

## Fentanyl factors into more military deaths

By ROSE L. THAYER  
*Stars and Stripes*

Fentanyl was involved in 88% of the deaths of service members who overdosed on illicit drugs in 2021, a steep increase in five years, according to Defense Department data provided to Congress.

“Our military is not immune to the opioid epidemic,” Sen. Edward Markey, D-Mass., said in a statement Wednesday. “The Department of Defense’s latest report underscores the urgency of this moment and our need to ensure access to quality care and treatment without stigma or shame.”

Five years ago, the synthetic drug was involved in 36% of troop overdose deaths, according to Pentagon data.

Markey and other senators requested data on overdoses from the Defense Department

in September and last week received 12 pages from Pentagon officials that included statistics and prevention efforts.

From 2017 to 2021, 15,293 service members overdosed on drugs and alcohol and 332 died. More than half of those who died had taken fentanyl, a synthetic opioid that is more potent than morphine, the report found.

Fentanyl, an approved pain medication being produced and sold illegally, is killing about 70,000 Americans each year, President Joe Biden said earlier this month in his State of the Union speech.

Increasingly, fentanyl is mixed with other illicit drugs or used to replace another drug entirely so that users are expecting something else, and this has led to a rise in deaths from the drug nationwide, according to

the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Military officials determined service members accidentally overdosed in 84% of the deaths.

Just 12% of the deaths were thought to be suicides.

“Every drug overdose is a preventable loss of life and we must work to do better,” Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Gilbert Cisneros wrote in his letter to senators.

“The department continues to evaluate, refine and improve strategies for overdose prevention to ensure we are making every effort to prevent these tragic deaths.”

About 10% of those who died had previously failed a drug test administered through their service, the Defense Department said.

The Army, which is the lar-

gest of the service branches, saw the most overdose deaths during the five-year period, with a slight decrease from 36 deaths in 2017 to 35 in 2021, according to the Defense Department.

The Navy and Marine Corps, however, saw the number of deaths in each service double. Eleven sailors died in 2017 and 21 died in 2021. The Marines lost five sailors in 2017 and 10 in 2021.

The Air Force saw overdose deaths increase from nine to 11.

Cisneros told senators that the Pentagon’s effort to prevent overdose deaths are “focused on integrating all drug-related data, including fatal and non-fatal drug overdoses, to ensure timely data monitoring and improve coordination, messaging, treatment intervention and promote readiness.”

## US troops train in polar pairing with Nordic, NATO allies

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

STUTTGART, Germany — The U.S. Army in Europe on Thursday launched one of its largest drills in recent years in the Arctic, where thousands of troops are fanning out across Finland and Norway to test their cold-weather fighting skills.

Arctic Forge 23, an inaugural exercise led by U.S. Army Europe and Africa, comes as allies put greater emphasis on deploying combat-ready forces to NATO’s northern flank.

The Arctic drill, which runs until March 17, includes Finland’s Defense Exercise North and the exercise Joint Viking in Norway.

“Arctic Angel” soldiers from the Alaska-based 11th Airborne Division will take part in an “over-the-pole” flight to Finland. And soldiers from the 10th Mountain Division and Virginia Army National Guard will join

the effort.

The focus will be on commanding and controlling a multinational force at the battalion level, USAREUR-AF said in a statement Wednesday.

“The goal of Defense Exercise North is to demonstrate readiness by deploying a combat-credible force to enhance power in NATO’s northern flank in support of our partner Finland, an aspiring NATO member,” the statement said.

Meanwhile, 730 Marines and 200 U.S. soldiers will take part in Joint Viking alongside more than 10,000 combined military personnel from Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands, Norway and the United Kingdom.

Joint Viking also involves winter warfare and maneuver training as well as live-fire drills carried out by the Army’s 41st Field Artillery Brigade.

The training in the High North is unfold-

ing as Russia takes steps to fortify its position in the region, even as its forces are bogged down in Ukraine.

In an annual intelligence report released Monday, Norway noted that defense of Russian bases in the Arctic has become more critical for the Kremlin, given Moscow’s difficulties in Ukraine and overall tensions with the West.

Nuclear weapons could play a larger role in Russia’s strategy for defending its positions in the Arctic, given its conventional losses in Ukraine, the Norwegian Intelligence Service said in its report.

The Arctic, where the melting of sea ice has raised the prospect of easier navigation in sea lanes, has become more of a military focal point for the Pentagon in recent years.

“We must win in any engagement, including and especially the Arctic,” Gen. Darryl Williams, commander of U.S. Army Europe and Africa, said in a statement.

# US learning lessons from Ukraine war

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — As the war rages on in Ukraine, the United States is doing more than supporting an ally. It's learning lessons — with an eye toward a possible clash with China.

No one knows what the next U.S. major military conflict will be or whether the U.S. will send troops — as it did in Afghanistan and Iraq — or provide vast amounts of aid and expertise, as it has done with Ukraine.

But China remains America's biggest concern. U.S. military officials say Beijing wants to be ready to invade the self-governing island of Taiwan by 2027, and the U.S. remains the island democracy's chief ally and supplier of defense weapons.

While there are key differences in geography and in U.S. commitment to come to Taiwan's defense, "there are clear parallels between the Russian invasion of Ukraine and a possible Chinese attack on Taiwan," a Center for Strategic and International Studies report found last month.

A look at some of the lessons from the Ukraine war and how they could apply to a Taiwan conflict:

## Arm in advance

Soon after Russian troops crossed into Ukraine last February, the U.S. and allies began sending massive amounts of weapons across the border from partner nations.

But Taiwan would need to be fully armed in advance, CSIS found in dozens of war scenarios it ran for its report.

"The 'Ukraine model' cannot be replicated in Taiwan because China can isolate the island for weeks or even months," CSIS found. "Taiwan must start the war with everything it needs."

Deputy Secretary of Defense Kathleen Hicks said Ukraine "was more of a cold-start approach than the planned approach we have been working on for Taiwan, and we will apply those lessons."

Hicks told The Associated Press that an amphibious landing is the hardest military operation to undertake. And re-supply will be difficult, particularly if China chokes off ocean access.

## Stockpile woes

But the Pentagon can't preposition equipment it doesn't have. Ukraine is putting intense pressure on the U.S. and European defense stockpiles and exposing that neither was ready for a major conventional conflict.

For some items "we have weaknesses in both our inventory and our production capacity," said CSIS International Security Program senior adviser Mark Cancian, an author of the Taiwan report. "In a couple of places, particularly artillery ammunition, it could become a crisis," he said.

Ukraine is shooting as many as 7,000 rounds a day to defend itself and has depended on announcements about every two weeks of new ammunition shipments from the U.S.

Since Russia invaded, the U.S. has sent Ukraine millions of rounds of munitions, including small arms and artillery rounds, 8,500 Javelin anti-armor systems, 1,600 Stinger anti-aircraft systems and 100,000 rounds of 125 mm tank ammunition.

One of the biggest stockpile pressure points has been 155 mm howitzer ammunition. The U.S. has sent Ukraine 160 howitzers and more than 1 million howitzer rounds, which have

been put to heavy use with as many as 3,000 rounds fired a day, according to the Pentagon.

Ukraine is waging a different type of war than the U.S. would likely face with China, said Doug Bush, assistant secretary of the Army for acquisition. A future U.S. campaign would likely involve much more airpower and seapower, taking some of the pressure off land-based systems and ammunition.

But allies would still need to be supported with land-based systems and ammunition.

## Rebuilding takes time

The Pentagon's defense strategy says the U.S. must be able to conduct one war while deterring another, but the supply chain has not reflected that.

Hicks said the surge of weapons to Ukraine "has not slowed down U.S. support to Taiwan," but many of the military sales promised to Taiwan are facing the same pressures the Ukraine munitions face, such as limited parts or workforce issues.

In response, the U.S. has set up a presidential drawdown authority for Taiwan, Hicks said, which will allow the U.S. to send weapons from its own stockpiles instead of arranging new contracts.

The Army is working with Congress to get the authority to do multiyear contracts, so that companies will invest to meet longer-term needs, especially for the systems Bush called "the big four" — Javelin missiles, High Mobility Artillery Rocket System (HIMARS) launchers, Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System (GMLRS) munitions and 155 mm rounds.

"Without that urgency, we risk being behind at the wrong time later," Bush said.

The Army is adding produc-

tion lines for 155 mm artillery — including major components such as the outer metal shell, chargers, the fuse and the explosive material — while right now all production is at one facility in Iowa.

All of that will take time. CSIS reported it could take five years or more to replenish 155 mm, Javelin and Stinger stockpiles.

For European stockpiles, there's not much excess left to send, and many of the partner nations are rushing to sign new contracts with industry to replenish inventories.

However, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg warned this week in Brussels that particularly for larger caliber munitions, such as for ground artillery, it could be as long as 2 ½ years before some new orders are delivered.

## Be ready for cyberwar

While the satellites and their transmissions must be protected, the ground stations to process and disseminate information are also vulnerable. As Russia invaded, a software attack against Ukraine's Viasat satellite communications network disabled tens of thousand of modems. While Viasat has not said who was to blame, Ukraine blamed Russian hackers.

China would most likely use cyber warfare to prevent Taiwan from being able to send out similar messages showing that it was effectively resisting any assault, Brands said.

That issue has the attention of the U.S. Space Force.

"If we're not thinking about cyber protection of our ground networks," the networks will be left vulnerable, and the satellites won't be able to distribute their information, said Chief of Space Operations Gen. Chance Saltzman.

# Trump grand jury believes witnesses lied

*Associated Press*

ATLANTA — A special grand jury that investigated efforts by then-President Donald Trump and his allies to overturn his election loss in Georgia says it believes some witnesses committed perjury, and it recommends “appropriate indictments.”

The panel recommended that the district attorney “seek appropriate indictments for such crimes where the evidence is compelling.” But the report does not name the people who are alleged to have lied.

In addition to the section on perjury, the report’s introduction and conclusion were released Thursday. But any recommendations on potential criminal charges for specific people will remain under wraps for now.

The partial release was ordered Monday by Fulton County Superior Court Judge Robert McBurney, who oversaw the special grand jury. During a hearing last month, prosecutors urged him not to release the report until they decide on charges, while a coalition of media organizations, including The Associated Press, pushed for the entire report to be made public immediately.

McBurney wrote in his order that it’s not appropriate to release the full report now because it’s important to protect the due process rights of people for whom the grand jury recommended charges.

The investigation is one of several that

could have serious legal consequences for the former president as he tries to persuade voters to return him to the White House in 2024.

The special grand jury, which was requested by Fulton County District Attorney Fani Willis to aid her investigation, did not have the power to issue indictments. Instead, its report contains recommendations for Willis, who will ultimately decide whether to seek one or more indictments from a regular grand jury.

Over the course of about seven months, the grand jurors heard from 75 witnesses, among them Trump allies including former New York Mayor and Trump attorney Rudy Giuliani and U.S. Sen. Lindsey Graham, of South Carolina. Top Georgia officials, such as Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger and Gov. Brian Kemp, also appeared before the panel.

Trump, who has publicly refused to accept that Joe Biden won the November 2020 election, has seemed particularly bothered by his loss in Georgia and what he saw as a failure of Republican state elected officials to fight for him. Georgia tipped to Biden by about 12,000 votes, making him the first Democratic presidential candidate to win there since 1992.

Trump and his allies have made unproven claims of widespread voter fraud and have repeatedly berated Raffensperger and Kemp for not acting to overturn his loss. State

and federal officials, including Trump’s attorney general, have consistently said the election was secure and there was no evidence of significant fraud.

Willis has said since the beginning of the investigation two years ago that she was interested in a Jan. 2, 2021, phone call in which Trump suggested to Raffensperger that he could “find” the votes needed to overturn his loss in the state.

“All I want to do is this: I just want to find 11,780 votes, which is one more than we have,” Trump said during that call. “Because we won the state.”

Trump has said repeatedly that his call with Raffensperger was “perfect,” and he told the AP last month that he felt “very confident” that he would not be indicted.

Based on witnesses called to testify before the special grand jury, it is clear that Willis is focusing on several areas. Those include phone calls by Trump and others to Georgia officials in the wake of the 2020 election; a group of 16 Georgia Republicans who signed a certificate in December 2020 falsely stating that Trump had won the state and that they were the state’s “duly elected and qualified” electors; false allegations of election fraud made during meetings of state legislators at the Georgia Capitol in December 2020; and the abrupt resignation of the U.S. attorney in Atlanta in January 2021.

## FBI searched Biden’s alma mater in classified documents investigation

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — The FBI searched the University of Delaware in recent weeks for classified documents as part of its investigation into the potential mishandling of sensitive government records by President Joe Biden.

The search, first reported by CNN, was confirmed to The Associated Press by a person familiar with the matter who was not authorized to discuss it publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity. The person would not say whether anything was found.

A Justice Department special counsel is investigating how classified documents from Biden’s time as vice president and senator came to wind up in his home and former office — and whether any mishandling involved criminal intent or was unintentional. Biden’s personal lawyers disclosed in January that a small batch of documents with classified markings had been found weeks earlier in his

former Washington office, and they have since allowed FBI searches of multiple properties.

The university is Biden’s alma mater. In 2011, Biden donated his records from his 36 years serving in the U.S. Senate to the school. The documents arrived June 6, 2012, according to the university, which released photos of the numbered boxes being unloaded at the university alongside blue and gold balloons.

Under the terms of Biden’s gift, the records are to remain sealed until two years after he retires from public life.

Biden’s Senate records would not be covered by the presidential records act, though prohibitions on mishandling classified information would still apply.

The White House referred questions to the Justice Department, which declined to comment. The University of Delaware also referred questions to the Justice Department.

## Urinal ban reversed

*Associated Press*

MILFORD, N.H. — A New Hampshire school board has reversed a policy banning middle and high school students from using urinals after dozens protested the measure, which had been a compromise to a proposal that would have blocked students from using facilities based on their gender identity.

Students at Milford Middle School and Milford High School can still access the bathroom that “corresponds to their gender identity consistently asserted at school.” But at its Feb. 6 meeting, the school board debated a proposal that would require students to use the restroom and locker room of their assigned sex at birth. The proposal upset transgender and gender nonconforming students.

The ban on urinals approved by the board was offered as a compromise. Dozens of students walked out several days later.

Milford School District Superintendent Christi Michaud said school officials also received emails and phone calls opposing the ban, which led to Wednesday night’s vote.



# Biden 'doubling down' on equality in government

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden on Thursday ordered the federal government to do more to address racial inequality as the challenges and complexities of systemic racism are again drawing the public's attention.

The order, signed during Black History Month, requires that an initial review into long-standing disparities in government services and treatment that he ordered on his first day in office become an annual requirement for federal agencies. The reviews are aimed at increasing access to federal programs, services and activities for disadvantaged communities. The new order also directs federal agencies to have equity teams and name senior leaders who would be accountable for increasing equity and addressing bias.

"My Administration has embedded a focus on equity into the fabric of Federal policymaking and service delivery," Biden wrote in the order, adding that, "By advancing equity, the Federal Government can support and empower all Americans, including the many communities in America that have been underserved, discriminated against, and adversely affected by persistent poverty and inequality."

Last month, Tyre Nichols, a Black man, died several days after he was severely be-

ten by five police officers following a traffic stop in Memphis, Tenn. Nichols was one of several Black men across the United States who died after encounters with police recently. The problem also extends to racial disparities in wealth, housing, crime and education that reflect decades of discriminatory policies.

Chiraag Bains, the president's deputy assistant for racial justice and equity, said that the new order shows Biden is "doubling down" on the commitment he made on his first day as president "to put equity at the center of how this government operates."

The order institutionalizes Biden's pledge that government be open and accessible to all and "is a recognition that achieving equity is not a one- or a two-year project. It's a generational commitment," Bains told The Associated Press.

Federal agencies would need to improve the quality and frequency of their engagement with communities that have faced systemic discrimination. And it formalizes Biden's goal of a 50% bump in federal procurement dollars that go to small and disadvantaged businesses by 2025.

Under the order, agencies must also focus on new civil rights threats, such as discrimination in automated technology and access for people with disabilities and for those who speak languages other than English.

## NATO chief urges Turkey to approve Finland, Sweden

Associated Press

ANKARA — NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg on Thursday urged Turkey to ratify the applications of Finland and Sweden to join the military organization, repeating his claim that the Nordic neighbors have done enough to satisfy Ankara's demands that they crack down on extremism.

At a news conference in Ankara standing alongside Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, Stoltenberg also condemned the burning of the Muslim holy book, the Quran, at a protest in Sweden, but said it is not illegal in Europe.

Alarmed by Russia's invasion of Ukraine a year ago, Finland and neighboring Sweden abandoned decades of nonalignment and applied to join the alliance. All 30 NATO members approved their applications, and 28 have ratified their accession. Only Turkey and Hungary have failed to do so.

Stoltenberg and most allies have long said that both the Nordic neighbors should join at the same time, but in recent days, NATO's top civilian official has softened his stance amid Turkey's reluctance to ratify Sweden's accession.

"My position is that both can be ratified now. But the main issue is not whether they are ratified together, the main issue is that Finland and Sweden are ratified as soon as possible," he told reporters in Ankara.

Turkey has accused the government in Stockholm of being too soft on groups it deems to be terror organizations or existential threats, including Kurdish groups. Earlier this month, Cavusoglu said Ankara has fewer problems with Finland joining.

"It would not be a realistic approach to say that Sweden has fully fulfilled its obligations," Cavusoglu said Thursday. "At the moment, we have not yet seen the concrete steps we want."

With cracking down on extremism a likely vote-winner in elections scheduled in Turkey for May — although the polls might be delayed due to the devastating earthquake that rocked Turkey and Syria last week — the rhetoric from Ankara has become increasingly heated.

In recent weeks, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has expressed anger at a series of separate demonstrations in Stockholm. In one case a solitary anti-Islam activist burned the Quran outside the Turkish Embassy, while in an unconnected protest, an effigy of Erdogan was hanged.

## What's a legal slap? Slap fight league regulators addresses safety concerns

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — The state commission that regulates slap fighting — in which opponents take turns striking each other in the face — attempted Wednesday to address a critical question for the budding sport: What constitutes a legal slap?

Competitors in the Power Slap League must deliver only open-handed blows and must not hit opponents below the chin, according to amended rules approved by the Nevada Athletic Commission that seek to make the matches safer.

The commission originally voted in October to sanction slap fighting, asserting it wanted to prevent unregulated matches

and ensure competitors are safe. However, commissioners were concerned the rules weren't specific enough.

"So, these guys want to get serious about the sport and it sounds like they do," said Anthony Marnell III, chairman of the commission which also regulates boxing and other combat sports. "It sounds like they want to evolve the rules. We as a commission need to keep up with them at lightning speed on how we're going to review this. And we have to have a process for it because there's going to be controversy."

Any slap that doesn't meet the criteria will result in disqualification, and every strike is subject to video review.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

**Bill requires state to buy out farms hurt by PFAS**

**ME** PORTLAND — A Maine lawmaker has proposed a bill to require the state to offer to buy out farmers whose land was contaminated by long-lasting chemicals caused by the spreading of sludge.

The chemicals are PFAS chemicals, which are sometimes called “forever chemicals” because of how long they persist in the environment. Republican Rep. Wayne Parry’s bill would require the state to value the land as if it weren’t contaminated and sets a minimum price of \$20,000 per acre, the Portland Press Herald reported.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency began an effort in 2021 to try to limit pollution from the chemicals, which are linked to health problems including cancer and low birth weight. PFAS-tainted sewage sludge has long been used as fertilizer.

**Ex-day care director faces counts in melatonin case**

**IN** GREENFIELD — A former suburban Indianapolis day care director is facing multiple charges after being accused of giving melatonin gummies to children without their parents’ consent to get them to sleep.

Tonya Rachelle Voris, 52, of Fortville, faces 11 counts of neglect of a dependent and six counts of reckless supervision by a child care provider. Voris formerly operated the Kidz Life Childcare Ministry at New Life Church in Cumberland, court

records say.

Pastor David Faulk told Cumberland police he learned Voris and another employee gave 17 kids, ages 1 to 4, melatonin gummies without their parents’ consent from mid-December through the end of January, court documents said. Faulk told police he fired Voris after she admitted to giving melatonin gummies to some of the kids. Faulk said the other worker was still employed.

Several parents told police their children had trouble sleeping and developed a rash.

**Homicide suspect attacks her attorney in court**

**WI** GREEN BAY — A woman accused in a grisly killing and dismemberment case in Wisconsin attacked her attorney Tuesday during a court hearing, moments after a judge agreed to delay her trial.

Taylor Schabusiness, 25, was seated in a Brown County circuit court when her attorney, Quinn Jolly, asked the judge for an additional two weeks for a defense expert to review his client’s competency to stand trial.

Moments after Judge Thomas Walsh reluctantly agreed to postpone her March 6 trial, Schabusiness attacked Jolly and was wrestled to the courtroom floor by a deputy, WLUK-TV reported. The courtroom was then cleared before the hearing resumed.

Schabusiness is charged with first-degree intentional homicide, mutilating a corpse and third-degree sexual assault in the killing of Shad Thyryon, 25, in February 2022. Authorities say she strangled Thyryon

at a home in Green Bay, sexually abused him and dismembered his body.

Schabusiness has pleaded not guilty and not guilty by reason of mental disease or defect. She is being held on a \$2 million cash bond.

**County to pay \$1.3M to man hurt by sheriff’s K-9**

**CA** SANTA ROSA — Sonoma County will pay \$1.35 million to settle a civil rights lawsuit brought by a man who was mauled by a sheriff’s K-9 three years ago.

Sheriff’s deputies used a stun gun on Jason Anglero-Wyrick and then unleashed a police dog on him in April 2020, following an unsubstantiated report that he had pointed a gun at another person.

No gun was ever found and charges were never filed against Anglero-Wyrick.

He sued in 2021, claiming the two deputies used excessive force during the encounter, which Anglero-Wyrick’s teen daughter recorded on video. The settlement was reached Jan. 6.

The video shows Anglero-Wyrick raising his hands outside his home as deputies shout at him to get on the ground. The dog attacked him for 90 seconds, according to the lawsuit, ultimately tearing a chunk out of his calf.

**Stax offers its 3rd free virtual soul music event**

**TN** MEMPHIS — The foundation associated with the Stax Museum of American Soul Music and the Stax Music Academy says a new multimedia presentation cele-

brating Black History Month is now available for viewing online.

The Memphis-based Soulsville Foundation made its third virtual Black History Month presentation available for viewers Feb. 3.

Stax Museum and the youth music academy were born from the former Stax Records, the Memphis recording studio where Otis Redding, the Staple Singers, Isaac Hayes, Carla Thomas, Booker T. and the M.G.s and other soul legends cut classic songs during the 1960s and 1970s.

Titled “Soul of America: The Evolution of Soulsville,” the presentation is free of charge.

**Sports gambling sought without statewide vote**

**GA** ATLANTA — Georgia lawmakers are pushing bills that would allow sports betting and horse race betting without a state constitutional amendment, arguing that can be legal under the authority of the state lottery.

The House and Senate are taking different approaches. House Bill 380, introduced Monday, would allow sports betting only. A Senate committee on Tuesday held a hearing on Senate Bill 57, which would explicitly include horse racing as part of sports gambling. That bill would also authorize three horse racing tracks with betting statewide.

Some Georgia lawmakers attempt to expand gambling every year in the General Assembly, but none have been successful since voters approved the lottery in 1992.

— From wire reports

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# NASCAR's 75th season one of transition

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Kevin Harvick is looking for the exit ramp as he enters his final season as a NASCAR driver while seven-time champion Jimmie Johnson is sliding back into stock cars.

Harvick's farewell tour will come nine years after his only Cup Series title and ahead of a move into the broadcast booth. Johnson, after two years in IndyCar, has returned to NASCAR as its newest team owner.

Petty Enterprises, an emblem of NASCAR since shortly after the series' 1948 launch, has re-branded once again and is now Legacy Motor Club. Johnson will sometimes drive for the team he co-owns; this week, for example, he qualified 23rd for Sunday's Daytona 500.

This 75th season of NASCAR begins Sunday with the big race and it will be a year of celebra-

tion and transition.

Veteran drivers are making room for potential new stars that the public must learn to love. Series leadership is negotiating with its current television partners with the \$8.2 billion deal with Fox and NBC set to expire at the end of the 2024 season. NASCAR owners are also demanding a more stable financial model that makes their success less dependent on outside sponsorship.

And then there are the frantic changes NASCAR is making to protect its drivers in the second year of the Next Gen car. The rear of the car proved too stiff last year and the energy drivers absorbed in routine collisions led to concussions — including one that ended veteran Kurt Busch's career.

Alterations made during the offseason lacked the desired effect at the preseason Busch

Light Clash exhibition at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum, where low-speed bumping and banging left drivers complaining about the "violence" of the race, including the jarring whip-lash effect they felt each time their rear bumper was slammed.

"We think the changes are certainly heading in the right direction, but from an engineering perspective obviously there needs to be more attenuation in the rear of the car to absorb more of the energy," David Wilson, president of Toyota Racing Development, told The Associated Press.

"There's no question that they've made a steep change. The first car that gets backed in the wall, everyone's going to be paying attention, right?" Wilson added. "(One) of the questions is: What impact will it have on the rest of the car, now that

they've softened up the rear of the car?"

## New races and rules

NASCAR continued this year to tweak a schedule that went decades with little to no change. This year, the All-Star Race moves to North Wilkesboro Speedway for the first Cup race at the historic North Carolina track since 1996.

NASCAR on July 2 will also run its first street course race, in downtown Chicago. And the first race of the year at Atlanta and the playoff race at Texas have both been reduced from 500 miles to 400 miles.

Stage breaks have been removed from road course races. If a wheel comes off a car while on track it will now only be a two-race suspension. It was a four-race suspension last year that included the crew chief, who will no longer face punishment.

# Hendrick cars take front-row spots for Daytona 500

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Alex Bowman admired yet another Daytona 500 pole trophy that he won from mastering the superspeedway over one fast lap ahead of NASCAR's marquee race.

The Hendrick Motorsports driver still wants to add to his Daytona collection. There's a championship trophy missing.

"It may not be the big one," Bowman said. "But it's not a bad one to have."

Bowman and Kyle Larson turned Daytona 500 qualifying into another Hendrick Motorsports romp.

Bowman posted the top speed in his No. 48 Chevrolet at Daytona International Speedway and won his third career pole for the race. He'll be joined by Larson in the No. 5 Chevrolet on the front row for NASCAR's season opener.

The Hendrick dominance is a

recurring theme at Daytona.

"They've got something figured out, for sure," Larson said. "There's obviously tricks they've learned along the way that still apply to these cars."

Bowman, who missed five races late last season because of a concussion, is on the Daytona 500 front row for the sixth straight time, and the organization has produced a pole winner in eight of the last nine years.

"There's a ton of effort that goes into trying to qualify well here," Bowman said.

Jimmie Johnson made a triumphant return to NASCAR on Wednesday night and qualified for the Daytona 500, a tremendous start for the seven-time champion as he heads into his first Cup race since 2020.

The 47-year-old Johnson returned from a two-year dalliance in IndyCar for an ownership stake in Legacy Motor Club — and he quickly added to his

own, joining the 40-driver field Wednesday night in his No. 84 Chevrolet.

Yes, a reverse of the No. 48 he ran when he won two Daytona 500s.

"I think I really have a shot to win," Johnson said before he qualified. "If I survive and get through the first two stages, there's really a shot that I have to win this race."

Johnson will be joined Sunday by another 40-something part-timer in former X Games thrill-seeker Travis Pastrana. Pastrana said racing in the Daytona 500 was one of his last motorsports goals and this was his last, best shot to get there. He landed a ride for Daytona in the No. 67 Toyota as a third entry for the NASCAR team owned by Michael Jordan and Denny Hamlin.

With 36 drivers already locked into the 40-car field based on NASCAR's charter

system, Johnson and Pastrana were among six others competing for the final four starting spots at Daytona International Speedway.

Johnson and Pastrana embraced on pit row after they locked themselves into the race. They can rest easy for a night.

So can Bowman, who has yet to parlay the top spot into a Daytona 500 win, and Larson. Bowman, who received a new contract and a new crew chief in Blake Harris entering this season, turned a top speed of 181.686 mph and Larson hit 181.057. Both drive Chevrolets for team owner Rick Hendrick.

"Now it's time to finish," Bowman said. "Make it to the end."

The final two open spots and the starting order were settled in Thursday night's duel qualifying races. Conor Daly, Austin Hill, Chandler Smith and Zane Smith were vying for the two open spots.



# Spring training a test for MLB's new rules

Associated Press

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Spring training games might be a little ugly this year, particularly during the first few weeks.

For Major League Baseball, that's a feature, not a bug.

The Grapefruit and Cactus League games in Florida and Arizona over the next month will be used as a petri dish for the sport's rule changes, including a pitch clock, bigger bases and limits to infield shifts. The idea is that the worst kinks will be worked out before opening day on March 30.

Though there's multiple innovations, one stands over the rest.

"The pitch timer is — by far — the biggest change that's coming this season," MLB executive vice president Morgan Sword said Tuesday. "Frankly, it's probably the biggest change that's been made to baseball in most of our lifetimes."

The pitch clock has been tested for a few years at the minor league level. Pitchers will have 15 seconds to deliver their pitch with no runners on base and 20 seconds when runners are on base. There will be 30 seconds between batters and 2 minutes, 15 seconds between innings.

MLB games averaged 3 hours, 4 minutes last season following the introduction of the PitchCom electronic device to signal pitches, down from a record 3:10 in 2021. Sword said MLB's research indicates fans prefer games that are around 2:30.

The pitch clock's effect on minor league games in 2022 was substantial. Games that used the clock were, on average, 25 minutes shorter than those that did not.

"Fans want a crisper pace," Sword said.

Sword said umpires will be

watching for more balks when runners are on base. Some pitchers — particularly relievers — have funky idiosyncrasies in their deliveries and never come to a complete stop before delivering a pitch. That's technically a balk, but umpires usually let those tics slide.

A complete stop with no movement becomes more significant because the pitch clock operator turns off the clock once the pitcher's motion toward the plate begins.

Balks rose to 924 during a 1988 crackdown from 356 the previous year, then declined to 407 in 1989 and 288 in 1990. The total has been under 200 annually since 1989 and was at 122 last year.

Sword said many MLB players who spent time in the minors during 2022 grew to appreciate the clock, even though there was an

adjustment period. He said most players needed a few weeks to a month to get used to the changes, which is about the length of spring training's game schedule.

Sword said the rule changes will be "full go" from the first day of spring training. That might lead to some irritated players and awkward moments during late February's spring training games.

Former big league pitcher Joe Martinez, who is MLB's vice president for on-field strategy, demonstrated some of the logistics on Tuesday at Talking Stick Field, spring training home of the Arizona Diamondbacks and Colorado Rockies.

He also detailed some of the technology that will be used to make the new pitch clock system happen, including buzzers for umpires, which vibrate when a pitcher has run out of time.

## Johnson proved himself in West, now out to be SEC's best

Associated Press

Jay Johnson is among the few college baseball coaches from the West Coast who have entered the cauldron that is the Southeastern Conference.

In his first season at LSU, he smashed any notion he would be overmatched in a league that has produced three consecutive national champions and eight of the past 13.

The Tigers won 40 games, had their first top-four finish in the SEC since 2017 and reached an NCAA regional final.

Johnson was just getting started.

LSU signed the nation's best recruiting class, brought in the top-rated group of transfers and has back the favorite to be the No. 1 overall pick in the 2023 MLB Draft in center fielder Dylan Crews.

The Tigers will open the season at home Friday night against Western Michigan as the consensus No. 1 team in the polls, the first time since 2019 they've had a top preseason ranking.

Any season not ending with LSU among the eight teams in the College World Series in Omaha, Neb., is a disappointment to the Tigers' passionate fans. That's the minimum expectation this year.

"I'm not a betting man, but if you want to bet,

I would imagine they're going to be one of those eight hot teams in Omaha and if they stay hot they'll win the whole darn thing," said Andy Lopez, a College Baseball Hall of Fame coach and Pac-12 Network analyst who was Johnson's predecessor at Arizona.

Johnson made two CWS appearances in six seasons at Arizona before he became the third coach to move from the West Coast to the SEC. The first two were Lopez and Dave Serrano.

Lopez was hired by Florida three years after he won the 1992 national title at Pepperdine. He led the Gators to two CWS appearances over seven seasons. He spent the last 14 years of his career at Arizona, winning the 2012 national championship before he retired in 2015. Johnson succeeded him in Tucson and the two are friends.

Serrano left Cal State Fullerton after the 2011 season and coached Tennessee six years, never finishing higher than fifth in the SEC East or making an NCAA Tournament.

Johnson, 45, grew up in the Northern California town of Oroville, played at Point Loma Nazarene in San Diego and worked his way up the coaching ranks from assistant at San Diego to head coach at Nevada and Arizona.

"I was very content at Arizona and really believed that was going to be my lifetime job,"

Johnson said. "I loved those players and what we accomplished there and was very comfortable."

As a player and young coach, Johnson followed the Tigers and iconic coach Skip Bertman from afar as they won five national titles from 1991 to 2000.

"For me, a lot is made out of the West Coast-to-the-South thing," Johnson said. "In reality, coaching is coaching, recruiting is recruiting, and so I just wanted to test myself against the best players, the best coaches, the best programs in college baseball right now."

Johnson, who will earn \$1.25 million in the second year of his five-year contract, said his plan was to build for 2023. He used year one to identify the program's greatest needs and addressed them in recruiting and through the transfer portal.

Starting pitching was the first concern. Johnson said the 2022 rotation, by metrics he and his staff use, ranked 11th of 14 in the SEC.

Johnson hired pitching coach Wes Johnson away from the Minnesota Twins and signed elite transfers in Paul Skenes (Air Force), Thatcher Hurd (UCLA) and Christian Little (Vanderbilt). Right-handers Chase Shores and Aiden Moffett and lefty Griffin Herring are the top freshman arms.

# Shiffrin holds on, strikes gold in GS

Associated Press

MERIBEL, France — American skier Mikaela Shiffrin won the gold medal in the women's giant slalom at the world championships on Thursday, a day after her unexpected split with longtime coach Mike Day.

Shiffrin overcame a mistake near the end of the race to hold on to her first-run lead. When she saw her time, she covered her mouth with her hands, then collapsed to the snow in joy, relief and celebration.

She stayed there for a few moments, breathing heavily from the exertion of her run.

Italian skier Federica Brignone, who was 0.12 seconds behind to take the silver, and Ragnhild Mowinckel of Norway, who trailed by 0.22 for the bronze, came over to congratulate her.

"It's been definitely some high levels of stress these days," Shiffrin said. "It was very, very

difficult today to keep the focus and keep the intensity on the right level."

Shiffrin's victory came two days after Day, her head coach since 2016, left her team during the middle of the championships. Shiffrin informed him that she planned to take a new direction with her staff at the end of the season and Day decided to leave immediately.

"One thing I really want to say is just thank you to Mike for seven years of — I can't even say helping me — he's been such an integral part of my team and being there to support me through some of the most incredible moments in my career and some of the most challenging moments of my career and also my life," Shiffrin said.

"So it's it's just a little bit sad how it came down," Shiffrin said, adding that she was hoping to give Day "the time and the notice" to figure out his own plans

before the end of the season but that his sudden departure was "difficult for all of us to imagine" after "being such a tight group, really a family."

World championship races don't count toward the World Cup circuit, where Shiffrin has racked up 11 wins this season to take her overall tally to 85. She broke former teammate Lindsey Vonn's women's record of 82 last month and has moved within one of the overall mark set by Swedish great Ingemar Stenmark in the 1970s and 80s.

French skier Tessa Worley, who was second after the opening run, slid on her inside ski and fell in her second run.

"I felt my skiing was not relaxed enough," Worley said. "I didn't want to go for a medal, I wanted to go for the win."

Worley, a two-time giant slalom world champion, had the added pressure of skiing in front of her home fans.

"This is not an easy position, with the home crowd favorite to ... I mean, thank you for cheering for me anyway," said Shiffrin, who was the 2018 Olympic champion and won five of the last six giant slaloms on the World Cup circuit.

Brignone, who won gold in the combined event that opened the worlds last week, recovered from illness over the past days.

"I'm so proud, so happy, I managed to do it," the Italian said. "Today I was completely free, thinking about my skiing, I was able to put everything away."

It raises her tally to seven world titles and 13 medals overall from 16 career world championship races. She is in second place behind German skier Christl Cranz on the all-time list for the most individual medals won by a woman at the worlds. Cranz won 15 medals in the 1930s.

## NBA heads to Salt Lake City for All-Star weekend

Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY — If so inclined, and if fellow captain LeBron James was to cooperate with his own selections, Giannis Antetokounmpo could pick Luka Doncic, Nikola Jokic, Joel Embiid and Lauri Markkanen to play on his team Sunday night.

Imagine that: an All-International All-Star starting lineup.

It's one of the many possibilities for this weekend's events in Salt Lake City.

NBA All-Star weekend is almost here, with many of the principals arriving in Utah on Thursday and a few more set to arrive on Friday in time for the official three-day lineup to begin. More than 60 players from the NBA and G League will be part of the showcase — the All-Star Game on Sunday, the dunk, three-point and skills competitions on All-Star Saturday, and

the Rising Stars games for first- and second-year players on Friday.

"You can never take this for granted," said Antetokounmpo, the Milwaukee Bucks forward who is heading to his seventh All-Star Game. "You never know how many times more you're going to be an All-Star. I don't take this for granted. And by the way, thanks for all the fans who voted for me as captain. I don't take that for granted. We have to go there, have fun, enjoy the time with our kids."

Of the 10 starters on Sunday night, barring any changes to the rosters because of injuries, six were born outside the U.S., which is a record. The nine internationally born All-Stars ties a record.

It's a homecoming of sorts for Donovan Mitchell, the Cleveland guard who spent the first

five years of his NBA career in Utah until he was traded last summer. Mitchell still has deep ties to Utah; he's throwing a comedy show for charity this weekend to benefit Kearns High School, a place that he worked closely with when he played for the Jazz.

"You learn to appreciate those moments," said Mitchell, who had to miss last year's All-Star Game in Cleveland because of an upper respiratory issue. "You learn to appreciate those things because they saw me grow up. I was a young kid, just happy to be drafted and then given a role to be one of the leaders on the team early, making the playoffs, having big moments, having struggles, ups and downs. And to grow into who I am today, I'm forever grateful, forever thankful."

"So to be there my first time as

a starter, back on the team that I was a fan of as a kid, there's just so many different things you can point to."

For some — Minnesota's Anthony Edwards, Sacramento's De'Aaron Fox, Oklahoma City's Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, Indiana's Tyrese Haliburton, Memphis' Jaren Jackson Jr. and Markkanen of the host Jazz — this will be their first appearance.

The NBA is set to pay tribute to James passing Kareem Abdul-Jabbar earlier this month as the league's career scoring leader with a halftime ceremony on Sunday night.

James missed three games with foot and ankle issues, then returned and played only 29 minutes in the Lakers' win Wednesday over New Orleans — so he should be fully recharged for the last 23 games.