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Navy request eyes research, operations

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Navy's proposed fiscal 2021 budget decreases spending slightly from last year as the service looks to buy fewer ships and direct more funding toward operations and research.

The Navy is requesting \$207.1 billion, of which \$194.1 billion is for its base operations and \$13 billion for Overseas Contingency Operations.

This is a \$2.9 billion decrease from 2020, with an 8.3% reduction in procurement to fund a 3.8% increase in operations and maintenance, a 6.4% increase in personnel, and a 5.1% increase in research and development, according to the Navy's budget request document released Monday.

The Navy's total budget request includes the funding for the Marine Corps. The Navy-specific base operations budget is \$161 billion and \$11.2 billion for Overseas Contingency Operations funding.

The Navy's realignment toward meeting the challenges of great-power competition laid out in the 2018 National Defense Strategy has forced the service to rearrange \$80 billion in its budget and find \$1.4 bil-

lion in savings for 2021, according to its budget request.

Operations and maintenance funding again make up the largest share of the Navy's budget request with \$70.6 billion.

Procurement is \$57.2 billion, with \$19.9 billion for accruing ships, a decrease of \$4.1 billion from the 2020 budget. About \$55.2 billion will be spent on personnel and \$21.5 billion on research, development, test and evaluation. Infrastructure gets \$2.6 billion, or 1% of the total request.

The Navy wants to grow its personnel number to close staffing gaps on ships and meet the recruiting needs that come with newer ships in their fleet. For active-duty personnel, the Navy requested 7,300 sailors for an end strength of 347,800, up from 340,500 in 2020. The Pentagon budget request includes a 3% pay raise for personnel.

The Navy's aim in each year's budget is to move toward its total battle-force requirement of 355 ships by 2030. However, the 2021 request has a 17% reduction in shipbuilding procurement, from \$24 billion to \$20 billion. The procurement funding is to be reinvested in areas of operations and maintenance, personnel, and research and

development, Rear Adm. Randy B. Crites, the deputy assistant secretary of the Navy for budget, told reporters Monday at the Pentagon.

The Navy seeks to procure contracts for eight battle-force ships in 2021, including a Columbia-class submarine, a Virginia-class submarine, two Arleigh Burke class destroyers, and one of the new Navy frigates, the FFG (X).

The funding for the Columbia submarine was the highest priority for the Navy in 2021, Crites said. The budget fully funds the first Columbia submarine in the program and its first deployment is on schedule to be in 2031.

The Navy's budget proposal allows for 306 deployable ships by the end of 2021, up from 297 ships in 2020. Fifteen ships will be delivered in 2021, including three nuclear attack submarines, five littoral combat ships, and four destroyers. Six ships will be retired in 2021, including four littoral combat ships and a dock landing ship.

The 2021 budget request also restores nuclear reactor core refueling for the aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman.

Marines see funding dip, reductions of personnel

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Marine Corps' annual budget request will shrink in fiscal 2021, along with its overall end strength, under a proposal released Monday.

The Marines will use the 2021 budget to maneuver the service alongside the Navy in alignment with the Pentagon's National Defense Strategy, which refocuses the service's attention on competing against adversaries like China and Russia.

The Marine Corps' request is incorporated in the overall Navy request for \$207.1 billion. The Marines' budget would be \$46 billion, a decrease from \$47.4 billion in 2020, if Congress approves the plan, according to the request released Monday. The Marines' Overseas Contingency Operations funding is \$1.8 billion.

The Marines' operation and mainte-

nance funding is \$7 billion, the majority of which is for expeditionary forces.

The service would eliminate 2,100 spots for a total end strength of 184,100 Marines, down from 186,200 in 2020. Of those, 21,670 would be officers and 162,430 would be enlisted. The Pentagon budget request includes a 3% pay raise for personnel.

The reduction in Marines will be seen in areas such as headquarters with excess capacity in nonoperational units, according to Rear Adm. Randy B. Crites, the deputy assistant secretary of the Navy for budget.

The reduction in personnel is part of a larger effort by the service to allow for it to reinvest in modernization efforts, according to the budget proposal, which include policy reforms and business process improvements.

The Navy's aviation procurement request for 2021 — which includes Marine

Corps aircraft — is for 121 aircraft costing \$17.2 billion. The Marine Corps aims to maintain its current aviation fleet.

For fixed-wing aviation procurement, the Marines are asking for 10 F-35C and 10 F-35B Lightning II fighters and five KC-130J refuelers. For rotary aircraft, the service is asking for seven CH-53K King Stallion helicopters, three MV-22B Ospreys, nine TH-73A training helicopters and five new VH-92A helicopters, which are used as the president's Marine One. No unmanned aircraft are being requested.

The Marines' procurement budget for expeditionary equipment is \$2.9 billion. It plans to buy 752 Joint Light Tactical Vehicles — the Combat Tactical Vehicle and the Combat Support Vehicle — with configuration kits, 512 fewer than in 2020. They also want to purchase 72 Amphibious Combat Vehicles, 16 more than in 2020.

DOD seeks lowest Afghan War funds in 10 years

BY PHILLIP WALTER
WELLMAN

Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — The U.S. military is planning to spend less on the war in Afghanistan than at any other time in over a decade, partly because of an expected draw-down of American forces from

the country, a draft Defense Department budget shows.

The Defense Department asked Congress in a funding request Monday for \$14 billion to support its Afghan missions during the next fiscal year. The amount requested is \$3 billion less than was allocated for the current fiscal year and \$100 billion less than the amount

provided in 2011 when the war in Afghanistan was at its peak.

“The budget assumes a draw-down of [American] forces,” the request said.

American officials, including Defense Secretary Mark Esper, have suggested the number of U.S. troops in Afghanistan could be reduced to 8,600 from the current total of

around 13,000, regardless of the outcome of ongoing peace talks with the Taliban.

A key Taliban demand in the negotiations is that all foreign troops leave the country. The insurgent group has agreed to reduce violence while negotiations continue, but the U.S. and Afghan government have demanded a cease-fire.

DOD proposes stripping Stars and Stripes’ funding

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
AND NIKKI WENTLING

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon has proposed a cut to funding for Stars and Stripes as part of its \$705.4 billion budget request submitted to Congress, a senior defense official said.

The proposed cuts to the editorially independent news organization, which is partially funded by the Pentagon, were a product of the recent defense-wide review ordered by Defense Secretary Mark Esper, said Elaine McCusker, the Pentagon’s acting comptroller. That review sought to find funding that could be moved from non-military applications into warfighting coffers.

“We have essentially decided coming into the modern age that newspaper is probably not the best way we communicate any longer,” McCusker told reporters Monday at the Pentagon during a briefing to discuss the Defense Department’s fiscal year 2021 budget proposal.

Stars and Stripes’ ombudsman, Ernie Gates, on Twitter defended the mission of the media organization against McCusker’s comment.

“Stars and Stripes’ mission is not to communicate the DOD or command message, but to be an independent, First Amendment publication that serves the troops — especially deployed troops,” Gates wrote. “So ‘we communicate’ misses

the mission.”

It was not immediately clear how much money the Pentagon proposed cutting from Stars and Stripes. McCusker did not provide those details, and other Pentagon officials declined to comment or did not return requests for comment.

Pentagon officials first informed Stars and Stripes’ leadership of the proposed budget cuts Monday morning, after The Wall Street Journal published a story identifying the planned funding reduction, citing draft budget documents.

Max Lederer, Stars and Stripes’ publisher, said Pentagon officials told him Monday that the budget cut would “eliminate operating and main-

tenance funds for Stars and Stripes,” which amounts to about \$7 million and about 35% of Stripes’ annual expenses.

Most of Stars and Stripes’ funding comes from sales, subscriptions and advertising, but it depends on the Defense Department subsidy to cover the expensive and sometimes dangerous task of overseas reporting and distribution.

Lederer said that the loss in funding would “definitely reduce” Stars and Stripes’ news reporting abilities.

“The men and women who sacrifice every day for the safety of our nation deserve the objective and balanced unique content produced by Stars and Stripes,” he said.

More troops suffered brain injuries in missile strike

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY

Stars And Stripes

WASHINGTON — An additional 45 service members have been diagnosed with traumatic brain injuries stemming from the Iranian missile attack Jan. 8 on al Asad Air Base in Iraq, the Pentagon announced.

As of Monday, 109 U.S. troops have been diagnosed with mild cases of TBI.

The Pentagon said that 76 service members have returned to duty, 75 of whom were treated in Iraq. One was transported to Germany but also has returned

to duty in Iraq.

There have been 27 service members who have been transported to Germany for evaluation and treatment, six more than the previous report. Of those troops, 21 service members were sent to the United States and five are still in Germany being evaluated.

Seven service members are en route from Iraq to Germany, according to the Pentagon.

The reported number of injured troops has continued to grow in the weeks after the attack due to the nature of trau-

matic brain injuries, where symptoms can manifest or worsen over days and weeks. The Pentagon’s statement Monday said that the numbers can still change and the announcement is just a “snapshot in time.”

“The Defense Department is steadfast in its efforts to deliver programs and services intended to lead to the best possible outcomes for our service members,” Alyssa Farah, the Pentagon press secretary, said in a prepared statement. “We are grateful to the efforts

of our medical professionals who have worked diligently to ensure the appropriate level of care for our service members, which has enabled nearly 70% of those diagnosed to return to duty. We must continue to address physical and mental health together.”

Pentagon spokesman Jonathan Hoffman said Feb. 3 that the individual military services determine the criteria for whether to recommend an individual for a Purple Heart medal, which is given to troops who are injured by an enemy.

Ex-Army medic sentenced in wife's death

Associated Press

HONOLULU — A former Army medic stationed in Hawaii was sentenced Monday to 35 years in prison for the 2014 stabbing of his wife in a case involving porn, sex charges and a love triangle.

Michael Walker, 40, pleaded guilty to second-degree murder in September, about a week before his trial was scheduled to begin. He said he arranged for the woman with whom he was having an affair to kill his wife, Catherine Walker, while he was working in the emergency room at Tripler Army Medical Center in Honolulu.

Ailsa Jackson, who committed the killing, was sentenced to 30 years in prison Monday.

In 2015, Jackson pleaded guilty to murder, describing how she stabbed Catherine Walker and then waited a half-hour to make sure she was dead.

Jackson, 29, avoided a mandatory life sentence by helping prosecutors win an

indictment against Walker, including providing information about their coded messages to each other, Assistant U.S. Attorney Tom Brady said Monday.

Under a deal with prosecutors, Michael Walker faced 24 to 30 years in prison. But U.S. District Judge Susan Oki Mollway said she sentenced Walker to a longer term because he orchestrated the killing. Mollway, who agreed to sentence Jackson to a range of 30 to 33 years, said she wanted to make sure Walker's sentence was longer than Jackson's.

"Ms. Jackson wielded the knife that killed your wife," Mollway said. "And that was a terrible, terrible deed. But it does appear to me that you were in control. That she did what she did because you wanted her to. And you knew she had mental health problems."

After meeting through an online dating site in September 2014, Michael Walker told Jackson he was married and that his "deepest desire" was to have his wife gone,

but he couldn't divorce her, prosecutors have said.

Walker told Jackson he couldn't simply divorce his wife because of financial concerns and stood to receive \$400,000 in life insurance, Brady said.

On Nov. 14, 2014, they met in a military reservation's gym parking lot, where Jackson said she would kill Catherine Walker that night, Brady said.

Jackson said in court previously she "went inside and grabbed a knife and went upstairs and stabbed her."

In 2016, a military court found Walker guilty of child pornography charges that surfaced during the murder investigation.

In 2017, Walker was convicted of sexually abusing a child, physically assaulting a child, and wrongfully communicating a threat. He was reduced in rank from sergeant to private, sentenced to 10 years confinement, and received a dishonorable discharge, the Army said.

Marines flex amphibious muscles with Japanese troops during Okinawa drill

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

KIN, Okinawa — A new Japan Ground Self-Defense Force unit joined with the outfit it most resembles, the U.S. Marines, for a series of firsts during a recent exercise on Okinawa.

The JGSDF Amphibious Rapid Deployment Brigade and a landing team from the 31st Marine Expeditionary Unit hit the beach Sunday to simulate battle with an enemy force. The units deployed together from the America Expeditionary Strike Group for the first time.

The Marines notched another first by deploying an M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket System, or HIMARS, to the beach using a landing craft air cushion and simulating a rocket launch. They are the first Marine expeditionary unit to have an attached HIMARS platoon.

The exercise, which began Jan. 25 and ends Thursday, is designed to strengthen the allies' amphibious capabilities, especially small-boat operations, officials from both militaries

said. Sunday's drill featured about 150 Marines and 60 Japanese troops.

The exercise also demonstrated how the Navy, in this case Amphibious Squadron 11 under Capt. Richard Lebron from Sasebo Naval Base, the Marine Corps and the JGSDF brigade could work together in a crisis response, Brodie said.

Japan launched the amphibious brigade — modeled after the U.S. Marine Corps — in 2018 as a force to retake island territory should it fall to another power. China, for example, disputes Japan's claim over the small, isolated Senkaku Islands. The brigade is based at Camp Ainoaura, northwest of Sasebo in Nagasaki prefecture.

The event began Sunday afternoon as 11 black specks on calm seas off Kin materialized into rubber combat-raid boats from the dock landing ship USS Germantown. The boats carried Marines from Company C, Battalion Landing Team, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines and Japanese soldiers of the amphibious brigade.

They landed and linked up with Marines already hiding on the beach.

The simulated enemy — U.S. Marines in lighter camouflage — waited just inland from the beach.

The assaulting Marines and their Japanese counterparts charged inland, maneuvering through smoke, around obstacles and firing blank rounds at their enemy.

Meanwhile, the hovercraft came ashore from the amphibious transport dock USS Green Bay and unloaded the HIMARS, which simulated a rocket launch as the Marines and Japanese soldiers fanned out to set up a security perimeter. In no time, the units then receded back into the sea.

"We've been working together for the past two weeks now building up to this point, doing practices on the ship, on the shore, out on the water," said Marine boat company commander Capt. Philip Hanf. "It all came together today. Overall, it's been a very beneficial and extremely good experience."

SEAL team member convicted in sexting case

Associated Press

NORFOLK, Va. — A member of Navy SEAL Team 6 was convicted of indecent conduct in a case in which he was accused of impersonating someone and soliciting nude photos of women.

Petty Officer 1st Class Aaron Howard was sentenced to spend 30 days in a military prison, forfeit \$500 of his pay for three months and take a reduction in rank to petty officer second class, according to a statement from Navy Region Mid-Atlantic obtained by The Virginian-Pilot.

Howard was accused of using a text messaging app to create a fake phone number and send messages to women, prosecutors alleged during a court-martial at Naval Station Norfolk. In one case, prosecutors said that Howard pretended to be a female dietitian hired by Naval Special Warfare Development Group in order to get women to send naked pictures.

China still mostly closed down amid virus

Associated Press

BEIJING — China remained mostly closed for business Tuesday, as the daily death toll from a new virus topped 100 for the first time, pushing the total above 1,000.

Despite the official end of the extended Lunar New Year holiday, many remained at home Tuesday with around 60 million people under virtual quarantine.

Authorities in Hong Kong evacuated people from an apartment block where four were found to be infected, raising fears the virus may be spreading through plumbing, similar to what happened in 2003's deadly SARS outbreak.

With the death toll reaching 1,016 in mainland China and no end in sight, heads

are beginning to roll.

While no central government-level officials have lost their jobs, state media reported Tuesday that the top health officials in Hubei province, home to the epicenter of Wuhan, have been relieved of their duties.

No specific reasons were given, although the province's initial response was deemed slow and ineffective. Speculation that higher-level officials could be sacked has simmered, but doing so could spark political infighting and be a tacit admission that the Communist Party dropped the ball.

The number of newly confirmed cases fell to 2,478 from 3,062 the day before, bringing the total to 42,638 on the Chinese mainland.

The crossing of more grim thresholds

has dimmed optimism that the near-quarantine of some 60 million people and other disease-control measures are working.

The restart of business poses a risk of further spreading the virus, but the country has little recourse, said Cong Liang, secretary general of the National Development and Reform Commission, China's main economic planning body.

"Without the reopening of businesses, in the short term, it will affect the supply of medical material and ... in the long run, it will affect the supply of all kinds of production and life materials and will make the control and prevention efforts on the front line unsustainable. The target of defeating the epidemic will not be reached," Cong said at a news conference.

Air Force issues new standards for grooming

BY CHAD GARLAND

Stars and Stripes

Airmen will be allowed to wear up to a 2-inch beard under a new Air Force guidance that outlines grooming standards for religious accommodations.

The updated grooming policy, published Friday, also allows members of the Sikh faith to wear turbans and Muslim women to wear hijabs.

Airmen must have a religious or medical exemption to grow a beard, the policy says.

The guidance for beards grown under a shaving waiver remains unchanged: such whiskers must not be trimmed to

give a sculpted appearance and cannot exceed a quarter-inch in length, the updated policy states.

The Air Force is following the lead of the Army, which in 2017 became the first service to allow Muslim and Sikh soldiers to wear head coverings and beards in line with their religious beliefs. A similar accommodation was later extended to Norse pagan service members.

A Muslim airman was first allowed to wear a beard in 2018. The following year, a Sikh and at least two Norse heathen airmen were granted beard ac-

commodations, according to a review of media reports.

The new guidance does not limit how long a religiously accommodated beard can be but states that it must be rolled or tied so that it does not extend more than two inches below the chin. A connected mustache must not extend past the line of the upper lip, the guidance says.

Turbans, under-turbans and hijabs must be made of a "subdued material in a color that closely resembles the assigned uniform," it states. Designs other than a camouflage pattern matching the uniform are

prohibited. The head coverings must be worn in a neat and conservative manner and, when directed by a commander, may need to be made of fire-resistant material. Turbans may be worn in place of traditional military headgear.

Wing commanders or the equivalent, colonel and above, may grant waivers for the sacred scruff or holy headgear after a chaplain has interviewed the applicant to ensure a request is based on sincerely held religious convictions. In the past, chaplains had to certify it was part of a doctrinal or traditional observance.

'Satanist' soldier pleads guilty in bomb plot case

Associated Press

TOPEKA, Kan. — A 24-year-old Army infantry soldier described by prosecutors as a Satanist who hoped to overthrow the U.S. government pleaded guilty Monday to distributing information through social media about building a bomb and making napalm.

Pfc. Jarrett William Smith, stationed at Fort Riley, Kan., and previously at Fort Bliss, Texas, admitted during a court hearing to providing information about explosives in September to an FBI undercover agent.

Smith signed a formal plea agreement with federal prosecutors and then entered his pleas verbally during a half-hour court hearing before U.S. District Judge Daniel Crabtree. He wore an orange prison jumpsuit and black athletic shoes and alternated between "Yes" and "Yes, sir" in answering questions from Crabtree.

"Did you provide this information with the intent that the person would use it?" Crabtree asked him.

Smith replied, "Yes."

Smith also had faced a third felony charge of threatening to burn down the

house of a far-left-leaning "antifa" member in Michigan, but that charge is to be dismissed under the plea agreement.

The two other charges dealt with Smith's actions while stationed at Fort Riley starting in July 2019.

Smith initially pleaded not guilty to all three charges in September but notified Crabtree last month that he would change his plea.

The two charges to which he pleaded guilty carries a maximum penalty of 20 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine. Crabtree set his sentencing for May 18.

Army wants \$178B for 2021

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The U.S. Army wants \$178 billion for its fiscal 2021 budget as the military moves forward with a multiyear effort to modernize weapons systems designed to counter adversaries such as Russia and China, the service said Monday.

The budget plan also would give a slight boost to regular Army end strength, which would rise to 485,900 soldiers — 5,900 more than 2020 levels, Army officials said.

The budget plan would be a slight reduction from the previous fiscal year's budget of \$180 billion.

Most of the reductions in the 2021 request were the result of cutbacks in overseas contingency funds, a result of scaling back in the Middle East, Army budget director Maj. Gen. Paul Chamberlain told Pentagon reporters.

The budget zeroes in on a range of weapons projects that have been in the works for several years, including improvements to long-range

precision fires, the development of land-based hypersonic missiles and future attack reconnaissance aircraft.

The Army budget also calls for the modernization of combat vehicles including the Bradley Fighting Vehicle, Abrams tank, Stryker and Paladin. Nearly \$35 billion will be spent on research, development and acquisition, while \$21.7 billion will be dedicated to procurement for weaponry, Chamberlain said.

Another focus for the Army has been on boosting the readiness of the force.

To that end, the budget expands initial entry training for armor, cavalry scout and engineer units. The increase from 14 to 22 weeks of training follows similar extended infantry school training that was implemented last year.

In 2021, the Army also plans to hold Defender Pacific, a major exercise that involves rotating large numbers of forces from the U.S. to the region for drills.

In all, the Army intends to spend \$30.9 billion on readiness efforts, budget documents stated.

Space Force seeks \$15.4B

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Space Force requested a \$15.4 billion budget for fiscal year 2021 that would grow the size of the military's new, sixth branch and invest billions on research and design aimed at improving the defenses of key U.S. space assets.

The request marked the first full budget proposal for the Space Force, which was established in December. Like the Space Force itself, the budget was largely carved out of existing assets that have moved out of the Air Force.

The budget would allow the Space Force to grow from an expected 38 troops by Oct. 1, the end of fiscal year 2020, to about 6,434 in 2021, according to documents detailing the Pentagon's \$705.4 billion budget request for next year. Those troops include most of the Air Force personnel that are expected to transfer into the Space Force once systems are established to ensure they can be paid properly.

The largest chunk of the Space Force's budget is a \$10.3 billion request for research, development, testing and evaluation focused on space. The funding seeks to develop ways to "protect and defend current space assets, build more resilient and defensible architectures, and develop offensive capabilities to challenge adversary space capabilities," according to the budget documents.

That funding includes money for upgraded GPS systems, better protected communications satellites, and other "space warfighting enterprise," according to the documents. It also funds research for new spacecraft technology and development of a new command and control system for space.

USAF looks to evolve with proposed funding

BY ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Tough choices and a transfer of resources dominated the proposed fiscal year 2021 budget for the Air Force released Monday. Officials extracted the new Space Force — for the most part — from its sister service within the Department of the Air Force.

While keeping spending and personnel relatively flat — a trend across the entire Defense Department — the Air Force proposed retiring some legacy aircraft earlier than planned to make room for spending on new aircraft and researching the next phase of warfighting technology, according to Maj. Gen. John Pletcher, deputy assistant secretary for budget in the Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Financial Management and Comptroller.

The \$153.6 billion proposed

budget for the Air Force appears as a decrease from last year's enacted fiscal year 2020 budget of \$168 billion, but only because of the funds transferring to the first standalone budget of the Space Force.

It's a similar story for Air Force active-duty personnel. The service proposed an end strength of 333,800, which is down 6,600 from the previous year, because of the transfer of personnel to the new branch. The Air and Space Force will continue to share a personnel budget under the proposal, as well as military construction funding.

Growth in troops come within the Air Force Reserve, which has a projected end strength of 70,300, up 200 from last year, and Air National Guard up 108,100, an increase of 400 personnel. When combined with the increase of Space Force personnel, the overall depart-

ment is expected to grow by 1,500.

The Air Force also intends to repurpose manpower from retiring aircraft platforms to mitigate shortfalls in fighter and tanker squadrons and to support the bed-down of new aircraft.

The Air Force now intends to divest 16 KC-10s and 13 KC-135s, both tanker aircraft, in 2021 as officials continue to procure and accept deliveries of the new KC-46, Pletcher said. Additionally, 17 of the least capable B-1 bombers will retire, but their maintainers will remain in the force to drive up readiness of the remaining fleet until the B-21 replaces the platform in the mid-2020s.

Other areas of divestment include in the surveillance aircraft RQ-4 Global Hawk, a remotely piloted system that is under modernization and sustainment efforts.

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Dayton having best season in 53 years

Associated Press

DAYTON, Ohio — NCAA Tournament fans will be talking about Dayton a lot this year, and not only because of the First Four.

With March around the corner, the Flyers are No. 6 in the country with a reenergized fan base that hasn't seen anything like them in a long time. It's been a half-century since they've reached such heights.

Dayton's main impact on the tournament the last few years was hosting the First Four, the play-in games between the four lowest-ranked, at-large teams. Now, the Flyers fans are ruminating about the possibility of a run to the Final Four.

"This is a basketball town," said coach Anthony Grant, a former Flyers player who returned three years ago to rebuild the program. "That's probably an understatement, when you look at the history of the University of Dayton, what basketball is in this area.

"This is the beginning of March Madness each year. That speaks for itself."

With one of the deepest and most balanced lineups in the country, these Flyers could have a lot to say about how the Madness plays out.

Dayton (21-2, 10-0 Atlantic 10) put itself in the national spotlight with a spectacular run at Maui in November, thumping Georgia and Virginia Tech before losing to Kansas in overtime. The only other loss was to Colorado in overtime at the Chicago Legends event.

Since then, the Flyers have won 12 straight and zoomed all the way up to their highest ranking since they were No. 6 in December 1967. It's the fourth time in their history that they've been a top-six program. They made it to No. 4 in the 1954-55 season and up to a school-best No. 2 in 1955-56.

What's most impressive about the Flyers has more to do with some other numbers.

Their deep, versatile offense

ranks sixth nationally in scoring at 81.7 points per game, falling behind Central Michigan and Wright State (both 81.8) when they beat Saint Louis 71-65 on Saturday.

They lead the nation in field-goal percentage at 52.4% and are second in assists per game at 18.4, trailing Belmont's 18.7.

"We love sharing the ball," said forward Obi Toppin, whose alley-oop dunks are the punctuation mark to Dayton's pass-it-around style. "We know giving up a good shot to get a better shot is always the right way to go."

The 6-foot-8 Toppin has 160 dunks in less than two seasons at Dayton, which was one of the few teams that showed an interest. Toppin — his full first name is Obadiah — was a late bloomer at Ossining High School in New York, measuring only 6-foot-2 as a junior.

Toppin found Dayton, and the Flyers have been finding him ever since. The Flyers' ball movement gets defenses out of

position and Toppin to slip behind a defender to slam down a pass.

"I have really great teammates," Toppin said. "They're putting me in position to be successful. All the credit goes to them for me getting the dunks."

It's far from a one-man show.

The Flyers have a little bit of everything on offense, which is why they're so tough to guard. Jalen Crutcher has a team-high 54 three-pointers while shooting 42% from beyond the arc. Trey Landers shoots 61% from the field, including 40% on three-pointers.

Sixth man Ibi Watson made one start this season because of injury, scored 30 points and went back to the bench. He shoots 43.2% from beyond the arc.

Dayton lost to UCLA for the national title in 1967. It has reached the Elite Eight two other times, in 1984 and 2014.

College basketball roundup

No. 1 Baylor stretches winning streak to 21 games

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — MaCio Teague scored 11 points, Devonte Bando added 10 and No. 1 Baylor defeated Texas 52-45 Monday night for its 21st straight victory — one short of the Big 12 record set by Kansas in 1997.

The Bears (22-1, 11-0 Big 12) wrested control with a 13-0 push that put them ahead 42-27 with 9:28 remaining. Five players scored for Baylor during that stretch. The Longhorns helped out with three turnovers and failed to score for a period of 5:06.

Texas (14-10, 4-7) trailed by 16 with less than seven minutes left. Then Coleman and Jones hit consecutive three-pointers, and Jones made a three-point play and suddenly the Long-

horns found themselves down by seven.

But Jared Butler responded by making an open three-pointer with 4:49 left after the Bears navigated through Texas' defensive press. Baylor led 22-16 after a first half of inept offense.

Matt Coleman led the Longhorns with 11 points, and Andrew Jones scored 10. Texas shot a season-low 30.5% from the field.

No. 7 Duke 70, No. 8 Florida State 65: Tre Jones had 13 points to help the host Blue Devils overcome a turnover-heavy performance to beat the Seminoles.

Duke (21-3, 11-2 Atlantic Coast Conference) was coming off a wild and emotionally draining overtime win against rival North Carolina on Sat-

urday. And the teams entered this game tied for second in the ACC, sitting one game back in the loss column of No. 5 Louisville.

Big man Vernon Carey Jr. had a quiet offensive night (10 points and 10 rebounds), but the Blue Devils got a boost with junior guard Jordan Goldwire matching his career high with 13 points on 5-for-5 shooting — including three three-pointers — after coming in averaging 4.0 points.

Trent Forrest finished with 18 points, nine rebounds and eight steals to lead Florida State (20-4, 10-3), which shot just 38%.

No. 24 Texas Tech 88, TCU 42: Davide Moretti and Jahmi'us Ramsey each had 17 points and the host Red Raiders made a season-high 13 three-

pointers against the turnover-plagued Horned Frogs.

Moretti made a three on the first shot of the game, after TCU's first turnover, to put Texas Tech (16-8, 7-4 Big 12) ahead to stay. Kyler Edwards also had four threes while scoring 14 points.

Kevin McCullar and TJ Holyfield each had 10 points for the Red Raiders, who moved back into the Top 25 earlier Monday following a two-week absence. They have won three in a row since three losses in their previous four games, and this was their largest margin of victory ever in a Big 12 game.

Jaire Grayer had 10 points and was the player in double figures for the Horned Frogs (13-11, 4-7). Texas Tech scored 33 points off 20 TCU turnovers.

QB Rivers won't be back with Chargers

Associated Press

COSTA MESA, Calif. — Philip Rivers' 16-year career with the Chargers has come to an end.

The franchise announced Monday that Rivers will enter free agency and won't return to Los Angeles for the upcoming season. General manager Tom Telesco said in a statement that as they talked through various scenarios with Rivers, it became apparent it would be best for both "to turn the page on what has truly been a remarkable run."

Rivers' future in powder blue was the main storyline late in the season after the Chargers were eliminated from post-season consideration. He said during the final weeks that he intended to play in 2020, even if that meant going to another team.

The 38-year old Rivers was emotional and in a reflective mood after the Chargers' 31-21 loss to Kansas City in the

season finale. He acknowledged it would be weird to be in another uniform but didn't think it would be much of an adjustment.

Los Angeles made the playoffs in 2018 but was 5-11 this season with nine losses by one score. The seven-win decline was the worst dropoff in the league in 2019 and the second biggest in franchise history. Rivers' 4,615 passing yards were fourth in the league, but his 20 interceptions were third most and just one off tying a career high.

Rivers moved his family to Florida last month from their longtime home in San Diego. He commuted between the team's Orange County headquarters and San Diego since the franchise moved in 2017.

"I am very grateful to the Spanos family and the Chargers organization for the last 16 years," Rivers said in a statement. "In anything you do, it's the people you do it with

that make it special. There are so many relationships and memories with coaches, support staff and teammates that will last forever, and for that I am so thankful. We had a lot of great moments, beginning in San Diego and then finishing in LA. I wish my teammates and coaches nothing but the best moving forward."

Rivers was selected fourth overall by the New York Giants in the 2004 draft but was traded to the Chargers in a draft day deal for Eli Manning, who announced his retirement last month. Rivers went on to set 30 franchise records with the Chargers and was an eight-time selection to the Pro Bowl. He also led the Chargers to the playoffs six times but only twice since 2010.

His 224 consecutive regular-season starts are second-most among quarterbacks in NFL history and his 123 wins are ninth. He is one of six quarterbacks to eclipse 50,000 career

yards and his 397 touchdowns are sixth.

The Chargers have plenty of questions that need to be answered during the offseason as they prepare to move into SoFi Stadium in Inglewood. They have the sixth pick in the draft in what looks to be a deep quarterback class that includes LSU's Joe Burrow, Alabama's Tua Tagovailoa and Oregon's Justin Herbert. The Rivers announcement comes two weeks before the NFL scouting combine begins in Indianapolis.

Los Angeles also has quarterbacks Tyrod Taylor and Easton Stick under contract. Taylor will be entering his 10th season and has 46 starts with Buffalo and Cleveland. Stick was selected in the fifth round last season.

Besides Rivers, the Chargers' other top free agents include running back Melvin Gordon, tight end Hunter Henry, safety Adrian Phillips and fullback Derek Watt.

NHL roundup

Beauvillier, Isles keep Ovechkin stuck at 698 goals

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Anthony Beauvillier scored twice, Josh Bailey had three assists and the New York Islanders kept Alex Ovechkin stuck at 698 career goals in beating the Washington Capitals 5-3 Monday night.

The Islanders jumped out to a 5-1 lead and held on to hand the Capitals a second consecutive regulation loss at home. Washington also lost center Evgeny Kuznetsov to a scary-looking upper-body injury when he was crunched into the boards in the second period.

Leo Komarov, Devon Toews and Jordan Eberle also scored, chasing Capitals rookie goaltender Ilya Samsonov after he allowed five goals on 20 shots. Braden Holtby, who got yanked after allowing seven goals on 25 shots behind a similarly

weak defensive performance Saturday against Philadelphia, stopped all 12 shots he faced in relief.

Thomas Greiss made 25 saves to pick up his 16th victory of the season for New York. Barry Trotz improved to 4-0 in Washington as Islanders coach since leading the Capitals to the Stanley Cup in 2018.

Lightning 2, Blue Jackets 1 (OT): Nikita Kucherov scored his second goal of the game 31 seconds into overtime to give visiting Tampa Bay its seventh straight win.

Columbus' Zach Werenski turned the puck over behind his own net and Victor Hedman fed it out to Kucherov, who beat Elvis Merzlikins for his 27th. The Lightning are 19-2-1 in their last 22 games.

Flyers 4, Panthers 1: James

van Riemsdyk had a goal and assist, Carter Hart stopped 30 shots in his return from injury and host Philadelphia beat Florida.

Travis Sanheim, Ivan Provorov and Claude Giroux also had goals for the Flyers, who are 6-1-1 in their last eight. The Flyers improved to 19-5-4 at home.

Coyotes 3, Canadiens 2: Jakob Chychrun scored a tie-breaking power-play goal with a minute left, lifting Arizona to a win at Montreal.

Derek Stepan and Taylor Hall also scored for the Coyotes, who scored three goals after going down 2-0 early. Antti Raanta made 26 saves.

Flames 6, Sharks 2: Milan Lucic and Tobias Rieder scored in a span of 34 seconds early in the first period, Matthew Tka-

chuk added a highlight-reel tally in the third, and Calgary won at San Jose.

Zac Rinaldo, Mark Jankowski and Mikael Backlund also scored to give the Flames back-to-back wins following a three-game losing streak. David Rittich made 34 saves.

Erik Karlsson and Brent Burns scored for the Sharks.

Canucks 6, Predators 2: Jacob Markstrom stopped 36 shots, and Elias Pettersson and J.T. Miller each had a goal and an assist to lead host Vancouver.

Zack MacEwen, Brandon Sutter, Jordie Benn and Jake Virtanen also scored for the Canucks, who ended a four-game losing streak. Quinn Hughes had three assists to take over the lead in the rookie scoring race with 44 points.

NBA Roundup

Raptors roll to 15th straight win

Associated Press

TORONTO — OG Anunoby scored a career-high 25 points and matched his career high with 12 rebounds, Kyle Lowry had 27 points and 11 assists, and the Toronto Raptors extended their franchise-record winning streak to 15 by beating the Minnesota Timberwolves 137-126 on Monday night.

Pascal Siakam scored 14 of his 34 points in the fourth quarter, Rondae Hollis-Jefferson had a season-high 21 and Fred VanVleet added 16 as the Raptors won their 16th straight home meeting with Minnesota.

Lowry returned after missing Saturday's win over Brooklyn because of whiplash, but center Serge Ibaka sat because of flu-like symptoms. Hollis-Jefferson started for Ibaka.

D'Angelo Russell scored 22 points in his Minnesota debut and Karl-Anthony Towns had 23 points and 10 rebounds.

Bucks 123, Kings 111: Khris Middleton and Eric Bledsoe scored 28 points apiece to lead host Milwaukee Bucks to a defeat of Sacramento.

The Bucks' Giannis Antetokounmpo, the reigning MVP, missed the game after he and his girlfriend welcomed their first child, a son whose birth he announced earlier Monday on his Twitter account.

Milwaukee trailed 90-88 after three quarters, but opened the final period with 13 consecutive points.

Harrison Barnes had 23 points and

De'Aaron Fox added 17 for the Kings, who had won four of their previous five.

Lakers 125, Suns 100: Rajon Rondo scored a season-high 23 points, Anthony Davis added 25 points and 10 rebounds, and host Los Angeles rolled over Phoenix.

The Lakers had dropped three of their last four at Staples Center but didn't have any problems against the Suns. Los Angeles put the game away in the second as Rondo scored 15 points in the quarter. It was only the fifth time in Rondo's 13-year career he has scored 15 or more in a period.

Heat 113, Warriors 101: Jimmy Butler had 21 points and 10 rebounds in his return to the lineup, and Miami won in Andre Iguodala's first game back in the Bay Area.

Jae Crowder added 21 points and eight rebounds. Bam Adebayo had 13 points, 11 rebounds and seven assists. Kelly Olynyk had 12 points and a career-high 11 assists.

Iguodala, a key member of Golden State's three championship teams from 2015-18, had two points and five rebounds in 17 minutes against his former team.

Jazz 123, Mavericks 119: Jordan Clarkson scored 25 points before fouling out and Rudy Gobert stayed perfect from the floor against Dallas this season, leading visiting Utah.

Gobert was 7-for-7 shooting after making all eight attempts in Utah's home victory last month. He finished with 17 points and 16 rebounds. The 7-foot-1 center has

made 17 consecutive shots against Dallas going back to last Feb. 23.

Nuggets 127, Spurs 120: Jamal Murray scored 14 of his 26 points in the fourth quarter to help host Denver rally from 23 down.

The Nuggets scored 74 points in the second half, a season high, and outscored the Spurs by 21 after halftime. Denver has won three in a row and six of its last seven.

Nets 106, Pacers 105: Spencer Dinwiddie made a 21-foot jumper with 5 seconds left, lifting Brooklyn to the win at Indiana.

Dinwiddie finished with 21 points.

The lead changed hands three times in the final 27 seconds and wasn't decided until Malcolm Brogdon's three-pointer at the buzzer came up short. The Nets have won two straight at Indianapolis for the first time since 2012-13.

Magic 135, Hawks 126: Aaron Gordon scored 26 points for host Orlando, and Nikola Vucevic had 24 points, nine rebounds and nine assists.

The Magic shot 52.6% from the field and made a season-high 18 three-pointers in their highest-scoring game this season. Evan Fournier added 22 points.

Hornets 87, Pistons 76: Miles Bridges scored 18 points, helping Charlotte win at Detroit to stop a five-game slide.

The win was the Hornets' 10th straight against the Pistons.

Major League Baseball considers expanding playoffs

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Major League Baseball is considering expanding the playoffs to nearly half the 30 teams and allowing higher-seeded wild-card teams to choose opponents.

The playoffs would grow from 10 clubs to 14 under the plan, first reported Monday by the New York Post. There would be four wild cards in each league, up from two.

Details were confirmed by a person familiar with the proposal who spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity because MLB did not authorize any public com-

ments. Another person, also speaking on the condition of anonymity, said MLB has been looking at several plans.

Any proposal would have to be negotiated with the players' association. The current collective bargaining agreement runs through the 2021 season.

"Expanding the playoffs in a sensible way is something worth discussing when part of a much more comprehensive conversation about the current state of our game," union head Tony Clark said in a statement.

Only the division winner with the best regular-season record would advance directly to the

Division Series under the plan. The two other division winners and wild-card teams would start in a best-of-three round.

The division winner with the second-best record would choose its opponent from among the three lowest-seeded wild-card teams. The division winner with the third-best record would then get to pick from among the remaining two wild cards. The top wild card would face whichever team is left over after the division winners make their choices.

The selections would be made on a televised show.

MLB long restricted its

postseason to just the pennant winners facing each other in the World Series. Postseason teams doubled to four with the split of each league into two divisions in 1969, then to eight with the realignment to three divisions and the addition of a wild card in 1995, a year later than planned due to a players' strike.

The postseason reached its current 10 teams with the addition of a second wild card and a wild-card round in 2012.

A postseason of 14 teams would mean 47% of franchises reach the playoffs.