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Dems: McConnell's rules a 'cover-up'

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump's impeachment trial quickly burst into a partisan fight Tuesday at the Capitol as Democrats objected strongly to rules proposed by the Republican leader for compressed arguments and a speedy trial.

Chief Justice John Roberts gavelled open the session, senators having taken an oath last week to do "impartial justice" as jurors.

Democrats warned that the rules package from Trump's ally, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, could force midnight sessions that would keep most Americans in the dark and create a sham proceeding.

"This is not a process for a fair trial, this is the process for a rigged trial" Rep. Adam Schiff, D-Calif., chairman of the House Intelligence Com-

Impeachment trial opens with partisan rancor

mittee leading the prosecution, told reporters. He called it a "cover-up."

McConnell opened the chamber promising a "fair, even handed" process — and warned that the Senate would stay in session until his proposed rules package was adopted.

"The president's lawyers will finally receive a level playing field," the Kentucky Republican said, contrasting it with the House impeachment inquiry.

The first test was coming as senators prepared to begin debate and vote on McConnell's proposed rules. The package diverges in some ways from the most recent impeachment trial, of President Bill Clinton in 1999, by condensing opening arguments into two days for each side. It pushes votes to consider whether to hear from

witnesses later in the process.

Republican senators, who hold the majority, are falling in line behind his plan.

"Sure it will be a fair trial when you've got 24 hours of arguments on both sides," Sen. Chuck Grassley, of Iowa, told state reporters on a conference call.

The rare impeachment trial, unfolding in an election year, is testing whether Trump's actions toward Ukraine warrant removal at the same time that voters are forming their own verdict on his White House.

Trump himself, in Davos, Switzerland, for an economic conference, denounced the proceedings as "a total hoax," as he does daily, and said, "I'm sure it's going to work out fine."

With Trump's presidency on the line, and the nation deeply

divided just weeks before the first Democratic primary contests, four senators who are also presidential candidates will be off the campaign trail, seated as jurors.

"My focus is going to be on impeachment," Sen. Bernie Sanders, the Vermont independent running for the Democratic nomination, told reporters. He said his supporters would keep working "to defeat the most dangerous president in American history."

The Democrats say the prospect of middle-of-the-night proceedings, without allowing new witnesses or even the voluminous House records of the trial, will leave the public without crucial information about Trump's political pressure campaign on Ukraine and the White House's obstruction of the House impeachment probe.

US sends its 1st warship of 2020 through Taiwan Strait

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS

Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The U.S. Navy sent a warship through the Taiwan Strait for the first time this year, less than a week after a separatist president was reelected the island's chief executive.

The Yokosuka-based guided-missile cruiser USS Shiloh sailed through the strait Thursday, demonstrating "the U.S. commitment to a free and open Indo-Pacific," 7th Fleet spokesman Lt. Joe Keiley said Monday. He called the transit "routine."

In response, Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokesman Geng Shuang urged the United States to "prudently and properly han-

dle issues relating to Taiwan to avoid harming China-U.S. relations and affecting peace and stability across the Taiwan Strait" at his daily press conference Friday.

"China paid close attention to and monitored from start to end the passage of the U.S. military vessel through the Taiwan Strait," Geng said. "The Taiwan question is the most important and most sensitive issue in China-U.S. relations as it bears on China's sovereignty and territorial integrity."

The Shiloh's passage came less than a week after Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen — a pro-democracy, pro-separatist advocate — won a second term in an election that drew a large

turnout. Her reelection was interpreted as a rebuke to China's efforts to attract what it regards as a breakaway province.

"We must work to keep our country safe and defend our sovereignty," Tsai was widely quoted as saying in Taipei after the election.

The U.S. considers Taiwan's status unsettled, but adheres to the "One China" policy, acknowledging that China asserts sovereignty over the island.

In a tweet last week thanking Secretary of State Mike Pompeo for his congratulations on her reelection, Tsai said, "Taiwan is and will ever be great friends of the U.S."

"We are grateful for the actions you've taken to protect

free markets, democracy and freedom around the world," Tsai said. "Taiwan stands with you & we will be that bastion of freedom in the Indo-Pacific."

The U.S. last year sent 11 ships through the Taiwan Strait on eight separate transits, most recently with the USS Chancellorsville on Nov. 12.

It was a significant increase from 2018, when the U.S. made just three passages through the strait.

China regularly objects to U.S. transits through the strait, which it considers its territorial waters. The U.S. considers them international waters, and thus fair for any country to sail through without requesting permission.

Pentagon weighs reduced presence in Africa

The Washington Post

The Pentagon is facing growing pressure from Congress to maintain U.S. troop levels in Africa as the Defense Department considers significantly reducing the American presence to refocus on the Asia-Pacific region.

Defense Secretary Mark Esper has undertaken a review of each geographic combatant command, its missions and assignments and will assess whether allies and partner nations can take on more responsibilities, said Jonathan Hoffman, the chief Pentagon spokesman.

The review began with the region under U.S. Africa Command, which includes the entire continent except for Egypt, which falls under U.S. Central Command. President Donald Trump has said that he wants to get the United States out of “ridiculous Endless Wars, many of them tribal, and bring our soldiers home.”

Although Pentagon officials say no decisions have been made, the effort has generated a rising bipartisan tide of concern that the United States will cede influence to rival nations such as Russia and China and do less to counter extremist groups with links to al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

“Any drawdown of our troops would be shortsighted, could cripple AFRICOM’s ability to execute its mission and, as a result, would harm national security,” said Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, who has generally been a strong supporter of the Trump administration.

Sen. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., another Trump ally, also raised the issue in a letter to Esper that expressed “serious concern regarding reports of a possible decision to significantly reduce or completely withdraw U.S. Armed Forces,” especially in West Africa. The letter was co-signed by Sen. Christopher Coons, D-Del.

The cuts are under consider-

‘I would think if you have a problem that’s potentially growing and you do less, it’s not going to be helpful. That’s logical. That’s not the intent.’

Army Maj. Gen. William Gayler
U.S. Africa Command

ation as high-profile attacks by militants from Niger to Kenya have rattled nerves and raised concerns about stability and security. On Jan. 5, a U.S. service member and two U.S. contractors were killed in an attack carried out by the Somali militant group al-Shabab on an airfield in Kenya, highlighting the group’s ability to extend beyond Somalia.

The Pentagon has about 6,000 troops in Africa, including about 1,400 in West Africa, primarily in Niger, said Air Force Col. Chris Karns, a military spokesman. About 4,400 are in East Africa, with most in Djibouti, and between 650 and 800 in Somalia, where the U.S. military advises African forces combating al-Shabab.

A senior defense official, who, like several other officials interviewed for this story, spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue, said that changes in Africa could include a greater reliance on a concept the Pentagon calls “dynamic force employment,” in which troops are moved with little notice to demonstrate a U.S. presence and unpredictability. The Pentagon has used that model to do things such as showcase an aircraft carrier, but it is unclear how well it will apply in Africa, where small teams of service members are often distributed across large areas.

Another senior defense official said that although no decisions have been made, Esper has concerns about past “mission creep,” in which efforts gradually expand because service members are already deployed. Esper believes European allies can take on additional missions

and allow the Pentagon to focus more elsewhere, the senior official said.

“The thing we always look at is: Do our goals support the NDS?” the official said, referring to the national defense strategy. “We are doing drastic prioritization of all our assets and all of our personnel on where they are best utilized to support the NDS and the national interests.”

Army Gen. Stephen Townsend, the Africa Command chief, will visit Washington this week for previously scheduled meetings at the Pentagon and on Capitol Hill, two defense officials said. But the cuts, first reported by The New York Times last month, are sure to be discussed.

The issue has also caught the attention of the French government, which has about 4,500 troops deployed to Mali and nearby nations, and relies on American support for intelligence, transportation, surveillance and aerial refueling to fight extremists.

French Defense Minister Florence Parly said recently that she will travel to Washington this month amid growing concern that the United States could withdraw forces. French President Emmanuel Macron announced on Jan. 13 that he is sending hundreds more troops to West Africa and urged other European countries to join the battle, expressing alarm over the prospect of losing the “irreplaceable” help of the U.S. military. A senior military officer with AFRICOM, Army Maj. Gen. William Gayler, played down the significance of the Pentagon’s review, calling it “nothing more than an

assessment of globally aligning resources” to the U.S. defense strategy. He indicated, however, that growing security concerns in Africa complicate it.

“I would think if you have a problem that’s potentially growing and you do less, it’s not going to be helpful,” Gayler said in a phone conference with reporters on Thursday. “That’s logical. That’s not the intent.”

On Tuesday, a bipartisan group in the House sent a missive to Esper arguing that a “narrow focus on confronting Russia and China in great power competition is a shortsighted action.” Doing so, “diminishes our overall national security posture and our ability to lead with American values and influence,” lawmakers wrote.

Rep. Anthony Brown, D-Md., one of the co-signers, said that before visiting Mali, Niger and Nigeria last summer with three other lawmakers, he believed the United States should reduce its troop presence in Africa. But after seeing how U.S. special operations forces and aid workers collaborate to provide stability and an American foothold on the continent, he now thinks a modest increase makes more sense, he said.

“It’s really just preserving relationships and making sure that China, particularly, does not become a partner out of necessity,” Brown, a retired Army officer, said in an interview.

Rep. Michael Waltz, R-Fla., a retired Green Beret officer who also signed the letter, said that although he agrees the Pentagon must prepare for competition with China and Russia, he worries the “pendulum can swing too far” from counterterrorism and stability operations.

He cited Russian involvement in Libya and the possibility of the Russian military gaining a port there.

“I’m looking at a small footprint and what it costs us now versus what it could cost us in the long run by pulling back,” he said.

Hillary Clinton doubles down on Sanders dis

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Hillary Clinton says “nobody likes” her former presidential rival Bernie Sanders, even as the Vermont senator remains entrenched among the front-runners in the Democratic race, with the Iowa caucus beginning in less than two weeks.

In an interview with “The Hollywood Reporter” published Tuesday, Clinton was asked about a comment she makes in an upcoming documentary where she says Sanders was “in Congress for years” but, “Nobody likes him, nobody wants to work with him, he got nothing done.”

Clinton replied that the criticism still holds and refused to say she’d endorse him this cycle if he wins the party’s nomination, adding: “It’s not only him, it’s the culture around him. It’s his leadership team. It’s his prominent supporters.”

Sanders’ campaign said Tuesday it didn’t have a comment about Clinton’s remarks.

Her comments may ultimately energize Sanders loyalists who believed the Democratic establishment rigged the 2016 primary in her favor. That could be especially helpful with this cycle’s Iowa caucuses looming on Feb. 3. Many polls show Sanders among the leaders with former Vice President Joe Biden, Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren and Pete Buttigieg, the former mayor of South Bend, Ind.

But Clinton also blamed Sanders’ supporters for fostering a culture of sexism in politics — a charge that is especially sensitive now, given that Sanders’ top progressive rival in the 2020 race, Warren, has accused him of suggesting a woman couldn’t win the White House during a private meeting between the two in 2018.

Sanders has denied that, but both candidates accused the other of calling them “a liar.” Warren has declined to comment further, but Sanders, 78, said Sunday that while sexism was a problem for candidates, so were other factors, like advanced age.

Seoul says it will send naval destroyer to Strait of Hormuz

BY KIM GAMEL

Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea will send a naval destroyer with a crew of 300 to the Strait of Hormuz in an independent mission, the defense ministry said Tuesday, a decision that followed months of U.S. pressure as Washington seeks help amid tensions with Iran.

Seoul faced a dilemma in trying to balance a need to support its decades-old ally the United States and avoid alienating Iran, one of the few countries to have diplomatic relations with both North and South Korea.

South Korea will deploy troops to the strategic waterway by expanding operational areas of the Cheonghae Unit, which has been on an anti-piracy mission in the Gulf of Aden off the coast of Somalia since 2009, according to the defense

ministry.

“In consideration of the current situation in the Middle East, the government has decided to temporarily expand the Cheonghae Unit’s sphere of activity in order to guarantee the safety of our people and the freedom of navigation of our vessels,” the ministry said in a press release.

The unit’s 4,400-ton destroyer Wang Geon and its crew were to assume their new role Tuesday, it said.

The ministry added that the mission will act independently from the U.S.-led international coalition defending the strait but will send two liaison officers to the International Maritime Security Construct and will cooperate with it if necessary.

The announcement came less than a week after Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reportedly called for collective efforts to safeguard the narrow water-

way during a meeting in California with his South Korean counterpart, Kang Kyung-wha.

The waterway has become a flash point after the U.S. withdrew from a 2015 nuclear deal with Iran and killed Iran’s top general in an airstrike earlier this month.

Iran was accused of attacking international oil tankers in the area last year, although it denied the allegations. It also seized a British-flagged oil tanker after an Iranian oil tanker suspected of sanctions violations was detained by authorities in Gibraltar. Both ships were eventually released.

More than 70% of South Korean oil imports are carried via the Strait of Hormuz, and South Korean vessels sail through the area about 900 times per year, the ministry said, adding that about 25,000 South Koreans live in the Middle East.

Senior NCO to Japanese, US troops: Space Force focused on warfighting capabilities

BY SETH ROBSON

Stars and Stripes

YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan — It’s fun to talk about Space Force uniforms and blasting troops into orbit, but the first priority for the new service branch is getting capabilities to warfighters, a top Space Force enlisted leader said.

Chief Master Sgt. John Bentivegna, senior noncommissioned officer for Combined Force Space Component Command and Space Operations Command at Vandenberg Air Force Base, Calif., spoke to U.S. and Japanese service members Tuesday during a “Space Symposium” at Yokota, home of U.S. Forces Japan in western Tokyo.

Service members working for the Space Force, which was created in December by des-

ignating the Air Force Space Command as its own service branch, are airmen who will eventually become something else, said Bentivegna, who wore a shiny space operations occupational badge.

A photo of the first Space Force name tape on a camouflage uniform on social media recently provoked a slew of snarky comments from people saying the camo wouldn’t blend well with the stars.

“Members will look like their joint counterparts they’ll be working with, on the ground,” the Space Force wrote in a tweet.

Space Force officials will meet with President Donald Trump to talk about logos, naming conventions and ranks for the new force, Bentivegna said.

There’s been talk about what

the culture of the new service should be, he added.

“We are trying to get that right but what’s more important is the organizational structure and how we, as an operational service, provide capabilities to the warfighter,” he said in an interview after the symposium. “How do we organize, train and equip space professionals? That’s one of the major reasons we started up the Space Force.”

Enlisted personnel fly satellites and send commands to keep them in the right orbit. They keep satellite batteries charged and analyze the data they send back before passing it on to other organizations, Bentivegna said.

“Enlisted operators are integrated across all aspects of space operations,” he said, noting that they’re doing things that only officers were authorized to do a few years ago.

Hawaii attack suspect described as unhinged

Associated Press

HONOLULU — A man suspected of stabbing a woman and killing two Hawaii police officers would record neighbors with a camera mounted to his hat and rig a barbecue grill to blow thick smoke directly into their windows, a lawyer for residents said.

Jaroslav “Jerry” Hanel, facing eviction, stabbed a woman in the leg Sunday before he fired on responding authorities, killing Officers Tiffany Enriquez and Kaulike Kalama, police said. A fire at Hanel’s residence then spread in a normally peaceful neighborhood at the far end of famed Waikiki Beach, an area where attorney David Hayakawa has represented three neighbors in restraining orders against Hanel since 2014.

“It was pretty clear he was out of control,” Hayakawa said.

Authorities did not respond to repeated requests for comment Monday. Police had said Hanel is missing but they’re almost certain he is inside the burned house. Honolulu Police Chief Susan Ballard had said it could take days to process evidence and recover any remains.

Two women were also missing after the fire. Hanel’s lawyer, Jonathan Burge, says property owner Lois Cain’s sister told him Cain was unaccounted for. “She was trying to see whatever information we had because they can’t reach Lois,” Burge said. The sister told him she spoke with the woman who was stabbed, who was one of the tenants of the house, he said.

Cain had recently sought to evict Hanel, who lived in the home for free in exchange

for his work, according to court records and his lawyer. Hanel has been described as paranoid and unhinged.

Neighbors complained of bizarre and annoying behavior including Hanel chasing cars down the street, confronting their guests and workers who came to their homes, recording them with a camera mounted to his hat and forcing thick smoke from his barbecue grill directly into their windows, Hayakawa said Monday. “Just crazy things,” he said.

Burge has represented Hanel since 2015 in various disputes with neighbors, including temporary restraining orders that three obtained against him. Hanel, a native of the Czech Republic who used Czech interpreters in court, faces a hearing next week on a charge of misusing 911 services, Burge said Sunday.

As coronavirus spreads, anxiety rises in China

Associated Press

WUHAN, China — Face masks sold out and temperature checks at airports and train stations became the new norm as China strove on Tuesday to control the outbreak of a new coronavirus. It has so far reached four other countries and territories, and threatens to spread further during the Lunar New Year travel rush.

Anxiety grew both at home and abroad after Chinese government expert Zhong Nanshan confirmed fears on state television late Monday that the virus can spread

from human to human.

Six people have died and 291 have been infected in China, the National Health Commission said Tuesday.

The stock prices of some companies that sell masks rose Tuesday, but markets fell in much of Asia as investors worried about the potential impact on tourism and the economy.

Concerned about a global outbreak similar to SARS, another coronavirus that spread from China to more than a dozen countries in 2002-2003, numerous nations have adopted screening measures for travelers from China, especially those arriving

from Wuhan, the central city where the virus appears to have originated.

Guards at Wuhan’s airport pointed electronic thermometers at travelers. Several online retailers were sold out of masks, which were being sold for more than 10 times their original price. Users of the popular Weibo social media platform urged others to wash their hands and stay home.

The first cases late last month were connected to a seafood market, and transmission was thought to be occurring from animals to humans. Authorities previously had not confirmed human-to-human transmission.

Officials: 1 dead as protesters take Baghdad highway

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Iraqi riot police opened fire Tuesday amid clashes with anti-government protesters on a central Baghdad highway, killing one person and wounding over a dozen others, officials said. They were the latest casualties since violence erupted again last week between demonstrators and security forces.

Clashes on the key Mohammed al-Qassim highway broke out when riot police moved in to disperse a crowd of mostly young men who had gathered

there. The protesters burned tires, halting traffic along the key artery and some protesters hurled Molotov cocktails, or fire bombs, at the riot police.

Police fired live rounds and tear gas canisters at the crowd. At least 14 protesters were wounded, their injuries ranging from severe to moderate. One protester died after being struck by a tear gas canister to the head, according to police and medical officials and activists.

As the violence escalated, police pulled back, allowing demonstrators to take over the

thoroughfare, witnesses said, speaking on condition of anonymity, fearing reprisals.

The Mohammed al-Qassim highway connects areas in Baghdad’s Rusafa, a district to the east of the Tigris River. Protesters have already blocked three central bridges — the Sinak, Jumhuriyah and Ahrar. Blocking the highway threatens to halt movement altogether in the central part of Baghdad.

Meanwhile, outgoing Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi condemned an overnight triple-rocket attack targeting

the heavily fortified Green Zone, the seat of Iraq’s government, and ordered an investigation into the incident, military spokesman Maj. Gen. Abdul Karim Khalaf said. The Katyusha rockets fell near the U.S. Embassy but caused no casualties.

The Green Zone attack was the second rocket attack to target the area in the last two weeks, amid soaring tensions between Washington and Tehran after a U.S. drone strike killed top Iranian Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad earlier this month.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police: Man stabbed with metal letter opener

AZ PHOENIX — Police in Phoenix said a suspect is in custody on suspicion of stabbing a man with a metal letter opener.

They said Anastacio Blanco Jr., 36, was charged with one count each of attempted second-degree murder and aggravated assault.

Police said Blanco jumped over a wall to a condo complex north of the Biltmore Fashion Park mall, climbed a tree and reached the balcony of a condo before using a rock to force himself inside.

Police said Blanco allegedly threatened to kill a 71-year-old man inside the residence before grabbing a letter opener and stabbing the man multiple times.

School bus driver on leave after scary ride

CA MANTECA — A central California school bus driver is on administrative leave after elementary school students said she drove in circles and over curbs during a scary ride home, according to a news report.

Parents told school officials their kids called them crying and saying the driver was operating the bus erratically, KCRA-TV reported.

The parents became concerned when their children were more than a half-hour late coming home from school.

Couple together 65 years die on same day

MO ARNOLD — A couple who had been together for nearly 65 years died on the same day at a St. Louis-area nursing home.

Jack and Harriet Morrison's beds were placed next to each other in their final hours, allowing them to hold hands, the St. Louis Post-Dispatch reported.

Jack, 86, died first. Harriett, 83, died later Jan. 11.

"I'm sad. But I know they're at peace and they're back together," said Sue Wagener, a niece raised by the Morrisons. "It truly was a love story for the books."

The couple went on their first date on Halloween of 1955.

Police rescue 3 pigs missing from trailer

NY SAYVILLE — Three pigs that escaped a trailer destined for an animal rescue in New York were retrieved by police and others, officials said.

Sgt. Theodore Martinez was driving a police car when he saw what looked like a pig on the side of the road, department officials said in a release.

Martinez then saw a trailer attached to a Hummer with its doors flung open and a lone pig inside. Martinez pulled the Hummer over, and the driver said she was transporting four pigs to the Evelyn Alexander Wildlife Rescue Center in East Quogue and wasn't aware that three were missing.

Additional officers responded along with employees from the Sayville Animal Hospital and employees of the Town of Islip.

Manhole fires prompt outages, street closures

MA BOSTON — Manhole fires prompted utility officials to cut off power in the area of Faneuil Hall in downtown Boston recently.

Fire officials said they received multiple reports of fires and found smoke in the basements of buildings around the

historic meeting hall, as well as from area manholes.

Power company Eversource said the smoke appears to have come from fires underground caused by equipment failure.

Man cited after rappelling into canyon

MT BILLINGS — A 55-year-old Indiana man had to be rescued in Yellowstone National Park after he rappelled down a deep canyon, then was unable to climb back out after he left his rope to retrieve a backpack he dropped, park officials said.

Dave Christensen, of Winamac, was uninjured, but he was cited for disorderly conduct and for illegally going off-trail in the Grand Canyon of the Yellowstone, according to court records.

Christensen was near the end of his 360-foot rope in the canyon, which is more than 1,200 feet deep in places, when he dropped his backpack, district park ranger Clint Powell said.

He slid down the canyon wall to retrieve it, and then could not climb back up. A friend who was communicating with him by radio called for help after about two hours, Powell said.

Lynching memorial, museum expanding

AL MONTGOMERY — The nation's first memorial to lynching victims is expanding.

The Equal Justice Initiative opened a new welcome center and exhibition space that will add to the existing lynching memorial and museum that documents the history of racial inequality in America.

The Legacy Pavilion will include a monument to women, men and children who were victims of racial terror lynch-

ings in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War and during Reconstruction.

Deputies: Man sought hit man to kill brother

FL ST. PETERSBURG — Authorities said a Florida man sought to hire a hit man to kill his brother and even offered a \$160 down payment.

It turned out, however, that the "hit man" was actually an undercover detective with the Pinellas County Sheriff's Department. Officials said as a result Gary Hudge, 54, was charged with solicitation to commit murder.

The Tampa Bay Times reported that Hudge met the detective during a drug investigation and said he wanted to hire the undercover detective to kill his brother, Thomas Hudge, 57. The two were at odds over financial issues.

Principal fired after giving student alcohol

WA GIG HARBOR — The principal of a private school in Gig Harbor lost his job after allegations surfaced that he supplied drugs, alcohol and money to a student while at his previous teaching job at a Seattle high school.

The News Tribune reported the Archdiocese of Seattle received "credible allegations" that Davin Reyes, the principal of St. Nicholas Catholic School, had given the items to a student at O'Dea High School, according to spokeswoman Helen McClenahan.

"Because of this, he was terminated as principal of St. Nicholas and his case was turned over to police," McClenahan said. The Archdiocese's legal team contacted Seattle police in December, she said.

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Brady, though idle, stays in the news

Associated Press

Tom Brady is sitting out the Super Bowl for the first time since the Denver Broncos walloped him 23 times in the AFC championship four years ago, sending a hobbled Peyton Manning to the big game for his final hurrah.

Still, Brady's all the buzz even as the Kansas City Chiefs and San Francisco 49ers prepare for their Super Bowl LIV showdown in Miami on Feb. 2.

After teaming with Bill Belichick for a half dozen rings over their 18 years together in New England, Brady is on the cusp of becoming the biggest free agent to hit the open market since Manning in 2013, a foray that featured news media helicopters following the quarterback's every visit.

"I am open-minded about the process and you know at the same time I love playing football and I want to continue to play and do a great job," Brady told Jim Gray on his Westwood One radio show on conference championship Sunday.

"So, I'm looking forward to what's ahead, whatever the future may bring, I will embrace it with open arms."

Brady, whose contract voids in March, has said he wants to play to age 45. He'll turn 43 in August.

If he leaves New England, it's clear Brady would want to go to a team ready to compete right away so he can get his shot at a record seventh Super Bowl title.

The Chargers, Titans and Colts all could prove enticing landing spots for Brady,

whose Patriots (12-5) suffered their earliest exit from the playoffs in Brady's career when they lost to Tennessee 20-13 in the wild-card round on Jan. 4.

Brady had reached the AFC championship 13 times in his first 17 seasons, going 9-4 on his way to winning six Super Bowl rings. Three of his title-game losses came against Manning and the other one was against Joe Flacco.

Even as Patrick Mahomes and Jimmy Garoppolo, the vanguard of a new generation of mobile, mercurial quarterbacks who have vanquished the old guard, get ready for Super Bowl LIV, Brady's status remains the biggest story line as the NFL wraps up the yearlong celebration of its centennial season.

Sharapova short on answers after another early exit

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Her Grand Slam losing streak up to four matches, Maria Sharapova surely was aware questions about her future would be coming.

She wasn't able to provide answers.

Might this have been her last trip to the Australian Open, a tournament she won in 2008 as part of a career Grand Slam?

"I don't know," Sharapova said, her head shaking and eyes looking down. "I don't know. ... It's tough for me to tell what's going to happen in 12 months' time."

Might she enter low-level tournaments to try to raise a WTA ranking that once was No. 1, all those years ago, already was only 145th entering play at Melbourne Park and now will tumble outside of the top 350 following a 6-3, 6-4 loss to Donna Vekic on Tuesday?

"I just don't know," Sharapova said. "I haven't thought of my schedule moving forward from here yet."

After a rainy Day 1 filled up Tuesday's schedule so much that at least eight matches needed to be postponed until Wednesday, the sun was out and there was plenty of action around the grounds at the first

Grand Slam tournament of the decade. Joining Sharapova on the way out were three-time major semifinalist Johanna Konta, 2019 French Open semifinalist Amanda Anisimova and the 20th-seeded man, Felix Auger-Aliassime.

Seeded winners included two-time major champion Simona Halep and No. 1 Rafael Nadal, who began his bid to equal Roger Federer's record of 20 Grand Slam singles titles with a 6-2, 6-3, 6-0 victory over Hugo Dellien.

The man Nadal beat in last year's U.S. Open final, No. 4 Daniil Medvedev, eliminated 2019 Australian Open quarterfinalist Frances Tiafoe of the U.S. in four sets. Also advancing: three-time major champion Stan Wawrinka, two-time French Open runner-up Dominic Thiem, No. 12 Fabio Fognini, No. 16 Karen Khachanov and No. 23 Nick Kyrgios, an Australian who spurred tennis players to contribute funds for wildfire relief efforts — and inspired TV analyst John McEnroe to pony up \$1,000 per set Kyrgios wins the rest of the way in the tournament.

This is the only time in Sharapova's long career that the 32-year-old Russian has lost in the first round at three consecutive major tournaments.

Indeed, there only was one other instance of Sharapova dropping opening matches at Slams twice in a row: All the way back in 2003, when she was a teen and made immediate exits at the very first two major appearances of her career.

Hampered by right shoulder problems that have been an off-and-on issue for more than a decade, Sharapova is no longer the player she once was. One difficulty is simply that shoulder itself; another is the lack of match play because of her health. And since serving a 15-month ban after failing a drug test at the 2016 Australian Open, Sharapova has only reached one major quarterfinal.

She played a total of 15 matches last season, going 8-7. After a promising run to the fourth round in Melbourne a year ago, including a victory over reigning champion Caroline Wozniacki that was her most recent win against a top-20 opponent, Sharapova went 5-6 the rest of 2019.

"It's tough to say I'm on the right track right now, 45 minutes after the match," she said Tuesday. "But, I mean, there is no way to get out of it except to keep believing in yourself, because if you do all the right things and you don't believe in yourself, then that's probably a

bad formula."

Against the 19th-seeded Vekic, who's never been past the second round at the Australian Open, Sharapova appeared to be righting herself at the outset of the second set, grabbing a 4-1 lead, before ceding the final five games.

"She's still hitting it as hard as I can remember," Vekic said.

Perhaps. But Sharapova was not putting the ball where she wanted, especially on her forehand side, which produced 18 miscues alone — more than Vekic's full unforced error total of 17.

"She had some amazing results in her career. You know, her work ethic is pretty amazing. I saw her training in the offseason and she's really working hard," said Vekic, who practiced with Sharapova before the start of the season. "So I think her results will come."

No one can know, of course.

"As far as the work that I did, yeah, I did all the right things. I put in all the right work. There is no guarantee that even when you do all of those things, that you're guaranteed victory in a first round or in the third round or in the final. That's the name of this game," Sharapova said. "That's why it's so special to be a champion, even for one time."

Lillard's 61 leads Blazers past Warriors

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — After setting a Portland record with 61 points, Damian Lillard knew exactly who held the old mark.

He did.

Lillard topped his own franchise scoring high Monday night in the Trail Blazers' 129-124 overtime victory against the Golden State Warriors. He also established a team best with 11 three-pointers.

"I guess if somebody's going to beat my record, it's good to be me," Lillard said.

The star guard's previous career high was 60 points earlier this season against Brooklyn, which broke the club record at the time. His 61 points Monday were the most in the NBA this season.

Lillard became the first player in NBA history with 60-plus points and 10-plus three-pointers in a game, and just the sixth player with multiple 60-point games.

He also had 10 rebounds for his 10th double-double of the season, and made all 16 of his free throws. Hassan Whiteside added 17 points and 21 rebounds for the Blazers (19-26), who snapped a two-game skid.

"I'm excited about it, I'm happy about it, but I wish it counted for three wins instead of one," Lillard said.

Lillard's layup and free throw gave Portland a 110-109 lead with 2:26 left, but rookie Eric Paschall dunked to put Golden State back in front with less than a minute to go.

Alec Burks added a pair of free throws to extend Golden State's lead, but Lillard's three-pointer tied it with 14.9 seconds left and the game went to overtime.

"He's a great player," Warriors coach Steve Kerr said about Lillard.

NBA roundup

Tatum, Walker lead Celtics' rout of Lakers

Associated Press

BOSTON — Kemba Walker scored 20 points to end a career-long personal losing streak against LeBron James, and Jayson Tatum scored 27 to help the Boston Celtics rout the Los Angeles Lakers 139-107 on Monday.

"I'm happy I got one at least, before he goes," Walker said with a laugh after the Celtics snapped their three-game losing streak.

It was the Western Conference leader's biggest loss of the season.

Jaylen Brown scored 20 points and Enes Kanter had 18 points and 11 rebounds for the Celtics.

James had 15 points and 13 assists for the Lakers, who had won 10 of their previous 11 games. But Boston made 13 of its first 22 three-point attempts to open a 103-75 lead in the third quarter — the biggest against Los Angeles all season — until Boston made it a 34-point game in the fourth.

"We were fortunate to put the ball in the basket quite a bit," said Celtics coach Brad Stevens, whose team shot 56% overall. "The ball going in masks some things."

76ers 117, Nets 111: Ben Simmons tied a career high with 34 points and added 12 rebounds and 12 assists, car-

rying Philadelphia to a win at Brooklyn.

Announced as the Eastern Conference Player of the Week during the game, Simmons got a good start on winning the next week's award. He shot 12-for-14 from the field in his career-best fifth straight game with 20 or more points, finishing with his fourth triple-double of the season.

Al Horford added 19 points for the 76ers, who won their fourth consecutive game.

Bucks 111, Bulls 98: Giannis Antetokounmpo had a triple-double and scored his 10,000th career point, and host Milwaukee beat Chicago to sweep the four-game season series.

Antetokounmpo had 28 points, 14 rebounds and 10 assists for his fourth triple-double of the season. He reached 10,000 points on a jump hook with 4:30 remaining in the fourth.

Thunder 112, Rockets 107: Chris Paul scored 28 points, Danilo Gallinari had 25 and Oklahoma City rallied for win at Houston.

Paul scored 27 in the first half against his former team. Gallinari and Dennis Schroder, who scored 17 of his 23 points after halftime, carried the Thunder after the break.

Jazz 118, Pacers 88: Dono-

van Mitchell scored 25 points and Rudy Gobert had 20 points and 14 rebounds, leading host Utah to the runaway victory.

Bojan Bogdanovic added 16 points for the Jazz. Utah never trailed on its way to snapping a three-game losing streak to the Pacers.

Nuggets 107, Timberwolves 100: Michael Porter Jr. posted his second double-double in three games with 20 points and 14 rebounds, helping short-handed Denver to the road win.

Jerami Grant scored 19 points for the Nuggets, who again had three of their top five scorers absent — Jamal Murray, Paul Millsap and Gary Harris Jr. — and were playing on back-to-back nights. Nikola Jokic had 17 points and 13 rebounds.

Heat 118, Kings 113 (OT): Kendrick Nunn scored 25 points, James Johnson added 22 on 9-for-11 shooting and Miami improved its NBA-best home record to 19-1.

Goran Dragic scored 18 and Bam Adebayo finished with 16 points and 11 rebounds for the Heat, which also lead the NBA with a 7-0 overtime record this season.

Pelicans 126, Grizzlies 116: Jrue Holiday matched his season high with 36 points in his return after a seven-game absence, and New Orleans set a

franchise record with 21 three-pointers in a win at Memphis.

The Pelicans ended the Grizzlies' seven-game winning streak.

Spurs 120, Suns 118: Derrick White scored a season-high 25 points, Bryn Forbes added 24 and San Antonio coughed up a 20-point lead in the second half before rallying for a win at Phoenix.

Devin Booker led the Suns with 37 points. He had 22 during the third quarter in a nearly single-handed effort to keep Phoenix close.

Wizards 106, Pistons 100: Bradley Beal scored 29 points and Ian Mahinmi added 21, helping host Washington snap a three-game losing streak.

Beal passed Wes Unseld for fourth place on the team's career scoring list.

Raptors 122, Hawks 117: Norman Powell scored 27 points for Toronto, including 17 in the final period in a win at Atlanta.

Knicks 106, Cavaliers 86: Marcus Morris Sr. and Julius Randle each scored 19 points, powering New York to the road win.

Magic 106, Hornets 83: Evan Fournier scored 26 points and visiting Orlando handed Charlotte its seventh consecutive loss.

College basketball roundup

New No. 1 Baylor wins 15th straight

Associated Press

WACO, Texas — Freddie Gillespie and the Baylor Bears can now say they have been No. 1 during the season.

"Outside of that, guys have bigger goals," Gillespie said. "That's nice, thank God for it, but now just move forward."

MaCio Teague had 16 points, fellow transfer Davion Mitchell had 13 and Gillespie had a double-double as the Bears won their first-ever home game as the No. 1 team. They held on to beat Oklahoma 61-57 on Monday night, after leapfrogging Gonzaga for the top spot in the new AP Top 25 poll released earlier in the day.

"The Big 12, if you want to win a championship, you've got to win your close games. You've got to win your home games, and we did and that's all that matters," coach Scott Drew said. "Thanks to everyone for praying on that last shot."

The Sooners, down by 11 early after halftime, pulled

to 59-57 on three-pointers by Brady Manek and Austin Reaves, and had the ball when Kristian Doolittle got a steal against Baylor guard Jared Butler. But Reaves missed a potential go-ahead three-pointer from the left corner in front of the Oklahoma bench with 6 seconds left.

"I was proud of our guys for fighting and scratching and hanging in there," Oklahoma coach Lon Kruger said. "I can't say we had anything drawn up. It was a steal and it's a break."

Baylor (16-1, 6-0 Big 12) won its 15th game in a row, second only to No. 4 San Diego State's 19 in a row. The Bears are 6-0 in conference play for the first time since winning their first 10 Southwest Conference games in 1948, when they made the national championship game.

Manek had 21 points to lead Oklahoma (12-6, 3-3), following up his career-high 31 points only two days earlier against TCU.

The only other time the

Bears reached No. 1 was in the poll released Jan. 9, 2017, and they lost by 21 the next night at No. 10 West Virginia. They rebounded with a win at No. 25 Kansas State, but had slipped to No. 6 by time they returned home the following week.

Teague, the junior guard who transferred from UNC Asheville, had a steal and a break-away layup with just under seven minutes left to stretch the Baylor lead to 53-46. When he missed a three on his next shot, Gillespie had a putback slam.

Gillespie finished with 12 points and a career-high 15 rebounds. It was the seventh double-double this season for the 6-foot-9 senior forward who started his career at the NCAA Division III level before walking on at Baylor.

Mitchell scored 10 points with two threes when Baylor broke a tie and went ahead to stay with a 17-6 run to end the first half. A shot clock-beating jumper was the first of seven

points in a row for the former Auburn transfer.

Butler, who was second in the Big 12 with 16.9 points a game, missed his first 10 shots and finished with only four points on 2-for-13 shooting.

"He's bailed us out of situations many times before, so it's our job to bail him out of situations the same way he does for us," Teague said.

No. 14 West Virginia 97, Texas 59: Oscar Tshiebwe had 13 points and 11 rebounds, Derek Culver scored 13 points, and the host Mountaineers jumped to a big early lead and coasted to an easy win over the Longhorns.

Jermaine Haley added 12 points and Jordan McCabe scored 10 for West Virginia (15-3, 4-2 Big 12), which bounced back from a lopsided loss at Kansas State that cost it a spot in the top 10 this week.

Texas (12-6, 2-4 Big 12) has dropped two straight after falling to No. 3 Kansas at home on Saturday.

NHL roundup

Acciari's goal with 5.6 seconds left propels Panthers

Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. — Doink. Doink. Winner.

Noel Acciari scored with 5.6 seconds left in the third period and the Florida Panthers rallied to win their fifth straight game, beating the Minnesota Wild 5-4 on Monday night.

Despite his stick being held by Ryan Suter, Acciari was able to tip in a shot from the point by Mark Pysyk that was first tipped by Aaron Ekblad. A video review upheld the goal.

"That's what you call a break, very opportunistic break," Panthers coach Joel Quenneville said.

"Yeah, it was pretty crazy," added Keith Yandle, who had a

goal and three assists for Florida. "Mark Pysyk, the hybrid does it all. Defense, forward — great shot by him. I think it was double tipped. Game-winning goal in a building that has been tough for us to win in."

It was Florida's first regulation victory in Minnesota. Since a 2001 scoreless tie during the Wild's inaugural season, Minnesota was 10-0-1 at home against Florida, including seven wins in a row.

Aleksander Barkov added a goal and an assist for the Panthers. Evgenii Dadonov and Vincent Trocheck also scored. Sergei Bobrovsky made 29 saves in his second consecutive start after missing two games

with an upper-body injury.

Florida has won six of seven and 12 of 16 to move into third place in the Atlantic Division.

Luke Kunin had two goals, including one short-handed, Zach Parise scored on the power play and Jared Spurgeon added a goal and an assist for Minnesota, last in the Central Division and seven points out of a playoff spot. Alex Stalock stopped 20 shots and Joel Eriksson Ek and Suter each had two assists.

Avalanche 6, Red Wings 3: Nazem Kadri had two goals and an assist, Nathan MacKinnon also scored twice and host Colorado beat reeling Detroit.

Matt Nieto and Ryan Graves

also scored for the Avalanche, and Pavel Francouz stopped 22 shots. Cale Makar had two assists. Colorado finished 3-0-2 on a five-game homestand.

Tyler Bertuzzi, Dylan Larkin and Givani Smith scored for Detroit, which has dropped five in a row (0-4-1). Larkin also had two assists. Jimmy Howard made 40 saves in falling to 2-18-2.

Leading 2-1 early in the third, Kadri helped Colorado put the game out of reach when he and Nieto added goals 53 seconds apart.

After Smith pulled Detroit to 5-3 late in the third, MacKinnon added an empty-netter with 1:00 remaining to seal the win.