

Senators: We must OK strikes on Houthi

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Several senators on Tuesday said the White House must seek congressional approval for ongoing U.S. airstrikes against Houthi rebels in Yemen, dismissing claims by the Pentagon that its actions are properly authorized.

Senior members of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee said the military operations that began in January to protect shipping in the Red Sea from attacks by the Iran-backed militants are now beyond President Joe Biden's limited war powers.

Sen. Chris Murphy, D-Conn., the chairman of the committee's Middle East subpanel,

said he will be discussing legislation in the coming days to provide congressional authorization.

"This looks to me like war in every bit of the constitutional sense: We have engaged in multiple rounds of strikes, we have a limited number of boots on the ground, we have taken casualties, we have prisoners," Murphy said. "I'm having a hard time understanding why this does not require a traditional congressional war authorization."

Sen. Ben Cardin, D-Md., chairman of the full Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Sen. Todd Young, R-Ind., agreed.

The White House has characterized the strikes as self-

defense and said Biden is within the legal scope of his authorities as commander in chief. Only Congress can authorize war under the Constitution but the White House has the right to launch limited foreign military action.

Daniel Shapiro, the deputy assistant secretary of defense for the Middle East, said Tuesday during the Senate hearing that the Pentagon feels "very strongly" that Biden is carrying out the Yemen campaign with proper authorities.

He also said the constitutional power granted to Biden to act in self-defense also applies to U.S. partners.

Senators were not convinced. "Self-defense means you can defend U.S. personnel, you can

defend U.S. military assets, you probably can defend U.S. commercial ships," said Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va. "If you're defending the commercial ships of other nations, it is in my view, laughable to call that self-defense."

Murphy said the extension of the self-defense authority to the protection of partners was a "very troubling and creative interpretation" of the Constitution.

The U.S. plays a leading role in a coalition of more than 20 countries assembled in December to patrol the Red Sea and safeguard commercial shipping after the Houthis began attacking vessels transiting the key shipping route in the Middle East in November.

German navy ship's shots on Houthi drones 1st since WWII

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

The recent downing of attack drones by a German ship in the Middle East likely marks the first known use of live weapons in combat by the country's navy since it was rebuilt after World War II, a German expert on maritime security said Wednesday.

On Tuesday, the frigate Hessen repelled two separate aerial drone attacks in the Red Sea, the German Joint Forces Operations Command said in a post the same day on its X account.

At 8:09 p.m., the ship used a 76 mm onboard gun to shoot down an Iranian-backed Houthi aerial drone flying toward it, the German news website Der Spiegel reported Wednesday.

Minutes later, Hessen's ra-

dar picked up a second drone, which was shot down by its close-in defense system, according to the Der Spiegel report.

That response is significant, said Sebastian Bruns, a senior researcher for Kiel University's Center for Maritime Strategy and Security.

"I would even go so far (as) to say that it will go down in German naval history as the first shots fired in anger by one of our frigates" since the modern German navy was founded in 1956, Bruns said.

Hessen entered the Red Sea on Friday as part of the European Union's Aspides mission to protect shipping in the vital waterway.

The mission, which includes France, Greece and Italy, will coordinate with the U.S.-led Operation Prosperity Guardi-

an, providing needed additional help against the Houthis.

On Tuesday, U.S. forces and a coalition warship shot down five Houthi one-way attack drones between 9:50 p.m. and 10:55 p.m., Sanaa time, U.S. Central Command said in a statement the same day.

The statement did not name the warship, but CENTCOM typically defers to the involved country to publicly identify itself.

Hessen's participation in the EU mission is noteworthy, given that the German navy generally has been tasked with counterpiracy, antiterrorism, mine clearance and other low-to-medium-intensity operations since 1991, Bruns said.

German participation in the mission follows a 2022 push by Chancellor Olaf Scholz to invest 100 billion euros in tech-

nology, equipment and personnel for the country's defense.

At the same time, Scholz pledged to meet a key defense spending guideline used to gauge the resolve of allied countries in supporting collective NATO defense, though that goal has stalled.

"What the Hessen has been authorized to do is thus very significant, not just for Germany and the EU ... but also for showing that 'zeitenwende,' (a turning point) is really here," Bruns said.

But Houthi militants have continued their attacks, with some success in recent weeks. On Tuesday, a rocket fired off the coast of Yemen exploded off the side of an unidentified ship traveling through the sea, The Associated Press reported. The crew and vessel were reported safe.

Services set to brief Austin on Ospreys

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The military services will take a key step toward getting the V-22 Osprey fleet back in the air as they lay out their plans Friday to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin for addressing safety concerns stemming from a fatal crash in Japan, three defense officials said.

The U.S. fleet of about 400 Osprey tiltrotor aircraft has been grounded for 83 days following the crash of a U.S. Air Force Special Operations Command CV-22B on Nov. 29 in Japan that killed eight service members. It's unclear how quickly Austin would make any decision on the matter.

The Air Force has said it knows what failed in the Osprey but still

does not know why it failed. In the months since, the services have worked on a plan to mitigate the known material failure through additional safety checks and also by establishing a new, more conservative approach to how the Osprey is operated to safely work around the known issue, a fourth official, a senior defense official familiar with the V-22 program, said.

Japan is the only international partner in the Osprey program and also grounded its fleet of 14 V-22s after the November crash. A return to flight is a sensitive topic in the country, where public opinion on the Osprey is mixed. One of the defense officials said none of the U.S. Ospreys would return to flight until Japan has

had an opportunity to weigh in on the military's plan.

After that, each service would decide on its own return to flight. Not all services would need to put their Ospreys back into operation simultaneously.

The officials spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak about the Osprey decision process.

The military-wide grounding has left the deepest impact on the U.S. Marine Corps, which relies on more than 300 MV-22 Ospreys to conduct a major part of its aviation mission. Air Force Special Operations Command has about 50 CV-22B Ospreys. The Navy is planning on replacing its C-2 Greyhounds, which transport

passengers to aircraft carriers, with more than two dozen CMV-22 Ospreys.

The presidential fleet also uses a limited number of Ospreys to ferry White House staff, security personnel and reporters. Those have also been grounded since Dec. 6.

A small number of Marine Corps MV-22s in Djibouti have had an exemption to the grounding since Jan. 17 due to mission needs and have flown since then without incident.

The extraordinary decision in December to ground the aircraft military-wide reflected questions about the safety of the platform. Just before the November incident in Japan, an Osprey crash in August killed three Marines.

Captain of ship 2 SEALs died trying to board held

Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. — A Pakistani national who U.S. officials say was the captain of a ship carrying Iranian-made missile components to Houthi rebels in Yemen was ordered Tuesday to remain behind bars as he awaits trial on charges of attempting to smuggle a warhead and other weapons, and lying to U.S. Coast Guard officers as they boarded the boat.

Two Navy SEALs drowned while boarding the unflagged vessel in the Arabian Sea on Jan. 11 in the wake of continued Houthi attacks on commercial and military ships in the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

In court documents, federal prosecutors said the boat's captain, Muhammad Pahlawan, refused to slow the ship when the U.S. Navy began its boarding attempt and "shouted for the crew to burn the boat before the Navy could board it."

The ship was described as a

dhow.

U.S. officials said Navy Special Warfare Operator 1st Class Christopher J. Chambers slipped into the gap created by high waves between the vessel and the SEALs' combatant craft. As Chambers fell, Navy Special Warfare Operator 2nd Class Nathan Gage Ingram jumped in to try to save him, according to U.S. officials familiar with what happened.

Efforts to find and rescue the two SEALs were unsuccessful and they were later declared dead by the Navy.

During a detention hearing in U.S. District Court in Richmond, Va., on Tuesday, FBI Special Agent Lauren Lee testified that Pahlawan initially said he was the boat's engineer and that the captain had gotten off the ship. He also said he was not aware of any cargo on the ship, Lee said. She said he later contradicted himself, saying, "I am in command of the boat."

Marines can voice uniform preferences in new survey

BY JENNESSA DAVEY

Stars and Stripes

The Marine Corps is polling its constituency on a handful of proposals, from uniform changes to incentive pay, in a survey published this week in an administrative message.

Marines were surveyed about uniforms in 2021 and 2018, but this is the first poll put out through an admin message, specifically MARADMIN 080/24, on Feb. 22.

"The survey step of the Uniform Board process is where the individual Marine gets to provide feedback on uniform issues," the message states.

The survey — available to all active-duty and Reserve Marines — opened Monday and concludes March 26.

It addresses suggested changes in specific uniform categories: the positioning of devices on ribbons and medals, boat cloaks and pumps for the evening dress uniform, necktabs, all-weather coats

and tanker jackets.

It also asks Marines to weigh in on adding a tanker jacket to the seabag and minimum requirement list for recruits, and a "medium blue" to the allowance for the funeral detail at Marine Corps Logistics Base Barstow, Calif.

The survey ensures anonymity, though participants are required to answer five questions, including rank, active or reserved status and years of service.

Participants who complete the survey may share additional comments or feedback. This feature allows Marines to address specific uniform concerns, as well as contribute ideas that may not have been previously considered, according to the message.

Survey results may be discussed at a Uniform Board meeting to take place between April and June. The commandant will communicate the board's decision in a separate message.

Michigan primaries highlight concerns for Biden, Trump

Associated Press

LANSING, Mich. — Joe Biden and Donald Trump easily won their party's primaries in Michigan, but Tuesday's results showed that both candidates have cause for concern in their bid to win the swing state in November.

An "uncommitted" vote in Michigan's Democratic primary was the first indication of how backlash over President Biden's handling of the Israel-Hamas war in Gaza might impact his reelection campaign. Trump won his primary by a large margin, but support for rival Nikki Haley once again showed that some Republican voters may have misgivings about giving the former president another four years in the general election.

Here are some takeaways from Michigan:

■ **Some Democrats express anger over Gaza with 'uncommitted' vote.**

Michigan has become the focal point of Democratic frustration regarding the White House's actions in the Israel-Hamas conflict. It has the largest concentration of Arab Americans in the nation.

That anger came through loud and clear on Tuesday as some voters marked "uncommitted" on their ballot in the Democratic primary. Biden still dominated the primary, but the result could be a concern in a state he won by less than 3% in 2020 and likely can't afford to lose this year.

Organizers of the "uncommitted" movement had purposely kept expectations low, having only seriously begun their push a few weeks ago. The "Listen to Michigan" campaign that organized the push said they were hoping for 10,000 votes, pointing to Trump's win of less than 11,000 votes in 2016 to show the significance of that number.

When Barack Obama ran for reelection in 2012, the last time a Democratic presidential incumbent sought re-election, the "uncommitted" option received close to 21,000 votes — or 11 percentage points.

The "uncommitted" vote totals would need to be between 20 and 30 percentage points for Democrats to worry about their impact in November, said Richard Czuba, a pollster who has long tracked Michigan politics.

■ **Some Republicans still op-**

pose Trump.

Despite Trump's clear victory in Michigan, Haley still saw significant support from the swing state's Republicans.

Some of her best results came in Oakland and Kent counties, where Democrats have been gaining ground in recent years, contributing to their recent statewide success. She also performed better in counties where the state's largest universities are located, Washtenaw and Ingham counties.

Trump has dominated in primaries with help from his base but his strength among general election voters remains unclear. The former president has appeared in Michigan regularly in the eight years since he became president, while Haley only began stumping in the state over the weekend.

AP VoteCast reveals that a large portion of Trump's opposition within the Republican primaries has come from voters who abandoned him before this year.

All three statewide Republican candidates that Trump endorsed in the 2022 midterms were crushed by Democratic incumbents.

McConnell to step down from Senate post

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Mitch McConnell, the longest-serving Senate leader in history who maintained his power in the face of dramatic convulsions in the Republican Party for almost two decades, will step down from that position in November.

McConnell, who turned 82 last week, announced his decision Wednesday in the well of the Senate, a place where he looked in awe from its back benches in 1985 when he arrived and where he grew increasingly comfortable in the front row seat afforded the party leaders.

"One of life's most underappreciated talents is to know when it's time to move on to life's next chapter," he said. "So I stand before you today ... to say that this will be my last term as Republican leader of the Senate."

His decision punctuates a powerful ideological transition underway in the Republican Party, from Ronald Reagan's brand of traditional conservatism and strong international alliances, to the fiery, often isolationist populism of former President Donald Trump.

McConnell said he plans to serve out his Senate term, which ends in January 2027. Aides said McConnell's announcement was unrelated to his health.

The Kentucky senator had a concussion from a fall last year and two public episodes where his face briefly froze while he was speaking.

The senator had been under increasing pressure from the restive, and at times hostile wing of his party that has aligned firmly with Trump. The two have been estranged since December 2020.

Biden's physical results closely watched

Associated Press

BETHESDA, Md. — President Joe Biden spent about 2½ hours at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center on Wednesday for an annual physical that will be closely watched as the 81-year-old president seeks reelection.

The oldest president in U.S. history, Biden would be 86 by the end of a second term, should he win one. After his last exam, performed in February 2023, doctors declared Biden

"healthy, vigorous" and "fit" to handle his White House duties.

But voters are approaching this year's election with misgivings about Biden's age, having scrutinized his gaffes, his coughing, his slow walking and even a tumble off his bicycle.

The White House said it would release a written summary of the "routine" checkup later in the day.

A recent special counsel's report investigating Biden's possession of classified documents

repeatedly derided Biden's memory, calling it "hazy," "fuzzy," "faulty," "poor" and having "significant limitations." It also noted that Biden could not recall defining milestones in his own life such as when his son Beau died or when he served as vice president.

Still, addressing reporters the evening of the report's release, Biden said "my memory is fine" and grew visibly angry as he denied forgetting when his son died of brain cancer in 2015.

Raging wildfires scorch Texas Panhandle

Associated Press

A fast-moving wildfire burning through the Texas Panhandle grew into the second-largest blaze in state history Wednesday, forcing evacuations and triggering power outages as firefighters struggled to contain the widening flames.

The sprawling blaze was part of a cluster of fires that burned out of control and threatened rural towns, where local officials spent the night shutting down roads and urging residents to leave their homes. The largest of the fires — which grew to nearly 800 square miles — jumped into parts of Oklahoma and remained completely uncontained as dawn broke, according to the Texas A&M For-

est Service.

Officials were starting to assess the damage Wednesday and warned it could be extensive. The town of Fritch, with a population of less than 2,000, appeared to be hit hard.

The people in that area are probably not “prepared for what they’re going to see if they pull into town,” Hutchinson County Emergency Management spokesperson Deidra Thomas said in a social media livestream. She compared the damage to a tornado.

The town remained unsafe for people to return, she said.

Authorities have not said what ignited the fires, but strong winds, dry grass and unseasonably warm temperatures

have fed the blazes. Near Borger, a community of about 13,000 people, emergency officials at one point late Tuesday answered questions from panicked residents during a Facebook livestream and told them to get ready to leave if they had not already.

“It was like a ring of fire around Borger. There was no way out ... all four main roads were closed,” said Adrianna Hill, 28, whose home was within about a mile of the fire. She said a northern wind that blew the fire in the opposite direction “saved our butts.”

Republican Gov. Greg Abbott issued a disaster declaration for 60 counties.

The encroaching flames

caused the main facility that disassembles America’s nuclear arsenal to pause operations Tuesday night, but it was open for normal work on Wednesday.

The blazes tore through sparsely populated counties on the vast, high plains that are punctuated by cattle ranches and oil rigs. The main fire, known as the Smoke House Creek Fire, had grown to more than half the size of the state of Rhode Island. It is five times the size it was on Monday, when it began.

The weather forecast provided some hope for firefighters — cooler temperatures, less wind and possibly rain on Thursday. But for now, the situation was dire in some areas.

Storms leave destruction around the Great Lakes

Associated Press

Severe thunderstorms that may have spawned a rare February tornado outbreak toppled trees, cut power and damaged homes in the Chicago area and other parts of the Great Lakes following a spell of summerlike, sometimes record temperatures.

In Michigan’s Grand Blanc Township, near Flint, winds damaged subdivisions, tore up trees and uprooted gas lines in

the wee hours of Wednesday. Police officers said they saw a tornado, but weather authorities have yet to confirm that.

Police and firefighters moved residents in an area of gas leaks to a firehouse, and they were allowed to return when a utility made repairs, authorities said.

“There are still numerous reports of wires down in the area,” police said. “While there is significant damage to houses in the area, no one was hurt.”

More than 100 miles to the southwest, a possible tornado damaged homes and barns and knocked down trees and power lines in Calhoun County’s Lee Township, the sheriff’s office said on Facebook. Crews cleared roads for rescue teams, but no injuries were reported.

Warning sirens jolted residents of central Ohio awake as a possible tornado hit near Columbus. Significant damage was reported at an airport in

Madison County, between Dayton and Columbus. Toppled trees closed roads in the area until debris could be cleared.

At one point, over 50,000 customers in Ohio and Michigan lacked power Wednesday, according to PowerOutage.us.

In Geneva, in Chicago’s western suburbs, storms Tuesday evening uprooted trees and left some homes with broken windows and shorn-off doors, said Fire Chief Mike Antenore.

Zelenskyy pleads for more ammo at Albania summit

Associated Press

TIRANA, Albania — Ukraine’s president pleaded Wednesday for more ammunition to repel Russia as he co-hosted a summit with Albania’s government to build further support for Kyiv among southeastern European countries while signs of war fatigue grow.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said that increasing the supply of armaments, and especially ammuni-

tion, was “the most fundamental initiative” for Ukraine just over two years since Russia’s full-scale invasion. “I think this is the question of: Will we stand or not,” he said during his speech to the summit.

Zelenskyy arrived in Albania overnight to join a summit of 11 countries from southeastern Europe, including some of Ukraine’s neighbors — three of them participating online — along with officials from the Eu-

ropean Union and other international organizations.

It was the latest stop in an international tour that saw him in Saudi Arabia on Tuesday to push for a peace plan and the return of prisoners of war from Russia.

Zelenskyy sought to build solidarity among his country and those of the Western Balkans, saying that all of them deserved to be members of the European Union and NATO if they choose.

“The European Union and NATO have provided Europe with the longest and most reliable era of security and economic development, and we are all equally worthy of being a part of the European and Euro-Atlantic communities,” Zelenskyy said.

He said that Kyiv wanted “international law and global stability to be based on truly multilateral and transparent processes.”

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Judge says billy clubs ban is unconstitutional

CA SAN DIEGO — A federal judge struck down a California law banning possession of club-like weapons, reversing his previous ruling from three years ago that upheld the prohibition on billy clubs, batons and similar blunt objects.

U.S. District Judge Roger Benitez ruled last week that the prohibition “unconstitutionally infringes the Second Amendment rights of American citizens,” after reviewing the case under new U.S. Supreme Court guidance, and enjoined the state from enforcing the law, the Los Angeles Times reported Monday.

Weapons such as billy clubs have been outlawed in some form or other in California since at least 1917, with exceptions for law enforcement officers and some state-licensed security guards, the Times said.

Benitez declared in September 2021 that California’s ban on such weapons qualified as “longstanding” and therefore did not violate the Second Amendment. But while that ruling was under appeal, the U.S. Supreme Court issued a decision in *New York State Rifle & Pistol Association v. Bruen* that altered the legal analysis for Second Amendment regulations.

Dr. Seuss’ birthday celebrated with free book

NY NEW YORK — Babies born this coming Saturday could get a birthday present featuring a guy who knows how to have fun — The Cat in the Hat.

Dr. Seuss Enterprises is celebrating the iconic children’s author’s 120th birthday with a free giveaway of “The Cat in the Hat” to U.S. residents who have a baby born this March 2.

The offer is on a first-come, first-served basis, capping at 10,000 copies. Entrants must be at least 18, legal residents of the 50 states and Washington, D.C., and be parents or legal guardians of a child born March 2, 2024.

Family Dollar to pay for ‘insanitary’ warehouse

AR LITTLE ROCK — Family Dollar Stores, a subsidiary of Dollar Tree Inc., pleaded guilty Monday to holding food, drugs, cosmetics and other items under “insanitary” conditions at a now-closed, rodent-infested distribution center in West Memphis, Ark., federal prosecutors said.

Family Dollar faced one misdemeanor count of causing FDA-regulated products to become adulterated while being held under insanitary conditions at the facility, the U.S. Department of Justice said in a news release. The company entered into a plea deal that includes a sentence of a fine and forfeiture amount totaling \$41.675 million, the largest-ever monetary criminal penalty in a food safety case, the department said.

Confederate group may lose tax breaks

VA RICHMOND — Legislation that would end tax benefits for the United Daughters of the Confederacy — the Richmond-based wom-

en’s group that helped erect many of the country’s Confederate monuments — is on its way to Republican Virginia Gov. Glenn Youngkin, who hasn’t said whether he supports it.

The Democratic-led House of Delegates gave final passage Monday to a bill that would eliminate both a recordation and property tax exemption for the group. A separate, companion measure that reached final passage last week also eliminates those exemptions.

The bills have moved through the legislature with mostly party-line support and relatively little debate. The few individuals who have spoken out against the legislation have called it discriminatory, while supporters argued the tax benefits have amounted to state-sponsored subsidies for Confederate monuments and are out of line with 21st-century values. The United Daughters of the Confederacy for over a century has “spread the lie” of the Lost Cause — an ideology that downplayed the role slavery played in the Civil War.

The nonprofit group, which owns a marble-clad Memorial Building positioned on a prominent Richmond boulevard with an assessed value of over \$4.4 million, did not respond to requests for comment Monday.

Bill allowing exemptions for vaccines passes House

WV CHARLESTON — West Virginia would join 45 other states that allow religious exemptions from childhood vaccines required for school attendance under a bill that passed the House of Delegates on Monday.

The religious exemption is in-

cluded in a bill that would let private schools decide whether to implement vaccine mandates. It was added to the bill as an amendment that passed on Friday. The overall bill was approved Monday on a 57-41 vote and now goes to the state Senate, where its chances of passage are uncertain.

But the Senate will have to act quickly: the 60-day regular session ends on March 9.

Some medical experts in West Virginia, one of the unhealthiest states in the nation among adults, called the bill archaic.

Medical school goes tuition-free thanks to gift

NY NEW YORK — A New York City medical school will be tuition-free for all students from now on thanks to a \$1 billion donation from a former professor, the widow of a Wall Street investor.

Ruth Gottesman announced the gift and its purpose to students and faculty at Albert Einstein College of Medicine Monday, bringing some in the audience to tears and others to their feet, cheering. Gottesman, 93, has been affiliated with the college for 55 years and is the chairperson of its board of trustees.

The gift is intended to attract a diverse pool of applicants who otherwise might not have the means to attend. It will also let students graduate without debt that can take decades to repay, college administrators said. Tuition at Einstein is \$59,458 per year. The average medical school debt in the U.S. is \$202,453 according to the Education Data Initiative.

— From wire reports



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Leafs' Matthews on pace for rare 70-goal feat

Associated Press

The offensive artistry of Auston Matthews has reached the point where even hyperbole seems almost plausible.

"Everything he's shooting," Colorado coach Jared Bednar said recently, "is going in the net."

It sure does feel that way.

With 52 tallies through 57 games, the Toronto Maple Leafs' goal-scoring marvel is on pace to become a rare member of the 70-goal club, joining the ranks of hockey royalty such as Wayne Gretzky and Mario Lemieux. Last week at Arizona, where he grew up, Matthews set a record for the fastest U.S.-born player to reach 50 goals in a season (54 goals).

"He continues to find body position in the open ice and his timing that way is really elite and something that goes unnoticed," Maple Leafs center John Tavares said. "But his ability to find open space and continue to do it night after

night is really impressive."

No one is near Matthews' 52 goals, with the closest challenger through Tuesday being Florida's Sam Reinhart (39). The 26-year-old Matthews has 10 goals and 14 points in the past seven games, including a pair of hat tricks.

At this rate, Matthews' career high of 60 goals, set two seasons ago, is sure to be surpassed. No active player has reached that mark twice. Accomplish that and the player who's earned the nicknames of "Big Cactus" (he's an Arizona native) and "Papi" (a nod to his favorite baseball player, David Ortiz) would put himself in select company.

He would become the ninth player to accomplish that double and the first since Pavel Bure scored 60 goals in the 1992-93 and 1993-94 seasons.

It would be understandable if Toronto coach Sheldon Keefe took his star player's unique skillset almost for granted. But he doesn't.

"We're very fortunate to have a player of that caliber on our team," Keefe said of the No. 1 overall pick in 2016. "Auston leads the way for us in ways that we know and are obvious and show up on the score sheet, but he also leads the way in so many other categories that help set the standard for our team."

It's a sentiment shared by Toronto forward Max Domi.

"He's so hungry every time he steps on the ice," Domi said. "He's one of the best if not the best player in the world right now. He's driving the bus right now. Fifty-two goals in however many games he's played is insane, absolutely ridiculous."

Matthews is in the running to win his second Hart Trophy in three years. According to FanDuel Sportsbook, his odds are currently second-best behind only Colorado's Nathan MacKinnon and just ahead of Tampa Bay's Nikita Kucherov.

Matthews isn't just an offensive force, blocking 63 shots this

season and generating 60 takeaways — both among the league leaders for forwards. He is making a compelling case for the Selke Trophy, too, which is given to the top defensive forward. The only player to be presented both awards in the same season was Sergei Fedorov of the Detroit Red Wings in 1993-94.

Matthews' play helped the Maple Leafs reel off seven wins in a row before a Tuesday loss to the Golden Knights, which was their longest streak since 2003. It's putting them in the conversation as a possible Stanley Cup threat, which the Leafs infamously haven't won since 1967.

Toronto finally made it to the second round in the last postseason after going one-and-out six years in a row.

"Everyone is just buying in," forward Tyler Bertuzzi said of Toronto's winning ways that's seen them climb to third in the Atlantic Division behind Boston and Florida.

Bears could dictate offseason QB derby with No. 1 pick, Fields

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Chicago Bears coach Matt Eberflus already endured one round of the Justin Fields debate.

He's hoping, for everyone's sake, the second round ends soon.

The man who has stood in Fields' corner the past two seasons as others argued about whether to keep Fields or start over with a new quarterback, was answering those same, old questions about the No. 1 overall pick again Tuesday at the NFL's annual scouting combine.

"We have no big news for you today, we're going through the process," Eberflus said as the league's coaches and general managers took center stage in Indianapolis. "If Justin's coming back, we'll have a plan in place for that. If we have a new quarterback, we'll have a plan in place for that."

Chicago's decision is sure to make ripples — on its roster and perhaps around a league that places premium value on quarterbacks.

With what some consider a deep quarterback class including three who could come off the board immediately in April, the teams

holding those first three picks could lead to new starters — or plenty of trade possibilities.

And the Bears are right at the top, just as they were last year when they had the No. 1 pick and Fields. They eventually dealt the pick to Carolina for receiver D.J. Moore and four picks, including the one that put them back at No. 1 this year.

Sure, they could do it all over again.

But after missing the playoffs in each of Fields' first three seasons and no postseason wins since the 2010 season, the organization recognizes there's a clamoring for change in the fan base.

It's not just the fans who are getting anxious, though. Fields said last week on a podcast that he wanted to stay in Chicago though he also wants the debate to end. So Tuesday, general manager Ryan Poles told Bears reporters he would move as quickly as possible.

Then the next dominoes may fall.

Washington, picking at No. 2, thought Sam Howell, a fifth-round pick two years ago, might be a franchise quarterback. Instead,

he's gone 5-13 as a starter, has as many TD passes as interceptions (22) and is now on a franchise with a new owner, a new general manager and a new coach looking to take the Commanders in a new direction.

New England, at No. 3, is still searching for Tom Brady's successor after using a first-round pick on Mac Jones in 2021 and a fourth-rounder on Bailey Zappe in 2022. Both have started, but neither has had great success.

"I'd say there are a lot of options on the table," Patriots general manager Elliot Wolf said.

Arizona has the No. 4 slot and there had been speculation Kyler Murray could also be available since the No. 1 overall pick and 2019 AP Offensive Rookie of the Year has produced just one winning season in five years.

Some fans in Atlanta, New York and Pittsburgh also think the Falcons, Giants and Steelers need to move on from Desmond Ridder, Daniel Jones and Kenny Pickett. Jones is rehabbing from a torn anterior cruciate ligament in his right knee, and none of those franchises seem ready for a big change at QB just yet.

Tkachuk returns, Panthers top Sabres

Associated Press

SUNRISE, Fla. — Matthew Tkachuk scored a goal and had an assist in his return from injury and the Florida Panthers defeated the Buffalo Sabres 3-2 on Tuesday night.

Tkachuk gave Florida a 2-1 lead with a power-play goal with 4:24 to go in the first period and never relinquished it to win for the eighth time in nine games and move into a tie for first place in the Eastern Conference with the idle Boston Bruins. Both teams have 82 points.

Sam Bennett and Brandon Montour also scored for the Panthers while Sergei Bobrovsky made 28 saves. Montour also picked up a pair of assists and has 10 points in his past five games.

Dylan Cozens and Tage Thompson scored for the Sabres while Ukko-Pekka Luukkonen stopped 34 shots.

Avalanche 5, Stars 1: Andrew Cogliano and Nathan MacKinnon scored 49 seconds

apart, Alexandar Georgiev stopped 33 shots and host Colorado cruised past Dallas.

Logan Stankoven scored early and Jake Oettinger made 22 saves for Dallas.

Penguins 4, Canucks 3 (OT): Erik Karlsson scored the winning goal at 1:42 of overtime to lift visiting Pittsburgh over Vancouver for its third consecutive victory.

J.T. Miller, with a goal and an assist, Nils Hoglander and Brock Boeser scored for Vancouver.

Jets 4, Blues 2: Sean Monahan scored a goal and added an assist after missing a game because of an illness to help host Winnipeg extend its winning streak to four games.

Pavel Buchnevich and Brandon Saad scored for the Blues.

Golden Knights 6, Maple Leafs 2: Jonathan Marchessault had two goals and an assist, William Karlsson had a goal and an assist, and visiting Vegas snapped Toronto's seven-game winning streak.

Tyler Bertuzzi and Ryan Reaves scored for Toronto and Ilya Samsonov stopped 26 shots.

Devils 7, Sharks 2: Nico Hischier had a goal and three assists, Jack Hughes added a goal and two assists and visiting New Jersey beat San Jose.

Nico Sturm and Justin Bailey scored for San Jose.

Hurricanes 3, Wild 2: Stefan Noesen scored a goal with his face midway through the third period and visiting Carolina rallied to beat Minnesota.

Connor Dewar and Jonas Brodin scored for Minnesota.

Red Wings 8, Capitals 3: Shayne Gostisbehere scored in each of the first two periods and host Detroit beat Washington for its first six-game winning streak in nearly five years.

Hendrix Lapierre, Michael Sgarbossa and Max Pacioretty scored and Charlie Lindgren stopped 23 shots for the Capitals.

Flyers 6, Lightning 2: Tyson Foerster and Bobby Brink each

scored as host Philadelphia defeated Tampa Bay after a power outage led to a nine-minute delay in the first period.

Nicholas Paul and Steven Stamkos each scored for the Lightning.

Flames 4, Kings 2: Yegor Sharangovich scored the go-ahead goal at 12:09 of the third period as host Calgary earned its fourth straight win.

Phillip Danault and Kevin Fiala provided the offense for Los Angeles.

Predators 4, Senators 1: Roman Josi had two goals and an assist as host Nashville extended its winning streak to six games with a victory over Ottawa.

Drake Batherson scored and Joonas Korpisalo made 32 saves for Ottawa.

Canadiens 4, Coyotes 2: Sam Montembeault made 36 saves to help host Montreal snap a five-game losing streak with a victory over Arizona.

Alex Kerfoot and Nick Bjugstad scored for Arizona.

Ohtani hits 2-run homer in first exhibition game

Associated Press

GLENDALE, Ariz. — Shohei Ohtani stepped into the bright Arizona sun, carrying the weight of a \$700 million contract and the expectations that go with it, before launching a two-run homer in his first exhibition game for the Los Angeles Dodgers.

Not a bad way to endear himself to his new legions of fans — not to mention his new team.

"I'm starting to learn really quickly, he's built differently," Dodgers manager Dave Roberts said.

Ohtani needed just three exhibition at-bats to show how he might impact the Dodgers lineup on Tuesday, working a full count in the fifth inning before an opposite-field shot off Dominic Leone that just cleared the left-field wall.

The Japanese slugger was hitless in his first two plate appearances, striking out on four pitches in the first inning and hitting a hard grounder into a double play in the third.

"Definitely felt good at the plate, felt better each time," Ohtani said through a translator. "We're trending in the right direction."

The two-time Most Valuable Player received a standing ovation before his first at-bat at Camelback Ranch, where dozens of fans wore his No. 17 jersey and cheered his every move. The Dodgers — already one of MLB's premier franchises — have become even more popular after spending more than \$1 billion to sign Ohtani and fellow Japanese pitcher Yoshinobu Yamamoto.

Ohtani spent his first six big league seasons playing for the Los Angeles Angels before signing with the crosstown Dodgers.

The three-time All-Star's first full swing on Tuesday wasn't exactly one of the memories. He missed the ball, his helmet tumbled off his head and it took a few seconds to gather himself before returning to the batter's box. But he bounced back from that awkward moment in a hurry, showing the power

that's helped him hit 124 homers over the past three seasons.

The crowd roared when Ohtani connected and the cheers grew louder as the ball slowly drifted over the left-field wall, which helped the Dodgers beat the Chicago White Sox 9-6.

"I thought I hit it a little too high, but maybe the Arizona weather factored in a little," Ohtani said.

Ohtani was in the second spot of the lineup against the White Sox, sandwiched between leadoff hitter Mookie Betts and Freddie Freeman.

Roberts said all three stars were receptive to the Betts-Ohtani-Freeman lineup construction. The manager added that having Ohtani at the No. 2 spot wasn't "set in stone," but it's something he wants to try for a while during spring training. Catcher Will Smith hit cleanup and third baseman Max Muncy was fifth, giving a preview of what the top half of the Dodgers order could look like this season.

BYU halts Kansas' home winning streak

Associated Press

LAWRENCE, Kan. — BYU coach Mark Pope had just been given a technical foul late in the game, and the volume was quickly ramping up inside Allen Fieldhouse, where so many opponents over the years have wilted down the stretch against mighty Kansas.

Pope walked back to his huddle and realized something special about his players.

"They were the ones composed," he said. "They were like, 'Hey, we're OK. Let's keep working.' And they did."

Led by 18 points apiece from unflappable Dallin Hall and Jaxson Robinson, the Cougars wiped away a 12-point deficit and then held on for a 76-68 victory Tuesday night, ending the seventh-ranked Jayhawks' 19-game home winning streak.

"All of us are lifelong college basketball fans," Pope said, "and this arena, this team, this coach, these players — you

know, it's an all-time mecca. I think that's what makes this special. We talk about faith in our program, and certainly it is an important part of our university, and watching our guys' faith in each other tonight and faith in the process was special to watch."

The Cougars (20-8, 8-7 Big 12) trailed 58-57 with 4:50 to go when Hall made two free throws for their first lead. A few minutes later, Noah Waterman hit a 3 to give BYU a 66-63 lead. And when Hunter Dickinson answered with a 3 for Kansas, Robinson hit two free throws and Hall made another 3 to send the Cougars to a win in their first trip to the Phog since 1971.

"They play hard and they challenged us on every front," Hall said, "but we responded and executed our game plan."

Dickinson had 17 points and 11 rebounds to lead the Jayhawks (21-7, 9-6).

No. 1 Houston 67, Cincinnati

59: L.J. Cryer scored 22 points, J'Wan Roberts added 15 and the top-ranked Cougars won their sixth straight game.

Cryer had 15 points in the first half and Houston led 26-17 at the break. Jamal Shead finished with nine points and 11 assists for the Cougars.

No. 16 Kentucky 91, Mississippi State 89: Reed Sheppard made a runner from just inside the foul line with less than a second remaining and finished with a career-high 32 points, giving the visiting Wildcats a wild victory.

Josh Hubbard tied the game at 89 with 11 seconds remaining by hitting his seventh 3-pointer for Mississippi State. Hubbard had career bests of 3s and 34 points.

No. 20 San Diego State 72, San Jose State 64: Jaedon LeDee had 27 points — 21 in the second half — and 11 rebounds as the host Aztecs held off the last-place Spartans to keep pace

in the tight Mountain West Conference race.

No. 21 Dayton 80, Davidson 66: Koby Brea came off the bench to score 17 points, including 5-for-9 shooting from 3-point range, and the Flyers bounced back from a road loss with a comfortable home win.

Enoch Cheeks led five other players in double figures with 15 points for Dayton, which went 12-for-28 on 3s. Leading scorer DaRon Holmes II had a low-key first half but finished with 14 points and 10 rebounds.

No. 22 Utah State 77, Fresno State 73 (OT): Great Osobor had 21 points and 11 rebounds, Darius Brown II drained two clutch 3-pointers and the visiting Aggies outlasted the Bulldogs in overtime to remain atop the Mountain West Conference standings.

Utah State (23-5) and Boise State are both 11-4 in league play with three games left in the regular season.

Strus drills 59-footer at buzzer to lift Cavs over Mavs

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Max Strus caught the pass, and with barely any time to think never mind shoot, one thing crossed his mind.

"Get it up," he said.

Down it went.

Strus drilled a 59-footer as time expired, his fifth 3-pointer in the final four minutes, to give the Cleveland Cavaliers a wild 121-119 win over the Dallas Mavericks on Tuesday night.

After the Mavericks took the lead on P.J. Washington's dunk with 2.9 seconds left, the Cavs, out of timeouts, inbounded the ball to Evan Mobley, who passed it back to Strus — whose barrage of four 3s in a span of 67 seconds down the stretch brought Cleveland back from a 10-point deficit.

Strus then took a dribble before launching his shot from

well beyond mid-court. As it swished through the net, Strus was tackled to the floor by his celebrating teammates as the Rocket Mortgage FieldHouse crowd erupted.

Donovan Mitchell scored 31 points, Strus added 21 and Jarrett Allen 19 for the Cavs, who improved to 12-3 since Jan. 2.

Luka Doncic had 45 points and 14 assists for the Mavericks.

Celtics 117, 76ers 99: Jaylen Brown scored 31 points and host Boston earned its ninth straight win, powering past Philadelphia.

Jayson Tatum added 29 points, including 15 in the fourth quarter, to help the NBA-leading Celtics post their 25th consecutive home win over an Eastern Conference opponent.

Tyrese Maxey led the 76ers with 32 points and five assists.

Warriors 123, Wizards 112:

Klay Thompson scored 25 points on a forgettable evening for Stephen Curry, and visiting Golden State beat Washington.

Curry was held scoreless in the first half for the first time in the regular season since Nov. 23, 2012, against Denver.

Bucks 123, Hornets 85: Giannis Antetokounmpo had 24 points, Damian Lillard had 23 points and Bobby Portis scored 21 as host Milwaukee pounded Charlotte for its most lopsided victory of the season.

Pelicans 115, Knicks 92: Trey Murphy III scored 26 points, Brandon Ingram had 24 and visiting New Orleans beat New York.

Timberwolves 114, Spurs 105: Anthony Edwards scored 34 points, returning from an injury scare right before halftime, and host Minnesota beat San Antonio without All-Star Karl-

Anthony Towns.

Thunder 112, Rockets 95: Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 31 points and host Oklahoma City beat Houston for its sixth straight win.

Heat 106, Trail Blazers 96: Jimmy Butler had 22 points and nine assists, Terry Rozier scored 19 points and visiting Miami beat Portland for its fifth straight win.

Hawks 124, Jazz 97: Jalen Johnson had 22 points and 13 rebounds and host Atlanta never trailed after scoring the first 12 points against Utah.

Magic 108, Nets 81: Franz Wagner scored 17 of his 21 points in the first half and host Orlando rolled over Brooklyn.

Pistons 105, Bulls 95: Cade Cunningham scored 26 points and visiting Detroit stopped a six-game losing streak by beating Chicago.