

Service chiefs stress maritime dominance

BY GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

SAN DIEGO — The top four-star officers of the Navy, Marine Corps and Coast Guard on Wednesday emphasized their plans to sustain flexible, powerful maritime forces during a lunch and town hall that drew an overflow crowd at the West 2026 conference.

Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Daryl Caudle, Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Eric Smith and Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Kevin Lunday underlined the defense industry conference's theme of "maintaining maritime dominance and readiness" as hundreds of attendees watched the four-star feed live on a nearby jumbo closed-circuit television at the San Diego Convention Center.

"We just have never been in a time and space when the maritime services are more required and important," Caudle said.

The trio pointed out that recent buildups of U.S. forces in

the Middle East have relied on the Navy and Marines, while efforts to pressure Venezuela — culminating in the special forces raid to extract President Nicolas Maduro — have relied heavily on Navy and Coast Guard forces.

Smith underscored the Marine Corps' match with the Pentagon's new National Defense Strategy, which calls for leaner, modern, mobile U.S. forces.

"We had to be able to strike the adversary," Smith said. "We had to be able to strike at range."

The Marines are transitioning from 30 years of strategy and tactics used while fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq.

"We are proud to have done it, but it wasn't going to get us anywhere against a pacing threat, a true peer competitor, which we haven't faced since the 1940s," Smith said.

The Marines are training for a wider range of scenarios, including the Indo-Pacific region

and the new strategic emphasis on the Western Hemisphere.

Caudle reprised his "U.S. Navy Fighting Instructions" blueprint, which he presented earlier this week, calling for tailoring the response to the situation.

He said this week that it could mean using alternatives to the traditional aircraft carrier strike force.

"This whole idea of the fungibility and scalability and applicability of our forces has never been more demonstrated than right now," Caudle said.

The Navy still needs an infusion of investment in its fleet and the industrial base, which has led to delays in shipbuilding and worker shortages. Caudle said the issue affects the Navy's ability to support the Marines' need to get them into combat when called upon.

"I need to do more for Eric, to be a better partner with him, with my readiness," Caudle said.

Lunday praised Congress for a \$25 billion infusion of money

for the Coast Guard — the largest in the service's history — contained in last year's congressional budget reconciliation package.

The funding boost comes at a critical time, as the Coast Guard takes a leading role in drug interdiction, border security and monitoring Chinese and Russian activity in the Arctic, Lunday said.

"We are now beginning to emerge from probably one of the worst readiness crises in the last maybe 150 years for the Coast Guard, just due to sustained lack of annual appropriation investment," Lunday said. "It's an incredibly exciting time for our Coast Guard, with operations that are ongoing right now."

All three sea service chiefs said they were pleased with an upswing in recruiting and retention rates. They also agreed on the need for faster, more flexible procurement to allow the services to catch up with their acquisition goals.

Judge temporarily blocks DOD from punishing Kelly

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A federal judge agreed Thursday to temporarily block the Pentagon from punishing Democratic Sen. Mark Kelly, a former Navy pilot, for participating in a video that called on troops to resist unlawful orders.

U.S. District Judge Richard Leon ruled that Pentagon officials violated Kelly's First Amendment free speech rights and "threatened the constitutional liberties of millions of military retirees."

Kelly, who represents Arizona, sued in federal court to

block his Jan. 5 censure from Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth.

In November, Kelly and five other Democratic lawmakers appeared on a video in which they urged troops to uphold the Constitution and not to follow unlawful military directives from the Trump administration.

President Donald Trump accused the lawmakers of sedition "punishable by DEATH" in a social media post days later. Hegseth said Kelly's censure was "a necessary process step" to proceedings that could result in a demotion from the senator's

retired rank of captain and subsequent reduction in retirement pay.

The judge concluded that Kelly's speech has full First Amendment protection. Leon wrote, "Horsefeathers!" in response to the government's argument that Kelly is trying to exempt himself from the rules of military justice.

"Rather than trying to shrink the First Amendment liberties of retired servicemembers, Secretary Hegseth and his fellow Defendants might reflect and be grateful for the wisdom and expertise that retired service-

members have brought to public discussions and debate on military matters in our Nation over the past 250 years," Leon wrote.

"If so," he added, "they will more fully appreciate why the Founding Fathers made free speech the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights!"

Kelly said in a video statement posted after the ruling that the case was about more than just him and that the administration "was sending a message to millions of retired veterans that they too can be censured or demoted just for speaking out."

DOD allowed anti-drone laser test in Texas

Associated Press

EL PASO, Texas — The Pentagon allowed U.S. Customs and Border Protection to use an anti-drone laser earlier this week, leading the Federal Aviation Administration to suddenly close the airspace over El Paso, Texas, on Wednesday, according to two people familiar with the situation who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive details.

The confusing arc of events began as the FAA announced it was shutting down all flight traffic over the city on the U.S.-Mexico border for 10 days, stranding some travelers, but the closure ended up only lasting a few hours.

The Trump administration said it stemmed from the FAA and Pentagon working to halt an incursion by Mexican cartel drones, which are not uncommon along the southern border.

One of the people said the laser was deployed near Fort Bliss without coordinating with the FAA, which decided then to close the airspace to ensure commercial air safety.

Others familiar with the matter said the technology was used despite a meeting scheduled for later this month between the Penta-

gon and the FAA to discuss the issue.

While the restrictions were short-lived in the city of nearly 700,000 people, it is unusual for an entire airport to shut down even for a short time.

Stranded travelers with luggage lined up at airline ticket counters and car rental desks before the order was lifted.

Normal flights resumed after seven arrivals and seven departures were canceled. Some medical evacuation flights also had to be rerouted.

Jorge Rueda, 20, and Yamilexi Meza, 21, of Las Cruces, N.M., had their morning flight to Portland, Ore., canceled, so they were losing part of their Valentine's Day weekend trip.

Rueda said he was glad that "10 days turned into two hours." They were booked on an evening flight out of El Paso.

The investigation into last year's midair collision near Washington, D.C., between an airliner and Army helicopter that killed 67 people highlighted how the FAA and Pentagon were not always working well together.

The National Transportation Safety Board

said the FAA and the Army did not share safety data with each other about the alarming number of close calls around Reagan National Airport and failed to address the risks.

Democratic Sen. Tammy Duckworth of Illinois, a former Army helicopter pilot who serves on committees focused on aviation and the armed services, said the issue Wednesday was the latest example of "the lack of coordination that's endemic in this Trump administration."

Senate Commerce Committee Chairman Ted Cruz, R-Texas, said he would request a briefing from the FAA on the incident.

Rep. Veronica Escobar, a Democrat whose district includes El Paso, said neither her office nor local officials received any advance notice of the closure. After it was lifted, she said "the information coming from the federal government does not add up."

"I believe the FAA owes the community and the country an explanation as to why this happened so suddenly and abruptly and was lifted so suddenly and abruptly," Escobar said at a news conference.

In solicitation, Navy seeks drones with fewer launchpad limitations

BY LARA KORTE
Stars and Stripes

The hot item on the Navy's drone wish list these days is unmanned aircraft that sailors can launch from smaller ships or austere locations to carry out long-range attacks.

Instead of aircraft carriers, the launchpad for such a drone would be smaller vessels such as destroyers, littoral combat ships and frigates, according to a Defense Innovation Unit solicitation posted this week.

The Navy wants the aircraft to have a range of at least 1,400 miles and the ability to deliver 1,000-pound class munitions typically used by fighter jets like the F/A-18 Super Hornet and F-35 Lightning II.

The drones should also be able to operate in rough seas and with minimal personnel and infrastructure, the solicitation said. Responses are due by Feb. 27.

"Naval surface combatants are constrained in their ability to support long-range strikes over extended combat operations due to reliance on single-use missile systems, with limited magazine depth and limited at-sea muni-

tion replenishment capability," the Defense Innovation Unit wrote.

The agency is responsible for fielding and developing technology for the military.

The publication of the announcement came the same week as the Navy's top uniformed officer, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Daryl Caudle, outlined warfighting instructions for the service during a speech in San Diego.

Detailing the future of Navy operations, Caudle said he thinks the service relies too much on its carriers and called on commanders to use smaller, newer ships and other assets for missions.

As part of his plan for a "Golden Fleet," President Donald Trump last year proposed a revival of the Navy's heavily armed class of warship known as battleships.

An analysis from the Congressional Research Service sent to lawmakers last month said the ships would be armed with a "combination of missiles, guns, lasers" and other weapons that would be greater as a whole than what is currently used on the Navy's cruisers and destroyers.

2 Navy vessels collide during replenishment

Staff and wire reports

Two people reported minor injuries after a U.S. Navy destroyer and a supply vessel collided Thursday during a replenishment-at-sea, according to U.S. Southern Command.

The Arleigh Burke-class destroyer USS Truxtun and the fast combat support ship USNS Supply collided, said Steven McCloud, a spokesman for SOUTHCOM, adding that both ships reported they were sailing safely and that the collision is under investigation.

The USS Truxtun is a recent addition to the large naval presence in the Caribbean Sea that stands at 12 ships, including the world's largest aircraft carrier, the USS Gerald R. Ford, and several amphibious assault ships carrying thousands of Marines. The Truxtun left its home port in Norfolk, Va., on Feb. 3.

The destroyer had to return to port for several days to conduct "an emergent equipment repair" and it ultimately set sail for the Caribbean on Feb. 6, according to a Navy official.

Immigration crackdown ending in Minn.

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — The Trump administration is ending the immigration crackdown in Minnesota that led to thousands of arrests, violent protests and the fatal shootings of two U.S. citizens over the past two months, border czar Tom Homan said Thursday.

The operation called the Department of Homeland Security's "largest immigration enforcement operation ever" has been a flashpoint in the debate over President Donald Trump's mass deportation efforts, flar-

ing up after Renee Good and Alex Pretti were killed by federal officers in Minneapolis.

The U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement operation focused on the Minneapolis-St. Paul area resulted in more than 4,000 arrests, Homan said, touting it as a success.

"The surge is leaving Minnesota safer," he said. "I'll say it again, it's less of a sanctuary state for criminals."

The announcement marks a significant retreat from an operation that has become a major distraction for the Trump ad-

ministration and has been more volatile than prior crackdowns in Chicago and Los Angeles.

But Trump's border czar pledged that immigration enforcement won't end when the Minnesota operation is over.

"President Trump made a promise of mass deportation and that's what this country is going to get," Homan said.

Democratic Gov. Tim Walz said Tuesday that he expected Operation Metro Surge, which started in December, to end in "days, not weeks and months," based on his conversations with

senior Trump administration officials.

"The long road to recovery starts now," Walz posted on social media after Homan's announcement. "The impact on our economy, our schools, and people's lives won't be reversed overnight. That work starts today."

While the Trump administration has called those arrested in Minnesota "dangerous criminal illegal aliens," many people with no criminal records, including children and U.S. citizens, have also been detained.

House votes to slap back Trump's tariffs on Canada

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House voted Wednesday to slap back President Donald Trump's tariffs on Canada, a rare if largely symbolic rebuke of the White House agenda as Republicans joined Democrats over the objections of GOP leadership.

The tally, 219-211, was among the first times the House, controlled by Republicans, has confronted the president over a signature policy, and drew instant recrimination from Trump himself. The resolution seeks to end the national emergency Trump declared to impose the

tariffs, though actually undoing the policy would require support from the president, which is highly unlikely. It next goes to the Senate.

Trump believes in the power of tariffs to force U.S. trade partners to the negotiating table. But lawmakers are facing unrest back home from businesses caught in the trade wars and constituents navigating pocket-book issues and high prices.

"Today's vote is simple, very simple: Will you vote to lower the cost of living for the American family or will you keep prices high out of loyalty to one

person — Donald J. Trump?" said Rep. Gregory Meeks of New York, the top Democrat on the House Foreign Affairs Committee, who authored the resolution.

Within minutes, as the gavel struck, Trump fired off a stern warning to those in the Republican Party who would dare to cross him.

"Any Republican, in the House or the Senate, that votes against TARIFFS will seriously suffer the consequences come Election time, and that includes Primaries!" the president posted on social media.

The high-stakes moment provides a snapshot of the House's unease with the president's direction, especially ahead of the midterm elections as economic issues resonate among voters. The Senate has already voted to reject Trump's tariffs on Canada and other countries in a show of displeasure. But both chambers would have to approve the tariff rollbacks, and send the resolution to Trump for the president's signature — or veto.

Six House Republicans voted for the resolution, and one Democrat voted against it.

GOP pushes strict proof-of-citizenship rule for voters

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — House Republicans rushed to approve legislation on Wednesday that would impose strict new proof-of-citizenship requirements ahead of the midterm elections, a long shot Trump administration priority that faces sharp blowback in the Senate.

The bill, called the Safeguard American Voter Eligibility, or SAVE America Act, would require Americans to prove they are citizens when they register to

vote, mostly through a valid U.S. passport or birth certificate. It would also require a valid photo identification before voters can cast ballots, which some states already demand. It was approved on a mostly party-line vote, 218-213.

Republicans said the legislation is needed to prevent voter fraud, but Democrats warn it will disenfranchise millions of Americans by making it harder to vote. Federal law already requires that voters in national

elections be U.S. citizens, but there's no requirement to provide documentary proof. Experts said voter fraud is extremely rare, and very few noncitizens ever slip through the cracks. Fewer than one in 10 Americans don't have paperwork proving they are citizens.

"Some of my colleagues will call this voter suppression or Jim Crow 2.0," said Rep. Bryan Steil, R-Wis., presenting the package at a committee hearing.

But he said "those allegations

are false," and he argued the bill is needed to enforce existing laws, particularly those that bar immigrants who are not citizens from voting. "The current law is not strong enough," he said.

The GOP's sudden push to change voting rules at the start of the midterm election season is raising red flags, particularly because President Donald Trump has suggested he wants to nationalize U.S. elections, which, under the Constitution, are designed to be run by individual states.

US transfers control of base to Syria

BY LARA KORTE
Stars and Stripes

Syrian government forces have taken control of a long-held U.S. military base in the eastern part of the country, Syrian and American officials said Thursday.

U.S. Central Command said it had completed the orderly departure of troops from al-Tanf Garrison on Wednesday as part of a “deliberate and conditions-based” transition of its anti-ISIS mission.

“U.S. forces remain poised to respond to any ISIS threats that arise in the region as we support partner-led efforts to prevent the terrorist network’s resurgence,” said Adm. Brad Cooper, the CENTCOM commander, in a statement. “Maintaining pres-

sure on ISIS is essential to protecting the U.S. homeland and strengthening regional security.”

Al-Tanf is strategically located along the borders of Iraq and Jordan, and for years was an important hub for the U.S. military’s campaign against the Islamic State.

ISIS was defeated in Syria in 2019, and the U.S. currently leads an international coalition that seeks to prevent a resurgence in the country.

The U.S. maintains about 1,000 troops in Syria, primarily as part of those anti-ISIS efforts.

Two U.S. soldiers and an American translator were killed in December when a gunman with ties to ISIS fired on troops who were working with

Syrian security forces in Palmyra.

The gunman was killed on site, and U.S. officials vowed swift retribution for the attack. Since then, CENTCOM forces have struck more than 100 targets and captured or killed more than 50 ISIS terrorists, according to the command.

The Syrian Defense Ministry said Thursday units of the Syrian Arab Army have secured the facility and its perimeter and started deploying troops in nearby desert regions at the borders with Iraq and Jordan, according to SANA.

The handoff also comes after a month of heightened tensions between the Syrian government and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces — a long-

time U.S. ally in the fight against ISIS.

Late last month, CENTCOM said it planned to move thousands of Islamic State detainees from Syria to secure locations in Iraq, citing concerns about a breakout.

American troops at al-Tanf had endured repeated drone attacks from Iran-backed militia groups in recent years.

The deadly 2024 attack on Tower 22, which killed three U.S. soldiers and injured 47 others, occurred about 12 miles from the al-Tanf garrison.

Such attacks from Iranian-backed militias have dropped off sharply since the overthrow of Bashar Assad’s government more than a year ago, according to The Associated Press.

Russia fires barrage at Ukraine, talks unclear

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russia launched a barrage of ballistic missiles and drones at Ukrainian cities in overnight attacks, officials reported on Thursday as Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said Moscow was “hesitating” about another round of U.S.-brokered talks on stopping the fighting.

Washington has proposed further negotiations next week between Russian and Ukrainian delegations in Miami or Abu Dhabi, in the United Arab Emirates, which was the location of the last meeting, Zelenskyy said late Wednesday.

Ukraine “immediately confirmed” it would attend, he said. “So far, as I understand it, Russia is hesitating,” Zelenskyy told reporters in a messaging app interview late Wednesday.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said on Thursday that another round of talks was expected “soon” but gave no fur-

ther details.

American officials made no comment on the possibility of further talks as part of a year-long peace effort by the Trump administration. Zelenskyy said last week that the United States has given Ukraine and Russia a June deadline to reach a deal.

But with Russia’s invasion of its neighbor marking its fourth anniversary later this month, disagreements between Moscow and Kyiv over key issues have held up a comprehensive settlement. The issues include who keeps the Ukrainian land Russia’s army has occupied, especially in eastern Donbas, and Moscow’s demands for Kyiv to surrender more territory.

Ukraine wants Western-backed security guarantees, including a date for joining the European Union, and a postwar reconstruction package in place before it can contemplate signing a proposed 20-point settlement, Zelenskyy said.

Marine declared dead after falling off USS Iwo Jima in Caribbean Sea

BY BRIAN MCELHINEY
Stars and Stripes

A U.S. Marine who fell overboard into the Caribbean Sea while deployed on the amphibious assault ship USS Iwo Jima was declared dead this week after a three-day search, according to the Marine Corps.

Lance Cpl. Chukwuemeka E. Oforah, 21, was declared dead on Tuesday following a 72-hour search and rescue operation, according to a II Marine Expeditionary Force news release Thursday.

Oforah was reported falling overboard Saturday evening, according to the release. He was a rifleman assigned to 3rd Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, and deployed with the Iwo Jima Amphibious Ready Group and the 22nd Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable).

“We are all grieving alongside the Oforah family,” unit commander Col. Tom Trimble said in the release. “The loss of Lance Cpl. Oforah is deeply felt across the entire Navy-Marine Corps team. He will be profoundly missed.”

The Iwo Jima was part of a large buildup of Navy and special operations forces that assembled in the Caribbean before the Jan. 3 U.S. operation that captured Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro and his wife, Cilia Flores. Maduro and Flores were held on the ship before being taken to New York.

The incident is under investigation, according to the release.

Oforah enlisted in the Marine Corps in October 2023 and graduated from Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, S.C., in February 2024, the release said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Groups: Remove covert license plate readers

CA SACRAMENTO — More than two dozen privacy and advocacy organizations are calling on California Gov. Gavin Newsom to remove a network of covert license plate readers deployed across Southern California that the groups believe feed data into a controversial U.S. Border Patrol predictive domestic intelligence program that scans the country's roadways for suspicious travel patterns.

"We ask that your administration investigate and release the relevant permits, revoke them, and initiate the removal of these devices," read the letter sent Tuesday by the Electronic Frontier Foundation, Imperial Valley Equity and Justice and other nonprofits.

An Associated Press investigation published in November revealed that the U.S. Border Patrol, an agency under U.S. Customs and Border Protection, had hidden license plate readers in traffic safety equipment. The data collected by the Border Patrol plate readers was then fed into a predictive intelligence program monitoring millions of American drivers nationwide to identify and detain people whose travel patterns it deems suspicious.

New Target CEO, ex-COO, reshapes leadership team

NY NEW YORK — Target CEO Michael Fiddelke is reshuffling his leadership team and making other changes shortly after stepping into the top job at the retailer that has struggled operationally.

Rick Gomez, the 13-year Target veteran who oversees the chain's vast inventory of merchandise, will leave the company. Jill Sando, the chief merchandising officer overseeing categories like apparel and home and who has been with the company since 1997, will retire.

Lisa Roath, who oversaw food, essentials and cosmetics, will take Fiddelke's previous job as chief operating officer, the company said Tuesday. Cara Sylvester, who had been chief guest experience officer, will become the company's chief merchandising officer.

Target has struggled to find its footing as many Americans have cut back on spending. The company has also been buffeted by consumer boycotts and backlash after it scaled back its corporate diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives.

National laboratory axes another 134 positions

CO GOLDEN — The National Laboratory of the Rockies let go 134 employees on Monday, the second time in less than a year that the facility formerly known as the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, or NREL, has terminated staff.

David Glickson, a spokesman for the National Laboratory of the Rockies, told The Denver Post late Monday afternoon that the eliminated positions were in both research and operations. The lab operates under the U.S. Department of Energy and its main location is the 327-acre campus in Golden, Colo. The lab also runs the National Wind Technology Center in Boulder County, where workers provide technical support needed to de-

velop new wind turbine designs.

"These actions were taken to adjust to existing and projected funding levels and alignment with DOE priorities," Glickson said.

In May, the Trump administration slashed 114 positions at what was then known as the NREL campus in Golden. It renamed the lab in December, stripping the word "renewable" from its title, with Assistant Energy Secretary Audrey Robertson saying at the time, "we are no longer picking and choosing energy sources."

TVA now wants to keep using 2 coal-fired plants

TN NASHVILLE — The nation's largest public utility says it now would prefer to keep operating two coal-fired power plants it had planned to shutter, changing course before a meeting of its board, which has a majority of members picked by the coal-friendly Trump administration.

In new filings, the Tennessee Valley Authority signaled that it wants to ditch closure dates for the Kingston Fossil Plant and Cumberland Fossil Plant in Tennessee, which would require further action from its board. The new plan would still include introducing natural gas-fired plants at both locations.

TVA had intended to shutter its remaining, aging coal plants by 2035 in an effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions that spur climate change. But the utility, which partners with local power companies to serve roughly 10 million people in seven states, said it is rethinking the coal plant closures because of regulatory changes and in-

creasing demand for electricity.

Several clean energy groups said extending the coal plants would raise questions about TVA's decision-making, since the utility has said more natural gas plants were needed to retire polluting coal plants.

Feds: Supervisor made ambulance chasing easy

NY NEW YORK — An NYPD civilian supervisor illegally used her access to private police databases to supply attorneys with names of car accident victims in exchange for thousands in cash and gifts, federal officials said last Friday.

Authorities said Pamela Dillard, 48, a department communication technician, made ambulance chasing easy for the lawyers she conspired with, while soliciting and accepting bribes of more than \$17,000, according to court records.

For nearly three years, Dillard combed private databases, accessing records of 911 calls made during automobile accidents, officials said.

Dillard also supervised other communication technicians and accessed names from their dispatches as well. Her co-conspirator owned and operated a call center that referred accident victims to lawyers and doctors, officials said.

In return for the names and contact information of accident victims, Dillard received money and other items of value. Dillard pleaded guilty to participating in a conspiracy to solicit and accept bribes, prosecutors said. She faces a minimum of five years in prison when she's sentenced on July 1.

— From wire reports

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Speedskater Stolz opens bid for 4 golds

Associated Press

MILAN — Jordan Stolz pictured this moment most of his life, ever since he was 5 and learning to skate on a frozen pond in his Wisconsin backyard after falling in love with speedskating while watching the 2010 Winter Olympics on TV — and hoping to one day step atop the podium himself.

So what was the little hassle of a 10-plus-minute wait to make sure this first speedskating gold medal would officially be his Wednesday? Especially because, as Stolz would say later, “I didn’t think anybody was going to beat that time.”

Stolz needed to hold off on a celebratory lap with a U.S. flag until another competitor got the chance for a re-skate, then soon enough was able to smile while leaning forward to receive his gold for winning the men’s 1,000 meters at the Milan Cortina Games in an Olympic-record time thanks to a blistering closing stretch.

“It was just a feeling like, ‘You finally did it,’” said the 21-year-old Stolz, who was trailing silver medalist Jennings de Boo of the

Netherlands with 400 meters to go. “It almost doesn’t seem real, right?”

Stolz’s father, Dirk, plowed away snow on their pond all those years ago so that little Jordan and his older sister, Hannah, could skate — over the objections of their mother, Jane. When they all gathered after Wednesday’s race, Dirk said, “He showed me (the medal) and said, ‘I finally got it!’”

Now Stolz will hope to keep going and add to his collection of trophies: He’s entered in three more events in Milan.

“Well, it’s hard to say, ‘Oh, I could win four gold medals,’ when you haven’t won one yet. Now that I’ve won one, I kind of know what to expect and can kind of feel like how the crowd is, with the energy, and the ice,” he said. “So it’s going to be good.”

Skating in the next-to-last pairing at Milano Speed Skating Stadium, a temporary facility constructed for these Olympics, Stolz finished in 1 minute, 6.28 seconds.

That didn’t threaten his world record of 1:05.37 but did better the Olympic standard of 1:07.18

that had stood since 2002. All four long track speedskating races in Milan have been won in the fastest times ever turned in at an Olympics.

De Boo ended up a half-second slower; no one else came within a full second of Stolz. Zhongyan Ning, of China, got the bronze.

“He’s just a killer on the last lap,” said Bob Corby, Stolz’s coach.

Stolz’s medal was his first at this level: As a 17-year-old at the 2022 Beijing Games, he was 14th in the 1,000 and 13th in the 500.

It was also the first medal of any sort in the men’s 1,000 for the United States since the 2010 Vancouver Games. That’s when Shani Davis — a mentor and, at one point, coach to Stolz — won his second consecutive gold in that event, and Chad Hedrick got the bronze. Dutch men had won the 1,000 at each of the past three Winter Games.

With Eric Heiden, the only speedskater to win five golds at one Olympics, sitting next to rapper Snoop Dogg in the stands, Stolz pulled ahead of de Boo by the time one full lap was

done. Then de Boo moved in front and was still there at the 600-meter mark.

But Stolz zoomed ahead around the final corner and crossed the line first with his hands on his knees, then rose for an understated pump of his right hand.

“I had high hopes. But his last lap is just incredible,” de Boo said. “I heard him coming at 800 meters, and then I just knew it was too late.”

Stolz entered the day as a big favorite.

He holds the 1,000 world record and is a two-time world champion at the distance. Plus, he went 5-for-5 on the World Cup circuit this season in the event, confirming his status as the man to beat at the Olympics.

Up next: Stolz races the 500 on Saturday, the 1,500 on Feb. 19 and the mass start Feb. 21.

Stolz’s name is often mentioned alongside that of Heiden, the only speedskater to claim five long track gold medals at a single Winter Games. At the 1980 Lake Placid Olympics, Heiden won the 500, 1,000, 1,500, 5,000 and 10,000.

Busch grabs Daytona pole while chasing elusive win

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Kyle Busch won the pole for NASCAR’s season-opening Daytona 500 to give the driver with the longest active losing streak in “The Great American Race” a shot at the victory that has escaped him his entire career.

Busch is 0-for-20 in the Daytona 500 and hasn’t started in the top five since 2016, when he still drove for Joe Gibbs Racing. He started fourth and finished third that year, then was a career-best second to then-teammate Denny Hamlin in 2019.

William Byron has no such issue. He will try to become the first driver in history to win the

Daytona 500 three consecutive years when the 68th running opens the NASCAR season Sunday.

Byron won last year’s event in overtime after Hamlin got spun while leading on the final lap, igniting a multicar crash. Byron ended up passing eight cars on the last lap to return to victory lane.

No driver has ever won his first Daytona 500 after 20 previous attempts. The late Dale Earnhardt won for team owner Richard Childress in his 20th start in 1998, three years before Earnhardt was killed in a crash on the final lap of the 2001 race.

“Sounds really good right now — being able to qualify on my

first pole for the Daytona 500, that’s pretty special,” said Busch, who wore custom-designed Olympic-themed racing shoes at Daytona International Speedway.

He earned the pole Wednesday night with a lap at 183.925 mph in a Chevrolet for Richard Childress Racing, the team that signed him before the 2023 season when his contract was up with Gibbs and his salary was too high for most teams.

But his time in the No. 8 has been rocky for the two-time NASCAR champion. He’s won three races since joining RCR — all in his first season — and takes a 93-race losing streak into the Daytona 500.

Busch starts the year with new crew chief Jim Pohlman, who led Justin Allgaier to the 2024 championship in NASCAR’s second-tier series.

The pole runs continues a strong few weeks for Busch and his family, as his older brother Kurt was inducted into the NASCAR Hall of Fame last month.

“Feels really good for RCR as a group,” Busch said. “Just a valiant effort by everybody here. It would be really nice to be doing an interview like this about being No. 1 come Sunday night.”

RCR last put a car on the pole for the Daytona 500 in 2014 when Austin Dillon, grandson of the team owner, qualified first. Dillon won the race in 2018.

Diggins fights injury for cross country bronze

Associated Press

TESERO, Italy — Jessie Diggins of the United States battled through injury to claim bronze Thursday in the women's 10-kilometer interval start, a race dominated by Sweden's Frida Karlsson as she won her second gold medal at the Winter Olympics.

Diggins, racing in her final season, collapsed to the ground, shouting out in pain after finishing the freestyle race at the Milan Cortina Games and adding to her gold, silver and bronze career medal tally.

The 34-year-old American finished 49.7 seconds behind a Swedish one-two, with Karlsson clocking 22 minutes, 49.2 seconds. Ebba Andersson was sec-

ond, 46.6 seconds behind the leader.

Diggins fell in the opening race, the Skiathlon, and bruised her ribs. The injury hurt her following performance in the individual sprint where she was eliminated in the heats.

"I need a new body," Diggins said. "Honestly, I think I'm the happiest, most grateful bronze medalist in the whole world. It's been one heck of a painful week. Two days ago, I was like, I don't know how I'm going to do this."

She hugged her Swedish rivals before stepping onto the podium to chants of "Jessie! Jessie!" from a crowd that included a large traveling group of her family and friends.

"I just felt like I was skiing out of my body the whole time. And I was just trying to fight for every single second and to leave it all out there," Diggins said. "I've been up at night with my ribs clicking in and out of place. It's just really been hard."

Her medal is the second for the U.S. team in cross country at the Games, following Ben Ogden's silver medal sprint in the men's competition. But Diggins said the pain of racing Thursday made her unaware of her position in the standings.

"I had no idea what place I was in," she said. "It's been disconcerting and really, really painful."

Showing emotion, Diggins said she had received video

messages of support from elderly relatives unable to make the trip, adding: "I saw my husband and got a big smooch before the start and that really helped me out."

Sweden's women have now won seven out of the nine medals handed out in cross country skiing at Milan Cortina. Karlsson said she felt confident of victory after a strong hill climb before the finish, adding that she would celebrate with teammates later with a victory cake provided for podium performances by the team chefs.

"I was bursting with energy," she said, giggling. "I felt the pain but it was after the finish line. The good feeling came on the last hill."

France's Beaudry, Cizeron beat US ice dancing stars

Associated Press

MILAN — Laurence Fournier Beaudry and Guillaume Cizeron arrived at the Milan Cortina Olympics amid a swirl of controversy, with the French ice dancers hoping to upset the dominant American duo of Madison Chock and Evan Bates when it mattered most.

They will leave with a gold medal.

Maybe a little bit more controversy, too.

Beaudry and Cizeron answered a season-best free dance by Chock and Bates with a season best of their own Wednesday, giving them 225.82 points and the top step of the podium. Chock and Bates finished with 224.39 and a bittersweet silver medal after having lost just four times in the four years since they finished fourth at the Beijing Games.

"We're still in shock," said Cizeron, who also became the first skater to win back-to-back ice dance gold with different partners, having won previously with Gabriella Papadakis. "Looking back a year ago, when we started dreaming this, it's pretty incredible."

There were some who viewed their victory as unbelievable. Cizeron made several mistakes, including a glaring one during his twizzle sequence, while Chock and Bates were nearly perfect. Yet the French judge favored the French skaters by nearly eight points in the free dance, while five of the nine judges favored the American team. The other three that gave top marks to Beaudry and

Cizeron did so by a slim margin.

"I feel like in life, sometimes you can feel like you do everything right and it doesn't go your way, and that's life in sports," said Bates, who along with Chock won a second straight gold medal in the team event earlier in the Winter Games. "It's a subjective sport. It is a judged sport. But I think one fact that is indisputable is that we delivered our best. We skated our best."

Even more awkward: The French and American teams are intimately familiar with each other because they have the same coaches — Marie-France Dubreuil, Patrice Lauzon and Romain Haguenauer — and train at the renowned Ice Academy of Montreal.

The Canadian team of Piper Gilles and Paul Poirier earned the bronze medal with 217.74 points, pulling away from the Italian team of Charlene Guignard and Marco Fabbrì and the British duo of Lilah Fear and Lewis Gibson with a deeply emotional free skate.

"I usually prefer Guillaume and Laurence," Fabbrì said, speaking candidly following the medal ceremony. "But today, in my opinion, they didn't skate so well. So I think Madison and Evan would have deserved to win."

Beaudry and Cizeron arrived at the Winter Games with controversy hanging over them stemming from their former partners.

This time last year, Beaudry was wondering whether she would even compete this season after Skate Canada banned her partner and longtime boyfriend, Nikolaj Sorensen, amid allegations of "sexual maltreatment." Beaudry has maintained his innocence and the suspension was overturned in June on jurisdictional grounds, but the case is still pending.

Cizeron stepped away from competition after the 2022 season, shortly after his Olympic triumph, and retired two years ago. But the chance to make a comeback with Beaudry, who was ninth with Sorensen at the Beijing Games, was too good to pass up.

Beaudry and Cizeron won every event they entered this season save the Grand Prix Final, when they finished second to Chock and Bates in their previous head-to-head meeting. But their smooth ride to Milan was shaken up when Papadakis wrote in her new memoir that Cizeron had been demanding, controlling and manipulative toward her — accusations he called a "smear campaign."

"It's been quite a challenge that we set out to do," Cizeron said. "I think from the beginning we tried to create a bubble where we really supported each other through everything, and we've been through some incredibly hard moments. But I think the love we have for each other and for the sport really draws through, and it kind of helped us keep our heads on our shoulders."

Clips top Rockets on Leonard's late 3-point play

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Kawhi Leonard scored 27 points and his three-point play with two seconds remaining lifted the Los Angeles Clippers to a 105-102 victory over the Houston Rockets on Wednesday night.

Leonard, who had 12 rebounds, scored 19 points in the fourth quarter to extend his career-best streak of 20-point games to 33.

Los Angeles led by four points when Kevin Durant made one of two free throws before a lay-up by Alperen Sengun cut the lead to 102-101 with 43 seconds left. Leonard missed a 3-pointer and Jabari Smith Jr. grabbed a rebound to give Houston the ball.

Sengun shot 1 for 2 from the line with 7.2 seconds left to tie it and Leonard got the rebound before the Clippers called a timeout. Leonard then made a fadeaway jumper as he was fouled and hit the free throw to make it 105-102.

The Rockets had a chance to tie it, but Tari Eason's shot was off.

Durant led Houston with 21 points and Reed Sheppard added 17 points off the bench.

Cavaliers 138, Wizards 113: Sam Merrill scored a career-high 32, Donovan Mitchell added 30, and host Cleveland rolled to a victory over Washington in James Harden's first home game wearing wine and gold.

Harden had 13 points and 11 assists in 28 minutes for his second double-double in three games since being traded by the Clippers to the Cavaliers on Feb. 4. He was only 1 of 4 from the field, but went 10 of 12 from the foul line.

Kyshawn George had 17 points and Jamir Watkins 16 for the Wizards, who have dropped three straight and four of five.

Hornets 110, Hawks 107: Brandon Miller had 31 points and nine rebounds, LaMelo Ball made seven 3s and scored 24 points and host Charlotte held

on to beat Atlanta, just hours after two of its starters were suspended by the NBA for fighting.

The NBA suspended Hornets forwards Miles Bridges and Moussa Diabate for four games for their role in a fight Monday night against the Detroit Pistons.

Kon Knueppel added 18 points on four 3s, and Miller hit five 3s as Charlotte finished 19 of 51 from beyond the arc for their 10th win in 11 games.

Celtics 124, Bulls 105: Payton Pritchard scored 26 points and host Boston rolled past Chicago in the final game for both teams before the All-Star break.

Jaylen Brown added 24 points. Nikola Vucevic finished with 19 points and 11 rebounds for the Celtics, who have won six of their last seven games.

Rob Dillingham had 16 points and seven assists to pace the Bulls, who have lost six straight. Matas Buzelis added 15 points and eight rebounds.

Bucks 116, Magic 108: Cam Thomas scored 34 points in his second game with visiting Milwaukee and Kevin Porter Jr. added 18 points, 10 rebounds and 11 assists in a win over Orlando.

Jericho Sims and Ousmane Dieng scored 17 points apiece for the Bucks. Sims added 11 rebounds, leading Milwaukee to a 47-30 advantage on the boards.

Desmond Bane led the Magic with 31 points. Paolo Banchero added 17 and Jalen Suggs had 16 points, 10 assists and four steals.

Pistons 113, Raptors 95: Cade Cunningham scored 28 points, Paul Reed had 16 of his 22 in the first quarter and visiting Detroit beat Toronto in the final game before the All-Star break for both teams.

The Eastern Conference-leading Pistons won for the sixth time in seven games despite playing without centers Isaiah Stewart and Jalen Duren. The two began serving suspensions handed down earlier in the day for their roles in a fight

Monday in a win at Charlotte.

The Raptors' Immanuel Quickley scored 18 points and Scottie Barnes added 17. RJ Barrett had 16 points and Brandon Ingram added 13.

Knicks 138, 76ers 89: Jose Alvarado scored a season-high 26 points and Mikal Bridges added 22 points as visiting New York beat Philadelphia.

Karl-Anthony Towns had 21 points and 11 rebounds. Mohamed Diawara scored 14 points. Jalen Brunson, who scored 40 points against Indiana on Tuesday, scored eight.

Tyrese Maxey led the way with 32 points in three quarters for the 76ers, who played without center Joel Embiid, who sat due to right knee soreness. VJ Edgecombe added 14 points, and Dominick Barlow scored 13.

Pacers 115, Nets 110: Jarace Walker had 23 points, Kam Jones secured the victory with a 3-pointer with 16 seconds remaining, and short-handed Indiana beat host Brooklyn.

Micah Potter had 19 and Ethan Thompson had 15 for the Pacers, who won for the second straight night after winning in overtime over New York on Tuesday night to end a four-game losing streak.

Indiana played without eight key players, including T.J. McConnell (right hamstring soreness), Andrew Nembhard (lower back injury management), Aaron Nesmith (lower back soreness), Pascal Siakam (left hamstring soreness) and Ivica Zubac (left ankle sprain).

Heat 123, Pelicans 111: Bam Adebayo had 27 points, 14 rebounds and four blocks and short-handed Miami beat host New Orleans in the final game for both teams before the All-Star break.

The Heat used only nine players, with Tyler Herro, Norman Powell, Pelle Larsson and Andrew Wiggins sidelined. Herro missed his 15th straight game.

Timberwolves 133, Trail Blazers 109: Julius Randle had 41 points and host Minnesota beat Portland to end its winning streak at three.

Randle, who also had seven rebounds, capped his night with a windmill dunk that put the crowd at the Target Center on its feet. Jaden McDaniels added 21 points for the Timberwolves, playing their final game before the All-Star break.

Thunder 136, Suns 109: Jalen Williams scored 28 points, Isaiah Joe added 21 and hot-shooting Oklahoma City cruised to a victory over host Phoenix.

Dillon Brooks led the Suns with 23 points. Royce O'Neale and Jordan Goodwin both added 12.

Jazz 121, Kings 93: Jaren Jackson Jr scored 23 points in his home debut to lead Utah over Sacramento.

Demar DeRozan led the Kings with 20 points and Devin Carter added 19. Sacramento lost its 14th straight game after trailing by double digits over the final 40 minutes.

Nuggets 122, Grizzlies 116: Nikola Jokic and Jamal Murray warmed up for their appearances in the NBA's All-Star festivities by teaming up to help host Denver hold off Memphis.

Jokic had the 184th triple-double of his career with 26 points, 15 rebounds and 11 assists. Murray added 22 points and was 4 for 4 from the foul line in the final 11.7 seconds.

Spurs 126, Warriors 113: De'Aaron Fox scored 27 points and Victor Wembanyama added 26 to send visiting San Antonio into the All-Star break on a six-game winning streak after beating Golden State.

Wembanyama followed up his 40-point performance against the Lakers on Tuesday night with another strong outing to give the Spurs a 38-16 record at the break. After missing the playoffs the past six seasons, San Antonio has the second-best record in the Western Conference.