

CBO: Super Hornet aging worse than older F-18s

By **WYATT OLSON**
Stars and Stripes

The Navy's fleet of Super Hornet fighter jets introduced in the late 1990s are aging more poorly than the preceding fleet of F-18 Hornets, according to a Congressional Budget Office report released Thursday.

The report compared availability of the newer F/A-18E/F Super Hornets with the older F/A-18C/D Hornets introduced in the mid-1980s and still in use.

Availability refers to the percentage of time an aircraft can be flown for training or operational missions instead of down time for undergoing repair or maintenance.

The CBO's analysis found the newer Super Hornets had lower availability rates than the F/A-18C/Ds had when compared at similar ages.

"For example, Super Hornet availability at age 10 was about 18 percentage points lower than F/A-18C/D availability at age 10 and

is comparable to F/A-18C/D availability at age 20," the report states.

"These findings suggest that age has had a more adverse effect on Super Hornets than it did on F/A-18C/Ds," the report states.

The fleet of F/A-18s is the Navy's "mainstay" of its carrier aviation operations, according to the report. The twin-engine Super Hornets have a top speed of Mach 1.7 and can carry Sidewinder and Harpoon missiles.

The differing rates of availability were not attributable to a greater number of flying hours for the newer jets, which would subject the aircraft to greater wear and tear, the CBO concluded from a review of flight data.

"Monthly flying hours of Super Hornets modestly exceeded those of F/A-18C/Ds only in the initial years of operation of both fleets," the report states. "By age 10, however, Super Hornets were flying four fewer hours per month than 10-year-old F/A-18C/Ds

flew."

The Navy told the CBO that many factors contributed to differences in availability between the two generations of F-18s, highlighting "the greater levels of galvanic corrosion arising from the greater use of composite metals in Super Hornets," the report states.

The report's footnotes describe galvanic corrosion as "damage induced when two dissimilar materials are coupled in a corrosive electrolyte. It occurs when two (or more) dissimilar metals are brought into electrical contact under water."

The future of availability rates for aging Super Hornets is up in the air, the report states.

"The experiences of the oldest Super Hornets suggest that their availability is likely to continue to decline as the fleet ages," the report states. "A similar trend has been observed for many fighter and attack aircraft.

But some fleets have had leng-

thy periods with stable availability rates.

"Because the Super Hornet is a relatively new aircraft, the Navy could take actions that might increase or stabilize the aircraft's availability rate, such as increasing funding for maintenance."

The Defense Department announced in December that it had awarded Boeing \$2 billion to upgrade and modernize software and hardware on the Navy's fleet of Super Hornets over a five-year period.

Diminishing availability is not just an issue for Navy aircraft.

A January 2022 CBO report found that availability rates for all aircraft in use by the Air Force and the Department of the Navy, which includes the Marine Corps, had declined between 2001 and 2019.

But the decline of availability for Navy aircraft was greater, driven by a "marked decline in the availability of F/A-18C/D legacy Hornets," the 2022 report stated.

Air Force test-fires unarmed ICBM into Pacific Ocean

By **WYATT OLSON**
Stars and Stripes

The Air Force on Thursday evening test-fired an unarmed intercontinental ballistic missile from California into waters 4,200 miles away near the Marshall Islands in the Pacific Ocean, the service said.

The launch of the Minuteman III by a team from the Air Force Global Strike Command at Vandenberg Space Force Base was routine and "not the result of current world events," the Air Force said Friday in a news release.

The launch was intended to test the accuracy and reliability of the missile's "reentry vehicle" as it descended on Kwajalein

Atoll, which is home to the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site, the Air Force said.

The Air Force has conducted more than 300 such tests, most recently in September.

Thursday's launch, however, comes on the heels of tense relations with China over its surveillance balloon that traveled across the continental U.S. last week before an F-22 fighter jet shot it down off the East Coast on Feb. 4.

The ICBM test also came a day after a military parade in North Korea that showcased the largest number of long-range missiles ever displayed during such a procession there.

North Korea picked up the pace of missile testing last year, launching roughly 75 missiles.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in a speech late last year called for an "exponential increase" in arms for its military.

Despite the routine nature of the Thursday launch, it was intended to convey a message of U.S. military might to any would-be adversary.

"A test launch displays the heart of our deterrence mission on the world's stage, assuring our nation and its allies that our weapons are capable and our airmen are ready and willing to defend peace across the globe at a moment's notice," Gen. Thomas

Bussiere, who leads Air Force Global Strike Command, said in the news release.

Col. Christopher Cruise, commander of the 377th Test and Evaluation Group, said in the news release that the launch showcased the "reliability of our strategic deterrence systems while sending a visible message of assurance to allies."

The Minuteman III missile is slated to be replaced by the LGM-35 Sentinel missile beginning in 2029.

The Sentinels would eventually replace all Minuteman III missiles, which are stationed in North Dakota, Wyoming, Montana, Nebraska and Colorado.

Trudeau: US jet shot down object over Yukon

Associated Press

VANCOUVER, British Columbia — Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said Saturday that on his order, a U.S. fighter jet shot down an “unidentified object” that was flying high over the Yukon, acting a day after the United States took similar action over Alaska.

North American Aerospace Defense Command, the combined U.S.-Canada organization that provides shared defense of airspace over the two nations, detected the object flying at a high altitude Friday evening over Alaska, U.S. officials said. It crossed into Canadian airspace on Saturday.

Trudeau spoke with President Joe Biden, who also or-

dered the object to be shot down. Canadian and U.S. jets operating as part of NORAD were scrambled, and it was a U.S. jet that shot down the object.

Canadian Defense Minister Anita Anand told a news conference in Ottawa that the object, flying at around 40,000 feet, had been shot down at 3:41 p.m. EST, approximately 100 miles from the Canada-U.S. border in the central Yukon. A recovery operation was underway involving the Canadian Armed Forces and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police.

Hours later, in the U.S., the Federal Aviation Administration said Saturday night that it had closed some airspace in

Montana to support Defense Department activities. NORAD later said the closure, which lasted a little more than an hour, came after it had detected “a radar anomaly” and sent fighter aircraft to investigate. The aircraft did not identify any object to correlate to the radar hits, NORAD said.

F-22 fighter jets have now taken out three objects in the airspace above the U.S. and Canada over seven days, a stunning development that is raising questions on just what, exactly, is hovering overhead and who has sent them.

At least one of the objects downed was believed to have been a spy balloon from China, but the other two had not yet

been publicly identified.

While Trudeau described the object Saturday as “unidentified,” Anand said it appeared to be “a small cylindrical object, smaller than the one that was downed off the coast of North Carolina.” A NORAD spokesman, Maj. Olivier Gallant, said the military had determined what it was but would not reveal details.

Anand refused to speculate whether the object shot down over Canada came from China.

“We are continuing to do the analysis on the object and we will make sure that analysis is thorough,” she said. “It would not be prudent for me to speculate on the origins of the object at this time.”

F-22 downs ‘high-altitude object’ off Alaska coast

By DOUG G. WARE

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A U.S. fighter jet on Friday shot down a “high-altitude object” over U.S. waters near Alaska several days after a Chinese surveillance balloon was shot down off the coast of South Carolina, U.S. officials said.

President Joe Biden ordered fighter jets to shoot down the object because it posed a threat to civilian air traffic, officials at the White House and later the Pentagon said.

“The object was flying at an altitude of 40,000 feet and posed a reasonable threat to the safety of civilian flight,” said Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder, the Pentagon’s top spokesman.

John Kirby, spokesman for the National Security Council, had told reporters at the White House that the object was much smaller than the

Chinese balloon shot down Feb. 4.

U.S. Northern Command scrambled two F-22 Raptors from Alaska’s Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson to shoot the object with an AIM-9X Sidewinder missile, Ryder told reporters at the Pentagon.

He said the “airborne object,” which was first detected Thursday as it breached U.S. territory, was shot down Friday at 1:45 p.m. EST off Alaska’s northern coast. U.S. officials have not yet said whether they suspect the object belongs to another country.

“At this point, we don’t know the origin of the object. We will know more once we’re able to recover some of the materials,” Ryder said.

Neither Ryder nor Kirby elaborated on the object’s appearance or disclosed whether it was a balloon.

Ex-Blue Angel who flew for Cruise talks ‘Top Gun’

By DOUG G. WARE

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Cmdr. Frank “Walleye” Weisser is a decorated former Navy fighter pilot with decades of experience, thousands of hours in the cockpit and dozens of combat missions under his belt.

But his most famous mission recently made it to the big screen, with Weisser flying for Tom Cruise in Hollywood’s big blockbuster of last year — “Top Gun: Maverick.”

“The only reason I became involved is because Tom Cruise and [Producer] Jerry Bruckheimer had a couple scenes they wanted done at extreme low altitudes,” he said. “What’s really cool about this movie is the fact that almost everything you see on that big screen we flew. We really did it.”

Weisser was part of a discussion Thursday hosted by the

Military Officers Association of America, a nonprofit, nonpartisan group comprised of active-duty and retired American service members that advocates for a strong national defense and the welfare of military families. Weisser described what it was like to be a naval pilot and how it felt standing in for Cruise in the \$170-million, years-in-the-making “Top Gun” sequel — an assignment that took about a year and involved several real-life pilots. Weisser, though, was the one who flew F/A-18 Hornets for risky scenes close to the ground.

“The effects on the ground had to be real, had to be legitimate because you can’t fake that stuff,” he said. “There was only one opportunity to do it because the destruction it causes to the set made the set unusable for any future takes.”

Russia shells Ukraine amid east push

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian forces over the weekend continued to shell Ukrainian cities amid a grinding push to seize more land in the east of the country, with Ukrainian officials saying Moscow is having trouble launching its much-anticipated large-scale offensive there.

One person was killed and one more was wounded Sunday morning in the shelling of Nikopol, a city in the southeastern Dnipropetrovsk region, Gov. Serhii Lysak reported. The shelling damaged four residential buildings, a vocational school and a water treatment facility.

In Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, one person was wounded after three Russian S-300 missiles hit infrastructure facilities overnight, regional Gov. Oleh Syniehubov said. The Russian military said they hit armored vehicle assembly workshops at the Malyshev machinery plant in the city.

Ukrainian forces also downed five drones — four Shahed killer drones and one Orlan-10 reconnaissance drone — over the partially occupied Zaporizhzhia and Donetsk regions Saturday evening, Kyiv's military reported.

Overall, Russian forces carried out 12 missile and 32 air strikes in Ukraine over the past 24 hours, as well as over 90 rounds

of shelling from multiple rocket launchers, Ukraine's General Staff reported in its daily update.

The attacks come as Russian forces push to take over more land in the eastern industrial heartland of Donbas, comprised of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Ukrainian and Western officials have warned that Russia could launch a new, broad offensive there to try to turn the tide of the conflict as the war approaches the one-year mark. But Ukrainian officials have said Moscow is having trouble mounting such an offensive.

"They are having big problems with a big offensive," Oleksiy Danilov, the secretary of Ukraine's National Security and Defense Council, told Ukrainian television on Saturday night.

"They have begun their offensive, they're just not saying they have, and our troops are repelling it very powerfully. The offensive that they planned is already gradually underway. But (it is) not the offensive they were counting on," Danilov said.

A U.S.-based think tank noted it is also Russia's pro-Kremlin military bloggers who question Moscow's ability to launch a broad offensive in Ukraine.

They "continue to appear demoralized at the Kremlin's prospects for executing a major offensive," the Institute for the Study of

War said in its latest report.

Last week, the owner of the Russian Wagner Group private military contractor actively involved in the fighting in Ukraine said the war could drag on for years.

Yevgeny Prigozhin said in a video interview released late Friday that it could take 18 months to two years for Russia to fully secure control of Donbas. He added that the war could go on for three years if Moscow decides to capture broader territories east of the Dnieper River.

The statement from Prigozhin, a millionaire who has close links to Russian President Vladimir Putin and was dubbed "Putin's chef" for his lucrative Kremlin catering contracts, marked a recognition of the difficulties that the Kremlin has faced in the campaign, which it initially expected to wrap up within weeks when Russian troops invaded Ukraine on Feb. 24.

Russia suffered a series of humiliating setbacks in the fall when the Ukrainian military launched successful counteroffensives to reclaim broad swaths of territory in the east and the south.

On Sunday, Prigozhin said that Wagner fighters have taken over the Krasna Hora settlement north of Bakhmut, a strategic city at the epicenter of the fighting in recent months.

Biden to visit Poland as war reaches 1-year mark

Bloomberg News

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden will travel to Poland this month to mark the one-year mark of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the White House announced.

Biden will visit Poland from Feb. 20 through Feb. 22 where he will meet with Polish President Andrzej Duda "to discuss our bilateral cooperation, as well as our collective efforts to support Ukraine and bolster NATO's deterrence," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Friday.

Biden also plans to meet with leaders of the so-called Bucharest 9 group of eastern-flank NATO allies.

The trip is meant to highlight Ukraine's resilience in the face of a Russian military campaign that many expected would topple its government in a matter of days.

Biden has helped marshal an international coalition to supply Kyiv with arms and funding to aid its defense, and has imposed sweeping sanctions on Moscow in an effort to hamper its war effort. The administration has committed nearly \$30 billion in security assistance to Ukraine since the Feb. 24, 2022, invasion.

Visiting Europe will give Biden the chance to meet in-person with allies to shore up their efforts on behalf of Ukraine.

Trump campaign paid firm to prove 2020 fraud

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Former President Donald Trump's 2020 campaign commissioned an outside research firm in a bid to prove electoral fraud claims but never released the findings because the firm disputed many of his theories and could not offer any proof that he was the rightful winner of the election, according to four people familiar with the matter.

The campaign paid researchers from Berkeley Research Group, the people said, to study 2020 election results in six states, looking for fraud and irregularities to highlight in public and in the courts. Among the areas examined were voter ma-

chine malfunctions, instances of dead people voting and any evidence that could help Trump show he won, the people said. None of the findings were presented to the public or in court.

About a dozen people at the firm worked on the report, including econometricians, who use statistics to model and predict outcomes, the people said. The work was carried out in the final weeks of 2020, before the Jan. 6 riot at the U.S. Capitol.

Trump continues to falsely assert that the 2020 election was stolen despite abundant evidence to the contrary, much of which had been provided to him or was publicly available before the Capitol assault.

Turkish contractors under probe; survivors defy odds

Associated Press

ANTAKYA, Turkey — Turkish justice officials targeted more than 130 people allegedly involved in shoddy and illegal construction methods as rescuers extricated more survivors, including a pregnant woman and two small children, six days after a pair of earthquakes collapsed thousands of buildings.

The death toll from last Monday's quakes that hit southeastern Turkey and northern Syria stood at 33,179 on Sunday and was certain to rise as search teams locate more bodies in the rubble. Authorities said over 92,600 other people were injured in the disaster.

As despair also bred rage at the agonizingly slow rescue efforts, the focus turned to who was to blame for not better preparing people in the earthquake-prone region.

Even though Turkey has, on paper, construction codes that meet current earthquake-engineering standards, they are too rarely enforced, explaining why thousands of buildings slumped onto their side or pancaked downward onto residents.

Turkish Justice Minister Bekir Bozdag said Sunday that 134 people were being investigated for their alleged responsibility in the construction of buildings that failed to withstand the quakes, according to Turkey's state-run Anadolu news agency. He said three had been arrested pending trial, seven people were detained and seven other were

barred from leaving the country.

Bozdag has vowed to punish anyone responsible, and prosecutors have begun gathering samples of buildings for evidence on construction materials. The quakes were powerful, but victims, experts and others across Turkey have blamed bad construction for multiplying the devastation.

Authorities at Istanbul Airport on Sunday detained two contractors held responsible for the destruction of several buildings in Adiyaman, the private DHA news agency and other media reported.

One of the arrested contractors, Yavuz Karakus, told reporters Sunday: "My conscience is clear. I built 44 buildings. Four of them were demolished. I did everything according to the rules," the DHA news agency reported.

Two more people were arrested in the province of Gaziantep suspected of having cut down columns to make extra room in a building that collapsed, the state-run Anadolu Agency said.

A day earlier, Turkey's Justice Ministry announced the planned establishment of "Earthquake Crimes Investigation" bureaus. The bureaus would aim to identify contractors and others responsible for building works, gather evidence, instruct experts including architects, geologists and engineers, and check building permits and occupation permits.

Nearly 1M French march in 4th day of pension rallies

Associated Press

PARIS — Police were out in force across France on Saturday as protesters held a sometimes restive fourth round of nationwide demonstrations against President Emmanuel Macron's plans to reform the country's pension system.

Over 960,000 people marched in Paris, Nice, Marseille, Toulouse, Nantes and other cities, according to the Interior Ministry. Protesters hoped to keep up the pressure on the government to back down, and further action is planned for Feb. 16.

In the French capital, authorities counted some 93,000 participants, the most to demonstrate in Paris against the pension changes since the protests started last month.

The weekend demonstrations drew young people and others opposed to the pension proposals who weren't able to attend the previous three days of action, all held on weekdays.

This time, though, rail worker strikes did not accompany the demonstrations, allowing trains and the Paris Metro to run Saturday. However, an unexpected strike by air traffic controllers meant that up to half of flights to and from Paris' second largest airport, Orly, were canceled Saturday afternoon.

In Paris, some workers and students who wanted to voice opposition attended the protests for the first time, owing to heavy weekday workloads.

"We often hear that we should be too young to care, but with rising inflation, soaring electricity prices, this reform will impact our families," Elisa Haddad, 18, said. "It is my first demonstration because I couldn't attend with uni. It is important that the voice of (France's) parents and students is heard."

French lawmakers began a rowdy debate earlier in the week on the pension bill to raise the minimum retirement age for a full state pension from 62 to 64. It's the flagship legislation of Macron's second term.

Saturday's protests featured flashes of unrest. One car and several trash bins were set on fire on a central Parisian boulevard as police charged the crowd and dispersed protesters with tear gas. Paris police said officers arrested eight people for infractions ranging from possession of a firearm to vandalism.

Iran marks 44th Islamic revolution anniversary amid protest, tension

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Iran on Saturday celebrated the 44th anniversary of the 1979 Islamic Revolution amid nationwide anti-government protests and heightened tensions with the West.

Thousands of Iranians marched through major streets and squares decorated with flags, balloons and placards with revolutionary and religious slogans. The military put on display its Emad and Sejil ballistic missiles and cruise missiles as well as its Shahed-136 and Mohajer drones.

Protesters began pouring into the streets in September after the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, an Iranian-Kur-

dish woman detained by the country's morality police. Those demonstrations, initially focused on Iran's mandatory headscarf, or hijab, soon morphed into calls for a new revolution.

In a speech at Azadi Square in the capital Tehran, President Ebrahim Raisi referred to the protests as a project by Iran's enemies aimed at stopping the nation from continuing its achievements.

Raisi called the celebration "epic" and a show of "national integrity" while praising post-revolution achievements in the country.

The remarks prompted the crowd to chant "Death to the U.S."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Investigators apparently solve mystery Tesla crash

M DETROIT — Investigators from the National Transportation Safety Board apparently have solved the mystery of why no one was found behind the steering wheel of a Tesla that crashed in a Texas two years ago, killing two men.

The agency said in an investigative report released Wednesday on the fiery April 17, 2021, crash in the Houston suburb of Spring that the 59-year-old Tesla driver apparently moved to the back seat after slamming into the car's front air bag, deforming the steering wheel in the crash.

Although the crash raised questions about whether the car was operating on Tesla's "Autopilot" partially automated driving system, the NTSB determined that the system could not have been used on the street where the crash happened due to lack of lane lines. Testing showed the car's "Traffic Aware Cruise Control" system could have been used, although it would only work up to the maximum speed on the suburban road, 30 mph, the report said.

The 2019 Tesla reached 67 mph two seconds before hitting the second of two trees at 57 mph before being consumed by flames as the lithium-ion battery caught fire.

Jury: Cheating husband drove drunk legally

CA SACRAMENTO — A husband caught cheating on his wife drove drunk legally to escape his angry wife and lover, a California jury found.

The 60-year-old Ukiah man was caught driving with a blood alcohol content of 0.11%, the Mendocino County District Attorney's Office said in a Feb. 4 Facebook post. In California, it is illegal to drive with a BAC higher than 0.08%.

After a four-day trial, a jury found he was "not guilty of driving a motor vehicle under the influence of alcohol and not guilty of driving a motor vehicle with a blood alcohol .08 or greater," the district attorney said.

The defense argued that the man's driving was legally justified, the district attorney said.

After the man's wife caught him cheating, "his driving was necessary to allow him to escape two angry women," according to testimony presented, the district attorney said.

The prosecution argued that the "law of necessity" should not and has never been used in a situation like this, but the judge allowed the argument to be heard, the district attorney said.

Under a necessity defense, the district attorney said, the defendant must prove a number of conditions, including that "he acted in an emergency to prevent a significant bodily harm or evil to himself or someone else" and that others would have deemed it necessary, too.

'Finch-smuggling kingpin' is sentenced to prison

NY NEW YORK — A man who repeatedly admitted scheming to smuggle finches from Guyana into New York for birdsong competitions was sentenced Thursday to a year and a day in prison.

It was Insaf Ali's second time being sentenced in a Brooklyn federal court for a crime related

to bird trafficking, and he vowed it would be his last.

"I'm going to stay away from the birds," Ali pledged in a video he submitted to the court, "because it's trouble."

His lawyer, Christine Delince, said after court that she was disappointed in the sentence, which came after she and Ali detailed his longtime affinity for birds during a life fraught with personal and medical problems.

More than 200 shotguns are found in dumpster

OK MIDWEST CITY — An Oklahoma firearms dealer is under investigation after more than 200 shotguns were found in a dumpster outside a store he owns in suburban Oklahoma City, according to a search warrant by the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.

"A Midwest City sanitation worker found a large, but unknown number of firearms in a dumpster ... located near International Firearm Corporation" owned by Raymond Anthony "Tony" Mussatto in Midwest City, according to a Jan. 26 search warrant by ATF agent David Moore.

Investigators recovered 236 imported Radikal Arms .20 gauge shotguns from the dumpster following the Jan. 19 discovery, according to the search warrant.

Girl missing over year found in closet of home

MI PORT HURON — A 14-year-old girl who was reported missing over a year ago by her foster family has been found hiding in the closet of a Michigan home, authorities

said.

A U.S. Marshals fugitive team found the girl in Port Huron, about 62 miles northeast of Detroit. Child Protective Services took her to a hospital, where it was discovered that she was pregnant.

"She was crying," Deputy U.S. Marshal Robert Watson told the Detroit Free Press. "She didn't know where she was going to go. She was pretty terrified. And she was afraid of losing her baby."

Authorities are pursuing parental kidnapping charges against the girl's biological mother, who previously lost custody of her daughter, Watson said.

Mouse wins Guinness award for longevity

CA SAN DIEGO — A tiny California mouse now has a big title after winning a Guinness World record for longevity.

A Pacific pocket mouse named Pat — after "Star Trek" actor Patrick Stewart — received the Guinness approval Wednesday as the oldest living mouse in human care at the ripe age of 9 years and 209 days, the San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance announced after a certification ceremony.

Pat was born at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park on July 14, 2013, under a conservation breeding program, the alliance said.

The Pacific pocket mouse, which weighs as much as three pennies, is the smallest mouse species in North America and gets its name from cheek pouches the animals use to carry food and nesting materials, the wildlife alliance said.

— From wire reports

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Harden: 'Dysfunction' broke up Nets

Associated Press

NEW YORK — James Harden isn't surprised Kevin Durant and Kyrie Irving wanted out of Brooklyn, having tired quickly of the "dysfunction" he saw in his brief time with the Nets and asking out.

"I didn't just ask to leave for no reason," Harden said.

Harden was traded to Philadelphia at the 2022 trade deadline. By the time he came back Saturday just a year later for the first time in the regular season, Durant and Irving were also gone.

He wouldn't specify his reasons for souring so quickly, but made clear he felt there were problems within the Nets organization.

"There was just a lot of dysfunction — clearly. There was a lot of internal things that I'm not going to ever just say or put in the media or anything, and that was one of the reasons why I chose to make my decision," Harden said after scoring 29 points in the 76ers' 101-98 victory.

"But now, fast forward to today, I don't look like the crazy one," he added. "I don't look like the guy, or the quitter or whatever the media want to call me. Like, I knew what was going on and I just decided to, like, I'm not built for this. I don't want to deal with that. I want to play basketball and have fun and enjoy doing it."

Harden added six rebounds and six assists after being booed in introductions and then early in the game.

"I don't get caught up in homecomings or the outside distractions," Harden said. "I think our focus was just to come here and win a game and we did a good job of that tonight."

Mikal Bridges scored 23 points in his first game with the Nets, but missed a layup that would have given the Nets the lead with about 2 seconds left. Harden then made two free throws with 0.9 seconds to go, and Spencer Dinwiddie's three-pointer after a timeout was too late.

The Nets started Bridges, Cam Johnson, Dinwiddie and Dorian Finney-Smith, the four players they acquired this week from Phoenix for Durant and Dallas for Irving. The Nets had the look of a tough defensive team that will miss the scoring of their All-Stars, managing only one basket in the last 6½ minutes.

"The Twins," as Bridges and Johnson were nicknamed in Phoenix by former teammate Deandre Ayton because they did so much together, had plenty of time to think about moving to New York. Durant's initial trade request came last summer.

"There was a lot of jokes, especially in the summer when KD wanted to come here and we knew the pieces and who might be the ones that were going to go, and us two was the main two," Bridges said. "And we joked around, we always said, 'At least we got us, at least we got us,' and it happened and that's still to this day. It's just like, at least I got

my twin with me."

Harden was acquired from Houston in January 2021 and the Nets quickly became a championship favorite with their potent lineup. But they lost in the second round of those playoffs after both Irving and Harden were injured against Milwaukee, then struggled to get off the ground in 2021-22 after Irving refused to be vaccinated against the coronavirus so he could be eligible to play in all their games.

After Durant sprained his knee in January 2022, the Big Three was often down to just one and Harden's effort and interest seemed to wane while forced to carry a team that had to play unproven players around him. He told the organization he wanted to leave and the Nets sent him to the 76ers in a package for Ben Simmons.

Harden wouldn't say if the Nets' problems — or his frustrations — started with the difficulty in being able to count on Irving.

Jokic's triple-double leads Nuggets past Hornets

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Nikola Jokic had 30 points, 16 rebounds and 10 assists for his league-leading 20th triple-double and the short-handed Denver Nuggets handed the Charlotte Hornets their seventh straight defeat, 119-105 on Saturday night.

Kentavious Caldwell-Pope added 15 points, and Bruce Brown and Michael Porter Jr. each had 14 for the Nuggets.

Denver played without Aaron Gordon (rib contusion) and Jamaal Murray (knee inflammation), but outscored the Hornets 62-45 in the second half.

Jokic now has twice as many triple-doubles as Dallas' Luka Doncic, who was second in the

league with 10 entering the weekend.

But the two-time NBA MVP said that doesn't mean a thing to him, adding, "it's just how I play, and I don't even think about it."

P.J. Washington had 22 points and Gordon Hayward added 21 for Charlotte. LaMelo Ball finished with 18 points, 12 assists and nine rebounds.

Knicks 126, Jazz 120: Jalen Brunson scored 22 of his 38 points in the first half, Josh Hart had 11 points off the bench in his Knicks debut and host New York outlasted Utah.

76ers 101, Nets 98: Joel Embiid had 37 points and 13 rebounds, James Harden scored 29 points in his first game in

Brooklyn since being traded a year ago to begin a Big Three breakup and visiting Philadelphia beat Brooklyn.

Lakers 109, Warriors 103: D'Angelo Russell had 15 points, six assists and five rebounds in his Lakers return after being acquired from Minnesota at the trade deadline, Dennis Schröder scored 26 points and visiting Los Angeles beat Golden State.

Kings 133, Mavericks 128 (OT): De'Aaron Fox scored 36 points, including six free throws in the final 18.4 seconds of overtime, leading host Sacramento over Dallas.

Cavaliers 97, Bulls 89: All-Star Donovan Mitchell scored 19 of his 29 points in the second half and Jarrett Allen had 23

points and 10 rebounds, rallying host Cleveland past Chicago.

Wizards 127, Pacers 113: Bradley Beal scored 32 points, Kristaps Porzingis and Monte Morris added 17 apiece and host Washington shot 70% from the field through the first three quarters of their rout of Indiana.

Heat 107, Magic 103 (OT): Tyler Herro scored 23 points, Jimmy Butler added 22 and Gabe Vincent had 20 as visiting Miami rallied to beat Orlando in overtime.

Hawks 125, Spurs 106: Trae Young had 24 points and a season-high 17 assists, De'Andre Hunter added 24 points and host Atlanta beat reeling San Antonio.

Vols stunned again by three at buzzer

Associated Press

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — D'Andre Gholston hit a three-pointer at the buzzer to give Missouri a stunning 86-85 victory over No. 6 Tennessee on Saturday night.

With 4.2 seconds left in the game and the Volunteers (19-6, 8-4 Southeastern Conference) leading 85-83, Santiago Vescovi missed a free throw. His second attempt was waived off when Tobe Awaka committed a lane violation, setting up a final chance for the Tigers (19-6, 7-5).

Gholston took the inbounds and dribbled up the court before taking an off-balance contested three-pointer from about 30 feet that swished through the net at the buzzer for the win. He was mobbed by his teammates after hitting the shot.

The end was similar to Tennessee's Wednesday night loss to Vanderbilt. Vescovi missed a free throw then and a three-pointer at the buzzer ended the game. The Vols have now lost three of their past four.

No. 3 Alabama 77, Auburn 69: Rylan Griffen scored 16 points, Mark Sears added 15 and the visiting Tide held off a challenge from their in-state rival.

Alabama (22-3, 12-0 Southeastern Conference) remained the only Power 5 team without a league loss. Sears and Griffen helped Alabama overcome an off shooting performance from star Brandon Miller, who had 13 points but missed all seven three-point attempts.

Stanford 88, No. 4 Arizona 79: Spencer Jones scored all 18 of his points in the second half and played a key role in neutralizing Pac-12 leading scorer Azuolas Tubelis, as the host Cardinal stunned the Wildcats.

Stanford (11-14, 5-9 Pac-12) beat a ranked team for the first time this year. Arizona (22-4, 11-4) had a seven-game winning streak snapped.

Courtney Ramey scored a season- and game-high 26

points for Arizona. Tubelis was held to four points.

No. 5 Texas 94, West Virginia 60: Sir'Jabari Rice scored 24 points in just 17 minutes in the host Longhorns' win over the Mountaineers.

Texas (20-5) remained in first place in the Big 12 at 9-3, while West Virginia (15-10, 4-8) lost for the sixth time in its last seven games against the Longhorns.

No. 7 UCLA 70, Oregon 63: Jaime Jaquez Jr. had 25 points and 12 rebounds, and the Bruins won in Eugene for the first time since 2019.

UCLA (21-4, 12-2 Pac-12) has won four straight after losing to Arizona and rival USC at the end of January and sits atop the Pac-12 standings.

No. 8 Virginia 69, Duke 62 (OT): Armaan Franklin scored 23 points, including a three-pointer with 39 seconds left, to lift the host Cavaliers.

Kihe Clark added 16 points for Virginia (19-4, 11-3 Atlantic Coast Conference), which won despite shooting 9-for-22 from the free-throw line.

Duke (17-8, 8-6) appeared poised to win when Kyle Filipowski drove to the basket on the final play of regulation and two defenders contested his shot. Officials whistled a foul, but waved it off after a lengthy review — a decision the ACC later said was incorrect.

The league issued a statement hours later, saying officials applied rules incorrectly and that Filipowski should have been sent to the line for two free throws.

Jeremy Roach led the Blue Devils with 16 points.

No. 9 Kansas 78, Oklahoma 55: Jalen Wilson scored 18 points, and the visiting Jayhawks rolled past the Sooners.

Wilson, who entered the day leading the Big 12 with nearly 21 points per game, bounced back from a two-point outing against Texas on Monday.

Dajuan Harris scored 16 points for Kansas (20-5, 8-4 Big 12).

No. 10 Marquette 89, Georgetown 75: Kam Jones, Oso Ighodaro and Tyler Kolek each scored 14 points to lead a balanced scoring attack for the visiting Golden Eagles.

Olivier-Maxence Prosper had 11 points and Chase Ross added 10 for Marquette (20-6, 12-3 Big East), which moved into first place in the conference.

Oklahoma St 64, No. 11 Iowa St. 56: John-Michael Wright scored 19 points and the visiting Cowboys rallied to hand the Cyclones their fourth loss in five games.

Bryce Thompson added 12 points for Oklahoma State (16-9, 7-5 Big 12) in its fifth straight win.

Texas Tech 71, No. 12 Kansas State 63: De'Vion Harmon scored 20 points, including a crucial driving basket in the final minute, as the host Red Raiders upended the Wildcats.

Texas Tech (13-12, 2-10 Big 12) held Kansas State (19-6, 7-5) to two field goals in the game's final four minutes.

No. 14 Baylor 72, No. 17 TCU 68: Adam Flagler scored 28 points, with 16 in a row during the stretch when the Bears overcame a 10-point deficit in the second half.

LJ Cryer had 23 points for Baylor (19-6, 8-4 Big 12), which has won nine of its last 10 games.

No. 15 Saint Mary's 81, Portland 64: Logan Johnson had 34 points, six rebounds and six assists as the Gaels handled the Pilots on the road.

Alex Ducas added 18 points and six rebounds for Saint Mary's (22-5, 11-1 West Coast Conference) and Aidan Mahaney contributed 10 points and five assists.

No. 16 Gonzaga 88, BYU 81: Julian Strawther scored 26 points, including the go-ahead three-pointer with 3:10 remaining, and the host Bulldogs ral-

lied to beat the Cougars.

Drew Timme added 19 points, eight assists and seven rebounds for Gonzaga (21-5, 10-2 West Coast Conference).

No. 18 Indiana 62, Michigan 61: Trayce Jackson-Davis had 28 points and 11 rebounds, Jalen Hood-Schifino scored 21 points and the visiting Hoosiers held on for a win.

Indiana (18-7, 9-5 Big Ten) trailed by 11 in the first half and for much of the second, but went ahead for good with 2:58 left when Hood-Schifino made two free throws.

No. 19 Miami 93, Louisville 85: Nijel Pack scored 22 points in the host Hurricanes' win.

Miami (20-5, 11-4 Atlantic Coast Conference) could not shake off the conference's last-place team until Pack's three-pointer with 2:44 remaining made it 82-72.

St. John's 73, No. 20 Providence 68: David Jones scored 16 points and AJ Storr added 15 for the host Red Storm.

Bryce Hopkins equaled a career best with 29 points for the Friars (18-7, 10-4).

No. 22 N.C. State 92, Boston College 62: Jarkel Joiner scored 26 points and D.J. Burns Jr. added 18 with 10 rebounds to lead the visiting Wolfpack (20-6, 10-5 ACC).

No. 23 Creighton 56, No. 21 UConn 53: Trey Alexander scored 17 points to lead the host Bluejays after the Huskies had what would have been a tying three-pointer erased on video review in the final seconds.

Illinois 69, No. 24 Rutgers 60: Coleman Hawkins scored 18 points and the host Illini held the Scarlet Knights scoreless for more than 10 minutes in the second half to rally for the win.

No. 25 San Diego State 82, UNLV 71: Adam Seiko scored all 18 points on three-pointers and Matt Bradley added 17 points to lift the host Aztecs to their seventh win in eight games.

Caps win, Bruins take rare home loss

Associated Press

BOSTON — Nicklas Backstrom and Garnet Hathaway each scored a goal and the Washington Capitals beat NHL-best Boston 2-1 on Saturday, sending the Bruins to just their second regulation loss at home this season.

The Bruins are 22-2-3 at home. Their other regulation loss at TD Garden came on Jan. 12, a 3-0 setback against Seattle.

Darcy Kuemper made 27 saves for the Capitals, who have won three of their last four games.

"It's definitely 'go-time' for us. You could see that in our play," Kuemper said. "It would have been disappointing to come into this building and not put in the effort we did. ... We played unbelievable. That's probably the hardest building to win in this year."

Nick Foligno scored for Boston and backup goalie Jeremy Swayman stopped 21 shots.

"We had our chances," Foligno said of Boston's late surge.

"We were just too cute."

Washington star Alex Ovechkin was held without a point for a season-high matching third straight game, only the second time this season that's happened.

With both teams coming off long layoffs between games (Washington 11 days and Boston 10) the Capitals had the better scoring chances in a sloppy first period that saw a handful of breakdowns, mostly by the Bruins, in their own defensive zone.

"I really liked the start," Washington coach Peter Laviolette said. "Coming off the break and not knowing what you're going to get, I thought we played a smart period. I thought we defended well."

Playing just his 11th game after recovering from offseason hip surgery, the 35-year-old Backstrom made it 1-0 when he collected a loose puck that Swayman couldn't cover and flipped it into the net during a 5-on-3 power-play advantage 6:28

into the game.

Blues 6, Coyotes 5 (OT): Ryan O'Reilly scored at 1:02 of overtime to lift host St. Louis past Arizona.

Predators 2, Flyers 1 (OT): Matt Duchene scored 34 seconds into overtime, Juuse Saros made 23 saves and visiting Nashville defeated Philadelphia, but lost top scorer Filip Forsberg in the first period after he took a hard late hit.

Canadiens 4, Islanders 3 (OT): Mike Matheson scored in overtime to lift host Montreal.

Wild 3, Devils 2 (SO): Mats Zuccarello and Frederick Gaudreau scored in the shootout to lift host Minnesota past New Jersey.

Blue Jackets 4, Maple Leafs 3: Kent Johnson scored in the third period as last-place Columbus beat host Toronto to split the teams' home-and-home set.

Jets 4, Blackhawks 1: Blake Wheeler had two goals and an assist to lead host Winnipeg.

Lightning 3, Stars 1: Anthony

Cirelli scored twice, including the winner with 43 seconds to play, to lift visiting Tampa Bay.

Avalanche 5, Panthers 3: Nathan MacKinnon had two goals and an assist as visiting Colorado beat Florida.

Red Wings 5, Canucks 2: Dylan Larkin and Jonatan Berggren scored two goals apiece and host Detroit beat Vancouver.

Rangers 6, Hurricanes 2: Artemi Panarin had four goals and an assist to lead visiting New York to its fifth straight win.

Oilers 6, Senators 3: Connor McDavid and Zach Hyman each had a goal and an assist to lead visiting Edmonton.

Flames 7, Sabres 2: Visiting Calgary scored four times in just over five minutes in the second period to rally past Buffalo.

Kings 6, Penguins 0: Adrian Kempe had his first four-goal game and completed host Los Angeles' first natural hat trick in nearly 10 years, and Phoenix Copley got his second career shutout.

Makhachev tops Volkanovski, keeps UFC lightweight title

Associated Press

PERTH, Australia — Islam Makhachev defied a rowdy crowd and a sustained challenge from Alexander Volkanovski on Sunday to cement his supremacy in the UFC lightweight division in a grueling fight in Perth, Western Australia.

In the main event of UFC 284, Makhachev defended his 155-pound belt with a unanimous decision (48-47, 48-47, 49-46) to prevail in a five-round slugfest.

The 31-year-old also claimed the title of best pound-for-pound fighter from featherweight champion Australian Volkanovski, who saw his 22-bout winning streak ended.

"People will call me not just

'champ', but 'best fighter in the world.' I'm very happy," said the Russian who was jeered throughout the fight by a sold-out 13,000 crowd at RAC Arena.

"I landed many good punches but he's strong and a real champion. He was the best fighter in the world ... not now."

Makhachev (24 wins, one loss) had to fend off a furious challenge from the 34-year-old Volkanovski but his grappling and wrestling prowess proved enough.

Volkanovski, a former concreter and rugby league player, impressed as he moved up a division. He landed several blows and dominated for stretches of the contest but fell in his second defeat from 27 fights.

"It was a winnable fight. I'm very harsh on myself," said Volkanovski, who hopes for a rematch with Makhachev after suffering his first UFC defeat. "I'm still proud of myself and proved people wrong but I expected to win and could have capitalized on things earlier (in the fight). Maybe I held back just a little bit until the last round."

Considered the greatest UFC featherweight of all time, Volkanovski faced the toughest challenge of his career against an opponent four inches taller and 15 pounds heavier.

Volkanovski, who made his ring walk to the classic Australian song 'Down Under,' needed to rely on his formidable striking and speed to produce

an upset.

Both fighters felt each other out initially amid a febrile atmosphere before Volkanovski went on the attack as they traded blows.

But Makhachev got on top with his favored grappling and tried to choke out Volkanovski but was unable to.

Volkanovski, who holds the nickname 'The Great,' survived a big left from his opponent in the second round before clawing back into the fight as it went the distance.

During a frenetic finish, willed on by giddy fans, a bloodied Volkanovski made his move and a big right-handed blow gave him one last chance, but Makhachev held firm to ultimately prevail.