

US bolsters defenses near Jordan base

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. has bolstered defenses at a base in Jordan that was attacked by Iran-backed militants as it prepares for a wider U.S. response to the drone attack that killed three service members, a U.S. official said Friday.

Even as a larger U.S. military response seemed imminent, some Iran-backed factions pledged to continue to attack U.S. forces in the Middle East.

In a statement released Friday, one of Iraq's strongest Iran-backed militias, Harakat al-Nujaba, announced its plans to continue military operations against U.S. troops, despite other allied factions having called off their attacks in the wake of the Sunday drone strike in Jordan.

Some of the militias have been a threat to U.S. bases for years, but the groups intensified their attacks in the wake of Israel's war with Hamas following the Oct. 7 attack on Israel. The war has led to the deaths of thousands of civilians in Gaza

and spilled across four other countries now. Iran-backed militia groups throughout the region have used the conflict to justify striking Israeli or U.S. interests, including threatening civilian commercial ships and U.S. warships with drones or missiles in almost daily exchanges.

A second U.S. official said the military had taken additional self-defense strikes inside Yemen Friday against Houthi military targets deemed an imminent threat. Al-Masirah, a Houthi-run satellite news channel, said that British and American forces conducted three strikes in the northern Yemeni province of Hajjah, a Houthi stronghold.

While previous U.S. responses in Iraq and Syria have been more limited, the attack on Tower 22, as the Jordan outpost is known, and the deaths of the three service members has crossed a line, the official said. In response, the U.S. is weighing a much wider response to include striking militia leaders.

The U.S. options under consideration include targets in Syria, Yemen and Iraq, where the Iranian-made drone that killed the service members was fired from, the official said.

The attack on Tower 22 led to the first deaths of U.S. service members since the war between Israel and Hamas broke out. U.S. response options were being weighed as President Joe Biden, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. CQ Brown traveled to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware to be with the families of those fallen soldiers as they are honored at a transfer ceremony.

The U.S. has blamed the Jordan attack on the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, a coalition of Iranian-backed militias. In the days since the attack, the U.S. has bolstered the defenses around Tower 22, which houses about 350 U.S. troops and sits near the demilitarized zone on the border between Jordan and Syria. The Iraqi border is only 6 miles away.

On Thursday Defense Secretary Austin indicated that the U.S. response against the militias would widen.

"At this point, it's time to take away even more capability than we've taken in the past," Austin said in his first press conference since he was hospitalized on Jan. 1 due to complications from prostate cancer treatment.

Austin said that Iran has had a hand in the attacks by supplying and training the militias. The U.S. has tried to communicate through back channels to Iran over the last few months to get them to rein in the militant groups, another U.S. official said.

The officials spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss details that have not been acknowledged publicly.

The U.S. has also tried more limited military responses in a series of strikes against weapons storage sites and training areas. So far, the response has not deterred the groups, which have attacked U.S. facilities at least 166 times since October.

Hamis expected to respond soon to cease-fire proposal

Associated Press

BEIRUT — Hamas officials said Friday that the group is studying a proposed cease-fire deal that would include prolonged pauses in fighting in Gaza and swaps of Israeli hostages for Palestinian prisoners, but at the same time appeared to rule out some of its key components.

Osama Hamdan, a senior Hamas official in Beirut, said the group remains committed to its initial demands for a permanent cease-fire. Hamdan also said the group seeks the release of thou-

sands of Palestinian prisoners being held for acts related to the conflict with Israel, including those serving life sentences.

Hamdan's comments on the prisoners were the most detailed demands yet to be raised by the group in public.

The insistence on large-scale prisoner releases and on an end to the fighting in Gaza put the group at odds with the multi-stage proposal that officials from Egypt, Israel, Qatar and the United States put forth this week. The proposal does not in-

clude a permanent cease-fire.

"There is no way that this will be acceptable by the resistance," Hamdan told Lebanon's LBC TV on Friday, referring to proposed successive pauses in fighting.

Israeli leaders have said they will keep fighting until Hamas is crushed, even while agreeing to long pauses that are accompanied by the release of hostages.

Late Friday, the Israeli military said its Arrow missile defense system intercepted a missile that approached the country from the Red Sea, raising suspi-

cion it was launched by Yemen's Houthi rebels.

The Iran-backed rebels did not immediately claim responsibility for the attack but have launched barrages of missiles towards southern Israel since the war erupted on Oct. 7. Virtually all the projectiles bound for Israel have been intercepted.

The Israeli military said it was the fifth time during the war that it has deployed the Arrow—which was developed with the U.S. to intercept long-range missiles.

Ukraine says Russia won't turn over bodies from crash

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — A Ukrainian intelligence official said that the country has repeatedly asked Russia to hand over the bodies of scores of prisoners of war who Moscow claimed were killed in the downing of a Russian military transport plane by Ukrainian forces.

Andrii Yusov, the spokesman for Ukraine's military intelligence said in televised remarks late Thursday that Kyiv has urged Moscow to hand over the bodies of those who died in the Jan. 24 crash, but it has refused to do so. He reaffirmed Ukraine's call for an international probe into the crash that would determine whether the cargo plane carried weapons or passengers along with the crew.

Russia and Ukraine have traded accusations over the crash, with Moscow accusing Kyiv of killing its own men and

Ukraine dismissing Moscow's assertions as "rampant Russian propaganda."

Kyiv has neither confirmed nor denied that its forces downed the Il-76, and Russia's claim that the crash killed Ukrainian POWs couldn't be independently verified. Ukrainian officials emphasized that Moscow didn't ask for any specific stretch of airspace to be kept safe for a certain length of time, as it has for past prisoner exchanges.

Russian President Vladimir Putin's spokesman Dmitry Peskov told the state RIA Novosti news agency on Friday that the Kremlin hadn't received a Ukrainian request to hand over the bodies.

Putin said Wednesday that Russia wouldn't just welcome but would "insist" on an international inquiry into the plane's downing that he described as a

"crime" by Ukraine.

Yusov said in televised remarks that some of Ukrainian POWs who were meant to be part of a prisoner exchange on the day of the plane crash were swapped Wednesday when about 200 Ukrainian prisoners of war returned home.

Russia's Investigative Committee, the main state criminal investigation agency, said Thursday that its probe into the crash found that the Il-76 military transport plane was brought down by the U.S.-made Patriot air defense system, which Western allies have supplied to Kyiv.

Russian officials claimed there were 74 people on board, including 65 Ukrainian prisoners of war, six crew members and three Russian servicemen. All were reported killed when the plane hit the ground and exploded in a giant fireball.

N. Korea tests more missiles

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea on Friday extended a provocative run in weapons tests by firing cruise missiles into the sea, as leader Kim Jong Un called for his military to step up war preparations while touring a shipyard.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said the U.S. and South Korean militaries were analyzing the North Korean launches into its western sea. It said the South's military detected multiple missiles but it did not provide a specific number or an assessment of their flight characteristics.

The launches, which were the North's fourth round of cruise missile tests in 2024, came hours after state media reported that Kim reiterated his focus on strengthening his naval forces as he inspected naval projects at a shipyard in Nampho, on the west coast.

Kim in recent months has emphasized his effort to build a nuclear-armed navy to counter what he portrays as growing external threats posed by the United States, South Korea and Japan, which have stepped up their military cooperation to cope with Kim's nuclear weapons and missile program.

North Korea's official Korean Central News Agency paraphrased Kim as saying that the strengthening of his naval force "presents itself as the most important issue in reliably defending the maritime sovereignty of the country and stepping up the war preparations."

KCNA did not specify the types of warships being built in Nampho, but said they were related to a five-year military development plan set during a ruling party congress in early 2021.

US lawmakers urge Hungarian leader to OK NATO membership for Sweden

Associated Press

BUDAPEST, Hungary — A bipartisan group of U.S. lawmakers are urging Hungary to immediately ratify Sweden's application to join NATO, saying patience with the Central European country is "wearing thin" as it continues to delay its approval for the Nordic nation.

Hungary is the only country in the 31-nation military alliance that hasn't yet backed Sweden's membership bid, and frustration has mounted within NATO as Budapest has repeatedly pushed back a vote on ratification for more than a year.

In a joint statement released Thursday, U.S. Sens. Jeanne Shaheen, a New Hampshire Democrat, and Thom Tillis, a North Carolina Republican, called on Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán to "advance Sweden's accession protocols to NATO without further delay," and said continuing to hold up the process would harm Budapest's relations with its allies.

"Despite its numerous prior public commitments, Hungary is the last remaining NATO member to have not ratified Sweden's bid and both time and

patience are wearing thin. Hungary's inaction risks irrevocably damaging its relationship with the United States and with NATO," the senators wrote.

Orbán, a staunch nationalist that has led Hungary since 2010, has long promised that his country wouldn't be the last NATO member to approve Sweden's application.

But as Turkey's parliament voted to back Stockholm's bid in January, attention has shifted to Budapest as NATO members seek to expand the alliance amid Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine.

Senate headed for key test vote

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Senate will hold a crucial test vote next week on legislation that would pair new policies at the southern border with wartime aid for Ukraine and other American allies, leaders pressing ahead despite heavy skepticism from Republicans and some Democrats.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer said he will set in motion a test vote on the national security package for Wednesday. However, with some Republicans resisting the timeline and many remaining uncommitted to supporting the border policy changes, the bill's future remained uncertain.

"Our southern border is in urgent need, in urgent need, of fixing," Schumer said in a floor

speech.

Senate negotiators are expected in the coming days to release the text of a bill that would overhaul the U.S. asylum system with tougher and quicker enforcement as well as send tens of billions of dollars in military assistance to Ukraine, Israel and other allies in Asia. Negotiators, toiling for weeks to finish the deal, have kept the bill's details a closely guarded secret, but have come under heavy pressure from Republicans who are both frustrated they have not seen the bill's contents and are wary of making any compromise on border security.

The Senate deal could be President Joe Biden's best chance to enact policies to address a southern border that has

been marked by historic numbers of migrants seeking asylum as well as deliver on one of his top foreign policy goals — buttressing Ukraine's defense against the Russian invasion. The Senate readied to proceed towards a vote next week, but widespread support from Republicans, especially House Speaker Mike Johnson, remained doubtful.

"We'll see. I will try," Biden told reporters Thursday as he entered a prayer breakfast at the Capitol with Johnson.

Many Senate Republicans have declined to offer support for the bill until they can dig into its details. They are also facing a headwind of criticism from Donald Trump, the likely Republican presidential nominee who has called the proposals insuffi-

cient to clamp down on illegal immigration.

The lead Republican negotiator, Sen. James Lankford of Oklahoma, has tried for weeks to convince his colleagues that the proposal represents Republicans' best opportunity in decades to gain control of illegal immigration — an issue they have made central to their political campaigns. He hoped that releasing the bill would counter the heavy criticism it has received from conservatives and activists.

"I've explained it a lot, but people just need to read the text," Lankford told reporters. "They hear it, but then they read the internet and try to make a decision — which one they believe the internet or me. And so they got to see the text."

Few choices for Biden as immigration comes to fore

Associated Press

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Almost immediately after he walked into the Oval Office on his first day as president, Joe Biden began rolling back his predecessor's immigration policies, which he had assailed throughout the 2020 campaign as harsh and inhumane.

A lot has changed in three years.

Biden, now sounding increasingly like former President Donald Trump, is pressing Congress for asylum restrictions that would have been unthinkable when he took office. He's doing it under pressure not just from Republicans but from Democrats, including elected officials in cities thousands of miles from the border who are feeling the effects of asylum seekers arriving in the United States in record numbers.

With the 2024 presidential campaign shaping up as a likely rematch between Biden and

Trump, immigration has moved to the forefront as one of the president's biggest potential liabilities. Biden, looking to neutralize it, has already embraced a sweeping bipartisan measure still being negotiated in the Senate that would expand his authority to put strict new limits on border crossings.

"If that bill were the law today, I'd shut down the border right now and fix it quickly," Biden said last weekend.

The bill's future is uncertain, and Trump has weighed in against it, but Biden's Democratic allies have grown impatient for the president to act.

Arizona Gov. Katie Hobbs, a liberal Democrat, recently called on the president to call up the National Guard, and when he declined, she did it herself at the state's expense.

"Every Arizonan should know we are taking significant and meaningful steps to keep them safe, even when the fed-

eral government refuses to," Hobbs said in her state of the state address in January.

The influx has strained social services in cities including New York, Chicago and Denver, which are struggling to shelter thousands of asylum seekers without housing or work authorization. Images of migrants with nowhere to go camping out in public have dominated local newscasts.

Nine Democratic governors from all across the country sent a letter last week to Biden and congressional leaders pleading for action from Washington "to solve what has become a humanitarian crisis."

States and cities are spending billions to respond but are outmatched by the record pace of new arrivals, wrote the governors of Arizona, California, Colorado, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York and New Mexico.

They asked for money to help with their immediate

needs and a commitment to work toward modernizing immigration laws.

"It is clear our national immigration system is outdated and unprepared to respond to this unprecedented global migration," the governors wrote.

Trump, meanwhile, is eager to rekindle the passions that the border fueled during his successful 2016 campaign, when his vow to build a wall along the southern border with Mexico became perhaps his most familiar rallying cry.

"It has been a message that has resonated not just with Republicans or Democrats, but across the country, because now even those liberal cities, those blue cities, those blue mayors, they're saying we can't handle the crisis anymore and give us help," said Corey Lewandowski, Trump's first 2016 campaign manager. "It is a fundamental shift in thinking over the last eight years on the issue."

Calif. is drenched by first of two atmospheric rivers

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Heavy rain flooded California roadways and much-needed snow piled up in the mountains as the first of back-to-back atmospheric rivers pummeled the state Thursday.

The storm focused its energy on the southern and eastern parts of the state after initially hitting the San Francisco Bay Area on Wednesday, where it halted cable car service. The downpours arrived Thursday in Southern California in time to snarl the morning commute.

An atmospheric river, which is a long band of moisture that forms over the Pacific, was fueling the storms dousing the Los Angeles and San Diego areas, said National Weather Service forecaster Bob Oravec.

Atmospheric rivers “typically occur ahead of cold fronts across the Pacific,” he said. “And when they interact with the West Coast topography, you often get some very heavy rain both along the coastal ranges and also inland through the Sierras.”

As sheets of rain fell in San Diego, Ruben Gomez cleaned debris from storm drains in his parents’ neighborhood Thursday.

He piled sandbags around what was left of their home, which was hit hard by flooding from an earlier deluge. Firefighters had to rescue his parents, both 82, from the home after the earlier storm, which filled with water reaching 6 feet high. His father was hospitalized for two days because of hypothermia and his mother for a week after she got water in one of her lungs.

“Every hole in the house, I’ve got plugged with plastic and paper to make sure water doesn’t go up so high again,” he said.

They have no insurance and are relying on donations from family, friends and neighbors. He said he is grateful still because his parents survived and are now safe at his home in an area less prone to flooding.

Last winter, California was battered by numerous drought-busting atmospheric rivers that unleashed extensive flooding,

big waves that hammered shoreline communities and extraordinary snowfall that crushed buildings. More than 20 people died.

This week’s “Pineapple Express” — called that because its plume of moisture stretches back across the Pacific to near Hawaii — will be followed by an even more powerful storm on Sunday, forecasters said.

The California Governor’s Office of Emergency Services activated its operations center and positioned personnel and equipment in areas most at risk.

Brian Ferguson, the office’s deputy director of crisis communications, characterized the situation as “a significant threat to the safety of Californians.” He said an area from the state’s border with Oregon all the way south to San Diego and from the coast into the mountains could be affected over the next 10 to 14 days.

“This really is a broad sweep of California that’s going to see threats over the coming week,” Ferguson said.

US added 353,000 jobs in January

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The nation’s employers delivered a stunning burst of hiring to begin 2024, adding 353,000 jobs in January in the latest sign of the economy’s continuing ability to shrug off the highest interest rates in two decades.

Friday’s report from the Labor Department showed that last month’s job gains topped the 333,000 that were added in December, a figure that was itself revised sharply higher. The unemployment rate stayed at 3.7%, just above a half-century low.

Wages rose unexpectedly fast in January, too. Average hourly pay climbed a sharp 0.6% from that of December and 4.5% from that of January 2023. The strong hiring and wage growth could complicate or delay the Federal Reserve’s intention to start cutting interest rates later this year.

The latest gains far exceeded expectations and showcased employers’ willingness to keep hiring to meet steady consumer spending. It comes as the intensifying presidential campaign is pivoting in no small part on views of President Joe Biden’s economic stewardship. Public polls show widespread dissatisfaction largely because even though inflation has sharply slowed, most prices remain well above pre-pandemic levels. Some recent surveys, though, show public approval gradually improving.

This week, the Fed took note of the economy’s durability, with Chair Jerome Powell saying “the economy is performing well; the labor market remains strong.” The central bank made clear that while it’s nearing a long-awaited shift toward cutting interest rates, it’s in no hurry to do so.

US probe into Tesla steering problems upgraded, now one step closer to recall

Associated Press

A U.S. government investigation into steering problems with more than 334,000 Tesla electric vehicles is a step closer to a recall.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration says in documents posted Friday that it upgraded a 2023 investigation to an engineering analysis.

The probe was opened in July of last year after the agency received a dozen complaints

about loss of steering control in 2023 Model Y and 3 vehicles. Now the agency says it has 115 complaints, and it received another 2,176 after requesting information from the company.

Agency documents say drivers are reporting loss of steering control, often accompanied by messages showing that power-assisted steering has been reduced or disabled. Some complained of an inability to turn the steering wheel, while others said it required more effort.

In one case a driver told NHTSA that they couldn’t complete a right turn and ran into another vehicle.

The agency said there have been multiple allegations of Teslas blocking intersections or roadways. Over 50 vehicles had to be towed, according to the consumer complaints.

The agency said it is looking into possible steering rack failures.

A message was left Friday seeking comment from Tesla.

Extreme cold gripping much of Alaska

Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska — Much of Alaska has plunged into a deep freeze, with temperatures well below zero. Anchorage has seen some of its coldest temperatures in years and the mayor opened warming facilities for people who are homeless or don't have reliable heating.

To the south in the state capital, Juneau, snow blanketed streets and rooftops as part of a two-day storm that helped set a new January snowfall record of 6.4 feet for the city, which is nestled in a relatively temperate rainforest. That's after back-to-back storms walloped Juneau earlier in the month.

Anchorage surpassed 100 inches of snow this week, the earliest date the state's largest city has ever hit that mark.

For much of the last week, temperatures were minus 40 degrees Fahrenheit or colder in Fairbanks, an inland city of about 32,000 that's a popular destination for seeing the northern lights. In other far-flung towns, the thermometer ho-

vered between minus 30 Fahrenheit and minus 20 Fahrenheit for days.

"That's a pretty solid streak," National Weather Service meteorologist Dustin Saltzman said, adding that it was the coldest outbreak in at least several years.

It's not only Fairbanks: Much of Alaska saw temperatures in the single digits or below zero on Thursday.

Anchorage, which hit minus 17 Fahrenheit late Wednesday night, is experiencing its coldest temperatures in 15 years, said Brian Brettschneider, a climate scientist with the local weather service office. The forecast called for temperatures there to remain below zero through Friday before climbing into the teens by Sunday.

In the small town of Kotzebue, 550 miles by air to the northwest, temperatures of minus 30 Fahrenheit and below caused heating fuel to thicken so much that home heating systems and stoves stopped working, the Anchorage Daily News

reported. City Manager Tessa Baldwin told the newspaper that water lines have frozen across town.

That coincided with challenges that south-central Alaska's largest utility, ENSTAR Natural Gas Co., has had with two wells at a gas storage facility that was built to address the peak winter demand. The system was "the most strained I've seen," in large part due to gas delivery issues related to the well problems, company president John Sims told a news conference in Anchorage.

Anchorage resident DuShan Vujnovic, a native of Serbia who is working for the Alaska Railroad, said this winter has been "too much."

This is Vujnovic's fifth winter in Anchorage and it's been the coldest. If that weren't bad enough, last week his job took him north to Fairbanks.

"I've never experienced anything that cold, but here I think I'm mostly annoyed with the snow," he said. "I drive a white car, so sometimes it's hard to

even find it in the snow after two days of not leaving the house."

Meanwhile, parts of southeast Alaska were almost balmy by comparison, including in Ketchikan, where it was nearly 50 degrees Fahrenheit and raining Thursday. Ketchikan is closer to Seattle than it is to Anchorage.

Anchorage Mayor Dave Bronson last week signed an emergency declaration effective through Feb. 9 and added the warming centers, some of which are open around the clock.

A man believed to have fled a fire at a home in the south-central community of Sutton was found dead early Wednesday, possibly due to exposure, Alaska State Troopers said.

Anchorage sent a letter to 1,000 businesses warning them to vacate their properties until snow is removed from the rooftops. At least two commercial buildings have suffered collapses under the weight, and crews are shoveling thick layers of snow from rooftops around the city.

Punxsutawney Phil emerges to predict early spring

Associated Press

PUNXSUTAWNEY, Pa. — Punxsutawney Phil predicted an early spring Friday in Gobbler's Knob, Penn., the scene of the country's largest and best known Groundhog Day celebration in the United States.

The annual event is a tongue-in-cheek ritual in which Phil's handlers, members of a club with roots in the late 19th century, reveal whether the groundhog has seen his shadow.

Just after sunrise Friday, the Punxsutawney Groundhog Club announced Phil did not see his shadow, which will usher in early springlike weather. The groundhog seeing his shadow presages six more weeks of winter, according to the group.

About 10,000 people have made their way in recent years to Punxsutawney, where festivities begin in the dead of night and culminate in the midwinter

forecast. A bundled-up crowd, some wearing groundhog-themed hats, watched musical performances and fireworks as they waited for sunrise and the appearance of Punxsutawney Phil.

Pennsylvania Gov. Josh Shapiro took the stage before Phil to urge people around the world watching the festivities to come to Punxsutawney next year. Shapiro also announced the famed groundhog is the new of-

ficial meteorologist for Pennsylvania.

"Punxsutawney is the center of the universe right now and I love that you're all here," Shapiro said.

Phil predicts more winter far more often than he sees an early spring, not a bad bet for February and March in western Pennsylvania. A federal agency took a look at his record last year and put his accuracy rate at about 40%.

STARS AND STRIPES®

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

Reporting
World, National
and Military News

Super Bowl QBs are chasing greatness

Associated Press

Patrick Mahomes is chasing Tom Brady. Brock Purdy is playing in the shadow of Joe Montana.

Winning the Super Bowl would be another major step for either quarterback.

Mahomes and the Kansas City Chiefs seek to become the first team in 19 years to win back-to-back Super Bowls when they take on Purdy and the San Francisco 49ers in Las Vegas on Feb. 11.

For Mahomes, it's an opportunity to win his third NFL championship in his sixth full season as a starter at age 28. Brady won his third of seven Super Bowl rings in his fourth season as a starter at age 27.

Purdy has a chance to complete his journey from being the last player selected in the 2022 draft to leading a storied franchise to a record-tying sixth Super Bowl title. Only the Patriots and Steelers have won six.

If Mahomes is going to make a run at Brady's record, he has to win this one. These opportunities are rare.

The Chiefs had a difficult path to get to this point and had to go on the road twice in the

playoffs for the first time in the Mahomes era. There's a reason why no team has repeated since Brady led New England to two Super Bowl victories in a row in the 2003-04 seasons.

A third title in five years would solidify Kansas City's claim to a dynasty. The Patriots won three in four years in the 2000s and they won three in five years in the 2010s.

"I think in dynasties, I always say you've got to win three," Mahomes said before the season. "Our job is to do whatever we can to win as many as we can, not have any regrets when we step off the field. I think if we keep the mentality we have, we can look back at the end of our career (and) then we can decide if we're a dynasty or not."

The Chiefs realize they have a unique talent in Mahomes, already a certainty for the Pro Football Hall of Fame. The two-time NFL and Super Bowl MVP has built an impressive résumé and is working toward being in the GOAT conversation.

"We see it every day; we don't take that for granted," coach Andy Reid said. "We respect the job that he does, and we appreciate it. We know we're seeing

something special, and he's still young in this business. That's a great thing for the Chiefs; it's a great thing for the city. It's somebody you can build around, and (general manager) Brett Veach does a great job with that of making sure that other positions are relative to that."

If Purdy wins, he'll stamp his own identity in San Francisco, where Montana led the 49ers to four championships in the 1980s and fellow Pro Football Hall of Famer Steve Young led them to their fifth title 29 years ago.

Purdy rose from being "Mr. Irrelevant" to replace Jimmy Garoppolo and Trey Lance and won his first seven career starts, including two playoff games. But he suffered a significant elbow injury in the first quarter of San Francisco's loss at Philadelphia in the NFC championship game last year.

Purdy returned from surgery to start the season opener and was outstanding, becoming a finalist for the AP NFL MVP award. He led the NFL with a 113 passer rating and his 9.6 yards per attempt were the most in the NFL for a qualifying QB since Kurt Warner had 9.9

in 2000. Purdy was the first Niners quarterback in more than 20 years to throw for more than 4,000 yards (4,280) or at least 30 TDs (31).

He's helped the 49ers advance with a pair of comeback wins in the playoffs, showing off some of those "Joe Cool" qualities in the clutch that made Montana one of the all-time greatest winners.

Purdy has signed a major deal with Toyota to be a national partner and brand ambassador, becoming the first active player the company has partnered with since signing a partnership with the NFL in October 2023.

All he needs now is a Super Bowl MVP trophy. He'd be happy with just a win.

"What a challenge. You've got Mahomes, what he does, their team, they're special," Purdy said. "They're winners. They've proven that over however many years he's been there. For us to go back and play them is going to be sweet, going to be special for all of us. I wasn't here obviously in '19. You could just tell the guys that have been here, like anybody, it would be special for them to play these guys. I'm excited to be a part of it."

Jim Harbaugh is ready to resume his NFL title chase

Associated Press

INGLEWOOD, Calif. — Jim Harbaugh fulfilled one of his goals by winning a national championship at his alma mater.

Now he's looking to capture his ultimate goal of hoisting the Lombardi Trophy with one of the teams he played for.

Harbaugh resumed his pursuit of a Super Bowl title on Thursday when he was introduced as the Los Angeles Chargers' coach. He agreed to terms on a five-year contract Jan. 24 after nine seasons at the University of Michigan, including going 15-0 and winning the

school's first national championship since 1997 last month.

"It was time. I said this the other day, there's only so many sands left in the hourglass. I want another shot to simply be known as world champions and to win the Lombardi Trophy. That's my mission," he said. "I felt that the Spanos family and organization made clear they like what I did and how I did it. That's all you want from an employer."

Harbaugh becomes the 19th coach in franchise history and the first former Chargers player to return to the team as head coach. He played for the Bolts in

San Diego in 1999 and 2000 before retiring after the 2001 season.

Although Harbaugh had expressed interest in Minnesota and Denver the past two seasons, returning to one of the five teams he played for during his 15-year career struck a chord.

"Every single job I've taken in coaching, there's an emotional tie there," Harbaugh said.

Harbaugh's hiring has also put the Chargers back on the national radar for something other than their penchant for blowing late leads. The team was 5-12 last season and were winless in seven games decided by three

points or fewer.

"It's been about a week now and in this very short period of time, you've electrified this city and this fan base," owner Dean Spanos said to Harbaugh. "Our fans deserve a day like this. I am so incredibly happy for them."

Chargers fans are hoping Harbaugh's record as coach is better than it was as the team's quarterback. He was 6-11 as a starter in his two seasons in San Diego. They are also hoping he can deliver consistent success to a franchise that hasn't won a division title since 2009 and has made only three playoff appearances since 2013.

Cantlay trails Detry by 1 at Pebble Beach

Associated Press

PEBBLE BEACH, Calif. — Patrick Cantlay has spent about as much time on the phone as the golf course this week as a PGA Tour board member trying to nail down a deal for a \$3 billion investment. It didn't seem to affect his day job at the AT&T Pebble Beach Pro-Am.

On a surprising day of weather when umbrellas gave way to sunglasses, Cantlay saved par five times and had eight birdies at Spyglass Hill for an 8-under 64 that left him one shot behind Thomas Detry of Belgium.

Detry worked his own short-game magic at the end, chipping in from thick, damp rough for birdie on the 18th at Spyglass to finish with three straight birdies and a 63. Torrey Pines winner Matthieu Pavon had the best round at Pebble Beach, closing with four birdies over the last five holes for a 65.

Rory McIlroy, no longer on the PGA Tour board but offering eye-opening comments this week that LIV Golf players should be able to return without punishment, was among the leaders until it all fell apart at the end at Spyglass.

He was leading at 6 under, coming off five birdies in seven holes, when he three-putted for bogey. And then on the par-5 seventh, he drove into trouble and took a penalty drop by going some 20 yards back on his line and then moving one club length to the right.

One problem — that rule was changed to allow that in 2019, and then changed back in 2023. McIlroy was supposed to drop on the line between his ball and the hole. So the two-shot penalty turned his bogey into a triple bogey, and he shot 71.

"I wasn't aware that that rule was changed again in 2023, so I took a drop thinking of the 2019 rules when everything was changed, not knowing that the rule was changed again in 2023," McIlroy said. "So got a two-stroke penalty there."

The 80-man field — the strongest and smallest for Pebble Beach, which is now a signature event offering a \$20 million purse — was mostly happy they weren't drenched from a forecast that suggested even more rain on top of the 1.5 inches that dropped overnight.

The vibe wasn't quite as fes-

sive without entertainers from Hollywood and the music industry. The amateur field also was cut to 80, most of them from the NFL if they weren't running Fortune 500 companies. Gone was an opening scene of a happy hour on the first tee at Spyglass. In its place was a quick pace and an All-Star cast.

Detry had 10 birdies by keeping the ball in play off the tee, key on a week of players being able to lift, clean and place their golf balls in the short grass. The chip-in certainly helped.

"I felt pretty comfortable I would put it within 3 feet, to be honest," Detry said. "And it rolled nicely, just trickled in the hole. It was lovely to watch."

Cantlay has been a central figure as one of six player directors on the board who has worked through the shocking June 6 agreement with Saudi Arabia's national wealth fund, then entertaining bids from private investors, selecting a Strategic Sports Group and then finalizing a deal Tuesday night for a \$3 billion investment that includes equity ownership for players.

"I think you have to compartmentalize," Cantlay said.

"When you're doing what you're doing, you have to be as focused as you can be. Maybe it's a little harder with all the distractions, but resolve to do as best I can in focusing at the task at hand.

"And I thought I did a good job of that today at Spyglass."

His round was good. Most of the questions were about the deal with SSG, and where this leaves negotiations with the Public Investment Fund, the Saudi backers of LIV Golf.

McIlroy's comments caught players by surprise, including Rickie Fowler.

"Probably not in the same spot that Rory," he said when asked about LIV players potentially returning. "Maybe we started in a similar area, but I think there's been a little roller-coaster ride on his part."

Fowler has been on a roller-coaster start to his season, mostly down. He finished toward the bottom of the pack at Kapalua and missed the cut in The American Express. He bounced back with a 67 at Spyglass Hill.

The soft conditions and limited wind allowed for good scoring on both courses, with only 19 players who were over par.

Orioles land their ace, trading for All-Star Burnes

Associated Press

The Baltimore Orioles finally landed a proven front-line pitcher to go with all that young hitting talent.

The Orioles acquired All-Star right-hander Corbin Burnes from the Milwaukee Brewers on Thursday night. Baltimore sent left-hander DL Hall, infield prospect Joey Ortiz and a competitive balance draft pick to Milwaukee in the deal for the 2021 National League Cy Young Award winner.

It's a blockbuster for the Orioles, who were having a quiet offseason but remained hopeful of adding more pitching while preparing to defend their AL East championship.

Baltimore has a terrific core of young players — particularly position players — but had not been particularly aggressive in terms of signing free agents or making trades. That changed Thursday.

Even after a 101-win season last year, there were questions about whether the Orioles could sustain a real American League juggernaut, given their low payroll. Then on Wednesday, the team announced that Carlyle Group co-founder David Rubenstein had agreed to buy the Orioles and become their new controlling owner, a move that could enable the franchise to spend more in the future.

The next day, the Orioles

traded for Burnes, who turned 29 in October. He went 10-8 with a 3.39 ERA last year. The previous three seasons, he had an ERA under 3.00, including when he went 11-5 with a 2.43 ERA in 2021.

He can become a free agent at the end of this coming season, and that was a factor in this deal.

"Any time you trade a guy like Corbin, it's always a difficult decision," Brewers general manager Matt Arnold said. "I think the overarching theme here is that we're excited about the players we're getting back. And the reality of our situation is that we had one year left with Corbin. I think Corbin had been pretty public about how this was

going to be his last year as a Brewer."

Burnes joins a Baltimore rotation that was good enough to win a division title last season, but remained more of a question mark than some other areas on the roster. Kyle Bradish and rookie Grayson Rodriguez pitched well down the stretch in 2023, and now Burnes arrives as someone who can clearly be an ace when he's pitching to his potential.

Baltimore is sending the 25-year-old Hall — a first-round pick in 2017 — to the Brewers after he went 3-0 with a 3.26 ERA last season. The 25-year-old Ortiz is ranked as baseball's No. 63 prospect by MLB Pipeline.

Lakers top Celtics without LeBron, AD

Associated Press

BOSTON — Austin Reaves scored a season-high 32 points and hit a career-high seven 3-pointers to help a Los Angeles Lakers team missing LeBron James and Anthony Davis stun the Boston Celtics 114-105 on Thursday night.

James sat out because of a left ankle injury and Davis was sidelined by an Achilles tendon issue and left hip spasms.

Reaves was 7 of 10 from beyond the arc. He also was fouled on one of the misses and made all three free throws. The Lakers hit 19 of 36 3-pointers, holding off the NBA-leading Celtics to end a two-game losing streak.

D'Angelo Russell added 16 points, 14 assists and eight rebounds for the Lakers. Jaxon Hayes had 16 points and 10 rebounds.

Jayson Tatum scored 23 points for the Celtics, who had

15 turnovers. Boston has lost three of its last five at home since starting the season 20-0 in TD Garden.

Boston never got closer than seven points in the fourth quarter.

76ers 127, Jazz 124: Tyrese Maxey scored a career-high 51 points hours after being selected to his first All-Star Game, helping visiting Philadelphia overcome star center Joel Embiid's absence to beat Utah.

After missing three games because of a sprained left ankle, Maxey topped his previous career high of 50 — set Nov. 12 at home against Indiana — with two free throws with 4.1 seconds left. He was 17 of 27 from the field, 7 of 9 on 3s and made 10 of 11 free throws.

Embiid has an injured lateral meniscus in his left knee and will miss games at least through the weekend. He was already

set to sit out against Utah, but an MRI revealed the injury that will cause him to miss more time.

Tobias Harris added 28 points and Kelly Oubre, Jr. had 16 for Philadelphia. The 76ers finished 1-4 on their longest trip of the season.

Lauri Markkanen scored 28 points for Utah.

Knicks 109, Pacers 105: Jalen Brunson scored 40 points and shook off an apparent eye injury to make the go-ahead basket with 1:46 remaining and host New York beat Indiana for its ninth straight victory.

Hours after being voted an All-Star for the first time in his career, Brunson scored 11 in the fourth quarter to rally the Knicks in a game they trailed by 15 points.

They had surged back to take the lead, then fell behind 100-99 when Brunson crashed into An-

drew Nembhard in the backcourt, lying on the court and holding his face as Jalen Smith picked the loose ball for an uncontested basket.

Jalen Smith led Indiana with 20 points. Pascal Siakam had 18.

Cavaliers 108, Grizzlies 101: Donovan Mitchell had 25 points and seven assists and visiting Cleveland beat Memphis for its fourth straight victory and 12th in 13 games.

Caris LeVert added 16 points in a reserve role, Jarrett Allen finished with 14 points and nine rebounds, and Max Strus had 11 points and 10 rebounds.

Darius Garland scored nine points in his second game since returning from a fractured jaw that sidelined him for 19 games. He had 19 points Wednesday night in a home victory over Detroit.

Jaren Jackson Jr. led Memphis with 25 points.

Nebraska rallies to knock off No. 6 Wisconsin in OT

Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. — Nebraska came back from an 18-point second-half deficit to knock off No. 6 Wisconsin 80-72 in overtime on Thursday night, the second top-10 opponent the Cornhuskers have beaten this season.

Rienk Mast scored early in overtime to give the Huskers the lead for good, and when time expired, the students spilled onto the court for the second time this season. The first was Jan. 9 when the Huskers beat then-No. 1 Purdue 88-72.

C.J. Wilcher scored 16 of his 22 points in the second half, Mast finished with 20, and the Huskers (16-6, 6-5) improved to 6-0 at home in Big Ten play.

AJ Storr matched his season high with 28 points to lead the Badgers (16-5, 9-2). Max Kles-

mit and Chucky Hepburn had 13 apiece.

No. 11 Arizona 91, California 65: Oumar Ballo scored a season-high 22 points and grabbed 13 rebounds, Keshad Johnson added 15 points and host Arizona rolled to a win over California.

KJ Lewis scored 14 points off the bench while Caleb Love added 12 for the Wildcats.

The Golden Bears (8-13, 4-6 Pac-12) were led by Jalen Celestine's 13 points while Rodney Brown Jr. had 12. Jaylon Tyson added 10 points and 10 rebounds.

Arizona (16-5, 7-3) never trailed, jumping to a 29-11 lead by midway through the first half. The Wildcats took a 48-28 halftime lead after shooting 56% from the field and outrebounding the Golden Bears 25-11.

No. 1 South Carolina runs winning streak to 20 games

Associated Press

AUBURN, Ala. — Ashlyn Watkins had 14 points and 15 rebounds, reserve MiLaysia Fulwiley scored 15 points and No. 1 South Carolina overcame a slow start to beat Auburn 76-54 on Thursday night.

In a matchup between the top offense and the top defense in the Southeastern Conference, the Gamecocks broke through in the second half, going on a 13-2 run late in the third quarter to put away the Tigers.

Kamilla Cardoso added 13 points and six rebounds for South Carolina (20-0, 8-0), which outrebounded Auburn 48-35.

Auburn's Honesty Scott-Grayson matched her career high with 31 points for the Tigers (14-7, 3-5).

South Carolina has won its

first 20 games in back-to-back seasons. The Gamecocks' lone loss last season came in the Final Four to Iowa.

No. 5 N.C. State 63, No. 24 North Carolina 59: Aziaha James scored eight of her 10 points in the fourth quarter and North Carolina State's defense locked down late to hold off rival North Carolina.

Saniya Rivers had 14 points, nine rebounds and four assists for the Wolfpack (19-2, 7-2 Atlantic Coast Conference). N.C. State's defense held the Tar Heels without a point on their final seven possessions.

Deja Kelly scored 21 points to lead the Tar Heels (15-7, 7-3), who were within range when freshman Reniya Kelly knocked down a clean look at a 3-pointer as UNC cut it to 62-59 at the 3:45 mark.