

Navy extends boot camp by 2 weeks

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Navy has extended its enlisted basic training by two weeks to ensure recruits are better prepared to enter the fleet — the first major change to the boot camp structure in 20 years, the admiral in charge of naval service training said Friday.

New recruits will now spend 10 weeks at boot camp, which includes a new two-week capstone phase that focuses on mentorship, small-unit leadership, professional and personal development, Rear Adm. Jennifer Couture said.

“We are trying to give sailors some preventative maintenance ... giving them some tools that they can use to prepare themselves as individuals to be part of a warfighting team,” she said.

Fleet Master Chief Wes Koshoffer, the top enlisted adviser for Navy manpower, personnel, training and education, said the updated training was needed as competition with great-power countries, such as China and Russia, has caused a “sense of urgency” to ensure sailors are properly prepared.

“We are committed to ... looking at every aspect of what we do to optimize, to increase performance because our near-peer competitors are working hard in the same man-

ner that we are,” he said. “The development of sailors is part and parcel — if not the single-greatest — advantage that we have over other militaries in the world.”

The new curriculum was designed to address some of the issues that Navy leaders see in the fleet with incoming sailors reporting to their first commands and prepare recruits for life after boot camp, Couture said.

“[We train on] what can they expect when [recruits] get to the fleet and as they continue on in their training,” she said. “It’s reinforcing the things that they’ve learned in the first eight weeks, giving them more practical applications, more scenario-driven [and] more hands-on training.”

It is the first time such a major overhaul to boot camp has occurred since the early 2000s, Couture said. The extra two weeks will also include training in life skills, such as organization, time management, self-awareness, goal setting and financial management.

“Many of our recruits come here and it’s the first time that they’re really out on their own,” Couture said. “They have a steady paycheck and for many of them, [it’s] their first significant career choice, so we know there are things we need to teach them about

some basic living on their own.”

The training will also incorporate some key personnel problems that the Navy has been working to address, such as preventing suicide, sexual assault and sexual harassment, she said.

“We are telling our recruits, ‘Here are our behaviors of a 21st century sailor ... all the things we expect you to do, and here’s how we expect you to behave and act,’” Couture said. “It is treating people with respect, holding people accountable for their behaviors and peer-to-peer accountability.”

“We believe very strongly that those types of behaviors are directly impacting warfighting readiness and the performance of our sailors,” she added.

The added two weeks is not expected to slow down the flow of new sailors into the fleet, Couture said. The Navy still intends to bring in new recruits and graduate sailors from boot camp weekly.

“Our nation is depending on us to bring the Navy the nation needs to be competitive, to remain the number one Navy in the world,” Koshoffer said. “So we’re looking at every possible aspect of how to increase sailor or performance at every level in our Navy from the senior most leader to the first and last recruit in the door.”

US, NATO rule out halt to expansion, spurn Russia

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The United States and NATO on Friday roundly rejected Russian demands that the alliance not admit new members amid growing concerns that Russia may invade Ukraine, which aspires to join the alliance.

Secretary of State Antony Blinken and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said Russia would have no say over who should be allowed to join the bloc. And, they warned Russia of a “forceful” response to any further military inter-

vention in Ukraine.

Their comments amounted to a complete dismissal of a key part of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s demands for easing tensions with Ukraine. Putin wants NATO to halt membership plans for all countries, including Ukraine. The former Soviet republic is unlikely to join the alliance in the foreseeable future, but NATO nations won’t rule it out.

Blinken and Stoltenberg spoke separately following an extraordinary virtual meeting of NATO foreign ministers. The

meeting of the North Atlantic Council was the first in a series of high-level talks this week aimed at easing the tensions.

“We’re prepared to respond forcefully to further Russian aggression, but a diplomatic solution is still possible and preferable if Russia chooses,” Blinken told reporters in Washington. He categorically dismissed Russia’s claim that NATO had pledged not to expand eastward following the admission of several former Soviet satellites after the end of the Cold War.

“NATO never promised not to admit new members; it could not and would not,” Blinken said, accusing Putin of raising a strawman argument to distract from Russian military moves along the Ukrainian border.

Earlier in Brussels, Stoltenberg made similar remarks as the allies prepared for the flurry of diplomatic contacts that will begin between the U.S. and Russia in Geneva on Monday and move to a NATO-Russia Council meeting and a pan-European meeting with Russia on Wednesday and Thursday.

Marine officer: Bad data led to sinking incident

Associated Press

CAMP PENDLETON, Calif. — A Marine Corps battalion commander testified Friday that in retrospect he would have halted the exercise that killed nine of his Marines whose amphibious assault vehicle sank off the Southern California coast but at the time he did not have accurate information to make such a decision.

Lt. Col. Michael J. Regner said his decisions were based in part on what other commanders told him, including that all the Marines had completed their swim certifications and that the aging vehicles they were in had been fixed and were ready for the mission.

He said he was also unaware that the Navy had changed plans that day and did not launch a safety boat.

“Had I known that at the time, I would have said ‘No we’re not going to go into the ocean without a safety boat,’” Regner said.

Regner gave his account to a three-officer panel at a Board of Inquiry. That panel will issue a recommendation to the commanding general of Regner’s unit as to whether the decorated officer, who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, should be considered for discharge just shy of his 20-year mark and be denied retirement benefits.

However, a decision isn’t expected until lat-

er this month and will follow Boards of Inquiry pending for other officers, including one scheduled for next Tuesday.

A Marine Corps investigation found that inadequate training, shabby maintenance and poor judgment by leaders led to the July 30, 2020, sinking of the amphibious assault vehicle in one of the deadliest Marine training accidents in decades.

The vehicle — a kind of seafaring tank — had 16 people aboard when it sank rapidly in 385 feet of water off the coast of San Clemente Island. Seven Marines were rescued as the vessel was returning to a Navy ship on a training exercise.

Regner was relieved of command of the landing team of the 1st Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment, 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit, shortly after the sinking. A Marine Corps statement at the time said his removal was based on a “substantial amount of information and data” and cited a loss of trust.

The government argued at Friday’s hearing that while Regner is not the only one to blame for the tragedy, his “substandard” leadership set the groundwork for things to go as badly as they did.

The panel was expected to review 6,000 pages of investigative reports and evidence before making its decision.

New amphibious vehicles cleared after issue fixed

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

Marine Amphibious Combat Vehicles can return to missions in the open sea after a new tow rope was developed in response to a deadly training accident that forced the Marines to curtail operations, a top general said last week.

“Amphibious operations, including the use of amphibious ship-to-shore connectors, is a foundational aspect of Marine Corps operations and is critical to the future force and its ability to remain the nation’s premier expeditionary force in readiness,” Marine Lt. Gen. David Furness said in a statement Thursday.

The Marine Corps in September suspended operations of the new Amphibious Combat Vehicle in unprotected waters while it worked on a solution to towing problems revealed in after-action investigations related to a July 2020 training accident off the coast of California that left eight Marines and one sailor dead. That accident involved the Marine Corps’ older model amphibious vehicle, known as the Assault Amphibious Vehicle. In December, the Marines said they would no longer deploy or train on the aging AAV, though the vehicles remain in stock should they be needed in a crisis.

Once equipped and trained on the new tow-rope solution, Marine units can use the newer ACVs to perform “unrestricted amphibious operations,” including self-recovery missions in the open ocean and through the surf zone, the Marine Corps said.

Until Marines are trained on the ropes, operations will remain restricted to land mobility, gunnery operations and amphibious operations only in protected waters, the service said.

For Marines to be fully trained, there are a wide range of tasks that units must complete before being certified to resume full waterborne operations.

The tasks include ensuring training qualifications for crew members are met and troops are properly equipped, vehicles have passed required inspections and operations are conducted with safety boats, and sea state assessments.

South Korea disputes the North’s claim of hypersonic missile test

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea dismissed North Korea’s claim to have recently launched a hypersonic missile as an exaggeration on Friday, saying it was a normal ballistic missile that could be intercepted.

The assessment is certain to anger North Korea. South Korea has previously avoided publicly disputing North Korea’s weapons tests, apparently so as not to aggravate relations.

South Korea’s Defense Ministry said it believes North Korea hasn’t acquired the

technologies needed to launch a hypersonic weapon.

It said in a report that what North Korea fired on Wednesday was a type of ballistic missile that was displayed in October during a weapons exhibition in Pyongyang, its capital. It said South Korean and U.S. forces could shoot it down.

The ministry said North Korea’s claim that the weapon flew 435 miles and maneuvered laterally appeared to be an exaggeration. Ministry officials said the claim was likely aimed at a domestic audience to boost public confidence in its missile program.

Hospitalizations soar for kids with COVID

Associated Press

Hospitalizations of U.S. children under 5 with COVID-19 soared in recent weeks to their highest level since the pandemic began, according to government data released Friday on the only age group not yet eligible for the vaccine.

The worrisome trend in children too young to be vaccinated underscores the need for older kids and adults to get their shots to help protect those around them, said Dr. Rochelle Walensky, director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Since mid-December, with the highly contagious omicron variant spreading furiously around the country, the hospitalization rate in these youngest kids has surged to more than 4 in 100,000 children, up from 2.5 per 100,000.

The rate among children ages 5 to 17 is about 1 per 100,000, according to the CDC data, which is drawn from over 250 hospitals in 14 states.

Overall, “pediatric hospitalizations are at their highest rate compared to any prior point in the pandemic,” Walensky said.

She noted that just over 50% of children ages 12 to 18, and only 16% of those 5 to 11, are fully vaccinated.

The overall hospitalization rate among children and teens is still lower than that of any other age group. And they account for less than 5% of average new daily hospital admissions, according to the CDC.

As of Tuesday, the average number of under-18 patients admitted to the hospital per day with COVID-19 was 766, double the figure reported just two weeks ago.

The trend among the very youngest kids is being driven by high hospitalization rates in five states: Georgia, Connecticut, Tennessee, California and Oregon, with the steepest increases in Georgia, the CDC said.

At a briefing, Walensky said the numbers include children hospitalized because of COVID-19 and those admitted for other reasons but found to be infected.

The CDC also said the surge could be partially attributable to how COVID-19 hospitalizations in this age group are defined: a positive virus test within 14 days of hospitalization for any reason.

The severity of illness among children during the omicron wave seems lower than it was with the delta variant, said Seattle Children’s Hospital critical care chief Dr. John McGuire.

Ahmaud Arbery killers are sentenced to life in prison

Associated Press

BRUNSWICK, Ga. — Three white men convicted of murder for chasing and killing Ahmaud Arbery were sentenced to life in prison Friday, with a judge denying any chance of parole for the father and son who armed themselves and initiated the deadly pursuit of the 25-year-old Black man.

Superior Court Judge Timothy Walmsley said Arbery left his home for a jog and ended up running for his life for five minutes as the men chased him until they finally cornered him. The judge paused for a minute of silence to help drive home a sense of what that time must have felt like for Arbery, whose killing became part of a larger national reckoning on racial injustice.

“When I thought about this, I thought from a lot of different angles. I kept coming

back to the terror that must have been in the mind of the young man running through Satilla Shores,” he said, mentioning the neighborhood where Arbery was killed.

Greg and Travis McMichael grabbed guns and jumped in a pickup truck to chase Arbery after spotting him running in their neighborhood outside the port city of Brunswick on Feb. 23, 2020. Their neighbor, William “Roddie” Bryan joined the pursuit in his own truck and recorded cellphone video of Travis McMichael firing close-range shotgun blasts into Arbery.

“Ahmaud Arbery was then hunted down and shot, and he was killed because individuals here in this courtroom took the law into their own hands,” the judge said. Walmsley ordered the McMichaels to

serve life without parole and granted Bryan a chance to earn parole after serving at least 30 years in prison.

A few dozen supporters cheered Arbery’s family as they exited onto the courthouse steps Friday afternoon.

“Today your son has made history, because we have people who are being held accountable for lynching a Black man in America!” said Benjamin Crump, a civil attorney representing the family.

Murder carries a mandatory sentence of life in prison under Georgia law unless prosecutors seek the death penalty, which they opted against in this case. During the sentencing hearing, Arbery’s family had asked the judge to show no lenience in deciding whether to grant an eventual chance at parole.

Judge dismisses sole criminal charge against Cuomo

Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. — The only criminal charge filed over the sexual harassment allegations that drove former New York Gov. Andrew Cuomo from office was dismissed Friday at prosecutors’ request, clearing what had been seen as the most serious legal threat to the Democrat.

The move had been expected after Albany County prosecutors said they couldn’t prove the case and intended to drop it.

Cuomo, who denied the allegation that he

groped an aide in the executive mansion in 2020, didn’t speak during Friday’s short hearing, held with the judge sitting in an Albany courtroom and the lawyers and defendant appearing via videoconference.

Wearing a black mask, Cuomo was visible for only a few seconds when his lawyer, Rita Glavin, swiveled her camera to show him in the room.

“As the governor has said, this simply did not happen,” Glavin said in a video statement after the hearing. “Today, reason and

the rule of law prevailed. Not politics, rhetoric or mob mentality,” she added.

During the hearing, which lasted only a few minutes and would have been even shorter if not for audio glitches, Assistant District Attorney Jennifer McCanney told the judge prosecutors had reviewed the evidence “and concluded we cannot successfully secure a conviction in this case.”

Judge Holly Trexler noted district attorneys’ “unfettered discretion” to decide whether to prosecute a case.

1 missing in Northwest flooding, slides

Associated Press

BELLINGHAM, Wash. — At least one person was missing and presumed dead as snow turned to rain and deluged the Pacific Northwest on Friday, causing flooding, landslides and avalanche danger in the mountains.

A 72-year-old man never returned after leaving his residence to move his car to higher ground on Friday morning west of Olympia, Wash., in Cosmopolis, according to Grays Harbor Undersheriff Brad Johansson.

The man's residence was on a road that was flooded and authorities fear his vehicle was swept into floodwaters down a steep bank next to his driveway, Johansson said.

Snow and rain forced the closure of parts of Washington state's two major highways — Interstate 90 and Interstate 5 — with flooding that also swamped roads throughout Western Washington and Oregon.

In southwestern Washington's Lewis County, a 20-mile stretch of Interstate 5 had been closed in both directions south of Chehalis because of flooding from the Chehalis River. All lanes of Interstate 5 in that area reopened Friday afternoon.

The major route across Washington's Cascades — I-90 over Snoqualmie Pass — closed Thursday due to avalanche danger, heavy snow and low visibility. Stevens Pass on U.S. 2, White Pass on U.S. 12 and Blewett Pass on

U.S. 97 also closed Thursday.

Transportation officials say the four mountain passes that connect Western Washington with Eastern Washington likely would remain closed until Sunday because of dangerous conditions.

And part of one of the only other roads crossing the state, State Route 14 on the Washington side of the Columbia River, closed for several hours on Friday because of a fatal crash near Lyle, Washington State Patrol Trooper Will Finn said.

Dozens of watches and warnings were in effect in Washington and Oregon, including a flood warning for the northern Oregon Coast following huge amounts of rainfall.

Former Kazakhstan anti-terror leader arrested

Associated Press

MOSCOW — The former head of Kazakhstan's counterintelligence and anti-terror agency has been arrested on charges of attempted government overthrow in the wake of violent protests that the president has blamed on foreign-backed terrorists.

The arrest of Karim Masimov was announced Saturday by the National Security Committee, which Masimov headed until he was removed during the week by President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev.

Authorities say security forces killed 26 demonstrators during the week's unrest and that 18 law-enforcement officers died. More than 4,400 people have been arrested, the In-

terior Ministry said Saturday.

The protests in the Central Asian nation were the most widespread since Kazakhstan's independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

The unrest began in the country's far west as protests against a sharp rise in prices for liquefied petroleum gas that is widely used as vehicle fuel. The protests spread to the country's largest city, Almaty, where demonstrators seized and burned government buildings.

At Tokayev's request, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a Russia-led military alliance of six former Soviet states, authorized sending about 2,500 mostly Russian troops to Kazakhstan as peacekeepers.

Tokayev said Friday that he had authorized security forces to shoot to kill those participating in unrest. On Saturday, there were no immediate reports of trouble in Almaty. Police dispersed a demonstration and detained people in the city of Aktau, while sporadic gunfire was heard in Kyzylorda, Russian news agency Sputnik said.

No details were given about what Masimov, the former security agency head, was alleged to have done that would constitute an attempted government overthrow. The National Security Committee, a successor to the Soviet-era KGB, is responsible for counterintelligence, the border guards service and anti-terror activities.

German convicted in murder over 'cannibalism fantasies'

Associated Press

BERLIN — A Berlin teacher was convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison on Friday for the killing of another man that the court said was carried out as part of "cannibalism fantasies."

The 42-year-old, who has been identified only as Stefan R. in keeping with German privacy rules, also was convicted of disturbing the peace of the dead after a trial that opened in August.

The Berlin state court found that the defendant killed a 43-year-old mechanic in Septem-

ber 2020 "to live out his cannibalism fantasies," news agency dpa reported.

"What you did was inhuman," Presiding Judge Matthias Schertz said.

The men met on a dating portal and agreed to meet for sex at the teacher's apartment in the German capital, according to investigators.

The court found that the defendant killed his acquaintance there, cut up his body and then spread parts of it in different neighborhoods of the city. It said that the victim had not expected

"an attack on his life."

The defendant had increasingly "developed slaughter and cannibalism ideas" and had been in online cannibalism forums, Schertz said. Investigators later found a bone saw and special knives at his apartment.

Prosecutors said that he cut off the victim's genitals with the intention of eating them, and judges agreed, dpa reported. It couldn't be established whether he actually carried out that intention.

Police spent weeks looking for the missing mechanic before

walkers found bones in a Berlin forest.

The court found that the defendant bears "particularly grave" responsibility, meaning that he won't be entitled to the automatic parole after 15 years that is customary in Germany.

He disputed the charges, saying that he had found his acquaintance dead on a couch after he spent the night and hadn't called police or an ambulance "because it would have come out that I am homosexual." The defense had sought his acquittal.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Lawmaker apologizes for referee interaction

TN NASHVILLE — A top Tennessee House Republican lawmaker has apologized for losing his temper and being ejected from watching a high school basketball game after a confrontation with a referee. The dustup included what appeared to be either a feigned or failed attempt at pulling down the official's pants, according to video footage.

On Tuesday, Rep. Jeremy Faison, 45, posted on Twitter that he "acted the fool tonight and lost my temper on a ref."

Providence Academy, a private religious school in Johnson City, livestreamed the boys game against Lakeway Christian Academy, a private school in White Pine. Faison's son is on the Lakeway team.

Since 2019, Faison has been the House caucus chairman for Republicans. The GOP caucus chairman is among the most influential position in the House.

Burger King worker fired gun at suspect

MILWAUKEE — Authorities in Milwaukee say a Burger King employee fired a gun during an attempted armed robbery, but that it's not yet clear who fired the shots that killed a cashier.

Police are still investigating whether the robbery suspect also fired a weapon and did not say the co-worker's gunshots killed Niesha Harris-Brazell, 16. However, prosecutors have charged the co-worker with possessing a gun as a felon.

According to a criminal complaint, the male employee, 34,

could be seen on surveillance video firing his weapon at the robbery suspect who had leaned into the drive-thru window holding a gun. Police say the robbery suspect has not been located.

The complaint said the co-worker could be seen crawling on the floor of the restaurant, collecting spent casings. A restaurant manager told police the employee asked her to hide the gun in a safe because he was a felon and could not possess a firearm. Police recovered a pistol that was in the safe.

Man points gun in shop, then tries to sell it

SD SIOUX FALLS — Police in Sioux Falls have arrested a man after he allegedly pointed a gun at a pawn shop employee and then tried to sell the weapon.

The Argus Leader reported two men walked into the pawn shop. Police spokesman Sam Clemens said one of them, a 31-year-old from Ocheyedan, Iowa, pulled out a revolver that was still in its holster. The trigger was exposed, however, and the man pointed it at the worker and asked for money.

He then put the weapon down and tried to sell it. They couldn't reach a deal and the man left with the gun. The employee called police. The two men returned while officers were in the shop and the man who pulled out the gun was arrested.

Sale of historic wharf to institute finalized

ME PORTLAND — The parties behind the sale and preservation of a his-

toric wharf in Maine said the sale has been finalized.

Gulf of Maine Research Institute in Portland said in November that it would buy Union Wharf, which dates to the 18th century. The institute and the owners of the wharf said they've now finalized the sale and transfer of ownership.

The parties did not disclose the terms of the sale. The owners and managers of the wharf said in November they chose the research institute because they plan to preserve it as part of Portland's working waterfront.

New Year's Eve bank robbery investigated

CA GUERNEVILLE — Authorities were searching for a man who robbed a Northern California bank on New Year's Eve.

The suspect passed a note to a teller at the Westamerica branch in Guerneville and walked out with an unknown sum of money, according to the Sonoma County Sheriff's Office.

Lt. Greg Piccinini said he didn't think there were any customers inside the bank at the time.

Details of the crime, such as whether a weapon was used, were not revealed because the case is under investigation, Piccinini said.

Police: Girl, 12, hurt in chicken house collapse

DE ELLENDALE — A girl, 12, was injured in a chicken house collapse likely caused by snow on the roof, Delaware State Police said.

It happened as two adults and

four children were working in chicken houses in Ellendale, where about 14.5 inches of snow had fallen, according to the Delaware Environmental Observing System.

A teen, 17, noticed the food and water lines sagging, and began warning everyone to get out when the roof collapsed, police said in a news release. Everyone inside got out without injury except two girls, aged 11 and 12, police said.

The teen and one of the adults dug through the debris and found the 12-year-old girl pinned under the collapsed roof and removed her safely. She was taken to a hospital in stable condition, police said.

US agency investigates killings of wild horses

AZ HEBER — U.S. Forest Service officials have appealed to the public for help in identifying those responsible for the recent shooting deaths of three more federally protected wild horses in eastern Arizona.

A \$10,000 reward has been offered for the arrest and conviction of those responsible, the Black Mesa Ranger District of the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests, officials said in a statement.

The three horse killings raise the total of such deaths in the Heber area since October 2018 to over 30, azfamily.com reported. No arrests have been made.

The Forest Service statement said the agency "takes this matter seriously" and asked anybody with information to contact the Navajo County Sheriff's Office.

— From Associated Press



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

Reporting World, National and Military News

RB Harris carrying the load for Steelers

Associated Press

All those games ago, it was a young Ben Roethlisberger who helped a popular Pittsburgh Steelers star go out on top.

Come Sunday, a Steelers newcomer hopes to give Roethlisberger another chance in the playoffs.

A first-round draft pick in 2004, Roethlisberger was in charge the following season when veteran running back Jerome Bettis capped his career as a Super Bowl champion with a win over Seattle.

Last Monday night, first-round pick Najee Harris played a key role as the Steelers beat Cleveland during what was likely the 39-year-old Roethlisberger's final game at Heinz Field.

Harris will potentially have a chance to boost Roethlisberger into the playoffs for the 12th time in his 18 seasons on Sunday in the regular-season finale at Baltimore.

"It's an honor," the rookie running back said. "Just from somebody like that and the reputation he has. Just him as a player ... he's going to be a future Hall of Famer."

To make the playoffs, the Steelers (8-7-1) need to win at Baltimore (8-8) and also hope

Jacksonville beats Indianapolis.

Harris, the No. 24 overall pick in the 2021 draft from Alabama, was selected as Pittsburgh's top rookie earlier in the week. He has started all 16 games and has run for 1,172 yards and scored 10 total touchdowns.

Harris leads NFL running backs in touches with 366 and he has yet to fumble.

"It's amazing because it's so hard on rookies," Roethlisberger said. "He hasn't slowed down, he has gotten better. It just speaks volumes about the preparation, the work he puts in and the football player he is. He's going to be a lot of fun to watch here for a long time."

Harris has been strong down the stretch for Pittsburgh with at least 90 yards rushing in three of the last four games. He ran for a career-high 188 yards on 28 carries, including a 37-yard touchdown run that sealed the Steelers' win last Monday against Cleveland.

His 188 yards rushing were the most for a rookie this season and most by a Steelers rookie in franchise history. A 30-yard run in the third quarter against Cleveland — the longest of his career — moved Harris past

Hall of Famer Franco Harris for the franchise record for rookie rushing yards in a season, initially established in 1972.

When Najee Harris arrived in Pittsburgh, Roethlisberger gave the rookie running back a quick history lesson of the lineage at his position.

"When he got here, I told him that this town loves its defense and its running backs," Roethlisberger said. "He's got a chance to really embrace this town and for this town to embrace him."

Harris is well aware that the Steelers will need an offensive identity after Roethlisberger's likely retirement after this season — just like Roethlisberger took over after Bettis left. It's a young group, but Harris is prepared to be the centerpiece moving forward if need be.

"The future of this organization, I'm really excited to see where we're headed because we have so many young pieces," Harris said. "We can do something great. I'm willing to be that person, but I need some guys with me. If somebody has to step in there, it can be me."

'Relentless' Alabama, UGA build all-star teams

Associated Press

After Georgia beat Florida in November, Bulldogs coach Kirby Smart was asked about the importance of recruiting. His response was both obvious and emphatic:

"The best coach to ever play the game better be a good recruiter because no coaching is going to outcoach players," he said.

Georgia will play Alabama in an all-Southeastern Conference national championship game on Monday night in Indianapolis. How they got here is pretty simple.

Smart and his mentor, Crimson Tide coach Nick Saban, have assembled the most star-studded teams — recruiting stars, that is — in recent college football history. The Bulldogs and Tide have been so far out in front of most of the competition on the recruiting trail that they were practically too talented to fail this season.

Both schools benefit from being located in the heart of the most fertile recruiting territory in the country and pour huge amounts of manpower and resources into evaluating and procuring talent.

"It's a relentless approach to recruiting, not just a relentless approach to football coaching. And that's what Coach Saban has done here and it's been proven and it's been awesome," said Bill O'Brien, the Alabama offensive coordinator and former Penn State coach.

Georgia and Alabama then consistently send those highly touted recruits on to the NFL, which is the best recruiting tool of all.

"Just coming from high school to here I wanted to surround myself by people who had the same mindset as me, same competitive nature as me, same standard and expectation as me no matter the outcome of whether I was playing or not,"

All-America linebacker Will Anderson Jr. said.

Rosters can turn over quickly for the Tide and Bulldogs as blue-chip high schoolers turn into college players who declare for the NFL draft after three years in school. That creates opportunities for freshmen to play right away.

Anderson, a former five-star from Hampton, Ga., made an immediate impact in Tuscaloosa. He had seven sacks among 10½ tackles for loss, playing all 13 games as a freshman on last season's national title team.

This season, Anderson has been the nation's most dominant defensive player with 97 tackles, 33½ for loss and 17½ sacks.

"I think that's one of the biggest challenges that I took by coming here, being able to compete, go against the best every day," Anderson said. "And it's helped me so far."

Early playing time is far from

guaranteed with these loaded teams. That doesn't deter the top talent.

Georgia linebacker Nolan Smith was considered the No. 1 overall recruit in the 2019 class by some analysts. His development has come slower and he has had to share games reps with a stacked group of linebackers and edge rushers at Georgia.

Smith, a Georgia native, said he never considered transferring for more playing time. He said having former Georgia outside linebacker Azeez Ojulari, who was a second-round pick by the New York Giants last year, and other older players as mentors was invaluable.

"They showed me how to work and they showed me you just trust the process," Smith said.

Alabama sets the standard for producing NFL players, with 51 draft picks in the last five years.

Djokovic had virus last month

Associated Press

Novak Djokovic's lawyers filed court papers Saturday in his challenge against deportation from Australia that show the tennis star tested positive for COVID-19 last month and recovered, grounds he used in applying for a medical exemption to the country's strict vaccination rules.

The No. 1-ranked Djokovic was denied entry at the Melbourne airport late Wednesday after border officials canceled his visa for failing to meet its entry requirement that all non-citizens be fully vaccinated for COVID-19.

Djokovic was given a medical exemption backed by the Victoria state government and Australian Open organizers on Jan. 1, based on information he supplied to two independent medical panels, and he was approved for a visa electronically.

But it has since emerged that the Victoria state medical exemption, allowed for people who tested positive for the coronavirus within the last six months, was deemed invalid by the federal border authorities.

Djokovic has been confined to an immigration detention hotel in Melbourne, where he's been preparing for the legal challenge against his visa cancellation in the Federal Circuit Court on Monday.

The Australian Open starts Jan. 17. Djokovic is the defending champion and has won the Aussie men's singles title nine times. He has 20 Grand Slam singles titles, a men's record he shares with Roger Federer and Rafael Nadal.

The court submission Saturday said Djokovic received confirmation from Australia's Department of Home Affairs saying he met the requirements for quarantine-free arrival in Australia.

Bell tops Chen to win first figure skating championship

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Mariah Bell had been to the U.S. Figure Skating Championships nine times without standing atop the podium.

She'd finished second once. Third a couple times. A disappointing fifth four years ago, when the ever-smiling Bell arrived at nationals as one of the leading contenders for the three-woman team headed to that year's Winter Olympics.

All those bitter disappointments made Friday night all the sweeter.

Putting together a mesmerizing free skate to k.d. lang's rendition of the Leonard Cohen staple "Hallelujah," the 25-year-old Bell became the oldest skater in 95 years to win the national championship. And by edging the superlative Karen Chen for the gold medal, Bell likely locked up that long-awaited spot on the Olympic team headed to Beijing.

"There's definitely been

some times when, I don't know, times are tough and you just want to call it quits," Bell said. "It's really exciting to be a little bit older and showing you can do it at a young age and also an older age. I'm 25. It's not like I'm ancient. But in skating I kind of am. And I want that to be a known fact that skating doesn't end at a certain age."

Bell narrowly led after a spectacular short program, but it took an equally incredible performance Friday night to hold off Chen's pursuit of a second title. Bell earned 140.70 points in her free skate and 216.25 points total, putting her nearly three points ahead of Chen and six ahead of 14-year-old bronze medalist Isabeau Levito.

Levito nearly stole the show in her senior nationals debut, piecing together an effortless series of triple jumps set to music from "Swan Lake." But there was no stealing an Olympic spot — she's too young to compete in Beijing.

While Bell and Chen are locks when U.S. Figure Skating's selection committee announces the three-woman team on Saturday, the other spot is likely to go to Alysa Liu. The two-time national champion was third after her short program but had to withdraw earlier Friday following a positive test for COVID-19.

"Obviously that's unfortunate," Bell said, "but this variant is really serious and people are catching it left and right, so it's unfortunate she couldn't do the long program. But she's had a great season to back her up."

Still, the news of Liu's positive test — and one for Amber Glenn later in the day — left the rest of the skaters shaken.

"Definitely the news was very, very shocking, and super unfortunate to hear," Chen said.

The 16-year-old Liu is at least the fifth competitor to test positive for the virus in the run-up and during nationals, and the third that was expected to make the team for the Beijing Games.

Pauses have teams playing way to 'game shape'

Associated Press

DURHAM, N.C. — When second-ranked Duke returned from a COVID-19 outbreak, it didn't take long for coach Mike Krzyzewski to see just how much work was ahead for the Blue Devils to get back into form.

"One of the kids, he was back for the first day" of practice, Krzyzewski said. "After 2 minutes, he threw up, and then he came back to practice and did well."

It's a scene more common for the start of preseason training, not the middle of a schedule.

Yet it's one of the challenges facing men's and women's bas-

ketball coaches across the country amid the growing number of postponements, cancellations and pauses.

After an abrupt halt to the schedule due to COVID-19 protocols, players face the arduous task of gradually getting back into game shape while avoiding injuries that come from pushing too hard to make up for lost time. Men's teams like the Blue Devils, fifth-ranked UCLA and Florida, along with the 11th-ranked UConn women are among those searching for that balance in returns this week.

"It's definitely going to be a slow grind," Duke wing Wendell Moore Jr. said. "I mean, be-

cause the place we were in before, it took months of preparation."

As of Friday afternoon, more than 720 men's and women's games have been postponed or canceled through Monday because of COVID-19, the majority coming in the past three weeks. That has again thrown schedules into chaos and stalled gains from months of conditioning. And that only increases risks injuries as players try to rush back.

Marcia I. Faustin, a UC Davis Health system doctor of family and sports medicine, said athletes must build gradually toward long-term goals.

Hurricanes keep rolling after layoff

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — Andrei Svechnikov scored two goals and the Carolina Hurricanes returned to action after nearly a week layoff by beating the Calgary Flames 6-3 on Friday night.

Brady Skjei had a goal and two assists, while Derek Stepan, Jesper Fast and Tony DeAngelo also scored and Steven Lorentz had two assists for Carolina, which won for the ninth time in 10 games. The Hurricanes moved past Washington and the New York Rangers into first place in the Metropolitan Division.

Frederik Andersen stopped 36 shots while playing a full game for the first time in nearly three weeks.

Blake Coleman and Matthew Tkachuk had a goal and an assist, and Johnny Gaudreau also scored for the Flames, who lost three straight for their longest stretch without a point this season.

Dan Vladar stopped 31 shots while appearing in back-to-back-games for only the second time this season after suffering the loss in Thursday night's 4-1 defeat at Tampa Bay.

Blues 5, Capitals 1: Pavel Buchnevich had two goals and an assist, Ville Husso stopped 26 shots to help host St. Louis beat Washington.

Torey Krug, Oskar Sundqvist and Ivan Barbashev also scored to help the Blues improve to 8-2-2 in their last 12 games, and 10-0-1 in their last 11 at home. Ryan O'Reilly and Robert Thomas each added two assists.

Daniel Sprong scored for Washington, which lost in regulation for the third time in its last 12 games (6-3-3). Ilya Samsonov gave up four goals on 16 shots through two periods.

LaVine, Bulls win 9th in row

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Coach Billy Donovan chose to focus more on where the Chicago Bulls need to improve than a win streak that's their longest in more than a decade.

"We have to get better," he said. "We just have to get better."

The Bulls didn't look bad in beating the Washington Wizards 130-122 Friday night for their ninth straight win.

Zach LaVine scored 27 points. Coby White added 21 and the Bulls matched their longest winning streak since the 2010-11 team won nine in a row to finish the regular season. They also had an easier time in this one after winning last week at Washington on DeMar DeRozan's buzzer-beating three-pointer, grabbing the lead late in the third quarter and remaining in control down the stretch.

Donovan sure will take it.

He praised the effort and resilience his team is showing this season. The Bulls have been hit hard by COVID-19, with players and Donovan getting sidelined. They lead the Eastern Conference and are setting themselves up to make the playoffs for the first time since 2017.

But ...

"We've got to be better defensively," Donovan said. "I thought we did some really good things offensively tonight with our unselfishness and the way we moved and shared the basketball. I think if you spoke to those guys, they would say that we've got to keep getting better defensively. We have the capability."

Lonzo Ball scored 18 points, hitting six of Chicago's 15 three-pointers. Rookie Ayo Dosunmu also had 18 points, and coach Billy Donovan earned his 300th NBA win.

Bradley Beal led Washington with 26 points, and Kyle Kuzma had 21 points and 11 rebounds. The Wizards lost for the third

time in four games.

Bucks 121, Nets 109: Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 31 points in his return from a one-game absence, Khris Middleton added 15 of his 20 in the third quarter and visiting Milwaukee blew out Brooklyn.

Bobby Portis scored 20 of his 25 in the first half to help the Bucks snap a two-game skid.

Antetokounmpo had nine assists and seven rebounds, and Portis grabbed 12 boards.

Lakers 134, Hawks 118: LeBron James scored 23 of his 32 points in the second half, Malik Monk added a season-high 29 points and host Los Angeles held off Atlanta for its first four-game winning streak of the season.

Avery Bradley and Talen Horton-Tucker scored 21 points apiece for the Lakers, who have won five of six overall while remaining perfect on a five-game homestand that ends Sunday. With Anthony Davis the only major contributor still absent from their injury-plagued roster, the Lakers had a season-high 37 assists.

76ers 119, Spurs 100: Joel Embiid had 31 points and 12 rebounds and host Philadelphia beat short-handed San Antonio for its sixth straight victory.

Seth Curry and Tobias Harris each scored 23 points for the 76ers.

Dejounte Murray scored 27 points for San Antonio. The Spurs were without six players because of health and safety protocols. They have lost five of six.

Mavericks 130, Rockets 106: Tim Hardaway Jr. had 19 points and seven assists and visiting Dallas overcame the absence of Luka Doncic, Kristaps Porzingis and coach Jason Kidd to beat Houston.

Doncic has a sprained right ankle, Porzingis missed his fourth straight game in the NBA's health and safety protocols, and Kidd who entered the

health and safety protocols Friday. Assistant coach Sean Sweeney stepped in his place. The Mavericks have won five a row.

Raptors 122, Jazz 108: Fred VanVleet had 37 points, 10 rebounds and 10 assists for his first career triple-double, OG Anunoby scored 22 points and host Toronto ended Utah's road winning streak at 10.

Pascal Siakam scored 17 points, Chris Boucher had 13, Scottie Barnes had 11 and Gary Trent Jr. added 10 to help the Raptors extend their winning streak to five.

Nuggets 121, Kings 111: Nikola Jokic had 33 points and 10 rebounds and host Denver beat Sacramento to end a two-game losing streak.

Jokic reached 20 points for the seventh straight game as Denver got reinforcements back from health and safety protocols.

Forwards Jeff Green and Zeke Nnaji were activated off the COVID-19 list while Aaron Gordon and Bones Hyland played after being sent home from Thursday's film session due to non-COVID-19 illnesses. Green had 18 points, Hyland 13 and Gordon 10. Denver coach Michael Malone remained in health and safety protocols.

Timberwolves 135, Thunder 105: D'Angelo Russell had 27 points and 12 assists and visiting Minnesota routed Oklahoma City for its third straight victory.

Russell made 11 of 12 field goals and 4 of 5 three-pointers to help the Timberwolves beat the Thunder for the second time in three nights. Minnesota won 98-90 on Wednesday night in Minneapolis.

Cavaliers 114, Trail Blazers 101: Darius Garland had 26 points and Rajon Rondo added 11 in his Cavaliers debut, leading visiting Cleveland past Portland.

Cleveland improved to 22-17, matching its victory total from last season.