

Navy chief in Japan charged with espionage

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — A U.S. sailor assigned to a warship based here has been charged with espionage and communicating classified information to an unidentified foreign national.

Chief Petty Officer Bryce Steven Pedicini, a fire controlman aboard the guided-missile destroyer USS Higgins, is accused of handing off classified national defense information to a foreign national at least seven times between November 2022 and February 2023, according to a charge sheet obtained by Stars and Stripes.

Pedicini, of Tennessee, is “suspected of mishandling classified documents and information,” according to Cmdr. Arlo

Abrahamson, a spokesman for Naval Surface Forces Pacific.

The Navy alleges Pedicini handed documents to a foreign national first at Hampton Roads, Va., and later attempted to pass information at Yokosuka in May, according to the charge sheet. He is also charged with failure to report contact with a foreign national.

Hampton Roads is home to major military installations and commands, including Naval Station Norfolk, Norfolk Naval Shipyard and Langley Air Force Base.

Pedicini had reason to believe that those documents “would be used to the injury of the United States and to the advantage of a foreign nation,” according to the charge sheet.

“The incident remains under

investigation and legal proceedings continue,” Abrahamson told Stars and Stripes in an email Wednesday.

Authorities allege Pedicini also attempted to hand over photographs of a computer screen connected to the Defense Department’s network used to transmit classified information.

The document identifies the alleged recipient or recipients only as a “citizen and employee of a foreign government.”

The charge sheet lists seven specific allegations of espionage and one of attempted espionage, seven for communicating defense information, two for failure to obey a lawful order and two for violating a lawful general order.

The document indicates that Pedicini has been in pre-trial

confinement since May 19. He was still confined in San Diego as of Wednesday, Abrahamson wrote.

On Jan. 18, the case was referred for a general court-martial under the authority of Naval Surface Forces Pacific, according to the charge sheet.

A motions hearing for Pedicini was scheduled Wednesday in San Diego, according to the Navy Judge Advocate General’s Corps trial docket.

As a fire controlman, Pedicini would have worked with “everything from radars, fire control systems and computer systems to the Navy’s most advanced missile system, Aegis,” which is used aboard guided-missile destroyers and cruisers, according to the Navy’s description of the job.

New Pentagon prosecutors handling over 2,600 cases

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

Four independent military prosecution offices created by Congress have invoked their authority in the past two months to take the decision-making in more than 2,600 courts-martial from generals and admirals.

Under the new policy, which took effect Dec. 28, 162 specially trained attorneys serving in the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marines would have the last say on bringing court-martial charges against defendants for 13 specific offenses under the Uniform Code of Military Justice, the Pentagon said.

The crimes include murder, manslaughter, kidnapping, rape, certain sex crimes, crimes against children, intimidation such as stalking or retaliation,

and the possession or distribution of pornographic or intimate images or other materials. Sexual harassment will become part of the jurisdiction of the counsels on Jan. 1, 2025.

Four special counsels have been created — one each for the Army, Navy, Marines and Air Force, which will also handle cases involving the Space Force. The attorneys will be among the 2,000 staffers working for the four offices, according to the Pentagon.

Officials with each service’s special trial counsel confirmed last week the number of cases investigated or prosecuted under the new policy.

The Air Force said its counsel invoked court-martial authority in 970 cases. The Navy counsel took over 855 cases. The Army

has moved 594 cases to its counsel. The Marines moved 239 cases.

Prior to the policy, commanding officers had great leeway on when to prosecute, who would sit on court-martial panels, and what the sentences would be, according to a Defense Department briefing in December.

Critics in Congress such as Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., and advocates for victims of sex crimes such as former Air Force prosecutor Don Christensen have said top military officers were not recommending charges in many sex abuse cases.

In others, commanders were accused of reducing or negating punishments determined in courts-martial.

The new policy was support-

ed by some lawmakers, such as Gillibrand, who had introduced legislation calling for special counsels more than a decade ago.

“It took a long time to pass my reforms, but finally, victims of sexual assault and other serious crimes have the independent, impartial justice system they deserve,” she has said.

It also had backing from others, including Sen. Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, who has said she was sexually harassed during her 23-year career in the Army, in which she rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel.

A majority in both chambers of Congress supported an end to command influence on courts-martial, according to an April 2021 report in the New York Times.

Pentagon to focus on fixes to facilities

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

The Pentagon admitted its aging housing and other buildings on hundreds of U.S. installations were substandard in a new strategy released last week that aims to improve military infrastructure to better serve the lives of service members.

The Defense Department now faces \$134 billion in a growing backlog on needed infrastructure maintenance and upgrades across the 538 bases that it owns in the United States and 25 other countries, Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks wrote in the strategy published Feb. 14 and dubbed the Resilient and Healthy Defense Communities Strategy.

While the department spends almost \$30 billion every year on building new facilities and upgrading old structures, Hicks wrote it was not enough to address problems in the Pentagon's buildings — most of which were built in the 1970s or earlier.

"The department recognizes that a significant gap persists between installation conditions today and the quality standards that our service members and

their families expect and deserve," Hicks wrote in a memorandum accompanying the strategy's release. "Given the magnitude of the infrastructure funding deficit, it is imperative that we not only invest more but also invest better to achieve our goal of delivering healthy, safe, functional, and resilient spaces."

Hicks wrote improving facilities for service members, Defense Department civilian employees and military family members was a "national security imperative" and "our moral obligation to the people who defend our nation."

Each of the military services have admitted to problems that plague their infrastructure, especially with on-post living quarters in family housing managed by private agencies and barracks run by the military.

Among the most high-profile issues have been mold infestations in housing at numerous posts and reports of rodent and insect infestations, shortages of living spaces, and infrastructure problems such as broken air conditioning systems. In recent weeks, soldiers at Fort Liberty, N.C., have also seen trash piling

up in dumpsters on the post, with Army officials there blaming equipment problems with the company contracted to dispose of waste on the installation.

Lawmakers have called out the military for years over poor living conditions. But Congress has yet to pass a Pentagon budget for fiscal 2024, which began Oct. 1, that could provide funding to address infrastructure problems. Top military officials, meanwhile, have admitted the substandard living conditions likely have contributed to the military's recent recruiting woes.

Barracks and other living facilities for single service members are at the top of the list of needed improvements, said Brendan Owens, the assistant defense secretary of energy, installations and environment.

The new plan outlines three areas of the Pentagon's on-post communities that it seeks to improve — new requirements based on improving human wellness, cutting down the Defense Department's footprint, and finding new ways to manage department assets.

Hicks vowed to adopt "human-centered requirements," which

would include new technology-based mechanisms for troops and their families to provide feedback to installation managers, and it would seek to improve facilities with human wellness in mind instead of providing troops merely utilitarian living quarters.

She also called on the Pentagon to eliminate underused and inadequate buildings through consolidation to shrink the Defense Department's massive infrastructure and save money. Hicks called for a "smaller, higher-quality portfolio" of newer buildings that are purpose-built to last for decades and better withstand harsher climates than structures the military built in and before the 1970s.

Finally, Hicks called on the Pentagon to develop a new "asset management strategy" to improve the DOD's sustainment performance while also reducing costs. She wants the department to "deepen partnerships with private industry, local and state governments, and academic and community organizations to leverage their capabilities in infrastructure financing, design, construction, and management."

Houthis suspected of attacking ship, Israeli port city

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — A suspected missile attack by Yemen's Houthi rebels set a ship ablaze in the Gulf of Aden on Thursday as Israel intercepted what appeared to be another Houthi attack near the port city of Eilat, authorities said.

The attacks come as the rebels escalate their assaults over Israel's war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip.

The attack Thursday in the Gulf of Aden saw two missiles fired, the British military's

United Kingdom Maritime Trade Operations center said. It said the unnamed ship was ablaze, without elaborating. Later Thursday, the UKMTO said the ship suffered minor damage after the fire and that its crew was safe.

Ship-tracking data analyzed by The Associated Press identified the vessel ablaze as a Palau-flagged cargo ship named *Islander*. It had been coming from Thailand bound for Egypt and previously sent out messages saying "SYRIAN CREW ON BOARD" to potentially avoid

being targeted by the Houthis.

"The missile attack led to a fire onboard and coalition military assets were responding to the incident," the private security firm Ambrey said.

The ship's Liberian-listed owners could not be immediately reached for comment.

The French military separately said it shot down two Houthi drones Thursday in the southern part of the Red Sea.

Meanwhile, sirens sounded early Thursday morning over Eilat, followed by videos posted online of what appeared to be an

interception in the sky overhead.

The Israeli military later said the interception was carried out by its Arrow missile defense system.

Israel did not identify what the fire was, nor where it came from. However, the Arrow system intercepts long-range ballistic missiles with a warhead designed to destroy targets while they are in space.

The Houthis did not immediately claim either attack. They typically acknowledge assaults they conduct hours afterward.

Israel strikes Gaza amid cease-fire plea

Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Israeli strikes killed at least 48 people in southern and central Gaza overnight, half of them women and children, health officials said Thursday, as European foreign ministers and U.N. agencies called for a cease-fire, with alarm rising over the worsening humanitarian crisis and potential starvation in the territory.

Tensions were also rising in the Israeli-occupied West Bank, where three Palestinian gunmen on Thursday opened fire on morning traffic at a highway checkpoint, killing one person and wounding five others, Israeli police said.

Israel's defense minister, Yoav Gallant, announced

Thursday that the government "will expand the authority given to our hostage negotiators." His comments, delivered in a meeting with U.S. Mideast envoy Brett McGurk, signaled a small sign of progress in cease-fire talks.

Benny Gantz, who sits on Israel's War Cabinet with Gallant and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, said late Wednesday that new attempts are underway to reach a cease-fire deal between Israel and Hamas that could pause the war in Gaza and bring the release of around 130 Israeli hostages held by the militants since their Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel. It was the first Israeli indication of new efforts since negotiations

stalled a week ago.

But Gantz, a former military chief and defense minister, repeated his pledge that unless Hamas agrees to release the remaining hostages, Israel will launch a ground offensive into Gaza's southernmost town, Rafah, during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which begins around March 10.

More than half of Gaza's population of 2.3 million is crowded into Rafah after fleeing fighting and bombardment elsewhere in the territory. Israel has said it will evacuate them before attacking. But it is not clear where they would go, with much of the rest of the tiny Mediterranean enclave consumed in combat — raising fears civilian casualties

could spiral in an Israeli assault that has already killed more than 29,400 people.

The heads of 13 U.N. agencies and five other aid groups issued a joint plea for a cease-fire late Wednesday, warning that an attack on Rafah will bring "mass casualties" and could "deal a death blow" to the humanitarian operation bringing aid to Palestinians, which "is already on its knees." Earlier this week, the World Food Program had to halt food deliveries to northern Gaza because of increasing chaos.

The foreign ministers of 26 European countries on Thursday called for a pause in fighting leading to a longer cease-fire.

Russia's forces turning focus on northeast Ukraine

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian forces are probing Ukrainian defenses for weak points in the country's northeast, an official said Thursday, an area where analysts believe the Kremlin seeks to build on its recent success in taking a key city by mounting an ambitious four-pronged offensive to break through the front line.

Russia overwhelmed Ukraine's army in Adviidka, a strategic eastern city, where it

brought to bear its significant battlefield advantage in men, aircraft and artillery. Emboldened by its first major triumph in the war in nine months, Moscow appears determined to leverage its superiority as it shifts its economy onto a war footing.

Russian President Vladimir Putin took a co-pilot's seat to fly in a Tu-160M strategic bomber Thursday after visiting an aircraft manufacturing plant in Kazan, a city east of Moscow.

Kyiv officials have pleaded

with Ukraine's Western partners to accelerate delivery of military aid so its forces can hold out against the onslaught. The front line running more than 600 miles across eastern and southern Ukraine has not shifted much in the run-up to the war's two-year anniversary on Feb. 24.

Moscow's troops are driving forward around Lyman and Kupiansk, in the Kharkiv region that borders Russia, ignoring casualties or equipment losses, according to Illia Yevlash, spokesper-

son for the operational group overseeing the eastern front line.

"Despite the enormous losses, which the enemy does not take into consideration, it is constantly replenishing its reserves," Yevlash said on Ukrainian television.

The Russians are attacking in strength along four parallel axes in the northeast, "likely reflective of a wider operational objective and higher-level operational planning," the Institute for the Study of War said.

France: Russia threatened to shoot down its aircraft

Associated Press

PARIS — Russian forces threatened to shoot down a French surveillance aircraft patrolling in international airspace over the Black Sea, a signal of increasingly aggressive behavior from Moscow as its invasion of Ukraine struggles to make headway, French defense officials said Thursday.

"A Russian air traffic control system threatened to shoot

down French aircraft in the Black Sea when we were in a free international zone where we patrol," the French defense minister, Sébastien Lecornu, said on RTL radio.

A French military spokesman, Col. Pierre Gaudillière, said Lecornu was referring to an incident in mid-November that involved one of France's four giant Airborne Warning and Control System, or AWACS,

surveillance aircraft that was flying over international waters in the Black Sea. Gaudillière described the incident as unprecedented for French pilots in that region.

"Through a radio exchange, it was threatened by the Russians," Gaudillière said.

"It was a particularly aggressive radio exchange," he added. "It's a first."

Two other officials said the

exchange was in English and that Russian air traffic control said its forces would "destroy" the French aircraft. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the classified details.

In his radio interview, Lecornu said Russia is returning to a "particularly aggressive" posture reminiscent of the former Soviet Union's behavior during the Cold War.

Biden said to be mulling border crackdown

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The White House is considering using provisions of federal immigration law repeatedly tapped by former President Donald Trump to unilaterally enact a sweeping crackdown at the southern border, according to three people familiar with the deliberations.

The administration, stymied by Republican lawmakers who rejected a negotiated border bill earlier this month, has been exploring options that President Joe Biden could deploy on his own without congressional approval, multiple officials and others familiar with the talks said.

But the plans are nowhere near finalized and it's unclear how the administration would draft any such executive actions in a way that would survive the inevitable legal challenges.

The exploration of such avenues by Biden's team underscores the pressure the president faces this election year on immigration and the border, which have been

among his biggest political liabilities since he took office.

For now, the White House has been hammering congressional Republicans for refusing to act on border legislation that the GOP demanded, but the administration is also aware of the political perils that high numbers of migrants could pose for the president and is scrambling to figure out how Biden could ease the problem.

White House spokesperson Angelo Fernández Hernández stressed that “no executive action, no matter how aggressive, can deliver the significant policy reforms and additional resources Congress can provide and that Republicans rejected.”

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 Biden's presidency. But officials fear those figures could eventually rise again, particularly as the November presidential election nears.

The immigration authority the adminis-

tration has been looking into is outlined in Section 212(f) of the Immigration and Nationality Act, which gives a president broad leeway to block entry of certain immigrants into the United States if it would be “detrimental” to the national interest of the United States.

Trump, who is the likely GOP candidate to face off against Biden this fall, repeatedly leaned on the 212(f) power while in office, including his controversial ban to bar travelers from Muslim-majority nations. Biden rescinded that ban on his first day in office through executive order.

But now, how Biden would deploy that power to deal with his own immigration challenges is being considered.

House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., has also called on Biden to use the 212(f) authority. Yet the comprehensive immigration overhaul Biden also introduced on his first day in office includes provisions that would effectively scale back a president's powers to bar immigrants under that authority.

New York AG vows to seize Trump's assets if he can't pay \$454M penalty

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Donald Trump could be at risk of losing some of his prized properties if he can't pay his staggering New York civil fraud penalty. With interest, he owes the state nearly \$454 million — and the amount is going up \$87,502 each day until he pays.

New York Attorney General Letitia James told ABC News on Tuesday that she will seek to seize some of the former president's assets if he's unable to cover the bill from Judge Arthur Engoron's Feb. 16 ruling.

Engoron concluded that Trump lied for years about his wealth as he built the real estate empire that vaulted him to stardom and the White House. Trump denies wrongdoing and has vowed to appeal.

“If he does not have funds to pay off the judgment, then we will seek judgment enforcement mechanisms in court, and we will ask the judge to seize his assets,” James, a Democrat, said in an interview with ABC reporter Aaron Katersky.

Trump's ability to pay his mounting legal debts is increasingly murky after back-to-back courtroom losses. In January, a jury ordered him to pay \$83.3 million for defaming writer E. Jean Carroll.

Trump claimed last year that he has about

\$400 million in cash — reserves that would get eaten up by his court penalties. The rest of his net worth, which he says is several billion dollars, is tied up in golf courses, skyscrapers and other properties, along with investments and other holdings.

But don't expect James to try to grab the keys to Trump Tower or Mar-a-Lago immediately. Trump's promised appeal is likely to halt collection of his penalty while the process plays out.

With Trump promising to appeal, it's unlikely he'll have to pay the penalty — or face the prospect of having some of his assets seized — for a while. If he wins, he might not have to pay anything. Under state law, Trump will receive an automatic stay if he puts up money, assets or an appeal bond covering the amount he owes. A stay is a legal mechanism halting enforcement of a court decision while the appeals process plays out.

“Even if we choose to appeal this — which we will — we have to post the bond, which is the full amount and some, and we will be prepared to do that,” Trump lawyer Alina Habba told Fox News on Monday.

Trump's lawyers can also ask the appeals court to grant a stay without obtaining a bond or with a bond for a lower amount.

Biden calls Putin a 'crazy SOB'

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — During a fundraiser for his reelection campaign Wednesday night, President Joe Biden called Russian President Vladimir Putin a “crazy SOB” and took aim at former President Donald Trump's comments comparing himself to the Russian opposition leader who died last week in an Arctic prison.

Biden was talking about climate change when he said, “We have a crazy SOB like Putin and others, and we always have to worry about nuclear conflict, but the existential threat to humanity is climate.”

Speaking to donors at a private San Francisco home Wednesday, Biden also said he was astounded by recent comments made by his likely Republican challenger.

Trump compared the suspicious prison death of Russian opposition leader Alexei Navalny to his own legal troubles in the U.S. Trump was fined \$350 million after a New York judge found he lied for years about his wealth on financial statements in his companies. Trump said the ruling was a form of “communism or fascism.”

“Some of the things that this fellow's been saying, like he's comparing himself to Navalny ... I don't know where the hell this comes from,” Biden said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police: Man left hospital in gown, stole ambulance

VA FAIRFAX — A man who was injured in a car crash walked out of the northern Virginia hospital where he was being treated and made off in an ambulance, which was later found abandoned, authorities said.

Police on Tuesday were searching for the man, who was one of five people who were injured when a stolen car crashed Monday afternoon at the junction of Interstate 66 and Route 50 in Fair Oaks, said Fairfax County police, noting that guns and narcotics were later found in the vehicle. All five were taken to a hospital, including two who had life-threatening injuries, police said.

A man who had been a passenger in the crashed car but who hadn't been discharged yet from Fairfax Hospital walked out in a medical gown with an IV still in his arm and then drove off in a private ambulance, authorities said.

Man is dead after a pet Gila monster bite

CO LAKEWOOD — A Colorado man has died after being bitten by his pet Gila monster in what would be a rare death by one of the desert lizards if the reptile's venom turns out to have been the cause.

Christopher Ward, 34, was taken to a hospital shortly after being bitten by one of his two pet Gila monsters on Feb. 12. He was soon placed on life support and died four days later, Lakewood Police Department spokesman John Romero said Tuesday.

Ward's girlfriend handed

over the lizard named Winston and another named Potato to Lakewood animal control officer Leesha Crookston and other officers the day after the bite.

Ward's girlfriend told police she had heard something that "didn't sound right" and entered a room to see Winston latched onto Ward's hand, according to Crookston's report.

She told officers Ward "immediately began exhibiting symptoms, vomiting several times and eventually passing out and ceasing to breathe," according to the report.

Gila monster bites can cause intense pain and make victims pass out but normally aren't deadly.

USCG launches system to keep whales safe

WA SEATTLE — The U.S. Coast Guard has launched a pilot program to alert ships of whale sightings in Washington state's Salish Sea. The goal of the agency's "cetacean desk" is to keep the marine mammals safe from boat strikes and reduce noise in the highly transited inland seawaters.

The program began official operations in December.

Fed by the Pacific Ocean, the Salish Sea is a maze of islands and canals that make up the inland waters between Washington state and British Columbia, including Puget Sound. Two groups of orcas, as well as baleen whales, have cruised these waters since time immemorial and are now often visible from Seattle's shoreline.

But these waters are now also home to major American and Canadian ports, and nearly 300,000 vessels crisscrossed the area in 2023, according to the

Coast Guard. That doesn't include private crafts.

The new whale desk reduces the risk of collisions by combining sightings by mariners and civilians on whale-watching apps and data from underwater listening devices into an integrated system that will send out alerts to commercial vessels and regional ferries through a mobile app.

First person charged under gun storage law

MI FLINT — A Michigan man was charged Tuesday under the state's new law requiring safe storage of guns after his 2-year-old daughter shot herself in the head with his revolver the day after the law took effect.

The 44-year-old Flint man became the first person to be charged with violating the law that took effect on Feb. 13, Genesee County Prosecutor David Leyton said. The girl is hospitalized in critical condition.

The man faces charges including first-degree child abuse, a felony violation of Michigan's gun storage law, being a felon in possession of a firearm and ammunition and lying to a police officer in a violent crime investigation.

Flint police learned of the shooting after the man took the girl to a hospital. They found two guns in the bedroom of the man's home: the revolver and a semiautomatic pistol. Both were unsecured and loaded.

Governor seeks disaster declaration for flooding

VT MONTPELIER — Vermont Gov. Phil Scott announced Monday that he has requested a federal ma-

ior disaster declaration to help communities hit by severe rainfall and flooding in December.

Such a declaration would allow municipalities to be reimbursed for 75% of eligible costs, such as debris removal, road and public building repairs, and staff overtime related to cleanup from the storm, Scott said.

The storm that hit the Northeastern U.S. on Dec. 18 and 19 flooded roads and downed trees, knocked out power to hundreds of thousands, forced flight cancellations and school closures, and killed at least five people.

In Vermont, federal assessors identified more than \$1.9 million in costs incurred by public entities for repairs to public infrastructure, Scott said.

Man arrested after firework blast near mall

CA TUSTIN — A man was arrested Tuesday after allegedly setting off a homemade firework near a Southern California shopping center, police said.

Reports of an explosion at The Village at Tustin Legacy prompted authorities to evacuate several businesses said Eric Davidson, a spokesperson for Regency Centers, which owns and operates The Village. There were no injuries and there was no damage to the shopping mall.

Tustin Police Lt. Matt Nunley said a 30-year-old man was detained after a witness reported smoke and someone walking away from the scene.

The man was cited for three misdemeanor health and safety code violations, and then released, the Orange County Register reported.

— From wire reports

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NBA teams head into the stretch run

Associated Press

There's no NBA player who is a bigger fan of harness racing than Denver's Nikola Jokic. He owns horses, goes to tracks whenever he can and even accepted one of his MVP awards while riding around at his farm in Serbia.

Jokic knows the stretch run often decides races.

And the same holds true in the NBA, which is entering its stretch run.

The All-Star break is over, games resumed on Thursday and the defending champion Nuggets — along with a slew of other contenders — are hoping that this is the time when they can start hitting their best stride. Denver is coming out of the break in fourth place in the Western Conference, three games back of No. 1 Minnesota.

"We don't try to listen to what people say," Jokic said. "We know what we are capable of. And it's working for us. So, I don't know what people are saying, that we are not good. I don't

say that we are the best, but we are not bad."

They were the best last season. This season, the best won't be crowned until June, of course. The next couple of months are all about jostling for playoff position — or in some cases, fighting for playoff spots.

It's not the second half — what people commonly call the period after the All-Star break — but rather the final third of the season. The league is exactly two-thirds of the way through the season, 820 games down, 410 games to go. It's the time of year when playbooks tend to get tweaked a little and things get a little more serious.

Paul George of the Los Angeles Clippers knows the playoff push is underway. But as a veteran, he also knows that the most important game is always the next one.

"Can't look too far ahead," George said. "Take it one game at a time. Because that's what you tend to do, second half of the season, start to look ahead and

look forward to playoffs and just trying to get to the playoffs. But we just got to take it one game at a time."

Boston has the NBA's best record and sits high atop the Eastern Conference, Minnesota and Oklahoma City — a pair of surprises — are first and second, respectively, in the West and some teams with championship pedigrees like Golden State and the Los Angeles Lakers are hoping their pre-All-Star momentum carries over now.

The Warriors were 8-2 in their last 10 games before the break, the Lakers 7-3.

"The most important thing for me is definitely my health, where I'm at right now, where our team is leaning," Lakers forward LeBron James said. "We're trending in the right direction. Obviously, with our Laker team, it's been about health all year. Trying to do what's best for me for the betterment of the team."

He's been dealing with an ankle issue that limited him in the

All-Star Game and will keep him out of Thursday's game against Golden State, the Lakers said. Other teams have far bigger concerns — primarily the Philadelphia 76ers, who spent a bit of time in November atop the East but have dropped nine of their last 12 games with reigning MVP Joel Embiid out with a knee injury.

They're sliding and so are the Milwaukee Bucks, who have gone 3-7 since Doc Rivers took over as coach. Rivers said at All-Star weekend that he knew that taking over a team just before a long road trip would be a mistake; it seems like he was right. But he also believes there's time to figure things out.

"If you look statistically over the last 20 years, the same teams win it: the teams that are in the top five or 10 in offense and the teams that are in the top five or 10 in defense," Rivers said. "That's not going away. So you can score all you want. But you better be able to defend, too, if you want to win."

MVP race just as wide open as battle for playoff spots

Associated Press

The new rule that rendered Philadelphia's Joel Embiid ineligible for a second consecutive NBA MVP award because he's missing too many games has the potential to create something the league hasn't seen in almost two decades.

That would be a wide-open MVP race.

Steve Nash won the MVP award for the 2005-06 season with only 46% of the first-place votes, marking the last time somebody won the NBA's top individual honor without having his name atop more than half of the ballots.

The winner in every season since has gotten at least 50% of the first-place votes — and Stephen Curry even got 100% when

he was MVP in 2016. This year sure seems like it could go differently, with several players in the realistic mix coming out of the All-Star break.

"There's a lot of guys," Boston forward Jaylen Brown said. "Who knows what the actual criteria is, to how it goes. I've had questions about a lot of different things that goes into stuff. But, you know, I guess we'll see."

Denver's Nikola Jokic certainly could end up with the award for the third time in four years. Milwaukee's Giannis Antetokounmpo may be in the mix for his third MVP as well. Oklahoma City's Shai Gilgeous-Alexander was fifth last season and should be higher this year. Dallas' Luka Doncic will likely be on plenty of ballots. If the Los An-

geles Clippers continue their strong play, don't be surprised if a case gets made for Kawhi Leonard.

"Kawhi should definitely be in that conversation," Clippers forward Paul George said. "But there's a lot of guys. You talk about Shai, you talk about Luka, you talk about Jokic. There's a lot of guys out West and even out East, there's a lot of guys doing a hell of a job representing their team."

Brown believes his Celtics teammate Jayson Tatum should be atop the MVP list. It's a reasonable argument; Tatum is the best player on the team with the best record in the league and his averages of 27 points, nearly nine rebounds and nearly five assists per game certainly merit

award consideration. A player has finished a season with those averages 26 times over the years; of those, nine have won that season's MVP award.

Except this season, there are at least two other players — Doncic and Antetokounmpo — averaging that many points, rebounds and assists. Embiid was as well before he got hurt; it's unclear when or if he'll be back, but even if he does return he won't be eligible for the MVP and probably won't meet the threshold to rank among statistical leaders, either.

Part of the challenge of selecting an MVP is this: There's no absolute definition. To some, it might mean "best player." To others, it might mean "most valuable to his team."

Matthews fastest to 50 goals in 28 years

Associated Press

TEMPE, Ariz. — Auston Matthews scored his 50th and 51st goals of the season Wednesday night in the Toronto Maple Leafs star's hometown return, breaking a tie as the fastest U.S.-born player to reach 50 goals at 54 games.

Matthews scored the milestone goal on a power play at 5:01 of the first period in a 6-3 victory over the Arizona Coyotes.

From nearby Scottsdale, Matthews scored on a shot from the circle to the left of goaltender Karel Vejmelka to make it 2-0. Mitchell Marner and Timothy Liljegren assisted on the

goal that came with Michael Carcone in the penalty box for slashing.

"We had a couple of power plays and were kind of able to snap it around. I just tried to get open and (Marner's) got the puck and he's got a great sense of where I am on the ice and vice versa," Matthews said. "We just try to push ourselves to be the best that we can be individually and the best teammates we can be."

Matthews added his 51st — giving him 350 career goals in 535 games — late in the second period for a 4-2 lead en route to Toronto's fifth straight victory.

"It's a small step in a long

season," Matthews said. "Coming back home against a team that's really had our number the past couple of seasons, it was just a good effort all around. It's a great atmosphere, and it makes for a pretty fun game."

Toronto is 9-0-2 in its past 11 games, and snapped a four-game skid against the Coyotes. The teams meet again Feb. 29 in Toronto.

Matthews shared the previous U.S.-born mark with former Pittsburgh star Kevin Stevens at 62 games. Matthews is the fastest to 50 since Mario Lemieux did it for Pittsburgh in 50 games in 1995-96. Wayne

Gretzky holds the record, scoring his 50th in his 39th game for Edmonton in 1981-82 on his way to a record 92 goals.

Matthews has nine goals in his last four games, having two consecutive hat tricks before a single goal against St. Louis on Monday night. Florida's Sam Reinhart is second in the NHL with 39 goals.

Matthews had 60 goals two seasons ago to lead the NHL, making him the first to reach that mark since Steven Stamkos had 60 in 2011-12. The last players to score 70 or more in a season were Teemu Selanne and Alexander Mogilny, who each had 76 in 1992-93.

Messi, Inter Miami top Real Salt Lake in MLS opener

Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — Lionel Messi had two Real Salt Lake defenders on either side of him, two more a few yards in front of him. He quickly tapped the ball away from them all with his left foot, to a spot where only teammate Robert Taylor could reach.

Moments later, Inter Miami had the first goal of the Major League Soccer season.

Taylor's goal in the 39th minute set the tone, Diego Gómez added an insurance score in the 83rd minute and Inter Miami — to start Messi's first full season with the club — opened the 29th season of MLS with a 2-0 win over Real Salt Lake on Wednesday night.

Messi was in midseason form, darting through and around defenders, almost giving the sellout crowd what they wanted to see by nearly scoring on a free kick and then a corner kick midway through the first half.

"I think the eyes of the world are on Inter Miami, and I'm hoping that they're able to deliver on that and whatever expectations people have," said MLS Commissioner Don Garber, who was at Wednesday's match. "Mostly, I'd just like his experience to be good, the experience of the team to be successful, how they're positioned both here in the league but also around the world. That's the story that I think is most important to us."

Messi had 11 goals in 14 total matches

with Inter Miami last season, leading the team to a Leagues Cup championship — its first-ever trophy — shortly after he stunned much of the soccer world by signing a 2½-year contract worth around \$150 million. He appeared in only six MLS matches in 2023, scoring once. Injuries slowed him late in the 2023 season and Inter Miami, which was way out of the postseason picture when Messi joined last summer, didn't make the MLS playoffs.

But the craze surrounding him is not fading. The lines for fans to buy his jersey, which was MLS' top-seller last year and has a new sponsor design this year, was out the door of the team store. He had the assist on the first goal and set up Luis Suarez — one of his former Barcelona teammates, like fellow Inter Miami stars Sergio Busquets and Jordi Alba — with the pass that Suarez turned into the assist on Gómez's goal.

"I'm so happy," Suarez said.

They looked every bit like a contender. That wasn't the case in the exhibition season.

Inter Miami started its season with an international preseason tour with seven matches in five different countries — netting roughly 25,000 miles of travel, a total of eight goals, multiple apologies to refund-seeking fans after Messi missed a game in Hong Kong because of injury, and just one win.

But they completely controlled the first

half of Wednesday's match against a team that comfortably made the Western Conference playoffs last season. Messi even flicked the ball around Salt Lake defender Andrew Brody, who was injured and down near the top of the penalty box late in the half, weaving around him with ease. Brody was able to stay in the game.

"If anybody had been skeptical about what this team can do, I think the first half showed them," Inter Miami coach Gerardo "Tata" Martino said.

Inter Miami, according to FanDuel Sportsbook, enters the season as the favorite to win just about everything. Messi's team is listed as the 5-2 favorite to win the MLS Cup, while Messi and Suarez are the top two picks to win the Golden Boot — given to the league's leading scorer.

The club is basically an even-money favorite to win the Supporters Shield as MLS' top regular-season club. And if someone wagered \$200 on Inter Miami making the Eastern Conference playoffs right now, that bettor would stand to profit exactly \$1 if Messi's club makes the field — meaning it is considered to be an absolute postseason lock.

It should be noted that the club has yet to win a playoff match. Inter Miami has been to the playoffs twice, getting eliminated right away on both occasions, both times by 3-0 scores.

"You don't have to jump the gun," Martino said. "It was just one game."

Yankees' Stanton wants new narrative

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Giancarlo Stanton's condition was dissected on his first day back at Yankees spring training much like pastrami at a New York deli: how lean?

A markedly slimmer Stanton stood by his corner locker after arriving in the refurbished clubhouse and discussed his decline from All-Star to albatross.

"I got to stay on the field and the start-stopping is not ideal," he said Monday before his first workout. "I need to play, not be on the sidelines."

At 34, Stanton realizes the repercussions of another subpar season, especially after the Yankees acquired Juan Soto and Trent Grisham.

"It looks really good," manager Aaron Boone said. "This is kind of where he should be playing at this point in his career. And I think if you go back to

even his MVP season, I think this is more in line with where he was kind of size and weight wise. ... I think he, we, everyone realized that it's probably better, especially with some of the things that he's dealt with from an injury standpoint and being north of 30 years old, to play at a lighter weight and I don't think he's compromised much in the way of strength."

New York owes \$118 million in guaranteed pay through 2027, part of a \$325 million, 13-year contract, and Stanton's salary has not matched his statistics — a .191 average with 24 homers and 60 RBIs last season.

"It's not ideal in any form of anything last year. So, yeah, flushing that down the toilet wasn't hard at all," Stanton said. "If you don't produce, there's going to be adjustments.

"I don't base it off luck. It's just what it is, what it has been,"

he added. "You got to change the narrative."

Stanton's 6-foot-6 frame casts a shadow over the Yankees, who went 82-80 last year and missed the playoffs for the first time since 2016.

He has not played a full season since 2018, the first year after New York acquired him from Miami. He missed 266 of 708 games in the past five seasons (38%) because of a strained right biceps and strained posterior cruciate ligament in his right knee (2019), strained left hamstring (2020), strained left quadriceps (2021), right ankle inflammation and left Achilles tendinitis (2022) and strained left hamstring (2023).

That prompted the Yankees' Brian Cashman to say at the general managers' meetings last Nov. 13: "He's going to wind up getting hurt again more likely than not because it seems to

be part of his game."

Stanton said succinctly: "He knows my reaction to that."

Stanton has hit .233 with 97 homers and 259 RBIs over the past five years, down from .265 with 302 homers and 772 RBIs in his first nine seasons.

After playing 38 games in the outfield in 2022 and 33 last year, Stanton again wants to be useful with his glove, which opens the DH spot for Aaron Judge.

"This is the same narrative every year, the same questions about if I'm going to play in outfield," Stanton said. "That's always the ideal."

Stanton said belief in himself isn't an issue.

"It's not a ego or confidence — rebuild of confidence. It's a big stack of things that weren't aligned," he said. "This is a new year and after this, I'm not really much talking about last year too much."

CFP already discussing adding two teams for 2026

Associated Press

DALLAS — Now that the yearslong process to finalize how the 12 teams for the expanded College Football Playoff will be selected for the next two seasons is complete, there are already discussions about maybe adding more teams for 2026 and beyond.

The CFP management committee discussed the potential of a 14-team bracket on Wednesday, along with governance of the playoff and the distribution of growing revenue after the next two seasons. But the 10 FBS conference commissioners and Notre Dame's incoming athletic director did not reach any conclusions after meeting for nearly nine hours in a hotel at the Dallas-Fort Worth International Airport.

"Really productive, very collegial, very collaborative," ACC Commissioner Jim Phillips said. "Not everybody loves everything all the time. It's just one of those things when you have 11 different entities. But I think really a positive meeting."

That commissioners met a day after university presidents and chancellors who oversee the playoffs approved the format for the five highest-ranked conference champions

and seven at-large teams for the playoff field that triples in size for the upcoming season. CFP managers first started working on an expansion plan in 2019, though the pandemic likely slowed down some of the progress.

The timing is more pressing now on pending and potentially contentious issues, like money, since there is no contract in place for the CFP past the 2025 season.

"Today was good in that it created that sense of 'let's keep working even faster,'" Big Ten Commissioner Tony Petitti said.

The CFP and ESPN have agreed in principle to a six-year contract extension that runs through the 2031 football season that's worth about \$1.3 billion annually. But that deal isn't done because issues related to revenue distribution and governance have to be worked out.

ESPN already has exclusive rights for the semifinals and championship games the next two seasons, but broadcasts for the additional early round games this year and next still have to be settled since the 12-team format took effect before the end of the current deal.

Executive Director Bill Hancock said the

CFP would like to be done with the format and new TV deal within about a month.

"We need to be done with this," Hancock said. "Today left everyone with an encouraging feeling."

Hancock said he wouldn't get into details about any of the discussions concerning revenue, format or governance of the CFP moving forward since everything is subject to discussion and change, but said there were "very positive vibes on everything that we had in front of us."

Like over the past decade with a four-team setup, no conference has automatic access into the new 12-team playoff. But now that field could potentially include automatic qualifiers for some leagues.

As for CFP revenue, under the four-team playoff system, the Power Five conferences received about 78% of that money to distribute to their members, and the Group of Five got almost all of the rest. Now with only four power conferences, how the money is split up is certain to change.

The SEC will grow to 16 teams next fall. Four of the 10 departing Pac-12 members are joining what will become an 18-team Big Ten.