

One-third of troops offered vaccine refused, DOD official tells Congress

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — About one-third of U.S. troops offered the coronavirus vaccine as of Wednesday have refused the inoculation, top Defense Department officials told House lawmakers.

The Defense Department has fully vaccinated about 147,000 of its troops across the force, including active-duty, National Guard and reserves, Robert Salesses, the Pentagon's homeland defense chief, told the House Armed Services Committee on Wednesday. Another roughly 212,000 service members have received their first of two doses of the vaccine, he said.

Pentagon officials in recent weeks had declined to provide information about the number of troops vaccinated or an estimate of how many have declined the vaccination. Salesses provided the numbers at the request of Rep. Mike Rogers, of Alabama, the committee's top

Republican.

Pentagon officials want to see more service members and other members of the Defense Department community accept the vaccinations, said Air Force Maj. Gen. Jeff Taliaferro, the Joint Chiefs of Staff vice operations director.

"We believe, of course, the vaccine is the right thing to do," Taliaferro said. "It's clearly safe for service members, and we need to continue to educate our force about its safety and ensure leadership is involved in the discussion of the benefits of these vaccines."

However, the general said that because the vaccines manufactured by medical giants Pfizer and Moderna have only been authorized by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration on an emergency basis, the Pentagon cannot mandate its personnel accept the vaccine, as it does other inoculations.

"The services and combatant commands have worked hard to

make sure we can operate in a [coronavirus] environment," Taliaferro said. "The addition of vaccines should make us more capable in that environment. But, we've already demonstrated over the last year we're fully capable of operating in a [coronavirus] environment."

In all, the Pentagon has conducted 916,575 injections through Wednesday throughout its community, a number that includes service members, their family members, department civilians and contractors, Salesses said. It has focused primarily on inoculating front-line health care workers and so-called Tier 1 troops, focused on the nation's most strategically vital missions, he said.

All service members who want to be vaccinated should be able to get their shots by late July or August, Taliaferro said.

Meanwhile, the Defense Department is ramping up its support to the broader effort to inoculate the U.S. civilian popula-

tion. The Federal Emergency Management Agency has requested up to 10,000 troops to support up to 100 mass-vaccination sites that it plans to set up throughout the country. By next week, more than 700 active-duty troops will have deployed to support vaccine locations in California, Texas and New York. Salesses said the Defense Department would continue to provide additional troops, vowing it would "move further and faster to help end the [coronavirus] pandemic."

Another 28,430 National Guard troops are now deployed in dozens of states to help with coronavirus operations, including providing inoculations, distributing vaccines and manning testing locations, said Air Force Maj. Gen. Steven Nordhaus, the National Guard Bureau's operations director.

Nordhaus expected those deployments to continue through at least the spring, he told House lawmakers.

Marines resume Arctic exercises in frigid Norway

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

About 1,000 U.S. Marines left in limbo in Norway after Arctic drills were canceled because of coronavirus concerns will now be staying on until spring, the Corps said Thursday.

"The Marines will carry out their field training in accordance with Norwegian and U.S. COVID safety protocols," Maj. Adrian J.T. Rankine-Galloway, Marine Corps Forces Europe and Africa spokes-

man, said in a statement.

The Marines had traveled to Norway last month for the long-planned Joint Viking and Reindeer I exercises, only to see them canceled soon after arrival when case levels spiked in the country.

The number of new daily cases throughout the country dropped from highs of about 900 per day in early January to about 250 per day as of mid-February, Norway's public health agency reported Thursday. The Marines say they will now press ahead with their Arctic mis-

sion.

"Norway offers challenging, rugged terrain that hones our cold-weather and mountain warfare skills with top specialists in fighting and winning in arctic conditions — the Norwegian military," Rankine-Galloway said.

The pandemic has complicated military training efforts in Europe for nearly a year. Numerous exercises have been canceled or curtailed, including the Marine-led Cold Response exercise in Norway last year.

The Camp Lejeune, N.C.-based Marines are part of a rotational force that trains with the Norwegian military and other NATO allies.

The Marines have been a regular presence in Norway since the Cold War and continue to keep stockpiles of weapons in Norwegian caves. The mission expanded three years ago when the Corps launched six-month rotations that kept Marines in Norway all year, with back-to-back rotations.

30 Taliban die in bombmaking accident

By J.P. LAWRENCE
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — About 30 Taliban militants were killed when they detonated a bomb they were learning how to assemble, the Afghan Defense Ministry said.

The blast occurred last week at a bombmaking course in Afghanistan's northern Balkh province, the statement said.

Six foreign fighters were among the militants who died in the incident, the Afghan military said. While the foreigners were not identified, militants from abroad — some affiliated with al-Qaida — have trained Taliban fighters to make bombs during the last two decades of war in Af-

ghanistan.

The Taliban are supposed to prevent Afghanistan from being a base for terrorist groups such as al-Qaida, under the terms of a deal signed last year that would lead to a U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan.

But the Taliban leadership continues to maintain ties with al-Qaida, with members of the terrorist organization integrated into Taliban forces and command structures, a new report said Thursday.

Last year, the guerrillas launched repeated attacks against Afghan forces as U.S. troops started to withdraw, in order to gain leverage in negotiations with the Kabul government, the report to Congress by

the Lead Inspector General for Operation Freedom's Sentinel said.

The Biden administration is weighing whether the Taliban are meeting their commitments as it decides whether to withdraw all troops from the country by May 1.

Gen. Scott Miller, the top U.S. commander in Afghanistan, told Reuters this week that Taliban violence is too high and could hinder peace negotiations if not curbed.

"Taliban violence is much higher than historical norms ... it just doesn't create the conditions to move forward in what is hopefully a historic turning point for Afghanistan," Miller said.

Outages in Texas drop below 1M as its water crisis persists

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — Power was restored to more Texans on Thursday, with fewer than a half-million homes remaining without electricity, and many still were without safe drinking water after winter storms wreaked havoc on the state's power grid and utilities this week.

Meanwhile, the Appalachians, northern Maryland and southern Pennsylvania braced for heavy snow and ice. Snow fell in Connecticut, New Jersey and New York, and the National Weather Service predicted up to 8 inches in the New York metropolitan area Thursday and Friday.

More than 320,000 homes and businesses were without power in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama as storms dumped as much as 4 inches of snow and ice.

The extreme weather has been blamed for the deaths of more than 30 people, some of whom perished while struggling to keep warm.

In the Houston area, one family succumbed to carbon monoxide from car exhaust in their garage. A woman and her three grandchildren died in a fire that authorities said might have been caused by a fireplace they were using.

In Texas, just under 500,000 homes and businesses remained without power, down from about 3 million on Wednesday. The

state's grid manager, the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, said the remaining outages are largely weather-related, rather than forced outages that were made early Monday to stabilize the power grid.

"We will keep working around the clock until every single customer has their power back on," said ERCOT Senior Director of System Operations Dan Woodfin.

Adding to the misery, the weather jeopardized the state's drinking water systems.

Texas officials ordered 7 million people — a quarter of the population of the nation's second-largest state — to boil tap water before drinking it, following days of record low temperatures that damaged infrastructure and froze pipes.

Some Austin hospitals faced a loss in water pressure and heat.

"Because this is a state-wide emergency situation that is also impacting other hospitals within the Austin area, no one hospital currently has the capacity to accept transport of a large number of patients," said David Huffstutler, CEO of St. David's South Austin Medical Center.

Water pressure has fallen because lines have frozen, and many people left faucets dripping in hopes of preventing pipes from icing over, said Toby Baker, executive director of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality.

NATO allies plan to further expand their Iraq mission

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — NATO allies agreed Thursday to significantly expand their training mission in Iraq, a move that will bolster the alliance's position in the Middle East and potentially ease demands on U.S. forces in the country.

The non-U.S. NATO mission will grow from its current 500 service members to about 4,000, and its efforts will extend to regions beyond the greater Baghdad area, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said at the end of a two-day meeting of alliance defense ministers.

The United States, which began drawing down its forces last year, has about 2,500 troops in Iraq in a separate mission.

Stoltenberg said the expansion would start in the coming months.

"Increases in troop numbers will be incremental," he said.

NATO has had a presence in Iraq since 2004, when it deployed a small number of advisers who worked with Iraqi security forces both in the country and in neighboring nations.

NATO now appears poised to do more by vastly expanding the initial effort. The request for additional trainers came from the Iraqi government, Stoltenberg said.

Life expectancy in US drops by a year

Associated Press

Life expectancy in the United States dropped a staggering one year during the first half of 2020 as the coronavirus pandemic caused its first wave of deaths, health officials are reporting.

Minorities suffered the biggest impact, with Black Americans losing nearly three years and Hispanics, nearly two years, according to preliminary estimates Thursday from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

"This is a huge decline," said Robert Anderson, who oversees the numbers for the CDC. "You have to go back to World War II, the 1940s, to find a decline like this."

Other health experts say it shows the profound impact of COVID-19, not just on

deaths directly due to infection but also from heart disease, cancer and other conditions.

"What is really quite striking in these numbers is that they only reflect the first half of the year. ... I would expect that these numbers would only get worse," said Dr. Kirsten Bibbins-Domingo, a health equity researcher and dean at the University of California, San Francisco.

This is the first time the CDC has reported on life expectancy from early, partial records; more death certificates from that period may yet come in. It's already known that 2020 was the deadliest year in U.S. history, with deaths topping 3 million for the first time.

Life expectancy is how long a baby born

today can expect to live, on average. In the first half of last year, that was 77.8 years for Americans overall, down one year from 78.8 in 2019. For males it was 75.1 years and for females, 80.5 years.

As a group, Hispanics in the U.S. have had the most longevity and still do.

Black people now lag white people by six years in life expectancy, reversing a trend that had been bringing their numbers closer since 1993.

Between 2019 and the first half of 2020, life expectancy decreased 2.7 years for Black people, to 72. It dropped 1.9 years for Hispanics, to 79.9, and 0.8 years for white people, to 78. The preliminary report did not analyze trends for Asian or Native Americans.

US jobless claims jump to 861,000; layoffs stay high

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of Americans applying for unemployment aid rose last week to 861,000, evidence that layoffs remain painfully high despite a steady drop in the number of confirmed viral infections.

Applications from laid-off workers rose 13,000 from the previous week, which was revised sharply higher, the Labor Department said Thursday. Before the virus erupted in the United States last March,

weekly applications for unemployment benefits had never topped 700,000, even during the Great Recession of 2008-09.

The job market has stalled, with employers having added a mere 49,000 jobs in January after cutting workers in December. Nearly 10 million jobs remain lost to the pandemic. Though the unemployment rate fell last month from 6.7%, to 6.3%, it did so in part because some people stopped looking for jobs.

People who aren't actively seeking work

aren't counted as unemployed.

Fraudulent claims may be pushing up the totals. Last week, Ohio reported a huge increase in applications, and said it had set aside about half the increase for additional review out of concern over fraud.

Two federal unemployment aid programs — one that provides up to an extra 24 weeks of support and another that covers self-employed and gig workers — were extended until March 14 by a \$900 billion rescue package that was enacted late last year.

With bill in motion, Biden supports reparations study

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden's White House is giving its support to studying reparations for Black Americans, boosting Democratic lawmakers who are renewing efforts to create a commission on the issue amid the stark racial disparities highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

A House panel heard testimony Wednesday on legislation that would create a commission to examine the history of slavery in the U.S. as well as the discriminatory government policies that affected former slaves and their descendants. The commission would recommend ways to educate the American public of its findings and suggest appropriate remedies, including financial payments from the government to compensate descendants of slaves for years of un-

paid labor by their ancestors.

Biden backs the idea of studying the issue, White House press secretary Jen Psaki said Wednesday, though she stopped short of saying he would sign the bill if it clears Congress.

"He certainly would support a study of reparations," Psaki said at the White House briefing. "He understands we don't need a study to take action right now on systemic racism, so he wants to take actions within his own government in the meantime."

Biden captured the Democratic presidential nomination and ultimately the White House with the strong support of Black voters. As he campaigned against the backdrop of the biggest reckoning on racism in a generation, Biden backed the idea of studying reparations for the descendants

of slaves. But now, as he tries to win congressional support for other agenda items including a massive coronavirus relief package, he faces a choice of how aggressively to push the idea.

Even with Democrats controlling both chambers of Congress and the White House, passing a reparations bill could prove difficult. The proposal has languished in Congress for more than three decades.

Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, D-Texas, said the descendants of slaves continue to suffer from the legacy of that brutal system, pointing to COVID-19 as an example. Data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicate that Black people are nearly three times as likely to be hospitalized because of COVID-19 as white people and nearly twice as likely to die from the illness.

Calif. virus aid would pay \$600 to millions

Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — Millions of low-income Californians would receive \$600 checks under a \$9.6 billion coronavirus aid package announced by Gov. Gavin Newsom and legislative leaders.

The plan announced Wednesday would cut checks to about 5.7 million people who earn less than \$30,000 per year, as well as some immigrants living in the country illegally who were excluded from federal COVID-19 relief payments made during the Trump administration.

The plan also provides a new round of small-business grants and more housing assistance for farmworkers infected by the virus.

The Legislature plans to quickly take up the measure, with votes expected as early as Monday after budget committee hearings starting Thursday. Legislators are hoping that money for some of the largest segments of the plan can be distributed in April.

New York

NEW YORK — A woman said she was fired from her server job at a New York City restaurant over not yet wanting to get the coronavirus vaccine, which the restaurant said was a requirement.

Bonnie Jacobson, 34, told The New York Times she was fired Monday from the Red Hook Tavern in Brooklyn, after she told management that she wanted to hold off because she and her husband are trying for a child and it's unclear if the vaccines could have any impact on that.

She said employees received an email from the restaurant that getting vaccinated was a requirement, and when she said she wanted to wait, she received an email saying, "At this time your employment will be terminated. We are sad to see you go. If you do change your mind, please do not hesitate to let us

know."

The federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has said employers can require employees to get vaccinated.

In a statement, restaurant owner Billy Durney said, "Once New York state allowed restaurant workers to receive the COVID-19 vaccine, we thought this was the perfect opportunity to put a plan in place to keep our team and guests safe."

Vermont

MONTPELIER — Vermont's congressional delegation says the New Jersey vendor picked for the latest round of a federal food distribution program in Vermont is failing to meet the needs of hungry residents amid the pandemic.

Democratic Sen. Patrick Leahy, Rep. Peter Welch and independent Sen. Bernie Sanders sent a letter to U.S. Agriculture Secretary-designate Tom Vilsack on Friday saying that Global Trading Enterprises LLC, which won the contract for the latest round of Farmers to Families Food Box Program, "submitted a bid that is seemingly too low for them to deliver food boxes to the areas promised under the contract."

Global Trading Enterprises is only delivering food boxes to seven locations in just five of the state's 14 counties, the delegation said.

"This will leave nearly 250 towns, and hundreds Vermont families, without the food assistance they were promised under this federal program," they wrote in the letter.

Missouri

O'FALLON — Rural Missouri counties are both the most and least successful at getting the COVID-19 vaccine into the arms of residents, according to data from the state's coronavirus dashboard on Wednesday.

Shelby County, with just 6,400 residents in a remote area of northeast Missouri, has provided

at least one dose of the vaccine to 20.7% of residents. Atchison County, with just under 6,000 residents in Missouri's far northwestern corner, has vaccinated 20.2% of residents, followed by Worth County at 18.2%.

Among the top 15 counties for vaccinations, just one — Cape Girardeau County — has more than 50,000 residents. Cape Girardeau County is tied for fourth with Gasconade County, where 17% of residents have received a dose.

Pulaski County, which is home to Fort Leonard Wood and has 52,000 residents, has the lowest vaccination rate at just 4.2%, followed by other outstate counties — Newton at 4.4%, McDonald at 4.7%, Crawford at 5.2% and Pemiscot at 5.5%.

Overall, 10.6% of Missourians have received at least one dose, and data shows the two urban areas lag behind.

Wyoming

CASPER — The Wyoming Department of Health has warned residents about phone scammers who are promising quicker access to a coronavirus vaccine in exchange for personal information.

The health department reiterated that all coronavirus vaccines are free and recipients will not be asked for their health insurance information or Social Security number over the phone, the Casper Star-Tribune reported Tuesday.

Insurance is not needed to receive a vaccine. The most county health departments may ask for a person's insurance or Medicare information.

The state is currently in Phase 1B of its vaccination tier system, which includes residents 65 and older, people with certain pre-existing conditions and some front-line workers.

Pennsylvania

Pennsylvania is facing a temporary shortage of booster shots of the Moderna vaccine because

providers inadvertently used them as first doses, setting back the state's already stumbling vaccine rollout.

The error could mean more than 100,000 people will need appointments rescheduled, state health officials said Wednesday.

About 30,000 to 60,000 appointments for the COVID-19 booster shot will need to be pushed back by one or two weeks, said Alison Beam, the state's acting health secretary. Delivery of another 30,000 to 55,000 initial doses of the Moderna vaccine will need to be delayed, as well, as officials scramble to get Pennsylvania back on track.

The second-dose shortage does not affect the Pfizer vaccine.

Wisconsin

MADISON — More than 1 million doses of the coronavirus vaccine have been administered to more than 740,000 people in Wisconsin, the state Department of Health Services reported Wednesday.

Gov. Tony Evers praised the milestone, calling it "exciting news" while also urging people to remain vigilant.

To date, nearly 264,000 people have received both doses and 740,450 have gotten at least one, the state health department reported.

Wisconsin ranked seventh in the percentage of its population that has received at least one dose through Tuesday, according to the U.S. Centers of Disease Control and Prevention. In Wisconsin, 12.7% of the population had gotten at least one dose, ahead of the national average of 12%.

The number of new COVID-19 cases in Wisconsin continues to decline, with the seven-day average as of Wednesday at 731. A month ago, the seven-day average was 2,129. The average is now at its lowest point since early September.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Gambler scores \$1.1M jackpot, tips dealers

NJ ATLANTIC CITY — A gambler who hit a \$1.1 million jackpot on a progressive poker game after placing a \$5 wager at an Atlantic City casino celebrated his win by offering a \$50,000 tip to the dealers on shift.

Frank Nagy, who lives in Monmouth County, scored his big win Saturday afternoon at the Tropicana, where he has played for many years.

The win marked the largest jackpot on a progressive poker game in the history of the casino's parent company, Caesars Entertainment. The last time the jackpot was hit was in August 2019.

Argument over barking dog leads to fatal shooting

AZ PHOENIX — A 71-year-old man has been arrested in connection with a fatal shooting in west Phoenix that allegedly stemmed from an argument over a barking dog, according to authorities.

Phoenix police said Manuel De La Cruz-Rodriguez has been booked into Maricopa County Jail on suspicion of second-degree murder.

Police said Xavier Henriquez, 19, was on his cellphone Monday afternoon when a man came up to him and started arguing with him. The person who was on the other end of the phone call reportedly said the man was yelling at Henriquez about his dog barking, according to police. The person said a shot was heard.

Arriving police officers found Henriquez with a gunshot wound to the head. He was

rushed to the hospital and doctors later pronounced him dead.

Police said investigators found evidence connecting De La Cruz-Rodriguez to the shooting.

Ice fishing derby includes an impromptu wedding

NH MEREDITH — A 2.62-pound white perch won the grand prize and a couple got married at this year's Great Meredith Rotary Fishing Derby at Lake Winnepesaukee, one New Hampshire event that wasn't canceled because of the coronavirus pandemic.

Cameron MacDonald, 23, of Pittsfield, Mass., caught his winning fish on Saturday for the \$15,000 grand prize, The Laco-nia Daily Sun reported.

Also Saturday, Eric Peterson and Shannon Tinker decided to get married on Meredith Bay, in front of their Bud Light-themed bobhouse.

"We both wanted something simple, we both like being down there on the ice even though we never catch anything," Peterson said.

When the time came, about 75 anglers put down their fishing poles and walked over to be part of the impromptu — and socially distanced — wedding party.

11 rescued from streets after water main break

PA PHILADELPHIA — At least 11 people were rescued Tuesday evening after a large water main break in Philadelphia left cars submerged and the area completely flooded, authorities said.

The 48-inch break occurred around 6 p.m. in the Nicetown area of North Philadelphia, news

outlets reported.

Floodwaters consumed the streets, swamping cars and leaving workers and customers of a nearby U-Haul storage facility trapped inside, authorities said.

Philadelphia Fire Commissioner Adam Thiel said one woman was freed from her car, which was immersed in the floodwater, and 10 others were rescued from the U-Haul facility. No injuries were reported.

It's unclear what caused the rupture.

Boy escapes trash truck blade thanks to driver

FL TAMPA — A young Florida boy was nearly crushed when the garbage can he was hiding in was emptied into a garbage truck, authorities said.

Elias Quezada, 7, had climbed into his grandmother's garbage can while he was playing outside, last Tuesday.

Thankfully, garbage truck driver Waldo Fidele was monitoring the trash being emptied into the truck and noticed something unusual being dropped in. He turned off the blade and called 911.

"I come outside, I see him, he seemed happy," Fidele said. "I said, 'OK, you're OK now.'"

It's an experience the boy won't soon forget.

"I got picked up and thrown to where I was going to be a mashed potato," the boy told WFLA in Tampa.

West Coast quake warning system to finish rollout

CA LOS ANGELES — The earthquake early warning system known as ShakeAlert will be capable of deliver-

ing alerts directly to wireless devices in Oregon on March 11 and to Washington state in May, completing the West Coast rollout, the U.S. Geological Survey said Tuesday.

The ShakeAlert system, which warns of significant quakes, has been enabled in California since October 2019. The system uses a network of sensors that detect the start of an earthquake and calculate magnitude, location and the expected amount of shaking. It sends the information in real time to distributors that send out alerts to cellphones and the internet.

The information moves so quickly that people may have valuable seconds to protect themselves before shaking arrives, trains can be slowed or industrial processes stopped.

Graceland plans in-person events during Elvis Week

TN MEMPHIS — On the 44th anniversary of Elvis Presley's death, fans will get to celebrate the musician once again at the annual Elvis Week event in Memphis, Tenn.

Presley's Graceland is preparing to host visitors and offer in-person events for Elvis Week from Aug. 11 through Aug. 17. Organizers said public health protocols will be in place, including the requirement of masks, temperature screenings and socially distanced seating.

Since Presley's death on Aug. 16, 1977, fans have flocked to Memphis to commemorate his life and career in the week leading up to his death anniversary. Because of the coronavirus pandemic, Elvis Week events were mostly held online last year.

— From wire reports

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New spring, same protocols for MLB

Associated Press

Completing the 2020 season required MLB to rewrite its rule book. Stadiums were emptied, schedules rewritten. Some players opted out. The ones that didn't spat into COVID-19 testing cups until their mouths went dry.

"When it was all said and done, you kind of look back and go, 'God, that was the longest 60 games I've ever been a part of,'" veteran pitcher Jon Lester said last month.

Well, to borrow from another Chicago Cubs favorite:

Let's play 162!

Against the backdrop of a still dangerous coronavirus pandemic, pitchers and catchers are reporting to spring training this week, the first step in a 2021 season that will take many of the complexities from 2020's 60-game sprint and stretch them over an additional four months.

Sure, there's the usual buzz over players with new homes. Blake Snell and Yu Darvish, hoping to push the upstart San Diego Padres over the top. Still in their way, the World Series champion Los Angeles Dodg-

ers, who upgraded with NL Cy Young Award winner Trevor Bauer. Francisco Lindor is a Met, Nolan Arenado a Cardinal, and George Springer and Marcus Semien have joined up with the Blue Jays.

This season, though, promises to again be defined by the pandemic.

Offers by MLB to delay opening day were rejected by the players' association last month, defaulting the league into an on-time start.

Baseball will again use seven-inning doubleheaders and runners on second base to start extra innings — experiments introduced during last year's condensed regular season to ease the burden on pitchers amid a flood of postponements prompted by positive tests and contact tracing.

Sunflower seeds are still outlawed, and high-fives frowned upon, too. Although limited-capacity crowds are expected at many stadiums, autographs will remain a no-no.

Other 2020 changes have been put on the bench. The universal designated hitter is gone, and no deal has been re-

ached to reexpand the postseason. Of course, last year's agreement to fatten the playoff field from 10 to 16 teams wasn't finished until hours before the first pitch on opening day, so there's precedent for a late change.

Then again, the league and union have agreed on little lately — hardly a promising sign with the collective bargaining agreement set to expire Dec. 1. Expect chatter about that this spring, too.

Scheduling figures to remain a headache. There were 45 games postponed for coronavirus-related reasons last year, and all but two were made up.

Players will again be tested 3-4 times per week for COVID-19 and heavily restricted in what they can do during their time off. Lester, signed by Washington as a free agent in January after six seasons with the Cubs, compared the exhaustion of last year's protocols to a deep playoff run.

"Mentally, you don't realize how draining it is until you're done," he said. "I think last year was that. It was two months of that mental grind of

the testing, worrying about the testing, making sure you're doing all the right things."

And now it's time to start all over, beginning soon in Clearwater, Tempe and all the familiar camp sites.

Spring rosters will be limited to 75 players, with minor league camps delayed until the big leaguers leave town for opening day April 1. For fans accustomed to exploring the backfields, there won't be much to see.

The good news for all involved — spread of the virus has slowed near camps. Arizona has dropped from a peak of nearly 14,000 cases in one day to under 2,000, while Florida went from a high of 19,000 cases to under 8,000.

Still, MLB has adopted extra spring precautions. The Grapefruit League schedule was reworked to limit travel, and clubs won't play exhibitions against local colleges — usually a spring staple. Some early games may be shortened to five or seven innings, and half-innings can be called off before three outs if a pitcher has thrown at least 20 pitches.

AP: Tatis Jr., Padres agree on 14-year, \$340M deal

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Fernando Tatis Jr. has helped make baseball fun again in San Diego.

In return, the Padres have agreed to give the electrifying shortstop a \$340 million, 14-year deal that could keep him with San Diego until he's 35 years old, according to two people familiar with the situation.

The two people spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity Wednesday night because the deal hadn't been announced.

It will be the longest contract signed in MLB history. Giancarlo Stanton, now with the New York Yankees, signed a 13-year, \$325 million deal with Miami in 2015. Bryce Harper signed a 13-year, \$330 million deal with Philadelphia in 2019. The

biggest deal by dollars remains Mike Trout's \$426.5 million, 12-year contract signed with the Angels in 2019.

The 22-year-old Tatis has bloomed into a superstar in less than two full seasons with the Padres, hitting .301 with 39 home runs, 98 RBIs and 27 stolen bases in 143 games. He helped San Diego end a 13-year playoff drought in 2020 and win a wild-card series against the St. Louis Cardinals before the Padres were swept by the rival Los Angeles Dodgers in the NL Division Series.

He has quickly become one of the faces of baseball. He stands out because of his flair, easy smile, blond dreadlocks flowing from under his cap, a uniform dirtied by his hard-charging play and his dance moves in the dugout after hitting home runs.

Tatis was literally raised in the game at the feet of his father, who played 11 seasons in the big leagues. He has dared to challenge old-school norms — after hitting his second home run in an 11-9 win in Game 2 of the wild-card series against the Cardinals, he unleashed an emphatic bat flip. A photo of Tatis in that moment is on the cover of the video game MLB The Show '21.

In August, Tatis caused a stir when he hit a grand slam on a 3-0 count with the Padres leading the Texas Rangers by seven runs. The furor died down and the Padres became the first team in MLB history to hit grand slams in four straight games and five in six games.

Tatis comes from San Pedro de Macoris, Dominican Republic, also known as the Cradle of Shortstops.

Jazz crush Clippers for 9th straight

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Donovan Mitchell scored 24 points, Rudy Gobert had 23 points and 20 rebounds, and the Utah Jazz rolled past the short-handed Los Angeles Clippers 114-96 on Wednesday night for their ninth consecutive victory.

Jordan Clarkson scored 18 points for the NBA-leading Jazz, who improved to 24-5 with their 20th win in 21 games. After three tight quarters, Utah broke it open in the fourth to win this matchup of Western Conference powerhouses — although it wasn't a proper showdown with Los Angeles missing injured superstars Kawhi Leonard and Paul George.

With the 7-foot-1 Gobert scoring 17 points in the second half while playing a dominant game on both ends of the court, the Jazz beat the Clippers for the ninth time in the teams' last 12 matchups.

"I think it really started from the defensive end, our physicality," Gobert said. "They were really aggressive in the first half. They were just playing harder than us. Regardless of who we play, we can't really let that happen if we're going to be the team we want to be. In the second half, we became more aggressive and we got better shots."

The Jazz opened up a tight game with a 14-2 run spanning the third and fourth quarters.

Lillard's 43-point effort lifts Blazers past Pelicans

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Damian Lillard scored 43 points, including a go-ahead three-point play with 16.5 seconds left Wednesday, to lift the Portland Trail Blazers to a 126-124 defeat of New Orleans for their sixth consecutive victory.

Lillard also added 16 assists — his third consecutive game of at least 30 points and 10 assists.

Lillard had 11 fourth-quarter points and was clutch in the final seven minutes. JJ Redick gave the Pelicans a 105-103 lead with 7:34 left, capping a 7-0 New Orleans run, but Lillard then came off the bench and immediately hit a three-pointer as the Trail Blazers regained the lead. Anfernee Simons added a three-pointer on the next possession to make it 109-105.

Hawks 122, Celtics 114: Trae Young had 40 points and eight assists and Atlanta won at Boston to snap a four-game losing streak. Clint Capela had 24 points and 13 rebounds to help the Hawks win in Boston for the first time since April 8, 2018, ending a seven-game losing streak. John Collins added 20 points and six rebounds.

Warriors 120, Heat 112 (OT): Stephen Curry hit a go-ahead three-pointer with 1:15 left in overtime and had 25 points, 11 assists and seven rebounds to help Golden State outlast visiting Miami.

Kent Bazemore had a season-high 26 points for the Warriors. Draymond Green was a late scratch by Golden State because of right ankle soreness.

76ers 118, Rockets 113: Joel Embiid had 31 points, 11 rebounds and nine assists and hit a key jumper late in host Philadel-

phia's victory over Houston.

Seth Curry scored 25 points, and Tobias Harris added 24 to help the Eastern Conference-leading 76ers snap a three-game losing streak. Ben Simmons (illness) didn't play for Philadelphia a game after scoring a career-high 42 points and adding nine rebounds and 12 assists.

Wizards 130, Nuggets 128: Bradley Beal made two free throws with a tenth of a second left and Washington beat visiting Denver for its third straight victory.

Davis Bertans had career highs with nine three-pointers and 35 points.

Magic 107, Knicks 89: Terrence Ross scored 18 of his season-high 30 points in the second half and host Orlando used a decisive third-quarter run to beat New York.

Pacers 134, Timberwolves 128 (OT): Domantas Sabonis had 36 points, 17 rebounds and 10 rebounds, Malcolm Brogdon added 32 points and nine rebounds and Indiana won at Minnesota in overtime.

Grizzlies 122, Thunder 113: Grayson Allen and Jonas Valanciunas each scored 22 points, and Ja Morant had 15 points, 11 rebounds and 12 assists for his first triple-double of the season and host Memphis beat Oklahoma City.

Bulls 105, Pistons 102: Zach LaVine scored 37 points and host Chicago beat Detroit on short notice.

The Bulls were scheduled to visit Charlotte, with the Pistons at Dallas. Those games got called off Tuesday by the NBA because of COVID-19 contact tracing concerns with the Hornets and power outages in Texas. Chicago and Detroit were then scheduled to play each other, instead.

USC, led by Mobley brothers, downs Arizona State

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Evan Mobley had 22 points, nine rebounds and seven assists, and No. 17 Southern California beat Arizona State 89-71 on Wednesday night to stay atop the Pac-12.

Isaiah Mobley added 20 points and 12 rebounds, and Tahj Eaddy had 18 points for the Trojans, who improved to 18-3 to start a season for the first time since 1973-74. They're 12-2 in the league and have won 13 of 14 overall.

Pac-12 scoring leader Remy Martin scored 30 points — three off his career high — for the Sun Devils (7-10, 4-7). Kimani Lawrence added 12 points.

The Mobley brothers dominated the first 10 minutes of the second half, outscoring Arizona State 18-10 on their own.

No. 19 Tennessee 93, South Carolina 73: Victor Bailey drilled 7 of 10 three-pointers and scored a career-high 29 points to lead the host Vols past the Gamecocks.

No. 22 Loyola Chicago 54, Valparaiso 52: Keith Clemons scored 16 points, Cam-

eron Krutwig added 13 and the host Ramblers made a defensive stop in the final seconds to finish off Valparaiso.

Loyola Chicago (19-4, 14-2 Missouri Valley Conference) has won 12 of 13 and extended its home winning streak to 20 games. Loyola lost its previous game, 51-50, in overtime at Drake on Sunday.

No. 23 Kansas 59, Kansas State 41: Marcus Garrett scored 14 points, Jalen Wilton added 11 and the Jayhawks won on the road. Kansas (16-7, 10-5 Big 12) held the Wildcats to a season low in points.

Osaka stops Williams in semifinals

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — As Serena Williams walked off the court after her latest so-close-yet-so-far bid for a 24th Grand Slam title ended with a loss to Naomi Osaka at the Australian Open, the 39-year-old American paused and put her hand on her chest while thousands of spectators rose to applaud.

Was this, Williams was asked at a news conference after the 6-3, 6-4 semifinal defeat, her way of saying goodbye?

"If I ever say farewell," she replied with a smile, "I wouldn't tell anyone."

When the next question returned the conversation to the subject of Williams' many mistakes Thursday — twice as many unforced errors, 24, as winners, 12 — she shook her head, teared up, said, "I'm done," and abruptly walked out of the session with reporters.

On Saturday, at 7:30 p.m. local time, Osaka will meet first-time Grand Slam finalist Jen-

nifer Brady of the United States for the championship. The 22nd-seeded Brady, who is from Pennsylvania and played college tennis at UCLA, prevailed in an epic, 18-point last game to edge No. 25 Karolina Muchova 6-4, 3-6, 6-4 in the semifinals.

Brady dropped to her back at the baseline after saving a trio of break points, then converting her fifth match point when Muchova sent a forehand long.

"My legs are shaking," Brady said. "My heart is racing."

She lost to Osaka in a three-set thriller in the U.S. Open semifinals last September.

"Everyone's just really excited whenever they play their first final," Osaka noted about what awaits Brady, "but they're also really nervous."

Williams was hoping to get to her 34th Grand Slam final but, once again, couldn't quite get the job done in order to add one more Grand Slam trophy to her collection of 23 and equal Margaret Court for the most in tennis history.

Osaka, who also beat Williams in the chaotic 2018 U.S. Open final that concluded with the crowd booing and both women in tears, reached her fourth major title match and stretched her winning streak to 20 matches by claiming the last eight points.

"I don't know if there's any little kids out here today, but I was a little kid watching her play," Osaka, 23, said about Williams, "and just to be on the court playing against her, for me, is a dream."

The No. 3-seeded Osaka's Grand Slam collection also includes last year's U.S. Open and the 2019 Australian Open and she is, without a doubt, the most dangerous hard-court player in the women's game at the moment.

That used to be Williams, of course. But she was off-target too much in this contest.

"I could have won. I could have been up 5-Love," said Williams, who instead took a 2-0

lead at the outset before dropping the next five games. "I just made so many errors."

Her forehand, in particular, went awry, with no fewer than 10 unforced errors off that side in the first set alone.

"Too many mistakes there," she said. "Easy mistakes."

That stage hasn't been a problem for top-ranked Novak Djokovic, who has won 14 of his last semifinals at Grand Slam events. His record is perfect in semifinals at Melbourne Park, improving to 9-0 with a 6-3, 6-4, 6-2 win late Thursday over Aslan Karatsev, a Russian qualifier who was ranked No. 114 and making his debut in a major.

Djokovic is seeking a ninth Australian Open title and 18th Grand Slam trophy overall. Karatsev was playing in his first Grand Slam tournament.

Rafael Nadal — who lost in the quarterfinals to Stefanos Tsitsipas after blowing a two-set lead — and Roger Federer are tied for the men's record of 20.

Kerfoot lifts Leafs over Senators

Associated Press

TORONTO — Alexander Kerfoot broke a tie with 9:14 left, Frederik Andersen made 27 saves and the NHL-leading Toronto Maple Leafs beat the last-place Ottawa Senators 2-1 on Wednesday night.

Auston Matthews added his NHL-leading 14th goal for Toronto in the second game of a three-game series in Toronto. Jake Muzzin had two assists.

In the opener Monday night, Ottawa overcame a 5-1 deficit in a 6-5 overtime victory. The teams will wrap up the series Thursday night.

Brady Tkachuk scored for the Senators, and Matt Murray made 26 stops.

Not long after a Maple Leafs power play ended, Kerfoot fished a puck out of a scramble in front of Murray following Muzzin's initial shot for his third goal of the season.

Toronto opened the scoring at 4:32 of

the second on Matthews' 13th goal in his last 12 games. Moments after Joe Thornton had one of his own waved off for the second time in the game — a high stick on this occasion — Matthews took a pass from Justin Holl and rifled a one-timer past Murray.

Panthers 4, Hurricanes 3 (OT): Jonathan Huberdeau scored his second goal of the game midway through overtime to lift Florida to a win at Carolina.

Blackhawks 2, Red Wings 0: Kevin Lankinen made 29 saves for his first career shutout and fellow rookie Philipp Kurashev scored a pretty goal in Chicago's victory at Detroit.

Oilers 3, Jets 2: Leon Draisaitl scored two goals and host Edmonton beat Winnipeg to complete a split of a two-game set with the Jets.

Canucks 5, Flames 1: Brock Boeser had a goal and two assists to lead Vancouver to a win at Calgary.

Source: Wentz headed to Colts

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — The Philadelphia Eagles have agreed to trade Carson Wentz to the Indianapolis Colts, according to a person familiar with the deal.

The Eagles will receive a third-round pick in this year's draft and a conditional second-round pick in 2022 that can turn into a first-round pick if Wentz plays 75% of the snaps this year or 70% and the Colts make the playoffs.

The person spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the deal hasn't been announced.

Wentz is coming off the worst season of his five-year career and was benched for rookie Jalen Hurts after 12 games. He finished third in NFL MVP voting in 2017 when he led the Eagles to an 11-2 record before a knee injury ended his season and Philadelphia went on to win its only Super Bowl title.