internet service was down across Gaza again on Wednesday, an outage that could complicate efforts to communicate with Hamas leaders inside the territory who went into hiding after Oct. 7.

The war has led to a humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Tens of thousands of people are crammed into overcrowded shelters and tent camps amid shortages of food, medicine and other basic supplies. Israel's foreign minister traveled to Cyprus to discuss the possibility of establishing a maritime corridor that would allow the delivery of large amounts of humanitarian aid to Gaza.

Despite a burst of diplomacy by high-level officials in recent days, the two sides appeared to be far from an agreement.

Hamas has said no more hostages will be released until the war ends, and is expected to in-

sist on the release of large numbers of Palestinian prisoners, including high-level militants, for the captives that remain.

Israel has rejected the demands so far. But it has a history of lopsided exchanges for captive Israelis, and the government is under heavy public pressure to bring the hostages home safely.

Egypt, along with Qatar, helped mediate a weeklong cease-fire in November in which Hamas freed over 100 hostages in exchange for Israel's release of 240 Palestinian prisoners. Hamas and other militants are still holding an estimated 129 captives.

Hamas said that Haniyeh — who is believed to be based in Qatar but whose movements are rarely publicized — would discuss the war with Egyptian officials, without providing more details.

Ziad Nakhleh, the leader of the smaller Palestinian Islamic Jihad militant group, which took part in the Oct. 7 attack and is also holding hostages, said he would also be going to Egypt in the coming days to participate in the talks.

New York to consider slavery reparations

AP/Report for America

ALBANY, N.Y. — New York state will create a commission tasked with considering reparations to address the persistent, harmful effects of slavery in the state, under a bill signed into law by Gov. Kathy Hochul on Tuesday.

It comes at a time when many states and towns throughout the United States attempt to figure out how to best reckon with the country's dark past, and follows in the footsteps of similar task forces established in California and Illinois.

"In New York, we like to think we're on the right side of this. Slavery was a product of the South, the Confederacy," Hochul, a Democrat, said at the bill signing ceremony in New York City. "What is hard to embrace is the fact that our state also flourished from that slavery. It's not a beautiful story, but indeed it is the truth."

The law, which was passed by state lawmakers in June, says the commission will examine the institution of slavery, which was fully abolished in New York by 1827, and its ongoing impact on Black New Yorkers today.

"The battle for civil rights was not below the Mason-Dixon line. The largest port of slave trade was in Charleston, S.C., and Wall Street, N.Y.," said the Rev. Al Sharpton, who spoke at the signing ceremony. "So this today starts a process of taking the veil off of northern inequality and saying we must repair the damage and it can be an example for this nation."

The nine-member commission will be required to deliver a report a year after its first meeting. Its recommendations could potentially include monetary compensation but would be non-binding.

US flies bombers for drills with S. Korea

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — The United States flew long-range bombers for joint drills with South Korea and Japan on Wednesday in a show of force against North Korea, days after the North performed its first intercontinental ballistic missile test in five months.

The trilateral training off South Korea's southern island of Jeju was meant to strengthen the countries' joint response against North Korean nuclear threats, South Korea's Joint

Chiefs of Staff said in a statement.

The exercise involved B-1B bombers and South Korean and Japanese fighter jets, the statement said. It said the B-1Bs' flyover is the 13th time that a U.S. bomber has been temporarily deployed near and over the Korean Peninsula this year.

A B-1B is capable of carrying a large conventional weapons payload.

North Korea has previously called the bomber's deployment a proof of U.S. hostility and had

reacted with missile tests.

North Korea on Monday launched a Hwasong-18 ICBM into the sea in a drill it said was meant as a warning over the U.S. and South Korea's confrontational steps. North Korea cited a recent U.S.-South Korean meeting to discuss their nuclear deterrence plans. The U.S., South Korea and Japan slammed the launch as a provocation, noting it violated multiple U.N. Security Council resolutions that ban any ballistic activities by the North.

Groups sue over migrant arrest law

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — The White House and Mexico's president on Tuesday came out strongly against a new Texas law that would allow police to arrest migrants who illegally cross into the U.S. and empower local judges to order them to leave the country.

Also Tuesday, civil rights groups and Texas' largest border county filed a lawsuit, calling the measure that Republican Gov. Greg Abbott had signed into law less than 24 hours earlier an unconstitutional reach over the U.S. government's authority on immigration.

The Texas law that takes effect in March could be a test of how aggressively a state can limit immigration amid a surge in illegal crossings in remote areas that has escalated pressure on Congress to reach a deal on asylum.

Abbott said Tuesday that Texas is going to such dramatic lengths because of frustration over the Biden administration's immigration policies.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre criticized

the state's approach as extreme and dehumanizing to immigrants. She would not say whether the Justice Department would challenge the law.

"This is not who we are as a country," she said.

The lawsuit, filed in federal court in Austin, was brought by El Paso County along with the American Civil Liberties Union and the Texas Civil Rights Project.

It was filed against the head of the Texas Department of Public Safety, whose troopers could arrest migrants, and the El Paso County district attorney, whose office would potentially prosecute cases in that border community.

El Paso County District Attorney Bill Hicks said he woke up Tuesday morning having no idea he would be sued by his own county. He told reporters that the lawsuit could reach the U.S. Supreme Court, a scenario that some Texas Republicans welcome even as they defend the law as constitutional.

A DPS spokesperson declined to comment in an email Tuesday, citing the pending litigation.

Migrant families rally to end NY's new shelter limit

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Migrant families and their advocates marched outside New York City Hall on Tuesday to demand Mayor Eric Adams end his plan to limit the number of days newly arrived immigrants can remain in city-run shelters.

The late afternoon demonstration of students and parents at City Hall Park was in response to an order Adams issued in October limiting homeless migrants and their children to 60 days in city housing. The Democrat said the move was necessary to relieve a shelter system overwhelmed by asylum-seekers crossing the southern U.S. border.

Liza Schwartzwald, a director at the New York Immigration Coalition, one of the groups that organized Tuesday's rally, said the time limits only serve to uproot families who have already made the dangerous journey across the border after fleeing poverty and crime in their homelands.

"There's no excuse to retraumatize these families," she said.

Karen Alford, a vice president at the United Federation of Teachers, said the policy will force migrant students just settling into classes to move from school to school as their families

seek out new places to live in the city.

"As a city we must do better," she said.

Spokespeople for Adams didn't respond to an email seeking comment. But the mayor earlier Tuesday suggested frustrated New Yorkers should be protesting in the streets of the nation's capital instead.

"We need to mobilize and rally and go to D.C. and say to the national government this is not fair what is happening to New York City," said Adams, who has been among the big city mayors appealing for more federal help in managing the surge of migrants they say are arriving in their cities with little to no coordination, support or resources from President Joe Biden's administration.

The 60-day limit is among the Adams administration's efforts to rein in New York's decades-old "right to shelter," which obligates the city to provide emergency housing to anyone who asks.

The first families affected by the order were expected to reach their time limit just days after Christmas. But the mayor's office told The Associated Press last week that those migrants will receive extensions through early January.

Immigration fuels uptick in US population growth

Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — The number of immigrants to the U.S. jumped to the highest level in two decades this year, driving the nation's overall population growth, according to estimates released Tuesday by the U.S. Census Bureau.

The United States added 1.6 million people, more than two-thirds of which came from international migration, bringing the nation's population total to 334.9 million.

It marks the second year in a row that immigration powered population gains.

A decline in the number of deaths since the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic also contributed to the U.S. growth rate.

Population gains stem from immigration and births outpacing deaths.

After immigration declined in the latter half of the last decade and dropped even lower amid pandemic-era restrictions, the number of immigrants

last year bounced back to almost 1 million people.

The trend continued this year as the nation added 1.1 million people.

The last time immigration surpassed 1.1 million people was in 2001, according to Census Bureau figures compiled by William Frey, a demographer at The Brookings Institution.

It is a sign of things to come. Without immigration, the U.S. population is projected to decline as deaths are forecast to

outpace births by the late 2030s.

"The immigration piece is going to be the main source of growth in the future," Frey said.

The census determines how many U.S. congressional seats each state gets.

If trends continue through the 2030 count, California could lose four U.S. House seats and New York three. Texas could gain four seats and Florida could add three, according to an analysis by the Brennan Center for Justice.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

State releases 5 wolves in reintroduction plan

CO GRAND COUNTY — Somewhere on a remote mountainside in Colorado’s Rockies, a latch flipped on a crate and a wolf bounded out, heading toward the tree line. She disappeared into the forest.

She was one of five gray wolves Wildlife officials released in a remote part of Colorado’s Rocky Mountains on Monday to kick off a voter-approved reintroduction program that was embraced in the state’s mostly Democratic urban corridor but staunchly opposed in conservative rural areas where ranchers worry about attacks on livestock.

The wolves were set free from crates in a Grand County location that state officials kept undisclosed to protect the predators.

It marked the start of the most ambitious wolf reintroduction effort in the U.S. in almost three decades and a sharp departure from aggressive efforts by Republican-led states to cull wolf packs. A judge on Friday night had denied a request from the state’s cattle industry for a temporary delay to the release.

Social media group sues Utah over app use limits

UT SALT LAKE CITY — A trade group that represents TikTok and other major tech companies sued Utah on Monday over its first-in-the-nation laws requiring children and teens to obtain parental consent to use social media apps.

Two laws signed in March by

Republican Gov. Spencer Cox will prohibit minors from using social media between the hours of 10:30 p.m. and 6:30 a.m. unless authorized by a parent — and require age verification to open and maintain a social media account in the state.

The restrictions are designed to protect children from targeted advertisements and addictive features that could negatively impact their mental health. Both laws take effect March 1, 2024.

The NetChoice trade group argues in its federal lawsuit that although Utah’s regulations are well-intentioned, they are unconstitutional because they restrict access to public content, compromise data security and undermine parental rights.

Spike Lee Air Jordans sold for nearly \$51,000

OR PORTLAND — Watching a countdown of the auction’s final minutes on Monday, Erin Holcomb couldn’t believe it: the sale price kept jumping for the rare, gold Nike Air Jordan 3s that were anonymously dropped in the donation chute of the Oregon shelter where she works in Portland.

“In the last five minutes it went up and up, and every time we saw that number increase, there were tears and people clapping,” Holcomb, director of staff ministries at the Portland Rescue Mission, told The Associated Press.

The sneakers, one of just a few custom pairs that had been made for filmmaker Spike Lee, ultimately sold for \$50,800 — more than double the high end of the predicted sale price. All

proceeds will benefit the Portland Rescue Mission, which has served people struggling with homelessness, hunger and addiction since 1949.

Kansas picks new license plate that recalls sunsets

KS TOPEKA — The next standard Kansas license plate will have bands of light gold and blue that recall a prairie sunset and an image of the Statehouse dome following an online vote, Gov. Laura Kelly’s office announced Monday.

It was the landslide favorite among five possible choices made public by the state last week, according to Kelly’s office. But the voting did not completely quiet the hubbub because some lawmakers and social media users didn’t like any of the five.

Kansas residents cast about 270,000 votes online over five days last week, the governor’s office said. The winning design received about 140,000 votes, or 53% of the total. The other four split the rest, with the runner-up receiving only 19%. Only votes from people listing Kansas ZIP codes were accepted.

Indigenous students’ full costs covered in program

WI MADISON — Indigenous students from any of Wisconsin’s 11 tribes will be able to attend the University of Wisconsin-Madison for free beginning next fall, Chancellor Jennifer Mnookin announced Monday.

The Wisconsin Tribal Education Promise program will use private donations and other internal funding to cover tuition,

fees, housing, meals, books and other expenses for undergraduate students after they’ve applied any other scholarships and grants they’ve earned, Mnookin said at a news conference. Students must show they’re enrolled tribal members to qualify.

Confirmed tribal members who pursue a law or medical degree will get their tuition and fees covered as well. The program will begin with the fall 2024 semester.

In-state undergraduates currently pay about \$28,000 per year to attend UW-Madison. That includes tuition, fees, housing and transportation. Tuition and fees total about \$11,200.

Family discovers owl in their Christmas tree

KY LEXINGTON — One Kentucky family got a little something extra when they picked out their Christmas tree this year: an owl.

Lexington resident Michele White told WDKY-TV that it’s a tradition for the family to pick out a Christmas tree every year and this year seemed no different. They had the tree in their home for four days and didn’t notice anything unusual.

Bobby Hayes, who owns Magic Carpet Cleaning and was at the home while the family was out, first noticed the bird after plugging in a piece of equipment and seeing the tree start to sway.

He sent photos to White, who said she was glad he was there to deal with the animal. Hayes said he was able to safely release the owl in the family’s backyard.

— From wire reports



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Backup QBs on display, starring all around NFL

Associated Press

MIAMI GARDENS, Fla. — Joe Flacco was at home a month ago, all but ready to accept his 15-year NFL career might be over.

Then came a phone call from his agent with an invitation to a workout with the Cleveland Browns. A commercial flight and practice squad deal later, the Super Bowl 47 MVP has become an instant star for a team ravaged by injuries but still trying to maintain playoff hopes.

It can happen almost overnight: a backup quarterback goes from holding a clipboard — or in Flacco's case, watching at home — to being thrust into action, sometimes at the most important point of the NFL season. They're on display all around the NFL right now after a flurry of starters have gone down for the season with injuries and teams have needed help to stay in contention.

"It's one of the more important positions on your team," said Miami Dolphins coach Mike McDaniel, who called on backups in several games last season, including in the postseason, when starter Tua Tagovailoa missed time with concussions.

"Not only are you supporting the process of the starter, but

you have to, at a moment's notice, go and orchestrate full-speed everything you have worked on. ... It is challenging, challenging, challenging because you never know what's going to happen."

Despite the NFL's efforts to protect quarterbacks, passers are still getting injured in an era in which they are leaving the pocket more and defensive rushers are quicker and more skilled than ever.

At the end of Week 15, 18 teams had started quarterbacks who weren't their first-string passers on opening day; 56 different quarterbacks have started an NFL game this season. And the list of starters who are out for the season is star-studded: Aaron Rodgers (torn Achilles tendon); Deshaun Watson (shoulder surgery); Joe Burrow (wrist); Anthony Richardson (shoulder surgery); Justin Herbert (broken index finger); Daniel Jones (torn ACL); Kirk Cousins (torn Achilles tendon).

In Indianapolis, Gardner Minshew is 6-4 as a starter this season and has kept the Colts in contention for the AFC South title after the rookie Richardson had season-ending surgery on his throwing shoulder in October. Jake Browning is 3-1 in Cincinnati since Burrow suffered a

torn ligament in his right wrist last month. The New York Giants entered Week 15 on a three-game winning streak thanks to the unexpected emergence of undrafted rookie quarterback Tommy DeVito.

"When you see guys go out and play well in those situations, it's pretty impressive because all week they didn't get a rep," said Dallas backup Cooper Rush, who is 5-1 filling in for Dak Prescott.

"When you get a full week to prep and game plan and talk with the coach and run the play with the players you're used to playing with, that helps a lot during the week."

San Francisco's Brock Purdy went from the final pick in the NFL Draft to winning his first seven starts and leading the 49ers to the NFC title game after they lost first- and second-stringers Trey Lance and Jimmy Garoppolo to season-ending injuries last season.

Purdy is 16-3 as a starter and is an MVP candidate this season for the NFC-West leading 49ers with 3,795 yards, 29 touchdowns and a 119.0 passer rating.

Not all teams are as lucky.

The New York Jets entered the season with Super Bowl aspirations after landing Aaron Rodgers in the offseason, but af-

ter the four-time league MVP tore his left Achilles tendon on the fourth snap of his Jets debut, the team's postseason hopes fizzled as they have shuffled struggling backups in and out of their lineup.

But the production of veterans such as Flacco, who is 2-1 with the Browns, and young standouts such as Purdy shows the value of a solid second-stringer. The recent success of backups shows the talent gap between starters and backups may be narrowing, said Pittsburgh Steelers defensive coordinator Teryl Austin.

"When you look at the league in terms of it's not all five-, seven-step drop-back (anymore)," Austin said. "There's a lot of play action. There's a lot of different things where you can protect a quarterback. He can be very accurate. He could get the ball out of his hands and that offense can keep moving. So if and when the quarterbacks do get hurt, there's not a big drop-off."

The Browns have had four different quarterbacks start and win this season and have stayed in playoff contention despite the juggling act. Cleveland has also gotten wins from rookie Dorian Thompson-Robinson and P.J. Walker since Watson's season-ending shoulder surgery.

Freshman McCown leads UTSA to Frisco Bowl win

Associated Press

FRISCO, Texas — Redshirt freshman Owen McCown recovered from a shaky beginning to his first start of the year to complete 22 of 31 passes for 251 yards and two touchdowns as UTSA rallied from a 14-0 deficit to beat Marshall 35-17 in the Frisco Bowl on Tuesday night.

Robert Henry had touchdown runs of 3 yards and 1 yard and Rocko Griffin had one for 17 yards for UTSA (9-4), which won a bowl game for the first time following four bowl losses, including in each of the previous three seasons.

Joshua Cephus caught a 44-yard TD pass and David Amador II caught one for 19

yards.

Marshall (6-7) lost seven of its final nine games to finish with its first losing season since 2016.

One play into the second period, UTSA trailed 14-0, had been outgained 114 yards to 16, had one first down, two interceptions thrown and three punts.

"The grit of that team, to be down 14 to nothing — I bet if all the Roadrunner fans were honest, a bunch of 'em were probably ready to give up," UTSA coach Jeff Traylor said. "Those kids just won't ever go away."

McCown, a transfer who started three games for Colorado last year, stepped in after senior Frank Harris, who recorded 39

wins in 51 starts over seven years in the program, was declared out about an hour before kickoff because of a shoulder injury suffered in UTSA's previous game on Nov. 24.

Traylor said the staff and players knew 3½ weeks ago that Harris wouldn't play; the pain from the injury prevented him from practicing.

"Our team didn't tell a soul," Traylor said. "It was the best-kept secret ever in the history of San Antonio, I would imagine. He tried. He wanted to play more than life itself."

"He prepared Owen all week. He's as much the reason we won as anybody."

Royals sign Renfroe to 2-year, \$13M deal

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Hunter Renfroe and the Kansas City Royals finalized a \$13 million, two-year contract Tuesday, filling the biggest offensive hole for a club that has spent heavily in free agency in an attempt to go from worst to first in the AL Central.

The power-hitting outfielder, who turns 32 next month, will get a \$5.5 million salary from Kansas City for the upcoming season. Renfroe's deal also includes a \$7.5 million player option for 2025 with a \$1 million buyout.

"The talent they've brought through the minor leagues and

who they have in the major leagues right now is pretty spectacular," Renfroe said, "and the guys they added this offseason made it a no-brainer for me. The way the Central is now, there is no doubt that we can contend in it."

The Royals lost 106 games last season, when injuries punched holes in their lineup and their pitching staff was among the worst in baseball. General manager J.J. Picollo has spent heavily over the past few weeks in an attempt to build depth and remake both their rotation and the bullpen, landing a pair of starters along with some impact relievers.

The Royals signed right-hander Seth Lugo to a \$45 million, three-year deal and fellow starter Michael Wacha to a \$32 million, two-year pact, which filled two glaring holes in the rotation. They also signed left-hander Will Smith to a \$5 million contract to close out games, and right-handed reliever Chris Stratton to a \$4 million deal to hold onto leads.

Utility man Garrett Hampson was added for \$2 million, and the Royals swung trades with Atlanta to land right-handed reliever Nick Anderson and right-handed starter Kyle Wright, who will be ready in 2025 after rehabbing from shoulder surgery.

"When we left Nashville (and the winter meetings), I'll say there was some disappointment because I didn't feel like we were making headway like we wanted to," Picollo said. "But we look up 10 days after the winter meetings end, and you look at our team now versus 10 days ago — it's vastly different. It's a much deeper team. It's a more experienced team."

Renfroe has primarily played right field, but he can also play center field and first base. He hit .233 with 20 homers and 60 RBIs this past season, when a hot start turned into a tough finish, while splitting time with the Angels and Reds.

Kaprizov lifts Wild over Bruins in overtime

Associated Press

BOSTON — Kirill Kaprizov scored his second goal of the game with 2:06 left to play in overtime, lifting the Minnesota Wild to a 4-3 victory over the Boston Bruins on Tuesday night.

Boston captain Brad Marchand had scored with 66 seconds left in regulation, sending the Bruins to their fourth consecutive overtime game.

But Kaprizov finished off a 3-on-1 break for the winner.

Ryan Hartman and Kaprizov each scored a third-period goal for Minnesota before Marchand tied it.

"You get down a little for a moment as it goes in," Hartman said. "We had a lead and they're a good team and going to do everything they can to put the puck in the net."

Marcus Johansson also had a goal for the Wild and Marc-Andre Fleury made 40 saves. Hampered by injuries to three key players — forward Mats Zuccarello and top defensemen Jonas Brodin and Jared Spurgeon — Minnesota found a way to improve to 8-3 under coach John Hynes since Dean Evason was fired on Nov. 27.

"I think it's an important win for us because these are the games that you have to find ways to win under adverse conditions in a lot of different ways, whether that's guys out of your lineup or back-to-back [games] against a rested team," Hynes said. "In a highly competitive game, to find a way to win is very important."

David Pastrnak had two goals for the Bruins, who have taken at least a point in eight of their last nine games (5-1-3). Linus Ullmark stopped 27 shots and Pavel Zacha returned from missing three games with an injury to set up Pastrnak's second score.

Coyotes 4, Senators 3: Michael Kesselring scored with 3:33 remaining to cap a four-goal comeback, and host Arizona spoiled the return of Ottawa interim coach Jacques Martin.

Jack McBain, J.J. Moser and Clayton Keller also scored for the Coyotes, who trailed 3-0 after the first period. Karel Vejmelka stopped all 16 shots he faced after replacing Connor Ingram, who gave up three goals on six shots.

Angus Crookshank, Josh Norris and Dominik Kubalik scored for the Senators in their first game since coach D.J. Smith was fired Monday. Martin was 342-255-96 in his first stint as Ottawa coach from 1996-04. Daniel Alfredsson made his debut as an assistant coach.

Flyers 3, Devils 2 (OT): Owen Tippett stole the puck in the opposition's zone and scored at 3:25 of overtime to help visiting Philadelphia beat New Jersey and extend its point streak to nine games.

Ryan Poehling had both regulation goals for the Flyers and Samuel Ersson made 24 saves as Philadelphia improved to 8-0-1 in its run.

Blackhawks 3, Avalanche 2: Tyler Johnson snapped a third-period tie and Connor

Bedard had two assists, helping host Chicago beat Colorado.

Ryan Donato added a goal and an assist for last-place Chicago, which had lost four in a row. Lukas Reichel also scored, and Petr Mrazek made 35 saves.

Islanders 3, Oilers 1: Anders Lee and Bo Horvat scored power-play goals and host New York beat Edmonton.

Simon Holmstrom scored his league-leading fifth short-handed goal and Ilya Sorokin stopped 30 shots as the Islanders snapped a two-game skid.

Hurricanes 6, Golden Knights 3: Michael Bunting had a goal and two assists, Brady Skjei added a goal and an assist, and host Carolina matched its highest-scoring output of the season in the win against Vegas.

Rangers 5, Maple Leafs 2: Mika Zibanejad scored twice and Igor Shesterkin made 31 saves as visiting New York beat Toronto.

Canucks 5, Predators 2: Elias Pettersson and Pius Suter each had a goal and an assist to lead visiting Vancouver past Nashville.

Kings 4, Sharks 1: Anze Kopitar had a goal and an assist as Los Angeles beat San Jose for another big road win.

Lightning 6, Blues 1: NHL points leader Nikita Kucherov had two goals, Andrei Vasilevskiy made 28 saves and host Tampa Bay beat St. Louis.

Blue Jackets 9, Sabres 4: Kirill Marchenko scored three consecutive goals for his second career hat trick, and visiting Columbus beat spiraling Buffalo.

Curry, Warriors rally past Celtics in OT

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Stephen Curry let fly a high-arching 3-pointer just like those he practices time and again during his extensive pre-game routine, and swished it through the net right in front of his wild, celebratory Warriors teammates on the bench.

Night-night, indeed, just as the superstar signaled with both hands at the side of his cheek as he took off running the other way.

“It was a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow,” said rookie Tracye Jackson-Davis, who delivered a key block against Boston star Jaylen Brown in OT and notched his first double-double with 10 points and 13 rebounds as the Warriors rallied past the Celtics 132-126 on Tuesday night.

Curry caught a skip pass from Chris Paul, who had corralled an offensive rebound, and connected on that 3 with 12 seconds left in overtime on the way to scoring 33 points, and Golden State made enough timely plays and stops to snap Boston’s five-game winning streak.

Jonathan Kuminga made a steal and uncontested dunk to put the Warriors ahead in overtime then grabbed a key rebound on the other end that led to another scoring play, and Boston missed key chance after chance when it mattered most.

Klay Thompson hit a tying 3-pointer with 2:18 remaining in regulation, then Derrick

White answered from deep before Curry connected from the top to even it up again at 121. The Celtics then missed four shots on their next possession and again before the buzzer sounded for regulation.

Grizzlies 115, Pelicans 113: Ja Morant capped a stirring, 34-point season debut with a spinning dribble in the lane to set up a game-winning floater as time expired in visiting Memphis’ victory over New Orleans.

The Grizzlies, who entered on a five-game skid and were 6-19 during Morant’s 25-game suspension for his social media antics with guns, trailed by 24 in the first half but took a 113-111 lead on Morant’s inside basket with 1:22 to go.

The Pelicans tied it and the teams exchanged missed 3-pointers before Morant’s winner.

Jaren Jackson Jr. scored 24 points and Desmond Bane had 21 for Memphis, which also snapped the Pelicans’ four-game winning streak.

Brandon Ingram also scored 34 points for New Orleans, but Zion Williamson’s time on the court was limited by foul trouble and he finished with just 13 points.

Bucks 132, Spurs 119: Damian Lillard scored a season-high 40 points to push his career total over 20,000, Giannis Antetokounmpo had a career-high 16 assists, 14 re-

bounds and a season-low 11 points and host Milwaukee trounced San Antonio.

The Spurs played without Victor Wembanyama, who sat out the game with a sore right ankle.

Lillard increased his career point total to 20,034 and became the 51st person in NBA history to reach 20,000 points.

Bobby Portis added 23 points and 10 rebounds, Khris Middleton scored 17 points and Brook Lopez had 14 points and six blocks for the Bucks.

Keldon Johnson had 28 points and 12 rebounds for the Spurs, while Zach Collins added 22 points and Devin Vassell had 17.

Trail Blazers 109, Suns 104: DeAndre Ayton had a double-double of 16 points and 15 rebounds, Anfernee Simons had 23 points and seven rebounds, and host Portland erased a 22-point deficit to beat Phoenix and snap a seven-game losing streak.

The Suns lost for the fifth time in their last seven games. Phoenix’s Kevin Durant led all scorers with 40 points in the loss while Devin Booker had 26 points and seven assists.

Jerami Grant also had 22 points for Portland, while Malcolm Brogdon had 14 points and four assists off the bench.

Portland was hot from the 3-point line all night, making 14 of 28 3-pointers to just five for Phoenix.

Carter, Providence roll past sixth-ranked Marquette

Associated Press

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Kim English, like Ed Cooley before him, sent Shaka Smart and No. 6 Marquette home from Providence with a loss.

Devin Carter had 22 points and eight rebounds to lead the Friars to a 72-57 victory Tuesday night — the third time in five seasons the unranked Friars have beaten a Golden Eagles team in The Associated Press Top 25.

Carter made a career-high five 3-pointers and Ticket Gaines also hit five from beyond the arc to score 18 for Providence (10-2, 1-0 Big East), which hasn’t lost at home to Marquette since 2019. Bryce Hopkins had 11 points and nine rebounds.

Playing in English’s first Big

East game as Providence coach, the Friars posted their largest win over a Top 10 opponent since beating No. 8 Villanova 83-68 in January 2011.

Reigning Big East Player of the Year Tyler Kolek had 21 points, nine rebounds and five assists for Marquette (9-3, 0-1). Kam Jones scored 13 and Oso Ighodaro had 11 points and eight rebounds.

The Golden Eagles led by five early before Providence scored 12 of the next 15 points to take the lead for good with just under 12 minutes left in the first half. It was a 30-27 Friars lead before they finished the half with a 10-2 run to make it 40-29.

No. 20 James Madison 87, Coppin State 48: TJ Bickerstaff scored 18 points on 8-for-9

shooting and grabbed seven rebounds to lead the host Dukes over the Eagles.

Terrence Edwards Jr. added 16 points and Julien Wooden finished with 13 points, six rebounds and four steals for James Madison, which improved to 11-0 for the first time in program history and remains one of just four unbeaten teams in the country.

Justin Winston had 13 points and eight rebounds to lead Coppin State.

No. 23 Memphis 77, No. 22 Virginia 54: David Jones scored 26 points, Caleb Mills added 11 and the host Tigers built a second-half lead to pull away from the Cavaliers.

Jones was 8-for-15 from the floor, including 2-for-3 from

outside the arc as Memphis won its fourth straight.

Reece Beekman led Virginia with 13 points, while Jake Groves added 12 points. Ryan Dunn finished with 11 points and 11 rebounds as the Cavaliers’ five-game winning streak ended.

No. 25 Mississippi 74, Troy 53: Matthew Murrell scored 18 points and added 10 steals, and the host Rebels improved to 11-0 with a win over the Trojans.

Jaemyn Brakefield scored 17 points, Jaylen Murray added 16 points and Allen Flanigan had 13 points as well as a game-high eight assists and seven rebounds for Mississippi.

Tayton Conerway led Troy with 13 points while Aamer Muhammad added 11.