

US strike targets Iran-backed militia

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — President Joe Biden ordered an airstrike in Syria, targeting facilities belonging to a powerful Iranian-backed Iraqi armed group.

The Pentagon said Friday's strikes were retaliation for a rocket attack in Iraq earlier this month that killed one civilian contractor and wounded a U.S. service member and other coalition troops.

Iraqi militia officials said the attack killed one fighter and wounded several others. The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said 22 Iranian-backed fighters were killed, according to The Washington Post. The group said the death toll could rise.

The Iraqi militia official told The Associated Press that the strikes against the Kataeb Hezbollah, or Hezbollah Brigades, hit an area along the border between the Syrian site of Boukamal facing Qaim on the Iraqi side. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak of the attack. Syria war monitoring groups said the strikes hit trucks moving weapons

to a base for Iranian-backed militias in Boukamal.

"I'm confident in the target that we went after, we know what we hit," Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told reporters flying with him from California to Washington, shortly after the airstrikes.

The Washington Post reported that Russia was warned an attack was imminent.

Russia was given about four to five minutes warning, according to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov. But he said the warning came too late to "deconflict" the situation.

"Our military was warned four or five minutes in advance. Of course, this has no value even from the angle of deconfliction, as they say in relations between Russian and U.S. servicemen," Lavrov told a Moscow news conference. "This kind of notice given at a time when the strike is already being delivered."

Russia emerged as a key player in Syria when President Vladimir Putin deployed forces in 2015 to back Moscow's longtime ally, President Bashar Assad.

The Biden administration in its first weeks has emphasized its intent to put more focus on the challenges posed by China, even as Mideast threats persist. Biden's decision to attack in Syria did not appear to signal an intention to widen U.S. military involvement in the region but rather to demonstrate a will to defend U.S. troops in Iraq and send a message to Iran.

The U.S. has in the past targeted facilities in Syria belonging to Kataeb Hezbollah, which it has blamed for numerous attacks targeting U.S. personnel and interests in Iraq. The Iraqi Kataeb is separate from the Lebanese Hezbollah movement.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based group that monitors the war in Syria, said the strikes targeted a shipment of weapons that were being taken by trucks entering Syrian territories from Iraq. The group said 22 fighters from the Popular Mobilization Forces, an Iraqi umbrella group of mostly Shiite paramilitaries that includes Kataeb Hezbollah, were killed. The report could not be independently verified.

Austin weighs warship needs in Pacific and Mideast

Associated Press

ABOARD THE USS NIMITZ — Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin told sailors on the USS Nimitz on Thursday that he hopes to avoid long ship deployments like the more than 10 months they just spent at sea. But as he made his first aircraft carrier visit as Pentagon chief, he acknowledged the demand for American warships around the globe as he wrestles with security threats from China in the Pacific and Iran in the Middle East.

Standing in the ship's hangar bay, Austin said he will make a decision soon on whether to send a carrier back to the Middle East, where the Nimitz had been. But he said there have been times when the U.S. has opted not to have a carrier strike group in that region.

"There's going to be gaps," he said. "As we do that, we do things to make sure we have

resources in the right place so can respond."

The Nimitz, which left its homeport of Bremerton, Wash., last April, has been at sea for nearly 300 days, including several weeks of pre-deployment exercises. By the time it gets home in March, the ship and its strike group — which includes the USS Princeton and the USS Sterett — will have sailed about 99,000 nautical miles around the globe.

The ship's return home has triggered renewed debate over whether the U.S. should keep a persistent aircraft carrier presence in the Middle East as a deterrent to Iran.

And it underscores the persistent competition for Navy ships as the U.S. and the Pentagon focus on China as a key threat that has required an escalating presence in the Indo-Pacific.

Over the past year, however, military commanders have successfully argued for a carrier presence in the Gulf region because of threats from Iran and Iranian-backed mi-

litias.

Just a year ago, the U.S. poured more than 20,000 additional troops into the Middle East to counter escalating tensions with Iran that peaked with the missile attack on American forces in Iraq in early 2020.

The Nimitz's lengthy deployment was largely due to decisions to keep it in the Middle East last year and this year to serve as a deterrent to Iran. Sailors late last year were just starting to head home, after being held in the Gulf region for an extended time. But in early December, as the U.S. pulled troops out of Afghanistan and Iraq, then-acting defense chief Christopher Miller announced that they would be staying in the region — forcing the ship to turn around and head back to the Gulf.

On Dec. 31, Miller announced the ship was finally going to head home. It's now off California.

2 Navy warships in Mideast hit by virus

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Two U.S. Navy warships operating in the Mideast have been struck by coronavirus outbreaks, authorities said Friday, with both returning to port in Bahrain.

A dozen troops aboard the USS San Diego, an amphibious transport dock, tested positive for COVID-19, said Cmdr. Rebecca Rebarich, a spokeswoman for the Bahrain-based 5th Fleet. The guided-missile cruiser USS Philippine Sea also has “confirmed several cases of COVID-19,” she said.

“All positive cases have been isolated on board, and the (ships) remains in a restricted COVID bubble,” Rebarich told The Associated Press. “The port visit and medical

support have been coordinated with the host nation government and Bahrain Ministry of Health.”

The San Diego sails with nearly 600 sailors and Marines aboard, while the Philippine Sea carries some 380 sailors.

The 5th Fleet patrols the waterways of the Mideast. Its vessels often have tense encounters with Iran in the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz.

The Navy’s largest outbreak so far in the pandemic was aboard the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt, which had to be sidelined in Guam for nearly two months last year. More than 1,000 sailors tested positive and one died. Eventually all of the 4,800 crew members were sent ashore on Guam for weeks of quarantine, in a system-

atic progression that kept enough sailors on the ship to keep it secure and running.

The failure of the ship’s leaders to properly handle the outbreak exploded into one of the biggest military leadership crises in recent years. The ship’s captain, who pleaded for faster action to protect his crew from the rapidly spreading virus, was fired and the one-star admiral on the ship had his promotion delayed.

Earlier this month, three sailors tested positive as the aircraft carrier was conducting operations in the Pacific. The sailors and those exposed to them were isolated, and the Navy said it is “following an aggressive mitigation strategy,” including masks, social distancing, and proper hand-washing and hygiene measures.

Academies see drop in sexual assault reports

By CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The three military service academies had fewer reports of sexual assault and sexual harassment in the 2019-2020 school year after students transitioned to online classes at home due to the coronavirus pandemic, according to a Pentagon report released Thursday.

However, the number of sexual assault reports matched the same quarterly trend as the previous academic year before cadets and midshipmen were sent home in mid-March, said Nathan Galbreath, the deputy director of the Pentagon’s Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office.

But by the fourth quarter of the academic year, there was a noticeable decrease in reports that is attributed to students leaving the schools, he said. Students in their senior year at the Air Force Academy in Colorado stayed on campus, according to

the report.

The annual report on sexual harassment and violence found the service academies received a total of 129 reports during the 2019-2020 academic year that involved students as survivors or perpetrators, a decrease of 20 reports from the previous year. Of those reports, 105 were made by or about current students, 11 were reports for assaults prior to service, 10 were from active-duty members or civilians after they had left the academy, and three were preparatory school students, according to the document.

In addition to the report, the biennial survey on the prevalence of sexual assault and sexual harassment at the academies was not conducted in March and April. With the official reports, the survey helps understand how often sexual assault happens.

“It’s something that we were very disappointed not to be able to capture,” Galbreath said.

Senators press DOD on troop vaccinations

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Roughly 60% of military health care workers have now received the coronavirus vaccine, Pentagon officials told members of the Senate Armed Services Committee on Thursday. However, they said more educational efforts are needed to encourage the rest of the force to accept the vaccination.

“We’ve only been at this for about 60 days, but [locations] where we’ve seen vaccine rates at lower acceptance rates, the commands are getting involved, providing education forums, having town halls and those type of things to provide that insight,” Robert G. Salesses, acting assistant secretary of defense for homeland defense and global security, said during a hearing about the Defense Department’s support of combating the pandemic.

The comments Thursday by Salesses followed testimony last week by Air Force Maj. Gen.

Jeff Taliaferro, vice director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, who told the House Armed Services Committee that about one-third of all U.S. service members had turned down inoculation when offered it.

Yet Salesses offered little information about the next tier of Defense Department personnel eligible for the vaccine.

Sen. James Inhofe, of Oklahoma, the ranking Republican on the committee, said he’s seen data that shows about one-third of service members are opting out of getting the vaccine.

“I have a hard time understanding why it’s true, but so many people are reluctant to use the vaccine,” Inhofe said.

Because the vaccine is approved as an “emergency use,” the Defense Department cannot require service members take it, Salesses said when questioned by senators on why it can’t be made mandatory.

House set to vote on virus bill

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Democrats are ready to shove a \$1.9 trillion COVID-19 relief package through the House on Friday, despite a setback that means a minimum wage boost is unlikely to be in the final version that reaches President Joe Biden.

A near party-line vote seemed certain on the measure, Biden's first crack at his initial legislative goal of acting decisively against the pandemic. In the year since the coronavirus has taken hold, it has stalled much of the economy, killed half a million Americans and reshaped the daily lives of virtually everyone.

The relief bill would provide millions of people with \$1,400 direct payments. It contains billions of dollars for vaccines and COVID-19 testing, schools, state and local governments, the ailing restaurant and airline industries and emergency jobless benefits while providing tax breaks to lower earners and families with children.

Republicans oppose the sweeping measure, saying it's too expensive, not targeted enough at the people and businesses that most need it and a grab bag of gifts for Democratic allies. Not one has publicly said they will support the legislation, an ominous sign that the partisan gulf that has enveloped Washington for dec-

ades shows no sign of closing.

The House bill would also hoist the federal minimum wage to \$15 hourly by 2025, more than doubling the current \$7.25 floor that's been in effect since 2019.

But that proposal seemed highly likely to die in the Senate after that chamber's parliamentarian said Thursday that the cherished progressive goal must be dropped from the relief legislation, Senate Democratic aides said.

Democrats can afford little dissension over the minimum wage or anything else in the COVID-19 relief bill. They have just a 10-vote edge in the House and no votes to spare in the 50-50 Senate.

US implicates Saudi crown prince in murder

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Saudi Arabia's crown prince likely approved an operation to kill or capture a U.S.-based journalist inside the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, according to a newly declassified U.S. intelligence report released Friday that could escalate pressure on the Biden administration to hold the kingdom accountable for a murder that drew bipartisan and international outrage.

The central conclusion of the report was widely expected given that intelligence officials were said to have reached it soon after the brutal Oct. 2, 2018, murder of Jamal Khashoggi, a critic of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's authoritarian consol-

idation of power.

Still, since the finding had not been officially released until now, the public assignment of responsibility amounted to an extraordinary rebuke of the ambitious 35-year-old crown prince and was likely to set the tone for the new administration's relationship with a country President Joe Biden has criticized but which the White House also regards in some contexts as a strategic partner.

The report was released one day after a later-than-usual courtesy call from Biden to Saudi King Salman, though a White House summary of the conversation made no mention of the killing and said instead that the

men had discussed the countries' long-standing partnership. The kingdom's state-run Saudi Press Agency similarly did not mention Khashoggi's killing in its report about the call, rather focusing on regional issues such as Iran and the ongoing war in Yemen.

The prince said in 2019 he took "full responsibility" for the killing since it happened on his watch, but denied ordering it. Saudi officials have said Khashoggi's killing was the work of rogue Saudi security and intelligence officials. Saudi Arabian courts last year announced they had sentenced eight Saudi nationals to prison in Khashoggi's killing. They were not identified.

Mr. Potato Head drops mister in rebranding effort

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Is it Mr. Potato Head or not?

Hasbro created confusion Thursday when it announced that it would drop the "Mr." from the brand's name in order to be more inclusive and so all could feel "welcome in the Potato Head world." It also said it would sell a new playset this fall without the Mr. and Mrs. designations that will let kids create their own type of potato families, including two moms or two dads.

But in a tweet later that afternoon, Hasbro clarified that while the brand is changing, the actual Mr. and Mrs. Potato Head characters will still live on and be sold in stores. In a picture posted on Twitter, the

"Mr." and "Mrs." names are less prominently displayed at the bottom of the box, instead of the top.

"While it was announced today that the POTATO HEAD brand name & logo are dropping the 'MR.' I yam proud to confirm that MR. & MRS. POTATO HEAD aren't going anywhere and will remain MR. & MRS. POTATO HEAD," the company tweeted.

The tweet came after news of the brand name change exploded on Twitter, with people asking if Barbie will change her name next. "I think Hasbro needs to drop the 'Bro' and just be 'Has,'" another person tweeted.

Hasbro appears to want to have it both

ways: expand the brand, while not killing off its most iconic characters, which appeared in the "Toy Story" films.

"They are looking to broaden the franchise," said Robert Passikoff, founder of marketing consultancy Brand Keys. "You take the focus of what is essentially one character and now allow it to be a platform for many characters."

GLAAD, an LGBTQ advocacy group, applauded the more inclusive Potato playset.

"Hasbro is helping kids to simply see toys as toys, which encourages them to be their authentic selves outside of the pressures of traditional gender norms," said Rich Ferraro, GLAAD's chief communications officer, in a statement.

Biden marks 50M vaccine doses in 5 weeks

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Days after marking a solemn milestone in the pandemic, President Joe Biden is celebrating the pace of his efforts to end it.

On Thursday, Biden marked the administration of the 50 millionth dose of COVID-19 vaccine since his swearing-in. The moment came days after the nation reached the devastating milestone of 500,000 coronavirus deaths and ahead of a meeting with the nation's governors on plans to speed the distribution even further.

"The more people get vaccinated, the faster we're going to beat this pandemic," Biden said at the White House ceremony, noting that his administration is on course to exceed his promise to deliver 100 million shots in his first 100 days in office.

"We're halfway there: 50 million shots in 37 days," Biden said. "That's weeks ahead of schedule."

All told, more than 45 million Americans have been administered at least one dose of the approved vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna since they received approval from the Food and Drug Administration in December, with more than 20 million receiving both required doses.

Illinois

SPRINGFIELD — The 130,021 COVID-19 vaccinations administered Wednesday set a record for the state, the Illinois Department of Public Health announced Thursday.

Heath officials made the boast as they reported 1,884 new cases of the coronavirus and 32 new deaths.

The number of shots Wednesday shattered Illinois' previous high of 95,375 inoculations given Feb. 11. Gov. J.B. Pritzker said in a statement he expects six-figure vaccination days to become the norm as pharmaceutical companies bolster production and states receive larger shipments.

Pritzker's expansion of the

Phase 1B rollout took effect Thursday. It allows people 16 and older with underlying health conditions, such as heart disease or diabetes, to register for a shot.

About 2.4 million vaccines have been administered statewide.

Missouri

O'FALLON — Missouri teachers and child care providers will be eligible for COVID-19 vaccination in mid-March, Gov. Mike Parson said Thursday.

Parson said during his weekly media briefing that the state plans to open up vaccinations to those in Phase 1B, Tier 3, effective March 15. That group involves an estimated 550,000 additional residents. The new date is about a month earlier than state leaders originally projected.

In addition to teachers and child care workers, those newly eligible will include school staff, water and waste employees, energy workers, critical manufacturing workers, and food and agricultural workers.

Teachers have been urging the state to move them up on the vaccination priority list, as many other states have done. Most Missouri schools are open for in-person learning even though teachers are not yet being vaccinated.

North Carolina

RALEIGH — North Carolina civil rights groups struck a deal on Thursday with Gov. Roy Cooper's administration to allow for the early release of 3,500 inmates in state custody over the next six months.

If the state abides by its commitment to trim about one-eighth of its more than 28,000-person prison population, the North Carolina branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People would dismiss its lawsuit alleging prison conditions during the coronavirus pandemic have violated inmates' rights under the state constitution.

A Wake County Superior

Court judge granted a stay on Thursday that will allow the parties to go forward with the terms of the settlement they had negotiated.

Since the start of the pandemic, at least 47 inmates have died of COVID-19, while more than 9,500 have been infected, according to state Department of Public Safety data.

Florida

FORT LAUDERDALE — Florida will open coronavirus vaccine sites in six underserved minority communities around the state, Gov. Ron DeSantis announced Thursday, responding to criticism that such neighborhoods had been previously skipped.

DeSantis also said he expects that Florida will be able to expand the list of who is eligible for a vaccine in March and is optimistic that by some time in April, inoculations will be widely available as more vaccine becomes available.

Currently, Florida restricts the vaccine to residents 65 and older and frontline medical providers such as doctors and nurses. The state has said it soon expects to start vaccinating teachers and police officers who are 50 and older.

Ohio

COLUMBUS — Outdoor and indoor sports and entertainment facilities can reopen with limited attendance under rules announced Thursday by Ohio Gov. Mike DeWine. He also said guidance for proms, banquets, wedding receptions, fairs, festivals and parades is coming soon.

The attendance limits could be further eased depending on the progress of the coronavirus pandemic this spring and summer, but could also be restricted if things worsen because of the coronavirus variant, the governor said.

DeWine said outdoor venues can reopen with a maximum 30% capacity and indoor venues with 25% capacity. Social distancing and continued mask

wearing are key to making these limits work, the governor said.

The Republican governor called the measures "a bridge" back to normal life, but one built on vaccinations and continuing to follow safety protocols such as mask wearing.

Alabama

HOMEWOOD — State regulators have suspended the alcohol license of a Birmingham-area bar over alleged violations of the state's pandemic health order in what an official described as the first such case under COVID-19 rules.

Regulators accused Grocery Brewpub in Homewood of violating rules about face mask requirements, occupancy limits and social distancing, Alabama Alcoholic Beverage Control spokesman Dean Argo said Thursday. The emergency suspension, issued Tuesday, was Alabama's first license suspension linked to a failure to enforce health rules meant to slow the spread of the virus, he said.

Argo said inspectors visited the business after receiving several complaints, including one that included a photograph circulated on social media showing a huge, unmasked crowd at the bar. ABC staff met with the management to discuss the problem, Argo said, and they returned Friday night to see the same situation despite the earlier discussion.

New York

NEW YORK — Tens of thousands of New York City middle school students returned to their school buildings on Thursday for the first time since city schools were closed in November amid a surge in coronavirus infections.

Classroom doors opened for the 62,000 students in grades 6 through 8 whose parents chose a mix of in-person and remote learning for their children. There are about 196,000 students in those grades in the city's public schools.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

'Call 911' sign in window leads to man's arrest

PA LATROBE — A woman's hand-scrawled "Call 911" sign in the window of a Pennsylvania home led to the arrest of her boyfriend.

State troopers said they found a "visibly distraught" woman who was bleeding after someone who saw the sign called state police to the Westmoreland County home over the weekend.

According to court documents, the woman told troopers she was beaten and attacked by her boyfriend, James Vickers, 45, who she said had smashed her phone during an argument. The woman told troopers she thought she was going to die because Vickers had strangled her.

The woman managed to put up the "Call 911" sign to draw attention.

Heating element eyed in deadly fire at exhibit

OH MEDINA — Officials suspect a heating element caused a fire that claimed the lives of some turtles at a turtle exhibit in northwest Ohio.

Firefighters responded to a report of a shed fire at Turtle World of Medina on Wednesday afternoon.

In a Facebook post, the department said firefighters removed approximately 10 turtles, which included two large tortoises, from the smoke-filled shed and used specially designed masks to administer oxygen to the reptiles.

About half the turtles did not

survive, firefighters said.

"The shed had been insulated and heated to house the turtles and it is believed that one of the heating elements started the fire," the department said.

Naked man shot outside apartment complex

FL PEMBROKE PINES — A naked man who was knocking on doors at a South Florida apartment complex was shot on Wednesday by someone who then called 911 to turn himself in, police said.

The man was carrying a Bible and knocking on doors at the Sunshine Garden Apartments when someone there shot him, Pembroke Pines police Maj. Al Xiques told the South Florida SunSentinel.

The man was taken to a hospital in critical condition, police said.

Police were already on their way to the area to investigate reports of a naked man when another 911 caller said he had just shot the man, police said.

Police aid mom who delivered baby in car

NJ ATLANTIC CITY — Two police officers in New Jersey took immediate action when a woman gave birth in a car outside a hospital.

Officers Auttika Taing and Justin Peyton were leaving the AtlantiCare Regional Medical Center when a vehicle pulled behind them and the driver said her friend needed help, Atlantic City police said.

The woman had just given birth and the baby was inside her pants.

Body cam video showed Ta-

ing safely removed the baby and the umbilical cord from around the baby's neck. The baby was wrapped in a jacket while medical personnel cut the cord, police said. Peyton pinched the cord while Taing carried the baby into the emergency room, police said.

The officers met the mother and the baby, Anna, on Wednesday. Both are "doing well," police said.

Fast moving fire destroys 115-year-old church

VT MIDDLESEX — A fast moving fire destroyed a 115-year-old church in the Vermont town of Middlesex on Wednesday.

The fire in the Middlesex United Methodist Church was reported around 11 a.m. Wednesday. The fire quickly consumed the church.

No injuries were reported.

There was no immediate word on the cause.

The church hadn't been used regularly during the winter.

Ag commissioner says State Fair coming in fall

NC RALEIGH — North Carolina's agriculture commissioner declared Wednesday that there will be state fairs this fall, and he encouraged people to get vaccinated to ensure the events will be safe in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and will lead to record attendance.

Agriculture Commissioner Steve Troxler said plans are underway not only to bring back the N.C. State Fair in Raleigh, but to hold the Mountain State Fair as well in Fletcher in Sep-

tember, The News & Observer of Raleigh reported.

"A year without a State Fair is almost unendurable," Troxler said in remarks streamed on Facebook by the North Carolina Farm Bureau. "So we're working very hard to make this the best State Fair that anybody has ever seen, and with your help, it will be the biggest State Fair that we've ever seen."

Funky electronics chain Fry's is closing for good

CA SAN FRANCISCO — Fry's Electronics, the go-to chain for tech tinkers looking for an obscure part, is closing for good.

The company, perhaps even more well known for outlandish themes at some of its stores, from Aztec to "Alice's Adventures in Wonderland," said Wednesday in an online posting that the COVID-19 pandemic had made it impossible to continue.

Fans immediately took to Twitter to post images and memories (good and bad).

The chain was concentrated on the West Coast, but had 31 stores in nine states. It was founded 36 years ago.

The pandemic has done heavy damage to retailers, but Fry's was already getting hammered by online competition and a battle between heavy-hitters Best Buy and Amazon.com.

Fry's Electronics Inc. said its operations have ceased and the wind-down of locations will begin immediately. Customers with electronics being repaired in-store are being asked to pick them up. The stores' online presence appears largely to have been shut down.

STARS AND STRIPES®

Single source convenience, reliably independent. Visit www.stripes.com.

Reporting
World, National
and Military News

NBA-best Jazz hitting all the right notes

Associated Press

Looking at individual stats reveals nothing about the Utah Jazz.

They have one player among those with the 50 highest scoring averages so far this season. They have only one player among the top 50 per game in rebounding. They don't have anyone with a top-30 assist average.

And they have the NBA's best record — by a considerable margin.

Take note: The Jazz are off to the best start in franchise history, are on pace to shatter the NBA record for three-pointers made per game, have won 20 of their last 22 games and just handed the reigning champion Los Angeles Lakers their worst loss of the season.

"They're the hottest team in the league," Lakers coach Frank Vogel said after his team, which was without Anthony Davis and Dennis Schroder, lost 114-89 in Salt Lake City on Wednesday night. "Nobody's playing as well as the Utah Jazz in the NBA right now."

At 26-6, the Jazz sit atop the NBA. That alone is impressive.

The rest of the team numbers only adds to the story.

They have led by double figures at some point in 26 of their 32 games, led by at least

20 points in 19 of them and led wire-to-wire six times. They are third in the NBA in points per game scored — despite playing at the league's 22nd-slowest pace — and are second in points per game allowed.

And what they're doing from beyond the arc is historic. Utah is averaging 17 three-pointers per game, well ahead of the NBA record of 16.1 per game set by the 2018-19 Houston Rockets. The Jazz have made 544 threes, the most in NBA history by any team in its first 32 games.

"At the end of the day, everybody's coming for us," guard Donovan Mitchell said.

When counting all players, not only those who have made enough appearances to qualify for the league leaders in various categories, the Jazz don't have anyone ranked in the top 20 in points per game and only one in the top 50; Mitchell is 21st. Rudy Gobert, ranked third, is the only Utah rebounder in the top 50.

Mike Conley leads the Jazz in assists per game; he entered Thursday ranked 32nd in the league in that stat. Conley is averaging 16.3 points and 5.7 assists. Those are good numbers, hardly eye-popping ones, but this is where just looking at the stats the Jazz are putting up can be dangerous.

Utah openly clamored for Conley to make his first All-Star team this year and join

Mitchell and Gobert on the squad; not enough voters agreed, quite possibly overlooking him because averages like his are fairly common — going into Thursday's games, 24 players had those averages in both categories.

What voters might not have realized is this: Conley is averaging that in only 29 minutes per game. The Jazz often are playing reserves by the midpoint of the fourth quarter, a perk that comes when games have turned into blowouts.

"A lot of these games we've played we've won by double digits, so you're not normally playing late in the fourth quarter and stuff like that," Conley said. "Our team is that good right now."

Tests are coming, though.

The Jazz end the season's first half with a four-game road trip that starts Friday in Miami. Once the All-Star break ends, Utah plays five of its first six second-half games on the road as well.

"The way they're shooting the ball, the way they're connected defensively, the continuity bump that they're getting by having the same team come back," Vogel said. "All those things are playing out well. Coach Quin Snyder is doing a phenomenal job with them. They're playing like the best team in the league right now."

Irving, Harden lead Nets rout of Magic

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Kyrie Irving had 27 points and nine assists, James Harden scored 20 points and the Nets extended their longest winning streak since moving to Brooklyn to eight games with a 129-92 rout of the Orlando Magic on Thursday night.

The Nets have the longest current winning streak in the NBA and their longest since a franchise record-tying 14-game run late in the 2005-06 season. They moved from New Jersey to Brooklyn in 2012.

This roll has come almost entirely without Kevin Durant. He missed his sixth straight game with a strained left hamstring. They're explosive enough with their other two All-Stars, improving to 7-2 when Irving and Harden play

but Durant doesn't.

Landry Shamet added 19 points and nine rebounds for the Nets, who blew open the game with a 26-4 run spanning halftime. The NBA's highest-scoring team reached 120 points for the 20th time, already tying a franchise record in only 34 games.

Bucks 129, Pelicans 125: Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 38 points, Khris Middleton added 31 and host Milwaukee outlasted New Orleans for its fourth straight victory.

Zion Williamson scored 34 points, and Brandon Ingram added 23 for the Pelicans.

Grizzlies 122, Clippers 94: Tyus Jones scored a career-high 20 points, his team's defense held Kawhi Leonard and Paul George to sub-standard nights and Memphis beat visit-

ing Los Angeles.

Dillon Brooks added 19 points for Memphis, and Jonas Valanciunas and Ja Morant had 16 each, with Valanciunas adding 15 rebounds. Jones was 9-for-11 from the floor, including 2-for-3 from outside the arc.

Leonard scored 17 points, and George and Serge Ibaka had 13 points each, although George was stymied by a 3-for-12 shooting night, part of the Clippers shooting 41%.

76ers 111, Mavericks 97: Joel Embiid had 23 points and nine rebounds, Ben Simmons scored 15 and host Philadelphia beat Dallas.

Simmons and Embiid wrecked the Mavericks in the second quarter, and with each steal, dunk and drive showed why they were again selected as All-Stars and have led the

Sixers to the best record in the Eastern Conference at 22-11.

Knicks 140, Kings 121: Emmanuel Quickley scored 18 of his 25 points in the first half and Julius Randle had 21 points and 14 rebounds to help host New York beat Sacramento.

While the Knicks cruised to their fifth win in their last seven games, Sacramento's free-fall continued. The Kings (12-20) dropped their ninth straight, a stretch in which they have allowed 126.3 points per game.

Wizards 112, Nuggets 110: Bradley Beal scored 33 points and visiting Washington escaped Denver with a victory when Facundo Campazzo missed a hurried three-pointer at the buzzer.

Rui Hachimura added 20 points for the Wizards.

No. 3 Michigan rolls over No. 9 Iowa

Associated Press

ANN ARBOR, Mich. — Hunter Dickinson gave Luka Garza fits around the basket, and Franz Wagner scored 21 points to lead No. 3 Michigan to a 79-57 victory over No. 9 Iowa on Thursday night.

The Wolverines (17-1, 12-1) passed yet another test against a highly ranked opponent, and they look increasingly alone atop the Big Ten, where every other team has at least four conference losses. Dickinson more than held his own against Garza in a much-anticipated matchup of two standout big men who have known each other for years.

Garza led the Hawkeyes (17-7, 11-6) with 16 points, but he shot 6-for-19 from the field.

No. 1 Gonzaga 89, Santa Clara 75: Corey Kispert scored 25 points, Drew Timme had 16 of his 18 points in the second half and the Bulldogs won their 50th straight at home, beating the Broncos.

Gonzaga won its 27th straight overall dating to last season, but struggled to shake Santa Clara for most of the

night.

Timme was a big reason why the Bulldogs (23-0, 14-0 West Coast Conference) were finally able to pull away in the second half.

Guglielmo Caruso led the Broncos (10-7, 4-5) with 19 points.

Michigan State 71, No. 4 Ohio State 67: Aaron Henry had 18 points to help the host Spartans improve their chances of making the NCAA Tournament with a win over the Buckeyes, two days after coach Tom Izzo's team beat No. 5 Illinois by nine points.

Michigan State (13-9, 7-9 Big Ten) rallied from a nine-point, second-half deficit with Gabe Brown finishing with 11 points and Josh Langford making key plays at both ends of the court.

Ohio State (18-6, 12-6) finished the game without coach Chris Holtmann, who was ejected for arguing with officials when he was called for a second technical foul with 1.4 seconds left.

No. 5 Illinois 86, Nebraska 70: Kofi Cockburn scored 24 points, freshman Adam Miller

added 18 and the host Illini beat the Cornhuskers.

Illinois (17-6, 13-4 Big Ten) played without star Ayo Dosunmu, who broke his nose Tuesday against Michigan State and is expected to miss at least two more games.

Freshman guard Andre Curbelo narrowly missed a triple-double with 10 points, 12 rebounds and eight assists.

Trey McGowens led Nebraska (5-17, 1-14) with 18 points.

No. 12 Houston 81, Western Kentucky 57: Quentin Grimes scored a career-high 33 points and had six rebounds to help the host Cougars beat the Hill-toppers.

Grimes scored 21 points in the first half, including 18 straight at one point. The junior guard finished 11-for-21 from the field, making 8 of 16 three-pointers.

Marcus Sasser and Tramon Mark each had 12 points, and DeJon Jarreau had nine points for Houston (19-3). The Cougars shot 46%, including 13-for-31 on three-pointers.

Houston forced Western Kentucky (15-5) into 20 turn-

overs, which it turned into 27 points.

Colorado 80, No. 19 Southern California 62: Jeriah Horne hit a career-best six three-pointers on his way to 24 points, McKinley Wright IV had a career-high 14 assists and the host Buffaloes routed the Trojans.

Wright added 15 points for Colorado (18-7, 12-6 Pac-12), which has won six straight against USC (19-5, 13-4).

The loss was a blow to USC, which fell a half-game behind rival UCLA (17-5, 13-3) for first place in the Pac-12 race.

No. 22 San Diego State 78, Boise State 66 (OT): Matt Mitchell scored 24 points, including four in overtime, and the host Aztecs overcame 29 points by Derrick Alston Jr. to beat the Broncos for their ninth straight win.

Trey Pulliam matched his career-high with 18 for SDSU (18-4, 12-3), which blew a 17-point second-half lead before recovering in overtime to take the inside track to repeat as Mountain West Conference regular-season champion.

NCAA reveals contingency plans for tournaments

Associated Press

Turns out the top four teams left out of March Madness won't have their bubbles burst quite yet.

Under a contingency plan released Thursday by the Division I basketball committees, those four at-large teams that don't make the original field in the men's and women's NCAA tournaments will be placed in order and serve as the replacement teams should any conference with multiple bids have a school that is unable to participate due to COVID-19 issues.

If the tournament begins without any withdrawals, the four would still be eligible to

compete in the NIT.

The contingency plan only applies to the short period between the announcement of the brackets — March 14 for men and March 15 for women — and the start of games later that week. Once a tournament begins, any team whose opponent is forced to withdraw would automatically advance to the next round.

If there are COVID-19 issues with a qualifying school leading up to the NCAA Tournament selection, conferences get to designate a replacement team and it will be seeded in the bracket based upon its own body of work.

Single-bid conferences likewise can choose their replacement provided the team has gone seven days without a positive test.

Due to the pandemic, the entire men's tournament will take place in Indianapolis and the surrounding area beginning with First Four games March 18 at Mackey Arena in West Lafayette and Assembly Hall in Bloomington. The Final Four will take place at Lucas Oil Stadium with the championship game scheduled for April 5.

The women's tournament, which begins with first-round games March 21, will take

place in San Antonio and the neighboring cities of Austin and San Marcos. The Final Four is set for the Alamodome with the title game April 4.

The basketball committees formulated their contingency plan based on four core tenets: once the bracket is released, it will not be changed or reseeded; it will attempt to ensure a full field before the tournament with no replacement teams once play begins; every participating conference should have at least one team in the field; and the replacement teams should be the best teams considered for an at-large that still remain.

Islanders cruise past Halak, Bruins

Associated Press

UNIONDALE, N.Y. — Anthony Beauvillier scored the tiebreaking goal in New York's five-goal third period and the Islanders beat the first-place Boston Bruins 7-2 on Thursday night.

Mathew Barzal had a goal and an assist, and Adam Pelech, Jordan Eberle, Jean-Gabriel Pageau, Anders Lee and Oliver Wahlstrom also scored to help the Islanders get their second straight victory and improve to 6-0-1 at home. Semyon Varlamov stopped 34 shots.

New York, which got its highest scoring output of the season, beat Boston for the third time in three meetings — three of the Bruins' four regulation losses this season — to move one point behind Boston and Washington in the East.

Nick Ritchie and Craig Smith scored for Boston, and Jaroslav Halak had 30 saves in his first game against the Islanders since leaving after the 2017-18 season.

Jets 6, Canadiens 3: Kyle Connor scored twice and host Winnipeg spoiled Dominique Ducharme's debut as Montreal's coach.

Nate Thompson scored the go-ahead goal in the third peri-

od, Blake Wheeler had a goal and two assists, and Pierre-Luc Dubois and Mark Scheifele each had a goal and an assist. Connor Hellebuyck made 18 saves. The Jets have won three in a row to improve to 12-6-1.

Montreal fired coach Claude Julien and associate coach Kirk Muller on Wednesday, promoting Ducharme to interim head coach. The Canadiens have lost four straight to fall to 9-6-4.

Capitals 5, Penguins 2: Tom Wilson scored the go-ahead goal on a power play with 7:20 left and host Washington beat Pittsburgh for its second victory in six games this season between the rivals.

Nicklas Backstrom scored his team-leading ninth goal of the season, and T.J. Oshie had one for the highlight reel in the third period when he dived one-handed to poke the puck past Tristan Jarry.

Blackhawks 2, Blue Jackets 0: Patrick Kane broke a scoreless tie in the third period with his 399th goal, Malcolm Subban got his first shutout of the season and visiting Chicago beat Columbus to sweep the two-game series.

Carl Soderberg added an empty-net goal with 50 seconds

left in the game. Subban had 26 saves to record his second shutout in 72 NHL games and his first as a member of the Blackhawks.

Lightning 3, Hurricanes 1: Curtis McElhinney stopped 31 shots and had an assist in host Tampa Bay's victory over Carolina.

Mikhail Sergachev, Yann Gourde and Barclay Goodrow scored for Tampa Bay. The Lightning have won three of the four straight meetings between the teams.

Panthers 3, Stars 2: Frank Vatrano scored the go-ahead goal with 3:10 remaining and host Florida rallied to beat Dallas.

Aleksander Barkov and Anton Stralman also scored in the final 6 1/2 minutes as the Panthers overcame a 2-0 deficit. Sergei Bobrovsky made 37 saves.

Devils 4, Sabres 3 (OT): Pavel Zacha converted Jesper Bratt's drop pass to score 1:17 into overtime and visiting New Jersey rallied to beat Buffalo.

Bratt, Miles Wood and Nico Hischier also scored for the Devils, and Mackenzie Blackwood stopped 29 shots. Zacha had two assists to extend his points streak to eight games in

which he has three goals and seven assists.

Senators 6, Flames 1: Colin White scored twice, Matt Murray made 29 saves and host Ottawa routed Calgary for its third straight victory.

Drake Batherson, Erik Gudbranson, Connor Brown and Erik Brannstrom also scored for Ottawa, with Batherson running his goals streak to four games. The Senators improved to 7-14-1.

Red Wings 5, Predators 2: Sam Gagner scored three goals, ending a 17-game drought that lasted nearly a year, and host Detroit beat Nashville.

Luke Glendening and Adam Erne also scored for Detroit, which set a season high for goals. Jonathan Bernier made 37 saves.

Oilers 3, Canucks 0: Mike Smith made 32 saves for his second shutout of the season and 41st overall and visiting Edmonton beat Vancouver.

Alex Chiasson and Jesse Puljujarvi had power-play goals to help the Oilers win their fifth straight and improve to 14-8-0. Connor McDavid padded his lead atop the NHL's scoring race with an empty-netter.

Sorenstam returns to LPGA Tour with fewer birdies

Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — Annika Sorenstam doesn't remember golf being this difficult.

She still managed plenty of smiles Thursday when the most dominant player of her era played her first LPGA Tour event in more than 12 years. With one birdie and one bad hole, Sorenstam had a 3-over 75 in the LPGA Gainbridge on her home course at Lake Nona.

"It seems a little bit more stressful, this kind of golf," she said.

Sorenstam was 10 shots behind another Lake Nona member, Lydia Ko, who opened with a 7-under 65 for a two-shot lead.

But then, this week isn't about Sorenstam adding to her 72 career victories or even starting a comeback at age 50. The LPGA Tour came to her home course and she wanted to play.

With that early head turn and tee shots that more often than not found the fairway, it didn't seem like Sorenstam had been away from the LPGA Tour since Nov. 23, 2008, when she retired

after a three-win season to start a family.

It was the rest of the game that felt so foreign.

"I could have been more aggressive on the putts, I could have been more aggressive on iron shots," she said. "I'm at a point in my life that it's not automatic. It's not a pin-seeker the way it was. Now it's more a green-seeker. I did OK. A little more stressful golf, but overall, it's fun."

Lake Nona members and a few family guests were allowed,

and Sorenstam found about 150 people gathered around the first tee. That constitutes a sizeable crowd in the COVID-19 pandemic era.

"I was quite nervous. I've been nervous for a few days," said Sorenstam, adding that she practiced meditation that morning to help calm her down.

The highlight was a gap wedge from about 95 yards on the 14th hole that landed some 10 feet behind the hole and spun back to a foot away for a tap-in birdie.