

## Caudle eyes fleet growth, sailor health

By ALISON BATH  
*Stars and Stripes*

NAVAL STATION ROTA, Spain — The show of hands by sailors in answer to a question about their well-being was not what the Navy's highest-ranking active-duty officer was hoping to see during a recent visit to this Atlantic Ocean base.

Adm. Daryl Caudle, chief of naval operations, wanted to find out whether the more than 200 sailors in attendance at a meeting Friday know that he considers them his top priority.

Only about 10% raised their hand in affirmation, a response he called disappointing.

But the sailors' candor revealed important lessons, among them that better communication is needed regarding his efforts to improve their quality of life, Caudle said during the meeting.

Caudle told the sailors at Rota that he is their "strongest advocate" for what they need to be successful, and he wants to know if their expectations are not being met.

Skepticism may also have been behind the lack of affirmative response from service members, who have heard those promises before, Caudle later told Stars and Stripes. Allaying doubts will require visible investment and results, he added.

"It's OK that they challenge me on that," Caudle said. "I want to rally behind what we're talking about here so that (our efforts are) palpable and measurable."

The Rota stopover by Caudle and Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy John Perryman followed a similar two-day visit at U.S. Naval Support Activity Naples in Italy.

Those personal check-ins dovetailed with separate appearances at both bases by Secretary of the Navy John Phelan.

In the visits to Rota and Naples, sailors were more interested in learning Caudle's thoughts on the threats in Europe, the Indo-Pacific and Middle East than answers to the more granular work-related issues he usually addresses, he said.

For example, he fielded questions about the safety of sailors and their families in the Middle East, what carrier would deploy next and where (spoiler: Caudle doesn't know where the George H.W. Bush Carrier Strike Group will go) and the Navy's operations in the Caribbean Sea.

Those queries and others reveal that sailors there are motivated, focused, ready to do their jobs and proud to be serving, Caudle said.

The visits to both bases in the U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa/U.S. 6th Fleet command by the Navy's highest officials demonstrate their significance to U.S. defense, particularly in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, which Caudle characterized as the "center of gravity" in the region.

The Navy's capabilities and reach there allow incomparable synergy among U.S. European Command, U.S. Africa Command and U.S. Central Command theaters, an area stretching from NATO's southern flank into Africa and the Middle East, Caudle said.

In addition to his experiences with sailors in Naples and Rota, Caudle discussed his Sailors First initiative and efforts to modernize and grow the fleet, among other topics.

Sailors First is a key initiative for Caudle in revamping the Navy's efforts to foster sailors' well-being through top-notch combat platforms, training, education and support.

The effort includes ensuring that the service meets or exceeds expectations in such areas as

housing, recreation, day care, grocery shopping, food service and schools.

### Better quality of life

Soon after officially taking his post in August, Caudle ordered an end to the practice of having sailors live on ships when they aren't underway, an effort he characterized as a no-brainer in improving quality of life.

To do that, the service would invest in unaccompanied and family housing and help sailors make good use of a recent increase in their basic allowance for housing.

The directive is in line with recommendations in a 2023 Navy investigation into the suicides of several sailors assigned to the aircraft carrier USS George Washington.

Junior sailors were living in poor conditions on and off the ship while the carrier was undergoing a grueling yearslong overhaul, investigators found.

The investigation included 48 recommendations to better the quality of life for sailors.

In tackling the issue, Caudle learned that an estimated 7,500 to 10,000 sailors were assigned to live on ships. Today, that number has been reduced by more than half, to between 2,500 and 3,000, Caudle said at NSA Naples last week.

"No sailor's mailing address should be a ship," he said.

Caudle hopes to see the number reduced to zero as soon as next year. Commands will need to be creative in using barracks and off-base housing to achieve that goal, he said.

A small number of sailors may want to continue living on their ships, he added.

Caudle also intends to modernize galleys so they meet the nutritional and dietary needs of sailors. Ensuring affordable, availa-

ble and durable uniforms and free Wi-Fi in barracks also are on the list, according to the memo.

### Future of the force

Caudle acknowledges that the demand for Navy forces is growing across theaters, including a carrier presence in waters off the coast of Venezuela.

But the need demonstrates the unique benefits and advantages the service offers to the Joint Command, he said in his talks with sailors.

For example, the Navy recently postured forces including the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln in the Arabian Sea to address growing tensions with Iran while it maintains a similarly sized force in the Caribbean, he told sailors at both Naples and Rota.

Meanwhile, five destroyers maintain Navy presence in Europe, and a carrier strike group and other forces are on patrol in the Indo-Pacific to address concerns about China.

The Navy's force structure lets the service easily mobilize its forces across the world, he said, adding that "the fact that it just doesn't matter" where Bush is deployed is "the greatest complement" a person in his position could have.

And that degree of capability will only improve with the growth initiative known as the Golden Fleet, Caudle said.

It proposes to preserve existing Navy platforms such as aircraft carriers, destroyers, submarines and amphibious assault ships while adding new vessels, such as a battleship designed to deliver superior firepower.

The plan also prioritizes drones, robots and autonomous systems as central in reshaping and strengthening the Navy for future conflicts, Defense News reported in December.

# New helmets set for Marine, Navy pilots

By COREY DICKSTEIN  
*Stars and Stripes*

Some Navy and Marine Corps aviators will get lighter, more capable helmets in the coming years as the services replace the headgear their pilots have worn for decades with a modern model.

The Navy in January awarded Gentex Corp. a \$22.6 million contract to produce more than 5,000 Next-Generation Fixed Wing Helmets for Navy and Marine pilots flying F/A-18 Hornets and Super Hornets, EA-18G Growlers and other fixed-wing aircraft, Naval Air Systems Command announced Feb. 4. The new helmets will replace the Gentex-built HGU-55/P and HGU-68P that pilots have worn since the 1980s and 1990s, respectively.

The helmets were designed with extensive input from cur-

rent Navy and Air Force flyers, according to Gentex. The new helmets are much lighter than the legacy headgear and easy to upgrade to incorporate digital advancements — like modernized heads-up displays and night-vision capabilities — to futureproof them for the foreseeable future, according to the company.

The new helmet, dubbed the NGFWH, “delivers meaningful advancements in aircrew safety, comfort, and mission performance, ensuring Naval aviators and Naval flight officers are equipped with technology that keeps pace with the rapidly evolving demands of modern aviation,” Robert McCay, Gentex’s vice president for aircrew systems, said in a news release. “We are honored to continue our trusted partnership with the U.S. Navy and look forward to provid-

ing the US military and international allies with the [new] helmet system for decades to come.”

Those advances will “improve both aircrew health and combat effectiveness,” according to the Navy.

The advanced carbon-fiber construction reduces the amount of weight pilots feel on their heads and an “optimized center of gravity” is designed to address chronic neck and back strain pilots have reported for decades from long missions with heavy headgear, according to the Navy.

“The NGFWH is a leap forward in aircrew ergonomics. By utilizing a lighter, more balanced carbon-fiber shell, we are significantly reducing the long-term physical toll on our aviators,” Capt. Joseph Kamara, the Naval Aircrew Systems program manager, said in a news release.

“This isn’t just a piece of safety gear; it’s a modular platform that allows us to rapidly integrate the next generation of digital cockpit technology without needing to field an entirely new helmet every few years.”

The latest helmet comes as the Navy, Marine Corps and Air Force have all worked in recent years to upgrade pilots’ headgear. The new helmets will not be available to F-35 Lightning II stealth fighter pilots, who wear a highly advanced helmet specifically built for that aircraft. The \$400,000 F-35 helmet takes pilots about two days to have personally fitted to their bodies, Defense Department officials have said.

The Navy said the NGFWH contract awarded to Gentex is open-ended and more of the helmets could be produced after the initial 5,000-helmet order.

## Europeans to take charge at two NATO commands

By JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

STUTTGART, Germany — Leadership of two NATO commands will shift from U.S. to European hands in connection with a shakeup aimed at having allies shoulder more responsibility in the 32-nation bloc, according to an organization insider.

NATO Joint Force Command in Norfolk, Va., and a similar headquarters in Naples, Italy, both led by American officers, will eventually transfer to European officers, the NATO official told Stars and Stripes on Tuesday.

Unaffected by the plan is leadership of NATO’s Supreme Allied Commander Europe slot, which has always been in the hands of an American officer.

“Allies have agreed on a new distribution of senior officer responsibility across the NATO

command structure in which European allies, including NATO’s newest members, will play a more prominent role in the alliance’s military leadership,” said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity.

The official described the arrangement as “Europe moving to the fore, and Americans absolutely committed to NATO.”

In a related move, responsibility for NATO’s Maritime Command in the United Kingdom will be shifted to the leader of the Naples-based U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa.

The plan would give the head of NAVEUR-AF dual-hatted NATO command responsibilities in a similar manner to the leaders of U.S. Army Europe and Africa and U.S. Air Forces in Europe and Air Forces Africa, who oversee corresponding NATO land and air command head-

quarters.

A NATO statement Tuesday offered more detail about the arrangement.

The U.K. will lead Joint Force Command Norfolk, and Italy will do the same for the Naples headquarters. Meanwhile, Germany and Poland will share leadership of Joint Force Command Brunssum in the Netherlands on a rotational basis.

The change puts Europeans in charge of all three of NATO’s four-star commands, which lead at the operational level in crisis and conflict, the statement said.

The developments, first reported by Politico on Monday, come ahead of a NATO defense ministers meeting Thursday in Brussels, where allies are expected to discuss U.S. force posture in Europe.

During the past year, American officials including Defense

Secretary Pete Hegseth have emphasized the need for allies in Europe to shoulder more responsibility for NATO and the defense of Europe.

In particular, the Pentagon wants allies to provide the lion’s share of military capabilities when it comes to the conventional defense of the Continent. Those priorities also now extend to NATO’s command structure as Europeans take on more prominent roles.

Matthew Whitaker, the U.S. ambassador to NATO, said Monday that the U.S. remains committed to the alliance but that allies must follow through on plans to beef up their own defenses.

“We are not trying to dismantle NATO,” Whitaker said at a forum in Munich ahead of a major security conference in that city later this week.

# Dems unhappy with White House ICE deal

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Democratic leaders say a proposal from the White House is “incomplete and insufficient” as they are demanding new restrictions on President Donald Trump’s immigration crack-down and threatening a shut-down of the Homeland Security Department.

Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer and House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries said in a statement late Monday that a White House counterproposal to the list of demands they transmitted over the weekend “included neither details nor legislative text” and does not address “the concerns Americans have about ICE’s lawless conduct.” The White House proposal was not released publicly.

The Democrats’ statement comes as time is running short,

with another partial government shutdown threatening to begin Saturday.

Among the Democrats’ demands are a requirement for judicial warrants, better identification of DHS officers, new use-of-force standards and a stop to racial profiling.

They say such changes are necessary after two protesters were fatally shot by federal agents in Minneapolis last month.

Earlier Monday, Senate Majority Leader John Thune, R-S.D., had expressed optimism about the rare negotiations between Democrats and the White House, saying there was “forward progress.”

Thune said it was a good sign that the two sides were trading papers, and “hopefully they can find some common ground here.”

But coming to an agreement

on the charged issue of immigration enforcement will be difficult, especially as rank-and-file lawmakers in both parties were skeptical about finding common ground.

Republicans have balked at the Democrats’ requests and some have demands of their own, including the addition of legislation that would require proof of citizenship before Americans register to vote and restrictions on cities that they say do not do enough to crack down on illegal immigration.

And many Democrats who are furious about Immigration and Customs Enforcement’s aggressive crackdown have said they won’t vote for another penny of Homeland Security funding until enforcement is radically scaled back.

“Dramatic changes are needed at the Department of Homeland Security before a DHS

funding bill moves forward,” Jeffries said earlier Monday. “Period. Full stop.”

Congress is trying to renegotiate the DHS spending bill after Trump agreed to a Democratic request that it be separated out from a larger spending measure that became law last week. That package extended Homeland Security funding at current levels only through Feb. 13, creating a brief window for action as the two parties discuss new restrictions on ICE and other federal officers.

Democrats made the demands for new restrictions on ICE and other federal law enforcement after ICU nurse Alex Pretti was shot and killed by a U.S. Border Patrol officer in Minneapolis on Jan. 24, and some Republicans suggested that new restrictions were necessary. Renee Good was shot by ICE agents on Jan. 7.

## US official admits meeting Epstein despite early claims

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Under questioning from Democrats Tuesday, Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick acknowledged that he had met with Jeffrey Epstein twice after his 2008 conviction for soliciting prostitution from a child, reversing Lutnick’s previous claim that he had cut ties with the late financier after 2005.

Lutnick once again downplayed his relationship with the disgraced financier who was once his neighbor in New York City as he was questioned by Democrats during a subcommittee hearing of the Senate Appropriations Committee. He described their contact as a handful of emails and a pair of meetings that were years apart.

“I did not have any relationship with him. I barely had anything to do with him,” Lutnick

told lawmakers.

But Lutnick is facing calls from several lawmakers for his resignation after the release of case files on Epstein contradicted Lutnick’s claims on a podcast last year that he had decided to “never be in the room” with Epstein again after a 2005 tour of Epstein’s home that disturbed Lutnick and his wife.

The commerce secretary said Tuesday that he and his family actually had lunch with Epstein on his private island in 2012 and he had another hour-long engagement at Epstein’s home in 2011. Lutnick, a member of President Donald Trump’s Cabinet, is the highest-profile U.S. official to face bipartisan calls for his resignation amid revelations of his ties to Epstein. His acknowledgment comes as lawmakers are grasping for what accountability looks like.

## Governors won’t meet Trump after only Republicans invited

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The National Governors Association will no longer hold a formal meeting with President Donald Trump when the group of state leaders meets in Washington later this month after the White House planned to invite only Republicans.

“NGA staff was informed that the White House intends to limit invitations to the annual business meeting, scheduled for February 20, to Republican governors only,” Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt, a Republican who is the chairman of the NGA, said in a letter to fellow governors obtained by The Associated Press. “Because NGA’s mission is to represent all 55 governors, the Association is no longer serving as the facilitator for that event, and it is no longer included in our official program.”

The NGA is scheduled to meet in Washington from Feb. 19-21. Representatives for Stitt, the White House and the NGA didn’t immediately comment on the letter.

The governors group is one of the few remaining venues where political leaders from both major parties gather to discuss the top issues facing their communities. In his letter, Stitt encouraged governors to unite around common goals.

“We cannot allow one divisive action to achieve its goal of dividing us,” he wrote. “The solution is not to respond in kind, but to rise above and to remain focused on our shared duty to the people we serve. America’s governors have always been models of pragmatic leadership, and that example is most important when Washington grows distracted by politics.”



# IRS: \$1,776 payment to troops tax-free

MassLive

The Internal Revenue Service has confirmed that a widely discussed \$1,776 payment distributed to service members will not be subject to federal income taxes, resolving a major point of uncertainty as tax filing season begins.

The payment, called the “Warrior Dividend,” qualifies as a non-taxable military benefit under federal law. Because the funds were issued as a supplemental basic allowance for housing rather than standard income or bonus pay, recipients

will not include the amount in their taxable gross income for 2025.

The confirmation puts to rest questions on whether the payment — a symbolic nod to 1776 and the nation’s 250th anniversary — would increase tax liabilities or affect credits and deductions this filing cycle.

Pentagon press officials welcomed the clarification, noting that service members will keep the full \$1,776 without federal tax withholding.

“The tax-free Warrior Dividend places \$1,776 directly in

the hands of our warfighters and their families,” a Pentagon spokesperson said in a January statement.

The payment’s origins trace back to a December announcement from the White House, when the administration introduced the Warrior Dividend as a thank-you gesture for active service personnel and select Reserve members.

“In honor of our nation’s founding in 1776, we are sending every soldier \$1,776,” President Donald Trump said during the Dec. 17 announcement.

The dividend applies to 1.28 million active-duty service members who were in qualifying service status as of Nov. 30.

It also includes 174,000 Reservists and National Guard members who were on active-duty orders for at least 31 consecutive days as of Nov. 30, 2025.

The payments exclude general and flag officers in pay grades above O-6. It also does not include veterans, retirees, civilian Defense Department employees or most National Guard members not on qualifying orders.

## EU drafts concessions list for Russia in bid for peace

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — The European Union is drafting a list of concessions it believes Russia must make to secure any long-term peace in Ukraine, the bloc’s top diplomat said Tuesday, as U.S.-run talks to end four years of war show little sign of progress.

Russian forces used cluster munitions in an attack on a market in Ukraine killing seven as envoys from Moscow and Kyiv met in Abu Dhabi last week for another round of U.S.-brokered talks. No breakthrough was made, although a new prisoner swap was agreed.

After saying in 2024 that he could end the war in a day, then 100 days, President Donald Trump has now given Ukraine and Russia until June to come to an agreement.

The EU is convinced Russia is not negotiating seriously and it doubts European and Ukrainian interests are being represented by the Trump administration, so work has begun on “a sustainable peace plan” that might force Moscow’s hand.

“We have just seen increased bombing by Russians during these talks,” EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas said, including

the targeting of Ukraine’s electricity grid during what has been the coldest winter of the war.

Kallas said the 27-nation bloc is “very grateful” for U.S. diplomatic efforts so far, but “to have sustainable peace also, everybody around the table including the Russians and the Americans need to understand that you need Europeans to agree.”

“We also have conditions,” Kallas told reporters in Brussels. “And we should put the conditions not on Ukrainians that have already been pressured a lot, but on the Russians.”

A draft list of conditions is likely to be shared among EU member countries in coming days for a possible discussion when the bloc’s foreign ministers meet Feb. 23.

Kallas said the Europeans do not want to start a separate track of peace talks, which Russia would likely dismiss, but that it is important “to change the narrative.”

“Everybody wants this war to stop, except the Russians,” she said. “We can push them into the place where they actually want to end this war. They’re not there yet. Unfortunately, it’s not an easy solution.”

## Top Iran official in Oman, site of nuke talks with US

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — A top Iranian security official traveled Tuesday to Oman, the Mideast sultanate now mediating talks between Tehran and Washington over the Islamic Republic’s nuclear program aimed at halting a possible American strike.

The visit by Ali Larijani, a former Iranian parliament speaker who now serves as the secretary to the country’s Supreme National Security Council, likely focused on what comes next after the initial round of indirect talks held last week in Muscat with the Americans.

Larijani’s entourage shared photos of him meeting with Omani Foreign Minister Badr al-Busaidi, the chief intermediary in the United States-Iran talks, with what appeared to be a letter sheathed in plastic and sitting alongside the Omani diplomat.

Iran has in the past communicated its positions in writing when dealing with the Americans — and famously, Japan’s then-Prime Minister Shinzo Abe tried to hand Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei a letter from Presi-

dent Donald Trump in 2019 that he refused to take.

Iranian media had said Larijani would deliver an important message. Iranian state television hours after that meeting, however, described al-Busaidi as having “handed over a letter” to Larijani. It did not elaborate from where the letter came.

Larijani also met with Oman’s Sultan Haitham bin Tariq for nearly three hours, the state-run IRNA news agency reported. Neither Iran nor Oman offered any details on what had been discussed in Larijani’s meetings. Larijani was later to travel to Qatar, which hosts a U.S. military installation that Iran attacked in June after the U.S. bombed Iranian nuclear sites during the 12-day Iran-Israel war.

Iran and the U.S. held new nuclear talks last week in Oman. Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi, speaking Sunday to diplomats at a summit in Tehran, signaled that Iran would stick to its position that it must be able to enrich uranium — a major point of contention with Trump. That war disrupted earlier rounds of nuclear talks between Washington and Tehran.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

## Ex-principal avoids jail after party at her home

**FL** ORLANDO — A former Brevard County school principal accused of allowing a raucous, alcohol-fueled party for minors at her home last year accepted a plea deal Monday that allows her to avoid jail time.

Prosecutors said the party at the home of Elizabeth Hill-Brodigan, the former principal of Roosevelt Elementary School in Cocoa Beach, on the night of Jan. 19, 2025, led to one minor being evaluated by paramedics for alcohol poisoning and another being arrested for driving under the influence.

Hill-Brodigan, who according to a warrant affidavit has a relative that attends Cocoa Beach High School, was sentenced Monday to two years of probation after pleading no contest to holding an open house party and contributing to the delinquency or dependency of minors as part of the deal, prosecutors announced that day.

Cocoa Beach police responded to Hill-Brodigan's home that night after receiving multiple calls about the party. There was an active party at the home when police initially arrived, the former principal's arrest warrant affidavit said.

## Teacher suspended after report of porn in class

**NC** HILLSBOROUGH — A Cedar Ridge High School teacher has been suspended after students reported being shown a pornographic image in class, according to a parent and district offi-

cial.

The parent, who did not want to be named because of retaliation fears, told The Raleigh News & Observer that civics teacher Francis Felicelli began showing a slide presentation to his ninth-grade students Thursday morning.

But the third image on the screen had one or more naked women engaged in a sex act with a naked man, their students told them.

Orange County Schools district spokesman Kevin Smith confirmed Felicelli has been suspended with pay while an investigation is being conducted.

## Harvard proposes cap on A's amid grade inflation

**MA** BOSTON — Harvard University is proposing to limit the number of top grades awarded to undergraduate students, responding to concerns that grade inflation may weaken the meaning of a degree from the school.

The plan would cap A grades at 20% of undergraduates, with some flexibility, across courses and departments if it's approved by faculty ahead of the 2026-27 school year, Amanda Claybaugh, dean of undergraduate education, said in an email on Friday that included a 19-page outline of the plan.

Claybaugh announced a committee to study grading policies and possible alternatives in November 2024. At the start of the current semester, she said the share of "flat A's" had fallen to 53%, from 60% previously.

The proposal on Friday cites concerns from employers and admissions officials who have said that "Harvard transcripts

no longer provide them useful information about the performance and distinction of Harvard students."

## Oyster season prompts calls for disaster aid

**MD** ANNAPOLIS — Maryland officials are asking for federal help after what they describe as one of the worst oyster seasons in state history, a collapse they say threatens both watermen and a cornerstone of the Chesapeake Bay economy.

U.S. Rep. Andy Harris, R-Md., this week asked the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to declare an economic fishery disaster under the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. Such a designation can unlock emergency federal assistance for fisheries harmed by natural or market conditions.

"Severe weather this year, combined with shrinking market access and increased competition, left many crews effectively tied to the dock," Harris said in a statement. He said immediate relief is needed to offset financial losses.

Lawmakers also warned of environmental consequences if the industry stalls. State Sen. Johnny Mautz, R-Middle Shore, said working oyster bars helps prevent sediment buildup and supports oyster reproduction.

## Judge rules against on-campus voting sites

**NC** GREENSBORO — A federal judge on Sunday ruled against a coalition of college students from three

North Carolina universities — including the nation's largest HBCU — who sought to compel the state to host early voting sites on their campuses.

The judge, William Osteen Jr., wrote that it would be potentially impossible for the court to force universities to open early voting sites on such short notice, given that in-person voting begins this coming week.

Students from Western Carolina University, UNC Greensboro and NC A&T State University sued the state in late January after election officials rejected their efforts to secure on-campus early voting sites for the March 3 primary election.

## Skiers on lift witness man's fatal fall on slope

**CA** LOS ANGELES — A skier died at Mammoth Mountain on Thursday following a fatal accident in full view of other skiers riding a nearby lift. It was the fourth death at the resort this season.

The skier, who has not been identified, was attempting a run called Dropout 2 — among the steepest marked trails in California — which descends from the summit ridge of the 11,000-foot mountain.

The run falls about 1,200 vertical feet below a slow, three-person lift that ferries expert skiers to some of Mammoth's most adventurous terrain.

The man fell hard enough to pop out of his skis in the steep, icy moguls near the top of the run before sliding headfirst for hundreds of yards, apparently unable to stop himself, according to witnesses who posted on Reddit.

— From wire reports

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# Shiffrin's woes persist in team combined

Associated Press

CORTINA D'AMPEZZO, Italy — Mikaela Shiffrin didn't offer any excuses. No sense of anger, frustration or tears for that matter either.

The most decorated slalom racer in history could tell the snow under her skis didn't feel right as she made her way down the Tofane Alpine Skiing Center in the first Olympic women's team combined event on Tuesday.

Something about the feedback she was getting seemed ... off.

By the time Shiffrin crossed the finish line, the slim lead Breezy Johnson handed her after a brilliant and gutsy downhill was gone. So was a shot at the gold, which went to Austria's Ariane Raedler and Katharina Huber.

Silver and bronze disappeared too, with fellow Team USA members Jackie Wiles and Paula Moltzan holding off their two friends for third to earn the first Olympic medals of their lengthy careers.

Four years removed from a forgettable two weeks in Beijing

when she went 0 for 6 and failed to even reach the finish line three times, Shiffrin's fourth Olympics began with a run that started slow and never came together. She lost time at every checkpoint, sending her and Johnson sliding down to fourth.

How sluggish was Shiffrin? Her time of 45.38 was 15th fastest out of the 18 skiers who reached the bottom. For comparison, Shiffrin hadn't finished that low in an individual slalom she finished since 2012, when she still was a teenager and her rise to three Olympic medals and a record 108 World Cup titles (and counting) was still beyond her wildest dreams.

It wasn't a confidence issue. Shiffrin took the chair lift up to the top of the course inspired by Johnson, who backed up a gold-medal performance in the women's downhill on Sunday by storming her way to the front to give Shiffrin a slim lead of .06 seconds heading into the slalom.

Shiffrin, who knows a thing or two about attention, marveled at Johnson's ability to focus given the whirlwind that comes when

you break through at the Olympics. She leaned forward at the start intent on giving Johnson her second gold in 48 hours.

Down at the finish, Wiles and Moltzan sat in third torn between rooting for their teammates and dreading having a medal snatched away by the best to ever do it.

"We were asking for a miracle," said Wiles.

They got one. Shiffrin stood in the finish area after her time was posted and was immediately embraced by Johnson. Hugs with Moltzan and Wiles — well aware of the bullet they dodged — soon followed.

"I think if you let Michaela go run that course (again), I think she'd come down at least a second (faster)," Moltzan said.

Only she didn't. Not this time anyway. Whatever personal disappointment Shiffrin might have felt was offset by watching two friends she's skied alongside for the better part of two decades have their Olympic moment years in the making.

Wiles, who cried while talking to the media after a fourth-place finish in the downhill, be-

came the oldest woman to medal in an alpine event at 33 years and seven months.

"There's so much sweet about the day," Shiffrin said. "So we're taking that and I will have some learning to do like always."

Shiffrin was careful to not put too much pressure on herself, having learned that every Olympic experience is different. There was joy in Sochi in 2014 and Pyeongchang four years later. There was dismay in China after her ambitious schedule was pockmarked with baffling DNFs that left her sitting in the snow wondering what went wrong.

Shiffrin will spend Wednesday recovering. On Thursday, she'll point to the rest of an Olympics that may still have plenty to offer. Just not on Tuesday, when the comfort level she needed to get to full speed never arrived.

"I'm going to have to learn what to do, what to adjust in the short time we have before the other tech races," she said. "There's always something to learn."

## German Taubitz dominates women's single luge race

Associated Press

CORTINA D'AMPEZZO, Italy — Julia Taubitz added a new chapter to Germany's Olympic luge dominance. Elina Bota made some history for Latvia.

And Ashley Farquharson was moved to tears — after giving USA Luge just the seventh medal in its Olympic history.

Taubitz rolled to the win in the women's singles race at the Milan Cortina Olympics, finishing her two-day, four-run strut to the gold in 3 minutes, 30.625 seconds — nearly a full second ahead of Bota, who got the silver.

Farquharson got the bronze, the third singles medal ever for USA Luge at the Olympics and matching the best finish by an

American women's slider. Chris Mazdzer got silver in men's singles at the 2018 Pyeongchang Games, and Erin Hamlin got the women's bronze at the 2014 Sochi Olympics.

This time, it was Farquharson's turn.

Taubitz got the 17th gold medal awarded in women's singles luge, and the 13th that went to a German slider.

The Olympic singles gold medal was the only thing missing on Taubitz's resume.

She's a two-time women's singles world champion, a five-time World Cup overall champion, a winner of more than 30 World Cup races and none of that takes into account how she

has piled up medals as part of Germany's near-unbeatable team relays.

And now, the biggest medal. The shiniest one, too. She's the Olympic champion, taking over that crown from now-retired German great Natalie Geisenberger, who won the last three gold medals.

Emily Fischnaller was 12th for the Americans in 3:33.035, falling from fifth after three runs with some trouble in her final heat. Summer Britcher of the U.S., a two-time World Cup race winner this season and now a four-time Olympian, was 14th in 3:33.553.

Taubitz and Merle Fraebel were so far ahead of the field en-

tering Tuesday that the only way they wouldn't win gold and silver was if someone committed a huge mistake.

Fraebel did exactly that.

It took about one second for her gold chance — or any medal chance — to be gone. Fraebel badly botched the start of her third run, bouncing off the wall and ping-ponging her way down the rest of the track. She went from second entering the third run to 10th entering the last, way out of medal contention.

And that meant, for the fourth run, Taubitz didn't even have to get into fourth gear. With a lead of 0.704 seconds going into the final heat, there was no doubt that Taubitz would get gold.



# Kansas hands Arizona first loss of season

Associated Press

LAWRENCE, Kan. — Flory Bidunga had a double-double and No. 9 Kansas defeated top-ranked and previously unbeaten Arizona 82-78 on Monday night.

The Wildcats (23-1, 10-1 Big 12) entered Allen Fieldhouse with the second-longest winning streak in Division I men's basketball.

The Jayhawks (19-5, 9-2) played without freshman guard Darryn Peterson, who was a late scratch with flu-like symptoms. Peterson has missed 11 games with a combination of hamstring, calf and ankle issues.

Arizona held a three-point lead at halftime and led by as many as 11 before Kansas took its first lead of the game at the 9:32 mark in the second half.

Bidunga put the Jayhawks ahead with a layup, which capped a personal seven-point

run. He finished with 23 points on 8-for-11 shooting and added 10 rebounds.

The Wildcats closed within one point with 34 seconds left in the game, but senior guard Melvin Council Jr. shot 3 of 4 from the line in the final minute and 10 of 11 in the game to help seal the victory for Kansas. He finished with 23 points. Tre White also added a pair of late free throws.

**No. 7 St. John's 87, Xavier 82 (OT):** Zuby Ejiofor scored six of his 25 points in overtime and the host Red Storm outlasted the pesky Musketeers at Madison Square Garden for their 10th consecutive victory.

With his 904th career win on the court, Hall of Fame coach Rick Pitino passed Roy Williams for third place in Division I history behind Mike Krzyzewski (1,202) and Jim Boeheim (1,116).

It was Pitino's second victory

in 17 days over his son, Richard, the first-year coach of Xavier. In the previous meeting, the elder Pitino earned his 900th win when St. John's rallied from a 16-point deficit in the second half for an 88-83 victory at the Musketeers.

Bryce Hopkins added 19 points and nine rebounds for the Red Storm (19-5, 12-1 Big East), who won for the 15th time in 17 games and tied No. 6 UConn atop the conference standings.

Tre Carroll, the Big East's leading scorer, had 21 points and eight rebounds for the Musketeers (12-12, 4-9), who have lost five of six and eight of 11.

**No. 24 Louisville 118, NC State 77:** Mikel Brown Jr. had 10 3-pointers and scored an Atlantic Coast Conference freshman single-game record 45 points as the host Cardinals routed the Wolfpack.

Ryan Conwell added 31 and

Louisville (18-6, 8-4 Atlantic Coast Conference) shot 60% for the game.

Brown eclipsed the previous ACC freshman record of 42 points, set last season by Duke's Cooper Flagg. The 45 points also tied Hall of Famer Wes Unseld's single-game Cardinals scoring mark, set Dec. 1, 1967, against Georgetown College.

After up-and-down scoring outputs in five games since returning from a lower back injury, the heralded freshman guard had 21 points with five 3s by halftime before erasing LaBradford Smith's school freshman mark of 32 midway through the second.

Ven-Allen Lubin had 20 points and Tre Holloman 19 for N.C. State (18-7, 9-3), which had won six in a row and entered 6-0 in ACC road games. The Wolfpack shot 41% and made just 18% from deep.

## Raiders hire Kubiak as coach after title with Seahawks

Associated Press

HENDERSON, Nev. — The Las Vegas Raiders made it official Monday by announcing Seattle Seahawks offensive coordinator Klint Kubiak will be their next head coach.

Kubiak arrived in Las Vegas on Monday fresh off a 29-13 Super Bowl victory over the New England Patriots on Sunday.

Among the questions facing Kubiak, who was formally introduced Tuesday, as he takes over:

■ **Who he will hire as his coordinators on offense and defense?**

If Kubiak brings coaches with him from Seattle, he could consider quarterbacks coach Andrew Janocko for offensive coordinator and Aden Durde on the defensive side. Though it would be a promotion for Janocko, Kubiak might still call the plays. Durde is the Seahawks' DC, but he would have the opportunity to have full control of the defense, unlike in Seattle where coach Mike Macdonald calls plays on that side of the ball.

■ **What to do about defensive end Maxx Crosby?**

Two NFL reporters have said that the

Raiders' star pass rusher wants out. He wasn't happy about being placed on injured reserve with two games left this past season and might not have the appetite for another rebuild attempt. Crosby said on "The Herd with Colin Cowherd" that no such talk came from him, but he also didn't deny he wanted out.

Las Vegas could get a haul by trading the 28-year-old Crosby and perhaps even accelerate the rebuild. Dallas got two first-rounders and three-time Pro Bowl defensive tackle Kenny Clark by shipping Micah Parsons to Green Bay.

■ **How will he prepare for free agency and the draft?**

The Raiders have the No. 1 pick and more than \$91 million in salary cap space, according to overthecap.com, so they have the opportunity to greatly upgrade their roster. It's almost certain they will use that top pick on Fernando Mendoza, who won the Heisman Trophy and quarterbacked Indiana to the national championship.

But Las Vegas will need to surround Mendoza with a lot more talent than is currently on the roster. Their top priorities will likely be improving the offensive line and finding

a No. 1 wide receiver. The defense doesn't have a glaring weakness, but can use help throughout that side of the ball.

Kubiak, 38, confirmed during an on-field interview with NFL Network after the Seahawks won the Super Bowl on Sunday that he was heading to Las Vegas. Not that it was a surprise.

Kubiak and the Raiders began working toward finalizing an agreement more than a week ago for him to take the job, a person with knowledge of the discussions said at the time. The person spoke to The Associated Press on the condition of anonymity because no contract was in place and no announcement could be made until after the Super Bowl in Santa Clara, Calif.

He'll be the third coach in three seasons for Las Vegas and fifth full-time leader since they moved in 2020. He succeeds Pete Carroll, who went 3-14 in one season with the Raiders after a storied run in Seattle that included two Super Bowl appearances and one championship.

Kubiak oversaw a Seahawks offense that went from being ranked 18th the year before in scoring to third in the NFL this season and from 14th to eighth in yardage.

# Pistons' win vs. Hornets ends with brawl

Associated Press

Cade Cunningham had 33 points and nine rebounds, and the Detroit Pistons hung on to beat Charlotte 110-104 on Monday night, snapping the Hornets' nine-game winning streak in a wild game that included a fight and four player ejections.

Charlotte coach Charles Lee was also ejected after having to be restrained from going after an official while arguing a no-call in the fourth quarter.

Duncan Robinson scored 18 points for Detroit and Jalen Duren added 15 before being ejected when he ignited the brawl by hitting Moussa Diabate with an open right hand in the third quarter.

Brandon Miller scored 24 points for the Hornets, while LaMelo Ball and Kon Knueppel each had 20.

Midway through the third quarter, Duren was driving toward the basket when he was fouled by Diabate. Duren got face-to-face with Diabate and the two appeared to butt heads. Duren then hit Diabate in the face with his open right hand, igniting a confrontation that lasted more than 30 seconds.

"Emotions were flaring," Duren said. "At the end of the day, we would love to keep it basketball, but things happen. Everybody was just playing hard."

While Pistons forward Tobias Harris was holding Diabate back, Diabate threw a punch at Duren. Duren walked away and Miles Bridges charged at him, throwing a left-handed punch.

Duren retaliated with a punch. Diabate attempted to charge again at Duren and had to be held back. Isaiah Stewart left the bench to confront Bridges, who responded with a punch, and the players tussled.

Diabate, Bridges, Duren and Stewart were ejected.

Duren said that opposing NBA teams have been trying to "get in our head" all season.

"This isn't the first time that people have tried to be like extra

aggressive with us and talk to us, whatever the case may be," Duren said. "But as a group we have done an OK job of handling that energy and intensity. At the end of the day, emotions got high with everybody being competitive. Things happen."

Charlotte did not make Bridges and Diabate available for interviews after the game.

Bridges, however, took to Instagram late Monday night to say: "Sorry Hornets Nation! Sorry Hornets Organization! Always gonna protect my teammates forever".

"It looked like two guys got into a heated conversation and it just kind of spiraled from there," Lee said.

**Nets 123, Bulls 115:** Nic Claxton scored 28 points and had 10 rebounds to lead host Brooklyn over Chicago.

Noah Clowney added 20 points for the Nets, who won their second in a row. Drake Powell had 14 points off the bench, rookies Danny Wolf and Nolan Traore each had 13 and Ziaire Williams added 11.

Brooklyn won three of the four meetings between the Eastern Conference teams that are rebuilding.

**Jazz 115, Heat 111:** Brice Sensabaugh made a go-ahead 3-pointer with 47 seconds remaining to lift visiting Utah over Miami.

The Jazz won for only the fifth time in their last 23 games.

Andrew Wiggins scored 26 points, Bam Adebayo had 23 points and 11 rebounds and Kaspas Jakucionis finished with 20 points for the Heat.

**Pelicans 120, Kings 94:** Trey Murphy III made five 3-pointers and finished with 21 points, Jeremiah Fears scored 14 of his 20 in the second half and host New Orleans sent Sacramento to its 13th straight loss.

The Kings have their most consecutive losses since the franchise moved from Kansas City to Sacramento ahead of the 1985-86 season.

Murphy has made 23 3-pointers on 40 attempts (72.5%) in the last three games. Zion Williamson scored 18 points on 7-of-11 shooting and had six assists for the Pelicans.

**Cavaliers 119, Nuggets 117:** Donovan Mitchell scored 32 points, including two free throws with 0.9 seconds left after James Harden's tying 3-pointer, and visiting Cleveland rallied to beat Denver.

Harden finished with 22 points and 10 rebounds in his second game with the Cavaliers. Harden, acquired from the Los Angeles Clippers on Feb. 4, scored 23 points in his Cleveland debut three nights later.

Nikola Jokic had 22 points, 14 rebounds and 11 assists, but missed a potential winning 3-point shot at the buzzer. Two nights after Jokic passed Oscar Robertson for second place in career triple-doubles, he notched his 183rd.

**Trail Blazers 135, 76ers 118:** Toumani Camara scored a career-high 30 points and shot 8 of 10 from 3-point range, Deni Avdija had 26 points and 10 rebounds, and host Portland used a huge third quarter to cruise to a victory over Philadelphia.

Jerami Grant and Donovan Clingan each added 15 points for the Trail Blazers, who trailed 65-64 at halftime before outscoring the 76ers 49-22 in the third to take control.

Joel Embiid, who scored 33 points in a win at Phoenix on Saturday night, sat out against Portland to rest his right knee after an off day.

**Thunder 119, Lakers 110:** Jalen Williams scored 15 of his 23 points in the second half of his return from a 10-game injury absence, and visiting Oklahoma City snapped its two-game skid with a victory over Los Angeles.

Reigning league MVP Shai Gilgeous-Alexander and current NBA scoring leader Luka Doncic both sat out due to injuries, leaving their supporting casts to play a Thunder-style

physical game featuring 52 combined free throws.

The Lakers ended their three-game winning streak ended with another ineffective defensive performance.

**Magic 118, Bucks 99:** Anthony Black scored 26 points, Desmond Bane added 25 and host Orlando beat Milwaukee to snap the Bucks' season-long three-game win streak.

Magic forward Franz Wagner played 17 minutes after missing 23 of the last 25 games due to a high ankle sprain. Wagner came off the bench for the first time in his career and finished with 14 points and five rebounds.

Kevin Porter Jr. led Milwaukee with 28 points and seven assists, but the Bucks committed 20 turnovers and gave up 67 points in the second half.

**Timberwolves 138, Hawks 116:** Anthony Edwards scored 21 of his 30 points in the first half as host Minnesota used a dominant second quarter to cruise to a win against short-handed Atlanta.

Edwards led seven Timberwolves players scoring in double figures, pushing them to a commanding win after a pair of disappointing losses to New Orleans and the Los Angeles Clippers.

CJ McCollum had 38 points for the Hawks, who have lost four of five and were playing without Jalen Johnson (left knee inflammation), Antonio Daniels (right ankle inflammation) and newly acquired Jonathan Kuminga (left knee bone bruise).

**Warriors 114, Grizzlies 113:** Gui Santos made a go-ahead layup with 19 seconds left and Al Horford stole the ball from Cam Spencer moments later after he rebounded a Memphis miss, and host Golden State rallied late to beat the Grizzlies.

Jahmai Mashack scored 17 points off the bench and Memphis reserves scored 68 points, the most the Warriors have given up to an opponent's backups this season.