

NATO touts allies' defense spending

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Nearly 20 NATO countries are expected to hit the bloc's defense spending target this year, marking a leap forward for an alliance that has faced decades of harsh criticism for missing the mark.

In 2024, 18 allies will spend 2% of their gross domestic product on defense, NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said Wednesday ahead of a meeting this week of allied defense ministers.

Stoltenberg did not specify which of the 31 countries in the alliance are on track to reach the goal.

"That is another record number and a sixfold increase from 2014," Stoltenberg said.

At that time, only three allies

met the threshold, prompting NATO to set a 2024 target for full compliance.

NATO allies in Europe will invest a combined \$380 billion in defense this year, a commitment that amounts to 2% of their cumulative GDP for the first time, Stoltenberg said.

Stoltenberg's announcement on defense spending comes days after former U.S. President Donald Trump took issue with NATO members that have consistently fallen short of the benchmarks.

Trump's comments, which came Saturday during a campaign stop in South Carolina, caused shockwaves in Europe. He said he once warned that he would allow Russia "to do whatever the hell they want" to NATO

countries that didn't spend enough.

In doing so, the frontrunner for the Republican presidential nomination called into question whether the U.S. under him would stand by NATO's linchpin Article 5 provision that an attack on one member state is an attack on all.

Stoltenberg responded that any doubt cast on the allies' willingness to defend one another increases the risks of war.

The bloc "has been able to prevent a military attack against any NATO ally for 75 years, and we have done that because it has been absolutely clearly communicated ... that we are there to protect allies," Stoltenberg said Wednesday.

The push for hitting the 2%

benchmark gained momentum in 2014 after Russia's initial invasion of Ukraine. The second Russian invasion of Ukraine eight years later caused Finland and Sweden to end decades of neutrality and seek NATO membership.

Finland joined last year, becoming the 31st member of the alliance. Sweden's hopes of simultaneous accession with Finland were dashed by Turkey and Hungary, and the Swedish bid is still pending almost two years later.

In 2023, only 11 NATO countries, or 35%, spent the desired level of GDP on defense. Poland, the U.S. and Greece came in above 3%. The other eight to hit the mark were Estonia, Lithuania, Finland, Romania, Hungary, Latvia, the U.K. and Slovakia.

100 US troops in Norway for large NATO exercise

Stars and Stripes

More than 100 U.S. sailors and Marines are in the high north of Norway to establish a maritime command as part of NATO's largest military exercise in Europe since the Cold War, according to the Navy.

U.S. 2nd Fleet and Expeditionary Strike Group 2 personnel left Naval Air Station Oceana, Va., on Feb. 7 to form a unit in Bodo to command and support maritime forces during Steadfast Defender, a Navy statement Tuesday said.

The exercise kicked off last month with the departure of the dock landing ship USS Gunston Hall from Norfolk, Va. It will include more than 90,000 forces from all 31 NATO countries and prospective member Sweden, ac-

ording to the statement.

During Steadfast Defender, allied forces will practice skills in varying climates, terrains and circumstances against the threat of Russian aggression in Europe. Joint Force Command Norfolk and 2nd Fleet worked with allies in planning the exercise.

A U.K.-led sea component of the exercise, Joint Warrior, begins Feb. 24. That exercise will include sailors and Marines from U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa, Stars and Stripes reported last month.

The Navy has seen demands in the European theater grow in recent years, with Russian threats in the Baltic Sea, the war in Ukraine and operations in the Mediterranean Sea related to the Israel-Hamas war.

Estonia: US-led alliance must block Russia in east

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

NATO could face a Soviet-strength army along its eastern flank within a decade, as Russian plans to post thousands more troops nearby increase the odds of conflict with the U.S.-led alliance, a new threat assessment by Estonia said.

The annual report, dated Jan. 31, argues that Russia's hopes to bolster its position near the Baltic states and Finland ultimately hinge on how events in Ukraine play out.

"While the likelihood of a direct military attack against Estonia remains low in the coming year, the security situation in Europe and along Estonia's borders in the near future depends on whether Ukraine, with the

support of its allies, can shatter Russia's imperialist ambitions," the report stated.

The public release of the assessment comes amid high tension between Estonia and Russia, which issued an arrest warrant for Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas this week over the removal of Soviet-era monuments in her country.

Kallas has been mentioned as a possible candidate to replace NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg after he steps down later this year. Should Russia succeed in its aims in Ukraine, NATO should expect "a Soviet-style mass army" on its borders, the Estonian report said.

Views are mixed about the extent of Russia's ability to project power around the Baltics.

Ukraine says it sank Russian ship in Black Sea

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Ukraine's military said Wednesday it used naval drones to sink a Russian landing ship in the Black Sea, a report that has not been confirmed by Russian authorities.

The Caesar Kunikov amphibious ship sank near Alupka, a city on the southern edge of the Crimean Peninsula that Moscow annexed in 2014, Ukraine's General Staff said. It said the ship can carry 87 crew members.

Sinking the vessel would be another embarrassing blow for the Russian Black Sea fleet and a significant success for Ukraine 10 days before the second anniversary of Russia's full-scale invasion on Feb. 24, 2022.

Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov refused to comment on the claim during a conference call with reporters Wednesday. He

said questions should be addressed to the Russian military.

It is the second time in two weeks that Ukrainian forces have said they sank a Russian vessel in the Black Sea. Last week, they published a video that they said showed naval drones assaulting the Russian missile-armed corvette Ivanovets.

Ukraine's Military Intelligence, known by its Ukrainian acronym GUR, said its special operations unit "Group 13" sank the Caesar Kunikov using Magura V5 sea drones on Wednesday. Explosions damaged the vessel on its left side, it said, though a heavily edited video it released was unclear. The same unit also struck on Feb. 1, according to officials.

The private intelligence firm Ambrey said the video showed that at least three drones conducted the attack and that the ship likely sank after listing heavily on its port side.

The Caesar Kunikov probably was part of the Russian fleet escorting merchant vessels that call at Crimean ports, Ambrey said.

Ukrainian attacks on Russian aircraft and ships in the Black Sea have helped push Moscow's naval forces back from the coast, allowing Kyiv to increase crucial exports of grain and other goods through its southern ports.

A new generation of unmanned weapons systems has become a centerpiece of the war, both at sea and on land.

The Magura V5 drone, which looks like a sleek black speedboat, was unveiled last year. It reportedly has a top speed of 50 mph and a payload of 700 pounds.

The Russian military did not immediately comment on the claimed sinking, saying only that it downed six Ukrainian drones over the Black Sea overnight.

Out of hospital, Austin presses for weapons for Ukraine in virtual visit

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A day after his latest hospital stay for health issues following treatment for prostate cancer, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin hosted a virtual session on Ukraine to help resource urgently needed ammunition and artillery for Kyiv as it faces shortages in its now almost two-year war with Russia.

In his opening remarks to the Ukraine Defense Contact Group, a regular gathering of about 50 member countries that coordinate military support for Ukraine, Austin said Wednesday he'd intended to be with the group in person, "but I had to return to the hospital for non-surgical procedures."

"I'm in good condition, and my cancer prognosis remains excellent," he said.

Austin conducted the virtual session from his home, where he is still recovering from complications from his December surgery to treat prostate cancer. Austin was released from Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., after being treated for a bladder issue.

The Pentagon has been out of funds to send weapons and ammunition to Ukraine since December. Since then European allies have continued to send some support but the loss of regular shipments of ammunition to Ukraine

is having an impact.

Austin said in his opening remarks that the contact group would work Wednesday on resourcing some of Ukraine's most critical near-term needs, "including its urgent need for more artillery, ammunition and air defense missiles."

It's not clear if, or when, Congress will come to an agreement that would give the Pentagon additional funds to restart regular shipments of ammunition to Ukraine's front lines.

The Senate passed its latest version of a multibillion-dollar war funding package early Tuesday with some Republican support, stripping out controversial border security language that has been a sticking point for conservative members in hopes that the pared-down bill could gain Republican support in the House. But House Speaker Mike Johnson has already indicated that it could be weeks or months before Congress sends the legislation to President Joe Biden's desk — if at all.

The \$95.3 billion legislation includes \$60 billion for Ukraine; \$14 billion for Israel's war with Hamas, \$8 billion for Taiwan and partners in the Indo-Pacific to counter China, and \$9.1 billion in humanitarian assistance for Gaza and the West Bank, Ukraine, and other populations caught in conflict zones across the globe.

GOP lawmaker warns of serious security threat

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The head of the House Intelligence Committee said Wednesday he had information about a serious national security threat and urged the administration to declassify the information so the U.S. and its allies can openly discuss how to respond.

Rep. Mike Turner, an Ohio Republican, gave no details about the nature of the threat in his statement. House Speaker Mike Johnson said he was not at liberty to disclose the classified information. "But we just want to assure everyone steady hands are at the wheel. We're working on it and there's no need for alarm," he told reporters at the Capitol.

Turner earlier Wednesday sent an email to members of Congress saying his committee had "identified an urgent matter with regard to a destabilizing foreign military capability" that should be known to all congressional policy makers. He encouraged them to come to a SCIF, a secure area, to review the intelligence.

National security adviser Jake Sullivan told reporters at the White House that he already had been due to brief Turner and other senior congressional intelligence leaders Thursday.

He acknowledged it was not standard practice to offer such a briefing.

GOP-led House impeaches Mayorkas by a single vote

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. House voted Tuesday to impeach Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas, with the Republican majority determined to punish the Biden administration over its handling of the U.S.-Mexico border after failing last week in a politically embarrassing setback.

The evening roll call proved tight, with Speaker Mike Johnson's threadbare GOP majority unable to handle many defectors or absences in the face of staunch Democratic opposition to impeaching Mayorkas, the first Cabinet secretary charged in nearly 150 years.

In a historic rebuke, the House impeached Mayorkas 214-213. With the return of Majority Leader Steve Scalise to bolster the GOP's numbers after being away from Washing-

ton for cancer care and a Northeastern storm impacting some others, Republicans recouped — despite dissent from their own ranks.

President Joe Biden called it a “blatant act of unconstitutional partisanship that has targeted an honorable public servant in order to play petty political games.”

The charges against Mayorkas next go to the Senate for a trial, but neither Democratic nor even some Republican senators have shown interest in the matter and it may be indefinitely shelved to a committee. The Senate is expected to receive the articles of impeachment from the House after returning to session Feb. 26.

Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., called the case against Mayorkas a “sham impeachment” and a

“new low for House Republicans.”

In a frantic scene of vote-tallying on the House floor, the GOP effort to impeach Mayorkas over his handling of the southern border took on an air of political desperation as Republicans struggle to make good on their priorities.

Mayorkas faced two articles of impeachment filed by the Homeland Security Committee arguing that he “willfully and systematically” refused to enforce existing immigration laws and that he breached the public trust by lying to Congress and saying the border was secure.

But critics of the impeachment effort said the charges against Mayorkas amount to a policy dispute over Biden's border strategy, hardly rising to the Constitution's bar of high crimes and misdemeanors.

Democrats flip Santos' House seat

Associated Press

Democrat Tom Suozzi won a special election for a U.S. House seat in New York on Tuesday, coming out on top in a politically mixed suburban district in a victory that could lift his party's hopes heading into a fiercely contested presidential election later this year.

Suozzi defeated Republican Mazi Pilip to take the seat that was left vacant when George Santos, also a Republican, was expelled from Congress. The victory marks a return to Washington for Suozzi, who represented the district for three terms before giving it up to run, unsuccessfully, for governor.

It's unclear how long his next stint on Capitol Hill will last, as a redistricting process unfolds that could reshape the district. But for now the result narrows the already slim Republican majority in the House. And it provides Democrats a much-needed win in New York City's Long Island suburbs, where the GOP showed surprising strength in recent elections.

Suozzi stressed his campaign trail theme of bipartisan cooperation in a victory speech that was interrupted by protesters criticizing his support of Israel.

“There are divisions in our country where people can't even talk to each other. All they can do is yell and scream at each other,” he said, acknowledging the demonstrators. “That's not the answer to the problems we face in our country. The answer is to try and bring people together to try and find common ground.”

Suozzi's win will likely reassure Democrats that they can perform well in suburban communities across the nation, which will be critical to the party's efforts to retake control of the U.S. House and reelect President Joe Biden.

Illegal-crossing arrests from Mexico plunge after a record-high December

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Arrests for illegal crossings on the U.S. border with Mexico fell by half in January from record highs in December to the third lowest month of Joe Biden's presidency, authorities said Tuesday.

The sharp drop is welcome news for the White House, even if it proves temporary, as immigration becomes one of the biggest issues in this year's presidential election, with exit polls showing it is the top concern among many Republican voters in early primaries. House Republicans voted Tuesday to impeach U.S. Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas for his oversight of the border.

Seasonal declines and height-

ened enforcement by the U.S. and its allies led to the sharp decline, said Troy Miller, acting commissioner of U.S. Customs and Border Protection. U.S. authorities have repeatedly praised Mexico for a crackdown launched in late December.

Border Patrol arrests totaled 124,220 in January, down 50% from 249,735 in December, the highest monthly tally on record. Arrests of Venezuelans plunged 91% to 4,422 from 46,920 in December.

Numbers ebb and flow, and the January decline may prove tenuous.

Panama reported that 36,001 migrants traversed the notorious Darien Gap in January, up 46% from December. The vast

majority who cross the Panamanian jungle are Venezuelans headed to the United States, with considerable numbers from Haiti, China, Ecuador and Colombia.

Tucson, Ariz., was again the busiest sector for illegal crossings with 50,565 arrests, down 37% from December, followed by San Diego.

Arrests in the Border Patrol's Del Rio sector, which includes the city of Eagle Pass, the main focus of Texas Gov. Greg Abbott's border enforcement efforts, plummeted 76% from December to 16,712, the lowest since December 2021.

Arrests in Texas' Rio Grande Valley dropped 60% to 7,340, the lowest since July 2020.

Israel recalls team from cease-fire talks

Associated Press

JERUSALEM — International efforts to broker a cease-fire between Israel and Hamas suffered a setback on Wednesday as Israel reportedly recalled its negotiating team and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu accused Hamas of hobbling the high-stakes negotiations by sticking to “delusional” demands.

Netanyahu’s remarks came hours after local media reported that the Israeli leader had ordered an Israeli delegation not to continue talks in Cairo, raising concerns over the fate of the negotiations and sparking criticism from the families of the roughly 130 remaining captives, about a fourth of whom are said to be dead.

The relatives of the hostages said Netanyahu’s decision amounted to a “death sentence” for their loved ones.

The mediation efforts, steered by the United States, Egypt and Qatar, have been working to bring the warring sides toward an agreement that might secure a truce in the monthslong war, which has killed more than 28,000 Palestinians, most of them women and children, according to local health officials.

The fighting has destroyed vast parts of Gaza, displaced most of the territory’s population and sparked a humanitarian catastrophe.

“In Cairo, Israel did not receive any new proposal from Hamas on the release of our

captives,” Netanyahu said in a statement. “A change in Hamas’ positions will allow progress in the negotiations.”

Hamas officials had no immediate comment.

On Tuesday, CIA chief William Burns and David Barnea, the head of Israel’s Mossad spy agency, attended the talks in the Egyptian capital, but there were no signs of a breakthrough. The talks continued Wednesday at a lower level, even as deadly violence persisted both in the Gaza Strip and along Israel’s border with Lebanon, where fighting has simmered since the war broke out.

Israeli media reported Wednesday that Netanyahu told his delegation not to return

to the talks unless Hamas softens its demands.

The sides have been far apart on their terms for a deal. Netanyahu has vowed to continue the war until “total victory” over Hamas and the return of all the remaining hostages.

Hamas has said it will not release all the captives until Israel ends its offensive, withdraws from Gaza and releases a large number of Palestinian prisoners, including top militants. Netanyahu has rejected those demands, calling them “delusional.”

The plight of the hostages has deeply shaken Israelis, who see their lengthy captivity as an enduring symbol of the failure of the state to protect its citizens from Hamas’ attack.

Driver killed, 5 hurt when car crashes into hospital

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — A car crashed into a Texas hospital’s emergency room Tuesday, killing the driver and injuring five other people, including a child with life-threatening injuries, authorities said.

The car smashed into the lobby of the ER at St. David’s North Austin Medical Center shortly after 5:30 p.m., fire officials said at a nighttime news briefing. The driver was pulled from the car and received CPR but died in the ER, authorities said.

Photos showed a silver sedan with a mangled front end sitting entirely inside the lobby.

The crash was under investigation and there was no immediate word on the cause, but the Austin Police Department said it appeared to be unintentional.

Five people in the ER lobby were injured. One was treated at the hospital while two adults and two children were taken to other hospitals, authorities said.

Of those transported, one

child had critical life-threatening injuries and an adult had “serious, potentially life-threatening injuries” while the other two victims had non-life-threatening injuries, said Capt. Christa Stedman of Austin-Travis County Emergency Medical Services.

Eight patients who already were undergoing treatment at the hospital were being moved to other facilities, said Dr. Peter DeYoung, chief medical officer for the hospital.

DeYoung said the ER doors were damaged and an aquarium inside was struck, but overall the building was in good condition.

No ambulances were being accepted although the ER was still taking walk-ins who would be treated at a makeshift triage area at the ambulance bay, he added.

“We’re hoping to kind of regroup here over the night and see where tomorrow leaves us,” DeYoung said Tuesday.

Thousands of drivers strike on Valentine’s Day

Associated Press

Thousands of ride-hailing and delivery workers in the U.S. and the U.K. went on strike on Valentine’s Day, calling for fair compensation and other changes to their working conditions.

In the U.S., Uber and Lyft drivers planned daylong strikes in Chicago; Philadelphia; Pittsburgh; Miami; Orlando and Tampa, Fla.; Hartford, Conn.; Newark, N.J.; Austin, Texas; and Providence, R.I. Drivers were also holding midday demonstrations at airports in those cities, according to Justice for App Workers, the group organizing the effort.

Meanwhile, U.K. delivery drivers for Uber Eats, Deliveroo, Just Eat and Stuart said they would turn off their apps and refuse deliveries between 5 p.m. and 10 p.m. The group Delivery Job U.K., which called for the walkout, said on Instagram that the strike was “a crucial opportunity to be seen and heard by society.”

“Our request is straightforward: fair compensation for the work we do,” the group said. “We’re tired of being exploited and risking our lives daily.”

Delivery Job U.K. said 3,000 people planned to strike, but it was unclear how many U.S. drivers would be participating. Uber said Tuesday that based on past walkouts, it didn’t expect the strike to have much impact on its operations.

“These types of events have rarely had any impact on trips, prices or driver availability,” Uber said in a statement. “That’s because the vast majority of drivers are satisfied.”

Uber and other companies that rely on self-employed gig workers say those workers appreciate the flexibility of the job.

But many gig workers are pushing to unionize, saying that would give them the ability to bargain over compensation, safety measures and other benefits.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Baby girl OK after being placed in 'safe haven' box

MO ST. LOUIS — A baby girl is doing well and will be put up for adoption after being surrendered at a "Safe Haven Baby Box" at a Missouri fire house, the fire chief said Monday.

The infant was dropped off Thursday at a Mehlville Fire District station in St. Louis County. The district installed the box in August. It was the first of its kind since passage of a Missouri law in 2021 allowing babies to be surrendered in a safe haven box — a secured incubator — if a parent is unable to care for the child.

Chief Brian Hendricks said the child was several hours old. After examination at the hospital, she was placed in state custody.

Avalanches kill skier, snowmobiler in Rockies

CO CRESTED BUTTE — A backcountry skier and a snowmobiler were killed in separate avalanches in the Rocky Mountains as dangerous snow conditions persist across the West.

The skier was buried Sunday in an area locally known as "The Playground" near Crested Butte in southwest Colorado, according to the Colorado Avalanche Information Center, which keeps track of avalanche deaths across the country. His partners dug him out of the avalanche debris, but he died of his injuries. No other information was released.

In southern Wyoming, two snowmobilers were riding west

of Battle Pass in the Sierra Madre range on Friday when they were caught in a slide. One of the snowmobilers rode out of the moving debris and turned to see that the other rider was partially buried with his feet in the air and his head below the surface of the snow. The first snowmobiler dug his partner out and performed CPR, but the buried snowmobiler did not survive.

Small plane lands safely after rear door falls off

NY CHEEKTOWAGA — A small plane with two people aboard landed safely at Buffalo Niagara International Airport on Monday after its rear door fell off, police said.

There were no reports of injuries or property damage on the ground, according to police in the Buffalo suburb of Cheektowaga.

The private plane lost the door around 5:30 p.m. as it flew over Cheektowaga, a few miles south of the airport, authorities said.

Police officers searched for the door but did not find it.

Former pro wrestler in custody in wife's death

OR PORTLAND — Former professional wrestler William Albert "Billy Jack" Haynes Jr. has been taken into police custody in connection with the death of his wife in Portland, authorities said.

Portland police said in a statement over the weekend that Haynes, 70, was in police custody at a local hospital, undergoing treatment "for a medical condition unrelated to the hom-

icide or his contact with law enforcement." Police said charges would be announced when Haynes is booked into jail.

Haynes was identified by police as the suspect in the fatal shooting of Janette Becraft, 85.

Police said they responded Thursday to reports of a shooting in a Portland neighborhood and requested help from special teams including crisis negotiators. KGW-TV reported that Haynes was detained two hours after two hours of negotiations. Police found Becraft dead inside the home.

A police spokesperson on Monday did not answer questions about the case, including whether Haynes had been released from the hospital, citing the ongoing investigation.

Smoking in cars with kids may be banned in W.Va.

WV CHARLESTON — Smoking in cars with children is banned in 11 states, and lawmakers are pushing to join them in West Virginia, where more adults use cigarettes than anywhere else in the nation, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The state Senate on Monday passed a bill calling for fines for anyone caught smoking or possessing a lit tobacco product in a vehicle when someone age 16 or under is present.

The bill passed on 25-8 vote and now goes to the House of Delegates, where similar legislation has failed and it faces an uncertain future.

Senate Majority Leader Tom Takubo, a doctor-turned-lawmaker, made a promise long ago to a patient whose father was a

heavy smoker that he would try to ban smoking in vehicles carrying children in West Virginia.

Takubo has made it almost an annual effort since 2017 to introduce the legislation, but it didn't gain traction.

Lawmaker allowing a 93% pay raise for themselves

KS TOPEKA — Kansas is set to nearly double state legislators' pay at the start of next year, making their compensation better than it is for their counterparts in a majority of states, including more populous ones like Georgia and Texas.

The increase is nearly \$28,000 a year for rank-and-file legislators, boosting their total compensation from \$30,000 to nearly \$58,000, an increase of 93%.

Legislative leaders get additional payments because of their duties, and the House speaker and Senate president are set to make more than \$85,000 a year, up from \$44,000.

The pay increase appeared to have bipartisan support, though lawmakers never voted directly on it. Instead, they set up a bipartisan pay commission last year, with its proposal taking effect unless both legislative chambers passed a resolution rejecting it by Wednesday.

An effort to force a debate in the Senate failed last week and there was no such move in the House.

Some Kansas legislators have complained for years that their annual compensation of \$30,000 isn't enough to live on year-round, while their duties as lawmakers cut into outside work.

— From wire reports

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Syracuse takes down No. 7 North Carolina

Associated Press

SYRACUSE, N.Y. — Judah Mintz scored 25 points, including 16 in the second half, and JJ Starling had 13 of his 23 points in the second half as Syracuse stunned No. 7 North Carolina 86-79 on Tuesday night.

The raucous home crowd rushed the court to celebrate the program's first win over a Top 10 team since a 95-91 overtime win over Duke in 2019.

The Orange shot 63% from the field and 47% from 3. The loss was North Carolina's third in five games.

"This game, obviously, was the best game we've played all year," said Syracuse first-year coach Adrian Autry. "Judah and JJ really stepped up big, but everybody who stepped on the court had a hand in the victory."

North Carolina (19-6, 11-3 Atlantic Coast Conference) missed its first 10 shots of the second half and fell behind 52-43, but rallied and took a 65-64 lead on a layup by RJ Davis with 7:16 to go. But the Orange (16-9, 7-7), who suffered a 103-67 loss at Chapel Hill last month, were not to be denied.

"We showed that we got heart," Mintz said. "I think we've been showing that all year."

"We wouldn't have won if we didn't think we could win it," he

added. "We're a confident group no matter how the odds are stacked against us. It's great to get the win for the program."

No. 4 Marquette 78, Butler 73: Tyler Kolek scored 27 points, including a key 3-pointer with 90 seconds left, and Oso Ighodaro had 17 points and 10 rebounds as the visiting Golden Eagles beat the Bulldogs.

Kolek also had seven rebounds and five assists as Marquette (19-5, 10-3 Big East) salvaged a split in the season series with its eighth consecutive win.

No. 10 Iowa State 68, Cincinnati 59: Curtis Jones and Tamin Lipsey each scored 15 points, and the visiting Cyclones forced 25 turnovers to beat the Bearcats.

Iowa State (19-5, 8-3 Big 12) had 12 steals and turned Cincinnati's turnovers into 26 points in the schools' first meeting since 2016. Cincinnati is new to the Big 12 this season.

No. 12 Baylor 79, No. 25 Oklahoma 62: Jayden Nunn scored a season-high 27 points, including three 3-pointers in a go-ahead run before halftime, and the host Bears beat the Sooners.

Nunn finished 8-for-12 shooting, including 6-for-9 on 3s, and all five starters scored in double figures for Baylor (18-6, 7-4 Big 12). Jalen Bridges added 14 points, while 7-foot freshman

Yves Missi had 12. RayJ Dennis had 11 points and eight assists, and Ja'Kobe Walter had 10 points and six rebounds.

No. 14 Illinois 97, Michigan 68: Terrence Shannon Jr. scored 31 points on 11-for-15 shooting as the host Illini cruised past the Wolverines.

Coleman Hawkins had 17 points and five assists for Illinois (18-6, 9-4 Big Ten), Marcus Domask had 13 points and Quincy Guerrier had 10 points and seven rebounds. Most of Illinois' starters were on the bench for the final 9:29.

No. 16 Dayton 75, Duquesne 59: DaRon Holmes II had 24 points and 11 rebounds as the host Flyers bounced back from an ugly loss to beat the Dukes.

Down by four with 6:17 left in the game, Dayton went on a 22-2 run to put away Duquesne.

No. 17 Creighton 94, Georgetown 72: Baylor Scheierman recorded his team's first triple-double since 1985, Trey Alexander made his first five 3-pointers and finished with 26 points, and the host Bluejays rolled past the Hoyas.

Creighton (17-8, 9-5) swept the season series and took sole possession of third place in the Big East. Georgetown (8-16, 1-12) lost its ninth straight overall and sixth in a row to the Bluejays.

No. 19 BYU 90, UCF 88: Jaxson Robinson scored 21 points off the bench and the host Cougars outlasted the Knights.

Noah Waterman added 17 points and nine rebounds as BYU (18-6, 6-5 Big 12) won for the fourth time in five games. Trevin Knell also scored 17 and Dallin Hall had 10 points, five rebounds and five assists.

No. 20 Wisconsin 62, Ohio State 54: Steven Crowl had 16 points and 10 rebounds and AJ Storr added 14 points and 12 rebounds as the host Badgers beat the Buckeyes to snap a four-game skid.

Pittsburgh 74, No. 21 Virginia 63: Blake Hinson scored 27 points and made five of his team's 14 3-pointers, and the surging Panthers ended the Cavaliers' nation-best 23-game home winning streak.

No. 22 Kentucky 75, Mississippi 63: Ugonna Onyenso blocked a Rupp Arena-record 10 shots, Antonio Reeves scored 15 points and the host Wildcats beat the Rebels to end a three-game home losing streak.

Illinois State 80, No. 23 Indiana State 67: Johnny Kinziger scored a career-high 31 points and the visiting Redbirds handed the Sycamores a loss in their first outing as a ranked team since Larry Bird led them to the national title game 45 years ago.

Source: Giants sign Soler to 3-year, \$42M contract

Associated Press

PHOENIX — The San Francisco Giants and slugger Jorge Soler agreed to a \$42 million, three-year deal on Tuesday, according to a person with direct knowledge of the negotiations, taking one of the remaining marquee free agents off the market as most of the 30 teams reported for spring training in Arizona and Florida.

But there's still plenty of talent available — especially considering it's mid-February.

Two-time Cy Young Award winner Blake Snell, lefty Jordan Montgomery, third baseman Matt Chapman, slugger J.D. Martinez and former MVP Cody Bellinger are all still looking for homes as camps get underway.

Eighteen teams started workouts Wednesday and the final 10 begin Thursday. The Los Angeles Dodgers and San Diego Padres began early because of their March 20 opener in Seoul, South Korea.

The veteran provides the Giants with a formidable power threat. He made his first All-Star team with the Marlins last season, hitting .250 with 36 homers, and led the American League with 48 homers in 2019 while with the Royals.

Cavnar hired by A's

Jenny Cavnar is the new primary play-by-play announcer for the Oakland Athletics, hired by NBC Sports California.

Cavnar becomes the first woman to handle primary play-by-play duties in major league history — set to be the voice for most of the A's games during the upcoming 2024 season.

She has covered baseball for 17 of 20 years in the media business, most recently calling Colorado Rockies games the past 12 years as a backup play-by-play announcer while also hosting pregame and postgame shows and regional coverage.

Celtics extend winning streak to five

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Even though he tied a career high by scoring 31 points before half-time, Jayson Tatum wasn't tempted to chase a huge number.

He's had big scoring nights before. He's after an NBA championship, and can only get that with all his teammates.

Tatum had 41 points and 14 rebounds, and the Boston Celtics won their fifth straight game by beating the Brooklyn Nets 118-110 on Tuesday night in the opener of a home-and-home series.

Tatum had his 25th 40-point game in the regular season, with a career high of 60. But after scoring 16 in the first quarter and 15 more in the second, he took only nine shots in the second half.

"We've got a really good team where in any given possession we could have two, three advantages and it's not always just going to be me," Tatum said. "So just understanding that and knowing that I need my teammates. I need everybody, we all need each other."

Jaylen Brown added 19 points for the Celtics, who improved to 42-12 and hosted the Nets on Wednesday in the final game for both teams before the All-Star break.

Mikal Bridges scored 27 points and Cam Thomas had 26 for Brooklyn, which lost for the fourth time in five games and doesn't

have much time to figure out what else it can do against Tatum.

Thunder 127, Magic 113: Jalen Williams scored 33 points, Shai Gilgeous-Alexander added 32 points and five assists and visiting Oklahoma City beat Orlando.

Gilgeous-Alexander scored 13 points during a five-minute stretch of the third quarter in which the Thunder took command of the game.

Paolo Banchero led the Magic with 23 points and 10 assists. Wendell Carter Jr. had 22 points and seven rebounds.

Heat 123, Bucks 97: Nikola Jovic scored a career-high 24 points, Bam Adebayo had his second triple-double of the season and visiting Miami beat Milwaukee.

Adebayo finished with 16 points, 12 rebounds and 11 assists. Duncan Robinson added 23 points and shot 6-for-8 from 3-point range for the Heat, who have won five of seven since a seven-game skid.

Giannis Antetokounmpo had 23 points, 11 rebounds and eight assists for the Bucks, but didn't attempt a free throw all night.

Timberwolves 121, Trail Blazers 109: Anthony Edwards had 41 points and visiting Minnesota sent Portland to its fifth straight loss.

Rudy Gobert added 16 points and 15 rebounds for his sixth straight double-double. Karl-Anthony Towns, who had foul trouble

early, finished with 13 points for the Western Conference-leading Timberwolves.

Deandre Ayton had 22 points and 16 rebounds for the Blazers, who host Minnesota again on Thursday night.

Suns 130, Kings 125: Kevin Durant scored 28 points, Devin Booker added 25 and host Phoenix outlasted Sacramento.

The Suns erased an 11-point deficit in the third quarter and took a two-point lead into the fourth. The game was tied at 108 and stayed tight the rest of the way. Royce O'Neale's 3-pointer with 47 seconds left put Phoenix up 122-118. De'Aaron Fox responded with a 3 to cut the margin to 122-121 with 41 seconds remaining, but Booker hit a jumper after a timeout for a 124-121 advantage and the Suns made enough free throws on the final possessions to stay in control.

Lakers 125, Pistons 111: LeBron James had 25 points and eight assists, Anthony Davis had 20 points and 14 rebounds, and host Los Angeles beat NBA-worst Detroit for its fifth win in six games.

D'Angelo Russell scored 21 points and hit four 3-pointers for the Lakers, who have won 10 of 15 overall to move three games above .500 (29-26) for the first time since a week before Christmas. Rui Hachimura and Austin Reaves added 15 points apiece. Spencer Dinwiddie had six points and seven assists in his debut with the Lakers.

Shaq's No. 32 jersey first to be retired by Magic

Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — Shaquille O'Neal was Orlando's first in lots of ways. First No. 1 overall draft pick. First player to make an All-Star team in a Magic uniform. First rookie of the year. First All-NBA selection. And the first big-time superstar to leave the franchise.

It's that last part that he figured might cost him.

O'Neal never thought the Magic would raise his jersey to the rafters of their arena. But he was wrong, and on Tuesday night, Orlando retired O'Neal's No. 32 — another first for the team and its first star. Most fans stayed for the postgame ceremony, even after the Magic fell to Oklahoma City.

"You know, there's an old say-

ing: Never forget where you come from," O'Neal said. "And my professional career started here. I've been living here mostly all my life. The fans have been hospitable. The people have been very, very hospitable. I never thought this day would happen."

The Magic, who are celebrating their 35th season, drafted O'Neal No. 1 overall in 1992. They've never retired a number for a player, but decided their anniversary season was the right time. Many of O'Neal's former Orlando teammates were there Tuesday night, including Penny Hardaway, Dennis Scott and Nick Anderson. O'Neal brought Anderson to the lectern at one point in the ceremony, telling

him he should have been the first to get the jersey retirement from the Magic.

"There's no one more deserving to be the first than Shaq," Magic CEO Alex Martins said. "Shaq put the Orlando Magic on the map. And the foundation of his Hall of Fame career started right here in Orlando."

O'Neal — who has No. 34 retired by the Los Angeles Lakers and No. 32 retired by the Miami Heat — is the third player to have his jersey retired by three franchises, joining Wilt Chamberlain and Pete Maravich.

Chamberlain's No. 13 has been retired by the Philadelphia 76ers, Golden State Warriors and the Lakers. Maravich had No. 44 retired by the Atlanta

Hawks and No. 7 retired by the Utah Jazz and the New Orleans Pelicans — even though he never played for that franchise. His number is retired in New Orleans because he played there for the Jazz and went to LSU.

"It means that every franchise you played for, they enjoyed you," O'Neal said. "The fans enjoyed you. They appreciated your hard work."

The Magic were 70-176 in their first three seasons, then got O'Neal and went 41-41 in his rookie year, 50-32 with the team's first playoff appearance in his second season, 57-25 with a trip to the NBA Finals in 1994-95 and finally 60-22 in his fourth and final season with Orlando.

Point's OT goal lifts Bolts over Bruins

Associated Press

BOSTON — Brad Marchand almost had the perfect ending for his 1,000th career NHL game.

The Bruins captain had two assists in regulation and almost scored the game-winner in overtime. But Andrei Vasilevskiy deflected the shot high and then stopped all three Boston attempts in the shootout to deliver a 3-2 victory for Tampa Bay on Tuesday night.

"He made an incredible save. That's why he's one of the top goalies in the league," Marchand said. "I thought I put it in a great spot to get it, but he showed why he's one of the best."

Vasilevskiy stopped 36 shots and Brayden Point scored the only goal of the shootout for Tampa Bay. Nikita Kucherov and Erik Cernak scored early to spot the Lightning a 2-0 lead just 21 minutes into the game.

Charlie McAvoy and James van Riemsdyk scored for Bruins, who have the best record in the Eastern Conference despite losing three of their last four games. Linus Ullmark stopped 23 shots for Boston, but he knocked Point's shot into the net with his stick after deflecting it in the air with his glove.

Oilers 8, Red Wings 4: Connor McDavid had a career-high six assists to lead host

Edmonton to its eighth straight home victory.

Alex DeBrincat, Joe Veleno, Patrick Kane and David Perron scored for the Red Wings, who have lost two of their last three.

Canucks 4, Blackhawks 2: Conor Garland scored twice, Dakota Joshua added a goal and two assists, and NHL-leading Vancouver won on the road against depleted Chicago.

Tyler Johnson and rookie defenseman Kevin Korhinski scored for Chicago.

Avalanche 6, Capitals 3: Artturi Lehkonen had two goals and two assists, and his line led the way as visiting Colorado ended its four-game losing streak by beating Washington.

Alex Ovechkin extended his goal streak to six by scoring on the power play with 11 minutes left in the third.

Stars 4, Hurricanes 2: Jason Robertson scored the go-ahead goal early in the third period and host Dallas defeated Carolina.

Jordan Staal had a goal and an assist for the Hurricanes.

Maple Leafs 4, Blues 1: Bobby McMann registered the first hat trick of his NHL career as host Toronto defeated St. Louis.

Alexey Toropchenko scored for St. Louis.

Sabres 7, Kings 0: Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen stopped 33 shots for his fourth career shutout, and Jordan Greenway scored

twice and added an assist to lead host Buffalo to a rout of Los Angeles.

Rasmus Dahlin, JJ Peterka and Alex Tuch had a goal and assist apiece to help the Sabres snap a three-game home skid in which they combined to score three times.

Devils 4, Predators 2: Nico Hischier scored twice to lead visiting New Jersey past Nashville.

Ryan O'Reilly and Tommy Novak scored and Juuse Saros made 42 saves for Nashville.

Kraken 2, Islanders 1 (SO): Tomas Tatar scored the lone goal in a shootout and visiting Seattle snapped a three-game losing streak.

Matty Beniers scored in regulation and Philipp Grubauer made 26 saves for the Kraken.

Canadiens 5, Ducks 0: Nick Suzuki had two goals and an assist, and host Montreal cruised to victory over Anaheim.

Juraj Slafkovsky, who connected with Suzuki all night, had a goal and two assists for the first three-point game of his career.

Senators 6, Blue Jackets 3: Brady Tkachuk recorded the second hat trick of his career to lead host Ottawa to its fourth straight win.

Dmitri Voronkov, Boone Jenner and Jack Roslovic scored for the Blue Jackets. Daniil Tarasov stopped 24 of 29 shots.

Nebraska softball pitching star Bahl lost for season

Associated Press

LINCOLN, Neb. — Jordy Bahl, the softball pitching star who transferred to Nebraska after winning two straight national championships at Oklahoma, will miss the rest of the season after injuring her knee during the Cornhuskers' opener last week.

Bahl announced the anterior cruciate ligament injury in her left knee on X and Instagram on Tuesday. She was hurt while delivering a pitch in the third inning against Washington at an event in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, on Feb. 8.

"With a heart thankful for God's plan and timing, I will be red shirting this year, and looking forward to a season of

growth and learning from a different point of view," she wrote. "I'm thankful for the support of my family, friends, coaches and staff. I'm truly blessed to have so many wonderful and loving people in my life. I'm not going anywhere. See you in 2025."

Bahl will apply for a medical hardship for the 2024 season. Nebraska officials said they expect the hardship will be granted and that Bahl will have two seasons of eligibility.

The two-time All-America pitcher shocked the college softball world last June when, a week after she led Oklahoma to a third straight national championship and was named Most Outstanding Player in the Women's College World Series, she

announced she would transfer to her home-state school.

Bahl grew up in the Omaha suburb of Papillion and strongly considered going to Nebraska out of high school before picking the powerhouse Sooners. She went 44-2, won two national titles and was Big 12 pitcher of the year and a first-team All-American each year.

Women's Super League tries to grow US soccer

A new women's professional soccer league that has received top division sanctioning from U.S. Soccer seeks to give more players careers at the elite level and give fans greater access to the women's game.

The USL Super League will

kick off in August in eight U.S. cities. It will join the National Women's Soccer League at the top tier of the sport.

Super League President Amanda Vandervort said Tuesday that the focus will be on the experience for both the fans and the players.

The eight host locations are: Spokane, Wash.; Charlotte, N.C.; Brooklyn; Fort Lauderdale, Fla.; the Dallas/Fort Worth area; Washington, D.C.; Lexington, Ky., and Tampa, Fla. Plans are in the works to add more teams in the future.

The two professional leagues aren't likely to be in direct competition because the NWSL is embarking on its 11th season and already is well-established.