

Trump's lawyers blast impeachment

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Lawyers for Donald Trump opened his impeachment defense Friday by strenuously denying he played any role in inciting the deadly riot at the U.S. Capitol, blasting the case against him as politically motivated “hatred” and part of a yearslong Democratic “witch hunt.”

Lawyers for the former president told senators that Trump was entitled to dispute the 2020 election results and that his doing so, including in a speech that preceded the assault on the Capitol, did not amount to inciting the violence that followed. They sought to turn the tables on prosecutors by likening the Democrats’ questioning of the legitimacy of Trump’s 2016 win to his challenge of his election loss. When Trump implored supporters to “fight like hell” on Jan. 6, they said, that was no different from the Democrats’ own charged rhetoric that risks precipitating violence.

“This is ordinarily political rhetoric that is virtually indistinguishable from the language that has been used by people across the political spectrum for hundreds of years,” said Michael van der Veen, one of Trump’s lawyers. “Countless politicians have spoken of fighting for our principles.”

After a prosecution case rooted in emotive, violent images from the Capitol siege,

the impeachment trial shifted to defense lawyers who made a fundamental concession: The violence was every bit as traumatic, unacceptable and illegal as Democrats say — but Trump did not order it. Van der Veen said the siege was carried out by people who had “hijacked” for their own purposes what was supposed to be a peaceful event and had made plans for violence before Trump had even spoken.

“You can’t incite what was going to happen,” he said.

Acknowledging the horrors of the January day is meant to blunt the visceral impact of the House Democrats’ case and quickly pivot to what Trump’s defenders see as the core — and more winnable — issue of the trial: Whether Trump can be held responsible for inciting the deadly Jan. 6 riot.

The argument is likely to appeal to Republican senators who want to be seen as condemning the violence but without convicting the president.

“They haven’t in any way tied it to Trump,” David Schoen, one of the president’s lawyers, told reporters near the end of two full days of Democrats’ arguments aimed at doing just that.

He previewed the essence of his argument Tuesday, telling the Senate jurors: “They don’t need to show you movies to

show you that the riot happened here. We will stipulate that it happened, and you know all about it.”

In both legal filings and in arguments this week, Trump’s lawyers have made clear their position that the people responsible for the riot are the ones who actually stormed the building and who are now being prosecuted by the Justice Department.

Anticipating defense efforts to disentangle Trump’s rhetoric from the rioters’ actions, the impeachment managers spent days trying to fuse them together through a reconstruction of never-been-seen video footage alongside clips of the president’s monthslong urging of his supporters to undo the election results.

Democrats, who concluded their case Thursday, used the rioters’ own videos and words from Jan. 6 to try to pin responsibility on Trump. “We were invited here,” said one Capitol invader. “Trump sent us,” said another. “He’ll be happy. We’re fighting for Trump.”

The prosecutors’ goal was to cast Trump not as a bystander but rather as the “inciter in chief” who spread election falsehoods, then encouraged supporters to come challenge the results in Washington and fanned the discontent with rhetoric about fighting and taking back the country.

Biden says US is securing 600M vaccine doses by July

Associated Press

BETHESDA, Md. — President Joe Biden said Thursday that the U.S. will have enough supply of the COVID-19 vaccine by the end of the summer to inoculate 300 million Americans.

Biden made the announcement at the sprawling National Institutes of Health complex just outside Washington as he visited some of the nation’s leading scientists on the frontlines of the fight against the disease. He toured the Viral Pathogenesis Laboratory that created the COVID-19 vaccine now manufactured by Moderna and being rolled out in the U.S. and other countries.

The U.S. is on pace to exceed Biden’s goal

of administering 100 million vaccine doses in his first 100 days in office, with more than 26 million shots delivered in his first three weeks.

“That’s just the floor,” Biden said. “Our end goal is beating COVID-19.”

Biden announced on Thursday that the U.S. had secured contractual commitments from Moderna and Pfizer to deliver the 600 million doses of vaccine by the end of July — more than a month earlier than initially anticipated.

“We’re now on track to have enough supply for 300 million Americans by the end of July,” he announced.

The pace of injections could increase fur-

ther if a third coronavirus vaccine from drugmaker Johnson & Johnson receives approval from the Food and Drug Administration.

Speaking with Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation’s top infectious-disease specialist, Biden emphasized that his administration is doing everything possible to increase the vaccine supply and the country’s capacity to deliver injections into arms.

“It’s been a hell of a learning process,” Biden said.

Biden, wearing a mask, used his remarks to criticize President Donald Trump, saying he inherited “no plan to vaccinate most of the country.”

Dems push aid bill through House panels

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Democrats pushed half of President Joe Biden's \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief plan through a House committee Thursday, advancing \$1,400 payments for millions of Americans and other initiatives that Republicans call too costly, economically damaging and brazenly partisan.

The Ways and Means Committee approved its \$940 billion chunk of Biden's proposal on a 25-18 party-line vote, highlighting a frenzied week that's seeing a dozen House panels fashion contributions to the sprawling measure. On Wednesday, the Education and Labor Committee approved another top Democratic priority — a boost in the federal minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$15 hourly over five years.

"Yes it will. We're very proud of that," House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., told reporters when asked if the overall House bill would include the minimum wage increase.

The House bill would provide hundreds of billions for state and local governments and to boost vaccination efforts, raise tax credits for children and increase unemployment benefits and federal health care assistance. Democratic leaders hope for House passage later this month, with Senate approval and a bill on Biden's desk by mid-March.

In committee after committee, Republicans futilely launched waves of amendments at the Democratic measures in an attempt to derail the new president's top initial priority — a massive bill aimed at

stemming the deadly pandemic and re-suscitating an economy that's shed 10 million jobs and shuttered countless businesses.

And while Democrats fended the amendments off, their control of the House and Senate is razor thin. Divisions between progressives and moderates and solid GOP opposition means the bill's final contours can still shift.

Republicans' amendments spotlighted what they see as political soft spots they can exploit. Their themes were clear: Democrats are overspending, hurting workers and employers' job markets, being too generous to some immigrants, inviting fraud and rewarding political allies — allegations that Democrats dismiss as ludicrous.

Biden hopes infrastructure effort can bridge broad partisan divide

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden is hoping that launching an effort to build roads and bridges can help to unite Democrats and Republicans in a time of sharp partisan divisions.

Biden met with lawmakers from both parties at the White House to discuss infrastructure on Thursday, even as the Senate is holding impeachment proceedings against former President Donald Trump where partisan divisions are on full display.

"I've been around long enough," Biden said, "that infrastructure wasn't a Republican or a Democratic issue."

The president specifically mentioned the potential for improvement projects in the states of the senators attending the meeting, signaling that lawmakers might be willing to cooperate in order to make lives better.

Biden highlighted the need for repairs to "a lot of bridges in West Virginia." Republican Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, of West Virginia, the ranking member of the Environment and Public Works Committee, was among those in attendance. She later voiced her support for a "bipartisan surface transportation reauthorization bill that makes long-term investments in our nation's roads and bridges."

The president also referenced Route 9 in his home state of Delaware, which he shares with Democratic Sen. Tom Carper, the committee chairman, who was also in the Oval Office meeting Thursday and had discussed these issues with Biden last week.

"The American people desperately want us to bring our roads, trains and bridges out of the last century and into the future," Carper said after Thursday's meeting.

Carper pledged to work on a transportation bill that will focus on reducing greenhouse gas emissions by cars and trucks and boosting electric cars.

The current authorization bill for surface transportation expires in September, so "there is no time to waste," Carper said, adding that he expects bipartisan support for the reauthorization bill in the Senate.

Also at the meeting were Vice President Kamala Harris, Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg (virtually), Republican Sen. Jim Inhofe, of Oklahoma; and Democratic Sen. Ben Cardin, of Maryland.

"One reason is that I've known the president forever, and we've worked on highway bills before," Inhofe said. "The main thing that I want to be careful on is when you're working on infrastructure that's high dollar stuff."

Miss. moves to ban trans athletes on female teams

Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. — Transgender athletes would be banned from competing in girls' or women's sports in Mississippi schools and universities, under a bill that advanced in the Republican-controlled state Senate late Thursday night.

There was little discussion of Senate Bill 2536 before senators passed it 34-9. Four senators voted "present," which does not count for or against the measure. Five did not vote.

"I've had numerous coaches across the state call me and believe that they feel there's a need for a policy in Mississippi because they are beginning to have some concerns of having to deal with this," said the bill's sponsor, Republican Sen. Angela Hill, of Picayune.

Supporters of bills such as the one in Mississippi argue that transgender girls, because they were born male, are naturally stronger, faster and bigger than those born female. Opponents say such proposals violate not only Title IX of federal education law prohibiting sex discrimination, but also rulings by the U.S. Supreme Court and 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

Biden looks to up refugee admissions

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden wants to raise refugee admissions to 62,500 for the current budget year, overriding former President Donald Trump's record-low limit of 15,000, a U.S. official and others said Thursday.

The official and others with knowledge of the plans spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly.

Trump set the ceiling on refugee admissions in October when the 2021 budget year started, and it runs until September 30. Biden's proposal of 62,500 would replace that, and the president has already announced plans to raise admissions to twice that amount in 2022.

Biden is said to have wanted to raise refugee admissions immediately but not set the target as high as 125,000 people because that would be unrealistic to reach this year with the coronavirus pandemic and the work needed to rebuild the refugee program that had been largely dismantled by the Trump administration.

Biden by law must submit his proposal to Congress and consult with lawmakers before making a presidential determination. The U.S. State Department confirmed that it sent the president's report to Congress, starting that process.

"We are working with Congress to arrange these consultations and are eager to engage the appropriate members," the department said in a statement.

In his first foreign policy speech earlier this month, Biden announced plans to up admissions in 2022 to 125,000, which would surpass the ceiling of 110,000 set by President Barack Obama before he left office and be more than eight times the amount set by Trump near the end of his term.

Biden, through executive order, also called for rescinding Trump-era rules that resulted in excessive vetting of applicants, expanding capacity for adjudicating applications for refugee applications, and other steps.

Biden, who co-sponsored legislation creating the refugee program in 1980, has said reopening the doors to refugees is "how we will restore the soul of our nation."

SF sues schools, citing suicidal students

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — The number of suicidal children in San Francisco has hit a record high and health experts say it is clear that keeping public schools closed "is catalyzing a mental health crisis among school-aged children," according to a lawsuit the city filed Thursday to push its school district to reopen classrooms.

San Francisco City Attorney Dennis Herrera announced last week he was taking the dramatic step of suing the city's own school district, which has kept its classrooms closed nearly a year amid the coronavirus pandemic. In the motion filed Thursday in San Francisco Superior Court, Herrera included alarming testimony from hospitals in

the San Francisco Bay Area, doctors and parents on the emotional and mental harms of extended distance learning.

One mother, Allison Arieff, said she had recently found her 15-year-old daughter "curled up in a fetal position, crying, next to her laptop at 11 a.m." Arieff said her daughter often cries in the middle of the day out of frustration and "is losing faith not just in SFUSD but in the world."

Another mother, Lindsay Sink, has seen a "major regression" in her 7-year-old son who has "uncontrollable meltdowns that turn (the) whole house upside down." Sink's 10-year-old daughter is experiencing "depression and anger" and she fears her daughter's "mental health will continue to

suffer" until in-person learning resumes.

Last month, UCSF Children's Emergency Department at Mission Bay reported record high numbers of suicidal children seen and treated, according to the legal filing which did not provide detailed numbers of cases and hospital visits. It also quoted doctors citing an increase in anxiety, depression and eating disorders among children, consistent with national data.

"The medical evidence is clear that keeping public schools closed is catalyzing a mental health crisis among school-aged children in San Francisco," said Dr. Jeanne Noble, director of COVID Response for the UCSF Emergency Department.

Cubans stuck for 33 days now in US detention

Associated Press

MIAMI — Three Cubans who capsized and survived 33 days on coconut water, shellfish and rats atop a deserted rocky islet south of Florida were in U.S. immigration custody Thursday, and legal experts said they may be allowed to stay under current federal policies.

A Coast Guard helicopter earlier this week spotted the two men and one woman and hoisted them in baskets from a rocky cliff in Anguilla Cay, a Bahamian islet close to Cuba.

The three were flown to a Key West, Fla., hospital and then taken Wednesday by U.S.

Border Patrol officials to an Immigration and Customs Enforcement detention center in Pompano Beach, Fla. Officials said the Cubans had no serious injuries.

The Associated Press requested interviews with the survivors, but Coast Guard and immigration officials have not released their identities and did not grant access for interviews.

"They will receive comprehensive medical care from the moment of their arrival and throughout the entirety of their stay," said ICE spokesman Nestor Yglesias. "The three individuals will be afforded access to all legal

processes available to them under the laws of the United States."

Attorneys familiar with the Cuban Adjustment Act, which has given Cubans a virtually guaranteed path to legal residency and eventual citizenship, said the Cubans could have permission to stay on humanitarian grounds.

It was unclear whether the group was originally bound for the U.S. or simply lost at sea, and the Coast Guard has said it focused merely on rescuing them. However, the rocky, uninhabited island is routinely monitored by the Coast Guard for strandings of migrants hoping to reach U.S. soil.

NY sent more patients to nursing homes

Associated Press

NEW YORK — More than 9,000 recovering coronavirus patients in New York state were released from hospitals into nursing homes early in the pandemic under a controversial directive that was scrapped amid criticism it accelerated outbreaks, according to new records obtained by The Associated Press.

The new number of 9,056 recovering patients sent to hundreds of nursing homes is more than 40% higher than what the state health department previously released. And it raises new questions as to whether a March 25 directive from Gov. Andrew Cuomo's administration helped spread sickness and death among residents, a charge the state disputes.

"The lack of transparency and the meting out of bits of important data has undermined our ability to both recognize the scope and severity of what's going on" and address it, said Richard Molloy, the executive director of the Long Term Care Community Coalition, a residents advocacy group.

The new figures come as the Cuomo administration has been forced in recent weeks to acknowledge it has been underreporting the overall number of COVID-19 deaths among long-term care residents. It is now nearly 15,000 up from the 8,500 previously disclosed.

The Cuomo administration's March 25 directive barred nursing homes from refusing people just because they had COVID-19. It was intended to free up space in hospitals swamped. It came under criticism from advocates for nursing home residents and their relatives, who said it had the potential to spread the virus in a state that at the time already had the nation's highest nursing home death toll.

In its reply to an AP Freedom

of Information request from May, the state health department this week released two figures: a previously disclosed count of 6,327 admissions of patients directly from hospitals and a new count of 2,729 "readmissions" of patients sent back from a hospital to the nursing home where they had lived before.

Illinois

SPRINGFIELD — A Rock Island resident is the first in Illinois identified by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to have contracted a variant of COVID-19 first identified in South Africa, public health officials said Thursday.

Cases of the variant were first reported in the U.S. at the end of January. Illinois Department of Public Health Director Dr. Ngozi Ezike says the variant, like others identified, spreads the coronavirus more rapidly, which can lead to more COVID-19 cases.

Illinois has administered more than 1.5 million vaccinations, with those receiving the required two shots totaling 346,773, according to public health officials.

Washington

OLYMPIA — All but six of Washington state's 39 counties will be in Phase 2 of the state's economic reopening plan as of Sunday, with five new regions meeting the requirements necessary to join two other regions that have already seen a loosening of COVID-19 restrictions, including limited indoor dining.

Gov. Jay Inslee announced Thursday the East, North, North Central, Northwest and Southwest regions, which comprise 26 counties across the state, will join the Puget Sound and West regions in the second phase of the plan. He initially said Phase 2 for those counties would take effect on Monday but a spokesman for his office

said later Thursday it would now happen one day earlier. The South Central region part of the state — Kittitas, Yakima, Benton, Franklin, Walla Walla and Columbia counties — will remain in Phase 1 for at least another two weeks.

Texas

HOUSTON — Officials in Houston are hoping to address the racial disparity within Texas and the U.S. in who is receiving COVID-10 vaccines with a new clinic on the campus of one of the area's historically Black universities.

Baylor St. Luke's Medical Center, one of the hospitals from Houston's Texas Medical Center, has partnered with Texas Southern University for the clinic that starting Monday will administer vaccines to some of the areas most vulnerable populations, including people 75 years and older and minorities who meet the state's guidelines for vaccine distribution.

St. Luke's Health CEO Doug Lawson said the clinic was part of the hospital's efforts to reach out to communities of color, underserved communities and address "racial inequities in the health care that we are delivering."

In Texas, Black people make up 13% of the population and 18.2% of the health care workforce but only 7.2% of the vaccine recipients so far, according to the AP's analysis.

North Carolina

RALEIGH — North Carolina House lawmakers on Thursday approved a bill to compel K-12 school districts to offer at least partial in-person instruction to the state's 1.5 million public school students, but the Senate did not agree to send it to the governor because of recent changes that were made to the proposal.

Senate Bill 37 would give districts about two weeks to reopen schools while also granting parents the option of having their child continue to learn remotely. Republican leaders want classrooms swiftly reopened, but the state's Democratic governor has expressed concern of a statewide requirement mandating the reopening.

Oklahoma

Oklahoma to expand vaccines to teachers, vulnerable adults

OKLAHOMA CITY — Oklahoma plans to expand coronavirus vaccine eligibility to school employees and adults with underlying health conditions beginning on Feb. 22, state health officials said Thursday.

There are more than 89,000 pre-kindergarten through 12th grade school employees and more than 1 million adults with co-morbidities who are expected to become eligible, said Deputy Health Commissioner Keith Reed.

Among the underlying medical conditions considered for adults in Oklahoma's vaccine distribution plan are obesity, diabetes, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, and chronic lung, renal and liver disease.

Ohio

COLUMBUS — Ohio's Health Department is restructuring its infectious disease division following the discovery of as many as 4,000 unreported COVID-19 deaths and will investigate how the error happened, the state health director said Thursday.

The Health Department said that "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.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police: Man flees in chase, runs out of gas

KY BEAVER DAM — A Kentucky man has been charged with nearly striking a police officer with his car and later leading officers on a high-speed chase that ended when he ran out of gas, state police said.

Officers received a call about a driver ramming another vehicle in an alleged road rage incident in Ohio County. Police located the car and performed a traffic stop, according to a media release from Kentucky State Police. But the motorist fled and nearly struck an officer from the Beaver Dam Police Department, according to the release.

A state trooper located the suspect's vehicle on a state highway and pursued the car at over 100 mph on the Western Kentucky Parkway. The car ran out of gas in Grayson County after crossing the median, and the driver was taken into custody by a state police trooper.

Police charged Rex L. White, 26, of Louisville, with endangerment of a police officer, reckless driving, drug trafficking and other offenses.

Police seek vandal who painted swastikas

WA SPOKANE — The Spokane Police Department is looking for the person who painted swastikas on the Temple Beth Shalom building and a Holocaust memorial.

Police were alerted earlier this week about the graffiti.

The Spokesman-Review says the perpetrator was seen alone on the Temple Beth Shalom camera system wearing blue jeans, black boots, and a dark-

colored jacket with a hood.

Police are investigating the matter as malicious harassment and a hate crime.

FBI seeks information on homemade bombs

NC GIBSONVILLE — Authorities in North Carolina are asking the public for help in an investigation that involves homemade explosive devices in Gibsonville.

The FBI said in a press release that at least five homemade explosive devices have been found along Wood Street in the town outside of Burlington.

The agency said that residents have also reported hearing explosions for the last several months. The FBI is offering a reward of up to \$10,000 for information that leads to the arrest and conviction of the person or persons who are responsible.

Police: Woman assaults boyfriend who left TV on

AZ BULLHEAD CITY — Police in Bullhead City arrested a 74-year-old woman accused of hitting her sleeping boyfriend in the head with a hammer because he left the television on during the night.

They said Marilyn Kepler told officers she was upset with her boyfriend because she couldn't sleep with the TV on.

Kepler was booked into the Mohave County Jail on suspicion of aggravated assault and domestic violence, according to police.

Police said the 74-year-old victim was treated at a Kingman hospital for head injuries. His name wasn't immediately released.

The man told police he was

able to convince Kepler to drive him to the hospital after the assault. But instead of taking him to get medical attention, Kepler drove past the hospital and allegedly pulled a gun on him while she was driving.

The man was able to wrestle the gun away and get out of the car before Kepler drove off.

People driving by saw the victim and took him to the nearest hospital.

Authorities: Infant inside stolen vehicle found

OH COLUMBUS — A 4-month-old boy who was in an SUV that was stolen Tuesday from a child care center parking lot in Ohio's capital city was found unharmed about four hours later by two women who had just seen an Amber Alert about him, authorities said.

The vehicle was stolen around 8:30 a.m. by two men, according to Columbus police. The SUV's driver had left the vehicle running while she brought an older child from the vehicle into the child care center.

An Amber Alert was soon issued, and around noon two women who were driving in the city saw a parked SUV that resembled the stolen vehicle cited in the alert. They opened the SUV's door and saw the child, who was sitting peacefully in a car seat.

The two women notified police, and the child was soon taken to a hospital as a precaution. It wasn't immediately known if the boy had been reunited with his family.

Male polar bear kills female polar bear at zoo

MI ROYAL OAK — A male polar bear killed a 20-year-old female polar bear

at the Detroit Zoo when he attempted to mate, officials said.

"This was completely unexpected and the Detroit Zoo staff is devastated by the loss of Anana in this sudden and tragic event," said Scott Carter, the zoo's chief life sciences officer.

Nuka killed Anana on Monday after being apart for several months, the zoo said.

Nuka, who is 16 years old, has lived at the zoo since 2011 and bred with other bears without harmful behavior, the zoo said. Anana arrived at the zoo in suburban Detroit in January 2020 and was introduced to Nuka a few months later.

The mating program "is vital to sustaining this endangered species and can result in successes like the recent birth of twin cubs" fathered by Nuka, the zoo said.

Official: Heavily armed man arrested at airport

NV LAS VEGAS — A Nevada man is facing a federal weapons charge after he was arrested outside a business at a suburban Las Vegas-area airport clad in a ballistic vest and carrying a handgun and a machete, authorities said.

Etori Hughes, 45, of Las Vegas, was arrested Jan. 30 after Henderson police were called to Henderson Executive Airport about an armed man trying to get inside the flight school business, U.S. Attorney Nicholas Trutanich said.

Court documents allege Hughes had a 9mm handgun, more than 350 bullets loaded in 14 ammunition magazines, swords, a smoke grenade, gas mask and other items in a car belonging to his estranged wife.

— From wire reports

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Earnhardt left lasting legacy with NASCAR

Associated Press

Ryan Newman was lying in bed one morning, his two daughters still tucked in down the hall, when a YouTube video of his death-defying crash popped up as a recommended watch.

He hit play, absorbing every angle of the terrifying tumble that nearly killed him on the final lap of last year's Daytona 500. He started to cry.

His tears had little to do with his wreck, which started when he hit the wall, bounced back into traffic and was drilled by another driver. His car flipped, landed on its roof and skidded to a halt in a harrowing, heart-stopping show of sparks and flames.

"Those are tears of respect and appreciation, not tears of sadness, because I was here and I was able to watch it and know that just down the hallway my kids were going to wake up," Newman said.

NASCAR fans and fellow competitors feared the worst for Newman, but the 2008 Daytona 500 winner walked out of the hospital 48 hours later holding hands with his girls. He will take his seat Sunday in the No. 6 Ford for the Daytona 500.

Newman is a symbol of how far the sport has come since NASCAR's darkest day 20 years ago, when seven-time champion Dale Earnhardt was killed in the final turn of the 500. Earnhardt was the fourth national series driver killed in nine months — two of them hit the same wall at the same track eight weeks apart — and the one who brought NASCAR to its knees.

On the cusp of a national popularity explosion, NASCAR never stopped after the deaths of Adam Petty, Kenny Irwin Jr. and Tony Roper. But losing Earnhardt forced the stock car series to confront safety issues it had been slow to even acknowledge, let alone address.

The dramatic upgrades have saved mul-

iple lives — NASCAR has not suffered a racing death in its three national series since — and are the hallmark of Earnhardt's legacy.

A look at how Earnhardt's death reverberated through NASCAR, making life-changing impacts on safety, and, of course, Newman.

Safety improvements

"The Intimidator" was considered one of the toughest to ever climb into a stock car. Earnhardt never backed down and often was the lone voice speaking to NASCAR for all drivers, friends and rivals alike.

Talk of modernizing the car had been tiptoed around, and many drivers frowned on the confines of head-and-neck restraints. NASCAR marketed — perhaps even glorified — big wrecks and hard races, and that door-banging image overshadowed any pressing needs for safety improvements.

"Dale still had a bit of an image in terms of, 'It's not something we talk about,' right?" longtime NASCAR executive Steve O'Donnell said. "Certainly you want the cars to be safe, but you want to talk about racing."

O'Donnell, who joined the series in 1996, insists the sanctioning body wasn't "blind to safety," but says Earnhardt's death prompted hard conversations about NASCAR's reality.

Notable advancements:

■ **SAFER Barriers:** The Steel And Foam Energy Reduction Barrier was designed to absorb and reduce kinetic energy during high-speed crashes. "Soft walls" have been gradually added to nearly every NASCAR track, first in high-impact areas and later, after Kyle Busch broke both legs in a 2015 crash at Daytona, in place of nearly every spot of exposed wall.

■ **HANS device:** NASCAR mandated the use of head-and-neck restraints in late

2001. Drivers had resisted using the U-shaped neck restraint made of carbon fiber because they found it cumbersome and restrictive. They became required equipment after 25-year-old Blaise Alexander was killed in a crash at Charlotte Motor Speedway some eight months after Earnhardt's death.

■ **Redesigned cars:** NASCAR has developed three new cars since 2001, each one adapting to the latest technology. The latest "Next Gen" car was supposed to debut this year but was postponed to 2022 because of delays caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

"The culture is what Dale Earnhardt changed," O'Donnell said. "It's our ability to each and every day talk about technology, talk about safety and continue to have people in the industry approach us about those ideas versus just how to make the car go faster."

Ryan Newman

Newman is the ultimate testament to NASCAR's changes. He missed just three events following his accident and is back for his 20th full season.

He realizes Earnhardt's death saved his life. But he prefers to remember his childhood idol by what he accomplished in life.

"I knew him as the guy that drove the black 3 car, and if he didn't win it outright, he'd knock somebody out of the way to get it done and stood in victory lane and smiled about it," Newman said. "Unfortunately, because of the way the book ended for him, there's a different version of that legacy."

"I feel fortunate that my book, or at least that chapter, didn't end that way for me," he said. "And we did learn a lot from what happened to him. We collectively have kept so many drivers alive since then because of the adjustments that have been made in the safety of our sport."

Almirola, Dillon win Daytona qualifying Duel races

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — What should have been a tune-up for the Daytona 500 might have cost Hendrick Motorsports the front row for NASCAR's version of the Super Bowl.

Alex Bowman and William Byron were slated to lead the Daytona 500 field to green but that's in danger following Thursday night's qualifying races. Bowman had an engine problem in the first 150-mile race and, if his motor needs to be changed, he'll

forfeit Sunday's pole.

Byron was collected in a crash in the second Duel and it ruined his Chevrolet. He needs to move to a backup car for the 500 and the swap sends him to the back of the field.

"Bummer," Byron said. "Man, the thing was fast."

Aric Almirola won the first race. After a rain delay pushed the second Duel into Friday morning, Austin Dillon used a cross-over move on Bubba Wallace to beat Wal-

lace to the checkered flag.

Almirola in a Ford will slide up to the front row when Byron falls to the back. Dillon, in a Chevrolet, will wait to see if Hendrick changes Bowman's engine this weekend.

Austin Cindric and Kaz Grala both earned their first berths into the Daytona 500 by claiming the two available transfer positions in the Duels. Ty Dillon, Timmy Hill, Garrett Smithley and Noah Gragson all failed to advance.

Lillard again leads Blazers past 76ers

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — Damian Lillard scored 30 points and the Portland Trail Blazers beat the Philadelphia 76ers 118-114 on Thursday night.

Carmelo Anthony added 24 points off the bench, including 16 in the fourth quarter, to help Portland win for the fourth time in five games.

Joel Embiid led the 76ers with 35 points and nine rebounds, and Ben Simmons added 23 points and 11 boards. The loss snapped a four-game road winning streak.

The Eastern Conference-leading Sixers had won six of seven, with the only loss during that span coming a week ago to the Trail Blazers, 121-105. It was

just the second loss at home for Philadelphia.

Warriors 111, Magic 105: Stephen Curry made 10 three-pointers and had 40 points, eight rebounds and five assists, leading host Golden State past undermanned Orlando.

Curry made four of his first seven threes and finished 10-for-19 from deep — even having one taken away by a replay review after the third quarter. The two-time MVP has made at least four three-pointers in a career-best 13 straight games.

Golden State attempted a franchise-record 30 three-pointers in the first half and went 20-for-50 from long range overall.

Orlando was already missing

four key players, then lost guard Frank Mason III to a strained right groin early in the game. Nikola Vucevic had 25 points, 13 rebounds and five assists for the Magic.

Celtics 120, Raptors 106: Semi Ojeleye had a career-high 24 points and six three-pointers as Boston beat visiting Toronto.

Rookie guard Payton Pritchard added 20 points and had a career-high six threes to help the Celtics stop a two-game skid. Boston never trailed and led by 19, thanks in part to a season-high 20 three-pointers.

Kyle Lowry led the Raptors with 24 points and six assists. Pascal Siakam had 23 points.

Heat 101, Rockets 94: Jimmy Butler had a triple-double

with 27 points, 10 rebounds and 10 assists and Miami overcame a slow start on the road to beat slumping Houston.

Miami won its fourth straight and handed Houston its fourth loss in a row.

John Wall and Eric Gordon led the Rockets with 17 points each.

Pacers 111, Pistons 95: Domantas Sabonis had 26 points, eight rebounds and eight assists and Indiana beat host Detroit to end a four-game losing streak.

Malcolm Brogdon added 18 points, and Jeremy Lamb had 17.

Josh Jackson led Detroit with 18 points. Rookie Isaiah Stewart added 17 in his first start at center.

No. 20 Southern Cal rolls past Washington

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Andy Enfield was already thrilled with what he was getting from No. 20 Southern California defensively for most of the Pac-12 season.

The Trojans have been even better at that end of the court for their past two victories.

Evan Mobley scored 17 points, brother Isaiah Mobley added 12 points and 12 rebounds and No. 20 Southern California rolled past Washington 69-54 on Thursday night.

Ranked for the first time since early in the 2017-18 season, the Trojans (16-3, 10-2) won for the 11th time in their past 12 games thanks to another stellar defensive performance and a dominant effort on the interior against the undersized Huskies.

USC held rival UCLA to 48 points in an 18-point victory last Saturday, then limited Washington to its second-lowest point total in conference play this season.

“Defensively, we were very

good. I think you saw that midway through the first half into the second half, we challenged every shot, made them shoot a low percentage,” Enfield said. “Then we dominated the paint on offense. I think with this team it starts at the defensive end.”

The Trojans took control by outscoring Washington 25-7 during a 10-minute stretch spanning the end of the first half and the beginning of the second half. USC closed the first half on an 18-4 run, turning a four-point deficit into a 10-point halftime lead, and pushed the lead to 48-34 in the opening minutes of the second half.

The Mobleys were at the heart of USC’s fifth straight win, but they got help from others. Chevez Goodwin had 11 points of the bench and Taj Eaddy added 10.

USC outscored Washington 46-22 in the paint and held a 41-24 advantage in rebounds. The Trojans missed their first six three-point attempts before Eaddy’s three-pointer with 3:18

left pushed the USC lead to 63-50. But the lack of perimeter shooting didn’t matter thanks to the dominance on the inside.

“We’re an inside-outside, inside game offense first. That’s where our big guys are hard to stop and then our guards when they make shots, we’re awfully good,” Enfield said. “Tonight, we didn’t have it going from the perimeter, but we made enough plays down the last 15 minutes to win the game.”

Quade Green led Washington (3-15, 2-11) with 16 points and it was a much better performance than the meeting last month in Los Angeles when the Huskies suffered a 27-point loss.

But scoring was a problem all night for Washington. The Huskies became the sixth straight team held under 70 points by the Trojans. USC entered the night with the second-best scoring defense in the conference, allowing less than 64 points per game.

Jamal Bey added 10 points, but the Huskies had just eight

made field goals and nine turnovers in the second half.

“Offensively, I felt like we did a decent job it was just our turnovers. We just turned it over too much,” Washington coach Mike Hopkins said. “We don’t have a large margin for error. So maybe take away five turnovers, those become five three-point shot opportunities, and now we’re in a real chance to pick them off.”

Minnesota 71, No. 24 Purdue 68: Marcus Carr Carr finished with 19 points, including eight in the final 1:08, to lift the Golden Gophers over the visiting Boilermakers.

Gabe Kalscheur broke out of a shooting slump to score 16 points, Brandon Johnson scored 15 and Liam Robbins added 11 points and 10 rebounds for Minnesota (12-7, 5-7 Big Ten), which trailed by five with 2 minutes to play.

Trevion Williams led Purdue with 24 points and 10 rebounds. Eric Hunter Jr. had 14 points and Zach Edey added 13 for the Boilermakers (13-8, 8-6).

Australian Open forced to ban fans

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — If Serena Williams somehow manages to conjure up another on-the-run, back-to-the-net, no-look, over-the-shoulder shot in her next Australian Open match, a local coronavirus flareup means there won't be any spectators to react with the appreciative applause and yells that greeted this one.

That's because while Williams was using that bit of magic Friday to help pull off a comeback victory over an opponent who is 20 years younger, the head of the Victoria state government was announcing a five-day lockdown in response to a COVID-19 outbreak at a quarantine hotel.

Competition at the year's first Grand Slam tournament will be allowed to continue, but no fans can attend as of Saturday.

After the pandemic led to the cancellation of Wimbledon, zero fans at the U.S. Open and only 1,000 a day at the French Open in

2020, the government let Tennis Australia admit up to 30,000 daily, 50% of normal capacity.

But not anymore.

"It's going to be a rough few days for, I think, everyone. But we'll hopefully get through it," Williams said after beating 19-year-old Anastasia Potapova 7-6 (5), 6-2 despite 25 unforced errors in the first set alone. "It's been really fun to have the crowd back, especially here. It's been really cool. But you know what? At the end of the day, we have to do what's best. Hopefully it will be all right."

Novak Djokovic's bid for a ninth Australian Open championship was thrown into doubt after he took a fall during a 7-6 (1), 6-4, 3-6, 4-6, 6-2 victory over Taylor Fritz and said he tore a muscle.

The No. 1-ranked Djokovic said he might not be able to play his next match, scheduled for Sunday against Milos Raonic.

"I don't know if I will step on the court or not," Djokovic said.

A year ago, Williams dropped just three games against Potapova in the first round. But then the American was surprised in the third round, her earliest exit in Australia in 14 years.

This time at that stage, Williams — who has won seven of her 23 Grand Slam singles titles in Australia — fell behind in the opening set, which Potapova served for at 5-3. But the 2016 Wimbledon junior champion double-faulted five times in that game, including twice on set point.

Williams then trailed 5-3 in the tiebreaker. But she took the next four points, the last on a 21-stroke exchange that ended with Potapova putting a forehand into the net.

Other women's fourth-round matchups established Friday: three-time Grand Slam title winner Naomi Osaka against two-time major champion Garbiñe Muguruza, 2019 French Open finalist Marketa Vondrousova against Hsieh Su-wei, and

two-time major champ Simona Halep against reigning French Open champion Iga Swiatek.

No. 8 Diego Schwartzman became the highest-seeded man to lose so far, eliminated 6-3, 6-3, 6-3 by Aslan Karatsev, a qualifier from Russia ranked 114th and making his Grand Slam debut at age 27.

No. 3 Dominic Thiem, who won the U.S. Open in September, appeared to be in real trouble against Australia's Nick Kyrgios in front of a raucous crowd, but came all the way back from a two-set deficit to win 4-6, 4-6, 6-3, 6-4, 6-4. Thiem's fourth-round opponent is No. 18 Grigor Dimitrov, who advanced when Pablo Carreno Busta retired after losing the first seven games.

Karatsev is the first qualifier to reach the fourth round at Melbourne Park since Milos Raonic a decade ago and will meet No. 20 Felix Auger-Aliassime, who defeated No. 11 Denis Shapovalov 7-5, 7-5, 6-3 in an all-Canadian matchup.

Crosby lifts Penguins over Islanders in overtime

Associated Press

UNIONDALE, N.Y. — Sidney Crosby scored the only goal of the shootout to lift the Pittsburgh Penguins to a 4-3 comeback victory over the New York Islanders on Thursday night.

Casey DeSmith made 26 saves for the victory, including five stops in overtime plus all three of the Islanders' attempts in the shootout.

Mathew Barzal gave the Islanders a 3-2 lead late in the third period before Evgeni Malkin tied it for the Penguins with 18 seconds remaining.

Barzal scored his fifth goal of the season on a tremendous individual effort, maneuvering the puck around and past defenseman Pierre-Olivier Joseph before beating DeSmith

over the shoulder at 13:35.

Casey Cizikas and Jean-Gabriel Pageau also scored for the Islanders. Semyon Varlamov made 32 saves for the Islanders, but couldn't stop Crosby in the shootout.

Malkin's tying goal, his third of the season, came with DeSmith pulled for an extra attacker. Bryan Rust and Zach Aston-Reese also scored for the Penguins.

The teams will meet again Saturday night on Long Island.

Panthers 5, Lightning 2: Aaron Ekblad and Alex Wennberg each had a goal and an assist and host Florida snapped Tampa Bay's winning streak at six games.

Frank Vatrano, Carter Verhaeghe and Brett Connolly al-

so scored, and Sergei Bobrovsky made 19 saves.

Jets 5, Senators 1: Connor Hellebuyck made 41 saves and Paul Stastny, Nikolaj Ehlers and Blake Wheeler scored second-period goals to help host Winnipeg beat Ottawa.

Blue Jackets 6, Blackhawks 5: Boone Jenner, Jack Roslovic, Michael Del Zotto and Kevin Stenlund scored during a wild third period and visiting Columbus stopped Chicago's three-game winning streak.

Ducks 1, Golden Knights 0: Max Comtois scored in the third period, John Gibson made 21 saves and visiting Anaheim beat Vegas.

Hurricanes 5, Stars 3: Nino Niederreiter broke a tie early in the third period and visiting Carolina beat Dallas for the

third time this season.

Oilers 3, Canadiens 0: Mike Smith made 38 saves in his second start of the season for his 40th career shutout in visiting Edmonton's victory over Montreal.

Kings 6, Sharks 2: Anze Kopitar, Carl Grundstrom and Jaret Anderson-Dolan each had a goal and an assist and host Los Angeles beat San Jose to snap a five-game losing streak.

Predators 3, Red Wings 2: Dante Fabbro scored with 59.2 seconds remaining to lift host Nashville past struggling Detroit.

Flames 3, Canucks 1: Mark Giordano had a goal and an assist and visiting Calgary handed Vancouver its sixth straight loss.