

Survey: Stress levels rising among sailors

By **WYATT OLSON**
Stars and Stripes

The overall well-being of U.S. sailors has continued to slowly improve, but levels of severe and extreme stress plague a third of the force, according to an annual Navy survey released Thursday.

Sailors reporting severe or extreme levels of stress have steadily increased since the annual reports began five years ago, according to the 2023 Health of the Force Survey.

In 2019, 26% of those surveyed reported experiencing severe to extreme stress. In 2023, that level rose to 37%.

Survey participants with the grade of petty officer first class or below were the most likely to report severe or extreme stress levels, the survey found.

“Since 2019, inadequate manning has topped the list of reasons for heightened stress levels,” the survey states.

Quality-of-life issues for service members are of growing

concern for all the services, particularly as recruiting and retention have become more difficult in recent years.

These “challenges exacerbate Fleet manning shortages, putting additional stress on our force, which could have negative effects on readiness and potentially impact future retention, in an environment where retention is ever important,” the survey states.

In the wake of separate collisions in 2017 of two guided-missile destroyers, USS John S. McCain and USS Fitzgerald, the Navy undertook a comprehensive review of the fleet.

Among its conclusions were its ships deployed overseas were inadequately maintained, and the crews overworked, undermanned and short on training.

“During these contentious times, it is imperative that we not only build, maintain, train and equip combat-ready, lethal Naval forces, but we must maintain the strong foundation

of our most critical strength, our highly trained and skilled Sailors,” the survey states.

The 2023 survey had 19,380 participants who completed at least a third of the survey. The level of participation translates into a margin of error of plus-or-minus 5%.

Among the metrics, or “protective factors,” the survey uses to assess overall status of the force are how connected sailors feel in the context of a larger group; equality of opportunity; organizational commitment to the service’s goals and values; and trust in the integrity of the chain of command.

“In comparison to previous results, 2023 indicates that the protective factors have stabilized and rebounded slightly as observed by increases in the percentage of participants with moderate levels of each factor and decreases in the percentage with low levels,” the survey states.

Most significantly improved

was organization commitment, where the percentage of personnel with moderate to high levels increased to 71% from 61% the previous year.

Twenty-three percent of participants said their plans for exiting the Navy were certain, three times the percentage expressing that in the 2022 survey. Roughly a fifth of those surveyed were “on the fence” about staying in the Navy, the survey states.

“[T]he most commonly cited influences to leave include civilian career opportunities, salary, difficulty balancing work and their personal life, a desire to focus on the family and the climate at their current command,” the survey states.

And what factors might influence them to stay in? The most mentioned factors were job security, availability of billets in desirable locations, salary, retirement benefits and the ability to balance work with personal life.

Navy SEALs in Cyprus send signal to adversaries

By **JOHN VANDIVER**
Stars and Stripes

Navy SEALs operating in the Eastern Mediterranean said that drills carried out off the coast of Cyprus were a signal to adversaries that attacks in the Eastern Mediterranean will be opposed with plenty of force.

The comments, delivered Wednesday after several weeks of training, come amid ongoing tensions with Iran and its proxies in a region roiled by the war in Gaza.

Capt. Bill Gallagher, Naval

Special Warfare Group 2 commander, said his team’s collaboration with Cypriot forces “sends a clear message.”

“Through joint endeavors, we fortify our capabilities and make clear that any aggression will be met with a swift, unyielding response,” Gallagher said in a statement.

Since the start of Israel’s war with Hamas in Gaza, Cyprus has turned into a hub for U.S. and other allied special operations teams. Commandos from Germany, the Netherlands and United Kingdom

were some of the forces dispatched to the country, where they were put on standby in the aftermath of Hamas’ Oct. 7 terror attack on Israel.

The type of training being carried out by special operators can pose risks for the troops involved.

In November, five U.S. Army Special Operations troops died in a helicopter crash off the coast of Cyprus, where they were taking part in a refueling training mission.

The crew members were part of the Army’s 160th Spe-

cial Operations Aviation Regiment, a unit responsible for getting special operations teams to hot spots.

The SEALs and special warfare combatant-craft crewmen, operating from Limassol, Cyprus, wrapped up three weeks of training Wednesday.

The sailors and their Cypriot counterparts took part in drills intended to hone skills needed in covert missions and search and seizure operations at sea, the Naval Special Warfare Group 2 statement said.

1,000th taps performance set at WWI memorial

By LINDA F. HERSEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Every day a lone bugler stands at the World War I Memorial across the plaza from a statue of Army Gen. John Pershing.

The bugler salutes the American flag, lifts a simple brass instrument without valves or keys, and sounds the 24 distinctive notes of taps — the universal call sounded at dusk at U.S. military installations across the world.

“The taps bugle call is what unites every American soldier,” said Jari Villanueva, an Air Force veteran and director of the nonprofit Doughboy Foundation, which supports the daily taps program.

To commemorate Presidents Day on Monday, the foundation will recognize the 1,000th time that taps is performed since the memorial opened three years ago at 1400 Pennsylvania Ave. across from the White House

visitor center.

Guest bugler will be Kevin Paul, an active-duty trumpeter and senior musician with the Army Band in Washington. Paul, a sergeant first class, has played at Arlington National Cemetery, the White House and the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

He also serves as operations manager for the Doughboy Foundation helping to coordinate the daily taps calls at the World War I Memorial.

The AEF band — named after the American Expeditionary Forces — will participate Monday in World War I uniforms.

The memorial is owned by the National Park Service. The space where it was built incorporated an existing statue of Pershing, who led the American Expeditionary Forces across Europe during the war.

“When America threw itself into preparing for conflict, Pershing was named the com-

mander,” said Villanueva, who sounded the first daily taps at the memorial on Nov. 11, 2021.

Villanueva will be guest speaker at Monday’s event. He will note the significance of the event in brief remarks prior to the sounding of taps at 5 p.m.

A ceremonial trumpeter, Villanueva served for nearly 25 years in Washington. He has participated in more than 5,000 funerals and other occasions at Arlington National Cemetery and other sites. He served from 1985-2008 at Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling.

Though the taps melody originated with the Civil War, the daily 5 p.m. call at the memorial honors all American service members and their loved ones, according to the Doughboy Foundation.

Villanueva organized the corps of buglers tapped to honor U.S. service members and veterans with the early evening bugle call.

“The thought was let’s have a bugler in World War I uniform pay tribute every day, rain or shine, snow or heat,” said Villanueva, former president of Taps for Veterans, a nonprofit that sent buglers to military funerals.

The memorial was the final war monument to open in Washington in remembrance of the major U.S. conflicts of the 20th century. The other sites commemorate World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

An individual veteran is honored daily when taps is played. The veteran can be from any military branch or era, according to the foundation.

Clarence Clarke, a bugler with Company D of the 369th Infantry Regiment, will be commemorated on Presidents Day. He was a member of an all-Black Army regiment, known as the Harlem Hellfighters, a unit that served with distinction in World War I.

Teen alleges sexual abuse from Marine Corps recruiter

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

AUSTIN, Texas — A Texas teenager who said a Marine Corps recruiter sexually abused her while she was a high school senior eager to enlist filed a \$5 million claim Thursday against the service because officials had been warned the recruiter posed a threat.

In an 11-page complaint filed through the Federal Tort Claims Act, the teenager described how Gunnery Sgt. Christopher Champagne, who oversaw her pre-enlistment program in Decatur, Texas, coerced her into a sexual relationship, isolated her from her peers and tried to control her life.

During much of the recruiter’s months-long pursuit of her that began in September 2022, she was a 17-year-old who had recently moved to Texas and was looking to be part of a community, according to

the complaint. Stars and Stripes does not name victims of sexual assault.

“My client was looking forward to spending her life serving her country as a Marine. But her faith in the Marines has been shattered because she was sexually abused by her recruiter — someone she thought she could trust,” said Christine Dunn, the woman’s attorney.

The filing is a first step toward a lawsuit against the Marine Corps, the Navy and the Defense Department, Dunn said. Law requires that claims against a federal agency must first go through an administrative process that affords the agency six months to investigate. Then a lawsuit can be filed in court.

Champagne in October self-published a memoir about his actions toward the “poolee,” a Marine Corps term for people who intend to enlist but have not yet become a recruit or attended basic training.

In the book, he described his immediate attraction to the young woman and referred to her arrival in his office as a “gift,” according to the complaint. He also wrote he “exercised plenty of risky behavior” throughout his career.

The Naval Criminal Investigative Service confirmed Thursday that it is conducting a thorough investigation into Champagne.

“Out of respect for the investigative process, NCIS will not comment further while the investigation remains ongoing,” the agency said in a statement.

The Marine Corps did not immediately respond Thursday with information on Champagne’s status in the service.

Officials previously told media outlets that he was under investigation and had been removed from his position following publication of the memoir, which is no longer available for purchase online.

Texas to spend \$131M on new base at border

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

AUSTIN, Texas — The Texas National Guard will spend nearly \$131 million to build a forward operating base near the state's border with Mexico to house up to 1,800 troops serving on a mission to deter illegal activity.

Gov. Greg Abbott made the announcement Friday alongside Maj. Gen. Thomas Suelzer, commander of the Texas National Guard, at a podium backed by a row of Guard troops armed with assault rifles and wearing body armor.

The contract was awarded Feb. 9 to the company Team Housing Solutions for "Forward Operating Base Eagle Base Camp" with a completion date of Sept. 7, according to the state's online contract records.

A presentation created by the New Braunfels-based company shows a camp similar to those al-

ready housing troops at the border — just on a larger scale. The facilities proposed are modular buildings, trailers and tents. The presentation compares the facilities with those already in operation at other camps the company maintains for the National Guard, such as Camp Walker in Laredo and Camp Alpha in Del Rio.

Troops at the new base will still rely on trailer-based toilets and showers, as they do in the other camps. There will be one toilet per seven soldiers, according to the presentation. The "executive trailer" rooms boast in-suite bathrooms. However, Abbott said Friday the camp will "improve conditions for our soldiers" and focus mainly on the location reducing their travel time to work.

"Before now, National Guard have been scattered across this entire region in cramped quarters away from fellow soldiers and Guard, sometimes traveling

long distances to be able to do their job," he said.

Abbott began sending troops to the border on a state mission nearly three years ago. Known as Operation Lone Star, troops work with state police to deter illegal activity between legal ports of entry. At its peak, the mission had roughly 10,000 troops assigned to it but that number has decreased overtime. The Texas Military Department also stopped releasing the number of troops working at the border.

The state legislature has provided Operation Lone Star more than \$10 billion during that time. That price tag includes aspects of the mission that are outside the scope of the Guard, such as the governor's program that buses migrants out of state. The new base is needed to expand and sustain the state's effort, Abbott said.

Those efforts have come in opposition to the federal govern-

ment's border operations in recent months, pitting Abbott against President Joe Biden in at least two border-related court cases.

Texas sued the Department of Homeland Security in October for cutting coiled wire barriers placed by Guard troops near the border, calling it destruction of state property. Customs and Border Protection responded it has an obligation under federal law to detain and process any people who reach U.S. soil or act when conditions put migrants at risk. The case is ongoing.

Meanwhile, the Department of Justice sued Texas last month to challenge a new state law it deems unconstitutional. The law creates two new state crimes that attempt to regulate immigration — something the courts have ruled is the job of the federal government, not the states. The law is set to go into effect next month.

DOD seeks \$300M for first of its Replicator drones

Bloomberg News

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon has sent Congress a classified request to shift \$300 million in funds to speed development and purchasing of its first Replicator drones, an effort to field thousands of pilotless aircraft to counter Chinese capabilities by August 2025.

This initial request to reprogram funding previously approved for other purposes, which must be approved by all four congressional defense committees, reflects the Defense Department's determination to show unaccustomed agility in developing a new armada of air, sea and sub-surface drones. The unmanned aircraft have become everyday weapons, from the war in Ukraine to the Houthi attacks on shipping in the Red Sea.

Contractors whose drones are selected will see millions of dol-

lars in increased sales.

"We hope they will act quickly, which will allow us to ramp up and accelerate production on Replicator capabilities," said Pentagon spokesman Eric Pahon. Asked why the request was classified, he said "we are taking a careful approach of what information we reveal" and will do so "if it makes sense in the context of our operational needs."

Aditi Kumar, deputy director of the Pentagon's Defense Innovation Unit, which is managing Replicator and working with industry, said last week at a forum that "we will be very selective about how we talk about those capabilities publicly." The innovation unit, based in California's Silicon Valley, is working to tap into the talents of tech companies rather than relying solely on the Defense Department's usual contracting giants.

Photos show Egypt building wall near Gaza Strip border

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Egypt is building a wall and is leveling land near its border with the Gaza Strip ahead of a planned Israeli offensive targeting the border city of Rafah, satellite images analyzed Friday by The Associated Press show.

Egypt, which has not publicly acknowledged the construction, repeatedly has warned Israel not to forcibly expel the more than 1 million displaced Palestinians now in Rafah into its territory while Israeli troops battle the militant group Hamas for a fifth month.

Israel's defense minister said Friday that Israel has "no intention" of pushing Palestinian civilians across the border into Egypt. However, the preparations on the Egyptian side of the border in the Sinai Peninsula suggested that Cairo is prepar-

ing for such a mass ejection.

The satellite images, taken Thursday by Maxar Technologies, show ongoing construction on the wall, which sits along the Sheikh Zuweid-Rafah Road some 2 miles west of the border with Gaza. The images show cranes, trucks and what appear to be precast concrete barriers being set up along the road.

Those satellite images correspond to features seen in a video released by the London-based Sinai Foundation for Human Rights on Feb. 12. The video shows a crane lifting concrete walls into place along the road.

The construction "is intended to create a high-security gated and isolated area near the borders with the Gaza Strip, in preparation for the reception of Palestinian refugees in the case of (a) mass exodus," the foundation said.

Manchin says he won't make a White House run this year

Associated Press

NEW YORK — West Virginia Sen. Joe Manchin announced on Friday that he is not running for president, saying he didn't want to be a "spoiler."

"I will not be seeking a third-party run," he said in a speech at West Virginia University. "I will not be involved in a presidential run. I will be involved in making sure that we secure a president that has the knowledge and has the passion and has the ability to bring this country together."

The speech was billed as part of a national listening tour Manchin announced when he decided not to seek another Senate term. He told the Morgantown audience that he had no interest in being "a deal-breaker, if you will, a spoiler, whatever you want to call it."

"I just don't think it's the right time."

The centrist Democrat who often bucked his party's leadership had been considering a run for the presidency and had said he thought it would be clear by March if there was a path for a third-party candidate this year. He said in the speech that he thought a third-party bid might be viable at some point "but right now it's really challenging."

His decision comes as the leadership of No Labels, a national political movement that could offer an independent presidential ticket in 2024, has worked privately to identify serious candidates to represent the group in the general election. Manchin was viewed as one of the top prospects.

Manchin is not running for reelection in 2024. His Senate seat in a heavily Republican state is expected to be a prime pickup opportunity for the GOP.

Manchin, the only Demo-

crat holding statewide office in West Virginia, has been at odds with members of his own party over his support for coal and other fossil fuels.

With the Democrats holding a slim majority in the U.S. Senate, Manchin was a critical vote who wielded considerable influence to shape legislation and diluted much of President Joe Biden's social spending plans.

In addition to the No Labels effort, a group pushing for Manchin to partner with retiring Utah Sen. Mitt Romney to seek a third-party presidential bid filed paperwork last year to form a draft committee with the Federal Election Commission. Romney and Manchin did not sign on to the effort.

After Manchin's announcement, No Labels issued a statement saying the organization welcomed the senator's efforts to strengthen "America's commonsense majority."

Hundreds grieving Navalny in Russia

Associated Press

Over 400 people were detained in Russia while paying tribute to opposition leader Alexei Navalny, who died at a remote Arctic penal colony, a rights group reported Sunday.

The sudden death of Navalny, 47, was a crushing blow to many Russians, who had pinned their hopes for the future on President Vladimir Putin's fiercest foe. Navalny remained vocal in his unrelenting criticism of the Kremlin even after surviving a nerve agent poisoning and receiving multiple prison terms.

The news reverberated across the globe, with many world leaders blaming the death on President Vladimir Putin and his government. In an exchange with reporters shortly after leaving a Saturday church service, President Joe Biden reiterated his stance that Putin was ultimately to blame for Navalny's death. "The fact of the matter is, Putin is responsible. Whether he ordered it, he's responsible for the circumstance," Biden said. "It's a reflection of who he is. It cannot be tolerated."

Meanwhile, Navalny's wife, Yulia Navalnaya, published a picture of the couple on Instagram on Sunday in her first social media post since her husband's death. The caption read simply: "I love you." Hundreds of people in dozens of Russian cities streamed to ad hoc memorials and monuments to victims of political repression with flowers and candles on Friday and Saturday to pay a tribute to the politician. In over a dozen cities, police detained 401 people by Saturday night, according to the OVD-Info rights group that tracks political arrests.

Maine gunman told police soldiers concerned he would 'do something'

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Maine—An Army reservist responsible for Maine's deadliest mass shooting told state police in New York before his hospitalization last summer that fellow soldiers were worried about him because he was "gonna friggin' do something."

Reservist Robert Card, 40, told troopers who escorted him to a hospital in upstate New York that fellow reservists and others kept talking about him behind his back, "and it's getting old," according to police body cam video obtained by WMTW-TV and others under New York's

Freedom of Information Law.

"They're scared 'cause I'm gonna friggin' do something. Because I am capable," Card said. The release of the police body cam video recorded July 16 followed the release of a new detail Thursday by Maine State Police who addressed an independent commission investigating the tragedy: A review of Card's cellphone revealed a note he had written three days before the Oct. 25 shooting in Lewiston that left 18 people dead and 13 more wounded in which he said he'd "had enough" and warned he was "trained to hurt people."

Army spokesperson Bryce

Dubee said Friday it's cooperating with the independent commission and that eight of Card's fellow reservists have been authorized to testify in their personal capacity at an upcoming meeting. The Army was also conducting an investigation.

Liz Seal, who lost her husband, Josh, in the shooting and who is now raising four children on her own, called the videos "disturbing."

"They show there were clear warning signs that Card posed a risk to others and yet the system failed to ensure that his guns were taken away from him," she told AP via text message.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Protesters dump powder on Constitution display

DC WASHINGTON — Conservationists at the National Archives cleaned up the building’s rotunda area after a pair of apparent environmental protesters dumped reddish powder on the display case housing the original U.S. Constitution.

Conservationists painstakingly cleaned the pinkish-red powder from the nooks and crannies of the document’s protective housing. Their tools include everything from vacuum cleaners to cotton swabs to bags full of shredded erasers.

Two men dumped the powder onto the horizontal display case around 2:30 p.m. Wednesday.

“We are determined to foment a rebellion,” one man said, in a video posted on social media. “We all deserve clean air, water, food and a livable climate.”

Crossing border with pythons in pants is costly

NY ALBANY — A New York City man who admitted to smuggling three Burmese pythons in his pants through a U.S.-Canadian border crossing was sentenced last week to a year of probation and fined \$5,000, federal prosecutors said.

Calvin Bautista, 38, crossed into northern New York with the hidden snakes on a bus from Montreal to New York City on July 15, 2018. The young adult snakes were hidden in the inner thigh of his pants in snake bags tied to the pants’ drawstring.

They were discovered by U.S. Customs and Border Protection officers, according to court doc-

uments and a release from the office of U.S. Attorney Carla B. Freedman. The Queens resident purchased the snakes, which were worth more than \$2,500, at a reptile store in Canada, according to court documents.

Second new reactor begins splitting atoms

GA ATLANTA — A nuclear power plant in Georgia has begun splitting atoms in the second of its two new reactors, Georgia Power said, a key step toward providing carbon-free electricity.

The unit of Atlanta-based Southern Co. said operators reached self-sustaining nuclear fission inside the reactor last week at Plant Vogtle, southeast of Augusta. That makes the heat that will be used to produce steam and spin turbines to generate electricity.

Plant Vogtle’s Unit 4 is now supposed to start commercial operation sometime in the second quarter of 2024.

Recently discovered Alaskapox kills victim

AK ANCHORAGE — An elderly man has died from Alaskapox, the first known fatality from the recently discovered virus, state health officials said.

The man, who lived in the remote Kenai Peninsula, was hospitalized last November and died in late January, according to a bulletin last week from Alaska public health officials.

The man was undergoing cancer treatment and had a suppressed immune system because of the drugs, which may

have contributed to the severity of his illness, the bulletin said. It described him as elderly but didn’t provide his age.

Alaskapox, also known as AKPV, is related to smallpox, cowpox and mpox, health officials said. Symptoms can include a rash, swollen lymph nodes and joint or muscle pain.

Only six other cases of the virus have been reported to Alaska health officials since the first one in 2015. All had mild cases and recovered without being hospitalized.

Stingray with no male companion is pregnant

NC RALEIGH — Charlotte, a rust-colored stingray the size of a serving platter, has spent much of her life gliding around the confines of a storefront aquarium in North Carolina’s Appalachian Mountains.

She’s 2,300 miles from her natural habitat under the waves off southern California. And she hasn’t shared a tank of water with a male of her species in at least eight years.

And yet nature has found a way, the aquarium’s owner said: The stingray is pregnant with as many as four pups and could give birth in the next two weeks.

Sunday sales of liquor move forward in House

SC COLUMBIA — The South Carolina House has given key approval to a bill allowing liquor stores to stay open on Sundays for a few hours if their local governments allow it.

Supporters said it is time to update centuries-old rules based on religion that designat-

ed Sunday as a day of rest. They said it would help businesses — especially those frequented by tourists who spend well over \$20 billion annually in South Carolina and who are sometimes surprised to find they can’t get a bottle of tequila or rum on a summer beach day.

The proposal faces one more routine approval vote before it heads to the Senate.

The bill would allow liquor stores to open from 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday if a county or city council agrees to put the idea up for a public vote and it gets a majority approval.

9 firefighters injured after fuel tank explodes

CA LOS ANGELES — A truck’s fuel tank exploded Thursday in a neighborhood south of downtown Los Angeles, sending a fireball into the air and injuring nine of the 10 firefighters responding to the blaze, including two critically, fire officials said.

All nine Los Angeles firefighters were rushed to Harbor-UCLA Medical Center and were stabilized, and one of the critical patients had to be intubated and airlifted to a burn unit at Los Angeles General Medical Center, said Dr. Molly Deane, a trauma surgeon.

The driver of the truck escaped injury after noticing something was awry with the big rig’s tractor and stepped away to call 911, officials said.

The tractor was fueled by compressed natural gas in two 100-gallon tanks, one of which exploded six minutes after firefighters arrived on the scene in Wilmington.

— From wire reports



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

Reporting World, National and Military News

Curry wins 3-point shootout over Ionescu

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Stephen Curry was on a roll — and it was barely enough to beat Sabrina Ionescu.

And fittingly, he won by three.

The Golden State star and NBA's all-time 3-point king beat Ionescu 29-26 in the Steph vs. Sabrina competition at All-Star Saturday night, the first such him-vs.-her event of its kind at the league's weekend showcase.

"For us to deliver a show like that, it was perfect," Curry said. "As much excitement as you can build in that short amount of time with two great shooters going at it. This is something we'll remember for a long time."

Ionescu won the WNBA's 3-point shootout at its All-Star weekend last year with a record 37 points, smashing Curry's NBA shootout mark of 31 points. From there, the plan was concocted for them to meet at All-Star weekend.

So they did, and it felt like the main event of the night.

"Hopefully, this isn't the last time we do this," Ionescu said.

Given how the fans — and really, everybody from both the NBA and WNBA — seemed to love it, it likely won't be the last time, especially since Curry and Ionescu talked afterward about adding partners to the mix next year when All-Star weekend just happens to be in San Francisco, the area where he plays and she calls home.

Curry's prize was a championship belt, with images of goats — as in, GOATs — on either side.

And he's the shooting GOAT, without question. But Ionescu, the New York Liberty star, almost gave him more than he could handle.

Ionescu went first and made 18 of 27 shots — starting 7-for-7. Some of them were worth one point, some worth two, giving her a total of 26 points.

She shot from the NBA 3-point line, which is roughly 12 to 18 inches farther from the basket than the WNBA line, depending on the area of the floor. Ionescu used a WNBA ball, which is slightly smaller than the NBA ball Curry used.

Curry had to rally a bit at the end, making nine of his last 10 to finish off the win.

Combined, they shot 39-for-54 (72%) in a contest with unconventional elements like a lime-green glass floor in a football stadium with the world watching.

"This was so authentic for the both of us to be able to be here, finally not in a closed gym, shooting in front of everyone watching and understanding what it means for ourselves but also the bigger picture," said Ionescu, who has beaten Curry in a H-O-R-S-E competition before without millions of people watching on television. "This is where I wanted to be. ... It's

changed the landscape of how people view what we're doing."

There's no rivalry between the two, even though Curry heckled Ionescu during her rehearsal shooting session on Friday. He was booing her as she shot.

"Trying to apply some pressure, for sure," Curry said.

The reality is he's been inspiring Ionescu for more than half her life. Ionescu's family had season tickets to Warriors games. He gave her a high-five once when he was in the tunnel connecting the locker room and the court.

She even had a photo of him as her screensaver.

Years later, when Ionescu was starring at Oregon, she was the one high-fiving Curry's daughters — who love her. And on Saturday, Ionescu said the experience of just being part of something so unique on the All-Star stage taught her a key lesson.

Topuria stops Volkanovski, claims featherweight title

Associated Press

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Ilia Topuria boldly declared himself a UFC world champion in his social media biography for months before he actually became the first Georgian to win a title.

When Topuria finally got the belt strapped around his waist at UFC 298 on Saturday night, he cried at the feeling of dreams coming true.

Topuria stopped Alexander Volkanovski in the second round to claim the featherweight title, ending the Australian champion's four-year reign with a devastating series of strikes.

Topuria (15-0), who lives and trains in Spain, controlled the first round of his first UFC title fight with sharp punching before he sensationally finished off Volkanovski with more of the same.

Topuria staggered the 35-year-old Volkanovski to the cage with a left-right combination before putting him on the canvas with a perfect right hand followed by a big left. Topuria finished the champion on the ground with 1:28 left, improv-

ing to 7-0 since joining the UFC in late 2020.

"I feel so happy right now," Topuria said afterward with a combination flag of Georgia and Spain wrapped around his shoulders. "They're going to tell you you can't do it. They're going to knock you down and doubt you. But guess what? The only person you need to have your back in this life is yourself. Just trust yourself, work tirelessly, have faith and everything is possible. Look at me now."

Topuria perfectly seized a moment several years in the making. He had stormed to the top of the list of contenders for Volkanovski's belt with six consecutive UFC victories in less than three years, capped by a blowout decision over Josh Emmett last summer.

Volkanovski (26-4) had made five consecutive successful title defenses since winning his belt in late 2019, but his reign ended with his first featherweight loss in UFC competition. Volkanovski also lost twice in the past year to lightweight champion Islam Makhachev in a failed

bid to become a two-division champ, and he didn't show his usual relentless work rate against Topuria before the fight abruptly ended.

Topuria didn't lack for confidence during the promotion of this fight. He repeatedly spoke of Volkanovski's reign in the past tense, and he even swiped the title belt off the table in front of Volkanovski at their news conference Thursday.

UFC President Dana White is hoping to make his promotion's debut in Spain with Topuria's next fight. White was delighted by Topuria's self-confidence in declaring himself a champion even before he won the belt.

"Today is a historic moment for the country of Georgia," said Georgian bantamweight Merab Dvalishvili, who beat Henry Cejudo earlier at UFC 298.

Former middleweight champion Robert Whittaker won a unanimous decision over Paulo Costa in the penultimate bout of the mixed martial arts promotion's first pay-per-view show in Southern California in more than two years.

Top-ranked UConn men rout Marquette

Associated Press

HARTFORD, Conn. — UConn is the No. 1 team in the nation and the defending national champion, yet the Huskies went into Saturday's matchup with No. 4 Marquette coveting something the Golden Eagles won a year ago: a Big East championship.

Donovan Clingan had 17 points and 10 rebounds to help the Huskies to an 81-53 rout of Marquette and control of the conference race.

"We were just trying to prove who we are, and we're just trying to win," Clingan said.

Tristen Newton added 15 points, eight rebounds and eight assists for the Huskies (24-2, 14-1), who have won 14 straight games. Cam Spencer and Hassan Diarra each added 14 points.

Kam Jones scored 15 points and Oso Ighodaro had 14 for Marquette (19-6, 10-4), which came into the game with an eight-game winning streak.

The Huskies now lead the second-place Golden Eagles in the Big East by three games in the loss column with five to play.

The Huskies led by 16 points after a strong defensive first half and 18 after a putback by Newton to open the second half.

They took a 51-30 lead after an offensive rebound by Newton, who fed Clingan for an emphatic dunk through the lane. UConn built its lead to as many as 29 points in the second half.

"You play elite offense, you play elite defense and you're a great rebounding team and you play harder than the opponent, it doesn't give them a lot of places to go," UConn coach Dan Hurley said.

No. 3 Houston 82, Texas 61: L.J. Cryer scored a season-high 26 points, Jamal Shead had 16 points and 11 rebounds, and the host Cougars dominated the Longhorns for their third straight win.

Cryer and Shead combined to score 23 first-half points on 8-

for-15 shooting as Houston (22-3, 9-3 Big 12) built a 40-27 halftime lead.

Dylan Disu had 16 points and seven rebounds and Chendall Weaver added 11 points for Texas (16-9, 5-7).

Houston, which has won 19 straight home games, remains tied atop the Big 12 with No. 10 Iowa State. The Cougars and Cyclones play on Monday night.

No. 5 Arizona 105, Arizona State 60: Jaden Bradley scored 21 points, Oumar Ballo dominated inside and the host Wildcats overpowered the Sun Devils in the rivals' final Pac-12 game at McKale Center.

Arizona (20-5, 11-3 Pac-12) had its free-flowing offense clicking all night and tightened up its defense late in the first half to turn the rivalry game into a blowout before the teams head to the Big 12 next season.

No. 6 Kansas 67, No. 25 Oklahoma 57: Hunter Dickinson had 20 points and 16 rebounds, and the visiting Jayhawks rallied to beat the Sooners.

Johnny Furphy had 15 points, nine rebounds and three steals for Kansas (20-6, 8-5 Big 12).

Jalon Moore had 17 points and Javian McCollum added 15 for Oklahoma (18-8, 6-7).

No. 7 North Carolina 96, Virginia Tech 81: Armando Bacot had 25 points and 12 rebounds and the host Tar Heels led most of the way in a victory over the Hokies.

RJ Davis added 20 points, Cormac Ryan scored 16 and Harrison Ingram had 12 points and 17 rebounds for North Carolina (20-6, 12-3 Atlantic Coast Conference).

No. 8 Tennessee 88, Vanderbilt 53: Dalton Knecht and Zakai Zeigler scored 14 points apiece to lead the host Volunteers to a rout.

No. 9 Duke 76, Florida State 67: Jared McCain set a school freshman record with eight 3-pointers and matched the freshman mark with 35 points to lead the visiting Blue Devils past the

Seminoles.

His point total tied Zion Williamson's 35-point performance against Syracuse in 2019.

No. 10 Iowa State 82, Texas Tech 74: Keshon Gilbert had 24 points and eight rebounds to lead the host Cyclones past the Red Raiders.

Curtis Jones contributed 12 points for Iowa State (20-5, 9-3 Big 12), which has won all 15 of its home games this season.

LSU 64, No. 11 South Carolina 63: Jordan Wright had 14 points including two free throws with five seconds left as the visiting Tigers erased a 16-point second half deficit to upset the Gamecocks.

South Carolina (21-5, 9-4) had a final chance, but Jacobi Wright's 3-pointer from the left corner bounced off the rim.

No. 12 Baylor 94, West Virginia 81: Freshman Ja'Kobe Walter scored 23 points to lead five teammates in double figures and the visiting Bears beat the Mountaineers.

Jayden Nunn added 20 points, and RayJ Dennis had 18 points for Baylor (19-6, 8-4 Big 12), which has won five of its last six.

No. 22 Kentucky 70, No. 13 Auburn 59: Antonio Reeves scored 22 points and the Wildcats led throughout and ended the Tigers' 16-game home winning streak.

Kentucky (18-7, 8-4 Southeastern Conference) held Auburn to 30.9% shooting.

No. 14 Illinois 85, Maryland 80: Terrence Shannon Jr. scored 27 points and the Illini earned their first road victory against the Terrapins since 2011.

Marcus Domask had 19 points for Illinois (19-6, 10-4 Big Ten).

Maryland wore throwback 1970s-style uniforms to honor former coach Lefty Driesell, who died Saturday at 92.

No. 15 Alabama 100, Texas A&M 75: Mark Sears had 23 points, four rebounds, four assists and three steals and the

hot-shooting Crimson Tide beat the visiting Aggies.

Rylan Griffen scored 17, Lattrell Wrightsell Jr. had 16 and Aaron Estrada and Sam Walters added 11 each for Alabama (18-7, 9-2 SEC).

No. 16 Dayton 78, Fordham 70: DaRon Holmes II got his eighth double-double of the season with 29 points and 10 rebounds to lead the host Flyers (21-4, 11-2 Atlantic 10), who are eyeing an NCAA Tournament berth for the first time in seven years.

No. 17 Creighton 79, Butler 57: Baylor Scheierman finished with 27 points and 10 rebounds, his sixth consecutive double-double, and Ryan Kalkbrenner added 21 points as the visiting Bluejays (19-7, 10-5 Big East) rolled past the Bulldogs.

Oklahoma State 93, No. 19 BYU 83: Freshman Jamyron Keller scored 22 points in his first start to help the host Cowboys beat the Cougars.

Foussef Traore scored 17 points and Trevin Knell had 16 to lead BYU (18-7, 6-6), which came into the game leading the nation in made 3-pointers.

Iowa 88, No. 20 Wisconsin 86 (OT): Tony Perkins' layup with 1.3 seconds left gave the host Hawkeyes an overtime win over the Badgers.

Perkins had 16 of his 18 points in the second half and overtime.

Steven Crawl had 22 points to lead Wisconsin (17-9, 9-6).

No. 21 Virginia 49, Wake Forest 47: Reece Beekman scored 20 points and the host Cavaliers (20-6, 11-4 Atlantic Coast Conference) overcame poor free-throw shooting to beat the Demon Deacons.

Southern Illinois 74, No. 23 Indiana State 69: Xavier Johnson scored 23 points and the host Salukis overcame a 13-point deficit to hand the Sycamores (22-5, 13-3), ranked for the first time since the Larry Bird-era, lost their second straight loss.

Kings beat slumping Bruins in overtime

Associated Press

BOSTON — Brandt Clarke scored on a breakaway with 27 seconds left in overtime for his first career goal and the Los Angeles Kings rallied to beat the slumping Boston Bruins 5-4 on Saturday.

Clarke had just been sprung from the penalty box for taking down David Pastrnak and was all alone when he skated in on Linus Ullmark and slipped the puck past the Boston goaltender.

David Rittich stopped four shots in overtime and the Kings successfully killed the hooking minor on Clarke before his game winner.

Anze Kopitar tipped in a goal with 1:35 remaining to tie it at 4-all and force overtime. Matt Roy, Vladislav Gavrikov and Alex Laferriere scored goals for the Kings, who improved to 3-2 since Hiller took over for the fired Todd McLellan.

James van Riemsdyk scored twice and added an assist for the Bruins, and Ullmark finished with 30 saves. Trent Frederic and Anthony Richard also

scored for Boston, which has lost five of six.

Maple Leafs 9, Ducks 2: Auston Matthews had his second straight hat trick to push his NHL-leading goals total to 48 and added two assists for a career-high five points in host Toronto's victory over Anaheim.

William Nylander added a goal and two assists to reach 500 career points, Bobby McMann had two goals and an assist, Nick Robertson finished with a goal and an assist and Jake McCabe and Tyler Bertuzzi also scored.

Devils 6, Flyers 3: Devils captain Nico Hischier had two goals and an assist, including the second-fastest goal to start an outdoor game, and host New Jersey never looked back in beating Philadelphia before 70,328 fans at MetLife Stadium.

Owen Tippett scored twice and Nick Seeler added a goal for the Flyers, who were 4-0-1 in their previous five games. Samuel Ersson made 33 saves in a game that featured a Stadium Series-record 85 shots.

Blackhawks 3, Senators 2:

Jason Dickinson scored the tie-breaking goal off a rebound of his own shot with 1:52 remaining and host Chicago snapped an eight-game losing streak with a win over Ottawa.

Tim Stützle had a goal and an assist and Jakob Chychrun, the nephew of Blackhawks coach Luke Richardson, added a power-play goal for Ottawa. Korpi-salo made 19 saves.

Oilers 4, Stars 3 (OT): Evan Bouchard scored his second goal 30 seconds into overtime, and seven seconds into a power play, to lift visiting Edmonton to a win over Dallas.

Red Wings 5, Flames 0: James Reimer stopped 38 shots to lead visiting Detroit past Calgary.

Predators 5, Blues 2: Filip Forsberg and Ryan O'Reilly each had a goal and assist while goalie Juuse Saros registered 35 saves, lifting visiting Nashville to a victory over St. Louis.

Sabres 3, Wild 2 (OT): Dylan Cozens tied it with 37 seconds left with goalie Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen off for an extra attacker

and Henri Jokiharju scored 1:29 into overtime to give visiting Buffalo a victory over Minnesota.

Panthers 9, Lightning 2: Matthew Tkachuk and Sam Bennett each had two goals and two assists as Atlantic Division-leading Florida won its franchise-record 11th consecutive road game by routing Tampa Bay.

Capitals 4, Canadiens 3: Aliaksei Protas and Anthony Mantha each had a goal and an assist as visiting Washington defeated Montreal.

Hurricanes 3, Golden Knights 1: Seth Jarvis and Stefan Noesen scored in the first seven minutes of the third period to lift visiting Carolina over Vegas.

Jets 4, Canucks 2: Gabriel Virdani had two goals and an assist, Connor Hellebuyck made 35 saves and visiting Winnipeg beat NHL-leading Vancouver.

Blue Jackets 4, Sharks 3: Boone Jenner scored with 12.9 seconds left as visiting Columbus edged San Jose in a matchup of last-place teams.

Daytona 500 postponed until Monday because of rain

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — NASCAR has postponed the season-opening Daytona 500 until Monday because of two days of rain at Daytona International Speedway.

The race had been scheduled for Sunday afternoon, although the weather forecast put that in doubt all week. The final practice for drivers was canceled Saturday, as was the Xfinity Series race.

The Xfinity Series race is now scheduled to be held Monday morning, hours ahead of the 4 p.m. start for the Daytona 500.

Joey Logano is set to start from the pole for Team Penske.

The last time the Daytona

500 was postponed a full day was in 2012. NASCAR completed 20 laps in 2020 before rain halted activity, and the race resumed the next day.

In making the early call Sunday, NASCAR prevented fans from sitting in the rain awaiting a decision on whether the race would proceed. It continued a willingness NASCAR exhibited earlier this month when it moved the exhibition Clash at the Coliseum up a full day on little notice because of poor weather headed toward Los Angeles.

Spire Motorsports driver Zane Smith offered on social media to mingle with fans Sunday.

"Hate the rain won today but going to try to make the

most of it and meet some of you guys," Smith tweeted. "Let me know your camp spot and I will try to come find you! Might be able to drag a few other drivers along too."

Added Spire teammate Carson Hocevar: "Unfortunate cards we have been dealt as a sport, but probably the right call. Feel bad for the fans that saved up for this trip and now can't stay."

Despite the postponement, NASCAR and Daytona continued many of the pre-race activities, including celebrity visits from singer and Trackhouse Racing co-owner Pitbull and actor Dwayne "The Rock" Johnson.

Pitbull's pre-race concert was scrapped. He already

agreed to return next year and perform then. Johnson is the race's grand marshal, tasked with delivering the command for drivers to start their engines.

"Everything happens for a reason," said Madison Marsh, the reigning Miss America who was scheduled to drive the pace car and lead the field to the green flag. "Although I would have loved, obviously, to get to drive the pace car, there have been so many other parts of this weekend that have been fantastic.

"Just getting to be a part of that, I'm never going to regret coming here. ... Obviously would have liked to drive, but everything is going to work out the way it's supposed to."