

European leaders hold talks on Ukraine

Associated Press

PARIS — European leaders sought to form a united front Monday at emergency talks in Paris, called after a U.S. diplomatic blitz on Ukraine which has thrown a once-solid alliance into turmoil and left the Europeans questioning the reliability of their key transatlantic partner.

Shortly before the meeting, French President Emmanuel Macron spoke with President Donald Trump, but Macron's office would not disclose details about the 20-minute discussion.

Leaders of Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, Poland, Spain, the Netherlands, Denmark and the European Union met at the Elysee Palace for talks on Europe's security quandary. NATO Secretary General Mark Rutte was also there.

Since last week, top U.S. officials from the Trump administration, on their first visit to Europe, left the impression that Washington was ready to embrace the Kremlin while it cold-

shouldered many of its age-old European allies.

Gen. Keith Kellogg, Trump's special envoy for Ukraine and Russia, underlined Monday that Europe has no place at the negotiating table.

"All their concerns will be known, and addressed as well," Kellogg told reporters in Brussels, where he briefed the 31 U.S. allies in NATO, along with European Union officials, before heading to Kyiv for talks on Wednesday with Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

"I don't think it's reasonable and feasible to have everybody sitting at the table. We know how that can turn out and that has been our point, is keeping it clean and fast as we can," he said.

Kellogg's remarks come after a flurry of speeches by Vice President JD Vance and Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth last week questioned both Europe's security commitments and its fundamental democratic

principles.

Macron, who has long championed a stronger European defense, said their stinging rebukes and threats of non-cooperation in the face of military danger felt like a shock to the system.

The tipping point came when Trump decided to upend years of U.S. policy by holding talks with Russian President Vladimir Putin in hopes of ending the Russia-Ukraine war.

German Chancellor Olaf Scholz told reporters a possible peace agreement with Russia cannot be forced on Ukraine from outside.

"We welcome the fact that talks are taking place, that peace is developing everywhere. But for us it must and is clear: This does not mean that peace can be dictated and that Ukraine must accept what is presented to it," he insisted after he left the Elysee Palace, as the meeting was still ongoing.

"Negotiations are moving fast with Europe," Zelenskyy said in

a virtual news conference Monday in Kyiv, adding recent U.S. moves "accelerated everything,"

Zelenskyy said Macron had agreed to provide him with a briefing on the conclusions from the meeting in Paris.

A strong U.S. component, though, will remain essential for the foreseeable future since it will take many years before European nations can ratchet up defense production and integrate it into an effective force.

That U.S. bond also applies to dealing with war in Ukraine, said U.K. Prime Minister Keir Starmer. "U.S. support will remain critical and a U.S. security guarantee is essential for a lasting peace, because only the U.S. can deter Putin from attacking again," Starmer wrote in Monday's Daily Telegraph.

Starmer appears to be charting a "third way" in Europe's shifting geopolitical landscape — aligning strategically with Trump while maintaining EU ties.

Russia, US set to hold meeting on war, without Kyiv

Associated Press

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia — Senior American and Russian officials, including the countries' top diplomats, will hold talks on improving their ties and negotiating an end to the war in Ukraine, officials said Monday, in what would be the most significant meeting between the sides since Moscow's full-scale invasion of its neighbor nearly three years ago.

The talks, scheduled for Tuesday in Saudi Arabia, mark another pivotal step by the Trump administration to reverse U.S. policy on isolating

Russia, and are meant to pave the way for a meeting between President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Putin's foreign affairs adviser Yuri Ushakov set off for the Saudi capital on Monday, according to Russian state TV. U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio, national security adviser Mike Waltz and Special Envoy Steve Witkoff will meet the Russian delegation, State Department spokesperson Tammy Bruce said. Ukraine will not participate.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said the talks will be primarily focused on "restoring the entire range of U.S.-Russian relations, as well as preparing possible talks on the Ukrainian settlement and organizing a meeting of the two presidents." Bruce said the meeting is aimed at determining how serious the Russians are about wanting peace and whether detailed negotiations can be started.

"I think the goal, obviously, for everyone is to determine if this is something that can move forward," she told reporters traveling with Rubio in Riyadh,

Saudi Arabia. Bruce said that even though Ukraine would not be at the table for Tuesday's talks, actual peace negotiations would only take place with Ukraine's involvement. Kyiv's participation in any peace talks was a bedrock of U.S. policy under Trump's predecessor, Joe Biden.

Speaking on Fox News Channel's "Sunday Morning Futures" program, Witkoff said he and Waltz will be "having meetings at the direction of the president," and hope to make "some really good progress with regard to Russia-Ukraine."

Troops who refused vaccine can reenlist

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Defense Department has told the military services to reach out once again to service members who were forced out or voluntarily left the military because they refused to get the COVID vaccine and see if they want to reenlist.

The directive reflects the executive order signed by President Donald Trump a week after he took office, and it says that all service members who opt to return to the military will have to reenlist for at least two years.

According to a memo released on X, Darin Selnick, who is working as the defense undersecretary for personnel, said the vaccine mandate was an “unfair, overbroad, and completely unnecessary burden” on service members. It directs the services to set up a program to con-

tact troops and begin doing so in two months.

At least 8,200 troops were forced out of the military in 2021 for refusing to obey a lawful order when they declined to get the vaccine. The military services sent out notices in 2023 to all troops discharged over the vaccine, advising them they could return to the military, but just 113 have reenlisted. Defense officials said at the time that many troops appeared to use the vaccine mandate as a way to get out of their service obligations quickly and easily.

It’s unclear how many more may now be interested, since this new offer will allow eligible troops to come in at their previous rank and give them back pay, benefits and bonuses, as long as they meet all requirements for the reinstatement.

To return, all would have to

meet weight, fitness, medical and other requirements, and they could be refused if they now have a criminal record or other disqualifying factor. Officers would have to get recommended, which is a simple appointment process.

The memo directs the services to “broadly apply waiver authorities to permit maximum eligibility, as appropriate.” And, in a highly unusual move, only very senior civilian leaders confirmed by the Senate will have the authority to reject a waiver request.

In addition, any recommendation to reject a service member’s request for reinstatement must be sent to the secretary of that service, and that authority cannot be delegated to anyone else. Traditionally waivers or other similar decisions are made at much lower levels.

The services will have 30 days to identify those who were forced out “solely” for refusing the vaccine order, and within 60 days must begin a program to contact them.

Once service members receive the estimate of back pay and other compensation, they will have 60 days to decide whether to return to the military. The offer is only good for one year from the date of the memo, which was Feb. 7. It wasn’t posted publicly until late Thursday afternoon.

Service members must go through screening through the Boards for Correction of Military/Naval Records process.

Troops who left the service voluntarily to avoid the vaccine may also seek reinstatement but must submit a written statement saying they left for that reason.

China says US ‘gravely backpedaled’ on its Taiwan independence stance

Associated Press

BEIJING — China’s Foreign Ministry took issue Monday with a revised U.S. government fact sheet that removed a line on American opposition to independence for Taiwan.

The United States has “gravely backpedaled” on its position on Taiwan and sent the wrong message to “separatist forces” on the island, ministry spokesperson Guo Jiakun said.

Taiwan and China split in 1949 during the civil war that brought the communists to power in China. The defeated Nationalists fled to Taiwan and set up a rival government there. Taiwan has its own government and military but has never declared formal independence from China.

“We urge the U.S. to ... stop emboldening and supporting Taiwan independence and avoid further damaging China-U.S. relations and the peace and stability of the Taiwan Strait,” Guo said when asked about the revision at a daily media briefing.

The Taiwan Strait is a narrow waterway

that separates Taiwan from China’s east coast.

The U.S. State Department removed the phrase “we do not support Taiwan independence” from the fact sheet last week. The document on America’s relations with the self-governing island is posted on its website.

Taiwan’s government welcomed the move, though a statement on Monday did not mention the language specifically.

“The Ministry of Foreign Affairs has noted that the U.S. State Department updated the ‘Current State of U.S.-Taiwan Relations’ page ... with text that is positive and friendly toward us, reflecting the close and amicable partnership between Taiwan and the United States,” it said.

It’s not the first time the State Department has removed the phrase. It did so in May 2022 but restored it a few weeks later after a strong protest from China. It’s unclear why the State Department changed the language again and whether it signals any shift in policy under President Donald Trump, who returned to the White House last month.

US kills 2 militants in strike in Somalia

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany— The United States carried out an airstrike Sunday against ISIS in Somalia, killing two militants, U.S. Africa Command said.

The attack, the second against ISIS this month, hit a target in the northeastern part of the country that serves as a stronghold for the militant group.

“Degrading ISIS and other terrorist organizations’ ability to plot and conduct attacks that threaten the U.S. homeland, our partners, and civilians remains central to U.S. Africa Command’s mission,” the command said in a statement.

AFRICOM said no civilians were harmed.

The airstrike comes on the heels of a Feb. 1 operation that targeted a cave network in northeastern Somalia. Fourteen militants were killed in those strikes, AFRICOM said.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said last week that the Feb. 1 airstrike was an example of commanders now having more decision-making authority on such matters.

Trump administration cuts reach FDA

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration's effort to slash the size of the federal workforce reached the Food and Drug Administration this weekend, as recently hired employees who review the safety of food ingredients, medical devices and other products were fired.

Probationary employees across the FDA received notices Saturday evening that their jobs were being eliminated, according to three FDA staffers who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly.

The total number of positions

eliminated was not clear Sunday, but the firings appeared to focus on employees in the agency's centers for food, medical devices and tobacco products — which includes oversight of electronic cigarettes. It was not clear whether FDA employees who review drugs were exempted.

On Friday, some officials expected the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to fire 5,200 probationary employees across its agencies, according to an audio recording of a National Institutes of Health department meeting. HHS oversees NIH, FDA and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, among other things.

People who spoke with the AP on condition of anonymity on Friday said the number of probationary employees to be laid off at the CDC would total nearly 1,300. But as of early Sunday afternoon, about 700 people had received notices, according to three people who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly. They said none of the CDC layoffs affected the young doctors and researchers who track diseases in what's known as the Epidemic Intelligence Service.

The FDA is headquartered in the Maryland suburbs outside Washington and employs nearly 20,000 people. It's long been a

target of newly sworn-in Health and Human Services Secretary Robert Kennedy Jr., who last year accused the agency of waging a "war on public health" for not approving unproven treatments such as psychedelics, stem cells and chelation therapy.

Kennedy also has called for eliminating thousands of chemicals and colorings from U.S. foods. But the cuts at FDA include staffers responsible for reviewing the safety of new food additives and ingredients, according to an FDA staffer familiar with the firings.

An HHS spokesperson did not immediately respond to a request for comment Sunday.

Over 1K new VA workers fired in cost-saving move

BY LINDA F. HERSEY

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Department of Veterans Affairs fired more than 1,000 new employees largely not represented by labor union agreements, as part of a cost-saving move that is expected to save the agency close to \$100 million, according to the VA.

The dismissals are effective immediately, the VA said. Employees were informed Thursday night that they no longer have a job with the VA.

Dollars spent on employees' wages will be redirected to pay for services and benefits for veterans, the VA said in an announcement.

The reduction in VA staff supports President Donald Trump's plan to downsize the federal government to make it less costly, more responsive and efficient, the VA said.

"VA is refocusing on its core mission: providing the best possible care and benefits to veterans, their families, caregivers

and survivors," the VA said.

But Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., who sits on the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, blasted the Trump administration for "attempting to balance the budget on the backs of veterans."

He said the firings include newly hired doctors, nurses and other medical personnel. A staff shortage already exists for these positions, he said.

"It is reprehensible to target recently hired federal employees — particularly those who have chosen to serve veterans — solely because they have less due process rights and employment protections than other employees," Blumenthal said. "It is a massive waste of taxpayer dollars to fire employees the department just invested months into recruiting, vetting, and training."

Trump also signed an executive order last week directing federal agencies, including the VA, to hire only one worker to replace every four who leave.

Staff at FAA fired weeks after DC helo-jet crash

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration has begun firing several hundred Federal Aviation Administration employees, upending staff on a busy air travel weekend and just weeks after a January fatal mid-air collision at Ronald Reagan Washington National Airport.

Probationary workers were targeted in late night emails Friday notifying them they had been fired, David Spero, president of the Professional Aviation Safety Specialists union, said in a statement.

The impacted workers include personnel hired for FAA radar, landing and navigational aid maintenance, one air traffic controller told the Associated Press. The air traffic controller was not authorized to talk to the media and spoke on condition of anonymity.

Spero said messages began arriving after 7 p.m. on Friday and continued late into the night. More might be notified

over the long weekend or barred from entering FAA buildings on Tuesday, he said.

The employees were fired "without cause nor based on performance or conduct," Spero said, and the emails were "from an 'exec order' Microsoft email address" — not a government email address.

The firings hit the FAA when it faces a shortfall in controllers. Federal officials have been raising concerns about an overtaxed and understaffed air traffic control system for years, especially after a series of close calls between planes at U.S. airports. Among the reasons they have cited for staffing shortages are uncompetitive pay, long shifts, intensive training and mandatory retirements.

In the Jan. 29 fatal crash between a U.S. Army Black Hawk helicopter and American Airlines passenger jet, which is still under investigation, one controller was handling both commercial airline and helicopter traffic at the busy airport.

DOGE seeks access to taxpayer data

The Washington Post

Elon Musk's U.S. DOGE Service is seeking access to a heavily-guarded Internal Revenue Service system that includes detailed financial information about every taxpayer, business and nonprofit in the country, according to three people familiar with the activities, sparking alarm within the tax agency.

Under pressure from the White House, the IRS is considering a memorandum of understanding that would give officials from DOGE — which stands for Department of Government Efficiency — broad access to tax-agency systems, property and datasets. Among

them is the Integrated Data Retrieval System, or IDRS, which enables tax agency employees to access IRS accounts — including personal identification numbers — and bank information. It also lets them enter and adjust transaction data and generate notices, collection documents and other records.

According to a draft of the memorandum obtained by The Washington Post, DOGE software engineer Gavin Kliger is set to work at the IRS for 120 days, though the tax agency and the White House can renew his deployment for the same duration. His primary goal at the IRS is to provide engineering assis-

tance and IT modernization consulting.

The agreement requires that Kliger maintain confidentiality of tax return information, shield it from unauthorized access and destroy any such information shared with him upon the completion of his IRS deployment.

IDRS access is extremely limited — taxpayers who have had their information wrongfully disclosed or even inspected are entitled by law to monetary damages — and the request for DOGE access has raised deep concern within the IRS, according to three people familiar with internal agency deliberations.

The news comes as roughly

150 million taxpayers prepare to file returns by the April 15 deadline. In his first term, President Donald Trump openly mused about sending IRS agents after political opponents, leaving agency officials on edge about the IRS's independence.

The tax agency's systems are widely considered antiquated — many were built using computer coding language from the 1960s — and overhauling the agency's IT is in line with DOGE's mandate to modernize government technology. IRS contractors are generally provided system access to repair or maintain IDRS and similar data systems.

EEOC seeks to drop transgender discrimination cases

Associated Press

Signaling a major shift in civil rights enforcement, the federal agency that enforces workplace anti-discrimination laws has moved to dismiss six of its own cases on behalf of workers alleging gender identity discrimination, arguing that the cases now conflict with President Donald Trump's recent executive order, court documents say.

The requests by the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission mark a major departure from its prior inter-

pretation of civil rights law and a stark contrast to a decade ago when the agency issued a landmark finding that a transgender civilian employee of the U.S. Army had been discriminated against because her employer refused to use her preferred pronouns or allow her to use bathrooms based on her gender identity.

Just last year, the EEOC updated its guidance to specify that deliberately using the wrong pronouns for an employee, or refusing them access

to bathrooms corresponding with their gender identity, constituted a form of harassment. That followed a 2020 Supreme Court ruling that gay, lesbian and transgender people are protected from employment discrimination.

The EEOC is seeking to dismiss three cases in Illinois as well as one in Alabama, New York and California. In each instance, the original complaints allege discrimination against transgender or gender nonconforming workers. The agency

cites Trump's Jan. 20 executive order declaring that the government would recognize only two "immutable" sexes as the reason for why it no longer intends to pursue the cases.

The requests to dismiss the cases come just weeks after Trump dismissed two Democratic commissioners of the five-member EEOC before their terms expired, an unprecedented decision that removed what would have been an obstacle to his efforts to upend interpretation of civil rights laws.

'Life-threatening' cold, polar vortex stretches across US

Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Harsh weather moved west on Monday as a polar vortex was expected to grip the Rockies and the northern Plains after winter storms pummeled the eastern U.S. over the weekend, killing at least 10 people, including nine victims in Kentucky who died during flooding.

The National Weather Service warned of "life-threatening

cold" into Tuesday, with temperatures in northeastern Montana predicted to dip as low as 45 degrees below zero with wind chills down to 60 below.

Dangerously cold wind chill temperatures as low as 50 degrees below zero were expected in most of North Dakota, which remained under an "extreme cold warning" along with large swaths of South Dakota and Minnesota, according to the

weather service.

Meteorologists said several states would experience the 10th and coldest polar vortex event this season. Weather forces in the Arctic are combining to push the chilly air that usually stays near the North Pole into the U.S. and Europe.

Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear announced Sunday that the death toll in his state had risen to nine and at least 1,000 people

stranded by floods had to be rescued. President Donald Trump approved Kentucky's request for a disaster declaration, authorizing the Federal Emergency Management Agency to coordinate relief efforts throughout the state.

In Atlanta, a person was killed when a large tree fell on a home early Sunday, raising the overall death toll from harsh weather to 10.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man confesses to murder after parts found in river

NY NEW YORK — A Manhattan man killed his elderly roommate before trying to dispose of his body in the ocean, prosecutors said.

New York City prosecutors have charged the man in the brutal stabbing, which they say was followed by an attempt to cut up and dispose of the body. Christian Millet, 23, is being held on murder charges without bail.

The investigation started on Feb. 5, when police in the NYPD harbor boat unit found body parts, including a severed torso, in a duffel bag floating in the East River.

Police eventually identified the body as the remains of Edwin Echevarria, 65. In court documents, prosecutors said Millet confessed to stabbing Echevarria.

26 vehicles involved in fatal tunnel crash

WY GREEN RIVER — A third victim was found Sunday in the wreckage from a fiery crash inside a Wyoming highway tunnel that involved 26 cars and trucks, officials said.

At least five people were seriously injured in Friday's accident along Interstate 80 near the small town of Green River, Wyo. The crash sparked a fire inside the tunnel that destroyed six commercial vehicles and two passenger vehicles.

Most of the wreckage had been removed by Sunday, with fewer than 10 vehicles still inside the tunnel, said Sgt. Jason Roascio with the Wyoming Highway Patrol. The crash took

place in the westbound tube of the twin tunnel under Castle Rock, a sandstone formation that looms over the town of Green River in the state's southwest region.

Bakery owner offended over pastry painting rule

NH CONCORD — A bakery owner in New Hampshire testified Friday that his excitement about displaying a painting by high school students of giant pastries quickly turned to annoyance after a zoning code officer told him it was a sign and had to be changed or removed.

Sean Young said the the work atop his bakery is art, and was never intended to be a sign.

The bright painting atop Leavitt's Country Bakery shows sunbeams shining down on a mountain range made of sprinkle-covered chocolate and strawberry doughnuts, a blueberry muffin, a cinnamon roll and other pastries.

A federal judge is considering whether the town is infringing on Young's rights.

For now, the painting has been allowed to remain since it was first displayed in June 2022.

Challenger-era NASA director dies at 102

AL HUNTSVILLE — William Ray Lucas, who led the NASA facility that shouldered much of the blame for the 1986 explosion of the space shuttle Challenger, has died. Lucas was 102.

Lucas died at his home in Huntsville, Ala., according to an obituary published Friday by Laughlin Service Funeral Home in Huntsville.

Lucas was director of the

Marshall Space Flight Center in Huntsville when the Challenger exploded on Jan. 28, 1986, just 73 seconds after liftoff from Cape Canaveral, Fla. The explosion killed all seven crew members, including schoolteacher Christa McAuliffe, who had been tapped to become the first U.S. civilian to travel to space.

State's measles outbreak worst in nearly 30 years

TX GAINES COUNTY — The ongoing measles outbreak in West Texas has doubled in size to 48 cases, mostly in children and teens, making it the state's worst in nearly 30 years.

State health officials said Friday in a news release that those who are infected are either unvaccinated or their vaccination status is unknown. Thirteen people have been hospitalized.

The outbreak has spread from its epicenter in Gaines County, with single-digit cases in nearby Lynn, Terry and Yoakum counties.

South Plains Public Health District Director Zach Holbrooks said that some of the cases appear to be connected to private religious schools.

Man pleads guilty after teen at wrong house shot

MO LIBERTY — An 86-year-old Kansas City man pleaded guilty Friday to a lesser charge in the 2023 shooting of Ralph Yarl, a Black honor student who rang the white man's doorbell by mistake.

Andrew Lester was scheduled to stand trial on charges of first-degree assault and armed criminal action in the shooting of the then-16-year-old, who

survived and has since graduated from high school.

As part of a plea deal, Lester pleaded guilty to second-degree assault, a charge that Judge David Chamberlain said carried a sentence of one to seven years.

Lester, who will be sentenced on March 7, was hunched over as he was wheeled into the courtroom, his hands folded.

Couples get hitched on Valentine's Day ski run

CO LOVELAND SKI AREA — There is nothing like dozens of couples saying "I do" simultaneously to warm the crisp, frigid air that grips the Colorado Rockies in the heart of winter.

Loveland Ski Area west of Denver lived up to its name once again on Valentine's Day as it hosted its 34th annual Mountaintop Matrimony on the gentle slope of a snowy beginner's run just shy of 12,000 feet above sea level.

Surrounded by snow-covered trees, craggy wind-swept peaks and curious onlookers, a record 130 couples converged on the Forest Meadow run near the Continental Divide on Friday, clicking into skis and strapping on snowboards for the mass wedding ceremony. Some wore traditional wedding attire like tuxedos and gowns, while others dressed in all manner of wild costumes — colorful tutus and veils, heart-shaped sunglasses, even a T-shirt resembling a tuxedo — to mark the occasion.

At the direction of an officiant, the couples said their vows and smooched and party music played.

— From wire reports

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Byron wins second straight Daytona 500

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — William Byron fortuitously missed the ferocious wrecks down the stretch at the Daytona 500 that knocked out contenders racing for the checkered flag and left him with a repeat victory in sight.

Still, sitting ninth with one lap left in an overtime finish, the odds seemed against the driver of the No. 24 Chevrolet to escape the rest of the race unscathed, or even have enough time to pull off the comeback win.

Thanks to one more crash, Byron used a clean ride on his final lap to escape the chaos and race to his second straight Daytona 500 victory. He dodged a string of late-race wreckage that knocked out a chunk of contenders and sent the Hendrick Motorsports driver into victory lane Sunday night at Daytona International Speedway.

"It's not all luck to win twice in a row," Byron said.

Maybe not. But Byron certainly was in the right place by racing near the outside wall in overtime to become the first back-to-back winner since Denny Hamlin in 2019-20.

Byron took advantage of another major mess on the final lap — NASCAR did not drop the caution and let the field race to the finish — and took another, familiar burnout in Daytona International Speedway.

"It's obviously really special," Byron said. "It's an amazing race, and obviously a lot of crazy racing out there tonight and just a lot of pushing and shoving."

The 27-year-old Byron held on to win after two weather delays totaling more than 3½ hours, and with President Donald Trump set to watch the rest of the race in Florida, after he earlier led drivers on two laps around the track in his heavily armored presidential limousine known in Washington as "The Beast."

Hendrick Motorsports won

its 10th Daytona 500 to break a tie with Petty Enterprises for the record.

"Just obviously fortunate it worked out in our favor," Byron said. "Crazy? Yeah. I can't honestly believe that but we're here."

Byron became the youngest driver to win multiple Daytona 500s, breaking the record held by Jeff Gordon, also in the No. 24. Gordon, a Hall of Famer and four-time NASCAR champion, is now Byron's boss as vice chairman of Hendrick Motorsports.

Gordon flashed a thumbs up when told Byron broke his record for youngest two-time winner by four months.

"I hope he breaks them all," Gordon said. "I'm in full support of that."

Austin Cindric held the lead headed to the white flag when he was wiped out in a crash that took out a slew of drivers that included Chase Briscoe, Hamlin and Alex Bowman. It was sixth time in the last eight Daytona 500s the race spilled into overtime, setting up Byron to become the fifth driver to win it in consecutive years.

Byron won for the 14th time in his Cup career, and already set his sights on the championship race in Phoenix after finishing third in the standings in each of the last two years.

"We plan on trying to win a lot of races this year, so we're not going to stop here," Byron said. "We're going to continue to push forward and try to get to Phoenix."

It wouldn't be Daytona without all the flips, slams and skids down the stretch that inevitably send the race into overtime.

With four laps left, Ryan Preece turned upside-down and essentially did a wheelie in his No. 60 Ford. His car flipped onto its roof and turned back onto its tires before hitting the outside wall. Preece dropped his safety net to signal to crews he was OK.

Preece called on NASCAR to

do more to prevent cars from becoming airborne during superspeedway races, as this was the second time he was in such an accident. His first crash was much more harrowing in the summer race at Daytona in 2023. His car flipped numerous times, and he was transported to a hospital and kept overnight. He showed up the week after with two black eyes from the wreck. NASCAR and Daytona responded by replacing sections of infield grass with pavement.

"As a father, as a racer, we keep beating on a door hoping for a different result and we know where there's a problem: at superspeedways," Preece said. "I don't want to be the example. When it finally does get somebody, I don't want it to be me."

Bubba Wallace, Kyle Larson, Daniel Suarez and Brad Keselowski all had their shots at victory lane spoiled, and the race was red-flagged, just 11 laps after another big one shuffled the field and knocked four former Cup Series champions out of contention.

Reigning NASCAR champion Joey Logano and Ricky Stenhouse started the multi-car melee when Logano moved to the middle and Stenhouse moved to block him. It stacked up Logano, and the accordion effect sent several cars — including ones belonging to former Cup champs Kyle Busch, Ryan Blaney and Chase Elliott — sliding in every direction.

Busch's car ended up on a wrecker, extending his skid to 0 for 20 in "The Great American Race."

Tyler Reddick was second and two-time Daytona 500 champion Jimmie Johnson was third. Briscoe was fourth and John Hunter Nemechek fifth.

Xfinity Series champion Justin Allgaier finished ninth driving for team owner and two-time Daytona 500 champion Dale Earnhardt Jr. in JR Motor-

sports' Cup debut.

Not bad. Not good enough to beat Byron.

Byron, a self-taught racer who used computer equipment to hone his skills, was left standing one more time as a Daytona winner. Gordon was a three-time Daytona 500 winner and noted he still had the edge over Byron.

"Until next year," Gordon said.

Leave a legacy

Johnson and Nemechek gave Legacy Motor Club two top-five finishes. A Hall of Fame driver and seven-time NASCAR champion, Johnson is now the majority owner under an offseason restructuring. It was his highest finish in the race since he won it in 2013.

"I have emotions that I didn't expect to have. I've never been in this position as an owner, and it's really opened up a different set of emotions," Johnson said after his highest finish in the race since winning in 2013.

Early exit

Four-time Indianapolis 500 winner Helio Castroneves and 2017 NASCAR champion Martin Truex Jr. were among the drivers whose race ended after they were collected in a wreck before the halfway point.

Castroneves made the Daytona 500 under a new rule that allows for a "world-class driver" to receive a provisional spot. He landed a NASCAR ride as part of Trackhouse's "Project 91," designed to give renowned racers from outside of the series a shot in a stock car.

Truex, who retired from full-time racing at the end of last season, failed to win the Daytona 500 in 21 tries.

Truex finished 38th and Castroneves 39th.

Up next

The series shifts to Atlanta Motor Speedway, where Suarez is the defending race winner.

No. 9 St. John's tops No. 24 Creighton

Associated Press

NEW YORK — RJ Luis Jr. had 23 points and 14 rebounds to help No. 9 St. John's strengthen its grip on first place in the Big East with a 79-73 victory over No. 24 Creighton on Sunday.

The Red Storm (22-4, 13-2) lead the Bluejays (18-8, 11-4) by two games. A Creighton win would have given it the head-to-head tiebreaker over St. John's, which is seeking its first regular-season title since 1986.

Luis made 6 of 17 shots in his eighth double-double this sea-

son. He sank six free throws in the final two minutes and made 10 of 13 overall to help the Red Storm secure their 10th win in 11 games.

Kadary Richmond had 19 points and 10 rebounds for St. John's. Zuby Ejiofor added 18 points and nine boards.

Steven Ashworth scored 23 points for the Bluejays, who dropped their second straight after winning nine in a row. Jamiya Neal added 19. Ryan Kalkbrenner was held to 12 points and appeared to have limited mobility in his right foot after

getting helped to the locker room with 9:45 left.

Kalkbrenner was injured jostling for a rebound under the rim with Ejiofor and Luis. He returned with 3:47 remaining, but he only attempted two more shots.

Takeaways

Creighton: The Bluejays went 8 of 30 (26.7%) from 3-point range. In its loss to UConn, Creighton shot 29.2% (7 of 24) from 3.

St. John's: Deivon Smith played 26 minutes and shot 4-

for-9 after missing last week's loss at Villanova with a neck injury. Smith was 8-for-34 in his previous four games after hurting his shoulder on Jan. 11.

Key moment

After missing 11 straight shots, the Bluejays got within 61-59 on a tip-in by Neal with 6:37 left. But the Red Storm responded with a 3 by Aaron Scott and a jumper by Luis.

Key stat

St. John's shot 58.6% (17-for-29) from the foul line.

Ballard, Wichita State shock No. 14 Memphis in OT

Associated Press

WICHITA, Kan. — Quincy Ballard scored 14 of his 19 points in the second half and overtime to help Wichita State beat No. 14 Memphis 84-79 on Sunday.

Bijan Cortes hit a 3 to give the Shockers a 78-77 lead with 1:10 remaining in OT. Wichita State never relinquished the lead from that point.

The Shockers (15-10, 5-7 AAC) won their fourth straight game and first over a ranked opponent in the regular season since 2021. Wichita State had five players in double figures. Corey Washington had a double-double with 18 points and 15 rebounds.

The Tigers (21-5, 11-2) saw their eight-game winning-streak end. Tyrese Hunter led Memphis with 24 points. Moussa Cisse had a double-double for the Tigers with 12 points and 14 rebounds.

The Shockers took a 32-28 lead into halftime highlighted by an 11-3 run in the final 5:28 of the opening 20 minutes.

Ronnie DeGray III hit a pair of free throws to tie the game at 71-71 with 18 seconds left for Wichita State to force overtime. Memphis scored the first four points in OT before

the Shockers took over.

No. 20 Michigan 86, Ohio State 83: Vladislav Goldin had a critical putback basket with 52 seconds left as part of a 20-point, 10-rebound performance as the visiting Wolverines held off the Buckeyes.

Danny Wolf had 17 points and 11 rebounds for Michigan (20-5, 12-2), which holds a one-game lead over Michigan State in the Big Ten standings. Nimari Burnett added 11 points as the Wolverines won their sixth straight game.

Roddy Gayle Jr., who played the last two years at Ohio State, was booed throughout the game. Gayle gave Michigan the lead for good on a bank shot to make it 82-80. He finished with nine points and eight rebounds.

Devin Royal had 26 points and five rebounds for Ohio State (15-11, 7-8). Bruce Thornton added 17 points for the Buckeyes, but missed a chance to tie the game on a shot in the lane in the final three seconds. John Mobley Jr. added 16 points.

No. 25 Maryland 101, Iowa 75: Ja'Kobi Gillespie scored 26 points, and the host Terrapins scored their most points in a Big Ten game since enter-

ing the league a decade ago.

The Hawkeyes (14-11, 5-9 Big Ten) actually led 51-47 at halftime, but they missed all 13 of their 3-point attempts after the break and could do little to slow a rampant Maryland team.

The Terrapins (20-6, 10-5) have won seven of their last eight games. Maryland's previous high score in a Big Ten game came in a 100-65 win over Ohio State in 2016.

The starting five scored 95 points for the Terrapins. Derik Queen and Rodney Rice scored 18 points each, Selton Miguel added 17 and Julian Reese had 16.

Pryce Sandfort scored 15 points for Iowa, which has lost four of five.

Louisville 75, Notre Dame 60: Chucky Hepburn scored 16 points with six assists, James Scott had his fourth double-double of the season and the visiting Cardinals beat the Fighting Irish.

Scott had 10 points and 10 rebounds for Louisville (20-6, 13-2 ACC). Terrence Edwards Jr. scored 14 points and Reyne Smith made four 3-pointers.

Louisville has won four games in a row and 14 of its last 15.

Markus Burton led Notre Dame (11-14, 5-9) with 22 points and Tae Davis finished with 15. Braeden Shrewsberry added 12 on four 3s.

Bradley 61, Drake 59: Duke Deen led the visiting Braves with 12 points, and Darius Hannah hit the winning dunk with 10 seconds left as Bradley knocked off the Bulldogs.

Deen went 4-for-10 from the field (3-for-7 from 3-point range) for the Braves (21-6, 12-4 Missouri Valley Conference). Zek Montgomery scored 11 points while going 4-for-6 from the field. Hannah shot 3-for-5 from the field and 2-for-4 from the free-throw line to finish with nine points.

The 6-foot-9 Hannah set a ghost screen on the right wing for Zek Montgomery, who hit a cutting Hannah for the go-ahead two-hand dunk.

Daniel Abreu missed a potential winning jumper at the buzzer.

Conference-leading Drake (23-3, 13-3) was led by Abreu, who posted 16 points. Mitch Mascari added 14 points for Drake. Kael Combs had 11 points. The loss ended an 11-game winning streak for the Bulldogs.

All-Star MVP Curry helps OGs win tournament

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO—The winning total last year: 211 points.

The winning total this year: 41 points.

An All-Star Game like none other — since it was three games, not one — still had plenty of flash and not a lot of fire. And in the end, Boston's Jayson Tatum had the dunk that decided a crown.

Shaq's OGs won the first All-Star mini tournament in NBA history Sunday night, getting 15 points from Tatum and 12 from Stephen Curry — three of them on a half-court shot, the sort of highlight the All-Star Game is known for — to beat Chuck's Global Stars 41-25 in the final.

Curry was the MVP on his home floor at Chase Center, where he and the Golden State Warriors play. He said the weekend was "a celebration of a lot of great things."

"It's obviously our responsibility to come out and put on a

show," Curry said, flanked by his fellow OGs. "And I thank them for helping me do that."

The title game was basically over early, and the halftime show — an 18-minute tribute to TNT — lasted longer than the game did. The Global Stars started the title game 0 for 10 from the field, 0 for 6 from 3-point range and fell into a quick 11-0 hole.

In a regular NBA game, that's no big deal. In a first-to-40 game against some of the best players on the planet, that's a problem.

San Antonio's Victor Wembanyama led the Global Stars with 11 points in the final. He was visibly frustrated when Tatum scored the title-clinching basket.

Wembanyama came into his All-Star debut saying he would play hard, like a real game. And he did.

"To me, that is the only way to play basketball," Wembanyama said.

It was the debut of the All-Star mini tournament format: four teams, three games, with only 40 points needed to end each contest.

The league opted for the untimed, short games with hopes that asking All-Stars to play fewer minutes would lead to better competition. Last year's game in Indianapolis had a 211-186 final score, setting a slew of records but prompting the league to take action after years of urging players to take the exhibition a bit more seriously.

And no, there wasn't exactly a playoff-type intensity. Or at least, not much of it.

"I think they're just looking for a more competitive game and trying to find ways to create that," said Milwaukee's Damian Lillard, who helped Shaq's OGs to the title. "I thought tonight was a little bit more competitive than it had been in past years."

There were some less-than-serious efforts the likes of which

have been seen in past years — underhand lobs from half-court, for example, and a whole lot of interjection from on-court emcee Kevin Hart — but there was at least some defense played. Phoenix's Kevin Durant argued for a foul late in his team's first semifinal win and probably merited a call that would have sent him to the line for what could have been a game-winning free throw.

The first two-shot foul of the night came early in the title game. Denver's Nikola Jokic of the Global Stars missed both shots.

"I just wanted tonight to be fun," Curry said. "I think it was fun."

It was fun for the winners, for certain: Dallas' Kyrie Irving of the OGs carried the All-Star trophy into the Global Stars' locker room after the game.

"Y'all good?" Irving playfully asked the runners-up. They booed him.

Aberg rallies down stretch to win Genesis Invitational

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Ludvig Aberg never felt worse leaving a golf course than three weeks ago at Torrey Pines when he shared the 36-hole lead only to get violently ill from a stomach ailment and stagger to the finish with a 79.

That's what made Sunday — same course, different tournament — feel so sweet.

Aberg was three shots behind and running out of holes when he hit three shots to near perfection for birdies and capped off his late rally with a 7-foot birdie putt on the par-5 18th for a 6-under 66 and a one-shot victory over Maverick McNealy in the Genesis Invitational.

The tournament had to relocate to Torrey from Riviera because of the wildfires in Los Angeles, and Aberg made good on another chance at one of his favorite courses. It was somewhere toward the end that he turned to caddie Joe Skovron and said, "This Sunday is a lot more fun than the last one we had."

"Was nice to come here starting to feel like myself again and physically getting there," he said. "It means a lot. This is the

best feeling in golf, and to be able to do what I did today is definitely going to help me going forward in the future."

He met Tiger Woods, the tournament host, for the first time a few weeks ago at the indoor TGL in Florida. This was better — Woods presenting him the trophy, the second PGA Tour title for the 25-year-old Swede and his third worldwide that takes him to No. 4 in the world.

"It's very reassuring to know that I can go from where I was a couple weeks ago to winning a tournament in sort of a quick turnaround," he said.

It was a close call for McNealy, who three months ago won for the first time on tour. He looked like a winner at Torrey Pines when he opened with eight birdies in 11 holes — not to mention a 40-foot par putt on the first hole — and stretched his lead to three.

But he had to scramble for par on the 17th after a drive that caromed off a pole and into an impossible lie in the rough, and then he failed to convert a birdie on the 18th. He still shot 64, but still on the course was the Swede

regarded as one of golf's rising stars.

"It's more than I could have asked for at the start of the day," said McNealy, who started five shots behind. "Ludvig played awesome. I knew with that leaderboard it was going to take some great golf to get it done."

Woods watched a lot of unfold from the broadcast booth. He withdrew from the tournament Monday as he coped with the death of his mother, Kultida, last week. Players wore a red button that had the Thai symbol of love to honor her.

Aberg's strong rally started with a 6-foot sliding par putt on the 12th. He two-putted from 50 feet for birdie on the 13th, attacked a daunting back pin on the 14th to 5 feet for birdie and rolled in a 25-foot birdie putt on the 15th to tied for the lead.

From the middle of the fairway on the par-5 18th, he hit 7-wood long, some 70 feet away, rolled that down to just under 7 feet and calmly holed the putt.

"It was a great fight," Aberg said. "I'm really proud of the way I finished. It was really cool."