

Putin: 2 separatist regions independent

The Washington Post

Russian President Vladimir Putin has recognized the independence of separatist regions in eastern Ukraine, raising tensions with West.

The Kremlin announced the move Monday, which Russia could use to justify an attack in those areas.

Troops continue to gather near the Ukrainian border, suggesting that the window for a diplomatic resolution to the crisis is closing and striking a discordant note from Sunday's news that President Joe Biden and Putin had agreed "in principle" to meet. The summit was proposed by French President Emmanuel Macron during separate calls with Biden and Putin on Sunday. Officials in Paris and Washington said the talks would go ahead only if Moscow doesn't attack.

Russian officials were ambiguous about whether the summit would go ahead. Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Monday that there are not "concrete plans" for a Russia-U.S. summit.

Biden's national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, struck a pessimistic chord in comments to ABC News on Monday morning:

"We never give up hope on diplomacy until the missiles fly or the tanks roll," he said. But "the likelihood there's a diplomatic solution, given the troop movements of the Russians, is diminishing hour by hour."

Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba on Monday called on the United Nations Security Council to meet immediately to discuss Ukraine's security.

In a Twitter post, he said he was acting on behalf of Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. He asked that Security Council members confer over "urgent actions aimed at de-escalation, as well as practical steps to guarantee the security of Ukraine" under Article 6 of the Budapest Memorandum on Security Assurances.

The agreement was signed by Russia, the United States and the United Kingdom in December 1994. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, Ukraine inherited the world's third-largest nuclear arsenal, but agreed to relinquish it in return for assurances of its sovereignty and the sanctity of its borders.

Among the guarantees given to Kyiv, the three countries promised that they would "refrain from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political

independence of Ukraine, and that none of their weapons will ever be used against Ukraine except in self-defence."

The memorandum's sixth and final article said the three would "consult in the event a situation arises that raises a question concerning these commitments." However, the agreement did not contain any mechanism to force signatories to comply.

This month, the U.N. Security Council's rotating leader — which has some control over the body's agenda — is Russia.

Russia's Security Council earlier on Monday had called on Putin to recognize the independence of two Russian-backed separatist regions in eastern Ukraine, a move that could give him a pretext to invade Ukraine, particularly after Moscow's claims that Kyiv forces were attacking the areas.

Ukraine officials Monday denied the attacks, saying the claims were Russian disinformation. Western officials have warned repeatedly that Moscow is manufacturing a reason to invade.

All the members of Putin's Security Council supported recognizing two regions, calling themselves the Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic.

Marine, Navy, Coast Guard chiefs talk cyber recruitment

The San Diego Union-Tribune

The great pandemic resignation and a shift toward recruiting older, more skilled military service members was a major theme at the keynote panel that wrapped up the WEST 2022 conference in San Diego on Friday.

Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Mike Gilday, Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David Berger and Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Karl Schultz addressed a room of largely military contractors, laying out in broad terms their take on a host of issues, most notably the need to enlist cyber security and other experts.

Berger — who in November,

released a new plan for overhauling how the Marine Corps recruits and retains its personnel — said civilians leaving their jobs as the COVID-19 pandemic leads them to reassess how they spend their work hours, and what they get paid for it, provides an opportunity for the military.

"We shouldn't look at this resignation as a big negative," he said. "Fine, they're unhappy with their jobs. Our recruiters are going to be right there."

Under Berger's new vision, the Marine Corps will look to reverse the high turnover that's come with targeting younger, unskilled recruits. Instead, the

service will focus on people with experience, particularly in cyber security and other technology fields, creating pathways for entry that don't require starting at the bottom. Military families have seen consistent pay raises of at least 2.5% a year since 2018.

"We have always been a very young force," he said. "We can't do that going forward, for a lot of reasons. We're not giving up on the high school graduate, but we have to reach a better balance in our force."

Held at the San Diego Convention Center, the three-day event featured an array of military technology. Corporate war contractors from Lockheed

Martin, Northrop Grumman and Boeing to Verizon and AT&T showed off everything from robotic dogs to the latest drones.

The Coast Guard, which boasts the highest retention in the armed services, has also had challenges bringing in new recruits, Schultz said at the event.

Retention has been up across the branches during the pandemic.

As the need for cybersecurity expertise has increased, the military has also started targeting new recruits online, said Gilday with the Navy, which met its recruitment targets last year.

German soldier's 'machine gun' robot has a shot

BY ALEXANDER RIEDEL
Stars and Stripes

KAISERSLAUTERN, Germany — Gereon may be the cutest cross between a Roomba and an angel of death that you'll ever see.

The 20-inch-tall machine may vaguely resemble a robot vacuum cleaner on off-road tires, but its battlefield simulation equipment makes it a capable stand-in for enemy forces stalking the students at the German army's officer school, according to a Bundeswehr statement.

Named after the patron saint of soldiers, the robot is the brainchild of 1st Lt. Marc Wietfeld, a 31-year infantry officer at the school in Dresden.

Wietfeld said that when he was in the enlisted ranks, he spent a lot of time playing an opposing force, or OPFOR, soldier for other units. During training, he spent hours lying in wait in drafty buildings

just to fire off a few blanks at fellow trainees during mock assaults.

He thought there was a better way, so he started to work on the project in his off time while majoring in management and media studies at the German Army University's Munich campus.

"The whole prototype was created in my basement and later in the living room with my friends," Wietfeld is quoted as saying in the German army statement.

What started as amateur tinkering caught the attention of military officials and is now a funded German army project to reproduce the one Wietfeld invented.

Multiple Gereons acting with partial autonomy could create the illusion of a larger troop presence that challenges soldiers to incoming fire. The same approach could also see use in combat, the statement said.

The robot comes with a loudspeaker, a smoke mortar and a weapon with an LED muzzle flash simulator. When firing, the decoy gun fully simulates a machine gun, the statement said.

Gereon hunts the student officers using an optic-acoustic sensor and a high-resolution camera. Its independently mounted rubber wheels can roll through grass and brush. It weighs about 26 pounds.

The vision of creating the illusion of a larger force with robots is a new twist on an old battlefield tactic. In World War II, the inflatable mock tanks of the "Ghost Army" of the U.S. Army's 23rd Headquarters Special Troops and the 3133rd Signal Service Company fooled Hitler's troops with realistic tank mock-ups and audio recordings. The 1,100-person unit created the illusion of whole divisions, tricking the Ger-

mans into believing its small unit had 20,000 troops. Earlier this year, the units were honored with the Congressional Gold Medal.

What makes Gereon special, Wietfeld said, is its modular design. Planned upgrades include a sensor that can give the robot three-dimensional scanning ability. A powerful laser could be used to confuse and distract modern tactical vehicles.

"The idea is for Gereon to laser on enemy tanks, for example, tricking the vehicle's sensors into thinking it's being targeted by an anti-tank weapon," Wietfeld said in the statement.

The current version is based on a 3D-printed chassis and commercially available parts. In its basic configuration, the robot costs 4,000 euros in materials, and Wietfeld's team aims to keep final unit cost after upgrades below 10,000 euros, or about \$11,300.

China sanctions Raytheon, Lockheed over Taiwan deal

Associated Press

TAIPEI, Taiwan — China said Monday it will impose new sanctions on U.S. defense contractors Raytheon Technologies and Lockheed Martin due to their arms sales to Taiwan, stepping up a feud with Washington over security and Beijing's strategic ambitions.

Foreign Ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin announced the move at a daily press briefing, citing a newly passed Anti-Foreign Sanctions Law that took effect in 2021. It was in response to a \$100 million deal approved by the U.S. for maintenance of Taiwan's missile defense systems by the two companies.

"China once again urges the U.S. government and relevant parties to ... stop arms sales to

Taiwan and sever military ties with Taiwan," Wang said.

Taiwan is a democratically self-governed island that communist-ruled China claims as its own territory. The two sides split amid civil war in 1949. The U.S. has no formal relations with Taiwan but is its main ally. It has increased weapons sales in recent years, angering China with the sales. U.S. law requires the government to ensure Taiwan can defend itself.

Raytheon, Boeing, Lockheed Martin and other defense giants face controls on sales to China of military and dual-use technologies that have both defense and commercial applications. But they also have major civilian businesses and China is a huge market for aviation, among other industries.

At Olympics, cybersecurity worries linger in background

Associated Press

BEIJING — Warnings to use disposable "burner" phones and laptops. Privacy-protecting software. Concerns about a security flaw in an official Games smartphone app.

Such precautions fueled unease about data privacy for competitors and attendees at the Winter Olympics in Beijing. Not everyone heeded them.

"Honestly, I've been coming to China for 12 years or whatever, and I'm not that important," Canadian snowboarder Mark McMorris said. "Maybe if I was a diplomat or something, then I'd switch out my phone."

Beijing has long been accused by the U.S. and technology watchdogs of widespread online snooping and data pilfering, allegations it denies. Now that the Games are

ending, concerns turn to what malware and other problems those who failed to heed the warnings might be carrying with them.

The good news: Cybersecurity firm Mandiant said there's been no sign of any "intrusion activity" tied to the Olympics by the Chinese or other governments. But that shouldn't be taken as a sign that nothing happened, said Benjamin Read, Mandiant's director of cyber espionage analysis.

"Most compromises are detected weeks or months after they occur, so it's too early to say for sure that there were no incidents," he said.

He advised anyone who traveled to China for the Winter Games to change their passwords and make sure that no unknown devices or services have access to their accounts.

US cases, hospitalizations continue to fall

Associated Press

Average daily COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations are continuing to fall in the U.S., an indicator that the omicron variant's hold is weakening across the country.

Total confirmed cases reported Saturday barely exceeded 100,000, a sharp downturn from around 800,850 five weeks ago on Jan. 16, according to Johns Hopkins University data.

In New York, the number of cases went down by more than 50% over the last two weeks.

"I think what's influencing the decline, of course, is that omicron is starting to run out of people to infect," said Dr. Thomas Russo, professor and infectious disease chief at the University of Buffalo's Jacobs School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences.

COVID-19 hospitalizations are down from a national seven-day average of 146,534 on Jan. 20 to 80,185 the week ending on Feb. 13, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention COVID data tracker.

Public health experts say they are feeling hopeful that more declines are ahead and

that the country is shifting from being in a pandemic to an "endemic" that is more consistent and predictable. However, many expressed concern that vaccine uptick in the U.S. has still been below expectations, concerns that are exacerbated by the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions.

Dr. William Schaffner of Vanderbilt University's School of Medicine said Sunday that the downturn in case numbers and hospitalizations is encouraging. He agreed that it likely has a lot to do with herd immunity.

"There are two sides to omicron's coin," he said. "The bad thing is that it can spread to a lot of people and make them mildly ill. The good thing is it can spread to a lot of people and make them mildly ill, because in doing so, it has created a lot of natural immunity."

However, Schaffner said it's much too early to "raise the banner of mission accomplished." As a public health expert, he said he'll be more comfortable if the decline sustains itself for another month or two.

"If I have a concern, it's that taking off the interventions, the restrictions, may be hap-

pening with a bit more enthusiasm and speed than makes me comfortable," he said. "My own little adage is, better to wear the mask for a month too long, than to take the mask off a month too soon and all of a sudden get another surge."

Officials in many states are cutting back on restrictions, saying they are moving away from treating the coronavirus pandemic as a public health crisis and instead shifting to policy focused on prevention.

In Buffalo, Russo said he sees two possible future outcomes. In one, the U.S. experiences a fairly quiet spring and summer while immunity is still strong. He said in that scenario, it's likely immunity will wane and there will be a bump of new cases in the cooler months during flu season, but hopefully not a severe surge.

In the second — the one concerning public health experts — a new variant evolves and evades the immunity wall that was built up from both omicron infections and vaccinations.

"Whether such a variant can evolve is the big question, right?" he said.

Australia welcomes back vaccinated tourists after lifting most restrictions

Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia — International tourists and business travelers began arriving in Australia with few restrictions on Monday, bringing together families in tearful reunions after separations of two years or longer forced by some of the most draconian pandemic measures of any democracy in the world.

Australia closed its borders to tourists in March 2020 in a bid to reduce the local spread of COVID-19, but on Monday removed its final travel restrictions for fully vaccinated passengers.

Tearful British tourist Sue Witton hugged her adult son Simon Witton when he greeted her at Melbourne's airport.

"Seven hundred and twenty-four (days) apart and he's my only son, and I'm alone, so this means the world to me," she told reporters.

Travelers were greeted at Sydney's airport by jubilant well-wishers waving toy koalas and favorite Australian foods including Tim Tams chocolate cookies and jars of Vegemite spread.

Federal Tourism Minister Dan Tehan was on hand to welcome the first arrivals on a Qan-

tas flight from Los Angeles that landed at 6:20 a.m. local time.

"I think there'll be a very strong rebound in our tourism market. Our wonderful experiences haven't gone away," Tehan said.

Danielle Vogl, who lives in Canberra, and her Florida-based partner Eric Lochner have been separated since October 2019 by the travel restrictions. She said she burst into tears when she heard about the lifting of the restrictions, which will allow them to reunite in April, and telephoned him with the news.

"I actually woke him up to tell him, because I thought it was big enough news to do that," Vogl told Australian Broadcasting Corp.

Lochner was not eligible for an exemption from the travel ban because the couple weren't married or living together.

Home Affairs Minister Karen Andrews said all travelers' vaccination status would be checked before they arrived to avoid a repeat of Serbian tennis star Novak Djokovic's visa debacle. Djokovic was issued a visa through an automated process before he left Spain to compete in the Australian Open in January but was deported after he arrived because he was not vaccinated against COVID-19.

Israel successfully tests new naval air defense system

Associated Press

JERUSALEM — Israel on Monday said it successfully tested a new naval air defense system, intercepting a series of threats in what officials called a key layer of protection against Iran and its proxies in the region.

The "C-Dome" system is a naval version of the Iron Dome, which has been used to shoot down rockets fired from the Gaza Strip for the past decade. The C-Dome is being installed on Israel's latest-generation corvette warships, which protect Israel's coastline and offshore natural gas assets in the Mediterranean.

Monday's test simulated a number of incoming threats, including rockets, cruise missiles and drones, the Defense Ministry said.

The C-Dome is to become part of Israel's multilayer missile defense system — which includes weapons capable of intercepting everything from long-range missiles to short-range rockets.

No end seen as US rents climb to 'insane' levels

Associated Press

Krystal Guerra's Miami apartment has a tiny kitchen, cracked tiles, warped cabinets, no dishwasher and hardly any storage space.

But Guerra was fine with the apartment's shortcomings. It was all part of being a 32-year-old graduate student in South Florida, she reasoned, and she was happy to live there for a few more years as she finished her marketing degree.

That was until a new owner bought the property and told her he was raising the rent from \$1,550 to \$1,950, a 26% increase that Guerra said meant her rent would account for the majority of her take-home pay from the University of Miami.

"I thought that was insane," said Guerra, who decided to move out. "Am I supposed to stop paying for everything else I have going on in my life just so I can pay rent? That's unsustainable."

Guerra is hardly alone. Rents have exploded across the country, causing many to dig deep into their savings, downsize to subpar units or fall behind on payments and risk eviction now that a federal moratorium has ended.

In the 50 largest U.S. metro areas, median rent rose an astounding 19.3% from December 2020 to December 2021, according to a Realtor.com analysis of properties with two or fewer bedrooms. And nowhere was the jump bigger than in

the Miami metro area, where the median rent exploded to \$2,850, 49.8% higher than the previous year.

Other cities across Florida — Tampa, Orlando and Jacksonville — and the Sun Belt destinations of San Diego; Las Vegas; Austin, Texas; and Memphis, Tenn., all saw spikes of more than 25% during that time period.

Rising rents are an increasing driver of high inflation that has become one of the nation's top economic problems. Labor Department data, which covers existing rents as well as new listings, shows much smaller increases, but these are also picking up. Rental costs rose 0.5% in January from December, the Labor Department said last week. That may seem small, but it was the biggest increase in 20 years, and will likely accelerate.

Economists worry about the impact of rent increases on inflation because the big jumps in new leases feed into the U.S. consumer price index, which is used to measure inflation.

Inflation jumped 7.5% in January from a year earlier, the biggest increase in four decades. While many economists expect that to decrease as pandemic-disrupted supply chains unravel, rising rents could keep inflation high through the end of the year since housing costs make up one-third of the consumer price index.

One person dead in shooting near Oregon protest

The Washington Post

PORTLAND, Ore. — One person was killed and five others were injured during a shooting Saturday night in Portland, near the site of a demonstration planned to protest police violence.

The Portland Police Bureau said that one woman was dead when officers arrived at the scene, just after 8 p.m. local time. The wounded victims, two men and three women, were taken to hospitals. Authorities have not released information about their conditions and have not identified a suspect or those shot.

The episode unfolded in the city's northeast, near Normandale Park, a frequent hub for protests against racism and police killings. On Sunday, police said they believe the incident "started with a confrontation between an armed homeowner and armed protesters." Beyond that, officials have not publicly discussed a potential motive and have said the investigation is "very complicated," made more difficult by witnesses they say were unwilling to talk to responding officers.

Department spokesperson Lt. Nathan Sheppard would not say whether police had made any arrests in connection to the shooting, telling reporters at a virtual briefing on Sunday afternoon that "things are changing constantly in this investigation."

"As we learn more, things change," Sheppard said. "At this point, it would be irresponsible of me to comment on arrests that were made, if any."

According to social media fliers, protesters were set to gather in the park at 7 p.m. Saturday before setting off an hour later. They sought to highlight the cases of Amir Locke, a 22-year-old Black man who was shot and killed by a Minneapolis police officer earlier this month during a no-knock raid, and Patrick Kimmons, a 27-year-old Black man killed by Portland police during a 2018 altercation. The shooting apparently began before the march was underway.

The area was quiet on Sunday morning, with a few strands of police tape hanging from the entrance to a nearby apartment complex the only remaining sign of the previous evening's gunfire. Neighbors said they heard a volley of shots around 8 p.m.

An initial statement from Portland police said that homicide detectives were investigating the scene and that the Oregon State Medical Examiner would determine the cause and manner of the victim's death.

F-5 fighter jet crash kills 3 in Iran

Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran — A fighter jet crashed onto a soccer pitch in a city in northwest Iran, the country's state-run news agency reported Monday. The crash killed two pilots and a civilian.

IRNA said the F-5 fighter crashed onto the field in a residential area of Tabriz, a city of 1.6 million residents. Authorities are investigating the incident, the report said.

Gen. Reza Yousefi, commander of the air base in Tabriz, said the crashed jet had been used for training and suffered a technical problem on its final flight.

"Pilots could not reach the runway," he

said, according to the report.

In an effort to avoid crashing into the residential area, the pilots guided the jet to the soccer pitch, he said. The report quoted Yousefi as saying: "The pilots sacrificed themselves, they could (have) used the ejection system, but they refused to do it."

The pilots headed for the pitch "to keep people safe," Yousefi said in the report.

A state TV reporter at the crash scene said that because the pitch was not long enough, the plane left the field and hit a school wall.

No one was inside. Schools were closed amid Iran's sixth wave of the coronavirus pandemic.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

DOT retrieving traffic cones tossed into river

MA BOSTON — People keep tossing traffic cones in the Charles River. The Massachusetts Department of Transportation keeps retrieving them.

Surveillance video following a public records request by NBC Boston showed several people hoisting the orange cones and tossing them one by one off the Massachusetts Avenue Bridge.

Earlier this month, workers spent hours retrieving more than 100 cones from the ice on the river. The cones are part of a bicycle safety pilot program that launched in November.

MassDOT officials said it was unclear why people have tossed the cones off the bridge.

Man caught in kickback scheme kills himself

MI DETROIT — A judge is defending how she handled the case of a former Detroit-area airport official who killed himself rather than report to prison for accepting more than \$6 million in kickbacks in a record-setting corruption investigation.

James Warner's body was discovered Friday, a day after he was supposed to turn himself in for a 10-year sentence. He was convicted in 2019 but allowed to remain free while pursuing appeals.

"Mr. Warner agreed to continue mental health treatment and his doctor certified he was not a danger to himself," U.S. District Judge Victoria Roberts said. "Mr. Warner abided by all conditions the court set for him.

He did not appear to be any danger to himself."

Warner, 55, was an infrastructure manager at the agency that runs Detroit Metropolitan Airport, from 2010 through 2014.

He was convicted of steering more than \$43 million in contracts to people in exchange for more than \$6 million in kickbacks — "the highest bribe totals in district history," prosecutors said, referring to Detroit and eastern Michigan.

Stolen car parked at retired officers' home

MN ST. PAUL — A Minneapolis man is in trouble with the law after he allegedly stole a car and tried to hide it at the home of two retired police officers.

The St. Paul Pioneer Press reported that Alexander John Thompson was charged Jan. 31 with auto theft in Dakota County.

According to police, Thompson stole a car in Lakeville and parked the car in a pole barn at a Greenvale Township home. The home is owned by a retired Prior Lake police officer and her husband, a retired New Mexico police officer. The couple saw Thompson, handcuffed him and called police, according to a criminal complaint.

It's not clear why Thompson allegedly put the car in the barn.

Worker run over by street sweeper dies

FL BRANDON — A worker driving a street sweeper in the parking lot of a Florida supermarket died after a crash sent him flying out

of the sweeper truck into its path as it kept moving forward, running over him, authorities said.

The truck operator had left the parking lot of a Publix supermarket to make a U-turn and get back into the lot, authorities said in a news release. The sweeper truck went into the path of another car, which crashed against the side of the street sweeper, officials said.

The worker was ejected and then run over by the sweeper.

Funeral worker jailed for stealing jewelry from body

ME SACO — A former funeral home worker was sentenced to three months in prison for stealing and selling the wedding bands and engagement ring of a deceased 102-year-old woman.

Stuart Weston, 51, of Sanford, worked for Autumn Green Funeral Home in Alfred. Weston pleaded guilty to a felony theft charge, The Portland Press Herald reported.

In January 2021, Weston was in charge of the funeral arrangements for Laura Wood, but Wood's daughter said the funeral home did not have any of her mother's jewelry, WCSH-TV reported.

Sally Wood said she found the missing rings at a local pawn shop called Maine Gold and Silver in South Portland.

Overtime fraud charges hit dozens of officers

CA OAKLAND — Dozens of current and former Highway Patrol officers have been charged with racking up more than \$226,000 in phony hours in an overtime fraud

scheme, California's attorney general said.

The charges stem from a criminal investigation of officers in the East Los Angeles station.

Between 2016 and mid-2018, 54 officers recorded hours of phony overtime while patrolling high-occupancy traffic lanes or providing protection to state transportation workers in construction zones, prosecutors said.

Charges were filed earlier this month and the officers were booked by the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department last week, according to a statement from the attorney general's office.

Festival returns after two-year COVID hiatus

LA NEW ORLEANS — It's been two years since the largest free festival and showcase of Louisiana music, food and culture has taken place in New Orleans' French Quarter.

But that changes in April, when the 2022 French Quarter Festival returns. The coronavirus pandemic forced organizers to cancel the event in 2020 and last year.

"We are returning strong with over 1,800 local musicians, more than 50 chefs and restaurants, new interactive fan experiences, and evening programming across the city," said Emily Madero, president and chief executive of French Quarter Festivals Inc., the nonprofit that produces the event.

More than 260 acts will perform from April 21 through April 24.

— From wire reports

STARS AND STRIPES®

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

Reporting
World, National
and Military News

Cindric wins Daytona with teammate's help

Associated Press

Roger Penske had one rule at the Daytona 500 for his drivers: Do Not Wreck Each Other.

His orders were followed Sunday night when Austin Cindric worked with teammate Ryan Blaney over the closing laps to win the Daytona 500 as a celebration of Penske's 85th birthday.

It was just one year ago that Penske drivers Cindric, Joey Logano and Brad Keselowski all crashed while racing for the win on the final lap at Daytona International Speedway. It took time for tempers to thaw as Penske made his expectations clear to his drivers.

"We had talked for weeks after last year, when we were one-two and ended up in the fence," Penske said. "I said, 'Look, the best man wins at the end. I think we've got to work together.'

"They played ball, and Austin won."

Cindric was the leader at the start of the two-lap overtime shootout with Blaney beside him. He was driving the No. 2 Ford, the flagship car at Team Penske that was vacated at the end of last season when Keselowski left the organization, and now Keselowski was behind him, determined not to get beaten by his replacement.

But Cindric switched lanes as soon as he'd cleared Blaney to drop in front of his teammate so the duo could hook together for two final trips around the track. Blaney made one desperate attempt up high to get around Cindric, but Cindric threw a huge

block that forced Blaney into the outside wall.

Bubba Wallace then surged even with Cindric in the bottom lane, forcing Cindric to forget about Blaney behind him and focus on beating Wallace to the finish line.

"Oh, my God. I've got so many people to thank," a stunned Cindric said after climbing from his car and saluting the capacity crowd of some 120,000 spectators. "First and foremost Roger Penske, happy birthday!"

Then Cindric remembered Blaney, who gave him a winning push but finished fourth.

"Appreciate Ryan being a great teammate," Cindric said. "Obviously, he wants to win this one."

Blaney was clear on the Penske expectations — "I wanted to try to win the race for Roger Penske. Whether that was me or another car, that's what I was doing" — and didn't have much to say after the race about Cindric's block.

"I don't know. Congrats to him, I guess," Blaney said. "You've got to throw a block in that situation."

It was the first career Cup victory for the 23-year-old Cindric, who was promoted from the Xfinity Series to replace Keselowski and run for NASCAR's rookie of the year honors.

The win was the third Daytona 500 victory for Penske, who also picked up the trophy in 2008 with Ryan Newman and 2015 with Logano. Ford Motor Co. has won

the Daytona 500 17 times, including two in a row.

Wallace finished second for the second time in his career in the Daytona 500.

"What could have been, right?" Wallace said. "Just dejected."

A trio of Ford drivers rounded out the top five with Chase Briscoe third, followed by Blaney and Aric Almirola.

Kyle Busch was sixth to join Wallace as the only Toyota drivers in the top 10. Michael McDowell was seventh, followed by David Ragan and Keselowski, and finally Chase Elliott in the only Chevrolet to finish inside the top 10.

Cindric, meanwhile, gave his family another one of the crown jewel trophies in motorsports. He's the son of Tim Cindric, the president of Penske's racing organization, and the maternal grandson of the late Jim Trueman, who fielded Bobby Rahal's winning car in the 1986 Indianapolis 500. Trueman died of cancer 10 days after the win at age 51.

Tim Cindric watched the finish from a suite high above the speedway alongside Penske and other team executives.

Penske said his longtime executive finally showed some emotion during overtime.

"I always kid him, I say, 'You've got to be a little more excited.' Well, he was excited today, really," Penske said. "He even got out of his cool, calm way. I think he said, 'I'm going to really celebrate; my boy won the Daytona 500.'"

Wallace crushed after 2nd Daytona runner-up finish

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Bubba Wallace tried to explain how he lost the Daytona 500 by inches when the replay flashed on the 40-foot screen overlooking the track.

Wallace winced when he watched himself fall just short of Austin Cindric.

"I don't want to see that," Wallace said. "That sucks! Gah!"

Wallace had to relive his second career Daytona 500 runner-up finish moments after the most agonizing near-miss of his NASCAR career. Wallace, who led laps Sunday for

the second straight Daytona 500, had the checkered flag in sight. The 23XI Racing driver charged to the finish and hugged the yellow line. Cindric had enough to nip Wallace by 0.036 seconds.

"I could smell it," Wallace said of a win.

Wallace, who finished second behind Austin Dillon in 2018, had tears in his eyes outside the No. 23 Toyota as his fiancée came up for a hug. He sipped from a water bottle and stared at the screen as Cindric was interviewed and fireworks shot off around him.

"I'll probably go punch a pil-

low or hug my dog when I get back to [the] bus," he said.

Wallace could only think of how agonizingly close he was to etching his name in history.

"This could hurt or victory could be sweet," he said. "I think I'd rather get wrecked out than finish second."

Wallace pulled himself together and congratulated Cindric in victory lane.

"I know there's a lot of people that want this really bad and he's definitely one of them," Cindric said. "He's worked hard for it and puts himself in position in a lot of these races."

Wallace already had the highest finish for a Black driver in the Daytona 500 and last year he became the first one to lead laps in the race. He led seven times for 12 laps on Sunday — surely enough to impress team owners Michael Jordan and Denny Hamlin.

Just not enough to win a Cup race for the second time in his career.

"I had a lot of confidence those last 10 laps," he said. "I thought we had it in the bag. Even though we were like sixth, fifth, whatever, I was like, this is our night. Maybe I jumped the gun."

Curry sets All-Star threes mark in win

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Stephen Curry got another three-point record. LeBron James got another All-Star win.

Not a bad night in Ohio for the two All-Stars from Akron.

“It’s right on the nose of how it should go,” Curry said.

Curry turned boos to oohs and aahs with the greatest long-distance shooting performance in All-Star Game history, then James made a turnaround jumper that gave Team LeBron a 163-160 victory over Team Durant on Sunday night.

Curry made 16 three-pointers and scored 50 points, two off Anthony Davis’ record. He was clearly hunting it, asking on the sideline during a sizzling third quarter how many points it would take.

On a night both players were among the greats of the game who were honored during a halftime ceremony celebrating the NBA’s 75th anniversary team, Curry and James showed why they continue to stand out among today’s best.

Curry, who earlier this season became the NBA’s career leader in three-pointers, missed his final attempt beyond the arc that

would have allowed him to surpass Davis. But with James’ team needing a basket to reach the target score of 163 points, they couldn’t afford to keep feeding Curry.

So James pulled up from deep on the right side for the winning bucket, making him 5-0 in the format where the leading vote-getters in each conference draft teams.

The All-Star Game’s return to Cleveland was expected to be James’ night. He is the Cavaliers franchise’s greatest player, having led them to their only NBA championship in 2016.

Instead, he fittingly co-starred with Curry, who was born in the same Akron hospital three years later.

“Obviously I got the MVP; I played well the whole night. He hit the game-winner,” Curry said. “All the history of our series and the Akron ties, and all that kind of going into how the night went, so it was pretty — can’t really draw it up any other way.”

Giannis Antetokounmpo had 30 points, increasing what was a 28.8 average that was already best in All-Star Game history. James finished with 24 in his old home. Joel Embiid led Team Durant with 36 points.

Curry finished 16 of 27 beyond the arc — sometimes well, well behind it. He launched a few from the All-Star 2022 logo near midcourt, running backward without even waiting to watch one go in.

The three-point arc is slightly more than 23 feet away. Curry made shots listed from 37, 33 and 34 feet during one stretch of the third quarter.

“This guy is from a different planet. He literally has an automatic sniper connected to his arm, and when he lets it go, not only himself, but everybody on the floor, in the stands, on TV, on their phones, whatever you are watching on, you think it’s going in every time,” James said.

Curry had been booed all weekend, smiling through the sounds during pregame introductions as Cleveland fans made clear they hadn’t forgiven him for helping Golden State beat the Cavaliers three times in the NBA Finals from 2015-18.

But the fans were enjoying his show too much to keep going as the game went on, though the boos returned when he was presented the MVP award that in 2020 was renamed in honor of Kobe Bryant, who won a record-tying four of them.

Barkov leads Panthers to victory over Blackhawks

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Aleksander Barkov had a goal and two assists and the surging Florida Panthers beat the Chicago Blackhawks on 5-2 on Sunday for their third straight win.

Aaron Ekblad, Brandon Montour, MacKenzie Weegar and Anton Lundell also scored as Eastern Conference-leading Florida won for the seventh time in eight games and finished a five-game road trip at 4-1-0.

The Panthers are 3-0 following the All-Star break and jelling when away from South Florida. They’re an impressive 23-3-0 at home and have improved to 12-7-5 on the road.

According to Florida coach Andrew Brunette, there’s no need for the high-scoring Panthers to be flashy all the time.

“I think we’ve managed the game pretty well on the road of late,” Brunette said. “We have

so much skill and we can play at a pretty high level some time, we can get a little carried away.”

Hurricanes 4, Penguins 3: Jesper Fast scored 9 seconds into the third period to break a tie, Sebastian Aho followed with his 22nd goal of the season and Carolina edged host Pittsburgh to move into first place in the Metropolitan Division.

Jesper Kotkaniemi and Jordan Staal also scored for the Hurricanes, who never trailed in the first meeting of the season between the teams that entered the day tied atop perhaps the league’s most competitive division. Antti Raanta made 31 saves to pick up his 100th career victory.

Canadiens 3, Islanders 2 (SO): Andrew Hammond made 30 saves and stopped two of three shootout attempts, leading Montreal to a win at New York.

It was Hammond’s first regular-season start since March 28, 2018, and first NHL regular-season win since April 9, 2016, when he backstopped the Ottawa Senators to a 6-1 win against the Boston Bruins.

Rangers 2, Senators 1: Igor Shesterkin stopped 29 shots, Ryan Strome and Artemi Panarin scored and New York won at Ottawa.

Tim Stutzle scored the lone goal for the Senators, who were playing the second half of a back-to-back and coming off a 3-2 overtime loss to Boston. Filip Gustavsson made 31 saves in his first NHL start since Dec. 7.

Blue Jackets 7, Sabres 3: Dean Kukan had two goals and an assist, Jean-Francois Berube stopped 33 shots in his first NHL start in nearly four years, and host Columbus beat Buffalo.

Boone Jenner had a goal and an assist, and Zach Werenski,

Brendan Gaunce, Gus Nyquist and Justin Danforth also scored for the Blue Jackets. Patrik Laine added two assists as they won for the seventh time in nine games.

Coyotes 3, Stars 1: Nick Schmaltz and Clayton Keller each had a goal and an assist and Arizona stopped Dallas’ six-game road streak.

Lawson Crouse scored his 50th NHL goal and Scott Wedgewood made 32 saves for the Coyotes, including 17 while under almost constant pressure in the third period.

Golden Knights 4, Sharks 1: Jack Eichel scored his first goal since joining Vegas, helping the visiting Golden Knights beat San Jose for the 10th straight time.

Wild 7, Oilers 3: Kevin Fiala had two goals and an assist to lift Minnesota to a win at Edmonton.

Michigan's Howard hits Wisconsin assistant

Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. — Angry about Wisconsin calling a late timeout, Michigan coach Juwan Howard began arguing in the postgame handshake line.

Moments later, he hit a Badgers assistant in the head, and mayhem followed.

The Wolverines' inability to boost their NCAA Tournament credentials was the least of their concerns after a 77-63 loss Sunday at No. 15 Wisconsin. Their head coach could be facing major discipline after his poke turned a pushing-and-shoving scrum into a punch-filled brawl.

Howard struck Badgers assistant Joe Krabbenhoft after jawing with Wisconsin coach Greg Gard during the handshake line. The Big Ten said it planned to "take swift and appropriate disciplinary action when it com-

pletes its review."

During his postgame news conference, Howard said he didn't like the Badgers calling for a timeout with 15 seconds left and leading by 15.

"I thought it was not necessary at the moment, especially being a large lead," Howard said.

Gard said he called the timeout because his reserves were in the game and only had four seconds to get the ball past midcourt. A timeout gives them 10 seconds.

"I was not going to put them in position, where the ball had already gotten knocked out of bounds, to have to break a press in four seconds," Gard said.

After the game, Howard pointed a finger at Gard while complaining about the late move. Later on, Howard reached through a crowd to

get to Krabbenhoft — replays showed Howard had his hand open as he struck Krabbenhoft on the left side of the head.

Players from each side got involved in the skirmish, and video appeared to show Michigan's Moussa Diabate and Wisconsin's Jahcobi Neath throwing punches.

Howard said he reacted after someone from the Badgers put hands on him. He said that "at that point, I felt it was time to protect myself."

Video showed Gard had his hands touching Howard's arm or wrist area while trying to explain why he called the timeout.

"Someone touched me, and I think it was very uncalled for, for them to touch me, as we were verbalizing and communicating with one another," Howard said. "That's what escalated it."

No. 5 Purdue ends Rutgers' run against ranked teams

Associated Press

WEST LAFAYETTE, Ind. — For Purdue coach Matt Painter, Jaden Ivey's ability to break down the defense was the difference.

Ivey scored 25 points, Zach Edey added 15 points and the No. 5 Boilermakers beat Rutgers 84-72 on Sunday, ending the Scarlet Knights' recent run of success against ranked teams.

Rutgers had won its last four games, all against teams in the Top 25. The Scarlet Knights also beat Purdue in December.

The Boilermakers stopped the string as Ivey did much of his scoring at the line, hitting 15 of 18 free throws. Trevion Williams and Sasha Stefanovic each scored 11 points and Mason Gillis 10 points for Purdue (24-4, 13-4 Big Ten).

Zach Edey and Trevion Williams were a combined 10-of-14 from the field with Edey making 5 of 6 shots.

"I think teams know if they play us 1-on-1, there is high chance we're going to score," Williams said. "It's all about making the other team make a decision. You are either going to play us 1-on-1 or you are going to sink in and we'll dish it out to our shooters.

It's been working for us to go inside out."

Paul Mulcahy scored 15, Clifford Omoruyi added 14, Ron Harper Jr. had 12 points and Geo Baker 11 points for Rutgers (16-10, 10-6).

"We were trying to push the lead," Ivey said. "We didn't want it to get close at all. We just played great team basketball today."

No. 8 Providence 71, Butler 70 (OT): Jared Bynum made two free throws with 38 seconds left in overtime, capping the visiting Friars' rally from a 19-point deficit against the Bulldogs.

Down 43-24 early in the second half and still trailing by seven points with 2½ minutes left in regulation, Providence (22-4, 12-2 Big East) pulled off the comeback.

Nate Watson scored 22 points and Noah Horchler had 15 points and 11 rebounds to help keep the Friars atop the conference standings.

Chuck Harris had 17 points and Aaron Thompson added 16 for Butler (13-15, 6-11), which has lost three in a row.

No. 14 Houston 76, Wichita State 74 (2OT): J'Wan Roberts' dunk with 1.3 seconds remaining in double overtime lifted the vis-

iting Cougars.

It was Roberts' only basket of the game and followed the Shockers' Craig Porter hitting a tying three-pointer with 5.4 seconds remaining in the second overtime.

Josh Carlton scored 11 of his 23 points in the two overtimes, finishing 9 of 14 from the floor for Houston (22-4, 11-2 American Athletic Conference).

Porter and Ricky Council each scored 17 for Wichita State (13-10, 4-7).

No. 17 Southern California 62, Washington State 60: Boogie Ellis hit a 16-foot jumper from the foul line with 0.2 seconds left to lift the host Trojans over the Cougars.

Washington State had a 60-57 advantage before USC scored the final five points. Max Agbonkpolo hit a three-pointer to tie it with 2:15 remaining.

Ellis scored 21 points, with six coming in the final five minutes. Drew Peterson added 17 points for the Trojans (23-4, 12-4 Pac-12). They have won four straight and are off to their best start since 1974.

Tyrell Roberts had 16 points for the Cougars (14-12, 7-8). Noah Williams added 14.

Creighton 82, Marquette 82:

Ryan Kalkbrenner scored 21 points and Ryan Hawkins made a layup with 1:55 left to help lift the host Bluejays past the Golden Eagles.

Hawkins' layup capped a 7-1 run for Creighton. Neither team scored again until the final eight seconds.

The Bluejays' Ryan Nembhard missed a three-pointer with 17 seconds to go and Creighton turned over the ball when the shot clock expired. Rati Andronikashvili got the ball back with a steal with eight seconds to go and the Bluejays finished it off with 3 of 4 free throws.

SMU 73, Memphis 57: Kendrick Davis scored 27 points, Marcus Weathers added 20 points and seven rebounds, and the Mustangs won their 13th straight home game.

Franklin Agunanne had seven rebounds for SMU (19-6, 10-3 American Athletic Conference). Michael Weathers added six points, 10 rebounds and four blocks.

Lester Quinones had 13 points for the Tigers (15-9, 9-5), whose six-game winning streak was snapped. Landers Nolley II added 12 points. Jalen Duren had 11 points and four blocks.