

US access expands in Philippines

By **SETH ROBSON**
Stars and Stripes

U.S. troops will have access to four more military sites in the Philippines under plans announced by the two countries on Thursday.

The agreement marks a turn in the allies' relationship under a new Philippine president after slow progress during the administration of former leader Rodrigo Duterte, who had sought closer relations with China.

The U.S. and the Philippines agreed Thursday to "accelerate the full implementation of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement" by completing projects at five locations named in the agreement and adding the four new sites, according to a

statement from the U.S. Department of Defense.

Work has been underway, since the defense agreement was announced in 2014, to build facilities for U.S. forces at several previously announced sites in the Philippines. Those five locations are Antonio Bautista Air Base in Palawan, Basa Air Base in Pampanga, Fort Magsaysay in Nueva Ecija, Mactan-Benito Ebuen Air Base in Cebu and Lumbia Air Base in Cagayan de Oro City.

A few dozen leftist activists held a noisy protest Thursday and set fire to a mock U.S. flag outside the main military camp where Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin held talks with his Philippine counterpart. While the two countries are allies, leftist

groups and nationalists have protested boisterously for decades against any U.S. military presence in this former American colony.

The four new sites will not be revealed before a consultation process is completed, Philippines Defense Secretary Carlito Galvez Jr. told reporters during a press conference Thursday alongside Austin.

"We are not seeking permanent basing in the Philippines," Austin said. The agreement is about rotational activities, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, he added.

Forces using the sites could assist in other crises, not just for the Philippines but for the region, according to Austin.

The defense secretaries reaffirmed their alliance, Austin

said, noting that it applies to attacks on either nation in the South China or the West Philippine seas.

"These efforts are especially important as [China] continues to advance its illegitimate claims in the West Philippine Sea," he said.

The EDCA agreement is a key pillar of the U.S.-Philippine alliance, which supports combined training and exercises and helps forces from the two countries work together, according to the DOD statement.

"Expansion of the EDCA will make our alliance stronger and more resilient, and will accelerate modernization of our combined military capabilities," the statement said.

Navy ends medical testing on sheep at UW-Madison

By **DOUG G. WARE**
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals claimed a small victory Wednesday after learning the Navy ended years of what the group called "crude" medical testing on sheep at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

PETA said the Navy paid for two testing programs at the campus, which involved subjecting sheep to high-pressure environments to learn more about decompression sickness in humans, commonly known as "the bends."

"That sheep will no longer have the life literally squeezed out of them in crude and archaic decompression tests at UW-Madison is cause for celebration," PETA Vice President Shalin Gala said.

PETA called the end of the testing on sheep "a victory" and encouraged the Navy to go further and ban all similar animal testing at all Navy-funded research locations.

"We urge the Navy to fully ban the conducting and funding of all decompression

sickness and oxygen toxicity experiments using any animal at any institutions, given the extreme cruelty of these tests and their irrelevance to human physiology," Maggie Wisniewska, science policy adviser at PETA, wrote in a letter Wednesday to Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro.

Decompression sickness is caused by nitrogen gas bubbles that form in the bloodstream and organs as the human body rapidly goes from a high-pressure environment, such as underwater, to a normal-pressure environment. The bends is often seen in divers who rise to the surface too quickly and can be deadly if not treated quickly. PETA only recently discovered the testing programs ended after receiving records from UW-Madison through a Freedom of Information Act request. The Navy confirmed Wednesday that the decompression sickness testing with sheep at UW-Madison ended in July.

"The contract for the project came to its natural conclusion at the end of the performance period," a Navy spokesperson said,

adding the testing was done to determine whether emergency procedures would "safely and successfully allow submariners trapped in a disabled submarine on the sea floor to escape or be rescued."

"The safety and health of our sailors and Marines is the Navy's highest priority," the service spokesperson said.

However, a PETA spokesperson said the testing programs were authorized to continue until August 2023 and June 2024.

PETA sent letters to Del Toro and Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin last year asking for the tests to be halted.

The group argued the tests are harmful and painful for the sheep and offer little value because the results don't translate well to humans. Further, the group said there are better non-animal test methods that provide better results.

This is not the first time that PETA campaigned against sheep being used in research testing at UW-Madison. In 2010, the group successfully helped to stop similar experiments.

EU officials in Kyiv as Russia hits civilians again

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian missiles hit residential areas in an eastern Ukrainian city Thursday for the second time in 24 hours, while top European Union officials held talks with the government in Kyiv as the war with Russia approaches its one-year milestone.

The latest strikes in Kramatorsk came as rescue crews searched for survivors in the rubble of an apartment building hit late Wednesday by a Russian missile that killed at least three people and wounded 21 others. At least one more victim was thought to be under the debris, Ukraine's presidential office said.

"Kramatorsk again shattered

by explosions — the Russians made two more rocket strikes," regional governor Pavlo Kyrylenko wrote in a Telegram post.

He said at least five civilians were wounded in the latest strikes, which hit residential buildings as well as a children's clinic and a school in the heart of the city. Kramatorsk Mayor Oleksandr Honcharenko urged residents to stay in shelters.

Kramatorsk is a major hub for the Ukrainian military in the east.

No further details of Thursday's attack were immediately available.

Russia has frequently struck apartment buildings during the war, causing civilian casualties, although the Kremlin has de-

nied targeting residential structures.

Russian shelling across Ukraine over the previous 24 hours killed at least eight civilians and wounded 29 others, the presidential office said. Along with the victims in Kramatorsk, the toll included four who died when a Russian mortar shell hit a basement where they were sheltering in the northeastern Chernihiv region.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy met with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen ahead of what officials described as a summit on Friday. The last such summit was held in Kyiv in October 2021 — a few months before the war started on Feb. 24,

2022.

Von der Leyen praised wartime Ukraine's "brilliant application" for European Union membership, though Brussels officials have noted that Ukraine joining the 27-nation bloc is still a long way off.

Ahead of possible membership, Von der Leyen said, the Commission is proposing that Kyiv "join key European programs — this will give Ukraine benefits close to those of EU membership in many areas."

Von der Leyen, on her fourth visit to Kyiv since Russia's invasion, added that she was "comforted" by Ukraine's anti-corruption drive. Stamping out endemic corruption is a key condition for joining the EU.

US opens embassy in the Solomon Islands

Associated Press

WELLINGTON, New Zealand — The United States opened an embassy in the Solomon Islands on Thursday in its latest move to counter China's push into the Pacific.

The embassy in the capital, Honiara, is starting small, with a chargé d'affaires, a couple of State Department staff and a handful of local employees. The U.S. previously operated an embassy in the Solomon Islands for five years before closing it in 1993 as part of a global reduction in diplomatic posts after the end of the Cold War.

But China's bold moves in the region have the U.S. seeking to increase its engagement in a number of ways, such as by donating COVID-19 vaccines, bringing back Peace Corps volunteers to several is-

land nations, and investing in forestry and tourism projects.

"The opening of the embassy builds on our efforts not only to place more diplomatic personnel throughout the region, but also to engage further with our Pacific neighbors, connect United States programs and resources with needs on the ground, and build people-to-people ties," said Secretary of State Antony Blinken in a statement.

The U.S. State Department notified lawmakers early last year that China's growing influence in the region made reopening the Solomon Islands embassy a priority. Since then, the Solomons has signed a security pact with China, raising fears of a military buildup in the region, and the U.S. has countered by sending several high-level delegations.

Air Force: PCS moves have not been placed on pause

By JENNIFER H. SVAN

Stars and Stripes

The Air Force is processing new assignments and scheduled permanent-change-of-station moves are still going according to plan, the service said, following numerous social media posts referring to a pause in processing the movements of airmen.

"The Air Force Personnel Center is not pausing processing military assignment actions nor canceling assignments for those scheduled" to move in fiscal year 2023, Tech. Sgt. Deana Heitzman, an Air Force spokeswoman at the Pentagon, said in a statement to Stars and Stripes on Wednesday.

Numerous comments and screenshots of what appear to be Air Force documents and unit messages were posted to unofficial military social media channels earlier this week, in-

forming airmen that assignments and moves had been temporarily paused due to a significant shortfall in the service's PCS budget.

"We are Air Force wide 7-day assignment pause," said an anonymous post Tuesday on Air Force Reddit, noting that someone had posted about the issue earlier but had since deleted the post.

The PCS budget is projected to be expended for enlisted members by Aug. 1 and sooner for officers, the post continued. "They are pausing to ensure that the math is correct and come up with a solution."

Added to the comments below the post was a screenshot of a message directed to unit leaders, stating that the loading of new assignments into the system was on hold. Heitzman said she could not confirm the authenticity of the note.

Biden, McCarthy meet to talk debt crisis

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden and House Speaker Kevin McCarthy met face-to-face Wednesday for more than an hour of highly anticipated budget talks — “a good first meeting,” the new Republican leader said — but expectations were low for quick progress as GOP lawmakers push for steep cuts in a deal to prevent a national debt limit crisis.

Biden has resisted direct spending negotiations linked to vital action raising the nation’s legal debt ceiling, warning against potentially throwing the economy into chaos.

McCarthy had all but invited himself to the White House to start the conversation before a summer debt deadline. And he

emerged saying the meeting went better than expected: The two agreed to meet again, and the speaker said he expected to hear from Biden soon.

“No agreement, no promises except we will continue this conversation,” McCarthy told reporters outside the White House.

He said he told the president he would not raise the debt ceiling without concessions from Democrats.

“I was very clear,” he said. “We’re not spending more next year than we spent this year.”

And Biden’s response? McCarthy said the president insisted on a “clean debt ceiling” vote without the budget cuts Republicans are demanding.

“We both have different perspectives on this, but I thought

this was a good meeting,” McCarthy said.

The White House said the president and the speaker agreed to continue the conversation. The president made clear that it is their “shared duty” to not allow a “catastrophic default,” the White House said.

The House speaker arrived for the afternoon session carrying no formal GOP budget proposal, but he is laden with the promises he made to far-right and other conservative Republican lawmakers during his difficult campaign to become House speaker. He vowed then to work to return federal spending to 2022 levels — an 8% reduction.

He also promised to take steps to balance the budget within the decade — an ambitious, if politi-

cally unattainable goal.

McCarthy said he told the president, “I would like to see if we can come to an agreement long before the deadline.”

The political and economic stakes are high for both leaders, who have a cordial relationship, and for the nation as they work to prevent a debt default.

Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen notified Congress last month that the government was reaching the limit of its borrowing capacity, \$31 trillion, with congressional approval needed to raise the ceiling to allow more debt to pay off the nation’s already accrued bills. While Yellen was able to launch “extraordinary measures” to cover the bills temporarily, that funding is to run out in June.

Mourners at Nichols service call for changes in policing

Associated Press

MEMPHIS, Tenn. — Tyre Nichols’ family and friends remembered him with songs of faith and heartfelt tributes Wednesday, blending a celebration of his life with outraged calls for police reform after the brutal beating he endured at the hands of Memphis police.

Nichols’ mother, RowVaughn Wells, fought back tears as she spoke lovingly of her son.

“The only thing that’s keeping me going is that I truly believe that my son was sent here on assignment from God. And I guess now his assignment is done. He’s gone home,” she said, urging Congress to pass police reform.

The Rev. Al Sharpton and Vice President Kamala Harris both delivered impassioned speeches calling on lawmakers to approve the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, a broad package of reforms that includes a national registry for police officers disciplined for misconduct, a ban on no-knock warrants and other

measures.

Harris said the beating of Nichols, a Black man, by five Black officers was a violent act that violated the stated mission of police to ensure public safety.

“It was not in the interest of keeping the public safe, because one must ask, was it not in the interest of keeping the public safe that Tyre Nichols would be with us today? Was he not also entitled to the right to be safe? So when we talk about public safety, let us understand what it means in its truest form. Tyre Nichols should have been safe,” she said.

Nichols, 29, was beaten after police stopped him for an alleged traffic violation Jan. 7.

Video released after pressure from Nichols’ family shows officers holding him down and repeatedly punching, kicking and striking him with a baton as he screamed for his mother.

Sharpton said the officers who beat Nichols might have acted differently if there were real accountability for their actions.

Hunter Biden seeks probe of Trump allies over laptop

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A lawyer for President Joe Biden’s son, Hunter, asked the Justice Department in a letter Wednesday to investigate close allies of former President Donald Trump and others who accessed and disseminated personal data from a laptop that a computer repair shop owner says was dropped off at his Delaware store in 2019.

In a separate letter, Hunter Biden’s attorneys also asked Fox News host Tucker Carlson to retract and apologize for what they say are false and defamatory claims made about him on-air, including implying without evidence that he had unauthorized access to classified documents found at his father’s home.

The request for a criminal inquiry, which comes as Hunter Biden faces his own tax evasion investigation by the Justice Department, does not mean federal prosecutors will open a probe or take any other action. But it nonetheless represents a concerted shift

in strategy and a rare public response by the younger Biden and his legal team to years of attacks by Republican officials and conservative media, scrutiny expected to continue now that the GOP has taken over the House.

It also represents the latest salvo in the laptop saga, which began with a New York Post story in October 2020 that detailed some of the emails it says were found on the device related to Hunter Biden’s foreign business dealings.

The letter, signed by attorney Abbe Lowell, seeks an investigation into, among others, former Trump strategist Steve Bannon, Trump’s longtime lawyer Rudy Giuliani, Giuliani’s own attorney and the Wilmington computer repair shop owner, John Paul Mac Isaac, who has said Hunter Biden dropped a laptop off at his store in April 2019 and never returned to pick it up. The letter notes that Mac Isaac sent a copy of the laptop data to Giuliani’s lawyer, Robert Costello, who in turn shared it with Giuliani.

Winter storm lingering in southern US

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — A mess of ice, sleet and snow lingered across much of the southern U.S. on Thursday as thousands in Texas endured freezing temperatures with no power, including many in the state capital of Austin.

At least ten people have died due to treacherous road conditions since Monday, including seven in Texas, two in Oklahoma and one in Arkansas.

Hundreds more flights were canceled again in Texas, although not as many as in previous days. But another wave of frigid weather in the U.S. is on the horizon, with an Arctic cold front expected to move from Canada into the northern Plains and Upper Midwest and sweep into the Northeast by

Friday. The front is expected to bring snow and wind chills lower than minus 50 to northern New England, according to the National Weather Service.

Nearly 430,000 customers in Texas lacked power early Thursday, according to PowerOutage, a website tracking utility reports.

The outages were most widespread in Austin, where frustration mounted among more than 156,000 customers, over 24 hours after their electricity and heat went out. For many, it was the second time in three years that a February deep freeze caused prolonged outages and uncertainty over when the lights would come back on.

The city's utility warned all power may

not be restored until Friday as ice continued causing new outages, even as repairs were finished elsewhere.

School systems in the Dallas and Austin area, plus many in Oklahoma, Arkansas and Memphis, Tennessee, closed Thursday as snow, sleet and freezing rain continued to push through.

Airport crews battled ice to keep runways open. By Thursday morning, airlines had canceled more than 500 flights at Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport — more than a quarter of all flights scheduled for the day. Still, that was down from about 1,300 cancellations on Wednesday and more than 1,000 on Tuesday, according to FlightAware.com.

Board revises Black history class after criticism

Associated Press

BATON ROUGE, La. — A revised curriculum for a new Advanced Placement course on African American studies downplays some components that drew criticism from conservatives including Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis, who had threatened to ban the class in his state.

In the official framework made public on Wednesday, topics such as Black Lives Matter, slavery reparations and queer theory are no longer subjects to be taught. They are included only on a list of topics that states and school systems could suggest to students for end-of-the-year projects.

The rejection of the course by DeSantis, a possible Republican presidential candidate in 2024, stirred new political debate over how schools teach about race. Florida officials last month issued a chart that said

it promoted the idea that modern American society oppresses Black people, was inappropriate, and uses articles by critics of capitalism.

A spokesperson for DeSantis on Wednesday said the state education department is reviewing the revised curriculum for compliance with Florida law.

The course is currently being tested at 60 schools around the U.S., and the official framework is intended to guide the expansion of the course to hundreds of additional high schools in the next academic year. The College Board, which oversees AP courses, said developers consulted with professors from more than 200 colleges, including several historically Black institutions.

The College Board has been taking input also from teachers running the pilot classes as the draft curriculum has gone through

several revisions over the last year.

Critics accused the organization of bending to political pressure.

"To wake up on the first day of Black History Month to news of white men in positions of privilege horse trading essential and inextricably linked parts of Black History, which is American history, is infuriating," said David Johns, executive director of the National Black Justice Coalition. "The lives, contributions, and stories of Black trans, queer, and non-binary/non-conforming people matter and should not be diminished or erased."

The course has been popular among students in schools where it has been introduced. At Baton Rouge Magnet High School in Louisiana, so many students were interested that Emmitt Glynn is teaching it to two classes, instead of just the one he was originally planning.

Groundhog Day: Phil predicts 6 more weeks of winter

Associated Press

PUNXSUTAWNEY, Pa. — A furry critter in a western Pennsylvania town has predicted six more weeks of winter during an annual Groundhog Day celebration.

People gathered Thursday at Gobbler's Knob as members of Punxsutawney Phil's "inner circle" summoned him from his tree stump at dawn to learn if he has seen his shadow — and they say he did. According to folklore, if he sees his shadow there will be six more weeks of winter. If he doesn't, spring

comes early.

The "inner circle" is a group of local dignitaries who are responsible for planning the events, as well as feeding and caring for Phil himself.

The annual event in Punxsutawney, about 65 miles northeast of Pittsburgh, originated from a German legend about a furry rodent. The gathering annually attracts thousands.

This year, Phil's prediction came during a week when a mess of ice, sleet and snow has lingered across much of the southern U.S.

According to records dating back to 1887, Phil has predicted winter more than 100 times. Ten years were lost because no records were kept, organizers said.

The 2021 and 2022 forecasts also called for six more weeks of winter.

While Punxsutawney Phil may be the most famous groundhog seer, he's certainly not the only one. New York City's Staten Island Chuck made his prediction for an early spring during an event Thursday at the Staten Island Zoo.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Spectator dies after melee at basketball game

VT ALBURGH — A brawl broke out among spectators at a middle school basketball game in northern Vermont, and a man involved in the fight died, police said.

Vermont state troopers were called to the Alburgh Community Education Center just before 7 p.m. Tuesday after a report of a large fight involving spectators during a seventh- and eighth-grade boys basketball game between Alburgh and St. Albans.

The fight ended before troopers arrived, and many of the participants had left. Russell Giroux, of Alburgh, 60, sought medical attention, police said. He was taken by ambulance to the Northwestern Medical Center in St. Albans, where he was pronounced dead.

Giroux's death is being investigated by state police and the Grand Isle state's attorney's office.

Lawmakers again seek LGBTQ limits in classes

NC RALEIGH — Senate Republicans in North Carolina have introduced sweeping legislation that would bar instruction about sexuality and gender identity in K-4 public school classes and give parents greater authority over their children's education and health care.

The proposed "Parents' Bill of Rights" would also require schools to alert parents, in most circumstances, prior to a change in the name or pronoun used for their child.

Among other provisions, the proposal requires schools to make certain classroom reading materials available for parental review and instructs schools to alert parents of any changes to a child's mental well-being.

A version of the bill passed the state Senate last year but did not get a vote in the House.

Body of 96-year-old woman found in garage freezer

IL CHICAGO — The body of a 96-year-old woman has been found inside a freezer in a garage behind a northwest Chicago apartment building.

Police responded Monday afternoon to the building in the city's Portage Park neighborhood after receiving a call from a relative who lives in another state, the Chicago Sun-Times reported Tuesday.

Neighbors said the woman and her daughter, the building's landlord, lived together in a first-floor apartment.

The dead woman was identified by a relative as Regina Michalski, according to the newspaper.

Diane Michalski, a granddaughter of the identified woman, told the Sun-Times she once lived on the second floor of the Portage Park flat but hadn't seen her grandmother or aunt for about 20 years.

Police have not said if any arrests were made.

Spike seen in students eligible for cheaper meals

MD ANNAPOLIS — The number of Maryland students eligible for free or reduced-price meals has risen surprisingly high, causing

a \$390 million increase on the cost of the state's sweeping education reform law in the next fiscal year, according to a recent state fiscal briefing.

Fall 2022 enrollment figures showed 110,503 more students qualifying for free and reduced-price meals than in fall 2021, increasing the number of qualifying students from about 323,000 to 433,000.

Senate President Bill Ferguson told reporters Tuesday the most recent number makes up about 52% of Maryland K-12 students, noting that it is adding to the cost of the Blueprint for Maryland's Future.

The reform blueprint for the state's K-12 schools, which the General Assembly approved two years ago, is being phased in over a decade. It provides aid to help struggling schools adequately prepare students for college and careers.

Report: 2022 good for casino, tourism revenue

NV LAS VEGAS — The year 2022 was good for gambling and tourism in Nevada, where winnings at casinos statewide set calendar year records and Las Vegas visitor tallies nearly reached levels before the coronavirus pandemic.

"Las Vegas enjoyed a robust recovery trajectory across core tourism indicators in 2022," the regional Convention and Visitors Authority said in a report summarizing December and year-end visitor volume figures on Tuesday.

"The year closed out with 38.8 million annual visitors," the report said, up more than 20% from 2021 and down just under 9% from 42.5 million in

2019.

The Nevada Gaming Control Board said separately that 459 large casinos statewide won an all-time high \$14.8 billion last year, up more than 23% from calendar year 2019.

The figures are important, because casino taxes make up about 17% of state revenues, second only to sales taxes in a state that has no personal income tax.

State moves for early slot for presidential primary

MI LANSING — Michigan House Democrats voted Tuesday to move the state's presidential primary to the fourth week of February and become a part of a new group of states slated to lead off the Democratic Party's presidential primary starting next year.

The move, which was approved by the state Senate along party lines, comes after a Democratic National Committee panel voted last month to approve a plan that would make Michigan the fifth state to hold its presidential primary in early 2024, and potentially, in years to come.

Democratic leaders in the state have said that the move will give Michigan an increased voice in national politics and drive more attention to the battleground state.

House Republicans argued Tuesday that the move could cost the state party nearly all of its delegates in 2024 after the Republican National Committee set an early primary calendar that does not include Michigan.

— From wire reports

STARS  AND STRIPES®

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

Reporting
World, National
and Military News

Riley says Kareem had 'only greatness'

Associated Press

Pat Riley remembers just about every detail surrounding the events of Dec. 29, 1961. It was a cold night in Schenectady, N.Y. A little snowy, the roads a little icy. And when the bus carrying the opposing team from New York City arrived, all of Riley's Linton High teammates peered out the window.

They saw a giant.

Long before Riley and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar were winning NBA championships together as coach and player with the Showtime-era Los Angeles Lakers in the 1980s, they were opponents. Riley and Linton beat Power Memorial and Lew Alcindor — Abdul-Jabbar's name before converting to Islam — 74-68 that night.

Abdul-Jabbar, then a 6-foot-10 freshman, was held to eight points because he spent virtually the entire game in foul trouble. He has told Riley several times over the years that Linton won because Riley's father — a lifelong baseball man — had his umpiring friends refereeing

the game.

"Which we did," Riley acknowledges.

Riley knew it then and came to appreciate it even more years later — there were only a few ways to stop the player who would eventually spend nearly four decades as the most prolific scorer in NBA history. Abdul-Jabbar is on the verge of being passed by the Lakers' LeBron James, the 38-year-old who was nearly nine months from being born when the unforgettable center made one of his signature sky hooks on April 5, 1984 to overtake Wilt Chamberlain and become the league's scoring leader.

"Kareem was a guy that never had any potential. He just had greatness," said Riley, now the president of the Miami Heat and one of the few who has worked with both Abdul-Jabbar and James. "You could see that. When you can bypass potential and you move right to greatness as a high school player, and then college and then the pros ... there are very few like him.

There's a handful. Two handfuls, at the most."

James is one of them, going from high school straight to the NBA, and now in his 20th season, he is just 89 points away from passing Abdul-Jabbar's record. The Lakers played Thursday in Indiana, then Saturday at New Orleans.

The most realistic target for the record-breaker is Tuesday in Los Angeles against Oklahoma City or — perhaps symbolically — next Thursday in L.A. when the Lakers play host to the Milwaukee Bucks, the team with which Abdul-Jabbar started his NBA career.

This past October, Abdul-Jabbar — on his Substack page where he discusses and offers opinion on a variety of topics, often nothing to do with sports — wrote that when James passed Kobe Bryant for No. 3 on the all-time scoring list in 2020, he "knew it was just a matter of time before he passed me too."

Abdul-Jabbar added that every time a record is broken, all people are elevated.

"When I broke Wilt Chamberlain's scoring record in 1984 — the year LeBron was born — it bothered Wilt, who'd had a bit of a one-sided rivalry with me since I'd started doing so well in the NBA," he wrote. "I don't feel that way toward LeBron. Not only will I celebrate his accomplishment, I will sing his praises unequivocally."

The relationship between Abdul-Jabbar and James seems complicated. Abdul-Jabbar was outside the Cleveland locker room during the 2016 Eastern Conference finals as James was jogging by; the two embraced and shared a few kind words, prompting James to discuss the respect he has for Abdul-Jabbar and others who paved the way in his postgame remarks.

Abdul-Jabbar also has lauded James "as a community leader and athlete." But he criticized James for not doing more with his platform to encourage people to get vaccinated against COVID-19. And earlier this season, James said he has "no relationship" with Abdul-Jabbar.

NBA starters giving up minutes to help improve backups

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Draymond Green dribbles the ball up the court and takes charge of Golden State's backups, directing two-way teammate Anthony Lamb on the wing, dishing the ball to Donte DiVincenzo or finding Jonathan Kuminga down low.

The move Warriors coach Steve Kerr made with Green in November to boost the defending champions' then-struggling second unit has worked out well, especially considering those players have been needed in a big way due to injuries over the past month.

Green, who continues to play significant time with the reserves, is regularly praised by coaches around the league for

his willingness to sacrifice his starter minutes to help the overall balance, something other stars are also doing around the NBA.

"It's the modeling part for those guys that's very helpful for them in their game," said Rockets coach Stephen Silas, who called Green "one of the most cerebral players in our league who has a voice that those guys will listen to."

In Dallas, Luka Doncic is relied upon to play key stretches with each unit. With Nets star Kevin Durant sidelined by a knee injury, Kyrie Irving is also spending more of his minutes with the Brooklyn backups as coach Jacque Vaughn is forced to get more creative with his lineups.

"Some nights we're going to put points on the board very easily, guys are feeling good," Irving said of adjusting without Durant, "and some nights we're going to have to really rely on our poise, really rely on our defensive pressure, and let that lead us to wins."

Rick Carlisle recalls fondly how former Mavericks star Dirk Nowitzki also used to play with the backups. And when Carlisle played, the now-Pacers coach always cherished the minutes Hall of Famer Bill Walton played with him and the Boston backups.

Hawks coach Nate McMillan took on that role at times, too. McMillan used to play key stretches with the youngsters — and the stars — in Seattle, tak-

ing great pride in making the others shine, "because that was the strength of my game." Gary Payton would move to the wing and McMillan might run the point on the floor with Hersey Hawkins, Sam Perkins and Detlef Schrempf.

"I was the guy that would come in and really be that coach out on the floor," McMillan recalled. "I was that guy who was initiating and making sure that we set up. Very similar to Draymond, I wasn't providing a lot of scoring but the defense was going to be there, moving the ball, getting the ball to those shooters, all of that."

Green gets that. He wants to be part of helping his teammates build a better NBA future by serving as an on-court guide.

Unheralded Chiefs earn redemption

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — The Kansas City Chiefs have some of the biggest names in the NFL, from Patrick Mahomes and Travis Kelce to Chris Jones and JuJu Smith-Schuster, yet they're playing in their third Super Bowl in four years largely because they refused to give up on players only their most passionate fans know about.

There's the quartet of rookie defensive backs that were picked on all season, but who largely shut down Ja'Marr Chase and the Bengals' other talented wide receivers while picking off Joe Burrow twice in the AFC championship game.

There's Skyy Moore, their fumble-prone rookie punt returner whose fumble cost them a win in Indianapolis in Week 3, but whose big return in the waning seconds Sunday night helped to set up the winning field goal in the 23-20 victory.

And there's their kicker, Harrison Butker, whose sprained ankle in the regular-season

opener in Arizona led to the most inaccurate season of his career, yet who drilled the 45-yarder with 3 seconds left that ultimately sent the Chiefs back to the desert.

"Really, those are the redemption stories that you get into," Chiefs coach Andy Reid said. "It was quite a deal to watch."

Indeed, Reid has been around long enough to understand the unforgiving nature of the NFL, where players' careers are often measured in weeks rather than years. He's seen hundreds with promise flame out, their chances at making it big done in by fumble problems, blown blocking assignments, missed tackles or other seemingly minor miscues.

He likes to say that the line between success and failure is so small that it's almost imperceptible.

So nobody would have batted an eye had the Chiefs relegated Moore to the mothballs earlier in the season, when the first-

year wide receiver couldn't even make a fair catch.

The Chiefs finally pulled him from return duties, at least during games. But Moore continued to work in practice, and it wound up paying off. Their new returner, Kadarius Toney, hurt his ankle against the Bengals, and his backup Justin Watson already was inactive with an illness. So, the Chiefs sent Moore back to fetch the biggest punt of the season.

He not only fielded it cleanly but raced up the sideline to give Kansas City a chance to win the AFC title in regulation.

"I just had to remind myself who I was and why I was here," Moore said. "I was doing something new, and I was going to take my bumps and bruises. I just kept working at it. I didn't think I was ever going to get a punt return again this season. But I didn't stop catching punts. I was prepared for that moment and it paid off."

So did the decision by the Chiefs to keep putting rookie

cornerbacks Trent McDuffie, Jaylen Watson and Josh Williams on the field together, often with rookie safety Bryan Cook, even as wily wide receivers kept beating them and flags kept flying for pass interference. Much like Moore, they took their lumps early in the season so they would be ready later.

In the AFC title game, Watson and Williams both picked off passes, one of them after Cook batted the ball in the air.

Butker was a slightly different case. His ankle injury in the opener in Arizona not only caused him to miss three weeks, it also forced him to alter his approach to kickoffs and field goals. The result was a shaky season.

And yet Butker got just enough on the 45-yarder that it squeaked over the crossbar and gave the Chiefs their third AFC title in four years.

"Everybody pushed through and made it work," Reid said, "so I'm very proud for our guys."

Pro teams eyeing rising number of transfer players

Associated Press

MOBILE, Ala. — The prolific pace of school-switching among college players has helped some NFL prospects have breakout seasons and demonstrate they can adapt to a new system.

They're hoping that pays off in the draft.

Offensive lineman O'Cyrus Torrence followed his coach, Billy Napier, from Louisiana-Lafayette to Florida and proved he could thrive against Southeastern Conference competition. He could get rewarded with being a first-round pick in April — and doesn't have to answer questions about the level of competition he faced.

"I feel like it shows that I'm more versatile than it originally seemed, and that I could hold

my own against bigger, faster players," said Torrence, an All-SEC selection. "And just different looks and different things I faced in the SEC. It just shows that I'm ready to hit the ground running with whatever team drafted me."

The transfer floodgates opened wide after the NCAA's April 2021 rule change meant they wouldn't have to sit out a year at another FBS school. It's created some more opportunities for players and a chance for more homework from NFL teams, which can evaluate how players made the transition from one system to another and get feedback from multiple college coaching staffs.

"We try to keep up with it as best as we can," said Matt Groh,

the New England Patriots' player personnel director. "But you can look out there and there are countless number of players from this school, he was at that school.

"We keep up with all that, and really it's just another group of coaches, support staff from different schools (and we) get their opinions and their input on a prospect. You can be at one school and have four different offensive coordinators, though, so that's the way it is here these days. These kids have got to learn to adapt."

Some do it better than others. The Senior Bowl and East-West Shrine Game rosters are loaded with players who played for multiple college teams in bids for more playing time, better

personal situations or chances to improve their NFL Draft stock. It's likely too early to tell how the increased movement affects players' transition to the NFL.

Several first-rounders in last year's draft were transfers, including ex-Alabama and Ohio State wide receiver Jameson Williams, Florida State defensive end Jermaine Johnson Jr. (via Georgia) and Boston College guard Zion Johnson, who started his college career at Davidson.

Zion Johnson became an immediate starter for the Los Angeles Chargers, Williams missed most of the Lions' season while recovering from a knee injury and Jermaine Johnson played in 14 games for the Jets.

All-Star festivities showcase newest NHL stars

Associated Press

New Jersey Devils players watch from the bench often and marvel at some of the things Jack Hughes can do on the ice.

“Every game, at least a couple times, I’ll be like, ‘Oh my God, that guy’s amazing,’” forward Michael McLeod said. “He just gets it done every night.”

The same goes in Buffalo, where Rasmus Dahlin described Sabres teammate Tage Thompson’s development as “a ticking time bomb.” And in Dallas, where coach Peter DeBoer lay awake dreaming of coaching Jason Robertson with the Stars.

While being an All-Star is old hat for the NHL’s old guard of Sidney Crosby, Alex Ovechkin and even unquestioned best player in the world Connor McDavid, the festivities this weekend in South Florida are a showcase for the league’s next generation of stars, led by Hughes, Thompson and Robertson. Hughes is an All-Star for the second consecutive season, Thompson and Robertson each for the first time, and their emergence could upend the way the standings — and leaderboards — look for years to come.

“Once you establish yourself as an NHL player, the next step is

how you figure out how to try to win,” said Hall of Famer, two-time MVP and six-time Stanley Cup champion Mark Messier. “It’s been fascinating to me to see these players going through that process of becoming not only NHL players but bona fide superstars, but more importantly how they’re trying to figure out how to win in this league.”

With Thompson, Robertson and Hughes all in the top 10 in goals and points, it’s no coincidence each player’s respective team is in the playoff race at the break. So are the surprising Seattle Kraken, the only team without an All-Star after rookie Matty Beniers was injured, but they’ll need him more down the stretch to make it in their second season of existence.

The Devils are on pace to play playoff hockey for the first time since 2018 and just the second in 11 years thanks in large part to Hughes, who trails only McDavid, Boston’s David Pastrnak, Colorado’s Mikko Rantanen and Thompson in the goal-scoring race. Mike Rupp, who won the Cup with New Jersey in 2003, expected Hughes to produce at a 100-point pace but did not anticipate his scoring to become so

meaningful this season.

“He’s scoring in big moments,” said Rupp, an NHL Network analyst who will see Hughes up close this weekend in Sunrise. “It’s the way he’s doing it. He’s carrying his team at certain times. He’s pushing his team along, Jack and Tage, (too). And I think that is the incredible part is they’re not just great talents: They’re great talents, and they seem like they’ve got nerves of steel.”

Thompson’s nerves and playmaking ability could be on display in the playoffs if Buffalo can finish strong and knock either Crosby’s Pittsburgh Penguins or Ovechkin’s Washington Capitals out of a wild-card spot. The Sabres have by far the league’s longest playoff drought at 11 seasons, and if they snap it, Thompson will be a big part of it even before starting a \$51 million, seven-year contract he was rewarded with last summer.

Messier credited Thompson for getting stronger in the off-season, augmenting the hands that made the now 25-year-old a 38-goal scorer in 2021-22 and putting him on track for more than 50 this season. Norris Trophy-winning defenseman P.K. Subban, who experienced Thompson’s growth firsthand from playing against

him several times the past five years before retiring and joining Messier as an ESPN analyst, sees him as a taller version of Hughes with the same level of skill.

“What separates him from a lot of players in the league, and is going to separate him from a lot of players in the league going forward, is his ability at that size to do everything at top speed (with) his range, his skill with the puck, his skating ability,” Subban said. “He has all the tools to be a dominant player in this league for a long time.”

So does Robertson, who’s coming off a breakout 41-goal season and like Thompson signed a lucrative extension before opening night. The 23-year-old from California, who’s Filipino-American and hopes to be a role model for players of Asian descent, has a big personality that matches his play and could soon be one of the faces of the league.

Robertson has put on a show this season with 66 points in 51 games.

“You kind of get used to it, and you almost have to sit and think about it after about how special it is what you’re witnessing,” DeBoer said. “It’s unbelievable. He’s making it look easy.”

Golf’s biggest rivalry is about tours, not players

Associated Press

PEBBLE BEACH, Calif. — Jon Rahm began his year by winning two in a row on the PGA Tour. Rory McIlroy began his year with birdies on the last two holes to win in Dubai.

This would seem to have the look of golf’s latest rivalry in the making, except that it will be difficult to replace the rivalry golf already has.

It’s a rivalry between tours, not players.

That much was clear in Dubai when there was as much attention on McIlroy leading as the players who were chasing him.

That starts with Patrick Reed, a thorn in McIlroy’s side dating to that energy-draining Ryder Cup singles match at Hazeltine in 2016 that Reed won. Not to be forgotten is when they played in the final group of the 2018 Masters. Reed led by three and went on to win his lone

major as McIlroy faded to a 74.

But at various times Monday during the final round in Dubai, a chunk of LIV’s roster was lined up behind McIlroy — Reed, Ian Poulter, Richard Bland, even Bernd Wiesberger made a push to get on the fringe of contention.

McIlroy’s star power is enough to carry any tournament. Reed plays the role of villain exceedingly well, and that made it even juicier. But no one was watching that production without thinking it was the establishment against the Saudi-funded newcomer.

It was like that at the U.S. Open last summer at Brookline, quiet chatter about which LIV player would have the best finish (Dustin Johnson tied for 24th).

Any other year, watching such talent as Rahm and McIlroy win early would prompt the tired phrase, “The Masters can’t get here

soon enough.” This year is no different, only the anticipation goes beyond who’s playing well to who’s playing where.

Is that such a bad thing?

Players with LIV Golf are outsiders in the established world of golf. And it will be that way at the other three majors, though the Masters most likely will have the most LIV players (16) in the field.

The networks won’t want to talk about it. Everyone else will be thinking it.

The presumption is LIV players are no longer as motivated with so much money already in the bank, that they won’t be as sharp by competing over 54 holes with no cut against the same roster of players, many of them past their prime. What better place to prove otherwise, particularly since it will happen so infrequently?