

Russian jets in Mideast present risk

By J.P. LAWRENCE

Stars and Stripes

Russian fighter jets are creating the risk of an accidental shootdown by flying over U.S. bases in Syria without telling American counterparts first, a U.S. defense official warned.

“Russia has continued to violate protected airspace above U.S. and coalition positions in Syria,” Capt. Daniel de La Fe, a spokesman for 9th Air Force (U.S. Air Forces Central), said Thursday. “Russia’s violations of this airspace have the potential to be misinterpreted as an act of aggression and lead to escalation.”

Drone attacks by Iranian-backed militias already have U.S. troops stationed in the Middle East on high alert for aerial threats, and the Russian overflights could put them on edge even more, military officials and

analysts said.

Russian aircraft flying over American bases in Syria are also most likely collecting intelligence and sharing it with adversaries of the U.S. in the region, Joseph Votel, a retired general who helmed U.S. Central Command from 2016 to 2019, said Thursday.

U.S. troops in Syria and Iraq have faced more than 100 attacks from Iranian-backed militias since the start of the Israel-Hamas war on Oct. 7, the Defense Department says.

A drone attack on a base in northern Iraq on Christmas left three U.S. service members injured, leading to retaliatory airstrikes.

The downing of a Russian pilot could lead to open conflict, said Votel, now a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute.

“I am always concerned about

the potential for escalation and for one incident elevating the overall posture,” he said.

Votel and a U.S. defense official said there have been fewer of these overflights and airspace violations since Oct. 7 than there were over the summer.

That was when Russian pilots attempted to goad U.S. counterparts into dogfights, and at one point a Russian fighter jet in Syria fired flares at a U.S. drone and damaged its propeller.

Although both Russia and the U.S. have declared missions in Syria to defeat Islamic State, their backing of opposing Syrian groups has led to deconfliction protocols. These include agreements on areas where the two countries pledged to notify each other prior to transiting. Both sides have accused the other of violating these agreements.

Russia does not want a region-

al war between its ally Iran and the U.S., but it wouldn’t mind if Middle Eastern conflicts distract the Pentagon from the war in Ukraine, Jonathan Lord, a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security, said Thursday.

“They’re definitely stirring the pot,” Lord said. “Because tensions are generally heightened, there is a greater risk of miscalculation, everyone’s a little jumpier and the Russians are ones to press in those situations.”

In addition, Russian planes flying over American bases have been equipped with sensors that most likely gather info, and Moscow has a motive to disclose any data they collect to Iran and Syria, U.S. military leaders and analysts say.

“I think you have to make that assumption going into this,” Votel said.

Lawyers to handle sexual assault cases for military

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. military on Thursday opened a new chapter in how it investigates and prosecutes cases of sexual assault and other major crimes, putting independent lawyers in charge of those decisions and sidelining commanders after years of pressure from Congress.

The change, long resisted by

Pentagon leaders, was finally forced by frustrated members of Congress who believed that too often commanders would fail to take victims’ complaints seriously or would try to protect alleged perpetrators in their units.

The new law was fueled by a persistent increase in sexual assaults and harassment across the military.

The Air Force, the Marine Corps and the Navy all saw reported sexual assaults go up last year, but a sharp 9% drop in reports from the Army — the largest military service — drove the overall number down. In 2021, reported assaults spiked by 13%.

Under the law, new special counsels will have the authority to make prosecution decisions on a number of crimes, including murder, rape and several other sexual assault-related offenses, kidnapping, domestic violence, making or possessing child sexual abuse images, stalking and retaliation.

In a statement, Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III called it “the most important reform to our military justice system since the creation of the Uniform Code of Military Justice in 1950.”

It’s unclear, however, what impact the change will have on the broader problem of sexual misconduct in the military, in-

cluding if it will trigger an increase in prosecutions and, if so, whether that will have any deterrent effect.

Senior military officials who are familiar with the new program said they already have more than 160 certified special trial counsels who will take over the prosecution decisions as of Thursday. Many of those lawyers, however, have already been involved, providing advice and support for months.

As of Thursday, the special trial counsels will have sole authority to make prosecution decisions on new cases involving the major crimes. Any advice on already existing cases is non-binding, the officials said.

To our readers

Stripes Lite will not be published on New Year’s Day.

Russia hits Ukraine with massive attack

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia launched 122 missiles and dozens of drones against Ukrainian targets, officials said Friday, killing at least 30 civilians across the country in what an air force official called the biggest aerial barrage of the war.

At least 144 people were injured and an unknown number were buried under rubble during the roughly 18-hour onslaught, Ukrainian officials said. A maternity hospital, apartment blocks and schools were among the

buildings reported damaged across Ukraine.

In the capital, Kyiv, broken glass and mangled metal littered city streets. Air raid and emergency service sirens wailed as plumes of smoke drifted into a bright blue sky.

Kateryna Ivanivna, a 72-year-old Kyiv resident, said she threw herself to the ground when a missile struck.

“There was an explosion, then flames,” she said. “I covered my head and got down in the street. Then I ran into the subway sta-

tion.”

Meanwhile, in Poland, authorities said that what apparently was a Russian missile entered the country’s airspace Friday morning from the direction of Ukraine and then vanished off radars.

In the attack on Ukraine, the air force intercepted most of the ballistic and cruise missiles and the Shahed-type drones overnight, said Ukraine’s military chief, Valerii Zaluzhnyi.

Western officials and analysts had recently warned that Russia limited its cruise missile strikes

for months in an apparent effort to build up stockpiles for massive strikes during the winter, hoping to break the Ukrainians’ spirit.

The result was “the most massive aerial attack” since Russia’s full-scale invasion in February 2022, Air Force commander Mykola Oleshchuk wrote on his official Telegram channel.

It topped the previous biggest assault, in November 2022 when Russia launched 96 missiles, and this year’s biggest, with 81 missiles on March 9, according to air force records.

Sailor who helped stop suicide continues giving help

By ALISON BATH

Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — A Navy Seabee whose quick thinking helped prevent a suicide earlier this year is ensuring that more sailors have the assistance they need to navigate the rigors of life in the service.

Petty Officer First Class Cayla George this year helped establish an Alcoholics Anonymous chapter at Naval Air Station Sigonella in Sicily. That effort followed a February episode in which a co-worker tried to end their life.

George’s reaction to a phone call from a number she didn’t recognize is credited with initiating a team response that saved the sailor’s life, the Navy said in a state-

ment.

The caller said the service member was in their barracks room attempting suicide, George said Dec. 19.

With the person still on the phone, George texted base duty personnel to alert them. After hanging up, she made calls that reached security and first responders, who were able to get to the service member in time, George said.

“I was very, very thankful I was able to answer the phone, take it seriously and be able to immediately offer some aid and start the process of getting the service member some help,” George said.

The sailor had given the caller George’s cellphone number as

someone on base to contact. Previously, George had spent time with the sailor after noticing they were having trouble sleeping and potentially feeling alone and homesick. Those problems could be indicators a person may need help, she said.

After spending a day with the sailor, George thought they would be OK. It seemed the sailor was just going through typical stress and needed more interaction with people who cared about them, she said.

But the attempted suicide “just goes to show that, sometimes, we don’t know,” George said.

“Sometimes, we just have to be very, very aware and be ready to help one another if it comes up,”

she said.

For her actions, George received the Seabee Heritage Command’s 2023 Everyday Hero Award during a ceremony at the Naval Construction Battalion Center in Gulfport, Miss., on Nov. 16.

A facilities management specialist who has served in the Navy for nearly nine years, George has been assigned to Sigonella since 2022.

She is responsible for 81 facilities and 22 tenant commands at the base, according to the Navy.

She also is the team lead in her department for a Navy program that works to help sailors better overcome stress and problems in life.

Crews continue search for missing airman after crash

By ALEX WILSON

Stars and Stripes

U.S. and Japanese crews continue to search for the remains of the last of eight crew members killed when an Air Force CV-22B Osprey crashed off the coast of southwestern Japan in late November, the Air Force said recently.

Divers searched the waters around Yakushima, an island just south of Kyushu, the southernmost of Japan’s four main islands, for the remains of Maj. Eric Spendlove, 36, of St. George, Utah, Air Force Special Operations Command said in a Facebook post Wednesday.

“Locating and recovering

our eighth Airman remains the primary effort,” the command wrote.

Salvage teams meanwhile are working to recover the tiltrotor aircraft, according to several Air Force Special Operations Command news releases.

A Navy rescue and salvage

ship, the USNS Salvor, joined the search Dec. 23, and its crew is coordinating with teams from the Japan Coast Guard, Japan Self-Defense Force, local law enforcement, volunteers and other U.S. military assets, the command announced in a news release that day.

Palestinians pour into south Gaza as Israel advances effort

Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Tens of thousands of Palestinians streamed into an already crowded town at the southernmost end of Gaza in recent days, according to the United Nations, fleeing Israel's bombardment of the center of the strip, where hospital officials said dozens were killed Friday.

Israel's unprecedented air and ground offensive against Hamas has displaced some 85% of the Gaza Strip's 2.3 million residents, sending swells of people seeking shelter in Israeli-designated safe areas that the military has nevertheless also bombed. That has left Palestinians with a harrowing sense that nowhere is safe in the tiny enclave.

People arrived in Rafah in trucks, in carts and on foot. Those who haven't found space in the already overwhelmed shelters have built tents on the roadsides.

"People are using any empty space to build shacks," said Juliette Touma, director of communications at UNRWA, the U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees. "Some are sleeping in their cars, and others are sleeping in the open."

Israel's widening campaign, which has already flattened much of the north, is now fo-

cused on the urban refugee camps of Bureij, Nuseirat and Maghazi in central Gaza, where Israeli warplanes and artillery have leveled buildings.

But fighting has not abated in the north, and the city of Khan Younis in the south, where Israel believes Hamas' leaders are hiding, is also a smoldering battleground. Militants have continued to fire rockets, mostly at Israel's south.

The war has already killed over 21,500 Palestinians, most of them women and children, and sparked a humanitarian crisis that has left a quarter of Gaza's population starving.

An additional 187 Palestinians were killed across the Gaza Strip over the past day, Ashraf al-Qidra, the spokesman for the Health Ministry in the Hamas-ruled territory, said Friday. The ministry's death toll does not distinguish between civilians and combatants.

Israeli officials have brushed off international calls for a cease-fire, saying it would amount to a victory for Hamas, which the military has promised to dismantle. It has also vowed to bring back more than 100 hostages still held by the militants after their Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel that triggered the war. The assault

killed some 1,200 people, mostly civilians.

The military says 168 of its soldiers have been killed since the ground offensive began.

The U.N. said late Thursday that around 100,000 people have arrived in Rafah, along the border with Egypt, in recent days. The influx crams even more people into one of Gaza's most densely populated areas.

Israel has told residents of central Gaza to head south, but even as the displaced have poured in, Rafah has not been spared. A strike Thursday evening destroyed a residential building, killing at least 23 people, according to the media office of the nearby Al-Kuwaiti Hospital.

Israel said this week it was expanding its ground offensive into central Gaza, targeting a belt of crowded neighborhoods that were built to house some of the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees from the 1948 war surrounding Israel's creation.

Israel blames the high death toll on Hamas, which it accuses of embedding inside the civilian population, saying that its forces have uncovered weapons troves and underground tunnel shafts in residential buildings, schools and mosques.

Bataan and Carter Hall leave the Middle East

BY ALISON BATH

Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — A U.S. amphibious ready group sent to counter Iranian interference with commercial shipping in the Persian Gulf recently left the Middle East after nearly five months in the region.

The amphibious assault ship USS Bataan and the dock landing ship USS Carter Hall, along with embarked elements of the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit, entered the eastern Mediterranean Sea on Thursday, U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa said in a statement the same day.

There they will join the amphibious transport dock ship USS Mesa Verde, reintegrating the Bataan Amphibious Ready Group, the Navy said.

The group, which includes more than 3,000 sailors and Marines, arrived in the Middle East on Aug. 6.

The Pentagon's deployment of additional forces to the region came after Iran tried to seize two oil tankers in the Gulf of Oman in early July.

The attempts, during which Iranian naval forces fired on one of the ships, were the latest in a string of actions by Tehran to harass oil tankers. At the time, the Navy said Iran had harassed, attacked or seized 20 commercial ships since 2021.

In other U.S. Navy activity in the Mediterranean, the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford arrived Tuesday for another port call at U.S. Naval Support Activity Souda Bay on the Greek island of Crete, according to a post on the base's official Facebook page.

Ford, which left its homeport in Norfolk, Va., on May 2, has been on duty in the region for nearly eight months.

USS Mason downs drone, ballistic missile in latest Red Sea attack by Houthi rebels

Stars and Stripes

A U.S. Navy guided-missile destroyer shot down a drone and an anti-ship ballistic missile fired by Houthi rebels in the Red Sea on Thursday, according to U.S. Central Command.

The USS Mason was in the southern Red Sea around 5:45

p.m. Thursday when it shot down the missile and drone, which marked the 22nd attempted attack by Houthi rebels against international shipping since Oct. 19, CENTCOM said in a Friday post to X, formerly Twitter.

The attack also came just two

days after U.S. fighter jets and the guided-missile destroyer USS Laboon, part of the Eisenhower Carrier Strike Group, fended off a dozen drones, three anti-ship ballistic missiles and two land attack cruise missiles over the course of 10 hours on Tuesday in the Red Sea.

Trump removed from Maine primary ballot

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine — Maine's Democratic secretary of state on Thursday removed former President Donald Trump from the state's presidential primary ballot under the Constitution's insurrection clause, becoming the first election official to take action unilaterally as the U.S. Supreme Court is poised to decide whether Trump remains eligible to return to the White House.

The decision by Secretary of State Shenna Bellows follows a ruling earlier this month by the Colorado Supreme Court that booted Trump from the ballot there under Section 3 of the 14th Amendment. That decision has been stayed until the U.S. Supreme Court decides whether Trump is barred by the Civil War-era provision, which prohibits

those who "engaged in insurrection" from holding office.

The Trump campaign said it would appeal Bellows' decision to Maine's state courts, and Bellows suspended her ruling until that court system rules on the case. In the end, it is likely that the nation's highest court will have the final say on whether Trump appears on the ballot in Maine and in the other states.

Bellows found that Trump could no longer run for his prior job because his role in the Jan. 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol violated Section 3, which bans from office those who "engaged in insurrection."

Bellows made the ruling after some state residents, including a bipartisan group of former lawmakers, challenged Trump's position on the ballot.

"I do not reach this conclusion lightly," Bellows wrote in her 34-page decision. "I am mindful that no Secretary of State has ever deprived a presidential candidate of ballot access based on Section 3 of the Fourteenth Amendment. I am also mindful, however, that no presidential candidate has ever before engaged in insurrection."

The Trump campaign immediately slammed the ruling. "We are witnessing, in real-time, the attempted theft of an election and the disenfranchisement of the American voter," campaign spokesman Steven Cheung said in a statement.

Legal experts said that Thursday's ruling demonstrates the need for the nation's highest court, which has never ruled on Section 3, to clarify what states can do.

"It is clear that these decisions are going to keep popping up, and inconsistent decisions reached (like the many states keeping Trump on the ballot over challenges) until there is final and decisive guidance from the U.S. Supreme Court," Rick Hasen, a law professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, wrote in response to the Maine decision. "It seems a certainty that SCOTUS will have to address the merits sooner or later."

While Maine has just four electoral votes, it's one of two states to split them. Trump won one of Maine's electors in 2020, so having him off the ballot there, should he emerge as the Republican general election candidate, could have outsized implications in a race that is expected to be narrowly decided.

Mo. woman out of jail after getting friend to kill mom

Associated Press

Gypsy Rose Blanchard, the Missouri woman who persuaded an online boyfriend to kill her mother after she had forced her to pretend for years that she was suffering from leukemia, muscular dystrophy and other serious illnesses, was released Thursday from prison on parole.

Blanchard was released early in the day from the Chillicothe Correctional Center, said Karen Pojmann, a spokesperson for the Missouri Department of Corrections. Blanchard was granted parole after serving 85% of her original sentence, Pojmann said.

Blanchard's case sparked national tabloid interest after reports emerged that her mother, Claudine "Dee Dee" Blanchard, who was slain in 2015, had essentially kept her daughter prisoner, forcing her to use a wheelchair and feeding tube.

It turned out that Gypsy Blanchard, now 32, was perfectly healthy, not developmentally de-

layed as her friends had always believed. Her mother had Munchausen syndrome by proxy, a psychological disorder in which parents or caregivers seek sympathy through the exaggerated or made-up illnesses of their children, said her trial attorney, Michael Stanfield.

"People were constantly telling Dee Dee what a wonderful mother she was, and Dee Dee was getting all of this attention," he said.

Through the ruse, the mother and daughter met country star Miranda Lambert and received charitable donations, a trip to Disney World and even a home from Habitat for Humanity.

Stanfield said Gypsy Blanchard's mother was able to dupe doctors by telling them her daughter's medical records had been lost in Hurricane Katrina.

Among the unnecessary procedures Gypsy Blanchard underwent was the removal of her salivary glands.

University chancellor claims he was fired for making porn

Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. — Former University of Wisconsin-La Crosse Chancellor Joe Gow said Thursday that the school's governing board fired him because members were uncomfortable with him and his wife producing and appearing in pornographic videos.

The Universities of Wisconsin Board of Regents, which oversees UW-Madison, UW-La Crosse and 11 other regional campuses, voted unanimously during a hastily convened closed meeting Wednesday evening to fire Gow.

After the vote, Universities of Wisconsin President Jay Rothman and regents President Karen Walsh issued statements saying the regents had learned of specific conduct by Gow that subjected the university to "significant reputational harm." But neither of them offered any details of the allegations.

Gow told The Associated Press in a phone interview Thursday morning that regents had discov-

ered that he and his wife, former UW-La Crosse professor Carmen Wilson, had been producing and appearing in pornographic videos.

He maintained that he never mentioned UW-La Crosse or his role at the university in any of the videos and the firing violated his free speech rights.

"My wife and I live in a country where we have a First Amendment," he said. "We're dealing with consensual adult sexuality. The regents are overreacting. They're certainly not adhering to their own commitment to free speech or the First Amendment."

Gow also complained that the regents never told him what policy he violated and he was never given a hearing or other opportunity to present his case. He said he's contemplating a lawsuit.

Rothman said in an email to the AP on Thursday morning that Gow mistakenly believes the First Amendment equates to a "free pass to say or do anything that he pleases."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Argument over gifts turns deadly, deputies say

FL LARGO — A Florida woman holding her 11-month-old son in a baby carrier was fatally shot by her 14-year-old brother while trying to defuse an argument over Christmas gifts he was having with a 15-year-old brother who also was armed, authorities said.

The 15-year-old brother then shot his 14-year-old brother, though not fatally, for killing their sister on Dec. 24 in Largo, Fla., which is located in the Tampa metro area, the Pinellas County Sheriff's Office said in a news release.

The argument started while the three siblings were Christmas shopping with their mother and the sister's two sons, ages 6 and 11 months. It continued when they went to their grandmother's house where the sister, 23, told the younger brother to stop arguing with his older brother since it was Christmas Eve. The younger brother then told his sister he was going to shoot her and her infant, and then he shot her in the chest, the sheriff's office said.

The older brother then shot his younger brother outside the home and fled, tossing his firearm in a nearby yard, authorities said. He was taken to a mental health facility after he was located since he had threatened to harm himself.

Magnitude 3.8 quake shakes small town

AR ETOWAH — A magnitude 3.8 earthquake rattled parts of northeastern Arkansas on Wednesday, according to geologists.

The earthquake occurred shortly before noon near the town of Etowah, the U.S. Geological Survey reported. The rural town, which has a population of about 250 people, is about 50 miles north of Memphis, Tenn.

The Arkansas Division of Emergency Management said there were no reports from county officials of damage or injuries. Etowah is near the New Madrid fault line, which has been responsible for numerous small and large earthquakes.

Man sentenced in remote desert power plant fire

NV LAS VEGAS — A Colorado man was sentenced Wednesday to prison in Nevada following his arrest last January for setting his car afire at a remote facility in what authorities initially characterized as a terror attack on the electric system serving Las Vegas Strip casinos.

Mohammed Reza Mesmarian, 35, was sentenced to two to 10 years following his plea in November to guilty but mentally ill on charges of felony arson and property destruction in the incident at a remote desert solar array about 25 miles northeast of downtown Las Vegas.

Mesmarian received credit for nearly a year already served in custody and could be paroled in early 2024.

Mesmarian, a dentist, is from Aurora, Colo., where state records showed he faced Dental Board discipline and his license to practice was restricted in July 2022. Records also showed that Mesmarian filed Chapter 7 bankruptcy in October 2022.

Police reported that no one was injured in the Jan. 4 fire, which wasn't immediately de-

tected. Mesmarian was found and arrested a day later.

More comment time sought for nuke project

NM SANTA FE — New Mexico's congressional delegation wants the public to have more time to weigh in on a proposed transmission line that would bring more electricity to one of the nation's top nuclear weapons laboratories, saying the comment period should be extended by 60 days.

The project comes as Los Alamos National Laboratory looks to power ongoing operations and future missions that include manufacturing key components for the U.S. nuclear arsenal.

Native American tribes and environmentalists already have voiced opposition to the multi-million-dollar power line project, which would cross national forest land in an area known as the Caja del Rio and span the Rio Grande at White Rock Canyon. Several pueblos have cultural and spiritual ties to the area.

The delegation said in a letter to the National Nuclear Security Administration that the current 30-day comment period falls on numerous federal and religious holidays and overlaps with multiple Pueblo feasts, making it difficult for any meaningful participation.

Chase ends with police ripping apart truck's cab

TX CHANNELVIEW — Texas police on Wednesday ripped apart the cab of a tractor trailer and pulled the truck's driver out after pursuing him in a slow highway chase that shut down the road for hours.

The confrontation on a stretch of highway east of Houston came hours after sheriff's deputies began trying to pull over the truck, which could be seen on television news footage crawling along the interstate.

Deputies finally brought the 18-wheeler to a stop on the shoulder of Interstate 10 using spike strips to puncture its tires.

For hours, the driver had ignored police commands to exit and continued to rev the engine of the disabled vehicle, Harris County Sheriff Ed Gonzalez said.

Police eventually used a bulldozer-like vehicle to pulverize the cab before sending a dog into the truck and then pulling the driver out at around 4 p.m.

Gonzalez said the driver appeared to be suffering from "heavy impairment."

State: Some medical pot products being retested

MS JACKSON — The Mississippi State Department of Health said Wednesday that "a large number" of medical marijuana products are on hold so they can be retested.

The department first issued the hold on Dec. 21.

A news release from the department said the products are being retested "to validate results related to the use of pesticides and presence of mycotoxins," which are produced by fungi. No illnesses from the products have been reported, the department said.

The department said as batches of products are cleared, the hold on those will be lifted and the products will be back on the market.

— From wire reports

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and Military News

Alabama, Texas have edge to reach title game

Associated Press

The final four-team College Football Playoff promises to be one of the closest in the 10-year history of the event.

The combined spread of the two New Year's Day semifinals sits at six points, according to FanDuel Sportsbook. No. 1 Michigan is a 1½-point favorite against fourth-seeded Alabama in the Rose Bowl. No. 3 Texas is a 4½-point favorite over No. 2 Washington in the Sugar Bowl.

That's the smallest combined line for the CFP semifinals since the 2017 playoff, when Georgia beat Oklahoma in overtime at the Rose Bowl as a 2½-point favorite and Alabama was favored by 3½ against Clemson in the Sugar Bowl and rolled over the Tigers.

The matchups that will decide each CFP semifinal, with the winners advancing to the Jan. 8 championship game in Houston.

Rose Bowl

Alabama's offense and quarterback Jalen Milroe have been a work in progress this season. Recent Crimson Tide teams have paired eventual first-round draft pick quarterbacks with a bevy of star receivers to create explosive offenses.

This isn't that. Alabama is 30th in the country in yards per play (6.36) and has allowed 43 sacks, a woeful 123rd nationally, while throwing only 302 passes (122nd nationally).

"The big question will be which Alabama offensive line shows up, because the one we saw against Georgia (in the SEC championship game) was dominant. There have been times this year where they have been a flat-out liability," Cole Cubelic, who works as an analyst for ESPN and the SEC Network, said on the AP Top 25 College Football Podcast.

Michigan doesn't have one player up front defensively that stands out as a star — the way Alabama All-America edge rusher Dallas Turner does —

but they are deep and committed to stopping the run, often with eight players close to the line of scrimmage.

Michigan will want to put the game in Milroe's hands. Early in the season that seemed like the way to beat Alabama, whose only loss was by 10 points at home to Texas. Now, less so.

Milroe is 6-foot-2, 220 pounds with speed and a powerful arm. He is a player with difference-making skills, but his game has holes, especially as a mid-range passer. Milroe will miss some open throws, but he has thrown only six interceptions and Alabama has lost only four fumbles.

Tide offensive coordinator Tommy Rees doesn't call many designed runs for Milroe. He might need to dip into the bag in the Rose Bowl.

"They're going to have to do that to have some success on the ground," said Mike Kuchar, the co-founder of the X&O Labs football research company. "I don't see them lining up and coming downhill on Michigan's defense at all."

Michigan allowed 4.28 yards per play, fourth in the nation. The numbers suggest an elite defense, but beware: The Wolverines saw few potent offenses in the Big Ten.

On offense, Michigan is run-heavy and mistake-free. The Wolverines have committed only seven turnovers.

But the Wolverines' running game fell off this season. After averaging well over 5 yards per carry the last two years, they are down to 4.27. Blake Corum scored 24 touchdowns, tops in the nation, but his average per carry was 4.72 yards after being over 5.0 the previous two seasons.

Michigan will also be without All-American guard Zak Zinter, who broke his left leg during the Ohio State game. The Wolverines have had some pass protection issues off the edge, too.

What coach Jim Harbaugh and offensive coordinator Sherone Moore's team has shown is

a knack for being able to run when they needed to most in big games against Penn State and Ohio State.

Alabama hasn't locked down the run as well as most of Nick Saban's best teams (3.7 yards per carry against, 31st in the country), but nobody is going to bully the Crimson Tide.

"It's going to take some creativity. It's going to take some pre- and post-snap movement, whether that's split-zone, jet-motion, different things like that," Cubelic said. "And Michigan carries some of that, but they don't really make a living on that. What they do extremely well is formation you."

Michigan quarterback J.J. McCarthy is rarely asked to carry the offense. The third-year player has NFL tools, both with his arm and legs.

In a game where yards are likely to be hard to get and points at a premium (the over/under is 44.5), McCarthy will need to be at his most efficient against an Alabama secondary that features two All-America defensive backs in Kool-aid McKinstry and Terrion Arnold.

Prediction: Alabama 23-20.

Sugar Bowl

The nightcap of the CFP semifinal doubleheader figures to be a very different game than Alabama-Michigan.

Washington and Texas both have top-15 offenses, talented quarterbacks in Michael Penix Jr. and Quinn Ewers, multiple future NFL draft picks to throw to and problems stopping the pass.

That's a recipe for points.

The one group that stands out on defense: The Texas defensive line, which features All-American T'Vondre Sweat and second-team All-American Byron Murphy II.

"There's not a lot of teams in the country that have the interior guys like Texas has, specifically Murphy and Sweat," Cubelic said.

Part of the reason teams attack the Longhorns secondary, especially their inexperienced safeties, is because they mostly give up on the running game. Texas is allowing 80.5 yards per game and 2.87 per carry, top-five in the country in each.

Washington counters with an offensive line that was underappreciated much of the season, but ended up winning the Joe Moore Award as the best in the country. Led by second-team All-America tackle Troy Fautanu, the Huskies allowed only 11 sacks while throwing the ball 37 times per game.

Washington doesn't run it in volume, but coach Kalen DeBoer and offensive coordinator Ryan Grubb seemed to evolve as opponents adjusted to try to take away the deep throws the Huskies love. Running back Dillon Johnson's role in the offense expanded later in the season, with Penix often lining up under center.

"They have relied on (Johnson) the last few weeks, and he's been very good downhill," Kuchar said. "And I think their confidence is growing every week. I think he's taking a lot of pressure off Penix."

Stops could be hard to come by for the Huskies, but Texas coach Steve Sarkisian's red-zone offense has been a problem much of the season. The Longhorns have scored touchdowns on 49% of their opportunities, 120th in the country.

Then again, tightening up near the goal line hasn't been a strength for Washington's defense. The Huskies have allowed 31 touchdowns in 44 red-zone trips (70.45%).

Washington has scored touchdowns on 70% of its red-zone trips, 19th in the country. But when the field shrinks, Sweat and Murphy become even tougher to handle. Texas is 10th in the nation in red-zone defense, allowing touchdowns on only 46% of opportunities.

Prediction: Texas 35-28.

Flacco fueling Browns' postseason push

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Joe Flacco has turned a seemingly cursed season into a charmed one.

Cleveland's quarterback for just over a month, Flacco passed for 309 yards and three touchdowns and the Browns clinched an unlikely playoff berth — just their second since 2002 — despite numerous injuries this season with a 37-20 win over the New York Jets on Thursday night.

The Browns (11-5) are assured of a wild-card spot and still have a chance to win the AFC North and maybe the conference's No. 1 overall seed, something that seemed unfathomable just weeks ago as major injuries piled up.

But things have changed since Flacco arrived.

The 38-year-old quarterback improved to 4-1 as a starter with the Browns, who plucked the Super Bowl 47 MVP off his couch in New Jersey last month to hopefully rescue their season. He's done that and more.

In the final minutes, Browns fans chanted "Flac-co! Flac-co!" to a quarterback they once reviled with Baltimore and now revere.

"You don't know how many of

these moments you're going to get," Flacco said. "I'm going to remember this for the rest of my life."

Flacco threw two TD passes to Jerome Ford in the first half as the Browns built a 20-point lead over the Jets (6-10), who chose not to re-sign the 15-year veteran after he spent three seasons with them — and after Aaron Rodgers tore his left Achilles tendon in Week 1.

Flacco torched New York for 296 yards in the first half and became the first QB in 34 games to go over 300 yards against the Jets. He's also the first Cleveland quarterback to pass for more than 300 in four straight.

Flacco insisted revenge wasn't on his mind, but Jets receiver Garrett Wilson said the QB was out to prove something.

"He's wound like that," Wilson said. "He told me at the end of last season, he wasn't going to be a backup. He was going to play and he held to that. Joe's a great guy. The type of teammate you want. He deserves everything."

The atmosphere was electric from the start inside Cleveland Browns Stadium, as fans who have felt mostly heartbreak for decades finally got a chance to

celebrate something.

"It was special," Flacco said. "This is obviously a unique situation for me, so I've got a lot of different emotions running through my head."

The Jets were forced to start Trevor Siemian for the second week in a row with Zach Wilson sidelined by a concussion.

Siemian had some nice moments, but an overthrow late in first quarter was returned 30 yards for a TD by safety Ronnie Hickman to put the Browns up 20-7.

New York allowed a season-high in points and yards (428). Although the Jets gave up just 61 yards in the second half, they dug themselves too big a hole.

Jets linebacker Jermaine Johnson had a pick-6 in the second quarter when he beautifully deflected Flacco's pass to himself and returned it 37 yards.

Nothing has been easy this season for the Browns, who have continued to win despite being overrun by injuries since the opener. Flacco is their fourth starting quarterback, they're missing both first-team offensive tackles and 12 players — including QB Deshaun Watson and running back Nick

Chubb — are on injured reserve.

So it was fitting they went into their biggest game this season missing their kicker, punter and wide receiver Amari Cooper, who was coming off a franchise record-setting 265-yard performance on Sunday in Houston.

Garrett & Garrett

Browns star defensive end Myles Garrett ended a five-game streak without a sack by taking down Siemian in the first half.

Garrett played with a heavy heart, disclosing after the game that his uncle, Chris Johnson, died on Christmas.

"Still hard to believe," he said. "I was speechless then. I really just don't know how to put it into words now. I've had headaches just daily just because I don't know how to handle it emotionally. So it just comes out in different ways, like just pains. I feel like sometime in a fog."

Wilson went over 1,000 yards receiving for the second straight season. He also did it as a rookie in 2022 and is one of 10 active players with two 1,000-yard seasons to start their career.

Healthy QBs have fueled success for Ravens, Dolphins

Associated Press

BALTIMORE — When Tua Tagovailoa outdueled Lamar Jackson early last season — with both quarterbacks playing like MVP candidates — it showed how much potential the Dolphins and Ravens might have.

Those teams both had to wait a year, but now they're sitting at the top of the AFC. They just needed their star passers to stay healthy.

"I got a lot of respect for Lamar, the things that he's done throughout his career," Tagovailoa said. "I can vividly re-

member when I was in college, I think he was in the NFL, and he reached out to me. He told me I was balling, and I thought that was the one of the coolest things. I think that was the year he won the MVP."

Jackson is now the favorite to win his second MVP after leading the Ravens to a big victory Monday night at San Francisco. Baltimore (12-3) has the top record in the NFL and can clinch the No. 1 seed in the AFC with a victory over Miami on Sunday. If the Dolphins (11-4) win at Baltimore, they would control their own path to the top

seed in the conference.

On the other hand, the loser of this game might not win their own division.

So there's quite a bit at stake — much more than there was in Week 2 last season. That was when Tagovailoa threw for 469 yards and six touchdowns as the Dolphins rallied from a 21-point fourth-quarter deficit to beat the Ravens 42-38. It was something of a coming-out party for the Miami offense in its second game under coach Mike McDaniell.

"They did some great things against us in the passing game,"

Baltimore coach John Harbaugh said. "Made some huge plays. It was a massive comeback. Obviously, it was a tough pill to swallow for us."

That same day, Jackson became the first quarterback in NFL history with both a touchdown pass and a touchdown run of at least 75 yards in one game.

Both teams went on to make the playoffs, but each lost its postseason opener. By then, Jackson was out with a knee injury and Tagovailoa's concussion problems left him unavailable, too. They've both played every game this season.

Young's big numbers rarely in question

Associated Press

The numbers that Atlanta guard Trae Young are putting up are notable, averaging 28.1 points and 11.3 assists per game so far this season. Keep that up for an entire season, and he'll do something that only Oscar Robertson, Tiny Archibald and James Harden have accomplished.

Stats like those typically get a player at least mentioned in an MVP conversation.

With Young, it might not even be a guarantee that he'll be in the All-Star conversation.

The Hawks opened their post-Christmas schedule at Chicago on Tuesday night, when Young was trying to do something nobody has ever pulled off in NBA history. He had at least 30 points and 10 assists in each of his last seven games, tying Robertson's league-record stretch done in the 1964-65 season. Nobody other than Robertson, until now, had ever managed that in more than five consecutive games.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm going to stop you right there," Young said after he tied Robertson's mark over the weekend. "Let's go to another question. I don't want to talk

about my stats. Let's talk about something else. Thank you, though. Appreciate you."

He had to settle for tying Robertson's record of 30-10 point-assist games: Young had 21 points and 13 assists in Atlanta's 118-113 loss at Chicago on Tuesday.

But maybe the way Young didn't want to talk about tying the mark is a sign of maturity from someone who has a confident swagger that can be perceived as arrogance. To his credit, he's 6-foot-1 and might be the lightest guy in the league; the Hawks list him at 180 pounds, which seems generous. He doesn't often let being the smallest player on the floor impede him in any way when it comes to putting up numbers.

But sometimes, his numbers get looked at as empty calories. Young's stretch of 30-point, 10-assist games seemed barely noticed, what with the league going into its Christmas schedule and with Detroit on a 28-game slide that tied the worst run in NBA history after losing to Boston on Thursday in overtime.

And it should be noted, the banged-up Hawks went 3-4 in

those seven games with Young on this 30-10 tear. Great numbers, not great results.

"You can't evaluate a player's performance necessarily based on their stat line," Hawks coach Quin Snyder said. "That's particularly true when you have a playmaker or a leader on the court."

While Young's intangible leadership skills might also get lost in the shuffle, if people did evaluate him solely on the numbers, he'd be far more revered.

Young averaged 26.7 points and 10.3 assists before the All-Star break last season — and didn't make the All-Star Game. In the formula used to determine the starters, Young finished fifth among Eastern Conference guards in the fan voting, sixth in the media voting and, perhaps most damning, 12th in voting among fellow players. There were 375 players who returned All-Star ballots last season (player voting counts as 25% of the formula) and only 13 (3.5%) of them listed Young as someone who should start.

"Let me say this: We have a tendency to put Trae under a microscope and that's a credit to

who he is as a player," Snyder said. "And that's a good challenge for him. ... Players want to improve and they want to be coached."

In fairness, there are things that go unnoticed. There are also things that are noticed.

People in Miami still haven't forgotten how Young told the fans there that "it's over" when the Hawks went up 117-111 with 59.9 seconds left of a game in 2019. It, indeed, was over: The Heat scored the next 22 points and won by 14 in overtime. Fans in New York won't forget how Young took a theatrical bow there when the Hawks were beating the Knicks in the 2021 playoffs, either.

Young made it clear that he wasn't happy about not being picked for the team that USA Basketball sent to the World Cup in Manila earlier this year. That, combined with no All-Star nod and not making the All-NBA team last season, seems to have made Young even more defiant.

"If you don't think I've been disrespected, I mean, you're just not telling the truth," Young said when this season started.

Creighton hosting Marquette hoping to get back on track

Associated Press

Creighton came within a few seconds of the Final Four last spring and has the type of roster that could make another deep run this season.

After a solid start to the season, the Bluejays have hit a few bumps in the road, losing two of their past three games to plummet down the AP Top 25.

No. 22 Creighton gets a big chance to get back on track Saturday at home against No. 10 Marquette.

"Any time you're in a position in the Big East to beat a good team, it stings when you lose, especially when you did a lot of things right," Creighton coach Greg McDermott said after the

Bluejays' 68-66 overtime loss to Villanova last week.

The Bluejays (9-3) opened the season with five straight wins before losing to No. 15 Colorado State at the Hall of Fame Classic in Kansas City. Creighton pulled out a solid win against Oklahoma State and crushed in-state rival Nebraska before losing to UNLV and Villanova dropped the Bluejays 10 spots in this week's poll.

The Bluejays will certainly have their hands full with the Golden Eagles (10-3).

Marquette has an impressive list of wins, including No. 2 Kansas at the Maui Invitational, No. 21 Texas and UCLA. The Golden Eagles followed the Kansas win with a loss to top-ranked Purdue

in Maui, lost to Wisconsin and opened Big East play with a loss to No. 25 Providence, which moved into the AP Top 25 for the first time this season on Monday.

Zags and Aztecs

No. 13 Gonzaga has not been nearly as dominant in its non-conference schedule as it typically is, with three losses already.

The Zags get one last test before the West Coast Conference schedule starts on Friday, when they play San Diego State.

Gonzaga has a new-look roster this season, with several newcomers and All-American Drew Timme no longer in the middle. The Zags have wins over

UCLA and Southern California, but also lost to top-ranked Purdue, reigning national champion UConn and Washington.

Owls rising

No. 7 Florida Atlantic had its highest ranking as a program last week, proving last year's Final Four run was no fluke.

The Owls have nearly everyone back from that team and has two wins over ranked teams, including a gritty overtime victory over No. 4 Arizona last weekend in Las Vegas.

Florida Atlantic had one game last week, and it was against another team that made a memorable March run in recent years — Florida Gulf Coast.