

Germany, Poland: No troops to Ukraine

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — European military heavyweights Germany and Poland affirmed Tuesday that they would not be sending troops to Ukraine, after reports that some Western countries may be considering doing so as the war with Russia enters its third year.

The head of NATO also said the U.S.-led military alliance has no plans to send troops to Ukraine, after other central European leaders confirmed that they too would not be providing soldiers.

The Kremlin, meanwhile, warned that a direct conflict between NATO and Russia would be inevitable if the alliance sends combat troops. “In this case, we need to talk not about

probability, but about the inevitability (of conflict),” Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters.

Moscow’s warning came a day after French President Emmanuel Macron said that sending in Western ground troops should not be “ruled out” in the future, after hosting a conference of top officials from more than 20 of Ukraine’s Western backers.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz appeared to have a different view of what happened in Paris. He said the participants had agreed “that there will be no ground troops, no soldiers on Ukrainian soil who are sent there by European states or NATO states.”

Scholz said there was also

consensus “that soldiers operating in our countries also are not participating actively in the war themselves.”

The idea of sending troops has been taboo, particularly as NATO seeks to avoid being dragged into a wider war with nuclear-armed Russia. Nothing prevents NATO members from joining such an undertaking individually or in groups, but the organization itself would only get involved if all 31 members agree.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg told The Associated Press that “NATO allies are providing unprecedented support to Ukraine. We have done that since 2014 and stepped up after the full-scale invasion. But there are no plans

for NATO combat troops on the ground in Ukraine.”

At a meeting in Prague on Tuesday, Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said, “Poland does not plan to send its troops to Ukraine.” Prime Minister Petr Fiala of the Czech Republic insisted that his country “certainly doesn’t want to send its soldiers.”

Slovakian Prime Minister Robert Fico has said his government is not planning to propose a deployment, but that some countries were weighing whether to strike bilateral deals to provide troops to help Ukraine fend off the Russian invasion.

Fico did not provide details about which countries or what the troops would do in Ukraine.

Israel, Hamas downplay talk of cease-fire in Gaza

Associated Press

JERUSALEM — President Joe Biden signaled that a cease-fire in Gaza could be at hand, saying Israel has agreed to pause its offensive during the upcoming Muslim holy month of Ramadan if a deal is reached to release some hostages held by Hamas.

But both Israel and Hamas on Tuesday downplayed the idea that a breakthrough was imminent.

The president’s remarks came on the eve of the Michigan primary, where he faces pressure from the state’s large Arab American population over his staunch support of Israel. Biden said he had been briefed on the status of talks by his national security adviser, Jake Sullivan, but said his comments reflected his optimism for a deal, not that all the remaining hurdles had been overcome.

In the wake of Hamas’ attack on southern Israel, Israel’s air, sea and ground campaign in Gaza has killed tens of thousands of people, obliterated large swaths of the urban landscape, displaced 80% of the battered enclave’s population and sparked concerns that a famine could be imminent, according to the United Nations.

Now the prospect of an invasion of Rafah has prompted global alarm over the fate of civilians trapped there.

Talks to pause the fighting gained momentum recently and were underway Tuesday. Negotiators from the United States, Egypt and Qatar have been working to broker a cease-fire that would see Hamas free some of the dozens of hostages it holds in exchange for the release of Palestinian prisoners, a six-week halt in fighting and an increase in

aid deliveries to Gaza.

The start of Ramadan, which is expected to be around March 10, is seen as an unofficial deadline for a deal. The month is a time of heightened religious observance and dawn-to-dusk fasting for hundreds of millions of Muslims around the world. Israeli-Palestinian tensions have flared in the past during the holy month.

“Ramadan’s coming up, and there has been an agreement by the Israelis that they would not engage in activities during Ramadan as well, in order to give us time to get all the hostages out,” Biden said in an appearance on NBC’s “Late Night With Seth Meyers” that was recorded Monday.

In separate comments the same day, Biden said that he hoped a cease-fire deal could take effect by next week.

At the same time, Biden did not

call for an end to the war, which was triggered when Hamas militants killed 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and abducted roughly 250 people, according to Israeli authorities.

Israeli officials said Biden’s comments came as a surprise and were not made in coordination with the country’s leadership. A Hamas official played down any sense of progress, saying the group wouldn’t soften its demands.

The Israeli officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they weren’t authorized to discuss the sensitive talks with the media, said Israel wants a deal immediately, but that Hamas continues to push excessive demands. They also said that Israel is insisting female soldiers be part of the first group of hostages released under any truce deal.

Law, staff cited in Austin disclosure failure

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Privacy restrictions and staff hesitancy are being blamed for the failure to notify the president and other U.S. officials about Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's prostate cancer and subsequent hospitalization for complications from surgery, according to an internal review released Monday by the Pentagon.

Austin's staff was limited in the information that they could provide due to medical privacy laws preventing what information could be shared with them by medical staff, according to an unclassified summary of the review.

The review, which was conducted by Jennifer Walsh, director of administration and management at the Pentagon, does not mention any punishments or reprimands for staff members. Austin has previously stated he did not instruct anyone on his staff to withhold information about his

health.

"There was no finding of ill-intent or an attempt to obfuscate," Air Force Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder, the Pentagon's top spokesman, said Monday.

The review made eight recommendations, and two are already being implemented. In a memorandum from Austin, the six remaining recommendations will be implemented in the next 90 days, unless specified otherwise. Some of the actions include ensuring key defense officials in the order of succession are familiar with relevant processes and procedures, as well as the department reviewing and updating internal reporting practices associated with the transfer of duties, Ryder said.

"As hindsight has shown, the process for making decisions to transfer the secretary's authority could and should be improved. Additional written guidance and support plans would aid in setting optimal conditions for the secre-

tary's and deputy secretary's teams to provide appropriate support for the deputy secretary when assuming the functions and duties of the secretary as acting secretary," according to the summary of the review.

Ryder also said the classified version of the review has been sent to Congress.

Austin is scheduled to testify before the House Armed Services Committee on Thursday about his failure to notify the White House and Congress about his illness. The Defense Department inspector general is still conducting a separate investigation into Austin's handling of his hospitalization.

Austin, 70, returned to the Pentagon on Jan. 29 after being absent from the building for nearly a month because of his health. The secretary had been released from Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., on Jan. 15 after spending about two weeks there following the

surgery, which was conducted Dec. 22.

He addressed reporters at the Pentagon on Feb. 1 and apologized for not disclosing his diagnosis, the surgery that followed and complications that led to an extended hospital stay.

"I want to be crystal clear: We did not handle this right. I did not handle this right," Austin said. "I should have told the president about my cancer diagnosis. I should have told my team and the American people, and I take full responsibility."

But during Austin's medical treatments, no one at the Defense Department notified the White House, Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks, Congress or the public for several days.

The summary of the review states Austin's staff was "hesitant to pry or share any information" that they learned and as long as the secretary remained in the ICU "timely secured communications" could not be ensured.

Outages hamper military health records system

By JOSEPH DITZLER
Stars and Stripes

The online military medical records system, MHS Genesis, was experiencing "intermittent network outages" Tuesday, according to the Defense Health Agency.

Without Genesis, patients in the military health care system cannot schedule appointments or lab tests or fill prescriptions online, among other services.

"The problem has been identified, and we are currently working to restore connectivity," DHA announced on its official Facebook page at about 8 a.m. Tuesday in Japan. The post did not identify the nature of the problem, and a DHA representative did not re-

spond to an email seeking further comment after hours in Hawaii.

Service was restored around noon for the hospital at Yokosuka Naval Base south of Tokyo, according to a post on the hospital's official Facebook page. Other facilities in Japan reported continued outages on their pages.

DHA recently completed global installation of the digital recordkeeping and appointment system with its implementation at U.S. military hospitals and clinics across the Indo-Pacific.

A cyberattack last week on Change Healthcare, the largest commercial prescription processor in the U.S., also crippled MHS Genesis pharmacy services, according to DHA.

US and Japanese forces practice island defense

By SETH ROBSON
AND MARI HIGA
Stars and Stripes

U.S. Marines and sailors and Japanese troops have begun three weeks of amphibious training amid concern in both countries about Chinese military moves around Japan and Taiwan.

Troops will practice recapturing an island during the Iron Fist 24, which is "focused on island defense," a spokesman from Japan's Ground Staff Office said by phone Tuesday.

The commander of Japan's 2nd Amphibious Rapid Deployment Regiment, Col. Hajime Tsuji, and the head of the Okinawa-based 31st Marine Expedi-

tionary Unit, Col. Matthew Danner, gave troops a pep talk Sunday during Iron Fist's opening ceremony at Camp Ainoora in Nagasaki prefecture.

Iron Fist marks a milestone as U.S. forces integrate more deeply with the Japanese marines, Danner said in a Feb. 5 Marine Corps statement.

"With each bilateral event that we, as the 31st MEU, have participated in, I've witnessed our combined knowledge and ability to rapidly integrate grow significantly," he said in the statement.

Camp Ainoora is a few miles from Sasebo Naval Base, homeport of the amphibious assault ship USS America, which is participating in the drills.

Biden presses lawmakers to avoid looming shutdown soon

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden implored the top four leaders of Congress Tuesday to act quickly to avoid a looming government shutdown early next month and to pass emergency aid for Ukraine and Israel, as a legislative logjam in the GOP-led House showed no signs of abating.

Biden hosted House Speaker Mike Johnson, R-La., Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., House Minority Leader Hakeem Jeffries, D-N.Y., and Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., in the Oval Office along with Vice President Kamala Harris.

“The need is urgent,” Biden said of the Ukraine aid. “The consequences of inaction every day in Ukraine are dire.”

He noted that Israel also needs U.S. funding to replenish its supply of Iron Dome interceptors that it uses to protect against inbound rockets.

Republicans in the House have thus far refused to bring up the \$95 billion national security package that bolsters aid for Uk-

raine, Israel and the Indo-Pacific. That measure cleared the Senate on a bipartisan 70-29 vote this month, but Johnson has resisted scheduling it for a vote in the House.

Central Intelligence Agency Director Bill Burns also joined Tuesday’s meeting. Burns has played key roles coordinating the U.S. response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine as well as efforts to secure the release of hostages held by Hamas after its attack on Israel.

Apart from the national security package, government funding for agriculture, transportation, military construction and some veterans’ services expires Friday. And funding for the rest of the government, including the Pentagon, the Department of Homeland Security and the State Department, expires a week later, on March 8, the day after Biden is set to deliver his State of the Union address.

“It’s Congress responsibility to fund the government,” Biden added. “A government shutdown would damage the economy significantly. We need a bi-

partisan solution.”

The Senate’s top two leaders also urged that the government be kept open.

Parts of the government could start to scale back operations as early as Friday unless a deal is reached on spending and legislation is sent to Biden for his signature.

Schumer said in a speech on the Senate floor ahead of the White House meeting that he hoped it would be an “important, timely and fruitful discussion” and urged Johnson to tune out demands from hardline conservatives.

“We recognize that the speaker of the House is in a difficult position, but he must reject the MAGA hard right which wants a shutdown, wants to hurt America and does not represent a majority of Republicans in the House, a majority of Republicans in the Senate and a majority of Republicans in America — let alone all Americans,” Schumer said.

Schumer added that he will make a “strong case” to Johnson for why the military aid for Ukraine is immediately needed.

Biden and Trump set to travel to border

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump will make dueling trips to the U.S.-Mexico border on Thursday, as both candidates try to turn the nation’s broken immigration system to their political advantage in an expected campaign rematch this year.

Biden will travel to Brownsville, Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley, an area that often sees large numbers of border crossings, White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said Monday.

He will meet border agents and discuss the need for bipartisan legislation. It would be his second visit to the border as president. He traveled to El Paso in January last year.

“He wants to make sure he puts his message out there to the American people,” Jean-Pierre said.

Trump, for his part, will head to Eagle Pass, Texas, about 325 miles away from Brownsville, another hotspot in the state-federal clash over border security, according to three people who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity to discuss the plans.

Biden, speaking in New York on Monday, said he had planned to head to the border on Thursday and didn’t know “my good friend apparently is going,” too.

The trips underscore immigration’s central importance in the 2024 presidential race, for Republicans and increasingly for Democrats, particularly after congressional talks on a deal to rein in illegal migration collapsed.

Toppled moon lander sends back more images with only hours left

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — A moon lander that ended up on its side managed to beam back more pictures, with only hours remaining before it dies.

Intuitive Machines posted new photos of the moon’s unexplored south polar region Tuesday.

The company’s lander, Odysseus, captured the shots last Thursday shortly before making the first U.S. touch-

down on the moon in more than 50 years. Odysseus landed on its side, hampering communication and power generation.

Once sunlight can no longer reach the lander’s solar panels, operations will end. Intuitive Machines expects that to happen sometime between Tuesday afternoon and early Wednesday.

The mission, part of NASA’s effort to boost the lunar econo-

my, was supposed to last until at least Thursday, when lunar nighttime sets in. NASA has six experiments on board.

Intuitive Machines is the first private business to land a spacecraft on the moon without it crashing.

Another U.S. company launched its own lunar lander last month, but a fuel leak doomed the mission and the craft came crashing back to Earth.

High Court doubtful of social media limits

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court cast doubt Monday on state laws that could affect how Facebook, TikTok, X, YouTube and other social media platforms regulate content posted by their users. The cases are among several this term in which the justices could set standards for free speech in the digital age.

In nearly four hours of arguments, several justices questioned aspects of laws adopted by Republican-dominated legislatures and signed by Republican governors in Florida and Texas in 2021. But they seemed wary of a broad ruling, with Justice Amy Coney Barrett warning of “land mines” she and her colleagues need to avoid in resolving the two cases.

While the details vary, both laws aimed to address conservative complaints that the social media companies were liberal-leaning and censored users based on their viewpoints, especially on the political right.

Differences on the court emerged over how to think about the platforms — as akin to newspapers that have broad free-speech protections, or tele-

phone companies, known as common carriers, that are susceptible to broader regulation.

Chief Justice John Roberts suggested he was in the former camp, saying early in the session, “And I wonder, since we’re talking about the First Amendment, whether our first concern should be with the state regulating what we have called the modern public square?”

Justices Samuel Alito and Clarence Thomas appeared most ready to embrace arguments made by lawyers for the states. Thomas raised the idea that the companies are seeking constitutional protection for “censoring other speech.”

Alito complained about the term “content moderation” that the sites employ to keep material off their platforms.

“Is it anything more than a euphemism for censorship?” he asked, later musing that term struck him as Orwellian.

But Justice Brett Kavanaugh, seemingly more favorable to the companies, took issue with calling the actions of private companies censorship, a term he said should be reserved for restrictions imposed by the government.

DA wants Trump gag order citing previous comments

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Prosecutors in Donald Trump’s New York hush-money criminal case asked a judge Monday to impose a gag order on the former president ahead of next month’s trial, citing what they called his “long history of making public and inflammatory remarks” about people involved in his legal cases.

The Manhattan district attorney’s office is asking for what it described as a “narrowly tailored” order that would bar Trump from making or directing others to make public statements about potential witnesses and jurors, as well as statements meant to interfere with or harass the court’s staff, prosecution team or their families.

The district attorney’s office is also seeking approval to show jurors the infamous “Access Hollywood” video, made public in the final weeks of Trump’s 2016 White House campaign, in which he bragged about grabbing women’s genitals without asking for permission.

Prosecutors contend the release of the 2005 footage, followed by a flurry of women coming forward to accuse Trump of sexual assault, hastened his efforts to keep negative stories out of the press,

leading to one of the hush-money arrangements at the heart of the case.

Trump’s lawyers wrote in court papers Monday that the “Access Hollywood” video “contains inflammatory and unduly prejudicial evidence that has no place at this trial about documents and accounting practices.”

The judge, Juan Manuel Merchan, didn’t rule immediately on the requests. Jury selection is scheduled to start March 25. Barring a last-minute delay, it will be the first of Trump’s four criminal cases to go to trial.

Imposing a gag order on Trump would add to restrictions put in place after his arraignment last April that prohibit him from using evidence in the case to attack witnesses.

Without limits, prosecutors said, Trump’s rhetoric would “create a significant and imminent threat to the trial by distracting personnel, diverting government resources, and delaying the administration of justice.”

A spokesperson for Trump’s presidential campaign called the gag order request “election interference pure and simple” and called the hush-money case a “sham orchestrated by partisan Democrats.”

Biden blasts Trump, feeds memes in ‘Late Night’ chat

Associated Press

NEW YORK — President Joe Biden joked Monday that a potential 2024 endorsement by Taylor Swift is a “classified” matter as he made a rare media appearance to mark the 10th anniversary of “Late Night With Seth Meyers.”

Biden’s arrival was nominally a surprise to the audience: He stepped on stage after the announced guest — comedian and actor Amy Poehler — noted that Biden had been a guest on

Meyers’ first show when he was vice president. Poehler said she could get him to return, prompting Biden to enter to “Hail to the Chief.”

“It’s good to be back,” Biden told Meyers. “Why haven’t you invited me earlier?”

Going into this year’s presidential election, Biden is seeking additional ways to reach out to voters, having largely avoided White House press conferences and on-the-record sit-downs with text reporters. Bi-

den also skipped the traditional pre-Super Bowl presidential interview.

Meyers quizzed Biden about a conspiracy theory spread among some conservatives on social media that Swift and Super Bowl champion Kansas City Chiefs tight end Travis Kelce are part of an elaborate plot to help Democrats win the November election.

“I have you on the hotspot here,” Meyers asked. “Can you confirm or deny that there is an

active conspiracy between you and Miss Swift?”

“Where are you getting this information, it’s classified,” Biden retorted, adding that Swift endorsed him for president in 2020.

Meyers also asked Biden what he thought of the “Dark Brandon” meme, which features Biden with lasers for eyes. Biden quipped, “I resent the hell out of it,” then donned a pair of his signature aviator sunglasses.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Officials: Lithium ion battery caused fatal fire

NY NEW YORK — A lithium ion battery sparked a fire that killed one person and injured 17 others at a New York City apartment building, fire officials said Saturday.

Friday's two-alarm fire began just after 2 p.m. on the third floor of a six-story building in Harlem. New York Police Department video shows firefighters being lowered by ropes from the roof to rescue people trapped on the building's upper floors.

The city has seen hundreds of fires linked to the lithium ion batteries that power electric bikes and scooters in the last few years. The Fire Department has repeatedly issued warnings and safety tips.

FDNY Chief of Operations John Hodgens said an apartment door of the burning apartment was left open, intensifying the fire and hampering efforts to extinguish it.

"If you could, imagine flames coming out that door and blocking off the stairwell," he said. "Normally we go directly up to the floor above the fire, but we were even unable to get past those flames."

Lack of snow cancels major sled dog race

ME PORTLAND — The organizers of the longest sled dog race in the eastern United States said Monday that they are canceling the event due to a lack of snow on the ground.

The Can-Am Crown International Sled Dog Races have taken place in northern Maine for more than three decades, in-

cluding a 250-mile event that is the marquee sled dog race in New England. But this year, snowfall has been well below average in Maine, and it's not safe to run the races, organizers said.

A forecasted heavy rainstorm and period of unseasonably warm weather also bode poorly for trail conditions, said Can-Am president Dennis Cyr.

The races are held in Fort Kent, more than 300 miles north of Portland near the border with Canada. The town has had 46.8 inches of snow this year and would normally have had more than 80 inches by now, the National Weather Service said.

Ex-commander charged for illegally taping cops

PA PITTSBURGH — A now-retired Pittsburgh police commander has been charged with using police-issued body-worn cameras to illegally record other police officers last year, authorities said.

Allegheny County police said they were asked in October to investigate after a body-worn camera was found hidden in an unmarked Pittsburgh police vehicle. Investigators later determined that multiple Zone 2 officers "were recorded without their knowledge on cameras that were placed inside unmarked police vehicles," county police said Friday in a Facebook post.

Former Zone 2 Commander Matthew Lackner, 50, was charged Friday with four third-degree felony counts of interception, disclosure or use of wire, electronic or oral communications. Lackner has retired from the force since the investigation began, officials said.

According to the complaint, Lackner told officers he'd recorded that it was part of a federal investigation of an unnamed person and ordered them not to speak of it again, but county police said federal authorities had confirmed that no such probe authorized any such activity.

AT&T will give \$5 to customers hit by outage

TX DALLAS — AT&T says it will give affected customers \$5 each to compensate for last week's cell-phone network outage that left many without service for hours.

The Dallas-based company said on its website that customers will get the \$5 credit on their account within two billing cycles. The credit does not apply to AT&T Business, prepaid service or Cricket, its low-cost wireless service. AT&T said prepaid customers will have options available to them if they were impacted, although it did not elaborate on what those options might be.

The outage knocked out cell-phone service for thousands of its users across the U.S. starting early Thursday before it was restored. AT&T blamed the incident on an error in coding, without elaborating, and said it was not the result of a cyberattack.

Fellow student charged in wrestler's killing

KY CAMPBELLSVILLE — A college wrestler in Kentucky was killed by a fellow student at a private Christian university over the weekend, authorities said.

Josiah Kilman, 18, was pronounced dead at a hospital after

police officers were called early Saturday to Campbellsville University in central Kentucky, city police said in a news release. He was found unresponsive in his dorm room, and the state will conduct an autopsy.

A campus lockdown was lifted after a 21-year-old student was arrested Saturday evening by state police following a report of a suspicious person in a barn, police and school officials said. He was charged with murder and second-degree burglary, and bond was set at \$2 million, court records show.

Man jailed in starvation death of disabled sibling

MI MUSKEGON — A Michigan man who pleaded guilty in his disabled brother's starvation death was sentenced Monday to a minimum of 30 years in prison by a judge who said the defendant is "one step away from becoming a psychopath."

Paul Ferguson, 21, pleaded guilty in December to first-degree child abuse in the death of 15-year-old Timothy Ferguson. He was sentenced Monday to a minimum 30 years and maximum 100 years in prison.

Timothy Ferguson, who had autism and was speech- and motor-impaired, weighed only 69 pounds when he died in July 2022 at the family's western Michigan home in Norton Shores, authorities said.

The brothers' mother, Shanda Vander Ark, 44, of Norton Shores, was sentenced in January to life in prison without a chance of parole after a jury convicted her of murder and child abuse in the teen's death.

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Vols' Knecht improving his draft stock

Associated Press

Dalton Knecht's decision to transfer to Tennessee and hopefully improve his NBA Draft stock sure seems poised to pay off.

Both for him and the fourth-ranked Volunteers.

The 6-foot-6 forward is second in the Southeastern Conference with 20.1 points per game since league play started in January. His ability to knock down layups, dunks and 3-pointers has skyrocketed Knecht to a potential lottery pick this June.

"It's worked out great for me," Knecht said.

Not only has Knecht played his way into consideration for both SEC and national player of the year, his ability to get key buckets could provide the missing link for coach Rick Barnes and Tennessee to finally earn the program's first Final Four berth.

"We didn't have a guy that could go get the points like Dalton did tonight when we needed them," Barnes said last week af-

ter a win at Missouri.

Knecht's scoring has put him in company with Tennessee legends like Bernard King, Ernie Grunfeld, Chris Lofton and Allan Houston. With four regular-season games remaining, these Vols are tied with No. 14 Alabama atop the standings in the chase for the Southeastern Conference regular-season title.

"My teammates, they just told me it was going to be like this. But maybe I didn't think it's going to be like this much," Knecht said. "But it's just really cool just to see our work pay off and be with great teammates and great coaching staff."

The shooter from Thornton, Colo., led the Big Sky at Northern Colorado last season by averaging 20.2 points. That was good enough to rank 23rd nationally in Division I.

Knecht knew he needed to hone other parts of his game, especially his defensive skills.

The chance to play for the man who at Texas coached Kevin Durant, Knecht's favorite

player growing up, made playing for Barnes the easy choice.

Barnes, who notched his 800th career victory Saturday night when the Vols beat Texas A&M, has asked Knecht to be the best player on the court, and not just when it comes to scoring.

"Every single time on defense, offense, rebounding," Knecht said. "In every aspect of the game, he wants me to be consistent and the best."

Knecht has been dazzling since the Volunteers started their SEC slate. He became the first Tennessee player to score at least 30 points in four of five games and the first SEC player to do that in 14 years. He became the seventh Tennessee player with five 30-point games in a season.

He credits his new teammates with helping ease his transition into the mighty SEC, which features five other ranked teams this week.

After he scored 32 in a win at Vanderbilt, they crowded

around as he took questions from reporters, one asking how it felt to be nicknamed the "White Mamba."

"That's what y'all call me," said Knecht, with a chuckle.

To improve defensively, coaches wanted Knecht more active in the passing lanes. He did just that two weeks ago in a road win at Arkansas. Assistant coach Gregg Polinsky said Knecht was asked to use his length defending the Razorbacks' top scorer, guard Tramon Mark.

"Sure enough, Dalton blocked a shot," Polinsky said. "Great move, great matchup. But at the same time, that's Dalton. Like give him credit for kind of upping his game, if you will, at the defensive end of the floor. And we still know there's a lot more to go in a good way, so Dalton can keep getting better there."

Playing in the SEC against faster, stronger players has been just what Knecht was looking for, as well.

North Carolina tops Miami, Davis has record 42 points

Associated Press

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. — After a huge first half, RJ Davis saw no reason to back off.

Davis poured in four straight 3-pointers during a riveting second-half stretch on his way to a career-high 42 points, and No. 9 North Carolina held off skidding Miami 75-71 on Monday night.

"I kind of felt good most of the game," Davis said. "Came out hot. I told myself since I had a good first half to continue to stay on it. I was aggressive and shots were falling. For me to have a performance like that tonight means the world to me."

Davis, a senior guard who set a single-game Smith Center scoring record, had 21 points in each half. He picked up the pace with a dazzling display with less than 7½ minutes to play, and ended up shooting 7 for 11 on 3s.

The only player for the Tar Heels (22-6, 14-3 Atlantic Coast Conference) to score in double figures, Davis went 1 for 2 at the

free-throw line with 24.4 seconds remaining to give UNC a 73-70 advantage.

"It wasn't just his points," coach Hubert Davis said. "I thought he was great defensively, took care of the ball. We needed every bit of his 42."

Norchad Omier had 22 points, Bensley Joseph scored 21 and Kyshawn George added 14 to lead Miami (15-14, 6-12), which lost its seventh game in a row.

Omier missed a hook shot in the lane that could have tied it with about 45 seconds left. Then twice in the last 25 seconds, North Carolina secured offensive rebounds off missed free throws.

"That was a valiant effort on our part," Miami coach Jim Larranaga said. "RJ Davis had an answer every time we made a run."

North Carolina, with three regular-season games remaining, stretched its ACC lead to 1½ games over second-place Duke.

Davis racked up the most points for a Tar

Heels player since Shammond Williams scored 42 in a 1998 double-overtime win at Georgia Tech.

"He put us on his back and took over the game," forward Harrison Ingram said. "RJ took the ball and (let's) see what he does."

No. 15 Baylor 62, TCU 54: Ja'Kobe Walter scored 13 of his 16 points after halftime, and the standout freshman started and capped a game-turning spurt by the visiting Bears in a win over the Horned Frogs.

Yves Missi, a 7-foot freshman, also finished with 16 points and Jalen Bridges scored 15 as Baylor (20-8, 9-6 Big 12) snapped a two-game skid. RayJ Dennis had nine points, nine rebounds and nine assists.

Jameer Nelson Jr. had 11 points and Emanuel Miller 10 for TCU (19-9, 8-7), which made 33% (17 of 51) of its shots. That included 10 consecutive misses to end the first half, and a span of nine misses in a row over 7½ minutes after halftime.

US falls to Mexico for just the 2nd time

Associated Press

CARSON, Calif.— Mexico beat the United States for the second time ever, getting goals from Lizbeth Ovalle and Mayra Pelayo for a 2-0 victory Monday night in the CONCACAF Women's Gold Cup.

The U.S. entered the game 40-1-1 against its rival, with its only previous loss a 2-1 decision during Women's World Cup qualifying in 2010.

It was the first loss for the U.S. under interim coach Twila Kilgore, who took over after the team's dramatic exit from the Women's World Cup last summer in the round of 16. Emma Hayes will take over for Kilgore this spring.

Mexico, which failed to qualify for last year's World Cup, finished atop Group A in the Gold Cup while the United States finished second. Both teams advanced to the knockout round.

"They went out and they were bold, they were brave with the dream of playing a good game against the United States," Mexico coach Pedro Lopez Ramos said.

Ovalle, who plays for Tigres of Monterrey, put Mexico ahead in the 28th minute. U.S. defender Becky Sauerbrunn tried to defend Ovalle but kicked the ball right at her. Ovalle floated a shot over goalkeeper Alyssa Naehner and two U.S. defenders and into the net.

It was the first goal conceded by the U.S. to a CONCACAF opponent in 33 matches.

"I think it just shows how far the game is coming and there's no easy games anymore. And if we don't take care of business and we don't execute, this is to be expected," Kilgore said. "We'll step up and take ownership in that and I think anytime you have a group that is willing to

take ownership in things like this, it's a good thing for the future of the tournament. Everything's still on the table and we'll be motivated, that's for sure."

Sauerbrunn took full responsibility for the goal, both on the field and in the locker room afterward.

"As a veteran, you know, you have some rough days at the office and tonight is definitely a rough day," she said. "But luckily, you'll have another day at the office and it's just what you make out of it."

Mexico nearly scored again in first-half stoppage time but Karla Nieto's shot from distance hit the crossbar.

Kiana Palacios had a good chance to give Mexico a cushion but her shot hit defender Abby Dahlkemper and bounded away.

By that time, Mexico could feel its momentum.

Pelayo scored from distance in stoppage time and Mexico's players celebrated wildly on the field.

"If we lose in the quarterfinals, then the beautiful win of today is useless," Lopez Ramos said through a translator. "I hope that this is not an isolated moment."

The United States saw success from its teenagers in the first two games of the tournament. Olivia Moultrie, 18, scored twice in a victory over the Dominican Republic and Jaedyn Shaw, 19, scored a pair in a victory over Argentina.

But Mexico played surprisingly tough and the United States could not rebound after conceding that first goal.

This is the first-ever Women's Gold Cup, created to give women's teams in the CONCACAF region more competitive matches.

Hart sinks winner for Knicks after refs miss foul call

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Jalen Brunson missed a 3-pointer, eventually got the ball back and passed it to Josh Hart for the go-ahead basket.

In between were three turnovers and a missed foul call in one of the most chaotic and controversial possessions of the season.

Hart ended it with a layup with 2.8 seconds left and the New York Knicks beat the Detroit Pistons 113-111 on Monday night.

"We won. This is the NBA, man. We don't care how we win. We don't care how ugly it is," Hart said.

Brunson had 35 points and 12 assists for the Knicks, and it was his missed 3-point attempt with 20 seconds remaining that started the wild back-and-forth that led to Hart's basket and left Pistons coach Monty Williams irate afterward.

Detroit chased down the re-

bound but threw it away, then appeared to recover when Ausr Thompson stole a pass by Donte DiVincenzo. But then Thompson lost the ball during a collision with DiVincenzo along the sideline, the Knicks came up with it and Brunson found Hart under the basket for his layup while being fouled.

"Donte dove for the ball and the ball came loose and then I looked at the clock, looked up the floor, saw Josh was open and just got around their defense and hit him," Brunson said.

Referees determined afterward that DiVincenzo fouled Thompson.

"Upon postgame review, we determined that Thompson gets to the ball first, and then was deprived of the opportunity to gain possession of the ball," crew chief James Williams said. "Therefore, a loose-ball foul should have been whistled on New York's Donte DiVincenzo."

After the Pistons lost their sixth straight, Williams went onto the court to yell at one of the officials near where Thompson went down.

"The absolute worst call of the season," Williams said during his brief postgame remarks. "No call, and enough's enough."

It left the Pistons with the same anger the Knicks had after a Feb. 12 loss in Houston, when officials said afterward they shouldn't have called a foul on Brunson with 0.3 seconds remaining, giving Aaron Holiday the free throws that gave the Rockets a 105-103 victory. The Knicks have filed a protest.

Hart added 23 points and DiVincenzo had 21 for the Knicks. Cunningham scored 32 for Detroit.

Heat 121, Kings 110: Bam Adebayo scored 28 points, Jaime Jaquez Jr. added 26 and short-handed Miami beat host Sacramento for its fourth straight win.

Kevin Love provided a spark with 19 points off the bench for the Heat, who were missing three starters because of injuries or suspensions.

Sacramento's Domantas Sabonis had 14 points, 14 rebounds and 10 assists for his NBA-high 21st triple-double of the season.

Raptors 130, Pacers 122: All-Star Scottie Barnes had 21 points, 12 rebounds and 12 assists for visiting Toronto.

RJ Barrett scored 24 points for the Raptors, who won their third straight.

All-Star Tyrese Haliburton struggled for Indiana, finishing with nine points.

Nets 111, Grizzlies 86: Dennis Schroder scored 18 points, Dorian Finney-Smith added 13 points and nine rebounds, and visiting Brooklyn gave Kevin Ollie his first win as an NBA coach.

Lamar Stevens scored 17 points on 8-for-9 shooting, but Memphis, shot 38.7% overall.

Horvat, Islanders beat Stars in OT again

Associated Press

DALLAS—Bo Horvat scored at 2:54 of overtime, his second extra-period winner against Dallas this season, as the New York Islanders beat the Stars 3-2 on Monday night.

Ryan Pulock had a goal and an assist and Kyle MacLean also scored for the Islanders in their second win in seven games (2-3-2). Ilya Sorokin stopped 30 shots.

In overtime, Horvat took a pass from Mathew Barzal and scored from the slot moving toward the net on one knee. He also ended New York's 3-2 win over Dallas at home on Jan. 21 in Patrick Roy's debut as Islanders coach.

"I don't know if it's just ... we've got their number this year," said Horvat, second on

the team with 23 goals.

The Islanders are tied with New Jersey, seven points behind Tampa Bay for the second wild card in the Eastern Conference. Washington is one point ahead of the Islanders and Devils.

"We know every game matters for the rest of the season," Horvat said. "That's a big two points today."

Logan Stankoven had a goal and an assist for his first two NHL points in his second game, and Matt Duchene scored for his 800th career point as the Stars lost for the fifth time in six games (1-3-2) and lead the Central Division by two points. Scott Wedgewood had 25 saves.

Kraken 4, Bruins 3 (SO): Kailer Yamamoto scored the only goal in a shootout and host

Seattle overcame David Pastrnak's hat trick to beat Boston.

Jordan Eberle, Vince Dunn and Oliver Bjorkstrand scored for the Kraken. Philipp Grubauer denied all three Bruins shootout attempts, the last of which was by Pastrnak.

It was Boston's sixth straight game that went beyond regulation time. By earning one point, the Bruins tied idle Vancouver for the most points in the NHL at 82.

Oilers 4, Kings 2: Leon Draisaitl and Evan Bouchard each had a goal and an assist as host Edmonton beat Los Angeles to snap a three-game skid.

Zach Hyman and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins also scored, and Connor McDavid had two assists to help the Oilers move two points up on the Kings for third

place in the Pacific Division. Stuart Skinner stopped 38 shots.

Trevor Moore and Alex Laferriere scored for the Kings, who had won five of six. David Rittich finished with 27 saves.

Capitals 6, Senators 3: Hendrix Lapierre scored twice and host Washington inched closer to playoff position by beating Ottawa.

John Carlson, Max Pacioretty, Aliaksei Protas and Beck Malenstyn each had a goal as the Capitals won for the fourth time in five games. They've picked up a point in seven of their past eight since ending a six-game losing streak.

As a result, they're four points back of Philadelphia for third place in the Metropolitan Division, with two extra games left to play.

Twins acquire Margot in 3-player deal with Dodgers

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS—The Minnesota Twins acquired outfielder Manuel Margot, minor league shortstop Rayne Doncon and cash on Monday from the Los Angeles Dodgers for minor league shortstop Noah Miller.

In conjunction with the trade, the Dodgers announced a \$4 million, one-year contract to keep Kiké Hernández.

The 29-year-old Margot just joined the Dodgers two months ago with starting pitcher Tyler Glasnow in a trade with Tampa Bay. Margot hit .264 with a .686 OPS in 99 games for the Rays last season while playing center field and right field. He has also played left field.

"A guy that can complement you very well against left-handed pitching," Twins manager Rocco Baldelli said. "He helps you in the middle of the field. He does a lot of things skill-set wise. We talked about rounding our team out with the right kinds of players—he is that kind of player. He's a great character add for our team off the field and in the clubhouse."

Margot made his major league debut with San Diego in 2016 and was the primary center fielder for the Padres from 2017-19, before being traded to the Rays. In 788 career games, he's batted .255 with a .694 OPS, 52 home runs and 91 stolen bases.

"Normally at that age, some guys are really slowing down. He's not," Baldelli said. "His foot speed is literally pretty close to what it's been previously, and he's a really good athlete."

Margot has a \$10 million salary this season as part of a \$19 million, two-year contract he signed with the Rays, a deal that includes a \$12 million mutual option for 2025 with a \$2 million buyout. If the option is not exercised, the Rays must pay the Dodgers an additional \$2 million as part of the Glasnow trade.

The Rays agreed to send the Dodgers an additional \$2 million toward Margot's salary for 2024, and Twins president of baseball operations Derek Falvey said his club will receive that \$4 million commitment as well as an unspecified amount on top of that from the Dodgers to cover Margot's salary. The Twins have pared back their payroll in 2024 in light of a reduction in regional television revenue.

Margot will essentially replace Michael A. Taylor, who became a free agent after hitting a career-high 21 homers and playing 126 games in center field last season while star Byron Buxton was limited to designated hitter duty due to knee trouble. Buxton is healthy again and on track to be the regular center fielder, with Matt Wallner in left and Max Kepler in right, but utilityman Willi

Castro was the only other sure bet for the opening day roster with reliable outfield experience.

Margot was a player the Twins had targeted for a while as a fit for his exceptional defensive ability in the corners, as well as his capability of handling center field when Buxton is out of the lineup.

"Everything we've gathered from guys who've been with him in Tampa and other spots is how instinctive he is, how good he is off the bat, how good his reads are, his ability to go in both directions to go get it," Falvey said.

The 20-year-old Doncon played last season for Class A Rancho Cucamonga. He was signed out of the Dominican Republic.

Miller was the 36th overall pick by the Twins in the 2021 amateur draft. The 21-year-old finished last season with Class A Cedar Rapids.

Hernández hit .237 with 11 home runs and 61 RBIs in 140 games with the Red Sox and Dodgers in 2023 while playing all four infield and all three outfield positions. The 33-year-old was reacquired by the Dodgers from Boston on July 25 and became a free agent after the World Series.

Hernández has played in 10 major league seasons, including parts of seven with the Dodgers.