

Judge grants relief to troops over vaccine

The Washington Post

A federal judge granted a preliminary injunction on Monday blocking the Defense Department from taking action against a group of 35 Navy sailors who had refused to get a coronavirus vaccine, raising questions on how it might shape the Pentagon's requirement that all U.S. troops get vaccinated.

U.S. District Judge Reed O'Connor found that the pandemic "provides the government with no license to abrogate" the freedoms that any American has, and that the service members had a right to avoid getting a vaccine on religious grounds.

"This Court does not make light of COVID-19's impact on the military. Collectively, our armed forces have lost over 80 lives to COVID-19 over the course of the pandemic," O'Connor wrote Monday in a 26-page order.

But the judge added that the "loss of religious liberties outweighs any forthcoming harm to the Navy," and that "even the direst circumstances cannot justify the loss of constitutional rights."

Pentagon spokesman John Kirby said Monday night that defense officials were aware of the injunction and reviewing it.

The troops — a group that included Navy SEALs and other members of Naval Special Warfare Command — filed suit against President Joe Biden, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, Navy Secretary Carlos Del Toro and the Defense Department to challenge the Navy's vaccination requirement in November. They cited Christian beliefs that they should not take a vaccine developed from aborted fetal cell lines and saw a modification of their bodies as an "affront to their Creator." Many Christians have sought vaccination, with Pope Francis urging Catholics to do so on humanitarian grounds.

The suit was filed by First Liberty Institute, a nonprofit that specializes in defending religious liberty. Michael Berry, a lawyer for the institute, said in a phone interview that the ruling "sends a clear message to the Biden administration, to the Pentagon and to the Navy that our service members do not give up their religious freedom when they serve their country."

Should the Biden administration appeal the decision, Berry said, "we will defend this as far as it needs to go."

O'Connor noted that the Navy has a process by which service members can seek a religious accommodation to avoid vaccination, but said that "by all accounts, it is theater."

Twenty-nine of the 35 troops represented in the lawsuit had seen their requests to avoid the vaccine denied, with many appealing, his ruling said.

"The Navy has not granted a religious exemption to any vaccine in recent memory," O'Connor wrote. "It merely rubber stamps each denial."

The injunction comes after nearly all of the more than 1 million active-duty U.S. service members received at least one coronavirus vaccination, and as the Defense Department has begun to end the military careers of those who do not. The Air Force and Marine Corps began administratively separating service members last month, while the Navy and Army were expected to begin doing so beginning this month.

Abraham Lincoln captain makes historic deployment

BY ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

The USS Abraham Lincoln made history on Monday as it departed San Diego, the first deployment of a U.S. aircraft carrier skippered by a woman.

Capt. Amy Bauernschmidt assumed command of the Abraham Lincoln in August. The ship departed with its strike group for a regularly scheduled deployment in support of global maritime security operations, according to a Monday news release from U.S. 3rd Fleet.

"These Sailors are incredible professionals who have trained exceptionally hard to ensure they are ready for any operational obligations required of us on deployment," Bauernschmidt said in the release. "They are absolutely prepared for today's deployment, and I have no doubt they will represent our nation proudly as we defend our national interests."

The carrier's deployment to the region comes amid rising hostile rhetoric between China and Taiwan. Rear Adm. Jeffrey Anderson, the Lincoln carrier strike group commander, didn't comment specifically on the matter during a news conference Monday but said the strike group is ready to accomplish its mission, whatever that might be.

"We're trained and certified for global deployment," Anderson said. "Our mission is to provide combat capability and ready naval forces so that we can work alongside our allies and partners to be able to deter aggression and also counter malign influence."

The ship's departure also coincides with soaring coronavirus case numbers. However, unlike previous carrier deployments, the crew of the Lincoln, its air wing and the crews of other ships in the battle group are 100% vaccinated, Anderson said. The crew did not have to quarantine ahead of the ship's departure, and, as the strike group deploys,

they leave with known positive cases among them.

"We do have some positive cases within the strike group," Anderson said. "But ... we're extremely confident that we can safely and effectively execute our mission."

All active-duty sailors and Marines were required to be fully vaccinated by the end of November. Marines who refused the vaccine are already being booted from the Corps, and the Navy is preparing to do the same with its noncompliant sailors.

A Milwaukee native, Bauernschmidt graduated with a bachelor's in ocean engineering from the Naval Academy in 1994, the first graduating class in which women were allowed to serve aboard combatant ships and aircraft, according to the Navy. She earned a master's at the Naval War College and was designated a naval aviator in 1996. She has 3,000 flight hours and numerous commendations, according to her Navy biography.

Navy gets final order to close fuel facility

By **WYATT OLSON**
Stars and Stripes

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii — The Hawaii Department of Health on Monday gave final approval to an emergency order to close the Navy's Red Hill underground fuel storage facility on Oahu that is linked to contaminated water affecting thousands living in military communities.

"Today's decision affirms DOH's actions to safeguard the drinking water that we share as a community," Kathleen Ho, deputy director of environmental health, said in a news release.

Ho ordered the facility closed Dec. 6, about a week after people living on and near Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam began complaining of foul-smelling tap

water that carried an oily sheen.

The Navy traced the problem to petroleum contamination in one of the three wells used in its water distribution system.

Hundreds were sickened from drinking or bathing in the water, and thousands of residents have been living temporarily in hotels as the Navy works at flushing out the contamination.

"In light of today's ruling, we call upon the Navy to act without further delay to address the imminent peril this facility poses to the people and environment of Hawai'i," Ho wrote.

The Navy contested the emergency order, which prompted a lengthy evidentiary hearing shortly before Christmas heard

by David Day, deputy attorney general of Hawaii.

Day upheld the emergency order, describing it as an "imminent peril" sitting about 100 feet above Oahu's primary aquifer.

"The Red Hill Facility has already damaged human health and the environment and, as currently situated, inevitably threatens to do so into the future," wrote Day, noting that the "weight of the evidence establishes" that the facility is "a metaphorical ticking time bomb located 100 feet above the most important aquifer on Hawaii's most populous island."

In a lengthy 15-point rebuttal last week, the Navy argued that the Health Department lacks the authority to order the World War

II-era facility closed. It holds about 150 million gallons of fuel used by all the service branches.

Navy attorney Craig Jensen wrote that the state's order was the product of a "truncated, expedited and limited process" and that decisions about the facility's future would be properly considered during the permitting process.

The Navy has 30 days to appeal the Health Department's final order in Hawaii Circuit Court, the news release said.

Navy spokeswoman Cmdr. Reann Mommsen said in a written statement Monday that the Navy is reviewing the decision.

"The order will remain in effect unless it is stayed by a court," the news release said.

Explosives-bearing drones shot down near Iraq base

By **CHAD GARLAND**
Stars and Stripes

Two fixed-wing drones rigged with explosives were shot down Tuesday near a base in Iraq that houses American troops, the second such incident in as many days, officials said.

The unmanned aircraft were downed outside the perimeter of al Asad Air Base, in Iraq's western Anbar province, the Iraqi government's Security Media Cell said on Twitter.

Although U.S. troops remain in Iraq to advise its security forces in the fight against Islamic State, the base is home to Iraqi troops, said an official with the U.S.-led coalition fighting ISIS.

"These are attacks against Iraqi installations, an attack against the Iraqi people and the military that protects them," said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity. "We maintain a minimal footprint on Iraqi bases. The coalition no longer has its own

bases in Iraq."

Two drones were shot down Monday near another base housing coalition forces close to Baghdad airport, the coalition's press office said Monday by email. There were no reports of injuries or damage from either incident.

The thwarted attacks came as groups backed by Iran marked the two-year anniversary of the U.S. drone strike at the Baghdad airport that killed Qassem Soleimani, a top Iranian general. Soleimani was the head of Iran's elite Quds Force. He was killed alongside Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of Iran-backed paramilitary groups in Iraq. Iraq's Shiite factions, aligned with Iran, have vowed revenge for the killing and are seeking the full withdrawal of American troops from the country.

The U.S.-led coalition formally ended its combat mission against ISIS last month, but some 2,500 troops remain as advisers.

'Brandon' items crossed AAFES' line on vulgarity

By **WYATT OLSON**
Stars and Stripes

The Army and Air Force Exchange Service is emphasizing a ban on the sale of lewd or profane products in its stores after a vendor in Alaska sold figurines carrying a crude catch phrase aimed at the commander in chief.

In the days leading up to Christmas, a temporary vendor at the exchange on Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson sold wooden bear figurines fashioned to resemble former President Donald Trump and holding signs reading, "Let's Go Brandon," according to the Anchorage Daily News, which first reported the sales.

"Let's Go Brandon" serves as code for some who oppose Joe Biden's presidency. Pro-Trump crowds chant the phrase at rallies, and it now adorns merchandise popular with conservatives.

The cipher emerged Oct. 2 as code for "F--- Joe Biden" during a NASCAR race in Alabama. Race-

winner Brandon Brown was being interviewed by an NBC Sports reporter, and the microphone picked up a crowd chanting the phrase. Video of the reporter suggesting the crowd was chanting "Let's Go Brandon" went viral.

The independent vendor's short-term stint at the Alaska base had already ended by the time the agency learned of the prohibited merchandise, AAFES spokesman Chris Ward told Stars and Stripes by phone on Monday.

"The exchange routinely reviews products to determine their compliance with the Exchange's prohibition from selling items that are illegal, promote the use of drugs or alcohol, contain racial or ethnic slurs, promote racial or ethnic supremacy, or include words, symbols, or scenes that are lewd, profane or vulgar," he said. The exchange reviewed the product, and it was "determined to be outside their established parameters for resale."

Omicron delays return to schools, offices

Associated Press

Some school systems around the United States extended their holiday break Monday or switched back to online instruction because of the explosion in COVID-19 cases, while others pressed ahead with in-person classes amid a seemingly growing sense that Americans will have to learn to co-exist with the virus.

Caught between pleas from teachers fearful of infection and parents who want their children in class, school districts in cities such as New York, Milwaukee, Chicago, Detroit and beyond found themselves in a difficult position midway through the academic year because of the super-con-

tagious omicron variant.

New York City, home of the nation's largest school system, reopened classrooms to roughly 1 million students with a stockpile of take-home COVID-19 test kits and plans to double the number of random tests done in schools.

"We are going to keep our schools open and ensure that our children are in a safe environment," newly sworn-in Mayor Eric Adams said.

New Yorker Trisha White said that she feels the risk is the same for her 9-year-old son in or out of school, and that being with classmates is far better for him than remote learning.

"He could get the virus outside of school," she said as she

dropped the boy off. "So what can you do? You know, I wouldn't blame the school system. They're trying their best."

While the teachers union had asked the mayor to postpone in-person learning for a week, city officials have long said that mask requirements, testing and other safety measures mean that children are safe in school. The city also has a vaccination mandate for employees.

New cases of COVID-19 in the city shot up from a daily average of about 17,000 in the week before the holidays to nearly 37,000 last week.

Across the U.S., new COVID-19 cases have tripled in the past two weeks to over

400,000 a day, the highest level on record, amid a rush by many Americans to get tested.

The high infection rates and resulting worker shortages are putting a heavy burden on employers large and small. Thousands of airline flights have been canceled in recent days, and many businesses have shelved return-to-work plans.

Dawn Crawley, CEO of House Cleaning Heroes, a cleaning service based in Herndon, Va., said she had to cancel four of 20 cleaning jobs for Tuesday because four employees were sick — three with COVID-19.

"The fear is it will run through the team" as well as customers, she said.

Guam 'stays the course' as COVID-19 cases spike again

By MATTHEW M. BURKE

Stars and Stripes

An influx of new coronavirus cases and several deaths is testing mitigation efforts and the health care system on Guam, the U.S. island territory in the Western Pacific.

Guam on Tuesday reported 210 new cases of COVID-19, the coronavirus respiratory disease, including 11 hospitalizations, according to a statement from the Joint Information Center. One of the hospitalizations was at Naval Hospital Guam.

Seventy-one new cases and three deaths were reported over the New Year holiday weekend, according to a separate statement Monday.

The three individuals who died were all vaccinated, the Joint Information Center said in a statement Monday. Two of them — a 76-year-old female and a 47-year-old female — reportedly had underlying health conditions.

A 58-year-old male, pronounced dead on arrival at the

Guam Regional Medical City on Friday, had no reported underlying health conditions.

A spokeswoman for Guam Gov. Lou Leon Guerrero, in an email to Stars and Stripes on Tuesday, called the surge "manageable" and said residents should not panic.

"None of these admissions are in [intensive care unit] level of care nor are they on a ventilator," Krystal Paco-San Agustin wrote.

By contrast, the Joint Information Center reported 43 new cases and eight hospitalizations on Dec. 28.

Paco-San Agustin said people are being treated at home with monoclonal antibodies to keep them out of the hospitals.

"Protecting our limited health care resources remains our top priority," she said.

She said public health officials cannot yet attribute the new cases to the fast-spreading omicron variant of the coronavirus that was first detected in South Africa in November.

USS Milwaukee returns to sea following COVID-19 outbreak

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The USS Milwaukee returned to sea Monday after a coronavirus outbreak among crewmembers halted the ship's departure from a port visit in Cuba, according to the Navy.

The littoral combat ship was at Naval Base Guantanamo Bay on Dec. 24 when a portion of the crew tested positive for the coronavirus and officials sidelined the ship to prevent further spread of the illness.

Every sailor on the ship was vaccinated, and those who tested positive for the virus "exhibited mild or no symptoms," the Navy said in a statement issued Monday. Those who tested positive were separated from those who did not.

"The crew worked together as a team to ensure we are ready to conduct the mission," said Cmdr. Brian Foster, commander of the Milwaukee. "My entire crew is feeling great, healthy and excited for the next portion of our deployment."

Though the entire crew was vaccinated, not all had received booster shots. The Milwaukee on Dec. 29 administered coronavirus boosters aboard the ship to sailors who volunteered, according to the Navy.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in August ordered all service members receive the vaccine, though booster shots remain voluntary. Chief Pentagon spokesman John Kirby, however, has said defense officials are discussing the matter.

The Navy recommends all sailors receive the booster shot, according to the statement.

"The ship's crew will continue to follow aggressive cleaning protocols, wear masks and social distance while at sea to ensure they remain mission ready," the Navy said.

The ship had been at Guantanamo Bay for four days for a regularly scheduled visit before the Navy announced the outbreak. The Milwaukee had just begun its deployment after leaving its homeport of Naval Base Mayport, Fla., on Dec. 14.

Schumer: Senate to vote on filibuster rule

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Days before the anniversary of the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol, Majority Leader Chuck Schumer announced the Senate will vote soon on easing filibuster rules in an effort to advance stalled voting legislation that Democrats say is needed to protect America's democracy.

In a letter Monday to colleagues, Schumer, D-N.Y., said the Senate "must evolve" and will "debate and consider" the rule changes by Jan. 17, Martin Luther King Jr. Day, as the Democrats seek to overcome Republican opposition to their elections law package.

"Let me be clear: January 6th was a symptom of a broader illness — an effort to

delegitimize our election process," Schumer wrote, "and the Senate must advance systemic democracy reforms to repair our republic or else the events of that day will not be an aberration — they will be the new norm."

The election and voting rights package has been stalled in the evenly split 50-50 Senate, blocked by a Republican-led filibuster with Democrats unable to mount the 60 votes needed to advance it toward passage.

So far, Democrats have been unable to agree among themselves over potential changes to the Senate rules to reduce the 60-vote hurdle, despite months of private negotiations.

Two holdout Democrats, Sens. Joe Manchin of West Virginia and Kyrsten Sinema

of Arizona, have tried to warn their party off changes to the Senate rules, arguing that if and when Republicans take majority control of the chamber, they can then use the lower voting threshold to advance bills Democrats strongly oppose.

President Joe Biden has waded only cautiously into the debate — a former longtime senator who largely stands by existing rules but is also under enormous political pressure to break the logjam on the voting legislation.

Voting rights advocates have warned that Republican-led states are passing restrictive legislation and trying to install election officials loyal to the former president, Donald Trump, in ways that could subvert future elections.

Former Theranos CEO Holmes is convicted of fraud

Associated Press

SAN JOSE, Calif. — In a case that exposed Silicon Valley's culture of hubris and hype, Elizabeth Holmes was convicted Monday of duping investors into believing her startup Theranos had developed a revolutionary medical device that could detect a multitude of diseases and conditions from a few drops of blood.

A jury convicted Holmes, who was CEO throughout the company's turbulent 15-year history, on two counts of wire fraud and two counts of conspiracy to commit fraud after seven days of deliberation. The 37-year-old was acquitted on four other counts of fraud and conspiracy that alleged she deceived patients who paid for Theranos blood tests, too.

The verdict came after the eight men and

four women on the jury spent three months sitting through a complex trial that featured reams of evidence and 32 witnesses — including Holmes herself. She now faces up to 20 years in prison for each count, although legal experts said she is unlikely to receive the maximum sentence.

The jury deadlocked on three remaining charges, which a federal judge anticipates dismissing as part of a mistrial ruling that could come as early as next week. The split verdicts are "a mixed bag for the prosecution, but it's a loss for Elizabeth Holmes because she is going away to prison for at least a few years," said David Ring, a lawyer who has followed the case closely.

Federal prosecutors depicted Holmes as a charlatan obsessed with fame and fortune.

In seven days on the witness stand, she cast herself as a visionary trailblazer in male-dominated Silicon Valley who was emotionally and sexually abused by her former lover and business partner, Sunny Balwani.

The trial also laid bare the pitfalls of a swaggering strategy used by many Silicon Valley entrepreneurs — conveying a boundless optimism regardless of whether it's warranted, known as "fake it 'til you make it." That ethos helped hatch groundbreaking companies such as Google, Netflix, Facebook, and Apple.

Her conviction might lower the wattage — at least temporarily — on the brash promises and bold exaggerations that have become a routine part of the tech industry's innovation hustle.

Hundreds of drivers stranded as I-95 shuts down in Va.

Associated Press

RICHMOND, Va. — Hundreds of motorists waited desperately for help Tuesday after being stranded for nearly 24 hours in freezing temperatures along a 50-mile stretch of highway south of the nation's capital that became impassable when tractor-trailers jackknifed in a winter storm.

The disabled trucks triggered a chain reaction Monday as other vehicles lost control and blocked lanes in both directions of Interstate 95, the main north-south highway along the East Coast. As hours passed and night fell, motorists posted messages on social media about running out of fuel, food and water.

Meera Rao and her husband, Raghavendra, were driving home from visiting their daughter in North Carolina when they got stuck Monday evening. They were only 100 feet past an exit but could not move for roughly 16 hours.

"Not one police (officer) came in the 16 hours we were stuck," she said. "No one came. It was just shocking. Being in the most advanced country in the world, no one knew how to even clear one lane for all of us to get out of that mess?"

Around daybreak, road crews began helping drivers get off "at any available interchange to get them," the Virginia Depart-

ment of Transportation tweeted.

By 9 a.m., a single lane of traffic was creeping forward between many stalled trucks and cars in one direction, while people could be seen walking down traffic lanes still covered with ice and snow. Crews were working to remove stopped trucks, plow snow, de-ice the pavement and guide stranded motorists to the nearest exits, transportation officials said.

Gov. Ralph Northam said his team responded through the night, sending out emergency messages to connect drivers with help and working with local officials to set up warming shelters.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man shot with flare gun in road rage incident

MD BOWIE — Police in Maryland said that one motorist shot another with a flare gun during a road rage incident.

Police said the man who was shot by the flare gun was taken to a hospital with injuries that did not appear to be life-threatening. Authorities said they're searching for the alleged shooter. He was driving a white Ford pickup that had a white cap on the bed of the truck.

Video released by police showed two men standing outside their vehicles and arguing. It also showed one of the motorists shooting the other with a flare gun. The man who was struck was hit in the cheek.

Sheriff's 'no shave' fundraiser brings \$4K

LA THIBODAUX — A wintertime law enforcement fundraiser called "No Shave November" has raised about \$4,000 in two months, proving so popular that a Louisiana sheriff is making it year-round.

Deputies and other employees of the Lafourche Parish Sheriff's Office have been donating \$25 a month to charity to be allowed to grow beards in November and December. Those who don't grow beards can dress more casually on Fridays if their jobs allow it.

Employees raised \$2,595 for the American Cancer Society and \$1,260 for Special Olympics Louisiana, the sheriff's office said. They could also choose other nonprofit groups, and smaller amounts were given to 22, in-

cluding Wheelchairs for Warriors and the American Red Cross.

Over 125 of the office's 350 employees have been participating, and about one-third of the participants were women, Capt. Brennan Matherne, spokesman for the sheriff's office, said in an email.

School defends canning 'Jingle Bells' over history

NY BRIGHTON — An upstate New York school district is defending its decision to drop the holiday classic "Jingle Bells" over the song's history.

Brighton Central School District Superintendent Kevin McGowan wrote in a message on the Rochester-area district's website that it was appropriate to discontinue using the song at the Council Rock Primary School considering research has shown it may have initially been performed by white actors in blackface in the 19th century.

McGowan said removing the song wasn't an example of cancel culture or meant to push any agenda, but instead was a "simple, thoughtful curricular decision," the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle reported. The school's students are in kindergarten through second grade.

College pays \$300K for way it handled rape case

NE OMAHA — A former Chadron State College student has been awarded \$300,000 after she argued in a lawsuit that college officials didn't do enough to protect her after she reported being raped.

The Scottsbluff Star-Herald

reported that a federal jury sided with the woman. The woman said the college should have banned the man who attacked her in 2016 from campus instead of just ordering him not to have contact with her.

Attorney Maren Chaloupka, who represented the woman, said she felt unsafe on campus because of the chance of running into her attacker and had to complete her degree through online classes after the two assaults in 2016.

College officials defended the way they handled the situation as reasonable, and a spokeswoman for the Nebraska State College System that oversees Chadron State said officials plan to appeal the verdict. Besides ordering the man not to have contact with the woman, the college ordered the man to complete counseling.

2 men rescued after writing 'SOS' in snow

OR EUGENE — Two 19-year-old men who went winter camping were rescued near Eugene, Ore., by the U.S. Coast Guard after signaling for help by writing an "SOS" sign in the snow.

The Oregonian/OregonLive reported the two men went camping near Swastika Mountain southeast of Eugene around Christmas Day and failed to return as expected on Dec. 29, officials said. Officials said the men were reported missing on New Year's Eve.

The Coast Guard crew was able to find the two men and they were evacuated via helicopter to the Eugene Airport, officials said. They did not suffer any injuries, according to the Coast

Guard.

Coast Guard officials said the men were smart to stay near their car and logging roads and to write, "SOS" in the snow to ensure they could be found easily.

Locals asked to not burn trees at ocean sandbar

HI HONOLULU — The public lands agency in Hawaii is warning people that they face arrest if found burning Christmas trees at an oceanic sandbar.

The sandbar that rests between the open Pacific Ocean and Kaneohe Bay on Oahu's windward side is a popular gathering place for local boaters and tourists.

A tradition of piling up Christmas trees for bonfires on the sandbar is harming the environment, Department of Land and Natural Resources officials said.

Ambulance stolen from hospital found nearby

IN GARY — An ambulance was stolen from a Gary hospital parking lot but was recovered a few miles away, police said.

Gary police received a call about the ambulance stolen from outside the emergency room at Methodist Hospitals - Northlake Campus, Cmdr. Jack Hamady told The (Northwest Indiana) Times. Elite Medical Transportation staffers said when they left the hospital, they noticed the vehicle was gone.

Griffith police arrested a 44-year-old woman from Dyer who was inside the ambulance, Hamady said.

— From wire reports



Single source convenience, reliably independent. Visit www.stripes.com.

Reporting World, National and Military News

Steelers beat Browns in likely Heinz Field finale for Big Ben

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Ben Roethlisberger looked for the last time into the Heinz Field stands peppered with No. 7 jerseys bearing his name and tried to soak in a moment as inevitable as it was unimaginable for most of his career. This is the end for the longtime Pittsburgh Steelers quarterback.

And rather than fight it, the player defined by his ability to fend off defenders with his left arm and make game-changing throws with his right embraced it.

Roethlisberger did a victory lap following a 26-14 victory over Cleveland on Monday night that kept his team's faint playoff hopes alive. He hugged team president Art Rooney II. He unsuccessfully fought back tears. Then he grabbed the hand of his wife Ashley and their three children and walked into the tunnel and out of sight.

His on-field performance — 24 of 46 for 123 yards, with a touchdown and an interception — was remarkable only for its inefficiency. He became the first QB since at least 1950 to win a game with more than 40 attempts for fewer than 150 yards, according to STATS.

But the numbers — as has often been the case during an 18-year career that includes two Super Bowl victories — were beside the point.

Roethlisberger played. The Steelers won. And so it goes.

Pittsburgh (8-7-1) will finish at .500 or better for the 18th straight season, or every year since the Steelers selected Big Ben with the 11th overall pick in the 2004 draft.

"That's been the story of my career," he said. "Not always pretty, but we find a way."

The Steelers need a victory over Baltimore next week and a loss by Indianapolis to lowly Jacksonville to make the postseason for the 12th time with Roethlisberger, a possibility he admits is slim.

Still, it exists, and that's thanks in large part to rookie Najee Harris, who ran for a career-best 188 yards and a touchdown, and linebacker T.J. Watt, who sacked Baker Mayfield four times to give him 21½ on the season, one short of the NFL record set by Hall of Famer Michael Strahan in 2001.

Yet the night belonged to Roethlisberger. The "Let's Go Ben!" chants started immediately after he was introduced, replaced by "Thank You Ben!" after the 39-year-old took a knee in the final seconds to seal his 26th win over the team that bypassed the

Ohio native in the draft nearly two decades ago.

"This is home, you know?" Roethlisberger said. "And I just, I know I was born in Ohio, but I live here and I'll always be here."

The only people more eager for Roethlisberger to retire than his family might be the Browns. Cleveland (7-9) — which was eliminated from postseason contention on Sunday — fell to 3-26-1 when facing Roethlisberger.

The Browns inexplicably put the game on Mayfield's tattered shoulders rather than feeding running back Nick Chubb against the NFL's worst rush defense. Chubb ran 12 times for 58 yards while Mayfield threw 37 passes, completing just 16, for 185 yards with two touchdowns and two interceptions.

"If anyone questions how much I want it, turn on this tape," Mayfield said. "I kept swinging. That's who I am. That's who I've always been."

Mayfield plans to have surgery on his ailing left shoulder soon, though his erratic season made his long-term outlook murky for a team where instability at the position has been the norm for decades.

Things are different in Pittsburgh.

Roethlisberger was 22 when he took over for an injured Tommy Maddox in Week 2 of his rookie season. He never let go of the position, leading the franchise to an era of success that nearly rivaled the Super Steelers of the 1970s.

Roethlisberger finally admitted this week that "all signs" were pointing to his 18th season being his last. His tank might be running low, but it's not empty, and he showed flashes — briefly, anyway — of his "Ben being Ben" prime.

A shoulder fake here. A step up in the pocket there. The feet don't move as fast as they used to. His arm doesn't deliver with the precision of the past. The field-stretching heaves have been largely replaced by dinks and dunks designed in part to protect him behind an offensive line that isn't nearly as talented as the groups he regularly led to the postseason.

Yet if there's been one constant during Roethlisberger's career, it's been his mastery of the Browns.

Roethlisberger's last win over Cleveland provided a small measure of revenge less than a year after he threw four interceptions in a first-round home playoff loss to the Browns last January.

Bucs' Arians: Brown didn't claim an injury before walkoff

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Antonio Brown's latest messy departure from an NFL team, the Buccaneers, was not about an injury, coach Bruce Arians said Monday.

Yes, Tampa Bay is moving on from Brown, whose NFL career is on hold again after another in a series of incidents, including two women accusing him of sexual assault in 2019.

But Arians dispelled the notion that Brown stormed off the field Sunday — tossing some of his gear into the stands and waving to fans at the Jets' MetLife Stadium — after refusing to go back in because of an ankle injury that had sidelined him for several weeks.

Twice, Arians was asked about Brown claiming he was hurt. Both times, the coach answered "No," that Brown didn't tell him he was injured.

"It's pretty obvious what happened. He left the field and that was it," Arians said, declining to elaborate on an exchange the coach said he had with the receiver on the sideline.

Pressed for details on what was said and whether Brown claimed he was too injured to play, Arians replied: "We had a conversation and he left the field."

Asked what specifically was said that might move Brown to react the way he did, the coach added: "You have to ask him, brother. I don't have a clue."

"I just hope the best for him," Arians said, while shedding little light on what led to Brown taking off his jersey, shoulder pads, undershirt and gloves before walking off during the third quarter of Sunday's 28-24 Buccaneers victory.

Arians added he has no regrets about giving the often-troubled receiver an opportunity to play with Tom Brady and revive a career derailed by on- and off-the-field issues — even though it ended in such a bizarre fashion. Tampa Bay was Brown's third team since his last full season in the NFL with the Pittsburgh Steelers in 2018.

The 33-year-old Brown also had messy departures from Oakland and New England — released before ever playing a game for the Raiders and then suiting up just once during a brief stay with the Brady-led Patriots in 2019.

Sooners QB Williams enters portal

Associated Press

Oklahoma quarterback Caleb Williams said Monday he is entering his name in the transfer portal so he can speak with other schools.

The freshman added he had not ruled out staying with the Sooners, but within hours of Williams' announcement, Oklahoma might have found his replacement.

Former UCF quarterback Dillon Gabriel, who had committed to transfer to UCLA last month, posted on Twitter that he was instead planning to go to Oklahoma.

Williams, a former five-star recruit from Washington, D.C., who was recruited to Oklahoma by then-head coach Lincoln Riley, revealed his intentions on social media.

Riley left Oklahoma to become coach at Southern California the day after the Sooners ended their regular season with a loss to Oklahoma State. Former Clemson defensive coordinator Brent Venables was hired to replace Riley.

"I think we all come to college to find our path and prepare for the future. I came to Oklahoma with a plan, but with all the recent changes, I need to figure out what is the

right path for me moving forward," Williams tweeted.

Williams would be one of the most sought-after transfers in college football.

He passed for 1,912 yards and 21 touchdowns and ran for 435 yards and six scores in 2020, taking over the starting job from preseason Heisman Trophy favorite Spencer Rattler midway through the season.

Rattler already has transferred to South Carolina.

Williams led the Sooners (11-2) to a victory last week against Oregon in the Alamo Bowl.

"Proud of what we did this whole season but especially that last four weeks," Williams said.

To be recruited and contacted by other schools within NCAA rules, Williams had to enter his name into the transfer portal, but that doesn't necessarily mean he is transferring.

"Staying at OU will definitely be an option as I begin this process," Williams said.

Venables and Oklahoma athletic director Joe Castiglione released a statement saying they would "continue to be engaged" with

Williams.

"While we believe OU provides Caleb the best opportunity to develop as a player and realize his goals for college and beyond, we respect his right to explore his options following key staffing changes here," they said.

Venables hired Jeff Leiby away from Mississippi to be Oklahoma's offensive coordinator. Leiby spent the past two seasons working with quarterback Matt Corral, who is projected to be a potential first-round pick in the next NFL Draft.

Leiby also spent two seasons at UCF, one coaching Gabriel in 2019.

In five years with the Sooners, Riley coached two Heisman winners and first overall draft picks in Baker Mayfield and Kyler Murray. He also had Jalen Hurts, who transferred from Alabama and became a Heisman finalist and second-round draft pick at Oklahoma.

At USC, Jaxson Dart started much of last season as a freshman and is likely to be at the top of the depth chart again after former starter Kedon Slovis transferred to Pittsburgh.

Smart can rewrite legacy by ending title drought

Associated Press

Kirby Smart did his best to get ahead of the questions about Nick Saban while acknowledging the topic was inevitable.

It seems the Georgia coach can't avoid Saban, when championships — and Smart's big-game legacy — are on the line.

Smart is 0-4 against Saban, his former boss at Alabama. That includes the Bulldogs' 41-24 loss to Saban's Crimson Tide in the Southeastern Conference championship game in Atlanta on Dec. 4.

Smart fielded questions about Saban prior to that game before earning a rematch when his team beat Michigan 34-11 on Friday night in the College Football Playoff semifinal.

The coach insisted on Monday the Georgia-Alabama rematch for the national title is not about Smart vs. Saban.

"Each game has been differ-

ent," Smart said. "And it will never be about he and I. I know he won't make it that and I won't make it that, because that's for you guys to do that."

Smart's Bulldogs legacy is on the line. That's about more than how he compares with Saban, already assured of being remembered as one of the greatest coaches in college football history.

As Smart wraps up his sixth season at his alma mater, the national championship game will help determine his place in Georgia history. That includes how he will be judged in comparison with his predecessor, Mark Richt, as well as Vince Dooley, who won the Bulldogs' last national championship in 1980.

Smart was hired to give Georgia the push it lacked to win the biggest games. He was hired to bring championships to the Bulldogs.

So far, Smart trails Richt. Thanks to the humbling loss to the Crimson Tide last month, Smart remains stuck on one SEC title, in 2017. Richt won two SEC championships in his first five seasons in Athens.

Smart's big-game history also includes an overtime loss to the Crimson Tide in the 2017 national championship game.

By bringing Georgia to another national title game, Smart has made the Bulldogs a regular part of the championship picture.

Saban has blocked Smart's path to big-game success. Smart can change that script by winning the biggest game of all in his second national title appearance against Alabama.

Saban has won seven national championships, including six in the last 12 years at Alabama. He is looking for back-to-back titles with the Crimson Tide.

Smart was the defensive coor-

dinator on Saban's Alabama staff before he was hired to lead Georgia's program.

Smart's Bulldogs were 12-0 following their first undefeated regular season since 1982 and on track for their first national championship in 41 years before the SEC title game loss to Alabama.

Sure, Smart doesn't deny that Saban and Alabama are a hurdle the Bulldogs have not yet cleared. Smart says he's not alone.

Smart said the Crimson Tide "have also been a problem and a thorn for any team they've played besides ours. We have that in common with a lot of teams."

Smart knew better than to celebrate Friday's runaway rout of Michigan in the Orange Bowl. He called a timeout and put a firm roadblock on plans by running backs Zamir White and James Cook to empty a watercooler on his head at the end of the game.

Blazers win, overcome 56 points from Young

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — Anfernee Simons had a career-high 43 points and the Portland Trail Blazers overcame an NBA season-best 56 points by Atlanta's Trae Young, snapping a four-game losing streak in a 136-131 win over the Hawks on Monday night.

Young shot 17-for-26 from the field, 7-for-12 from three-point distance and 15-for-15 from the line for his career-high scoring total, and added 14 assists. His 56-point game eclipsed Kevin Durant's 51-point performance for the Nets at Detroit on Dec. 12. Golden State's Stephen Curry and Boston's Jaylen Brown have also had 50-point games this season.

Young became the first player with 50-plus points and 14-plus assists in a game since James Harden with the Houston Rockets on Dec. 31, 2016.

Portland starting center Jusuf Nukic had 21 points and 12 rebounds. Simons had a career-high nine three-pointers, the most for a Blazers player this season.

Grizzlies 118, Nets 104: Ja Morant scored 36 points and five players scored in double figures as Memphis extended its winning streak to five games with a win at Brooklyn.

Desmond Bane scored 29 points, Brandon Clarke added 16, and Jarrett Culver and Tyus Jones had 12 apiece.

Pistons 115, Bucks 106: Saddiq Bey scored a career-high 34 points and visiting Detroit ended Milwaukee's six-game winning streak.

The Pistons own the NBA's worst record

(7-28) but beat the reigning NBA champions and ended their recent futility in the series. The Bucks had won 12 consecutive regular-season matchups with Detroit by an average margin of 16.7 points before Monday.

Bulls 102, Magic 98: DeMar DeRozan scored 29 points, Zach LaVine added 27 and host Chicago beat Orlando for its eighth straight victory.

Nikola Vucevic had 13 points and 17 rebounds for the Bulls. Coby White came off the bench to score 17 points.

Warriors 115, Heat 108: Jordan Poole scored 32 points, Andrew Wiggins added 22 points and a key driving dunk with 4:34 remaining on a quiet night for Stephen Curry, and host Golden State held off undermanned Miami.

Timberwolves 122, Clippers 104: Anthony Edwards scored 28 points to lead six players in double figures and visiting Minnesota routed Los Angeles to end a three-game skid.

76ers 133, Rockets 113: Joel Embiid had a triple-double with 31 points, 15 rebounds and 10 assists, leading host Philadelphia over Houston.

Wizards 124, Hornets 121: Kyle Kuzma had a season-high 36 points and 14 rebounds, and Bradley Beal scored 35 points in host Washington's win over Charlotte.

Jazz 115, Pelicans 104: Donovan Mitchell scored 29 points, Bojan Bogdanovic added 21, and Utah defeated New Orleans to extend its road winning streak to nine games.

Mavericks 103, Nuggets 89: Luka Doncic had 21 points and matched a season high with 15 assists in host Dallas' win over Denver.

Badgers stun No. 3 Purdue

Associated Press

WEST LAFAYETTE, Ind. — Wisconsin guard Johnny Davis was hungry Monday night.

After skipping breakfast in the morning and spending the afternoon trying to figure out how to beat No. 3 Purdue on the road for the first time in nearly eight years, the Badgers found plenty of ways to feed their sophomore star.

Davis scored a career-high 37 points, grabbed 14 rebounds and made most of the big shots to lead No. 23 Wisconsin past the third-ranked Boilermakers 74-69.

"I just went out and played my game," Davis said. "My teammates did a really good job getting me the ball in the right spots."

Davis repeatedly made Purdue pay, too, by going 13-for-24 from the field, 2-for-5 on three-pointers and 9-for-12 at the free-throw line. He also led the Badgers (11-2, 2-1 Big Ten) with two blocks and two steals.

No. 9 Arizona 95, Washington 75: Ben Mathurin scored 27 points, Christian Koloko added 22 points and 10 rebounds, and the host Wildcats returned from an extended break to beat the Huskies.

Arizona (12-1, 2-0 Pac-12) moved the ball well offensively in its first game in 16 days, shooting 55% and finishing with 28 assists on 33 made shots.

Kerr Kriisa finished with 21 points, and the Wildcats went 12-for-25 from three for their best start since opening the 2015-16 season 13-1.

Arizona was a bit shaky at taking care of the ball for the second straight game, though, with 21 turnovers that Washington converted into 25 points and allowed them to hang around despite struggling from the perimeter.

Rangers top Oilers, move atop standings in NHL

Associated Press

NEW YORK — New York Rangers coach Gerard Gallant was looking for a strong group effort against the Edmonton Oilers. He got that on Monday night, and now his team is sitting atop the NHL standings.

Chris Kreider scored his 20th goal, Ryan Strome had a goal and two assists, and the Rangers beat the slumping Oilers 4-1 for their third straight win.

"When we talked before the game, we talked about 20 guys playing, and 20 guys

showed up to play hard so that was huge for our group," Gallant said. "We got the lead again and just kept going."

Alexis Lafrenière and Barclay Goodrow each had a goal and an assist, and Adam Fox had two assists to help New York win for the fourth time in six games (4-1-1). The team moved into first place in the Metropolitan Division and the NHL. They're tied with Washington with 48 points, but hold the edge with more wins in regulation.

The latest win followed two victories

against two-time defending champion Tampa Bay — including a 4-0 shutout on Sunday.

"The last two nights have been just a really good team effort, top to bottom," Strome said. "D, forwards, goalies. It's been nice to see. ... We've been playing really good hockey. The rink's buzzing, guys are excited and happy, it's a good feeling."

Alexandar Georgiev, playing for the first time in 2½ weeks, stopped 33 shots to get his first win since Dec. 10 against Buffalo. He improved to 6-3-2 this season.