

## Dems: Rioters acted on Trump 'orders'

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — House Democrats prosecuting Donald Trump's impeachment said Thursday that the Capitol invaders believed they were acting on "the president's orders" to storm the building and stop the joint session of Congress that was certifying Democrat Joe Biden's election.

The prosecutors are wrapping up their opening presentation, describing in stark, personal terms the horror they faced that day and drilling down on the public and explicit instructions Trump gave his supporters — both in the weeks before the Jan. 6 attack and at his midday rally that unleashed the mob on the Capitol. They presented videos of rioters, some posted to social media by the rioters themselves, talking about how they were doing it all for Trump.

"They truly believed that the whole intrusion was at the president's orders," said Rep. Diana DeGette of Colorado. "The president told them to be there."

Trump's lawyers will launch their defense on Friday.

At the White House, President Joe Biden said he believed "some minds may be changed" after senators saw chilling security video Wednesday of the deadly insurrection at the Capitol, including of rioters searching menacingly for House Speaker

Nancy Pelosi and Vice President Mike Pence.

Biden said he didn't watch any of the previous day's proceedings live, but later saw news coverage.

The never-before-seen audio and video released Wednesday is now a key exhibit in Trump's impeachment trial as lawmakers prosecuting the case argue Trump should be convicted of inciting the siege.

Democrats used their remaining hours of arguments to lay out the physical and mental harm caused by the attack, discuss Trump's lack of action as it unfolded and do a final presentation on the legal issues involved.

Videos of the siege have been circulating since the day of the riot, but the graphic compilation shown to senators Wednesday amounted to a more complete narrative, a moment-by-moment retelling of one of the nation's most alarming days. It offered fresh details into the attackers, scenes of police heroism and staff whispers of despair. And it showed how close the country came to chaos over the certification of Trump's defeat to Biden.

The footage showed the mob smashing into the building, rioters engaging in hand-to-hand combat with police and audio of Capitol police officers pleading for backup.

It underscored how dangerously close the rioters came to the nation's leaders, shifting the focus of the trial from an academic debate about the Constitution to a raw retelling of the assault.

Rioters were seen roaming the halls chanting "Hang Mike Pence," some equipped with combat gear.

Outside, the mob had set up a makeshift gallows. And in one wrenching moment, police were shown shooting and killing a San Diego woman, Ashli Babbitt, as the mob tried to break through doors near the House Chamber.

Pence, who had been presiding over a session to certify Biden's election victory over Trump — thus earning Trump's censure — was shown being rushed to safety, where he sheltered in an office with his family just 100 feet from the rioters. Pelosi was seen being evacuated from the complex as her staff hid behind doors in her suite of offices.

Though most of the Senate jurors seem to have made up their minds, making Trump's acquittal likely, they sat riveted as the jarring video played in the chamber. Republican Sen. James Lankford of Oklahoma bent his head at one point, with another GOP colleague putting his hand on his arm in comfort.

## Biden launches DOD task force on China strategy

By **CAITLIN M. KENNEY**  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — A Defense Department task force will review national security strategy toward China, President Joe Biden announced Wednesday during his first visit to the Pentagon as commander in chief.

The task force will assess Defense Department policies, programs and processes on China and provide "recommendations on key priorities and decision points to meet the China challenge," according to a Pentagon fact sheet.

"It will require a whole of government effort, bipartisan cooperation in Congress and strong alliances and partnerships. That's how we'll meet the China challenge and en-

sure the American people win the competition of the future," Biden said during the speech to Defense Department personnel.

Before his speech, Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris met with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and other senior military and civilian personnel, and Biden spoke to them about his national security priorities.

The Pentagon has been focused on China's growing influence in the world for the past several years. The 2018 National Defense Strategy established under the Trump administration shifted the military's focus from counterterrorism operations to "great power competition" with China and Russia. China's modernization of its mili-

tary and push for greater regional and international influence are major concerns for the U.S. military, according to the National Defense Strategy.

The 15-person Department of Defense China Task Force will be composed of military and civilian DOD employees from Austin's office, the Joint Staff, combatant commands, the intelligence community and the military services, according to the fact sheet. It will be led by Ely Ratner, special assistant to the defense secretary and an expert on China.

The task force will study force posture, defense relations with China, U.S. alliances and partnerships, intelligence and operational concepts.

# Light vehicles give Marines better tank killer

By CHAD GARLAND  
*Stars and Stripes*

Marine Corps experiments show that lightweight vehicles mounted with long-range weapons can take out enemy tanks at a distance 15 to 20 times greater than a Marine tank could, a top general said this week.

The anti-tank mission was one of the examples cited by Lt. Gen. Eric Smith, deputy commandant for combat development and integration, for how the service is reshaping to create a “light, lethal and austere” force by the end of the decade.

Smith’s comments, made Wednesday at the International Armoured Vehicles Conference hosted by Defence IQ, were first reported by USNI News.

The Marine Corps began divesting its heavy tanks last year,

following guidance from Commandant Gen. David Berger.

Law enforcement, cannon artillery, infantry and conventional aircraft units are also being cut or restructured, and officials expect to cut 12,000 Marines from the service’s troop strength by 2030.

It’s all in preparation for a future battlefield where U.S. forces expect to face more conventional forces with capabilities similar to their own.

To combat these “near-peer adversaries,” the Marines could employ groups of about 75 Marines on the first island chain off the coast of mainland Asia and outfitted with their own aircraft and surface ships, to maneuver quickly and keep their enemy’s resources tied up trying to hunt them down.

“In the past, you would think,

‘Well, there’s 75 Marines in location X, they’re not a threat,’” Smith said, as quoted by USNI News. But “if I can sink one of your billion-and-a-half-dollar warships with a one-and-a-half-million-dollar missile, I am a threat.”

That kind of capability “may change the calculus, if I can do that and rapidly move using things like our Joint Light Tactical Vehicle and make it incredibly hard for you to find me,” Smith said. “You have to respect that very small unit, of which we will have dozens and dozens and dozens placed strategically.”

U.S. forces have witnessed that kind of imbalance firsthand over the past 20 years, as insurgents used cheap improvised bombs to kill or wound troops and disable their expen-

sive hardware

Now, tiny drones that can be easily purchased and weaponized pose the greatest tactical threat to U.S. forces since the roadside bombs began proliferating, Marine Gen. Kenneth McKenzie Jr., head of U.S. Central Command, said earlier this week.

The Marines plan to use more drones and robotics themselves for combat, as well as for resupplying food, water and munitions, and as potential decoys, Smith said.

A nimbler Marine Corps, capable of hit-and-run style tactics, would take away the “luxury” an enemy might have of focusing its intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance on “a few key warships or a few key larger formations who may be closing in on the area,” he said.

## USAF wants to know if key airfield could disappear under a rising sea

By WYATT OLSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

The Air Force is spending \$1.75 million to gauge the effects of future sea-level rise at Wake Island Airfield, located on a remote Pacific atoll that is a key asset in America’s missile defense system.

The “inundation study” was contracted out by the Pacific Air Forces Regional Support Center in September and is slated for completion in March 2022, Pacific Air Forces said in a statement provided Wednesday to Stars and Stripes.

“The purpose of contracting this study is to gather data and better prepare for future military construction projects,” the statement said.

Jupiter, a climate analytics firm based in San Mateo, Calif., has been subcontracted to conduct the comprehensive study that will “anticipate future sea-level rise and flooding” on the airfield in Micronesia, the company said in an announcement last week.

Wake Island is approximately 1,500 miles east of Guam and 2,300 miles west of the Ha-

waiian Islands.

The remote airfield “holds great significance to the Air Force because it serves as a trans-Pacific refueling depot for military missions in addition to being a military training and missile testing location,” the Air Force said in a news release in October.

The 9,800-foot runway — described in the news release as “the longest in the Pacific Islands” — has deteriorated after many years of use.

Roughly 500-600 aircraft use the airfield each year, the Air Force said.

Radar on Wake Island is routinely used in tests of America’s ballistic missile defense system.

“Having the data that this project will yield will enable the Air Force with strategic asset planning,” Jupiter said in its announcement. “With these data, the Air Force will be able to prepare for and mitigate anticipated consequences of severe weather events.”

Those steps could include “hardening” airfield facilities to withstand flooding or relocating them, Jupiter said.

## Marine moms have 1 year to return to fitness standards

By CAITLIN M. KENNEY  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The Marine Corps is giving women more time to get into physical shape after childbirth, according to a new policy change.

Once a pregnancy is confirmed, the woman is exempt from taking a fitness test or participating in the Body Composition Program or the Military Appearance Program. Those programs are aimed at Marines who are not meeting the service’s fitness and appearance standards.

After the birth of the child, the woman has at least 12 months to meet fitness and appearance standards, according to the new update posted Monday, which goes into effect immediately.

The extension was made in recognition of the individual circumstances of each Marine’s pregnancy and postpartum time, and to alleviate the stress of returning to the service’s standards.

# GOP attacks Dems' \$1.9T virus aid bill

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — Republicans are attacking the Democrats' \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package as too costly, economically damaging and overtly partisan, an all-angles attempt to derail President Joe Biden's top priority as it starts moving through a Congress his party controls only narrowly.

Five House committees worked Wednesday on their pieces of sweeping legislation that would send \$1,400 payments to some Americans. It would also provide hundreds of billions for state and local governments and to boost vaccination efforts, raise tax credits for children and increase unemployment benefits. Democratic leaders hope for House passage later this month, with Senate approval and a bill on Biden's desk by mid-March.

As committees worked, Republicans

launched amendments spotlighting what they see as the legislation's soft spots. Their themes were clear: Democrats are overspending, hurting workers and employers' job markets, opening doors to fraud and rewarding political allies — allegations that Democrats dismiss as ludicrous.

The proposals signaled that Biden's plan faces solid Republican opposition in a House and Senate where Democrats have few votes to spare, while forcing Democrats to take positions that could tee up GOP campaign ads for the 2022 elections.

There were amendments to reduce the \$400 extra in weekly jobless benefits Democrats want to provide through August and exempt the smallest businesses from Democrats' plans to gradually raise the minimum wage to \$15 hourly from \$7.25.

Others would put strings on emergency funds to help schools reopen safely, requir-

ing that schools offer in-person classes or give the money to parents for education savings accounts if they remain closed. Still others would have made sure assistance for renters, homeowners and the airline industry didn't extend long after the pandemic ends, and divided \$26 billion for urban transportation systems between cities and rural areas, which many Republicans represent.

"I don't know if the White House knows this, but you're supposed to be creating jobs, not killing them," said Texas Rep. Kevin Brady, the top Republican on the Ways and Means panel. He said that while his party has backed over \$3 trillion in earlier pandemic relief bills, "whatever this rushed, partisan, special interest 'stimulus' package does, it comes with no bipartisan discussion, no opportunity for finding common ground."

## GAO: DOD can't track sexual assault reports filed by civilians

By COREY DICKSTEIN

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The Defense Department has no ability to track exactly how many workplace sexual assaults are reported by its civilian population, according to a new Government Accountability Agency report published amid the military's high-profile fight against sexual misbehavior among its troops.

The majority of DOD's 900,000 civilians have fewer means of reporting allegations of sexual misconduct to authorities than their uniformed colleagues, the GAO concluded in its report published Tuesday. The Pentagon also lacks universal tools and guidance across its massive bureaucracy to fully track reports of sexual assault or harassment involving its civilians, according to the Congress-mandated report.

"Without guidance that addresses these areas, DOD does not know the extent to which its civilian workforce has reported work-related sexual assault worldwide," GAO concluded.

The Pentagon, under pressure to act from Congress and others, has taken great strides in recent years to attempt to track every report of sexual assault among its uniformed troops. But it does not track sexual assault cases involving most of its civilians in its

centralized database, called the Defense Sexual Assault Incident Database, or DSAID. It also doesn't mandate that its components — like agencies outside of the military services — track such occurrences.

"Limited guidance on tracking reported incidents hinders DOD's visibility over such incidents," the GAO report read. "Moreover, not all DOD components have access to the department's centralized database for the collection and maintenance of information regarding reported sexual assaults, which limits visibility."

In fiscal year 2018, for example, the Defense Department estimated about 49,700 of its civilians experienced sexual harassment at work and about 2,500 experienced workplace sexual assaults that year, based on employee surveys. But the DOD tracked a total of only 370 civilian work-related sexual assaults through official channels during the five-year period from 2012 to 2019.

GAO issued 19 recommendations to correct the problems, including issuing common guidance across the department to allow for comprehensive tracking of work-related sexual assaults involving its civilians, enhancing its anti-harassment training programs for civilian workers and conferring with Congress about expanding civilians' avenues for reporting sexual assaults.

## Chinese craft orbits Mars, joining UAE

*Associated Press*

BEIJING — A Chinese spacecraft went into orbit around Mars on Wednesday on an expedition to land a rover on the surface and scout for signs of ancient life, authorities announced in a landmark step in the country's most ambitious deep-space mission yet.

The arrival of Tianwen-1 after a journey of seven months and nearly 300 million miles is part of an unusual burst of activity at Mars: A spacecraft from the United Arab Emirates swung into orbit around the red planet Tuesday, and a U.S. rover is set to arrive next week.

China's space agency said the five-ton combination orbiter and rover fired its engine to reduce its speed, allowing it to be captured by Mars' gravity.

"Entering orbit has been successful ... making it our country's first artificial Mars satellite," the agency announced.

The mission is bold even for a space program that has racked up a steady stream of achievements and brought prestige to China's ruling Communist Party. If all goes as planned, the rover will separate from the spacecraft in a few months and touch down safely on Mars.

# US jobless claims fall slightly to 793,000

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans seeking unemployment benefits fell slightly last week to 793,000, evidence that job cuts remain high despite a substantial decline in new viral infections.

Last week's total declined from 812,000 the previous week, the Labor Department said Thursday. That figure was revised higher from the previously-reported figure of 779,000. Before the virus erupted in the United States in March, weekly applications for jobless aid had never topped 700,000, even during the Great Recession.

The job market's improvement slowed through the fall and in the past two months has essentially stalled. Over the past two months combined, employers have cut 178,000 jobs. Nearly 10 million jobs remain lost to the pandemic.

Though the unemployment rate fell in January to 6.3% from 6.7%, that was mainly because many people who had lost jobs stopped looking for one. The government doesn't count people as unemployed unless they're actively seeking work.

All told, 20.4 million people were receiving unemployment benefits in the week that ended Jan. 23, the latest period for which data are available. That's up from 17.8 million the week before.

The job market's persistent weakness is fueling President Joe Biden's push for a \$1.9 trillion economic rescue package. Biden's proposal would extend, through August, two federal unemployment benefit programs that are set to expire in mid-March. His proposal would also raise the federal unemployment benefit to \$400 a week from the current \$300.

## Connecticut

HARTFORD — New and limited data released Wednesday from the Connecticut Department of Public Health suggests there are racial disparities in the administration of the COVID-19 vaccine in the state, mirroring

what's been happening in other states where Black populations lag far behind white populations in getting the shot.

As of Feb. 3, nearly 2% of residents age 75 years and older who have received the vaccine were Black while 59.7% were white, according to the data. Meanwhile, slightly more than 1% were Asian; 2.3% were Hispanic; 6.2% were mixed-race; and 19.4% were listed as other, which includes American Indians, Native Alaskans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders.

According to 2019 U.S. Census data, 74.6% of Connecticut's population is white while 11% is Black or African-American.

## Iowa

JOHNSTON — Iowa Gov. Kim Reynolds on Wednesday defended her decision to end mask requirements and other rules designed to slow the spread of the coronavirus, even as public health officials warned against ending the measures when a new more contagious variant of the virus is spreading in the U.S.

Reynolds announced Friday that she would lift a partial mask requirement, limits on crowd sizes and other mitigation measures. Asked at a news conference why she decided to end those rules, Reynolds repeated her frequent refrain that Iowa residents can make decisions without government mandates.

"I'm not saying, 'Go out there and be carefree and not be responsible.' I'm saying I trust Iowans to do the right thing," she said. "I don't think they need me to say mandate it."

Since its peak in November, Iowa has seen significant drops in hospitalizations and less robust virus spread. However, it has the highest seven-day rolling average positivity rate in the nation at just under 26%, according to researchers at Johns Hopkins University.

## Louisiana

NEW ORLEANS — Hospitality industry workers who will lose income because of an upcoming

bar shutdown and other coronavirus restrictions in the French Quarter can apply for five days of part-time work with the city, the mayor's office said Wednesday.

Bars are being shut down throughout the city Friday, the beginning of what is usually a raucous Mardi Gras weekend. And there will be limits on automobile and pedestrian traffic in the French Quarter, where bars usually cater to shoulder-to-shoulder crowds.

In a \$100,000 program, the city is offering up to 200 displaced workers jobs that officials say may include trash and litter pickup and mask distribution, according to a news release from Mayor LaToya Cantrell's administration. Workers selected can earn up to \$100 a day for five hours of work a day Friday through Tuesday.

## Oregon

PORTLAND — Gov. Kate Brown announced Wednesday that some outdoor contact sports, including high school football, can resume this week.

In addition, the Oregon Health Authority reported data shows a "sharp decrease" in daily coronavirus cases, hospitalizations and deaths from the previous week.

Health and safety protocols for school sports teams are determined based on the risk level in the county.

In "lower risk" and "moderate risk" counties, practices and games for outdoor contact sports can resume. In "high risk" and "extreme risk" counties, where COVID-19 remains more widespread, schools and other sports organizations can opt-in to resuming outdoor contact sports with additional protocols in place; On-site COVID-19 testing for symptomatic individuals, contact information for contact tracing and a waiver identifying health and safety risks and a commitment to isolation and quarantine if exposed to COVID-19.

## Ohio

COLUMBUS — The Ohio Department of Health says as many

as 4,000 COVID-19 deaths may have been underreported through the state's reporting system, and those deaths will now be added to the state's tally of deaths from the coronavirus during the coming week.

Health officials say "process issues affecting the reconciliation and reporting of these deaths" began in October, with most occurring in November and December. The department identified the problem during a routine employee training, officials said.

The department says it will continue working with the auditor of state's office, which has been doing an audit of COVID-19 data since September.

Officials say adding the deaths will inflate daily reported death counts for two or three days, but the appropriate date of deaths will be reflected on the state's COVID-19 dashboard.

As of Wednesday, the state was reporting a total of 11,856 confirmed and probable COVID-19 deaths.

## Tennessee

Public health officials in eastern Tennessee announced Wednesday that 975 doses of the COVID-19 vaccine that went missing were likely thrown out by accident.

Knox County — which encompasses Knoxville — said the state's Department of Health confirmed that the doses were shipped to the region last week, but local officials said they have no record of receiving them.

Knox County Health Department Director Dr. Martha Buchanan said that based on GPS data, she believes the box containing the doses was probably discarded by someone who thought they were throwing out dry ice. Due to security reasons, vaccine doses are shipped without any readily identifiable information attached.

"It was a kick in the gut for all of us," Buchanan said through tears. "I apologize. Vaccinating our community is very important to us."

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### White tiger figurine prompts calls to police

**MD** ROCKVILLE — Police in Maryland said they received several calls about a large, life-like figurine of a white tiger that was placed on the side of Interstate 270.

The Washington Post reported that the figurine was perched atop a Jersey barrier on the highway in Rockville.

A Rockville police officer went to look at the figurine after a 911 call was received.

Officers from the Montgomery County Police Department removed the tiger. It has since been “adopted” by officers of the county police department’s first district.

The question of how and why the figurine came to appear on the interstate remains a mystery.

### Herd of calves escape farm, stroll highway

**IN** LAPORTE — A herd of about 75 Holstein calves barreled down an Indiana highway after escaping a nearby farm.

Capt. Derek Allen, an off-duty officer who happened to be nearby in his police car, quickly made a U-turn when he saw the cows running by in LaPorte County.

“It’s really important to note, these cows weren’t just walking, they were at a full gallop, if you will,” Allen told the South Bend Tribune.

Allen, along with LaPorte County Detective Jim Fish, as well as a number of volunteer firefighters and other onlookers, began corralling the calves as they moved south.

Eventually, all the cows were accounted for, Allen said, and no injuries were reported to the human onlookers or the cattle.

Police declined to identify the farmer whose cows had escaped.

Allen credited the lack of injuries to county police’s car take-home program, which allowed him and Fish to direct traffic quickly and effectively.

### Authorities: Shiv found in inmate’s nose

**NY** CAPE VINCENT — An inmate is in special housing and awaiting disciplinary charges after a correctional officer found a shiv in his nose, authorities said.

The officer noticed something in the inmate’s nose during a contraband search Jan. 29 at a New York prison in Cape Vincent, according to the New York State Correctional Officers and Police Benevolent Association, the union that represents correctional officers.

The inmate, who is serving an 18-year sentence for attempted murder, voluntarily removed the item from his nose, WWNV-TV reported. It was a piece of sharpened ceramic melted into a plastic cap.

### Hoops fans compete to leave largest tip

**OH** CINCINNATI — A crosstown rivalry between basketball fans of the University of Cincinnati and Xavier University has extended to leaving tips at restaurants, with the largest exceeding \$4,500.

The restaurant The Birch in Terrance Park posted a photo on Facebook of a receipt with

the monster tip left on a \$55 ticket, the Cincinnati Enquirer reported.

As many as 90 families pooled money to give the tip, Aaron Tritsch, owner of The Birch, told the newspaper.

Fans of the teams have left rival tips at more than 20 area restaurants since Jan. 9, the newspaper reported.

### Fire damages historic Krispy Kreme store

**GA** ATLANTA — A historic Krispy Kreme Doughnuts store owned by Shaquille O’Neal was engulfed in flames this week, heavily damaging the structure.

Battalion Chief Douglas Hatcher said firefighters saved most of the building after the fire started in the back. No injuries were reported. Hatcher said the cause of the fire was under investigation.

The Midtown Krispy Kreme opened in 1965. It was one of the first locations established outside the company’s main bases of operations in Winston-Salem, N.C., and Nashville, Tenn.

O’Neal bought the store in 2016.

### Police officer charged with stealing truck

**CA** SANTA ANA — A Los Angeles police officer was charged with stealing a truck from an Orange County dealership and using it for more than a year, including driving it to work, authorities said.

Matthew Calleros, 45, of Whittier was arrested last November after a nearly yearlong investigation by the LAPD and the Orange Police Department.

He pleaded not guilty to three felony charges.

Prosecutors alleged that in October 2019, Calleros went to a dealership in Orange and drove off in a 2015 Chevrolet Silverado. Calleros then used another police officer’s identification to call the LAPD’s Vehicle Warrant Unit to report the stolen truck had been recovered, prosecutors contend.

He also used the California Law Enforcement Telecommunications System to link a license plate number belonging to a different Silverado to the stolen truck, according to prosecutors.

### Man banned from park after poaching elk

**OR** CRATER NATIONAL PARK — An Oregon man was banned from Crater Lake National Park, ordered to pay over \$40,000 in restitution and sentenced to probation with a six-month stay at a residential reentry center after he pleaded guilty to poaching a trophy bull elk in the park, prosecutors said.

U.S. Attorney Billy J. Williams said the guilty plea and sentence came after an investigation into the activities of Adrian Wood, 44. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service began tracking the White City man after reports that he was illegally hunting in the park in 2014.

Federal agents searched Wood’s residence and found specimens of hunted animals including at least 12 deer, a black bear and 13 elk, according to a DNA analysis.

— From wire reports

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# NASCAR ready for 'best season ever'

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Michael Jordan took his own advice and just did it: Air Jordan formed his own NASCAR team and expects the foundation will be in place to build a stock car Dream Team centered around Bubba Wallace.

Jordan has some company on the celebrity starting grid: Pitbull bought his own piece of a NASCAR team and "Mr. World-wide" could have fans — up to 30,000 of them at the Daytona 500 — shouting "Dale!" at next week's season opener.

"There's no better time to be involved in NASCAR," said Pitbull, who was attracted to the sport by the 1990 movie "Days of Thunder" and is now partnered with new team Trackhouse Racing, which along with Mexican driver Daniel Suarez provides a platform to reach a broader audience.

"In the same way that music is a universal language, I also see NASCAR as a universal language," Pitbull added. "Everybody loves a fast car and a great story."

The fan favorites extend well beyond the owner's box. Chase Elliott, NASCAR's most popular driver, is the reigning champion and three-time Daytona 500 winner Denny Hamlin — who helped usher MJ into the sport — has kids asking about his PJs in a national commercial tagline he can't shake.

The schedule underwent an overdue overhaul and now has a whopping seven road courses and five new venues. NASCAR is even set for an off-road detour through the dirt at fan-favorite Bristol Motor Speedway.

Perhaps in any other season, NASCAR could raise a glass to what its broadcast partner is billing as "The Best Season Ever." But promising "best" anything in a pandemic seems as outlandish as a 62-year-old

driver — 1990 winner Derrike Cope — in the Daytona 500.

Yet here we are.

While NASCAR can hope the racial reckoning from last season that led to its Confederate flag ban has eased, concerns that it can reach the season finale without interruptions to the schedule and drivers falling ill still linger.

NASCAR last year navigated the pandemic by first filling the free time with nationally televised iRacing and found a way to become one of the first major sports to resume competition in May. It was the first sport to complete its full schedule but got to November only by moving races, running without spectators or limited spectators, and trusting participants to monitor their own health.

At least four drivers tested positive for COVID-19 during the 2020 season, with Jimmie Johnson, Austin Dillon and Truck Series driver Spencer Davis missing races.

NASCAR again won't test competitors in 2021 but plans on having rapid tests at the tracks when needed. The bubble has been widened this season to allow a team owner into the garage for the first time since last March and NASCAR acknowledged it must be "nimble" with its schedule. The second race of the season scheduled in Fontana, Calif., has already been moved to the road course at Daytona because of pandemic restrictions.

Daytona International Speedway can hold more than 100,000 in the grandstands and thousands more in the infield, but the speedway will be limited to roughly 30,000 spectators for the Feb. 14 season-opener.

Hamlin is seeking to become the first driver to win three consecutive Daytona 500s while also transitioning into team own-

ership. He still drives for Joe Gibbs Racing but has partnered with Jordan to create 23XI Racing (pronounced twenty-three eleven) and field a car for Wallace, the only Black full-time driver at NASCAR's top level.

Wallace had a tumultuous 2020 as he became NASCAR's face for racial justice and change. He successfully pushed NASCAR to ban the Confederate flag at its events and with it came a wave of backlash from traditional fans. Wallace weathered it as best he could — even when NASCAR brought in the FBI to investigate a garage door pull in his stall at Talladega that had been fashioned into a noose months earlier — and it ultimately led to millions in new sponsorship dollars that gave Wallace the funding to help get 23XI Racing off the ground.

Wallace is seeking a balance in trying to be successful with a high-profile team while also using his platform to push for diversity. If he can do it all with fewer headaches, he'd be thrilled.

"I lost 7 pounds through everything that happened last year. So much stress and pressure, Lord," Wallace said. "I have a goal every year to not be a part of the headlines. Every year I have that goal. And I've failed every year."

23XI with Jordan and Trackhouse with Pitbull are two of three new teams entering the Cup Series this year in anticipation of a new car in 2022 that will make NASCAR more affordable for owners.

New teams, new tracks, young drivers and an abundance of optimism has led broadcast partner Fox to market the 2021 NASCAR campaign as "the best season ever." That remains to be seen starting with the Daytona 500 and ending with the Nov. 7 finale at Phoenix.

## Bowman, Byron give Hendrick sweep of Daytona front row

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — New number, new day, new time, same result for Hendrick Motorsports.

Alex Bowman and William Byron swept the front row Wednesday night in qualifying for the Daytona 500, giving Hendrick its 14th pole and sixth in the last seven years. Rick Hendrick's engine-building wing has seven straight poles

because it powers Ricky Stenhouse Jr., last year's pole-winner.

"I think it means a lot to Mr. H — he wants to win everything, like every category, he wants to be top of the list," Bowman said. "Here it really just comes down to who built the fastest race car. And I think it's important for Hendrick Motorsports to come up and prove that they're the ones that did that."

Bowman posted a lap at 191.261 mph to earn the top starting spot for the second time in his career. It's the fourth consecutive year Bowman will start from the front row, but he's got a completely new look this time.

Bowman in the offseason was moved from the No. 88 into the No. 48 vacated by seven-time NASCAR champion Jimmie Johnson. He inherited sponsor Ally, which has committed to

backing Bowman and helping him develop his brand.

Bowman drove his Chevrolet more than 1 mph faster than teammate Byron, who qualified second with a lap at 190.219 mph. Only the front row was set Wednesday, the first time Daytona 500 qualifying has been held at night under a condensed Speedweeks schedule.

It's the ninth consecutive year Chevrolet won the pole.

# Lakers top Thunder for 3rd straight OT win

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — LeBron James hit the tying three-pointer late in regulation and then broke up the Thunder's final possession in overtime to lead the Los Angeles Lakers to their sixth consecutive victory, 114-113 over Oklahoma City on Wednesday night.

James had 25 points, seven assists and six rebounds for the defending NBA champions, who survived their third consecutive overtime game. Montrezl Harrell scored 20 points, and Dennis Schröder had 19 points and seven rebounds.

Al Horford scored 25 points and Kenrich Williams had a career-high 24 for the Thunder, who excelled at Staples Center despite having just eight available players for back-to-back narrow losses to the Lakers.

**Suns 125, Bucks 124:** Devin Booker scored 30 points, Chris Paul added 28 and host Phoenix extended its winning streak to

four games by rallying past Milwaukee.

The Bucks had their five-game winning streak snapped despite getting a season-high 47 points from Giannis Antetokounmpo. They had a chance to win it on the final possession, but Antetokounmpo missed a 20-foot jumper at the buzzer.

**Bulls 129, Pelicans 116:** Zach LaVine scored a season-high 46 points, hitting nine of a franchise-record 25 three-pointers, and Chicago cooled off visiting New Orleans.

Coby White made eight threes and scored 30 points in an impressive show by Chicago's starting backcourt. The Bulls went 25-for-47 from beyond the arc and shot 59% (48-for-81) overall.

**Mavericks 118, Hawks 117:** Luka Dončić had 28 points, 10 assists and 10 rebounds and Dallas rallied to win at home, a week after ending a six-game losing streak in Atlanta.

Tim Hardaway Jr. scored 13 of his 16 points in the fourth quarter.

**Nets 104, Pacers 94:** Kyrie Irving had 35 points and eight assists and host Brooklyn was defensively dominant in the first half in shutting down Indiana to snap a three-game losing streak.

**Clippers 119, Timberwolves 112:** Kawhi Leonard had a season-high 36 points and Lou Williams added 27 points in Los Angeles' victory at Minnesota.

**Nuggets 133, Cavaliers 95:** Paul Millsap scored a season-high 22 points, Michael Porter Jr. added 19 and host Denver routed Cleveland to snap a three-game skid.

**Raptors 137, Wizards 115:** Norman Powell scored 28 points, Pascal Siakam added 26 and Toronto made 19 three-pointers in its victory at Washington.

**Grizzlies 130, Hornets 114:** Kyle Anderson hit a career-high six of Memphis' franchise-record 23 three-pointers and scored 27 points to help his team beat visiting Charlotte to snap a four-game losing streak.

# Rebels stay hot, upend Mizzou for 3rd win in a row

Associated Press

OXFORD, Miss. — Jarkel Joiner scored 21 points to help Mississippi beat No. 10 Missouri 80-59 on Wednesday night.

Devontae Shuler and Luis Rodriguez added 15 points apiece for the Rebels (11-8, 6-6 Southeastern Conference), who extended their winning streak to three games including wins over No. 16 Tennessee and the No. 10 Tigers.

Ole Miss used a 17-2 run that spanned the final two minutes of the first half and the opening three minutes of the second half to build an insurmountable 51-37 lead. The Rebels led by as many as 22 points midway in the second half as Missouri never seriously threatened again. Dru Smith led the Tigers (13-4, 6-4) with 17 points as they snapped a three-game winning streak.

**No. 5 Villanova 96, Marquette 64:** Jeremiah Robinson-Earl scored a season-high 27 points to lead the host Wildcats to a victory over the Golden Eagles.

Collin Gillespie added 16

points and 11 assists, and Jermaine Samuels scored 14 for Villanova (13-2, 8-1 Big East), which has won 10 of 11. Robinson-Earl made 10 of 11 shots, including all five three-point tries, and added eight rebounds. Dawson Garcia scored 28 points and D.J. Carton had 13 for Marquette (9-11, 5-9). The Golden Eagles, playing the first of five straight road games, have lost five of six.

**No. 8 Houston 82, South Florida 65:** Quentin Grimes had 29 points and the visiting Cougars beat the Bulls, spoiling their first game in 32 days because of coronavirus interruptions.

Tied at 25 at the eight-minute mark, Houston (17-2, 11-2 American Athletic) shot 58% in the first half and led 43-35 at halftime. DeJon Jarreau scored 13 of his 17 points in the first half and also had eight assists.

The Cougars pushed the pace in the second half and outscored USF 29-8 in the first 9:18 of the half to take a 72-44 lead. The Bulls (7-6, 3-4) got as close at 76-

61 with 6:01 remaining, but did not hit another field goal.

**No. 9 Virginia 57, Georgia Tech 49:** Trey Murphy III scored 18 points, Kihei Clark added 14 and the visiting Cavaliers pulled away from the Yellow Jackets down the stretch.

Virginia (14-3, 10-1 Atlantic Coast Conference) finished on a 16-5 run in a game that was tight most of the way.

Georgia Tech (9-7, 5-5) lost to Virginia for the second time this season and missed a chance to give its postseason résumé a big boost.

**No. 15 Iowa 79, No. 25 Rutgers 66:** Joe Wieskamp scored 26 points and Luka Garza overcame a slow start to score 22 as the host Hawkeyes beat the Scarlet Knights.

Iowa (14-6, 8-5 Big Ten), which fell out of the top 10 of the Associated Press poll this week for the first time this season, was coming off a stretch of four losses in the last five games.

Wieskamp, who had 16 points in the first half, added 10 rebounds for his third double-dou-

ble of the season.

**No. 16 Tennessee 89, Georgia 81:** Jaden Springer scored a career-high 30 points to lead the host Volunteers to a victory over the Bulldogs.

Santiago Vescovi added 19 points, Josiah-Jordan James had 18 points and Keon Johnson scored 11 for Tennessee (14-4, 7-4 Southeastern Conference).

The Vols were playing without 6-foot-6 senior Yves Pons, who is nursing a right knee injury.

Pons, a leader in rebounds and blocked shots, had scored 69 points in the last five games.

K.D. Johnson scored 20 of his 22 points in the second half to lead Georgia (12-7, 5-7).

**No. 21 Wisconsin 61, Nebraska 48:** Jonathan Davis scored 10 points and made a couple of big baskets to help the visiting Badgers begin pulling away after halftime, and they overcame a poor shooting performance to beat the Cornhuskers.

Wisconsin (15-6, 9-5 Big Ten) swept the season series.

# Kenin eliminated from Australian Open

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Sofia Kenin knew this would be a tough test at the Australian Open and a potentially early end to her first attempt to defend a Grand Slam title.

Upon realizing she would probably be playing big-hitting veteran Kaia Kanepi in the second round, Kenin acknowledged, she “maybe kind of broke down a little bit.”

Kenin was right to be worried. And, with Kanepi at her best, this one was over quickly. Delivering 10 aces, Kanepi powered her way past the fourth-seeded Kenin, overwhelming the 2020 champion 6-3, 6-2 in only 64 minutes on Thursday.

“I obviously felt like I’m not there 100% — physically, mentally, my game. Everything just feels real off, obviously. It’s not good,” Kenin said at her news conference, where she wiped away tears. “I mean, I just — I know I couldn’t really handle the pressure.”

One person who knows how to defend a major title is Rafael Nadal, who shares the men’s record of 20 with Roger Federer.

Nadal shrugged off some heckling from a spectator before beating 177th-ranked Michael Mmoh 6-1, 6-4, 6-2 in the last night match, showing no signs of the back soreness that has bothered him.

Nadal was serving for the second set at 5-4 when a woman yelled out and made hand gestures as he prepared to serve. She yelled again at 30-0 and stadium security escorted her out of Rod Laver Arena. As the rest of the crowd started booing the woman, Nadal laughed.

After the brief delay, he hit two aces to finish off the set. He wrapped up the match at 1 hour, 47 minutes.

Nadal said it was a “positive evening.” Except for one strange thing.

Asked if he knew the unruly spectator, Nadal said he didn’t “and, honestly, I don’t want to know.”

In the preceding match on the main show court, fifth-seeded Elina Svitolina beat 16-year-old Coco Gauff 6-4, 6-3, knocking the youngest player out of the draw.

Gauff had a breakout major in Melbourne last year, reaching the round of 16 with wins over Venus Williams and Naomi Osaka before losing to Kenin. But Svitolina was just too consistent when it counted, saving all four break points she faced and converting on two of the three she had on Gauff’s serve.

Gauff said she stayed calm and was playing at a higher standard of tennis than last year, but it wasn’t quite enough.

Top-ranked Ash Barty did manage to avoid a surprise Thursday, but she blew a big lead in the second set and survived a shaky tiebreaker to get past Daria Gavrilova 6-1, 7-6 (7).

Other women’s winners included former No. 1 Karolina Pliskova, who beat Danielle Collins 7-5, 6-2, and Shelby Rogers, who reached the third round at

the Australian Open for the first time by beating Olga Danilovic 6-2, 6-3.

In an all-American match, No. 22 Jennifer Brady beat Madison Brengle 6-1, 6-2.

Fifth-seeded Stefanos Tsitsipas was pushed all the way by No. 267-ranked Australian wild-card entry Thanasi Kokkinakis in a 6-7 (5), 6-4, 6-1, 6-7 (5), 6-4 win. Tsitsipas will next play Mikael Ymer, who beat 17-year-old Spanish qualifier Carlos Alcaraz in the second round.

Also advancing were No. 9 Matteo Berrettini, No. 21 Alex de Minaur and Mackenzie McDonald, who beat 22nd-seeded Borna Coric 6-4, 6-2, 4-6, 6-4, and 39-year-old Feliciano Lopez.

Russia’s ATP Cup-winning teammates Daniil Medvedev and Andrey Rublev continued their unbeaten starts to the year with straight-set wins. The fourth-seeded Medvedev extended his winning streak to 16 by beating Roberto Carballes Baena 6-2, 7-5, 6-1.

# Marchand lifts Bruins over Rangers in overtime

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Brad Marchand scored 36 seconds into overtime to give the Boston Bruins a 3-2 victory over the New York Rangers on Wednesday night in the opener of a two-game set at Madison Square Garden.

Marchand beat goalie Alexander Georgiev with a nifty forehand-backhand maneuver. Defenseman Charlie McAvoy broke up an odd-man rush and set up Marchand.

“You have to take chances at times,” Tuukka Rask said about the 3-on-3 overtime. “Smart players make smart plays, and I think that was the case.”

Chris Wagner and Anders Bjork also scored and Rask made 33 saves to help the Bruins extend their winning streak to

four and points streak to nine games at 8-0-1.

“That’s the mentality we have always had in this room, we are one,” Marchand said. “We battle adversity together. We win and lose as a team. We feed off a line or a guy. Guys are just stepping up and making big plays right now.”

Julien Gauthier — with his first NHL goal — and Kevin Rooney scored for the Rangers, Brendan Lemieux had two assists and Georgiev stopped 29 shots. New York has lost two in a row.

“The way we kind of measure our game is how fast we play, the way we pressure, the way we forecheck,” Rangers center Mika Zibanejad said after his goal drought extended to nine games. “We were playing a real-

ly good team tonight so it’s going to go a little bit back and forth, but I thought we played with a lot more speed and a lot more tempo today than we did last game.”

The teams will meet again Friday night.

Georgiev made his first start following a postgame altercation with defenseman Tony DeAngelo which came after an overtime loss to Pittsburgh. DeAngelo has since cleared waivers and will not play another game with the Rangers, according to general manager Jeff Gorton.

Rooney evened it at 2 midway through the third, less than three minutes after Bjork gave the Bruins the lead. Rooney buried a loose puck at the side of the net after Lemieux redirected a shot from Ryan Lindgren.

**Maple Leafs 4, Canadiens 2:** Justin Holl and Ilya Mikheyev scored in a 42-second span early in the third period to help visiting Toronto beat Montreal.

Travis Dermott and Zach Hyman also scored for the Maple Leafs, Frederik Andersen made 33 saves, Jake Muzzin added three assists and John Tavares had two. Toronto is 8-0-1 in its last nine and leads the NHL and North Division at 11-2-1.

Josh Anderson and Tomas Tatar scored for the Canadiens and Carey Price stopped 20 shots. The team dropped five points behind the Leafs.

Auston Matthews’ career-high goals streak was snapped at eight games for Toronto, but he extended his points run to 11. Mitch Marner’s eight-game points streak ended.