

## Militia strike test of Biden's Iran approach

*The Washington Post*

WASHINGTON — The U.S. military strike on Iranian-backed fighters in Syria this week represents a crucial first test of the Biden administration's attempt to balance competing goals on Iran, a strategy experts say is unlikely to end a lethal history of militia violence against U.S. personnel.

Analysts described the attack on a site near Syria's southeast border with Iraq as a calibrated response to rocket fire on U.S. facilities in neighboring Iraq, but said it would probably have little practical impact, in part because it avoided more sensitive areas controlled by Iranian-backed militias.

More importantly, leaders in Tehran have taken measure of President Joe Biden's pledge to use renewed diplomacy to resurrect the 2015 Iran nuclear deal and his desire to curtail America's decadeslong military activities in the Middle East, both of which suggest a less bellicose approach than embraced by President Donald Trump.

"To Iran, the Biden administration's

clear interest in re-exploring a nuclear accord is tantamount to an invitation to utilize proxies as a means to buy leverage and time," said Charles Lister, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute. "If there's anything Iran is good at, it's probing the enemy and testing its red lines — all while seeking to gain leverage in doing so."

U.S. officials assessed that the strike, in which two F-15E Strike Eagle jets dropped seven precision bombs, killed a handful of fighters affiliated with two Iranian-backed militias. The officials said the groups are linked to a Feb. 15 rocket attack on a U.S. base in northern Iraq that killed a contractor working with the U.S. military and injured an American service member.

Asked by reporters Friday about what message he intended for Iran in authorizing the operation, Biden said: "You can't act with impunity. Be careful."

Officials have also blamed Iranian proxies for other rocket attacks on U.S. sites in Iraq since Biden took office. Once a daily occurrence during the war that followed the

2003 invasion of Iraq, what are known as indirect fire attacks — rocket or mortars usually launched from fixed sites or the back of trucks — have been sporadic in recent years, often causing no harm.

That was not the case in December 2019, when a barrage of missiles struck a U.S. base, killing an American contractor. That event triggered a string of events culminating in the Trump administration's decision to authorize a drone strike killing Qassem Soleimani, a revered Iranian general, and a retaliatory missile attack launched from Iran on U.S. forces in Iraq.

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said the operation, which occurred early Friday in Syria (late Thursday in Washington), targeted a compound containing housing and other militia resources.

The administration's decision to strike a militia site in Syria, rather than Iraq, reflects its intent to minimize friction with Baghdad, which vigorously criticized unilateral U.S. attacks on militia targets during the Trump administration.

## Deal to end Afghanistan war seen to embolden Taliban

By J.P. LAWRENCE

*Stars and Stripes*

KABUL, Afghanistan — The drawdown of U.S. troops from Afghanistan has encouraged the Taliban's belief that they are closer than ever to victory, analysts and fighters said, one year after a deal was signed with the militant group meant to bring peace to the country.

On Feb. 29, 2020, U.S. and Taliban representatives gathered in Doha, Qatar, to sign an agreement that would allow for the withdrawal of American troops in exchange for concessions by the militants.

The concessions included opening peace talks with the government in Kabul and preventing extremist groups like al-Qaida from using the country to launch attacks on America and

its allies.

But a year later, a peaceful end to the bloodshed remains elusive, with the increasingly emboldened Taliban escalating their attacks on government forces, still maintaining ties with al-Qaida, and remaining unlikely to compromise in negotiations, a recent report to Congress said.

"The Taliban's military momentum and the continued drawdown of U.S. troops have reinforced the Taliban's narrative of its political and military ascendancy," the report by the Lead Inspector General for Operation Freedom's Sentinel said.

President Joe Biden's administration is reviewing the deal with the Taliban, with some U.S. policymakers calling for a renegotiation of the agreement ahead of a May 1 deadline to pull all

troops from the country. Some 2,500 U.S. troops remain in Afghanistan at about a dozen bases, alongside 9,600 NATO troops and around 18,000 civilian contractors.

Taliban fighters told Stars and Stripes they are on the verge of taking over the country and believe the deal is proof that they defeated U.S. and NATO forces, in the same manner that earlier militants defeated the Soviet Union.

The efforts by the Trump administration to end the war in Afghanistan included two concessions the Taliban had long demanded and the U.S. had resisted, said Elizabeth Threlkeld, deputy director for South Asia at the Stimson Center, a Washington think tank. The U.S. committed to leaving Afghanistan and

held direct talks with the Taliban in a process that shut out the recognized Kabul government, Threlkeld said.

Both steps helped Taliban leaders celebrate the deal "as a victory won on the battlefield ahead of a Soviet-style withdrawal, building a sense of momentum among their fighters over the past year," Threlkeld said.

Instead of peace, Taliban offensives swept the country, overrunning checkpoints and surrounding key cities like Kandahar and Lashkar Gah.

The continuing bloodshed has undermined public support in Afghanistan for the long-delayed peace talks between the Kabul government and the Taliban, the Freedom's Sentinel report said.

# Military sacrificing vaccine for others

BY WYATT OLSON

*Stars and Stripes*

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii — Many of the Defense Department personnel opting out of receiving the coronavirus vaccine are doing so because they believe individuals at higher risk of complications from the disease should be vaccinated first, the director of the Defense Health Agency said Friday.

Lt. Gen. Ronald Place said that roughly a third of military personnel are declining to be immunized. Others are reluctant because there are no studies on long-term effects of the new vaccines, he said.

Despite the high opt-out rate, Place said

over one million doses of the coronavirus vaccine have been administered to Defense Department personnel.

Progress in vaccinating has been steady, although some logistical challenges, such as the winter storm that recently hit Texas, have slowed delivery, Place said.

“Our goal is to ensure that the overwhelming majority of our DOD dependents are offered the vaccine by this summer, enabling us to celebrate a renewed Independence Day,” he said.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration authorized vaccines from Pfizer and Moderna on an “emergency use” basis — and for

that reason, vaccination has remained voluntary for members of the armed forces.

Medical leadership has been assessing the reasons for vaccination refusal during “sensing sessions,” Place said.

“Many, and I mean many, of our uniformed health care team are very young — late teens, early 20s or into their mid-20s,” he said. “And many of them are saying, ‘Hey look, leaders: I’ve been working in this facility for months. I know how to take care of myself. I know how to keep myself safe. Use those vaccines on somebody who’s older or sicker who needs it worse than me. When there’s plenty of vaccine, I’ll come back.’”

## Marines mark last deployment of F/A-18 Hornets

*The Orange County Register*

Eleven F/A-18 Hornets launched from the deck of the USS Nimitz on Thursday heralding the end of an era for the famed fighter jets in the Marine Corps.

The flight to the Marine Corps Air Station Miramar’s tarmac marked the last time the Marines would deploy with Hornets on an aircraft carrier. By 2028, most of the 3rd Marine Air Wing’s pilots will fly the more stealth F-35 B fighter jets.

It also marked the end of an 11-month deployment to the Middle East and Africa for the USS Nimitz, its 5,000 sailors, and ac-

companying destroyers, which on Friday arrived at Naval Base San Diego.

The 11 jets, part of squadron VMFA-323 known as the Death Rattlers, appeared over the skies of Miramar in two formations, landing at exact intervals and then taxiing together in a line. Among the pilots was Lt. Col William Mitchell, the commanding officer of the squadron, who was the last to fly off the aircraft carrier.

The Death Rattlers transitioned to the famed fighter jet in 1982.

When their engines powered down Thursday, families, friends and pilots from

other squadrons joyfully welcomed them home.

The Death Rattlers logged more than 35,000 flight hours, 14,000 missions supporting the tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel and practicing landings, and fired off nearly 250,000 rounds of ammunition, Marine officials said.

Also returning with the USS Nimitz were the destroyers USS Sterett and the USS Princeton and two other Navy helicopter squadrons based at Naval Air Station North that had deployed with the carrier air group.

## Crew taken hostage in 1968 awarded \$2.3 billion

BY ROSE L. THAYER

*Stars and Stripes*

A federal court has awarded \$2.3 billion to several crewmembers and families of the USS Pueblo, a Navy ship taken hostage by North Korea more than 50 years ago.

Split evenly for compensatory and punitive damages, the amount is among the largest ever awarded in a state-sponsored terrorism case, according to Mitchell Silberberg & Knupp, the Washington law firm that filed the case three years ago on behalf of 61 crew members and 110 family members in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia.

“Even though we didn’t expect anything, it is a relief to be recognized for what we went

through. Maybe now it is finally settled, and we can move forward,” said Don Peppard, a surviving crew member and president of the USS Pueblo Veteran’s Association. He served as a chief cryptologic technician on the ship.

Thursday’s announcement follows a 2019 default judgment that held North Korea liable for taking the crew hostage in 1968.

North Korean warships and fighter aircraft surrounded and fired upon the Pueblo on Jan. 23, 1968, during an intelligence-gathering mission in international waters off the Korean Peninsula. One crew member was killed, and the remaining 82 members — consisting of sailors, Marines and civilians —

were held hostage by North Korea for 11 months until the United States negotiated their release.

The plaintiffs of the lawsuit sought damages for torture, hostage-taking, and personal injuries that they suffered as a result, according to the law firm.

Catherine Soto, a daughter of crew member Herman Baldrige, said her whole family suffered alongside her father as a result of his captivity. Baldrige, who was a hospital corpsman in the service, died in November at 89 years old.

“I wish he was still here for me to tell him that justice is served, and this is finally over,” she said.

# House passes \$1.9T virus relief bill

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — The House approved a \$1.9 trillion pandemic relief bill in a win for President Joe Biden, even as top Democrats tried assuring agitated progressives that they'd revive their derailed drive to boost the minimum wage.

The new president's vision for flushing cash to individuals, businesses, states and cities battered by COVID-19 passed on a near party-line 219-212 vote early Saturday. That ships the massive measure to the Senate, where Democrats seem bent on resuscitating their minimum wage push and fights could erupt over state aid and other issues.

Democrats said the still-faltering economy and the half-million American lives lost demanded quick, decisive action. GOP lawmakers, they said, were out of step with a public that polling shows largely views the bill favorably.

"I am a happy camper tonight," Rep. Maxine Waters, D-Calif., said Friday. "This is what America needs. Republicans, you ought to be a part of this. But if you're not, we're going without you."

Republicans said the bill was too expensive and said too few education dollars would be spent quickly to immediately reopen schools. They said it was laden with gifts to Democratic constituencies like labor unions and funneled money to Democratic-run states they suggested didn't need it because their budgets had bounced back.

"To my colleagues who say this bill is bold, I say it's bloated," said House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif. "To those who say it's urgent, I say it's unfocused. To those who say it's popular, I say it is entirely partisan."

Moderate Democratic Reps. Jared Golden of Maine and Kurt Schrader of Oregon were the only two lawmakers to cross party lines.

That sharp partisan divide is making the fight a showdown over who voters will reward for heaping more federal spending to combat the coronavirus and revive the economy atop the \$4 trillion approved last year.

The battle is also emerging as an early test of Biden's ability to hold together his party's fragile congressional majorities — just 10 votes in the House and an evenly divided 50-50 Senate.

At the same time, Democrats were trying to figure out how to assuage progressives who lost their top priority in a jarring Senate setback Thursday.

That chamber's nonpartisan parliamentarian, Elizabeth MacDonough, said Senate rules require that a federal minimum wage increase would have to be dropped from the COVID-19 bill, leaving the proposal on life support. The measure would gradually lift that minimum to \$15 hourly by 2025, doubling the current \$7.25 floor in effect since 2009.

## Biden travels to Texas to survey weather damage

*Associated Press*

HOUSTON — President Joe Biden heard firsthand from Texans clobbered by this month's brutal winter weather on Friday and pledged to stick with them "for the long haul" as he made his first trip to a major disaster area since he took office.

Biden was briefed by emergency officials and thanked workers for doing "God's work." He promised the federal government will be there for Texans as they try to recover, not just from the historic storm but also the public health and economic crisis caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

"When a crisis hits our states, like the

one that hit Texas, it's not a Republican or Democrat that's hurting," Biden said. "It's our fellow Americans that are hurting and it's our job to help everyone in need."

With tens of thousands of Houston area residents without safe water, local officials told Biden that many are still struggling. While he was briefed, first lady Jill Biden joined an assembly line of volunteers packing boxes of quick oats, juice, and other food at the Houston Food Bank, where he arrived later.

The president's first stop was the Harris County Emergency Operations Center for a briefing from acting FEMA Administrator Bob Fenton and state and local emergency management officials.

Texas was hit particularly hard by the Valentine's weekend storm that battered multiple states. Unusually frigid conditions led to widespread power outages and frozen pipes that burst and flooded homes. Millions of residents lost heat and running water.

At least 40 people in Texas died as a result of the storm and, although the weather has returned to more normal temperatures, more than 1 million residents are still under orders to boil water before drinking it.

The president also stopped by a mass coronavirus vaccination center at NRG Stadium that is run by the federal government.

## Florida is moving to restrict some exotic reptiles

*Associated Press*

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — Pythons, iguanas, monitor lizards, oh my! Florida is moving to restrict 16 invasive reptile species that have wreaked havoc in the Everglades and across the state.

Burmese pythons, in particular, have been especially destructive to native wildlife.

"Breeding invasive species in Florida is like playing with matches in a tinder box," said Julie Wraithmell, vice president and ex-

ecutive director of Audubon Florida.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission voted Thursday to move these animals to a prohibited list. That means they can only be brought to Florida for exhibition, such as a zoo, or at a research facility.

"These animals are creating enormous issues for our state," said Rodney Barreto, chair of the commission. "The environment trumps the livelihood on this one, unfortu-

nately."

The rules are complicated. Once they take effect, pet owners and others who have these species will have 180 days to ensure the creatures come into compliance with outdoor caging rules.

Iguanas and tegu lizards can be sold commercially until June 30, 2024. After that date, their sale in Florida will be banned. Both are very well established throughout South Florida.

# Villages in Alaska boast no virus cases

Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — In an unusual example of the effectiveness of social distancing, residents of a southeast Alaska fishing community have so far escaped the coronavirus pandemic without any infections.

The town of Pelican is one of the Alaska communities that has avoided the illness by remaining isolated, Alaska Public Media reported Thursday.

Pelican, which can only be reached by bush plane or boat, has no recorded cases of COVID-19 and has vaccinated more than half of its adults.

“Everybody claims that it’s so hard to get in and out of here. I say, that’s perfect,” Pelican Mayor Walt Weller said. “There is no better time to be stranded in the middle of nowhere.”

State officials said privacy considerations prevent them from identifying communities without cases. But discussions with residents and social media posts indicate Pelican is not alone.

Alaska’s unique geography and isolation have helped villages thwart the pandemic with astonishing success.

There are at least 10 virus-free communities from Pelican to the Aleutian Islands to deep in the Alaska Interior region, Alaska Public Media reported. In southwest Alaska, where many communities have seen major outbreaks, officials at a regional tribal health care provider said six villages still have no recorded virus cases.

## Louisiana

NEW ORLEANS — New Orleans’ coronavirus pandemic restrictions were expected to be relaxed Friday, Mayor LaToya Cantrell’s office said.

“The past 30 days have shown a sustained decrease in case counts, transmission rate, and positivity rate,” a news release said Thursday. Starting at 6 a.m. Friday, it said, groups of up to 75 would be able to gather indoors

and 150 outdoors, and restaurants, bars, breweries, libraries and other businesses would be able to seat up to 15 people at a table. Indoor stadiums would be able to admit up to 15% of the maximum number of fans usually allowed, with outdoor stadiums admitting up to 25%.

The news release was sent hours after Gov. John Bel Edwards said steadily declining numbers of COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations statewide might indicate that vaccines are making a difference.

## Vermont

Vermont is much closer than many other states in getting kids fully back to in-person learning amid the pandemic but even with improvements to remote learning and some in-person instruction it’s not sufficient and many students are struggling, Gov. Phil Scott said Friday during his twice-weekly coronavirus briefing.

It’s not a reflection on the hard work of teachers, the Republican governor said.

A study done in collaboration with the Vermont Department of Health and the University of Vermont found that youths aged 12 to 17 reported increases in depressive symptoms and anxiety in the fall of 2020, compared to the fall of 2019, according to Mental Health Commissioner Sarah Squirrel. Reports of anxiety in young adults aged 18 to 25 also increased significantly, she said Friday during the briefing, and about 70% of youth reported that the pandemic made their anxiety/worry, mood or loneliness “a little” or “a lot” worse.

## Missouri

MEHLVILLE — A couple whose bodies were found in their home last week died of COVID-19, St. Louis County authorities said Friday.

Police were called to the home in Mehlville on Feb. 18 after receiving a report of a sudden death, The St. Louis Post-

Dispatch reported.

Officer Tracy Panus said a man and woman were found dead at the home.

The couple were quarantining after testing positive for COVID-19. Family members told police the man and woman both were experiencing symptoms, police said.

“We have no reason to believe their deaths were caused by anything other than COVID-19 at this time,” police said in a statement.

## Arkansas

LITTLE ROCK — Arkansas Gov. Asa Hutchinson on Friday lifted most of the safety restrictions imposed to curb the spread of the coronavirus, except for a mask mandate he said would remain in place until at least the end of March.

Hutchinson announced the rollback of the safety rules as he extended the public health emergency he declared last year until the end of March. The Republican governor made the move a day after lawmakers advanced a bill requiring the state to refund fines it has collected from businesses for coronavirus safety violations.

The limits being lifted include capacity limits for bars, restaurants, gyms and large venues. They will remain in place as a guideline, or strong recommendations from the state health department. Hutchinson left open the possibility of reinstating the restrictions if there’s another surge in cases.

## Kentucky

FRANKFORT — Gov. Andy Beshear visited Louisville Friday and urged Black Kentuckians to get the COVID-19 vaccine.

Beshear joined NAACP leaders to speak about the hesitancy among some in the Black community with getting the shot. The governor visited the NAACP’s west Louisville office. Several residents received the

vaccine at the office from Norton Healthcare, according to a release from the governor’s office.

The governor’s office said Black Kentuckians only account for about 4.6% of those in the state who have been vaccinated.

## Illinois

CHICAGO — The days of paying cash on the Illinois Tollway are gone forever.

The tollway announced Thursday it is permanently eliminating cash toll collections and will accept only I-Pass, EZPass or online payments. Customers unable to pay online can pay by check or money order.

The move comes nearly a year after the tollway suspended cash tolls in mid-March because of the coronavirus outbreak.

The tollway also said it will begin a program in May to help low-income drivers by waiving deposits on I-Pass transponders and adding \$20 in tolls to people with household incomes up to 2½ times the poverty line.

## Rhode Island

PROVIDENCE — Two Rhode Island field hospitals set up three months ago to deal with a possible flood of new coronavirus cases were expected to be shut down Friday, health officials said.

The facility at the Rhode Island Convention Center in Providence was originally scheduled to close Friday while the Cranston site was expected to shut down in two to three weeks. The Cranston facility discharged its last patients earlier than expected and so it also was to close Friday, state Health Department spokesperson Joseph Wendelken told WPRI-TV.

Department Director Dr. Nicole Alexander-Scott said last week hospitalizations in the state were down 65% since last month when vaccinations picked up.

**AMERICAN ROUNDUP**

**Golden lion steps down after decades at hotel**

**AK** ANCHORAGE — The golden lion that stood watch in the Alaska hotel named after it has finally been retired after the building changed hands.

The nearly 50-year-old stuffed lion was moved from its home at the Best Western Golden Lion Hotel in Midtown Anchorage, the Anchorage Daily News reported.

The hotel was bought in December by the Municipality of Anchorage as part of a plan to convert the property into a drug and alcohol treatment center.

Groseclose shot the lion in Uganda in 1972 during a month-long trip to Africa with his wife, Lonnie.

**No major injuries after car hits daycare center**

**CA** SANTA CLARITA — A car accidentally drove through a wall and into the classroom of a daycare facility and three children were taken to a hospital for evaluation although no major injuries were reported, authorities said.

A statement from La Petite Academy said a “school family member’s vehicle” struck the building and drove into a classroom.

Three children and a staff member were in the classroom, the statement said. The children, all under the age of 4, were airlifted to a hospital for evaluation as a precaution without serious injuries, authorities said.

Another person, believed to be the driver, was taken to the hospital with minor injuries, KCBS-TV reported.

**Court rejects ‘warrior gene’ defense for murder**

**NM** SANTA FE — The state Supreme Court upheld a murder conviction against a man who claimed a “warrior gene” made him predisposed to impulsive acts of violence.

In a unanimous decision, justices ruled that a lower court was justified in excluding evidence about a theory that lacks scientific reliability in the conviction of Anthony Blas Yopez by a jury for the death of an elderly Santa Fe man in 2012.

Defense attorneys say Yopez was incapable of forming the intent to deliberately kill, but expert testimony on the scientific claim was excluded in the pre-trial hearing phase.

Yopez was convicted in 2015 in the killing of his girlfriend’s step-grandfather during a domestic dispute. He is serving a 22-year sentence for second-degree murder with additional time for auto theft and tampering with evidence.

**Jaguar fight at zoo leaves 1 big cat dead**

**FL** JACKSONVILLE — A fight between two jaguars at a Florida zoo left one of the big cats dead, officials said.

A female named Zenta, 21, died following a confrontation with a male named Harry, 12, at Jacksonville Zoo and Gardens, the zoo announced in a news release.

The fight occurred in a holding complex after Harry was brought in for an examination, officials said. Keepers tried to separate the animals but were

unsuccessful. A special team was called to immobilize Harry, but Zenta was already dead by the time they arrived, officials said.

**Prison sergeant faces contraband drug charges**

**LA** BATON ROUGE — A Louisiana prison corrections officer was placed on leave and faces multiple charges in connection with drug possession at the prison, the state Department of Corrections said.

The department news release said Dameesha Johnson, 28, of Baton Rouge was arrested after fellow corrections officers at Elayn Hunt Correctional Center discovered the drugs during a shift change.

Charges include taking contraband to or from a prison and malfeasance in office. The department said she had been employed at Hunt since April 2017 and holds the rank of master sergeant.

**Dog rescued after 4 days stranded along icy river**

**MI** ECORSE — A dog that survived frigid temperatures and a run-in with a coyote has been rescued after spending four days stranded on ice along the Detroit River.

The small dog was rescued by a boater from Windsor, Ontario, following an international effort that involved Americans and Canadians on both sides of the river.

Dr. Lucretia Greear, who’s one of the veterinary doctors at Woodhaven Animal Hospital caring for the dog, said he is recovering from frostbite to his

paw pads, dehydration and pancreatitis.

**Luxury car deliverer attacked, vehicles stolen**

**IL** DES PLAINES — Four men attacked a luxury car delivery driver in suburban Chicago and took off with three high-end vehicles, authorities said.

The driver was repeatedly punched and kicked as the assailants ordered him to hand over keys, police said. He suffered serious but non-life-threatening injuries to his wrist and leg — surveillance video shows him hopping away from the attackers as they make off with the cars.

Jidd Motors owner Adam Jidd said two BMWs and an Alfa Romeo were stolen.

**Court: Rape protections endure after death**

**NM** SANTA FE — The New Mexico Supreme Court ruled that legal protections against rape extend to victims who are unable to express consent — including the dead.

The high court upheld a rape conviction against a Clovis man accused of stabbing a woman and then raping her dead body. Lorenzo Martinez was convicted of murder and rape in the 2017 stabbing death of a woman, 57.

On appeal, attorneys for Martinez argued that New Mexico law requires that a rape victim be alive at the time of the crime for criminal statutes to apply.

The court disagreed and said its decision sets a legal precedent.

— From The Associated Press



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# Harper eager to end Phils' playoff drought

Associated Press

CLEARWATER, Fla. — Bryce Harper's first year in Philadelphia ended with his former team winning the World Series, and the Phillies suffered another September collapse in his second season.

He says it's time to end the team's nine-year absence from postseason baseball.

"I hate being home for Halloween," Harper said Thursday. "The city of Philadelphia deserves it and they need it. We're a team that can hopefully do that for them and give that to them. They deserve to be in the stands in October and I know they're willing to do that."

Before the Phillies hired David Dombrowski to be president of baseball operations and re-signed two-time All-Star catcher J.T. Realmuto and shortstop Didi Gregorius, Harper wasn't sure about the team's direction.

"When you get halfway through the off-season and there's not really much going on, you kind of start worrying about what our identity as a team is going to be," Harper said. "I was wondering what we're going to do."

Then, Phillies managing partner John Middleton brought Dombrowski on board and promoted Sam Fuld to replace general manager Matt Klentak.

"You don't really bring in Dombrowski unless it's a win-now move," Harper said.

Dombrowski won a World Series with the Marlins in 1997, another with the Red Sox in

2018 and reached two with the Tigers. He's trying to lead the Phillies to success after they fell one win shy of reaching the expanded postseason in the pandemic-shortened 2020 season.

Besides bringing Realmuto and Gregorius back, Dombrowski has strengthened a bullpen that blew 21 leads last year.

"He's done a great job," Harper said. "We have a lot of competition in camp. ... Just very fortunate to play for an organization that is ready to go, ready to win and made the moves that are the significant moves that we needed to this offseason."

Harper hit .268 with 13 homers, 33 RBIs and a .962 OPS in the second year of his \$330 million, 13-year contract. He led the majors with 49 walks and was fifth with a .420 on-base percentage. Harper tailed off down the stretch while playing with a back injury that made it difficult to throw from the outfield.

He's healthy now and eager to not only reach the postseason but win a series for the first time in his 10-year career. The Nationals lost four Division Series during Harper's seven seasons in Washington, then won their first title after he left.

"I love postseason baseball. I love the mentality of it," Harper said. "It's always a lot of fun. I think the fans are craving it so much and getting back into the ballparks and what a great year to be able to get back into it."

The 28-year-old Harper has enjoyed his time in Philly, where fans embraced him

from the start. He showed up to spring training this week wearing a "Clearwooder" T-shirt and swinging a bat featuring the image of the Phillie Phanatic.

"I feel like I speak more free here in Philadelphia than I did prior to being able to talk to you guys and just be myself," Harper said. "I think that's always fun. I love playing in Philadelphia. I feel like I can take advantage of that and be Bryce, just be myself here. They've never once said to me: 'Calm down or do this or do that. We want you to be this type or that type.' They've just let me be me and I really appreciate the Philly organization for doing that for me."

Manager Joe Girardi has been effusive in his praise of Harper. He cited former Yankees manager Joe Torre's philosophy on handling charismatic players.

"Joe Torre used to say all the time: 'Let a player be himself as long as it's not hurting the club,'" Girardi said. "Let them be who they are because you want them comfortable when they come to the ballpark every day in who they are. I'm not asking them to be someone they're not whether it's on the field, off the field, in the clubhouse. As long as what he's doing is not detrimental to the team, I'm all for it. I really think that's what makes our lives interesting. If everyone was the same, it would be boring. I like the different personalities. I like the different music genres. I just like the different energy levels of different people because it's what makes the world go round."

## Five-inning games, two-out innings offer new look

Associated Press

Colorado Rockies infielder Ryan McMahon figures players can find plenty to do with any extra time they could get at the end of days if spring training games don't go nine innings.

"Maybe slide out for some golf. If not, head home, hit the couch and watch some basketball right now," McMahon said.

Or maybe even some extra batting practice.

"It could be, right? Depending on the day and depending on how things went, there's a lot of different ways that you could go with it," McMahon said. "The days are different every day, that's for sure."

Things certainly could look

different when spring training games begin Sunday, with managers allowed to mutually determine in advance how many innings their teams need or want to play.

Some games may not even make it to a seventh-inning stretch, since they can be as few as five innings through March 13. Even after that, until the end of spring training, games can be scheduled for only seven innings.

The potentially shorter spring training games, and the ability to end innings before three outs, come on the heels of 2020, when teams had to alter workouts and the season was shortened to 60 games because

of the coronavirus pandemic that is still ongoing.

### Manny's laser fix

Padres slugger Manny Machado said he had offseason laser eye surgery to deal with the lights.

"I hope it helps me hit better. I was dealing with some stuff last year with the lights, just night games. I still have the same vision," he said. "We'll just see when the lights turn on in San Diego, make that little adjustment there, if it helps me out or not. Vision's fine, same thing, nothing major, nothing different, but hopefully it helps me see the ball a little better and I can hit .320, .330."

### Arizona relief

Veteran right-hander Tyler Clippard has done just about everything in the bullpen in 14 years and with 10 teams as a big league reliever. He should be able to do whatever is needed in Arizona.

"I understand the value in being a bridge guy, maybe covering multiple innings or coming in with guys on base in the sixth," Clippard said Friday, four days after agreeing to terms on a \$2.25 million, one-year contract. "I can do a lot of different things so I understand the value in that. So there's no urgency to say I want to do this or that."

# Three-goal second period lifts Rangers

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Ryan Strome had a goal and two assists and Chris Kreider had a goal and an assist in New York's three-goal second period, leading the Rangers to a 6-2 win over the Boston Bruins on Friday night.

Julian Gauthier, Colin Blackwell, Pavel Buchnevich and Jonny Brodzinski also scored to help the Rangers get their third win in four games. Adam Fox and Ryan Lindgren each had two assists, and Alexandar Georgiev stopped 31 shots to improve to 2-0-2 in his last four starts.

"I really liked an awful lot about our game tonight," Rangers coach David Quinn said. "We were ready to play from the drop of the puck. We had all four lines going, our D corps played well and our goalie

played well. It was truly a team effort."

With fans back at Madison Square Garden for the first time this season, the Rangers beat Bruins for the first time in three meetings. Boston was 5-0-1 in the previous six games with the Rangers.

After the game, the Rangers gathered at center-ice to salute the 1,800 fans in attendance before skating off. Several players gave their sticks to some of the fans.

"It felt like it was pretty full," Strome said of the fans' return. "I had some goosebumps in the national anthem. Has been a while since I felt those. They definitely brought us energy ... It was great, sound-wise and visually, just seeing people and seeing people cheer. Just a little more excitement and buzz. It

was awesome."

Brad Marchand had a goal and an assist, Patrice Bergeron also scored and David Pastrnak had two assists for Boston. Tuukka Rask finished with 28 saves in the Bruins' fourth loss in five games.

The Bruins, who lost 7-2 at the New York Islanders on Thursday night, had not given up more than four goals in their first 16 games.

"Hockey is about making sure we stay together as a team when things are up or when things are down," Bergeron said. "It's about figuring out as fast as you can things you can get better at and right now it's obviously our 5-on-5 play defensively and giving up easy plays."

The teams play again in New York on Sunday to complete a

two-game series.

**Wild 3, Kings 1:** Kirill Kaprizov, Nick Bjugstad and Joel Eriksson Ek scored in a 3:03 span of the first period and Minnesota held off Los Angeles for its fifth straight victory.

Cam Talbot stopped 27 shots for the Wild, allowing only Jeff Carter's goal late in the third period. Jonathan Quick made 27 saves for Los Angeles.

**Avalanche 3, Coyotes 2:** Nazem Kadri had a goal and two assists, Hunter Miska made 16 saves and visiting Colorado survived Arizona's late shutout.

Playing in his fourth NHL game, Miska lost the shutout on Phil Kessel's goal with 1:36 left. Drake Caggiula scored again with 53 seconds left.

Mikko Rantanen and Andre Burakovsky also scored for Colorado.

# Montgomery makes history as owner of Dream

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Former Atlanta Dream guard Renee Montgomery made history on Friday as part of a three-member investor group that was approved to purchase the team.

The ownership change follows pressure on former Sen. Kelly Loeffler, a Republican who angered WNBA players with her opposition to the league's racial justice initiatives, to sell her share of the Dream.

Real estate investor Larry Gottesdiener was approved as majority owner of the team. The investor group also includes Montgomery and Suzanne Abair, president of Northland Investment Corp. in Massachusetts, the firm Gottesdiener founded.

Montgomery becomes the first former player to become both an owner and executive of a WNBA franchise. She said she would play an active role with Abair in the leadership of the

team.

"I'm going to be working with Suzanne and she's going to lead the way," Montgomery said.

Montgomery said she first began considering her role in an ownership group after Los Angeles Lakers star LeBron James tweeted about the possibility of being part of such a group.

"That tweet prompted my mind," Montgomery said, adding she "started to figure out if that could become a real possibility."

She said she also was motivated by James' role in the "More Than a Vote" campaign that worked to increase voter turnout and reduce voter suppression in the Black community.

James applauded Montgomery's ownership role by posting on Twitter: "So proud of this Queen. This is everything we are about!"

Montgomery sat out the 2020 season to focus on social justice issues and recently announced her retirement from the league

after 11 seasons and two WNBA championships.

"I think it's great that Renee has stepped up after she retired from playing the game to continue having an impact on the game," WNBA Commissioner Cathy Engelbert said Friday. "I've seen her strong work ethic. I've seen her advocacy and knowledge of the game and I'm sure that's going to be an asset to Larry and Suzanne and a huge benefit to the team."

The 34-year-old Montgomery won WNBA titles with the Minnesota Lynx in 2015 and 2017. She was an All-Star with the Connecticut Sun in 2011, when she set a career high with her average of 14.6 points per game. She was the WNBA's Sixth Woman of the Year in 2012.

The approval by the WNBA and NBA Board of Governors was expected and unanimous. It means co-owner Mary Brock also sold her share of the team.

Though his business is based in Newton, Mass., Gottesdiener

said the team will remain in Atlanta.

"This is an Atlanta asset," Gottesdiener said. "The Dream isn't going anywhere."

The WNBA announced on Jan. 20 the ownership change was close to being completed.

Players around the league had called for Loeffler to sell her 49% stake in the Dream after she wrote a letter to Engelbert over the summer objecting to the league's advocacy for racial justice and the Black Lives Matter movement.

Dream players wore "Vote Warnock" T-shirts in support of Democratic candidate Raphael Warnock, who defeated Loeffler in Georgia's Senate runoff. Warnock's victory, along with Jon Ossoff's win in Georgia's other runoff, handed control of the Senate to Democrats.

The high-profile campaigning against Loeffler by players on a team she owned was credited with boosting Warnock's candidacy.

# Depleted Raptors fend off Rockets

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Norman Powell scored 30 points, Kyle Lowry had a triple-double and the depleted Toronto Raptors beat the Houston Rockets 122-111 on Friday night.

The Raptors were without head coach Nick Nurse, five assistant coaches and starting forward Pascal Siakam in accordance with the NBA's health and safety protocols regarding the coronavirus. Assistant coach Sergio Scariolo directed the team. He had been away from the Raptors while coaching Spain in FIBA's EuroBasket 2022 qualifiers and just cleared quarantine Friday.

Lowry had 20 points, 11 rebounds and 10 assists to help the Raptors hand the Rockets their 10th straight loss. Fred VanVleet added 25 points, making 5 of 11 three-pointers. Lowry was 4-for-5 from long range, and Powell 4-for-8.

Victor Oladipo led the Rockets with 27 points, and John Wall had 21 points and 12 assists.

**Heat 124, Jazz 116:** Jimmy Butler scored a season-high 33 points, Goran Dragic tied his season best with 26 and Miami held on to visiting Utah just its third loss in its last 25 games.

Bam Adebayo had 19 points and 11 rebounds for Miami in its fifth straight victory.

**Lakers 102, Trail Blazers 93:** LeBron James had 28 points, Dennis Schroder added 22 in his return to the lineup, and host Los Angeles beat Portland to snap a four-game losing streak.

Damian Lillard scored 24 of his 35 points in the first half for Portland.

**Celtics 118, Pacers 112:** Kemba Walker made two late free throws and scored a season-high 32 points to help Boston beat visiting Indiana and

snap a three-game skid.

Daniel Theis added 17 points, and Jaylen Brown had 15.

**Clippers 119, Grizzlies 99:** Kawhi Leonard scored 30 points, Lou Williams added 17 and Los Angeles beat host Memphis to split a two-game series.

Jonas Valanciunas led Memphis with 22 points and 11 rebounds. Ja Morant scored 20 points before he was ejected, receiving a pair of technical for arguing a no-call with 2:18 remaining. De'Anthony Melton scored 16 points.

**Suns 106, Bulls 97:** Devin Booker and Deandre Ayton each scored 22 points and visiting Phoenix rallied to beat Chicago.

Chris Paul, who'll join Booker at the All-Star Game, added 14 points, 15 assists and six rebounds to help the Suns win for the 10th time in 12 games.

**Thunder 118, Hawks 109:** Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 24 points and Oklahoma City beat visiting Atlanta after changing uniforms at halftime because a mix-up left the teams wearing similar colors at the start.

John Collins scored 25 points for the Hawks.

**Warriors 130, Hornets 121:** Draymond Green had a triple-double with a career-high 19 assists along with 12 rebounds and 11 points to help host Golden State beat Charlotte for its first three-game winning streak this season.

Rozier led Charlotte with 24 points.

**Kings 110, Pistons 107:** De'Aaron Fox scored 27 points and visiting Sacramento beat Detroit to snap a nine-game losing streak.

Sacramento blew a 17-point first-quarter lead, then rallied from an eight-point deficit in the final quarter.

# No. 21 Loyola holds on to beat Southern Illinois

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Marquise Kennedy scored 16 points, and No. 21 Loyola Chicago hung on to beat Southern Illinois 60-52 on Friday.

The Ramblers (20-4, 15-2 Missouri Valley Conference) steadied themselves in the closing minutes after letting a 16-point lead shrink to four and came out on top for the 13th time in 14 games. They also reached 20 wins for the fourth straight year, a streak that started when the 2017-18 team went 32-6 and made the Final Four.

"I love the consistency of it," coach Porter Moser said. "Our guys are hungry."

Braden Norris scored 13 and made three three-pointers. Cameron Krutwig added 11 points, six rebounds and four blocks, though he sat out the final 7 minutes, 56 seconds because of cramps.

The Ramblers extended the nation's fifth-longest active home winning streak to 21 games. They also tied the program record for conference victories.

Steven Verplancken led Southern Illinois (11-12, 5-12) with 17 points. Lance Jones scored 14 points while making 4 of 8 three-pointers, but the Salukis committed 18 turnovers against the nation's stingiest scoring defense. And they lost their 14th in a row against ranked opponents.

"Give credit to Loyola," said coach Bryan Mullins, a Ramblers assistant from 2013-19 before taking the Southern Illinois job. "They made more plays than us, especially those last four minutes. They were able to make some big baskets and get some stops. We've got to execute better at the end of the game."

Hanging on: Loyola was rolling along with a 41-25 lead early in the second half, only to see things tighten down the stretch.

Verplancken cut it to 45-41 with 5:19 remaining when he

made a three. But the Ramblers' Norris bumped it to 50-41 with one of his own from deep.

Kennedy hit two free throws for Loyola with 1:15 remaining to make it 52-44 and stole the ball from Jones, leading to a layup for Jacob Hutson, bumping the lead to 10 with 44 seconds to play.

Quick recovery: Loyola had eight steals in the first half and held Southern Illinois scoreless for nine minutes while building a 29-20 lead.

The Ramblers trailed 14-5 about five minutes into the game after Jones — a sophomore from nearby Evanston, Ill. — made his first four three-pointers. But things turned around in a big way after that.

The Salukis missed their next 10 shots as Loyola scored 12 straight in a 17-2 run.

Kennedy came off the bench to score the first eight points in that run. Layups by Krutwig and Keith Clemons put the Ramblers on top by three before Jones made one of his own to end SIU's drought. Clemons then hit a three-pointer and Lucas Williamson scored on a fast-break layup to stretch the lead to 22-16 with about five minutes left in the half.

"They came out ready to play," Kennedy said. "Our first two, three minutes weren't good. I just knew I could come off the bench and provide a spark."

## Big picture

**Southern Illinois:** They have not beaten a Top 25 team since a win at home over then-No. 22 Wichita State on Feb. 5, 2013. The only time they knocked off one on the road was when they beat No. 13 Butler on Feb. 17, 2007.

**Loyola:** The Ramblers remain tied with Drake for the conference lead heading into Saturday's finale. Loyola got the win despite making just 5 of 27 three-pointers.