

Putin to West: Don't send troops to Ukraine

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Russian President Vladimir Putin vowed Thursday to fulfill Moscow's goals in Ukraine and sternly warned the West against deeper involvement in the fighting, saying that such a move is fraught with the risk of a global nuclear conflict.

Putin's blunt warning came in a state-of-the-nation address ahead of a March election he's all but certain to win, underlining his readiness to raise the stakes in the tug-of-war with the West to protect the Russian gains in Ukraine.

In an apparent reference to French President Emmanuel Macron's statement earlier this week that the future deployment of Western ground troops to Ukraine should not be "ruled out," Putin warned that it would lead to "tragic" consequences for the countries who

decide to do that.

Putin noted that while accusing Russia of plans to attack NATO allies in Europe, Western allies were "selecting targets for striking our territory" and "talking about the possibility of sending a NATO contingent to Ukraine."

"We remember the fate of those who sent their troop contingents to the territory of our country," the Russian leader said in an apparent allusion to the failed invasions by Napoleon and Hitler. "Now the consequences for the potential invaders will be far more tragic."

In a two-hour speech before an audience of lawmakers and top officials, Putin cast Western leaders as reckless and irresponsible and declared that the West should keep in mind that "we also have the weapons that can strike targets on their territory, and what they are now

suggesting and scaring the world with, all that raises the real threat of a nuclear conflict that will mean the destruction of our civilization."

The strong statement followed earlier warnings from Putin, who has issued frequent reminders of Russia's nuclear might since he sent troops into Ukraine in February 2022 as he sought to discourage the West from expanding its military support for Kyiv.

Putin emphasized that Russia's nuclear forces are in "full readiness," saying that the military has deployed potent new weapons, some of them tested on the battlefield in Ukraine.

The Kremlin leader said they include the new Sarmat heavy intercontinental ballistic missile that has entered service with Russian nuclear forces, along with the Burevestnik atomic-powered cruise missile

and the Poseidon atomic-powered, nuclear-armed drone, which are completing their tests.

At the same time, he rejected Western leaders' statements about the threat of a Russian attack on NATO allies in Europe as "ravings" and again dismissed Washington's claim that Moscow was pondering the deployment of space-based nuclear weapons.

Putin charged that the U.S. allegations were part of a ploy to draw Russia into talks on nuclear arms control on American terms even as Washington continues its efforts to deliver a "strategic defeat" to Moscow in Ukraine.

"Ahead of the U.S. election, they just want to show their citizens, as well as others, that they continue to rule the world," he said. "It won't work."

German ship accidentally targeted US drone in Red Sea

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

A German navy ship mistakenly targeted a U.S. Reaper drone in the Red Sea earlier this week while operating as part of the European Union's Aspides mission to protect shipping in the vital waterway, a Defense Department official said Thursday.

The MQ-9 drone wasn't damaged in the Tuesday incident and continued its mission, the official told Stars and Stripes on condition of anonymity because they weren't authorized to provide their name.

The targeting of a drone by an ally demonstrates the challenges the U.S. and its partners

face in attempting to stem attacks by Iranian-backed Houthi militants, analysts say.

Although the U.S. and other countries operating in the Red Sea are cooperating with each other, the lack of a unified command means information can be incomplete, overabundant or ambiguous, said James Holmes, chair of the maritime strategy program at the Naval War College in Newport, R.I.

"Mistakes are going to happen when a loose naval confederation with no central command takes to the sea to wage war in a high-pressure environment," Holmes said.

The department was in close communication with the EU and Aspides "to investigate the

circumstances that led to this event and to ensure safe deconfliction of airspace," the defense official said.

The Aspides mission also includes France, Greece and Italy, among other EU countries, and is working in coordination with the U.S.-led Operation Prosperity Guardian.

German Defense Ministry officials identified the ship as the frigate Hessen. The warship shot at the drone when it appeared that the aircraft was not from an allied nation, ministry spokesman Michael Stempfle told the German tabloid Bild on Wednesday.

Hessen later realized the mistake, Stempfle said.

Citing operational security

concerns, the ministry did not identify the drone as American or say why Hessen was unable to accurately identify it.

It also wasn't clear whether the warship's shots missed the target or self-destructed when Hessen realized that the drone wasn't from an enemy.

"The statements made by ... spokesman Mr. Stempfle stand for themselves and will not be commented on further," the ministry said in an email response to Stars and Stripes.

Hessen entered the Red Sea on Friday. Days later, the frigate shot down two Houthi attack drones in what is believed to be the first known use of live weapons in combat by the German navy since World War II.

Russian push hard on Ukrainian towns

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian forces are pushing hard against more Ukrainian towns and villages in eastern and southeastern Ukraine as Moscow has tried to press its current advantage in weapons and troops, Kyiv officials said Thursday.

Despite Russia's apparent offensive momentum on the ground, Ukraine said it shot down 13 Russian warplanes in February, including three on Thursday, as the Kremlin's forces pushed forward.

With the full-scale war now into its third year, Russian forces have been bludgeoning some Ukrainian defensive positions into submission, deploying overwhelming amounts of artillery and troop numbers in an effort to punch through defensive lines at targeted points.

Though Russia's gains have been small, slow and costly, Ukraine doesn't have enough reservists and has a severe shortage of artillery shells as the supply of military aid from Western partners has waned.

The Russian army is trying to seize the towns and villages of Tonenke, Orlivka, Semenivka, Berdychi and Krasnohorivka in the eastern Donetsk region, Ukraine's army chief, Col. Gen Oleksandr Syrskyi, said on social media.

Those are places where Ukrainian military officials had said they would form a new line of defense after Ukrainian troops pulled out of Avdiivka on Feb. 17.

In the southeastern Zaporizhzhia region, Russian forces are focusing on retaking Verbove and Robotyne, towns that Ukraine won back in last summer's counteroffensive in 2023, Syrskyi said. Syrskyi, who was appointed by Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy to lead the country's military on Feb. 8, accused some of his commanders of making "miscalculations" in assessing the enemy and taking countermeasures.

Meanwhile, Ukraine's Defense Ministry said its forces shot down three Russian Su-34 jets overnight.

That made a total of 11 warplanes, includ-

ing an early warning and control A-50 plane, that Ukraine claims to have downed since Feb. 17, and 13 in February — the highest monthly tally, it said, since October 2022.

"The enemy has increased its air presence in the east. Our top military leadership reacted accordingly," air force spokesman Yuriy Ihnat said on national television.

A major question for Kyiv officials is how they can unlock further military help from their partners. Emergency U.S. national security funds for Ukraine are still on hold amid a political dispute in Washington.

Ukrainian parliamentary Speaker Ruslan Stefanchuk addressed an open letter to U.S. House Speaker Mike Johnson, asking him to put to a vote the Biden administration's proposal to send \$60 billion of aid to Ukraine.

The letter Stefanchuk posted on X, formerly Twitter, on Wednesday was also signed by 23 speakers and heads of parliament in European countries.

Pentagon must move to mitigate blast exposure in troops

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Senators on Wednesday said the Pentagon must collect better data on troop exposure to blast overpressure and identify those most at risk for traumatic brain injury at a much faster pace to protect the health of service members.

Lawmakers on the Senate Armed Services Committee's personnel subpanel as well as experts on brain injury said the Pentagon has been too passive in addressing and preventing damage caused by shock waves that emanate from exploding weapons, known

as overpressure. The cumulative effect of repeated low-level blast exposure can cause headaches, seizures, hallucinations and increase risks of depression and suicide.

Frank Larkin, a former Navy SEAL who worked for a Pentagon organization focused on improvised explosive devices, said the health risks of blast exposure were a concern 15 years ago, when the United States was at war in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Those worries led to the creation of new armored vehicles to survive blasts, but the service members inside them were not spared from the invisible pressure waves

that rocked their bodies, Larkin said.

Larkin said his Navy SEAL son, Ryan Larkin, became a different person after serving as a combat medic, sniper and explosives breacher in four combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. He had trouble sleeping and became convinced there was something wrong with his head.

Ryan Larkin was prescribed more than 40 medications for his ailments but in 2017, at 29-years-old, he died by suicide. A post-mortem examination showed he had microscopic-level brain injury that was uniquely related to blast exposure, his father said.

Marines stationed in DC charged in hate-crime incident

BY GARY WARNER

Stars and Stripes

Two Marines assigned to the service's oldest installation have been charged with scrawling antisemitic symbols and racial slurs in a University of Maryland dormitory, the service confirmed Wednesday.

Lance Cpl. Sergio Delgado and Lance Cpl. Hayden Pritchard, who are stationed at Marine Barracks, Washington, D.C., were charged by university police, according to Capt. Kayla Haas, public affairs officer for the barracks.

Haas said the two Marines were charged

Feb. 8 in connection with an April 29, 2023, incident at La Plata Hall at the University of Maryland in College Park, Md.

Security video showed the writing of antisemitic symbols and anti-Black slurs inside at least two floors of the dormitory, university police said.

Tentative deal reached to avoid shutdown

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Congressional leaders announced Wednesday they have reached a tentative agreement to prevent a government shutdown for now, days before an end-of-the-week deadline that risked shuttering some federal operations.

Under the new plan, Congress would temporarily fund one set of federal agencies through March 8 and another set through March 22. In the meantime, Congress will try to pass packages of legislation to fund the government for the remainder of the budget year.

But there was no immediate plan to approve the \$95 billion emergency national security funds for Ukraine, Israel and other allies.

The House and Senate will now need to vote and approve the deal with its temporary funds ahead of Friday's deadline, when some federal monies run out.

"We are in agreement that Congress must work in a bipartisan manner to fund our government," said the joint statement from House Speaker Mike Johnson, Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, Senate Re-

publican Leader Mitch McConnell and House Democratic Leader Hakeem Jeffries, along with the Appropriation Committee leaders.

The deal comes together as negotiators in Congress have been working furiously to finish up a federal spending plan and Washington joined Ukraine and other American allies around the world in watching and waiting for Johnson's next move.

The new Republican leader is facing the test of his career trying to keep the U.S. government open by Friday's midnight deadline for several federal de-

partments. At the same time, emergency funding for Ukraine, Israel and Indo-Pacific allies remains stubbornly stalled. President Joe Biden convened leaders Tuesday in hopes of pushing them toward a deal.

"As the President and Congressional Leaders made clear at yesterday's meeting, we cannot allow a government shutdown," White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said in a statement. She said the agreement reached would help prevent a "needless" federal shutdown.

Supreme Court to hear immunity case in April

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court on Wednesday agreed to decide whether former President Donald Trump can be prosecuted on charges he interfered with the 2020 election, calling into question whether his case could go to trial before the November election.

While the court set a course for a quick resolution, it maintained a hold on preparations for a trial focused on Trump's efforts to overturn his election loss. The court will hear arguments in late April, with a decision likely no later than the end of June.

That timetable is much faster than usual, but assuming the justices deny Trump's immunity bid, it's not clear whether a trial can be scheduled and concluded before the November election. Early voting in some states will begin in September.

The court's decision to intervene in a second major Trump case this term, along with the dispute over whether he is barred from being president again because of his actions following the 2020 election, underscores the direct role the justices

will have in the outcome of the election.

Trump's lawyers have sought to put off a trial until after the election.

In the end, the timing of a possible trial could come down to how quickly the justices rule. They have shown they can act fast, issuing a decision in the Watergate tapes case in 1974 just 16 days after hearing arguments. The decision in Bush v. Gore came the day after arguments in December 2000.

By taking up the legally untested question now, the justices have created a scenario of uncertainty that special counsel Jack Smith had sought to avoid when he first asked the high court in December to immediately intervene. In his latest court filing, Smith had suggested arguments a full month earlier than the April timeframe.

Trump wrote on Truth Social that legal scholars "are extremely thankful" the court stepped in to decide on immunity. "Presidents will always be concerned, and even paralyzed, by the prospect of wrongful prosecution and retaliation after they leave office," he wrote.

Judge won't halt Trump's \$454M penalty amid appeal

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A New York appellate judge on Wednesday refused to halt collection of Donald Trump's \$454 million civil fraud penalty while he appeals, leaving the former president less than a month to pay the staggering sum or secure a bond covering the full amount he owes.

Judge Anil Singh of the state's midlevel appeals court rejected Trump's offer of a \$100 million bond, though he did give Trump leeway that could help him secure the necessary bond before New York Attorney General Letitia James seeks to enforce the judgment starting March 25.

Singh granted a stay pausing part of Judge Arthur Engoron's Feb. 16 verdict that barred Trump, his company and co-defendants from borrowing money from New York financial institutions.

The Republican presidential front-runner's lawyers had told the appellate court earlier Wednesday that the lending ban had made it impossible for him to secure a bond for the full amount.

Trump's lawyers warned he

may need to sell some properties to cover the penalty and would have no way of getting them back if he is successful in his appeal. State lawyers said those disclosures suggested Trump — who has more than a half-billion dollars in pending court debt — was having trouble coming up with enough cash to foot the bill. The penalty is increasing by nearly \$112,000 each day because of interest and will eclipse \$455 million on Saturday.

Trump's lawyers proposed their smaller bond amount in court papers asking the appellate court for an order preventing James' office from enforcing the judgment while his appeal plays out. Singh, sitting in the Appellate Division of the state's trial court, ruled after an emergency hearing Wednesday.

Singh's decision is temporary. A five-judge appellate panel will consider Trump's request on an expedited basis, with a ruling expected in a few weeks. State lawyers must submit paperwork by March 11. Trump's lawyers have until March 18 to respond.

Witnesses say Israeli troops fired on aid-seekers in Gaza

Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — Israeli troops fired on a large crowd of Palestinians racing to pull food off an aid convoy in Gaza City on Thursday, witnesses said. More than 100 people were killed.

Israeli officials acknowledged that troops opened fire, saying they did so after the crowd approached in a threatening way. The officials insisted on anonymity to give details about what happened, after the military said in a statement that “dozens were killed and injured from pushing, trampling and being run over by the trucks.”

President Joe Biden said the United States was still trying to determine what happened in Gaza City. When asked if the loss of life would complicate efforts to broker a cease-fire, he said, “I know it will.”

Thursday’s deaths bring the death toll since the start of the Israel-Hamas war to more than 30,000, according to Palestinian health officials.

Gaza City and the surrounding areas in the enclave’s north were the first targets of Israel’s air, sea and ground offensive, launched in response to Hamas’ Oct. 7 attack.

While many Palestinians fled the Israeli invasion in the north, a few hundred thousand are believed to remain in the area, which has suffered widespread devastation and has been largely isolated during the conflict. Trucks carrying food reached northern Gaza this week, the first major aid delivery to the area in a month, officials said Wednesday.

Aid groups say it has become nearly impossible to deliver humanitarian assistance in most of Gaza because of the difficulty of coordinating with the Israeli military, ongoing hostilities and the breakdown of public order, with crowds of desperate people overwhelming aid convoys. The U.N. says a quarter of Gaza’s 2.3 million Palestinians face starvation; around 80% have fled their homes.

Kamel Abu Nahel, who was be-

ing treated for a gunshot wound at Shifa Hospital, said he and others went to the distribution point in the middle of the night because they heard there would be a delivery of food. “We’ve been eating animal feed for two months,” he said.

He said Israeli troops opened fire on the crowd as people pulled boxes of flour and canned goods off the trucks, causing them to scatter, with some hiding under cars. After the shooting stopped, people went back to the trucks, and the soldiers opened fire again. He was shot in the leg and fell over, and then a truck ran over his leg as it sped off, he said.

Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Jordan accused Israel of targeting civilians in the incident. In separate statements, they called for increased safe passages for humanitarian aid and for the international community to take decisive action to pressure Israel to abide by international law and to reach an agreement for an immediate cease-fire.

Wildfire in Texas now largest in state history

Associated Press

CANADIAN, Texas — A wildfire spreading across the Texas Panhandle became the largest in state history Thursday, growing to nearly 1,700 square miles of scorched rural ranchlands and destroyed homes.

The Smokehouse Creek Fire has merged with another blaze and is 3% contained, according to the Texas A&M Forest Service.

The fire’s explosive growth slowed as snow fell and winds and temperatures dipped, but it was still untamed and threatening more death and destruction. It is the largest of several major fires burning in the rural Panhandle section of the state. It has also crossed into Oklahoma.

Firefighters have made little progress corralling it, but Thursday’s forecast of snow, rain and temperatures in the 40s offered a window to make progress before temperatures and winds increase this weekend. Authorities have not said what ignited the fires, but strong winds, dry grass and unseasonably warm temperatures fed the blazes.

Less than an inch of snow is expected, but moisture is not the only benefit, said National Weather Service meteorologist Samuel Scoleri.

“It will help keep relative humidity down for the day, and that will definitely help firefighters,” Scoleri said.

Snow and rainfall were expected to end Thursday afternoon, with dry, windy conditions returning Friday and critical fire conditions possible again Saturday and Sunday.

An 83-year-old woman is the only confirmed death so far, but with flames still menacing a wide area, authorities have yet to conduct a thorough search for victims or tally the numerous homes and other structures damaged or destroyed.

Biden ‘continues to be fit for duty,’ his doctor says after president’s physical

Associated Press

BETHESDA, Md. — President Joe Biden “continues to be fit for duty,” his doctor wrote Wednesday after conducting an annual physical that is being closely watched as the 81-year-old seeks reelection in November.

Dr. Kevin O’Connor, Biden’s physician, wrote that the president is adjusting well to a new device that helps control his sleep apnea and has experienced some hip discomfort but also works out five times per week.

“President Biden is a healthy,

active, robust, 81-year-old male who remains fit to successfully execute the duties of the presidency,” O’Connor said in a six-page memo on the president’s health, following a physical that took Biden to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center for more than 2½ hours.

His memo added that Biden “feels well and this year’s physical identifies no new concerns.”

The oldest president in U.S. history, Biden would be 86 by the end of a second term, should he win one. His latest physical mirrored one he had in Febru-

ary last year when O’Connor described Biden as “healthy, vigorous” and “fit” to handle his White House duties.

Still, 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.

After he returned to the White House on Wednesday, Biden attended an event on combating crime and suggested that when it came to his health “everything is squared away” and “there is nothing different than last year.”

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Lawsuit claims fentanyl drip replaced with water

OR MEDFORD — The first lawsuit brought amid reports that a nurse at a southern Oregon hospital replaced intravenous fentanyl drips with tap water seeks up to \$11.5 million on behalf of the estate of a 65-year-old man who died.

The wrongful death suit was filed Monday against Asante Rogue Regional Medical Center in Medford, The Oregonian/OregonLive reported. It also names nurse Dani Marie Schofield as a defendant.

Last month, Medford police disclosed that they were investigating potential crimes against patients involving the theft of “controlled substances,” which may have led to “adverse” outcomes for some.

Fentanyl is a powerful synthetic opioid that has helped fuel the nation’s overdose epidemic, but it is also used in legitimate medical settings to relieve severe pain.

Reinstated musher withdraws from Iditarod

AK ANCHORAGE — A musher who was disqualified from the world’s most famous sled dog race only to be reinstated days later has now officially withdrawn from this year’s Iditarod.

Eddie Burke Jr. scratched from the Iditarod Trail Sled Dog Race, officials said in a statement late Monday. Burke in a Facebook post said when he was disqualified that he leased members of his dog team to other mushers, and it was too difficult to reassemble his team after being reinstated.

A ceremonial start of the 1,000-mile race across the Alaska wilderness is Saturday in Anchorage, followed by the competitive start 75 miles north on Sunday.

Burke, the race’s rookie of the year last year, and 2022 champion Brent Sass were disqualified as allegations of violence against women embroiled the race. Race officials disqualified Burke on Feb. 19. But the state of Alaska then dropped charges alleging he choked his then-girlfriend in 2022, and the Iditarod Trail Committee reinstated him.

Pieces from memorial sold for scrap, recovered

CO DENVER — Three bronze artworks stolen from a Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. memorial in City Park in Denver, along with seven bronze pieces taken from a nearby fountain, were recovered after being sold to a scrap metal business, Denver Police said Tuesday.

Police said because the items were taken from two memorials and sold as scrap, they do not believe it was a bias-motivated crime. Two suspects are being sought and one of the men has been identified, police said.

A large plaque depicting Black military veterans from the “I Have a Dream” monument was cut into four pieces prior to being sold, police said. A torch and angel taken from the King monument were also recovered last week.

Investigators learned the pieces missing from the King monument were taken early on Feb. 18.

The thefts from the Joseph Addison Thatcher Memorial

Fountain had not been reported until the items were recovered. Some pieces from the fountain remain missing, police said.

Bill to raise marriage age to 18 heads to governor

WA OLYMPIA — A law to establish 18 as the minimum marriage age in Washington state is headed to the governor’s desk for his signature.

State lawmakers in the House and Senate passed House Bill 1455 this session after the measure stalled in the Senate last year and other bills failed to gain traction in previous years.

This year, the House passed it unanimously on the first day of session. On Feb. 23, the Senate voted to pass the bill with a vote of 48-1. Republican Sen. Jeff Holy, of Spokane, cast the lone no vote.

Currently, 17-year-olds in Washington state can marry with parental consent, and those younger than 17 need approval from a judge.

Lawsuit claims isolation, abuse at youth facility

WY CHEYENNE — Staff at Wyoming’s state youth detention facility locked juveniles in solitary confinement for weeks at a time, repeatedly buckled one in a restraint chair for up to 12 hours a day and poked fun at another while withholding the leg brace he needed for his disability for months, a federal lawsuit alleges.

The abuses the Wyoming Boys School has been accused of coincided with sharp state budget cuts that shut down part of the facility and occurred even as most other states limit or to-

tally ban juvenile solitary confinement.

For the still-developing brains inside juvenile facilities, the practice is especially harmful, alleges the lawsuit filed Monday by three former inmates against the Wyoming Department of Family Services, Wyoming Boys School and 10 of the facility’s employees including Superintendent Dale Weber in U.S. District Court in Casper.

The Wyoming Department of Family Services, which oversees the Wyoming Boys School, refutes the lawsuit’s allegations of wrongdoing, department spokesman Clint Hanes said by email.

Thermal imaging camera helps find child in swamp

FL TAMPA — A sheriff’s aviation unit used thermal imaging to guide deputies to a 5-year-old who had gone missing in a swamp near Tampa.

The autistic girl wandered away from her home Monday evening and was quickly reported missing, Hillsborough County Sheriff Chad Chronister said.

The thermal camera captured images of the girl walking through ankle-deep water.

“Hey, I think I got her in the woods,” a deputy in the helicopter told deputies on the ground. “She might be able to hear her name if you call her. She might be about 80 feet in front of you.”

A body camera recording showed the moment the deputies made contact with the child.

A deputy called her name and held up his arms. The little girl also held her arms up and walked toward him. He quickly picked the child up.

— From wire reports

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NBA's Western Conference a tight race

Associated Press

It's almost hard to picture a postseason without both LeBron James and Stephen Curry.

And yet it very well could happen. They're both on the bubble.

That's just the strength of the Western Conference this season. As it currently stands, James and his ninth-place Los Angeles Lakers would host Curry and the 10th-place Golden State Warriors in the play-in tournament, with the loser being eliminated and the winner still needing to win another to actually make the postseason field.

From top to nearly bottom, the West has been a grind this season. Consider this: Kawhi Leonard and the Los Angeles Clippers reside in fourth and four games out of the No. 1 seed. They're also a five-game slide away from falling into play-in territory.

Uncertainty reigns in a conference where the Minnesota Timberwolves sit atop the standings with a 42-17 mark

and the youthful Oklahoma City Thunder are just a half game back at 41-17.

The next several weeks are going to be a mad dash for seeding — and playoff survival.

"The depth of the West and the amount of teams that are legit threats is as deep as it's ever been," said Phoenix coach Frank Vogel, whose team has a record 34-24 but is the same number of games out of first as New Orleans (35-25), and both are a game away from the play-in line.

A quick refresher course on the format for the play-in tournament that takes place April 16-19: The seventh and eighth seeds will play in each conference and the winning team will earn the seventh seed into the NBA playoffs. The eighth seed still has a safety net and will face the winner of the ninth and 10th seeds to see who gets in.

Last season, Miami lost its first game in the play-in bracket, then beat Chicago to advance. The Heat made it all the way to the NBA Finals before losing to Denver in five games.

The Lakers, too, were in the play-in tournament, winning their matchup, before going on a run all the way to the Western Conference finals.

Right now, Sacramento sits in the eighth spot and would travel to Dallas to face Luka Dončić and the Mavericks. The loser would draw either the Lakers or the Warriors, with either James or Curry being knocked out — or both.

That's still down the road, though.

The playoff picture in the West remains way too blurry, unlike the Eastern Conference where Boston leads by eight games over Cleveland. Miami, Philadelphia and Indiana are tied for fifth, 13 games back.

"The Western Conference has just been a bear for as long as I can remember, and this year is no exception," Thunder coach Mark Daigneault said. "Great teams up and down. Very, very potent and capable teams on any given night."

The path to the crown, of course, goes through Nikola Jokić and the reigning cham-

pion Denver Nuggets after they won their first NBA title in franchise history. Jokić is putting up MVP-worthy numbers once again, averaging 25.9 points, 12.3 rebounds and 9.3 assists.

But with Jamal Murray and Kentavious Caldwell-Pope dealing with nagging injuries this season, Nuggets coach Michael Malone has stated he will prioritize health over chasing a particular seed.

"I'm much more concerned with getting all of our players to the finish line healthy," said Malone, whose team is currently third. "Knowing that if we are healthy going into the postseason, I have the utmost confidence this team can go into any building in the entire NBA and win a series."

This season may be the dawn of a new era for the Warriors, who captured four titles behind the nucleus of Curry, Draymond Green and Klay Thompson. Now each in their 30s, the trio is getting some younger help in the form of Brandin Podziemski and Jonathan Kuminga.

Texas' Sweat tops list of huge DLs at NFL combine

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Defensive tackle T'Vondre Sweat might have been the biggest guy on Texas' campus the past five seasons.

It may be a fitting title for the NFL next season, too.

After extra medical checks caused a nearly four-hour delay in his scheduled appearance at the league's annual scouting combine, the 6-foot-4, 365-pound former Texas star brushed aside any lingering concerns, stood at the podium and made sure it was worth the wait.

"I'm just a big guy," he said. "You know, a lot of people get scared of the numbers and all that, but when y'all see me move

tomorrow, I feel like a lot of people are going to be like, worried about his numbers? You know what I mean?"

Sweat certainly cut an imposing figure for the Longhorns, but he doesn't look like any other defensive prospect at the combine.

Byron Murphy II, who played next to Sweat the past three seasons and has been projected to be the first defensive tackle taken in April's draft, wore a fitted shirt that showed off his muscular 6-1, 308-pound frame.

The biggest threat to the Texas tandem being first off the board could be Johnny Newton, who played last season at 6-2, 295. His college teammate at Illinois, Keith Randolph Jr., also

is at the combine after producing another solid season, at 6-5, 300.

Yes, all are big men — just not as much as when they're in the presence of Sweat.

But for Sweat, this is about more than size.

Late last year, he won the 2023 Outland Trophy and the Big 12 Defensive Player of the Year award. He was a unanimous All-American and struck the Heisman pose after catching a 2-yard TD pass in the Big 12 championship game. He won a conference title, played a big part in Texas' first appearance in the four-team College Football Playoff and then headed to Mobile, Ala., where he participated in and met with team ex-

ecutives at the Senior Bowl.

He also has something to prove — even in his extra-large body, he's nimble enough to be an NFL game-wrecker.

Murphy, Newton and Randolph face other questions.

Newton won't work out in Indy after undergoing foot surgery in January for a partial fracture though it didn't impact his performance last season. Scouts should have another chance to see the reigning Big Ten Defensive Player of the Year work out, though.

At the moment, Randolph is the lowest rated of the big four. Draft analysts question whether he's big enough or quick enough to become an NFL starter.

GM's patient plan paying off for Red Wings

Associated Press

DETROIT — Steve Yzerman's patient plan to turn around the Detroit Red Wings looks like it may be paying off.

The rolling Red Wings routed the Washington Capitals 8-3 on Tuesday night, winning six straight games for the first time in nearly five years with their first eight-goal game since 2017.

"We've got some work to do in some areas, but it's very encouraging," Yzerman said in an interview with The Associated Press after his team's latest win. "We're getting stronger as the season goes on."

Yzerman returned to Detroit as general manager in April 2019 — three years after its last playoff game — to take on the tall task of fixing a franchise that had fallen on hard times after being one of the league's best for two-plus decades.

The Hockey Hall of Famer spent his entire NHL career in the Motor City, where he's a favorite athlete, and the fan base kept its faith in him even as the postseason drought lingered un-

der his leadership.

The Red Wings seem to have their groove back and are moving toward their first playoff appearance since 2016.

"They're as good as any team in the National Hockey League," Capitals coach Spencer Carbery said.

Lately, that's been a fact.

Going into Thursday, Detroit had the longest active winning streak in the Eastern Conference — matched by only Nashville in the league — and leads the wild-card standings. The Red Wings are also closing in on Toronto for the Atlantic Division's third guaranteed spot in the playoffs.

Washington and the New York Islanders, who played at Little Caesars Arena on Thursday night, are among the teams chasing the Red Wings for a wild card.

If the Red Wings beat New York, it would be their first seven-game winning streak since January 2012.

"These four-point games are new for us," Detroit coach De-

rek Lalonde said. "This late in the season, there's a little extra urgency to them.

"But that team that's chasing, they're literally playing for their season. You saw that in New York (Monday) night, winning in Dallas, something not many people can do. We'll have (the Islanders') best again on Thursday."

The franchise's fans, which included Lions defensive end Aidan Hutchinson against Washington, are clearly fired up about the team's chances to make the playoffs. The seven-year postseason drought is Detroit's longest since the 1970s.

Lalonde is hoping Lions coach Dan Campbell is the next to make an appearance.

"I got the bat signal out," Lalonde said. "I know he's in the combine right now. Obviously I would love for him to come and address the boys."

The Red Wings are led offensively by Alex DeBrincat, Dylan Larkin and Lucas Raymond. They're getting plenty of scoring support from the likes of veteran

Patrick Kane, who was signed in November, and defenseman Shayne Gostisbehere, who scored twice against the Capitals.

"We've got a pretty balanced attack with offensive contributions from all four lines, and defense," Yzerman told the AP.

Detroit unleashed its offense throughout the night against the Capitals as seven of its players had at least one point in a game for the first time in eight years.

Yzerman refused to spend big money in free agency, or via trades, until the team was good enough to compete and he decided the time to make moves was last summer.

Alex Lyon, a career backup, was signed to add depth, and he has emerged as the No. 1 goaltender with a four-game winning streak of his own to improve his record to 18-8-2 this season.

Lyon finished with 18 saves for the Red Wings, whose last six-game run was from March 23 to April 2 of 2019, to help hold off wild-card contenders for at least another night.

Stars acquire defenseman Tanev in trade with Flames

Associated Press

The Dallas Stars acquired defenseman Chris Tanev from the Calgary Flames on Wednesday night, the latest addition by a Stanley Cup contender in the Western Conference ahead of the March 8 NHL trade deadline.

Dallas sent a 2024 second-round pick, 20-year-old defense prospect Artem Grushnikov and a 2026 conditional third-rounder to Calgary for Tanev, who was considered one of the top trade candidates available. The Flames are retaining half and New Jersey another quarter of Tanev's \$4.5 million salary as part of the deal, which also includes the Stars flipping a '26 fourth-round pick to the Devils for unsigned goaltending prospect Cole Brady.

"We are fortunate to have the opportunity to add a player of Chris' caliber to our team," Stars general manager Jim Nill said. "He is a proven defenseman with postseason experience that is comfortable in all sit-

uations on the ice. Chris is one of the best penalty killers in the NHL and will be a tremendous asset to our special teams play."

Tanev, 34, gives the Stars some much-needed depth not only on the penalty kill, but defensively 5-on-5 to try to get through the gauntlet that is the playoffs in the West. The league-leading Vancouver Canucks already got the top center available by trading with Calgary for Elias Lindholm, and the Winnipeg Jets, tied with Dallas atop the Central Division, followed suit by acquiring Sean Monahan from Montreal.

The Stars, who lost to eventual champion Vegas in the Western finals last season, are adding the 6-foot-2, 193-pound Tanev to a blue line that's headlined by Miro Heiskanen and also includes veteran Ryan Suter and defensive stalwarts Esa Lindell and Jani Hakanpaa.

Tanev, in the final season of a four-year, \$18 million contract, is averaging nearly 20 minutes of ice time this season and has a

goal and 13 assists in 56 games.

Calgary might not be done dealing, either. First-year general manager Craig Conroy has another pending free agent defenseman in Noah Hanifin and could likely fetch a significant return for goaltender Jacob Markstrom, signed through 2026, if he chooses to trade him.

Grushnikov was a second-round pick of the Stars in the 2021 draft. The Voskresensk, Russia, native has played nearly 50 games in the American Hockey League since moving up from junior hockey.

"Artem is a player our organization has identified, for some time now, as being a strong addition to our prospects pool," Conroy said. "We are excited to acquire a player with Artem's qualities and look forward to his contributions to the Flames' success for a long time. We have also been able to secure another second-round draft pick in 2024 and the potential for a third-round selection in 2026."

No. 17 Gaels streak toward lofty goals

Associated Press

MORAGA, Calif. — When Saint Mary's stumbled to five losses in the first eight games of a season that began with high expectations, the immediate goals were much more modest than conference titles and NCAA Tournament berths.

"I was hoping for 4-5 when we were 3-5," coach Randy Bennett said. "That's exactly how we approached it."

The 17th-ranked Gaels (23-6, 14-0 West Coast Conference) did that and haven't slowed down a bit.

They have won 20 of the past 21 games to move to the verge of denying perennial power Gonzaga a share of the regular-season conference title for just the second time in the past 24 seasons.

Saint Mary's has already clinched the top seed in the WCC tournament next month in Las Vegas for a second straight season and could win its first outright conference title since 2012 by winning at Pepperdine on Thursday night or against No. 23 Gonzaga at home on Saturday.

"We knew just keep pounding the rock and eventually it's going to break," forward Alex Ducas said about the mindset following the shaky start. "You don't know if it's going to be the fifth time hitting the rock or the thousandth time, but eventually it will break. We knew that. That's all part of maturing as a team."

The Gaels came into the season ranked 23rd for the fourth preseason ranking in school history, despite losing two-time all-conference guard Logan Johnson and defensive stopper Kyle Bowen to graduation.

Ducas had to work his way back to health from a back injury and Bennett had to incorporate Augustas Marciulionis — the son of former NBA star Sarunas — and Joshua Jefferson into the lineup.

The early results were lacking, with the Gaels facing a difficult nonconference schedule that led to losses against Weber State, San Diego State, Xavier, Utah and Boise State.

"You got to always be the hunter," center Mitchell Saxen said. "I think early in the season,

sometimes we were afraid to lose, whether that was coming in ranked at the start of the year or whatever it may be. But we've really just grown as a team there."

Through Wednesday, the Gaels have won 15 straight games for the longest active winning streak in the nation and have set a school record with 14 straight conference wins.

They have been dominant in that stretch, leading the nation in point differential (plus 21.3 per game), ranking second in rebounding differential (plus 11.1 per game) and fifth in opponent shooting percentage (39.2%).

They have even survived a season-ending knee injury to Jefferson and have kept rolling.

"It could have gone a lot of different ways, but they just kept hanging in there and getting better and staying together," Bennett said. "You can get beat up by losses and especially a team that is as young as we are. I know it sounded like we had a lot of good players coming back. They weren't good yet. They had to become good."

Bennett has made a career of developing players since taking over a two-win team in 2001 that played in a tiny gym in a Bay Area market focused on professional teams.

He tapped a pipeline of Australian players early in his tenure to build a program that has become one of the most successful on the West Coast with 16 straight non-pandemic seasons with at least 20 wins.

The Gaels have the eighth-most wins in the country over the past 15 seasons and have won either a share of the regular-season conference title or the conference tournament seven times in that span.

Now the next question for the Gaels will be whether they can translate this run into NCAA Tournament success. Saint Mary's is set to make its third straight tournament appearance for the first time in school history, but the Gaels haven't made it past the opening weekend since going to the Sweet Sixteen in 2010.

But first is the more immediate goal of winning the conference.

Twins' Buxton glad to be healthy and back in field

Associated Press

FORT MYERS, Fla. — Byron Buxton patrolled center field for the Minnesota Twins for the first time in 554 days.

Healthy after two consecutive seasons ended with knee surgeries, the 2022 All-Star made his spring training debut at-bat and, most importantly, in the field as the Twins tied the Philadelphia Phillies 3-3 Tuesday.

Aside from a seven-inning appearance with Triple-A St. Paul on a rehabilitation assignment last summer, Buxton hadn't played center field since injuring himself while diving for a ball on Aug. 22, 2022.

The 2017 Rawlings Platinum Glove winner — given to the

best overall defender in each league — appeared in 85 games for the Twins in 2023, but only as a designated hitter because his right knee wasn't healthy.

He didn't make a catch on Tuesday, only fielding two balls hit in his direction, but that wasn't the point.

"Great to see him flying around the field. He's looked good all spring," Twins manager Rocco Baldelli said. "He looks strong and he looks explosive right now. Good day for him and a good day for all of us."

The 30-year-old Buxton has not appeared in 100 games since 2017, when he played in 140 games. The second overall pick in the 2012 amateur draft made

his major league debut in 2015 and has not made it through a full season without landing on the injured list.

His body feeling good for the first time in two years, there's been plenty of fun experienced by Buxton early in camp. After batting .207 with 17 home runs, 42 RBIs and a .731 OPS in 304 plate appearances last season, Buxton said he's 100 percent healthy after doctors removed the plica tissue last October, eliminating the pain he likened to a knife stabbing his kneecap.

Whether dominating teammates during wind sprints, taking live batting practice, shagging fly balls or simply participating in a normal schedule,

Buxton has spent the first week-plus of spring training showing off this good health at every turn.

Though he originally expected to feel anxious about playing in the outfield, Buxton said he was nerve-free. The Phillies hit a pair of line drives directly at Twins outfielders in the first inning, one to each side of Buxton. He didn't receive his first chance at a ball until Rodolfo Castro singled with two outs in the third inning. Trea Turner followed with an opposite-field double to right-center that Buxton raced down and quickly fired back in, a ball he might have laid out for during the regular season.