

Polish leader seeks more US firepower

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Poland wants to see larger stockpiles of U.S. weaponry on its soil, which would allow allies to respond faster in a crisis, the country's head of state said this week.

President Andrzej Duda said in an interview Wednesday on Polish television that he had brought up the issue with his American counterpart, Joe Biden, during talks in Warsaw.

Duda asked that Army equipment and weapons be moved "to places created especially in Poland in order to strengthen the potential of the American presence in terms of infrastructure."

"My proposal was received with great attention," he said on national broadcaster TVN24.

Biden's two-day visit to Warsaw concluded Wednesday with a meeting between leaders of Poland and other NATO countries on the alliance's eastern flank for discussions about regional security.

Since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine one year ago, the number of American troops operating out of Poland has been on the rise. About 10,000 U.S. service members are now carrying out missions to the country on a rotational basis.

But even before the invasion, Poland had emerged as a center of gravity for the U.S. military in Europe, where several thousand troops have been positioned on a steady basis since 2014.

Duda's comments about a desire for more military equipment come as allies near completion on a major weapons depot in Powidz, which now functions as a logistical hub in Poland for the Pentagon.

As early as this spring, a new Army prepositioned stock site is expected to open after years of construction. It is one of the largest NATO-funded infrastructure initiatives in decades.

The site covers more than 650,000 square feet of warehouse space, which is expected to eventually be filled with battle

tanks, armored combat vehicles and artillery.

The Army began setting up various weapons depots around Europe after Russia's aggression in Ukraine in 2014, resulting in the occupation and illegal annexation of the Crimean Peninsula.

The purpose of the depots was to have ready-to-use combat gear in places that U.S. soldiers could quickly man in a crisis.

During his discussions with Biden, Duda said the two leaders also spoke on the need to detail procedures for deploying forces to the eastern front in crisis scenarios.

"The point is that there should be designated units from the U.S. that will come to help in case of need," Duda said.

Such units also need to be designated within the rest of the alliance, he added.

NATO is expected to refine regional defense plans for how units will mobilize to reinforce the eastern flank, when heads of state gather this summer for a summit in Vilnius, Lithuania.

Storms bring plights aplenty across wide swath of US

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — Winter storms sowed more chaos across the U.S. on Thursday, shutting down much of Portland after the city experienced its second snowiest day in history and paralyzing travel from parts of the Pacific Coast all the way to the northern Plains.

The nearly 11 inches of snow that fell in Portland stalled traffic during the Wednesday evening rush and trapped drivers on freeways. Some spent the night in their vehicles or abandoned them altogether as crews struggled to clear roads.

The storms brought heavy snow to places that rarely see it, knocked out power to hundreds of thousands of homes and grounded or delayed thousands of flights.

For the first time since 1989, the National Weather Service issued a blizzard warning for the Southern California mountains. Forecasters predicted "multiple rounds" of snow, with accumulations of up to 3 to 5 feet predicted for the Sierra Nevada region.

Snow was also expected over some lower

foothills and valley areas near the Pacific Coast, the weather service said, "given the depth of cold air that has infiltrated the West."

Large amounts of moisture in the air also created an increased risk of flash flooding, forecasters said. Some coastal areas could see waves as high as 10 to 14 feet through Thursday, forecasters said.

At one point Wednesday, more than 65 million people in more than two dozen states were under weather alerts. The weather service said temperatures in some parts of the upper Midwest could plunge to 40 degrees below average.

In Wyoming, roads across much of the southern part of the state were impassable, state officials said.

In the Pacific Northwest, high winds and heavy snow in the Cascade Mountains prevented search teams from reaching the bodies of three climbers killed over the weekend in an avalanche on Washington's Colchuck Peak.

In Arizona, several interstates and other

highways were closed due to high winds, falling temperatures and blowing snow.

A Michigan firefighter in the village of Paw Paw died Wednesday after coming in contact with a downed power line, authorities said. Van Buren County Sheriff Dan Abbott called it a tragic accident that was "no fault of the firefighter."

As of Thursday morning, more than 681,000 customers were without power in Michigan; over 84,000 in Illinois; over 58,000 in Wisconsin; about 42,000 in California and about 32,000 in New York state, according to the website PowerOutage.us.

Weather also contributed to nearly 1,800 U.S. flight cancellations on Wednesday and another 759 by Thursday morning, according to the tracking service FlightAware. Another 6,000-plus flights were delayed across the country.

As of Thursday morning, the weather service reported 16 inches of snow in the Minneapolis suburb of Savage and 10.1 inches at Minneapolis-St. Paul International Airport, with only a little more expected.

'Pilot error' caused crash aboard carrier

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

A junior officer's failure to complete a landing checklist during a specialized maneuver last year caused an F-35 to crash into an aircraft carrier, injuring six sailors and destroying the \$115.3 million jet, the Navy determined.

The pilot, an unnamed lieutenant assigned to Strike Fighter Squadron 147, failed to complete his checklist before attempting to land the F-35C Lightning II aboard the USS Carl Vinson on Jan. 24, 2022, according to the accident investigation report provided to Stars and Stripes on Thursday by Naval Air Forces Pacific spokesman Cmdr. Zachary Harrell.

As a result, the pilot failed to transition from a manual control mode to automatic, the F-35C did not behave as he expected and it

subsequently crashed onto the flight deck, according to the report.

Video footage of the crash leaked on social media in February 2022 shows the fifth-generation fighter striking the Carl Vinson's deck, bursting into flames and skidding across the deck before falling into the South China Sea.

The Navy recovered the jet from the ocean floor on March 2, 2022, more than a month after the crash.

On his approach, the pilot attempted an expedited recovery maneuver, also referred to as a "Sierra Hotel Break" by pilots. However, his "lack of familiarity" with the maneuver and the loss of "situational awareness" led to the crash, Vice Adm. Karl Thomas, 7th Fleet commander, said in the report.

"This mishap was the result of

pilot error," Thomas wrote in his endorsement. "The mishap pilot (MP) attempted an expedited recovery breaking overhead the carrier, an approved and common maneuver, but the MP had never performed this maneuver before and it reduced the amount of time to configure the aircraft and conduct landing checks."

During an expedited recovery maneuver, pilots use gravity to rapidly decelerate their aircraft during a 360-degree turn before landing on an aircraft carrier; the maneuver can reduce the time necessary to recover an aircraft, according to the report.

During this maneuver, however, the pilot failed to transition from a manual control mode to an automated one. Unaware of this mistake, the pilot's subsequent adjustments and corrections to the aircraft's thrusts

were not what he expected, according to the report.

A signal officer attempted to wave off the pilot, but the aircraft crashed into the flight deck just four seconds later.

Crash debris injured four sailors on the flight deck and another on the landing signal officer platform; the pilot was also hurt.

The impact and debris caused millions of dollars in damages. Debris struck a nearby EA-18G Growler, resulting in \$2.3 million in damage; another \$120,000 in damage was done to the carrier's deck.

And the F-35C, which the report said was purchased for \$115.3 million, was "struck from the inventory."

The pilot, meanwhile, has been removed from flight status but remains in the Navy, USNI reported on Tuesday, citing an unnamed Navy spokesman.

Chemicals found at school; Okinawa seeks soil samples

By MATTHEW M. BURKE
AND KEISHI KOJA
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — Okinawa prefecture wants to sample soil and water on Marine Corps Air Station Futenma after detecting PFOS at a neighboring elementary school in December.

Tests by the prefecture's Environmental Preservation Division found contamination at three sites in Ginowan, including Futenma Daini Elementary School, that was 16 times higher than at the Itoman control site where no U.S. base is nearby, the division said in a Feb. 15 statement.

The prefecture cannot rule out MCAS Futenma as a source of the pollution, according to the statement. Marine Corps Installations Pacific did not respond to an email requesting comment.

The chemical compounds PFOS and PFOA are subgroups of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, otherwise known as PFAS, and are used to make coatings and products that resist heat, oil, stains, grease and water, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. They are also found in firefighting foam used on U.S. military bases.

Prefectural officials invited on to MCAS Futenma in July 2021 to collect treated wastewater samples found combined PFOS and PFOA levels below the safe drinking water standard of 50 nanograms per liter, according to a statement by the prefecture.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency updated its advisories in June to say no level of PFOS or PFOA in drinking water is safe.

SEAL dies in parachute training accident in Ariz.

By SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

A Navy SEAL was killed Sunday in a military free-fall parachute accident in Arizona, according to multiple media outlets.

Chief Special Warfare Operator Michael Ernst died while training in Marana, Ariz., according to a Wednesday report by the Navy Times, which cited a statement from Naval Special Warfare Command.

The San Diego-based command did not respond Wednesday to phone and email messages from Stars and Stripes.

The Massachusetts native, assigned to an East Coast naval special warfare unit, was pronounced dead at Banner University Medical Center in Phoenix, according to the Navy statement, which was also cited by local

news station KOLD and USNI News.

"Mike was an exceptional teammate," Rear Adm. Keith Davids, the Naval Special Warfare commander, said in the statement. "He was a dedicated NSW sailor who applied his talents and skills towards some of our nation's hardest challenges, while selflessly mentoring his teammates. Mike and his family will always be part of the NSW family, and he will never be forgotten."

Ernst enlisted in August 2009. His awards and decorations include a Silver Star, Defense Meritorious Service Medal and three Combat Action Ribbons, according to Navy Times.

The Navy declined to provide additional comment pending a complete investigation, the reports said.

More extremist killings in US over last decade

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of U.S. mass killings linked to extremism over the past decade was at least three times higher than the total from any other 10-year period since the 1970s, according to a report by the Anti-Defamation League.

The report, provided to The Associated Press ahead of its public release Thursday, also found that all extremist killings identified in 2022 were linked to right-wing extremism, with an especially high number linked to white supremacy.

They include a racist mass shooting at a supermarket in Buffalo, N.Y., that left 10 Black shoppers dead and a mass

shooting that killed five people at an LGBT nightclub in Colorado Springs, Colo.

“It is not an exaggeration to say that we live in an age of extremist mass killings,” the report from the group’s Center on Extremism says.

Between two and seven extremism-related mass killings occurred every decade from the 1970s to the 2000s, but that number skyrocketed to 21 in the 2010s, the report found.

The trend has since continued with five extremist mass killings in 2021 and 2022, as many as there were during the first decade of the new millennium.

The number of victims has risen as well. Between 2010 and

2020, 164 people died in ideological extremist-related mass killings, according to the report.

That’s much more than in any other decade except the 1990s, when the bombing of a federal building in Oklahoma City killed 168 people.

Several factors combined to drive the numbers up between 2010 and 2020. There were shootings inspired by the rise of Islamic State as well as a handful targeting police officers after civilian shootings and others linked to the increasing promotion of violence by white supremacists, said Mark Pitcavage, a senior research fellow at the ADL’s Center on Extremism.

The center tracks slayings linked to various forms of extremism in the United States and compiles them in an annual report. It tracked 25 extremism-related killings last year, a decrease from the 33 the year before.

With the waning of ISIS, the main threat in the near future will likely be white supremacist shooters, the report found. The increase in the number of mass killing attempts, meanwhile, is one of the most alarming trends in recent years, said Center on Extremism Vice President Oren Segal.

“We cannot stand idly by and accept this as the new norm,” Segal said.

US revises down GDP rating to 2.7% growth

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. economy expanded at a 2.7% annual rate from October through December, a solid showing despite rising interest rates and elevated inflation, the Commerce Department said Thursday in a downgrade from its initial estimate.

The government had previously estimated that the economy grew at a 2.9% annual rate last quarter.

Meanwhile, the Labor Department reported Thursday that the number of Americans filing for jobless aid fell last week as the labor market remains resilient in the face of the Federal Reserve’s interest rate increases meant to cool the economy.

Applications for unemployment benefits in the United States for the week ending Feb. 18 fell by 3,000 last week to 192,000, from 195,000 the previous week, the Labor Department said Thursday. It’s the sixth straight week claims were

under 200,000.

The four-week moving average of claims, which evens out some of the weekly volatility, inched up by 1,500 to 191,250. It’s the fifth straight week that figure has been below 200,000.

The Commerce Department’s revised estimate of last quarter’s gross domestic product — the economy’s total output of goods and services — marked a deceleration from the 3.2% growth rate from July through September. While overall growth was solid in the fourth quarter, business spending barely rose, and consumers spent cautiously, suggesting the economy lost momentum at the end of 2022.

More recent data issued this month, though, shows the economy has since rebounded. Consumers boosted retail sales in January by the most in nearly two years, and employers added a surprisingly outsize number of jobs. The unemployment rate reached 3.4%, the lowest level since 1969.

NTSB: No alert for train crew until just before derailment

Associated Press

EAST PALESTINE, Ohio — The crew operating a freight train that derailed in East Palestine, Ohio, did not receive a critical warning about an overheated axle until just before dozens of cars went off the tracks, federal safety investigators said in a report Thursday as U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg made his first visit to the crash site.

An engineer slowed and stopped the train after getting a “critical audible alarm message,” according to a preliminary report by the National Transportation Safety Board. The crew then saw fire and smoke and alerted dispatch of a possible derailment, the report said.

The axle investigators are focused on had been heating up as the train went down the tracks, but did not reach the threshold for stopping the train and inspecting it until just before the derailment, the report said. The train was going about 47 mph at the time, just under the speed limit of 50 mph, according to safety investigators.

Ohio Republican Lt. Gov. Jon Husted told CNN ahead of the re-

port’s release that its findings had the potential to form the basis of a criminal referral from the state. He also said railroad company Norfolk Southern should temporarily relocate people who continue to feel unsafe, or even consider buying their property.

Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro’s administration has already made a criminal referral of Norfolk Southern to the state attorney general’s office.

NTSB released its preliminary findings as Buttigieg went on a tour of the crash site Thursday after getting criticized for not coming sooner, and amid mounting criticism of the overall federal response to the Feb. 3 derailment.

The Biden White House has defended its response to the train derailment, saying officials from the Environmental Protection Agency, the transportation safety board and other agencies were at the rural site within hours of the derailment. The White House said it has also offered federal assistance and FEMA has been coordinating with the state emergency operations center and other partners.

Court favors tech giants in lawsuit

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court seemed skeptical Wednesday of a lawsuit trying to hold social media companies responsible for a terrorist attack at a Turkish nightclub that killed 39 people.

During arguments at the high court several justices underscored that there was no evidence linking Twitter, Facebook and Google directly to the 2017 attack on the Reina nightclub in Istanbul. The family of a man killed in the attack says the companies aided and abetted the attack because they assisted in the growth of Islamic State, which claimed responsibility for the attack. A lower court let the lawsuit go forward. What the court does with Wednesday's case and a related one it heard a day earlier is important, particularly because the companies have been shielded from liability on the internet, allowing them to grow into global giants.

If the court bars the lawsuit involving the attack in Turkey from going forward it could avoid a major ruling on the companies' legal immunity. That outcome would

leave the current system in place, but also leave open the possibility that the justices could take up the issue again in a later case.

Justice Amy Coney Barrett was among the members of the court who suggested that the suit against the companies lacks the kind of facts required under a federal anti-terrorism law to hold platforms responsible.

Barrett suggested that a lawsuit against a company such as Twitter would need to have more, such as direct messages, comment threads or other evidence that the platform was being used to coordinate activities for a terrorist attack, "not just general recruitment or radicalizing people."

Justice Neil Gorsuch, participating remotely for a second straight day because of illness, said he was having difficulty with the argument of a lawyer for the family of Nawras Alassaf, who was killed in the nightclub attack. Gorsuch told lawyer Eric Schnapper that he was "struggling with how your complaint lines up with the three requirements of the statute" that the companies knowingly helped a person commit a

terrorist act.

The justices seemed more willing to accept the arguments of a lawyer for Twitter, Facebook and Google, Seth Waxman. At one point during two and a half hours of arguments, Justice Sonia Sotomayor told Waxman to help her sketch out what an opinion would look like if the court ruled for his clients. "Write it for me," she said.

Justice Brett Kavanaugh summarized Waxman's argument this way: "When there's a legitimate business that provides services on a widely available basis ... it's not going to be liable under this statute even if it knows bad people use its services for bad things."

Seeming to agree with that idea, Justice Samuel Alito suggested that it would be outlandish if telephone companies were held responsible for criminal activity of people using their phones.

The law the case involves is the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act, which allows Americans injured by a terrorist attack abroad to sue for money damages in federal court.

Trump lawyers blast Ga. probe after juror speaks

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Former President Donald Trump's lawyers in Georgia are criticizing the Fulton County investigation into potential illegal election meddling after the foreperson of the special grand jury seated to help the probe went public this week.

Emily Kohrs first spoke out in an interview published Tuesday by The Associated Press, a story that was followed by interviews in other print and television news outlets. She described some of what happened behind the closed doors of the jury room — including how some witnesses behaved, how prosecutors interacted with witnesses and how some witnesses invoked their rights not to answer certain questions.

Trump attorneys Drew Findling and Jennifer Little said that despite having concerns

about the panel's proceedings from the start, they kept quiet out of respect for the grand jury process. But they said revelations offered by Kohrs this week compelled them to speak up.

"The end product is the reliability of anything that has taken place in there is completely tainted and called into question," Findling said in an interview with the AP on Wednesday evening. He said he held "no chagrin for a 30-year-old foreperson" who was part of "a failed system."

"She's a product of a circus that cloaked itself as a special purpose grand jury," he said.

Findling and Little said the district attorney's office, which was advising the special grand jury, should have done a better job of educating the grand jurors about the solemnity of the process.

FDA proposes oat, soy drinks can be called milk

Associated Press

Soy, oat, almond and other drinks that bill themselves as "milk" can keep using the name, according to draft federal rules released Wednesday.

Food and Drug Administration officials issued guidance that says plant-based beverages don't pretend to be from dairy animals — and that U.S. consumers aren't confused by the difference.

Dairy producers for years have called for the FDA to crack down on plant-based drinks and other products that they say masquerade as animal-based foods and cloud the real meaning of "milk."

Under the draft rules, the agency recommends that beverage makers label their products clearly by the plant source of the food, such as "soy milk" or "cashew milk." The rules also call for voluntary extra nutrition labels that note when the drinks have

lower levels of nutrients than dairy milk, such as calcium, magnesium or vitamin D. They would continue to allow labels that note when plant-based drinks have higher levels. Fortified soy milk is the only plant-based food included in the dairy category of U.S. dietary guidelines because of its nutrient levels.

The new guidelines are aimed at providing consumers clear nutrition information, FDA Commissioner Dr. Robert Califf said in a statement. The draft rules do not apply to nondairy products other than beverages.

In the past, lawmakers in dairy states have tried to get bills passed that would require the FDA to enforce a federal standard that defines "milk" as the product of "milking one or more healthy cows." The agency will accept comments on the draft guidelines through April 23.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Brothel worker arrested after shooting, standoff

NV YERINGTON — A worker at a legal brothel in Northern Nevada was arrested early Tuesday after a shooting and hourslong standoff with sheriff's deputies, authorities said.

No one was injured, and Lyon County Sheriff Brad Pope said there was no threat to the public following the arrest of 28-year-old Moonlite Bunny Ranch worker Savannah Henderson, of Dayton.

Henderson, who also uses the name Tiara Tae, was being held at the Lyon County Jail pending an initial court appearance on multiple felony shooting and drug charges, and misdemeanor charges of discharging a firearm and resisting arrest, the sheriff's office said.

Sheriff's deputies on Monday night responded to a report about a dispute between co-workers and gunshots fired at the brothel in Mound House, Pope said in a statement. Arriving deputies reported hearing several more gunshots and began evacuating the business while Henderson retreated into a room, the sheriff said. She surrendered about three hours later.

Firefighter pleads guilty in fatal firetruck crash

MO KANSAS CITY — A Kansas City firefighter who agreed to plead guilty to charges arising from a collision that killed three people was sentenced Tuesday to three years of probation.

Dominic Biscari, 22, pleaded guilty to three counts of second-

degree involuntary manslaughter shortly after the charges were filed, according to the Jackson County Prosecutor's Office.

On Dec. 15, 2021, Biscari was driving a pumper truck with lights and sirens activated on the way to a fire call through the city's Westport Entertainment District when he ran a red light, according to court documents. The firetruck hit a vehicle in the intersection before continuing into several parked cars and smashing into a building.

The driver of the vehicle, Jennifer San Nicolas, and a passenger in her car, Michael Elwood, died in the crash. Tami Knight, who was walking on a sidewalk, was killed when she was struck by the vehicles, investigators said.

Biscari and three other firefighters in the truck were not injured.

In September 2021, a medic warned fire officials that Biscari's driving was "horrendous" and that she refused to get into another firetruck with him, according to court documents.

Kansas City previously agreed to pay \$1.3 million to the victims' families. Another lawsuit is pending.

Mormon church fined for portfolio irregularities

UT SALT LAKE CITY — The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its investment arm have been fined \$5 million for using shell companies to obscure the size of the portfolio under church control, the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission announced Tuesday.

The faith, widely known as

the Mormon church, maintains billions of dollars of investments in stocks, bonds, real estate and agriculture. Much of its portfolio is controlled by Ensign Peak Advisers, a nonprofit investment manager overseen by ecclesiastical leaders known as its presiding bishopric.

The church has agreed to pay \$1 million and Ensign Peak will pay \$4 million in penalties based on the violation.

Ensign Peak avoided disclosing investments "with the church's knowledge," denying the SEC and the public of accurate information required under law, Gurbir Grewal, the agency's enforcement director, said in a statement.

Federal investigators said for 22 years, the firm violated agency rules and the Securities Exchange Act by not filing paperwork required that disclosed the value of its assets. Instead, they said Ensign Peak filed the forms through 13 shell companies they created, even as they maintained decision-making power.

Guns seized from man with mental health ban

CA AZUSA — Authorities seized nearly two dozen guns, silencers and some 35,000 rounds of ammunition at the Southern California home of a man who was forbidden to own weapons because of a mental health-related ban, it was announced Tuesday.

Agents from the California Department of Justice arrested the man on Jan. 25 at his home in the Los Angeles suburb of Azusa, Attorney General Rob Bonta announced.

The man was under a "mental

health-based prohibition" but was listed in the state's Armed Prohibited Persons System database as owning one firearm, according to a statement from the attorney general's office. The database identifies people who legally held firearms but were later banned from having them.

College students object to library, sports changes

VT MONTPELIER — Students angry about a plan to switch to an all-digital library at three Vermont state colleges and to restructure athletics took their cause to the Statehouse on Tuesday, hoping lawmakers could help reverse the schools' decision.

Northern Vermont University, which has campuses in Johnson and Lyndon, Castleton University and Vermont Technical College in Randolph will merge into a single Vermont State University this summer.

The Vermont State Colleges System, which has struggled financially for years, announced early this month that the Vermont State University library will shift to an all-digital format, effective July 1. The change in athletics will come in 2024, when the Johnson campus will switch from the NCAA to United States Collegiate Athletic Association as well as club sports.

At a Statehouse news conference Tuesday, some student athletes said they would have to transfer to other schools to continue to play in the NCAA. Other students questioned the decision to remove the physical library collections they say they rely on to learn.

— From wire reports

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NBA teams gearing up for stretch run

Associated Press

Kevin Durant went to Phoenix. Russell Westbrook moved from Los Angeles to Los Angeles. Kevin Love did what once worked out nicely for LeBron James, taking his talents from Cleveland to Miami. And speaking of James, he says he's about to play some of the biggest games of his career.

The All-Star break ended Thursday.

Let the playoff-push fireworks begin.

"It's not the start of a new season," Miami guard Tyler Herro said. "But I think this is when guys really raise their level of play."

Boston, Milwaukee, Philadelphia, Denver, Cleveland and Memphis probably can go ahead and make playoff plans. Houston, Charlotte, San Antonio and Detroit probably can go ahead and start scheduling April vacations.

That leaves 20 teams for 10 playoff spots. Sacramento is in position to end the longest drought in NBA history — 16 years and counting — and Cle-

veland is in line to make the playoffs without someone named LeBron on the roster for the first time since 1998.

"We have a group that's dedicated to winning, and there are certain things we have to learn about each other," Cavaliers guard Donovan Mitchell said. "It's not going to be all sunshine and rainbows with us. We're still a team that's young, but we also are figuring each other out."

The Cavaliers are five games behind Boston, 4½ behind Milwaukee and two behind Philadelphia in the East. The rest of the race might get jumbled; 13th-place Orlando is only four games from a play-in berth.

"We've given ourselves a chance," Magic rookie Paolo Banchero said.

Out West, it's a mess.

"The West is loaded now," Clippers forward Marcus Morris Sr. said. "I don't know how that happened."

Here's how: Durant went to Phoenix. Durant's trade to the Suns could make a team that looked vulnerable anything but vulnerable.

Denver is five games clear of Memphis for the West lead and eight games up on No. 3 Sacramento.

But starting with the Kings, there are 11 teams in the standings — Sacramento, the Los Angeles Clippers (who just got Westbrook, after he was bought out by Utah following a trade with the Lakers), Phoenix, Dallas (now with Kyrie Irving alongside Luka Doncic), New Orleans, Minnesota, Golden State, Oklahoma City, Utah, Portland and the Lakers — separated by just six games.

The seedings could flip every night out West.

"Must-see TV," Morris said.

And James — who just passed Kareem Abdul-Jabbar for the NBA scoring record — says the 23 games the Lakers have left carry incredible significance.

He didn't go to the playoffs last year. He can't envision missing them again.

"I don't want to see myself not being part of the postseason for two years straight. It's just not part of my DNA," James said.

Here's some of what to know

for the stretch run:

7 with 30

There are seven players — Dallas' Doncic, Philadelphia's Joel Embiid, Milwaukee's Giannis Antetokounmpo, Oklahoma City's Shai Gilgeous-Alexander, Portland's Damian Lillard, Boston's Jayson Tatum and James — averaging at least 30 points per game.

If that holds, it'll be an NBA record.

It's the fourth quarter

It's not the second half of the season. It's really the fourth quarter.

An NBA regular season has 1,230 games; 884, or 72%, have been played. So if the season was an NBA game clock, 1:30 would remain in the third quarter.

Teams have somewhere between 21 and 25 games left. Minnesota is down to a league-low eight home games remaining, while Indiana has nine. Washington has a league-high 15 home games left, while Atlanta and Charlotte each have 14.

Song OK for Phillies after transfer to Navy reserves

Associated Press

CLEARWATER, Fla. — The Philadelphia Phillies said Noah Song's transfer from active duty to the Navy reserves frees up the pitching prospect to report to camp with the team on Thursday.

Song, a 25-year-old aviator from California, was taken by the Phillies in the winter meeting draft in December with hopes he would play after military service.

The 6-foot-4, 200-pound right-hander was picked from the Boston Red Sox system in the draft for unprotected minor league players. Philadelphia put him on the military list while he continued active duty.

While Song is on the military list, he won't be counted against the 40-man roster until opening day. If he makes the team out of spring training, Song will be placed on the Phillies' 26-man roster. If he doesn't make the team, he will be traded or placed on waivers.

The Red Sox drafted Song in the fourth round — he likely would've gone much higher, but his impending military service caused teams to back off.

Song impressed in his only pro season, making seven starts for Boston's Class A Lowell affiliate in 2019, with a 1.06 ERA and 19 strikeouts in 17 innings. With a fastball clocked in the upper 90s, the right-han-

der dominated that year as a senior at the U.S. Naval Academy, going 11-1 with a 1.44 ERA and 161 strikeouts in 94 innings.

During his four-year collegiate career at Navy, he posted a 2.37 ERA in 58 games, with 428 strikeouts in 334⅓ innings. He pitched 14 complete games, nine of them shutouts. He throws a fastball, a slider, change-up and a curveball, but he hasn't pitched professionally since 2019.

In November 2019, Defense Secretary Mark Esper signed a memo clearing the way for athletes at military academies to delay service commitments and play pro sports after grad-

uation. Song's request to have those rules retroactively applied to him was denied.

Song began school as a flight officer in the summer of 2020 and finished that phase last April. He started additional aviation training the next month.

Song was among the 15 players, including three Boston pitchers, taken in the big league phase of the winter meeting draft. Washington took righty Thad Ward from Boston's Triple-A roster with the first pick. Baltimore took Red Sox minor league pitcher Andrew Politi with the ninth choice and the Phillies chose Song with the 11th selection.

Penguins scrambling as stretch run looms

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — The faces around Sidney Crosby, Evgeni Malkin and Kris Letang have changed over the years.

Coaches have come and gone. General managers, a litany of players — some of them forever etched in Pittsburgh Penguins lore, others not so much — and owners, too.

Yet Crosby, Malkin and Letang have remained. Through heartache and triumph. Milestones and giddy early summer parades along packed downtown streets, the Stanley Cup in tow.

They are the fulcrum around which the organization revolves, their presence in the NHL playoffs practically a given for 16 years and counting.

Yet nearly three-quarters of the way into their 17th season together, the group known simply as “The Big Three” finds itself in practically uncharted territory: scrambling to stay in the midst of a playoff chase.

The Penguins entered play on Thursday against Connor McDavid and Edmonton on the outside of the top eight in the Eastern Conference.

While there is plenty of time for Pittsburgh to right itself, the

reality is the Penguins have rarely looked as beatable during the Crosby/Malkin/Letang era as they have over the past five middling and maddening months.

The latest proof came in a frustrating 4-2 loss to the New York Islanders on Monday night, a game in which the Penguins dominated play for the first 45-plus minutes only to crumble down the stretch on their way to a ninth straight loss to a Metropolitan Division rival.

The setback marked the sixth time in 14 games the Penguins lost after leading through two periods. A team long known for its ability to finish has become vulnerable to late lapses that have cost them precious points in the standings.

“I mean, it’s not ideal when you lose games and you have leads, but the only way out of it is to find a way to win one and try to get some momentum from that,” Crosby said. “We can’t dwell on it.”

Mostly because there’s no time.

The NHL’s oldest roster finds itself facing a daunting sprint down the stretch. Pittsburgh will play its final 26 games in the

span of 50 days. Not ideal for a group that, save for a brilliant 14-2-2 run from Nov. 9-Dec. 15, has been ordinary at best.

While it’s not the first time during the Penguins’ streak of 16 straight playoff appearances that they have looked iffy as March looms, it may be the first time their options to rectify things have been so limited.

There are no young legs ready to come up from their American Hockey League affiliate in Wilkes-Barre/Scranton as Jake Guentzel, Bryan Rust and Conor Sheary did in 2015-16, an arrival that coincided with a dash to the franchise’s third Stanley Cup.

And there may be little in the way of reinforcements coming at the trade deadline. The players the Penguins have that are considered the most attractive to other clubs are the same players they can’t succeed without, and general manager Ron Hextall has a very different mandate than his predecessor, Jim Ruth-erford.

Where “Trader Jim” moved the parts around Crosby, Malkin and Letang frequently in search of a mix that worked, Hextall has been far more deliberate in his approach. He’s loathe — public-

ly anyway — to trade Pittsburgh’s first-round pick in this year’s draft as Pittsburgh keeps an eye toward the post-Big Three Era.

Still, coach Mike Sullivan, who signed a contract extension last fall, remains optimistic his team is close to figuring it out. His mantra of “playing the right way” hasn’t changed much from the day he was hired in December 2015.

Asked if there’s concern that Sullivan’s message may not have as much impact as it once did, Hextall shook his head.

“I think Sully is a terrific coach,” Hextall said when he last spoke to reporters earlier this month. “I would put him up against any coach in the league and if there’s any players that are not responding to him, I would look to move those players.”

Maybe, but barring something drastic, Pittsburgh will head into the final seven weeks of the season with essentially the same group that has flip-flopped between electric and erratic since October. It means the answers to what is ailing one of the league’s marquee franchises will likely have to come from within.

Ovechkin returns to Capitals after death of father

Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Va. — Alex Ovechkin is back with the Washington Capitals, eager to play hockey again while he and his family are still mourning the death of his father, Mikhail.

Ovechkin missed four games over the past week to fly to Moscow. He went straight from the airport to the team’s practice facility Wednesday after landing to take part in practice with an eye on returning to game action as soon as Thursday.

“Obviously it was a hard week mentally, physically,” Ovechkin said after skating for roughly 45 minutes to get his conditioning back. “It was probably toughest situation I’ve been through my whole NHL career. But it’s life, and we move on.”

Ovechkin thanked the Capitals for their moment of silence dedicated to Mikhail prior to a game last week and for the support shown by members of the organization and fans. He said he got the chance to speak to his dad by video call before his death at age 71 last week and expects his mother and brother to visit him in the United States soon.

“We try to do the best we can in that kind of hard moment,” Ovechkin said.

In his hard moment, Ovechkin wanted badly to get back on the ice. After only skating once during his absence, the 37-year-old captain said this season felt like training camp.

But there also wasn’t time to waste. The Capitals went 0-4 during Ovechkin’s absence and have lost five in a row in reg-

ulation for the first time in nine years.

“I just want to come back right away, put my mind in a different position,” Ovechkin said. “We’re struggling right now, so I just want to try to do my best to bring energy, bring something to the team.”

Having been outscored 20-8 during the franchise’s longest skid since 2014 — the previous time the Capitals missed the playoffs — they’ll gladly take the lift that comes with Ovechkin returning.

“He’s our leading scorer,” coach Peter Laviolette said. “He helps in a lot of different areas: offensively, power play, leadership, size, physicality, presence, so there’s a lot of things that Alex brings to the table. I’m glad he was able to get home and be with his family, and we’re certainly glad to have him back.”

MLS season starts with eye on Cup

Associated Press

The push toward the World Cup in 2026 begins now for Major League Soccer.

The league, entering its 28th season this year, has a new team in St. Louis City SC and a new media deal with Apple TV. This season will also feature an expanded Leagues Cup, which will involve all of the MLS and Liga MX teams for the first time.

The tournament is part of an ever-increasing collaboration between MLS and Liga MX, with both professional leagues looking forward to the attention they'll see in the run-up to the World Cup hosted by the United States, Mexico and Canada.

The 2022 World Cup in Qatar was already record-breaking, with 36 MLS players making national team rosters — double the league's players that were in Russia in 2018.

L AFC is the defending MLS Cup champion and Supporters Shield winner. The Western Conference team is loaded with talent, including Carlos Vela, Kellyn Acosta and Giorgio

Chiellini, but top scorer Cristian 'Chicho' Arango was sold to Pachuca in Mexico.

Wales legend Gareth Bale, L AFC's splashy signing last June, retired in the offseason but not before he provided a memorable moment in the championship game with an equalizer late in extra time that sent the match to penalties and a victory over the Philadelphia Union.

"I think our first 11 is still pretty good, and we're quite pleased with it. And we have a few very good players off the bench, we just don't have as deep a bench as last season. So we're focusing on staying healthy, and trying to manage a lot of games in a congested schedule this year," L AFC second-year coach Steve Cherundolo said.

Philadelphia, the Eastern Conference's top finisher last season, didn't make many huge moves in the offseason but lost key sub Cory Burke in free agency. The Union scored a league-best 72 goals and allowed just 26, fewest in MLS last

season and a record for a 34-game season.

"It's going to be hard to replicate what we did defensively last year, setting a record in goals-against, and then scoring as many goals as we did is certainly going to be a challenge, but this group will fight like hell for our fans and try to get back to that MLS Cup final," Union coach Jim Curtin said.

The 28th MLS season opens this Saturday.

How about them Apple(s)

MLS kicked off a 10-year partnership with Apple with the launch of Season Pass on Apple TV+ this season. Apple has made previous forays into sports streaming, but this is its first significant involvement with a league.

MLS will receive at least \$250 million per season from Apple. The league averaged \$90 million per season under its previous eight-year agreements with Fox, ESPN and Univision.

Oh, and for those who prefer watching games at the local pub

or eatery, the league has a "commercial establishments" deal with DirectTV.

New kids on the block

St. Louis City joins MLS this season as the 29th club. City opens the season on the road at Austin but returns home to face Charlotte on March 4 at the team's soccer-specific stadium, CITYPARK. The team's first home match will be played before a sellout crowd of 22,500.

City named goalkeeper Roman Burki, who came from Borussia Dortmund in the German Bundesliga, as its captain for the inaugural season. Defender Tim Parker was named vice captain.

"We want to play a fast-paced game. We want to keep it action packed, we want to really be working in the transition, we want to be working on the front foot, really bringing a lot of energy to the fans, hoping that they sit on the edge of their seats and not really get too comfortable, right?" coach Bradley Carnell said.

Paul set to take next step in boxing with Fury fight

Associated Press

Jake Paul's unorthodox career in boxing might just be about to get serious.

The YouTube influencer-turned-prize fighter will be coming up against a recognized professional boxer for the first time Sunday when he takes on Tommy Fury, the half-brother of world heavyweight champion Tyson Fury.

Since venturing into boxing in 2018, Paul has fought a fellow influencer, a former NBA basketball player and three MMA fighters. He has won each time, building up his already-sturdy brand in the process.

Fighting Fury is widely regarded as a step up and the WBC, which is sanctioning the

fight, recognizes it. Indeed, if the 26-year-old Paul — a blond, bearded social-media phenomenon — wins, he will be granted a place in the WBC's world rankings at cruiserweight.

"Jake has dedication and respect to the sport," the sanctioning body said, "and the WBC will not tolerate discrimination against anyone. He deserves the opportunities that any other boxer has."

It's hardly a move that will be popular with boxing traditionalists.

Then again, Paul is not exactly operating in those circles or attempting to please that demographic. He has forged a very different path into the boxing world and is making a success

of it, given the fight against Fury has gotten pay-per-view status and is deemed big enough to be hosted for big money out in Diriyah, Saudi Arabia.

Paul rose to fame a decade ago by posting Vine videos and then as an actor on Disney Channel show *Bizaardvark*.

Boxing is his most recent passion. He joined the pro ranks in 2019 and said he is "as serious as it gets" about the sport. He says he has a 30-person team supporting his training, which is largely done at the Cleveland native's base in Puerto Rico.

"Because my life's on the line," he told British newspaper *The Independent* ahead of the Fury fight, "so I'm not going to take that lightly."

Becoming a world champion boxer is his ultimate aim, even if that goal appeared even more remote with the news in January that Paul has signed a deal with the Professional Fighters League in mixed martial arts.

Certainly Fury doesn't take his opponent seriously.

"That's like saying a pig is going to fly, isn't it?" Fury said of Paul's ambitions of becoming a world titleholder.

"I'm going to teach Jake Paul a lesson ... I'm going to show him he can't just pick up a pair of gloves and say, 'I'm going to be a world champion.'"

Fury has an 8-0 boxing record but has never fought more than six rounds in a single bout.