

## High court weighs Biden vaccine rules

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court's conservative majority appeared skeptical Friday of the Biden administration's authority to impose a vaccine-or-testing requirement on the nation's large employers. The court also was hearing arguments on a separate vaccine mandate for most health care workers.

The arguments in the two cases come at a time of spiking coronavirus cases because of the omicron variant, and the decision Friday by seven justices to wear masks for the first time while hearing arguments reflected the new phase of the pandemic.

Justice Sonia Sotomayor, a diabetic since childhood, didn't even appear in the courtroom, choosing to remain in her office at the court and take part remotely. Two lawyers, representing Ohio and Louisiana, argued by telephone after recent positive COVID-19 tests, state officials said.

But the COVID circumstances did not appear to outweigh the views of the court's six conservatives that the administration overstepped its authority in its vaccine-or-

testing requirement for businesses with at least 100 employees.

"This is something the federal government has never done before," Chief Justice John Roberts said, casting doubt on the administration's argument that a half-century established law, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, confers such broad authority.

Roberts and Justices Brett Kavanaugh and Amy Coney Barrett probably hold the key to the outcome in both cases, as they have been more receptive to state-level vaccine requirements than the other three conservative justices. Barrett and Kavanaugh also had tough questions for Solicitor General Elizabeth Prelogar, the administration's top Supreme Court lawyer.

The court's three liberal justices suggested support for the employer rule. Justice Elena Kagan said officials have shown "quite clearly that no other policy will prevent sickness and death to anywhere like the degree that this one will." And Justice Stephen Breyer said he found it "unbelievable" that it could be in the "public inter-

est" to put that rule on hold. He said that on Thursday there were some 750,000 new cases in the country and that hospitals are full.

Beginning Monday, unvaccinated employees in big companies are supposed to wear masks at work, unless the court blocks enforcement. Testing requirements and potential fines for employers don't kick in until February.

Legal challenges to the policies from Republican-led states and business groups are in their early stages, but the outcome at the high court probably will determine the fate of vaccine requirements affecting more than 80 million people.

"I think effectively what is at stake is whether these mandates are going to go into effect at all," said Sean Marotta, a Washington lawyer whose clients include the American Hospital Association. The trade group is not involved in the Supreme Court cases.

OSHA has estimated that its emergency regulation will save 6,500 lives and prevent 250,000 hospitalizations over six months.

## White House taps Kurilla as CENTCOM commander

**By COREY DICKSTEIN**  
*Stars and Stripes*

Lt. Gen. Michael "Erik" Kurilla, the commander of the Army's 18th Airborne Corps, is the White House's pick to lead American forces in the Middle East, according to congressional records and a military official.

President Joe Biden on Wednesday nominated Kurilla to receive a fourth star, according to Senate records that do not indicate for which position he had been selected. But a military official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, confirmed a Wall Street Journal report Thursday that Kurilla had been chosen to become the next U.S. Central Command leader.

Kurilla, an infantry officer, is 1988 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point with extensive experience in the Middle East and Afghanistan, according to his Army biography. If confirmed by the Senate, he would replace current CENTCOM

commander Marine Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, who is slated to retire in the spring.

McKenzie has led the command responsible for the Middle East and parts of central Asia including Afghanistan and Pakistan since 2019, overseeing the full U.S. withdrawal of forces from Afghanistan last year, the end of the U.S. combat mission in Iraq last month, and the U.S. raid in October 2019 in Syria that led to the death of Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Kurilla would inherit CENTCOM as it transitions with the United States moving its focus from two decades of counterterrorism wars in the Middle East and Afghanistan toward preparing for potential fights against major power competitors such as China and Russia.

His nomination comes amid increasing tensions in Iraq and Syria between American forces and Iranian proxy militias who seek to push them out of the region. In recent

days, U.S. and anti-ISIS forces have shot down multiple enemy drones near Iraqi bases housing American troops, and Iran-backed militias have lobbed rocket attacks on at least one base with U.S. forces in north-eastern Syria, defense officials have said. About 2,500 American troops remain in Iraq to train Iraqi forces to fight the remnants of ISIS. The United States has less than 1,000 troops in Syria primarily working alongside local anti-ISIS forces, the Pentagon said this week.

Kurilla is a battle-tested Army leader who has commanded at practically every level in the Army's conventional and special operations fields, according to his biography. He served in combat operations in Panama, Iraq during Desert Storm, Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Inherent Resolve, and Afghanistan. Before taking the helm of the 18th Airborne Corps at Fort Bragg, N.C., Kurilla served as CENTCOM's chief of staff.

## Kazakh leader: Forces can shoot to kill amid riots

*Associated Press*

MOSCOW — Kazakhstan's president authorized security forces on Friday to shoot to kill those participating in unrest, opening the door for a dramatic escalation in a crackdown on anti-government protests that have turned violent.

The Central Asian nation this week experienced its worst street protests since gaining independence from the Soviet Union three decades ago, and dozens have been killed in the tumult. The demonstrations began over a near-doubling of prices for a type of vehicle fuel but quickly spread across the country, reflecting wider discontent with authoritarian rule.

In a televised address to the nation, President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev used harsh rhetoric, referring to those involved in the turmoil as "terrorists," "bandits" and "militants" — though it was unclear what led the peaceful protests to first gather steam and then descend into violence. No protest leaders have emerged so far.

"I have given the order to law enforcement and the army to shoot to kill without warning," Tokayev said. "Those who don't surrender will be eliminated."

Concerns grew in recent days that an even broader crackdown might be coming, as internet and cellphone service was severely disrupted and sometimes totally blocked, and several airports closed — making it difficult to understand what was happening inside the country and for images of the unrest to reach the outside world. Adding to those fears was Tokayev's request for help from a Russia-led military alliance, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, whose troops began arriving Thursday.

On Friday, Kazakhstan's Interior Ministry reported that security forces have killed 26 protesters during the unrest, which escalated sharply on Wednesday. Another 26 were wounded and more than 3,800 people have been detained. A total of 18 law enforcement officers were reported killed, and over 700 injured.

The numbers could not be independently verified, and it was not clear if more people may have died in the melee as the protests turned extremely violent.

# Report: Over \$188M spent in Afghan aid at Quantico

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — It took more than \$188.4 million to support thousands of Afghan refugees housed at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., for three months following the U.S. evacuation mission from Afghanistan, according to a Defense Department inspector general report published Thursday.

That amount, which was tallied Dec. 3, did not include the additional \$38.3 million expected then to cover expenses to return the base to its original condition and sustain operations until they ended Dec. 22, according to the report.

Quantico was one of eight military bases in the United States that housed Afghan evacuees after U.S. and coalition forces evacuated more than 120,000 people from Afghanistan in August during the final days of the 20-year U.S. conflict there. President Joe Biden officially ended the war on Aug. 31 after the last U.S. service members left the country.

The 2nd Marine Logistics Group, assigned to support the evacuees at Quantico,

initially covered the expenses but the Pentagon later provided \$138.4 million from DOD overseas humanitarian, disaster and civic aid funding to support the operations.

Comparatively, it cost the air wing at Ramstein Air Base in Germany about \$56.3 million to house and process about 30,000 Afghan refugees between Aug. 18 and Sept. 14 before their flights to the U.S., according to a DOD IG report last month. However, the overseas mission differed from Quantico's, which focused on housing and preparing Afghans for resettlement in the United States.

The first 241 Afghans arrived at Quantico on Aug. 29 — and that number grew to 3,755 by Sept. 25, according to the report. However, the inspector general's report did not say how many Afghans were housed at the base, but it had the capability to support up to 5,000.

Aside from the financial costs, the operations also took a toll on readiness as the Camp Lejeune, N.C.-based 2nd MLG staffed most of the Quantico camp's needs, according to the report. The report did not say how many Marines were sent to help.

## USS Paul Ignatius commander relieved over loss of confidence

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The commander of the guided-missile destroyer USS Paul Ignatius was relieved Thursday, the Naval Surface Force Atlantic said in a statement.

Cmdr. Jeffrey Servello was removed from his position after less than a year "due to a loss of confidence in his ability to command," according to the statement. Servello had commanded the Mayport, Fla.-based ship since June.

Rear Adm. Brendan McLane, the commander of Naval Surface Force Atlantic, made the decision, but Navy officials did not provide further detail behind the loss of confidence.

The Paul Ignatius is one of the Navy's newest destroyers, having been commissioned in 2019. Servello was the ship's second commanding officer after serving as its executive officer.

Servello will be temporarily replaced by Cmdr. Eric Meyers until a permanent commander is selected, according to the service.

The announcement comes eight days after the littoral combat ship USS Montgomery's commanding officer Cmdr. Richard Zamberlan and executive officer Cmdr. Phillip Lundberg were removed from their positions due to a loss of confidence in their command ability.

The Navy also has not released details behind the Montgomery dismissals.

# Return to remote learning strains families

Associated Press

DETROIT — Parent Latonya Peterson sums up her frustration over Detroit schools returning — at least temporarily — to virtual learning in three short words: “I hate it.”

Facing a surge in COVID-19 cases, the Detroit district this week joined a growing number of others in moving classes online after the winter break. The shift involving 50,000 students once again leaves parents juggling home and work schedules around the educational needs of their children.

A single parent who works more than 60 hours each week at two jobs, Peterson sometimes had to miss work to help her teenage son during more than a year of online learning.

“I will have to take time off, but I’m looking at how long this is going to last. You only get so many off days and so many paid time off days,” Peterson said Wednesday, a day after the district announced that stu-

dents would resume classes at home with laptops through at least Jan. 14.

The vast majority of U.S. districts appear to be returning to in-person learning, but other large school systems including those in Newark, N.J., Milwaukee and Cleveland have gone back to remote learning as infections soar and sideline staff members. Dozens of smaller districts have followed, including many around Detroit, Chicago and Washington.

The disruptions also raise alarms about risks to students. Long stretches of remote learning over the last two years have taken a toll, leaving many kids with academic and mental health setbacks that experts are still trying to understand.

President Joe Biden, who campaigned on a promise to reopen classrooms, is pressing schools to remain open. With vaccines and regular virus testing, his administration has said there’s no reason to keep schools closed.

“Look, we have no reason to think at this point that omicron is worse for children than previous variants,” Biden told reporters on Tuesday. “We know that our kids can be safe when in school.”

But the reality for some districts is not so simple: Testing supplies have been scarce, and many districts face low vaccine uptake in their communities. In Detroit, just 44% of residents 5 and older have received a vaccine dose, compared with a statewide rate of 63%.

The closures are often driven by waves of teachers calling in sick. More than a third of Philadelphia’s 216 public schools have switched to remote learning through at least Friday, drawing an outcry from families that were given little time to prepare.

Officials in districts that are returning to online instruction insist the move is only temporary, with most intending to go back to in-person classes within a week or two.

## Ex-Biden advisers call for new COVID strategy

The Washington Post

Six former health advisers to President Joe Biden’s transition team released a series of journal articles on Thursday calling for a “new normal” in the nation’s approach to fighting COVID-19 and other viral threats.

In the articles, the advisers lay out dozens of recommendations, sometimes explicitly and often implicitly criticizing the federal response. For instance, they urge the administration to create a “modern data infrastructure” that would offer real-time information on the spread of the coronavirus and other potential threats, saying inadequate surveillance continues to put American lives and society at risk. They also suggest investments in tests, vaccines and prevention beyond what the White House has done, such as mailing vouchers to Americans that could be used to obtain free, high-quality face masks.

“We’re trying to take the next steps, to anticipate where we

need to be in the next three to 12 months,” said Ezekiel Emanuel, the University of Pennsylvania bioethicist who coordinated the effort. In an interview, Emanuel characterized the advisers’ articles, which were published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*, as an “outline of a national strategy ... to find a new normal.”

Rather than continuing in “a perpetual state of emergency,” he and the others argue, the United States must shift to a strategy of seeking to live with the virus by suppressing its peaks, rather than attempting to eliminate it.

The advisers’ effort to rethink the federal response comes amid experts’ growing realization that neither vaccinations nor infections appear to confer lasting immunity against the coronavirus. Some also express frustration the White House has squandered opportunities to contain the virus as the administration approaches its first anniversary.

## Calif. coronavirus surge hits police, fire, teachers

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES—A dramatic surge in coronavirus cases has sidelined more than 800 Los Angeles city police and fire personnel and led to slightly longer ambulance and fire response times, adding to concerning absences statewide of public safety officers, health care workers and teachers.

Mayor Eric Garcetti said Thursday that more than 500 LAPD officers and other police employees and nearly 300 firefighters were off-duty after testing positive for COVID-19, though he said measures were being taken to ensure the safety of the public.

“This is an incredibly tough moment,” Garcetti said. “The omicron variant has taken off like wildfire.”

The rapid rise in infections of public employees and front-line workers is mirroring the trend in the general public driven by the fast-spreading omicron variant first detected in late No-

vember.

The nation’s largest state extended an indoor mask mandate until Feb. 15 to prevent overwhelming hospitals as cases climbed nearly five-fold in the last two weeks. Two-in-five hospitals expect critical staff shortages and some have a quarter of staff out because of the virus, said Kiyomi Burchill of the California Hospital Association.

Schools have also been hard-hit with absences.

One in six of San Francisco’s 3,600 teachers were out Thursday. Even with administrators, substitutes and others stepping in there weren’t enough teachers for every classroom, said Superintendent Vince Matthews.

“This is the most challenging time in my 36 years as an educator,” Matthews said during a break from filling in as a sixth grade science teacher. “We’re trying to educate students in the middle of a pandemic while the sands around us are consistently shifting.”

# US added 199,000 jobs in November

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — U.S. employers added a modest 199,000 jobs last month while the unemployment rate fell sharply, at a time when businesses are struggling to fill jobs with many Americans remaining reluctant to return to the workforce.

The Labor Department said Friday that the nation's unemployment rate fell to a healthy 3.9% from 4.2% in November.

Omicron has sickened millions of Americans, forced airlines to cancel thousands of flights, re-

duced traffic to restaurants and bars and caused some major school systems to close, potentially keeping some parents at home with children and unable to work.

Still, the job market may be healthier than the modest hiring gain the government reported Friday. The aftermath of the pandemic has made the government's employment figures more volatile, with one month's data often followed by a sharply different trend a month or two later.

The economy has also shown resilience in the face of surging

inflation, the prospect of higher loan rates and the spread of the omicron variant. Most businesses report steady demand from their customers despite chronic supply shortages.

Consumer spending and business purchases of machinery and equipment likely propelled the economy to a robust annual growth rate of roughly 7% in the final three months of 2021. Americans' confidence in the economy rose slightly in December, according to the Conference Board, suggesting that spending proba-

bly remained healthy through year's end.

Even with December's modest gain, 2021 was one of the best years for American workers in decades, though one that followed 2020, the job market's worst year since records began in 1939, a consequence of the pandemic recession. Companies posted a record number of open jobs last year and offered sharply higher pay to try to find and keep workers. Americans responded by quitting jobs in droves, mainly for better pay at other employers.

## Colorado fire caused at least \$513M in damage

*Associated Press*

LOUISVILLE, Colo. — Last week's Colorado wildfire caused at least \$513 million in damage and destroyed nearly 1,100 homes and structures, officials said Thursday as they updated the toll of property lost in the most destructive wildfire in state history.

Boulder County released the new totals after further assessing the suburban area located between Denver and Boulder where entire neighborhoods were charred. It's the first estimate of economic damage for the Dec. 30 blaze.

Authorities previously estimated that at

least 991 homes and other buildings were destroyed. Two people are missing, though officials have found partial human remains at one location. President Joe Biden was scheduled to survey the damage on Friday.

Investigators are still trying to determine what caused the wind-whipped wildfire, which forced thousands to flee on very little notice. The inferno erupted following months of drought and fed on bone-dry grassland surrounding fast-growing development in the area near the Rocky Mountain foothills.

Experts say similar events will become

more common as climate change warms the planet and suburbs grow in fire-prone areas. Ninety percent of Boulder County is in severe or extreme drought, and it hadn't seen substantial rainfall since mid-summer.

The fire, which spanned 9.4 square miles, ranks as the most destructive in state history in terms of homes and other structures destroyed and damaged. A 2013 fire outside Colorado Springs destroyed 489 homes and killed two people. In 2020, Colorado also suffered its three largest wildfires in recorded history as a prolonged drought holds its grip on the Western U.S.

## Warrant: Child might have started deadly Philly blaze

*Associated Press*

PHILADELPHIA — Investigators are looking into whether a 5-year-old who was playing with a lighter set a Christmas tree on fire, sparking a conflagration that killed 12 family members in a Philadelphia row home, officials revealed Thursday.

That disclosure was included in a search warrant application as city and federal investigators sought to determine the cause of the blaze, the city's deadliest in more than a century, which took the lives of three sisters and several of their children early Wednesday.

Jane Roh, spokesperson for District Attorney Larry Krasner, confirmed the contents of the search warrant, which was first reported by The Philadelphia Inquirer.

Fire officials provided few details at an afternoon news briefing, declining to say how many people escaped the blaze or speculate on a possible cause, adding the fire scene was complex. Officials also did not say where the fire began, calling it part of the investigation.

"I know that we will hopefully be able to provide a specific origin and cause to this fire and to provide some answers to the loved ones and, really, to the city," said Matthew Varisco, who leads the Philadelphia branch of the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives.

ATF specialists and other investigators took photos and combed through the charred, three-story brick duplex owned by the Philadelphia Housing Authority, the city's

public housing agency and the state's biggest landlord.

In a statement at a Thursday night vigil, relatives said the matriarch of their family had lost three daughters and nine grandchildren in the blaze. The daughters were identified as Rosalee McDonald, Virginia Thomas and Quinsha White. There were two survivors, the family said. Temple University Hospital said one was in stable condition.

The fire department previously said none of the four smoke alarms in the building appeared to have been working. But housing authority officials said Thursday the building actually had 13 tamper-resistant, 10-year detectors, all of which were operational during the last inspection in May 2021.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### Uber rider refunded \$600 bill after icy jam

**VA** RICHMOND — A Richmond man has been refunded the \$600 he was charged for an Uber ride that became trapped with hundreds of others on an icy stretch of Interstate 95 in Virginia.

Andrew Peters was returning from San Francisco and did not understand the severity of the situation when he took an Uber from Dulles International Airport on Monday and got stuck in the traffic disaster, WTOP-FM reported.

"It was kind of scary," Peters said. "We didn't have any food or water."

Hundreds of motorists were stranded in freezing temperatures along a 40-mile stretch of I-95. Police said part of the road became impassable when tractor-trailers jackknifed in a winter storm. The interstate fully reopened Tuesday night after more than a day of blockage.

After a nine-hour trek, Peters got home Tuesday and paid a \$200 bill. But then Peters said Uber added \$400, raising his total bill to \$600. He disputed the additional charge.

In a statement sent to The Associated Press, Uber said Peters would get his money back.

### Toddler gets gun in car, shoots mother, sibling

**TX** GRANBURY — A handgun went off in the hands of a toddler in a Texas Walmart parking lot Wednesday, wounding the child's mother in the arm and side and young sibling in the leg, police said.

The shooting happened in Granbury, Texas, about 40

miles southwest of Fort Worth.

Police said the gun discharged once when the 2-year-old took it from between a seat and the center console while in the car with a 1-year-old sibling and with their 23-year-old mother standing outside near the driver's side door. The children's 26-year-old father was standing near the vehicle's rear, police said. The mother and 1-year-old were taken to Fort Worth hospitals, but neither was wounded severely, said police Lt. Russell Grizzard.

### New roller coaster set to debut next month

**FL** ORLANDO — A long-anticipated new roller coaster is opening at SeaWorld Orlando next month.

The theme park announced that its Ice Breaker roller coaster will make its debut on Feb. 18.

The roller coaster ride has four airtime launches, as well as a 93-foot tall spike with 100-degree angle.

### 2 charged with making false injury claim

**NC** RALEIGH — Two people have been accused of telling investigators one of them was hurt in a traffic accident which was later found to be a false claim, the N.C. Department of Insurance said.

The department said in a news release that Timira Chiquita Glaspy, 31, and Dandre Lamar Morrison, 33, were both charged with felony insurance fraud and misdemeanor making false statements on applications for insurance.

Special agents with the department accused Morrison

and Glaspy of telling insurance claim investigators that Glaspy was hurt in a collision while driving her vehicle in May. Criminal summonses say Glaspy was not in her vehicle at the time and couldn't have been hurt.

### Police: City truck used in ATM theft attempt

**MD** OWINGS MILLS — A Baltimore city public works employee used a city truck in an attempt to steal an ATM in Baltimore County last week, officials announced Wednesday.

Police responding to a report of a burglary in Owings Mills around 3:30 a.m. Dec. 29 found a truck backed up to an ATM with chains wrapped around it, news outlets reported. A man, identified as Kirk Parker Jr., 36, fled, but he was arrested in a wooded area after a short chase.

Parker is charged with second-degree burglary, theft, malicious destruction of property and two counts of fourth-degree burglary, according to court records. Department of Public Works spokesman James Bentley confirmed Parker worked at the department.

The vehicle involved was a Ford truck registered to the city, but the city emblem and front license plate were taped over, police said. The truck had been reported stolen in Carroll County, police said.

### Water line break forces nearly 70 out of motel

**VT** COLCHESTER — Nearly 70 motel guests in Colchester had to leave their rooms in the middle

of the night because of a water main break.

Emergency crews arrived at the Motel 6 on Wednesday night, just before midnight, WCAX-TV reported.

A total of 66 people had to leave their rooms because of water damage. Many of the guests were staying at the motel as part of the state's homeless hotel program, police said.

Motel staff and the Red Cross helped find the guests a temporary place to sleep Wednesday night, the news station reported.

### 2 arrested after ski team's gear stolen

**GA** ATLANTA — Two men have been arrested after skis and other equipment belonging to a U.S. National Ski Team member were stolen in Atlanta, police said.

Dani Loeb and her supporters have been pleading for the thieves to return her gear, saying the \$1,600 skis give her the best possible chance to qualify for the Winter Olympics that begin Feb. 4 in Beijing.

The skis — along with U.S. ski team bags, a uniform, her helmet and other gear — were stolen from her mother's pickup truck in a parking deck off Peachtree Street on Dec. 15, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported.

The men were arrested Tuesday and charged with criminal trespass and entering an automobile with the intent to steal.

Loeb is now waiting to hear from Atlanta investigators whether the specially made skis were recovered, the newspaper reported.

— From Associated Press

STARS AND STRIPES®

Single source convenience, reliably independent. Visit [www.stripes.com](http://www.stripes.com).

Reporting  
World, National  
and Military News

# Game 17 is uncharted territory for NFL

Associated Press

That sweet 16-game symmetry of the NFL, with each team's schedule neatly divided into quarters just like the action on the field, has been brushed aside after 43 seasons.

The long-discussed 17th game has finally arrived, another weekend of the made-for-television inventory that turned the league into an annual 11-figure revenue generator.

Deep into Sunday night, the playoff field will still be filling out with a win-and-in game between the Los Angeles Chargers and Las Vegas Raiders. This is the same date, Jan. 9, on which the Super Bowl was staged 45 years ago.

At the end of a second straight virus-affected season, with COVID-19 all but guaranteed to make an appearance in the playoffs, the added game could hardly be seen as strange anymore with so much abnormality in the NFL these days.

As luck would have it, 13 of the 16 games on the ledger will have a bearing on the bracket, with league-leading Green Bay (13-3) the only club in either conference with a seed already locked

in. The AFC has two spots still open and five teams alive. The NFC has two teams vying for one bid. Good timing for that third wild-card berth that was tacked on just last season in the expansion to a 14-team field.

Several statistical milestones remain within reach, too, obviously boosted by the extra game but eligible for league record books just the same.

Here's a closer look at the wrinkles of the extra week as it fits with the 2021 season:

## Marching in?

In a purely chronological picture, New Orleans (8-8) looks like a beneficiary of the 17th game with a matchup against Atlanta (7-9). If the Saints beat the Falcons and San Francisco (9-7) loses to Los Angeles (12-4) — the Rams can clinch their division with a win — the Saints will edge out the 49ers for the final spot in the NFC.

On the other hand, New Orleans' additional game was at Tennessee, which currently holds the No. 1 seed in the AFC. The Titans won 23-21 Nov. 14. The 49ers won their extra interconference game at Cincinnati

on Dec. 12. Philadelphia, which has clinched a wild-card but has the same record as the 49ers, also won its added game against the New York Jets.

## Bills due

New England (10-6) must beat Miami (8-8) and have Buffalo (10-6) lose to the Jets (4-12) to take back the AFC East title from the Bills.

Nobody in the league would ever sympathize with the Patriots and their six Super Bowl trophies in their past two decades, but the extra game on their schedule this year was a 35-29 loss to NFC East champion Dallas (11-5) on Oct. 17. The Bills? They beat Washington (6-10) on Sept. 26.

Even though the Cowboys finished one game out of their division lead last season, they were the third-place team and thus matched up with the Patriots, who took third in 2020.

## Jumbled up

There are 18 teams still mathematically in championship contention, the most entering the final week of regular-season games since 20 teams were alive in 2006.

In the AFC, the Patriots can still finish as the No. 1 seed, the No. 7 seed or almost all of them in between. While six of the eight division titles have been determined, the seeds are still largely unsettled.

If the season was over now, as it was in the past, the Titans would be looking forward to their first-round bye with the extra week for star running back Derrick Henry to heal from his foot injury. If they lose to Houston, however, they could fall to the second, third or fourth seed.

## King Kupp

The Rams' Cooper Kupp leads the NFL in receptions (138) and receiving yards (1,829) and has a chance to set the single-season record in all three categories. He needs 12 receptions to beat Michael Thomas (2019) and 136 receiving yards to pass Calvin Johnson (2012).

"It wouldn't hold the same weight to me as it does for guys that have done that in a 16-game season," Kupp said. "Those are incredible things, incredible accomplishments. You kind of have to separate the two. We're in a new age of football here."

## Havin' a record year: Several marks could fall in Week 18

Associated Press

When Eric Church sang about "havin' a record year," he wasn't referring to the NFL.

The country music star could have been.

For the 2021 season that ends this weekend with the first set of 17th games in league history, a slew of marks are about to be broken. Major records, too.

Start with the most successful quarterback in NFL annals, naturally. Tom Brady leads in completions (456), yards passing (4,990) and touchdown passes (40). Tampa Bay's Brady is within striking distance of the season records for both passing yards (Peyton Manning's 5,477 for Denver in 2013) and completions (Drew Brees, 471 for New Orleans in 2016). Brady, of course, has that extra game to chase down Manning and Brees.

The Rams' Cooper Kupp leads in receptions with 138, receiving yards (1,829) and TD receptions (15) and is within striking dis-

tance of the season records for receptions and receiving yards. The Saints' Michael Thomas, who won the Offensive Player of the Year award in 2019 when he had 149 catches, holds that mark.

Kupp will need a big game against San Francisco to get to Hall of Famer Calvin Johnson's yardage record of 1,964 in 2012. Kupp is at 1,829.

"The most important thing is that we win the game, lock down the division title and be ready to move into the playoffs here," Kupp said, "but it would be a very cool thing because of the respect I have for the players in this league and the talent that there is. It's a tough thing to do."

All records are tough to reach. If you have Brady throwing to you, though, extending a standard you've already set might be easier.

Bucs wide receiver Mike Evans enters this week with 946 receiving yards. With 54

against Carolina on Sunday, Evans will become the first player with at least 1,000 receiving yards in each of his first eight seasons.

That's something Bengals rookie Ja'Marr Chase might, well, chase as he moves along. Last week, Chase had 266 yards receiving, the most in a game by a rookie. He now has 1,429 yards receiving the season, passing Minnesota's Justin Jefferson's 1,400 in 2020, a Super Bowl era mark. With 45 more yards at Cleveland on Sunday, he will surpass the Houston Oilers' Bill Groman's 1,473 in 1960 for the all-time rookie record.

On the other side of the ball, the sacks mark set by Hall of Famer Michael Strahan — and helped by Brett Favre's pratfall — could fall when the Steelers face the Ravens. With 1½ sacks at Baltimore, T.J. Watt will break Strahan's 2001 record of 22½. The stat became official in 1982.

# Georgia looks to stop skid vs. Bama

BY JOHN ZENOR  
Associated Press

**T**he Georgia Bulldogs aren't the only team having a tough time beating fellow Southeastern Conference powerhouse Alabama.

They're just the only one that gets another shot in the season's biggest game.

The No. 3 Bulldogs have the kind of talent-rich roster that appears built to give the top-ranked Crimson Tide a run for their money. They'll head into the national championship game Monday night in Indianapolis trying to finally get over that elephant-sized hump while Alabama is seeking its seventh national title since the 2009 season.

Beating Bama for some five-star recruits has proven easier than besting coach Nick Saban & Co. on the field. Alabama has won the last seven meetings, including one in a previous national title matchup and three with SEC championships on the line.

Georgia coach Kirby Smart, a former Nick Saban disciple at Alabama, is 0-4 against his old boss. Smart points out they share those struggles "with a lot of teams."

He's right, but the Bulldogs are the ones who have a chance to change that recent history a little over a month after Alabama toppled them from the No. 1 ranking with a 41-24 win in the SEC championship game.

It matched the regular-season score from 2020 in Tuscaloosa.

"We have a tremendous amount of respect for them," Saban said. "And I think it's important for our players to know what they need to do to be able to continue to have success in the next game, regardless of what happened in the last game."

Or the past seven games.

The Bulldogs also have pushed Alabama to the limit, most notably in their last for-all-the-national-marbles meeting on Jan. 8, 2018.

But the streak stands among the SEC's two most dominant, talented programs.

■ On Dec. 4, Bryce Young passed for an SEC championship-game record 421 yards, locking down the Heisman Trophy and the No. 1 College Football Playoff seed for his team.

■ Oct. 18, 2020. Alabama scored three touchdowns in a 10-minute span starting late in the third quarter for the first 41-24 win. Saban was cleared to be on the sidelines after a false positive COVID-19 test. Mac Jones passed for 417 yards and four touchdowns, similar to Young's numbers in the first rematch.

■ Dec. 1, 2018. Jalen Hurts got to be the hero this time. The former starter replaced an injured Tua Tagovailoa in the SEC championship game, throwing for one touchdown and running for another with just over a minute to play in a 35-28 victory.

■ Jan. 7, 2018. Also in Atlanta, Tagovai-

loa and fellow freshman DeVonta Smith connected on a 41-yard touchdown in overtime for a 26-23 victory. Tagovailoa had replaced a struggling Hurts in the second half.

"He just stepped in and did his thing," Hurts said afterward. "He's built for stuff like this. I'm so happy for him."

Some 11 months later, he got a piece of glory himself.

Before Smart's arrival, then-No. 13 Alabama routed Mark Richt's eighth-ranked Bulldogs 38-10 on Oct. 3, 2015.

The Tide also survived a 32-28 SEC championship game in 2012 when the clock expired with Georgia stopped at the 5-yard line.

Alabama split the first two meetings under Saban, falling in overtime 26-23 in 2007 and winning 41-30 the following season. Smart was an Alabama assistant for that first meeting and defensive coordinator for the next few so his personal record in the rivalry is a more respectable 3-5.

Smart doesn't need to emphasize the recent one-sided nature of the Alabama-Georgia series, describing his team's mood simply as "they're excited."

"They earned another opportunity to go play a really good football team," he said. "Now we've got a really good football team. Our guys are physical, excited and looking forward to this opportunity on the biggest stage there is."

## Djokovic thanks fans as he awaits hearing in Australia

Associated Press

The top men's tennis player in the world, Novak Djokovic, spent Orthodox Christmas in an immigration detention hotel in Australia on Friday as he sought to fend off deportation over the country's COVID-19 rules and compete in the Australian Open.

Djokovic received calls from his native Serbia, including from his parents and the president, who hoped to boost his spirits on the holiday.

On Instagram, he posted: "Thank you to the people around the world for your continuous support. I can feel it and it is greatly appreciated."

The 34-year-old athlete and vaccine skeptic was barred from entering the country late Wednesday when federal border authorities at the Melbourne airport rejected his medical exemption to Australia's strict COVID-19 vaccination requirements.

He has been confined to the detention hotel in Melbourne pending a court hearing on Monday, a week before the start of the tournament, where he is seeking to win his record-breaking 21st Grand Slam singles title.

### Sue Bird announces her return to Storm for another season

SEATTLE — Sue Bird announced Friday that she will return to the Seattle Storm next season, putting off retirement for at least one more year.

The four-time WNBA champion and 12-time All-Star selection has spent her entire WNBA career with the Storm after being the No. 1 pick of the 2002 WNBA draft. The 2022 season will be Bird's 21st overall with the franchise, but she missed the 2014 and 2019 seasons due to injury.

Bird, 41, averaged 10 points and 5.3 assists

per game last season. She also averaged nearly 28 minutes per game, her highest total since 2017.

### US Women's Open purse nearly doubles to \$10 million

Long considered the biggest event in women's golf, the U.S. Women's Open now has prize money and future sites to match.

The U.S. Golf Association announced Friday the purse will nearly double this year to \$10 million, by far the richest in women's golf and challenging top prizes in women's sports.

Also:

■ At Kapalua, Hawaii, Cameron Smith of Australia shot an 8-under-par 65 on Thursday for a one-shot lead in the Sentry Tournament of Champions. Patrick Cantlay and Jon Rahm each trailed by one stroke.

# Penguins win 10th consecutive game

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Oh sure, leave it to Bryan Rust and Jake Guentzel to carry Pittsburgh's top line. Try four goals and an assist between them to keep Pittsburgh perfect in their past 10 games.

That third member of the line? Well, Sidney Crosby did at least chip in two assists.

"When they play the right way like they are right now, they set the bar for our team and it drives our team," Penguins coach Mike Sullivan said. "The rest of the group follows their lead."

The Penguins won 10 straight games for the sixth time in franchise history, getting two goals each from Rust and Guentzel to beat the depleted Philadelphia Flyers 6-2 on Thursday night.

The Penguins won the second game of a back-to-back and haven't lost since Dec. 1 against Edmonton.

## Stars 6, Panthers 5 (SO):

Jamie Benn had a goal and an assist two days after coming out of COVID-19 protocols, and Dallas beat visiting Florida in a shootout in their first game in 2½ weeks because of virus issues throughout the team.

Joe Pavelski and Jason Robertson scored on the only two shots in the shootout for the Stars. Braden Holtby stopped both Florida shots to end the game.

The Panthers left their net empty and had an extra skater on the ice when Jonathan Huberdeau scored with 29 seconds left in regulation to force overtime.

**Avalanche 7, Jets 1:** Gabriel Landeskog had his fourth career hat trick and finished with four points to lead host Colorado over Winnipeg.

Landeskog scored twice in a three-goal second period for the surging Avalanche. Nathan

MacKinnon had a goal and four assists, and Mikko Rantanen added a goal and two assists to give Colorado's top line 12 points on the night.

**Wild 3, Bruins 2:** Kirill Kaprizov scored in his fourth straight game, Matt Boldy got a goal in his NHL debut and visiting Minnesota snapped a five-game skid with a victory over Boston.

Boldy, who played at Boston College last season and grew up about 20 miles southwest of Boston in Millis, Mass., put Minnesota up 3-1 with a goal 12:26 into the second period, and the Wild hung on for their first win since Dec. 9.

**Lightning 4, Flames 1:** Nikita Kucherov had two assists in his return from an injury during host Tampa Bay's three-goal third period.

**Golden Knights 5, Rangers 1:** Jonathan Marchessault scored twice, Robin Lehner made 18 saves in his first game in nearly three weeks and host Las Vegas defeated New York.

**Predators 4, Kings 2:** Filip Forsberg had a goal and an assist for his third consecutive multi-point outing, Matt Duchene got his first goal in 10 games and visiting Nashville won its third straight.

**Devils 3, Blue Jackets 1:** Jesper Bratt scored the go-ahead goal early in the third period, MacKenzie Blackwood made 31 saves and host New Jersey beat Columbus for its fourth victory in five games.

**Coyotes 6, Blackhawks 4:** Johan Larsson scored his first three goals of the season for his first career hat trick and Arizona dealt visiting Chicago its sixth consecutive loss.

**Sharks 3, Sabres 2:** Adin Hill made 37 saves, Tomas Hertl had a goal and an assist, and visiting San Jose ended a two-game skid.

# Paul, Suns beat Clippers, improve to NBA-best 30-8

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Chris Paul and the Phoenix Suns have turned into some of the league's best closers. It's a big reason they've reached 30 wins before any other team in the NBA this season.

Paul had a triple-double with 14 points, 13 rebounds and 10 assists, and the Suns improved to 25-0 when leading after three quarters by beating the Los Angeles Clippers 106-89 on Thursday night.

As usual, the 36-year-old Paul was the maestro making big plays in the final minutes to close out the Clippers. He hit a crucial 3-pointer and had five assists in the fourth quarter.

"Some teams' biggest issue is that they don't know what they want to run or who they want to go to down the stretch," Paul said. "I think we have a good sense of that. We know what our go-to plays are."

The Suns moved a game ahead of Golden State for the best record in the league. They've won three straight and four of five. That's despite several players missing considerable time this season, including All-Star guard Devin Booker.

"I just think the players have done a really good job of driving our culture," Suns coach Monty Williams said. "We have unreal guard play, which really helps."

Paul continues to look 26 years old instead of 36, doing a little of everything to keep the Suns among the league's elite. His 13 rebounds were a career high in his 1,128th regular-season NBA game.

Cam Johnson added a career-high 24 points, and Jalen Smith — the second-year forward whose playing time has drastically increased recently because of the Suns' COVID-19 issues — had another good game with 19 points and 14 rebounds.

"We're having a lot of fun playing together," Johnson said.

"Things are starting to click."

Those performances helped offset a tough night for Booker, who shot just 5 of 22 from the field and finished with 11 points. He was 0 of 7 on three-pointers.

The Clippers dropped below .500 at 19-20 despite a season-high 26 points from former Suns forward Marcus Morris Sr. Reggie Jackson added 16. The Clippers were missing guards Luke Kennard and Xavier Moon, along with center Ivica Zubac, because of COVID-19 protocols.

**Knicks 108, Celtics 105:** RJ Barrett banked in a three-pointer at the buzzer to lift New York past visiting Boston.

Evan Fournier scored a career-high 41 points, and the Knicks overcame a 24-point, second-quarter deficit. The teams will finish the home-and-home set Saturday night in Boston.

Jayson Tatum scored 36 points for Boston. He tied it on a long step-back jumper with just over a second to play. The Knicks inbounded after a timeout, and Barrett banked in the long-distance shot for the victory.

**Pelicans 101, Warriors 96:** Brandon Ingram broke out of a shooting slump with 32 points and host New Orleans beat depleted Golden State to snap a three-game skid.

Golden State's Stephen Curry was ruled out after hurting his left quad during a loss a night earlier in Dallas. Draymond Green was out with a sore hip.

**Grizzlies 118, Pistons 88:** Ja Morant had 22 points, nine rebounds and six assists and Memphis built an early lead and coasted past visiting Detroit for its seventh straight victory.

Dillon Brooks finished with 18 points, and Tyus Jones and rookie Ziaire Williams added 14 points apiece for Memphis, a season high for Williams.