

## Russia advances on Ukraine's capital

*Associated Press*

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian troops bore down on Ukraine's capital Friday, with gunfire and explosions resonating ever closer to the government quarter, in an invasion of a democratic country that has fueled fears of wider war in Europe and triggered worldwide efforts to make Russia stop.

With reports of hundreds of casualties from the warfare — including shelling that sliced through a Kyiv apartment building and pummeled bridges and schools — there also were growing signs that Vladimir Putin's Russia may be seeking to overthrow Ukraine's government. It would be his boldest effort yet to redraw the world map and revive Moscow's Cold War-era influence.

U.S. President Joe Biden and his NATO counterparts agreed at an urgent meeting to send parts of the organization's response force to help protect its member nations in the east. NATO didn't say how many troops would be deployed.

In the fog of war, it was unclear how much of Ukraine remains under Ukrainian control and how much or little Russian forces have seized. The Kremlin accepted Kyiv's offer to hold talks, but it appeared to be an effort to squeeze concessions out of Ukraine's embattled president instead of a gesture toward a diplomatic solution.

The U.S. and other global powers slapped ever-tougher sanctions on Russia as the invasion reverberated through the world's economy and energy supplies, threatening to further hit ordinary households. U.N. officials said millions could flee Ukraine. Sports leagues moved to punish Russia on global playing fields.

The second day of Russia's invasion, the largest ground war in Europe since World War II, focused on the Ukrainian capital, where Associated Press reporters heard explosions starting before dawn and gunfire was reported in several areas.

After 8 p.m., a large boom was heard near Maidan Nezalezhnosti, the square in central Kyiv that was the heart of the protests which led to the 2014 ouster a Kremlin-friendly president. The cause was not immediately known and smaller repeated blasts could be heard in the distance.

Russia's military said it had seized a strategic

airport outside Kyiv, allowing it to quickly build up forces to take the capital. It claimed to have already cut the city off from the west — the direction taken by many of those escaping the invasion, leading to lines of cars snaking toward the Polish border.

Russia's Defense Ministry claimed to have blocked off the cities of Sumy and Konotop and that the offensive had claimed dozens of Ukrainian military assets. The statement could not be independently confirmed.

Intense gunfire broke out on a bridge across the Dneiper River dividing eastern and western Kyiv, with about 200 Ukrainian forces taking defensive positions and sheltering behind their armored vehicles and under the bridge. Another key bridge leading to the capital was blown away, with smoke rising from it.

Ukrainian officials reported at least 137 deaths on their side and claimed hundreds on the Russian one. Russian authorities released no casualty figures, and it was not possible to verify the tolls.

U.N. officials reported 25 civilian deaths, mostly from shelling and airstrikes, and said that 100,000 people were believed to have left their homes, estimating up to 4 million could flee if the fighting escalates.

"When bombs fall on Kyiv, it happens in Europe, not just in Ukraine," Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said, pleading for Western assistance. "When missiles kill our people, they kill all Europeans."

His whereabouts were kept secret after telling European leaders in a call Thursday night that he was Russia's No. 1 target — and that they might not see him again alive. His office later released a video of him standing with senior aides outside the presidential office, saying he and other government officials would stay in the capital.

"All of us are here protecting our independence of our country," Zelenskyy said. "And it will continue to be this way. Glory to our defenders, glory to Ukraine, glory to heroes."

Zelenskyy tweeted that he and Biden discussed "strengthening sanctions, concrete defense assistance and an antiwar coalition," adding that he was grateful to the U.S. for the support.

A U.S. defense official said a Russian am-

phibious assault was underway, and thousands of Russian naval infantry were moving ashore from the Sea of Azov, west of Mariupol. The official said Ukrainian air defenses have been degraded but are still operating, and that about a third of the combat power that Russia had massed around Ukraine is now in the country. All told, the official estimated Russia had fired more than 200 missiles into Ukraine, with some hitting residential areas.

A senior American intelligence official with direct knowledge of current intelligence assessments told the AP that Russian armor is 31 miles to both the north and west of Kyiv.

Zelenskyy offered to negotiate on a key Putin demand: that Ukraine declare itself neutral and abandon its ambition of joining NATO. The Kremlin initially said it was ready to send a delegation to Belarus, then later backpedaled, saying it preferred to meet in Warsaw. Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov suggested it was too late, saying Zelenskyy should have agreed to talks earlier on.

The assault was anticipated for weeks by the U.S. and Western allies and denied to be in the works just as long by Putin. He argued the West left him with no other choice by refusing to negotiate Russia's security demands.

In a window into how the increasingly isolated Putin views Ukraine and its leadership, he gave a strongly worded statement Friday urging the Ukrainian military to surrender, saying: "We would find it easier to agree with you than with that gang of drug addicts and neo-Nazis who have holed up in Kyiv and have taken the entire Ukrainian people hostage."

Playing on Russian nostalgia for World War II heroism, the Kremlin equates members of Ukrainian right-wing groups with neo-Nazis. Zelenskyy, who is Jewish, angrily dismisses those claims.

The autocratic leader hasn't disclosed his ultimate plans for Ukraine. Lavrov gave a hint, saying Friday: "We want to allow the Ukrainian people to determine its own fate." Putin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said Russia recognizes Zelenskyy as the president, but wouldn't say how long the Russian military operation could last.

# NATO activates task force for 1st time

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

RZESZOW, Poland — NATO on Friday activated a spearhead force created in the aftermath of Russia's intervention in Ukraine eight years ago, marking the first time in alliance history that the quick response unit has been put into real-world action in Europe.

The decision, announced after President Joe Biden and other allied heads of state met for an emergency summit on the crisis in Ukraine, means thousands of additional forces will be headed to the eastern part of the alliance, NATO said.

"We have activated NATO's defense plans to prepare ourselves to respond to a range of contingencies and secure Alliance territory," NATO said in a statement.

Those plans include "drawing on our response forces," NATO said.

The 5,000-strong unit, formally known as

the Very High Readiness Joint Task Force, is carved out of NATO's larger response force of 40,000 troops. Both the spearhead unit and other elements of the response force will deploy, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said. But not all 40,000 troops will mobilize at this time, he said.

"We are now making significant additional defensive deployments of forces to the eastern part of the Alliance," the NATO statement said. "We will make all deployments necessary to ensure strong and credible deterrence and defense across the Alliance, now and in the future."

NATO's spearhead force is intended to respond to a crisis within about five days, but it is capable of deploying within 48 hours when there are signs of trouble.

NATO's response forces have all been at a higher level of alert for weeks as allies watched Russia mass troops around Ukraine's border.

The decision to mobilize the spearhead unit, currently led by the French with supporting German forces, is a political victory for the 30-member security pact, which requires unanimous support for decisions.

Questions have long persisted about whether allies would be able to reach consensus, given differing views and threat perceptions related to Russia.

Germany typically has been among the most reluctant of NATO allies when it comes to taking military steps that could be viewed as provocative by Moscow. But Germany on Friday said its forces were ready.

"Together, we are ready if needed," Germany's diplomatic mission to NATO said in a Twitter post Friday.

Stoltenberg said Friday that Russia's actions means "shattered peace in Europe."

"We must stand ready to do more even if it means we have to pay a price, because we are in this for the long haul," he said.

## EU targets Putin, Lavrov with more sanctions

*Associated Press*

BRUSSELS — With a military intervention in Ukraine off the table, countries around the world looked to heap more financial punishment on Moscow, including the European Union's approval of an asset freeze on Russian President Vladimir Putin and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov.

The EU's unanimous decision, part of a broader sanctions package, indicated that Western powers are moving toward unprecedented measures to try to force Putin to stop the brutal invasion of Russia's neighbor and from unleashing a major war in Europe.

Austrian Foreign Minister Alexander Schallenberg said the move would be "a unique step in history toward a nuclear power, a country that has a permanent seat on the Security Council, but also shows ... how united we are." It was unclear what the practical impact on the two men would be and how important their assets in the EU were.

"I can assure you that if you got major assets and all of a sudden you can't get hold of them, it will cost you," said EU foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell. He did not provide details.

In addition, the International Olympic Committee urged sports bodies Friday to cancel or move all events they plan to hold in Russia and Belarus, and stop using the countries' flags and national anthems.

The request from the Olympic body came after UEFA moved the Champions League final from St. Petersburg to suburban Paris, and after the governing body of skiing and Formula One pulled upcoming races from Russia.

An equally big move would be to ban Putin and Lavrov from EU travel. But overnight, EU leaders made it clear that would be off the table for now, if only since it might complicate diplomatic moves once all sides get around the negotiating table.

EU ministers have said that even further sanctions were still possible, including booting Russia out of SWIFT, the dominant system for global financial transactions.

"The debate about SWIFT is not off the table; it will continue," Luxembourg Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn said.

Admonishing Russia further, the Council of Europe suspended Russia from the continent's foremost human rights organization.

The 47-nation council said Russia remained a member and continued to be bound by the relevant human rights conventions.

Undeterred in the game of punitive sanctions, Russia started its own tit-for-tat measures, banning British flights to and over its territory in retaliation to a similar U.K. ban on Aeroflot flights.

Russian authorities also announced the "partial restriction" of access to Facebook after the social media network limited the accounts of several Kremlin-backed media. Russian state communications watchdog Roskomnadzor said it demanded that Facebook lift the restrictions it placed Thursday on state news agency RIA Novosti, state TV channel Zvezda and pro-Kremlin news sites Lenta.Ru and Gazeta.Ru.

Action wasn't only limited to Western powers. Countries in Asia and the Pacific have joined the U.S., the EU and others in the West in piling on punitive measures against Russian banks and leading companies. The nations have also set up export controls aimed at starving Russia's industries and military of semiconductors and other high-tech products.

# Biden taps Ketanji Jackson for Supreme Court choice

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden on Friday nominated federal appeals court Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson to the Supreme Court, the White House said, making her the first Black woman selected to serve on a court that once declared her race unworthy of citizenship and endorsed segregation.

In Jackson, Biden delivered on a campaign promise to make the historic appointment and to further diversify a court that was made up entirely of white men for almost two centuries. He has chosen an attorney who would be the high court's first former public defender, though she also possesses the elite legal background of other justices.

Jackson would be the current court's second Black justice — Justice Clarence Thomas, a conservative, is the other — and just the third in history.

Biden introduced Jackson in remarks at the White House Friday afternoon, where Jackson also spoke, the White House said.

She would also be only the sixth woman to serve on the court, and her confirmation would mean that for the first time four women would sit together on the nine-member court.

The current court includes three women,

one of whom is the court's first Latina, Justice Sonia Sotomayor.

Jackson would join the liberal minority of a conservative-dominated court that is weighing cutbacks to abortion rights and will be considering ending affirmative action in college admissions and restricting voting rights efforts to increase minority representation.

Biden is filling the seat that will be vacated by Justice Stephen Breyer, 83, who is retiring at the end of the term this summer.

Jackson, 51, once worked as one of Breyer's law clerks early in her legal career. She attended Harvard as an undergraduate and for law school, and served on the U.S. Sentencing Commission, the agency that develops federal sentencing policy, before becoming a federal judge in 2013.

Her nomination is subject to confirmation by the Senate, where Democrats hold the majority by a razor-thin 50-50 margin with Vice President Kamala Harris as the tie-breaker. Party leaders have promised swift but deliberate consideration of the president's nominee.

The next justice will replace one of the more liberal justices, so she would not tip the balance of the court, which now leans 6-3 in favor of conservatives.

# 3 other officers found guilty in Floyd's killing

*Associated Press*

ST. PAUL, Minn. — The three Minneapolis police officers alongside Derek Chauvin at the scene of George Floyd's killing offered a variety of reasons why they weren't to blame: Inexperience. Bad training. Fear of a senior officer. The looming threat of angry bystanders.

A federal jury swept them all aside Thursday, emerging from two days of deliberations that followed a month of testimony to convict Tou Thao, J. Alexander Kueng and Thomas Lane of violating Floyd's civil rights.

All three men were convicted of depriving Floyd of his right to medical care as the 46-year-old Black man was pinned under Chauvin's knee for 9 1/2 minutes while handcuffed, facedown on the street on May 25, 2020. Kueng knelt on Floyd's back, Lane held his legs and Thao kept bystanders back.

Thao and Kueng were also convicted of failing to intervene to stop Chauvin in the videotaped killing that sparked protests in Minneapolis and around the globe as part of a reckoning over racial injustice.

Floyd's brother Philonise Floyd called the verdicts "accountability," but added: "There can never be justice because I can never get George back."

And Floyd's nephew Brandon Williams said he hoped the verdicts would change laws and policies to "protect people from these situations." He also said the outcome "sends a message that says, if you murder or use excessive or deadly force, there's consequences that follow."

Lane shook his head and looked at his attorney as his verdict was read. Thao and Kueng showed no visible emotion.

Charles Kovats, acting U.S. attorney for Minnesota, called the convictions a reminder that all sworn law enforcement officers have a duty to intervene.

"These officers had a moral responsibility, a legal obligation and a duty to intervene, and by failing to do so, they committed a crime," Kovats said.

The former officers remain free on bond pending sentencing, which has not yet been scheduled.

Lane, Kueng and Thao also face a separate trial in June on state charges alleging that they aided and abetted murder and manslaughter.

# House panel requests more Trump records from National Archives

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — A congressional oversight committee sought additional documents Friday from the National Archives related to former President Donald Trump's handling of White House records as the panel looks to expand its investigation into his handling of sensitive and even classified information.

The House Committee on Oversight and Reform sent a letter to the archivist, laying out a series of document requests needed to determine if the former president violated federal records laws when he took 15 boxes of White House records to his Mar-a-Lago residence in Florida after leaving office last year.

The committee needs additional documents and information uniquely available

from the National Archives and Records Administration "to investigate the full extent of this conduct and determine what additional steps, including potential legislative reforms, may be needed to ensure the preservation of presidential records for the American people," Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., the chairwoman of the Oversight Committee, wrote in the letter.

Among the items requested is a detailed account of the contents of the more than a dozen boxes recovered by the archives from Mar-a-Lago, all presidential records Trump had attempted to destroy, communication records made on personal devices and unofficial messaging systems between White House aides including former chief of staff Mark Meadows, counsel Don McGahn and lawyer Pat Cipollone.

# CDC to significantly loosen mask rules

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Biden administration was to significantly loosen federal mask-wearing guidelines to protect against COVID-19 transmission on Friday, according to two people familiar with the matter, meaning most Americans will no longer be advised to wear masks in indoor public settings.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Friday was to announce a change to the metrics it uses to determine whether to recommend face coverings, shifting from looking at COVID-19 case counts to a more holistic view of risk from the coronavirus to a community. Under current guidelines, masks are recommended for people residing in communities of substantial or high transmission — roughly 95% of U.S. counties, according to the latest data.

The new metrics will still consider case loads, but also take into account hospitalizations and local hospital capacity, which have been markedly improved during the

emergence of the omicron variant. That strain is highly transmissible, but indications are that it is less severe than earlier strains, particularly for people who are fully vaccinated and boosted. Under the new guidelines, the vast majority of Americans will no longer live in areas where indoor masking in public is recommended, based on current data.

The new policy comes as the Biden administration moves to shift its focus to preventing serious illness and death from COVID-19, rather than all instances of infection, as part of a strategy adjustment for a new “phase” in the response as the virus becomes endemic.

The two people familiar with the change spoke on the condition of anonymity to preview the CDC’s action before the announcement.

The change comes as nearly all U.S. states that had put in place indoor mask-wearing mandates for the winter omicron surge are letting them lapse as cases have

precipitously dropped nationwide. Some have eliminated the mandates entirely, while others have kept mask-wearing requirements in place for schools and medical facilities.

It was not immediately clear how the new CDC guidance would affect U.S. federal mandates requiring face coverings on public transportation.

The CDC’s director, Dr. Rochelle Walensky, has said a change has been in the works.

“We must consider hospital capacity as an additional important barometer. Our hospitals need to be able to take care of people with heart attacks and strokes. Our emergency departments can’t be so overwhelmed that patients with emergent issues have to wait in line,” she said during a White House briefing last week.

However, she declined to give a specific day when the CDC would announce a change. CDC officials on Thursday refused to confirm a release date.

## Key inflation gauge rises 6.1%, highest since 1982

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — An inflation gauge that is closely monitored by the Federal Reserve jumped 6.1% in January compared with that of a year ago, the latest evidence that Americans are enduring sharp price increases that will likely worsen after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine.

The figure reported Friday by the Commerce Department was the largest year-over-year rise since 1982. Excluding volatile food and energy prices, core inflation increased 5.2% in January from that of a year earlier.

Robust consumer spending has combined with widespread product and worker shortages to create the highest inflation in four decades — a heavy burden for U.S. households, especially lower-income families faced with elevated costs for food, fuel and rent.

At the same time, consumers as a whole largely shrugged off

the higher prices last month and boosted their spending 2.1% from December to January, Friday’s report said, an encouraging sign for the economy and the job market. That was a sharp improvement from December, when spending fell. Americans across the income scale have been receiving pay raises and have amassed more savings than they had before the pandemic struck two years ago. That expanded pool of savings provides fuel for future spending.

Inflation, though, is expected to remain high and perhaps accelerate in the coming months, especially with Russia’s invasion likely disrupting oil and gas exports. The costs of other commodities that are produced in Ukraine, such as wheat and aluminum, are rising, too.

President Joe Biden said Thursday that he would do “everything I can” to keep gas prices in check.

## Chinese fighter jets sortie into Taiwan’s air zone

BY WYATT OLSON

*Stars and Stripes*

Taiwan scrambled fighter jets Thursday in response to nine Chinese aircraft entering its air defense identification zone, the Taiwan Ministry of National Defense said on its website.

Chinese aircraft have encroached on Taiwan’s air defense zone with increasing frequency during the past year, but Thursday’s sorties come at a particularly fraught time, just hours after Russia launched an invasion into Ukraine.

Taiwan issued radio warnings to the Chinese aircraft and “air defense missile systems deployed to monitor the activities,” the defense ministry said.

Eight J-16 Chinese fighter jets and one Y-8 reconnaissance prop airplane flew over the southwest tip of Taiwan’s air defense zone, according to a map on the ministry’s website.

Some defense analysts have

speculated China could move militarily against Taiwan amid the chaos of a Russian invasion of Ukraine, which came after weeks of amassing forces along its border.

British Prime Minister Boris Johnson said Saturday during a security conference in Munich that China was watching the level of support Western nations were offering Ukraine for its defense.

Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen on Wednesday called for increased surveillance of China’s actions in light of the unfolding Ukraine crisis, saying “all government units must be more vigilant.”

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying on Wednesday dismissed as “unwise” any linking of the two issues.

“Taiwan for sure is not Ukraine,” she told reporters. “Taiwan has always been an inalienable part of China’s territory.”

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### DA returns artifacts worth \$20M to Greece

**NY** NEW YORK — Dozens of looted antiquities seized from billionaire hedge fund founder Michael Steinhardt after a yearslong investigation have been returned to the people of Greece, prosecutors in New York announced Wednesday.

The artifacts included a sculpture of a young man from about 560 B.C., known as a kouros, that is worth \$14 million, Manhattan District Attorney Alvin Bragg said.

The district attorney's office has accused Steinhardt of relying on a "sprawling underworld of antiquities traffickers, crime bosses, money launderers and tomb raiders" to build his collection.

The handover of the ancient objects to Greece occurred after the district attorney's office announced a deal in December under which Steinhardt was to surrender \$70 million worth of artifacts acquired illegally from Greece and other countries including Egypt, Israel, Syria and Turkey.

Under the agreement, Steinhardt will not face criminal charges but is subject to an unprecedented lifetime ban on acquiring antiquities. Steinhardt is a co-founder of Birthright Israel and a philanthropist who is chair of the Steinhardt Foundation for Jewish Life.

### Moose roaming city tranquilized, relocated

**MA** MARLBOROUGH — A moose on the loose in a Massachusetts city was tranquilized Tuesday and

moved to a more appropriate setting, state wildlife officials said.

The moose spotted roaming around a densely-populated Marlborough neighborhood was tranquilized by the Massachusetts Environmental Police at about 10 a.m., tagged, and taken to a wildlife management area in northern Worcester County, Martin Feehan, a deer-moose biologist for the state Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, told The MetroWest Daily News.

It took two tranquilizer darts to get the 6-year-old female to sleep, he said.

### Fire at church is third in neighborhood this week

**IL** CHICAGO — A fire that broke out at a church Wednesday was the third to strike a city neighborhood on Chicago's North Side.

Chicago firefighters battled a blaze at House on the Rock Church in the city's Albany Park neighborhood. The church sustained heavy damage, including to its large stained glass windows. The fire was under control before 2 p.m. No injuries were reported.

A Chicago brewery was destroyed by a dramatic blaze early Monday that fire officials believe started in a nearby apartment building. The Twisted Hippo partially collapsed due to the fire which started about 3:30 a.m. One man was taken to a hospital suffering from possible smoke inhalation, according to authorities.

Also this week, a fire broke out at a building that was under construction. One firefighter was injured in the blaze.

### Firearms sweep nets more than 100 guns

**CA** LOS ANGELES — Authorities seized more than 100 guns in Southern California as part of a five-day sweep to remove firearms and ammunition from people who are no longer legally allowed to own or possess them, officials announced Tuesday.

The operation last week in Los Angeles County also included 13 arrests, California Attorney General Rob Bonta said at a news conference. Investigators also took nearly 50,000 rounds of ammunition and 87 high-capacity magazines away.

People prohibited to own or possess firearms in California include those who were convicted of a felony or a violent misdemeanor, placed under a domestic violence or other restraining order, or suffer from serious mental illness. The state established a system in 2006 — the first to do so — that tracks firearm owners who fall into one of those prohibited categories.

Authorities found 55 handguns, 19 rifles, 15 shotguns, 17 assault weapons, and eight ghost guns as part of the sweep across 51 cities in LA County. A similar operation was conducted in January in the San Francisco Bay Area, where 30 firearms were seized and eight people were arrested.

### Explosion causes fire at potato chip plant

**OR** HERMISTON — A boiler explosion at a potato chip plant south of Hermiston, Ore., sparked a dramatic fire Tuesday afternoon.

The Tri-City Herald reported

Umatilla County Fire District 1 and the Umatilla County Sheriff's Office were called to the Shearer's Foods plant just before 1 p.m. after employees called 911 to report an explosion. Good Shepherd Medical Center reported that seven people came to the hospital from Shearer's Foods. None of the injuries were reported as serious.

The plant supplies much of the Western U.S. with potato and corn chips.

### Pair of suspects sought in 4 bank robberies

**NC** RALEIGH — Police in North Carolina's capital are looking for two people who are believed to have committed four bank robberies within hours.

News outlets report N.C. State University and the Raleigh Police Department have connected a car fire near the school's Centennial Campus on Tuesday to bank robberies in Cary, Morrisville and Raleigh. An alert was issued for N.C. State students for two men wanted for bank robbery were on the run after their car crashed into an apartment building.

Morrisville police were called to a First Horizon Bank branch shortly before noon to investigate a robbery. Raleigh police responded to a robbery at a Wells Fargo near the N.C. State campus around 12:30 p.m.

Fifteen minutes later, another robbery was reported at a Wells Fargo in Raleigh. Just after 1 p.m. a robbery was reported at a Wells Fargo branch in Cary. Although police said someone demanded money, no weapon was shown.

— From Associated Press

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# Major League Soccer getting early start

Associated Press

With the World Cup looming at the end of the year, Major League Soccer had to make significant adjustments as it embarks on its 27th season.

The league's 28 teams kick off this weekend, the earliest start ever with a quicker finish scheduled as MLS will make way for the World Cup in late November. And because of COVID-19, the 2021 MLS season didn't start until April, about six weeks later than usual, which led to a later championship and a scant 11-week offseason.

New York City FC and the Portland Timbers have been impacted the most. NYCFC is the defending MLS Cup winner, lifting the trophy on Dec. 11 on a penalty shootout after a 1-1 draw in Portland. NYCFC opens the upcoming season Sunday on the road against the LA Galaxy.

The runner-up Timbers, meanwhile, will host defending Supporters' Shield winner New England on Saturday. The Revolution have gotten better with the addition of Sebastian Lletget, Omar Gonzalez and Jozy Altidore.

Expansion Charlotte FC opens its inaugural season on Saturday at D.C. United. Charlotte will play its home games at Bank of

America Stadium, also home of the NFL's Carolina Panthers. It's the sixth straight season that MLS has added at least one new team.

MLS Commissioner Don Garber has pointed to that expansion, even in the face of the pandemic disarray of the last two seasons, as one of the league's successes.

"Between 2017, five years ago, when Atlanta and Minnesota debuted and now 2022, we've added eight new teams, and all of this growth, both in our markets, on the field and off the field, and the momentum have come despite some major disruptions and challenges that have marked the last two years for all of us, and certainly for Major League Soccer," he said during his preseason address.

The regular season will run through Oct. 9. The MLS Cup championship is set for Nov. 5, ahead of the start of the World Cup in Qatar, which kicks off Nov. 21.

Nineteen MLS players were on national team rosters for the 2018 World Cup in Russia. That number figures to be higher in Qatar with Canada and the United States expected to qualify.

**Vegas on the Horizon:** After Charlotte, the league will welcome a new team in St. Louis next season. Las Vegas is the front-

runner for the next expansion team, although Garber said the deal isn't over the line yet.

"When we said we were going to have 28 teams, we never thought we would go beyond that; and then when we had a path to 30, we never thought we'd go beyond that," Garber said. "As soccer becomes more popular and more cities see the opportunity with their fans and their communities to host a first-division MLS club, we have to process all that and determine whether MLS will be a 32-team (league) at some point in the future."

**International Flavor:** A handful of prominent international players joined the league for this season, among them Swiss striker Xherdan Shaqiri, signed by the Chicago Fire; Argentine attacker Alan Velasco, brought in by FC Dallas; fellow Argentine Thiago Almada, acquired by Atlanta United; and Facundo Torres of Uruguay, signed by Orlando City.

"I wanted a new thing to try and so the opportunity came to come to the U.S. and to come to this club to help to bring the glory back," Shaqiri said. "This is my most important thing. I want to be successful. I want to bring to this club new goals and to be successful."

## Bright new stars and big expectations for IndyCar

Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — The stars of IndyCar crowded into Indianapolis Motor Speedway to celebrate an upcoming season of opportunity for America's open-wheel racing series to further cement its legitimacy and expand its popularity.

The party to mark the 100-day countdown to the Indianapolis 500 went off course amid word Michael Andretti was again trying to acquire a Formula One team. Mario Andretti, the 1978 F1 world champion, wrote that Andretti Global had applied for an expansion team to launch in 2024 — news so very indicative of IndyCar's peculiar dilemma.

IndyCar has weathered the pandemic under Roger Penske, who had the misfortune of purchasing the series and IMS about two months before the global shutdown. Despite the challenges, Penske enters his third season at the top with all critical metrics trending upward.

IndyCar's growth can be attributed to a crop of young stars — a Dutch driver, a Mexican, a Spaniard and 21-year-old Colton

Herta of California — who won races and new fans. IndyCar's growth has made it a respectable and even desirable landing spot for top drivers around the globe, but the bright young lights of IndyCar's resurgence all happened to grow up dreaming of F1.

If Michael Andretti ever does get an F1 team, he is almost certain to take Herta from Andretti Autosport with him as the next American driver. Herta was a central figure in last year's failed Andretti talks to purchase Sauber, and as he prepares this Sunday to defend his St. Petersburg victory from a year ago, he's again in the headlines for the wrong series.

"It's the same as how I was with the Sauber stuff, it doesn't really make too much of a difference to me," Herta told The Associated Press on Tuesday. "My main goal this year is IndyCar and that's what I'm focused on."

Pato O'Ward, a 22-year-old Mexican, races for McLaren in IndyCar and seems to already have one foot out the door. He tested the F1 car for McLaren in December and could be the team's reserve driver at select

2022 races.

Herta and O'Ward, teammates in January on a class victory at the Rolex 24 at Daytona, have established themselves as motorsports' new guard.

It's a lot of attention on a pair of drivers who both fell short of the IndyCar championship and are both still scraping together the points the FIA requires to get an F1 drivers license. And of all the emerging stars, the one to finally dethrone six-time IndyCar champion Scott Dixon last season was neither Herta nor O'Ward, but instead Alex Palou — Dixon's Chip Ganassi Racing teammate.

Palou was new to Ganassi last season but in his second year of IndyCar, and the 24-year-old Spaniard has a remarkable steeliness and relentless thirst to understand every element of his craft.

"We didn't surprise people last year, but they didn't really talk about us, either," Palou said. "We need to be consistently part of the conversation so that people understand clearly this team is for real."

## Booker fills in for Paul in Suns' rout of Thunder

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — Devin Booker had 25 points, 12 assists and a career-high six steals to help the NBA-leading Phoenix Suns beat the Oklahoma City Thunder 124-104 on Thursday night.

Booker played point guard with All-Star Chris Paul out with a fractured right thumb. Booker finished with a season-high assist total.

Cameron Johnson and Mikal Bridges each added 21 points for the Suns. They have won eight straight and 19 of 20 to improve to 49-10.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander led Oklahoma City with 32 points in his return after missing 10 games because of a sprained right ankle. Josh Giddey added 15 points, nine rebounds and six assists.

**Bulls 112, Hawks 108:** DeMar DeRozan scored 37 points while extending an NBA-record streak and Eastern Conference-leading Chicago squeezed by visiting Atlanta.

DeRozan pushed mark of scoring at least 35 points while shooting 50% or better in eight games. The five-time All-Star made 15 of 21 shots and had five points in the final minute, helping the Bulls pull out their sixth straight victory.

DeRozan also made it nine games in a row with 30 points or more, the longest such streak by a Bulls player since Michael Jordan did it in 10 straight from Dec. 25, 1990, to Jan. 14, 1991.

Zach LaVine scored 20 points after missing the final three games prior to the All-Star break because of his ailing left knee. Bogdan Bogdanovic led Atlanta with a season-high 27 points. Danilo Gallinari scored 26 points.

**Warriors 132, Trail Blazers 95:** Stephen Curry had 18 points and 14 assists and Golden State returned from the All-Star break to rout host Portland.

Klay Thompson also had 18 points for the Warriors. They lost four of their last five before the break.

The Warriors led by 37 points in the second half and rested their starters in the fourth quarter.

Anfernee Simons had 24 points for Portland. The Trail Blazers had won four in a row.

**Timberwolves 119, Grizzlies 114:** D'Angelo Russell had 23 of his 37 points in the fourth quarter, including a tiebreaking three-pointer with 1:23 left, to lead Minnesota past visiting Memphis.

Ziaire Williams and Jaren Jackson Jr. each scored 21 points for Memphis. Ja Morant had 20 on 7-for-25 shooting.

**Celtics 129, Nets 106:** Jayson Tatum scored 30 points and Boston returned from the All-Star break with its second romp in Brooklyn this month.

The Celtics picked up where they left off before the break, when they won nine of their final 10 games. One of those was a 126-91 victory in Brooklyn on Feb. 8.

Seth Curry scored 22 points for the Nets. They have lost 13 of 15.

**Nuggets 128, Kings 110:** Nikola Jokic had 25 points, 12 rebounds and nine assists, Will Barton inched closer to the franchise record for three-pointers and Denver beat host Sacramento.

Barton scored a season-high 31 points on 11-for-17 shooting. Barton made three from beyond the arc and needs five to pass J.R. Smith for most in franchise history. Smith, who played five seasons in Denver, made 768.

**Pistons 106, Cavaliers 103:** Cade Cunningham hit four free throws in the final 46 seconds to help Detroit beat visiting Cleveland.

Hamidou Diallo led Detroit with 21 points and Cunningham added 17.

## Gonzaga stretches win streak to 17

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Chet Holmgren had 21 points and 15 rebounds, and No. 1 Gonzaga picked up its defensive pressure in the second half to hold off San Francisco 89-73 and extend its winning streak to 17 on Thursday night.

Drew Timme just missed a triple-double with 20 points, nine rebounds and eight assists, and Julian Strawther added 15 points for the Zags (24-2, 13-0 WCC), which earned a 23rd straight victory against USF and 10th in a row on the Dons' home floor.

Khalil Shabazz scored 17 points for San Francisco (22-8, 9-6), which honored him and the other seniors before their final home game on the Hilltop.

**No. 2 Arizona 97, Utah 77:** Azuolas Tubelis scored 23 points and Kerr Kriisa had his program's first triple-double in 18 years to power the visiting Wildcats over the Utes.

Kriisa had 21 points, 10 rebounds and 10 assists, becoming the first Arizona player with a triple-double since Andre Iguodala in February 2004. Dalen Terry and Benedict Mathurin each scored 14 as the Wildcats (25-2, 15-1 Pac-12) won their ninth straight game.

Gabe Madsen scored 15 and David Jenkins Jr. added 14 for Utah (11-17, 4-14).

**Oregon 68, No. 12 UCLA 63:** De'Vion Harmon scored 17 points in the host Ducks' win over the Bruins.

Jacob Young scored 14 points and Will Richardson and Eric Williams Jr. each had 11 for Oregon (18-10, 11-6 Pac-12). Franck Kepnang had eight points, nine rebounds and three blocks.

Tyler Campbell and Cody Riley each scored 12 points to lead UCLA (20-6, 12-5).

**No. 22 Ohio State 86, No.**

**15 Illinois:** Freshman Malaki Branham scored 31 points to lift the visiting Buckeyes, who dealt a serious blow to the Illini's Big Ten title hopes.

Illinois (19-8, 12-5) is a full game behind leaders Purdue and Wisconsin with two weeks left in the regular season. Ohio State (18-7, 11-5) is in fourth place in the conference.

**No. 16 Southern California 94, Oregon State 91 (20T):** Beavers guard Dashawn Davis missed a three-pointer from the corner with three seconds left in double overtime, and the visiting Trojans escaped with another conference win.

Drew Peterson scored 24 points and pulled down 10 rebounds for USC (24-4, 13-4 Pac-12), which extended its winning streak to five games. Isaiah Mobley had 19 points and 10 rebounds for the Trojans.

**No. 19 Murray State 76, Belmont 43:** Forward KJ Williams had 30 points on 12-for-19 shooting and added five rebounds, and the host Racers claimed the Ohio Valley Conference regular-season title by beating the Redhawks.

Murray State (27-2, 17-0) has won 17 straight games. Belmont (24-6, 14-3) had its 10-game winning streak halted after being limited to 32.1% shooting from the floor, 19.2% from beyond the arc and getting outrebounded 40-22.

**No. 23 Saint Mary's 60, San Diego 46:** Logan Johnson scored 14 points, Kyle Bowen had 12 and the visiting Gaels beat the Toreros for the 16th straight time.

Saint Mary's (23-6, 11-3 West Coast) clinched the No. 2 seed in next week's conference tournament. Matthias Tass had 10 points and nine rebounds for Saint Mary's, and Tommy Kuhse added 10 points.

# Matthews scores twice as Leafs top Wild

Associated Press

TORONTO — Auston Matthews scored his 35th and 36th goals to take the NHL lead and the Toronto Maple Leafs beat the Minnesota Wild 3-1 on Thursday night to snap a three-game losing streak.

Matthews broke a tie midway through the third period. He stripped Wild fourth-line right wing Brandon Duhaime of the puck outside the Minnesota blue line and turned the other way for a give-and-go goal with Mitch Marner.

Matthew moved a goal ahead of Edmonton's Leon Draisaitl for the NHL lead.

Alex Kerfoot added an empty-netter in the final minute.

Petr Mrazek made 29 saves for Toronto. He was given the start over the struggling Jack Campbell.

Frederick Gaudreau opened the scoring for Minnesota midway through the second, and Matthews tied it 27 seconds later.

**Canucks 7, Flames 1:** J.T.

Miller scored on a penalty shot and finished with two goals and two assists as host Vancouver ended Calgary's 10-game winning streak.

Elias Pettersson had two goals and an assist, Bo Horvat scored twice and Conor Garland added a goal for Vancouver. Quinn Hughes and Brock Boeser each had two assists. Thatcher Demko made 29 saves.

**Blue Jackets 6, Panthers 1:** Cole Sillinger and Justin Danforth scored 10 seconds apart in the third period and visiting Columbus beat Florida.

Oliver Bjorkstrand, Gabriel Carlsson, Boone Jenner and Patrik Laine also scored to help Columbus beat the Panthers for the first time in nine games, extending its winning streak to a season-best four games.

**Predators 2, Stars 1 (SO):** Mikael Granlund scored the lone goal of a four-round shootout, helping host Nashville cap a night to remember by beating Dallas.

The Predators began the evening by honoring longtime goaltender Pekka Rinne before the game by raising his No. 35 jersey to the rafters. A fat catfish wrapped in a Rinne shirt hit the ice before the puck dropped, and a record crowd of 17,869 came out for the celebration.

**Rangers 4, Capitals 1:** Alexis Lafreniere and Mika Zibanejad each had a goal and an assist to help host New York beat Washington.

Chris Kreider and Barclay Goodrow also scored and Igor Shesterkin stopped 36 shots. New York won for the fifth time in six games. The Rangers have won eight of their last 11 overall (8-2-1) and nine of 12 (9-1-2) at home.

**Bruins 3, Kraken 2 (OT):** Jake DeBrusk scored his second goal of the game 33 seconds into overtime to lift visiting Boston past Seattle.

Boston opened a lengthy road trip with its third straight win and welcomed Brad Marchand back from suspension. DeBrusk

scored off a fluky bounce in the first period and beat goalie Philipp Grubauer on the short side from a tight angle on the first shot of the extra period.

**Devils 6, Penguins 1:** Jesper Bratt scored twice in the first six minutes, rookie Nico Daws made 37 saves and last-place New Jersey routed host Pittsburgh.

Yegor Sharangovich, Dawson Mercer, Damon Severson and Nico Hischier also scored. The Devils won for the third time in 12 games.

**Sharks 4, Islanders 3 (SO):** Logan Couture was the only scorer in the shootout and James Reimer made 44 saves as host San Jose snapped a seven-game losing streak with a win over New York.

Couture also scored in regulation as San Jose let two leads slip away in regulation but managed to win for the first time since Jan. 26. Alexander Barabanov and rookie Jasper Weatherby also scored for the Sharks.

## MLB nearing self-imposed deadline for new labor deal

Associated Press

JUPITER, Fla. — Another negotiating session produced only minor movement and no proposals on big-money issues, leaving Major League Baseball four days from management's Monday night deadline for a deal to salvage opening day and a 162-game season.

Both sides appeared Thursday to be in a you-make-the-next-move staredown on central economic issues of the lockout, such as luxury tax thresholds and rates, the minimum salary and the proposed bonus pool for pre-arbitration players.

Given those stances, it appeared the earliest movement on the main issues would be in the hours before management says it will carry through on its threat to start canceling games and costing players salary.

The union came away with the impression that management said it was out of ideas until players offer new proposals on key issues. Clubs say the union hasn't altered its luxury tax plan since November, and players say they are waiting because management told

the union luxury tax usually is among the last items addressed.

Players also want to reduce revenue sharing and expand salary arbitration eligibility, and teams say they will not agree to either proposal.

Both sides agreed to meet again Friday, the fifth straight day of bargaining and the 11th on core economics since the lockout started Dec. 2.

Baseball's ninth work stoppage, its first since 1995, entered its 86th day Friday.

Players have not accepted Monday as a deadline and have suggested any missed games could be made up as part of doubleheaders, a method MLB said it will not agree to.

The union told MLB if games are missed and salaries are lost, clubs should not expect players to agree to management's proposals to expand the postseason and to allow advertisements on uniforms and helmets.

Baseball commissioner Rob Manfred has not publicly commented on the talks since

Feb. 10 and union head Tony Clark since Dec. 2.

Players modified part of their formula for additional service time for top young players, covering the top 15 in each league by WAR among starting pitchers, relief pitchers and outfielders, down from 20, and the top five at other positions, down from seven.

The union says such a mechanism is needed to prevent teams from holding players in the minor leagues to delay free agency, such as the union claimed in an unsuccessful grievance against the Chicago Cubs over Kris Bryant that was decided by an arbitrator two years ago. Teams say they won't agree to such a proposal.

The union also tweaked its complex plan for a lottery to decide the top seven amateur draft picks to prevent a team that pays revenue sharing from picking among the top nine if it finished among the lowest eight winning percentages in each of the two previous seasons or the bottom 12 in each of the previous three.