

Rebels evacuate civilians to Russia

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Spiking tensions in eastern Ukraine on Friday aggravated Western fears of a Russian invasion and a new war in Europe, with a humanitarian convoy hit by shelling and pro-Russian rebels evacuating civilians from the conflict zone.

A strong explosion hit the eastern city of Donetsk.

The Kremlin declared massive nuclear drills to flex its military muscle, and President Vladimir Putin pledged to protect Russia's national interests against what it sees as encroaching Western threats. U.S. and European leaders, meanwhile, grasped for ways to keep the peace and Europe's post-Cold War security order.

While Putin held out the possibility of diplomacy, a cascade of developments this week have further exacerbated East-West tensions and fueled war worries. This week's actions have fed those concerns: U.S. and European officials, focused on an estimated 150,000 Russian troops posted around Ukraine's borders, warn the long-simmering separatist conflict in eastern Ukraine could provide the spark for a broader attack.

Vice President Kamala Harris said the U.S. still hopes Russia will de-escalate but is ready to hit it with tough sanctions in case of an attack. U.S. leaders this week issued their most dire warnings yet that Moscow could order an invasion of Ukraine any day.

"We remain, of course, open to and desirous of diplomacy ... but we are also commit-

ted, if Russia takes aggressive action, to ensure there will be severe consequence," Harris said at the annual Munich Security Conference.

While Russia snubbed this year's conference, lines of communication remain open: The U.S. and Russian defense chiefs spoke Friday, and U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin called for de-escalation, the return of Russian forces surrounding Ukraine to their home bases and a diplomatic resolution, according to the Pentagon. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov agreed to meet next week.

Immediate worries focused on eastern Ukraine, where Ukrainian forces have been fighting pro-Russia rebels since 2014 in a conflict that has killed some 14,000 people.

A bombing struck a car outside the main government building in Donetsk, an Associated Press journalist there said. The head of the separatists' forces, Denis Sinukov, said the car was his, the Interfax news agency reported.

There were no reports of casualties and no independent confirmation of the circumstances of the blast. Uniformed men inspected the burned-out car. Broken glass littered the area.

Shelling and shooting are common along the line that separates Ukrainian forces and the rebels, but targeted violence is unusual in rebel-held cities like Donetsk.

However, the explosion and the evacuations were in line with U.S. warnings of so-

called false-flag attacks that Russia would use to justify an invasion. The U.S. State Department noted that Blinken had warned of "this type of false-flag operation" on Thursday at the U.N. Security Council.

Separatists in the Luhansk and Donetsk regions that form Ukraine's industrial heartland known as the Donbas said they are evacuating civilians to Russia. The announcement appeared to be part of Moscow's efforts to counter Western warnings of a Russian invasion, and paint Ukraine as the aggressor instead.

Denis Pushilin, head of the Donetsk rebel government, said women, children and the elderly would go first, and that Russia has prepared facilities for them. Pushilin alleged in a video statement that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy was going to order an imminent offensive in the area.

Authorities began moving children from an orphanage in Donetsk, and other residents boarded buses for Russia. Long lines formed at gas stations as more people prepared to leave.

Putin ordered his emergencies minister to fly to the Rostov region bordering Ukraine to help organize the exodus and ordered the government to offer a payment of 10,000 rubles (about \$130) to each evacuee, equivalent to about half of an average monthly salary in the war-ravaged Donbas.

Ukraine denied planning any offensive, with Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba saying that "Ukraine does not conduct or plan any such actions in the Donbas."

Sailors accused of leaking video of jet crash on carrier

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Five sailors have been charged with violating military law over leaked video showing an F-35 fighter jet crashing on an aircraft carrier in the South China Sea last month, the Navy said Thursday.

An ensign, three chief petty officers and a senior chief petty officer were charged under Article 92 of the Uniform Code of Military Justice, the Navy said in a statement to

KGTV-TV in San Diego. Their names weren't released.

Article 92 involves disobeying a lawful order or regulation or being derelict in performance of duty.

The Navy also said the case involved the unauthorized release of shipboard video that appeared online this month and showed the F-35C Lightning II hitting the deck of the San Diego-based USS Carl Vinson wing-first, and then skating off the deck

into the water on Jan. 24.

The pilot ejected and was injured along with six sailors. The cause of the crash has been under investigation.

The wreckage of the multimillion-dollar aircraft hasn't been recovered yet.

The aircraft carrier had superficial damage and was able to resume operations, the Navy has said. The Carl Vinson and its strike group returned to San Diego on Feb. 14 after an eight-month deployment.

Marine reservist, nurse charged in vaccine scam

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A Marine Corps reservist who was charged in last year's riot at the U.S. Capitol also schemed with a nurse to steal, forge and sell hundreds of fake coronavirus vaccination cards and destroy vaccine doses to fake inoculations, federal authorities said Thursday.

Cpl. Jia Liu, 26, was released on \$250,000 bond to home detention with an ankle monitor after a court appearance Thursday. Nurse Steven Rodriguez, 27, was released on \$100,000 bond.

"By deliberately distributing fraudulent COVID-19 vaccination cards to the unvaccinated, the defendants put military and other communities at risk of contracting a virus that has already claimed nearly 1 million lives in this country," Brooklyn U.S. Attorney Breon Peace said in a statement.

Liu's lawyer, Benjamin Yaster, declined to comment. A message was left for Rodriguez' attorney.

The defendants are charged with conspiring to commit forgery and to defraud the federal government. The charges carry the potential for up to 10 years in prison for Liu, of Queens, and Rodriguez, of suburban

Long Beach.

According to an indictment, Rodriguez, who worked at a clinic on Long Island, pilfered blank COVID-19 vaccination cards.

The two men allegedly offered customers the choice of buying blank or fraudulently filled out cards, with a premium-priced option: a fake vaccination record in the New York state and city databases that are used to issue vaccine passes.

A buyer who sprung for the add-on would go to the clinic, where Rodriguez would dispose of a dose of vaccine, forge a card and make a phony entry into the databases, the indictment said.

Covering their tracks by referring to "gift cards," "Cardi Bs," "Christmas cards" and "Pokemon cards," Liu and Rodriguez conducted the scam through encrypted messaging apps and social media and instructed buyers to mask online payments as "consultancy" or "Korean BBQ," the indictment said.

The indictment said some of the fake cards went to Liu's fellow Marine reservists, following a Pentagon order in August that all members of the military be vaccinated.

Navy ordered to review thousands of 'bad papers'

BY NIKKI WENTLING
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Navy has been ordered to review and potentially upgrade thousands of general and other-than-honorable discharges dating back to 2012, according to a lawsuit settlement approved by a federal judge.

The Navy Discharge Review Board must reconsider thousands of cases where upgrades were denied, despite evidence that veterans were struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury or military sexual trauma when they separated from the military, according to the settlement approved Monday.

The board will review decisions made between March 2, 2012, and Feb. 15, 2022, that partially or fully denied relief to Navy, Marine Corps and Reserve veterans with other-than-honorable discharges.

The settlement was made as a result of a nationwide, class-action lawsuit first filed in 2018 by Iraq War veteran Tyson Manker.

Manker was kicked out of the Marine Corps after being caught with marijuana, which he said he used to self-medicate. The Navy agreed in October 2021 to upgrade Manker's discharge to honorable.

U.S. District Court Judge Charles Haight, in his approval Monday, wrote the settlement was "an impressive example of the manner in which a class action can be made the vehicle for doing substantial justice and advancing the rule of law."

The court approved a similar settlement in a class-action lawsuit against the Army last spring.

The Defense Department instituted a policy in 2017 to give "liberal consideration" to veterans looking to upgrade their other-than-honorable discharges, known as "bad paper," in situations in which a service-related medical disorder could have led to their misconduct. Plaintiffs in both lawsuits argued the discharge review boards ignored the policy and denied upgrades when they were warranted.

Bad paper discharges disqualify veterans from receiving certain health and education benefits, as well as preferential hiring and tax breaks.

Navy's new tilt-rotor Osprey craft not yet reliable, Pentagon reports

Bloomberg News

The U.S. Navy's new version of the tilt-rotor Osprey aircraft designed for missions at sea isn't yet "operationally suitable" because it has only "partially met reliability requirements," according to the Pentagon's testing office.

Among the problems: Its ice protection system "accounted for 25% of the operational mission failures, which will result in mission aborts," the Defense Department's director of operational test and evaluation said in a non-public assessment marked "Controlled Unclassified Information" and obtained by Bloomberg News.

Otherwise, though, the test office found

the CMV-22B Osprey is "operationally effective for carrier onboard delivery, medical evacuation, Naval Special Warfare support and search and rescue."

The CMV-22B is a modified version of the widely used Marine Corps aircraft that lands and takes off like a helicopter and then flies like an airplane. It's replacing the C-2A Greyhound, a nausea-inducing, claustrophobic aircraft first produced in 1965, to land cargo and people on aircraft carriers.

Spokespersons for Bell Helicopter Textron and Boeing, which jointly produce the Osprey, referred questions to the Naval Air Systems Command.

Calif. announces endemic virus policy

Associated Press

SACRAMENTO, Calif. — California became the first state to formally shift to an “endemic” approach to the coronavirus with Gov. Gavin Newsom’s announcement Thursday of a plan that emphasizes prevention and quick reaction to outbreaks over mandated masking and business shutdowns.

The milestone, nearly two years in the making, envisions a return to a more normal existence with the help of a variety of initiatives and billions in new spending to more quickly spot surges or variants, add health care workers, stockpile tests and push back against false claims and other misinformation.

“We are moving past the crisis phase into a phase where we will work to live with this vi-

rus,” he said during a news conference from a state warehouse brimming with pandemic supplies in Fontana, east of Los Angeles.

The first-term Democrat, who last year survived a recall election driven by critics of his governance during the pandemic, promised the state’s nearly 40 million residents that as the omicron surge fades, “we’re going to keep them safe and we’re going to stay on top of this.”

A disease reaches the endemic stage when the virus still exists in a community but becomes manageable as immunity builds. But there will be no definitive turn of the switch, the Democratic governor said, unlike the case with Wednesday’s lifting of the state’s indoor masking requirements or an announcement coming Feb. 28 of when precisely schoolchildren can stop wearing

face coverings.

And there will be no immediate lifting of the dozens of remaining executive emergency orders that have helped run the state since Newsom imposed the nation’s first statewide stay-home order in March 2020.

“This pandemic won’t have a defined end. There’s no finish line,” Newsom said.

With omicron fading in many parts of the world some countries have begun planning for the endemic stage. But no state has taken the step Newsom did and offered a detailed forward-looking plan. Newsom’s plan sets specific goals, such as stockpiling 75 million masks, establishing the infrastructure to provide up to 200,000 vaccinations and 500,000 tests a day in the event of an outbreak, and adding 3,000 medical workers within three weeks in surge areas.

Senate sends Biden bill to avert shutdown

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Senate has given final approval to legislation averting a weekend government shutdown, sending President Joe Biden a measure designed to give bipartisan bargainers more time to reach an overdue deal financing federal agencies until fall.

Final passage Thursday was by a bipartisan 65-27 vote, five more than the 60 votes needed. The House easily approved the legislation last week. Each party had concluded that an election-year shutdown would be

politically damaging, especially during a pandemic and a confrontation with Russia over its possible invasion of Ukraine.

Yet as with virtually all must-pass bills, politics hitched a ride. Before passage, conservatives forced votes on amendments including on one of the year’s hot-button issues, COVID-19 vaccine mandates. They were defeated mostly along party lines.

Without Senate passage of the identical House bill, agencies would have had to stop functioning over the weekend. The legislation will finance government through

March 11.

Both parties hope the short-term measure will be the last one needed as negotiators craft compromise bills financing agencies through Sept. 30. Since the government’s budget year began last Oct. 1, federal agencies have functioned at spending levels approved in the waning weeks of Donald Trump’s presidency.

The new spending bills will be bipartisan compromises but will let Biden and Democrats controlling Congress put more of a stamp on spending priorities.

Wife also expected to plead guilty in Navy espionage case

Baltimore Sun

BALTIMORE — The wife of the former Navy nuclear engineer who on Monday pleaded guilty in a scheme to sell military secrets to foreign governments may be following her husband’s lead, federal court records show.

Jonathan Toebe, 43, admitted in federal court in West Virginia he shared troves of data and documents pertaining to nuclear submarines to undercover FBI agents, who duped him into believing they

were representatives of another country, in exchange for thousands of dollars worth of cryptocurrency.

Until Monday, Toebe and his wife, Diana, 46, maintained she was innocent.

However, Jonathan Toebe told a federal magistrate judge Monday he conspired with Diana to give classified information to a foreign government. His plea agreement named her as his accomplice and specified that she acted as a lookout when her husband

left digital memory cards at “dead drop” sites.

Diana Toebe, a former humanities teacher, was slated to change her plea Friday morning in front of the same magistrate judge, signaling that she’s slated to plead guilty.

Diana Toebe was scheduled appear before U.S. Magistrate Judge Robert W. Trumble in the W. Craig Broadwater Federal Building and United States Courthouse in Martinsburg, W.Va. The court hearing should expedite

resolutions in the cases of the Annapolis couple, who were arrested in October on espionage charges.

A federal grand jury handed up an indictment Oct. 19 charging the couple with one count of conspiracy to communicate restricted data to a foreign government and two counts of communicating restricted data to another nation with the intent to harm the U.S. or to give that nation an advantage. They faced a maximum penalty of life in prison.

Judge: Trump must testify on business

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Former President Donald Trump must answer questions under oath in New York state's civil investigation into his business practices, a judge ruled Thursday.

Judge Arthur Engoron ordered Trump and his two eldest children, Ivanka and Donald Trump Jr., to comply with subpoenas issued in December by New York Attorney General Letitia James.

Trump and his two children must sit for depositions within 21 days, Engoron said following a two-hour hearing with lawyers for the Trumps and James' office.

The eight-page ruling is almost certain to be appealed, but if upheld it could force the

former president into a tough decision about whether to answer questions, or stay silent, citing his Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination — something he's criticized others for doing in the past.

"THERE IS NO CASE!" Trump said in a statement, accusing James' office of "doing everything within their corrupt discretion to interfere with my business relationships, and with the political process."

Trump called the ruling "a continuation of the greatest Witch Hunt in history — and remember, I can't get a fair hearing in New York because of the hatred of me by Judges and the judiciary. It is not possible."

In her own statement, James said: "No one

will be permitted to stand in the way of the pursuit of justice, no matter how powerful they are. No one is above the law."

James, a Democrat, said her investigation has uncovered evidence Trump's company, the Trump Organization, used "fraudulent or misleading" valuations of assets like golf courses and skyscrapers to get loans and tax benefits.

A lawyer for the attorney general's office, Kevin Wallace, told Engoron that it wasn't unusual to have civil and criminal investigations proceeding at the same time. The judge rejected a request from lawyers for the Trumps to pause the civil probe until the criminal matter is over.

Police begin arrests in Ottawa COVID protest

Associated Press

OTTAWA, Ontario — Police began arresting protesters and towing away trucks Friday in a bid to break the three-week, traffic-snarling siege of Canada's capital by hundreds of truckers angry over the country's COVID-19 restrictions.

Working slowly and methodically, police led protesters away in handcuffs through Ottawa's snow-covered streets, with at least one of those under arrest carrying a sign that read, "Mandate Freedom."

Tow truck operators — wearing neon-

green ski masks, with their companies' decals taped over on their trucks to conceal their identities — arrived under police escort and set to work removing the big rigs, campers and other vehicles parked bumper to bumper.

While some protesters surrendered, many remained defiant as the crackdown unfolded.

"Freedom was never free," said trucker Kevin Homaund, of Montreal. "So what if they put the handcuffs on us and they put us in jail?"

Police made their first move to end the occupation late Thursday with the arrest of two key protest leaders. They also sealed off much of the downtown area to outsiders to prevent them from coming to the aid of the self-styled Freedom Convoy protesters.

The capital represented the movement's last stronghold after three weeks of demonstrations and blockades that shut down border crossings into the U.S., caused economic damage to both countries and created a political crisis for Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Senate confirms DOD nominee with Russia expertise

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The Senate on Wednesday overwhelmingly confirmed one of President Joe Biden's Pentagon nominees whose expertise on Russia could be critical amid the Russia-Ukraine crisis, overcoming the opposition of Sen. Josh Hawley, R-Mo.

The vote was 83 to 13 for Celeste Wallander, CEO of the U.S.-Russia Foundation, to serve as assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs. Hawley opposed the nomination, joined by a dozen other Republicans.

Hawley objected last week to a rapid confirmation process. He has blocked Pentagon nominees to protest the Biden administration's handling of the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Afghanistan last summer.

Hawley delayed not only Wallander's confirmation, but also that of another Penta-

gon nominee — David Honey, who has been chosen by Biden to be the deputy undersecretary for research and engineering.

Hawley's delaying tactics forced Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., to file a cloture motion Monday night to accelerate debate and bring the nominations to the full Senate floor. After two procedural votes at midday, the Senate confirmed Wallander and then confirmed Honey on a 94-to-1 vote. Hawley was the lone dissenter.

Hawley's move angered several Democrats, including Schumer.

"Intentionally delaying the confirmation of a qualified expert on Russian affairs at a time like this is supremely reckless," Schumer said Wednesday, adding that Hawley's actions are "making the American people less safe."

Hawley's colleagues on the Senate Armed

Services Committee also have criticized his move.

"Senators have the right to object," Sen. Jack Reed, D-R.I., chairman of the Armed Services Committee, said earlier this week. "They also have a responsibility to America's national security interests, particularly when Russia is massing troops in Eastern Europe. It's time for politics to take a back seat here."

On Monday, Hawley defended his decision to delay Wallander's confirmation process by accusing Biden of pushing Europe closer to war.

"As Joe Biden's incompetence leads Europe closer to war, Dr. Wallander seems to think we should keep doing more of the same in Europe, including bringing Ukraine into NATO, which will mean more and more American troops," said Hawley.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Parents accused of leaving child to ski

VT KILLINGTON — Two parents are accused of leaving a 2-year-old in a car when temperatures were below freezing while they skied at a Vermont resort where they also worked.

Killington police received a report of a child left alone in a car on Feb. 8 and stopped a couple while they were driving away from the Killington Resort, WCAX-TV reported Wednesday.

Police said they eventually admitted they had left the child in the car while they skied and said they checked on the child after each run. Police said ski resort records show they rode the ski lift 10 times and that it was 28 degrees fahrenheit and windy outside.

Both parents were charged with cruelty to a child and one was also charged with a DUI, the television station reported.

Workers fired for giving licenses without tests

MA BOSTON — Four Massachusetts Registry of Motor Vehicle employees were fired after an investigation found that 2,100 drivers were granted licenses without taking a driver's test.

The Massachusetts Department of Transportation's investigation discovered that starting in April 2018, two road test examiners at the Brockton Service Center gave about 2,100 people passing scores on the road test without drivers taking it and employees administering the test, WCVB-TV reported Wednesday.

According to MassDOT, affected drivers have been notified that they will have 10 days to take the road test or their license will be suspended.

Man gets 30 days for bald eagle feather

LA SHREVEPORT — A 20-year-old Louisiana man has been sentenced to 30 days in prison and a year on supervised release for possessing a bald eagle feather, federal prosecutors said Wednesday.

Daniel Glenn Smith, of Homer, was sentenced Tuesday in Shreveport for violating a law that says only federally recognized Native American tribes may possess any part of a bald or golden eagle, U.S. Attorney Brandon B. Brown said in a news release.

This is the same law that former New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo unknowingly broke when he picked up an eagle feather from a lake and unwittingly confessed to when he talked about the incident in 2018.

Airplane crashes into tractor-trailer on road

NC LEXINGTON — An airplane crashed into a tractor-trailer on Wednesday on a North Carolina highway, killing the pilot and sparking a small fire, the N.C. State Highway Patrol said.

The Federal Aviation Administration said a twin-engine Beechcraft Barron crashed into the tractor-trailer on Interstate 85 South, near the Davidson County Airport in Lexington at around 5:35 p.m.

Early reports indicate the

plane was taking off from the airport when it lost altitude and crashed into the southbound tractor-trailer. The name of pilot wasn't released Wednesday night pending notification of relatives, the patrol said.

News outlets report the driver of the tractor-trailer was taken to a Winston-Salem hospital for treatment of minor injuries, officials said.

Video footage from the scene showed both the tractor and trailer on its left side. The tail section of the aircraft was seen next to the overturned rig. Video also showed firefighters spraying water as flames burned the ground next to I-85 with some debris scattered on the road.

Single license plate proposal is rejected

SD PIERRE — South Dakota won't be switching to single license plates any time soon.

The Senate Transportation Committee on Wednesday rejected a proposal for a rear-only plate for passenger cars, vans and pickup trucks.

Thomas Frisch, of North Sioux City, testified in favor of the change. Frisch said newer vehicles are more aerodynamic with rounded fronts that have fewer places for mounting license plates. He said manufacturers often provide only rear mounts for plates, KELO-TV reported.

Human trafficking effort rescues more than 80

CA LOS ANGELES — Los Angeles law enforcement announced Tuesday

the rescue of more than 80 human trafficking and sexual exploitation victims, including children, during a weeklong operation that also netted hundreds of arrests.

The annual "Operation Reclaim and Rebuild" was held last week and coincided with the run-up to the Super Bowl in Los Angeles, according to the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

Sheriff Alex Villanueva said 74 adults and eight children were rescued, while 34 suspected traffickers were arrested. About 200 sex buyers, known as johns, were also taken into custody as part of the operation.

"Remember, this is one week only," Villanueva said. "This is just one small slice of what happens throughout the entire year."

Box found in stone when pedestal removed

VA RICHMOND — Workers removing the pedestal left behind after protesters toppled the Jefferson Davis monument in Richmond found a box encased in stone Wednesday, a city official said.

The box was removed Wednesday and the city will store it in a secure location until the owner, the Black History Museum and Cultural Center of Virginia, decides what to do with it, Jim Nolan, a spokesman for Mayor Levar Stoney, said. Last month, the city transferred ownership of all Confederate monuments and associated artifacts to the museum, which will work with The Valentine museum to decide what to do with them.

— From Associated Press

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Americans in third in women's bobsled

Associated Press

BEIJING — The Germans remain right at home on China's Olympic sliding track.

Winners of gold medals in seven of the eight sliding events so far at the Beijing Games, Germany has put itself in prime position to add more hardware to its record-setting total — holding down the top two spots at the midway point of the women's bobsled competition Friday night.

Laura Nolte and Deborah Levi have a commanding half-second lead after two runs, with a combined time of 2:02.05. Defending Olympic champion Mariama Jamanka and Alexandra Burghardt are second, in 2:02.55.

"Today was a really good show," Nolte said. "We have to do the same tomorrow."

And the U.S. is third, with four-time medalist Elana Meyers Taylor and brakeman Sylvia Hoffman finishing their first two runs in 2:02.79 — well

ahead of Canada's Christine de Bruin, who posted a two-run time with brakeman Kristen Bujnowski of 2:03.21.

"I'm just going to go out there and have fun tomorrow," said Meyers Taylor, who has hinted that she may retire after these Olympics. "It's been a long journey and I'm just going to enjoy the heck out of it. I feel really good right now. I'm going to get some rest and get after it tomorrow. It's a whole new day tomorrow."

Monobob gold medalist Kailie Humphries, seeking a fifth Olympic medal and fourth gold, has some work to do. Teaming with brakeman Kaysha Love, Humphries is fifth at the midway point in 2:03.38 — nearly six-tenths of a second away from what currently is the bronze position.

"Kaysha did an amazing job today," Humphries said. "We'll look again at our equipment, look to clean up some drives and see what happens. ... We go out

there and we do the best that we can do. Sometimes it's not good enough and sometimes it is."

The final two runs of the event are Saturday night.

It's no surprise to see those nations at the top of the standings. The U.S., Germany and Canada have combined to win 14 of the previous 15 Olympic medals awarded in the event; Italy is the exception, winning bronze in 2006.

Germany's seven sliding golds already at these Olympics is a record for any nation, and its 12 medals — and counting — ties what East Germany and West Germany managed in 1976.

Germany went 4-for-4 in luge events at these Olympics, then 2-for-2 in skeleton and swept the medals in the two-man bobsled race. The only gold from the Yanqing Sliding Center that hasn't gone to Germany so far was in women's monobob, when Humphries won and Meyers Taylor was second for the U.S.

That may be the lone blip on the German sliding resume from these games, with Nolte leading this event and reigning world champion Francesco Friedrich the big favorite in the four-man event that begins Saturday morning.

Nolte set the tone, leading after the first run Friday night with Jamanka — the defending Olympic champion — only 0.06 seconds behind. Meyers Taylor was third, Humphries fourth at that point, the first-to-fourth gap being 0.37 seconds.

It opened up considerably in the second heat, as Nolte pulled away.

"My runs weren't perfect and especially in the second run I had some mistakes," Jamanka said. "That's more on my mind than the position we are in. ... We have some stuff to do."

The order atop the standings largely stayed the same in the second heat, the only change being de Bruin passing Humphries in the race for fourth.

Canada beats US for bronze medal in men's curling

Associated Press

BEIJING — John Shuster began his fifth Olympics as a U.S. flag bearer, leading the defending men's curling champions and the rest of Team USA into the Beijing Games' opening ceremony.

He ended them empty-handed, losing 8-5 in the bronze medal match to Brad Gushue and Canada.

"I'm not retiring, but that doesn't mean I'll ever get back here," said Shuster, who would be 43 for the 2026 Games in Milan and Cortina. "No matter what happens, I'm so happy and proud and love playing with these guys, and I hope they want to keep doing it."

Gushue returned to the podium 16 years after he won gold in Turin — beating an Amer-

ican team that included Shuster in the semifinals. Four years ago, Canada was shut out in the men's and women's events for the first time since the sport returned to the Winter Games in 2002.

All three Canadian curling teams in Beijing finished the round robin 5-4, but the women and mixed doubles teams missed the playoffs on a tiebreaker.

"I'm sure people are going to talk about why we didn't win gold. And rightfully so," said Gushue, who was teamed this time with Mark Nichols, Brett Gallant, Geoff Walker and alternate Marc Kennedy.

"We've been a very good team for a long time," Gushue said. "But this is not easy; this is hard."

Gushue shared the podium in Turin with Shuster, who won bronze. Shuster has been back at every Winter Games since, winning it all in Pyeongchang four years ago.

"He's a freak, man. Like, five Olympics and we're going to hopefully go for six. That guy's an absolute animal," U.S. second Matt Hamilton said. "The guy's an awesome dude and a great teammate, and just I'm lucky to be on his team."

Gushue wasn't able to get through the ultra-competitive Canadian Olympic trials again until this year.

"The fact that I was away for 16 years, this whole experience means a lot," he said. "Even if we lost today, we've made the most of the experience. At 41, those are the things you re-

member more than at 25, when it's all about winning. The perspective has changed dramatically."

The Canadians capitalized on a missed final shot by Shuster in the second-to-last end that turned a one-point edge into an insurmountable 8-5 lead.

Canada's third-to-last shot in the 10th end cleared all of the American rocks out of the target area, leaving no chance for the U.S. to tie the match. Shuster immediately conceded.

"You could argue that fourth place is the worst spot to finish in the tournament. And I still love my team, and I love curling," Hamilton said.

"It would have been great to win a medal. But at the end of the day, these guys are still my boys," he said.

Keselowski, Buescher win Daytona Duels

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Brad Keselowski took Jack Roush to victory lane for the first time since 2017 as their re-branded team showed it's ready for the Daytona 500.

Keselowski and Chris Buescher won the 150-mile qualifying races at Daytona International Speedway on Thursday night to put them side-by-side starting from the second row in NASCAR's sold-out, season-opening spectacular.

"We have good hot rods here," Buescher said. "They are fast and they handle good. I knew we were in good shape that whole race."

He won the race on the 60th and final lap of the second qualifying race for the Daytona 500 when leader Joey Logano wrecked trying to block Buescher's run. Logano, who was visibly angry after wrecking his Team Penske Ford, said

he misjudged Buescher's closing rate.

"Driver screwed up. That's really all there is to it," Logano said. "It's my fault. It stinks because it tore up our car and kind of puts us in a spot as a race team. It's just a dumb mistake."

Across the speedway, Logano's former Penske teammate was making his second trip to victory lane of the night.

Keselowski celebrated a huge first night of Daytona racing as both the team owner and its driver. He left Penske in November for an ownership stake in Roush's organization — now called RFK Racing for Roush Fenway Keselowski — and is now the driver of Roush's flagship and original No. 6 Ford.

He has a long-term vision for RFK and its not a quick fix to get the team back among the NASCAR elite. And yet Keselowski won the first qualifying race and obviously has a fast

car for the Daytona 500.

Keselowski said the night was critical for creating a culture that expects to win at RFK, which last won a Cup race in 2017 with Ricky Stenhouse Jr. at this track.

"There's a lot of guys and gals on my team that have never won a race before. The company hasn't won a race in five, six years now? That's any kind of race," Keselowski said. "It's really important to get that winning habit built up, and the only way you can really do that is to go win. That builds confidence in each other and builds expectations."

Keselowski and Buescher will start Sunday behind NASCAR champion Kyle Larson and his Hendrick Motorsports teammate Alex Bowman. The Chevrolet drivers locked down the front row in Wednesday night time trials.

Floyd Mayweather Jr. will make his NASCAR debut Sunday when The Money Team

Racing starts the Daytona 500. Kaz Grala drove the No. 50 Chevrolet into the race with a pass of J.J. Yeley on the final lap of the first race.

Six teams came to Daytona battling for four "open" spots in Sunday's 40-car field. Two spots were filled in time trials — former Formula One champion Jacques Villeneuve will make his Daytona 500 debut, as will Noah Gragson for Beard Motorsports — and one spot was available in each of the two qualifying races.

Grala earned one of them with a pass for 18th on the final lap of the first race. NY Racing, a team owned by Black entrepreneur John Cohen, raced its way into the Daytona 500 in the second race. The team pulled Greg Biffle out of semi-retirement and at 52, Biffle will be the oldest driver in the field Sunday when he makes his 15th career Daytona 500 start.

Caufield's two goals help Habs snap 10-game skid

Associated Press

MONTREAL — Cole Caufield forced overtime with 8.7 seconds left in regulation and then scored the winner in overtime to help the Montreal Canadiens snap a 10-game skid with a 3-2 victory over the St. Louis Blues on Thursday night.

Paul Byron also scored and Samuel Montembeault stopped 26 shots for the Canadiens, whose last win came on Jan. 18 at Dallas. The victory was the first for interim coach Martin St. Louis, who was 0-3-0 since taking over for the fired Dominique Ducharme.

Robert Thomas and Pavel Buchnevich scored for the Blues, and Ville Husso made 27 saves.

With 1:19 to go and the game tied at 1, Buchnevich powered his way to what looked to be the winning goal with a slap shot from the right faceoff circle.

But Caufield forced overtime on a one-timer with less than nine seconds remaining.

Capitals 5, Flyers 3: Garnet Hathaway scored two goals in a span of less than two

minutes late in the third period and visiting Washington rallied late to defeat Philadelphia.

Joe Snively, Michal Kempny and John Carlson also scored for the Capitals, who won their fifth in a row on the road to improve to 16-5-4 away from Washington.

Islanders 4, Bruins 1: Noah Dobson and Mathew Barzal each scored and had an assist, helping host New York snap a three-game skid.

Ilya Sorokin made 26 saves, Jean-Gabriel Pageau also scored, and the Islanders kicked off a two-game homestand with a victory after a disappointing four-game road trip (1-3-0).

Red Wings 3, Rangers 2 (SO): Pius Suter scored the winner in the sixth round of the shootout, and Thomas Greiss made 37 saves as visiting Detroit beat New York.

Detroit's Lucas Raymond and the Rangers' Mika Zibanejad each scored in the first round of the shootout, and each team missed its next four chances. Suter beat Igor Shesterkin and Rangers forward Filip Chytil failed to convert.

Maple Leafs 4, Penguins 1: Morgan Rielly and Auston Matthews each had a goal and an assist, and Jack Campbell made 45 saves to lead host Toronto past Pittsburgh.

David Kampf and Michael Bunting also scored for Toronto, which was outshot 46-29 but won its second straight.

Senators 3, Sabres 1: Austin Watson scored the tiebreaker in the third period and Zach Sanford and Brady Tkachuk added goals for visiting Ottawa.

Blue Jackets 7, Blackhawks 4: Red-hot Patrik Laine scored three goals to lead visiting Columbus past Chicago.

Jets 5, Kraken 3: Josh Morrissey scored the tiebreaking goal with 6:10 left in the third period for host Winnipeg.

Oilers 7, Ducks 3: Leon Draisaitl scored twice and host Edmonton routed Anaheim to remain unbeaten under new head coach Jay Woodcroft.

Canucks 5, Sharks 4 (OT): J.T. Miller scored with 2:21 remaining in overtime after visiting Vancouver allowed a tying goal in the final second of regulation.

Embiid leads 76ers in win over Bucks

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Joel Embiid had 42 points, 14 rebounds and five assists and the Philadelphia 76ers regrouped after squandering a 15-point lead to beat the Milwaukee Bucks 123-120 on Thursday night.

Embiid put the 76ers ahead for good at 117-116 with a 10-footer with 2:32 left.

Giannis Antetokounmpo had 32 points, 11 rebounds and nine assists for the Bucks.

Philadelphia played without James Harden, who hasn't made his 76ers debut since coming over in a trade with the Brooklyn Nets last week. The 10-time All-Star and 2018 MVP hasn't played since Feb. 2 due to an injured left hamstring.

Milwaukee's Khris Middleton missed a three-pointer with about nine seconds left.

The Bucks had one final chance after Philadelphia's Furkan Korkmaz lost the ball out of bounds with 2.3 seconds left. After Embiid fouled Antetokounmpo to force one more inbound pass with 1.1 seconds

left, Middleton missed a desperation three-point attempt at the buzzer.

Tyrese Maxey and Tobias Harris scored 19 points each for the 76ers.

Mavericks 125, Pelicans

118: Luka Doncic had 49 points and 15 rebounds and Dallas never trailed against host New Orleans en route to its sixth victory in seven games.

Doncic made four of his first five three-point shots — sometimes skipping back to the defensive end in celebration as the net billowed from a long make — before finishing 7-for-14 from deep. He also had eight assists.

Dallas raced to a 45-27 lead after the first quarter, when Doncic scored 19 points and the Mavs combined to make 9 of 12 threes. The Mavs took their first lead of 20 or more on another three by Davis Bertans on their first shot of the second period.

CJ McCollum scored 38 points, giving him four straight games with 20 or more, includ-

ing three with at least 30, but the Pelicans fell to 1-4 since acquiring the star guard from Portland on Feb. 8.

Heat 111, Hornets 107

(20T): Kyle Lowry scored 12 of his 25 points after regulation and visiting Miami beat Charlotte in double overtime to enter the All-Star break tied for the Eastern Conference lead.

Duncan Robinson added 21 points for Miami, and Jimmy Butler overcame a horrendous shooting night to make clutch jumpers in the second overtime period to finish with 15 points, 10 rebounds and eight assists. Miami has won six of their last seven games, tying the Chicago Bulls for the best record in the East at 38-21.

Miles Bridges had 29 points and 11 rebounds for Charlotte, and LaMelo Ball added 14 points, 14 assists and 10 rebounds before fouling out in the second overtime.

Wizards 117, Nets 103:

Rui Hachimura scored 20 points, Corey Kispert added 16 and Washington beat visiting

Brooklyn.

Ish Smith had 15 points, and Dani Avdija 13 to help the Wizards win their second straight.

Patty Mills scored 22 points, and Cam Thomas added 20 for the Nets, coming off a comeback victory at New York on Wednesday night. They have lost 12 of 14.

Clippers 142, Rockets 111: Marcus Morris Sr. scored 27 points and Luke Kennard added 25 as host Los Angeles sped to a 17-point lead in the first half and beat Houston.

Terance Mann scored 20 points as the Clippers won for the third time in four games. Los Angeles shot 51.4% (18-for-35) from three-point range, and had a 50-35 rebounding advantage. Kennard went 8-for-9 from three-point range.

Jalen Green had 21 points and Jae'Sean Tate added 19 for the Rockets, who lost their seventh straight game and for the 11th time in 12 games. Christian Wood and Josh Christopher scored 13 points apiece for Houston.

No. 3 Arizona beats Oregon State for 7th straight win

Associated Press

TUCSON, Ariz. — Azuolas Tubelis scored 22 points, Benedict Mathurin added 20 and No. 3 Arizona pulled away in the second half to beat Oregon State 83-69 on State on Thursday night.

The Wildcats (23-2, 13-1 Pac-12) have won seven straight and maintained a two-game advantage in the conference. Christian Koloko added 16 points on 8-for-11 shooting and had nine rebounds.

Ramon Silva and Jarod Lucas led Oregon State with 13 points each.

Oregon State (3-21, 1-13) has lost 11 straight, going winless since beating Utah on Dec. 30.

No. 13 UCLA 76,

Washington State 56: Johnny Juzang scored 19 points, Jaylen Clark had a career-high 18 points and 11 rebounds, and the host Bruins beat the Cougars.

Tyrell Roberts led Washington State (14-11, 7-7 Pac-12) with 14 points, including four three-pointers. Noah Williams and Andrej Jakimovski scored 11 apiece.

UCLA (18-5, 10-4) had dropped three of four going into the game, but easily controlled things from the opening tipoff and led throughout.

No. 14 Houston 70, Central

Florida 52: Taze Moore had 14 points and seven rebounds, Fabian White Jr. added 12 points, and the host Cougars snapped a

two-game losing streak with a win over Golden Knights.

Jamal Sheard had 12 points and eight assists, and Kyler Edwards added 10 points, nine rebounds and seven assists for Houston (21-4, 10-2 American Athletic Conference).

Darius Johnson and Dre Fuller Jr. each scored 12 points to lead UCF (15-9, 7-7).

No. 17 USC 79, Washington 69: Chevez Goodwin scored 16 of his 24 points in the first half and the host Trojans defeated the Huskies.

Drew Peterson had 14 points, seven assists and six rebounds, Isaiah Mobley added 12 points, and USC (22-4, 11-4 Pac-12) won for the fourth time in five games.

Terrell Brown Jr. scored 23 points and Emmitt Matthews Jr. added 20 as Washington (13-11, 8-6) lost by double digits again in the second of three straight games against ranked opponents.

No. 21 Murray State 91,

Austin Peay 56: KJ Williams had 25 points and seven rebound and the host Races beat the Governors for their 15th straight victory.

Tevin Brown scored 13 points and DJ Burns, Justice Hill and DaQuan Smith each had 11 for Murray State (25-2, 15-0 Ohio Valley).

Elijah Hutchins-Everett had 12 points for Austin Peay (10-15, 6-9).