

Hegseth orders revision of chaplain corps

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth this week ordered sweeping changes to the U.S. military's chaplain corps, with a plan to simplify a system that he said has become too focused on "new age" concepts.

"Our chaplains are chaplains, not emotional support officers, and we're going to treat them as such," Hegseth said in a video statement to the force on Wednesday.

"Faith and virtue were traded for self-help and self-care,"

Hegseth said, adding that chaplains had been "minimized" and were "viewed by many as therapists, instead of ministers."

He took special aim at the Army, saying its current spiritual fitness guide is pushing secular humanism, and he ordered the service to cease using the program immediately.

"It mentions God one time. That's it," Hegseth said. "It mentions feelings 11 times. It even mentions playfulness, whatever that is, nine times. ... In short, it's unacceptable and

unserious. So we're tossing it."

Hegseth said the Pentagon is working on a new program, which could curtail what qualifies as a faith or belief recognized in the military.

"More reforms will be coming in the days and weeks ahead," he said. "There will be a top-down cultural shift putting spiritual well-being on the same footing as mental and physical health."

In 2017, the Defense Department updated what qualifies as a recognized religious denomination or belief system, with a

list of 221 groups that ranged from the mainstream to obscure Christian sects, Wiccans and atheists.

Hegseth blamed such changes on "political correctness" and an "ongoing war on warriors." The department will create a new list of religious affiliation codes, he said without specifying what religions or belief systems are in and which ones are out.

"We're going to streamline it ... so that our chaplains can actually use it to minister better to the flock," Hegseth said.

US to block 'sanctioned oil tankers' into Venezuela

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump said Tuesday he is ordering a blockade of all "sanctioned oil tankers" into Venezuela, ramping up pressure on the country's authoritarian leader Nicolás Maduro in a move that seemed designed to put a tighter chokehold on the South American country's economy.

Trump's escalation comes after U.S. forces last week seized an oil tanker off Venezuela's coast, an unusual move that followed a buildup of military forces in the region. In a post on social media Tuesday night announcing the blockade, Trump alleged Venezuela was using oil to fund drug trafficking and other crimes and vowed to continue the military buildup until the country gave the U.S. oil, land and assets, though it was not clear why he felt the U.S. had a claim.

"Venezuela is completely surrounded by the largest Armada ever assembled in the

History of South America," Trump said in a post on his social media platform. "It will only get bigger, and the shock to them will be like nothing they have ever seen before — Until such time as they return to the United States of America all of the Oil, Land, and other Assets that they previously stole from us."

Pentagon officials referred all questions about the post to the White House.

Venezuela's government released a statement Tuesday accusing Trump of "violating international law, free trade, and the principle of free navigation" with "a reckless and grave threat" against the South American country.

Maduro's government, according to the statement, plans to denounce the situation before the United Nations.

The U.S. buildup has been accompanied by a series of military strikes on boats in international waters in the Caribbean and eastern Pacific. The cam-

paign, which has drawn bipartisan scrutiny among U.S. lawmakers, has killed at least 95 people in 25 known strikes on vessels.

Trump has for weeks said that the U.S. will move its campaign beyond the water and start strikes on land.

The Trump administration has defended the strikes as a success, saying they have prevented drugs from reaching American shores, and pushed back on concerns that they are stretching the bounds of lawful warfare.

The Trump administration has said the campaign is about stopping drugs headed to the U.S., but Trump's chief of staff Susie Wiles appeared to confirm in a *Vanity Fair* interview published Tuesday that the campaign is part of a push to oust Maduro.

Wiles said Trump "wants to keep on blowing boats up until Maduro cries uncle."

Tuesday night's announcement seemed to have a similar

aim.

Venezuela, which has the world's largest proven oil reserves and produces about 1 million barrels a day, has long relied on oil revenue as a lifeblood of its economy.

Since the Trump administration began imposing oil sanctions on Venezuela in 2017, Maduro's government has relied on a shadowy fleet of unflagged tankers to smuggle crude into global supply chains.

The state-owned oil company Petróleos de Venezuela S.A., commonly known as PDVSA, has been locked out of global oil markets by U.S. sanctions. It sells most of its exports at a steep discount on the black market in China.

Francisco Monaldi, a Venezuelan oil expert at Rice University in Houston, said about 850,000 barrels of the 1 million daily production is exported. Of that, he said, 80% goes to China, 15% to 17% goes to the U.S. through Chevron Corp., and the remainder goes to Cuba.

Coast Guard downgrades swastikas, nooses

The Washington Post

The U.S. Coast Guard has allowed a new workplace harassment policy to take effect that downgrades the definition of swastikas and nooses from overt hate symbols to “potentially divisive” despite an uproar over the new language that forced the service’s top officer to direct that both would remain prohibited.

The new policy went into effect Monday, according to written correspondence that the Coast Guard provided to Congress this week, a copy of which was reviewed by *The Washington Post*. The manual is posted online and makes clear that its previous version “is cancelled.”

The *Post* last month was first to report on the Coast Guard’s

plan to revise its workplace harassment policy. The Trump administration called the article “false,” but within hours of its publication Nov. 20 the service’s acting commandant, Adm. Kevin Lunday, issued a memo forcefully denouncing symbols such as swastikas and nooses, and directing that both remain prohibited. Lunday said at the time that his directive would supersede any other policy language.

It’s unclear why the new policy was not revised to align with Lunday’s guidance before the new manual went into effect.

The Department of Homeland Security, which oversees the Coast Guard, did not respond to a request for comment before the publication of this

report.

Later Tuesday, a spokeswoman for the agency, Tricia McLaughlin, issued a statement attacking *The Post* and calling its reporting “pathetic” and “false.”

McLaughlin’s statement does not address why the language downgrading nooses and swastikas to “potentially divisive” symbols, rather than hate symbols, was allowed to remain in the new policy.

She said Lunday’s Nov. 20 memo “was issued to further clarify the display of divisive and hate symbols and flags prohibited as a violation of Coast Guard policy and the Uniform Code of Military Justice.”

A spokesperson for Lunday did not respond to a request for

comment.

At a House subcommittee hearing Tuesday, Democrats expressed frustration with the situation and questioned why Lunday — whose nomination to take over as the permanent commandant faces a Senate confirmation vote later this week — allowed the “potentially divisive” language to remain in the new policy manual.

Rep. Salud Carbajal, D-Calif., the top Democrat on the Transportation and Infrastructure subcommittee on the Coast Guard, said during the hearing that Lunday had told him “that he was going to fix the language, to make it clear the Coast Guard will not tolerate hate symbols. Instead he released the policy as it was originally written.”

Marine dress item mainly worn by men to be unisex

BY LYDIA GORDON

Stars and Stripes

An eye-catching Marine Corps uniform accessory that was long reserved for male officers and senior enlisted leaders at the service’s birthday ball and formal evening dinners is no longer exclusively men’s wear.

The boat cloak, a niche evening dress accessory, is now authorized for eligible female Marines following an update to the service’s uniform regulations.

An administrative message dated Thursday announced the results of a uniform board process that began two years ago.

The change was originally proposed in an early 2024 survey, which explored expanding authorization of the men’s boat cloak to female officers and senior enlisted Marines.

The special-order item, which can cost upward of

\$1,000, differs from the current women’s evening dress cape, which is also reserved for formal evening events.

The difference in format was a vestige of the fashion of the mid-20th century, military historian Charles W. McFarlane told *Business Insider* last month.

Shorter evening capes designed to show off the wearer’s gown were popular among civilian women at the time, and the military based the design of its dress capes on that model, McFarlane said. He noted that the Army and Navy have had some version of the boat cloak in their history as well.

The flamboyance of the garment has also proved alluring on social media. For example, a Marine master gunnery sergeant with the TikTok handle POG_ACTUAL_1169 has at least two videos highlighting the accessory.

Senate sends \$901 billion defense budget to Trump

BY SVETLANA

SHKOLNIKOVA

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Senate on Wednesday passed a \$901 billion defense policy bill authorizing a 3.8% pay raise for troops while forcing more transparency from the Pentagon and putting limits on efforts to pull the U.S. military from Europe and South Korea.

The 77-20 vote sends the annual bill, known as the National Defense Authorization Act, to President Donald Trump for his signature. The legislation authorizes \$8 billion above the Trump administration’s request for national security spending and still needs to be funded by a defense appropriations bill.

Lawmakers used the legislation to push back against Trump’s moves to disengage from Europe, notably autho-

rizing \$400 million for each of the next two years for a Ukraine security assistance program the administration did not want to continue.

The bill also curbs the administration’s ability to reduce the number of troops in Europe below 76,000 or to give up U.S. command of NATO’s top officer position unless Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth certifies to Congress that such actions aligned with national security interests and were made with the consultation of NATO allies.

Similar restrictions are in place for pulling back the U.S. military presence on the Korean Peninsula below 28,500 troops.

The legislation also reflected frustration with the way the Pentagon communicates with lawmakers, particularly regarding the strikes on alleged drug boats

Popularity waning, Trump to preview agenda

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump intends to preview his agenda for next year and beyond in a live speech from the White House on Wednesday night, remarks that come at a crucial juncture as he tries to rebuild his steadily eroding popularity.

The White House offered few details about what the Republican president intends to emphasize in the speech. Public polling shows most U.S. adults are frustrated with his handling of the economy as inflation picked up after his tariffs raised prices and hiring slowed.

The president's mass deportations of immigrants have also proven unpopular, even as he's

viewed favorably for halting crossings along the U.S. border with Mexico. The public has generally been nonplussed by his income tax cuts and globe-trotting efforts to end conflicts, attack drug boats near Venezuela and attract investment dollars into the U.S.

In 2026, Trump and his party face a referendum on their leadership as the nation heads into the midterm elections that will decide control of the House and the Senate.

Trump has said that he thinks more Americans would back him if they simply heard him describe his track record, which administration officials say will reverse the recent decline in manufacturing jobs and dramatically

increase tax refunds next year.

"It has been a great year for our Country, and THE BEST IS YET TO COME!" Trump said in a Tuesday social media post announcing the speech.

White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said that Trump would discuss his achievements this year and his plans for the remainder of his second term.

Trump has been omnipresent on social media and TV this year with his impromptu news conferences and speeches. But addresses to the nation often can be relatively sober affairs, as was Trump's June address describing the U.S. bombing of nuclear facilities in Iran.

A report released on Tuesday showed a jobs market that looks

increasingly fragile, even if the overall economy still appears to be stable.

Employers were adding on average 122,750 jobs a month during the first four months of this year. But since Trump announced his broad tariffs in April, monthly job gains have averaged a paltry 17,000 as the unemployment rate has climbed from 4% in January to 4.6%.

Trump's team has blamed Democratic lawmakers for shutting down the government for the job losses reported Tuesday during October. The president continues to blame his Democratic predecessor, Joe Biden, for any challenges the nation might face over inflation or ending Russia's war in Ukraine.

Appeals court may find Guard deployment in DC to be lawful

The Washington Post

An appeals court signaled Wednesday that it may find the National Guard deployment in D.C. to be lawful, disagreeing with a lower-court judge's opinion and issuing an order that will allow troops to stay in the city while litigation continues.

A three-judge panel — with two Trump appointees and one Obama appointee — wrote that the Trump administration is likely to succeed in its appeal of that lower-court ruling.

The panel's unanimous order on Wednesday was not a determination of the deployment's legality and functioned only to allow the troops to remain deployed pending final rulings, likely to come next year.

"Because the District of Columbia is a federal district created by Congress, rather than a constitutionally sovereign entity like the fifty States, the Defendants appear on this early record likely to prevail on the merits of their argument that the President possesses a unique power within the District — the seat of the federal

government — to mobilize the Guard," the panel wrote in its Wednesday order.

President Donald Trump, a Republican, deployed the National Guard to D.C. streets in August. Trump declared a "crime emergency" in the District, ramping up federal law enforcement and immigration enforcement, temporarily seizing control of the police department, and ordering a deployment of troops that has since swelled to about 2,600 National Guard members from D.C. and 10 states.

D.C. Attorney General Brian Schwab, a Democrat, sued the Trump administration over the deployment in September. In addition to asking for the deployment to be stopped entirely, Schwab asked a judge to halt the deployment as litigation continued.

A U.S. District Court judge has not issued an opinion on the underlying lawsuit but in November gave D.C. a preliminary legal win by ordering the Trump administration to halt the deployment by Dec. 11 as the case continued.

Jack Smith says his team has 'proof' against Trump

Associated Press

Former Justice Department special counsel Jack Smith told lawmakers in a closed-door interview on Wednesday that his team of investigators "developed proof beyond a reasonable doubt" that President Donald Trump had criminally conspired to overturn the results of the 2020 election, according to portions of his opening statement obtained by The Associated Press.

He also said investigators had accrued "powerful evidence" that Trump broke the law by hoarding classified documents from his first term as president at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Palm Beach, Fla., and by obstructing government efforts to recover the records.

"I made my decisions in the investigation without regard to President Trump's political association, activities, beliefs or candidacy in the 2024 election," Smith said. "We took actions based on what the facts and the law required — the very lesson I learned early in my career as a

prosecutor."

The private deposition before the House Judiciary Committee gives Smith his first chance to face questions, albeit behind closed doors, about two investigations into Trump that resulted in since-abandoned criminal charges between the president's first and second terms in office.

Smith was subpoenaed earlier this month to provide both testimony and documents as part of a Republican investigation into the Trump probes during the Biden administration.

Smith was appointed in 2022 to oversee the Justice Department investigations into Trump's efforts to overturn his 2020 presidential election loss to Democrat Joe Biden and his hoarding of classified documents at Mar-a-Lago. Smith's team filed charges in both investigations.

Smith abandoned the cases after Trump was elected to the White House again last year, citing Justice Department legal opinions that say a sitting president cannot be indicted.

Putin warns of Russian expansion if talks fail

Associated Press

Russian President Vladimir Putin warned Wednesday that Moscow will seek to extend its gains in Ukraine if Kyiv and its Western allies reject the Kremlin's demands in peace talks.

President Donald Trump has unleashed an extensive diplomatic push to end nearly four years of fighting following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, but Washington's efforts have run into sharply conflicting demands by Moscow and Kyiv.

Speaking at an annual meeting with top military officers, Putin said Moscow would prefer to achieve its goals and "eliminate the root causes of the conflict" by diplomatic means, but he added that "if the opposing side and its foreign patrons

refuse to engage in substantive dialogue, Russia will achieve the liberation of its historical lands by military means."

Putin was referring to Ukrainian territory seized by Russia — action widely condemned in the West as a violation of Ukraine's sovereignty and an unprovoked act of aggression.

Putin claimed that "the Russian army has seized and is firmly holding strategic initiative all along the front line" and warned that Moscow will move to expand a "buffer security zone" alongside the border.

"Our troops are different now, they are battle-hardened and there is no other such army in the world now," he said.

Putin praised Russia's growing military might and particularly noted the modernization of

its atomic arsenal, including the new nuclear-capable intermediate range Oreshnik ballistic missile that he said will officially enter combat duty this month. Russia first tested a conventionally armed version of the Oreshnik to strike a Ukrainian factory in November 2024, and Putin has boasted that it's impossible to intercept.

At the same time, he rejected European officials' statements about Moscow's purported plans to attack European nations as "lies and sheer nonsense ... driven by short-sighted personal or group political interests, not by the interests of their people."

Putin's tough statements follow several rounds of talks this week between Ukrainian, American and European offi-

cials on a U.S.-drafted peace plan. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said after meeting with U.S. envoys in Berlin that the document could be finalized within days, after which U.S. envoys will present it to the Kremlin.

Putin wants all the areas in four key regions captured by his forces, as well as Crimea, which was illegally annexed in 2014, to be recognized as Russian territory. He also has demanded that Ukraine withdraw from some areas that Moscow's forces have not captured yet.

The Kremlin also insists that Ukraine abandon its bid to join NATO and warns it won't accept the deployment of any troops from NATO members and will view them as "legitimate target."

Millions raised for Bondi mass shooting 'hero'

Associated Press

Like many Australians strolling at Bondi Beach on long, warm summer evenings, Ahmed al Ahmed just wanted a cup of coffee with a friend. Around him, a bloody massacre erupted as two gunmen targeted Jews during Hanukkah festivities at a park close to the shore.

Soon al Ahmed was creeping, bent over, between two parked cars, before barreling directly toward one of the unsuspecting shooters. In footage that has been viewed millions of times around the world, the 44-year-old father can be seen tackling one of the gunmen, wrestling the man's shotgun from his grip and turning it on the attacker.

The story of the Syrian-Australian Muslim shop owner who put an end to the rampage of one of the shooters on Sunday has been seized upon by a country desperately seeking comfort after one of its darkest hours: the

slaying of 15 people as they celebrated their Jewish faith.

A fundraising page established by Australians who had never met al Ahmed had attracted by Tuesday night donations by some 40,000 people, who gave \$1.5 million.

Al Ahmed, who is married with two young daughters, faces a long struggle ahead, those who have spoken to him since Sunday's massacre say. He was shot multiple times in the left arm, apparently by the second gunman in the attack as the man fired indiscriminately from a footbridge.

He has already undergone surgery and more operations are scheduled, said Lubaba al-midi Alkahil, a spokesperson for the Australians for Syria Association, who visited al Ahmed in a hospital late Monday. The "quiet and humble" man was conscious but frail and faced at least six months of recovery, Alkahil said.

Louvre workers extend strike, museum partially reopens

Associated Press

PARIS — Employees at the Louvre Museum voted to extend a strike that has disrupted operations at the world's most visited museum, though the attraction partially opened Wednesday to allow visitors to enjoy the "Mona Lisa" and other highlights.

The museum said that visitors have started entering, where they had access to a limited "masterpiece route" which includes Leonardo da Vinci's "Mona Lisa" and the famous Venus de Milo.

"Due to a strike, some rooms in the Louvre Museum are ... closed," it said. "We apologize for any inconvenience."

Union workers are protesting chronic understaffing, building deterioration and recent management decisions.

The decision came during a morning general assembly, after workers had adopted the walkout unanimously earlier this week. The museum was

shuttered Tuesday for its weekly closed day.

Tensions have been further sharpened by fallout from the theft of crown jewels during a daylight robbery that exposed serious security lapses at the museum.

Culture Ministry officials held crisis talks with unions Monday and proposed to cancel a planned \$6.7 million cut in 2026 funding, open new recruitment for gallery guards and visitor services and increase staff compensation. Union officials said the measures fell short.

Louvre President Laurence des Cars was scheduled to appear before the Senate's culture committee later Wednesday as lawmakers continue probing security failures at the museum.

Des Cars has acknowledged an "institutional failure" following the heist but has come under renewed scrutiny after admitting she only learned of a critical 2019 security audit after the robbery.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man who tried to kill Trump asks for attorney

FL ORLANDO — A man convicted of trying to assassinate President Donald Trump on a Florida golf course last year has decided to use an attorney during the sentencing phase instead of representing himself as he did for most of the trial.

The sentencing hearing for Ryan Routh in Fort Pierce, Fla., was pushed back from this week to early February after he requested and was granted an attorney to represent him during the sentencing and appeal phases of the trial.

The federal courtroom erupted into chaos in September shortly after jurors found Routh guilty on all counts, including attempting to kill a presidential candidate and several firearm-related charges. Routh, 59, tried to stab himself in the neck with a pen, and officers quickly dragged him out. The pen Routh used was flexible to prevent people in custody from using it as a weapon.

Prosecutors said Routh spent weeks plotting to kill Trump before aiming a rifle through shrubbery as the then-Republican presidential candidate played golf on Sept. 15, 2024, at his West Palm Beach country club.

Affidavit: Driver in fatal bus crash hit 91 mph

CO DENVER — The 22-year-old driver accused of crashing an SUV into a school bus carrying a Grand Junction, Colo., high school wrestling team in Lakewood

and causing the death of an 18-year-old passenger had no valid license, reached speeds up to 91 mph, and initially refused to answer police agents' questions in the wreck, according to an arrest affidavit.

Denver resident Andrew Logan Miller, who has been arrested and faces multiple reckless vehicular assault and other charges, "was very escalated" and asked "What happened?" and "Who did I hit?" according to a Lakewood Police arrest affidavit in the Dec. 6 crash.

Miller also told police at the scene that "I knew this would happen," and that "I had a dream about this," the affidavit said, noting Miller left the car and was on the ground, unable to move because of a leg injury. A total of 16 people were injured, including students, coaches, and three people inside the SUV.

Two days after the crash, Miller told police he didn't remember the crash, that side airbags in the 2015 Nissan Pathfinder he was driving had been removed due to a previous incident and that the brakes "were not working as they should," the affidavit said.

Miller's license had been suspended since Feb. 5, 2022, the affidavit said.

Electric ferry boats one step closer to reality

CA SAN DIEGO — Plans to make San Diego a national leader in modern maritime transit took a key step forward this month when the company that runs the San Diego-Coronado Ferry began soliciting bids for new electric boats.

The company, Flagship Cruises & Events, plans to

spend \$21 million replacing two diesel-powered boats with electric ferries that will reduce pollution on San Diego Bay and nearby neighborhoods.

Shipbuilders have until Jan. 9 to submit bids to build the new vessels. Flagship officials say they plan to select a builder in early February.

The boats will take over for two long-running vessels — the Cabrillo and the Silvergate — and operate two existing ferry routes, one from Coronado to Broadway Pier and another from Coronado to the convention center.

'Phoenix Wheel' returns home this spring

PA PHOENIXVILLE — The 132-year-old Phoenix Wheel delighted thousands of visitors to Asbury Park, the crown jewel of the Jersey Shore, for nearly a century from 1895 to 1988.

Next spring, the vintage amusement wheel will proudly rise again, as a 78-foot-high, 68-foot-wide permanent sculpture in the center of Phoenixville, the town that originally crafted the wheel's steel components, according to a news release issued by the Schuylkill River Heritage Center, which is leading the effort.

In 1893, the Phoenix Bridge Co., a subsidiary of Phoenix Iron and Steel Co. in Phoenixville, manufactured four extraordinary Phoenix Wheels — large, round steel marvels emblematic of the industrial era and a testament to the skilled craftsmanship of the times.

One of these four grand structures was delivered to Asbury Park, N.J., a popular beach ven-

ue where decades of Philadelphia-area beachgoers enjoyed summers and where a young Bruce Springsteen began his musical career at the fabled Stone Pony music spot.

The Asbury Park Wheel remained in operation until 1988.

Nonprofit to pay off fallen firefighter's mortgage

MN BURNSVILLE — A nonprofit group is paying off the mortgage for the home belonging to the family of fallen Burnsville Fire Department firefighter and paramedic Adam Finseth.

The Tunnel to Towers Foundation will pay off the mortgage on the Finseth family home through the Fallen First Responder Home Program as part of the 2025 Season of Hope.

On its website, the New York foundation, which was inspired by the aftermath of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, spoke about Finseth's bravery, saying he "acted without hesitation in his last moments."

Finseth, along with Burnsville police officers Matt Ruge and Paul Elmstrand, both 27, were ambushed in a shooting while responding to a domestic violence call in February 2024.

Feb. 18 was supposed to be a day off for Finseth, 40. But as one of his department's two SWAT medics, he didn't hesitate when he was called to respond to a standoff at a home in Burnsville.

The man in the standoff started shooting at officers without warning as they negotiated with him to surrender. When Finseth tried to provide an officer with medical aid, the gunman also shot him.

— From wire reports

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Knicks beat Spurs to win NBA Cup title

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — It's been more than half a century since the Knicks hung an NBA championship banner inside Madison Square Garden.

The wait since 1973 to add another one didn't end on Tuesday night, but New York can make room for the NBA Cup banner.

OG Anunoby scored 28 points, Jalen Brunson had 25, and the Knicks rallied to beat Victor Wembanyama and the San Antonio Spurs 124-113.

"This is great and we're going to enjoy this," Brunson said. "But once we leave tomorrow, we're moving on."

This is a championship roster — NBA Cup MVP Brunson, Josh Hart and Mikal Bridges cut down the nets in college at Villanova — with high hopes of representing the Eastern Conference in the NBA Finals.

"This is a single-elimination tournament when you get to a certain point, so every game counts," New York coach Mike Brown said. "There was pressure on every game if you expect to be who you think you are.

When you're able to have success, it breeds confidence in everybody in the organization."

New York's Karl-Anthony Towns had 16 points and 11 rebounds despite battling a calf injury. He went into the locker room with a minute left before halftime and later exited for the bench with 5:06 remaining in the third quarter and didn't return until late in the fourth.

Dylan Harper led the Spurs with 21 points, Wembanyama scored 18 and De'Aaron Fox had 16.

Wembanyama excused himself early from the postgame news conference because he said "just lost somebody" on Tuesday.

New York dominated inside, outrebounding the Spurs 59-42, with Mitchell Robinson collecting 15 boards, including 10 on the offensive end in 18 minutes. That helped give the Knicks a 56-44 edge in points in the lane.

The Spurs, however, led for much of the game before the Knicks went on a 13-1 run that began late in the third quarter to go up 100-95. New York never

trailed again.

"After 25 games in, I believe that we've shown some signs that we can be a pretty good team," Spurs coach Mitch Johnson said. "We've also shown that we have a lot of areas of improvement. I think that's where we were living today."

San Antonio led 92-81 with 2 minutes left in the third quarter, when Wembanyama — who played off the bench once again as he works his way back from a strained left calf — connected on a deep 3-pointer.

The score the rest of the way: Knicks 43, Spurs 21. San Antonio shot 6-for-23 over those final 14 minutes. It got outrebounded 25-8 — a staggering differential. The Knicks outscored the Spurs 18-4 in the paint over that stretch, too.

All one-sided numbers, and that's how the game got away.

"It's do-or-die, I think, out there," Harper said. "You've seen the level of intensity rise up for us, and them. Obviously, they came out with the win. But for us, it's not taking anything for granted; I think that's the

biggest thing. When we all go out there, we all know that we've got to play 110% in order to win things like this."

The Spurs are 18-7; Tuesday's loss doesn't factor into the record for this season. They've had four of their key players — Wembanyama, Harper, Fox and Stephon Castle — together for exactly two games, those being the Cup semifinal win over Oklahoma City on Saturday and the Cup final loss to the Knicks.

The Knicks got more than a trophy. Each player with a standard contract got an extra \$318,560 for winning, making the total \$530,933 for even reaching the final.

This game doesn't count in the standings, so both teams remain 18-7, putting them atop their respective divisions.

Just making the final bodes well for both teams. The previous four finalists — Los Angeles Lakers, Indiana, Oklahoma City and Milwaukee — also made the playoffs. The Pacers made the Eastern Conference finals in 2024, and the Thunder won the NBA championship last season.

Rams don't rule out injured WR Adams for Seahawks

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Receiver Davante Adams has not been ruled out for the Los Angeles Rams' showdown at Seattle on Thursday night despite his hamstring injury.

Coach Sean McVay said the NFC-leading Rams (11-3) will likely wait until game time to make a final decision on the availability of the NFL's touchdown receptions leader. The team remains hopeful Adams can play, although he didn't participate in their walk-throughs and practice Tuesday.

"I'm not ruling anyone out," McVay said Tuesday. "He just got his hamstring. He felt it a little bit, and it's something he's

been dealing with, and he's as tough as it gets. Want to be able to see what it looks like with the time we have."

Playoff-bound Los Angeles could use all the help it can get against the Seahawks (11-3), who sit tied with the Rams atop the NFC West and the conference standings. LA has the tiebreaker edge after its tight 21-19 win over Seattle last month.

Adams aggravated his hamstring injury while running a long route in the fourth quarter of the Rams' 41-34 comeback win over Detroit on Sunday. The 32-year-old wideout has dealt with hamstring problems twice previously this season, and he was listed as questionable for

that game.

Los Angeles doesn't have a productive No. 3 wide receiver behind Adams and Puka Nacua. Matthew Stafford has thrown just 58 total passes this season to all of the wide receivers behind his dynamic duo.

Adams has 60 catches for 789 yards and 14 TDs in his first season with the Rams, forming an immediate bond with MVP candidate Stafford.

Defensive lineman Braden Fiske also injured his ankle during the win over the Lions, but LA will wait to determine his status as well for a short-week game that's likely to play a major role in its playoff seeding.

"We'll take it all the way up to

game time and see where they're at," McVay said.

The Rams have won a championship, reached two Super Bowls and won four NFC West titles during seven playoff appearances under McVay, but they've never finished with the No. 1 seed in the NFC during the coach's nine seasons in charge.

As if potentially playing without Adams wasn't tough enough, McVay is working on almost no sleep for this preparation week because his wife, Veronika, gave birth to their second son, Christian Alexander McVay, on Monday.

"What a crazy week to have to play on a Thursday," McVay said with a chuckle.

Joshua shoots tiebreaker to lift Leafs

Associated Press

TORONTO — Dakota Joshua batted in a rebound with 3:01 left, just 8 seconds after Auston Matthews tied it, and the Toronto Maple Leafs rallied past the Chicago Blackhawks for a 3-2 win on Tuesday night.

Third-period goals by Oliver Ekman-Larsson, Matthews and Joshua erased Toronto's two-goal deficit and completed a wild comeback.

Joseph Woll made 23 saves and the Maple Leafs earned just their second victory this season after trailing after two periods.

Wyatt Kaiser and Jason Dickinson, short-handed, staked Chicago to a 2-0 lead in the first period.

The Blackhawks were without third-year center Connor Bedard, who was placed on injured reserve Monday for at least two weeks because of an upper-body injury.

Oilers 6, Penguins 4: Leon Draisaitl had four assists and became the fourth-fastest player in NHL history to reach 1,000 career points as visiting Edmonton beat Pittsburgh.

Draisaitl, who hit the milestone in the first period on a secondary assist, became the 103rd player in NHL history, first German-born player and fifth in franchise history to reach 1,000 points. He has 416 goals and 587 assists in 824 games for 1,003 points.

Connor McDavid scored twice, including a spectacular power-play goal and added two assists, as he and Draisaitl improved to 23-0-0 when both have at least three points in a regular-season game.

Avalanche 5, Kraken 3: Nathan MacKinnon scored twice for an NHL-leading 28 goals this season and added an assist as visiting Colorado beat Seattle for their third straight win.

MacKinnon also extended his point streak to six games as Colorado won for the fifth time in that span. The Avalanche, who have the league's best record, have earned a point in 24 of the last 25 games.

Artturi Lehkonen, Samuel Girard and Brock Nelson also scored for the Avalanche.

Mackenzie Blackwood had 34 saves.

Chandler Stephenson, Shane Wright and Jordan Eberle scored goals for the Kraken, who have lost nine of their last 10 games. Philipp Grubauer stopped 33 shots.

Blue Jackets 4, Ducks 3 (OT): Adam Fantilli scored with 1:28 left in overtime to lift Columbus to a home win over Anaheim, snapping a five-game losing streak.

Zach Werenski scored twice and added an assist in his 600th NHL game, Boone Jenner had a goal and an assist, and Kent Johnson added two assists. Jet Greaves stopped 24 shots for his first win since Nov. 20.

Mikael Granlund had a goal and an assist, Ryan Strome and Jackson LaCombe also scored goals, and Ryan Poehling recorded two assists for Anaheim. Ville Husso made 24 saves as the Ducks dropped three games on their five-city road trip.

Bruins 4, Mammoth 1: Morgan Geekie scored a pair of goals and Jeremy Swayman stopped 20 shots to help host Boston beat Utah for their fifth win in their last six games.

Casey Mittelstadt and Michael Eyssimont also scored goals, and David Pastrnak had a pair of assists as the Bruins returned from a three-game road trip to open a five-game homestand.

Barrett Hayton scored for the Mammoth, and Vitek Vanecek made 19 saves.

Canucks 3, Rangers 0: Evander Kane and Liam Obergren scored and Thatcher Demko made 23 saves as the league-worst Vancouver defeated host New York.

Conor Garland added an empty-net goal as the Canucks, who had won only three of their previous 12 games, smothered the Rangers from start to finish. New York is 4-10-3 at home.

Kane scored his sixth goal 1:46 into the contest, when he beat Rangers netminder Jonathan Quick after defenseman Matthew Robertson's path was briefly blocked by a linesman.

Flyers 4, Canadiens 1: Carl Grundstrom and Bobby Brink scored in the final minute of the first and second period, respectively, leading Philadelphia to a road win over the Montreal Canadiens.

Trevor Zegras, playing in his 300th NHL game, ran his goal streak to a career-high four games as Philadelphia (17-9-6) snapped a season-worst three-game skid.

Travis Konecny added an empty-net goal for the Flyers, and Dan Vladar made 21 saves. Vladar has won both his starts this season in Montreal.

Alexandre Texier scored his second goal in two games for the Canadiens (17-12-4), who have dropped four of six.

Red Wings 3, Islanders 2: Alex DeBrincat scored two power-play goals in the third period as host Detroit beat New York.

DeBrincat has eight goals and 13 points in his last eight games for the Red Wings, who have won five of six. John Gibson made 16 saves to win his sixth straight start.

Ilya Sorokin stopped 18 shots for the Islanders, who had won three in a row and seven of eight.

New York was going for a season sweep, having out-

scored Detroit 12-2 in the first two meetings.

Sharks 6, Flames 3: Macklin Celebrini scored a jaw-dropping goal and added an empty-netter and two assists to become the fastest Sharks player to reach 50 points in a season as host San Jose beat the Calgary Flames.

Celebrini assisted on two goals in the first period and then took over the game in the third. First he took a pass from Collin Graf, spun without breaking stride and beat Dustin Wolf for his 17th goal of the season to make it 4-2.

The empty-netter put it away, giving the 19-year-old Celebrini 51 points in San Jose's 34th game of the season. That's three games faster than any other Sharks player reached the 50-point mark, with Erik Karlsson, Joe Thornton and Owen Nolan all doing it in 37 games.

The only teenagers to reach 50 points earlier in an NHL season were Sidney Crosby and Wayne Gretzky.

Wild 5, Capitals 0: Vladimir Tarasenko had two goals and an assist, Filip Gustavsson made 25 saves, and Kirill Kaprizov became the Wild's career leader in power-play goals in Minnesota's home win over Washington.

The Wild are an NHL-best 17-3-2 since Nov. 1 and 3-0 since acquiring defenseman Quinn Hughes on Friday via one of the NHL's biggest blockbuster trades in recent memory.

Washington has lost three in a row and been outshot 183-134 in its past five games.

Kaprizov's backhand score with 7:09 left in the second period moved him past Zach Parise for the club's career lead in power-play goals with 70. It was also Kaprizov's 206th career goal, surpassing Mikko Koivu for second in the team's 25-year history.

Gillespie, No. 20 Vols top No. 11 Louisville

Associated Press

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — Ja'Kobi Gillespie had 23 points and five assists to lead No. 20 Tennessee to an 83-62 victory over No. 11 Louisville on Tuesday night, snapping a three-game losing streak.

Nate Ament scored 13 and Jaylen Carey had 12 points and 10 rebounds for the Volunteers (8-3). Gillespie had 20 of his points in the second half.

Ryan Conwell scored 22 and Adrian Wooley had 19 for the Cardinals (9-2).

Tennessee outrebounded Louisville, 35-30, and limited the Cardinals to just 38% shooting from the field.

No. 1 Arizona 96, Abilene Christian 62: Freshman Brayden Burries scored 20 points, Motiejus Krivas added 15 and host Arizona rolled to a win over Abilene Christian.

Arizona (10-0) jumped out to a 6-0 lead in the first 90 seconds and never trailed, taking a 51-31 lead by halftime. Arizona has won five straight by at least 20 points for the first time since the 2010-11 season.

The 6-foot-4 Burries scored at least 20 points for the third time this season, shooting 9 of 11 from the field. He had a season-high 28 points in Saturday's win over then-No. 12 Alabama. The 7-foot-2 Krivas made all four of his field-goal attempts and shot

7 of 8 on free throws.

No. 3 Duke 97, Lipscomb 73: Cameron Boozer scored 26 points and had 13 rebounds to help the host Blue Devils overcome a 10-point deficit and earn Jon Scheyer his 100th coaching victory with win over the Bison.

Isaiah Evans scored 16 points, reserves Maliq Brown and Darren Harris each provided 11 points and Patrick Ngongba II added 10 points and 11 rebounds for Duke (11-0), which has matched its best start since the 2017-18 season.

The Blue Devils, who had been off since winning Dec. 6 at then-No. 7 Michigan State, prevailed despite committing 22 turnovers.

No. 5 UConn 79, Butler 60: Solo Ball scored a career-high 26 points and Tarris Reed Jr. added 16 as the host Huskies began Big East play with a victory over the Bulldogs.

Jayden Ross had 13 points and eight rebounds off the bench and Braylon Mullins scored 12. UConn (11-1, 1-0) held Butler 30 points below its season average after the Bulldogs entered shooting 49% from the field.

Drayton Jones had nine of his 13 points in the first half for Butler (8-3, 1-1). Azavier Robinson and Evan Haywood finished with 10 apiece.

No. 9 Michigan St. 92, Toledo 69: Jaxon Kohler had 16

points and 13 rebounds, and the host Spartans never trailed while rolling over the Rockets.

Kohler's double-double was his sixth of the season. Jeremy Fears Jr., who came in averaging a Division I-best 9.5 assists per game, had 15 points and eight assists.

No. 10 BYU 93, Pacific 57: AJ Dybantsa had 23 points and 10 rebounds, Richie Saunders led the host Cougars with 24 points in a win over the Tigers.

Robert Wright III added 22 points for BYU (10-1). Saunders and Wright each had five steals.

No. 12 North Carolina 77, ET-SU 58: Henri Veesaar scored a career-high 26 points to power the host Tar Heels over the Buccaneers.

Veesaar shot a near-perfect 10-of-11 from the floor and also pulled down eight rebounds for North Carolina (10-1). Caleb Wilson added 20 points and eight rebounds for the Tar Heels.

No. 14 Arkansas 108, Queens (NC) 80: Trevon Brazile scored a career-high 26 points on 9-of-11 shooting from the field to lead the host Razorbacks over the Royals.

Arkansas (9-2) was never in trouble, taking a 24-point lead into halftime behind 60% shooting from the floor. Brazile had 18 points in the opening 20 minutes. Darius Acuff Jr., who finished with 23 points and 10 assists,

scored 16 in the first half.

No. 17 Kansas 73, Towson 49: Flory Bidunga had 18 points and 10 rebounds to spur the host Jayhawks over the Tigers.

Tre White had 16 points and a career-high six assists for Kansas (9-3). Melvin Council, coming off a career-best 36-point performance in Saturday's overtime win over N.C. State, added 15 points.

No. 19 Texas Tech 101, Northern Colorado 90: LeJuan Watts scored 36 points on 12-of-13 shooting, JT Toppin scored 23 and the Red Raiders extended their nonconference home winning streak to 45 games by beating the Bears.

Texas Tech (8-3) never trailed after leading by as many as 14 points, but needed a spurt by Watts in the second half to go ahead for good.

No. 22 St. John's 79, DePaul 66: Dylan Darling scored a season-high 17 points off the bench and gave the host Red Storm a lift with his 3-point shooting as St. John's opened Big East play with a home victory over the Blue Demons.

Playing their only conference game inside Carnesecca Arena this season, the Red Storm (7-3) led virtually the entire way and avoided another slow start after missing 12 of their first 13 shots in Saturday's 91-64 win over Iona at Madison Square Garden.

Jacksonville State holds off old rival Troy for bowl victory

Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. — Caden Creel threw a touchdown pass, Deondre Johnson had six receptions for 101 yards and Jacksonville State beat Troy 17-13 on Tuesday night to win the Salute to Veterans Bowl.

Andrew Paul's 1-yard run off a direct snap gave the Gamecocks a 17-13 lead with 5:44 remaining. With about a minute left, Tucker Kilcrease drove the Trojans past midfield, but his Hail Mary pass-attempt to DJ Epps on the final play was knocked down in the end zone.

Creel completed 14 of 20 passes for 173

yards that included a 22-yard touchdown pass to Brock Rechsteiner in the first quarter. Garrison Rippa added a 51-yard field goal in the third for Jacksonville State (9-5).

Kilcrease was 12-for-23 passing for 116 yards and threw two interceptions for Troy (8-6), which ended a 79-game win streak when leading heading into the fourth quarter.

Late in the first quarter, the Trojans scored their only touchdown on the Gamecocks' botched flea flicker. Luis Medina recovered a fumble in the end zone after TJ

Thompson strip-sacked Creel. Scott Taylor Renfro kicked field goals from 38 and 30 yards in the second quarter and Troy led 13-7 at halftime.

The Trojans had won the last seven games between the teams, but it was the first meeting since 2001 for the schools located just 162 miles apart. Troy is 33-29-2 in the series that dates to 1924.

Jacksonville State has played in a bowl game in each of its three seasons at the FBS level. Marshall is the only other team (1997-99) to appear in bowl games in each of its first three eligible seasons.