

Spy balloon leads Blinken to nix China trip

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon said at midday Friday that a Chinese spy balloon had moved eastward and was over the central United States, and that the U.S. rejected China's claims that it was not being used for surveillance.

Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder, Pentagon press secretary, refused to provide details on exactly where the balloon was or whether there was any new consideration of shooting it down. The military had ruled that option out, officials had said, due to potential risks to people on the ground.

Ryder said it was at an altitude of about 60,000 feet, was maneuverable and had changed course. He said it currently was posing no threat. He said there was only one balloon being tracked.

Earlier, the U.S. announced that Secretary of State Antony Blinken had postponed a

planned high-stakes weekend diplomatic trip to China as the Biden administration weighed a broader response to the discovery of a high-altitude Chinese balloon flying over sensitive sites in the western United States.

That abrupt decision came despite China's claim that the balloon was a weather research "airship" that had blown off course. The U.S. has described it as a surveillance vehicle.

Discovery of the balloon was announced by Pentagon officials who said one of the places it was spotted was over the state of Montana, which is home to one of America's three nuclear missile silo fields at Malmstrom Air Force Base.

A senior defense official said the U.S. prepared fighter jets, including F-22s, to shoot down the balloon if ordered. The Pentagon ultimately recommended against it, noting that even as the balloon was over a sparsely

populated area of Montana, its size would create a debris field large enough that it could have put people at risk.

The official said the balloon was headed over the Montana missile fields, but the U.S. has assessed that it had only "limited" value in terms of providing intelligence China couldn't obtain by other technologies, such as spy satellites.

In a relatively conciliatory statement, the Chinese foreign ministry said late Friday that the balloon was a civilian airship used mainly for meteorological research.

The ministry said the airship has limited "self-steering" capabilities and "deviated far from its planned course" because of winds.

"The Chinese side regrets the unintended entry of the airship into U.S. airspace due to force majeure," the statement said, citing a legal term used to refer to events beyond one's control.

Blinken had been prepared as late as Thursday to travel to Beijing this weekend but the administration had begun to reconsider the trip following the discovery of the balloon on Wednesday, even before its presence was made public, an official said.

The official, who spoke to reporters on condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the matter, said the administration had "noted" China's expression of regret.

Blinken's long-anticipated meetings with senior Chinese officials had been seen in both countries as a way to find some areas of common ground at a time of major disagreements over Taiwan, human rights, China's claims in the South China Sea, North Korea, Russia's war in Ukraine, trade policy and climate change.

The meetings were to begin on Sunday and go through Monday.

NATO urges Russia to respect nuclear pact with US

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — NATO called Friday on Russia to respect the only treaty it has with the United States aimed at keeping a lid on nuclear weapons expansion and urged Moscow to allow on-the-ground inspections of military sites to resume.

The so-called New START Treaty was signed by Russia and the U.S. in 2010. It caps at 1,550 the number of long-range nuclear warheads they can deploy and limits the use of missiles that can carry atomic weapons. It allows short-notice inspections of each other's nuclear bases and support facilities.

"We note with concern that Russia has failed to comply with legally-binding obligations under the New START Treaty," NATO ambassadors said in a statement.

The 30-nation U.S.-led military alliance supports the treaty and believes that it helps to limit the expansion of nuclear forces.

The envoys said that Russia's refusal to hold consultations or to allow U.S. inspections since last August "prevents the United States from exercising important rights under the Treaty, and undermines the United States' ability to adequately verify Russian compliance with the Treaty's central limits."

"We call on Russia to fulfil its obligations under the Treaty by facilitating New START inspections on Russian territory, and by returning to participation in the Treaty's implementation body," the forum in which the two sides could consult, NATO said.

President Vladimir Putin has repeatedly ramped up his nuclear rhetoric since he ordered Russian troops into Ukraine almost a year ago, raising concern among Western allies and the public over whether he might actually use such weapons.

The U.S.-Russia committee formed under the treaty last

met in October 2021, but Russia unilaterally suspended its cooperation with the pact's inspection provisions in August 2022 to protest U.S. support for Ukraine.

Inspections of U.S. and Russian military sites under the New START treaty were paused by both sides because of the spread of the coronavirus in March 2020.

The U.S. State Department warned Tuesday that "Russia's refusal to facilitate inspection activities prevents the United States from exercising important rights under the treaty and threatens the viability of U.S.-Russian nuclear arms control."

EU eyes sanctions as Russia readies attack

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — The European Union will unveil its 10th package of sanctions against Russia on Feb. 24 to mark the anniversary of Moscow's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, a senior official from the bloc said in Kyiv on Friday, as Ukrainian forces gird for an expected Russian offensive in the coming weeks.

The sanctions will target technology used by Russia's war machine, among other things, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen told a news conference.

The sanctions will take aim in particular at components used in the manufacturing of drones, she said, naming Iran as a key supplier of Russia.

Ukraine's forces are bracing for an expected new onslaught by the Kremlin's troops in eastern Ukraine. Kyiv's forces "have a chance" of beating back the looming offensive if supplied with the right Western weapons, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said.

"Our task is not to give them (an) opportunity (for revenge) until our army is strengthened with appropriate weapons. I think we have a chance," Zelenskyy added.

Officials in the eastern Luhansk region said that Russian forces have disabled mobile internet connections, stepped up shelling and deployed more troops in prepara-

tion for an offensive there.

Top EU officials met with Zelenskyy in a show of support for the country as it battles to counter the Kremlin's forces and strives to join the EU as well as NATO.

The last such summit was held in Kyiv in October 2021 — a few months before the war started. The highly symbolic visit is also the first EU political mission of its kind to a country at war.

The high-level meeting came as a 60-year-old man was killed and six others were wounded Friday after Russian missiles hit central Toretsk, a town in Ukraine's eastern Donetsk region, the local prosecutor's office said in a statement on Facebook.

Ukrainian authorities reported Friday that at least six civilians were killed and 20 others were wounded over the previous 24 hours.

Among the dead were two brothers, ages 49 and 42, killed when Russian shelling destroyed an apartment building in the north-eastern Kharkiv region, Ukraine's presidential office said. Their 70-year-old father was hospitalized with unspecified injuries.

Also, six people were wounded and 18 apartment buildings, two hospitals and a school were damaged in a Russian attack in the eastern city of Kramatorsk on Thursday, Gov. Pavlo Kyrylenko told Ukrainian TV.

Three people died when a Russian missile hit an apartment building in that city on Wednesday.

European officials were adamant about continuing to support Ukraine militarily and economically, but they didn't provide any new details about Ukraine's accession path to the EU.

Zelenskyy said that Ukraine's goal "is to start negotiations this year."

But the process will likely take years and require the adoption of far-reaching reforms, including a clampdown on endemic corruption as the country receives billions of dollars in aid. Kyiv formally submitted its application last June.

Zelenskyy said that progress had been made to further economically integrate the Ukraine into the EU across several sectors, including agriculture, industry, energy and customs.

Ukraine's government is also keen to get more Western military aid, on top of the tanks pledged last week, as the warring sides are expected to launch new offensives once winter ends. Kyiv is now asking for fighter jets.

The U.S. was expected to announce Friday it will send longer-range bombs to Ukraine as part of a new \$2.17 billion aid package.

EU assistance for Ukraine has reached almost \$55 billion since the fighting started.

Retired captain gets 2 years for taking 'Fat Leonard' bribes

The San Diego Union-Tribune

SAN DIEGO — For more than two decades, David Williams Haas charted an upward career path, facing combat in Iraq and Afghanistan as he ascended the Navy's ranks, at one point coordinating the operations of some 100 ships and submarines, 200 aircraft and 40,000 sailors and Marines.

But his illustrious career came crashing down soon after the arrest of defense contractor Leonard Glenn Francis, better known as "Fat Leonard." Haas would later admit Francis bribed him with hotel stays, parties, dinners and the servic-

es of prostitutes in exchange for routing ships to Asian ports controlled by Francis.

U.S. District Judge Janis Sammartino on Thursday sentenced Haas, who pleaded guilty in 2020 to a bribery conspiracy charge, to two years and six months in federal prison.

"You of all people should have known your relationship with Mr. Francis was wrong," Sammartino told Haas, who retired as a captain. "Bottom line, you betrayed and hurt the Navy (and) your fellow officers."

Assistant U.S. Attorney Valerie Chu said "Francis saw Haas

as one of the most powerful weapons he had," thanks to his lofty position in the Navy's 7th Fleet in the Pacific. It was a "position of extraordinary power, influence and value to Mr. Francis," Chu said.

Addressing the judge, Haas, 54, said he brought shame on his family and the Navy and tarnished his long, decorated career.

"I should never have had a relationship with that guy," Haas said. "I should never have allowed Leonard Francis into anywhere."

Haas was a captain on the Blue Ridge, the 7th Fleet com-

mand ship from which Francis heavily recruited allies. As part of his plea agreement, Haas admitted to accepting bribes valued at nearly \$91,000, including a multiday party in Indonesia called "Cinderella Liberty" that included dinner, nightclub entertainment and the services of prostitutes. Another two-day party in Tokyo reportedly cost \$75,000.

In return, Haas used his influence to benefit Glenn Defense Marine Asia, Francis' ship-support company that provided everything from water and trash removal to security and tugboat services.

US adds surprisingly strong 517K jobs despite Fed hikes

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — America's employers added a sizzling 517,000 jobs in January, a surprisingly strong gain in the face of the Federal Reserve's aggressive drive to slow growth and tame inflation with higher interest rates.

The unemployment rate dipped to 3.4%, the lowest level since 1969.

Friday's government report added to the picture of a resilient labor market, with low unemployment, relatively few layoffs and many job openings even as most economists foresee a recession nearing. Though good for workers, employers' steady demand for labor has also helped accelerate wage growth and contributed to high inflation.

But the Fed's inflation watchers might be reassured some-

what by January's wage data: Average hourly pay rose 4.4% last month from that of a year earlier, slower than the 4.8% year-over-year increase in December. And from December to January, wages rose 0.3%, below the 0.4% increase the previous month.

On top of the sizzling job growth it reported for January, the government on Friday also revised up its estimate of the gains in November and December by a combined 71,000.

January's job growth was broad-based across industries. A category that includes restaurants and bars added 99,000 workers.

Professional and business services jobs, including bookkeepers and consultants, rose by 82,000.

Governments added 74,000, boosted by the end of a worker

strike against California's state university system.

Health care added 58,000 jobs, retailers 30,000. Construction gained 25,000 jobs. Manufacturing added 19,000.

Economists, who had collectively estimated that the economy added just 185,000 jobs last month, were caught off-guard by the magnitude of the gains.

"This is a labor market on heat," said Seema Shah, chief global strategist at Principal Asset Management. It would be difficult, she suggested, "to see the Fed stop raising rates and entertain ideas of rate cuts when there is such explosive economic news coming in."

The proportion of adults who either had a job or were looking for one — the so-called labor force participation rate — stayed at 62.4%, well below pre-pandemic levels.

Texas power woes linger; Northeast set for freeze

Associated Press

Rising temperatures offered some hope Friday for frustrated Texans days after they lost power in a deadly winter storm, while a new wave of frigid weather rolling into the Northeast led communities to close schools and open warming centers.

Wind chills in some higher elevations of the Northeast could punch below minus 50 as an Arctic front swept in from Canada, forecasters said.

In Texas, Austin officials compared damage from fallen trees and iced-over power lines to tornadoes as they came under criticism for slow repairs and shifting timelines to restore power. More than 240,000 customers across the state lacked power early Friday, down from 430,000 on Thursday, according to PowerOutage.us.

Power failures were most widespread in Austin. Impatience rose there among nearly 123,000 customers days after the electricity first went out.

Thursday night, officials backtracked on early estimates that power would be fully restored by Friday evening. Damage was worse than originally calculated, they said, and they could no longer provide an estimate.

The worst wind chills in the populated areas of the Northeast shouldn't go lower than minus 40, National Weather Service lead forecaster Bob Oravec said.

Wind gusts as high as 40 mph raised the prospect of power outages in Maine, and communities began opening warming stations.

Even cold-weather sports were curtailed. Some ski resorts scaled back operations, eliminating night skiing and reducing lift operations. A popular weekend pond hockey tournament was postponed.

Domestic violence gun law struck down

Associated Press

A federal appeals court ruled Thursday that the government can't stop people who have domestic violence restraining orders against them from owning guns — the latest domino to fall after the U.S. Supreme Court's conservative majority set new standards for reviewing the nation's gun laws.

Police in Texas found a rifle and a pistol at the home of a man who was the subject of a civil protective order that banned him from harassing, stalking or threatening his ex-girlfriend and their child. The order also banned him from having guns.

A federal grand jury indicted the man, who pleaded guilty. He later challenged his indictment, arguing the law that prevented him from owning a gun was un-

constitutional. At first, a federal appeals court ruled against him, saying that it was more important for society to keep guns out of the hands of people accused of domestic violence than it was to protect a person's individual right to own a gun.

But then last year, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a new ruling in a case known as *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association v. Bruen*.

That case set new standards for interpreting the Second Amendment by saying the government had to justify gun control laws by showing they are "consistent with the Nation's historical tradition of firearm regulation."

The appeals court withdrew its original decision and on Thursday decided to vacate the

man's conviction and ruled the federal law banning people subject to domestic violence restraining orders from owning guns was unconstitutional.

Specifically, the court ruled that the federal law was an "outlier that our ancestors would never have accepted" — borrowing a quote from the Bruen decision.

The decision came from a three-judge panel consisting of Judges Cory Wilson, James Ho and Edith Jones. Wilson and Ho were nominated by former Republican President Donald Trump, while Jones was nominated by former Republican President Ronald Reagan.

Thursday's ruling overturned the federal law and is not likely to impact similar state laws, including one in California.

US urges expulsion of Russian mercenaries

Associated Press

CAIRO — The United States has stepped up pressure on Middle East allies to expel the Wagner Group, a military contractor owned by an oligarch with close ties to Russia's president, from chaos-stricken Libya and Sudan where it has expanded in recent years, regional officials told The Associated Press.

The U.S. effort described by officials comes as the Biden administration is making a broad push against the mercenaries. The U.S. has slapped new sanctions on the Wagner Group in recent months over its expanding role in Russia's war in Ukraine.

The group is owned by Russian oligarch Yevgeny Prigozhin, who has close ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin. The Pentagon has described it as a surrogate for the Russian Defense Ministry. The Kremlin denies any connection.

The Biden administration has been working for months with regional powers Egypt and the United Arab Emirates to pres-

sure military leaders in Sudan and Libya to end their ties with the group, according to more than a dozen Libyan, Sudanese and Egyptian officials. They asked for anonymity to speak freely and because they were not authorized to discuss the issue with the media.

A senior Egyptian government official with direct knowledge of the talks said the Wagner group "is at the top of every meeting."

The group doesn't announce its operations, but its presence is known from reports on the ground and other evidence. In Sudan, it was originally associated with former strongman Omar al-Bashir and now works with the military leaders who replaced him. In Libya, it's associated with east Libya-based military commander Khalifa Hifter.

Wagner has deployed thousands of operatives in African and Middle Eastern countries including Mali, Libya, Sudan, the Central African Republic and Syria. Its aim in Africa,

analysts say, is to support Russia's interests amid rising global interest in the resource-rich continent. Rights experts working with the U.S. on Jan. 31 accused the group of committing possible war crimes and crimes against humanity in Mali, where it is fighting alongside government forces.

"Wagner tends to target countries with natural resources that can be used for Moscow's objectives — gold mines in Sudan, for example, where the resulting gold can be sold in ways that circumvent Western sanctions," said Catrina Doxsee, an expert on Wagner at the Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies.

Prigozhin did not respond to a request for comment sent to the press department of the Concord Group, of which he is an owner.

The group's role in Libya and Sudan was central to talks between CIA director William Burns and officials in Egypt and Libya in January.

Secretary of State Antony

Blinken also discussed the group with President Abdel Fattah el-Sissi in a late-January trip to Cairo, Egyptian officials said. Weeks after the visits, Burns acknowledged in a Thursday speech at Georgetown University in Washington that after recent travel to Africa, he was concerned about Wagner's growing influence in the continent.

"That is a deeply unhealthy development and we're working very hard to counter it," Burns said.

Burns and Blinken called on el-Sissi's government to help convince Sudan's ruling generals and Libya's Hifter to end their dealings with Wagner, an Egyptian official briefed on the talks said.

The group and Prigozhin have been under U.S. sanctions since 2017, and the Biden administration in December announced new export restrictions on its access to technology and supplies, designating it as a "significant transnational criminal organization."

US releases Gitmo prisoner

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S. military officials said Thursday they have freed and sent to Central America a onetime al-Qaida money courier who had completed his sentence, ending an imprisonment that included torture at clandestine CIA sites and 16 years at the Guantanamo Bay detention center.

Majid Khan, a Pakistani citizen who grew up outside Baltimore, arrived in Belize on Thursday under a Biden administration agreement with that government.

This was the first time since the Obama administration that U.S. officials have been able to reach agreement with a stable third-party country willing to take Guantanamo prisoners

whom the U.S. no longer considers a threat.

Khan, who is in his early 40s, said in a statement through his legal team that he deeply regretted his years of working with al-Qaida in his early 20s. That included ferrying \$50,000 from Pakistan to fund a deadly 2003 hotel bombing in Indonesia.

Before arriving at the military prison on the U.S. base in Cuba in 2006, Khan spent some three years at CIA black sites overseas. Khan's treatment was detailed in a Senate Intelligence Committee report that accused the CIA of abusing al-Qaida prisoners far beyond its legal boundaries and of giving the false accounts of useful interrogations at the sites.

UK man admits treason in crossbow plot against queen

Associated Press

LONDON — A man who was arrested on the grounds of Windsor Castle with a loaded crossbow pleaded guilty to treason on Friday for planning to attack Queen Elizabeth II.

Jaswant Singh Chail, 21, admitted to a charge under the Treason Act of intending to "injure the person of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, or to alarm her Majesty." He also pleaded guilty to making threats to kill and possessing an offensive weapon.

Chail appeared at London's Central Criminal Court by video link from Broadmoor, a secure psychiatric hospital where he is detained. He is due to be sen-

tenced after the judge assesses psychiatric reports.

Chail was arrested at the royal residence west of London on Dec. 25, 2021, when the queen was staying there. Prosecutors say the former supermarket worker from the southern English city of Southampton scaled a wall with a rope ladder and entered the castle grounds, wearing a metal mask and carrying a loaded crossbow with the safety catch off.

They say he told a police officer "I am here to kill the queen," before he was arrested.

Police say Chail wanted revenge on the British establishment for its treatment of Indians.

Accused Islamic State sniper on trial in US

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Ruslan Maratovich Asainov had been brought from the battlefields of Syria to a New York lockup, a U.S. citizen charged with serving as a sniper and weapons trainer for the Islamic State group.

And even in jail, Asainov kept a makeshift version of the militants' black flag right above the desk in his cell, according to trial testimony this week.

"What's the big deal? It's mine. It's religious," then-jail lieutenant Judith Woods recalled him saying when she went to confiscate the hand-drawn image in 2020.

Years after the fall of the extremist group's self-proclaimed

Islamic caliphate, the trial is a reminder of the enduring and far-reaching fallout of a war that drew tens of thousands of foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq. Their home countries are still contending with what should become of them.

Jurors, who are expected to start deliberating as soon as Monday, have gotten a refresher course in ISIS' gruesome rule and its sophisticated, social-media-savvy recruitment of distant supporters to come and take up arms. Prosecutors say Asainov did so and rose through the group's ranks, eventually becoming an "emir" who taught other members to use weapons.

In post-arrest videos shown at his trial, he gives his occupation

as "a sniper" to FBI agents and readily tells them that he provided instruction in everything from rifle maintenance to ballistics to adjusting for weather effects — and, of course, "how to actually pull the trigger."

"Oh, it's a long lesson," he explains, sitting on a bed in a room where he was being held. "I would give, like, a three-hour lesson, just on that, just to pull the trigger."

Jurors have seen photos alleged to be of Asainov in camouflage, aiming a rifle, and the handmade flag that Woods said she took from his cell. Witnesses have included his flabbergasted ex-wife, who testified that he morphed from a Brooklyn family man into a zealot. She said he

weighed in from Syria to complain about their daughter donning a Halloween costume and sent a photo of the bodies of what he said were comrades killed in a battle, according to the Daily News of New York.

Asainov chose not to testify. One of his lawyers, Susan Kellman, has said he went to Syria because he wanted to live under Islamic law. He has pleaded not guilty — a plea that Kellman entered on his behalf because, she said, he didn't abide by the American legal system.

He faces charges that include providing material support to a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization. If convicted, he could be sentenced to life in prison.

Not so sorry: Some 1/6 rioters change tune after apology

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Appearing before a federal judge after pleading guilty to a felony charge in the deadly Capitol riot, former West Virginia lawmaker Derrick Evans expressed remorse for letting down his family and his community, saying he made a "crucial mistake."

Less than a year later, Evans is portraying himself as a victim of a politically motivated prosecution as he runs to serve in the building he stormed on Jan. 6, 2021. Evans is now calling the Justice Department's Jan. 6 prosecutions a "miscarriage of justice" and describes himself on Twitter as a "J6 Patriot."

"Some ppl have said I need to apologize and condemn #J6 if I want to win my election as the

media will attack me," he tweeted recently after announcing his bid for a U.S. House seat in 2024. "I will not compromise my values or beliefs. That's what politicians do. We need Patriots not politicians."

Evans joins a series of Jan. 6 defendants who — when up against possible prison time in court — have expressed regret for joining the pro-Trump mob that rattled the foundations of American democracy only to strike a different tone or downplay the riot after receiving their punishment.

The very first Jan. 6 defendant to be sentenced apologized in court and then went on Fox News Channel shortly after and seemed to minimize the riot. Another defendant who called Jan. 6 "horrifying and disgust-

ing" later donned an orange jumpsuit to play the part of a distraught prisoner in a bizarre tribute to imprisoned Capitol rioters during a conservative conference.

Some defendants have drawn ire from judges or the Justice Department for their inconsistent comments. But there's not much the legal system can do for an adjudicated defendant. And because some conservatives hold up Jan. 6 defendants as martyrs, there's incentive for them to change their tune.

It could push judges to impose stronger punishments for rioters who haven't yet made it to the end of their criminal cases. Even before Evans' sentencing, the judge who heard his case began questioning the sincerity of rioters' apologies after

he felt duped by another defendant, saying he was "all too familiar with crocodile tears."

Before being sentenced last June to three months behind bars for a civil disorder charge, Evans said he regrets his actions every day and told Senior Judge Royce Lamberth he is a "good person who unfortunately was caught up in a moment."

Shortly after, prosecutors wrote to the judge about several statements Evans made on a radio show and that were "inconsistent with the contrition" he showed at sentencing. When asked whether he regretted his actions, Evans said on the show that he regretted the "situation" he was in. But he said he was "never going to have regrets when it comes to standing up and doing what's right."

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Hurts ready for a historic Super Bowl

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Brandon Graham laughed as he recalled all the doubters who rushed him during the offseason and blurted out the same question — the main concern, really — about the state of the Philadelphia Eagles quarterback.

“What’s Jalen going to do?” said Graham, the strip-sacking defensive end.

Yes, it’s hard to remember now, but Jalen Hurts was a bit of a mystery headed into his second full season as the starting QB. His solid 2021 season was marred by a poor playoff performance against Tampa Bay (that included two crushing interceptions) and reports of a rough go at organized team activities.

So the question raised around Philly really was, what’s Jalen going to do?

“I don’t know how many times I got that from fans, even some media people,” Graham said. “I don’t know, the X-factor factor is Jalen. We don’t know what Jalen is going to do.”

How about take the Eagles to the brink of their second Super Bowl championship?

Hurts launched the Eagles from preseason 30-1 odds to win the Super Bowl to staking them as 1½-point favorites against Patrick Mahomes and the Kansas City Chiefs in the Super Bowl.

As the seconds ticked down in the NFC championship victory over San Francisco, Graham and Fletcher Cox embraced Hurts on the sideline. Just a couple of defensive stalwarts who wanted to thank the quarterback that made it all happen.

“I was just telling him, I appreciate him because of all the things that he had to overcome this year,” Graham said. “You didn’t see him get rattled, not one time. Man, I’m going to fight for a guy like that every time.”

The only true setback this season was a sprained right shoulder that cost Hurts two games. He still is playing through it; Hurts was a modest 15-of-25 passing for 121 yards and ran for 39 yards and a touchdown against the 49ers. The 24-year-old Hurts has downplayed the severity of the injury from the beginning. He simply said Thursday, “I’m getting there.”

The AFC champion Chiefs are prepared for Hurts at full speed.

“This is the Jalen Hurts Show at the end of the day,” defensive end Frank Clark said. “If you can stop what he’s doing, you can possibly slow them down. But he’s playing some great football.”

Hurts is appreciative of the magnitude of the moment. Mahomes and Hurts are both Texas natives. They are both NFL MVP finalists. And they will be the first Black QBs

to face off in a Super Bowl.

Hurts said he tried to live up to the trail blazed in Philadelphia by fellow Black quarterbacks such as Donovan McNabb, Michael Vick and Randall Cunningham. While they are the most notable names, Rodney Peete and Vince Young were also Black starting QBs in Philly.

Hurts was honored to match up with Mahomes.

“I think it’s history. I think it’s something that’s worthy of being noted,” Hurts said.

The Chiefs beat the Eagles in October 2021 when Hurts threw for 387 yards and two touchdowns. Mahomes? Well, he threw for five. But the game was one of the earliest signs that Hurts would grow into the man in Philly.

“He had a great game this day,” Eagles coach Nick Sirianni said, “but he continues to get better.”

The Eagles stunned their fans when they drafted Hurts out of Oklahoma in the second round in 2020. They seemingly had Carson Wentz entrenched at QB and had more pressing needs. Hurts was expected to serve as insurance for Wentz. Instead, he supplanted him. Now the Eagles are on the road to Glendale, Ariz.

Chiefs’ injured QB Mahomes getting back to work

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Patrick Mahomes strolled through Arrowhead Stadium without any issues with his injured right ankle on Thursday, and the Kansas City Chiefs quarterback expects to practice fully in the next 10 days leading up to the Super Bowl.

Mahomes sprained the ankle during the divisional round against Jacksonville, and he was clearly hobbled in last Sunday night’s AFC championship win over Cincinnati. But despite taking a couple of hard shots during that game, and his mad dash in the closing seconds to set up the winning field goal, Mahomes came out of it feeling just fine.

“It was a physical game. My whole body was a little sore. But I don’t think I had any step backward, a reaggravation of the ankle,” Mahomes said. “A little pain playing with it but other than that, I feel like I’m in a good spot.”

The Chiefs sustained a number of other

injuries during their 23-20 win over the Bengals, though. They lost three wide receivers — Mecole Hardman reinjured his pelvis, JuJu Smith-Schuster had swelling in his knee and Kadarius Toney sprained his ankle — while cornerback L’Jarius Sneed was in the concussion protocol and Willie Gay Jr. hurt his shoulder.

Gay was the only one that returned to practice on an unseasonably mild February day in Kansas City.

Coach Andy Reid did say that Toney did the morning walk-through and “he’s close and doing well,” while Smith-Schuster “is in a good place. The main thing is, we let that calm down. We’re very optimistic right now.”

The news wasn’t as positive for Hardman, who first hurt his abdominal area in November. The Chiefs later began to classify it as a pelvis injury as Hardman neared his return from injured reserve, but he wasn’t able to make it back onto the field until the AFC ti-

tle game. He was hurt while getting wrapped up after a catch and did not return.

“Very courageous effort,” Reid said, “and my heart goes out to the kid. He is hurting today.”

While the Chiefs remained thin at wide receiver, they did have Justin Watson back on the practice field. He was ruled out before kickoff against Cincinnati with an illness, forcing Marcus Kemp to come up from the practice squad.

The Chiefs also are hopeful that Sneed will clear the concussion protocol in the two weeks between games.

In a defense featuring three rookie cornerbacks and a rookie safety, Sneed is often tasked with covering the opposition’s best wide receiver. It would have been Ja’Marr Chase against the Bengals, but Sneed was hurt on the game’s fourth play and did not return; it will likely be A.J. Brown or DeVonta Smith if he can play against the Eagles in the Super Bowl.

James 63 points shy of scoring record

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — LeBron James had 26 points, seven rebounds and seven assists and pulled 63 points away from becoming the NBA's career scoring leader as the Los Angeles Lakers rallied to beat the Indiana Pacers 112-111 on Thursday night.

James has 38,325 points, with Kareem Abdul-Jabbar holding the record at 38,387.

James gave Los Angeles its first lead on a 3-pointer with 2:35 left, and Anthony Davis' 11-footer with 35.1 seconds left was the decisive basket. Davis had 31 points and 14 rebounds.

Aaron Nesmith scored a career-high 24 points for Indiana, with Buddy Hield's 17-foot jumper clanking off the rim in the closing seconds.

Bucks 106, Clippers 105: Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 20 of his 54 points in the fourth quarter and Milwaukee overcame a 21-point deficit to beat Los Angeles for its sixth consecutive victory.

Antetokounmpo also had 18 rebounds. The Greek star reached the 50-point mark for the third time in his last 11 games. He had a career-high 55 on Jan. 3 against Washington and scored 50 in only 30 minutes Sunday against New Orleans.

Norman Powell scored 26 points to lead Los Angeles. The Clippers lost for the second time in eight games and failed to capitalize on a couple of Milwaukee turnovers in the closing seconds.

Mavericks 111, Pelicans 106: Luka Dončić scored 31 points before leaving with a right heel injury, and Dallas won without its All-Star to hand travel-weary New Orleans its 10th consecutive loss.

Dončić stayed in the game after taking a hard fall in the third quarter when he was

winding up for a one-handed dunk on a drive and Brandon Ingram knocked the ball out of his hand as Dončić was bumped by Jonas Valanciunas.

Ingram was called for a foul, and New Orleans successfully challenged. Dončić returned after the break for the review, but after one trip down the court, the 23-year-old star screamed in frustration as he limped to the locker room without looking at the Dallas bench.

Nuggets 134, Warriors 117: Jamal Murray scored 33 points and Nikola Jokić had his 17th triple-double of the season, leading Denver past short-handed Golden State.

Jokić finished with 22 points, 16 assists and 14 rebounds. He had a triple-double by the midway mark of the third quarter as the Nuggets remain unbeaten this season when he reaches the plateau.

Kentavious Caldwell-Pope added 18 points for the Western Conference-leading Nuggets. They improved to 24-4 at home.

Stephen Curry had 28 points for Golden State.

Cavaliers 128, Grizzlies 113: Darius Garland scored 32 points shortly after being left off the All-Star team and carried Cleveland following Donovan Mitchell's ejection, leading the Cavaliers past slumping Memphis.

Garland was one of several players having All-Star-caliber seasons not named an Eastern Conference reserve by the coaches. He added 11 assists.

Mitchell, voted an All-Star starter last week, was tossed in the third quarter for throwing the ball at Grizzlies guard Dillon Brooks after the pair tangled under the basket. Brooks also was thrown out.

With the Cavs leading 81-76, Brooks mis-

sed a shot and fell in the lane. While on the floor, he flung his arm back and struck Mitchell, who was standing over him, in the groin area. Mitchell dropped in pain and retaliated by firing the ball at Brooks and then charging and shoving him along the baseline in front of the Memphis bench.

Desmond Bane scored 25 points and All-Star Ja Morant had 24 points, eight rebounds and eight assists for the Grizzlies.'

Knicks 106, Heat 104: RJ Barrett rebounded from a late-game benching with 30 points, Isaiah Hartenstein made big plays on both ends of the floor in the final minute and New York beat Miami.

New York pulled out the victory after Erik Spoelstra correctly challenged a call that turned a Heat foul into a Knicks turnover. But Tyler Herro's potential winning 3-point attempt bounced off the rim.

Julius Randle added 23 points, 10 rebounds and six assists for the Knicks, who pulled one game behind Miami for sixth place in the Eastern Conference, the final guaranteed playoff spot.

Bam Adebayo had 32 points and nine rebounds for the Heat. Herro scored 25 points.

Bulls 114, Hornets 98: Ayo Dosunmu matched a season high with 22 points, Coby White scored 20 points and Chicago overcame shaky outings by DeMar DeRozan and Zach LaVine to beat Charlotte.

Dosunmu made 9 of 10 shots, and White hit three 3-pointers. Nikola Vučević added 17 points and 12 rebounds, and Andre Drummond had 15 points and 11 rebounds. The Bulls used a big third quarter to turn a four-point halftime lead into an 85-70 advantage heading to the fourth.

Terry Rozier scored 23 points for Charlotte.

Embiid, Morant, Brown lead All-Star reserve class

Associated Press

Philadelphia's Joel Embiid, Oklahoma City's Shai Gilgeous-Alexander and Portland's Damian Lillard had to have known they were going to the All-Star Game. Players averaging more than 30 points per game typically don't have to worry about not hearing their name called.

Other players — for instance, Miami's Bam Adebayo, Indiana's Tyrese Haliburton and Utah's Lauri Markkanen — had

reason for concern.

NBA coaches made them very happy. And probably made a few other guys very unhappy.

The reserves for the Feb. 19 All-Star Game in Salt Lake City were announced Thursday night. From the Eastern Conference, it was Embiid, Adebayo, Haliburton, Boston's Jaylen Brown, Chicago's DeMar DeRozan, Milwaukee's Jrue Holiday and New York's Julius Ran-

Even for a now six-time All-Star like DeRozan, it still matters.

"It's everything," DeRozan said. "I just hope anybody out there, whatever field you work in, never listens to the outside noise, to people doubting you, counting you out, everything. As long as you're true to yourself, believe in yourself, you keep putting in the work with a genuine heart and genuine passion, you'll be rewarded."

From the Western Conference, the picks were Gilgeous-Alexander, Lillard, Memphis teammates Ja Morant and Jaren Jackson Jr., Markkanen, Sacramento's Domantas Sabonis and the Los Angeles Clippers' Paul George.

"Every single year, starter or not, I'm competitive," Embiid said. "Obviously you want to be the best. I felt like I put myself in position to be up there and the best."

Djokovic back at top of ATP rankings

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Novak Djokovic's Australian Open championship returned him to a rather familiar spot on Monday: No. 1 in the ATP rankings.

His four-place rise from No. 5 to replace Carlos Alcaraz at No. 1 is the largest jump to the top spot in the 50-year history of the computerized rankings for men's tennis.

"You never know how much more time you have left, so, of course, I nurture and celebrate these moments of becoming No. 1 again and Grand Slam champion," the 35-year-old Djokovic said after beating Stefanos Tsitsipas 6-3, 7-6 (4), 7-6 (5) in the final at Melbourne Park on Sunday night, "even more than I have, maybe ever in my career. I

don't take it for granted."

Aryna Sabalenka's first major title moved her up from No. 5 to a career-best-equaling No. 2 in the WTA rankings, behind only three-time major champion Iga Swiatek.

Ousmane Jabeur, twice a finalist at Slams in 2022, went from No. 2 to No. 3, followed by No. 4 Jessica Pegula, No. 5 Caroline Garcia and No. 6 Coco Gauff.

The player Sabalenka beat in Saturday's Australian Open final, Elena Rybakina, makes her top 10 debut at No. 10, up from No. 25.

This marks Djokovic's 374th week leading the ATP, adding to his record. He earned a 10th title at the Australian Open and tied Rafael Nadal with 22 Grand Slam trophies.

Alcaraz slid to No. 2. He had become the youngest man to be No. 1 when he took over at age 19 after winning the U.S. Open last September. Alcaraz missed the Australian Open because of a leg injury.

Nadal, who hurt his left hip flexor during a second-round loss to Mackenzie McDonald of the United States, dropped from No. 2 to No. 6.

Tsitsipas went from No. 4 to No. 3 because of his run in Melbourne; he would have been No. 1 for the first time if he had managed to win the title. Casper Ruud, a two-time Grand Slam runner-up who lost in the second round to Jenson Brooksby of the United States, went from No. 3 to No. 4. Andrey Rublev is No. 5 after getting to the quarterfinals.

Walker's 3s rally No. 3 Houston past Wichita State

Associated Press

WICHITA, Kan. — Jarace Walker had 15 points, including a tiebreaking 3-pointer with 4:27 left, and No. 3 Houston rallied past Wichita State 70-61 on Thursday night.

Marcus Sasser also scored 15 for the Cougars (21-2, 9-1 American Athletic Conference), who trailed by six midway through the second half before Walker connected on a trio of timely 3s.

Jamal Shead added 13 points and seven assists. All five starters scored in double digits to help Houston win its third straight since a one-point loss to Temple.

Jaykwon Walton equaled his career high with 24 points for the Shockers (11-11, 4-6), who went 3 for 20 from 3-point range and shot 39% overall. James Rojas added 15 points and seven rebounds.

No. 5 Arizona 91, Oregon 76: Azuolas Tubelis scored 40 points, most by an Arizona player in 28 years, and the Wildcats avenged an earlier loss to Oregon.

The Ducks (13-10, 7-5 Pac-12) manhandled Arizona 87-68 at home last month in Arizona's biggest loss under coach Tommy Lloyd.

The Wildcats (20-3, 10-3) returned the favor with a dominant performance, riding an early 21-2 run to a 15-point half-time lead. Arizona kept its foot on the gas from there, shooting 54% and dishing out 23 assists on 31 field goals.

The 6-foot-11 Tubelis overpowered and outran the Ducks in transition, hitting 16 of 21 shots. It was the most points by an Arizona player since Damon Stoudamire had 40 against Washington State in 1995.

Tubelis didn't score in the final 7½ minutes and fell one point shy of the McKale Center record set in 1976 by Al Fleming, who was honored posthumously at halftime.

Will Richardson had 20 points to lead the Ducks, who trailed by 20 before making a late run.

No. 9 UCLA 70, Washington 61: Jaime Jaquez Jr. had 15 points and 10 rebounds, Amari Bailey scored 13 and UCLA defeated Washington.

UCLA completed a season sweep of the Huskies and stopped a two-game skid that had followed a 14-game winning streak. The Bruins (18-4, 9-2 Pac-12) also remained first in the conference standings.

Keion Brooks Jr. led Wash-

ington (13-11, 5-8) with 23 points.

No. 12 Gonzaga 88, Santa Clara 70: Drew Timme scored 15 points and surpassed 2,000 for his career, leading Gonzaga past Santa Clara.

Timme, who also had 10 rebounds, became the third player in school history to reach the milestone. He needs eight points to pass Jim McPhee for second on Gonzaga's career scoring list. Timme also needs to average 18.9 points over the next 10 games to pass Frank Burgess for the top spot.

After having its 75-game home win streak snapped against Loyola Marymount, the Bulldogs (19-4, 8-1 West Coast Conference) beat Santa Clara at home for the 15th straight time.

Rasir Bolton scored 16 points and Julian Strawther added 12 for Gonzaga.

Carlos Stewart had 22 points for Santa Clara (16-8, 4-5).

No. 18 Saint Mary's 68, San Francisco 59: Randy Bennett earned his 500th win as Saint Mary's coach when the Gaels beat San Francisco 68-59 for their 11th straight victory.

Alex Ducas had 18 points and Aidan Mahaney scored 13 of his 17 in the second half to lead the

Gaels (20-4, 9-0 West Coast Conference).

Saint Mary's has won at least 20 games in 15 of the last 16 seasons — missing out only in the pandemic-shortened 2020-21 season — and Bennett's 500 wins are the sixth-most among active coaches at their current school.

Khalil Shabazz scored 16 points and Marcus Williams added 15 for San Francisco (15-10, 4-6).

UAB 86, No. 19 Florida Atlantic 77: Eric Gaines scored 21 points and UAB ended Florida Atlantic's 20-game winning streak, which was the longest in the nation.

The Owls (21-2, 10-1 Conference USA) hadn't lost since falling 80-67 to Mississippi on Nov. 11. They made their debut 2½ weeks ago in the AP Top 25.

Jordan "Jelly" Walker had 13 points and six assists for UAB (16-7, 7-5) in his return from a foot injury that had sidelined him since Jan. 11.

The Blazers closed the first half on a 14-2 run for a 43-30 lead.

Nick Boyd led Florida Atlantic with 18 points, and Johnell Davis had 17 on 5-of-19 shooting.