

Ford heading to Mideast as tensions rise

Carrier was moved from Mediterranean to Caribbean during October buildup

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The United States will send the aircraft carrier USS Gerald R. Ford to the Middle East to back up another already there, a person familiar with the plans said Friday, putting more American firepower behind President Donald Trump's efforts to coerce Iran into a deal over its nuclear program.

The carrier's planned deployment to the Mideast comes after Trump only days earlier suggested another round of talks with the Iranians was at hand. Those negotiations didn't materialize as one of Tehran's top security officials visited Oman and Qatar this week and exchanged messages with the U.S. intermediaries.

Already, Gulf Arab nations have warned any attack could spiral into another regional conflict in a Mideast still reeling from the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip. Meanwhile, Ira-

nians are beginning to hold 40-day mourning ceremonies for the thousands killed in Tehran's bloody crackdown on nationwide protests last month, adding to the internal pressure faced by the sanctions-battered Islamic Republic.

The Ford's deployment will put two carriers and their accompanying warships in the region. Already, the USS Abraham Lincoln and its accompanying guided-missile destroyers are in the Arabian Sea.

The person who spoke to The Associated Press on the deployment did so on condition of anonymity to discuss military movements.

It marks a quick turnaround for the Ford, which Trump sent from the Mediterranean to the Caribbean last October as the administration built up a huge military presence in the lead-up to the surprise raid last month that captured then-Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro.

It also appears to be at odds with Trump's national security strategy, which put an emphasis on the Western Hemisphere over other parts of the world.

Trump on Thursday warned Iran that failure to reach a deal with his administration would be "very traumatic." Iran and the United States held indirect talks in Oman last week.

"I guess over the next month, something like that," Trump said in response to a question about his timeline for striking a deal with Iran on its nuclear program. "It should happen quickly. They should agree very quickly."

Trump told Axios earlier this week that he was considering sending a second carrier strike group to the Middle East.

Trump held lengthy talks with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on Wednesday and said he insisted to Israel's leader that negotiations with Iran needed to contin-

ue. Netanyahu is urging the administration to press Tehran to scale back its ballistic missile program and end its support for militant groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah as part of any deal.

The USS Ford set out on deployment in late June 2025, which means the crew will have been deployed for eight months in two weeks time. While it is unclear how long the ship will remain in the Middle East, the move sets the crew up for an unusually long deployment.

Iran at home faces still-simmering anger over its wide-ranging suppression of all dissent in the Islamic Republic. That rage may intensify in the coming days as families of the dead begin marking the traditional 40-day mourning for the loved ones. Already, online videos have shown mourners gathering in different parts of the country, holding portraits of their dead.

German leader: 'Repair and revive trans-Atlantic trust'

Associated Press

MUNICH — German Chancellor Friedrich Merz called on Friday for the United States and Europe to "repair and revive trans-Atlantic trust together," arguing that even the U.S. isn't powerful enough to go it alone in an increasingly tough world.

Merz called for a "new trans-Atlantic partnership," acknowledging that "a divide, a deep rift" has opened up across the Atlantic as he opened the Munich Security Conference, an annual

gathering of top global security figures including many European leaders and U.S. Secretary of State Marco Rubio.

At last year's conference, held a few weeks into President Donald Trump's second term, Vice President JD Vance stunned European leaders by lecturing them about the state of democracy and freedom of speech on the continent — a moment that set the tone for the last year.

A series of statements and moves from the Trump admin-

istration targeting allies followed, including Trump's threat last month to impose new tariffs on several European countries in a bid to secure U.S. control of Greenland, a semiautonomous territory of NATO ally Denmark. The president later dropped that threat.

"The culture war of the MAGA movement in the U.S. is not ours," Merz said. "The freedom of the word ends here when this word is turned against human dignity and the constitution. And we don't believe in tariffs

and protectionism, but in free trade."

He added that Europe would stand by climate agreements and the World Health Organization "because we are convinced that we will only solve global tasks together."

But Merz said Europe and the U.S. should conclude that "we are stronger together" in today's world.

He argued that the post-World War II world order "as imperfect as it was at its best times, no longer exists" today.

Round of talks between Russia, Ukraine slated for next week

Associated Press

Another round of U.S.-brokered talks between envoys from Russia and Ukraine will take place next week in Geneva, days ahead of the fourth anniversary of the all-out Russian invasion of its neighbor, officials in Moscow and Kyiv said on Friday.

The meeting will be held on Tuesday and Wednesday, Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said in a statement carried by Russian news agencies. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy's communications adviser, Dmytro Lytvyn, confirmed the new round of negotiations.

The talks take place against a backdrop of continued fighting along the front line, relentless Russian bombardment of civilian areas of Ukraine and the country's power grid, and Ky-

iv's almost daily long-range drone attacks on war-related assets on Russian soil.

Previous U.S.-led efforts to find consensus on ending the war, most recently two rounds of talks in Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates, have failed to resolve difficult issues, such as the future of Ukraine's Donbas industrial heartland that is largely occupied by Russian forces.

Zelenskyy said last week that the United States has given Ukraine and Russia a June deadline to reach a deal. Previous deadlines given by U.S. President Donald Trump have passed largely without consequence.

Meanwhile, the bodies of two Nigerians fighting for Russia have been found in eastern Ukraine, the country's authorities said Thursday.

Hamzat Kazeen Kolawole and Mbah Stephen Udoka both served in the 423rd Guards Motor Rifle Regiment of the armed forces of the Russian Federation, according to a statement from the Main Directorate of Intelligence of Ukraine.

It said the men signed their contracts with the Russian military in the second half of 2025. Neither man received any military training.

The bodies were found in Luhansk, an area in the Donbas region of the eastern part of Ukraine.

"Both Nigerians were killed in late November during an attempt to storm Ukrainian positions in the Luhansk region. They never engaged in a firefight — the mercenaries were eliminated by a drone strike," the intelligence organization said.

US reaches deal with Taiwan to cut tariffs

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration reached a trade deal with Taiwan on Thursday, with Taiwan agreeing to remove or reduce 99% of its tariff barriers, the office of the U.S. Trade Representative said.

The agreement comes as the U.S. remains reliant on Taiwan for its production of computer chips, the exporting of which contributed to a trade imbalance of nearly \$127 billion during the first 11 months of 2025, according to the Census Bureau.

Most of Taiwan's exports to the U.S. will be taxed at a 15% rate, the USTR's office said.

The 15% rate is the same as that levied on other U.S. trading partners in the Asia-Pacific region, such as Japan and South Korea.

The Taiwanese government said in a statement that the tariff rate set in the agreement allows its companies to compete on a level field with Japan, South Korea and the European Union.

It also said the agreement "eliminated" the disadvantage from a lack of a free trade agreement between Taiwan and the U.S.

The deal comes ahead of President Donald Trump's planned visit to China in April and suggests a deepening economic relationship between the U.S. and Taiwan.

Taiwan is a self-ruled democracy that China claims as its own territory, to be annexed by force if necessary.

Beijing prohibits all countries it has diplomatic relations with — including the U.S. — from having formal ties with Taipei.

Poll finds Republican voters unhappy with Trump's push for Greenland

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Republicans may be willing to stick with President Donald Trump through almost anything, but his recent push to seize control of Greenland has turned off many in his own party, according to a new AP-NORC poll.

The survey from The Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research finds that about 7 in 10 U.S. adults disapprove of how Trump is handling the issue of Greenland, a semiautonomous territory of NATO ally Denmark. That's higher than the share who dislike how he's handling foreign policy generally, suggesting

that Trump's Greenland approach has created a weak spot for the administration.

Even Republicans aren't thrilled.

About half disapprove of his attempt to turn the icebound landmass into American territory, something that Trump has insisted is critical for national security in the Arctic, while about half approve.

The poll was conducted Feb. 5-8, which is after Trump had made the decision to scrap tariffs designed to pressure European countries into supporting U.S. control of Greenland, but after his weekslong push for American intervention over the

island.

Trump's base is normally unwavering behind him, so Greenland stands out as an exception.

The marks represent Trump's lowest ratings among Republicans on a list of key issues in the poll, including the economy and immigration — where about 8 in 10 approve — and foreign policy generally. About 7 in 10 Republicans approve of his overall foreign policy approach.

Trump has argued that the U.S. needs Greenland to counter threats from Russia and China in the Arctic region, despite America already having a military presence there.

Judge: Father of 3 Marines can stay in US

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — An immigration judge has dismissed the deportation case against a landscaper who was arrested in Southern California last year, and the father of three Marines is now on a path toward legal permanent residency in the U.S.

The June detention of Narciso Barranco, who came to the U.S. from Mexico in the 1990s but does not have legal status, caught widespread attention as the crackdown on immigration by President Donald Trump's administration drew scrutiny and protests.

Witnesses uploaded videos of the arrest in Santa Ana, a city in Orange County. Federal agents struggled with Barranco and pinned him to the ground outside an IHOP restaurant where he had been clearing weeds.

Barranco was taken to a Los Angeles detention center and

placed in deportation proceedings. In July, he was released on a \$3,000 bond and ordered to wear an ankle monitor.

In a Jan. 28 order terminating the deportation case, Judge Kristin S. Piepmeier said that Barranco, 49, had provided evidence that he was the father of three U.S.-born sons in the military, making him eligible to seek lawful status.

"I feel happy," Barranco said in a phone interview in Spanish. "Thank God I don't have that weight on top of me."

Barranco said he is still staying mostly at home and not taking any chances going out until his legal paperwork has been finalized.

The Department of Homeland Security said Thursday that it would appeal the judge's decision, which was first reported by the New York Times.

Barranco's lawyer Lisa Ra-

ramirez said her client feels "extreme relief" now that immigration officers have removed his ankle monitor and discontinued his check-ins.

"The aggressive nature of the apprehension, it was traumatic," Ramirez said Thursday. "Mr. Barranco has had zero criminal history. They came after him because he was a brown gardener in the streets of Santa Ana."

Ramirez said Barranco has applied for Parole in Place, a program that protects the parents of U.S. military personnel from deportation and helps them obtain permanent residency. If that petition is approved, Barranco will receive a work permit. She estimated the process could take six months or more.

DHS Assistant Secretary Tricia McLaughlin reiterated previous government claims that

Barranco refused to comply with commands and swung his weed trimmer at an agent.

"The agents took appropriate action and followed their training to use the minimum amount of force necessary to resolve the situation in a manner that prioritizes the safety of the public and our officers," McLaughlin said in Thursday's statement.

His son Alejandro Barranco said in June that his father did not attack anyone, had no criminal record and is kind and hard-working. The U.S. Marine Corps veteran said the use of force was unnecessary and differed greatly from his military training. He aided the U.S. military's evacuation of personnel and Afghan allies from Afghanistan in 2021.

Alejandro left the Marine Corps in 2023. His two brothers are currently active-duty Marines.

US ordered to bring back deported Venezuelans

Associated Press

A federal judge on Thursday ordered the Trump administration to make arrangements to allow some of the Venezuelan migrants deported to a notorious prison in El Salvador to return to the U.S. at the government's expense.

The case has been a legal flash point in the administration's sweeping immigration crackdown. It started in March after President Donald Trump invoked the 18th century Alien Enemies Act to send Venezuelan migrants accused of being gang members to a megaprison known as the Terrorism Confinement Center.

U.S. District Judge James Boasberg criticized the White House's response to his earlier order that it come up with a plan to give the men a chance to challenge their removals.

"Apparently not interested in participating in this process, the Government's responses essentially told the Court to pound sand," Boasberg wrote. Nominated to the federal bench by President Barack Obama, the judge has repeatedly clashed with the administration over the deportations.

White House spokesperson Abigail Jackson blasted Boasberg's ruling, saying in a statement it was "an absurd, unlawful ruling from a far-left judicial activist trying to undermine the President's lawful authority to carry about deportations."

Boasberg's order says U.S. officials must provide the men in third countries who wish to fly back to U.S. with a boarding letter. The government must also cover their airfare. He noted the men would be detained upon their return.

Bid to rescind health grants for blue states put on hold

Associated Press

President Donald Trump's administration cannot rescind \$600 million in public health grants allocated to four Democratic-led states, for now, a federal judge in Illinois ruled Thursday.

California, Colorado, Illinois and Minnesota sued Wednesday to try to block the planned funding cuts to programs that track disease outbreaks and study health outcomes of LGBTQ+ people and communities of color in major cities.

U.S. District Judge Manish Shah stopped the cuts from taking effect for 14 days, saying in his order that the states "have shown that they would suffer irreparable harm from the agency action."

That will keep grant money flowing from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

to state and city health departments and their partner organizations while the challenge proceeds.

The first batch of grants could have been pulled Thursday if the judge had not intervened, Colorado Attorney General Phil Weiser said.

The Department of Health and Human Services said the grants are being terminated because they do not reflect CDC priorities, which were revised last year to align with the administration's shift away from health equity, the idea that certain populations may need additional support to eliminate health disparities.

Much of the money helped cities fight the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, especially among gay and bisexual men, adolescents and ethnic minorities.

Indonesia preps up to 8K troops for Gaza peacekeeping mission

Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia — Indonesia has begun training a contingent of up to 8,000 soldiers it plans to send as part of an international peacekeeping force to Gaza, the first firm commitment to a critical element of U.S. President Donald Trump's postwar reconstruction plan.

Indonesia has experience in peacekeeping operations as one of the top 10 contributors to United Nations missions, including in Lebanon, and has been deeply involved in providing humanitarian aid to Gaza, including funding a hospital.

But many Indonesians are skeptical of President Prabowo Subianto's plans to join Washington's proposed Board of Peace and participate in the International Security Force with only vague details so far on how they will operate, seeing it as simply kowtowing to Trump's agenda as the two countries negotiate a trade deal.

"We need to be careful to ensure that our military personnel are not supporting the Israeli military forces," said Muhammad Zulfikar Rakhmat, a Middle East expert with Jakarta's Center of Economic and Law Studies. "We need to be careful that our military forces are not fighting against wrong actors."

U.N. peacekeeping forces all have clear and strict mandates, but since the Board of Peace and ISF will operate outside the U.N., many wonder how the troops will be used, and who will pay for them. Last year's ceasefire agreement broadly says that the ISF will "provide support to vetted Palestinian police forces in Gaza" and will "work with Israel and Egypt to help secure border areas."

Indonesia currently is paid by the U.N. for the troops it sends to serve as peacekeepers, but people fear it will have to pick up the tab for the troops sent to Gaza, as well as a possible \$1 billion

payment for a permanent place on the Board of Peace, as outlined in a draft charter.

Indonesia is the world's most populous Muslim country and firmly supports a two-state solution in the Mideast, and officials have justified joining the Board of Peace by saying it was necessary to defend Palestinian interests from within, since Israel is included on the board but there is no Palestinian representation.

"Indonesia sees the importance of the involvement of the parties to the conflict as part of the process towards peace," Foreign Ministry spokesperson Yvonne Mewengkang said this week.

She said Indonesia would use its membership to "ensure that the entire process remains oriented towards the interests of Palestine and respects the basic rights of the Palestinian people, as well as encouraging the realization of a two-state solution."

New crew heading to space station

Associated Press

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — A new crew rocketed toward the International Space Station on Friday to replace the astronauts who returned to Earth early in NASA's first medical evacuation.

SpaceX launched the replacements as soon as possible at NASA's request, sending the U.S., French and Russian astronauts on an expected eight- to nine-month mission stretching until fall. The four should arrive at the orbiting lab on Saturday, filling the vacancies left by their evacuated colleagues last month and bringing the space station back to full staff.

"It turns out Friday the 13th is a very lucky day," SpaceX Launch Control radioed once the astronauts reached orbit. "That was quite a ride," replied the crew's commander, Jessica Meir.

NASA had to put spacewalks on hold and deferred other duties while awaiting the arrival of Americans Meir and Jack Hathaway, France's Sophie Adenot and Russia's Andrei Fedyaev. They'll join three other astronauts — one American and two Russians — who kept the space station running the past month.

Satisfied with medical procedures already in place, NASA ordered no extra checkups for the crew ahead of liftoff and no new diagnostic equipment was packed. An ultrasound machine already up there for research went into overdrive on Jan. 7 when used on the ailing crew member. NASA has not revealed the ill astronaut's identity or health issue. All four returning astronauts went straight to the hospital after splashing down in the Pacific near San Diego.

It was the first time in 65 years of human spaceflight that NASA cut short a mission for medical reasons.

Thailand using birth control vaccine to curb elephant population near farms

Associated Press

BANGKOK — Thailand has begun using a birth control vaccine on elephants in the wild to try and curb a growing problem where human and animal populations encroach on each other — an issue in areas where farms spread into forests and elephants are squeezed out of their natural habitat.

The initiative is part of efforts to address confrontations that can turn deadly. As farmers cut down forests to make more farmland, elephants are forced to venture out of their shrinking habitats in search of food.

Last year, wild elephants killed 30 people and injured 29

in Thailand, according to official figures, which also noted more than 2,000 incidents of elephants damaging crops.

Sukhee Boonsang, director of the Wildlife Conservation Office, recently told The Associated Press that controlling the wild elephant population has become necessary as numbers of elephants living near residential areas rises sharply, increasing the risk of confrontations.

The office obtained 25 doses of a vaccine and conducted a two-year trial on seven domesticated elephants — using up seven doses of the vaccine — which yielded promising results, he said. He explained the

vaccine doesn't stop female elephants from ovulating but prevents eggs from being fertilized.

Then, in late January, the vaccine was administered to three wild elephants in eastern Trat province, he said, adding that authorities are now determining which areas to target next as they prepare to use up the remaining 15 doses.

The vaccine can prevent pregnancy for seven years and the elephants will be able to reproduce again if they don't receive a booster after that time expires. Experts will closely monitor the vaccinated elephants throughout the seven-year period.

Norwegian wins record-tying 8th gold

Associated Press

TESERO, Italy — Friday the 13th will be remembered as a lucky day for Johannes Hoesflot Klaebo. Norway's cross-country skiing star won an eighth gold medal at the Milan Cortina Olympics on Friday, tying an all-time Winter Games record. The 29-year-old claimed victory in the men's 10 kilometer interval-start race, for his third gold at the 2026 Games.

With three races still ahead of him, Klaebo now shares the record with three other Norwegian athletes who have retired: Marit Bjørgen and Bjoern Daehlie in cross-country skiing and Ole Einar Bjørndalen in the biathlon.

Klaebo again gained vital ground in the final hill and clocked 20 minutes, 36.2 seconds, showing rare signs of fatigue as he collapsed at the finish line of the race considered to be his toughest challenge.

He was 4.9 seconds head of France's Mathis Desloges and 14 in front of his main challenger Einar Hedegart also of Norway who lost momentum on the last hill.

"It's a special day," Klaebo said. "This one means a lot for sure ... I'm lost for words."

Thursday Women's super-G

CORTINA D'AMPEZZO, Italy — Italian skier Federica Brignone's pursuit of her first Olympic gold is complete after she posted the fastest time in the women's super-G.

Brignone, 35, broke multiple bones in her left leg in April that required two surgeries to fix, but she looked just fine in difficult foggy conditions.

Romane Miradoli of France won silver and Cornelia Huetter of Austria took bronze.

Several stars crashed or missed gates, including downhill champion Breezy Johnson of the U.S. and Italian star Sofia Goggia.

Women's halfpipe

LIVIGNO, Italy — Chloe Kim fell short in her bid to become the first Olympic snowboarder to win three consecutive gold medals.

Kim finished second to Gaon Choi of South Korea in the women's halfpipe. Choi, 17, dethroned the two-time defending champion with a score of 90.25 on her final run. Kim had one more shot to get back on top but she fell on her last of three runs. The 25-year-old American took silver, while Japan's Mitsuki Ono claimed bronze. Choi recovered after taking a hard tumble on her first run.

Choi is the first non-American to win the gold medal on the women's side of snowboarding's premier event since Torah Bright of Australia at the 2010 Vancouver Games.

Men's moguls

LIVIGNO, Italy — Unheralded Australian freestyle skier Cooper Woods snatched Olympic gold away from former champion and multi-medalist Mikael Kingsbury of Canada after they got the same score in the final. The tiebreaker went to their "turns" score based on how cleanly the skiers handled the alternating mounds of snow on the bumpy course. In that area, Woods eked out a victory by 0.7 points. Woods, 25, had only

managed one podium finish in 51 World Cup events. Kingsbury won Olympic gold at the 2018 Pyeongchang Games. This was his third silver medal.

Luge

CORTINA D'AMPEZZO, Italy — Germany won gold in the team event, as it has done at every Olympics since it was added to the program in 2014.

The team of women's singles gold medalist Julia Taubitz, men's singles gold medalist Max Langenhan, women's doubles silver medalists Dajana Eitberger and Magdalena Matichina, and men's doubles bronze medalists Tobias Wendl and Tobias Arlt took the gold in 3 minutes, 41.672 seconds.

Wendl and Arlt became seven-time Olympic gold medalists — three in doubles, four in relays.

Austria finished second in 3:42.214 and host Italy was third with a time of 3:42.521.

The team event consists of one run for all four sleds, and teams must slap a pad that hangs from the top of the track as they cross the finish line to either activate the starting gate for the next sled or stop the clock at the end.

Speedskating

MILAN — Xandra Velzeboer of the Netherlands won the women's 500 meters in short-track speedskating after breaking her own world record in the semifinals. Velzeboer finished first in the final in 41.609 seconds, ending Italian silver medalist Arianna Fontana's attempt to become the first woman to win three consecutive individu-

al Winter Games short-track golds at any distance. Fontana was more than a half-second behind with a time of 42.294. The considerable contingent of orange-clad Dutch fans had more reason to cheer later when Jens van 't Wout won the men's 1,000 with a terrific final surge and a close-as-can-be finish.

Also:

■ Francesca Lollobrigida of Italy claimed her second gold medal of the Milan Cortina Games by winning the women's 5,000 meters by an incredibly narrow margin to the delight of the home crowd. With fans rising to their feet and roaring on every lap, Lollobrigida finished in 6 minutes, 46.17 seconds — just 0.1 seconds faster than Merel Conijn of the Netherlands. Ragne Wiklund of Norway, the runner-up to Lollobrigida in the 3,000 meters, was third, 0.17 seconds off the pace. Lollobrigida won the 3,000 on Saturday, her 35th birthday, for host Italy's first gold medal.

Men's snowboardcross

LIVIGNO, Italy — Alessandro Haemmerle of Austria and Canada's Eliot Grondin repeated as gold and silver medalists in men's snowboardcross after another close finish between the two rivals.

Grondin looked to be in position to flip the result from Beijing 2022 coming over the final roll. But Haemmerle closed the small gap over the final meters and thrust his board ahead of Grondin's to successfully defend his title by 0.3 seconds.

Fellow Austrian Jakob Dusek took bronze, keeping France's Aidan Chollet off the podium.

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US pounds Latvia in hockey opener

Associated Press

MILAN — The U.S. goal song — “Free Bird” by Lynyrd Skynyrd — blared seven times over arena speakers Thursday night. Twice, the celebration was only short-lived.

Bouncing back from having two goals wiped out by coach’s challenges, the U.S. opened the Olympics by rolling past Latvia 5-1 in a showcase of some of the country’s best NHL players.

Brock Nelson scored twice, four players had two assists apiece and there was production up and down the lineup.

“We believe in the depth we have,” winger Jake Guentzel said. “There’s good players on every line. That’s just where American hockey is right now.”

After a weird first period with a couple of video reviews and a tying goal by Latvia, the Americans found their groove and for long stretches barely let their opponents have the puck. The U.S. outshot Latvia 38-18 and needed starter Connor Hellebuyck to make only 17 saves.

“I felt like we controlled the play,” center Jack Eichel said. “We’re going to continue to get better every game in this tournament, every period in this tournament. That’s our goal, and it’s a good start for us.”

Elvis Merzlikins was under

siege at the other end, and after Nelson’s second goal he sat in the crease with his head bowed in his lap. An odd-man rush became a version of the Harlem Globetrotters on ice with pass after pass: Jack Hughes to brother Quinn to Matthew Tkachuk, back to Jack and then to Nelson to tap into a half-open net with 11.1 seconds left in the second period.

“I don’t think there’s much to do,” Merzlikins said. “If that guy wouldn’t score, probably the other guy would score because I felt completely two open guys, and it’s hard to save something like that.”

Brady Tkachuk scored the first U.S. goal of the tournament less than six minutes in, and Tage Thompson roofed a nifty backhand on the power play, making coach Mike Sullivan look smart for putting the 6-foot-6 winger on the loaded top unit. Four goals on 32 shots was enough to chase Merzlikins, who was pulled to start the third for Arturs Silovs.

Captain Auston Matthews welcomed Silovs to the Olympics with a power-play goal, assisted on by Eichel and Quinn Hughes. Each of them had two assists, along with Matthew Tkachuk and Jack Hughes.

“I just think the depth that we

have, it showed,” Brady Tkachuk said. “I thought everybody played a great game tonight. You just see the buy-in. You see the buy-in of every line playing the right way.”

The U.S. plays Denmark on Saturday night before wrapping up the preliminary round 24 hours later against Germany.

Canada bests Czechia

Macklin Celebrini scored Canada’s first goal in the return of the NHL to the Olympics and Jordan Binnington stopped all 26 shots he faced in a 5-0 defeat of Czechia that showed the tournament favorite is already a well-oiled machine.

“Our intentions were really good with the way we played,” captain Sidney Crosby said. “I thought we were physical. We were moving our feet. The execution, sometimes that comes with time. But even other times we did some good things and executed well. Just a matter of building off of that.”

Celebrini, his country’s youngest player at 19, deflected a shot by Cale Makar past Lukas Dostal with 5.7 seconds left in the first, putting an exclamation point on a terrific, back-and-forth period. After Mitch Marner’s saucer pass to Mark Stone for his goal and Bo Horvat’s on a

breakaway later in the second, Czechia never stood a chance.

“When you’re playing in the Olympics for the first time, it never gets old, and everybody’s got their jitters,” coach Jon Cooper said. “You know what I liked? I thought we got better as that game went on.”

The handful of times Binnington got tested, he made the save. Before Celebrini scored, Binnington kept it 0-0 by making a stop on Michal Kempny and reaching out to smother David Kampf’s rebound attempt.

At the other end of the ice, Dostal played well but was helpless to slow down much of the onslaught. There was nothing he could do on the Crosby-to-Connor McDavid-to-Nathan MacKinnon tic-tac-toe power-play goal in the third period.

“Two of the best players ever to play passing it to me is cool,” MacKinnon said. “I didn’t do much for that one. Just blessed to be on the back side. Anyone would have put that in.”

The same trio combined for almost the same goal in the opening game of the 4 Nations Face-Off a year ago. Canada won that Olympic appetizer by beating the U.S. in overtime.

McDavid finished with three assists, including one on Nick Suzuki’s goal that made it 5-0.

ISU defends scoring after French duo’s ice dance gold

Associated Press

MILAN — The International Skating Union says it stands by the judging of ice dance at the Milan Cortina Winter Olympics, where the scores from the French judge this week played a big role in the French couple of Laurence Fournier Beaudry and Guillaume Cizeron beating the American team of Madison Chock and Evan Bates.

The judge, Jezabel Dabouis, favored Beaudry and Cizeron by nearly eight points over the three-time world champions in

the free dance, a margin so large that if her score was removed from the equation entirely, Chock and Bates would have won gold.

“It is normal for there to be a range of scores given by different judges in any panel and a number of mechanism are used to mitigate these variations,” the ISU said, adding it has “full confidence in the scores given and remains completely committed to fairness.”

There is little recourse for the U.S. team if the global govern-

ing body is unwilling to investigate the scoring discrepancy.

This is not the first time Dabouis has turned in questionable scores for Beaudry and Cizeron. At the Grand Prix Final in December, when Chock and Bates beat them in their only other head-to-head matchup, the judge had the Americans narrowly beating them in the free dance despite two deductions, including an egregious fall. The French team wound up with a silver medal.

Dabouis also had a wide mar-

gin favoring the French couple in the Olympic rhythm dance, when they beat the U.S. team.

“Any time the public is confused by results, it does a disservice to our sport,” said Chock, who along with Bates won a second straight team gold medal earlier in the Games. “I think it’s hard to retain fans when it’s difficult to understand what is happening on the ice.

“People need to understand what they’re cheering for and be able to feel confident in the sport that they’re supporting.”

Injunction paves way for Ole Miss QB to return

Associated Press

PITTSBORO, Miss. — In saying “the NCAA ignored its own rules,” a Mississippi judge granted Ole Miss quarterback Trinidad Chambliss a preliminary injunction Thursday against college athletics’ governing body, allowing him to receive an extra year of eligibility so he can play next season.

The NCAA denied Chambliss’ waiver request on Jan. 9, and after Chambliss appealed, the organization’s Athletics Eligibility Subcommittee upheld the denial on Feb. 4.

Judge Robert Whitwell said in explaining his decision that he agreed with Chambliss’ argument that the NCAA did not properly consider the player’s medical history. Chambliss, 23, has been in college for five years, but was healthy enough to play just three years.

“We appreciate the thoughtful consideration given to this matter and for the court’s recognition of the circumstances surrounding Trinidad’s case,” Ole Miss’ athletic department said in a statement. “We believe this outcome affirms what we have maintained throughout this process that Trinidad deserves the opportunity to compete and complete his collegiate career on the field.

“Trinidad has demonstrated tremendous perseverance, character and commitment to his teammates, this university and college football.”

Whitwell said Chambliss would have received “irreparable harm” had the NCAA’s ruling been upheld, but that the organization will not be damaged by allowing him to play.

The NCAA released a statement expressing frustration with the legal system, but the organization did not say whether it would appeal the ruling.

Mears in Daytona 500 field after avoiding last-lap crash

Associated Press

DAYTONA BEACH, Fla. — Casey Mears spun on pit road, got briefly stuck in the infield grass and missed a last-lap crash by mere inches. After all that, he finished eighth in a qualifying race Thursday night for the Daytona 500, good enough to get him into “The Great American Race.”

Mears choked back tears three separate times after squeezing into the 41-car field as the highest-finishing “open” car in the first of two 150-mile qualifying races.

“I was worried when we got stuck. I was worried about going two laps down,” Mears said. “Actually got on the radio and asked all the guys to stay calm, said, ‘We still got a shot here.’ For sure when we were sitting in the grass, that wasn’t pretty.

“I can’t believe it. After all that, being sitting in position to go race the Daytona 500 on Sunday, pretty much the whole race I was thinking that was out of our grasp.”

Anthony Alfredo initially earned the final spot in the starting lineup in the second qualifier, but NASCAR disqualified his car and the berth went to B.J. McLeod.

Joey Logano of Team Penske won the first race and Chase Elliott of Hendrick Motorsports took the second. Both were already assured of spots in NASCAR’s season opener and will start on the second row Sunday.

Mears is driving for Garage 66, a team owned by former driver Carl Long with just 10 employees on hand in Daytona. The 47-year-old driver is in pursuit of 500 career Cup Series starts and received financial assistance from former NASCAR team owner Bob Germain to enter Daytona.

Mears, who last competed

full-time in 2016, will make his 495th start Sunday. With his fate uncertain, his wife and 14-year-old son booked two separate plane tickets from their home in Phoenix. His daughter has a cheerleading competition in Las Vegas, and they were either headed to see her or to Florida to watch Mears in the Daytona 500.

“Couldn’t be happier they’re taking that flight to Orlando. Gosh, dang, man, got choked up. It means a lot,” he said. “It just means a lot. Especially now, you know what I mean? My kids were younger when I was racing. Even before I started doing this this last year, I’d asked my son about, ‘Do you remember this or that?’ He didn’t remember. He was young.

“To come back and do it now, my kids, the ages they’re at, they understand what dad did for a living is cool.”

Like Mears, Alfredo was also in tears after making the Daytona 500 for what he thought was the third time in his career. He missed the race last year.

“My career is a lot of ups and downs and you never know when you will get another shot to race on any Sunday, especially the Daytona 500, the Great American Race,” Alfredo said. “Missing it last year has haunted me until this very moment. This is the only thing that could pull that black cloud over.”

His joy was short-lived as NASCAR announced the Beard Motorsports entry was disqualified because the transaxle cooling hose wasn’t properly attached in post-race inspection.

“It’s unfortunate to be here. Any small, open team we don’t like to have these problems,” Cup Series director Brad Moran said. “But we do have to do our job, make sure there’s parity amongst the field and also par-

ity amongst people trying to make the 500.”

Logano won the first Daytona 500 qualifying race when a crash in overtime cost Corey LaJoie the spot that went to Mears.

Logano, in a Ford for Team Penske, had control of the race when a caution for a five-car accident with four laps remaining brought out the yellow. Logano had the lead on the restart for the two-lap sprint to the finish and wasn’t challenged before the final crash ended LaJoie’s hopes and gave Logano his fourth victory in a Daytona qualifying race.

Logano is a three-time Cup champion who won the Daytona 500 in 2015.

“I do think we have a strong race car, obviously a fast race car; we proved that,” Logano said. “There’s definitely some things I want to work on, no doubt. It’s always like that. We have to have speed. We’ll work on some handling pieces, but I feel like we’re pretty close.”

Elliott, the 2020 NASCAR champion, has won a qualifying race three times now.

“A great way to get the blood pumping for sure on a Thursday night,” Elliott said. “Nice to get the NAPA Chevy a win. Not a 500. I’ve been here before and not the other one, so you have to kind of learn to take it a day at a time.

“A great way to start the speed week for our team. Proud of our effort, everybody at Hendrick Motorsports, the boss, from top to bottom. Good night. Looking forward to Sunday.”

The four drivers who failed to qualify were Alfredo, LaJoie, Chandler Smith and JJ Yeley.

Kyle Busch won the pole in time trials as he attempts to win his first Daytona 500 in 21 starts.

LeBron now oldest with NBA triple-double

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — LeBron James became the oldest player in NBA history with a triple-double when he put up 28 points, 12 assists and 10 rebounds in the Los Angeles Lakers' 124-104 victory over the Dallas Mavericks on Thursday night.

At 41 years and 44 days old, James broke the record held by Karl Malone, who recorded a triple-double for the Lakers when he was 40 years and 127 days old.

James scored 14 points in a dominant first quarter, and had 22 points and 12 assists heading to the fourth. He grabbed his 10th rebound with 2:06 to play and checked out moments later, wrapping up another sensational game in his unprecedented 23rd NBA season.

James is headed to the All-Star Game this weekend after being selected for the 22nd time. He got his most recent triple-double on Feb. 1, 2025.

Naji Marshall and Max Christie scored 19 points apiece for the Mavericks, who lost their ninth straight to fall into their

longest skid in 28 seasons.

NBA scoring leader Luka Doncic didn't suit up against his former team, missing his fourth straight game for the Lakers with a mild hamstring strain. Star rookie Cooper Flagg sat out with a sprained foot for Dallas that will prevent him from participating in All-Star weekend at nearby Intuit Dome.

James and Austin Reaves sat out the Lakers' loss to San Antonio on Tuesday for health maintenance, but both returned in a comfortable victory. Reaves had 18 points and six assists.

Rui Hachimura scored 21 points for the Lakers, who have won seven of 11.

Bucks 110, Thunder 93: Former Thunder forward Ousmane Dieng had 19 points, 11 rebounds, six assists and four blocks, and Milwaukee won at Oklahoma City.

The Thunder traded Dieng just before the deadline. The 6-foot-9 Frenchman was the G-League Finals MVP as the Oklahoma City Blue won the championship in 2024 and a Thunder reserve.

Both teams were missing im-

portant pieces.

Milwaukee coach Doc Rivers was out attending a funeral, and assistant Darvin Ham filled in. Bucks All-Star Giannis Antetokounmpo was out with a right calf strain.

Oklahoma City played without reigning NBA MVP Shai Gilgeous-Alexander (abdominal strain) and co-star Jalen Williams (right hamstring strain). Both will be re-evaluated after the All-Star break.

AJ Green scored 17 points for the Bucks, and Bobby Portis added 15 points and 12 rebounds.

Isaiah Joe scored 17 points and Chet Holmgren added 16 points and 13 rebounds for the Thunder, who were coming off road wins against the Los Angeles Lakers and Phoenix.

Trail Blazers 135, Jazz 119: Jrue Holiday scored a season-high 31 points and Donovan Clingan added 23 points and 18 rebounds as visiting Portland beat Utah—hours after the Jazz lost Jaren Jackson Jr. to knee surgery and were fined \$500,000 by the NBA for sitting healthy stars.

Clingan also had a career-high seven assists and three blocks. Holiday had nine rebounds and seven assists to lead Portland (27-29) to its fourth victory in five games.

Jerami Grant added 18 points and Scoot Henderson scored 15 in his fourth game this season.

Brice Sensabaugh had 28 points while Ace Bailey, Kyle Filipowski and Isaiah Collier each scored 15 for Utah (18-38).

In his first NBA game, Utah two-way player Blake Hinson scored 11 points and hit a 3-pointer to pull the Jazz to 111-108. But the Blazers responded with an 11-2 run capped by Holiday's layup to clinch the win.

Clingan sparked a 10-0 spurt with dominating play on both ends to give the Trail Blazers a 75-65 lead. Portland outscored the short-handed Jazz 40-23 in the third quarter to take control.

Jackson, who led the Jazz to a 2-1 record since arriving from Memphis in a trade last week, did not play. In a post-trade physical exam, Jackson was diagnosed with a benign growth in his left knee and will have surgery next week.

Jazz fined \$500,000, Pacers \$100,000 for sitting stars

Associated Press

The Utah Jazz appeared to find a loophole in the NBA's player participation policy, but the league sent a message Thursday by hitting them with a \$500,000 fine.

The NBA also docked the Indiana Pacers \$100,000 for holding out Pascal Siakam and two other starters in a Feb. 3 game against the Jazz.

The policy was put in place in September 2023 to try to discourage clubs from purposely losing in order to improve their chances with the draft lottery. This year's draft is considered the strongest in several years, possibly incentivizing clubs like the Jazz to position themselves

for a high pick.

The Jazz did not play stars Lauri Markkanen and Jaren Jackson Jr. in the fourth quarter of recent close games at Miami and Orlando. The Magic rallied from 17 points down to win 120-117, but the Jazz defeated the Heat 115-111.

Jazz coach Will Hardy was asked after the game at Miami whether he considered playing Markkanen and Jackson in the fourth quarter.

"I wasn't," Hardy said.

Hardy said Thursday night after a loss to Portland that he was following the advice of the team's medical staff.

"I sat Lauri because he was on a minutes restriction," he said.

"So if our medical team puts a minutes restriction on Lauri, I'll try to keep Lauri healthy."

In fining the Jazz, the NBA said in its release "these players were otherwise able to continue to play and the outcomes of the games were thereafter in doubt."

NBA Commissioner Adam Silver said in a statement the competition committee and team owners will work "to implement further measures to root out this type of conduct.

"Overt behavior like this that prioritizes draft position over winning undermines the foundation of NBA competition and we will respond accordingly to any further actions that com-

promise the integrity of our games," Silver said.

"Agree to disagree ...," Jazz owner Ryan Smith posted on social media. "Also, we won the game in Miami and got fined? That makes sense ..."

The NBA fined Utah \$100,000 last season after the Jazz rested Markkanen in multiple games.

Utah has prioritized development of its younger players at the expense of chasing wins. The front office is motivated to hold onto a first-round pick in this year's draft that is top-eight protected.

Falling outside the bottom eight in the standings would mean losing that pick to Oklahoma City.