

Marines aim to create 'smarter' infantry

By CHAD GARLAND

Stars and Stripes

The Marine Corps is ditching some of its formation marches and adding board games to a new, longer entry-level infantry training course aimed at creating Marines who can better think and act for themselves.

The Infantry Marine Course pilot program launched last month at the service's School of Infantry-West on Camp Pendleton, Calif., where instructors were pictured instructing new Marines on how chess relates to battle-field tactics. The course focuses less on micro-management and more on individual responsibility, the service said in a statement.

"Rote memorization, instant obedience to orders are good for certain things, and they're not getting thrown away from this course," Chief Warrant Officer 3 A.J. Pascuiti, the training battalion's gunner, said in Friday's statement. "We're just going a step further, and understanding that the individual — and a collective of individuals — is what wins in combat."

Already about double the length of the course it's meant to replace, the pilot is expected to eventually grow to 18 weeks, USNI News reported late last year. The new course was developed over a year and is based on Commandant Gen. David Berger's plan for re-vamping the service for future conflicts.

Under Berger's vision, grunts will be expected to fight in small units that will be highly mobile and independent, and often dispersed far from headquarters. The new course is aimed at giving rookie Marines the tactical and cognitive skills to act on their own, and takes a "fundamentally different approach" than its eight-week predecessor, the Corps said.

"To be more dispersed and more precise, we need privates now that can operate by themselves and don't have to be told and shown where to go all the time," said Lt. Col. Walker Koury, the training battalion's commander.

The unit's Alpha Company is taking the course first before a second one launches at

Camp Lejeune, N.C., later this spring. It's expected to alternate two more cycles between the east and west coasts before being finalized next year, the statement said.

After initial training on a topic, Marines will be expected to apply their own thinking the next time it comes up. Instead of following itemized gear lists and being marched where they need to be, they'll be expected to be more responsible for themselves throughout the course. Playing chess is meant to encourage them to think about their actions in a complex environment. They'll also no longer be trained in terms of narrow specialties such as rifleman, machine gunner, mortarman or anti-tank missileman, but instead will be expected to be proficient in every company-level weapon by graduation.

Later weeks of the training will focus on testing the Marines' knowledge while they work in fire teams and squads, learning to patrol over complex terrain and employ fire and maneuver tactics. Students also will lead force-on-force actions during the latter phase.

US closes in on 500K deaths from coronavirus

Associated Press

Just one year ago, America had no idea. Life in February 2020 still felt normal. Concern was building about a mystery respiratory illness that had just been named COVID-19. There was panic buying, and a sense of trepidation. Yet it was tempered by a large dose of American optimism. The coronavirus still felt like a foreign problem, even as U.S. authorities recorded the country's first known death from the virus.

Precisely a year later, America is hurtling toward a horrifying milestone of 500,000 deaths from COVID-19.

The first known deaths from the virus in the U.S. happened in early February 2020, both of them in Santa Clara County, Calif. It took four months to reach the first 100,000 dead. The toll hit 200,000 deaths in September and 300,000 in December. Then it took just over a month to go from 300,000 to 400,000 and about two months to climb from 400,000 to the brink of 500,000.

The running total passed 499,000 Monday, roughly the population of Kansas City, Mo., and just shy of the size of Atlanta. The figure compiled by Johns Hopkins University surpasses the number of people who died in 2019 of chronic lower respiratory diseases, stroke, Alzheimer's, flu and pneumonia combined.

The global death toll was approaching 2.5 million, according to Johns Hopkins.

President Joe Biden planned to honor the 500,000 lives lost from COVID-19 with a moment of silence and candle lighting ceremony at sunset Monday at the White House.

He's expected to be joined by first lady Jill Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris and her husband, Doug Emhoff.

Words like shutdown and social distancing were not yet part of our national vocabulary in those early days. Few of us wore masks as we stood in long lines to stockpile groceries and cleared the shelves of toilet paper.

The World Health Organization declared the crisis a pandemic in March, and everything from college campuses to corporate headquarters cleared out.

Dr. Anthony Fauci, the nation's leading expert on infectious disease, became a household name in daily news conferences. When he estimated in March that 100,000 to 200,000 Americans could die from the virus, horror was tempered by total disbelief.

Amid escalating loss, vaccines arrived in mid-December, kicking off the biggest vaccination effort in U.S. history. It felt like the first good news in a doomed year.

As the country and the world bid goodbye, and good riddance, to 2020 it became clear that 2021, at least the early months, would look pretty similar.

The COVID-19 death toll is not stopping at 500,000, and the virus has mutated countless times, with some variants easier to spread and harder to protect against.

GI charged in neo-Nazi plot: Jury lacks diversity

By CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

A soldier indicted on federal charges of conspiring with neo-Nazis to ambush his own unit wants his case dismissed because the grand jury didn't include enough Black and Hispanic members.

Pvt. Ethan Melzer's attorneys said the lack of diversity in the jury pool violated their client's rights to an impartial jury and due process. But prosecutors said they adhered to the Constitution and federal law.

The two sides met Monday with U.S. District Judge Gregory H. Woods over the phone to discuss the case and set deadlines for upcoming motions, pending a decision on the defense motion to dismiss, which was filed in November.

Melzer, 22, was arrested last spring in Italy, where he served

with the 173rd Airborne Brigade, and pleaded not guilty in September to eight charges, including conspiracy to kill U.S. nationals, and conspiring and attempting to murder U.S. service members, as well as providing support to terrorists. Prosecutors accused him of using an encrypted app to send sensitive details about his unit's locations, movements and security to members of the extremist groups Order of the Nine Angles, or O9A, and the neo-Nazi "Rape-Waffen Division." They say he sought to plot an ambush on his unit during a planned deployment to Turkey.

The grand jury that indicted him was drawn from the northern part of the Southern District of New York and convened in White Plains, though the case is being tried in a Manhattan federal courthouse in the district's south, where there's a larger Black and Hispanic population. Melzer's at-

torneys said prosecutors violated his rights under the Fifth and Sixth amendments, and a 1968 federal law, when they sought the indictment in the less diverse community.

"Allowing a defendant to be indicted in one division and tried in another opens the door to prosecutorial gamesmanship where the government can forum shop for the racial, gender and economic demographics of their choice," the attorneys wrote.

But in an opposing motion filed in late December, prosecutors said they sought and obtained indictments in June and August from one of the few available federal grand juries in the district as the coronavirus pandemic forced suspension of other grand juries throughout the country.

Doing so was consistent with the law because the jury was in the same district as the trial court, they argued.

"Most of the defendant's claims to the contrary rest on a faulty premise: That a defendant who is likely to be tried in the Manhattan courthouse must be indicted by a grand jury sitting in that same courthouse," the federal prosecutors wrote. "That is not the law."

They argued that the defense's analysis of demographics relies on an "apples-to-oranges comparison" of the minority makeup of the jury pool and the communities, and that any minority underrepresentation in the jury selection process is the result of what courts have found to be outside factors, not prohibited systematic exclusion.

The judge has yet to issue a decision on the motion on Melzer's case, said defense attorney Jennifer Willis, who works for a non-profit that defends poor people charged with federal crimes.

French navy helps block illegal trades by N. Korea

By HANA KUSUMOTO
Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — A French navy frigate will patrol the East China Sea until early March as part of United Nations efforts to enforce sanctions on North Korea, according to Japan's Ministry of Defense.

The frigate *Prairial* will look for illicit ship-to-ship transfers of goods by North Korea, whose commerce is shackled by the U.N. until it dismantles its nuclear weapons program.

The U.N. since 2006 has passed almost a dozen resolutions aimed at North Korea, including bans on sales or purchase of military equipment and the export of electrical equipment, coal, agricultural products and other goods, according to the Council on Foreign Relations.

This is the second time since 2019 that a French vessel has pa-

trolled in the East China Sea, the ministry said on its website Thursday.

Japan welcomes France's contribution toward dismantling North Korea's nuclear weapons and ballistic missiles in a "complete, verifiable and irreversible manner," according to the ministry. The Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and coast guard will cooperate with other nations enforcing those sanctions and gather information on vessels suspected of making illegal transfers with North Korea, the ministry said.

The *Prairial* took part in a refueling exercise with the U.S. Navy and JMSDF on Friday in southern Japanese waters, according to a JMSDF news release.

European countries are increasing their presence and cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region due to rising concern over China's military activities.

Soldier in Germany loses appeal for return of drone

By MARCUS KLOECKNER
AND IMMANUEL JOHNSON
Stars and Stripes

GRAFENWOEHR, Germany — A U.S. soldier who was fined 500 euros and had his electronics confiscated after shooting aerial pictures of the 2019 Oktoberfest in Munich lost his appeal to have his drone returned, court officials said Monday.

The service member, whom German media reports and the Army have identified as Feng Q., in late September 2019 violated a German law when he flew his drone over the vast field where Oktoberfest is held, a spokesman for the district court in Munich, Klaus-Peter Juengst, told *Stars and Stripes* by email.

A law enacted on Aug. 1, 2019, declared the air space above Oktoberfest a no-fly zone, Juengst said.

The soldier, who the Army said

is assigned to U.S. Medical Department Activity Bavaria in Vilseck, said "there were no signs anywhere" to indicate flying was forbidden over the Theresienwiese, where the beer festival is held, the *Bild Zeitung* tabloid quoted him as saying. But the court argued that it was reasonable to expect him and anyone else to know that "flying an object over a gathering of people like the Oktoberfest is prohibited," Juengst said. The authorities estimate that 6.3 million people attended the festival, which ran from Sept. 21 to Oct. 6, 2019.

German police tracked down the American as he flew his drone around 150 feet above the festival on the opening night. They confiscated the drone and his cellphone.

The court in Munich agreed Friday to return the soldier's phone but rejected his request to recover his drone, Juengst said.

China urges US to remove trade limits, stop conflict

Associated Press

BEIJING — China's top diplomat called Monday for President Joe Biden's administration to lift restrictions on trade and people-to-people contacts while ceasing what Beijing considers unwarranted interference in the areas of Taiwan, Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Tibet.

Foreign Minister Wang Yi's comments at a Foreign Ministry forum on U.S.-China relations come as Beijing presses the new administration in Washington to drop many of the confrontational measures adopted by former President Donald Trump.

Trump hiked tariffs on Chinese imports in 2017 and imposed bans and other restrictions on Chinese tech companies and academic exchanges as he sought to address concerns about an imbalance in trade and accusations of Chinese theft of American technology.

Trump also upgraded military and diplomatic ties with Taiwan, the self-governing island democracy claimed by China as its own territory, while sanctioning Chinese officials blamed for abuses against Muslim minorities in Xinjiang and a crackdown on freedoms in Hong Kong.

"We know that the new U.S. administration is reviewing and assessing its foreign policy," Wang told diplomats, scholars and journalists at the Lanting Forum. "We hope

that the U.S. policy makers will keep pace with the times, see clearly the trend of the world, abandon biases, give up unwarranted suspicions and move to bring the China policy back to reason to ensure a healthy, steady development of China-U.S. relations."

Wang put the onus for improving relations squarely on the shoulders of the U.S. and offered no direct proposals for major breakthroughs.

Wang said China has "no intention to challenge or replace the United States" and is ready to peacefully coexist and seek common development.

Wang urged the U.S. to "stop smearing" the reputation of China's ruling Communist Party and to "stop conniving at or even supporting the erroneous words and actions of separatist forces for Taiwan independence and stop undermining China's sovereignty and security on internal affairs concerning Hong Kong, Xinjiang and Tibet."

On trade, Wang said China would defend the rights of U.S. companies while hoping the U.S. would "adjust its policies as soon as possible, among others, remove unreasonable tariffs on Chinese goods, lift its unilateral sanctions on Chinese companies and research and educational institutes and abandon irrational suppression of China's technological progress."

Boeing wants to ground 777s after engine failure

Associated Press

Boeing has recommended that airlines ground all 777s with the type of engine that suffered a catastrophic failure over Denver over the weekend, as U.S. regulators ordered United Airlines to step up inspections of those planes.

Several airlines, including United, said they were temporarily removing the aircraft from service after one of the American carrier's planes made an emergency landing at Denver International Airport on Saturday because its right engine blew apart just after takeoff. Pieces of the casing of the engine, a Pratt & Whitney PW4000, rained down on suburban neighborhoods. None of the 231 passengers or 10 crew on board were hurt, and the plane landed safely, authorities said.

U.S. Federal Aviation Administration Administrator Steve Dickson said in a statement Sunday that based on an initial review of safety data, inspectors "concluded that the inspection interval should be stepped up for the hollow fan blades that are unique to this model of engine, used solely on Boeing 777 airplanes."

Dickson said that would likely mean some planes would be grounded — and Boeing said they should be until the FAA sets up an inspection regime. Japan ordered the planes out of service, according to the financial newspaper Nikkei, while saying that an engine in the same family suffered trouble in December.

Boeing said there were 69 777s with the Pratt & Whitney 4000-112 engines in service and another 59 in storage.

United is the only U.S. airline with the engine in its fleet, according to the FAA, and it had 24 of the planes in service. Two Japanese airlines have another 32 that are being pulled while Asiana Airlines grounded nine, seven of which were in service, until Boeing establishes a plan to fix the problems. Korean Air said it was discussing whether to ground 16 aircraft, six of which are in service.

"We are working with these regulators as they take actions while these planes are on the ground and further inspections are conducted by Pratt & Whitney," Boeing said in a statement issued Sunday, referring to American and Japanese regulators.

The engine maker said it was sending a team to work with investigators.

Supreme Court won't impede turnover of Trump's tax returns

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — In a significant defeat for former President Donald Trump, the Supreme Court on Monday declined to step in to halt the turnover of his tax records to a New York state prosecutor.

The court's action is the apparent culmination of a lengthy legal battle that had already reached the high court once before.

Trump's tax records are not supposed to become public as part of prosecutors' criminal investigation, but the high court's action is a blow to Trump because he has long fought on so many fronts to keep his tax records shielded from view. The ongoing investigation the records are part of

could also become an issue for Trump in his life after the presidency. Trump has called it "a fishing expedition" and "a continuation of the witch hunt — the greatest witch hunt in history."

The Supreme Court waited months to act in the case. The last of the written briefs in the case was filed Oct. 19. But a court that includes three Trump appointees waited through the election, Trump's challenge to his defeat and a month after Trump left office before issuing its order.

The court offered no explanation for the delay, and the legal issue before the justices did not involve whether Trump was due any special deference because he was president.

Mask-wearing may continue into 2022

From wire reports

Pandemic-weary Americans have employed a particular dependent clause so often that it has become a cliché: “When things are back to normal...”

Kids back to school. Parents back at work. Bars. Gyms. Concerts. Travel. Dinner parties.

It is a phrase as optimistic as it is anticipatory. But it hides a burning question: When will things be normal again?

Anthony Fauci, the nation’s top infectious disease official, gets asked that question several times per week, and he is aware of how closely Americans are following his every prediction amid the coronavirus pandemic.

“No, you know, I can’t say that, Dana,” Fauci told CNN’s Dana Bash when she asked him on Sunday whether his timeline for a return to normality had been pushed back by a year or more. “Because then it will be a sound bite that’s not true. I’m saying: We don’t know.”

If consensus among experts on this subject exists, it is that nobody really knows when normal will return. Fauci also said masks — for many Americans, one of the most visible signs of abnormality — may still be necessary in 2022.

“I think it is possible that is the case,” he said when asked whether Americans will still be wearing masks next year. The level of new infections must go “way down,” he added, before he could say people will not need face coverings.

“I want it to keep going down to a baseline that’s so low there is virtually no threat,” Fauci said. “If you combine getting most of the people in the country vaccinated with getting the level of virus in the community very, very low, then I believe you’re going to be able to say, you know, for the most part, we don’t necessarily have to wear masks.”

Arizona

PHOENIX — Arizona health

officials on Sunday reported 1,804 new COVID-19 cases and 25 additional deaths.

The latest numbers increased the state’s pandemic totals to 807,967 cases and 15,505 known deaths.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control said Saturday that Arizona ranked third in the country for COVID-19 deaths per capita over the last seven days and 19th in cases.

The number of ICU beds used by COVID-19 patients around the state declined to 501 on Saturday, the fewest since Nov. 22.

California

LOS ANGELES — California’s death toll during the coronavirus pandemic remains alarmingly high, topping 49,000 this weekend, even as the rates of new infections and hospitalizations continue to plummet across the state.

The number of patients in California hospitals with COVID-19 slipped below 7,000, a drop of more than a third over two weeks, the state Department of Public Health reported Sunday.

The 6,760 new confirmed cases are more than 85% below the mid-December peak of about 54,000. Total cases are approaching 3.45 million.

California reported another 408 deaths, bringing the total since the outbreak began to 49,105 — the highest in the nation.

New York

NEW YORK — The first case of the South African coronavirus variant has been discovered in a New York state resident, Gov. Andrew Cuomo said Sunday.

The South African variant case involved a resident of Long Island’s Nassau County, Cuomo said in a news release. The sequencing was conducted at Opentrons Labworks Inc.’s Pandemic Response Lab, a New York City-based commercial lab, and verified at the Wadsworth Center in Albany.

worth Center in Albany.

New York state’s latest COVID-19 numbers, meanwhile show a continued downward trend in hospitalizations and deaths following the holiday season spike.

There were fewer than 5,800 patients hospitalized with the virus Saturday, a decline of more than 800 from a week earlier.

Oklahoma

OKLAHOMA CITY — More than 1,000 new coronavirus cases and nearly 30 new deaths were reported in Oklahoma on Sunday, the state health department reported.

The 1,036 new cases and 26 new deaths reported by the Oklahoma State Department of Health brings the state’s total virus cases to 419,354 and the total deaths to 4,181 since the pandemic began.

The seven-day rolling average of new cases in the state has fallen below 1,000 during the past two weeks, dropping from 2,215.7 per day to 932.4, according to data from Johns Hopkins University. The seven-day rolling average of new cases has fallen to its lowest level since Sept. 16, according to the COVID Tracking Project. The seven-day rolling average of deaths declined from 34.1 per day to 24.7 during the past two weeks.

More than 681,400 Oklahomans have now received the coronavirus vaccine, including more than 204,000 who have received both required doses, according to the Oklahoma State Department of Health report.

Texas

AUSTIN — Hospitalizations in Texas due to the coronavirus dropped Sunday to their lowest level since mid-November, according to data released Sunday by state health officials.

The Texas Department of State Health Services reported 7,146 hospitalizations. That is the lowest it has been since the

7,083 hospitalizations on Nov. 12. Hospitalizations have been steadily dropping since mid-January.

There were an additional 130 COVID-19 deaths and more than 4,259 new cases, the department reported.

Texas has had more than 2.5 million coronavirus cases since the pandemic began, and more than 42,000 deaths due to COVID-19, the third-highest death count in the United States, according to data from the COVID Tracking Project and Johns Hopkins University.

The seven-day rolling average of new cases has fallen from nearly 18,980 per day to nearly 5,041 and the average of daily deaths has dropped from 305.7 per day to 127.3, according to the COVID Tracking Project data. During the past two weeks, the rolling average of daily new cases in Texas has fallen by 13,354, a decrease of 75.9%, according to the Johns Hopkins figures.

Wisconsin

MILWAUKEE — The daily update on COVID-19 numbers posted Sunday by the Wisconsin Department of Health Services listed no deaths for the first time since late September.

Health officials confirmed 403 new cases in the last day, the lowest count since 324 positive tests were registered in late June. The new case average continued its decline with a mark of 610, the lowest number since 595 in early July.

The COVID Tracking Project reported that the rolling average number of daily new cases over the last two weeks in Wisconsin has decreased by 43%. There were about 203 new cases per 100,000 people in that time, which ranks 42nd in the country for new cases per capita.

A total of 559,575 cases and 6,284 deaths have been recorded in Wisconsin since the start of the pandemic.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Woman's face slashed in an unprovoked attack

NY NEW YORK — A 60-year-old woman was slashed across her face in an unprovoked attack on a Bronx street, according to New York City police.

The woman was walking along a sidewalk when a man approached her from behind and tapped her on the shoulder, police said. When she turned around, the man silently slashed her across the forehead and eyes before fleeing in a gray Honda Civic.

The victim was treated at a hospital.

Police released a photo of the vehicle, along with a plea for tips.

Redwood forest area preserved in \$25M deal

CA SAN FRANCISCO — A sprawling redwood forest north of San Francisco received permanent protection under a deal between a Bay Area environmental group and a family who has owned it since 1925.

Under the agreement, Save the Redwoods League paid \$24.7 million to buy a conservation easement over the sweeping Mailliard Ranch, located about 80 miles north of San Francisco in Mendocino County, the Mercury News reported.

The nearly 15,000-acre property belongs to the Mailliard Family, which includes Charlotte Mailliard Shultz, wife of former U.S. Secretary of State George Shultz, who died Feb. 6 in Palo Alto.

The forest will not be open to the public. The family will con-

tinue to own the property and be allowed to conduct commercial logging — at half the rate currently permitted under state laws — on second-growth redwoods there, as it has done for generations.

Crews rescue parachutist dangling from power lines

AZ ARIZONA CITY — A military parachutist who dropped onto high-voltage power lines in southern Arizona had to dangle for several hours before he could be safely rescued by firefighters and utility crews.

Firefighters arranged to have the lines de-energized before crews using a ladder truck could get near the parachutist and pull off the rescue, Eloy Fire District Assistant Chief Robert Maestas said.

The jump went awry south of Arizona City near a small private airport that had been the planned landing point for the training jump.

The parachutist was making the jump with other members of a small group of military personnel from a foreign country, Ian Mackenzie, military operations director for Airborne Support Group, an Arizona company that runs the drop zone, told The Associated Press.

Man convicted of robbing same bank twice in 1 year

SD SIOUX FALLS — A federal jury convicted a Nebraska man of robbing the same bank in South Dakota twice in a year's time.

Ferris Valentine was convicted of two counts of bank robbery in Sioux Falls.

The U.S. Attorney's Office in

South Dakota said the 54-year-old Omaha man and a partner robbed the First National Bank in Sioux Falls on Nov. 15, 2016.

Prosecutors said in November 2017, Valentine robbed the same bank again, wearing a mask, as he did in the first robbery, and again used a gun.

Officer fired after 8 force incidents in 5 months

SC COLUMBIA — A police officer who shot a man in the head during a traffic stop in South Carolina was fired after using force on at least eight people over the past five months, officials said.

Columbia Police officer Sean Rollins was fired for unsatisfactory performance after an internal review, police spokesperson Jennifer Timmons said.

The firing came after The Post and Courier of Charleston reviewed police reports and body camera footage from Rollins after he shot Sir Brandon Legette in the back of the head during a scuffle after a traffic stop in 2019.

The documents reviewed by the newspaper showed Rollins struck, forcibly subdued or used his stun gun on no fewer than eight people over five months.

Customs inspectors find cocaine-coated cereal

OH CINCINNATI — Customs authorities in Ohio said they intercepted a shipment of cereal earlier this month with a special frosting — cocaine.

U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers in Cincinnati reported finding 44 pounds of cocaine-coated cornflakes that

had been shipped from South America to a Hong Kong home.

Officials said a narcotics detection dog named Bico was checking out incoming freight from Peru on Feb. 13 when he alerted officers to the package. Officers found that the cereal contained white powder and the flakes were coated with a grayish substance. Both tested positive for cocaine.

After 2 years and 2-state journey, cat is back home

NE NORTH PLATTE — Nearly two years after going missing, a big black-and-white cat named Crookshaw is back with his Colorado family after being identified in Nebraska.

The North Platte Telegraph reported that the tuxedo cat and his owners were reunited after the cat's identity was discovered when his microchip was scanned at Tender Hearts Veterinary Center in North Platte. He had been missing from his home in Northglenn, Colo. — 258 miles away — since May 2019.

The cat's journey began when he wandered away from his home into a woman's yard. She assumed he was a stray and took him in, then moved from Colorado to North Platte, taking the cat with her. The woman recently decided to move again, but she couldn't take the cat because of a restriction at her new place. She reached out to Sami Erickson, who operates a program to trap, neuter and return feral cats.

Erickson took the cat to Tender Hearts for a checkup, where they found the microchip.

— From wire reports



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Numbness gone, Strasburg says he's ready

Associated Press

Stephen Strasburg was among the first players manager Dave Martinez ran into at the Washington Nationals' spring training facility Thursday before the team's first official workout for pitchers and catchers.

That's significant because the 2019 World Series MVP pitched only five innings in 2020 before he was shut down because of a nerve problem in his right wrist that required surgery.

"He's going to get ready to start the season just like normal. Normal spring training for him," Martinez said about the 32-year-old starter who was the No. 1 overall pick in the 2009 amateur draft. "He looks good. He looks great, actually. And he feels good, which is the most important thing."

The nerve issue in Strasburg's wrist would get aggravated every time he threw a baseball, the Washington ace said Sunday, and "basically would go from numbness in my thumb to numbness in my whole hand."

Speaking to reporters for the first time since before he was shut down in August, Strasburg said the problem went away imme-

diately after the 15-minute carpal tunnel surgery.

"I haven't had any residual effects from it ... I think, if anything, all the work I've done strengthening it has only improved the movement of my pitches," Strasburg said.

As much as a key part of Washington's desire to move past a tied-for-last finish during last year's pandemic-shortened season as the many offseason roster changes, Strasburg is slated to throw a bullpen session Friday.

"He is in preparation mode," general manager Mike Rizzo said, "not in rehabilitation mode."

One of the other top four members of Washington's rotation, Max Scherzer, is being told to progress cautiously at the start of spring training — not because of anything to do with his arm, but because he sprained his left ankle about two weeks ago, Martinez said.

"He said he felt OK, and he went to throw a bullpen and he felt it. So we told him: It's early, we're going to back off a little bit," Martinez said about the three-time Cy Young Award winner.

"Hopefully this is something that won't

hold him back too much," Martinez said. "As we all know, this is the last year on his contract, so he's going to push himself. But we need to be careful right now."

All of the team's pitchers and catchers reported and went through the COVID-19 screening.

"Everybody is here, everyone's clear and we're full-go," Rizzo said.

Other topics addressed by the GM and manager during video conferences from West Palm Beach, Fla., on Thursday:

■ The team is "still in the early stages of discussion" with NL batting champion Juan Soto on a long-term contract, Rizzo said, adding that there were talks last spring training that "didn't go very far." The 22-year-old slugger will shift from left field to right in 2021.

■ The Nationals are sticking with Carter Kieboom at third base; he's hit .181 so far in 44 games with Washington. "If we listened to Twitter world," Rizzo said, "we would have gotten rid of Robin Ventura when he was 0-for-48 or something like that in his early days in the big leagues."

Rockies' Desmond will opt out again

Associated Press

DENVER — Ian Desmond provided a calming voice to help the Colorado Rockies stick together soon after losing star third baseman Nolan Arenado in a blockbuster trade.

That just may be the veteran outfielder's biggest contribution this season.

Desmond decided Sunday to opt out for a second straight season. He announced on his Instagram account that his "desire to be with my family is greater than my desire to go back and play baseball under these circumstances."

No amount of lobbying by Rockies manager Bud Black could persuade the 35-year-old Desmond, who was scheduled to make \$8 million this season after walking away from a pro-rated salary of \$5,555,556 last season.

"This was a decision not about money," said Black, whose team will begin full-squad workouts Tuesday in Arizona. "This was from the heart, and from the stomach. This was hard. This was agonizing for him."

Desmond did leave the door open for a possible return by adding "for now" in his post. He vowed to "continue to train and watch how things unfold."

His leadership was on display soon after the Rockies traded eight-time Gold Glove winner Arenado to the St. Louis Cardinals. Desmond, along with shortstop Trevor Story, outfielder Charlie Blackmon, reliever Scott Oberg and others, preached the same message over and over — stick together.

"That goes to show who he is and his commitment to the team," Black said. "Again, he's going to follow us. He's going to continue to train. He's going to assess what's going on and maybe his feelings in a month, two months, two weeks, two days ... I don't know, but he's engaged. He's not, from those conversations with his teammates, checked out."

Desmond is in the final year of a five-year, \$70 million deal he signed in December 2016. Colorado has a \$15 million option for 2022 with a \$2 million buyout.

In opting out last summer during the coronavirus-shortened season, Desmond cited a desire to spend more time with his family and to help grow youth baseball in his Florida hometown. He also added that the COVID-19 pandemic made the baseball season one that "is a risk I am not comfortable taking."

Narváez out to regain his lost hitting form

Associated Press

Milwaukee Brewers catcher Omar Narváez refuses to blame his hitting struggles last year on the unusual circumstances of the pandemic-delayed 2020 season.

"Everything got out of control," Narváez said Sunday from the Brewers' spring training complex in Phoenix. "To me, it feels like there's no excuses. It was a short season. Everyone talks about that. I feel like as a professional, I cannot have excuses. It didn't go well."

Narváez, 29, arrived in Milwaukee with a reputation as a quality hitter and not-so-skilled defensively. He was just the opposite in his first season in the National League after the Brewers acquired him from Seattle in December 2019.

His batting average plunged from .278 in 2019 to .176 last year. His on-base percentage sank from .353 to .294. After homering 22 times in 132 games in 2019, he had two homers in 40 games last year.

Timberwolves fire Saunders

Associated Press

The Minnesota Timberwolves fired coach Ryan Saunders on Sunday night, hours after the team with the NBA's worst record this season lost for the eighth time in the last nine games.

A person with knowledge of the situation said that the Timberwolves were finalizing plans to introduce Toronto assistant Chris Finch as the new coach Monday. The person spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity because Finch's hiring has not been formally completed.

ESPN first reported Saunders' dismissal and The Athletic first reported Finch's looming hiring.

Saunders, the 34-year-old son of longtime Minnesota coach Flip Saunders, was with the Timberwolves for parts of three seasons, going 43-94. Minnesota has the league's worst record this season at 7-24 and is already 7½ games out of what would be the final play-in spot for the Western

Conference postseason.

"We would like to thank Ryan for his time and commitment to the Timberwolves organization and wish him the best in the future," Timberwolves President of Basketball Operations Gersson Rosas said. "These are difficult decisions to make, however this change is in the best interest of the organization's short and long-term goals."

It had been a wildly disappointing season for the Timberwolves, who started 2-0 and haven't had much to savor since. Karl-Anthony Towns, the team's best player, dislocated his left wrist in the season's second game and missed six games — then returned and missed 13 more after being diagnosed with COVID-19.

D'Angelo Russell, the other key piece for the Timberwolves, had surgery last week on his left knee and may be out until April.

The Timberwolves were down by 21 points in the third quarter at New York earlier Sunday, then took the lead in the final minutes before falling 103-99.

No. 3 Michigan, Dickinson stop No. 4 Ohio State

Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Hunter Dickinson had 22 points and nine rebounds and Eli Brooks scored 17 as No. 3 Michigan held off a late flurry to beat No. 4 Ohio State 92-87 on Sunday.

In a matchup of teams aiming for No. 1 seeds in the NCAA Tournament, the Wolverines led by nine with 23 seconds left. But a pair of three-pointers from Duane Washington Jr. around a layup by CJ Walker got the Buckeyes within three points with 3 seconds to go.

Brooks sealed the win with a couple of foul shots.

Chaundee Brown Jr. came off the bench to score 15 points and Isaiah Livers added 12 for the Wolverines (16-1, 11-1 Big Ten). Michigan won its fifth straight around a three-week break due to COVID-19 issues.

Washington had a career-high 30 points and went 5 for 10 on 3s for Ohio State (18-5, 12-5). E.J. Liddell had 23 points and 10 rebounds.

No. 6 Houston 90, Cincinnati 52: Quentin Grimes had 20 points and eight rebounds, and the host Cougars used a big first half to roll past the Bearcats.

No. 11 Iowa 74, Penn State 68: Luka Garza scored 23 points to become the Hawkeyes' all-time leading scorer, and they won on the road over the Nittany Lions.

Izaiah Brockington and Myreon Jones each had 11 points to lead Penn State (7-12, 4-11).

No. 21 Wisconsin 68, Northwestern 51: Micah Potter scored 19 points, D'Mitrik Trice had 13 and the visiting Badgers routed the Wildcats on the road.

Navy 69, American 60: Greg Summers matched his career high with 21 points as the Midshipmen won on the road.

Cam Davis had 17 points for Navy (13-2, 10-1 Patriot League), which earned its fifth straight road victory. Richard Njoku added eight points with seven rebounds. Tyler Nelson also had seven rebounds. The Midshipmen shot 53% in the game (28-for-53).

Jamir Harris had 30 points for the Eagles (2-4, 2-4). A late 10-0 run for American cut the Navy lead to 67-58 with 49.5 seconds left. Summers rounded out Navy's scoring with two free throws and a dunk.

Holy Cross 67, Army 51: Austin Butler had 23 points and 12 rebounds as the host Crusaders beat the Black Knights.

Matt Faw had 14 points for Holy Cross (4-11, 4-11 Patriot League). R.J. Johnson added six assists.

Pelicans rally, beat Celtics in OT

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — Brandon Ingram hit a go-ahead three-pointer with 33.3 seconds left in overtime and the New Orleans Pelicans beat the Boston Celtics 120-115 on Sunday after rallying from 24 points down in the third quarter.

Ingram finished with 33 points. Zion Williamson scored 24 of his 28 points after halftime and had 10 rebounds, four assists and a block for the Pelicans, and Josh Hart had 17 points, 10 rebounds, three blocks and a steal.

Jayson Tatum had 32 points and nine rebounds for the Celtics and Jaylen Brown added 25 points. They appeared to be cruising to their third victory in four games when Tristan Thompson's free throws made it 79-55 midway through the third quarter.

New Orleans pulled even

at 98 on Ingram's three with 4:10 left. The lead changed hands twice in the last 11 seconds of regulation, with Tatum hitting a jumper to make it 106-105 and Williamson making a layup as he was fouled to put the Pelicans up 108-106 with 6.9 seconds to go. Tatum then hit a driving floater in the final second to force overtime.

Nets 112, Clippers 108: James Harden scored 37 points and Brooklyn won at Los Angeles for its season-best sixth victory in a row.

The Nets wrapped up a 5-0 trip, beating Golden State, Sacramento, Phoenix and both Los Angeles teams to complete their longest undefeated single trip in franchise history.

Knicks 103, Timberwolves 99: Tom Thibodeau's first game against his former team turned out to be the last one for Ryan Saunders.

Bucks 128, Kings 114: Giannis Antetokounmpo had 38 points and Khrist Middleton scored 32 to lead host Milwaukee past skidding Sacramento.

Magic 105, Pistons 96: Nikola Vucevic had 37 points and 11 rebounds, Evan Fournier added a season-high 29 points and host Orlando beat Detroit.

Hawks 123, Nuggets 115: Trae Young had 35 points and 15 assists, Clint Capela added 22 points and 10 rebounds and host Atlanta beat Denver.

Raptors 110, 76ers 103: Pascal Siakam and Fred VanVleet each had 23 points and host Toronto beat Philadelphia for its fourth straight victory.

Thunder 117, Cavaliers 101: Shai Gilgeous-Alexander had 31 points and nine assists and Oklahoma City handed host Cleveland its 10th consecutive loss.

Bruins rout Flyers at Lake Tahoe

Associated Press

STATELINE, Nev. — After going through the handshake line following a lopsided win, the Boston Bruins all gathered at center ice for one last team photo.

It truly was a picture-perfect day for the Bruins at Lake Tahoe.

David Pastrnak had three goals and Boston took control by scoring three times in a span of 1:39 during the second period to beat the Philadelphia 7-3 on Sunday in a scenic outdoor game.

“It was beautiful,” Pastrnak said. “I think personally playing in both conditions, the sun and the dark, was great. The dark is beautiful, too. You get to play outside. Overall it was an unbelievable experience.”

After a delay-filled opening game of the weekend between Colorado and Vegas because of bright sun that made for poor ice conditions, the game Sunday went off with fewer hitches. The Bruins’ high level of play matched the picturesque setting with the lake and snow-covered mountains in the background.

Pastrnak scored in the opening minute of the first two periods and then again late in the third to give him his second hat trick in three games against the Flyers this season. Charlie Coyle, Trent Frederic and Nick Ritchie scored in succession late in the second to give Boston five wins in five games this year against Philadelphia.

Charlie McAvoy also scored and Tuukka Rask made 16 saves for the Bruins.

“Hats off to the NHL and everyone who made this happen. It was really special,” said defenseman John Moore, who had two assists. “I’ve played in some outdoor events and this one blows those out of the water.”

Joel Farabee, Sean Couturier and James van Riemsdyk scored for the short-handed Flyers, who have six players on the COVID-19 list. Carter Hart allowed six goals on 23 shots in the first two periods and has now given up 20 goals in four losses to Boston this season.

With the bright sun out again Sunday, the NHL moved the game time to 4:30 p.m. PST to avoid the problems that led to a delay of more than eight hours on Saturday between the first and second periods.

The start of this game was delayed about 20 more minutes because there was some glare on the ice from the sun, and players said it was hard to see in the first period.

“It wasn’t easy, obviously. The hardest part was probably the first with all the sun,” Couturier said. “Being blinded by the sun in some places, it was kind of dangerous sometimes. But it was the same thing for both teams.”

Capitals 4, Devils 3: T.J. Oshie scored twice to end a lengthy drought, Alex Ovechkin had a late power-play goal and host Washington erased a two-goal deficit to beat

New Jersey.

Ovechkin scored with 4:04 left, and that turned out to be a necessary insurance goal when Nikita Gusev beat Craig Anderson with 11.9 seconds left. But it was too late for another comeback, and the Capitals avoided back-to-back losses.

Anderson made 22 saves for his first NHL victory since March 7. Anderson and New Jersey’s Aaron Dell each hadn’t started an NHL game in more than 11 months.

After the Devils jumped out to a 2-0 lead, Oshie stared the comeback by scoring on a deflection on the power play in the second period. That ended a nine-game goal drought and Dell’s shutout bid on Washington’s 23rd shot of the game.

Senators 3, Canadiens 2 (OT): Brady Tkachuk scored at 3:30 of overtime to lift host Ottawa past Montreal.

Drake Batherson and Josh Norris also scored, and Matt Murray made 30 saves. The Senators are last in the NHL at 5-14-1.

Corey Perry and Nick Suzuki scored for the Canadiens, with Perry tying it at 2 with 5:35 left in the third period.

Jets 4, Canucks 3 (OT): Pierre-Luc DuBois scored 27 seconds into overtime to lift visiting Winnipeg past Vancouver for a two-game sweep.

The Canucks’ Elias Pettersson tied it with 38 seconds left in regulation on a power play, his second goal of the game.

Bell gives Gibbs racing another surprise victory

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Give him good cars and Christopher Bell will win races. But in his second race? With a new team? That seemed unlikely.

Bell defied the odds Sunday and earned his first career Cup series victory — in just his second race since Joe Gibbs Racing pulled him back into its inner circle — to close out an unpredictable week of racing at Daytona International Speedway.

Michael McDowell was the surprise Daytona 500 winner and then Bell earned an earlier-than-expected first trip to victory lane. It’s just the third time in NASCAR history the first two races of the season were won by first-time winners. It was previously done in 1949 and 1950 — NASCAR’s first two seasons.

More important, Bell and McDowell have

snagged coveted berths in the 16-driver playoff field, a troubling trend for mid-pack teams that need all 26 regular-season races to point their way into the championship picture. Race winners earn automatic berths and the remaining spots are decided by the points standings.

“The dynamic has changed dramatically,” Brad Keselowski said. “We’re very early in the season and it’s now turned into a points race for those last few spots. If you don’t win, you’re in a lot of trouble because it’s not looking like you’re going to be able to get in the playoffs.”

Bell chased down Joey Logano on the winding Daytona road course to grab his first victory. Logano had a commanding lead but Bell, on fresher tires than Logano, reeled him in and passed him with just over one lap remaining.

“This is one of the highlights of my life,”

Bell said. “I’ve prepared my whole life for this moment to race in the Cup Series.”

The 26-year-old Oklahoman is a longtime Toyota development driver who won 16 Xfinity Series races driving for Gibbs. But there’s only four Cup seats in the organization and they were full last season when it was time to move Bell to the big leagues.

He was instead loaned to Leavine Family Racing, and although it was also a Toyota team, the one-car operation wasn’t nearly as strong as the Gibbs group. Team owner Joe Gibbs last summer decided not to renew Erik Jones, who said he was blindsided by the move, and instead bring Bell back into the fold.

It put the pressure on Bell to deliver and he did after a rocky opening a week ago. Bell was running at the front of the Daytona 500 pack when he gave Aric Almirola too big of a shove and triggered a 16-car crash.