

Congress investigating Osprey program

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A congressional oversight committee has launched an investigation into the V-22 Osprey program following a deadly crash in Japan which killed eight Air Force special operations service members.

The entire Osprey fleet remains grounded following the Nov. 29 crash with the exception of limited Marine Corps flights in emergencies.

More than 50 U.S. service members have died in Osprey crashes over the lifespan of the program, and 20 of those died in four crashes over the last 20 months.

The Osprey is a fast-moving airframe that can fly like both

a helicopter and an airplane — but its many crashes have led critics to warn it has fatal design flaws.

The government of Japan, the only international partner flying the Osprey, has also grounded its aircraft after the Nov. 29 crash.

On Thursday the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Oversight and Accountability sent a letter to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin requesting a massive amount of documentation on the Osprey's safety record to be delivered to the committee by Jan. 4.

“Our servicemembers remain in harm's way without resolution of known mechanical issues,” wrote the com-

mittee chairman, Kentucky Republican James Comer. “While, statistically, the Osprey is not considered as dangerous as some other military aircraft, the Committee remains alarmed that most fatalities involving the aircraft have happened during training exercises, not combat operations.”

The Osprey only became operational in 2007 after decades of testing. Since then, it's become a workhorse for the Marine Corps and Air Force Special Operations Command, and was in the process of being adopted by the Navy to replace its C-2 Greyhound propeller planes, which transport personnel on and off aircraft car-

riers at sea.

Shortly after the Nov. 29 crash, the Air Force said that a malfunction of the aircraft, not a mistake by the crew, was probably the cause.

The Osprey has faced persistent questions about a mechanical problem with the clutch that has troubled the program for more than a decade.

There also have been questions as to whether all parts of the Osprey have been manufactured according to safety specifications and, as those parts age, whether they remain strong enough to withstand the significant forces created by the Osprey's unique structure and dynamics of tiltrotor flight.

Death toll in Gaza has exceeded 20,000, officials say

Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Israel's war to destroy Hamas has killed more than 20,000 Palestinians, health officials in Gaza said Friday, as Israel expanded its offensive and ordered tens of thousands more people to leave their homes.

The deaths amount to nearly 1% of the territory's prewar population — the latest indication of the 11-week-old conflict's staggering human toll.

Israel's aerial and ground offensive has been one of the most devastating military campaigns in modern history, displacing

nearly 85% of Gaza's 2.3 million people and leveling wide swaths of the tiny coastal enclave. More than half a million people in Gaza — a quarter of the population — are starving, according to a report Thursday from the United Nations and other agencies.

Israel declared war after Hamas' Oct. 7 attack, in which militants from Gaza stormed into southern Israel, killing some 1,200 people and taking some 240 hostages. Israel has vowed to keep up the fight until Hamas is destroyed and removed from power in Gaza and all the hostages are freed.

After many delays, the U.N. Security Council adopted a watered-down resolution Friday calling for immediately speeding up aid deliveries to desperate civilians in Gaza.

The United States won the removal of a tougher call for an

“urgent suspension of hostilities” between Israel and Hamas. It abstained in the vote, as did Russia, which wanted the stronger language. The resolution was the first on the war to make it through the council after the U.S. vetoed two earlier ones calling for humanitarian pauses and a full cease-fire.

Martin Griffiths, the U.N. humanitarian affairs chief, lamented the world's inaction.

“That such a brutal conflict has been allowed to continue and for this long — despite the widespread condemnation, the physical and mental toll and the massive destruction — is an indelible stain on our collective conscience,” he wrote on the social media platform X.

Israel, shielded by the United States, has resisted international pressure to scale back its offensive. The military has said

that months of fighting lie ahead in southern Gaza, an area packed with the vast majority of the enclave's 2.3 million people, many of whom were ordered to flee combat in the north earlier in the war.

Evacuation orders have pushed displaced civilians into ever-smaller areas of the south as troops focus on the city of Khan Younis, Gaza's second-largest.

The military said late Thursday that it is sending more ground forces, including combat engineers, to Khan Younis to target Hamas militants above ground and in tunnels.

On Friday, it ordered tens of thousands of residents to leave their homes in Burej, an urban refugee camp, and surrounding communities in central Gaza, suggesting a ground assault there could be next.

To our readers:

Stripes Lite will not be published on Monday, Christmas Day.

Former Marine who refused vaccine arrested

By JONATHAN SNYDER
AND HANA KUSUMOTO

Stars and Stripes

MARINE CORPS AIR STATION IWAKUNI, Japan — A former Marine who refused the COVID-19 vaccine while serving in Japan and defied orders to return home was arrested this month at her former duty station.

Japanese police allege that Catherine Arnett, 25, was detained by military police after attempting to enter MCAS Iwakuni around 2:30 a.m. Dec. 1, a city police spokesman told Stars and Stripes on Tuesday. She was turned over to Iwakuni city police around 11:30 a.m. that day and released from custody “last week,” the spokesman said.

Arnett was returned to California in Marine Corps custody earlier this year and spent 113 days in

brigs awaiting a court-martial before the Corps dropped all charges against her, set her free and administratively discharged her.

As a lance corporal at MCAS Iwakuni, Arnett refused at least three times to board aircraft bound for the U.S. and faced discharge for refusing the vaccine. She was charged separately with insubordination, missing a military flight, disobeying an officer and other offenses over her refusal to leave Japan.

Arnett, who described herself as a staunch Catholic, said the 2021 vaccine mandate from Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin was an unlawful order. Her case drew attention from a foundation critical of vaccines, Children’s Health Defense, founded by Robert F. Kennedy Jr., who interviewed

her on his podcast. Another nonprofit foundation, founded by former SEAL Eddie Gallagher, in June helped raise \$50,000 for Arnett’s legal expenses.

Arnett did not respond to a Dec. 6 request from Stars and Stripes by Facebook Messenger and a phone call Tuesday seeking comment. In response to an email Tuesday, a woman who described herself as Arnett’s secretary said Arnett was engaging in an act of civil disobedience by returning to MCAS Iwakuni.

“Ms. Arnett was solely standing on the principle that since the mandate was unconstitutional from the jump, all other actions that transpired as a result were also unlawful orders,” Jamie Engel said by email Friday. “She arrived at the base to take the stand and drive home the concept that

she refused to take her DD214 and still refuses to comply with any separation orders.”

DD-214 is the official form issued to a service member upon their discharge from service.

Military police at MCAS Iwakuni detained Arnett on suspicion of violating the status of forces agreement between Japan and the U.S., the spokesman said. Some government officials in Japan may speak to the media only on condition of anonymity.

“Catherine Arnett was separated from the United States Marine Corps several months ago and has since had no official affiliation with the service,” base spokesman 1st Lt. Aaron Ellis told Stars and Stripes by email on Wednesday. “Since Catherine Arnett is a civilian, we do not have any additional information.”

Report: Soldiers have little incentive to push People First

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

An initiative developed by the Army to deal with a culture crisis has failed to get the job done because its objectives conflict with other priorities, like training for combat, a new service-sponsored study said.

The Army’s People First initiatives set goals that are at odds with demands of the training benchmarks for soldiers, according to a Rand Corp. report released this week.

“At the unit level, soldiers perceive that incentives are based on training outcomes and that there is little recognition or reward for People First outcomes,” the report said. “Soldiers rely on other soldiers first and big Army last when faced with work-life balance challenges.”

Researchers had been asked to examine ways to overcome problems associated with the

conflict between mission requirements and work-life balance, given the Army senior leadership’s focus on putting people first.

The findings showcase the difficulty in revamping a culture damaged by high-profile instances of sexual assault, misconduct and violence, such as the 2020 murder of Spc. Vanessa Guillen by a fellow soldier at the Texas base formerly known as Fort Hood. After a scathing 136-page internal report detailed widespread problems at the base, now called Fort Cavazos, the Army came up with the People First concept to address culture issues across the service.

Since then, a patchwork of programs has been developed with the goal of improving command culture and team-building at the unit level.

But while the Army’s top generals and senior enlisted leaders have touted their focus on im-

proving soldiers’ quality of life, those efforts break down when the rubber meets the road, according to researchers.

“Put simply: The message of ‘People First’ is not reaching the officers and staff NCOs in charge of managing and training soldiers with anything near the priority that the Army’s senior leadership has set,” Rand said.

Although top Army leaders provide guidance on managing decisions related to matters such as soldiers’ time off, those lessons are not “evenly heard or understood at lower levels,” Rand said.

One reason for that is the message gets diluted as it moves down the chain of command.

For example, the chief of staff of the Army and other four-star leaders may set priorities that allow for a degree of readiness risk when balancing quality of life concerns, but the trickle-down takeaway is that improv-

ing combat readiness is the overriding imperative.

“The People First priorities had disappeared or had been so subsumed into readiness language that it was clear that the focus was on training, not people,” Rand said.

Soldiers interviewed by Rand said the Army should identify opportunities to assess a leader’s commitment to People First concepts in officer and noncommissioned officer performance reviews, known as OERs and NCOERs, respectively.

“Having something that says, ‘List 8 People First accomplishments you oversaw’ (in an OER) would go a long way,” one soldier told Rand.

Researchers made a series of recommendations to address the problems. They concluded that “striking the right balance ... will have an impact on how the Army recruits and retains its strength.”

Flu, COVID cases up; holiday surge likely

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Look for flu and COVID-19 infections to ramp up in the coming weeks, U.S. health officials say, with increases fueled by holiday gatherings, too many unvaccinated people and a new version of the coronavirus that may be spreading more easily.

High levels of flu-like illnesses were reported last week in 17 states — up from 14 the week before, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said.

“Folks are traveling a lot more this season. They want to see their families,” said the CDC’s Dr. Manisha Patel. “And all of that sort of adds to the mix” in the spread of viruses.

Health officials are keeping an eye on a version of the ever-evolving coronavirus, known as JN.1. The omicron variant was first detected in the U.S. in September and now accounts for an estimated 20% of cases. The CDC expects it to reach 50% in the next two weeks, Patel said.

It may spread easier or be better at evading our immune systems, but there is no evidence that the strain causes more severe disease than other

recent variants, health officials say. And current evidence indicates vaccines and antiviral medications work against it.

As for flu, early signs suggest current vaccines are well-matched to the strain that is causing the most illnesses, and that strain usually doesn’t cause as many deaths and hospitalizations as some other versions.

But the bad news is vaccinations are down this year, officials say. About 42% of U.S. adults had gotten flu shots by the first week of December, down from about 45% at the same time last year, according to the CDC.

Americans have also been slow to get other vaccinations. Only about 18% have gotten an updated COVID-19 shot that became available in September. At nursing homes, about a third of residents are up to date with COVID-19 vaccines.

And only 17% of adults 60 and older had received new shots against another respiratory virus. RSV, respiratory syncytial virus, is a common cause of mild coldlike symptoms but it can be dangerous for infants and older people.

Tape reveals Trump pushed officials to not certify vote

Associated Press

Donald Trump pressured two election officials not to certify 2020 vote totals in a key Michigan county, according to a recording of a post-election phone call disclosed in a new report by The Detroit News.

The former president’s 2024 campaign neither confirmed nor denied the recording’s legitimacy, insisting in a statement that all of Trump’s actions after his defeat to Democrat Joe Biden were taken to uphold his oath of office and ensure fair elections.

Trump has consistently repeated falsehoods about the 2020 election as he runs again for the White House. No evidence has emerged in a litany of federal, state and outside investigations of voter fraud that could have changed the outcome of the election.

The Nov. 17, 2020, telephone call included then-President Trump, Republican National Committee Chairwoman Ronna McDaniel and Wayne County elections authorities Monica Palmer and William Hartmann, both of them Republicans, The Detroit News reported. Trump told the two canvassers that they would look “terrible” if they certified results after hav-

ing initially opposed certification, the newspaper said.

The newspaper said the recordings were made by a person who was present for the call with Palmer and Hartmann.

The report comes as Trump seeks the 2024 Republican nomination while grappling with multiple criminal indictments, including a federal case and a Georgia case tied to his efforts to overturn Biden’s victory. As he campaigns for a return to the White House, Trump continues to repeat the lies that the 2020 election was stolen, despite multiple recounts and court cases confirming his defeat.

Biden won Michigan, with Wayne County, which includes Detroit, providing a trove of Democratic votes. As such, it was one of the key places Trump focused on in the weeks after Election Day in 2020.

“We’ve got to fight for our country,” Trump said on the recordings, according to The News. “We can’t let these people take our country away from us.”

National GOP Chairwoman McDaniel, a Michigan native, reportedly said during the call: “If you can go home tonight, do not sign it,” adding, “We will get you attorneys.”

Fed’s favored inflation gauge tumbles in November

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Federal Reserve’s preferred measure of prices fell last month, another sign that inflation is easing and that Americans should benefit from reduced interest and get relief from painful price shocks in 2024.

Friday’s report from the Commerce Department showed that U.S. consumer prices slid 0.1% last month from October and rose 2.6% from November 2022. The month-over-month drop was the largest

since April 2020 when the economy was reeling from the COVID-19 pandemic. Excluding volatile food and energy prices, so-called core inflation last month rose 0.1% from October and 3.2% from a year earlier.

The numbers show somewhat more progress against inflation than economists had expected. Inflation is steadily moving down to the Fed’s year-over-year target of 2% and appears to be clearing the way for Fed rate cuts in 2024. That, in turn, could translate into lower rates on ev-

erything from mortgages to credit cards. The rate on the benchmark 30-year fixed-rate mortgage is already dropping: This week it dipped to a six-month low 6.67%, down from 7.79% in October.

Americans have already seen some relief from high prices. Consider the ingredients of a BLT sandwich: Prices are down almost 1% over the past year for bacon, more than 10% for lettuce and 4% for tomatoes. Car rental prices have tumbled 11%, air fares 12%, furniture 3%.

After nearly two years of Fed rate hikes — 11 since March 2022 — inflation has come down from the four-decade highs it hit last year. The Labor Department’s closely watched consumer price index was up 3.1% last month from November 2022, down from a 9.1% year-over-year increase in June 2022. Encouraged by the progress, the Fed has decided not to raise rates at each of its last three meetings and has signaled that it expects to cut rates three times next year.

Biden issues pardon for thousands convicted of marijuana charges

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden is pardoning thousands of people who were convicted of use and simple possession of marijuana on federal lands and in the District of Columbia, the White House said Friday, in his latest round of executive clemencies meant to rectify racial disparities in the justice system.

Biden is also granting clemency to 11 people serving what the White House called “disproportionately long” sentences for nonviolent drug offenses.

Biden said his actions would help make the “promise of equal justice a reality.”

“Criminal records for marijuana use and possession have imposed needless barriers to employment, housing, and educational opportunities,” Biden

said. “Too many lives have been upended because of our failed approach to marijuana. It’s time that we right these wrongs.”

The categorical pardon issued Friday builds on his categorical pardon issued just before the 2022 midterm elections that made thousands convicted of simple possession on federal lands eligible for pardons.

The White House said thousands more would be eligible under Friday’s action.

Biden reiterated his call on governors and local leaders to take similar steps to erase marijuana convictions.

“Just as no one should be in a federal prison solely due to the use or possession of marijuana, no one should be in a local jail or state prison for that reason, either,” Biden said.

Biden: Japanese purchase of US Steel warrants scrutiny

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden believes “serious scrutiny” is warranted for the planned acquisition of U.S. Steel by Japan’s Nippon Steel, the White House said Thursday after days of silence on a transaction that has drawn alarm from the steelworkers union.

Lael Brainard, the director of the National Economic Council, indicated the deal would be reviewed by the secretive Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States, which she participates in and includes economic and national security agency representatives to investigate national security risks from foreign investments in

American firms.

She said in a statement that Biden “believes the purchase of this iconic American-owned company by a foreign entity — even one from a close ally — appears to deserve serious scrutiny in terms of its potential impact on national security and supply chain reliability.”

“This looks like the type of transaction that the interagency Committee on Foreign Investment Congress empowered and the Biden administration strengthened is set up to carefully investigate,” she said. “This administration will be ready to look carefully at the findings of any such investigation and to act if appropriate.”

Pacific storm barreling down on southeastern Calif.

Associated Press

SANTA BARBARA, Calif. — A Pacific storm that pounded California’s coastal areas and stranded motorists was poised to pounce on the southeastern area of the state through Friday, bringing flood threats to a sweeping area extending from San Diego into the Mojave Desert and even into parts of Arizona.

As millions of Californians scrambled to finish their holiday shopping or prepared to head out onto highways, the National Weather Service issued flood watches for low-lying urban areas and the deserts.

Showers and thunderstorms could dump up to 1.5 inches of rain through the day, but the real concern was that some areas could be drenched with a half-inch to an inch of rain in just an hour, causing streams, creeks and rivers to overflow, the weather service said.

On Thursday, motorists were stranded in their vehicles on

flooded roadways northwest of Los Angeles.

Downpours swamped areas in the cities of Port Hueneme, Oxnard and Santa Barbara, where a police detective carried a woman on his back after the SUV she was riding in got stuck in knee-deep floodwaters.

Between midnight and 1 a.m., the storm dumped 3.18 inches of rainfall in downtown Oxnard, surpassing the area’s average of 2.56 inches for the entire month of December, according to the National Weather Service.

Hours later, at Heritage Coffee and Gifts in downtown Oxnard, manager Carlos Larios said the storm hadn’t made a dent in their Thursday morning rush despite “gloomy” skies.

“People are still coming in to get coffee, which is surprising,” he said. “I don’t think the rain is going to stop many people from being out and about.”

No serious damage or injuries were reported.

Pornhub to pay \$1.8M to resolve trafficking charge

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The owner of Pornhub, one of the world’s largest adult content websites, has admitted to profiting from sex trafficking and agreed to make payments to women whose videos were posted without their consent, federal prosecutors in New York announced Thursday.

Aylo Holdings, the website’s parent company, reached a deferred prosecution agreement to resolve a charge of engaging in unlawful monetary transactions involving sex trafficking proceeds, according to the office of Breon Peace, U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of New York.

The deal calls for the Montreal-based company to pay more than \$1.8 million to the U.S. government, as well as make separate payments to the individual women harmed by the trafficking. It also requires appointment of an independent monitor for three years, after which the charges will be dismissed.

“It is our hope that this resolution, which includes certain agreed payments to the women whose images were posted on the company’s platforms and an independent monitorship brings some measure of closure to those negatively affected,” Peace said in the statement.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Passenger hid bullets in baby diaper at airport

NY NEW YORK — It was a loaded diaper, but not like you would think.

Security officers found 17 bullets concealed inside a disposable baby diaper at New York's LaGuardia Airport, the Transportation Security Administration said.

Officers pulled the otherwise clean diaper from a passenger's carry-on bag after it triggered an alarm in an X-ray machine at an airport security checkpoint, the TSA said.

According to the agency, the passenger initially claimed he didn't know how the bullet-filled diaper ended up in his bag. Later he suggested his girlfriend put it there, the agency said.

The TSA identified the passenger as a man from Arkansas who was ticketed for a flight to Chicago's Midway Airport, but did not disclose his name. Port Authority police cited him for unlawful possession of the 9 mm ammunition.

Firefighters rescue quarry worker who got trapped

GA DALLAS — A worker at a Georgia rock quarry was rescued after spending hours trapped and partially buried in a funnel-shaped hopper filled with gravel.

"He is conscious and alert," Lt. Steve Mapes of Paulding County Fire and Rescue told reporters after the worker was pulled free. "He knows what happened. He's talked to the rescuers. He's complaining of pain in his back and his legs, and he's cold."

The man, whose name was not released, somehow got buried chest-deep in gravel inside a hopper that's about 30 feet deep, Mapes said. The hoppers act like giant funnels to fill trucks at the quarry in Paulding County northwest of Atlanta.

Mapes said rescue workers were able to talk with the trapped worker throughout the ordeal, which lasted roughly five hours as firefighters worked to free him without triggering a rockslide that could bury him completely.

Mother refuses to sign child's probation terms

MS JACKSON — The mother of a 10-year-old child who was sentenced by a Mississippi judge to three months of probation and a book report for urinating in public has refused to sign his probation agreement and has asked for the charge against her son to be dismissed, the family's attorney announced.

The child's mother had initially planned on signing the agreement to avoid the risk of prosecutors upgrading her son's charge, as they threatened, but she changed her mind after reading the full agreement, attorney Carlos Moore said.

"We cannot in good conscience accept a probation agreement that treats a 10-year-old child as a criminal," Moore said. "The terms proposed are not in the best interest of our client, and we will take all necessary steps to challenge them."

The terms for the 10-year-old's probation were similar to those prosecutors would demand of an adult, including sections that prohibited the use of

weapons and demanded he submit to drug tests at a probation officer's discretion, Moore said.

Mayor apologizes for wrongful racial arrests

MA BOSTON — Boston Mayor Michelle Wu issued a formal apology Wednesday to two Black men who were wrongly accused in a 1989 murder of a white woman, a case that coarsened divisions in a city long split along racial lines and renewed suspicion and anger directed at the police department by the city's Black community.

"I am so sorry for what you endured," the mayor said during a news conference. "I am so sorry for the pain that you have carried for so many years."

Alan Swanson and Willie Bennett were wrongly named as suspects in the Oct. 23, 1989, death of Carol Stuart, whose husband, Charles Stuart, had orchestrated her killing.

Stuart, who was also white, blamed his wife's killing — and his own shooting during what he portrayed as an attempted carjacking — on an unidentified Black gunman, leading to a crackdown by police in one of the city's traditionally Black neighborhoods.

News helicopter crashes, killing pilot, photographer

PA PHILADELPHIA — The Philadelphia television news crew members who died after their helicopter crashed in a southern New Jersey forest were returning from a trip to film a Christmas lights display, an investigator said Thursday.

Todd Gunther, a National Transportation Safety Board in-

vestigator, told reporters near the crash site that WPVI's Chopper 6 took off from Northeast Philadelphia Airport on Tuesday night and "had flown over to report on some Christmas light activity, and then they were returning back to base when the accident occurred."

Killed in the crash were the pilot, 67-year-old Monroe Smith of Glenside, Pa., and a photographer, 45-year-old Christopher Dougherty of Oreland, Pa.

Gunther said investigators will look at anything that may have either contributed to or caused the crash, which occurred on a clear, cold night.

Woman bought vase for \$3.99, sold for \$107K

VA RICHMOND — Jessica Vincent had just started surveying the shelves of a Virginia thrift store when a vase caught her eye. It was shaped like a bottle and had ribbons of color, aqua green and amethyst purple, that spiraled up its glass surface like stripes of paint.

The piece looked old among the clutter of measuring cups, candles and other tchotchkes. After adjusting her eyes, Vincent made out the words "Muranoro" and "Italia" on its base.

"I bought it thinking it would look beautiful in my house somewhere," said Vincent, 43, a horse trainer who paid \$3.99 at a Goodwill outside of Richmond. "I definitely didn't buy it thinking, 'Oh, I'm going to sell this.'"

Her thinking changed after some research. The vase sold through the Wright Auction House for \$107,100. The buyer, a top collector from Europe, wished to remain private.

— From wire reports

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Rams continue to surge toward playoffs

Associated Press

INGLEWOOD, Calif. — Sean McVay turned the Los Angeles Rams' already jubilant locker room into a party Thursday night with an announcement: The players are off until Tuesday, allowing them to spend the entire Christmas holiday with their families.

These surprising Rams earned their holiday with a surge of five wins in six games down the stretch, culminating in another impressive victory over a fellow NFC playoff contender.

Matthew Stafford passed for 328 yards and two touchdowns, rookie Puka Nacua had nine catches for a career-high 164 yards and a score, and the Rams surged forward in the race for a postseason berth with a 30-22 victory over the New Orleans Saints.

Kyren Williams rushed for 104 yards and a touchdown, and Demarcus Robinson added

82 yards receiving and another score for the Rams (8-7), who are above .500 for the first time since Week 1 after sitting at 3-6 in their bye week last month.

"We earned the opportunity to be at this point, in my opinion," Stafford said. "We've had stakes since the bye, so I'm just proud of the way these guys have put their head down, gone to work and shown up."

With its second win in five days during a self-described remodeling season, Los Angeles also jumped past Minnesota (7-7) and moved to sixth in the NFC standings in its bid to secure a wild-card playoff spot — and an increasingly possible opening-round showdown with the Detroit Lions, Stafford's team for 12 seasons.

Los Angeles led 30-7 with 12:44 left in the fourth quarter after scoring on six of its first eight possessions, but allowed its opponent to make it close for the second straight game after

a late 21-point lead turned into an eight-point win over Washington last weekend.

"It's a short week, so it's tougher to finish," Rams safety John Johnson said. "Maybe the tank hit empty before we wanted it to, but now we can regroup, recharge and get back to it."

Derek Carr threw TD passes to Juwan Johnson and A.T. Perry in the fourth quarter, with a 2-point conversion trimming the Rams' lead to eight points with 3:53 to play. But Nacua recovered an onside kick and then got a key first down on a 9-yard jet sweep, and the Rams ran out the clock on their fourth straight home victory.

"We sure make it interesting, don't we?" McVay asked. "But I love the resilience of this group. They just continue to show up. I thought there was a lot of really good stuff throughout the course of this game."

Carr passed for 319 yards and hit Rashid Shaheed for an early 45-yard TD for the Saints (7-8), whose two-game winning streak ended with a painfully slow start and 458 yards allowed by their defense, which even coach Dennis Allen acknowledged was confused at times by the aggressive, complex pre-snap motions in McVay's offense.

Although this loss hurts its chances, New Orleans is still in serious contention for a playoff spot and the NFC South title because it finishes the season with two games against division opponents, starting with Tampa Bay on New Year's Eve.

"We certainly would have liked to start the game and play better, but we didn't," Allen said. "We're not into the percentages. We let an opportunity go by, and now we have to get ready for the things we can control. We'll regroup. We're still in this thing."

Bucks face long holiday road trip through New York

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Milwaukee Bucks forward Bobby Portis says he didn't even bother getting a Christmas tree for his home this year.

There was no need. He and his teammates are making an extended holiday visit to New York.

NBA players have become accustomed to the possibility they'll be working away from home on Christmas. But no team's ever had a holiday trip quite like the one the Bucks are experiencing.

"Obviously I ain't going to be able to open no presents under my tree," Portis said earlier this week, pointing out the team is leaving Friday. "They'd be sitting at the crib under the tree for five or six days after Christmas."

The Bucks have consecutive early afternoon games with the New York Knicks on Saturday and again on Christmas Day before visiting the Brooklyn Nets on Wednesday. According to the Elias Sports Bureau, this marks just the second time an NBA team has played three straight road games

in the New York metro area, and the first time that it's coincided with Christmas.

The Washington Wizards played at Brooklyn and then followed it up with two games against the Knicks in March 2021. The Atlanta Hawks will become the third team to play consecutive road games in the Big Apple when they have back-to-back games in Brooklyn on Feb. 29 and March 2 before facing the Knicks at Madison Square Garden on March 5.

After going unbeaten during a season-long, six-game homestand, the Bucks are trying to make the best of this unusual trip.

"Aside from home, there's no place like New York on Christmas, right?" Bucks guard Pat Connaughton said. "I know a lot of people love New York on Christmas time, so we're fortunate to be able to spend it there."

Many of the Bucks have relatives joining them.

Bucks guard Malik Beasley plans to get an artificial tree to put in his hotel suite. Rookie Andre Jackson Jr., who grew up in Amsterdam, N.Y., and went to Albany

Academy, is hoping to fit in a trip upstate to see his grandmother. Two-time MVP Giannis Antetokounmpo says his extended family is coming along.

"Everybody's going to be there," Antetokounmpo said. "It's going to be like a huge party."

Antetokounmpo's younger brother, Alex Antetokounmpo of the NBA G League's Wisconsin Herd, will be in the area playing a game against the Long Island Nets on Dec. 27. Antetokounmpo even brought up the possibility of attending a Broadway show.

Another quirk in this schedule has the Bucks playing early afternoon games in each of the two matchups with the Knicks. The noon tip-off for the Christmas Day game raises complications on exactly when players and their families can celebrate the holiday.

"We're going to have that Christmas spirit, play the game and then come back and open presents," Beasley said. "I think it's a little too early to open presents at like 7 a.m. for a (noon) game."

FSU board OKs lawsuit against ACC

Associated Press

The Florida State board of trustees on Friday cleared the way for a lawsuit against the Atlantic Coast Conference, challenging a contract that binds the school to the league for the next 12 years and creating a potential path to leave without paying more than \$500 million in penalties.

"I believe this board has been left no choice but to challenge the legitimacy of the ACC grant of rights and its severe withdrawal penalties," Florida State Board of Trustees chairman Peter Collins said during a trustees meeting.

Florida State outside counsel David Ashburn said a lawsuit was ready to be filed that claims the ACC's grant of rights violates antitrust law and has unenforceable withdrawal penalties. Ashburn said it would cost a school \$572 million to withdraw from the conference. The lawsuit also accuses the ACC of breach of contract and violation of public policy.

Florida State is looking for a way out of the conference it has

been a member of since 1992 because it believes the ACC is locked into an undervalued and unusually lengthy media rights deal with ESPN that runs through 2036. The school leaders also say the league refuses to change its revenue distribution model to match FSU's value.

Florida State leaders have been pushing for unequal distribution of revenue for more than a year.

"It's time for us to try to do something about it," Florida State President Richard McCullough said.

McCullough said the trustees' approval of the legal challenge was not a direct reaction to Florida State recently being left out of the College Football Playoff, despite having an undefeated record.

"This is not a reaction, but something we've done a lot of due diligence on," he said.

The ACC has agreed to create a bonus system that would direct more revenue to schools that have postseason success in football and basketball. It did not immediately comment on

Friday's decision.

Florida State leaders have made it known they are unhappy with the school's current situation in the ACC, where revenue distribution lags way behind the payouts to schools in the Southeastern and Big Ten conferences. That gap is likely to grow substantially in the near future as new media rights deals kick in for the SEC and Big Ten while the ACC is locked into a deal with ESPN that still has more than a decade left.

"We are not satisfied with our current situation," McCullough said during an August board meeting.

Earlier this month, Florida State won the ACC football title game but became the first Power Five conference champion to finish with an undefeated record and still be left out of the College Football Playoff.

The snub of the Seminoles (13-0) for a playoff spot that went to SEC champion Alabama reignited frustrations at Florida State with what many of their supporters view as a conference that holds back their athletic

program — and most notably the football team.

Any ACC school that wants to leave the conference would have to challenge the grant of rights to be able to get out before joining another league. The grant of rights gives the ACC control over media rights for its member schools — including the broadcast of games in all sports. In addition, any school that wants to leave would have to pay an exit fee of three times the league's operating budget, or roughly \$120 million.

The length of the ACC's agreement and potential financial penalties have protected the conference from being poached by other leagues the way the Big 12 and Pac-12 have been in the most recent round of realignment.

But it has also caused consternation in the conference as its members see a future where SEC and Big Ten schools are receiving upwards of \$75 million annually from their conferences and ACC schools are struggling to stay within \$30 million of their competitors.

Pac-12 resolves revenue distribution disagreement

Associated Press

Oregon State and Washington State announced Thursday they have reached an agreement in principle with 10 departing Pac-12 schools on revenue distribution for 2023-24 that ends a legal battle sparked by conference realignment.

Last week, Oregon State and Washington State were given control of the Pac-12 and assets when the state Supreme Court of Washington declined to review a lower court's decision to grant the schools a preliminary injunction.

Financial terms of the settlement were not released, but in a joint statement Washington State and Oregon State said the

departing members will forfeit a portion of distributions for this school year and guarantees to cover a specific portion of "potential future liabilities."

"This agreement ensures that the future of the Pac-12 will be decided by the schools that are staying, not those that are leaving. We look forward to what the future holds for our universities, our student-athletes, the Pac-12 Conference and millions of fans," Oregon State President Jayathi Murthy and Washington State President Kirk Schulz said in a statement.

The conference, which Oregon State and Washington State intend to keep alive and hope to rebuild, will retain its assets and

all future revenues.

"This agreement allows OSU and WSU to maintain control of the hundreds of millions of dollars coming into the conference in future years, as we have always maintained they would, while calling for the vast majority of funds earned in 2023-24 to be distributed equally among the 12 members," the 10 departing schools said in a joint statement.

The schools said the "fine details" of the agreement would be worked out in the coming days.

The Pac-12 was ripped apart this summer after the league's leadership failed to land a media rights agreement that would keep it competitive with other

power conferences.

Next year, USC, UCLA, Oregon and Washington will join the Big Ten; Arizona, Arizona State, Colorado and Utah will join the Big 12; and Stanford and California will join the ACC.

Oregon State and Washington State were left behind. The schools sued the conference and the 10 departing schools in September, claiming they should be the sole board members of the Pac-12.

Oregon State and Washington State said the other members relinquished their right to vote on conference business when they announced their departures and a Superior Court judge in Whitman County, Wash., agreed.

MLB widening runner's lane to first base

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Major League Baseball is widening the runner's lane approaching first base to include a portion of fair territory, changing a more than century-old rule that caused World Series controversy over interference calls.

MLB also is shortening the pitch clock with runners on base by two seconds to 18 and further reducing mound visits in an effort to speed up games.

Another change adopted Thursday by the sport's 11-man competition committee requires a pitcher who warms up on the mound before a half inning to face at least one batter.

The new runner's lane overrides a rule that has existed since the National League mandated in 1882 that runners must be within the 3-foot box on the foul side of the base line during the final 45 feet between home and first. Violators were subject to being called out for interfering with fielders taking a throw. The rule was designed to prevent collisions; foul lines intersected the middle of bases until the bags were moved entirely

into fair territory in 1887.

"If you're sitting at home or you're even in the game, it just doesn't make sense," Yankees manager Aaron Boone said of the old rule.

The change widens the lane to include 18-to-24 inches of fair territory until the edge of the grass, though MLB said it will allow a grace period for compliance because of the need to modify artificial turf surfaces.

The old rule has long sparked frustration because right-handed hitters necessarily begin their sprint to first base in fair territory, and the first base bag is fully in fair ground, too.

Umpires' interpretations of the rule have sparked disputes.

The New York Mets' J.C. Martin was in fair territory when he was hit on the left wrist by pitcher Pete Richert's throw following his sacrifice bunt in the 10th inning of Game 4 of the World Series in 1969. That allowed Rod Gaspar to score the winning run from second against Baltimore as plate umpire Shag Crawford and first base umpire Lou DiMuro failed to call interference.

"Since then I've always watched over the years everybody running down the lane," Richert said Thursday. "I'd say that 30% to 40% of them run inside and it's never called, and changing it now is not going to make any difference in those calls. It'll just justify the no-call. Every once in a while I'll be watching a game and I'll see it and I'll go, 'There they go. They missed another one.'"

The decision went the other way in the seventh inning of Game 6 of the World Series in 2019, when Washington's Trea Turner was called out for interference by plate umpire Sam Holbrook when he was hit on the back of the right leg by Houston reliever Brad Peacock's throw, a decision upheld in a video review.

"It's just going to make things easier for the ballplayers and the umpires," Holbrook said of the change. "Players can run straight to the bag, especially the right-handed hitters. It's been talked about for a while. I think they're trying to do the right thing."

The out cost Washington a

run when Anthony Rendon homered, and Martinez was ejected for arguing after the half inning, needing to be restrained by bench coach Chip Hale.

"I don't know how long that rule has been in place, probably a hundred years," Martinez said the following day. "These judgment calls are difficult. The umpires do the best they can on getting it right. I know that."

When Turner was called out for interference on a throw to first by Chicago Cubs catcher Willson Contreras following an errant pitch on a third strike on May 19, 2021, Martinez was ejected by umpire Chris Conroy. The manager picked up the first base bag and slammed it to the ground and then kicked it. After another similar call went against Washington on June 14, 2023, Martinez printed out a photo showing where the baserunner was and held it up during his postgame news conference.

The changes were approved by the committee over objections from all five players who voted.

Sources: Dodgers get prized pitcher Yamamoto

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Prized free-agent pitcher Yoshinobu Yamamoto and the Los Angeles Dodgers have agreed to a \$325 million, 12-year contract, according to multiple reports.

Yamamoto is set to join Japanese countryman Shohei Ohtani with the Dodgers, who signed the two-way superstar to a record \$700 million, 10-year deal last week.

The Dodgers did not confirm the agreement with Yamamoto on Thursday night. MLB.com and ESPN were among the outlets citing anonymous sources in reporting the deal.

The New York Yankees and New York Mets were among the many clubs that pursued Yamamoto.

It's the third major pitching coup for the NL West champion Dodgers this offseason. In addition to Ohtani, the team signed right-hander Tyler Glasnow to a \$136.5 million, five-year contract after he was traded from the Tampa Bay Rays to Los Angeles.

Ohtani made a video pitch to Glasnow to join him in Hollywood.

"It was important to Shohei that this wasn't the one move we were going to make," Dodgers President of Baseball Operations Andrew Friedman

said at Ohtani's introductory news conference last week.

Yamamoto was 16-6 with a 1.21 ERA this season, striking out 169 and walking 28 in 164 innings. He is 70-29 with a 1.82 ERA in seven seasons with the Orix Buffaloes. Yamamoto struck out a Japan Series-record 14 in a Game 6 win over Hanshin on Nov. 5, throwing a 138-pitch complete game.

Orix posted the 25-year-old right-hander on Nov. 20 and Major League Baseball teams had until Jan. 4 to sign him.

Yamamoto's deal with the Dodgers would be the largest and longest ever guaranteed to a big league pitcher.

Ohtani was a two-time AL

MVP with the Los Angeles Angels before becoming a free agent this offseason and moving to the Dodgers.

Yamamoto pitched his second career no-hitter, the 100th in Japanese big league history, on Sept. 9 for the Buffaloes against the Lotte Marines. The game, watched by MLB executives, extended his scoreless streak to 42 innings.

A two-time Pacific League MVP, Yamamoto also threw a no-hitter against the Seibu Lions on June 18 last year. His fastball averaged 95 mph and topped out at 96.6 mph in Japan's semifinal win over Mexico at the World Baseball Classic in March.