

Health officials in US let infected staff work

Associated Press

Health authorities around the United States are increasingly taking the extraordinary step of allowing nurses and other workers infected with the coronavirus to stay on the job if they have mild symptoms or none at all.

The move is a reaction to the severe hospital staffing shortages and crushing caseloads that the omicron variant is causing.

California health authorities announced over the weekend that hospital staff members who test positive but are symptom-free can continue working. Some hospitals in Rhode Island and Arizona have likewise told employees they can stay on the job if they have no symptoms or just mild ones.

The highly contagious omicron variant has sent new cases of COVID-19 exploding to over 700,000 a day in the U.S. on average, obliterating the record set a year ago. The number of Ameri-

cans in the hospital with the virus is running at about 110,000, just short of the peak of 124,000 last January.

Many hospitals are not only swamped with cases but severely shorthanded because of so many employees out with COVID-19.

At the same time, omicron appears to be causing milder illness than the delta variant.

Last month, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said that health care workers who have no symptoms can return to work after seven days with a negative test, but that the isolation time can be cut further if there are staffing shortages.

In the Phoenix area, Dignity Health, a major hospital operator, sent a memo to staff members saying those infected with the virus who feel well enough to work may request clearance from their managers to go back to caring for patients. Dignity Health hospitals in California

have not yet implemented the new guidelines, but said it may need to do so in the coming days and weeks.

"We are doing everything we can to ensure our employees can safely return to work while protecting our patients and staff from the transmissibility of COVID-19," Dignity Health said in a statement.

In California, the Department of Public Health said the new policy was prompted by "critical staffing shortages." It asked hospitals to make every attempt to fill openings by bringing in employees from outside staffing agencies.

Infected workers will also be required to wear extra-protective N95 masks and should be assigned to treat other COVID-19-positive patients, the department said.

"We did not ask for this guidance, and we don't have any information on whether hospitals

will adopt this approach or not," said Jan Emerson-Shea, a spokesperson for the California Hospital Association. "But what we do know is that hospitals are expecting many more patients in the coming days than they're going to be able to care for with the current resources."

Emerson-Shea said many hospital workers have been exposed to the virus, and are either sick or caring for family members who are.

The 100,000-member California Nurses Association came out against the decision and warned it will lead to more infections.

Gov. Gavin Newsom and other state health leaders "are putting the needs of health care corporations before the safety of patients and workers," Cathy Kennedy, the association's president, said in a statement. "We want to care for our patients and see them get better — not potentially infect them."

Navy will comply with order to fix Hawaii fuel facility

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The Navy will comply with a Hawaii emergency order to empty fuel tanks and make repairs at a storage facility that contaminated drinking water with jet fuel at Pearl Harbor, an official said Monday, appearing to abandon its legal fight with the state before Navy leaders are grilled about the public health crisis in a hearing on Capitol Hill.

A November leak of 14,000 gallons of jet fuel at the long-troubled Red Hill underground fuel-storage facility at Pearl Harbor flowed into a Navy-operated well, sickening scores of people and driving 3,500 military families from their homes between Thanksgiving and Christmas.

The Hawaii Department of Health issued an emergency order on Dec. 6 after tests showed fuel had contaminated a well at

Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam. The order required the Navy to develop a plan that would empty the tanks, identify needed repairs and address deficiencies within the operation, along with the installation of water filtration at the contaminated well.

The Navy suspended operations at the facility and began treating water, but went to court to contest the order. Its resistance ended Friday, however, following a decision from the state deputy attorney general to uphold the emergency order that was later affirmed by Hawaii health officials last week.

"U.S. Pacific Fleet is complying with the Department of Health's Emergency Order for Red Hill," said Capt. Bill Clinton, a spokesperson for the command, in a decision that has not been publicly announced. The pause in operations at Red Hill has been in

effect since Dec. 7, Clinton said, and there have not been any impact on operations at this time.

It is unclear if the Navy will appeal the decision, according to a defense official who spoke on the condition of anonymity due to the sensitivity of the issue. The Navy is in talks with the Justice Department on options and long-term solutions for the facility with national security implications in mind, the official said.

Environmental attorneys told Hawaii Public Radio that an appeal is possible, but it would be a challenging fight for the Navy. Military officials have contended that the Red Hill facility is the linchpin fuel operation in the Pacific, capable of storing up to 250 million gallons of fuel as the Pentagon focuses on China as its most pressing adversary.

US announces \$308M in aid for Afghans

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The White House has announced \$308 million in additional humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan, offering new aid to the country as it edges toward a humanitarian crisis since the Taliban takeover nearly five months ago.

White House spokesperson Emily Horne said in a statement Tuesday that the new aid from the U.S. Agency for International Development will flow through independent humanitarian organizations and will be used to provide shelter, health care, winterization assistance, emergency food aid, water, sanitation and hygiene services.

The country's long-troubled economy has been in a tailspin since the Taliban

takeover. Nearly 80% of Afghanistan's previous government's budget came from the international community. That money, now cut off, financed hospitals, schools, factories and government ministries.

Desperation for such basic necessities has been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic as well as health care shortages, drought and malnutrition.

The USAID called on the Taliban to allow "all aid workers, especially women ... to operate independently and securely" as humanitarian groups look to assist those suffering.

"The United States continues to urge the Taliban to allow unhindered humanitarian access, safe conditions for humanitarians,

independent provision of assistance to all vulnerable people, and freedom of movement for aid workers of all genders," the agency said in a statement.

The new aid brings U.S. humanitarian assistance for Afghanistan to more than \$780 million since the chaotic ending of the 20-year war in August. The United Nations says 22% of Afghanistan's 38 million people are living near famine and another 36% are facing acute food insecurity.

In addition, the White House pledged that it would send Afghanistan 1 million additional COVID-19 vaccine doses through COVAX, an initiative by the World Health Organization to improve access to vaccines.

Kremlin: No significant optimism on Russia-US talks

Associated Press

MOSCOW — The Kremlin said Tuesday it saw "no significant reason for optimism" after the highly anticipated Russia-U.S. talks over Ukraine and other security issues.

The talks aimed at defusing tensions over Ukraine took place in Geneva on Monday and offered no sign of immediate progress. Moscow went in insisting on guarantees to halt NATO's eastward expansion and even roll back the military alliance's deployments in Eastern Europe — demands that Washington had earlier firmly rejected as a nonstarter.

Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said

Tuesday the manner in which the talks were held — "open, comprehensive and direct" — "deserves a positive assessment," but it's the result that matters. "So far, let's say, we see no significant reason for optimism," Peskov told a conference call with reporters.

"There are still several rounds (of talks) ahead of us, which will allow us to work out a clearer understanding, a clearer picture of where we stand with the Americans. For now, it's impossible to draw any conclusions, unfortunately," the spokesman added.

Last month, Moscow submitted draft security documents demanding that NATO

deny membership to Ukraine and other former Soviet countries and roll back the alliance's military deployments in Central and Eastern Europe. Washington and its allies have refused to provide such pledges, but said they are ready for the talks.

The demands, contained in a proposed Russia-U.S. security treaty and a security agreement between Moscow and NATO, were drafted amid soaring tensions over a Russian troop buildup near Ukraine that has stoked fears of a possible invasion. Russia has denied it has plans to attack its neighbor but pressed for legal guarantees that would rule out NATO expansion and weapons deployment there.

North Korea fires a 'more advanced' ballistic missile

BY DAVID CHOI

Stars and Stripes

North Korea launched what appeared to be a ballistic missile off its eastern coast, South Korean military officials announced Tuesday morning.

The projectile reached speeds of Mach 10, or 10 times the speed of sound, and was "more advanced" than a so-called "hypersonic" missile the North launched Jan. 5, the South Korean Defense Ministry said in a news release Tuesday.

Tuesday's launch occurred at 7:27 a.m. inside North Korea, according to a text mess-

age to reporters from the South's Joint Chiefs of Staff.

"Our troops are maintaining their readiness posture and monitoring relevant moves thoroughly under close cooperation between [South Korea] and the U.S. in preparation for an additional launch," the message said.

The missile reached a peak altitude of 37 miles and flew over 435 miles, according to the Defense Ministry.

Japan's Ministry of Defense in a press release also estimated the missile traveled about 435 miles and landed outside of the country's exclusive economic zone.

South Korea's National Security Council held an emergency meeting and "expressed strong regret" immediately after the launch, which came at a time "when a stable state of affairs is very necessary," the presidential Blue House said in a statement Tuesday morning.

Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida following the launch told reporters it was "extremely regrettable."

The launch follows what Pyongyang claimed to be the firing of a "hypersonic" ballistic missile on Jan. 5, its first such test this year.

Safety doors failed in NYC high-rise fire

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Investigators sought answers Monday for why safety doors failed to close when fire broke out in a New York high-rise, allowing thick smoke to rise through the tower and kill 17 people, including eight children, in the city's deadliest blaze in more than three decades.

A malfunctioning electric space heater apparently started the fire Sunday in the 19-story building in the Bronx, fire officials said. The flames damaged only a small part of the building, but smoke poured through the apartment's open door and turned stairwells into dark, ash-choked death traps. The stairs

were the only method of escape in a tower too tall for fire escapes.

Fire Commissioner Daniel Nigro said the apartment's front door and a door on the 15th floor should have been self-closing and blunted the spread of smoke, but the doors stayed fully open. It was not clear if the doors failed mechanically or if they had been manually disabled.

The heavy smoke blocked some residents from escaping and incapacitated others as they tried to flee, fire officials said.

Glenn Corbett, a fire science professor at John Jay College in New York, said closed doors are

vital to containing fire and smoke, especially in buildings that do not have automatic sprinkler systems.

"It's pretty remarkable that the failure of one door could lead to how many deaths we had here, but that's the reality of it," Corbett said. "That one door played a critical role in allowing the fire to spread and the smoke and heat to spread vertically through the building."

Dozens of people were hospitalized, including several in critical condition.

The dead included children as young as 4 years old, City Council Member Oswald Feliz said.

A fire department official said

the space heater had been running for a "prolonged period" before the fire began. What caused it to malfunction remains under investigation, spokesman Frank Dwyer said.

Bronx Park Phase III Preservation LLC, the group that owns the building, said it was cooperating fully with the fire department and the city and working to assist residents. A spokeswoman for the ownership group, Kelly Magee, said maintenance staff in July fixed the lock on the front door of the apartment in which the fire started and, while doing that repair, checked that the apartment's self-closing door was working.

Biden will back filibuster changes for voting reform

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Joe Biden will use a speech in Georgia to endorse changing Senate filibuster rules that have stalled voting rights legislation, saying it's time to choose "democracy over autocracy." But some civil rights groups won't be there, in protest of what they say is administration inaction.

Biden on Tuesday will pay tribute to civil rights battles past — visiting Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church, where the late Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. once held forth from the pulpit, and placing a wreath at the crypt of King and his wife, Coretta Scott King — before turning to today's challenge.

With Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., setting up Martin Luther King Jr. Day as the deadline to either pass voting legislation or consider revising the rules, Biden is expected to evoke the memories of the U.S. Capitol riot a year ago in more forcefully aligning himself with the effort.

Biden plans to tell his audi-

ence, "The next few days, when these bills come to a vote, will mark a turning point in this nation."

"Will we choose democracy over autocracy, light over shadow, justice over injustice? I know where I stand. I will not yield. I will not flinch," he'll say, according to prepared remarks. "I will defend your right to vote and our democracy against all enemies foreign and domestic. And so the question is where will the institution of United States Senate stand?"

A White House official, previewing the speech on the condition of anonymity, said Biden would voice support for changing the Senate filibuster rules only to ensure the right to vote is defended — a strategy Democrats have been looking to the president to embrace. Filibuster rules require 60 votes to advance most legislation — a threshold Senate Democrats can't meet on their own with their thin, 50-50 Senate majority. Republicans unanimously oppose the voting rights measures.

Rittenhouse's gun supplier pleads no contest in deal

Associated Press

MADISON, Wis. — The man who bought an AR-15-style rifle for Kyle Rittenhouse pleaded no contest Monday to a reduced charge of contributing to the delinquency of a minor in a deal with prosecutors that allows him to avoid prison.

Kenosha County Circuit Judge Bruce Schroeder accepted Dominick Black's plea during a six-minute hearing. Assistant District Attorney Thomas Binger dropped two felony counts of intent to deliver a dangerous weapon to a minor as part of the deal.

Contributing to the delinquency of a minor is a misdemeanor punishable by up to nine months in jail, but Binger reduced the charge to a non-criminal county ordinance violation. Under the deal, Black will pay a \$2,000 fine. Each felony count would have been punishable by up to six years in prison and a \$10,000 fine.

Rittenhouse used the rifle to shoot three people, killing two, during a night of protests in Kenosha in 2020 over the shooting of a Black man, Jacob Blake, by a white police officer. A jury acquit-

ted Rittenhouse of homicide and other charges in November.

Binger told Schroeder that he didn't believe he could move forward with the felony counts against Black, who testified against Rittenhouse. Binger noted, among other things, that during Rittenhouse's trial, Schroeder sided with defense attorneys who argued that Wisconsin law prohibits minors from possessing short-barreled rifles and short-barreled shotguns but allows them to possess long guns.

"In these circumstances, to go forward with these felony charges against Mr. Black, given the court's legal ruling as well as Mr. Black's cooperation and the jury's decision in the Rittenhouse case, does not seem appropriate," Binger said.

Black was 18 and dating Rittenhouse's sister when he purchased an AR-15-style rifle for Rittenhouse in May 2020. Rittenhouse, of Antioch, Ill., was 17. Black testified during Rittenhouse's trial that he bought the rifle so he and Rittenhouse could target shoot and hunt on a friend's property in northern Wisconsin.

Surgeons transplant pig heart into human

Associated Press

In a medical first, doctors transplanted a pig heart into a patient in a last-ditch effort to save his life and a Maryland hospital said Monday that he's doing well three days after the highly experimental surgery.

While it's too soon to know if the operation really will work, it marks a step in the decades-long quest to one day use animal organs for life-saving transplants. Doctors at the University of Maryland Medical Center said the transplant showed that a heart from a genetically modified animal can function in the human body without immediate rejection.

The patient, David Bennett, a 57-year-old Maryland handyman, knew there was no guarantee the experiment would work, but he was dying, ineligible for a human heart

transplant and had no other option, his son told The Associated Press.

"It was either die or do this transplant. I want to live. I know it's a shot in the dark, but it's my last choice," Bennett said a day before the surgery, according to a statement provided by the University of Maryland School of Medicine.

On Monday, Bennett was breathing on his own while still connected to a heart-lung machine to help his new heart. The next few weeks will be critical as Bennett recovers from the surgery and doctors carefully monitor how his heart is faring.

There's a huge shortage of human organs donated for transplant, driving scientists to try to figure out how to use animal organs instead. Last year, there were just over 3,800 heart transplants in the United States, a re-

cord number, according to the United Network for Organ Sharing, which oversees the nation's transplant system.

"If this works, there will be an endless supply of these organs for patients who are suffering," said Dr. Muhammad Mohiuddin, scientific director of the Maryland university's animal-to-human transplant program.

But prior attempts at such transplants — or xenotransplantation — have failed, largely because patients' bodies rapidly rejected the animal organ. Notably, in 1984, Baby Fae, a dying infant, lived 21 days with a baboon heart.

The difference this time: The Maryland surgeons used a heart from a pig that had undergone gene-editing to remove a sugar in its cells that's responsible for that hyper-fast organ rejection.

Kazakhstan says foreign security is set to withdraw

Associated Press

MOSCOW — The president of Kazakhstan announced Tuesday that a Russia-led security alliance will start pulling out its troops from the country in two days after completing its mission.

The mostly Russian troops were deployed to Kazakhstan last week by the Collective Security Treaty Organization, a military alliance of six former Soviet states, at the president's request amid the worst public unrest the former Soviet nation has faced since gaining independence 30 years ago.

Protests over soaring fuel prices erupted in the oil and gas-rich Central Asian nation of 19 million on Jan. 2 and quickly spread

across the country, with political slogans reflecting wider discontent over the authoritarian government.

Over the next few days, the demonstrations turned extremely violent, with dozens of civilians and law enforcement officers killed.

In Almaty, Kazakhstan's former capital and largest city, protesters set government buildings on fire and briefly seized the airport.

By the weekend, the unrest had been largely quelled.

President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev has blamed the unrest on foreign-backed "terrorists" and insisted that his request for help to the CSTO was justified.

"When this decision was being made, we could have completely lost control over Almaty, which was being torn apart by terrorists. Had we lost Almaty, we would have lost the capital and the entire country," Tokayev told Kazakhstan's parliament Tuesday.

The president said that the CSTO has largely completed its mission in the country and will start withdrawing its troops in two days — a process that will take no longer than 10 days.

Asked whether such a move was premature — the troops only started arriving to Kazakhstan five days ago — Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said it was "utterly and completely" Kazakhstan's prerogative.

Pilot rescued from wreckage moments before train hits

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — The pilot of a small plane averted death twice in a span of minutes on Sunday, first when he crash-landed onto railroad tracks, then when Los Angeles police rescued him just before a commuter train smashed into the aircraft.

Bodycam video showed the officers working furiously to disentangle the bloodied pilot from the cockpit of the crumpled Cessna 172.

"Go! Go! Go! Go! Go!" someone yelled as the officers dragged the man away seconds before the Metrolink train, its horn blaring, barreled through the plane.

The single-engine plane had engine failure during takeoff from Whiteman Airport in the San Fernando Valley community of Pacoima and went down moments later, police Capt. Christopher Zine told reporters.

The plane ended up on a rail crossing in an intersection adjacent to the airport and just blocks from the Los Angeles Police Department's Foothill Division station. Officers arrived at the crash scene almost immediately.

"I had requested Metrolink to cease all train activity, but apparently that didn't happen," Sgt. Joseph Cavestany told CBSN Los Angeles.

Officer Christopher Aboyte told KABC-

TV that he initially stood by the plane trying to keep the pilot, who was seated, conscious and alert.

Then, bells and flashing lights signaled an oncoming train, Officer Robert Sherock told the station.

"We looked and sure enough there was a train headed right for us at full speed," he said.

Officer Damien Castro told KNBC-TV that training and experience kicked in, and adrenaline helped.

"When things like that happen you kind of just go and do it," Castro said. "You don't really have much time to think."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man found stuck in chimney after break-in

MD SILVER SPRING — At first, police did not find anyone when a possible break-in was reported at a single-family home in Silver Spring, Md.

But when residents said they still heard noises and voices, police returned, and this time, they found a man stuck in the chimney.

The man, who police said did not live in the home, was taken to a nearby hospital under police escort after firefighters spent about 90 minutes freeing him.

Montgomery County Fire and Rescue spokesman Pete Piringer told The Washington Post that authorities believe the man climbed down the chimney and got stuck.

Man catches fire after hit with police stun gun

NY CATSKILL — Graphic video made public showed a man who doused himself in hand sanitizer bursting into flames when a police officer used a stun gun on him at a New York police station.

Security footage released by the state attorney general's office showed Jason Jones, 29, rolling on the floor in the Catskill police station lobby and rubbing his head to stop the flames.

Prior to being hit with the stun gun, the shirtless Jones is seen in a tantrum, ripping his hoodie and undershirt off, throwing a shoe at a table and knocking over a jug of hand sanitizer as three officers look on.

A few minutes later, Jones picked up the jug of hand sanitizer and squirted the liquid on his back and head. An officer then took out a stun gun and shot Jones with it, and there is a flash of light on the video as Jones burst into flames.

Family reunited with missing cat 3 years later

IA GENESEO — An Iowa family has solved the mystery of what happened to their missing cat that likes to sit on horses.

The Quad City Times reported that Ann Kandis said the cat, named Noodles, jumped into the trunk of her father's car while he was at the family's farm in Geneseo. Her father drove off, but stopped along the road when he heard a noise. He then opened the trunk, and the cat jumped.

The family posted "lost cat" notices and searched along the road, but couldn't find Noodles.

She had given up on finding Noodles until she stumbled across a Facebook message that a fellow horse lover posted around the time Noodles went missing. The post showed a cat sitting on a horse and asked whether anybody recognized the cat.

Police arrest man for vandalizing city hall

NC ASHEVILLE — A Pennsylvania man has been arrested for writing graffiti and for breaking windows at a North Carolina city hall that is on the National Register of Historic Places, police said.

Reece Sebastian Jaksec, 22,

was arrested on several charges, including damage to real property and placing exhibit with intent to intimidate, according to a news release from the Asheville Police Department.

Police said Jaksec wrote graffiti with profanity on the side of a city building. Weeks later, he threw rocks that damaged windows at Asheville City Hall.

Authorities find mother of baby found in box

AK JUNEAU — Authorities have located the mother of a baby found abandoned in a cardboard box in frigid conditions in Fairbanks, Alaska State Troopers reported.

A unit within the troopers that handles major cases identified and located the mother, and she was taken to a Fairbanks-area hospital for evaluation and medical care, troopers said in a statement. The statement identified the mother as a juvenile.

The statement from the troopers said the investigation "into the circumstances surrounding the baby being abandoned is ongoing, and no criminal charges have been filed at this time."

Troopers reported that the child, known as Teshawn from a note left in the box, was in good health and in the care of the Office of Children's Services.

Woman charged after baby ingests heroin

WI LA CROSSE — Prosecutors have charged a La Crosse woman after her 10-month-old son ingested heroin.

The La Crosse Tribune reported Jessica Borger, 32, was

charged with child neglect causing great bodily harm and bail jumping for allegedly violating a no-contact order with the child.

According to a criminal complaint, first responders were called to a residence on a report of an infant choking. Borger allegedly told police she had the child in her arms when he spit up fluids and his lips and face turned blue.

The first responders gave the child Narcan, a drug that reverses opioid overdoses, and took him to a hospital. Borger said a guest used heroin and probably left some behind where the child could consume it.

State Museum set to open 'Gen X' exhibition

IL SPRINGFIELD — Tired of baby boomers' stories of the "good ol' days," of millennials' tiny attention spans or the fatuous complaints of zoomers?

You must be part of the "forgotten" Generation X, and the Illinois State Museum wants to hear from you.

The museum's Springfield facility will open an exhibition titled "Growing Up X" in October, dedicated to those born generally from 1965 to 1980, described by the museum as "the last generation to have had an analog childhood."

Illinois State Museum Curator of History Erika Holst is inviting Xers to complete an online survey about their experiences growing up and to loan the exhibition items from that era, from portable cassette players to inline skates.

— From wire reports



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Georgia drops Alabama, ends title drought

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Confetti rained on Georgia. The Bulldogs fans chanted “Kir-by, Kir-by!”

Four decades of pent-up emotion were unleashed Monday night as the Bulldogs snapped a frustrating national championship drought by vanquishing their nemesis.

Stetson Bennett delivered the biggest throws of his storybook career and Georgia’s defense sealed the sweetest victory in program history, beating Alabama 33-18 in the College Football Playoff for its first title in 41 years.

“I’ve never been around a group of players that really wanted it so bad and wouldn’t be denied,” Bulldogs coach Kirby Smart said. “I told the guys in the locker room, just take a picture of this.”

Smart, a Georgia defensive back in the mid-1990s, returned to his alma mater in 2016 after helping Nick Saban build a dynasty as an assistant at Alabama.

Georgia has become an elite program under Smart, but has not been able to chase down its Southeastern Conference rival. Until now.

“This was for all the glory, we took it,” defensive tackle Jordan Davis said.

They did it the way Alabama has broken their hearts so many times in recent years: coming from behind and finishing with a flourish.

Bennett connected with Adonai Mitchell on a 40-yard touchdown to give the Bulldogs a 19-18 lead with 8:09 left and then hooked up with Brock Bowers for a 15-yard TD on a screen to put them up eight with 3:33 left.

The final blow came from Georgia’s dom-

inant defense. Kelee Ringo intercepted an underthrown deep ball down the sideline by Heisman Trophy winner Bryce Young.

“I just saw the ball in his hands and that was all she wrote,” said safety Lewis Cine, the game’s defensive MVP.

With just over a minute left, Ringo took off behind a convoy of blockers and went 79 yards, Smart chasing and yelling at him to go down so he wouldn’t risk a fumble. The touchdown set off a wild celebration by the relieved Bulldog fans who packed Lucas Oil Stadium.

Georgia (14-1) hadn’t won a national title since freshman Herschel Walker led them there in 1980. If simply snapping the drought wasn’t good enough, doing it against No. 1 Alabama (13-2) made it even better.

“I cried, so pretty good,” Bennett said when asked how it felt.

Saban’s Tide had won seven straight against the Bulldogs.

Georgia lost two SEC championship games, including one five weeks ago, and the 2018 CFP title game to Alabama under Smart.

“I told them we burned the boats. The only way home was through them,” Smart said.

Bennett, the former walk-on turned starter, completed 17 of 26 passes for 224 yards and no interceptions.

For most of the first three quarters, the first CFP title game to be a rematch of a regular-season game was an old-fashioned SEC defensive struggle in the heart of Big Ten country.

The first touchdown came with 1:20 left in the third quarter. After James Cook broke a 67-yard run to get the Bulldogs into the red zone, three more running plays — and a face-

mask penalty by the Tide — got them into the end zone. Zamir White went in standing up from a yard out with massive defensive tackles Jalen Carter and Davis leading the way as blockers. Georgia led for the first time, 13-9.

After Alabama added another field goal, the Tide caught a break on strange turnover. As Bennett was being taken down deep in the Bulldogs’ territory, he tried to throw the ball away. The ball slipped loose, and bounced toward the sideline, seemingly harmlessly. Alabama’s Drew Sanders casually caught it as he was jogging out of bounds.

Surprisingly, the ruling on the field was a fumble, recovered by the Tide and replay upheld it, giving the Tide the ball in the red zone. A few plays later, Young eluded the rush and found Cameron Latu for a 3-yard touchdown that put Alabama up 18-13 with 10:14 left.

Bennett was 13-for-22 for 141 yards as the next drive started, and you could practically hear all skeptical Georgia fans wondering why Smart didn’t turn to his four-star backup QB, J.T. Daniels, for a spark.

As he has done so many times during a career that started on the scout team and took a detour through junior college in Mississippi, the small-town Georgia kid nicknamed “The Mailman” came through.

Bennett completed all three of his passes for 68 yards, including a long strike to Mitchell for a touchdown with 8:09 left that gave the Bulldogs a one-point lead after a failed two-point conversion.

Georgia’s defense clamped down on Young, forcing a three-and-out on the Tide’s next drive, and then Georgia went to work on sealing a long-awaited championship.

CFP talks slow, dim hopes of expansion until 2026

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — College Football Playoff expansion talks remain stalled and the possibility of implementing a new format by the 2024 season dimmed Monday after three days of meetings failed to produce an agreement.

“We have entrenched issues that are no closer to be resolved,” Big 12 Commissioner Bob Bowlsby said.

While Bowlsby said it looked increasingly unlikely that an expanded playoff would come be-

fore the end of the current CFP contract that expires in 2026, it was not ruled out altogether.

“We’re going into overtime,” Executive Director Bill Hancock said, hours before No. 1 Alabama and No. 3 Georgia played for the College Football Playoff national championship.

Everybody involved supports expansion, but they are hung up on the how and when.

Hancock said the management committee, comprised of 10 conference commissioners and Notre Dame’s athletic di-

rector, are still stuck on the same lingering issues: Whether conferences should have automatic qualification into an expanded field, and which ones; how bowls will be used as sites in a new system; and athlete health and welfare issues related to more games.

Mississippi State President Mark Keenum, who heads the Board of Managers that has final say over the College Football Playoff, said he remains optimistic an agreement can be reached in time to add playoff

spots by the 2024 season.

“I think we’ll get there,” Keenum said.

A proposal for a 12-team playoff has been on the table since June. That proposal calls for the six highest ranked conference champions, regardless of conference, to be in the playoff field along with the next six highest ranked teams.

Expansion before the end of the contract has been estimated to be worth an extra \$450 million dollars for the conferences to split.

Kadri's goal lifts Avs over Kraken

Associated Press

DENVER — Nazem Kadri scored the go-ahead goal late in the third period, and the surging Colorado Avalanche rallied to beat the Seattle Kraken 4-3 on Monday night.

Nicolas Aube-Kubel had two goals and Devon Toews also scored for Colorado, which beat former goalie Philipp Grubauer to win its franchise-best 12th straight at home and fifth in a row overall.

Grubauer, who had 31 saves, played the previous three seasons with the Avalanche. He received a warm reception from the crowd, who shouted "Gru" when he was first shown on the scoreboard. He was 30-9-1 in 40 games with Colorado last season but was a casualty of the salary cap, became a free agent in the summer and signed a six-year, \$35.4 million deal with Seattle.

"I wasn't sure if they were boos or Grus coming back here," Grubauer said. "If it was a Gru, I definitely appreciate it. The love and the appreciation and the support I got here, it's been incredible. Denver is always a special place in my heart, especially the fans, too. It feels amazing for sure."

The Kraken had six games postponed since Dec. 18 and were playing for the first time since losing to Vancouver on Jan. 1 but showed little rust. Marcus Johansson, Jared McCann and Colin Backwell had goals to put Seattle ahead 3-1 in the second period.

"We played a darn good hockey game but at the end of the day you have to address what the result is," coach Dave Hakstol said. "We didn't come here to play a good hockey game, we came to win a hockey game."

Aube-Kubel's second goal of the game

made it 3-2 and Toews tied it when the puck deflected off his right skate and in at 11:47 of the third. The goal was upheld upon review.

"I don't know what the definition of a kick-in is," Grubauer said. "Maybe you can find an answer for me."

McCann and Johansson also had assists.

Kadri got the winner when he beat Grubauer high at 14:17 of the third for his 13th goal of the season.

"I had some room. I was looking to pass it, but I had some room to walk in and just wanted to stay aggressive and was able to find that short side," said Kadri, who also had an assist Monday night.

Grubauer came off for an extra skater but the Kraken couldn't get the equalizer against Pavel Francouz, who finished with 23 saves.

Bruins 7, Capitals 3: Trainers repaired the giant gash on Brad Marchand's nose, stuffed gauze up his nostrils and then he stepped back on to the ice minutes after taking a violent high stick to the face.

Bloody nose and all, Marchand looked like the epitome of an old-school hockey player and led visiting Boston back from a two-goal deficit to rout Washington. Marchand scored two goals and assisted on another, while longtime linemate Patrice Bergeron saved one at the other end.

"It certainly didn't come as any surprise to any of us," defenseman Matt Grzelcyk said of Marchand's toughness. "When you get to see that each and every day, it's extremely inspiring for us as teammates to want to follow in his footsteps. If your best players are working as hard as they do, it feels out to the rest of the group and there's no excuse."

After falling behind by two on goals by the Caps' Conor Sheary, the Bruins scored six in a row to hand the Capitals their fourth consecutive defeat, which is their longest losing streak this season.

"We're losing games in all types of styles right now," Washington forward Nic Dowd said. "I'm not going to sit here and say, 'Oh, it's one thing or whatever.' We're up, we're down, we're coming back, we're losing in overtime."

Marchand started it all in the first period after taking a hard high stick from Dowd, requiring significant cleanup of blood on the ice and repairs to his nose on the bench. With Dowd still serving the double-minor penalty, Marchand sparked the comeback by setting up David Pastrnak for his first goal of the game.

Kings 3, Rangers 1: Phillip Danault, Blake Lizotte and Adrian Kempe scored in host Los Angeles' win over New York.

Trevor Moore had two assists and Cal Petersen made 22 saves for the Kings, who have won four of five.

Mika Zibanejad had a goal and Alexandar Georgiev made 36 saves for the Rangers, who have lost two of three to start their longest road trip of the season.

Los Angeles scored twice in the opening 3:41 of the second period. Zibanejad pulled New York back within 2-1 with less than eight minutes remaining in the third. But Kempe scored into an empty net with 1:17 remaining to seal it.

Kris Knoblauch served as temporary coach for the Rangers after Gerard Gallant tested positive for COVID-19 on Sunday.

Browns GM: Team will bring Mayfield back

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Baker Mayfield didn't lose his starting job after a losing season.

Browns general manager Andrew Berry said Tuesday the team expects the quarterback to return as its starter next season and rebound after an injury-filled, sub-par 2021 that raised questions about Mayfield's future with Cleveland.

Mayfield tore a labrum in his left shoulder in Week 2, but continued to play while wearing a harness. The injury contributed

to him playing poorly and contributed to the Browns (8-9) missing the playoffs despite high expectations. He'll have surgery on Jan. 19.

Berry said the team is confident Mayfield will "bounce back."

"We're looking forward to Baker getting healthy in the off-season, and then having the type of season we know he can have moving forward," Berry said.

Part of the rationale for sticking with Mayfield, the No. 1 overall pick in 2018, is the

team's familiarity with him, knowing his work ethic and his past success in coach Kevin Stefanski's system, Berry said.

It's still possible Cleveland could pursue other options at quarterback, but Berry said he remains confident Mayfield will play better.

The Browns have already exercised Mayfield's \$18.9 million contract option for next season, but have yet to discuss a long-term extension with the QB, who led them to the postseason and a playoff win in 2020.

Berry said he's not concerned about Mayfield potentially entering next season without a contract beyond 2022.

Mayfield sat out Sunday's season finale against Cincinnati and missed two other games — one to rest the shoulder, one after testing positive for COVID-19.

The 26-year-old Mayfield went 6-8 as a starter this season. He completed 253 of 418 passes with 17 touchdowns and 13 interceptions, including seven in his last three games.

Embiid lifts 76ers to 7th straight win

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Joel Embiid had 31 points and eight rebounds to lead the Philadelphia 76ers over the Houston Rockets 111-91 Monday night for their seventh straight win.

Embiid turned in his seventh straight 30-point game and also had six assists. He was 9-for-16 from the field and made all 13 of his free throws.

He's the second player in NBA history to score exactly 31 points in four straight games. Bob McAdoo was the first to do it for the Buffalo Braves in November 1973. Embiid entered Monday averaging 26.8 points per game, sixth in the NBA.

"I hold myself to that standard of trying to win and be the best, or one of the best, ever," Embiid said. "The good thing about it is, we've been winning. To be able to win every single night, I've got to show up."

Philadelphia has the longest winning streak in the Eastern Conference and the second-longest in the NBA behind Memphis' nine-game string.

Christian Wood and Jalen Green each scored 14 points for Houston. Josh Christopher had 13 and Daniel Theis added 12.

Celtics 101, Pacers 98 (OT): Jaylen Brown scored 26 points and Jayson Tatum had 24, carrying host Boston over Indiana in the first of a home-and-home series between the teams.

Robert Williams III had 14 points and 12 rebounds for the Celtics, including a key block in OT. They won for the fourth time in six games.

Torrey Craig led the Pacers with 19 points and Lance Stephenson scored 14, but missed a potential tying three-pointer late in OT. Indiana has lost seven of eight.

Pacers scoring leader Domantas Sabonis was held to 11 points but had 23 rebounds after scoring a career-best 42 points in his last game. He finished with a triple-double, adding 10 assists.

Trail Blazers 114, Nets 108: Anfernee Simons had 23 points and 11 assists, and short-handed Portland took advantage of James Harden's absence for a victory over visiting Brooklyn.

Harden was out with a hyperextended left knee. Kyrie Irving started in his second game of the season and finished with 22 points. Kevin Durant led all scorers with 28 points and 10 rebounds for the Nets.

Robert Covington had 21 points, including five three-pointers, for the Blazers, who saw all five starters score in double figures.

Monday's game was originally scheduled for Dec. 23 but was postponed because of COVID-19 issues.

Knicks 111, Spurs 96: RJ Barrett scored 31 points in his first home game since hitting his first career buzzer beater, leading New York over San Antonio.

Evan Fournier returned from a one-game absence with 18 points for the Knicks, who broke open a game that had been close throughout by outscoring the Spurs 18-2 to start the fourth quarter.

New York won for the third time in four games to reach the midpoint of their schedule at 20-21.

Dejounte Murray scored 24 points for San Antonio, which finished a 1-6 road trip. Jakob Poeltl had 12 points and 10 rebounds.

Hornets 103, Bucks 99: LaMelo Ball hit the go-ahead basket with 15 seconds left, Terry Rozier scored 27 points and host Charlotte beat NBA champion Milwaukee for the second time in three nights.

Ball scored 18 of his 23 points in the second half, and Miles Bridges added 17 points and 11 rebounds for the Hornets, who have won six of eight games and improved to 12-5 at home.

Khris Middleton had 27 points and 11 assists, and Giannis Antetokounmpo added 26 points, 13 rebounds and eight assists for the Bucks, who also lost 114-106 to Charlotte on Saturday night.

Ball sank the winner when he drove across the lane, swept the ball above his head and launched an off-balance 10-foot runner.

Pistons 126, Jazz 116: Cade Cunningham scored 18 of his career-high 29 points in the third quarter to help host Detroit erase a 22-point deficit and beat Utah.

Saddiq Bey added 29 points for the Pistons, who are 4-2 in 2022 after finishing 2021 with 18 losses in 19 games.

Lead assistant coach Rex Kalamian took charge with coach Dwane Casey having entered COVID-19 protocol.

Donovan Mitchell scored 31 points for the Jazz, and Hassan Whiteside had a season-high 21 points as well as 14 rebounds.

Utah, which had won 10 straight against Detroit, led by 22 in the second quarter but was outscored 94-62 in the final 2½ quarters.

Cavaliers 109, Kings 108: Jarret Allen had 18 points and 17 rebounds, Darius Garland also had a double-double and visiting Cleveland held off Sacramento.

Kevin Love scored 19 points, Evan Mobley added 17 and Lauri Markkanen and Cedi Osman finished with 15 points apiece. Garland had 12 points and 11 assists as the Cavaliers completed the season sweep of the Kings.

Hall of Fame wide receiver Maynard dead at 86

Associated Press

Don Maynard, a Hall of Fame receiver who made his biggest impact catching passes from Joe Namath in the wide-open AFL, has died. He was 86.

The Pro Football Hall of Fame confirmed Maynard's death on Monday through his family.

"Don Maynard is as essential to the history of the New York Jets as anyone. He came to this franchise at our inception and

left a Super Bowl champion," the Jets said in a statement. "On the field, he cemented himself as many things: record holder, Hall of Famer and forever our No. 13. Off the field, he was unflinchingly himself — a family man who stayed true to his roots, bringing a Texas cowboy to New York.

"His passing is especially difficult as he remained close with the Jets throughout his life. Our

thoughts today are with his family and loved ones. We will all miss him."

Namath's best skill was throwing the deep ball, matching Maynard's main talent. As Broadway Joe's primary target, Maynard had three seasons with at least 1,200 yards receiving in a four-year span. He caught 14 touchdown passes in Namath's rookie season, and twice more had 10 TDs in a season.

When he retired in 1973 after one season with the St. Louis Cardinals, he was pro football's career receiving leader with 633 catches for 11,834 yards and 88 touchdowns. In 1987, he was elected to the Hall of Fame. The Jets retired his No. 13 jersey and selected him in 2010 for their inaugural ring of honor class, which also included his teammates Namath and Winston Hill, and coach Weeb Ewbank.